

# Parents' Pantoum

for Maxine Kumin

Where did these enormous children come from,  
More ladylike than we have ever been?  
Some of ours look older than we feel.  
How did they appear in their long dresses

More ladylike than we have ever been?  
But they moan about their aging more than we do,  
In their fragile heels and long black dresses.  
Then say they admire our youthful spontaneity.

They moan about their aging more than we do,  
A somber group—why don't they brighten up?  
Though they say they admire our youthful spontaneity  
They beg us to be dignified like them

As they ignore our pleas to brighten up.  
Someday perhaps we'll capture their attention,  
Then we won't try to be dignified like them  
Nor they to be so gently patronizing.

Someday perhaps we'll capture their attention.  
Don't they know that we're supposed to be the stars?  
Instead they are so gently patronizing.  
It makes us feel like children – second-childish?

Perhaps we're too accustomed to be stars,

The famous flowers glowing in the garden,  
So now we pout like children. Second-childish?  
Quaint fragments of forgotten history?

Our daughters stroll together in the garden,  
Chatting of news we've chosen to ignore,  
Pausing to toss us morsels of their history,  
Not questions to which only we know answers.

Eyes closed to news we've chosen to ignore,  
We'd rather excavate old memories,  
Disdaining age, ignoring pain, avoiding mirrors.  
Why do they never listen to our stories?

Because they hate to excavate old memories  
They don't believe our stories have an end.  
They don't ask questions because they dread the answers.  
They don't see that we've become their mirrors,

We offspring of our enormous children.

# Afternoon Happiness

for John

At a party I spy a handsome psychiatrist,  
And wish, as we all do, to get her advice for free.  
Doctor, I'll say, I'm supposed to be a poet.  
All life's awfulness has been grist to me.  
We learn that happiness is a Chinese meal,  
While sorrow is a nourishment forever.  
My new environment is California Dreamer.  
I'm fearful I'm forgetting how to brood.  
And, Doctor, another thing has got me worried:  
I'm not drinking as much as I should . . .

At home, I want to write a happy poem  
On love, or a love poem of happiness.  
But they won't do, the tensions of every day,  
The rub, the minor abrasions of any two  
Who share one space. Ah, there's no substitute for tragedy!  
But in this chapter, tragedy belongs  
To that other life, the old life before *us*.  
Here is my aphorism of the day:  
Happy people are monogamous,  
Even in California. So how does the poem play

Without the paraphernalia of betrayal and loss?  
I don't have a jealous eye or fear  
And neither do you. In truth, I'm fond  
Of your ex-mate, whom I name "my wife-in-law"  
My former husband, that old disaster, is now just funny,

So laugh we do, in what Cyril Connolly  
Has called the endless, nocturnal conversation

Of marriage. Which may be the best part.  
Darling, must I love you in light verse  
Without the tribute of profoundest art?

Of course it won't last. You will break my heart  
Or I yours, by dying. I could weep over that.  
But now it seems forced, here in these heaven hills,  
The mourning doves mourning, the squirrels mating,  
My old cat warm in my lap, here on our terrace  
As from below comes a musical cursing  
As you mend my favorite plate. Later of course  
I could pick a fight; there is always material in that.  
But we don't come from fighting people, those  
Who scream out red-hot iambs in their hate.

No, love, the heavy poem will have to come  
From *temps perdu*, fertile with pain, or perhaps  
Detonated by terrors far beyond this place  
Where the world rends itself, and its tainted waters  
Rise in the east to erode our safety here.  
Much as I want to gather a lifetime thrift  
And craft, my cunning skills tied in a knot for you,  
There is only this useless happiness as gift.

# The Great Blue Heron

M.A.K., September 1880-  
September 1955

As I wandered on the beach  
I saw the heron standing  
Sunk in the tattered wings  
He wore as a hunchback's coat.  
Shadow without a shadow,  
Hung on invisible wires  
From the top of a canvas day,  
What scissors cut him out?  
Superimposed on a poster  
Of summer by the strand  
Of a long-decayed resort,  
Poised in the dusty light  
Some fifteen summers ago;  
I wondered, an empty child,  
"Heron, whose ghost are you?"

I stood on the beach alone,  
In the sudden chill of the burned.  
My thought raced up the path.  
Pursuing it, I ran  
To my mother in the house  
And led her to the scene.  
The spectral bird was gone.

But her quick eye saw him drifting  
Over the highest pines  
On vast, unmoving wings.  
Could they be those ashen things,  
So grounded, unwieldy, ragged,  
A pair of broken arms

That were not made for flight?  
In the middle of my loss  
I realized she knew:  
My mother knew what he was.  
O great blue heron, now  
That the summer house has burned  
So many rockets ago,  
So many smokes and fires  
And beach-lights and water-glow  
Reflecting pinwheel and flare:  
The old logs hauled away,

The pines and driftwood cleared  
From that bare strip of shore  
Where dozens of children play;  
Now there is only you  
Heavy upon my eye.

Why have you followed me here,  
Heavy and far away?

You have stood there patiently  
For fifteen summers and snows,  
Denser than my repose,

Bleaker than any dream,  
Waiting upon the day

When, like gray smoke, a vapor  
Floating into the sky,

A handful of paper ashes,  
My mother would drift away.

# Night Sounds

based on themes in the *Tzu Yeh*

The moonlight on my bed keeps me awake;  
Living alone now, aware of the voices of  
evening,  
A child weeping at nightmares, the faint love-cries of a woman,  
Everything tinged by terror or nostalgia.

