

DEAREST WATER

POEMS BY NANCY TAKACS

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for Jan, Ian, and Jenni

1. POEMS FOR WOMEN ONLY

FOR WOMEN ONLY

It wasn't easy inventing the language,
turning our *mmm's* and *ahh's*
into hummingbirds and gardens.
It wasn't easy grinding the corn,
beading the slippers,
baking over those open fires.

Maybe that's why our mothers
forgot their ironing, their
embroidering of swans
on towels, left pans
to sit overnight
on the stove. That's when
we women invented
the dishwasher, invented
the words for summer afternoon
in the backyard, reading
The Smithsonian instead of
House Beautiful.

My mothers and I went on
to invent many gardens,
rambling roses, apple trees.
We fluttered in the honeysuckle
trailing our green wings behind us.

We invented the hibachi,
rice salad with raisins and almonds,
lightly done salmon in lemon
with a hint of parsley.

We ate outside listening
to the sparrows and chickadees,
on our glass table that shattered
once when lightning struck it.

It was then we invented
the portable table,
sprang it open near lakes

where we swam the butterfly
to the deep, and back a couple of times.

We ate pastrami
and tiramisu from the deli,

opened our journals,
uncapped our fine-point pens
under the tang of pines.

after Tony Hoagland

REMNANTS

Some Saturdays,
after saying our rosaries at early Mass,
Aunt Ginny and I took the hour-long
bus ride to Manhattan's garment district.

I'd help her sort
through messy bins, pick out
a yard or two of paisley challis,
a piece of shimmering shantung
she found alluring.

Single, prim, devout,
she was so good
at her own designs
and invisible seams
she became loose with pleasure
as our palms felt the prickles
of weave, our wrists the feather
of selvage.

Over our arms
we hung watered silks
and sheer chiffons
she would conjure
into blouses for herself,
my mother, and me.

That was where
I learned about luxury
for almost nothing, how to eye
the sharp store owner,
and bargain bitterly
for whatever I love.

SPELL TO BANISH A GHOST

At night I hear Anna
snipping toenails
in my wicker chair,
smell her cologne,
Ambush.

Once my favorite aunt,
she whispered to me
with venom
when I was twenty
she never liked me
because I was born
last in our family
and took her place.

She died alone
last October
with a brain tumor.

She eyes me in sink water
from my mother's dishes,
her blue face in their lilies,
her earrings like onions.

She cocks her head,
skinny robin on my side-mirror,
then craps on my door handle.

So tonight on this quarter moon,
I make a fire.
I find my red frying pan,
fill it with lavender oil
and wait till it hisses.

I hold my only picture of her,
write her name on the back of it,
and kiss it three times.

NAILS FOR THE NEW YEAR

Aubrey spins me a circle
of white gel powder
and sparks of ruby.

My old friend opens the door
and sits down with Kathy
to sift bottles
for the perfect blue.

We parted ways four years ago
over her betrayal,
a lie about me to a friend.
She apologized.
I've never called.

Both in the front window,
we're quiet as it snows,
then raise small questions.

Her timbre quavers.
Her cheeks have new
contours. She asks
for my new number.

We have to turn away
for the women
to hold our hands still.

Such small canvases we are
as they wipe away slivers
from any cuticle
that weeps,

asking us if we want roses
or jewels, heads down
as they stir shiny filaments
to embellish us for the new year
with the finest brush.

MAKING UP

is like the first pickle from a mason jar,
raspberry jam in the tapioca. My husband
speaks to me for the first time after our
argument that shimmered with hooves.
Now his voice is all hallowed and velour.
Now my voice is hazy and mango. We halt
our sorrows for now. We go out to the tulips
and have a cookie. I put on my magenta
sweatshirt. The dusky sky has one tamp of bitter.
Holding a hand can be like a hornet in a balloon.
It takes two hours for our toes to get drowsy.

FOSSIL FISH

Two fish on a slab,
each an eye-shape
with the half-shine
of a fingernail
over blue spines,
faces pointed
in the life that has
become them,
harbored in mud they
couldn't swim out of,
sideways in the last
of that warm sea
dried up a million
years ago. If my
mother were alive
and here with me,
she would think
of the inlet where
she and my father
brought a bucket
of killies, some days
they baited their lines,
and never argued.

ACCIDENT

A neighbor doesn't know I can see him peeing
on his pyre of burning leaves.

My insurance agent most likely
won't pick up her phone until noon.

I'm wondering if I should leave the corduroy
of this couch, and walk the mile
for a double espresso.

Or pat myself
on the back like the yoga teacher
says we should do, after our hardest pose.

The brilliant yellow trees say: *Alive, Alive.*

Maybe I shouldn't care my old red car
is smashed into another world.

I've never seen this bird here—a Steller's jay
insisting something I should take to heart,
his yakking and yakking salty-sweet.

I take from the cracked bowl this ripe peach,
lift it to my face in rapture, then float back
into my body.

I think I'll stay in the house all day
and read poetry from a time
when people rowed out in little boats.

THE BEEKEEPER

for Karen

My friend keeps bees.
They rise around her,
alighting on her veils.

When she lost her mother,
she left the armature
she had curved into the figure
of a young woman
cradling a bird.

As the bees swarm
in her long garden,
she watches to see what they will do.

As a sculptor she has learned
so much from her hands,
so much from her body.
Now she learns from her bees.

~

This is spring
when all the decisions are made.

The bees are ready among
the lavender, the carnations,
making room for another queen,
feeding her the royal jelly.

Who will mate with her?
Who will see the mating flight?

The ones in the hive beat their wings,
an updraft of pheromones
to lead her back home.

~

My friend sees how the bees organize,
work quickly, brush in and out of
every hyacinth and violet,
every blossom of her plum tree.

She brushes honey on her toast,
swirls drops in her lavender flan.
She is in love with the work
that has come from flowers,
from the delicate legs
that carry baskets of pollen
at dusk to their secret place.

She is careful
not to walk between the beelines
from heather to the hives.

~

She sees how bees sculpt hexagons,
the most efficient shapes
to harbor their labor,
how they sweeten just for the hive,
how easily they accept dying.

~

She watches the drifts
of them, in and out,
and is gentled by them.

She is always careful
not to interrupt the queen.

~

Grief goes out to pasture.

~

She paints a woman,
an orchestra conductor
pulling streams of air from horns and violins,
the woman's eyes wide open.

Burgundies and blues
in the veins and bones
of the woman's hands,
violet fury in her hair.

~

She has learned the word *let*,
the word *inter*,

leaves the bees more
than enough honey for winter,

and takes up the armature again,
remakes the tired arms, smooths
the lowered neck of the girl
who has been all along cradling the bird
in her light-filled studio.

~

The new queen is ready.

If you spend a life watching bees,
you might never see her fly.