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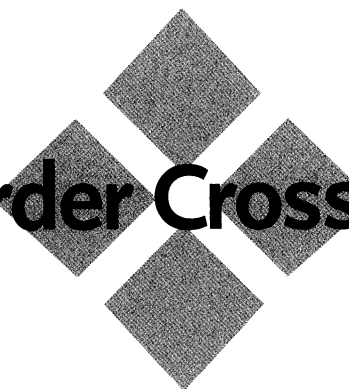
Border Crossings

POEMS BY HEATHER DUBROW

HEATHER DUBROW, Tighe-Evans Professor and John Bascom Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is the author of a chapbook entitled *Transformation and Repetition* and of a play, *The Devil's Paintbrush*, which was produced by a community theater; her recent poems have appeared in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Southwest Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She has also published five books of literary criticism and co-edited a collection of essays.

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Border Crossings

*Poems by
Heather Dubrow*

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For three doctors who cared for my mother so skillfully
and cared about her so deeply—

Hugh Barber, M.D.

Carmen Galvez, M.D.

Adam Romoff, M.D.



ONE

Border Crossings

To the memory of my mother, Helen Dubrow (1918–1999)

In the hospital waiting room
 In the long winter of my mother's life,
 I climb between the warm covers of my art book
 And pull its glowing jacket over my eyes.
 At the heart of its Mughal painting
 A horse dies horribly—
 Lavendar as its carousel changelings
 But stiff as January soil—
 Under a tree as absurdly lacy
 As cotton candy at an August fair
 Or mold
 Or the gauze bandage from her latest operation.
 The painting, it will be obvious by now,
 Gives mixed signals, like my mother's disease.

Yet Islamic paintings recall those sets of Russian dolls,
 Nestling painting within border,
 Border within another border.
 And so my dying horse is set off
 By a yellow square which is in turn set off
 By a blue square which is in turn—
 Well, you get the point.
 There are three slender borders altogether,
 Embraced by the fourth, a spacious garden full of flowers,
 Where a halo of gold
 Giftwraps each blossom
 In its own glowing singing margin:
 Theirs is the perfect pitch of dawn in spring.

Mughal artists are of course hardly alone
 In this fascination with containment.
 Ding potters, though I always knew them mainly
 For their confections garbed in bridal white,
 Also caress and curve their winter darkness

Into black bowls slim as April mornings,
 Which hold night firm within their fragile rims.
 As for Louise Nevelson, I'm not certain
 If she knew the violence of dying pastel stallions,
 But she knew grief well enough
 To joy in boxing blackness into pattern.

Meanwhile my mother lives a different blackness:
 For past the margins of the primary site
 Those cells grow luxuriant and uncontained.
 Her body a tropical garden
 Blooming death.

Meanwhile too my fear spills from its cover,
 An ink blot falling soiling spoiling—on my art book.
 And I wonder if the cancer drifts
 From her genes into mine,
 Langorous and inescapable
 As dandelion seeds on a summer breeze.

Even if I festoon my poems
 With rhyme as sentinel at the ends
 Where the line drops into blackness,
 Sooner or later all songs end on edges.
 Even if I string my poems
 With Christmas bulbs of cheery iambs
 Sooner or later the tree dries into silence
 And becomes a fire hazard.
 Sooner or later its fragrant cones

Metastasize.
 Yet the calligraphies of art still glide
 Gold onto black paper:
 Lighting blots as they spread.
 And so I keep reading and writing
 As she edges ever closer to the border
 Of the cliff I cannot fence.

June 3, 1991

To the memory of my father, Hilliard Dubrow, M.D. (1912–1991)

The moment you died, I was sheltering in a bookshop door
From the summer cloudburst the sky shouted
Without warning. The weatherman's the last to know.

I thought I surely would have known
The moment of your death. Surely that door
Should slam, not glide. Not murmur, shout.

Through the misted window, overweight titles shouted
Their messages. I thought, if I had known
About the storm, I would have stayed at home, indoors.

If I had known, I would have shouted rage at the revolving door.

Patient

Two of her clocks stopped
The week of the diagnosis.
“Avoid obvious symbolism,”
I would have chided my students.

