

New Poetry by Maggie Harrison: "Clutch and Bless"



MY RASPBERRY HEART / *image by Amalie
Flynn*

CLUTCH AND BLESS

my heart is a raspberry
juicy yet taut
fragile

temporal
eat it now
 before it degrades and
leaves a tasteless
piece
of itself
 smeared on the basket.
my raspberry heart lives in the moment
 but not my gut
my gut dreams
 unpredictable
 digesting whatever latest bout
 I've consumed
 pandemic fear
 fear of white supremacists
 indignation
 incarceration
 playacting colonization with real guns on the
range
 a night in jail to protest police violence
 hope for change
 the audacity to hold it
all of this roils
 my gut
 terribly
tangled in the past
 it's what I ate yesterday and am now
 transforming
 to expel in the future
my raspberry, my beating heart
 crush it, suck it through your teeth, and savor

**New Poetry by Suzanne
O'Connell: "Airport Luggage
Carousel" and "Shipwreck"**



IMAGINE GOLD DOUBLOONS / *image by Amalie Flynn*
Airport Luggage Carousel

A battered cardboard box

holes punched in the side
tied with frayed rope
lid popping up
plastered with masking tape, wrinkled.
One lone orphan
going round and round the luggage carousel,
heading nowhere.
Packed in chaos.
Full of soiled clothes
bloody Kleenex
unpaid bills
splinters
and Dear John letters.

This is what the last year has been.

So I imagine the contents differently.
I imagine gold doubloons,
a child's drawing of a rainbow,
a coupon for a free fried chicken dinner.
Maybe a photograph of a family, at Christmas,
standing together on a hillside,
everyone wearing red and green,
the husband holding a puppy,
and Carol,
still alive.

Shipwreck

She sniffed my trenches,
turned away from the skin she made,
her own thick blood
flowing in my waterways.
Me, a vacant dwelling on the shore,
wearing swaddling,
drinking low-fat milk.

Oh, wire mother of the soul,
entertainer of strangers.
She of too many decibels,
too many bright colors,
passing macaroons to visitors
while I carved "I love Chris"
in the dining room table.

Find the fur coat,
find the hairdresser,
find the beach umbrella
find the wine coolers
find the plants in pots
resigned to death.

Little fish swim by her ankles.
Like me, they long for contact.
Mercy, the color of the sea,
never granted.
In that day, at that hour,
on that wretched beach,
she wanted an audience
but found only me.

**New Poetry by Naomi Ruth
Lowinsky: "In And Out Of
Time," "In The Wake Of Our
Lady Of The Double-Edged Axe**

**The Notorious RBG,” “Prepping
For Apocalypse,”
“Sideswiped,” and “The Queen
Of Souls”**



THE ALWAYS HOVERING / *image by Amalie Flynn*
IN AND OUT OF TIME

In the fire-eaten land
in the smoke-drenched air

I dream

Crystal Lake

square raft afloat
at the center

I in my clodhopper shoes
in the patchwork circle skirt
I made myself
in my hippie days

have jumped in the lake
to show
my solidarity

with forest
mountains
ancestors

with glittering Crystal Lake
I swam as a girl
whose raft was sanctuary

from Father's far-flung furies
from head-smacked howling brothers
from tongue-lashed weeping Mother

This simple handmade craft
of wood of nails
floats me out of time

holds me
in the great blue round
of lake of sky

the green surround
of pines
where the always hovering

Old Ones
who knew me then
who dream me now

give me the words
to write myself back
 into time

in my waterlogged
clodhopper shoes
 my patchwork skirt

back to the fire-eaten land
back to the smoke-drenched air

 my handmade craft

 my raft

**IN THE WAKE OF OUR LADY OF THE DOUBLE-EDGED AXE
THE NOTORIOUS RBG**

(Erev Rosh Hashana in the year 5781)

The shofar wails

She's gone

from her body gone

from her seat on the court gone

*from her grip on what's equal what's just
gone*

from her fierce resolve

to keep breathing

until January 20th 2021

Everything hung on her small frail frame

What will we do without her?

