

Madeline Sharples

What Is Loss?

I lose my keys or sunglasses
and find them in my hand all along.
I lose my little boy in the department store
and he pops out squealing with laughter
from under the clothes display,
I lose important papers
and find them
in the stack of other papers on my desk.

I didn't lose my son, Paul.
Paul is dead. Death is forever.
There's not a chance of finding him.

The light I've left on in the hall for him
every night since he died
doesn't show him the way back home.
There are no more piano gigs out there for him.
The Sunday paper entertainment guide
doesn't list his name at any jazz club.
He can't join the young guys at the Apple Genius Bar
and help people solve their computer problems.
Paul would have loved that job.
He was made for that job,
but he checked out too early.
The new meds and surgery for manic depression,
the new information about mental illness
are not for him.

Why do people refer to death as loss?
Maybe just to encourage
people like me.
Maybe just to keep me looking for him.
Maybe so I can pretend he's still out there.

Maybe that's why I long to mother
The strong young men at the gym
who hardly notice me
and the bright ones at work.
They are the right age.
They have the same look.
They have the same appeal.

Every time I see a young man
with close-buzzed hair,
well-worn jeans
a white t-shirt and a black jacket
sitting outside of Starbucks
sucking on a cigarette,
every time I see a skinny guy
walking fast across the street
carrying a brown leather bag over his shoulder,
I look to make sure.

Madeline Sharples worked most of her professional life as a technical writer, grant writer, and proposal process manager and began writing poetry, essays, and creative non-fiction when her oldest son, Paul, was diagnosed as manic depressive. She continued writing as a way to heal since his death by suicide in 1999. She is currently working on a memoir in poetry and prose, a poetry anthology, and poems for a book of photography, called The Emerging Goddess.