

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Lisel Mueller**  
**- poems -**

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## Lisel Mueller(February 8, 1924)

an American poet.

She was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1924 and immigrated to America at the age of 15. Her father, Fritz Neumann, was a professor at Evansville College. Her mother died in 1953. "Though my family landed in the Midwest, we lived in urban or suburban environments," she once wrote. She and her husband, Paul Mueller (d. 2001) built a home in Lake Forest, Illinois in the 1960s, where they raised two daughters and lived for many years. Mueller currently resides in a retirement community in Chicago. Her poems are extremely accessible, yet intricate and layered. While at times whimsical and possessing a sly humor, there is an underlying sadness in much of her work.

She graduated from the University of Evansville in 1944 and has taught at the University of Chicago, Elmhurst College in Illinois, and Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont.

Mueller has written book reviews for the Chicago Daily News.

# A Day Like Any Other

Such insignificance: a glance  
at your record on the doctor's desk  
or a letter not meant for you.  
How could you have known? It's not true  
that your life passes before you  
in rapid motion, but your watch  
suddenly ticks like an amplified heart,  
the hands freezing against a white  
that is a judgment. Otherwise nothing.  
The face in the mirror is still yours.  
Two men pass on the sidewalk  
and do not stare at your window.  
Your room is silent, the plants  
locked inside their mysterious lives  
as always. The queen-of-the-night  
refuses to bloom, does not accept  
your definition. It makes no sense,  
your scanning the street for a traffic snarl,  
a new crack in the pavement,  
a flag at half-mast -- signs  
of some disturbance in the world  
because your friend, the morning sun,  
has turned its dark side toward you.

Lisel Mueller

# Alive Together

Speaking of marvels, I am alive  
together with you, when I might have been  
alive with anyone under the sun,  
when I might have been Abelard's woman  
or the whore of a Renaissance pope  
or a peasant wife with not enough food  
and not enough love, with my children  
dead of the plague. I might have slept  
in an alcove next to the man  
with the golden nose, who poked it  
into the business of stars,  
or sewn a starry flag  
for a general with wooden teeth.  
I might have been the exemplary Pocahontas  
or a woman without a name  
weeping in Master's bed  
for my husband, exchanged for a mule,  
my daughter, lost in a drunken bet.  
I might have been stretched on a totem pole  
to appease a vindictive god  
or left, a useless girl-child,  
to die on a cliff. I like to think  
I might have been Mary Shelley  
in love with a wrong-headed angel,  
or Mary's friend. I might have been you.  
This poem is endless, the odds against us are endless,  
our chances of being alive together  
statistically nonexistent;  
still we have made it, alive in a time  
when rationalists in square hats  
and hatless Jehovah's Witnesses  
agree it is almost over,  
alive with our lively children  
who-but for endless ifs-  
might have missed out on being alive  
together with marvels and follies  
and longings and lies and wishes  
and error and humor and mercy  
and journeys and voices and faces

and colors and summers and mornings  
and knowledge and tears and chance.

Lisel Mueller

## Another Version

Our trees are aspens, but people  
mistake them for birches;  
they think of us as characters  
in a Russian novel, Kitty and Levin  
living contentedly in the country.  
Our friends from the city watch the birds  
and rabbits feeding together  
on top of the deep, white snow.  
(We have Russian winters in Illinois,  
but no sleighbells, possums instead of wolves,  
no trusted servants to do our work.)  
As in a Russian play, an old man  
lives in our house, he is my father;  
he lets go of life in such slow motion,  
year after year, that the grief  
is stuck inside me, a poisoned apple  
that won't go up or down.  
But like the three sisters, we rarely speak  
of what keeps us awake at night;  
like them, we complain about things  
that don't really matter and talk  
of our pleasures and of the future:  
we tell each other the willows  
are early this year, hazy with green.

Lisel Mueller

# Bedtime Story

The moon lies on the river  
like a drop of oil.  
The children come to the banks to be healed  
of their wounds and bruises.  
The fathers who gave them their wounds and bruises  
come to be healed of their rage.  
The mothers grow lovely; their faces soften,  
the birds in their throats awake.  
They all stand hand in hand  
and the trees around them,  
forever on the verge  
of becoming one of them,  
stop shuddering and speak their first word.

