

Virtuosi

By Lisel Mueller

In memory of my parents

People whose lives have been shaped
by history—and it is always tragic—
do not want to talk about it,
would rather dance, give parties
on thrift-shop china. You feel
wonderful in their homes,
two leaky rooms, nests
they stowed inside their hearts
on the road into exile.
They know how to fix potato peelings
and apple cores so you smack your lips.

The words *start over again*
hold no terror for them.
Obediently they rise
and go with only a rucksack
or tote bag. If they weep,
it's when you're not looking.

To tame their nightmares, they choose
the most dazzling occupations,
swallow the flames in the sunset sky,
jump through burning hoops

in their elegant tiger suits.

Cover your eyes: there's one

walking on a thread

thirty feet above us—

shivering points of light

leap across her body,

and she works without a net.

Notes:

The epigraph of this poem was originally omitted in the changeover to the new website. Because of this, reciting the epigraph is optional for the 2019-2020 Poetry Out Loud season.

Lisel Mueller, "Virtuosi" from *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems*. Copyright © 1996 by Lisel Mueller. Reprinted by permission of Louisiana State University Press.

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Lisel Mueller was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1924. She has had a career both writing poetry and translating. She attended the University of Evansville and did her graduate study at Indiana University. She has taught at the University of Chicago, Elmhurst College, and Goddard College. She has also worked at as a social worker, a receptionist and a library assistant.