Substitutes

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To A Despairing Friend

by Ellen Feinberg

You have not lived long enough
To know the silent length of death

You think death will cleanse and cauterize
Like fire, burning off your impurities
And leaving your parched bones glistening.

(But the dead moult their skin like feathers
And their flesh blurs into the damp earth)

You seek order in plotted rows
And companionship in caskets nestling together,
Pressing together into the same earth.

(But the dead are as separate as stars,
Their closeness only the perspective of distance)

You must see the time—which may yet come—
Unfilled, and pass away fulfilled.

Substitutes

by Karl Schilling

Between the time grade school lets out for the day and
the time Kevin's mother comes home, there is an hour.
Often a part of it is spent erasing the blackboard and beating
erasers. Sometimes he is moderately bad for the privilege.
But Billy has the job today. So Kevin goes straight home.
Kevin enters the house and puts his lunch box on the counter, where it is supposed to be so his mother doesn’t have to look for it in the morning. He goes out back to a small lawn, distinguished from the others only by a very large tree. The tree is too large for the lawn but it gives too good a shade to be removed. Besides, Kevin likes it. At first he was afraid of it because it was so big, and it had a branch that sometimes rubbed against his window at night. But his fear ended when his father had told him the way to tell a friendly tree from an unfriendly one. You put your hand on it, and if the tree warms to your hand, it likes you and will be friendly.

Kevin puts his hand on the tree and his cheek against it, and the tree warms to him. He feels the bark, and it’s warm now and scratchy and rough like a man’s cheek. It would be a good tree today.

Kevin jumps up and catches the bottom limb and pulls himself up. The limb is a very strong one but flexible as if it were held by muscle. Kevin stands on the branch and grabs the next, then bounces, whispering upsdy daisy, upsdy daisy, upsdy daisy, upsdy daisy, upsdy daisy. . . .

Kevin tires and walks the limb back to the trunk and sits in the rough lap and puts his cheek to the trunk, and the tree warms to him again. And Kevin imagines a time of stories before the trip upstairs on strong shoulders. “One thing was certain, that the white kitten had had nothing to do with it—it was the black kitten’s fault entirely. For the white kitten. . . .”

Kevin realizes he is becoming sleepy so he stands on the limb again. It wouldn’t do to fall asleep in a tree. You can fall. Even the friendliest trees won’t prevent a fall. They’re very neutral that way. And mother will be home soon. And she likes to have her big boy welcome her, and maybe be cook by putting the T.V. dinners in the oven.

Kevin walks out, almost to the end of the branch, and bounces. Upsdy daisy, upsdy daisy, upsdy daisy, upsdy daisy. . . .