

Excerpt from *Homage* by Kathleen Spivack

Ping Pong Sestina. For Elizabeth Bishop

On Monday mornings in your apartment we faced
each other across the net, two poets
having a go at ping pong. Your arthritic hands
gripped the paddle. Determined, you played
against my energy and youth, a tricky game
in which I held myself back, wanting you to win,

not to succumb to your age, or defeat: always to win.
You grinned with delight at the speed of the game,
pressing in for the slow shots, gingerly played
as the ball dripped casually over the edge of the net,
handling your aching body and keeping the poetic
plonk of the white ball going. Wheezing, your face

was childlike. "Please call me Elizabeth." But I couldn't face
that. You were "Miss Bishop." Elizabeth Bishop, Poet,
as in "Miss Bishop's too noble-O." Even with one hand behind
your back, whatever smallest edge you had you played
to advantage as if seeing angles were a game and as if
there were only one way of recording, one way to win

that cancelled all other alternatives. You so easily won
friends, admirers, yet always at play
was your encircled suffering, lack of love hinted, gamely
ignored; the poems and stories in which pain was handled
so far back behind the eyes that the poetry
stood for itself, was really poetry, not pain. You faced

it only obliquely. Once, showing me a photo, the face
of yourself as a baby, small, stubborn, not at all "poetic,"
protesting abandonment in crumpled white lace, hands
tightly folded as if your dear life, even then, was not
a game, as if you sensed you had something dark to play
out, a despairing intelligence behind that winning

little person. But it was late now. You were winded,

fighting arthritis, the ball. I found myself mentally playing
both sides of the table, cheering your game
so much more than my own. Did I hold back? Did I hand
you the final point? The match? No, you won on
your poems alone. Your austere inward face

was wickedly triumphant, handing me the paddle. "Shall we play
again?" Lunch was waiting, talk of books and poetry. But facing
winter noon in Cambridge, we started another game.

The Frost Farm in Derry, New Hampshire

Robert Frost, your homestead in Derry, New
Hampshire is a mess:
the orchard out back has been cut down;
the ground has been stripped of its topsoil

and is an auto wrecking yard.
In the moonlight the subsoil glitters like Christmas
with cracked windshields; discarded tires
wreathe the mounds where apple trees once stood.

Route 28 passes right out front.
I lay awake, acquainted all one night
with the upstairs front bedroom
where you listened to the breathing of your children

in nineteen oh seven.
Now diesel trucks and souped-up cars shift gears
by the front door. They are more deafening than rain.
There is a trailer camp across the way

where you used to do all that meeting and passing.
The brook's a brown polluted stink.
It's impossible to get hired help;
and they've torn out your kitchen to make it

workable. They have moved in a fellow
who says he is a poet.
But who knows? This poet has a wife
who isn't in the least a silken tent

nor he. Living on food stamps, they are
substantial human beings
who don't know a damn thing
about farming.

A tramp came to the door today,
some bearded hippie from out west named Patrick,
who thinks you're the greatest.
This fellow hitchhiked all the way from Montana

to see this place where you lived and worked.
Now Patrick, the poet and the wife
are sitting in the green remodeled kitchen
in what used to be your farmhouse

and rapping (that's the word
they use these days) about you,
Robert Frost, you lousy farmer,
who sold this farm and got out of New Hampshire

the minute your grandfather's will said you could.
The farm's so mean and poor no one could make it pay
so you did what you could do best which was to write,
(and some of the walls you mended are still standing.)

When you finally sold the Derry farm you wrote:
"It shall be no trespassing/ If I come again some spring
In the gray disguise of years/ Seeking ache of memory here."
The new owner auctioned the topsoil to make the down payment;

later he sold to the auto wrecking yard. That's progress,
I guess. But you were so paradoxical
you were to look back on that hen scratching
in Derry as in an idyll

in a long line of insanities and death.
("What but design of darkness to appall?")
The first child died and was buried in the snow
but four slept still in a safe white whisper.

