

On the Air, Fragrant: A Group of Poems
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On the Air, Fragment

Under the Mead Moon

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On the Air, Fragrant

Whether from blossom or newly-opened leaf,
Whether by loft or drift, haphazard or headlong
Like myself, whether by merely being carried
On air, the scent of a just-born thing –
Caught in its moment of opening, alive along the river.

How often I want simply to loaf, to lie down awhile
Under a willow and when the fronds wave or brush
The top of my head, my collar or nape, I wake
Caressed by a tree, woven into its dreams, perhaps,
The way birdsong early mornings weaves my brain.

There's no solving what is carried of bone-ache, heartstruck
Moods, whether dawn, midday, dusk, whether by
Water or window-screen, backyard hammock to sway
And lull, no solving but lulling, loafing, that ever-
Soothing motion, back, forth, of rocking, waking, dying.

Under the Mead Moon

Whisper back to me, leaf upon leaf, how the tendril
Reaches first to find a hold, to twine itself
A fastness upon a lower stem —

A green cascading waterfall of leaf, vine, another
Petiole and leaf, a linkage, a lash, a notch,
And then a dollar-coin sized leaf and leaf.

From my window, I see how these make a roof,
An open-sided hut clambering over a bush's
Architecture — and I'd go on living there,

Learning to love there, if I could, under the mead moon.
The floor's a crackling dust of broken leaf and stem,
Soft enough for bedding down, a coverlet of wind.

The air's not sorrowful yet, not strangled or moist,
Pine tree dry, almost citrus, the cool updraft from a fold
In earth, a labial fold like the petal of a rose.

One grows nearby, you'll see. If it's possible to gaze upward,
Seeing through transparent green to blue, then I vow
to ascend the ladder rungs the one stalk has left,

The mustard garlic that dropped its load of blooms
But hid away the seed kernels, falling to earth
Awaiting next spring's heat – then I'd be the intrepid

Journeywoman climbing rung upon higher rung,
This is the way, yes – the house a far off room
Of its own, cold outpost, and the stars leaving it
In dark but illuminating all that is magic here.

The Popular Adrift

“I live between the heron and the wren.” — Roethke

Not so bad, after all, to lie down in water, drifting off
From the others with no chance of coming back.
At least, today, the river runs green, the silt
Having cleared, and wherever the mallard floats,
So go I.

Back along the path, there’s one I call the harp tree,
Not to be found in a field guide, having gotten its name
From a pruning job with a chainsaw by two old guys
Who pattered up one day in a battered orange truck.
Its talent is to sound,

Now, all the grief that passes it—a divining rod
For that below-radar tune lodged
In muscle and bone of those who go strolling by.
The hurt that can’t be shared, it shares,
Without a word.

Not so bad, after all, to be fatally on the move,
Facing the dam downstream. The mad used to be tied to trees
Along rivers, in hopes the water would cure them.
The sound here? Their voices silvery leaves,
Making this sharp air.

Three Hunters Kneeling

Laid out in rows on South Carolina's burnt grass,
A square of ten by fifteen shapes, a quilt of limp forms
Of crows, their dusky tails and feathers changed now,
Gone to will-not-fly-again, will-not-caw-or-cry-out,
Life's sheen disappeared from their discerning eyes.

Three men in camouflage kneel behind, grinning, their puffed-
Out chests making me think of the top bird on the tree,
The alpha bird at the suet cage, chasing the small birds
Off – though not slaughtering them, ever, one by one.

Overnight, pulling them into my eyes and brain in sleep,
I set them on the wing on the updraft air under the sturgeon moon,
Alive in my hands cupped, the lifelines breathing life
Back into them, blessing them, giving them peace,

Dripping a bit of cool water into their beaks, and one
Shakes its head, the draught silvery down its throat,
And it revives. If their crime was eating the whole crop
Of pecans, now I give them back acres more of them,

The ground thick, and pokeweed's berries, dangling and dark.
I turn the men into bird droppings – and now the crows
Go swooping down, parading there, turning, eating in the sun
What has passed through undigested, whole and still sweet.

Wetlands

Fallen or broken, last year's cattails rattle pale
And dry, among tussocks of last year's grasses,
The wet seepage of groundwater, a wild iris
Or two. One tree near the edge stands nude
In sunlight – bark in one large piece peeled away,
Not the red-bellied woodpecker but the hands,
Most likely, of raccoons. This month the outgoing wrack
Of all that's done sees, going past, the new blades
Whirring up. Brutal, the way wind still bites,
Light glaring on barely-emerged buds. Half-caught,
Me too – whether to mourn or cheer. What I sense,
Bone-deep, root-thick, is how some spring will catch
And I won't care – won't walk or notice even to stoop,
Remark on what's coming up, lament what won't emerge.

