

10 Lyrical Short Fiction Pieces
from

DARLING ENDANGERED

by

Carol Guess

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Nostalgia

We spun a radio out of the wreckage. Sidereal songs echoed over our cereal. Leaves tangerined. Surrogates shoved children on swings, hoping chains would make astronauts of all of us. In gym we could choose Flashdance or Golf. Once a week we stitched the flag, mending snags where wind got grabby. Everyone mouthed a different pledge. Cows grazed on chocolate and cardboard gave milk. Sometimes aloud, sometimes in silence black letters made meaning by crossing the page. Pain was a story we couldn't explain, and night, how it held us handcuffed to pink beds.

Coyotes, Motor Oil, Chiffon

Wings shake dunnage off union docks, slough rockslides onto Chuckanut Drive. Bird of the harbor, of the terrible temper—I let you lure me *up up up*. Teach me how to build a city out of touch. Mornings I enter a room full of music. Scribble *No Exit* on the door in lipstick. Others move with crowds through crowds, thoughts entombed in cocktail chatter. The football player in my neighbor's window is a cardboard figurine. Jeans on the line, a three-legged tabby, strawberries nesting in a cracked blue bowl. At noon-plus the noon bus pushes off from the station. Fear of dying like Isadora Duncan inhibits the driver from putting the top down. This is a city of bagpipes and re-ups. Pick up the tempo of *Scruffy Allegiance*. Come nightfall children drop books to win kickball—no, they're kicking a soft-spoken boy.

Sonatina Americana

Balustrade (The Lost Ballet)

Twin trees and a balustrade toy with bourrées. Lost choreography battles lost socks for resurrection. On TV Cylons battle humans, becoming humans who were already Cylons, awaiting rebirth in the beds of toy gods. Music lures dancers from trees to light. Socks brighten night at the foot of a bed. Balanchine later reused the Concerto. He twinned a new toy from the old.

Stravinsky Violin Concerto

Release her wrists. Round her down to dissonance. Squeak her knees into bouquet. Wrongness of thigh must be set right; port de bras relaxed to slump. Retract, retreat with spat and kick, then kiss (if elbow may be mouth; it is).

Chaconne

The girl runs toward the boy too fast, not in time as they've rehearsed. She lifts herself before he lifts her, long enough for him to catch. Risk draws genius to her dress. Dressed in street clothes past the theater, she flings herself at cabs and snow. Her jeans sign autographs. She starves to make you think she floats.

Don Quixote

Some love on horseback, tilting at song birds. Some love the wrong one. She swells religion, as door adheres to jamb and will not open. Dulcinea's return means real girls vanish. Curtain, applause. Old man rides off. Some love ether more than earth.

Serenade

Blind, he's guided to the fallen girl. Blue tulle pools where she slipped and cried, where Balanchine said *Stay*, in waiting for the one who rushes in, off cue. No men in White Plains. An odd number of women, piano hidden behind rhododendron. The Sonatina starts with first: shoes snapped like fans. Tchaikovsky's elegy comes last.

The Four Temperaments

The shape of the thing becomes the thing until it's something else. Tumult turns caress turns flight path, as if a circus, drained of tulle, played out in urban haunts. Phlegmatic's surrounded by stilts and knives. Hindemith holds him in the tiger's mouth. Girls stagger, pulse, devour the highwire. The audience exits in bright yellow clown cars.

Whistler

Everyone lost someone in the avalanche that year. Nights, we held dances in the ruined garden. Wolves wove the trail but stopped short of the fireline. The mountain refused to name what it knew. When a dog or child went missing we wore miner's headlamps, bright sieves for thick dark. Everyone waltzed, but not everyone tangoed. Hard-packed snow tumbled, gathering speed, eating ice farmers, sentries, and skis. Our shouted questions stirred rocks. We had to learn not to talk--to move mutely, we of the valley--and to bury the bodies when spring thawed ice walls. Our dead came down perfect, red in their cheeks, palms flexed as if resisting the pyre.

