

Eleven Poems

by

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(Selected by Chana Bloch)

Editor's Note: "Birthday Poem," "Life's Work," "Morning Swim," "Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief," "Appetite," and "On Being Asked To Write a Poem in Memory of Anne Sexton" are from *Maxine Kumin: Selected Poems, 1960-1990* (W.W. Norton, 1997). "Women and Horses," "Historic Blacksburg, Virginia," and "Sonnet in So Many Words" are from *Jack and Other Poems* (W.W. Norton, 2005). "Looking Back in My Eighty-first Year," and "Six Weeks After" are from *Still To Mow* (W.W. Norton, 2007). We thank Maxine Kumin and W.W. Norton for their graciousness in allowing these poems to be included here.

Birthday Poem

I am born at home
the last of four children.
The doctor brings me as promised
in his snap-jawed black leather satchel.

He takes me out in sections
fastens limbs to torso
torso to neck stem
pries Mama's navel open
and inserts me, head first.

Chin back, I swim upward
up the alimentary canal
bypassing mouth and nose holes
and knock at the top
of her head to be let out
wherefore her little bald spot.

Today my mother is eighty-two
splendidly braceleted and wigged.
She had to go four times to the well
to get me.

Life's Work

Mother my good girl
I remember this old story:
you fresh out of the Conservatory
at eighteen a Bach specialist
in a starched shirtwaist
begging permission to go on tour
with the nimble violinist you were
never to accompany and he
flinging his music down
the rosin from his bow
flaking line by line
like grace notes on the treble clef
and my grandfather
that estimable man I never met
scrubbing your mouth with a handkerchief
saying no daughter of mine
tearing loose the gold locket
you wore with no one's picture in it
and the whole German house on 15th street
at righteous white heat. . . .

At eighteen I chose to be a swimmer.
My long hair dripped through the dinner
onto the china plate.
My fingers wrinkled like Sunsweet
yellow raisins from the afternoon workout.
My mouth chewed but I was doing laps.
I entered the water like a knife.
I was all muscle and seven doors.
A frog on the running board.
King of the Eels and the Eel's wife.
I swallowed and prayed
to be allowed to join the Aquacade
and my perfect daddy
who carried you off to elope
after the fingerboard snapped
and the violinist lost his case
my daddy wearing gravy on his face
swore on the carrots and the boiled beef
that I would come to nothing
that I would come to grief. . . .

Well, the firm old fathers are dead
and I didn't come to grief.
I came to words instead
to tell the little tale that's left:
the midnights of my childhood still go on.
The stairs speak again under your foot.
The heavy parlor door folds shut
and "Claire de Lune"
puckers from the obedient keys
plain as a schoolroom clock ticking
and what I hear more clearly than Debussy's
love song is the dry aftersound
of your long nails clicking.

Morning Swim

Into my empty head there come
a cotton beach, a dock wherefrom

I set out, oily and nude
through mist, in chilly solitude.

There was no line, no roof or floor
to tell the water from the air.

Night fog thick as terry cloth
closed me in its fuzzy growth.

I hung my bathrobe on two pegs.
I took the lake between my legs.

Invaded and invader, I
went overhand on that flat sky.

Fish twitched beneath me, quick and tame.
In their green zone they sang my name

and in the rhythm of the swim
I hummed a two-four-time slow hymn.

I hummed "Abide With Me." The beat
rose in the fine thrash of my feet,

rose in the bubbles I put out
slantwise, trailing through my mouth.

My bones drank water; water fell
through all my doors. I was the well

that fed the lake that met my sea
in which I sang "Abide With Me."

Our Ground Time Here Will Be Brief

Blue landing lights make
nail holes in the dark.
A fine snow falls.
We sit
on the tarmac taking on
the mail, quick freight,
trays of laboratory mice,
coffee and Danish
for the passengers.

Wherever we're going
is Monday morning.
Wherever we're coming from
is Mother's lap.
On the cloud-pack above, strewn
as loosely as parsnip
or celery seeds, lie
the souls of the unborn:

my children's children's
children and their father.
We gather speed for the last run
and lift off into the weather.

Appetite

I eat these
wild red raspberries
still warm from the sun
and smelling faintly like jewelweed
in memory of my father

tucking the napkin
under his chin and bending
over an ironstone bowl
of the bright drupelets
awash in cream

my father
with the sigh of a man
who has seen all and been redeemed
said time after time
as he lifted his spoon

men kill for this.

