

GOSHEN LANE

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by

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The poems in this book are concerned with the ways in which we gain knowledge and identify ourselves in the world. Both require positing one's perceptions of the world against those of others and finding a means of reconciling incongruities. The poems in this book are divided into three sections which seek to map such a progression. The first section reflects traditional influences from art, literature, religion, and legend; the second section is a more immediate and more self-conscious grappling with perceiving and understanding; and the third section offers itself as a more solidified understanding of placement in the world.

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Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven . . .

--Wallace Stevens

"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"

The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

--Wallace Stevens

"Poems of Our Climate"

I. The Voices

The Kiss

--a painting by Gustav Klimpt

He knows he is irresistible. No doubt he has
looked in the mirror wearing his stained glass robe

and seen the cropped curls and stately shoulders
of Marc Antony. He cups my head like an infant

and lifts my chin toward him. He thinks I am shy;
my eyes are closed, my face turned away. He thinks

that this arm slung about his neck is my embrace,
that I've shrunken my shoulders forward so the dress

slides down my white arms just for him. This swirling
pekoe aura around me, he believes, exudes

my great excitement. I am trapped on my knees
on a cliff of flowers, and I've braced myself.

My bare toes tense forward, stiff as triggers.

Penelope

You set me in a high place. I gave you a son.
Helen's war called; you never looked back.
I do not sleep again tonight, my bed
cold as basalt that lines your sea. To dim
the revelry sounding nightly now in the great hall
I walk about the gardens, overlook your realm,
watch the sea licking Ithaca away.

At my feet, creaking between two stones
like a pinched mast, is a cricket. Remember
how we rocked to such sound, with sails
plumping and flashes that split the night,
jagged and sulfurous--tantrums of some god?
(The sorrow of my father who would not watch
me go already near forgotten.)

The moon pokes its head between two clouds
and catches on my dress, a game
from another night when you and I bruised
spring grasses caught in the moon.
But that was another life, fifteen years that grew
your son to a man and withered
your mother like a raisin till she vanished.
And me, my virtue is renowned.

The Sacrifice

At her table the old mother
kneads her coarse brown bread.
She is cold. It is morning,

and her husband has taken the boy
(he does this from time to time)
to tend the flock on the slope

to teach him his numbers he says.
Worn as the prayer shawl around his neck
she straddles a low stool;

finishing one task she starts another
perhaps carding the wool, perhaps
something else a daughter would have done

had there been one. She worries
the boy will fall down a ravine
or against some jagged rock, be mauled

by the dogs, be lost some reasonable hundred
ays that would undoubtedly stab her heart
that she must obligingly accept. Tonight

she will not understand the boy's silence
his round brown eyes checking every corner
every firey shadow leaping and popping

in the darkness, why he sidles close to her
refusing the torn loaf his father offers.
She will think fatigue and tuck him in

to wrestle a demon chasing his night
forever, to cry out, to waken chilled with sweat
having learned the dimension of man,

the generosity of fathers, a knowledge
almost too great for one day.

Lot's Wife

I admit it now, there had been doubts.
The streets always a black bazaar. Men mounting
men, women and their nameless raglings. My husband
is a righteous man and fearsome. He fortified
our home, made it an oasis, a safe warm cave.
Our daughters grew like orchids, untouched petals.
When he took the strangers in that night
we made such a party of it; all smiles and chatter
until the street closed in. Husband shielded
his guests, bartered something precious of his own.

But in the end, the strangers saved themselves,
and when morning came, jostled us awake early
to gather the rest of the family (who only laughed
from their beds and rolled over), to leave the city
and settle our fortune in an unfamiliar place. Such noise
behind, as though the world were exploding, pebbles
leaping before us like fish, the wind pushing us like sails.
We were told not to look back, to abandon the plain
and climb high to the safety of the mountains.

And Husband's pace was beyond mine. He tugged
my arm. The sulfurous air stung my lungs.
And I could hear shrieks. My daughters' homes
lay on top of them, their hair was tinder.
What could he have done then? God was
at our side; he had always known this.
It was my hard lesson to learn,
stopped here, burning, to witness the pure fury
of His goodness. Ashen snow fell for days
like sorrow, or forgiveness. My transformation
is generous. I need nothing but my Lord
who reveals himself to me incessantly. I am
polished by the wind, tended by the glazing sun.

Magdelene

This is the one you like to hear:

Like the rest I watched him for days,
not so much seeing the prophet or god.
To touch his hem was no goal of mine,
but the bevel of an ear or the hollow
of his salty throat, the creases of hands
moving like slow sparrows in the air before him.

I was distracted I would have said that night
when I followed him in the dark to the dinner party.
Doors stood wide. I kept behind him in a corner
--nothing was planned. His feet were dirty and coarse.
Bunions jutted; veins like tough blue cords spread
across the tops; and the ankles were bloated.
I reached out and slipped the knot of his sandals.

