

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Ellen Bass: The Market & the God

Ellen Bass · Wednesday, January 16th, 2013

Ellen Bass's poetry books include *The Human Line* (Copper Canyon Press) and *Mules of Love* (BOA Editions). Among her awards are the Lambda Literary Award, New Letters Poetry Prize, the Larry Levis Prize from Missouri Review, and the Pablo Neruda Prize from *Nimrod*. She teaches in the MFA poetry program at Pacific University.

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## Walking by Circle Market Late at Night

The city is quiet  
as though it's cried itself out.  
Circle Market, its windows busy  
with stickers for surfboard wax and bands  
with names like Make-A-Mistake,  
is dark now too. Last year  
the owner was held up,  
but he handed over the money  
and wasn't shot.  
I sealed two twenties and a ten  
in an envelope and walked to the corner.  
We went there a lot  
when the kids were little,  
popsicles and nights we ran out of milk.  
Mr. Song on his high stool  
by the cash register, presiding  
over the aisles, the dusty cans  
of Campbell's soup and Hamburger Helper,  
Huggies and Ajax.  
His body looked sunken now  
and his eyes jerked over to the door  
when he told me the man pointed  
a gun at his wife—she'd been sitting  
on a stack of the *Sunday Chronicles*—  
and warned him not to reach  
for the phone. After that  
he wouldn't let me pay for my pint

of Haagen Dazs and added  
 an ice cream sandwich on top—  
*for the child* he said, even though  
 the youngest is grown and gone.  
 When I protested he slipped in  
 a Snickers bar and when I insisted  
 he couldn't keep doing this,  
 he tossed in a handful of Chiclets.  
 Last summer when my friend was visiting,  
 I sent her instead, but he'd seen us  
 walking the dog together  
 and wouldn't let her pay either,  
 sneaking in a pack  
 of American Spirit Lights and a yellow Bic.  
 The Greeks believed  
 every human act is perilous.  
 I can't go in there anymore.

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## Ode to The God of Atheists

The god of atheists won't burn you at the stake  
 or pry off your fingernails. Nor will it make you  
 bow or beg, rake your skin with thorns,  
 or buy gold leaf and stained-glass windows.  
 It won't insist you fast or twist  
 the shape of your sexual hunger.  
 There are no wars fought for it, no women stoned for it.  
 You don't have to veil your face for it  
 or bloody your knees.  
 You don't have to sing.  
 The plums bloom extravagantly,  
 the dolphins stitch sky to sea.  
 Each pebble and fern, pond and fish  
 are yours whether or not you believe.  
 When fog is ripped away  
 just as a rust red thumb slides across the moon,  
 the god of atheists isn't rewarding you  
 for waking up in the middle of the night  
 and shivering barefoot in the field.  
 This god is not moved by the musk  
 of incense or bowls of oranges,  
 the mask brushed with cochineal,  
 polished rib of the lion.  
 Eat the macerated leaves  
 of the sacred plant. Dance  
 till the stars blur to a spangly river.  
 Rain, if it comes, will come.

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This god loves the virus as much as the child.

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