

## Three Poems

Linnea Nelson

### *Runner-up for the 2023 Thomas McGrath Award in Poetry*

#### Returning to North Dakota

today i packed our kitchen  
so i would know  
we no longer live here.

goodbye threshold  
you carried me over  
& splinter that snagged my veil.

goodbye toilet  
i knelt beside after learning  
of my father's cancer.

goodbye bedroom where you  
& i lie sleepless & living  
room where we said we *should go*.

i stand in our long driveway  
& hold out my hand  
waiting for some bright sign

of blessing to alight  
but nothing touches me.  
the metaphor is

not lost.  
i agreed to this.  
i agreed to leave. o God

of second thoughts & childhood  
hometowns make me  
somehow a stranger there.

let me be  
the one sun-  
flower in the field

whose face still  
bends toward the wrong  
part of the sky.

## Planting Greek Tomatoes

We ease the sopping rockwool out  
of barrels filled with nutrient water,  
nudge the nearly indiscernible seeds  
one by one below the fibrous surface

and wait. The instructions tell us  
how soon we can expect  
growth, and this time I know  
that's not a promise. If nothing comes

up, the packet says, the problem  
isn't the seeds; it's probably that  
the environment is too cold, or we just  
didn't make enough space. And it wasn't

my idea—incubating in our home—  
but I let you keep the rows of black plastic trays  
in the empty upstairs room,

let myself imagine how  
months from now, I'll transform

what's ripe into bright sharp  
salsas, bold simmering sauce.  
Maybe some things need time

to tell you if they are alive,  
to decide if they wish to be.

In Greek tradition it's said a baby  
can sense how much love exists  
in the moment of its conception.

Last year, we stared at the skin  
below my navel, me biting my lip, you  
frowning a little, meaning *if we must*, or  
at least that was what I thought.

And when we learned that nothing was there  
after all, that our lives could stay the same,

I felt within us one long rush  
of air, sort of like the sound a train makes  
right when it's slowed to a halt—both a gasp  
and an exhalation—and then

we went on with what we had been doing.

**Aubade with Three Persons**

I have never seen anything  
I understood in the moment  
to be a ghost. But now  
it's November. & a last  
gem-yellow leaf beyond  
the stirring curtains rushes away  
from the tree it belonged to  
as if fleeing. I hear it  
scuttle in all directions  
on the ground. Searching  
& urgent. & further out  
muffled clouds press down. Saying  
something serious. I want to go.  
Get closer to hear more  
clearly. But instead I lie still  
& recall another  
November when I thought  
I wasn't reaching  
for anything. When I woke  
warm on the floor of a cold house  
to a dark wet Sunday sky  
& arms gathering me as if  
in intercession. & when I moved  
a little against him  
he murmured *Skip class*. But I went  
to church anyway. A supplicant.  
Circled the center  
of the city like an hour  
hand passing across the surface  
of a clock. My progression  
nearly imperceptible. Only

if I had stopped  
would it have been evident  
I was moving at all.  
& there it is: the ghost.  
& there I am: reaching.

*Linnea Nelson's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Cimarron Review, Terrain.org, Spoon River Poetry Review, Rattle, Beloit Poetry Journal, Seneca Review, The Journal, South Dakota Review, and elsewhere. She received a BA in English from North Dakota State University in 2014 and an MFA in creative writing from Oregon State University in 2017. Linnea is a doctoral candidate in educational practice and leadership at UND.*