But that is not the beginning.  
It is the end of the story,  
and before we come to the end,  
the mothers and fathers and children  
must find their way to the river,  
separately, with no one to guide them.  
That is the long, pitiless part,  
and it will scare you.

Lisel Mueller

# Blood Oranges

In 1936, a child  
in Hitler's Germany,  
what did I know about the war in Spain?  
Andalusia was a tango  
on a wind-up gramophone,  
Franco a hero's face in the paper.  
No one told me about a poet  
for whose sake I might have learned Spanish  
bleeding to death on a barren hill.  
All I knew of Spain  
were those precious imported treats  
we splurged on for Christmas.  
I remember pulling the sections apart,  
lining them up, sucking each one  
slowly, so the red sweetness  
would last and last --  
while I was reading a poem  
by a long-dead German poet  
in which the woods stood safe  
under the moon's milky eye  
and the white fog in the meadows  
aspired to become lighter than air.

Lisel Mueller



# Curriculum Vitae

1992

- 1) I was born in a Free City, near the North Sea.
- 2) In the year of my birth, money was shredded into confetti. A loaf of bread cost a million marks. Of course I do not remember this.
- 3) Parents and grandparents hovered around me. The world I lived in had a soft voice and no claws.
- 4) A cornucopia filled with treats took me into a building with bells. A wide-bosomed teacher took me in.
- 5) At home the bookshelves connected heaven and earth.
- 6) On Sundays the city child waded through pinecones and primrose marshes, a short train ride away.
- 7) My country was struck by history more deadly than earthquakes or hurricanes.
- 8) My father was busy eluding the monsters. My mother told me the walls had ears. I learned the burden of secrets.
- 9) I moved into the too bright days, the too dark nights of adolescence.
- 10) Two parents, two daughters, we followed the sun and the moon across the ocean. My grandparents stayed behind in darkness.
- 11) In the new language everyone spoke too fast. Eventually I caught up with them.
- 12) When I met you, the new language became the language of love.
- 13) The death of the mother hurt the daughter into poetry.

The daughter became a mother of daughters.

14) Ordinary life: the plenty and thick of it. Knots tying threads to everywhere. The past pushed away, the future left unimagined for the sake of the glorious, difficult, passionate present.

15) Years and years of this.

16) The children no longer children. An old man's pain, an old man's loneliness.

17) And then my father too disappeared.

18) I tried to go home again. I stood at the door to my childhood, but it was closed to the public.

19) One day, on a crowded elevator, everyone's face was younger than mine.

20) So far, so good. The brilliant days and nights are breathless in their hurry. We follow, you and I.

Lisel Mueller

# Five For Country Music

## I. Insomnia

The bulb at the front door burns and burns.  
If it were a white rose it would tire of blooming  
through another endless night.

The moon knows the routine;  
it beats the bushes from east to west  
and sets empty-handed. Again the one  
she is waiting for has outrun the moon.

## II. Old Money

The spotted hands shake as they polish the coins.

The shiny penny goes under the tongue,  
the two silver pieces  
weighted by pyramids  
will shut down the eyes.

All the rest is paper,  
useless in any world but this.

## III. Home Movie

She knows that walk, that whistle, that knock.

It's the black wolf who sticks  
his floured paw underneath the door.

She tries not to open. One look at his face  
and she'll drop the gun. He will pick it up  
and turn it on her where she waits,  
her eyes shining, her hands over her head.

## IV. Golden Boy

Whitewashed, the eyes refuse you.

And so the mouth must be serene,  
the muscles play, the body  
take an easy stance

to divert you from the two  
boarded-up chambers  
where someone has died.

#### V. Washing Day

Each year her laundry line gets lighter.  
One by one they disappear,  
ten little Indians. They take their socks,  
their jeans, their stiff plaid shirts.

Above the Ford on its concrete blocks,  
striped and zippered,  
her cotton dress flutters on and on.

Lisel Mueller

# For A Thirteenth Birthday

You have read War and Peace.  
Now here is Sister Carrie,  
not up to Tolstoy; still  
it will second the real world:  
predictable planes and levels,  
pavement that holds you,  
stairs that lift you,  
ice that trips you,  
nights that begin after sunset,  
four lunar phases,  
a finite house.

