

Seven Poems by Keith Polette

Axis Mundi

Midwinter, the snowfall so thick, it feels like I am walking
through a flock of gulls, and I am reminded, briefly,
of that famous Hitchcock movie — though, without the blind malice.
The ground before me is as white and smooth as a spread tablecloth,
and the hills on either side have fallen out of view,
obscured by flakes as fat as feathers in freefall. The snow collects
on my shoulders like loose insignias, and, as it ticks upon my glasses,
it sounds like an erratic clock. I have stepped into the day
to fill the deer feeder on the edge of the woods which have emerged
in the dim dawn like a black and white photograph. With each step,
I sink ankle-deep into white and wonder if this is how it feels
to walk on water. After treading halfway across the field —
a sea without wave or whitecap — I stop to listen for bird call.
Hearing nothing but the soft and insistent voice of snow,
I close my eyes and stand in stillness, content to be
a snowman for a while.

Assent

After ascending the stepladder, I unscrew the burnt-out porchlight bulb,
the way the approaching night unbraids the day, and place it
in my jacket pocket, where it rests like an egg that will never hatch.
From my other pocket I produce a bulb waiting to glow —
and I think of the story of the Buddha who was born
from his mother's side, as I insert it into the socket and start
to twist into place. After six, seven rotations, however,
I find it odd that the bulb is not secured, so I continue to twist.
After an hour, the bulb still not in place, I grip it with both hands,
sweat dripping down my face, and twist it like a screw
on the quick end of a drill bit. By midnight, the bulb is still
not set; I grit my teeth and continue to twist, faster and faster,
until my hands begin to blur and my fingertips start to smoke,
when suddenly, I am lifted from the stepladder
and begin spinning in the air. My grip is wrenched,
and I wheel out of myself, a far-flung sideways summersault,
whirling so fast that I am whipped wholly into light.

Borders

At the first sound of birds, the cat's ears,
those mobile satellite dishes, start to twitch.
And then a staggered sound like chirping
flutters in her throat, as if she had swallowed
an old coffee grinder that wheezes as it works
in starts and fits. And then she perches
on the window seal, her face pressed to glass,
her eyes wide and bright as stars ready to shoot
into the pool of dark just above the dawn.
And then she paws the window,
as if trying to find a secret opening,
as if her claws were keys that would unlock
the smooth surface of invisibility
that separates her from a world ready to glow.
And then the birds looking up,
seeing her in the window, noticing
that she is frantically waving at them
from inside her frame in the wall.
For a moment, they tilt their heads in her direction
and then return to poking the grass for bugs,
their heads like little sewing machines
stitching together the fading night and the growing day.

Second Sight

My glasses are lying upside down
on the cover of a closed book, their arms
extended like the legs of a magician's assistant
protruding from the end of a brightly colored box
that is about to be sawed in half. In the half-dark,
just beyond the edge of the nightstand,
the faces of the audience tilt upwards
like Halloween masks floating on a canal.
At the rear of the theatre, a door is cracked open,
allowing a ribbon of light to fall across the floor.
Outside, in the perfect dark, a single porch lamp
glows like a pear about to be picked. Moths flutter
erratically in the oblong light like a book opening and closing
on a nightstand near an open window. In the distance,
a train whistle rises from a steaming kettle in a farmhouse
that has been rowing through the night.
As the people inside sing, I put on my glasses,
their lenses bright as funhouse mirrors,
to take a closer look at the shapes of their songs
that are spinning towards me like tumbleweeds
across the face of the moon.

Door

A hinged picture frame blind from birth.

A field of flattened flowers without fragrance.

A becalmed medieval sea where wayward ships
tumble over the edge into the mouths of dragons.

raven's call

a barn door hinge

needing oil

A click of the knob is your single speech,
unless the hinge of you that holds the bird
begins to squeak. You are the navel of the castle,
the untasting tongue of any room, the swinging panel
that no king has ever touched. Alone, you can do
your work like a moon opening and closing the tide,
or you can work in pairs, as the French do,
but you cannot become a trinity, there are no hinges for that —
though I have seen four of you slide back and forth
on a track like an anorexic train, or rotate in place
like the cylinder of a pistol. In your dreams, you swing
past your jambs to surf among the stars and growl
like Whitman's bear. You wish to marry, knowing that
on the night of your first bliss, you will join with your beloved
on a new plane and awaken in the dewy light of dawn
as the jaws of a crocodile.

cicada days

the sudden snap

of castanets

Elsewhere

I hope this one, this piece of writing,
doesn't get away from me, the way it so often does:
slipping the leash, wrenching out of my grip,
flying free from the cage I forgot to fasten.
And after it does, I spend days, sometimes weeks,
searching for it, looking under stones, in the mouths
of toads, and in the tangled tracks of stars.
And, yet, at other times, it gushes forth
like a river bursting a levy,
threatening to capsize the little boat of my pen.

Like the time I had hiked deep
into the Guadalupe Mountains on a gray day,
the hard-packed trail breathing up dust
with my every footfall, the hawk, high on thermals,
circling overhead, outlining an ancient wheel in the sky,
the rocks around me holding their secret waters,
until I rounded a bend and stepped into the sightlines
of a gray fox, who suddenly froze and studied me with a tilted head,
keeping me in its gaze for a moment, or an aeon,
before it disappeared, faster than a branch snapping,
into the thick skin of the day, leaving me standing
there with nothing but a faint hope for words.

Orbits

muddy river—
prying open a mussel
to find a firefly

A voice in the dusk carries itself, as if in flight, to the middle of the desert where it renounces its allegiance to wings. . . . How curious, the mind's movement from the moon perched on a fingertip to the bone-beat of breath. Perhaps the necessary but unexpected thing reveals itself best in the moment when it shimmers like a star before falling.

gust of wind
bruises from a shower
of peaches

The mockingbird, a gray flame, perched atop the leafless cottonwood, breaking open the day. The red-spotted toad emerging from the dreamless sleep of the desert floor. The incantation of the wind moaning through the windows of a ramshackle chapel.

autumn moon
what the bleached cow skull
knows of the desert

Does it matter if we record our own turning into dust? Though we have tried, we can't convert a river into a sentence, even if we can imagine how easy it would be to submerge ourselves there. The truth is that most days we are lucky if we can stumble across something like a hawk's nest, large as a tire, blown from the black oak, lying on the ground like a rough-hewn crown that is too large to wear.

end of the game
the king running out
of squares