



Second Story

poems

Mark Cunningham

a right hand pointing
web chapbook

www.righthandpointing.com

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42opus: "Starfish," "Comb"

Fourteen Hills: "Sink"

HazMat Review: "Bannister"

Jabberwock Review: "Sheet"

Los: "Space Beneath the Bed"

Right Hand Pointing: "Pockets," "Thread," "Box"

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Bannister

A tree cut down is supposed
to keep you from falling. Yet
it tempts you to climb,
thus--. The old and the weak

can't help themselves. They
walk to the ledge, lean
straight into it. Others stay back,
or stroke the waxed pole

the way you check some living
thing that might slip away.
Is it really a jungle out there?
No, that's all been cleared.

But inside is still partly forest.

Pockets

Quarters change into nickels. Whole
keys, half of phone numbers: gone.

At times, there's a special place for a watch.
Time vanishes, but never completely.

Only your name doesn't change,
though you put the card in again and again.

Remember Clarke's claim: a science whose laws
you don't grasp appears to be magic.

Black holes draining energy from small objects.
White holes spitting out lint.

Shower Curtain

A downpour spews
the moment you step behind.

And this gives no shelter.
The earth reels round the sun:

you make the longest trips
without moving much.

In time, too. Naked, tool-less,
you stand beyond the social veil.

For hours after you come back
no clothes can stain you.

Comb

The first was a fish skeleton.
But you don't want
the top of your head

to dart and shift
without cease. So
the comb is made

of molded plastic.
So it's more human.
Now you're in a slowness

race to see which
will last longest,
your hair or its teeth.

Mirror

"In the mirror it's Sunday."
Tomorrow will be Sunday, too.
Always around the mirror:

Sunday. Break its reserve,
cross to where what was left
is found, what was wrong

righted: a shattering as of anti-
matter meeting matter and,
miracle voiding all laws

of physics, you're in roughly
the same spot, bleeding from
only a few more scratches

than if you hadn't moved.
You ruffle shards from your
hair. Try to bend: you

give up at once. Now you're
alone, and still you have to
stand a little more stiffly.

Sink

but it doesn't. It outlasts stubble and dreams and
spit, even in cold-water motels in Montana. In half-
demolished buildings it still juts from the wall on the
fourth floor, bared to the rain. You cup your hands
in imitation, for a moment search for a steadying
light, a no change, then as water drains from your
face you open your eyes. Find your reflection.

Soap Dish

You have to scrub, scrape, scour.
Usually it is the dirtiest thing.

Faulty planning: a small boat

that carries its pond inside.
Of course that makes the soap leak.

A mess is always transitive.

Leave the water running: you
need to wash your hands again.

Space Behind the Door

Where heat separates from light,
light from heat. You're not sure
if you're more afraid of finding

your shadow or missing it.
Space stays still for a small
constellation, maybe triangulum,

visible mostly when your
own breath can blind you.
You wish it would

free you from its pull.
But if your wish is granted,
that means. . . .

Leave the door open
and anything can come
in. Close it

and you engulf
the room. Sooner or later
you go someplace else.

Mirror

You see the vase on the table, then the table's right foreleg, then the shadow of its left back leg: you catch one thing, but miss all others. Glance at the mirror, recall how in a movie somebody passes through a mirror that is really water, and--what was that flash? Have a memory, and you miss the present. Have another, and you miss another present. Soon all the presents that were a blank become the past, so your memory is a blank: nothing, Alzheimer's.

And right now's now? Light reaches you almost without delay. You watch the wall. You watch yourself. But not even the mirror's reflection is instantaneous.

Band-Aid

When one puts down its ear flaps, part of you, red and chafed, starts out into the cold.

It's riddled so the wound keeps breathing. If the wound keeps breathing, you keep breathing.

Wear one on New Year's Eve: both sides joined with a pillow in the middle. Resolution

after resolution. Still, you've only scratched the surface. Your blood keeps leaving you. What's the matter with you?

Box

When things go wrong, you have a practice room, a model of how to behave. Carton books when their messages bore; realign the yin and yang of shoes when they get under, rather than on, the feet. But be careful. Leave something inside too long and presto!--mildew and silverfish. Even at your most ambitious, aim for less than magic, say a shift in varieties of the mundane. B. F. Skinner used a box to teach pigeons to play ping-pong and pace in figure eights.

Starfish

Dreams that no matter what button you push, the floors keep flicking past, 33, 34, 35, that you're walking on a long bridge, no land in sight, cars passing closer and closer as you near the vanishing point, which does not recede--this is the star for their wishing, voices warping as it pries the calcium shell, digesting and eliminating in the dark. It sits on its table. Imagine biting it--creme wafers. The brittle sweetness you got after school as a reward.

Sheet

Neither cocoon nor web,
but it swaddles newborns
and newdeads. You're

not that blank: more
rational, stronger,
you've cleared squirm room.

Yet when you wake,
your arms snagged,
your legs wound,

you've left billows
and pulls damp
from pleasure, from fear.

Even if your head
isn't cowled,
contact leaves hauntings.

Space Beneath the Bed

Clump dust, flat dust, hair--
the dehydrated shadow
of the fust bracking
under your tongue

as day after day
you explain what
you want. Every
night, you sleep on it.

Thread

A maple leaf, newly unraveled
at the end of its branch, rides

and jolts in muscular gusts.
The pumping of your heart

keeps you awake. Roof vents
whirl and whir. You get up

to write another note. A cloud
slides across the quarter moon.

Your eyes sag, heavy
as damp canvas. Just before

your eyes close, a floor scrubber
late on her way home bends

and picks up a scrap of thread lying
in the exact outline of the cloud.

Pillow

Sleep mumbles, rolls--
or sprawls mute. Never
inert, it still doesn't make it

all the way to life.
And so this death mask:
featureless, never hardening.

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Flashlight

There's not enough light
to do all that's needed,
so Edison figured out

the electric bulb; but
after you're done with that
you still have to get up

and find the bathroom.
You blaze the torch, but
it's you burning, burning.

Or you just need to
turn down the furnace.
Hours after you thought

you were finished, the last
trail of shine leads to this:
you click off the beam

and see farther and farther
through what you took for
darkness but is only night.



Mark Cunningham received an MFA from the University of Virginia, and still lives in the Charlottesville area. Poems have appeared in a number of magazines, including *Paragraph*, *BathHouse* and previously on *Right Hand Pointing*. A selection of poems on parts of the body is on the *Mudlark* website. The poems here are from a manuscript of poems about (mostly) household objects.