

Nostalgia

I remember you

Sweet juice of a mango drips

I long for Kreyol.

Noon's harvest on tongue

Taste sugar cane, cacao,

And one more ...plantain.

Turquoise sea blesses

Hold conch shell to ears longing

Listen, all sea life.

A Poet Walks the Bowery

Do tourists make love on tuna can springs
every night at the White House Hotel?

Is that Robert Frank behind the green gate
near the old Bistro Bar on Bleecker?

Does Amiri Baraka care about Heddie
who lives in that tenement on 5th?

And who buys the Chuckles, Clark Bars
and Dots at Economy Candy on Rivington?

Do the upscale guests at the Bowery Hotel
cross the street to Bowery Tattoo?

Blueberry knishes, potato and leek
at Schimmel's on East Houston Street.

And a memory surfaces from years ago:
My mother loved cherry and cheese.

And what does he write, that cigar-smoking man
who types in that window above

while poets and pinstripes munch onions and cheese
at McSorley's on 7th off 3rd.

I'll tell you a secret about Dead Horse Bay
yells a man from the bar with a pint

arm raised high saluting the air—
sawdust dispersed everywhere.

The Afterlife of Pennies

They become dollars.
Able to fold and no longer
in need of a train and its track
to bend. They lose
their weight, no longer a burden
to carry, and they learn quickly
how to use their newfound
silence, slipping
in and out of hands and pockets
with hardly any notice.
They begin, sometimes, to forget
the power in numbers.

For those at the bottom
of dark wells, the ground swallows
and returns them
through the mouths of volcanoes.
They become the earth and even
heaven's rain. The scales
shimmering on the backs of fish
and armadillos, noctilucae, the parts
of the moon that shine.

Some return
only through thought. Others,
when they've completed their journey,
when in this life they've taken less
and given more, it is believed
they become pure luck.

Grace Notes

Attuned to the oncoming breeze,
crimson blossoms circling
the urn's alabaster rim
delicately sway, like a colorful fan
fluttering in a pale concubine's hand.

I Will Celebrate Each Revolution

I could devour this
morning—belly full
of dew-kissed grass

birdsong nesting
gently in my throat

taste of dawn brilliant
on my tongue

my breath fragrant
with possibility.

Sleep Words in my Ear

Five golden moons
loop the sky

Our boat noses
through ice flowers

Slow, green rain
fingers the lake water

A lichen tree holds twin owlets
whose hoots ring the dark

You whisper sonnets
that open my heart

Found poem composed/modified from words in Carol Ann Duffy's poem "Rise"

Sycamore Roots

Sycamore trees lined our street,
Planted so long before me
that their roots
were already making a crazy quilt
out of the city-laid cement sidewalks,
adding several degrees of difficulty
to my roller skating and hopscotch.

The Climbing Tree

Ancient initials of fairy tale lovers
decorated the wide waisted copper beech,
a climbing tree, branches within reach.

These natural tattoos,
carved back before my time,
memorialized breaking news
posted forever, inviting peer reviews.

Grown almost too lofty to read,
the lettering crept skyward at glacial speed,
a funereal pace raising a question in its place:

Did their love grow too?

Now memories only of hearted initials, then still in view
from two score years before
when first I climbed the low scarred limbs in '64.

Letters graved as headstones are
block and permanent reminders
of the carver back then
so antique to one not yet ten.

The beech is gone without trace
birch trees planted in its place.
I reflect upon that haunted alphabet,
eidetically limned a lifetime ago,
at sunset now in the park:
I missed the beech and miss the marks.

The Reckonings of Spring

My poem. Is easily Broken.
A fine-blown. Easter Egg.
Finch-yellow. Shell-blue. Tea-green.
Pastels. Easily fade. On display.
In the glaring Eye.
It only knows. The Shelter.
Of a Poet's Cramp-bent. Hand.
And after. Hoarding.
Grave distance.
The Hollow burden.
Weighted with Air.
Hardens to Stone.
So before my Poem cracked. Untold.
I set it. Down in. Seedlings.
Rain-slaked. Sun-sprouted.
To Wait. For those. Who.
Hunt for Color. In Dew-white. Hiding. Places.
And now. With Gentle gestures.
Display. Nature's ornaments.
Bespoke. Ornate. Plainspoken.
The Reckonings of spring.