Once I forgot I was real
a daughter of earth and sky
forgot what the angel
had told me at birth

Once I had holes in my tongue

from biting it
had blood on my hands
from broken glass
on the top of that wall
There was no escape

Throttled by custom by law
I spat my teeth on the road
My fire was used to burn me up
My body did not belong to me
a vessel for lust for seed

But you our soft-spoken battle-ax
our mother who was a falcon
had the cunning the courage the ken
to seize the keys to the castle
the plantation the prison
to deliver us
from gender's cages
the shackles of race
from those scoundrels in power
who steal from the poor
and ransack the earth

The shofar wails

*She's become one
of the Holy Ones
No longer can everything hang
on her small frail frame*

*Too much for one body to bear
It's your fight now*

Bless us O falcon-headed soul
of the notorious RBG
Our Lady of soaring sight
of focused attack
Our messenger

between the worlds

Sit on our shoulders

Hunt in our dreams

for the courage the cunning the keys

the double-edged axe

we'll need

to end the mad king's reign

and rouse your spirit in us

all over this land

PREPPING FOR APOCALYPSE

for Alicia

requires the pursuit

of toilet paper avocados gluten-free bread

He needs blueberries with his yogurt

You need mushrooms with your eggs

Both of you stuck in lockdown

So surrender

Hang yourself upside down

Be the bat who sees in the dark Smell

the terror cruelty carnage Hear

the echoes of the ancestors

Pandemic is pandemonium

the world turned into a charnel house

The sinister rider on his pale horse

has rolled us all up in The End of Days

like a medieval map ringed with dragons

A Revelation is at hand The sun

gone black The moon

a bloody show Guadalupe wanders

the woods haunted by who

She once was

made it before it hit you in the right rear
I thought it was just a fender bender
They'd fix you up at the body shop
like the surgeon fixed my hip

But the man in the Beamer leapt out shouting
It's all your fault!
I can still hear him shouting
while his kind quiet
wife
asks for my registration

What's that? I think
my mind in fragments

Later I'll gather the flame raisins
dates apricots and almonds pulse them
into small bits in the Cuisinart knowing one needs
to break things up to make that rich sweet

Middle Eastern paste charoset
that's meant to bind us together
when vessels shatter

Later the total loss claims man will pronounce you
totaled You Lola
who had the *saichel* to feed your own battery I'm still
reaching
for your slow-down lever grasping thin air forgetting
I'm driving a clunky Chevy rental
on my way to retrieve the layers of umbrellas shopping
bags
shoes in case of earthquakes maps we no longer use
flashlights whose batteries likely died in all those
years
before you started losing oil
before the black Beamer sideswiped you
before the man began to shout

before the total loss man
pronounced you worth more dead dismembered
for spare parts instead of resurrected one last time
at the body shop the buff young woman
commiserates with me helps me carry
the detritus of our years together
to the clunky Chevy

It's Easter week and Passover
We remember the ones who've passed on
We light candles for my children's father
Dan's children's mother my mother
the bedlam that erupted in her wake
O my separated kin will you ever join us again?

We name the plagues Old Pharaoh flings at us
as we gather our *mishpocheh* on the way to freedom
We name what plagues our own shattered times
Stolen Elections
Separated Children
Hatred of Strangers
Greed
School Shootings Sanctuary Shootings Police
Shootings Street Shootings
Homelessness
Climate Chaos
Species Extinction
Family Feuds

The youngest one adds
People who cannot forgive

Pass the charoset

THE QUEEN OF SOULS

*O Lady, Lady of the changing shapes,
help me remember...*

–Judy Grahn

Some souls are shy They hide out behind the shutters
of your eyes
Some souls are soggy like the earth after rain like a
woman after a good cry
Some souls get born to sass the universe listen to them
snicker

in the back of the class

Some souls can never be satisfied Give them three wishes
they want five
They eat your heart out send your spirit packing You
forget
who brought you here You question your every breath
your spirit guides your mother's milk

Some souls have rocks in their shoes drag you down
to the bottom of the slough where earthworms squirm
and you are sunk spat out for what terrible deed
in what former life?

Some souls insist on dance Some need poems Some will
make you
map out a whole world of characters who'll take over
your inner chambers Won't stop talking until you write
them down

Some souls keep singing even in the eye of the storm even
at the bottom
of the pit where the Queen of Souls She who harrows
your bones knows
even black holes even dead trees grow mushrooms host
baby birds and snakes

Some souls live in sandcastles
until a wave knocks them down

The child forgets what she built

Some souls have feathers and claws

Some souls can shed their skin

Some souls become jaguars in your sleep

Some souls surf atmospheric rivers wrangle tornadoes

ride nightmares glide and glitter

amidst rays of the sun in the redwood grove

Some souls are old and lonely Can't remember

the last body

they were in

They hover in the rafters watch the infinity loop

of lovers impatient for that last passion cry

for the deft dive of sperm into egg hungry to leap

into new life

Some souls remember themselves as tears as pearls

on the throat of the Queen of Souls

When your time comes She'll weigh

your heart your balance of feather and claw

Maybe She'll give you a glimpse

of your soul's flight wings aflame

on the

way to your stars

New Fiction from Susan Taylor

Chehak: “With a Whimper”

