

Glenna Holloway
913 E. Bailey Rd.
Naperville, IL 60565

(312) 983-5499

PANTHER IN THE GLOVE

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*National Federation of State Poetry Societies publishes a limited edition anthology of annual prize winners for the membership

OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, dresser scarves, antimacassars
no one wants, filling boxes, filling huge cotton prints,
sleeves sloping like tents, hooks unfastened
back of the neck, they string out
death in rocking chairs.

Daily they fatten to fill their final boxes, paying
out advice no one needs, paying
out the slow twine, enlarging the old designs,
straining fifty-odd years of wifery
for a mite to impress the young ones
tightening against their webs and cardboard,
closing in with the last lid.

Frayed sheaths
used awhile by knife-voiced kin
who own everything in focus
outside the net of squares and wheels.

On humid suburban evenings, on some deserted
concrete patio, they group like toadstools,
picking at the threads of the days' patterns,
unraveling their mouths,
honing their only weapons.

BEFORE A POET KNOWS WHAT SHE IS

Eyes wild and light as a puma's,
breast-buds flowered plump, up-tilted to summer,
opal and nectarine heraldry of Erato in jeans.

Graduation brought three marriage pleas,
bottled forest smells, soft wool and leather
always close, mouths and arms she liked.
New sums to sift at the deep waking.

The suitors spoke hoarsely of apartments
and TV, bed, money, children
and two promised a car of her own.
She ran alone to wrap night around her.

Without secret pages,
too unsure to say how warlock winds
hurried her blood, how river tongues rhymed
with hers and promised more. Too new
to tell how strings and reeds in minor keys
leaned her on shoulders of granite,
closed her eyes with pine breath
while wilderness sinew held her closer.

And her unnamed babies
already lay in an outgrown box
pressing blue gentians from ditches.

THE BEST THING MY FATHER DID WAS LIE

People, all the pretty people lie so well and tell truth like amateurs in little threadbare theaters; it all comes out damp and gray, slurred and slurried, going away and coming back.

Where do you dig for truth? Out on the parallax, in the center or the middle? There's a difference—one is this fence I'm on: the pickets are cut and dried, alternating black and white, scratching fact sore but not much truth. People climb up here out of context to reach boughs of that old tree, maybe the Eden Tree, but the whole crop's wormy to the core. My father said conqueror worms were final ONLY truth.

He polished his lies like jewels, wore one in each eye, mounted a ruby in his tongue. His skull rattled with others stored for special events and Sundays. When some went out of style, he re-faceted, and none wore dim before him. He mined the world for his rough material mine polished was dull beside.

We inlaid his coffin with his favorites; he willed the rest to me, never to go with fence-climbing, fruit-picking clothes. I keep them here because I don't know how to get rid of them. Worms have started on the box but the gems are still gorgeous and whole. I planned to sit here until all were devoured but it won't happen. Worms tried to bite the big ruby, sprung their jaws and died. Only harder stones can make dust of these. Or some marvelous ray. Until unequivocal then, the beasts will eat boxes and bones, the jewels will glitter, each its own irrelevance, and I am tired of watching.

All the real stuff is down there in either-sided sludge. Quasi-I must jump off right or left and grope for nothing absolute.

If only some almost holy wind would push.

4/

YOU SHOULD KNOW SHOULD I SAY YES

I've never understood her well.
She comes and goes at will,
sometimes more than once a day.
Now and then I turn and do
a double take to make sure it really is she.

Her voice is alto soft; you called her shy.
She's the one to marry, she's the one
who doesn't have to win
or even compete; she'd be satisfied
with a bungalow, a hatchback, and simple country food.

This place is always crowded; I didn't see
my other friend come in. I say
"friend" because she's been so close--
all through school in the same class,
so many nights in the same bed.

Fantasizing about some boy she wanted bad,
she never spared details. Her imagery would wheel
through my head, center in my lower half and while
I lay thinking how a slow hot cure would feel
against my aching, she'd begin to fill

her mental shopping cart with perks and goods
her favors could harvest-- as if the gods
designed her just to be rewarded for her beauty.
I'd call her nasty names and say her body
was not meant to be used that way.

