

Write a commentary on *one* of the following:

1.

### Birth of the Owl Butterflies

They hung in our kitchen for days:  
 a row of brown lanterns that threw no light,  
 merely darkened with their growing load.  
 Pinned to a shelf among the knick-knacks  
 5 and the cookery books;  
 ripening in the radiator's heat:  
 six Central American *Caligo* chrysalids,  
 five thousand miles from their mountain home.

My father had brought them here,  
 10 carefully packed in cotton wool,  
 to hatch, set, identify, and display:  
 these unpromising dingy shells plumped up  
 like curled leaves, on each a silver spur,  
 a tiny gleam or drop of dew,  
 15 Nature had added as a finishing touch  
 to perfect mimicry.

For weeks the wizened fruit had been maturing.  
 Now, one by one, the pods exploded,  
 crackling in the quiet kitchen,  
 20 and a furry missile emerged – quickly,  
 as if desperate to break free –  
 unhinged its awkward legs,  
 hauling behind it, like a frilly party dress,  
 the rumpled mass of its soft wings.

25 It clung unsteadily to the cloven<sup>1</sup> pod,  
 while slow wings billowed with the blood  
 that pumped them full.  
 The dark velvet began to glow  
 with a thousand tiny striations<sup>2</sup>,  
 30 and there, in each corner,  
 boldly ringed in black and gold,  
 two fierce owl-eyes widened.

Uneasy minutes, these, before *Caligo*  
can flex its nine-inch wings and fly.  
35 They drooped still, gathering strength,  
limp flags loosely flowing.  
When two butterflies hatched too close,  
and clashed, each scrabbling for a footing,  
one fell and its wings flopped  
40 fatly on the kitchen floor.

I pictured them shattering later  
on taps and cupboard corners;  
but my father gauged his moment well,  
allowed a first few timid forays,  
45 then swooped down gentle-fingered  
with his glass jar for the kill.  
The monstrous wings all but filled it,  
beat vigorously, fluttered, and were still.

Ruth Sharman, *Birth of the Owl Butterflies* (1997)

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<sup>1</sup> cloven: split in two

<sup>2</sup> striations: an academic term for stripes

2.

**(love song, with two goldfish)**

(He's a drifter, always  
floating around her, has  
nowhere else to go. He wishes  
she would sing, not much, just the scales;  
5 or take some notice,  
give him the fish eye.)

(Bounded by round walls  
she makes fish eyes  
and kissy lips at him, darts  
10 behind pebbles, swallows  
his charms hook, line and sinker)

(He's bowled over. He would  
take her to the ocean, they could  
count the waves. There,  
15 in the submarine silence, they would share  
their deepest secrets. Dive for pearls  
like stars.)

(But her love's since  
gone belly-up. His heart sinks  
20 like a fish. He drinks  
like a stone. Drowns those sorrows,  
stares empty through glass.)

(the reason, she said  
she wanted)  
25 (and he could not give)  
a life  
beyond the  
(bowl)

Grace Chua, from *QLRS* Vol. 2 No. 2, January 2003

3

## On Death, Without Exaggeration

It can't take a joke,  
find a star, make a bridge.  
It knows nothing about weaving, mining, farming,  
building ships, or baking cakes.  
In our planning for tomorrow,  
it has the final word,  
which is always beside the point.

It can't even get the things done  
that are part of its trade:  
dig a grave,  
make a coffin,  
clean up after itself.

Preoccupied with killing,  
it does the job awkwardly,  
without system or skill.  
As though each of us were its first kill.

Oh, it has its triumphs,  
but look at its countless defeats,  
missed blows,  
and repeat attempts!

Sometimes it isn't strong enough  
to swat a fly from the air.  
Many are the caterpillars  
that have outcrawled it.

All those bulbs, pods,  
tentacles, fins, tracheae,  
nuptial plumage, and winter fur  
show that it has fallen behind  
with its halfhearted work.

Ill will won't help  
and even our lending a hand with wars and coups d'etat  
is so far not enough.

Hearts beat inside eggs.  
Babies' skeletons grow.  
Seeds, hard at work, sprout their first tiny pair of leaves  
and sometimes even tall trees fall away.

Whoever claims that it's omnipotent  
is himself living proof  
that it's not.

