

Spring 4-1-1990

# Columbia Poetry Review

Columbia College Chicago

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# COLUMBIA POETRY REVIEW



*Number 3*

# **COLUMBIA POETRY REVIEW**

**Columbia College/Chicago**

**Spring 1990**

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# KARYN WALL

## MEMPHIS ON THE ROCKS

The air leaves a cold metal bite on my tongue as we pull into the gray city, an inch of it through your window. Just a taste of the South in a deep freeze.

We slept last night on the lip of Missouri while winter cracked Memphis, leaving the streets as blades in icy sheaths.

So we slipped into their town more unnoticed than unwanted—looking up barren alleys for a sign, some sign that there were people in the blue city.

Too cold for much more than pizza and sleep, we asked the hotel counter-man about delivery. He spoke in round words, glistening with magnolia,

of a little place 'round the corner serving ribs and catfish. Ribs of catfish is what I heard. But nobody would deliver on a night so froze as this.

We woke hungry and the ice still slicked the ground like that ol' white on rice. Drove the way Chicago did and we made ourselves an image.

Women curled against their breasts on the bus stand, children wearing clothes not thick enough to keep light out, men with their signs of trade, day's work for a meal.

Here they stood while the car flew past in confident hands, faster than all but the wind on a day of crisis. No one knew what winter was. Memphis didn't own alpaca and furs, snowplows

and coarse salt, scrapers and antifreeze. Memphis barely thought of the second month as chilly. Here they were in a town where winter cracked its spine and served it up for cocktails.

## SAVANNAH

We never took that road before,  
a trickle on my map bleeding  
towards Savannah.

Dark but for the green glow  
on my arms and her face,  
the dashboard through clouds  
of cigarettes.

She laughed then  
at something she said  
and tossed her head back,  
like that, and bared  
her teeth.

The road ran on through trees,  
their summer-swollen arms  
dipped to brush against us.

The sienna dirt  
clung hard,  
the wheels groaning  
under the new weight.  
Talk ran to Maureen's  
new breasts,  
big and round,  
better than before.  
She paid a lot.

The food was wet,  
soaked by ice  
intending to help.  
There was the time to  
stop, but nowhere  
the place.

The vinyl was hot,  
left damp crosses on  
my bare legs. The windows  
couldn't open any further  
and she talked of Walker,  
the man who died.

He'll be buried there,  
in the Georgia clay, a cool  
blanket on his drying bones,  
a kudzu vine wrapped round  
his ribcage with his marble  
pillow softening in  
the rain.

I'll remember him  
my way, black angel  
of my temple, singing praises  
to gypsy kings and the women  
he trusted.

I trembled as the rain came,  
sneaking in my window and  
pricking my skin with  
its intent.

These drops mix  
the red clay into glue,  
sealing the earth around  
that pine box.

I hit the door handle,  
moved into the road,  
and my feet buried  
themselves.

She looked towards me  
as I fell, head turning  
so slow  
her hair flew  
like cornsilk in water,  
and she laughed  
and bared her teeth  
like a demon,  
and she seemed like  
the woman in  
Walker's last  
dream.

# MARY HAWLEY

## VERACRUZ, MEXICO

12 July 84

José and Vilma and I are watching an American western in their living room. The only light is the shifting blue flare of the television screen. John Wayne leans from the saddle toward the pretty girl. "No sé si me hayas dicho la verdad," says the Duke.

José speaks into the room. "There is one way I know if someone tells the truth." Vilma and I look at him. "I torture him." She nods; I cannot look away.

"Remember last night at the station when we played the music so loud?" I remember Noé dancing with a broom around the waiting room. "You know why? We had one of those market thieves in the back room. We stripped him and held him on the floor. One of us sat on each leg, each arm. I held his nostrils shut while Marco poured buckets of water down his throat.

"That's one way we do it. No one lies after three buckets." José smiles at me and begins to rub Vilma's feet.

## WHERE I LIVE

they will sell you test tubes or condoms. some nights the boys are too drunk to sing. a chinese man yells mah-ree! mah-ree! down the litter cracked sidewalk.

spitting used to be pleasurable. the old man shook when he saw the anti-christ. how could anyone stand all that metal? they poked around until a shoe fell from the roof.

garbage heats and cools in dumpsters. i watch the workboots kick a path through bystanders. they knew he had left when his groceries started to smell.

## BACK IN SALVADOR

1

we know this country  
we are the daughters of missions  
sons of cocktail negotiators  
we have shopped here  
we were always kind to servants  
the government recognized  
our fathers' contributions  
to overall stability we were  
overall stability riding in limos  
ushered through airports  
we waited in the whitest of lines  
only the whites of lies  
and wines for us

when i was a child i wondered  
at the poor shufflers street criers  
a boy pointed to a toe oozing pus  
i gave him coins

we return perhaps only nostalgically  
what is left of our blue-eyed regime  
our plazas and local orquestas  
as children we found this country  
on a map and traced a line  
to our mother in the north  
our hearts were full of american cartoons  
of banana groves and good shoes

2

we are met by a salvadoran marimba band  
led by a tiny woman guerrilla  
dressed in red satin and black satin  
one of her arms is a hook  
it is hot  
we are hungry  
but the girls bring only bullets  
on a styrofoam plate

it isn't like the old days  
no pineapple accommodations with  
the general himself  
no angelina washing uniforms  
all day long  
smiling into soapy water

now fingers arrive with the newspaper  
at the rockefeller shopping plaza  
purses and wallets are heavy with bones  
ears wash up on beaches  
like national shells  
glistening currency

we do not enjoy our visit  
a government car burns after the parade  
they march us to funerals, to offices  
lined with sandbags, to fashionable  
neighborhoods where corpses  
walk the dogs

3

they say it isn't possible to leave  
no hotel checkout  
no glide of passports from official hands

instead we look  
through plastic pages of the dead  
reading for meaning  
reading with eyes that have too long  
squinted into cameras  
into sunsets and grateful crowds

we cannot read these faces  
they are dark and incomplete  
they are pressed to earth  
and the earth shifts under their weight  
something is breaking or sliding  
or being born  
something is about to happen  
but we do not understand  
we simply do not understand

# KATHLEEN MARKKO

## LIP SERVICE OF A BLAND VENUS

I'm always the sex girl  
a bleary eyed blonde  
with bad teeth  
old-fashioned hips  
all the right tattoos

wicked  
head popper  
with itchy moods  
making my own justice  
hanging the moon

I coulda done  
a lot of things  
created prayer rugs  
dashboard saints  
ballsy white boy myths

some girls have all the  
luck  
charming vagueness  
loopy plans  
of corner drug stores  
mini malls  
lessons in nail biting

it's not the money  
poking hands  
into men's shirts  
gnashing teeth  
while praying to Jesus

