

FIVE POEMS

THE EMIGRANT
NIGHT TRAIN FROM D.C. TO CHICAGO
THREE TIMES BLESSED
MY MOTHER'S ROOM
ON RECONCILIATION

THE EMIGRANT

A Facebook post about a cat that died
brought back sensations of distant
voices calling names of pets,
of tender, loving laughter, hovering
in the breeze of time,

of sunburnt terrace tiles under naked feet
and cool Atlantic air,

of dog paws clicking
on precious inlaid hardwood floors,

of squeaky stairs in a darkened house
with art on the walls,
a rotary dial phone in one corner.

When her son called from the land of peaches,
the painter would sit on a green velour chair by the window
and conjured up the day when he would win the Oscar.
Fondling the panting dog, she'd call me when
she was ready to pass on the receiver.

The light from the monastery across the street filled the sky
while heat and river fog paralyzed the city.
No air condition. His sister took cold baths at night
to freshen up her oily olive summer skin. How pretty she was
in purple dresses, with long, dark curls and self made jewelry
and her warm, sad smile that runs in the family.

Out at the open coast, near the cape,
the reed grass is waving and the waves are breaking
as always, they swallow the beach until they hit the
concrete boardwalk wall. What remains?
Maybe salt crystals on sundrenched faces — and longing,
so much longing, unfulfilled and self-sustained.

The preposition 'lá' defines a place that is undefined.

The light from the monastery is still the same.
Shadows waft across bare walls in empty rooms,
silhouettes of animals and young lovers, long departed.

A green light fights its way through orange darkness.
A train whistles like so many years ago.

Stop. Listen. Watch.
Talk to me.

NIGHT TRAIN FROM D.C. TO CHICAGO

Was it happening outside my window
 or reflecting from across the aisle?
 That spectacle of scarlet stripes
 veining the West Virginia sky,
 skinny trees stretching their black bare branches,
 calling for Munch's disheartened lovers,
 that gilded patch of atmosphere,
 where clouds floated much like steamboats
 at sunset, on one of those wide rivers in
 this country of wide rivers. And railroads.

The temperature dropped with each mile traveled.
 Soon enough, darkness engulfed the train.
 Blind darkness, impenetrable —
 in pale-lit faces on the windowpane
 passengers scanned their own eyes and features
 for something recognizable
 something to hold on to, in
 this corridor with no coordinates,
 this tunnel of unsolved questions.

Lost in my own reflection
 I traveled far, far back in time,
 to one last place in search of answers:
 our first house, across the estuary —
 coming down the river, I took the ferry —
 the twilight on the bay similar
 to the one swallowed up not long ago.
 Norwegian colors in the sky,
 I saw a ghost ship in the delta, then
 seagulls and a heron — maybe, later.

The train thrust further inland,
 deep into a starless polar vortex.
 I debarked the boat and found the beach deserted,
 the seaside village burned to ruins.
 Mayhem. All history leveled to the ground.
 Cats pissing in the dunes.

Like a firefighter in denial
 defying the obvious defeat,
 I sifted through heaps of bricks and mortar
 lifted wind-fell trees, turned damaged hulls around,
 hoping to find that one survivor,
 still breathing days after the collapse;
 trying to unearth one buried clue that would explain
 if only half the truth of what had happened.
 Yet over and over and over again
 I pulled out corpses from the fragments.

A strident whistle cut through the Steel Valley like a scream.
I who don't pray, prayed
for proof that for a reason they all died,
that they may continue to exist in
a world of harmony and clean, clear wells,
where the concept of repentance is
understood and not disputed
and forgiveness conceivable — that at least.

A world where the moon is not as weary
as it was that devastating night.

I prayed for a miracle:
a flickering bulb despite the black out,
a yellow flower amidst nuked desolation.
I prayed for something recognizable,
for one relic to salvage from this waste.
But not a single trace offered me salvation.

Eventually, I fell asleep.
I woke not knowing where I was.

Now, all I do is wait.
Wait until nature will reclaim the site
wait like white-dressed women by the shore
wait like a small town before New Year's Eve
until the break of morning,
until the train will emerge over Midwestern plains
until the skyline will rise by the lake
and the tears you shed but never remembered
will have evaporated from my heart
and reality becomes bearable — that at least.

THREE TIMES BLESSED

I.

