

POETRY OF PASSION

CLASS THREE: PASSION FOR ART

JOY

By Liesel Mueller

“Don’t cry, it’s only music,”
Someone’s voice is saying.
“No one you love is dying.”

It’s only music. And it was only spring,
The world’s unreasoning body
Run amok, like a saint’s, with glory,
That overwhelmed a young girl
With unreasoning sadness.
“Crazy,” she told herself.”
“I should be dancing with happiness.”

But it happened again. It happens
When we make bottomless love...
It has nothing to do with the passing of time.
It’s not about loss. It’s about
Two seemingly parallel lines
Suddenly coming together
Inside us, in some place
That is still wilderness.

Joy, joy the sopranos sing,
Reaching for the shimmering notes
While our eyes fill with tears.

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THE CELLIST

By Marcy Heidish

Strings of sound lower themselves
Through my apartment’s ceiling:
Such delicate and invisible tracery,
Almost human but not quite human,
The melody erratic, then familiar:
“Happy birthday to you...to you...”
The song is nearer than memory,

Brushing me with repeated notes,
Blessing and stitching the air,
Played over and over again
As if in preparation for a party.

How I hoped to meet the cellist,
Perhaps in our building's elevator
---and there she was one day,
A tall ordinary graying woman
With a red cello on her back.
This weaver of audible magic
Deserved my spoken praise
But I was mute as she was.
I hoped for the right words
But the elevator descended,
Its metal doors slid open and
All I could say was: "Lobby?"

I never saw the cellist again
But I still have hopeful dreams
Of thanking her with new words
Instead of my awestruck gaze.
Even later, after we moved,
I sometimes had the old dream.
In this one I offer up a "Brava!"
I've disappointed hope's promise
And that, I realize, has a price.

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THE NEW COLOSSUS

By Emma Lazarus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

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EATING WORDS

Marcy Heidish

Listen. Bears in the garbage again.
Unworthy of note for a house in the mountains
but worthy of note for a frustrated writer.

This time no orange rinds were consumed,
no crusts, no crumbs, no cremated asparagus.
The bears dined on "manuscript marinara:"
soaked in tomato sauce, seasoned with garlic
—the draft of a novel I could not get right.

Two hungry bears found it in our dumpster.
They pawed through my novel's insipid prologue,
munched on the soporific first chapters,
going on to devour some two hundred pages,
saturated in red sauce, too spicy for us.

I'd finally sent out my flawed manuscript
—and where did it go? It found takers
whose enthused reception was immediate;
you might call this reaction a rave review.

How to reward creatures who destroy shame?
Once I feared bears who can kill with one swipe.
Now I smile when I notice them, even at night—
"Thank you," I say, "For accepting my novel."

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CANDLE HAT

Billy Collins

In most self-portraits it is the face that dominates:
Cezanne is a pair of eyes swimming in brushstrokes,
Van Gogh stares out of a halo of swirling darkness,
Rembrandt looks relieved as if he were taking a breather
from painting The Blinding of Sampson.

But in this one Goya stands well back from the mirror
and is seen posed in the clutter of his studio
addressing a canvas tilted back on a tall easel.

He appears to be smiling out at us as if he knew
we would be amused by the extraordinary hat on his head
which is fitted around the brim with candle holders,
a device that allowed him to work into the night.

You can only wonder what it would be like
to be wearing such a chandelier on your head
as if you were a walking dining room or concert hall.

But once you see this hat there is no need to read
any biography of Goya or to memorize his dates.

To understand Goya you only have to imagine him
lighting the candles one by one, then placing
the hat on his head, ready for a night of work.

Imagine him surprising his wife with his new invention,
the laughing like a birthday cake when she saw the glow.

Imagine him flickering through the rooms of his house
with all the shadows flying across the walls.

Imagine a lost traveler knocking on his door
one dark night in the hill country of Spain.
"Come in, " he would say, "I was just painting myself,"
as he stood in the doorway holding up the wand of a brush,
illuminated in the blaze of his famous candle hat.

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THE DANCER

Marcy Heidish

At six I started ballet.
It shaped the shadow
I was when I began.
It formed my shyness
into pirouettes
no one could touch

not the bullies at school
not the shouting at home
until that home broke
and the bullies moved on.
Now my soul was free
leaping into perfect arcs
high above any floor.
I saw this in the mirrors
at the studio where I flew
to new heights, unafraid.
I danced the great stories
of the Firebird and Giselle
they let me into the magic
where I stayed many years
Now, at forty, I must quit.
The bullies are gone
The old home is gone
But I still need the magic.
My body is weaker
I strain as I try to fly.
Am I brave enough
to go on? Risk a fall?
Well, it's not my magic.
I know it never was.
The dance is the magic.
I'll summon my courage
to serve what saved me.

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MONET REFUSES THE OPERATION

By Lisel Mueller

Doctor, you say there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.

Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,
wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you
the Houses of Parliament dissolve
night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?
I will not return to a universe
of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.
To paint the speed of light!
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and change our bones, skin, clothes
to gases. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

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THE STARRY NIGHT
Anne Sexton

“That does not keep me from having a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars.” Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to his brother

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry.

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