Last street in town: a collection of poems

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The Last Street in Town
A Collection of Poems

by
Gillian Kiley

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

COLBY COLLEGE
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On Santorini

so many dogs lay on their sides,
legs straight out, slack-eyed,
I thought they suffered from some malaise of the heat.

Each was fed, and no one tried to move them
from the sidewalks or doorways of shops
as I was sitting, standing, walking.

Perhaps it was a torpor of sulphur,
the smoke rising like a continual dawn
from the slopes of the volcano in the bay, a vapor

of septic fervor and old eggs. The dogs
were cinnamon, or black,
aged uncles with their ears to train tracks;

anemic children with bellies full of milk,
breathing at the ceiling. They were icons
on the cobblestones, unpettatable,

but so warm, I thought,
if they moved, the release of heat
might do them harm.

The square had the topography of commerce,
solid-banked in small, cut rocks.
I never stayed long.

I was drawn to the cliffs, high
and unpracticed in the pragmatic grasp
of mortar. I could lean over edges,

watch the quick erosions of silt far below
sliding like sugar into the waves, and succumb
to giddiness, that desire to follow,

to wither into gravity, my pulse
like a drone in the swelter and the animal silence
as dulcet as the languor of sirens.
Affection

A woman has just touched your neck -
a friend of your mother, your brother's lover,
or a mere acquaintance, she put a finger

through a hole in the hammock,
raising hairs at your nape
into a thicket; straight up

and attendant to thrill,
as nurses are attendant
to the physic

of professional attention
in close rooms florescent
with unnatural circumstance,

the stethoscope in a cool slide across your back
as the doctor encourages you to sigh.
Briskly, she has withdrawn -

to the house or the bushes zealous
with raspberries - undescribed,
because you never saw her face.

Lying on your back
you see how diffuse it is above.
No mackerel sky, no fleece

of clouds. An umitigated potentate,
that blue's elemental
and broad-ranging.
The Man in the Pew

I saw him eating pap in a room
of my provision. He would be alone:
tray table before a cheap painting,
plastic icons with exaggerated eyes -

pacific and certain
his irregular black boots
with steel straps were loved,
or overlooked.

I could overlook
the lumpen profile,
pink smear of eyelid,
but that stump of arm

hanging at breast level,
a penis tendered
for the sign of the peace, no.

Oh
myself, five fat fingers and a stalk
of hairy arm, a patent grasp,

and a looseness, too,
like a fish held by the tail
and swung out over dark water.

"Peace be with you," he said,
his puzzle of flesh
bred up like a talent
before me, doughy and precocious.

My fingers fell about him
in a concurrence of skin
like a pulpy hinge, one body
at rest for a beat
in the midst of turning from itself.

The rector had us kneeling, then.
My elbows hard on the next pew, keen
with discomposure like knuckles
grinding against each other,
and the man seated, above,
his small foot swinging narrowly,
metal brace ticking
the wood of the bench.
Ariel

Quietly, a prodigy lies across her mother's lap, a traveling rug for a journey. The needle stabs quickly through the thickness, emerges again and again from below, bright and silver as if polished each time, the thread trailing behind, trace exhaust from an airplane.

The child watches the scar on her mother's thumb as she works, dark pink and shiny where it was split by the top of a can torn off quickly.

She sees the light on the crown of her head, the small finger, bent from a long-ago break: a pivot and guide for the swan dive of her mother's wrist.

The child wants to touch the cotton and the curved scar, so she steps forward and the work stops, thread in the hand of the child in the air above her mother's thighs.
It's spring, and the air is fine
at the top of the drive.
With a sense of urgency,
a girl stands astride her bicycle,
front wheel wagging like the neck
of a punchdrunk horse,
lighting her father's last cigarette.
His back broad as a mast, she knows
he is looking
from the screened-in porch,
pine-boarded and sagging
from the toll of ingress.
She covers her mouth to cough
and her hands are crocuses, brilliant
and early, blooming contusions
under the dissipating smoke.
He presses his thumbs
into the dry wood of the doorframe,
can almost smell
some kind of flower,
or imagines he can.
In Summer

Nothing sticks
like the humidity
of sleep these days.
Eyelids' curve as final
as a flyball's last arc
to a field empty
of players.

They are sick
of running, their hands swollen
into leather mitts
unable to scratch
their appetites,
and so return
to the hazy kind of rest
low clouds
give valley towns in July.

