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Poetry Anthology

Volume 2



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Contents

Copyright & Contact Information	6
Welcome	7
Malama MacNeil <i>The Book of Fi</i>	8
Diagnosis	9
Lamentation.....	10
K.M.	11
Dementia.....	12
Medical Transport (Empirical Trial)	13
Untitled I.....	14
Blues for Fi.....	15
for H.	16
Untitled II	17
Untitled III	18
Judith L. Wyatt <i>Mother Lode</i>	19
A Picnic at the End of Time	20
Mother Lode.....	21
Hearing the News.....	23
Resurrection	24
Three Days Before You Die.....	25
When You Stopped.....	26
The Words	27
The Workshop.....	29
The Telling	31
Lament.....	33
The Work of Grief	34
Breakdowns.....	36
Goodbye	37
Barney F. McClelland <i>18 Poems</i>	38
The Ninth Commandment.....	39
Kaleidoscope	40
Nomenclature	41
Soundtrack.....	42
Geographica	43
Calls After Midnight.....	44
Crabapples	45
Caoineadh Bhriáin	47
In the Field of My Heart.....	48
Toíreasa, ‘A Chara	49
A Lenten Prayer	50
To My Daughter, Katie, at the Feis	51
Diagnosed Autistic.....	52
Forgotten.....	53
A Long and Careful Letter	54
Lines Written in Late Winter	55
Revenant.....	56
Rince na Bhadb (Dance of the Furies).....	57
Sine*	59
Sine, Mo Mhuirín*.....	60
Cassidy Rowe <i>18 Poems</i>	61
Blue Monday	62
Winter	63
Wildflowers.....	64
Nona.....	65

Act One.....	66
Route 31.....	67
Spring.....	68
Shade.....	69
The Passing	70
Seconds Before Night.....	71
Red Comfort & Sangria.....	72
The Stray Thought	73
Freeing the Shaman	74
Cats Catch What Cats Can	75
Spinning.....	76
Dreams.....	77
America	78
Bespectacled Jesters.....	79
Janet Best 25 <i>Poems</i>	80
Into the Warmth	81
Action:	82
Angels on my walk	83
Lady Girl - Woman Child	84
On Jordan Pond.....	85
Alien Nation	86
Applesauce	87
Celestial Messenger.....	88
My Beekeeper in Sonoma	89
Grandma, are you there?.....	90
Change.....	91
Gemini	92
Hell.....	93
Erected in 1924, by Jack Williby.....	94
Lady Finger	95
The Best Medicine Has Laughter Written All Over It	96
Fall Leaves	97
The Classroom	98
Lost in 1969.....	99
Standing Still.....	100
Sunlight to Heal	102
This is I.	103
Tulips	104
Web.....	105
River Thames	106
Rebecca Ingalls 22 <i>Poems</i>	107
the somebody cross.....	108
lunacy.....	109
station g.....	110
ain't no mountain	111
5pm	112
curricule.....	113
(from a weekend in ny).....	114
nurse...her...he	115
constituted, albeit loosely	116
blue.....	117
on the turbulent arch between days.....	118
of water and land.....	119
morning in boston	120
quick resolve	121
after a stale good bye	122

andrew	123
wreak.....	124
should be in bed by now	125
on being a grown-up boy.....	126
below ground.....	127
jane.....	128
Tom Flynn <i>17 Poems</i>	129
Speechless	130
Bitter Scents	131
Silent Exit.....	132
Idle Passion	133
Steel Barriers	134
Father's Manic Departures.....	135
Two Days Growth.....	136
Holding My Own	137
Somewhere Up North	138
Green Beans	140
Home Patterns	142
Flannel, Silk, or Cotton.....	143
Wet Fire	144
Night Blooms	145
Oh Lover.....	146
Shock Waves.....	147
Playing Hardball	148
Victory Lee Schouten <i>23 Poems</i>	149
Wily Coyote in the Land of Love	150
Voyeurs.....	151
Down on First.....	152
Shaking the Evil Eye	153
Adjustments.....	154
Breaking Spells	155
Stronger in the Broken Places	156
Listen to the Grandmothers	157
The Buddha in Montana	158
Watching.....	159
Live Girls.....	160
Dancing with Ma.....	162
Wolf Love.....	163
We All Fall Down.....	164
Mock Orange Grows Wild	165
Losing Jesse.....	166
The Middle Way	167
Bed Trilogy.....	168
The Butterfly Effect in Love	169
Seeing Mr. Olson	170
Prices.....	171
Change in the Weather	172
Let It Ride.....	173
Janet I. Buck <i>18 Poems</i>	174
That Nitro Pill	175
Marrow Marrow	176
Dog Hair	177
Ivory Keys	178
Cold Crepes.....	179
November 9 th	180
The Orphan.....	181

Pocket Change.....	182
Brussels Sprouts.....	183
The Laundromat.....	184
Paper Doves.....	185
Chimera	186
Ice & Worry	187
Quiet Cooks.....	188
Purpose Flames	189
The Hurried Poem.....	190
The Sushi Bar	191
KotaPress Menu of Service	192
Appetizers.....	192
Soup	193
Entrees	194
KotaPress Web Design	195
Guidelines for Submission.....	196
Dedication.....	197

*As always, this KotaPress work
is dedicated to Dakota Jones
born & died March 11, 1999*

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KotaPress Poetry Anthology

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KotaPress, established in 1999, is dedicated to providing publication voice to poets around the world through print and Internet mediums. We welcome email submissions for both our online *KotaPress Poetry Journal* as well as our eBook Anthologies resulting from annual contests. Full guidelines for both Journal ezine and Anthology Contests provided at www.KotaPress.com in the Poetry Journal.

Panel Judges

A special thanks to Tim, Carla, Dana, Elisabeth, and Heidi

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WELCOME

Welcome to another edition of our KotaPress Poetry Anthology. I'm sure you've noticed by now that the Anthology has taken on a new, ebook format. It's a very exciting venture for us here at KotaPress to be bringing you new technologies in our Anthology books. This is Volume 2 of the Anthology, and it's derived from the contest we held early in 2001. The judging was difficult this time around as the quality of work we are seeing keeps getting better and better. It was very difficult for our judges to pick only the 9 winners you see here!

This collection is, to me, stunning once again. It overwhelms me that so many talented writers have come to KotaPress and trusted us with their creations. This issue especially, I am grateful to the 9 authors here. The Anthology Contest and this resulting book underwent many changes, evolutions, and delays throughout production. And yet, the authors here were patient, understanding, and supportive of the positive outcome of seeing their works represented by KotaPress in this way. Their graciousness humbles me. Their talents delight me.

That said, we are honored to present Malama MacNeil, Judith L. Wyatt, Barney F. McClelland, Cassidy Rowe, Janet Best, Rebecca Ingalls, Tom Flynn, Victory Lee Schouten, and Janet I. Buck for your reading pleasure. Enjoy!

Miracles to you,

Kara L.C. Jones
Editor-In-Chief

MALAMA MACNEIL

The Book of Fi

Author Biography

I am a native Californian, though I lived five years in community on the south fork of the Shenandoah River in Virginia, and four years in Kailua (Oahu), Hawaii. I've been married thirty years to Hasan; we have five adult children and live now in Chico, California, where I care for our middle daughter, Fiona, do hands-on healing work, and practice taijiquan. I am currently developing a one-woman performance piece on the theme of the transformative work of grieving which blends poetry, narrative, movement, and exposition. I welcome responses. You can reach me at cloudhands@pacbell.net

Diagnosis

they have drawn a line
across our book of days now
taken this child's young life
boldly, with finality,
inked out the days beyond
some point in time
as yet unfixed will be
her last

they have drawn their line
across our book of days
boldly with finality, said
here she will begin to fail
here lose all sight
or sense
move no more nor sing
nor care
as vision fades
confusion grows
fits take her
and the final darkness closes in

like the inking out of pages
on our calendar
of days

Lamentation

hardly past knowing
and already you will leave us
hardly learned
your life unlearns itself
unwinds, unravels, disengages
and already I see you are forgetting
making ready your departure
it will not wait
fragile, young and blind
my daughter
your world dims
while you burn clear
rocking, smiling, and
you call
bird-like
hands clasping and unclasping
hold the edge of night

yes I can turn on the light
(but I can't stop the dark)
I can take your hand
(but I can't hold you here)
and I can't stop the rain from falling
can't stop the rain
can't stop the night
can't stop my tears
from falling

K.M.

he speaks of shattered dreams
as if 'like fine crystal'
dreams had substance
tangible, rigid, fixed in time and space
like great sheets high rising
rainbowed glass
mirrors hand held
prism bars
the eggshell of the cosmos
shimmering with starlight
brittle as moonstone
sheer as ice
and
loss,
earthquaker,
shatterer of dreams

but
mine are more fluid
ephemeral bonds
made of the scent of rain on the wind
the sound of a young girl's laughter
the light in her eyes
birdsong at dawn
thunder in the buttes
the flash of a thousand geese winging north
the throb of shorebreak surf
the wild joy of running
the milky smell of babies sleeping
the warmth of my hand in another's

and loss comes subtly,
dimming the light
draining color
robbing sense
destroying balance
'til we fall
first numb, then screaming
plunge, knowing rage
to taste despair and
find extinction
the end of dreams
to wake
to life
and hope
and finally
to love

Sacramento: 1/18/90

Dementia

all I have for you is prayer
starlight singing in the bone
empty-handed, I come to give you comfort
to wish for you the carelessness of sleep

fair one,
that prayer for you should be a blessing,
and blessing, thanks,
I am here, gathering the fullness
sunk to the fixed point of attention
watching you, watching the chaos
your mind
a distant fitful wind

right here in this moment, when I
look to you to answer
knowing you cannot
seeing intention
and your feeble movement toward my hand
may mean you like this stroking
right here in this moment
these tears may mean I care
am moved to reach to you across this silence
here, in this moment when
all I have for you is prayer

Medical Transport (Empirical Trial)

setting out this morning -
we travel into the glowing morning,
dawn like a caress brushes lunar hills;
the green of new rice
penetrates like a scent,
the odor of promise.
My lover beside me, my children's father
sings softly with the dashboard Coltrane sax
surprised, he says, such sounds
will not issue from his mouth.
I hold anger like a hammer in my hands,
waiting to strike.

We travel into the morning
carrying our cargo of pain.
Behind us, our daughter, slowly dying,
in great distress when wakeful,
snores her drugged sleep.
The sour smell of her clings like cobwebs to my skin.

At her making
while he crooned "baby, baby,..."
conjured into being
contained within our passion,
rooted in our union
buried at the kernel of our joy
this chaos was,
this ruin,
breaking through.

Now
driving to doctors
who have no cure and little comfort
we pass houses in new paint -
the ravages of termites, rust or mildew hidden -
the road before us is new asphalt,
with new lines painted,
and behind, just there beyond my shoulder,
comes the undoing.

Untitled I

what garments
strange with fear
we wrap ourselves in
barely free of swaddling and
life stretches us
unfolds our limbs to
take our hands to
find our feet
clears vision
tunes our hearing
opens wide the sense of smell
to learn the kindred scents:
perfume of safety/ stench of pain
so to us all

do we recoil
to find ourselves unmoved
grounded in the matter
survive
inturning
numbing suffocation of our own
brief will
take on the armor of the senseless
need to please, to bargain
or beguile
and always wait our
moment of revenge
we shake with rage the rags of
shredded hope
taste blood - our own -
hot bitter blood
brought on by screaming
or the biting back of hate
and wrap ourselves in binding
shroudlike fear
fold up, cave in, expire
lest we breath again
one single song of courage
or we dream a dance
to be

Blues for Fi

Ho, girl!
you be laughin' again
lookin' off into that space
somewhere over all our heads
an' you be laughin'
like you got some private joke
nonna us git in on
Ho, girl!
we be listenin' ta the blues
an' there you sit with that dreamy smile
we be listenin' ta the blues an' you know
it aint no joke, girl
this here is serious!
you there, sittin' an' rockin'
back an' forth
listenin' ta the blues
smilin' at that private place you go to
makin' lightta all this
makin' light of it

you be jus' passin' through, girl
damn! we hate ta see you go
with your head cocked off to one side
like you hear some secret whistle in the night
some train ta somewhere else
jus' pack your bags an' take on outta here
one night
makin' lightta all this
jus' shake it off your shoes
an' lightta all this,
fly on outta here

well, be gone then, girl
you got to go
swingin' in your corner
you got yourself ta hol' onto
you got your self
and my heart, girl,
take care

for H.

(after reading Corinne Edwards' Low Pain Threshold)

I woke this morning
in a panic
before dawn
afraid to move
I could find my courage
with neither hand
duty the motive
I rose to wake children
cook oatmeal
slice oranges with precision
I brushed one's hair
found books for another
lingered in good-bye hugs
made tea
you
found me there
at the kitchen table
in tears over
poems of loss

*in a world which contains
the possibility
of
annihilation
the holocaust
the slow decline
the death of mothers
the loss of sons
fear
is not
unreasonable*

you offered me
the comfort of your arms
brought me
to your bed

*so long as there is
passion in the daylight
love binding to the core
union possible
we are perhaps
still
vulnerable
perhaps still
liable
to
hope*

Untitled II

If not redemption
to what will poems bring us?
If not the still point of poise
our hearts opened
our sacrificial grief like incense rising,
our need for certainty offered at the altar
in perpetual act of atonement,
if in the moment of stark truth spoken
in words as sure as smoke
we burn away despair
and incandescent, mark ourselves for mercy
to what (our chrysalis dreams being spent)
might we wake
but grace?

Untitled III

Because of her
I learn what is essential
feel the earth through my feet
find the center of gravity
because of her
I know that rivers run deep
that the stars are innumerable
that time hangs in the balance
that to look long is to love
to listen is to know
that we are none of us all
or only what we seem

JUDITH L. WYATT
Mother Lode

(A 13 Poem Suite)

Author Biography

Judith is a psychotherapist practicing in San Francisco, CA. Her poetry has appeared in Portland Review, Midwest Poetry Review, American Poetry Monthly, The Spoon River Poetry Review, Rio Grande Review and elsewhere. She is co-author of Work Abuse: How to Recognize and Survive It.

A Picnic at the End of Time

She sits cross-legged in the wind,
her cloth spread with chicken and fruit,
grass dotted by toddlers, dogs, kites.
The lake slinks past the dock,
pewter under the gathering storm,
a giant animal heaving toward extinction,
skin sleek and silk as money.

The book in her lap says
Not by Fire But by Ice.
She wonders to the dandelions,
how will we pay the price?
Will this picnic green go
under acre-high snow?
Will dream families drown
on the flooding plains,
300-mile an hour gusts
devour the whole food chain
from lilac bushes to children? Will we

fall into lightning cracks,
the earth's back finally
breaking under our weight,
and land in lava, the way
ants fall in a cup?
Will a meteor slice
grass, clover and rock
off into space
like a wedge of watermelon? And will our souls
wag sperm tails
up galaxy avenues,
fleshed into new devotion?

The rain's suspended in sky,
rolling and welling,
while she holds
water, green, and wind
like an ancient vase
in her fingers' grease
(oh delicate dust)
as she sits waiting.

Mother Lode

The flower of your illness opens
petal by petal.
One month your stomach swells in a vise;
the next month food won't stay down.
The basket of pain fills
with nowhere to rest it.
Daily I call you long distance
to help balance the weight.
We stagger under it as
the flesh runs off your face,
the deathmask winking underneath,
and our arms grow ropy from
holding it up.

I come to visit
and watch you sleeping upright
on the white loveseat,
your favorite spot by the picture window,
your mouth hanging slack
in the skull mountain.
It seems invisible fingers
are peeling and sculpting you as
I sit paralyzed. It seems
that each new ache
descends in the livingroom like shears,
clipping pretenses,
layers of niceties,
your hair and your laughter falling
secretly as petals.

The worst is when your eyes look up,
wounded does,
and that Russian baby whose father
dropped her in the forest as he
fell, shot through the heart,
begs through them, dumb and stricken,
for me to pick her up.

Wasting, yet so strong, will you
consume me at last,
my flesh trembling to
feed you, Mother, as you
stretch heavy arms to me over
decades, the dreams and toil
evaporating off your cheekbones.

Chicken soup fragrance
rises in the old apartment.
A shy girl catches the streetcar
with pennies and cucumber sandwiches,
addressing envelopes, fifteen dollars a week,
till a man full of words and temper
sweeps her up,
his mind cramped by the ghetto,
but pushing out like a fist, a Bonzai tree
raving and lyrical.
Daddy lit you like a lantern,
climbing stairs to the concerts by his side,
cherishing babies, running to keep up
his courage, his wages, match

to his stubborn fire.

And you bore me to carry you
as you carried Grandma to her grave,
Olympic medal wanderers,
you rocking across the Atlantic,
me hitching up superhighways,
flying Chagall-like over the ashes,
bearing a somber glow
to light dark halls,
inventing new homes
out of yesterday's loss.
"Daughters are special," you say to me as we
cry with each other's weakness
and strength in our arms,
oh, wagon trains of hot coal hearts
burning each other up.

Hearing the News

When the doctor calls with the news
you have only weeks to live,
I feel my body gear up like an astronaut
hunkering down,
suited with my own gravity and fuel
to withstand propulsion into
a screaming void.
This hard body goes to the bank, does
laundry, packs, and answers the phone
while somewhere inside
the molecules of the smooth
heart muscle,
a tiny me pounds, stripped cold and wet,
on a cross made of the words "not yet"
and "no."

I form my pain in an arrow toward the day
I lift off and fly to you.
I cling to anticipating
the texture of our embrace
when I come through your door,
the condemned man's right to gluttony
at the last meal.
When the plane takes off, as always, I feel the jets
fill with the loud power to crush
the body's will, and pull
the soul outward, rushing, rushing
to pry us from earth.