## BABY, YOU'RE MY TYPE

I sleep in pairs  
curled with  
old men  
neighborhood squatters  
runaways  
gone slightly wrong

Imperfect Utopia  
sifting for bones  
scraping change  
lying on false marble  
stiff and cold  
as lawn boys

I dream of living  
the IT girl  
Shar-pei faced  
well heeled  
riddled with wigs and  
props

I'll walk in your gardens  
America  
inked into my arms  
wearing severe  
weight  
smelling of meat

## JAZZ

I used to have  
friends  
tarted up  
coat check girls  
wasp shopping  
ashamed of middle-class status  
eating Mexican every night

Spectator to freedom  
I copped a bus out  
watched TV full time  
perfected this  
rebellion thang

Moving and pathetic  
wearing crushed velvet  
and bandanas  
I fulfill the country's need for  
victims  
fingering through towns  
where the T is silent

I spend my life worshipping  
glorifying poverty  
perfecting depression  
a runaway with an attitude  
and dirty hair

## KEVIN CASSIDY

### THE EMPEROR MING-HUANG'S JOURNEY TO SHU

There are cracks in the paper that can't be fixed,  
cracks in the world that can't be filled.

He travels away through hills that insist on being green.  
All the effort is gathered in the shoulders of the horse.

There are peaks wrapped by fleshy clouds where no one can go  
yet there they are for everyone to see.

The emperor can only gaze up. He doesn't know the road ahead.  
To turn and look back would break his heart.

There is distance.  
There are problems that no one can solve.

## HOME

The last time I heard you walking away  
it was over snow so tight and frozen  
that it cried beneath your feet as if small birds  
were circling and calling in the ice.

We were high up in the Rocky Mountains,  
miles from home, and I listened in the cold  
and crystal air. No hungry animal,  
not a leaf was stirring. It was winter.

Twenty years now and I am still hearing  
those birds outside the window of my house.  
I live here with my wife and my children.  
I want nothing now but to keep them warm  
in a world green and flowing with water.  
I no longer love the cold. Forgive me.

## THE FEMININE MOUTH

Consider the feminine mouth  
and the masculine; the difference  
in the lips and tongue,  
the difference in what is meant  
and what is said,  
in the movement of the shoulders  
and the hips as if the sexes  
were given different gravity.

I saw a woman on a train.  
She wore a great black coat  
with a window sewn to the back.  
You could see high blue sky  
brushed by mare's tail clouds,  
a northern lake crowned with pines.

At dusk the sky turned red.  
A water bird descended in the dark.  
Wood smoke emerged from the trees  
where someone was stirring a pot.  
I watched the moon cross the sky,  
a globe, a crescent, a tilted bowl.  
I began to remember everything.

My father's coat is dark with rain,  
and there is flat land behind him  
where precise veins of lightning  
flash the distance from sky to earth.  
He is steady and his eyes are serene.  
And this is how I think of him;  
he enters my room before morning  
and watches me sleep. He listens to my breathing.  
When I wake I feel him near me in the early light,  
but I rise from my bed fully grown  
and wander the rooms of my empty house.  
He is gone. This is Indiana and it's hard  
for men and women to want the same thing.

## WILLIAM STRAW

### WALKING AMERICAN

almost gone in my dreaming  
my limbs are numb  
from those nights  
when I had to pretend to be  
some kind of superhero  
almost gone, a long time gone  
the waving of iron hands  
slapping the faces of the  
truthful speaking  
and here's me, walking american

the tragedy outskirts  
the hot flash welcomes  
the woman wearing  
a "get it girl" t-shirt  
does she mean it  
she's the hot flash, I suppose  
I wonder on what wall  
does her name belong  
but she's walking american

a very fine line of noted  
cave fish virgins disguised  
absent is the art of love  
evenings in a bum's house  
naming the original faces  
I once had loved  
I had once would give my soul to love  
now the sight of them disgusts me  
but they are walking american  
like all patriotic sermons

a thousand dollar used gauge  
and a .32 caliber  
give birth to new gun street children  
kissing temporary salvation  
their hearts are to please the good lady of white  
but even they if you don't look too hard  
are walking american

## BROTHERS

brothers—  
ghostish heritage  
large murder party  
willow children  
practitioners of mad flight  
brothers—  
don't be afraid of them  
they dance in rainy streets  
living in ghettos with magic wings  
going to jail for inhaling  
ritual vapors  
stealing rich wisdom to feed their kind  
brothers—  
the other Is, yous, and mes  
and all are not dark  
wet dreams that won't stop  
with its crazy masquerades  
shadow lovers too numb from the coke  
to even feel a breeze  
trading their bodies and souls  
to moan one night with Ben Franklin in green  
brothers—  
fantasized dyno men  
wearing swordfish fabrics  
could they cut the light  
with their testimonies?  
something called nasty  
something called dirty  
something drowning in flame  
something with a real name  
they don't disguise themselves  
as puny secrets with madhouse tattoos  
sacred only to jigsaw refrains  
brothers—  
that's what they be  
to me to you to everybody  
brothers and sisters  
brothers and mothers  
brothers and fathers  
brothers and missionaries

brothers and dreamers  
brothers and freedom  
brothers and preachers  
all kinds of hollow body compositions  
without electricity  
the ghostish magis

# NATALIE KENVIN

## SKIN HUNGER

You hold me like you'd clutch  
The tough, slippery chassis  
Of a mannekin  
You really loved.  
We lie in a practical ache.  
My mouth opens, avid for sweets.  
My bones loosen.  
The music I hear is cuntmusic,  
The womb's velvety longing,  
Empty women keening hard  
For something lost.  
It is a want no bone can hold,  
No thrum or probe can stop.  
It is a blank unspoken murder  
Like a pulled tooth.  
It is a wineshop, a tavern  
Of odors. From this clump  
The white and purple scents of mucus  
Mix and rise.  
We lie in the simmering confusion  
Of wasps.

## CYNTHIA CINDERELLA COLUMBUS

Birthright ignored, I grew like stinkweed  
Among maps, straight compasses and ties.  
My brother studied boundaries, cartography.  
My canvas shoes were wet with slopwater.  
I had, the prince's family said,  
A pleasing face.  
Cynthia barbarian.  
Alone in dust, I taught myself to read  
With books,  
Like a tree without leaves or fruit  
Clothes itself in cockleburrs and wrens.  
After my bitchy sisters were declared insane  
They took me away to the palace.  
I stayed five years,  
But the soup I drank turned to mud,  
The bread to straw in my mouth.  
Too much married, I left the prince.  
I got an idea to run a ship  
Down the dark cut of a river  
To the sea and across.  
The crew was afraid and hated me.  
For three weeks I whipped their backs  
Until their lips bulged.  
Then we saw it.  
Me, Cynthia, forced us so far  
To a land of tubers, roots, moss, shadows.  
This wild place of the new world  
Was my reward  
After my house-caring, my long journey,  
My sea-refuge, my lucky number win.  
Yes, Cynthia went home in chains,  
But she bent the sea  
And swept it back with a broom.

