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# Poetry

NORTHWEST



POETRY  NORTHWEST

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POETRY NORTHWEST

WINTER 1974-75

*Paul Zimmer*

Three Poems

ZIMMER THE DRUGSTORE COWBOY

At least I know my peculiar emptiness,  
My vague reality, as though I'd been  
Stunned by a concrete tit at birth,  
Dull as a penny bouncing off a cinder block;  
My white socks down over high tops,  
The big lugs heavy with gravel and mud.

I always get up in the early morning,  
Sit on the drugstore bench in the mist,  
Drink Dr. Pepper's for breakfast until  
The boys at the Shell station start  
Revvng their motors like a pride of lions.  
I wait all day for things to cool down,  
Watch the bread trucks and the big rigs  
Deliver and depart, pass out of my sight  
Down the Interstate.

I get mad about things:  
Shattered safety glass in the streets,  
The stupid heat lightning swelling out of trees,  
Groove, gash, dent, dog, mosquito, fly;  
Once in a while something just froths me,  
My anger bursting through my skin and slapping  
Surface like the side of a bluegill,  
My cold bony mouth snapping and sucking  
At the hot air, my eyeballs pivoting  
Until I can settle down again.

At night I walk the town, look up  
Through the tiny squares of window screens,

Inside the squares of pictures and doorframes,  
Inside the glowing squares of television,  
Inside the squares of the windows.  
Everything is plumb and solid in the night,  
The corners of lamplight fastening things down.  
Wherever I move the darkness moves  
Because I have become my own shadow.  
The crickets tinker with the silence.  
I walk in the dark alleys, see stars  
Well out of the roofs of buildings.  
They swarm and multiply like a mass  
Of shiny gnats in my gaze. I wonder  
How many I could see if I watched forever?  
Star growing into star, year after year,  
The new revelations spreading out beyond my sight  
Until they would all grow together,  
Swelling like heat lightning out of trees.  
Then maybe I could live like a bluegill  
All of the time, full of hunger and purpose,  
Cool, trim, quick in the water,  
One little muscle waiting to strike.

#### THE SWEET NIGHT BLEEDS FROM ZIMMER

Barney catches me in a dark place  
With no sunlight I can squirm through.  
His body uncoils its frustrations  
And fists plunge like the last stones  
Of a landslide.

I fall before  
I feel his blows, then pain  
Flies to my surfaces as though  
It has always been there waiting  
For Barney to challenge it out.  
My skin folds back in slots and tabs  
And the sweet night bleeds from my face.

Barney catches me in a dark place,  
His jaws and pincers grinding.

I feel my brains sucked out of my head,  
My heart clutched in his claws,  
Remembering and still trying to beat.  
I am ground up and spat into the weeds,  
The sweet night bleeds from my skull.

Barney catches me in a dark place  
And stars descend to coil about my head,  
Buzzing about my gravity, sinking  
Their stingers in my lips and eyelids.  
In the trees each twig and sucker  
Is pointing at a separate fire.  
How could I have forgotten all these stars?

Stars in the desert faded at dawn;  
Then the flash and shock wave  
Rammed sand in my face, uprooting cactus,  
Blasted the animals, birds from the sky.  
Afterwards, under the fireball  
And faint stars, we wanted to kick  
Dead rabbits, throw stones at each other,  
Call each other sons-of-bitches.

Once on the dark still lake I dropped  
My line between the stars and prayed  
For fish in the midst of night.  
The small pickerel swallowed my hook  
And when I ripped it out the fish  
Screamed like a wounded rabbit.  
I rowed my boat in out of the dark,  
Churning the galaxies and nebulae,  
Spoiling the perfect night.

Barney caught me in a dark place,  
He won't back off and let me be.  
I look for a place to hide under  
Mother's navel, behind father's penis.  
But I can't remember who I am.  
Someone wounded and breathing hard,  
Trying to become the earth; sorry man

Remembering each cruelty under the stars;  
Someone wagging submission forever.

### ZIMMER AT THE DIGGINGS

It is best to begin in the morning with  
The low sun slanting over the cool site.  
I brush the dust from the grooves  
Of ancient trash, strip down the layers,  
Sift, count, dig, date the axeheads.

These are my findings:  
Surface—Bones of wild dogs,  
Some elm stumps smelling of urine.  
Second level—Residue of hemp,  
Circular mounds of earth, post holes  
Testing of urine, scattered bones of  
Children, birds, woodchucks, snakes,  
The femur of a stupendous cave bear.  
Third level—Reasons for the circles,  
A ring of large sandstone tablets sunk into  
Mounds of cranial fragments, eye teeth,  
Delicate shard and fingerbones.

I sweat. By midafternoon with the sun high  
And sky pressing down upon my head,  
I start to imagine I can join it all.  
The axeheads strain like wings.  
I begin to glue the shard together,  
Rack the teeth, stack the bones  
And string them with muscle and sinew.  
I breathe on them and listen for voices.

At last, in heat, I wander into the countryside,  
Gather the small, exquisite things I love:  
Maple seeds, phlox petals, flakes of birch bark,  
Gypsum pebbles, baby mice, all minute jewels.

In my great warmth and confusion  
I put them into my mouth and chew them,  
Let my teeth commit their quick atrocities.  
Then in highest hopes I swallow them,  
Feel their pulp and grit slide delicately  
Down my throat into the dark acids.

I return to the shade of the site,  
Small beauty pumping out to the edges  
Of my body, infusing into my parts.  
Amidst the ring of tremendous stones  
I feel my cells divide in fragile ecstasy.

*Sonia Gernes*

Two Poems

### ROPE ENOUGH

the hay:

We were the penitentiary's best customer  
that year my brothers made the rope machine,  
buying bales of its hard-labor twine  
to string the sweet loom of our alfalfa field.

A boy at each end, I was the bright bobbin  
that coursed between the twisting strands,  
blonde hair floating out and out with the running twine,

Weaving rope strong enough to rip the flesh  
from our father's hand that summer in the mow.  
They grafted him in a body cast—a round white cup,  
his elbow plastered for the handle's crook.

Looking back, I want to tip him,  
pour out the pain that floated to his eyes,  
let love be the pulley where he hitched that rope

to rafters in the shed, his own therapy,  
pulled and pulled that handle of an arm

back to length and use. Three fates in that field,  
we had measured out his pain, his health.

the belt:

This birthday,  
I learn a sailor's art; tie down  
one by one those strands that slip  
and make my counting wrong.

I number back to strokes I've brushed  
in my mother's hair—white threads  
that multiply, snap like worms  
as each part grows. She has seen hours  
wriggle in the hand, dissolve into parts  
before they die.

I pull this partial belt in line,  
leave out the beads my friends advise  
(I don't want what turns). Where string ripples  
I pattern knot after knot, design  
my defense. What I tie  
stays.

the hanging:

Carol swallowed Mayo Clinic thread  
the weeks her esophagus closed. Hand  
over hand, like fishline, reeling in  
and out again, it was all she had  
against that sealing off.