**There's no life  
that couldn't be immortal  
if only for a moment.**

**Death  
always arrives by that very moment too late.**

**In vain it tugs at the knob  
of the invisible door.  
As far as you've come  
can't be undone.**

**Wisława Szymborska**

4

**The Wasp's Nest by James Rosenberg**

Two aerial tigers,  
Striped in ebony and gold  
And resonantly, savagely a-hum,  
Have lately come  
To my mailbox's metal hold  
And thought  
With paper and with mud  
Therein to build  
Their insubstantial and their only home.  
Neither the sore displeasure  
Of the U. S. Mail  
Nor all my threats and warnings  
Will avail  
To turn them from their hummed devotions.  
And I think  
They know my strength,  
Can gauge  
The danger of their work:  
One blow could crush them  
And their nest; and I am not their friend.  
And yet they seem  
Too deeply and too fiercely occupied  
To bother to attend.  
Perhaps they sense  
I'll never deal the blow,  
For, though I am not in nor of them,  
Still I think I know  
What it is like to live  
In an alien and gigantic universe, a stranger,  
Building the fragile citadels of love  
On the edge of danger.

5

## Minority

I was born a foreigner  
 I carried on from there  
 to become a foreigner everywhere  
 I went, even in the place  
 5 planted with my relatives,  
 six-foot tubers sprouting roots,  
 their fingers and faces pushing up  
 new shoots of maize and sugar cane.

All kinds of places and groups  
 10 of people who have an admirable  
 history would, almost certainly,  
 distance themselves from me.

I don't fit,  
 like a clumsily-translated poem;

15 like food cooked in milk of coconut  
 where you expected ghee<sup>1</sup> or cream,  
 the unexpected aftertaste  
 of cardamom or neem<sup>2</sup>.

There's always that point where  
 20 the language flips  
 into an unfamiliar taste;  
 where words tumble over  
 a cunning tripwire on the tongue;  
 where the frame slips,  
 25 the reception of an image  
 not quite tuned, ghost-outlined,  
 that signals, in their midst,  
 an alien.

And so I scratch, scratch  
 30 through the night, at this  
 growing scab of black on white.  
 Everyone has the right  
 to infiltrate a piece of paper.  
 A page doesn't fight back.

35 And, who knows, these lines  
may scratch their way  
into your head –  
through all the chatter of community,  
family, clattering spoons,  
40 children being fed –  
immigrate into your bed,  
squat in your home,  
and in a corner, eat your bread,  
  
until, one day, you meet  
45 the stranger sidling down your street,  
realise you know the face  
simplified to bone,  
look into its outcast eyes  
and recognise it as your own.

Imtiaz Dharker, *Minority*, published in Postcards from God, Bloodaxe Books (1997)  
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<sup>1</sup> ghee: a class of clarified butter that originated in the Indian subcontinent

<sup>2</sup> neem: the shoots and flowers of the neem tree are eaten as a vegetable in India

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6

**Household Gods** by Philip Hobsbaum

“I mirrored their breaking lives, I saw their pale  
Distraught coming and going, lined despair,  
His shaken bulk, her calm pose in the doorway—  
I saw them. I was there.”

“I have so long been silent, even now  
Hardly at all remember how her slim  
Long fingers once caressed me—was that how  
At one time she touched him?”

“His lips on mine in the morning, or, in darkness,  
After a happy embrace, warmed my clay.  
Where is the firm mouth now, where the kiss?  
Broken and swept away.”

“They lay me down to serve their steady feet,  
How many times they strode over my pile!  
Of late those steps were tentative. Now, a street  
For strangers, I am so much jute and wool.”

“Bit by bit they painted my walls, the ceiling,  
Made me in terms of their vision—I was glad.  
But signs of time flake down, the walls are peeling,  
What is a house when occupants are fled?”

“My hands repeat themselves, so does not time.  
The climactical moment is past, whoever will come.  
I gather myself to cough one cautious chime,  
But the works are rusted. Henceforth I am dumb.”

“I mirrored their coming here, I see their going,  
Together once, now separately. Their outer  
Semblance concerns me. I have no way of knowing  
Their motives, or their reasons for departure.”

“Dust settles in the fireplace, and the curtains  
Hang without a purpose in neat folds.  
The books are stacked, chairs not to be sat on  
Grouped over-nicely in a house grown cold.”

“I see no more. Their life gave our lives meaning,  
But broken homes will not set again.  
Their parting was our dissolution, they  
Will never know their household gods are slain.”

# MARIANNE MOORE

UNITED STATES • 1887-1972

7

## Silence

My father used to say,  
"Superior people never make long visits,  
have to be shown Longfellow's grave  
or the glass flowers at Harvard.  
Self-reliant like the cat—  
that takes its prey to privacy,  
the mouse's limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth—  
they sometimes enjoy solitude,  
and can be robbed of speech  
by speech which has delighted them.  
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;  
not in silence, but restraint."  
Nor was he insincere in saying, "Make my house your inn."  
Inns are not residences.

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*Marianne Moore •*