

POETRY

This Poem

This poem is what's left of this morning.
These words, nothing more, really,
than a knit-one, purl-one assembly.

This poem, like verity, a half of a sock
that doesn't stretch beyond the ankle,
a din of wool scraps, a desire

to shelter the shin, still working the turns
on the heel. This morning,
when I searched for a table, to write,

a sudden wind pummeled maples outside.
I could swear
I heard screams in the branches,

then wisps from a stunning unraveling
as the leaves spun
and fell unaligned.

How will I trust what I saw, those I heard?
As if to find truth in a day I haven't lived,
beauty from a past I don't know --

Can the wind be a Muse who deceives?
At noon,
what is left is this poem. Ordered.

Sound. Re-raveled. Like memory,
it is a phony of sorts,
however authentic in its goals,

it's production. It is the reason
why I write, the reason why my mother
always reaches for her knitting bag

in a crowded elevator, casts on a few
stitches. Although no one will hear,

Poetry

no one will know a thing. The Sirens
in her head, she is ten years old again,
hunkered down inside a bunker
with my grandmother, neighbors,

her hands inside her sack of half-
finished socks.
This poem is what's left.

Of Allied planes overhead,
casting beauty,
truth,

onto my mother, underneath,
fumbling
for wool and needles.

Petra Uhrig

Amnon, being stronger
than she, forced Tamar, and lay with her.
Then Amnon hated her exceedingly...
And *she had* a garment of divers colors upon her:
for with such robes were the king's daughters *that were* virgins appareled.
Then his servant brought Tamar out, and bolted the door after her.
And Tamar put ashes on her head,
and rent her garment of divers colors that was on her,
and laid her hand on her head, and went on crying.
2 Samuel 13

Tamar

He has come and gone away again. Her body urges a voice but she has no answer. No one has told her that once, women wore sacraments of grief. She rides the bus through outlying developments, broken glass and cinders in parking lots fanned out from the mall. The shopping mall is the arched space in her mind. Her breath grows shallow as she stands in the sterile light. Her mother sees her silence. Her mother buys her glass bracelets and a new bathrobe. The bus passes a church where the priests do not rend their vestments for Christ tortured on a tree, and where roses are delivered to the altar with thorns already removed. No one has shown her to rub ashes on her breasts or to chop her hair with scissors. Her brother closed the door and he closed the door and left. She threw her jeans in the trash. She has never torn a garment. She hears the wind near the dumpster. Her body needs a voice.

There is no attic above her mother's apartment. No great trunk holds irrevocable black silk. She will not hide her blood inside rustling skirts. No black-edged cards are received or sent. She is motionless in the family room. On TV there are temples in Japan. A girl lays a plastic baby beneath vivid red pillars; Tamar can smell the chrysanthemums. Here, there has been no death. He has come and gone away again. Her body urges.

She negotiates the house without making demands. In the sky of her mind lives the rage of bones. Tamar creates the sacrament of hunger. On the vinyl floor of her room, she lies without clothes. She has no taste in her mouth, and tears will purify every warm opening. Her breasts are involuntary. She will be dry leaves before her mother thinks to ask. *It has to be physical*, she might begin when her mother says goodnight in the hall, before Tamar locks her hollow door, but no one has told her there are words for this: Her body.

Helen W. Mallon

The Children's Golden Book of Science

Air, how much do you need for a cloud

I am six, perched on a metal stool at the lab. It's cold so I wear my coat. Dad uses a pipette to drip samples into test tubes. Pipette. I like the word. *See how I lift my thumb to draw up the liquid?* he asks.

Breath, why visible in cold temperatures

The lab's in a metal shed like where we keep our lawnmower but bigger. Lab bench -- that's not for sitting; it's like our kitchen counter but longer. Glass cabinets with rows and rows of breakers. *Beakers*, says Dad. Every size test tube, dish and jar. The air smells like gummy bears dropped in nail polish remover.

Clouds, why do they approach each other from opposite directions

Now, Dad clamps the test tubes along the inner wall of the centrifuge. This is one of my favorite parts. It looks like the State Fair Walls of Death, which I'm not allowed to ride. A barrel spins, the floor drops out and people edge sideways like spiders across the walls.

