A Sestina for Pareidolia

Pareidolia is one word for this … tendency to find creatures and faces, meaning, and even monsters in clouds, shadows, and stains. —Lynda Barry, artist statement.

When I was young and awake in the night
I’d sometimes see in the corner of my room
a man-like form. An apprehension of rumpled clothes
and chair palely lit by star or moonshine, a menace
implied, a shadowy notion of the animate.
I’d hold my breath, freeze, so as not to betray

myself. I was old enough to feel betrayed
by my emotions, not believing in night-
monsters, but still young enough that the animate
and imaginary could blur in the fantasy room
of my mind to freeze me like a rabbit under the menace
of an owl’s stare. It’s not cloth

shadows that make me shiver these days, but people clothed
in hatred, who can’t help betraying
their own fear of change and see menace
in anyone different—face, color or faith. But at night,
I take stock of my own ethos, try to make room
for my own stains and blemishes. I might animatedly

declare myself better than they; my revulsion not for animate
beings, but their small-minded thoughts, all while wrapped in the cloth
of righteous indignation. Is there room,
I wonder, for my contradictions to meet, to not betray
me as just one more person who believes they are the knight
in tarnished armor who can fight the menace?

I’ve been ill lately. One thing or another. The menaces
I battle are my own mid-life fears of mortality, animate
as any dragon; my middle-of-the-night
anxieties. My wife, if awake in the night, thinks about what clothes
she’ll wear the next day. I lie still, eyes closed to not betray
my wakefulness. Colors swirl on my closed lids, in a room

with no monsters on the other side. I breathe slowly, make room
for a vision of our favorite lake. We’re in a gently rocking canoe, no menacing
wind. One of us will point to the deer on the other side of the lake, which betrays
itself, on closer inspection, to be a small stump shaped like a deer animatedly drinking at water’s edge: an illusion of stick and water, but clothed in imagination it becomes what we want. That night

in the tent, no menace but the food-rustling chipmunk outside our nylon room. Loons animate the air with their yodels. We are clothed in each other’s warmth. Nothing is betrayed by the soft thrush of sound running through the night.

--Steve Tomasko