Hoopla

hot pink joggers

hotter pink tee

orange and fuchsia paisley

cardigan, navy squiggles

tangerine flowers

grow on pale pink socks

two-tone sneakers

robin's egg and navy blue

eighty- something dressed

to trot, nowhere to go

nap

perhaps

Epiphany

January 6, 2021

And so they rush the steps and bash the doors.
With windows smashed, the winter light breaks in.
Forgotten is the frankincense, the myrrh,
the gold the wisemen brought. Instead, our kin

or neighbors storm the halls. We recognize
their faces, tense with hate. In different form
they look a bit like us. Yet we surmise
this mob that waves its flags, together swarms

toward House or Senate, cannot live so near.
We say hello on walks? They guard our homes?
This is the hard epiphany we fear:
the ones we loathe and love might be the same.

And that bright star? We find the manger bare
except for all our anger swaddled there.

November Rain With Wind

Watch now!
The leaves
will fly off
The grass
will kneel down
And the colors
that take your breath
for sustenance –
watch! They are
going to ground
lumen by lumen.

Orange-black wings

on a curbstone
work at liftoff, turning
absence into longing, turning
mini-eyes inward
to fields of bee balm, verbena,
marjoram, milkweed, pears
growing soft and succulent
in a farmer's field,
tongue sunk in their juices.
Something has stilled
this monarch's veins,
and its wires twitch and probe
the roosts of memory.

When the Stars Come Knocking at My Door

asking me to come out of my shell,
to wander the neighborhood like the fox
seen scurrying across the pond
of light the street light has laid out,
maybe tonight is the night they'll ask me
to join them swimming in the ocean just so
we can admire the phosphorescent trail
shimmering in our wake or to strut
at the side of the highway nonchalantly
with a mountain lion as we admire
the moon who has nary a qualm
about appearing in all her glory day or night,
or just to lie on my back in the grass
counting them like sheep until I fall asleep.
I'm always ready for adventure, but morning
always finds me in my own bed.

Effort(less)

Tonight the words feel stuck
like I might choke on the cross of a t
or the hump of an h
the width of a w
the jagged edges of a z
So I swallow them with tea
and honey,
remember sipping peppermint and chamomile
by the fire,
envision the words, instead, like the curve of you,
your bow-shaped lips and flowing hair
Drink it all down
like the sound of my name on your tongue

Division

In Fall, when Dad's body begins to shut down,
he begs Mom to break the irises apart.

She resists saying the flowers can make it one more year.
Her eyes show she'd rather be beside him.

He tells her the plants are producing poorer blossoms.
Some have even stopped blooming,

so she pries rhizomes from the earth,
separates roots with a pointed tool and shakes loose soil.

A couple months pass before my father asks about the irises.
She tells the truth. Some survived, but some didn't.

My father believes flowers are a gift from Yahweh;
his favorite irises are heavily ruffled,

with pale petals marked with dark veins,
and a silver beard like his.

He tells us irises are messengers
opening their wings.

Giant Pacific Octopus

The man beside me says she's pathetic,
this solitary creature camouflaged
against rust-colored corals and crevices.
I want to tell him about footage
I watched where an octopus took down a shark.
Even though she remains still,
her slits for eyes follow us.
I want him to notice how delicately
her gills draw in her breath
like my father in CCU.

