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Rituals

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Rituals

by

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Preface

Where does a poem begin? It is created by the mind and is presented in vivid language, yet it is based on what is found in the world. A poem's value is in the experience it recalls, because a poem can capture a particular moment and portray it to the reader or keep it for the writer to relive in the future.

Although the poems in this collection weren't written around a single thematic concept, they have that unique value of being experiences that are recorded as they happened. Several of the poems capture experiences that occur at night, during different seasons, or during cycles of a particular season or event. Some record a single moment or act while others depict a repeated act or a series of acts.

But poetry is more than just recorded images that appeal to the mind and arouse feelings. The words are more than what they say for they combine into a style and form that involves sound and rhythm patterns, figures of speech, and symbols and allegories. Poetry states more than facts; it makes imaginative statements that can be valued even if the facts are distorted. But all of these statements are communicated to the reader through various poetic forms. And just as the recorded experiences are the poet's, so are the poetic forms the poet chooses to represent them.

A poem should speak immediately, with a voice and tone that is contemporary and relevant. It should make some sense and give some pleasure and may not provide all of its meaning in one reading. But it should not be some kind of puzzle with a secret message that needs decoding. All of its symbols, its meaning, should refer back to the concrete images the poet has used to record her experience, for a poem is based on what the poet has discovered in the "real" world.

All of the poems in this collection are "discoveries," sensory material that the poet responds to mentally and emotionally. Several of the poems represent experiences that are repeated to the extent that they become ritualistic. That is why the collection is entitled Rituals, because most of the poems are often single moments or acts that recur in the poet's life.

Rituals occur in the opening poems of "Summer Rites." The speaker performs a daily tanning ritual and participates in a yearly holiday ritual in "On Tanning" and "July Ritual." Most of the ritual poetry involves late night and early morning occurrences in which the speaker responds mentally to the concrete images and emotionally to her own loneliness.

"Late Night Dipping" describes a swimming ritual that the speaker performs while "Late Night Ritual" indicates that the speaker reminisces nightly about a lost love. A ritual is even suggested in "Anonymous Caller" because the speaker uses "habit"

to indicate that the phone call is a regular incident. In "Window Sitting" the speaker has experienced this waiting before and the feelings associated with it. Another type of repeated waiting occurs in "I am Ready" as the speaker prepares for the start of a school day.

In some ways poems like "My Downstairs Neighbor" and "4 a.m. Poem for Sylvia" represent continued episodes, but in the latter poem the repeated process becomes the poem itself. In "Moving Again" the repeated process involves a gradual diminishing of the speaker's identity as she moves from place to place. Also involved is a reverse process where the speaker experiences an increasing burden of loneliness and depression.

Also contained in this collection are groups of poems that represent various happenings during different seasons or during cycles of a season. "Lambing Season" is a group of poems depicting a life and death cycle that occurs during the season when lambs are born. Although the lambing season is a yearly process, the individual poems are recorded as single events. In "Commuting" the speaker travels during different seasons but remains in the same car. Still, the whole series is concerned with the weather as it changes during this "commuting" cycle. The Haiku poems in "Seasoning" are also seasonal poems but hint at another cycle of sexual ripening.

The rest of the poems in Rituals portray situations in

which an act or a series of acts is repeated. Some poems like "Birthday Poem," "The Ambush," "The Ice of Human Hurt," and "On the 24th Floor" depict moments when the act will not be repeated. In "First Poem for Tristan" the baby may repeat the act but will eventually accomplish her goal.

The remaining poems, "Closed Minds," "All I Have Left," "Feeding the Sheep," "Last Words," "First Event," and "Forward 1½ Tucked Somersault," also concern single acts, but all of them have the possibility of recurring. No matter whether a moment or a repeated act is captured in the poems, all acts represent experiences that can be portrayed for the reader or relived by the poet.

The poems in Rituals contain more than just recorded images. Most of the poems are in free verse form, with the exception of the Haiku poetry and the syllabic verse. Free verse style helps the poet discover the form of the poetry while in the act of writing it. Using white space for emphasis, I shortened and lengthened lines to accommodate my words. I also organized most of the selections without stanzas, giving the poems a continuous vertical flow. This "running-on" of thought helps establish rhythm.

When stanzas appear in my work, they are used to separate information in the poems, usually when a sentence has been completed. Although most of my poetry lines are end-stopped,

I do experiment with enjambments in "Anonymous Caller" and "4 a.m. Poem for Sylvia." Enjambments also allow for "running-on" of thought between lines and stanzas, dramatically changing the rhythm.

By using various stresses and pauses, I have established recurrences of rhythm in all of the poetry. Most of the poems in "Summer Rites" and "Commuting" contain three to five stresses per line, along with several repeating consonant sounds like "b," "d," "l," "m," "s," "t," etc. This alliteration in my poetry again helps establish rhythm, slowing the reader down to direct his attention to the imagery.

