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## The Memory Game

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The woman who lives here knows  
 that the coin that buys houses, soap for the bath,  
 clothes for her children, lapis lazuli  
 necklaces matched with earrings set in gold,

is paid by the hand that slaps her around.  
 In the back, long-limbed boys row  
 fragile shells over the lake. In the front,  
 silver maples dwarf the colonnade,  
 sway in light breezes, drop leaves in high wind,  
 threaten to break with every storm.

*Tim Muren*

## The Memory Game

My father holds a stringer above a river – two catfish  
 hang against the greasy sky. Photographic evidence  
 he wasn't always ancient, he says.

I remember the suck of water as he rose up  
 from the bathtub. I picture him up there, upstairs,  
 thirty years younger, the dead moths inside

the milky, glass bulb form a black, triangular heap of brittle  
 wings above him. Through the door, clutching  
 a terrycloth towel with one fist

at his hip. He kicks my scattered toys at me,  
 demanding a clear path. Sometimes lately, is it  
 my imagination? A storm rises through a space

in the corner of his eye. His age seems to increase, and at that  
 moment  
 he looks at me like I am a stranger. Then he returns, quickly,  
 and he continues. He spears the ground

with a horseshoe stake. He lights the charcoal grill. He cuts  
 into the belly of a fresh catfish. He invents a game  
 for his grandchildren – a box of small objects:

scissors, a spool of red thread, a button, a spoon.  
 “Look closely,” he says, then he covers the contents with  
 the tablecloth, “now tell me what’s in the box.” My mother

and I discovered years ago that if we paused when he entered  
 the room, long enough for him to walk past, to move outside,  
 out of ear-shot, we could avoid his joining the conversation,

With his unalterable opinions, his fierce authority on every  
 subject.  
 How do I reconcile  
 the grandfather with the father –

whom I followed with my eyes  
 as I crouched in the endless hallway with crayons  
 and notebook paper. Now

I avoid conversation by speaking –  
 of swimming against contractual deadlines,  
 at work and home, strange weather patterns, other

states where I wouldn’t mind living, until my wife gets antsy  
 and gathers our children from in and around the house. We  
 begin the process  
 of leaving, of hugs and handshakes and promises to return,

and we are back in the car – the children drifting to sleep,  
shoulder  
to shoulder in the back seat. I search for a decent radio station,  
and newscasters and skypilots and choirs roll

through on static waves. You can tell our house by  
the leaves that cover everything between  
two neatly manicured neighbor's lawns, and you will smell gas

from the lamp-post's extinguished pilot light as you climb  
the concrete steps. Rain stains the ceiling around  
the living room's skylight, the one my father, a retired carpenter,

has offered to take a look at. I scribble notes in charcoal pencil.  
Once he helped me chase a salamander, black  
with a red stripe, until we lost it in the mud and water.

When he emptied the pockets of his overalls – I remember.  
coins, a pocketknife, jelly beans, folded papers, a folded dollar bill.