

Jane Kenyon, Circle of Voices December 4th

After an illness, Walking the Dog

Wet things smell stronger,
and I suppose his main regret is that
he can sniff just one at a time.
In a frenzy of delight
he runs way up the sandy road—
scored by freshets after five days
of rain. Every pebble gleams, every leaf.

When I whistle he halts abruptly
and steps in a circle,
swings his extravagant tail.
The he rolls and rubs his muzzle
in a particular place, while the drizzle
falls without cease, and Queen Anne's lace
and Goldenrod bend low.

The top of the logging road stands open
and light. Another day, before
hunting starts, we'll see how far it goes,
leaving word first at home.
The footing is ambiguous.

Soaked and muddy, the dog drops,
panting, and looks up with what amounts
to a grin. It's so good to be uphill with him,
nicely winded, and looking down on the pond.

A sound commences in my left ear
like the sound of the sea in a shell;
a downward, vertiginous drag comes with it.
Time to head home. I wait
until we're nearly out to the main road
to put him back on the leash, and he
—the designated optimist—
imagines to the end that he is free.

Christmas Away from Home

Her sickness brought me to Connecticut.
Mornings I walk the dog: that part of life
is intact. Who's painted, who's insulated
or put siding on, who's burned the lawn
with lime—that's the news on Ardmore Street.

The leaves of the neighbor's respectable
rhododendrons curl under in the cold.
He has backed the car
through the white nimbus of its exhaust
and disappeared for the day.

In the hiatus between mayors
the city has left leaves in the gutters,
and passing cars lift them in maelstroms.

We pass the house two doors down, the one
with the wildest lights in the neighborhood,
an establishment without irony.
All summer their *putto* empties a water jar,
their St. Francis feeds the birds.
Now it's angels, festoons, waist-high
candles, and swans pulling sleighs.

Two hundred miles north I'd let the dog
run among birches and the black shade of pines.
I miss the hills, the woods and stony
streams, where the swish of jacket sleeves
against my sides seems loud, and a crow
caws sleepily at dawn.

By now the streams must run under a skin
of ice, white air-bubbles passing erratically,
like blood cells through a vein. Soon the mail,
forwarded, will begin to reach me here.

The Blue Bowl

Like primitives we buried the cat
with his bowl. Bare-handed
we scraped sand and gravel
back into the hole. It fell with a hiss
and thud on his side,
on his long red fur, the white feathers
that grew between his toes, and his
long, not to say aquiline, nose.
We stood and brushed each other off.
There are sorrows much keener than these.
Silent the rest of the day, we worked,
ate, stared, and slept. It stormed
all night; now it clears, and a robin
bubbles from a dripping bush
like the neighbor who means well
but always says the wrong thing.

Let Evening Come

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

Otherwise

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.
At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

Gettysburg: July 1, 1863

The young man, hardly more
than a boy, who fired the shot
had looked at him with an air
not of anger but of concentration,
as if he were surveying a road,
or feeding a length of wood into a saw:
It had to be done just so.

The bullet passed through
his upper chest, below the collar bone.
The pain was not what he might
have feared. Strangely exhilarated
he staggered out of the pasture
and into a grove of trees.

He pressed and pressed
the wound, trying to stanch
the blood, but he could only press
what he could reach, and he could
not reach his back, where the bullet
had exited.

He lay on the earth
smelling the leaves and mosses,
musty and damp and cool
after the blaze of open afternoon.

How good the earth smelled,
as it had when he was a boy
hiding from his father,
who was intent of strapping him
for doing his chores
late one time too many.

A cowbird razzed from a rail fence.
It isn't mockery, he thought,
no malice in it. . . just a noise.
Stray bullets nicked the oaks
overhead. Leaves and splinters fell.

Someone near him groaned.
But it was his own voice he heard.
His fingers and feet tingled,
the roof of his mouth,
and the bridge of his nose. . . .

He became dry, dry, and thought
of Christ, who said, *I thirst*.
His man-smell, the smell of his hair
and skin, his sweat, the salt smell
of his cock and the little ferny hairs
that two women had known

left him, and a sharp, almost sweet
smell began to rise from his open mouth
in the warm shade of the oaks.
A streak of sun climbed the rough
trunk of a tree, but he did not
see it with his open eye.