

Climb

for Jane

At 20,000 feet
roped in a line of silhouettes
stepping single file
across a sky scraped clean
by wind so strong
she can lean her full weight against it,
she knows a hurt so deep
she closes her eyes
before each step and builds
a new reason for going on,
but she knows too how new
the Bolivian light will seem
those mornings after the climb
when she wakes late
in her room in La Paz,
stands in the open window
looking out at the mountain
that crushed her spirit
to dark stone
then gave it back to her
with brighter wings
to carry her between here
and her next climb.

Touching History

I was with the poet Thelma Nava
in the bookstore café in Mexico City.
She was telling me about Tlatelolco in '68
and how she drove the wounded out
in her small car and then went back
until her husband told her she had to stop,
"They will know you."

The next day I stood in the Plaza de Tres Culturas
where there is a Catholic church on one side,
a glass and steel office building on another,
down steep steps the ruins
of an Aztec Temple, and on the fourth side
the back of the apartment buildings
and the windows where the government snipers
opened fire on the students below.
I felt the death from as far back as the Aztec altars
and I heard the screaming of the girls
who tried to hold their blood inside.

I am remembering now the picture of John Carlos
and Tommy Smith on the victory stand
at the '68 Olympics with their black gloved fists
raised, and I am wondering if Carlos and Smith
knew of the more recent killings and disappearances,
and suddenly I am sure they did,
and I am thinking of acts of courage
that will never be fully written into any history.

After a reading by the Oaxacan women poets
at the Casa de Poesía, Thelma insists
that she will drive me to the subway station.
"Something could happen to you on the streets."
After she has driven away, I see a woman,
her head covered by her rebozo
and here face in shadow,
climbing out of the hole beneath a building
that was shattered in the earthquake of '85
and will remain that way until the city
is shaken again and its collapse is complete.
Behind the woman are two smaller shadows
that dissolve with her into the darkness
before I can know what I should do.

I feel the fifty pesos in my pocket,
the \$6 and a little more American
that would feed such a family for days,
and something I will never get back
leaves with those dark figures,
taken to the place where the souls of the missing
of Tlatelolco sing the same songs as those
sacrificed to raise the temples of any enterprise
to which poems and courage and conscience
are black fists of flame arising from bodies
that can be all too easily gunned down from above.

Historical Interlude

This is a CD of a sonata
first performed before an Earle
in a large hall with marble floors that shone,
while in an upstairs room, polishing the clawed feet
of a dressing table was a girl
who paused to touch her mouth with two fingers,
trying to decide if her lips were too full
or perhaps not full enough, and, stealing a glance
at herself in the gilt-framed mirror,
noticed that the blemish beside her nostril had disappeared,
the sign she had decided would mark
her readiness to allow the stable boy
with the wild blond hair to press her into a corner
of the Earle's tack room and kiss her once
and nothing more, no matter what argument
he used to move her to a second kiss
or to sit with him a moment longer
in the fresh straw he would exchange
for the dung and urine soaked
old bedding of the gray dappled
Clydesdales in the morning.

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And did you know that the Bard
was actually that girl
who watched as that boy
was flogged and cast out
after which she was relieved of her duties
when she filled her master's boots
with the contents of his chamber pot
as he pushed against her
with drunken insistence and tried
to lift her skirts and slips with the hand
in which he was not holding a stein of beer,
and that she was given refuge by a young man,
Shakespeare, as it turned out,
who took dictation from her
as she wandered deranged and naked
through the two rooms of the garret
where he was living while he was

trying to make a name for himself
as an actor who specialized in playing
older women in the second rate plays
of Christopher Marlowe who never believed
that Shakespeare was writing
the comedies or the tragedies much less the sonnets
that the chamber maid spilled
as she was thinking about the stable boy
who had kissed her that night
while they were both supposed to be on duty
in the house of the Earle who happened
to be looking for a place in the hay
to lie with his neighbor's wife
but instead found the chamber maid
and stable boy staring into each other's faces
after the first and only kiss either would ever have?

Memory

You are climbing the side stairs
to a stage in what was
a school cafeteria.
There's no electricity,
but full afternoon sun
fills the tall windows
and gilds the ancient podium
in a quicksilver glow.

You step out from the wings
and feel the adulation
of cobwebs and dust
and the rapt attention
of ranks of benches
standing on their heads
on the tables.

Even now there is the taint
of canned peas and sawdust
soaked in vomit,
and a furor of small voices
is caught in the folds
of the curtain that sags
behind you.

You begin by saluting the shadow
where you know the flag once hung.
Then, just when you are sure
the past is waiting to know
what it should have been,
you step back

into what you are

Bats

If you are here just as the sky begins to lighten,
you will see the bats coming back to their rest.
If you sit where I sit making no sound
except the almost silent tapping on a keyboard
or the light scratching of a pen or pencil on paper,
you will hear the bats taking their positions for sleep.
Then, long before sunlight breaks over the ridge,
there will be silence again inside these walls,
and no one would know unless he had been here
to see the black shapes dart across the pale sky
that they were hanging there like soft cocoons
waiting to open again to chase echoes across the dark..