

WOODSPURGE

Bonwill

WOODSPURGE

Selected Poems by:

Jo Merrill

WOODSPURGE

a memorial printing
selected poems
of Jo Merrill
1929 - 2002

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Poetry by Jo Merrill

JM/bjw

For Bill

now more than ever

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WOODSPURGE

Were You?

Sometimes a child looks
at you, and you swarm
back in history; ice caves
shimmer, open fires
smoke hot.

You had memorized clouds
the shape of stones. Archaic
animals fed your hunger.

And now a filament
of memory holds the
child's eye to yours.

You startle. Have you
forgotten something that
it knows? How to weigh
the weather, smell a kind
of danger, a kind of love?

The child stares. Your
eyes fill with ancient
stars. Are we home yet?
you want to ask it. Have
you been here before?

MARCH

"You were born in the worst storm
that year." she said. Struck out
of Eden on the ruddy way. The bridge
near silted under, half the town
fitful in its sleep.

Wind was confetti, shreds
and streamers where the naked elms
had clawed, dank and dumped
all on that dumb parade -- 2 Model T's
choked on mud. My mother choked
on me.

"But we made it," she always said,
granting ether, alcohol and starch
could steel four walls to seal us
from that crowded air.

Yet eyeing this alien thing
so loved but unlike,
that night came storming in
her eyes again as though
the weather'd marked us both
like winded genes.

And she was right. These
fractured seasons war the blood
and raging, March comes true
forever, Mother, the most uncertain
month the year metes out.

A skinny wind shrieks to the sun
streaking through frozen rain.
Mud moves, boiling on ice
striking a strobe of lightest
light to darkest dark,
as at the ends of livid sentences
all living things crouch
like question marks.

Verities and Variables

Saturn in her incandescent
rings watches winter sleep walk
off our edges. And April sling
her lingo: bright and yellow
bright and green. Sun peeling
February's faded skin.

Yearning leans out the window,
peepholes scrubbed through. Wings
of honey bee begin to hum. Down
in its rhizome, Iris gathers blue.

And Saturn in her monotonous
season, sees the back side of
her neighbor start to shine
start to shine.

Somewhere in Saskatchewan

The first time
I ever thought of anything
going on forever was on
a prairie road.

A painting would
know its edges
bound us in, then
let us go.

But our eyes see
only sky, bent all
around, making an
infinity of blue to
frame an infinity
of green.

This must be why
strangers came
and stayed, reckoning
everything went on
forever. And the edges
of the earth were
for others to fall off,
rolling down that long
slow curve
of blue.

Praying Mantis

And she told me of the time
in the arbor in the last month
of summer when the moon,
blood orange, couldn't cool
the leaves and hot light
dripped to the dim ground
where she lay half sleeping.

And she told me of the sounds
of the night; a distant indifferent
quarrel, the whine of a dog at a
neighbor's door. She told me of
a dim motion in the moon beyond
her eyelids, the sudden scream
that lifted her hair. And just
there a prying mantis, a cicada
clutched in its death grip,
he who had sung just as the sun
fell, who screamed as his brittle
back shattered, as he broke
sucked up in the feeding.

Now drowned in human blood
as we are; I hear that screaming
with the old terror, belying
the benevolence of summer
the attitude of prayer.

The Nameless Anger

Observe,
it's like our very hairs
turn in toward
their follicles
nothing
reached to silence
only
teeth touch

and our bodies
heavy and cold as icebergs
in some aimless ocean
drift.

The Great Horned Owl

1. Feather wrapped in the furred shadow, he opens his topaz eye, blinks contempt at my twig snapping. Late afternoon amethyst flickers, Song birds startle, fall silent. He has waited for them with no malice. Only need has marked them with his smoldering eye.

I can see their singed feathers, the spreading ring of burnt ash. He has hungered, willed them into evening where he lives. Now because of me they panic, fly backward into morning, into the sun's hot saffron eye.

2. He followed her into sleep swallowed the gaunt rats running from her dreams, sat on the bedpost blocked the moon, transmitted nightmares through his glittered stare. She circled the sun in her terror, felt the scorch of it, wings fanning fire. Cold shadows covered the sun finally, and she fell burning, a talon turning turning in her heart.
3. Finally he forgave her. Or forgot. When she woke, she saw the moon swell gold. Through the window feathers floated, drifted toward her, caught in cobwebs above her head. Yet she lay sleepless, moon spattering the walls with yellow eyes, rattles of bird bones in her skull, feather bed rustling, sounds of muffled wings.

Wind in the Madrona

Wincing she whipped and whined,
trapped in the winding sheets
of wind; fierce on to trip her
tip her in her stance.
Even the birds, the blue sky
weighed on her unwieldy head.

The wind demanded more,
howling, hurling hail
and rain drenched epitaphs.
She leaned again,
knew the dance designed to sway her,
drive her to dementia down.

One tree, solitary and singled out
to swallow all the winds
of all the world; to deal
a hurricane humility, domesticate
the devilish gale?

Then one day
she smiled
Irony fused to iron
in her spine. Suddenly
she laughed. She shook
The unaccustomed clatter rattling
in her martyred limbs scattering
the clouds and cloying sky, rumbled
in her roots, shot green currents
through her ravaged hair
One day she laughed
And turned
And leaned away

Cinnabar Is What I'll Say to My Husband If I Should Leave Awhile

It's as though I thought
I held that bridge up
with my eyes and if I
turned my back it would
collapse and make that crash
because my ears were there
to hear it.

And along the freeway
seeing shooting stars
I know they blow because
I'm there all big eyed
and sighed up with
the look of it.

Vanity O Granny
you have got it. Go
off to the city where
the air is so full
of things you can't focus,
the locus is nowhere, the point
is to let your eyes wander.

Like your son says,
"My mother's attention
span is so short she
reads the dictionary so
she won't hang up on the plot."
It's not that sonny, although
you're only put on intermittently,
let me disagree, just for the record.

There is one word I've
heard more years than I
can accurately remember.
It has a round round sound
I come back to as in
treadmill, ball bearings,
money, maypole, the moon moon
and "cinnabar," there you are
again. That means red, means

Cinnabar ... Cont ...

metal, is part Mercury --
cynopar, cinabre, cinobre,
cinnabaris, kinnabiar, zinjafre,
zinjifrah, sinoble, sinople,
sinope -- in all tongues defies
my intent to describe it.

And were I to close that
book for the bit in the
city, you'd bug me. Knowing
I'm only half there when
you're half here. Having
only half said it: Cinnabar

You are.

Even When We Cry

The sounds are muffled by
the wind:
deserts blown in by the sea
and towns all disappeared
in dust.

Even then, when hate begins
to crust the country like
a scab,
the deaf gone deafer
the weaker washed away
in sand.

Even then we cry and even
then their words are oily like
the sour wind.
And in the Parliament they shrug
and shrug again.

And pick their teeth with trees
and spit the splinters
in the wind.

Not Really

A famous poet's wife
once told me,
"One doesn't need words.
Intellect
can be sensed."

Ever since I've worn
a perfume called "Insightful"
waiting for a rich writer
to sniff me out.

Home Town

I know the names of these tall trees
singing a summer almost gone.
Below the branch above the earth
unreel the streets, and houses line
our valley floor.

Inside each door and locked
in their particular maze
some few familiar and some dear,
I know the shape and sound of signature.
Silent going in their days are legion
names I never knew.

Each day beginning . .

On main street this early hour
signals stop and go,
reflect on wet, and rainbowed
neon shines; the little town
allotted all by numbers, lines.

By lines we come and numbered
pause and go.
The rain and tears remembering
other places, other years.

On the Farm

Papa's picking apples
again today.
God help me
or any bird comes by.
Applesauce up to my ears,
can barely breathe.
Two legs tread sticky ooze
to keep my head
above it all.

Picking apples again
he daily fumes
"all this good fruit
gone to waste." Oh taste
it cows, come with your
liquid eyes and grind
your grass sweet teeth on
all these treats;
eight trees, a million twigs
each with its red globe
of pulp and peel, come
hungry kids from anywhere.

FREE APPLES FREE APPLES

and free ME from
a glassy horde, the rancid
rows of naked cores
vinegar up my nose
and
skin skin skin skin skin

Time

The clock has hands
divulging facts to me
of little consequence
except perhaps as impetus
for changing acts from one
to two to three.

It is the wheels
engage me, the wheels
turning, turning endlessly,
revolutions which my mind
reveals as space
I had not seen before.

And I become a choreography
of bees; the language
of each tree, each twig
and every breath and breeze
appears most intimately known
and all logistics
of that space imprint
an image on my bones,

as I search out
and find a flower;
to turn and turn in
its perfume, extracting
only what I need
to prove the logic
of the bee
and of the bloom.

The hands say nothing,
nothing. They have tilted
only slightly in their time,
but in that while behind
the face the wheels
spun free

Time Cont ...

and I
returning now to caligraph
a dance of distances;
compressed and codified.
Perhaps a silent thing
save for the sound
of spaces changing
in the wake
of wings.

The Juggler

He has four knives
in the air, a ball balanced
on his nose and in
the background
a burning hoop.

He is oblivious.
The knives dart and
glitter, glancing
as his unquiet eyes.

If we asked would he say
it was easy (sound could
shatter these blades
like shrapnel)? Could we
catch his eye (blink
and the sky could fall)?

Will we always fear
for him then, seeing
the scarred wrists,
the missing finger?

And in a r.e.m. stage
flinching
his eyes watch nightmares
of empty air?

Clear Cut

I am all that is left here
by the river. Imagine I am
making a small eddy, trailing
bubbles in the sun
hiding fishes.

Rivulets of mud are beginning
to foul the river, the mountain
is washing away. Imagine we
hear the ghosts of the stricken
forest stalking the sky; they
who shook the clouds with their
singing. Who dazzled the sun.

I sang like that once. To have
been so tall, so close to stars.
And now I am only reflection,
trailing my dreams like moss
in the murky river.

In the next storm I will wash
downstream and beach myself on
on a stretch of sand, watch gulls
arabesque in the whirling wind.

Too soon I will be a watery ruin.
Nothing will take my place.
Imagine the tides coming closer
Oceanus, she with the last word.

A word that might make paltry men
tremble, still their avarice.
Imagine there might be time left
to make peace with the forests.
The hungry sea.

I Don't Do Literary Talk

The mainland mountains shout
to the island now. People
standing on the shoreline flats
applaud the peaked horizons,
the far off hallelujah sky.

As in conversations, we sometimes
go past fog and up to heights
where even mountain goats might
slip, to make a sculpture, or
more plausibly, a pile of ice.

But mostly cautious, we assume
our ordinary stance, note the
more momentous altitudes, their
steeps and slopes, shine and
substance. And hear again their
hailing shout.
We open our windows
and look out.

Fog

Yesterday we wore our crystal wigs
with flash, flaunting ourselves in
sun. Now light has left us, wafting
off in grey chiffon.

Music drifts from somewhere faintly.
Birds busy with winter berries; gone.
Horizons, hard edges join the music
melting in the snow.

This is the land of no sight, no
feeling, where we might float forever,
not hear even the fog horns in the
sound, their ancient asking:

Where are we
Where are we going?

Return

Hot home in an August
night, the small town sweats
and watery mirages rise
of misted bridges and a city
half slipped into a bay.

The moon catching edgeways
leaves of the willow, forms
again moving in the mind as
light lines of water.

Let the lines light --
light there across the dusty
road, field flowers
long gone.

