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"PAINTING IN HALF-LIGHT" AND OTHER POEMS

by

Jane Eklund

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
of the Senior Scholars Program

COLBY COLLEGE
1981
ABSTRACT

Through the course of the year, I have been writing and revising poetry with a concern for the growth of my work. To that end, I took advantage of the time afforded me by the Senior Scholars Program not only to devote myself to writing, but to reading the poems of American, European and South American poets from the point of view of craft. Poets whose work has been important and influential in my writing this year include Pablo Neruda, Yannis Ritsos, Francis Jammes, Charles Simic, Larry Levis and Pamela Stewart.

The poems in my collection, "Painting in Half-Light" and Other Poems, deal with a variety of issues. Among them are childhood and family poems, persona poems, and poems dealing with more social and political concerns.
AFTER SUPPER

After supper, a family leans away from the table, piles up dishes no one wants to wash. The father tells a joke, a funny thing happened to someone else.

It's been dark for an hour now, candlelight barely flickering on their faces. Perhaps they love each other but won't say so.

Soon the children will pack their suitcases and go back to school. The mother will fill the cabinets, fold up the tablecloth. Though she wants to cry out for her daughters, she thinks: what could be better than a family at dinner, the father and son in debate, pots stacked in the sink?

In a moment, someone might stand and in rising break the bond, the settling in after supper that holds them to the table. The children will withdraw upstairs; the father, with his newspaper, to the living room. Or perhaps they'll linger in the kitchen, a little restless but not yet ready to stand up or walk away.
PAINTING IN HALF-LIGHT: 1910

She leans against her lover's shoulder:
her body a weight he bears.

Beside them, in shadow, a man's face
rests in his hands. No music;

the figures stiffened at the piano--
etched into their dim corner.

A room in half-light:
only the woman's face is betrayed

by the lamp's dull reflection.
For a moment, I thought this was my house.

I wanted to call her grandmother,
rest my hand on this woman's cheek.

Now, when my family assembles,
it seems somehow wrong: the bright den,

my mother chatting with my father
in his chair across the room, his slight

laughter. As if one hesitation
would shatter the picture, send us reeling

into shadows. Behind glass, a woman
guarding a terrible prediction

we all live.
WHAT'S LOST

Speaking by telephone, what's lost
is the means to compare
our complaints, lacking recourse
to category: grownup and child.
Father, what good is a bird
in your hand? And the wolf, she's content
to roam the plains by moonlight
in her own clothes. These are fatal analogies.
Dictum moves us from scene to scene.

Talking on the phone with you,
I know what you want to say: I miss
your terrible jokes, the way you line up
chairs by the kitchen table before we eat.
I need to reassure you, to tell you
I often think of our walks in the woods.
Instead, we speak briefly, our talk defined
by hesitations. In the conversation

of prairies, silence is cleared
by the moan of a coyote or trill
of a hummingbird. Father, what's lost is not
precision, the ability to name wolf
or coyote; it's just the two of us--
two voices, two hundred miles apart.
IN ONE WEEK

You lost your cousin and aunt; your mother withered in a home. Even our old spaniel had gone blind and arthritic: I shrugged the night you predicted her death, but when I woke up the next day, you'd already buried her in the yard.

Mother, you grew up a mortician's daughter; death bought your new shoes. But that July it honed in on us; circled our house like a dog chasing its tail. Days, you hovered by Grandmother's side; came home and scrubbed pans in the kitchen, tired and mad with the living. I'd avoided your mother for weeks, but nights in my sleep, I carried her, heavy in my arms. The morning she died, I left you and cried in the shower. That was me you heard, crying in the shower.
SUNDAY MORNING
after a painting by Edward Hopper

I don't know what it's like
to be down and out, but I know
I've been down this street before:
the house where I grew up
sits just around the corner.

It's Sunday, so we're all still
in bed, or just stepping into
our slippers. Father's whistling
in the bathroom while his whiskers
drain down the basin. Around the table,
everyone's so happy I know
today's the day my sister
walked away in her training pants.
My parents found her, hours later,
on this street, trailing a gang

of teenage boys. For weeks,
I wanted to follow her,
and one evening I stood waiting
on the sidewalk, though I didn't know
where I was going.
LILLIE
for my grandmother

Now, the whole apartment's yours,
cluttered with greeting cards, family china.
The story books you read to me, years ago,
still wait on their shelf in the hall,
as if another little girl
might come calling. You want to call me back
to 1923, the old garment factory
on Warren Ave., where you worked. A thread
of lightning struck your stool, knocked you to the floor.
Now, when it storms, I shiver in my chair,
proud of that jolt: a spark to keep.

When you gave me your grandmother's earrings,
I understood: the past
is what we wear each day, a ring
that slides around and around the finger,
a gold earring we shine
between our palms. It's what keeps us
together, keeps you moving through these rooms.
Each time I leave, I take something with me.
Esther Lillie: flowers
that bloom and bloom each spring.
THREE-DAY PASS

That first night home, we sat on your porch swinging out the time. I talked about my troop, how I'm the best shot, how our side won the war games, but you only laughed. You laughed at my uniform, my army haircut, the way I called your father "Sir."

