

Classic Poetry Series

Joyce Sutphen
- poems -

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Joyce Sutphen()

Joyce Sutphen (born 1949) is an American poet, currently serving as Minnesota's Poet Laureate. She is the state's second laureate, appointed by Governor Mark Dayton in August, 2011. Sutphen also serves as a professor of English at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota.

Sutphen was raised in Saint Joseph, Minnesota and currently resides in the city of Chaska. She holds degrees from the University of Minnesota including her Ph.D. in Renaissance Drama.

Her first book of poetry, *Straight Out of View* (Beacon Press, 1995), won the Barnard New Women's Poets Prize. Her second, *Coming Back to the Body* (Holy Cow! Press, 2000), was a finalist for a Minnesota Book Award, and her third, *Naming the Stars* (2004), also from Holy Cow! Press, won the Minnesota Book Award in Poetry.

In 2005, Red Dragonfly Press published a fine press edition of *Fourteen Sonnets*. Her poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Water~Stone*, *Hayden's Ferry*, *Shenandoah*, *Luna*.

A Kind Of Villanelle

I will have been walking away:
no matter what direction I intended,
at that moment, I will have been walking

Away into the direction that you now say
I have always intended, no matter what my
intention was then, I will have been

Walking away, though it will not be clear
what it was that I was leaving or
even why, it seems that you will say

That always, I was walking away,
intending a direction that was not towards
you, but moving away with every step,

Or, even when I pretended to be walking
towards you, only making the place
for my feet to go backwards,

Away, where I will have been walking,
always away: intention and direction
unknown, but knowing you will always
say I will have been walking away.

Joyce Sutphen

At The Moment

Suddenly, I stopped thinking about Love,
after so many years of only that,
after thinking that nothing else mattered.

And what was I thinking of when I stopped
thinking about Love? Death, of course—what else
could take Love's place? What else could hold such force?

I thought about how far away Death once
had seemed, how unexpected that it could
happen to someone I knew quite well,

how impossible that this should be the
normal thing, as natural as frost and
winter. I thought about the way we'd aged,

how skin fell into wrinkles, how eyes grew
dim; then (of course) my love, I thought of you.

Joyce Sutphen

Casino

My mind is shuffling its deck tonight,
slipping one card over another,
letting them all fall together at the corners;
the random hand of memory
is dealing from the bottom of the pack.

First: a bearded man emptying
the dragon kiln, then a woman
whistling, her face turned away
as she opens the oven. Next:
a big cat, six toes on each paw,
climbing up the yardpole. Last:
a pair of workhorses circling a tree
until they grind themselves to dust.

There is no one home in the world
tonight. Everyone is out of range.
The cradles are empty, the boughs
broken down. Trees go helter-skelter
and the wheel is creaking on its shaft.
Hit me, I say to the dealer. Hit me again.

Joyce Sutphen

Crossroads

The second half of my life will be black
to the white rind of the old and fading moon.
The second half of my life will be water
over the cracked floor of these desert years.
I will land on my feet this time,
knowing at least two languages and who
my friends are. I will dress for the
occasion, and my hair shall be
whatever color I please.
Everyone will go on celebrating the old
birthday, counting the years as usual,
but I will count myself new from this
inception, this imprint of my own desire.

The second half of my life will be swift,
past leaning fenceposts, a gravel shoulder,
asphalt tickets, the beckon of open road.
The second half of my life will be wide-eyed,
fingers shifting through fine sands,
arms loose at my sides, wandering feet.
There will be new dreams every night,
and the drapes will never be closed.
I will toss my string of keys into a deep
well and old letters into the grate.

The second half of my life will be ice
breaking up on the river, rain
soaking the fields, a hand
held out, a fire,
and smoke going
upward, always up.

Joyce Sutphen

Evening Angelus

I have forgotten the words,
and therefore I shall not conceive
of a mysterious salvation, I shall
not become a tall lily and bloom
into blue and white. Then what
oracular event shall appear on
my doorstep? What announcement
shall crowd me to a corner,
protesting an unworthiness,
which doubtless shall be believed?

But these are only bells we hear,
pulled down by the arms of the
drunken janitor, two fingers missing
on his left hand. And we have
climbed into that tower, its spiraling
wooden staircase creaking beneath our
feet. We have seen for ourselves
that it is only iron that rings, iron
swinging on an iron bar, the rough rope
threading down to the cold ground,
no death or holiness in
those hollow shells.

