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The Empath's Travel Log

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The Empath's Travel Log

Abstract

Cynthia Marie Hoffman Studner said of the poem, "This is an ambitious poem that delivers on empathy, just as promised. The poem establishes a metaphor of a "taught thread" that pulls together the traveler and an "orange-coated mutt" spotted in Italy, and this thread weaves throughout the poem as one of continual and deep connection with others. One wonders of the empath's fate, especially when the poem begins with the story of wives cremated beside their dead husbands. What are the implications of this empathy in terms of its being something the speaker must bear? At times, it is guilt, as in the case of the baby rabbit that cannot be saved. Later, it is the insensitivity of a father who laughs and orders a rabbit cooked and delivered on a plate. It seems the speaker ultimately comes to find purpose and usefulness in empathy, saving animals after all (making the dream come true in which "the thread connecting/ me to you does not snap,/ and you live,/ and you live"). But it is the stark absence of animals and others in the final section that haunts me. The tension and strangeness in the ending lines is satisfying in a way that resists closure. I want more, but at the same time, I don't want more. And that seems just right."

Keywords

Travel, Empath, Empathy

Disciplines

Creative Writing | Poetry

Comments

2016 Gettysburg College Poetry Prize, Runner-Up

This poem was written for Professor Nadine Meyer's seminar, *ENG 405: Seminar in Writing: The Poet's Voice*, Fall 2015.

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I— Jodhpur, India

From the top of the red-orange sandstone fort
the city becomes a mirror to the sky.
Every building is painted the same cerulean blue,
so that the fort stands out not only in vast height,
but in color contrast.
My mother stands next to me,
wrapped in a pink cashmere shawl,
and tells me, in a whisper, *this is home*.

I cannot know what she means,
I am eleven and know we are only
staying here until our train leaves the station.
But I catch a glimpse of something
in her wistful stare that pulls at my heart,
and tells me, a part of her will never leave this place.

I turn from the cityscape to face a red wall of hands.
There are so many carved into the clay,
and I press my small, white hand on top of one,
in solidarity, not knowing why. Later the tour guide
tells me, these were artifacts of Sati,
and each hand represented a wife
who was ceremonially cremated,
immolated, with her dead husband.

I imagine, on the bus ride to the city temple complex,
a funeral pyre and thirteen white robed figures,
their long black braids like whips against
their backs, thrown onto the flames.
Those hands on the wall burn in my mind;
hands that seemed so small and fat
like a toddler's.

II— Bari, Italy

From my balcony I can see into the courtyard,
which is dusty and made of hard, brown clay.
The afternoon breeze brings in the smell
of sea salt on the air that is harsh entering my nostrils.
Somewhere in the courtyard,

a lemon drops to the ground with a dull thud,
and I find myself looking over the balcony wall.

At the bottom of the ivy-thick partition beneath me,
is an orange-coated mutt.
He sees me, and lets out a happy kind
of demanding yelp— he is so beautiful
that I toss him one of my *polpette di melanzane*—
eggplant meatballs— from the height.
It plops onto his nose, almost elegantly, and he looks bewildered
for a moment, then hastily devours the treat.

I want to call to him, but I do not know his name.
He belongs to the neighbors, clearly,
but in this moment, he is mine.
The dog barks again,
bending down on his front paws, as if to bow
to me in thanks.
I think I shall call him Milo.

A few days later, in the town square,
I see him, on a black leash.
I call out to him, in the name
I have given, Milo, Milo,
but he does not turn to greet me.

It is only in the moment before a man
in a black suit comes between us,
that the dog looks at me, finally,
with his yellow-amber eyes,
and I feel it again,
like the taught thread,
which is pulled with a needle
between two blocks of quilt cloth.

III— Greencastle, United States
The summer I was twenty-one I heard you,
from across the cul-du-sac. I knew that cry
too well. Last summer, the dogs had torn into
the nest in the bushes, and I had thought that sound
was a squeak toy, but instead was the death
squeal of a baby rabbit.

This time, I ran to you, in time, and there were no

wreathing organs pouring out of your chest.
You were sweet faced, soft, and your heart
pounded too hard, pushing the skin out around
your ribcage in a small circle.
Without asking, I took a shovel from the neighbor's
garage and placed you upon it, scared
I might break you. Knowing
the night before the dogs
had destroyed the nest
and your true mother had fled,
I carried you with me for sometime,
pacing around the yard.
My dog, Minerva, followed me,
close at my heels,
as if I were keeping a treat from her.

Looking closely,
I could see your eyes were still closed.
I could not nurse you, hopeless,
I knew I had failed you already.
I asked my own mother what I might do with you,
and she said only, *You should have let the dogs have it.*

I did not want to leave you,
brown body splayed upon brown mulch,
under the cover of the heather.
I wished then, that I could live another life.

In the moment, when I walked away,
abandoning you,
there was a rift in the universe,
a divergence.
In one reality, I swear,
the thread connecting
me to you does not snap,
and you live,
and you live.

IV— *Budapest, Hungary*

It is Easter, the wide open
windows of the Hotel Sofitel
are packed with plush, live,
baby rabbits.

Other children watch them,
wide eyed and wiggling
with joy as their parents
let them enter the make-shift habitat.
I pull on my father's coat,
Can I please go see the bunnies?
He looks down at me,
smirking, his fleshy cheeks
look like leather in the sun,
and he shakes his head.

*Please? I just want to hold one
for a minute.* A girl in a yellow
spring coat picks up a Russian dwarf
and holds it close to her chest.
She tenderly pets his head
and smiles. *No.* My father says,
his thin red lips curling around
brown teeth. I don't ask again.

Later, for Easter dinner,
my father orders a rabbit.
He laughs, a full hearty laugh
as it comes out of the kitchen,
whole on his plate, limbs baked brown.

V— *Nosara, Costa Rica*
Looking like Queen Elizabeth,
my copper hair tight in humidity
wrought ringlets, I hold a baby
howler monkey in my arms.

He looks at me with his deep brown eyes,
sleepily. He's lost his mother to newly hung
power lines and only survived by clinging
to her back as she feel.

Last night I helped a sea turtle give birth.
I became that limb, that phantom flipper
lost to the sea. There are these scales
of life and death, a pound of flesh
for a pound of flesh.

VI— *Hong Kong, China*

At night, the city
looks like many living colored crystals.
I haven't seen a single pigeon
or fly or scrap of trash.