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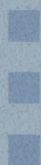
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LUCK
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POEMS BY MARILYN ANNUCCI

MARILYN ANNUCCI lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and teaches at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater in the Department of Languages and Literatures. She has worked as a writer and editor, and has taught at the Western Pennsylvania Young Writers Institute and the University of Pittsburgh, where she received an MFA in Poetry. Her poems have appeared in various publications, including *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Journal*, and *Poet Lore*.

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MARILYN ANNUCCI

LUCK



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for my parents,

Steve and Betty

In the Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh

*There is so much Everything
that Nothing is hidden quite nicely.*

– Wislawa Szymborska
“Reality Demands”

Words get lost in the vaulted air.
Light gets lost;
there is no pink, yet
there is this pink glow.
Wrought iron, round
wooden tables –
a quiet veranda, or a street;
all the horses have disappeared.
A man's voice rings out,
processing . . . computer. . . .
It is, of course, the end
of the 20th century. Other voices
flutter at the muffled edges
bats, moths.
A woman coughs;
there is something she cannot say.
Bing.
The elevator door slams shut –
not like a box car,
not like a row of grocery carts.
A man's heels click
on the cold floor.
Does anyone hide in the oak bench?
It lifts like an old school desk.
Down the darkened halls,
along the heavy doors,
invisible robes
touch the floor like prayers.
A woman told me this,
someone I cannot kiss.
No one sits in the alcove
with stained red glass.
Stone ivy, iron daffodils.

The light over the table glows white;
my hands, a friend said, look old.
I cannot pretend I will last as long
as the fluted arches, or the steel grids.
Look, how they make the space above
safe enough to lean toward.

Remembering My Mother Sewing

I.

Evenings I'd find you
bent over the dining room table
like a surgeon over a disembodied angel.

Under five yellow lights
you would rearrange
the wispy wings, pin them

to the floral cotton,
the blue corduroy –
the common material our bodies might fit.

This was the beginning
of the reconstruction. You worked
with a quiet determination,

the knuckles of your long fingers
whitening
as you applied the tiny teeth

of the tracing wheel
against the delicate skin.
Later,

after your careful unpinning,
the anticipated sundering
and airy uplift –

forgive me my moments of doubt –
the mortal fabric
would lie there, yes,

bearing the marks. . . .

II.

You knew in time
the dress or slacks would grow
too tight, or short,

that our days would be a succession
of stepping in and out of pants and skirts,
blouses and shirts,

of turning in the long mirrors,
wanting beauty,
lines that flatter,

cloth that carries the wearer
when brains are not enough.
Yet wanting more than that,

despite the turtlenecks and scarves
you wear today to hide
your wrinkly neck.

One day it will all come off.
Someone will bathe our bare bodies,
maybe efficiently,

perhaps with revulsion or fear.
If we're lucky
with tenderness.

I cannot bear to think of you this way.
Your lovely, bony body
no more.

Your dress folded over a chair.

Luck

Sometimes I like to wear the same
clothes two days in a row –
maybe change my panties,
maybe not –
so that yesterday
could be today
or tomorrow.
If it's good
why risk a change?

The doctor tells me my biopsy
results will be in after lunch
with the 2 o'clock mail.
He sent off a small piece of my face.

I have two hours to kill
so I head for the mall
to shop – a good sign,
means I'm thinking of Future,
means I'll probably change
my clothes.

To get to the mall
I have to take the highway
through a tunnel
that's dull fluorescent
and tiled like my bathroom.
I get anxious,
can't see the hole out.

Some clichés are true, I think,
remembering
my friend's mother's words –
I see the light! –
right before her face glowed
and she died,
and what the psychic said about ghosts –

how if you see one,
direct them toward the light
and be firm: they need to go.

And then I'm out into a gray sky
with cars passing to my left
and before you know it I see
what a good deal
this life is
Food 4 Less
ExpoMart
Freight Liquidators
as the woman on the radio asks
"Wouldn't one thousand
and six dollars be nice?"
If I could only stay tuned
but I can't –
there's the mall.

