

Michael Miller – Two Poems

Housewarming, East Los Angeles

Someone across the patio calls the neighborhood sketchy
and the woman at the far end, who has sipped her beer alone
and tapped her throat to indicate where the operation
took her voice, hoists up a pad and pen and displays them
like a magician with a handkerchief too thin to pack a dove.
The few of us between conversations her audience, she starts
with the slim bones of the surroundings: rugged hill above
the winding street that the parked cars shrink to one lane,
stray dog slouched on the corner, a single balloon on the rail
that indicates a party at this house up the crooked steps.
On the patio before the open gate that she sketches without
the padlock dangling, the crowd half covers the blank space.
The pen rests for a minute and she shows us our ritual:
this whiteness marked only by the outlines of gathering,
the compulsion to touch and not drink alone. Without words
or faces to tell our stories, do the lines show if we celebrate
or mourn? The new homeowners toast with their margaritas,
the man's fingers spreading to show the ring to her parents,
but joy and grief make their own congregations—a circle just
as tight around the landlady who holds her late mother's Polaroid
and nods eagerly at condolences with her tears having dried.
All that unites us are our neat survivals, this touch of sky
and nearness with friends what we run to at any hour
when a room is not enough—the bottles that fizz one by one
an incantation against silence, solitude. Our society captured
now on her pad, the artist fills in its boundaries. At the curb below
the steps, three men saunter by and watch, their faces too distant
to read but their gait slowing to signal thirst. Down the block,
two boys set bottles on the fence and let fly with a slingshot,
one stone per turn, the game won by what is broken just right.

Arboretum

Perched on one palm's strength, her knees dodging the mud,
she jabs her stick sharply and corrects the stream's defiance.

With her prodding, the rocks inch toward single file,
each shift jolting the current smoother, muting its song.

Behind, her father pockets the life of Amelia Earhart,
their story for tonight. The book, he always chooses.

When they turn the globe at bedtime, as he knows they will,
what will she ask to find? The flight from Honolulu

may thrill her the most: the first pilot, woman or not,
to fly from Hawaii to the mainland, the black dot for Oakland

neat and round proclaiming the finish line. On this globe,
Howland Island hides unlabeled, too small for a finger's descent.

This is achievement, he practices mouthing already.
Her dolls wait at home, the one with the smudge thrown out.

It is the exploring, the safe landings never promised.
For now, the riverbanks declare the moment's task.

Her stick too thin, she stretches to pull the thickest one
from the bottom, steels her wrist, gouges weeds aside.

Was the flow wrong before? She never stops to explain,
but her stick will not drop until it courses right.

As the stones give way, the surface flattens, calms,
each twist on the ground changing the sky's compliant shape.

Michael Miller says these two poems were written during Marge Piercy's annual poetry workshop on Cape Cod, in which he took part. He is a longtime entertainment writer for the Los Angeles Times and the author of two books of poetry, *College Town* (Tebot Bach, 2010) and *The First Thing Mastered* (Tebot Bach, 2013). He has received a page on the Poetry Foundation website. Miller also serves as a judge every year for Poetry Out Loud and he is the co-founder of Moon Tide Press, a Southern California-based press that launched in 2006 and has published nearly two dozen books of poetry.