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Featured Poet

Ellen Bass

All Hallows Eve

We take the pumpkins out to the pavement
and set them down on a sheaf of newspaper.
I make the first cut with a kitchen knife,
then he saws the thick rind with a sturdy
serrated blade, exposing the meaty flesh.

We scoop and pull out the stringy web
that holds the seeds, slippery as newborns.
Then he jabs the knife into the inked
eye sockets, nostrils, the toothless grin
until his small hands tire.

It's twilight, the city sky streaked
melon-pink and so quiet
I can hear sand grind under his heel
as he twists to press in the blade.

On our street, the branches
of the maple rise like the bare arms
of a young god, stretching.

* * *

After the Worst

After the worst
and before the next
terrible thing, there is a kind
of happiness you can't
pin down, like bits of light
rippling on the sea,
appearing and disappearing,
traveling toward you
in a fractal path from the silver
arc at the horizon.
Sun caressing the crown
of your head, your brow,
shutting your eyes
as it strokes down your bones,
the way a mother
puts her baby to sleep,
the lids heavy, heavier,
closing longer
and longer with each
sweep of her palm.

* * *

Eating the Bones

The women in my family
strip the succulent
flesh from broiled chicken,
scrape the drumstick clean;
bite off the cartilage, chew the gristle,
crush the porous swellings
at the ends of each slender baton.
With strong molars
they split the tibia, sucking out
the dense marrow.
They use up love, they swallow
every dark grain,
so at the end there's nothing left,
a scant pile of splinters
on the empty white plate.

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Ellen Bass's poetry books include *The Human Line* (Copper Canyon Press), named a Notable Book of 2007 by the San Francisco Chronicle and *Mules of Love* (BOA, 2002), which won the Lambda Literary Award. Her poems have been published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Kenyon Review*, *American Poetry Review* and many other journals. Her non-fiction books include *The Courage to Heal and Free Your Mind*. She teaches in the MFA program at Pacific University and at conferences and retreats in many beautiful places. www.ellenbass.com

from Poet's Bookshelf: Contemporary Poets On Books That Shaped Their Art

poet Ellen Bass

Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet*
E. E. Cummings
T. S. Eliot
Denise Levertov
Keats, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge
Anne Sexton
Adrienne Rich
Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*
Sharon Olds
Dorianne Laux
Billy Collins

When I was in my early teens, my brother was away at college. On weekends, I'd cut myself a thick slab of salami, take a couple slices of American cheese, a knob of rye bread and a glass of milk and settle myself in the leather recliner in his empty bedroom and read books from his shelves.

The one that swept me away I'd chosen randomly: *Justine*, the first volume of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. I was too young to understand it. I couldn't even follow the story. But I was enthralled with the exotic world that emerged from its pages: the heat, the smells, the intense desire. I read *Justine* over and over, trying to find my way in that foreign and compelling land of passion.

In my freshman year at Goucher College, it was poetry I fell in love with. E. E. Cummings ("not even the rain has such small hands"). T. S. Eliot ("I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river/ Is a strong brown god"). I read Denise Levertov ("The disasters numb within us/ caught in the chest, rolling/ in the brain like pebbles") and wished I could write about my feelings about the war in Vietnam.

My sophomore year I spent at Russell Sage, a small women's college in upstate New York. I'd transferred there because I was going to marry my high school boyfriend and he went to school in the same town. But we broke up and I was stuck in the interminable cold and snow with classmates who enjoyed a kind of school spirit that was foreign to me—football games, frat parties, identical blazers in the school's colors. So different from Goucher and my small group of intellectual friends to which I desperately wanted to return. I developed insomnia and memorized a fair-sized chunk of nineteenth century Romantic poetry—Keats, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley—to stave off my misery.

At Boston University (where I received an MA in Creative Writing), I had the great good fortune to study with Anne Sexton. Her work had a crucial impact on me as a beginning poet. Her

courage, boldness, and wild imagery all amazed me. While my other teachers set about pruning my feeble efforts, Anne encouraged me to write more, expand, take risks. Without her generous urging, my poor poems would have been reduced to nothing.

In the seventies, I was deeply affected by Adrienne Rich's poetry and prose, especially *Diving Into the Wreck*, *The Dream of a Common Language* (a whole new poetry beginning here), and *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. She showed us what love between women could mean and how that love could become a political vision. (No one ever told us we have to study our lives.) Her poetry broke down the barriers between private and public worlds.

Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* was unlike anything I'd ever read, combining a history of patriarchy, science, ecology, and feminism, along with a fierce cherishing of women and of all life. I was passionately moved by the scope of her vision, her gorgeous language, and the stakes involved.

Through these books, and others by feminist writers of the seventies, I recognized my own intense connection to women's stories. Susan Griffin wrote, "We are a community of those coming to speech from silence. This is an elementary fact we share—a history of illiteracy, suffocations, spiritual and literal, burnings of body and work, the weight of the unutterable surrounding all of our lives. And in no way can this shared history be separated from what we write today, nor from our love of each other's voices." This "love of each other's voices" is what led me to spend decades immersed in women's writing, and what, ultimately, led me to come out as a lesbian. I'm the only lesbian I know who was more deeply influenced by literature than by a compelling sexual orientation.

The three poets whose work most inspired my own in more recent years are Sharon Olds, Dorianne Laux, and Billy Collins. Sharon Olds is a master of metaphor and her precise and detailed images have been a touchstone for me. She claimed the compelling world of the body, sexuality, and family relationships for poetry. Dorianne Laux has been my cherished mentor for many years and she has taught me, as well, by the example of her lush language, unflinching honesty, and wild mind. And Billy Collins demonstrates again and again how clarity can reveal profound depths and how wit can bring us face to face with the truths of our lives.

Of course there are many more that it's hard to leave out. From James Joyce's *Ulysses* to Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, from Yeats to Audre Lorde. I am grateful to them all.

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