

Linda Norton

Song of Degrees

*I am very much struck in literature by the appearance
that one person wrote all the books . . .*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

In the glare of two-billion-year-old light
these people stand to gain as much as they lose by their position
and they are said to eat their wives and children.
Friends also follow the laws of divine necessity.

The whole frame of things preaches
indifferency. Do not craze yourself with thinking.
The same omniscience flows into the intellect
and makes what we call genius.

They have light and know not whence
it comes. I almost wrote "no not whence,"
and why not wear it thus.

In the nature of the soul is the compensation
for the inequalities of condition. The death
of a brother assumes the aspect of a guide or a genius.
I am my brother and my brother is me.

It has been a luxury to draw the breath
of life. We were children playing with children,
playing with children. You cannot draw the line
where a race begins or ends.
I love a prophet of the soul.

She knew not what to do and so she read.
Having decided what was to be done, she did that.
No matter whether she makes shoes or statues,
or laws. It is easy to see
what a favorite she will be with history.
Her book shall smell of pines.

The poets made all the words.
The rainbow, mountains,
orchards in bloom. Stars.

Money is as beautiful as roses.
This is the meaning of their hanging
gardens, villas, garden houses.

Rose with No Name

... such as are often found in old gardens growing on their own roots, and sometimes of great age. They are of the highest value in the garden, as the picture well shows. Such a rose, though not the one shown, whose name is lost, is Anna Alexieff.

Gertrude Jekyll, *Walls and Water Gardens*

Red roses on a rose bush looped with garden hose—
The first paintings were made with blood,
beauty out of carnage, or was it red ink
from the body of the first girl, from the first
wondering about what was happening
and how it might look and how it might smell—
The heirloom roses in this garden smell old
which means they smell fresh as the first girl
unlike some of the new roses bred to blossom
thornless, fast, synthetically, to resist pests.
They smell of money and garden hoses,
pneumatically flawless, ungardened; anyone
could do it, could do them; pornographic.
The first girl and the first rose were Sapphic.

Holy Week

A song of degrees, of pilgrimage, as in the Psalms of David

My brothers all have died,
the boys I held when they were small,
when I was small,
the boys I fed and shoved.

Should I lie down with them and keep them warm
or step over them to live?

Or should I crawl across their bodies in pilgrimage
the way my grandmother climbed the concrete steps to the shrine
on her knees, with me one step behind her at her elbow,
her pocketbook swinging at my face
every time she took a step—

In the parlor of her apartment she had a tapestry of the Roman Coliseum
and a crucifix and a picture of Pope John the 23rd
and houseplants in coffee cans on the windowsills—
marvetta, coleus, basilico.

One year after her death at 92, I went to Rome for the first time.
It was Holy Week and all the stores were closed—*chiuso, chiuso, chiuso*.
I was six weeks pregnant.

At the Coliseum I kept stumbling over imaginary statuary,
petrified feet and hands in the grass.
Who died here?

I kneeled to vomit in the weeds.

Fata da forta, my grandmother used to say. *Make yourself strong*.

I will walk around the bodies of my brothers,
arrange their limbs, and trace the contours of their faces.

I will remember the clean smell of the grass that grew at the Coliseum
and in the cracks on the steps to the shrine
and I will write about it in a book.