

PANTHER IN THE GLOVE

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* National Federation of State Poetry Societies is made up of individual state societies such as the Poetry Society of Georgia, Texas, etc. NFSPS conducts annual competitions and many member states have their own. The winners are published in small books of limited edition.

1.

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.

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.

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 déjà 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.

4.

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 he did.
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.

WARM BEADS

I'm late to the coronation.
The strand of elliptical cut jade
you gave me to go with my favorite dress
wasn't in my jewel box.
I searched away the time,
knew I had to leave. The shiny wall
of my shower reflected watercolor greens
around my neck as I hurried to bathe.
You'd added more beads and put them on me
while I was dragging dream feet
down another charcoal corridor
with too many doors and none of them mine.
The new beads, lavender, peach, white,
blooming between the familiar leaf shades,
glowed against my skin all those hours.

"Jade isn't always green," you said
of the first string presented in a case,
"but it's always cold--
unless the wearer loves."

I feel the heat stored in each bead
before entering where you wait.

TROMPE L'OEIL

It means deception of the eye,
this unique art form
making us believe nonexistent things.
Your den's north wall appears lined
with shelves of brightly bound classics,
a bust of Homer, a Ming censer, brass pots
trailing ivy and florescence.
The clever painter lies, then provides
real scent of lilacs to satisfy the nose.
But the hand that tries to grasp
a volume of verse or feel jade's coolness
resents being made a fool.
And still the eye insists,
forcing another tactile confrontation
with flatness.

So must I resolve you
in the brain's right and left privacy,
in the unlighted offshoots
that don't remember facts.
Another artist has blueed your eyes
with faithfulness and burnished your skin
with sweet shades. Your walk is smooth
and the line of your throat is gentle.
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.

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
hailed 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.

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.

SALES FIGURES

Hot-wired for sound and motion, Hendrix sat in the outer office already tasting every word he and the man inside would serve. Two of his own kind waited in tan lounge chairs near Hendrix. They had traded small nods as each entered the arena. The clan was thinning. Once there would have been four or five grinning their clean-shaven double-breasted confidence at their rivals. Once they warred sportingly. Now it was kill and eat if they could. Lately Hendrix woke all hours of the night, a weird feeling in his chest or belly or down his spine, always trying to scrape sleep back over it till time to bathe and cologne the reek of failure.

Every morning he put on his well pressed lies, emulsioned the kink in his colon and headed out again to another reception cubicle, ten-by-ten designer spaces for people who worried their ties and wearied their creases. Now he declined the presiding blonde's offer of coffee, thinking about the clown in the inner office, imagining him swiveling around in his imported smoke chrysalis between his Wall Street Journal, his damn computer and his crystal decanter. Hendrix toyed for awhile with the idea of a clone or two of himself he could send to the other chambers he must visit; they could all finish in time for a golf match. One of them would have to win that at least.

He didn't play much anymore except when a client preferred to say "no" over the back nine. The embroidered bottom line of the executive encounter was always the same, over drinks, over lunch, over fair-traded joke stock. And however cerebral, handsomely holstered or steel-jacketed in necessity, it was always a scorching stinking lead slug NO going straight to the gut.

The inside door opened, ejected the first salesman, pale and older: The indecent exposure revolted Hendrix. The man lurched out into the corridor. The second salesman, suddenly infected by the same germ, lumbered to his feet mumbling, "You think he forgot his overcoat?" The blonde looked irked. "Maybe he's coming back," said Hendrix, vowing never to let anyone see like that into a torn opening. The second salesman gathered up the coat; they all heard the shot in the hall. Only Hendrix was sure what it was.

"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.

VILLANELLE IN VIRIDESCENT GRAYS

The line between neap tide and sky
Has disappeared like rubbed pastels,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

They draw their graphic pattern high
Across mixed hues; it parallels
The line between neap tide and sky.

Light's changing moods intensify
The foreground textures, sheen and shells,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

The pier shades truth while colors lie;
Imagination's stroke compels
The line between neap tide and sky.

