

Vain Attics

Trying at night to hold it all together
in my head: scraps of lace whirl above me.
As if peace instead of grief could come through
remembering
where the hairline held before it retreated—
leaving behind no tide-mark—
or recalling how my neck felt, my voice soared, before
Adam's tree dumped its apple,
and insistent whiskers sprang up,
repetitive as pop songs on the radio,
lyrics that once felt so accurate they embarrassed me
for fear that if someone guessed the one I clung to,
they'd know why I'd never fit in.
Today, an oldies station found me out,
though I couldn't recall the group's name
till I hunted down scratched 45's in my psychedelic-orange,
fake-fur carrying case under the stairs.

Trying to relearn what I presumed indelible:
Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour,
Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, Catherine Parr;
je suis, tu es, il est, nous sommes, vous êtes, elles sont
—the symmetry of the seventh grade.

Trying to refurbish my childhood: Willowware's pattern
stands in for Aunt Pearl's Blue Onion;
I smoothe the same soft tablecloth as my mother's
and save parochial-school textbooks that I once memorized
in a box among titles that haunt me:
RETURN TO GONE-AWAY LAKE;
THE CLUE IN THE CRUMBLING WALL;
and the dishwasher takes up its rhythmic, womblike sloshing—
a lullaby to my middle-class psyche
as I still do homework at the kitchen table.
Sometimes it's as if I never moved away.

—Of course some old people sell their homes
to escape unmanageable memories.
They either hide in the present
or are unravelled by the past.

But after we've moved on,
who will remember what we've forgotten,

decipher our checkbooks, see to our New Year's
resolutions, attend our reunions?
Who will make sense of our random
musings, those vain attics?
Who will grope along the rasp of our lives,
feeling for webs among the splinters?

I am my own archivist.
Trying to reassemble more than I can remember,
I go back long before I was born
to a priest who unrolls a cloth scroll,
points out the family plot.
I trace the crest of a long ridge.
This cemetery looks out over nothing
but trees, the mill town below obscured.
There's French on every stone.
We could be in Brittany or Lachine.
But five rows down and six across,
the one word, one surname
that would have leapt out at me
is missing.

Even spider webs are mostly
gaps. Sometimes we come up against
silence so total, it echoes.
Unmarked graves—
Whole lives forgotten—
perhaps more whole because forgotten,

but more in vain?

Steven Riel