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BEDTIME STORY

Say he is a walker,

Son,

Say he is a loper against shadows

Tilting at falling light,

Ducking athwart walls, a hideous

Laughter to himself.

One

Day he stood on our stoop, yes,

And looked at my teapot geranium

For an hour through beanpod eyes,

Son,

He was gone before the others came

Home, walked away into his own

Shadow, chewing on air. The same

Man.

Walks,

Walks upon a bogeyman's slouch

He, I say, never speaks at all

Though once I saw three tongues in his mouth,

Son,

But the light was dim.

It may have been the crack in the pane

That made me see these

And there was the thin light before rain

Son

Stay earthbound away from

Your own shadows. Please.

Don't grow old and churn

Light into foam.

Son.

Kalyan Ray

WORDS

You'd think Dora is dying of something,
like leukemia or lupus.

My mother has stopped slapping her . . .
now grovels, pins in mouth, at her hem.

Evenings and week ends Dora turns the pages
of TRUE ROMANCE and THE BIBLE,
picking her pimples and sighing.
The other night I heard her whimper to Mamma
about her boss: "He keeps using those big words."

In the corner, with my homework,
I let my teacher's words waltz around
in my skull: "Willo Von Musson! You're
the *antithesis* of your big sister."

From behind the lace curtain, Mamma aims a green
gaze at the neighbor, Phyliss, and her fiancee.
"Looks aren't everthing!" The curse flaps like a
bat to the duff of their departing car.

In the other corner, my father snoozes
behind his illustrated pamphlet on Armageddon.

"Boy-crazy!" This second curse flashes through
the curtain and lassoes Francie, in tandem with
her fella on his motorcycle.

Dora is twenty, and she has never had a date.

"Go ta C.E.!" Mamma has been hollering to her
for two years,

and at last, hemmed, frizzed, cologned,
depilatoried, Dora sets out for the corner church
to Endeavor with the young Christians.
She's accompanied home by a girl who yoo hoos
at passing cars.

"She's so *mouthy*," Dora complains to Mamma, who snaps, "*Yer too backwards*. B'sides, I hear she's got a pack o brothers."

Sure enough: Sunday night after C.E.
the pumpkin putt putts to a stop at our curb,
and both Dora's black leather pumps descend
to the grass.

The lace curtain shimmies with thanks.

My father snuffs like a groundhog
who's seen his shadow.

His name is Hank, and his hair is the color
of mustard, and he's all elbows.

"He brags," Dora snivels to Mamma,
who sighs, "Look at it this way, Girl:
He's got a job and he's Dutch."

Sunday evenings, on the couch beside Dora,
Hank guffaws, out of the corner of his mouth,
like a gangster, "That don't cut no ice with me . . .
An I says 'Button yer lip, Kid' . . ."

In my corner, mute as a doll, I sugar my
thoughts with vocabulary homework:
plebian/patrician *mediocre/superior*

On her twenty-first birthday, Dora displays
on her ring finger a brave little blink of a
diamond.

I open my dictionary and savour antonyms,
like Life Savers.

Karen Snow

TWO POEMS**Resurrection**

Abandoned in the stifling tomb
Facing his own face and no other face
He made the greater sacrifice:
The cross

He brushed the flecks of dried blood from his lips
And knew that the pitcher would sweat cold
When he drew it from the well
And that his lips would bulge at the touch of water
Like shrivelled roots fleshing after rain

He touched the foolish, scraggled beard
Brittle with the dry salt of those hours
And the dry grit of the desert path
And the dry spit of the aimless jesters
And knew that he could stand the drench of hot water
And the quietude of the rough, deep towel
Warm on his cheeks

Touched the sharp blade of a rib
And remembered the famished days
The heavy trudging from village to village
Staggering under the load of the unutterable word
That could not be laid down, nor given away . . . nor
taken

His fingers trembled at his loins
And knew the pallor of immolation
Senses drab, dipping into death at the root
Gelding anger and love and hate and pity and lust
The flesh subdued
The soul redeemed

And there in the tomb
Facing his own face and no other face
He made the greater sacrifice: the soul
The soul undomiciled
Naked, searching gull without a roost
Wings beating in the infinite wash of the white sky
And no landfall

He touched the crushed bones and the holes
(Heritage of ardent spikes through tearing flesh and sullen
wood)

And yielded himself to the surgeon's art
To heal himself
Here in the flesh, hot in the hair and the breathing
Here in the life, the hurt and the gasping lust
Here in the heart, in the fear, in the sweat
In the breathing

And it came to him, concerning the Magdalen
What his eyes could not see then, blind in his preaching
Her breasts
The amiable rising and falling
Of her breasts

