

Stone Egg

I asked
how her
chicken had
died and she said
It became eggbound
and I reflected on the awful
suffering of that one particular
chicken and in the same breath on all
of our eggs, germs, spermatozoa, un-
sprouted seeds, what should be born
and is not, that which kills us with its
un-birth and solidifies within us,
which is what she said happens
to the egg, and wondered
what if anything we
can do next time.

One Week

The backs of dahlias: green
stems bled into petals of flat white.
Remembered fireflies, covered mirrors,
heat lightning. My mother's hair
in a box.

The mute empty clothes. Drawers
we never opened. Sun on the carpet.
Clouds and the shadows of clouds.

Absence of Shadow

One day
you're driving along
your father has died
your mother has died
the sunlight is thin
or the night sky is grey
the membrane between here and there
vibrates

You remember the boy who died in Joe's arms
after a car crash
those who have survived
those who have not
you remember memory
and wonder
where does memory go

Elegy of the Blue Screen

Many times after watching a video, or part of a video,
when we became too drowsy or too aroused to pay attention,

and we stopped the movie and the scene disappeared
and was replaced by blue, we would watch that blue.

Or if we slept and awoke, there it would be, a hue
of alluring intensity, yet not too intrusive, a blue so rich

you could eat it. In that distance blue always evokes
I imagined episodes, a story, depths so different

from those I later found myself in
they seemed to come from the wrong reels

spliced into the right film, or was it
the other way around? And the switch

to undifferentiated color field, the interrupted
signal, later seemed to invoke

our interrupted narrative, its lapses into some post-
modernist text, allusive as hell, which nevertheless

withholds any recognizable meaning
behind its scrim of words.

* * *

He slept easily; often I would find myself alone
in the long nights with that glassy eye, which now feels

accusatory, blaming me for valuing its surface,
velvety lake, less than whatever I hoped to discover beneath.

Rats had chewed the edges of the futon cover
on which we lay, looking for sustenance, starved finally

or too chilled to stay the winter in an unheated houseboat.
The river water held no mystery;

I knew what lapped below its dark, colorless surface,
what called at times more seductively than the dilated screen.

So I clung to the fascination of the unknown, the wondering
what happens next that keeps us crouching around the flickering

light of the fire, listening to the storytellers, even if we know
or should know the ending, because it could turn out differently

this time. Fragile as nitrate film, I muse on those
blue nights, lost now but not forgotten,

signifying, unspooled, unclaimed.

Haunted House

Each piece of lint is gone from here by now
which came from him: his cast-off, dried skin cells
mingled with mine in soft mauve clusters of dust,
hairs carelessly dropped from body and head, nail parings;
not even an eyelash could linger after a year.
Yet still I feel his breath in the stopped
air, his warmth, the knife of his love. This house
waits, listening. I tell it to guard its heart,
discard our former feelings or at least
also recall his deceit, his disregard,
his outright savagery. *What you miss
was only illusion, I say; I'm real, I'm here,
I'm the one you want.* The house just sighs, steadfast.
I cannot break its ties to what is past.

What we don't talk about when we don't talk about love

Two blue crabs under the water, eating
a snake from either end, its white belly up.
The love my mother couldn't give me.

Rattlesnakes mating in the road
beneath our wheels.
Your warm skin; the words we don't use.

Anhingas drying their wings in a tree.
When our eyes meet; when they don't.

A man crawling and rolling in the police car's headlights.
Joe said, A glove is lying in the road.
I heard "love."

Coffee Cake

Cream 1/8 lb. butter, 1 cup sugar
(or less if history's undertow tugs
you toward salt, toward bitterness).
Add 2 whole eggs, 1 1/2 cups flour, sifted
with powdery memories of your mother's kitchen,
entire, fragmented, smashed, a mishmash of love,
regret, cracked hope, nourishment bestowed
and withheld, acrid white dust. Leaven with
1 1/2 tsp. baking powder, for levity, even
chemically induced; for ease,
whatever is light, what rises, what floats.

What is a mother's recipe without
milk, 3/4 cup, life's beginning, always shadowed
by the nuance of turning, the possibility of souring.
One tsp. vanilla or maple flavoring—
the ersatz favored above the genuine—was that
to pinch pennies or because it lasted when the real
thing, what my parents thought real, didn't
persist, fermented perhaps, drunk on its own
sweetness? Can any pleasure, any promise,
endure? Better not to risk wrecking
on the shoals of what might not be sure.

Decades later, awash in my own hesitations,
I wonder: Why not blueberries? Fresh or frozen,
summer or winter, that untamed blue. The topping:
Mix nuts, cinnamon, sugar, sprinkle well over batter before baking.
To everything an order, a natural harmony, do this and that
must follow; keep safe by circumscribing
life. Can we stop death from taking
its turn?

