

Soul Sister

There are so many things I love about Molly Peacock's poems. There's the way they combine an effortless, almost chatty voice with an underlying playful formality. Notice the off-rhymes sus- / dis- / plums / virus in "Market Friendship," for example. It's not everyone who can take us so elegantly and offhandedly from health and normality to sickness and fear, our current condition. I love the way she can write a tender love poem about the Covid-enforced confinement that has ruined so many relationships, but fortunately not hers—and put the rare, mythological word "omphalos" in it, along with exercise routines and making squash lasagna. I love the way she looks at such a wide variety of common subjects freshly and inquisitively. It's as if she is always wondering, always doing that thing poets are supposed to do but often don't: making the poem into an act of discovery. Thus, in "Friendship," she asks what is it that makes us choose someone as a friend, and the subtitle—"on not knowing what you need"—opens up the whole topic of the unconscious as the "fog" in which we wander. In "Question," she wonders why we think of the soul as the body's guest and not the other way around. After all, the soul, if it exists, will last a lot longer than the troublesome, flaking, bunion-prone body. Does the soul get old, too?

Mystics and fortune-tellers like to tell a seeker that she's an "old soul," meaning she is wise and full of understanding. In that sense, Peacock qualifies. But only in that sense, because the dominant note of her poems is wit, elegance, and a sense of fun that has sparkled in seven books of poems and several of prose as well. *Life can be hard and sad* is the message of these four poems, two of which reference Covid-19. But there are friends. And love. And plums.

—Katha Pollitt

Question

Is the soul hairless?
Does it never secrete or flake?

Does it not have bunions?
As the soul ages, doesn't it have days

when it's difficult to walk?
Scratching and sneezing,

won't it forget
its guest?

Elbow and spine,
pancreas and liver,

hysterias and amusements,
have I behaved myself?

Have I, its guest
...overstayed?

I'll have to let
Soul be the judge of that,

its bald head gleaming,
or, if it's a lily,

simply nodding in the gusts,
or, if it's wind,

simply breezing
its caress

on the bare leg
of its guest.

Market Friendship

Hovering over the oranges and maybe not even picking one, just suspended in absorption ... the fennel fanned above them in her designed display. I miss it. Just gawking at the plums next to the V-wedge of carrots I miss. None of us smells well behind our masks. If we nudge a grapefruit with our thumbs we're supposed to buy it. Corona virus erases my delight in her market, carefully curated for the restaurants' best, though they're not buying now. It's me, hawk-eyed in the tiny aisle aiming for my target: six free feet of space. I miss her face that hides behind her mask. I can't get my mask to smile. Stop whining. Just shop. Neither of you has died. Now bark hello through that plastic divide.

Molly Peacock's latest poetry collections are *The Analyst* and *Cornucopia: New and Selected Poems*. She is the co-founder of *Poetry in Motion* on New York's subways and buses and the series founder of *The Best Canadian Poetry*. Her poems appear in leading literary journals such as *Poetry*, *The Malahat Review* and *The Hudson Review*, and are anthologized in *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. Author of a one-person play about poetry, *The Shimmering Verge*, she is also a biographer. Her works include *The Paper Garden: Mrs. Delany Begins Her Life's Work at 72* and *Flower Diary: Mary Hiester Reid Paints, Travels, Marries & Manages a Life*, to be published in 2021.

Friendship

On not knowing what you need

I cannot choose a friend intentionally.
I've tried, when I've needed a friend in a crowd,
to pick the person, but my choice and me
work only in the flattery stage, the wow
of being wanted. It shocks me when it frays
because I'm convinced I know what I need.
But at my side some person in the bluish haze
of the not-quite-ignored and I begin to read
one another almost as a scent is read
before the rain—minerals in the soil—
and I'm led as the other is led
to some stray but mutual remark as it uncoils
from an almost infinite spool, though its just a thread
then, like a little orange thread off a pair of jeans,
oh, of course nothing's what it seems—why don't
I see that? After years, the close friend who emerged
from a fog at my side recalls a want
so hidden from me then, it seemed itself a fog.

In the Mood

Once it was clear that we could die,
we thought, Let's make the end sweet.
Zip it. No whining. Each day repeat
the smile of routine. Don't lie.
Living in nine hundred sixty square feet:
get out the exercise sheet.
Noon: yoga; 3pm: squats and weights.
After the dinner we cook together
(squash lasagna) exquisite, since we make
it step-by-step (no email on the side),
we limit the news, read, then have our triumph:
blasting In the Mood as we step-glide
two thousand steps round our suite.

Our omphalos: the bed! We reach for one another,
if only verbally (we've both been
murmuring a steady commentary
on all we've pondered through the day—
except the thought that both of us could die).
If we can choose our end, we choose it this way.