IT IS DAYLIGHT

I called my house from a pay phone
down the street before I went home.
I needed to check on the empty situation.
It was daylight,
still here.
My shadow looked large and unschooled.
The sidewalk was yellow in the sun.
I was thinking that I wasn’t anyone
and that my future would be a trajectory
leading further away.
The lilacs were out. They looked like a detail
from a bucolic story or tableau
where people are naked, eating picnics,
grapes, kissing, and drinking wine
while playing musical instruments. It seems made up,
but it’s not. It must be based on a world
something like the one that’s here while I’m walking.
Many houses are abutted by hedges.
I don’t like this, but I wouldn’t take them away.
The hedges are often surrounded by beds of woodchips.
The sight of them is a silent story about the dead.
I was filled with yearning
to sit against the side of a house
between two hedges.
I don’t know how to pray but I would try.
I felt somber and excited about to go into my house.

Some people come down the street.
They’re very dressed up.
I can see them from my bedroom window.
My house is quiet,
as though it isn’t mine
but was given to me
by something other than myself.
The dressed up people cross the street
and walk under the lilac trees.
They look very nice and awful. The young woman
wears a peach dress with cream-colored heels.
She’s with a young man wearing a dark blue suit
and a turquoise shirt. How unfortunate
that they have to go out in daylight
and see themselves
out among trees, streets, and open sounds.
Walking through my house, I love the doors
best. Waking up the other day, I went downstairs
and banged my face into the doorframe
of a closet. It hurt. It was only an accident,
but I ended up in tears.
Now with this bump on my forehead,
I’m grateful.
I wash the dishes, clean the bathroom, vacuum.
Over the course of several days
I feel satisfied that my apologies have run themselves out.
I don’t know when it’s time to stop
but eventually I do, and I do other things.

In this title poem from Arda Collins’s Yale Younger Poets Prize–winning book, nothing
happens that would typically be seen as noteworthy. The persona narrator calls her home,
oberves what seems to be an ordinary suburban landscape, returns home, observes a
well-dressed couple, recalls bumping her head, does some housekeeping, and then goes
on to “do other things.” The drama of these events is not in the events themselves, but in
how the persona narrator responds to them: with sadness (“I was thinking that I wasn’t
anyone / and that my future would be a trajectory / leading further away”; “The sight of
them is a silent story about the dead”), imaginative delight (“They looked like a detail /
from a bucolic story or tableau / where people are naked, eating picnics, / grapes, kissing,
and drinking wine / while playing musical instruments”), judgment (“They look very nice
and awful”), and fear (“How unfortunate / that they have to go out in daylight / and see
themselves / out among trees, streets, and open sounds”). In her introduction to this
collection, Louise Glück writes, “At the heart of the poems’ struggle is shame, which
results not from something the speaker has done, from action, but rather from being, from
what she is or what she lacks. Collins’ speaker cannot bear to be seen; hence her
furtiveness, her preference for enclosed environments (sometimes her fear of light).” And not only does the persona narrator’s desire to hide drive this poem, but this desire seems to be fueled by her deep connection with — and affection for — her own loneliness. “I needed to check on the empty situation,” she says at the opening of the poem; and later, “I was filled with yearning / to sit against the side of a house / between two hedges,” and, “Walking through my house, I love the doors / best.”

The danger with this style, in which a persona narrator speaks with a flat tone about uneventful events, is that the entire poem will fall flat. What gives life to this poem? First, as noted above, there’s the persona narrator strong emotional reactions to all that she sees. Second, there’s the writer’s deep connection to the feelings driving the poem — shame, loneliness, longing. And third, there’s an attentive engagement with the things of the material world — such as lilacs, hedges, doors. Writes Collins in an essay for the Poetry Society of America (https://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/new_american_poets/arda_collins/)

: “There are animals, oceans, and the components of reality. Language about these and all things comes from the space inside of us, the actual physical space that joins us with the world, and it is one expression of the shape of our perception.”

**Assignment:** Create a calm, somewhat slangy, plainspoken first-person PN to tell about the uneventful events of an ordinary day. This PN is full of feeling about his/her place in the world (sadness, loneliness, longing, etc.), and these feelings infuse his/her reactions to the objects and experiences s/he encounters. These reactions may not be all of a kind — the PN may be delighting in the things of the
world in one moment, and reacting with dread in the next. As Marie pointed out in Craft Class, such contrasts between happy/sad, darkness/light have the effect of highlighting or emphasizing each other.