

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Mother

Your love was like moonlight
turning harsh things to beauty,
so that little wry souls
reflecting each other obliquely
as in cracked mirrors . . .
beheld in your luminous spirit
their own reflection,
transfigured as in a shining stream,
and loved you for what they are not.

You are less an image in my mind
than a luster.
I see you in gleams
pale as star-light on a gray wall . . .
evanescent as the reflection of a white swan
shimmering in broken water.

Lola Ridge¹

Reflections

In many ways I find this lyric illustrative of what I admire most about poetic form: attention to line break, restraint and extension of metaphor, fruitful ambiguity, and prismatic image. The title instructs us in a way that is at once direct but not restrictive, more gesture than command. And while it may be a straightforward address to a specific person, it might just as well be an address to someone (or something) far less particular: one mother or any mother, Mother Earth, the *idea* of mother, metaphoric mother, mother figure, etc., “less an image...than a luster.”

More than craftsmanship or proficiency, though, I find this to be one of the most beautiful love poems I know. No matter to whom or for whom specifically the poem is written, it feels spoken without sentimentality and from a posture of gratitude, of awe, of adoration for this presence capable of transfiguring, of turning “harsh things to beauty.”

¹ “Mother” by Lola Ridge. Public Domain.

My grandmother would have been 101 years old this week. Were she alive, I would like to tell her what I know now that I could not have known as a younger woman: that if we're lucky, there are people in our lives who love us in ways we might not believe we deserve, ways that we may only realize later did indeed transform us. I mean to say that I wish I were half as good and as lovable as she believed I was, and that perhaps her believing me so did somehow move me toward such goodness. I would thank her now for beholding me in that "luminous spirit," as generous, I imagine, as God's. I think this poem might be speaking of that divinely-inspired kind of love, unearned and transfiguring.

There is an interesting shift in the last line of the first stanza—"and loved you for what they are not"—which invites me to think about the ways the poem relies on an understanding and use of reflection, both to love and to be loved. There are three specific instances of reflecting (lines 4, 7, and 12) and when I use the word "prismatic" I mean to suggest not only refraction and distribution of light (moonlight, starlight, cracked mirrors, shimmering lake-light) but, in this case, the refraction and distribution of love—luminous, evanescent and gleaming. From one to another and back again, shimmering, the origin of that love-light is indistinguishable from, and magnified by, its destination.

✧ About the poet

Lola Ridge (1873-1941) was an Irish-American avant-garde poet best remembered for her feminism and her politically-charged poetic sequences, though still largely neglected by biographers and anthologists. She has only recently received some renewed critical attention for her role in the early Modernist movement, particularly as a champion of the working class, illuminating issues of class conflict and social protest. "Mother" is one of her lesser-known poems.



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