

Four Poems

From Jennifer Maiden's *Appalachian Fall: Poems About Poverty in Power*

Hillary and Eleanor: 15: San Francisco Bay

Jimmy Carter: One: Pretty Saro

Jimmy Carter: Two: Dylan Thomas

Diary Poem: Uses of the Appalachian Fall

Hillary and Eleanor: 15:

San Francisco Bay

Eleanor Roosevelt woke up in yet another hotel room, this time in San Francisco in fresh March. Hillary Clinton was just back from the Professional Businesswomen in California Conference, and looked as if San Francisco were wine, and she a maenad prancing processionally, giddily, into Eleanor's old arms. Hillary exclaimed, 'My God! Spring in San Francisco. I want to put some flowers in my hair!' The only flowers in the room were a bouquet of baby's breath and daisies from a fan. Eleanor said, 'I think that might make rather a mess, dear. Anyway, I believe that song spoke about the summertime, not spring.' But her newly woken fingers found their life again in Hillary's soft hair. Eleanor - who forgot nothing, had not forgotten the bayonet that was used to sodomise Colonel Gaddafi, and how Hillary had been so ecstatic about



his death on TV, but she saw that this ecstasy was not that one. She saw that this mood was the peace that follows loss, when the loss is not of living blood and flesh. They held hands on the floral puffed coverlet, looked out at a view of the Bay. It was flat and mirrory, as often, but its synapse-soothing shine dropped Hillary's voice to a whisper, still happy: 'It's full of sharks, yachts, ducks and suicides, as always, Eleanor,' with her head a dollar-gold harbour on Eleanor's firm shoulder. She said, 'At first, I thought they gave it to Trump because I was too tough: they thought I'd wedge Russia too much on Syria, to impress the Senate, score myself a Supreme Court Judge, and Putin wouldn't back down, so I'd cause World War Three, or something. But, now, it seems they thought I'd be too canny when they dished the propaganda: that my knees wouldn't jerk enough.' 'It is true, my dear, you do not have jerky knees', said Eleanor, 'and Trump as a businessman has knees that bend in any poll direction. At first that gave one hope, of a rather macabre nature, but once he sacrificed General Flynn as National Security Adviser, it was clear that he might scare in any undesirable direction.' The Bay fluttered, glowed in night. Hillary said, 'I miss dark eyes. She doesn't contact me much, but I guess without the White House I'm not much use to her. It seems I am still some use to you, my love, however.' It wasn't a remark for response, except the endearment, and Eleanor kissed the little fistful hand, and placed it gently on the leggings. 'Korea',



she said,'and the Mother of all Bombs on that Afghan ant's nest,
will need you to seem restrained in contrast. Now you are
the ideal that should have been and you suggest
Stephen not Vince Foster. You are Appalachian Queen,
the Mother who would have saved, and kept the secrets.
Take off the *Wild One* coat, the blossom blouse, and get you down
to work the crowd again: no San Francisco summer, just
New York, in its black-ice spring, where you belong.' 'And if
I don't', teased Hillary, 'You still will stay?' For the Tammany
was gone so no End of Days would come
and she knew that the old lady wouldn't leave her.

Jimmy Carter: One:

Pretty Saro

Sara Carter Bayes woke up at the 2017 Presidential Inauguration, next
to her 92 year old distant cousin, Jimmy Carter, then the oldest
Ex-President to attend such an event. If he had to be accompanied
by some stranger from the afterlife, he thought, he'd have preferred
Dylan Thomas, whose poetry he cherished. So why wasn't this woman



Dylan Thomas? She was here for a purpose, no doubt. His wife, Miss Rosalynn, smiled in spite of the tension that had to be inherent in a Trump Inauguration. Outside, women prepared to march in fluffy pink pussy ears. Miss Rosalynn wore a lot of black and white, a smart spotted scarf and smiled the smile of she who has sat through peculiar ceremonies in Africa. He knew why he loved her. She smiled interestedly at Sara, who might have been anyone, but dressed in splendour in silken jazz age drapery, one step ahead, Miss Rosalynn supposed of Carolina Herrera. Sara said, 'When you're from West Virginia, you dress as best as you can when you make a bit of money, you show that they can do that where you came from. They like that where you came from, in the little shops and farms.' Jimmy nodded, 'It was the same in Georgia, where we came from.' He remembered now this woman singing songs on the radio, in nights smelling indelibly of peanuts and exhaustion. The singing Carter Family who found songs anywhere, made them respectable, gave a voice to poverty so fatal it could only express itself in music. I won't be hungry in heaven. I won't have lost you, love, in heaven. You'll be sorry when they find me in the river, the cold rushes. I'm a thin boy selling papers because mother says my father is a drunkard. Starved. Miss Rosalynn



