

Passing Through

After Cavafy

It's inevitable and you've prepared,
constructed a self that can withstand
bewilderness. This is as it should be
for you who will leave, who discovers
grace only in geographies
of mountain, field, forest, lake
of this ocean or that, of some desert,
in a blur of customs

you are unaccustomed to;
who finds courage in the unfamiliar
faces searched for meaning,
among glottal stops and labials unlike
any you know, among the gutturals
and songs of those whose idioms
dislodge words and estrange a language
you thought belonged to you.

Once again, it's time. But no use complaining.
And don't whine—there's nothing to plead for.
Above all, don't try to fool anyone, especially
yourself. Don't say you'll come back
or imagine it would be the same
if you did. And don't think that the girl
who for a year lived in the corner house
could be remembered
as anything more than passing through.

 You were given this
place, though it's different from the one
everybody else is rooted in.

So say goodbye to all you are losing—
voices in a procession of exquisite
music, landscapes that spoke to you
in wind or water that was once
yours—and, now, look, how it recedes.
Look at what only memory can possess.

Military Brat Collage, Beginning with a Sevenling

Festival Days

Temple bells ring in the sun. Red silk
and ceremonial shrines
(like the palanquins of gods) parade
through streets too narrow for cars—
saked men shoulder poles, staggering
under the weight, chanting
while rice-wined women dance like flowers.

Mishap #83

Only the smallest, narrow-shouldered men could squeeze
into fuel tanks—which were leaking again. *Fix them! Now!*
ordered the colonel, yelling at a captain who yelled at a sergeant
who yelled at crews on the tarmac. An airman crawled in
to check a rubber-lined tank. And was forgotten. Engines roared,
jets refueled, took off. All up and down the line, boxes were
checked: satisfactory, excellent, outstanding, and a note made:
one man AWOL.

Keeping Time

Pulse ticks like a clock on the machine over the bed, louder as night grows. Sound fills the room. A nurse sweeps in, checks vitals, listens to echoes (murmur/click/ blood-rush/valve-close) in the chambers of your damaged heart, and weak-smiled, tosses the cuff on a chair as she leaves. Empty, it inflates, gasping, then heaves down, drowning out the hiss of C-paps. I try not to look at the direct line feeding into your neck, not to imagine veins collapsing, not to see the blood-mist fingerprints of whoever put it in, try not to think about the large mass some lab is peeling back from the kidney they took. Pulse accelerates; you double click; morphine drips beeping. Pulse slows; you drift down again, too deep. The alarm blares. I jump up, close your dropped mouth, and cupping your chin, try to yell you back, “Dad! Wake up! You forgot to breathe! Come on—come on, Dad, *breathe!*” and you do.

Ah, Ecstasy! An Essay

Unnh?! was Mrs. Kiniry's imperative/questioning/expletive—and her Unnh?! Unnh?! was more than twice as much, as in—See? Get it? Listen to this! Isn't that amazing? Feel that sound? —See how it's done? And I did see, so did you, even if the words were strange. I knew those mice.

*Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!*

Though with her and your New Englander imitation of a Scots accent, it was more *bee ahh stee* and *bree ahh stee*. All the while Vietnam raged, base alerts were constant and planes went down, one with the wing commander. Stateside maintenance crews, Dad said, were young, unskilled and overworked—experience shipped overseas for the war. Flight crew bodies were buried if recovered and former dependants moved off base. Classmates disappeared to the far-off homes of grandparent/uncle/aunt, or just got transferred. Townies were different; you stayed, stayed in the place where you were born.

But Mrs. Kiniry was talking about a poem addressed to a mouse—whose nest has been turned up with the plough: *I'm truly sorry, the farmer says,
poor earth-born companion,/An' fellow-mortal!* and though *The best laid schemes o' mice an' men/Gang aft a-gley.
An'lea'e us nought but grief an' pain/For promised joy.*

*Still thou are blest, compared wi' me!/The present only toucheth thee:
But och! I backward cast my e'e/On prospects drear!
An'forward, tho' I canna see,/I guess an'fear!*

My cousin killed the mice we'd discovered under the shrub. He got a shovel and flung the naked-looking, thumb-sized bodies up onto the path where barn cats prowled. Farm kids aren't sentimental, not even about their own well-cared-for animals; they raise them, show them, sometimes win ribbons, then send them off to slaughter without a blink—the nature of things—like the natural and unremarkable unmystery of sex. Meanwhile, unfarm cousins are unable to look away from horses, cows, pigs even chickens doing things we couldn't ask about. Oh, I knew why he had to kill them—they'd get into feed corn stored in the silo, into root cellar bushels, garden beans or tomatoes or potatoes or the berry brambles—and it wasn't that I wanted crops to be lost or feed destroyed, but still, still, I felt sorry for the mice.

Unnh?! Unnh?! Mrs. Kiniry said. And I understood—a man in 1785, living in a country I knew nothing about, was singing here and now, close to me.

