

Timothy Russell

IN SIMILI MATERIA | 140

When she stopped on the sidewalk,
near the yellow storm drain,
near gnats swarming above the hedge,
the little girl, perhaps three,
yelled something unintelligible
at the doll in the pink carriage.
When she slapped her baby
I remembered flocks of pigeons
erupting from beams and ledges
at the Sinter Plant,
how they would flutter and circle,
flickering in the sun, and always
return to their niches to roost.

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Philip Levine

THE POEM OF CHALK | 130

On the way to lower Broadway
this morning I faced a tall man
speaking to a piece of chalk
held in his right hand. The left
was open, and it kept the beat,
for his speech had a rhythm,
was a chant or dance, perhaps
even a poem in French, for he
was from Senegal and spoke French
so slowly and precisely that I
could understand as though
hurled back fifty years to my
high school classroom. A slender man,
elegant in his manner, neatly dressed
in the remnants of two blue suits,
his tie fixed squarely, his white shirt
spotless though unironed. He knew
the whole history of chalk, not only
of this particular piece, but also
the chalk with which I wrote
my name the day they welcomed
me back to school after the death
of my father. He knew feldspar,
he knew calcium, oyster shells, he
knew what creatures had given

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their spines to become the dust time
pressed into these perfect cones,
he knew the sadness of classrooms
in December when the light fails
early and the words on the blackboard
abandon their grammar and sense
and then even their shapes so that
each letter points in every direction
at once and means nothing at all.
At first I thought his short beard
was frosted with chalk, as we stood
face to face, no more than a foot
apart, I saw the hairs were white,
for though youthful in his gestures
he was, like me, an aging man, though
far nobler in appearance with his high
carved cheekbones, his broad shoulders,
and clear dark eyes. He had the bearing
of a king of lower Broadway, someone
out of the mind of Shakespeare or
García Lorca, someone for whom loss
had sweetened into charity. We stood
for that one long minute, the two
of us sharing the final poem of chalk
while the great city raged around

us, and then the poem ended, as all
poems do, and his left hand dropped
to his side abruptly and he handed
me the piece of chalk. I bowed,
knowing how large a gift this was
and wrote my thanks on the air
where it might be heard forever
below the sea shell's stiffening cry.

Nancy Willard

A WREATH TO THE FISH | 135

Who is this fish, still wearing its wealth,
flat on my drainboard, dead asleep,
its suit of mail proof only against the stream?
What is it to live in a stream,
to dwell forever in a tunnel of cold,
never to leave your shining birthsuit,
never to spend your inheritance of thin coins?
And who is the stream, who lolls all day
in an unmade bed, living on nothing but weather,
singing, a little mad in the head,
opening her apron to shells, carcasses, crabs,
eyeglasses, the lines of fisherman begging for
news from the interior—oh, who are these lines
that link a big sky to a small stream
that go down for great things:
the cold muscle of the trout,
the shining scrawl of the eel in a difficult passage,
hooked—but who is this hook, this cunning
and faithful fanatic who will not let go
but holds the false bait and the true worm alike
and tears the fish, yet gives it up to the basket
in which it will ride to the kitchen
of someone important, perhaps the Pope
who rejoices that his cook has found such a fish
and blesses it and eats it and rises, saying,

“Children, what is it to live in the stream,
day after day, and come at last to the table,
transfigured with spices and herbs,
a little martyr, a little miracle;
children, children, who is this fish?”