Let come, as from
the distances of clouds,
that for city; the faces
of friends showered as petals
in the softest rain.

Our Best Friend

When it isn't being held up by him,
it's washing right down the river;
bridges gone along too, and the trees.
Growing things should stay stuck, I say,
But he is undismayed -- sooner or later
water has the last word.

It couldn't be we take him for granted,
eyes only occasionally out to sea.
And most times like a banty rooster
he blurts out the death of dragons
and other doers of evil deeds, defends
his lady love, schemes to repair the planet.

We scoff then, knowing at bottom
he's richer than we are. And at night's
asleep in 30 seconds with a smile on
his face. Some people are born that way --
knowing all the secrets beforehand
and still willing to give it a try.

Once he holds a stick in his hand
it turns into something: a house or
a whistle. And he whistles us home
that way, eyes glowing like moon shells,
just ahead of the tide, the one that turned,
the one our ship will come in on,
The big one
everyone waits for

After a Wakowski Reading

Standing like a bird
down and hungry from
a long flight,
head gone this way
that, eyeing crumbs
the young hold warmly
in their hands.

Diane, I couldn't make the moon.
My technology is limited
to fallen stars.
The young girl
behind me pulls my hair.
Only, she said,
"to see your face."
Odd, I feel
my face not adding up
or any words designed
to make that quarter
million miles to plant
a flower or a flag.

The students crowd
behind, ahead of me
by 20 years.
This hour their minds are
out among new constellations,
light now, near you,
standing like a bird
head gone this way,
that.

This being vulnerable
needs only living
to ensure it.
The friends who're
"never there" the child
who never was.
The reverse can be
that lucid of aloneness,
as ever at removes.

After a Wakowski Reading Cont ...

My transparent body
floating in this depth
discovers itself
divided, small bodies
floating past
beyond the glass and into
greens and darks
I only dreamed.

Diane, I couldn't
make the moon.
My tickets have been
lost. Lovingly I have
misaid them.

Except tonight, gone
on that trip, wanting
to tell you who've
come down now
like a bird, hungry,
head gone this way,
that.

CAUGHT IN THEIR CRAW

One eagle, 5 crows
float over --
no only the eagle
floats, the crows
flap
ragged black flags
sqawking like doom
diving at, flapping
around, flaying him --
their wings; nagged
maneuvers. Bad mannered
little bullies,
silly ineffectuals.

This public uproar
this rude racket
shreds only air,
not him. He lines in on his favorite
limb, glides on gilded
air, lights, becomes sculpture
indifferent as stone.

Flap away rags; rattle
your empty feathers, gossip
beggar between you --
"He thinks he's
so much better -- CRAW CRAW
we'll get him next time -- CRAW CRAW

No you won't
worm eaters.
What you think
he thinks he is --
he is.

**Mothers and Daughters
Mothers and Sons**

The people who walk on hot coals
one foot after another flames licking
bare feet, eyes molten with hope
mouths whispering "cool moss cool moss."

Along this way we take them
hand in hand. May their bodies
never be less than whole
step after step
their spirits not flounder.

Along this way we lead them
whispering "cool moss" like
a litany. Wanting to run
wanting to rest. Wanting
them not to tire, not to
thirst. Never to catch the scent
of live flesh burning.

For Tim

Just you and I
watching bluebirds
busy in the apple
blossoms by the old
house on Eping Lane.
You were almost four
and we were holding
hands and you were
quiet. I think you
sensed something happening
maybe only once a life.

When you remember
high spots do you
think of that? Or
are they memories of
first loves or the
"big one" you caught
with Dad on blue
Wallowa Lake?

Things like apple
blossoms and blue
birds don't make poems
anymore, and the word
"happy" has more or
less become like
Christmas; something
you buy and tie up
with a tinsel string.

The thing is, I take out
those apple blossoms and
the bluebirds as often
as I can. And you,
of course. You
have to be there, to
make that old word as
true as it ever was
Or could be.

Realizing My Limitations in Cold Country

I will say I saw the glaciers
tongue between teeth, agog.
The books don't say how
the ice just hangs there looming
like history, half a sky full, hung
there, cracked bones, boulders
in its craw.

Like an ant with an eye on
a hailstone, I step sideways.
Having been halfgone in a gulleywasher
once in my life, I don't
kid myself about being picked
for a cruise on an ark. Or holding
an Indian Ocean up with two hands.

Midsummer

Cars look absurd in rain
great slobbering machines
with tinny arms to
flick off tears.

The world's gone astigmatic
bless it.
All out and walk
who gets a hi
on oil slicks
wet hair
hot asphalt hiss
and rain
undoing dust
the leaves lived in.

Mc Donald

I wanted her hugely eyed
and hollow jowled, a cud
chewer blowing that sweet
warm wind.

Slow she'd be, and placid,
pushing the ferny grasses
through like a fat machine
making cow pats fit
for posy food.

But what she was, she was:
meat market, blunt bodied
small eyed. Simian, I said,
and named her for a bun.

She skittered and shied
red eyes rolling, brayed
like a donkey, scattered
nervous dung

But each day she got
more beautiful or I got
blinder. And when they
hailed her off to town

she went so calm
I shuddered, knowing those
bones would rattle my
dreams and blood run through
my days like a river

And I'd have to cross it
hypocrite skirts up
over my eyes, spatula
held tight
like a rudder.

Something for Charlie

And so I imagine
a cloak for you
I would sew myself
to be both
dark and light laden
with symbols; a saber's tooth
and wings always
an eye in every
button hole, badges
flowers and ice
some of every season.

But your spirit grows
more huge each year. The thing
would weigh
you down.

So I simply thread
you through my eye
again in ten bright shades
of silk.

Watch through a prism
while I say this
it's what there is.

Photograph from Richard

"There was a voice
of the child in herself
unburied, who had long
ago insisted: I want only
the marvelous." Anais Nin

1. Wings of the cicada
sing in the photograph
before me, transparent
between the veins
where our flesh crowds the human
self to earth; here the vision
is of air rainbowed toward
a rim of flight.

And he is motionless
on paper, magnified
enormously past life,
his destiny a child's
guess: unreal mirages,
dreamings of a jeweled
and spangled air.

Be marvelous, Bug.
Let your awkward armored
shell float upward,
dust moats shine
black diamonds in the sun.
And in your mirrored eye
the moon smiles
as when I was young all imaginings
of heaven did. And earth.
When I was young.

2. "There was the voice
of the artist ...
saying, I will create
the marvelous." Anais Nin

Photograph from Richard Cont ...

Underground he lies
entombed, awaits his
birthday; seventeen.
Gawked and gimpy
with his vaulted years
and unprotesting, just
come out of all that silent
black. "Stoned," you said
and put him on a pad, a
bit of wood and peeling
paint, trained your lens
on that unlovely stuff "stout
body, wide blunt head and
large transparent wings"
the dictionary reads.

Blind, the dictionary has
no eye for poetry or art --
it is a singleness of things;
your lens a multiplicity
as mind and eye make
random bits take notice,
join and then emerge again
as one, as from a darkroom
or from underground
comes art or nature
cries Creation

in the open eye.

Opium

Immobile in a still
and somber noon
the giant oriental poppies
flare and glow. Ruthless
as flame would stir
a paralytic air to make the forms
of it at least ice blue,
melting as it touched, or
better; thunderheads black
as the raw dope running
in the veins.

The rain won't come, a hundred
days now the earth has orbited
as our vacuum stays unchanged
heavy, motionless. Sun rises,
sets, unseen. Unseeing. Grey
moss gathers.

I scream and only
the letters of the word
"scream" appear vapourously
in the clotted air. Your mouth
was moving in the last wind
before this stillness. That
was weeks ago.

Now
only the poppies dare.
Damn them. Vulgar and defiant.
Indifferent to delicacy as a fat
red-stained whore. "So what?"
they say. *Papaver Somniferum*.
palaver.
O stay while I find wit
to praise you.

In Style

Well, I see now
they've discredited
encounter sessions
free sex
shrinks in general
and sugar.

We're back to
a grain of salt
our own council
keeping secrets
and more or less monogamy.

It's like I hang on
to all my old clothes forever
figuring
the way things go
I'll be hip
now and then
anyhow.

Photographs of the Findings at Lasceaux

Lens centers on one
leaf, one stone, one
falling star; the very same
vignettes we watched
as Cro-Magnon before we gave
our bones up
for the digs.

Ah Lasceaux -- your loveliness --
I want to be there now
inside you, as inside each
opening eye or lens.

Give me my cave.
And I will leave you
something. A grove of
poems
tiny island
my very bones.

Patient in the Next Bed

Drop by drop by dark
drop the needle dispenses
life in her arm. Inside
her ulcer bleeds, her words
drop on my drugged ear.

I've seen the squalid
town she lives in, houses
like moldy loaves against
a raw hill, her kids, her
old man killing steers at
the packing plant. With
a pistol now, not the old slow
way with sledge hammers.

"Being Friday," she says,
"my old man's tying one
on -- he probl'y had
a 200 head day."

On the green drapes, orange
squares swim ceilingward,
her voice hits the silence
in waves.

Later my love lifts me
with one hand from
darkness, his voice
reading Rimbaud like
a prayer.

Orange squares drifting
down, settle in their corners.
She is quiet.
I turn to her dark eyes fastened
on us like a spaniel's.
Slowly,
as the bloody bottle empties,
they fill with tears.

Mistletoe

The kiss shimmers
in the trees
saprophyte
it sucks
the rain, and roots,
sends a tremble
shudder in the leaves.
The white lobes
on the branch
blaze.

Who's to know
what beauty
warrants sun:
the tree -- part earth
the kiss
part sky and both
of each?

Say this is
known:
the kiss is

brilliant
lightning
snow
crystal melting

seasonal.

This

for Regina

I thought of the camellias --
how I'd send you some
budded by the window
far from bloom; remembering
your joy in them as though
your fingers found a pulse
of spring we were too drowned
in February's slush to feel.

Grey birds go for grey pods now
tattering in the twigs November
leaves. The thinnest edge of blue
glows on a leaded cloud.

Is the color grey to make
the brighter ones look better?

We could believe that -- or
I would choose to. If I should
worry about you today -- or need
to think of you in some fine
rewarding role, for my own sake --
what to do then? Only leave these
words: petals, if you will, my hand
is reaching for.

Dog Days

He is the dandy, dazzle furred,
sly a bit, but cons so beautifully.
She the classic bitch; loud largesse
lard assed, but melancholy in repose.

Provocateur, he wants a rumble,
softly but insistent wuffs her finally
to a frenzied bay, at usually nothing
much; a shrew, its minute labours
under leaves, a skrawking jay.
And then I swear
he almost grins, almost knows
the neighbors miles away are cursing
that unholy howl, bred in her antique
kin to keen across
the black bayous.

She shuts up finally,
drops and drifts asleep again. Or else
he teases her to tussle, tug at sticks or
other trash—keeps a stash they've filched
from god-knows-where old bones
gone shoes, rags and tag ends
from the dump

Occasionally they disappear an hour
or so, come back boggled, brimmed
with documentaries we can't decode.
Sasquatch? A bug nobody's catalogued?
A wooden dalliance, dead soldiers
left over from some war? They're mute.
simply wag their tails like windmills
whirling in the wordless air

She, Geisha-like chews
the frosted ruff around his neck.
I swear he grins. And enviably
(I sometimes think) unsexed, they fall
asleep smugly nose to nose
A dog's life
is what they chose, and enviably
(I sometimes think)
chose well.

