

Poetry Series

Matt Mullins
- poems -

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Matt Mullins lives and writes in Kalamazoo, Michigan. A musician, poet, and fiction writer, he spends a considerable amount of time splitting firewood and driving around in the dark with his car stereo turned off. His work has appeared in Descant, The Birmingham Poetry Review, Born Magazine, The Grand Valley Review, The Detroit Metro Times, The Furnace, and elsewhere.

Chinatown Valentine

Chinatown: a neon mantis.
Hailstones tapping a
Mandarin braille of love.

Two young girls scrape
the icy sidewalk in
crushed-can-high-heel-shoes.

Pause at a shop window
before jewelry boxes,
imagining the spring-wound song.

Matt Mullins

Corporeal

This flesh is
as we conceive

each sparkling pin
of sunlight filling

our cupped palms'
gift of the red

hand-pump's cool
water spilled here

in sleepy summer's park
before our very eyes

our lips, and tasting it
we know at last, need

and the wet bones of our
bare feet, the promise

kept for us while still
above the soil: this

carnal irony of consciousness,
ephemeral and costing

only each of our precious
lives: this beloved

flash, this flesh
of instance:

our mortal mind
of eternal soul

so corporeal.

Death Loves Soup

How is it that death loves soup
best here in my kitchen, drinking alone
with a pot bubbling on the stove?

Is it because death
hates the small things:
the way Megan pins her hair back

fatally nailing the sweet curve
of her jaw line to my memory
or maybe the way I dice celery just so?

Perhaps both, or neither, only
I still taste the onion tears and fear gone
rotten to liquid in a dark tin box.

I'd rather explode than be heated
slow to boiling, a lobster's sleep and this much
death knows. Better to sit with my wife

who has just now walked into the room
the two of us, together in this kitchen
imagining our lives to the sound of shattering glass
or dove's cooing us toward the guess of what's left.

No. This: our staring out the window
into all that will come next
while blowing steam off the circle
of a wooden spoon.

Matt Mullins

Father And Son In The Second Person

One day he will come into the bathroom
to watch you use the blade. And at five
or six or however old he still won't have
the right words, but what he'll be looking for
is the truth of his future face scraped clean
or shaped by beard. He'll want admittance
to the ritual and he will stand and stare at the wet
edge of the Ewek & Son Sexto©Blade flush
against your skin.

'Daddy, what's that? ' he'll say.
'Straight razor, son, ' you'll tell him
as you sweep the steel of your father's blade
through the lather covering your jugular vein.
'It takes the shadow off my face.'

'But where does the shadow come from? '
As usual, he'll want the answers to everything
years too soon. Say nothing. He must learn
the rest in the way you strop the razor,
in the tone of the cold water thrown against
your face, in the damp towel and how you
consider yourself at the mirror before
tousling his hair and walking away
leaving him to write his own future in the mystery
of a fogged mirror or the sting of styptic pencil
punctuated by the blotting shreds of tissue
torn to stem the inevitable consequences
of a young man's desires grown then cut
to fall with the thin hairs of his first shave.

Matt Mullins

Four Accidentals

First, you die. Then I choose the place and time
to brush away the dry leaves, rolling aside
the note-heads of pill-bugs and curled centipede clefs
testing the edge of your guitar with the calloused
fingertips that will send the blade of its body down.

You once told me that a song could not exist unless
each note carried an acceptance of its own passing
in the same way that expectation serves the bridge's promise
of return. I put my ear to the box at hand, listening
for those accidentals telling me the difference

In the sounds of your burial: the scraped song
of a cheap pine box, your descending scale of soon
to be bones, your dreadnaught, sprung from its nail
instrumental and not mine to understand.

Two eyes spring open in the back
of my head: one red eye to guide me
toward the stage's edge one blue eye
for keeping time.

