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Poems

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West African Homegoing

for Charles

Everything you see there
will be something remembered:
that troublesome flower
of another time still intact
within your pocket.
Something about the faces
pulls you up short:
memory lights on the wing of a nose,
the crest of a lip.
Many rivers cross the broad of a cheek.
The greeting you elicit is extant
in the hands of your aunts on Sunday morning,
gestures smuggled in the holds of ships
like undetected treasure,
the language left
when words are gone

There will be trees whose names you
do not know—acacia, dombeya, bambussu, raphia—
but their embrace is as familiar
as your darkened cradle.
Colors unbearably bright
where you live now
pick up their skirts
and talk back to the sun.
Greens and frying fish
drift toward you
like fingers of hope

Fragments of song come through,
 the melodic shards of childhood.
 Phrases loop past,
 lines you can't catch.
 No matter. You'll net them in dreams,
 cadence of another country,
 as if voices could sing across water

Gingkos

I hate this dying season.
 I'm not moved by harvest time,
 or pumpkins, nor the sky's crisp arc
 in rapture at my window.
 I feel December's whip,
 the cold thump of winter's bones.
 I'm no pilgrim, reap no lessons
 from adversity. I take personally
 the exit of birds, the sudden
 loss of light.

Don't give me that autumn in New York stuff.
 Forget September,
 jerking along the remnants of summer
 like yarn before a cat. And
 October's smoke screen? Costumes and apple-bobbing.
 Then November nips the sill with pies
 and holidays and the color orange and—
 oh, never mind November. Worst of all,
 November. I can't stand November

except when the gingkos
 gold-leaf Waverly Place.
 What a blaze of fan faces!
 How do these awkward boughs,
 these stick figure trees,
 produce such leaves!
 One day dreaming in branches,
 silent mouths denying the fall,
 and the next air is flocked with guilt

and from the gutter gold tongues
 lap a layer willing to stick,
 not the kind to be kicked by boys
 coming home from school.

No one passes without
 stopping to gaze at the gloss
 our street has taken:
 light-filled, open, innocent,
 it floats in the Byzantine style,
 a luminous backdrop: images majestic
 if somewhat stiff,
 bashful, giddy, glitter a moment
 before retreating.

Even dogs revere the spot,
 stepping instead to maples
 or lindens, implying an instinct for beauty
 which overrides territorial imperative.
 Notice the subway mosaics
 merely bounded by graffiti: no one breaches
 the fields of PENNSYLVANIA STATION, 14TH STREET, or
 CATHEDRAL PARKWAY, where tesserae trees remain
 intact in a little bit of heaven.
 And why not?
 We know god when we see it.

A Man Talks to Me on the Bus

If you intend the path to my house,
 best you take up another road.
 The only prints upon this doorstep
 belong to me or the overruling rain.
 I have but one chair—a passerby
 would find not even a cup
 to spare—now go!

Love has been put out of this house like a cat
 you don't mean to let back in.
 Touch is merely memory across the skin.

Footsteps cause my hair to rise,
 my claws are extended—see:
 I am also that cat put out.

She told me I hardly spoke,
 even in that finding fault.
 I had my back to her,
 a familiar chaos rising in my chest.
 Then I heard it in her throat:
 laughter the sound of breaking pottery.
 I said to her: Get out.
 That was all.

Don't, don't, don't
 come closer.
 This conversation is ended.
 There are other hearths
 at which to ring.
 No voice but mine breaks the silence of stone.

At last the pleasure of my own thin song.
 Should anyone intrude upon this house,
 I close the door,
 and the door shuts out.

Romulus and Remus

*after a statue in Central Park depicting the legendary
 founders of ancient Rome being suckled by the She-Wolf*

For a last-minute replacement
 she's mighty protective.
 But look how far you'll go
 to save a kitty mewling
 at the kitchen door.
 Little sons of Mars,
 abandoned by man and god,
 pulled crying from the Tiber,
 dragged ashore at Rome

and now at Central Park
by a canine with a soft spot for children.

Despite the foundlings
clinging at her belly,
she insists on standing
though it brings Romulus and Remus
to their feet.

This way she can
peruse the park for danger
without disturbing her charges,
who have accepted as perfectly normal
the tits of a wolf.

Observing them is a man
so still he himself is
a statue.

His faded coat hangs
in folds of hope.
He keeps distance,
studying her from afar
as if he dare not come before
a nursing mother.
Wonder has caught
like sun in a chink of armor.

Except for the presence of trees
the park is so utterly empty that
no one sees him
sweep his hair,
lay back his collar,
and then, yes, he actually bows to the wolf.

With what diffidence does he approach
the lady. How gingerly he tenders his hand
to pat her head.

Granted the wolf is a foil.
But what a foil!
Romulus and Remus suck toward her
like a desert to a mirage. And she's

glad to have them: finally, two pups,
however odd, to call her own.

And as for our man—
you cannot imagine
what it takes for him
to make his move.
He yearns for the wolf
with the intensity of a lover,
and though motionless
appears to be walking out of himself,
the timid suitor issuing in stages.
Gesture struggles for form
but your hands will not stop shaking
and your feet won't move so you project
some astral body of love toward
the object of your affection.
Your stomach lies helpless in waves
and thumping at your ribs is a hammer
that has got inside you. Your tongue is a log.
You turn to your clothing as if
courage were the fine line of a sleeve
and love a fool for fashion.
Kiss that goodbye.
We are stripped, left with
what the heart wears:
a well-frayed coat.

In love we are all beggars.
And if you don't believe that,
watch yourself next time
hope beckons.

Christine Perri: *Recent Works*

Prospect. Mixed media on paper. 28 x 56 in. (page 127)

No Utopia. Oil on canvas. 42 x 34 in. (page 128)

Cold Command. Oil on canvas. 48 x 58 in. (page 129)

Shoring up Ruins. Mixed media on paper. 40 x 52 in. (page 130)

The Place Beneath. Oil on canvas. 58 x 35 in. (page 131)