

Classic Poetry Series

Erin Belieu
- poems -

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Erin Belieu(1967 -)

Erin Belieu is an American poet

Life

She graduated from Boston University, and Ohio State University with an MFA. She taught at Washington University, Boston University, Kenyon College, and Ohio University. She teaches at Florida State University.

Belieu is the author of three collections of poetry. Her first book, *Infanta* (1995), was a winner of the National Poetry Series, selected by Hayden Carruth. *Infanta* was also chosen as a best book of the year by *The Washington Post* and *Library Journal*.

Her second collection, *One Above & One Below*, was the winner of the Midland Authors Prize in poetry and the Ohioana prize, and her most recent collection, *Black Box*, was a finalist in 2007 for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. She is presently Director of The Graduate Creative Writing Program at Florida State University.

Belieu is also the coeditor of *The Extraordinary Tide*, an anthology published by Columbia University Press that features the work of contemporary American women poets. She has worked extensively in literary publishing and was previously the managing and poetry editor for *AGNI* magazine, as well as the founding editor of *Hotel Amerika*.

In addition to her writing, editing, and teaching, Erin Belieu is the co-founder and co-director of *VIDA*, a literary organization that seeks to explore critical and cultural perceptions of writing by women through meaningful conversation and the exchange of ideas among existing and emerging literary communities.

Against Writing About Children

When I think of the many people
who privately despise children,
I can't say I'm completely shocked,

having been one. I was not
exceptional, uncomfortable as that is
to admit, and most children are not

exceptional. The particulars of
cruelty, sizes Large and X-Large,
memory gnawing it like

a fat dog, are ordinary: Mean Miss
Smigelsky from the sixth grade;
the orthodontist who

slapped you for crying out. Children
frighten us, other people's and
our own. They reflect

the virused figures in which failure
began. We feel accosted by their
vulnerable natures. Each child turns

into a problematic ocean, a mirrored
body growing denser and more
difficult to navigate until

sunlight merely bounces
off the surface. They become impossible
to sound. Like us, but even weaker.

Erin Belieu

Another Poem For Mothers

Mother, I'm trying
to write
a poem to you—

which is how most
poems to mothers must
begin—or, What I've wanted
to say, Mother...but we
as children of mothers,
even when mothers ourselves,

cannot bear our poems
to them. Poems to
mothers make us feel

little again. How to describe
that world that mothers spin
and consume and trap

and love us in, that spreads
for years and men and miles?
Those particular hands that could

smooth anything: butter on bread,
cool sheets or weather. It's
the wonder of them, good or bad,

those mother-hands that pet
and shape and slap,
that sew you together
the pieces of a better house
or life in which you'll try
to live. Mother,

I've done no better
than the others, but for now,
here is your clever failure.

Dum Spiro Spero

Come, Lord, and lift the fallen bird
Abandoned on the ground;
The soul bereft and longing so
To have the lost be found...

Before the movers came,
we found the sparrows' nest

concealed inside the chive
plant on the patio.

And the bald chicks there
calling, unfledged, undone.

Love, the mean days collecting
scored us, and hourly

such years: we feel too much

assembling what our world
got wrong; black artery

of wires, branched hazard, rat
stinking in the beams. Wrong as

your mattress on the floor,
walls where the only stud

sinks into a metal grief.

Take this distance as you go,
Love, which is my faith, tedious,

steady, like scraping gum
from a shoe. Strong as a cobweb,

I give you this durable string.

Because I remember you:
who saves the sparrows;

the chicks calling and calling
and you who won't forget them;

have seen the ghost who rents
your eyes dissolve when

your face turns to the light.

Today, I watched the other birds
who lived this winter

peppering our tulip tree. The buds'
tough seams begin to crack.

Ordinary. No sign to read, I know.
But while we breathe, we hope.

epigraph from "Come Lord And Lift," by T. Merrill

Erin Belieu

Field

Field is pause field is plot field is red chigger bump where
the larvae feed corn wig curled in your ear. Field cares not
a fig for your resistance though kindly gently lay your
head down girl lay it down. When ready storm when
summer kilned smoothly as a cake. Awake! Awake and
wide is field. And viral. Biotic. Field of patience of percolation
and policy. Your human energy. Come again? What for? In
field there is no time at all no use a relief the effort done
which is thank you finally the very lack of you. Lay your
head down girl lay it down. In field which has waited since
you first ascended to the raw end of your squared off world and
gazed upon your subjects: conger of rat snake corn snake
of all the low ribbons bandaging the stalks. Progress in field
foot sliding in matter slick chaff in fall. And always field's oboe
this sawing a wind that is drawing its nocturne through the 23rd
mansion of the moon. Field is Requiel's music and the Wild Hunt
of offer. In field they are waiting you are sounding. Go home.

Erin Belieu

For Catherine: Juana, Infanta Of Navarre

Ferdinand was systematic when
he drove his daughter mad.

