

POETRY

Choir Performance, Second Grade

Centrifugal force on the risers: each child
full of her seventh year. I speculate,

knowing this, the cool auditorium dark
as lake water, little people testing

their voices, tape marks on the stage.
Awkward vocation: soft words firm in their

mouths, on their tongues. Small feet find their
marks, girls float in their skimpy surplises:

cheesecloth and oxfords. One sheer stage
curtain that will not be raised, each little girl's

body blunt as a saltshaker. They are all
thirsty, tongues dry as feathers,

collective arpeggios and trills, each note
glossy as a window. The girls can taste

the gauze curtain; each one practices
indifference like scales. *Stand up,*

says the chorus master. Little girls
scatter into place like anapests.

Their voices collect, soar above their skin.
The cool dark is flawless, each voice

pulsing off the risers. We offer our bright
palms in the dark, little moons of applause.

Carol Frith

Dali Triptych

Purgatory 17

painting from the *Devine Comedy* suite by Salvador Dali
*"Ah, vain Arachne, thee I saw distraught,
already turned half spider, in the shreds
of that which thou to thine own ill had'st wrought."* --- Dante

Until I was 42, Dali wouldn't paint me.
A gallery auctioned Arachne, and I saw my own six attenuated limbs
stretched to breaking. In the painting, she flees

as two small figures turn their backs. Mountains, too pale to be
other than far distant, sketch the horizon, dim
beneath a red-streaked sky. When I was 42, Dali painted me,

and I bought myself that day. I am she,
feeding daughters, bleeding through a canvas scrim.
Stretched to breaking, Arachne flees

and envies her shadow its shade. A refugee
without refuge, she touches the lines that swim
like lanes to somewhere. When I was 42, Dali painted me.

The blue Virgil looks back over his shoulder; he sees
the matted hair, large breasts. His face grim,
he knows she's stretched to breaking as she flees

the bright expanse, searching for shelter, a cave, a tree---
but only sun and rocks and a pounding rhythm:
keep going, keep going. When I was 42, Dali painted me---
stretched to breaking, poised, aching, no place to flee.

Mary Carol Moran

Bathing With Ponge

Perhaps the sound of *l'huître* and *nacre* made me go in. Bly's translations didn't match the words I saw. And Devon asked me which poet to translate while she studied French near the Library of Congress. She is so pretty and reminds me of how I wish I'd known I looked like her at her age.

So I dared Devon to come up with two translations and I would too, and we both swam into the word pleasures of Francis Ponge. The *seule* man who knows things, *les choses*. His words are the last words we need to understand oyster or door. *Vraiment*, I know this because I've said his words in two languages every week since, and I see kings on their thrones wanting to open a door or an oyster, secretly reaching for gold doorknobs, gently caressing the corners of mahogany and cherry, finding reasons to send servants away, stealing a knife in their purple sleeves to slice into the *nacre*.

Because on the other side, inside, Francis himself, sitting serene in a bath near a green hedge, naked, with his arms open to kings, Devon and me.

Donna L. Emerson

Umbilical

My child insists that everything
has a belly button and finds them easily
on his dolls, his own round stomach,
and ours. We search for the navels
of animals under their fur
and begin to see that many things
have centers or indentations
the size of a fingertip.
Even rocks have notches, openings.

It is not difficult in the orchard.
Every fruit bears a mark
showing how it has been
umbilical to the tree, and every
tree bears at least one wound,
one pair of nubs where a branch
once clung. I can even see the tree,
where it presses itself to the ground,
umbilical to the earth,
and the leaves stretching out
umbilical to the sun.

I keep working in this way,
seeing the sun umbilical
in the sky, the sky and earth
umbilical to each other---
seeing how everything shows us
where it has come through
and what it has left behind.

Elizabeth Schott

Angelus Mortis

She arrived in a pink box
with clear tape sealing each seam,
laid out on a cardboard backing
and tied in place with white ribbon bows.
White tissue paper had been wrapped
carefully over each of her hands
as if in some funereal rite.

My husband, who must introduce
himself to you as your son each time
we visit, worried that she was too heavy,
but I knew that the weight
was what you wanted to bear.

I began to wonder which of your babies
we were bringing back to you.
One of the four who died?
One of the four who grew so far
beyond you? The plaything
they never allowed you in the orphanage?
The afterthought of an ageing mother
you once were, now snug
in a pink snow bunting
embroidered with butterflies
and matching hat? You took her
at once into the crook of your arm,
not needing to tell us
who she was because you
had recognized her immediately.

Though you used the word "doll"
easily enough while we were there,
we heard you greet her gently
after we had left the room.
No matter how we talk,
we cannot calm you. You were waiting
for the one who would keep silent,
the one who would teach you
to be open-eyed, unblinking.

Elizabeth Schott

Reflection

From the steps on the porch,
I watch the sun slip behind the hills.

It is the first evening I feel winter.

