

Upon hearing about the suicide of a friend + 3

By

Rosalie Hendon

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... *I confess, a fear for poems mourning death at risk of cloying candor and saccharine sentiment. Here I sat, "perched on rocks slick with sediment," certain to be about to "clambered up webs of tree roots." In her tribute, Rosalie Hendon, 'Upon hearing about the suicide of a friend' manages to dampen a most jaundice eye. Her free verse flows "ascending into sunlight." At times, I think they're never far "the cardinal I can't see ...trilling in the backyard." On 'Rooftop in Quito' "I clutch a chipped piece of tile, / study the whorls in the clay like it holds answers." Ahh, I believe, the cosmically micro-macro intuits a wonderous, universal awe. Now, I might not quote any of 'Men Who Need to Retire' endangered by being "condescending [and] novel-length." It hits to close to home. Before I "Sink into soil. Root. Climb. / Jockey for light." I must also commend 'Cottonwood Summer' It is equally Hendonesque. Lastly, fading into 'the dim tunnel of trees behind you,' 'Brothers' is as beautifully written. Past time for me to turn from "faces open and looking forward." Rosalie is worth the read. (To maintain poet's spacing each poem is on a separate page. Please scroll down.) HS*

Five Stars!

Upon hearing about the suicide of a friend

For Mike

I never wanted to write this poem.
I would much prefer you, in Atlanta,
going to work, visiting your mom,
getting drinks with friends.
I would much prefer you,
somewhere out there,
wheeling through your days.
I'd prefer the possibility that we will talk again,
catch up over lunch in Midtown.

I remember emerging from the gloom of the MARTA station
and ascending into sunlight
almost as bright as your grin.

We bought sandwiches to eat in the park,
you in your smart work clothes and badge,
and you carried my suitcase for me back to the train.

What's hard about this
(for me, personally, selfishly)
is that I won't see you again.

We were out of touch.

Didn't mean we weren't friends.

Didn't mean I didn't love you,
with your tousled hair and square glasses
and always a button-down,
your love of debate, your kind heart.

The way you were up for anything,
from line dancing to folk festivals
to so many Wednesday night dinners.

Swimming at the Bot Gardens,
taking the orange trail,

me in my big sunhat, you in plaid.

We ventured into the muddy waters of the Middle Oconee,
perched on rocks slick with sediment,
clambered up webs of tree roots.

I think there was a rope swing,
but it was just out of reach.

We were content to laze in the shallows,
hug the bank,
bask in the sun.

I've been noticing birds.

The robins chirping at the park,
the heron flying over the interstate construction,
the cardinal I can't see, just hear trilling in the backyard.

On Sunday, the day before you--
the day before you left us,

I woke up under my grandparents' eaves
to the sound of mourning doves.

Their soft coos, haunting in the quiet.

I can't figure out the right way to describe this,
this act of leaving, this voluntary departure.
Some ways seem more poetic

(he took his own life, your friend Zack said)
or clinical (he committed suicide, I've said)
or hurt (*se mató*, I told my husband, burying my face in his neck).

Se quitó la vida, he said,
and I could only think of you
shrugging off your life like a coat
that didn't fit right anymore.
Like it was too big for you.

Rooftop in Quito

The dove flies from roof to roof,
singing to herself.
Dogs yip and howl in the valley below.
The lock springs open,
a pause just long enough for two people to pass,
and the black metal door clangs shut again.

The wind sighs in the feathered leaves.
Square buildings squat, their windows shuttered.
I can see about a third of the mountain, maybe,
beyond these human structures—
the brick, the barbed wire, the satellite dishes.

The sun slides behind the clouds,
the light washed out and soft on my face.
I clutch a chipped piece of tile,
study the whorls in the clay like it holds answers.
The cat watches from behind a pane of glass,
his ochre eyes large with what I imagine
is a mix of jealousy and resignation.
He reminds me,
you're closer to the stars here.

Men Who Need to Retire

I can't hear you talk about the 90s again,
the golden age, your heyday,
savior and cowboy all in one

I can't read your condescending, novel-length emails
in which you always know better
because you are older

I can't wait for your timetable,
because we might to get to that goal
in a hundred years,
when we're all dead

I can't slow down for you.
I can't discard "self-imposed deadlines"--
it's called project management
and it's how to get things done

I can't watch you belittle your coworkers
because you're intimidated
and disparage the community
because they ask you hard questions

There's wisdom and respect,
a legacy to be proud of--
and I don't see any of it.
You're actively in the way,
working at cross-purposes,
hobbling and bottle-necking
and always saying
No, wait, slow down, you can't, stop, no

I *can* say,
maybe it's time you retire

Cottonwood Summer

Early June, and it's snowing.

White fluff makes constellations against the forest's deep shade
and sticks to the glass of the lake surface.

Drifts form around tree roots and pile up in sidewalk cracks.

The cotton catches the sun, twinkling.

I imagine the mighty trees, all ridged bark,
arrow-shaped leaves, frenetic waving in the wind.