Nights I wake to feel a closing,  
a stricture in whatever goes within,  
I hunt for pencils in the dark,  
string out words across a page,  
filament by filament, testing  
until they're strong.

I know the old saying: men given rope . . .  
I'm careful enough. I've seen friends  
tangle in their words, dangle

where some capricious muse  
hoists dreams on attic rafters, smashes  
other loves, breathes the peace of oven doors  
that open only once.

Wherever there's rope, there is danger;  
I keep mine to the size of twine,  
know that alone it won't hold me,  
but it's there, tangled and dark by the bedside  
nights I wake and swallow, swallow, hoping  
it is enough.

#### TERMINAL PAPER

The professor has died in my dream.  
We huddle, forms without content,  
in the room that was his class,  
speak softly, wonder what it was—  
enjambment of the breath,  
a dissociation of the spirit and the sense . . .  
We say nothing correlates.

The wife comes. A net of weeping  
curbs her rhythmic stride. She says,  
"It came so suddenly. He's dead, you know,  
from an infection he picked up  
using the Oxford English Dictionary—  
that awful O.E.D."

We nod, know how it is,  
mutter so she cannot hear:  
That's what it gets you, all that  
dark research. Surely there's a lesson here.

We fumble in our bags, draw out  
clean white cards. We make a note  
of that.

## HER LIES

I dreamed I saw myself;  
 an old man beating a stick  
 on a stone. I said, "Old man  
 who did you love, anyone?"  
 he said, "Son, it was well  
 before they cut down trees  
 with chains, before the deluge  
 of cats, and her eyes were  
 blue, light blue, two  
 robin's eggs that hatched,  
 two yellow hummingbirds  
 that flew, and it was there  
 in that place that I loved  
 even her lies, the small ones  
 that grew, those I caught  
 right away but listened to,  
 and the larger they got,  
 the more I loved her;  
 and when I'd pound my fist  
 on the table bellowing  
 Stop, she'd fly half-way  
 to the ceiling and return  
 embarrassed at being caught;  
 but the louder I bellowed  
 the harder it was to stop  
 these lungs from bursting,  
 bursting out in laughter."

## HER SADNESS

... and being a little sad  
 you speak of the days when ...  
 how once a poet loved  
 in a less modern, more delicate  
 way, as I begin to yawn

a yawn that promises to last  
 forever, scratch my head,  
 or crude as a lumberjack  
 waking up slow and cold  
 at dawn, I pound my chest  
 until your eyes avoid mine  
 and your chin begins to tremble,  
 until I am able to say it,  
 say I love you and know  
 these words come straight, clear  
 from the bottom of my lungs.

## APOLOGY

Whatever it is that forms  
 that frown, that blue veil  
 covering your face, its edge  
 like a scar my dreams etch  
 in a plate of purple glass;  
 whatever it is, I think  
 in my own way I understand  
 and I have felt it also;  
 the conclusion I forced,  
 the long silences, the lies,

the trails I left scattered  
 across the country-side,  
 the small circles of stones  
 covered with warm ashes,  
 each larger than the last;  
 in the morning the loneliness  
 of breaking camp, at night  
 the feelings a small stream  
 must have entering a lake  
 suddenly. These I feel

and though it seems to make  
 no difference if I like it  
 or not, there are times

I pull a stone from the fire,  
hold it up in my bare hands,  
offering it all for its end,  
an end doused in a pool  
of calm water; a stone resting  
at its bottom, and a mist  
rising to cover it over.

Yet, having felt what it is  
I believe it must be allowed  
to continue its long walk  
winding toward exhaustion,  
which is not an excuse  
but rather the hope that  
having walked through it  
my way, all will come out  
in the end, seen to be balanced  
and justified by you; my hope

based on the certainty  
that something inside you  
will rise from its exhaustion  
to meet me; something like  
a candle lit in a cellar  
smelling of earth and roots;  
like the petals of a rose  
burning down its stem, until  
like an empty glass its flame  
touches and warms you

with ambitions for morning;  
something kindled deep inside  
the almost imaginary bones  
in your face, making your face  
glow faintly; something like  
the smile one comes to  
lifting a face, long buried  
in the blue veil of cold hands,  
from the hands, a smile  
that is yours and mine.

*Stephen Dunn*

Three Poems

## PROPHECY FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS

He is somewhere in our future,  
the beggar who gives change.  
He will be waiting for us perhaps  
outside a department store, his pockets  
bulging like the stomachs  
of starved children: all hope and air.  
When we give him a quarter  
he'll hand us a note marked  
"This is only the beginning, friends."  
And we, who have never completed  
a single gesture,  
will carry that note  
for the rest of our lives.

## DEATHS

The first time the news comes, I'm twelve,  
I stop as they do in movies,  
search for what I feel.  
And though I hardly care  
everything inside me moves.  
People can disappear.

Uncle Frank, dead for no good reason.  
The neighbor's dog at least was chasing  
a white ball into the forbidden  
territory of the street.  
Just a bad cold that got worse. Poof.  
And suddenly my parents, in perfect health,  
move on to my critical list.

And years later they die of nothing  
I could have predicted.  
And for my father I sit on a tile floor  
until it hurts, and after it hurts.



And for my mother I play host  
at the wake and keep the face  
everybody wants.  
Then some friends die in an accident,  
and a girl I slept with once is found  
in a lake.

And always the stillness that is not  
a stillness when the news comes.  
The dance in place, the old  
funereal rag.  
And the rhythms after a while  
are breathless, and beat my name.  
A walk down a street, a night in bed,  
become the same as a trip in a jet:  
I can see my body—ashes.  
They will learn my name  
from my dental records.

And my children, whom I cannot teach  
these lessons, think my lap a resting place  
and come there when they're tired.  
When I stand up, all they know  
is that it's gone, and will reappear.  
But I, I'm happy these days  
simply to be there when I rise.

#### THE VISITANT

Maybe Wolfe's title should have read  
"You have to go home again, even though  
you can't."—From a conversation

You try to shake the hand of the small boy  
who lives within you,  
but it's buried in the deep  
debris of adulthood  
and the hand is too shy, doesn't know you,  
recedes into the safety of its dark.  
One day when you reach for it, though,

it curls a finger and beckons you  
back into the half light,  
and soon you're at an airport,  
surprised, heading home.

The old house is empty when you arrive,  
your parents gone.  
It's the attic you go to; rather  
where you find yourself going.  
There are locks strewn on the floor,  
keys still in them like men  
who've had heart attacks in women.  
And empty trunks sit like sarcophagi  
near the junk boxes, and you try  
to remember what belongs in them.  
Soon you notice the small boy  
is extending his hand, asking you to grasp it.  
But there's a finger missing  
and another gnarled and broken;  
you grasp what you can.

And the small boy wishes to stay,  
says he must gather the scattered flesh,  
all his own broken promises.  
And though you tell him  
about your wife and kids, the business  
that is waiting for you,  
he doesn't listen, sits down,  
throws a tantrum,  
says you and he are finished.