She turns the clocks' faces to the wall
But cheers lipstick on her own.
And as the devil inside her
Builds his Pandemonium
With columns of her bones,
She bargains all her shiny hair
To buy from him
One more
Sunny winter afternoon.

Pennsylvania Station
Thanksgiving 1997

After Sir Philip Sidney, "Yee Gote-heard Gods"

You station masters with your cocky voices
 That fill tunnels with polyester music,
 He used to wait right by that dirty pillar—
 Have you seen my father waiting for my train?
 He untangled the fears knotting my forests
 Till night smothered him in early evening.

His jokes turn vinegar to wine in sour evenings.
 Can't you hear his voice—just there—beneath those voices?
 He is too bright to get lost in dank forests.
 Station masters, you must turn down your music
 So he hears the announcement of my train—
 There's his shadow, there, right by the dirty pillar.

When I was young, I thought your words were pillars,
 And the sun rose when you came home in evening,
 Or when I saw you waiting for my train.
 The chords of your voice resolved less steady voices:
 Words were cotton candy or Broadway music
 To others lurking in my family's forest.

As I grew up, I learned you lived in forests
 Of fears and turned opinions into pillars,
 Learned your heart beat syncopated music
 That might not last even until your evening.
 Yet love was the only language of your voices,
 And I knew that you would always meet my trains.

Now memory shoves against me on the train,
 And I know I'll step down from it to a forest
 Of foreign words spoken in clotted voices.
 A old fluorescent bulb right by his pillar
 Burps light, and in this dark November evening
 I hear wind when I try to sing his music.

Once he and I played duets. Now our music
Is stifled by a loud departing train.
Now my bags are heavy as November evenings.
Instead of sunbeams in this filthy forest
Old candy wrappers glint beside his pillar.
Instead of his greeting, I hear mocking voices.

For my head is an evening of dark voices,
Their jangling music echoes off his pillar,
Chanting, "Death, not he, meets all trains in this forest."

Prayer for the Dying

Red rose petals fall like harp notes
 From the flowers her friends sent.
No, this is the fallen garden:
Write the commandments of cancer.
 The only vases here are nephrostomy bags.
 Here even the daffodils bleed.
 It's the will of God, comforts the well-meaning nurse.

Hospital menu: check ONE (1) choice for dinner:
 Friends' voices ooze vanilla pudding.
 The IV drips the prescribed poison.
 Cousins pour the chocolate milk of human kindness.
 It's the will of God, comforts the well-meaning nurse.

Cancer cradles his sickle
 Behind the hospital screen.
 But who can look away from the jackboots
 Halfway outside the screen?
 It's the will of God, comforts the well-meaning nurse.

A big-eyed fetus, curled and shaking
 With the labor of being born
 Into the garden where she thinks
 She'll play a harp.
 It's the will of God, comforts the well-meaning nurse.

Red rose petals fall from her mouth
 No. Harp notes fall like roses
 All over
 No
 It's the will of God, comforts the well-meaning nurse.

The mess she's dripping all over her sheets
 Is cleaned up by the well-meaning nurse.
 Was cancer God's message in that garden
 Or just God's mess
 And who cleans up after God,
 I ask the well-meaning nurse.



TWO

The Baur Collection

Admission: 5 Francs

Life, when it tries hard to imitate art,
 Takes its cue from the sense of humor
 Teenagers display. Thus witness Alfred
 Baur, whose fortune from manure fertilized art,
 Porcelain treasures.

Rose, a *famille* in which colors never
 Quarrel. Pink buds perching like butterflies on
 Creamy curves, and its peaches feeling
 Furry. But also, there, Shino stoneware,
 Sensibly greying.

Lacquer preens here in the dimness, shining
 Subtly. Rivers like a lover's skin in
 Moonlight: silver and as dappled. Pines with
 Golden needles. And there water cascades:
 Hair of a goddess.

Jade and nephrite in this corner lacing
 Polyphony into patterns. Tendrils,
 Shaped into baskets, here sing chords of grapes. There
 Pale jade blooms into a lotus, humming
 Vines over blossoms.

