

MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS & NIGHTBIRDS

POEMS INSPIRED BY THE DREAMS OF EMILY DICKINSON

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Emily, The Poet

*To realize that nothing can be seen but to retain the concept
of invisibility...* —Hui-neng

I am afraid to own a Body... —Dickinson

Unknowable, she's easy
To step on. A sliver of her
Sequestered self
Lodged in exposed toes
That never learned the dance.

The Philosophy of House-Keeping

“She died at play/ Gambolled away/ Her lease”

* Five Chinese brothers live with retarded cats, wander the edge of the woods in wait. The five brothers with one name, one nature, with five gills, five gifts, housed in one body with five doors. As Emily dreams, she floats to the top floor, head in clouds, laughing helium. A cup of cinnamon tea. She visits the five chiming brothers who save her from drowning, burning, fading, shrinking—nightly she retreats into a spectral episode and the brothers draw her near—sing to her / recite her favorite lies, bouquets of jasmine and buttercup pregnant with songbird scent. A goldfinch Eucharist flutters against her teeth (ooh!), attempts to escape belief. In one dream she’s a porn star—wraps her diminutive thighs around a pole, how she wraps her mind around death, poem after pole, after poem, and then she’s dressed in Frankenstein’s creation—her bodice and crushed girdle, a patchwork of putridity. Baking loaves of gingerbread**, sifting sugar, licking tears from hummingbird eyes, always she’s Emily recalling a world in a house, objects in a kitchen—desire, hope, love—now*** rolling pins, an herbarium, the wire mousetrap. She embraces each noun that will vanish when she dies to the nothing it came from—the word—the way a cloud pie**** flies like a bee buzzing past the ear, flakes, and tenderly melts. Night blows out the single star for fear.***** Trombone air. Troubador.

Notes

* A poem without “I” wanders purgatory, swims through tormented seas of unsewn sheafs, travels farther into summer than birds.

** The lost chapter on bread baking.

*** Language is a machine that brings abstractions into being, semiconductor that permits contact between light wave and light bulb; its antonym: death, which acts as a microtransformer of objects, reversing them into concepts. Without the authority of one fatal tongue, words fall into the vast vat of sound.

**** Place $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of cloud in glass bowl. Saturate with lemon water. A pinch of salt from teardrops. Introduce feathery chartreuse, magenta, cobalt and cream—slowly fold in memories of pleasure until light and well blended.

***** Without a child she will always be a broken pine, burning the oven.

Commentary

She who wrote: “To die—takes just a little while—/They say it doesn’t hurt”
—How willing to expire might she have been? As a specialist
in dying and a meticulous record-keeper
of the dead—their possessions, thoughts, senses—
She inhabited a world that could be trusted
To forget. Her question: “What kind of a world do we love in?”

The Secret Conversing of Birds

Sometimes it starts with a murder of crows congregating on an echoing field
Of Persian onions in bloom, wild leeks, crimson poppy.

Caw, caw, the crow circles its cry, never returning

To the taking-place, the spin-off point, as if Doctor Maximus, of theosophical
Speculation, donned in body's negative dervish-frock, swims

The earth's solid breath, (*ku? ku?, where? where?*). Is he listening
to melodic

Hammering at the goldsmith's smithy? Dancing for hours, never

Turning twice, as if the good doctor were exiled in the flesh

Of Rumi where illuminations join at an interior and anterior edge,
where everything

Is the same, only somehow something is not—, his feminine tears

Submerge the bolted landscape as they mutually dissolve. With loss

Of motion goes memory, with collapsed space our dervish halts,

Utterly alone, uttering to strings of light—*ku? ku?*, he says—*ku ku*, they reply

Into his shelter of thought that forms a hapless desire for

A deep divine homelessness, as if homelessness amounts to attaining or being

Initiated into the inspirited spiritualis, as if buildings abruptly refuse

To conceal their exhausting dance, as if we follow our homes

Throughout our lives, as if our lives

Depend on our seeking or seeing

Scrying tears where poeming commences.

As if the ancient dances of homing and whirling were distinct.

(As we circle our cries to call ourselves home)

Rumi knows the kitchen and weaving places, hemstitching

Fraying seams after the tangerine moon

Has risen, the indivisible sun sets

Behind grenadine syrup—willful, reviled,

There are great mirrors around him,

Bolts of blinding shine reveal

Sunlight swords (sun's words),

Dawn whispers, "Are they coming or going?"

The purple light of reason. What is Great Purple? A season passing.

Dancing above amethyst sand, camels carry souls across the desert—transporting
You and me to our next bodies.

I'm a language cashier at a pet shop
Where more dialects are spoken than words in the mega-dictionary.
We carry birds—young parrots with green plumage, a rooster
Who heralds in the Morning Prayer that each species
Diligently attends, as they tend to do. We have the dog of the seven
sleepers who sits
Vigilantly protecting their dreams, awaiting their awakening
When they'll feed him the sweet kernel, which contains our most precious oil.
He'll taste the world in it.

I sell temporary kitties in the form of reconstituted sponges.
Place one in a tank of water filled with fresh thoughts
And she'll implode into nuclear color. Down a sliding pond. Licking
Her paws and the eyes of her kitty-cat pals, preening toes and assholes,
Batting around more reconstituted sponges (other temporary kitties).

