

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Katy Day: Three Poems

Katy Day · Wednesday, July 31st, 2019

### Blueback Herring, a Triptych

*for E, wherever you go*

#### I.

Before she became addicted to heroin  
and her son became a ward of the state,  
E and I took a road trip to Taunton State Hospital,  
an abandoned asylum in Massachusetts  
where her great great grandmother was once a patient.  
Our flashlights swept over rats burrowing  
in the smashed sheetrock. Crooked bedframes,  
opened cabinets, hallways lined with doors  
to different dimensions.

#### II.

In the 1850s, women across America  
were banished by their husbands  
and sons to the women's ward.  
Gruel broth, spoiled beef, rotten water.  
Shock therapy turned the uterus  
into a bad melon.  
Ice baths dumped over heads  
by the bucketful. Chattering teeth,  
goose-fleshed, and tied to a bench  
to reset- reset- reset-

When we were there, the clawfoot tub  
at Taunton was filled with flecks  
of paint, glass fragments,  
an uprooted fingernail.  
A vine crept up a brick wall

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beside the window facing East  
where the sun rises. E's mother  
was already addicted to heroin  
when they call it an epidemic  
in Baltimore. It wasn't hard for us  
to map the route from the Taunton  
women's ward to Baltimore, to E's mother.

### III.

Somewhere off the scenic byway,  
E dumped her blue Gatorade  
into the Connecticut River  
and refilled it with watershed.  
She pulled a blueback herring  
from the current with her bare hands  
and held it like a newborn child.  
*A gift for my mother*, she said.  
*Herring sounds like harrowing or heroin.*

The whole ride home, we sang  
*Bridge Over Troubled Water*.  
*I'm on your side when times*  
*get rough*, we sang, while the fish  
scribbled in the plastic bottle,  
trying to break itself free.

\*

### The Work of Grieving Second Graders

When our classmate was shot by his father  
they removed his desk from our classroom  
  
and made us play musical chairs  
to forget where he was supposed to be.

We squished our bodies together  
on shortened risers to take our class picture,  
  
hefted a sign that proclaimed 20 students  
instead of 21 and worked 43 muscles,  
  
which is how many it takes  
to smile for a photographer

whether you're happy or not.

When our friend was killed by his father,

we pushed all our desks against the wall  
and rolled out a mural on the floor.

We cut rainbows and angels and peace signs  
out of construction paper, and labored

for days to make it perfect for his mother.

We wrote her cards with hearts on Mother's Day,

and learned to write in cursive her son's name  
after learning our own. We grew, on average,

2.5 inches that year, read a newspaper  
for the first time in Saturday morning light

to read about our friend's death,

learned C makes the Sssssound

in homicide and suicide.

We spent the rest of that school year

preparing for a Disney musical to put on  
for the rest of the school in which our friend

wasn't cast. Learned all the words

to *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*

and *Circle of Life*. Tell me if there isn't anything  
to be done except teach our children

the work of grieving their shot friend,  
their shot neighbor, their shot classmate,

their shot bus buddy, which is the person  
you ride the bus to school with every day,

which is what this person was to me  
and when he was murdered by his father,

the adults rearranged our lives,  
made us all sit in different seats,

take in different views  
of the classroom, of the lunchroom

of the neighborhood from the bus,  
but all we wanted was to sit in our seats,

to hold a space next to the window  
for our friend.

\*

## Plastic God

It's a 30-minute drive to my brother  
who said in a text he was trying to get a toe-hold  
on life, but life didn't want him, the body  
too difficult to inhabit. Now silence.  
Now he won't answer my calls as I drive.  
I've never had a God to believe in except once  
when my babysitter performed a baptism  
on me in her pink bathtub because I asked  
what it felt like to be in water with clothes on.  
I thought I could see God in a watermark  
on her ceiling, because I told her  
I didn't believe what I couldn't see  
and she said you had to look hard for him  
in unexpected places. Now I am alone,  
but there is a bobblehead of Abe Lincoln  
on my passenger seat that one of my children  
brought home from a fieldtrip. I sit him  
on the dash so he can watch me groan  
in traffic, imagining the ways a brother  
could die from his own hand. I look into Abe's  
plastic eyes and whisper, *God*. And now that I know  
he is here and watching, I have someone  
to blame. *How could you watch this  
and do nothing*, I can say. *What kind of God  
would do that*, and he nods. He nods emphatically.

(Author photo by Patricia Smith)

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