RHAPSODY IN BLUES

poetry by

Stan Galloway

Walking Toward Emmaus

After Rembrandt's Supper at Emmaus, 1648
For Denise Levertov

We know the road.

Dusty callused feet move by habit
along its hardpacked crust,
regularly into Jerusalem
and back
and back again,
a road like any other road taking
people to and from the city
to the temple,
the markets,
the executions.

But this Passover's angel
did not pass over
the One they'd hoped in –
Sabbath passed
they plod for home along a routine road,
walking toward Emmaus.

Aren't there roads to Emmaus
variously named
for all of us?
Wittingly or not,
we each walk such a road.
Some blindly scurry for a goal that is no more or never was.
Some see no farther than where the road
bends in the undergrowth and hesitate,
and hesitate
then plunge unsurely on.

But most of us
just walk.
Each step no arrival.
No loving cup,
no citation,
no hope moves us. We
just walk
toward Emmaus
as we've always done.
Dreams bashed
or bent
or never born
cannot enthuse our hearts.
We trudge toward our Emmaus where supper waits to be prepared.

Like some Mary before the tomb
or Miranda before rabbitside reverie,
Gabriel Conroy before a window framing snow,
or two men walking back along a road
they'd traveled many times before,
our hearts fail to tell our minds that eternity walks beside us,
the divine has come to walk the road with us
in human form.

Rembrandt shows the Christ arrived,
the glow of recognition and release.
Their supper feeds both soul and flesh.
The too-late question: Didn't our hearts burn within us?

So much,
too much,
so many steps
before arrival.

Dusty callused feet move by habit

regularly into Jerusalem
or Singapore
Islamabad
Johannesburg
San Salvador
Los Angeles

How sense-less we have become,
dusty, calloused from the traveling, choosing sight for insight
teaching ourselves to ignore the daily heart burn while
we walk
toward Emmaus.

Niagara Blues

After Hippolyte Sebron's Chutes du Niagara en hiver, 1856

Stark blue-white ecoscape in water
ice and snow
two states co-existing:
I remember
Marilyn looking over
the lady of the mist
ghost or hope or
sad misunderstanding of the self
broad and flowing
hardened into stasis
1856, 1952, and now
all one
the passionate rush and roar
muted into still, compacted splinters
the soft
deception of snow
and when the falls have frozen over
the everlasting promise
of water mumbling
where no one stands

To Know the Heart

After Enrique Simonet y Lombardo's Anatomía del corazón, 1890

When I behold that heart I thought I knew
before, can I discern what words you held
unsaid? Anatomy can never hope
to track emotion's wisps unhoused today:
the light and dark foreshortening the facts,
the fancies, chiaroscuro of a heart
embarrassed to be glad except in hushed
and private moments, solitary tick
of joy for every hundred hours of
propriety. How many yeses beat
behind each no? This world of black and white
obscures the subtleties hearts harbor, mine
and yours, del Sarto to Lucrezia, dumb,
imagined whistles lancing syllables
from air before the ear can claim them. False
and true revolve like subject, object, and
subjunctive struggling for ascendancy.
No scalpel can reveal what motivates
this muscle of resistance, cleave its c's
and e's to truth, no sponge absorb its dew
of penetration – silent syntax. In
the sterile aftermath I hold your heart
as never in your life. Who better than
the one who vowed affection even as
you chose another – motioned me aside –
you cannot ask who is the savage, who
the noble, never knowing which stands by
you in the end. To know the heart is moot,
the spark and heft of romance starkly lost.

Canadian Prairie Gothic

After Grant Wood's American Gothic, 1930
For Jenna Butler

what is true about this land is not
in mother-in-law's tongue or caladium

cardboardy walls oiled against the wind
home-shaped boards warping to old wood

one ogival window pointing
to sunbreak, windbreak

carpenter-farmer who would have been a better dentist
Sister Jones in cameo or gingham

hayfork in one hand, calloused hopes in the other
spreading straw and heritage on 640 acres

forcing bloom, or green, from dust-soaked plots
coaxing hard red wheat from dark soil

one thin beaver pelt covering a cracked spindle
weather whistling of Autumn chaff and winter ballast

shadows grant peace
faces long in the wind

Solitary Nymph

After Mabel Rollins Harris's Golden Dawn, c. 1930s

At the northern forest's edge
where the call and response of ravensong
patrols the fields and woods,
far beyond the range of other nymphs
(where even humans seldom come)
she tends the wild iris –
blue as sky,
causing momentary misperception to the bees –
and dear delphinium,
adored by kissing hummingbirds.