Through the kitchen window,
our son and his love at the table beside you.
At dinner, you said you liked your reflection
in the bedroom mirror you bought before we met.

They left to peer into the mirror. Returned flushed, laughing,
said they started to kiss and couldn't stop.

In their absence
it didn't occur to either of us
to touch the other.

Before you,
I had no home, no children.
Only a suitcase of dresses,
a box of books.

Love gave me what I didn't have.
But I know nothing lasts. Not flesh
or the warmth of a mouth upon a mouth.
This night will pass. Light will again strike the window.

Smoke twists from a neighbor's chimney. I crave
a cigarette, although I quit years ago.

Jane Downs

it looks a lot like peeing

if women had penises
i think it highly unlikely
that they'd water the irises
the same way that man is:
his right hand holding hose nozzle
just below and in line with his navel
unembarrassedly spraying,
stream playing, pubicly public,
for anyone to see,
including, for instance,
a person like me: on foot
and female, post-menopausal,
vision imperfect, far-
sighted and literal.

Barbara Ann Porte

Praying At Your Bedside

*Talking to God is like talking to a stone,
Momma muses while you doze.
Prayer helps like leeches
on a dead person, Aunt Ella adds.*

Cousin Frieda admits she still prays,
though not to God, but to her mother,
because her mother promised
she'd answer: *Listen for me, Friedele.*

Momma says: *I was the youngest of ten
and prayed to no one, even before the war.
All I wanted back then were warm boots,
pretty plucked eyebrows, a piece of chicken.*

*In ghetto we had plenty loose bricks,
but nothing to hide behind them.
Not one zloty to put under a walnut shell.
Now so many zlotys. Helps like wet rags.*

While you lay in your hospital bed,
did you hear us? Or were you remembering
your living grave, fifty years before,
where you hid under hay, a plank,

the click of Nazi boots? Seeing you
in that hospital bed, imprisoned
in your own body, in your own thoughts,
permanently attached to tubes

you couldn't rip out, able to see our hands
but not reach for them, I admit to times
I prayed for your death. But Momma, a god
of iron, willed you to live, pressing her comb

through your random hairs, her kisses onto your eyes
and each of your unmoving fingers. God, were you alive
in Momma's kisses and combing, in Frieda's listening
for her mother, in my prayers for my father's death,

in my hope You wouldn't answer?

Doris Ferleger

5 O'Clock Poem

Descending the gray nudge of Market Street
I am heavy in my shoes,
a little sack-bent.

The dryness in my throat
is familiar but not comfortable,
my body is familiar but not comfortable.

Most openings are too small to enter,
but upstream and tired, I fall in
some slat of light, some pod of tenderness

achy stone of me exploding like a rose.
People look almost real
swaying toward the charcoal night into streetcars.

The train is always approaching always pulling out.
What I mean to say is we live in the illusion
of beginnings and endings.

Above ground the trucks are coming
in a flow of red-turning lights.
By a stream in a life that is not mine

a salmon thrusts the silver
glint of its body
up a shallow stream that is pushing it ---

can you feel it pushing you? ---
backwards.
And what if it gave in

let the exhausted muscle of its being
ride the way-down current.
All these people how hungry they look

and not nearly as guilty as they feel
shuffling onto the silverlit train cars
by ones

as something
they have been waiting for
has come to take them home.

Jennifer K. Sweeney

The Living Hand

Picture the writing hand of Balzac, Hugo,
Emily Bronte. Picture the ink stains on

the first and second fingers – the blue cold
around the knuckles in the unheated upstairs

bedroom of the parsonage, the mark and stain
of the ashes dead in the grate; picture the

unwashed hand of George Sand; she's
hunched over in the light of the fire, writing,

her lover stirring in the bed, amazed that
she's awake after all that. See the writing

callus on the middle finger of the hand of
Virginia Woolf, the square capable hand

of Sir Walter Scott, Charlotte and Anne
holding hands as they walk up and down

the dining room floor, rehearsing their
stories, and Keats – holding out his

living hand, that warm scribe – to us,
a hand with thin bones, smallish and
pale, and gone, gone, gone.

Irene McKinney

Orchard In Stow, 4 October 03

Your boy cheeks, elongating to a young man's face
bones rising from roundness, mimicking the curves
of the ocean of apples, people bobbing among them
returning wet-footed with halfpecks of fruit

"Tricking the ladder" read the poet Cervone,
and my floodgates creaked open to enter the day
when with hurt hearts benumbed we picked apples in rain
and so marked the passing of Walter, your dad.

We noted with pleasure the farmyard display,
the cinnamon doughnuts, the sticks full of honey,
when the day just before we had driven north fast
to outpace the moment that had already passed.
From the highway we phoned and embraced our dismay.

You had sat by his bedside, quietly weaving
small rings into chain maille of galvanized steel.
Few words passed—the odd joke, the sly story,
move this pillow—
till fatigue overtook him and nurses claimed his time,
their efficient poetics of coming and leaving.

Deborah Maier