

- Mary Oliver

✱ IN BLACKWATER WOODS

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Alice Walker

A FEW SIRENS

Today I am at home
writing poems.
My life goes well:
only a few sirens herald disaster
in the ghetto
down the street.
In the world, people die
of hunger.
On my block we lose
jobs, housing and breasts.
But in the world
children are lost;
whole countries of children
starved to death
before the age
of five
each year;
their mothers squatted
in the filth
around the empty cooking pot
wondering:

But I cannot pretend
to know
what they wonder.
A walled horror
instead of thought
would be my mind.

And our children
gladly starve themselves.

Thinking of the food I eat
every day
I want to vomit, like
people who throw up
at will,
understanding that whether
they digest or not
they must consume.

Can you imagine?

Rather than let the hungry
inside the restaurants
Let them eat vomit, they say.
They are applauded
for this. For this
they are light.

But
wasn't there a time
when food was sacred?

When a dead child
starved naked
among the oranges
in the marketplace
spoiled
the appetite?

Refugee mother and her child

by Chinua Achebe

No Madonna and Child could touch
that picture of a mother's tenderness
for a son she soon would have to forget.

The air was heavy with odours
of diarrhoea of unwashed children
with washed-out ribs and dried-up
bottoms struggling in laboured
steps behind blown empty bellies. Most
mothers there had long ceased
to care but not this one; she held
a ghost smile between her teeth
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's
pride as she combed the rust-coloured
hair left on his skull and then -
singing in her eyes - began carefully
to part it...In another life this
must have been a little daily
act of no consequence before his
breakfast and school; now she
did it like putting flowers
on a tiny grave.

Hyperbole for a large number

by Stephen Brockwell*

Not the hair that you or I have touched
but the follicles all lovers hands have combed
their fingers through, that number so much
greater, say, than all the teeth from speechless

mouths that now the fish and birds
perceive as stream and garden pebbles.
Not the breaths our mother exhaled
since mud filled her father's lungs

at Amiens but all the breaths of children
put to rest since Iphigenia's sacrifice.
Not the drops of blood that have
fallen on all the battlefields of spring

but the particles of mist the sun has scattered
from them -- enough to weigh your khakis
down after a patrol, enough to resurrect
your face from its evening mask of ash.

Not the number of the stars that burn
and burn out like eyes of but the number
of the particles that give the stars their fire
surely exceeds the number of our crimes.

*Contemporary • Canadian

History Lesson

Natasha Trethewey

I am four in this photograph, standing
on a wide strip of Mississippi beach,
my hands on the flowered hips

of a bright bikini. My toes dig in,
curl around wet sand. The sun cuts
the rippling Gulf in flashes with each

tidal rush. Minnows dart at my feet
glinting like switchblades. I am alone
except for my grandmother, other side

of the camera, telling me how to pose.
It is 1970, two years after they opened
the rest of this beach to us,

forty years since the photograph
where she stood on a narrow plot
of sand marked colored, smiling,

her hands on the flowered hips
of a cotton meal-sack dress.

Natasha Trethewey, "History Lesson" from *Domestic Work*.
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Minnesota.

Blond

Natasha Trethewey

Certainly it was possible — somewhere
in my parents' genes the recessive traits
that might have given me a different look:
not attached earlobes or my father's green eyes,
but another hair color — gentleman-preferred,
have-more-fun blond. And with my skin color,
like a good tan — an even mix of my parents' —
I could have passed for white.

When on Christmas day I woke to find
a blond wig, a pink sequined tutu,
and a blond ballerina doll, nearly tall as me,
I didn't know to ask, nor that it mattered,
if there'd been a brown version. This was years before
my grandmother nestled the dark baby
into our creche, years before I'd understand it
as primer for a Mississippi childhood.

Instead, I pranced around our living room
in a whirl of possibility, my parents looking on
at their suddenly strange child. In the photograph
my mother took, my father — almost
out of the frame — looks on as Joseph must have
at the miraculous birth: I'm in the foreground —
my blond wig a shining halo, a newborn likeness
to the child that chance, the long odds,
might have brought.

White Lies

Natasha Trethewey

The lies I could tell,
when I was growing up'
light-bright' near white,
high-yellow, red-boned,
in a black place,
were just white lies.

I could easily tell the white folks
that we lived up town,
not in the pink and green
shanty-fied shotgun section
along the tracks. I could act
like my homemade dresses
came straight out the window
of Mason Blanche. I could even
keep quiet, quiet as kept,
like the time a white girl said
(squeezing my hand), now
we have three of us in the class.
But I paid for it everytime
mama found out.

She put her hands on me
then washed out my mouth
with ivory soap. This
is to purify, she said
and cleanse your lying tongue.
Believing her I swallowed suds
thinking they'd work
from the inside out.