

6 Poems by Maria Bennett

Ancestors In The Kitchen

Ancestors in the kitchen
our dead come to us
in strange places
speak to us
in unexpected phrases
the morse code
of el mas alla
of what's beyond
telegraphed in the steady beat
of a knife at work
chopping onions
for easter dinner
we find our departed
in our kitchens
asking us to plunge our fingers
into paprika and butter and
redden them in remembrance
stretching flour and water into dough
that we knead with their
forgotten dreams
knowing

all cooks
are the real technicians of the sacred
and at times like this
we would rather stay in the kitchen
than even write poetry

I Dream Of The Number 60

I dream of the number 60
the dream enters through
an unseen hole
in the pocket of memory
the forgotten window
left open to divination
the gates of ivory in deceit
or the gates of horn in truth
like charles demuth
who saw the figure 5 in gold
I see the number 60
etched in glittery ink
on a calling card
a man in a red fez
hands it to me
and says
this is your lucky number
so stop stealing from the poor box

he looks like sun ra
wild with truth
so I take him very seriously
maybe this will change your life
he adds
singing
if tears were diamonds
i'd be a millionaire
I try to stop him when he leaves
but there's a fire burning beneath my feet
and it's destroying nothing at all
just blazing with more undeciphered gold in its flames
while everything stays intact
but is brighter than before
he shouts over his shoulder
your ancestors are coming through here
and they are trying to speak
through your own misinterpretation of code
so listen up
your
anger burns through the floor boards
but it's fire that heats this house
and the orishas
are always closer
than you think

in night all is passage

in night all is passage
where we have ransacked
the libraries of angels
in our sleep
and i have plaited clocks
in my hair
for each missed moment
we dance
the waltz of the bruised rose
as stars offer
wordless consolation
and body reaches
for body
in this dream
we ferry
beyond
all shores

in your absence

in your absence
i miss your
hands
like dowsing rods
searching for uncharted springs
i find instead
undetected signs of love
hyacinths left in the kitchen
a photograph of you at seven
tucked into a book
eyes wide and unguarded

before you learned to hold your misery
like a dance partner
swaying but never
letting
go

poem for ella fitzgerald

april 25, 1917

voice born

to hit a high c

as clear

as a muezzin's

call to prayer

sure to make you change

your definition

of religion

and possibly

perfection

1932

dressed in hand-me-downs

reform school runaway

from the colored orphans' asylum

ella chases a train

to the apollo theater

wants to dance before the crowd
in old men's boots
but the competition is too stiff
so she sings instead
imitating her favorite connie boswell song
to win the prize
twenty five dollars
a depression-era fortune
i know how to sing by listening
to the horns
she said
don't look at her face
just listen to the voice
said chick webb
who could not scratch away
ella's alchemical gold
when he died
she took the band with her
anyway
miss ella
life held together
with safety pins and spit
found the rhythm of each missed moment
knowing all we love

can be taken from us
in an instant
and everything starts
with all that's broken
wrapping the mess of life
around her shoulders
like a chiffon scarf
billie holliday said
good morning heartache
and welcome
ella said
get the hell out
and take your cardboard suitcase
full of grief
with you
when they finally met
ella at twenty
too shy to speak
held out an autograph book
instead
today she holds out her arms
standing like an oak
in bronze
feet firmly planted
her statue

facing the hudson
saying stay a while with me
and listen
blocks from where
her home is now a bodega
in downtown yonkers
selling meat pies
she would have loved
ella
always hungry for more
looking out at the river
in a fancy crinoline hoop skirt
with a grin as wide and all-knowing as louis armstrong's
her twin in nostalgia for a lost childhood
mal du pays inconnu
homesick for an unknown land
settling for grits and gravy
and a winning hand at the card table
when she died
the obit in the times said
she was a black woman singing songs
written by jewish men
to a white christian audience
but
the paper of record

should have paid
more attention
ella with an understanding of phrase and light
which defied the laws of physics
here is the true god particle
she says
the ear's majesty
she offers
in a scat deconstruction of grace
finding the song
in all that abides
when the only gift left us
is this voice
that dances
with the fineness of glass
all
embracing

*Poem for the one hundredth year
of eleanora Fagan*

in june, 1941
billie holiday said to lester young
there's

too much music
here
for the heart
to hold

but not enough
white gardenias
prez

take your horn
and sing
to me
and I will make
my voice
a reed to
answer
o brother
in broken saxophone
melody

in this church
of misplaced prayer
that is life
without its skin

the sound
of blue moon
and strange fruit
early on sound brassy
but later
seem
slightly out of tune
with
whiteness of flower
and drug
and shroud

march 12, 1959
pres no longer can slip her the note
leaves his blood in harlem's stomach
this world is but a shadow
of the real

a point of departure
for embarcations into a place
of purer harmony
where god comes in
through the ears
alone

lester plays his notes

in between

billie said

she understands time

like no other singer

answers lester

red norvo would add

pretty is the only way

to fly

now

we write all our poems

for the notes in between

and

strain for beauty

when the obbligato's miracle

fails

as the critic said

if there were not such pain

would the song still be as sweet?