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THE POETRY OF MARY HARTER MITCHELL

Nothing to Do with Dionysus

Rather than go to my dying mother's bed,
I write an inconstant poem for her.
What reason? What is it I am?
If you drink from the sun,
if your tongue scalds,
the pain must form on something,

the form of which saves you.
Because in ancient Greece
the actors left the stage to switch
their masks and voices, a chanting
chorus covered the changes, they say.
I say the art of the sons and daughters
is all that holds us,

crossing, re-crossing,
treading out tragedy.
One dance across the stage
becomes one line of a poem,
the verse where the dancers
turn. Millennia pass.
A sadness without myth
climbs into the lines
as into a lap.

Between the stanzas
the mothers are inconsolable.
If the words do not turn and call
us back the poems break out
and dance up the mountains,
their feet moving under the snow.

Irrational

It was a pretty little pie
I gave my mother:
 fluted crust,
 red cherries
 in sugar.
O, she did love sweets!
O, we loved her, all her children!
When we gathered 'round her bed—
 nice family!—
 and she died,
in a twinkling changed and left us,
I was thinking
of the pie she never ate,
how it pertly sat unwrapped,
how it now was changed forever,
 little circle,
 sweet pretty little pie.

Shell Game

If it is true that at death's
 instant some aura escapes
 from the body and is visible,

briefly, then is gone,
 I will never be quick enough
 to love that soul before it leaves

this world. I will be lingering
 on the lips, not for words
 but for cushion, the hands' stars,

crumpling, the ears for their maze
 of sticky valleys and not for any
 admittance, the feet's crusty bones,

the chest for its still precious heft
 and hollows, after the looping air
 has raveled away, even the skin

folded thinly over the eyes
 I will kiss. I plan already
 to hold for as long as I can

to the still shape, the literal unhinged
from eternity; and though thereby
I may miss some pure

essence lifting like morning fog,
like the top of a metaphor carried off,
what else can we love, being human,

but this hull, this bass note, this
altar of stones? It is more to us
than any bright everything up into which

a soul can pour. At fairs I never could
follow the pea hustled
under the three scuffling shells;

I was always amazed;
I was always tricked.
That's what made the game pay.

When the jig is up we might as well
be changed into something vaguely
shining. Yet when the fingertips' whorls—

why in heaven's name so singularly
wrought?—stiffen and drain,
what earthly consolation can we find

in new whorls brightly spinning
on the sun's old face?
Mary at the tomb

would have stroked the hands'
stars; she would have spat out
holy wafers onto the ground.

Profile

They tend to not be loners.
Their neighbors usually know
who they are.
They tend to not
traffic in weakness.
They probably never were
very hungry
for food.

They know about weapons and politics.
They almost always think
in packs.
They like to be known as
someone
not to be f . . . ed with.

They are usually
religious: when provoked
they like to take a deity
off its shelf
and set it on the table
to be handled.
They tend to not hear voices.

They are usually
conventional; they often talk and dress
very well.

It will do no good
to report them to authorities.
They probably are
the authorities

and even if not
you would turn them in and come back later
to find them sharing coffee and jokes
with the other powers
and everyone wearing
nice shoes.

You should know
they are
extremely
dangerous.

Retribution

Fisted, go from the execution,
the missile crater, the body count—
uncrumple your hand, it is
still empty,
and the red hole in the muscle of your heart
is still a red hole
in the muscle of your heart.

Clearness

In the meeting-room plain as a close-eyed face,
pure of symbols, undistracted,
we worship in pews squared to simple walls
and windows of almost invisible glass.

But this morning someone has set in our view
a glass globe crowded with zinnias and cosmos.
We sit and consider the flowers.
Their stems arch crazily over each other
and over their juttled leaves.
They are red and orange and pink.
The sun tips into the room and through
their wheels of petals.
Under the water the sturdy stems
are covered with tiny bubbles.
Over the water the colors tremble with seed.

The flowers are just the flowers.
We sit and see where the cut green life of them
pierces the tender membrane between worlds,
the level skin where air sits on water.
One could live like this.

Palm Sunday

Hosanna!
It's a rollicking damn-good time.
We cheer, we
shout along the streets, we
wave the life lines, love lines, laugh lines
of our unbroken palms.
O God,
we are guilty
of such innocent, innocent times.

