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The beauty of this world. 2014

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The Beauty of This World

Poetry by
Rosemary Zurlo-Cuva



A Parallel Press Chapbook

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The Beauty of This World

Poems by
Rosemary Zurlo-Cuva

Parallel Press

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The poem “Arboretum Walk” previously appeared in *Echolocations*;
“Facing the Muse” and “Improvisation” in *Mush*; “Door County Sunset”
in *Sisters*.

Frank, always

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*Let grief be your sister, she will whether or no.
Rise up from the stump of sorrow, and be green also,
like the diligent leaves.*

*A lifetime isn't long enough for the beauty of this world
and the responsibilities of your life.*

Scatter your flowers over the graves, and walk away.

Mary Oliver
from *Flare*, 12

December, Big Bay Park

This is what I want you to see: Lake Michigan
moody in its spectrum of grays, the rusty-nail bite
of snow in the air. In summer the sand will whiten, the water
turn magically blue-green, but this is the lake I will show you:
dark, impenetrable, reassuringly taciturn.

We are an odd couple, combing beaches in winter while
friends line up tickets to sunny hot places, listening
for the quiet that falls between gusts of wind and hovers
in the breaks between waves.

The wind will muscle us further and further along
the beach, wearing away all resistance until, huddled close, we find
ourselves spilling things that come out nowhere else, the worries
the failures and endless small hurts.

A rim of ice just thicker than frost will form where the waves fan
out on the shore; we'll shiver and listen and walk until
we no longer notice the bite in the air, until we can stand to climb back
to the world that expects so much from us.

We Have Always Known Grief

There were always the fireflies, rising
out of the grass at dusk, the call of crickets
at summer's end when the fat milk pods begged
to be split and their seeds to float like
questions on the wind

and the endlessly churning lake, impervious
to the cries of seagulls, changing color with each
passing cloud, smoothing bits of shattered
bottle glass and spitting them back
as jewels to be treasured and forgotten
in a small girl's pocket

the roar of the city bus after depositing
the cleaning ladies on our unimproved
suburban lanes as if aliens from
another planet, the immigrant grandmother
enthroned on a lime-green plastic
lawn chair, tugging her black sweater close
on the hottest summer afternoon.

Door County Sunset

We find the rockers, you and I
when the evening is spread out against the sky—
no, we aren't going there—on the limestone
porch behind the visitor center;
and I recall the priest who married
us, who in his homily envisioned
our many years ending
with two codgers rocking side
by side. Had he imagined this rosy
orange light splayed over
the water, your fingers curled
around mine, face etched in a backlit
dusk as the first star makes
its shy presence known?

Arboretum Walk

The trail to the spring snakes in
and out of the woods, snow packed

and easy through stalks of tall
prairie grass stiffened and gold in the clean

winter sun. Ice fishers hunker
down to their work, far off on an ocean

of white, their voices travel
upstream, deep and rusty as barking

dogs from a distance. Follow
the sound of spring water bubbling

to the surface, forming
wreaths of low-lying vapor. Find

hope in the watercress, impossibly
green alongside the snowy bank.

How the Beatles Brought Me the World

I could never make up my mind who
I loved most: Paul
was so cute, John so cool, George
the shy boy with the hurt in his
eyes. Ringo, even at ten, I could not
consider seriously.

Morning and night I listened
to my transistor radio, waiting
for those early songs, such joyful
refrains of longing—*Please please
me, All I wanna do*—a girl
might easily clasp
each note to her soul. In between
I was forced to absorb
the news, the traffic
report and the weather, and
began always to know what
was going on.

At school I went back each
week to study the library atlas like
a treasure map. *Liverpool. London.
Hamburg. New York.* Traced the blue
capillaries of the Thames and the Mersey.
Our clever librarian handed me
books—histories, novels, poems
and travelogues. *England*, she'd
say and I'd read, swallowing
whole, the promise of life
like the Sweet Tart dissolving
on the back of my tongue.

Post Card to My Mother

—Winchcombe, Gloucestershire

On the lane from Sudeley Castle, a shaded
stone bench beside a brook and a meadow. A horse
grazing far off in the corner seems not to notice
when I sit down to rest from the gravel dust
and a midday sun. “You’ve dreamed your whole
life about England,” my mother said as I packed
to leave. “I worry the real thing might
disappoint you.” It went unsaid
the number of real things that had come
to disappoint her.

I pull a post card and a pen out of my pack
and pause, listening to the rush
and slap of the brook over stones, the world
imperturbably green. I sit frozen long enough
that the horse comes to investigate, leaning
over the fence to blow a puff of hot breath
on my shoulder.

