

Blessing In Deep Disguise

GOODNIGHT JONQUIL, GOODNIGHT UNION *An American Suite (in a woman's voice)*

In one of the early American primers there was a picture of a big old tired plough horse standing patiently in the middle of a pasture, with a complete menagerie of little colts, lambs, kids, hens, and puppies all chasing, fighting, and bunting each other in a circle around him. The picture was supposed to teach such truths as these: "The lamb can play." "The hen can run." "The dog can jump." And underneath in bold-faced pica was the legend, "The horse is kind, but he is old and slow."

Frances & Gertrude Warner,
Pleasures and Palaces, 1933

A rooster must fight best on his own dunghill.
Let me alone, do you hear,
I am whole and sound,
I will stay that way.



Or pile up my guts in my hand
And I will carry them
Up to the stone wall at its angle and over it
To silence just one cannon.

Josephine Miles, "Views From Gettysburg"

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I. No Falcon Wings Home, Promised Land

No falcon wings back to me. Quaker-plain I stand.
No frost-flowers on the pane
but a sky of firebrick, long in the kiln.

I dream of Revere's silver, lighting a matchflame:
but in my hand hold no lantern shining
"Two if by sea, one of by land." Can't tell my enemy, so no warning.

Landless, a common lady
without Harriet Tubman's ferocity:
yet with a certain steadiness of vision, burning constantly.

If color is an injection
I sit
waiting for the surgeon

waiting by the white window
for the bright gown, silver-as-faucets
to darken the dooryard.

Wait for the shot
to turn the town's river
iron, from bland. Hartford-Smoke & Federal-Drab our town.

Wait to watch elms flame
jonquil
with autumn, a watercolor prism.



My dog, "Patches,"
waves, black as ink, black as John Hancock's name
on the Declaration. My mutt, his tail a flag in the wind.

Slavespeech & slaveship at dusk wane
the horror of that locust-cloud
rolling in, our common shame, our blame, our blood-pigeon.

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Grant & Lee & the oak tree & the gallows-limb darken.
O my mongrel-land
O marginal land, O stripmined sweetheart I have none

of Elizabeth Blackwell's
passion for medicine;
am no Betsy Ross with ardent design.

There are such precisionists as "crystallographers."
I swear that same blood-red, bone-bright flag
—after our fever—comes.

Grasses of Gettysburg blowing African harps over the dead.
Old Patches. I stare & stare at him, Man's best friend.
I steady his flag in my vision: gesso, oil-definite:
 Before things grow inexact & change.

II. What's Past Is Prologue

Take back your gentian,
doorway.
Dim but swiftly

flags flown
above the bars
of my body die. The War-Torn South, I

form relief-lands,
hoist battlecries.
What's past is prologue.

Waiting for surgery
to have my head grafted back on my body
I see the small false-Dutch windmill opposite me

turn
brown, cream.
To contemplate collision with death is a precision

correct as a Haarlem town.
New York gleams on the eyeball, Amsterdam Ave.'s cobbles
till my special light comes. Underground Railways burnish things

scrub shrubs
to bleached linen, or else bronze, bringing me voyage.
Perfecting elms to spires of copper.

Somewhere on this earth
burns the perfect fire:
comes my body's flawless twin.

III. Season Of Blessing In Deep Disguise

Too wise to be tender,
too tender to be wise
we rise.

Our mountains mist
like geese flying south
in a whited-over oil painting.

Mist, like bandages done by a civil war nurse.
Mist, like a white room seen thru tears
sickroom, someone dying.

This too will pass
This season
of whitewashed blessings. In deep disguise they go

rabbiteyes
thru snow. Bloody as a scarlet marble
—Redcoats, or Union men.

Don't shoot till you spy the white of their eyes.
But all I see—come sunrise
is the red

Too tired—to be lowly, or wise.

IV. To Silence Ten Thousand Cannon

we'd pay a king's ransom.
But storm behind the churchspires is massing.

We fold our hands—yearn
for a bolt of fresh cloth
& on its heels, INSPIRATION Boldface, Primer style.

Yearn for
fresh bread, chowder, clambakes
ponies blizzarded by flour-snow, ponies cut out of sacking in a log cabin.

Let's make a fresh start.
Let's build a nest for our child,
(that burn-free mare, that stallion running.)

O brown dogmouse
O gold-legged chicken
only a knife-sharp beginning will salvage us

we've had a tailspin
skirting
asylum.

So we fold our hands, yearn for:
fur on the cat's tongue,
fire on the primrose, back home.
All things new—but
accustomed, as before the storm.

V. Locusts (The Pioneer Family)

“Three years’ll pass quicker’n a wink
& it’ll be ours
the promised land.”

But locusts come
blackening sky like an old-masters painting.
Sure as Grant took Richmond—scar-fire reached the mind.

Just as belltowers went out of light
into blackness & silence—
the hour was told.

Now the griefs unfold
black as crows, black as bonnets, as funeral clothes
red as the fire the Preacher foretold.

White as cream,
hopes blown down, one after one
till the flooded sky finally is flame, the tall ships turn back, home.

Sailors, while you’re praying on aquamarine
against evil omen,
on what shall I pray to purge us—of this visitor?
Water-bones, this Lady, acid-spirit, fire-tongue.

VI. Sailor, I Cannot Tell The Tall Ships By Name

that spelled our land
Despair, Hope, Fame, Ambition.

Sun
(that holdup woman in yellow sweater)
flames to light the gashed silk sky. Her laughter—

a series of quail
mending
the war-torn south, warming that iced winter, Valley Forge

laughter in her bosom.
While lemon-light falls in the window on—
no girl—but a woman, sewing stars & stripes in

a flag's skeleton.
No Primadonna,
no beauty. Rawboned.

O girl back home, applepits are in your hair,
your breast,
your skin, fair as a negative to be developed.

But I see things all pale, not yet teak-oiled.
I wait for my color-injection.
Goodnight, Jonquil.

The frozen windowframe houses a crocusbullb
white flame
a flower floating in a bowl. It has no name.

Like you, Jonquil
it's my harbor, my home
this infant-sad nunnery-none, nursery-green land.

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VII. Hushaby

don't you cry
go to sleepy little baby.

Moonlight
pours in on my knife
oils it. You sleep behind me, with

all the ponies.
While I milk, smoothly, the white gal's baby
to save her albino body.

My milk bright as a tumor,
the scalded moon, the milky way
this whole mad-dog country

torn down center like a crinoline-gown
sleep, small as yet
chocolate-lady, fever-eye.

VIII. Free, Grace

In primal colors
the rooster crows on his dunghill.
Goodnight, Paul Bunyan Johnny Appleseed Tom Paine.

Heads bowed, you think you're free but you're in prison.
Syrup for motion-sickness turns you
blue, frostbitten.

The dry hours house you.
Sun's flame
scorches walls.

Cracking the slats of midnight-stairs,
you return
redolent with passion.

You didn't belong to this land
till you came. Now you've come
but still feel strange

alien in breathing.
You get to the topmost stair.
Lavish of light, you flick it off there. Blackness.

You seek OUT of this turning, to sleep deeply.
But take too many sleeping-draughts—hallucinate or die.
No controlled flame—no 4 sides of glass housing this:

*It bends you all ways. A forestfire rages in a lantern,
flames in your hand.
Goodnight Jonquil, my bastard, my midage mellow vision.*