Dew, is it an earth-bound cloud

Then, Dad slots the test tubes into a rack. When the timer rings, Dad will take readings. Not words in a book but writing down numbers. *Would you like to make a cloud?* he asks. He's forgotten that we've done this before but I want to, Yes, yes. I don't tell him we have or maybe we won't.

Experiment, how can we prove what we see

This jug's used for experiments, not cider. *Put on your gloves. Don't put your fingers in your mouth; that's toxic.* Toxic. That means not for tasting. Dad lets me pour rubbed alcohol -- *Rubbing*, says Dad -- into the jug. We plug it; pump in air through a tube; then unplug. A perfect cloud hovers inside.

Poetry

Fog, is it a cloud with fear of heights

Dad lifts me off the stool and puts the cloud jug on the floor. *You keep an eye on that for me, all right?* I lean so close that my breath fogs the glass. I wipe it clear and peer at my captive.

Gas, when it burns, where does it go

Sometimes we make clouds with dry ice and water in a bucket. But they don't last as long. *Science is the study of change*, says Dad. *He's studying quarters*, I think proudly, *so will I*.

Head in the clouds, what is the effect of

I always ask *Can I take the cloud home?* No, he says, *It belongs here*. That's why I open every drawer even though he tells me to stop. I'm looking for clouds

before they're released into the sky.

Linda Ontjes

Unspoken

You played rough
like a dog with his knotted sock,
got down on all fours,
made a low table over me,
tickled my spindly body
till I couldn't speak
or breathe.

And when I tried to say
—don'tll or —stopll or —leave,ll
the words caught in my throat
like a section of orange,
a sliver of moon,
the clenched fist of a peony.

Karen Bashkirew

Unfounding Fathers

I hope you fail miserably, I told my wife;
We turned into the supermarket, she said-
61 years old when he graduates -- no, 62!

No luck trying Farmer Jack - {pharmacist gets off early}
Test kits get locked next to the cigarettes after 7.
Protection still available opposite the produce aisle.
(kitty corner to the cukes & kiwis)

CVS impressed --digitized kit with flashing symbol.
Plastic box, extra test free. Greatest Certainty.
—Results in wordsll *yellow bannered* its label.

Words – we get words now, too?
Crossed fingers, piss & chemicals weren't enough?

This is what its come to?

I shook the box and listened.

George Sperry

Shelter Life

Call me Turtle Woman. The only time I remove my house -
this backpack-is to shower. And it makes a good pillow.

When you see shit happen here, don't speak. Or else you will find
pee in your bed, food missing, a sudden bully to your son.

Like children, we close our eyes and freeze, think
that we become invisible to the repairmen who trample in.

After chores, the payphone sheds tears everyone can hear.
Black candle of hope. Umbilical cord to real world.

That liquor store owner always knows when the shelter
is full: the phone cards sell out before noon.

Which chore is worse? Bathrooms sticky from boys with poor aim
or mossy food in the fridge labeled by someone long gone?

If you don't smoke, you will make the most friends –
and babysit a living room full of forgotten children.

Maria Luisa Arroyo

Dashboard

The 15-year-old boy impaled his heart
against the dashboard when the 17-year-old
drunk crashed into him and careened
over the embankment. Into the river
leaving the boy talking to his mother
in the front seat, talking and her saying
help is coming as always saying
it will be all right. Ten minutes earlier
you should have seen her putting
on lipstick and teasing him
about his driving. Ten minutes.
The way my own son jokes
about his body and laughs
at its every missive, and we drive
one and a half hours every day
to work. We cross a lake and take a boat
where we look for the sea monster
of Lake Champlain. It's always the same
old tired story: What spares us, what sets
us apart? My son struggles to open
his future like a present. At night
I dream it is a coiled snake
the way I was jumped in college
by a man who smiled
as he pulled a knife
on the street corner.
The story ended with me talking
my way into my car,
locking him out at the last
minute. *Lock all the doors*, I tell my son
now too quickly, too often
& his smile is a butterfly
is the opposite of the tired story
is me leaving that street corner,
driving away.

Linda Young

When I Felt That Your Shadow Could Slay Me

At sleep's edge I saw you
standing in my own dark woods.
Your loose hair whipped across your face.