In an old warehouse by the shipyard I was looking
for something half forbidden, half prerequisite.
It didn't seem to matter anymore if time was limited.

I moved past infinite elevator shafts,
empty studios drenched in early spring light,
loopholes in the walls and hidden stairways,

until I saw you standing in the center of a darkened loft.
You wore velvet, side curls and a beard.
You just stood there — waiting?

I couldn't tell.

Still, I slowly walked around you, thinking:

*How come I do this when I don't know
how to dance your dances or how to sing your songs?
Is it not far too early to be dreaming this?*

And then I woke.

II.

The buses were yellow and all the men wore black.
You wore black too, if faded, and oddly belonged
although you didn't.

The men glanced at us while we cut through their crowd,
walking side by side yet separately.

Oh man, I feel so not dressed appropriately!

The park was packed, green and humid.
Under a lavish tree, a pretty bride in long-sleeved silk posed
with her groom, whose smile seemed warm and colorful.

I didn't want to stare too long. Behind the baseball fields,
a couple on a blanket watched their little daughter teeter on
the grass — *Ruth*, I thought I heard them call her —

though this might have been nothing but imagination.
I wondered if you saw your young parents sit there, too.
You didn't say. I didn't ask.

III.

Another dream. Way up north —I could not say how far up —
I stepped onto a train that runs non-stop
down to the isles in the land of fire.

The coach doors closed. Beset with feelings like before,
somewhere between urgency and fear, I reached through the
window, to scratch four words on a translucent glacial surface.

Three words. One name.

Caught restless in the moving train, I knew that giving is the root
for loving and that, in silence, we gave a lot— but wished I had not missed
the time and lacked the poise to say out loud: *I love you, Asher.*

And then I woke.

MY MOTHER'S ROOM

My mother's room is always dusted,
 silent and tidy; the shadowbox
 holds the same figurines
 I played with growing up,
 waiting for life to begin.

Stowed behind printed cardboard
 — red poppies, blue cornflowers —
 lie photos and letters, neatly bound together:
 black and white with ruffled edges,
 a serious blond man amidst high wheat.

He became a journalist and drank too much.

In pale blue female handwriting, the account
 Of her best friend's wedding night fifty years ago,
 and in a tiny tin case oxidized a ring
 she only told me was an engagement ring
 when my divorce was finalized.

Published by a leading newspaper,
 a complete edition sits on enamel shelves, pristine:
 The 50 Must-Read-Novels of the Century,
 waiting to be bestowed upon — me, I guess?

*Take this longing, take all my pain and sacrifice,
 remember everything I did not do
 for the family's sake. I know you like to read.*

The collector of abandoned dreams
 didn't want to go to trade school,
 but children obeyed their parents then.

*Guidance, Mom, guidance, not obedience
 is what gives children confidence.*
 I guess once she knew that, too.

How sovereign and happy she looked the day
 I saw her lying on the carpet of the living room,
 gazing out the window doors across
 the pasture behind our fence at dusk, past
 the cherry tree and range of low, rainy hills,
 the last elevation before the land flattens out
 toward the still far sea. Music played.

With the years, the unlived dreams
 became too much to carry.

ON RECONCILIATION

What if . . .
I let you live,
as I must anyway,
acknowledge that I did get justice,
if not the way I wished for deep inside,
accept that you survived your madness,
although I cannot fathom how, or why,
tolerate that you keep telling lies about me,
although I could expose your lies so easily,
endure the news about your procreation
despite the sadness in my expiring womb,
stop comparing what I have with
your mommy-fueled debauchery,
admit that mostly pride, not grief
prompts those bloodthirsty cravings for revenge
that still grip me, here or there,
making me feel ashamed – yet then they don't . . . ?

What if . . .
I just sit here,
listen to the rattling sagebrush
and remember the day you bought me cranberry juice
and held me through the night, under the viscose quilt
in that shabby motel room just down the road, when
I was so sick, I did not even want to go skiing . . . ?

Your arms were beautiful. I do not like to say that
because they almost killed me later and I know other
arms now, also beautiful and far more tender, however
that does not change the fact that once they made me feel
safe and loved.

So what if I do leave it there,
in that shabby motel room,
quietly close the door, and walk along the empty road
while the wind keeps blowing across the dusty mesa?

At the end of the day, this is what I came here for.