

DIANE SEUSS

## My Education

Not just what I feel but what I know  
and how I know it, my unscholarliness,  
my rawness, all rise out of the cobbled  
landscape I was born to. Those of you  
raised similarly, I want to say: this is not  
a detriment and it is not a benefit. It only is,  
it is, like a cobbled house is, fieldstones  
and mortar, slipshod, spare parts welded  
crookedly, crudely but cleverly, skinny  
iron winding staircase leading to the attic  
bolted on both ends, and up there, a gap  
in the window where the snow comes in  
and architects a little drift on the bed.

And meals were cobbled. Kernels on the cob  
haphazardly arranged, not lined up in military  
rows, and sometimes a row was not filled in  
at all, and your teeth, when biting down,  
met an emptiness. And shotgun pellets  
in the rabbit meat. Stray hobnail dishes, studded,  
rescued from an abandoned house on fire,  
in an array of jewel tones, would appear  
without warning on the table. A blood-colored  
butter dish, yellow perch on a cobalt blue platter  
encircled in fried egg sacs. Or ducks or a pheasant  
thrown erratic on the back porch, payment  
for something given or not taken.

When I'd been away and returned, I could see,  
freshly, the cobbled lushness of the trees,  
and the arbitrary drift of brown spots  
on the white cows in the meadows,  
and the wireworm-filled tunnels in the morels  
at the base of dead cherry trees. The cemetery  
is unsystematic, as is the library, graves scattered

like chicken feed, books strewn on old tables  
from canceled Sunday school classrooms. I loved  
books but learned very little in school. I could read,  
so the reading instruction drove me nearly mad,  
and I plugged my ears, first with my hands  
until I was caught, then with something I could do  
inside my head that muffled the teacher's voice  
like she was speaking into a canning jar.

What I know of literature, of history, is spotty.  
I was a poor student, disengaged from the things  
I didn't need, and I knew what I needed,  
and that the time to get it was now.

When I needed Keats, I got him. I read enough  
to get the point, then tuned in to his ghost.  
I read most of Joseph Conrad, having figured out  
that I could find some things repulsive and still  
require them for my project. My project  
was my life. There was no vision or overarching  
plan. There was only foraging for supplies,  
many of which were full of worms or covered  
in dust, like apples on the orchard floor,  
and furniture junked on the side of the road.  
Have you ever seen a pie cooling on the sill  
and found yourself hungry enough to steal it?  
Or does that only happen in picture books?  
If you are like me, to learn of the gods you must  
beg, borrow, or steal. Eavesdrop, as gossip  
is sagacity, a word I learned from Emily  
Dickinson. Don't underestimate direct  
experience. Ants know earth. Dragonflies  
know air. A cobbled mind is not fatal.  
You have to be willing to self-educate  
at a moment's notice, and to be caught  
in your ignorance by people who will  
use it against you. You will mispronounce  
words in front of a crowd. It cannot be  
avoided. But your poems, with all of their  
deficiencies, products of lifelong observation  
and asymmetric knowledge, will be your own.

Built on the edge of tradition, they will  
rarely be anthologized. I have camped  
at this outpost my whole life, as did my mother,  
who slept on sugar sacks in the basement  
or on the front porch, in early spring,  
when snow still clumped around fugitive  
crocuses, just to keep herself forsaken.

## Simile

You can't be simile.  
Deep down even  
mud is not  
comparable. I had a friend  
whose smile was a frown.  
My last paramour, my very  
last, wore an atypical  
cowboy hat. A bit of a rodeo  
clown. Paranoid  
about the whole area of the belly  
button. People  
are so unlike.  
I had a side-eyeing dog.  
A king forced  
into a peasant's clothes. At the end,  
and there is always an end in tales  
of peasants, I'd look up and find him  
staring bullet holes into my skull.  
Not memorizing me.  
Asking to be rescued from his plight.  
Pain is the ultimate plight  
he might have said in a tale,  
but he could not talk  
until he came to my friend in a dream.  
Promise you'll tell mother I miss her,  
he said. And my friend fulfilled  
her promise. I almost wrote  
my friend fulfilled her primrose, an unlike  
flower. Big-ovary and hairy-stemmed,  
old, fertile, femme.  
My friend, who does not believe in portents,  
still obeyed the talking dog.  
This is her version of love, and it's her version  
all the way down.  
Death also incomparable, specific

only unto itself. Death to the dying must feel  
so contrary to death's history, as the ego  
dies hard. Mine. The hands curl in on themselves,  
fern fronds. When I nursed my baby decades  
back moonlight poured in the window,  
and starlight,  
and I felt myself click into the template,  
like a bone back into its joint,  
doing what mothers do and have done.  
Maybe I was painted on an urn somewhere.  
Until later when the handle busted off  
and the urn turned to dust and we were solidly,  
brutally nothing  
but ourselves.  
When I taught figuration  
I said the simile, with its like and as, confesses  
failure in its very nature. It can't transmogrify  
a spoon into a fish or revivify  
the marriage. We liked each other.  
We like each other no more,  
our loathing radical and strange.  
Nor can it warm  
the corpse and bring a throb back  
to its temple. The shroud,  
laundered and bleached,  
returns to its essential nature, bedsheet,  
with a mended scar  
and a menstrual stain shaped unlike  
any constellation of stars  
and goddamnit I sleep on it.

# Villanelle

I dreamed I was reading a villanelle  
in front of a crowd. Next to me on the floor  
was a large bag of garbage I'd mistakenly  
brought with me onto the stage. My own garbage.

And the crowd did not care about the villanelle.  
Its intricacies or its subject, which was ornate  
and thorny and probably none of my business.  
I was a snob in the midst of a throng of people

hungry only for the truth. I have never played  
the role of a snob or read a bad poem  
into a microphone next to a sack of my own  
garbage, in life or dream. What do you think

it means? Are the gods mocking me for acting  
in-the-know? This would happen back home a lot.  
Anybody who tooted their own horn  
or dared to sound as if they were an expert

on any subject were mocked and driven  
into the next county. Never hold yourself above.  
There is no expertise. There is only good sense,  
earned hard and held close to the vest.

It is not to be displayed but hoarded,  
like canned goods in a storm cellar.  
Go back for the garbage and deal with it.  
In so doing, if you rouse a swarm of flies,

they're yours to tolerate or swat. Choose  
your poison, but don't poison the well.  
Your dreams are just dreams, Diane,  
and all dreams go up in smoke.