

Pastoral

Steven R. Vogel

There is no such thing as a wide gravel road
in the deep country sweeps
of brome and alfalfa, ryegrass and fescue.
The land is too precious to tread,
too full of clovers and field peas, sunflowers
and orchards for the bees—
too filled with wafts and scents, savory aromas
and the fragrance of apple trees.

Walk the stones slowly, with love at your side,
and let your nose lead you
to memories and passions that can't fit a book.
Brush with your fingers
foxtails and milkweeds that dare to come near,
and when inclination is ripe,
step down the bank, through the windbreak,
and into a field full of grasses—

filled with rabbits and beetles, with field mice
and katydids. Let your ears play
the music of nature's vocations and leisures,
the notes of the breezes
and clicks of the jumpers, birdsong and scolds.
And if time gives the blessing,
bed down a few grass stems far into the field,
just enough to hide two,

and let the grass rushes put lulls
in the senses, a drowse in the mind, till the sun
lets you go to the cool of the dusk,
the embrace of the dark.
And if your good fortune allows you to stay,
sip the moon from its ladle
at the peak of night, for then it's most sweet
and the kisses of love most complete.

Spanish Girls

Steven R. Vogel

The girls of Spain wear searing colors
bound in flounces and cascades
and stripes that course their practiced movements,
slashes of a jonquil yellow,
forest turquoise
(half between the robin and the teal),
a pause of black before the blazing red –
not blood-red, but a lancing ruby that provokes
the mind to watch.

And as each passing eye congregates,
they bend and turn
like breezes on a meadow –
no beginning and no measured end,
only the sway of invitation to catch hold a breath
until the dream has changed from one
into another, languid, spelling, tethering.

And worn above, a melded smile that draws
the while it promises more
than you could bear if you should take it up
as yours – if you should put it onto yours
like cherry jam on toast. And yet, you cannot but
return the soul of you, together with
that holded breath, to grasp another while
the air is soft.

But as you do, they fill the sky with chatter about
things you cannot know,
that will not even fit into a dream,
for they are small but myriad and run together
like a cloud of starlings.
And every finger dances with the words,
just slightly, like the fingers on a harp, each wrist
makes careful bends
that gather, gather, hold.

You must pray to reach another day as they pass by,
for this is their creation,
made somehow from flax and straw,
this eternal evocation of the past sent down
by Spanish girls for themselves alone. And so they go
rejoicing, for on Monday they'll wear black.

Paupers in the Rain

Steven R. Vogel

I. Soweto

She sits against the tin wall, barefoot,
watching dust go by —
an afterthought of boys' feet
wrangling a ball,
the center of life — her fuchsia shorts
and tee beautiful
against her sable skin,
a tin pail at her tiny toes, her work to
catch what might fall from a notice.

But charity is slim in the hot air,
and time pushes the sun
until it wants to spill its fall to earth.
The sky is brimmed with water,
and the dour clouds have caught some
in a leaky pouch,
which has begun to tame the dust
with immense thudding drops —
widespread, at first, then gathering.

The world, sudden-changed,
revamps its smells and footsteps,
hides the birds, and chases industries
indoors ... but one.
She inverts the pail over her head
and takes the drumming deep
into her soul (its manic
melody somehow a comfort) and holds
the yellow dirt until it disappears.

II. Becida

He sits on oiled dirt
in a dark green world, a shadow
of a shadow if the dim light would allow
such, for nothing can draw
shadows in this gray.
His corner is the least of shelters –
a lean-to implement shed
meant to keep out the worst.

Its double sliding doors are thrown wide,
and its slanted roof is made the same
as all of it:
corrugated steel sheets
nailed to just enough wood to hold up.
It stands near empty,
for this is not workable land,
though weed and brush must be opposed.

But not today, for this is leisure –
close as it will come –
these hours of guarded dusk
kept private in the silence of the thunder
of the rain, its wild, unmeasured
steadiness a friend
as near as there will be,
its cloaking cold a solitary hug.