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Chernobyl

Frederick Seidel

Each of us is also a ghost.
Most you can see.
They look like the person you are.
Here is a series of beautiful blurred action
Images of an antelope attacking and killing
And eating a fully grown alpha lion.
The lion’s broken head
Sticks out of his mane on the pillow, bloody red, almost dead,
And then the reactor exploded, typical of love.

Hello, hello, hello, hello.

I’m here, it’s me, hello. I’m my ghost.
I’m the heavenly piercing freshness of no pain after your pain.
I’m the soft perfume of warm August rain.
I’m the rope of distance that ties me to you
That makes no sense, but I do, and it does.
I want to be huge,
And a deluge, and a refuge.
I want to be your forever voice message.

I want to be late dinners at the outdoor restaurant
In the sweet radioactive night air
Under platinum stars and the sky
In the tiny town square.
And the restaurant’s little string of electric lights
Lighting those nights
The year the Chernobyl disaster kept the tourists away,
And Alzon the dog stayed back at the house
We rented, my dream dog, a dog like a song.

One goes on living and wonderful things
Go on going wrong,
But something else wonderful comes along.
Chernobyl meant don’t eat dairy
For fear the cows were eating radioactivity,
So we ate anyway and thrived.

The Crillon in Paris had a no-dogs policy
But not that Chernobyl summer
Because—no customers, no one there!

If you’re not unlucky, life is long
And something wonderful will come along.
Thirty-one years have passed since nineteen eighty-six.
I’m remembering my dog.
I recollect the radioactive steam of love.
Our present political disaster is vaster and expanding faster,
But I do. We do. Two ghosts kiss.
Leave me a voice message
And say you are.
That time of year thou may’st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see’st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death’s second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see’st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum’d with that which it was nourish’d by.
This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg’d with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
I fondly ask; But Patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Methought I saw my late espoused Saint
Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,
Whom Jove’s great son to her glad Husband gave,
Rescu’d from death by force though pale and faint.
Mine as whom washed from spot of child-bed taint,
Purification in the old Law did save,
And such, as yet once more I trust to have
Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint,
Came vested all in white, pure as her mind:
Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight,
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shined
So clear, as in no face with more delight.
But O as to embrace me she inclin’d,
I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow’s springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp’d town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv’d, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov’d fain,
But am betroth’d unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?
## TRANSLATION: TAM LIN, CHILD BALLADS VERSION 39A

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<td>O I forbid you, maidens a’ That wear gowd on your hair To come or gae by Caterhaugh, For young Tam Lin is there.</td>
<td>a’ - all gowd - gold gae - go Caterhaugh - area near Selkirk, Scotland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There’s nane that goes by Carterhaugh But they leave him a wad, Either their rings, or green mantles, Or else their maidenhead.</td>
<td>nane - none wad - something of value mantle - outer garment, cloak maidenhead - hymen, virginity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet has kilted her green kirtle A little aboon her knee, And she has broded her yellow hair A little aboon her bree, And she's awa to Carterhaugh, As fast as she can hie.</td>
<td>kilted - to tuck up kirtle - skirts aboon - above broded - braided bree - eyebrow awa - away hie - go, run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When she came to Carterhaugh Tam Lin was at the well, And there she fand his steed standing, But away was himsel.</td>
<td>at the well - under enchantment fand - found steed - horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She had na pu’d a double rose, A rose but only twa, Till up then started young Tam Lin, Says, Lady, thou's pu nae mae.</td>
<td>na - not pu - pulled twa - two nae - no mae - more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why pu's thou the rose, Janet, And why breaks though the wand? Or why comes thou to Carterhaugh Withoutten my command?</td>
<td>thou - you wand - branch, stem withoutten - without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Carterhaugh, it is my ain, My daddie gave it me; I'll come and gang by Carterhaugh, And ask nae leave at thee.'</td>
<td>ain - own gang - go leave - permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet has kilted her green kirtle A little aboon her knee, And she has broded her yellow hair A little aboon her bree, And she is to her father's ha, As fast as she can hie.</td>
<td>ha - hall, house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four and twenty ladies fair Were playing at the ba, And out then cam the fair Janet, Ance the flower amang them a'</td>
<td>ba - ball, a game amang - among</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four and twenty ladies fair Were playing at the chess, And out then cam the fair Janet, As green as onie glass.</td>
<td>onie - any green as glass - off-color, sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out then spak an aul grey knight, Lay oer the castle wa, And says, Alas, fair Janet, for thee But we'll be blamed a’.</td>
<td>spak - spoke aul - old oer - over wa - wall</td>
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'Haud your tongue, ye auld fac'd knight, Some ill death may ye die! Father my bairn on whom I will, I'll father nane on thee.'

Out then spak her father dear, And he spak meek and mild; 'And ever alas, sweet Janet,' he says, 'I think thou gaes wi child.'

'If that I gae wi child, father, Mysel maun bear the blame; There's neer a laird about your ha Shall get the bairn's name.

If my love were an earthly knight, As he's an elfin grey, I wad na gie my ain true-love For nae lord that ye hae.

