

Poems by *Lauren Flowers*

They Say You'll Forget Everything

She remembers
 The painting strangely:
 black spaniels
 lounging by a green lake
 with an overdone reflection of clouds.
 It was comforting,
 and the memory
 still is.
 If she were a friend recalling a visit
 to a museum—say, a retrospective
 on the dog
 in English landscape painting,
 the picture wouldn't
 bother me at all.
 But she is my sister,
 talking about
 Our grandmother's house
 in Oklahoma.
 We agree on two things:
 it was a fine
 painting, and the varnish
 damn near ruined it.
 The dogs had gone
 mosaic long before
 we set eyes on them.
 Of course, in my heart
 of hearts,
 I know they were pointers—
 two of them, like her spaniels
 — facing left
 in a field of uncut grass,
 long tails out,
 tense on three legs,
 doing what pointers do.
 And only one of us is right.
 Or neither.
 I refuse to grow the picture,

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 throwing
her black spaniels in with my pointers,
 but somehow we talk past them,
and furnish
 the rest of the room
with the sleeper
 sofa we spent the night in
 while watching
the Zenith TV, quaintly housed in
 its Early American cabinet.
 We remember, too,
the long narrow tub
 that held us together,
 imagining
our grown-up bodies pressing the porcelain.
 and not for the first time,
I feel the sweet pull
 of forgetting
how memory comes,
 more dream than witness
 in the murky warmth
 of sisters
soaking in a shared bath.
 Stains rise from their shared bodies,
each smeared on but
 momentarily suspended
a shape,
 fragile and dissolving,
then gone—the triumph of purity.
 Judging skins,
you think it's gone for good,
 but pull the plug,
 it comes right back,
ringing the tub
 with the smell of two dogs,
and the odd chance
 of a third arriving
any day now,
 alert on three legs,
pointing the way home.

Geometry Lesson

At a lecture on sacred geometry,
The speaker draws four columns side by side
On an otherwise empty blackboard.

He sets them at regular intervals,
Gives them all Ionic capitols, and
Asks his audience, How many there?

Right off, I know the answer's loaded.
No way we all came to number one, two,
Three, then four. I came for geometry—

A single word, taking the earth's measure—
And for the comfortable word sacred,
Its implication our keen numbering

Is somehow good for the world itself,
The redemptive force of meter, whereby
A tape measure whips us all into shape,

Fits Mother Earth with a new brassiere, then
Sends her on to Weight Watchers as penance
For letting herself go, world without end.

A lady on the front row answers four.
The speaker smiles. Ah, but the Greeks counted
It seven. Seven evoking one week,

Distant planets in their courses, closer
Demons in the head, the Ages of Man,
And now—at last—four columns made of chalk.

You see, the Greeks counted the gaps between.
In space we perceive the relationship
Of one column to another.
We're
Taught

To count only the visible object,
Thereby, neglecting our unseen graces.
And what else, I wonder, do we forget

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To number? What rich emptiness attends
Our waking moments? What barren niches
Wait for us to saint them with awareness?

Leaving the lecture behind, I conjure
A host of unlived years between my years,
Shuffled just like cards, a never-born Jack

Tucked under the ace of spades I nurtured.
I devise elaborate equations
To ascertain the life I've left undone,

And naturally I sum up failure.
Half-lived, I feel really old, no longer
Forty-five, but double it minus one.

Algebra always brought me to ruin.
I return my thoughts to the lecture; and
In the columns on the blackboard, I see

My years side by side, crowned with capitols,
Neatly set apart by all my failures.
I call it the Parthenon of living.

Heading Home

Every road trip has its signs.
 Even the short ride out
 From my house to the new Winn Dixie
 Is crammed with oracles

And countless opportunities
 For making icons out of
 Billboards, for honoring
 The holiness of hamburgers.

Mondays heading home, who can say
 Where I will go—home,
 Yes. But a destination shaped
 By the road I travel.

Monday noon the preachers come out
 To change their church marquees,
 Playing scrabble with the traffic.
 Their black plastic letters

Too regular for beauty, but
 Trying still for wisdom,
 Like forgeries done on Sinai.
 A surfeit of vowels,

Marks of punctuation, commas
 Bigger than a Bible,
 Spelling epigrams for pilgrims,
 Hitching a ride with me.

“Never put a question mark,” writes
 The First Baptist preacher,
 “Where God has had a period.”
 And who am I to doubt

Whether God has one of those? I
 Let it stand, driving on,
 In praise of southern Baptists, while
 Down the road, the pastor

Of First Methodist stands wordless
 By his marquee—a bare

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Y his only effort. It might
Become the start of You.

Alone it seems a chromosome;
Missing the rib it gave
An X. In my rearview, I watch
Y limping on one leg:

An old man. I flip him upside
Down to see him stand like
Some divining rod. He aims me
All the way to Adam.

Church Kiss

In the pew with my mother,
I am wondering, at the age of six,
Why church candles flicker

At immutable heights
From the moment the acolytes lights them
To the recessional snuffing them out.

They are hollow and plastic
Filled with liquid paraffin—
I do not know this yet,

At six their tender wax burns curiously inviolate,
A centifolia rose, permanently petalled.

The priest is chasubled
Like the tree for Christmas.
He lifts his arms overhead to break the host,

And Mother raises the church bulletin
To her mouth, biting its folded edge,
Rolling her lips in together.

The priest says, the gifts of God
For the people of God,
And Mother eyes her blotted bulletin:

The red imprint of her half-mouth
Almost smiles
On the edge of its front cover.

Post-communion in the pew—
The candles still holding their flames,
Torchbearers going the distance

—I ponder the mystery of Mother's kiss.
Careful not to spoil a line of its floral print,
I steal the bulletin from her purse.

Mesmerized by its exterior fold,
I open it—the glorified fullness
Of the human mouth.

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Amazing: a tiny map made of wax
With little red roads connected together.
For all their apparent confusion,

They look well-traveled.
I see the world there, born and living,
And full of tenderness.

Missing Buns

Scanning the pantry, my son at eighteen:
 There's never enough buns in this house.
 A whole pack of dogs hung out in the fridge
 Waiting on buns to come home.
 He interrupted my thoughts to say it.

I parlayed the alchemical copout:
 Said, some things keep longer than others,
 And, thus far, not a bun on the market
 Can outlast a dog. Not to my Knowledge.
 But hey—they're working on it.

This left us at the impasse of why
 I never notice important things, like
 What day it is, or hour, or even
 Buns turning blue in their unopened bags
 —You'd think they were children, I almost said.

But it wasn't metaphor he wanted.
 Just bread for a hotdog. And after all,
 Hunger—even hunger that is named
 Ketchup chili hold the onions
 —even this speaks louder than words.

I wanted to tell him about magnolias,
 The one I'd seen that morning. It was May,
 And I'd come from the mailbox down the drive
 To see our front yard magnolia at work,
 Sending secret love letters to the world,

Its wide sheets of blooming curled up in scrolls,
 Two dozen diplomas treed on its limbs.
 I noticed it a thought of him—
 The boy then, calling it his climbing tree,
 The boy now, graduating from high school.

It had everything to do with buns,
 With why I never remember them,
 And not a bite to offer his hunger.
 So, I've come from the Winn Dixie now
 And laid the buns out where he'd notice.

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I see him scrolled like a May tree blooming,
And he lines ketchup on dogs like ink.
The panfried buns won't keep, will perish
Like the seen magnolia, holding on
For a while, its long root augured in memory.

Lauren Flowers lives in Dothan, Alabama. She is the mother of three teenagers. This is her first publication.