As far as rhyming is concerned, none of the poems contain end rhymes, but there are selections which incorporate internal rhyming. In "My Downstairs Neighbor" there is rhyming with "thin" and "begins" and "Below" and "low." "I am Ready" contains "gaze" and "haze" in the same line, while "On Tanning" uses "flesh" and "fresh" three lines apart. This internal rhyming groups ideas, placing emphasis on particular words. It also tends to be less distracting and forced than end rhyming.

The person in most of the poems is speaking for herself, so much of the poetry is written in first person. But although the poet speaks directly of her personal experience, the reader does not have to study the writer's biography to understand

the nature and tone of her subjects. The reader can share and relate to all of the poems because they are experiences in life that have been conveyed to the reader in a work of art.

Summer Rites

I. On Tanning

My noon ritual:
coating my flesh
with butter, baby oil,
slowly browning
like fresh hamburger
in a frying pan.
My skin crinkles,
sticks to the towel
when it is time
for me to get off
the cement burner.

II. July Ritual

Savoring the scent
of damp evening grass,
I lie back against
the soft itch
of a wool blanket,
studying the sky
as fireworks burst,
streak brilliantly
like paint splotches
on black canvas.

III. Late Night Dipping

The pool is streaked
with shimmering streetlight
as I step out of sandals
and shed clinging garments.
Leaning over the lustrous surface,
I dive underneath into wet darkness,
pulling and gliding downward
until my fingers brush bottom
and I am floated upward.
Emerging from the water,
I ascend a silver ladder.

My Downstairs Neighbor

The floors are much too thin.
Below, my neighbor turns
his music low, begins
to beat his wife.

Lying still in bed, I hold my
breath, hearing chairs overturn
and dishes rattle on shelves as
she slams against the wall.

When her clipping heels retreat
to other rooms, I sit on the
stairwell, watching the doorknob
jiggle as she tries to escape.

Later, I listen to her soft
whimpers and the rhythmic
squeaking of bedsprings,
despising her and my aloneness.

Late Night Ritual

Wide awake,
I lie still,
straight as a corpse
in a coffin,
feeling your absence
press close to me.

Closing my eyes,
I try to see
your face
in the darkness,
wondering if you
ever existed.

Anonymous Caller

He has a habit of calling at 2 a.m.,
slumped in his black leather chair,
the receiver cradled on his shoulder.

I cover the mouthpiece and listen

to his mumbles, to the muted moments
when he dozes off or takes a drag

on his Marlboro. Fondling the cord,
he hangs up first, dropping the receiver.

I have a habit of listening to the
dial tone, staying awake for another hour.

4 a.m. Poem for Sylvia

This four in the morning poem
Is being created

From four cups of coffee,
One for each hour

I lie awake listening
To the soft minute flips

On the digital clock,
Watching streetlight glitter

Under the window shades.
My queasiness will pass,

And I will put away my notebook
Because I am dead-tired

And the poem is not perfected.

Lambing Season

I. First Breath

The ewe gasped,
pawed a straw bed,
as air steamed from black nostrils,
rose under a heat lamp.
We watched as a dark head
oozed from between her damp legs
and then stuck.
Dad, thrusting an arm into her body,
wrenched the forelegs,
and soon a blood-streaked lamb
popped out into his hands.
It lay still on the straw
as the ewe licked it dry,
so Dad swiped the mucous
from its mouth.
I held my breath, waited
for the lamb to gasp
and bleat weakly.

II. Nursing

The tiny lamb was dying
as it lay on soiled rags
in a cardboard box
on the kitchen heat register.
Mom tipped a half-filled
Pepsi bottle, squirting
warm milk on her forearm.
With two fingers,
she pried the lamb's
mouth open and shoved
in a stiff, black nipple.
The lamb gulped quickly,
the milk streaming
down its dark face
to closed eyes.
Mom pulled the nipple
from its sucking mouth
to give it air.

III. The Renewing

We found the lamb Easter morning
lying in a dark patch
in a dim corner of the barn.
It was dead,
but Dad still nudged its gray body
with his black dress shoe.
Outside, the mother bellowed hoarsely
and frantically paced
near the barn door.
Her blood sack dangled
between her hind legs
as she tried to lick
another ewe's lamb.
Dad gently shoved her away
to hoist the lamb for me to pet.
Stroking its silky black ears,
I brushed my nose against the coarse wool
to smell its strong life.

I am Ready

Stone-faced,
feet straddling the trash can,
I jut like a gargoyle
over the corner of my desk
and gaze into a gray haze
on the chalkboard.

Then lifting each elbow
sluggishly off indented thighs,
I relax loosening fists
to rub the sleep from my eyes.
With my final swig of tasteless,
lukewarm and gloomy coffee,
I am ready to slide
precariously off the edge
and face an arrival-bell horde.

Closed Minds

If looks could kill
my whole class
would drop dead
from my stare.

Their closed minds
are so hard to pry open,
always threatening to snap
down on my fingers.

Birthday Poem

Today

I'm a quarter-century old,
quite a few years less
than my students' guesses.

Today

I will ignore
the spitwads breeding
on the ceiling,
the mysterious dismantling
of the third sharpener
in two weeks,
and the scrap paper
floating down past
the history class window
like fat white snowflakes.