Winged calls begin to prophesy
The storm this palette's blend foretells,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

They pose on pilings, preening dry
Before their stippled rising swells
The line between neap tide and sky
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

A DIFFERENT ROAD TO SUN-UP

My mother would have muttered a certain chant all day.
All the omens were there: Sickly sun
plunged wide shafts into the ground, sucking it dry,
giving no warmth, only taking, leaving a swath
of cold-parched earthworms and clay crumbs.
The first wind pried the shutters, crashed my lamps,
spilling all my oil far from the green firewood.
An alto afterwind was discordant whispers,
slaps of chill, wavy scent of damp animals.
Half of me gathered wolfsbane, racing decaying daylight;
the other half swallowed drugstore pellets of sleep.
I waited for it under a blanket
my mother had woven her mystic symbols into.

Awakened by blackness darker than sleep, heavier
than night, I tried to surface, swim up through it
like a cave fish looking inside its head
for its lost eyes. Night pushed up
from all the world's old graves, smelling
of all the world's old sins. A wolf night,
diseased and howling. A night to grow everything old.
I lit a trembling candle. Morpheus fled,
leaving me an empty bottle, floating me in vertigo.
But Pluto was there to breathe out my frail flame.

The charred moon smoked, reversed itself,
revealing a death's head just as she always said,
withholding its downshine, dripping
ice sweat wolf sweat grave sweat.
Black was nebulized violence and violation. Black
stained walls and air, seeped into books to lie
in wait forever. Trackless black where the wolf walked,
bearded reeking black, silhouette of hills not there,
of beasts clanning moonward, necks fletched like arrows.

I said my mother's name, her part of me
clutched the stems of aconite, flung them on the bed.
She rose in me like ether. I groped beneath fear
for the incantations drummed into my childhood,
stumbled and skidded over roots my father planted;
some trailing tendril snagged and held.

Weed essence opened the flue; friction made a spark.
Still sneezing, I relit the candle,
snatched up the wolfsbane for a funeral pyre
crowned with her hand-hewn table. Leftover night
was stilt-legged shadows on a hearthlit stage,
the usual cast with known names.
I am no part of her or here. Tomorrow,
I announced to the snickering flames,
is the time to move back among my kind.

SURGEON'S SESTINA

Beneath my closing lids the scene still waits:
A different jungle, a beginning rhythm,
My far-off forebear, undulating witch-man
With his mystic motions in the watered light
Of ancient moon and lake, the mark of blood,
The fetish fang and feather in his hands.

I recognize the language of his hands
Rehearsed in sleight, the primal chant that waits
Between each hesitation of my blood.
My sleepless pulse pursues the secret rhythm,
The alternating tom-tom, loud then light,
Systole—diastole, incessant man.

Alien incantations, feral kinsman
My atavistic cells recall; my hands
Have held the same thin chances up to light.
While devil-doctors dance, he watches, waits.
No, we aren't strangers, shaman, sharing rhythm,
Wild harsh cadence, current other than blood

That quickens with the questions—Brothers by blood
Minus our masks in breeding black— one man
Tonight. Hyena sirens punch their rhythm
Through my dream. The groping promise of my hands
Begins to stir; the twisted gauntlet waits
For fingers in the dark to locate light.

The new and sterile lineage of light
(Begot by stone incision, too much blood,
A thousand herbs and fire) seldom waits
For birth attended by the grasp of man.
Sorcerer, healer, leech, my licensed hands
Aren't far removed holding mortal rhythm.

Deep in the covenant genes, that rhythm
Made some conjurer's conscience reach for light,
Defy endemic demons, pledge his hands.
Some holy heathen swore in his own blood
To rising order on behalf of man
And medicine. The unresolved still waits

To pound in rhythm with the learning blood.
Sure shadowless light anoints awaking man,
Supports his hands; the sacred scalpel waits.

SELF-CARVED EPITAPH

When I was twenty I believed John Donne:
"No man is an island entire of itself..."
But he was wrong. I wept— and the mass pool
didn't rise. I bled— it didn't redden
one grain of my neighbor's beach.
I grew up, became a total island.
My play has one brief role. My song
is just a single perfect note.
And no man's death can diminish me
because I am not involved in mankind.
Soundproof fog surrounds me, secession
is secure. No one ever probes.
Why, Preacher, would I send to know a thing?
My house is built of sand and furnished
with restful dark. I polarized the currents
and tides of my sea away from my placid steps.
And here I sink and die
certain that no bell tolls and never will.
None knows.

