

JESSE TRUESDELL PECK

By

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Actuarial

Sure she was old, smoked like a tarkiln,
never hit a lick at exercise
and made a steady diet of summer sausage,
cheese and what she called
the occasional Ho-Ho, but her absence
seems so aberrant
that while insurance charts show her misled life
lopped off years back,
I endlessly replay her death. How she said,
I've outlived all I know
to do, and I said, You teach everyone you see
how the body wanes,
its brevity here. And she shot back,
Well hell, anybody old
does that. But only she instructed me
on love's burdens. That
she really didn't want to hear, so didn't. Eyelids
hinge. Last breath.

The Only Pussy in the House

While Master snores under cloudy poufs
of comforter, Cat enjoys
a tail-whipping interval
on the bed's border, licks paws
as if recently done with twelve-course
feast of mouse, while pondering full extent
of Master's dumbness, which renders him
incapable of scooping from the rodent hole
even the slowest gray mouse,
so Cat always has to do it
for him. As if in thoughtless gratitude
for this fact, Master at that instant unrolls,
opening broad warm chest
for visit. Cat, both forgiving and enticed,
delicately steps aboard
the body boat, tentatively turns around.
With front paws sunk in belly dough, Cat hoists
her tail like a flag and backs her hind parts up
so Master can get a whiff of
and open his eyes to
her little stink star. Master,
pissed, hurls Cat into the roiling ocean off
the bed's edge and follows
Cat's spreadeagled form
with first one then another pillow. Cat
skids, retreats around the corner,
then draws up into her most Egyptian form,
from which she prisses off thinking,
albeit wordlessly, *I'm what
they named it after.*

When I leave, it goes with me.

In A Time of War

Somewhere people are singing
though leaves have been seared from trees,
though mounds of dirt hide eyeholes threaded through
by worms. The old sift through sand for grain
spilled from passing trucks. The young
have found sticks to wield against invisible dragons.
A white rag tied to a broom
their only standard.
In the scorched field, their fake spears and bayonets
part the dry stalks.

Each is a mouth ready for kisses.
Each ribcage holds the misty atmosphere of hope.
No pain can smother it.

Against the poisoned sky, the black branches scratch
like bare nerve endings. Inhale,
exhale. Clear the rubble.
Yoke the beast to the plow.
Plunge the stob in the earth and drop the seeds.
Shine on each other. Sing.

The Ice Fisherman

hacked a hole because Grandpa Dan pronounced
way long ago, *Huge as a Cadillac*
that fish down there.

When on a Saturday, the wife directed chores
at the fisherman's face, it was perhaps
that phantom fish who stared back blank, then swam
to windows crept across by frost.

The fisherman wanted an unwrit spread of ice
to keep him from the wanting wife, the Monday
time card punch.

The river lured him to its marble palace floor
He hacked a hole, then lowered a leaded line through slush.
In steel-toed boots, above this small abyss,
he made a slumpy stand.

Headphoned to the Pops, engrossed,
he watched the far-off chimney wisps, oblivious
to spider cracks. When the river chasmed under him,
it was a blind
plunge into white flame. His headphones
drifted down to silt. He rolled like a walrus,
body chub keeping him up

as green currents pulled him seaward at a tilt.
He felt the scarf his wife had knit an iron noose.
He failed to feel his hands.
His numb lips pressed to the river's spine, to suck
slid inches of air.
When he skimmed under the town rink,
music blurred and bored into his hurt ears.

Maybe some grappling hook wielded by solid citizens
would scoop him, heave him
steaming onto the ice like a calved seal.
But the skaters' blades just cut scrollwork above his face.
Their blades went *whisk*, and he went out of reach.
Then out of his red mouth hole
he hollered up

for that world he'd craved so bad to leave,
its bundled kids and Gap-clad teens.
His dumb heart slowed.
All this was very swift, and by the time
the great gray fish with mandarin whiskers
nosed his hand, he didn't know
it wasn't the stony ghost of Grandpa Dan,

watching his last breath
flower into pale balloons, which soared
above him in a drove. Through green haze
his specter rose
till he burst upon the velvet floor of Heaven.
There he was a wrought and burnished form
reeled in and hoisted up to show.

The Resurrection

When death finally came, the cold
crept in from his extremities.
From the far star points of his pinned form,

the black ice inched at glacial pace.
We're born to watch, and from that vigil
care, even if one winds up pinioned

to a stick, the heart's blood gone sludge.
Maybe Christ felt his gaze coil small
till the vacuum siphoned up his soul

and murk filled the old frame,
sprawling like squid ink.
How lonely he was for pain,

for the splintered feet.
He ached for two hands made of meat
he could reach to the end of.

Then in the core of the corpse
the stone fist of his heart began to bang
on the stiff chest's door, and breath

spilled back into that battered shape,
the way warm water
shatters at birth, rivering every way.

Winter Term's End

for Betsy Hogan

The student pokes her head into my cubicle.
 She's climbed the screw-thread stairs that spiral up
 to the crow's nest where I work
 to bid goodbye.
 She hands back books I lent.
 I wave her to move papers from the spot
 she always took, worrying a sentence or a line;
 or come with protruded tongue to show
 a silver stud;
 or bamboozled by some guy who can't appreciate
 the dragon tattooed on her breast, the filigree
 around her thigh. This term she's done with school.