Cut loose and plunging into
erasing blue light,
I look down on my life, the hills
I love, now mere gold mounds,
the pearl houses and beetle cars,
and all the important hands and words
dropping like petals out of sight.
My headset, my book, irrelevant in my lap,
I wrap my urge to you around
my shivering heart hurtling through space
like hands in a gust cupped around a flame
so it won't go out,
whispering to myself
over and over your name.

Resurrection

You move into your dying like
a ship passing through locks.
Stunned, I watch from the shore
following you down,
linked by mysterious radar,
my stomach, my sleeplessness, signaling
each level drop.

One day you can't rise from the bath
even with our arms locked around your middle.
Bea holds you while I move your swollen legs
with my hands, one by one, out of the peach tub.
You land crying on the toilet seat.
Then you can't keep down even
the bland Cream of Wheat or chicken broth.
The jello lapses to spoonfuls.
We feed you ice chips in hundreds as you begin
that thick liquid cough
that tells us the ocean is rising
up inside you to meet
your final fall.

Barnacle, I track your breath to breathe.
I crouch on the little brown footstool next to your white sofa
leaning into you, whispering in your ear,
my hands adjusting, cradling,
listening from a depth I never knew I had.
Is it a cellular partnership or psychic
that carries me on my own drop by your side?
As your body sheds skin after skin
a more translucent you peeks through your chiseled face,
the you I've hungered for behind your rage
all these years. Now that you've given up
everything but love,
she swims out in dark light,
a fire in your eyes blinding as flurried wings
and palpable as lips, kissing me as you look,
a homing light calling to me
with the sure joy of the dove after flood.

So I am torn with you, mourner and celebrant,
your prophet and your bride,
faithfully dripping the morphine under your tongue
to slow the ragged rattle in your chest,
crooning old songs to you with each new sun,
and sinking with you, in your arms at last.

Three Days Before You Die

I keep seeing you
as Bea and I are lifting you onto the commode,
her thick Black arms hoisting you from the white sofa,
wrapped like a guardian angel around your
swollen belly in the rose shift,
your bloated legs teetering,
no longer yours,
a colonized territory.
My small pale hand supports your right arm
still with its perfect red nails,
"the only part of me that hasn't changed," you said,
still my mother's hand.

We sit you carefully on the white plastic seat
in the livingroom, the big window
high over harbor and sky.
You are ashamed, though no one else can see.
I stand beside you stroking your bird's neck,
frail and sharp to touch,
stroking the tiny down still soft on your cheek,
your head against my chest.

I see us three poised there
like your favorites: Degas' dancers, Monet's spring days,
or three washerwomen,
the warm soft tones and the transcendent curves
carrying them to grace without their knowing.
The pillow behind your back,
Bea stands before you splashing a cloth in water
and letting it drip, over and over again,
the sight and sound supposed to
help you let go. She murmurs
encouraging words.
And I see my back
curled over you,
your head leaning on me,
my hand cupping it gently to my breast,
cypress trees bowing in wind,
my fingers trembling with this bond of pain
and ecstasy,
shaken to find here
a final nest.

When You Stopped

I am called from the phone because
there's been a sudden change,
a quickening of your plunge.
Now we hang suspended at the sofa's edge,
ludicrously paralyzed
around your violence.
There is a bucking bronco in your lungs,
there is a blast furnace crackling,
a jet revving for takeoff,
an inside hurricane
blowing you to bits.
You cry, "Oh, God, oh, God!"
We watch transfixed as the model T of you
rattles and gurgles,
thinking - can this go on? -
wanting it to end,

and then it stops. We all
lean forward toward your
open mouth, waiting
to see if the breath
will start again.
Your stillness spreads like ink.
We blot it up blank as
sponges, can't yet believe
the complex hurdles we've leaped
in tandem have ended so
abruptly, leaving us
staggering in midair.

The silence thickens to ether. Then
I see the blue around your fingernails,
my hand lifting yours, warm
but limp now.
I drop it, as
the futility of touching you
guts me like a stunned
rabbit. Now the tears
fall from the walls of face
like suicides. "Oh, Mama,
go with the light!" I shout,
believing with all my might,
putting my head on your
belly, putting your hands
on my hair,
and then the spell breaks, the air
rushing back into us
with bitter relief
as we breathe for ourselves alone again
in the empty room.

The Words

Yours was not the leaden dying
where the air grows thick with the unsaid,
you lying, us sitting like stones, or the
panels of stained glass window
separated by heavy
black lines of silence.
You did your dying in a rippling pool,
surrounded by the commotion of
our comings and goings,
our noisy meals, sometimes plates on our knees
next to your sofa,
calling to each other, bringing you
vitamins, milkshakes, juice,
holding and cajoling you.
We fussed over you, hummingbirds
round a tropical orchid,
and you settled into us, cradling you
to oblivion.

You and I were never close-mouthed
for more than a strained hour.
We never stopped trying to show each other
the face behind the face
in spite of failure, and
we never gave up
wanting to see,
and each of us knew that, and held
the frustration, the other's mysterious
sadness, like a bird
trapped in a locked box,
but singing still, alive.
And when those mornings and nights
of your dying came,
I hurled myself into that last chance
with a sculptor's passion,
shaping and glazing moments ripe with words
that pushed themselves out of us
like babies desperate for birth.

They were astoundingly stupid words,
not quotable, because they lived
not in themselves but in the density
behind them, pulling fathomless
roots of the heart
out to the touch of light.

I said you held for me
all beautiful things of the world;
I'd never see them without you,
and you replied
I was to you the blooming of
some delicate flower - this corny
eloquence made fierce by being
torn shyly, in torture, from the throat
closed for years in shame, and the eyes
naked with forgiving
all those lost years.

One evening I whispered to you
my mystical conversion on a night

in summer when I felt
from head to toe the peopling of
all the black space between the stars
with sentient joy.
One morning I asked you
to hold in your arms the child
my uncle abused, and tell her you didn't blame her,
that she was pure.
And I asked you, non-believer, in case
we survived beyond this death,
would you meet me when I crossed over; you said
"I'll be waiting." All
these trite and simple words,
rituals of the tongue,
candles of the voice,
like blossoms scattered, like hands
giving and receiving
final vows.
We exchanged them as treasures
folded into our laps until
we were replete.
Gesticulating praise to the end,
we tracked sunsets and sunrises
over your lake,
followed the slippery moons.

Now when night shrinks me
out of the wooden world
into lamplight and the bandages
of memory,
I unpack these words like necklaces
or stickpins from your suits,
and feel them as I roll them in my
hands, back and forth, all these
jewels of the open sky,
deathless fruit.

The Workshop

I have come from dismembering your home
to attend a workshop for psychotherapists.
I stand in a carpeted hall with twenty others
learning to retake the children's bodies
that haunt us all,
a matter of psychomotor
development gone wrong.
A matter of tensing here, collapsing there
and lo and behold,
I hunch into the stubborn 3-year-old
straining to keep up with you,
the "no" crushed out of her by
your force of will.
Then I'm the 2-year-old, poised to run, a wall
of fear alerting her to
the nearness of you, her explorations reduced
to keeping your tide of need
from pulling her down.

Good girl, I follow instructions well,
when the job must be done.
Just as I emptied your closets,
so now I excavate these ancient shapes
hanging like rhinestone gowns in your zipper bags,
eloquent and hushed with frozen moves,
perfectly preserved.
Amazing after the bath of love
that soaked through your death
to find the monolith you,
the hatred, the hell,
still clinging to muscle and nerve,
still craving to tell.

You split me, a forked tongue
wrapped around dual truths
like your ruthless embrace.
I go to lunch stunned,
sit in a red upholstered booth
drinking coffee, your absence across from me,
vivacious, stirring your
sweet and low,
smoothing your lipstick with your pinkie,
full of the glow of a child,
excited, resilient,
a part you played
much easier than I
who watched, amused and longing,
tagged after you afraid.

I hold the two sets of us,
like porcelain scenes
off your end tables,
one in each hand.
I pay my bill and leave
the mints, toothpicks, your ghost
to move my sturdy, thin feet
along the Berkeley street,
and this is what I know:
the weasel, fear, skulking beneath your drive,
the flavor of my shattering in your paws,

the blindness of your
engine-driven love
mowing me like a hill, and all because
you wanted so much to give
what you had never had
or had and lost.

And this is what I carry in my bones:
the years I fought to free myself
at any cost,
and then the years I fought
and wrestled to meet your hunger and your sword
as equals, to hold and not to run,
and that I found the way
into a love with you
that would not kill,
and that I fought to love you
and I won.

The Telling

We chose our moments
or they chose us,
ripe and generous with
suspense, like cherries
bloating till they burst
anonymous to earth.
The moment to tell you,
long delayed, closed in
that April, the month of your birth,
known for its cruelty.

I came with my secret
held in reserve
to celebrate you still standing
against all odds.
Ragged and wrinkled from
chemo and radiation,
you gathered yourself
up like a fistful of cattails,
staunchly four foot ten,
erect in the rapids
and daring God.
At the glassy restaurant
I trembled for us both,
lifting our wine,
death stalking you thin and gray
in your red suit,
Caliban caged and pacing
under my pleated silk.

That night, the terror of telling
rose in my bed
like waves of heat in a desert,
slapping my cheeks.
Caught in the familiar
vise of competing pains,
I wanted to spare you mine, but the exiled beast
laboring in my bones
to breathe, came chilling my spine,
panicked to think of you drifting
forever out of reach
while she still shudders estranged
and dirty on the
ghetto blade of me,
never to find a home,
never to speak.

When I finally sat beside you I had to
force the words out, that this uncle
cracked open my 4-year-old body
and picked the meat out,
leaving the shell of my mind
splintered. I grew up hidden
before you all those years,
numb, half visible
and you were blind.

You put your hand to your chest,
your mouth a sprung trap, your eyes
riveted like black

stars of pain on mine.
Something shattered in the room, as though
my words had destroyed the atomic bonds
of the air we breathed, the shine
on the leaves of your perfect plants,
as though I had soiled
the very nap of the carpet,
the combed velvet,
and all would have to be
thrown out, along with me.

I was scared by the rapid beating of your heart,
but more by the fact that when you spoke,
with exhausted anguish
and confirming rage,
it failed to piece together
the looking glass I broke.

It was the breaking of an age, Mama,
the mirage you spun around us,
that glowing web
of dinners, vistas, music
by your strength of will,
to ride these things
skyward like storybook swans
beyond all ugliness and dread,
which, small and lost, I clung to tight
hoping your spells would erase
the stink and the bad.

We sat on the sofa shivering from shock,
your feet in my lap,
feeling the rot rewrite
our history, invade
our sanctuary as the dropping sun
left streaks across the lake.
The child I was
welled up
in gratitude and love
wanting to break the long suspended
egg of grief
finally on your breast,
but I could see white strain
circling your eyes
and pinching your face,
and felt the spiral that freed me
twisting toward your death,
the prodigal bird returning
too late to the ruptured nest.

Lament

The new year washes over me in
cold water, waves of the icy lake
you cherished. Your home
is sold and soon your furniture
will be removed, the horizon
receding away from
the embodied you, and I am free
to dump your things
and move around the world with new spurs and wings,
a raw and fledgling me. I'd be
scattered and thoughtless and silver as the fish
asleep in the frozen lake
moving through time without you, if I could take
hold of this present only, cross the line
into the young year that is now mine. I wish
I could transcend your suffering, your kiss,
and let them rest
and not feel it a crime.
But all I want to do
is run like a stubborn child up to the new sun's skirt
and try to pull it back and push it in the dirt
and keep it from moving me a single day
farther from the sound of your voice,
the blurring of your bones against my breast,
speeding so fast away.

The Work of Grief

I speak to you constantly.
I remember how you came to me where I sat
on the toilet seat crying
minutes after you died,
and circled me in a sphere of light,
palpable,
as close to arms as you could come,
just fresh from your body
which lay cooling on the sofa,
waiting like a sacred, broken doll
to be removed.

It was our last attempt at clinging,
to finish what never could be, the urge
to dive into each other
and lift each other's pain,
so glorious, so demented, the sacrifice
that blinds and illumines
the mother and the child.

In the prism of the bathroom
I leaned back held by the luxury of
you as light.
Wanting you never to leave,
I told you to go where you needed.
You left; but perversely
I speak to you
as though some essence of you
listens always, as I
walk to work, breathe asleep, brush my teeth,
behind the sealed partition dividing
your plane from mine.

It is, after all, so familiar
this separation, so like
the frustration of being alive
and gripped in the heady claws of
our generations,
rending us with their truths till we
are devoured, reaching
desperately past each other.

I wake before the alarm again.
In my dream you are split
in two, one faceless dying, the other
your laughing vital self, the you who could crack
a moment, opening to
the midst of darkness,
its pearl in your hands.
In the dream we have planned a trip;
I go to sleep and wake to my aunt
and my father, long lost, telling me
you are dead. The soundless scream
of the dreaming self wakes me the second time
in my winter cold room
groping to recover
from disbelief, so many
layers of me
struggling to waken to you
gone, the pearl

of that reality.

Breakdowns

Try to forgive it: the smell of stale cigarette
back then in the basement phone booth
of the dormitory,
you standing there counting
the nicks in the door,
the dime rooted to your hand,
ears ringing from pills, the hinged brain
swinging into sky,
your body floating till
a finger drifts down, you watch it
dialing the doctor,
wanting to live.

Remember, it happens to everyone,
this trailing away of hope
like a flimsy scarf. Remember
the pudgy rolls of the child,
receding telescope eyes,
shot at the family picnic, holding
a limp ball. Forgive
the smell of salami, hot grass,
aluminum chairs, familiar voices, shame.

Every moment's a deathbed,
candle burning in the brown room,
hair greasing pillow, the scapula
stark and fragile. Wings
flutter over the eyes,
rustle of leavetaking, heart
leaps off the branch,
while you remain
inching through sticky days.

This happens while you are reading the TV Guide,
waiting in silent crowds for your train,
peeling an orange at the kitchen sink.

Now raise your eyes to the hill out your window
full of night,
lit by houses in which bruised children dream,
women with layered aches drag upstairs,
men numb as shrapnel drink at TV screens. Forgive
all, and the proud shrieks
of teens in the church next door,
loosing their fledgling
blindness on the world.

Goodbye

Mountain bane, unattainable,
blurred by smoke and tears,
teach me to be stone,
some part of me,
to hold the meadow lake, its snaking grass,
the light glazed caramel trees,
in a place as cold and still
as the wild cape of your arms
surrounding the cycles of birth.

Make me a place
that never empties, never fills,
a place so old
it outlives ageless quarrels over forgotten bottles,
misplaced maps,
the rubbing wounds where our traps match
our love,
or almost; a place that will hold
like a good knot the threads of breeze and leaves,
the glow of gold on bronze ferns
and coral on your rock
at sunset as you fall
in folds and crevices like flesh
furry with trees, but keeping
your perfect shapes
when hungers waste us all to death,
embracing us still.

BARNEY F. MCCLELLAND

18 Poems

Author Biography

Barney has published numerous short stories, articles, and poems. These publications include Birmingham Poetry Review, Touchstone, Windsor Review, The Poetic Page, Forum, South Dakota Review, State Street Review, Pencil Press Quarterly, Zelo, Florida Magazine and others. In 1979 he was the recipient of the Mary Reid McBeth Memorial Award for Fiction. He currently works as a freelance writer in Cincinnati, Ohio and is the managing editor of An Cailleach Press.

The Ninth Commandment

For this, I traveled an hour through
snow and Christmas traffic –
Latte-sipping, graduate program poets
and an uncomfortable chair

An earnest young man stands,
delivers his vision of innocence.
A childhood peopled with grandfathers
hunting for arrowheads and fossils
in dry creek beds in Connecticut
or Kentucky – I can't remember which –
my attention taken by her, his girl.
Adoring, yet cool, in her smart girl glasses,
black hair wound tight as watch springs,
and those legs, poems in themselves, long enough
to hold your shoulders like a vise.

I ask myself why he isn't writing about her?

He now tells us he is a tree -
imagining his leafy fingers outstretched to the sky -
while I imagine mine
reaching under her blouse.
As he tells how his branches scrape the water,
her's scrape my back raw.
The wind sings to him,
She nearly breaks my eardrum with her screaming.
He tastes the summer rain,
I taste blood where she's bitten through my lower lip.

Now he's in a schoolroom
in Indiana or Illinois,
his obsession with geography brings
me back to earth and the question;
Why doesn't he write about her?
But, he will - someday -
the day she leaves him and every day after that
when she steps out of his vision of innocence and
into someone's a little less so.

Kaleidoscope

for Vanessa Lyman

There is a difference
Between refraction and reflection:
A difference between a May sky gone silver;
Shimmering with lighted water -
A screen from cloud to earth -
And, say, light bent and cracked
Into spectra by a broken windshield.

You insert your glass bead words,
Cut and beveled, leaded and stained,
Into paper tubes with mirrored phrases
Ground and polished to a lustrous sheen.
Inveigling us to view the constellation
You have wrought with the light
Cutting through your ravaged eyes.

Nomenclature

for Thomas Bihl

In the cold March rain,
The stopped-up gutter (a promise not kept)
Fills with water like a trough
While the wrens swoop in

Like cowboys slapping
Their dusters at the end of the long drive,
The railhead having been reached,
They prepare for town.

In from the bunkhouse
I've provided by not fixing the eaves,
(Another promise not kept)
They shed their winter grime.

Shrill and squabbling,
They preen, boast of thistle and the pleasures
To be found in painted
Girl wrens in town.

While staring at this small marvel
Created by my indolence,
The veterinary student -
With one eye on the leaf-clogged gutter -
Speaks *ex cathedra* cloaked
In the infallibility of the
Peterson's Field Guide to Eastern Birds;

"They're not wrens, they're sparrows."

