

Poetry Reading

ROSANNA WARREN

INTRODUCTION

I read these poems, a retrospective from early work to the most recent, at the meeting of the American Philosophical Society in November 2014. The poems meditate on experiences both personal and historical, although that distinction can feel arbitrary: the personal cannot help but be historical. The first poem, “Max Jacob at St. Benoît,” is from my first collection, *Each Leaf Shines Separate* (W. W. Norton, 1984), and imagines the French poet Max Jacob, a Jew who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1915 and was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944. He died of pneumonia in the concentration camp of Drancy outside of Paris. He was lucky; his name was on the list for the next transport to Auschwitz. “Porta Portese” is the name of the flea market in Rome but is really about Wall Street. “Fire” expresses grief and rage at the American invasion of Iraq. In the private realm, “Mediterranean” recalls my dead mother, “Aftermath” sorrows for a friend who died of cancer, and “Man in Stream” ponders a failing marriage. I hope the poems, taken together, create a complex harmony of grief, passion, illumination, and hope.

MAX JACOB AT SAINT BENOÎT

The noonday square. Plane leaves, dust:
they scurry in heat shimmering gusts.
Even shadows rustle. The Belgians are gone.
The tiny terrier trots alone.
Max prayed here, *le grand poseur*,
salon mystic and *littérateur*,
but fourteen years, remember, that's one hell
of a pose for a Paris swell.
He had an infallible sense of scene.
See that stone soul torn limb from limb
between the devils and seraphim?
Romanesque, of course, for Max to preen
his own soul's pretty plumage here
year after tiresome dusty year.
And still, it wasn't easy. *Quel ennui!*
This flat, hot land, the sluggish Loire;
daily, nightly, daily: *prière, devoir*;
no more blue-yellow visions of Christ on the tree
(from Max's aquarelle), no more *cinémathèque*
blue movie Maries scolding "*pauvre Max*"
(to scandalize confessors),
no more dandified mystics dogging his tracks.
At Saint Benoît, just dust. The trek
to God? Beyond the crypt, it led
from boredom to boredom to prison camp bed
in Drancy. There, the Nazis let him die
—an old Jew with pneumonia—"naturally."

THE TWELFTH DAY
For Pam Cantor

It is the twelfth day
The hero will not take food
He refuses wine sleep women

How can the body not spoil?
Dragged by chariot
gashed smeared

in mud and horse droppings
Mutilate Mutilate
cries the hero's heart

as he lashes the horses
around and
around the tomb

If he can just
make his mark on this
corpse whose

beauty freshens
with each lunge
as though bathed

in balm Even the gods
in gentle feast are
shocked: Is there no

shame? The hero has
no other life
He has taken

to heart a body
whose face vaulting
through gravel and blood

blends strangely
with the features
of that other

one: the Beloved
For this is
love: rigor

mortis in the
mortal grip
and never to let

go Achilles hoards
and defiles the dead
So what if heaven

and earth reverberate
release So what
if Olympian

messages shoot through
cloudbanks sea
chambers ether

So what if everything
echoes the Father *let go let*
go This is Ancient

Poetry It's supposed
to repeat
The living mangle the dead

after they mangle the living
It's formulaic
That's how we love It's called

compulsion Poetry can't
help itself
And no one has ever

explained how
light stabbed
the hero how he saw

in dawn salt mist
his Mother's face (she who
Was before words she

who would lose him)
Saw her but heard
words *Let him let*

go Saw her and let
his fingers loosen
from that

suspended decay and
quietly
too quietly

turned away

CASSANDRA

Don't say that word, comfort

Wherever the splendid sun beats down on sorrow
no one will

hear, but the blind
beggar already totters from chamber to chamber

in the vault, murmuring, embracing urns
that have yet to be filled with

a story that has yet to spark or char the mind

MUD
(For John Walker)

It's not as simple as rhyming "mud" and "blood"
as Owen did and does ("I, too, saw God through mud")
in his "Apologia."

Or feces and "fecit" which is
a kind of rhyme as in
"Walker fecit," which he

did and does through
mud, bruised flesh, pigment, glossy
oil pressed from memory's trench:
"God" rhymes of course with
everything. It's not enough
to spread damp clay ("Was it for this

the clay grew tall?") across canvas: he can't
bury fathers, uncles,
sons, they keep
sprouting, worms their words ("Men went
to Catraeth as day
dawned"): Our words, his

words: Aneirin, Jones, a seethe on
the surface we cannot
possess. The dead belong
to no one, live their own
maggoty life observed
by the small, sheep-skulled soldier;

by the father who clammers out of the painter's skull;
by the easel which wants
to be lantern and cross.

