

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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Watching the Mayan Women

*I hang the window inside out
like a shirt drying in a breeze
and the arms that are missing come to me.*
Yes, it's a song, one I don't quite comprehend
although I do understand the laundry.
White ash and rain water, a method
my aunt taught me, but I'll never know
how she learned it in Brooklyn. Her mind
has gone to seed, blown by a stroke,
and that dandelion puff called memory
has flown far from her eyes. Some things remain.
Procedures. Methods. If you burn
a fire all day, feeding it snapped
branches and newspapers—
the faces pressed against the print
fading into flames—you end up
with a barrel of white ash. If
you take that same barrel and fill it
with rain, let it sit for a day,
you will have water
that can bring brightness to anything.
If you take that water,
and in it soak your husband's shirts,
he'll pause at dawn when he puts one on,
its softness like a haunting afterthought.
And if he works all day in the *selva*,
he'll divine his way home
in shirtsleeves aglow with torchlight.

Luisa Villani¹

¹ "Watching the Mayan Women" by Luisa Villani. Used with permission of the author.

Reflections

One of the most compelling things about this poem is its use of an extended metaphor—laundry—as a way of commenting on memory and discovery. Here the speaker introduces a lesson her aunt has taught her: how to make soap from ash and rain water. But the poem is much more than that; it extends into an ambiguous past to raise questions about the way our memory works, or doesn't. Interestingly, it's never clear who speaks the first three lines of the poem, a bewildering little song that even the speaker claims she does not "quite comprehend" though it moves us seamlessly into this meditation on water "that can bring brightness to anything."

The poem feels layered and veiled and folded, as a shirt whose sleeves are folded into themselves so that it is only in *un*folding, or in hanging up properly, that you see the shape in its entirety. On one layer—perhaps the surface—things are fairly straightforward in a way that procedures and methods tend to be: if this, then that. Make a fire, let it sit, fill the barrel. It's ordered and neat, with a certain cleanness to it. (Of course, if you don't know this old trick for making soap, one layer might be a pretty cool science lesson.)

And still another layer is probably the one that most intrigues me. Within the lesson is a beautifully hazy sketch of a woman, the speaker's aunt, whose "mind / has gone to seed" and whose "dandelion puff" of memory "has flown far from her eyes." It's really all we get to know about her, other than that she is the one responsible, however mysteriously the circumstances, in Brooklyn, for teaching her niece the self-same lesson the poet teaches *us*. What's haunting is the way our instruction (addressed to the universal "you") includes a sort of mythic husband in the final lines, working in the *selva*, the Mayan jungle. It is of him that we are given the most details but who is enfolded in the mysteries of memory so that we aren't quite sure where he's been or where he's going.

The most poignant phrase for me is this: "Some things remain." How is it possible that we release and retain without explanation? How is it that this woman, "blown by a stroke," is able to recall not only the method of soap-making but also the precise way her husband dressed at dawn, his pause, the softness, the glow of his shirt's clean fabric, his coming home? How is it that the memory of his shirtsleeves is as bright as their torchlight glow? And is it those very sleeves that cover "the arms that are missing"? Are those the arms that "come to me"? Where has he gone? To which home has he found his way?

I particularly love the choice of the verb "divine," a synonym for discover, especially in a poem about losing and finding, about memory and understanding, and about the ways stories are passed one person to another as inherited discoveries. The song in the beginning of the poem, whatever its origin, is yet one more thing passed down—in this case from writer to reader. Another layer, another discovery.

And let us not forget the title—"Watching the Mayan Women"—as it is an essential component to our appreciation of the poem, a meditation as much about how we struggle to understand that which eludes us as it is about this family—an aunt's memory, an old tradition, a jungle-working husband that may or may not have disappeared. It is the reader of

the poem who becomes the watcher—a witness to these women, their lives—and she, too, who must divine her way forward.

✧ About the poet

Luisa Villani's work has appeared in such prestigious literary journals as *The New England Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Hayden's Ferry Review* (where this poem first appeared). She is the author of two books of poetry, *Running Away from Russia* and *Highway of the Mayan Sky*, from which selections recently appeared in the Random House anthology *Poetry 180*. She currently is a University Diversity Fellow at the University of Southern California.



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