

Dark Refuge

Poems by Edward Byrne

Whale Sound Audio Chapbooks
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For Alex and others with autism whose inspiration leads the way

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Summer Storm

Tonight, a summer storm brightens the sky,
striking with its quickly lit filaments of lightning
and moving through like that late freight train
traveling toward an early morning rendezvous
at a transfer station somewhere north of here,
barely beyond the state line. My son awakens, shaken
by the sudden thunder, the longer jutting limbs
of an old oak weighted with wet leaves scraping
against the vinyl siding running just underneath
the eaves. Already, a frustrated search for speech,
each word lost like the black surface of that little
lake now hidden behind his shut window shades.

On Learning of Our Son's Illness

The only sound we hear is that warm afternoon
wind still sifting through the long arms of elms
everywhere around us. We watch as our son
runs alone across the grass, his figure silhouetted
now against sunshine slowly dying in the sky
behind him. Our own shadows are lengthening
along the lawn, drifting like little splotches
of cloud cover, spotty knots of shade blotting
bits of landscape in that late light— as always,
eventually seeming to link us with everything
we can see until nightfall once more gathers
all together in the false security of its embrace.
Even in such darkness, as the three of us return
home, fears of what might lie ahead never disappear.

Night of the Diagnosis

Daylight faded to black hours ago.

Now, I notice a single star light

the summer sky the way one silver

earring glistens when a woman's

hand lightly brushes back her hair.

In this stillness, I sit and listen

to windless silence while my wife

and son sleep, the invisible vines

twisting like twine in the darkened

garden, where tomatoes and red

peppers continue their slow growth

unseen in an act that constitutes

some secret counter to the chaos

we will all witness with sunrise.

Dark Refuge

My son runs among the thick trees in this wildlife
refuge, and I'm amazed at his ability to maneuver
through the narrow gaps—leaping each obstacle
in the covered maze, jumping every exposed root
jutting up or fallen branch underfoot—leading
me through those limited openings as if he knows
where he is going, even though we have never
been here before. He seems unafraid of what lies
ahead. Birds chirp somewhere in the dark snarl
of limbs looming above us, then fly away unseen.
By the time we reach a wide clearing, I'm nearly
out of breath and in need of rest, but Alex appears
refreshed, ready to begin again. Without a word,
he rushes by me, back to that black web of shadow.

Lake Gulls at Daybreak

Again the daylight begins
 in stages as a vague sun gives way

to flames rising high behind
 that drapery of gray sky still shading

a smooth glaze of lake water
 tinted jade beneath it. A tattered

patch of flat pasture borders
 this shoreline, an edge of dead grass

aligned alongside the dunes,
 where white-winged gulls with ringed

bills fly by, lift, hover above
 in an onshore wind. I watch my son

run through a few shallow
 pools along the soft slope of beach.

Each time he reaches out
 toward the birds floating overhead

as if holding a bright new kite
 with tightening string, feeling every

bob or weave aloft, hoping
 he might reel one in before we leave.

Beneath Leaf Shadow

My son sits on one of the cement
benches beneath bulky shadows
of park oaks, again awaits the late
flash of sunlight that will angle
below those long lower branches
like a white page of stationery
secretly slipped under someone's
shut door. Leaves flutter above
like black moths with each breeze.
Alex enjoys the way he seems
to disappear in the darker corridor
of shade, as though no one will
know he's still there, staying safely
away from sight like some young
thrush tucked into its nest, just
knotted twigs, or as a cold hand
is hidden in the pocket of an old
coat, hoping for more warmth.

Insomnia

After a month of drought, the August
 lawns burnt brown under bright sunlight,

a few weightless clouds now drift by
 in a late afternoon sky. Already, parched

leaves of our backyard trees have begun
 to turn; each curls like a crisp bit of paper

placed a little above a flickering candle
 flame. My son shades his eyes to glimpse

the horizon, as if again awaiting tints
 he sees every evening hinting at the finish

of one more day. In his mind, Alex is
 measuring time by charting the sun's arc,

tracing its rate of descent beyond far
 lines of black trees, marking this brilliant

vision of backlit landscape to recall all
 these details in the darkest hours of night,

when he will fear the sounds he hears
 in dry winds blowing outside his window,

hoping to remember even those distant
 stones glowing like embers in a dying fire.

Seeking Inklings in an Old Video

He held mussel shells—indigo blue inside and black
on back—or those round pebbles he had

found rolling like dark marbles in the tidewater
wash, as if he had a handful of hard candy.