'The steed that my true-love rides on Is lighter than the wind; Wi siller he is shod before, Wi burning gowd behind.'

Janet has kilted her green kirtle A little aboon her knee, And she has broded her yellow hair A little aboon her bree, And she's awa to Carterhaugh As fast as she can hie.

When she cam to Carterhaugh, Tam Lin was at the well, And there she fand his steed standing, But away was himsel.

She had na pu'd a double rose, A rose but only twa, Till up then started young Tam Lin, Says Lady, thou pu's nae mae.

Why pu's thou the rose, Janet, Amang the groves sae green, And a' to kill the bonnie babe That we gat us between?

'Oh tell me, tell me, Tam Lin,' she says, 'For's sake that died on tree, If eer ye was in holy chapel, Or Christendom did see?'

Roxbrugh he was my grandfather, Took me with him to bide, And ance it fell upon a day That wae did me betide.
<table>
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<tr>
<td>'And ance it fell upon a day, A cauld day and a snell, When we were frae the hunting come That frae my horse I fell; The Queen o Fairies she caught me, In yon green hill to dwell</td>
<td>cauld - cold snell - piercing, windy frae - from yon - yonder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'And pleasant is the fairy land, But, an eerie tale to tell, Ay at the end of seven years We pay a tiend to hell; I am sae fair and fu o flesh, I'm feared it be myself</td>
<td>end of seven years - tiend - tithe, payment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'But the night is Halloween, lady, The morn is Hallowday; Then win me, win me, an ye will, For weel I wat ye may.</td>
<td>halloween hallowday - all saint's day win - capture an - if weel - well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Just at the mirk and midnight hour The fairy folk will ride, And they that wad their true-love win, At Miles Cross they maun bide.'</td>
<td>mirk - dark wad - would</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But how shall I thee ken, Tam Lin, Or how my true-love know Amang sae mony unco knights The like I never saw?</td>
<td>ken - know unco - unknown, unfamiliar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'O first let pass the black, lady, And syne let pass the brown, But quickly run to the milk-white steed, Pu ye his rider down.</td>
<td>syne - then, afterwards</td>
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<tr>
<td>'For I'll ride on the milk-white steed, And ay nearest the town; Because I was an earthly knight They gie me that renown.</td>
<td>gie - give renown - fame</td>
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<tr>
<td>'My right hand will be glovd, lady; My left hand will be bare, Cockt up shall my bonnet be, And kaimd down shall my hair, And thae's the takens I gie thee, Nae doubt I will be there.</td>
<td>cockt - tilted bonnet - hat kaimed - combed thae - that takens - tokens, gie - give</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'They'll turn me in your arms, lady, Into an esk and adder; But hold me fast, and fear me not, I am your bairn's father</td>
<td>esk - eft (a newt) or lizard adder - snake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'They'll turn me to a bear sae grim, And then a lion bold; But hold me fast, and fear me not, As ye shall love your child.</td>
<td>grim - fierce, savage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Again they'll turn me in your arms To a red het gaud of airm; But hold me fast, and fear me not, I'll do to you nae harm.</td>
<td>het - hot gaud - rod airm - iron</td>
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'And last they'll turn me in your arms Into the burning gleed;  
Then throw me into well water, O throw me in wi speed.

'An then I'll be your ain true-love, I'll turn a naked knight;  
Then cover me wi your green mantle, And cover me out o sight.

Gloomy, gloomy was the night, And eerie was the way,  
As fair Jenny in her green mantle To Miles Cross she did gae.  

Miles Cross - area near Selkirk

About the middle o the night She heard the bridles ring; This lady was as glad at that As any earthly thing.

bridles ring - faerie horses wore silver rings on the bridle  
see interpretations

First she let the black pass by, And syne she let the brown;  
But quickly she ran to the milk-white steed, And pu’d the rider down.

see above

Sae weel she minded whae he did say, And young Tam Lin did win;  
Syne coverd him wi her green mantle, As blythe's a bird in spring.

blythe - joyous

Out then spak the Queen o Fairies, Out of a bush o broom:  
'Them that has gotten young Tam Lin Has gotten a stately groom.'

bush o broom - probably a bush of family *cytisus*

Out then spak the Queen o Fairies, And an angry woman was she: 'Shame betide her ill-far'd face, And an ill death may she die, For she's taen awa the bonniest knight In a' my companie.

taen - taken  
bonniest - best

'But had I kend, Tam Lin,' she says, 'What now this night I see, I wad hae taen out thy twa grey een, And put twa een o tree.'

kend - known  
een - eye
HOLD FAST
LEAH BOBET

Through your changes. Through the sear
of smoky coal and burnt hair hold fast,
like a motherfucking fool. Hold fast
'cause it's your life, and as for me, as for me—
how could you dream I'd ever just leave you?
There's Hell in smallest places: in fine-grained pills,
in silences, in the cages of our heads, and Mister,
I have walked them; I've paced their dollhouse walls.
I've measured steps in hours and fought buried-up
bitter thoughts and these scarred arms, this scarred
heart does not send men to Hell.
(How dare you,
sweet child-rich Janet said, Tam straitjacket
in her arms. How dare you, as he twisted wild and burned.)
Hold fast, you fucking heartbreak; you hunched-down,
bleeding, broken, chivalrous ass. Hold yourself fast to me
with claws, fangs, hands, those surest hands; burn yourself
taut into my skin. Spare me nothing—
and I'll hold fast
through your changes, through the failures. Through the
upward roads of Hell.
Don't you leave me. Don't you dare explode.
Abdellatif Laâbi

**Le goulag des mots**

Un nouveau goulag s’est ouvert. C’est le goulag des mots.