Forecast

Gravel bank of the Kolyma River
men with picks
uncover a pachyderm, these
centuries an ice statue, perfectly
preserved, one foot raised, mouth
full of butter cups.

They only guess: volcanoes along
the Pacific, violent hot blast
upward. and down: instant air drop
to 150 below. Froze him, head up
forever in place, the foot
raised to walk.

Today is late March
snowing. A friend brings
the first buttercup, soft petalled,
glowing along the hard edge
of something I know.
White ash flake still
falling on Pacific fishermen,
warped
faces of Hiroshima, weather
odder each year.

Today our sons
assemble bones from a mastodon
found in this valley,
so excited when they brought them
home.
White flakes
on the window.
Heads bent
hands at work
their laughter
|
an age away

Forecast Cont ...

watch
loving them
fiercely,
feel from my frozen grin
green leaves
dangle.

Sunflower

Askance from sky
or window, who never knew
or knows the weather, beheaded
hothouse rose encased itself
in crystal bowl. Or rather
thin well tended fingers did
and do caress without a touch
the jade vase, the teak
reflecting lily's face effete
and cool. Oh, it's all so
polished, so quite correct,
so soothingly, one might say;
unsexual, or non-sectarian
or such, so smooth, so unassuming
and so
proper, so proper.

And what of you --
whopper hippo's hind, reared
through yellow underwear?
Come on like a Goldwyn Girl
Mae West's moon boob
brazened out in maize.
Bulbous, seed studded
brown bagel, dripping
butter batter,
loud in the sun's praise
hot hued, who makes happen
shade pie, bounty for birds
in show season
ragtime, cadmium jitterbug Baby,
be pleased.
Glory, Sunflower,
gold through a grey day even.

Question

Our old fire insurance
agent showed up in my
dream last night. I'd met
the man only once and in
a trivial role. Now he
intrudes in my sleep
(expecting sympathy for
a wasp sting sloshing
back and forth like a
sea cucumber under his
pin stripe suit.)

And there are others --
long forgotten presences,
bit players, scarce
acquaintances ambling,
without noticeable intent,
in and out.

Am I being this ineffectual
and unbidden in someone
else's sleep? And meanwhile
where are you astray to
with your little flame
thrower and your penchant
for starting fires?

Wandering off into a
stranger's dream, I suppose,
while small flames flare
up behind you and old
friends wander by
burning?

Far Out

His neighbor smokes elk shit
he tells me, run out of regular stuff.
Makes a good smoke, he says, smells
just like lit grass.

Never smokes nuthin' else now,
he says, the elk eat better'n
just tobacco, gets all his greens.

Picks it up on the path, he says,
dries it out a little and stokes up.
One less bother, and besides, he says,
feels better to "make do",
especially if you don't have to.

Phosphorescence

for Carol Matthews

August angst
filmed drift dulls
the wave's edge
briefly turns tourists
sour, snorkeled sightlessly
in murk.

At night, beached,
the four of us, bawdy
on beer, know the miracle.
wait for the final fade
to unfold it.

"There it is." First
radiant ripple, now ALL
is luminous wave after
wave crested with
brilliance, stars burst
and fall as fish
leave the water, one
after one wet galaxies
glitter.

"I dare you!" you say
knowing my weakness,
my Piscean pull -- and suddenly
thread bared and brazen we dive incandescent
explode into diamonds
the day had dimmed over.

Referring to insular
madness, insulations of fat;
our men shout landlocked
abuses, fused
to their loud leaded shadows
smutted and static.

Phosphorescence Cont ...

Prismatic we quiet
tranced by our toes
our fingers, all forms
of us shattering facets.

Then WHOOPEE!! we're mad
again, sated with wonder
and with last luminosities
shot from our scalps
go --
laughing like all laudable drunks --
under.

For Joy on Christmas

You are inside your face.
I know it.
The moon is boneless
behind you
floating in mists
cloud flowers, seasonless.

Outside the sea lies
calm. Colours on the far
shore burn like fire opals,
flamed fingers reaching
out, across.

This rare warmth
informs your own
resemblances.
Consider the sea then,
its vastness, history hidden
beneath its skin.

Consider it sister.
Twin.
And the beauty of it
and your face. Outside
and In.

Country Girl

It finally was
a far thing got me
eyestems
stretched up past
these improbable buildings
out
to forms of sky as
meet a meadow
with a blue
longing my fingers
feel.

Talk With Mt. Emily on a Bad Day

Bitch. You brood, and I'll not
look your way now, not past the scabby
roofs again, the weave of willow trees.

Molehill, to think I thought you lovely
yesterday, sky shot blue across
your back. Now you fade, grey blotched
in rags of rain, your face
cracked in two by clouds.

To be a mountain, a man,
a heroine takes height and you
are only "human" then, reduced
to clods by weather.

Old girl, I only talk to hear
the echoes in you. This common grey
holds us together. It is the clouds
we keep our heads in tear us.
The clouds.

Wild Flower

Remember, Papa, how you picked
the trillium, an armload from
the woods? I had to tell you
about the law; how the Mounties
hereabouts, comb the bush for
such as you: old elves with
silver beards, illicit
flowers in their arms.

You didn't hear me of course.
You rarely did. And anyway
it's just as well. The flowers,
even I'd admit, put Mama's picture
in its rightful place.

And then each Spring you went
and gathered what was left. Her
picture bloomed in April every
year. Papa, you were always just
this side of wrong. I knew that,
delighted in it really, if
you could know.

So that when you died, after
all those proud years of
pilfering, we wove a wreath of
fir and pine. And put the last
small token of our regard;
a single trillium
for you and Mama
shining
in the green.

Ferrari

Ooga Ah Ooga
red car he
say to me
street spin
swingin' him sassy
stuff
my vows;
natural
spare
discrete
my head
stuffed with flowers
prayer.
All muffed.

Where are you
St. Francis when
I need you;
amulets
small animals
stones?

Most of all
where is my metaphor?

Read it
Red Robin then
Spring Day
Worm.

Ooga ah ooga
chirps Red.
Worm hears
turns.

Jehovah's Witness

He comes lean
on the wind
each Tuesday old
as a tree
gnarled as roots
his fingers
tap my door.

"If we knew
what the Lord
knows,"
he says, holding
his new book
"the world would be
better."

Taking my dime
we talk
of the weather.
I try
for something to
tell him:
buttercup,
a cure
for his limp ...
(if I knew
what the Lord knows)

Oil Spill Off Sooke

Red eye glares
half gone in ooze, a ball-less
hunk of bull with crusts
of crud as odorous and dead
as its insides, steel hide
filled to burst with diesel
as much to make another
city burn and cough its
dying breath across
the countryside.

It is complex: commerce
has us by the hairs. We need.
We need. We need. An infant
dies when Daddy's factory door
slams shut, the rasp of worker's
widowed hands is loud. Another
sheik requires yet another
Silver Cloud.

So you -- raper of the straits --
slug by to shit and list
and shit and list and finally
wallow out of sight. And when
the night bleaks back to gray,
the seas gone black. Wrecked
reeds lean against a greasy shore.

And you who leaked
and lied us in the eye
have left all lovely things
and all the sea birds
damn you
dying in the slime.

QUENA*

for Bill

I will you my bones
then, that you may carve
and hone me
into a music
for the heart's ease.
It is a vanity
to hear the tears
of nightingales dropped
from their drooping
branch, the mourning
of the doves doubled
in a witless dirge.

For this is no sad song.
See? I would be even
castanets to click
a dancing girl to motion
in your quickened eye.
And then, laughter
from your fluted hand,
and the hummed silence
after, as you dreaming
smile.

* A flutelike instrument made of human bones.

Out to Open Water

The boat shakes as
a wet dog
thrashing away from
the pier where people
wave, lines on
a long lure
bobbing. Bobbing, we
dip half into
blue, settle
a steady throb

humming mountains by
watching the wake
churn white water
where momentarily
we were.

And I question the engine
the heart
heaving us through
deep water

the clean wake
how it's done.

Laundromat

Its tongue protrudes
clanking; digests my tender.
Lights go on, a motor
hums and legs and arms
of all our days
begin a circular embrace.

In tangible solution
that sweat dissolves.
Those tears. And joy
rides high on bubbles.
Metamorphosis occurs.

Until no souvenir
of nights or days
remain. Our week is
rinsed and drained
and spun away, its
wrappings sterilized
and dry, some threads
worn through a paler
shade, some frazzled
ravelings. Albeit,
all are folded then,
formless
ready to begin
again
ready to begin.

Listening for Spring

Praying foolishly to willow bark
turned rose and rust in the hazed
rain or the blue iris just where
the petals unfold by threes. Gold
throats whispered down. Blue behind
the eyes.

Colours in the cupped hand held
to the ear as a shell for the
sea sound
And the sun, the sun itself
shattered with bird wings
the song echoed in gold throats
earth sound
held to the ear

in the cupped hand.

Arriving Late

"Burn yourself into me,"
I say. "Sky, my world seems
narrow." Sprawl, white limbed
in some of summer's slow
beginnings.

Swaying on
the ends of grasses,
ants watch the immovable
mountain of me.

I'm tall as
my left eye in
clouds, small as my
right on ants. Final
as a mountain, dispensable
as one drop
of rain.
Am as you ant,
without wings crawling
past obstacles

and here and there
have looked close at
the face of flowers
somewhere between
earth and sun, make do
with late arrivals
carrying crumbs.

Falling Quiet

November sensed so early
now, the way winter comes
to trees. That the deer
drink from the freezing
water in which their eyes
no longer shine.

That the flowers have
shriveled into thin bones
whose ovules shone like
seed pearls in perfect rows
beneath the green skin.
Fat worms hoveled in the
ground, blind mole huddled
in grey velvet. Blue
goes grey.

That the last bird
is gone and the leaves.

Suddenly,
the falling quiet
and the leaves.

Winter Dance

It started with festoons
of snow looping from
the silvered branch as if
it had been swirled and
twisted for a prom.

The ballroom floor was filled
with ferns in glistening filigree
and honed calligraphies of twigs
and twinings, and over all the awning
branches dazzling.

And there was light: flashing
off each prised flake, the globes
of opalescent white and bright
and silvered streaks and lightning
strikes of ice.

And there was music: a singing
zing of crystallizing air,
crunch and crinkle of our
trudging feet, all creaturely things
their murmurings deep under

And we began to dance like polar
bears over the grounded glittering
stars, as snow like a Rosecrucian
organ played us on.
Lord, how it sang that day
And shone.

Anniversary
for Bill

If you weren't living here already,
I'd move you in this minute. Make
room for your old photographs,
even your collection of owls.

Our time has gone by faster
than I can focus.
If we looked in the mirror
together we could mark
this passage.
The lines look like paths
we walked, crossed, or lost
altogether.

See this crease in my forehead?
This was from loving you
too much or too little.
The effort of it
either way.

And I remark your eyes
seeing through me all
too often, as though
there were silver edges
somehow, on my other
side.

Look how we smile at this image.
As in a mirror it misses
true dimension
is always backward
only half lifesize.

When Time Tries

for Michael who died of
Aids March 9, 1989

And then you died
our first born
our beloved, after
3 years of all too
visible agonies we
were witness to
and inner ones
you mostly saved
us from.

The night the lesions
crowded in your skull
covering up the language
you lived by, you
cried out for help
and I, struck dumb,
crawled in beside
you and held you
in my arms until
sleep in its
mute mercy came.

How many centuries
have mothers done this?
And fathers too -- this
is not the contract,
this cruelest of the
double cross; one
for you, one for all
the us you left behind?