## PROM NIGHT AT GROSSE POINTE HIGH AND LAFAYETTE CLINIC

The boys wear tux  
That hang in great, dark wardrobes.  
The girls are pink and silver.  
Their impassive throats adorned  
With lace and cold gems,  
They live soldered to their mothers.  
The pearl pins in their corsages  
Clip roses, carnations to their breasts,  
Pitifully sweet.  
But I am standing in the laundry room  
At the back of a ward of beds.  
My pinstripe robe is stamped with my name.  
Denny, the night aide, pours wine  
Into a paper cup half-filled with Kool Aid.  
My nipple stiffens under touch,  
Erect as a meringue.  
His stubby black fingers close  
Around my arm.  
“You’re a sweet girl” he says.

## MY DAUGHTER

My daughter is a fantail carp  
Dissolving to the glass fisheye  
Of the sun.

She is the sheep's cold blooming  
melting to cotton, wool,  
The stunned captain of no ship.

She is a white butterfly beating ragged  
In the nappyheaded moon,

A wise outcast,  
Dumb, freed and wingbruised real.

In darkness she turns  
And lightly sings.

## GRAHAM LEWIS

### MARJORIE AGAIN IN EXILE

It's true river towns never made her happy.  
All that filthy water, all those filthy people . . .  
sometimes she just wanted to open her shirt,  
press her breasts against a mirror  
and melt into a puddle of foul levee mud.  
Or write her ex-husbands love letters,  
saying she loved them more than cigarettes,  
more than Engels loved Marx, anything for a laugh.  
This morning she woke to a vision: a parade  
of Christs floating outside her motel window.  
She wondered, Who does their laundry? Their hair?  
On a good day she might shake it off and sing,  
imitating the pulse at her temples  
by plunging her head into the toilet,  
crooning "beautiful" until both lungs cried.  
But today is not a good day. The river stinks,  
she's on the move, and Jesus makes her crazy.

**SECRET LIFE**  
**for Devon**

I am the old barn, planks peeling like skin,  
my roof a mouth to suck rain and sunlight  
into haylofts, stalls.

I am the horse that stepped on a child's head  
and was shot by his father, here, where I stand.  
All around me I see what I am, what I've been,  
rubbing my white belly  
beneath a sky of my own design.

In thunder I hear my death, the drying of blood  
on a chicken-block. Even in sleep I dream  
of landscapes, the black ground wolves run on,  
black as a dead moon, black as myself in night,  
wounded by plows and combines, grim  
as a country judge.

I will live here forever, nothing foreign, all known.  
The insects will sing my name, their wings  
carving it across fields and highways.  
I will send you my thoughts in wind, heal you  
with a poultice of mud, drown you in the pool  
our hearts leave behind. I will haunt you  
as you drive the curves of this road. Look for me  
in tree stumps, cattle mourning their mute shadows,  
the secret life of all I have seen.

# JULIE MILLS

## POEM

Early in the years of hindrance  
they used to be more pleasant  
but who crawls upon the liver spots  
of old forgotten hands now?  
jumping from cable to reel  
from table to saxophone  
they jones you from far distances  
and you can't resist to accept  
the joyous violence we all want to create  
the stay-up-late crowd laughing after dark  
there's a baby in a cylinder  
crying to its children  
as critters eclipse one another  
and call everyone "my son"  
listen honey brother sweetie dear  
get off my toilet and harp an old song  
it's been a long time since  
the new moon caressed my breast  
the light shining hard soft  
they ask questions about your snicker  
and I tell them it's a verbal twitch  
I'm clinging to eternity  
and my head is stuck  
between the prison bars

## JIM SIKORA

### INFERNO

had a friend  
once  
who worked  
up on this great steel  
press, hammering

things, white hot  
into smaller things  
while I was down  
under that press

shoveling the filthy  
slag, knee deep  
in dark oil, like  
hot mud

but it was o.k.  
because we'd break, and have  
a secret round  
of beers out back

maybe he'd have  
some reefer  
and tell the tall tales  
that old bikers do

like the nipple belt buckle  
that he wore every day  
given to him by  
Marilyn Chambers at  
The Great Alaskan Blow-out  
of 1974

the same story  
a million times over  
relieved us of  
the heat

the nippleseye  
cool, sensuous  
frozen in sunlight  
a clear-white  
shot up  
the spine

in the inferno  
were lessons not  
given over  
easily  
but simply  
oiled with little  
money  
a few lies  
and a lot of  
time  
to  
wait

# KARLA DENNIS

## SIX POEMS

1

I have been poked with  
the hot blood of Haiti.  
Faces of old Africans  
crowd my womb, rebelling  
against my lifestyle.  
I have no taste for  
creole, plaintains, and  
peasants pounding millet  
with colored scarfs and  
sagging eyes and tits.

I dream with malaria  
of smoky clubs and  
Wynton on the sax.

## Prayer for the Baka

Sing women sing  
the forest song  
of Baka  
small black people  
who eat termites  
with pure honey  
and carry babies  
like the monkey  
sing your stories  
by the moon  
the rain gods  
cannot save you  
the axe is coming soon  
the axe is coming soon

The pumice, the glass, the crash  
are all my friends  
at 6 A.M., my folks  
Black sheep bleeding  
near cold dirty ovens  
for the one white  
shepherd/pimp player  
punk slobbering prosperity  
in a robe  
in the news  
bounded and holy  
and for ten bucks a crack  
and there is none  
the edges of the whole  
are burning like  
the beginning of Bonanza  
and there is none  
arms all bleeding reaching  
for the gutter and the glamor  
on the everyday little lives  
wishing the big sun  
turn like field flowers  
in another country  
on the mountain top  
we still coming over  
I am praying for rain

At the table  
he said: "You know people don't  
usually mess with me."

His eyes rolled over,  
turning dead like a  
shark's eye cold.  
I shuddered to think  
of a snake swallowing  
something whole.

He sleeps with women's  
clothes, old cars and  
murmurs of creole.  
He said: "This table for two  
looks like it will  
seat twenty-six."

He is an octopus  
and I love him  
directly and with  
a quickness.