I give you Dreiser  
although (or because)  
I am no longer sure.  
Lately I have been walking into glass doors.  
Through the car windows, curbs disappear.  
On the highway, wrong turnoffs become irresistible,  
someone else is controlling the wheel.  
Sleepless nights pile up like a police record;  
all my friends are getting divorced.  
Language, my old comrade, deserts me;  
words are misused or forgotten,  
consonants fight each other  
between my upper and lower teeth.  
I write "fiend" for "friend"  
and "word" for "world",  
remember comes out with an "m" missing.

I used to be able to find my way in the dark,  
sure of the furniture,  
but the town I lived in for years  
has pulled up its streets in my absence,  
disguised its buildings behind my back.  
My neighbor at dinner glances  
at his cuffs, his palms;  
he has memorized certain phrases,  
but does not speak my language.  
Suddenly I am aware

no one at the table does.

And so I give you Dreiser,  
his measure of certainty:  
a table that's oak all the way through,  
real and fragrant flowers,  
skirts from sheep and silkworms,  
no unknown fibers;  
a language as plain as money,  
a workable means of exchange;  
a world whose very meanness is solid,  
mud into mortar, and you are sure  
of what will injure you.

I give you names like nails,  
walls that withstand your pounding,  
doors that are hard to open,  
but once they are open, admit you  
into rooms that breathe pure sun.  
I give you trees that lose their leaves,  
as you knew they would,  
and then come green again.  
I give you  
fruit preceded by flowers,  
Venus supreme in the sky,  
the miracle of always  
landing on your feet,  
even though the earth  
rotates on its axis.

Start out with that, at least.

Lisel Mueller

# Immortality

In Sleeping Beauty's castle  
the clock strikes one hundred years  
and the girl in the tower returns to the world.  
So do the servants in the kitchen,  
who don't even rub their eyes.  
The cook's right hand, lifted  
an exact century ago,  
completes its downward arc  
to the kitchen boy's left ear;  
the boy's tensed vocal cords  
finally let go  
the trapped, enduring whimper,  
and the fly, arrested mid-plunge  
above the strawberry pie  
fulfills its abiding mission  
and dives into the sweet, red glaze.

As a child I had a book  
with a picture of that scene.  
I was too young to notice  
how fear persists, and how  
the anger that causes fear persists,  
that its trajectory can't be changed  
or broken, only interrupted.  
My attention was on the fly:  
that this slight body  
with its transparent wings  
and life-span of one human day  
still craved its particular share  
of sweetness, a century later.

Lisel Mueller

# Monet Refuses The Operation

Doctor, you say there are no haloes  
around the streetlights in Paris  
and what I see is an aberration  
caused by old age, an affliction.  
I tell you it has taken me all my life  
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,  
to soften and blur and finally banish  
the edges you regret I don't see,  
to learn that the line I called the horizon  
does not exist and sky and water,  
so long apart, are the same state of being.  
Fifty-four years before I could see  
Rouen cathedral is built  
of parallel shafts of sun,  
and now you want to restore  
my youthful errors: fixed  
notions of top and bottom,  
the illusion of three-dimensional space,  
wisteria separate  
from the bridge it covers.  
What can I say to convince you  
the Houses of Parliament dissolves  
night after night to become  
the fluid dream of the Thames?  
I will not return to a universe  
of objects that don't know each other,  
as if islands were not the lost children  
of one great continent. The world  
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,  
becomes water, lilies on water,  
above and below water,  
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow  
and white and cerulean lamps,  
small fists passing sunlight  
so quickly to one another  
that it would take long, streaming hair  
inside my brush to catch it.  
To paint the speed of light!  
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,



burn to mix with air  
and change our bones, skin, clothes  
to gases. Doctor,  
if only you could see  
how heaven pulls earth into its arms  
and how infinitely the heart expands  
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

Lisel Mueller

# Moon Fishing

When the moon was full they came to the water.  
some with pitchforks, some with rakes,  
some with sieves and ladles,  
and one with a silver cup.

And they fished til a traveler passed them and said,  
"Fools,  
to catch the moon you must let your women  
spread their hair on the water --  
even the wily moon will leap to that bobbing  
net of shimmering threads,  
gasp and flop till its silver scales  
lie black and still at your feet."