The Somme? July 1, 1916: men went, men
want: all those men marched
which century? Sixth? The

Welsh at Catraeth, three hundred dead: a sum:
a song. Whose ribcage
gapes? Whose numbers ooze

in the ditch of years? This painter comes
too late. He hoists
his loops of pods upon

a firmament of mud, he hangs dark swags
of script and
sacrament. (A
duchess approves. She likes chiaro-
scuro in love and
war.) The painter has brought

a necklace—no, a rosary—of human
kidneys, slick
and soiled. It is
not as easy as rhyming “mud”
and “blood.” The words belong
to no one. (Not that we

wanted. Not that we wanted to know.)

MOMENT

When you turned to me—you in bed, still sleepwarm, against
the pillows,

I across the room, skirt zipped, stockings on—
and you asked, so quietly,

“Was that a truthful answer?”

and outside our narrow third-storey window
the Norway maple was poking odd thumbs into the sky
and a skim milk early morning light leaked down the street,
down front porch steps, around grimed collars of snowbanks,
and the oval Victorian mirror of my dresser
reflected all that, with odd angles of rooflines, gutters, chimneys
jutting into its peripheral vision,

your question cut
like a knife so sharpened it
slices clean and the surprised flesh doesn't know for a moment
how to bleed,

and I answered, after a pause
in which the strangeness felt like a form of love,

“No.”

MEDITERRANEAN

—when she disappeared on the path ahead of me
I leaned against a twisted oak, all I saw was evening light where she had
been:

gold dust light, where a moment before
and thirty-eight years before that

my substantial mother strode before me in straw hat, bathing suit, and loose
flapping shirt,
every summer afternoon, her knapsack light across her back,

her step, in sandals, firm on the stony path
as we returned from the beach

and I mulled small rebellions and observed the dwarfish cork trees
with their pocky bark, the wind-wrestled oaks with arms akimbo,

while shafts of sea-light stabbed down between the trunks.
There was something I wanted to say, at the age of twelve,

some question she hadn't answered,
and yesterday, so clearly seeing her pace before me

it rose again to the tip of my tongue, and the mystery was
not that she walked there, ten years after her death,

but that she vanished, and let twilight take her place—

MISTRAL I

Two donkeys graze in a meadow of wild golden buttons.
 Scents of eucalyptus and honeysuckle mingle in morning air.
 Distantly, down at the shore, rise the voices of children discovering things.

Childhood burned with a long wick, I have returned here to examine
 the ashes.

The gulls lament some tedious, age-old woe
 as they skim off toward the harbor

while the sun bores into and into the petalled whorls of the golden flowers
 like radiation, the whole meadow bristling with a heat that destroys
 and sustains.

This doesn't matter to the donkeys, who munch on, regardless.

Over my garden table, the sun casts a shadow lattice of ilex leaves,
 an open weave that trembles across books and notebook pages,
 rearranging the words. Just as well, they were not the best words,

I am willing to be rewritten, and let the printed poems of others be
 rewritten as well,
 and let them steep in the bitter smell of eucalyptus, which is said to heal.
 And may the dark fire, far away, charring my friend's hurt cells,

complete its work, let him grow into his longer story,
 the good one, the one in which sunlight runs in the veins with the force
 of summer,
 and children find some new thing, and shout at the sea.

AFTERMATH

“Dawn. The moment it was
it was over.”

Deborah Tall

It was that last, euphoric summer, between
one chemo and another, when you looked out
your kitchen window and saw the doe standing
at the edge of your lawn where the thicket gathers—
autumn olive, buckthorn, forsythia, dogwood.
And when you stepped outside, the doe stayed still
and looked in your eyes, you thought, with a companionable
complicit question, and didn't run. You were
light-headed. The doe lowered her nose
to shove at the small bundle at her feet
folded up like an awkward deck chair
till then invisible in its hollow of grass.
She had just given birth. The fawn couldn't stand
but raised its too-large head to gaze at you.
You were, as you said, already more or less
posthumous. You took each other in.
One of you before, the other beyond fear.
Two creatures, side effects on one another,
headed in opposite directions.

