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Cocktail Glasses, American Poetry (3 CR), Milan Cathedral

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Maura Stanton

Cocktail Glasses

Even as a nine-months baby
the tulip shapes of thin,
enticing glasses on end tables
beckoned me. I'd drop my rattle
and crawl across the carpet
reaching for the stemmed crystal
glittering with something clear
like water, but much shinier.
The fat, magnified olive
pierced by a toothpick wrapped
brightly in red cellophane,
bobbed gently near the bottom.
I learned to stand, they say,
by grabbing a couch cushion
then pulling myself up
as I reached for the glass
until an aunt, stubbing out
a lipstick-printed cigarette
noticed me, and laughed,
lifting me up on her lap.
When I no longer ate strained
carrots with my baby spoon,
or sucked on a warm bottle,
my grandfather would save
his gin-soaked olive for me,
and I'd toddle toward him
in my organdy pinafore
trimmed with red rick-rack.
I made them laugh, they said,
my mouth puckering up,

as I chewed and swallowed
a Manhattan-soaked cherry,
but I always wanted another,
thrilled by the odd taste.
I remember staying behind
when the grownups filed into
the dining room for dinner
lining empty glasses in a row
along the coffee table,
admiring the sparkling stems
under the shaded lamps.
I'd practice the elegant gestures
of my grandparents and aunts,
who lived in the flat above ours.
When I was older, I'd sneak upstairs
away from my baby brothers
playing with their ABC blocks.
My grandmother took naps,
so I'd tiptoe past the gold
chiming clock on the mantelpiece
and slip into the dining room.
I'd switch on the chandelier
with its hanging prisms
that shot light everywhere,
illuminating the china cabinet
filled with a hundred glasses
or more, all of them different,
some thin as a skim of ice,
others carved deeply like jewels
but strangely made out of lead.
I liked the heavy-bottomed ones
called "Old-Fashioned" glasses,
and the tall champagne flutes
and the beveled edge water goblets
and the handblown wine glasses
and the big bells for brandy,

and the plain shot glasses
 for Irish whiskey, and the tiny
 sparkling doll-sized glasses
 for green and orange liqueurs.
 Later I hated the tumblers
 for chocolate milk, the juice glasses
 stamped with smiling oranges,
 and the Porky Pig drinking mugs
 dug from boxes of soap
 after we moved from Chicago
 and my father stopped drinking
 for the rest of his life.

American Poetry (3 CR)

*"Helen, thy beauty is to me
 Like those Nicean barks of yore
 That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
 The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
 To his own native shore."
 – Poe*

Something shimmers at the open window. . . .
 A Nicean bark, splashing through golden light,
 Crab-like oars stroking the sultry air,
 Hovers lightly just beyond the wide sill
 Of the stuffy classroom where I'm talking
 About comparisons, the "tenor" and the "vehicle."
 I rise at once, gesturing with delight.
 Shall we step aboard, I ask my students,
 And let the skilled oarsmen waft us away?
 They glance down at Poe, glance back at me.
 Nothing out the window but a football stadium.

How'd I'd love to shepherd them aboard,
 Tell them to sink back on the velvet pillows,
 Strum a guitar, or sip a glass of wine,
 Toasting the clock tower as we float across
 The Gothic rooftop of the Student Union,
 Then drift unnoticed over the Business School.
 Tonight we'd anchor off a flowery island
 Near some black lava beach. Students, I'd say,
 Your job's to count the stars, or serenade
 Each other, or trail your hands in the foam
 Talking of things worthless and imaginary.
 I'd watch their tender faces fall asleep,
 Hoping one or two might remember our voyage
 Some day in the future on their native shore
 As they stall in traffic, cursing their jobs
 In cubicles, or the falling stock market,
 Then suddenly see that shining vehicle,
 Hovering in the air, ready to transport them.

Milan Cathedral

This roof's a maze of spires and pinnacles
 Casting a tracery of shade as I stand
 Transfixed in the arched doorway. I balance
 On slate tiles to peer up at the gargoyles
 Poised to swoop from a belfry or gable.
 Marble saints look down on the same Piazza
 Pious tyrants crossed on the way to Mass:
 Visconti, Sforza, Napoleon, Mussolini.
 Not long ago police patrolled up here,

Training machine guns on the crowds below
 As limousines arrived for the funeral
 Of a dress designer murdered in Florida,
 And paparazzi shot the somber expressions
 Of Madonna and Princess Diana gorgeous in black.
 But today anyone's free to climb the steep
 Pitch of the roof to the central tower
 For the promised view of distant, snowy Alps –
 But through the pointed arch of the belvedere
 There's nothing! I see only skyscrapers,
 Then smog and blur, clouds mixing into smoke.

Descending winding stairs, gripping the rail,
 I'm face to face with the ornate top story
 Of the Rinascente Department Store, named
 By a poet, Gabriele d'Annunzio
 For 5,000 lire, and rebuilt after the bombs
 Of World War II turned it into rubble.
 Half-off placards beckon through plate glass
 And soon I'm riding gilded escalators,
 Dazzled by chatoyant silks and crepe de Chine,
 Touching everything that's shiny or beaded,
 Longing to pull jacquard or sheer chiffon
 Over my neck, fingers burning with desire.
 One shopper, excited by a golden dress
 On sale, just like the one I'm clutching,
 Can't wait for an empty dressing room.
 Her daughter unzips her, and she stands exposed
 Before men and women in her bra and panties,
 Her face hidden as she tries to pull
 The bright cloth over her stretch-marked stomach
 Get it smoothed down around her dumpling hips.
 Out on the Piazza with my shopping bag,
 I sit on a bench to watch the fountain's jets
 Spurt up to echo the Cathedral's facade

In shapes of water, sparkling, ephemeral,
 Imitating the floating heaven of stone
 Built with money from assassins and dictators
 Who prayed beneath the dome in velvet tunics,
 Gold chains, soft leather boots, and ostrich feathers.

Philip St. Clair

Cleopatra's Needle

What has this obelisk to do with Cleopatra VII? Absolutely
 nothing,
 but nevertheless one must acknowledge
 the slightest of associations: Caesar Augustus (when he was
 Octavian)
 removed it from Heliopolis to Alexandria in 14 BC,
 and despite the fact that Octavian and Marc Antony (Cleopatra's
 lover
 and co-regent) were triumvirs who became
 sworn enemies (Battle of Actium, 31 BC), Antony's suicide after
 his defeat
 and Cleopatra's autotoxy that next year
 (after Octavian spurned her) leads one to doubt that a Tribune-
 For-Life
 would need to express his dominance
 sixteen years later by barging a huge piece of granite (two
 hundred tons,
 sixty feet high) down the Nile to the Mediterranean Sea.
 Our obelisk, in actual fact, was first erected by Tuthmosis III
 (c. 1450 BC),
 whose well-preserved body (discovered 1881