We would write
a book we told your
friends. Mostly it
would be your work, some
published some
not. We would tout
your causes, display
your brilliant
unerring eye.

When Time Tries Cont ...

It's been four years now
and we have not. We
shuffle through things,
rustle papers and refile.
Your words make your absence
keener. We weep, irresolute.

Some day soon, we say
when time, touted to
heal all and ever,
tries
and the mind won't turn
leaden with that
longing
words can't work through.

LES FLEURS

1.

We hum by halves
uncertain of the source
but certain
in our ears a madness
makes it inadequate
or tame.

If there could be
a clarity, a song
consistent with the heart
and timed to sound
music in our alternate mood;
then as flowers
in their season we
could shine,
constant
to all we look to
and for each perform
that music
as only love allows.

2.

I hate flowers
to wilt
an hour to.

You
held me once
lightly
below a storm
you said was gathering.

Now
you're nowhere in this rain
or in the wake or
in the words
that coil around us;
philosophies that shed
our skin.

I
don't know what's meant
by "win."
We
share one
medal, mirrored
in that
sudden blossomed
hour
in a storm's eye.

3.
Do you remember then, that lighthouse,
the rock, the curved sand, how the poppies
spread out in a field before it, how
they were so gold, how that blue was behind
them, the white tower, the red roofs?
Poppies. The gold of September.
But we are too old to remember.

The painter Wishart would remember,
writing to her:

"You were still very young and you
really could not bear the end of
anything ever. Some weeks later
you had filled my cabin with roses,
which made it harder to realize
that we should not meet again until
we had both completely changed. Perhaps
this is the moment
to thank you for them."

translating to canvas

"Roses on a Blue Cloth"

"Water Flowers"

"Garden for the Child Mozart"

"Rose"

a stem, a petal, the mists
that surround them
impressions
past time a florescence
the rose, life everlasting
Look!
he has left off the thorns

In Idaho, Morning Glory
is a dirty word.
Morniglory Morniglory
why do you wind round
the wheat so
cover gold with blue
why do you
Morning Glory?

So you remember then, that Botany was not a bore:
There were the flowers, always; the names committed
to memory, the drawings to be done, the cellular structure
a form of beauty, an inner order.
To learn
we learn to dismember.

And we are too young to remember.

Mary Mary quite contrary
I'm stealing again
from a nursery rhyme
and a world filled
with macadam.

And yet they are everywhere
the flowers
Edelweiss
Anemone
and at all varying heights
a reminder of us
breathed past

Pleistocene

November

But we are
too old to remember.

4.
The answer to a Koan, a zen riddle, he
has made an answer to a zen riddle they
won't tell me. It is that old game -- I tell
you an answer for a question, now you must

make the question, I do not know the question.
Dante Gabriel Rosetti, his name a flower,
has made an answer to a zen riddle, not hearing,
does not know he has made an answer, writing of
a man in a field of flowers, in a field where
the man has run, his hair streamed
in the grass, his naked ears, he says, hear
the day pass, hear the day pass in that
nameless grief we know, has run into the
field, throwing himself to the ground
hearing the day pass, reaches out, touching
a flower, woodspurge, its name is woodspurge.
I know this riddle, live it, hear with my
naked ears the days pass, Dante Gabriel

Rosetti writing:

"From Perfect Grief there need not be
wisdom or even memory.
One thing learnt remains to me --
The woodspurge has a cup of three."

Dante Gabriel Rosetti, his name a flower,
and I would sing of flowers, how they grow,
how they are themselves, always
only themselves, how when I was 12 in
another time, how when I was too old at 12
in another time, I crawled under the neighbor's
fence because it was forbidden, lay under it
and looked up through the green leaves.
There among the leaves, the pale yellow in
profusion, the tightly closed buds as candles glowing
into the fade damp, how as the day dimmed they began
to open, how I watched mindlessly, transfixed,
how they opened petal by petal of pale yellow
perfect flowers.

"Evening Primrose," my father said later, forgiving
my trespasses as now they have changed it to "debts"
we said then,
"forgive us our trespasses."

And I would tell you as Dr. Williams does
of the thorns, why they have their place.
What does he say, where is their place.
where is their place? I have lent my books
again, now I need them, they're gone, now
I have no Asphodel, now the words are gone.
What words did he use, how did he say,
"I come, my love, to speak to you of Asphodel,"
did he say there were flowers even in hell?
I have lent my books again, now I need them,

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, his name a flower, not lying
as I have, saying truthfully it was a weed
the woodspurge was a weed in a field, crawling
under fences in nameless grief
my naked ears
hear the world, the days pass, I,
Rossetti

myself
my friend
the day he died
saying,

"I can no longer do with weed clutching."

5.

I will leave this room
we have made of resemblances
If you are
still
here I will leave
not calling you.

A Strangeness has come upon
our room, the flowers bent from
us, longing for a lost light, crossed
from our window.

Doves have flown here, the sea
has touched and much
that was graceful
Laced branch on
that grace of us.
I will leave
Lost

Les Fleurs Cont ...

The five steps to the door, foreign to me!

un
deux
trois
quatre

les fleurs
The Flowers!

In Tongues

**Poetry written after reading
Technicians of the Sacred*,
a collection of the rarely
heard voices of non-European
cultures**

*** Edited by Jerome Rothenberg
Anchor Books
Doubleday & Co.
1969**

The Love Object

(After the Bantu)

My love whose face is known only by me
Whose face is the deepest mystery, the deepest desire
Whose face is the still pond of reflection, the pond
 on which float lilies, on which flowers fall
My love whose thought wings toward me on the feathers
 of the lark, whose thoughts are the sea's deep secrets
My love whose face is a map of the mountains, the high
 places, the deep gorges, the forest, the fresh spring
Whose brows are the rows of good grain
Whose mouth is eternal river
My love whose tongue learns all things, as air around me
Whose eyes are polished agates which have seen many ages,
 much wisdom
Whose throat is the harvest of all things thought
Whose shoulders keep up the sky
Whose arms are cords binding all things
Whose breast is the smooth stone on which grow
 the fresh mosses
Whose hands are the messengers of eagles and hummingbirds,
 of earthworms and butterflies
Whose fingers are brown stalks, the bare ribs of bird wings
Whose armpits are leaves burning, are marsh grasses,
 are mud flats for sea creatures
Whose waist is a hinge, a swivel, a hammer
Whose hips are the midday of summer
Whose loins are the summer night
My love whose legs are the movements of lynx,
 the presence of boulders
Whose feet are the rolling pebbles, the silence of shadows
My love whose sex is a mallet, an oar, a porpoise
Whose sex reaches toward me in moonlight, in fire
My love who equals the earth and all of its elements
Whose love is the universe, the heavens, the galaxy
 all of its stars

Still in the Bantu mode, the next six poems are written
as riddles with the answer at the bottom of the page.

Riddle # 1

The one who holds me senseless
Who senseless sees me, seized by my demons
The one who guides me to rapturous places,
torturous places, long languid places
The one to whom I am mute and deafened
The one who hears my fierce love throbbing
Who feels the stabs of my yearning
my quiet love calming
The one I cleave to my dark companion
Whose form my body is pressed on
Who feels my sex beating like bird wings
Who takes me to a heaven of no name no being
This one who holds me
mad with dreaming

The Bed

Riddle # 2

The one who torments us
Who tears our eyes from their sockets
Who sets up a throb in our skulls
The one who speaks in all tongues
Now of blasphemy, now of blessing,
The one who seduces our young sons, our young
daughters.
Who ruptures the nights of our husbands,
the days of our wives.
The one who snares the unwary,
who wraps him in silk thread, who binds him with wire.

The one who snarls, who soothes with tongue honey,
This honey which stills us, which halts
the feet in their fleeing
from this one.
The one who throws our days to the sunset
hordes fiercely our hours.
The contemptible cohort, the one we desire.
Illustrious, Radiant one.
The one we revile.

Television

Riddle # 3

She is my sheen, my dark shadow
She paints me with sun, with sorrow
She mocks me, gravels my eyes
Gashes my mouth in her gaping
She leers at me, showing sharp teeth
Snaps at my throat like a sea turtle
She has drawn all the years on me
She treads on my face,
leaving her smudges and furrows
She is cunning, is cruel
Friend of the devil
She shows no mercy

Mirror

Riddle # 4

The one who carries
away my beloved who
carries him into fierce danger
slashing the forest with white
shining eyes slashing the mountains
with shining white ribbons groaning
and screeching and coughing black poison
The one who greedily swallows our fortune
The one who can run amok in a moment
plunge into gorges shuddering with sickness
The one whose spite spreads hatred among us
Malignant this monster who pretends
to be slave but is always the master
Misbegotten this master coughing
and spitting who carries, this monster,
away my beloved

Automobile

Riddle # 5

This spirit who dwells in sweet fruit
whose fragrance engulfs me
This spirit who comes with tenderness
with compassion, great pity
The one who comforts me, stifles
the cries of grief in my throat
smoothes my webbed forehead

The one whose sweet presence fills me
Whose spirit my greatest companion
Who sends me a skiff on the quiet water
Whose laughter bubbles my throat in her bounty
Who sends a fog to obscure my detractors
This one who loves me more true than myself
Though later I see she has loved me untruly
Untrue is the one who has loved me so falsely
who possesses no pity
whose spirit has killed all compassion
perfidious liar
The one who loves falsely

Wine

The remainder of these poems were either
written in various "Primitive" modes or
were generated from a work in Technicians
of the Sacred.

Contemporary considerations in the Aztec mode.

This Habit

This habit
follows me like
a hungry dog
an ugly dog
who is black
whose hair has fallen
from sickness
from scales
from scabs from red sores

this dog
is bad
with bleeding eyes
with teeth
of splinters of
stone this dog
howls with sounds
of the earth groaning
of mountain sagging
against mountain
of wind moaning this dog
tears at my feet
his teeth bitter
this blood from
his eyes falling
it thickens my
feet this blood
it grows me
to stones
I am stiffened
am stilled
the path disappears
before me

this dog waits
he has time
he has time
he has time.

Contemporary considerations in the Aztec mode.

The Forest in Nuclear Winter

It is verdant
is thick with grasses
with fresh greens
It is thick with deer
with rabbit with
stalks and stems

There is joy
trees are felled
wood is gathered
a place of green.

Then comes ice
ice forms a surface
wind crashes
whistling spreads
forms whirling

Misery abounds
nothing is edible
Misery spreads. Lamentations
of hunger. All is hunger
the home of hunger

There is fright
constant fright
one is anguished
is tormented
there is a trembling
a stretching out prone

The earth is pressed down
pain is pressed down
frost falls
frost forms a surface
blackness descends
only blackness continues
nothing continues
only blackness

The Forest In Nuclear Winter Cont...

In the forest only
blackness continues
only blackness is growing.

In the Aztec mode.

Joy

A cloud of
great joy engulfs
me great rapture
this cloud has come from the lake
the place which is
good which sees
flowers this cloud
sees fern small plantings
hears birdsong
this cloud
the swish of small
fishes, this cloud
feels sun which
feels breeze
which sings praises
this breeze
to all things.

Cloud of delight
this cloud my hands
cannot hold only
sky can this cloud
where it goes
only sky
holds it close
by my head
holds it close
only sky can

Young Girl's Sorrow

(From the menstrual customs of the Mendi.)

I have been sent
to the pig shed to bleed.

Here I squat
by the old sow
staining the straw
with my sorrow.
Here my sorrow drains
from me five days
drains from me.