From The Old Man and the Girl

Looming over her, I drew my hands slowly
Down the long, smooth slopes of her body
Inciting quiverings, and shimmerings and sighs
And then returning, over rippling velvet
To her thighs
Where my fingers wandered, pilgrims far from home
Among the folds of her flower

And I, the old man, knew that I could not totter for safe
cover now

Could not duck behind a boulder, wedge myself under,
and lie still

By my touch, I had anointed myself and become
King Solomon in his rich array, creator of glories
Of ships, of palaces, of wheatlands, of wondrous harps
And of musicians to tune them and to sing to him of
creation

And of the summoning of queens in all their nakedness
And of concubines in their satins, adorned with golden
lace

Yes . . . and of herds of droll and witty elephants
And of goats lechering in the meadows, and of tigers
Sulking among fig trees and counting the hours 'til noon

And there, with my fingertips sensing the innermost depths
Of her flower

I remembered the Tarot

Unsummoned came the Death card, pitiless as dry bones:
A parched skeleton riding a white horse down a littered
pathway . . .

Unbidden came the Zero card, imaging the Fool:

A festive youth, head cocked, bindle over shoulder
Trips toward the precipice. His free hand holds a flower
His dog, dismayed by the naked scarp, rears back
The Fool, his eyes closed, plunges back

The morning sun sent its streamers over my body
The acacia tree outside whipped at my window
Flaunting its white flowers

Held by her fragrance, I was lost in the flower that was
Joan

I did not see the precipice . . . nor the Abyss below

Sidney Brenner

MY DIAMOND STUD

He'll be a former cat burglar
because I have baubles
to lose. I'll know him
by the black
carnation he's tossing:
heads, he takes me,
stems, the same. Yes,
he'll be a hitchhiker at this
roller-rink I frequent, my diamond
stud who'll wheel up shedding
sparks & say "Ecoutez
be-be. I'm a member
of a famous folded trapeze
act. My agility is legend, etc."
keeping his jeweler's eye on
my gold fillings. He'll know
what I really want, whipping
me with flowers, his finger's grosgrain
sanded smooth, raw
to my every move. For our tryst
we'll go to travel folder heaven
& buff-puff each other's
calluses in valentine tubs.
He'll swindle the black heart
between my thighs
dress me up in ultra-
suede sheaths, himself
in naugahyde. No,
leather. He'd never
let anything touch him
that wasn't once alive.

Alice Fulton

LESSONS IN PRISON

I

A summer night: wet heat, the shadows long and blue.
“How can you work with *them*?” the guard
asks as he walks me from the classroom to the gate.
His young lip, newly mustached, curls.

Summer and winter I return, a hopeful
recidivist. “Full moon tonight,” he says.
“*They* all get worse then.” He who works with *them*
day-in
seems to think I too am lunatic. I think
of another year, another place, of my son
in prison. He began to go crazy in his cell,
but not from the fat white moon,
no. The warden simply lost his name, left him
crammed in a barred world, six by eight, until
his nails dug raw graves in his palms
and a tic sent shockwaves down his face. His voice
scraped my gut as he told of trying to talk with somebody,
anybody. Asked a guard why he chose to work with
prisoners.
“Because I like to look at the animals.”
Yes, the boy was guilty, no denying it, but not
of mindlessness or being less than human.
Almost too late the warden’s eye opened. I stopped
crying and learned to keep my eye on the keepers.
And not to tell a gun-belted man in state-blue
uniform anything he does not need to know.

We reach the gate. No reference to *them*,
 I say, "Teaching's my job. See you next week."
 He shakes his head; his teeth still show. I commit,
 with calculation, repeated errors of passion.

Students and teacher, we live out our convictions.

2

An old story: the teacher is taught. I trade
 watchwords—metaphor, exaggeration, irony—
 for definition of an oil joint, "Like, y'know,
 a shootin gallery," and three arms outthrust illustrate
 in living black and white the absence of usable veins.

What are freedom, love, and loneliness? Take photographs.
 You tender negatives: shadow that died of a rat bite,
 choked cock that crows awake each morning sun,
 backpacks of unwanted time, and damn! ol Jesus
 rackin pool balls while he slug down Ripple wine.

You have imagination in your court. Try wordwork,
 puns, get twice the message out of book or blue or habit.
 You grin. "Yeah, double the pleasure, double the fun."
 And, "Double jeopardy, ain't that a bitch."
 I say, "The pen can set you free." And you

keep taking liberties. Here laws are flouted. Tense has
 truck with flesh, not verbs. Apostrophes run wild,
 the sonorous six-barreled word misfires, language is
 murdered and sometimes, spitting, singing, rises.
 You do justice to the idea; I bargain for its guise.

