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Tom Daley

Any persona poem is a kind of talking back, a switching of the mouthpiece we place over our own delicious and terrifying impulses at civilization's behest for the controlled scream of another. This act is a species of permission, even of licentiousness—we can say, on behalf of someone else, “[W]hat the most extravagant might possibly think without saying,” as Thomas Wentworth Higginson characterized the very forthright Emily Dickinson in their first encounter. The nasty, curmudgeonly, hateful stance of the monk-narrator towards the prissy gardener-monk with whom he shares a table in Robert Browning's “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” may have nothing to do with Robert Browning's personality or character, but Browning certainly had the imagination to reach for the vehemence of forbidden impulses and give them a kind of temporary lease in that poem.

Writing these poems in the voice of my mother enabled me to talk back, not just to her (and certainly some of this group of poems do that), but to have her persona give vent to my own grievances, wishes, disappointments. But the poems are not a mere fusion of my impulses and my idea of her character. The voice is one neither she nor I would recognize (“Mom didn't talk like that!” was the only response my siblings gave me when I read them a poem from this series). It is a voice suffused with an archness that my mother could adopt when it served her, but which she generally eschewed; with a vocabulary that she would have understood but rarely used; and with an agenda she wouldn't necessarily have consciously endorsed. The tone is the tone poetic license permits. The stance is a fiction that finds its facts in the bit of unbridling of the unconscious which writing often provokes.

My mother suffered, but bore her suffering largely in silence. In these poems, her persona gives vent to its anger and sadness but takes no responsibility for its own complicity. Revenge is rarely equitable.

TOM DALEY

What My Mother Forgot to Tell My Only Living Brother on His Birthday

Goodbye my boy Rooster
whittling at your phantom perch
inside the barn the last tenant torched

before we came spry and easy
to that kind, prickly kingdom
of the raspberry cane.

Goodbye mean thicket.
Goodbye shuttered well. Goodbye
you old gray tongue of tainted groundwater.

Son, we will you a tree house
to howl from or scan all creation—
boy in your chokehold colic, sporting

the jam-stained jersey of a denatured soul,
the blazon of not enough and not enough.
You wept us baffling

out of your live traps and trials,
your cruelties consumed
and revived. We recall your inaccurate pitch,

your sorrow and rough,
your conjuring strange without willing it,
your small fires in the rage,

your garbage cans too zinc to blaze,
your always smelling
of my sour breasts and tick repellent.

Discard your guitar picks,
son of my Rayon Age,
and tell me why moths

scorch their pioneer shapes
in the lining of your pockets,
why you clambered up the rainspout,

then drizzled from the gutter, then collected
your wrists into cherrybomb boasts, into
spikes in the spokes of far better.

My Mother Explains Why She Threw Away All My Dolls

The kickball pitcher in second grade
warned your captain
would see you canned

when, to my dismay,
he found you, clutching,
in each hand, a rag doll

sprouting mopstring hair. So,
I stashed your darlings
in the magical cache

of Junkfill Hill and The Land
of Ash—grey rabbit,
that brown-with-Brahms-for-a-heart bear.

I know I pledged my
word they'd be bustling
at your headboard again soon.

But you were turning scabbard
from sword and all the elixirs
in my spoon mean to soothe

you away from that feverish maze
you still stagger towards
in your girlish haze, my boy

with your dowsing stick bent
in the wrongest ways.
I was the Angel

poxing your mitten thumb
Andys and Raggedy Anns,
your orange-furred puppet foxes

and pimple fleece lambs.
Son, if you cannot speak
to sorrow in the full skin

of a man,
I will not hedge tomorrow
just to lose it in your hands.

My Mother Tells Me She Saw a Man in a Coffee Shop Who Looked Like My Father Might Have Forty Years Ago

From the back, I could see that the reddish tinge
had all gone, That one's head
was shaved. What's left

of his scalp that might sprout—who can tell?
I wanted him to turn, and he did,
and of course it wasn't him.

