

Poems by Diann Blakely

MAGI

Midnight neon flickers on the rain-sheened sidewalk,
on that doorway's two women, their ebony hair
curled and intricate as the labyrinth described
in *Stories from the Ancient World*. My father slows
until we're barely moving, the ice in his drink
clinking on the dashboard above the greenish dials,
the radio's band of light. *Take a chance on romance*
loud enough to reach that door, where one woman laughs

and starts a ragged duet. *A chance on romance*—
I mouth the phrase with lips still sugar-tingling
from Christmas cookies eaten instead of supper,
cookies till I'm gluttoned and offer the last star
to Anna Mae, bargaining for a late bedtime;
soon my parents' key clicks in the door, wafting chill air
mingled with perfume and scotch-scent, and I'm allowed
to ride along when he takes Anna Mae home, warm

in the backseat with her, streetlights disappearing
as we approach the project where she lives. Curbside,
my father counts out bills then waves goodnight, turns up
the radio—*take a chance*—and we speed downhill
and farther, till the city hurtles into view,
multicolored strands of light shining from puddles
on the oily sidewalks, a mechanized Santa
in a store window and a real one near the entrance,

his bell drawing coins from late passersby. Season
of carols, tree decorations, being lifted
in my father's arms to place the gold crowning star.
No department store grandeur on the next few blocks,
just those pawn shops' iron grating padlocked in place,
bars with steam-fogged windows and loud music spilling
from their doors as customers leave. The two women.
What did I ask? *Fallen angels*, my father laughs,

mouth twisting like their ankles in spiky high heels
just a few yards away, thin skirts and furry stoles
blown by December wind. One startles to see me
kneeling in the backseat, hands pressed to the window,
and she looks angry as Anna Mae when I track

muddy footprints across the rug, slamming her palm
on the car's hood. My father U-turns and my head bumps
against the door, but I'm thinking about my book's
other stories. *For unto us this day is born—*

didn't that scene take place at night too? We turn back
toward our neighborhood of clapboards and split levels,
brown lawns puddled, red and gold and green lights hanging
like Babylon's gardens from naked dogwood trees
and roofs, behind half-draped windows. Mother's sleeping;
Daddy forgets to read to me or hear my prayers,
so I rehearse a new list for Santa: black wig,

high heels, a fur stole I'll let fall from one shoulder.

How do angels fall, and does it hurt? Were the ones
we saw tonight there when Jesus was born, spike heels
sunk in frigid sand as those wise men knelt before
the promised child, knowing their treasure—perfumed oils,
gold coins—leaked and smudged as all the earth's best glories,
but their hands trembling to extend that bounty,
their lips shaping prayers in return for divine love?

GEORGIA PILGRIMAGE

Crowds thin as winter nears, as the trees lift
their black and twisted limbs toward leaden skies
that today show no signs of Mary's face,

“sad but so pretty,” said the local farmwife
whose sightings drew thousands last summer,
church busses unloading the sick and lame,

those failed by love, in humid air some swore
was perfumed with roses. My nose prickles
at the stale grease that films this diner's booth,

the framed clippings and photos hung above it
of a child crowned just last month in a pageant
when her flaming baton act—I crane to read

small print—“dropped the crowd to its knees.”
A waitress fills my cup, and, shyly beaming,
says she coached her child's routine all year,

curled the ringlets that halo those pink cheeks.
They're plump as the cortisone-swollen ones
of this state's most famous author, whose face rises,

her body slumped on crutches, from my book,
already sticky but wreathed with coffee-steam
in this refuge from wind, those now-famed skies

empty except for leaves. Leaves splotched the road
that leads back here then to another farm,
where Flannery lived with peacocks and her mother,

whose beatitudes—“pretty is as pretty does”—
echo through that story of a crippled girl,
acid-tongued and frumpy till she's smitten

with a Bible salesman who steals her wooden leg.
There's enough light to reach the place by sunset,
and the waitress, who took a trip there before

she left high school, bends in a perfumed cloud
and smooths a spotted menu, drawing a map
to where O'Connor stood at twilight, watched

her peacocks spread their tails in a strutting pageant
through the red-clay yard, screeches echoing
toward each other like electrified applause;

where she prayed—*Mother of God*—that her loneliness
be warmed by more than immaculate beauty,
those thousand blue and green eyes winking among

black feathers like stars, beauty that requires
incense and flowers, prayers that soar sky-high
as it knocks us to unlovely, creaking knees.

BIO:

Diann Blakely is the author of three books of poetry as well as an editor, essayist, and reviewer. She has taught at Belmont University, Harvard University, Vanderbilt University, Watkins Arts Institute, and also served as the first poet-in-residence at the Harpeth Hall School in Nashville, Tennessee. A Robert Frost Fellow at Bread Loaf, she was a Dakin Williams Fellow at the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Blakely has been anthologized in numerous volumes, including *Best American Poetry 2003* and *Pushcart Prize Anthologies XIX* and *XX*.

A few other distinctions include having her first collection, *Hurricane Walk*, listed among the year's ten best by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*; her second book, *Farewell, My Lovelies*, was named a Choice of the Academy of American Poets' Book Society; and her third volume, *Cities of Flesh and the Dead*, won the Alice Fay Di Castagnola Award from the Poetry Society of America while still a manuscript-in-progress, as well as the 7th Annual Publication Prize from Elixir Press.

A poetry editor of *Antioch Review* for a dozen years, and now occupying the same position at *New World Writing*, Blakely continues compiling reviews, essays, and memoirs for *Each Fugitive Moment: On the Life and Work of Lynda Hull* with Kendra Hamilton. Two other prose books are also underway: *Notes on the State of Southern Poetry and Other Essays*, and a "poet's memoir" for *Plath Profiles*, which will be published in sections there. While completing her fourth manuscript of poems—*Rain in Our Door: Duets with Robert Johnson*—and simultaneously working on another, *Lost Addresses*, Blakely is also a recent contributor of essays and arts reviews to the *Best American Poetry* blog site, *Harvard Review*, *Plath Profiles*, *Pleiades*, and *Smartish Pace*. She lives south of Savannah.