

Safe

K. M. S. 1948_1986

The tendons sewn together and the small bones
healed, that your hand
might close in on a pencil again

or hold a cup. The delicate muscles made
whole again,
to lift your eyelid and govern your smile,

and the nerves new_laid in their tracks.
The broken
point of the kitchen knife_and here

let the surgeon be gentle_removed and the skull
knit closed
and the blood lifted out of the carpet and washed

from the stairs. And the nineteen_year_old_burgler returned
to the cradle or
his mother's arms_he must have been harmless

once, even he, who is not sorry, had
nothing
to lose, and will never be harmless again.

*

Emma is learning to wield her own spoon_
silver for abundance,
though it seldom finds her mouth as yet.

She hates to be fed, would rather starve,
but loves
to steer the precarious course herself.

Silver for pride, then, or luck of the sort
some children
are born with, omitting

the manifold slippage
that separates
privilege and weal. Luck in this popular figure

is three parts silver anyway,
that the child
not succumb to crack in the schoolyard,

rats in the hall, the clever fence with a
shopping list,
bad plumbing, bad food, and hatred_on_a_staircase

with a knife in hand and dim designs
on jewelry
or a VCR. The spoon was superfluity_

the best part of your paycheck for a child
you haven't lived
to see. Friend, her cheek is fresh as hope

of paradise. And every passing minute in the hours
of light
and the hours of darkness, in the fever

of pneumonia or the ignorant sweet wash
of health,
the miraculous breath

moves into her lungs and, stitch
by mortal
stitch, moves out.

*

When the paramedics came at last, my friend
apologized:
she must have hit her head, she thought,

she'd just take a minute to mop up the mess
by the phone.

Her broken hands, for which
the flaw in memory had provided no such
alibi,
her broken hands had kept him two or

three times from her face.

And later
when the anesthesiologist had

launched her on his good green gas
and launcher her,
as they do sometimes, a shade too fast,

she slipped the bonds of recall altogether.

Safe
as houses. You know what a house is for the likes

of us: downpayment on the nursing home,
our four-square
pledge to be debtors of conscience, if debtors

in conscience may not look too closely
where credit's
refused. Our piece of the here for here—

after, which shows us diminished regard
and just
such a face as fear has made:

one night a woman came home to her house

and locked its useless
locks, and buttoned her nightdress and read

for a while, and slept till she was wakened.

Linda Gregerson

Statement: A Note on Form

The tercet used in “Safe” is one I used for most of the poems in *The Woman Who Died in Her Sleep* and *Waterborne*. It’s a form I’m moving away from now, but when I first discovered it, after much trial and error, I felt it had saved my life. I’d written earlier in a variable stanza form, but the lines were almost invariably flush left and of a relatively constant length. I came upon a couple of my own poems in an anthology one day, poems I liked as well as I liked anything I had ever written, but coming upon them as a “stranger,” I realized with dismay that there was no way a reader could infer their real rhythm from the contours of the poem on the page: the stanzas were over-compressed and airless. I needed to let in some light and air, to slow down the visual pacing, to register the syncopation (the tension between lineation and syntactical unit) that’s as close to anything I have to poetic voice. The tercet I eventually devised appealed to me because of its symmetry: three lines, the second deeply and the third more shallowly indented, the metric feet roughly disposed as 5 + (1 or 2) + 4. It turned out to be (I thought) a godsend not only for transmission of the poem but for its composition: the unfolding template gave me a kind of musical and cognitive momentum, a pattern of anticipation and resistance, and license, somehow, for the production of a variable and investigative syntax, lengthily and elaborately structured sentences alternating with very simple sentences. I tend to be all but enslaved to the iamb and have to work very consciously to vary it with triple meter; the tercet has helped me a lot with its insistent thre-ness.

For me, the tension between lineation and syntax has parallels in diction, narrative fragmentation, and other aspects of sentence formation itself. I like to move from high to low and back again, from highly idiomatic or colloquial language to conspicuously “composed” phrasing, from standard English to class- or place- or occupationally-inflected phrasing. And I love interruptives of every sort: appositives, internal branching modifiers, sidebars, cited phrases, bits of language that disrupt the vocal surface with voicings from another realm. Narrative is more truly advanced by digression than by anything else, especially in the lyric poem. I try hard to avoid mere mannerism: the great advantage of interruptives, properly used, is their ability to reflect the contours and processes of thought. Finally, and this is a formal proposition too, I’m convinced it is: a poem is not a poem unless the poet has managed to surprise herself in the course of its making. So the multiple contracts with expectation (meter, stanza form, lineation, syntax) are all a strategy for directed rumination, a means for the poet to stay productively off-balance.