I'd shame her, make her promise to behave, then we
wouldn't speak till the next night
when I was studying, my stomach in a knot,
and she'd bring up clothes or yachts; she wanted it all.
Next day I'd hear her laughing as I rode the El,

(cont.)

struggling with theses and a twelve pound book,
 her "degrees won't get it for you, babe," in the back
 of my head. So of course, you've met her,
 a cunning child with trailing scented hair
 looking lies from under lashes long enough

to blow in the wind. You've heard her voice, sometimes a knife
 out of its sheath. You've seen her eyes, wild
 and craving as a hawk's, cool fire like a cougar's willed
 to the art of pursuit, always weighing, always hiding
 something. And you've fallen into their orbit, unheeding.

But watch. The lids lower and raise and she's gone.
 Here sits a middling woman with nothing to gain
 by telling you this. I wonder why I did.
 Yet you must have noticed when daisies died
 and orchids bloomed on a hollyhock stem.

You've seen fawn eyes transmit praise and trust, then steam
 with sudden rage, and back again to blue-greened
 layers of velvet empathy, deep ingrained
 with kindness, reflex lenses of compassion. Right now
 she who cares so much is past tense, how long I don't know.

I share these eyes with her and her. I've confessed
 the complexities of woman. A blink. That fast.
 The change can happen with a syllable, a color,
 or slowly like the build-up of a chafing collar.
 Part of this trihedroness should be kept

in full sun; part needs to be tightly capped
 like fulminate of mercury, never stirred.
 The less definite one needs to be steered
 with a modicum of persuasion, a steady hand.
 Sometimes the hand must be my own, my conscience hound,

or just the basic elements of selfhood.
 Are we so different after all? If you had
 a psychic scalpel would you sever
 all your prisoners, or keep them in the brew for savor?
 Think how each taste will flourish with more than one receiver.

STRANGER

This is a never before hereness
yet such an old village--
not somewhere I would live.
The houses look noxious,
the streets abscessed and humpbacked.
I know every cranny as surely
as the sound of your voice
calling my name.

Only yesterday
we were expelled from a silver express train,
booted off as if we didn't have the fare
or some VIP claimed our seats.

I've heard about this place
in rattling prologues to winter
and from spider tracks behind the furnace.

You've ruckled these alleys
with your flickering eyes,
skewed these rooftops with your fever.
Your jaw clenches the dejà vu of pain.

How can I stay?

But if I don't
you might lose your way
and no one else knows the road home.

TROMPE L'OEIL

It means deception of the eye,
this unique art form
making us believe nonexistent things.
Your den's north wall appears
as bookshelves of brightly bound classics,
a bust of Homer, Ming censers, brass pots
trailing ivy and florescence.
The clever painter lies, then provides
real scent of roses to satisfy the nose.
But the hand that tries to grasp a volume
of verse or feel jade's carved coolness
resents being made a fool. And still the eye
insists, forcing another confrontation
with flatness. So must I resolve you
in the brain's right and left privacies,
in the unlighted offshoots
that don't remember facts.
Another artist has blue'd your eyes
with faithfulness and burnished your skin
with sweet shades. Sometimes my hand
finds heat and roundness much more
than a match for illusions of sight.
No place wanting softness or substance
goes empty. Yet I know I'll touch again
that one-dimension hardness,
try to hold the light that isn't there,
face that depthless smile.
And all your old false colors
will shame me for my blindness.

8,
"LIKE A PANTHER IN THE GLOVE" --Emily Dickinson

(For Emily M.)

"She was so thoughtful"--
"So sweet and caring"--
her friends recite in psalter tones.
The ritual room of shaking heads,
soft sibilance and carnation overkill
thick enough to replace her bier
light my anger like a torch.

At least no mawkish mass
will ever fill a space like this
once my lips are cosmetically closed.
They could never muster enough charity
to honey their tongues with me. What right
have they to my name in their warm mouths!

Maybe she wasn't always wonderful.
Or maybe she ran on low amperage,
never knowing how it is to operate
on your own hot crossed-circuitry,
splicing with scorched fingers
your own frayed smoking wires. Or maybe

she did it all and knew it well
under insulation of infinite grace.

In silence
I will make myself her monument.

COMMUTER TRAIN RIDERS

Let all the habitual passengers know
in the dark of their heads
that the 8:15 will pile jackknifed and jagged
in a ditch tomorrow. Leave Gabriel feathers
on their doorsills so they're sure.
Some will ride it anyway, unable to crack
their molds, ratcheted to their private reels,
racked on indelible rails in sweat-fitted hides.