I should be telling you this in perfect metrics:
an approximation of the heart will have to do.
To suffer so much and still to go on writing
was either famous Frost perversity or courage.

Years later, after your wife had died,
she sent you back with her ashes to scatter them.
You drove up to the door on the highway home
and found the farm scarred by strangers, irretrievably.

And you turned away with the ashes past the house,
past the broken glass, the wreckage, the ruined fields,
and walked out on New Hampshire for the second time,
to sleep in America forever.

Peace Pilgrim

She was eighty some years old
when she finished walking across America:
a little white haired old lady
in pants and a navy blue sweatshirt;
her name written across the back: "Peace Pilgrim."
Her past: she had renounced it,
and all attachments too, focusing
only on her naïve message "peace."
That simple word walked with her:
peace: inner, individual,
in families, community and world—
a childlike faith.
Were things as complicated then?
Or was she crazed? An inspired bag lady
with a cockeyed glint in her bright blue eyes?
A glowing lunatic hobo for which America is famous?
She walked away the latter half of her life,
crossing and re-crossing the country
in a constant state of prayer.
Her real name was unknown:
she had changed it so long ago anyway.
The details of her life, her family,
she said, were unimportant—only what she was doing,
right now, in this glistening moment:
the scent of pine breathing up from the roadside,
rain or scarves of wind against her face,
the clouds that changed about her
yet cradled her heart, a glowing ember
around which the night sky swirled.
She carried a blanket, water, answered her mail,
and slept, saying "Body, lie down,"
by the side of the road, in culverts,
meadows, and on the floors of local jails.
She ate only when offered food, which was
surprisingly often, she said,
spent time with folks along the way,
believed in something she called
"god" and didn't expect anything else.
Surprised, life was the perpetual gift.

Singular in happiness,
she spent her life walking around
peacefully, looking out at the world
in delight, writing about it sometimes,
a harmless little loony old lady
whom one might envy:
Peace Pilgrim.

Madame Joelle Blot, my French Teacher

You gathered lilacs for me, immoral armloads
Of lilacs. Shivering, they groaned as they broke.
They shed some starry petals on wet ground.

We were in Tours, in the Loire Valley, in France, yes
in France, country of excess. You stood on the ladder
hacking away at your voluptuous lilac bush

and hurled the heavy branches down.
You were sixty years old, a delicate curly haired person:
Madame Joelle Blot, my French teacher, determined that

I should not spend another night without lilacs in my room.
Then you mouse-stepped down the ladder, little feet in little
strappy high-heeled shoes, set the lilacs firmly in a crate and

carried them inside, a bushel of lilacs. For me. No one
had ever... Selecting just the exact tool, you laid into the lilacs
with an enormous antique hammer, mashed down the woody

stem-ends splintery and flat. This is how it's done, you showed me.
In France. Where they break eggs to make their omeletts.
In Tours, where they speak the best French, unaccented

and pure, so they say. I wanted to learn that language from you.
I was foreign, foreign even to myself
and so applied myself diligently to your lessons.

Even the lilacs knew you were boss. They glowed in my damp
chamber, lasted for weeks as you said they would,
and flung their weighted perfume recklessly about.

Their daringly giddy fragrance swirled like 'Beginning Again',
like a kiss, like learning the meanings of words one had perhaps
always known: like Possibility. Like Risk.

Seeming to Happen

Was it something I chose: the door, open,
the backyard singing with flowers, their upturned faces,
the wide sky beyond that, even that,
and the stranger beckoning “Come”?

Was it this I chose, walking out the kitchen,
letting the dish towel fall, untying the apron?
Were these the apple blossoms, white as in a dream?
Were the horses neighing to me?

Were there messages, as I thought there were, in the tall grasses?
Did even the flowering maple tree hang its head in acquiescence?
Was this myself, stepping out of an accustomed life
Moving toward, and then into, the gleaming arms of a stranger?

Even if the words “stranger” and “danger” rhyme;
Even if in that one gesture, an entire choice has been made;
I, who thought myself “indecisive” find indeed I was only waiting:
Waiting for you, for me, for paths to walk into this painting.