DIANE SEUSS

My Education

Not just what I feel but what I know and how I know it, my unscholarliness, my rawness, all rise out of the cobbled landscape I was born to. Those of you raised similarly, I want to say: this is not a detriment and it is not a benefit. It only is, it is, like a cobbled house is, fieldstones and mortar, slipshod, spare parts welded crookedly, crudely but cleverly, skinny iron winding staircase leading to the attic bolted on both ends, and up there, a gap in the window where the snow comes in and architects a little drift on the bed. And meals were cobbled. Kernels on the cob haphazardly arranged, not lined up in military rows, and sometimes a row was not filled in at all, and your teeth, when biting down, met an emptiness. And shotgun pellets in the rabbit meat. Stray hobnail dishes, studded, rescued from an abandoned house on fire, in an array of jewel tones, would appear without warning on the table. A blood-colored butter dish, yellow perch on a cobalt blue platter encircled in fried egg sacs. Or ducks or a pheasant thrown erratic on the back porch, payment for something given or not taken. When I’d been away and returned, I could see, freshly, the cobbled lushness of the trees, and the arbitrary drift of brown spots on the white cows in the meadows, and the wireworm-filled tunnels in the morels at the base of dead cherry trees. The cemetery is unsystematic, as is the library, graves scattered
like chicken feed, books strewn on old tables
from canceled Sunday school classrooms. I loved
books but learned very little in school. I could read,
so the reading instruction drove me nearly mad,
and I plugged my ears, first with my hands
until I was caught, then with something I could do
inside my head that muffled the teacher’s voice
like she was speaking into a canning jar.
What I know of literature, of history, is spotty.
I was a poor student, disengaged from the things
I didn’t need, and I knew what I needed,
and that the time to get it was now.
When I needed Keats, I got him. I read enough
to get the point, then tuned in to his ghost.
I read most of Joseph Conrad, having figured out
that I could find some things repulsive and still
require them for my project. My project
was my life. There was no vision or overarching
plan. There was only foraging for supplies,
many of which were full of worms or covered
in dust, like apples on the orchard floor,
and furniture junked on the side of the road.
Have you ever seen a pie cooling on the sill
and found yourself hungry enough to steal it?
Or does that only happen in picture books?
If you are like me, to learn of the gods you must
beg, borrow, or steal. Eavesdrop, as gossip
is sagacity, a word I learned from Emily
Dickinson. Don’t underestimate direct
experience. Ants know earth. Dragonflies
know air. A cobbled mind is not fatal.
You have to be willing to self-educate
at a moment’s notice, and to be caught
in your ignorance by people who will
use it against you. You will mispronounce
words in front of a crowd. It cannot be
avoided. But your poems, with all of their
deficiencies, products of lifelong observation
and asymmetric knowledge, will be your own.
Built on the edge of tradition, they will rarely be anthologized. I have camped at this outpost my whole life, as did my mother, who slept on sugar sacks in the basement or on the front porch, in early spring, when snow still clumped around fugitive crocuses, just to keep herself forsaken.
Simile

You can’t be simile.
Deep down even
mud is not
comparable. I had a friend
whose smile was a frown.
My last paramour, my very
last, wore an atypical
cowboy hat. A bit of a rodeo
clown. Paranoid
about the whole area of the belly
button. People
are so unlike.
I had a side-eyeing dog.
A king forced
into a peasant’s clothes. At the end,
and there is always an end in tales
of peasants, I’d look up and find him
staring bullet holes into my skull.
Not memorizing me.
Asking to be rescued from his plight.
Pain is the ultimate plight
he might have said in a tale,
but he could not talk
until he came to my friend in a dream.
Promise you’ll tell mother I miss her,
he said. And my friend fulfilled
her promise. I almost wrote
my friend fulfilled her primrose, an unlike
flower. Big-ovaried and hairy-stemmed,
old, fertile, femme.
My friend, who does not believe in portents,
still obeyed the talking dog.
This is her version of love, and it’s her version
all the way down.
Death also incomparable, specific
only unto itself. Death to the dying must feel
so contrary to death’s history, as the ego
dies hard. Mine. The hands curl in on themselves,
fern fronds. When I nursed my baby decades
back moonlight poured in the window,
and starlight,
and I felt myself click into the template,
like a bone back into its joint,
doing what mothers do and have done.
Maybe I was painted on an urn somewhere.
Until later when the handle busted off
and the urn turned to dust and we were solidly,
brutally nothing
but ourselves.
When I taught figuration
I said the simile, with its like and as, confesses
failure in its very nature. It can’t transmogrify
a spoon into a fish or revivify
the marriage. We liked each other.
We like each other no more,
our loathing radical and strange.
Nor can it warm
the corpse and bring a throb back
to its temple. The shroud,
laundered and bleached,
returns to its essential nature, bedsheet,
with a mended scar
and a menstrual stain shaped unlike
any constellation of stars
and goddamnit I sleep on it.
I dreamed I was reading a villanelle
in front of a crowd. Next to me on the floor
was a large bag of garbage I’d mistakenly
brought with me onto the stage. My own garbage.

And the crowd did not care about the villanelle.
Its intricacies or its subject, which was ornate
and thorny and probably none of my business.
I was a snob in the midst of a throng of people
hungry only for the truth. I have never played
the role of a snob or read a bad poem
into a microphone next to a sack of my own
garbage, in life or dream. What do you think

it means? Are the gods mocking me for acting
in-the-know? This would happen back home a lot.
Anybody who tooted their own horn
or dared to sound as if they were an expert

on any subject were mocked and driven
into the next county. Never hold yourself above.
There is no expertise. There is only good sense,
earned hard and held close to the vest.

It is not to be displayed but hoarded,
like canned goods in a storm cellar.
Go back for the garbage and deal with it.
In so doing, if you rouse a swarm of flies,

they’re yours to tolerate or swat. Choose
your poison, but don’t poison the well.
Your dreams are just dreams, Diane,
and all dreams go up in smoke.