

WINNER OF THE
RICHARD WILBUR
POETRY AWARD



MIDLIFE

MATTHEW BUCKLEY SMITH

The Fell Swoop

I guess you've probably googled me by now.
You should. These days a girl can't be too careful.
Tonight, though, you're in luck. I'm very nice.
That's what the neighbors say, or most of them,
In certain articles you would have seen:
A shock . . . A tragedy . . . The nicest man . . .
Now, to be fair, a handful disagreed,
Including some that I'd considered friends.
They snatched the chance to speculate in public,
"Translating" body language, trading memes,
And peddling their unlikely explanations
Of what I did, of what they think I am.
But let me ask you what I've asked myself:
How many of those amateur detectives
Can say they ever truly loved their families
The way I loved my own?

I wish you'd caught
The TV interview I gave last spring
When I addressed the kidnapper directly:
You cannot grasp the nature of my love.
The footage is on YouTube, so I'm told.
The other week it topped a million views.
Still, in the end, it hardly made a difference.
No phone call came. No ransom note arrived.
No jogger happened on a heap of corpses.
And even that night, early in the search,
As I stood fast and faced the rolling cameras

To read the written statement of my love,
I sensed it — that my wife and our fine boys
Were all already gone, and that no words
Would ever call them home to me again.

Are you all right? You've hardly touched your food.
Please, eat. I'll order us another bottle.
Now, what were we discussing? Yes, the past.
Someone as young as you can't understand,
Not really, what it means to have regrets,
But by the time you're my age you'll have learned
That certain choices can't be taken back,
And that eventually we all endure
Two lives: the life we greet each day on waking,
And then the life we wake to in our dreams.
I used to dream that, had I been on time
For that last round of callbacks in '03,
Had I turned down the steady retail job
And said yes to the unpaid internship
In that experimental midtown playhouse
And left the following fall for New York City
And not for Maryland's third-best school of law,
Or had I simply married someone else,
Or nobody at all, and had no kids —
And, yes, if mostly I had had no kids —
I might have made a life upon the stage,
Playing the roles that every actor longs for:
Brick and Orestes, Oedipus and Hickey,
Hamlet, Iago, Brutus, Lear, MacDuff.
That kind of life, a dream-life free of dreams,
It seems beyond the limits of the body,
A feat you couldn't possibly achieve . . .

Until the day you open up the *Times*
And, just like that, atop the Culture section
Some kid grins at you, double-fisting Tonys,
Who used to snap the ball to you in school.

I'm sorry. I've been rambling. You're too young —
Happily *much* too young — to understand
The pain of watching other people live
A life that by all rights should be your own.
But standing in the studio that night,
Speaking the speech about my poor dead family
Whose deaths had not — still haven't — been confirmed,
I caught my own reflection in the lens,
A handsome man, a man not yet too old
To sell his house and rent a small apartment,
Take acting lessons, build a résumé,
Lose weight, buy Rogaine, sleep with twenty-somethings,
And be the man he always meant to be.
I saw this new life taking shape before me
As I appealed for mercy to the man
Whom I had so consistently described
To county, state, and federal detectives . . .
A man who, surely, has his own regrets.
Now *there's* a thought to put an end to sleep.

Well, I'll be damned! We've made it to dessert.
This place — trust me — you really can't go wrong.
I've tried it all, and nothing disappoints:
The frosted figs, the caramel meringue,
The rhubarb tart, the salted creme brulée!
If anything, you'll want to try it all.
So take a breath, look over every choice,

And if, somehow, you don't like what you get,
Remember that it's not too late to change.
You know the secret to a happy life?
It's not too late. It never is too late.