Something that I knew,
that was not you, flared out,
flickered back, fast as acetylene torch.

I believe that your darkness is
coloring, not evil. Your tallness
is height, not looming.

But sometimes I lose that belief
in the reel of remembrance.
How I fell from grace,

a container for darkness.
How I slept like the dead
in the sling of a blood red moon.

Sandra Ahrens

This is What Goes On

Four o'clock in the afternoon,
summer sun still high,
young woman sits
with her girlfriend on a curb,
waiting for the bus,
breast-feeding her baby.
Dark hair braided and piled high,
blue jeans, crisp white shirt, sunglasses.
She straightens her clothes,
shifts the baby around,
fusses with him, pats his bottom,
then picks up the cigarette
she has left on the pavement and inhales.
Her friend stands up next to her,
stretches, bounces on the balls of her feet,
leans over to coo at the child.
They laugh and talk, look at the baby
while the mother jiggles him on her lap,
takes a drag, turns her head,
watches the street for their bus.

Charlotte McCaffrey

Last Poem for You

Yesterday flitting in behind me
yellow bee of a car buzzing down
the road like a child's toy
I kept trying to catch some recognition
in my rear view mirror
some clarity that what we'd been
doing these past months made any sense
except to me
that the sameness riding between us
wasn't just my imagination
that falling in love with your eyes
and the way you saw me
didn't have to mean
anything except maybe you wanted it too
but I kept my eyes off the mirror
as you've kept yourself away from mine
I looked at the road
and sang my little girl a song
about farmers and pigs
except it wasn't my voice coming out my mouth
just a thin reflection of a sound
like when you send a call out deep
into the forest and it returns
far away or not at all
and then because I had to look again you
had already darted into the other
lane and turned left
out of sight like a hare between birches
where you've been all along
(if I remember it the way I've forgotten)
out-of-sight
except here in the throat
whispering
drowsy hum of a song
singing from flower to flower.

Claire Drucker

The Ditch

In summer I followed my little brother, enraptured by
the dawn rooster. Horseflies humming in the heat-haze.

Daring Saturdays we wandered through our backyard ditch
to escape our father's bellow, his corder belts.

Wary of opossums and skunks, of gnarled ground branches,
we wound its passage into the hills. We pretended

that our shoes repelled the mud and silt.
We became two ghosts—our flesh, our physical trunks

floated above the stables, our temporal street.
In January, when the ditch flooded,

we submerged our feeble bodies in the freezing runoff.
We pushed our backs upstream toward the hills, having not yet

learned to describe it: the swiftness of water.
Light disembodied from wind. The ditch's slippery substance

like a tinderbox, holding us in, holding us under, our torrential wonder
tapering in and out with the flow, our bodies bent on survival.

Christine DeSimone

Nude Descending a Staircase

The model was beautiful. Persimmon
breasts, hips swinging free,
she savored the pleasure of placing
one bare foot on each cool
step as she descended.

But Dunchamp, obsessed
with motion, split her supple
body into twenty wooden planks--
shoved the rigid torsos
down the staircase, and thrilled
to the mechanics.

Ruth Tucker

Poem Of The Descent

There was no door.
We lived in a bottle
where the marriage of numbers is
unresolved.

It divides itself into
infinity
which is now, where it is all over.
I wear the number.

I don't know how
the years ever stumbled
on the Alcatraz of myself.
I see your shadow

sixty floors up
leaning out from
the bottle you called our life.
Don't call me back.

My arms: long boned-guns.
I learned with them
to measure miles and miles
from rigid shoulder

to fingertip
from you to me
that distance
and how to keep it.

Suzanne Owens

Finding Daddy's War Letters

Arched on my toes, and
exactly even with my eye
peeking inside
I can see cradled deep
inside the bureau drawer
(left open an inch or two) mounds of
letters bundled like babies of love
criss-crossed with pink ribbons
bound for the future.

They are grey, strange papers,
unlovely letters coated with something
slick over the dark grey words
not with the deep pure black
or Waterman's permanent blue inks
scrolling the mysterious writing
tucked into the paper packages
but more fuzzy dusty grey
gorgeous Palmer Method lines,
circles of silent messages to
us who are far from
the terrible —Front.¶

What the Front is, what it is like,
is an awful mystery to me,
but with a child's certainty, I
know that that is the place where my
father lives every day and every day
writes a magical letter to us
where my name is written in many places
on each page by his own hand and fingers
directing his fountain pen to
arch and flow over the wonderful
words that are all of him
I can ever remember. He had always
been in the war all of my short life.