Years later, boxing my mother’s things, cleaning
out her desk after the funeral, I find
among the other letters and cards, the one
picturing Sudeley Castle. On it I had written: *Dear Mom,*
I am not disappointed.

Walking the Cranborne Chase

—Wiltshire Dorset Borders, 2007

We started from the village of Tollard Royal, where a swan paddled her pond, oblivious to the summer rain. We kept repeating the name *Tollard Royal*, one of the best on a journey of delicious place names: Chicksgrove, Iwerne Minster, East Knoyle. Thatchers working under a tarp called down to us: *Fine day for a walk*, and laughed themselves silly.

The rain held steady through a few miles of grazing fields, then a village where Romans watered their horses, pondwater thick and brown with stirring, and finally the shelter of woods, though we were already soaked and it seemed fair to ask, Why this place? Why now? The English majors among us once thought we knew, remembering our adolescent attachments to all things British—the Beatles, the Brontës, Bathsheba Everdene flitting over the Wessex Downs—how we'd wrapped ourselves in our teenage melancholy and the certainty that we did not deserve to suffer the pains of our particular present. We'd felt ourselves orphans, like Pip or Oliver Twist, waiting for our real parents, our true lives and true loves to arrive.

Sodden and puffing from a long upward climb to the road, the mystery and emotion of those earlier times grew elusive: all woods look pretty much the same after all. We drank tea and ate sandwiches at Compton Abbas Airfield, a view of the Spitfires and Tornados parked along the grass field to stiffen our moist upper lips. Dryer and fortified we trudged the road south, relieved the sky had ceased its damned leaking but no longer expecting much in the way of wonders.

We turned off to find ourselves at the edge of a rugged scarp, a long vale dotted with sheep. The path followed a steep, narrow track that wound around clumps of gorse with their yellow flowers and spines like rusty nails, and where we were stunned by a rainbow, flickering against a gray sky and the green, green hills.

Haymarket Pub

In the city at last we needed to stretch
our legs, to feel sun for the first
time in days, though it came with a scrappy
wind and we wore our long sleeves. Standing
half way across Hungerford Bridge we surveyed
the domain—Thames high and churning after long
rains, the Houses of Parliament making their usual
post card impression, the Eye in suspension over
the bank like the great and powerful
Oz. We snapped photos with hapless tourist
abandon, eyes squinting, hair flailing. I look
at those now and remember the unremarkable
pub where we sat to rest our feet and drink
for a while out of the summer squalls, how we must
have seemed loopy and loud, we middle-aged
Americans: old friends, companions,
the loves of each other's lives, giddy
with joy to be to be reunited
once more.

Mary McDonough

We have made it to this coast, to these harrowing
Irish cliffs tufted with grass thick and cold
in the morning dew. Wind cuts the air
between us, billows our jackets. The ferry
won't take us to Inis-Mor because of storms
too far off yet to see; the roiling waters still glitter
where sun dares to glare from between
sulky clouds.

I think, how she must have loved this place.
And hated it with all her desolate,
half-starved soul, sixteen years old, my great
great grandmother. How she must have keened
to leave this whorl of wind and rock and coal-dark
sea. And still longed
to escape.

Did she stand here for hours, reluctant
to be torn from this land, this sea that could rend
a young heart, voices wailing on the wind, hovering
within mist and foam frothed up by furious
waves, songs of the travelers who never found
their way back?

Recourse

Literature is the expression of a feeling of deprivation, a recourse against a sense of something missing. —Octavio Paz

I often recall that time
lived in the lilt
of my mother's voice
singing to the radio, my father's
white shirt starched and cool
on my cheek, my
grandfather's Red Wing
boots, scuffed
with wear and always
in the periphery
of my vision as I lay
on the carpet to watch
TV: these same details
I've tried to write over
and over, as if to render
us whole and together
once more.

In This Way We Conjure Our Lives

I do not strain to bring back the words
my father said to me, but the sound
of his living voice. Trying to recall my baby's first
word, I hear again her laugh, its full throttle, full
body abandon. It is melody I crave, not
lyric. And yet I spend most days struggling
to find the right word, as if words might mean
everything, when perhaps they mean
nothing—sweet nothings, punches
we pull, barbs that pierce tender skin
on the way in and again coming
out. *In the beginning was the Word* that later
became flesh. Catalog, define, describe,
render the world
speechless.

