

Classic Poetry Series

Kate Northrop

- poems -

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Affair With Various Endings

I. Kempton, Pennsylvania

Perhaps the last of the light
lifting this evening from the field of wheat

means something. Perhaps the view
includes us, and we are not errors
in the landscape

or meant to be erased. The painter, it's true,
prefers not to preserve
our figures in the brush

of hills layered into green. Perhaps he too
is careless with the truth. What lies

have you had to tell to land you here

outside Kempton, with the creek rising behind us?
How did the story sound? If I say your hand
on my thigh, the truck still idles

beneath us, tracks in the frozen road

that months from now will thaw
& heave. If I say your mouth
and the deer begin drifting

across the field, who's to say
we didn't call them out—their figures shadowy,
their eyes gem-like and glittering?

II. Undine

It was all too urgent being human.
You ordered drinks, gestured
with your hands, told stories

and the more I knew

the more I was frightened. Those evenings
the air came unpinned, got lost
in autumn & dusk, in the leaves

at the edge of the field. And weren't the edges themselves
vanishing? When you walked to the barn
where the cats had gone in,

taken to rafters. I heard your footsteps
moving the gravel, the ice
in your glass of vodka.

I listened like that
for the ends of things: the last of the cars, the headlights crossing
our bedroom. I listened
to your breathing.

but rooms kept turning in places
I could not ignore. I left because I loved you
without reserve. Because I would not be allowed
to keep you with me in the world.

III. "Kings River Canyon"

Because when you read it your voice shakes,
breaks over the last words,

Because in the Pennsylvania Hospital
at 8th and Spruce, surgeons have split open your chest
and with instruments

are cutting your heart,

and because I wanted to hurt them, because they never
get older, but return each year

refreshed, blond—

I read the poem, Rexroth walking back through the canyon
where twenty years before he had slept
with his new wife

at the beginning of autumn.
It was her birthday

and they lay there on the hard earth,

the stream running beside
and the walls soaring up

to hold them there. Maybe
he made love to her, the air
chilling the skin

or maybe that was the disease

beginning even then, gathering itself deep
inside her body, considering
the distance between itself

and the surface.

There was no path.
They'd cut their way into the canyon

where eighteen years later,
a highway's been blasted through. Eighteen years
he writes ground to pieces.

I am more alone that I ever imagined.

You are dead. And in the mechanical
cool of the classroom
I felt it grip me:

how it will be without you
when I'll be fifty-five, sixty,

in the beginning of winter, in the first
waves of snow. I'll watch the slow drag
of the Schulykill

or I'll go the garden where we met,
the leaves spinning down
into the empty fountain,

where I will never see you,
not again, not your hands, your face,
or hear aloud the way

you said my name. I'll turn
and turn again,

but you'll be gone, nothing filling up your place.

Kate Northrop

Hiding

—to my sister

Because the moon in late October made landmarks glow: the broken
gate, our yard

full of stones, the attic window

suddenly foreign, across its face
a blue dissolve. In spite of that, the farm

remained an arrangement (barn
behind the house, pond
across the road) and a girl sometimes

feels torn. We turned our dresses inside out,
ran into a grove. We played

you're blind, Molly, try to find me.
It was a family game: get left

in darkness. I climbed
up into the oak, listened for your voice
until my name became

a sound from the other side, from the poor
order of the world. I came back

because I had to. And believe me, you who are fragile
and so faithful, I hated to return

materializing through trees.

Kate Northrop

Iowa & Other Accidents

There was snow that afternoon covering the road
which twisted toward the secret
of water, the mysterious surge

of sludge & loam, the living
Mississippi, unlike the rest of the Midwest,

drawing itself through landscape. There was an appointment
you were keeping

in Moline: a cheap hotel, booze, a little blow. On the Lower
East Side, a woman

spills her martini, makes a gesture
like erasure, or regret. It was almost Christmas.
In the rear view

suddenly, the car you will always describe as oncoming
must have slipped into a skid

and now, rising up over the bank,
it startles you—that reflection. In Moline

the maid corners the bed, straightens the clean
line of sheet. Almost Christmas. On the road,
swirls of snow. On the road

the car hovering behind you, a witness,
unfortunate & so unlike the audience permitted
the distance of fictions, the artifice

of plot. And worse, of course, the law

of cause & effect: I looked up,
it started to fall. You must attach

subject to verb, must say
I saw, and did, in your rear view, the car you'd thought
nothing of,

the gray sedan lifting slowly from the common snow,
turning, and the accident
always there, about to happen.

