

An Ox And A House

Poems

for the Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award 2017

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The 1901 World Series

Do you remember Bhopal? Fox News is pretty sure you don't.
Do you remember your first joint? Your mother swears
it never happened. Do you remember
the 1901 World Series? Our librarian would rather you didn't.
As for how smooth the gun felt,
the doorman at the club has forgotten.

Do you remember the last time you masturbated?
You're making Ayn Rand feel uncomfortable.
The kid you knocked over. Bright pink vomit
on snow. Your past or future therapist
will wipe these things away. Do you dream
of My Lai?

Vladimir Putin suggests you forget
the smell of breastmilk; resistance of a blade.
The drunk woman peeing herself on the stairs
can see you perfectly under the table.
Her hair was shorter. The midnight sun.
The kid freezing in the desert could care less.

The traffic cop waves. Your waiter clears away
the image of your beloved, seduced.
Ezekiel calls for an empty box.
You think you'll recall
your last breath, but God
has other ideas.

For Real

I—Reverie

Younger, I liked to mingle with dreams,
rubbing shoulders at parties, noting
 the shimmering dresses they wore—
 topaz, vermilion, gold—
kind of like silk but so supple,
opaque but only just—
 dreams
laughing with me, throwing their heads back,
 laughing I think with me
 or if at me, then at
my extensive good humor, my insouciant charm—
though I could be wrong

Dreams
no taller than me
with thick dark hair or red

dreams
with shining lips
 and black shoes that came off

dreams, whose long nails
had been worked to sharp tips
 by nerveless hands

whispering
 a thing or two in my ear

II—Welcome to Funland

Abandon yourself
to thrills—

Rollercoasters, you can make them
go where you want, do
whatever—you'd not believe
the wild rides—take
someone else too
if you want,
you might get wet,
you'll probably fall out
but it won't hurt—
get back on, do it
again—it's all joy, nothing
ever stings except
leaving

Sometimes I
stay for days

Till someone
falls out
hits the ground
hard
becomes real

III—no escape

as they made us do it, or tried,
at the hospital—no
meds no drink
no drugs cutting sex
—only the true

betrayals of us
by others,
and the ones
of others
by us

back—the years
we drank away
burned away fucked away—the years we
sent needles into
our eyes, shoved blades
under our fingernails, anything
to hurt this bastard this
worm we hated
more than anyone

the world out there
missing—our selves
too real

IV—Tricks

Ways to cope: to tilt
one mental pan
above another, tip
some hurt
too old to heal. They
work. For a very
short time. Then
you do them
again.

Choose
not to—the real
sits stark,
a rock you
can't shift. Can't
gauze this, paint it
in flowers.

Summon
enough to make
a cliff. Tide eats
at a crumbling beach.
A black weight
is up there
pulling

V—Exiled to Cornwall

That other, black, world
of tall cliffs, sweeping rain, gray seas.
It's a long hike
up from the harbor, and my asthma
means I have to stop. My grandmother
sits with me and says
she thought she could make it too,
could not. Her body
is next to mine and is ash
in a hole in the churchyard
where I'm going, where it's spring
and a few migrant orange flowers
root and grow on the cliffs.
The sea throws spray
in white bursts on the granite.

I'm getting wet, and
who am I kidding—I'm not there,
haven't been since her funeral.
I'd better take another route, cross the river
to the slippery footpath, up the cliff
where I accidentally proposed to my wife
and she said *OK*
on top of what's real.

I Want You To Invite Me To Everything Ever

Invite me into your eyes
 so I can smear them with laughter.
Invite me into your endless nights
 where I'll burn like diesel.
Invite me into your slaveholding past—
 man, I'll fight for you even when you're right.
And when the time comes, you'll sell me off like dead grass.

Invite me into your specialist's diagnosis:
 crisp, decaying, an elm tree full of spores.
Invite me into your abortive birthday party—
 what the hell were you thinking anyway, with that accent?
Invite me into your bouncing bunny ears—
 Cute! Cute! Vanished in a hurricane!
And when it's over, anoint and torch me, with *all* your golden oil.

Pump me into your heart—
 I've always wanted to see where you hide yourself.
Conceal me in your children's faces—
 I promise I'll only stay for a touch.
Massage me into your empty egg sac—
 it's OK, it's OK; not too many grown men are watching.
Show me your ringworm, your temple, your armory:

then all betrayals will run dry and our aftermath be but honey.

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A train shoots out of trees
and over the bridge; I heard a horn
but somehow wasn't expecting
Train—what *did* I expect—a bear
pursued by a train? A fox hunt, a minstreling maiden?
An aphrodisiac, an armadillo? A batsman, a bantam, a backside?
A cardiac arrest? A devilfish, a Decembrist,
a dervish drilling out an egg? A failed fishmonger with a grudge,
a gadabout in a hole, a hubcab on an igloo, a jaguar, a jugular,
a kingdom in lassitude with ludicrous lack of lustre?
A monstrance of mastic, a muthafucka with a mission,
a number, a noodle, an orange? An over-achiever as Pantalone,
Pantalone in a *pissoir* going Pop? A piss artist, a quantum, a rosary, a ship?
A sitting duck and a toad for it to sit on, a toadstool
and an undergrad to smoke it, an upside-down cake, a vulture,
and Whoosh!—a xenophobic yellow-fevered youngster yodelling
with zebrafish, zorkmids and zithers?

No—it was a train—
silver and blue, the rusty bridge thunder, and dawn
silk on its side—

wonders.

Walking In New England Woods, I Am Happy

I am happy because I'm following the tracks of a dog
and its prints look like flowers
blooming in the mud, five petals tight together.
I am happy because this morning there was a first coat of snow
dropped on the roofs and lawns,
and for once I got seven hours' sleep.
I am happy because running at 6 a.m.
I felt the steel that comes with snow,
and I love wild weather, how it makes me feel
I could have wildness in myself.

I am happy because before I could drive
I had to scrape snow off my car,
and this will become a new ritual, a nest to curl up in.
The ground under my feet is muddy and soft
and therefore welcoming, but not so wet
that it covers my shoes, which are not waterproof.
I am happy because my socks are too thin
and I should have worn boots, and even this
makes me think of how new is this New England winter.

I am happy because I am wearing a new down coat
that's red and a size too large,
and it feels like it will warm me everywhere I could go.
Even the pockets have a layer of down
so my bare hands are snugged and protected;
and this was designed for me by someone I'll never know
who wanted me always to feel cared for and well.
I am happy because the fallen leaves are so crisp and clean
the whole wood seems decorated
for someone to adore it, and right now that person is me.

I am happy because each morning I light our wood stove
from last night's embers, and the first flame shows
that yesterday can stay alight in me.
I am happy because I'm thinking about what it's like to emigrate,
and when my wife said she wanted to,
while our daughter napped
and we were naked;
which happened too seldom then and even less now
with a second kid, in a cold house, and winter coming.

I remember her looking at me
like a child longing for a gift,
and all I had to do was say
Yes, I will go anywhere with you.
I am happy though I know I shouldn't be
because her breasts are painful today
and she asked me to check for mastitis,
and I was amazed again at their smoothness and whiteness,
and even though they belong to the kids these days
I was made happy anyway.

I am happy because when the children are in their own rooms
I will get her back, hold her naked under the comforter,
and even though that's four years away at least,
it's a day closer than it was yesterday.
I am so happy
I feel like air—a swirl
that could be anything, go anywhere.