

“Ode to American English”

by Barbara Hamby

I was missing English one day, American, really,
with its pill-popping Hungarian goulash of everything
from Anglo-Saxon to Zulu, because British English
is not the same, if the paperback dictionary
I bought at Brentano's on the Avenue de l'Opéra
is any indication, too cultured by half. Oh, the English
know their delphiniums, but what about doowop, donuts,
Dick Tracy, Tricky Dick? With their elegant Oxfordian
accents, how could they understand my yearning for the
hotrod, hotdog, hot flash vocabulary of the U.S. of A.,
the fragmented fandango of Dagwood's everyday flattening
of Mr. Beasley on the sidewalk, fetuses floating
on billboards, drive-by monster hip-hop stereos shaking
the windows of my dining room like a 7.5 earthquake,
Ebonics, Spanglish, “you know” used as comma and period,
the inability of 90% of the population to get the
present perfect:

I have went, I have saw, I have taken Jesus into my heart,
the battle cry of the Bible Belt, but no one uses
the King James anymore, only plain-speak versions,
in which Jesus, raising Lazarus from the dead, says,
“Dude, wake up,” and the L-man bolts up like a B-movie
mummy. “Whoa, I was toasted.” Yes, ma'am,
I miss the mongrel plenitude of American English, its fall-guy,

rat-terrier, dog-pound neologisms, the bomb of it all,
the rushing River Jordan backwoods mutability of it, the low-rider,
boom-box cruise of it, from New Joisey to Ha-wah-ya
with its sly dog, malasada-scarfing beach blanket lingo
to the ubiquitous Valley Girl's *like-like* stuttering,
shopaholic rant. I miss its quotidian beauty, its querulous
back-biting righteous indignation, its preening rotgut
flag-waving cowardice. *Suffering Succotash*, sputters
Sylvester the Cat; *sine die*, say the pork-bellied legislators
of the swamps and plains. I miss all those guys, their Tweety-bird
resilience, their Doris Day optimism, the candid unguent
of utter unhappiness on every channel, the midnight televangelist
euphoric stew, the junk mail, voice mail vernacular.
On every *boulevard* and *rue* I miss the Tarzan cry of Johnny
Weismueller, Johnny Cash, Johnny B. Goode,
and all the smart-talking, gum-snapping hard-girl dialogue,
finger-popping x-rated street talk, sports babble,
Cheetoes, Cheerios, chili dog diatribes. Yeah, I miss them all,
sitting here on my sidewalk throne sipping champagne
verses lined up like hearses, metaphors juking, nouns zipping
in my head like Corvettes on Dexedrine, French verbs
slitting my throat, yearning for James Dean to jump my curb.

The first thing you notice about Barbara Hamby's poems is that they LOOK different: they fill the printed page almost to the edge, they are divided into neat couplets with the even-numbered lines indebted just a little tiny bit, and you have to use 16 point type rather than 18 to make them fit on a computer page. It is as if Hamby were the thriftiest poet around, determined to use every square inch of each page, terrified that she might leave something out that could still be shoehorned in.

The second thing you notice about Hamby's poems is that they are made up of immensely long sentences, like Faulkner or somebody, and each of those sentences is crammed full of stuff. Take this mind-blowing tour-de-force:

. . . What is the word for someone who looks into her friend's face
and sees once smooth skin gone like a train that has left
the station in Petersburg with its wide avenues and nights
at the Stray Dog Café, sex with the wrong men,
who looked so right by candlelight, when everyone was young
and smoked hand-rolled cigarettes, painted or wrote
all night but nothing good, drank too much vodka, and woke
in the painful daylight with skin like fresh cream, books
everywhere, Lorca on Gogol, Tolstoy under Madame de Sévigné,
so that now, on a train in the taiga of Siberia,
I see what she sees — all my books alphabetized and on shelves,
feet misshapen, hands ribbed with raised veins,
neck crumpled like last week's newspaper, while her friends
are young, their skin pimply and eyes bright as puppies',
and who can blame her, for how lucky we are to be loved
for even a moment, though I can't help but feel like Pushkin,
a rough ball of lead lodged in his gut, looking at his books
and saying, "Goodbye, my dear friends," as those volumes
close and turn back into oblong blocks, dust clouding
the gold-leaf that once shimmered on their spines.

"Letter to a Lost Friend".

One of the most charming things about Hamby's

writing is her willingness to laugh at herself, even to the extent of satirizing her own writing style. Example: she becomes positively euphoric when she discovers the word “marivaudage” (defined by Wordnik as a writing style which is “a mixture of subtle metaphysics and bizarre trivialities, with over-refined sentiments which [are] mingled with the most ordinary colloquialisms”) and adopts it as her own:

. . . I’ve just discovered *marivaudage*,
and it has taken over my cranial chrysanthemum
like a shot of methamphetamine to the medulla oblongata,
because it explains my method to myself,
Marivaux’s sentences going on and on like a road
to nowhere that sometimes ends up in Constantinople
in the court of Suleiman the Magnificent and Roxelana
or else at one of those fetes at the Sforza castle
with Leonardo’s mechanical whirly-gigs and fireworks
but often plunks down in Two Egg, Florida,
at the Piggly-Wiggly right in front of the Little Debbie cakes
or maybe the freezer with the pigs feet,
sometimes it’s so hard to tell, and Marivaux’s characters
trying to not only express everything they have thought,
but what they would like to think they have thought
if their brains could have expanded like the Wizard
of Oz’s hot air balloon over Kansas

“Ode to Marivaudage, Ratiocination, and BlahBlahBlah”.
Irresistible.

