Poetry Analysis: Four Poems

Summer in the Yakima Valley
by Ruth Roach Pierson

By day I loved
the farmhouse on the hill
the dust haze the pickup raised
plying the dirt roads
the orchard trees in even
rows down the slopes
and out in all directions
the sigh of apricots
Santa Rosa plums, Bing
and Queen Anne cherries
ripening in the dry heat
the long-short snick snick
of the sprinklers' jerky rotation
hum and hiss of a low-flying
spray plane

In over-the-knees rubber boots
my cousin and I stomped
the uneven ground   careful
of cow pies and Canadian thistles
plucked alfalfa shoots
to stick between our teeth
swaggered like cowboys
to the edge of the irrigation ditch
and stripped to swim in its muddied water
giddy on the danger of going too near
the whirlpool pull
of the main pipe's undertow

But after dark
in the attic room
in that house on the top of the hill
he always fell asleep first,
my cousin, leaving me
to listen alone
to the sounds of the night
the valley now as alien
as the other side of the moon—

a coyote's hungry cry

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the twist and scrape of tumbleweed
like a wind-tossed tangle of bones
over clay-dry earth
a jackrabbit caught
in the beam from a jeep's headlight
Exiled in the moon-engorged room
I lay prey to the sick
ache, the hunger for home
as nightmare shadows slid
across the floor, loomed
on the wall over my head

and everywhere the eerie
whine of the wind aprow
in the Yakima Valley by night—
weedy, persistent, atonal

In this poem, the speaker recollects his childhood experiences in the countryside. He remembers how he played around wells—shafts dug into the ground to obtain water.

Personal Helicon
 by Seamus Heaney

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
 And old pumps with buckets and windlasses
 I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.
 I savoured the rich crash when a bucket
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.
So deep you saw no reflection of it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch
 Fructified like any aquarium.
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch
 A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call
 With a clean new music in it. And one
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now to pry into roots, to finger slime,
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

Key Language:
helicon: Mount Helicon was a site in Ancient Greece where the Muses were worshipped. The Muses were believed to inspire all artists, especially poets.
windlass: the handle used to raise the bucket from the bottom of a well
fructified: productive, full of life
Narcissus: a young man in Greek mythology so enchanted by his own image reflected in a pool of water that he was unable to remove himself and gradually wasted away

Ordinary Life

by Barbara Crooker

This was a day when nothing happened,
the children went off to school
without a murmur, remembering
their books, lunches, gloves.
All morning, the baby and I built block stacks
in the squares of light on the floor.
And lunch blended into naptime,
I cleaned out kitchen cupboards,
one of those jobs that never gets done,
then sat in a circle of sunlight
and drank ginger tea,
watched the birds at the feeder
jostle over lunch's little scraps.
A pheasant strutted from the hedgerow,
preened and flashed his jeweled head.
Now a chicken roasts in the pan,
and the children return,
the murmur of their stories dappling the air.
I peel carrots and potatoes without paring my thumb.
We listen together for your wheels on the drive.
Grace before bread.
And at the table, actual conversation,
no bickering or pokes.
And then, the drift into homework.
The baby goes to his cars, drives them
along the sofa's ridges and hills.
Leaning by the counter, we steal a long slow kiss,
tasting of coffee and cream.
The chicken's diminished to skin & skeleton,
the moon to a comma, a sliver of white,
but this has been a day of grace in the dead of winter,
the hard cold knuckle of the year,
a day that unwrapped itself
like an unexpected gift,
and the stars turn on, order themselves
into the winter night.

Prelude to Jumping in the River
by Katia Grubisic

He unpeels himself, lays his light shirt, glasses, straw hat
and shoes on the sea-monster
driftwood, where they rest as easily
as they do on him. The mental preparation
takes some time. I have also stood
on that rock, feet
cupping the low, flat lip. The decision is not yet made.

What goes on at the edge of the bank
could last years, centuries. The bottom will shift or
vanish entirely, will prod
from the muck we can barely toe
deeply rooted lilies, suckling
bladderwort. Its weight separating it
from the air, the water seeks
itself and stays there, closing
without fuss over whole worlds. It has swallowed
countless resolves to jump or
retreat and kept no record of either. Yet —
the pizzicato of the crickets, the stream — this is at stake,
and it remains enough to give us pause.

The exit, too, will be graceless. There are no footholds
among the reeds and we can barely heave
the body up. We are hopelessly terrestrial, and vaguely,
mnemonically aquatic, but never both at once. In the end,
I catch the aftermath: the slowing ripples, the dogs
rushing down the hill, the surprised head bobbling
above the water. Waiting, I have missed the jump,
the perfect, reckless moment when we cannot turn back.

Key Language:
back. prelude: an introduction to a poem or piece of music
bladderwort: an aquatic plant
pizzicato: the sound made by plucking a stringed instrument
mnemonically: associated with a deep memory