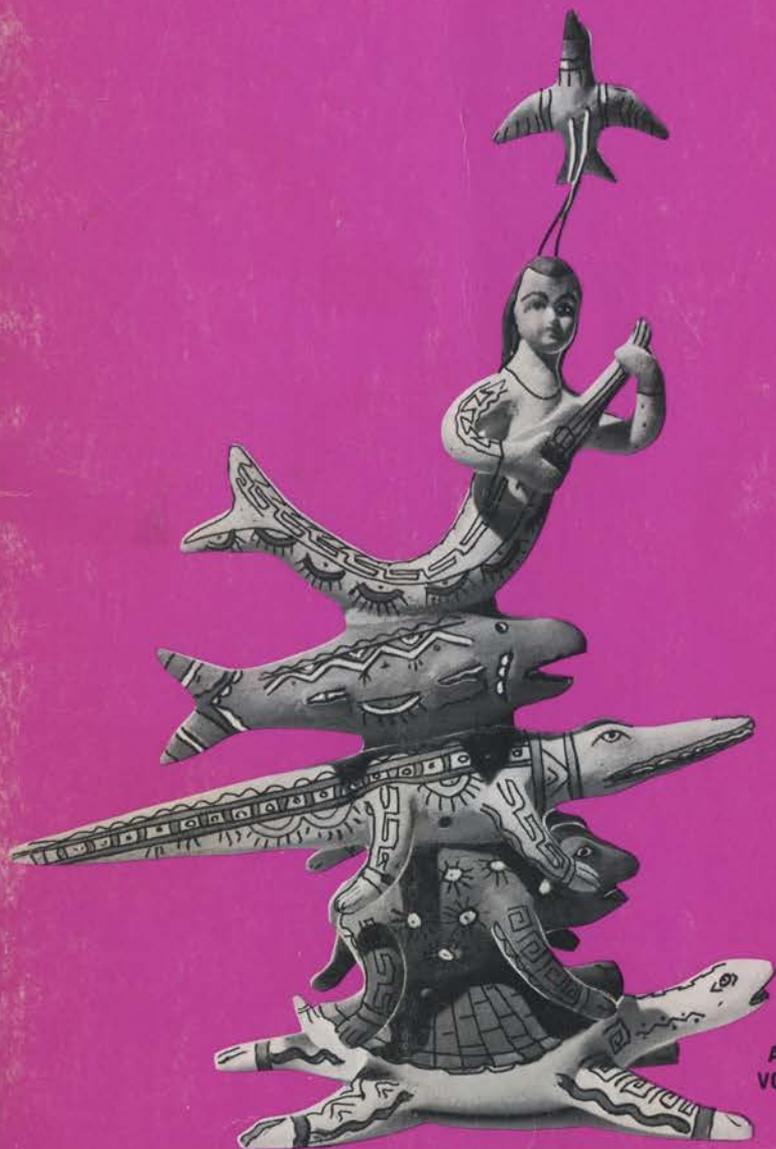


Poetry

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AUTUMN 1972
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POETRY NORTHWEST

AUTUMN 1972

Richard Hugo

Seven Poems

LETTER TO PETERSON FROM THE PIKE PLACE MARKET

Dear Bob: I'll be damned. The good, oh so utterly sweet people of Seattle voted to keep the market as is. I wish I could write tender lines. The way I feel I could call to gulls in gull language, or name all fish at a glance the way Wagoner can birds. I'm eating lunch alone in the Athenian, staring across Puget Sound to the islands, the blue white Olympics beyond the islands and the sky beyond them, a sky I know is reflecting the blue of the ocean. And commerce seems right, the ships arriving from every nation, the cries of vendors outside that leak in. Sol Amon the fish man looks good, and Joe, the Calabrian. The taverns are as usual, unpretentious, run down, human, and tiers of produce gleam like Kid Ory's trombone. Today, I am certain, for all my terrible mistakes I did the right thing to love places and scenes in my innocent way and to spend my life writing poems, to receive like a woman the world in its enduring decay and to tell that world like a man that I am not afraid to weep at the sadness, the ongoing day that is draining our life and is life. Sorry. Got carried away. But you know, Bob, how in the smoky recess of bars all over the world, a man will suddenly dance because music, a juke box, a Greek taverna band, moves him and how when he dances we applaud and cry go. That's nobility of blood, a recognition by those who matter that in special moments we are together facing the brute descent of the sun and that cold brittle star we know already burned out. Hell, that's enough. Wish you were here in the market helping me track down the moment for some euphoric jolt. The barbecued crab is excellent. Much love. Dick.

PLANS FOR ALTERING THE RIVER

Those who favor our plan to alter the river
raise your hand. Thank you for your vote.
Last week, you'll recall, I spoke about how water
never complains. How it runs where you tell it,
seemingly at home, flooding grain or pinched
by geometric banks like those in this graphic
depiction of our plan. We ask for power:
a river boils or falls to turn our turbines.
The river approves our plans to alter the river.

Due to a shipwreck downstream, I'm sad to report
our project is not on schedule. The boat
was carrying cement for our concrete rip rap
balustrade that will force the river to run
east of the factory site through the state-owned
grove of cedar. Then, the uncooperative
carpenters union went on strike. When we get
that settled, and the concrete, given good weather
we can go ahead with our plan to alter the river.

We have the injunction. We silenced the opposition.
The workers are back. The materials arrived
and everything's humming. I thank you
for this award, this handsome plaque I'll keep
forever above my mantel, and I'll read
the inscription often aloud to remind me
how with your courageous backing I fought
our battle and won. I'll always remember
this banquet this day we started to alter the river.

Flowers on the bank? A park on Forgotten Island?
Return of cedar and salmon? Who are these men?
These Johnnys-come-lately with plans to alter the river?
What's this wild festival in May
celebrating the runoff, display floats on fire
at night and a forest dance under the stars?
Children sing through my locked door, "Old stranger,
we're going to alter, to alter, alter the river."
Just when the water was settled and at home.

