

ADVICE FOR THE UN-FORLORN

Have a little sympathy for the person who waits,
who doesn't tap her foot but keeps absolutely still
as others enter and exit, as the tide goes in and out,
as the train never comes, or leaves, as the answer
to an important question gets lost in the tangled
branches of the briar patch that threaten to grow
higher around the castle. There is, after all,

an art in this. It's easy to be impatient,
to demand marching forward. But think
what would happen if armies were experts
in waiting and waiting, listening to trees rustle,
if there are trees, or taking note of miniscule
changes in the shape of the finch's beak, until
they begin to love an old man who embroiders
at the age of ninety-four because passing time

is about how your time passes. So have
a little sympathy for those in the crowded
waiting room. It's an unexpected gift, this wait,
because what's the hurry. One Mississippi,
two Mississippi, three Mississippi, she hears
the mighty river even in her sleep.

ABOUT THE DAY

The top branches of my locust trees
tell me the direction of the wind.
A southwest wind means warmer air;

easterly – some fretful weather;
north-easterly- storm coming;
a northwest wind sings clear,

invigorating, almost promising,
like September mornings in Kabul
all those years ago when even

the bray of a laden donkey
did not yet sound mournful.
On the balcony of the new Kabul Hotel

we drank our cardamom tea, listened
to bicycle bells, sheep bells, camel bells,
the occasional beep beep of an old taxi.

Here, this morning, I drink cardamom tea
and wait for this day to unfold.
Those brown hills around Kabul, wrinkled

like brows - what would they look like now,
the same but not the same, all these intervening
years of devastation. Every evening before

Kabul Radio signed off with the national anthem
of Pushtunistan, they played a song that still
sounds in my brain: "*Bya borem qalim bubofem-*

Come here, we'll go weave a rug together."
I used to live six thousand feet above sea level.
Where I live now, looking at the sky grounds me.

DECLARATION OF RUE, WRITTEN ON A SCRAP OF NEWSPRINT

Discarded, brown-edged; apology.
You tossed it, formal confession writ
in pencil with flourishes, for no one

to read, not even the eyes of mice
rooting in the closet for shreds
to soften their nests. Oh, fiddlesticks.

Another wasted attempt. Mental vapor
fogging up your bifocals. You are old
enough to know better; old enough

to know worse; old enough to know
nothing. Your brain continues
to ricochet through constellations

of memory, like shooting stars in August
redefining what the sky means.
You keep the dusty wooden box of marbles

resurrected from the fruit cellar
when you were ten. Endurable spheres
of swirly greens, blues, purples,

the largest a white galaxy of spinning veils.
You transport it from place to place
for more than half a century to where

you live now. A house of windows.
You open the wooden box of marbles.
They catch the morning light.

SELF-PORTRAIT

At the age of 75 years, 8 months, &
25 days, am I getting smaller and smaller
or am I more expansive than I have
ever been? Sometimes, it's hard to tell.

What I know about football could fit
inside a thimble but I do remember
walking fourteen blocks to the stadium
with my father, bundled up against the
bitter upper New York State November
and sitting on the fifty yard line.

I walk on the beach now, reminded
that the body is both sea water
and stardust, that human and humous
both mean 'of the earth' and dust to dust
is what we must understand, finally,

so therefore, I begin each morning
with a pot of perfectly brewed tea.
I pay attention to the direction of the wind
by looking at the top of my locust trees.
My house is in a hollow. A bird's nest
is on that forked branch, right there.
I can see the little heads bobbing.
I take a deep breath. I want to wrap
my arms around the earth and rock it back
to a gentle quiet, which, of course,
never existed, what with molten lava
at the core and tectonic plates cracking
and one war after another, but wait.
I am trying to talk about myself
and the subject got away from me.

I remember the cring cring of my bicycle bell
as I rode through the streets of Kabul.
Here I am, it said, politely, just another
slow-moving living person weaving her way
among all the others.

The surfaces in my studio are covered
with scraps –papers, cut-up paintings –
tentative arrangements of colors,
edges, textures; I work small now.

I wonder how many masterpieces
might fit within the margins of a book
or how many great events in a single word.

I am diminishing, or do I expand?
Does it matter? Do I need this thought now?

I would like to be wrapped in a shroud
and lowered into the ground of Pine Grove
Cemetery in the Truro hills. That's not,
any time soon, going to happen. Don't laugh.
No room left and I can't afford it anyway.
Ashes to ashes. My hair is long and mostly grey.
I'll be a saw-whet owl that hardly makes a sound.