

Two Poems · *Paul Allen*

SABBATICAL

I

I'm not expecting anything again.
Still, I check the mail, early afternoon
heading toward the street looking for sign—
fresh tracks in the sand under the box,
the scalloped tire marks tying neighbor to neighbor,
all flags down up to the cul-de-sac.
She has been here—the delivery woman,
the Post Mistress, Post Person—whatever name
she is known by now, she has come. And whatever
is in there now is all there will be today.

I've seen him before. A man from one of the even
numbers across the street is coming, breathing hard,
tied to his daughter with rope around his middle.
She holds on, roars on her skateboard. She does not
swing wide enough to miss the sandy delta of my drive
that empties into the street. I should sweep all that back.
Unseen, and now, I see, dangerous for daughters
pulled by their fathers for a rad ride. She falls
into me, gets up. We're all a little embarrassed.
I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm very sorry.
She picks up her board, heads home shaken and unhurt.
She has no whim to help him with his limp tether.
His nod to me is that of two guys, two strangers
On the interstate, who have relieved themselves
Side by side and meet at the sink to wash.

I wonder whether all fathers look the fool
when daughters leave them standing like a fool.
This one does. He starts toward his house, fumbling
with the knot at his side. The rope uncoils
behind him, begins to follow him home.

II

It is not this incident alone, but from the little town
on the border of my home state, Crazy Jimmy pulls
me to him again, as he has done a half dozen times
this year. (Too much time, I guess, to brood
and drink and watch the local artists on *Midday*).
Something bad had happened to him in The Great War,
thinking the smell of new-mown hay
was the smell of new-mown hay
and not the gas that would make him gather cardboard boxes,
pile them high on his bicycle. The streets were his.
Even for the best drivers, my old man said, Jimmy
might impose on their right of way. He died at the V.A.
My father joined other men to clear out Jimmy's place,
men who had crossed the river before on other matters—
to hunt, and, as mother said, to gamble their life's savings.

This time all the men came back with rope.
Dad served supper: Jimmy had things hanging in the trees.
Plow, ax, harrow, hand and band saw, a fuse box, tubs
(two tubs). But nothing that could be repaired or used,
except the rope. Pie pans were nailed to the pine, up
the trunk then out the first and largest limb. Two
toilets, a skillet, and 16 wingnuts bunched in an oak
like wind chimes. What with the bicycle and boxes,
we knew the man was strange, but not like that.
Strange as if at home he might eat dog.
Strange as if his place were all too neat.

Something else Dad told us one by one at different times,
mostly when one of us would help him in the yard
or when we found him, late nights, downstairs in the kitchen
taking a bourbon to help him get some sleep:
Jimmy had not lived alone out there.
Whoever it was had gone. But there were undisputed signs
of someone else. Whoever it was that helped
him hoist that junk, whoever lay with him evenings
listening to the housewares in the trees
had disappeared. Or had slipped into our midst.
When we crossed the street, left the doctor's office, stepped
into the blinding light after the double-feature matinee—
someone we were looking at was she. Who she was
was anybody's guess. And we did, naming first
the homely and alone, and then, in time we all
suspected everyone in some way or another.
He hadn't lived alone; she walked among us—
about this we felt better, and worse.

III

Why that odd and arbitrary thing comes now
I do not know. Or why it has come a lot
this year. Or ever, even the first time.
It doesn't matter, and I feel foolish for standing
this long holding my mailbox by its warped jaw.
My neighbor follows his daughter to their home.
I think I could like him given time.
It is odd how he stops in the road, stops
at the edge of his Yard-of-the-Month, stops
on the last step of his home—how he seems
to insist on getting the knot untied before
stepping into the dark doorway where his daughter
has gone on to other games. I go in, not waiting
to see whether he gets himself loose. I don't like him
that much. For me it's late enough for a beer
and a quiet romp through the mail— Resident. Occupant.
And an I-may-already-have-won.