THREE STOPS TO TEN SLEEP

Ho. The horses can water. We are miles
ahead of schedule thanks to cool weather
and a strong wind at our backs. Ahead
are the mountains where we plan to build
our city. Our bank will be solvent. Our church
will serve all faiths. We will pass tough laws
against fragmentation. Anyone threatening
unity will be sent to the plains to wander
forever. The plains have snakes and wolves
and much of the water is poison. Have the women
make dinner. We camp here. Tomorrow
we should be close to that forest, and the next day
we will find our place to live as destined.

Stop. It is farther than it seemed. No doubt
an illusion created by light off high snow.
Then, the wind changed and discouraged
the horses. They don't like wind full in their eyes
all day. I urge you to stop this bickering.
Remember, our city will be founded
on mutual respect. I urge you to accept
this necessary rationing of food.
Above all, remember, every time you frown
the children see it. Several already
have been crying and saying there will be no city.

Wait. The mountains are never closer. What
is this land? We lost too many last night
in the storm and those who remain
are the worst, the ones we hesitated to take
when we started back at the river. You
remember? That town where we first formed?
Those saloons and loose women? Let them grumble.
We are going on. Indians know
the right roots to eat and there's water in cactus.
Even if we fail, wasn't it worth the trip,
leaving that corrupting music behind
and that sin?

IN YOUR BAD DREAM

Morning at nine, seven ultra masculine men explain the bars of your cage are silver in honor of our emperor. They finger the bars and hum. Two animals, too far to name, are fighting. One, you are certain, is destined to win, the yellow one, the one who from here seems shaped like a man. Your breakfast is snake but the guard insists eel. You say hell I've done nothing. Surely that's not a crime. You say it and say it. When men leave, their hum hangs thick in the air as scorn. Your car's locked in reverse and running. The ignition is frozen, accelerator stuck, brake shot. You go faster and faster back. You wait for the crash. On a bleak beach you find a piano the tide has stranded. You hit it with a hatchet. You crack it. You hit it again and music rolls dissonant over the sand. You hit it and hit it driving the weird music from it. A dolphin is romping. He doesn't approve. On a clean street you join the parade. Women line the street and applaud, but only the band. You ask to borrow a horn and join in. The bandmaster says we know you can't play. You are embarrassed. You pound your chest and yell meat. The women weave into the dark that is forming, each to her home. You know they don't hear your sobbing crawling the street of this medieval town. You promise money if they'll fire the king. You scream a last promise—Anything. Anything. Ridicule my arm.

WHY I THINK OF DUMAR SADLY

Forgive this nerve. I walked here up the long hill from the river where success is unpretentious commerce, tugs towing salable logs and drab factories tooting

reliable workers home. Here, the stores are balanced on the edge of failure and they never fail. Minimal profits seem enough to go on one more day and stores that failed were failures in the 30's. The district failed from the beginning. The pioneer who named it for himself died wondering what's wrong with the location. Three blocks north the houses end. Beyond them, gravel pits and scotch broom.

The nerve I ask forgiveness for is in my gaze. I see this district pale. When lovers pass me on their way to love I know they'll end up hating and fresh paint gleaming yellow on the meeting hall peels before it dries. Whatever effort the grocer makes to increase sales, he'll end up counting pennies in a dim room, bewildered by volitant girls who romp in clouds above his store. The family next door is moving after 30 years to Phoenix. The well built daughter of the druggist started sagging yesterday.

I think of Dumar sadly because a dancehall burned and in it burned a hundred early degradations. How I never knew the reason for a girl's wide smile, a blue spot raying over dancers, a drum gone silent and the clarinet alone. I hear the sad last shuffling to Good Night Sweetheart. I take the dark walk home. Now see the nerve you must forgive. Others in pairs in cars to the moon flashing river. Me on foot alone, asking what I do wrong.

DRIVING MONTANA

The day is a woman who loves you. Open. Deer drink close to the road and magpies spray from your car. Miles from any town your radio comes in strong, unlikely Mozart from Belgrade, rock and roll from Butte. Whatever the next number, you want to hear it. Never has your Buick

found this forward a gear. Even
the tuna salad in Reedpoint is good.

Towns arrive ahead of imagined schedule.
Absorakee at one. Or arrive so late—
Silesia at nine—you recreate the day.
Where did you stop along the road
and have fun? Was there a runaway horse?
Did you park at that house, the one
alone in a void of grain, white with green
trim and red fence, where you know you lived
once? You remembered the ringing creek,
the soft brown forms of far off bison.
You must have stayed hours, then drove on.
In the motel you know you'd never seen it before.

Tomorrow will open again, the sky wide
as the mouth of a wild girl, friable
clouds you lose yourself to. You are lost
in miles of land without people, without
one fear of being found, in the dash
of rabbits, soar of antelope, swirl
merge and clatter of streams.

SILVER STAR

for Bill Kittredge

This is the final resting place of engines,
farm equipment and that rare, never more
than occasional man. Population:
17. Altitude: unknown. For no
good reason you can guess, the woman
in the local store is kind. Old steam trains
have been rusting here so long, you feel
the urge to oil them, to lay new track, to start
the west again. The Jefferson
drifts by in no great hurry on its way
to wed the Madison, to be a tributary

of the ultimately dirty brown Missouri.
This town supports your need to run alone.

What if you'd lived here young, gone full of fear
to that stark brick school, the cruel teacher
supported by your guardian? Think well
of the day you ran away to Whitehall.
Think evil of the cop who found you starving
and returned you, siren open, to the house
you cannot find today. You question
everyone you see. The answer comes back wrong.
There was no house. They never heard your name.

When you leave here, leave in a flashy car
and wave goodbye. You are a stranger
every day. Let the engines and the farm
equipment die, and know that rivers
end and never end, lose and never lose
their famous names. What if your first girl
ended certain she was animal, barking
at the aides and licking floors? You know
you have no answers. The empty school
burns red in heavy snow.