Darling Endangered

Crone dog slows. Drags her bones to the foot of the hill and balks. Sulks at the pier off Boulevard Park. This is the moment I smash my clock. Bronze blossoms bunched on dumpsters unfurl into hundreds of tiny spiders. Sparrows teach sparrows how to swerve and skim trees. Chlorine mist drifts over the harbor, workers unsure of their returning coworker: Lisa, tall blonde who used to be James. Train whistle. Train. The trestle bridge is caged with mesh over the tracks. Dog lets me lift her past passerine practice. Girls scatter carbs. Wings tousle chignons.

:(< :)

I've spiked my work ethic with electrolytes, sparkly nightlights for the inner dark. Not lounging. Not much for talking. Not at the mall. My small talk's small. Yesterday I tried to love everything: bulk box of unbreakable ornaments, dog's bowl crackling with cackling pine. Why is it hard to be kind in December? Shoppers descend, denuding stairs of faux snow trim. Lip-syncing pop stars plug clothing lines, pink rhinestones made in China. Megachurches transform cellphone towers into crucifixes: *Hold for Jesus*.

Upturned Cistern, Plastic Fawn

The lettered streets stop short of *K*. Knock on the garden of the ruined gate. Beyond us cold orchards and kerosene lanterns, frozen Delicious asleep on the tree. *Past Anchor Island, past Petulant Ridge, past the failing pedestrian bridge*. You've brought weather from the places you go. A girl could get lost among handfuls of loose tea. Two men in scrubs ferry a trolley, body without heart or heat. An airplane lands on frozen water, windows white with winter geese. The pet sitter decorates houses with dust, flowery pillows from her dead daughter's stuff. I'm your only possessive *S*. Brace yourself if you love someone else.

Detachable Sainthood

Cell phones are just earmuffs fuzzy with the static of a new century. You're pimping polyester like the 80's were yesterday. Maybe retro's where it's at, holding onto holding on. I'm not thinking of toy guns when I tell you what I want. You're at the far end of the farthest corner of the road. You're a girl where girls don't go. This is where I come to find you, counting saints to fool the devil. Your name changes in my mouth, little accidents colliding with consonants. I am not your plate tectonics. Don't nod off and don't say *Dork*. Frost on the stoop means you'll wear your tracksuit, a 70's sort of detachable sainthood. I've loved you longer than that. I'm ready. My hands flex *Stop* like stopping traffic, but nothing stops.

White Rock

Flyaway first, birds lifting the tree. Breakfast, plates shift, and the café shudders. We cling to the counter, counting afters. This isn't the city we were born to. We're just two girls who traverse borders. The clerk rolls each finger through ink onto paper, crossing out *groom*, writing *bride #2*. Nobody notices us, but we do. One thousand white crosses stain Peace Arch Park. Border guards search our car for cherries. Our license dissolves as we trundle through Blaine. Pessimism of planes overhead: the low thrum of war scatters deer down Mount Baker. The whole town's hiding, dodging discourse with cellphone ringtones. It's just us in our trousseaus on Railroad. The avenue stretches as far as its drugs. Red lights, bail bonds, dark drop, crunk. *We Will Not Be Undersold*. International rumspringa away from the cube. From the start we promise no tattoos.

Maritime Heritage

The no-firecracker zone sleeps under silk sheets in high-ceilinged rooms at the Marina Hotel. We're hunkered down in my brother's houseboat while he backpacks Alaska with one pair of socks. Hot air comes musky off the docks, skittish skunk or house afire. We tug on jeans, pour cowboy coffee, stumble the pier to see the face of the thing. *The Alaskan* burns low, black skeleton smoldering. Passengers stand sequestered and staring from grass at the tip of Zuanich Point Park. Rescue settles around the docks, smoke trailing tourists still in white robes. You climb onto the seawreck statue, sailor holding a shit-splattered anchor. The day's first firecracker, then another. Someone adds names to the list of sea dead.

About the Poet

Carol Guess is the author of seven books of poetry and prose, as well as three forthcoming collections: *Doll Studies: Forensics*, *Willful Machine*, and *My Father In Water*. She is Associate Professor of English at Western Washington University. Follow her at: www.carolguess.blogspot.com.