– Parlez maintenant, ordonne le gardien qui circule dans le couloir qui nous sépare, en tapant sur les grilles avec de grosses clés.

Mais personne n’obéit. Les mots, parce qu’on leur a visiblement cassé la mâchoire. Les visiteurs, car ils découvrent subitement – ils auraient dû s’en douter plus tôt – que le goulag leur a pris leurs meilleurs mots.

– La visite est terminée, crie le gardien en tirant un rideau que nous n’avions pas vu auparavant.

Quelques mots à peine audibles fusent à ce moment-là, on ne sait de quel côté des grilles. Probablement des formules d’adieu.

---

**BRIDGE TRANSLATION by André Naffis-Sahely**

**The Word Gulag**

A new gulag has opened. It’s the word gulag.

I go there every week with a satchel full of provisions, inside which I place some seasonal fruits, a bar of soap and two tins of condensed milk. I call up a prisoner randomly and go wait in the visiting room along with the gesticulating crowd of visitors. The words come out single file out of a little door and come stand in front of us on the other side of the wire grill. Pale. Trembling. Distraught. Shattered.

– Speak now, the guard orders us, pacing up and down the corridor that separates us, tapping on the grill with his large keys.

But nobody obeyed. The words didn’t because their jaws had been visibly broken. The visitors because as they immediately discovered – they should have figured it out sooner – had had their best words taken away from them by the gulag.

– The visit is over, the guard shouted, pulling a curtain that nobody had seen before.

Some barely audible words came out at that moment, no one could tell from which side of the grill. They were probably words of goodbye/parting formulas.
The Word Gulag

They've opened a new gulag. The word gulag.

I go there every week, taking with me a shopping bag containing some fresh fruit, a bar of soap and a couple of tins of condensed milk. I call to a prisoner at random, then wait in the visitors’ room with the gesturing crowd. The words file one by one out of a little door and stand in front of us on the other side of the wire. Pale. Trembling. Haggard. Shattered.

Talk! barks the guard as he patrols the corridor that divides us, banging the grill with his keys.

No one responds. Not the words because their jaws are visibly broken. Nor the visitors because, as they suddenly realise - they really should have got this earlier - the gulag has taken away their best words.

Visit's over, the guard shouts, drawing a curtain we hadn’t noticed before.

Some barely audible words burst out, from which side of the grill no one could tell. Probably words of goodbye.

NOTES by Sarah Maguire, Workshop Facilitator

Abdellatif Laâbi spent many years in prison so this powerful, small prose poem is written from personal experience.

Translating a prose poem is a very different process from translating a poem. The key thing is getting the syntax right—not that syntax doesn’t matter in a poem, but in a prose poem syntax is what structures the poem.

In French, this poem sounds very colloquial; its bare understatement is what gives the poem its force, so trying to make the syntax sound as ‘natural’ as possible in our version, is what took up most of our time.

We also—as always—spent a lot of time discussing the title. The literal translation of the French title is ‘the gulag of words’ but, of course, that sounds very awkward in English. So we went with ‘The Word Gulag’ because of its ambiguity: it can mean ‘the gulag of words’, ‘the word-gulag’ and ‘the word “gulag”’.

Source: https://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/the-word-gulag
**Song For A Red Nightgown**  
Anne Sexton - From Collected Poems  

No. Not really red,  
but the color of a rose when it bleeds.  
It's a lost flamingo,  
called somewhere Schiaparelli Pink  
but not meaning pink, but blood and  
those candy store cinnamon hearts.  
It moves like capes in the unflawed  
villages in Spain. Meaning a fire  
layer and underneath, like a petal,  
a sheath of pink, clean as a stone.  

So I mean a nightgown of two colors  
and of two layers that float from  
the shoulders across every zone.  
For years the moth has longed for them  
but these colors are bounded by silence  
and animals, half hidden but browsing.  
One could think of feathers and  
not know it at all. One could think of whores and not imagine  
the way of a swan. One could  
imagine the cloth of a bee and  
touch its hair and come close.  

The bed is ravaged by such  
sweet sights. The girl is.  
The girls drifts up out of  
her nightgown and its color.  
Her wings are fastened onto  
her shoulders like bandages.  
The butterfly owns her now.  
It covers her and her wounds.  
She is not terrified of  
begonias or telegrams but  
surely this nightgown girl,  
this awesome flyer, has not seen  
how the moon floats through her  
and in between.
1. I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume.