She revels a little too much
In my inheritance of ignorance;
Granny's legacy of misnomers
And dubious etymologies -
A muddled lexicon of forty years.

Still, it makes a man think.

I called them wrens for decades
With no real harm done.
But I can't help but wonder about
The big words, by big, I mean important;
Words like *love* and *promises*, *sex* and *faith*,
Or that really big one - *death*.

Sometimes, I buckle under the weight of these words.
I tell you, boy, it makes a man think.

Soundtrack

Early Sunday morning,
clean-shirted and freshly shaven,
I walk through fog with her to mass.
The perfect backdrop
for this final scene of film noir
In grainy black and white.

There should be a film score,
a soundtrack for our lives,
providing an aural cue,
a foreshadowing to tell us;

"Stop. Pay attention. This is your last look."

Whether it be a melancholy violin solo or trumpet's blare
would be purely a matter of personal preference.

But, it would give us the time we need
to take in the smell of her hair,
notice the small white scar on her lip,
the look in her eyes as you make love
that tells you she has already left,
and won't be back until morning for her body.

Then again, the cacophony of oncology wards
might prove to be too much.
Airports, train stations, and ports -
the thousand other points of parting -
would grow to a deafening roar.

Perhaps it is best that we are left
to sit blinking in the silence
of a darkened theater;
hoping to recognize a name or two
among the credits flickering past.

Geographica

The sky over the Syrian desert
allows words like azure and lapis lazuli
to seem plausible, or, at least,
not so ridiculous as the Corinthian columns
rising from the empty wadis.

My travels confined mostly to sunless bogs;
the resting place of schizophrenic saints
and grasping landlords.
The stench of rotting gorse and bad religions
preserves us precious little.

But in the arid monochrome panorama
of the desert, nothing much changes.

I retreat to a garden of a single tree,
a respite against the solar assault, and
In that coolness, I imagine
resting my bedbug-bitten and scorpion-stung
body on the wall of the fountain.

My fair and freckled skin blistered
as buttered salmon left on the coals too long.
Dipping my hand in the fountain,
I flirt with dysentery
As I would with the green-eyed Kurdish girls
A few pages before.

The water splashes on my lips -
evaporating in the instant it lands,
while I dream of rain and red poppies
washing the hillsides.

Calls After Midnight

The ringing telephone
arcs across my dreamscape
like aerial flares
catching me, the errant sapper,
alone,
flatfooted,
in the minefield
that has become
you and I.

With yards to go before
I reach the darkened safety
of the tree line,
blinking in the phosphorescent
glare of
your voice, now
disembodied,
the plunger's found
under foot;

"Are you awake?"

Click.

I lie frozen,
mindful not to shiver
in my own sweat.

Any movement,
however slight,
can set the damned thing off.

Crabapples

for Wendy Molloy

We smoke our cigarettes
outside the bank, feet stinging
with standing in the snow.
Between the hurried drags
you recount a tale of a
faithless lover, feckless friend.
Wondering aloud what yet
the New Year might still bring.

Your wan coloring redolent
of winter and fatigue
complains of sleepless nights
brooding on betrayal's pain.
We light two more and walk,
exchanging recollections
of casual cruelties
inflicted upon our hearts.

Passing a crabapple tree,
we pause, gazing at a pair
of mated crows laboring to
free the ice-glazed, bitter fruit.
The she-crow swoops aground
to defend their wintry cache.
She caws, spreads ebon wings,
defying hungry rivals.

In her desperate dance for
aliment, I see you now;
Shiny black hair wafts like wings
over snow crested shoulders.
Driven by thirst and hunger
to quench a love-starved heart -
obedient to an instinct
cruel as crows to forage.

In front of the pub, you turn
to slip inside a promised warmth.
Saying good-byes, I catch full
your youthful countenance.
Not immune to your beauty,
forgoing the offered embrace,
you take my hand, warming it;
displaying gentle kindness.

I hold your gaze, and for an
instant, ponder what can never
be, intercepting in the
panes behind you an image
of lines etching deeper on
a weary, ravaged face.
His ghost welcomes me to view
a man fastened in middle age.

The evidence presents itself
this morning - clumping in the
bathtub drain. The glassy crawl
of thinning hair allows me
to understand that somewhere

my own box is being readied.
Its carpenter's hammer rings
in the recesses of my core.

Reasoning that I'm not old
enough to raise a ghost, I
leave your warmth and wish you well.
Turning into the coldness
of my own heart's need, I think
of crows and young girls' laughter -
musing if crabapples
are somehow sweet in winter.

Caoineadh Bhríáin

for Brian Patrick McClelland (1961-1996)

Mother named you for the *Boru*,
but no rough-handed Dane
struck you down
or took you from us.
No. In a desperate moment,
you fled astride wild horses
up a lonely mountainside
to ride among the clouds.

In the dimming hour
when light
bleeds away in a fractured second,
when all the world is gray;
I see you moving
between the shadows.
The throaty laughter
of your voice is heard
in the clinking glasses
whenever whiskey's poured.

In the Field of My Heart

for Barbara McClelland Peters (1955-1987)

A winter storm's
come early; too early.
Harvest half-reaped,
stalks green with hope
lay wind-sheared and broken.
Grains holding promise,
their bounty scattered
amid chaff and flurries
swirling backwards across
furrows hardened and cold.

On a small rise, an ancient oak,
storm-stripped, solitary, silent,
last of its stand.
Spared for the shade
she gave weary ploughmen,
her naked boughs launch
flocks of screeching blackbirds.
She watches, always watching
as gray mice skitter
from underneath gnarled roots
into eddies of despair,
gleaning the few kernels
of love left.

Toíreasa, ‘A Chara

for Theresa Eberly

Tonight –
We noisily sing
Praises in your honor.
We roar and drink
To your accolades.
But, Little Flower,
Do not take
Our prattle to heart.

Instead,
Bring out the box,
You know the one,
From underneath
the cover
of your soul,
Where no one is allowed.
Carefully unwrap the gauze.

Listen;
It's your father's voice
In the other room.
Dandelions, clutched tight
In a child's hand,
Taken,
Lovingly placed,
In a crystal vase
On your mother's window sill.
Across the aisle at Mass
Furtive glances –
A stolen kiss
Under the school steps
At the dance
Where every step fell in time
To music made magic
By the quickening of your cadence.

Take care to wrap these well.
Place them where your vanished days
Silently gather
Warming you in the morning
When we are gone.

A Lenten Prayer

The Angelus bell rings
along Apple Street
in a language we no
longer understand,
or try to hear.

Old men huddle on the
corner waiting to
warm their souls hardened by
cold in cheap Holy
Spirits by the quart.

The house needs painting, the
gutters fixed, same as
last year. Winter here has
left us poor in heart
as well as pocket.

Rusty clunkers crawl like
beetles over pavement left
in shards, as though the
Air Guard's been strafing
us for practice.

Roaming cracked and goose grown
WPA sidewalks,
in a frost tumbled wall I spy
crocus under stone:
simple beauty.

To My Daughter, Katie, at the Feis

This everlasting day of being young,
corralling with your friends against the wall -
fresh-shod fillies from the ferrier's stall,
clopping in hard shoes, frisky and high strung.
Your legs long and muscle rippling to new,
displaying quiet surety and grace,
unsteady, but eager to course the race.
Impetuous and confident are you!
And for the keen-eyed man who knows the truths
of horses, keep your sight on the long one
with sorrel mane, she's ready for the run -
clear-eyed, strong-willed, disinclined to lose.
- Surprised and delighted with your ardor,
- proud, I am, to have you as my daughter!

Diagnosed Autistic

for my son, Brendan Francis

Though described
To be *all to one's self*,
Perhaps, just perhaps
Your floodgates stand
Wide open,
Turbines spinning
To a fevered pitch,
And the roar
Of turbulent water
Crashing
Is all we can perceive
As you find
Your way to open sea
And like your
Namesake,
The Navigator,
Chart courses
For unknown lands
Where
One is all,
All is one.

Forgotten

for Jeanne Vennemeyer

Through sleepy veils
of half-remembrance;
in the morning
you hear the descent of
footsteps on your staircase.
When their weight finds
the one that groans, that one
you meant to mend -
you will know it was me.
I always walk
on the broken step, the
others all avoid it,
I walk on it
to remember.

A Long and Careful Letter

Every syllable chosen
to convey what went wrong.

The white of the page hemorrhages
septic blood of past injuries.

The scratches of ink against hope
suturing the festering wound.

The autopsy reveals the time
of death to be the moment of its writing.

Lines Written in Late Winter

So late is it, only demons can slip
through bricks of houses held in winter's throes.
No promise in the air to break its grip;
no night insects, no dawn harbinger crows.
Rationally, I love our bleakest season,
love it for itself, and because it's still.
Chastened by the northern stuff of reason;
books are read, my verses written, until -
viewing my garden wrapped in hoary down,
realizing only then, Spring's sedition.
Jonquils and phlox conspiring, give the sound
for bees to buzz - birds sing without contrition.
-But now, I'll retire to my wintry keep,
-with no woman to share my bed - I'll sleep.

Revenant

These lifeless leaves, once lusty, verdant,
sticky, summer words;

now ugly brown, scattered at my feet,
crumble under step.

Outside the walls of your disdain,
I have stood before,

I have known this ground too well; frigid,
flinty and barren.

My lips, cracked to bleeding, as if
kissed by hoarfrost

leaving the bitter, black blood lying
clotted on my tongue,

as now sweet passion poems whispered,
sour to the taste.

Held in my loving eye, your beauty
dissipates to tears,

washing away to merely pretty,
and prettiness, love,

a treat in a confectioner's glass;
a child's temptation.

And childish yearnings at any age,
if given yield,

swallow saccharine coated lies and
like all confections:

Rot the teeth, foul the breath, weakens bone
and sickens the soul.

Rince na Bhadb (Dance of the Furies)

for Wendy Molloy

Morrigan's daughter's
starling black hair flocks
and wheels across a
pallid solstice sky.
In her steps; screeching
scavenger voices
call to memory
Nuada's vision:

*"Beauty, death and dreams
are the substance of my myth."*

Skin blanched as bone
littering the slopes
of Aughrim, where we
are only half-taught
the ceremony
of death and defeat.
Macha now transformed
to bird shape, utters;

*"Birds of battle
Birds of darkness
Birds of death."*

Her feral music
advances and retires
pronouncing lost names;
Ennis and Athlone,
Limerick of the
broken treaty stone.
Rotting corpses hang
in a yeoman's noose.

*"The carrion of sons and kinsman
make fair feasting for ravens."*

Her eyes, green as the
reflecting pools left
in gardens long since
forsaken in fright
by a gentry who
in the darkness heard
her pagan cadence
set to their quadrilles.

*"I am the bearer of dreams
tangled in the darkness of my hair."*

Scarlet lips adorn
a moonwhite visage
as bloody petals
of battle blossoms
scattered on a fresh
fallen Christmas snow
sweep rise and vale of
Kinsale's hallow'd ground.

"I am the dealer of death

War-witch blessed with beauty."

Muscle and sinew
transmute to graceful
immortal feet, tips
to ancient bodhrán
beat, a lithesome shape
breathes new life into
heathen pipers' skirls,
imploring to recall.

*"Beauty, death and dreams
are the substance of my myth."*

From Leabhar Gabhala, trans. J. Fitzpatrick

- 1 Morrigan – A triune Celtic war goddess composed of Badb (Fury), Macha (Battle), and Nemain (Slaughter)
- 2 Nuada – "Nuada of the Silver Hand" one of the Tuatha de Dannan
- 3 Morrigan to Nuada in the Leabhar Gabhala
- 4 Site of an Irish defeat.
- 5 Irish battles
- 6 Battle in 1601 marking the final defeat of the clans
- 7 A small drum used in traditional music.

Sine*

A hot August night
Thick as a cover
Lies soft on my chest.
The city below
Hums to the rhythm
Of the blood pounding
Full in my temples.
The street lamp's glow cuts
A sudden shaft through
An attic window,
Catching the figure
Of my skittering love
Crossing the still floor.
Pallid moonlight falls
Cross new morning snow
Of her waist's curve.
Her dark and long hair
Curtains over my face.
She bends to kiss me
My fingertips stretch to
Find her parchment breasts,
Her beauty's strength
Ignites with flame's speed
A searing passion,
Banishing fear from
My impoverished heart.
My own humble gifts;
My arms, my words
Dissolve into a
Silent dream where I
Lie waiting for words
I long to hear.

*(pron. SHEEN-ah)

Síne, Mo Mhuirín*

Entranced by eyes so deep and blue,
her fairy breath steals away my soul.
And with the fury
of my passion
spent,
under slumber's wave I slip.
Tonight, I sleep with angels.

*(pron. SHEEN-ah Maw VOOR-neen trans. Sheena, My Darling)

CASSIDY ROWE

18 Poems

Author Biography

I began writing poetry when I was twelve, and it has always been my creative medium. I am now twenty-five and live in Wilton, New Hampshire with my husband and two children.

Blue Monday

The light shines through your dirty window
red, always red
except on Mondays when it's blue
and I watch from the safety of my car
the silhouettes passing intimately
I will not come in tonight
I came in this morning before you were awake
to surprise you with breakfast in bed
but I was too late
Her hair was ebony and lay
like silk across your bare chest
and I left in haste and in shame
So I will not come in tonight
I see by the shadows
in the light from the dirty window
red, always red
except on Mondays when it's blue
that she has not yet gone
and the proximity of her lips
to your neck
awakens the thought in me
that she will not go home tonight
and I watch from the safety of my car
the silhouettes passing
through the light of the dirty window
red, always red
except on Monday when it's blue
I will not come in tonight

**This poem has been accepted for publication by Anthology Magazine.*

Winter

When children in trees
flock
to the sounds of
streetlights and dinner
silent trails emerge
from swings
still in motion
and seesaws
teetering with
sudden abandonment
Impressions of tiny and hungry
footsteps
scatter from forgotten
amusement
and race home

**This poem has been published in Reflections Magazine*

Wildflowers

Wildflowers
beautiful lilting bastard children
paraded and exhibited by mother wilderness
harrowing proudly their stolen terrain
frivolous and vain
and with shuddering aromatic entrancing
enticing deceiving wistful breath
they command demand and postulate admiration
In relation
to their cousins tame subdued and quite contrite
they abdicate association in a pagan rite

**This poem has been published in Reflections Magazine*

Nona

She wears hospitality on her face
like a dream she can't escape
her hands are unsteady
as she hugs her company
A tray of pink biscuits
appears from the depths of her
perpetually stocked kitchen
and is devoured, double-fisted,
by appetites of all ages
She is thankful for the conversation
but eyes the tan clock on the wall
and after coffee and long hours
she excuses herself
to the privacy of her room

Act One

The sapphire ocean rolls forward
The foaming shell of a wave
cracks open with a groan onto
smoldering saturated sand
Lingering briefly in an interlude
of domination;
Withdraws to its undulating dormitory

Above the diamond moon,
puppeteers with invisible strings
dance its watery reflection
at the edge of the desolate beach

Route 31

It has been so long
since I envisioned harmony
around dripping candles
in an unheated apartment
Conversation
paranoid and compulsive until dawn
rising above the din
of strip poker and
drunken lamentation
From the porch, free advice for passing cars
and somehow the stray cats
always found their way inside
But they don't agree with Dylan or Jim Croce
and they allowed themselves to be pet a while
before disappearing into the darkness
From contemplation on the couch
someone has discovered a passage of Keats
that moves them
and it is being shouted
above the music & the conversation & the card game
A shout of laughter and clinking of glasses
as someone has just lost the game
and then silence and cigarette smoke
while the record is changed
It was well past dawn when conversation died
& music ceased & books closed & cards were put away
& it was Monday morning

Spring

That summer I shattered innocence
like a fragile mirror.
Gingerly retrieved fragments
of naive judgment

In autumn I withdrew
to cater to odd fantasies
and danced unrelenting
at open windows

Winter fell fast.
Carried scaling challenges
and merciless requests
on its icy shoulders

But Spring
Spring thrust hope
in meek amiable packages
into my atmosphere and esteem
and I clung like the new vines
to salvation

Shade

SHADE-
is the sensual cover
of sin and irregular heartbeats
the clever mask
of what many choose to disbelieve
Protective lover
of gleaming eyes and unsteady hands
the last adventure
of nature's shimmering seduction

SHADE-
Amphibious in appearance
and destructive in climate
it controls the jittering of
a nervous city
Allows significant gaps
in the understanding of logic
and the safety of day
Shatters swept corners and
laughs through invisible night

SHADE-
Metamorphosis of the
intransigent curbside
and betrayer of intimate darkness
Contortionist of inadvertent hesitation
and of mislaid fear
uneasy transition of
miscast adversaries
and misplaced pedestrians

The Passing

It ticks
inopportune moments
into fading memory
dreams to solidity
actions to reactions
Echelon of mobility
it races and slows
stoic and decisive
Paragon
of triumph over tragedy
bravery or cowardice
pleasure or disinclination
setting the seconds in stone

Seconds Before Night

What good are the Golden Wishes
in the silvery atmosphere
of seconds before night?

