

Creature

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for my mother and father

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1 Their Solitary Way

The Millennium Turning

Above the balcony, above the speckled parking lot,
sparks of sky splash

with less and less voltage, the experts say. Among sibilant
crickets
neglected angels pick up their cards.

They have lost their places in the book of Psalms,
though spaces in the choir

remain for them, if they can get their voices back.
The moon shines weakly on their cribbage hands.

The tallest, and acknowledged leader, whistles to the dogs
and waits for day to ripen into evening,

the shadows of nostalgia lengthening to overtake
the labyrinthine house.

Oxen stand easy, chewing in the pasture.
A tired angel stretches and yawns

and slouches to the next room to write something down
before returning to the next hand.

In a distant country, a palsied anchorite scribbles advice
to put into the mail.

Outside the powdered ruins, pale Bianca wanders in the shades,
listening for the broken fragments of a fugue.

To the Reader

I would make this poem personal
and include a black willow, hematite,
and a crow. Each would stand apart,
exact, dense, and inarticulate.

You would supply the connections
while the lines proceed as you choose,
with grand sounds or the echoes of sounds.
The connections would begin to shift.

The poem would turn up conceptions
even after you'd turned away.
It would quote Augustine's *Confessions*
and allude to the poems of Kabir.

Returning to it, you might see
it is not at all what you had thought,
but only because you have changed.
This poem would be something you'd forgotten

and that you had not considered before.
Its lines would be sediments of voice.
Now it's late, the traffic is going by
sporadically, and the river

goes depositing shells on its banks.
The poem will not come into your hands.
Already, what it might have been is fading.
These are the traces of its never having been.

—after Donald Justice

'Evening Faces'

“And why are you in this wretched place?
He took Genji's hand and pulled him to his feet.”

The world could not but have been set on a page.
Think of a singer swaying in a coffee shop, how the twilight
intermingles with her stories
and the flies' buzzing over drinks and heads rhythmically
nodding.
Out back school kids are lighting firecrackers.
A half moon in a blue sky . . . rippling sunlight reflected off a
bridge's underside . . .
What can follow?

In my hometown library a lady showed me a copy of *Dracula* and
assured me
I didn't want to read it.
There's a story of a boy whose father dies
and meets him at the library one last time, puts a huge hand on
his shoulder,
and sits down to tell him a story. A tale calls forth sentences.
No statement recurs. One brings up another. They go on talking.
After long illness Genji felt “as if he had come back to a strange
new world.”
I had not heard of Genji,
and the world was what I always had with me.
A girl sits down on the stairs to light match after match.
The glass door reflects her face. A radio blares from the
sidewalk.

A woman sits alone by a window, writing.
Crickets chant in the grass
from which rises an iron birdbath.
Zinnias crumble in my palm. A fire is fading.
Let the time revise all we have set in our books.

History

The Minotaurs trudged across the landscape,
A wintry force hammered in flank and foot.
The copper sky dripped resinous perfume
While water nymphs reached up, calling
To the shape-shifting boys running by.
A creature like a shadow, without eyes,
Held itself taut against the sunlight,
Then drifted into the trees.

The tarn out back bubbled all night.
A woman sang of age surpassing age,
Plucking strings she'd improvised from vines,
Her eyes like the frets of an unplayed guitar.
A thunderstorm brought relief to the nymphs,
Who swam across the roiling tarn.
A Minotaur bellowed from the trees,
Scrawling notes in his magenta book.

The waters no longer reflect our faces.
The shadow creature eats the wood ashes
And appeals to the nymphs for a song.
They look away, anointing their skin with perfume
While naked boys howl from the smoking trees.
The Minotaurs have disappeared from the scene.
Two nymphs walk together, making their way
To the mud cathedral beyond the brook.

Plato's House

Doorways rush by. My footfalls fade.
Laughter echoes around the corner.
A stairway intrudes like geometry.
Upstairs or downstairs, it's always the same.
The slamming of iron doors

digs channels in the air
thick like panicked sweat.
The bathroom tile, cool against my forehead,
forecloses further dialogue
of beauty in us all and who

will defend the citizens.
I'm running I don't know where.
I could go outside any time to see
the river, the traffic, the dust and seeds,
the places where trouble most begins.

I am a text already glossed, faded, written over.
What draws me down to the dirt?
In the wall, a sound of scuttling claws;
upstairs, a cry like falling bodies: "Always! Always!"
Rhythms percussed on bones

become a music that cannot recover
abandoned tales that only initiates can key.
Harmonies give way
to rigid disymmetries
devolving to others yet unknown.