They call me colored girl  
“ragazza di colore”  
and I loved it to be colored  
like a Matisse  
They called me “Bella Bronzita”  
and I smiled a Nubian, Egyptian  
Southside queenly Black African  
exotic smile  
My ass grinned and swayed  
around back and forth  
like the spiaggia at Capri  
In their eyes I saw foreign perversion  
Eyes covered me, devoured me  
and whispered  
“Cosa tu vuoi”  
and I was bounty  
like before

# BARBARA CAMPBELL

## NONNA ADA

These rooms end too soon  
and these windows  
    like doors  
we could walk off the end

just like figures in a plaster frieze  
in Florence  
    Firenze  
        April's fine leg

Two urns, a face bower-strewn over  
    a mother board  
and a man pared off like the moon  
pulling at his wife's hair  
    her leg  
    he still can't leave her alone  
    half-cut  
She carries him around  
    like a baby or a Bible

All your rooms are blue  
You made your fortune from  
    the death of your small son  
    that poem you wrote  
You lived off the fat of it for years  
    the slap and sizzle of backfat  
Still it holds his scent  
    this room holds scent  
        like a seed

A younger son is always sweeter  
    like his mother  
    first to marry  
open    paler    curved  
    round-shouldered

in soft cloth shoes  
The rain rolls off his back

Send me all your coarse-bred sons  
I'll rock them  
    like someone rocking a light open boat  
    bouncing foot to foot

And wrap them  
    in soaked white legs  
    like April

around the slit gut of summer

And watch it all fall  
    into your lap

The wet truth

## MOTHER

She walked the dust of Atlanta for a year  
but

My mother is no Georgia Peach  
She is the daughter of an Irish whore  
married with 5 children  
and a Greek who prowled the alleys  
of South Philly for  
clean white wives

Her mother kept her eight months  
and walking down the street  
hair flying  
took her downtown  
and gave her away

Two people took her to church  
white gloves teacups hanging from a tree  
the brother who wouldn't talk  
taught her to rock

hammered her fingers  
A maiden Aunt who married  
her first cousin heard voices  
in the baseboards  
wild red hair at the breakfast table

A life of stifled Sundays  
spent at a starched table  
starch the maid ate at night

Made to kiss the grandfather  
who boarded the windows  
saved shit in a shoebox  
waved a gun in his sleep

She found her papers  
dreamed her mother  
prowled her sleep for the long hair  
coarse hands

Dreamed her father  
saw the boats  
the sea

Found my father at 19 married  
she kept her girl  
put her to sleep in a dresser  
drawer to keep her

Waiting she sees herself  
gaunt half-eaten  
singing alone into the night  
for her mother

## A CLEAN HEART

In the low June light of one afternoon

Everything is pitched

A risk

Walking the edge of the stones

We are tipped into a certain balance

Something closes around

A fine white throat

An open mouth

Two boys with smooth hard backs and calves

One bleeds the other runs

Happy? he says

Happy

Hangs her head at the sound of that word

Bouncing over a shoulder like a sack

Of something

Freshly cut and

Dripping

## SALOME

This is not some little Salome  
waiting for you on dirty feet in the Abyssinian Church  
somewhere in Harlem, sleepwalking  
strut-chinned on her little goat's legs  
She does not want your head, rolled and golden,  
threads hanging  
before her on a blue plate  
She would rather go home to her Momma in Mississippi  
to clog her throat with wet earth and weeping  
This is not some little Salome  
dancing for you in a grassrustling dress  
She's just a bare-headed girl  
paint-faced and proud  
Swinging her clubbed foot in the gutter and whistling loud  
a rolled-up song of stockings

## SOPHIA OBSERVED

They lined us up under the ashed crosses  
his living resurrection  
He wanted to see us there  
skins clear  
backs straight  
Stand the children in the doorway  
And here we all are, finally  
It wasn't much of a yard  
and we sat until dusk  
listening  
Our tongues clucked  
and touched sounds you had never heard  
Our hair was dark  
uncut  
and dirty for Chicago  
much less America  
Our grandmother told of holding  
a dark print dress aside  
to empty her bowels and  
later her womb into the  
clear river  
Our sister rolled her green eyes  
climbed the back stairs  
to unroll her hair  
She will not sling hash sew buttons  
marry a Greek and die in a black shroud of settled  
grief  
Every truth has its advocates  
She may move to Cleveland or Spokane  
with a blonde man, that singer  
and high-heeled pumps that  
pinch her good square feet  
Our clothes that day were dark stiff hot  
formal  
lace collars  
later pulled off and picked up  
for some domed Sunday  
We watched our grandfather step  
off the boat and into the street  
in dark pants

his best shirt  
with the same wide eyes  
jaws clenched with intent  
And some mavrone—fifteen years old  
in a green car  
stops too late

This man had no English

# CAROLYN GUINZIO KOO

## ONE FALSE MOVE

I can't stay anything.  
I am in the dollhouse,  
in the bathtub,  
reading a magazine.

Me, with power,  
towering over the quiet  
and pliable living  
and cool and difficult dead.

The church bell a bodyguard  
when I passed in the night,  
ringing, scaring and securing me.  
In the garden until the bells  
of evening mass, long shadows  
on the lawn and burning back.

I am quiet as dark patches  
on the face of the house  
in the evening.  
I put on the light and  
watch cats crawl.  
There is no gate.

The tracks aren't near here,  
but I can hear the train  
and want to run.  
Used to believe it could pull me  
toward it, and the power  
of the train  
leaves me speechless and frozen  
like a child hearing a lie.

In the fatalist  
modesty of the dollhouse  
there is no religion,  
mirrors, or means of moving.  
I fall from where there  
should have been a wall.

# KIRK SMITH

## ROAD

Elastic dynamics  
divide and decide  
the flow.  
I tightrope the  
flowing white portal.  
My equilibrium  
is give and take.  
I am a torn scab  
still enamored of flesh.

My thoughts turn  
to the stones.  
I am self-absorbed  
in latex.  
The hands are  
razor cuts,  
salted with  
wringing dry  
dank situations.

I am a road replacement.  
No steel-belted  
points of interest  
other than everywhere.  
My pavement is  
petrified blisters.  
I walk in simple logic.  
I don't stop.  
I don't go.

## STUCK

His thoughts twitch  
two or three miles beyond Little America.  
Blue balloon veins  
circle the arm  
like over-fed garter snakes.  
His hand spastically pats  
cushioned arm rest.  
Finger on map  
jerks as if leashed.

Stop  
Pope County  
Remember  
Walk

(He wasn't hit  
for standing  
on the clothes.  
Daddy's on the phone.  
The Armistice was signed.  
Daddy's coming home.)

Folded up.  
Handed over.  
Nodded polite refusal.  
He stared.  
Heard eyes close and  
absence of blood flow.  
It fell to the floor.  
He's gone.  
I understand.

## DEAF FROM STATUS CYMBALS

His steam-ironed Kerouac  
stares out from his chest.  
One of a million great visionary t-shirts.  
A name-dropping trendsetter,  
he waves an underground flag.  
His attitude peaks above sea level.  
That's not just a chip on his shoulder.  
It's a potato.  
Cannabis is not just a weed.  
It's an adventure.

