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The Flood and 3 Other Poems

Christine Boese
Independent

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The Flood and 3 Other Poems

Cover Page Footnote

All four poems by in the single document may be considered together or separately.

The Flood and 3 Other Poems

The Flood

I meant tomorrow but wrote yesterday.

Tomorrow I must tear out the garden.
Have I done it already, somewhere, to write
yesterday? Or is it just my brain
misfiring, the dyslexia I've lived with all
my life supplying its usual left-to-right
reversals? Or is it something more?

The grief took me over, not real grief, just
reluctance to tear out and destroy those
tomato vines, now leafless, the overripe fruit
hanging like Christmas balls in tall, round cages.

Oh, and my onions! I must not touch,
must not eat my beautiful onion tops—
scallions really—the bulbs never bulbed
in the crowded bunches.

Tomorrow that is already yesterday
I must tear out my garden, the bolting basil,
one lonely cucumber, a late volunteer,
fattening suddenly high on the frame
after the flood.

The toxic, black water flood, twenty-five inches
of sewage-stained water, the river ran over
its banks in flash flood minutes, spouting
manhole geysers. Groundhog dens and
basements destroyed, spawning generations
of mold and dark unspeakables. Yesterday,
today, tomorrow and tomorrow.

So now I can't eat my garden. Although I did
sneak out in the night and steal a bag of my

highest and prettiest unsplashed tomatoes.
I'm sure they were unsplashed. Two quarts canned.
Don't tell! Washed with bleach, rinsed, vinegar-washed,
rinsed, took off the skins and boiled, boiled, boiled.

I gave away the onions. Another gardener
will hide them in his soil for three months.
They are not lost. They will wait for him.

All that's left in our flood plain of raised beds,
our fertile crescent riverbend the village
gives over to gardeners and floods, a tale
as old as the world, to destroy our hopes
of sweet fruit, fall harvest, tomato bounty,
to rot and fold fallow in on itself, erase
our yesterdays, lose the tomorrows to
the black water effluvium, as goodness
and darkness drain into the earth. Too much
will kill you, yet here we dig into it,
into the graveyards of worlds.

The Greats

Homey, unobtrusive farm families
encircled by the 1900s. Fixtures.
So many siblings. Tractors.
Plows. Cows getting loose.
Barn boots. Mud. Milking.

No one will remember

Electricity came.
Outhouses disappeared.
Mostly.

Eight brothers and sisters.
Eight brothers and sisters.
Six brothers and sisters.
Five brothers.

No one will remember them

Twenty-seven Greats
were children once.
Twenty-six married in.
A few married again.
The begats began.

Four went to war.
All returned.

Their parents passed young –
in the Depression. War Years,
Post-War Years.

No one can fail to remember

The strongest of eight drowned in a lake,
fishing at 38, saving his wife and two others
from the capsized boat. Twenty-six Greats.
Fifty-two by marriage. A deck of cards.

The oldest of six hopped trains,
working out west on the Grand
Coolie Dam. Hard times. Loved
books and engineers. His brother
invented a color TV in his shop.

No one can fail to remember them

Wisconsin Germans drinking beer,
playing Buck Euchre, swearing.
Taking the trick with a black Jack.

Pulling seine nets of night-running smelt
through cold wind off Lake Superior.

Busybody aunts were not always old,
but always up in your business,
listening on party lines, gossiping

at church, potlucks, or the tavern.

They loved you hard – piercing eyes
cutting through coke bottle glasses.
Loud, fast-talking, interrupting each other
louder. Making pies. Trading off kids,
sending them out to play in the barn.
“Don’t fall down the chute!”

They lived longer than the men,
than their parents.
than us.

No one will remember what it was like without them

The Greats were born old.
Grandparents’ bodies laid out
in the living room. A mother sent
with tuberculosis on a barge.
Never came back.

An uncle’s body kept frozen
in the lean-to all winter until
the ground had thawed for burial.

They all survived the Spanish Flu.
None got polio.

No one can remember what it took to get through

Farming uncles got the shuffle,
knees kept giving out. Some
got stooped from milking.
got quiet. Got cancer. Died.

Electrician uncles burned brighter,
lived longer, suffered
other ailments.

As they declined, diminished,
older cousins filled the gaps.

Funerals were big parties.

No one ever thought they could be gone

We circled *them*, telling old stories,
filling in bits from memory
for the missing.

Who crashed the wedding party
with a broken leg. Who always showed up
unannounced for dinner. Who passed out
in the basement. Who invited herself
on the trip. Who stole her sister's boyfriend.
Who thought she saw Baby-Face Nelson.
Who played in the polka band. Who ran liquor
from the tunnels under Gateway Inn.
Who hit the hot wire while standing
in a puddle, and lived.

Then there were ten.
Three or four youngest from each family.
Carriers from a time that was.

The last six.
Two brothers.
Two sisters.
Two sisters.

Mascots. Younger Greats
adopted by those who lost their own.
Their burden in old age, each birthday
bigger than the one before.

Two made it to 99.
World War II vets.

Then the last two, baby sisters
from different families.

Then the very last.
Everyone's favorite aunt.

In the bleachers at all the games.
Organizing flowers for the altar.
Tending all the graves.

Just as a WAC at 21,
she drove an ambulance
out of Fort Dix, New Jersey,
unloading war-wounded
from the Queen Mary.

Or driving bus at our school.
Keeping watch.

No one ever believed it would end

Royal Corbin

My grandfather's middle name:
Corbin. His own river
started near Worthington.
Minnesota. His mother Mary
disappeared down a barge
to St. Paul with tuberculosis.

Royal Corbin and his son
fought at Saratoga. The Mohawk
joined the Hudson. He was one
of fourteen men who looked over
and thought to draw a town
on that eastern bank.

I knew nothing. Two hundred
and thirty years later I came
to Illium, to engineer a world.
I picked that spot on the river,
a random eddy on the map.

The road curved at my house,
the river bend across the street,

the only curve in town.

The Melville house historian
said it was the only house
standing when the fourteen Dutch
patroons got the deed to grid
the town. The circuit riding
preacher's place. My place,
built over its 1770s foundation.

The preacher ran a school, she said.
I wrote my dissertation there.
After I left, it crumbled, condemned.

Years later I meet Judge Corbin.
A name on the family tree.
Upstanding and DAR-worthy,
he happened to die in that town,
the town where I once lived.

If I hadn't found the documents
I never would have known he sent
his kids to school, the only school,
in that old house in which I chose
to turn my mind inside out.

Another founding patroon,
created up upon the hill
the school of engineers
that gave me my credential.

A school I picked out of a hat,
that coyly put me on a wait-list,
then did invite me to partake
of its financial aid. I took it
and spun out from there,
out of that unknown eddy
into my future-past.

I need poetry to be more than it is

I need it to roll in startling rounds
of lightning and thunder, whisper to me
the voice of its darkest wish. Draw to
my hearth bright, glowing faces,
eyes lit with a fire left by someone
who showed a way to live.

Most of all, a poem should ride home
on the shoulders of soldiers, to open
space for hard memories.

And one by one, as we lose all loves,
it should wrap in comfort that hoary end,
watch through a window of swirling snow
when each in turn appears, to call
from a warmer place. Then a poem
should lead you on.