And they fished with the hair of their women  
till a traveler passed them and said,  
"Fools,  
do you think the moon is caught lightly,  
with glitter and silk threads?  
You must cut out your hearts and bait your hooks  
with those dark animals;  
what matter you lose your hearts to reel in your dream?"

And they fished with their tight, hot hearts  
till a traveler passed them and said,  
"Fools,  
what good is the moon to a heartless man?  
Put back your hearts and get on your knees  
and drink as you never have,  
until your throats are coated with silver  
and your voices ring like bells."

And they fished with their lips and tongues  
until the water was gone  
and the moon had slipped away  
in the soft, bottomless mud.

Lisel Mueller

# Paul Delvaux: The Village of the Mermaids

Who is that man in black, walking  
away from us into the distance?  
The painter, they say, took a long time  
finding his vision of the world.

The mermaids, if that is what they are  
under their full-length skirts,  
sit facing each other  
all down the street, more of an alley,  
in front of their gray row houses.  
They all look the same, like a fair-haired  
order of nuns, or like prostitutes  
with chaste, identical faces.  
How calm they are, with their vacant eyes,  
their hands in laps that betray nothing.  
Only one has scales on her dusky dress.

It is 1942; it is Europe,  
and nothing fits. The one familiar figure  
is the man in black approaching the sea,  
and he is small and walking away from us.

Lisel Mueller

# Reading The Brothers Grimm To Jenny

Jenny, your mind commands  
kingdoms of black and white:  
you shoulder the crow on your left,  
the snowbird on your right;  
for you the cinders part  
and let the lentils through,  
and noise falls into place  
as screech or sweet roo-coo,  
while in my own, real, world  
gray foxes and gray wolves  
bargain eye to eye,  
and the amazing dove  
takes shelter under the wing  
of the raven to keep dry.

Knowing that you must climb,  
one day, the ancient tower  
where disenchantment binds  
the curls of innocence,  
that you must live with power  
and honor circumstance,  
that choice is what comes true--  
oh, Jenny, pure in heart,  
why do I lie to you?

Why do I read you tales  
in which birds speak the truth  
and pity cures the blind,  
and beauty reaches deep  
to prove a royal mind?  
Death is a small mistake  
there, where the kiss revives;  
Jenny, we make just dreams  
out of our unjust lives.

Still, when your truthful eyes,  
your keen, attentive stare,  
endow the vacuous slut  
with royalty, when you match

her soul to her shimmering hair,  
what can she do but rise  
to your imagined throne?  
And what can I, but see  
beyond the world that is,  
when, faithful, you insist  
I have the golden key--  
and learn from you once more  
the terror and the bliss,  
the world as it might be?

Submitted by David Shackelford

Lisel Mueller

# Reasons for Numbers

1.

Because I exist.

2.

Because there must be a reason  
why I should cast a shadow.

. . .

10.

Created functionless, for the sheer play  
of the mind in its tens of thousands of moves.

Lisel Mueller

# Scenic Route

For Lucy, who called them "ghost houses."

Someone was always leaving  
and never coming back.  
The wooden houses wait like old wives  
along this road; they are everywhere,  
abandoned, leaning, turning gray.

Someone always traded  
the lonely beauty  
of hemlock and stony lakeshore  
for survival, packed up his life  
and drove off to the city.  
In the yards the apple trees  
keep hanging on, but the fruit  
grows smaller year by year.

When we come this way again  
the trees will have gone wild,  
the houses collapsed, not even worth  
the human act of breaking in.  
Fields will have taken over.

What we will recognize  
is the wind, the same fierce wind,  
which has no history.

Lisel Mueller

# Sometimes, When the Light

Sometimes, when the light strikes at odd angles  
and pulls you back into childhood

and you are passing a crumbling mansion  
completely hidden behind old willows

or an empty convent guarded by hemlocks  
and giant firs standing hip to hip,

you know again that behind that wall,  
under the uncut hair of the willows

something secret is going on,  
so marvelous and dangerous

that if you crawled through and saw,  
you would die, or be happy forever.

Lisel Mueller



# The End of Science Fiction

This is not fantasy, this is our life.  
We are the characters  
who have invaded the moon,  
who cannot stop their computers.  
We are the gods who can unmake  
the world in seven days.