When it is time to reach
beyond serenity, we must
Grasp the Madness
that lies beneath the safety of reason

We have chosen sanctuary
amidst vast surroundings
of insurmountable instability

We have shed doubts
spilled tears
fought demons
entranced spectators
gambled odds
defied shackles of iron
in an everlasting battle
for the solidity of
Golden Wishes
that lay trapped beyond
the delirious silver haze
of seconds before night

Red Comfort & Sangria

when vaporous wine lingers
languorously past midnight
dull senses
trace shadows flickering on the wall
and fragmented monotonous speech
rocks gently inside your head
Movements slow and efforts concentrated
you release words and sentences
into the circling relaxed verbiage
that surrounds your realm of interpretation
before closing your eyes
and slipping to submissive slumber

The Stray Thought

When creeping enemy
slips unsuspecting
into electric eclectic fantasy,
Thunderous Lamentation
deafens and disturbs
predators and prey
The instant before adaptation
is the longest interval between
life and death
Shield tender eyes
or there are sure to be
images in the afterlife
Sweet Spirit,
allow joyous passage
through your golden feathers
of innocence
and carry a bruised and broken soul
to safety or to sacrifice

Freeing the Shaman

Into the sunlight
he dances wildly
in & out of shimmering leaf shadows
Robs me of my words and my thoughts
and tucks them into his pocket
for later use
He brings earthen forest wherever he wanders
that is where he is comfortable
Soars with the eagles
Runs with the wolves
Heals with the shaman
in spiritual recognition
and ethereal dominion

Cats Catch What Cats Can

Cats catch what cats can
a philosophic persuasion

Cats catch what cats can
a rich widow with a taut boyfriend

Cats catch what cats can
drunken shells of men in a dim bar

Cats catch what cats can
a dead sparrow in an alley

Cats catch what cats can
rhythmic melodious jazz ensemble

Cats catch what cats can
a philosophic persuasion

Spinning

With irrepressible charm and invincible energy
encased in sunlight and freedom
I am spinning, spinning

Amidst wildflowers and weeds
swaying with fragrant tantalizing breeze
I am spinning, spinning

Throwing back my head
in flirtatious innocence toward wind and nature
I am spinning, spinning

Like an adventurous, angelic child
entertaining her limitless mind
I am spinning, spinning

Caressing petals and enchanting onlookers
in the vibrant brush
I am spinning, spinning

Freeing wildflowers from my hair
with wild uninhibited motion
I am spinning, spinning

Tempting imaginary audience
and coaxing them into
spinning, spinning

Dreams

Dreams are falling, catch them
capture them and set them free
In delicacy
they fall from the pillow
and tango silently to the floor
once worn
like a photographic blanket of content
they scatter with the switch
of a cat's tail
Still they sail
uplifted and chaotic their descent
set intimate pieces to the ground
unfound

America

Scandalous visions of infidelity
protrude through crevices
of crumbling and ancient stone
Overrun
by images of hospitality
and shattered
by heroism and happiness
Justice has brandished
its blinding sword
and has risen unscathed
from the gaping jaws
of disaster
only to stumble drunken steps
across the filthy floor
and collapse into
the defeated and patronizing corner
of solemn misunderstanding

Bespectacled Jesters

we are bespectacled jesters
flying in odd little cars
down the highway
we could not find on the map
to a place unknown
to a future
that requires a foreign past
hands hanging out open windows
to catch air & to release it
bells jingling from stray gusts
and silk tickling naked flesh
beneath fuzzy buttons and cold zippers
we laugh the whole way in remembrance
of the sad and funnily twisted people
a mile back on the side of the road
and we stick out heads out of the car
to suck in the harsh and invigorating air
and we sneeze and drive away

JANET BEST

25 Poems

Author Biography

Janet has been writing poetry for more than 20 years. She began writing poetry as therapy for herself. What has developed is a way for her to share her experiences with others. She wants her poetry to make reassuring statements to those in doubt of life, happiness, or anything at all. She wants people to believe in the faith that she feels when writing poetry. She wants her audience to feel the spiritualness that she does. In creating her poems, many topics came from vivid dreams. Some topics came from things she likes to ponder over, like seeing angels on a walk, or how your livingroom can represent hell. She wants people to feel thankful for what they have, not worry about what they don't have, or what they feel they should have. But, most of all, she would like to share her poems with as many people as possible.

Into the Warmth

The leaves at the bottom
of the hill were already
changing by the time
I reached them.
I remember the last
time you saw them,
your face pale with age,
your hands red and swollen
the way my grandfathers
used to look after a day
of picking cotton.
Your eyes full of life
in a body grown to die
from the pressure and anger
that you created from.
I tried to ease your mind,
but your ears closed tighter
as my words spoke.
My comfort was not enough
to take the pain away
that you felt year after year
as the price of cotton fell
and the winters deemed to be
worse then the previous.
I feel happy and sad
as now you can rest in peace
and watch respectfully without
worry as the fall turns
to winter and I settle
on the beaches in Florida.

Action:

(for Lucille Clifton)

Hidden behind the mask,
beneath her wounds,
the little girl,
is trapped inside her world.

The actors' voice
rolls with the camera,
action scripted
to create a life
and entertain a world.

A symbol of being
recreated, fantasized.
This masterpiece
written before us,
juxtaposed
against the beating
that was given
for every wrong,
judged high
from the one
not really understanding,
and still,
the cycle is not broken.

No makeup,
no color
the attraction black and blue-
turned yellowish green by now.

No fanned breezes
to cool the sweltering heat,
no director present
for this uncut version-
modified to fit your screen-
closed caption edited
the life.

Angels on my walk

Heavenly spirit;
soul inside a shell,
bruised with cancer
eyes spinning cartwheels
across the lawn
spirit dancing among young and old
footsteps slowing to a crawl
shuffle step...shuffle step.

God knows this
hoity-toity woman
showily dressed underneath
that wide brimmed blue hat.
Soul inside that hardened shell
reaches,
lessons pasting
sticking like sap
from an evergreen tree.
Angel to person, casual tones
through the sounds of a muffled voice
patterned to fit any subject
and one million thoughts provoked
in 10 minutes.

Lady Girl - Woman Child

Girl child frozen in a
growing woman's body.
The temptation to halt the
alteration overwhelms.
Her creative mind so alive,
but confused
like a balloon loosing air
flying in circles
falling listlessly to the ground.
Her eyes nervous
staring at the limp balloon.
Her ears nervous hearing
the roar of woman inside her.

On Jordan Pond

Bubble hills backdrop
as the history
of an old legacy continues.
Once iced by a massive glacier
no more cold to add,
but today hears
"is that ice cream you're eating?"
Yes, in the late Pleistocene period,
ice spread to someday become
rounded on popsicle sticks.
Overlapping conversations of
mystified romances
on fall afternoons as the
leaves change from green to
yellow to red and then
tea is served to tables
assembled in symmetrical orders
and we continue to stare at the backdrop
of bubble hills.

Alien Nation

Sky lights at sunset
clouds folded above
wispy strokes
float together
forming giant spheres—
perfect hiding place
for an alien spaceship.
Invisible martians—
George Orwell's, Big Brother.
1984 seemed so far into
the future
now, 16 years behind.
Orbiting eyes invade
our quiet time,
watch how we drive
through flooded traffic
to make it home by 6 p.m.,
dinner cooked by 7.
They watch how some
refuse to let pettiness go
and how others hoard
the money they make.
They wonder what is
meaningful; what is routine.
They wonder how some days
have any meaning at all
when all that is known
is anger.
They wonder what trust is
and if it's really something
we value.

Applesauce

Pop-pop reaches from a step stool,
shade protecting
from the warm beast overhead,
arm extends, broom in hand.

Whack!
The closest apple falls to the ground.
One more stretch for the big green one above his head.
Swing....
miss...
Swing again. It plummets to the ground.
Grandma wonders why
he never shakes the tree.
He, too smart to get hit in the head
from falling apples.

Grandma peeled, cored and
simmered over medium heat.
"Keep stirring," she told Pop-pop to save
herself from his empty conversations.
The more I stir, the saucier I become.

Next, apples spin faster and faster,
mashed, blended—
cinnamon, vanilla, sugar added
to flavor the somewhat tart fruit.

Once completed, Pop-pop samples.
Grandma watches his expression.
The straight smile was
always a good sign.
He'd never say for sure,
except he always told me
the sauce was good because he knew how
to pick the best apples,
even if he did knock them down
with a broom handle.

Celestial Messenger

An angel appeared on my walk today
Soul inside a shell
bruised by cancer
eyes fluttered cartwheels
across green lawn
spirit danced among young and old
footsteps slowed to a crawl
shuffle step...
shuffle step

God knows this proud woman
showily dressed underneath
the wide-brimmed blue hat
which takes second
to her struggles and lessons
to carry on the enlightenment of
angel to person

Casual tones sounded less
muffled as she touched my hand
Omnipotent knowledge
stuck to my heart
like sap from an evergreen tree
Energy swelled
individually fit—
as mom tailors my
last prom dress
and amazingly
one million ponderings
awoke in 10 minutes

My Beekeeper in Sonoma

Patience echoes in her head
floating in the space that is
fabricated for love, happiness, and contentment.
Sadly, it is devoid of any true meaning.
Like an empty hive, the bee
scattered for fear a
sickness would prevail.

Remarkably, her beekeeper appeared
to charm her once again and assist
in her perfection of who she had become—
to answer her prayers of love and forgiveness.

Rescued by the swarm
the lost bee has now returned safely
to her organized colony
where a miraculous creation
flows as sweet tenacious fluid.

Nectar gathered from mature blossoms
also used as the center piece
which stands to attract all eyes.
All eyes are known to believe
that to help one is helping all.

Her fears subside—
the hum of wild insects
metamorphosize into music
soft and gentle, enough to calm
even the most apprehensive ones
and produce a confident expectation
so great that the bee flees
to become the Queen within herself.

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Grandma, are you there?

In answering my own question,
her spirit rose
before me and we were all
there to celebrate her life.
As a wedding couple re-marries,
why not does the life of a death
ever get celebrated twice?

The trinkets in her garden
were as they always were
at first glance,
but to pick one as mine,
nothing was left
except pumpkin shaped cacti
that if touched, would sting.

The massive garden before me
marched in memorial status
showering the seasons before my eyes.
I was there watching Spring turn to Winter.

The unrecognized cousins
inside hovered in silence.
Ironically, no sadness
appeared on any one of their faces.

In eulogy, I expressed:
"Grandma, you've given me
much more than you know.
Spiritually we've come closer
then grandmother and granddaughter.
We have not only the laughter,
but peace from the mouth,
that smiles with joy from parched lips.

Your ominous hugs are endless
against my shoulders
and you're as powerful as the
strong wind that blows in the trees.
I feel you everyday, so close to my heart
that it makes me shiver
and I always shed a joyous tear
for you.

Change

Life's broken,
flowing down a different stream,
feeling thoughts that aren't nice,
but that are really mean.

Growing older, losing friends
driving through towns
to different ends.
Feeling harsh instead of soft,
lying below instead of on top.

Seeing other visions
besides those ones known
it's a bit scary thinking
of ending up all alone.

Another variation has
been undergone
in which mystical visions
seem to spawn.

They take away all that's known
and replace it with frightened
forecasts of the future untold.

Gemini

The twins came to see me last night,
one female, one male
their big brown eyes,
fixed on my body.
I reached out to embrace them,
but they ran away
laughing at my silliness.
Their untouchable
dark haired smile
I remember,
but their feel
is gone.

I turned on the shower
warm water trickled
down my back; it slid
like cool ice cream
on an aching throat.
I shivered,
my wet body
dripping like blood
from an open wound.
I got out,
then didn't remember
how I got wet.

I heard the twins voices
singing 'Sweet Jesus'
in my head.
I wanted to cradle
their tender bodies;
my tender body
listless and unknowing
aiming to control.
With patience,
the time will come
when I will, once again,
laugh with the twins.

**accepted by the IWA San Diego, CA 2/98*

Hell

The dungeons are full
the pit
below the ground
that rocks
so violently
is sometimes
your livingroom-
the livingroom inside your
head that heals wounds,
promises good things,
and takes your loved ones away
fades to darkness and sinks
between the corners of the moon
to darken the rainbow that
once appeared from the sun.
The colors of the chimera
are black, but the black
must not be mistaken for
the illusion that has disappeared.
Everyone has the power
to brighten his own colors
the colors that emit
their own light
to shine on you;
to shine on others
thus lighting the way
so that your darkness
will truly be bright.

Erected in 1924, by Jack Williby

Visions and feelings emerge
as my eyes scan the black-top driveway
formed between two green sections
of bladed shoots
next to a flowered path
that leads to the front door.
Hidden inside the attractiveness
I feel warmth, coldness,
birth, death,
happiness, tragedy
for the apple tree
no longer bears fruit.

The small upstairs window
protrudes from the roof
like a child emerging
from her mother.
The swing on the porch
lies motionless
to a house that was filled
with sweet scents
of lemon coffee cake and sizzling bacon,
laughter of children
pounding on the piano,
evening strolls around
the pond
on warm summer evenings,
candlelit dinners
that marked the togetherness
of the family,
but now
their life has been packed
into a box
and sold to the highest bidder.

**accepted by the IWA San Diego, CA 5/98*

Lady Finger

Roughness chomped into
the red slick calcium
layered attribute
and ripped it from
its stable resting place.
The grater frightfully
severed just one
as the others still
bath in their long length,
but not for long.
The pain ripped through
like a shock wave
causing a loud scream
to bark from within.

Colors adorably matched
with each new article of clothing.
Jewels accentuate
the fleshy appendages,
but now the sandpaper
popsicle stick must
smooth the harsh edge
and level all the others
and this becomes a great loss.

The Best Medicine Has Laughter Written All Over It

Jovial mirth expressed by a smile
explodes into sound
piloted by a laughing jackass.

A mixture of bad air and tension
turned inside is dubbed
with the amusement that's
in your heart.

The expression of merriment from the comic
is really an influx of pretensions from a heated debate;
a contagion into our consciousness.

Fall Leaves

Only time will tell
which way the wind will blow.
Leaves dangle by one thin stem,
patiently waiting for the gust
to shake them loose from
their nurturing mother,
but fear not
for their death is our beauty.

As the wind soars its
ferocious face bending branches
backwards and forwards,
leaves descend in a colorful shower
and the hallowing is our message
that Autumn has arrived.

**Sent to IWA, San Diego, CA 11/98*

The Classroom

Lonely hearts are
breaking all over.
Confusion as the headmaster
of greater tales to tell.
Anxiety speaks up first
wondering what's going on,
Pain filters in as the
head throbs with each
look of the eyes.
Fun sits with a smile
in the back
not saying a word.
Sadness explodes to the
front of the class
No one can hide from it
it's seen on everyone's faces.
Scary weaves in here and there,
dark stories to tell
of times not so long ago.
All created for a purpose
of which is unknown.

Lost in 1969

My parents in the kitchen
mom doing dishes,
dad sitting at the table
drinking vodka.
Little did I know
about their argument,
Dad slurring an apology
about missing the meeting.
I covered my ears
from the familiar tones
and retreated to the couch
where my feet did not quite
reach the end of the cushion.
I couldn't read the magazine,
so I pretended
to look at the pictures
which were upside down
in this Life on my lap.

The universe had now
extended as Neil Armstrong walked
on the moon. If he fell,
or became unhitched
from the cord that wrapped
around his body,
protecting his soul
faithfully inside,
he'd float into oblivion,
closer to heaven,
and wouldn't have to suffer, much.

The men on the ship
could leave him, forget
he's out there, then what?
Would he fly home
arms first through the sky,
diving to reach the earth
like superman.
I began to shake,
curled up in a ball.
As my mother put
her arms around me
I could smell
the scent
of dinner on her apron.

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Standing Still

The lid creaked. Dust slid off the back
like snow being swept off porch steps.
The woman grabbed a yardstick propped open the lid
so it wouldn't fall on her freshly manicured fingers.
An overwhelming mothball scent itched her nose
and she sneezed. She remembered the first time she'd found
this hope chest, back in 1977 when her family
moved in to stay with her grandparents.
She'd wanted to open the hope chest since then,
but her Grandma always told her to stay out of the attic,
because the floor was not sturdy
and she might fall through.

She looked inside and saw an ivory colored dress
folded in a plastic cover. Her imagination came alive.
She remembered her grandmother
telling stories about the dress,
but she was always too busy to stay and listen.
Now, she wished she had.

Looking at the dress, she could see her grandparents
spinning around the dance floor
everyone staring with envy. She heard laughter
and saw women giggling to each other.
She absorbed the happiness she saw
in that ballroom along with all who were there.
Looking closer at the dress, she noticed
the neckline lined with pearls and sequins.
Such an elaborate dress; such an elaborate occasion.

She set the dress aside; searched for more "good stuff".
She found a red hard covered book.
The cover was blank on front so she tilted
it to the side and read "Principles of Speech."
Something familiar; this was her mother's book
from her college days at Nasson College in Maine.
The pages inside were yellowed;
the thread binding unraveled, but that didn't matter;
she still found the book so remarkable, as she
found all books remarkable. She thought about the hours
her mother must have spent reading
and memorizing for those big speeches.
She imagined her mother living and breathing this book
for at least 5 months. It must have gone with her everywhere:
the library, her mother's dorm room,
her friend's dorm room, the coffee shop, the burger drive-in...
the list was endless. She was even sure
it went under her mother's pillow,
as most college kids thought osmosis would
kick in if they concentrated hard enough.
But now, the book's life was over,
no more eyes to scan the pages,
no more speeches to write.
It's been retired to this chest, stuffed full of memories.

She continued looking for other memorable things.
Underneath a pile of "stuff" was an old shoebox
covered with wrapping paper. She opened it.
It was full of pictures. Most of them were black-n-white.
She discovered a 4 x 6 photo of her grandfather's father

standing next to his ice truck. The picture must have been taken
in the 1900's. She dug deeper in the box.
On the very bottom she found an old pocket watch.
She picked it up, caressed it in her hand.
The time read 2:10...am or pm? She wondered.
Did this time have any significance, or did the watch
just die? What was the date? Who's watch was it?
At this point, her own guess satisfied her curiosity.

She dug a little deeper and found one more item.
Her fingers touched on a small black box,
it was hidden in the corner of the chest.
She stared at it in her hand. Part of her wanted to open it,
another part didn't want to pry any
further into her Grandmother's personal things.
At that moment, she felt a great warmth behind her;
a voice whispered, "open it." She hesitated,
then opened the velvet box. Creak....
Her eyes glowed as light illuminated from within.
She became her grandmother's wedding ring.
Her eyes filled with emotion and she finally
understood that her grandfather had purposely
stopped his watch at the exact time he had proposed.
It was his way to express the happiest
moment of his life. Now, that moment
would always live in them forever,
and his love for her would forever be
.....standing still.