Matt Mullins

Guitar Player Between Towns

He counts time to the metronome slashes
of white center-line that refuse to fall into song
as his headlights switch on the amplified eyes
of deer powered up to spring into the full
volume of collision's opening bars. This is
the encore no one asks for, the tune no one hears
a tablature of back-roads high-beamed
into stark contrast, his car a final bullet
breaking radio silence to report the soundtrack
of long thoughts, lyrics to questions he feels
but will not ask: Whose guitar is this dumb in the trunk?
Whose amp rattling its electric guts to the syncopations
of each rut and bump? Whose map taking him
the long way around the speed traps and breathalyzers
only to pass the sudden mirage of a road-side circus
where night's risky travelers put heel to toe
along a painted high wire, sway beneath the spinning lights
speak backwards in tongues before being
shown to their second row seats? Somehow it's still

the mission the kid stepped forward for at thirteen.
Night beyond night, gig after gig, he remains
that bloody-fingered kid cutting himself into posters
tacked above stained sheets. This is why he hauls
his gear through the smoke and explosions
of drunken laughter, scuffs his boot heels across
the gritty exclamations of shattered glasses licked
into sharp, wet mounds by the bouncer's angry broom
because there is nothing louder than the silence
of his own disbelief. When, exactly, did he become
this guitar player between towns, the echo of a sound
shot solo through the dark to burn the night miles
toward home after yet another show? Seems to him
it's been this way ever since he was old enough
to take the wheel: his head a transistor, his clothes soaked
in a barroom's ashtray, an evening's thin pay riding

between his back pocket and the seat the only proof
that he lives anything beyond life in a rehearsal space.

All he can tell you is that sometimes his aim is true.
Some nights the stars' polarities do align and he takes hold
to become an instant's connection in the circuitry of flesh
and steel and wood and bone. Wood and bone. Flesh
and steel. Wheels against the road. These
are the passing notes to the songs in a set list
he'll always know, the blue chords he leaves hanging
from a rusty finger-bone driven through the spine
of a backstage door before he shuts his guitar case
like a coffin lid and lights out of town. These
are the nights he keeps an ear to the rearview mirror
while his car drums the length of a.m. road
asphalt peeling back like the curl of a snapped string
each time he hears something leaping into the plucked
air of his wake.

Matt Mullins

Matin

Luminous seconds falling before
the alarm that always becomes

The darkness tumbling to an edge set
between night and the morning

Faults of light rent to shake this jagged
awakening wrung from sweat

Startled sheets of stained sleep twisting
up from a nightmare within a dream

This is not the turned earth owing them
a new beginning, but their bodies

Collision with the blood's commute
toward keeping out the wild reaching in

An open hand's slapped silence
stumbling from bed to knees

Sunlight staving the blinds to singe
the prayers that cannot help:

Everything laid bare by silence torn
from the illusion of rest insisting

Each dawn reveals what is broken.

Matt Mullins

Ode To The Sirens Of Our American Commute

What is it about sitting inside our cars
that puts an invisible shield around our sense
of see and being seen? Of course, we're used
to fat head in his uber SUV, his fat head ballooned
to a red veined throb above the noose of his tie.
There's no surprise in catching him with a finger
crammed up his nose to the 2nd knuckle.
We expect no less from a person knowing
only how to dig and dig and take-even if
from themselves. But what of this carefully
crafted accident at the wheel of the Jaguar
dead-stopped in the morning jam next to me?
Her sunglasses are bigger than my paycheck
and she needs to check and recheck and recheck
that rearview to freeze her mind into the belief
in her face's promise to not go suddenly imperfect.
The ice hanging from her ear refracts a rainbow
of white stars and crystalline light against her cheeks.
Her redblack blood lips are drawn back
from the clean white bones of teeth raring to tear
out pounds of meat around the boardroom table
as her low cut blouse offers just enough distraction
for the tits that cost her a few grand each to float
her all the edge she needs for cutting a stiletto
heel through the clawing hands of those glass
ceiling old boys whose backs she's climbing over
on her way up the man-meat ladder toward American