But what I want to tell him most
is how far from home and alone I am,
how I stumbled across this small aquarium,
how this shy animal
just moments ago
sailed toward me across the bottom,
her tentacles stretched up
like my father's arms lifting out of
the river near the Wye
after he carried me on his back
across territory too deep.

not that we possessed wisdom

not that we possessed wisdom
but at times we moved in unison
i mean all of us
those with delicate tendrils
the scuttlers
the shelled ones:
whenever the moon cut a torch through the sky
we clustered together
translucent pulsing
in salt water & mud
tiny ancient animal

I've been waiting for word from the future

empty beach at Race Point
the way heat waves from a distance
spindles of dust on this Windsor chair
so many fonts and type, these books on my shelf
 always nose in
when the volcano on Tonga erupted
 they say it pealed like a bell
dear sunbeam I slosh through ash
dear tidal wave quench my thirst
vis a vis arroyo
only that I miss you
 please write

The Men of Key West

All night the men danced on the beach,
alone or together, clasping hands,

while sand hounds delirious with moonlight
nipped at their fingers and their toes,

lapping sea water from their heel prints,
inhaling luminescence.

How thirsty the dogs were when the sun rose
and the men became old again,

their secrets hidden deep in their pockets,
their bearded chins tucked into their chests.

Spring Morning on the Rondout

for Dave

Would it surprise you that we are birdsong?

What makes me sing equally makes you want to sing—

an iridescent sky and a tide

that rises until creekwater licks the dock.

The eagle with its talons full of branches

for the nest it is building in the Sycamore tree.

They say that birds sing every morning

to tell their mates where they are.

Darling, I am alive and calling to you

from a field buzzing blue with wildflowers:

I have made it through the night,

long though it was without you.

Night meditation

Elvis hovers over the east coast.

Two coins cover his eyes.

I pour pink sand into a silver pail.

Emerald waves wobble in moonlight.

Scenes from an Indonesian Village Where Flooding Hits a Nearby Dye Factory, Turning the Water Red

Getting waist deep in the bloodletting, groceries and laundry parked
on sodden heads, the villagers are accustomed to this monthly ritual.

My neighborhood submerges, too, but not in so many incoming waves of
red as if the earth itself were menstruating, staining skin from bare

soles to pubic bones. Downhill from the Tequesta Indian burial mound,
I wade through the runoff of artifact and colonized debris. Mating peacocks

catwalk next to me. In Jenggot, a construction of motorbikes patterns
the river, balanced as cranes. Next moon the batik factory will gild this

runway the color of urine or gold, depending on your faith, whether it's that
of cynics or disciples, and after that, a turquoise or amethyst that will tessellate

this land the way wax cants it on fabric. Here, by Biscayne Bay, a red tide
apocalypse isn't so precious, but its un-pronged setting is just as easy to lose.

MURMURATION

An iridescence of starlings
shape shifts over the salt marsh
at sunset, like dancers tying a
seamless ribbon around God's
pink-packaged earth

Ocean Agreement

Deeper my daughter shouts
from the top of a wave
I am up to my knees

Get your hair wet I used to
beg my mother
I am up to my hips

What do you want My therapist
wonders
I am up to my chest

I know I prefer the ocean
here
at my throat

HOWLING AFTER

In the roaring winter dusk,
the ghostly clothes of jazz,
as heavy as the moon, dance
under the battered bridge

listening to the terror
of wartime, crazy time,
animal soup of time.
Heartless horrors, waking

nightmares illuminated
in supernatural darkness
by the flashing alchemy
of the trembling cosmos.

Loss

my ears

in perfect asymmetry

hear select

their mystic spiral

pairing, proof of order

god's

in-skull amps

blasting trauma's

clatter, a pan

a pot, a deafening

cacophony of kitchen-

dread

one ear deaf

genetic gift

what tamped ringing

might it hear

in windless skies

musical spheres

accessed through

spiral's twin

longing of geometry

Biodiversity

If we all saw the world through the same eyes, we wouldn't see at all. That's why I like standing on my head, walking down familiar streets pretending that they're new to me, in rain, or underneath the ghostly golden light of a full moon. In gardens, there is room enough for every hue, a place for plants that love the shade and those that revel in full sun. Why can't it be the same for us? Insisting on just one breed of berry leaves them vulnerable to attacks from viruses. Bananas may disappear for just that reason. We could be undone by our shallow gene pool, narrow views, a penchant for uprooting the one oddly patterned plant, the twisted tree.

