

A Poem

by Michael BLUMENTHAL

Michael Blumenthal is the author of six collections of poetry, most recently *Dusty Angel* (1999), and editor of the collection *To Woo & To Wed: Poets on Love and Marriage* (1992). He is also author of a widely-acclaimed novel, *Weinstock Among The Dying*, a collection of essays, *When History Enters the House: Essays from Central Europe*, and the recently published memoir, *All My Mothers and Fathers* (HarperCollins, 2002). His work has been rewarded by several literary prizes, the most recent ones being the Harold U. Ribalow Prize for Fiction (1994) for *Weinstock*, and the Isabella Gardner Poetry Prize (1999) for *Dusty Angels*. For ten years he was Associate Professor of American Literature and Director of Creative Writing at Harvard University, and has been Distinguished Poet/Writer-in-Residence at numerous American colleges and universities, most recently at Santa Clara University in California. He has also been a Visiting Fulbright Professor in Budapest, Israel and Berlin, and is presently Professeur Associé at Université Jean Monnet (Saint-Étienne). The following—unpublished—poem, *Habitations*, is a gift of the author to this journal, a gift which is indeed most welcome.

Habitations

*In each of these houses, a habitation,
and, in each habitation, lives
in the making, small orgies
of particulars and wildnesses,
where unto some a Saviour is born*

unto others a mere profligacy
of wishes, desires, habits,
oracles of turkey and dressing,
an abundance of stuffing and egg nog,
a superfluity of cholesterol, chocolated
and whip-creamed, hydrogenated
until, in the arteries somewhere, it hardens,
but not now to contemplate such mortalities,
not now a feeling of death or diminishment,
but rather a survey of small abundances,
a log in the fire, a Chopin Nocturne
played by Arthur Rubinstein or Guomar Novaes,
a Bach cantata, old Elvis tunes or Tony
Bennett crooning to Bill Evans
a Schumann Lied, perhaps "Ich Grolle Nicht,"
sung by Hermann Prey, and, on the stove,
some hot Glühwein with cloves and cinnamon,
the scent of a child's popcorn, and,
under the tree-laden temporary greenery,
a cacophony of gifts—stacked, sorted, carded
for their proper recipients—and, outside,
on the grass, a thin encrustation of ice, testimony
to last night's ineffectual incursion of winter
above which, now, in early morning,
a mockingbird salutes from a branch of the Yaupon Holly
from where he has just evicted a pair of cardinals,
carmine and scarlet in their own way, who have gone
to join the nattering bluejay in a nearby oak,
a mini-menorah of birds, hoping that the minimal oil
of their cries will burn brightly enough to outlast
the mocker's oratory and hunger, as Bill ("William,"
he says, "really") who lives down the road on Merrie Lynn,
stops by to admire our half-finished, fudged, unfilligreed fence,
an urbanite's botched handiwork become suburban,
and our new kitten, L.C., trembles into the first light
of her new abode, a neighborhood filled with streets
named Hemlock, Kern Ramble, Merrie Lynn, Larry Lane,
a melting pot of the leftover and intermarried, the pierced,
poked, tattooed, ever-so-slightly marginaux of our local
mini-America, the Erikas and Pauls and Isabelles and Sams,
a Roger Tory Petersonesque amalgam of feathers and pedigrees,
of ever-so-slightly renovated rooms painted in earthtones
and then over-graffitied by children, termites, fire ants,
all things small and beautiful that thrive in this ancestral hotbed
of the mulched and munchable, the compost-driven,
antediluvian upsurge that heats and ferments, that scoops up
from the air an unimaginable abundance, a duff and detritus,
a lustful, free-floating amalgam of untethered dreams

and hopes, a gleeful relinquishment of the moral and moralistic,
 a Clintonesque, unimpeachably free-floating libido of aches
 and animas, a Freudian and Jungian broth, a flame acanthus
 eagerly awaiting its butterflies and hummingbirds,
 a millennial overabundance of webs and nets, jujubees
 of excess communications e-mailed and faxed and farted out
 into real and imaginary time, but brought to earth again
 by the soft gurglings of potato water stovetopped somewhere,
 the age-old lubricated stops and starts of love and desire,
 that old ridiculous harvest of human strivings and ambitions
 that ends, finally, when a democratic potato somewhere
 finds its way to a flotilla of mouths gathered around a table
 and the sweet counterproductivity of crême brûlée melts
 once more on the endlessly wagging tongue, reducing it
 to the love-hungry vehicle it was meant to be, delicious
 with horseradish sauce, or pickled on fresh rye, as is not
 befitting this particular season, but delectable nonetheless,
 so that the memory of all that is luscious fans out, broadens
 the appetite and, at the same time, the sympathy
 appetite brings in its delectable wake, so that, no,
 friends, this is not a poem whose purpose it is
 to overlook the suffering, the sick, the diminished, the deprived,
 but only to recognize that we do them no service
 when we sentimentalize our pains and pleasures,
 when we deprive the world of that sweet abundance
 which is sometimes to be taken from it, nor would my friend,
 the Hungarian poet Orbán, so unfairly stricken
 with Parkinson's disease, want us, on his behalf,
 to abstain from these simple pleasures
 which each illness and misfortune only convinces us
 are here to be relished; no, he would merely want us
 to lift yet another glass of palinka or scotch or cognac or feher bor
 and to give thanks for everything that trembles

on its way in or out of the earth, these splotched,
 repainted, reverberating, inhabited, habitable houses
 that continue to rotate on the ever-revolving, evolving planet
 with their habitations of grace and misery and hunger and love
 in God's name and our own, God bless us all.

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