Writing wrong's no crime. And ignorance is no defense.
 You have explained to me the meaning of a sentence:
 unfixed term concluding always with a question mark.
 We serve out our days and years. You teach, I learn:
 my guilt-edged innocence is redefined.

3

My bedtime hand, unshackled of its watch,
turns off the Tensor's switch: and light
flicks on as darkness floods my room, my open
senses that dream you suddenly.

Locked in, you learn to sleep at night
alone in dormitoried company,
no actions, parts, or nightmares private,
your blankets or tattooed forearms

lidding your eyes against that fiat
that decrees unshaded, electric day.
Or eyes strained at the tailor shop's machines,
the bindery's texts, are simply,

wearily sewn shut, the filaments imprinting
false dawn on your guarded dreams.
And some snore, some mumble or grit teeth,
and some cry out, grown children

whom the repeal of darkness cannot comfort.
How careless my freedom is—
a second's gesture, finger nudging plastic,
tigers and demons kept at bay without a fire,

silence, and beside me the black
illumination of chosen flesh.
Let there be dark. And it is done.
This freedom—how immense.

Janet Lembke

—FROM *PLATTE VALLEY HOMESTEAD*

Anna sits on the back lawn
in a rocker handed down from her mother,
nursing the baby. She rocks back and forth,
humming something I can't quite
put my finger on,
though I sit on a milkstool
tilted back beside her.
The child is so small that it says I exist
through the noise of its sucking.
Yet I cannot imagine the universe
managing without him,
how this one arrived on time
and in flawless form,
every inch of its way measured out
as if a soft deliberate tune,
many hearts with the beat
of one heart,
naturally.

Nearby, on the trunk of a high barkless cottonwood,
a flicker with ungodly ease
is defying gravity,
the crescent of red on its busy nape
the only color in all the world
it could be.

And how do the ducks
swim on that little pond just over there,
this side of the toolshed?
Easy as pie, my boy.
Easy as pie.

Across the river
the Pentecosts are gathered
for a baptizing,
the words to their song
suggesting that someone,
perhaps even a member
of their own congregation,
is in the mire, far from the
peaceful shore, sinking.
You can watch them on their knees
forcing each other's heads
down and into something—
a layer of water, maybe,
a layer of mud,
an underworld of sand.
Because twelve weeks ago
the river was moved away
in blocks of ice
to cool the produce
in the boxcars of the Burlington.
William worked for a time
for wages then,
one day bringing home a polygon of ice
with a carp frozen
squarely at the center.
God's paperweight,
I called it at last,
putting an end to our wondering
how the fish had managed
to trap himself so cleanly.
Now the sun comes all the way from heaven
to thaw the faces of the Pentecosts,
and I swear that if the word
was something yet
to be devised by man,
I'd almost rise to sing the music with them.

Now the bulk of the ice
moves in heavy silence downstream,
barges with nothing
but their own flat mass to bear,
and in a sky so vast it wheels the mind
a full snow moon is saying Yessiree, you bet,
depend on it: winter's back, this time, is broken.

Yet the pony just north of the barn
stays frozen in the mind,
and when Anna brings Monday's wash
into the kitchen
my overalls, for all the snow moons in the world,
lie flat and hard as bangboards.

Placed on boxes behind the woodstove then
they thaw and dry, begin as if by habit
to balloon. Am I already in them?
Something there is that smells of cotton,
something warm soft fresh clean.

Who can forget the arm of Anna
moving a flatiron back and forth, up and down,
the pony hoof to knee to croup to nostril
softening.

When I touch Anna's face
I touch the afterglow
of steam,

ice in the river
ancient history.

The pony atop the hill
in half-moon silhouette
says Bone,
says Blood,
says Flesh,

beyond him
seven sisters
saying Stone,
saying Solid,
saying Fixed,

and on the bed each word
I move to shape, but fail,
in limbo
on the border
in between.

Now suddenly the leaves on the willows
are lime,
and you see them mostly
with the eye of the salivary gland,
juices more plentiful than sap
against the tongue.

In the kitchen
Anna skims away the clean yellow liquid
that is butter,
throws out the sediment.
Solid to liquid to solid,
one route or another
the promise of the bloodline
clarified.

Under a square of flannel soaked in milk
Anna's face becomes soft
as the underbelly of a dove—
the one, that is, who sits each evening
on the only bare limb on the linden,
calling over and over Love, Love, Love.

