

Classic Poetry Series

Lisel Mueller

- poems -

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A Day Like Any Other

Such insignificance: a glance
at your record on the doctor's desk
or a letter not meant for you.
How could you have known? It's not true
that your life passes before you
in rapid motion, but your watch
suddenly ticks like an amplified heart,
the hands freezing against a white
that is a judgment. Otherwise nothing.
The face in the mirror is still yours.
Two men pass on the sidewalk
and do not stare at your window.
Your room is silent, the plants
locked inside their mysterious lives
as always. The queen-of-the-night
refuses to bloom, does not accept
your definition. It makes no sense,
your scanning the street for a traffic snarl,
a new crack in the pavement,
a flag at half-mast -- signs
of some disturbance in the world
because your friend, the morning sun,
has turned its dark side toward you.

Lisel Mueller

Alive Together

Speaking of marvels, I am alive
together with you, when I might have been
alive with anyone under the sun,
when I might have been Abelard's woman
or the whore of a Renaissance pop
or a peasant wife with not enough food
and not enough love, with my children
dead of the plague. I might have slept
in an alcove next to the man
with the golden nose, who poked it
into the business of stars,
or sewn a starry flag
for a general with wooden teeth.
I might have been the exemplary Pocahontas
or a woman without a name
weeping in Master's bed
for my husband, exchanged for a mule,
my daughter, lost in a drunken bet.
I might have been stretched on a totem pole
to appease a vindictive god
or left, a useless girl-child,
to die on a cliff. I like to think
I might have been Mary Shelley
in love with a wrong-headed angel,
or Mary's friend. I might have been you.
This poem is endless, the odds against us are endless,
our chances of being alive together
statistically nonexistent;
still we have made it, alive in a time
when rationalists in square hats
and hatless Jehovah's Witnesses
agree it is almost over,
alive with our lively children
who--but for endless ifs--
might have missed out on being alive
together with marvels and follies
and longings and lies and wishes
and error and humor and mercy
and journeys and voices and faces
and colors and summers and mornings
and knowledge and tears and chance.

Submitted by David Shackelford

Lisel Mueller

Another Version

Our trees are aspens, but people
mistake them for birches;
they think of us as characters
in a Russian novel, Kitty and Levin
living contentedly in the country.
Our friends from the city watch the birds
and rabbits feeding together
on top of the deep, white snow.
(We have Russian winters in Illinois,
but no sleighbells, possums instead of wolves,
no trusted servants to do our work.)
As in a Russian play, an old man
lives in our house, he is my father;
he lets go of life in such slow motion,
year after year, that the grief
is stuck inside me, a poisoned apple
that won't go up or down.
But like the three sisters, we rarely speak
of what keeps us awake at night;
like them, we complain about things
that don't really matter and talk
of our pleasures and of the future:
we tell each other the willows
are early this year, hazy with green.

Lisel Mueller

Bedtime Story

The moon lies on the river
like a drop of oil.
The children come to the banks to be healed
of their wounds and bruises.
The fathers who gave them their wounds and bruises
come to be healed of their rage.
The mothers grow lovely; their faces soften,
the birds in their throats awake.
They all stand hand in hand
and the trees around them,
forever on the verge
of becoming one of them,
stop shuddering and speak their first word.

But that is not the beginning.
It is the end of the story,
and before we come to the end,
the mothers and fathers and children
must find their way to the river,
separately, with no one to guide them.
That is the long, pitiless part,
and it will scare you.

Lisel Mueller

Blood Oranges

In 1936, a child
in Hitler's Germany,
what did I know about the war in Spain?
Andalusia was a tango
on a wind-up gramophone,
Franco a hero's face in the paper.
No one told me about a poet
for whose sake I might have learned Spanish
bleeding to death on a barren hill.
All I knew of Spain
were those precious imported treats
we splurged on for Christmas.
I remember pulling the sections apart,
lining them up, sucking each one
slowly, so the red sweetness
would last and last --
while I was reading a poem
by a long-dead German poet
in which the woods stood safe
under the moon's milky eye
and the white fog in the meadows
aspired to become lighter than air.

