

STONES AND OTHER POEMS

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Stones

Practice on stones
was the sage advice.
Write poems about poems.
Describe landscape, light.
Examine architecture.
Explore taxonomy.
Learn the names of trees
that you may speak precisely.
When you consider death, at first
let it be of insects, then mammals.
When you write about love,
don't wander beyond the theoretical.
Use myth. Avoid anecdote.
Being young, you give away too much
of yourself. Don't spend your sincerity
too eagerly. It's your only currency.
Broke, you fall back on soliloquy.
That isn't poetry. Remember
the poems you read that made you
want to write poems. How inadequate
all your questions were thereafter.
How hesitant the tongue felt
when the usual phrases
fell, suddenly feeble,
as you went in search
of the stunning idiom, imagery
precarious and potent.
Do not be discouraged.
The rules were designed
to buckle, inspire mutiny,

falter like the limbic system.
All you have to do is listen
with ears piqued, pen poised,
and the truth will find itself
an elaborate cage to sing in.

After Stephen Dunn

In Praise of Elephants

It's elephants, only elephants, coming through
across the barren page of winter quiet, winter calm,
tips of their ivory tusks dangling slivers of ice.
A stretch of twelve, thirteen, lumber, trudge, tread
their mountainous strides across the empty page.
Only their image (the wrinkled skin, dark puddles
of ancient eyes, and ears! those giant cartilaginous
wings) animates my pen again, this sleepy wrist.
A pair galumphs, the others march, and one, the last
in line, turns his magnificent head, skull-house
of a brain four times the weight of mine, the one
in which he appears, flapping an astronomical ear.
And when he stares at me as though to anoint my eyes,
he is saying, to be clear, *We are untouchable*,
which I take to be miracle in a world of edges,
splinters, snags, skin, meat, bone, the triumvirate
of net, bullet, cage, a world to which I belong.
But the elephants of mind, in mine, *are* untouchable,
too large for archways except of moonlight.
One wink of theirs makes treetops shudder,
wakes Rip Van Winkle. No room I might speak of
or awkwardly inhabit can contain them. No
matter, idiom, price deem them unnecessary.
They are chameleon-like, translucent when need be.
Their trunks defibrillate thrice-revived hearts
with breath of trumpets. Who else, what else
will trace the ellipsis of a sorcerer's wand
then disperse the mirage with a whisper of dust
underhoof, to urge my pen again, again?

Growing Up with Monet

Now and then I forget
the indescribable awe I felt,
at six, upon discovering
Monet's water lilies
in a book.

Then it comes back to me,
what my teacher said.
He was going blind
when he painted them,
wearing specially-tinted glasses.

Something inside me
was shaken. I began to suspect
there are worlds apart from ours,
with wormhole-portals
scattered through our attics

and backyards.
Eyes behind eyes
that do the real seeing.
A shy but marvelous iris
at the epicenter of sleep.

Some things I learned in youth:
to make a statement true,
add an unremarkable *if*.
Explicate the assumptions;
assumptions fill the wells

from which we drink.
The eye is an aperture
embedded in a body.
At twenty, all I had
learned of the world

fit these definitions.
Dream is an act by which
the mind takes a stroll
around the neighborhood
as the body sleeps.

Betrayal, a thorn
concealed by petals.
Suffering, the length
of this thorn
and its sharpness.

Vanity, that by which
a bird measures the sky
with its body.
Courage, the attempt
of this bird.

Forgiveness, the notion
by which the blind
do not envy us our eyes.
The eye is an aperture
embedded in a body,

and the body expires. Monet,
like the whippoorwill
in a rhyme I called whimperwill,
from the age of six,
I have searched

for your *nymphéas* in life
and have found the world
in its vastness—such
immensity—radiant and
gorgeous and lacking.

Immigrant

Neither first- nor second-generation. It was a choice, this, to pack the two red suitcases, to take them both.

I chose the date and time and out of which airport. Chicken or fish, coffee and tea, the in-flight movie.

Chose a return date and let it pass, guiltlessly. Left because I knew the way back, or thought I'd left

a trail of breadcrumbs over the Pacific, or guessed (*akala ko, akalain mo*) I'd follow seagulls home,

negotiate a path toward the equator. At the back of my mind, I thought it might be possible.

But then I hardly looked back, with my *ñ* and nearly indistinguishable accent, an education which meant

something else in every state, I arrived at the city of arrivals, set up camp on the edge of the subterranean

way, a pentacle of routes. Uprooted, transplanted myself to one Woodside after Sunnyside off the 7,

the single train on the city's purple vein. And if Google maps could home in on my rented room,

X-ray the inner life of this living thing, my new city, gaze into its windows, it would find me here.

Three seasons away, a blizzard and forty-two weeks
from those first summer days according to Celsius,

before the scattered rain turned into wintry mist.

By now I've found a place for the empty suitcases,

out of sight, though I still think of them sometimes,
repeat the combination of their locks to myself,

think of the need, were I to move again, to pack light.

And the child with my same face who could not

discard a pairless sock, who kept her sundry treasures
in an old cookie tin, makes me wonder what I'd save

in a fire or bring to the lost, always nameless island
of the hypothetical archipelago on the ocean

of tired small talk. What would *you* bring?

