

Three Poems

Charles Douthat

First Hour

With the first child finally born
a nurse wrapped him in a stained sheet.
She was leaving the room to wash
and weigh him, to prick one pink heel
and squeeze for blood. Quickly then
the young man had to decide.
Go with his son for the satisfaction.
Or stay with a torn and empty wife.
It was his first full glimpse of freedom.
The broken water on the floor.
The toweled tray of used instruments.
A door opening to a hospital of doors.

Green

Some days I walk down the street
where we lived and the fat man
who stole tomatoes
sits under the same old sycamore
tapping out his angry rhythms
on the knotted roots. And though
the children are no longer ours,
the oaks are no less generous
to the sidewalks with their shade.
Overhead, sweet air still arrives
through many simple branches—
some reaching skyward for joy,
others downcast for a reason.

We were like good trees
the years we lived on this street.
We were so green. Fresh as leaves.
And the days whispered through us.

Going on this Way Living Forever

Before the betrayal were the years on Bradley Street.
Those lovely, lonely, stupid years with only odd jobs
and borrowed money and deep winters
we walked through happily together.

Always we were arriving early or at the very latest
on time, knowing no one in town yet
and having nowhere to go but the Italian corner market
where the owner gave us soft plums for the baby

and nectarines that spurted and juiced down his chins.
Our flat was below the turnpike and behind a hill.
Even the television reception was poor. Yet tomorrow
arrived each morning before breakfast, and yesterday left us

always with the rich taste of starting out in our mouths.
Most afternoons there was mail to wait for.
Having nothing, we were always expecting something.
The least little card or advertisement excited us

as if to those few, bright, thrift-store furnished rooms
a future would soon be brilliantly delivered.
No one could go on this way living forever.
Evenings, I started slipping out with my notebooks

to the old stone library on Elm Street.
In the main reading room near racked magazines
I'd sit at one end of a long scarred table, penciling out plans,
gauging my own reactions. From the high blistered ceiling

paint chips drifted down like leaves. I considered
every option. Leave you and the baby. Take my ambition
back to California or on to New York alone.
One day I spent half our rent on three dress shirts

and a blue suit at Sears. I threw out my notebooks
and for a year that rolled over me like a wheel
I'd jack up the car stereo and shout out the words
to "Thunder Road" on my way to work.

Darling, no one was listening.
No one will ever care about our lives as we did.
You must say what's carried you through.
For myself, I call it betrayal now

only out of this battered gratitude.
But for the lost days and their beauty
how would we know to recover?
What would we have to mourn?