

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Cathy Salmons
Milonguita

As always the room spins
with dancers, each man with his woman, each one
with his lovely love--and why not? For the moon
is beautiful, round as an apple and full
of grace, and its light on the floor, here,
spills through the window like a splash
of good champagne--and though I
came here alone with my wounded heart
so empty, empty and dry, I will place my
loneliness into the waiting arms
of a stranger--any man who asks--and allow my body
to be for him the shadow of a memory:
what he writes with; some small phrase he'll sing;
I will yield myself without answer
to the questions his thin torso shapes;
to the paleness of his fingers and the longings in his bones.

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After the Milonga

I'm the calm at the eye of a storm,
3:30 a.m., descending foot-worn stairs
press my palm to the greasy-glass exit door
and into the rain alone
to walk myself home, brave in the late streets
clutching my cloak like a hooded Geisha...

Meanwhile, at the top of the stairs
remains the shadowy form of a man
who could have eaten me up with tenderness
and the longing in his eyes
but couldn't leave one shred of his rigid world
behind--not even the empty floor
where the last 3 couples dance
in pools of half-light, garish, brothel-gray
to the strains of the night's last tango, sad
and cheap, now, all the magic gone
when the young night held such hope
in its school of sighs and broken dreams...

He cannot abandon his lonely world
not even to follow a Woman--
No, I think he will wait forever, there,
in limbo, at the top of the stairs,
consumed with his own talent
while his love walks away before his eyes
and behind him, the music fades.

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Clouds and Rain

If I am a cloud
and you are driving rain--
 Why not?
Come pour your flesh through me
all teeth and sweat and heat
every inch
of you lean and long and perfect
smelling of cedar
covered in fine, brown hair
like I've never seen on any man,
soft fire at the tips of my fingers
curling in waves around my tongue--
 O, I am helpless, here! Just look
what I've become, a hungry she-wolf
tearing into you like warm bread,
never asking what does it mean?

I understand you as a sharp-eyed Faun,
Eternal Boy, the tempter:
 As for your "philosophies,"
I wouldn't want to know more.
It's sad, I guess--have I used you up?
We both got what we came here for:
one little dose of a perfect fit;
our portion; clouds and rain...

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Tango For A Daughter

Somewhere in my solitude,
in the silence of my bones,
I carry a daughter
who will never know her name.

She is lovely, and tall; her shadow sprawls
through my body like branches of cedar.
I feel her questioning, her baby steps
in the mysteries of language.
When I speak, I am longing to teach her:
meanings of "hummingbird" and "full moon night";
how "beauty" makes two different shapes
in the mouths of men and women.

Every gesture, in my work, is an effort
to heal her, and to heal myself.
from the failure of my body to produce her:
Whenever my feet sink roots in my studio floor
and I gather a roomful of women
to split ourselves open on waves of dance,
our power is hers;
when I break long ribbons of grief and desire
into lines, unleashing the spell of a poem,
its energy is hers.

When I dance with a man, sometimes, I think
I embrace him in order to teach my daughter
the tools for beginning to love.

Late at night, I sing sad songs for her,
to remind myself she has always been,
and will be, blood of my blood.

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Letter at the End of Love...

"...of that intoxicating poem, nothing is left between us: As I say my sad goodbye, you will feel the emotion of my pain."

(lyric from the tango "Poema," Bianco/Melfi/Canaro)

What I'm sending you in this letter
is the force of a dying breath.

I'm sending you a love poem
after Love has fallen away,
leaving only a pile of bitter bones
and a scent of decay.

I enclose the last rose from my garden
which I've pressed like the edge of a memory,
saving the beauty I saw in your heart, all along
which I hope you'll embody, someday...

I send you my sadness of 18 years
not as poison, but let's say, medicine--
scalpel that cuts to the truth of its own sharp steel
with a language of such precision
there can be no room for disease to hide
and no blood to nourish lies.

This box I include is a coffin--
my small grave of shattered passions:
fragments of nights I waited in bed
for the sound of your key in the lock at 4:00 am,
smell of beer on your breath, and perfume
like a shroud made of someone else's flesh...

Here are shards of your anger,
jagged stones, little cunt, little bitch, little idiot,
snippets of scenes when these became more than words
and the place in my mind that held me,
dodging blows like a wounded, hunted thing
as my soul lost its shape
and my body forgot how to love.

All that's left of my desire for you
I place here in this envelope,
a dusting of broken colors
thin as a drift of butterfly wings.

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From the long list of my gifts
that you rejected, I return to you
this echo, fragile melody--
 my re-mix of the Siren Song
that used to burn the hearts of men
and kindle in my easy limbs
the wildfire of a dance:
I send it back, and I reclaim it;
listen one more time and know
that I no longer walk through the world
as a creature of fear.

Finally, I send you one last kiss:
May it open your heart like the waters of March
tearing loose old scars in the bedrock,
snapping roots and crushing what stands in their way--
healing the earth as they break it.

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Air de Nostalgie

And what would I do with you now,
old friend, whose love I craved so long ago?

Could we find our way back to that Paris spring
when new light bloomed along the quais;
could we drink our old, cheap wine again,
as dark and slick as the ribbons of oil
that float on the ash-grey Seine?

Could we bring the same, 2 open hearts
unwounded, after all these years--
just fall into our language
full of jokes and innuendos?

What happened then was nothing
and the everything between us
unfulfilled as a promise in winter,
broken branch jutting out through snow's young skin:
a girl of 23, a poet, and you
my dark-eyed Argentine, much older
singer in nightclubs, keeper of hours
exciting and late...

So now, here's my lullaby back,
my song to give you after all this time
wrapped up in my nostalgia
which I've pressed for you like a single rose;
which I've tied in a corner of handkerchief
like a pièce from our fountain at Trocadéro;
which I've lain in a locket
like one black swirl of your hair...

Here's your face on my computer screen, unchanged
and you write back to me I am beautiful
in the photo I have posted on my Facebook page.
So maybe there's hope! A beginning
we'll compose here in a new dimension
in spite of old scars, deep distance
and the long, long march of years.

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Cathy Salmons, M.A., is a poet, dancer, teacher and performing artist, currently based in Rutland, VT, where she directs Studio Bliss: Center for Expressive Movement. Her poems have appeared in Harvard Review, Partisan Review, Prairie Schooner, Fulcrum and many other publications. She holds an M.A. in Creative Writing from Boston University, and teaches poetry in the graduate department of Creative Arts in Learning at Lesley University. Cathy founded and directed the award-winning poetry-music ensemble Vox Pop, receiving a 2007 performance grant from New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA).

As a dancer, Cathy is a certified teacher of the Nia dance technique, with over 10 years' teaching experience in the field. She has training in modern, jazz, ballet and tango. A passionate dancer and performer of Argentine tango, Cathy created the newly popular tango-based dance workout, TangoFlow!™, which she now teaches regularly in Burlington, VT and at Air de Tango studio in Montreal.