What if my cells start
sprouting cancerous growths
all over my face? I think
as I stand in a spruce sweater
before a store mirror.
Then I *won't* want a color
that draws attention to my eyes.
Will I?
I can already see another spot –
it's small, but has the same pearly surface.
Malignant: something evil
in nature, influence or effect;
aggressively malicious;
tending to produce death
or deterioration.
One of my friends won't even say
the C word.
Bad luck.
I like that this sweater's pretty.

My bags rest on the car seat like docile cats,
the sweaters soft inside.
There's music on now. I barely notice
the billboards until they're small
in my rearview mirror –
postcards I can't read from far away.

When I enter the tunnel and the music
stops, I think, only for a moment,
of the ceiling caving in.

Desire Under the Cheese Grater

Open the kitchen drawer –
I want to be idle as a tea ball. I want to lie
beside the wooden spoon, the carrot
peeler, the 5 plastic cups that fit one
inside the other: tidy travelers to the counter.
I want to be reckless as measuring spoons –
to fling my big, smaller, small heads back,
dream of ginger, of cinnamon,
sprawl akimbo on the flowered tack paper.
I want to be called dramatic by the corn cob holders,
poor things, how they can only jab and stick;
so what if I want to be picked up.
Let me be. The way butter becomes a yellow river,
a place for the garlic to shout and moan;
how the onions give over to shine and sigh,
I want to be turned over and over
in competent kitchen hands.
I want to be surprised.
I want to grow shy as an egg poacher.

Questions of Purpose

The woman I live with, meaning my partner (but not business), my friend (but more than that), my lover (but only sometimes), my significant other, wife-but-not-really is crying tonight, while I sit on the other side of her wall working words that will tell you, stranger: I am sick of her heaviness, of her sobbing. Words that sound selfish and cold.

My friend Martha Looney used to sing
Make the world go away
Get it all off my shoulders
in the asphalt school yard in 1974
when we were 13 and knew already
how sadness was big as the world, which meant
big as our families –
my own mother glum at the kitchen table,
my father angry about the Puerto Ricans and long-haired men,
whatever he let keep him from his own grief.
Martha would sing the words in a pitch so
desperate, so urgent
we could only laugh at our helplessness,
at our own small lives, waiting for the bell to ring.

My significant etcetera needs to know
why she's here, meaning in the world,
what it is we're meant to do –
questions of purpose that haunt me, too,
though I like to think I'm here partly to comfort,
which means I'm sad when I cannot,
when I'm too sick of sorrow myself, too tired
of tears, like tonight, tired even of language
which will never let me tell it all, never get this right,
how sometimes I miss Martha Looney, her sad funny song,
miss, too, the times I'd chase her down the street with dog doo
on a stick, until she'd stop, swing
toward me like a lunatic, eyes rolling,

so that I'd drop the stick and scream, so that we'd break
into wild laughter, bent double in the street,
and it would be enough.

5 A.M.

The blocky ambulance stops in the middle of the road –
an ominous ice cream truck, red lights pulsing quietly.

They're coming to take the old woman, I think.

Two men, tall and uniformed, cross the street;
they carry a metal cart stacked high with pillows, sheets.
The house next door is dark, but for two squares of light –
the old woman's living room, or bedroom.
I stay at my window a long time, waiting.

The street is empty –
only the insistence of birds,
the hum of the ambulance engine.
Then I hear the front door swing open,
see the old woman swaddled in white on the cart –
“Be careful” and “let the wheels down now,”
her tone vaguely irritable, that of someone used to giving orders.
That she speaks at all surprises me, disappoints me I realize.
I wanted a quiet resignation, the old matriarch
being carried off alone, and for the final time.