But one girl
worrying the wires
of the chainlink fence at the diamond
wants to grind the mound
cleave the air
chisel her face
into the neck of your son, lick away
the syrup of these days
toss knots of sheets
out the window
and use the mattress
to break her fall.
Fugue

There is something peculiar
about a rental car. At airports or strip malls
you can get them, interiors blank as the looks
of your father and the dark-haired girl
at the small table on the side street
you did not mean to walk up, the levers smooth
and responsive as the men
of hotel lobbies whose lighters always work.

The first time I did it
I exchanged papers and brief
intelligence with a woman in a lot whose skirt,
as she slid into the seat to show me
how to release the brake,
slipped up her thigh as easily
as a curtain pulls across a doorway.

Pressing the pedals was like pouring
thin honey from a milk jug, and I sensed
the length of machine behind me
constantly erasing itself from the pavement
as I swooned down the highway,
the route numbers curled at me like fingers, and songs
about cheating I could sing
like never before.
On this hill

I want to sprout
a pelt, black as night in the night,
or brown, if the day's that way,
And in winter, white - well,
that's planning.

I'm not headed for the farthest root,
the tree near the water hole
hunters haven't conceived of. I maintain
a rifle isn't what this hill is made for...
What I mean is

I know it, the place and fur
will cover my lips, speaking
is too hard for something soft as that.
Turbulence

Pigeons' breasts quiver
thick as plums, wings beating
on wings in descent.

Near the bench,
the woman's face is a handkerchief
snapping open in a rush of wind.
Blight

Driving, the snow is like a plague,
rushing into the windscreen

at such unbelievable angles,
the glass of course invisible. Your vision

is occluded, inhibited by the motion
of these white insects riding the air before you,

a spindle and a stinger in every direction.
Billow and sudden increase,

their surges decline nothing and you are coasting
into an indistinct and reductive region.

As if you had forfeited something,
you cannot traverse the distraction

to listen to your friend the driver, deliberate
in this stunning dusk, the road bathed in dust

from spooling cotton, the bodies
of a million fallen gulls. Spinning out,

pulling back easy, she turns silence into talk
of distant things, torsion and gambits,

a photo of a farmer holding up sodden fruit
after the flood, like a torch, like a way back.

And still, spinning into the windshield
and all around this surfeit, judgment

or evidence against you.
Trying to Remember Scripture All Day on the Porch

Tapping open an eggshell
is dawn, the thinness breaking
in a near accident of light.

Noon is a bald flash of camera, blindness
while walking in the shine
of a place without trees

and sunset is when a brilliant snake
has molted, an effulgence
of tatters.

No. Perhaps it is the glare
of something beyond the visible
horizon, something magnificent and southerly,
reflected upward but not toward.
The Postman

The bearded pines make insulated copses,
like confessionals. I wonder if the postman
is drawn to such enclosures.
All day he comes so close to our homes, quickens
to the false ardor of telephones, the receivers
in their places at a glum distance; an aspect, through glass,
like modified bone. In one broad driveway,
careless at this time of day, a child of uncertain age
pedals up and back, while behind a screen
a woman is indistinct and vigilant.
Not fast, but brisk, the pace of a furtive
freebooter, a peeper, the postman moves
like a beetle over crumbling clay, awkward
with too easy a commission. He wishes
these missives had more heft, required
more labor than a drop in a slot.

He is transient against this landscape,
a trespasser charged with handling what is bound
for appointed disclosure, feckless and longing
for station, material inscription.
Homecoming

You walk into the house and it's all lilies and basins full of ink.
Your sister rushes about black-handed, trying to die white petals black. She works for a florist and there's a funeral, not a wedding.

Your mother backs a strange car into the driveway, removes three music stands and a box full of bells. She does not want your help. She peers into the refrigerator, the light comes on instantly, like a pure form of anger. Nothing, she says, soon drives away.

On the television, the people are slender and professional, no one reminds you of anyone, and you cannot assemble the features of your very best friends. Your sister speeds through the room with grey flowers, dripping, slamming the door so the curtains are sucked to the windows and then there's a release like the distance this blue holiday between you and your newfound lover, a release like a lapse of muscle.
In Everything

I once had a professor who found death in snowfall, sex in everything. A lampshade, a bellpull, grass stuttering in the wind, I guess it's all in the way you say it: cartwheel, bingo. Yes, passion may be a contortion of the tongue; love and other things come like that though I have never been good with anything in my mouth but my heart, or my foot. Does that sound silly? Maybe it's in the way you say it, Adam. Adam.
An Early Elegy

With my eyes closed, you exist less. Do you think I’m childish?