Burning Bush

This is the one miracle
you must believe:
past the pain that shuts the mouth
is another pain that opens
the mouth, the burning alive becomes
both a screaming in

and a sign.

Some say it was yellow leaves
or the low sun.
From my blackened tuft of sticks I open
my mouth, I say
no, no! the leaves were green as young mint and it
was fire.

Creation

I hold with those who say the world begins
in fire on ice, a day like today, in a word
exhaled warmly onto a mirror
of polished silver awareness—
our work to be weaving with all we sense, hemming
with all we love, fine fabric
to drench in the wet breath
of the open Mouth.

Fish ribs bleach and dissolve
in a lake of sky, sun dazzles over
the rolling brightness of snow,
a blue is sunken
like ink into the downs both shallow and deep,
and from cold pasture
trees muscle up raw iron,
gray, thinly gilt, and weeds are caught
like brown needles in the softest
white cloth.

November

a wide gray lowers
over what is left
in the cold
whole fields of hollow
stems rattling
in ragged rushes and leaves

their many browns broken
even to dull red
and yellow
broken in waves
across whole shaken fields

poor scavenge

a wind ahead of the snow
drives into our faces
the children start coming home from school
in the dark

something old in us
wants to store hard things
in close places—cellars, shelves
pour dry seeds shooshing into sacks
heap shells and sheaves in rooms, near
but out of the wind

for a heaviness pulls at us now
we swallow cider the color of bloody gold
sweet, sweet as cold apple blossoms
we wait we live
hard by the counter-weight of the store
we live hard by

Poet

I pressed Clara's flowers
in the unabridged dictionary
years ago
in the pink and yellow times
and have just again found them
in the press of words.

She danced on a luminous stage
in pale pink slippers,
youngishly tossing our hearts,
and afterwards her grandparents gave her
yellow carnations,
which she has forgotten.

This is what I do:
I close and open the book.
It is a slow career,
but I do it: I press and then look
to see
what holds.

**April, Contracts Class,
First Year of Law School¹**

In law school you are learning what to sight
and it should move you.
In other life, sighting a robin
is something you can do, but
in law school, it seems, you have to cite
what someone who is not you has seen.
In other life, you can taste and smell what nourishes.
See April. See also love.
But cf. you decide this spring
how many classroom windows to leave open.

In other life promises, covenants,
can be deeply part of who we are;
but here we make a brief-long study
of broken promises by people—
we don't know who they are,
Party A, Party B, appellations—
about widgets—we don't know *what* they are.
See Corbin, Williston, Murray.
See also Moses, Mohammed, Mao. It is time,
past time, to wonder

what I am doing here, because I have
tenure, and it scares me to be so secure
(and doesn't that sound just precious
to a worker newly fired from the factory
moving where it's cheaper), and also because
criticism is cheap behind these sturdy walls;
see, e.g., feminism, Marxism,
critical legal studies, critical race theory,
and the voices that haven't yet made it even
into the footnotes.

But see, e.g., should a feminist
prefer, to that label, an autobiography?
Should she talk about her children? Should she ever
profess an interest in family law?
Should she smile and speak softly
and nurture across her desk with its vase of flowers?
Shouldn't she rather kick ass,

1. Originally published in 52 J. LEGAL EDUC. 312, 312-13 (2002). The *Indiana Law Review* thanks the *Journal of Legal Education* for granting permission to reprint this poem.

get off on the Uniform Commercial Code,
and computerize her outline of the role of contract law
in Western civilization

(roman numeral two sub A, sub seven, where does family go?
where does love meet work in the linear outline? sub children
hyperlink)? I do not profess to understand
all the abbreviations: *e.g.*, someone I love is dead
and every birthday I have now
is a going away.

See also children growing up;
country long gone to war;
and hatred, finely tailored as a lawyer,
going to political conventions.

See also too many students want it all
in declarative sentences,
of one piece, whole, with handles,
as if that would be truer.

Cf. what we, wrung out, would settle for now
as good enough law.

Finding myself here—"professor"—
what to profess?
to build a career, or a life, on the urge
that only some people have

to drop their eyes to the footnotes?
to make a community among those journeying
between the text and the questions:
 by what and whose authority?
 and what else is there to say?
and even then to dispute the whole like a mystic
(not everything is in sight)?
finally to profess
in all the voices that I have:
yes, this is what we are doing? For now.

But see:

