

The Onlookers

By WILLIAM MEISSNER

We gather, we become
a crowd. It is our choice, our duty to stand
near the curb, to imagine the steel
folding like tin foil in a fist.

We arrived just a minute after it happened,
even before police car doors
thumped dully as coffin lids.
At first, the insides of our stomachs felt
something that wanted to quiver,
the way a severed hand would
when wrapped tight in plastic.

We glance at each other's faces
and see a red light pumping its blood,
rushing blindly across foreheads.
We do not know anyone's names, they are strangers;
yet somehow they are all our friends.
They were pulled here by the same thin tongue
that brought us. The burning feeling: to look at things
we don't really want to see,
to hear the hissing engines, a sound
like a python with its mouth stuffed full
with plastic bags.

Could we just as easily have been
somewhere else, watching
the noose hug a man's throat on a town square
or a witch eaten alive by a ring of flame,
while someone in the back row snaps
their fingers, a man's bones cracking
beneath the weight of
cast stones?

The thought almost occurs
that we might have stood
at the edge of the accident
for two thousand years.

We circle the two autos
that stand surprised, a frozen explosion

of metal, and we join hands
with one another.

We could stay here
for days,
each of us
witnesses to our own deaths.

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Friday Night Television

I am kneading my own blood
into pink clay.
As I knead, I ask myself: where
does the knife blade glisten
like a white eye with no eyeball, like
madness? Madness crawling like a blue glow
under the logs of junked cars,
between cracks in sidewalks, filling up
dimly-lit telephone booths, squeezing itself
like an electric worm through high voltage wires,
spreading thinner, waiting invisible between
the layers of plate glass,
beneath the silver coatings of bathroom mirrors.

We ask ourselves: who has been killed? Who is guilty?
Who drinks blood and laughs?

We mold the clay skin of our own hands
into the shape of a cup.
We drink the grey speechless water
of dead men's dreams.

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