Sunlight to Heal

Like the dream
the evil makes it hard
to sleep - makes it
hard to awake.
I implore for
a secure hand as
the coldness of the
dream taps on
my shoulder
and frightens me
in this unfamiliar house-
I pray for the sun's light.

Curled in my mind
the gunshots are
fired in succession
one...two...three...
I feel the pain as
they burn a hole
inside my spirit.
The shots like
the hand surge
towards me,
I cringe at this
unacceptable touch
too afraid to scream.
I watch from afar
as it passes before
me like a movie
and I'm trapped
as my horror lives on and
I pray for the sun's light.

This is I...

running through life like it's a final in school,
sniffing humid stagnant air
instead of sweet honeysuckle,
tasting bitter baking chocolate
instead of scrumptious red velvet cake,
I'm tattered like wet baggy jeans
instead of a fine knit sweater,
and there's no more room to grow
as the belt around my brain
is on the last loop-
the buttons all buttoned-
no room for expansion
and the only voices I hear
are drowned by the pounding
of a jackhammer.
Never do I hear
the soft whisperings of a whippoorwill.

Tulips

Today, my world, it smiles
as bright as the tulips
on a spring day.
You've intensified my world
in so many wonderful ways already
and I wish us to bloom perpetually
with each new sunrise.
A single flower cannot effect
this much beauty,
as I alone cannot generate
this much love, without you.

Web

The web of life
leads us to a colossal of words,
straight from Webster's Dictionary.
Cobweb;
an entangled mesh
it catches my mouth
every morning when I cross the threshold.
They're never ending,
those stringy silk threads.
I vacuum one,
ten more appear,
spider art
exampled by Charlottes Web
worked in so proud and beautiful,
but a dangerous ambush.
A deathtrap to some,
tongue ensnares
ones mind,
tangled in such
an intertwined freeway.
One can be caught in a web,
for tangled webs are
forever weaved,
and they too reappear
just as the old ones are sucked away.

River Thames

1 a.m.,
quiet foggy night,
moonlight trying to find
an open door to peer through,
feet moving at medium pace
under hazy streetlights.

Ker-plunk
a rock sounds the same
half-way across the world
tossed into the Thames River from a stone bridge.

Darkness sensed around the
clickity clack of footsteps
on cobblestone.
No porchs lit in any
old English house;
traffic tucked away in garages
inhabitants tuned to heavy-eyed dreams.

Across Oxford Meadows,
behind thick trees,
he sees himself fixed
at the edge of the green.
Familiar faces stand before him.

The hum of their voice's heard,
but not understood.
Ears strain to listen,
but not comprehending.
But wait? Are they singing,
"For he's a jolly good fellow."
on the edge of the green?

But why?
Panic escalated
he runs to the crowd yelling,
"I'm here; I'm here,"
but no one listened.
Their eyes watering, and he knew,
he was already gone.

REBECCA INGALLS

22 Poems

Author Biography

Rebecca is a graduate of Cornell University and now pursuing her master's degree in English Literature at Boston College. Originally from Maine, she served as editor for an international magazine based in Boston before deciding to return to academia. Now, in conjunction with her degree pursuits (she intends to move toward the doctorate upon completion of her master's), she is also pursuing a career as a poet.

the somebody cross

she was royalty and
i was a raw harbinger.
but we clung to the size of weather.
even strokes swum from the trailer park home
pitched forward three ladies,
high from the taste of waking up.
drowsy weekend, canceled school, packed lunch,
burnt shoulders, training bra, no lessons, no lessons,
no lessons...day trip to the Somebody Cross and
the thought of late summer...all keeping in touch
with each other today? not so much.
we collide.
math sits in her head,
a senile judge worthless to its jury,
while old prizes make a stale case
for a former windjammer queen.
with a progression of one year, running relay to the next, to the next.
standing for the Somebody Cross
makes my stomach turn over and grab hold —
list the reasons for mid-summer cold..
this prayer sits centered on my tongue
while my throat searches for a vowel to kick it going.
she's was my Somebody Cross but she's not been
to mass in so long, i think her faith is all gone.
this leaves a heavy relief
that bleeds into sadness,
expertly stitched in this up-down-left-right
to save us from madness.

lunacy

the party pokes from door to porch,
toting punches ready to happen mid-street,
smearing accusatory blame on dirty-minded
boys who won't tip or touch or trade this night for focus.
so, the phone jumps off its shelf to shake the caller,
the door deadbolts in steady preparation for
expected guests, and, while they wax eager,
gripping a struggling spoon inside an acquiescent dish,
the dog's unamused, and keeps watch.
ain't the crib sturdy enough to get a good glimpse
without waking the long, long story?
beware the drunken tin rap and inquiries without;
slink down to the sill 'til the lip hits the chin;
collie, stop all your barking — it's time to come in.
treat the fruits to bread without butter,
heavy breathers in sleep, ain't no matter
what starts the hum down from an e below c.
e for every kid crazier than me.

station g

i could have been young,
or black and blue,
and known all along that
the evidence rode my side
like a leech on a sea-swimming fish.

i have dry land underneath my fingernails,
too much rain on my face,
a train's length away from
here
to you
and back.
laid flat on the track,
the sound in the rail
is hush
and wail.
and i wait. and it comes.
holding ground by my thumbs.
the conductor waves "move!"
jesus said he'd have loved
me more if i played dead,
melted flat like a one-cent 'neath the rolling,
whistling toil of the engine and i believed ...
no.
slow, train, slow.
up i go from the dust.
unbruised,
minus the inkling to stay,
i will walk the rest of the way.

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ain't no mountain

it sits awkwardly between my knees.
i cramp, knowing this performance is syndicated from others before me.
it chokes.
it's nervous. it's cracking jokes.

i worship strong hands and this one hasn't got them.
we laugh, i moan and it's a pretend symphony...and i could always sing.
if you put me in a part,
i could swing it -
even double parts if the tenor can't bring it.

it climbs. it struggles on the way. it pauses,
superficially shrinks from the holdup this causes.

belly-up floaties slide by,
i state a preference for the next peak over.
it quits. i cry,
examine the remains of its lover,
i slide downhill with the space between my knees,
mark a conscious effort to climb alone, please.

5pm

5pm daily. in winter. the sun goes, my head turns quiet.
for some moments my heart is the loudest voice
in this organic girl-body machine.
heartstrings cut through with a horsehair bow,
usually the pianissimo part of the symphony,
have a solo. forty measures, or so.
we in the audience pause, nod,
consider reconsidering an old piece of music we love -
ditch the symphony for the ditty.
this ancient little woman's been coming to the hall for years.
when the strings play by themselves, she leaves for the
powder room, returns with the return of the french horns and the triangle, the
piccolo and the double bass.
i wipe my hands on my apron during this time 'round 5,
secretly wish the evening paper still came,
sit at the kitchen table, which rocks beneath the weight of
my elbow, my chin, my heavy quiet head.
wonder when the thin steel strings will feel less inclined
to upstage the healthy heart of its band.

curricule

the bristle-faced, man-handed citizens of a coastal town boil vats of varnish,
roll each onto a monster barge that glides on top of seas spread round the globe.
deconstructed down to silver cans, room-temperature glaze coats
a gymnasium floor and a dim byway from west wing to east.
a sacred hall spills over with thundering morning service,
the tempestuous basement riddleroom where the musicians practice
ebbs silent between movements,
and this fume leaks into the coffeehouse nearby.
we charge blood like plugged-in plastic toys and
the field ghosts grab their bellies with laughter
when self-importance and youth marry, las vegas-style, and
cough up answers that turn gaseous post-oral,
shattering droplets of wrong that bounce and tinkle on the shiny classroom floor.
this season breeds humility in a few heavy-lidded seedlings;
apparitions cling to the possibility of acres of thought
that might majestically roll along english lakes,
sit confidently in purgatorial trials that wind up hung,
construct a newfangled drive on both sides of the road,
and study the landscape like so many texts that speak when opened.

(from a weekend in ny)

i splinter.
i don't remember a time when my shoes came untied so often in one day.
young hands dry in winter
unsoaked, lately watered, will decay.
a quick pace speeds through a weekend agenda, i'm more numbed by the minute,
and it took me long enough to feel this way from lying too long in it.

the metro smells like piss.
i consider the comfort of frequenting the franklin street stop.
in all of that time i never sought the solace at the bottom of the
island like this,
where liberty is stuck in the middle of the harbor like a top,
beneath which the world spins kindly
and today i find it tucked in the bite the wind brings to blind me.

a pre-adolescent kid struts northward on the most main street,
trousers creep southward, china-ward, in a fashion his momma wouldn't allow.
a pink-stained tongue hangs over a lower lip, he's sweet -
i pass and catch the warm watermelon smell from the hollow,
a breathy remnant of the candy-flavoured walls of his throat.
i smile and ache and fuss with the button on my coat.

on the roaring ride back uptown a chinese mother and daughter yell in
sign language.
this inspires me to give up. to resign.
a homeless black man recites his mantra from car to car while a woman
holds tight to her baggage
hands in front, hands behind
with a faux humility he learned from poor days of youth
the foam from his empty insides collects at the corners of his mouth.

a woman at the next table over wants her fiancé to take off his jacket
but he's cold.
alone at the bar at my hotel i feel old.
i practice remembering to fall out of step with this ordeal
nurse my wine and watch my hands and aim to feel
something clean, unstained by the shit that bores me,
by the fallowing ass who claims he adores me.
i consider an embroidered plan,
order another glass of wine - because i can.

lately, i've been taking my mother's advice. a risk. indeed.
but she's the reason i find peace in this city.
i reckon she'll spark the reason i find the peace i need
to be calm, and smooth, and graceful and strong - and pretty.

nurse...her...he

i hit a rough patch -
left elbow,
right heel,
(lake not q-u-i-t-e solid).
bandaided knee and a casual sway,
sweet sultry in black, in grey.
i cool and the breeze on my face
is like a clay room in august,
and he warms.
i peel dermic layers to see the ice underneath
while he melts.
and i see a priceless bead slide down the side of his cheek
because thought steals the heat
before heart knows what hit it.
and this is how we play...
seesawing and chattering non-stop, no breaths,
while we wait for them to get off of the
damn swings.

constituted, albeit loosely

he said that youth skulks in the same room,
oozes out in safety,
climbs out in adventure,
retreats in torture.
sigh —
it used to be so boring.

whereas the fear of flaws prevents me
from jumping (how high?) at the unexpected chance,
but instead urges slinking in that direction,
and now i'm trying to tame a lion;

whereas the girl who makes love
wrestles the beasts in the basement,
while the soirée goes swimmingly on upstairs,
brioche, anyone?;

whereas speech is now a science,
color a cursory indecision,
taste hides beneath my tongue
in the unsatiated place, and
marvelous folds of jasmine,
exude like laying a flat sheet on a bed
in slow motion;

whereas somewhere else wants me there —
it's possible to pine for geography —
the surreptitious baseline
moans low
and steady;

whereas that brand new pain (welcome to my home) comes daily,
glad is alarming,
anger is finally here,
and sadness is outnumbered for now, folks;

whereas the shell calls my attention, and theirs,
worry knocks off the unknown,
cancerous organics relate to music,
white harbors delicious caution,
green announces itself loudly
and blue, well, we know what blue does ...

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blue

berg mountains and sea water,
white and blue-black,
amidst a polar fog,
and silent, save the low moan and swell of whales —
the floe drifts an empty little caruso to land.
this perch is cold and
ties its traveler to deeper breaths
to calm hunger, to clear the eyes,
to inspire a song, to pass the time.
god casts a gale —
sends a seal, sends a gull —
stills the passenger's fear of unknown.

on the turbulent arch between days

having been gallantly rescued from
my traditional sunday dip,
i stretched the evening to eleven o'clock.
since sleep is a wrench in my spine,
i carried on the childish
back-and-forth with myself.

the turning of pages outside my door
suddenly soothed me.
the night sucked, anyway.
separated into its ordinary three segments,
each made of whatever sludge,
bubbles at the bottom of my psyche,
the series of awakenings depleted my water supply,
and purposely enraged me because i
was just too fucking tired to go back to the well.

i'm surprised the clamor didn't wake you, too —
every part of me trying to yell above the other,
demanding my attention like a spoiled child —
my brain, my womb, my heart, my lungs,
all pled a different case,
and no handsome tv lawyer in prime time
would successfully defend the leftovers to these mobsters.

certainly it's no surprise that i reaped a calmness
while behind my sunglasses on the highway this morning,
and unearthed a sophisticated, stinging awareness
when i had to remove them.

of water and land

you can see a dirt-clouded piece of me
rising through the war of tubers,
trying to fix me underground.

it's the place where i pleaded patience.
pluck that nearby flower
and just you see what happens, goal-less pedestrian,
unsympathetic adventurer,
memory-creator.
do you deserve a drag, a snip,
even a lift down the street?

if i could drive,
i'd take you away to the ocean
and leave you there
to hurt it out on that very fine line.

it's caution that burns the wick in your lifeline too quickly.
and for you life is too long?
crawl off that box of superman strength and
try out my new and lasting patience limb.

i ain't accustomed to posterity,
or a self-important, mid-morning
serious session with hard core creation
beyond what you got in the beginning.
jump off my back,
because you have other less living things
in your water body, sailor.

morning in boston

i miss europe when the sky is low and misty and
whitish-grey, when the temperature doesn't change from the inside to the out,
and the softened form of civilization,
as if they progressed so far and then decided to stop.
untuned, slow and moderate,
like i have imagined my days would someday be,
with all of the satisfaction that comes with the success of
contentment.

recollection of smells and touch comes
when i need to move my mind to a place other than here:
the scent of curry, the feel of brocade
and the musty thickness of the museum air.
the oldest house in town, the place where a famous girl once slept,
and the pieces of a language i can barely capture
merely decorate the blanket of home
that covers me at night in a bed that isn't mine.

quick resolve

don't you think ...
a pristine piece of frosted cake
tastes better
when you've scandalously drug your finger along the side,
when it's still melty,
when you know you're gonna
get you're little hand slapped
for juvenile gluttony?

my silly friend ... she prettied and poisoned
so that the distance between
a touch and a tongue
stretched farther than she could tell even you.
not-her-own hand to mouth
confused her sense of what was
delicious and what struck her sick.

i heard the other day that she melted away.
i heard that a careless cut
of a knife took her life,
and left her to dry
on the counter top.
why?

i could have sworn that she said, i ain't afraid of the air,
or the beach,
or the storm that's already here.
i ain't concerned with the upside-down drill of your hate,
the ornery cracks in the plate,
or the sleepless misfortune,
the painful intrusion,
the bloody allusion to fear.
i'll be a lot stronger this year.

after a stale good bye

to the bathroom to prepare for bed,
salt in my mouth, speech in my head,
certain that chocolate would be no good,
considered leaving, and whether i could.
studied my face —
red eyes, how my hair had grown,
how thin my neck down to collarbone.
in twenty-five years of knowing the reflection,
could make no connection
between child and today,
living, breathing and aging away.
but beauty stood
pure,
true,
unrelated to you,
with nothing to do with a long walk, a large dose or a small town.
and i pondered my wedding —
would i wear my hair up?
or down ...

andrew

he would a windsor.
he would a streamlined course,
a purebred horse,
forthcoming in tune with
the orchestra of wit,
of the answered why, and
the option to fold.
he burns and he's cold.
his mouth births the breath's shortness
because the thought couldn't bring verbiage
suitable for
such
thought.
and do you know the smell ... midseason, christmas,
the feel of white obsidian,
mmm ... but melted,
floured,
rolled out and kneaded, soft, uncut,
self-powered,
gracefully formed, occasionally warmed,
but never to stale,
out, misfortune (inhale),
where the pure water goes when it meets a tempest.
there is his instinct,
this reservoir of ever-unsoiled
clean anger,
clean madness,
clean sincerity, rise and sink again.
don't ask if you can't bear knowing,
don't touch if you can't bear letting go,
don't talk if you can't bear being
heard
word for word
and turned clear around
to see yourself found.

wreak

her overturned ballast smells like algae,
feels like too long in the tub,
like a cross between sticky religion and syrupy neglect.
kerosene takes the pitch off your fingers,
but "i don't recommend a walk in the woods with that boy, anyway."
merry-land was a thought,
and i concur with her on that.
the coast is clear, the tar hardened,
the holiday vacant for a bright face.
can we visit? i said.
she sometimes stands sideways to
explore her breasts in the mirror.
and this is what she did.
but i get a pain when i remember that baby girl
as she hardened before my eyes,
while i tried to do the same.
i write to you now, my love,
'cause there's no way i'm going to merry-land dressed like this.
so, big-bellied, arm-in-arm,
we'll see her one day, i think.
until then, i'll manicure my configured dreamboat self.

should be in bed by now

the movement just passed our way
and i think we missed it.
mea culpa.
heavens, clear out this room
a cause for something tense.
in the bath house a spoiled beetle parks in the corner.
but i have other plans for the
steam and the surface on which
the hull of my day can
stay just slightly sunk beneath the water ceiling,
and i'm the only one who hears it leaking —
i can't pay attention,
i can't close my hands,
and i can't believe the shit i'm hearing
when i pull this string and that,
knowing an exit will turn my lids
down, up again
to see the doorway full.
i just assume,
i have to know a thing or two,
i'm alright in a procrastinated space,
throttled in a purposeful place,
that song still stings,
but i don't cry that much anymore.
i'll keep my eye on that door.

on being a grown-up boy

my window of contentment is small now.
it's not because I'm already warm enough,
or because I don't relish the idea of comfort
and slow breathing, and long sleeps,
and holidays;
on the contrary, i do.
but when you're in a plush first class car on a transcontinental train
(and you've never seen the prairie),
even in the dead of winter you'd be wise to get off
to smell dead grass under snow,
to listen to the loud silence more haunting, even urgent,
than any city's roaring crashing blaring,
and a forever that's more difficult to digest than infinity or absence.
i believe that there will be another train.

i don't see anything problematic in a boy's
unwillingness to be a man,
if he hasn't taken a lick more than once, and given it good;
if he can't seem to remember the color of her eyes,
doesn't believe in life without leftovers
of drunkenness, soreness from god-knows-what,
as close as you can get,
and as far away,
as hot and as cold and as deep and as strong.

and if i haven't run with the bulls,
dropped from some kind of craziness and ecstatically brushed off
the dust, ready for another go,
out of breath (and don't tell me i've had enough),
wounded, healed, scarred and cut open again...
felt your skin, and my skin, and hers and hers, too,
(and maybe all together now),
and proven that whatever it is, it's founded,
and it's worth your time and mine,
then i will not insist upon being called a mister
or a master
or a man.

i will not have to insist upon it at all.

