

Classic Poetry Series

Erin Belieu

- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

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

All Distance

Writing from Boston, where sky is simply
property, a flourish topping crowds
of condos and historic real estate,
I'm trying to imagine blue sky:
the first time, where it happened,
what I was becoming. Being taken there
by car, from a town so newly born that grass
still accounted all distance, an explanation
drawn in measureless yellows, a tone
stumbling the whole world, ten minutes away.

Consider now how the single pussy willow
edging a cattle pond in winter becomes
a wind-shivered monument to what this mean
a placid loneliness asking nothing, nothing?...
Not knowing then the proper name for things
green chubs of milo, the husbandry of soy,
bovine patience, the rhythm of the cud,
sea green foam washing round
a cow's mouth, its tender udders,
the surprise of an animal's dignity...

but something comes before
Before car or cow, before
sky becomes...

That sky, I mean, disregarded
as buried memory ...

Yes. There was a time before.
Remember when the tiny sightless hand
could not know, not say hand, but knew it
in its straying, knew it in the cool

condensation steaming the station wagon windows,
thrums of heat blowing a brand of idiot's safety
over the brightly-wrapped package
that was then your body, well-loved?

This must have been you, looking out at that world
of flat, buttered fields and blackbirds ascending... '

But what was sky then?

Today, I receive a postcard of
a blue guitar. Here, snow falls with wings,
tumbling in its feathered body, melting
on the window glass. How each evening becomes
another beautiful woman holding
the color of expensive sapphires
against her throat, I'll never know.
It is an ordinary clarity.

So then was it music?
Something like love or
words, a sentimental moment once
years ago, that blue sky?

How soon the sky and I have grown apart.
On the postcard, an old man hangs
half-dead, strung over his instrument, and what
I have imagined is half-dead, too. Our bones
end hollow, sky blue; the flute comes untuned.

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 ha!fsand-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

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

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