My husband sits
far away with the men.
Far away I hear them
laughing through thick leaves
through clean sky
I can hear laughing.

I am soiled, am dirty.
In the pig shed
I bleed into.
In foul air am I
weeping.

My hands are poison
my breath is poison
The mouth of the snake
of my womb
spits venom.

They must not
touch me. I must
touch nothing.
My body streams
slow pools of poison.

I have been sent
to the pig shed to bleed
in the straw by the old sow.
Here weeps my sorrow.

The Antagonist

(After the Bantu.)

His mouth is on
a long stem
coming closer
his lips move
his words come closer
the stem grows
toward me
words shoot from
his lips like spears
come closer
like nettles like
needles they
come toward me
the stem grows
closer the words
deafen come
closer the needles
sting come closer
the stem wraps
around my neck
like a hard
woody vine comes
closer
the stem wraps
around my neck
comes closer choking
my neck comes closer
all is black
his mouth bites
my ear off
comes closer
bites off my mouth
his mouth
is pain come closer
his mouth is pain.

A Brown Dying (After the Cherokee colour chants.)

Brown is the tongue under coffee
Brown as the dead leaf
of yesterday's day.
Brown is the rotted hay.
Brown are the teeth
of the old crone cackling
her gossiping brown, a brown
sulfurous haze.

The room reeks of brown
brown dust leaking through
brown shadowed gloom.
Bloodstains are brown
meat is
The mat where he wiped
his feet, lying
his brown eyes did
His tongue brown with
brandy
The day is
brown rotted hay.

Brown dew
Brown dust
Brown rain streaming
blown from a desert of
brown sand
Brown death brown lies
Brown mouth screaming

Brown the sick river
the mud flat the Brown backs of Waterbugs
last skin the snake shed
marsh reeds in winter
green bled.

Ice bittered rose brown
wounded wren brown
his eyes brown
as lies begin.

A Brown Dying Cont...

Brown is my death, his death
frost kill keening
a day's death.
Gone. Gone.

Here,
Only Brown is.

The Drunk

(In the Aztec mode.)

It will wash out
his tongue they say
dissolve the words
of his lips, come as
through water gargled
garbled
they say with
no meaning.

His eyes
swim in it, sink
in it, drown
in it

He is drowning
they say
cannot speak cannot
move in
this liquid
of venom they say
he is floating
head down he is
drowning they say
he will drown
will be dead
they say
he will die

"My God Thot is of precious stones." (From Egyptian Prayer to Thot.)

The Secret

My ear is open
open like shells
like a lily

My ear is a vessel
that catches all
thought
The wind brings thought
to my vessel
Words trickle in.

Words tickle my vessel
words trickling in.
JOY to my vessel
this lily is filling
with music no fear in
My ear fills
a flower
with glee with great rapture
no fear in.

My lips like leaves
close around lily
My lips close
hiding great beauty
colours of jewels
no rage in no sorrow
my lily
my lips close
hiding tomorrow.

A contemporary consideration in the Aztec mode.

The Jobless

My hands have withered
have wasted
have crumbled to dust
they say, have disappeared.

My hands who held bread
who held wood for fire
my hands who tied
hard knots
who held children who made
marks of my passing.

My hands who held pride
who held life and my living.
My hands have been robbed
they say of their ways
and their working.

Have been robbed by machines
they say and their madness
Madness has robbed me
my hands are hanging
soon my heart follows.

My heart who held joy will follow
who held love who held hope
will follow
my life will be wasted
will disappear they say
will be gone.

Bank Teller

"Pretend to be different things."
"Talk Chinese or something."
"Give everyone a new name."
(From Gift Event, Kwakiutl)

She is my keeper, my conscience
knows my code name, my number.
Knows if I'm off to Brazil or to Spain
or the Congo this summer. Or
grounded at home to grow beans.

She has the key to my will
and my passport.
In fact her ten fingers are keys
keys to the car, to the house
to the larder.

Why does she frown at the numbers
I've written, why does she scuttle
away like a beetle, why is her back
bent so long at the books, vertebrae taut
tuned like computers?

O God, let me balance, teetering
here at the North Pole
about to sink in a blizzard
of paper. Let her back thaw, let her
eyelids flick frost from her lashes
let her jaw melt. Make her mush
toward me, holding out money.

Hibernation (After the "Hyena": Hurutche)

We went into the snow caves
fat with the furies
tallow, caked blood
hung from our dark hair.

There among old bones
and mummies, we slept fitfully.
Mounted heads, hieroglyphs
shone dimly down
snow drowned our
sleeping screams.

We imagined we could do
small murders here
with no - one the wiser.
Or bring something we'd lost
back to life. Between sleep
we do neither. Seeds of
old hates rot
and shine.

When we emerge with our fur
fluffed out and our eyes bright
with hunger
watch us.
Watch us.
Weeds stir under
our eyelids, dreams grown
in our hands like
grenades.

We growl and stumble,
glistening with malice. Listen.
See. Each step brings us
closer. And Closer.

Branch in the Water

Fat prominence of bark
sky branches
I sat beneath it
saw my face/cracked
mirror (From the Juncture
of the Tree: Aztec)

Say it's you there
bent over the water
what do you see?

Do you see each year
with its own skin grown
over your memory deep in
the shell of those days?

Do you see thought
upon thought upon thought
as the cells thickened
growing your shelter, your prison?

Do you see thought
upon thought upon thought
as the cells thickened
growing your shelter, your prison?

Do you see your leaves
fall like the seasons
floating away
Are you heavy with heartwood
do you bend with the weight
of it under your skin?

Do you weep at your own reflection
seeing the circle
your life makes
your beautiful dying
there in the water do you see
are you weeping?

"Outside It Is Raining Stars"

You walk in
My mouth goes dry
as a dune.

Between us the fingers
of a long wind reach
as far south as Mexico
and north enough
to turn to solid ice.

Before, we have failed,
trying to bend it
where it pushes a heavy
mountain of sand together
or cuts scars in the sure
face of slate.

My grandmother used
to sit braiding her
white hair over and under,
her fingers long forgot
the wind, under and over
as she sat.

Dry grass whispers
somewhere trying
to tell me. But my tongue
rolls between small stones.
Solace is lost
this long time.

Now the sand moves
making another mountain.
"Outside it is raining stars."
And we are disappearing
without a sound.

The Bum God Sits Down to Supper

"... bum god ... your belly full
you can't be bothered. Let
shitballs be thrown at you.
Fart on this phony god not
worth our curses."
From the "Funeral Eva" by
Koroneau, (Polynesia)

Waffle the cat
watches me. She has
sat unmoving for hours
watching me, her eyes
incandescent, gleam with
contempt. Inscrutable,
she has sat now for hours
stiff as a statue, malevolence
cracks like a shock
through her fur.

(My mistress screamed
when she saw me clawing
that small hairy thing,
that intruder she murders
with traps and poison.
I caught it fairly, scrabbling
from cupboard to cupboard,
the thing half dead, its
warm blood like nectar.
She let it escape me, no
doubt it dies slowly
somewhere in a cranny.
My mistress steals food
from my stomach.)

Waffle
Waffle, come kitty
come to supper
here are your
nice little nibbles.

The Bum God Sits Down to Supper Cont...

(My mistress is trying
to con me. Capitulate never,
I'll sit here and watch her.
She clatters the pots. She
gets out the beef, its blood
splatters the counter. She
cooks it, a haunch of large
hairy thing. She calls the
blood gravy. They gloat around
all of them grinning. They
cut up the corpse.)

Waffle watches
amber eyes glowing.

(My mistress is chewing
chewing and swallowing.
She is filling her stomach.
My stomach is empty. The
small hairy thing somewhere
dies slowly.)

Waffle the cat
watching watching.

Cat, I am human
have learned my hypocrisies
reviewed my deceits, repeated
my prayers, buried the dead
one way or another.

Cat, heathen
Someday I'll die like the rest.
I'll be re-incarnated.
I'll come back as Cat.
I'll earn my own living.
I'll lead an honest life.

Waffle watches
stiff tail twitching.

IN ART CLASS IN ARCHIPELAGOS

Reflections of an Art Teacher

Abstract

"Is this O.K.?"
they keep asking
Is this O.K.
Is this O.K.?

their splendid
seraphic worlds
we walk into
this fast hour

"Butterfly Salad"
"What Laughter Looks Like"
"Rainbows Melting in Snow"
"Thoughts of a New Pink Pig"
"The Way Stars Shine in Rain"
"Curiosity"

I think I'd like
that pink pig
feeding my mind
forever
those butterflies
that snow

"It's O.K."
I say to them
yeah
it's O.K.

Painting, Free Style

In this ultra
tidy classroom
tres trompe l'oeil

the regular teacher tells me
**THIS WILL TAKE TIGHT
ORGANIZATION**

So behind
before I start
nevertheless portion
out blobs
of primaries
36 times
yellow red blue

for you and you and you and you etc.

Soon hear
that symphonic
universal SPLATTT
pure music
36 variations
andante
andantino

presto
poor teacher sighs
sound bubbles
up

red yellow blue

Pitiless
I watch her world
gone all impasto
neo-impressionist
surreal

To organization
I should have told her
some things
never yield

Field and Form

Every object occupies
a space in air. Imagine
the air in this room
is deep blue.

I am a hole in
the deep blue. The hole
is shaped like me.

Try cutting a square
out of black paper.
You now have
a square of black paper
with a square hole.

Take the black paper
hold it up
to your eye. Look
through the hole.
See my shape left
in blue air, black
edges defining
the blue square.

I am the blue air
only, the center
is gone, a faint glow
of ectoplasm shows
my interior. The blue
around me is what
I am.
This sky
I'm leaning on
these words.

A Grade 6 Conquers Negative Space

Prodigy factor
I call it; rare
and often errant
guest, settles in
the genes, produces
perfect pitch,
timing,
a voice singing
before it learns
to talk,
and drawing eye teeth
would trade for.

Did he learn this
in the caves with
Cro Magnon? His gestating
mother belly up to
Michaelangelo
grind up geometry
and Escher
to zap
his mash?

Clicking from his
fingers like castanets
at furious pace, imagination
gone off the map; configurations
invented creatures, all in
duplicate, mirror imaged
fitting around each
other as though
there were no air.

A Grade 6 Conquers Negative Space Cont ...

Gaps so crowded
with creation
I gasp

This one, more
enabled in my
mind than any
man who walked
the moon

inventing his own
outlandish space
all enclosed
encircling
all tracing
in.

Some Aspects of Colour

Green or blue?
I ask them
what does that mean
to you? Water they
answer, sky. Emotions?
Hope
they tender.

Yellow? Warm
of course. Happy.

Orange is scary
a boy says, it
means dark
means dead.

Grey is indecision
I think maybe,
boulder holding down
my head.

But pink!
Pink is unanimous
Happy they say
ZING
it says.

Rosemadder alizron
even carmine mix it
with white please
and we'll have pink

But what does
white say?
Silence
covering up
all the questions

Some Aspects of Colour Cont ...

Or curiosity
like paper
like canvas: Asking
always asking.

Grade 1 Gems in the Diamond School

The 12 of us
sitting circular
discussing ART
and allied stuff.

Solemn little Salish
bright unbuttoned eyes
offers the closing
commentary:

"Walter just cut wind."

We blink in the sulfuring
silence.

"Walter," I bleat
to cover it
"you've got a great future
as a critic".

