# **Classic Poetry Series**

# **Ellen Bryant Voigt**

- poems -

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# Ellen Bryant Voigt (1943-)

Ellen Bryant Voigt (born 1943) is an American poet. She has published six collections of poetry and a collection of craft essays. Her poetry collection Shadow of Heaven (2002) was a finalist for the National Book Award and Kyrie (1995) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her poetry has been published in several national publications. She served as the Poet Laureate of Vermont for four years and in 2003 was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Voigt grew up in Virginia, graduated from Converse College, and received an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. She has taught at M.I.T. and Goddard College where in 1976 she developed and directed the nation's first low-residency M.F.A. in Creative Writing program. Since 1981 she has taught in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers.

She resides in Cabot, Vermont.

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## A Marriage Poem

#### 1.

Morning: the caged baby sustains his fragile sleep. The house is a husk against weather. Nothing stirs—inside, outside. With the leaves fallen, the tree makes a web on the window and through it the world lacks color or texture, like stones in the pasture seen from this distance.

This is what is done with pain: ice on the wound, the isolating tourniquet— as though to check an open vein where the self pumps out of the self would stop the second movement of the heart, diastolic, inclusive: to love is to siphon loss into that chamber.

## 2.

What does it mean when a woman says, "my husband," if she sits all day in the tub; if she worries her life like a dog a rat; if her husband seems familiar but abstract, a bandaged hand she's forgotten how to use.

They've reached the middle years. Spared grief, they are given dread as they tend the frail on either side of them. Even their marriage is another child, grown rude and querulous since death practiced on them and withdrew.

He asks of her only a little lie, a pale copy drawn from the inked stone where they loll beside the unicorn, great lovers then, two strangers joined by appetite:

it frightens her, to live by memory's poor diminished light. She wants something crisp and permanent, like coral—a crown, a trellis, an iron shawl across the bed where they are laced together, the moon bleaching the house, their bodies abandoned—

3.

In last week's mail, still spread on the kitchen table, the list of endangered species. How plain the animals are, quaint, domestic, but the names lift from the page: Woundfin. Whooping Crane. Squawfish. Black-footed Ferret. California Least Tern.

Dearest, the beast of Loch Ness, that shy, broad-backed, two-headed creature, may be a pair of whales or manatee, male and female, driven from their deep mud nest, who cling to each other, circling the surface of the lake.

## At the Movie: Virginia, 1956

This is how it was: they had their own churches, their own schools, schoolbuses, football teams, bands and majorettes, separate restaurants, in all the public places their own bathrooms, at the doctor's their own waiting room, in the Tribune a column for their news, in the village a neighborhood called Sugar Hill, uneven rows of unresponsive houses that took the maids back in each afternoon in our homes used the designated door, on Trailways sat in the back, and at the movie paid at a separate entrance, stayed upstairs. Saturdays, a double feature drew the local kids as the town bulged, families surfacing for groceries, medicine and wine, the black barber, white clerks in the stores—crowds lined the sidewalks, swirled through the courthouse yard, around the stone soldier and the flag,

and still I never saw them on the street. It seemed a chivalric code laced the milk: you'd try not to look and they would try to be invisible. Once, on my way to the creek, I went without permission to the tenants' log cabin near the barns, and when Aunt Susie opened the door, a cave yawned, and beyond her square, leonine, freckled face, in the hushed interior, Joe White lumbered up from the table, six unfolding feet of him, dark as a gun-barrel, his head bent to clear the chinked rafters, and I caught the terrifying smell of sweat and grease, smell of the woodstove, nightjar, straw mattress— This was rural Piedmont, upper south; we lived on a farm but not in poverty. When finally we got our own TV, the evening news with its hooded figures of the Ku Klux Klan seemed like another movie—King Solomon's Mines, the serial of Atlantis in the sea. By then I was thirteen, and no longer went to movies to see movies. The downstairs forged its attentions forward, toward the lit horizon, but leaning a little to one side or the other, arranging the pairs that would own the county, stores and farms, everything but easy passage out of there and through my wing-tipped glasses the balcony took on a sullen glamor: whenever the film sputtered on the reel, when the music died and the lights came on, I swiveled my face up to where they whooped and swore,

to the smoky blue haze and that tribe of black and brown, licorice, coffee, taffy, red oak, sweet tea—

wanting to look, not knowing how to see, I thought it was a special privilege to enter the side door, climb the stairs and scan the even rows below—trained bears in a pit, herded by the stringent rule, while they were free, lounging above us, their laughter pelting down on us like trash.

## **Blue Ridge**

Up there on the mountain road, the fireworks blistered and subsided, for once at eye level: spatter of light like water flicked from the fingers; the brief emergent pattern; and after the afterimage bled from the night sky, a delayed and muffled thud that must have seemed enormous down below, the sound concomitant with the arranged threat of fire above the bleachers. I stood as tall and straight as possible, trying to compensate, trying not to lean in my friend's direction. Beside me, correcting height, he slouched his shoulders, knees locked, one leg stuck out to form a defensive angle with the other. Thus we were most approximate and most removed.

In the long pauses between explosions, he'd signal conversation by nodding vaguely toward the ragged pines. I said my children would have loved the show. He said we were watching youth at a great distance, and I thought how the young are truly boring, unvaried as they are by the deep scar of doubt, the constant afterimage of regret—no major tension in their bodies, no tender hesitation, they don't yet know that this is so much work, scraping from the self its multiple desires; don't yet know fatigue with self, the hunger for obliteration that wakes us in the night at the dead hour and fuels good sex.

Of course I didn't say it. I realized he watched the fireworks with the cool attention he had turned on women dancing in the bar, a blunt uninvested gaze calibrating every moving part, thighs, breasts, the muscles of abandon. I had wanted that gaze on me. And as the evening dwindled to its nub, its puddle of tallow, appetite without object, as the men peeled off to seek the least encumbered consolation and the women grew expansive with regard how have I managed so long to stand among the paired bodies, the raw pulsing music driving loneliness into the air like scent, and not be seized by longing, not give anything to be summoned into the larger soul two souls can make? Watching the fireworks with my friend, so little ease between us, I see that I have armed myself;

fire changes everything it touches.

Perhaps he has foreseen this impediment. Perhaps when he holds himself within himself, a sheathed angular figure at my shoulder, he means to be protective less of him than me, keeping his complicating rage inside his body. And what would it solve if he took one hand from his pocket, risking touch, risking invitation— if he took my hand it would not alter this explicit sadness.

The evening stalls, the fireworks grow boring at this remove. The traffic prowling the highway at our backs, the couples, the families scuffling on the bank must think us strangers to each other. Or, more likely, with the celebrated fireworks thrusting their brilliant repeating designs above the ridge, we simply blur into the foreground, like the fireflies dragging among the trees their separate, discontinuous lanterns.

#### Lesson

Whenever my mother, who taught small children forty years, asked a question, she already knew the answer. "Would you like to" meant you would. "Shall we" was another, and "Don't you think." As in "Don't you think it's time you cut your hair."

So when, in the bare room, in the strict bed, she said, "You want to see?" her hands were busy at her neckline, untying the robe, not looking down at it, stitches bristling where the breast had been, but straight at me.

I did what I always did: not weep --she never wept-and made my face a kindly whitewashed wall, so she could write, again, whatever she wanted there.

Anonymous submission.