

Also by Lia Purpura

Increase (essays)

Stone Sky Lifting (poems)

The Brighter the Veil (poems)

Poems of Grzegorz Musial (translations)

On Looking
ESSAYS
Lia Purpura

Sarabande  Books
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

The Smallest Woman in the World

...said the red letters on the painted measuring stick at the Maryland State Fair. It was a hot, darkening day, the sky holding off rain. Between the play-till-you-win fishing game and made-to-look-old carousel, there was her booth. The Smallest Woman in the World.

Do you want to see her, I asked Joseph and his friend, Denis. Yes, they said. It was only fifty cents. Ania, who just told us that she was afraid of big characters in costumes and so would never go to Disney World, figured she was not going to like a very small person either, and stayed out. The man at the entrance returned her fifty cents, in dimes.

Joseph and Denis went into the tent and peeked behind a cubicle, gray and fabric-covered like in an office. I saw them waving. Waving *back*, since at seven, they wouldn't have thought to do so on their own.

Yes, a heart can sink. A heart can drop as fast as a white rock in a clear river, a dry leaf in white water. A heart can sink far from sight, the misstep above chipping the rock, the pieces hitting each outcrop down the steep cliff: there was a folded blue wheelchair in the

corner. There was a cheap wheelchair I was hoping the boys wouldn't notice.

Because then she'd be small-because-hurt. Small-due-to-problems. Not little-pal small. Not hold-her-in-your-pocket-magically-small, like a coin or a frog. Not small as a secret, or the very idea of a dog waiting all day outside the school fence—just for you.

Hoping they didn't see *what?* The way the chair leaned into the makeshift corner? Its blue, tarp-like back? Its own terrible smallness? How its careless placement broke the illusion of small-for-small's sake?

I stayed out of the tent. I wasn't going to leave Ania alone, with her fear of large characters transforming. I could not let her stand there while I went with the boys, who of course, also needed to hold a hand while looking.

Looking at what?

The Smallest Woman in the World.

Now, weeks later, Joseph still can't sleep and comes calling: *I'm thinking of the smallest woman in the world. Why? And: When will I stop thinking of her?*

When I was eighteen, and in college, I began to think a lot about being seen. I remember not wanting to be seen "as an object." And that we insisted on being called "women." But just a few weeks ago, walking past some old, drunk guys on the stoop of a neighborhood bar, I reversed my position. I let them look. I allowed them the sight of me. I mean I did not scowl and did not turn sharply away. At eighteen, I'd have been edgy and hard; I'd have walked past with my shoulders angled to cover my body. But I walked by them thinking, "If this is all you have, if all you can do is look, then here, *look*. Take it all in." It was easy to do, though not enjoyable. If it was some sort of sacrifice, it was not hard—first profile, then a full frontal view. What do you want to

see—some ass passing by? The swing in my walk? And you, some breast? I was on the way to meet a friend and had been singing a John Pryne song I like these days: "Somebody said they saw me, swinging the world by the tail, bouncing over a white cloud, killing the blues."

You're seeing me killing the blues, I thought—you're seeing that, right?—the white cloud, the world by the tail? Because I'm in deep, and somehow that's clear to you three, who have been drinking, it must be, for hours already, though it's still early morning. I'm killing the particular blues I've got by laughing a little at your stupid, raw comments, by turning toward and not away, and the amber liquid is tilting a line, like—so clearly it comes back—the cross section of a glacial lake up against its perpetual glass in the Museum of Natural History back in New York. What you're holding in your hands, in that bag, is terrain. What I am is—terrain. Map me, then, Sailor. Lay me out. Say you're just passing through and want to see a sweet thing before you leave port.

But she wasn't passing through. The boys were. They walked up to the cubicle and waited and waved. And stood for a moment and waved again. And then turned to go—as she must have turned from them, and back to something at hand, at rest in her lap. *Enough*, her eyes must have indicated. *That's all you get.*

I did not see what my son saw. He went out without me and now he's lost there, in the scene, with her, though she was *nice*, he assures me. She had a plastic jack-o'-lantern of candy she was eating from. A *jack-o'-lantern*, I asked? Yes, he said, with her hand digging in it. It was August. And that gesture, that image, will displace him for weeks: the jack-o'-lantern in summer. The candy unoffered. Her own private stash. And was there a book, tableside, she was reading? A tiny TV? My own questions keep coming. Does that man make her sit there, my son asks and asks. Is he mean? Is she happy? Does she want to be there? Mom, why am I sad? Is it because I looked at her like she was a sculpture? Why is he advertising her?