I'd watched her on her daily walks – an old white woman,
bent and bleary-eyed, accompanied by her nurse,
a middle-aged black woman, patient at her side.
Sometimes the old woman would offer her arm.
I see that the nurse is with her now –
does she live there? –
swathed in red light, talking to the men.
She looks back at the old woman,
raises a knuckle to her mouth, as if chewing.

The men raise the old woman between the two metal doors now,
her oblong body angled as if for liftoff;
for a moment her face seems in line with my own –
the lower end of a see-saw –
so that I jump back, crouch lower,
a coward behind a dark window.
Then the two heavy doors shut – like a trunk, or a freezer.
“I'll ride up front,” the nurse says, hurrying ahead.
I imagine the old woman fierce inside the lit box.

Butter

Butter is a closed coffin,
no pall bearer.
I kneel before it.
It is a well-made bed,
every corner tucked tight
the way my mother taught me.
I am very small, and
butter is a wall, my separation
from the salt and pepper shakers.
Should I scale its slippery sides?
It was not made for snow,
this low adobe schoolhouse with closed doors,
the children quiet inside.

But wait, southwestern heat
weakens all resolve, and butter goes –
north, to the city,
where a woman who is late for work
must wait for the freight to pass
and only briefly notes

pretty yellow box car, no graffiti.

Marvin's

"How are the oranges?" I ask Marvin,
as I always do, hungry
for his conviction.
He nods his head vigorously:
"Excellent."
As are the pears
pork sausages
potatoes.
I prod the thick orange skin through the cellophane
"They're at their peak," he smiles. "*This week.*"
I admire the neat packages he's laid out.
I wonder if that was him I saw on Liberty Avenue,
jaw thrust forward,
body bent on the horn.
I wonder if he's mean to his wife.
He moves in and out of the enormous fridge,
weighs my organic chicken breast.
(The sign in his window:
Your Money back
If Our Poultry Is Not
the Best and Freshest.
I admire the risk.)
"It's a nice size," he says,
holding up the chicken,
his mouth tense;
the movie theater next door
wants to expand,
to take over the very ground on which he stands;
he'll sell as a market or nothing.
I try to imagine the small floor cleared,
canned peaches and Bisquik gone,
the fridge full of fudgsicles.
In its place – *what?*
A big white screen,
stars who don't even buy their own food;
and Marvin, stoic in the dark,
his shoes sticking to the gummy floor –
all those years of politeness, of pleasing,
the butcher knife firmly in place.

Retreat

I'd been there
two days when I failed,
snuck down the back stairs
during the bishop's presentation:
Discipleship: An openness to God's call.

Lenore had tried to keep me:
*Come on, the bishop's gonna talk at 7:00 –
he wears a little barretta,
you've got to go!*

But I left,
like a thief in the night

I drove to the enormous grocery store
for soup and eggs.
I squinted into the fluorescence,
the toastettes and bagelettes and nuttie butties,
the shelves of soda.

I drove into the convenience and disappointment of America.

I'm a teacher, I'd told Sister Jacinta.
Her face glowed behind thick glasses.
Oh, teaching touches eternity.
It really does.
A silver cross, like a loose key, hung at her waist.

I drove with no radio,
the red tail lights and white headlights
noise enough.

If you make the divine the center
of your life, said Father Dan,
the rest will fall into place.
Think of Thomas Aquinas' *unum necessarium*,
Terese of Avila's "interior castle."

I thought if I could nap
I might stay, but
the bed was narrow
the room cold.
Don't ask why you suffer, said Father Dan.
Ask for whom.

Sister Mary Ann and Sister Elaine
told of visiting eight high school classes in a row:
We really rested on the wings of the Holy Spirit that day!

They fed us fish and potatoes,
salad and cake.
Sister Jacinta cleaned her plate.

Lenore said she found the repetition of the rosary dull.
Does a mother ever tire of hearing her baby call
Ma Ma? Sister Claudette asked.
Yes, Lenore laughed.

I stripped my bed, folded
the extra wool blankets
and returned them to the hall table.
I thought of the chapel,
the iridescent tiles of the Christ mosaic.
I'd miss the night prayer.

