

A Letter from Poland, October 4, 1952

Dearest Tekla, my only sister,

The war has been over for so long but still we suffer the leavings of war: We have tables but no food, pain and no medicine, strong metal beds but no straw to sleep on.

Each day I wait for night to free me from the longing but it only brings me dreams: our dead mother crying about the wash, blaming me for the dresses I can't get clean. I hold them above the tub but haven't the strength to lower them into the water.

Sometimes, I see her standing in the doorway looking east toward the autumn forest where snow already falls. Perhaps if you could come back to Poland and travel back to the village with me, maybe we could find the grave where they killed her and Genja.

Someone there must know where they are buried. Maybe then mother would stop coming to me.

If you could come in the spring perhaps, you could bring me a bolt of blue cloth, blue with little white flowers. You know the kind we wore the year before the war. A new dress for summer would be so nice.

Your loving sister, Sophia

John Guzłowski

In Krakow

Because the rain was there,
quiet as a question
that has to be asked
beneath the volume
of more sacred words,
I took off my shirt,
held both my arms out
past the window and
let the cold, dark water,
from the four a. m. sky
run down to my shoulders.
I will remember this
somewhere in the future,
not through a related light,
nor through some dog-eared smell
like the twenty loaves
of baking bread diffusing
themselves through the streets,
but maybe, I hope,
because I will be happy
and alone again, seeing
not so much this city,
medieval and perfect,
built with more stone than brick,
but myself wanting
to touch just one thing
at the dispense of all
thoughts, and from absence
of all thoughts, return to them
realizing that what happened
was, though rare, still possible.

James Davis May

Holding Her

Nights in the darkroom, I hoarded
my daughter's gestures,
the way she straddled a picnic bench
or lifted one hand as if to stroke
silk, the softest feathers.
It was her last year at home.
I'd worked to capture everything,
labeled the boxes of negatives—
camping, prom dress, Christmas.

Stirring prints beneath an amber light,
I waited for my girl's face to surface,
faint at first on the soaked paper,
pale as a night-blooming flower.
Time, which to a photographer
is both tool and the thing transcended,
worked against me too. She would go.
Even in that sealed room,
I felt the season turn.

Sharon Fein

Through the Lens, October

After a day of torch-bright groves,
sidewalks ankle-deep in fallen leaves,
I walk into a gallery in Stowe,
find the town offered in black and white:
light pearling the limbs of maples;
lawns printed gummetal gray;
framed roses, unobtrusive in a charcoal hue.
So much reduced to so little.

Everyone needs black and white,
a friend observed decades ago,
so we can get at the bones of things.
I had a darkroom then—
tables hammered together by a lover,
a borrowed enlarger. Late at night,
I stood before the line of trays,
lifting prints with wooden tongs,

trying to transform the lush and complicated
into something manageable, something pure.
How black thrilled me where it pooled
in unlit planes and creases.
True, absolute black. And the white
of exposed paper—a snow field waiting.

But mornings now, I feel my age
and want to be warmed by raw, noisy crimson,
all those greens, jumbled and unframed.
I carry a digital camera. Inside it,
encoded in ones and zeroes, Stowe.
Just a blaze of golden light.
The way we get ready for winter.

Sharon Fein

Lobby Stone

Rose was the color of the stone:
I stepped onto the polished tile,
a tossed marble, a numb and squared
rock doing the work of civil-
ization. Yes, I stepped onto
my day's quarry as if onto
a lost and cooling star: I found
purchase, the sun's birth no longer
fragment of imagination: I said,
I turned to the sun as if I
would flower: I rose in my limbs
to the rose of being: let me
call it privilege, whether I
walk the stars or the earth: flower,
fruit, branch, thorn: rose was the color
of the stone: I stepped, foot to fire.

Melissa Peters

Strawberries

Whose brown hand chose this fruit,
sized to fit between
thumb and finger, gently,
secreted close to the mounded earth,
beneath layer of serrated green, the
swollen bud-end of a plain
white flower turned
blood-red in the heat, the accumulated
color of bending over
and over below a ripe sun?

And what is the reward, the dizzy
rush of standing upright at the end
of the row, at the end of the day,
a respite, a lull, of letting muscle
and tendon go slack,

while I reach willingly, freely,
into a clean white bowl, to choose
one plump polished berry with its
finely dimpled skin, heady with
the essence of leisure, a sweet surfeit
on the tongue, juice on the chin,
time to savor it?