Listen, you said. The birds are flying--north for the summer. You wanted to take a walk in the rain.

I kissed you lightly and called you my girl. You laughed and laughed. I'm my own girl, you said, my own girl.
Some nights I reach for someone to hold on to, but only shadows seem tangible enough. A simple bureau, water draining from a sink—what else but rooms and rooms like these?

I remember a woman who, leaving her husband, said "I'm tired from the pleasure of you."
In the measured shade of the lobby, her face assumed two tones of weariness. Now, I like to think of her husband: fondling the keys to his room or scraping her name from the mailbox. I like to think of the travellers unpacking suitcases in their rooms: folding and unfolding, unfolding and folding.
This morning I went down to the river again
to paint the language of water polishing the banks.
What I saw there—waves smoothing
over stones—made me wonder how a rock
survives the current’s course. Tonight,
drawing strength from your letters, I think
of endurance, words transcribed
on parchment. We live for this, the consummation
of pen and ink. And all along, the river
flowing towards the open sea.
SCENARIO

The reflections in this pond aren't real:
yellow trees, wavering boulders,
even the ducks floating upside-down
are numb as your gaze.

Another wasted picnic veils the blanket:
half-eaten sandwiches, bottle of wine
you couldn't bring yourself to open.
The water's lovely, I say,

but even as I speak, the pond's transforming:
a borrowed rowboat, the lake where she fell,
your first girl, reeling from your naive kiss.
The lake she still possesses, your kiss

still between her lips. I suggest:
let's talk about love, but
you're staring at the reflections, overcome
by the violence of it all.
GIRL WITH BRAIDS

Amedeo, Mama says I bother you, sitting here watching you work. But I like how you've painted me, my hair just touching my shoulders. I think you love my braids most, the way you roll them between your palms for warmth. I've tried to imagine what it's like for those women I've heard you laughing with. I know the difference between us; you'll never paint them. My portrait takes the form of acceptance, a careful admission into your life. I want to tell you, I love your presence in this room, the stroke of a brush moving across canvas, your hands smoothing my braids.
MARRIAGE

Even as the musicians pack up their guitars, we hang together on the dancefloor, unable to move apart. The bride and groom escaped hours ago; only a drunk cousin remains, while the caterers mop spills by our feet. All night I've tried to remember:

have we always been a couple at opposite ends of our bed, secured by elusive vows? No matter. Convenience is the romance of the middle-aged. We've no desire to recall our own wedding, we only note the carnation in your buttonhole, smashed in our last waltz.
MOVIE

It's always the same: a plush hotel room, urns of roses, men behind dark glasses. Stretching across a heart-shaped mattress, she's the queen of porno. When the leading man gestures, she slithers into motion: legs open on command, hands caressing the bedspread. Eyes closed, I see my name in glitter on the marquee.

Then I think of the camera and can almost feel its metal moving between my legs, the violation. These are the dreams that tear women: the desire for fame and the desire to remain unknown. I look around and it seems almost real—we could be in a basement, the glaring lights, my hands tied to the bedpost.
HYPNOTIST

The lady in the red dress
marches onto the stage.
She has no intention
of losing control.
The hypnotist takes
her hand. Relax.
In his dark suit
he looks like a little boy.
You are growing sleepy.
His watch ticking and swinging
ticking and swinging.
She begins to tremble.
Sleepy, sleepy, sleepy.
The lights dim.
He seems to be growing
larger and larger.
When I snap my fingers,
You are mine...
EQUINOX

I wait all day for something
bizarre to happen. I think of a friend
who's gone to Washington, another
to Massachusetts. The names
of those places sound like oceans;
take hold on my lips. I shut my eyes,
shut the door to my room: I'm beginning
to enjoy this. When I open my eyes,

I'm on a Greyhound, it's sundown,
we're heading west, or north,
it doesn't matter. I don't know
the lady in the next seat,
but the driver calls out each town
we pass through, and everyone
murmurs: Smithfield, Farmington,
Rumford. Night travelling
into each of us.
THE SONG OF THE RUNAWAY

"I'm a wind from nowhere. I can break your heart."
--AI

When the first leaves drift
from the limbs of the swaying birch,
I'll draw near. I'm a wind from nowhere,
I'm a land you've never seen.

When the lights dim
in the village, I'll float
to sleep in your hayloft or pasture,
or curled up with your neighbor's son in the barn.

I can touch you
the way two lovers touch in sleep;
the way the night passes
through us all. When you wake, I'll be gone.

Think of me
as the lucky stone in your pocket;
the highway song on the car radio;
the red red rose by the side of the road.
The illumination of the sun against a tapestry, illumination of a knight and horse, a woven bride. In flowing white robes she approaches the window: swish! Down with her hair. A sturdy forest appears, with saplings and vines. The hair comes up. The damsel waits patiently, in distress.

