

An Argument of Roots

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An Argument of Roots by Cornelia Veenendaal

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POEM

Somewhere near the fireplace, the fire
having burnt down to a red crackle,
a cricket strikes up—among the birch logs
or in the fireirons' dark—
calculating his tenure on this hearth,
as if he were the young emperor's
cricket, who waited a lifetime for him
under the throne, until the palace was made
a tourist attraction, and his master
came back as one of the people.
The cricket tells me he is well;
others have drowned under tarpaulins,
or been fed to turtles. He is here still,
scraping his colors on the hours.

TREE SWALLOWS

Indigo head, white breast,
slate along the wings --
never so close

suddenly in the cold sky
a widening compass
zigzagging down to the far trees;

his sharp signal comes back
across the meadow.

Out of the birdhouse
the brown mate arrows;
I hear the clip clip of her wings

and leave the garden,
its ashes of the lost gardener.

There is fire in the hearth.
The farm daughters are ready
to begin spring planting.

All day they work,
like their Frisian forebears;
they get covered in mud

and say unexpected, flying things.
“I’ve known you for a hundred years,
but never really known you till today.”

TERRITORIAL

In the torpid dark when I cannot sleep
the voice of a mockingbird
floats out of the trees,
pensively tender
calling to his land not to steal away.

Daylight comes,
he flings himself off his perch,
dancing a little buck and wing in air.
I'm just walking along
not even whistling --

on my way to the Registry of Deeds,
a long, high, fan-cooled room
at the top of the courthouse.
Here is the volume and page,
the street plan, 1897,

handwritten where I
fit into the scheme of things,
my city plot fans southwest,
enough to plant a border garden
and kneel to cultivate it.

THE HOUSE PAINTERS

They have come and gone. Now
the house is radiant. Never has
white trim been so manifest.
Yellow (two coats) so sun-searching.

All day they stood on paint-cruised
ladders. The heat rose above 90 degrees.
“Egyptians are used to the hot sun,”
they said, bantering in Arabic.

They painted old scraped shingles
with supple brushes and small rollers,
their drop cloths cavalierly
scattered over bushes and steps.

The house became itself;
as it was meant to be. “It’s not garish,”
pronounced a neighbor, “it’s bright!”
I remember still, when their noonday

lunch was cleared away,
three young men,
on their knees in our garden,
heads bent to the ground in prayer.

HOUSE

Twenty years storied into a home
and it's no longer
just a station of the journey.

Shadow of pyramid on the street--
a carpenter's vision
has shaped my daily sun.

Generations of tricycles--
what dreamwork went on
under the lamps of the drafting room?

HEDGE

A privet hedge alive with sparrows fluttering
branch to branch all chirping at once
has a winter sound. Tom trims the hedge
in summer, feeds the birds through the cold months.
In the high thicket they're protected from cats
and the flying snow. Walking past, at eye level
with the sparrows, I think of children hidden
in a hedge, long ago in Ireland, safe for an hour
to give voice to their history and language.

NOT BY CLOCKS BUT BY THE TURNING
OF A GREAT WHEEL*

In the slant of morning sun
I have to look carefully
to see the Vietnamese shop window
as a little shrine—

brass clocks like headlights,
a peacock in a doorway telling the hours,
lovers in a frame: chronometer.
Remember

how we stood in our thousands
out on the Common,
while the war went on with its own
momentum. Years later

came the long avenue of voices,
veterans singing in unison;
the shadow-sound of their boots
marching.

They marched at last to forgive,
and by the timing of a great wheel
we are on the long way
to reconciliation.

Here above the patience of quartz
two baby dresses hang—
and mirrored in the glass
a honey locust tree.

BRONZES

They appeared one summer
beside the gymnasium.

Not knowing they were gods,
I went on my way.

Later they moved from transcendence
to the shaded lawn of a laboratory.

Sometimes I visit them there,
as if their struggle in space

or my effort to decode them
will crack their meaning.

Their names tell me they are early
Olympians,

but I wonder if they are not
Desert gods:

limbless dark trunk,
barely formed foot,

pocked hoof
turned to move away,

trying to get out of nature,
dancing on swollen feet.

NEEDLE'S EYE

As the crow flies from North Cambridge to Boston's skyline, the Federal Reserve Bank rears its faint blue washboard-- once meant to be a page of sunlight, warm as hedge funds in the chilly vaults. Arriving, hovering, the Crow observes, across the rush of traffic, a caravansary of blue tents, and sails down in the midst of a fellowship of thinkers, twicesaying each glimpse of a society that is just. No tea party on the Greenway with photo ops, no finished slate to rile ideologues; just a gathering of humans. Crow listens, picks up some interesting bright scraps.

THE SEA WAS NOT CALM

It rose up against Atlantic City and washed part of the boardwalk away. It set up the rollercoaster for underwater chills. Rushed into the subways of New York. Still there days later, it ebbed with the roar of pumps.

Lower Manhattan had gone dark and cold. My friend Isabelle, and Boris, her cat huddled four days in the powerless apartment, sustained by crackers and water.

In England, they were celebrating November 5, as they have since 1605, when the gunpowder plot to blow up Parliament was apprehended and foiled. The student Milton, as if to foresee our unopposable storm, wrote in Latin, “his pitchy wings swim through the liquid air. Wherever he flies, rush country winds in hosts.”

Flattened by wind and waves, the Rockaways. The unhoused were sleeping in shelters, standing in line for a gallon of gas. Here, where we felt only the outer winds, we were clearing fallen branches and raking leaves; fearing our unthinking selves, who cause the poles to melt.

Fearing worse to come, our volcanists sharpen their watch on Iceland’s smoking ground where people and birds go about their quiet lives.

A LUNAR WEEK IN FALL

On the frozen pond, the fox gets his tail in the water.
I ride to Cambridge, reading about a journey across Siberia,
a roll of dimes and a roll of quarters weighting my bag.
What do I find? A sign on the savings bank door:
“Because of a robbery this bank will be closed today”

Do not run after what seems lost; it will return by itself.
I sit at my desk. Across the street Nick’s door is open.
And our friend himself is raking leaves! He must have
come back from the island; his parents must be well again.
The radio celebrates with “Overture to Candide.”

Long, drawn-out struggles must be reckoned with.
I was mistaken. It wasn’t Nick I saw yesterday.
No lamplight in his windows last night. It’s dark here too.
The president is in Japan. I watch the news on TV
hoping not to see stress and fatigue in his face.

The finest clothes turn to rags. Be careful all day long.
Yesterday chickadees sheltered on the porch. When we
looked through the door they flew up to the red maple.
In the high trees scraps of yellow foliage tremble;
I tremble at the Civil Rights movie, “Mississippi’s Burning.”

We look around us. God sees into the heart.
Children who lived in the “Dust Bowl” in the ‘30’s
are old now. The dust that blew across the Southern Plains
for a decade blew as far as Washington, D.C.
Then at last the heart-breaking stories were heard.

Do not look back. Go Forward.
In Plymouth, at my sister’s house, the cedars
and field brush have been grubbed. We see the ocean,
calm, steady, wide.
Sun all day. Frost tonight.