How seriously should you take  
the mind of a child? You leave,  
choosing not to wait for your parents  
who are gone,  
and head back to the home  
you've made for yourself out of love  
and forgetfulness.  
You are pleased the small boy  
changed his mind, suddenly stopped crying,

came with you. But you know this isn't  
the end of it.

He has slipped back into you like a child  
into quicksand, a black child now  
rising all the way down,  
fist over his head,  
uninviting, meant for you.

*Diana O Hehir*

Three Poems

### FORGETTING THE PAST

(Written after a visit "home")

The clock over the mountain strikes twelve and a half,  
The hour at which all of the ladies grow up.  
I am not going to worry it any more:  
No more sullen sulks, no cakes untasted.  
I'll forgive everything.

Behind me slovens that dark stretch of prairie,  
Gritty, a road into exile, back over boredom.  
It flails out under the blank sky like a cloak,  
A terrible country of leisure with the sound turned off,  
Under a dome where the sun sags like an egg plant,  
Where the rock crashes in scalding silent dust,  
Where a finger's crook takes a year, crying takes three,  
And feet are invisible. I walked that road searching pain with my  
toes.

And up here the mountain is bare. Its clock has stopped striking.  
I hold in my hand the egg of the morning.  
There is blue air over rocks with angled corners,  
Spiked like human questions.  
The mountain reflects brightness,  
And my children have packed me a lunch: six cookies,  
A geranium for my hair. I tell the summit: I'm coming!  
On the other side will be rocks of a different color.

### A PLAN TO LIVE MY LIFE AGAIN

I would adore doing it over.

I wouldn't marry the prince and live in his Mediterranean palace;  
No marble vistas of stairs, no  
Peacocks' tails unfurled; clematis falling from porticos;  
The electric sea silent for some other feet; the lover,  
Curls brushed, teeth flashing like road signs,  
Holds out his arm for another fainting mate.  
That glass slipper cramps,  
A slipper of notions; a little cold vise.

My other country has white roads and static skies.  
Once, flashing a car across Utah, I saw  
A crown of mountains upside down in the vague air;  
Peaks, echoes scraping the earth,  
But only in the mind's camera,  
A machine as ominous  
As dynamo, creasing water into electric light.

There can be no prince in such finality.  
He'd blow away like a cry across white sand  
End over end, his little arms flailing,  
A puff in the uncanny air. Those mountains crush  
Upside down, founder to all logic,  
A terrible problem,

Particles scraping against an interior lining.

### IMMANENT EARTHQUAKE

The sky is as dry as baking powder.  
A scuffed shoe may send the whole thing up.

Houses, sidewalks, stucco railings string out in a sound-line,  
A breakable presence, garage-door magic beam.  
It waits for its flag,  
And the rumbling mess, gawky-fingered, shoves home.

Like everything you wait for.  
It sits behind you holding its breath in static.  
It moves in the circle of your mother's death.

Last year's earthquake, we were at the opera.  
We flattened ourselves into our velvet chairs,  
Clutching the arms, weighed down by that pushing apron;  
A conveyor-belt roar lurched off next to my ear.  
It spoke in metal of a metal world, metal people and flowers  
Clashing themselves to a brassy finish,  
And death as the voice of an open gong.

Down in the works of the opera house,  
Shifting weights shoved each other like cousins,  
A raucous playground scraped by noise.

Afterward, the air wasn't dry. We laughed, a captive people,  
We laughed as if the sea had split for us.

*James Cole*

#### MINIATURE GOLF

We cross a footbridge to the garden,  
Rest on a stone bench, record the score.  
A canal cools. The air's light.  
We aim for the dragon's mouth  
Opening slowly and dropping shut—  
The eyes burn like taillights,  
The ball plops into the water hole.  
Mozart comes over the loudspeaker.  
Over the covered bridge the ball rumbles,  
Over the drawbridge being raised, rolls  
Between the great blades of the mill wheel,  
The open doors of the windmill.  
Mozart, a birdie, a thought  
By the wishing well. Par for the course.

*Carl Dennis*

Two Poems

#### HARDWARE

In line at the hardware store  
I lose my manners,  
Pushing to the front past an old man  
With varnish-black fingers,  
Slamming down the cash of a weekend carpenter.  
I've wasted my Saturday on a table  
When back at my room I could build a town  
In a day at my writing desk,  
And take it down for corrections,  
And build it again.

The old man behind me,  
Waiting in peace for his turn,  
Is content to spend a day sanding one board.  
He lives in the faith that his eyes and hands  
Show him the bottom warp of the world,  
The basement floor of the house  
Where he finds his work.  
They are on his side he's certain;  
They have never deceived him;  
They hold nothing back.

#### NATIVE SON

You try to imagine highways to all men  
But your heart has always loved boundaries,  
The heavy fields in back of your house,  
The visible streets of America.

Now when a plane crashed in Paris  
You scan the death list for American names,  
And only when American gunners fly out  
Do you board the plane in your dream  
And jostle the pilots, and grab the controls.

America is your friend at a loud party.  
Her jokes are no worse than the others  
But they sadden you most.  
You want to take her home before it's too late.

It's hard to write letters in your attic study  
When you hear your father downstairs  
Smashing the furniture on his path to a glass.  
He was a wino before you were born.  
You are not to blame  
You say to yourself as you go down  
To look at the mess.

*Ward Stiles*

AT 3:00 A.M. IN THE KITCHEN  
PEACE PASSES UNDERSTANDING

Shaking with coffee and tomorrow's  
cold dice, I stare at the kitchen window  
where the dark and the glass touch  
my face with two fingers of the same hand.

These are the questions that boil  
and finally sing in their madness: What flashlight  
will wake me in the dark?  
Will a breath lift the stones behind it?  
Will anything be said?

Outside the dream of owl  
begins to burn in the tree.  
Flesh soars in orange smoke.  
Small bones warp and scatter sparks.  
The membrane of anger curls up and flies from the heart.  
The membrane of fear softens to ash.  
The eyes, not the heart, turn to stone.  
The beak is buried in the heart.

*Barbara L. Greenberg*

THE FATTEST MAN

There is always a Fattest Man among us  
and he is always riding in a circus bus

or riding always in a wooden horse,  
an ark, a chariot, an altered hearse

where eight nine ten eleven hundred  
pounds of him are locked, impounded

by the Fact Collector, the official weigher  
who keeps the golden ledger. There,

only there, is the Fattest celebrated.  
He is not sought after. He is not invited

to the singalong, not summoned  
to the father's deathbed. Care, the common

salt of life, is not his portion  
nor any taste of tears. Old emotions

sit in his gut like time rings in a tree  
awaiting better times. Then history

will claim him, earth will make room  
for him, he will be the bridegroom

wearing gabardine, he will be immense,  
imperial inside a black piano case

which now he eats to fill. He will die younger  
than other kinds of men. He will last longer.

*Frances McConnel*

THE POETS CRY OUT AGAINST SCHOOLCHILDREN

*For Bill Ransom, Poet-in-the-Schools, Port Townsend*

How you adore us! our hair is more beautiful  
than the immortal wind, our hands flirt with swallows,  
and our words, how our words triumph  
humming in and out of your consciousness  
like the beat of the girl's radio at the end of the row.

