

MOTHERNEST



Sandy
Longley

Amor Mundi

for Annie

Dear box turtle, I understand your road crossings –
I, too, move with purpose and deliberation
I, too, am often hard-shelled.

There are berries and grasses to forage, eggs
to lay, clutches to disguise in the underbrush,
predators to flee, ponds to clean.

And yet here we are.
Let me help you cross the road. Like
a Valkyrie in black leggings and silver

I will stop Route 6 traffic with a raised arm and
a fierce stare. I will pick you up (never by the tail)
and bring you to the direction you are going.

Who would renounce jubilation? asked Rilke,
especially for the lowly. By that I mean I dreamed
of resting with you by water's edge, both of us

emerging from our colorful carapaces, stretching
our turtle necks up into the soft morning light –
a chorus of bullfrogs bassooning their brave songs.

Joys of Our Desiring

Such a brutal, beautiful place is this world.
Your heart feels like wet pulp one minute,
a battering ram the next. A blister the size
of a pearl onion forms on your left heel –
all that walking on concrete in suede boots.

A man crouches over a heat vent on the corner
of 56th and Broadway. A dog leans on his back.
You want to buy him a pair of blue cashmere
socks. (The dog, too.) He would then rise and
turn into the prince he once hoped to become.

And then you see a red neon sign on a pop-up
that shouts “Bach” – a fugue wafts out onto
the sidewalk. Pedestrians crowd the doorway –
Listen. A wizard conjures piano magic on a Yamaha
Grand: cascades of notes, jazzy chords, crazy counter-
point – a musical chase from line to astonishing line.

Buoyancy lifts us into late afternoon light. A woman
wearing earmuffs merges into traffic on her CitiBike.
A pigeon heaves into flight, gripping a bagel in its mouth.

Sometimes

I like to imagine
I'm Mary Shelley's mother and
she is seven. We are walking on
Race Point Beach, fingers intertwined.

She is wearing a two-piece spandex suit
from H&M, Van Gogh yellow. I coat
her pale British skin with SPF 80,
“dermatologist recommended.”

She is learning to swim in the
soft Atlantic surf, not that dreary
Lake Geneva where it always rains and
Mont Blanc casts shadows like male totems.

In this light she is a minnow –
silver, streaming her way into the shoals,
her breath not shallow, but buoyant.
She surfaces.

“Well done, Mary dear, well done!” I cry.
Common terns soar and screech

their choral validation, their creature
eyes green, glowing like small fires.

I swaddle her in a blue-striped towel
warmed by the June sun. We huddle
together and laugh at nothing and at
everything. What do I wish for her?

That her longing to be loved
has ebbed. I kiss each new freckle
splashed across her nose. She smiles
and licks salt off my shoulder.

Long Distance

There is a phone booth in my seaside town where you can call the dead. No quarters or dimes, credit card or password are needed. You just pick up the receiver and say something like “Mom, can you hear me?” Then wait.

You may have to start the conversation like “Mom, what’s it like there?” If there’s still no response you might say “Today, gannets and guillemots grace the harbor, right whales rise off the Point.” You take a few deep breaths and then wait.

You think you hear something on the other end – a distant train whistle? A sigh, like silk on silk. “Your damask tea towel covers the sourdough bread. The cloisonné box is hidden. Mom, may I ask, what is it *you* cling to?” Then wait.

Conversation with Crow

Me: My sister died this morning.

Crow: I'm sorry. Was she shot? Poisoned?

Me: No. I don't know what to do.

Crow: We often form a circle around the body, then fly off and return with twigs and leaves for cover, maybe something shiny.

Me: I can't do that – her body is gone.

Crow: Oh. Then tonight I will dream of her from my roost. Tomorrow watch for me on that pine branch and listen to my song of loss and sorrow for you.

Me: Thank you.

Crow: From now on look for her radiance on every blade of grass, in every drop of water. Will you do that?

Me: Yes, I will try to.

Crow: Now, close your eyes, breathe – fold both wings
over your heart.

Me: Like this?

Opossum Nights

She's out there somewhere, maybe playing dead,
maybe scuttling across the stubbled garden
now a farrago of roots and rot, rhubarb leaves
mottled crimson like withered bat wings. You think

she may live under the porch where you too would
be content to burrow, to linger, when the time
comes – a resident spirit for the house your children
called home. Listen: a boy's voice, a summons:

“Olly, olly, oxen free.” Your heart is close to bursting.
In this in-between place you would stroke your
pouch, then point your pink snout into the November
night hunting for snails and slugs. When you return

and the moon appears, haunting begins: *a clawed tap
on the kitchen window, a sassy flick of your prehensile
tail, a hiss, a screech.* Then sleep, dream, and conjure
for tomorrow. To be remembered it is almost enough.

*Such a brutal, beautiful place is this world.
Your heart feels like wet pulp one minute,
a battering ram the next.*

from “Joys of Our Desiring”

The 2022 Henry Morgenthau III
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“I know what I love about this book: its confidence and concision, its translation of the world of bears and crows into a language that does not impose on animals our human assumptions and needs. This is a poet whose poems are at home with borders and frontiers between danger and softness, life and death.”

David Keplinger, Prize Judge
author of *The World to Come*



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