

Honoring Linnea Johnson 1946-2013

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Red Stuga Studio
Topeka, Kansas

Music by Ingevalds Spelman and
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Then

By Muriel Rukeyser, 1913-1980
(Found filed with Linnea's will.)

When I am dead, even then,
I will still love you, I will wait in these poems.
When I am dead, even then
I am still listening to you.
I will still be making poems for you
out of silence,
Silence will be falling into that silence,
it is building music.

(Music)

The following poems were written by Linnea Johnson

Knees Mending

There are all those early memories; one cannot get another set."

---Willa Cather

Cinder alley my knees remember, my mother with tweezers pinching
black rock from craterous, scarred skin. Ears remember

hot mineral oil eyedropped in, mixed with clove oil, the throbbing
almost a music, my grateful, swimming head swathed in hot towels

on my mother's bony lap, the sluggish blood in her body
metronome, a tapping stick, gloved hands clapping.

Calves and thighs are etched with the burn of running home,
in sprints, after school. Nostrils, vase to my brain, hold deep

the smoked autumn afternoons of leaf fires. Home quick
a desire in me like tendon then, now, but the small fires at the curbs

drew me, held me like nectar holds, draws bees, some wasps.
Rash from my spider-run up three flights of carpeted stairs

is in my hands, wool raising welts even now as I remember.
My hair, iron now, if not copper, grows back remembering

braids long as spine, thick as sound legs, perpendicular as blue worts
in the prairie beside the train tracks. The hollows of me ring

with night whistles, the clackety brush of air disturbed
and clattering at my cheek. The clutch of milkweed held out

to my mother keeps in smaller remembered hands within my hands now.
My mother, herself prophesy, becomes history. Fear of memory

and of not remembering are opposite sides of the same leaf,
a leaf like the birch leaf I find just now

pressed into, become nearly one with, the onionskin bible page.
She left her bible to me to recall, she hoped, lessons

with which she'd anointed me, bathed me in, fed me
but this merge of birch and onion, leaf and page, leaf and leaf

reminds me not of god, of being good,
but of the skin of my mother's face

this anniversary of her death, the first one of the fourteen
which has passed through me like an occupant familiar with the cargo
passes through a dark warehouse --my mother's face
dry as the air in a winter's apartment
and gone into the aftermath of having already said goodnight,

stories read, milkweed collected, hair from braids combed through,
afternoon drained of solidity into the thick liquid of night, ears
sweetened, knees mending, my bedroom door pulled and closing between us.

Singing With the Radio

When I was little, my mother and I
would sing with the radio. The older
I got the more difficult it was for me
to hold to my part, harmony or melody.

She would say this was not a matter of my
ability --I knew the scales, could play and sing
them; she had taught them to me herself-- but of my
will; if

I really wanted to sing the song correctly, play
the piece, I could. I would. I was to sing duet,
play together. Not solo. Not alone. I should tune
to my part, to my partner. I don't know how

to make a life in harmony with anyone
any more than I know how to fit together bones
to make a xylophone. That first recital
the bones of my fists fit tight into my mother's hands,
"Lady of Spain" stuck in my fingers. Christmases,
the Swedish songs welled shut my throat. She said

To come to music you must open your mouth, unclench
your fists. I am singing with you, she said. Think
we are singing together with the radio. You can do it.

What I wanted, alone on any recital stage
was to sing my mother's voice in my throat, play notes
through her hands, together our voices, our hands, one:
to be sure, to be singing. What I want now

is to come to harmony again, to fit my bony
fist-life into your sound hand. My throat is full of song.
You open my hand. You open my mouth. It is your touch,
your voice, which moves me to music, to wanting to sing,
to singing together again. Let me find the partnered note,

sing with me until I hold to my part, then hold me to it,
knowing both my ability and my will.

(Music—The Great Divide)

East Side of Chicago: Graduation, June, 1964

George Washington High School
3535 East 114th Street Chicago, Illinois 60617

The day I graduated from high school, after the ceremonies there in the un-airconditioned auditorium, my father, fifty-four years old earlier that June, walked me outside congratulating me while getting a breath of air, if not fresh air, given the working steel mills ringing the lower basin of Lake Michigan

then. "What did they teach you? What do you think you know now?" He pointed to a riot of awkward weeds kitty-corner from my school

where for four years I had studied Latin, Social Studies, Geography, English, Algebra, and the history of everybody

everybody but my father and the fathers and grandfathers of virtually every kid at GWHS, most fathers union steelworkers like my father, many of them from the Old Country, though not the same Old Country as my dad, my dad, tall and strong and perfect, I thought, that day to this.

