

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Bonnie S. Kaplan: Three Poems

Bonnie S. Kaplan · Wednesday, April 8th, 2015

Bonnie S. Kaplan is a third-generation Angeleno who grew up in the San Fernando Valley. Her poems are published in *The Squaw Valley Review Poetry Anthology 2011*, *Adrienne Rich: A Tribute Anthology* (Split Oak Press, 2012), *This Assignment is So Gay: LGBTIQ Poets on the Art of Teaching* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2013), **82 Review 2.2* (2014), and *Out of Sequence: The Sonnets Remixed* (Upstart Journal, Clemson University, 2014).

Our Aquarium

My students, now out of prison,
attend school seven floors above Skid Row.
They ask if I've fed the fish.
Our class mascot, a scarlet Betta,
dances for us like a Geisha, sinks gently
to the bottom of the aquarium
spreading his silky robes.

Dime-store tropicals sold in eight-ounce cups—
it's a myth that Bettas thrive in small containers.
The toxicity builds quickly. They drown
in their own ammonia. I give our fish
a four-gallon heated tank,
ornamental ferns, a dark green algae ball
from a lake in Japan.

A leaf suspended like a hammock
lets him rest near the surface, suckle air,
blow bubble nests with saliva.
Bettas thrive in the rice paddies of Thailand,
puddle jump, burrow in mud,
with their lung-like labyrinth
they could live in spit.

Betta fights are blood sport in Asia—
two males in a tank, bets made

on who will live. In nature the males
 can retreat, swim away.
 My students insist our fish is lonely,
 no safe roommate for a Betta, they must live alone.
 Males with no escape will fight to the death.

Some of my students spent years
 in solitary confinement, thought too dangerous
 to house with others, came up for air
 only to walk the yard. After release
 they're still tortured by artificial light,
 stainless latrine and cinderblock.
 They can't bear the solitary fish.

Earthquake Drill in the Eighth-floor Parolee Classroom

They roll away the chairs,
 gather in their limbs.
 Hunched or squatting, some don't fit,
 tuck only their heads, rumps up.
 Herbert so huge the best
 he can do is fall to the ground,
 cheek to mottled linoleum.

Gregory hugs his knees, a listener
 at a campfire, waiting for all clear.
 Phillip curls his body, his back
 and feet pressed to opposite walls.
 Hard to imagine them running the streets
 armed for combat with rival gangs,
 selling nickel bags to twelve-year-olds.

They are used to hitting the floor,
 face down, arms spread.
 They know that drill but today
 they make themselves small,
 play hide and seek, hands over eyes.
 My students quiet as owls,
 almost at home beneath their desks.

How to Euthanize an Ailing Fish

Hard to get a fish to stay still.
 I'd need a prescription
 for Sodium Phenobarbital,
 call the connection,

a dental student with big debt.

Heard Alka Seltzer works,
hate to see a fish thrash
in a cup of fizzing CO2.
I'm not a neck snapper,
decapitation leaves twice
the mess to clean up.

I know a guy in Brooklyn
puts fish to sleep with clove oil,
milky white elixir, two shots
of vodka quickens the job,
grain alcohol seals the gills,
a tropical fish cocktail.

I studied the options
over the weekend,
decided I couldn't do it,
found my fish dead
Monday morning.

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