With a Casanova's careful art,
he moved slowly,
stole only one child at a time
through tunnels specially dug
behind the walls of her royal
chamber, then paid the Duenna
well to remember nothing
but his appreciation.

Imagine how quietly
the servants must have worked,

loosening the dirt, the muffled
ring of pick-ends against
the castle stone. The Duenna,
one eye gauging the drugged girl's
sleep, each night handing over
another light parcel, another
small body vanished
through the mouth of a hole.

Once you were a daughter, too,
then a wife and now the mother
of a baby with a Spanish name.

Paloma, you call her, little dove;
she sleeps in a room beyond you.

Your husband, too, works late,
drinks too much at night, comes
home lit, wanting sex and dinner.
You feign sleep, shrunk
in the corner of the queen-sized bed.

You've confessed, you can't feel things
when they touch you;

take Prozac for depression, Ativan
for the buzz. Drunk, you call your father
who doesn't want to claim
a halfsand-niggergrandkid.
He says he never loved your mother.

No one remembers Juana; almost
everything's forgotten in time,

and if I tell her story,
it's only when guessing
what she loved, what she dreamed
about, the lost details of a life
that barely survives history.

God and Latin, I suppose, what she loved.
And dreams of mice pouring out
from a hole. The Duenna, in spite
of her black, widow's veil, leaning
to kiss her, saying Juana, don't listen...

Erin Belieu

From On Being Fired Again

I've known the pleasures of being
fired at least eleven times—

most notably by Larry who found my snood
unsuitable, another time by Jack,
whom I was sleeping with. Poor attitude,
tardiness, a contagious lack
of team spirit; I have been unmotivated

squirting perfume onto little cards,
while stocking salad bars, when stripping
covers from romance novels, their heroines
slaving on the chain gang of obsessive love—

and always the same hard candy
of shame dissolving in my throat;

handing in my apron, returning the cash-
register key. And yet, how fine it feels,
the perversity of freedom which never signs
a rent check or explains anything to one's family...

Erin Belieu

Georgic On Memory

Make your daily monument the Ego,
use a masochist's epistemology
of shame and dog-eared certainty
that others less exacting might forgo.

If memory's an elephant, then feed
the animal. Resist revision: the stand
of feral raspberry, contraband
fruit the crows stole, ferrying seed

for miles ... No. It was a broken hedge,
not beautiful, sunlight tacking
its leafy gut in loose sutures. Lacking
imagination, you'll take the pledge

to remember - not the sexy, new
idea of history, each moment
swamped in legend, liable to judgment
and erosion; still, an appealing view,

to draft our lives, a series of vignettes
where endings could be substituted -
your father, unconvoluted
by desire, not grown bonsai in regret,

the bedroom of blue flowers left intact.
The room was nearly dark, the streetlight
a sentinel at the white curtain, its night
face implicated. Do not retract

this. Something did happen. You recall,
can feel a stumbling over wet ground,
the cave the needled branches made around
your body, the creature you couldn't console.

Erin Belieu

I Heart Your Dog's Head

I'm watching football, which is odd as
I hate football
in a hyperbolic and clinically revealing way,
but I hate Bill Parcells more,
because he is the illuminated manuscript
of cruel, successful men, those with the slitty eyes of ancient reptiles,
who wear their smugness like a tight white turtleneck,
and revel in their lack of empathy
for any living thing.

So I'm watching football, staying up late to watch football,
hoping to witness (as I think of it)

The Humiliation of the Tuna

(as he is called),

which is rightly Parcells's first time back in the Meadowlands
since taking up with the Cowboys,
who are, as we all know,
thugs, even by the NFL's standards. The reasons

I hate football are clear and complicated and were born,
as I was, in Nebraska,

where football is to life what sleep deprivation is
to Amnesty International, that is,

the best researched and most effective method
of breaking a soul. Yes,

there's the glorification of violence, the weird nexus
knitting the homo, both phobic and erotic,

but also, and worse, my parents in 1971, drunk as
Australian parrots in a bottlebush, screeching

WE'RE #1, WE'RE #1!

when the Huskers finally clinched the Orange Bowl,
the two of them

bouncing up and down crazily on the couch, their index
fingers jutting holes through the ubiquitous trail of smoke rings

that was the weather in our house,

until the whole deranged mess that was them,

my parents, the couch, their lit cigarettes,

flipped over backward onto my brother and me. My husband

thinks that's a funny story and, in an effort to be a "good sport,"

I say I think it is, too.

Which leads me to recall the three Chihuahuas
who've spent the fullness of their agitated lives penned
in the back of my neighbor's yard.
Today they barked continuously for 12 minutes (I timed it) as
the UPS guy made his daily round.
They bark so piercingly, they tremble with such exquisite outrage,
that I've begun to root for them, though it's fashionable
to hate them and increasingly dark threats
against their tiny persons move between the houses on our block.
But isn't that what's wrong with this version of America:
the jittering, small-skulled, inbred-by-no-choice-
of-their-own are despised? And Bill Parcells—
the truth is he'll win
this game. I know it and you know it and, sadly,
did it ever seem there was another possible outcome?

