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Steven Cramer

These poems represent three tendencies in my writing. "First Snow" strives to be naturalistic, to describe something that happened as clearly as possible and state for the record as honestly as possible how I (the speaker) reacted. If the speaker (me) comes off as a bit of a jerk, so be it. "I Wanted to Write a Poem . . ." at first tried, and failed, to behave like "First Snow"; that is, I labored to describe what I saw at the Tate. Early drafts lay inert on the page, needing some other dimension. Two things happened that allowed me to complete the poem: first, I owned up to my struggle to write it, which gave the description an emotional impulse; second, I found myself swerving into the Paolo and Francesca story. It's not for me to judge whether these elements--especially the reflexivity of a poem "about" itself--succeed, but I will say that I've never understood the taboo against "poems about poetry"; writing poems is something poets do often (or should). How can it help but form a crucial subject for them? "Untitled Events," I hope, creates a mood--paranoia, mainly--while leaving the narrative context for that mood up for grabs.

STEVEN CRAMER

Untitled Events

The river iced over to a black stripe
overnight. A half-mile off, shouts
from the hospital: people hurrying
across the frozen park, the sky a blue
so dull it's barely a color. Women lie awake
next to men who've shared their beds for years.
Before the playground's dirt hardened,
the Turner boy dug rows of holes with a spade.
Men cross the street to avoid scaring women.
Some keep notes. Some write letters
and numbers in sequences. The sky turns white,
naked, veined. You described the atmosphere
as poison taken in with every breath.
Knots of people, nodding, on each other's porches—
everyone expecting to get through the night
without waking up as news.

First Snow

If he'd killed her, it would've been her fault
was my first thought the night Hilary stepped
backward into the path of a passing van.
Outside Peking Garden, Charlotte straddled

a stone lion's neck, ordering me to *watch, Daddy,*
watch, as Hilary locked our car, then dangled
then troubled then jammed her keys into her bag—
a fiddling diffidence with life's kid-proof caps,

its Allen wrenches versus Stillson wrenches,
its menus, its remotes, that drives me wild, finds me
hectoring her, joylessly, to *look, will you? Look. . .*
The lion's mane glared with ice. Thus,

I stood in a half-turn on the curb, swerving
van, its horn blasting, about a forearm's length
outside the future Hilary had nearly turned
to fate, threads of breath rising over her face—

beautiful at this stage in her aging—the driver
possibly cursing *stupid bitch*, low beams peering
askew into the warp of white flakes, first snow
to accumulate this winter, with more predicted.

I Wanted To Write A Poem About The Blind Group Permitted To Touch *The Kiss*.

I started writing the poem by trying to
get right how their practiced hands

branched, like ivy, along the calves,
knees, thighs. Her breasts, his trunk.

And because the lovers are both lovers
and lovers embracing sin—Paolo’s right

palm on Francesca’s hip, the curve of
their spines exposed—I tried to fit

in my dream of Hell, sweating wind
buffeting Satan’s leaves from his yard

into mine; my penalty to rake eternally.
It didn’t fit. Then I wanted to add

what some say we do the moment we
first see *The Kiss*: a fast glance over

our shoulders, thinking: anybody
watching me? The Book of Lancelot

and Guinevere drops from Paolo’s
fingertips: a romance Francesca calls

a pimp. I wanted my poem to end
with the scrabbling hands that found

the book, felt it, then tried to reach
the kiss. But *The Kiss* isn’t a kiss. It’s

the instant her husband, his brother,
interrupts, just as their lips don’t touch.