Sipping obscure water from a stale glass,  
he cranks the eclectic on CD.  
He pets his cat with the mythological name  
and stalks the subtitles in movie guides.  
These are the machinations of a poet  
waist-high in a stream of consciousness.  
He feels afloat while his generation believe  
he's aloft, swinging from a poet lariat.  
He has a maxidefibrillator for a girlfriend.  
She's the two aspirin he takes in mourning.  
An anachronism who fits right in,  
he gets up. It's the end of the disc.

For a limited time only,  
believe that shit happens and things die.  
Spike-freeze the heart.  
Paper bag the mind.

## JOE SURVANT

### THE KINABATANGAN RIVER

By that brown river,  
crocodiles scuttle belly down  
heavy jaws up  
clacking in the air,  
and move like great torpedoes  
into the rolling water.

By that river we last saw  
open boats  
and the metallic glint  
of the sun.  
The women carry laundry  
like loaves of bread,  
and are themselves  
taken from the shores.

Which way to Lamag  
or any city on this  
river of monsters?  
If we had a raft  
we could sail to the sea,  
sail down to the Sulu sea.

## THE ATTRACTION OF OPPOSITES

Difference  
draws him.  
Arms reach out  
from vines.  
The lips are human,  
breasts and belly  
ripe fruit  
among the leaves.  
Only the thighs  
recede into stalk,  
flesh fibrous and brown.  
Despite fear  
he embraces  
hair, shoulders,  
forgets the wooden husk  
flourishing strangely  
on the forest floor.

Once joined,  
arms become vines;  
fingers sprout.  
The embrace hardens  
lips to lips,  
vine to vine.  
Eyes go blank  
with the rich red  
taste of wine.

# ELIZABETH BLAIR

## HUNTERS IN THE SNOW (by Pieter Bruegel)

The eye can only do so much,  
select one scene in the cup of the hills.  
The great-coated villagers frolic  
on the mirrored lake, the ribboned  
stream; dogs chase skates  
and ice-breath whitens into steam.  
This is the center ring  
beneath the brooding tongue  
of distant rock beyond the frame.  
But everyone knows this part, the  
part that can't be kept, except with paint.

It's something else that sent  
me searching magnified shots:  
the woman near the thatched hut  
burning something not seen; the  
sign we can't read, swinging  
loose-hinged from its iron frame;  
the hunters slumped on the roof of the town,  
coming home with their lean dogs  
curving tails and necks towards  
sleep, looking failure in the teeth.  
And yet, there's fox fur in the leather bags,  
sunlight in the dark phalanx of winter trees.

**MASS**  
**(for Judy Chicago)**

Blood fell out of me twice  
with the slithery heft of raw liver. Yes, blood.  
But it's not polite to talk about it, is it?  
One of life's little ironies, since we all entered  
the world on the slide of a bloody vulva.  
So let's address the facts.  
I make messy love, which is good.  
It takes root in my cavity and, early on, misfires.  
Enter the surgeon, intimate as hell  
with his calm knife. This too is messy.  
The blood-soaked gloves, the splattered glasses.  
It happens every day, so we're going to talk about it.

He removes blood and baby  
but cells hang on. The second time,  
in the office, he pulls out, saying:  
Jesus, I'm not going to curette  
you any more. We'll just wait it out.  
He waits months while I keep pumping HCGs.  
There is such a thing as a little bit pregnant.

Forty and another missed birth.  
It gets worse. I bleed for 90 days.  
This worries me but the doctor says:  
No problem. Your tank's still 70% full.  
It's New Year's Day when the first clot drops.  
I call him, give dimensions. He asks  
if it's stopped. Well . . . yes . . . but . . .  
Good. Call me if you have a problem.  
Now I really have a problem.  
Got to find another doctor.

Next day, I'm on the kitchen phone  
and a pound slides out.  
Phil rushes me to the emergency room  
where the cocky intern says:  
Women come in all the time and  
tell us they're bleeding to death  
when it's just a damn period.  
He sends me home.

It gets worse. A day later  
I'm at a pay phone making  
an appointment with a woman doctor  
and it begins again. I run for the restroom.  
As I sit draining, the steel hook  
on the metal door starts to sway.  
I melt into the flow, slide to the floor.  
Some time later I wake up  
and crawl—first thought: scrub out  
that blood nobody talks about.  
As I drag myself up by the lip of the sink,  
my head fills with angry bees  
and I slide again, hitting the radiator.  
A receptionist finds me in a pool of blood.  
She's sensible enough to keep me down  
and calls my husband, then wraps me  
in towels for a hygienic transfer.  
I understand this; we women spend our lives  
trying to prevent those telltale spots on our seats.

It gets worse.  
Back in the emergency room,  
they take my blood pressure prone.  
Down 20 points from last night.  
Next they take it upright and I hear  
my voice scream as I slip out of my skin.  
When I come to, the intern calls a resident.  
If I try to sit up, the blood that's left  
shifts from my head, so I stay horizontal  
until the resident says I need a D & C.  
No, I shout, I had them twice.  
Phil insists on an ultrasound, says the  
blood's got to be coming from someplace else.  
He's fierce and loud so they placate him;  
give me a bed and schedule the ultrasound.

It gets worse. In the morning,  
the technician scans my belly  
again and again, won't say why.  
Back in the room, I meet my new  
blue-eyed doctor who holds my hand  
as she gives us the news: two large masses.

She and the resident of last night discuss the possibilities: bleeding polyps, ruptured ovaries or—worst-case-scenario—ectopic pregnancies, cancer.

Masses. The word rattles in its gourd,  
mass transit, mass on the brain,  
a mass for the dead.  
They lay out the battle plan;  
in through the belly hole with periscopes,  
survey those abdominal ink blots.  
Anything could happen and I have to sign off.  
Phil has to stop squeezing my hand  
and retreat to the husbands' lounge  
when the rheumy-eyed orderly  
wheels me to surgery.  
I'm wearing the I.D. bracelet  
the baby I didn't have won't get,  
identified for the white coats,  
who'll cut any body found on a cart  
if it matches the chart.  
I'm delivered to the preps, get a fat  
blonde who talks about her hysterectomy.  
I panic, thinking she's got the wrong chart.  
She assures me I'll probably lose less.  
I tell her to shut up, but get no  
pleasure in seeing her mouth zip.  
The anaesthesiologist is a graying,  
white male who jabs me, announcing:  
We're going to make sure you have a good time today.  
I can't slap his face or talk back because I'm going under,  
which is the best part of the whole damn thing.