The Ambush

Bombarded by students
in a souped-up getaway,
my car is smeared
with sticky yolk
and exploded shell.
With one steamy hand,
I scrub yellow streams
frozen on the windshield,
cupping the other hand
over my nose and mouth
to keep from vomiting.
My nails tear, bleed
as I try to scrape off
the white fragments.

Commuting

I.

Confined to my crackerbox car,
I steer with one hand
while munching on hash browns
and a warm Egg McMuffin.

A red fox darts
across the glazed road,
fleeing into the yellow field.
I watch as its flaming color
disappears, and I spill
my hot chocolate into my lap.

II.

The snow blanket
brushed off its body,
my car shakes
like a vibrating bed,
discharging heat
that wraps around me
in a warm cocoon.
Lured to sleep,
I am jerked awake
by the car's belly
scraping over
a snow island.

III.

It is a sunless day,
murky as the coffee
in my thermos cup.
The car's bald tires
hiss on the wet highway
as hammering rain
shatters on the windshield
like scattered specks
of broken glass.
Rhythmic arms
sweep back
the glistening
crystals.

On the 24th Floor

I left my mark
at 4 a.m.
on the 24th floor
of the Ruan Building.
Leaning into glass
to see myself,
I pressed my nose
and fingertips
on the cool surface,
fogging the window
with my whiskey breath.
The mist dissolved
into night; below
the city lights
blurred, flashed
off and on with
my blinking eyes.
Backing away,
I left smudges
for you to admire
on Monday morning
when you break
from work to look
out the window.

All I Have Left

It's morning;
you've gone,
and all I have left
to savour
are warm, rumpled sheets
and the faint smell
of musk
on a dimpled pillow.

Feeding the Sheep

Balancing two sloshing water pails,
Dad scuffles up the basement steps
in unbuckled rubber boots.

"Time to sheep the feed,"
he wisecracks to Mom
as she sets the supper table.

As the screen door slams behind him,
he summons his flock from the field
with two shrill whistles.

They stampede to the barn,
dangling their dirty wool,
and stuff through the doorway.

Under a shower of hay,
the sheep shove their black noses
through the planks of the troughs.

Dad leans on his shovel,
whistling as the sheep chomp,
slurp in the water pails.

Mom calls us to the table
and we impatiently eye our food,
waiting for Dad to return.

First Poem for Tristan

In slow motion,
Tristan hoists up her diapers,
tucking two-month-old knees.
Face rubbed into the carpet,
she teeters on her side,
trying to roll over an arm
that is stuck like a doorstep.
After four more wriggles
she wrinkles her face to wail,
but waits until someone
tips her over so she can see
the rest of the world.

Seasoning

I.

Modest saplings shed
vestal drapery, reveal
blushing bare maidens.

II.

Falling virgin snow
settles softly on shoulders,
melted chastity.

III.

Finding ecstasy
in late blooming creations,
hard budding nipples.

IV.

Ripe succulent fruit
awaits reaping, fervent lips
cool on winsome flesh.

Window Sitting

I'm only sitting here through
one more commercial on the TV
I've got my back to.
One more commercial's
worth of window sitting.
One more plug
for decaffeinated coffee.
I will wait for
one more round of traffic
to stop in front of my building
and then I'm going to sleep.
Or I'll read.
Or something.
I could sit here
at the window in limbo,
watching myself suffer,
pining and mooning
or plotting revenge
or planning scenarios.
He'll find me reading
one more page in a book
I've got my nose in.
One more page
before going to sleep.

The Ice of Human Hurt

He calls
a month too late.
She is hardened;
her cold words
hang like icicles,
and her frozen tears
glisten on her cheeks.
His warmth
cannot penetrate
the ice of human hurt.
The line is freezing,
has gone dead.
No one has hung up.

Last Words

We argue
about who's taller
so Dad measures us
back to back.
I say it's unfair,
my lowcut Adidas
competing against
Mom's beauty parlor perm.
She says I'd be taller
and look five pounds skinnier
if I would quit slouching
and suck in my stomach.

First Event

Shoulders hunched,
she bends over the block,
locking knees,
cocking arms back
for the firing.

At the gun's blast
she catapults belly first,
smacking flat on the surface.
Arms flapping high,
she splashes water
like a surprised duck
taking flight.

The water strains
through splayed fingers
as she thumps small geysers
and claws a weaving path
to the other side.

Forward $1\frac{1}{2}$ Somersault

Launched

from the balls

of his feet,

the diver

reaches over

an imaginary bar

and tucks,

knees hugged

to his chest.

Rotating once,

he uncoils,

extends sharply

like a ball-point pen

stabbed into water.

Moving Again

Each time I move,
I pack myself
piece by piece
into boxes that sit
helplessly on the floor
waiting to be herded
into the U-haul.
No matter how tightly
I stuff myself
into these cartons,
parts of me always
manage to slip out
and stay behind,
increasing my burden
of loneliness while
I carry emptiness.