The secret, I know, is at the core,
that good great fortune of having, at the core,
something soft to begin with,
something at the core to urge to light,
something to work one's long and brittle passage
back to.

Anna's face unveiled
glows soft as the wood-bound image
behind an oval of glass
at the center of the south wall
in the living-room,
my own the face of a small boy
sad and grateful
deep in the sugar and the dough-dust
of a woman's apron.

See how all across the valley
the trees cannot contain themselves,
each trunk all winter holding its breath
until now, in April, it explodes,
the sound contagious:
now under a yellow sun
green the early wheat,
blue the meadow violet,
red the wing on the blackbird

today returned.

Anna with the pony
sheds the gooseflesh

that during hibernation
served as hair,
and on a down-soft blanket

in the clover,
a bale of hay from last October's crop
as if a stone to mark the birthplace

of our pre-
diluvian beginning,
I lie with Anna

corpulent and warm,
your teeth, my Juno,
never so soft,

your eyes
at the moment of rainbow
never so brown.

Die,

whine in the nose
of the black iron engine.

Don't you know that
near the crossing,

at the height of a longleaf pine,
a pewee is perched

like the first bird
ever,

singing?

In the fog you give the horse the reins,
believing that below you, below the wagon,
the center of the road moves by,
slowly, steadily,
believing that now, your reckoning
more absolute than dead,
you are about to find the lane
to turn the corner to pass the mailbox,
that then the dark solid earth
will rise beneath you gently,
will level at last to bend you to the right,
to bring you to a stop half in, half out
of the leanto, the sign of home
the damp heavy smell of mash and clover.

How old were you, anyway, when you first
were brave enough to drop the reins?
You watch the right front wheel
on the wagon, turning,
and because you know a thing or two
of axle and hub and dumb dependency
you know that the other wheels are turning, too.
Tell me, old man, how many autumns will it be
do you suppose
before you no longer have the nerve
to pick them up again?

William Kloefkorn

FLAMENCO

In the fall we moved in next door
to a Spanish restaurant. The wife
of the owner danced the flamenco
twice each night, serving customers
in between shows in her long, swirling
skirts and thin blouses. All that year
the pounding of her shoes beat
on the high wooden floor, beat
without end until I wondered
if I would ever again sink into sleep
without hearing her shoes drumming,
the rhythm beneath the uneven voice
of the guitar, her clapping
quick and sharp
to feed the foreign beat.

There was the taste of summer in the air
all that year, and a high sirocco wind
seemed always to be blowing, fanning
the lazy Spanish fire next door.
We took to drinking hot red wine
in the evening, and stopped wearing clothes
inside the room, even when the windows
gleamed with the uncertain city snow;
and we burned for each other
with a bright heat, all through
the long winter hours, all through
the sticky, untidy summer dark.

That year we had a bed that creaked as we
rocked back and forth and rolled
in great drops of salt and sweetness.
Your sweat would cover me like another skin
that I learned to put on and take off.
There were many long hours spent freely

in the summer fire, sucking in turn
each of your pale white fingers,
the delicate flicker of tongues
building like fever until the fire
began to die down, leaving us
to fall asleep
in the fullness of the moon.

One July night, the Spaniards packed up and left,
without warning, leaving their doors and windows open
to diffuse the heat of their going.
Some weeks later a French restaurant opened,
with the first cool promise of fall; but by then
it was too late. People like us,
so slow to warm up, such sudden flames,
had been left unattended too long
and had gone out.

Harriet Brown

FROM TIME

I took today to bed with me
when I turned out the light,
And held it very closely.
Through the cool, dark night—
I tucked it near my pillow
so that I could hear,
All the things that filled it
with my nighttime ear.
I held it very close to me—
It could not get away.
And yet when morning came again
It was another day.

Donna Meadows

TWO PART INVENTION

1.

“What’s so great about men?” he asked. “We-ell, you’ve got that great thing between your legs,” she ventured. “Ah, you can buy those in the drugstore,” he scoffed. The elevator stopped, the door opened. In a few seconds they were on the street. The question lay unresolved.

Another time, watching him upon his return from a long trip, she wondered: if it turned out that he’d lost his penis, would she still love him. This questions, also, lay unresolved.

2.

An electric heater throwing its light across the dark room,
a blanket spread upon the floor,
two pillows.

These were his preparations for her arrival.

Later, their bodies locked in amorous combat,
“Doucement,” she said.
“Too small?” he heard.

Ah no, not that.

The next day
the bruised bones of her pelvis sang to her of the spare
boards
of his floor.

“You are like a monk who loves women,” she told him.

3.