Brigit Truex

Ode to Letterpress

build white space with long silver nothings.
each word, brick by brick.
occasional swirl of ornamental surprise.
reliable magic of vowels.
b or d? or p?
the zen yoga tai chi sex
of typecase rhythm.
memorizing the homes of 26 friends.
tying up the set type
a solid rectangular gift
to yourself. dark stain of love
spread on rollers. magic wand
cranked over stiff paper.
intimate apparel of pages spread to dry.
ritual cleansing in a deep white sink.
lingering eyelash of a comma.

Jim Daniels

On Ether

Inside Royal Albert Hall, six giant trees lower from the sky, like brooding deities. Intermission. I am supposed to ignore this, exit through one of 48 doors, let my shoes walk me to the restroom, let the coins in my pocket jingle me to the nearest kiwi sorbet. Simply forget Bizet's Carmen for now—the blood she drew from a co-worker in a cat fight, the fine gypsy body that soothed throbs from watching soldiers, as if she were magnetic north. Intermission. The massive crucifix overseeing the Spanish kingdom circa 1853 has been dismantled, the tables suggesting barracks carried away. Replaced by these trees. Which float down, elegant in their bareness, massive, spinning ever so slowly as if testing thermals. The orchestra has muted its 63 voices. The actors have unzipped their faces. Even the stage itself, an elongated tear that turns back on itself, reposes. I have left the seat I paid twenty-two pounds for and settled into a better seat across the aisle. Intermission. A seat where I can watch this cabal of twisted branches descend, then pause, then hover a few feet above earth, like landing spaceships. What does it mean, this lowering of the heavens, this haunting? How can I explain the inwardness that suffuses the stage? One can taste the unsung tremolo, a lightness. But wait, one tree now touches down, and stage hands gather to anchor it. Then a second tree, then all of them. Stupid earthly trunks, opera, history, convention. I who was floating have touched down too. Let the trees rise, let all of us rise.

Lance Larsen

Voice

Reading Spanish to myself, I taste my tutor's voice again, a lift, a certain Santiago darkness. As if my words

were chunks of bread dipped in steaming *maté*, then swallowed whole. No, more intimate than that.

Have you ever watched a peasant mother wet a crust of bread by mouth then pass it to her hungry child?

Like that. *La bruja*, children called my tutor, *witch*. Meaning she was widowed and 39, meaning her white

zigzag of hair proved Satan still kissed his brides.

Shy and gringo, I kissed no one, and felt lost

tonguing words and mouthing air to get my accent right.

She'd laugh, then read headlines, making a doleful stew

of car wrecks, scripture from the falling price of eggs.

At night, it wasn't thieves she feared, or another *golpe*,

which killed her aunt, but haunting spirits. That's why she threw open her cracked windows. New air, stray cats—

these wove spells around her sleep. Thirty years:

I wander a paragraph and that voice from the other side

of sleep and summer tries my grammar. Reads me the way God reads his lost ones, without lips or eyes.

Lance Larsen

The Milk of the Mountain Goats

from *Cantiga de Santa María No. 52*
by Alfonso X, *El Sabio*

Wild beasts obey Saint Mary so adored
The Spotless One, Mother of Our Lord

I

Listen to the Glorious One's wondrous act.
The church at Montserrat bearing Her name
lies at a mountain's foot. Evenings, down came
a flock of mountain goats. They stood before
the church's door, and waited meekly for
the monks to milk them. This I have for fact.

Wild beasts obey Saint Mary so adored,
The Spotless One, Mother of Our Lord.

II

Four years and more, they were wont to slake
their thirst at Her behest, until a foolish
novice stole and ate a kid. At Her wish,
the bounty ceased. The monks, to no avail,
their robes flailing, pursued the goats. This tale
draws pilgrim throngs. It's true, make no mistake.

Wild beasts obey Saint Mary so adored,
The Spotless One, Mother of Our Lord.

Chris Waters

Sky Market

It seemed a sky
free of commercials,
blue and cloudless.
But he could sense,
swimming in all directions,
waves of banded frequency,
like hungry carp
fighting for food pellets
in a tiny pool
at the Botanical Garden.
With his rifle raised,
he shot to break
their pitching rhythm.
The dog ran out
to gather worry-free guarantees
and limited-time offers.
For dinner he'd eat
an employee discount
and wash it down with a bottle
of celebrity voice-overs.
If he awoke before dawn,
still hungry,
there'd be enough
for buy-one-get-one-free leftovers.