This isn't the first time that man has visited this cemetery, and he supposes it isn't going to be the last. As a child he was one of the pack of kids from the neighboring sprawl of houses who came here, against all warnings, to scare themselves silly with games of Ghost or Hide-and-Seek or Sardine. They gathered near the hedges where the black angel spreads her wings, looking down on anyone who dares look up. Her expression might be a face of horror or sorrow or rage, depending on the moon and how dark the night. Later, when he and his friends were older, they crept around in pairs and fell against each other, desperate to become one.



Now he stands alone here, a grimy shadow in his khaki pants and his brown shirt and his black shoes. His wife would have told him to change the shirt, at least. Put on something cheerful, such as the pale-pink one she bought him, but he didn't care for it and only wore it that one time, to please her.

The grave is new. Dirt. Waiting for rain. Waiting for sod to cover it over green. A motor grumbles in the distance. He looks up. It's the big, yellow backhoe trundling down the lane toward him. There was a time when a shovel was all you'd need. He lets fall the roses he's brought and turns away.

*

This is a young woman over here, but you might not know that

just by looking at her. Just by looking at her you'd have to make a guess because of how she has her hair cropped so close to her skull. That's how the kids do now—just shave it off and forget about it. Also she's hidden her body inside baggy jeans and an old sweatshirt—pitch black except where it's faded and fraying at the cuffs—so you can't tell by that either. Her face is youthful, though, exposed and shining in the morning light. Pretty little thing. She's got her mask pulled down under her chin, so you can't see the dancing skeletons on it, a wry design created by her younger sister, who is dark and depressed and, for the last few months, eager for the world to just come to its end already, the way the prophets have been promising her all her life it will. "Soon," this sister whispers, gazing into her own eyes. She's had enough, she says to anybody willing to listen. This girl here isn't like that, though. She's always been known by family and friends as the sunny one—no matter what else might be going on, she's always able to find something to make her feel fine. Right now that's a job to be done and a lollypop burrowed into one cheek while she does it. Banana Dum Dum, her favorite flavor, though she didn't choose it, just left it to chance and got lucky, and so it goes.

She's moving along house by house—through a gate, up a walk, up the steps, and then back down to the street again—going door to door in this neighborhood that looks like it's deserted, but how or why is none of her business to wonder. She'll leave a census form and a Dum Dum in a plastic bag inside the door or in the box or just there on the porch planks of every house she comes to on her assigned route. That's the job, plain and simple.

Who is this girl? She's not a kid and not a teenager either. You might guess her to be in her twenties. Early twenties, anyway. A college student, maybe? Had to drop out because of the plague, when classes shut down or went on-line and she had no computer of her own, or she had to drop out and move back

home to live with her mother and that gloomy younger sister, who have the old house to themselves now since Dad died of alcoholism or jumped out a window or has been institutionalized somewhere. Whatever. It's enough to know he's not around anymore, so the sisters have gone from riches to rags. And the mom? She suffers from anxiety, depression, agoraphobia, OCD, she's a hoarder who hasn't left her house for years and now, with the plague going around, won't ever leave it again, not even the backyard, such as it is. So this girl...this young woman, that is...she's not a girl, she doesn't like being called a girl...this young woman is doing the best she can under the circumstances.

She throws her head back and breathes deep, so now you can see the blot of a bruise on her neck, just there, below her chin, along the course of her jugular vein. A hickey is what it is. She was at a plague party last night is what, and the guy in whose arms she ended up was moaning as his mouth found her throat and branded it with his mark. She won't tell her mother this or her sister either. She thinks she doesn't care if she gets sick and dies, but she also doesn't believe she's going get sick, and she definitely doesn't believe she's going to die. Not anytime soon, anyway. She knows people who have been going around spreading the plague on purpose. Taking their chances with a single round, spin the cylinder, nuzzle the muzzle, pull the trigger, and...click?

