

Transcriptions of Daylight

Poems by
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A Man of Glass

My father collected art glass,
vases and bowls from Webb and Tiffany,
some glazed yellow and red, brilliant as sunsets,
others clear as a splash of water.
Carefully taking one down from a shelf,
he'd say, "Notice the enamel finish"
or "Look at the quality of the inlay."
Each contained its own beauty and signature,
which he delighted in unlocking.

And when the cancer started shaping him
like molten glass, it hollowed out his cheeks,
made deep pontil marks in his bony face.
His eyes glazed to a dark finish on his brittle life,
his unique gesture when curiously pleased—
flicking a finger down his nose and laughing—
his own beauty and signature,
which I would like so much to show you
but is on a shelf I cannot reach.

From the Silver Mines

Here, in this photo, I turn and look back,
my hair blown unnaturally to one side,
my mouth half open, maybe in surprise,
or maybe saying something best unsaid.

The innocence of being caught off-guard
is heightened by a sense of what escaped:
the only evidence of words, a ghost,
a sheet of condensed breath torn from my lips.

I think of others who looked back: Lot's wife,
and Orpheus, who had so much at stake—
how carelessly they must have turned and glanced,
looking like this before the shock set in.

And those who found Medusa over their shoulder,
gazed into her eyes, her sinister stars,
and saw themselves, into their wishes, saw
their future as a past and hardened to stone.

How quietly regret sneaks up behind us,
how slowly it accumulates, like salt,
or silver used to make a photograph
of someone, somewhere I would rather be.

Repetitions

Long walks are a tendency for losing things,
for passing and allowing things to pass:
a man strutting in shorts,
a woman trotting in a loose-fit skirt,
each falling behind and out of sight
as if misplaced.

So I, who stroll for hours,
can't be trusted with keys,
with compasses or maps.

I sometimes think of turning back,
but even then I'd be going forward,
looking ahead to notice
how some face as it approaches
reminds me of another,
and this new street
fills me with déjà vu.

Strange magic, a loss whose power
compounds in the memory
even the simplest gesture:
a mother sweeping hair
away from her child's eyes,
lover caressing the face of lover,
all hands gracing a common curve,
an arc of intimate regrets
familiar as a falling leaf,
a motion eased by repetition,
and often mistaken for directions home.

The Turtle

A bike ride in the park,
the lilacs blooming, poking
their violet tails through hedgerows,
the catkins twisting in
the wind like petaled corkscrews.

We slow, sighing for beauty,
then shift gears and move on
to further praise a spring
that claimed your young friend's life.

The dizzy hush of spokes
quiets our thoughts and eases us
into the next turn
where you ask to stop.

You lead us to a pond
whose dark reflections buoy
a fallen tree, the one,
where years ago, your friend
sat balancing himself
over the yielding water,
and where today a turtle
sits bathing in the sunlight.

His deep-green shell is thick,
is nearly black, as though
he carried on his back
the remnants of the night.
He's dignified and poised
above the depths, as still

and thoughtful as a hand
pausing above a keyboard
at the clarity of Bach,
the sorrow of Chopin.

You seem to hold your breath,
gathering in your eyes
the glazed and distant look
of waiting for the music,
of knowing it will come,
though not on a day like this—
not before you turn,
stepping back from the pond,
the sunlight dims and the turtle,
threatened by our movement,
dives into the dark water.

Virgil in Calcutta

He walked ahead of me, down the arcade,
fending off shopkeepers who offered brass
and ivory trinkets. He ushered me through shade,
pledged guidance anytime to anyplace.
He shooed the children begging at the door,
turned back a toothless, crescent grin and bowed,
gesturing toward the street as though he wore
the face of every myth of light and cloud.

Outside, people careened under the light.
The traffic died. The cars and buses steamed.
A mound of earth rose high around a site
where they exhumed something I read or dreamed:
these lame boys, faceless men, this painful heat.
I closed my eyes . . . and stepped into the street.

The Geode Site

Geologists pick and chisel,
careful among these hard facts
not to distort the beauty of the matter at hand,
although at first appearance
a dull thing, just like any
thrown through a neighbor's back window
with the accuracy of a bitter child.
Here what they look for
isn't the slingshot's extruded eye
but perfect memory; what the bruised flesh
will forget these stones remember.
For the hot rage cooled to trip the child
even as he ran from the scene,
pockets of air clotted his blood,
a space where years of a hard life
angled into glass. Beneath
the geologist's hammer, the stone splits open,
yielding to his gentle stroke
a specimen—proof to the angry end
that a hollow heart is lined with crystal.

Transcriptions of Daylight

Through space and sky, between cloud, building and tree,
the light falls, gathers in the distances
each elemental arc of gravity,
the dark rotations, such equivalencies
as adorn wave and particle, present the eye
with tendrils, filigree and arabesque,
such differences of gesture or reply
as weigh the water of all picturesque
landscapes, the memories and thoughts, like nets,
scattered across every terrain to catch
its meaning—leaves shaded with time, sunsets
distilling dreams from the day's small disclosures:
birds circling rows of trees, a struck match,
your hand taking mine, and between our fingers,
a darkness which our intimacy measures,
while around us daylight slows and lingers.

The Center of a Stone

As if it chose them, the sun illuminates
a particular house on a block, a certain bush in a row,
a single leaf fallen in its tangle,
as now, along the park, a line of trees,
submerged in shade, makes a wall of shadow
around the remainder of sunlight,
a central kingdom of trees, whose green is gilded,
luminous, suspended in a distance
remote as the winds that burnish its branches
and preen its grass, while birds,
swinging in ever-widening arcs,
their wings flashing like blades,
circle toward the wall of shadow
where it seems I have always been
sitting at the center of a stone
waiting for the daylight to begin.

The Gleaners

a painting by Jean François Millet

These three women pick at the remains,
the scatterings left behind
during the gathering of the harvest.
They bend, sorting through the cut stalks.

It's clear how Millet shaped the landscape
to echo their figures, the haystacks and houses
contoured to rise or fall at levels
that mirror their stooped or standing postures:
this one in a red bandanna, that one in a blue,
this one with her hand behind her back,
that one with a hand in her pocket.

But it means little when compared
to what we have in common with them:
an effort to gather what small grains
will sustain us for a lifetime.