Brendan Galvin

Three Poems

THE MAN WITH A HOLE THROUGH HIS CHEST (Eskimo Wood-Carving)

He did it because the wind
pushed him around. When he set out
to walk to the dawn
it shoved him into the sunset;
getting inside, it startled thoughts
that were sleeping like leaves.
So he let it out,
made a place for it to go through.

Now an ear is closing,
tired of the wind's secrets.
One eye is frozen open
on the white absence of friends
while the other grows teeth,
tunneling into its brow.
Below stubborn nostrils
other teeth fuse,
the jailers of words.

When there was nowhere to go,
nothing to hold,
he threw his limbs away,
simplifying his life.
He will not need his loins.
Wind blowing through the man
with a hole through his chest
won't turn him toward anyone.

TOWARDS A NATIVE AMERICAN OPERA

Somehow the woman has been with child
three years. She holds a hand there
wondering how, giving the room a pregnant look
while the organ, always pregnant, swells violently.
The season is indoors, the state Catatonia.
There, while snow, dust, and raised eyebrows fall,
a hand moves over a table, slow as a man on all fours
crossing a desert. Later it covers another hand,
symbiotically. Then there's a shattered windshield,
or inexplicable headaches, and somebody who left town
comes back with another face, but no one will notice,
only the audience crying Look out! Look out!
That's not your son! until swaddled in small talk.
Drinks swirl all the time, clicking the ice,
but no one falls down or throws up on his lawyer's suit.
A lady is told her father isn't her father.
Mascara runs. When the child is born
it's already six months old.

ASSEMBLING A STREET

Let's give it the Kamjian-Boyadjian Post,
Armenian-American War Vets,
and two bars with German names. Steuben's
and the Gartenhaus, say, with a drunk
whose face is sheer argument against shaving
emerging from under a torn convertible
roof and going into one or the other bar,
hands stuffed in a salt-and-pepper overcoat.
And scatter things around—
a few pebbles for leaping into shoes, and one
avocado ballpoint pen with pseudo-gold metal trim
to be found by someone pretty coming home
from high school. We'll need a puddle
with a starling in it wading after sun,
and a Puerto Rican car with lacy dolls
and dingleberries in the rear window.
And paint "God-is-my-Co-pilot"
in flag colors across the right front fender.
Time for some people to come home from work:
have that clandestine couple arrive
separately and enter the Gartenhaus
one at a time; her first, leggy, with him
tearfully proud coming behind.
Red brick for these houses, or better yet
that yellow gravelly siding stamped
like brick. Never aluminum—who would
we fool with it? Or by calling it
Old Oaken Bucket Way? We'll call it
Soaper Street and add piles of fresh turf
in the Soaper Street Cemetery down one end
beside that padlocked store with what look like
used stove-parts in the window.
See that lady there being helped
by her remaining son? Her face
has stared down Death so many times
he's afraid to take her.

HAWK: IN THE MANNER OF A FUGUE

A marsh hawk drifts with singlemindedness above our shore
In the suspensions of his appetite.
He grabs his steaks
While dropping out of thought.

We startled him up off a hash of field mouse yesterday.
Impossible for gods to be surprised,
But he left half,
And our slow muddy stares,

By elevating instantly, then wove a noose of air
Around our moral indignation, made
An island of
Us, our myopia.

He drifts and circles now and contemplates promising specks,
His eye as sharp as an American
Businessman's if
Fat capital were sex.

But he is clean as his metabolism and eats up
Profits and has no use for scavenging
Time. Time
Is the angle of his flight.

I think in one enormous almost oxygenless arc
He takes in us the house the dog the rat
Trapped in the well
The east crab dying west.

Perhaps he plans tomorrow's lunch. Cruises the boy scout camp,
Some prepubescent plump fillet the scout
Masters have missed.
Or, across the harbor,

A party at a burial with their best dresses on,
The minister with gospel in his mouth
Garnishing a grave,
Thinking of income tax.

Or notes canned swarming summer maggots in a trailer camp.
Along the shore road he can shop for us.
I was a kid
When I was told of kids

Eagles appeared from elders' nowhere to snatch up away.
I wanted desperately to be the boy
Wicked enough
To win that punishment,

And see the country of the eagles, maybe write a book
With a gold feather in indifferent blood
About the trip.
I'm too big now to sin

Into vision. But why does this hawk designate my day?
Tonight in sleep he'll see another hawk,
The poem's hawk
That calls him by his name

Shrilly, and flutters desperate rhythmic signs it wants to mate.
In that envisioned and thus possible
Moment when they
Explode in fusion I

Shall not be in myself but in the hawks and understand
Rapes from heaven, swans, doves, how unborn words
Fly lost in white
Clouds of the blank page, wait,

Circle return dip glide rise circle again and, at once, drop
To the poor violence of reality,
The poem's blood,
Thin ink blots from the sky.

FISH

Despairing again of catching anything
But my own discontent,
I go out in the boat and drop a line
Into another world:
"Wish you were here."

The surface of the morning is a dead
Calm where the hours are rings
That move out from my center of the clock.
Time circles but isn't caught.
No nibbles here.

Perhaps I am the one caught on the string.
The dark below the blue
Glass that reflects no face holds me secure
On no line but my own.
It waits my last

Laugh, thrash, sob, breath, then patiently will pull
Me down into itself,
Into the order of its solitude,
Blue sea that drowns blue sky,
Fixed open eye

That never will be closed and never see.
I freeze into the thought,
Hooked on the fine point of the noon's white heat.
I had left love at home,
Letters to write,

A lot of unpaid bills, memos, some gin,
And next year's calendar.
How was I pulled out of my element?
I can't get off the hook
Even to pray

To the nothing that holds me, to empty day,
To either sea or sky.
No time can pass here. Nothing will pass me by.
No rescuer can get
To here from here.

I watch, almost as if it were not me,
The frantic bleeding pumps
Of gills, flapping asphyxiation's last
Violent rites to leap
Out of thin air.