Lisel Mueller

Curriculum Vitae

1992

- 1) I was born in a Free City, near the North Sea.
- 2) In the year of my birth, money was shredded into confetti. A loaf of bread cost a million marks. Of course I do not remember this.
- 3) Parents and grandparents hovered around me. The world I lived in had a soft voice and no claws.
- 4) A cornucopia filled with treats took me into a building with bells. A wide-bosomed teacher took me in.
- 5) At home the bookshelves connected heaven and earth.
- 6) On Sundays the city child waded through pinecones and primrose marshes, a short train ride away.
- 7) My country was struck by history more deadly than earthquakes or hurricanes.
- 8) My father was busy eluding the monsters. My mother told me the walls had ears. I learned the burden of secrets.
- 9) I moved into the too bright days, the too dark nights of adolescence.
- 10) Two parents, two daughters, we followed the sun and the moon across the ocean. My grandparents stayed behind in darkness.
- 11) In the new language everyone spoke too fast. Eventually I caught up with them.
- 12) When I met you, the new language became the language of love.
- 13) The death of the mother hurt the daughter into poetry. The daughter became a mother of daughters.
- 14) Ordinary life: the plenty and thick of it. Knots tying threads to everywhere. The past pushed away, the future left unimagined for the sake of the glorious, difficult, passionate present.
- 15) Years and years of this.
- 16) The children no longer children. An old man's pain, an old man's loneliness.
- 17) And then my father too disappeared.

18) I tried to go home again. I stood at the door to my childhood, but it was closed to the public.

19) One day, on a crowded elevator, everyone's face was younger than mine.

20) So far, so good. The brilliant days and nights are breathless in their hurry. We follow, you and I.

Lisel Mueller

Five For Country Music

I. Insomnia

The bulb at the front door burns and burns.
If it were a white rose it would tire of blooming
through another endless night.

The moon knows the routine;
it beats the bushes from east to west
and sets empty-handed. Again the one
she is waiting for has outrun the moon.

II. Old Money

The spotted hands shake as they polish the coins.

The shiny penny goes under the tongue,
the two silver pieces
weighted by pyramids
will shut down the eyes.

All the rest is paper,
useless in any world but this.

III. Home Movie

She knows that walk, that whistle, that knock.

It's the black wolf who sticks
his floured paw underneath the door.

She tries not to open. One look at his face
and she'll drop the gun. He will pick it up
and turn it on her where she waits,
her eyes shining, her hands over her head.

IV. Golden Boy

Whitewashed, the eyes refuse you.

And so the mouth must be serene,
the muscles play, the body
take an easy stance

to divert you from the two
boarded-up chambers
where someone has died.

V. Washing Day

Each year her laundry line gets lighter.
One by one they disappear,
ten little Indians. They take their socks,

their jeans, their stiff plaid shirts.

Above the Ford on its concrete blocks,
striped and zippered,
her cotton dress flutters on and on.

Lisel Mueller

For A Thirteenth Birthday

You have read War and Peace.
Now here is Sister Carrie,
not up to Tolstoy; still
it will second the real world:
predictable planes and levels,
pavement that holds you,
stairs that lift you,
ice that trips you,
nights that begin after sunset,
four lunar phases,
a finite house.

I give you Dreiser
although (or because)
I am no longer sure.
Lately I have been walking into glass doors.
Through the car windows, curbs disappear.
On the highway, wrong turnoffs become irresistible,
someone else is controlling the wheel.
Sleepless nights pile up like a police record;
all my friends are getting divorced.
Language, my old comrade, deserts me;
words are misused or forgotten,
consonants fight each other
between my upper and lower teeth.
I write "fiend" for "friend"
and "word" for "world",
remember comes out with an "m" missing.