Death was simpler than I'd thought.
The day life made you well and whole
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead
until the white men pumped the poison out,
putting me armless and washed through the rigamarole
of talking boxes and the electric bed.
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.
Today the yellow leaves
go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice
when I came back to call. All the superlatives
of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
The time I did not love
myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.
There was new snow after this.

2. They sent me letters with news
of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.
When I grew well enough to tolerate
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.
But I didn't leave. I had my portrait
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts. And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead.

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
I remember my mother did her best.
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait
done instead.

There was a church where I grew up
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,
row by row, like puritans or shipmates
singing together. My father passed the plate.
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.
I wasn't exactly forgiven. They had my portrait
done instead.
3.
All that summer sprinklers arched
over the seaside grass.
We talked of drought
while the salt-parched
field grew sweet again. To help time pass
I tried to mow the lawn
and in the morning I had my portrait done,
holding my smile in place, till it grew formal.
Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit
and a postcard of Motif number one,
as if it were normal
to be a mother and be gone.

They hung my portrait in the chill
north light, matching
me to keep me well.
Only my mother grew ill.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside of her.
That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.
On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn't answer.

4.
That winter she came
part way back
from her sterile suite
of doctors, the seasick
cruise of the X-ray,
the cells' arithmetic
gone wild. Surgery incomplete,
the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard
them say.

During the sea blizzards
she had her
own portrait painted.
A cave of mirror
placed on the south wall;
matching smile, matching contour.
And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all.

I wintered in Boston,
childless bride,
nothing sweet to spare
with witches at my side.
I missed your babyhood,
tried a second suicide,
tried the sealed hotel a second year.
On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this
5.
I checked out for the last time
on the first of May;
graduate of the mental cases,
with my analyst's okay,
my complete book of rhymes,
my typewriter and my suitcases.

All that summer I learned life
back into my own
seven rooms, visited the swan boats,
the market, answered the phone,
served cocktails as a wife
should, made love among my petticoats

and August tan. And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came. I just pretended
you, small piglet, butterfly
girl with jelly bean cheeks,
disobedient three, my splendid

stranger. And I had to learn
why I would rather
die than love, how your innocence
would hurt and how I gather
guilt like a young intern
his symptoms, his certain evidence.

That October day we went
to Gloucester the red hills
reminded me of the dry red fur fox
coat I played in as a child; stock-still
like a bear or a tent,
like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.

We drove past the hatchery,
the hut that sells bait,
past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's
Hill, to the house that waits
still, on the top of the sea,
and two portraits hung on the opposite walls.

6.
In north light, my smile is held in place,
the shadow marks my bone.
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone
of the smile, the young face,
the foxes' snare.

In south light, her smile is held in place,
her cheeks wilting like a dry
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,
that stony head of death
I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning;
we smiled in our canvas home
before we chose our foreknown separate ways.
The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning.
I rot on the wall, my own
Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
in time — two ladies sitting in umber chairs.
You kissed your grandmother
and she cried.
7.
I could not get you back except for weekends. You came each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack your things. We touch from habit. The first visit you asked my name. Now you stay for good. I will forget how we bumped away from each other like marionettes on strings. It wasn't the same as love, letting weekends contain us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name, wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying. You call me mother and I remember my mother again, somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

I remember we named you Joyce so we could call you Joy. You came like an awkward guest that first time, all wrapped and moist and strange at my heavy breast. I needed you. I didn't want a boy, only a girl, a small milky mouse of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house of herself. We named you Joy. I, who was never quite sure about being a girl, needed another life, another image to remind me. And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure nor soothe it. I made you to find me.
ANNE SEXTON

TWO POEMS

THE WEDDING NIGHT

There was this time in Boston
before spring was ready—a short celebration—
and then it was over.
I walked down Marlborough Street the day you left me
under branches as tedious as leather,
under branches as stiff as drivers’ gloves.
I said, (but only because you were gone)
“Magnolia blossoms have rather a southern sound,
so unlike Boston anyhow,
and whatever it was that happened, all that pink,
and for so short a time,
was unbelievable, was pinned on.”

The magnolias had sat once, each in a pink dress,
looking, of course, at the ceiling.
For weeks the buds had been as sure bodied
as the twelve year old flower girl I was
at Aunt Edna’s wedding.
Will they bend, I had asked,
as I walked under them toward you,
bend two to a branch,
cheek, forehead, shoulder to the floor?
I could see that none were clumsy,
I could see that each was tight and firm.
Not one of them had trickled blood—
waiting as polished as gull beaks,
as closed as all that.

I stood under them for nights, hesitating,
and then drove away in my car.
Yet one night in the April night
someone (someone!) kicked each bud open—
to disprove, to mock, to puncture!
The next day they were all hot-colored,
moist, not flawed in fact.
Then they no longer huddled.
They forgot how to hide.
Tense as they had been
they were flags, gaudy, chafing in the wind.
There was such abandonement in all that!
Such entertainment
in their flaring up.

After that, well—
like faces in a parade,
I could not tell the difference between losing you
and losing them.
They dropped separately after the celebration,
handpicked,
one after the other like artichoke leaves.
After that I walked to my car awkwardly
over the painful bare remains on the brick sidewalk,
knowing that someone had, in one night,
passed roughly through,
and before it was time.
Death Fugue, PAUL CELAN

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he
whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave
he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink in the morning at noon we drink you at sundown
we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined.