The wind's speed picked up, the sea shining behind
him, each wave displayed like a crinkled

sheet of tinfoil unfurled under that day's final
splay of sunlight. Every one of our son's

uneasy steps at the ocean's edge left an impression,
still refilling with water—little hints missed,

a lack of balance whenever he would lean to lift
another stick of driftwood as if the shoreline's

slant had suddenly become too steep, or the tipped
head and sideways glance he'd give us.

Today, those unsure moves that camera caught
appear uninvestigated evidence left behind,

even in this scene when the tape runs to its end.
He sits on the sand, back toward the shore,

counting out his collection of shells in a single file
as if pretending all of them were merely parts

of some private treasure, the way anyone might
arrange family keepsakes, jewels or gems

kept as heirlooms somewhere in a darkened drawer,
brought out for comfort in a time of grief.

Wind Currents at Dusk

New gusts rustle through the few
trees that edge our backyard fence.

Their thick branches shift slowly
in the wind with the strict rhythm

one might find in a chorus line,
as though a whole row of dancers

had been choreographed to move
in time with the mellow melody

of an orchestra's tune. A gray
haze of chimney smoke unfolds

and gently rolls over the steep
slope of our roof. It slips across

the darkening lawn disappearing
below, sifted by stippled patterns

of shadows in the trees. My son
watches all through his bedroom

window, counts each black leaf,
calculates the world around him.

Balloon Launch

My wife, my son, and I
 watch two dozen balloons launched

from the middle of a mud-filled
 meadow, each one rising like another

colorful sun suddenly added
 to the wide morning sky, shining

in bright reflection as it drifts
 into a slant of dawn light, reaches

toward farmland farther east.
 Every year we come here, hoping

to notice once more how
 these large objects float so easily

with even the slightest breeze,
 moving smoothly through the blue

fields above us, now cruising
 the wind current as quietly as those

final few scraps of clouds
 forging higher overhead, nothing

more than decorative remnants
 left over from yesterday's storm.

The Art of Memory

First he lists the digits, numerals
 tied together in his mind like ivory

beads for keeping count on a rosary.
 He knows intimately those figures

most cannot fathom, has memorized
 pi to thousands of places. We believe

he visualizes the numbers printed
 as columns of cuneiform characters

posed in pictures seen on a tinted
 screen, perhaps in the way Cezanne

celebrated nature's abstract gifts
 by suddenly delivering vivid imagery,

broad lush brush strokes imitating
 its right angles and the vibrant tones

or those blunt shapes of dull stones,
 discovering true hues of shrubbery,

finding bright lines of sunshine, light
 sliding over slopes of shadowy hills.

November Stillness

We do not speak, the quiet broken
 only by echoes of footsteps on a lone

trail, stones twisting between slim
 evergreens and beyond until unseen,

lost among a black patch, a mystery
 bit of thickets yet filling the distance

except for one line of light above,
 that cold flow of sunlight still rising

higher over everything, indicating
 the beginning of a new day—offering

a sharp contrast to this dark path
 we have entered—its bright opening

like a slit that finally might split
 the thin screen of silence between us.

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About the author

Edward Byrne is the author of seven collections of poetry, most recently *Seeded Light* (Turning Point Books, 2010). An eighth collection, *Tinted Distances*, will be published by Turning Point Books in 2011. He has also edited two anthologies of poetry, including *Poetry from Paradise Valley* (Pecan Grove Press, 2010). In addition, his essays of literary criticism have been published in various journals and book collections, including *Mark Strand* (Chelsea House Publishers), edited by Harold Bloom; *A Condition of the Spirit: The Life and Work of Larry Levis* (Eastern Washington University Press), edited by Christopher Buckley and Alexander Long; “Claudia Emerson: Literary Criticism” in *Poetry for Students* (Thomson Gale Publishing), edited by Ira Mark Milne; and *David Bottoms: Critical Essays and Interviews* (McFarland & Co.), edited by William Walsh. He is a professor in the English Department at Valparaiso University, where he edits *Valparaiso Poetry Review* and maintains a blog, *One Poet’s Notes*.

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Nic Sebastian’s work appears in numerous online poetry journals. She blogs at *Very Like A Whale* and is founder-editor of *Whale Sound*, an online audio poetry journal featuring her readings of the work of web-active contemporary poets. *Whale Sound Audio Chapbooks* was established in November 2010 and has also published:

- *Handmade Boats* by H.K. Hummel (<http://wschap1.wordpress.com>)
- *Studies in Monogamy* by Nicelle Davis (<http://wschap2.wordpress.com>)
- *Cloud Studies* by Christine Klocek-Lim (<http://wschap3.wordpress.com>)