

Searching For Home

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Poems

Robert Pack

S L / . N T
B O O K S

SEARCHING FOR HOME

Poems

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THE BUTTERFLY AND THE SUN

Do you remember that our son
Was asked in kindergarten class
“What’s very bright and comes out every day?”
Perhaps our son thought that
The question was intended as a trick
Because it seemed so obvious.
The answer that he gave
Was, “It is a butterfly.”
His teacher said that he was wrong,
That the right answer is the sun,
And told us that he is not ready for first grade.
“A butterfly also is correct,”
We pleaded on our son’s behalf,
“And has its own appeal, its charm,
And does evoke the image of the morning sun.”

“Shakespeare’s King Lear,” I lectured the young teacher,
“Imagined the great joy he’d feel
When reunited with Cordelia,
His one trustworthy child.
Even in prison, so I believe,
They would be free from political intrigue.
Lear says, ‘We’ll laugh at gilded butterflies,’
Which might well represent for him
Transcendence in this world.”
“Remember,” I said, “in Greek myths
A butterfly is symbol for
The everlasting soul.”

“In early fall,” my wife chimed in,
“Thousands of Monarch butterflies
Gather in Canada to begin
Their long migration down to Mexico’s
Central mountain villages,
Where tourists come to marvel
At the astounding spectacle.
(We need to make this pilgrimage ourselves.)
The butterflies ride the currents of the air
And navigate magnetically
According to the sun.
I don’t know how their wings,
So delicate, survive the currents of the wind.
Their sunset orange color warns the birds,
‘Beware, I may be poisonous to eat.’”

“Thanks, Dear,” I teased my wife,
“For your reminding me
You graduated *summa* from
Your kindergarten class.”

“But here is what I know about the sun:
In only half a dozen billion years,
It will use up its fuel, its hydrogen,
And enter its Red Giant phase.
Burning at three thousand K degrees,
It will expand, extinguishing all life on earth,
And thus fulfill its evolutionary fate,
At last becoming a White Dwarf.
And so, my dear, I move past you
As first in today’s grown-up kindergarten class.”

“White Dwarf, I fear, must have become by now
A term politically incorrect,
Doubly offensive to the sensitive
And now must be replaced
With something like James Joyce’s ‘Quark,’”
I hectored on, “which we now use to designate

An elemental particle.
We need to rename the White Dwarf
Something more entertaining,
Culturally acceptable,
Like Cosmic Has-Been or
Solar Schlemiel.”

“Here is a mundane fact,” my wife replied,
“About the Monarch butterfly
That seems to me more meaningful,
More empathetic, than just being factual:
Its most favorite place to perch
And rest its decorated wings
Is on a petal of a sunflower.
To start the day with a bright metaphor,
As even our son’s teacher would agree,
Conveying peacefulness, evoking hope.”

MY ODYSSEY

Sing now, my unrepentant sixth-grade Muse,
our adaptation of blind Homer's poem,
the fabulous outlandish *Odyssey*
which we performed for the entire school.
Our teacher Mr. Shore told us that
blind Homer had a special gift
for seeing contradictions in his characters.
The stage production we would mount, he said,
will emphasize fragility and chance,
the whimsy of the interfering gods
whose fates are held in doubt,
and we'll conclude with Odysseus
returning home after twenty years to his Penelope,
who has been faithful against all worldly odds.

Hooray! we shouted, jumping up and down,
laughing together, ready to set sail.
We would discuss why Odysseus
preferred Penelope, his aging wife,
over a goddess who could offer him
eternal youth. Does immortality
turn tedious? we wondered, is that
why Homer's deities' main activity is to amuse
themselves observing us, our follies and our suffering?

Empathy was the next big theme that we focused on.
Mr. Shore told us: "Heartfelt empathy
is the emotion to redeem mankind,

to free us from our self-indulgent lives.”
So we decided that the episode
where tactical Odysseus pokes out
Cyclops’s central single eye would test
our stretched capacity for feeling pain
on the behalf of someone different from us.

Cyclops imprisoned sailors in his cave
and planned to feast on them—Odysseus’s crew—
but when the Cyclops slept that night,
Odysseus heated the sharp tip
of his trustworthy sword in Cyclops’s fire,
then thrust it into dreaming Cyclops’s eye.
Cyclops cried out in his tremendous voice:
“What is the name of the damn villain who
has blinded me?” Crafty Odysseus
replied, “It’s me, world-famous Nobody.”
The next day, when his neighbor asked who blinded him
Cyclops replied, “Nobody blinded me.”
His neighbor taunted him, “If Nobody has blinded you,
what then is your complaint?” The gory scene
dissolves back in wild hilarity.

Our somber Mr. Shore decided that
we should attempt something original.
The Cyclops’s scream will terrify the audience.
Don was the tallest member of our class
and thus assigned to play the Cyclops’s part.
By nature Don was reticent, and so
he had to learn to howl for the high sake of art.

Richie, as the god Poseidon, will
perform the epilogue in which the sea god vows
revenge for his blind, mutilated son.
The sea will be Odysseus’s nemesis
until he reaches home in Ithaca,
where his old nurse identifies him by his hunting scar.
With his well-aimed bow, he slaughters all

the meat-stuffed, cringing suitors—all except
the minstrel with his unforgetting harp.
Odysseus gives orders that
the household slaves be hanged
who had indulged in sex with suitors of Penelope;
we see their feet twitch in their agony.
What can one make of so much cruelty?
But we were children—we were
sixth graders, breathless with airy possibility.

I was assigned to play Odysseus.
I pasted flesh-colored adhesive strips
across Don's tightened eyes.
I cut a rubber ball in half,
fixed it where a center eye would be,
and painted a thick eyebrow over it;
and we were ready to begin the play.
The plot moved on to please the audience
until I smote the snoring Cyclops's single eye.
The rubber ball leapt from Don's head,
then bounced and wobbled crazily across the stage.

I don't know who first laughed out loud—
big Don, captured sailors, me,
or all of us together over frantic pleas by Mr. Shore
for us to persevere for Homer's sake.
Wave after cresting wave,
our laughter went rampaging through the auditorium,
reverberating off the paneled walls,
then out through swinging exit doors
into the street, into Laurel Park,
and then, uplifted by a dusty wind,
the laughter floated out beyond
the continent, beyond the legendary wine-dark sea.

Where is our sixth-grade laughter now?
Where does the bifurcated eyeball bounce
to find its final resting place?

Blind and immobile in my sunken chair,
I'm being read to by a female voice.
The slaughtered suitors' relatives unite to seek revenge.
They organize to march against Odysseus down by the sea
who with his father and his son are armed for battle.
Oncoming violence already shocks
the heavy air; the honey scent of blood
curdles their minds. Everything follows as it must.
Where there are men, there must be war—except
perhaps when a protective goddess intervenes
as militant Athena does
after Laertes kills a charging enemy.
Is intervention by a meddling god
the only way proliferating war can be
deflected and transformed to peace?

Is this the long-imagined homecoming—
Odysseus returning to the bed
that he had carved those twenty years ago?
Is this the flourish of the harpist's art?
Arpeggios to fill the emptiness?
Is this the laughter of oblivion?