Joyce Sutphen

Ever After

What am I to you now that you are no
longer what you used to be to me?

Who are we to each other now that
there is no us, now that what we once

were is divided into me and you
who are not one but two separate and

unrelated persons except for that ex-
that goes in front of the words

that used to mean me, used to mean
you, words we rarely used (husband, wife)

as when we once posed (so young and helpless)
with our hands (yours, mine) clasped on the knife

that was sinking into the tall white cake.
All that sweetness, the layers of one thing

and then another, and then one thing again.

Joyce Sutphen

How To Listen

Tilt your head slightly to one side and lift your eyebrows expectantly. Ask questions.

Delve into the subject at hand or let things come randomly. Don't expect answers.

Forget everything you've ever done. Make no comparisons. Simply listen.

Listen with your eyes, as if the story you are hearing is happening right now.

Listen without blinking, as if a move might frighten the truth away forever.

Don't attempt to copy anything down. Don't bring a camera or a recorder.

This is your chance to listen carefully. Your whole life might depend on what you hear.

Joyce Sutphen

In Black

The image that haunts me is not beautiful.
I do not think it will open into a field
of wildflowers; I doubt that it will take
wing suddenly, startling us into admiration.

It is one of those brutish facts of life,
the awkward nakedness of the memory when
it takes off its clothes and crawls
between the top and bottom sheet. Or rather,

It is my mother's memory that I carry,
pressed into my own: how at her grandfather's
funeral, his daughter—my mother's mother—
stood at an open door and cried, and then

The blood ran down her legs, gushing from
the womb where thirteen children had nestled,
and now, at once horrified and at ease with her
body's impropriety, they gathered all around.

This was the grandmother who lost three of those
thirteen, who hung a million baskets of wash,
who peeled a million potatoes, and splattered
her arms with the grease of constant cooking.

This was my grandmother who kept chickens,
who left her voice in the throats of all my aunts,
and was struck down in the cellar, legs twisted
beneath the fall and half her face stiffened.

Helpless until they found her, the jar
of canned fruit smashed on the cement.
And then at her funeral, I saw my mother's
tears, gliding ahead of me in a black limousine,
a procession not beautiful but haunting.

Joyce Sutphen

Just For The Record

It wasn't like that. Don't imagine
my father in a feed cap, chewing
a stem of alfalfa, spitting occasionally.

No bib-overalls over bare shoulders,
no handkerchief around his neck.
Don't imagine he didn't shave every morning.

The buildings on his farm weren't
weathered gray; the lawns were always mowed.
Don't imagine a car in the weeds.

I tell you this because you have certain
ideas about me, about farmers
and their daughters.

You imagine him bumbling along, some
hayseed, when really, he wore his dark
suit as gracefully as Cary Grant.

The one thing you're right about
is that he worked too hard. You can't
imagine how early and how late.

Joyce Sutphen

Living In The Body

Body is something you need in order to stay on this planet and you only get one.

And no matter which one you get, it will not be satisfactory. It will not be beautiful enough, it will not be fast enough, it will not keep on for days at a time, but will pull you down into a sleepy swamp and demand apples and coffee and chocolate cake.

Body is a thing you have to carry from one day into the next. Always the same eyebrows over the same eyes in the same skin when you look in the mirror, and the same creaky knee when you get up from the floor and the same wrist under the watchband. The changes you can make are small and costly—better to leave it as it is.

Body is a thing that you have to leave eventually. You know that because you have seen others do it, others who were once like you, living inside their pile of bones and flesh, smiling at you, loving you, leaning in the doorway, talking to you for hours and then one day they are gone. No forwarding address.

Joyce Sutphen

Naming The Stars

This present tragedy will eventually
turn into myth, and in the mist
of that later telling the bell tolling
now will be a symbol, or, at least,
a sign of something long since lost.

This will be another one of those
loose changes, the rearrangement of
hearts, just parts of old lives
patched together, gathered into
a dim constellation, small consolation.

Look, we will say, you can almost see
the outline there: her fingertips
touching his, the faint fusion
of two bodies breaking into light.

Joyce Sutphen

Next Time

I'll know the names of all of the birds
and flowers, and not only that, I'll
tell you the name of the piano player
I'm hearing right now on the kitchen
radio, but I won't be in the kitchen,

I'll be walking a street in
New York or London, about
to enter a coffee shop where people
are reading or working on their
laptops. They'll look up and smile.

Next time I won't waste my heart
on anger; I won't care about
being right. I'll be willing to be
wrong about everything and to
concentrate on giving myself away.

