

Three Poems

Stephen Burt

The Soul

Easy to recognize in its costume
made up of Sunday puzzles and Scrabble tiles,

you can take it, but not very far.
Nor can you baste, drip-dry or evaluate

happily what's left when it's removed.

Respectable people have found it in a guitar.
Consider where it lives, or hides, in you.

Backyardigans

To stand in the shoes of a barefoot magenta
alien and a chocolate-snouted moose,
to go nowhere while going everywhere
with bells on, with antlers affixed
to the forehead, to go on a quest for a glass of juice,

to memorize proper and improper
names, Austin, Uniqua, and Tyrone,
as Homer could memorize Nestor
and hence create him, is not to delete
the imagination, but to find its use:

we welcome these musical entities for the same
reasons that we do not need them, because they belong
to the best animators we know, who know
just why the number seven has
exactly as many legs as the number one

and that our children will be leaving soon;
who ask for a plastic shovel and turn
it into a bassoon,
or place a white ball in a black
bowl on a rung inside a log and call it the moon.

Prothalamion with Laocoön Simulacrum

*for the marriage of Amanda Schaffer, science writer, and Dennis
Potami, sculptor*

Everything good is a challenge: your plastic casts
that tax the calmest model, a digital eye
you trained to read the plastic casts, the lithe
and programmed curves by which your software makes
apparent to our analog gaze the myth
of a prophet who told the truth and wrestled snakes.

Today is your handiwork too, and everything flaunts
its goodness for you: you have become your own
informative heralds, supernatural pair
empowered to move us by dozens, friends and aunts
transported where needed through country lanes and midair,
so that it is not even a breach of tone

to speak of you and wish you well past dark.
A marriage, like a body, can be made
in a cocoon or a frenzy, but yours
is not: it is a part-instinctive braid
of space and work that feels nothing like work,
elusive and durable like the dinosaur's

bone in *Bringing Up Baby*, whose principals wrestle
each other, timetables and claims for romantic love—
what it may do and how it might evolve,
how it can climb smooth surfaces outdoors
through microfine adhesions, how to live
as something more than psychological fossils,

advancing always the more persuasive news
that we create each other, works in progress.
So ligaments evolved for us to use
flirtatiously, as a lover might stretch a toe
to touch a lover under a notional table,
a secular altar made of skirts and glass:

there's more of you in love than we can know.
Say love is like a ligament, is able
to bind with more than chemical attraction,
to bend and turn, to take most sorts of stress—
so hard to model, shaped by such selection
to hold you together and take you where you want to go.