Men have said I am beautiful, they say anything
in the dark. But he sat still, didn't perk at my touch.
I was the one trembled. I can't explain it,
the great weeping that came upon me. Or why
I laved his feet with my tears, took away sorrows
of a day, then dried them with my hair (though he loved
me for it). I embraced his ankles like a child,
kissed those bones. When I brought the spikenard
from my breast and rubbed it into his feet,
ah, the room smelled like . . .

This is the story you like to hear, the one you gather
your daughters for, when say, you see
me coming from the river, my gray hair dripping.
I know what you want is to touch it and believe
that, by extension, you have touched Him.
None's the harm. But I tell you too,
don't misunderstand me--mine was a singular event.
Know that some feet which might stay
happily put for your kisses would
just as readily stamp on a convenient throat.

Joan

My father saw the soldiers in a dream
perhaps bedded down around me in the straw.
So he kept me close, enlisted my brothers
as spies. He found a man for me
whom I would not marry. I was his trial.
So straight off the voices said not to tell
him anything. Leaving home took years.

But the dream, of course, was more awful
than hunger, more than urgent flesh. I'm not sure
whether, when he learned of my triumphs,
he thanked God, or cursed. If he saw me now
with this chain around my neck, able only to stand
in my iron cage, would he cross himself and turn away,
or bring me a cup of wine, a loaf of bread; would he
brush his hard hand against my cheek; would he nod?

II. The Expectant House

Miss Jenny

I put you in a house dress
and a blue print apron, full length
like butchers wear, and on foot with scuffed
and muddy shoes, your garden shoes probably.
When you arrive at the expectant house,
birds do not escort you nor children
come up from their fields of play
to run at your skirts. You enter a kitchen door.
In your bag, not a flowery carpet bag, a leather one
with a coarse two-inch wide strap, you carry
old sheets torn in squares, and scissors, iodine
maybe, and a length of package string.
Maybe a pint of blackberry jam.
There's plenty of nobility in just this.

I tried to put you on a white mule once
with fancy things--a black dress, a hired man
to boss around--but that story wouldn't work
itself out. I don't know much about you,
just fragments in a patchwork of retelling.
I do know that you delivered me; even then
you were old. I'm told I was the last.
You did what needed to be done with all the pomp
of efficiency and enough terror to fill your veins
with a tingling of calmness, with an allowance
for what you could not change to happen.

Epistemology at Seven

My son, hungry for danger,
watches for electrical storms
by rolling the slats of window blinds
parallel with his bedroom floor,
his view divided into neat little slices.
He tells me night is the best time,
the lightning bolts cut the sky
more deeply then, and replay themselves
for several blinks after; like echoes, he says.

He longs to spot a sleek black funnel
dropping from the clouds and would not
be surprised to find one day when he woke
his house dropped in some exotic jungle
pygmies in the den playing checkers
or a witch doctor dancing and chanting
circles around his little brown pup.

This summer we camped on the Cumberland
and all night long, when the sky cracked
and flashed, and the ground shuddered beneath
our sleeping bags like a scared thing,
he slept. He told us in the morning, crunching
a spoon of Cheerios, he had dreamed
he was the engineer on a train; it sounded
like Granny's old Singer
the time he took a ride on its treadle.

Paradise

1.

From a brochure and onto the sand
they step past beautiful brown boys
kicking a soccer ball, eyes soft as birds.
They slip their sandals and wade knee-deep--
The Atlantic hugs them frantically to her sunken breast
then frolics with them, yammering them
with her mouthy waves, as they scamper like turtles
back to the shore. A missing Seiko; a straw hat
sailing west: a story to embellish at dinner.

2.

At the Hotel Americana, an old woman strung
with pearls, a white leather purse swinging above
her gold watch enters the street. In a moment she is down
gleaned of her treasure, intent with cradling
her arm opening now a dark blossom.

3.

In the bus someone remarks that the tour
of the city is like last year's photo safari
as the guide points an historical finger
at the faces passing by: African, Native, Portuguese.
From a certain distance, they can pretend
Gauguin has painted the barrios
blooming like suns on the hillsides.

4.

The purity of this place is what one must remember,
the thick rich air inhaled like rare incense in church.

5.

Protect yourself in the mid-day tropics;
stroll beneath awnings in Ipanema;
look into windows studded with emeralds and topaz.
Wander the marketplace; witness the necessary
fruits and vegetables, plenteous, devouring
table tops, burdening rack and rail--pendulous grapes,
cauliflower big as soccer balls, the ostentatious melons.

Dear Sadie,

Because my key no longer fits the lock
Because I saw my smoke-gray Samsonite
 leaning in the moonlight heavy against the shrubs

When I read your letter tacked to the birch
When I trudged through your hyacinths, your narcissus
 swore at your bloody red tulips, beheaded them
When I put my things in the Buick and drove to the Holiday Inn

Since you don't like dinner alone
Since the box at Churchill Downs is paid
Since the shutters need painting

When your hibiscus blooms, and your yellow climbers
 put you in a better mind
When you want to go away, when you visit your sister

If you need someone to water the garden

Love,
Albert.