A knife. A book, I suppose. All we can bear to lose

we will. Only the sky will stay and notice

the clouds become cargo ships

for some ancient desire.

Museum Worker

Morning serves a breakfast of groans on the 7. Whistling over the tracks, jerking from borough to borough. A sudden glide— *These trains, they are teaching me patience*. Swimming through impressionistic fog, a swollen blue, into Manhattan.

At a quarter to ten. Not wanting to be late, not wanting to arrive too early, or sometimes at all. Still I find myself in the lobby, all windows, quiet and empty, filled with light, as Balzac casts a shadow in the garden, before the crowds arrive.

What I know about Expressionism: “It has a real quality to it. I love the quality to it.”

– Silver-haired man before *The Storm* by Edvard Munch

At lunch, one lingers in the galleries, lets the weight of the objects sink in. Each paean, each complaint, its own question. Or else I pay the vending machines a visit in the basement, marvel at the range of sugar for quarters.

Art is *a*) figment *b*) oddment *c*) what she meant *d*) what he meant *e*) to tell a riddle.

“I don’t get it.” – Young woman before the disassembled chandelier from the former ballroom of the Hotel Majestic

The job is tedious, the pay decent. Floods my weekends with color, light, a stretch of sixty gorgeous hours. A little nothing time, little calm, room to myself.

What I know about Impressionism: In gallery x, trees twisting in wind, propulsive wind, fiery

night, an oversized moon spilling light on a violent earth. Rain shatters a city into glistening droplets. Landscapes kaleidoscope into pinwheel umbrellas, water waking water.

Audio tour of my neighborhood: At the station, glance through the Hopperesque windows, blue waves on the bright tinted panes from the stairs ascending to the platform. How expertly the light clings to the steel of the oncoming train. When you walk home in the evening, notice the sidewalks Pollocked with birdshit. Monet's glassy eye in a mossy pond, puddles of muck swallowing sunlight. The streets specked with litter and dust. Catch a whiff of the markets redolent with spices, a gaudy nostalgia. Approach Skillman. Here the house is cold but the rooms are warm. You may enter. See my tin can of letters, odds and ends, makes a Joseph Cornell of my suitcase.

Art is *a) slanted mirror b) planted fissure c) sharpened scissor d) sweet incisor e) cross-eyed juror*

The museum is open everyday except Tuesday. Backpacks and long umbrellas must be left in the complimentary checkroom. Photography without flash is allowed in the permanent collection. No photography in the special exhibitions please. The galleries close at 5:30, except on Fridays we're open till 8:00. Please have your payments ready as you approach the counter. If you're a student, have your student ID out. Audioguides are available on the first desk to your right. Here's a list of current exhibits. You'll find a map at the end of this desk. Not in Russian, unfortunately. Up the steps to your right, entrance to the galleries. Thank you. Enjoy your visit.

Meanwhile the poems begin to percolate in the little house in Woodside. The house is cold, the room warm. In the meantime Mr. Serkin plays the Moonlight Sonata on Pandora. A fire engine siren wails beneath the attic window. Across the street, the metal doors of the supermarket shut like eyelids. A poem refuses to write itself.

Outdoors

He says, we'll get out of the city, rents a car, takes me skiing in Highmount, hiking on Wildcat Mountain. Covers me in wool, polyester, Gore-Tex. I fall twenty different ways with my newfangled feet. Toeless, slippery, five feet long. We wake at dawn, drive for miles through small New Jersey towns through snaking highways, to the mountains where we lose the trail, find the trail, lose it again, like Hansel and Gretel, I say, but he doesn't smile though he is always smiling at the face I make when I'm trying not to make a face, feeling his eyes on me. My default expression he calls uncertainty. The perfume I wear though I don't wear perfume. We make love in the woods, against boulders. In daylight, facing the lake, no one in sight for hours. I am learning to think in Celsius, learning to think in miles. Beneath the drooping leaves of unnamable trees. Their names don't escape me. I never knew them. Lost half the time. North, south, east, west are all the same to me. Everywhere surrounded. Without a word for anything.

Delphi

The myth goes thus: Zeus released two eagles
at opposite ends of the world and they met at Delphi.

And what mind doesn't keen to the sound of a beautiful lie, at least
once in a while? When we were younger, didn't we believe

in these ruins? Now with all the oracular magic of stones
laid bare by sunlight, the question still begs to be asked,

no longer expects an answer. Since oracular
always meant the mediator would be cast in doubt,

meant precisely she could be mistaken, her words merely
written on water, light and unsettling as wind.

And possibilities were never possible until they occurred
in real time. Beyond event, all else is speculation.

Besides the gods were deaf, Delphi, and mute.

Today I sit in your ruins, amidst a history of asking,

and there are no voices. In any case, I haven't come
for answers but simply to see, to wait for what happens,

blind to its coming until it comes. But to the ghosts,
or the memory of them, whose eyes believed,

whose ears believed in the future, in the erratic voice
of wind, how could I say, Wait. Be calm.