Godhood. So beautiful and rich and powerful
is she in the irradiating and emasculating perfection
of this stalled highway dream, her emerald Jaguar
skin kept forever radiant with magic surgical
potions and the sensual ministrations of Caribbean
spa attendants, we, I, do not expect to see her, this
glorious sexual hag of a being digging for gold
in such unexpected ways: the French manicure
of her talon-nail deftly no, delicately, probing
the left nostril of her perfectly sculpted nose, drawing
out the mucousy snot wad. Feeling my eyes on her

from the next lane where I sit in my dirty jeep, bearded,
sweat stained dress shirt, three days in the same
wrinkled slacks, hungover and forever strapped
into the skinbag I must drag to the desk where
I've chained what's left of my squandered days
she turns to me with what most would see
as the embarrassing evidence of their thoughtless
private, biological selves on the end of her finger
and, staring lasciviously into my eyes, devours it
transmuting my empty, self-righteous loathing for her
into love, instantly.

Matt Mullins

On Sunday Morning

We kiss to flamenco
on your kitchen radio

your eyes open
my eyes watching yours.

We've been talking about tribes
with your hair

still carrying the weight
of last night's smoke

and scented oil
as I shrug on the skin of a beast

you refuse to eat
and let myself out into the day.

Last night when you shot
pool beneath a cone of light

your long lines unfurling
as you leaned across the table

I knew we wouldn't make love
on your floor

but along the wall
I saw more than you

dark and quiet though not quite
still, a shadow waiting to pounce

on chanting natives moving
quickly, covered with clay.

Matt Mullins

On The Birthday Of A.A. Miller's First Son

The week you were born
eighty-some people died in Waco, Texas
the wrong finale to a long stand-off
between Branch Davidians and the ATF
a siege of 51 days ending only when
the entire compound went up in flames.
It was the middle of April and here
in Michigan, the climate of contraries
we've grown so used to carried us
through the cold though sunny afternoons.
We cracked our doors to the hint
of a spring breeze and sat in front of our TV's
shaking our heads in disbelief and waiting
for news of you. Your dad was out drinking
because you were late and your mom
and he had issues-as they still do
as you know, which might say something
about why I imagine you crowning
just as someone whipped a pyrotechnic grenade
through a slot between the boards nailed over
the Koreshan compound's nursery room window.

What did not ride in on the wind from Waco
was the sick-sweet scent of that burning
human flesh. All we smelled in our thawing
Midwest were daffodils pushing their heads up
through the rich, moist dirt. Such parallels
are not lost on you, now a teenager, stealing
your dad's Playboys and teaching yourself
the ways of punk rock defiance on his old drum set.
Daffodils and your soft head pushing its way
along the bloody walls of womb
as a woman on fire explodes from an inferno
running away until the screams of everything
she believed in made her turn back and throw
herself into the burning once again as if burning
to death beyond the flock wasn't burning
well enough. You asked me once
when you were five or so what the sticker

on my guitar case said: Question Authority
I told you, and you didn't ask what that meant.

So I'm telling you now: the week you were born
eighty-some people died in Waco, Texas.
Unquestioned authorities wearing bullet proof vests
opened fire with tanks and guns and hand grenades
on Christian fanatics who chose to die rather than
deny the apocalyptic prophet they'd empowered.
Tanks smashed into buildings. People were crushed.
People shot their own children in the head
then themselves in the head. Everyone involved
did what they did in blind service to the many
ideologies man sees fit to invent. This is
what was happening in our world just as you
were being born, just as you were giving living proof
that the inevitability of our own becoming is more
necessary and true than all gods or governments.
You pushed your way through and they cut you free.
They held you up naked, bawling into the light
of this world, which filled you and grows in you
and in all human beings who would do more
than curse the darkness by setting fire to reason.

Matt Mullins

Phone Call To Cousin Stacy

You are not Lady Godiva looking
through her closet for something
to wear out on the town with your lover
on New Year's Eve, but the daughter
of Uncle Jack in the hip-cast, getting paid
for making lunches and talking weather
in the kitchens of old men convalescing
who know nothing of your ex-nun mother
named for a flower or our dead grandmother
Hazel, whose eyes and name were not
the same color. Even over simple soups
you will never speak of the boys
who've pushed you apart or the words
you've chalked in the dark, those white lines
of desire burning behind your eyelids
like a sign leading you home at night naked
in the glowing cockpit of your car.

