

Poet of Note: A'yara Stein



Bio:

N. A'Yara Stein, born in Memphis in 1971, is a Romani-American poet and writer living on a chicory farm. She holds an MFA from the University of Arkansas and is a grant recipient of the Michigan Art Council and the Arkansas Arts Council and was the former editor of the arts quarterly *Gypsy Blood Review*. She's published in *America*, *The New Orleans Review*, *The Birmingham Poetry Review*, *The Oxford American*, *California Quarterly*, *Chiron Review*, *Crossroads: a Journal of Southern Culture*, *Great Midwestern Quarterly*, and *Poetry Motel* among others.

Self-interview:

How did I get into writing?

When I was a kid I spent a lot of time in my parents' dental office and to keep busy I would type out historical poetry; some of it rhymed "1492" and "ocean blue". Somehow I managed to not be shamed into quitting. Then I moved on to writing poetry for Love. Somehow I managed not be shamed into quitting.

What keeps me writing?

Good question. I actually stopped writing for nearly a decade after a bad relationship where a significant other burned my hard copies and deleted my hard drive. We are not together anymore. What kept me from writing? Love. What made me write again? Love.

What makes good poetry?

A good poem has emotion, energy, concise and accurate use of language; it can encapsulate ideas in the minimum of words. A good poem should lift the reader out of the ordinary and give a glimpse of a more illumining reality; it should surprise, if not enlighten. Content is arguably more important than style alone, one where the reader senses a oneness with the poet or perhaps an epiphany. A good poem is one you wished you wrote yourself.

WHY THE PROCESS WORKS THIS WAY

I don't know why the process works this way.
Is this the heart of detaching in love?
I don't have to prove I'm the one for you,
Or how in my chest pain prickles, then dissolves.
Who am I to say things aren't happening
Just exactly as they need to happen,
Like a glacier — vast and beautiful change
Sweeping the land clean of old boundaries?
Accept the inevitable; confusion
Doesn't always mean disaster looms.
Forget your hat, swirl your tongue around mine,
Slip icy hands, thirsting for heat—go ahead—
Underneath my clothes, release us into comfort.
Get it out. Get it all out, this magical
Uncertainty of direction; give yourself
Permission to be. Being is enough.
Surrender. You. Yes, you. It is time to let go,
Generous heart, who woke me with your kiss;
Kiss me now, now that you're fully awake.



IT'S ALL IN THE TRANSLATION

Ich liebe dich, mein teufel

Slick and luminous and vast, the Mississippi spreads impartial
as sunlight, eyes dancing up and down her back — the envy of her neighbors.

Here I am on the other side; what can we do with all that water?
I must tell you. I've got to tell you. I am afraid to cross this river.

Skin the glossy brown of caramel apples, you smell like ancient rosemary,
sweat and lemon; the stars so near your eyes they have volume.

Entirely self-invented, entirely self-made, angry evening wind whips the valley,
slings strands of hair into my eyes, gives nothing. I know about grief.

Just there, at the edge, is my first step. We haven't touched yet; you haven't sucked
the ends of my hair, little paint brushes to Klimt-coat pebbly nipples.

Just yet, I haven't licked your palms, pressed them open like pages in a book,
skin thin as a hummingbird, veins an intricate Braille for my salt-thirsty tongue.

Together now, we kiss across centuries, our traveler's energy comforts, defines.
Here we find no distance too great under the deep blue curve of sky.

TALL, THIN WINDOWS

You've banished this wife because I slight you.
But let me remind you how it was, and how
one cannot return to the twin bed, not ever,
and that alternative life of rotisserie pussy
will (unbelievable concept, I know) get old.
And after the weekend, even the kids leave home.

Your roam that crowded house of secrets
and dust I thought to catch fire to,
like I thought you'd set fire to mine,
full and given over to waiting, wanting.
Where I first fell, in just that place there,
your hands clenched around my wrists.

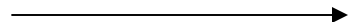
I balk at new delays, each incremental slip away
from getting to the open road of hard faith.
My tongue, unused to the patience of submission:
the bit, hard and metallic, mute in the mouth.
I tremble at the paradise of absence up ahead,
the rude shock of gravel that undercuts my feet.

Was it simply being simple,
trying to touch some invisible part
of ourselves yet untrampled or unscoured,
willing to make do if we could stay
reassigned to another disappointment,
the truth being so remote and unvisited
we couldn't ever be sure we'd really found it.



ADDENDUM: THE POET'S EPISTLE TO THE LONELY

There is an art of absence in the dense dash of the daily
life we all lead, the art of empty morning and night beds,
the absence of the failed promises of someone else
besides yourself, and after a while they hardly matter.
No, that's a lie;
this absence slams your heart on day two-hundred forty-four
just as hard as the first day you parted ways.
Try to think not of yourself as wild
beast of human hope sweltered in fetid furs,
of optic nerves strained with all this not-seeing.



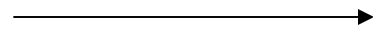
Come, in our spare time let's not seek revenge
until we erode the sound of the missing's name, turned it
from jalapeño to honey to vinegar.
Who needs to be an addict lugging a kit around
in search of a fix while love deals to someone else?
It's easy to confuse the heart;
understanding almost always comes near the end
of the edge of patience and nothing, just when you're ready to quit,
resist the silver charm dangled from the tongue of the beloved.

CARDINAL FAILURES

You're out for blood and there's no stopping you,
no use trying to disguise it as a lesser hunger.
Released from orbit, all day and night your motor
hums snug against the body's confinement
longing to escape, twist from taut buds
before the flesh erodes into hanging ribbons.
I, too, cannot reconcile myself with this
ordinary thing called marriage,
one of those corporeal terms you can't abide by
like a good and ordinary human.
The everyday's too everyday for your comfort;
It fits your mind's image only just well enough
to relent to the unease for a short time,
like a pair of slacks loaned for a round of golf.
You think I don't understand these longings
and so hope for that last black surge and blind swell,
that one rogue wave that will take us far apart.

HEART SHAPED EDIBLE PANTIES

In the sexxx shoppe, even the air is tinsly,
hot around the racks of spandex and plastic.
Two grunge girls with tie-dyed hair dance,
shove dirty dice and a single
red condom into their lover's fawn palm.
He counters with fistfuls of emotion
lotion pillow packs, showers them golden
with pleasure chest condom coins.
Their broomstick skirts swirl around him
shrieking like the drunken streets of Marseilles.



Fat chest churling tsunami waves,
a redhead giggles in giant gulps
as she ripples through
smoothes her eyes across nubby toys.

She is sugar cookie dough
scraped from the bowl with fingers,
determined not to go home alone
any more Saturday nights;
she oozes her breasts onto glass,
a display seen from all sides.

A buck toothed brunette prods her mate
with Max Arouse and a jock
pops his friend with a Christmas g-string.
They've never been dirty before and wonder why.

Dipping her head into notes of jazz
hung heavy on the line,
the sales girl is truly a honey.
Seeing her composure, each of us
is electric with hope, craves static.

A forty-something man grabs a stick
with a penis molded from hand-tinted
chocolate for his wife's birthday,
maybe thinks of her soft butterscotch voice
as he waits to pay. For her alone,
his arms are full of batteries and desire.