Kate Northrop

Late Aubade & Explanation

Once in a field, in a wide rising stretch of paintbrush
& purple vetch, we stuck down

a tent, like punctuation, and drank through the evening
our bottle of bad wine. When you looked up,
the weather was holding: a few breezes,

a full moon silvering the flowers

to white. In the distance, I heard the ache
& slide of snow, the beginning of crickets. It was twilight—

the landscape was lifting.

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A mountain. The clouds, further up,
came down. A Book of Hours. A tent in which we twisted,
pressed each against the other, drunk

and when I stepped out into the cool
moonlight, there was drifting through the watery
end of the meadow, a deer

pale beneath pines, beneath those soaring
darknesses. Then there was only darkness, the
idea of a deer.

Remember, I never wanted
to be alive, to have
an outline. Better, I knew, to slip

unheld, an opening into mist.

Kate Northrop

The Dead

Their reward is
they become innocent again,

and when they reappear in memory
death has completely erased
the blurs, given them boundaries. They rise

and move through their new world with clean,
clear edges. My grandmother, in particular
has become buoyant, unattached finally

from her histories, from the trappings
of family. By no means was she

a good woman. But the dead don't care anymore for that.
Weightless, they no longer assume
responsibility, they no longer

have bodies. Once,

at the end of August, after swimming
in the muddy pond

I'd gone into the living room, cool
as vodka, where my grandmother
sat. Greed thins a woman,

I remember her rings, bigger
than her fingers.

Water ran down my legs

onto the floor becoming slippery
and my grandmother, her breath
scratchy from cigarettes and blended whiskey,

leaned into my ear and whispered
you're an ugly girl. Do I have

to forgive her? My mother tells me

no one ever loved her,
so when I see her, I see her again in the park
in her pink tailored suit, suede pumps,

I see her moving among the strange
gentlemen that have gathered, the dark
powerful men. She is still young, blonde

and most of all, she is beyond reach, beautiful.

Kate Northrop

The Geranium

How can you stand it—looking at things?

For example, the geranium

out on the patio, the single pink
blossom in the sun? Or stand the sunlight
moving through it,

illuminating, holding the flower open like a high
clear note, an ecstatic
widening

which arrives, arrives. What
do you do with it? While the shrubs and the lowest
overhanging leaves

lift slightly in the wind, the blossom

doesn't move. It's the object
of affection, and this is how
it hurts you:

by holding the note open—

Past the front of the apartment, traffic goes by:
one truck, then another

comes on, disappears. And I have

the blossom in my vision—
sunlight, like vision,
making clear the tiniest

hidden veins. I don't know why
I should be here, alive

and having to see this, this bright thing
living in time

or have to see it later, at the end
of the afternoon, when the sun's

lower, its light diagonal across the pot,
its light then pulling away
across the mossed brick

like a wave, only slower,
slower. The blossom is still pink,
but no longer

brilliant. I'll go back
into the kitchen. But you, are you stronger than I? Can you
stay in love with it? Make promises,

marry it? Are you so sure
of your position in the world?

Kate Northrop

The Visitor

Down the hill, in the field of sweet alfalfa, they're
freezing each other, the children

playing tag and I'm up at the house, I'm
in the picture window, thin
and distant like the glimpse

of a surfacing fish. What dark waters
the house is, behind me, settling
into evening. Dusk

and there are, of course, fireflies. Tell me,
what was your name? When you visited once,

by the backroad where the stones glowed pale
in the moonlight, I was too young, I still thought
I belonged to the world. But now

quartered in this house, watching the neighbors' children
turn to dusk, I feel
I'm ready. Come back

and bring your finest wine, the oldest bottle.
Bring that strange dusty book you were reading.

Kate Northrop

Unfinished Landscape With A Dog

Not much of a dog yet,
that smudge in the distance, beyond the reach

of focus. It's just an impressionist
gesture, a guess. From the edge of the clearing, the farmhouse
materializes, settles

into wall & stone. The water,
making the surface

of the stream, makes
reflections. So why shouldn't the dog

accept limits, become

a figure? Is it like the girl who sits
in the hall closet and says she's not
hiding? She's inside—

listening without the burden
of sight, letting locations
release hold. Out of body,
they seem lighter: her parents' voices no longer

hooked to their mouths. They seem
cleaner. Even the electric can opener;
the sounds of children

that rise from the yard, and fall; the opening
window, these are no longer

effects, things expected
of a subject and verb. The world anyhow is too
straightforward.

Maybe the dog
does not want to be a dog, does not want
to be turned into landscape

but to remain in the beginning, placeless:

with the wind opening, the wind
a vowel, and the stars and waters
that flash, recoil, and retch

unnamed as yet, unformed, unfound.

Kate Northrop