

Renee Norman

New Westminster

I. Between the Walls, Dead Mice

in a navy wool coat
she unlocks her first front door
from out of nowhere
the realtor appears
solicitous apologetic
she longs to be alone
to take the first steps
without his sleazy regard
& only her unfriendliness
at last drives him away

the neighbour's son comes next
to offer help with boxes
she doesn't yet know
he will move away from his father's drinking
from his father's red-eyed watchfulness
with a shotgun
their bathroom window always open
too close to the back deck
she can hear this father cough
fart, pee, puke, aim
eventually she crosses all that out
with a lattice fence
the crisscrosses so close
not even light can pass through the tiny pinpoints
wood embroidery with a purpose

but that becomes the future past
this is the poem's present
when she does not realize
as she walks the echoing tiled hall
as she climbs the too-narrow stairs
to the attic rooms
childless
exactly who is empty
the self walking over red tiles
glued over self
grasping a shaky bannister
to find nails in between the grass
of the old shag rug
someone must have left them there
like leghold traps in the woods
when the vacuum floated over the shag
it would gulp one
seize up & die
the plug chewed away
by the venom of that careless leaving

whose stories gather like a hairball
in the corner of a broken tile?
bleed in the tip of a rusty nail?
linger in the smell of stale cigarette smoke
the yellow piss on blue rug
dead mice listen for them with skeletal ears
between the old walls

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where termites slowly eat their way
into homelessness
while lovers lie on shag beds of nails
feel the cold metal nakedness
of empty rooms empty hearts

she fills the living room with a bed
a fridge
the rug displays an orange juice stain
near the bedsheets
when florists peer into windows
see hardwood peeled back like orange skins
they assume no one lives there
as if only rooms of fine furniture & curtains
cribs
can breathe life into old houses
the gift enclosure card
sympathy for your loss
found wet by the curb
the only sign that someone sent cut flowers
to furnish all the emptiness

II. Outside, Trees & Hedges

in the strawberry patch she pulls weeds
aborts bean plants
which would have produced a second crop
if she'd known they had more in them
could carry to a second term
if he hadn't shouted from the bathroom window
yes, pull them
it's a lot of work, isn't it?
and are you building that fence because of me?

around the Japanese plum tree
ants swarm
more ants than she has ever seen in one place
some trees in the neighbourhood have trunks
painted white
the ants avoid these
have gathered here for a conference
(did she build that fence because of us?)
the plums are delicious
she feeds her swelling belly with their red flesh

until she can't taste the embryo in pieces
until she can't hear the dotted lines of ants
or see him carrying empty bottles out of his house
returning with brown bags bulging

over the hedge which divides
another part of the yard
a small girl swings
feet in the air
her mother clanks around in the kitchen
directs the girl in for supper
with a spatula
can be heard screaming over an expensive ring
the girl lost
this ring is ruby with 2 small pearls
dropped in the grass somewhere
a bright strawberry waiting to be picked

beyond the hedge
a woman in a wheelchair
hangs wash on a low clothesline
2 dish towels 1 baby bib
& a pair of men's shorts
her husband an ex-priest
looks over the hedge daily
checks the spaces in the lattice fence
the meat on the BBQ
the garden
& her swelling belly
one day he chops down the thick hedge
in a massacre of leaves
it is an unholy act

when the baby is born
the ex-priest exclaims over her fine features
the man who carries bottles & shotguns
does not notice the squalls of a newborn
& the ring
a thoroughfare for the ants
remains lost
in the middle of the neighbourhood