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Two Poems by Ellen McGrath Smith



Dear Employee Assistance Office,

The catchphrase of the day is “work/life balance.”
It is supposed to make you feel _____?
That slash mark bothers me, though, the way work leans on
life like a half-ton of soil on a retaining wall,
like a lake below sea level thrumming with sea
against a levee. On the other side is life, so what is all that other
matter weighing heavy on it?

Little White Obelisk

Mrs. Smith lives at the border between New York state and Canada, her backyard a thick green glade with a little white obelisk marking the border, which deer cross with impunity, and once, she told the CNN reporter, she saw some men in masks come in.

When the killers escaped from the prison, the thought that they might cross the border in her yard scared her. It scared the bejesus out of her, she said. Now, one convict's dead, and the other lies in the hospital. She does not have to worry anymore.

Soft, green borders in the north, barbed wire walls, rivers, deserts in the south.

In the neighborhood where I grew up, graffiti on the front of Las Palmas Carniceria: *Go back to Mexico*. Just a month ago, the Catholic high school there did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in Mexico City on El Dia de los Muertos: sombreros, skull face paint, &c. I imagine rehearsals were long and involved, with a trip or two to Chipotle for food. And I doubt many Mexicans go to that school, which costs over \$10,000 a year to attend. When I was growing up, it was a neighborhood of Italian, German, Irish, Anglos, Lebanese, maybe a black family or two—closely watched—some Latinos who didn't speak Spanish in public. Ethnicity wasn't a thing then; you hid it.

Unless you were a white Smith, obelisk mixing with the milk and the flour, hardening into cement.

Art Information

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Ellen McGrath Smith teaches at the University of Pittsburgh and in the Carlow University Madwomen in the Attic program. Her writing has appeared in the *American Poetry Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Quiddity*, *Cimarron*, and other journals; it's also appeared in several anthologies, including *Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*. Smith has been the recipient of an Orlando Prize, an Academy of American Poets award, a Rainmaker Award from *Zone 3* magazine, and a 2007 Individual Artist grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Her second chapbook, *Scatter, Feed*, was published by Seven Kitchens Press in 2014; her book *Nobody's Jackknife* was published in 2015 by West End Press.

For more information, visit: [Ellen McGrath Smith's website](#) [5] or follow her on Twitter [@breezely1462](#) [6].

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