It makes a nice refrain, a clang:
None knows, none knows, none knows.

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?

MAJOR RHAPSODY IN F# MINOR

You didn't expect him here
with silk hangings and life-size classic sculpture.
He made no entrance, he suddenly was
onstage, easy as moonlight, fitting with fountains
and topiary as if here had always been his background.
But when he moved and smiled, you knew--
you knew he was a trumpet man.

Son of a thin rumpled line inhaling used smoke
mixed with applause to blow from balloon cheeks--
son of the hard-molded case followers,
those rolled-up bus riders down the streaking nights,
closing their painted eyes and seeing brass
hanging over them begging to be snatched and hidden
for a couple of nights' peace-- watching it
turn to an armored snake in their jealous hands
then hearing it tongue out tarnished laughter
on three ribs, belling out morning and a hangover
in some town they mispronounced.

You didn't see this loose-angled one pick it up,
the instrument came like quick cell division
from his lip. And the sound began--
uncoiling slow, coming for you, crawling
into your head, changing the texture of your bare arms.

You know that sound, mama. Nothing as simple
as ever-popular heartbreak or phantom train whistles,
nothing as definite as a tenor sobbing Eili, Eili
or wild animals moaning up the moon.

His eyes ignite. Lightning arcs from his hair,
striking the conductor zapping it into your gravity center.
The sound, mama, leaching tones out
of the marble statues, out of your wine glass, rearranging
molecules, making them glow like neon fog,
fulminating red and purple.

How much is music, key lowered now half a step,
gone minor again, flowing that little groove
where pain runs convex to the surface?
How much is the glint of cut crystal hanging
from mirrored arches, moving barely
with audience breathing, striking flints in his pale eyes?

He is a prophet-- forecasting ruin, forecasting rain,
predicting your heartbeat, willing it, playing

your spine like a keyboard, electrifying your long red guitar strings. He compresses a grain of hot salt in every pore, starts small internal combustions, all pistons at odds, then one enormous turbine synched with him, generating enough current to throb down the marble columns, revving the riderless carriage outside the fourth dimension, holding a seance with Gabriel and Gershwin, DeBussy and Berrigan.

His grin is sudden. He flats his fifths and goes south on a short bridge, tootles to the carved unicorn, blows out the chafing dishes along with the illusions so for a jigger of time you can stand it, draw your breath on the afterbeat, see that he is a real live trumpet man, not a sorcerer, not a fakir pulling the cobra out of your basket.

He is a child-- blowing bubbles of incredible light, each expanding on its own spectrum, merging with bobbing sixteenth notes. He is Imperial Rome-- an announcement of gladiators, Caesar chariots, a boast of soldiers, an ancient fury. He is Africa-- black hunter cry, leopard stalking, impala bleeding, eyes looking out of water, eyes burning and curling edges of night, smoke rising, winding winged scales, sucking back into the bell, recycling.

He slams a fist in your throat, turns you on a spit and hamstrings you with blades of ice. He hustles the horn, wrestles it, shares it, his mistress and mentor, a panpipe saved by his kiss.

Feel the sound, mama? He's concentrating on all your edges now, honing sharp sharper-- quivering on a sill to somewhere, retiring to a glistening waver between turquoise and green, hanging on like dying gills. He's a trumpet man, mama, more lives than a cat, more wind than a Texas twister.

It's all the magic horn, mama, that golden fetish, possessed and possessing, that haloed concubine caressed and polished, surrounded with plush. And you-- bleached, smacked, sewing a dress out of mill ends, earning your master's degree in martyrdom with that eternal alloy suspended between you, even in bed-- that icon he hocked once to buy you an emergency doctor in Dayton. And you sold your mother's ring to get it back.

new stanza

And the man, mama, with the hard harsh mouth,
dead weight in the bus seat, little slivers of life
telescoped into battered cases and collapsible stands.
Trumpet man. Pitched all shades and angles like shadows,
worse for women than drifters. Gone too high too often,
a pile of feathers dripping wax on the downers,
always patching to fly one more set too near the sun.

