

Rotary Exchange
by Laura McNeal

I like to imagine it as a visit.
The alien is my guest,
And I the museum guide.
The alien finds everything fascinating
Our foods, the rules of baseball,
I tell him about hitting safely,
Balks, and warning track power.
I show him the things we can do on water, the many
Things we do with eggs.
Disgust and marvel, he feels it all in turn,
But some time or other
It will come out.

Wait, the alien says. You what?
Die.
When? the alien asks.
You never know.

I want to talk about Vermeer, but the alien is persistent.
He makes me explain about aging.
The long slow deaths, the sudden ones,
How you can be old and sick for a long time,
Or young and sick for a short time.

But no matter what, he says, no matter how good you get
At anything
And no matter how hard you try,
Or others try,
Death.

I nod.
So you only have warning track power, he says.
The rest of our tour is ruined, frankly.

How do you go about all this, he asks,
The making and unmaking
The commutes and dinners
Active shooters and repeated laundry?

Chiefly we pretend, I say.
We pretend it is not happening to us,
Or that it is not final.
It's very important to not think about it,
For yourself, but also for others.
We have to be brave.

I like to think the alien is deeply moved
That he is never the same
And he is trying to think how to tell the people back home,
What astonishing persistence prevails on earth.
How we have art to make a record of how brief it all feels,
How we have games every night,
So we can feel what it would be like to do the impossible,
To win, to walk off, to no-hit a whole team.
I like to think that although he never writes me,
Or answers my calls
He stands sometimes on a mound of red not-earth
Raises the ball to his chest,
Looks at the catcher,
Shakes his head as if with terrible impatience,
Nods his head, stares one more time,
And throws.