I used to be able to find my way in the dark,
sure of the furniture,
but the town I lived in for years
has pulled up its streets in my absence,
disguised its buildings behind my back.
My neighbor at dinner glances
at his cuffs, his palms;
he has memorized certain phrases,
but does not speak my language.
Suddenly I am aware
no one at the table does.

And so I give you Dreiser,
his measure of certainty:
a table that's oak all the way through,
real and fragrant flowers,
skirts from sheep and silkworms,
no unknown fibers;
a language as plain as money,
a workable means of exchange;
a world whose very meanness is solid,
mud into mortar, and you are sure
of what will injure you.

I give you names like nails,
walls that withstand your pounding,
doors that are hard to open,
but once they are open, admit you
into rooms that breathe pure sun.
I give you trees that lose their leaves,
as you knew they would,
and then come green again.
I give you
fruit preceded by flowers,
Venus supreme in the sky,
the miracle of always
landing on your feet,
even though the earth
rotates on its axis.

Start out with that, at least.

Lisel Mueller

Immortality

In Sleeping Beauty's castle
the clock strikes one hundred years
and the girl in the tower returns to the world.
So do the servants in the kitchen,
who don't even rub their eyes.
The cook's right hand, lifted
an exact century ago,
completes its downward arc
to the kitchen boy's left ear;
the boy's tensed vocal cords
finally let go
the trapped, enduring whimper,
and the fly, arrested mid-plunge
above the strawberry pie
fulfills its abiding mission
and dives into the sweet, red glaze.

As a child I had a book
with a picture of that scene.
I was too young to notice
how fear persists, and how
the anger that causes fear persists,
that its trajectory can't be changed
or broken, only interrupted.
My attention was on the fly:
that this slight body
with its transparent wings
and life-span of one human day
still craved its particular share
of sweetness, a century later.

Lisel Mueller

Monet Refuses The Operation

Doctor, you say there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.
Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,
wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you
the Houses of Parliament dissolves
night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?
I will not return to a universe
of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.
To paint the speed of light!
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and change our bones, skin, clothes
to gases. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

Lisel Mueller

Moon Fishing

When the moon was full they came to the water.
some with pitchforks, some with rakes,
some with sieves and ladles,
and one with a silver cup.

And they fished til a traveler passed them and said,
"Fools,
to catch the moon you must let your women
spread their hair on the water --
even the wily moon will leap to that bobbing
net of shimmering threads,
gasp and flop till its silver scales
lie black and still at your feet."

And they fished with the hair of their women
till a traveler passed them and said,
"Fools,
do you think the moon is caught lightly,
with glitter and silk threads?
You must cut out your hearts and bait your hooks
with those dark animals;
what matter you lose your hearts to reel in your dream?"

And they fished with their tight, hot hearts
till a traveler passed them and said,
"Fools,
what good is the moon to a heartless man?
Put back your hearts and get on your knees
and drink as you never have,
until your throats are coated with silver
and your voices ring like bells."

And they fished with their lips and tongues
until the water was gone
and the moon had slipped away
in the soft, bottomless mud.

Lisel Mueller

Reading The Brothers Grimm To Jenny

Jenny, your mind commands
kingdoms of black and white:
you shoulder the crow on your left,
the snowbird on your right;
for you the cinders part
and let the lentils through,
and noise falls into place
as screech or sweet roo-coo,
while in my own, real, world
gray foxes and gray wolves
bargain eye to eye,
and the amazing dove
takes shelter under the wing
of the raven to keep dry.

Knowing that you must climb,
one day, the ancient tower
where disenchantment binds
the curls of innocence,
that you must live with power
and honor circumstance,
that choice is what comes true--
oh, Jenny, pure in heart,
why do I lie to you?

Why do I read you tales
in which birds speak the truth
and pity cures the blind,
and beauty reaches deep
to prove a royal mind?
Death is a small mistake
there, where the kiss revives;
Jenny, we make just dreams
out of our unjust lives.