"Do you know what happened over there?" he said. And of course I didn't. What could have

possibly happened over there, across 114th Street, there in the weeds, on land that didn't even have the little Monopoly houses, chain link fence backyards, alleys, or even streets like the rest of the neighborhood. "No,

Dad," I said, there in my blue graduation robe, never surer of myself than on that day: "what?"

The East Side was a snug hive of a neighborhood then in which happily I would wear little white gloves to Bethesda Lutheran on Sundays, sometimes hop the CTA with my Mama

or, in high school, go downtown myself to all those grand places we all held as our very own --to the Art Institute, the Fish House, The Lyric Opera, the Natural History Museum, the Grant Park Bandshell summer outdoor concerts, Orchestra Hall, the ballet, the circus, Soldier Field for Fourth of July fireworks, the Lincoln Park Zoo and Conservatory, and, o, the Planetarium,

Chicago 's working class modestly honeyed and saving up given the mulish union jobs everyone claimed and tended, little me never crossing a picket line and proud of it to this day, vacations then sometimes extended because of strikes, my father refusing refusing management jobs he was ever offered because he knew what he knew and knew which side he was on, why, and that one sunny May day in 1937,

just after three in the afternoon about fifteen hundred women and men including my twenty-six year old father, walked a dirt road across a marshy prairie in the hot sun at 114th Street, chanting "C.I.O., C.I.O.!"

“Two hundred cops,” he said, “lurking out for us, brand new Republic Steel billy clubs slap-slappin’ their leather gloved palms itching for it to be our backs and skulls. Republic Steel goons supplied them with their tear gas, too. All of ‘em had guns.

The cops,” he said, “got between us and where we were going, those of us in the back moving up to see what was going on. We were there to set up our picket line, legal

as legal can be, everyone shouting elbows and fists at one another, about ninety degrees as only ninety degrees can be in Chicago on Memorial Day. Hot as pistols. Next thing I knew

the cops were shooting us. A couple hundred shots. One on either side of me, dead. This Swede dead. That Pollock dead.

Dead, and the cops weren’t done with us yet. They clubbed everyone they could reach still standing. Four of us dead, dead right then and there. Six more were gonna be real soon.

Thirty more shot, fish in a barrel. Two hundred shots, but the cops only got forty of us.” And here he smiles in a way, and then goes on as if watching a newsreel he sees, but I can’t, over there, kitty-corner from my school across 114th street, in the weeds still there. “They teach you any of this in your school? You know what happened over there?

People hit were picked up like wet kindling, taken roundabout and slow as they could go to hospitals, bodies bleeding from the clubbing, eyes burning from the gas.

A coupla cops maybe tripped over the people they killed, stubbed a toe here or there, but mostly, the golldarn cops weren’t hurt a bit. What

did we have? Weeds, a few small pebbles, sticks and dirt. All of us shot in the back or in the side, as I remember. I’ll never forget.”

He looks at me. I see him seeing me and I must look scared; he says, “Don’t worry, that’s all over now. All in the past. I guess it was your Mother who taught you policemen are your friends.” He laughs. I don’t.

“So, now you’re really graduated, I guess, rank and file this summer, off to college this fall. Then you’ll know what they’ll teach you there, kitty-corner and across the street from who knows what.”

Seeing Relieves Believing, or My Father's House VI. Catechesis

“Så går en dag än från vår tid.”

(So a day passes away from us)

From **Swedish Christmas**, read by Linnea and Louise Howard

Before Odin and St. Paul,
before armies,
before laws,
before war, writing, kings, emperors, warlords, Sweden, and Christmas,
thousands of befores ago...

what was belief then, Father, what was believed? What
was known? What were the stories painted to ceilings then?

Daughter! Fog, gooseberries, stones, juniper. And oak.
How fish is caught. Which greens to gather to eat, to heal.
Who before you could make this into that. Moonlight
through bird wing. What is before your eyes, at the threshold
of your ear, pungent to your nose, story handy to memory
as dirt is to hand. Rain falls. Who is

before you, who before them, before them, before them, stories
painted like stars in the telling on rock, on the earth's ceiling.

Save belief for what you don't witness, can't recognize. You
don't have to believe in what you see. Seeing relieves believing.

Is that science, Father, that knowing?

Daughter, science and conscience is cognizance that when you hear wind
howl but cannot see it, that still there is wind. You comprehend
weather from weather. You understand wind from wind. See
the constellations, daughter. Consider the lilies, the stars.
But, Father, if I wish to know what a birch ponders, what stories
a wolf tells its cub, which plant to swallow to ease my pain, invoke
ancestors dancing my brain, heal bone, toll away a stone, how
can I know that?