Hamby is intensely literary, even for a poet. As an initial matter, she has her parents to thank:

. . . How do you thank her
for the way she tossed words around and made them
spin and laugh and do cartwheels on the lawn?
And your father, he's the one who loved poetry,
bought the book that opened your world to you
like someone cutting into a birthday cake the gods
have baked just for her. . . .

“How to Pray”. And when she gives folks advice, it tends to involve books:

. . . Time can be dangerous, so read
Middlemarch, young women, because George Eliot
can do your thinking for you until you get your own mind
organized,
or Dostoevsky and Charlotte Brontë, who helped me
navigate
the utter stupidity of my early twenties, and Keats and Garcia
Lorca,
so in a sense, my younger self, you chose your friends well
though they were all in books, and Thomas Hardy
was one of your best boyfriends ever, wasn't he, . . .
and Jane Austen, she taught you to hold out for what you
really wanted, and Virginia Woolf — she showed you how
to be a woman and a man in the same body through time,
and *The Song of Solomon* told you that love could be
poetry . . .

“Ode to My Younger Self”.

Oftentimes Hamby’s literary heroes intersect with popular culture to comic effect, like the time she ran into Tolstoy while waiting in line to visit Elvis’s home:

I am standing in line waiting for the bus to take me
 across the street to Graceland when Tolstoy shows up
with his white beard and peasant’s garb, and I smell him
 before I see him, because let’s face it, Mennen’s speed stick
was not big at Yasnaya Polyana, but I recognize him right away,
 those big ears and the beard like one of the guys in ZZ Top,
and I say, “Lev Nikolayevich, what are you doing here?”
 And he gives me this mix of a stink eye
and *What are you doing later?* and says, “I need to talk to Elvis,”
 and I’m thinking, *Tolstoy looked at my boobs? . . .*

“Elvis and Tolstoy Save the World”.

Many of Hamby’s poems were written during her travels, which have been very extensive. We find her summer after summer in Italy, as well as in Siberia and Chile and many other places in between. We even have a lovely “Ode to Neruda’s Hats in Isla Negra”:

You are lined up on the top shelf of the closet

like soldiers in a forgotten war,
a gaucho with two ribbons, one pink and one white
with a flower, a top hat maybe worn in Stockholm
when he picked up his big prize, a Peruvian cap
with earflaps to protect him from winds
off the Andes, the jaunty boater for parties
with cocktails and canapés, the mortarboard
for all those honorary degrees, a stack of slouchy black hats
for walking down the beach of poetry

Some of Hamby's most charming moments come
when her love for her husband seems to burst forth
uncontrollably:

. . . in the beginning there was darkness until you came,
my pluperfect anagram of erotic delight,
my wild-haired professor of vinissimo and mayhem,
emperor of Urbino, incubator of rhythm, bright-eyed
Apollo of the late-night bacchanalia, and there was music,
that heady martini of mathematics and beauty . . .
I was a woman craving a blaze, a flame,
a five-alarm fire in my heart, in my bones,
my hair red as a hibiscus, like a burning bush,
I was Moses screaming at God,
filaments of flame eating my eyes,
my sex, the hard sweet apple of my mouth.

“The Word”.

Let us end with these inspirational last words from

Hamby:

. . . O let me always be lost in this storm of time,
may I turn every corner and see something I've never seen
before,
see the world open to me like a dragon with a mouth full
of torch ginger or a peony with a head of a thousand petals,
her pink shores and armada of clouds, each galleon
carrying all the gold of the summer when I was twelve,

the shimmer-slicked mornings and my salt-wracked breath.

“Ode on Going Holoholo and Getting Lost”.

For Further Reading: The obvious place to start is *On the Street of Divine Love: New and Selected Poems* (2014). Need more Hamby? Go to *Bird Odyssey* (2018) and *Holoholo* (2021). You won't be disappointed.

There is also a wonderful anthology, one of my all-time favorites, that Hamby edited with her husband David Kirby: *Seriously Funny: Poems about Love, Death, Religion, Art, Politics, Sex, and Everything Else* (2010), that has given me much pleasure as well as four poets featured this year in Poetry Corner: Hamby herself, Denise Duhamel, Jim Daniels, and Carl Dennis. Highly recommended.

For Further Viewing: Be sure to watch Kirk

Lawrence's send-up of today's featured poem — even funnier when read aloud than when read silently!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG_6QclhfVk

Carl