

Song of Departure

after Joseph Brodsky

If winter pleases, offer courage in a drink
to move you through these bereft streets.
Lifted on a buoyant wind those virtuous guests
our students, heave their sudden wings and soar away
in skies pockmarked with spotlights.
Town, from above, is multitudes
darker. Someone unknown and hunched
maintains my old office and a stuck-to lie
that the smell of my cigarettes remains
to haunt each successive resident.
Actually, that's the innate scent
of academics who come complete
with exile writhing under surfaces.

Whose winter? Those students
are long gone and in memoriam
wear allegiant color in those other cities.
I too arbitrarily and willful
strode elsewhere, as if taking after a Whitman
with whole states passing underfoot.
From a hawk's eye the tear winter
makes between one year and the next
is as broad as mother Atlantic, her stubborn eye
shriveling whiter each year. She carries
more and more, though it must be said
the carrying is a matter not of love, but duty.

A straggler crane speaks softer
than little girls afraid of teachers.
They did not ask to pass you
their messages, and so with
bullet's memories, and requiems,
they make their way

to those warehouses of surplus
verse, stirring, stirring, going still
and nestled to the breasts of their grown-old
mothers, too. Their dreams
identical to yours. Their breasts
lowered. Drunk up by no one.

The idle stars languish
hidden in plain sights:
their long gaze pales
at the last and critical moment, when
it might have delivered distant telegrams
from systems of belief
founded in more distant countries than
you or I have ever known; who are you
to tell them that in exchange
for a sodium streetlights and glittering
Christmas trees, in trade
for students' flights
and a town's solace in quiet, home for transients,
you denied even the final messages
of suns without so much as upward,
melancholy glances in apology?

In this I am as guilty as you.
Some other town huddles around
a poet's grave, and his bones
do silence as a long,
interminable dance. Nowhere
is as silent as a trilobite. From above
and from below in the air
are graves, and graves, and graves,
are verse, and verse, and verse
left remitted from blank pages
and, childishly, marked all
return to sender.

River Lace

after Alice Fulton

Everyone and their kids show up for Saturdays'
cascades. No, the water's identically
passing; there is no weekend special on cool
or sweet of bubbled lace
in the air's stick. A wet white
dress stucco to the skin. A white button-down
wearing down the weight,
your shoulders and mine a week
wary of work, strangers, and parking garages.

Our sweat dissolute. Solved an ache
by letting go the grip on holding
steady. We went over, seashell thrones
tacky glamour and selfies
soaked to the skin, sweet sixteen, toweled
tattooed sipping what legally
can't be Modelos, to-go pizza boxes, idle tents
in unanimous blues.

You're laughing too hard at yourself
to hear me say utopian,
and thank goodness. Someone's music dances
while they go just once
more over those last two most daring
catapults. Oh and those girls! who asked
in unison and so restrainedly
can we splash you: oh girls
let the splashing commence.

Guilty at the Quarantine

after Keith Taylor's "Guilty at the Rapture"

All custom went and rose
into the last winter airs
like white smoke from the chimney
behind a steeple.

Promise me I'll be left alone
in this abandoned world:
where on my silver Trek
given a woman's name
I briefly considered for myself, I can laugh
gaily in a stand of pines and smoke
two final, anticlimactic
American Spirits
before the new regime.

They are what my virtuous
and dry grandmother smoked,
before and after the cancer.
With her disappeared
ordinary secrets beyond counting.
Alone in this world,
my mother, my sisters'
voices scratched like records
from interminable distance, I prepare
to join them; unveil a fresh loneliness,
and from the river pluck
a silvery, secondhand name.

Weird Goodbyes

Lift me up to the sun. I was born
on another train of thought, which led
cardinally sequential. Events took place
inside one bedroom's electrical room.
Flipping one switch after
lights out. I sailed about the room
billowed onto Pauline with an eye
for rustling. With patience
fifteen minutes
can become five years. Retroactively
inordinate space: settled mostly
on one couch on one bloc under one
sublingual dose of autumn's high weeks,
the struggle to live subordinate to the struggle
to breathe. Daily growth evident in danger close
attention seeking sunlight through the stark.
And empty. Air. Winter's silicon and bleed
breathless. Sharp as ashes. You lived
inside me for a time, in miniature. I loved
some of the minutes paid out. Railroads at dusk,
discarded paper of the ice. One imagines human
blooming out of sync, never wilt
nor falter. As no flower will. Fifteen minutes
became five years, later. Wilted, withered, sheltered,
shuddered, budded, bloomed, and withered. Petals
drift with lovers drift with river
gunk. All in blessing. All in flux, in flow.