Wordsworth, too, and I was beside myself. Unnh?! Unnh?! He's brought his sister here after: *Five years have passed; five summers, with the length of five long winters! and again I hear these waters, rolling from their mountain springs... where ...upon the banks of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend, my dear, dear Friend...in thy voice I*

catch the language of my former heart and read my former pleasures in the shooting lights of thy wild eyes... Unnh?! See?

I did. We both did. Nothing could take away his joy, his joy at her joy, or even the memory of it. Like the pond at the end of the road—the one we'd climbed over a fence and walked through dark trees to get to—that you'd insisted on showing me only when the full moon would light our night swim. I understood that these things: *were to me more dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!*

And Keats, in his twenties, could be believed. Adults argued if he said, if the urn said, but listened anyway. The GI reported AWOL was found in the fuel tank he'd crawled in to fix—because it leaked again after refuel and take-off. The yearbook announced those who had died and who'd be joining up. More flags were half-mast while Keats wrote about what would last and asked his forever questions: *What men or gods are these? What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?...What wild ecstasy?* We parked, dome light on though you knew the lines by heart: *Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter; therefore ye soft pipes play on, not to the sensual ear, but more endeared, pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.*

Unnh?! Unnh?! And I knew something different from my life to then. Different from appearance, from image, from ironing my father's handkerchiefs so there'd be no unsightly wrinkles when he blew his nose. Different from the fact that uncrisp creases were akin to unclean; unshined shoes, shameful; spotted or unpressed, character flaws; ties unstraight, violations of dress code. And I looked my part: there were no runs in *my* stockings, my bangs were not, never got, long enough to fall into my eyes, blouses were starched, shoes unscuffed. And my room passed inspection every week. But Keats knew what you knew, knew what would be left when *old age shall this generation waste*, knew unheard melodies and well-wrought urns. Unnh?!

The poet says *The Brain is Wider than the Sky...is it?* What about this *certain slant of light?* What kind of hurt *leaves no scar?* Unnh?! What does she mean like...*the Distance on the look of Death—?* And Hopkins! Unnh?! *Glory be to God for dappled things...for whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)* or a windhover, soaring here in *oh, air in his ecstasy?* What about the world's grandeur flaming out like *shining from shook foil?* Unnh?! And this Holy Ghost—bending over the world with *warm breast and with ah! bright wings?* Unnh?! See? *Ah! Bright Wings.*

With that the school year ended. Mrs. Kiniry retired. You committed suicide. I left home. The war wound down and my father got sent overseas. Looking into the window that, as Rumi says, was opened in my heart, I find what persists—there's her, and you, you and me, you and poets who died poor or miserable, or too young, and us, and us, and *ah! ecstasy.*

EE I EE I OH

Now that I can read, my sister and I
form a temporary truce at the rigid
line down the middle of the back seat.
One by one she hands me books:
talking pigs who settle disputes
or can fly; chickens who give speeches,
love their rooster husbands, and are kind.

My uncle strides ahead, scattering chickens,
yoked shoulders balancing buckets
of yesterday's milk, potato peels,
pea pods, rhubarb stalks and unidentifiable
scraps. We stop to catch a chick, scurry after
him as hens regroup, pecking at our heels,
as a caucus of ducks and hissing geese close in.

The pigs are not as pink and a lot dirtier
than I'd imagined, louder too, as they snuffle,
squeal and jostle. At the splash of slop,
the sow backs out of the far corner. Massive
muddy haunches tremble in waves,
and I see a row of teats hanging nearly
to the ground, her whiskered mouth and snout
dribbling ropey, red tendrils. Piglets, knocked
aside as she lumbers to the trough, fall,
grunt and scramble to get up. My sister laughs;
I cover my nose, look to where the sow had been.
She has been eating the runt.

My sister starts to cry, wants me to take her back.
I give wide berth to the fence where a large, dark
bull glares at us, and avoid the yard, circling
behind the chicken coop.

On the way home, I push the stack
over to her side, and refuse to read.

Wedding Day

They met by chance.
But that's another story and theirs to tell.

Truth is
they lived a continent apart,
were traveling under different stars.
Mismatched days, tides, oceans.
Her moon was full hours before his.
Her morning: his night.
And yet, despite the whole
askew universe, they fell in love.

Some say destiny. Destiny—
from the moment they were born
under lyrical stars—
after all, aren't they both Irish?

Truth is they're far removed
from the roots their names suggest.
But however distant, these names
echo what comes together here
under these lucky skies:

Shannon, meaning goddess, wisdom,
well of knowledge and namesake
of myriad places, of bays, waterfalls
and rivers, all of them wise;

Brendan, as in prince, voyager
and saint, with namesake island,
a cathedral or two, numerous pubs
and his own feast day.

It's a dirty world, unjust, always
wars and everywhere the dying earth,
but still, still, there is this:

(Shakespeare says it best)
Love is an ever fixèd mark.

Yes! From this august August
day forward, love is their star,
theirs to navigate by, their true
astronomical north
wherever they wander
wherever they go from here.