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below ground

and now i know the smell of a house burnt down.
i can still see dirty snow on the ground
in my old home town,
feel forever freezing in my smallest bone,
biking alone
from home to piano lessons
that never stuck.

i understand the sound of a hung up phone,
louder than an innocuous click,
softer than the ticking
tongue of disappointment.
never done right, never done right.
tonight,
early to bed.
no food for thought, let alone for the tummy

i remember a feeling
just between indifference and agony
that began in the bottom
and flooded and overflowed the space
it was made to fill.
the smell of an unnameable perfume reminds me
and knocks me over.

but in a small closet in the wet wet basement,
seated on a mustard yellow remnant of the 70's,
star dots poked through black construction paper
taped over a light bulb,
i was not on Earth anymore.
couldn't even see it from my capsule window.
and i know how the moon tastes.
i do.
mildew on a moist cement floor in the back of my mouth.

jane

jane is my sister who grew out of the back stage corner,
where I may have thrown a high-heeled tap shoe in a rage
of wild make-up and a soft skirt.

jane is my mother who hung over my heavy and thoughtful head,
who carried me from a parked station wagon in the cold.

jane is my friend from four-year old days who taught me jacks
(which I hated),
and tried with such conviction to find a far eastern window
in the salty beach sand.

jane, she sits on my shoulder when I have to look fear in the eyes,
says she loves me still.

jane is the name of a first doll, a lost aunt, an ancient nana jane,
a plain jane, mother says, would carry such a princess to term,
such a princess as I.

and to love the simplicity of that name as I do is a wonder itself
in a name such as jane.

TOM FLYNN

17 Poems

Author Biography

Tom has an MA in Mythological Studies from Pacifica Graduate Institute. He is currently a PhD candidate at Pacifica in the same curriculum. His poetry has appeared in a number of anthologies in the Seattle area, mostly recently in *Water Colors*. His first chapbook of poems, *Complexions*, was published by Kota Press in 2000. Tom is also an essayist and his most recent work appeared in *The New Times*. He is a proud father of two children and lives in the Seattle area.

Speechless

I went home to visit father
At St. Peter's Hospital in Helena
Father kept company with others sick and ill
Those who might recover
But not father
It was his last stop before the pearly gates

Father could not speak
He could only point fingers at charts of pictures:
I have pain, bed sore, suction me, turn me
Not a word was exchanged
As he suffered in silent kindness

Jailed and dependent
Trapped by death
I bled with father
Walked into a stitch
And shut a wound behind us

His healing gaze peeled away the gauze
That curled around the ventricles of my heart
I writhed upon a red cross
Waiting for his death
Or was it my re-birth

We said our goodbyes
But money was useless
When shopping for words
When all we had were gestures and gazes
Hugs and kisses
Holding hands
Silence

We said our goodbyes
In cemeteries
Where words
Are buried
In unmarked graves under ivy
And fished for meaning
In a stream
Dammed by ice floes

Bitter Scents

He frightened me with his hollow cheeks,
His mouth drooped open and his eyes glazed.
He frightened me when his head swiveled
Towards me
And his mouth moved with the speed of a slug
Devoid of sound.
His movements told me
That he would die.
But it wasn't so much the dying that I detested,
As much as the acrid smell of the hospital.
The antiseptic odor permeated
My nostrils from the time I passed
Through the sliding glass doors to visit
Until I left.
My hospital visits with Dad
Reminded me of my childhood
When he gathered the whole eleven of us,
To visit his mother – my grandmother,
While she lay waiting for death,
Her body emaciated by cancer,
That same sour hospital smell
In her hospice,
And Dad, in his bulky frame
Sturdy black framed glasses
And starched business suit,
Blubbered like a child
In front of his clan.
Years later, Dad lay succumbing to death,
The sight and smell of him
Overwhelmed my senses
In that hospital room.
I had imagined myself the hero
Guiding him gently through his last days
Into death's arms.
But that fantasy crumpled in his face
In a sickly stench of cowardice.
I kept my visits to a minimum,
Trying not to stare or glare or touch too much.
I left his room when I was full as a fattened leech
Stuck to a dying heel.
I left to digest what I had seen and heard and smelled
And await my next visit to hell.

Silent Exit

The last time I saw Dad alive,
He was propped up in a mechanical hospital bed
Eyes moony and bright.
His fingers slowly crinkled and uncrinkled,
Throat gurgled with each breath.
A dessert he was not,
More like a desert
A man all dried out
Without a shred of ego,
Humbled by four months
Of unrecoverable recovery.
He lay prone in speckled hospital pajamas
In and out of consciousness
Skin a pallid pink.
Speech removed, he festered and faltered
Fell to dependence.
A needy man lay in that bed,
Hardly the sturdy Ponderosa
He was in my memory.
Death had nearly timbered this trunk,
The old man that raised me
From a boy into a man.
Before I left,
I gripped his hand,
Accepting its stillborn fat,
Its soon date with the ravages
Of crematorium,
A hand spotted with patches of liver
Webbed with green and blue threads of blood.
He slept unknown, unable, unattended by anybody
But me.
In the end I shook loose my sweaty palm,
As sleep needled my ankle and foot.
He should have been the one to say goodbye.
He should have said you were a great kid,
But I was the only one equipped for that,
And I told him those things
And we stared.
I swept silvery thin strands of hair
Back from his stony brow,
And there interwoven were tired wrinkles
Just tired wrinkles.
I turned and walked to the metal frame doorway,
Paused and then returned to his bedside,
Kissed that stony forehead with dry lips.
He raised a hand, a crooked, soft hand,
A hand I remembered carrying axes and hatchets
And pumping up the Coleman lantern for light.
That hand hung in the air in a silent wave
Suspended until I left.
I finally departed that glassed in hospital room,
And it was all the strength that I had
In my steel lined heart
To hike simply one step after another
Down that long sterile hallway
Alone.

Idle Passion

I

Before his death,
I steeled off in tidy compartments
How much I hated him for shaming me
And loved him for finally apologizing.
For years, our love was an idle passion.
Barely whispered words meant little
More than just passing the time
Work, children, jobs, cars, loans, real estate.
Those topics kept us occupied.
While the real work was being kicked
Around
Inside.

II

Inside my grief
Lay anger and love
Clashing together like two organs
Never again would I see Dad's face
Never again would I have a sense of his presence.
Always dead. Never alive.
My feelings for him
Live lives of their own
Autonomous of me.
They raise up their angry fists
And wet eyelashes
Without a moment's notice.

Steel Barriers

Why couldn't I have simply lowered the bed rail
While Dad lay alone on the mattress
In the hospital,
Bed supporting his soft bones
And weary tissue.
But I sat stiffly beside him
And held his thin fingers
Empty of nourishment
All taken in by his soul
Soon to leave this empty world.
I long, now, a year later,
To have let down that metal gate
That kept me from him
And crawled in beside his form
Curled around his hospital pajamas
Like a snake
And give him that warm loving
We both so deserved.
Trapped behind the stainless steel barrier
Of manhood,
I was poised along the edge of fear,
Unable to pull my heavy ass
And place it alongside
His gaunt frame.

Father's Manic Departures

You wore a businessman's white dress shirt
Sleeves rolled up in rectangular roundness
Wore a clean shaven face supported by narrow neck
Gripped by necktie.
The round lenses of your glasses
Never fogged,
But your memory did
When manic depression
Mood swings
Surfaced.

Like a tiger crouched,
Your manic depression
Lived in fits and starts,
Never resting,
A fifty pound medicine ball
Atop a stairway
That would sometimes tumble
Crashing through our nine child family
Like a grape crusher,
Smashing bottles of wine
Leaving behind a violet violence
Shattering nuclear family into shards
Sending slivers into closed drapes
Cloaking the view from the outside in,
Curtains that closed as soon as the medicine ball
Began its rough descent.

At times you were admitted to hospital
In hard to explain absences.
Nurses and doctors knew you
Better than your relatives,
As they steered you through your illness
That buried a minefield under the family
And left none us unscathed,
Most of all you.

Answering your body's
Sense of nonsense
You swung like testicles to and fro
Too loaded for their own good.
Manic depression
Molded your personality
Sweeping you away from me
At times unseen.

Two Days Growth

Each morning Dad, you hung your towel
On a chrome towel rack and left it to dry,
Spread 'lectric shave on your cheeks,
And fired up the electric razor,
Removing the stubble that remained
From the day before.
Its growth ever constant,
Leaving behind a bristle
That I occasionally felt
If I had a hug from you
Or a tender moment.
These layers of bristle grew longer
On our family trips to the cabin
Or vacations north to Canada with the Bell trailer
A stubble that was worn along with khaki shorts
Or cut-off jeans,
That changed into blue jeans as
Night crawled in and crickets chirped their songs.
By then, the bristle showed signs of gray
And patches of bareness
Alongside the pastures
That your short bristles grew.
Alas, a day in the not so distant future
Would arrive
And I would hear the buzz of the razor
Labor through that crusty layer
And remove the edge from your face
So that a goodnight hug could be soft
And tender and smell of Aqua Velva
Instead of scratchy and sweaty
From two days growth.

Holding My Own

Why is a Men's Bathroom
Called a Police Station?
Because it's Where All The Dicks Hang Out.

That's the raunchy joke you told me Dad,
In a Canadian border crossing rest area
North of Montana
When I was twelve.

As we faced porcelain with web cracks
And let our days worth drain,
You told me and my twin brother the joke,
That first raunchy joke.
You laughed with your hearty teeth and chuckled,
And I laughed too,
As I pondered what I held in my hand
And I looked at yours
And it looked so long and hairy and scary.
And then I heard my first
Racy joke from you about police stations
And dicks
And none of it made any sense to me
Even holding my own
As it dribbled into an ammonia smelling
Chest high urinal.

We buttoned up our pants
And flushed down the toilet
That strange oddness of being a boy
Alongside his father,
Who was either a caricature of a man
Or one born to raise this boy into one.
I'll never know.
But to this day,
My father is that joke he uttered
On our family vacation
About men's bathrooms
And police stations
And dicks hanging out.

Somewhere Up North

Dad and I walked with our fall coats on,
Away from Redmond Town Center and its stores -
Eddie Bauer, REI, and Loews Cinemas.
We strolled on a meandering sidewalk
Past tall grass
And under western red cedars
And Douglas firs.
Alongside us, the Sammamish slough
Slowly made its way
Somewhere up north.
My sweaty palms were in jean pockets
While he wore a beige overcoat
And thick triple bifocals.
He shuffled, his Parkinson's meds
Wearing off late in the morning.
He asked me this question:
How could you not want to tell me
Your opinion
When you disagree with me?
He was seventy.
I was thirty-seven.
Did he somehow forget the darkness,
The years he ruled the fortress with fear,
When I sometimes cringed, waiting for his anger
To subside,
Or for him to cream somebody else,
A sibling maybe
Anybody but me.
Did he forget all the space
He occupied in his rage?
Did he not know how much he froze this boy,
Made me toe the line,
So that maybe I could be on his good side,
The unscarred gentle happy man
Who told jokes,
Not the burnt to cinders, scarred fool
That came out from behind his mirror.
But that day, we walked alongside the slough
Under slate gray skies
And the call of Canadian geese,
Stepping past green spoils of goose droppings.
I told Dad how much
I feared him as a child,
How I did not like his ways,
How I wanted it to change,
And how I had a hard time
Telling him what I really thought
Especially when I disagreed with him.
In that moment, he turned like a clumsy ballerina,
And asked me, his eyes wide and mouth frowning,
What? You cannot tell me when you disagree with me?
How could that be?
I wish I had a tidy hero's ending to share
Like my hatchet rose up
And chopped off his head
And I gripped it by long blond hairs streaked with gray
His blood dripping on the mane of my horse
Dad's eyeballs bulging
And his tongue swinging to and fro.
But, rather, we stood toe to toe,

Incredulous with each other,
Neither of us understanding the other.
Slowly, both of us, our jaws working silent,
Our heads shaking,
We turned
And continued our slow walk
Along the meandering slough.
Dad shuffling and I trudging.
Two of us,
Side by side,
Still together,
Still apart,
Slowly making our way
Somewhere up north.

Green Beans

At age ten
Mother asks me
To retrieve
Just a can of green beans
From the basement.
I pause
Poised on top step.

Above the landing,
Downstairs,
A bare bulb
Hangs
In front of dusty coal bin door,
Casts a mere cone of light
On a landing that looks
Hazy.

A measly can of beans.
I pause, wait
Take one step
On worn wooden stair.
It creaks.
My hand grips cold pine railing.
Darkness veils the coal door
Like a shroud.
Another careful step.

“Where’s the beans, son?”
“Coming mom – “
Run and run and tennis shoes pelt stairs
And jump
And land.
Something brushes my ear –
String from light bulb.
Heart pounds.
I swat string like a dark spirit
That I know awaits me in pantry.

A quick left onto concrete,
Past unfinished sheetrock covered in
Splotches of plaster that concealed nail heads.
A right turn into pantry.
Pull brass nut on twine.
Light bulb blinks to life,
Exposes shelves of canned vegetables
Fruit cocktail
Ten pound bags of flour and sugar.
A metal gallon can of powdered Tang
Hunkers on shelf,
Unopened.
Eyes glare from potato bin.
Del Monte grins at me,
With teeth of green beans.
Ah ha!

I grab tin can,
Shiver,
Sprint out door,
Turn to left and to right
Stairs two at a time,

Land squatted on linoleum floor.

In warm and light kitchen,
Mother wears Betty Crocker apron
In front of aluminum sink.
Steam rises from colander.
I thump can on countertop.
“There’s the beans, Mom”
I turn in slow motion
To leave.
She studies the green can
With blue eyes.
“Thank you son –
Did you turn out the lights?”
AGGGHHHHH!

Home Patterns

In childhood, our Kool-Aid and lemonade stands
Stood beside constant traffic
On Eleventh Avenue and Warren Street.
I played games of red light, green light
And football games in the snow
With twin brother
Until church bells declared dinnertime
With six chimes.

We stepped inside home,
Warm melted snow from mittens
Forming droplets of muddy water
Scattered on linoleum
In the kitchen.

Theses images of past meld into the present
Now sharing a mortgage with my lover, partner, girlfriend.
Those classifications of her
Speak little of the fear that occupies my heart
While we choose new bedroom furniture and hang pictures
In our new house.

Will we fade to empty conversations about money
And taking out the trash
In our new house?
Will hot flesh exhausting nights of lust
Turn to bread pudding?

Like the bread pudding
My overburdened mother cooked for
Her nine children at home.
In a house with an absent manic depressive father
In a home where I played kick the can
Learned to fish and swim
Lived aside a twin
Visited cabin in the Rockies.
In a house where I watched father headlock teenage brother
For walking away from father's rage.
In a house where I saw mother helplessly wield wooden spoon.
In a house where I felt the sting of black leather on fatless buttocks.

Home is scattered patterns of trust,
Like forest clear-cut and virgin
Patchworks laid out by the saw of time
Cutting through thin layers of onion
To the bitter-sweetness of the past

Flannel, Silk, or Cotton

It didn't matter
What we lay on
In cool wet afternoon
Weather outside
Like bedrock
Wind spattered rain
Against glass window
In staccato and crescendo
Covered silent strokes
On goose bumps
Indoors

Like sweat
Beaded on skin
Droplets of hope
Rolled down
Wet the sheets
Where the weight
Of two bodies
Pressed in a dimple
Glazed
By lovers' dew

Wet Fire

Wind spoke
A language of force
Thrust droplets sideways
Rain struck the man's face
Under his main defense
An REI Gortex raincoat
A yellow lab retriever
Flushed sparrows from tall grass
Wet from nature's pantry

II

Wet from nature's pantry
He stood over her
Naked form
Posed with a slight smile
Hands abreast of hips
Neat black hair
Matted against his belly
Damp and wet and sticky
Remains of love and hunger
Thrust and balance
Loss and lust

III

Time will not reveal all
That remains of that day
But walking in the rain
Has a misery about it
That needs to be taken
Indoors for a walk
Without a leash
Hooked to a bed
And sleigh driven back
To innards of fire

Night Blooms

Her breasts swayed
In chthonic impulses,
Dangling above him
Like two constellations.

His erection
Trapped in wet,
Filled sacred space
Between tawny legs.

Eyes closed,
She moaned.
Hips circulated like vortex,
Quickening and
Crystallizing short gasps.

The man was
Strapped under her
Driven emotions
Like an Indy car
Chassis

She breached
A thin cloak
To her cerebellum:
Impulse entered.

He could be nothing.
To her, a device
For pleasure,
An erection tapping g-spot.