Knowing now, knowing nothing else,
they rattle their loose change, dash
from center to corner,
make deep fingernail tracks
on the sides of their thoughts. They dip
into the old bins to rummage for things
they once put somewhere. One reads
a certain book, one cleans the attic,
fondling trophies. One prowls sleep with pills.

They do what they can with their morning faces,
staring at the huge WHY that palls their reflections.
Slowly, though not enough to be late,
they go out and board the 8:15.

VERNAL EQUINOX

I don't want to know it's spring--
days as long as nights.

You and I began almost fifteen months ago.
You wore your old hunting boots
hauled from the trunk when your car stalled
in the blizzard and you walked the rest of the way.
Your ears had turned to American Beauties
just out of the florist's refrigerator.
The real ones never came.
Under my long dress I wore fleece sweat pants.
The church's vintage furnace picked that day
to sigh its last. Only three guests arrived.
We said our vows in the preacher's study,
his glasses so fogged he could barely read his lines.
Some people said it was a long achey winter.
But we loved it away and started on our second.

Now I could tell them the sharpest pang is green.
The coldest hurting is warm moist earth
crumbling and parting for still more green.

You said I'd make you a winner.
But all I did was make you a pair of boot socks
make the bed
make soup and deep dish pie
then turn to answer that strange knock at the door
and tomorrow's knob came off in my hand.

CAT-WALK

Her name is Nefertiti, this tabby
asserting ancient wiseness beyond our alley,
suspending
all my substance against the wall in her gaze—
Secret lenses of Alice's looking glass eye-level,
unguarded for an instant— Always I've known
if I moved with dark quick as light
I could descend one of those twin tunnels
when they opened to receive impatient night.

As I entered (did she know?)
the passage vibrated, still hot
with her last wild leap from cellar to bookcase.
My trackless feet swirled faint smells of fennel,
toadflax and humus. Tiny sparks flared,
died deeper in iris mazes of mist and whisper
of small things hiding in crevices. I opened
the first door. Ahead the shafts converged,
a vaulted corridor of oak-bark, leaf-shine, sun-stain.
Joy was magneto rhythm, intense probing prongs
of root-forks and moon-shed. Next, a trophy room
collaged with grasshoppers, shrews, bright wings,
There were hoarded summers, spare willows,
stacks of overgrown trails, adventures
still wrapped in assorted fur and sensuous string.
Convolutions of shapes and sounds
changed and flowed on a weft of black,
approaching, receding, on a vector of velvet.
Green was a flavor and all other eyes a strong scent.
Motion was a prolonged spring, a dive
that never reached water, reversed upward at will.

Deeper was slow cryptic drumming,
a sudden sinewy flash of untame gilt and ebony
lancing through vines and scorched grass
dissolving to jungle dusk.
Another door. A sly stir in a chamber beyond.
A brink, a river noise, a rush of olive and indigo.
At my feet a beetle—
No, a scarab jewel!
And I returned to my place without crossing the Nile.

AFTERNOON AMONG THE ARTIFACTS

If not for the small sign, I'd have passed it
without interrupted interest in the other displays,
without stopping at the thing that changed the world.
It's called The Fat Man.

The name is apt— a bulbous unarmed twin
of Nagasaki's Nemesis
obsoletely catching dust and fingerprints
in a museum on the fringes of Milwaukee.

Hard to think it a bomb or even a weapon,
more like a time capsule maybe filled
with swatches of our century's first third:
a beaded flapper dress, a megaphone,
a rumble seat. A tub for making gin
or soup enough for depression lines—
all things before my time but no more alien
than this bulging precedent marking the floor
with shadows, forerunner of smaller packages
of streamlined rage. We went from atomic
to hydrogen to nuclear with sinister interstices
filled with equations that don't translate
the same in every language.

I'm curiously detached. This is abstract art,
this huge clumsy egg. It should be seething
with metaphor. It should cry out
with the voice of Isaiah over the wails of hell.
I'm missing something. I've lost my hearing.

Maybe we stood too close to that first blast.
Maybe it damaged our inner ears and eyes
and all our inside senses, jarred spaces
in our cortex so we can't relate one thing
to another. The circuit arcs over the voids,
sputters, skips. A cerebral non sequitur.