John Randall

Taq Kasra

Where the army marches, prices go up.
The simplest letters home turn into poems.
A nimbus of significance surrounds
common gestures, even births and deaths. In time,
the novelty and attraction will wear,
and the sordidness expand like landfills
through endless stinking days. But we all know
history will retain what interests us
while fear and revulsion seldom linger.
Recruiters will promise and young men want
their proving range. So my city displays
bronzes that no one completely believes
yet none of us quite disdains. Flags still move us,
though wholly dependent on chance and wind.

M. A. Schaffner

How to Make Plum Dumplings

Pluck them
purple under dusky coats,
polish against thigh,
take a bite—

Ah. Now hold
the stoneware bowl
swollen with gems
to your breast,

sit on the porch,
inhale the bluing-
to-indigo sky,
invite

twilight to your table,
lap spilling over
with ovals. With one
arced flick,

liberate the pit,
(but leave the skin),
heal again whole.
Center in dough,

fold corners,
massage between palms
until seamless, smooth.
Drop into blue

enameled pot, flame hot,
flesh yielding, skin
bleeding its night shade
crimson to aubergine—

breathe in steam.
When risen, tender,
slip from water,
christen

in crumb and butter,
lover, in cinnamon sugar
and a lick
of cream.

Ronda Broach

Reunion

It felt like life flashing by—the heavy heads of summer wheat taller than us, them going soft brown in drought. They whispered secrets at my shoulders, told me of months spent in darkness, the force of light and heat. We flew into that late-June field, my cousin and me, him at the helm of the four-wheeler, me grabbing tight his waist as he sped us across blades. Flat there, smooth and even, I quit screaming. What I said to no one was, “Wow. How lovely.” Even over the motor, my cousin heard. He turned, took some pressure off the throttle to slow and say, “You like this.” Not a question. But to his back I answered, “Yes.”

Then at the field’s end, the cold camp spot with its black fire ring, a bench set to face the Tallulah River where it turned from the bridge and ran away between a deep cleft valley. I wanted to stop there, to hide behind the wheat’s tall scrim and touch our every memory, watching the river flow while time held the wheat just as it was, while time held us for a spell in rare and changeless arms. But it didn’t.

Bill turned the thing around and drove us back across the field, and I rode along knowing time never does let us stand still. And if that’s how it has to be, then what I wanted was to keep riding behind my cousin, holding my own hands above his new scar while he drove us over every hay field in the county. I wanted grass to rush by high as our heads, to have it tickle my ears, to get crickets on my shins, to be at peace while the motor revved,

and to have my cousin turn to me and say, “You like this.” Looking over his broad shoulder, I wanted to see a wide and easy way open before the both of us, to drive down it unafraid of all we face, as family and alone. To hold tight forever that dear one, answering him “Yes” in my calm and purest voice.

Heather Leigh Johnson

Old Man and Nurse

My father is dying
slowly and with much glee
always pleased to see me
though he can't tell who I am.
He writes the weather
each day on small scraps
of paper he tucks into his jeans
and when I arrive he unfolds
what time will bring—
on Monday, clear skies,
on Tuesday, *wrinkles*
and *headstorms*, more
of same till week's end:
beware. He watches TV
six hours one day
waiting to see a commercial
in which a girl he likes
drinks juice. Her pigtails
coiled, her fat cheeks sweet,
she is the me he remembers
but doesn't know I am.
There's my girl he says
when she appears. *There*
she is I say as I pull the plug.
He will think the set
is broken and when I return
to fit the prongs into their holes
oh what he will make of me,
so clever, fixer of TV's, opener
of jelly packets he tries to spread
whole on toast, bringer of bottles
of Pepsi and pain pills, not his girl

but someone equally nice,
someone whose name escapes him
now as I spread salve on his shingles,
as I fluff the pillow where he will
lay his head, his puff of white
hair, thick and greased. Not
his girl. I kiss his sunken face
and know whoever we may be
he has loved us both, that girl and me.

Melissa Crowe

Love's Lexicon

I spy my father in his seventy-third year,
pausing on his daily walk through the forest
to gaze upward at a patch of light in the sky,
arms held aloft as though worshipping a silent muse.
I should have known, peering down this tunnel
of dark pine & cedar toward the clearing where he stood,
that he was being called, that he would soon go.
But I approach as any son might, hoping
for a few more good years—
stand next to his slightly stooped figure,
massive arms still strong, pulling me closer,
looking me in the eye, saying
do you know how loved you are? And I do,
but cannot bear it, heart filled beyond
what such a small sack can contain.
Listen instead to his story: how he walks
pausing here and there to listen,
how certain brothers & sisters, long dead,
visit—assuring him there is another road
just ahead, that they will be waiting.

