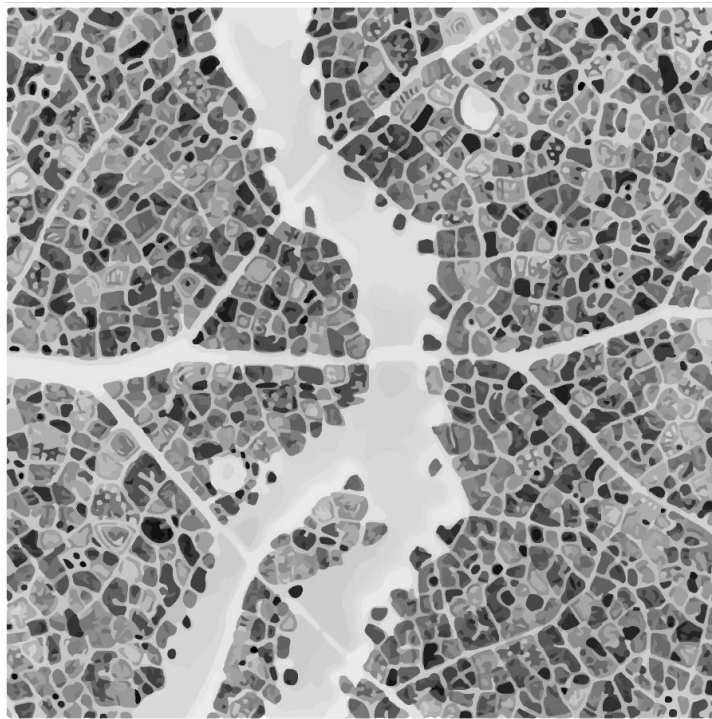


Summer Poems / 2015



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cover image: “From the River” by Karen McAlister Shimoda

2nd edition, December 2019, BC. 1st printing, July 2015, NY.

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FIRST WORDS

My mother spoke to me
early, I was swaddled in words.
“Will I — am I, do you think?”
she asked until I understood.
I took my mother in mouthfuls
secreted to me in a room alone.

I heard my name and kicked
free of myself like a knitted boot.
My mother spoke to me, she wept
and cast me to the ground like dice
until I not only listened but knew.
It was summer on the prairies.

Locusts sang, until in their winter
silence I could finally speak back.
My mother spoke to me long before
I understood although she was saying
daughter what she meant was sister
and the only one listening was me.

FAUNA

†

I never even saw that door
until she walked through it, grace
herself casting earthworm magic
through inscrutable muck.

I'd been stuck for days. My eyes
were caked with mud, mercilessly
rich and fertile, as I twisted lamely
in the grasp of myrtle root.

So that when she appeared,
a cup of wine half drunk
in her hand, the other outstretched
like a kite fighting a storm

and winning, she passed through
a door I hadn't seen. I was stultified
and in love. I forgot myself, and her eyes
touched mine as though passing the salt.

So comfortable, so cold. Then she was gone.
I can't find the door. I know that she bore
snake bites for bracelets, knives at her knees,
burrs laced in her hair, herself like a key.

†Roman goddess of fertility, women and the oppressed. Her husband beat her with myrtle when he discovered she had shunned sex with him to drink wine instead. Revered in secret rites by those seeking empowerment.

STILL LIFE

How grotesquely we seduce
one another and are jealous
of one another, as though we
were all pieces of fruit taken
at various points of readiness
to leave the branch, whether
willing or windfall, composed
on a teeming platter for slow
selection, ripening under close
observation, only to sweeten
or decay depending on whom
we lean against: soft shoulder
or hard, in sunlight or shadow.

