

A. E. STALLINGS

Lost and Found

1

I crawled all morning on my hands and knees
Searching for what was lost—beneath a chair,
Behind the out-of-tune piano. *Please*,
I prayed to Entropy, let it be there—
Some vital Lego brick or puzzle piece
(A child bereft is hiccougging despair),
A ball, a doll's leg popped out of its socket,
Or treasures fallen through a holey pocket.

2

Amazing what webbed shadows can conceal—
A three-wheeled Matchbox car, or half a brace
Of socks or shoes. Oblivion will steal
Promiscuously—lost without a trace,
Microscopic bits of Playmobil,
The back-up set of house keys. You misplace
Your temper and your wits, till you exhaust
All patience with the hours it has cost.

3

I thought too of that parable, the other—
Not the one men preach of the lost sheep,
The lesser known one, on the housewife's bother
Over a missing coin: how she must sweep
The house to find it. No doubt, *she* was a mother,
I think, and laugh, and then I want to weep:
The hours drained as women rearrange
The furniture in search of small, lost change.

4

"Tidy up your room," I told my son,
"That way, it's easier to look." (It's true.)
He made an effort, a half-hearted one
Abandoned after just a block or two.
"It isn't fair," he said, "it isn't fun,
I never do what *I* would like to do,
But you, you always do *just what you want*."
Which plucked a string, as though a cosmic taunt.

5

I paused. "Is *that* what you think, then," I said.
(Sometimes he seemed less seven-year-old boy
Than teenager.) "That making you go to bed
Or washing dishes is something I *enjoy*,
And that I've nothing better to do instead
Of hunting for a crappy plastic toy?"
Raised voices, tears, apologies all round,
And yet the crucial piece was never found.

6

That night I was still seeking in my dreams,
Still groping after fragments and the maimed,
Just as in dreams a seamstress stitches seams,
Or politician spins truth unashamed,
Or loping through remembered fields and streams,
The hound pursues the scent that can't be named,
Her paws a-twitch, though heavily she lies,
And dogsbody the body does not rise,

7

Or as a poet stalks a skittish rhyme
Behind her lidded eyes, beneath the mask
Of sleep—because the mind has no free time
But keeps at night to its diurnal task
And pushes the stone as high as it can climb
Before it trochees down again. Don't ask
The mind to rest, though someday it must cease;
In life, only the flesh has any peace.

8

It seemed I searched, though, in a dusty place
Beneath a black sky thrilled with stars, ground strewn
With stones whose utter shade seemed to erase
The land's gleam (like a tarnished silver spoon);
A figure neared, with adumbrated face,
Who said, "This is the valley on the moon
Where everything misplaced on earth accrues,
And here all things are gathered that you lose."

9

The moon? Yet I did not dispute the claim.
She seemed familiar—hard to tell among
Such alien surroundings. All the same,
A word seemed out of reach, tip of my tongue,
Close-clustered consonants and vowels, a name.
Beneath her hood I glimpsed a face not young
But elegant, refined as it grew older.
My name she knew, although I had not told her.

10

Now that my eyes had focused in the dark
I saw that what seemed mountains, ridges, hills
All hemmed around us, flinging down their stark
Chill silhouettes, were overflowing landfills,
Huge heaps of congeries. And I could mark
Here was a mound of keys or socks or pills
(Those were the things that I could recognize),
Like bombed-out cities black against the skies.

11

Somehow it brought to mind the vestibule
Jumbled with hats, umbrellas, backpacks, totes,
Scarves, gym shoes, that they keep at my son's school
Behind the lunchroom: bins of winter coats,
Hairbands, sunglasses stacked up on a stool—
Each thing spoke volumes or quipped anecdotes—
Lorn, makeless gloves; lunchboxes starting to mottle.
(I'd come to seek an AWOL water bottle.)

12

"Look there," she said, and gestured to the keys,
"Those are the halls to which we can't return—
The rooms where we once sat on others' knees,
Grandparents' houses, loving, spare, and stern,
Tree houses where we whispered to the trees
Gauche secrets, virgin bedrooms where we'd burn,
Love's first apartments. As we shut each door,
It locks: we cannot enter anymore."