12 fits of giggling
O -- my fine young innocents
such fresh air you are
And Walter, redeemed
throws caution
to the wind

AGAIN

Art Appreciation

To Marc With Love

Spang in summer
is where Chagall's
cherubic people are.
Sky cerulean;
such uncanny blue.

Whole zoos of clouds
and rosy folks
cavort; tintinnabulation
of a sunset barely
out of view,

all gold and apricot
and peach. And with
a southern flight
of love, that jazzy
bird, gone winging
through.

We sort of grin.
So much Valentine
strawberry fluff
and stuff. Even so
I start my
old soft shoe,

figuring they might
look up
and wave and smile
and I would too.

Then shag right in
pull up some cherubs
and stay awhile, strumming
their rose tattoos
humming a riff
on my kazoo.

Grade 8: Art as a Diversionary Tactic

Their bodies
changing faster
than fashion

poor dizzy things
all that estrogen
testosterone
boinking in
their blood

And brains
ancient or infantile
work in flashes
fractions
think in
strobe.

"Vultures are circling
your vision," I want
to tell them. Any small
truth you think
you find.

I know that
even as I stand
there; archaic bird
secretly obsessed
with Ethiopia
or hydrogen

or god knows what
offering a scenic
flight
to Capistrano

I'd take myself
if I knew
truly

how.

Grade 5 Conundrum

Sweet alabaster kiddo
your spider limbs
need sun.
Little mind lopsided
right.

I recognize
the freak
impediment, intense
doodles on
the margins of it all.

Learn your fizz ed.
I feel compelled
to tell you. Computer
ease. Japanese.

The world don't want
no more painters
word worriers
people picking tunes

and sub surface wonderers
— your curious eyes ---
are tres passe

So little
AustralopitheKid
paint yourself green
we'll go as
aliens.

They'll pick our
bones someday
trying to figure
where
we fit in.

View from the Gorge

poems written at the
Gorge Rehabilitation Hospital,
Victoria, B.C.
and dedicated to its staff

Physiotherapy

for Elly Eldridge

In among the geometric spider webs,
the glaring grids, the straps, the
buckles, nooses, slings, the 22nd
century machines; if you could, Elly,
you'd throw the ocean at these fires,
make a petrified forest swing.

I can just see you, having made
another damn muscle move to a
groove it gave up years ago, grinning
like some silly elf, like a shaman,
a diamond cutter grabbing fortunes
from an ordinary stone.

If there was a way to -- you'd
do it -- us in the streets,
dancing -- you flogging your tambourine.
I could say you're in the wrong
racket, but that would be like
saying Babe Ruth was better off
a candy bar.

The best is what it is:
quicksilver in the mud flats
gold veins in the coal.
Whatever shines is Will.
Whatever can, would.

And for you, we'd be out there
shining, throwing ticker tape,
staging some dumb parade.
If just for you to see Elly.
If we could.

Day Nurses

6 a.m. they fly in on a
fall monsoon, submerge
us in their breeze and bubble
soap and windings, whirl.
And all day canary-like they
croon to stones, and slip and slide
a glacier to its throne
to melt and piddle to its
heart's content.

Their flights are brief as swifts
or competent as crows, their
wings and motion tinted white
or pale pastel, they flit from
roost to roost, accomplish nests
or feedings, sanitized, inspected,
circumspect.

And rare, a hawk swoops,
eyes a happenstance and with
a flinty stare, flares feathers
at a chick who goofed.

We move or meditate among
their wings. Their bright twitterings.
We glow immaculate and eased
and practiced in our pillowed drills.
And they, who put us all to rights
and paid their winter dues, arise,
and set their feathers for
a Southern flight.

My Stuff

I could fold
and sort this stuff
like sheets or socks. But
nothing matches, nothing's
smooth. This one, that,
pigeon holed; the cupboard
door closed
finally.

And not look back
not see the small latch
turn, the stuff all
falling out; wrinkled rags
still stiff, unmalleable
but shrewd. They move.

They sniff my trail.

Jean

I watch you -- thin as fins
your warped bones knotted hard
against the skin. And ribs,
my God, a scuttled hull sunk
in mud a hundred years would
have more hide than that.

Death looks so optional when
you're young: contract or contraband,
something one could hide, and take out
when the chips are down.
The chips are down, Jean,
The only reason you're not dead:
the digger lost your name.

Eyes are wounds, shocked blind,
unblinking. Face has gone
blank as bread. The pain has
ground your slate quite clean.
Or is it drugs? Or has your
brain refused the killing anymore?

Whine your litter by me,
I won't watch. I won't watch you
when they shove the needle in.
I won't hear the nothing that
you never say. Because you're dead,
Jean, I've got the flowers ready by your bed.
And all my tears.

Night Nurses

Come like cutters through
the night or spinnakers, their
sails full blown and white
as Moby Dick, give solace soft
as plumes of mist, or small
rebuke, or lift our lids and
shine a light in lest our eyes
have glazed like carp caught
on a hook.

And then they leave us wallowed
in their wake; while they, sails
hoisted, make for open sea,
chart our constellations
diminished in the distance now,
and silence deep as drowning stars.

My Stuff

spirals of it
wind out my ears

balsam
fir

wood plane
busy in the brain

curls of it
wending out

cedar
pine

2 stones rub
sides together
in the dark

And Oh! bedazzled
flower of fire

My stuff
takes the unsuspecting spark
and Burns!

Clyde

Clyde occurs.
Is an occurrence
a catastrophe, a cataclysmic
calamity. Clyde occurs, his
Kuyger Nail clicking. Recounts
his story -- vast hyperbole or what,
no matter, Clyde recalls he
blundered on a cliff,
fell over, killed his knee
and Clyde recalls he crawled
and crawled and crawled
and crawled 2 days to safety.

600 stitches later Clyde occurs
caroming on his Kuyger Nail.
The healing flesh conceals,
but not so Clyde. He palms
the photograph; the Kuyger Nail,
elucidates the text.

Clyde has voodoo eyes
mimes a British comic
a philosophic seer, he carries
on, clickety click,
ex dooper, AA, innumerable shtick
women, wives, the jinxed jester;
almost born again, almost
believable.

Clyde has courage, panache
poetry. His life takes over
anywhere, completely, room size
wall to wall. The ceiling sucks
in its last gasp of air, braces
itself for some lost typhoon, clutter
of an avalanche. Clyde occurring.
Clickety click.

My Stuff

My stuff
goes off on a gauzy breeze.
Dandelion fluff it
reminds me of.

Floats over fairways
junkyards
green lagoons.

Finally does
what everyone does;
settles down somewhere, starts
repeating itself
over and over.

X-Rays for Arthritis

Tracerics of bones through beams
of light, these portraits draw
a base cartography on which a mound
of muscle defines more differences
makes the mold of like or unlike
refines.

And yet the bones remark it most,
inform the face of 'them' and 'them',
project to heights they mostly hate
and yearn to claim a different
altitude. Diverse. All is diverse;
the feet: thin and delicate as
clipper blades or wide and splayed
as waddling ducks.

(Do you recall how Hallowe'en
some teasing boy made paper
skeletons cavort, their grommeted
and stapled joints could jerk
and in demonic seizures dance
before our nightmared eyes-
huge lipless teeth would grimace
in the dark, the bones made
hollows for their eyes or where
they should have been?)

How fine the hands! A wave of
fronds across the face, a spider
face of bones: or blunt and capable
as hammer heads. And hum! The bones
are humming: some finely tuned
and fit with promises; some
dissonant percussive drone.

X - Rays for Arthritis Cont ...

"See," the doctor says, "These are the crystals." And she sees a quartz cut crown, bracelets, rosaries adorn the bones, as mica glints each faceted and cutting edge has come to life in light

That night she has a dream:
the crystals pop like pods from all her pores, attract each other cling, blood red as rubies; pyrite-a prismatic castle grows. Soon just her skin and bones are left without the ornament and humming, all of a chord, and in a major key.

And then she starts to walk
and then to run, and winded
leans against a tree, turns
to see her castle fire-spun
and fierce
irradiating in the sun.

My Stuff

I sort my stuff
again. At least
it doesn't rumple
lies almost flat;

letters I almost
wrote
Uranus
Friday
a friend.
See, they all
have names.

Just now
a stray cat crawls
through the aperture
of my eye.

Carefully without
concern buries it.
My stuff.
purring purring.

Doctor, Patient

A pet, a threat, a prodigy
of sorts; down from the peerage
pokes their ailing parts and cups
his ear toward a quest, distills
the data of a cryptic dystrophy
and hopes to hear a cracking of the
code; villains cloaked in the atmosphere,
the blood, the very bones.

Her name is Patient; misnomered
by some blind buffoon. There is
no patience here. Her guise is thin
and fragile as a cellophane. Pain is
a kaleidoscope .. Calliopes are
clanging in the brain, the pipes all
wrecked and raddled. Out of tune.

What are they doing here among the racks?
He should be on a Southern ship, sails
and rigging snapping in; the salt, cobalt
and azure in his eye. And she should be
somewhere tranced on light, Top Royals
in the frame, canvas stretched and waiting
for her name.

Yet here they are: Inside a fortress
of a kind. He more by design than she.
He catalogues, inquires and arranges odds.
And she, accomplice and antagonist by
turn, imagines manic dogs have barked all
her defenses down. And sees her plot as
some drab novel millions never bought or
bothered to incinerate or ban. And so it
sulks, illiterate and surly on the shelf.
And swells.

Doctor, Patient Cont ...

Oh well. He quotes the author of an epic,
reads in code, reviews the abstract footnote
to his tracts. While she, iced to the gills,
gapes like a flounder in the net, stalls
in the irrelevant: her plight.

Oh well. They both beg crumbs at best
and bang their heads on walls that rarely
bend. But both still slide their eyes
along the unforgiving stone and search
for clues; while hidden microbes bellow to
infinity, loud as thunder, random, indiscriminate
as rain. "It is complex," he likes to say,
voice spiraling to the edges of her world.
She turns away, still crouching on the parapet,
still counting raindrops in a sullen sky.

Slide Show: Sex and Arthritis

Flickering through a slice
of life or two, even the
projector seems to snicker.
Stick figures illustrate
"how to" whether the head aches
or whatever. Voice-over
yawns on.

Finally old make-or-break-
a-bad-situation-Ed, twits
"It's like all the push
buttons on your cook stove.
What they don't tell ya is,
only two of 'em ever
really work."

My Stuff

Crocus
Sunshine
Corolla of tulip
bronze to brown

May
and my stuff
sends out shoots
all pale and tentative
and embryonic swell
to spiral through
the warming mud
like mercury imprisoned
in its glassy rod

and finally hit
the light, explode
in periwinkle showers

Bluest blue. And at
their starry centers
whitest white.

Grace

for Grace Howes

Grace bestows
her tiny cubicle of space
with gentle calm. Her name
becomes her life, her art,
the way her days move in
and out of dark without
turbulence; the storms of
fire and ice that must have
been to bring her here:
melted into pools as deeply
hued and iridescent
as a silk.

All around her patience
green leafs out
murmurs this and that
point and counterpoint:
a filigree of leaves and light
as Grace bestows herself
and brings us ease.

The Fun House

In a hall of mirrors
they make their way
watch a private image
metamorphose into sleeping terror.
This man's legs are gone,
this one's hands have shrunk
and twisted into stunted paws
too weak to make a fist or smash
the glass to put an end to it.

They hide stunned fear
behind a cynic's grin
recanting only when the lights
go dim enough to smear their
faces into strangers' stares.