During winter, peach-faced lovebirds disappear
In the mirror game. They can play forever without striking
Their reflection—the winged body, our technology body
That utters the absolute, resolute, like a figure
Which is uttered into existence.
Water does not issue (rush) out the mouth of a stone bird
But what isn't animated? Even grief, even sleep.
A mountain of skulls.
What isn't animal!

Doctor Magnanimous spinning counterclockwise in a black dervish coat,
His tombstone headdress a reminder that an essential remainder
Coats the earth with who we've been before.
Flying the sky, cackling, careening, dragon bones melting, leopard
Spots fading feathers floating
Into snow crystals / icicles /
starlight stalactites / faithful dog
Finally fed his desserts justly—ebullient, turbulent, sighing winds
shifting and turning
Into whirling birds.

When Robert Schumann Met Hans Christian Anderson

She rubs a match against the wall.
(running/falling)

Mood: Green

It bursts into flame and where light sprays, the wall becomes transparent
And she sees the steam of roast goose stuffed with apples and plums—
A psychical consummation for the suppressed wish/desire.

Mood: Forest fire

How fire burns
Grandmother's cottage cheese
Cottage of whooping owls.

Her three magic peas. She sleeps on peas, seven Ps on her forehead,
In sea green soup, pea fog on her mind, pea dreams, drowning in peas.
Echoic images shadow her through dark avenues—P Street—They wear
Peacoats and breathe down her neck
Their breaths shake her skeleton. Sigh!

(She might be left outside to fry
In a forest without letters for trees—a long, quiet, resting forest)
... a poor little girl with naked feet.

It's all about shoes. Father was a cobbler.
Memory, like music, swirls around the cortex.

It's running tones
Toes and trees and stories // Sliced braising tongue

When the content oversteps the personal censor, she thinks, "I was only a dream.
I was only running for running's sake. It wasn't as though I wanted to arrive, to
win. I am only living because I am born."

How much has to do with scoring?

In logic, "Mood" and "modality" convey possibility / impossibility, existence /
non-existence, contingency / necessity. "Mood" in grammar, derived from "mode"
with its elongated vowel, is associated with states of mind (e.g. a good/bad mood).

Mood: Knifed

Red's the central character that might live inside her.

No matter how beat up she gets

Her flesh is without wound. It's more comfortable

When the damage is seen.

Once the music stops

The words stop

Even though it was a gnarly, old-growth forest,

Unyielding, impenetrable, at least she was walking through a friend.

She could run through it as though it were a forest in a fairy tale,

Read through it, red through and through

One person, who is dependent upon another, will at some point in time make a remark bound to be disagreeable to the second one, and because of it, a simile is born.

Its as difficult to build a daughter as to build a Shinto temple.

It's especially difficult to build an ocean,

And even more difficult to build *on* an ocean.

The floor slopes forward, the sitting mind wanders,

Pillars and perspective-lines tilt.

The one who crosses the ocean acts as a drum, throwing sound forward—none
Should be wasted. (Water beneath her for optimum resonance).

She slips words down her teeny throat

Just in case a line is later needed.

Emily has never seen the ocean (nor the sea).

... open a closet and mourn the death of white dresses...

... close the mouth and prose...

Just in case some dreams are forgotten.

This bridge is not a symbol, but a way of finding

Herself, of running into the forest.

Her bird body has drifted away. A letter in the mail. Emily's e-

How far across time can the voice reach?

The human form. Fox-form. Formlessness.

Tangled letters in scripted forests—underbrush and calligraphy. Spirited.

Suddenly all worldly attainments

Vanish. Her youthful flesh.

Calling out among the ivies, thieves, pines.

A loon song and the clicking of cicadas. Lone song. Plainsong.

We feel awkward at first light on the far side of the bridge,
Devoid of limb and limn, seeing and sound
Seafaring // the soundness of reason
Its soundlessness ghosting
A faded boy
I got so I could take his name
He put the Belt around my life
Mama never forgets her birds.

On Becoming a Poem

Three winter wrens
Flute through blinding field—
Their feathered extremities jacketing
Hollow bone, a hole, dear one
Spineless fascicles of ephemera

I've known some birds that appear
As accountants of lost objects. They
Call numbers through karmic arteries,
Scope and tally earrings, scarves, letters, thoughts
Set telegraphically, telepathically in a holograph storehouse
Deep in inviolate woods.

Percussive memories, plumes drum

Three librarians flutter
Above land neck, land waist
Lore of scythelike wing
Toward gnat's horizon

The philanthropist donates his phantom to a museum
Philomena swallows, weaves
Trace filaments
Faith trails

Swift's song of long glistening notes at noon, never to be
Seen. * Herself a part of a high March sky, the summer day and bird-call.

* From Emily Dickinson's obituary in the *Springfield Republican*, May 18, 1886, written by Dickinson's sister-in-law.

MARTINE BELLEN is the author of six collections of poetry, including *The Vulnerability of Order* (Copper Canyon Press); *Further Adventures of the Monkey God* (Spuyten Duyvil); *Tales of Murasaki and Other Poems* (Sun & Moon Press), which won the National Poetry Series Award; and *Places People Dare Not Enter* (Potes & Poets Press). She is presently collaborating with the composer David Rosenboom and ten composer/performers from around the world (see www.martinebellen.com for names and details) on *AH! an opera, no-opera*, which will be performed in September 2009 at REDCAT Theater in Los Angeles.

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