They survey, then make  
the cut, poke around, find cysts,  
rip them out, sponge blood and sew me up.  
I'm lucky they say. Didn't lose ovaries,  
could have bled to death. I tell myself this  
as I lie in the hard bed, still bleeding,  
hooked to a needle. The floors  
are filthy, airshaft view; the doctors,  
grandchildren who forget to drop by.  
I can't cough or laugh for pain and,  
to make matters worse, figure out that

the IV with the antibiotic is giving me  
the dry heaves. The resident dismisses this,  
says it's the anaesthesia. He sails off.

My new doctor arrives.  
She listens, takes out the IV,  
says: A lot of people get sick from  
this drug. Let's try you without.  
I cry with relief.  
She's been educated in  
their schools but she bleeds.  
The nightmare begins to lift.  
I stop getting sick.  
Although the baby doesn't come back,  
the love that started all this is real.

As is the surgeon-fattening blood we  
women let, so why don't we talk about it?

## BLAIR RAINEY

### SIANA (INANNA)

Barren trees  
hung on midnight lace advances  
a cold cemetery  
for a warm November night

None had her intensity  
and none held her power  
We knew by the patchouli  
the teeth of pearls  
her cremation in the sand

Tigers walk on silver  
for a marketplace goddess  
“oh, the calla  
and the lily . . .”  
They all pale by comparison  
those infidels of scent

I count the times backward  
that I waited for her  
Again, for all the times  
you made me believe

A #5 etching in feeling  
done on linen and broadcloth  
my beautibaby  
your name engraved on my skin

# JENNIFER HILL

## SESTINA

I'm back again, snaking, shaking down the streets  
of New York, all at once angry,  
annoyed, full of venom but with nowhere to send  
it flying, careening, barely missing  
the fat Jewish lady in the ugly green  
dress, who is positively crazy. . . .

Wait. Who am I to be calling someone else crazy?  
Me, the person who threw skinny Slim out on the street  
with nothing on but a pair of Levis and old green  
suspenders that always fall down. Boy, was he angry  
with me but that wasn't the first time. He'll end up missing  
me and, who knows, maybe he'll send

flowers to apologize. Roses with lots of thorns. Or he'll send  
my favorite perfume, Chantilly Lace. See, I am crazy  
thinking that he'd miss  
me that much. Maybe I'll see him on the street  
in a bar, probably the Angry  
Squire, and it'll be like old times. We'll drink green

Creme de Menthe, green  
like seafoam, and we'll send  
a round to the old couple in the corner, always angry  
and giving us dirty looks when we laugh too loud, the crazy  
bastards. Blind drunk, we'll trip down the street  
skidding on silicone sidewalks, missing

death by rush hour traffic, definitely a missed  
opportunity. When the light turns green  
we'll shuffle, solemn and breathless, up our street  
to find a virginal white letter sent  
by her, that red-haired crazy  
Evangeline from Memphis, full of angry

threats, promises of hell and damnation, anger  
barely contained in one tiny envelope. Slim says he misses  
her and is going back to Memphis, a fool for love, crazy  
man in Levis and old green  
suspenders, while I hang tight and send  
romance novels flying out the window into Carmine Street.

# BRADFORD THOMAS STULL

## HE PERFORMS A SINGLE WHIP

near morning glories flush  
with purple

curled open

a single whip taut  
as tendrils coiled around  
thin beaten poles still

as the blooms until subtly his  
waist leads left hand and leg follow

float in then out they crack  
the air as if

and with  
a swirl he folds in black-robed  
arms relax, stout legs

root

## BRUCE NEAL

### FROSTBITE

Cooing into the tinwhistle  
her fingers are bitten below zero.  
The aluminum diminuendo  
pierces my ear in virgin places.

The tropical warmth  
of her luscious tongue  
funneled rhapsody  
inundates the  
ice water atmosphere  
with delicate penicillin.

There is a ghost  
in her stomach,  
a kicking ghost  
made of tubes,  
matchsticks and  
fleshy liquid.  
The Peoria diesel  
is three hours  
overdue.

She is on the platform,  
her fingers burnt furious with needles,  
smelling pug and brazen like gunpowder.

## CHRISTINA MARKS

### LEDA SPEAKS

My ankles swirl in cool water.  
A grasp a trout, pale rainbow in each hand,  
Their tugboat forcing bilgewater through tired  
Gills and when I let go, they cascade belly up,  
Flashes in rocky mossy downpour.

Up on top of the dam the old man watches stars.  
He has witnessed the birth of the great bear, Orion as young  
Warrior fall before Scorpio, Polaris set behind the  
First domes. And he gave  
My mother away three times. It was dark  
Tropical. Tuxedoed band played wheelbarrows. I remember  
I wore a purple dress with white polka dots to the wedding,  
The smell of strangers and my mother's hair.

The one I think of sometimes has found himself a lover.

I have been in the water now, daydreaming years.  
The astronomer charting Venus, sighs, bends his gaze  
At last! I am invited, his  
House in the catalpa tree,  
Cactus on the window sills. A white heron writhes in flight;  
Meat-seeking planaria slide across floor.  
He is upon me, in me. I scream and claw neck.  
His human skin gives way to lizard underpinning.

My knight arrives too late. The star gazer is nebulous,  
Escapes into the atmosphere.  
My knight is somber, squinting at wet thighs;  
Hoarsely whispers that I carry demon seed.

# KATHLEEN GALLAGHER

## SMELLING

People stink in the morning  
On the train I smell them  
Sprawled over sweaty sheets  
Wrapped in their nightmares  
And drooling on flattened pillowcases  
The smell wears off while they work  
By dusk  
The day has permeated them  
Cigarette fumes  
Thin coffee  
Nutty candybars coated with cracked chocolate  
And french fries  
They store the smells  
In the pores of their skin  
Nothing ripens on the train going home  
Maybe a sniff of stale aftershave  
Or dead hairspray  
But none of the smells they've collected  
Those trickle out at night  
Swim through dreams  
And rot  
In time for dawn

# RUSTY McKENZIE

## A CHILL IN THE AIR

The cat sweeps her tail  
across the August sky  
children's voices gone from the lake  
an itch under my left breast  
ache in my writing thumb and around my hips

Helen lies in the hospital bed  
speaks for the first time  
since her third congestive heart failure  
Finally released from machines  
that breathe for her, tubes  
that medicate and urinate  
she asks for her teeth  
from a yellow plastic box on the table

"It's awful to get old," she whispers  
her voice dry as wind in the corn field  
"Everything goes at once, my eyes,  
teeth, hands . . ." Her left eye is closed  
and I remember the game that McKenzies  
like to play at family gatherings

The widow Jones is dead . . .  
How did she die?  
With one shut eye

In the emergency room she wore the respirator  
taped and tubed to her mouth

The widow Jones is dead . . .  
And how did she die?  
With mouth awry

And how does the rest of it go?

How did she die?  
With leg on high  
waving goodbye . . .

