

**Poems by Rhina P. Espaillat**

***Next-to-Last Song***

Singer of mortal songs  
in flight from kissing to kissing,  
where shall you go when your nest  
made of flesh and bone is missing?

Harp of five strings that play  
in praise of this borrowed light,  
what hand will caress you then,  
fallen to endless night?

Oh setting of copper suns,  
ocean of steel and tin,  
oh moon that goes grieving by,  
bleeding a silver skin!

Oh maples half dressed in bronze,  
sulphur, scarlet in the wood,  
tongues of flame that sing today  
tomorrow silent for good!

## *Peacock*

At the small local farm where toddlers walk  
bravely with geese but circumspect with sheep,  
behind a fence that neither wants to leap,  
a ghostly clamor, an unearthly squawk  
rings like a summons from some royal keep.

And there, far more than kingly, self-absorbed  
as any god, and gorgeous as the night,  
this barnyard apparition spreads his orbed  
and iridescent plumes not meant for flight,  
but for display and sacrificial rite.

What can these children make, with their two eyes  
apiece, of countless staring pupils pinned,  
unblinking, to his heavenly disguise,  
which shudders when he struts through dung that lies  
amid shed feathers puffed by a rank wind?

Eden the morning after comes to mind:  
the maker strolls alone among the trees  
heavy with unplucked fruit, all left behind  
by his lost creatures in the void he sees,  
in whose unpeopled light he is confined.

But here the metaphor, of course, breaks down—  
as metaphors should know enough to do—  
leaving the children safe in our small town,  
under diaphanous September blue  
innocent now of all it ever knew.

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**Rhina P. Espailat** has five poetry collections out, including *Where Horizons Go*, winner of the 1998 T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, and *Rehearsing Absence*, which won the 2001 Richard Wilbur Award. Additional awards include several from the Poetry Society of America and the New England Poetry Club, as well as the *Oberon Prize* and the Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award. She lives in Newburyport, MA, where she directs the Powow River Poets and coordinates the Newburyport Art Association Annual Poetry Contest.