PORTA PORTESE

—if it once gleamed, if it ticked, if it buzzed, if it
 oiled eternal youth, if it whispered
 on an old tape with the sexual lure of infinite
 cash, if it said I am your private
 castle and you are a queen, if it lit a thousand
 bulbs, if it shaved a thousand hairs, if
 it declared God loves you, if it promised
 to cure harelips eczema scabies rage,
 if it clipped hangnails, if it delivered proverbs, if it hugged
 the ass—it's laid out on a collapsible
 table or a mat on asphalt, money will change
 hands, money will change us
 all, change Gypsies professors Nigerian whores
 limping children drugged babies
 I-podded teens Somali refugees artists in
 drag illegal Albanians cruising pools We said
 one world We said isn't my money good enough
 for you Switch blade Switch banks The Cloaca
 Maxima accepts all currencies The Tiber
 leaks yellow between its legs venereal
 venerable duty-free luxurious silken rippling
 classical waves sold and soldered solved reflected here—

FIRE

It would take a voodoo skull, one eye darkened,
one candle-lit, to see

into these pictures. Who set that fire? Who piled
that cliff of smoke? The newsprint

is jaundiced, ripped at the edge.
I set that fire, I piled

that bombastic, mountaining smoke.
I mound it up every night and I don't haul anyone out.

The bodies are stiff, like little T-squares.
It's not clear what geometry problem they solve.

The ditch is a rampart.
The live ones, turbaned, stand on the upper rim.

Bombed trucks burn rectangularly.
The books on Mutanabi Street make a chunky oatmeal mush.

This world, the same for all, was shaped by no god or man
but always was and will be

an everlasting fire, said Heraclitus. And the child
in the charred room reaches out to touch the wall:

the furniture's burned, his father's shot, the mirror
reflects only the camera flash.

We found fire in our souls before
we stole it from heaven.

Now we are the lords of light
and the darkroom is ours.

OCULAR

So damp the pages of novels curl up like vine leaves,
the stories smear. In the Métro this morning
a man was scraping a poster from the wall:

all the promised felicity hung in shreds.
My eye is swollen, purple. I can't read, near
or far. My childhood is far.

I slept on a naked mattress the pit bull ripped;
it reeked of smoke, needles littered the floor.
I starved myself, I admired my delicate ribs,

the leaves of a petrified prehistoric fern.
I was prehistoric, my eye teeth turned to fangs.
Day marched in carrying night on his shoulders,

a wizened old man. I preferred night.
Come to me, I said, I'll kiss you anyway,
even if you're ancient and I'm blind and bruised,

we'll laugh, we'll be the Book of Revelation,
I'll wear lingerie from the crypt and we'll eat at the Loveless Café
where biscuits steam and no one spits in the jam.

That was years ago. Night's tired now,
we've worn each other out. We hardly meet.
But I still have one good eye, and when I squint,

you wouldn't believe what I see.

MAN IN STREAM

You stand in the brook, mud smearing
your forearms, a bloodied mosquito on your brow,
your yellow T-shirt dampened to your chest
as the current flees between your legs,
amber, verdigris, unraveling
today's story, last night's travail...

You stare at the father beaver, eye to eye,
but he out-stares you—you who trespass in his world,
who have, however unwilling, yanked out his fort,
stick by tooth-gnarled, mud-clabbered stick,
though you whistle vespers to the wood thrush
and trace flame-flicker in the grain of yellow birch.

Death outpaces us. Upended roots
of fallen trees still cling to moss-furred granite.
Lichen smolders on wood-rot, fungus trails in wisps.
I wanted a day with cracks, to let the godlight in.
The forest is always a nocturne, but it gleams,
the birch tree tosses its change from palm to palm,

and we who unmake are ourselves unmade
if we know, if only we know
how to give ourselves in this untendered light.