My mother tells us what must be done:
Bake 20-30 minutes in oblong pan at 350 degrees.
That "oblong" catches my eye, the beauty
of the word in her slanted handwriting, the slight
unexpectedness of the choice among others more
expected, those elongated consonants, the second
"o" practically a diphthong, the feel of the sounds
in my mouth like our rounded ancestral Russian,

diasporal Yiddish, the syllables of Jews on the run
yet conversing, keeping the mother tongues
alive, streaming off ships to congregate
in the kitchens of the New World and partake
in the ritual breaking of the bread,
tasting the salt, the coffee, the cake.

My Cousin and I Chat About Old Times

When my cousin said to me *the catastrophe*
that was your childhood I laughed, taking pleasure
in the phrase, feeling the relief of another's hyperbole,
the sick melodramatic flair: An observer would know,
without even scraping away the decades of dark grime
laid on by hands and contaminants not mine,
that beneath must lie a landscape, painted en plein air,
its original colors lively and untarnished by time;
gazing into which one could nearly
smell the violets by the stream,
feel the breeze shift up and down
the rotund hills in their infinite greens,
hear the dry rustle of leaves
as trees nod, shiver, nod again.

What Remains

(for M.N.)

Tenderly once again I place them in the small bark
I fashioned of smoke and hope, and nudge
it toward the current's pull with my heel,
reciting the Kaddish and praying my desperate
plea for these people, these dead parents, these
specters who haunt me to please embark
and leave what remains of my damaged soul
to me; to please just be quiet now, be still.
But this rite is halted by the recall
of a long-departed date: the cold of the fall
night on the water, the ceremonial burial
at sea of his dead parakeet. And though
he cared enough to craft a ritual, to fill
the little floating casket with tobacco and
I forget what other gifts for the afterlife, and
though as he pushed the feathered corpse away
from our canoe he spoke of missing
the bird, I knew his own neglect had killed
it: Too many hungry days, the damp chill
of the houseboat after he forgot the electric bill,
the failure at least to find it a warmer home. And still
I placed my heart, that atrophied muscle, in his hands
where the future unfolded as it always will.
Yes, he was, let's face it, crazy, or if not, he was
three doors away; and possibly so were they, the pair
whose non-corporeal remains I'm trying
to send down the river; and yes, more than likely
so am I, or else why do I build
these inadequate vessels and why do I tell
you about it? It's their voices I need to kill.

On Watching a Documentary about Julio Cortázar

The film was in Spanish, no subtitles,
and I was following some parts better
than others, and then suddenly Cortázar
was speaking French and Spanish subtitles appeared,
and because I am more confident about reading any language
(except English) than listening to it, and because
if something is there to read, I will read it,
I continued listening to the French, which I understood
fairly well, while reading the Spanish,
and although reading is faster than speaking,
reading Spanish while translating heard French
is a slower faster, so what with the speed discrepancy
and the three languages, two not mine, I felt a peculiar
sensation as of tectonic plates grinding, which I believe
was the two lobes of my brain struggling against each other—
as they do so often in attempts to interpret others' actions
or words, not to mention my own; or in the desperate
and constant endeavor to splice meaning to the bones
and flesh of the world, for which many find subtitles in the Koran
or the Old or New Testaments or the Bhagavad Gita or drugs
or some kind of retreat within a cocoon, but I, yo, je, don't know
how to read those runes, I'm illiterate and remain
puzzled by physical ciphers besides
and feel I am slipping
plunging dizzily
into the fault
between

Before Knowledge

Halloween ten years ago
Caligari's cabinet;
dry ice smoking in the punch

I was Medusa, stark white
face, hot eyes, glow-in-the-dark
snakes braided into my hair

I didn't think then
I had turned anyone
to stone

Spam from Freud

So many expectant days, scanning the inbox
for a message from you, the only one
who might understand me, might help,
and finally it arrives—Sender: Freud; Subject:
Your Personal Information Is Unsafe.
Yes, Herr Professor, you're right, I know that
very well and I'm on guard. Certainly what I know
is unsafe for me, or I wouldn't be in this fix; and
clearly it's unsafe for others to find out. But
should I worry about you? Surely you would safeguard
all you know about me? Or is this your subconscious
alerting me that even you are a danger? In that dark murk
we inhabit together, 50 minutes at a time, I risk many pitfalls
and lacerating edges. You seduced me, you led me down
that garden path where no flower blossoms. You promised
to stand by me and be my guide, you Beatrice, me Dante.
Without your steadfast presence I would have remained
above as long as I could, on that thinning ice. So now
that we're here, my clammy palm clasped in yours,
my palpitating consciousness trying to fend off
its fears yet expose its dankest corners
to the healing light,
you've got to come through, fulfill my slender
trust. If I'm unsafe with you
I'm better off not knowing.

I've decided to add you to my Blocked Senders List,
for after all you're only mortal, you suffer
your own psychic wounds, and it's *sauve qui peut*
around here. In parting may I suggest
you seek professional help, as you're exhibiting
classic symptoms of transference. I used to think you dead
which you will probably interpret as a typical twist
on the Electra complex which so fascinated you
a hundred years ago. Even the dead
can send messages, as we know;
so your missive doesn't convince me one way
or the other. In any case, Herr Doktor, we're through.
Don't email, don't call me; I'll call you.