Hamadryad

Imagine flowering in early fall on leafless twigs—
That's one of the witch hazel's magic traits.

And the fruit capsule, when dried, can shoot its seed
A full thirty feet—a tree that can move.

When it waits, as it does now, not wilting,
Not allowing one leaf to yellow or to drop—

Waits in the same black plastic pot, dusty,
It arrived in from the nursery, when it rustles

A bit in the slight breeze, surely there's a hint
Of its ultimate divinity—.

Our fates have become linked, both about to be
Planted by the ravine-edge—

There to soar, to ride the night and morning air,
Going through turns of the moon, tumbles of storm,

Lightning, snow, and rain. When I seek shelter,
I abandon it to the understory—

Calling myself hamadryad and also sorceress, water-
And depth-seeker—counting the months till I can

Cut a branch for dowsing, divining – eager to feel
That downward tug of a forked branch toward water,

Drawn to the underground current that flows here –
Rushing cold, running, loaded with snow-melt, tree-juice.

Breathing Fire

Where breathing starts, the skin pinks, the mouth opens,
The hibernating tongue now shrugs up, stretches to its tip,
And curls to sleep again in that toothy den.

Pines go on shivering their needles in the sun,
And the pokeweed's top leaves flick the butterfly off,

Respiration becomes a holy act, filling up and the sweet
Emptying out. A cat or a rabbit watches from the tall grass
In the dark shadow of the hosta near the blown

Peony, the pink lily. Let's not go where breathing stops,
But stay at its start—the wasps building all day

A knuckle-size paper nest to fit the fountain where it
Attaches, and look at their pulsing
Thoraxes—small jackets of black and gold.

Where air makes a breath's journey in is the live
Cell, the cilia-hair waving, the packed nest of the lungs,

A double cave, and out—where life reigns and walks with its
Swagger, past spiderwort and snake's lair at the wood-
Pile, past sundrops and the mandrake with its toxic hints,

Its lime-fruit, hidden and pendant, growing only
In the richest woods, breathing fire under open treetops.

Burning, Summer 2006

Something in the woods has snapped in half,
Yesterday's storm tore it, and the trunk shows
Fibers, ripped apart, and then the top half down.
No wilting yet, the tree believes it still could be
Alive, witness the leaves, but they're upside down,
Hanging a foot from the ground, heading there soon.

All night something in the woods cried out – a slow
Cry, a wail and not a screech, not an owl on the wing
Or a distempered raccoon trying to scratch inside –
More like a thing hungry or in pain, perhaps caught
And wanting free, nipping or gnawing at its own sore leg.

Today something on the wing flapped by, almost a ghost,
Following the creek, followed by another. By the time
I noticed, turning my head, it was gone. How could I be
Sure then that I'd seen it, heron-gray or ghostly white,
Feet disappearing last, no cry at all, a silent wisp?

Near the woods I sprayed, at dusk, poison on the wasps,
Mud-daubers, ones with a nest like an ocular eye,
An insect eye, many-celled, from which they peered
And flew, raised their young, buzzed out to sting
If a person with the wrong smell got too close.

There's a burned smell, or burning, at the woods' edge,
A dying fall, a weeping cry, the moist flattened grass
Shows that something lay here, paused here, stayed,
Rested its last rest before moving on wounded, going on
As it could, before it was devoured down to bone,
Eaten alive, taking its last hurried, gasping breath.

Homage to the Green-Backed Heron

To the heron
Standing near the bridge span
So quietly
And obscurely
Like a pillar
Or a stalk of teasel –
Who would notice
Or care
In this light?

And yet I spied
A glimmer of green
Iridescent in crepuscular
Light, slowing
My step, coming to
A quiet halt
With the dog, she
Who sat then
At my feet.

The moment went on
Lasting, the gray
Almost tangible light
Dimming further,
The heron not blinking
Or lifting a wing

But holding in a posture
Of deep thought,
Perhaps, or sleep—
Was that it?
No, the heron's eyes—
Yellow-rimmed, opened—
And it turned its slender
Beak back and forth,
Neck hunching down
More into its shoulders,
A conductor
Of air.

