

Making It to Columbus

by Kevin C. McHugh

It's morning. And we both avert our eyes.
She has left and so we eat cold cereal alone,
father and son, as we have done before. Things change.

At twenty-two you are no more my child
but no less my son and so I ache to take your pain
and wash it down like the black and bitter decaf
I drink because I am fifty-six and take it instead,
like my Kashi with soymilk and prunes.
A poor replacement for the real thing.

So we sit here in silence, taut as high-tension wires,
and I swallow my impulse to embrace you as I did
and we sit, with only the syncopated swipe of spoon
breaking our silent fast, waving away my would-be words.

But when I let my eyes trespass upon your place,
I note as well how other things seem, more and less,
to stay the same: you, still with your Cheerios drowned in milk—
though today I see them all as tiny “Oh”'s, circles of sorrow
as I witness you going through the motions, blind and by heart,
and so I wish them away and out of your misery.

Still you share the room with me; still you eat and so
I find comfort in that fact, and in our memories,
the painful equation of heartaches shared
at different times together, the cup of human consolation.

“I’m going to Columbus,” you say at last, the silence fractured.
“I need to get out of here. Not here, this house. But here.”
The words tumble from your lips and shatter like glass
upon a cold tile floor, each shard an instant artifact of loss.
But I know what you mean, and I take heart and no offense,
and then seek solace in the old cliché that life, indeed, goes on.

I fight a father's well-intended urge to tell a family tale,
knowing just as well that it and I would be rebuffed—
how your grandmother, too, had driven hard to Columbus,
always alone and through the mourning's blinding sun.
“I grip the wheel, say a prayer to St. Jude* and I drive”—
her answer to my protests as I sought to parent her a way to safety.

For you, that was long ago, but for me (and too soon for you)
the years, like rigid schoolmasters, soften all in the hindsight of age.
“Did your mother—did she make it to Columbus?”
asked an older, wiser poet-friend*, knowing full the answer.

I would, at first, have denied you both your journeys,
but now I see that you, my son, will make it to Columbus, too—
and on your own.

***St. Jude**—patron saint of lost causes

***poet-friend**—poet Howard Nemerov