

Poems

by

Diana O'Hehir

(Selected by Chana Bloch)

Diana O'Hehir is an award-winning author of poetry and fiction; in recent years, she has written a series of mystery novels as well. She is Professor Emerita of English at Mills College in Oakland, California, where she established the Creative Writing Program and was a beloved teacher to many generations of students. Now in her eighties, Diana is still writing away energetically, rubbing words together to create sparks. Detailed information about all her many books may be found on her website, <http://www.dianaohahir.com>.

"For a Friend Who Lost a Part of Herself," "Breathing," and "Forgetting the Past" are from *Summoned* (University of Missouri Press, 1976); "Living on the Earthquake Fault" and "January Class: It Hasn't Rained for Seven Months" from *The Power to Change Geography* (Princeton University Press, 1979); "Home Free" and "Waking" from *Home Free* (Atheneum, 1988); "Recognition" from *Spells for Not Dying Again* (Eastern Washington University Press, 1996); "Good Man Blues" and "Dress" from the chapbook *Love Affairs* (Depot Books, 2002). These poems are reprinted by permission of the poet.

For a Friend Who Lost a Part of Herself

That all of God's children must forage like this
Is understood.

We know the journey underground
Clutching the damp iced wall,
The feet nurtured in fog, the hand
That craves a hand
Deducing only a stony jail.

Down at the bottom is a lake solid in glass.

Dredge it open and hack out its secrets; you'll have
The answer to all those hows,
The why of the scratch on your wrist, the sound
Of the voice that awoke you from sleeping.
You'll have what escapes everyone always, the clue
To, why did I come here before?
How could I have dropped it,
So valuable and bright a use of myself?

Coming back is the hardest; it means
Walking on wire; your aerialist's feet falter;
The floor stabs white metal; the walls crowd over
Until only the skinniest traveler can squeeze a way through
Leaving pieces as souvenirs:
Here's one from me.

There's no band waiting to meet you.
Only enough sun
To make gritty eyes blink,
To show the broken fingernail with a seam down its center,
The hand clutching what you managed to bring back.

Breathing

I've been struck by lightning only once.
It soaks you down, dissolves the bones to soup,
Rattles your eyes like castanets.

The hands of lightning wrap you in plastic sheets,
You're the child inside, pulling.
Don't breathe, little one. Lie still.
Love, what comes out of lightning? Power,
A passion to breathe, even when breathing's death.

It happened only once. Life now is different.
Roads are straight as curtain rods; it's easy
To get up in the morning; the gardener squeaks his rake along the walk;
The mail is tied in bundles. I can help you.

Sometimes I meet someone in the supermarket; in her eye
The back gone out of the pupil, specks of mica, blackness
Where light has wedged a window into spiky country.
We watch each other, sharing a past:
Lightning. The taste of lightning.

Forgetting the Past

The clock over the mountain strikes twelve and a half,
The hour at which all of the ladies grow up.
I am not going to worry it any more:
No more sullen sulks, no cakes untasted.
I'll forgive everything.

Behind me slovens that dark stretch of prairie,
Gritty, a road into exile, back over boredom.
It flails out under the blank sky like a cloak,
A terrible country of leisure with the sound turned off,
Under a dome where the sun sags like an eggplant,
Where the rock crashes in scalding silent dust,
Where a finger's crook takes a year, crying takes three
And feet are invisible. I walked that road searching pain with
my toes.

And up here the mountain is bare. Its clock has stopped striking.
I hold in my hand the egg of the morning.
The mountain reflects brightness,
And my children have packed me a lunch: six cookies,

A geranium for my hair. I tell the summit: I'm coming!
On the other side will be rocks of a different color.

Living on the Earthquake Fault

It zigzagged
Under my house, across the back of my garden
And into the hill. The tunnel to Solano Avenue
Cried tears out of the middle of the earth.
And I was the one who tried to hold it together. I grabbed like a clutching
grandmother,
Bridged the earth-slip with my spine.

When they said: let go, I said
I'm holding the world shut all by myself, soon
It will mend like a slit in an orange.

It takes time to learn the logic of chaos.
The open fissure
Ground up pebb[les green as the coast of Ireland
Or streaked with blue like the bay, it spat out
Pieces of colored fire. My house sagged and squeaked. I went to look at
the view. It was
Extraordinary.

A vast new country, scarves of dark brown water,
It waited for me; it wanted my books and my children's mother;
It needed its name, and only I could say it.