PEELING PEACHES

It's unlocked. Open the car door with a clunk.
Get in and roll the windows down; it's summer time
in the desert Similkameen, and the seats will be hot,
edges stiff 'round unctuous middles, the car a tinful
of that encouraging, warm-dirty smell of good weather
journeys. Start the engine still fastening your seatbelt;
gear up and tune the radio to something country or
rock: clear but soft enough to talk. Find you don't
need to: speak with languid eyes instead set upon
the vision of that morning's love making, still on
your hands or, if they're on the wheel, the warm
oasian landscape weaving lightly by: red wing
black birds, rushes rattle-dry, and the lake water's
blue glint. Roar up the two-lane highway shining
to the nearest roadside Fruit Stand: Okanagan
Peaches, Jonagolds, Pick Your Own. Why Pay More?
Labyrinth of Chilliwack Corn! Forget the damn maize
and know just what you've come for: Red Havens,
Glow Havens, early Osoyoos: a dozen sweet tart
peaches so wet you ought eat them in the bath for
full effect. But I digress. Park. Find a flat and trace
the orbit of each fruit with your fingers' lightest touch,
as though trying to brush an owl's feather of dust.
Test its curves. Peaches' light-diffusing fuzz can hide
historic pickers' fingerprints, those of whoever's held on
less tenderly before: there should be no divots to touch
nor equally, resistance: no field-green pectinousness
or tensile chill. Each must be readily ripe, tabula rasa
impressionable. Full of last-night's rain and just-picked
that morning, so sun-hot as blood. Hurry home now:
throw ten bucks to the guy and the flat into the front
of the car and drive straight back to the kitchen where
half your coffee's still warm. Slide it aside with other
kitchen table stuff, and rest the flat of peaches there.
Take a deep breath of sweetness stirring the morning

air. Relax. You may begin to sing just softly, not even realizing it, a morning song we both know well. Turn on the heat beneath the water pot. Wash your hands, the stainless sink, then half fill that with water and ice, all save two cubes. Find your nimblest paring knife, and hold it with your best hand. With water now roiling hot, pick up a peach — helps make the first one bearable, bursting the even bobble of a flat, to choose at random rather than linearly as the enraptured instinct may suggest — given that: attack. Palm the peach's stem end and score its nubbed bottom with an X; draw the knife through the fuzz and vellum, but not flesh, and then, put it back, stem down before the slit has chance to weep. You'll want to work with a minimum of handling pressure. Repeat with each, dawdling a bit to see the cuts darken, juice wetting red the skin beneath. Once the pot of water's reached full boil, pick up a peach, again; this time, just like you'd lift a tiny tide pool crab off rocks, and slip it in the pot. Work fast but gently, and repeat: beware errors, bruising or scalding recklessness. Get it all in the water quick. But for just one minute — and you won't believe you're doing it, the perfume's too fantastic as raw fruit submits to heat, floats jammy sweet; you'll stare but give it no more — and with focus and a slotted spoon, begin to rhythmically take up (thus stop) the peaches from the cooking pot into the icy bath. Move fast. Preferably all's just a hips' pivot away, and gesture takes sway, so you can lift them nearly as at once. Now, turn off the heat and plunge in to your forearms. Let go. The feeling of all those peach skins moving off hot flesh, the way you barely have to coax, just slide your fingers down (and your hands are good at this) gently over until they drift, as though never contained by skin at all: gloss burning amber now so easily, aroma at once caramel and spice sharp. You'll be left with a naked sinkful of bobbing peaches, two cubes for gin, and hands that smell really nice. For all this work in our world, the near effortless it takes to peel a peach — my dear, it's sheer fucking delight.

NYX

†

The mother of fate is only shadow.
Contrary to common belief, all shadow
belongs to nothing; she's a fluid single
being, like aspen. Doesn't yours sometimes
look soft and kind, and others, even
in the same conditions of light and place,
shifty and crow-like? She hops bodies
like branches. Today she nests with a shepherd,
his heavy hood soots her feathers black. Sunlight slants
down his back until his long, leaning spine spills her out
calligraphic over the velvet brown hills
shimmering with heat, the stirring sheep
and at the golden hour her stature gives
her pride, as if she were alive.

†The fleet Roman goddess of shadow, sleep and death, and mother of the Moiræ sisters, who dole out human fate.

LETTERS TO A PHOTOGRAPHER

[Lunaria]

do you have your glasses on?
do they touch your face and leave
faint marks a self-portrait
tender as toothbites on the wrist
of someone with whom you
only intended to say goodbye?
does the light glancing off them
move towards or away?

(cont.)

[Dracæna]

with the insistence of fern fronds
I am a smooth, flat, pliant thing, furled up
to such an extent of tension, to such a hard crux
that my mind is neither giving nor receiving, neither
space nor substance my mind is a template for a tool

(cont.)