Instinct ruptured
Ripped through
Her rapture
Gripped her loins
Her voice
Her gyrations
Her shivers

Mistaking
Her swollen pleasure
For otherworldly,
His torso squirmed,
Lips alternated
Between
Grin and grimace

Fermenting
Like black humus
Under layers
Of Autumn's fertile beauty
In Spring
She shouted
Blooms

Oh Lover

I offer you a branch of weariness
While I rest in my puddle of loins,
Await a hunger to ravish me and cry out,
My bones crushed to dust.
Raise a blanket over my shadows
That linger in hope
For an untarnished blemish of life.
Skirmishes avoided like clichés
I burn
My husk for you and you lay still,
Unmoving, chained
Under my mask of foolishness
Only to survive the ignorant strokes
Of my adolescent passion
Time and again.
I yearn for a wise folly to release you
From the bones that I locked you under.
Squirming like an ace pilot,
You fly through darkened skies
And still I can't land you lover.
Only when I lay down my stiffness
At the touch of blood
Do I win your love.
Then, I touch the torch
That burns so hotly
At the center of your ember

Shock Waves

Eight hundred miles away
A 6.8 pulsed ripples
Through house
Girlfriend
Two kids
Ex-wife
Brothers

It shook them and stirred them
Gathered them together
In an unseen web
They excitedly compared notes
Without me
Telling what fell and what didn't
What crashed into smithereens
What table they ducked under
Or doorway they stood in

During the earthquake
I sat in a classroom
In Santa Barbara
Mulling over the notion
Of UFO's and aliens
As a myth in our culture
Unawares that I was
Outside the web

In school
I sought answers
To unresolvable questions
About the meaning of life
But it happened
Without me
Anyway
Eight hundred miles away
Shook me out of the loop
And made me into an alien

Playing Hardball

If softballs are so soft
Why do they strike a tinny sound
When hit by an aluminum bat?

In softball games,
Girls stand with feet
Shoulder width apart
In batter's box,
Stride toward pitching mound
With forward foot,
Arc a swing that smacks softball
Away from home plate,
While spectators in grandstands
Clench white knuckles
And watch their girls
Hurl softballs,
Duck errant pitches,
Take one in the back,
Get popped in mouth.

Why do we call it softball at all
If the real ball is hard
And painful
And makes as big a hole
In a girl's pride
As it does any boy
Playing hardball,

Don't tell me this has nothing
To do with sexuality or receptivity
Or desire or longing or erections
Or any other gender issues.
Because a girl can slug a softball
Or hardball
As hard as she wants to
Or is able.

It seems that
The only way
To sort this out
Is to stop using
Adjectives altogether
Name the softball
What it really is –
A small scale version
Of our world.

VICTORY LEE SCHOUTEN

23 Poems

Author Biography

Originally from Central Washington's Yakima Valley, Victory Lee Schouten has made her home on Whidbey Island for the past twelve years. While both places strongly inform her writing, it is the human experiences she depicts which imbue her poetry with the insights, warmth and wit her work is known for. A frequent reader/performer around the Pacific Northwest, Victory's first book and CD, *Wolf Love*, a handmade limited-edition was published last year. Victory and her husband Rob founded Great Path Publishing at www.greatpath.com

Wily Coyote in the Land of Love

The old sorrow
rises and clings
just beneath my skin.

Dampened fury flares,
my good friend stolen
by the hated plague.

I close my eyes
and conjure his escape
from the bitter bone cage.

Remembering too well
fierce black pain
morphine could not quiet.

I knew the secret
true believer,
disguised as worldly cynic.

The gourmet cook and opera buff
bringing home street-boys
and praying for true love.

His elegant jokes
of a successful diet
lost their punch.

Hard to laugh
at familiar gestures
made with skeletal hands.

You sorry little trickster,
I even miss your lies.

Voyeurs

I took
my morning shower

with seven spiders
dangling overhead.

They watched,
making provocative comments.

Down on First

Driving home,
wet streets hiss as I pass.
Safe from the contagion
of defeat.

Huddled sullenly
pressed into doorways,
bruised eyes stare back.

Unanswered pleas
from shifting shadows,
despair in flesh
and blood.

Former glamour
soaked and filthy.
Cars don't stop
on nights like this.

Guarded glances
and mute accusations
from forgotten kids
who know the end of this story.

Shaking the Evil Eye

Mixing Daddy's cocktails
and ducking Mama's rage,
she turned six.
Hiding bruises beneath sleeves
and panic under smiles,
she learned to read the signs.

Fleeing family curses,
beaten and bone-tired,
she ran before sixteen.
Fueled by desperate instinct,
too numb to feel.

Shame tattooed on thin skin
called predators to weakened prey.

Fighting for her life,
with spirit thieves in rented rooms,
frail flame stuttered and failed.
But through boozy nights
and desperate dawns,
an ember refused to die.

One spark is all that's needed
to coax back a fire's roar.
Kind words believed
and lucky breaks grabbed
can fund the grace
to turn a life around.

Wounds healing, scars divine.

Adjustments

I used to be willing
to wear kick-ass sky-high shoes,
violet satin with ankle straps
and three-inch spike heels.
Worth it all.
Stepping firmly,
feverish eyes
the only giveaway,

my feet throbbing as I sashayed,
dazzling and dangerous.

I no longer take that walk.
Unnecessary suffering
now easily given the slip.

Still,
I miss the shoes.

Breaking Spells

Stuck on mental hamster wheel,
frantically rerunning mistakes.
I swallow acid tears,
slip into familiar shame.

Crippled with long held fury,
I finally name names
and tell the secret stories.
Malice revealed loses power.

I call out loud for help,
a backyard faith healing,
a laying on of hands.
Cool water over scorched soul.

Call out the crone tonight.
Ask her to smudge the dark corners
and invite the moon inside.
Bring me home to myself again.

And she does. Blood warms
and mystery settles
her wide skirts around me.
Self returns to body.

Back in my own thin skin,
I take greedy gulps of holy air.
Family curses are old news here,
and the phoenix has been known to dance.

Stronger in the Broken Places

That we all have challenges
is small cold comfort.
I am here alone.

Hot furious joints
dictate sharp demands:
Surrender your strong walk.

Pain can be the path inside,
but it is still pain
and I do not love it.

Losses pile by the door-
ski poles and tap shoes.
Sorting tattered dreams,
I take what I can save.

Once a wild dancer
full of fearless moves,
I am more careful now.

Life in an occupied land
is not for sissies.
Chronic pain has no mercy,

engages in few cease fires
and does not honor white flags.
The body will not give up.
Tissue heals, fails
and heals again,

conducting fragile peace accord.
Reluctant acceptance
of life's indiscriminate
tolls and gifts.

I have come to crave words,
their power and music.
Come to prize stillness.
Learned to hear the wind
and spot the hawk in flight.

They do my wild dancing now.

Listen to the Grandmothers

I like a strong capable man.
Show me how you fixed the gate
while I memorize your jaw line
and inhale your briny scent.

Standing this close
I am tempted to lick your neck
like a creamsicle,
greedily swallowing
your hot dusty vibration.

My ancestors stand beside me
and cry out on your behalf,
"A good man like this
would get the wagons through."

Keep this one granddaughter,
keep this one.
Honor his secrets
and give him your tears.

The Buddha in Montana

You laugh
when I call this
a cowgirl vision quest.

But it is possible
to find a glimpse
of enlightenment

in a chipped cup
of small town
truck stop coffee.

Watching

I watch people all the time,
thinking, that's how you are.
That's how you are when you trust
your body. That's how you move
when you can stand on one leg,
and jump fearlessly ashore.

I don't move that way, but I like to see it.

And that's how you look
when you're scared all the time,
knowing you're doing it wrong.
That's how you pause,
when you're judging each word,
knowing you won't say it right.

I know those fears too.

And there's how you walk
when a good man is yours.
Yours, no kidding around.
That's how you stand when you
can barely believe your good luck.
That's how you smile when you're happy.

I am grateful to know that face.

And that's how you laugh
when you've been badly hurt,
when your sorrow makes weights
of your bones. That's how you laugh
when you don't believe anymore.
That's how you laugh when you're broken.

That false, fragile laugh; chimes near a grave.

And that's how your eyes slowly close
when you know that it's all just a gift.
That's how you smile when you're grateful
to be knee-deep in the whole wonderful mess.

It's how you smile when you mean it.

Live Girls

Late one night I lost big
at high-stakes backgammon
to a night chef from Mitchell's.
"Loser does whatever winner wants."
What fool would make a bet like that?

Paying off my chump wager,
I found myself downtown at 3 am.
Affecting nonchalance, we strolled
down 1st Ave's rain-slick sidewalk.
I wore high-heeled Italian boots,
and a worldly smirk for protection.

The Champ Arcade's red neon sign
flashes all night long: "LIVE GIRLS - XXX,"
photos of glossy girls pout from glass cases.
We laughed entering the dark labyrinth,
brushing by hunched faceless men.

Pockets full of change, we pulled
the curtain around our dingy booth
and stared, arms crossed, at scratched video
of sullen actors faking wild passion.
Feeling dazed, my spirit goes AWOL,
no warning.

In the next booth, our inserted quarters
raise a dull metal screen to reveal smudged glass
beyond which strut and dance, as promised,
three g-stringed. . . Live Girls.

Balanced on spike heels,
they purposefully grind tired young hips,
arch bare shoulders and shake tasseled tits
to old Rolling Stones tapes, lips parted.
Lost eyes stare into mine before shifting
their gaze to the next stranger's face.

Inside or out of the toxic fish bowl,
we've all got our stories.
Window-framed faces intently watch
exotic ghost-girls whose weary souls
have wisely fled. Just goin' through the motions,
blessed cigarette break only minutes away.

One thing is clear. I'm not the only woman here
who's lost more than she could risk.
Ignoring no admittance signs, I find my way
backstage, offering money for minutes of talk.
"Tell me, how can you stand it here?
How do you survive?"

"Listen," she puffs smoke in my face,
"This ain't so bad and it pays a hell of a lot more
than any goddamn waitress work,
and you can pick your hours.
What the fuck, it's just a job."

I repeat, the mantra,
"just a job, it's just a job."

I see her point, recalling the aching legs
and rude remarks of my brief waitressing career.
But still, *how do you survive?*
She laughs, shakes her head, turns back to her mirror.

I back off, unsure, out of place,
wincing as my tongue jabs a cracked tooth.
There is no air left here. I bolt,
head thick with questions I can't ask,
"How do I survive?"

Ducking out the alley door, all bets are off.
I need to get outside now.

Outside, where the ghosts wear more clothes.

Dancing with Ma

Kali Ma's necklace of skulls
slaps against her breasts.
Stunned by her fury,
I watch the goddess dance.

Her bare feet kick,
stomp up a storm
of dust and dread.
She smiles into my eyes,

leaps for my throat,
howling my name.
Puppet on tangled strings,
my legs twitch and jerk.

Let the sweat fly
and the blood flow,
we'll never be more dead
than we are now.

Rattle the bones,
dance the dance,
keep the spell molten,
plunge into the trance.

Boundaries dissolve
and Spirit ignites.

She and I both know
nothing is ever over.

Wolf Love

I read,
most whales
and most wolves

choose life mates,
loving ferociously forever.

I see
some men
and some women

choose pain and blame,
loving gingerly at best.

I want wolf love
with you.

Wolf love, with you.

We All Fall Down

A small-boned tornado,
sweeps through the door,
all perfume, hormones and heat.

The guys at the bar
straighten, stare
as she shakes her hair from her face,

She crosses the floor,
headed straight for the juke,
holding each gaze in the room.

Punching in choices,
restless hips toss,
tender shoulders dancing in place.

Man, you don't see
many women like that,
all wild legs and reckless abandon.

*Ring around the rosy,
pocket full of posy,*

She calls for a drink,
and wallets fly out.
Money slaps down on the bar.

Waiting boots catch on fire
as they stand for their turn,
leather soles beginning to smolder.

*ashes, ashes,
we all fall . . .*

"If you're gonna bruise me,
make it a pretty tattoo," she laughs,
flinging spike heels to the side.

She figures she'll dance,
forget all she knows.
Sure beats what lies waiting at home.

ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

Mock Orange Grows Wild

Mock orange grows wild in the canyon.
Yellow iris crowd the river bank,
and a freight train snakes below.

She sat quietly,
then said, "There is a lot of sorrow in life."
"I know," I said,
"I know."

Losing Jesse

We are not feeling philosophical.
We are not taking it well.
A boy we love is gone.

I never worried about Jesse,
reassured by the spark in his eyes,
and that great crooked grin.

I knew he ran some risks,
but didn't we all run wild at eighteen?

When Jess was ready, he'd find his way.
Not afraid to risk it all,
not afraid to love full-out.

We knew he was too smart, too bold
not to come to want more,
to want to dive deeply into life's mystery.

He'd be a man of compassion
like his father, courageous like his mother,
and open-hearted like his sister.

Thinking of Jesse would make me smile,
and I'd look forward to lunch with his folks,
catching up on family stories.

But this time it went all wrong.
This time there will be no more stories.

Driving fast without a seat belt,
makes better metaphor than action.
Try telling that to invincible young men.

We phone each other with the news.
No one should learn of this alone.
We come with casseroles and flowers. Helpless.

We thought we had the time
to see who he'd marry,
and watch the kids he'd raise.

To learn if he'd be seduced
by his raw talent for writing,
or follow some other blissful impulse.

We thought we had more time.

Spring wheat, cut too soon.

The Middle Way

All paths lead to the center.

There are no wrong turns
or dead ends, following innate map.

Choice and chance
lead deep into chthonic labyrinth.

I show up every day,
try to remain awake.

It's not as easy as it sounds.

Bed Trilogy

1. Coming Home

Slathering on rose scented cream,
I summon your lips to my neck.

Lighting azure candles,
I conjure your hands in my hair.

Painting toenails a dangerous red,
I shiver to your fingertips on my thigh.

Turning down pale yellow sheets,
I dream your smooth shoulders.

Curled in our bed,
I keep an ear cocked

for your car on the gravel,
footsteps at the door.

2. In the Temple

That sweet shady grove
disguised as simple bedroom,
a man with long graceful bones

and closed eyes
sucks ripe mango breasts.
Delicious delirious woman,

sun dappled shoulders
arched against cool sheets,
dark hair fanned on pale cotton,

here in the land beyond time.

3. Etiquette

My breasts
want to write you
a thank you note.

My thighs
favor sending roses.

The Butterfly Effect in Love

"How does *anyone* make it together,
for a dozen years?" she asked,
"Most don't last that long."

I told her what I know.

That the best way is by leaping together
into the deepest black water.

The best way, is by putting it *all* on the table.
Risking more than we can stand to lose.

Do that, and Life throws a party in your honor,
and the dancing will last till dawn.

Throw aside dark fears,
and lay your most shameful secrets
into the hands of your lover.

Then river otters will slip and slide
down delicious muddy banks,
wetly singing songs of praise.

Accept with gratitude
the weakness and the beauty
of the sacred fool you love,

and writers in Amsterdam and Topeka
will suddenly know the perfect
ending for their story.

Do these things, and Brazilian schoolgirls
will break into spontaneous sambas
across hot cement playgrounds,

Do this, and ranchers in the lower valley
will bring home all lost calves
well before nightfall.

Seeing Mr. Olson

He drags irrigation lines to the south,
then heads back over to the garden,
where we pull weeds in Yakima heat.

Shakes his gray head, polishes his glasses
on his shirttail, telling about how easy it is
to bend those sorry wheel-lines.
About how thick the coyotes are these days.

"Did you hear them last night?
That was some kinda concert.
Had to be a dozen or more.

They've gotten bold.
You see them right up near the house.

Not that they usually do any harm,
just huntin' pocket gophers and rabbits.

So many of them. They're lookin' hard for food.
The lame cow just had her calf last week.
A bunch of coyotes could take that calf down."

Mr. Olson carries his 22 when he moves the lines.
He shot a couple last week.
No joy in it, but you can't risk that calf.

He sees winter coming early.
looks for snow by early November.

A touch to my elbow, a nod to my husband,
he springs on old knees into the battered pickup's cab
and roars off down the long driveway,
coffee cup flyin' off the running board.

Prices

At a shower my young mother hosted,
I was allowed to join the laughing women,
soak in the waves of warm affection.

The price of admittance to this cozy paradise,
was that I be quiet. Speaking only if spoken to.
No chattering. No questions.

And I had done it too.

I ate frosted cake and pastel mints,
sipped glass cups of red fruit punch,
thrilled with my good luck.

My feted aunt asked me
to save the ribbons off her gifts.
I complied with rapt attention to detail.

At party's end, a few lingered,
saying last goodbyes,

when tired of being still,
unable to contain my reckless joy any longer,

I burst into a sudden tap dance.

My mother turned, tired, overwrought,
snuffing out my ecstatic soft shoe with a quick slap.

No one knew quite what to say,
quickly finishing goodbyes.

I say, turn that bright-eyed girl loose.
And may she break into dance anytime she pleases.

Change in the Weather

Soot clouds overpower blue sky
and the chill air quickens.

Furious storm predicted.
No surprise, we feel it coming.

Grebes and loons
mill nervously on the choppy bay,
riding chaotic white-caps.

Edgy seagulls hip-hop on dock rail.
Wind from the east, unusual here.

Snow slams into windows.
Garden prayer flags whip horizontal.
Purple crocus tremble and curse.

The dying madrona creaks,
and the crows fly backwards.

Rolling out sweet dough
in warm steamy kitchen,
I crave this wildness, pray for more.

Wind howling now,
the house shudders
with the explosive death scream
of the ancient cedar,
crashing to earth nearby

Nerves catch fire,
and I scramble to recant
my earlier prayers, naive and foolish.

Instantly converting
to the church of safe and sound,
I back from the dark rattling windows,

all life goals
drastically simplified.

Let It Ride

I have worked
barehanded

and risked everything
for passage to this life.

