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Poems

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Six White Horses

By Melita Schaum

Their necks are like swans, like white scythes slicing the tinny circus light. Their manes are flames of snow, and on their backs a woman sequenced like a barroom sign, her red suit a splash of grenadine on ice.

But my friend the painter needs more China white, more carnelian for this canvas. The lady has to be redder, she frowns. And these haunches are the color of softballs.

Her mother died last month, and she is angry. In the studio lights her eyes look bruised. She is the girl the color of blood on hospital sheets, the girl the color of a valentine, riding her bridled rage around and around.

Down in the alley an old black man quenches his pain on the golden stamen of a sax. The notes land like fists against time's body; they empty death's pockets.

My mother used to sing like that, before she let herself get old. I hear her voice rise in the purpling dusk, a sound as pure as fingers spinning crystal. I am eighteen again, bright with desire, bracing myself against the cantering white curve of years.

Pilot of Ponycarts

By Melita Schaum

Alone in the unnameable, inarticulate dark, a girl is writing because she has been forbidden to speak. A girl scratches in the lamplight all the tenderness of detail, the wand of her pen drawing a circle of yellow peace in a house of misdirected violence.

How lightly he cupped his hands beneath me when for the fourth time I had smashed my head against the cabin's lintel. Babe, he said softly, babe. Later, the crackle of twigs catching, the deep blaze reddening the stone. The air glowed like a sphere of bright speech. Our lungs, our laughter burned with it.

Alone at night, my mouth tastes of grief and song: love's octaves. Interesting that fugue is both a memory disorder and a piece of music. I trace arpeggios of space between us, play the dumb bed's rich, concordant blank. Outside, a storm swells in the belly of the sky. Trees are night's thighs, and between them desire's leaping stars.

I am tired of measuring my words, measuring my wounds. Love is a generous continent. We steer by stars across the surrounding, empty water. Compass me, I want to say to him. Where we go from here is pure invention.

Orbits

By Melita Schaum

I had been thinking how much fuller the trees were, how much smaller the yard than when I sprinted its length to meet the chugging schoolbus thirty years ago. Idling curbside in my car with out-of-state plates at one in the afternoon, I feel illicit, like a spy looking at the darkened upstairs windows of my childhood home. I inhale the azaleas, fragrant and bitter like the past, when suddenly a large naked woman rises like a white planet between the curtains and looks down at me, her breasts huge and gibbous in the dark refracted glass. We gaze at each other, my mouth fallen open at her unabashed skin. Gargantuan Venus, gleaming like a moon among the maturing maples. How is it that that look unbuttons time, undoes like laces the history of my lean, unhappy girlhood? In a moment she will turn back to her lover, perhaps another woman, lying naked on the unseen bed. It's no one, she says, and the slim past is devoured by this moment's plenty. Already I can hear their lawless laughter as I drive off, whispering my almond blossom, whispering my pulsing star.

Lizzie

By Melita Schaum

We cannot always have intensity. Sometimes the rain comes down like phantom hands smudging the air's canvas. Today is a day without shadows, a day when the heart goes forward slowly, dragging its schoolbooks. Lying on the sofa, paging through art catalogues, I come across a Fairfield Porter oil, a portrait of a breakfast table in the sun. The meal is over but the cloth has not been cleared-among the objects are a book, a China jar, a spoon and vase, a pot of marmalade and, surveying it all, a child with eyes as bright and keen as agates. She has just been fed and now is looking down the day, down the shining barrel of what's next to come. Still in her highchair, the morning arrives for her, is served on blue and white-the Delft pattern of the sky, the porcelain and eggshell lights-and she is its centerpiece, gathered like greenery and bloom. The date is 1958. Christ, I think, these last months that I have wasted despising the boundaries of my life. Time lost, yet the sensation of time remains. Today is nothing but an ache between my ribs. Things pass. Some days even art is beyond enduring.