You do not yet ask us to drink  
and be drunken, oracular, subject to fits  
of creation; except from the common concrete fountain  
where we bend to the warm water  
until we are near bowing, our noses  
stung with the slight prick of the splatter.

Faltering behind at recess, how we are puzzled  
at this abandonment, that already you have forgotten  
the joyful flutter at our arrival during math  
and the words that so stubbed you this morning,  
so fresh when you whispered them over  
in our bent ear, your breath  
unwashed and teeming as a dark jungle floor.

You teach us to be worshipped or, as often, mocked.  
You teach us to wear our hair long,  
our hands raving, to praise  
more freely than a bubbling baby,  
to be happy when no one notices the bell.  
What nonsense you teach us, what vanity: to make gestures  
out of our small honesty, to make sense  
out of our grand gestures.

Yet how you send us careening, sucked frail  
as a robin's egg, our moods  
as ephemeral as your triumphs.  
Will we ever recover from your audience?

Now that we go back to the obscure clutter  
of ourselves, that single loneliness?  
How many centuries it took  
to rise from the whim of your sullen  
masses, and yet in a term  
we trade all to toss  
words together and scramble to be the chosen.

*Robert Hershon*

THE CENTERPIECE

Ah yes  
the swan carved from ice  
The techniques introduced  
here at the school  
have furthered the art  
considerably

Carving from the inside out  
for example  
the exaggeration of  
the exposed neck  
and the increased sharpness  
of the beak

By freezing  
an entire banquet hall  
we can now make our swans  
last for months on end  
This enables the bride  
and groom  
to retain the first thrill  
of coolness  
almost indefinitely

*Kathleene West*

FOR CLEOPATRA, WHOSE NAME SHOULD NOT BE  
IN A POEM BECAUSE OF THE ASSOCIATIONS

But it's not your fault Mother ran off with the American,  
and what had you to do with being the first born?  
An old method: name the baby for the disowning grandmother  
and she'll forgive. With her Greek legacy and a Southern accent,  
you practice forgiving alone.

How many times have you listened to: "It's not really your name!"  
or explained, No, it's not Cleo.

Taking and discarding names from father, stepfather,  
and two husbands, you still haven't found a surname  
to match. Grandmother knew. Arranging love for you,  
she beckoned the young man from Athens. Promising dark eyes  
in great-grandsons, he came. Was it your American half  
rebellious, affirming the freedom of your winter skin!  
Or the fear of becoming Greek too soon?

In Montana, I dedicated a poem to you,  
and ten poets sitting around a table shook their heads, No!  
The name suggests too much.  
Consider Shaw, Shakespeare, the legends, Britannica.  
If you must dedicate, use the initial,  
or omit the name completely.

My dear "C," my sister,  
I strike surnames and each month send a letter east to Cleopatra.  
With violet ink on yellow paper, you transcribe  
Louisiana syllables. The mirrors need cleaning, you write.  
Your hands fly like frightened chickens, scratching  
at your hair, to mask your face.

Remember the night you woke, hearing Greek music  
and crept downstairs to watch Grandfather  
pacing folk dances on the rug. Seeing you peering from the shadows,  
he motioned you closer and guided you in his steps.

Tonight, after reading this, stand alone in your house  
and recall those steps. I will stand by you,  
my hand on your shoulder, and we will dance.

*John Vernon*

HANDS

I want more from my hands—not what they take  
but what they can't take, the fragile  
things that break to be touched—  
I want my hands to be too big, to scatter  
rather than organize things, to smash them to bits  
instead of fluttering over their surfaces—  
my clumsy hands, my half completed  
twin faces, trying to rob the world—  
for too long they've been dwarfs  
who shrink just to touch something—  
I want them to live  
by throwing themselves against the walls—  
they smell too much of the dictionary,  
I want them to be thirsty for  
disorder, and to shake a lot. . . .  
The next time a hand reaches out  
to touch mine, I want to say  
give me that, it's rent  
even though it's yours,  
all I did was nothing  
and my hands are empty to prove it. . . .  
My hands used to pray too much,  
they should get caught in a door  
because they'll learn they can't give away  
the distance between them and things—  
that's why they desire so much  
and waken even before the body  
like birds opening their wings—  
perched on the ends of the arms,  
trailing the arms behind them. . . .

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trailing the arms behind them. . . .

*Carolyn Stoloff*

### THE INNERMOST ROOM

"I have often thought that the best mode of life for me would be to sit in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar with my writing things and a lamp." —Franz Kafka, "Letters to Felice"

deep in the mill where the wheels grind  
awash in time I could penetrate  
the faraway the last cabin  
on the road back returning

with smoke down the chimney  
to three little pigs in sailor suits  
king of the golden river  
also the fisherman and the mermaid

to watch water pour off center  
dragged up in knotted strings  
so much fear! scales tears also  
but returning after all

again I would press  
toward the desert's last teeth  
mere stumps of mesas old buttes  
swathed in spacious light

or examining the diurnal azure  
my skylight's page I'd follow  
in Persian letters a long tale  
about the lizard's love

how he grew wings with deliberation  
fumbling toward flight  
how the ambivalent wind  
humiliated the strange scaled thing

but at last gave in  
to the quest without end

for the wind's home  
its ruby chalice

returned to my table, I'd dwell  
on a level with no support  
inventing exploits against night  
with one black wing

*David Weissmann*

### PRETENSIONS

When the wind comes, explain how trees  
live on air, dirt and water, how camels  
survive on sand, workers on grease.  
You're no saint though you love virtue,  
and your hard flesh faces the wind  
as green-bottled wine waits for drinkers,  
disdaining sunlight as mere history.

The sun has no further names, no escapes.  
It's borne as housecats endure quiet,  
sleepers their dreams. If you reveal  
some hideous secret, it will make friends.

But you relish the deep hours of boredom,  
small skulls stuck in the mind's craw.  
You stand among turbulent, empty days,  
knowing your wife for the storm's eye: more  
or less damaging but not that serious,  
unless some rank July they walk off  
and leave you the noise of your own sweat.

Save the long weather of burial for last.  
Imagine the plain food you wouldn't mind  
eating always. If no hunger finds you,  
what life is better than this, to lie back  
watching the seeds flower, the seasons pass.



## NOSTALGIA

One cold autumn day Tommy Braids  
 Drank cheap port with old men,  
 Tommy Braids the Indian, missing many teeth,  
 Nose bent at knife scar, drank cheap port  
 In a run-down tavern, saying Grandfather,  
 Grandfather Bright Rock in a Pool;  
 But the old men didn't listen  
 And everybody laughed; all prospectors  
 Had gone broke years ago.

But Tommy Braids the young buck  
 Had heard Grandfather Bright Rock in a Pool;  
 He clutched his wine bottle, his scarred mouth  
 Wailed at coyote, ice off the swamp  
 Catches a bullfrog, but the whites didn't listen  
 And the old men laughed. Tommy was broke  
 Trading tales for wine, but wine slurred his tale  
 Until he slept, climbing a rock slide;  
 His sleep screaming through a bent nose.

