

DOROTHY BARRESI

SOMETHING IN THE HOUSE WAS BEEPING

Thank you for your ignorance, it said.
On my orders, my husband dismantled the coffee maker.
I toppled boxes of old insurance forms; I threw

cotton sundresses over my shoulder
like salt for summer's spilled luck.
Am I getting warmer?

No, it said, pre-, post-, and cold beep, beep
from the utility knife drawer or
secretest pleats of the linen closet.

From smoke alarms I pulled perfectly good batteries—
batteries with something still left
to contribute. The clock radio

wore a fright wig of wires
when I was finished with it.
Dusk pulled night's covers to its chin.

Ants, oblivious, divvied up the season and carried it off,
crumb by dumb crumb,
while the screech owl that last spring aspired to eat our puppy

sat like a Buddha on the telephone cable
contemplating what was, by then,
two beeps:

one throbbing murder in my new dental work, the other
one distant and forlorn as my lost
first communion watch.

Does my husband drink too much red wine in the evenings?
Will I ever be capable of genuine closeness
with anyone?

A beep is a germ, a wink, a ticking intimacy, an auditory
pill to take for nerves
if you can take it—nerves ending and nerves beginning

all over again.

Where are you? I shouted at the air.

I'm in the backyard, my husband called. You should see the stars!

A truck in my brain backed up, beeping.
My sandbag heart banged against the upright bars: I was
in this alone, trying to pry open my son's PlayStation 2 with a pair

of toenail clippers. My handsome son,
who no longer bothered to hide his face
when he rolled his eyes at me.

What specialist, what exterminator could I call this late
to solve the problem of my authority
over nothing? What would it cost me?

Then, nothing. Silence—
complex, baffling, as though
a once-bright beast, a shaggy, munificent god had turned

a cold shoulder to the whole
lousy property, and I turned fifty.

STEREOTYPE

When a man is afraid of dying
 he opens up a sports car on the interstate
 to zero-out his doom and his *vita diligentissima*
 suddenly, under a smear of stars
 with all their hot mouths open, hoping—*half* hoping—

to trade the angel of incident
 for the angel of accident, and burning in that breach,
 be honored.
 The half of him that doesn't know a thing.

But a woman stays local,
 turns on the body.
 Seen from behind she's a teenager swaying True Religion jeans
 past downtown shops and cab stands
 with her hair swinging waist-long capitulations
 brown to blonde, her middle
 unmuddled by motherhood, she's in no hurry,

her gold sandals
 toy birdcages she must balance
 perfectly on, weighing pain against her need, in the end,
 to whisper
 “you have treated me like thieves of mercy,”

to death's sneering gang of cabana boys.
Luxe, calme, et volupte.

But catch her in a moment's profile; you'll see

something in her has worn down
to the regular leather of her age. Toppled kingdoms
and the days winebitten, the nights hard, hard. And cold.

All my life I have tried to outrun humiliation.
All my life, the pimple, the stumble—panties showing—
the inability to find a word, or, fumbling, word found,
grotesquely mispronounced. Found out:
I thought I would just die!

Then the bracing resuscitation of my mother's kiss, chiding me
alive though she herself
is dead—
“Dorothy, don't be ridiculous.”

When I am afraid of dying, a lesser fear,
I go to Las Vegas or Palm Springs
and make sport of the men in loud cars, and the teetering
worn women
cinched into bustiers,

and see them only for their grand ridiculousness
so whisper cruel, witty things
for my husband to hear, until such a superior pleasure
fills my hipbones
I float above the boulevards, past the sequined casinos
and loose-slot leprosariums,

feeling a little lighter, a little stronger
for the exercise.

You don't have to love yourself very much
if you can trick someone else
into loving you.

That's what most of us are betting on.
That's the hope that quickens me.