

Brenda Riches / TIME PIECES

I want to be an old woman, as old as the woods I used to ride in when I was a young girl on a fat black pony who went his ambling way in spite of me. Even so, if I flapped my legs like the wings of ravens whose flight conjured death's heaviness, then my slothful mount would gather his legs into a canter of sorts and surprise me.

Surprises were what I found in bran tubs at fetes. I fumbled in grainy dryness till I touched what was to be mine, like it or not. A fortune teller in her sweaty green tent told me for sixpence that I was to look after my heart because no one else would do that for me and doctors were a last resort, but I gave my heart to the fat black pony whose leg was shattered by the kick of a jealous mare. He was shot dead because he was irreparable.

What damaged things can be repaired? Certainly not balloons. But balloons, like promises, illusions, affairs, eggshells and rules, were made to be broken. A man I knew scrambled eggs and talked so much not even kisses would stop his mouth. His mouth is a sour memory. There's a jug of milk in the fridge that's been there for weeks on the top shelf. It has a thick surface of green furred skin, so beautiful, how could I possibly throw it out? If the moon forgot to wane, it would grow a fur coat to keep it warm in the cold sky.

Rain fell on the neighbour's cat crossing the road. So confident that no car would come, it walked slowly, taking the longest slanting route. When it reached the weeping birch, it sat and washed itself. The cat (mostly black with some white) and the birch trunk (mostly white with some black) formed a wholeness that took me beyond satisfaction, so that even when the cat got up and went away, the rainy birch still held me. The cat licking its wet fur told me more about acceptance than all Buddha's words, and the slow dripping from a swaying branch answered my waywardness.

The cat defied death for another moment and reaped its reward in the leaky shelter. One day it won't get to the other side of the road and that will be that.

My cat hasn't been home for two days, though I leave the door ajar and rattle her box of food outside from time to time. If she isn't home soon, I shall have to go out and look for her again, fearing every dark shape in the road, remembering the dead horse I saw in a highway ditch, a black dead horse with a blob of scarlet blossoming from its temple. It was a grey day, grey as tarmac, and the grass in the ditch was soft green. I thought blood always flowed.

I've paid for the creatures who came and went and left me laughing, crying, peeling onions, putting stale crumbs out for the birds, pulling weeds and pushing wheelbarrow-loads of dead leaves down the path to the bonfire that is the sentence of the dying year. Some days burst through the skin that tries to hold them, some take on eternity and some stay inside their ration of twenty-four hours no more no less. In the eight hours left of today I shall sit and watch the lamplight on my plants, watch the stillness of heavy curtains and wonder what the neighbour's doing inside her walls.

I'm afraid that if I look out of the window I shall see a sky like a rock poised low over the street. I don't want to see such a sky, or the sad wet wheels of cars, or hear the broken voices of children coming home from school, or the slow steps of women who lean forward when they walk and hide their eyes behind wrinkled lids. That's why I closed the curtains at four o'clock.

The man who scrambled eggs rarely threw the shells away. They lay on his counter top, on his floor, in his sink; his kitchen was littered with eggshells that entered my dreams like thieves, usually by moonlight, and turned into magnolia petals, stark white against leaves so dark I could barely see them. My dreams were filled with such fragrance, I forgave him his stinking shells and threw them out myself. Garbage is something I live with. Like daybreak.

The last time I saw my cat, she was sleeping on the footstool between me and the window. Her face was so shadowed, I couldn't see the lines of her closed eyes, and the curve of her mouth was a faint sickle moon in the black sky of her fur. Only the ridge of her back caught the light. I touched that path gently so I wouldn't wake her. I have always been careful to stroke my cats often. I never know, when they go out, if I will ever see them again.

Lamps are soothing, like honey, like butter on a burn; my lamplight wraps the plants, the polished tables, the small islands of carpet, in bandages of softness. My livingroom is where I sit and crochet squares of the people I've known. My hands have memories. Everything they've ever held—tightly or loosely—dropped, smacked; the disasters they've prevented and the creatures they've

stroked, linger like guests who outstay their welcome. The evenings and mornings won't go away, crushed inside my livingroom.

The egg man gave me a seashell to hold. The upper part was a spiral like a helter skelter worn smooth by gleeful descents, but the lower part was bulged and crevassed, pleated and disturbed like the sand on a beach after the sea has withdrawn. It trapped weed and was holed and broken in many places. I tucked my finger into the top and wound the shell around so that my finger followed its curves, and stopped, wedged tight in its core.

