

Ars Poetica
for the Day

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Ars Poetica for the Day

SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM



Dedicated to
Margarita Donnelly

Lost on Christmas Eve

In our minds she is a smile
wider than a shelf of new books
to sell, stopping the women
passing by with the wiles

of a peddler. Her cackle
rings with the day's caroling,
like it rang in exhibition halls
above the market's babbling

in her own Golden Age:
the moments between fires
in invisible valleys,
each lonely outlier,

to when her craft binds light
and smoke and burn, and stacks
these for readers in lonelier
shelters, her books axes

clearing dead wood from living.
In our lives her Golden Age
extends, even as our world
turns to mercury, and the page

on which memory writes, halts,
unable to weep, at her heat, lost,
that had created books where
once only our writing was.

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To the Storyteller

“to say to the passing moment”

Goethe, *Faust*

ever hungry

even when full,

never alone

even when lonely,

always aiming

target unknown,

voices murmuring burnt to ash,

ash imagined

settled to stone,

stone fallen

to forgotten

from where your stories come.

Dating

I went on another date with my writing today. We've been dating for a long time. I don't know why we keep meeting. It never ends in sex, although sometimes it's led to my reading a book in bed. Often he does not bother to appear. I wait and wait, throat burning in dread, my tight chest overflowing with aches and burrs of anxiety, until I cannot bear the humiliation, even if no one is there, no one's watching, and I don't care, I finally leave, abject and alone, for some thing else, a nut muffin, or worse, a plate of limp over-salted French fries. I never get really angry. I wish I would, and then maybe I'd say goodbye.

But when he does turn up, I'm fascinated by his blather, it can throw a surprise like an amateur hitting an underhanded blow. Yet I've heard most of his stories so many times I can end his lines for him. You could say I find him a bore, so I don't know why I keep listening. He's capable of mumbling. Between duhs and ums he may say something I like, and I carry it back in my mouth, imagining it's a bit of worm a magpie crams into the hungry crop of its chick, and I take it out when I am alone, greedy, before I actually swallow it.

We've been dating like this since I was nine. I wouldn't call him a pedophile but he's not a big brother either. No, it's not a healthy relationship, although it isn't exactly sick. And, yes, he's created problems, particularly with girlfriends who get jealous because of his attentions. They don't see how long-suffering I've been. My husband doesn't care. He understands first love comes first. Besides, he's my last love, and they don't offer the same—apples to bananas. I get fed up, today, feeling my age, and want to sit in the shade instead, eavesdropping on hummingbirds pillaging fuchsias and lilies. They're attractive if empty-headed. Still, every April, they lay their eggs, and at least one fledging sticks around till summer ends.

Jane Austen

What did she want of the gentlemen
that she wrote so longingly of them?
Riding to grand estates or towns, uniformed
and tall-hatted, always in sight,
like boxes of chocolates set aside
in a High Street shop, fancily bow-tied,
for the pretty rich young ladies;
that, counting her pounds and pennies,
plain Jane could not afford, even when pressed—
desire pressed to calculation—
seeing herself left on the shelf, home-made
confectionary, while the young men petition
beribboned chatterboxes, and she, homely,
at home crafting immortal candy.

The Moment

as I stand here ironing,
feet on the floor, toes curled
to sign at home—if all's
energy and mass its mobile
moment, the light iron's click,
red glow go, is here and now.
This morning delights in things
that will lie flat to be smoothed,
a small order reminding
mere chaos is more order
we cannot know. Water
sizzles on the unprotesting
cotton, its washed wrinkles
banished, no harm done,
while my hand glides, creating what
waves incoming do: erasing,
presenting fresh the ecstatic
blank beach for our footprints.

Similes

Something streaks across the sky,
a trial missile, stealth bomber,
tail of white smoke like pretty
cirrus on a May day, and I
glance up and look away, another
terror put aside in the story
of terrors, like vests embroidered
with suicide verse that the mothers
stitch, smiling, for the city centers.

The Muse's Love Song

The truth is she falls in love every day.
The truth is she cannot live without male passion.
The truth is the tenor's rising octaves
pierce her days more than poems do.
Before his sustained breath, she submits,
in thrall, the chains of pleasure renewed:
abandoning her seat of power to this man
whose song surges its mindless sweetness
in a soul she seeks to possess,
proud and solely pure.

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