

# Two Poems

**Katherine Young**

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## **Last Flight of the Gypsy King**

*Tomsk Airport, Siberia*

(for Elizabeth Miles)

Gypsies' cries engulf the hall;  
their black-eyed king has died too young.  
"An overdose," the desk clerk says,  
he shakes his head, tearing the tickets  
with inky fingers. The gypsy king  
requires a ticket, too, his body  
charged as cargo, counted among  
the crates, hand-tagged for destination.

*Last night I danced with the gypsy king.  
We danced, forgetting everything,  
his arms around me strong and warm,  
his kinglets sleeping back at home.*

In the ladies' room, tourists check  
their makeup in the mirrors, glancing  
sideways at a gypsy girl  
who lifts her hem to wipe wet eyes.  
They clutch their handbags close, fearing  
the gypsies' light-fingered ways:  
peddlers of dross, crocodile tears,  
traffickers in our secret dreams.

*Last night I drank with the gypsy king:  
he offered me pearls and precious things.  
We drank to friendship, love, and art;  
he gave me dewdrops from his heart.*

The gypsies mill around the gate,  
jostling against the passengers,  
tearing their hair, clinging to one  
another. The dead king's children,  
dressed in velvet, pass hand to hand  
like glass-eyed dolls. Their mother wails  
as if her heart might break. As if

no one had ever died before.

*Last night I lay with the gypsy king,  
his hands upon me trembling.  
We lay, and loved, until the dawn,  
until his wife came calling, calling.*

Katherine E. Young, from *Van Gogh in Moscow* (Pudding House Press, 2008)

This poem comes out of a true story: I did once fly across Russia with the body of a gypsy king and many of his grieving people. It was the most profound experience of grief I've ever witnessed – and the oddest, up there in the clouds, among the passengers nervously fingering their belongings, while the restless, wailing gypsies wandered up and down the plane's aisle.

**V-E Day**  
*Staunton, VA, 1945*

A child of nine in Sunday clothes sits up in the high seat, while her father pilots the farm truck towards town. Daddy, too, wears dress-up clothes; small dots of sweat band where his new hat meets his forehead. Along the road, the country people hang out flags, children shout, dogs bark, music floats from radios, follows in their wake. The child fingers blue ribbons Etha knotted around her pigtails, considers all she's heard of soldiers, Cousin Raymond coming home, no more ration cards, Pauline and Frances waltzing across the kitchen when the news came. May sun beats down on cattle fields, on ditches filled with chicory, milkweed pods, on sparrows flocking in yards as the truck approaches town. There in the streets, strangers wave, rockets pop, a band marches at the high school. As Daddy slows by the hospital gate, a boy trailing red, white, and blue streamers runs up beside the truck, he's shouting now, she smiles at him, hears Daddy saying "Pay no attention," at the same moment as the boy's shrill "Loony bin! Loony bin!" She sees the boy's face contort, just like her mother's when the words failed, jaw muscles working the empty air. Here is Mother, expressionless, smooth, waiting on the porch with her suitcase to brave the journey home.

Katherine E. Young, from *Gentling the Bones* (Finishing Line Press, 2007)

This poem is also based on a true story: my grandmother was released from one of her periodic hospitalizations while everyone around her was celebrating V-E Day in Staunton, Virginia. Fortunately, my grandmother had already had her children. The state sterilized “mental defectives” in the Commonwealth of Virginia until the 1970s.