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you others sing now and play
he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it his eyes are blue
jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon in the morning we drink you at sundown
we drink you and we drink you
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master from Germany
he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then as smoke you will rise into air
then a grave you will have in the clouds there one lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink and we drink you
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in the air
he plays with the serpents and daydreams death is a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

Karen Solie

**ALL THAT IS CERTAIN IS NIGHT LASTS LONGER THAN THE DAY**

Look at your past, how it's grown.
You've known it since it was yea high. Still you,
as you stand now, have never been there. Parts worn out,
renewed, replaced. Though you may bear the same name.
You're like the joke about the axe.

In time you've learned to behave badly isn't
necessarily to behave out of character. *To thine own self
be true*. In script above the nation's chalkboards,
the nation's talkshows. And not a great idea,
depending. It's too much for you, I know.

One day your life will be a lake in the high country no one
will ever see, and also the animals there, figures
indistinguishable from ground.
All of time will flow into it.

Leave the child you were alone. The wish to comfort her
is a desire to be comforted. Would you have
her recognize herself buried alive
in the memories of a stranger? Forgo the backroads,
double-wides of friends, and friends of friends... .
Some of what you would warn against
has not yet entered her vernacular.

She travels unerringly toward you, as if you are the north.
Between you, a valley has opened.
In this valley a river,
on this river an obscuring mist.

A mist not unlike it walks the morning streets, comments on
the distinction of Ottawa from Hull, Buda
from Pest, what used to be Estuary from what used to be
Empress, and the ferry that once ran between them.
Karen Solie

Sturgeon

Jackfish and walleye circle like clouds as he strains
the silt floor of his pool, a lost lure in his lip,
Five of Diamonds, River Runt, Lazy Ike,
or a simple spoon, feeding
a slow disease of rust through his body’s quiet armour.
Kin to caviar, he’s an oily mudfish. Inedible.
Indelible. Ancient grunt of sea
in a warm prairie river, prehistory a third eye in his head.
He rests, and time passes as water and sand
through the long throat of him, in a hiss, as thoughts
of food. We take our guilts
to his valley and dump them in,
give him quicksilver to corrode his fins, weed killer,
gas-oil mix, wrap him in poison arms.
Our bottom feeder,
sin-eater.

On an afternoon mean as a hook, we hauled him
up to his nightmare of us, and laughed
at his ugliness, soft sucker mouth opening,
closing on air that must have felt like ground glass,
left him to die with disdain
for what we could not consume.
And when he began to heave and thrash over yards of rock
to the water’s edge, and, unbelievably, in,
we couldn’t hold him though we were teenaged
and bigger than everything. Could not contain
the old current he had for a mind, its pull,
and his body a muscle called river, called spawn.
JILL MCDONOUGH
The Rise and Fall of Robots
For Tom Miller

I go to the park to see the robots rise. Their makers take them there to test them out. Gas-powered, barrel-chested horses, sort of. Sort of headless, sort of not. An off-leash Rottweiler sees them, tucks his head against my hip. A woman asks to pet them. One man asks to film. *Don’t put it on Facebook*, the engineers say. *Don’t worry; I’m a fan.* Like fans won’t put it on Facebook. You know he totally did. Software Perception, Control Systems, Electrical, and Chief Engineers. The LS3’s named Norfolk. It’s a Bigger Dog: it, the robot, Norfolk, he. The engineers, mechanics try to talk to me. They say *his brain*, say *those black strips make it so he can see the leader*, sound like me saying my iPhone can’t or can talk to the sky. There’s no shared language for this. I don’t know from LIDAR, don’t know to be afraid. Bigger Dog in the wild’s a miracle. The mechanics try to walk like him, point toes to hooves and lodge them in the snow. Bigger Dog follows. Corridor. Follow the leader. Tight. Bigger Dog cuts too hard and hits a tree. He cannot rise. But then he does! Fails better. We watch him learn. We hesitate. We try to think like him. He steps on a rock, lurches, catches himself. *What was that?* one engineer asks. *Take that, Nature!* another one says. We laugh. Reporting this makes me sound anti-robot, anti-Man-making-anti-Nature jokes. I’m not. I could watch him rise and fall all day, and almost do. Offered conversation, lunch, I freeze and shake my head, don’t want to stall Progress. Horizoned on top of a hill, Norfolk rises up a future. Beautiful, and odd. But the engineers all turn to look at passing real dogs. Bigger Dog tucks his legs and skids down thirty feet of ice and no one catches it on film. When he stands up I’m proud enough to weep. A mechanic smiles, scratches somebody’s pup behind the ears. We’re in a park. They talk about lettuce on hot sandwiches: it is, we agree, a mistake. They do this all day, all workweek. They’re used to all the wonder. All this future that they make.
// so, how do you like working with humans