She sings the song of every plant or animal
adjusting tessitura as she moves from fireweed to butterfly
from whiskyjack to honeysuckle
paper birch to forest spruce,
singing each clover, red and white and sweet, in its own key.
She clears some bramble – wild rose and raspberry –
retrieves a wren where it had gotten snarled,
gently sets it back upon a branch and
sings back the very song of thanks it sings itself.
She hums red to the pin cherry, wild free-born cranberry
sings forty hues of green to grasses, vines, and every tree
sings each black song –
of berry, cherry, spruce –
with dark notes tinted by each host.

At the pond edge
gazing at her own reflection, no love lost
dipping one foot in, followed by the other,
ripples, just like sound and color,
moving all directions,
showing things from several sides,
reminding even sharps and flats are natural,
standing with the water at her calves,

she thrums the song of dragonflies and punctuates with
blessings to the stripling bullfrogs testing new-grown feet,
reaches cups of water to her face,
her shoulders,
arms and torso,
rinsing dust and feeling sun caresses circle as she whirls,
slow-motion arms flung wide

The forest fragrance blends and purls
the air alight with waves and tints entwined.
Flitting now from pond edge through the grass
the minute tintinnabulation of her step
would tickle eyes and ears
if any witnessed earthly paradise
this sacred grove or clearing
reminiscent of the garden sown by Hesperus.
She sits on pine straw smiling
envisioning the man
whose visits might be memory or fantasy
with whom she longs to make deep love in
shallow
desperate
wild breaths
She feels his lips creating pleasant flutters on her skin
like tiny monarchs' wings

Under late sun languoring toward midnight
she lies back to sleep
her modest breasts and thighs untouched except by wind
her body sprawled in confident abandon
embracing light her only constant lover.

Monday, 1965

After Pablo Picasso's The Aubade, 1965

The tendrils of the curtain
twist lazily in surreal air
half seen, half imagined
in pre-dawn glimmer
sliced Venetian-style.

We are moored together in time's pocket
where regimented spondees
of an unseen clock lap unnaturally
against night's tide of pyrrhus
and its struggling amphibrachs.

Beneath the blankets I recreate Picasso's susurration
clarineting mutely to you
drinking me soundly and softly
warmth between us swirling yin and yang
your yawning teasing my ear
tightening my tympani.

I read you:
the braille of your breasts
the cipher of your navel
the vowels and consonants
our arms and legs semaphore
in half unconscious ritual.

Covers shift away in ripples
showing me the scarlet-edged maize of morning
anticipated and remembered
and I must rise again
to face a sky as dread as Hopkins' shook foil
and carry the salve of your skinprint
with me to mediate the day.

Queen's Rhapsody

After Pierre-Auguste Renoir's En été, 1868, and
Freddy Mercury's "Bohemian Rhapsody," 1975

i

Renoir's Bohemian in summertime
red-striped skirt,
red lips,
red ribbon in her hair
looks somewhere else
she cannot see me here
from her bed of green
eyes of sorrow understood
half-bared
unseen –
my gaze is all I have to give.

ii

one tale that hasna been washed white
is the "Song of Highland Mac"
who had the sweetest lass that lived
but lost her in the lake

Old Mac enjoyed the concert hall
as well as deer and bear
most folk called him wee bit strange
but he sang a pretty air

Sleep, Morna darling
safe beneath the wake
forgive our senseless quarreling
from the bottom of the lake

Mac and Morna pledged their love
at the height of summer sun
and many a week by the mountain lake
they had their summer fun

When days grew shorter, nights more heavy
they couldna agree
to winter warm in Edinburgh
or snug in Aberdeen

Sleep, Morna darling
safe beneath the wake
forgive our senseless quarreling
from the bottom of the lake