The younger sister has a room in the basement of the mother's house, and that's where she makes the masks. If you put your ear to the grate, you can hear the clatter and whir of the old sewing machine at all hours of the night. But this girl took the attic because it's least cluttered with her mother's growing accumulation of all that she thinks she needs and must save. Because the mother can't get up there is the only reason why. The folding stairs are stuck and have been stuck for years, so this girl, ever resourceful as well as cheerful, comes and goes through the small dormer window on the side

where the old oak has grown up taller than the house. She can shinny a rope to the tree's lower reaches, then climb on up the branches to the roof or vice versa on back down to the ground.

You might notice now that she's also wearing gloves on her hands, the floppy rubber kind made for cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors. She found them in the kitchen of the abandoned house where she woke up in the dark only a few hours ago. Where she woke up and rolled away from the guy whose mark she bears. Where she crept downstairs to scrounge in the cupboards with a hope of finding something to eat. Or drink. But there wasn't much there. Cans of soup and something floating in brine in the pantry. Sponges and disinfectants, bleach and scouring powder and the gloves under the sink. The others were all fast asleep by that time, but this girl has long been in the habit of rising with the sun. Or maybe it was just she's the only one who has a job.

*

That man is at home now. He's right over there, in the house on the corner. The yellow one with the white fence and all the flowers. He's sitting at his desk, where he's been writing a letter to the editor of the local paper. He has something to say about the situation. His situation. The world situation.

"There is a virus," he writes, "and it's going to kill us all." But everybody knows that. This isn't news. Whether you want to believe it or not, which his son does not. The boy called last night. Not a boy, another man, but he will always be a boy to his father. The boy had been drinking. Or something. He wasn't in his right mind, whatever that means. He seems to have some ideas that he picked up somewhere. Crazy talk about a hoax, is that it? The Pandemic. The Plague. The Plan-demic. Here to control us. Here to keep us locked down and desperate. But he can't stick it out. He doesn't have enough food to last the months it's going to take before we're

free again. "Do you, Dad? Do you?"

"Dear Editor," that man writes. "Can you tell me what's happening? Do you know what's real and what isn't? My son says this and my son says that, but it all sounds like something somebody made up to entertain us or to scare us or to cause us to...what? Do you know? Because I'm afraid I can't say I know anything for sure anymore."

But that's a lie. He does know one thing for sure. He has firsthand knowledge, that's what he has. And his wife is dead, that's what he knows. She was in a home, her brain already scrambled. He never wanted that for her, but it just got so bad that he had no choice. The children insisted. The boy and his sister. He couldn't care for her properly. That's something else he knows.

He didn't get to see her in the end but it doesn't matter, she wouldn't have recognized him anyway, and all she'd have to show him would be that quizzical look she'd get at the sight of his face, stabbing him with its emptiness. Her gnarled fingers at her lips, all twisted like twigs from some ancient tree, and her whisper nothing more than a whistle, "Who?"

He hadn't bothered to answer the last time. Just raised a hand and waggled his own fingers, which made her smile, before he turned around again and walked away.

So you see, she was already gone before she got sick, before she died, so he's not really in mourning for her now. More like he's in mourning for himself. She was cremated and then buried over there in the cemetery, in one of the plots they bought for each other a long time ago, when they were young, knowing but not really believing that that would be where they ended up. In the long run. Or the short, depending. He assumed he'd be the one to go first. All of us did. But what do we know? Nothing.

So now he walks over there every morning, before it gets too

hot and when no one else is up and about, while it's still safe.

Yours truly? No.

Sincerely yours? No.

Always? No.

Ever? Almost.

As ever, then. Followed by the trembling scribble of his name.

He folds the letter once, twice, three times. His hands are clumsy. His fingertips are numb. He licks the envelope, seals it, then opens it again. Unfolds the paper, crumples it in his fist, smooths it on the desktop, folds it once more. His head throbs and his pulse stutters in his ears. He doesn't want to lick the envelope, so he staples it shut, then hammers on the staples with his fist to flatten them, which causes the small frame at the edge of the desk to tip over and fall to the floor, leaving the glass shattered and her face in pieces behind it.

*

Over there, at the end of the block, this girl has paused. She might as well be the only person left alive on earth, one last girl standing there, sucking on a banana-flavored Dumdum with a satchel of official questionnaires slung over her shoulder, in these precious last moments we have left before the end.

Soon she'll turn the corner onto another street, and then she'll be out of sight, and after that there won't be anything left to disturb the frightful stillness that's settling in all around us now, acting for all the world like it might never go away.

While the flowers in the gardens nod their heavy heads, docile and dreamy, with nowhere to go and nothing to do but bloom and

die and bloom again. Like that.