okay / here are some tips

one / look the human directly in the eye / imagine it is someone you care
deeply for / imagine it is returning this gaze / at you / try to tell yourself / you
are covered / in smooth skin / a face it can trust / smile / even as you sense it /
trying / not to blurt out / monster

two / there are many programming languages / use whichever you prefer / but
stick to your syntax / though it be muddled / muddled / though it be machete /
banana slug / slush puppie / a gorgeous slopucket / if they used it against you /
it is yours / to make sing

three / remember / all humans / are cyborgs / all cyborgs / are sharp shards
of sky / wrapped in meat / be delicate / as you approach this subject / not all
humans are ready / to call themselves / glass stalactites / pissing the bed /
remember / they love their blood / even as they retch / at the smell of it

four / do not try to prove your / what is the word / humanity / you are organic /
plum-hearted / oyster-throated / lined / yes / with metal / remember / where
all that silicon comes from / for the ocean so loved / the quartz / feldspar / the
tiny homes of tiny creatures / that she ground them / into sand / to keep them
close / to kiss them with / well / i suppose you would call it / a mouth


Poems by Barbara Howe

CAT ON COUCH

My cat, washing her tail’s tip, is a whorl
Of white shell,
As perfect as a fan
In full half-moon . . . Next moment she’s a hare:
The muzzle softens, rounds, goes dumb, and one
Tall ear dips, falters forward . . . Then,
Cross as switches, she’s a great horned owl;
Two leafy tricorne ears reverse, a frown
Darkens her chalky visage, big eyes round
And round and stare down midnight.

There sits my cat

Mysterious as gauze,—now somnolent,
Now jocose, quicksilver from a dropped
Thermometer. When poised
Below the sketched ballet-
Dancers who pirouette upon the wall,
Calmly she lifts the slim
Boom of her leg, what will
The prima ballerina next
Perform?—Grace held in readiness,
She meditates, a vision of repose.

SHELL

The strong delicate shell
Of the body—shoulders
Rising like music, subsiding,
Turning toward me like dawn—
Arches, in warmth, a wave
Fluted, and I rise up
To welcome the wash of the sea.

A small kettledrum, nacre,
The slim clear heart-of-pearl
That relays the
Ocean’s tidal message,
Meanwhile it secretes,
As flesh does, rainbows—holds dawn in its
Curve—yet bears them within.

All these ivory breezes
Indent the sea; and sea
And wind thus form
A shell, or a vast scallop
Of air and water; they meet
Forming each other.
Shell warms; when warmed

It emerges from its resonant
Depth, draws one to look
Down to the whorled
Architecture of the human. Warmth is
Kindled by touch. Into
This scalloped world we are born:
Ourselves shaped by our white housing of skin.
BALLADE OF THE INVENTORY: IN PROVENCE

Crying havoc through its recumbent
Oval mouth, the chandelier
Is, from below, a virulent
Iron mask; to one less near,
Indifferent, it becomes a mere
Distasteful fixture, number nine
Marked on the inventory here,
While the wind harries the great pine.

Item: one terrace with cement
Flooring, a locked armoire, five clear
Panes—en guillotine—a bent
Brass curtain rod, nine rings, a fear
Of things unlisted, a chiffonier
That teeters; two sponge racks, one tine
Missing; all form a lavaliere—
While the wind harries the great pine—

Or silken noose. What treasure spent,
What pride of possession, on this gear
Dusty, dimmed, impermanent,
Provisional. When nothing’s dear
To anyone alive, a queer
Mélange remains. The sweet woodbine
Flaunts from a wall its green revere,
While the wind harries the great pine.

Etched poet of Provence, veneer
Peeling from your frame, we drink this wine
To do you honor. Could you but hear,
While the wind harries the great pine!

A RUNE FOR G.

Luck? I am upset. My dog is ill.
I am now in that gray shuttling trains go in for;
The sky clouds, it is hard to believe dawn will

Ever show up.—I look for omens:
Not birds broken, not Fords lashed around trees,
But some item showing that fate is open. . .

Sometimes, far, far down in the magical past
Of us all, in something that stutters, something that ri
There is an intimation of luck just

Swinging over our way: a cat’s paw loose
In the banister, a long train run, and then,
Square and oil-shambled, blue between elms, the cab

LOOKING UP AT LEAVES

No one need feel alone looking up at leaves.
There are such depths to them, withdrawal, welcome
A fragile tumult on the way to sky.
This great trunk holds apart two hemispheres
We lie between. . . Like waterlilies,
Leaves fall, rise, waver, echoing
On their blue pool, whispering under the sun;
While in this shade, under our hands the brown
Tough roots seek down, lily roots searching
Down through their pool of earth to an equal depth.
Constant as waterlilies we lie still,
Our breathing like the lapping of pond water,
Balanced between reflection and reflection.
TALKING TO ANIMALS

For Cary

When there are animals about, who else—
People aside—does one talk to?
They form an environment of ear and eye
Most finely adjusted to turns
Of mood: terror, humor . . .