13

There was a mound that loomed above our heads,
A skein of dusty strands large as a barn.
“Are these,” I asked, “the sum of hair one sheds
In life, or all the rips one has to darn?”
She laughed and said, “Those are the frayed, lost threads
Of conversations, arguments, the yarn
Of thought and logic’s clews we’d thought we’d spun
Only to find they’d somehow come undone.”

14

Then there was sunk, among the hills, a bowl,
A wide, shallow depression, in which “O’s”
Or ciphers gathered, thin, and black as coal,
Like washers of black iron. I asked, “And those?”
“They mark our absences—it’s through the hole
Of lapsed attention that the moment goes.”
I thought of those assemblies with repentance
Where I had mocked the prizes of attendance.

15

“And that?” I pointed to a pyramid
Of papers, ever threatening to tumble.
It shifted—sheaves of pages suddenly slid
And settled again. I stepped back from the jumble,
Thinking we might be buried there amid
An avalanche of foolscap—a hushed rumble
Shuffled its menace. I whispered, “Then are those
The poems lost, or pages of sure prose—

16

“Maybe even something that would sell
(A book about a young aspiring warlock?)—
That disappeared when something broke the spell,
When toddler learned to work the study door-lock,
Or the telephone brayed bad news—or the front bell
Portended importunity from Porlock?”
“The poems,” she said, “that perish at the brink
Of being, are not so many as you think,

17

“Nor yet so great. No, no, these are the letters
We meant to write and didn’t—all the unsaid
Begrudged congratulations to our betters,
Condolences we owed the lately dead,
Love notes unsent—in love, we all are debtors—
Gratitude to teachers who penned in red
Corrections to our ignorant defenses,
Apologies kept close like confidences.”

18

A vague, headachy cloud among the towers
Rose, heaped of dusky down as from black swans.
“Those are,” she said, “Insomnia’s desperate hours,
Lost sleep: countdown of clocks, the impotent yawns;
The teething cries, sweet drowsiness that sours,
The night feedings that soldier into dawns.”
I watched as creatures, etiolated, pale,
Weighed bales of feathers in a brazen scale.

19

What were the creatures doing? She explained,
“For every hour that we lose of sleep,
Another hour of wakefulness is gained;
There is a tally that we have to keep.”
“Unbearable minutes!” She saw that I was pained.
“Perhaps,” she said, “but sometimes in the deep
Of night, reflections come we cannot parse—
To *consider* means to contemplate the stars.”

20

Skittering round us, skirls of silver sand
Would swarm and arch into a ridge or dune,
And then disperse, as if an unseen hand
Swept them away (there was no wind), then soon
Accumulate elsewhere, a sarabande
Of form and entropy, a restive swoon
Of particles, forever in a welter,
Like starling murmurations seeking shelter.

21

"The sands of Time." (I didn't have to speak;
She answered straightaway with some disdain.)
"With scything hands you hasten through the week
Clockwise, while widdershins, the fair hours drain.
Haste," she declared, "is Violence, in Greek."
Then she bore on in silence once again.
"Why won't they rest?" I asked in puzzlement.
"Minutes are not lost," she said, "but spent."

22

Nearby, a glint of vitreous splinters, foiled
With silver, bristled in a jagged mass.
"This is a woman's loveliness that's spoiled
With age," she said, "and tears, and days that pass—
Her raiment that is creased, thread-worn, and soiled.
Here, seek that vanished beauty in this glass."
And gave me a reflection where I sought her—
Nothing at first—but then I saw my daughter—

23

Eyes brown, not blue; the hair, not straight, but curled.
"Not truly lost," she laughed, at my surprise.
"Some things fetch up on the bright shores of the world
Once more, under a slightly different guise;
Meanwhile, they are not lost, but somehow furled
Back into the heart of things from which they rise."
And saying this, she turned, and did not wait,
But something nearby made me hesitate,

24

I could not make it out at first: a pile
Of bone chips, ivory splinters? Like a sleuth,
I sneaked a handful, following the while,
But stopped short when I realized the truth,
And let them fall, and dropped my neutral smile:
Each keen point was a tiny human tooth.
I looked back over my shoulder for a glimpse
And gasped to see a thousand small, greyimps

