

## About

We were looking forward to being alive.

— *Dean Young*

About, my brain!

— *Hamlet*

What makes my sneakers squeak? I am wondering  
about it tonight, if there's something I can do  
to fix it. It's August, the month of late-night walks  
among crickets fiddling in the dark grasses and cicadas  
ratcheting in the trees. But all I can hear is this damn  
squeaking. And what about these questions?  
What gives them dominion over my passing?  
And that darker disturbance on a moist night like this  
when everything else is tufted in grey wool

like this cat who mews so plaintively, then  
so wretchedly that finally I pick her up, worried  
she'll interrupt my train of thought just when  
I finally have one going, but once she's in my lap,  
one thought slides into another and here I am, making  
big-handed strokes down her grey fur (a new kind  
of pleasure we discover through our mutual necessities),  
not the coo-chee-cooing I usually give her cheeks  
and that spot just above the base of her tail

which always makes me wonder if what I'm doing  
is inappropriate, except she likes it so much,  
and she always makes it clear when I should move  
my fingers back to her face, and besides,  
I do like the way her tail curls when she's digging it,  
and the way she slides it though the letter C  
of my hand so it looks like the Russian character  
pronounced /zayh/ as in "za" which means "behind"  
or "beyond" or "for" as in "for somebody's sake"

or "at a distance." In fact, she hasn't interrupted  
my thought after all, except for the part about the sneakers,  
which is a relief, after the stupidity of the last few days,  
and speaking of which what about my tires? I am thinking  
by now a solution would have struck me. Who's lying —  
the dealer or the tire salesman? And why am I stuck in the middle  
again? It's unjust — a waste of time, a waste of life

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[stanza break]

because on early August nights like these  
when crickets have been singing for a week  
and cicadas are swathed in silence because it's too wet  
to make that kind of love, and a horse in the barn next door  
is kicking a plastic bucket around in his stall, or maybe  
it's a raccoon, and the Thruway to the north  
is whining with the engines of commerce bringing us  
new things on a daily basis — isn't it great to be alive?  
In spite of the fact that last night my wife had the nerve

to call me a cynic. I couldn't believe my ears.  
We'd been getting along so well for weeks. It hurt  
because she said it right after I'd read my latest poem  
to her, and while, yes, there *is* a trace of cynicism in it,  
there's something sweet, too, I thought, so what she said  
hurt my feelings. I suppose this is how Swift felt too,  
neglected and abused. So what else can you do, but take off  
on a walk, away from household inquisitions?

When a car approaches from behind it's okay  
because it lights the road for you, and as it gets  
close it's kind of cool, watching white light scan  
down the underskirts of maples and oaks,  
though you wonder what makes you describe them  
so often that way — what's that about?  
Then the iris of white narrows as the rush  
gets louder, then it's passed in a torrent  
of tire noise, and you think again about your faulty  
treads, and the money and where does it all go,

and how much you hate cars anyway, they're  
killing the world, they just bring out the worst  
in people; though, most of that was there already,  
it just manifests differently in a car than at, say,  
the end of a battleaxe. But the old beast,  
she's upstairs asleep, or maybe not sleeping,  
the floorboards creaking, asking their own  
kind of questions, maybe it's her walking around,  
wondering what I'm up to down here,  
after she tried all day to make up to me  
without losing her dignity, offering to make me  
a sandwich, or not asking for help with the laundry,

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[no stanza break]

while I took my time stewing, an art I've perfected  
to the point where even the writing desk feels  
like a crucible, so I go out for a walk, as I have tonight,  
hoping to be someone else when I return.

But when a car comes head-on,  
it's blinding, and there are no shoulders  
in our neck of the woods, so I step off into  
the weeds at the roadside, my sneakers  
hissing through the wet stalks, and maybe  
that will stop the squeak, I think, but no,  
when the glare and the rush pass and my eyes  
adjust to near-darkness and I step back  
up onto the pavement, there it is again: squeak-step,  
squeak-step, squeak-step. So even the horses  
dancing in the moonlight stop. Or is that  
my cousin's floodlight filling the corral?  
His interpretation of night: something to negate  
with mercury vapor. Still, I wonder,  
if a car stopped, what would you do?

Get in and be kidnapped to a happier life?  
Give helpful directions to inscrutable strangers?  
Or just run? In daytime it's easy to see  
who's inside, what they might be about,  
but at night, things can get dangerous, even  
in the country, and who can you trust  
these days? And I wonder what they think about  
when they drive past, me squeaking in the weeds  
at midnight, my big bald head with hair like

dark strands of cirrus canted towards earth –  
a moon and its wispy corona. I wonder if they think  
I'm an alien, or some insomniac Bozo.  
I imagine I look like a city-boy, that I dress  
too much like a city-boy, an impostor  
who only wears baseball caps at high school reunions  
and has no idea who's winning the pennant  
or even when it starts, obviously,  
and even this cat who's moved from my lap  
to my reading chair because it smells like me,

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[“About” p. 4]

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[no stanza break]

(that kind of possession), and because the door  
to the bedroom is closed — all she wanted,

as it happens, was not all of my love, but only  
to know I was here and to get a few minutes  
of my pleasure given freely, and hopefully  
I’d receive hers too in the same manner.  
Then she’d get down, happy in her own  
replenished little body. I know I should talk  
less about myself, but it’s a subject I know  
pretty well, I think, or well enough, rather,  
or possibly least well of anything I do know.

That’s why I need you. I was never  
properly fitted with self-correcting lenses,  
and besides we barely know each other.  
How *are* you? Would you like to come in?  
What do you think of my poem? And the thing  
about walking at night is you can’t really see  
that much very well. You really have to listen.