

Tiles **Kissing** Close



Nora Delaney

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Nora Delaney

TILES KISSING CLOSE

Beyond the Glass

The great bay window grows gold with sunlight,
and hoarfrost hems the swan's-neck of river.
The estuary inhales, exhales—a tidal diaphragm.
Two eelish geese on the skim of ice
eye the stubbled whorls of cordgrass, glassworts—
plants that flourish on the brackish mudflats.
Through the window, I could touch Neponset,
waters gold-edged through glass, the tough grasses,
the New England winter, bitterns, herons—
anything, out there, I could touch. Beyond the glass.

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Charlemagne

Charlemagne was buried in a hairshirt—
jute, burlap, cilice, sackcloth, hessian—
coarse-woven, laid close to the monarch's skin.

Battered at Roncesvalles, flesh mortified,
Carolus Magnus—Old Franconian—
was buried in sackcloth, but on feast days

a golden buckle would cinch tight his cloak,
his whitened hair beneath his diadem.
King with the Grizzly Beard, interred in ash.

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Aldebaran

The mad bull rings his hammer hooves
against the convex dome of night.
Aldebaran, the brightest in the constellation,
forms his eye, follows the Seven Sisters
glares at bloodthirsty Orion, at Castor and Pollox.

And in the caves of Lascaux, on stone walls,
the bull lows, echoing through the corridors
of human history. He froths the seas to white,
the Phoenician princess rigid on his back,
and bellows his celestial timpani.

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Rot and Splendor

Stagnating Venice sinks lower each year;
the stilted buildings limp. They groan with age,
back pain, the compressed clay that barely strains
to reach above the marshy waters.

How did James find this city picturesque?
The luminescence on the water,
the diffuse impressions of pink and gold,
brazen collisions of rot and splendor.

Not far from the polluting motorboats,
The domes of St. Mark's hunch their pigeon-backs.
Inside the Byzantine basilica,
the golden sky of James is transfigured

and fractured into mosaic: glazed clay
cut in tesserae, and pieced together,
each tile kissing close. Some artist's opus—
many forgotten craftsmen in those cubes,

tessellated, made golden in design.
Outside, the canals reek of gasoline,
and waterbuses putter on the gray
oil-rainbowed water, under pink sky.

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The Garden of Love

Yellow-headed remembrances lift their brittle selves
into the winnowing wind, and lion's teeth spit,
dispersing downy motes across the midden.

Immortelles for the boutonnières of groomsmen.
Corsages of forget-me-nots for ladies in everwaiting.
All of Eden wailing bonnet-blue for Eve and Adam,
and the thistles of waste barring Blake from the garden.

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The Night Watch

Arquebusiers stride forth, slicked dark and bright
in oil. A grimy ragtag civil guard
fills the background, pikes out at all angles.
And at the head, Captain Frans Banning Cocq
strolls with his silkclad lieutenant. Cocksure,
illuminated from some unseen source,
the two men are held free of the chaos
around them by an invisible cord.
The folds in Cocq's vermilion and gold
trimmed sash resist the strain of years
that splits Rembrandt's canvas—the craquelure
as fine as crevices, runnels in skin.
The centuries have done little to damp
the ruddy candlelight of Cocq's two cheeks
or the milk-and-marmalade complexion
of the little demoiselle behind him;
she looks past the viewer, her basalt eyes
inscrutable as the rooster strung up
on the radiant satin of her gown.

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That Other Fall

And comes that other fall we name the fall;
ecstatic, each spiked oak leaf, each slim withe
whirls low in flame—candleshine, pale champagne.
The *quercus* catkin, wind-rippled, limb-torn,
falls to the mulchy earth.

Acorn cupules
drop on the thatched, brown tapestries of duff
and Indian Pipes lower pale white hoods
like monks: *sanctificetur nomen tuum*.

October is on the march again.
Its stone, opal, protects against illness:
the scourge that flanks the fall, rattlebones, ague,
pyrexia.

The fire of the heart-
shaped ember leaves that fall in mourning now
will smolder, warming my hearth through winter.

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Danaë

In St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum,
Rembrandt's *Danaë* was knifed through twice, blinded
with sulfuric acid by a madman

so that her luminous skin, her soft swells
of belly, melted into blistered brown
like the face of a Pakistani girl

vitrioled by her dishonored family.
The restoration of her lunar curves
and folds was slow. A violence had been done,

undoable like Zeus's brute shower.
Chiaroscuro, oil, charred and mottled.
Canvas gone blank—a clouded cataract,

a blindwhite milky eye. Tiresias
is silenced. The opaque glaze of scumble
covers Danaë, muffling like snowfall.

