

Julia Carlson – Three Poems

Hanging Tree, Salem, Massachusetts

Winter's puritan history, bred in this small New England town,
pilgrim's creed, churches on every common,
churches simmering a stew of prayer, a rolling boil of merchandise
made only for inhibited, anxious, scurrilous judges
who burned & hung their way through history. Chasing away
women, men, young, old - get them out of town, don't hide them
in your shed or out back in the woods nearby. We'll hang nineteen anyway
even if we don't find the ones hidden, tucked under dark bushes
with purple berries that sicken you if eaten. Curse, curse again,
as they hid deep in bushes and brambles, fern hedges waving a spell
over thoughts, over songs, over the Amens said at night.
Amens, & begging, fear turning into a tight spiral of rope
hypnotizing as it turned & twisted from the weight it was holding,
from the sea breeze blowing in off the Atlantic to the harbor.
No harbor for nineteen, whose history then became a story known & learned,
grown in us, retold, retold again, becoming only a story for a fall holiday.
& that hanging tree still standing, stone blocks underneath
like steps, or headstones, leading to it, where the women and men
may have stood waiting for the noose.

Fishing

I feel like I'm back in summer, but it's a hot night in October,
a hot night with a shrill screech of the last crickets

frantically searching for their mates among the asters in the garden
pale lavender flowers, wilting under the full hunter's moon, round

to bursting. sky and air damp and wet, the moon hovering, fat and
bright through the open window. you are pretending that

dimensions of compatibility are real by leaning your head onto
my shoulder, that your love is pure, and you are working on loving

the things about me that you hate. I try to understand this but really,
it's impossible. blue is blue. it can never be red. eggs are not apples.

we are not each other, even though it felt like this was true sometimes
when desire caught us, sticky web, gluing us together, simple and slick,

fronds of smooth leaves, like skin, a fine green sheen of early growth
opening to the sun, that's how it was. I would starve, give up sleep,

work my fingers to the bone, to taste that again. we should forget
that place where we belonged, where we've always belonged until now.

you took what you wanted from our chaotic riot, so did I, even when covered
in dirt, paint, mud, you knew instinctively which. deception can rise like smoke

from a dying fire. when the phone rings, don't answer, let possibilities disconnect,
surpass expectations, the ones we saw on tv together, when we watched tv together.

tomorrow we'll go fishing, thread the worm on the hook, toss the line into the water,
wait, wait and watch the moon, a mirror in the dark water, as the bait sinks down.

After Reading Night Sky with Exit Wounds (Ocean Vuong)

Phrases loping across the page
in rhythms of three or four words
sink into my head
songs full of anguish
but never regret.

Maybe regret for deaths seen,
limbs of blood moved,
none for the steps
pulling him alive, inch by
dark inch to New York City.

The Vietnam War so
ancient to anyone born
post 1968,
another history class
required for college.

Danang - zilch to
17- year old American kids
mall rats who study, shop,
play basketball & ask
parents for date money.

Not worrying about Father,
a bullet hole in his head &
a black gun muzzle
held between thumb and finger,
dangling just so.

Julia Carlson's poems have been published in *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Lyrical Somerville*, *Wilderness House Literary Review* and *Ibbetson Street Press*. She is the author of two chapbooks, *The Turn of the Century* and *Drift*. A new collection, *Prayer for the Misbegotten*, is due out in 2017. Her poem, "Hate", won first prize in the international Poetry Kit (UK) 2017 Summer Competition. She makes her home in Cambridge, MA, likes rock and roll and favors a wee dram on a cold night.