

POETRY

Traveler, Beware

If you find yourself driving, lost
and the October trees outside
your Chevette are wrestling
with their memories of daylight

and because of astigmatism
in your one good headlight
you can't see ahead,
only hear the ring-chink
of a bell on a bicycle behind you
and the maniacal laughter so suited
to your child, your once-was-in-you
whoever that was,

if you feel your spine suddenly
and you can't look back—

whoever that is,

and you think you may as well be
adrift putting through the outer
atmosphere until you recognize
the side rails swooning off the edge of the road
and the roadless yellow lifeline
luring you into the motorless night,
impossibly past the abandoned
Volvo of your lover,
dome light on, rear door left
ajar

and the voice of the asphalt road
with its chorale of monotone:
thumping this way, this way
and finally, the dangerously roundabout question
comes from the overlit truck stop—

where are you now?

or the blinding headlight
of dawn asking—

what happened?

Mary Elizabeth Ladd

Emphases

When the lake is pure sheen
in summer haze,
silver-white with a bluish blush
minus horizon line
minus the curve of the earth

and gulls as big as fishing boats
float motionless,
a mobile without the wind's
breath to make it
spin and dance

and waves tunnel but do not
break the water's surface,
slipping free at the shoreline
with whispers, hisses,
glumps--

then, in response, my bare feet
pull the water on
like a second skin

and driftwood punctuates
the shining water
like underscorings on a stark
page, like emphases
without words.

Georgia Ressmeyer

Where I Was, 1995

when my son was born, I threw away
all the photographs taken of my life from before
I was so determined to become somebody else
that I pretended that I was brand new
just like him

when my husband refused to work, I got a temp job
where I could work a week, then be home a week
so I could spend time with my son
there was no extra money, but I didn't care
I was so in love with that baby
nothing else mattered

I sold all my records to pay for groceries and rent
I threw away all my clothes that couldn't be used for work
everything I owned could fit in a backpack
a few pieces of jewelry I could sell in a pinch
enough to take me and my son
somewhere safe

Holly Day

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 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

Two Lives

1. You told me you want what I have.
2. You do not hear this conversation.

1. I wait too long before saying I want what I had in us.
2. You do not remember what you understood yesterday.

1. You are never anyone's friend. Except mine.
2. We are not best friends.

1. You quieted, came around if I cried.
2. That's not how it was in your family.

1. Your eye is a disk of night, the opposite of a white moon.
2. We do not look at one another's eyes anymore.

1. You did not run the relationship. And neither did I.
2. Not seeing how you contradict me becomes another contradiction.

1. You follow my gestures like a hand stokes fire. No explanations.
2. Your forgiveness rides a whale at dusk.

1. First you untie the knots in my hair. Drop the letters of my name in a box.
2. You have no other name for me.

1. You look away when you think I am someone else.
2. You tell me you just want information.

1. You think this is what I would want.
2. You say "I did it because you said that is what you wanted."

1. Food like bells in a burning field.
2. Stale bread stolen from crows.

1. What happened on your birthday every year was an accident.
2. A celebration remains unsettled. On this day a whole family tunneled from prison.

1. Ways of running me to love: make me look this way, laugh or sob.
2. You ask what I want. I answer. You ask if that is what I want.

Lisa Manzi

Second Soul

Moses then called together the whole Israelite community and said to them, "These are the things that the Lord has commanded you to do: On six days may work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death."

The rabbis
rushed to say
that we don't really die
if we work on Shabbat.
They were sure
that the second soul,
who arrives
on that day,
dies instead.

What does
a second soul
look like?
Not a gray,
gentle man
who comes to the door
with a sad smile
and leaves
just as politely,
in a whisper
through the fog.

No.
My second soul
is crouching now
under my chair—
a panting animal
for whom blood
and rest and sun
are the same.

Such a creature
does not go lightly
but dances
to every tune
offered up
by the wind.

Laurie Patton

What Happened

Seemed to freeze the water in the pond,
the turtles, their mud. It choked
the river in your brain, tore the page,
burned it, ate and vomited
the ash. You felt it unspin

every word murmured in half-sleep, make
raw the meals you shaped and served.
Each dish peacefully washed broken
then, the table split, bright
sky shriveled to sack. Only trash

caked at the curb seemed to mark what was
left, yet everything proceeded: old
people still old, happy children happy, air
clear and dirty as before. No crows
darkened the trees, no hands cramped

to claws, no tubers soured the ground.
No half-formed seed wrenched from its port
to stain our other portion, no taste bud
rooted from the tongue. No hammer
came down. No anvil broke, You did wish

that could be all, no reckoning, but you knew
what had happened and stepped to shape
the jolt and heat of motion. You made
a sound, decided: compact, even
black the solution: to act, at last to act.

Nancy White

Ruth To Her Daughter

Remember the old music master and his tuning pipes?
He had two notes, would start us off singing.
Those days no one could write a ticket out,
even Boaz with his baskets and baskets of grain.
The way it never occurred to us? I continue
to find that beautiful. But not for you.
Most of the time I was like the corn itself,
was their unspoken word. I found music in that.
It was enough. But not for you. Not you.

Nancy White

The Morrigan As Preceptor

In your stories of fanatical revenge,
I recognize your dire, dreadful, blood-spilling wrath
so much that nothing is enough to portray
the ire that lets you machinate with exactitude,
impelling you with appetite into frenzied madness
not nasty at all for you, Macha,
lover of hewn-off heads hanging by clotted hair.

You are the Phantom Queen,
you command the Washer at the Ford.
You bring whatever turmoil and terror
you think might freeze a hero's marrow.
You are preceptor and prophet,
teacher and seer of the horrid,
you gainsay all who refuse you.
Think of Cúchulain saying he needs no woman's help,
and then think of him beheaded by his foe who saw you
in your dread aspect of a crow upon the hero's shoulder.
Think of Cúchulain headless, his hand gone, bound to a pillar.
You brought the end to him you desired.
Yet you also sported with the Dagda in delight.

Shape-shifter, the inhabiting of the flesh
of maiden, of mother, of crone, of eel, of heifer, of wolf
reveals what you desire. You would keep consciousness
to yourself confined. Great Queen,
Macha, Morrigan, I do not underestimate you.
I pay respectful honor to qualities in you
I would use to quite another end.

A.E. Nugent

Beatings To Learn

Among the underground garden
of books burning of learning,
I skim across the surface,
a lanky-legged water spider,
a Jesus bug the wounds puncture:
the ragged boy from the dirt house
with dirt under his nails,
too much coconut oil
in his thick black hair,
some rubbed on his shoeless feet.
The ruler across his knuckles
echoes his bones.
His earlobe will be wrung
for dirty nails, for being late,
for homework not done.
His parents will die without reading English
or having sat in a classroom
except to watch an agricultural film
(with only a rumor for notice)
not because of agriculture,
but because it's a film.
I bruise with each turn.
I bruise in my own turn.
When I visited my old Hindu school,
I met a teacher who insisted
that beatings helped her to learn.

Zorida Mohammed

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,

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