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LOUISE GLÜCK [b. 1943]

The Wild Iris

At the end of my suffering
there was a door.

Hear me out: that which you call death
I remember.

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
Then nothing. The weak sun
flickered over the dry surface.

5

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

10

Then it was over: that which you fear, being
a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs.

15

You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:

20

from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater.

[1992]

JAMES TATE [b. 1943]

The Wheelchair Butterfly

O sleepy city of reeling wheelchairs
where a mouse can commit suicide if he can
concentrate long enough
on the history book of rodents
in this underground town

of electrical wheelchairs!
The girl who is always pregnant and bruised
like a pear

rides her many-stickered bicycle
backward up the staircase
of the abandoned trolleybarn.

Yesterday was warm. Today a butterfly froze
in midair; and was plucked like a grape
by a child who swore he could take care

of it. O confident city where
the seeds of poppies pass for carfare,

where the ordinary hornets in a human's heart
may slumber and snore, where bifocals bulge

in an orange garage of daydreams,
we wait in our loose attics for a new season

as if for an ice-cream truck.

An Indian pony crosses the plains

whispering Sanskrit prayers to a crater of fleas.
Honeysuckle says: I thought I could swim.

The Mayor is urinating on the wrong side
of the street! A dandelion sends off sparks:
beware your hair is locked!

Beware the trumpet wants a glass of water!
Beware a velvet tabernacle!

Beware the Warden of Light has married
an old piece of string!

RITA DOVE [b. 1952]

The Satisfaction Coal Company

1

What to do with a day.
Leaf through *Jet*. Watch T.V.
Freezing on the porch
but he goes anyhow, snow too high
for a walk, the ice treacherous.
Inside, the gas heater takes care of itself;
he doesn't even notice being warm.

Everyone says he looks great.
Across the street a drunk stands smiling
at something carved in a tree.
The new neighbor with the floating hips
scoots out to get the mail
and waves once, brightly,
storm door clipping her heel on the way in.

2

Twice a week he had taken the bus down Glendale hill
to the corner of Market. Slipped through
the alley by the canal and let himself in.
Started to sweep
with terrible care, like a woman
brushing shine into her hair,
same motion, same lullaby.
No curtains — the cop on the beat
stopped outside once in the hour
to swing his billy club and glare.

It was better on Saturdays
when the children came along:
he mopped while they emptied
ashtrays, clang of glass on metal
then a dry scutter. Next they counted
nailheads studding the leather cushions.
Thirty-four! they shouted,
that was the year and
they found it mighty amusing.

But during the week he noticed more —
 lights when they gushed or dimmed
 at the Portage Hotel, the 10:32
 picking up speed past the B & O switchyard,
 floorboards trembling and the explosive
kachook kachook kachook kachook
 and the oiled rails ticking underneath.

35

40

3

They were poor then but everyone had been poor.
 He hadn't minded the sweeping,
 just the thought of it — like now
 when people ask him what he's thinking
 and he says *I'm listening*.

45

Those nights walking home alone,
 the bucket of coal scraps banging his knee,
 he'd hear a roaring furnace
 with its dry, familiar heat. Now the nights
 take care of themselves — as for the days,
 there is the canary's sweet curdled song,
 the wino smiling through his dribble.

50

Past the hill, past the gorge
 choked with wild sumac in summer,
 the corner has been upgraded.
 Still, he'd like to go down there someday
 to stand for a while, and get warm.

55

[1986]

You Can't Rhumboogie in a Ball and Chain

for Janis Joplin°

You called the blues' loose black belly lover
 and in Port Arthur they called you pig-face.
 The way you chugged booze straight, without a glass,
 your brass-assed language, slingbacks with jeweled heel,
 proclaimed you no kin to their muzzled blood. 5
 No Chiclet-toothed Baptist boyfriend for you.

Strung-out, street hustling showed men wouldn't buy you.
 Once you clung to the legs of a lover,
 let him drag you till your knees turned to blood,
 mouth hardened to a thin scar on your face, 10
 cracked under songs, screams, never left to heal.
 Little Girl Blue, soul pressed against the glass.

That voice rasping like you'd guzzled fiberglass,
 stronger than the four armed men behind you.
 But a pale horse lured you, docile, to heel: 15
 warm snow flanks pillowed you like a lover.
 Men feared the black holes in your body and face,
 knew what they put in would return as blood.

Craving fast food, cars, garish as fresh blood,
 diners with flies and doughnuts under glass, 20
 Formica bars and a surfer's gold face,
 in nameless motels, after sign-off, you
 let TV's blank bright stare play lover,
 lay still, convinced its cobalt rays could heal.

Your songs that sound ground under some stud's heel, 25
 swallowed and coughed up in a voice like blood:
 translation unavailable, lover!

No prince could shoe you in unyielding glass,
 stories of exploding pumpkins bored you 30
 who flaunted tattooed breast and hungry face.

Janis Joplin: Blues singer in the 1960s (1943–1970). Born and raised in Port Arthur, Texas, her life was blessed by an innate musical talent and cursed by alcohol and drugs. She died of an overdose at age twenty-seven.

That night needing a sweet-legged sugar's face,
a hot, sky-eyed Southern comfort to heal
the hurt of senior proms for all but you,
plain Janis Lyn, self-hatred laced your blood.
You knew they worshiped drained works, emptied glass,
legend's last gangbang the wildest lover.

Like clerks we face your image in the glass,
suggest lovers, as accessories, heels.
"It's your shade, this blood dress," we say. "It's you."

CATHY SONG [b. 1955]

Girl Powdering Her Neck

From a Ukiyo-e Print by Utamaro

The light is the inside
sheen of an oyster shell,
sponged with talc and vapor,
moisture from a bath.

A pair of slippers
are placed outside
the rice-paper doors.
She kneels at a low table
in the room,
her legs folded beneath her
as she sits on a buckwheat pillow.

Her hair is black
with hints of red,
the color of seaweed
spread over rocks.

Morning begins the ritual
 wheel of the body,
 the application of translucent skins.
 She practices pleasure:
 the pressure of three fingertips
 applying powder.
 Fingerprints of pollen
 some other hand will trace.

The peach-dyed kimono
 patterned with maple leaves
 drifting across the silk,
 falls from right to left
 in a diagonal, revealing
 the nape of her neck
 and the curve of a shoulder
 like the slope of a hill
 set deep in snow in a country
 of huge white solemn birds.
 Her face appears in the mirror,
 a reflection in a winter pond,
 rising to meet itself.

She dips a corner of her sleeve
 like a brush into water
 to wipe the mirror;
 she is about to paint herself.
 The eyes narrow
 in a moment of self-scrutiny.
 The mouth parts
 as if desiring to disturb
 the placid plum face;
 break the symmetry of silence.
 But the berry-stained lips,
 stenciled into the mask of beauty,
 do not speak.

Two chrysanthemums
 touch in the middle of the lake
 and drift apart.