My third, last, sinking hope, temptation, sees
Another whole life flash
In front of it: once on a lobster boat
I saw a sculpin caught
In the pulled-up trap,

Mistake of no one but the sculpin, not
The lobsters', men's, or sea's.
Indifferent hands threw him back in again,
A resurrection down
To second chance.

My hands still hold the line that holds me here.
I think of other lives
The lucky sculpin gets, and how he thrives.
No one will give me two
But me. But me.

A WINTER VIEW

In such blind weather,
trees and sky sagging with rain,
clouds out of harness
romping from sheen to blackness
to pastures of long sleet,
I used to draw at the round, kitchen table.
The lamp was there,
dropping its oval of false sunlight,
while darkness and wind
peered around corners,
and frost began to grave
white manes of horses on the window.

Rain has no odor; only what it borrows
from grass or dust
or the very blue bins of memory.

Frost is a different guest.
It is the coldest of flowers.
It is the whitest of scents.
It is a gathering of jewels,
formal as a bouquet,
but subject to change by a fingernail,
or, out of awe, let be.

My awe was keen, but not enough
to leave those fantasies
between me and a further view.

Some vision was required,
and my hot breath,
round as a pond,
worked like a torch.

I breathed, I breathed,
in order to see through.

THE WATCH

There is always dread that the disease,
unnamed as yet,
will escape our vigil. The twitch in the night—
a fork turning—
the tug in the cave of the heart,
the giddiness without reason,
the sense of falling and failing,
even the exhilaration
just before the plumb-weight of fatigue
hauls down, and breath dangles
at the edge of the edge—
all the blue meadows of the past
running off with their live shadows,
birds broken,
winds bruised beyond recognition,
mementos (whole albums of breath, soft hair,
and the light on faces)
tossed out with leaves
for the annual burning.

Morning rituals are required:
investigation of the sudden blemish;
a cyst, unwarranted, beside an ear;
a knot in heel or groin,
an itch, a pang,
a narrow drumbeat in the bone
where, deep beyond the X ray, hides
an unoriginal but nervous sin.

There is always dread that the disease,
if left unwatched,
might turn into some common thing—
a simple wart, heat rash, a fading bruise—
and leave us unprepared to bear
the knife within
that like a red key turns
exposing all we have become and are.

CELLAR

That time I tumbled into the dark—
tilt, plunge, and cry
through a trap door left open
in a trusted pantry floor—

that descent, child hair streaming,
into a kingdom of potatoes
(their tall eyes sprouting upward
like pale green rockets),
dried onions, squash, a squeak of cabbages,
carrots hanging like withered darts,
preserves and relish winking
from provident shelves,
but the dust alive, and daintily clawed;

that moment of plunging through linoleum
embossed with faded birds
(the bitter smell of wind
or coal or something darker
hunched inside a box),
the gasp of arrival on hardened earth,
then the quick leap up
the black-wood stairs
toward a living room with lights still on—
being saved from rot
and breathing mice
and the crimson stars of tomatoes sliced
and staring out of glass—
resurrected, full of heart . . .

but now on deeper nights
a different void
below the edge of things—
the humpbacked dreams, the whirring sweat,
and no light left
except a bedroom clock's dim hands
that pace my foolish,
climbing breath.

Dick Case

FROM CRAB BAY—WITH LOVE

Three rainy months of butchering
And I have vision slurred with crab juice,
A gray in underwear that water can't wash,
And a beer ration that doesn't shrink the distance
In her letters; the last paycheck
Only paid bills, enough weather to say
T.V. isn't comfort on rainy nights,
Too many new names for neighbor talk—
By rumor the next five weeks are rain,

Rain and no airplane from Kodiak,
No escape from this rebuilt war boat
Putting scavengers on ice, filling a bay
With shells no bird or bear can eat.
My job is standing in a gut pool
Cracking crabs on a dull knife.
She gets my paycheck without a cocktail
Of sweat and the aroma of boiled crab.

One hot tub bath, three gulps
From a bourbon bottle to a Kodiak
Go-Go girl and Crab Bay would be memory
I could laugh at. But I can't quit,
Those who didn't quit would get my beer
While rain beat bad rhythm into boredom:
Without crabs to kill I would dream war boats
To that woman, bored with late shows,
Folding diapers when actors make love.

Tentacles stretched, mouth gasping
For water I can't give it, a killer claw
That can't kill its enemy, this crab
Can't sweep dung from the ocean
Or quit; its meat is money.
I push forward and slide its life away,

Pitching its back to the bears.
The gut pool grows. And I am healed
With sweat that doesn't wash.

John Taylor

POEM WITH SHARKS

The whole world is shut in with me,
The window blocked with ivy,
The sky invisible,
And the air conditioner making a sound
Like fur in the ear.

I sit down here and voices come to me,
Voices thin as knives,
And blood gathers,
Flowering like ink,
And the stain spreads and thoughts glide through
Shark-pale, shark-slow.

The ivy moves feebly with the wind,
Riddled by insects
As I am riddled by invisible rays
Streaming from a sky
Where the thought of God hangs like a shark.

The teeth of God are saw-edged
And the ivy is saw-edged,
And carnivorous thoughts slide through the darkness,
Cold as silence,
The elongated silence hanging over me.

Philip Murray

Two Poems

PEEPING TOM
COMES TO REALIZE THAT BEAUTY
IS IN THE EYES OF PEEPING TOM

*Whose soul sees the perfect
Which his eyes seek in vain
—Emerson, "The Sphinx"*

He saw hairs
Most of the time,
One by one,
Parted, platted;
Occasionally he saw
A swatch of skin
Freckled, pallid,
Goose-pimpled, bruised;
A flabby joint crooked,
Or flat backs like cheap boards,
Warped, cracked;
Once he viewed an entire room
Full of twitching eyes;
That time, he looked away.

*But man crouches and blushes,
Absconds and conceals:
He creepeth and peepeth,
He paltereth and steals.
Ibid.*

He tried to distinguish
The Men from the Women;
It was rarely possible
Under such furtive circumstances.
He spied eagerly
On the private parts
Of a dwarf
But he could only
Make out
Fitful shadows

Without his eye-glass;
His mind ached with wrong
With wrong guesses,
As his doodles show.

