

I grow old ... I grow old ...

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
---T. S. Eliot

Subtraction

Sun warming late October afternoon
coaxes me to stretch out, gather
heat to my bones. It may be
the last warmth for some time.
This soft hour will soon be erased.
With it, cartwheels, softball, frisbee,
my mother's voice calling
in the dusk that floated
me through the end of day
two letters away from dark,
now, for me, only one from dust.

Upon Turning Eighty

This day matters to me but it does not
to the check-out girl when I can't stop
myself from telling her it is my birthday.

At the end of his life, Beethoven devoted
days, weeks, working thirty-three variations
of an almost tuneless and insignificant

thirty-two bar waltz written by Anton Diabelli,
a composer of no great distinction. Turning
eighty, I think I may know why. Over and

over, straining for music to seep first into
his fingers then into his head, Beethoven
leaned on piano keys as I do on memory

using up printer ink trying to cobble together
notes from hours of reading but little writing.
No Emeril, cooking never interested me,

even making my grandmother's jam cake
for my birthday but I'd like to compare
myself to yeast in dough, edging over the rim

of a bowl. Pushed down, I may rise again,
become all I hoped to be. I knew I'd never be
a Beethoven but I would settle for being minor

like the Russian composer Alexander Borodin.
Not quite resting on the guillotine of old age,
but unable to muscle my carry-on in a plane's

over-head bin, I should watch the moon sliver,
court dawn when rain has injected root smell
into air, not gravedig into sleep. If a loafah

could scrape years, I'd have a birthday massage.
Kneaded and reamed like a lemon, maybe I'd
even pay extra for a foam. My life has unwound,

crisscrossing like a ball of yarn finally rolled
to me in rehab. I have no pattern, way to untangle,
take control. What would Beethoven have said

of his life, of his final obsession with Diabelli?
Each variation composed in one key, he
transposed it to another but always with a refrain

that was repeated as if trapped like a plant hopper,
wings spread, trying to fly first from resin only
to be entombed in amber. Encased in a past he tried

to rewrite, did Beethoven find his way out
of the commonplace of every waltzing couple,
transcend his reality to create a new context?

Two Ways

This must be someone's idea
of being funny! Rigged candles
on an 80th birthday cake.
Weakened lungs after weeks
in a ventilator blowing,
blowing against wicks taunting
wavering but refusing
extinction. Or could it be
a wish for eternal flame?

Through the Looking-Glass

*Echoes live in memory yet
Though envious years would say forget.*
—Lewis Carroll. *Prologue*, 1871

Draped in aqua blue, all imagination
and touch, Pierre-Auguste Renoir's
Young Woman Arranging Her Earring
is uninterested in what a mirror might
tell her –there is none in the painting,
maybe none in the room. She is either
putting the earring on, her eyes closed
as if anticipating a kiss, or aligning
it with a pink rose tucked behind her ear.

My eyes open, I avoid mirrors, don't
want to know how I look but can't stop
myself when passing sun-blackened
windows. Ignoring my reflection is
like burying wreckage of a rowboat
in sand in order to imagine life
it must have led, the fish it held while
seaworthy. Memory like water
forever tries to get back to where it was;
the Mississippi River was straightened
to make room for houses but it still floods
them. Renoir's woman sure of her beauty,
youth, didn't think about them, didn't try
to reach into the past hoping its glory will
emerge before surrendering to darkness.

Too Late for the Innocence of Daisies

Yes, I am well aware that in Russia, potted plants
are okay for older women. Having had my share

of philodendrons, I cross stitched and framed
the Mexican proverb, *She who is born to be*

a pot for a plant will not go beyond the porch.
If you visit, bring me a clear plastic sleeve

of peonies for romance and good fortune
or sunflowers for adoration and loyalty,

yellow roses, carnations, anemones, almost
anything other than chrysanthemums and statice

which I'll throw out long before they are dead.
If tied with a ribbon, I will release the blooms,

create a Hospice for them in a crystal vase.
Remember in a bouquet, the number should

always be odd—even numbers are for funerals.
Flowers will weaken as we all do with age;

I'll pinch wilting petals, clip stems a second time
before I turn them into compost, pretending

what remains is a new bouquet which I know
will disappear in time—but perhaps if I learn

how to let memory sustain me, I'll be dazzled
by pink blushing, canary yellow, even mauve.

