

QUIET EVENING; CAT; THEN RAIN

Seen from behind the fine mesh
of a screen intended to prevent
particles of outside from drifting in,
the back yard, newly mown this evening,
looks more than ever like a tapestry—
or a tessellation by some meticulous god
of lawns, vines, and tidy gardens.
The whole town might look like this
if we could see it through a giant scrim—
laid out in tiny squares, like
a town caught in a web: where each interstice
might signify a death, a place
a soul tore through. Our city's
like most in the midwest, built on a grid
of twelve blocks per mile, and it consisted,
for just about its first ten decades,
of twelve by twelve—144,
minus the five reserved for the dead
in the northeast corner. Say
a neighbor goes: an auctioneer
soon comes, and people gather
and disperse, taking (as I have taken)
muslin or mason jars, the flotsam
and jetsam of the oceanic sadness
auctions are: a billow
washes us, recedes. In the vacant house,
the blinds will have been pulled: that keeps
the heat in, or the outside out
of the house, more than likely
a boxy affair of white clapboard
—as mine is, all its windows open,
this July evening, to drifting stars,
and fireflies, and the odor of Quaker Oats
from the plant across the river.

What wild men

got swept here in a storm, working
in slaughter houses, driving
the country roads at night, flinging
gravel as they passed? That dust rises, falls
in living rooms, a grit we wipe away
each week with a damp cloth: we keep
the outside out. They're mostly
gone now, the packing houses
closed; this is a quiet town,
our school named for a famous nineteenth-century poet. . . .

And still we watch, we watch,
as night stirs in the garden,
and something moves, voluptuous and dark,
under the trees. The moon
has risen like an octopus,
and moths flutter whitely against the screen
beyond which stand
the lawnchairs' pallor, catalpas undulous
and gesturing. *Meow*. The cat wants in,
everything wants in, it seems, this evening,
only the screen's fine mesh opposing
owl calls, *brr* of mothwing, ashes
descending with the rain. . . . Water
sweeps the lawn, excites the orchestra
of trees, of cornstalks, bluejeans
swaying on the line, pinned in place. . . . It's time
to close the house. Our faces pressed
against plate glass, the outside's now
an underwater scene: waves convulse
the windows: what's outside
wants in again. It's late.