

**SOUTH OF PARIS, AND ONCE UPON A TIME**

An abandoned moat foolishly guarded a dying castle. But I digress. This is not that story. This is not any story. This is a poem, of thirteen once-but-no-longer-spherical poems.

Tennis balls. They are arranged in an earthly constellation  
 (divinely inspired resting places of unnamed spirits),  
 distanced from each other  
 too precisely to be irrational,  
 too overwhelming to be random.  
 like crystal balls signifying an  
 untimely end.

Each lays suspended in a frozen,  
 undrinkable brew of algae and dead water,  
 a stagnant pool in iced-over stages of decay.  
 They've found their way like elephants  
 to their ancient dying grounds,  
 guided by mysteries encoded in their fibers,  
 a silent understanding passed from one unto the other.

You and I, intruders on this sacred site  
 (and/or perhaps pilgrims with prophetic vision),

Stand witness to this silent ritual, muted,  
 unable to discern the crafted from the circumstantial.

A Sunday sky clouds the earthly reclamation underway.  
 While we, silent watch-humans, fix our eyes downward.  
 All of our senses frozen hostages to thirteen iced-over poems,  
 resting, precariously, in multiple sequences of decay.

**PERFECTLY SPHERICAL LOVE CONNECTIONS**

*P. Paddy.*

*Paddy exists. Paddy is gifted.*

*Paddy is an original. Paddy expresses her sexuality gifts.*

*Paddy enjoys her gift of womanhood. Paddy shares herself with*

*her wife Poetry. Paddy gave of herself in marriage to Poetry. Paddy gifts*

*herself to Poetry in their daily marriage. Paddy shares gifts of sexuality and*

*gender with her Poetry. Paddy promises to share her gifts and love with Poetry*

*eternally. Paddy gifts Poetry daily with commitments of love and of lifelong fidelity.*

*Poetry, also, gifts Paddy with daily commitments to lifelong loving & fidelity. Poetry*

*likewise, promises to forever share gifts, and love, with Paddy. Gifts Poetry shares*

*with Paddy include heart, sex & gender. Every day, Poetry remarries Paddy, as her*

*wholehearted soulmate. Poetry had given herself, in holy-words, to Paddy. Poetry*

*Flowers Paddy, her wife, with herself. Poetry hugs woman-ness and its gifts.*

*Poetry sings of sexuality gifts. Poetry is originality's source.*

*Poetry is existence. Poetry gifts.*

*Poetry. P.*

**MY THANK YOU FOR THE DANCE**

-for the blue-eyed man in the barn on July 20, 1991

These many years later, each time I read this,  
 I again thank you, Mr. Gentleman Stranger -  
 not for your eyes of clear grey and matching grey beard,  
 nor for your Lake Wobegon T-shirt, reminding me of a simpler day -  
 rather, oh yes and oh yes again, I thank you for the chances  
 to be jealous of your lady friend,  
 to be watching you waltz with her,  
 to be drinking in the courtesy of your leads,  
 to be breathing in the gracious trust of her bright yellow folds  
 following you curving, and curving, and curving  
 overpainting the rigid lines  
 of the Frederick, Maryland Recreation Center's barn-beaten floor  
 to be taking in to my mind's eye the ballroom you conjured for me  
 to be forever keeping it all, all of it, etched in my memory.  
 Oh yes, I thank you for that Cinderella castle, where  
 Mr. Stranger said I was a lovely woman; there,  
 where you said I was enough to forget fatigue,  
 enough to reconsider returning to the floor,  
 enough to agree to accept to dance with me.

Yes, oh, yes, Mr. Gentleman Stranger  
 (and you too, Ms. Gracious Stranger Lady-Friend)  
 I thank you yet again for unforgettable  
 loveliness and lovingness,  
 in a ballroom, turning, returning,  
 restoration, being enough  
 for chances that opened doors to other chances -  
 for healing, and then for hope-filled, joy-filled other life-dances.

**The Making of a Black Hair-Braider** – for Rachel Dolezal

Woman child began braiding baby sister Esther's hair.  
 Two-strand twists. Or, Esther's favorite: cornrows, with beads.  
 Woman child learned from borrowed library books, then birthed her own  
 book celebrating baby Esther and her tresses: *Ebony Tresses*.

Woman child penned Esther-voiced poetry for *Ebony Tresses*,  
 and hand-sketched full-color illustrations of Esther's natural  
 strands: "powerful, coiled, and comely."

Woman child created paper doll look-alikes for sister Esther,  
 complete with six hair-styling options: black culture-rooted  
 Curvy twists, curls, braids, and sister-inspired cornrows.

Woman child grew. Grew some more. Dressed up as Rachel Dolezal,  
 and did hair for years, until branded, as unbraidworthy.  
 Woman child defied the banning, kept on loving  
 for her sister, thru unstraightened hair, on blackness.

### The Ants and Me: American Childhood Still Life

Textures at my edges: pebbled sidewalks  
 multicolored grey, and a peeling metal fence;  
 a wood fence too, white once, in stages of decay,  
 five splintering porch steps, fatigued and green,  
 and unable to lie straight; the broken gate –  
 an un-fillable void had it been unhinged  
 from its lower hinge – something I waited for.

Other textures, that lived and that I counted on,  
 daily: the bark of the oak I toughened  
 my heels upon to climb, the bark of the three elms  
 rough and tender under my probing fingers  
 asking how it grew; my marigold and tomato  
 baby leaves understood by smell about which  
 I wondered why they pushed themselves up, up  
 through Iowa soil in April only to be refrozen  
 into curled embryos. The ones that survived  
 I sometimes dissected vein by vein – conveyor belts  
 in slightly sticky photosynthesizing factories;  
 lilacs in May carefully hugging themselves  
 in family clusters, soft petals bending in sun worship  
 together; red berries, round and hard and impenetrable  
 as my own innocence (I was told they were poisonous  
 and tasteless) and as uninviting to my own tongue  
 as the fuzzy surface of a new tennis ball:  
 textures for fingers only, fingers only, rounded  
 textures – like brassy door handles, rubbery  
 bike wheels, smooth roller skates, unbroken buttons.

The textures and their contexts: my hands around  
 the leather grip of my tennis racquet, on any court,  
 in any alley with a wall which I could hit against,  
 my feet at home on soft shifting clay or grass-cracked  
 cement, the same cement as that of pebbled sidewalks,  
 conditioning my once-tender feet to toughen to match  
 the hot yielding tar of summer streets that claimed  
 me. Textures of my calloused bare feet and rough-edged  
 bricks in the alley that sometimes hurt, but not as much  
 as the broken pieces of rock in the empty lot where cars  
 and we – the Bluff Street gang – competed for sanctuary.

But oh, and oh, the textures of the overgrown grass  
 and weeds in my defiant and determined small front yard  
 so soft beneath my feet and head when I lay down  
 to study and be soothed by the uniformly tiny ants and  
 their lives textured in patterns far simpler than my own.