“I feel as though I’m farting into your music,” he said, whacking away at his Stockhausen on one side of

the rehearsal hall while she played Chopin on the Pleyel at the other side. They continued to practice, back to back, each aware of the other and sometimes listening, but disturbing each other not at all.

4.

He made love energetically, using his fingers the way he used them to play the piano. Not caressingly but percussively. This did not preclude tenderness. But it was an abstract tenderness, totally without sentiment.

5.

His face was intelligent, unique, and magnetically attractive. Both men and women were drawn to his beauty and basked in his warmth until they discovered that this beautiful god was available to them only so long as they remained strangers; they became his enemies then. He said his dream of a woman was a beautiful stranger, not to know or be known by; and his life was a procession of thus encapsulated encounters all over the world. His satisfaction in the "romance" of parting left scores of women with a more affirmative view of love, or life, hungry for more, desolate or vengeful. Sometimes they would tell his wife.

6.

"But is happiness everything?" he asked, trying to leave her.

"No-o," she mused, "but it's not nothing."

7.

It was Christmas,
snow covering the ground,
his body covering hers,
sound of white peace, quiet
joy like an Invention by Bach.

It's heaven, he said,
I know, said she,
You can't know, said he
because you're you
and I'm only me.

8.

She comes across a sentence in a book: "Typical of the marriages of writers of genius (and other artists) is the intensely creative woman artist who loves the neurotic, possibly psychotic man; she cannot live without him, he is her secret Muse, bringing her poetry - and at the same time tearing her life apart."¹

9.

"You need him for your physical well-being," suggested Tibor the astrologer. She nodded vigorously. It was exciting to have her unacknowledged feelings given shape by a stranger.

"He enhances your creativity, he doesn't take from you."

Yes, yes.

"You are good for each other. So what is wrong?"

"He's afraid," she says. "He pushes me away all the time."

"He is right. He is a man of honor. Such a man would find it difficult to change."

She is incredulous. "What shall I do?"

"You are very demanding. Women are always at fault in these matters."

She muzzles her outrage. "All right. Will somebody else come into my life?"

"Do not abandon him for another!" came the reply, like a commandment from on high.

Resentful and reassured, she prepared to leave.

"Wait!" Jupiter aimed a bolt of lightning. "He may well outsmart you."

10.

"Can you imagine," he once said, "that someone would say such a thing about me, that I'm like a cow who gives the most beautiful milk - and then kicks over the bucket!"

"Extraordinary," she nodded.

11.

Food. It was perhaps a bad sign that he wasn't interested in food. He cared only about not eating what was not supposed to be good for one. Tea yes, coffee no. Vitamins yes. Sugar no. The way to his heart was definitely not through his stomach. On the contrary, it sometimes seemed that his approach to her was that of a chronic dieter to much-beloved chocolate cake. Since she represented the ultimate sensual pleasure, she was tasteable without guilt only once in a while. Two days in a row was cause for remorse and a whole night, not to mention a week of her company caused indigestion, palpitations, and vows to reform and not partake again - maybe never again - of chocolate cake.

12.

". . . if you don't want me . . ." she said.

"Don't you know I always don't want what I want!" he responded with great irritation.

"Oh my god," she thought desperately.

"I must leave you, I must," he muttered, pacing the floor. "But the next time I come to your door," he begged, turning to face her, "please throw me out."

13.

From one of the many letters of farewell she has received from him: ". . . my respect for you and for me demands exactly what you think it forbids: a huge sacrifice, perhaps a final one."

14.

She finds another passage in a book: "They admire and they desire purposeless death in the shape of self-sacrifice . . . [It is] their deepest longing. The French or the British want victory; Germans always only want to die."²

15.

"Are you a man or a mouse?" she demanded.

"I'm a mouse-ochist," he grinned, and changed the subject.

1. Donald Hall, *Remembering Poets*.

2. Count Harry Kessler, 1933.

Anne-Marie Levine

THE POINT OF IT ALL

"Don't use your strength
Mr. Hulbert!
Strike it with your heart!
Strike it with your heart!
Stop thinking about it!"