*Who has drugged my boy's cup?
Who has mixed my boy's bread?
Who, with sadness and madness,
Has turned the man-child's head?
Ibid.*

Magazines had
Misinformed him;
His diary was full
Of biomorphic shapes
And blacked-out passages.
He frequently slept
In his clothes
With the lights burning;
But on the prowl
He crouched in lover's lanes
And used-car lots,
After hours,
Grunting and sweating
Through dirty dreams.

*Thou art the unanswered question;
Couldst see thy proper eye,
Always it asketh, asketh;
And each answer is a lie.
Ibid.*

LE COQ SANS CONFIANCE

*Manqué, maudit,
Chantecler, Coq d'Or,
My titles bore me.
Servile bravado
Sustains the morning.*

I would as soon
Crow a full moon,
A white dog, a grey rat.
I knew light was matter
Long before Einstein.

When I draw blood
Around my rivals' eyes
It's because I love them
And my nameless hens
Without number.

In the old wives' tale
A serpent hatched an egg
Of mine that killed with one glance,
Full of corn and confidence.
Hélas, ces vers-coquins!

Laugh. I laugh myself sick
At my vulgar music
Hoisting the sun
Up from his bloody knees
Behind paling trees.

Hackles, cackles,
Gratitudes, platitudes,
Toutes les hautes attitudes
Fall down and rot,
Melodious or not.

But I'll crow in the dark
Like an ass imitating a siren
Until I am clapped in iron
Upon some venerable steeple,
Denouncing hell with sparks.

Barton Sutter

WHAT THE COUNTRY MAN KNOWS BY HEART

1

Why he lives there he can't say.
Silence is the rule.

But he knows where to look
When his wife is lost. He knows
Where the fish that get away go
And how to bring them back.
He's learned about lures
And knows how deep the bottom is.

He has been lost and found
Where he lives moss grows everywhere.
He's made his way home
The way that gulls fly through fog,
Find where water turns to stone.

In country covered with trees
He can find the heartwood
That burns best.
He can find his wife in smoke.

He knows where to look for rain
And why the wives of city men
Cannot stop dreaming of water.

2

When loons laugh he does not;
He waits for what follows, feeling
The meaning of animal speech
Crawl in the base of his brain.

But he knows there are no words
To answer the question the owl has kept
Asking all these years.

He knows a man alone
Will begin to talk to himself
And why at last he begins to answer.

3

He would never say any of this.
He knows how often silence speaks
Better than words; he knows
Not to try to say as much.

But then he won't say either
How often he longs to break the rule,
How unspoken words writhe in his throat
And blood beats the walls of his heart.

Jim Barnes

JOHN BERRYMAN: LAST DREAM SONG

The policeman waved like trying to stay hail.
Henry waved, replied
with a nosedive into the concrete current
cutting beneath the bridge.
Mr. Bones, you done done it now.
You is de dead end
we sweep up dat swept down.

You were a gone bird for de policeman's
scaredy-cat eyes. What you thought
when you said hi-dee-do wid dat wave
& took off off your perch
you'll never tell.

We don't mourn, Mr. Bones. We moan.
We knows de truth.
You done made a mess of thangs.

Stephen Dobyns

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

I am tired of this complicated life: people
with too many fists and faces like wet stones.
My body will be carefully packed and shipped
to a warehouse in Topeka. Goodbye, long fingers.
May you send word of the intricate ceremonies
of rats, their long lists of essential names.
I shall assume the form of chairs, squat
gracefully in the heavy lobbies of old hotels,
surrounded by bankers with papers and cigars.
Women will sit in me unknowingly.
Interested in rooms, I shall become them,
experience the security of walls and overhear
your most secret conversations.
I am that car you drive down a dirt road
late at night. I may not get you there.
I could also be the road. I am that mirror
you are looking into and which may not
return your reflection. Suddenly, you look into
the face of a stranger. The door closes behind you.
I could be that house tilted precariously
at the edge of town, leaning into a side street—
grey paint peeling, shingles off the roof.
Right now you are sitting within me. Right now
you are walking through me. Your shadow
slips over me. It could be slipping from you.
Or I could even be a kindlier place: a place
where sparrows live in comfort and dogs tell stories
of the winter before last. People, too, will be admitted.
But I am tired of manufactured things.
I will climb into the mountains
and become a place the water moves through:
a small valley, a mound of stones.
A place where the sky is still a question
and all the trees have tumbling names.
I shall learn the songs of water

and the long green songs of trees and grass.
Closing my hands and eyes, I may learn to sleep there.
Sinking into the earth, I may even learn to stay there.

Cynthia Macdonald

MUTATIONS

The sky has darkened
Obsessing the city with cabs
And the country with withered grasses.
The brown cast of the light
Makes lovers in the cliffs nestle closer.

The first lightning cracks apart the sky—
Armadillos and skunks rain down
Evenly spaced like a child's picture of
Snowfall. People run to the gutters
Or red fields to gather them in.

Few are perfect: lizards
Furred or striped black and white,
Skunks scaled, erect tails triangular.
Many are inside-out, belted with intestines,
Capped with brains, ribs, inverted parentheses

Under the lungs, the heart, a medal.
The poll-takers are there, taking note
Of who takes what to take home
And querying. There is a high percentage
Of "No Opinions." Surfaces are covered

With unclaimed bodies, most still alive.
The mayor declares a Civil Defense
Emergency. A meat packer devises a
Recipe for Skizard- or Lunk-burgers. He is
Not sure what they should be named.

SIMPSON

Simpson, age fifty, freezes
at the summit of the stairs
perceiving all descent as
perpendicular. "Let's go.
Get moving, Simpson. Take it
one step at a time." Too late.
The downhill muscles falter
and the bones go limp. One foot
fumbles at a wall of glass
and old friends offer crutches.

