

A Short Selection of Poems by Susan Jelus

Downpour

A hard rain soaks black pavement.
A cool mist blows onto my forearms.
I have the cover of a porch.
I have a summer night.

Asphalt mirrors headlights,
twin insect eyes
bulging out of the dark,
intruding like a bang.

And yet
the soft light of street lamps smudges
either side of a deep black pool –
the street is a mountain lake now.
Its surface rolls
like lake water moving,
moving again to the lap of the shore.
I lean out to see into the cottage lit across the way.
Have they hung Chinese lanterns out?
Are they dealing cards on the screened porch?
Is a man dreaming at the end of the rickety dock?
Is his wife doing dishes or needlework or reading?
Are the children running outside in the dark,
hurling sticks straight up to lure bats from the trees?
Are they all just sweeping the sand of the day, listening
to June bugs beat and buzz against the screens?

All light is doubled
in a night rain.
Tires hiss on wet pavement.
Downspouts tick-tick-tick-tick.

Memories hatch and grow legs
and keep swimming.
Tree limbs bow to light applause.
The sky has opened.

Black Black Water

1.

You shot yourself in the head
with two guns
on a Sunday morning
in the basement of your small town
gray frame Ohio home, white trim
with your wife and two boys upstairs
ready for church
two white shirts, clip-on ties

2.

Two bullets splashed
into your brain at once.
The announcement came trembling
through the silence before the church service
that morning. Murmurs spread through the pews
like blood in water. Pain instantly
smeared the faces of those who have longed
for the same relief.

3.

What about the front porch
you talked about replacing?
What about your bank – the First National Bank
of your father and his father?
Big shoes to fill. What about the next stranger
who comes to town, opens a new account,
and won't see your gentleness
weaving through the desks behind the high counter,
into the open safe.
Big heart for a small town.

4.

I don't know
but think you were looking at death
for a long time,
standing and gazing as if at the water's edge.
I think you were tired of imagining
what was below,
and you just dove in that day.
I hope it was cool.
I hope you swam like a seal
through the black black water.

First there is a River, then the Wind

First
there is a river, the song of life;
then
the wind rushes across the surface
to soften and carry the note.

We always get it exactly backwards,
being self-centered users
of wind
to power
soprano and bagpipe,
mill and vane.

My grandmother smiled and waved
(oh that blue-eyed Irish twinkle!)
propped up in bed, across
the empty Recovery room
as I exited backwards through the doors.
That was the last I saw of her.
The next day she was tucked in, like perfectly folded hands.
The next day she begged to be lifted,
her eyes like globes, pennies in a wishing well.
I was not tall enough to lift her,
my arms insufficient.
Her last two words, "Up" and "No,"
were the same as her first, I bet.

All night long I tried to sing her back to the river.
But she was already far off, downstream,
wandering the forest. I could hear
her song drifting out
-- a reed instrument with leaking bellows --
as she sawed and sawed the thick limb of life.

Finally
there was no water;
just
white crust of life, slow sunrise,
beautiful white clouds hanging so low
to soften and carry the note.

The Fall

1. *Season of Grief*

You spend mornings high on a hill,
watching a river loop through the valley.
A steeple juts up like a needle dropped into carpet.
You see farm animals. But there is no mooing, no clucking.
Maybe you have lost your hearing. No...
You can hear wind hissing in the treetops.
Sound dissolves with distance.

Your days are thickets, tangled
branches and thorns, the darkness and abrasion
of bark in your mouth, in your hair.
At first you whistle, but you eventually forget
the tunes, your lips won't pucker,
humming becomes moaning,
and you turn, turn.

In the evenings, old conversations
wade through your mind
like fisherman in water.

At night you watch the bright eye of the moon
as it moves through clouds that veil
the face of the sky with whitewash (or is it just mucous
crossing your eye?)

Supported by a tree, you slump
and dream the dream that always ends
in waking to tears sheeting down the wall of your face
like a roof leak.

And there is no understanding
in such a wide earth and sky.

The Fall (continued)

2. *Small Steps*

The back of the house
is missing on one side,
most likely torn off by the storm.

Wide steps lead up from the night to the second story bedroom
where I stand in roaring wind
and white light that beats in with the rain.

Sweet Jesus, put me on a soft donkey (smelling of hay)
and lead me from darkness with my child --
guide us (left and then right) from Egypt.

In the half-light just before dawn,
a man asks a question, laughs, loves
a woman without touching again and again.

Unlock the guest room door from the inside
with a brass key.
Wander out into the hallway.

There is softness under your feet.
Something is cooking
downstairs.

The Fall (continued)

3. *The End of Isolation*

The end
of isolation comes
like flood water
rushing
through a village,
carrying off stuff valuable yesterday
but now worthless --
cars drifting sideways, off-axle,
chairs caught in a swirl,
limbs yanked from the earth,
a flowered couch turning slowly in wide circles,
cushions soaked heavy with desire.

You should have known
it was coming --
water backed up
into a broad flat lake behind the dam
and you stood among the trees, looking down
thinking it is so still and distant it will never flow brown and foamy.
But while you slept
it spilled, one body poured into the other below
and once started, it pressed forward,
creating a silence of its own
as moving water splashed and roared downstream.

In the morning
the buses puffed and snorted.
An eye, oval, rose from a face
with only the slightest bulge,
an almond flowing gracefully inside its dotted shell,
and across a heavy mahogany table
two spoons dipped silver into white milk
and to lips
pink.

The Fall (continued)

4. *Comfort*

A newspaper opens
on white carpet.
A knee is creased, a calf folded back, pressed into a thigh.
The page turns slowly
with a rustle.
Steam rises
from mugs.

