Poems

Geri De Luca

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Recommended Citation
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House Dreams: For a Friend
Who Is Inconsolable

My home keeps coming undone.
The door frames are crumbling,
large chips fall away in my hand.
In the kitchen, the original green
is reestablishing itself. Maybe
it's not so bad, I think, the green
is tart and shiny like an apple.
My ex-husband, an earnest man,
is busy making repairs. Still,
it won't be safe to sleep tonight
unless we can replace the locks, and
first we've got to install new doors.
"Too good is no good," my father
used to say. The thought is comforting.

I have a friend who dreams of running
from his life, who says, "If it weren't
for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all."
When his father was alive, they would spend
several weekends every spring planting rows
of flowers in front of the shrubs,
pulling crab grass, pruning the hedge.
In the fall they moved inside where,
room by room, they went through the house,
sanding, papering, restoring the original
color to the moldings. When the old man died,
he sat in the living room, his
strange blue eyes scanning the walls
remembering every hole he drilled.
for insulation, every bruise he plastered
and repainted, every raised mark that
still remained.

He keeps to himself.
At night he plays the banjo and the mandolin,
old timey music, he calls it, melodies
that weave like ribbons on a May pole
for ladies in white dresses who danced
at Whitsun, his hands are relaxed,
graceful and easy on the strings,
this one's Soldier's Joy, though
don't ask him about Vietnam, because
he won't tell you.

Today he's just finished laying wood tile
in a water-damaged square of kitchen floor.
It's beautiful, I say, it looks
like a giant cheeseboard. He smiles
a wan smile, his head curled into his chest,
his chin about level with his beer can.

I take a drag on his cigarette, a brief,
itimate taste of death, and notice
that he's just had a haircut, his hair
is bone straight and beautiful and
streaked with gray. How odd that he looks
as neat as a roundhead or a monk
in this his hour of anguish. Hey, I want to say,
getting down to it, listen to your music.
Someone blessed your hands when you were born

as if that ever helped or I could understand
what he felt, could tell him to give up the
dream of sealing every drafty seam
in every leaded window. That's no way to heal,
I'd like to say, but he is too cold to hear me.
Where We Have Arrived: For Roni

We are taking the shuttle back from Boston to New York. The airport is quiet, as if we are the only ones there. You sit in the window seat in the twilight, the horizon below you, the sun setting against the dark length of your hair. We have traveled so many times together, have been each other's witnesses, like the twins in that children's book you loved, Lisa and Lottie, co-conspirators, arranging our own happy endings, leaving the formal dinners and the speeches to go to the movies, we were The Lion and the Unicorn,* Michael Hearn called us those two bitches from Brooklyn, and we loved that he said that, we took it as a compliment. And now, in some small way, we're even famous. Graduate students interview us on the origins of the journal—which means we're getting old. Historical. And soon to be revised. But deeper friends, beyond our young imagining. And still inside me there has always been this fear, you are talking about it now, what happens when I pull away. You put your hand over your heart, "You're in here," you say, "inside yourself," and I am relieved. I feel myself there. I felt it today when you and Ellie diverged

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*The Lion and the Unicorn is a journal about children's books that Roni Natov and I founded and co-edited for 15 years. It is now published by Johns Hopkins University Press.
from me in the bookstore, and I moaned about buying more books by men. Finally I am becoming weary of their authority, the very sound of their voices makes me angry. Forget them, you tell me, read whatever you want. I hear you laughing with Ellie and I am lonely even though I choose to set myself apart. I find Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams*, the title is unavoidable, you were the one who recommended it, I read the first line: “His two girls are curled together like animals whose habit is to sleep underground, in the smallest space possible.” And the father who watches thinks about how close they are and how much they will lose. It reminds me of you and Ellen Forman in the country, how entwined you always seemed to be in each other’s arms and legs, how you danced in the dark house in Chichester as I watched and played chords on Jonathan’s guitar. And that winter Ellen was killed by a car as she stepped off a curb, and you called me in the middle of the night and said, “Geri, it’s the worst,” and we stayed on the line together for a long time although there was nothing to say. And years before that, there was Laura’s death. And of course, you always said, I didn’t have to try to take their place.

The plane circles over Manhattan. I can see the lights, the Empire State Building, “Look,” I almost say, but catch myself. I am a sightseer, looking out the window, my eyes are jumping around, focus, I think, notice how people look at each other when they talk, remember to notice that the next time you have a conversation. The dark cabin protects me. “Sometimes,” I say, “you sit down next to me and I am overshadowed. I am lonely without you and then when you are there,
my heart is filled with something—fear, a loss of self. What fragile self is it that is so easily lost?"

I'm working on this, believe me.

The plane is landing as we talk, and part of me concentrates on its descent, the wheels hit the ground, and I breathe again, and we walk through the airport, arm and arm, and stop to call our separate homes, preparing to say goodbye. We will say at some point in the future, "Remember that day when we went to Ellie's meeting in Boston? How many years ago was that? And didn't we have a great time?"
Alas, Glass Slipper

I wrote a haiku once in high school, tiny poem about turned heads

that saw the spring where the window was once closed on winter

not knowing then the dark ground in which I seemed to be a geneless seed

in a cold field. Sadness grew endlessly in me. It took such space. Someone else could have a life in which the snow's dark days bore fruit while I lived

as if there were some elaborate flowered tree remembered in the mind

of God that I could never be and all else was just a paltry scratching at a shell that would not crack.
II

If a tree falls in a forest
and there is no man to hear it,
will it make a sound?

I know this thought. It has
a heritage, like bound feet,
says who told you

you could grow into anything,
make any noise, leave footsteps?
Tread softly. Make dull marks

indistinguishable from
a dead branch that
hits the ground and lies still.

Lately, every time I buy
a pair of shoes
I need a bigger size.