[Palmata]

some of this dulse bears calciferous
patterns like stone honeycombs others
neon green nipples indiscernibly
floral or faunal I lose myself consuming
long tatters knit through my teeth and down
the gullet warts and all wondering how
such things let me live off them as you do — simple
necessary redemptive even of the general ambivalence of life

(cont.)

[Thuja]

the air of forests in the north
is always cold as heavy cloth

laid over the clay of one's own
heart in the cautious studio of time

to gauge the capacity of the animal
you will become once kilned into

hard imperviousness then forced
to utter human words that crack

the mask of all your wilderness
into pocketable pieces of lore

NEON GREEN

(for Keith)

my old teacher told me

I was young once, hitched
all the way to New York City
from West Virginia as a boy

heart leaning lump like
rough river clay toward truth
felt uncoloured, unexplored

my old teacher told me

I travelled east with a guitar
to the New York City zen center
and on the steps I met a monk

and a large green lotus-posed statue
of the Buddha burning green green
so searing neon he asked, Why?

it turned green when the bomb hit
Hiroshima and has been green ever since
he said, then laughed and laughed

and I've never learned another lesson since

NARMADA KAVYA

नर्मदा कविता

†

१

*Amri chee, amri chee —
land, forest, river and life.*

1

The landscape here is one
dreamless sleep
of stark blue reverie
fine dry cloud.

The iron smile
of the plough turns
warm brown thoughts
comfortably over
and over beneath
the lush sexuality
of the trees.

(cont.)

†The Indian government and global investors are placing thousands of dams on the Narmada River and tributaries, primarily to develop export agriculture, such as cotton. The river has religious significance to all India, but especially low-caste Hindu and aboriginal Adivasi tribes who scatter its banks. Without legal title to the land, over 400,000 people are being forcibly relocated from the area, generally into lives of landless servitude. Some are fighting to death for a different story.

¹Hindi, "It is ours."

२

*We farm, we eat
and live happily.
The land is so fertile
that everything grows
with great ardour.*

In Kheda Balavari
the earth is good
and lived upon.
Children of a hundred
families smile and women
are beautiful, strong.

This is not idealism —
human life works here
surprising as an old watch
found ticking
beneath the dust.

(cont.)

३

*Never will we leave
this river that courses
through our veins
on whose banks
we dance and sing.*

Kheda farmers raise pulses
and grain from the land
here two hundred years
from Rajasthan,
and Adivasi take root
herbs and fish
as they have a thousand
years upon Narmada's banks.

Their breath
is the course of this river,
their flesh Narmada sand,
and their only age is the turn
of seasons from rain
to crop to rain
again. This their land.

(cont.)

✧

*I can feel the dams
being built continuously
in my heart.*

June riverbeds
are empty.
Dry days in the thick
of summer bloom
and burn together,
compassionate and cruel
as a mother's palm
against a fresh wet wound.

In Kheda Balavari
they plough the land now,
nervous as any lover
who has found his goddess
to be a cheat.

(cont.)

५

*Zindabad, zindabad —
this fight, this crucial war.*

2

For fifty years
the government's stacked
millstones bound to river
people's feet, damming
them as cities shriek
Widespread Water
Scarcity! Austerity Yields
Prosperity! Oh, India —
Majestic, Free!

And there has been silence.
The half million uplifted
by their punished mother's arms
are too parched to speak.

The water pump
has been dismantled
in Kheda Balavari,
while fields of cotton bloat
bloody-tongued smug.

(cont.)

²“We will win.”

६

*Mata, mata —
we are all one,
we will drown but
will not move.*

3

The landscape here is one
dreamless sleep
— the sleep of the hopeless.
Their soles fall slow
on dry Narmada's bed.
She's their giver, their mother.
Scales of mud catch and scatter
from their feet with a sound
just audible to her.

In Kheda Balavari
the children are gone
and the women are in their houses
tying themselves down
to the dam flood path.

She's a spark, not a flower!
Beneath the shrieking of cicadas,
beneath the sun-burnt saris clung
to the breasts of these women
whose story is up, she sings still
songs dry as tinder
of the coming of rain.

³“Mother.”

acknowledgments

Thanks to the journals where these poems have previously incarnated:

The Poet in New York: Peeling Peaches

*Star*Line*: Nyx

Hubbub: Fauna