On Being Asked to Write a Poem in Memory of Anne Sexton

The elk discards his antlers every spring.
They rebud, they grow, they are growing

an inch a day to form a rococo rack
with a five-foot spread even as we speak:

cartilage at first, covered with velvet;
bendable, tender gristle, yet

destined to ossify, the velvet sloughed off,
hanging in tatters from alders and scrub growth.

No matter how hardened it seems there was pain.
Blood on the snow from rubbing, rubbing, rubbing.

What a heavy candelabrum to be borne
forth, each year more elaborately turned:

the special issues, the prizes in her name.

Above the mantle the late elk's antlers gleam.

Historic Blacksburg, Virginia

The lavatory sign still reads
Colored on one side and White
on the other in the old
caboose that used to trail
the raveled skein of freight cars full
of West Virginia coal.
Whoever entered had to flip
his designation right side up
then brace against the track before
unbuttoning, back to the door
and pissing down the same foul hole.

Sonnet in So Many Words

The time comes when it can't be said,
thinks Richard Dalloway, pocketing his
sixpence of change, and off he goes
holding a great bunch of white and red

roses against his chest, thinking himself
a man both blessed and doomed in wedlock
and Clarissa meanwhile thinking as he walks back
even between husband and wife a gulf. . . .

If these are Virginia and Leonard, are they not
also you and me taking up the coffee
grinder or scraping bits of omelet free
for the waiting dogs who salivate and sit?

Never to say what one feels. And yet
this is a love poem. Can you taste it?

Looking Back in My Eighty-first Year

*How did we get to be old ladies—
my grandmother's job—when we
were the long-legged girls?
—Hilma Wolitzer*

Instead of marrying the day after graduation,
in spite of freezing on my father's arm as
here comes the bride struck up
saying, I'm not sure I want to do this,

I should have taken that fellowship
to the University of Grenoble to examine
the original manuscript
of Stendhal's unfinished *Lucien Leuwen*,

I, who had never been west of the Mississippi,
should have crossed the ocean
in third class on the Cunard White Star,
the war just over, the Second World War

when Kilroy was here, that innocent graffito,
two eyes and a nose draped over
A fence line. How could I go?
Passion had locked us together.

Sixty years my lover,
he says he would have waited.
He says he would have sat
where the steamship docked
till the last of the pursers
decamped, and I rushed back
littering the runway with carbon paper. . . .
Why didn't I go? It was fated.

Marriage dizzied us. Hand over hand,
flesh against flesh for the final haul,
we tugged our lifeline through limestone and sand,
lover and long-legged girl.

Six Weeks After

two roistering dogs splayed me flat
on frozen turf shattering six ribs
consigning me to gray walls, bleak thoughts
I'm up and about hitching from place to place

and I see the common coarse-grained stones
have not given up their good seats in the wall
though the deckle-edged daffodils came and went
while I monitored my rented bed up and down

and I see the greening margin along the road
is shaggy and unshorn and the goldfinches
have exchanged their winter costumes
for strobic lozenges of yellow that brighten

the window feeder and an indigo
bunting has brought his electric blue
to my sphere so that each time the rose-
breasted grosbeak alights for a sunflower chip

I am stunned into wholeness, healed
by a wheel of primary colors.

Women and Horses

After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.

—Theodor Adorno

After Auschwitz: after ten of my father's kin—
the ones who stayed—starved, then were gassed in the camps.
After Vietnam, after Korea, Kuwait, Somalia, Haiti, Afghanistan.
After the Towers. This late in the life of our haplessly orbiting world
let us celebrate whatever scraps the muse, that naked child,
can pluck from the still smoldering dumps.

If there's a lyre around, strike it! A body, stand back, give it air!
Let us have sparrows laying their eggs in bluebird boxes.
Let us have bluebirds insouciantly nesting elsewhere.
Lend us navel-bared teens, eyebrow- and nose-ringed prodigies
crumbling breakfast bagels over dog-eared and jelly-smear'd texts.
Allow the able-bodied among us to have steamy sex.

Let there be fat old ladies in flowery tent dresses at bridge tables.
Howling babies in dirty diapers and babies serenely at rest.
War and détente will go on, détente and renewed tearings asunder,
we can never break free from the dark and degrading past.
Let us see life again, nevertheless, in the words of Isaac Babel
as a meadow over which women and horses wander.