

Mary Jo Balistreri

The Saylesville Manuscript

In honor of our pond in Wisconsin

On the illuminated gray vellum of this day,
nature embellishes a late November page
with a variety of oak trees, filigreed and bronzed.
It stipples the prickly fur of red squirrels. Places
a blue heron by pond's edge, motionless and alert.
A breeze ruffles a torn leaf.

Scanning the open book before me, my eyes finger
nubs of raw silk, touch tips of bent willows
painted thin with silver.

In the middle of the lake, a fisherman's breath is incense
in the chill air, his exhale reaching upward only to vanish
in the vastness enveloping him.

As solstice draws near, the text grows darker, the words,
cold, then colder. We build fires to keep warm,
hallow the night. In silence,
voices come close, mere whispers at first,
then rise into light as we stoke embers,
re-ignite our flame.

Reading *The Cat in the Hat*

for Sam—1997-2005

He is that kind of boy,
a *Cat in the Hat* boy that leans
into my cradled arms quietly
for this moment, believing
that as long as he doesn't move,
Gramma will not leave.

When the story is over, I tell
him it is time to go, that I must take
care of Grandpa. I hold him close,
say I'll be back soon. He wants
to cry, lower lip trembling. If only
I'd known two weeks later
my grandson would be dead...

Years later, walking along the sea,
a small blonde boy runs across the beach,
his face all smiles as he tugs loose
from his mother's arm and bumps into me.

The sand spills into my shoes, sea spray
skirts my bare legs, but for the moment
I am blind, and all I hear is the laugh
and tease of Sam's words
as he squirts his water gun at me.
I got you Gramma!

Seagulls arc and screech.
Sunlight breaks the ocean into a million shards.

The Day She Left Behind

for M.B.

She picks up the children from school
takes them to the shelter. Leaves a note
on the windshield for her husband.
Her friend calls to tell him the car
is at Walgreens.

He calls a lawyer and his father,
brings the children's clothes
to his father's garage,
lays them out flat on the floor.
He leaves a stand-up note,
like a tag on a newly dug grave.

The Card Players

after Milton Avery

I. Two Girls and the Sun

All day the hours disappear, replaced
by degrees of heat and light,
waves of sound.

The sun, with an intensity that can't be
ignored, calls the girls inside
their beachfront rental, insists
they take time away from noon's white glare.

The room unfolds in a sun-drenched afternoon
where shapes stretch out and lengthen,
where the heavy world falls through air currents,
light as the feathers of osprey.

The girls, a flowering hibiscus and a wilting wallflower,
sit on the bed and play with hearts and spades.
The slap of cards, screech of gulls, and scent of seaweed
assume a kind of order.

The sky lowers its blue shade, and all becomes
dreamscape, state of mind, lucent, shimmering.

II. The Sun Speaks

My reputation precedes me like Don Juan,
but I seduce my lovelies without fancy words.
They love me for my warmth, the way I jewel
the ocean, and carry the flowered scents of the tropics
within my heat. They bask in my bronze,
anoint themselves with oil.

I wield my way through the open door of the beach
house, spot two girls, quiet with concentration. I light
on the back of the chairs,
but the girls ignore my glow of godliness.

I court them in crimson and pink, touch their arms,
their faces with a heat-red narcotic. Heads begin
to droop, these flowers of sun-lit desire. The blonde
pales first, limpid in her chair. The other girl,
a black-haired beauty, requires my high noon laser.
Resistant, but weakeneing, she kicks off her shoes,

untucks her blouse. Before long, she too leaves
the table, spreads out next to her friend on the bed.
I cover her gently with gold lamé. She sighs,
rolls over, giving herself to my irresistible charm.

III. From the Notebook of Milton Avery, 1944

June 15

To paint seduction,
lush sensuousness, slipping, sliding.
State of mind, edge of awareness,
yet not lose integrity of day.
Real lives.
Giorgione, Courbet, Manet,
mythology, goddess, earthy duality.
Engaged in quiet activity?
Subtle but centered.

June 18

Silent, drifting, absorbed. A game
to carry abstract order, mindful,
mindlessness—chess, cards, nothing
esoteric. Something common,
easily missed.

June 25

The sea as state of mind, as contained
chaos? Where real is fantasy,
awareness is dream?

July 1

I paint myself, always myself, layback,
intense, image of girls playing at cards.
Something suggestive—bed? rumpled?
Place of comfort, far away visions.

July 10

Color essential—disparities, active,
passive, chromatic color to carry
subtleties. Pastels? Blurred edges,
fluid boundaries. Can letting go be

anchored? Held to canvas by
sun-flattened shapes?

July 20

Almost there! Cards, gray board
to center girls. Anchor, rich, profuse
color of tropic, yellow hibiscus, red heat.
Sun-saturated.

August 1

Scumbled color across the whole surface
this morning, limpid heat haze,
seductive and lush. Spilled light,
radiant overflow from within. Yes!

News from the Tropics

September lies like a sleeping dog
before a fire. Hurricanes and tropical storms
threaten but the dog gives only an occasional whimper,
scratching his dream with a hind leg.

As I walk through the mangroves, “ Autumn Leaves”
weaves through my mind. The tree’s tangled limbs
and ancient roots are haloed in the sun-shot fog.
Many of these old trees, leaning on their tawny canes,
appear to walk across the brackish water.

The path to the sea hangs with a gossamer canopy.
Woven silk stretches from tree to tree,
like a mesh hammock that beckons in the heat.
Tireless banana spiders use this lull between seasons
to add to their inventory. Designs change from site to site.
For the Australian pine, they spin finely webbed scarves
draped advantageously against the tree’s green presence.

I forgot to mention that for weeks now, the air glints
with dragonflies and damsels. Thousands stitch
their way up and down the coast, on the side of estuaries,
across the berm, their transparent wings on fire.
Sparks fly in all directions, a mating orgy beyond imagining,
something delicious in that wild abandon.

Today a shift in the ocean, something muddy
and repressed brews along the bottom. The wind
blows hot and cold. The dog growls in his sleep.

Mary Jo has two full books of poetry, *Joy in the Morning* and *gathering the harvest* published by Bellowing Ark Press, and a chapbook, *Best Brothers*, by Tiger's Eye Press. Recipient of many awards, she has nominations for 3 Best of the Net, and 6 Pushcart nominations. Associate editor of Tiger's Eye Press, Mary Jo is also a founder of Grace River Poets, an outreach for women's shelters, churches, and schools. Please visit her at maryjobalistreripoet.com