It's a small deposit,
but I'm putting my faith in reincarnation. I need to believe
in the sweetness of one righteous image,
in Bill Parcells trapped in the body of a teacup poodle,
as any despised thing,
forced to yap away his next life staked to
a clothesline pole or doing hard time on a rich old matron's lap,
dyed lilac to match her outfit.
I want to live there someday, across that street,
and listen to him. Yap, yap, yap.

Erin Belieu

In Ecstasy

at the altarpiece of Saint Teresa

No need to be coy—
you know what
she's doing

And so did Bernini,
when he found Teresa
in the full-throttle of
her divine vision,
 caught her at it,

carving this surrender
so fluidly you expect
the impossible:

for her tang to swell up, ripe
as seafoam, from the gulf
of her flushed and falling
figure. Perhaps this is how

God comes to us,
or should come to us, all:

the bluntly and
beautifully corporeal at

prayers in the Sunday
school of pleasure. Why

shouldn't He come to us
as He did to Teresa? A saint

on her back—
a girl tearing open
the gift He gave her?

Legend Of The Albino Farm

Omaha, Nebraska They do not sleep nights
but stand between

rows of glowing corn and
cabbages grown on acres past

the edge of the city.
Surrendered flags,

their nightgowns furl and
unfurl around their legs.

Only women could be this
white. Like mules,

they are sterile
and it appears that

their mouths are always
open. Because they are thin

as weeds, the albinos
look hungry. If you drive out

to the farm, tree branches will
point the way. No map will show

where, no phone is listed.
It will seem that the moon, plump

above their shoulders, is constant,
orange as harvest all year

long. We say, when a mother
gives birth to an albino girl,

she feigns sleep after
labor while an Asian

man steals in, spirits
the pale baby away.

Erin Belieu

Loser Bait

Some of us
are chum.

Some of us
are the come-hither
honeycomb

gleamy in the middle
of the trap's busted smile.

Though I let myself a little
off this hook, petard
by which I flail,

and fancy myself more
flattered?—?
no ugly worm!

Humor me
as hapless nymph,
straight outta Bullfinch, minding
my own beeswax,

gamboling, or picking flowers
(say daffodils),

doing that unspecified stuff
nymphs do
with their hours,

until spied by a layabout youth,
or rapey God
who leaps unerring, staglike,
quicker than smoke, to the wrong idea.

Or maybe
the right?

For didn't I supply

the tippy box, too?
Notch the stick on which
to prop it?

Didn't I fumble the clove hitch
for the rope?
Leave the trip lying obvious
in the tall, buggy grass?

Ever it was.
Duh.

Be the mat,
and the left foot finds you welcome.

Though there's always a subject, a him
or herself. But to name it
calls it down, like Betelgeuse,
or the IRS.

It must be swell
to have both deed and
the entitlement, for leaners who hold our lien,

consumers who consume like
red tide ripping through a coastal lake?

Who find themselves so very well
when gazing in that kiddie pool, or any
skinny inch of water.

That guy, remember? How tell this tale
without him? A story
so hoary, his name's Pre-Greek.

What brought Narcissus down?
A spotty case
of the disdains, I think,

a one-man performance
where the actor hates his audience.

Rondeau At The Train Stop

It bothers me: the genital smell of the bay
drifting toward me on the T stop, the train
circling the city like a dingy, year-round
Christmas display. The Puritans were right! Sin
is everywhere in Massachusetts, hell-bound

in the population. it bothers me
because it's summer now and sticky - no rain
to cool things down; heat like a wound
that will not close. Too hot, these shameful
percolations of the body that bloom
between strangers on a train. It bothers me

now that I'm alone and singles foam
around the city, bothered by the lather, the rings
of sweat. Know this bay's a watery animal, hind-end
perpetually raised: a wanting posture, pain
so apparent, wanting so much that it bothers me.

Erin Belieu

The Hideous Chair

This hideous,
upholstered in gift-wrap fabric, chromed
in places, design possibility

for the future canned ham.
Its genius
wonderful, circa 1993.

I've assumed a great many things:
the perversity of choices, affairs
I did or did not have.

But let the record show
that I was happy.

O let the hideous chair

stand! For the Chinese apothecary
with his roots and fluids;
for Paoul at the bank;

for the young woman in Bailey's Drug,
expert on henna; and Warren Beatty,
tough, sleek stray. For Fluff and Flo,

drunk at noon, and the Am Vets lady
reading her Vogue, the cholos
on the corner where the 57 bus comes by,

for their gratifying, cool appraisal
and courtly manner when I pass.
Let the seat be comfortable

but let the chair be hideous
and stand against the correct,
hygienic, completely proper

subdued in taxidermied elegance.
Let me have in any future

some hideous thing to love,

Erin Belieu