Heron, I admire
Your subtle greenness
And even more
The stillness with which
You approach the coming
Dark. How easy
You make it seem
To live in the world,
To stand, one-footed,
By a rusted bridge,
Ignoring the querulous mallards,
Never silent, never alone,
Paired, forever paddling.

How can I say
I know anything
About the green-backed heron
Without seeing it open
Its glorious flexible
Wings, flying off low
And thoughtful, to its
Creekside nest?

Yet the call
To keep moving comes –
The dog shaking the leash –
And from the heron
I sensed a thought crossing
To me, mind to mind,
Urging me to step on.
Not for today the chance
Of seeing the heron drop
A bug on the water's surface,
Using a twig or an insect
To lure some hungry fish
To the water's mirrored top.
To save a treat for another
Day, to breathe where
Your feathers are –
And there we went, swinging
Along into sharp air, the river
Lifting its voice with the wind.

Tawny Light

If I could be carried back to this, the just-before-dark
Peach explosion of light touching the trees, and then
The tips and serrated leaves on the wasteland chicory,

If I could be lifted back to this before I die,
The way Queen Anne's lace blooms, then closes
Into a tight clump, each blossom a nest not

Large enough for a warbler or a wren, though a bee
Could crawl in, sleeping for a few hours
In a swaying stalk-top bed, canopied,

Dreaming of pollen, nectar sticky on pistils, all things sweet.
If I could feel in my hand the electric charge
When a hornet awakens in a petal, one

I've dead-headed and held still – a red, tissue-thin shred
Of hibiscus – in my palm. If I could believe beyond age,
Strife, death, beyond sorrow and despair, believe thus

In light's ample touch, its democratic, generosity-poured,
Free and extrapolated love sent here
By stars long since winking out, departed

Like our parents, then I could appreciate before going, nod,
And driving home tonight from the river – not mind
At all full darkness, and to come – no moon, no rest.

Plein Air Panegyric

Suppose instead of the desk
Dusty with pens standing tall
In a cup, instead of
The double-paned window with webs
Caught inside, smeared on the glass,
Where a spider-sac
Promises to open in a few weeks,
Disgorging a hundred white
Baby spiders each the size
Of a pin's head —
Instead of the papers layered in
Like silt in multiple deposits,
Sedimentary, here a bill,
There a friend's card on pink
Paper, there a notice from the city
About taxes or assessment —
Instead of all this, an escape,
A move outdoors, into the air.

Now you are working where time
Presses against you, and the urgency
Of wind lifts the corner of the page.
Now an animal cry from the woods
Touches your ear, hangs in the air,
And you pause and go on,
But the mortal, the wounded,

Lie now on the page.

That knock against an oak,
The faint drumming and now the call,
A throaty warble, that's a casual visitor
The red-bellied woodpecker, licking
Its sticky tongue under tree bark,
Pulling out, barb-caught, a grub.

To be on the edge where the wave
Of your life curls, ebbs, extends on
To the shore before receding, to sit
On the shore where the tide's
Due in, moon-pulled, invisible,
To know only and most particularly
What the skin feels – this rough
Plane of table, this sturdy spine-back
Of chair – and what the eye
Notices, the ear catches: a ticking
Tree? Not impossible, I say to you,
No, yesterday I heard one as
I stepped by in the park, pausing there,
Head tilted, to listen.

Oh air with a chill, air now dripping,
Whispering with a soft rain
Brought down from the north,
Be both inspiration and muse,

Source and light, weave me, sound
Me, oxygenate, refresh, and hone
My attention to a sharp point,
Breathing and sighing where I
Am sitting now, north-wise,
Rain-sopped, drenched
With synapse, sight,
And hue.

Sweet Vernal Grass

Between here and the lake, the purple clover bloomed
With meadow buttercups and sweet vernal grass.

A lawn of sorts, a semi-circle of gravel drive,
And then the wild, lapsed meadow into which

A pheasant disappeared. The hunting spaniel came
Nose down, traversing and sniffing. I thought

Any moment it would flush out, with a cry.
The taller field waved and rippled in wind,

With floating sweet-grass, soft rush, sneezewort.
And dark pools floated underneath the trees –

Scot's pine and a lone redwood to the east. The dog
Caught nothing. The pheasant ruffled down in its lair

Among tufted forget-me-not, the marsh foxtail
And marigold, and skullcap, too. Down the lane

The spaniel headed home. A mayfly or two, green
And drifting, sailed by into the second half

Of its life, each hour seeming long, and enough.