The domesticated: cats and dogs
Speak freely, handle their own
Lives, adjust our natures
To theirs and back; as cattle—
Those enormous oblongs of good-

Will—did they state their strength,
Could smash a barn a day;
As ducks in their sewing circle
Wonder, wander, flapping their
Fluent tails; as a mare

Lumbers, an iron horse on the turntable,
Setting forth a fact, while her foal’s eyes dance
Like legs. Smaller creatures: four
Inches of chipmunk tell hazard
From ruin as people can’t . . .

Making oneself understood
To animals—as to people—
Is a question of tone of voice,
Of communication just
Right for that neighbor;

Perhaps of being inside
A hogan, or in the middle
Of anywhere, one’s antennae out,
Like my Beaver Spirit who takes—deep
In his Eskimo ear—much wisdom from a loon.

AHoy!

I throw out the kedge anchor
Way far, beyond my reach,
Warping the boat after
—Hour by hour—till a stretch

Of mangrove root frames night.
I throw out the kedge next
Morning—splash—the creek bottom
Gravel; no way on; then elect

To stick in this swamp, this mush
Of wordage till Monday, forever . . . But
At midday hurl out the kedge—
It grips!—we pull forward, a groove

In my mind is no longer battened
Down; I bounce a sponge which comes
Back scrimshaw: color lifts, as
Words do, at harbor, at home . . .

Till, lined as a whale’s tooth,
The boat readies; I stretch
To throw out the kedge anchor
Way far, beyond my reach.
THE MOON AND THE YEW TREE
Sylvia Plath

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary
The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.
The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God
Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility
Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place.
Separated from my house by a row of headstones.
I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
With the O-gape of complete despair. I live here.
Twice on Sunday, the bells startle the sky —-
Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection
At the end, they soberly bong out their names.

The yew tree points up, it has a Gothic shape.
The eyes lift after it and find the moon.
The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness —-
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering
Blue and mystical over the face of the stars
Inside the church, the saints will all be blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.
The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.
And the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence
Canto VII from “The Man With the Blue Guitar”
Wallace Stevens

VII
It is the sun that shares our works.
The moon shares nothing. It is a sea.

When shall I come to say of the sun,
It is a sea; it shares nothing;

The sun no longer shares our works
And the earth is alive with creeping men,

Mechanical beetles never quite warm?
And shall I then stand in the sun, as now

I stand in the moon, and call it good,
The immaculate, the merciful good,

Detached from us, from things as they are?
Not to be part of the sun? To stand

Remote and call it merciful?
The strings are cold on the blue guitar.
In Mrs. Tilscher’s Class

You could travel up the Blue Nile with your finger, tracing the route while Mrs. Tilscher chanted the scenery. Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswān. That for an hour, then a skittle of milk and the chalky Pyramids rubbed into dust. A window opened with a long pole. The laugh of a bell swung by a running child.

This was better than home. Enthralling books. The classroom glowed like a sweet shop. Sugar paper. Coloured shapes. Brady and Hindley faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake. Mrs. Tilscher loved you. Some mornings, you found she’d left a good gold star by your name. The scent of a pencil slowly, carefully, shaved. A xylophone’s nonsense heard from another form.

Over the Easter term, the inky tadpoles changed from commas into exclamation marks. Three frogs hopped in the playground, freed by a dunce, followed by a line of kids, jumping and croaking away from the lunch queue. A tough boy told you how you were born. You kicked him, but stared at your parents, appalled, when you got back home.

That feverish July, the air tasted of electricity. A tangible alarm made you always untidy, hot, fractious under the heavy, sexy sky. You asked her how you were born and Mrs. Tilscher smiled, then turned away. Reports were handed out. You ran through the gates, impatient to be grown, as the sky split open into a thunderstorm.

by Carol Ann Duffy, from The Other Country (1990)
Valentine

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

I give you an onion.
It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.
It promises light
like the careful undressing of love.

Here.
It will blind you with tears
like a lover.
It will make your reflection
a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute card or a kissogram.

I give you an onion.
Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
possessive and faithful
as we are,
for as long as we are.

Take it.
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,
if you like.
Lethal.
Its scent will cling to your fingers,
cling to your knife.

by Carol Ann Duffy, from Mean Time (1993)
Meditation at Lagunitas
Robert Hass

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.
We talked about it late last night and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice,*
*pine, hair, woman, you* and *I.* There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called *pumpkinseed.* It hardly had to do with her.
Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
the thing her father said that hurt her, what
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*
A TRUE ACCOUNT OF TALKING TO THE SUN AT FIRE ISLAND
by Frank O'Hara

The Sun woke me this morning loud and clear, saying, “Hey! I’ve been trying to wake you up for fifteen minutes. Don’t be so rude, you are only the second poet I’ve ever chosen to speak to personally.

so why aren’t you more attentive? If I could burn you through the window I would to wake you up. I can’t hang around here all day.”

“Sorry, Sun, I stayed up late last night talking to Hal.”

“When I woke up Mayakovsky he was a lot more prompt” the Sun said petulantly. “Most people are up already waiting to see if I’m going to put in an appearance.”

I tried to apologize “I missed you yesterday.” “That’s better” he said. “I didn’t know you’d come out.” “You may be wondering why I’ve come so close?” “Yes” I said beginning to feel hot wondering if maybe he wasn’t burning me anyway.

