

Bill's Boiler

by John Grey

Up before dawn, walking the six dark blocks
to the mill, lunch-pail thumping against his thigh,
his wife dead.
And he was walking through her dying,
the cracked asphalt beneath,
the unlit houses on either side,
the brick monster emerging from the weeds
at the end of the lane.
He was breathing her last breath,
chilly and damp.
He was hearing her last heartbeats,
the clip of old shoes on sidewalk.
The wind was her groan.
The creak of her crippling arthritis
was the swing of the rusty mill gate.
Nothing could live until he opened up
the back door, stumbled down the cellar steps,
flicked on the light, started up that wretched boiler.
Until radiators kicked on, all through the upper floors,
the town was nothing but a corpse, awaiting burial,
and he, the very last undertaker,
in the same blue overalls he wore to every funeral.
But the room warmed up,
the early morning crew straggled in,
there was movement, activity, somewhere above him.
He settled back in his chair,
selected a well-thumbed magazine from the stack,
read the same stories, looked at the same pictures,
he did every day.
His wife dead, this was how he remembered her.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *That*, *Dunes Review*, *Poetry East* and *North Dakota Quarterly* with work upcoming in *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Thin Air*, *Dalhousie Review* and *failbetter*.

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