Was there a man at all?
Or just a flared gold phallus that seduced you
and crammed you in the gears of a music box on wheels,
hurled you across the bad-weather map
into broken-john motels with lint bedspreads
and the boozy corners of never-quite-level halls
full of lurching bodies and bad acoustics?
Trumpet man. Inseparable composite of flesh and reed--
cold spite for your touching,
hot pipe to all we know of paradise for his.

Tears emptied, he mounts the god syndrome
like mercury, surpasses sound, no longer protoplasm
and metal but some new alchemy entering
the last panging tunnel you sealed and secured.
Driving deeper, blowing down your barricades
like Joshua, playing what no mortal ever played.
Peeling off new notes like bright blisters,
exorcising the orchestra, resolving each chord
with light, nebulizing fire.
White consumes you, turns you immaculate,
unhurting anymore.
The trumpet fluoresces with his phosphorous eyes,
confetti light orbits his head
until his image blazes beyond seeing.

You open your eyes as the waiter pours champagne,
hear something shut like a latch, focus absently
on an alabaster herald you hand't noticed before.

CHICAGO

Yeah, you've heard of it--
3 million strong, the Loop, the Cubs,
boating on the lake, Sears Tower, the Chagall Wall.
"Something there is that doesn't love a wall,"
the poet said. I know what he meant--
even if it's invisible. Here on the southwest side
most of them are too visible--
warped with the weight of graffiti,
bullying up to the next one to rub off dirt
and slough off a few more bricks or concrete chunks.
That's the one thing that never stays where it falls--
bricks and pieces of masonry are good for breaking
windows and heads. It's a simple equation--
deprivation makes some people mean.
Whatever gets smashed is a stand-in
for the wall they can't beat to rubble.
City fathers keep talking about how new jobs
and renewed pride are gonna tear down the stockade
of poverty, crime and neglect,
just like they got rid of the old stockyards.
But poorness is more than lack
of tollgate fees to get through the barriers.
It begins with the ancient walls of the womb
and discovers the greatest heights
in partitions of the heart.

WAS THERE A CHILD NAMED YOU OR ME?

Were there really
satin-green bugs with wire-hairy feet
that made current zigzag down your spine
when you closed them in your palm?
Was there a vine that grew valentine leaves
and mini-potatoes for doll plates?
And easy-to-break chocolate rocks with insides
like sugar compelling your tongue to the test?
Were there tiny tunnels in the suntanned meadow
where you fished for pale humped "camels"
that bit and held the spit-and-mudball-baited stems
of fescue? And farther on, a waiting pond flocked
with yellow-green paisley that hid small swimmers
trading tails for legs? And wilding wispy smells
each matched in your mind with a color...

When was it over,
that swift season of knowing
and being
all there is
eye level in the grass?

Or is it a dose of strained fancy
force-fed beneath the sanded surface?
But wasn't there for sure a certain crouching path
where you couldn't see ahead and you backed off slow,
tightened by little corkscrews of warning in your middle?
Still—the field tilted and swayed—
somehow you went that way without knowing.
The soft fronds closed behind you
and the brambles made you shield your eyes.

YOU ALMOST MADE ME SORRY

Don't think I believe
you've changed.
For awhile I was impressed
with your strange skill,
your spring-loaded will
to survive, the way you flourish
despite the odds.
You seem so disadvantaged,
the archtype underdog,
under bush and porch,
under log and boot and tire.
Deprived of wing or claw
or even fin, forced to move
on basest bone design,
made to dine deformed,
unarmed, on ghastly meals
seasoned with your own rage—
I was near ready to forgive,
to reason you a victim
of legend's libel till I recalled
you're party to an ancient contract
and credit for success
is nowise yours.
For a moment last night uncoiled
beside the lily bed, your eyes
betrayed you; a freak Freudian slip
of your slit tongue and an unnatural
warmth belied your touch.
You're still very much his emissary.

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.

(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.

LAST UNCLE
Glenna Holloway

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 days 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 reaching out my own each year for the fine pots.