Old Mac insisted answers lay
in city streets and towers
which made less sense to Morna than
to ask the tawny owls

So out one night she goes to ask
when she's only half awake
and straight on for the echoed hooo
to the bottom of the lake

Sleep, Morna darling
safe beneath the wake
forgive our senseless quarreling
from the bottom of the lake

iii

doh diddle high biddle low avenue
bold ziddle hot griddle cold xanadu
cat kiddle bass fiddle calm callaloo
moose middle moon riddle meek manatou

iv

lie la lie
lie la lie
lie la lie
ready Teddy
ready Freddie
just Farrokh
Here to tango
and fandango!
Can you hear?
unheard, and heard
no yellow nymph
no cotton dress
does the tailor smile?
the deacon knows
he may, may not
the mercury for sure
lie la lie
liar, liar
sweet green icing
never tasted
just a boxer
shadow boxing
touch me softly, softly
gloves of dragon leather
know I'm stone cold crazy
cannot laugh at madmen
Don't you hear me calling?
too late
too late
too late

v

I'm afraid I've lost my way
a boy, a man alone
my ballad wound up tightly in her hair.

The soup is cold, the crow has flown,
the melody gone with her –
I tell myself I really shouldn't care.

The ribbon ties in tangles
extinguishing the candles
the white queen and the black queen gone their ways.

The pieces of the game are lost
their purpose dull disaster.
My life is turned from action into gaze.

Are these my mother's tears I cry?
Can she hear ditties of no tone?
I tell myself I really shouldn't care.

But when the woman turned her back
and walked away, she took
my reason wound up tightly in her hair.

vi

Summertime Bohemian
looks red in skirt,
in lips
in ribbon
wantonness –
my gaze is all I have to give
my life is all I have to live
my gaze
I live

Visiting

Her eyes will move
but seldom in relation to the people present.
Sometimes lips will scrunch as if
to speak or kiss or spit
but that is all:
no answers to the greetings
or the questions about food or warmth or pain.
The room is white sharp static,
so much different from the home she
decked and nurtured sixty years.

I set a pink carnation by her bed
beside her favorite figurine, three fingers high,
a unicorn of silver, pyrite, jade, and pearl –
"There's magic deep inside,"
she'd said, and winked (our secret)
when she sees me see it on her kitchen sill
(as if no time has lapsed since 1957).
As a child I help clear the meal: the plates, the tea,
the ham-and-cheddar casserole I love so well.
With dishes soaking, she regales me in the
scandalous delight of *Jailhouse Rock*,
premiered the night before,
or speculates the almanac is wrong:
"Because some expert thinks it, doesn't make it sure!"
Around the talk, she hums (quite well) –
"Love Letters in the Sand" or "All Shook Up."
Through the window, two small flower beds she tends
are mirrored in the floral stencil bordering the room.
The radio is chattering of Sputnik,
artificial satellite now orbiting the earth,
though some are claiming Russians faked it all,
or maybe it's the television
tuned to CBS where Sunday nights
Ed Sullivan distills the day

in black-and-white.
Newly bought, the Frigidaire vibrates low-A
beside the back-porch door,
appliances in matching turquoise,
counters always wiped and
ready for a cooling rack of oatmeal cookies.

Leaning close, I hum some old Sinatra in her ear,
imagine there's a shimmy in her eyes and
under silent skin a dance in tired bones.
Too soon, I kiss her forehead,
say I still believe the magic,
quietly retread through sterile halls to
tasks I won't have reason to recall.

The Song I Say

If I were Glen or Elvis
safe behind a public carapace of
black or rhinestone, I would sing
as if *secure* and *sin* were twins

The quiet song I say, though, is
a pre-dawn squeal
of frost on gravel, hungry
for forgiveness in charms
of glottal embraces,
steam fingers rising off fetid pond lilies
opaque, substantial only at the heart

The man I've been
a constricted bough
dotty green with parasites
startled alive
feeding starlings
along my spine of roadside wire

I sing, but few hear Memphis in me
and my heart will never get to Phoenix

The Summer Elvis Died

At seventeen I sought spies
and princesses
to love me,
(a close encounter of any kind
still in the future).
I could have them for a couple bucks,
for a couple hours, on the screen.
It was a different galaxy
far, far away
inside me.
I synthesized a world where I felt love
way down
in the deep I couldn't name
didn't know existed,
not knowing how to save my own life,
or knowing that it needed saving
never knowing I'd go without a real song,
or its emotional equivalent,
trying to place it in my spleen or gizzard or appendix
(that would take discovery three dozen years removed
leaving in its wake a morbid taste for bones)
not knowing dreams die first,
that what I dreamed
was really just a bridge too far
and the only rescuers
were insubstantial childhood cartoons.