You can, daughter, ask the birch of you, the wolf in your wit,
you must remember stories you have been told as a cub,
the greens you have seen eaten. Wolves, birch, greens, dirt, wit, and bone
are all the same, know-how available to the inquisitive more certain
than gods revealed to oracles, mystics, and prophets, knowledge to scholars.

Where, after all, are principles or divinity revealed
but in greens and bone, dirt and water? The red ox
with its white forehead and meaty smell is as likely to charm
and move and educate you as is parson, scholar, or governor.

Daughter, before Odin and St. Paul and Christmas, thousands of befores ago,
before Church created belief, worship, god-authority, riches, and sin, before
State created law-authority, armies, kings, emperors, criminals, warlords,
and wealth,

before, when we and the herring, insects, gooseberries, wolves,
and leaves lived among one another as tribe and food and dirt
belief was stories was knowing was all.

Belief was stories was knowing was all.

(Music)



Hearth Mirth

December, 2000

'Tis the season of solstice
And all through this cottage
The cats chase around
Their rodenty pottage.

While I in plaid flannel,
And Cheryl in Alpaca-socks
Building cheery, warm fires
Outside, inside rocks,
Bake cookies and cakes,
Craft ruminants from birches,
And darken the insides of tiny Swede churches.

Outside, spruces spruce up
And mooses stay mythical
As it greys up and snows
--the weather, quite typical.

Everywhere, deer try to turn orange as their killers,
Be invisible as Santa, President Nader,
Or arctic gorillas.

Squirrels make their nests
With lint from the dryer
While the fowl, their feathers fluffed,
(and none of them fryers)
Emit cholesterol spheres
For you and for me
All farm-y and homey
And way far from 'free'!

We miss all of you,
Your toes and your twinkles,
And hope that you keep us
Fast in your think-les.

So, happy reindeer to you,
To your shingles and roofs
(minus the hunters and terror,
And damage from hoofs.)

From Mill Creek and springhouse,
From each rhododendron,
From peach tree and waterfall,
From all Cheryl's sprung tendons,

We wish a merry solstice,
Chanukah, Christmas, and Jul,
To all chipmunks and ground hogs,
To each garden tool, to three-legged deer,
And phantom black bear,
To friends old and new, far away and near.

From compost and fence post
And Cheryl's big fat garden
We hope that you love us
And will Linnea's rhymes pardon.

We love you like gods
And wish you were here.
You're always most welcome
This, and every New Year.

Just At Dusk

Great Blue Heron woman
Out from shore, her
Perfect foot fit to
Seaweed boulder
Cobalt and granite
Water lapping, chill
Mauve dusk
Darkening her shoulder,
Her intellect, baleen
In oceans of inedible ideas.

Drying her hair,
Amber fingers
Fast through it
To catch last, low sun

She turns her head toward me,
Seems to see me, smiles, and waves.

Then, like the light, she becomes the dark
And stays the night with me,
A hood of stars, rush pull of breathing tide,
An occasional rustle in the alder and birch
Someone forlorn calling to someone missing,
Pointed firs staring dark out onto
What I wish were endless waters.

Samhain Eve

Deer move the night as if The Dead
might be marching home, dun and silver,
earth sweetened with life.

My head, shoulders, and chest
cantilevered out a second floor window,
I am listening hard so that I might see through
this night, see this night through, see who,

if anyone, might find me here, sleep a bother
of teeth snagging at my ankle to take me down
into blood and dream and rot and root. Owl

leaves her new wing baby here near me
and screaming as she wings upstream,
fleet as thought through drench of moonlight,
wing-rent air, the deer-scented woods.

Owl mother is teaching her baby, wild
and angry at having to learn, to snatch catch with
its own talons, peppery baby louder and louder
as mother flies farther and farther over spice
bush and aster, brittle undisturbed leaves,

over gurgling springs inside that stone building
with its haunted tin roof. How do The Dead,

no hooves or wings, find us, find me nights like these,
eyes black ripe and eager, oval ears silvered as if a
world split open, a breast, silvery milk, gauzy
as ectoplasm and webs, spilled tonight all over
everything, everywhere, and everyone?
Nearly November, it is late in the season
for young birds, for hanging out of windows
late at night. Someone is eating grass
and the apples I set out for them. I can

no longer see deer, and the owls fly away.
The moon takes cover in a sky which looks like
a child's hand has slipped out of a mother's hand,
a black coat lost and whipped into a dark crowd.

