

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.