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Rosebay

The blowsy oleander unfolds her
slattern petals, fairy-veined crimson throws,
her rosebay rosacea, fluttered scabs,
psoriasis, pustules and pox. Poison
reeling through xylem and phloem—
little killer like the crushed conium
that Socrates had drunk; subtle, secret rose.

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Ocelot

An Arkansas dumpster, dusty and jungle-warm
spills itself into the dusk, and cuts
the dense, rife night with urine and musk.
Two eyes—two clouded phosphorescent oceans—
light a sacred fire for themselves alone.
You are far from home, little ocelot,
sleek-eared and lonesome tree dweller,
far from the fetid Amazon, the adoring Andes,
the low shrubs and thickets of chaparral.
You totem yourself, rosettes of kohl
blessing your coat. And slow,
your sea-eyes turn to stone:
the obsidian sheen of a spear tip:
all bone and molar, hardness and dark,
you emerge in effigy
far from home, where the old Moche
once baked vessels of clay for you,
spotted and obscure.

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Eleutherios

The god within, generated from the vine
 vitis vinifera, dusty bloom, plump
on the Sangiovese fruit: dusky globes
 and plum-ripe amethyst—drunk
as the blood of Jove in Tuscany

drunk by the retinue of maenads and satyrs
 whose blood is amethyst, deep-veined ore
within the earth, ambrosial ichor, heady-red elixir
 Bacchus throws back his wild head and laughs
and the drums pound and timbrels shiver
 all is caught up in the purple heart of ecstasy

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Ossified

Winter ossifies my heart;
I am petrified—stone, bone
statuary.

 The open-palmed Madonna's
veiled head, haloed in snow
is no colder than I am.

 I watch the brownstones go;
Boston brick, a Catholic school,
monolithic.

 A priest sleeps in the rectory,
feet up. Unaware of starveling sparrows
that pester Mary's marble breast
and falter in the snow.

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Labyrinths Laid Out by Norwegian Fishermen

On the fjord-lined coast of Finnescandia,
the fishermen, in frightened desperate damp,
would place great stones and boulders row on row
in rococo coils upon the sand:
lines that curved like sickles, that folded in—
as delicate as brainstem, cerebrum.

These stony labyrinths would catch the wind,
entangle clews, stray skeins of thread,
trap trolls, night-roaming hags, and bearded oafs—
whatever might terrify fresh sailors
seeking only a good catch and safety.

Cities of Troy built on Norwegian sand
in winter dark and narrow crags of ice
far north of where the bull-man bellowed.
What word spread up the seas? What sorcerer
whispered in the cochlea of fishers
that they must build their hopeless labyrinths
on the fjord-lined coast of Finnescandia?

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Corvidae

Light thickens, and the crow

Makes wing to the rocky wood.

– Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

The family *Corvidae* releases its vowels:
a black burst of crows, rooks, and ravens—
a miscellany of silken-winged parapluiers
uttering the language of the dead king.
The swiftest wing of recompense is slow;
it moves unmeasured through dark hours,
threading warp and woof of guilt's black garments.
Borrowers of night split their beaks with sound:
jackdaws, carrion passerines, feathered deaths-heads
Fret the sky with grave cacophonous rebuke.

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The Endless Ark

From skylark to coelacanth:
all winged, all finned things.
Darwin's finches, catalogued;
all species great and small, tumbling
from the tangled bank, suspended
momentarily in time: the eon or eye-
blink from webbed hands to discrete digits.

And the eye developed independently
again and again: pit eyes, pinholes,
crystalline lenses, reflectors, refractors.

How old and unlikely is the earth.

The bee and the clover dance foreverever.
Each little thing rides the ark, without end,
roiled in the will to live and, blindly, to evolve.

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About the author

Nora Delaney is a founding member of the Boston Poetry Union, and edits *The Charles River Journal* from her home near Jamaica Pond in Massachusetts. Her poems, essays, and translations have appeared in publications including *Little Star*, *Fulcrum*, *Literary Imagination*, *Jacket*, *Absinthe*, *Critical Flame*, and *Sixty-Six: The Journal of Sonnet Studies*.

About this chapbook

“For the past six months, my friend Melissa Green has sent me a single word each day—‘whorls,’ ‘tesserae,’ ‘hessian.’ These poems came from Melissa’s daily words.”

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