

THE POETRY OF COURAGE

Class Two: THE COURAGE TO MOVE ON

A WOMAN'S VOICE

By Ted Kooser

I was an Ohio girl
who taught in a country school.
How I remember that day:
When the blizzard hit it blew
Some of the shutters closed
with a bang, breaking some panes,
and the snow came pouring in.
Toward evening, our fuel was gone,
so we set out walking,
holding one another's hands.
It was impossible to see,
but we followed a row
of dead sunflower stalks
all the way to a nearby farm.
I never see a sunflower now
that I don't thank my lucky stars.

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MORNING COURAGE

By Marcy Heidish

Blinking, I wake early here.
Windows frame a lemon dawn.

Stronger then, morning light lifts
eighteen sleepers from the dark.

I am a piece in a jigsaw puzzle of
mattresses on this chapel's floor,

all donated to the church that runs
this tight night-shelter for women.

We even have a map with names;
everyone knows who rests where.

Now we stir under thin blankets,
sunshine striping all our faces.

Waking, shaking heads, some say:
“Thank you, God, for another day.”

Never a curse, often that prayer.
I still can’t speak it and mean it.

Blankets folded, faces splashed,
we line up for coffee and rolls,

stale old rolls tasting so damn fine,
We’re intent on tearing into them.

By seven, mattresses are stowed,
the chapel is cleaned, restored.

Over the altar, a purple felt banner:
I am the vine; you are the branches.

We must be out by seven-thirty sharp;
we trudge toward our hot-lunch place.

Our stuff, our bags, we leave all here,
locked in with the labeled mattresses.

More light, like butter melting over us.
No rain, salty clouds, a blue-eyed day.

The doorway widens in a yawn —
chill air slaps us, now fully awake.

“Shit,” says someone. “Frozen tits.”
“Thanks all the same, another day.”

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OLD DOG IN MARCH

By Ted Kooser

From a cold stone stoop,
stepping down slowly
into another spring,
stretching his back,
stretching his back legs,
one leg at a time,
making a bridge
with his spine, reaching
from winter out and out,

forever out it seems,
then quaking at the end of it,
all down his length
so that his claws
skitter a little, losing
their grip on the world,
an old brown dog
gone stiff from chasing
all winter through dreams,
recovers his balance,
and, one ache at a time,
lowers himself
to the solid field of promise,
where with pink tip
of tongue between his teeth,
and frosty muzzle,
he sips the cool, delicious,
richly storied wind.

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YOUR LAUGHTER

By Pablo Neruda

Your Laughter
Take bread away from me, if you wish,
take air away, but
do not take from me your laughter.

Do not take away the rose,
the lance flower that you pluck,
the water that suddenly
bursts forth in joy,
the sudden wave
of silver born in you.

My struggle is harsh and I come back
with eyes tired
at times from having seen
the unchanging earth,
but when your laughter enters
it rises to the sky seeking me
and it opens for me all
the doors of life.

My love, in the darkest
hour your laughter

opens, and if suddenly
you see my blood staining
the stones of the street,
laugh, because your laughter
will be for my hands
like a fresh sword.

Next to the sea in the autumn,
your laughter must raise
its foamy cascade,
and in the spring, love,
I want your laughter like
the flower I was waiting for,
the blue flower, the rose
of my echoing country.

Laugh at the night,
at the day, at the moon,
laugh at the twisted
streets of the island,
laugh at this clumsy
boy who loves you,
but when I open
my eyes and close them,
when my steps go,
when my steps return,
deny me bread, air,
light, spring,
but never your laughter
for I would die.

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CEMETERY LUNCH

By Marcy Heidish

We lunched on a tombstone
throughout that hot summer.
Fish and chips, I remember;
you carried it all in a basket.
The tombstone, long and flat,
was the right size for a table.
Others, too, picnicked nearby.
in Boston's historic cemetery.
"Do the dead mind?" I asked.
You said, "They're appalled."
We decided to stay anyway.

You, my first editor, smiled.
Your flinty eyes saw things
I missed or chose to ignore.
At seventy-five, you were fit,
gray, tall, thin; a sapling.
At twenty-five, I was not fit,
a fey small-boned redhead.
What an odd pair we were,
bound tight as twin sisters,
lovers of books and words,
haunters of musty libraries.

You ate steak, drank gin,
talked tough when needed,
smoked small black cigars.
At our gravestone lunches,
you never spoke of your life
as your fingered the grass.
"I'm acclimating," you said.
Three days later, you died.
No one knew of the cancer
racing through your body;
you'd chosen to go on alone.
No graves are open now
in "our" historic cemetery
but I still think of you there.
And I still see us together,
alive, lunching at that tomb,
laughing, appalling the dead.

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AWAKENING

By Ted Kooser

How heavy it is, this bucket
drawn out of the lake of sleep
with a dream spilling over,
so heavy that on some mornings
you can't quite pull it free
so let it slip back under,
back into the darkness where
the water is warm, even warmer,
but the dream, like a minnow,
has swum away and is merely
a flash in the murky distance,

and the weight of waking up
seems even heavier. But somehow
you lift it again, its handle
biting into your fingers,
and haul it out and set it down
still rippling, a weight thing
like life itself, in which you dip
the leaky cup of your hands
and drink.

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SACRED STONES

By Marcy Heidish

Let me be an old rock wall in an Irish field,
stone laid on stone by hands gone to dust
that lingers beneath the accepting earth.

Let me be near to such earth, only once,
a thick wall so ancient its age is unknown,
its rocks great gray bells, poised to peal.

Let me border planted fields, their green
a thing you taste, smell, and in the nights
you hear the breaths of sleeping crops.

Let me set off land where men had fought
and bled and died and left their blades
to fall deep into dark fathoms of earth.

Let me watch the circling of centuries,
processions of coffins and of brides,
priests blessing seeds and the harvest.

Let me never die but wait to witness all life
until in the watching I become it and slowly,
gladly, graciously, let myself wear away.

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