

## Catharine Savage Brosman

### The Body's Past Its Prime

My youth was orderly, and I was green,  
reserved, and bent on cultivating mind—  
thank God; my figure, habits all were lean,  
my appetites appropriate, refined.

Time was abundant. One did not misspend  
it, though; for “recreation,” there were rules,  
for play and married love, the proper end  
of girlhood. Those ignoring them were fools.

I’m still alive; the gods may be confused.  
Or I. And now I’m squandering my old age—  
these added years a favor, but unused,  
my superannuated charms offstage,

while there’s no need for prudence; no one cares  
or notices; all conduct is the same,  
all preferences; no one says affairs  
or trysts. One’s liver is, perhaps, to blame

for caution; any other pretext, trite.  
Today, though, someone texts me from Saigon.  
(He worked there once.) He’s thinking of me. Might  
he come to see me? As in antiphon,

I answered, “Yes! Of course!” My old heart raced.  
Conditions set, however; I can’t yield  
too much. His company won’t go to waste;  
yet I am wary. Let’s define the field.

The body’s past its prime, eyes faulty, skin  
discolored, muscles slack. No shorts, sarong;  
no negligee for hours of yang and yin,  
sweet commerce, book talk. It cannot last long.

### Dry Lightning

Winking to us from the stage door at the horizon,  
it's given us a sound-and-light show,  
spotlights zig- and zagging, sheets illuminating  
all the backdrop, proscenium well lit,

with percussive fanfare, snare drums, timpani,  
and occasionally a bass drum bang. The clouds  
are waiting for their cue, it seems.  
This summer has been long, and hot, and parched;

we've gotten by on showers, mornings  
overcast that half-disguise the sun, patience, hope.  
This time, full-bodied rain will fall,  
a symphony! But no: I listen for light tapping

on the panes, then hard attacks. In vain;  
no signal comes.—That man also turned out  
to be dry lightning: salvos, smiles,  
admiring looks and words, the gestures of a suitor,

intimations, invitations. His display was finest  
on the fringes or remotely, behind the scrim  
of distance. The tender droplets I imagined, virgae,  
vaporized before they hit the earth.



### On a Birthday Party Photograph

It is my husband's natal day, not mine.  
 He faces neither camera nor me.  
 but, looking downward, pulls me close, the sign  
 that I should be the evening's honoree—

while I, expressionless beside him, stand  
 unmoved, it seems. It's my old self, severe,  
 my stiffness or aloofness. Yet my hand  
 has reached for his; though mute, the meaning's clear.

Though handsome, slim, bow-tied tonight, his hair  
 quite dark, he is not well; he's eighty-five.  
 And years fly faster now, as he's aware—  
 a bird of yearning, fragile but alive.

Does he reflect on whar we had, and lost—  
 the might-have-been, the carelessness of youth?  
 Or were misunderstandings just the cost  
 of later joy, to illustrate the truth

that everything is charged to one's account?  
 Acknowledging that errors have their price,  
 he thinks of love regained: it's tantamount  
 to miracles, our having found it twice.

The bird extends its wings, a silver thought  
 that rises out of time, arcs up in style,  
 and planes. The photo's taken; we are caught  
 together, happily. At last, I smile.



### Lifeline

As lightning bolted through the clouds and played,  
a deadly ignis fatuus, by his plane,  
Malraux observed his hand, the palm displayed  
a moment, trembling, with a sea-blue vein

and furrows deeply etched. The lifeline meant  
long years for him. But why? His father dead  
by suicide; *his* father—through intent  
or accident—by axe; new deaths ahead.

He'd tempted fate, he knew, at Angkor Wat,  
been jailed, then freed by friends and fortune. War  
would come once more, as in '14—the rot

of purpose. In the passage between facts  
and will lies human destiny: a door  
swings open, shuts again. Man *is* his acts.



### High Stakes

The young Voltaire, a commoner, was bold  
and proud enough to cast a verbal glove  
at an aristocrat who mocked him. Old  
Regime conventions held; for neither love,

nor fame, nor money could it countenance  
such breach of social code. To the Bastille!  
Then exile. He chose England. Circumstance  
served well: free conscience, ancient rights, ideal

for grooming thought. In France again, he bet  
his own, by acid pen, in his campaign  
against unreason, risking oubliette

and gallows yearly, while renowned abroad.  
He wrote for human happiness.—The vane  
of history turns, a shifty wheel, half-fraud.

