

Selection from

***Angles of Approach*, by Holly Iglesias**

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Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

CHICKEN HILL, 1943

Happy days came and went, as did the songs that Roy Price and his wife sang as they walked to the mill and back. Until the crash, until the strike that left five men dead beside the fence, until she expired birthing the girl. Two babies on his hands and nothing but a quilt to keep him company till Lillie came along, right out of the blue. How she soothed him, that woman, cooing at him, pulling lint from his hair, bearing him three more sons, all swiftly baptized by pressing their heels into a bowl of dough. Biscuits with beans, biscuits with corn: Heaven was made of this, Roy knew it, and his five children in bleached flour-sack shirts knew it too.

PERISHABLES

In the final days of the war, a boy eats cake, a cake from the saddest mother, a woman unaware that her own son has bled into history, a history with jaws that are soft and tropical, the greenest green, not gray like Lake Erie in winter.

The cake sealed first in waxed paper, then gift wrap, then a grocery bag dismantled with pinking shears, the bundle tied with cotton string, her fingers recalling the tiny buttons of his school shirts, the comb dipped in water before parting his hair.

Mercy rains at every latitude, at each contested parallel, rains anywhere that grunts line up for salt pills, clean socks, for unclaimed parcels that go to those who never get mail.

Cake sweetens the mouth of a boy the woman will never meet, a boy who tastes in the kindness of strangers the complications of survival, a boy who in manhood will crumble each time he tells the tale.

THE HIERARCHY OF FRUITS

We learned the virtue of apples, of firm flesh and uniform color. We diagrammed the passive voice, sang Gregorian chants, and charted personal hygiene habits as an exercise in science because there were no monkeys in space yet. We watched filmstrips and pondered limbo and the fate of pagans, those grinning, naked people who ate termites for breakfast but did not know God. Surely they got the better deal, dancing and climbing trees and eating with their hands, while we sat at metal desks, decked in plaid and guarded like grenades with faulty pins.

MASS FOR THE HAPPY DEATH OF INNOCENCE

Girls sashaying to the drugstore for smokes, for mint pastilles and Betadyne; lunch-counter ladies sucking their teeth, dabbing sweat from their lips with lavender handkerchiefs, pouring more chicory for Father Poché, poor soul, too late for communion, too early for Scotch. *Candy man has come and gone, oh my candy man has come and gone.* Boys hide in the trees, in trees that never lose leaves, boys drinking beer who jeer and flirt and whisper nasties onto the hats of passersby. A girl presses the small of her back against a tree, cocks one foot behind the ankle of the other, the very air an invitation to spoil, Carnival just a place between the legs. Air, the air that rarely moves, damp as anything in the mouth, and leaves that never fall. A single blossom of tea olive, white, the size of a pinkie nail, gives off a scent that can buckle a grown man's knees, plant the idea of sex-right-now behind his eyes. Shoes melting into the mud, the tar on the street, odors evolving with progress up or down Canal Street, Annunciation, Calliope. Standing in the shade, heels sunk in the soft soil of the neutral ground, a woman fingers a token, her friend rolling crisp white paper down the length of a baguette, offering a bite as the trolley approaches, its wheels clacking, sparks flying high and low.

Like a scar from a thousand whippings, the levee rises between river and peril, young men high on the swell of it taking their leisure. Stuck with schoolyard names—Bobby, Baby, Jimmy D—they consider themselves boys, always will, even when lifting the skirt of a wife, a mistress, a forbidden young thing. Everything that sloshes in a bottle of pink Chablis smiles on them, gives the nod to their antics as sun bronzes the water. Come dusk, they depart, gallants on the prowl for cherry-studded cocktails and girls who straddle stools like they can't get enough of anything, who booze with boys through an eternal childhood of damp air and the Tropics' imperative to couple. The only breeze enters the bar from a tiny window to the street, where pedestrians buy pints of Crown Royal and rye. Clawing the vinyl bumper, a weathered woman goes for the record, six Skip 'n' Go Nakeds, while the one who never eats, who never comes inside, stumbles into a metal cart of a vendor yelling, *Red Hots! Get 'em while they're red hot!* through clouds of steam. Eventually one day becomes the next and truth squats at the curb, blue as a bruise, as Jesuits move from *lait chaud* in the refectory to desks piled with arcana, waiting till lunch to switch to the hard stuff.

River like a slug in June, mud and more mud passing by, silt for the Delta, memory scoured from banks upriver, from territories once French and Indian, St. Louis regent of the upper valley, New Orleans the queen below. Imagine then the moment of purchase, the swift exchange of documents and flags, Toussaint and Napoleon menacing the freshly minted borders, the snits and snares of surrender to the bawdy boy of a nation set on conquest. A small army dispatched to measure mountains, to gather pelts and seed pods, to list the names of tribes on the journey west, thick-tongued mercenaries misinterpreting the nuances of

fealty, front men for speculators who could reduce the filigree of Creole society to knots on a surveyor's rope. The tourist is to believe that what remains of this plot is a flair for gracious living, nostalgic tidbits of burnt sugar served on doilies in the Quarter. But each Steamboat Gothic, every shotgun and project holds a secret, some hoodoo against the invader scrawled on wallpaper, stashed beneath the floorboards, locked in a pantry. The city itself settles deeper into that great bowl where all worlds—new and old, first and third—splash about.

Point your shoes where you want to go. Only in this way will you know direction in a land that sloughs itself daily, where tiny territories slip between your toes and seasons exceed meaning, just bloom and rain, rain and bloom, no gap between Carnival and Lent, Lent and Carnival, where upriver and down are the cardinal points, till the storm comes that changes the destiny of water, the current reversed like an infant refusing birth, aching back toward the warm and murky middle.

Bend down here; stroke the print of lovers in the sodden grass, a heel here, a knee there, the weight of their ardor in the aftermath. Watch the bodies of August wash by and know your turn will come. Pray now for those on foot, that they make the bridge by sundown, that they cross over, mercy! cross over for good.