

RHINA P. ESPAILLAT

Little Red Hen

Yes, Hen, you're right: give no free pass
to members of the leisure class
who angle for your unpaid labor.
And yet, consider: there's the neighbor
who's elderly or unemployed,
or in bad health, or has enjoyed
few opportunities. Does merit
precisely weighed enlist the spirit,
or is it need, or social duty?
Is there not something much like beauty
in serving, with no compensation
but saintly joy—that odd elation—
precisely those who, least deserving,
will find the unearned good unnerving
until they've passed it on in kind?
So Heaven may work upon the mind
of man—and maybe dog and cat.
But, Hen, your guarded, tit-for-tat,
ethical but unsaintly rule
is learned in a much older school,
Where even bread from wheat you planted
is not at all taken for granted.

"Things That Go"

Hoop and arrow,
wheel and dart,
kite and rocket,
stream and heart;

fan and motor,
mill and train,
waterwheel,
remembered pain;

summer, autumn,
winter, spring;
desire and
desired thing;

suns that burn
and rains that weep;
children you once
rocked to sleep.

The Wolf

Across two pages of my grandson's book
he leaps, bristling with speed, toothed like a saw,
intent on Piggy, his mad yellow look
igniting cloudy fireworks of straw.

Ambrose is two years old, and can surmise
how this must end: clearly he does not need
the words he has not heard. He shuts his eyes—
now brimming—and the book—and pleads, "No read,"
and burrows in the safety of my lap,
where Piggy, too, would have been safe. No doubt
Ambrose believes as much; he takes his nap
without more thought of the fierce, hungry snout
possibly trapped in texts he need not know,
or boiling in the pot where bad things go.

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 shred 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.

Dominican-born Rhina P. Espaillat writes poetry, essays and short stories, both in English and in her native Spanish, and translates between the two languages. She has published three chapbooks and seven books, most recently *Playing at Stillness*, a collection of poems in English, and *Agua de dos rios/Water from Two Rivers*, essays in both languages, and *El olor de la memoria/The Scent of Memory*, bilingual short stories. Her honors include the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, the Wilbur Award, the Nemerov Award, and several prizes from the Poetry Society of America and the New England Poetry Club.