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PANTHER IN THE GLOVE

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Acknowledgements

Western Humanities Review, 1984, The Best Thing My Father Did  
Was Lie

Manhattan Poetry Review, 1985, Commuter Train Riders

Cornerstone, 1986, You Almost Made Me Sorry

Christian Science Monitor, 1985, Calligraphy By Night

National Federation of State Poetry Societies Prize Poems,

1980-1984, Before a Poet Knows What She Is; Old Wives the  
Tales Come From; Cat-Walk; Last Uncle; Long Night Homeside

Reach of Song, 1984, King Tutankhamun: Once There Was a Boy  
Who Loved to Whistle; Afternoon Among the Artifacts

Seed-In-Hand Poetry Series, 1983, A Vase of Pink Plum Blossoms;  
You Ask If I've Forgotten Him; The Trihedroness

Poetry Society of Texas Prize Anthology, 1982, "Like a Panther  
in the Glove"

Ohio Poetry Day Winners, 1986, Old Plowmen

Poetry Society of America Diamond Anthology, The Interlopers

Pudding Magazine, 1983, Major Rhapsody in F# Minor

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3. Cat-Walk
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Biographical data

Born Nashville, Tennessee, married 30 years, traveled widely, especially the Orient, professional artist, specializing in enameling & silversmithing. Published articles in Chicago Tribune, Illinois Magazine, Saturday Review, etc. Been writing poetry seriously about 10 years. Member Poetry Society of America. Studied with James Dickey, 1983. Winner Dellbrook-Shenandoah Award, Shenandoah College, VA., 1979; Winner \$1000 Grand National Award, National Federation of State Poetry Societies, 1986

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.

"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.

## 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.



## 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.

# 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.



## THE TRIHEDRONESS

You've seen her, a cunning child  
looking lies from under lashes  
long enough to blow in the wind.  
You've seen her wanton eyes, wild and craving  
as a falcon's, cool and hot as a cougar's,  
waiting, always weighing,  
never saying what they mean.  
Then when the lids lower and raise  
she is gone.

You've seen her fawn eyes transmit praise, hope,  
blue-green layers of deep velvet understanding,  
reflex lenses of compassion.  
She who cared may be in the past;  
she may come back tomorrow.

A blink. That fast.  
Rapport returns to some vagrant sea.

You know I share the eyes with her and her.  
One needs chaining below.  
One should stay in the sun.  
Both are prisoners of me.