

Unexcused Absence

How to Make a Free and Happy Life without Masters or Tyrants

Jeff Sirkin

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I'm standing in the shadow that the window allows me
meaning to catalog the names

the overcast -- the muted crack
of distant hammers -- the droplets hanging
to the ridged leaves of the border shrubs

It rained sometime in the night and the kids today
are nowhere to be seen

the bio mass -- the causal links -- the notes
passing hand to hand

the schoolyard
huddled around the forsaken ball in the distance
and puddles masking the uneven pavement between us
meaning nothing's settled
or we have

The robins should be bounding across the grass
"industrious and authoritarian," but this morning
they're mostly in the trees, and all over town
there are men pouring the new walkways

We've been through this before: the kids
are locked down again, disappearing
one after another, a story, and nameless, the lives
behind us, and the light beyond

"Trees Color Our World" lining the antiquated windows
of Central Ave

the childish scrawl -- the names on display

Trucks roll by, swerving to avoid the muddle, the hum
of the machines spinning aimless, the run-off
drying or draining into the subsurface
of sand and crushed gravel –
 but the rain
 is what it is

“A desirable road is one
that will remain in constant condition
for satisfactory travel for a great many years”

Yesterday, crossing the empty field
on my way back from somewhere,
keeping an eye on the dirt and weeds,
the birds and faded dandelions, the absence
of any trash, I heard a shout: “Hey Mister!”
as a ball came bounding behind me, a cadre
of teens perched on the edge of the blacktop
where the hoops are raised and hung, over
near the naked tether ball poles,
that forlorn monument

and I stopped it soccer-style before heaving it back
to a squeaky refrain: “Thanks Mister!”

 When I woke
in the middle of the night, the moon pouring
through the glass led me here
 to look again
 and I did
 but we were all gone

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Please accept this note from the future. Understand that the fence was made to sort the scattered seeds into a program we could monetize, to disentangle the fertile field from these fallen faces. From one side through to the other, lost shoe, fishing reel, doors piled against the wall. Their only purpose to mark out the shadows, to set a value to what's been foreclosed upon. But I'm just the tour guide on the bus. Are we shooting for the school on the corner or the bank whose driveway skirts the edge? Forget it. It's the trees on the perimeter whose shade opens the stage on the drama below, the seedlings leapfrogging their way from corner to corner and edge to edge. The groundskeeper keeps it trim. The gym coach blows his whistle. The children? They're the ones running the bases, waiting for the blast that'll send them home. The girls in pink shorts, the boys in black. Poisoned pollinators swinging their bats, ponytails trailing in the wind.

Jeff Sirkin

Jeff Sirkin is the author of the poetry collection *Travelers Aid Society*, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Literary Review*; *The Shallow Ends*; *SplitLevel Journal*; *Forklift, Ohio*; and elsewhere. Co-editor of the online poetry journal *A DOZEN NOTHING*, he currently teaches in the Creative Writing Department at the University of Texas El Paso, where he also co-curates the Dishonest Mailman Reading Series.