I might protect you in a windstorm, or a sudden fit of hail. I imagine

I would laugh, because I like that, or I’m like that, useless on a day when slender girls sit

under spotted umbrellas. They lift their wrists to show dangly bracelets. They sing songs

for each other, pretend to try to remember lyrics. They sing for the passersby.

They talk on subjects without authority for hours and you watch their lips. It’s a theater

of poise, shimmering like spray off the back of a cresting dolphin.

I like to swim underwater, face up, eyes open,

so the clouds shiver. When my eyes are closed I can picture this.
Potluck

Everyone's lips are full of glass.
All red, I wish Lucille Ball at least
had a good time in a wine press for this.
That time, what was it

she was there for? Some scheme, some
misunderstanding, sure. Our confusions
should always end up in bare feet,
fruit between our toes, not

like this, glasses held to our lips
against disclosure which might prove
we have love, and don't know what to do with it.
What is it? Did the hosts want to steal

our serving dishes? I told the woman in yellow
I thought the moon used to follow me
on long car rides, because we were so friendly.
Not the woman, the moon.

In the back seat, as my sisters slept, there
was my companion, souising
in lakes, farmhouse ponds, protean, grand,
a floating neon vegetable unchastening

the dark, private silhouettes
of neighborhoods gone to bed.
Later my sister would rub the marks
on my knuckles, hold my hand

like a small animal. What affinity
did she have for correction, extraction?
Tonight, you press a glass upon me. I look
to see if I'm splashing in the bell of the cup.
You Can't Trust Me. Don't Date Me

I'd like to say I'm just walking by this schoolyard for inspiration, but I hardly look at these children, fenced in, standing on top of the dirt. I'd say it's for nostalgia, but they don't remind me of my childhood; I was schooled at home. I haven't read anything you've read.

I simply go forward. I truly desire to move, to live on a farmland somewhere south of here with a flock of white chickens so I may indulge my fascination.

To hold one with two hands, under the breast, over the wings, would be to hold one large, tender muscle. White floss over a warm pulse, a good, big Valentine but for the quivering of brittle appendages. A small panic.

Sometimes I eat as though distressed, quickly, like a refugee, though I'm not hungry, and my body, in company, is like a sound defect, something tuned wrong and emitting waves of disease. An unpleasant presence.

I displace my familiars and intimates. Fingers are so easily tiny legs, elbows are eyelids of old, tired mammals, and the fingernails are eerie: faces blanched of emotion.

These mothers eye me through car windows, though I suspect each has contemplated the thick, fruity smack of relentless, vindicated adulthood against the expanses of flesh of these coddled children.

I am just walking, taking care to avoid malfeasance, but they say we turn our worst faults outward. I think I like chickens for their own sake. I think the rapture of those birds is that they don't get off the ground.
Sleepwalking

My friend once spent hours before sunrise with the washroom doorknob, saying *the grams are all wrong*, over and over, touching the knob as if she could fix it, the way my mother would touch the lop-eared cactus brought from Utah, draped over its pot, the one she eventually lashed to a stick so it would stand up though it stung her with its prickles, as would a wounded raccoon, curled up and offended by the forest ranger's daughter.

Fixed on the relation of chemical element to atomic mass, the necessity of all things adding up cleanly, my friend was found by her roommate's boyfriend, who entered the bathroom stripped to and from the waist and felt suddenly small as she failed to apprehend his presence. She doesn't remember this, she tells me, over a holiday and a cup of coffee.

Sonambulants are efficient that way, taking their exercise and rest simultaneously. I don't walk at night, I talk, and I wonder if another person in my room or the next would know that always I am falling, through chimneys or out windows. My fetish is so hackneyed, they might think it's a dream of their own. Many try try to know me that way, as a rendition of someone else, so when my friend asks me if I don't think sleepwalking is the body's longing to keep on when we claim we can't, I don't want to tell her sleep seems like practice, suasion into something more final, and that I enjoy it immensely, as much as I do dancing in a dark stairwell, or a good story.