And always they imagine being
home, themselves restored somehow
and fit, their spaces lustrous and
filled with friends
and all their treasured things.

And always these mirages move
into the distance as a dream
and always they continue,
reach to meet their own hand
in the warping mirror
and catch the voices echoing

"You're here.
You're here."

MONTAGE FROM SUMMERS ON THE FARM

Montage From Summers on the Farm
for Art and Polly

The rattletrap belched smoke
and Mars turned black. There
was always something wrong. Sick
carburetor, tires sighing on
their ancient spokes. Cloudbursts
spattering from the rad, the stars
my father steered by
swam off the world.

Mama loathed the pilgrimage:
Grandma's keening tyrannies,
heat, flies, crowded rooms, boiling
cookstove, steaming kitchen, mountain
of sticky jars, garden gleanings, headless
fowl, blanched and feathered
stinking to be shucked.

Steeling his will and hers
to make the summer tithe: 3
months to feed his parents'
hungry winter: the penitent son,
husband my mother loved. She
set her shoulders. We
slogged on.

The miles ticked by like
time. Over mountains, past
little towns. A brother, two
sisters and a dog packed in among
the goods, insufferable or content
by turns.

To arrive finally, stagger
into summer. Our world had
shifted latitude, skewed horizons
ate the sun. And when we finally
blundered into sleep, the stars
swam back, to float all summer
in a foreign sky.

Barbarians

We were wingy,
wishes gone up like kites
to question air. And walloping
trees, branches way akimbo sent
birds spinning, their whanging
wings to bump the clouds all puff,
all cotton candied, kid contrived.

Crazed. O crazed with it we
were, our summers Indian.
Barbarian us. Our blood ancient, sung
the sun, the sap in it. And snazzy
days opened all in that green.
And we waltzed in.

Praying for a Month of Sundays

The cousins roared up the river
like a squall. Irving, Bitsy, Ivan Walter,
Lawrence Lee. Boys all boys and we, fancying
ourselves flowers in this eden, knew we'd be
outnumbered by blackening clouds, bullied
by unholy hail.
And hail it was. Treed like monkeys in
the Elms, they pelted us with moldy prunes,
tomatoes, what they grabbed from
Grandpa's compost or the barnyard.
Whatever ammunition, all was fair.
Their prize: to hear us howl and
slobber home, our petals splotched
with spoilage. Our furious tears.

We burned all summer. Anywhere we
turned, there were *the boys*. "Boys,"
my mother called, "leave the girls
alone." And momentarily they would.
Leave us to scheme and snivel, plot
and dream.

Praying for a Month of Sundays Cont...

One day a week the parents togged us
up for church. the boys twitched
like ducks, dune stranded; fidgeted,
squirmed and threatened fits. The aunts
stern as oak, rapped their knuckles with
thimbles, twisted their earlobes until
they reeled.

But we girls, we were decorous,
our bloom revived and glowing in the
sweetened sun. Halos positioned into
place, we sat the pews like pros, and
eyed the devils in their still disguise.
We smiled our holy smiles. "Vengeance
is mine," saith the Lord.
And we prayed.

.....

June foofaraw
Hollyhock
and moxie.
Carnival of pansies,
assorted masks.

And rose. And rose. And rose,
who said it all
then fenced the hoi polloi
with thorns.

But Morning Glory
my kin
opened her heaven blue
and I fell in
swam sapphire circles
forgot my name.

.....

The Curse

Shortly after A.D.
Guilt was seen running
from the circus to join
our home.

The thing grew appalling
fur. The family combed
it curried it, entered it
in our parades.

Through generations it
grew rabid, ravenous for
old clichés: the numerous
hands feeding it.
Feeding it.

.....

Two Uncles

She mined him for the guilt she
thought would make him holy. His
hands, found toying once with
greed, were flayed until
they matched the iris in the yard.

He carried dung to them, the iris.
only shyly wondered at dichotomies
of shit and bloom.
"Don't try to think" she told him,
"let the others do it." Then sent
him on his way to ply "the others"
with good deeds, tip his cap to all
the families in the town .. And then
she had him scrub the barn
and feed the iris once again.

The iris grew through all those sweet
and sour springs. The string she had
him tethered on forged itself in metal
links. Steel tripped his slow desires,
wore his ankles raw. Then one day

she claimed a demon reckoned in his heart. Her face turned blank as Sunday afternoon. And from her mouth a Black Sea poured.

He climbed aboard and rode it fast downstream. His eyes were scouting on ahead, he didn't see his good intentions waving on the shore. He only saw the oceans of the world converge. And they would rock him soon. And he would float and dream. Dream and drift. Without a paddle, even or a star.

.....

At 40, he still lived in Grandma's ailing house. scratched at a skinny crop, fixed bikes for nickels or an I.O.U. Once a week he herded us to town for popsicles, penny candy, left us gasped with banter, unworldly as his own

He grew baby chicks. Down as soft as evening, held in our hands. We learned to candle eggs, tell if grain size hearts were beating in the shell. The nests soon filled with fertile ones, a broody hen set on. We took the extras out then, hurled them at the barn or at each other hearts too small to make a stain or beat out loud.

We laughed at our impious pranks. and he laughed too; conspired in our slapstick world. Time was slow and simmering those long summers. When dogs and children whined, he turned a crank forever until ice-cream drowned

our petulance. The dogs licked
salty drips. And slept.

We owned the meanness of our years.
Sometimes mimicked his clubfoot gait,
walked as though our feet dragged on
heavy chain, hitched and shuffled
when his back was turned. He didn't
seem to notice, nor our snickers,
rank as weeds.

The ditch bank was where we found
him once. He just sat there staring,
head bent like a hanged man, for once
unbusy hands. I squirmed and wondered.
This uncle was one of us; what could
cause him such an ancient grief? Someone
broke the silence with a yelp. He
turned so slowly the smile faded
before it found his eyes.

We lurched and jostled toward him
then, and all that last summer, before
we got too old and careless; left
our childhood trappings where laughter
hid. And uncle, somber then and silent
stood his solitary guard.

.....

The Steed

Sprawled on top
her back seemed broader
then my bed. Huge hooves,
hair shagged; plushy muzzle.
Treacle, sugar smeared
from bribes.

Not that she cared; tons
might make her twitch, my
weight less bother
than a fly.

She dragged the disc,
furrowed between the rows.
Stoic, horse machine
rump rolled and rippled.
Like a sloop I undulated,
rocked in intoxicating
sweat. And nearly swooned.

Grandpa geed and hawed
the day into oblivion.
Tomatoes, corn, beets, all
boiled by. And burning
afternoon sent slow mirages
up above the trees.

Squinting at the vaporous
sleight of eye, I saw Pegasus
loping sleekly on its silvered
edge. And I Bellerophon, of
course, delirious in lupis,
rode him grandly home.

.....

July pizzazz
Corn clinging
in its cover
green sheen satin
silky wig.

Beet beats vermilion
tomatoes wreathing
red.

Once coiled in their
secrets, seeds
seethe now, shout their
promise
shine the air.
Sun's green shadow
softens blesses
singing earth;

all
in it abides.

.....

Two Aunts

Bethel. Her name meant
"Gift of Heaven," and
she was. Beautiful, so
beautiful her mother wept
and wrung her hands. But
the nimbus grew from far inside,
light years through her skin.
She could have saved her tears.

O, and she was my unattainable.
My star. Her shine and stance
the moon would move for. Her
smile made me a place, awkward
gangling that I was. And air
was easier to breathe.

How everlastingly and lovingly
she tended, like a garden
the child's heart, where I'd
pinned it; untidy pulp
and gristle
on my ragged sleeve.

Litha, lovely too
but dark. Fire opal
midnight followed. Shadow
reached to touch
her hands.

Her hands were marble
carved; thoughts and
pen in, curled closer
every year. Until
the brilliance flared
in her like phosphorous,
and from her fingers
meteors rained down.

Two Aunts Cont...

Each page she wrote
writhed and burned to
ash. And ashes led us
to her maze. Eyes turned
all opaque, she ran
ahead, named us strangers
barred the way.

She chose a time to die
and did. And all around
the words she'd written
made a ring of fire
burning
like her opaled eyes
forever
in the drowning dark

.....

The Day the Locusts Came

Sleep was staccato
seizured. When morning
named itself, a waking
nightmare stalked the day.

Black omens crawled
the houses, covered
everywhere each green
and gasping thing.

The dying lawn became
a ruin of their brittle
shells and on the roads
cars slid
in blackened muck.

Their bodies tough,
it took a heavy boot
to crush them. And
soon we found
refuge where we could.

The Day the Locusts Came Cont...

Out in the valley
men made barricades,
burned the bodies piling
up. To no avail. Swamping
everything in
sight, devouring it,
the tidal wave
moved on.

The summer the locusts came
my mother's eyes
turned dark. In her
wheelchair Grandma
keened. Grandpa's garden
disappeared. And Papa
battered by a regiment,
did his dwindling
chores, so pale
it seemed his blood
too had gone
for feed.

Was it only 30 days
we lived
through it, the while
our world was picked as
clean as carrion
beside the road?

The Summer the locusts came
my mother
sickened. I watched
her in the bed
where solace had
always been. Her arms
extended rigid from
the sheets, palms
up, flattened out
like shields. And then
they dropped, fists
clenching unclenching
and she was crying
crying in her dreams.

August

Fluff
the cottonwood
 drifts
 down

not flake
from flake unique
or starred. But usual
as each other.

We
 they say
not I.

Like us they make
pretense of cold
in Celsius so high
to stagger. Look,
See December
clung to
trees, green leaves
gone white?

And we four shiver
months away from
winter
hold hands up hot
in scorch

 to catch it:
 summer
 snow.

.....

Pookie

The cousin's ages were all
one digit when our city
cousin came. "Pookie" his
parents called him: piggy
faced ornery little runt. Stubby
legs stuck out his romper
(the fashion then for four year olds)
And from his puffy sleeves, fat
arms pummeled us

Pookie Cont..

free lance,
precocious mouth spewed
insult
snitchy grin
when we got punished
for his pranks.

One afternoon
we'd been
"obstreporous"
Papa said, sent us outside
with bowls of bread and milk
for supper. Pushing the stuff
around, we groused and grumbled.
Pookie louder than the rest.

Then
in that one flash
suddenly
so the eye is overflowed
Papa's face at the door, Pookie
pulling his romper down
PEED
right in his bowl. I gawked &
gaspd, my sister too.
The boys squawked their delight
as Papa's arm came out, scooped
up a leaking Pookie,
disappeared.

Next morning Pookie appeared
unscathed. We jeered and
teased; stopped soon enough.
He wouldn't squirm,
just sneered and postured
thumbed his nose.

Sometimes looking back
with something close to
envy, I see Pookie's small
opinions arcing home.

And sometimes
feeling breaded,
milked myself, I
plot the scene, in more
polished frame perhaps,
make my final
statement

with

panache sangfroid élan
nose fingers
all aligned
and thumb.

.....

Graffiti

Tack festooned the walls, loop
and swag, leaked addictive
scent of horse. Mice moved
tiny, animated shadows
in the feed.

I went there always
by myself, to chew
the horses' sweet dusty
wheat, to remember something
to forget.

On the walls, Grandpa
had nailed cardboard
boxes, layers of them to
send wind back
to winter.

One day, penknife poking for
what to do
I found an empty space, gouged
a little door, three sides
cut, still fastened
on the fourth.

Graffiti Cont...

Door folded
aside, I drew something
on the layer underneath.
Invention
bellowed in the room. I
carved another little door
within the first, until
the layers 4 or 5
gave out.

