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Annuals

Robert Lee Kendrick

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Robert Lee Kendrick

Annuals

An hour before dawn, yet still enough heat
for steam to flower from asphalt, curl knots
through the rain-sweetened air. Ragweed, thistle

glisten in moonlight that slips between clouds
—by noon, leaf and stalk sun-dry, but not
after saving each drop they can, as September

shortens towards the close of their yearly
lease. By noon, I'll wear gypsum crystals,
latex flecks on my arms, neck—halfway through

ten hours of drywall and spackle and paint,
off-whitening what will be someone and someone
and someone else's two-bedroom apartment,

tenant after tenant until the building
gets bulldozed, some younger crew starts again.
Twenty, thirty years' worth of move in, move

out, cash always short, the few hundred rent
knocked out for nine or ten dollars an hour,
the shift slog years to save up enough

to get your name on a deed, or at least
a new place away from used car lots,
razor wire, sirens. Others get caught in the drift,

one false start after another: *gone to seed*,
my first foreman said, and he was dead wrong—
pink slip, payday loan, back payments and interest,

scrounging to the fifteenth and thirtieth,
what anyone else would do. Too easy
to think you're too careful or stubborn to go

there yourself, and no good to hate your own
failures and debts—I know—no good to curse
work that you've chosen: another day's chance

to do small things well, and pass them to others.
A few minutes more on this hill. Then, sunup
to dusk spent tending walled plots where people

can set shallow roots. Ceiling, roof, to keep out
the weather. Windows to let in the light.
Rooms to come back to for something like rest.