Both hands are stopped at noon.  
We are beginning to live forever,  
in lightweight, aluminum bodies  
with numbers stamped on our backs.  
We dial our words like Muzak.  
We hear each other through water.

The genre is dead. Invent something new.  
Invent a man and a woman  
naked in a garden,  
invent a child that will save the world,  
a man who carries his father  
out of a burning city.  
Invent a spool of thread  
that leads a hero to safety,  
invent an island on which he abandons  
the woman who saved his life  
with no loss of sleep over his betrayal.

Invent us as we were  
before our bodies glittered  
and we stopped bleeding:  
invent a shepherd who kills a giant,  
a girl who grows into a tree,  
a woman who refuses to turn  
her back on the past and is changed to salt,  
a boy who steals his brother's birthright  
and becomes the head of a nation.  
Invent real tears, hard love,  
slow-spoken, ancient words,  
difficult as a child's  
first steps across a room.

Lisel Mueller

# The Laughter Of Women

The laughter of women sets fire  
to the Halls of Injustice  
and the false evidence burns  
to a beautiful white lightness

It rattles the Chambers of Congress  
and forces the windows wide open  
so the fatuous speeches can fly out

The laughter of women wipes the mist  
from the spectacles of the old;  
it infects them with a happy flu  
and they laugh as if they were young again

Prisoners held in underground cells  
imagine that they see daylight  
when they remember the laughter of women

It runs across water that divides,  
and reconciles two unfriendly shores  
like flares that signal the news to each other

What a language it is, the laughter of women,  
high-flying and subversive.  
Long before law and scripture  
we heard the laughter, we understood freedom.

Lisel Mueller

# Things

What happened is, we grew lonely  
living among the things,  
so we gave the clock a face,  
the chair a back,  
the table four stout legs  
which will never suffer fatigue.

We fitted our shoes with tongues  
as smooth as our own  
and hung tongues inside bells  
so we could listen  
to their emotional language,

and because we loved graceful profiles  
the pitcher received a lip,  
the bottle a long, slender neck.

Even what was beyond us  
was recast in our image;  
we gave the country a heart,  
the storm an eye,  
the cave a mouth  
so we could pass into safety.

Lisel Mueller

# What The Dog Perhaps Hears

If an inaudible whistle  
blown between our lips  
can send him home to us,  
then silence is perhaps  
the sound of spiders breathing  
and roots mining the earth;  
it may be asparagus heaving,  
headfirst, into the light  
and the long brown sound  
of cracked cups, when it happens.  
We would like to ask the dog  
if there is a continuous whir  
because the child in the house  
keeps growing, if the snake  
really stretches full length  
without a click and the sun  
breaks through clouds without  
a decibel of effort,  
whether in autumn, when the trees  
dry up their wells, there isn't a shudder  
too high for us to hear.

What is it like up there  
above the shut-off level  
of our simple ears?  
For us there was no birth cry,  
the newborn bird is suddenly here,  
the egg broken, the nest alive,  
and we heard nothing when the world changed.

Lisel Mueller

# Why We Tell Stories

For Linda Foster

I

Because we used to have leaves  
and on damp days  
our muscles feel a tug,  
painful now, from when roots  
pulled us into the ground

and because our children believe  
they can fly, an instinct retained  
from when the bones in our arms  
were shaped like zithers and broke  
neatly under their feathers

and because before we had lungs  
we knew how far it was to the bottom  
as we floated open-eyed  
like painted scarves through the scenery  
of dreams, and because we awakened

and learned to speak

2

We sat by the fire in our caves,  
and because we were poor, we made up a tale  
about a treasure mountain  
that would open only for us

and because we were always defeated,  
we invented impossible riddles  
only we could solve,  
monsters only we could kill,  
women who could love no one else  
and because we had survived  
sisters and brothers, daughters and sons,  
we discovered bones that rose  
from the dark earth and sang

as white birds in the trees

3

Because the story of our life  
becomes our life

Because each of us tells  
the same story  
but tells it differently

and none of us tells it  
the same way twice

Because grandmothers looking like spiders  
want to enchant the children  
and grandfathers need to convince us  
what happened happened because of them

and though we listen only  
haphazardly, with one ear,  
we will begin our story  
with the word and

Lisel Mueller