You think it is written, but it isn't?

Photograph

Your whip of hand disturbs the air
around you. Rush of trees, shining leaf.
One, trembling, falls upon your hair.
And in my hand, the box
that takes the light that touches you.
Amidst murmurs of wind, I make you still
and frame the flailing arms of trees
in the uproarious air, and with a finger
steal your eyes, the wreckage of
your windblown hair.

After Carlos A. Angeles

Anniversary

It's been nearly a year now since anyone's called me Silly Dabbler, your term of endearment, which for a few short months I wore with pride like a badge which meant some part of me belonged to you, was in your possession. I'd surrendered it and you'd claimed it for yourself, by virtue of naming. *Superior Being. That's what I'll call you*, I said, always with a smirk. But left alone sometimes I'd say it to myself unsmilingly. Sometimes I think we were more in love with each other's names than we were with each other. We had our names engraved on silver pens. Do you remember? I still write my letters with mine, am writing this. You called me Dabbler because my greatest dream is to be a writer, because I'd spent my entire life fueling this desire. Because I was writing songs from the day I was born. Because exaggeration is my lifeblood. I am a shameless liar, lover of invention and must perpetuate delusions of grandeur like an eternal flame. A trick candle. Growing up, you thought you were mediocre, the youngest of three, happy-go-lucky oddball, black sheep. But such a handsome face—*this* you knew—high cheekbones, perfect teeth, a dimple on each cheek. You used them to bargain, bend the rules, extract favors from strangers. I envied you this. *In my family I'm the smart one*, I tell would-be lovers. I told you. *My brother's the pretty one*. And I'm being honest, which is meant to be endearing. Then I open myself to the tenderness offered me after such a confession, a tenderness I expect, which I may or may not deserve. I let them run a finger along my cheek, cup my chin or touch my hair. Most go for the hair. I've never dated someone who didn't try to tell me what to do with it and who never, at some point, said I was beautiful. If they said that, I'd cut it. I'd chop it all off to hear it. Get a bouffant, a beehive, a mohawk to hear it. You said, *you're beautiful with your hair down. Don't ever cut it*. Now he says he likes the way it curls behind my ears. *Should I grow it up to here?* I ask, my hand at my shoulders. *No*, he says, and touches my right ear, fondles the lobe. *Here, right here*. I don't mind the short hair. What bothers me is how rarely he says my name. I try to bait him sometimes. I say, *hey you*. I say his name. But he only uses mine when he senses danger or when he's desperate for my attention. When he thinks, as we're about to cross, I've stepped into the street too early or am about to break something. You used to love my name, would say it over and over, whisper, coo, yawn, whimper, breathe, cry it out. I sometimes think we were more in love with each other's names than we were with each other. I think we were sometimes more in love with each other's names than with each other. Though

there were other times too. We loved what our names implied and what they sounded like together. I still love the last names in our country, the long, rounded vowels. And women's names that end with an *a*. I sometimes wish that mine did. But what's in a name? A roommate from boarding school is calling her firstborn *Mahimbing*, meaning *soundly* in Tagalog, that she may sleep soundly. Once you asked your father about yours and he said, *Would I name you after a minor river?* You once said, *I don't want to be in your poems. Don't write confessional poems.* But I confess all I want is to confess. I've touched him so many times now, when I close my eyes I can see his neck, feel his nape just where my hand rests, my hand's new nook, new cradle. It's been a year since you've called me anything. I can't tell you what I call him now when only he can hear me. I won't tell you what I've named him.

Visita Iglesia (with Paper Boats)

Flames quiver in the candlehouse. The saints are draped in blue and black.

Blues enough to go around conceal their wooden faces, hands of ivory.

A shrine of candles in the nave. And paper boats.

Wax, white and red, floats over the water. Nothing burns. I borrow
from the nearest flame, light one for us, think of the saints, the fasters,
who've lost their truest names to the centuries, happy to lose
whatever they owned. Rapturous in rags, and famished.

Meanwhile I am thirsty, have never known hunger,
and love you with a messy fearful love, this
confusion of daggers, sheathed, and inklings
of joy, in which your absence has a shape
and can be worn and lost and won.

Imagine the saints in their abandon, light as feathers, pinned to earth
only by dwindling flesh. Whatever it was they no longer loved
they simply let slip through their fingers. The rest survived
between the rough palms of faith, such bright palms,
like upturned faces in mortal light, in vanished time,
their barefoot treading through the harsh lands.
Where suffering burnished the wood
till the grain shone.

See, shoeless, saints couldn't walk on water or come marching in
like a shiny brass band. Instead they left home at the oddest
hours, on the coldest days, without pomp or procession,
with only the clothes on their backs. And never begged,
only asked, and always gave more than they had.
The way they loved, they're better off dead.

Amid the Lenten hues, the apocryphal lives of the saints,
I think of our own giving in, lingering indulgences
in bedrooms, restaurants, the inclination
to excess, to feed you with my hands
and sweeten the mouth
with honey of lies.

Love, let us be generous with one another.
There are lies enough, and saints, to go around.
I love you to the lees of your wine,
but cannot give up the wine.