Classic Poetry Series

Debora Greger
- poems -

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Debora Greger(1949 -)

Debora Greger is an award-winning American poet as well as a visual artist.

She was raised in Richland, Washington. She attended the University of Washington and then the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She then went on to hold fellowships at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She is a professor of English and creative writing at the University of Florida.

Her poetry has been included in six volumes of The Best American Poetry and she has exhibited her artwork at several galleries and museums across the country. She also has a poem on Poetry 180 in number 42. Her work appeared in Paris Review, The Nation, Poetry, and The New Criterion.

She lives in Gainesville, Florida and Cambridge, England with her life-partner, the poet and critic, William Logan.

A Woman On The Dump

Is it peace,
Is it a philosopher’s honeymoon, one finds
On the dump?
—Wallace Stevens
Out of the cracks of cups and their handles, missing,
the leaves unceremoniously tossed, unread,
from a stubble of coffee ground ever more finely
into these hollowed grounds,

the first shift coaxes bulldozers to life,
sphinxes to tease the riddled rubble
into fresh pyramids of rot. A staleness warms enough
to waft round the lord of all purveyed.

His to count the hauls past the yawning gates
of this New Giza into the Middle Kingdom’s
Late Intermediate Period. There, to purify,
to honor ourselves, we beg these offerings

of refuse be cast out. To the archaeologist
of the far-flung future, enough evidence
in the inscriptions to identify most owners:
spells scratched on the backs of envelopes

to be read out before animal sacrifice,
the milk, ground meat, beer, and soap
joined in this hereafter with the feast’s remains.
Over tomatoes splitting their sides,

over a teacup stained with roses
flattened into mosaic petal from petal,
earthmovers move a little mountain
and, having moved it, move on,

overturning a diamond sprung from its ring,
glitter to a magpie’s covetous eye.
If the art of loneliness is landscape,
armload by carload of black-bagged leaves,

landfill contours its likeness.

Debora Greger

Head, Perhaps Of An Angel

limestone, with traces of polychromy, c. 1250

Point Dume was the point,
he said, but we never came close,
no matter how far we walked the shale
broken from California.

Someone's garden
had slipped, hanging itself by a vine
from the cliffs of some new Babylon
past Malibu.

Drowning the words,
the wind didn't fling back in our faces,
the Pacific washed up a shell:
around an alabastron

of salt water for the dead,
seaweed rustled its papers, drying them out,
until it died. Waves kept crashing
into the heart

of each shell
I held to my ear like a phone,
but they were just the waves of my blood.
And through it all

I heard him say,
how could it be nine months ago
his grandson had taken his own life,
somewhere back east?

He was fifteen.
O Pacific, what good is our grief?
Something screamed at the sandy child
who poured seawater

into a hole.
Child, you'll never empty the ocean,

Augustine said. How can I believe?
The wet fist of a wave

dissolved in sand.
Like a saint, a seagull flapped down the beach
in search of something raw—an angel
with an empty pail?

No, a teenage boy,
hands big as a man's, held a sea slug
quaking like an aspic. Under a rock, another
drew into its body

a creature
larger than itself. Live, said Death,
to child and childless alike, indifferently.
I am coming.

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Station 40, Chiriu: The Poet Ariwara No Narihira At Eight Bridges

What is sky but water, more water,
crossed by eight bridges?
Is the ancient poet in a rush to reach land?

No, he's already one of the Six Immortals.
How long before the papery iris-petals
he admires wrinkle? They barely grow beards.

In a thousand years, pilgrims will come.
They will stand where he stood. Where, they will ask,
are the flowers that empurpled his poem?

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The Dictionary of Silence

And in that city the houses of the dead
are left empty, if the dead are famous enough;
by day the living pay to see if dust is all
    that befalls the lives they left behind.

    Coating even the glassed-in waistcoat in time,
coloring the air of the room stripped bare,
down four stories of twisted stair it falls,
    down on the dictionary no longer there.

    Empty your pockets,
empty your hearts, that empty upper room exhorts.
Forget the scrap of paper with the missing word
    for what's missing—

    go home to your rented room.
Go on. Six cramped quills, one elbow chair, missing a leg,
held up all those years by Johnson's willing it to hold
    his bulk—now even the "soul hath elbowroom"

    in that room where scribes scribbled out that quote.
In that city the dead never want to get up,
just as in life. What can we offer them?
    Just this dust to cover them deeper,

    kin to the soot that shadowed their days.
Kiss from a wife who no longer wanted to be touched—
love, he held, regarded with passionate affection,
    like one sex to the other, first; or, second,

    made do with the affection of a friend; or
managed merely parental tenderness, third; or, fourth,
no more than pleasure with, delighting in; or, fifth,
    no less than the reverent unwillingness to offend.

    O had a long sound, as in alone. Her opium.
On clean-shirt day he would pay a visit to his wife.
Pack meant large bundle of any thing—"on your head
    a pack of sorrows."

Quiet. The square just off Fleet Street
so quiet Carlyle got lost on his way there.
Remember the garret floorboards' complaint, the muffled
ruffling of pigeons just overhead?

Such silence we fell into
stair by stair, the house to ourselves.
Tired of London, he claimed, and one was
tired of life. Were we just tired?

Under the low ceiling as below deck,
up where no angle was true, we sank in deeper silence,
valedictory, the way it took us in.
Volumes of ancient air closed around us, blank,

weighted by the latest dust.
What had we come to the house of the dead to see? Something
exotic? The zebra presented to the queen in 1726? Something
exactly as it might have been? Did you

yawn first, back among the living?
You pulled me from traffic rushing downstream instead of up,
that Zambezi best forded from stripe to painted stripe,
a "zebra crossing." I'd looked the wrong way.

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The Poetry of Bad Weather

Someone had propped a skateboard
by the door of the classroom,
to make quick his escape, come the bell.

For it was February in Florida,
the air of instruction thick with tanning butter.
Why, my students wondered,

did the great dead poets all live north of us?
Was there nothing to do all winter there
but pine for better weather?

Had we a window, the class could keep an eye
on the clock and yet watch the wild plum
nod with the absent grace of the young.

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