



JAMES CUMMINS

BUYING A DOG FOR MARGARET

Sometimes a door swings open,
like a mask from a face,
and to do no harm,
to be allowed to do no harm,
to those we love,
is the greatest gift we can be granted;
and what was will not be again,
the greatest truth and sorrow.

My daughter asks for a dog.
It seems such a humble request
in the great scheme of things,
a desire expressed each day by thousands,
maybe millions of children,
and turned down by millions of fathers
who have other things to love.

But I wake in the night to the thought
that we can never revisit, undo.
Others would call it a recurring nightmare,
this panic that revisits me
so often, this great blackness, this door
that swings open like the emptiness of a face,
showing me all that can't be redeemed—

the fields, the grasses of the earth, the suns
that were so much more powerful
than the thought of myself on those days,
which are all blackness, darkness, now.

And I am so grateful, so pathetically grateful,
to be awakened to this terror,



to be brought close in dreams to voices
that speak again only at this price;
and the question is, as it has always been,
who or what has awakened me?

In a dream, Margaret's lips
stumble against the side of my face
as she whispers in my ear her urgency:
*Please understand, you who have all the power,
I need a dog. Not just want, but need.*

And what awakens me tells me
all I have not lived, all I have not redeemed,
will be as nothing in the future,
if I don't honor this need of hers to love.