Once in my tearose 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 pastel hollyhock days
there is one. My faded luggage is crammed with empty
pages as this jet eats space from east to west,
and I wonder if he'll feel like talking.

LONG NIGHT HOMESIDE

I should learn to speak Japanese.
There may be something more to say.

You smoke too much in Kyoto
under the blue tile roof of your father.
Why did I leave? Why did you stay?

Out of cigarets and choices.
Bored and huddled again on the prickly davenport
with my stewardess indigestion,
moon caught in the bared oak at my winter window.

Look. Two tiny stars, more alike than different,
impaled on California twigs
going unerringly to the heart of the matter..
Like haiku. Like shokwa. Needing no embellishment.
Impelled into jet-lag sleep on a wingless plane,
prodding grounded dreams while a jilted sun
hits bottom beyond the eastern arch, jarring
our paper fortunes near the gold pavillion,
jolting my moon free.

And at my periodic waking, the escapee
sheds no light on the fate
of lost pierced stars.

OF PAINTERS AND PAINTINGS

The old ones knew, the ones called masters,
revenants in ruddle and ocher,
compost for composistion for the newly damned;
they live on in owl eyes and refractions of rain,
still knowing.

Secrets steep in centuries of varnish,
never lost but seldom found by pigment plasterers
distracted with siren abstraction
to the scrambled margins of revelation.

An instant of atavism—

the brief bright flux of a guided hand—
maybe lingering only the length of an ox hair
while we sable-sweep the spectrum for lifetimes,
search and bleed our brushes, shading with lotus
that fades without the missing medium—
humble surrendered umber, disciplined earth,
infused pulse that defies dimensions,
even the fourth.

Star-stretched palimpsest of all between.
light and dark, beaten and stroked, stilled
but not stillborn—this is the goal and the gift—
total abduction through a canvas door.

COEFFICIENT OF GRAY

The familiar voice, slightly altered,
rebounding from a satellite
and strained through miles of copper wire
into my private hearing
pauses for me to make the same journey.

Once there was a warm mouth
charging the air with moist vibrations
caressing the spiral of my ear
so close I could feel each movement
and inhale the sweetness.

Now through a cold invention
the hollow message arrives
segmented, unwhole, unclear.

This is not progress.
The fault is not electronic
and the sound does not originate
in smiling.

OLD FLOWMEN

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."

IGNIS FATUUS

- I Men marvel at her hair, corona bright,
 The color of a winter waxing moon,
 For she is strange and wild, a child of night
 Who loves the swamps where twilight lurks at noon.
 I followed her until she disappeared
 Through sedge and slimy pools of brackish black;
 She always raced ahead where ravens jeered,
 Past dying pines and past the diamondback.
 She led me faster, luminous and lithe,
 Through devil's darkness cleft with wisps of fire;
 Behind me came another-- with a scythe--
 But still I stalked her in footprintless mire.
 Men say her eyes fluoresce with blue-green flame--
 I must embrace her once, must know her name!
- II Come searcher, learn the real will-o-the-wisp,
 Come slog among mutated mud-grown trees
 And wait for wind's unwinding snake-tongue lisp
 To wrinkle stagnant water near your knees.
 Here latent night seduces natural time
 Though fronds of sun still penetrate tall ferns
 While copulating vines grim-greenly mime
 Your myths and struggling gods, your snarled concerns.
 Again illusion spreads elusive light--
 A solar trick, not what you risked to see.
 Stay, brace for total dark and call it right:
 The Ignis fatuus, lure's apogee.
 Hold fast to scientific explanation--
 Pale viscous blaze ignites mind's conflagration.
- III Old Jonas knew the country called "Big Deep"
 That muddied up the margins of his state.
 He served as guide for forty years to keep
 Adventurers from snakebite/quicksand fate.
 Then Jonas went off fishing. Two teams tried
 To cross the slough, explore the worst quagmire.
 Some came back sick and hurt, three others died.
 When Jonas heard, he vowed not to retire.
 He knew the jack-o-lanterns danced out there,
 Those freakish flares that made men lose their way.
 He knew the legend, knew the truth to spare,
 Enough to be the expert of his day.
 Still, men pursued the elf fire, watched night burn--
 Till legend won-- the guide did not return.

