

Three Poems

Sharon Olds

I feel blessed that as I walked in I heard that beautiful song, “I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired,” sung by Diana Solomon-Glover. And then I got to hear some of my favorite James Weldon Johnson, a poet I was memorizing when I was in high school. An hour ago, I ran through the New York Marathon; I didn’t run the marathon, but the only way to cross Fifth Avenue from La Guardia Airport was to run through the marathon, so I’m very happy to be here!

First of all, I want to give my thanks to Bob Glick and Bob Pollack for so warmly roping me into today’s love rodeo. It’s always a pleasure to work and play with their minds and spirits and humors, and it’s thrilling for a poet when a need for poetry is felt. So this cowgirl of poetry is very happy to have been called in.

Of science and religion I have little to say today. I imagine there are those born and raised as atheists, those who convert to atheism, and those for whom, like me, atheism—I guess I would call mine atheistic paganism—came like a sort of salvation compared to the emphasis on Satan and hell that I was raised with. At the same time, anything that makes anyone’s life more pleasurable, not to say bearable, without at the same time making someone else’s less so, seems to me a gorgeous thing. Of love I have a little more to say. I’m definitely for it; in fact I believe that the cash reward for introducing me to an eligible gentleman just went up last week. This afternoon, however, I thought I’d look at love and obstacles in terms of family and of self.

I will read three poems. The first is “The Coney” by Paul Muldoon. Paul Muldoon was born in Northern Ireland and has lived in the United States for a long time. I’m sure you all know that *coney* is a very common word, in Ireland, for a little rabbit.

The Coney

Although I have never learned to mow
I suddenly found myself half-way through
last year's pea-sticks
and cauliflower stalks
in our half-acre of garden.
My father had always left the whetstone
safely wrapped
in his old, tweed cap
and balanced on one particular plank
beside the septic tank.

This past winter he had been too ill
to work. The scythe would dull
so much more quickly in my hands
than his, and was so often honed,
that while the blade
grew less and less a blade
the whetstone had entirely disappeared
and a lop-eared
coney was now curled inside the cap.
He whistled to me through the gap

in his front teeth;
'I was wondering, chief,
if you happen to know the name
of the cauliflowers in your cold-frame
that you still hope to dibble
in this unenviable
bit of ground?'
'They would be *All the Year Round*.'
'I guessed as much'; with that he swaggered
along the diving board

and jumped. The moment he hit the water
he lost his tattered
bathing-togs
to the swimming-pool's pack of dogs.
'Come in'; this flayed

Three Poems

coney would parade
and pirouette like honey on a spoon:
'Come on in, Paddy Muldoon.'
And although I have never learned to swim
I would willingly have followed him.¹

Paul Muldoon. I didn't think I was going to get through it, it moves me so much—that pure love of this son for this father. A gorgeous, gorgeous poem.

And I will read two of my own poems. The first, "Self Portrait, Rear View," begins with one of the biggest obstacles, I think, to healthy narcissism. I wrote it after some poetry travel, which is a broadening, educational experience, especially if they put you up at one of those hotels where the bathrooms are made entirely of mirrors. [What followed was Ms. Olds's poem "Self-Portrait, Rear View," not available for publication. It will appear in her forthcoming book, *O Western Wind*.]

This next poem, the last one that I will read, seems to me to have equal parts love and obstacle. It might not seem to, to you; and what it seems to you is what matters, really—I think poets' work is not really for themselves. Probably that's true of all of us in everything we do—that it is not for ourselves, but for anyone who might have any use for it. This is a poem that usually I read in the evening, and I'll read it in the afternoon.

The Last Evening

Then we raised the top portion of the bed,
and her head was like a trillium, growing
up, out of the ground, in the woods,
eyes closed, mouth open,
and we put the Battle arias on, and when I
heard the first note, that was it, for me,
I excused myself from the death-room guests,
and went to my mother, and cleared a place
on the mattress, beside her arm, lifting
the tubes, oxygen, dextrose, morphine,
dipping in under them, and letting them
rest on my hair, as if burying myself

Sharon Olds

under a topsoil of roots, I pulled
the sheet up, over my head,
and touched my forehead and nose and mouth
to her arm, and then, against the warm
solace of her skin, I sobbed full out,
unguarded, as I have not done near her;
and I could feel some barrier between us
dissolving,
I could feel myself dissolving it,
moving ever closer to her through it, till I was
all there, I went to my mom
for comfort. And in her coma nothing
drew her away from giving me the basal
kindness of her presence, I took a long turn
as a child on earth. When the doctor came in,
he looked at her and said, "I'd say
hours, not days." When he left, I ate
a pear with her, talking us through it,
and walnuts—and a crow, a whole bouquet
of crows came apart, outside the window.
I looked for the moon and said, I'll be right
back, and ran down the hospital hall,
and there, outside an eastern window,
was the waxing gibbous, like a swimmer's head
turned to the side half out of the water, mouth
pulled to the side and back, to take breath,
I could see my young mother, slim
and strong in her navy one-piece, and see,
in memory's dark-blue corridor,
the beauty of her crawl, the hard, graceful
overhand motion, as someone who says,
This way, to the others behind. And I went back,
and sat with her, alone, an hour,
in the quiet, and I felt, almost, not
afraid of losing her, I was so
content to have her beside me, unspeaking,
unseeing, alive.²

Thank you.

Three Poems

Notes

1. "The Coney" by Paul Muldoon appeared in his *Meeting the British* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987) and is reprinted by permission of Paul Muldoon.
2. "The Last Evening" by Sharon Olds appeared in the March 4, 2002 issue of *The New Yorker* and is reprinted by permission of Sharon Olds.