Simmering Gumbo

*Gumbo was born in the New World and took
cues from the old but adapted to the new.*

--Cynthia Lejeune Nobles

Cooking down roux, to show I can change,
I substitute butter for my Grandma's lard

from hogs Grandpa slaughtered in late
November on the full moon, knowing while

the moon waned meat would shrink with
too much fat. I also try repeating *retirement*

until it leaves me indifferent, but acceptance
is not the same as peace. Spinning around

as if I'm a revolving door, I wonder if circular
motion means movement or if I'm a hamster

on a wheel. In Thai culture, nine is a number
of renewal, of letting go. To begin again,

have ill luck washed off, let good fortune in,
let nine of anything living go. The key word

here is *living*. I doubt using celery, onions,
bell peppers on the cusp of going bad counts.

What can I offer? Like mixing up gumbo
in a pot, I try to cobble my days piecemeal,

be grateful for what the world gives, not
what has been taken away. If I can last until

late September when monarchs migrate, one
might land on me if I spread my arms seeking

a sign of hope, of change. If black and orange wings
flutter, can I wait long enough for one to light,

staying motionless like a blue heron, neck extended,
standing in the cove on one leg to spear a fish?

Fire Poppy

Golden, rising from ashes, heat, smoke,
charred soil are a cue for this fire follower,
sprouting once ground has been seared.
Seeds can have been dormant for years.
In an inferno, it's not just the trunks
and branches that blaze. Spreading
like wires underneath the forest,
roots are the fuse. At times, as if a heart
fighting its last battle, the only fire
burning with outsize intensity
is buried under trees. Dramatic?
Yes, but it's how I feel before
I get up each morning trying to think
in verbs again from the full stop
of retirement. It takes awhile
to adjust to not teaching grammar—
split a peach, I see wet parentheses.

With a motorcycle personality,
unstable when idling but solid
on the move, I used to be where
things were in a state of becoming.
I'm too afraid of being compared
to Joyce Kilmer to describe myself
as a tree or I'd say my branches
torment me by smoldering with
no hope of flame. The question is
how to put out the remaining fire
in them without drowning the fuse,
roots, new growth in seeds that
just might be waiting to germinate.

Still Crazy After All these years

---Paul Simon

Yes, steadiness is a virtue but
watching my calico stalk a butterfly,
I realize unsteadiness has a purpose.
Jagged trajectory, calibrated imperfections,
a monarch' wobbly flight, its only defense
against my cat's outstretched claws.

Always off balance even as a girl,
I still get queasy thinking about crossing
Rough Creek on the swinging bridge,
sagging beneath my step, swaying
on gray planks that were rotten,
gone in some places or broken
in the middle so only splintered ends
remained. Holes were a magnifying glass
turning water below black and wild.

No clue why I crossed that bridge.
There was nothing to do on the other side,
just a shed ringed by metal posts, barbed
wire melted clean and the shell
of a burned house, its stone chimney
hexing sky like an arthritic finger.

What on earth was I trying to prove?
Now, why am I paying a personal trainer
to watch me perch on a rehab ball?

No Anodyne

Plants that grow side by side,
one an antidote for poison
of the other, can't teach me
how to apply the word solitude
to soothe loneliness. Too old
to wander jungles of Belize,
I don't have to fear walking
under a black poisonwood tree,
need to seek a gumbo limbo tree
to smooth on its outer layer of bark
peeling like a sunburned tourist.

I am not fooled by poison hemlock
mimicking Queen Anne's lace;
I know even though jewelweed
is called *touch me not* because
ripe seed pods explode on contact,
its sap soothes the itch from
poison ivy blisters. I ease sting
of nettles with dock weed that does
double duty as a haven for butterflies,
but it's no cure for aging muscles
or bruises on thin skin, first blooming
red as flesh of yew berries with seeds
like growing old that have no antidote.