

Mother Goose Meets Shakespeare

Charlotte Hussey Comments on her Poetry

Why Sonnets?

Well, the impulse to write sonnets first came because I'd had a child, and I'd felt, being home with this child, that the next five years were going to be lost artistically. I was also reading Berryman at the time, and I was getting into his sonnets, which I admire a lot. And I was sort of studying them and imitating them a bit, and I figured, since I didn't have any expectations of having any work done, why not write sonnets. It was a way of keeping my hand in poetry.

Sonnets have, traditionally, been used to articulate male areas of experience. As a woman, did you feel at all subversive about writing them?

In studying sonnets I did realize that I had entered something that was more of a male preserve. A lot of them were addressing the beloved, and the beloved was usually a woman. My subversion of it, I guess, was to be a mother addressing the beloved, but the beloved being my daughter. It was sort of like Mother Goose meets Shakespeare.

Did the sonnets lead to any discoveries that you wouldn't have had otherwise? I mean, does the sonnet form encourage, qualitatively, a different experience of the world?

Well, it allowed me to make a commitment to a certain struggle that I would see through, because the sonnet form is very much something you struggle against. It made me, in other words, more active where I think one of my problems in my life has been that I'm a very passive female. I also discovered that within the structures of them there was a lot of freedom, strangely enough. And I think the confines really pushed me to go way beyond what I could really do. I can feel myself doing that more clearly when I write formally, than when I don't. Free-verse just seems easier and I'm less sure of when I'm challenging myself. Somehow the struggle with form frees the content. And you start getting surprised by the content then, because you've put all your conscious effort on the form. The sonnet is like a ritual that you perform, not unlike the Zen notion of art as ceremony. The ceremony, in some sort of way, focuses you and allows it to come through, it to happen - not you but it. I think all good sonnets are, ultimately, more directed by something else that comes to play upon the form, rather than something of your own volition. ☺



Sonnets for Zoë

I

You go feet first into your books--
it started with *Horns to Toes*, a story about
a monster's body parts. First you took
to biting your fists, sticking them in-and-out
of your mouth, as you considered his snagged bite.
Curious, you placed your hands over his paws--
stubby thumb and fingers--the size was right!
You grabbed your nose and hummed quite in awe
at the sight of his blue bulb snout. His feet--
you slipped yours over his chubby, flat prints
on their laminated cardboard page--squeak!
you love that slippery, cool feel, the glint
of words. Sound and sheen, a book can be
a ground on which to stand and see.

Charlotte Hussey -- *Sonnets for Zoë*

II

There's a kind of wild, unfocused hurrying
from toy to toy to play, too many
bears and you on your knees scurrying
over fallen dolls, pulled down and any
cardboard books from your shelves you can lay
your hands on. Raise a cloth block, drop it,
slap a shelf, bounce your knees, waylay
another toy, Goofey flung lickety split
over your shoulder. Giggling you grab a wash
basket of playthings, throwing them all
helter-skelter on the carpet, awash,
a primary colored, plastic free-for-all.
What your mother sees as a topsy-turvydom,
is you taking hold of your freedom.

III

My meddling forefinger rummages your cheek
pocket, slips along your boney gum
and into that soft, wet crease where, sneak,
you squirrel your finds. It's troublesome
how you cache them there, shreds of twine,
inky bits of paper, chunks of carrot,
lace torn off your first valentine,
chewy popped balloon, battery bought
for the calculator, and now it's a slippery dime.
You suck it away, candy on your tongue,
from my giant, thieving finger's well-timed
trespass-- plunging past your two young,
unabetted, bottom incisors, it flips
the coin out over gums and defiant lips.

I N D E X

IV

Just as I am standing you on a chair,
letting you wash dishes for the first time,
hecklers on tv stone carloads of scared
Mohawk elders, women, and children. Lunchtime
clean-up: you sloshing unbreakable cups
in warm soapy water, as bottles and bricks
dent locked doors. Windows are rolled up
crazed. Protective windshields pocked and nicked,
smash: a football-sized chunk of concrete
thunders into Joseph de la Croix's chest.
Tiring of plastic things *tout de suite*,
you reach for the gush of tapwater impressed,
as glass explodes nearby, a pelting storm--
such force, such surging against your palm.

V

Suddenly crying out for his bottle your cousin,
all tightfisted and toothless as a bud,
wails quivering his limbs, his burgeoning dozen
or so pounds, thirsty as a root pulled from the mud.
He sprawls on his back, while you unsteadily stand
wondering at someone smaller than yourself.
You sob too. Your allied body understands
his pangs--*Cousin, Cousine* a single self.
Crying's a birthright that's easily shared,
until a bottle of milk ends his distress.
Rhythmically sucking its nipple, he's repaired,
while you weep with a newfound sadness
harder than his hunger to subdue,
spilling like the tumbler of milk I hand you.

Charlotte Hussey -- *Sonnets for Zoë*

VI

"Why was the ocean angry at us?"
 you ask, fingering the pebbled break
 that punctures the sea wall. "Why?," you fuss.
 A pocked slab, concrete flakes
 and the powdery bone-smell of mishap
 roughen thought: pitched by the sea,
 big bad wolfing whitecaps
 hurled rocks and winter's debris.
 Now August's a liquid sheet, a strait
 of haze dampening a dug-up lawn
 where worms inch, as workmen estimate
 the redress of walls with twine, drawn
 taunt to vibrate in the burn-off of mist.
 "Why?," your smallness, the right to persist.

VII

The daycare workers call you "a seal,"
 giving each child an animal name.
 This is your seat for snacks and meals,
 its round face and flippers proclaim.
 Drawn with magic marker and taped
 to your small, blue plastic chair,
 its image floats a sea-bleached shape,
 as when your fisherman father stares
 at another slippery, surfacing head.
 Wading beyond the breakers he trolls,
 ghosted by a seal. Calming her dread,
 he sings like the ancient scalds who consoled
 the drowned, guiding them to land,
 to stay in soundings, hugging the strand.

Charlotte Hussey -- *Sonnets for Zoë*