

BARRY DEMPSTER

Visitations

Jehovah's Witnesses show up at my door,
a fumble of childish knocks, conditional
yet eager, a matched pair of anxious smiles
that know anything to do with soul
is a serious affair. Could Jesus have become
a timid middle-aged woman named Pat
after all these years? Is everything truly
possible, or is that just a huge cosmic excuse?
A shudder in North Korea makes me want
to open wider, but my left foot takes over,
a wedge between two fears. My stomach muscles
grip ribs, trying to hold limits in place.
I smile like the damned do when they're caught
with holes in their hearts. *Sorry*, I say,
apologies for dead angels, for physicists
and their energy hives, for a street still trembling
with slammed doors. Who would let God
into their house knowing how uncivilized He can be?
The Boy Scouts, the Avon lady, the spiritual brigade—
a parade of temptations to believe we're not alone.

That very night, I fumble with my car keys
in an almost empty parking lot, a shiver of danger
slipping through my chains. If fate were a mugger,
I'd hand over who I am in an instant, an identity
exchange. The villain could have my bracelets,
my brain cells, my photo I.D. But what would I do
if it turned out to be death himself, if trinkets
simply weren't enough? I'd stare at his full-

body frown the way North Koreans watched
 their nuclear haze, knowing that nothing
 would ever be the same again. Where's Pat
 when I need her, a spiritual intervention, someone
 to explain that misery doesn't always want to end?
 I knock on the car door lock, praying that luck
 let me in. I'll be safe behind the wheel, back
 in control, death left behind with an oil smear
 and a scent of burning rubber. I won't even
 notice the shimmer in the passenger seat,
 that bit of doubleness, guardian or creep, an energy
 that exists in spite of my constant self-denial.

Arriving home to meet another bedtime,
 a fleeting sense of safety as I wash and brush,
 the mirror avoids a full-on gaze, already
 knowing that a blue stranger lurks within.
 But what did Pat see when I creaked open
 my front door, what did God glimpse with His
 trespass glare? An energy on the verge of exploding?
 Unhappiness contaminating everything it looks at?
 I see soul like a little smear of steam, breath being
 all there is to the trick. I see cheeks and lips,
 mere appendages that a lover might want
 to grip or sip, but are otherwise ordinary visitations.
 I see a man who still longs for salvation,
 a transformation that can bend reality
 into a brand new plan. Reaching out,
 knuckles poised, I knock a little tune to this copy
 of myself. *Anyone there?* It feels like
 I'm touching the final flesh, and being touched.
 If a door were suddenly slammed,
 I'd lose so much more than fingers.