Simpson forgives the future:
offers to divorce his wife
(once a ballerina, twice
a mother); obliterates
his treasures; tears his clothing;
exposes to his children
a naked Simpson squatting
for his stool. He counts his teeth.
He quotes Ecclesiastes
(weeping) and he quotes himself.

Simpson looks down. A young girl
at the bottom stair looks up,
inhales, is calling "Simpson"
holding out her arms, her hair
like rain, her breasts, her armpits
wet with rainbow and her mouth
like blood. Flamingos hurry
through the glen. Snakes in their caves
are hissing. A boy on skis
sets out to cross the glacier.

PERSONAE DISPLACED

1

We are scribbled in pencil on foolscap.
Our lives have no meaning.
A chapter of birth is no truer to us
than a chapter of digging.

One page of our life is too many
and a thousand is insufficient.
We die and have never stopped dying
yet reach no conclusion.

Our tongues are like cactus leaves.
What voice shall we use?
We have lost the particular language
of our fathers' gravestones.

Our stars have no names.
We are ruled by the burden of morning.
Our thoughts are a compost to shovel and spread
on the weeds in our garden.

Our salt has no taste.
Our tears are as daily as urine.
Our blood is a verdict of rust on your bones.
We have no reasons.

2

Sudden they come and clean, of clean complexion.
Out of their bindings they come, gilt-edged and deckled.

Onto our beds they climb and sigh and couple
into a throb of love beyond instruction.

Even our bedding shines with moonlit honey.
Even our air is blessed, transfused with incense.

Out of our wooden arms they lift our children
promising words and worlds we never dreamed of.

Onto our windowpanes they splash a landscape.
Out of our piano they bring incredible music;

out of our well, sweet water; out of our soil,
grapes and roses; out of our granite, gems.

Out of the cupboards where our breadcrumbs molder
they have reaped abundance, spread a feast where

suddenly damask, crystal, candles; suddenly
wine; suddenly meat and fruit and pastry;

suddenly in our lives a banquet table
steaming with life, to which we are not invited.

3

Treasures we never knew we owned
were stolen from us.
We have met the thieves.

We have seen our names imprinted
on a list of victims
boldface italic in the evening papers.

Ten new commandments
have been delivered with the late editions;
ten thousand soldiers

but the thieves are dauntless.
They die and become immortal
which they will not teach us.

When they come tomorrow
bearing lighted torches
we will greet them, crying:

*Burn us.
We are crudely written.
We were meant to burn.*

Joseph Di Prisco

THE DUMB PAGE

My dear, you who pretend so perfectly to nothingness
are much too clever for my moored reflections
less evanescent, as they are, than a docked and peeling
rowboat, it being midnight, and the moon,
it being less than half itself.

A message, you say. Cable-? Tele-? Candy-? What?
What have you to say to *me*? Christ, it could never
be the delphic one, my phone's been off for weeks.
Will you sing it? dance it? speak it with a soft
voice? orchestrate your arms to feign intent?

Your profession! What you *have* to say
matters infinitely less than what certainly *is*,
you are chance, you are certainty.
Certainly, chances I take with you mean more
than a blind chip lost and blue in Reno.

If only to have initially imagined you
finally, to have given you milk and blood,
given you shelter and chair, portrait
and memory. But this is no excuse, I think:
the last word I leave you with: this is all there is.

The word will come in the morning.
I will look at you like a father, like a lover,
say, "You've been translated. What was reality
is now forever dream. I am content."
Even ink acquires the color of seeming purpose. Why not you?

You who pretend to nothingness are surely everything.
My hands are certain to obey you,
Such, the power of night,
Such, the melodies making their moist way
Up-throat, and rocketing off the tongue.

Alan Williamson

TWO FACES

(a newspaper photograph: white victim and black suspect
in a murder committed across the street from my parents'
apartment, April 22, 1968)

By the fence where his body slumped, I once was dogged
Home by the blond smirks of Polish kids. My father
Watched sometimes, praised me once for showing fight.
(I was never injured; these were no black powers.)
A smile like my child-photos' tilts down shyly
In search of, ashamed of innocence, too fleshy;
The black face tilts up to police-lights—suspect
And corpse linked subtly as brothers, newsprint gray,
As if one chose . . . My father does: "the victim,
A benevolent student. . . ." But if purity of heart
Is to will one thing, *that* face makes claims: its bones
Float high on a singular beauty—as, say, one
For one, one for the shared, blurred guilt of all.
My parents, tired of aesthetic politics, point
Their lesson. The grim clippings arrive in packets.
They are "sick" that they mistook the shot for a backfire.
My father went out, ill, on a quick May night
"To see the spot where trees cast a dense shadow."
Blackness lay folded, focused. Above, the quiet windows
Looked straight into other windows, crenellations
Of the glass house I was brought to . . . the clue streaming
On your bent back, Daddy . . . tender, self-baffled light.

Dabney Stuart

MAKING LOVE

The times I have turned this key
Asking *Who's there?*
Entering the echo

Mobs of desire
Throning my name
Her clothes floating my fingers

I planted myself in the great rooms
Dispersing those voices

I served
 denying
No hazard
Neither the loud nipple
Nor the shrewd thigh
Nor the place itself
Mothering

Was it to come here
I scrapped the billboards?
Tunneled beneath textbooks?
Was it to lose my head
This way
I starved my clichés?
Is this no different
From that other boneyard?

What grows What grows
On the way to itself?

Who's there?
Does any man fit
These spaces
Opening

The orient darkness

Keeping the flesh going

Roland Flint

HEADS OF THE CHILDREN

"If a son shall ask bread of any of you. . . ."

Father your voice was a fist
to slam my stomach shut
to start me from sleep like a rat,
you were the right and righteous anger,
your voice made me believe
in God in the Devil.

When we meet now, forty and seventy,
you are apologetically quiet,
you put your arms around me
and I know you mean it.
We are both old men.

But I can only remember
being held by you during beatings,
which were not often but terrible,
and always worse, before them,
the fanatical white in your shouting.
I know, now, you didn't mean it.