As I Age

for Kate

The membrane between thoughts seems to have thinned as I try to express the dullness of my teenage years and say “dudness”—a refugee fragment related to a wine that fell short of its price and its promise. And though most older people remember childhood far more distinctly than their recent pasts, my own early memories, once vivid and regularly trawled for reassurance, answers, the kernels of stories or poems, grow vaguer, gauzy with time, so that it is an effort to recall any but those singular snapshot moments—my red-faced infant moving her hands like a mime, as if trying to demonstrate the harrowing tale of her overlong birth; or later, the sweet smooth curve of her moonlit cheek on a New Year’s Eve walk in the woods—those moments when time stopped, I came alive to only that particular Now, and the small voice inside whispered:
This you must never forget.

My Mother's Bones

We buried her in pink Pumas—her last
mail-order purchase—and now I can't stop
picturing those sneakers cradling
the small, gnarled bones
of her feet. We ought to have dressed
her in woolens, a London Fog
for the damp, instead of the pale
summer dress she'd worn to parties
and teas, and matched
her vivid blue eyes—so thoroughly
unsuitable for an eternity
in the ground.

Fleeting

If rosemary is for
remembrance then honeysuckle
should be for forgetting, a smell
so ephemeral that each
spring I must learn it
again, breathe it in like
oxygen to a sickly
lung for the day
or two that it scents
our path around
the duck pond, stunning
us with a sweetness we
will spend the rest
of the year trying
to recall.

At the Dog Park

Just after the rain is best, when the earth
exudes its glorious scents of decay, worm flesh
buried deep and old piss soaked
into the dirt. In the woods, memories
of Gus the German short-haired
pointer—how we howled that day!—the mud
cool and slick on the round tender
pads of our paws. An odor of freedom
gusts over the wire fence, ripe
with rabbit, fox and squirrel, haunting
our dreams for days to come as we lie
by the fire, bellies pink and fat
and full.

Improvisation

—for Sally

Words make a tedious long hand
pulling grammar out of your hat
seeking always the correct, the succinct
all that cognition a chore.

See how music is only vibration
tuned to the perfect pitch of your
heart, the frequency
of your inside out—skip
the lyrics, skip along—a crow
caws on a hank of wind and you
are free, the song snaking out every
clumsy beautiful sad lovely thing
you want us to know.

Facing the Muse

At sunset wind rises
stirring tall grass the hiss
a murmur of childhood
a story a dream lost
in bittersweet colors
heavy metal November sky
trees going bare at winter's
breathy insinuations

so the bodies refuse
to stay underground
and the rumbling night train
will call me from sleep
run away run away run away

on the prairie at dawn
cold cheeks wet nose
wild asters periwinkle
at the edge of a swamp
it never ends
here never ends
lips moving the fingers
beginning to twitch

Rust and Steel

So here we are in our sixties
driving the Interstate towards Tomah
arguing over a song that rolls up
on the iPod, the cover of a masterpiece
from an eighties band, its lyrics
about the redemption of love almost belied
by the melody—bleak as the Baraboo Hills turned
to rust against the steel
of November sky.

You sound like a scold when you say
that the song was already perfect and I tell
you I like a new perspective now
and again, keeping my eyes on the mist that lingers
over faded meadow grass and between
leafless shrubs, remembering
as I do at odd moments that you
have had cancer and like Rilke said
the knowledge of impermanence haunts
our days with its fragrance, and maybe
also its tune, stark in minor key
splendor, not so much breaking
our hearts as finding the places
they are already
broken.

Row Out

I see the old woman I will
become in the dark screen
of my iPad, not my mother's face
yet, but she's there in the sag
and roll of the jaw line, a suggestion
of heaviness above the eyes.

I think of this later on my bike, racing
alongside the gray lake only hoping
to stir muddy air; it feels like wading
with my face, with every jiggle of loose
flesh as I ride over pebbles
and dips. The crew team laps
silently away from the shore, shining
so brightly through watery shadows.

A sheen of dew coats the blades
of quack grass that cover the ground between
shrubs and it strikes me a person
might at some point begin
to think that this
is enough, that
this, in fact
is all

and I can see myself rowing
out from the sheltering green
of the shore, from the amplified shouts
of the coxswain, reaching
for that swelling monochrome
quiet as my legs pump in rhythm
with my still
persistent
heart.



Rosemary Zurlo-Cuva grew up in Milwaukee, got her undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and has lived there ever since. She works as a journalist, editor and writing teacher. Her novel, *Travel for Agoraphobics* was published as an e-book in 2011.

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