

Mark Jarman

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*The Prayer Chain*

Mother's on the telephone, forging a link  
In the prayer chain, a tub of suds  
And dishes steaming in the sun-white sink.  
And I wonder if the twisted phone cord

Is part of it. But she explains  
That someone in the church is ailing.  
And she calls to start a chain  
Of prayers. She tells me this with feeling.

A cloud has dimmed the kitchen. Her face  
Hardens with conviction. Once the chain  
Is forged the call will come back to our place,  
The closing link, the praying done.

This is circa 1961,  
Redondo Beach, South Bay Christian Church.  
I wonder if there's still such a thing  
To pull the suffering into the reach—

Of what? Those links in the prayer chain?  
For wasn't it the casting of  
A spell, the binding of a span  
Of power? They would have called it Love,

Believers with this one sense of magic,  
Stringing the gold of faith from voice  
To voice. Like Rimbaud. Or like Blake,  
Beholding the dreaded tyger in its throes.

But that's not what they thought, surely,  
Or what she thought. And yet the chain

Reached from earth to heaven, really,  
Like the chain Milton imagined,

Dangling planet earth like a bauble.  
Their chain reached to a husband's  
Cancer, a widow's broken hip, and hauled  
Forth out of the depths, hand over hand,

The out-of-reach dying, the fallen-  
And falling-to-pieces. You might shrug  
At this quaint belief and its presumption,  
Unless you'd felt, as they each had, its tug.

## *Yggdrasil*

Five years old and strayed  
    Beyond permission, I stood  
In the eucalyptus and heard  
    My name, magical, dreadful,

Singing with surprise,  
    Called by a neighbor who recognized  
My crime. Holding me half concealed  
    Above the highway, the World Tree

Showed me all the world it held,  
    Fields where sprinklers twirled  
Like dervishes, the coast hills crested  
    With plumes of fog,

The highway running free.  
    I ruled the unclimbable air  
Above this adult and still cannot  
    Forgive her, whoever she was.

Proud to expose my deed  
    Before my mother, she made me  
Confess, in the twilit kitchen,  
    And accept my punishment.

And though I did climb down  
    Into my life, that princeling  
Still regards her from his tree,  
    And when she calls, he still will not reply.

## *Catch and Release*

By the scientist's front door  
An azalea, memento  
Of a term in college catching  
Field mice under redwoods among  
Azaleas, to study traits  
Of families, their range among  
Azaleas. Now she has one  
Flowering yearly by her front door.  
Pressure of the lab, of funding  
Overheads and uncommitted  
Assistants, yet the azalea  
Greets her every day, a memory,  
Tangled in it like cobweb mist,  
Of doing a simple task  
Repeatedly, under the redwoods  
With the Havahart traps, then in  
The clean-lit lab. Simplicity,  
Youth, one or two obligations,  
Their emblem the azalea—  
And the release, gray and silver  
Quickness in the undergrowth,  
To hunting, breeding, hunger.