

E M P T Y S P A C E



W I L L S C H U T T

I can't see what this couple sees outside;
outside's a blank to me. They point
past the windshield at restaurants
where they've eaten once, or thought
of eating, as if they'd rounded Neptune
rather than the H-mart, a Haitian
grocer's, their favorite, far-flung food truck.
The man, who's made a point of driving, points
to a building on the corner, a gray wall,
a gray nothing, nothing out of the ordinary,
iron railings, beside the door a plaque
bearing some braille-like inscription, stone
quarried in Maine, maybe, and carted south.
There's where I write, he says, pretending
he's picturing himself inside at work
rather than doing what he's doing, showing off
to the other man, the man I call my man
or dear or sweetie (how haven't I come up
with something better than sweetie yet?), sitting
shotgun, nodding like a dashboard toy.
Cool, cool, he answers. I don't see
what he could see in both them *and* me. I try.

Before we married, we'd been working
different hours – he by day at school,
me nights at the restaurant. We'd hardly
wasted an entire afternoon together
when he kneeled and asked, and I said sure.
Sure is all I said. What did he want
me to say? That I'd wanted nothing more?

Or that we'd want for nothing? I felt embarrassed. I felt like I was the one bending. Now we do what others do: Sunday brunch, the occasional excursion to see friends, his friends, always writer friends, long talks about the future and plans to travel. We've even gone some places: the Irish coast, an empty wedge of Canada. Wherever we go, there comes a time when he turns to me and says, "What if we left our place? You know, for someplace more like this." I thought it cute at first, him usually half in the bag, the thin shank of a meal on our plates, talk of change, and the day done, shut up, good-byed, the light changing easy, easily changing us, I felt. But we go, we see places, and then we're home, toting a scarf, a bottle of oil, a couple books he reads, or reads part of then shelves or discards, more plans to travel, to live healthier, be happier.

"Happy was one of your father's words," my mother'd say. "That and home. 'Honey,' he'd say, 'I'm going to buy us a home with a blue pond on the property.' Believe me, his dream house had swans flock to it." A wedge, I think they're called a wedge of swans. "He was a sweet man, your father. Sweet but on the stupid side."

Going back, it's the man's wife's turn to point, to tell me something more, I hope, than the location of her gym, her coffee shop, to tell me what we have in common isn't the backseat and yoga pants. But she just points out there, perfectly spaced, a perfectly square space between us, atlas-sized, the width of a light read. I look past her finger . . . Nothing much,

buildings with the roofs slumped, built
on foundations of steam,
tacky gold church towers, like oil
cruets, parks that serve
no discernible purpose, no people in them,
empty space . . .

They remind me of woods
that flank the freeways; you think they're there
to hide what's behind them. Before his accident,
when my dad still drove me home from school
in his showy, used, blue BMW
my mother was embarrassed to be seen in,
I thought they must be hiding love,
an extra city. Then I grew up
and those spaces didn't fool me anymore.
They couldn't fool me
even when I wanted to be fooled.