Self-Portrait at Five [1]

February 6, 2017 Featured Poetry [2]
Borders [3]

Three Poems by Louisa Howerow



Self-Portrait at Five

Mons, Belgium, 1950

What stays. Stone barracks, a garret room, a too-high window. Blurred corners trap disembodied whispers, drunken shouts.

On the drill square, children float paper boats in metal basins. I wander off, get lost in a maze of outhouses. In night dreams ever after, I never escape. Better to keep my eyes open, stare up, keep the oiled beams from falling.

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In this holding pen for war's displaced, family lines twist back to wheat fields, illusive sun. Away from damp and cold, a bright ladybird lands on the margins.

Outside the barrack walls cobbled streets open to market stalls, mounds of yellow potatoes, red and green cabbages. Open to fortune-tellers, shell games, to white chocolate, monkeys and parrots. Opens past the stalls to school.

The path to school is sure, taken solo. Here I'm praised, head patted. My words reach angels, and numbers fit like bobbin lace. In the Christmas pageant, *les Soeurs Noires* dress me as *la bête à bon Dieu*.* I know my role by heart.

**la bête à bon Dieu*—nickname for ladybird or ladybug; literally, "the good Lord's creature."



I Imagine My Parents in a Hollywood Film

because at thirteen, the year and where
they met are all I have. Mainz, 1943.
The script opens with bombers

darkening the morning sky, sirens,
people running. The hero, my father
pulls my mother down the cellar stairs

into a corner. They fold themselves
against the stone, the smell of rat dung.
On their right, women whisper, arrange

pillows, blankets, as if they're readying beds
for the night. Two men in suits, hats,
polished shoes, no socks, sit on upturned valises.

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An explosion. Nearer still. The men steady
their knees, their unopened umbrellas.
The women speak hurriedly, keep working.

My script carries no details as to what
my parents wear, but I want them to *embrace*
fiercely. I add fireballs, walls caving in.



Hospital Photo

Mainz, 1944

Unlike her other poses, here my mother
smiles, face bent toward me in her arms.

My head, the only part not swaddled,
is turned, as if attracted to a sound

from the metal bed. Above it a window,
opaque light. Closer to the camera's lens,

my mother's sleeve, a badge. OST.
Later I'll learn the colors were white

on blue, the designation *Ostarbeiter*.
Ukrainian *untermensch*. I was luckier

than most. Baby blanket, hospital birth.
I'm ready to ask how, why, but she

shakes her head, takes back the photo.

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Louisa Howerow's poems are included in the following anthologies: *Found It at the Movies: An Anthology of Film Poems* (Guernica); *Imaginarium 3 (and 4): The Best Canadian Speculative Writing* (ChiZine); *Full: An Anthology of Moon Poems* (Two of Cups); and *River of Earth and Sky: Poems for the Twenty-First Century* (Blue Light).

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