Matt Mullins

Scars

I have none to speak of
nor does my father
but my mother's body
is a roadmap of sharp turns
and pot-holed detours
that could not help but lead
to breakdowns and repairs.
Hysterectomy. Caesarian.
Dual Arthroplasty: Cadillac
words that failed to stretch
the length of wounds even
as they took her there.
Each scar is a stone
chipped into time, the cracked
window of pain's blank
memory working through
the glass of her flesh revealed
and polished to shine
by the folded hands of this
agnostic prayer.

Matt Mullins

Shivering

It's only when he's not thinking about you
that you come to him in his dreams. In one
you are smiling while pressing thumbtacks
into his erection and telling him everything
is going to be alright. In another, he's following
the drifting edge of your white gossamer gown
through a misty forest. In each, the tendrils
of your dyed red hair rope him in, cause him
to awaken with a shiver, deep and involuntary
as the shiver that catches up to him near the end
of a piss he's steaming through the chill dumpster air
of a bar's parking lot. There he stands
a drunk blank, nobody and anyone, reeling
and certainly not thinking of you. Even though
you moved away years ago, he still swears
he occasionally glimpses you driving
in the opposite direction, your sudden, random
passing undoing the instant in a shuddering
of memory and he'll shiver as if you had walked
bodily through his mind right then, naked
above your pale, delicate feet. These are the nights
he turns shivering upon his side and peeks
into the black hole of his sleeping lover's open
mouth, past her bared teeth and into the question
of how life must be with you, standing right now
in a dark hallway in another man's shirt
paused by a window, bathing in the watery
light thrown down by the distant, battered
infatuated moon.

Matt Mullins

Talk Talk

22nd floor where we work along
the shaft of this concrete tower
gothic and wearing the ghosts
of our own skin turned inside out
around this office listening
to the talk of those who
would claim to manage us.

We try not to mind too much
much, though, has already passed
us by: our very lives lifted
beyond us on the breeze rising
along the sirens that seem
to sweep up from the streets
toward the heart of so many
secret calamities: Everything
anything is more real now
than the ways by which we go
about their business.

I carry my bulk into meetings
learn the status of projects
the milk of my brains souring
as it pours over mouthful
after mouthful of dead words.

the dead weight
of words drawn up in documents
given to deliverables, the talk talk
of money, talk of status, of process
of roles, the value-added talk
of supervisors romancing
the sound of their own talk
into salaried certainty
running its weight through the nod
and bleated sheepishness
of our dumb sleep.

It should burn like an ember

in our guts: This concern of deadwood
sold as a job well done, this bilge poured
upon a spark. Better for me, I think, to sneak
my silence past the high windows
of this cock roost
Better for me to not consider the falcon
that owns the very air I used to need
as I carry to my superiors the crow's head
it has left on the sill for me to eat.

Matt Mullins

The Aftermath As Written On Scrap Paper

Good morning: and spit curls the half
fractured way of a moon grown soft
to crack like a rotten egg milking
over this dawn's slow horizon:
today this sun is too hard a yoke to bear

Empty tank, empty wallet
four bucks worth of gas and life
in the fast lane throbbing past
all the clarifications of distraction
woven so delicately in:

Lady in line ahead of me at the gas station
10 am and she's putting her hopes toward the lotto:
80mill worth to hit it, forty five dollars at a time
and me on the slow drain, last night's entertainment
hung on the line of wealthy friend's mansion alarm
still ringing through my mind

who am I fooling but the fool himself
distractions toward longing
time thrown to the side, a mind honed to edge
until it dulls or shines-to be abandoned
to abandon the self is to be purer than
an eternal sea of apologies flung
into the wake of what we leave behind

Holy holy holy, gods of power and might
May heaven and earth be filled with our glory
Our perfect excuses for why.

