

Four Poems from "Poems from the Northeast" by Victoria Leigh Bennett

Poem

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"I plot the angle in degrees  
From heart to soul to horizon's tree...."—G. Apollinaire

The eyes are gone that were the smile  
I am left to invention.  
Time gurgles in my stomach, a drain singing to itself at night,  
After the furnace cuts off.  
*No birds sing.\**  
Growling rumbling in the distance like trains:  
The night.  
With one whistle,  
Long, panegyric:  
The moon comes out from behind a cloud.

The smile is gone that boasted its harlequin.  
Darting of eye from behind soul,  
Soul only a gesture,  
A shadow skittering over parquet of black and white;  
In the mind's midnight are chairs, firm and stalwart  
Time and place holders  
In the King's hall.  
The harlequin darts around them, behind,  
Unable to deny the solid truth of furniture.

Of the eyes and smile, one crumbling fable remains,  
Recalling the time and place  
And telling of your departure.  
My longing tastes like stale bread.

\*A line from John Keats's poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"

## **A Life**

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**He was a man  
Rich in tea bags  
And paper napkins.  
His days were bounded  
By thoughts of Caesar  
And Agamemnon  
But he was none of them.  
Most of his friends  
Thought he must at one time  
Have been British,  
For the accent was hard to place.  
And when the little moustache quivered  
At some frustration  
With a daily happenstance,  
In secret, they found it funny,  
Though they didn't want to hurt him,  
Oh no, never to hurt him.  
He liked some alcohol in moderation,  
Going to the local bar to have it  
And always saluting the waitress politely,  
Though he longed for a male presence**

To be at his elbow, solicitous.  
In token of her womanhood,  
He always used the cardboard coaster  
She brought him under his pint,  
As if it had been her house and he her guest,  
Convinced that she found him  
More gallant that way.  
He took his landlady's grim lace curtains  
Down to be washed one day  
When she had left them up just too long;  
One day in winter, when the weather  
Was damp and drear,  
And he got soaked through, and his feet wet.  
Then he sneezed once and was promptly ill,  
As he would have expected.  
When he signed into the hospital  
The doctor wrote "chest complaint";  
How quaint! As if he belonged  
To another, untechnical era indeed.  
And when he inexplicably sickened and died  
A few days later,  
"No family" was written on his card at the morgue,  
Though a few well-meaning acquaintances  
Held a brief and noncommittal  
Commitment service  
Over his ashes.  
His little bird, as if she had been

A secret mistress no one knew about  
Or had forgotten in the dull excitement,  
Chirped with mysterious forebodings  
For three days more  
And then gave out from lack of water;  
She only knew that she had nothing to drink,  
Couldn't get out,  
And there was nothing to be done about it.  
When the ones appointed  
Went to clear out,  
They found her, and  
"What a pretty pet!  
How nice it would have been  
For the children to take her!" they said.  
She, whose little claws had stiffened  
Into predatory shapes,  
So gentle as she was.  
Gentle, as he had been gentle,  
And sometimes annoyed without conviction  
At the bounds of her cage,  
Just as he with his life.  
No greater conqueror than he of her,  
She his only claimed territory,  
The only living thing he even lightly controlled.  
His friends, shrugging in amusement  
At the cabinet of tea and coffee supplies,  
The paper napkins and the cans and jars

And boxes of tea and coffee,  
Ended by dividing them up,  
Each grateful, but not unduly,  
For his or her share,  
"To remember him by,"  
Not one of them wondering  
How long they might remember him  
When the stuff was gone.  
The landlady, satisfied that the tenant  
Had kept the premises clean  
Contented herself with a mere sweep  
And a few swipes  
With a lemon polish rag,  
Putting her notices up in the paper again.

## The Formula

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"Sit and think for a bit,  
It'll come to you;  
It always has before,  
Why should now be any different?"  
And yet, now is now  
And then was then,  
And poetry  
Is not made to order.  
Unresponsive to logic  
Even in its most rhetorical form,  
It follows a line and melody  
All its own,  
Declines to be summoned  
Except with most respect;  
Stays only to hear  
Its own self speak,  
Though it insists on  
Not being thought  
A pompous twit, a prig,  
But a voice from a heavenly aether,  
Or a cloud.

