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"What Was Expected," "Tomma and Sandy"

Joan Murray

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Two Poems

JOAN MURRAY

What Was Expected

It wasn't his ugliness that startled me. It was mostly
that he hadn't been expected, and when I flipped on the porch light,
he was eating from the cats' bowl, and when I tapped
the ice-etched glass, he looked up, the way the cats do,
and then he waited through that moment
of not knowing what was next —
as if I were Peter at the Gate, and it could go either way.
I tried to squeeze his opossum shape, his oversized
head and pointed snout, his dull black eyes and wormy tail
into the tidy image of a cat that I'd brought to the door with me.

And even though we gave it our best,
we realized, almost right away, that it was impossible,
and we had to pool our efforts and do what was
expected: I had to pull the door open — even though
the threat it made at that point was less than a child's bluff —
and once it had been done, he had to back away from the bowl,
giving up the incomprehensible gift he'd just come upon,
and slink down the steps — not quickly, mind you,
because he guessed, poor beggar, I wouldn't pursue him,
only leave him to his hunger and the dicey scraps of winter
as the stars did in December when he came.

But it wasn't as if I could lift the kitchen window and throw
a nickel or a dime to him, and watch him go away happy —
the way we did back in the fifties,
when the *beggars* — that's what my mother
called them — would come in winter
to sing in the backyards below our apartment windows
with their clear bright faces and beautiful voices
and the mystery of the coins ringing down from above

and rolling and skipping, and them bending and scraping
and tipping their hats and going away,
even though we weren't rich either.

No, he was more like the ones we'd come upon
in the places we were forbidden to go,
the ones our mothers called *bums* — the wild-eyed
grizzled ones, lying on their slit cardboard boxes
under the bridge ramps even in winter,
or raving along the tracks with their hands down their pants
because of the lice, or pissing in an alley as we ran through
and slowly turning midstream to call after us —
Have you got a nickel or a dime? — the ugly
ones, the ones who had no songs, the ones
with nothing to give us.

Tomma and Sandy

Across the pond this morning, there's only a folding chair
 with its back turned to the ice, and the pairs
 of footprints that stop there in the snow —
 where we saw them last evening from our window —
 how she leaned toward him, brought her face
 close to his, gathered his face in her hands,
 slid off the seat, knelt before him,
 closed her eyes. We saw her nodding —
 I told my husband we shouldn't be
 watching — the way she kept nodding —
 nodding and talking, it was almost
 too much, the way he kept looking up
 at her with his usual grin as if nothing
 were happening before we turned away

Later that evening, driving back from the sheep farm,
 we saw them together on the road.
 It was dark then, and she was holding
 onto him by the sleeves of a sweater,
 wrapped around his middle. I rolled the window
 down — I thought I should say something,
How's he doing? I tried with this juicy-fruit smile.
He's on his way out, she answered, she couldn't
 manage more, her voice was wrung
 out like a rag and he kept dragging her along,
 leading her where he was going with his usual
 grin, his coat, thick and golden, his tail
 sweeping side to side as if
 he had all the time in the world.