The Supremes,
who'd been there all my life,
moved on
(though they were never quite the same without Diana).
Elvis told the crowd in Market Square
"if you want us back,
just let us know
and we'll come back"
not knowing in himself

that it would be the final time,
that while one can't help falling in love
one also can't help falling in other ways,
the friends-forever crowd
faded as fast as the gas receipt
in the back window.
On Tuesday I was Monday
looking pacifically across the ring of fire
called adulthood.

Once so full of promise
August ended empty
a state I'd known before
but never lived in
looking for the magic that would
alchemize and merge
the substanceless with substance
fashion life from loss,
trying to keep time
without the music,
and even now,
confusing remembrance
with redemption.

World's First Blues

After Langston Hughes

Noddin' a three-note out-o'-kilter hum
Swayin' left an' right, usin' thighs for a drum
Cain knew he was alone.
Three days before, they'd sent him to the east
Couldn't comprehend that word *deceased*
He sat each night makin' muffled drone,
Each night makin' muffled drone,
Dronin' the world's first blues.
In the flicker of the firelight song
Feelin' still the weight of what he'd done wrong
World's first blues.
Shiftin' his hips, still apayin' the toll
There weren't no thing called rock-n-roll
Just the blues
Oozin' from a human soul
The blues.
His voice was high like a tenor in pain
You woulda heard that man complain
"Kilt a brother in a world that has no en'
Got myself to blame, who woulda known
Alone in a world without no frien'
Aloneness that goes clean to the bone."
Crack sputter pop went his fingers on his thighs
Searchin' for a rhythm that might comprise
The feel o' the blues
What the gut has said
The feel o' blues
From the back o' the head
The feel o' the blues
Wishin' he was dead
The same ever' night, he sang to the moon
Same three notes in a wretched new tune,
An' he moved to the east in his shufflin' shoes
Each day the song settled a bit more to defuse
The weight of the world's first blues.

Kentucky Blue

The guitarman sets out a heartbeat,
steady
measured
set.
The mandolin trips out a mournful quaver
like a hermit thrush whose wing has never mended
while the graybeard tells a tale
of days when pain was raw
and life
was slow.
No matter what the fiddler and the bass attempt,
the wistful woe cannot be overcome
because a heart that's locked in yesterday
will not be set aflight
against
its will.

June

The jazz notes you spur
summon Satchmo's cornet
squawk, syncopated yips scatting
over beats — syllables of desire
bending blue-hot pitches and
sliding be-be-bop all around the melody —
improvising every next move
vocalizing thump and groove
to mark the song be-be-bumping
inside dizzy spinning tumble-bumble
full-score-orchestration,
bells and sax — double-backed
double-tonguing, riding the cold train,
catfish jumping deep into Tunisia,
building my dream
on your be-bop-beating kiss.

snow jazz

she mouths each flake
frozen to her tongue tip
then twitches a profound but transitory fizz

flakes leisurely slither on her skin
sensing the frostpricks tumbling into her
as the skin fires a response
she whips her mouth delicately
stretching it to catch and find release

then deliberately she turns the snow inside
her frame trembling
her tastes sweltering with shortfall
oscillating privately

the change descends in a hot line to the drifts
the tips budding, compact
as the water glides over and between them

the cold melt mounting profounder by the moment
so contradictory, each a sizzling drop
as her sighs rise
she shuffles the snow downhill

she deliberately arches
as it glides irreducibly to her center
mocking herself with the scorching whiteness
she traffics with the synthesis
as the flame tingles bottomless, endless
as she jazzes single-mindedly

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