What a put-up job!  
Attributing itself  
To a series of unknowables  
Or unmeasurables, in the course of things,  
Like muses, twilit nights, the moon,  
Sorrows, radiant sunshine,  
Genius or capability for self-deception,  
Anyway—  
Really, what has ever been  
More uncompromising than poetry?  
More querulous, hard to please,  
Stubborn, self-dramatic,  
Quick to anger,  
Slow to compromise,  
And all-in-all  
Difficult to compose  
And call one's own?  
Yet, I suppose  
If I wait for it just a bit,  
Give it a chance to seem humble  
As if dropping in on me unawares,  
Uninvited, and unheralded,  
Then I won't have to threaten it  
With becoming prosy,  
With writing a short story instead.

Costan and Merlu

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Costan

Was what women know as a warm man.  
Up to all their wiles and tricks,  
Even seeing a few where there were none,  
But full of love and joy and yes, laughter,  
Nonetheless.

Merlu

His superior  
In the army  
They wrinkled their noses up at  
When they discussed him,  
And more than one thought  
“Cold fish.”  
His love and attention wasn't warm  
Rather possessive and deigning,  
Full of his own self-importance,  
And seeing not them.



Costan

At the sight of a red petticoat,  
Always had a second glance for it  
Over his shoulder,

Merlu

Had the mort arrested  
For crimes she'd only thought of committing  
And thought disdainfully  
Of poor people's attire,  
For modesty had nothing to do  
With red petticoats,  
And he flattered himself  
That he was a modest man.

Costan one evening

Caught up with a lovely young smart thing  
And chortled and sang with her  
Under the wall, where they sat,  
Sharing a bottle and some bread and cheese.

Merlu's henchman

No less forward to impropriety,  
But knowing what Merlu wanted,  
Carried the news.

The next night,  
Costan stood red-faced for reproach  
In front of Merlu  
Agreeing that yes, he had been most improper,  
And bowing his head to anger and what was more,  
Envy, though he hardly dared even to himself  
Think of Merlu in that light.

Two days later,  
There was a wall to storm,  
A bridge to take,  
And warning his friends to stand away from him,  
Lest they too fall into disfavor  
With the keeper of the garrison,  
Costan accepted the mission  
Forced upon him by Merlu,  
But eager himself to shine.  
The ending was inevitable,  
Given Costan's brave resilience,  
And throwing of himself over the wall  
Straight into enemy fire.  
His loving and noble heart was breached as well,  
By cannon fire he'd no way to fend off,  
Since all he could think to offer was himself,

His skill with firearms not equaling  
His skill with loving negotiations.

That evening, Merlu sat pondering:  
What more need he do to preserve  
The public order,  
What ordinance or regulation pass  
To keep his officers and men in line?  
As he then stood, just before his window  
He looked at another wall, like to the one  
Of Costan's trespass, and on it,  
Flaunting bold and red,  
As if someone had torn the red petticoats in pieces  
And stuck them in place any way at all,  
Someone had hastily painted the accusation  
"Murderer!" to face his window;  
He was startled, and for just a moment  
Struck to the heart  
That someone had read his thought.  
Then, taking on himself once more  
The yoke of office,  
He sent a man out to clean it off  
Or paint over it,  
Sure, or no, not sure,

But avoiding the thought,  
That someone knew him  
Better than he had known himself.  
Such knowledge comes too late for regret,  
And in any case,  
He was persuaded by the experience  
That constituted all his life so far  
That he was right to act so,  
That Costan had been hostile  
To the public temper and a danger  
To public life.  
And after all, once the word was painted over  
From the wall,  
There was no witness to the crime  
And that made all the difference to him,  
Though those who knew him sensed a subtle change,  
A tension in the command,  
As if he was second-guessing himself,  
A lack of certainty, a questioning,  
A questing for a solution to something  
They knew not.  
Came the day when he too was ordered over a wall  
In front of his troops,  
And taking a deep breath, nearly asking himself

If this was the price of it all,  
He tried to be valiant, as valiant as he could imagine  
Costan had been,  
Though when his body came back also shot through,  
The women and men of the town  
Didn't mourn him. Instead,  
As his shattered body made its way on a stretcher  
Through town, his last breath still not drawn,  
He heard them saying, "It's his time!" and laughing,  
And then  
Someone spitting by his frame,  
And "Serves him right!"  
"Vindictive peasants!" he thought, and shedding a tear  
For his own passing, he died.