No heavy, impassive back to nudge with one foot  
While coaxing, "Wake up and hold me,"  
When the moon's creamy beauty is transformed  
Into a map of impersonal desolation

.  
But, restless in this mock dawn of moonlight.  
That so chills the spirit, I alter our history:  
You were never able to lie quite peacefully at my side,  
Not the night through. Always withholding something.

Awake before morning, restless and uneasy,  
Trying not to disturb me, you would leave my bed  
While I lay there rigidly, feigning sleep.  
Still – the night was nearly over, the light not as cold  
As a full cup of moonlight.

And there were the lovely times when, to the skies' cold *No*  
You cried to me, *Yes!* Impaled me with affirmation.  
Now, when I call out in fear, not in love, there is no answer.

Nothing speaks in the dark but the distant voices,  
A child with the moon on his face, a dog's hollow cadence.

## How It Passes

Tomorrow I'll begin to cook like Mother:  
All the dishes I love, which take her  
Such hours to prepare:  
The easy dishes that are so difficult Like  
finnan haddie and beef stew  
"That I wouldn't be ashamed to serve a king";  
Her applesauce, bread pudding, lemon sponge,  
All the sweet nursery foods  
That prove I had a happy childhood.

Starting tomorrow, I'll be brave like Father,  
Now that I don't have those recurring nightmares  
Of jackboots on the stairs, the splintered door  
                  just before dawn,  
And the fascists dragging Daddy out of bed,  
Dragging him down the steps by his wonderful hair;  
The screams as his spine cracks when he hits cement.  
Then they make him brush his teeth with his own shit. Though  
I know this is the price of bravery,  
Of believing in justice and never telling lies,  
And of being Benjamin, the best beloved.

I'll begin tomorrow. I'll learn how to work  
Like my brilliant friends who speak in tongues,  
Who drink and crack up, but keep on working,  
While I waste my time in reading, reading, reading  
The words of my brilliant and not-so-brilliant friends.  
I promise to increase production, gather up  
                  all those beginnings

Of abandoned novels, whose insights astound me  
As I contemplate their fading paragraphs.  
I'll reveal how ambitious I have been in secret!

There is plenty of time.  
I'll find the starter button soon.  
After all, young women are meant to meander,  
Bemused by fantasies of future loves.  
It's just that I'm so sleepy tonight, so tired . . .  
And when I wake up tomorrow, I'll be old.  
And when night comes tomorrow,  
It won't go away.

# Thrall

The room is sparsely furnished:

A chair, a table, and a father.

He sits in the chair by the window.

There are books on the table.

The time is always just past lunch.

You tiptoe past as he eats his apple

And reads. He looks up, angry.

He has heard your asthmatic breathing.

He will read for years without looking up

Until your childhood is safely over:

Smells, untidiness, and boring questions;

Blood, from the first skinned knees

To the first stained thighs;

The foolish tears of adolescent love.

One day he looks up, pleased

At the finished product,

Now he is ready to love you!

So he coaxes you in the voice reserved

For reading Keats. You agree to everything.

Drilled in silence and duty,

You will give him no cause for reproach.

He will boast of you to strangers.

When the afternoon is older

Shadows in a smaller room

Fall on the bed, the books, the father.

You read aloud to him

"La Belle Dame sans Merci,"

You feed him his medicine.

You tell him you love him.

You wait for his eyes to close at last

So you may write this poem.

# Bitch

Now, when he and I meet, after all these years,  
I say to the bitch inside me, don't start growling.  
He isn't a trespasser anymore,  
Just an old acquaintance tipping his hat.  
My voice says, "Nice to see you,"  
As the bitch starts to bark hysterically.  
He isn't an enemy now,  
Where are your manners, I say, as I say,  
"How are the children? They must be growing up."  
At a kind word from him, a look like the old days,  
The bitch changes her tone: she begins to whimper.  
She wants to snuggle up to him, to cringe.  
Down, girl! Keep your distance  
Or I'll give you a taste of the choke-chain.  
"Fine, I'm just fine," I tell him.  
She slobbers and grovels.  
After all, I am her mistress. She is basically loyal.  
It's just that she remembers how she came running

Each evening, when she heard his step;  
How she lay at his feet and looked up adoringly  
Though he was absorbed in his paper;  
Or, bored with her devotion, ordered her to the kitchen  
Until he was ready to play.  
But the small careless kindnesses  
When he'd had a good day, or a couple of drinks,  
Come back to her now, seem more important  
Than the casual cruelties, the ultimate dismissal.  
"It's nice to know you are doing so well," I say.  
He couldn't have taken you with him;  
You were too demonstrative, too clumsy,  
Not like the well-groomed pets of his new friends.  
"Give my regards to your wife," I say. You gag  
As I drag you off by the scruff,  
Saying, "Good-bye! Good-bye! Nice to have seen you again."

## Election Day, 1984

Did you ever see someone coldcock a blind nun?

Well, I did. Two helpful idiots

Steered her across the tarmac to her plane

And led her smack into the wing.

She deplaned with two black eyes & a crooked wimple,

Bruised proof that the distinction is not simple

Between ineptitude and evil.

Today, with the President's red button playing

Such a prominent role,

Though I can't vote for it, I wonder

If evil could be safer, on the whole.

## A Song for Muriel

No one explains me because

There is nothing to explain.

It's all right here

Very clear.

O for my reputation's sake

To be difficult, and opaque!

No one explains me because

Though myopic, I see plain.

I just put it down

With a leer and a frown . . .

Why does it make you sweat?

Is this the thanks I get?

No one explains me because

There are tears in my bawdy song.

Once I am dead

Something will be said.

How nice I won't be here

To see how they get it wrong.