Four years she's siphoned every phrase,
 or anecdote, or quote that's mine to dole.
 She knows what I know,
 or used to know, for in me sonnets fade.
 Homer erodes
 like sandstone worn by age.

Each year I grow emptier, more obsolete,
 can barely grope
 to words that once hung iridescent in my skull.
 When, thirty years back, I asked my beloved tutor
 how I'd ever pay him back, he said, *It's not
 that linear. You won't pay me, only carry on this talk
 with someone else.*

All his thoughts on Western Civ
 would melt like ice without this kid—
 hair dyed torch red, painted flames on her lug-sole boots.
 She safety-pinned a plastic charm
 of Our Lady's sacred heart to her sleeve.

Last night, to plot her destiny
she hurled at the world map a lopsided dart
and hit a South Seas flyspeck. Call collect,
I say, if you get stuck. Read
thus-and-such translation of Rilke *only*.
And though I sound like Polonius to myself,

she scribbles down my platitudes
like wisdom. When
she turns to go, the spiral stair's a gyroscope that hurls her
into the wide circles of a life.
Without the grief of such departures,
I'd live in the dull smear

of my own profession, each kid
a repeat, indistinct from the vanishing instants
that mark us made.
The hand that holds this pen's assembled by some force
I often fail to note, unless it's newly manifest in a face.
She lent me wonder for a spell.

I loosed her in the labyrinth where I've meandered
addled as a child,
feeling along the string my teacher tied.
My eyes stare out from ever deeper sockets, edged in mesh.
I watch her cross the snow-swirled quad
backpacked in hunter plaid, bent like an old scholar,

moving with care across the slippery earth,
till mist devours her.
Snow is falling
over the quad, like rare pages
shredded and dispersed by wind,
that wild white filling every place we've stepped.

Pluck

That spring from a sky with a pallor like stone
 snow fell late and long
 to clog every road away from the house
 my marriage had withered in
 and whose mortgage I could scarce afford
 alone. Because my son was young and my paltry
 academic check went poof each month
 about day ten,
 and because I had no stocks to cash,
 nor trust to tap, nor dour soft-touch uncle
 to woo into taking up slack, and because I'd grown
 too old and sad to sell my ass (whoredom also
 being a bad example for the kid in house),
 I developed pluck—
 a trait much praised in Puritan texts,
 which favor the spiritual clarity
 suffering brings.
 Pluck also keeps the low-cost, high-producing poor
 digging post holes or loading deep-fat fryers
 or holding tag sales where their poor
 peers come to haggle over silver pie-slicers
 once boxed special for a bride. Pity me
 not: I was not
 starved or harried by war.
 But this was America, so poverty
 soured my shrunk soul
 to its nub.
 Nights, I lay on my mattress on the floor,

studying the clock face, whose each new digit
seemed to edge me closer to death's brink.

Sleepless, I twisted on the spit of my own spine.
Still, through no endeavor of my own,
I one day woke to sun, then the splat of melt
on ice crust. Soon
grass pushed through the sodden earth.

Then the green tongues became a jungle overrun
by crickets my son trapped dozens of
in a pickle jar's sphere
of sharp, upended air.

In an old aquarium, he laid a shaggy carpet
of clover torn by fistfuls, set in hunks
of apple and a mustard lid
filled with water—all this covered
with a screen, weighed down with the dictionary
so the cats couldn't get in.

On Mothering Sunday, when one is obliged
to revere and praise whatever bitch
brought on to this hard world,
my son led me down
to a room where crickets sang as if I were the sun.

Which I was, I guess,
to him, and he to me. After that,
when a creditor rang to bark his threats
of *legal action*,

I set the phone down on the counter
that he might hear
the kingdom my boy boxed up—
buzzing splendor
from such crude creatures,
woven through weeds, free for anyone to pluck.

The First Step

From your first step toward me

I sprang to life, though stood
stock still. Our gazes locked.

You ambled up, I couldn't move.

My swagger stopped.
My breezy bravura

went windswept plain. I stood

and let you come. For months we talked

most nights, but the chair you occupied sat
so far from mine, you were an island

oasis watched through a telescope's wrong end.

I barely heard the words your lush mouth shaped,
just thirsted for your breath to come

easing down my lungs. Each time

that mouth politely said goodnight

and turned away, then behind my bolted door

and upon it, I softly banged my head.

But then you said, one time, *Just close
your eyes, I wanna browse your face,*

as if I were a page. Then I was illuminated
manuscript and sacred text.

We became horizon then, we laid down.

Dawn's arms went wide to hold us.

Then this shimmer descended

to glaze our every instant—we got

the best table, the quickest cab.

The crosswalks told us *go*, the maitre d's
right now. Spring leaves bent

to brush our faces, till we whirled—

are whirling—still. From that first step,

I had to stop the turning world

to breathe you in, and now tend always

toward you, whom I ever was intended for.