2016

Four Poems by Cathryn Essinger

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Widow’s Tears

I bought the plant for its name—Widow’s Tears—and for its waxy leaves and modest blooms,

and because I had just taught “The Widow’s Lament in Springtime,” a poem that my students read

in a simple romantic way. The girls sigh and look out the windows. The boys shuffle their feet,

look down, half afraid that such passion might take hold of them, might lead them to such despair.

And yet, I know that it is not passion that moves the widow’s sorrow, but the ache of the familiar,

loss tainting even those things that are meant to bring her comfort, and the fear that this

grief is common, deserving no special notice.
Nothing has changed, her son returns with news

of the spring—the grass flames up, the orchard blooms, and once again, the marsh waits.
Rattled by the dog’s incessant barking,
the squirrel leaps from the tree
and dives between my feet,

followed immediately by the dog.
Neither of them is thinking
of my well being,

I who provide the kibble, fill the feeders.
The leash tangles around my
ankles and I’m down,

all of us blindsided by the immediacy
of it all, while the present keeps
presenting itself,

*I assume neither is thinking
about future progeny,*

the risk of paralysis or mental incapacity,
engaged as they are in sensory
overload. Never mind

the recent past when the dog should have
learned that squirrels can leave
a nasty bite.

No one is thinking about the future,
except for me, examining
my knees.

Finally, they crash against the fence,
the squirrel shooting for a space
narrower than he is wide,

the dog hitting so hard he ricochets
onto his back. I lead him
to the porch
for a lecture on caution and self-control,
while he rolls his eyes and feigns
thoughtfulness,

as I apply the sticky antibiotic that
he will soon remove with two
quick licks of his tongue.
Secret

The eggs sit upright in the pan
like a covey of pigeons,
quivering slightly as the water
begins to boil, trembling with
their own self-importance.

I did not ask the grocer
if the eggs were fresh, fertile.
It doesn’t matter; it’s their shape
that I am hungry for—fatter
than a droplet, firmer than a plum.

They tap against one another
jostling their need for space,
against my need to know,
and mimic a conversation
I barely hear. I watch the clock instead.

And now cold water, the easing
of the shell, the cup, the spoon,
and a question that I will not ask,
until you break the yolk, and spill
the silence we coddled in this place.
Of course...

for Levin

We hold the sonogram up to the light where it resembles the map of an unknown country, grainy, mountainous, its geography still unformed, a landscape in progress, and then we see, of course, the bony knob of an ankle, the Mickey Mouse fingers, and then a face so familiar that I know I have seen you in another life.

Little traveler, you have set some clock to ticking, and I will come to meet you from a place not so far away. But for now, I would not hurry this bliss, this sleep that we cannot imagine. Still, I admit, there is a wonder, a feeling of oneness that tells me you are complete, even now before your eyes have opened, before your mouth has found your thumb. And when you are my age, with the texture of a full life behind you, remember me, please. Remember that I knew you in this picture before I knew your name.