The other day, in the early September sun, I walked for a block or so to try this out: hands behind my head and elbows out, to take up a lot of room, like the guy who had just passed me. He was walking down a wide, shady street, at home in the ease of his body's expanse. And yes, walking that way, I take up a lot of room, as he did, but there's this: when my hands are behind my head, my breasts lift up. Am I freer because I take up more space, or less free because now I'm even more seen? Do I provoke more attention, erode my own space, invite, by the provocation I cannot help being, another's gaze into the scene?

I just want to be that guy, arms up in the cool air, my shoulders and neck stretching, lungs open, ribs rising.

I want to lift my shirt and scratch my stomach as a friend of mine does wherever he likes. "I do that?" he asks. Yes, you do, I point out—in the kitchen, in the store. On a walk. Wherever you like.

When will I stop thinking of her? my son asks and asks.

I have a friend who goes to strip joints. (And who, by the way, has written surprise compassion into those scenes, real compassion, the kind that shows he knows the below-deck of all the whirling hers in the dark surround: working mother, or artist, activist, would-be accountant. How formal and graceful his words become when touching, yes, touching, that other.) I have another friend who subscribes to *Playboy*. (Who thinks it's more the anticipation—article, article, article: photo!—than the photos themselves that . . . do it for him.) What do I think about that, he asks. What do I think of his subscription. I tell him: why not? As in: go ahead. Live it up. I say *why not?*—because I, too, like to look. At everything. To see myself. To see myself being seen. Though *Playboy* certainly used to bother me. A lot, when I was eighteen. My son, reading his cousin's 1970 collector's edition one morning this summer when we were visiting, woke me saying "This is disgusting! Why are their clothes off?" At

five a.m., this was all I could muster: I said it isn't disgusting, that the body is beautiful and it's natural to be naked, but the magazine isn't for kids. Not at all, hand it over.

My son still thinks, by way of the perspective in photos or drawings in magazines that some people are really *very* small—say, two inches high, and you can hold them in your hand. Just pluck them out of the photo and pocket them. He wants to know where they live. A boy in Sudan on a tiny barren hill. Can I take him? he asks. *Home*, he means, and *can I hold him here safely?*

There's a scene I remember from college, an image so sharp and clear and impressive I remember thinking, *you'll retain this*. It was my last year and I was standing outside the militant vegetarian co-op with a friend, talking. And I stopped, just stopped midsentence, and she looked in the direction I was looking. "He's *cute*," she said. But that wasn't it at all. I was aware of his beauty, and of my easy desire, but more powerful still, I wanted to *be* him. I wanted the angular frame and slim hips, low belt and button-flies resting just so. I wanted the T-shirt's sharp fall from his shoulders to fall from my shoulders. For a long moment he didn't even have a face. I couldn't unravel the two desires: I wanted to look and to touch, yes. But more than that, really, I wanted to *be* him.

I look now, at forty, more like him than ever. I've pared down. I wear my pants low, with a belt and I tuck in my T-shirts, simple white T-shirts or green or black ones. And though I've lost the wide hips of a new mother and the full breasts for feeding, the lines of me are still rounded. Is this a body a man would want to inhabit? Would a man want to be—I mean walk, sleep, move—in this frame?

When I started to read the *Little House on the Prairie* books to my son, I was prepared. While I loved the characters, and identified with them fully—the sisters whose hands were cut from twisting straw into makeshift logs for the fire, their bare faces browned by hot, summer

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sun, their calico dresses, the rough crunch of batting and ticking at night as they slept—I was prepared for him not to like the books. I was ready for him to say “this is for girls.” But he didn’t. Not once. I believe he felt that slightest membrane between bodies, that he saw how easily one form can inhabit another. There, on the prairie, in the dug-out, the lean-to, he tasted their water, cool from a dipper. He slapped down the bread and basted by lamplight. He sang with the family. He blew out a candle. He slept with a quilt.

He wanted to be one of them.

As he very much did not want to be small, and displayed at a fair in the heat of August.

The Space Between

Now, more than hitherto, there occurs shocks, surges, crossings, falls and almost scrambles, creating thus a different space, a space scattered and unknown, space enclosing spaces, superimposed, inserted, polyphonic perspectives.

—Henri Michaux

Where is the fear this afternoon? Where did it go and why can’t I locate it now?

A goldfinch flies up while leaves, gold and russety, sift and fall. A flight up, a flight down, the very air marked, so both rising and falling are held in a furor of sunstruck ongoingness.

I am outside this bright afternoon.

And even as I am built anew by fear these days, here, in Baltimore, I am also, right now, assembled by the brisk feel of New England, and fall, and my childhood there. That peace. Those biting blue skies. The elements mingle, brick by brick (though the sensation is softer and welling) and add up to this moment, a seep and twining that constitute *now*. Of course, this moment has little to do with simple construction, simple addition. But it’s hard not to think in these terms.

I’ll try again.

Events crosshatch: the air this afternoon is cleanly scented, still unstarck, and in it, among sheering leaves, among goldfinches lifting

