

Midfire

Running through all those
days and nothing caught me
but the price of grain and
the odd book written or
burned. The weather was off.
Fruit trees bloomed in winter
and the locusts came, shedding wings
like angels. There were flames
in the sky and we lost
all urge to forecast. There was
no truth but that found
in the black belly of the streets
of the empty-throated town,
swallowing, swallowing. My lover
visited. Taking my arms he said
This is no apocalyptic dream.
But I knew that. I knew, too,
that there was much more we couldn't say
before he went east to exile
and did not return. He wore an
embroidered coat as he
waved out of the train, waved,
and our words were as little use
as locust wings. Planes
rode in like the times roaring,
each one a gasp from the mountains,
moving out of hearing to stumble
into the sea. I had a nightmare of ladders,
rising, then bursting into flame
and crumbling above me. And the dust
was thick as dew, grinding
into our skins like glass
and it shone. We had run out
of time and virtues,

as in a child's bad dreams
we have entered badly
like soldiers in hobnailed boots,
goose-stepping soldiers. We weren't
beginning and it wasn't
a dream, all sirens raising
the night and the sounds of engines
close by. We tried to
add it all up and got
merely sunrise. Try putting
that in a letter to someone
in exile. Try naming that.

Hero At The Gates of Hell

for Bette Tomlinson

I'm afraid to ask the right questions.
The ones that elicit instruction and
guidance: how to hold a tree against
weather, my hands against time.
If only I hadn't come to this,
seen how shadows hold a greater light
across the darkness. No one will believe me.
And when I return I will invest everything
with strange new qualities.
The morning sun will brighten my room
in a way that will seem new, and when
I wake to it, leave my bed
and cross the cool floor to hold
the pitcher, feel the good clay
and its weight of clear water,
I will think how the moment
is so beautiful no one
would ever know it's not perfect.

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Neile Graham

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My Grandmother's Photograph

The wind tonight is not quite spring but holds
a fragrant hint of soil, and blind shoots
wake to that scent.

In gusts at once warm and cool
there is no room for bare feet or women like white birds
in Grecian gowns. It's not yet May and sixty-five years
have spun by. She's dead, who in this photograph presses
naked feet against grass, raises arms to dance,
a white shawl drifting like feathers from her hands.
She knows nothing yet. Her confidence, tender
as a bird's.

I can't trust the web spun between us
to bind her, it's stretched over so many years.
Looking at this girl, I wonder how much I would explain to her,
how I could warn her that her first child will be still-born.
Defying the doctor to conceive another, she'll take a pin
to the French safe he made her husband wear. Her daughter
will bear me and I will remember her old in the mahogany bed
lying in regal darkness at the curving hall's end,
never dreaming of this white-gowned girl with waist-long hair
stepping into the history of her life

and mine. The wind pushing through her to me
is fecund with dreams and mud and doesn't tie us. Each movement
I make toward her is another step in her dance, another breath
of wind pressing her forward into the season.

I remember gathering
her sweeping hair into a widow's bun. Her hair still dark as
distance, yet light as birds and the girl I create of her.

Washing at Sunset

My hands touch the water and I'm
crying. Simple as that.
I keep trying to put things together,
more than tears and water
while the sun, squeezed
between cloud and mountain,

focuses warm as a hand on my back.
I don't move. Wondering why the sky
opened like that, I see
myself in the water
with the sun behind and the dark
shape of the water nodding.

Nodding as if to tell me *yes*,
say *yes* to the man in the doorway
who has asked me to stay.
But it's not that simple, nothing is.
It's all too tangled

in years and the ways my body
knows his and knows nothing at all.
And it's this that I fear—the sun
setting over the mountain
like his mouth on my breast
and me wanting to push it

away, to run out into the street

naked, laughing.
It's too late to tell him lies.
The sun on my shoulder
is his hand and our motives are certain:
the parody of self

that is sometimes beauty.
The warm flesh. The fear
I want to name love.
I'm afraid I fall through life
and learn nothing—it is simple as that.
Simple to lift

my hands from the water
and turn to face into the sun.
And I would say simply
yes.

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