

FOUR POEMS



Edward Hirsch

IOWA FLORA

(In Memory of Amy Clampitt)

We thought we were having an indigenous childhood
splashed with Indian paintbrush and grassy knolls
thickened by birdfoot violets and ordinary goldenrod,

but we kept finding noxious alien weeds in the hills—
quackgrass and thistle, European morning glory
that no state legislation could control.

We inherited pioneer grasses high as a prairie
schooner, but there were also fresh settlements
of bog flowers and refugees from the sea-

coast marshes, silky-leaved Virginia plants
and Texas marigolds, imported seeds and ornamentals,
weeds from the wasted villages of other continents.

Nature consists of immigrants and mongrels:
you showed us how to prize coincidence and impurity
in wayward fields, the deserted and marginal...

I went down to the swamp to mourn for you, Amy,
and it was as if Providence led me to the place
where I stumbled upon yellow swamp betony

and pink foxglove mingled with something nameless
(unfathomable the mystery before us, you said)
and the shining, cup-flowered grass of Parnassus

OCEAN OF GRASS

The ground was holy, but the wind was harsh
and unbroken prairie stretched for hundreds of miles
so that all she could see was an ocean of grass.

Some days she got so lonely she went outside
and nestled among the sheep, for company.
The ground was holy, but the wind was harsh

and prairie fires swept across the plains,
lighting up the country like a vast tinderbox
until all she could see was an ocean of flames.

She went three years without viewing a tree.
When her husband finally took her on a timber run
she called the ground holy but the wind harsh

and got down on her knees and wept inconsolably,
and lived in a sod hut for thirty more years
until the world dissolved in an ocean of grass.

Think of her sometimes when you pace the earth,
our mother, where she was laid to rest.
The ground was holy, but the wind was harsh
for those who drowned in an ocean of grass.

ORPHIC RITES

(Hart Crane, 1899-1933)

Plato says the gods sent him weeping away, empty-
Handed from Hades, deceiving him with a shadow
Of his bride, not returning her actual body

Because he was only a poor-spirited musician
Enchanting himself into the underworld
Rather than joining her the proper way, by dying.

Orpheus descended through the gate at Tainaron
And sang so poignantly of his lost wife
He set even the bottomless spaces grieving,

But he was not going to pollute the altars
With blood or donate his lyre to the Shades.
He was not ready to swallow oblivion

Or share the destiny of the dead spirits
Whose bodies were scattered to nether regions
And whose mouths were transformed into fog.

That is when he was exiled among the Thracians
Where he sang of a country sealed behind him
Like the origin of all things, which is death.

Some say he founded a School of Darkness
And wandered through secret caverns devising
Rituals of initiation, canons of purity,

All the while denouncing the hydra-headed monster
Time, sleeping above ground, and mourning
A face he could no longer find in the light

And a voice he could no longer hear calling
Through a fissure in the earth. Therefore,
He turned to men's bodies for consolation,

Prohibited the eating of animals, and praised
Drunken ecstasy that leads back to the divine...
Some say the Maenads destroyed him, taking revenge,

But I believe he flung himself into the water
So that his head could go sailing home, singing
Under a cloudy sky brimming with erasures.

HUSBAND AND WIFE

I

I woke up and found you above me—
your face peering down through shadows,
your hair sweeping slowly across my chest,
your voice crying out a name in the darkness,
my name, just once,
as if it had been pulled out of you
from a great distance, from oblivion itself,
as if a rib had been carved from my side
and given back in your shape,
as if we were two halves of one body—
a cell, an egg floating in water,
a new being gathering force like a storm
(wind tossed, tossing the wind)
until the rain seeding the clouds
and the thunder bloating the sky
could stand it no longer
and we burst forth in a wild flood.

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Then we were falling away from each other,
breaking apart, tearing ourselves loose
from a cupped palm
and putting on our torsos, our limbs
our separate distinguishable selves.
The ecstasy—the oneness—was unbearable
and so we expelled ourselves,
who had tasted the fruit,
who had discovered our nakedness...
I woke up and found you lying next to me,
already awake. How long did we stay there
like strangers, shoulder to shoulder,
scarcely touching, until you got up
and went to the window, and I followed?
Outside, the branches scraped in the garden.
The lightning splitting through the trees
was a sword over Eden's gate.

TWO POEMS



Nicholas Murray

CYCLISTS

They are out in all colours on Offa's Dyke.
Black Lycra legs; spiked gloves;
Crash helmets; jockeys of the bike
That lightly bounces over rut and twig.

They are sealed within themselves,
Intent, armoured in bright rig,
Chasing pleasure with the grimness it deserves.
No time for me, no time at all:

The casual wanderer in normal shoes
Pausing to pluck a wand of bracken
To scout the flies; stopping for views
Of sleeping hills under sheets of mist.

A rabbit plumply settles on the track,
Its tardily suspicious eye not yet on me
Until I tread on fallen twigs that crack
A message of alarm to send it loping off.

Well-being spills with sunlight through a cloud
That opens like a clam to show a purer blue,
Glinting through leaves, the sprinting crowd
Of cyclists, fifty yards ahead, a bright flash.