

James Cushing

A Thin Home

I remember the campus of our school:
every Friday night, a trapdoor opened,
and my best self climbed down the stairs.
The reports I made about the blue world
as I found it there would fill a building
but as it turned out, I only walked through it
to pass the time, and thinking it was a “best exercise,”
I wrote my name on the wall with my pen, and ran.
They released me two days later without charging me.

Someone told my mother how brave and grown-up I acted.
I heard flamenco guitarists every time someone made a promise
and a long evening’s hands intending to reassure, but failing —
I would never be mistaken for my mother again.
The house was quiet, with a faint yellow glow.
My parents had told me parts of my body floated when I slept,
some nights clinging to the cars that passed by outside
my bedroom, other nights bouncing against my
ceiling before drifting back down into bed. No matter
what other people know, they told me, we know this.

My mouth was stained with cherries.
I sensed movement at the window sill,
a fly or something, which became the whole scene’s pivot.
On the sidewalk lay leaves the color of a first, angry love.
Down the boulevard, past the white buildings of the school,
past the pipes beneath the playground, past the pepper trees,
past a garden with a path and a gate and a green beast asleep inside it,
I could see everything start changing, pushing us away. I stopped
to shake hands with the glazed ceramic man I made when I was in school.

The Way You Thought It Was Going to Be

I noticed a lost balloon in a nest
of wires. I remembered a French book
with that premise, a balloon
leading a boy through Paris,
lots of color-saturated pictures,
the balloon a second skin for the reader
to find in the air. The air is made
for pirates and by pirates, as their sloppy
laughter proves. And even if my life is one
long weakness, there will be no end to
the scanning or the guessing. My ghost laughs
and tell its secrets to no one, not even me.

Mister Moonlight, come again, please.
Have you no bargain to keep with us?
It is so late in the evening,
the almanac promised you'd arrive hours ago,
and the air grows chilly and damp. Whatever I ate
has burned my tongue. Watching the land, I ask
"but what was it? All I want now
is a dipped soft-serve cone," but
the plague has closed the ice cream stand.

I remember the aging contours of the building,
its white and green walls, its idea: earth
would always be filled with pleasure
as a field is filled with grass. So many lovers,
so many breaths, so many worn-out shirts
and recipes that still leave us crying,
wanting to make love in costume
while feeding each other candy.
The machine builds up its force
with one hand in its pocket.
I'm not about to sit watching it get cold.

Theatre of Evening

I hear it slithering alongside our feet as we step outside
our homes, that animal sound, that whispery fabric,
one part sheet music, one part slow-motion waterfall —

So we ran past the school, finding nothing
but fallen leaves and crumpled napkins, and walked
slowly home with empty hands.

My memory of what we said was removed
because when someone turned the porch light on, we
saw our words had covered themselves in a thin, shiny weave

like laments. I looked at my feet, which felt miles away from
my face, and cries of local birds fell down through the air and welled up
around my shoes in a pool of clover. Then trees got reconstructed.

Ten years passed, and our circles kept drifting into opposite corners
of the ceiling, which explains why I was always alone in the car, singing
wrong words to your favorites. Now I play me down to sheep. But seriously!

I recognized the younger men as rooms where I had
lived, with each day and week laid out next to me like strips
of carpet. The women were management, to quote a famous phrase,

and when we descended into the broken earth, we could not count the
shards of pots and flakes of bone as we moved slowly forward
through the root-entangled dark. The vernal equinox

landed soon after that. But it came cut into squares,
accompanied by the sound of horses asking how well
you like the person you've become. Something ugly's

building itself in the grass. I can't think with all the singing,
it's like a mountain, but it falls like rain and everything is
laughing at a joke we can never be part of.



James Cushing, born 1953 in Palo Alto, California, holds a doctorate in English from University of California Irvine. In the early 1980s, he hosted a live poetry radio program on KPFK-FM in Los Angeles which gave early exposure to Dennis Cooper, David Trinidad, Amy Gerstler, Wanda Coleman, Leland Hickman, Scott Wannberg, and many others. Cushing retired in June 2020 after 31 years of teaching literature and poetry at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and served as the county's Poet Laureate for 2008-2010. His poems have appeared in many journals, and his 30-year association with Cahuenga Press has resulted in six full-length collections of poetry, the most recent of which is *Solace* (2018), which Brendan Constantine called "astonishing. . . . All the territories of the heart are explored here." His daughter is the New York-based poet Iris Cushing.