Classic Poetry Series

Louis McKee

- poems -

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American Beauty

The perfect American Beauty Rose,
is it diminished
by the slag heaps on Rt. 11, just west
of Scranton, or by the dark cloud
that seems to have settled an inch or so
beneath the surface of Lake Naomi,
or even the swell of soot that hangs
like a troubling thought over the town
on the other side of the river?
Is the rose there any less beautiful?
Or this woman here; right now
she is standing in the impatient way
women have, a hip thrust out,
a shoulder let low? She is casual
this Sunday morning, in jeans
and a simple top, and she stands
at the top of the hill holding a cigarette
and a leash, waiting for her dog to return.
You'll have to take my word for this:
she is as lovely as any rose
you'll ever find on those long walks you take
into the mountains, and nothing about her
is diminished by the bombs that are falling
this very moment on Afghanistan, the lies
packed tight and neat into cartons
and stacked with the rest in basements,
warehouses and storage rentals
throughout Washington, the three point shot
dropping like a rock short of the basket
in the final seconds of an important moment
in someone's life. In fact, it is just the opposite:
the grays around us fade—not reduced, no,
nor chased away—but lost to the flush
beauty of the red rose, of the women,
in a moment appreciated.

Anonymous submission.

Louis McKee

Inevitable

Somewhere in Forster—was it Aspects of the Novel?—
there's something to the effect of,
How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?
I've always meant to check the quote, but I'm half afraid
it won't be there, or if it is, that I got it all wrong,
and I pretty much like it the way it is—
I pull it out and toss it onto the table like one of those
really brightly colored chips that only get thrown into the pot
after the hand has gotten out of control and someone wants
to say something a bit more heady than, I'll see you,
and raise you, but that's what he always says, it's inevitable.
In fact, it is inevitable, the word, inevitable,
that has bought me down this road in the first place,
that made me remember Forster, and whether or not
something is inevitable—now, this is the leap—like, say,
the week I just spent in Illinois with a married woman,
who for a long time has been burning
like one of those sad wildfires they have had
all summer long out West, that gets bigger and hotter,
and spreads, it seems, forever, and while this one burned,
I kept telling myself that it was inevitable
that we would end up in the same town somewhere
at the same time, and inevitable, too, that after a few days
one or both of us would allow our ambiguity
about what was going on to get the best of us,
and we both would walk off sad and hurt,
when really it was not us who had a right
to sad and hurt, her husband and children having
a much better claim, and in the interest of terribly clarity,
of unrelenting truth, it is necessary here to interject
the word guilt, and while some people,
those who buy into religion, for example, who touch
finger to finger with the Hand of Heaven,
all herb and clay-tinted oil, on a stone ceiling,
will use Eve's apple to explain how all this is inevitable,
part of some great master plan. I wonder;
or was it simply another test, an opportunity to
do the right thing, and perhaps we failed, and I am not
even sure about that, but I know that she and I feel guilty,
and while I thought it was inevitability
I was talking about here, it was something else entirely,
and I guess old Forster was right, even if he didn't say it.

Anonymous submission.

Louis McKee

The Blackthorn

The blackthorn was his father's,
a piece of Ireland
that the old man could still get his hands around
even as his hands grew weak,
refused to hold. My father
never knew Ireland;
when he gripped the walking stick
it was something else he was holding on to.
I watched my father
get old; he would stare at his hand
and open and close his fist,
try to fight the arthritis.
By then he had lost the stick,
and he could have used it
to work his grip, to beat
at the hard knot that was tying him up.
When he died he was laid in the ground
only a few feet from his father,
while in Ireland the sturdy blackthorns
were defying that sad land
and bursting with white blossoms.

Anonymous submission.

Louis McKee

The New Theory

A butterfly's wing
moving gracefully
in a still Asian dawn
works up a storm
that beats the hell
out of us in Pennsylvania.
I used to think it was
a woman somewhere
on he other side of the world,
turning, maybe, in her sleep,
or tossing the hair
from her face with a soft flip,
that has wakened me
on this lonely dark night,
not a sound, not a glint
of light out the window,
and no air at all
on this night when I need
air, even if only
what comes of a butterfly
passing, or a woman
turning, or tossing her hair.

Anonymous submission.

Louis McKee

What Cowboys Know About Love

Last night on the sports channel
I watched the rodeo.
Those cowboys have it right;
the best and the beauty of it.
You cannot win, so you ride
for as long as you can and enjoy it.
When you dismount,
whether it be on your own or not,
it won't look pretty. You'll limp off.
But you'll feel good; your heart
will be pounding like it never has,
and walking away, one crazy step
after another, your ears will ring
with the loud approval
of those who never felt so good.

Anonymous submission.

Louis McKee