

Write a literary commentary on *one* of the following:

PROSE

1.

“You didn’t tell me,” her mother said.

“What?”

“You know.”

“That he knows how to speak to me?”

5 “Yes, that.”

“No, I didn’t tell you,” she said, suddenly bold, thrusting her hand as she formed the letters and made her irritation clear.

10 Her mother turned and walked into the house. Janey felt her footsteps in the boards of the porch. The floor had always carried her mother’s anger. She’d learned this first as a little girl when her mother and father argued. Their words might not have existed as sound for her, but anger always caused its own vibration.

15 She hadn’t been exactly sure why they argued all those years ago, but sensed, the way a child will, that it was usually about her. And when she grew older she decided that it must have been about what she could and couldn’t do, about what would be allowed and what wouldn’t, and finally about what would be done with her, or for her, though she couldn’t have put all of this into words as a child, words thought or spoken—in any form.

20 After their arguments her mother would come to her, take her into the kitchen while she worked, keeping her close, the stove’s heat encircling her, pressing against her, taking her breath almost with its expansion through the room. Then her father might come in later, pick her up or take her by the hand, and quickly they would go out of the house and up to the store or maybe to the depot to watch the afternoon train arrive and depart northward. He would sit with her, hold her hand, smoke his cigar, the smell and smoke surrounding them in a masculine world of men loading and unloading, of coals and iron rails and more smoke and dreams of departure, the two of them headed away.

25 And then they did head away, but not before more silences and anger that she felt kept her parents from listening to each other, each made deaf in his or her own way. But the day arrived when, her suitcases packed, she and her father boarded the train for Talladega. After three days, he left her there, settled, as best she could be at the age of twelve, in her dorm room and in school for the deaf and blind.

30 She’d loved it there, had learned the alphabet on her fingers and how to sign, and how to read lips. She’d continued, finally, with her regular schooling too, and taken art, and began to paint with oils. The other children there were like her, lived in her world of silence that was no longer quiet but filled with the voices of fingers and hands flying—thin fingers, long fingers, the beautiful hands of boys. It was wonderful to be able to give shape to words. She knew that her speaking voice was something she’d had less and less control over, and so seldom used it. Now words came through her fingers, the muscles there growing stronger and more sure, giving her a voice again, a voice that wanted to shout, or even sing.

40 Her mother wouldn’t visit, but wrote desperate letters about home, about missing her and wanting her there, those cursive words on the page like pieces of string tying and knotting her emotions. During her trips home she taught her father to speak to her, but for the longest time her mother could not, or would not, learn. “You can read lips,” she would say. “That’s enough for me.”

“What about me?” she’d sign, and, of course, no answer came, and wouldn’t have even if she’d forced herself to ask it aloud, from out of her throat and off her tongue.

Marlin Barton, *Into Silence* (2010)

2.

**Better Days**

Never anymore in a wash of sweetness and awe  
does the summer when I was seventeen come back  
to mind against my will, like a bird crossing

5 my vision. Summer of moist nights full of girls  
and boys ripened, holy drunkenness and violation  
of the comic boundaries, defiances that never

failed or brought disaster. Days on the backs  
and in the breath of horses, between rivers  
and pools that reflected the cicadas'\* whine,

10 enervation and strength creeping in smooth waves  
over muscular water. All those things accepted,  
once, with unnoticing hunger, as an infant

accepts the nipple, never come back to mind  
against the will. What comes unsummoned now,  
15 blotting out every other thought and image,

is a part of the past not so deep or far away:  
the time of poverty, of struggle to find means  
not hateful—the muddy seedtime of early manhood.

20 What returns are those moments in the diner  
night after night with each night's one cup of coffee,  
watching an old man, who always at the same hour

came in and smiled, ordered his tea and opened  
his drawing pad. What did he fill it with?  
And where's he gone? Those days, that studious worker,

25 hand moving and eyes eager in the sour light,  
that artist always in the same worn-out suit,  
are my nostalgia now. That old man comes back,

the friend I saw each day and never spoke to,  
because I hoped soon to disappear from there,  
30 as I have disappeared, into the heaven of better days.

A F Moritz, *Poetry Magazine* (2003)

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\* cicadas: very noisy insects