Still, when your truthful eyes,
your keen, attentive stare,
endow the vacuous slut
with royalty, when you match
her soul to her shimmering hair,
what can she do but rise
to your imagined throne?
And what can I, but see
beyond the world that is,
when, faithful, you insist
I have the golden key--
and learn from you once more
the terror and the bliss,
the world as it might be?

Submitted by David Shackelford

Lisel Mueller

Scenic Route

For Lucy, who called them "ghost houses."

Someone was always leaving
and never coming back.
The wooden houses wait like old wives
along this road; they are everywhere,
abandoned, leaning, turning gray.

Someone always traded
the lonely beauty
of hemlock and stony lakeshore
for survival, packed up his life
and drove off to the city.
In the yards the apple trees
keep hanging on, but the fruit
grows smaller year by year.

When we come this way again
the trees will have gone wild,
the houses collapsed, not even worth
the human act of breaking in.
Fields will have taken over.

What we will recognize
is the wind, the same fierce wind,
which has no history.

Lisel Mueller

The Laughter Of Women

The laughter of women sets fire
to the Halls of Injustice
and the false evidence burns
to a beautiful white lightness

It rattles the Chambers of Congress
and forces the windows wide open
so the fatuous speeches can fly out

The laughter of women wipes the mist
from the spectacles of the old;
it infects them with a happy flu
and they laugh as if they were young again

Prisoners held in underground cells
imagine that they see daylight
when they remember the laughter of women

It runs across water that divides,
and reconciles two unfriendly shores
like flares that signal the news to each other

What a language it is, the laughter of women,
high-flying and subversive.
Long before law and scripture
we heard the laughter, we understood freedom.

Lisel Mueller

Things

What happened is, we grew lonely
living among the things,
so we gave the clock a face,
the chair a back,
the table four stout legs
which will never suffer fatigue.

We fitted our shoes with tongues
as smooth as our own
and hung tongues inside bells
so we could listen
to their emotional language,

and because we loved graceful profiles
the pitcher received a lip,
the bottle a long, slender neck.

Even what was beyond us
was recast in our image;
we gave the country a heart,
the storm an eye,
the cave a mouth
so we could pass into safety.

Lisel Mueller

What The Dog Perhaps Hears

If an inaudible whistle
blown between our lips
can send him home to us,
then silence is perhaps
the sound of spiders breathing
and roots mining the earth;
it may be asparagus heaving,
headfirst, into the light
and the long brown sound
of cracked cups, when it happens.
We would like to ask the dog
if there is a continuous whir
because the child in the house
keeps growing, if the snake
really stretches full length
without a click and the sun
breaks through clouds without
a decibel of effort,
whether in autumn, when the trees
dry up their wells, there isn't a shudder
too high for us to hear.

What is it like up there
above the shut-off level
of our simple ears?
For us there was no birth cry,
the newborn bird is suddenly here,
the egg broken, the nest alive,
and we heard nothing when the world changed.

Lisel Mueller

Why We Tell Stories

For Linda Foster

I

Because we used to have leaves
and on damp days
our muscles feel a tug,
painful now, from when roots
pulled us into the ground

and because our children believe
they can fly, an instinct retained
from when the bones in our arms
were shaped like zithers and broke
neatly under their feathers

and because before we had lungs
we knew how far it was to the bottom
as we floated open-eyed
like painted scarves through the scenery
of dreams, and because we awakened

and learned to speak

2

We sat by the fire in our caves,
and because we were poor, we made up a tale
about a treasure mountain
that would open only for us

and because we were always defeated,
we invented impossible riddles
only we could solve,
monsters only we could kill,
women who could love no one else
and because we had survived
sisters and brothers, daughters and sons,
we discovered bones that rose
from the dark earth and sang
as white birds in the trees

3

Because the story of our life
becomes our life

Because each of us tells
the same story
but tells it differently

and none of us tells it
the same way twice

Because grandmothers looking like spiders
want to enchant the children
and grandfathers need to convince us
what happened happened because of them

and though we listen only
haphazardly, with one ear,
we will begin our story
with the word and

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