

A Special Kind of Magic

Goldfinches

A flash of yellow at the feeder
and I know the goldfinches
have regained their summer hue,
a magical transformation,
winter turned at last to spring;
a week ago were dark birds
seeking sunflower seeds
in the snow, finding shelter
amid the thick of a holly bush.
Today the males sport bright
feathers, showing off in time
to find mates, nesting partners
for a season, not a year,
no monogamy among finches.
With ducks a different story:
I've seen a dead brown mallard
by the roadside, a green head
hovering near, unwilling to admit
that death had claimed its mate,
like a human mourning loss,
momentarily bereft,
later open to the possibility
of winter slipping into spring.

Swimming in Sunlight

Stroking my way down a lane
in a steamy indoor college pool,
I swim suddenly in showers of gold.
Coins of sunlight, spilling at last
from gray clouds on a snowy day,
drop gilded blessings on the usual,
enticing me to further lengths,
stretching my arms to the sun.

The last time I swam in sunshine
was Yangon, in a long hotel pool
where satisfying laps were possible,
stroking in and out of shadows,
bathed in moments of sunlight
creeping further each minute
until the whole pool was awash
in gold like the great Shwe Dagon.

Crowned now by bits of gold,
I reach the far end of the pool,
garbed full in golden tesserae
like a painting by Gustav Klimt.
Encircled by strong golden arms,
My hair turns to ringlets of gold;
I swim in the sun's embrace,
kissed by an ocean of light.

In My Father's Darkroom

When he disappeared to the basement,
a dim room lit by the sour smell
of chemicals arrayed in trays,
I sometimes followed him,
enchanted by the mystical glow
of red darkroom light and how
images emerged from nowhere
on submerged paper squares.
My face would suddenly appear
or my baby brother materialize,
mute grays grown black and white,
wizardry of the best kind,
something out of nothing:
the artist's superlative gift.

But after the funeral, the small
white casket laid to rest
in a part of the cemetery set
aside for tiny plots and stones
adorned with angels wings.
the darkroom disappeared,
photo equipment out the door,
dollars in my father's hand.
Christmas cards came that year
from the greeting card store;
we never saw the camera.
There was no way to follow
my father into the darker room
of grief and disappointment.

Years later he apologized,
offering awkward hugs,
a make-up gift for lost affection
swallowed in the dark of death.
What images frescoed the walls
of his dark room so many years?

The sense that when a son dies
the line is ended? A thought
of how the wrong child survived?
Resentment that this daughter
would, just like his wife, be
someone who couldn't understand
his passion for photography or
the deep joy of landing a fish.

When finally years had sorted out
who was who, he realized how
she, though woman, wore his joys
like she was born to them:
fishing after dinner in a pond
by the old stone house, finding
peace with the great blue heron
who shared the deepening dusk;
prowling byways with a camera
to shoot scenes of great beauty,
a hundred holiday cards,
each a singular image.
At the end, he wanted words
to tell her so, but in that moment
of confusion, when death came
to call, he missed his cue.

Samsara

When I am born
one hundred years from now
with someone else's mind,
I'll ask to be a physicist,
abstractly numbering
among his many formulae
one brief equation
for the coming of the spring.
Then will I call up
the first charge of warmth
from a February thaw,
knowing that another month
will bring the full reaction.
I'll think on symbols
and be much better off
than some in literature
who chafe at deconstructing
what poets said before,
who struggle still with words
to say how simply
wind slips through hair
let loose from winter's knot.
Mine shall be a set of quanta
stating that spring comes
each year the same:
sometimes a trifle late,
but still attired
in green so new
it seems the very air
should stain it dark.
But as I work
I'll tell myself
that symbols are but shadows
of a bursting bud, the script
for brown earth softening,
more alive this round
than I remembered.

Shiva-Shakti

The Hindus say that *Shakti*
is the heart of everything,
that vibrant female energy
responsible for creation,
destruction, nurturing.
It's why they cage their women,
wrapping them in six-foot saris,
and marry them off at puberty.

But I have seen otherwise:
there is a stillness at the core
of the universe, of every being,
silence broken by few words,
a mountain lake rippled
by touch of a falling leaf.
This is the quiet of meditation,
everything the Buddha knew.

Concentrating, with his third eye,
Shiva too stands still, towering:
the great black lingam at Thanjavur
garland-draped, graced with light.
Deceptive his momentary calm:
any moment he may incinerate
Kama, decapitate Ganesh,
but in the presence of *Shakti*,
he is her quiet other half.