Must it always begin this way? A maiden locked in a castle, while the sound of her footsteps or singing or snoring lures the unsuspecting prince to her side. And everything we know of them simplifies them, binds them happily to an ending. Ending of the forest, ending of the marriage bed, but we don't have to guess these things: they belong to the "happiness" part of the tale, what's implied—understanding particulars of romance and what naturally follows. Forces too mythical to believe, yet the princes all gravitate toward castles, and we discover we love being lost in the story: that tangle of forest, the threads of tapestry mapping the way out.
CROSSING BROOKLYN BRIDGE

after Robert Hass

The wetness of nightfall and the taste
of a cigarette are passing joys.
Things are simple but disjointed. I'm standing
against the guard rail in my second-hand overalls.
This can't resemble Walt Whitman's crossing:
the times I was face to face with his photograph
he seemed so hopeful, so satisfied
standing in a wheat field in his farming clothes.
I understood that in his poems, as in his field,
everything's cherished, everything's sung
because the songs remain the same; because
the voices differ: Whitman, ultimately,
dead in his overalls.

Now the push of the current arrives
and it's the sound of a scythe cutting wheat, or the sound
of a baby torn from its mother's womb.
I decide to break promises, to search out the field,
to tear down monuments to Walt Whitman, to somehow jump
to the movement below. Through the railing
I try to picture the fields: little men in overalls
misplaced on rooftops; so far away they're almost lost.
HEARTS AND MINDS

In the village of Mekong, in the cemetery where the graves go on and on like seedplots, a woman throws herself onto a casket, the mourning of the body. When she sobs, I feel the sobbing inside my body. Inside the windows where prostitutes call to soldiers on the streets of Danang; inside the remains of the hut where the pigs all died from the bombings, or the hut where the pigs survived but the children died.

And on the other side, in Virginia, General Westmoreland sits on a park bench; the grass under his feet freshly plowed. Then, Vietnam was a sigh on my lips; a word for the war I grew up beside. But no bombs fell on the house where my parents gathered me into bed, or the schoolyard where children lined up in rows.

I've never been to Vietnam, and I don't live in Virginia, but in this theater there's a mood I can't translate. I don't speak, I just stretch: reclaim my body.
THE WHITE DOOR

There are three doors to my room.
One I close behind me.
One my clothes hang behind.
One hangs, behind glass,
on the wall.

This last door
interests me most, it gives
so few clues: a little dirt,
the moon's reflection
in a side window.

Of course it is night.
But the light strikes the door
so brightly I'm not sure
if it shuts me in
or shuts me out.

And on the other threshold?
A small room,
a little desk and chair.
A woman opening
and opening her palms.
POEM AFTER THE FOX
-D.H. Lawrence

Before the initial frost, few words are required. A woman storing wheat in a barn. Another in the kitchen shaping loaves of bread. All around, hills shield the house from the falling sun. So much must be done, still: cows led in pairs to their stalls; plates arranged on the table. They think the farm's too much for two women, they think it is enough. But there's something else, a fox prowls in the forest. The women holding rifles on the edge of their land. Already the chickens begin squawking, already the fox tastes the blood on his tongue. Night folds in. The women tumble in their sleep. Tomorrow a man will knock on the door.
REDINGTON ST. POEM

For Pearl and Lester Chick, who lived in my house until they died

The kitchen's not so tidy now, and the roses in the yard grow wild. On the basement wall, two photographs:

Lester, stiff in sailor's clothes; Pearl looking like anyone's grandmother--before and after poses of their lives. Still, their presence inhabits these rooms: I picture them plunking piano duets or touching palms in bed. What they had, they left to their heirs, a succession of renters. Sometimes I linger a moment too long in Pearl's rocker, or set roses in a glass on the piano--concessions to those ancestors. Once, I lifted Lester's hat from its peg in the hall. I dusted it off, then put it back.
THE LETTER I OWE YOU
after Pamela Stewart

He was all beer and cigarettes in the shadows of early evening, leaning over a chessboard.
One deliberate motion—
knights edging pawn from its place—
and he'd sink back in his chair and wait
and wait. The whole time he'd be watching me
rest against your shoulder.
Then we wouldn't see him for days.
He was your friend, and would soon be mine.
His room was tidy and sparse, a balance
for the clutter inside him.

We didn't like the outdoors,
we decided, and the three of us
spent hours in your den, dealing cards
or chucking wads of paper into baskets. Nothing
that was easy could hurt. We knew all
the songs on the radio; the ones we loved
and the ones we put up with. Sometimes
I sat between you on the floor slicing apples
in two. We'd roast them over the fire
and eat so many we'd all get sick. The night
before he left, I fought with you and found him
drinking in his room. Already
the place was torn apart: cartons strewn
across the floor like displaced furniture.
He had small hands and a scar
that ran the length of his back. All those glasses
of whiskey. We spent the whole night in a cloud
of liquor. I slept it off
while he moved out.

I was first alone
with him that day he came to my house
where I lay in bed, sick. He kissed me just once
and I pushed him away, let the fever take hold
of my body. Soon after he left, I left you
and took to walking my days in the town.
There is a fountain in a park
that takes me back. It is illuminated
with colored lights on summer evenings
and all the passersby gather to watch it glisten
until it is so lovely a few must turn away.
I think of him now, turning from his window; just after
the light has left the sky. He was lightning
and rain, a flash in the afternoon.