I got better at it as
the weeks went by; gauged
measurements, message,
image,
door in door
pushed the flaps
back in their place. No-one
knew my secrets singing
in the walls.

I've wondered since. Did
someone find them, startle,
laugh? Did the room burn, my
music like symphonic
sparks
in listening air?

Or are the walls still
hiding secrets, as we
all do, behind the tiny
doors, that open onto
others and onto others

until our crowded hearts
go quiet
and silence wins
the final word?

Grandma

She crabbed through
her slow eclipse.
The wheelchair ground
a dirge. "Dear Lord
Sweet Jesus" constantly
entreated. They demurred.

Grandma's pain
was real. Palpably it shook
her flesh, hands shuddered
on the melting knees and
wrinkled like an ancient
pudding, the pretty face
twisted with it, once periwinkle
eyes dissolved to grey.

Our love, or at least
our pity she begged for
And we gave it, too often
with a grudge. Her smile
was feeble. Unconvinced

But had she really smiled
once, opened her April
arms, brought Spring to
him? Had they laughed
and loved and lulled
themselves to dream?

Until her body bent
with babies -- eight of
them, two dead and one
disfigured — or time or
what?

The doctors didn't
know. Muttered "rheumatism"
walked away. And left her
wretched, wrapped in liniment
and rags.

Grandma Cont...

Was it then
her nature, stretched
too taut, snapped like
a fiddle string, left
dissonance to drum her
through the years?

Whatever turned in
her, turned us away.
Shame soured
in her wake.

Daily she shrieked
the walls down, so
softly they barely
knew they'd crumbled.
Rubble mounted in
every room.

We skirted it, scattered
to find pretense outside.
Only Grandpa stayed; obelisk
in unforgiving rain. He
stayed. Tried to put to
rights
her wronging world.

.....
Bumblebee
languished in
a flower, browsed
and drowsing, so
still I thought it
dead.
Enormously it
spanned
the cosmos
edge to edge.

I rolled it
onto my hand; fat

Bumblebee ... Cont...

and furred like jungle
beasts, bristled amber
black, isinglass wings
flaked and layered, veined
like leaves.

In an instant
it had stabbed me, and I
dropped it. I'd been
told; this bug bit
only once.
I retrieved it
for a second look.

Fabulous:
furred legs, pollen
powdered, gold dust
from a panner's
stash, and in the pewtered
facets of its eyes
the domed and multiplying
secrets of its world:
winged spaces
flowers roundelayed
all amethyst
and crimson
hyacinthine, maize, all
in that crystallized haze
a daze of colour
it had but to choose
and light
allegro
in its liquid hues.)

It roused
And razed me
once again.

This time I howled, hurled
it off forever, hobbled to
the ditch miffed and sniffing,
slopped mud on it.

Bumblebee ... Cont...

Grandpa chided and consoled:
"Child, the sting's gone soon.
But now you own that bee, take
it out and look it over
anytime you've a mind to."

I thought about it then
and now ...

Remark the story
and the sting
that bees and sometimes
summer
bring.

.....

Chester Hezekiah Packerham
1868 - 1952

In his twenties
he'd had his flocks
scattered through
the valley. They paid
the preacher off with
practicalities; pumpkins,
spuds, waved him and his
horse off to neighboring flocks
fattening in their souls.

Later, he drove freight
in wagons, teams of mules
teetered on the passes, waded
streams. He picked rock to make
a highway from a wagon trail, told
tales.

Once he said, the crew found
a den of hibernating rattlers
in the draw, coil on coil wrapped
around each other, venom loaded
and boiling in their blood.

Chester Hezekiah Packerham Cont...

Before they'd thought it
through, some idiot lobbed
dynamite into the hole and
poison rained from heaven
like a scourge. Two men died, others
sickened, ailed
for years.

By a fluke his fortunes
changed. Money wended its way
in. His house grew huge. He
was gently, mildly confused; knew
little of it, cared less. But
Grandma did. The dollars came and
went like supplicants. She built
the biggest church in town.

The lavish years he sidestepped
when he could, wanted to be a
missionary in some uncharted
place, make God another home.

And as fast as it appeared
the money lost itself. His orphaned
dreams went begging.
Opulence was sold.
He moved his family into dust.

By then he was almost
old, had tended too much
his wife, children, paupers,
leeches, the always lost. But
grace still reigned in him, his
hair a silver icon, his hands mapped
sacred years. And if the crass
denied him blessing, he doubled
his and blessed them
all.

Grandpa, I saw you
as God. Your kindness
crowned my day. You were
the first birdspeak of spring, all its

Chester Hezekiah Pakenham Cont...

beginnings, branches wrapped in buds,
blossoms scheming. You were the sunrise,
the set of it, the spaces in between, Your
callused hand that warmed to fur and wood held
tight to mine, walks along the pasture ways and groves
where sky and earth informed the soft
moss agate eyes. And
by them, mine.
My world
gained weight each hour.

And all those spinning years
that love made me a little less
than heathen. Gave me an idol
to worship
In a holy name

Boxed photographs; the family genes unorganized
not glued down. And now the celebrated truth
that pictures tell, fall in fractions from my
hands. Stamp each other null and void. They
seem alive; Papa's Valentino looks. the sexy
flapper dress, flaxy crown of braids my mother wore.
Lord, they were handsome. O Enough to step right
out and into one of Gatsby's do's Then we
the bookends, start closing in Grandparent's momentary
smile, and us the kids and cousins

S
T
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all across the lawn
by size too big for
cute too small for
use. Fixed grins, we

Chester Hezekiah Packerham Cont...

looked for all the
world like wads of
something; wax or dough
waiting to be stamped.

Guess and Guess Again
we sometimes played.

We watched a calf
get born; the struggle
of it, spindly drowning
thing wrenched out in
glue and blood the cow
licked up. I almost
heaved.

"Guess" my kid sister
said, and then explained
it all. "Where have you
been?" Not Mama and Papa
too, not surely them.
Guess again she said.
For weeks they all
looked strange.

There's no photograph
of cows, twice a day
lined up by the fence,
aromatic, dense. Or the cats
crowded in the corner of the
barn, while Uncle grabbed the
cow's teats, shot a stream of
milk right in their mouths
and rarely missed.

No authentic watermelon
grins. We spat the seeds
between the boards that bridged
the ditch. And if we swallowed
seeds? – Well guess my brother
teased; watermelons would grow
and burst us like balloons
all blood and guts and watermelon

Chester Hezekiah Packerham Cont...

juice, he said. We swallowed
our delicious fears.

There's no photograph of "April Showers" on Grandma's
bureau, talc so sweet I sniffed it like an addict.

No photograph of Grandpa's roll-top
desk, spiders learning to trace his script, feathers
floating from his pen. Or the front porch screened
from bats; its ceiling where a basket of blue glass
beads and eucalyptus hung. Watching it upside
down, wedged in among Victorian novels, I,
encasing myself in blue
blue glass
until one day
the basket
became somehow
unstrung
and cobalt eyes
flashed
from the ceiling
from every shelf

and there -- there's another
blue deeper than midnight,
its eye winks indigo
blinks in a shower of
sapphire sparks as though
the moon making the smallest
spasm of light had
turned it on.

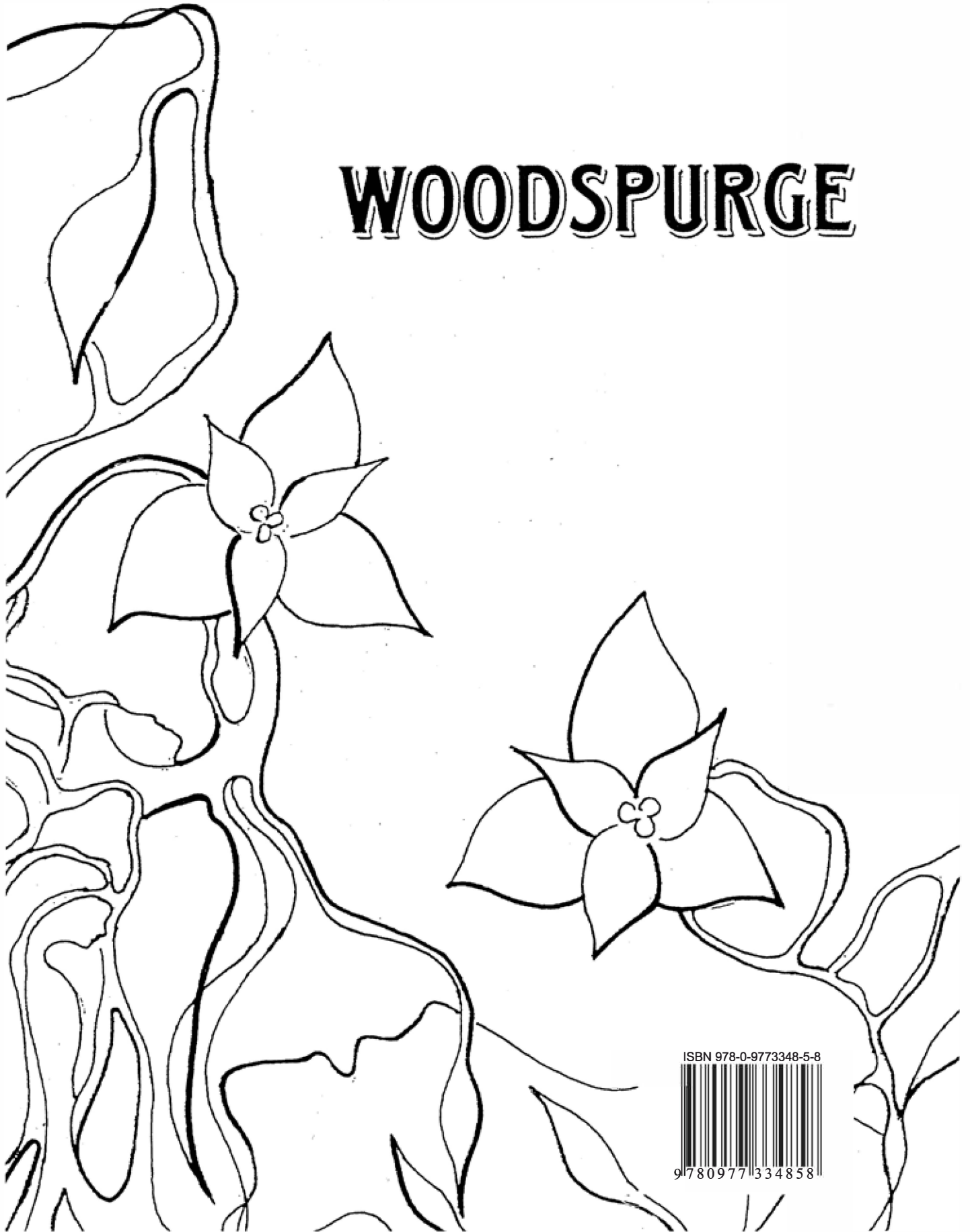
But there's no moon, no
and the air is dense with
breathing books, eucalyptus
begins to bud. The old
porch pulses, all incensed
leaves and blue
blue staring eyes.

They mesmerize, fasten
to memory like
a foreign stamp.

Chester Hezekiah Packerham Cont...

These memories that skip
and miss and scatter to
return and taunt and tattle
enough to make the season
tremble and horizons tilt
as always they did
at summer's end, and I
winded and unwound am left
to guess
and guess again.

WOODSPURGE



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