

l'inedito

MARYJO SALTER

New Poems

Wake-up Call

The water is slapping *wake up, wake up*, against the boat
chugging away from Venice, infinite essence
of what must end because it is beautiful,

Venice that shrinks to a bobbing, pungent postcard
and then to nothing at all as the automatic
doors at the airport obligingly shut behind you.

Re-enter a world where everything is the same,
where you've gone slack again, and don't even know it,
so unaware that you actually shrug to yourself,

I'll be back, and yes, for some lucky stiff's it's true,
sometimes it's you, you're sure to get more chances
at Venice, and Paris, and that blessed, unmarked place

where you sat on a bench and he kissed you that first time,
so many kisses, you hoped he would never stop,
you can hope, at least, not ever to forget it,

or forget how your babies, latching onto your breast,
would roll up their eyes in an ecstasy that was comic

in its seriousness, though your joy was no less grave,

but you're not going back to so much, and more and more,
the more you live there's more not to go back to,
and what you demand in your gratitude and greed

is more life in which to get so attached to something,
someone or someplace, you're sure you'll die right then
when you can't have it back, something you don't even know

the name of now, but will be yours before receding
as an indispensable ache; what you're saying
is *Lord, surprise me with even more to miss.*

Musical Chair

At the behest of our hostess, the senior member of the dinner party, everyone takes a chair out to the lawn. No sitting this game out. The final wedge of watermelon dispensed with, necks and ankles sprayed with bug repellent, we're sticky in every particular — hair silted and still half-wet from long swims in the pond that has begun to take on the purplish drama of the sky where clouds, pure white and lightly shaped — such sun-buffed edges, spaced with such offhand perfection of proportion — an hour ago had been floating, expressionless, in shallow blue. Syncopations of cloud, like not-quite-random drops in the pond's bottom — sudden to someone happening on a deep spot. "Oh! It's cold!" had been the repeated cry, a call to laughter — complaint, like everything else today, a luxury indulged in the general clemency of June. Rhythms of water lapping at the dock are more regular now, since having been displaced by some who clambered, swaying, out of kayaks, and swimmers large and small who hauled themselves up to waiting hands and the promise of a meal — seasonal, plentiful — that has ended. Everything has an end.

And this is how such evenings at her house have always ended: with a game from nursery school. In that is infinity, or so it feels as we line up an assortment of odd chairs as variously faulty as our bodies:

a ladderback, a rocker, a leatherette
 swivelly thing, four folding chairs dismissed
 from their ceremonial posts around the card
 table that serves, instead, to pose a puzzle
 forever on the brink of being solved
 but never quite.

Somebody has located the boom box
 and tuned it to the golden oldies station
 which, for the moment, is aimless talk and static.
 "Music!" decrees our hostess (herself too old
 to tell one recent decade's song from that).
 It's the big bang: a crowd of planets startle,
 clown and falter, then orbit in a steady,
 blase ellipsis before opinion splits —
 some of us dawdling, others speeding up —
 as to which course would save you, should the cosmos
 come to a halt.

"Pete! Pete!" The youngest one, just three, with help
 from several coaches, scrambles to stake out
 the wicker doll-chair (which nearly no one else
 could have taken without breaking). "Good job, Pete!"
 Fireplug-solemn, he has a Ptolemaic
 certainty that the earth — himself — is central.
 This is his throne. It takes a few more songs,
 a few more seats removed, before we gather
 that now he chooses not to make the circuit,
 hovering, instead, with little hops,
 near territory first seized as his own;
 and by the fourth song, or fifth, he gives up all
 pretense of rising from his right position.
 He, who any actuary would pronounce
 likely to have the longest time to live

of all of us, is the most conservative.
His mother nudges, tells him to be polite
to the other children. "Come on, Pete, let's dance —"
But he won't budge. His feet glued to the ground,
he looks down from the hill to where he swam
today, in a pond now deepening to a shade
that looks like bedtime, that looks like the dark place
you hide in under the covers, when afternoon —
such a happy, happy one — has been erased,
and he will not be unseated.

Aurora Borealis

An arch of searchlight,
and (as such) a not quite
accurate
way of going about it:

if you were looking
for some lost thing
in the ring
of dark circling

the earth,
if the path
of light you hunted with
(emerging from underneath

the horizon, and trained
not by you but a hand
unseen) ended
with a sideways bend,

if its torch forked
and flickered
as if overworked,
if it torqued

inside itself with a wow
and a flutter, a now
you see it now
you don't, how

long would it take
before you'd make
the leap? — Would you look
at those freak

streaks in the sky
forever before saying, "I
see the light:
this is what I sought tonight"?