My mother has told us that the odd
letters are just photographs of his letters,
pictures of the real letter,
words are gone here and there where

someone in the army has painted over them
with black ink, much of some pages are all
blacked out, just one or two words of Dad's
thoughts remain, but his name is
alright to leave on the page even
if all all the words
he had to put down on his
paper there near his battlefield, are
too secret to send home to us.

The silence of guns stares at us
from the curling pages, the quiet fall
of friends against the soft mud,
the fearful blood flows into the blessedly
cleansing rain, a chaplain gently screams
through mother's lips
as does the love the terror the lonely sleep
the wounded nights.
Surely I was far too young
to have been able to read
his letters, but I recalled them word for word like
nursery rhymes. Did I actually read the words
or did I just remember them from
the times our mother reread them
to us as we'd beg to hear
—Daddy?||

Judith Cody

August in Tupelo

We fell in love the night she shot me. I had scoffed at my mother's warning *Should you be throwing rocks at a Southern woman's window?* I thought only of those movies where Fred Astair wakes Ginger with a pebble at her pane; they kiss, coo, dance in misty midnight. I forgot the regiment of rifles, cold walnut goons, asleep along her den wall. So I glided up her drive beneath languid sighing stars with thoughts of Juliet's balcony and a basket of wine and risotto. Toss after giddy toss I emptied my beaded silk bag of Japanese serenity stones etched with the willowy characters for —lovell and —understandingll — then — the Click! Shhhlink! Flash! of bolt action. My ass full of buckshot, I slammed nose and teeth into curb, spattering blood and truffles across prickly bluegrass. Later, in the fogged purple before sunrise, she healed me with gentle hands that still smelled of blue metal.

Mary Laine Yarber

Nursing

When my son
hooks his fingers
in my navel
and slides closer to me,
taking the nipple into his mouth
and kicking me under the sheets,

I look at the top of his head,
hair just beginning to grow,
and I am questioning,
thinking of the future, past, and present,
thinking of God and creation and birth and death,
thinking I need a good night's sleep.

I look down at my son again.
All the answers to my questions
are in the gentle scratch marks
my son's fingers make
against my skin.

Cindy Seckler

Confession

The elliptical porch
surrenders to a flowering
jasmine tree, its
tender branches partly
portico. A half
moon sends blue
light over the leaves
as they tap out subtle
songs in the summer
air. You, too,
are newly married. I
met your mother in
Sparta. Your father
proudly showed me his lemon
trees; your younger
brother slung black
birds he had shot—slivers of
dark in their death eyes—
over his shoulder
the way I used to hang
a pair of skates.

Your husband, from Athens,
gets up to join mine
in the kitchen. You
lower your head
in the cross
of light and whisper
that he has hit
you, because
it is his duty
and because
a man needs to
hit his wife
once in a while.
You become quiet
as he returns, and
lean back
into your place;

Poetry

the heavy moon
weighs
into the chair,
spinning you
on the mosaic tiles
like a Delian sacrifice.

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

The Sound of Her Voice for Gertrude Stein

He calls it hullabaloo, delirious exegesis –
Oloyga! Eleleu! Alala!

When he uses the noun —woman!!
he means someone in her mid twenties

to late forties, with no door
on her mouth. Someone who leaks

sound like an old wineskin filled with new wine.
Woman -- the tone alone secures the pathos

of a madman, a decapitated hen --
uninspired, raw utterance.

But she doesn't belong
to his mythology any more

than the pit and loom, the low
sapped sway which pulls

down his vocal chords
taut and rodlike, quivering

as a tight stretched tendon hims.
Unbound by Man

in the sagging muscle of his restraint,
a woman pulls up and out of the earth,

cackling like a battle, roaring like a beefsteak.
Her sound warmhearted

and bloodthirsty.
The unattainable rising on the tip

of her tongue the world over, the sinking
bolt of impulse angling out into song.

Jenna Johnson

Poetry