Swiss-born, Baur lived for some years in Asia,
 Founding "A. Baur, the Ceylon Manure Works."
 Eden once was there in Asia. He re-
 Planted it with all its gardens intact
 Here in Geneva.

Divorce Court

This busy room is empty as iceberg lettuce.
This is not the place for the insistence of ginger.

My lawyer, his face smooth as his briefcase,
Has packed my story in tissue paper,
Folded crisp in a navy Brooks Brothers box.
Our courtroom is too smartly dressed for sequined lies.

The memories that grab mornings,
The truths that smell like old vegetables,
Claim the warm grates just outside the courthouse,
Overweight, unshaven,
Waiting to claim me as I leave.

But for now we perform the well rehearsed
Minuet of rotting love.

I sing the body arthritic

The dexterity in athletes we admire
Is skill at falsehood: stretching the limber lie
We too control our bodies. So the higher
They leap or throw their balls, the more we try
To believe in them rather than in pimples,
Our rubies of truth, our teachers whose text
Is the body's power over its simple-
Minded master (who fails the final: adolescent sex).
Much later, hormones again make obscene calls:
Panting hotly down the phone at three AM,
Persuading even unbelievers that the Fall's
Price is not only labor, but mayhem
Of menopause. Yet now sex teaches new lessons, smiling:
Grey is sterling; less often more; bald beguiling.

Accident (II)

Flat as 2AM

On the pavement.

The tendons of time rupture.

Before: Smiling steadily as any Attic statue,

Sure that the ground knows its place

Beneath my feet.

After: Kleenex tissue and finger tissue

Lie crumpled in the street.

All accidents are head injuries.

Jove the avenger? The spinning sisters?

We should be so lucky.

Our histories are promulgated, our fates decreed

By an overloaded car of giggling teenage gods,

Singing out of tune, swigging beer and blood.

Insomnia (III)

OK, for once I'll be grateful
I woke in the night's tunnel:
Clock smirking its wide-eyed digits at me,
Partner purring sleep beside me.

Things I will do between 4:40 and 7:

- 1) Sort jewelery box
- 2) Discard divorced socks
- 3) Begin taxes
- 4) Send FAXes
- 5) Affix photos in book
- 6) Attach plant hook
- 7) Begin

But rain insists,
Memories siren the dark,
Yesterday stains all lists.
And photos slide out of their albums
And stalk up the steps,
As tight with fury as a Van Gogh cypress.

West of the Metropolitan Museum

City spats splattering—hot markets, the bus
Driver's insult— blister even the thick skin
Of August pavements. Tar boils. A fuss
Reddens, bubbles, bursts. The familiar poison
From the cop's lips. And two
Nasal ladies, purple with perfume, insist
That rude child took their place in line. Too
Teary to protest, she drops her Coke bottle—her list.
And so I retreat to the ivory of museums:
Two scholars sit, calm as dusk, on a screen,
Their lips are half open: a duet, it seems?
Pine needles and peonies, incised lines clean
As flutes. Wait—blossoms or blisters? A crack
Snakes from his lips. Needling words, poisoned black?

Vacation

I

Don't try for a minute to tell me
 Spontaneous generation doesn't exist:
 From inky wells of mourning
 Fly shimmering lines of poems—
 Confident goldfinches.
 And more to my purposes now
 In this kind of job
 The fetid surfaces of neglected paperwork
 Spawn killer mosquitoes.
 Messages pile up, fifteen pounds overweight,
 Needing showers.
 Appointments scar the skin of days
 Into the unforgiving geometry of rectangles and squares.
 The phone is a two year old
 With an upset stomach.

II

At last.
 Two weeks round and promising as magnolia buds.
 Time serves itself with mint, for sipping slowly.
 Even the telephone naps through the afternoon.
 The pompously erect appointments that were chasing Daphne
 Variously slide,
 Contentedly alone,
 Into swinging hammocks,
 Or turn themselves into nonchalant laurels,
 Soft leaves swaying with laughter.
 Overheated taxis spout sails from their fins
 And float off into the welcoming bay welcoming
 Cool morning all day long morning all

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by Heather Dubrow

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