was talking to someone beside her. He said, 'You were lead singer, Sara. I always liked your voice, and that loud guitar behind you. Was that played by your sister?' 'Sister-in-law. My cousin Maybelle. She was better, you know, than Robert Johnson. That old question, 'Who's playing the second guitar?', when there wasn't one, was appropriate to her as well, but no one said she'd done a deal with the Master of the Crossroads. She was a pretty little lady, at first wore glasses. I was more classic in appearance.' He said, 'You still are,' not lying. She had the dark distant expression of a painting: strong bones, mountain eyes. Singing, her voice was deep and harsh but soothed, uncannily like a a cross between a violin and buzzsaw. He recalled: 'Wasn't there a scandal?' Miss Rosalynn smiled at them, encouraging vaguely. She and her companion were discussing the blue dress worn here by Melania Trump. Already it was being said it resembled the outfits worn by the French Team in *Harry Potter*, but in fact it was Ralph Lauren cashmere wrapped in crossovers, the blue not French but unprovocatively childlike and pale. He had thought once Melania was a sleeper, since her father was a Slovenian Communist, but now she just seemed frail. For some reason, he was touched by the matching high heels. Sara was puzzled by the dress: it did not have the straight filmy lacy



flow she thought was luxury, but she continued: 'There was no scandal: there was only me... A.P. was away quite often and I had to run the farm, the crops and the three children. I found new songs, too, sometimes in churches, but not so peripatetically. He could come home with one-legged black men, not that they didn't know good music. I didn't learn to read music, but when I first recorded my voice was as high as a train going into a tunnel. I dropped the pitch to move the sound around. I did it by smoking cigarettes. Once I was doing that, I wore trousers, too, and went out hunting. Didn't kill much, but it soothed me, firing off that rifle. Then I fell in love.' 'I'm not surprised', said Carter, 'I once annoyed people by referring to "Adultery in the heart". I can see why I was an annoying President. That was the closest that I ever came to the obligatory satyriasis.' He seemed amused, however. She said, "This wasn't in the heart. It was Coy Bayes, A.P.'s cousin. So we went around like lovers, until his family discussed it, all moved together to California, took him with them. A.P. already had the devil's temper, shook all the the time from some infirmity, but he did love me. I went on singing the songs to get the children money , but I lit out back to my own people, on the other side of the mountain, and then I only came back and slept there at Maybelle's, or if the children were unwell.'



Sometimes, she still had poverty's formal diction: 'Anyway, at last there was a happy ending. Six years later, I'd divorced A.P., and we were all singing on this really widely broadcast radio - quite the new invention. Coy hadn't answered my letters (his Ma hid them), but I thought he might still have ears to listen, so I introduced a song "To my friend, Coy Bayes in California." No one could believe it.' Carter thought Dylan Thomas might have been less entertaining. He asked, 'What was the song?' *'I'm thinking tonight of my blue eyes.'* He knew that one, recited: "*Would been better for us both if we'd never/ in this wide and wicked world had never met/for the pleasure we've both seen together/ I'm sure, love, I'll never forget...*" That must have got him?' 'Sure did. He said to his Ma, "I'm going to get her". She said, "I think maybe you'd better" . He drove all night to Tennessee to find me. We were married three weeks later. He was truly still the prettiest young man. We went back to California, without ever me singing unless I wanted, or ever learning music. God was good,' she added, with one of piety's graceful addenda. He thought she had once been the preacher of a vast vulgate bible, had grated to America its soul. He thought : we knew ourselves when we heard it: the low gut-scream of hunger, for some food, some pride, for any sort of civilising action, answered passion, and if all these people were Trump voters, maybe that in fact was why