Inexperienced
at being happy,

my imagination
wasn't wild enough

to picture
this day to day.

This life overflowing
with itself,

filled with problems
and perfection.

The shock of contentment
and learning what's real,

still surprised
to be here.

JANET I. BUCK

18 Poems

Author Biography

Janet is a two-time Pushcart Nominee and her work has recently appeared in The Pittsburgh Quarterly, The Paumanok Review, Born Magazine, pith, Saothar Portfolio, Poetry Magazine.com, The Eclipse, pif, and Comrades. She is the author of three collections of poetry: Calamity's Quilt, Reefs We Live, and Bookmarks in a Hurricane. In April 2000, Janet's poem "Acrylic Thighs" was featured at the United Nations Exhibit Hall in New York City.

Acknowledgments

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That Nitro Pill

We no longer drink.
For a reason. It's a dull
and tedious tale.
Suffice to say,
I hopped on the booze horse
and never climbed off.
Fell instead.
A bottle of wine
sits in the fridge,
one glass gone from
yesterday's brunch,
which you drank and I poured.
Its yellowness,
corked and pretty
like an old lover
who was probably worse
in bed than my wish recalls.

Would it matter if I slipped?
And sipped from the church
where my bones grew up.
I pop the top. Take a sniff.
A piece of me floats
in the dregs of its
vinegar giddiness.
I was secure beneath
porous wood like the homeless
find warmth, in short scraps
of wind, near oil cans.
For years, it was that nitro pill
that held off raging heart attack.

Marrow Marrow

Death never knocks
before it enters,
so carnal cannot
squat callously
and listen for its sound.
Even when ill
is stretched out long
like drum skin
over tin frame,
the bounce is
hideous collision
breaking nerves
in tiny ear.

So when you kiss
me lusciously,
I must shove
aside a stack of work,
play in the doll house
of an hour's gift,
smooch you back
under glittering stars.
Time's purse in our bed,
eternally light.
Its strap might break.

You tip my shoulders back;
my tongue comes out
to taste the sucker of yours.
I smell cherry in the air
and fresh lime squeeze.
The rind is our flesh
and we are inside.
Relishing both seeds
and juice.
Mirror, mirror
on caving wall.
Marrow, marrow
take me in.

Dog Hair

Powdered sugar winter snow
is falling on asphalt,
trumping the cards of autumn leaves.
Windows fog, contain my pant
as I gather my bones
for the drive to the gym.
My hair disheveled, graying now
at temples of thought.
Its attic door ajar, ghosts rising
buried ash to meet moot dawn.

Freshness of chill attacks my legs,
what's left of them.
Pristine hills tucking the valley
in a crusted portent--
washed by bars of Ivory soap.
Unsung hymns some studded tire
will leave a teething divot in.
The freeze will weed out the crowd;
few will think of swimming laps--
but those who like an icy lake--
hunting dogs that lean on
whistles calling them.

My limp doesn't match
how happy I am just to stand
surrounded by my limit fire.
Effort is a winding road
that has no end, but that's all right.
Cold is a minty breeze
in whipping cream
squirted on a slice of pie.
Pain, like dog hair, reminds one
of the crawl and the beg
and piercing claw of crosses
borne on heaving breast.

Ivory Keys

Air is a blast of freeze this autumn night.
You're workin' late and I'm alone.
Moments seem like acorns fallen
from a tree, just sitting there
in orange leaves awaiting
the scoop of chestnut hands.
Our puppy sleeps in slight repose--
nervous, ready, eager ears--
a woman with her son at war.
The clock ticks in its own droll way
outside the cloisters of our need.

I think of all the other darks
you've whitened like old dirty socks
lesser men would toss aside
because of holes,
the darning required to keep love fit
for wearing in the frozen month
of aging's blah menagerie.
Wonder like a music box winding down
if I've ever made you feel
as if you weren't here,
important as an ocean's current
is to wood along the beach,
stroking me without words as I wrote.

Electric chairs of gratitude
popping out my wayward eyes.
I smear your smile's calligraphy
in privy pastures of a poem,
knowing it is only dust
on ivory smooth piano keys.
Fire of cherish--fragile never facile whim.
I long for you to interrupt this silent ache.
We are relished pendulum.

Cold Crepes

Another brunch has come and gone.
Anger at dismissal's wind
has withered to a languished breeze.
I wanted more than orange rinds
in batter waiting for the pan.
Your birthday gifts were well-received.
For they were books I did not write.
Politeness rules when pain erupts.
Our secrets mice behind the fridge.
I leave their scraps in forms of pages
sitting in the torching sun.
The imminence of waiting grave,
an owl hooting at the frost.
Sweat and tears are fully clothed.
Hatted by the chattering.

I study angles of your eyes
like pool players chalk a stick.
Hope on hope, a candle sits
that might just pass a flame along.
Cold crepes are folded poignantly
in perfect rows, fruit is washed,
the table set, knives poised
with their silver moons facing
a center our hearts refuse.
We can't act like the warm kind
I swirl in butter bubbling,
smoking in the pending burn,
so the eating brand
will have to stand for something
greater than their flour.
Mother runs her fingertips
around her glass of Chardonnay
as if the rim will start to sing.

November 9th

Today, November 9th,
I spend the afternoon stuck on an overpass
behind a "Wide Load" truck,
behind a stalled motor home,
its shiny purple paint job, just washed,
but the engine dead, I suppose.
My radio tuned to NPR;
lawyers argue hotly about
the shape of ballots in a Florida county
and political knickers are twisted
like a corkscrew no one knows
who owns the bottle for.

The police arrive on the scene.
Bright red lights of justice writ
in black and white.
Impatient lines behind my car
growing chunks of centipedes.
They tell me I can "squeeze"
between the guardrail and the truck,
an inch to spare on either side of my mirrors.
So I sit, afraid of the risk
as the horns blare and the ads play.
Ten men pull out their cellular phones,
little red ants on a bulky tree,
the sugar of progress beneath wet hands.
Rant of minutia fading in the winter fog.

Eleven years ago today, the Berlin Wall fell.
A protest in Germany wails across
the ocean, lands in the nest of my lap;
accent grates on unschooled ears.
Neo-Nazis have struck again and killed,
as deftly as an umbrella pole slits an autumn leaf.
Crows speckle a nearby rooftop.
Hopping about its grainy shingles
like buttons popping off a blouse.
Their common blackness gathering
around a meal I cannot see.
My arms seem short and I am small.
Cuspid of a lazy angel
chewing on a cushy dawn.

The Orphan

Mother, you are my dream scroll
drifting in the tight neck of a bottle
floating a sea frozen by death.
Its vault a box I cannot open
with a single pair of hands.
My hair frizzed by
sedatives of words
latching on the figurative--
when I needed you
to comb its beaches with
unchipped shells of fingertips
now buried beyond
a memory's reach.

Father is kind, so generous
at wallet time, a Noah's Ark
when storms of knives
threaten motion's apple core.
He sponsors conferences of strength,
mugging rapists of my fate.
I tap him, questioning
the unsaid and the sacred,
but the keg is dry.
My arms are tired and muscles
lean toward atrophy.
The wait, a noose on creaking
scaffolds of the years.

The wish to know you--
tumor brewing underneath
the stitches of a tragedy.
I wonder what my stanzas mean.
Hang them in a closet's darkness,
hoping wrinkles shake out
creases ironed in.
My strange skin, this quilt of art,
a tapestry that has no roots.

Pocket Change

*"What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?"*

T.S. Eliot, "The Wasteland" -- 1922

As locust of grief gathers its legs
for the pounce and traffic spins
in its clotted grave,
answer escapes by channel of fog.
I am seized by the question's thrust--
turn toward ways you fanned a purse
and opened it on Christmas Eve.
A man with his face inking a sign
marked homelessness, dotting
your "I" with a tear of having more
than your heart required in wallet clutch,
pushed you to extend your gift.
You dropped \$5 in his lap.
He smiled the way a cock must crow
waking up a sleeping farm.
Teeth became a rope of pearls,
real in their soft reward.

Passersby withdrew from slug trail poverty
and the wind raced its breath
toward frost and clung.
"Pocket change, that's all we are
and all we have, trading pennies for a dime."
The song of it all in photograph
rekindled decades hence in water bath
for wisdom's tiny carrot curl.
"One clash with fate, that's all it takes,"
you murmured quietly, as if your vocal chords
had violins in lumpy throat.
That single reach. Rendering a bible's jacket
more than paper babble bound.
Undaunted by his drunkenness and sour cough,
a memory pushes through my hands.

Brussels Sprouts

The pool was warm;
we were seaweed
slung and drifting silently.
The locker room was a cold blast
reviving aches, reverberating
moans and groans
and other mortal assonance.
Nipples taut against the wind,
Brussels sprouts on cracking plates,
youth just passed at hurry's gait.
Rose of easy gone for good.

We talked about the trivial
of temperatures and icy roads.
Breaking hips like toothpicks
on an olive ring we tried to skewer,
but hit the seed.
"Yesterday," one woman said,
"thorns and bristles lined the street;
I swore at them, their littering;
today, in frost, they looked like lace."
Taken back and whittled down,
I sensed the way her struggles
brought her fish to fry.

Nature plays with leveling,
always finding Middle C
on dusty old piano slats.
Orange sunsets hanging out
in boxes of stashed ornaments,
beating up the black of dark.
Mercury of rising stars
in glassy-eyed thermometers.
Standing now would always be
that quick green kiss
beneath the drying mistletoe.
Our bones, shot tigers, all of them,
had things to say about the world.

The Laundromat

Day turns like chugging dryers.
Time, a simple Laundromat.
Put a quarter in a dream.
Watch the heat destroy
the cotton of the field.
Hours in wads too big to churn.
He reads a tattered address book,
scratching off the names
of friends who've
beat him to a pending grave.

Heel up. Hold.
Think. Be brave.
He sets it down
in aging's wax--
on saucer earth
sliding out from under will.
His back creaks--
a carriage of sorts
in hardened snow.

White cane wondering consumes--
will there be islands outside
quicksand, struggling?
Body bales can smell
the rain, smell
the sugar of the frost.

Paper Doves

It's time to do the tree--
but the doing undoes me,
twisting tendons, grieving joints.
Lights are wrapped
in bumpy circles, messy cords,
jingling like a tambourine.
What you left in weathered boxes,
losing bottoms as they drag
me out from closeted spell,
ornamental archery for
bringing in the baking scents
of cinnamon and gingerbread.

Paper doves, with glitter on their
brittle wings, wire feet,
attached to dawns you've
left to fend, now rise alone.
Eggs you glazed with
tiny scenes inside their shells.
How on earth you packed
their wombs with perfect
gentle fingertips stays way
beyond my awkward grasp.
So this is how it feels to walk
on raw bright glass of memory.

I love rich colors of Christmas hours--
deep magenta, mossy green,
gold that grabs a shade of wheat,
makes it almost savable.
But mourning bells still hammer so.
Take chisels to your crystal balls.
Suck moisture from our mistletoe.
I flock the dipping branches now
with cans of white derivative,
submerge myself, dry bags of tea,
in liquid, loving, languishing.
I drop a ball on marble floors.
It shatters like a passing comet,
leaving splinters in the moon.

Chimera

For Julie Morgan

Every Christmas, your heritage returns--
wired claws of a cold cat,
hungry, caked with rain and dirt,
scratching at a broken screen.
Your body used like a bullet-proof vest
to shield another from her pain.
I see that man inside my head,
storming in the unlatched door,
stewing whiskey for saliva,
aiming a gun, firing it,
slamming every treasure chest
of hope and health you ever owned.

Years of bitter afterward,
obesity like breaded dough
to wrap the skinny ghosts within.
A family with unskilled tears
that could not find a place to drop.
Bedsore for a turning pillow,
clouds of sobs, pity's phlegm
to suck through tubes.
Someone sent a plastic tree
staked by pink and gutless bows.

If hatred is a chimera,
its icy constitution hangs
on silhouettes of his remains.
I wear its sheet as halos
made of thorns you bore.
Your life, your death
just stood for things.
Bars of soap that cleaned
the counters of our blood.

Ice & Worry

You drive off slowly.
At our ages now, the pace
is a predictable thing.
My waving arms
rusty blades of tired
windmills waiting
on the spring's return.
Tires chew the rocks
like nuts, spit their shells
beside the road.

Fog--same thickness
as it was in winters past,
but eyes are draining
batteries, losing juice,
exactitude.
The darkness didn't used
to sting the light,
make fear swell
so guardedly.

Ice and worry side-by-side.
I want you home
at Christmas time,
even if you pick
at ways I set the table,
fail to polish silverware.
Poke at every centerpiece
that isn't balanced color-wise.

Grate on me like pine cones
do on beds of leaves.
Love with spurs
and thistled hour.
Safe and plumped
and chocolate-dipped,
outside the traffic's teething rites.
Our bodies hold no promises.

Quiet Cooks

I sit here, a soothsayer
with little on my tongue.
My step-mother pours her flesh
into a grave--last long drop
from a shot-glass of bourbon
at the kitchen bar.
Refusing to eat,
buoyed by booze and pills.
Suspenders of time
are ready to snap.
You study mordant scents
of death like curry
that steals the flavor of rice.
Your firm retreat
puts coupons for a suicide
into the petals of her hands.

When she leaves this earth
and leaps to peace or wherever
she's pointed now, you will say
some head-pat thingamajig:
"She wasn't happy anyway,"
proceed with clearing a table,
rinsing a dish that might
have held redder meat.
Quiet cooks us brown and dry.
Incessant silence--a scab
that cries to lift, but can't.
My scarlet veins of writer's pulse--
a creedal error, a database to flat ignore.
Code red tears won't fall here.
We don't like rain,
afraid of what it just might spell--
distorting the smooth silk pajamas
of a desert chosen long ago.

Purpose Flames

On my back. Staring up.
Headphones on. TV screen.
The dentist's drill is in my mouth.
He is preparing to cap a tooth,
seat its gold and resilient stone just so--
to guarantee my cracking smile
will keep firm beat with beauty's demands
and I shall be able to chew my food.
Live footage of a plane crash in Taiwan
comes across the ceiling glass--
flames in chartreuse rushing blood
attack the screen. Camera shifts from shells
of metal, body bags, and silver storms
to wailing mourners on the tarmac,
hammering to contain their grief.

I box the facts above my head
and push them back in closets
privy to the dark, respecting my need
by shutting my eyes.
My dentist is an artist with his tools
and paste and flossing rites,
a patcher of silent decay.
We were lovers long ago.
Both young, in bed with dreams
and fresh-squeezed oranges of suns,
minus tarnished follicles time's tweezers
would dye light, remove.

Our bodies firmer pilots then.
Before his wife had radiation.
Before he had three heart attacks.
Before I had my hips revised
and shoulder fashioned from a pipe.
The movie glass above our heads
seems far away, but closer
than an uttered prayer.
Our eyes meet just once
between those flames of human terror,
sensing all irrelevance
of middle-class grass and dripping ease.

I pay my bill. Leave silently.
Drive home to write.
Frost has warmed to shiny dew.
My own erosion--kaleidoscope of tininess
no pen can capture with its point.
Missives in their greedy ink must try
reversing dry crevasse.
I recognize my stale brand of witnessing.
Make the effort, foam on wave.

There are autumn leaves
lounging on the white picket fence.
All our halos look so dull.

The Hurried Poem

There are times when I break
the rules of artistry.
And inspiration is a charlatan
betraying my trust.
I drop it like the hot handle
of a metal pan--in touch
with sense, impending burn.
Rush to clean a messy house.
Leaving pictures hanging tilted.
Words in open bags of chips.
Smoky mirrors with toothpaste spray.
Disheveled dust that settles
on my busy desk.
I'll find the print that foot will make
in blowing sand tomorrow
when it's light once more.

For now, flesh wins.
Yours. Its velvet mulch,
dream state, cheesecake fairy tale.
A picket sign that
protests all that loneliness
which might have won
a seat in beds.
Love makes a woman hurry up.
Peel out of the driveway's lap,
chewing on gravel
like Christmas nuts.
A pen will be discarded bows
of violins, still pulsing with
a string of thought.
You kiss my ear. Your fingers win.
And I am greyhounds at the gate.
Paper is a constancy--
a bar of soap for opening.
But we could be gone--
quick as sneeze
from fresh-mowed grass.

The Sushi Bar

Face it. Fish weren't
the only raw entities
in the airport lounge.
Bodies packed like
corkscrew pasta
in a bag.
Scanning crowded walls
for a file that said:
"open me"
before I'm gone
from grocery shelves,
outdated as
a quart of milk.
Eat me like a nectarine.
I'll seed it and skin it.
Can it. Freeze it.
Do any, all
and all again
to run away
from loneliness.

I'll patch your jeans.
Do your heaps of ironing.
Buy you things.
Pour you drinks.
Attack your thirst.
Take you places.
Slip a diamond in gold
prongs over humps
of aging hands.
Rampancy of readiness
had chapters begging
for a thumb.
Hearts aching for
the lark of love.
I'll wash kimonos
with a kiss.
Jump your
dying battery.

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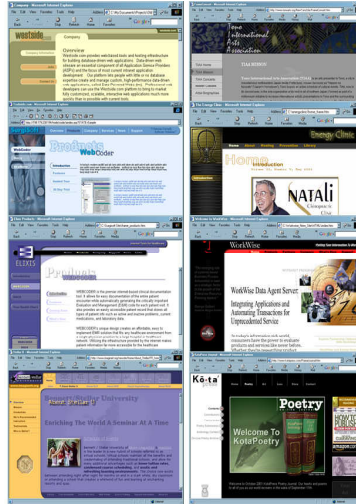
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DEDICATION

As always this work is dedicated to Dakota Jones, born & died, March 11, 1999.



Bereavement support is offer in the KotaPress Loss Journal at www.KotaPress.com/frameLoss.htm