

Joseph T. Barbarese

Through the Windows at Walt's

for Dan O'Hara

Spaced yards apart, three windows look north through the limbs
of some sixty-foot tree where the birds rock

in whichever direction the wind takes. I scare them.
I walk to the window and the room clouds up

like the light-shafts my steps disturb, laid slant-wise
bright mophandles of sun up the walls of the shack.

The pigeons go belching overhead. Up on that roof
they march over halfballs and pick the straws out

of the pitch and the shingles and tar
while the jay's electric blue tailfeathers

stick straight into the sunlight like a thumb
pressed against dogeared day at the turn

into neighborhood nightfall. Did he live here
when he made that crack about great audiences

or was he just passing through on his way back to Germantown
to rebuild his life like a city? Did he mean great

in size, like the guy on the street does? Whether
preacher, peddler, lecturer, tinman, gopher, jogger, or what-

ever? Each making a private chautauqua from inside his inkwell,
his nails bruising the fruit as recorded bird-song

is piped in and he works out the same script
where identity sticks to the poem like the moon to the outhouse

door when Joe Common comes striding forth
like the sun from in back of the sunny outhouse

to enlighten the flight of the circling fowl
whose flights seem ripples the sun's exit made

when it burst into day like a brick — is that it?
Is the whole world the sheet that sheets our nakedness,

as we come on the world like its masterpiece?
Blots the identity safely? You whistle it up

and up it pops
like Bozo the Clown, from an inkwell: the toy

ambition yields fields of verbatim, a common
perfection Joe Common can listen to

while he numbers the links on your zipper
linking your grief to his.

But once upon a time, November, a Sunday,
everything having been canceled,

I walked south by myself
to Girard Park.

Sun hit the windows
flush, like today.

The mullions' shadows filled each pane with a cross
and each cross, filling shade after shade,

made a cartoon of graves. This dog moped around
and moped home after me. I shut it out

but twice its muzzle scraped my father's front door,
and twice I looked up from the caissons, the riderless

horse through an arm'slength of sunlight to the threshold
and twice it got dark . . . I found a broken and divided thing

months later, next to a stopsign, 22nd and Ritner.

Face up in the skid-mark that stopped at it
it was an exclamation point. Flies

thrashed and rose. The eyes stared at what an instant
nothing death is: it stared

up as if death
were sight right through the surface

of nothing to something much less; as if death,
when it comes to the spot that life makes in the world,

fucking its way into being, first rapes us good
then tosses the soul into our eyes

where it hangs like a sock on a mirror.
But the sun comes out, and the sun came out

and I saw how it was a bitch, saw how much she housed,
saw the treadmark steeply rounding her gut

past the spot where the flies clumped to feed on her asshole,
back up to the dot-puzzle that swarmed over her eyes

whose sights were the tunneling in and out flies,
gnats, fleas, the stick that snapped once

that it rot undisturbed, in the opener air,
how it stared! When it got dark

I went back to the park. She was half there.
Night steam came out of the cobers

from Ritner north to Passyunk, Croskey east to Front Street.
Dark interests recoiled behind their drawn shades

colored blue by the teevee's constancy
beating their grief into them

while my life mugged before me:
half a dog on a dark street, steam ghosts, fogged windows,

America's script roly-poly and cursive

traced in the angry flatness condensing
down the tall city's tiers of mourning —

two bodies mirrored in too many windows,
two common sights in the public dark,

The Dog knocked flat; Joe Common, erect.
When I look at those windows

I thought not of its stare,
but of all of those homes battened on power,

holding the grief like a breath in
from Front Street west to the Schuylkill, Smith Playground to South
Street,

Shunk to Croskey to Mole, Oregon up to Columbia
past the palace of ARCO my love for it dreamt for my city

past the Passyunk Avenue Bridge bent like a mantis
over the bend in the river,

where the sunlight trapped in the oil slicks mugs back at the night.