Fire Tower

Never mind your replacement, the airplane.

You've pulled lightning from the sky,

tickled your legs blue with St. Elmo's fire.

You've bathed in cold fog, shed icicles

like thousands of earrings. You've whistled

through hurricanes, watched meteors

scratch the black dome in every direction

without leaving a trace. You've ignored

wars. You couldn't name a president.

You've chaperoned two generations of trees.

You've tolerated thousands of visitors

climbing the zig-zag of your spine

to stand inside your empty square head

& believe they see what gods see.

BIOPHANY

then you look up to find streetlights
with their great flashes
of nocturnal insight
bleached out all the velvety
pinpricks like the wood thrush
and house wren once trilling
across the Mayacamas
until creekwaters faded
and the bright sharp songs
stilled while we dozed
and put on a new layer
of babyfat watching iron chef
America & learning
to make perfect
quenelles

A Divine Idea

“The force that through the green fuse drives the flower...” Dylan Thomas

When in the drear of winter’s end, I long to write a holy poem. Words call
but I am cloistered here, and habit-bound with desk and pen; then
look to see a willow frond turning green, newly feathered, newly green.
Ah! Take the coat from off the hook, step through the portal, leap the step
and out of doors you go!

The earth has cracked! Set loose its streams to water the world. A coming gorge
on color breath bud then flower, shoot and leaf, exhalation of green,
apple green, no apples yet but promise of color: emerald, moss, sea;
promise of palette and breadth of sky: cerulean, Madonna blue.

After hues of lonely-in-the-house gray, dun, somber brown -- walking I come to
colors of sun: canary, saffron, yarrow, yolk. Streams of people out from houses,
slow like animals out from dens, small gods they kneel to plant new flowers:
innocence in petal and pearl; colors to comfort: rose and cream; colors of passion
to call desire: carmine, orchid, indigo.

O I am hungry, color hungry! Let me wear a dress of calendula, lie in ivory,
be taken in red! Far from mind where words are thin and follow a line.
Beyond the need for task or plan I feel the holy threaded through -- ardent,
heated, color-sated, seasoned, risen -- come alive!

denizen

In late spring this hinge
of red began to sing

from his perch within
our pine, a squatter

I'd call him
if he did not sing so eloquently,

of what I can't even fathom,
so hermetic not even the erudite

squirrels had a clue, possibly
(given his plumage) nothing

more than "I'm brighter than you."

Elegy

for B

the calendar dips and dimples entire days falling

for years to come ghosts are scar tissue in this

world where the universe reseals the absence
now is the moment we don't know

the right spices to steep in grief
a pinch of salt your own scraped wounds sting hot

and heavy mouthfuls too much, too big your voice

gives in to gulp this sadness so you manage to say
nothing bone tea and bergamot, rosemary in the shortbread

my chest keeps rising and falling towards the stars

heavy as an asteroid, gutted and retrofitted for flight
I once took small golden scissors and removed every thread

from the crewelworked rabbit on the stained edge

of an embroidered garden the linen left
more holes than weft, so unlike lace's delicate intention

In Somewhere

Sweet Frieda sways, perched
Somewhere is a copper mine
Frieda is a canary
Polly wants a chance for a better life

The pirate says *Arrrrrrrrrrgh*
Polly says *Aim high*

We can live with most anything
Worry we won't
Worry we do

Sweet Frieda never made it out
Polly says *Aim higher*

Carpathian Homecoming

When Mother pressed
me to her breast -- song
of the Carpathians cascading
like the Prutsky Falls
from her lips –
I swallowed whole.

I spoke your language
even though separated
by ocean and Iron Curtain.
Smuggled poems of dissidents
laid bare the pain of trampling
boots – sting of whip
borne on your back.

Bruised but never broken,

you welcomed me home –
daughter of reluctant refugees,
bombarded by bullets and bombs --
Even as they fled west,
they never stopped looking back.

