Segue
online literary journal

Leslie Anne Mcilroy
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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions via email of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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Herself to be a Mansion

She is a wrecking ball apologizing for hitting the house next door—amends like brick breaking, dust settling.

She is constructing, she says, herself to be a mansion. We wear hard hats and bright coats, learn not to look up, to scrub toilets, do laundry, fry fish sticks in her absence, to brace, to lie. We go it alone knowing the importance of actuating, finding oneself despite children. Travel, sex and Tao take lots of space.

I fix nothing with this hammer of forgiveness, my tools chisel-like, prying open small doors, chipping away.

I’m all locks, alarms, dogs and shutters. And no, I don’t invite her in. Light only makes the room smaller.
Author Notes

Leslie Anne Mcilroy won the 1997 Slipstream Poetry Chapbook Prize for Gravel, the 2001 Word Press Poetry Prize for her full-length collection Rare Space, and the 1997 Chicago Literary Awards. Her second book, Liquid Like This, was published by Word Press in 2008, and Slag is forthcoming from Main Street Rag in 2015. Leslie’s poems appear in Jubilat, The Mississippi Review, PANK, Pearl, New Ohio Review, and more. Leslie is managing editor of HEArt (Human Equity through Art) and works as a copywriter in Pittsburgh where she lives with her daughter Silas.

About the Work

I don’t believe this poem was “sparked” as much as surfaced. It is a very personal poem, as many of my poems are, and attempts to capture a sense of damage by abandonment—the struggle to understand a certain kind of selfishness guised as personal growth/self-actuation. There is a tone of sarcasm, a mocking sense on the part of the speaker who is trying to resolve the effects of desertion as a child, trying to understand the boundaries this creates between a mother and daughter in the long run. The speaker has learned a protection, a way to keep from getting hurt again—maybe a revenge of sorts, a closing of doors.

The poem was not a hard poem to write once honing in on “home” as a reigning metaphor and wreckage as a consequence. I guess the poem is really about an inappropriate selfishness typical of young mothers, who have yet to “find/know themselves” and find that more compelling than attending to the needs of a family.

The images (I hope) are chosen carefully to move the narrative forward in a fresh and unexpected way. The phonetic quality of the words (brick breaking, dust settling; hard hats and bright coats) were used to have the harsh sound, a hammer-like quality.

I love images and the idea of a person as a wrecking ball (I pray to god I didn’t get that from Miley Cyrus), especially a person who is so caught up in trying to become whole, that they don’t realize the collateral damage of their self-centeredness. So, the images were very clear to me—the idea of a living space/a house/home that is constructed/ruined and rebuilt with a protective/defensive armor.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the poem was addressing the anger/smallness of the speaker—the inability to forgive. I tend to write at night with a drink (which I am doing now) and revise in the morning with coffee (which I will do tomorrow). This poem took a number of shapes, but essentially ended up being built on the format of imagistically tight (for the most part) triplets (is that the right word? Three-line stanzas). I felt it suggested the construction of a self that is protected/compacted/limited in an ability to emotionally give.

Most times I just keep writing. When I get stuck or when the poem seems at a dead end, I put it away or begin it again in a completely different way. I think I was in love with the line “herself to be a mansion” and that resolved most everything in the poem for me, always coming back to what it means to want to be so big and enlightened (almost a Deepak Chopra parody), that you are blind to what you are willing to sacrifice to appear illuminated/cultured/experienced and free.
I have folders and folders of drafts I never go back to (lord forbid anyone gets my hard drive when I die—I would be mortified). Often if a poem doesn’t work in a few days, I give up on it and believe the process of writing it will somehow inform some future work.

I have some poems I am in love with that have been rejected a billion times, but the hard trick is to keep believing if you feel strongly, keep sending out. Workshopping is also a huge asset, but these days I tend to write in a vacuum, only sending drafts to a few intimate writers, if that. I am often disappointed with the response, but try to heed wisdom.

Poetry for me is a very intense kind of communication that can make a reader feel very intimately something new and raw and real, with deft juxtapositions of image, narrative tightness and a risk-taking. The poem has to have heart. I even love prose writers who write like poets: Jeannette Winterson & Carol Maso, for instance. For me it is a willingness to imagine something radical, to witness a truth, to express a secret, to challenge the reader with an openness that can be brutal or beautiful, or both.

Many of the poets I love are far more accomplished/educated, take far more chances with form and let their poems go places I am afraid I often avoid. I use these poets as inspiration, try to learn from them: Jericho Brown, Naomi Shihab Nye, Sekou Sundiata, Saeed Jones, Sharon Olds, Suheir Hammad, Andrea Gibson. Sometimes I am dumbfounded by their ability to get from here to there, leaving the reader changed in an emotional way that is inescapable.

I believe that poetry’s essential power is to alter the reader in some way—make her or him feel something/see something they have not necessarily felt before, and if they have, to give it some clarity, emotional presence on the page.

**Leslie Anne Mcilroy on the Web**

lamcilroy.org

heartjournalonline.com

www.connotationpress.com/poetry/2099-leslie-anne-mcilroy-poetry