

Classic Poetry Series

Deborah Ager

- poems -

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Alone

Over the fence, the dead settle in
for a journey. Nine o'clock.
You are alone for the first time
today. Boys asleep. Husband out.

A beer bottle sweats in your hand,
and sea lavender clogs the air
with perfume. Think of yourself.
Your arms rest with nothing to do

after weeks spent attending to others.
Your thoughts turn to whether
butter will last the week, how much
longer the car can run on its partial tank of gas.

Deborah Ager

Dear Deborah,

They tell me that your heart
has been found in Iowa,
pumping along Interstate 35.
Do you want it back?

When the cold comes on
this fast, it's Iowa again--
where pollen disperses
evenly on the dented Fords,

where white houses sag
by the town's corn silos,
where people in the houses
sicken on corn dust.

Auctions sell entire farms.
It's not the auctions that's upsetting
but what they sell, the ragged towel
or the armless doll, for a dollar.

I hear they've found
an eye of yours in Osceola
calling out to your mouth in Davis City.
That mouth of yours is in the bar,

the only place left in town,
slow dancing and smoking.
It's no wonder you look so pale.
Ever wish you'd done more

with your thirty years?
Seeing you last week I wonder
if you crave that sky
filled with the milky way

or the sight of Amish girls in blue
at sunset against wheat-colored prairie grass.
Here, the trees are full of gossip.
They're waiting to see what you'll do next.

Deborah Ager

Morning

We are what we repeatedly do.
—Aristotle

You know how it is waking
from a dream certain you can fly
and that someone, long gone, returned

and you are filled with longing,
for a brief moment, to drive off
the road and feel nothing

or to see the loved one and feel
everything. Perhaps one morning,
taking brush to hair you'll wonder

how much of your life you've spent
at this task or signing your name
or rising in fog in near darkness

to ready for work. Day begins
with other people's needs first
and your thoughts disperse like breath.

In the in-between hour, the solitary hour,
before day begins all the world
gradually reappears car by car.

Anonymous submission.

Deborah Ager

Night In Iowa

Nimbus clouds erasing stars above Lamoni.
Jaundiced lights. Silos. Loose dogs. Cows
whose stench infuses the handful of homes,
whose sad voices storm the plains with longing.

Deborah Ager

Night: San Francisco

Rain drenches the patio stones.
All night was spent waiting
for an earthquake, and instead

water stains sand with its pink foam.
Yesterday's steps fill in with gray crabs.
Baritone of a fog horn. A misty light

warns tankers, which block the green
after-sunset flash. My lover's voice calls
to others in his restless sleep.

The venetian blinds slice streetlights,
light coils around my waist and my lover's neck,
dividing him into hundredths.

Would these fractions make me happier?
My hands twist into a crocodile.
My index finger the tooth that bites

Gauguin's Tahiti. My thumb is the head feather
of a California quail crying chi-ca-go.
Night barely continues. Is this the building

staying still? Is this hand the scorpion
that will do us in? A few of Irving Street's
sycamores will blue the air come morning.

Deborah Ager

Santa Fe In Winter

The city is closing for the night.
Stores draw their blinds one by one,
and it's dark again, save for the dim

infrequent streetlight bending at the neck
like a weighted stem. Years have built
the city in layers: balustrades filled in

with brick, adobe reinforced with steel,
and the rounded arches smoothed
with white cement. Neighborhoods

have changed the burro trails
to streets, bare at night—
no pedestrians, no cars, no dogs.

With daylight, the houses turned galleries
and stores turned restaurants open—
the Navajos wrapped in wool

crowd the Palace of the Governors plaza
to sell their handmade blankets,
silver rings, and necklaces

to travelers who will buy jewelry
as they buy everything—
another charming history for themselves.

Deborah Ager

The Lake

The yard half a yard,
half a lake blue as a corpse.
The lake will tell things you long to hear:
get away from here.
Three o'clock. Dry leaves rat-tat like maracas.

Whisky-colored grass
breaks at every step and trees
are slowly realizing they are nude.
How long will you stay?
For the lake asks questions you want to hear, too.

Months have passed since, well,
everything. Since buildings stood
black against sky, rain hissed from sidewalks
and curled around you.
O, how those avenues once seemed menacing!

I know what you miss
sings this lake. Car horns groaning
in rush hour. Sweet coffee. Wind
pounding like hammers. Warmth of a lover.
Crickets humming love songs to the street.

Deborah Ager

The Space Coast

Florida

An Airedale rolling through green frost,
cabbage palms pointing their accusing leaves
at whom, petulant waves breaking at my feet.
I ran from them. Nights, yellow lights
scoured sand. What was ever found
but women in skirts folded around the men
they loved that Friday? No one found me.
And how could that have been, here, where
even botanical names were recorded
and small roads mapped in red?
Night, the sky is black paper pecked with pinholes.
Tortoises push eggs into warm sand.
Was it too late to have come here?
Everything's discovered. Everything's spoken for.
The air smells of salt. My lover's body.
Perhaps it is too late. I want to run
the beach's length, because it never ends.
The barren beach. Airedales grow
fins on their hard heads, drowned surfers
resurface, and those little girls
who would not be called back to safety are found.

Deborah Ager

The Tortoise In Keystone Heights

When I knew, it was raining.
Winter in decline. I was tired.
You in your soaked shirt diffused
into the western sky bulging with clouds,
speeding cars a few feet away—
why would they not slow down?

Though afternoon, a slip of moon
busied itself with rising,
and it had to mean something.
If only the moon were not out.
You shoveled the crushed tortoise
and her eggs off the highway into the dirt.

Those soft, white eggs.
This is how I love you:
drenched with Florida rain
and looking like hell,
Florida itself a hell,
the moonlit rain a rain of fire.

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