

Emily Dickinson

I think I was enchanted
When first a sombre Girl -
I read that Foreign Lady -
The Dark - felt beautiful -

And whether it was noon at night -
Or only Heaven - at Noon -
For very Lunacy of Light
I had not power to tell -

The Bees -- became as Butterflies -
The Butterflies - as Swans -
Approached - and spurned the narrow Grass -
And just the meanest Tunes

That Nature murmured to herself
To keep herself in Cheer -
I took for Giants - practising
Titanic Opera -

The Days - to Mighty Metres stept -
The Homeliest - adorned
As if unto a Jubilee
'Twere suddenly confirmed -

I could not have defined the change -
Conversion of the Mind
Like Sanctifying in the Soul -
Is witnessed - not explained -

'Twas a Divine Insanity -
The Danger to be Sane
Should I again experience -
'Tis Antidote to turn -

To Tomes of solid Witchcraft -
Magicians be asleep -
But Magic - hath an Element
Like Deity - to keep -

Tess Gallagher

Reading Aloud

When the light was shutting down on you
I said, "Behind my home is a palace of mountains."
I wanted you to see them, regal
in their shawls of snow above the working houses
of the town. I told them to you
the way a mother tells death to a child, so it seems
possible to go there and stay, leaving everyone
behind, saying softly, "Everyone's coming,"
so it's only a little while alone.

You were slipping from our days
like an opposite ripeness, still clinging
to the light. Each time you guessed your way home
by the edges, I saw my own image
freed in the streets of your memory, my face
like a time traveler's, forever young,
and every place you touched gave way.

I called it my year of the blind.
I was working for your friend who lived
a blindness he was born to.
"What did he lose? Noises, that's all
he knows," you said, would have no comfort
or instruction.

Long days I read aloud to your friend
the words that are the fountain sounds of the mind
causing light to fall inside itself over
the missing shapes of the world. "What do you think
when I say 'wings?'" I asked once. "Angels,
birds," he said, and I saw he could fly
with either. Once, about diamonds,
"Their light – a hiss in the rain
when the cars pass."

But you were memory-taunted by what was left
of your sight – the face of a beautiful
gradeschool teacher marooned in your childhood.
You cried against her neck and were grown.

The day we set out for the mountains

I strapped your sleeping bag to your back.
The woman who would call you "husband"
bound up her long hair and said your name
each time you fell and got up, *David, David*.
When we came to the chasm where a moss-slick log
Was the only bridge, we looked down for you
at the river stones, the water over
and over them.

She loved you too much and could not lead you.
I took your hand and put all my sight there,
balancing between trust and the swiftness
we could call to, walking backwards
so my grip was steady. When the river-sound
rocked us to either side, I fell deeper
for how you gave up to me
and to the river where we walked
like two improbable Christs held up by the doubt
that is the body.
When I let your hand drop on the far side
and we sank in the earth, the habit
of thanks was in me. Who could go with us
after that, though they joined us?

When I think of you in the years that have
passed us, I see a river under you
and always you are walking
into the shouting light of water and again
the wet smell of cloth
as when someone has been lifted free
with their breath still in them.

I know your walking is the other side of courage
and has no regard, like the cold faces
of the mountains seen from a childhood window
when the house is empty, when
with our many hands we have rushed through the rooms,
adding darkness, adding the words *mother, father*,
and no one answers back.

Jane Kenyon

Reading Aloud to My Father

I chose the book haphazard
from the shelf, but with Nabokov's first
sentence I knew it wasn't the thing
to read to a dying man:

*The cradle rocks above an abyss, it began,
and common sense tells us that our existence
is but a brief crack of light
between two eternities of darkness.*

The words disturbed both of us immediately,
and I stopped. With music it was the same—
Chopin's Piano Concerto—he asked me
to turn it off. He ceased eating, and drank
little, while the tumors briskly appropriated
what was left of him.

But to return to the cradle rocking. I think
Nabokov had it wrong. This is the abyss.
That's why babies howl at birth,
and why the dying so often reach
for something only they can apprehend.

At the end they don't want their hands
to be under the covers, and if you should put
your hand on theirs in a tentative gesture
of solidarity, they'll pull the hand free;
and you must honor that desire,
and let them pull it free.

Adrienne Rich

Diving into the Wreck

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers

the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
abroad the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it's a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone

to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or week

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
and I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he
whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
Obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log

the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to the scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.