Watch the parade of future giants, weightless overhead.

Sink into soil. Root. Climb.

Jockey for light.

Transformed by tons of carbon.

This is the freest you will ever be.

Brothers

Bats wheel overhead in the dusk
Sentinel trees dark against the sky
Fireflies flicker in our cupped hands
Your eyes dance, both of you
sitting together in that easy way that brothers have,
amidst the kale and the unripe tomatoes.

I take your picture there,
the dim tunnel of trees behind you
Older brother's arm slung across the younger's shoulder
How long is three years, when it's 15 to 18?
22 to 25?
This night, it seems no distance at all
The distance between your shoulders
as you pose,
faces open and looking forward

THE POET SPEAKS: *What inspired your poems, your stylistic influences and why poetry is important to you, to read and to write.*

1. *Upon hearing about the suicide of a friend;*
2. *Rooftop in Quito;*
3. *Men Who Need to Retire;*
4. *Cottonwood Summer;*
5. *Brothers*

*I write a lot from observation—what I see and feel. I admire frank, honest poetry that speaks to the heart of the matter. Garrison Keillor wrote in the introduction to *Good Poems for Hard Times*, “Poetry is rather straightforward compared to ordinary conversation with people you don’t know well....think of conversation at office parties or conversation between teenage children and parents, or between teenagers themselves, or between men, or between bitter spouses: rarely in ordinary conversation do people speak from the heart and mean what they say....All that matters about poetry to me now is directness and clarity and truthfulness.” I read this introduction years ago and have read it many times since. I want to understand a poem quickly but be surprised by it, each time I reread it finding new layers of meaning. I want a poem to resonate inside me like a struck note. I like poems that teach me, that make me see an ordinary thing in a new way. Writing a poem is a challenge, and I appreciate the communication aspect of it. When the pandemic began, I started a poetry group with friends and friends of friends. Most*

of them hadn't written since high school, probably never of their own volition. We had weekly prompts and monthly virtual readings, and I learned so much from them. I think it's important to experience poetry—reading and writing and listening—because it can be so direct and honest. It can be a balm, a bright light, a feeling that we aren't alone.

Some of my favorite poets are Sarah Kay, Barbara Kingsolver, Joy Harjo, E.E. Cummings, Margaret Atwood, Julia Alvarez, and Mary Oliver. I like the freedom of free verse and the lyricism, imagery, relationships, introspection, and nature that come through in their poetry.

“Upon hearing about the suicide of a friend”: As you see in the dedication, I wrote this for my friend Mike. He passed last spring, and it was so sudden and unexpected. This poem, among others, helped me process the loss of him. Collect all the moments that sprang to mind of our friendship and grieve him, while also find a way to say what we struggle to say, when we are confronted with suicide.

“Rooftop in Quito”: As it sounds, I wrote this on a rooftop in Quito, Ecuador. My husband is from Ecuador, and I wrote this on the sleepy quiet of New Year's Day. The quote from the cat is something my father-in-law said, and it sounded so poetic to me.

“Men Who Need to Retire”: Sometimes life is so frustrating, it has to be expressed in a poem. Someone I worked with was a constant bottleneck in projects. He wrote novel-length emails that no one wanted to read, bringing up ancient history and how things used to be. He liked to say no. He needed to control everything. And it all came from a paternalistic, I know best sort of place. My family calls this my “voodoo poem” because two months after I wrote it, he retired. It's part of a series about men that I've been writing when the frustration gets to be too much.

“Cottonwood Summer”: I wrote this poem in the summer of 2020. Where I was raised, we didn't have cottonwood trees, so I find the annual “snow” interesting now that I live in the Midwest. Some trees I can imagine growing from seed, like an oak from an acorn. But I find cottonwoods incredibly hard to associate with their tiny, wispy seeds—like a dandelion. And yet they quickly grow to tower over riverbanks and fields. I also love the way their leaves wave in the breeze, frantically. Cottonwoods are cousins to aspens, and their petioles (the stem of the leaf) are flattened, which is why they wave like that compared to other trees' leaves.

“Brothers”: My husband and his youngest brother, who is eight years younger, didn't see each other for three years. My husband was unable to go home to visit, and his brother was a minor. As soon as he turned 18, he came to visit for a month in the summer. I've never spent so much time apart from a sibling, so I wasn't sure if there would be a level of distance or discomfort. But they were so easy with each other, so natural. This poem is somewhat like the picture I took—we

were at a park near our house, wandering in the community garden, and the poem feels like a snapshot in time.

AUTHOR BIO: Rosalie Hendon is an environmental planner living in Columbus, Ohio with her new husband and many house plants. She started a virtual poetry group in April 2020 during quarantine that has collectively written over 200 poems. Her work is published in *Change Seven, Planisphere Q, Call Me [Brackets], Entropy, Pollux, Superpresent, and Cactifur*. Rosalie is inspired by ecology, relationships, and stories passed down through generations.