One cold April day Tommy Braids  
 Rose from the corner and drew a map  
 On a napkin with wine-blistered hand;  
 Tommy Braids the Indian missing many teeth:  
 Below the rock slide, a black boulder stopped the creek  
 And the pool hid his crazy grandfather,  
 Grandfather Bright Rock and everybody laughed;  
 Even Tommy laughed and the old men bought port  
 For Tommy Braids the scarred-mouth Indian.

Then wailing at coyote, he danced  
 Saying, as the snow went, he'd climb the rock slide,  
 And hunt the boulder damming the creek;  
 And he danced and everybody clapped  
 As Tommy Braids fell into a spit pool.  
 But he rose again to dance and as they clapped,

He bummed money with wine-blister hand,  
 Bummed enough for a gallon of port  
 And with a gallon of port he walked out.

The next cold autumn day hunters were told  
 To poke the fallen leaves. They thought of using dogs,  
 But nobody had kept anything of Tom's that gave a scent:  
 He wore every day the only clothes he owned.  
 Grandfather Bright Rock the drunk Indian was forgotten until  
 That next warm April day, two hookie boys after bullheads  
 Found Tommy Braids five miles from town,  
 His exploded hands drawing flies  
 And clutching nuggets.

## IMMIGRANT TO CANKOR CANYON

As a rabbit turns to duck beneath brush,  
 He walked into Cankor Canyon with a fist  
 Full of secondhand handouts, a bag of beans  
 A slab of moldy bacon, an old coat,  
 An ax and shovel picked from junk;  
 And in Cankor Canyon, a bottom full of swamp,  
 He discovered his beans would sprout in dirt,  
 The rock built a wall that held heat,  
 And tin enough for a roof the wind rattled.

And the wind always blew from a shadow,  
 From the west cliff hiding the August sun;  
 He said the wind was right, Cankor Canyon wasn't home,  
 Too many rabbits and no horizon,  
 No two story white house tall in a wheat field;  
 But that was Dakota, the Dakota full of dust  
 That choked him, that slapped him with hunger:  
 In Cankor Canyon, he could kill enough rabbits  
 To eat meat, to cover stones with fur.

And he didn't open his fist, the meadow  
 Too green, too many beans hanging from poles,  
 And after the Japs flew half the ocean,

Coming toward his west cliff, to bomb Pearl Harbor,  
He went after Japs; always up at dawn  
And able to fire from squat. It wasn't bad,  
Except for cleaning boots, he'd come back saying,  
He'd been to Guam, Guadalcanal, to Okinawa,  
He'd been there, fought yellow and almost died.

Certain the only bad that could happen in Cankor Canyon  
Would be the winter wind snaking away his roof;  
And the wind wasn't bad when he ate rations in mud.  
When he slept in rain under a helmet,  
He'd remember drops on tin and a dry bed.  
The swamp would never be dust, the rabbits  
Would never quit, and maybe the beans would go wild:  
Hadn't Cankor Canyon, the wind from a shadow,  
Stopped the hunger that almost knocked him dead?

But the trail back was road; he'd whipped the Japs  
And bulldozer had whipped his stone wall,  
The west cliff dropped by dynamite,  
Boulders broken on rabbits' runs,  
And he turned an old man, a fist  
Closed on a wine jug, belching dead rabbit  
At heels that crossed Cankor Canyon,  
Crossed and left asphalt that couldn't grow a bean:  
Behind the west cliff there is only blood.

*Naomi Clark*

FOUND POEM: FIRST LETTER FROM AUNT CAT

Hi  
I gess you'r surprise to get this letter.  
Think of you often where is your mama  
you would not know me I way 137  
yes this is your big fat Ant Cat.  
if I could tell you

But to get to that—is this something  
colors you never saw  
have started loosing 10 lbs a week  
bluegill's fin  
for no rime or reason  
swim round through in  
I have some kind of spell  
blossoms  
I just leave this world  
sandstorms ever day but there—plum petals  
come to in hospitle  
wind's all plum petals snow  
Been having one a month  
feedsack dress all turned to plum blooms  
Dr says they got stop or  
breath all plum bloom smell  
I'll be a vegetable for as long as I live  
and the water  
so pray for me that they find out what  
whirlpool still mirrer  
it is broke left arm Hon once  
scoop a drink  
heart back last time  
moon in my hands  
can't be by self or do nothen  
drink moon  
take medcine that makes me drunk  
swim in the moon  
but Dr say its bettern being out  
cloud wind pool moon  
Grady is on way to Big Spring Hospitle to see  
fly up  
if he can get something don too for him  
I'm the sky  
So pray for us  
bigger  
I love you  
than big  
Ant Cat

THE HOMEMAKER

She is climbing into the refrigerator,  
putting her fingerprints into the butter,  
tasting old onions, sleeping with the leftovers.  
She is helping herself, finding the right shelf.  
She is firming up like jello, slowing  
down, keeping cool, her skin thinning  
into pliofilm, her flesh stiffening into steaks.  
She is becoming a meal, ready to be eaten.

MEAT

"The counter life of fresh meat is three days."

Two days under  
fluorescent lights  
meat turns grey  
as the skin of rats

slate colored steaks  
laid out for viewing  
like dead fathers

mourners passing  
shaking heads, lamenting  
the high cost of survival.

The third day  
we turn the other cheek,  
expose a new side

you only imagined  
existed. "They look  
so natural," you say.

We are artists.  
The flesh glows  
health for another day

haloed  
by a wreath  
of fresh greens.

David St. John

THIS

after Tadeusz Różewicz

This is the light, I said.  
This is the light, and the day.

The boy looked at me, his face  
the color of dust. It's not enough,  
he said. You're lying. There's more.

This is the street, I said.  
This is the street where people walk,  
the street they see from their windows.  
It is this one.

He saw a waitress  
wetting her lips with her tongue.  
Yes, he said. Go on.

This is a house. Someone's home.  
There is a fire going, dinner on the table.  
There are children waiting: for a father,  
a brother back from the war. For a silence  
in the keening. For the beds to warm  
themselves, in winter.

Never, he said. I don't believe you.

Here; I pointed. A newsman  
whose tongue is a rancid almond. A machinist  
whose ears drone like sirens. Your own twin,  
looking for a street sign. A girl, slipping  
her hands under your shirt.

No, he said. Go on.

These are my hands,  
that drag a knife through meat,  
that stack crates in warehouses, in trucks,  
that whisper like thieves in dark offices,  
that twist an icepick into your temple,  
that hold a woman's face.

Yes. What else.

Nothing else. Or this:  
that some days, the letter you wait for comes;  
that the light is blowing into the hallway—  
as you open the door, and step out.

You're lying, he said. Go on.

*John Skoyles*

#### IN MEMORY OF MY VOICE

From this house of drains, no exit.  
I kiss the broken mirror, my own bad luck,  
and the scars white as erasures.  
Finally I've got myself by the throat,  
but the voice slipping between my fingers  
rehearses its chorus of threats.

