

Not There **by Maxine Scates**

Sometime late at night
around 11:05 when I'm watching the local news
reporting traffic accidents and meth lab busts
and the reasons for the smoke that has sealed
the city in a breath-ending autumnal haze
in mid-summer, I cannot lift myself –
I'm not there. Then it could be any year,
but probably the early sixties, '63 or '64, a Friday
night, I'm watching Johnny Carson or Steve Allen
or maybe Jack Paar and Judy Garland who is swinging
her legs from a stool, half-singing, half-crying. The jets
are screaming overhead and in the intervals
after they pass the neighbors are arguing again
and it doesn't matter which house because they all do:
Big John and his nameless wife, Julia and Ted,
The Smiths, Rosie and Bob, or Lynne and Jack,
the ex-Hell's Angels who have settled down
with their four kids. They all pretend they can't hear
what the next is yelling but I'm the one who hears
nothing. My mother is sleeping and my father
has left for good and all the years I was not there
when my father was are gathered in the haze
of aftermath, of disconnect and I'm still not there,
the way kids aren't when they can't do anything
about what is happening so instead watch the bird
dissolve into the corner of the ceiling as nothing
continues to happen, certain everything has happened
before them as I know everything has happened
before me. And all of it, the war, the harm my parents
visited upon each other evenings after work,
and the long days of the weekend, has left me untouched,
a miracle, living in a sheath of numbed, stunned light
I will wear years into the future I cannot yet imagine
where I will overhear a woman in a drugstore
telling the pharmacist how a drunk driver has killed

her child and though I am sorry and understand she hates
all drunks I know I am not the drunk who killed
her child. I am not there or even trying to be. But
soon I will awaken knowing I have been absent so long
I am in danger of never returning, and then I do begin
to wonder where I have been and all I can tell you
now is that time has not begun. And though I can't
explain how it did maybe some clock slowly began
to wheel when I did remember how one night
I let the steering wheel slide out of my hands, the car
beginning its slow drift toward the slough, just
for the sake of seeing how it felt, maybe for the sake
of ending the not-thereness. But mostly I don't feel
that way anymore – just those few minutes late at night
when I am tired and for a moment outside and then
life resumes in a kind of flooding that I recognize
as my lifetime, broken as anyone's, the pieces floating up,
the one that knows I could have been that drunk,
the weedy smell of the river in late afternoon, the crickets
humming the day's small aches and pleasures in this,
my present – which if I've learned anything, I've learned
is never possible without the past.