

Listening to My Parents from the Ventilator Shaft

Anita Tanner

Before sleep I overhear them,
their scrabble of words
scattered to draw meaning
from a day with eight kids,
their voices like bowls
that hold experience
until they can name
what happens and relive it.

What they say, what they mean—
the silence in between the two—
surprises, alerts, and softens me.
How deep the well of concern
from which they fumble words.
How one thought followed
leads a circuitous route
that ends up in city traffic
far from our secluded farm.
How he says she says
becomes a ball tossed
back and forth to a rhythm
I can fall asleep to.

It's here, through the shaft
below my bed, words
rising like starlings
from the underground,
where I first guess
their conjugal feeling, sounds
and tones expressing more
than can be said
in soporific backdrop.
It's here I learn to love language,
here the germination:
the said,
the unsaid,
the nevertalkedof,
the breath.