That voice rising sleek and pure  
costs breath, that voice scorns flesh,

ringing like the cries of some lost miner  
I choke myself to smother:  
his questions, that endless tone.  
Still, it rises  
with an anger worse than muscle.

So I handle this voice like a bird,  
a razor, or a tiny man,  
something to notice in an empty room.  
It seems useless, the struggle to connect  
with sound in another way than pain.

The voice, fixed in its long drone,  
waits to slip out of the body  
as a confused ghost, wondering  
which was better, the caves, or all this air.  
And the mind misses the voice and its tricks,  
slowly releases the face  
to an expression of great composure,  
the mouth left open like a favorite wound.

*James McKean*

#### THE GIFT

Beneath an incomplete set  
of *World Book Encyclopedias*  
and two movie magazines  
in the corner of Gracie's Junk Store,  
Dillon, Montana,  
I found  
Mrs. Ruth S. Julian's  
1898 edition of  
*A Selection from the  
Discourses of Epictetus*  
in which she had pressed  
one hundred and twenty-seven  
four leaf clovers.

BEGIN

All the winds that knew you  
turn away. The hill looks up  
from your shadow, looks up from the owl  
lodged in the hemlock. Hill,  
that is a marching under you, hill  
that refuses you nothing,  
to which you have agreed, to which  
your heart thickens  
like a root.

There is a memory of snow  
where you were but an absence  
deeper than memory. Yet the ground  
stays with us a while  
in your honor. Do not blame us  
for speaking, as though this were usual,  
as though you were not an opening  
in the silence we already begin.

BEGINNING TO SAY NO

is not to offer so much  
as a fist, is to walk away firmly  
as though you had settled something foolish,  
is to wear a tarantula in your buttonhole  
yet smile invitingly, unmindful  
how your own blood grows toward the irreversible  
bite. No, I will not

go with you. No that is not  
all right. No I am not your mother, no, nor your sister,  
your lover, your sweet dish, your home cooking, good  
looking daf-  
fodil. Yes is no

reason to slay the cyclops. No  
will not save it. And the cricket, "Yes, yes."

Fresh bait, fresh bait. The search  
for the right hesitation  
includes finally  
unobstructed waters. Goodbye,  
old happy-go-anyhow, old shoe  
for any weather. Whose  
candelabra are you? Whose soft-guy, nevermind,  
nothing-to-lose anthill?

"And," the despised connective, is really an engine  
until it is yes all day, until a light is thrown  
against a wall with some result. And  
there is less doubt, yes or no,  
for whatever you have been compelled to say  
more than once.

*Rich Ives*

HERON

The neck is a question  
of swallowing whole lives.  
Stay calm  
in this sliver of slow flight.

Sing like stiff reeds.  
Breathe like tide.  
Eat what the water hides.  
Stand quiet like seed.

When you eat fish you become an ocean.  
The moon swallows your breathing.

THE HEADLESS HAND

Still there are times I feel cheated!  
Is it a clean and fair exchange?  
Fingerprints. White nails. Jerusalem.  
The breasts of a joker, although you won't say it.  
Will I wake up some morning with blood  
in my thighs? ("I want to cover  
the whole side of your face with my hand  
and feel the softness.") Deliberate kisses  
stained with aged ink. Season's greetings.  
Rechargeable laughter. ("Who cares about infinity  
when she was so soft?") Through an inferno pressed over  
your eyes. ("And she was all red, down below, down there.")  
The concentration camps around your face,  
eyes like drunken scarecrows  
out of season in the snow. Quick penitents  
of wrinkled dough. Tracing, under your eyelids,  
two dry, defunct oceans. Crucified, a haughty word.  
In the pale desert, under a tide of saliva.

"Atlantis!" I cry. (Never "Leprosy!")  
"On top of your forehead people will stand  
and admire your harbors! From the bulk of your eyebrows!"

"I don't know," you say, flexing a noble  
Teddy Roosevelt hand. Red rubber ball.  
(You do not understand.) "I don't mind you  
not knowing how to cook or to sew, but I don't understand  
why you hide in the closet." (Three gunshots of kiss  
explode in my ear.) "Why you cut yourself after  
our argument. Why you came out and said that  
you'd seen a white deer chasing your skin away from  
the light." (The crescent moon on your fingernail  
slices my tongue. A rich harvest of angry  
fruit for the poor.)

"You do not understand," I say.  
(At night we make up stories  
about fried men who come out of the heater  
like Santa Claus, and four-acre beds.  
Chimney soot, and the moon.) "My hand  
has no house. Only fingerprints. Invisible,  
indelible. Of course I can't cook."  
(And your eyes shoot like Geritol, like  
mercury. The squeak of your jaw. Your head  
one small sparrow.)

A Christmas Eve memory  
of broken jokers, and bravery.  
("Tomorrow, we'll at once go out  
and bring in all the bloody sheep again.")  
You do not understand. You think, you gasp,  
while your headless hand squeezes  
the life from my thighs.

IN THE NORTH TEMPERATE ZONE

Consider the summer of 1816, when it snowed and sleeted  
through July and August. On Bear Mountain the sky rained grass  
and even though it wasn't summer, I froze. We made love

in front of an open refrigerator. You raised your head  
and your eyes were filled with snow, your arms forked  
branches, your bones a haiku, a landscape of old-fashioned  
snowmen.

Milk bottles glinted on the shelf. Somewhere on Everest a freezing  
crow cawed. My mouth was a mirror, my limbs were icicles.  
The burning bush, the fig tree, a handful of snowballs—but flowers

are food for dying people, and that was the summer we ate  
roses. They were well preserved in the early morning frost  
and reminded me of candied yams, the blotched petals a mixture

of blood and snow. Consider the lawnmower, lazy, abandoned,  
its spokes twanging through a junkyard of human flesh. That  
was the summer the grass was blue. That was the summer

that we wore red mittens and tried to sue God for  
malpractice. Our stomachs were screaming refrigerators,  
our tongues burned wildly in our heads. Someone to argue

with, someone to blame things on, someone to use in one way  
or another, that was enough to ask of each other, but as we turned  
into Eskimos our complexions darkened and we wore teeth and furs  
and never pulled free of the sun's enduring gravity, its winter  
love. Dreaming of the Sahara and endless rivers, we skated on our

imaginary blisters, projected sunburns, unearthed the sidewalk  
and the sea and shoveled the cold back into our mouths, ate pale  
roots  
that avoided the sun. Consider your hands upon my breasts,

our total inability to melt into each other, our skins like vanilla  
ice-cream cones, like dead children fossilized with our love.  
The metal on the kitchen counter (assorted grinders, knives and  
forks)

will feed us intravenously, bleach us, paralyze us with  
an exotic variety of leprosy, silence. Like an untouched sheet  
of unlined paper or a newly fashioned mannequin, if you try to cut  
open

my dark skin (sweet as chocolate, thick as papaya) you will find  
nothing  
but more snow. Seriously consider the rest of the year: a blizzard  
of unreality, sledding on our bones above the barren land,  
communicating under an avalanche. Skinning our knees was never  
this good. Indians are lurking in the woods. Consider Africa,  
Greenland,  
our new abode: consider us eating each other, unloading the last  
load.