Matt Mullins

The Age Of Reason

You dream of naked skin
against the water in us:

How we turn our faces to the air
like archer fish spitting glass beads

tasting gravity against our teeth.

We take this much deep with us
into the fathoms we breathe

into the planet's slashed magma
unstitched and still expelling

afterbirth: we stick our heads back
in to the heat. You explain how

skin and meat boil
away from the bone

what's left of us floats back
up in bits to be devoured

and carried around the world
forever in the bellies

by a thousand birds.

Matt Mullins

The Liar

The sick tongue of your
emotion's way flicks against
the taut flesh of lover-ghosts
and could-have-beens.

So afraid of self-betrayal
consequence and mislaid plans
how much longer can you go on
watching yourself slowly skinning

such a beautiful living thing as love?
Peeling the good, red flower
of flesh back, causing the bony
maw where there was only

once her honestly offered kiss.

God knows it's getting to you:

Those facial ticks and so much doubt
These arguments toward nothing.
The rattlesnakes of lightening
curled at the edges of her mouth.

And you, the one who set them there
even as they befriended her.
Knowing so little of your own soul
this was your life's

one true conscious sin:
Even as you speak these words
it's impossible
for you to mean them.

Matt Mullins

The Lightning And Us

Parked in our driveway, home after
spending the evening with good friends
grilling food and drinking beer: I'm staring
through the windshield at our house lit up
against the dusk while thinking of you
and the life we've tried to build here
in this Midwestern town with its late summer
storms and green tornado skies no different
from those hovering over those places where
we both grew up. I get out of the car, walk
through the opening bars of the oncoming rain
the distant overtures of thunder following me
up our slick steps where I stand fishing
my pockets for the key to our front door.
Slotting key into lock, I glance through the near
window and there you are, illuminated
and dissolving behind the smearing pane of glass
dancing to accordion music and sipping red wine.
I push the door open and say...

What I say to you as I enter isn't really important.
What's important is the way I've keyed myself in
to this music, the soft light of our kitchen and the idea
that right now I can't imagine us being anywhere
but here. Earlier as I lounged around
our friend's deck during the gloaming, drinking
and watching the late summer sun set somewhere
behind the warm, flat shadow-less light
of photographers' dreams, it was easy to imagine
us somewhere else living other lives
just as it was easy to explain to everyone why
you couldn't make it over today. They know
you're working too much these days, trying to do
all you can to hold up your end of our house
which opens itself to the storms we take in
on the porch, watching those distant illuminations
of lightening throwing their yellow-white
flares up against the horizon as we wait
for the following thunder. But tonight we don't

open the sliding doors wide and carry our drinks
out to the old couch on the porch.

We keep to the kitchen, talking music
and I find myself thick-tongued and trying
too hard to make myself clear
just like the punk band I stopped to catch
tonight on my way home was trying too hard
to prove their anger authentic.

Later, a kind of music still plays in our bedroom
a drumbeat of thunder I listen to
as I examine without my eyeglasses
the blurs of light that x-ray the bones of trees
through the curtains, and I think of how good
it is to have you with me in the dark. Once
actually, more than once, things in our past
have broken for us. We've failed at love
cursed each other's very names, betrayed
and were betrayed and still we came back
to this embrace, the two of us eye to eye
a nose's inch apart, the covers that shroud
the possibilities of everything that can happen
from the neck down withering away now
to the ankles locking us together inside this storm.

When we talk about having a baby
I imagine it will happen just like this: a slow start
that becomes a grappling, fierce but tender, a storm
rising as we rise in strobes of lightening
to the drumming of rain ripping through the leaves.
all of it so clearly orchestrated for us alone until
I realize those romantic, distant thunders are anything
but romantic or distant to someone stunned
by an explosion of shock and fire at their ground zero.
This is what I am thinking as I breathe what could
become someone's name into you: in that instant
before we are made we hear a sound in the atmosphere.
It's a sound without words, one we forget as soon
as we are born. But I want to imagine it must be
something like the ozone charging ahead of itself
in intangible waves gathering everything
that conspires to cause lightening to strike

the same place twice.