Minakawa is shouting at me

I'm trying to knock
the bejesus out of this temple bell
swinging a three hundred pound log against it

And this madman
shouting at me

Gary Hulbert

A FISH PRINT

The fisherman hauled
up the thing called 'saurel' or 'horse mackerel'
like a fallen meteor
heated to an incandescent green.
It lay in the bottom of the boat
still fizzing and giving off sparks, its mouth filled
with murder and those delicate jeweler's teeth
as precise as a Sioux sunburst design quilled
on buffalo hide,
its tail softly spanking the planks of the boat.
Already its eye peered up
through the milky cataract of death,
fixed forever on some microscopic
fanfare in the sky. It was a record catch,
fit for pharaoh's pomp, gutted and spiced and glazed
with myrrh and fine damar to make its pelt match
Mogul mail armor
with its overlapping scalloped copper scales,
but you said the fisherman
would take a print from it, braying it
with charcoal ink, pressing its still-warm
coldblooded body on a sheet of hand-made
paper. And so he did, for when we went in
to dinner, there lay the fish with a cockade
of paradisal
lemon, grilled a shade smaller than its shadow
self now hanging on the wall
behind it. I would impress my great
inky self that way on your unprimed
memory, before your love eats me: wear it backed
by your own body, a ward against the chill
of forgetfulness, a closeness, a contact.

Roger Finch

TWO POEMS**Parley Porter Picks up a Hitchhiker and Rides
through Cana County**

Now the women who first chewed this rawbone
dirt in their childhoods dug homes
in these fields, raised great diseased
branches of kin over this brokendown county. Care
for a smoke as we knock these closet bones?
Just take Aunt May Seafert, 93, a great-grandchild
gripped in her good arm when I bought
the old family place in '68
could remember the century
turning on the first stain of her womanhood
and her dead cousin
the Wilkes boy she first married,
two wonders at once,
and now in the Home studies an arthritic grandson
come for a visit, calls him Sweet Willie
though his name is Frank.
Now Aunt May's father was a famous sinner,
saw his older girls daily each planting time.
If you know what I mean you know
why they all married quick.

Or consider the lay of Emery Township
over west, its cemetery planted with idiot double
cousins, incendiaries who took two half-sister daughters
to wife, half-wits to boot,
then burned every crop north of McGee's.
I got that place for a song
after the last of two old maids
locked herself in an upstairs room, two weeks

waiting for Sweet Jesus to light on the beanfield
east of the house. When found was five days dead.
I'll sell it if you're interested,
cheap and no strings.

And then there's Ivan Collins at Lebanon,
the Cana seat, who shot
his uncle when he caught him with his wife,
one of the Ferguson girls related
to his mother's people. Never a dull one,
we say. Why even my own family's Porter stock
through and through. Settled in 18 and 24
with more sideways begats than Holy Writ
in a hundred years of the two-backed beast,
until my father, slaughtering hogs one day,
quartered my nearest sister then drove his Ford
off the lip of Five-Mile Quarry just beyond this rise.
Let me show you how it's done

Parley's Story Features a Famous Sinner to the Which He's Previously Alluded

You say *Jake Griswold*?

When that old man died he'd made 13
children, living and dead

4 hale sons, all passed on

3 married daughters, one yet living

a lame boy and his sister the old maid

a deafmute in the County Home gone before the first
war

2 boys killed in a runaway team

a girlchild born dead—13

children living and dead.

You say *Jake Griswold*?

Listen he was a lucky old fart who chewed

till he died one morning with a plug
wedged in his lip, tobacco slobber on his chin
the old maid wiped clean with a cloth. My brother was
there.

Lucky 'cause he had two good eyes
and peed without pain ('cause he kept it in the family)
'cause he outlived four wives' misery
the last one from St. Louis

Doris I think her name

—the one who lost her mind after *Wes* and *Bertie*
were hammered in
with nails yanked from the hooves of the nags
she'd poisoned. They threw those boys in a storm.
Aught-six I think.

Well like I say I was just a kid
when *Ardale* my mother's second cousin
over home tied a loose knot
with *Jake's* lame boy and then the old maid
come by for a visit and didn't leave for a year.

Momma used to say *Ardale* never
was the same after that. Seems that old maid
Griswold took to chewing in private
buried a closet floor in filth before *Ardale*
asked her to move along. She took
the lame boy with.

Later on I married *Ardale's* daughter
but by then the old man had 15
years in the bad place and I only heard about him
of a Sunday afternoon. Now just his youngest
girl is left, *Aunt May Seafert* in the new Home.
Catch her on a good day, she'll scorch
your ears and make the old man's bones
flip in their box. You were saying?

Duane Taylor

TWO POEMS

Love Song

Imagine I rented
the Guarneri Quartet
to tell you how I feel.
Listen close, that's Haydn they're playing,
mellow, isn't it?
Now, I don't pretend I know
what those 4 guys are saying
in the music, or even
what they're thinking as they play.
But listen to that violin
on the far left, the short guy.
His face looks like cold pudding,
but doesn't he love to warble
way up above the others?
The higher he plays, the more
the other 3 guys smile, like
he's got them all thinking
they're in heaven.
My sweet lady, if I had that guy's fingers
I'd sit on your bed and play
and warble until you'd want
those heavenly fingers to play
for you all night.