## RECENT ACQUISITIONS

Item: one tea bowl, Japanese *oribe*  
of a frozen porridge color  
its rim marked  
by three vertical lines  
terminating in circular scrawls.  
These may be read  
as spiders  
amulets, arrested  
raindrops  
plummeting  
into a deep green glaze whose color suggests  
if organic, dragonflies  
if chemical, arsenic.

Item: *conus*  
*aulicus*, reticulated  
black and white shell of the Philippine tide line.  
On its curved obsidian  
sides, a perspective  
of large and small white cones  
erupts, an infant mountain range extruded  
from the obscure sea floor.

Item: on the leathery  
moss and cream-colored foliage  
of *paphiopedilum concolor*  
a similar pattern  
recurs, a softened and flutelike  
canon at the octave;  
but its bloom, while of an appealing  
lavender-speckled yellow  
is sparse, infrequent, and for an orchid, totally  
insignificant.

Finally on a still-cryptic  
curl of ghostly gelatin

in a metal can, this snapshot:

framed

by yellowing Royal palms

left

green-shingled Colonial  
"ADAMS FUNERAL HOME"

center

low-lying, white, s-curved, voluptuous  
"A Morris Lapidus Associates Renovation,  
HEAVEN"

foreground

the choppy brown canal  
one heedless pleasure boat  
a third sign:  
"WATCH YOUR WAKE."

## SURE THING

*For Lee*

Your father picked a filly from the paddock;  
silver, insolent, an early fern  
rearing above drab leaves; pliant as grass,  
fickle as water, dappled like a stream bed.  
Mounted, she was a lethal blue machine.  
*Sure thing*, he said.

Driving through mud at the rail  
the dirty wave sucked her under, head over heels  
and held her, mauled her, teased her. When she surfaced  
riderless, on three legs, the fourth hoof dangled  
on its chains of tendon, scattering blood like a censer.  
Two men at her bridle, two at her stirrups, she would not  
have done with running, but, bearing them all, waltzed  
for home until the master rapped three times for silence.

Hers was a short dash and a quick ending.  
I can no longer die young; the deepening lines  
in my face, my palms, converge in perspective, forming

in my mind, as in an etching of Piranesi  
a baroque monument called Patience.

Those long months

I carried you, I learned one lesson well:  
*first be a good animal.*

## *Duane Niatum*

### SONGS FROM THE MAKER OF TOTEMS

*For Abner Johnson*

1.

I offer you the chance to forgive your wounds  
That often burned down the longhouse.  
And you must never blame the village shaker;  
I comfort you because of his dreaming.

See owl settling in the four directions, roosting  
In the salmon ceremony of your tribal fires—  
Flying back to First People hidden in your feelings,  
Easing the weight of morning on your eyelids.

They leave your pride in confusion's cave,  
Light your burden with another storm.

2.

Thunderbird because he's buried under bones,  
Teeth, and shell; Raven because he can't  
See sun reach the crocus beneath the ferns;  
Bluejay because so few hear the humor in his laugh,

His praise to the women swimming in the river;  
Whale because he's more hunted than haunted,  
Seaweed because it is now no more than desert dust.  
Beaver because his last dam was a collapsing



Rainbow that sent him off to the stars without  
A cedar chip to begin where the water song failed  
To hold the second circle in the second shadow.

3.

Wolf is roaming through the forest of your terror;  
He can't move until you stop running behind the dead,  
The drummers behind the moon. At dawn, he must be  
Given the rattle to shake you back to shore.

As it was your ignorance that started this tremor,  
Feeding the sharks the procession of hearts,  
The stream of suicides diving into white breakers.

*Jeffrey Bartman*

Two Poems

#### THE TREES DO THIS AND THAT

The trees do this and that  
in the wind, in the white and yellow sun.  
They taunt their shadows and go berserk  
as sunset unbuckles their spines. They seem  
about to strangle in the orange-lit evening.  
Undressing in the fog or waiting to be  
undressed by the smoke from a campfire,  
they try to burst the shotglass buried  
deep into their centers.  
Meandering snows jockey between their limbs.  
The trees have worn people to hangings,  
ribbons to fairs. Two bluejays don't collide.

The moon blinks, the trees woo,  
the flickering stars are ignored, the syrupy  
rain occasionally travels over the bark.  
The trees have spent lifetimes determining  
summer for winter, spring for fall  
and barricading night for day.

The trees in the yard, the trees on the corner.  
Peaches on a tree, blurred  
in the rain, through a window.  
The oldest tree in town and the tree  
in the park tattooed by lovers. The trees  
just planted. The trees on the orphanage lawn.  
The trees in the woods. The one tree  
we don't know about. The tree that does  
or doesn't fall. The branches tangled in  
the telephone wires that parallel the highway.

#### FROM THE LIPSTICK FACTORY

In the door and taken for the shift  
getting off. Well okay and we slap  
a fog of dust from our corduroys,

wipe our hands in our hair.  
Another set of eyes trades a photo  
with another set of eyes. An overwide

mouth howls when it wins at bingo.  
A few puckering others kiss sloppily. The girl  
is in love with the guy. The girl

is not in love with the guy. Two guys  
are in love with the same girl. Another girl  
loves somebody else or at least says she does.

A guy loses. A girl wins. Vice versa.  
All combinations of the above.  
Two girls bicker over the daredevil who said hello.

A girl and a guy whisper that the money's  
got to go for snowtires. One waitress in two uniforms  
takes up three seats. Three . . . Haloes

of our pink dust dream on the ceiling.  
Eyelids and underneath puffed up  
like a blouse full of wind. I breathe

long and short in emergency red. Blow-outs,  
air guns and wristwatch alarms.  
The jukebox, it revs. Eggs

fry and squeal and hams broil and cry.  
A rack of saucepans falls on the griddle  
and clangs slowly like a trainwreck telling itself

to a town via snow. Cuddling in houses  
embracing mountains, the sleepers  
they almost hear.

*Wesley McNair*

#### GOING BACK TO FIFTH GRADE

You sit down  
close to the floor  
losing your height forever.  
All along they have been  
expecting you. Across the aisle a boy  
with thick glasses and  
wide underwater eyes  
turns to smile. You become aware  
that he is not happy,  
that none of them are happy.  
The baby-faced girl  
with breasts and the bald one  
off by the windows who had ringworm  
are blaming you  
with words you can't quite  
catch. Surely they recall your painting  
of the tropical bird  
you ask, speaking their names  
which you have never forgot.  
But things get worse: Someone is questioning  
your decision to grow up  
in the first place, leaving them here.