Sometimes the years seem too many,
sometimes too few. But just now,
this moment fills a space that could
only be called *infinity*, lasts a time
that could only be named *eternity*—
love's lexicon imprinting the heart
with language only grief can bear,
only joy pronounce.

Dane Cervine

The Night My Father Died

I didn't think that he would really die.
It was like the Halloween when I was ten,
and dressed up as a clown, and, loaded down
with candy corn and Hershey bars and five dollars
all in dimes, took the shortcut I had heard about
past the sawed-off tree on Williams Way
and saw numbers going down instead of up
and ran and ran and ran and I was lost.
I saw his skin turn yellow, watched flat blue lines
worm their way across black screens. But his will
had been so strong, he'd been so much his own law,
I half-believed he'd sit up on the bed,
open the back door of a light blue Chevrolet
and say *It's dark out there, get in, I'll drive you home.*

Carl Auerbach

The Wayward Marl

said Beatrice to Benedick

Standing here between the flowers and the upturned earth
I have the time to listen to our youthful foolishness
in stereo in memory: you, the once and future bachelor,
my rants of barbed wire words that kept all men at bay,
and when our wits crossed blades, oh how the language sang!
I said, *Not till God make men of some other mettle than earth*
would I be husbanded. And here you, *piece of valiant dust*,
lie, to return from whence you came, and make more brave the ground
by ashes left behind. The digger-men rest on their shovels,
not impatient, as the dew still wets the grass and weeps
in through the calfskin of my shoes. I have come to pay respects,
to eat my words as though they were of clouds and not of clods,
to *make an account of life* to you, *my wayward marl*, my clay
and limestone calcified for forty years of marriage, shortened
this spring as the rains come down and make the greenery anew.
Next year the vintemen will not know you wait here when they come
to lay down plants and stick the soil with arches whose curves imply
the hope of terraces of grapes to come. The full-blooded red,
the warrior spirit of wine, the undercut that comes as aftertaste,
these are the tales that I will tell of these untasted grapes,
for marl makes possible the golden slope of vintages.
To the seedlings' warp and weft, I will recall our romance,
the children, pains borne, the everydays we celebrated.
I will die thirsty—the rough scratch of grape leaf against my cheek
as soft as the whiskers you put by to woo me—and never know
again the sweet drunkenness of you.

Mary Alexandra Agner

Votive at an Open Window

Rived cloud flies from wood to wood
the wind in antiphony from hill to hill
witness the crossings and the uncrossings
the scissors of day and night
the turning and returning of winter
and of consciousness and of blank being
you at the center where the shadows swing east
the earth slung 'round the sun the hurtling sun
the circles of planets the courses of galaxies.

Hold fast to the sill in the speed of it all
it is the stillness we pray to
the pure nothing we can't imagine
and to which everything returns
the dun birds alighting in thorns
their claws intersecting under wine-colored stems
the rabbit leaping triads in snow
a fathom apart the length of a man
the pines in the wind saying *I* saying *I*.

Light a candle for yourself my friend
soon to become God again.

Jeff O'Brien

Pythagoras's Flowering Heart

The calculations by which he arrived
at theorems for the fragrance of sunlight
are vanished now. If only they'd survived,
we'd better understand the deep delight
he must have taken from dawn's rose perfume,
the luminescent orchids of midday,
the way slow violets of late evening bloom
before the darkness seals their glow away.
But just the notion that the air can breathe,
while gold rays flower and make love to stone,
reveals a fevered ardor, one that seethes
with lust for leaf and dust, for bark and bone.
Spring mornings at the pond, he must have known
seduction by first shimmer. Sunlight's moan.

Lee Stonimsky

yes I say outspread

To drink in all this green:
the long lawns stretching
before one, liquid, languid, flanks
of women turning in their beds, blue
dreams and the green whisper
like a questioning caress.
First sun, an idle tickle,
lazes along the elongated
shadowed lawns and yes, I say
outspread, opening my
chartreuse soft
shade-spreading grass
to you and drinking,
slaking until
satisfied by green.
Oh Summer, strike your gong
and clamor. Let the curtain part!

Kathleen Spivack

CONTRIBUTORS

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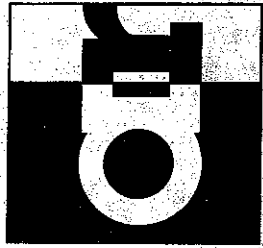
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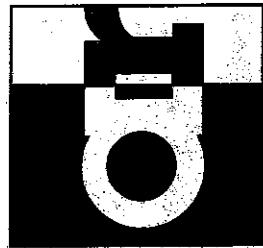
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