

Escaping

Before the betrayals, we used to sing
in two parts, our favorite rounds and folk tunes,
perhaps an aria, but then the slipping,
the wavering began, and we knew that soon

we would become nonessential, unknown
and invisible, obliged to silence
our own breathing, our hushed voices, a groan,
a gasp, a sudden slash of dissonance.

They drew their knives and we felt the high breeze
that spun itself down toward the hard foothills
and whistled through a bend of chestnut trees
where we could hide, so penitent and still,

so insignificant in the dense air,
huddled behind a shallow spray of leaves,
a sanctuary where they would not dare
to look, a place where we might start to grieve.

But the slim tendrils parted, on a cloud
of gray mist, and they did look, they did see
their wayward daughters, resonant and proud,
but damaged, by a brilliant memory

of blood screams and the bright, blazing chaos
to which we must return, bearing the pain
of renunciation, and the last loss
of hope, two songbirds trembling in the rain.

The Woman in 302

This morning the woman in 302
rolled the piano toward the window again,
and this time out it went, from three stories up,
a didactic gesture, she later explained,
rather than an aggressive one
although she did admit to being surprised
and perhaps disappointed
that no one was hurt.

She must have been more singularly
determined this time, and able to command
the resolve that is needed to do such a thing,
but we always knew that she possessed
enough leverage of spirit and control
of her imagination to reach
for grand, existential achievements,
drawing on a cunning strength of personality,
pushing through a tangle of ethical contradictions,
and finally, getting it to go,
a great black blur against the yellow brick
and indifferent silences of our building.

Afterwards we were told that she had no regrets
about so dramatically annihilating convention
in order to grasp a dream,
and watching her, in this her finest triumph
we all realized that we were in the presence
of greatness, even the poor, shaken, anonymous
pedestrians on Madison Avenue, who might eventually
be persuaded, she had often said,
to take more responsibility
for where they walk.

Escaping and Other Poems

S.H.C.

Not many would, I think, believe it true
that Auntie might explode while pulling weeds.
Ridiculous! Impossible, they'd say,
there must be other reasons, deeper clues,
as fire trucks careen to intercede,
too late for Auntie, who has burned away.

But let's not close our minds, it could be true
that high metabolism, added to
a taste for ion-busting alcohol
might cause a spark, a flame, a fireball!

It's not so bad, compared to leprosy,
or being mauled by rabid chimpanzees,
dismemberment by packs of wild boars,
that open window on the eighteenth floor,
a trash compactor that we might be crushed in.
I'd make the choice: spontaneous combustion.

Escaping and Other Poems

Dear Oscar

The tomb in Pere Lachaise surrounded,
a murmuring crowd of ardent admirers,
cameras zooming, tiny stones clicking on stone
to anchor scribbled messages to this imagined friend,
the florid celebrity poet, long dead now,
long dead and stopped, here in this shadowy corner
far from home, the Dublin pubs and lecture halls,
the London prisons.

They seem young, these French groupies,
non-readers, I suspect, unfamiliar with Lord Savile
or Lady Windermere, as they aim their cell phones,
and with blue chalk and black marker
ignore the warning, Please Do Not Deface The Monument,
affectionate tributes scrawled to dear Oscar,
You will shine for us always, with Truth and Courage,
Your Life imitated your Art, how I wish I had known you.

Stepping back then, the full view of the strange sculpture,
an odd creature without category, stretching forward,
leaning out defiantly toward the world,
a bizarre figurehead sailing into the wind,
attended by these faithful pilgrims,
his name obscured by intricate strands of lipstick kisses,
pressed to the cold marble like a wreath of roses.
Dear Oscar we love you.

Escaping and Other Poems

No Thomas Hardy

Shocked by another birthday, I dreamed of books
I will never read, nearly out of time
for Margaret Atwood and Rupert Brooke,
and all the abstruse Russians. How, through crimes

of idleness that I dared to commit
did I squander the rare and precious chance
to seek, to discover some kind of wit
that seemed to glimmer in the dry distance,

and how so fiercely did I remain blind
to breathless, dying fires, year after year,
to be finally defeated, resigned
never to know Count Vronsky or King Lear?

What might be heard through all this glorious burning?
Just the low, plaintive sound of a page, turning.

