

Fiddler Crabs

Acceptance Poems For SixFold

I tell you, we love by accepting
unconditionally: the simplest gifts,
the dumbest promises. You nod in agreement
but you're playing a game with the fiddler
crabs, shifting your feet, counting

the seconds until they reemerge
from their holes. 42, you announce,
as if it were the answer for everything.
They have to come out to eat, you say,
sifting the mud. And they mate

every two weeks. The males wave their big
claws to attract females who follow
them into their holes. Can love really be
that easy? I say, only if you're still
as a predator will they accept your presence.

But I don't think it's possible to discern
the difference between love
and the danger of a silent predator.
They're quick enough down their holes,
you answer, to make up for this deficiency.

Instead, you call this trust.
I watch an adolescent ibis work
its long curved beak into one of the holes
without success, mature birds know how
pointless this is and don't even try.

That's what lovers do, they tunnel
into safety, listen for the world
to stop shifting, as if love
were dangerous as a predator.
We keep counting but it waits us out.

Osprey

Acceptance Poems For SixFold

I tell you, we love by accepting
unconditionally: the simplest
gifts, the dumbest promises.

You nod in agreement but tell me,
the male osprey knows that if she doesn't
approve, his mate will discard the branch

he offers. Sometimes the things I want
to give to you, the words I want to say,
scare me like that. Above us a large nest

sits on a platform atop a power pole.
The male osprey flies out of it, low
through the mangrove limbs beside us,

his wings like knives in the leaves.
Instead, I offer you a shell I've picked
from the beach. Washed of its color,

its original shape nearly indiscernible,
you tumble it in your fingers. In full flight
the osprey grasps and breaks a twig from a tree.

Crack! The sound cuts right through us.
He turns back to his nest, though small
the branch is accepted. It's just an ordinary shell.

After a quick inspection you throw it
into the water. But it's all I want from you,
something small and plain as that twig.

Reminders

It was not her perfection but the vulnerable and breakable parts of Marilyn that made her too beautiful to survive in the world we made for her. It was the straw that hung from the straw man's sleeves that made him more than a scarecrow. And it was Tom Sawyer's push against the will of those boys, just enough extra to convince them it was a privilege to whitewash that fence. As it was radium's remainder, its half-life of radiation that left those baffling images on the photographic plates and in Marie Curie's body.

If Yin pulls us one way, Yang pushes against us, not as Chinese philosophy describes, but with too little or too much force, rarely equally. If your cancer is cured today but you're run over by a drunk driver tomorrow, is that equilibrium? It's random as weather. It's the yaw force of gravity that turns a spacecraft, it's why a knuckleball is rarely where the hitter swings. And it's why van Gogh painted all those stars to light his way out of darkness. How else to understand art and madness, every unquenchable longing, the way those stars overflowed his mind trying to explain it.

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The Empty Basket

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I begin with willow spokes, left long
(no need to decide just now what will be)
and crossed at the center
to build a foundation
of so many interconnections
it can not be accounted for.
Not until I score and bend the strands
do I know its dimensions.
Though, it's not emptiness
I'm thinking of
(as my body is more than container)
but what will fill it: heartstrings, sticky notes,
unopened letters—
life's inescapable details.

The weavers remind me
by their roughness
how even these least objects can be made
beautiful.
I twine them in and out,
before and after, under and over
the upright spokes as if the graceful
strokes
spelled out the simple choices
accounting for an ordinary life,
a kind of lucid
incoherence
I hold with clothespins at the corners
because I need their help getting out
of the corners
where my hands pause
until the strands learn to hold on
to one another,
until the basket can carry its own weight.

Until the need for closure,
a rim, an ending, requires me to stop—
to decide when to stop—
as if I would betray it to my own desires,
as if any love or thing could be
done with.

But I do abandon it, cut
the ends, soak them, roll and tuck them
invisibly to finish it. Emptied,
I can fill it now with these untieable knots
of string, the stained, illegible notes,
and those letters I can't bear to open.

Farewell, Key West

More than one illusion can break the heart,
still we are seduced by appearances:
the vulgar dance of palm fronds, legs akimbo,

oozing light and wind-shattered cinders;
sea grapes, confused and falling all over themselves,
leaves like those green, cracked, Fiesta dinner

plates your grandmother sent to Goodwill
years ago. In such a timeless landscape sunlight
blinds us to the imperfections of the world:

our faith in tin-roofed houses, helpless
against the hurricane; and those hand-tied string
hammocks we string like clouds in our yards.

What did we know of fashion, still wearing
bird's nests in our hair at the turn of the century,
our women, undulant and waiting behind the palms.

We lived like expatriates in our own country.
And the real Ernest Hemingway was still
fist fighting an imaginary Wallace Stevens

outside Sloppy Joe's Bar on Greene Street
when the tourists landed. A faraway look
in their eyes, as if they'd mistaken distance

for refuge, pirate rum and the sunset's green
flash a substitute for loss. They hunkered
down in the shade, their footprints

hardening to fossils as Hemingway's house
rotted from the inside and his cats
slipped into their own version of history.

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