



Christopher Bernard

Three Poems

At the Next Table, in The Blue Danube Coffeehouse

. . . on a summer afternoon, bone-cold with fog:
a salt-gray Ulysses flinches, a sleeping dog, dozing
between a murmuring counter and an awkward shelf of café journals
scribbled with greetings, despairs, daydreams,
and the high wall clock, above a love seat, vacant:

a charm of young ladies
fresh as the new millennium, ancient as the wind—
an athlete with an Egyptian profile, a Swede with a questing grin,
a bewitching eccentric, lithe and cheeky,
with mouse buns, enormous glasses
and a sheer, black stole lettered, in white,

with an incomprehensible alphabet—

cheerful as puppies rolling in a basket,
tittering, one-upping each other's secrets,
planning weekends, careers, relationships, parties,
between swift dips into their needy smartphones
and finger-tipping through texts—
their voices fluttering—breezes across the summer—
their glances dart about—hunting sirens—
they laugh and look and slip into his dreaming:
a hot breath, a flashing sun, the roar of the sea beckoning him to the rocks.

My Father's Rake

A neighbor borrowed a rake from my dad.
His own had broken at the head,
and he needed to rake his vegetable patch:
the rocks were strangling his cabbages.

Dad lent his tools only with reluctance:
they were heirlooms going back to before the Great War;
in fact, he had borrowed his rake from his own dad,
but had forgotten to give it back, or something like that.
But the neighbor was persuasive: he'd return it in a week.
It was early summer. The hot months passed
and stole into the oak yellow reds and the rains
of the eastern fall. The cabbage patch
had long been harvested, and the ground was flat
with mud once again, and late random weeds
it was pointless to pull: winter would soon come.

But no rake: the neighbor hadn't given my dad back his tool,
so my dad—a patient, forgiving man—
knocked on his door. “Oh, *that!*” said the neighbor.
“I lent it to Bob.” So my dad went to Bob.
“What rake? Oh, *that* rake! Hm . . . let me see now . . .
Yes! I gave it to Lawrence, who needed it to turn over
his potatoes.” Of course, Lawrence had lent it too, to Al,
who'd lent it to Sam, who lent it to Paul,
who had been meaning to return it to Sam but forgot
where he'd left it—in his flowerbeds?
Or—no—in his vines?

Yes! The concord grapes! It must be there! “Fine!”
said my dad. Of course, it wasn’t there either. With a sigh,
my dad came home. It might turn up in the spring,
the handle rotted out, the head and teeth rusted
from exposure, ugly and useless.

My dad shrugged it off
as just one more example of the lesson he’d never learned
(he told me many years later):
like that rake, you only borrow your life
that you keep for so long it almost seems yours.
You even lend it out, but don’t be surprised if you never see it again,
because the truth is: you never really owned it.
Birth is no cause for joy, death no cause for mourning.
Life, the world, is a perpetual transformation,
nothing is lost or gained forever.
Everything we possess, everything we are—
body and mind and soul and spirit—
is held between the past and the present and the future
with outstretched hands forever.

Tomato

After Spanish conquerors brought home
a tomato from the Americas in the
sixteenth century, it was long used only
as a table decoration.

—From *The New York Times*, July 18, 2018

So shockingly shining a bright-red shape upon the table’s round of white—
and fragrant as the sun-ripe gardens of the new exotic summer
west so far from here: it looks—
lumpy, misshapen, battered, bruised—
like (don’t you think?) a human heart.
I think of my deep childhood years: they sit there, calm, they glimmer.

But then I think of you: I barely know what I should do.

Just look, admire—
or pick you up,
and take a bite
of you?

Christopher Bernard is co-editor and poetry editor of *Caveat Lector*. His most recent collection of poetry is *Chien Lunatique*; a new collection, *The Socialist's Garden of Verses*, will appear in 2020. His novel *Meditations on Love and Catastrophe at The Liars' Cafe* will appear in November 2019.

Image from worthpoint.com