The other violin,
he's a funny guy, keeps his head down
and smirks. Listen!
He kind of darts in there,
slipping in a little lightning,
see, there he goes again.

He really gives old Haydn
a bit of pizzaz.

Ah, my tamarind, you know
how to make me smirk,
you sizzle of lightning,
you pang of strong liquor,
let me play for you.

And hear that third guy,
bubbling like red wine out of a bottle?
I could drink that stuff all day.
His kind of song I'd play for you
till you're so drunk with the music
that you'd dance wild and slow
'cause I love to watch you move.

Then that fourth guy,
the cello, who can't move from the chair
with his big third leg,
he hums a song he learned from you,
when you're sleepy and we're lying
with nothing between us
but a squeak of sweat
and we're glad to be together
and then I hear the low sound
in your voice like wind,
like the sound of trees growing.
I'd have you sing that slow song
in a clear cello voice
with all my fiddles
jigging around our bed
for the rest of our days.

Northern Minnesota, Armistice Day, 1940

The day was fine and
shooting ducks was like picking strawberries.
And forty years later I still remember
the day the sky fell.

It was good the day was calm and warm
since the old blue tent leaked
and I forgot to bring a dry shirt
in case of rain.

At noon the ducks began rafting up
and by four the lake was black with them.
Jim Paley stood to startle them
but the ducks just quacked.

They didn't shy, came low over tree tops,
gun barrel height over the swamp and dropped
like leaves, like acorns in the water
among the decoys.

We shot ducks. The birds rose
and wheeled about us, whirligigging
like a hatch of mayflies, then settled
just out of range.

Dozens of hunters took thousands of ducks.
We whooped to each other across the bay,
while spent shot pittered musically on the water
like showers of rain.

A breeze was up. And it got cold.
I climbed into the '36 Olds to keep warm,
the back seat full of ducks and the air smelling
of wet feathers and blood.

Jim was still shooting, as the sky closed down like a lid.
I honked the horn, then wrapped in a blanket,
got out and took down the tent.
There was ice on the puddles.

I hollered across the bay to Jim, there was ice,
and Jim came round with a dozen ducks.
We loaded the boat and started driving
as the snow began to fall.

Within a mile an inch was down
and the ruts we followed were hidden.
We steered between the ghosts of trees
and hoped the road was there.

By the time we hit the main road,
there were two inches and the air was white.
No up or down even, right and wrong were gone and U.S.

2

not a road but just a place to drive.

We followed a semi forty miles, skirting
dark forms in the ditch and cars tangled on the road,
plowing snow with our bumper
as we wallowed down to Hibbing.

Armistice was over.
We were happy to be home,
but many who stayed to shoot ducks
froze in blinds and tents and died.

For the next week we snowshoed the shores,
poking long sticks into the snow.
I was there when we found one car
beneath a big drift.

We used our snowshoes as shovels;
we found a body bristling with frost
and a sick dog asleep in feathers.
I wasn't used to seeing the dead.

That winter lots of folks slept uneasy;
and though we had one more Armistice Day,
in a year we would be digging again
under a different sky.

David P. Brunet

THE POSSIBILITY OF TURNING TO SALT

It was impossible to sleep there
not a level spot in the whole hundred and fifty acres
except the kitchen table wobbling so violently
we were afraid it might bolt for the woods
which is what we did when we went there
isn't it? No electricity no gas no phone
no international papers for a while no world
and no news of its absence. By sunday morning
I was convinced some tick had burrowed
into my skull and was gorging itself. My whole brain
ached from the damage which of course was irreversible
and terminal. I was terrified
already though at what we'd said on saturday
that moss in those woods was thick as carpet
and that tanagers there were merely sparrows
who had flown through metallic paint
and now I'm afraid the next time the world ends
it will kill me remembering what the world was like
the sudden overdose of all that peace and quiet
the withdrawal headache the looking over my shoulder.

Timothy Russell

CEREMONY

The 'copter lays flat the rice stalks
as it first hovers and then rises over the water
with the pilot pulling back on the stick.
The abducted, a fulvous skinned farmer, watches
his hamlet shrink into a tear.

Another Vietnamese aboard, hands bound
behind his back, with the rope looped tight
around his neck, stares with suspicion.

Both wear black, worn shiny, silk pajamas.
The bound one has no shirt over his scarred,
emaciated chest, while the farmer wears a buttonless
US Army jungle shirt, with one sergeant stripe hanging
on the left sleeve. It is permanently sweat-stained.