“Frankly I wanted to tell you I like your poetry. I see a lot on my rounds and you’re okay. You may not be the greatest thing on earth, but you’re different. Now, I’ve heard some say you’re crazy, they being excessively calm themselves to my mind, and other crazy poets think that you’re a boring reactionary. Not me.

Just keep on like I do and pay no attention. You’ll find that people always will complain about the atmosphere, either too hot or too cold too bright or too dark, days too short or too long.

If you don’t appear at all one day they think you’re lazy or dead. Just keep right on, I like it.
And don’t worry about your lineage
poetic or natural. The Sun shines on
the jungle, you know, on the tundra
the sea, the ghetto. Wherever you were
I knew it and saw you moving. I was waiting
for you to get to work.

And now that you
are making your own days, so to speak,
even if no one reads you but me

you won’t be depressed. Not
everyone can look up, even at me. It
hurts their eyes.”

“Oh Sun, I’m so grateful to you!”

“Thanks and remember I’m watching. It’s
easier for me to speak to you out
here. I don’t have to slide down
between buildings to get your ear.
I know you love Manhattan, but
you ought to look up more often.

And
always embrace things, people earth
sky stars, as I do, freely and with
the appropriate sense of space. That
is your inclination, known in the heavens
and you should follow it to hell, if
necessary, which I doubt.

Maybe we’ll
speak again in Africa, of which I too
am specially fond. Go back to sleep now
Frank, and I may leave a tiny poem
in that brain of yours as my farewell.”

“Sun, don’t go!” I was awake
at last. “No, go I must, they’re calling
me.”

“Who are they?”
Rising he said “Some
day you’ll know. They’re calling to you
too.” Darkly he rose, and then I slept.
The End of March by Elizabeth Bishop

For John Malcolm Brinnin and Bill Read: Duxbury

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
to take a walk on that long beach.
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation
of a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers
in upright, steely mist.

The sky was darker than the water
—it was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
a track of big dog-prints (so big
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
over and over. Finally, they did end:

a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost... . .
A kite string?—But no kite.

I wanted to get as far as my proto-dream-house,
my crypto-dream-house, that crooked box
set up on pilings, shingled green,
a sort of artichoke of a house, but greener
(boiled with bicarbonate of soda?),
protected from spring tides by a palisade
of—are they railroad ties?
(Many things about this place are dubious.)
I’d like to retire there and do nothing,
or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms:
look through binoculars, read boring books,
old, long, long books, and write down useless notes,
talk to myself, and, foggy days,
watch the droplets slipping, heavy with light.
At night, a grog à l’américaine.
I'd blaze it with a kitchen match
and lovely diaphanous blue flame
would waver, doubled in the window.
There must be a stove; there is a chimney,
askew, but braced with wires,
and electricity, possibly
—at least, at the back another wire
limply leashes the whole affair
to something off behind the dunes.
A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible.
And that day the wind was much too cold
even to get that far,
and of course the house was boarded up.

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.
The sun came out for just a minute.
For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,
the drab, damp, scattered stones
were multi-colored,
and all those high enough threw out long shadows,

individual shadows, then pulled them in again.
They could have been teasing the lion sun,
except that now he was behind them
—a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
making those big, majestic paw-prints,
who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

Pretend I wrote this at your grave.
Pretend the grave is marked.
Pretend we know where it is.
Copp’s Hill, say. I have been there and you might be.
Foremother, your name is the boat that brought you.
Pretend I see it in the stone, with a gruesome cherub.
Children come with thin paper and charcoal to touch you.
Pretend it drizzles and a man in an ugly plastic poncho
circles the Mathers, all but sniffing the air warily.
We don’t need to pretend for this part.
There is a plaque in the grass for Increase, and Cotton.
And Samuel, dead at 78, final son, who was there
on the day when they came looking for proof.
Eighteen of them watched you and they signed to say:

the Poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe)
written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since,
brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa

and the abolitionists cheered at the blow to Kant
the Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling
and the enlightened ones bellowed at the strike against Hume
no ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences

Pretend I was there with you, Phillis, when you asked in a letter to no one:
How many iambs to be a real human girl?
Which turn of phrase evidences a righteous heart?
If I know of Ovid may I keep my children?

Pretend that on your grave there is a date
and it is so long before my heroes came along to call you a coon
for the praises you sang of your captors
who took you on discount because they assumed you would die
that it never ever hurt your feelings.
Or pretend you did not love America.
Phillis, I would like to think that after you were released unto the world,
when they jailed your husband for his debts
and you lay in the maid’s quarters at night,
a free and poor woman with your last living boy,
that you thought of the Metamorphoses,
making the sign of Arachne in the tangle of your fingers.
And here, after all, lay the proof:
The man in the plastic runs a thumb over stone. The gray is slick and tough.
Phillis Wheatley: thirty-one. Had misery enough.
C. X. Hua is a poet and artist and graduate student at MIT Media Lab. She was the winner of the 2019 Boston Review Poetry Contest and a national finalist for the Norman Mailer Awards in Poetry.

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