Matt Mullins

The Neural Firings Of The Eternal Starlet

They love me
this means I'm beautiful
because they love me
I'll always be beautiful
as long as they love me
I'll always be
because I'm beautiful
this means they love me
as long as I'm beautiful
I'm always becoming
because I'm starving
to be beautiful always
in love with the hunger
that proves I'm beautiful
because I am trying
to be less and more beautiful
with each pill I am taking
to become the one radiating
their love even as my life
dissolves.

Matt Mullins

There Are Quarters In The Ashtray Next To The Bed

She is twisted around me in the bedroom's green curtained shadow
all is limbs, hair, skin.

There are cars this morning, wheels, as always, sighing on pavement.
The chirp of birds. A world going from here to there.

Suddenly she is reaching up, turning on the bedside light.
She needs the phone, I'm told, to call Fufu, Chuck and John.

Who? I don't know or care. I roll away, curling into a corner
of the bed, a pillow over my skull as she licks at the skin on my spine

when somebody puts her on hold. She talks on and on
smiling, laughing, seemingly so interested in everything she's told

as she runs her finger up and down the muscles of my arm.
I sit up. There are quarters, a bottle cap, and a roach in the ashtray.

I'm still trying to think of the last time we talked for real
when she sets the receiver down, throws the sheet aside

rubs a hand along her stomach, over her breasts and asks me
what it is I'm thinking now.

Matt Mullins

To Each His Own

What hurts most is not your forgetting
that unforgettable tune,
but the searching, the impossibility,
of actualized need ruining itself
upon the sleeve of your stained
and most sainted shirt before
you've even learned the truth
of the first word:

Desire. Let's blame it all on this life
where broken shards of the past
fresco themselves into a future
as ephemeral as lightning leaving
us only the flash-lit instant
of present and the patchwork
of our memories, absolutely perfect
in their fading.

There is nothing more our own
than the human shock of it: Mortality
the irony of consciousness, the deepest
well filled only by those things
we crave but do not have
and can never hope to keep.
It's only natural that we put an ear
to the mouth of the well's black silence
after we've dropped in the wishing stone.

Pointless. Thoughtless. Who knows
where the truth of living lies?
Somewhere between the rippled
undulations of longing?
Who ordered these days lost inside days,
this echoed jumbling talk of hours?
And what is there to claim in the end
but so many minds taken surprise
by the quick-fuse of time.

I shall not presume to understand that

which seeks us out only to unfold us
toward a focused spasm of our own dissolution:
this need to pull pale and deep-soaked
creatures into the writhing light.

It comes from something holy, we must know.
A red dividing of desire that mandates us,
that brings the mantra: "I'll get mine."
"I'll get mine."

Matt Mullins

Vesper

Twilit silence strung between the spent
light and the darkness gathering

Broken by vows pulled taught at
the noise of long shadows echoing

Churned in the angry wake of a window
thrown wide to the teeth

Cast adrift above the insect chorus
feeding on this mistake of boxes

This is not the clutch of tarmac skinning
the parking lot, but her belongings

Hauled through the gloaming to a car
within earshot of their apartment

The mortification of two sieved by heat
fleshing out intangible pointing fingers

Or an evening bell sounding the betrayal
of all that is above the heart:

Crown, eyes, ears, neck, shoulder, lip,
mouth, tongue, all of them insisting

This is the toll of distance.

Matt Mullins

Visit To The Old Hockey Player's Home

They've all got busted noses
and only a couple of teeth between them
but still enough to tell the stories of the gloves
thrown to the ice, the bare-knuckle fights
the concussions, and the goalie's puck-shattered
cheeks: badges all of those days before the helmet
and the mask when real men played the game.
Now everything's gone soft and melting
They find themselves facing off across from Nancy
the nurse who they swear must be quite the hockey
fan with her breakaway ass and unstoppable
slap shot spinning pills right past their tender gums.
They try to joke with her about spearing
butt ending (donner six pouces!) or checking from behind.
She grins at them gently, tucks their blankets tighter
gives them applesauce and water, her power play
more tender than a mother as she glides quickly
past them down the home's glazed floor. Offside!
Charging! Holding! Tripping! Slashing!
No ref seems to hear their shouting and no one
has the legs or speed to check her going
bed pans balanced like a barmaid's trays
or all the Stanley Cups of better days
piled upon her outstretched arms.

