

Elizabeth Willis

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Wesleyan Poetry

Elizabeth Willis

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I is to they
as river is to barge
as convert to picket line
sinker to steamer
The sun belongs to I
once, for an instant
The window belongs to you
leaning on the afternoon
They are to you
as the suffocating dis-
appointment of the mall
is to the magic rustle
of the word "come"
Turn left toward the mountain
Go straight until you see
the boat in the driveway
A little warmer, a little stickier
a little more like spring

TAKE THIS POEM

Take this spoon
from me, this
cudgel, this axe
Take this bowl
this kettle, this
continental plate
Take, if you will,
this shallow topsoil
above my bedrock
This swingset
above the topsoil
this raven
from my hair

Take your fear
from its closet
Take this shirt
in need of washing
this unread book
Take this child
this husband, this
teacup, this
provisional weather
Take this pill
with a tall glass

of water, take this
bus deep into
the interior

Take my wife
even if I meant
to keep her
Take my share
I don't need it
Take as long
as you need to
Take this line
between breathing
and voting
Take this city
Take that expensive
ship across this
cellophane model
of the sea

Take the F train
but not to Brooklyn
Take the case
of the missing cufflinks
Take this beverage
with its silver
Pullman ice

Take me with you
as far as you can go
I won't cause
any trouble

Take this office
overlooking the people
Take this patience
and burn it to the ground
Take down your
vanities, your hippodrome
your champagne
pyramid

Take down your hair
your curtains, your
razorwire fence
Take off your greasepaint
your necklace, your wig
your inadequate armor

Take off your coat
Stay a little longer
Take the low road
out into the sunset

Take it out back
And take it
to the people
Take Florida
Take Ohio
Take Wisconsin
Take Missouri

Take this chamber
like a bullet
Take this house
and paint it black
or take it down

NOCTURNE

I'm thinking of
the heat in the reins
a gear in love with itself
two parts that fit
I'm thinking about your face:
there's nothing to invent
Driven to distraction
or just walking there
The edge of my mind
against the edge of yours
An astrolabe isn't thinking
of a concrete lane
or unconquerable interior
Abiding by its class
and country church, a kitsch picture
is not "sincerity"
though I am native to it
A nation has this sound
of being born The human
is not its ill-begotten ad
A hemisphere is not your hair
in its Parisian rooms
An astrolabe is not

a metaphor for love
though love contain the mortal roots
of congress, like a peasant
inside the name you give its ruins

FRIDAY

Coming to you
from a jumbled dream

My heart caves in
the better to see you with

I'm thinking on the bright side
while looking for my keys

I've never seen a body
floating to the ceiling

in the big room
of the post office

A word is a symptom
of what can't be described

A promise, a premise
held open like a door

So I didn't find mercy
or it didn't find me

It's always personal
like the failure of a knee

A brassy rebuttal
clowning in the street

Your footprint on the planet
pinned down by outer space

BALLAD

Sometimes I think I see the air
and all that was potential
acquires the aura of its birth:

the desert that became a bottle
that broke into a crown
that chose to seize its day

Because I couldn't stop
for breath, my legs outran
their shadow like a train

By which I mean a cornfield
long-legged, mechanical,
the rhythm of a film

in the middle distance
shooting the horizon
The earth is round

A SPECIES IS AN IDEA (1)

Leaving my umbrella
I left everything behind

That dog, an emblem
of my dirty self

All this reflection
amounting to shadows

Ink eats the page:
it's Chemistry against the Forest

What train are you on
with all these thoughts?

What bitter landscape
the better to hear you with?

Its stepless grid
is suddenly a corridor

You write this down
You're at the end of it

F. A. Q.

Looking for the bigger picture
too early in the day
to curl into a question
you'll only have to answer later
Turn over the planet
like a dewy rock
The difference
between hot and cold
is not great at a distance
Appearing through the blind
a golden bough is just
a handle into hell
a vehicle that pays its toll
to name the day
as if it were a country

VALET OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Welcome to our treasured island
seized from the tribe
of enemy combatants
who nursed us through
the winter of 1642

This heap of shoes
This copper beech
This highway butter

This featureless cottage
about to be filled
with “genuine antiques”
This track into milkweed
seen from the ground

This monumental train
that thought it could
replace the barge
before it got choked out
by interstate
trying to protect
inalienable piracy

Planes thrown down
like lightning
Lightning thrown
like a glove

This eye is not a camera
passing through
the comb-like trees

This theory with its
problematic central arc
will be for sale
when the poem is over

This is the end
of the bike path

The moving sidewalk
is about to end
with the future on it
loaded with blankets
looking for a place to lie down

UNSEASONABLE PASTORAL

Those little hairs are really feathers
connected to the past
Behavior eats us up
A cardinal in the berry bush
Unmothered sometime

Don't feel ashamed of any bird
I wake up long enough
to think this is creepy
but not long enough
to write it down

I'm building the haystack
I'll disappear into
Everything's too much
until it's nothing
Try to find that woodpecker
in the jigsaw of the trees

Sink the dream into the hole
Throw its flag into the carpet dark
A test of composition
to open the field
betrayed by nightfall's
hourly wage

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