TASHLICH

“Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea”

We needed a running stream but we had our sins
We carried our sins but we needed bread We found
bread We carried bread in small stale lumps

to the river the river running as it ought
with water slapped in the face again and again by wind
Glister from high rises began to wink

like foil in the crinkled waves The pier
carved into the current What brilliant sins
shook in the punished waves Do high-rise sins

shine brighter What were your sins You wouldn't
tell nor would I ask The piles from ruined piers
poked at the not-quite-indigo dusk while cars

thrummed along the elevated West Side monotone
and planes whined higher carrying higher sins
and how was it how did it come to be that I

crushed someone's heart It wasn't like tossing bread
in a stream Then how could it be absolved
by casting bread That heart wasn't stale It wasn't

a lump No More like a wounded pigeon As if
I'd stamped on its chest with my heel as it flailed and now
the chorus of excuses rises in plainsong You

toss your bread The railing is cold at my chest
Your bread shivers and bobs in the waves
I clutch my bread And what do they mean by sin

I clutch my question Night is hustling down
over New Jersey over the restless flow
the contradiction between a river's thrust

to the sea and the tide's upstream beseeching roughed
by wind He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap
He lays up the deeps in storehouses so I raise

my hand in the dark I unclench my fingers I let
one more sorrow one more question fall
into the sudden the sodden and anonymous night

AS IF

The massive, grimy river shouldered its way
toward the harbor. I stood under the ruckus of sky.

The wind plucked awnings, plastic bags, newspapers
and sent the news twirling over corduroy waters.

I'd meant to see art, but the plan miscarried.
A guitarist stationed in a doorway bent his head

to rasp his ballad into the wind's
sore throat. Rainlight glossed the guitar strings

and played its own tune, this city such a storm of wants.
"You have a right to your actions,

but never to your actions' fruits," said Krishna
in a book I read, with all the etcetera

about desire and emptiness. What did I want
and why did I want it so hard? Not emptiness,

but a self like rain driven
aslant the fence, the hacked-at sycamore.

That morning, laid out on a marble slab at the store,
the exposed red knob of a fish's heart kept its pulse

in the butchered half-creature— no gills,
no head, no fins, no guts, no tail—

just the flat half-body and spine
and the heart blurping and shuddering in its own

obstinate rhythm. As if, it seemed to say,
as if, you idiot, you ever could be free.

RATS

As if you rose out of your coffin—as if
my heart was your coffin—you rose
yesterday in the sapphire-faceted light
of syringes, hospital sheets, and toxic Niagara mist
you painted into a glossy forever.
I felt again your weight upon me
that Manhattan night in our quasi-childhood.
You moved lovelessly upon me, almost angry—
anger I almost allowed myself to know—
as we lay on a borrowed floor trying to make
what might be called love. You broke
each spell. The way Proust discovered love
in captured rats squealing as the hat pin probed
their vital organs. I was a slow student, I learned
dumbly, blindly. And graduated
to my own destructions. The white rats scamper
through your landscapes of pill bottles and blood,
chopped trees and massacred Adirondack deer
and I dream of knocking all the books off my shelf
so that in the light breaking from those pages
I might behold, not hold, your broken face.

JULY

Under the cliff walls of apartment blocks, on a narrow patch
of grass as tough and discolored as old carpet,
they have parked their motorbikes and distributed themselves,

a tribe, a colony, girls and boys, some lounged
on the sward, some on cement paving in a strip of shade,
some on two facing wrought-iron benches planted in concrete.

Out of range of grownups, they play cards, they scuffle,
a girl places her head on a boy's lap to practice kissing,
they smoke, they pass lit cigarettes back and forth, a smaller boy

pops a soccer ball against the wall with slow, heat-drugged, sidewise kicks.
Hours pass. Cigarettes burn down. The ball thuds and shadows lengthen
across concrete from four cypresses and six anorexic ginkgos.

Day is endless, summer is endless, their throats sweetly sear.
They drink Coke and toss the plastic bottles on the grass.
This place, for now, is theirs. They can throw

what they want, their lungs are their own to burn, their limbs
loll in the loosened harmony of dancers at rest.
They can pick themselves up when they want.

SANS DOMICILE FIXE

Clouds like boulders. Boulders
like petrified clouds that rolled down
and stalled in the meadow—that was

yesterday. Now we're in the centripetal apartment
with peonies ageing in two
vases, pink and cream petals

frizzling into crepe. Mirrors multiply
the years: I see you seeing me
in the gilt-framed oval by the desk, I see us both

in the window reflected in the closet door glass.
My eye-corners crease. Flecks of dark chocolate
streak the inner spines of all the books—

words are drugs, love is a drug—while Europe
contracts into dark burgundy upholstery and cushions.
Deep in the French-English dictionary, three asterisks

mark extreme vulgarity. How long
can we stay here? Outside,
the new homeless twist dreadlocks

and pace their mastiffs. Tattoos bulge
on their forearms, paper wrappers
and crushed cans clot the gutter.