(Music)

Christmas Eve Midnight

“The animals speak and the dead come home to roost.”

From **Swedish Christmas**, read by Linnea Johnson

Who is out there babbling, blabbing, burbling, wailing in the dark?
Youngest and most sound of this farm’s thin-limbed daughters, I am
not afraid. The other animals chatter to me every day

in my red polka dot dress, my warm red sweater. Often
it is me and my braids out there bellowing in the dark. If it is

someone else, a stranger or a Troll calling, speaking, saying
surely I will understand them. I know what it is to bark in the dark,
growl and howl a music, gods, a spiderweb to the face.

At midnight Christmas Eve, the Living Dead swarm the unheated,
candlelit churches, my Father tells me. Who are they

that we must be afraid of them,

my Father’s Mother’s shadow comes back to whisper me stories?
I visit her grave. I can’t wait to see her.

But wait, I am told, don’t go to church too early. Wait
until first light glints open night like a lever a Giant’s eye. The dark,
one more treacherous ocean, is nothing to be out in, this of all nights

when all Nightmares, Werewolves and Man-Bears, Witches, Vattar,
Nack, Jette, Skogsra, Gardsra, Sjora, Tomtar, and Goblins are present,
exposed and quick-tempered. I am quick-tempered, too, when exposed
naked as hunger, ancient as the oldest of them. Show them all to me!
I think I may have already met them and I tell this to you, unhurt.

I may be one or more of them already,
an obscure ancestor nobody speaks about, unnamed
as everything before any of the guides or gods, perhaps
having once mated with Nack or Nightmare, Tomten or Troll.

There are so many stories. Maybe this is one of them.

The Living Dead return to their mortal homes on Christmas Eve night.
Cattle, horses, lambs, and pigs, kin to me as Ghosts, speak Christmas Eve
midnight, as I to them constantly. Of whom shall I be afraid?

Protect yourself, they say. Have a bath, they say. Clean house
in preparation for the return of the Dead. Strew straw on the floor
of the house in which you will sleep. Read it in the morning, straw
next to straw, straw crossing straw, straw on straw. Your bed tonight
is for the ancestors, the Living Dead who will visit during the night.

On Christmas Eve, put out food for the Dead. Good food. Lots of it.
Heat the bath house to steaming. before anyone called this night ‘christmas’
these were yet the darkest nights of the year. Then, too, animals spoke
and the Dead came home to roost. Moreso then

when more saw
and fewer believed.

Maybe this unnamed talk is Ghosts gibbering advice.
Or pagans laughing. Or choler. Maybe it is Trolls,
moody and whispery for summer light and for one another. Maybe
it is the dark wind spiraling itself into configurations of ancestors.

This Christmas Eve night I slip out to the barn
after we have eaten starch pudding, beer, cakes, and sausages.
I hear what is said and, like whispering to girlfriends in bed in the dark
when we are all supposed to be asleep, I chatter with cow and horse and pig.
Animals say what any captive says --a certain mumble of resentment
along with murmured prayers for more food, for stories of other lives
elsewhere, a certain urge for flight, a certain resigned contentment.

Tonight, in the piney, birchy woods at midnight,
or in the barn, all of us chattering and lowing,
or in the ancient house with the ancient people,
living and Living Dead, I am everywhere at once.

This Christmas Eve night I am Troll's eye dark as Nightmare.
I make a howl like those in the throats of Werewolves and Man-Bears.
I am Easter Witches skiing the wind, Vättor wet with mud, a Näck,
Jätte, Skogsrå, Gardsrå, Sjorå, Tomten, and a great clever Goblin
tricking myself out of a ride on a farmer's fat horse. When, finally,

I am put to bed, I look up and I see myself painted in to the stories
on my ceiling above my bed. "Father, Father," I call out in the dark, "read me
about when I am Freya, about our chariot pulled by cats!"

(Music)

A Blessing for Us All

Adapted from Linnea's Table Blessing for Ken and Martha

May the wonder of friendship be with us as we come together today.
May we create hope and encouragement for ourselves and others.

May we remember departed family and friends; may their names
and lives live with us in love, always.

May stories bubble among us and may we listen with sparkling
ears and respond in deed through our radiant hearts and sunny spirits.

May friends gathered today and other family and friends remembered
ever be acknowledged and honored for their rare and special gifts and
may we hold each other in effervescent love and
absolute respect.

May peace, hope, joy, and love be to all who dwell here and to all
who visit.

May we cultivate laughter, tickles, and giggles, healing, happiness,
and learning among us.

May we learn each other by heart.

(Music—All Souls' Night)