

2nd Place Winner – Tennessee Williams Poetry Contest 2021

Curing Beasts by Cristina Baptista

“I wonder if anyone has ever dealt more skillfully with a more vicious and deadly opponent than have I with the beast in my nerves?”

~Tennessee Williams, Notebooks, Thursday, 19 October 1944~

At the *No Refuge But Writing* exhibit, I studied your Olivetti Lettera 32,
and your collection of hotel keys—gathered from places you’d lingered.
For hours, I imagined your thrill of hoarding

these little rebellions: letting doors
stay locked, or maybe unlocked, until another
key was found or made; preventing people from living

their easy lives. It’s what you were always good at,
in your plays and in your stories. There was always the monstrous
lurking behind shuttered windows, or inside medicine

cabinets. Or within slackening skins, perfumed
and powdered. No one was ever fooled unless they desired
it to be so. I read your collected plays on the D Train

my first year living in New York City. I carried you
everywhere, my small slice of familiarity. I knew your ghost
was in my pocket, loitering with a pen over those words,

trying to excise a wrong adjective, staving off self-doubt
and criticism. Everyone in the city looked in need of an exorcism
and when I touched the cover of your book,

I felt relieved. For, you see, the beast lives in my nerves, too,
and I knew what it was like to hang by a nail, or cling
like tenacious cat to some footing in this fleeting life.

Words are a shorter distance between two places.
They fit every lock, tame every beast, draw the stranger
in the new city closer to herself with a finger tap echo

in her ear, puttering against the train’s grinding, dying
in some other time on some square black key. A shadow rises. Yours,
beckoning. You let me break things open, cleaving your words

snuggly to my racing mind. The comfort of making new.
Keys torn from locks. Fingers pressing keys, forging lives from paper and inked
ribbon. You are Blanche’s magic. You tell all truths, and we listen.