Your life is not about you, said Fr. Dan.
Surrender to the mystery.

I stole out the back door
into the misty air.
I thought:
I am still a child
I am tired
What is my faith.
I drove down the long drive
onto the wide streets.

I contemplated I-80,
how far I might get –
Illinois, Indiana, Ohio –
the sun rising,
the lights and toil of Pittsburgh.

I imagined driving all night.

Missing

for Nancy Fulton

My sister, the blonde ghost
peers out at me from strange cars –
her blue eyes
sharp as a surgeon's
before the gash.
And then she's gone.

I told my father, *Be kinder*
I told my mother, *Let her know you love her*
I told myself, *Don't lose track*

She's too old for the sides of milk cartons
so I'll tell you:

She was last seen in Vermont,
a woman in a pale green dress;
something about it seemed Victorian –
the collar?
the buttons?
Might have been her cheekbones:
Meryl Streep with Botticelli hair.
People used to stop her on the street
Are you an
angel?

I wonder if she misses me
misses us
her dull kin.
She used to wrap our Christmas gifts in felt.
I wonder what she tells when people ask –
My family? Oh.
I was the only one
to survive the crash.

Running Low

This new brand of floss
lets you know you're running low.
Innocuous, small as a doll's valise,
it rests on your bathroom sink;
when you lift its plastic lid,
your two startled eyes
meet its one translucent blue –
oblong, steady as a level –
Let me be your window in.
You see then,
the tight bobbin of your life
winding down.
Each time you pull the slender thread of it.
Each time you sever its pale throat
on the sharp silver tooth.
How can this be?
You with the effervescent grin.

For Things To Start Up Again

I sit on the heavy chair next to her hospital bed.
Isn't this a pretty spread? she says,
her fingers light against white inlay.

Her eyes are quick, even
under morphine. She does not surrender
graciousness. I try to smile.

The thick scar on her belly was opened,
the absence of uterus grown weedy
with adhesions, her ovaries

caught, entangled in bladder, intestine.
The surgeon's knife was imprecise:
her colon nicked.

No one knows if her bowels –
that long labyrinth of hope –
will move, start up again.

She is a scientist, she desires
diagrams. On the board near her bed:
a drawing of a mutant question

mark, the black puncture
too high from the bottom.
Later, she will ask the nurse to read

the label on the injection needle;
someone failed to chart her shot
at 4 a.m. She will keep track

herself. *This is serious,*
she has told me. *I am*
not out of the woods.

Though for now she is content
to hear stories, news of my friends'
wedding – *Wasn't it a wonderful day?*

And because I wish her anywhere
but here, I tease up dahlias and cosmos,
Anna roses and snap dragons,

rosemary bushes grand on Greek columns,
until her eyes darken with pleasure
and then weariness, and she lies back.

We have known each other only a few weeks –
too soon to know what we are to one another,
or what we may need to become. *I can't*

talk anymore, she says. And I don't
tell her I have been practicing the yoga
she taught me, wearing her blue Alaska sweatshirt,

which smells of sandalwood, of snow.

Messenger

No mail today,
and all my friends are scattered
like bird seed on the back porch.
I am tired of feeding those who never stay.
Tired, too, of my own transience,
the landlord who told me
I don't mean to sound like an auctioneer
but the first one to hand me a check gets it
Sometimes I think of the man
in front of me at the post office
who yelled at the clerk in broken English
You are full of BULL sheet!
because no one had told him
the postage had gone up,
because his careful calculation for 35 stamps
at ten dollars and fifteen cents was useless.
Sometimes I stand at my living room window, look out
at my neighbor's enormous TV, which flickers
like the quick movements of birds all night.
Does anyone see me? I wonder
what we would do if an angel
stopped on our stoops like the UPS man,
if he held toward our hands –
in a simple brown box –
the blue bone of loneliness, America.
Would anyone sign for it?

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