he couldn't despise their desperation. And who but Trump or Bernie Sanders would dare to prevent the TPP? No one cartels like a rich man, but Carter thought if Trump were a drug he'd be generic. His attempts at copyright were always too legal clumsily and he had the truculent passivity of an old man less bewildered by the small. Sara was becoming distracted by the strangeness of the dresses. He refocused her wistfully: 'Did you ever shoot a swamp rabbit?' She considered, alertly: 'Why, no, but I've seen them. Big things with big teeth and very unpredictable, especially in the water.' She giggled, her face's dignity rippling into arch Appalachian: 'Why, Jimmy, did one chase you?' She was Saro now, not Sara. He could recall that the other Dylan (Bob) tried numerous times to record the old song, from the Appalachians, '*Pretty Saro*', didn't succeed. You had to accept it was all about money: '*My love she won't have me/And I understand./She wants a freeholder/And I have no land./I cannot maintain her/I've no silver and gold/Can't give her the fine things/That a big house will hold*' was the version he'd heard himself. He said, 'Yes, a swamp rabbit chased me. I was in a boat and I was President, fishing. It swam over, tried to jump in. I think that hounds were chasing it. I splashed it and it left. The press made a big joke of it, but it was feral. I don't know what so alarmed me, Saro.' He thought: if she understands this, she will understand Iran,



and that I did better with Egypt and Israel, that my prestige has gone up since I left office. She said, 'Well, you could have shot it, but they don't eat well.' Still she continued to watch intently as he spoke, with an Appalachian earnestness now: in photos, her face when she sang. She thought: he follows strange roads - so did I, after all. He's talking about lands, of course, not rabbits in the river. Some of these coats on the women looked like something A.P. would wear in winter. They obviously don't need to make their homes seem tasteful. They must have been rich for centuries, or something. She herself liked fine silks that flowed shiny, cut crisply. Why did Cousin Jimmy think some embassy in Tehran was so crucial? She said, 'So, they tricked you - sold you out for arms and money, while you tried to outwait them and outwit them, like a fool, and then your use of force blew up against you, and you tried at last to introduce college conscription, lost the only vote you had. But that treaty between Israel and Egypt sounds straight out of the Bible. If I were you I'd stick with that. And nobody likes poverty, and everyone likes people who build homes.' 'It depends where they do it', he corrected: 'the downside of this Inauguration is Trump Towers in Jordan Valley, less immigration, Demon Mexico, maybe torture, more



even than under Obama.' But in her company the most languishing, dire anguish had a backnote of the cheerful, as if Maybelle still strummed and scratched along, self-taught on the guitar.

Jimmy Carter: Two:

Dylan Thomas

Dylan Thomas woke up in Plains, Georgia at the close-to-earth, lyrical little house of Jimmy Carter. It whispered all over with trees, country sun caressed its constant windows, where the thirty ninth President smiled like a leafy sun, himself a waiting window. As Thomas came in, 'I sang in my chains like the sea,' murmured Carter, half-haunted again by that poem. 'There's no sea here', grinned Thomas, 'And I wonder if the slaves sang in their chains here?' His own work made him nervous. America still made him nervous. College girls made him nervous, expecting you to fuck on a beer and sandwich after some breathy reading that sucked your gut out. Their terrible politeness for what Caitlin called his 'sexual autograph' made him nervous. Was that what murdered Dickens, too? He, Thomas, had made being rude to these people another art form, writhing and scratching



on floors not always metaphoric when they offered
some interpretation of a poem once written in seventeen
drafts and now forever shut away by booze from any prospect
of memory or explanation. Carter said, kindly, 'You're nervous',
helped his jacket off, explaining, 'This means very much, Mr. Thomas,
to me. I have read your work in every sort of crisis, and have found it
a key to staying sane, to knowing that "after the first death,
there is no other", in all its hope and horror. And I did not confine
the meaning, of course, to Jesus.' 'The meaning,' Thomas agreed,
more softly, 'was not confined to Jesus'. Carter had opened
the blue and fawn drapes and afternoon-easy breezes
of Georgia honeyed in. The couch was hard and straight, the room
was easy but built on firm edges. Carter poured coffee like midnight
in white thin mother-china. As if in a Swansea parlour, Thomas said
with courtesy: 'It's you I have to thank for that memorial
to me in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. You suggested
it on a state visit, I've been told. By Caitlin, actually, but
she was sneering. We'd just had another row, of course. Can
you believe that after her second marriage, she told everyone
she'd never had an orgasm with me?' He heard his own voice



summoning 'Cait!' down the ages, waiting for her in every lost
pub and lecture hall in Christendom, until her form
in all its curly sea-eyed bloneness Irished up, as enraged
as if she wasn't used to him by then. Carter was prepared
for some bitterness about women from a poet, but discerned
the way here was to praise and not condemn. He ventured,
'I thought her autobiography, the *Leftover Life to Kill* one,
was very finely written, very vivid, indeed quite wild but
brilliant in its overview of grief.' 'Its underview, you mean,'
amended Thomas, but the coffee was so strong it might have been
a shot of whiskey, and he remembered the death-numbness
from morphine like a Welsh graveyard in a joke or funeral,
like something from *The Doctor and the Devils*. When he took
the medical mistake that killed him, she was watching: his
American mistress, not Caitlin. He would say they were all
the same, just meant for bed or kitchen, but they seemed
so different to each other, and it wasn't them in either room,
that he at last remembered, only their desperate voices
flying, flying at him in the blackness. He said, 'At the hospital,
Caitlin came in, demanding, 'Is the bloody man dead yet?' But



