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Three Poems by Susanna Lang

Susanna Lang

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SUSANNA LANG

Gumball Machines

They have not changed since I was a child, simple machines
near the doors of groceries and check-cashing stores,

wherever children wait without attempting to understand
their parents' transactions, only coveting a few quarters

to fit into the slot, release the lever, rattle the gumball
into the chute. Was it a nickel when I was the child?

Sometimes the machine offered a bouncy ball that never went
where it should but made me chase from corner to corner, or the eternal

surprise of a plastic bubble that I pried open in the privacy
of the back seat, to find who-knows-what, a dog, a doll,

a spindly-legged monster. Today the gumball machines wait
in line with us at the check-cashing store where we will witness

our friend's will, this sunny afternoon before his surgery—
just in case, he assures us, his prognosis good but he is a careful man.

He walks us back to our car, none of us asking, *Do you remember...?*
or speculating about what might be coming down the chute.

Détente

Listen, you cannot wait till the war is over
to open your restaurant. Set a table or two now—
who knows when the guns will be silenced.
Place the tables where diners will have
a clear view of the sea. Cook the pasta *al dente*
and serve it with seafood, a light wine.
Arrange the plates like a still life, something
you might want to paint. The citizens of this city
need a place like this, where they can remember
what it means to sit down in the evening,
a little tired but not exhausted, taste the spaghetti
and comment to a loved one, someone
they have not yet lost, that there is just
the right amount of saffron in the sauce.

Turning Back

There used to be more of us living beside the water: one day my house will follow my neighbors' into the womb of the river, the salt of the sea.

Long ago we had grown our jointed legs to clamber out of the wet, and we'd built our shelters at the water's edge.

In the now and soon when there is no edge, will we find our way back into older stories of silkies and mermen?

We still make children who can walk like us, but the dandelion clocks tick off their seeds in the narrow green along the river.

When will we bear a new generation of web-footed babies? When will the dandelions learn to float like lilies?

When will we lose the knowledge of fire?