Begonia Pots

Begonia pots, bright pink and peach
festoon the dark drab days of fall
still only vaguely promised, not even yet /begun.
The garden dirt's dust-dry in spots
where sparrows shimmy, spin and flutter.
They do the cha-cha, that mites be gone.

Marsh Seasons

green tree frogs harmonize
with Fowler's toads
wet chorus of longing

greenheads deerflies
mosquitoes no-see-ums
pink splotches of calamine

spartina patens dries
crisp as the air
rustles like corduroy

cat the color of snow
lurks in the phragmites
patient as a heron

Templeton

I mistake the rat, munching
chips and salsa on the patio
as a squirrel due to two
jumbo margaritas. Beer goggles.

His skinny pink tail tells a tale
of mistaken identity. Should I call
the health department? *13 Action News?*
The cops?

But why? He's content eating
beside the illuminated dumpster
on a warm September night.
Like me.

Life was good then. Moonlit
parking lot. Greasy food. Drinks
with a new friend. Both of us living
the Rust Belt dream.

Dear Our Lady of Slow Learners

O, divine advice giver, please reply
with some breadcrumbs of insight

to octane my unicursal snail crawl
through the labyrinth of my fogginess

where I trek for clarity, for wisdom,
yet bump into the same dead end.

If you could send a new optical prescription
or list of tips, I will fold them into a square

and carry it in the zippered side pouch
of my purse like a compass, like a talisman,

or is that cheating? And I can see your face
tilt in my mind's eye, eyelids at half-mast

over sad brown eyes, brows raised in a tsk, tsk,
lips, thought puckered, tight, form a tiny pink heart,

which kind of gives me hope.

September Gait

—for Karen Poppy

The path to school is thick with fallen
years, memories crackling under my feet,
of the time before they started flaunting
their independence like a brooch pinned

to their chests, all rhinestones and gallop.
They trot through the pre-dawn darkness
with the valiance of legends, trampling
the grasslands of their infancy, as if grass

were no more than remnants of a forgotten
age stuck to the bottom of their feet,
more burden than beauty. Once the grasp
of horseshoe, saddle, molasses, their fingers

hardly graze mine now, unravel like poorly
braided rope, the thunderous years to come
rearing in their gaze as they let go
and wild across the vestibule without me.

Portraiture: dark room, self in the mirror

When the doctor asked about the abyss
I feel in my bones, I showed him a box

of bent wires stripped from the radio so he'd
understand why I couldn't echolocate.

I stopped drinking to trap the words.
Built birdbaths around the yard for ravens.

If they agreed to carry chimes
on their wings would the world sound

like a universal church? The only color I
can't hear the music of is eggshell.

I paint my eyes blue again. My first child
sucked the color clean, took that brightness

for himself. Now they are the first evening hour,
a glass forgotten in the sink.

I Am Having an Affair With the World,

but now I know all illicit love ends
badly and in anger despite the beauty
seen in the coleus grown from a cutting
no bigger than my thumb,
or in the red and yellows of a sunset spilling
its leftover hues into the sea's horizon,
a backdrop to the alley cat's call colliding with night.
I know these short-term loves will end,
and I will be picking up the debris
of petals and paws and feathers left
by the sparrow who perched on my sill
for a moment, leaving me enamored
by its striped breasted fluff,
but when I was about to reach
it trilled, then flew away.

Shoe, Tunnel, Belly

Each foot wrapped in its shoe,
each train held in its tunnel,

each lemon blooming
on a hill's belly—

we are dying every day.
Even so, I saw a cherry

browning in the dirt,
moon-orange edges

and mostly pit. Its beauty
so ruined, I wanted to eat it.

Don't Grieve for Fish

Not when their captives wear saris the dusky shade of star anise—and think not of death but dinner. Silver scales wink at mirrors; one last dance of surrender and forgiveness. Slow thrashing. Along the backbone, a tickle of memory: one of thousands, then one. Swim to the spot with purpose. Deep orange frames a blooming lotus blossom. Begin the day with a pattern: gold and copper and a single pearl.