The whole class applauds.  
Up front, meanwhile, the Penmanship Man  
who travels all over the state  
writing beautifully  
is putting on his coat,  
and the teacher is at the blackboard  
dotting the i in your name  
so hard her flesh jolts.  
You are the Person  
Who Always Spoils It  
For Everyone Else. If you could make  
one half-inch margin, you cry, just one  
beautiful pink map  
of Asia. Outside it is beginning  
to rain. When you stay after school  
nobody is there.

*Michael Magee*

Three Poems

#### THE CIRCUS

After we have slapped our thighs  
once more, and we laugh quietly  
down in the pit of our bellies  
there will be tougher acts to follow:  
clown-face, white-face, lovers.  
We could walk on our hands,  
see the big-top go spinning  
or rolling over, play dead  
for a minute like lions,  
lying on our backs, yawning.

With love as our ringmaster  
and three rings going at once  
who would know what to watch:  
our extraordinary juggling act  
where I suspend you breathless,  
cupped in the palms of my hands,

or the thrills of the high-wire  
as we touch briefly, passing again,  
tempting luck and death,  
losing our balance only for fun  
before we come down to earth.

Or me on the burning trapeze,  
you my star-spangled accomplice,  
dressed only in a handkerchief  
as we perform our triple somersault.  
And finally our sweeping bows,  
followed of course by applause,  
the cotton candy and hoopla,  
the horns and glittering girls,  
spotlights swinging above our heads  
as we exit through the roof.

#### THE LIE

You have told me this truth:  
that when we lie asleep  
I wake to your cold dreaming,  
that when the darkness cracks  
even this bed will not hold us,  
that we shoulder the night  
between our two backs,  
and pressed between our palms  
is the blood of our children.

That what we love, we fear:  
this pulse driving us on  
breaching our valley of bones,  
the many shapes we become  
like shadows torn from evening,  
this nest of tangled hair,  
the clay of our bodies  
wrested from its labor.  
I tell you to your teeth,  
it is a lie I like hearing.

#### POEM FOR THE POET STARVING TO DEATH ON HIS OWN VOCABULARY

I have bitten off the words,  
left them cold on my tongue,  
without sense or taste,  
not even a pinch of salt.

I kept only my bad breath,  
starving on this silence,  
gnawing the same old bones,  
settling for grubs and roots.

But I crave darker meat,  
anything I can chew on,  
fat, even gristle, the scraps  
from someone else's table.

*Brendan Galvin*

Two Poems

#### DIAGNOSIS

Between flesh and the spirit,  
who's not torn?  
A hairless curate  
trails around in me  
on rubber soles:  
his homilies are fluent  
as birch rods.  
He trims my wicks.  
A notebook in his skirts  
lists my offenses  
by the ounce.  
He calls the shots  
all right (let's call him  
A).

Though there's B, too,  
who wants and will not quit.  
He's the unstrung Harp  
who framed me for  
pratfalls. Just hear him,  
day and night:  
*Kick out the skids!*,  
ditched on his back  
in weeds beside the road.  
Oh, he's the nightsweat's  
father, I know that,  
Will-o'-the-Wisp  
dry in the throat,  
who nails his warning  
flare to my big toe.

Then when his deathbed  
pillow's plumped, he's randy  
for the candles and the oil.  
But A produces chalk,  
and, on the clearing  
blackboard of B's skull,  
describes delicious tits.

B knocks the blocks out then,  
goes with his goad  
and dams the tilted bucket.  
Think of the chicken  
and the egg, or  
partners in a dancehall  
marathon, marrying  
each other  
through the night.  
Think of diastole  
and systole,  
stick in a barrel  
beating good times out.

## IN ENVY OF INSTINCT

Earth, air, or water,  
which are we natural to?  
Running the country  
the only way I know how,  
I put one foot  
before another, where  
earlier a deer clicked off  
the distance like a caliper.

My heart beats red  
as the pouch  
of a horny frigatebird.  
My lungs are sponges  
working for more air.  
When I stop,  
a metaphor for nonchalance  
comes paddling up the creek.

Is it speech and its procrastinations  
that separate us  
from these lower orders?  
Or that backlash of knots  
and loops, the ultimate  
nervous system? Any wave skimmer  
belting along the coast  
could go without reason  
to Venezuela tomorrow.

Off Jeremy Point the bluefish  
hang straight out in midair;  
seeing them flexed  
over fleeing bait,  
my heart stands up  
and walks into my throat.

Surely this body's more than just  
support for a tangle of untied punchlines,  
out-takes from The Impossible,

and mash notes from the dead?  
Why can't I have a woman  
with breasts like the mourning doves'?

And goddam it I'd like  
the energy ants save the world with.  
To store it drib by drab in undermines  
and riddles of wood, no jot too small  
from smears and flakes,  
from lips of children asleep.  
A decimal at a time, to carry off  
whole silos, nudging the origin  
of species my way.

*Kenneth O. Hanson*      Four Poems

#### GOING TO SLEEP AS THE DOGS ARE BARKING

On that day when you wake up  
as if for the first time  
and find that the woman beside you  
is not beautiful, a whore—  
your life

the muscles that hold  
your eyeballs in place  
stretch tight as rubber bands  
you keep trying to blink, the skin  
touches your cheekbones—  
nothing has been overlooked  
it is that kind of day

tears start  
the vision is dazzling  
he loves me  
very much he loves me  
very much

she says over and over—  
a stomach that sounds  
like an old machine—  
your life

#### SAYING YES, SAYING NO

What amazement it is  
to be living  
only someone  
from a village could  
be so amazed  
I gaze  
at the blue sky  
thinking of verities  
what brain power  
direct  
sunlight  
always  
does this to me  
I blink like a star  
struck mole  
I break  
into song O sweet  
Greek morning my voice  
is like metal  
like crystal like glass  
I feel like  
the ocean floor  
profound  
I'm patient as a stone  
I know my place  
let the rest  
think clever  
spellbound  
numb  
Nights  
in the Gardens of Spain I say  
hello to the world with my eyes

## ALCYONE

Sitting in the sun by the blasted tree  
I say yes to begin with  
like old times.

The leaves hang down  
hang down from branches  
air between  
like the delicate bones of fish.

Across the square  
from levels of a balcony  
last night's warm sheets  
are cooling in the breeze.

The woman yawns  
and stretches, leaning on the railing  
looking rich.

So much to see  
so much to find  
no need to hurry.

She is open to suggestion  
like the tree.  
Nobody makes the first move.

## "SUDDENLY, ALL" SONG

Because it is spring  
she is washing the window  
like rain, washing  
the leaves of the tall  
eucalyptus  
I love you

The days  
are all turning themselves

into weeks, if you ask  
at the very beginning  
how, you will miss  
the beginning  
I love you

Suddenly, all  
the workers in buildings  
have dreams in the sunlight  
today  
they are dreaming the first part  
tomorrow the second  
I love you

It is too late now  
to go back and be strangers  
all the corpuscles join  
like a true majority  
singing  
Yes sir she's my baby  
the real thing

Too late to remember  
the way it was  
from the very beginning  
sun  
on your head like a hat  
in August, sun  
on your back like a hand

### *About Our Contributors*

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