I was, in roaring snake-tubing, and she just had to admit that she'd lost another child. She says in *Leftover Life* that she frets for me like an old cow for its calf: the thing is so badly physical. What she didn't admit in it yet, though, was that she was forced to have an abortion to do the American visit. It was late for one, and the child came out in pieces. When her prose breaks up like a sky of crackers that is what comes to my mind.' Carter poured him more coffee. He had swigged the last like spirits. Georgia breeze played with the drapes like a bored, determined kitten. Carter confided, 'The abortion issue is very hard for a politician. The current President, who is not really a madman, was a liberal about it years ago but now wants to unfund it as a program overseas, and I suppose that might be some sort of tactical diplomacy. Can you really help a country if you deplete its population? I have overseen elections where the lost votes of the poor were all that mattered.' Thomas said, 'I was a socialist. I was also a small man with bad manners. I deplored the BBC, but sold it *Under Milk Wood*, which Caitlin hated. The name of the town is really 'Buggerall' spelled backwards. Do you still trust my poems, after that?' 'With my life, as I always have', said Carter, who had known



all that, of course, already. He said, 'You should know I am a feminist. I left the Southern Baptist Convention when they ruled out any women as pastors, and that they should submit to their husbands. Abortion should be unnecessary, but I upheld *Roe v. Wade*.' The coffee pot was empty, and he took it to the kitchen, brought back cake. Thomas said, 'What will I read you?', as his books were on the table. 'You pick' enthused Carter, thin-eyed like a laughing infant. Thomas said, 'Nye Bevan quoted this one in *In Place of Fear*.' It was *A Refusal to Mourn* again. His voice had quickened quietness, not wasting wind as Caitlin had accused him: 'Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter, Robed in the long friends, The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother, Secret by the unmourning water Of the riding Thames...' Caitlin would spend most time with her second husband, the Italian director. But he saw that she now waited at the window, barely to be distinguished from the gold-haired light of Georgia. She had some of Carter's cake in her mouth and hand, as an Irish child, watching. He concluded, without echo, and almost without projecting: 'After the first death, there is no other,' and read until late at last with no effort. Then Jimmy Carter, delighting



in the success of the visit, walked his guests to the first unguarded gate.

Diary Poem: Uses of the Appalachian Fall

What would it involve, the small apocalypse where trees
stream down autumnal like the manes of tired horses
in their sweaty or dry horse colours, every whinny
in the wind as sexual and fatal as the vocal fall
of a careless rider, or an Appalachian singer? What
would it involve, the old bones breaking over
the scarlet ground like playthings, the old songs
resurrected like staggering corpses, what would
I make of the ballet then? What would I make then
of *Appalachian Spring*, on the digitalised film
of the dance by Martha Graham, to the tunes
wrenched from life and deified by Copland? Why,
I would still fall for the levitation. The staid way
pas de deux the groom dancer and bride dancer,



as a couple of times she risks, and gravely hovers
in air like a leaf with no apparent basis, since
his hands barely brush her waist. What would it
involve, her falling, as the winsome music drops
the dancers into tragic writhing, fearing every
agony in childbirth, religion, fearing whatever ever
in the bare woods steals a lover? What would
it involve, such poverty that warps within the bone,
refines the resurrected ghosts to nothing else but
folded arms and grinning confrontation? What
would be involved if I depicted the ballet in
modified silhouette, but made her barefoot, that
rain- risen woman? What if it were the dying fall in water,
that cleans the graves from bones, what if the storm
in the singing voices fades into the mountains
like lightning exhausted? Apocalypse then the hunger's
only answer? In the songs, the lost heart and the river
burst stronger than a world's end of starvations, than
some long-avenging election. What use would be then
involved out there still in the stubborn, stillborn wild?



What songs of use fall gold for its famished creatures:
that moonless one, so far, that stole the future, or
the sunless one, so close, that stole a child?

