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POETRY OF WILLIAM ARNES

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Just So

If we could live it all over again,
Jack would be a script supervisor--like "Miss-
Know-It-All" in Truffaut's *Day for Night*,
the alert one who makes out that the actress
in the swimming suit is showing, the quick one
who guesses where to find a photogenic cat
that will lap the milk.

Living it all over,

Jack would focus on continuity,
on taking care that all the details
were as they were--an uncapped soda bottle
just so full, bedcovers thrown back just so,
a shadow falling just so short, the minute hand
of a clock just so many seconds shy of the hour.

And he'd have shots he'd want retaken
till perfect--like the one in the kitchen,
the two plates in the dish rack, a third
soaking under the suds, and on the countertop
the replacement for glass the boy, mid-gesture,
will drop, the ice cubes melted just so,
everything, yes, *everything* lovingly seen to
so we can live that moment all over again,
the boy's shirt-tail hanging out in back,
the damp spot on his father's light blue apron
just so dark.

Walking on Water

Early March--
perhaps the last morning
the lake will support you

and you spot a scrap of newsprint
steeping in a puddle
atop the ice.

You squat
in hopes of learning
something new

and find
a recipe for devil's food,
the ingredients precise
and complete, the steps
written as if starting from scratch
will renew the world.

Sunday Morning

He's one of those people
who'll tell you the truth
each time he figures
it out.

He'll slouch unbuckled
in your passenger seat explaining
that *The New York Times* has come
to bore him as much as mowing,
as much as waking at two A.M.
to crunch another quarter off
a sleeping pill, as much as tugging
on socks, as much as the certainty
he'll never develop an interest in Revelations
because there's no way in hell
he'll ever read it.

"'It'? 'It'?" he'll repeat.
"Think of *it*. *It* is a revelation
--so pliant and handy."

One rule
he'll never break is picking up the ball
after missing (or sinking) his third putt
and then heading toward the cart--
usually sighing "Okay"
to No One In Particular,
if *sighing* is a word for relenting
as if taking charge.

damnation

The time comes
and out of necessity and love
or love and necessity
you place your father in a home
and take your mother in.

Most days she seems herself--
the well thumbed Camus
open on the arm of her chair
in the family room,
her wary pleasure in talking
to your daughters at dinner,

the old irony in her eyes
when she studies your wife,
the counters she keeps cleared,
not a muffin crumb in the toaster.

But some days

she's like this morning:

You hear her up before you,
out to bring in the paper.
When you come down
she sits hunched at the table,
nothing on but her unbuttoned housecoat,
a spill from her overfilled mug
soaking the comics.

"Damnation," she whispers,
without a laugh. "Damnation."

"I'll get some paper towel,"
you offer, patting her shoulder.
wanting to kid her,
"But, Mom, you don't believe
in God or hell."

"I know what you're thinking,"
she glares, still whispering.
With a flail of her hand
she knocks the mug to the floor--
"And God damn you!"

diatribe

Riled, the father railed,
the scolding switching
to diatribe,

the repetition
of "horseshit,
fucking horseshit"
like the strokes
of coarse-grained sandpaper

replaced by the rasping
medium whisper
of "not my son . . .
not my son . . .
not my son . . ."

And then
that fine finishing swipe--
"Don't you come
to my funeral"--

that left the kid smooth

and closed
as the resealed lid
of his mother's jewelry box.

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Raised in North Dakota, **William Aarnes** attended Oberlin College and did graduate work at both The Catholic University of America and The Johns Hopkins University. He now teaches at Furman University and lives with his wife and daughter in Clemson, South Carolina. He has published two collections of poems--*Learning to Dance* (1991) and *Predicaments* (2001)--both published by Ninety-Six Press. Over the years he has had poetry published in *FIELD*, *The American Scholar*, and *Poetry*. His poems have appeared recently in *The Valparaiso Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *Measure* and he has others forthcoming in *Shenandoah*, *the Seneca Review*, *The Literary Review*, and *anti-poetry*.