Next time, I'll rush up to people I love,
look into their eyes, and kiss them, quick.
I'll give everyone a poem I didn't write,
one specially chosen for that person.
They'll hold it up and see a new
world. We'll sing the morning in,

and I will keep in touch with friends,
writing long letters when I wake from
a dream where they appear on the
Orient Express. "Meet me in Istanbul,"
I'll say, and they will.

Joyce Sutphen

Older, Younger, Both

I feel older, younger, both
at once. Every time I win,
I lose. Every time I count,
I forget and must begin again.

I must begin again, and again I
must begin. Every time I lose,
I win and must begin again.

Everything I plan must wait, and
having to wait has made me old, and
the older I get, the more I wait, and everything
I'm waiting for has already been planned.

I feel sadder, wiser, neither
together. Everything is almost
true, and almost true is everywhere.
I feel sadder, wiser, neither at once.

I end in beginning, in ending I find
that beginning is the first thing to do.
I stop when I start, but my heart keeps on beating,
so I must go on starting in spite of the stopping.

I must stop my stopping and start to start—
I can end at the beginning or begin at the end.
I feel older, younger, both at once.

Joyce Sutphen

Sometimes Never

Talking, we begin to find the way into
our hearts, we who knew no words,
words being a rare commodity
in those countries we left behind.

Both refugees and similarly deprived,
we marvel at the many things there
are to say: so many variations
and colors of the same thought, so

many different lengths in the words
that line up together on our tongues.
No scarcity, no rationing, no
waiting in line in order to buy

the same answer we heard each time
we asked, that one word, owned by
the state, manufactured by the state,
serving all purposes equally alike:
No, No, No, and sometimes Never.

Joyce Sutphen

The Aunts

I like it when they get together
and talk in voices that sound
like apple trees and grape vines,

and some of them wear hats
and go to Arizona in the winter,
and they all like to play cards.

They will always be the ones
who say "It is time to go now,"
even as we linger at the door,

or stand by the waiting cars, they
remember someone—an uncle we
never knew—and sigh, all

of them together, like wind
in the oak trees behind the farm
where they grew up—a place

I remember—especially
the hen house and the soft
clucking that filled the sunlit yard.

Joyce Sutphen

The Exam

It is mid-October. The trees are in
their autumnal glory (red, yellow-green,

orange) outside the classroom where students
take the mid-term, sniffing softly as if

identifying lines from Blake or Keats
was such sweet sorrow, summoned up in words

they never saw before. I am thinking
of my parents, of the six decades they've

been together, of the thirty thousand
meals they've eaten in the kitchen, of the

more than twenty thousand nights they've slept
under the same roof. I am wondering

who could have fashioned the test that would have
predicted this success? Who could have known?

Joyce Sutphen

The Exorcism

It was homemade and primitive,
like pulling a tooth with a string
and a slamming door, like taking out
an appendix by kerosene light
where dogs wandered in and out
the dirt-floored room.

Nothing for the pain that
everyone wanted to examine,
the twisted heart they thought
they could shout back into place.

Moaning and fluttering their fleshy hands
on the wind, on the wail of the soul possessed,
they certified her in a manner Inquisitional,
frantic when she held to the grip of darkness,
grimly determined to wait the thing out,
something learned from movie sheriffs,
white hats ghostly in the moonlight.

When she would not answer (though they
conjured her by heaven and by the all
mighty names they knew), they laid hands
on her and shouted down the well of her eyes.
Many tongues twisted in their mouths when
she went, leaving behind only
the smallest tooth of wickedness.

Joyce Sutphen

The Farm

My father's farm is an apple blossomer.
He keeps his hills in dandelion carpet
and weaves a lane of lilacs between the rose
and the jack-in-the-pulpits.
His sleek cows ripple in the pastures.
The dog and purple iris
keep watch at the garden's end.

His farm is rolling thunder,
a lightning bolt on the horizon.
His crops suck rain from the sky
and swallow the smoldering sun.
His fields are oceans of heat,
where waves of gold
beat the burning shore.

A red fox
pauses under the birch trees,
a shadow is in the river's bend.
When the hawk circles the land,
my father's grainfields whirl beneath it.
Owls gather together to sing in his woods,
and the deer run his golden meadow.

My father's farm is an icicle,
a hillside of white powder.
He parts the snowy sea,
and smooths away the valleys.
He cultivates his rows of starlight
and drags the crescent moon
through dark unfurrowed fields.

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