

Forgetfulness

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read, never
even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses good-bye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a
bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

--Billy Collins

Daughter

Although I'm oldest I can't
be the one who paints

or speaks grandmother's language
like a picture-bride marriage

to a still life: a plate
of oranges, plums and grapes

one takes care to arrange
precise as syntax – as a passage

one must translate
for someone else. That

is the greater danger
than waking with a stranger.

--Kimiko Hahn

Spring

I am very happy
lying on this rug
beside the dog, listening
to the constant roar
of spring rain.
Everything I need
is here – even the desire
now drawing me
to the window to recall
the deer wandering
in the city of Nara.
As they gather around me
I feed them cake
from a hand
in my childhood.

--Kimiko Hahn

Geometry

I prove a theorem and the house expands:
the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling,
the ceiling floats away with a sigh.

As the walls clear themselves of everything
but transparency, the scent of carnations
leaves with them. I am out in the open

and above the windows have hinged into butterflies,
sunlight glinting where they've intersected.
They are going to some point true and unproven.

--Rita Dove

Early in the Morning

While the long grain is softening
in the water, gurgling
over a low stove flame, before
the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced
for breakfast, before the birds,
my mother glides an ivory comb
through her hair, heavy
and black as calligrapher's ink.

She sits at the foot of the bed.
My father watches, listens for
the music of comb
against hair.

My mother combs,
pulls her hair back
tight, rolls it
around two fingers, pins it
in a bun to the back of her head.
For half a hundred years she has done this.
My father likes to see it like this.
He says it is kempt.

But I know
it is because of the way
my mother's hair falls
when he pulls the pins out.
Easily, like the curtains
when they untie them in the evening.

--Li-Young Lee

The Only Word a Tree Knows

Tonight the hens line up on a bamboo roost,
sides touching.
You can hold their evening in the palm of a hand,
wondering at restlessness,
the stranger people should never let in.

Pecans falling before we have cracked the ones from last year!
Squirrels building a nest under the roof!
There is nothing to do that isn't singular.
One meal, one letter, one memory roaring inside the head.

The trees promise to remember us.
. It is the only word a tree knows.
Leaves dropping, it is the one thing left.

Tonight we will be branches loose in the wind of our bed,
a motion preceding and following everything we do.

The trees shrink on the wall of the sky.
Listen long enough, it sounds like
they're talking inside your head.
This bending, this rake –
a leaf lands, little boat, on the stair.
To be everywhere and know:
I was born to answer a tree.

--Naomi Shihab Nye

This Moment

A neighbourhood.

At dusk.

Things are getting ready
to happen
out of sight.

Stars and moths.

And rinds slanting around fruit.

But not yet.

One tree is black.

One window is yellow as butter.

A woman leans down to catch a child
who has run into her arms
this moment.

Stars rise.

Moths flutter.

Apples sweeten in the dark.

--Eavan Boland

Gospel

a humming ship of voices
big with all

the wrongs done
done them.
No sound this generous
could fail:

ride joy until
it cracks like an egg,
make sorrow
seethe and whisper.

From a fortress
of animal misery
soars the chill voice
of the tenor, enraptured

with sacrifice.

he complains, notes
brightly rising

towards a sky
blank with promise.
Yet how healthy
the single contralto

--Rita Dove

Slant

If the angle of an eye is all,
the slant of hope, the slant of dreaming, according to each life,
what is the light of this city,
light of Lady Liberty, possessor of the most famous armpit in the world,
light of the lovers on Chinese soap operas, throwing BBQ'd ducks at each other
with that live-it-up-while-you're-young, Woo Me kind of
love,
light of the old men sitting on crates outside geegaw shops
selling dried seahorses & plastic Temples of Heaven,
light of the Ying 'n' Yang Junk Palace,
light of the Golden Phoenix Hair Salon, light of Wig-o-ramas,
light of the suntanners in Central Park turning over like rotisserie chickens sizzling on a spit,
light of the Pluck U & Gone with the Wings fried-chicken shops,
the parking-meter-leaners, the Glamazons,
the oglers wearing fern-wilting quantities of cologne, strutting, trash-talking, glorious:
the immigrants, the refugees, the peddlars, stockbrokers and janitors, stenographers and
cooks,
all of us making and unmaking ourselves,
hurrying forwards, toward who we'll become, one way only, one life only:
free in time but not from it,
here in the city the living make together, and make and unmake over and over
Quick, quick, ask heaven of it, of every mortal relation,
feeling that is fleeing,
for what would the heart be without a heaven to set it on?
I can't help thinking no word will ever be as full of life as this world,
I can't help thinking of thanks.

--Suji Kwock Kim

The Trouble with Poetry

The trouble with poetry, I realized
as I walked along a beach one night—
cold Florida sand under my bare feet,
a show of stars in the sky—

the trouble with poetry is
that it encourages the writing of more poetry,
more guppies crowding the fish tank,
more baby rabbits
hopping out of their mothers into the dewy grass.

And how will it ever end?
unless the day finally arrives
when we have compared everything in the world
to everything else in the world,

and there is nothing left to do
but quietly close our notebooks
and sit with our hands folded on our desks.

Poetry fills me with joy
and I rise like a feather in the wind.
Poetry fills me with sorrow
and I sink like a chain flung from a bridge.

But mostly poetry fills me
with the urge to write poetry,
to sit in the dark and wait for a little flame
to appear at the tip of my pencil.

And along with that, the longing to steal,
to break into the poems of others
with a flashlight and a ski mask.

And what an unmerry band of thieves we are,
cut-purses, common shoplifters,
I thought to myself
as a cold wave swirled around my feet
and the lighthouse moved its megaphone over the sea,
which is an image I stole directly

from Lawrence Ferlinghetti—
to be perfectly honest for a moment—

the bicycling poet of San Francisco
whose little amusement park of a book
I carried in a side pocket of my uniform
up and down the treacherous halls of high school.

--Billy Collins