

First Place

Danielle Wheeler

In Each Other's Faces We Take Out Lines, Streets, Stories

The girls push a stroller with balloons. They laugh with colored cat-faces. The balloons pass a woman's face on a wall, painted white and black. I look into the sky. A siren is fading and someone is always leaving. Back down here, slowly, where small streets aren't quiet, everything is perception. You take a guess. She might have opened her windows each morning above the old Theatre Building. She might have never left him, or anybody. He might have spoken kindly. In each other's faces we take out lines, streets, stories.

The balloons escape the memory. What you want to say about her probably never happened. She is already moving away from you, down the street and towards the diner.

Her back is long gone

And there are birds in the street. In blue and red and white, they look like flags. Children talk and you join them. What I want to say about her is always happening.

2: Cindy Ragsdale

PARADE REST

The bell tower of St. Pat's will tell you, despite what my husband says, that thank-you notes matter.

Thank-you notes matter, and you do say "bless you" at summer sneezes of strangers, you do smile at buzz-cut children who may or may not smile back from their scooters, and you do show up at hospitals and funerals.

St. Patrick's bell tower, speaking for her church and all who flow in and out her doors some 100-plus years, will tell you if you ask, that it is little civilities of manner that matter. The little civilities are the transferable skills that skip over state lines, cross tracks, link us rural and urban, make us smaller and nearer.

At this 9a.m. hour, the bell tower, silent, guards a funeral inside. Soon, evident civility pours out onto the September sidewalk in hushed clumps of humanity . . . solos, pairings, triptychs, and one sextet:

(continues)

--Six pallbearers (5 full-grown men in suits and 1 20-something in striped polo shirt presumably pulled for duty from the date-night end of his closet) ease “Wallace” or “Myrtle” (please, God, not a young “Ashley” or “Logan”) into the hearse.

--A trio of middle-schoolish girls stands wobbly on inaugural high-heeled sandals, understanding need for quiet (because they come from civil families who attend funerals) but unable to suppress hopeful youth and make the leap to solemnity. They whisper of giggly things but do not giggle.

--An adult sibling pair (I imagine, because I badly want the silver coffin to contain their well-aged parent and not a peer) shares a slow, sustained hug, likely the longest they’ve ever dared. Funerals modify family rules, if just for the day, in ways that even weddings cannot, what with funerals having far fewer witnesses.

--Finally, one middle-aged woman in inexplicable blue metallic sequins ambles heavily toward her car to line up for the cemetery drive. I imagine she has chronic pain and lost her husband to COPD last spring. When her grandmother raised her in the 60s 8 blocks from St. Patrick’s, grandma neglected to teach her to wear black; grandma did teach her to show up, and to drop off a casserole next Tuesday.

“These are my people,” I fantasize for a moment. In everyday life, they maybe even send handwritten thank-you notes and would call out “bless you” if I sneezed right here. On Sundays, they probably pass the peace.

By 10a.m. they are gathered to go . . . police escort, then hearse, then 9-car procession of civility. The very least I can do is stand at the edge of the sidewalk -- at parade-rest more or less -- and be one more witness. I want to be small and near. In my mind, I whisper, “bless you” and “rest.”

Before 11a.m., a wedding party begins to arrive.

3-John Hawn

She Paints a Poem

In the belly are tombstones, where the fetus lies.
My daughter paints a pregnant woman
with a clock for a brain, an hourglass for an arm.
Highways connect these outrageous organs
to a gear-clogged heart, which one day will wind down.
“The inevitable,” she says.

(continues)

When she was twelve, I helped her
with spelling homework every night.
She struggled over “raccoon” and “cocoa,”
and she would lose patience, not understand
why I would not see what she was able to see,
that “raccoon” and “coco” made perfect sense.

I once tried to explain metaphor.
But the literary device was lost
on her. “Why can’t people just say
what they mean?” Being literal
was how one survived a life
complicated by confusing spellings.

I’m fifty-four; my daughter is half that age.
And I understand little about art.
My daughter paints, and I ask questions.
“It’s self-explanatory. Just look.”
I’m fifty-four and winding down, realizing
that “raccoon” and “coco” make perfect sense.