That man was dour, deep into indifference.
Sober. Your father would be much gaunter now—
he was already somewhat gaunt

last time I saw him, but that brightness
in his eye gave his gauntness the lie,
that shine cooked from silky longing.

One might have caught the hectic calm
of a carnival about to close
in his sheepish net of a face

engrossed in a washed-out grin that asks,
most sincerely, and with a flickering sigh,
How do you do? Not a question,

but an insinuation. Not an invitation,
but a maneuver, a query, brittle but sincere,
falling in an arc like a scimitar

and slashing to small pieces
the clumsy links of anyone's resistance,
trumping any threat of rebuff

with his honest promise of hope
for the delight of some unscheduled dalliance,
some rendezvous with his disasters.

His was the *come hither*
that pressed prospect
to satisfaction, but distilled nothing

like contentment from beholding those things
which incited delight
but only lit a slow wick
to where wicks find their expansive root.

My Mother Tries to Explain the Position of the Trotskyists vis-à-vis the Election and Her Candidate, October 2008

They say it is all wound down
and already over. They say Wall Street
incisors will nibble to moot

all the precinct levers
primed in the neighborhood
polling booths. That my erstwhile

community organizer now spoons soup
to golden parachutes. They say his demand
for ten thousand more commandos

to Afghanistan trips
a poppy-red hot wire to Armageddon.
They say hot cargo and sit-down strikes

might just flatiron the fat cats
mewling and tug-of-warring over
his capacious shirt cuffs.

When I talk of my man's
bright-All advisor, Mrs. Madeline,
they say every pearl

on her necklace grew
from the gritted heckles
of half a million Iraqis

snuffed out in her sanction.
When I say my man's
historical, they say that's mostly

metaphorical. So, he didn't scoff
over the scandal of post-Katrina—
that would have unpolished

his classy demeanor! When he rails
against the court for their death penalty
retort, they put him rightside of Bush

père et fils. What's their answer?
Restitution of the impulse

revolution. These Trotsky folk theorize

that to sermonize with the tease
of the logic of the lesser evil
only postpones a hoped-for

upheaval. That election for the presidency
merely reshuffles
the residencies of chief who slash

for chief who burn.

My Mother Contemplates a Clothespin Salvaged from the Sale of My Father's House in Gloucester

Mousetrap of a sun-bleached cuff.
Cinch-clamp of a wind-wrung hem.
Loaded spring ripened in salt air.
At the business end,
two pairs of concave notches
and a convexed edge.
Legs gouged, to better fix. Ridged
for fierce attachments.
Dulled prongs of a virgin
squeezed apart by a husband's finger and thumb.
How a modern Thetis
might have clipped, but missed
most of the heel of Achilles.
How Archimedes's
levers might have lifted
the whole world of sodden things.
Disused relic revived
by worry-wart climate-change warriors.
Celibate Shakers pryed them out of maple and ash.
What gypsies carved and bartered.
Eyed by their father,
in her white bobby socks the children's babysitter
is pinning washcloths and baby underpants
emblazoned with "Spank Me!" rants.
On hot and less modest days, he fidgets,
stretches brine-and-cum-soaked trunks
with these graying gadgets
to the parallel strings of a spinnable rack.
There, clothespins peg towel tents,
anchor fleets flying the snap
of her D-cup bra and his medium jockstrap
hoisted to taunt.
In her careless hands, the pins fall to be found
with bits of glass and gravel on the ground.
Stashed properly, packed,
they are inert yet restless soldiers
almost spilling from the sack.
Clothespin, where are the clean diapers
whiter than salt and warmer
than August? We sued to say who wins
the right to change them, but he never hung
a washed one on a line.
Clothespin, pinch and leash

his scorches, his stains.
Fasten and fly his greasy transgression
to the flagged-out wind and the dried-out sun.