My head is an anvil endlessly struck. There's no comfort in the clock's ticking, nor the face swept by hands. The clock gave me time to watch the sun in my hanging fern; time to wash up a glass, dry it carefully with a well-laundered cloth; time to fill the glass again and go back to the fern to see how its shadow had grown. Many things have grown on me besides memories and mould: the well-meaning hands of lovers; the midnight yowling of cats whose sexual symphony played to the wilderness of my sleep; the breaking faces of bereft people; the shuffling of bagladies. The shock of dreams.

When I can't find an answer, I take a sharp knife and pare an apple down to the core, split the seeds, and there's white inside them that can be cut too. And for a moment I think I've got down to what it's all about. Then the moment passes like a life and all I have is apple pulp and bits of seed I can't put together again.

When the egg man kicked me out, he was lying in bed, looking as pale as a moon and as tired as I was. Outside, rain had swept the fallen leaves to the drains, and there they lay, glistening in the lamplight, preventing the rain from draining away.

The wool I shall use next is soft and grey like the smoke that comes from my chimney in skeins all winter long, winter after winter the same grey smoke. I like to think there's a fire burning out there for lost cats to sit by and warm themselves.

In the gallery is an exhibition of kisses, mouths hooked to mouths, all over the walls. I sensed the attendant looking at me, probably wondering what it was this shabby woman was seeing in those paintings. One picture in my scrapbook was torn from a calendar: an eggshell broken in two, lying in a narrow niche made of bricks. The larger piece lies on its side, the smaller on its round end. A curved white feather rests between the two parts of shell, another floats away through an arch in the background where small white clouds hang in a heavy sky. I kept the picture in honour of the egg man who gave me calendars at the beginning of the year.

On sunny Sundays in winter I put on warm clothes and walk to the part of the lake that's kept clear for skaters. I like to see them move about in their jackets and bright knitted hats, the ice beneath them, the snow all around them. They make me wonder where they've all come from to be together, balanced on blades, and where they will all go when the sun goes down. I wish I could let images go, or be content to let them mulch into memory. Memory changes things; it doesn't preserve them. The lover who was so boring I could hardly wait to put on my clothes and catch the next bus home, has become matchless in my memory. Yet, if at that time I could have put him in a pickling jar and screwed the lid on tight, there he'd be now, a pig-faced narcissist making mouths at his reflection on the curved wall of his prison. The saving grace of narcissists is that we betray only ourselves.

There are empty jars in my cupboard that I save to fill with the preserves and sauces I intend to make in the spaces in my days. But the spaces stay empty and so do the jars; nothing to show for the desire I have to harvest the fruit of my trees, crabapple and plum. Scarlet and mauve, the fruit hangs till it drops onto the hot grass, and the hot grass grows cold and the fruit rots where it lies, and I think of autumn as the death of the worms of joy that squirmed in my belly all summer.

I dreamed I saw my cat stretched out on the grass by the footpath that leads from the road to the river. She looked as if she was asleep, but her paws didn't twitch with dreams and I woke up. My dreams are more important to me than the concern of neighbours, than crabapples rotting in the grass. They are more important than loss. My dreams are lights in a tunnel of blackness. They show me the seams in walls, the sheen on stones.

The neighbour has a kind husband. He chops kindling for me, fills my basket with logs, cleans my hearth and lays my fire every morning before he goes to work. I thank him: thank you, you are so kind. Kindness is a candle, I want to say, but my dreams are electric.

A rowan and the weeping birch grow close to each other on the front lawn, filling the kitchen window. When the sun sets behind them, it turns some of the rowan leaves red and others a glowing orange. The leaves of the birch are acid yellow and swing slowly on their stringy branches. If a cloud moves in front of the sun, the cloud is trimmed with brilliant light.

My brightest dream was of an ocean with high glittering waves that rose above me but didn't drop. I saw myself knee deep in dazzling water, facing a dazzling wall, and all I seemed to be was a tall black column facing a sea that should have tumbled.

The husband lays a good fire; one match lit and everything flares.

I want to tell him what love is like. It's like a shell washed up on a wide beach.

I used to live near a beach, long ago when I recognized the life of sand and could name the species of seaweed that grew thick in the rockpools.

If I had my way, I'd seize the shoulders of the kind husband and tell him what fire is about: for burning, not for warmth.

One of my clocks is wrong. When I die, they will say: She died at nine fifty-three. She died at nine forty-seven. The truth will swing from minute to minute while I shall be settling into my own place.