

9.

## Small Story Prompt

The prompt is to tell a small story from your past, a memory of your own or something told to you, but tell it in such particulars as to make it luminous. Allow your poem to move beyond the circumscribed incident. Start with the story and let the story deliver you to something wider. Deliver the wider vision in image not in statement.

### A Small Story

When Mrs. McCausland comes to mind  
she slips through a small gap in oblivion  
and walks down her front steps, in her hand  
a small red velvet pillow she tucks  
under the head of Old Jim Schreiber,  
who is lying dead-drunk against the curb  
of busy Market Street. Then she turns,  
labors up the steps and is gone . . .

A small story. Or rather, the memory  
of a story I heard as a boy. The witnesses  
are not to be found, the steps lead nowhere,  
the pillow has collapsed into a thread of dust . . .  
Do the dead come back only to remind us  
they, too, were once among the living,  
and that the story we make of our lives  
is a mystery of luminous, but uncertain moments,  
a shuffle of images we carry toward sleep—  
Mrs. McCausland with her velvet pillow,  
Old Jim at peace—a story, like a small  
clearing in the woods at night, seen  
from the windows of a passing train.

Peter Everwine

from Notes from a Journey Section 3:

Last night the beautiful  
woman in whose house I stayed  
told of finding a prostitute  
half dead of exhaustion in the street  
unable to speak  
and bringing her home and putting her  
into the woman's own bed  
she said  
and in the looking and seeing a light  
coming from the bed and from the figure there  
a gold light that filled the room with blessing  
and no one was there in the morning  
what am I to make of such a story  
having been given the same bed

W.S. Merwin  
from *The Rain in the Trees*

A child stood on his seat in a restaurant,  
holding the railing of the chairback  
as though to address a courtroom.

"Nobody knows what's going to happen next."

Then his turning-slide back down to his food,  
relieved and proud to say the truth,  
as were we to hear it.

Coleman Barks  
in *Prayers for a Thousand Years*  
edited by Roberts and Amidon

At Mayberry's wild party,  
some drunken friends  
raided his refrigerator  
and ran away in a laughing crowd  
to hunker behind a stone wall,  
then noticed Mayberry  
hunkered there among them,  
chomping on a chicken leg  
he'd stolen from himself.

jch 1970's

## Encounter

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.  
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.  
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,  
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

Oh, my love, where are they, where are they going  
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.  
I ask not in sorrow, but in wonder.

(Wilno, 1936)

Czeslaw Milosz

Translated by Milosz and Lillian Vallee

In *The Collected Poems*