Outside, the August sky  
a great blue bed,  
rumpled sheets drift  
like wings, a thousand  
pillows for her head

## CARI CALLIS

### THE WANTING IS AS SWEET AS THE GETTING

We bloomed only at night.

Our poems drop manhole covers  
on no blue eyes longer.

The Freedom  
played hunger on  
my soft shelled lips.

We learned to converse at parties  
above the sound of cocktail cubes  
rattling in our wrists.

In the kitchen  
they were waxpaper women.

But I wore pale skin,  
moon-beam bored and busy.

# AMY POLLÉ

## VITAL STITCH

What a drag  
to be the vital stitch  
in Quixote's dreams.  
To work for hours  
mending  
the massive  
holes.

Holes in his pants—  
panting holes  
holes  
the size of some  
Spanish heart  
sealing  
every dance.

What a drag  
to have Quixote  
stand  
over my shoulder  
while I stitch  
his britches—

to have him  
breathe  
down  
my neck  
with obsession.

He counts on me  
one itchy stitch  
to make his  
exits enter.  
Panting pride  
toward his  
romping  
windmill

he grabs           Aldonza  
                  and  
slips for  
                  his  
                  dreams.

**A SACRED BLOW**  
for Dexter Gordon

Perhaps it was your performance  
that lingered on  
after candles went submissive.  
Or it might have been  
your secret love a la carte  
that shiny bitch  
that revved up running  
on sight of your reflection.

It took two lips to  
your fingered fly  
to baby that back table boogaloo.  
Her long neck stretching to the  
farthest crevice—  
enticing  
two jiving beers  
half warm/half awakened  
to cool out  
in the spine draft  
of closing.

Blow for blow  
lady snapper remained bopping  
dipping  
over blue highs of heat—  
burnin' that mother of gloom  
her 52nd smile of restless bliss  
blazin'/crazin'  
for a good port  
in the hazes of smoke.

Perhaps it was her sultry scent  
that lingered on  
your dancing sweat—  
Seducing  
the verve of your vermouth  
to move its thighs  
above hip's harmony.

Perhaps

The way you played your secret love/sacred love  
played it/delayed it  
to hit the highpost  
halfway to heaven  
returning any moment  
to blowing secret  
lover's blows.

# MAUREEN RILEY

## SPRING

These memories of spring  
bring

water and buckets to catch  
the rain as it courses  
through the night, bring  
mornings heavy with the scent  
of hyacinths, the breath  
of birds, bring a long stretch  
of afternoon as long as bones  
that remember their movement  
that rise from the dank caves,  
that spring from the hillsides,  
that unfurl like fiddles.

All turns to joy in the forgiving,  
opening sex of spring. From  
the dense organs of flowers  
floats the alleluia.

I have waited, and the  
waiting becomes arrival.

What song shall rise up, unbidden  
from the stomach of salmon  
on their way back home? What  
stones are in  
me still that will not  
release their fragrance?

## POINTING THE MOON

The half moon rises from the bottom  
of the nail, its bright geometry  
like a Russian dreaming fields  
of grain, 'till round and full

and then again

thin, thinner, thinnest, like love  
it gets pared away. A curved  
blade in the heart, it hangs  
breathing faint Islamic prayers.

## SHAPESHIFTING

The night  
is an animal  
under the moon.  
I lie in a horse trough,  
absorbed  
by the darkness,  
hot, steamy water  
up to my neck,

breathing  
in the warm  
skin of water  
like an animal  
in its coat. Alone  
and aware

of the call  
of the night:  
coyotes,  
their ears standing high,  
traipsing through valleys  
smelling of juniper,  
nibbling at berries,  
tasting of pine, shitting  
blue and swallowing

the moon  
in one deep gulp . . .  
bubbles rising  
to the surface,  
dribbling

from my mouth.  
I pull out  
the stopper.  
The water sucks away  
from my legs,  
going limp,

and races downhill  
seeking bones . . .  
    moving faster  
and closer—

Coyote.

## BOBBYE MIDDENDORF

### DECEMBER'S WEIGHT

Abominations after a night with not much sleep  
Like you're wading through glass attracting  
Travesties lightened by anonymity daring to make the leap.

Say out loud every solitary thing you want to keep  
Close by the vest so secrets will not be accused of depicting  
Abominations after a night with not much sleep.

Responsibilities by the pound weigh into a heap  
Of papers, books, various tools of the trade: In essence nothing.  
Travesties lightened by anonymity daring to make the leap.

On the fly you see Anonymous at subways, farmhouses, or up steep  
Highrises where you become someone else riding elevators, parking:  
Abominations after a night of not much sleep.

Step by unconfident step you try to move in 4 directions so deep  
in a mire & tangle that you must become fearless determining  
Travesties lightened by anonymity daring to make the leap.

Not knowing how you made it happen forces the hand: You creep  
From sentiments foisted on by public glare, execution by lightning:  
Abominations after a night with not much sleep.  
Travesties lightened by anonymity daring to make the leap.

## ROCK I

Complexities of rock reveal  
What is mystical in water  
Old bewildered dialogues  
In someone else's hand  
Both sides silent as stones  
Velocity incestuous as the wind  
Cold rocks  
lost in a maze  
Cold as a poem  
Mute with dazzlement yet  
Unflaggingly submissive  
To come  
Light as a universe  
Cold as the splintering constellations

## HARVEY M. PLOTNICK

### LAUREL AND HARDY

They knew a pie in the face  
Is a soft wound;  
Falling through a brick wall  
Is a kind of collapse;  
And losing your pants  
Is to stand naked.

They perceived  
In the calculus of survival  
Long division is disastrous—  
You can save the heroine  
By dressing as a woman  
And marrying the villain,  
But then you're in real trouble.

And as they chased a piano down a hill,  
Or mixed watches in a milkshake container,  
Or made chest hairs explode like a firecracker,  
They made people laugh,  
And remember their laughter,  
In a world  
Where pratfalls are for keeps.

## THE BACHELORS

Every Saturday night they meet for dinner.  
They have an elaborate discussion where to eat—  
The cheap restaurant with the expensive name,  
The expensive restaurant with the cheap food,  
Or that new restaurant opening where a multitude  
Of similar restaurants closed down before.  
Invariably they choose "Supreme's Coffee House."

Inside, wilted waitresses shuffle with a prisoner's step.  
Though faces change, they are always the same:  
Automat voices, hair done up in a bun,  
Faded black uniforms like discarded nuns' habits.  
So the bachelors sit in a booth, making idle talk.

Forty is a lost horizon, while the years to come  
Seem like treadmill ducks in a shooting gallery.  
There are usually four of them,  
But sometimes Harry stays home,  
For pride, or shame, or a pathetic show of independence,  
Drinking beer and watching "The Dating Game" on TV.