Sun leaps off the roof tiles. A brisk
sea wind. In the mountains, those small purple flowers
with pods and curling tendrils (now you tell me) were vetch.

GRAFFITI

Kitty Goes Kommando and the Goldman Rats—Phooey!
That blue scaffolding holds up the sky. Who did we think
we were padlocking in, or out? Give me that huge
looping black script no one can read, a secret glyph,
and just where someone has smashed the window, Jesus
the Way the Truth the Life and a dented aluminum frame.
He bent down, we know, and wrote something illegible on the ground.
A toothy black and white dinosaur gapes. I like the crack
in this wall of monsters where skylines topple and ogres
twiddle train tracks in their claws like pipe cleaners.
Down the long, semi-abandoned street in Queens
calligraphy gallops toward the shop displaying,
like guitar strings, seven different iron rods
for gates. Hole in the wall, rose sound-hole,
ribbed sounding board—always from fissures and gaps
melody strains as trains thunderclank across
the girdered overpass, a siren keens, and a solitary man
ambles past amputated acacias fisting out with leaves.

A WAY

“The whole trick of this thing... is to get out of your own light.”
Marianne Faithfull

She said she sang very close to the mike
to change the space. And I changed the space
by striding down the Boulevard Raspail at dusk in tight jeans
until an Algerian engineer plucked the pen from my back pocket.
As if you're inside my head and you're hearing the song from in there.
He came from the desert, I came
from green suburbs. We understood
nothing of one another over glasses of metallic red wine.
I was playing Girl. He played
Man. Several plots were afoot, all
misfiring. One had to do with my skimpy black shirt
and light hair, his broad shoulders and hunger
after months on an oil rig. Another
was untranslatable. Apollinaire
burned his fingers on June's smoldering lyre
but I had lost my pen. The engineer
read only construction manuals. His room
was dim and narrow and no,
the story didn't slide that way though there are many ways
to throw oneself away.
One singer did it by living by a broken wall
until she shredded her voice but still she offered each song,
she said, like an Appalachian artifact.
Like trash along the riverbank chafing at the quay
plastic bottles a torn shirt fractured dolls
through which the current chortles an intimate tune.

GLAUCOMA

Garnet flashes in the wild turkey's wattle
as late sun sings the far edge of the meadow.
Lace-work bird-calls unravel little by little
into a frayed cat's cradle for catching shadow.

Ceremonial as bishops in their jerking strut,
the turkeys process into the transept of white pines
up the slope, where the millefeuille shale lies shut
in an ancient book, all scribbled between the lines.

The yellow fungus arrays its party dress
over petticoat and flounces. It dreams of rot.
The stream, silver-tongued, has more to discuss
as day grows tired and changes the subject, but

only in highlights now, and undertone.
The black bear, on our walk, gave me a hard look,
then lollopped up the hill this afternoon
melting into the grove of beeches across the brook.

We're all melting. This house is not our own.
Daily, my vision fails. What will it be
no longer to stare at bronze beech leaves strewn
on the loamy floor, at the stream's currency, not to see

the pearled, shadowless dawn unspool the field?
At the edge of the pond, a single heron stood,
a hieroglyph. I don't know what he spelled.
And Diana's last look, just days before she died:

enlarged by disease and sleeplessness, her eyes
searched mine as if across a no-man's-land,
and as if, by gazing, she could memorize
my face. I gazed back, wordless, stroking her hand.

Evening has settled now in the apple boughs,
the turkeys have gone. A half moon chalks the sky.
The stream keeps lisping the only story it knows,
and a loosened cobweb veils the moon's eye.

NOTES

“Max Jacob at St. Benoît”

Max Jacob (1876–1944) was a French Jewish poet and painter, close companion to Picasso, Apollinaire, and Derain. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 1915 (with Picasso as his improbable godfather), and spent his last years in close connection to the Benedictine monastery of St. Benoît-sur-Loire. He died of pneumonia in the concentration camp of Drancy outside of Paris.

“Cassandra”

“Wherever the splendid sun beats down on sorrow” translates a line in Italian from Ugo Foscolo’s monumental poem “*Dei Sepolcri*.”

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