But listen to me—
I'm doing the same thing
to my small son.
If my voice said what I mean
he could sleep all night in its branches,
but I hear your outrage in me,
over nothing, a bare lie, or nothing,
and I see him cower for the storm cellar,
just like me, his knuckles white with my yelling.
Father—I love you.
Jesus Christ, where does it end?

Linda Allardt

BUSH

Burn, damn you! we planted you, bush, to burn
with thunderous light, burn unconsumed
with the light of roots drunk on oil-rich mud,
the wick of speech from the burning ground, seep
of struck rock. We have come upon the unheard
smouldering of rotted chestnuts in the hedgerow,
followed the inchworm fire beat out in the grass,
the pillar of smoke that spoke a barn burning—
the common smudge of decay is not the word
we wait for! Your trunk's too green to catch,
your broken branch too dead to talk in the blaze.
Mocking, in fall your leaves break into red,
in spring your kindling blooms—we do not grasp
the speech of the country. Conflagration's our tongue,
we'll try to make any lumber talk,
ravel out our woods like Twelfth Night trees,
ignite a candle shoved in a bale of straw,
question a tenement with oil-soaked rags,
a saffron-robed man drenched and lighted,
but these burn down to ash without revealing
the secrets of the resistance to our persuasion.

Jay Meek

MORE WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD

Sarah Good to Judge Noyes, Salem, 1692: "I am no more
a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my
life, God will give you blood to drink."

We say they began it those monstrous children
thrashing in the kitchen with the pupils gone
from their eyes and their eyes grey as clams
they are rolling across the floor and barking

at her Tituba their black mammy mouths lungs
crying as if their stomachs would whelp so he
father opens the door and what could he think
thinking this is wrong I hear the yipe of sin
it's in them like worms so what could he tell
his parishes that his daughters were afflicted
not only with sin and witchery but imagination
which was worse so he didn't and they said yes
yes it certainly was with that same conviction
as that which they cherished after the trials
seeing the graves the men ground up like meal
the women burned like cattails dipped in oil
and put to fire saying yes this certainly was
because the children were better now or less
afflicted or less publicly so with the aging
the landless purged and buried how many died
fourteen nineteen and the children older now
more stable saintly with the town finally let
of its blood and so it was ended the children
sitting at their desks reading the holy pages
as if they hadn't moved so who could say this
who could say anything had changed after this
except that the barking stopped and so Tituba
the slave-nurse of their children went on too
leaning over the hearth moving the kettles up
and back across the fire stirring and looking
into the fire who was brought here not by her
own choice from Barbados but here nonetheless
who went each day to the trials and spoke out
against any man and who now shuttled her pots
back and forth as though they were iron links
clanging them in something like curt splendor
not as though she'd been traded not for a keg
of rum no it was how she moved in her kitchen
clanging them on the table with an abruptness
that might have passed for ownership of those
pots of her room that house of the whole town
now serving him that corpuscular trials-judge
serving him what recipe no one will ever know
nor even if she served him standing over him

after it she who brought the secret with her
locked in a slaver who made little tea-cakes
from jimson weed and drool of sheep and gave
them to her charges those monstrous children
whose barking sent the milk herds off to sea
and so she came again moving from her pantry
like a frigate over calm sea and served him
who held up with his fingers the cakes he bit
like coins and was it she or Goody Good or age
or chance or his bad blood that vollied on him
broadside with its spells compelling his eyes
to pulse like testicles intestines pump in warm
disruption until the blood undeniable and free
spewed from his lips like the river of the sea.

Edward Lueders

FOX

Old mahogany stand-up clock above the mantel
Over the cold stone hearth, ticking through
The house its mindless, humpbacked meter,
Labored and uphill, its heavy, senseless
Pendulum pushing the morning into day,
The daylight toward inevitable dusk.

I move deliberately to the window toward
The trees, the lake, the light. A fox,
Right there, is moving even as I see him,
His sense somehow attesting me. Lovely
In his fur and supple going, tail a plume
Of flashing red, he scuttles through the grass.

I hold my breath. His brilliant body smooths
Around a quickened heartbeat as he glides
Away, then lengthens into larger rhythms
As he lollops to the bend and out of sight.
The mantel clock returns to fill the room.
I study the reflection in the window glass.

Miller Williams

A TOAST TO FLOYD COLLINS

To Mitzi Mayfair
To Jesus Christ Man of a Thousand Faces
To Len Davidovich Trotsky
To Nicanor Parra

To whoever dies tonight in New Orleans
To Operator 7 in Kansas City

To the sound of a car crossing a wooden bridge
To the Unified Field Theory
To the Key of F

And while I'm at it
A toast to Jim Beam
To all the ice cubes thereunto appertaining
To Becky knitting
A silver cat asleep in her lap
And the sun going down

Which is the explanation for everything

Laura Jensen

TANTRUM

Nothing likes to pay.
Trees do not like to pay.
Wind beats the flowers
from black branches.
It never hears the cries of "Mine!"
It blows the day apart
and already the past is restless.
Now the night is simultaneously

new and used. In the dark
cats plan their movements,
but slip away when
shouts take passengers
into the terrifying air.
The body takes the throat
like an enemy tower.

At the end of the tunnel
the moon sees me crippled
and the sun sees me horribly deformed.
There has been hysteria
shaking the leaves of the willow.
From far off I hear you be
as hail rattles on a board fence
as the telephone wires
take the snow to be a mountain.

