

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



Shedding Skin

Pulling out of the old scarred skin
(old rough thing I don't need now
I strip off
slip out of
leave behind)

I slough off deadscales
flick skinflakes to the ground

Shedding toughness
peeling layers down
to vulnerable stuff

And I'm blinking off old eyelids
for a new way of seeing

By the rock I rub against
I'm going to be tender again

Harryette Mullen¹

Reflections

As nature continually instructs, it is surely true that survival in this world requires toughness—a species-particular fortitude, endurance, hardness, grit. Also true: survival sometimes requires brutality. The snake eats the egg. The hawk steals the kitten while the cat hunts the bird. These are important lessons.

But I am grateful, especially, for nature's other instruction—its long patience, its dormancy begetting transformation, its beauty in decay, its resurrection, its generosity. If I pick one berry to eat, or one bean, it will give me even more. And the horse, even exhausted, will carry a human on its back, bearing whatever weight it can until it simply cannot.

The world—nature, at least—is inevitably cruel, I suppose, because it must be. But it does not mean *we* must. It is our tenderness—the poem reminds me—that is our hope, our

¹ “Shedding Skin” by Harryette Mullen from *Blues Baby: Early Poems*, Bucknell University Press.

privilege, our choice. It is the possibility of a new way of being, brought forth from a rough tangle or shedding of skin and armor, that is the stuff of Soul. Brutality may save a species, but tenderness will save a soul.

Animals are put to death for far less suffering than many people endure, and much of it we inflict on one another. Today I wish to do no harm, only good. I wish to make beauty where I can, give some beauty back, find more. I wish to see clearly. I wish to be awake, and peel the layers down, for all that is coming anew.

✚ About the poet

Harryette Mullen (b. 1953) was born in Florence, Alabama, raised in Fort Worth, Texas, and now lives in Los Angeles where she teaches American poetry, African-American literature and creative writing at UCLA. She earned a PhD from the University of California at Santa Cruz, completing her dissertation on the narratives of enslaved people, and has spent her career working in various forms—the essay, prose poem, story, lyric—exploring sound, language, history and identity. In an interview for the *African American Review*, she says: “I feel that I need to write in order to know what I think and what I believe...It’s a way of keeping in touch with the inner landscape, I guess. And it makes me more alert to the outer landscape.”



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