Mount Pleasant

by Jennifer Chang

All night, six vagrants stood at our stoop chewing the fat out of a too-stout story. She did this, did that, took that, she never, never, never, never... a white fluttering, a thought, like headlights from a passing car, lights up this room

where I've never been restful, never still. Outside, the buses must be un-routing. I hear their slowing screech round the corner, engines dying. My neighbor's a dinosaur, Bonnie, she's lived here since the commune days, eats hempseed, I bet, always nods at me. It's not her out there, but she's in my head, the lonely field I imagine each night, awake again nowhere else to go.

Never is

a strange design, to name what can't be or won't begin. The hours quickening, never asleep. Or the trees' silence incanting I'll never belong. My silent habit is to listen:

for I knew these trees once

as a different self. I'll never speak to her again or stand outside like the trees, attending to what's limitless, the sky, stray faces at stray windows.

I couldn't hear back then, walking the night forest, not trusting how to follow. How to wend. Now it's the noise of mastery, the mastery of being alive—annoyed. I've said my piece is what I'd like to say, or my peace is still a part of there. I'm bad at idiom, as anyone can hear, as anyone can see, there's an immigrant on my face,

who makes me stray, makes me tired of you and you and you, all of you the never outside my window. Here, I turn to stone, turn to the body in the dark. I turn mortal and loathsome as bitumen blacking out a new roof. I turn at Florida Avenue, up 16th. I turn like milk, unforgivably sour. A sudden turncoat, I'll turn on you. My ideology, a tourniquet. I turn my face towards your light, alas, the last of which will not return to me. I'm turning off now—

Goodnight, America. Good night, neighbor.

I did not know your art was law, or the you sailed a boat on the Potomac, could parse the grammar of daffodils.... Tonight is Sunday; on Friday you died. Crowding the mail room with you last week, I wondered whether to note the winter drag, the government shut down again by brief-falling snow. Neighbor, I junked circulars and lost hope. I sighed, let my son cry too loudly, Bonnie, Bonnie rather than turn to you to wish you good night, good night....

Dear Bonnie, I wish you goodnight.