I wander among the airplanes, mostly wings of war,
fifty years of progress in flight. I pause
beneath an ultralight, stare at a lunar lander.
By the time I return to The Fat Man, a kid
has scrawled an obscenity in yellow crayon
on its dark bulk. It won't rub off;
it only smears. Maybe Eliot was too elegant.
Maybe the world ends without bang or whimper,
just one final blurted scatological curse.

The Fat Man is supremely indifferent.
I try to multiply thousands of lives
by millions of next time, by megatons of now.
How far past kill is overkill?
What is now? When is today?
Is it the decade or the afternoon?
Or the last minute?

(While I'm Trying To Write A French Rondeau)

YOU ASK IF I'VE FORGOTTEN HIM

I think of him when lightning splits
The pines astride this ridge then hits
The thicket wall still rolling fire.
Brush flares, rain hisses, makes a spire
Of smoke, a claim. It rarely quits
With that, but smolders in the pits
Of sticks and limbs till all my wits
Are stoked, so after I retire

I think of him.

In warming times each year this blitz
Re-scars my woods. I search for bits
Of green around charred wounds, then liar-
Like, hail life as something to desire.
All winter when my likeness fits,

I think of him.

OCTOBER BEFORE SLEEP

Night's fir-lined quiet
seeps into my tent and sleeping bag.
I open the skylight flap of canvas
for cool star sparks to pour through.

My squarish shadow steepes
in wild dissymmetry as native noises
begin dividing the dark.
Eyes closed, I label them--
strumming legs, ballooning throats,
tiny claws scrabbling in leaf mold,
random breeze bumping low branches.
The exercise satisfies the faint
what-ifs left over from childhood.

It has been decades since I was here
but only I
am different. A loon on the lake
crazes the horizontal sounds,
his cry a blue ice peak
on my spinal graph.
I smile and roll over slowly
into the semi-warmth of acceptance.

Chopbooks out:
Panther In Glue
(Andrew Maintrain) ✓
short

✓ Panther In Glue ✓
35 pgs. Animation Press

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staring at the huge WHY that palls their reflections.
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LAST UNCLE

In my dandelion days
I had five tall men
who swooped me to their shoulders,
swung me, made me squeal deliciously.

In my frantic floribunda days
they began leaving
and I let them, without ever learning
of the last year of the Cavalry, without feeling
the bees' warmth against the glass lab cases, meeting
the queens, tasting the special honey,
without watching the wet hands at the potter's wheel
but always reaching out my own for prize-winning pots.

Once in my pastel hollyhock days
it served me to serve with the cognac
what I had heard without listening— how one had flown
the early U. S. Mail, had twice met Lindy,
had crashed in a swamp but saved his cargo.
A dry-box tidbit with only a faint aroma
of rich ragout. Because I was always
singing in the choir, collecting carnival glass,
photographing children in the garden.

And now in my tearose days
there is one. My faded luggage is crammed
with empty pages
as this jet closes an east to west arch.
And I wonder if he'll feel like talking.

A VASE OF PINK PLUM BLOSSOMS

The dull clay coil in my potter's hands
obeyed my fingers, my will,
but only casually.
The relinquished form lusted after light,
rearranged its gray molecules in sun,
reveled in its experience with fire.
Still an apprentice,
it drank deeply of earth's unguents
flowed over its flaws, then healed
and ripened in the last lap of hereditary heat.
Today it came into its own
first flowering
alloyed with pollinated sisters of the soil.

OLD PLOWMEN

The big oil painting was eloquent with humanity
in bib overalls and ladder-back chairs
with the color worn off. Country store barrels
foiled the four practiced sitters
like family ghosts in the background.
In the upper left, Thadeus Ock idled his thick sole
against the obligatory pot-bellied stove
so I could smell the scorch. "Hunh, that's just as likely
if you spell sole with a 'u'," Clayburn Gilmer chided
from the foreground, sniffing. And Thad replied, "Naw,
I'll make it to heaven, all right. Doin' nothin',
stayin' outa mischief, that's how."

