

Lynne Viti

Ghazal

Could I go back there, could I return today?
By happy accident of physics, fly there today?

Transport myself back to those pale rooms,
Those hallways full of laughing girls, today?

We leaned in doorways, in late afternoons,
Confided secrets, triumphs, as we might today.

Our hair was gold, chestnut, or raven, catching light
From sunlight's slant through windows, like today,

Though stronger rays, intense, in memory's eye.
We sang in empty classrooms, looking towards today.

Who were we then? And are we still the same—
Though life has marred and marked us all deeply—today?

Thread the way back through long tunnel of years,
With young girls' eyes see who we are today.

Make time collapse, forgive the petty sins and slurs,
The slights and cuts, back then and today?

Recall when all was bright before us, all was fresh,
Vows not yet made or kept or broken, as today.

Could memories of youth –not specters of old age,
New disappointments—infuse our hours here, today?

Reckoning

Out of her basket of recriminations
She pulls the same one as before—
thoughtless adolescent girls, we
spurned her, made sure
she couldn't enter our circle. We spun
invisible walls around ourselves at lunch,
in the hallways after school,
at the bus stop. Decades have stacked up—
we've grayed, our worn bodies
have spread or require rigor and discipline
to stay within old boundaries.
Our feet suffer from bunions, or perhaps a hammertoe.
We prefer elastic waistbands, we might walk
with a cane, or favor one leg or hip, not quite
a limp, but a listing, now and then.

She spies me across the banquet hall—
a hundred women between us— takes
me to task for the third time in thirty years.
It's always an embarrassment, knowing
I— who fit in only by luck, the stars,
the charity of girls who like me
adored the Beatles, Chinese food,
Steve Allen's antics—was the object
of anyone's envy. We locked her out.

I utter a bromide: *Adolescent girls*
Can be so insensitive. This doesn't
mollify--the grievances aren't done.
I listen, nod, my eyes darting
In search of rescue.

I do not say what I know for sure:
I'd do it all again
if I had the chance, would fly to those
girls, throw up a barrier against the others.
We five circled around one another for a year
before we coalesced— Beatles Forever,
Thelonius Monk, Moo Goo Gai Pan
at Mee Jun Low on a Saturday night.

Blood Moon

Tried to see it from the soccer field
At the school some want torn down—
no way to rehab it,
poor drainage, asbestos lurking in walls,
wrapped around pipes, Eisenhower-era
construction, additions tacked on when
children cropped up everywhere

It's chilly for September, the moon
a bright white orb. No competition from stars.
A sliver of shadow appears at the moon's side,
creeps across.
It's not happening fast enough for us.
We want to see the pink moon, the blood moon—

Huddled in this playground, we wonder
why no one else is here. Are they watching
the blood moon on their televisions,
getting a clearer, sharper, super-pink image?
I pull my sweater tighter around me.
The shadow across the moon moves—

Now the moon turns salmon pink
smaller than the white moon.
Out on the grass this night
We six— a tight knot— suck in cold air.
Not another blood moon for years.
Will we be alive then, will we care enough
to step outside wherever we live then,
tilt our heads back marvel at the sky?

Common Onion

Spring, I thought, pawing through the pantry
when the fat onion came into view,
its lemon-yellow sprouts a foot long.
The onion had shrunk back into itself,
responded to the slight pressure of my thumb
by caving in. A ruined bulb, it gave
all its life to those useless stems.

Outside it was nothing like spring, only
snowy, clouds obscuring the day.
Rigid piles of last week's snow seven feet high
lined the roadway, soiled ramparts,
muddied, blackened, covering hydrants and saplings.

For weeks, the cat refused to go out,
preferring to lie on her favorite chair,
or leaping onto the bed at night
to steal some human warmth.

Boots lined the entryway, caked
with road salt, or chemicals strewn
along sidewalks and parking lots.
Our down coats shed tiny feathers,
gloves sprang holes,
shovels bent at their corners.

Everything in the house
was tired of winter, wanted to be finished
with clearing, chipping the detritus
of four storms, systems Siberia or Alaska
knew how to manage better, through
long years of bending under winter's yoke.

This onion's worth saving, was my first thought.
Then I tossed the pulpy thing
into the compost, consigned
to a pile of sweet-smelling rot.

Planting Garlic

Not Italian—as a child, never saw garlic bulbs,
not even garlic powder in our kitchen.
When my Welsh mother came to
visit, sniffed the garlic cooking
in the skillet, before the bread cubes
joined it in the olive oil to brown
she said, Smells Italian. I watched her
pick the golden croutons out of her salad,
push them to the side of the plate.

It's cold for October—
snow specks fall on our fleece jackets.
I yank up spent basil, arugula, cut rainbow chard,
consign tomato and pepper plants to the compost.
Along the inside periphery of the garden
I dig the holes, work in manure,
reach into my pocket and crack off a clove.
I lodge each one in its winter pocket,
make a row, turn the corner, make another,
cover the cloves and tamp down the earth.
Then for good luck, stamp it all down with my heavy boots,
the ones that took me from Enna to Cefalù last spring.

On the day the school year ends,
we'll dig up the succulent cloves, slice
the translucent segments of the holy bulb,
ignore my mother's voice, long ago stilled
—Smells Italian.

Sunday Afternoon at the Gardner

Thieves in darkness smart enough to wear
cops' uniforms, talk their way into the mansion
crammed with rich tapestries,
room after room of paintings, drawings
bowls, sculptures, carvings—
thieves experienced enough to tie up
guards, dazed, sleepy on the graveyard shift
I suppose these interlopers came
with a shopping list and box cutters,
worked quickly, lifting the art
from the wall, slashing the canvass from each frame.

In the dim light, complained about
the working conditions as they moved
from the Rembrandt to the Vermeer, the Degas
-- unlucky thirteen stolen works, thirteen fruits,
but for whom? A prince shut up in a flat
somewhere between Boston and the South Seas,
or a Brandoesque recluse in London or Philadelphia
with a handful of friends— acquaintances—
who'd see his art, gasp or sigh,
touch the paint, tracing the drapery of Christ's garment,
nicotine-stained fingers rubbing against
the master's brush strokes, light that seemed
to gather in the painted figure's eyes and shine out
from paint and canvas to catch the viewer's gaze.

Or maybe the canvasses are shut-ins,
rolled up and stashed in an attic or barn,
the thieves not so smart after all,
now long dead and their confidants
addled hoarders, barricaded behind newspapers, junk mail,
packing boxes that fill floor to ceiling, leaving
only a narrow path from front door to kitchen.

The museum's glass addition sparkles
in the winter sun, people line up
pay the price of admission, wander
the galleries, fixing on what's here—
every wall covered, the art so jammed
it's easy to forget what's not there
till you enter, single file, the room
with the empty frames, the nothing of it all
startles you, and you think
who did this, and why?

Hard not to take it personally,
as if you could walk right up to the woman
in long black evening dress, the pearls glistening
around her white neck, roping her waist,
and whisper sympathetic words-- great loss,
dear Isabella, infuriating, irreplaceable, tragedy—

Walk through the crowd waiting to retrieve
coats and umbrellas, hear them
talking about what's missing, wondering
aloud, asking guards for details, you hear
the same story over and over, it's
a prayer that ends with
Give it back, give us back our art.