Invariably they talk about women.  
Their social circle is a whirlpool, sucking in refuse:  
Disaffected ones, bitches, marriage-seekers, losers.  
They compare notes on Joan, once divorced.  
Yes, Joan is all business, marry me or get lost.  
Her nose was once curved like a pickle,  
Too bad plastic surgery can't change genes.  
Her ex has a crooked back  
From jumping through too many hoops,  
Now he's broke from buying her mink-lined panties.  
Yes, Joan is a bitch in boots, too bad.

The waitress arrives with:  
Butt steak for Bill, veal supreme for Irv, chicken mystique for Herb.  
The food is different, but it is all the same  
Beneath its blankets of gravy.

They finish and Herb is conned into driving,  
As he always is, and they go to the Mallory Hotel.  
On the seventh floor, men and women  
Pace about outside the dance hall.  
They look into each other  
As into a mirror, seeing only themselves,  
And Bill and Irv and Herb wince inside,  
But must play this game,  
A game they forfeit long ago.  
Within, women clump like grass,  
And the three bachelors are almost thankful for rebuffs.  
They've made their showing before the computer faces  
Of those who see and don't see them.  
They soon tire of the dance,  
Drive to another, then a third.

Around 1:00 A.M. they stop at Morry's Snack Shop.  
People inside are always the same  
Even when they are different:  
Floaters and down-and-outers;  
Couples processed and curried;  
Old women, faces a parfait of pale skin and rouge.  
The bachelors talk about women they saw,  
Women they did not see,  
And women they hoped to see.  
Finally, as wobbly, cotton-headed from fatigue,  
They start to leave,  
Irv always asks about the following Saturday.  
Bill says he's going to call someone, maybe Joan,  
While Herb mumbles about a family commitment.  
And next Saturday, they meet again.

## BRAD RICHMAN

### TEN AT KENTUCKY LAKE

As I crouched for fishing I heard  
Wind specks scampering through the pine tops  
Like bird shadows.

As I stood for casting  
I wondered at the moon, yellow, clear  
Adrift a cellophane murk,  
As I took the night into my nose  
I could trace the stench of sour bank  
Tinged algae perfume mingled cedar  
Burnt in crisp disinterested air.

As I sat in the impatience of a catch  
I relished the aftermath of a potato chip.  
As I waded foot high in rubberized knee-highs  
I could feel a cold-water-wraparound,  
Goosh of black bottom egg slime  
Weedtraps and sadness.

As I was netting the bass  
(A flipped-out flapjack)  
I thought of nothing permanent—  
The flash of a firefly  
Blind fish in cave streams  
An old green wicker chest  
Filled tight with deflated enthusiasms  
An unbearable winter that never touched  
Our icicles till spring.

## ROUGH RIFF

You're an uptempo high hat  
Shot me out of my amp at 250 decibels  
You're a Coltrane vampire  
Sharp edged atonal fire  
I want to fix your tempo  
Blues bellowing from betwixt  
Smoldering cave of sorrow  
Wailing tales  
How she left you cold  
Loved you  
Stole all your stash  
Left town  
Could have been your baby  
Your sweet saxophone  
Belching cedar air  
Could have been your harp  
On a canvas of apostrophes  
How when you crossed her  
She was your queen  
Tight balcony abalone kiss  
Miss her sweaty tip toe touch  
Laying naked in your crib  
Like a magazine without a cover  
Fingers once moving progressive  
Fusion on the small of your back  
How you wanted to wax that dolphin  
How she reached for your groin like a wallet  
Seven sweet measures of shoeshine ecstasy  
No mad dog to numb itchy brick memories  
Just a square groove  
From the gut of a big radio

## NERUDA

I happen to be ecstatic that I am male

Blue bone clusters

The disassembled enemies I once despised

Restaurants engrave their hearts in my gut

All food is good like sex in a damp movie house

Clotheslines criss-cross arid yards

Some brilliant crucifixion of common fashion

Water weeping out the tears of joyous Willie Wear

Dusty Eastern streets

The tension rising like a bright grey shoot-out

The hospital is near

A monument to dissonance

Everyone well-fed

Nurses like mothers

Comforting strangers in their smooth

Yellow arms

## CHRIS SIMS

### UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS

Pacing the floor, dragging  
a shrunken left leg across  
the ceiling over my head,  
above.

Some sort of retarded neighbor  
dragged his lousy leg like  
no sleep, mumbling.

This was trying my patience.  
Tolerating the crawl drawn  
dragging across the ceiling;  
in a thresher smashed, spit  
back out into slacks, I  
imagine the limb is like  
pieces of wind-torn corn,  
stalks run over by pick-up  
trucks, pounds of mortar  
in the flat beds.

Split open and smashed, rot  
comes with rain then stench  
inspired by sun, while pacing  
drags my thoughts into the  
tires' path.

Thinking carried outside  
beyond this from natural  
disasters to strands of light  
penetrating clouds  
from a wooden window smattered  
with paint and the green  
shutter hanging by one hinge,  
I observed through  
condensation on the glass.

Roaring its engine, a red  
car spat up black snow,  
cut in halves by cracks in  
my window, it slipped off  
without a squeal; I scratched  
kitten, and tried not to  
think of father's laugh.

The heater roasted the heave  
of my right cheek.

Who dares to perceive  
depression or damnation as  
the bent blue dumpster spills  
its insides out?

The large hinged lid  
neglectfully left hanging  
banging and beating about  
in the petrol breeze against  
its own square form, egg  
shells, spoiled meat, and  
empty containers, slipped  
out from battered steel lips  
flapping—half empty cans  
of peas spit out, scattering  
black eyes in the grass.

Through the street, blown  
and dancing, in carnival  
procession, tomato stems  
rolled about, like a hare-  
lip picking its teeth.

The rose pattern quilt  
blossomed over my knees,  
but even the absence of smell  
and thorn did not let me  
forget the dragged leg  
slobbering down chin without  
shame, turning back and forth,  
on heel, overhead, turning  
over the Dixie cup filled

with coffee and butts knocked  
over across the table, and  
I can't argue, but sure could  
then as sister pulled the  
towels from the roll and  
soaked the mess up in paper,  
chewing gum and scratching  
her head.

## SCALED DOWN TO GOOD RIDDANCE

Agonized temperament, it's  
very plain—  
a fly swatter slaps,  
grains of sugar scatter across  
the tile,  
sweetens the step,  
heel and bare foot.

Likewise,  
insects are made fat,  
wide and round ready  
for the swat,  
and head to head swarming  
through deadly spray  
they make off for  
transparent windows and  
bang themselves delirious.

Though some windows are not  
clean, all the same, they  
rattle against panes  
frustrated as thieves sticking  
up Plexiglas.



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