Gary Gildner

Two Poems

THEY HAVE TURNED THE CHURCH WHERE I ATE GOD

They have turned the church where I ate God
and tried to love Him into a gym

where as an altar boy I poured water and wine
into the pastor's cup, smelling the snuff
under his lip on an empty stomach

where I kept the wafer away from my teeth
thinking I could die straight to the stars
or wherever it was He floated warm and far

where I swung the censer at Benedictions to the Virgin
praying to better my jump shot from the corner
praying to avoid the dark occasions of sin

where on Fridays in cassock and Windsor knot and flannel pants
I followed Christ to His dogwood cross
breathing a girl's skin as I passed, and another's
trying less and less to dismiss them

where I confessed my petty thefts and unclean dreams
promising never again, already knowing
I would be back flushed with desire and shame

where I stood before couples scrubbed and stiff
speaking their vows, some so hard at prayer
I doubted they could go naked, some so shiny
I knew they already did it and grinned like a fool

where I stood before caskets flanked by thick candles
handing the priest the holy water
feeling the rain trickle down to my face
hearing the worms gnaw in the satin and grinding my teeth

where once a mother ran swooning to a small white box
and refused to let go calling God a liar screaming
to blow breath back in her baby's lungs

They have turned the church where I ate God
into a gym with a stage

where sophomores cross themselves before stepping
on soapboxes for the American Legion
citizenship prize
just as I crossed myself before every crucial free throw
every dream to be good

where on Friday afternoons in the wings
janitors gather to shuffle the deck
or tell what they found in a boy's locker wrapped in foil
or in a girl's love letter composed like maidenhair

where I can imagine pimpled Hamlets
trying to catch chunky Gertrudes at lies
no one believes in except the beaming parents

They have turned the church where I ate God
and tried to love Him into a gym with a stage
where now in my thirty-fourth year I stop
and bend my knee
to that suffering and joy I lost, that play
of pure confusion at His feet.

THE CLOSET

After they opened the new church
the small cross came down
from the sanctuary in the old one
and went in a closet with odds and ends,
with bent or mateless candlesticks,
with a string of pearls a Puerto Rican
lady forced on the pastor
for taking away a sin he couldn't
figure heads or tails of, with angel hair
too ratty for the crib,
with a punctured basket-
ball, with a roll
of unused tickets to the Summer Festival
at which mothers, blushing,
hustled Sloppy Joes
and the Assistant Pastor rattled
dice for Lucky Strikes,
with a laminated prayer
card in Latin,
with a handout advertising
Dunn's Funeral Home,
with a pair of reading glasses,
with a ripped galosh,
with a tarnished holy water shaker,
with a polka dot clip-on bow tie,
with a postcard showing downtown Wichita
and a scrawl saying "Hi Father! Buzz & Rita,"
with a cardboard pumpkin
and a baby's pink teething ring.

YOU CAN'T EAT POETRY

This poem will cost you.
 It will not register Black voters in Georgia.
 It will not wash oil from ducks.
 This poem will starve the big-bellied babies
 in Angola, if they send it.
 It . . . will . . . not . . . get . . . off . . . the . . . page
 To convince the President
 that loaded guns are dangerous
 and should be kept out of the hands
 of infants and senile demagogues.
 This poem will not feel around under your dress
 down by the lake. It will not be generous
 with its time, nor forgive. It can't be
 warmed up at midnight after the skating
 nor charm the miser out of his hole
 nor proclaim amnesty. It's words,
 God damn it, it's words.

THE MINUTES OF THE FACULTY SENATE MEETING

The minutes of the Faculty Senate Meeting
 are heavier than a collected poems,
 longer than the Medicine Rite of the Winnebago,
 duller than the cylinder head decoking
 of an Aston Martin.

They fall on the desk
 like angry hand meat, whup!
 Or All-Leaves-In-One,
 hitting the senses with the white stone of winter.

The cuttlefish, trying to hide its position,
 looses a cloud of ink.

GETTING OUT OF PUBLIC OFFICE

He wants to die.
 He can't carry the country any farther,
 a knapsack full of dwarf stars,
 so he climbs up to jump.
 He rises.
 How can America do this to me?
 Things can grow so heavy
 they fall through a hole
 and change signs:
 Eats become Vomit, shoes moo,
 cars return to Detroit,
 demanding a pass to the ore.
 And the moon, where he comes to rest,
 is a white eyelid
 at the bottom of the well.

from AFFECTION FOR MACHINERY

How clearly a spoon must think of its duties.
 It hoists your soup and sings of coupons in a clear treble.
 It shakes off your saliva
 and lies down in the drawer with its brothers and sisters,
 amid some danger in that black alley
 with those con knives and mutton forkers.

Poor fist cup, water leaks from every knuckle.
 If you ever fill that mouth up there,
 it all drains out, now and later.

Poor brain with so many trains out in the midwest,
 rushing toward stalled school buses, when you sleep,
 your dreams are the fat sparks from boiling soup.

The spoon dreams
 like a metal column,
 a star throat, a mercury cadenza,
 staring into the dense universe with a silver eye.

THE UNCLES

They came at Easter
in early yeast-time
to bless bread and pregnant women
proclaim the river fish full
strike the nails of ice
from the five yews

They told of nights
when water spun in the old bed
and the Thing-That-Reckoned
sat in the grove of aspen
thumbing testaments

I am Ham the Elder
with plans for a water bridge
from the Zee Estuary
to the Sahara. When it sings
rushing blue overhead
I'll change *this* line . . .
falling . . .

I am Luke the younger
I invented women with *this*
turning on the spit
until they cry *uncle*
King me, I made
a successful jump

They said you will hate the dirt
where the plow hangs
in the rootsnarl and stones
You will hate your face leather
and the thick joints
you will hate the bread

I brought you something
from the city
that never closes its eyes
two days to find out
what weather it is
wind it up and it will open its ears.

Help me say my name, nephew
It's brown and stiff
I can't cough it up
It sticks to my holes
Call me Uncle Peanut Butter

I was hired to name car colors
Biblical Black or Testament Tuxedo
Frail Lemon, Aspirin Avocado
Vomit Vermillion, Plurple
They forwarded my mail

You'll always wonder what Uncles do
what wet caves they hang in
what shaky branch they launch from
what Aunty-in-kitchen-corner
they fall on in the hard time

Gather around, the Uncles are unpacking
Pants are in their stride
Dirty shirts french their cuffs

Gather near, the Uncles are packing
Black suits lie in state
Socks roll up and play dead
The ties that bind are bound
Paisley chaps for Uncle Wag

About Our Contributors

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