Matt Mullins

Wedding Poem

Forget if you will the flowers
and gowns and suits of music;
forget the priest or rabbi
or judge and see only these
two coupled now before All, coupled
before the golden door
of their own future.

Look at them. Happy fools.
Beautifully ringed souls wearing a shock
more exact than their own skins, grins
Cheshireing up around their ears. It's obvious
they've come here to prove something.

So here we are, the Invited,
looking upon their proof, this bride and groom
and room full of well-wishers more than ready
to fling hopeful bullets of rice for the truth
of love's humanity. Relatives, friends,
human and flawed as we all are, we're with
those two up there at love's altar
though the truth of living
can make us a tough crowd to satisfy.

But this bride and groom, they're still willing
to take us on, willing to take on Time.
Willing to stand up and swear
that love is the first four letter word,
the deepest need that can do nothing
but awaken their separate bodies and minds
into the idea that two lives can be one
as much as two can be.

After Ceremony, at the party
or on the way there, but after we've seen
these two blessed and kissed and gliding past us
on scented carpets of air, we'll philosophize
simply: 'Wasn't that beautiful? '
'Isn't she beautiful? '

'Isn't he handsome? '

And of course we mean every word,
we always do; but champagned as we are
at seeing Ephemeral Life tricked out of fact
yet again, we still have no idea
what we're saying.

What we really mean to say is thank you
Bride and Groom for proving love's defense
against a life where so much can pass us by unrealized.
What we mean to say is thank you
for re-making the world's first miracle:
the birth of each watery, singular cell
into something far more complicated
and intoxicating.

Tonight these two must hear all this again
and again in different words, but what each
congratulation truly says, truly means and wants
is to take away the tux and gown
and lead them both slowly down an even path
with the wind at their backs then through
another golden door and into bed thirty years
from now, dreaming spooned inside their past,
arms flung around each other, breath as one.

Better yet, it wants to set them face to face,
a nose's inch apart, their eyes still pouring life
into each other, their bodies brushing to the touch
of a wind-turned branch against the bedroom window.
Thirty years married, and children sleeping
in the other rooms or no, all the beauty
and sadness of their years together rests along
the dark line of their bodies pressed together toward
that night which is proof enough of love
and what we're here for.

Matt Mullins

When The Painters Come

You once told me poetry
knocks on your door
at 6 a.m. and that flags
are killer when they fly
in the wind. You once told me
I needed to keep my shoes
on the porch and when
we were naked to look
look at that place where
my body entered yours.
You made yourself perfectly
clear through euphemisms
and I came know your period
as that week when
the painters come.

I don't mind that it is
left to me to remind you
of those nights before
you turned your back
on us and how I was there
as you rose up, still asleep
helping to guide your brushing
fingers over your arms as if
there could be no true
awakening until you
became certain that your own
skin truly was the Braille map
back from the land of your dreams.
I don't mind that my longing
for you was desperate and
misplaced and that your feelings
for me seemed to change
on a whim.

You've married. You have
kids now, maybe even
in their teens, a house in
the suburbs, I suppose.

No more cigarettes, beer
and weed, and I have no idea
if or when the poems come
to knock on anything
of yours. Last I saw of you
ten or so years ago
my band had just finished
the night's final set
at the most popular
bar in town. The crowd
had parted for me only
to reveal you standing
in the echo of our encore,
my lyrics, my guitar's
melody still ringing in
your ears. You seemed
surprised to see me
fully recovered and not
missing you at all.
You told me you loved
that last song.

Nothing has turned
out the way you or I'd
supposed
and the beauty of it all
is that this is fine
for both of us.

Matt Mullins