The 'copter flies lazily 2,000 feet above the paddies.
Through an interpreter, the American Lt.
asks the farmer three quick questions.
He replies with the same quickness. He doesn't know.
He is only a farmer, a poor man with half a crop
and half a family. A poor farmer who knows nothing,
nothing. Two more questions are asked of him, knowing
he is only a farmer and cannot know. And nothing.
One more, with the threat of him being dropped
from the 'copter. Tears of fear and resignation fall.

Without ceremony, he is shoved over the side.
He seems to glide. His scream floats up to the ears
of the bound VC, whose muscles tighten against the ropes.
The water buffalo jumps at the splash, and the
sucking mud swallows the crumpled body, buries him
in the ground of his ancestors. The sun burns
in the sky - incensed.

Even before the questions are asked of the VC,
the Lt. knows he will talk. And the VC knows he
will not, because he knows the sun also burns for
him; his ancestors are also below. Already
the cricket's chirp fills his marrow.

Richard M. Mishler

TWO POEMS

Recompense

I have stolen snow
From the pockets
Of the alder thickets,

Beckoned the snowy owl
From barrens the ptarmigan
And spruce grouse

Plume—I have taken
The hillstream's
Clarity

Washed by lichen
And the mirrorment
Of leafage

And winter's ghosts of
Leafage told by the shadows of limbs
On frozen pools

And the lost shelves of meanders
As a semblance
Of my proceeding—

I have stolen snow
From the pockets
Of the alder thickets

Attention

Brought ahalt on the trail while ago
By an eye-level spider
I noticed it
Had a white tuft at the rearend
Of its bodybulb—

A glob of polymer, I knew, but still
A cottontailed spider!
Then as I moved
In detour, it sprinted away along
An invisible highwire,

Leaving its cottontail
Behind: you can't always tell
What something is
By looking at it
Twice.

Jerald Bullis

TWO POEMS

After An Ice Storm

The house is abandoned
in the grip of unkempt trees;
old shrubbery fallen to its knees
around the door. One white tongue
of curtain follows the wind out
a broken pane. The wind
remembers teardrop chandeliers
hung in the great hall.
The sun warms the trees.
They remember summer
with a thousand lights. The wind
brings a crystal music singing.
The sun sends these sounds
to silence in the snow.

Burning Brush In Winter

All that fire, all that heat
scorching eyebrows, searing cheeks.
You'd think ice and snow would
give way in sizzling retreat.
We should see brown litter reappear,
green bracken springs unfurl again
but the sharp edge of winter is
only driven back a foot or two.

The jaws of winter briefly relaxed
as when the joiner shifts his stock
to better clean a mortise or
the dog turns the bone for better grip.

All sun secured within the wood
bursts forth, flying upward, outward
into space. Years of summers gone
to glory in an afternoon.

Some last twigs curl as red hot wires
in a forge. Night comes early. Snow
becomes a mirror for the moon.
The fire's eye dreams of dying suns.

Robert M. Chute

BEYOND CONTENTION

For Susanna

Across the well-tuned strings
she draws her bow
building a perfect arch
to the farthest point of hearing.
Because the ascent is all that matters
she floats into the air,
soars upon her craft.
She unfurls rainbows of sound
the way a woman
standing in the wind
next to her own door
will shake and shake a rug
longer than it needs
for the pleasure of making undulations
follow each other into the wind.

Hadassah Stein

STEW

The man tells me
that I have more flavor now.
He takes the credit for it
without saying so.
I feel myself
turning into a meal
right before his eyes
and he stands over me
and pours the spices in,
tasting and adjusting
until I am just right.
Without saying so,
he tells me I was water
before he came along.
Now I am a stew
or a deep mulled wine.

I haven't told him
that there were others,
each contributing
his own blend of spices.
I have secrets from him.
When something unfamiliar emerges
he marvels at his own skill.
I haven't told him
that I've been cooking myself
and adding things to the pot
which he can't comprehend.
We will be long parted
before I will say
I am ready for the table.

Marina Hotchkiss

PREGNANT

At last you can see it
the infant possibilities—

an egg moves through an hourglass,
a budding navel stares at the sky,
at the doctor, who listens to it like a conch.

There's an instinct to lie waiting in fields,
a musk melon, steeped in astronomy.

Walking, that bargain with gravity, is adjusted.

Would she float on water?

Pretty—
then the stomach rotates its milk
over the rim of a full pail,
leg bones turn to soap,
her back and neck snap like a safety pin.
The inevitable holiday approaches.

What lake is prepared for the pull of the moon?

What woman?

Neurine Wiggin