25

Go scampering up the hill, with wrinkled wings
Leathern like bats, with backs hunched up to carry,
Slung over their shoulders, sacks bulged with grim things—
More teeth, I thought—remains you ought to bury.
My guide observed me watch their scurrings.
“But don’t you recognize a real tooth fairy?
Each baby tooth, deciduous but bright,
Stands for a childhood rooted in delight,

26

“But those that come here stained, starting to rot,
Are childhoods that are eaten up with sorrow,
Eroded by the acids of their lot
And others’ sins they are compelled to borrow.”
“So many!” I exclaimed, as fairies brought
More chatterings of teeth. “Yes, and tomorrow,
It never stops. Each childhood is outgrown
For sharper permanence. Even your own”

27

(Children, she meant) “cannot stay as they are.
Already, your son’s childhood is consigned,”
She held up six fine milk teeth in a jar—
“Already he is leaving it behind,
Striding forth as light strides from a star;
Though the star itself blow out, inert and blind,
The light strides on, and reaches other eyes
That in some distant time scan these same skies.”

28

At last our path came to a spring whose gleam
Provoked my thirst. Two cups of battered zinc
Hung from a pair of hooks there: one had “Dream”
Inscribed upon it; on the other, “Think.”
But when I dipped each cup’s lip to the stream,
Immediately it began to sink.
When both had vanished, she said, “Do not wet
Your lips here with the waters of Forget.”

29

Not water, exactly, I knew as I drew near it—
It was a liquid, true, but more like gin
Though smelling of aniseed—some cold, clear spirit
Water turns cloudy. “Many are taken in,
Some poets seek it, thinking that they fear it,
The reflectionless fountain of Oblivion,
By sex, by pills, by leap of doubt, by gas,
Or at the bottom of a tilting glass.

30

“But you, you must remember, and return.”
Now I saw clearly skin of alabaster,
Her moon-washed hair, a gaze one could discern
As gunmetal grey—and then at last I asked her,
“Who are you? Are you she who learned to master
The art of losing? Or she who used to burn
With sweetbitter eros? She who did dying well,
The beekeeper’s waspish daughter? Amherst’s belle?”

31

“Don’t you know? But everyone who loses
Has prayed and laid an offering at my shrine—
Though each who knows me calls me as she chooses,
My name’s Mnemosyne; I am divine.
I am,” she said, “the Mother of the Muses—
Imagine, you have two, but I have nine!
More even than that—for all the arts that be,
All sciences too, are born of Memory.”

32

It made me smile to picture her at her loom
With a gaggle of teen-aged daughters at her feet:
No-nonsense Clio, Melpomene garbed in gloom,
Graceful Euterpe, Terpsichore, who won’t eat,
Thalia, laughing—Polyhymnia in her room
With prayers to chant—Urania taking a seat
At the telescope, Erato fine-tuning her fiddle,
Calliope starting her story in the middle.

33

She led the way now through a garden of musks
From dark, fanged flowers—incarnadine, maroon.
We came upon two gates: one made of tusks
Of prehistoric elephants, one hewn
From massive, savage horns. All round, the husks
And bones of great extinctions had been strewn.
“Here we must pass,” she said, “but not together.
You pass through one; I shall pass through the other.”

34

Then something began to happen. I felt her arm
On mine, we seemed to travel, standing still,
I saw a light. Had someone come to harm?
I heard a distant siren, pulsing, shrill—
But then I recognized the old alarm
Harping on its monitory trill—
It’s Dawn again, come with her golden rule
Like a shepherd’s crook, to harry us to school.

35

There are lunches to make, I thought, and tried to find
Some paperwork from last week I’d mislaid
(Due back, no doubt, today, dated and signed),
Instead, unearthed a bill we hadn’t paid,
Located shoes, a scarf, a change of mind:
I tried to put aside mistakes I’d made,
To live in the sublunary, the swift,
Deep present, through which falling bodies sift.

36

I saw the aorist moment as it went—
The light on my children’s hair, my face in the glass
Neither old nor young; but bare, intelligent.
I was a sieve—I felt the moment pass
Right through me, currency as it was spent,
That bright, loose change, like falling leaves, that mass
Of decadent gold leaf, now turning brown—
I could not keep it; I could write it down.