A sensitive brush caught sly turns of lip,
leprechaun eyes, impudent toothpick, poised Barlow knife.
"What about sins of omission, Thad?" Doc Benson drawled.
(He wasn't a real doctor but folks gave him the last word
on ague, constipation and male maladies till they forgot
he was just a farmer too. For one thing, everything of his
still worked at the time; for another,
he recommended "a modicum of sour-mash bourbon"
for a multitude of misfortunes.)
Thad and Jerry Holman addressed sinning by default
with square-boned shrugs. Jerry, haloed
in Kaywoodie smoke, added, "Reckon that's better
than actin' like a Pharisee makin' a big to-do."
A tobacco juice exclamation point seconded the comment.

The composition was sufficiently humble with grays
and blues; a muted palette of ochers and umbers
suspected the subjects of things
their own left hands hardly knew-- filled silos
for an injured neighbor, prize calf to a new widow,
kidney to a cousin, ready hammer and lumber
for the storm-damaged church belltower.

The artist's knowing stroke unstilled life
and sound. The faces defied canvas and time
that tried to reduce them all to sameness,
contain them in dark stained wood with mitered corners.

The gavel banged on my attention from the front
of the hall. The bidding was over. Afterward as I paid
the price, the auctioneer came over, wondering aloud
why I outbid the collectors. Had I known the artist?

"No. I watched him once. Bothered him probably."
I walked toward the picture I'd already entered
through the door he painted decades ago.
"I always wondered what happened to this work.
That man on the left-- the one peeling the apple--
he was my grandfather. The apple was for me."

(While I'm Trying To Write A French Rondeau)

YOU ASK IF I'VE FORGOTTEN HIM

I think of him when lightning splits
The pines astride this ridge then hits
The thicket wall still rolling fire.
Brush flares, rain hisses, makes a spire
Of smoke, a claim. It rarely quits
With that, but smolders in the pits
Of sticks and limbs till all my wits
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In warming times each year this blitz
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KING TUTANKHAMUN: ONCE THERE WAS A BOY WHO LOVED TO WHISTLE

Young pharoah, I studied your museumed effigies
catching light and oblique dark,
posed on the threshold of blue and saffron,
paused in the old dreams from the head of Horus:
Morning renascence out of a lotus—
rolling across the arch of heaven on sun wheels—
rafting under-earth rivers near shoals of Osiris
wrapped in the shawls of Ptah.

Mortal eyes are splended with your accessories,
a glut of gold and gods.
And everywhere your face with your ankh-eyes
reflecting on your mirror world.
(You must have seen eyes when yours were closed,
always on you, looking full at you from anywhere,
a thousand replicas to fill your own.)

I saw you at the bowstring—hunter, warrior,
hero-murals of a king, a moral for your subjects
foiled with lapis, carnelian, turquoise, ivory.
And in the end, failed by the vulturine wingspan
and flared serpent hood.

But back in the trailing edges of light,
beyond the artists' tales and the godsmiths' tolls
before you changed your name, there was a smiling boy.
I saw him clearly through a tear in the papyrus,
rollicking barefoot on sands old when legends began—
You on an ungilded afternoon, learning how to whistle.

It is he beneath the priceless mask—
Amarna child with puckered mouth framing melodies
for the songless ibis, and turning Selket's head.
On moon-chilled desert I can hear him
softly behind the myth of death.

THE INTERLOPERS

Beneath inverted black jungle
of water hyacinth roots underweaving my hidden bayou,
my diver's lamp the only hold with my world,
I disturb a concert of stripes: hundreds
of inch-long fishes silver-slanting right or left
as my hand directs. A king size mud cat
like Genghis Khan eyes me from the olive drab floor.
And overhead! My lost boat! Impounded
since last summer— clamped listing in a wet/dry vise,
sun-half of bulbous green vases feigning
innocence with flowers; night-half of fringe
and garland chain, propeller upholstered in velvet.
I rip away the slimy grip and feel
hairy stalactites creep closer, more determined
than topside kudzu. The gasoline-fed screw might
thresh a yard before losing. A new spring army
of trees wades out to make a stockade.
Roman-helmeted herons patrol
the spreading perimeter above with lances.
Here, the mighty Khan rules, guarded by turtles.
And I, slave to light and lungs
must fight myself free.

CALLIGRAPHY BY NIGHT

Three migrating cranes
Brushed their winged strokes across
The waxing moon's empty page.

In silvered silence
We read their cryptic beauty
Like an ancient haiku scroll.