Outside, finches drift
from a tall spruce
to small blue panes of glass
repeated in French doors,
partitioned eyes that open to reveal a shaded porch.
A car beeps in the distance.
A child calls a name across the street.
A stranger walks away slowly, uphill.

A breeze enters the room
like a maestro,
weaving quickly around and through.
A white baton taps, rises.
Feet twitch.
Lips whisper
one
and two...

Music
plays
strings
inside us.
We pour ourselves,
thick and cool
(like tinted paint from a can)
into each other's arms.

Beginning Again

I wanted to begin again,
and said out loud “Do you think we could start over?”
as my husband and I drove up the hill that curled around
the last wooded hillside, then emptied into Ohio farmland.
Harsh words, long silences, regrets.
People take chunks of us, like cartoon dogs, growling,
biting from behind, carrying off scraps of fabric
and flesh. We limp away from our creations,
eyes clear. “Now what?” Dementia
erases the board, takes people
back to the beginning.

My neighbour Doris wore sneakers
In her last years – no one knew her toenails
had grown until her feet were clawed like animal paws.
Experience sagged the way an old woman’s breasts
disappear into wrinkled belly. Doris saw people from 1910 –
the imposing undertaker next door, women with elaborate hairdos.
As we walked the block, she nodded and said “Hello,”
properly, to the decorative stone geese. When she climbed into my truck,
her raincoat gapped and revealed nakedness. Most nights,
she sat on her gingerbread porch. Her house was full –
a Black man was asleep on her couch,
her living room was packed with women in fancy dresses
watching all the beauty and pain
unravelling.

Homeless

A drifter
has come like a feather, to rest on my
couch pillow (maroon flecked with gold).
She sleeps and dreams of a blue room,
white eyelet, a clapboard house,
door knocker, sleep forever and ever;
& the wind blows the sheer curtains in
like mint. Kindness falls
like mist, sweat on an upper lip.

There is
an old store down the hill where the
windows fog in Winter. You can browse
there for hours. There is a kitchen somewhere
up north, potato peelings in a brushed silver sink,
bowl after tiny bowl of fruited jello, &
she carries an address book, a brochure of women hiking
at a spa, one question, a memory of parents
squabbling so vivid it is happening right now.

O Jesus,
take me from this place –
where the heart is one lonely organ
squeezing fluid one chamber to the next
& when you put the pieces
of a broken heart together
you can see the gaps in the seams: A heart
doesn't break cleanly & glue globs
when there is no spare hand to wipe the excess.
Jesus,
you know we are broken alone.

But this girl
is tired, & must catch a bus & wait
-- the electric lines whip with the sound
of little cymbal clashes as the harness pulls,
& the buses blow by. But the sun is out today,
the sky is blue
with feathered clouds up high.
The concrete steps are slightly warm.
The coffee house is closed this time of day
& it's all in my mind.
Just that.

The Gift of Flour

Today men are delivering flour to all the widows of Yellow Springs: one ton in 10-pound bags of powder -- a slave's bequeath carried forward 100 years.

Most widows hate the gift the first year:

the sacks too full, too still, creased and sagging in daylight.

Later, they add brown sugar, raisins, crack an egg: plop roll, cut, lick batter from one finger, embellish. Time passes: through the channel there is a black face at the door -- into the kitchen canyon:

bathrobe, limbs, warm oven, the blending and working of dust.

After Irish Fiddle Tunes

Cook in the Kitchen

My daughter, married now, but visiting
for the day, cooks a Sunday brunch in my kitchen.

It will be a strada.

I get out of her way, sit on a stool, and admire
her resolve and efficiency. The life

I gave her wasn't perfect: there was
the slice of divorce, money squeeze,
grating nerves, layers of emotion bubbling up.

But it was poured into a shell
of sweet, irrational love:

For her, a soft pink web of spun cotton candy.

For me, real whipped cream on sugar pie.

Cup of Tea

My friend from Brazil, a carpenter,
recovering from a double mastectomy
turns happily from her stove, pours green tea
from a brushed metal pot with a smooth wooden handle
into china cups on flowered saucers.

"For our health, Susan." We tip the cups,

drink it down

and believe

we will last a while longer.

After Irish Fiddle Tunes (continued)

Larry the Beer Drinker

Around midnight, Larry, sitting at a table on a neighbor's deck,
stands up and says, "Look. Look at all the stars in the top of that tree."
From where I sit, Larry seems as tall as the little house,
Although not as steady. John, working on his 4th bourbon,
squints up at Larry, unbelieving. I say "The stars haven't fallen.
It's only the street light reflecting on the leaves of that old pear tree.
Look how gold the light is. Have you ever seen gold stars in the sky?"
"Naw. Just in the middle of my forehead." He sits down, slightly deflated.
And the three of us listen for a minute to the first hint of summer:
the retreating whine of truck tires on the highway that passes
across the street, just a stone's throw away.

Dance of the Honey Bees

The peonies have thrown out hard, tight little green balls,
pink around the edges, to lure the crawling black ants.
And now the bees are tap-tap-tapping on them, anticipating
future flavor, dancing on the bobbing buds:
long-legged circus performers,
rehearsing.

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Susan's poems have been published in two anthologies, *Red, White and Blues* (University of Iowa Press) and *O Taste and See: Food Poems* (Bottom Dog Press), and have appeared in little magazines including *Common Ground*, *New Thought Journal*, and *Vincent Brothers Review*. She received an award in the 1996 Chester H. Jones Foundation National Poetry Competition.