LONG WAY TO MORNING

Every night after the light,
after the meaning and memory of light,
it closes in slow thickens rises
making prison around my bed. Impenetrable
something nothing. I see it
by what I can't see because of it: no more
thin dark-on-dark blazonry like goblins rampant
posing for half-reared children,
no draped rectangles or bars sinister
on the ceiling. No more
wet marigold smell tire whisper,
small breeze banked off my headboard.
I am contained whole like once when I crawled
frown first into my father's sleeping bag.

This I don't touch. I know I can,
know it won't burn draw back as if.
Circles of pyrotechnics explode
behind my compressed lids. My bones soften,
sweat marrow melts short circuits
my overstrung guitar strings. A Rebanna drum
bombards my bed beat for this big exercise,
this long rehearsal. One night I'll reach out,
embrace it hard. Only sleep
is the final fear What I've never met eyes open
all senses pricked
like a wine connoisseur's tongue

What I've never met
properly armed.

"WE MAY INHALE DESPAIR" ...Emily Dickinson

This stark cubicle stays closed:
No green grows; only the walls
Are tender. Your prodding finger knows—
But found no entry,
No valve for compressed dark to drain.

This cold crucible stays filled:
Refined slag, a purity of dross.
Your hopeful hands bruise
And now they ache with losing.
On your way home, gather for pressing
All the dying anodynes from this old garden.

URBAN TAPESTRY

My oar dollops the water, ravel the reflection:
Bridges above me—giant warps over river,
lanes, tracks, the yarns of my childhood.
Creeks were my flosses, keeping my linings
from fraying, keeping me close
to the ways of catfish and beavers. My origins
were up there in a garden-patch bungalow
once atop that burrowing segment of superway—
Now the new tunnel, breechloaded with cars,
blasts a volley of steel across the bow
of my small boat. The half-hoop of iron bridge
steadies the warning appliqued on carbon sky.
An oil barge passes me, rocks me
under the new span, into its shadow and roar,
and I think of the old hilly thunder
prowling the pinestand across the county,
unmuffled by rows of stacked people-bins
thwarting its rounds and teasing the lightning.
The barge slides the river, a disease-bearing
shuttle, its slimy wake smearing the bend
where my slow fever swears
the bones of my old home lie. Torn memories
underweave the weft of the city,
and I've run out of thread leading to freedom.

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 steep
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.

THE SOCIETY BLURB SAYS: "TYCOON ENTERTAINS JR. EXEC & SOUTHERN BRIDE"

Off the press before the event, I stare at the caption
(and my new name misspelled below) as we taxi
to the tycoon's mansion. "Stay close, my husband,
it's not my kind of evening. How important is this job?"

Gold brocaded, satsuma-sheen on my mouth, a roll of wit
under my tongue, I confront smiling lies
looking back from antique crystal and silver, haloed
in his moneyship's gimmicked pastel rays,
his paternal-satyr beaming. You programmed me,
my husband; I fill dialogue balloons
like prescriptions, watch them float, watch him
take them. I open my sequined jacket,
fan warm Chanel, try not to gag on escargot.

He is pious dimples and cloven hooves, custom-foiled
with wife, fame, belongings. He wants me to know
how he adores classical music, how fluent his French.
We sit orchestrated, smoke-haired, blue-toothed.
The napkins fluoresce. You and she sit silent,
gone dark like deactivated robots. His.

His voice is wet stucco, his
expensive scent an affront to greenness. His
zealous shoulder crawls my skin. I can't
see your face behind your wine glass, my husband.

Oh, give me back mimosa trees
and my old upright Steinway. Let me be barefoot
on the side porch, cleaning bream, watching
my father's hands at the potter's wheel through a spray
of scales-- turning to spatters of contrived light
coloring our host and me while I search
your silhouette for the shade of your love.

The tycoon embraces my hand with both of his, expectant
unlimited clay, throwing me on this wheel,
winding, coiling, turning me toward his imported suns.
My husband, will you light up
if I tell him to go to hell? Will your eyes come on
if I brandy my spinning into this design
and go with him?