Young Bride's Prayer

Tuck me in a feathered box
Give me skilletts and hollyhocks
Spare my babe from chicken pox
Teach me how to darn the socks

Make me frugal, make me wise
Grant, O Lord, my bread to rise
Allow my pie to win first prize
May all my daughters have blue eyes

Keep the scuff marks from my floor
Place a spaniel at my door
Deny my husband's yearn to snore
(Save me from a garrulous bore)

Fill my stream with trout and bass
Quench my thirst with sassafras
Place on my mantle sticks of brass
(that untended grow green as grass)

Soothe my nights with eider down
Protect my face Obscure my frown
Prefer my family in our town
In thy goodness, let us drown

Magazine Leaves

She's on safari today
stalking Nairobi
with a big black machete man
swiping paths through the jungle;
she is Livingstone.

My brother and I
come in the back door:
witchdoctor's children.
Our eyes walk quietly past.

She opens a quart of green beans
and rolls out her biscuits.
Daddy arrives smelling like holsteins
and chlorine, eats his supper.

In his recliner
he
moves
out
west
and becomes
a real cowboy.

Still Life

Beside the porcelain blue horse
beside the Chinese teapot
between the snake charmer and the Hindi

hand-dancer a picture on the oak shelf
of four generations stands of them sitting
on the edge oldest to youngest of a bed

The first one ninety-three the last one two
wear pigtailed Those between
wear glasses Uncle Joe sits in a tin-type

beside her bed on the table
young as a brother dressed for posterity
April 1917 beside the wavy black

beads of a sister her daughter
who's brought palm fronds
holy water and hand lotion that day

Matins

Grass crunched beneath his boots
those cold four o'clock mornings
began the same way for more years
than I knew him.

He would slide open the door
where the holsteins bawled
and spurted and waited.
They would saunter down the aisle
swinging low, counter-balancing,
put their heads through stanchions
and tongue-up crushed corn from the trough.

The warm milk lent a raw sweetness to the air
and the barn warmed itself around the cows.

Kinetic Theory

A line of velvet brown
has drawn itself up
the cabinet edge
above the refrigerator too
high for me to use,
and in the ceiling corners
translucent clusters arrange
and rearrange slightly
as the door opens. Airy
tattings crown the gathers
of the blue curtains.

I remember how my mother
scoured the tenant houses
we lived in, their yellowed
woodwork and split linoleum,
their rattley winter windows,
how she strained after cobwebs,
how, when she finished,
sat in a chair by the kitchen window
glad as the broom in the closet.

You speak of my corruption
as an old Calvinist might
admonish cleanliness next
to godliness. But I say
let the corners clean themselves.

III. Goshen

Fall Sermon

This field in mid-September is as pretty
as any park, rank with geraniums here
asters there and everywhere
the periwinkle the florist recommends
because it requires no special care.
This is the field of the promise
you will not be forgotten.

This is not a field for you, bony friends,
you who would keep just as well in the
root cellar or the tulip bed.
How can you, swaddled in your satin rooms
know of this anyway?
How the wind bears away the marble names?
How the oak roots overturn the granite?
How the children sing and dance an orbit
on the grass . . . Ashes, ashes?

Firebird

You live in the flap of a great bat's wing
amazed at your own blood surge, often
visiting your marble slab, its corners worn
these twenty years: You were not supposed to live.
When you slipped early from your bloody nest,
it was like the death of heaven. Months
you lay stunned in a desert of strange air,
your skin like queer opal and every touch electric.

No, not the bat, not his dank roof of night--
it has nothing to do with you. Your infant bones
are not arranged in the stiff organdy of burial,
they are trapped in the fire of your flesh.
You saved yourself and rose.

Light

From my back door
I watch the change of seasons
confuse the elements. Flashes
like worried florescence
dart between the clouds.
And it seems to me
the first blink of us all
must have been like this
when forced from that perfect embrace
as it collapsed on our heels.

A Story in a Book

Gray feathers are scattered
like petals on the lawn today.
If I were a child
I would gather them, a bouquet
to brush against my face.

Doves have blessed my yard
this year cooing from rooftop
and deck rail, the pine,
settling an abandoned robin's nest
in the sugar maple tree.
And made morning, when still
hung with mist, an illusion
of Eden before the fall
when light glimmered innocent
even in the snake's eye,
and we, the everlasting
fruit of promise, danced
naked in an undulant future.

I found a hatchling
dropped beside the flagstones
weeks ago, its translucent body
rivered with stillness.
I scooped it up with newspaper
and delivered it softly across the fence
into the cover of tall grass.

Goshen Lane, Spring 1992

Looking at this photograph
is like falling
into a cornucopia
receding inward
and deeply
over gravel, under elm
under sycamore,
the never-dying pine
(we call lonesome
because of this).
As Innisfree brought solace,
and sylvan England,
it lies just out of sight
along the path
slithering its dip
and curve back,
back. I go
to that place
where pungent and fecund,
moldering,
lie mighty death
and mighty birth,
whereupon breaks, through
the quivering sapped canopy,
slatherings of moted sunlight
calling forth all
that is known and more and myself.

I stretch out on smooth limestone
jutting from the slope,
warm myself against it
a cold rattler
beginning to molt.