January Class: It Hasn't Rained for Seven Months

We dip into hooks as if they were
Well of pity, cups of
Futures, lendings of light from the genuine owners of light,
Shining for miles into the awful garden
Where, deep enclosed, is the Rajah's frightening jewel.

In California almost everyone is divorced.
The eyes of my class stare at the pine tree that scrapes the building.
The clearing has in it your face, my face, the eyes
Of students bruised by the blue air of this
Driest January ever.

The sun comes through the window in knife patterns,
And none of us can say how it happens,
That loving turns to shapes so fierce,
Aiming for the lids, the corners of lips,
Wedging the voice. The edges of heat are square. They stop the throat.

But the jewel in the garden pulls like rain. Can it open
Our hard blue sky, can it
Make us speak.

Home Free

Inch by inch along the bed,
Growing more compact, his arms pulled up like bird's wings
(My father is almost ninety),
I love you, I say over and over,
Until I read in Time Magazine that saying this holds the dying
back;
They get polite, they hang around to thank you.
I love you, I say,
Under my breath.

In Bangkok you can buy a bird in front of the temple
For twenty cents. It's not to eat
Nor to listen to nor to admire but to
Set free.
Spring the door with your plastic diner's card, wait for the
scrabble, the
Head poked out the door, air by your face,
And up he goes.

Recognition

The exact taste of happiness, tangy, somewhere between loquat
and pear, why don't
We ever know it when we meet it?
No one says, Here's happiness' weather,
Planes overhead like white paint.

Three years from now or seven years we'll
Look at a photograph, the people small, communal as gnats, the
house reduced
In sunshine, no ghost yet
Over anyone's shoulder, no stranger riding up with a message
from the Tribunal,
Knocking all the ice plant off the slope
In his climb to our living room.

And we'll say: happiness
Wasn't round or square.
It never named itself was a series of negatives:
You were not inconstant, not sleepless;
I was not
Counting things.

Good Man Blues

That good man came back last night
opened my unlocked door last night
said, Let's do it over, do it right.

He parked his car at my door
parked his old white car at my door
brought his box of books, dropped his shoes down on
my floor.

I said, Last time I left you
got up one morning and left you.
He said, Okay, and lay down on my pillow

rested his hands at my waist
his sturdy hands at my waist.
I said, Those are the hands I still love best.

Stretched out his big body
his handsome, shiny body.
I said, I've wanted that weekdays and Sundays.

Darling, I said, I'm scared I'll hurt you
afraid I'll really hurt you.
He said, Okay, and pulled me down toward the pillow.

I lay down on top of him
spread myself out over him.
It was like my best remembering.

He had dark hair and mine was red
he, dark curly hair, mine was red.
We laughed about those fragments in the bed.

I was eighteen, he twenty-four
eighteen years old, he six years more
so young so raw, so fierce, so cockeyed sure
we rocked the bed; the landlady banged on the door.

Dress

Dying sneaks up on you, like a bad cold.

First you feel tired,
then
your arms hurt
then you wake up one morning, dead,

shrinking around the walls of the room
with the baseboards icing through you.

People don't understand.
You're different, they tell you, pale
what's the matter?
You tell them you're dead.
They don't listen.

A year ago I decided to live again.

I bought a new dress
That was lit from the bottom by fires like Christmas candles.

My friends wondered, what's
the matter
you're odd, hectic.
Are you frightened or nervous
in love?

And I was, but it didn't last.
Still, I remember
as that old cold dents my arms again,

I remember the clasp,
that upward singing current,
your hands tracing my hipbone
molding my ribcage
orange and scarlet, harsh up my body
that mobile heated air, that
clamorous
crackling
dress.

Waking

They buried me in gold, stopped my mouth in copper,
Coated my chest with a turquoise bird,
Swaddled my thighs in a metal pouch,
Poured over me the lid of night,
Perfectly fitting, not heavy enough.

My bones kept saying: wake me;
Knit me back, slice off the tattered cloth;
Unclench my arms, stretch each one out;
The leather flesh will fill itself with life,
The light from the open door,
Fierce as claws,
Rake memory over the brain.

The knotted throat craves speech, the tongue bends for
A taste of basil, the eyes for

Red spinning candle margins, the rusty lungs echo:
I'm alive! Everything is still possible!

Inside my gold cupboard a bee is waiting,
Its wings poised over its back.