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**BAKING BREAD DURING A DROUGHT**

This morning it was the quail flushing  
near the almost dry pond that made me think  
of small loaves of brown bread.

Now it is dark.

The countryside rises on moonlight.  
I listen near the porch to windbells,  
my neighbor's cows over the night's crust.

And measure flour  
as I think of quail in their dusty circle  
in the grass of the high field,  
break open packages of yeast,  
follow white silence between mix bowl  
and table, wait for my life to double,  
for my well to rise, the oven to pre-heat,  
earth to grow soft with woodrot,  
for crow blood to drizzle down.

Near midnight  
when the news is dry as ever,  
I go round with neither pity nor impatience  
but with bread dance, rain dance,  
dance of wife and child, all the moves  
I try to remember in a season  
shrinking beneath me inch by inch.

**Harry Humes**

**FOUR POEMS****Survivor**

Someone lives in my house

At night he opens the refrigerator  
inhaling the summer's coriander

On Radio Kashmir he hears announced  
all search has been abandoned  
for last year's climbers  
on Nanga Parbat

My house breaks  
with the sympathy of neighbours

This is his moment

In my room  
he sits at the table  
practices my signature answers my mail

He wears the cardigan  
my mother knit for my return

The mirror gives up  
my face to him

He calls to my mother in my voice

She turns

He is breathless to tell her tales  
in which I was never found

**Glass Bangles**

Those autumns my parents slept  
warm in a quilt studded  
with pieces of mirrors

On my mother's arms were bangles  
like waves of frozen rivers  
and at night

after the prayers  
as she went down to her room  
I heard the faint sound of ice

breaking on the staircase  
breaking years later  
into winter

our house surrounded by men  
pulling icicles for torches  
off the roofs

rubbing them on the walls  
till the cement's darkening red  
set the tips of water on fire

the air a quicksand of snow  
as my father stepped out  
and my mother

inside the burning house  
a widow smashing the rivers  
on her arms

**In the Mountains**

Somewhere  
without me  
my life begins

He who lives it  
counts on a cold rosary  
God's ninety-nine Names in Arabic

The unknown hundreth he finds in glaciers  
then descends into wet saffron fields  
where I wait to hold him

but wrapped in ice  
he bypasses me  
in his phantom-cart

He lets go of the hundreth Name  
which rises in calligraphy from his palm  
Fog washes the sudden skeletons of maples

Farther into the year by a broken fireplace  
I clutch the shiver of a last flame  
and forget every Name of God

And there in the mountains  
the Koran frozen to his fingertips  
he waits

farther much farther  
into the year  
he waits for news of my death

### **Prayer Rug**

Those intervals  
between the day's  
five calls to prayer

the women of the house  
pulling thick threads  
through vegetables

rosaries of ginger  
of rustling peppers  
in autumn drying for winter

in those intervals this rug  
part of Grandma's dowry  
folded

so the Devil's shadow  
would not desecrate  
Mecca scarlet-woven  
  
with minarets of gold  
but then the sunset  
call to prayer  
  
the servants  
their straw mats unrolled  
praying or in the garden  
  
in summer on grass  
the children wanting  
the prayers to end  
  
the women's foreheads  
touching Abraham's  
silk stone of sacrifice  
  
black stone descended  
from Heaven  
the pilgrims in white circling it  
  
this year my grandmother  
also a pilgrim  
in Mecca she weeps  
  
as the stone is unveiled  
she weeps holding on  
to the pillars

**Agha Shahid Ali**

## NEAR WINTER

*"In the horse breath weather I remember . . ."*

Carolyn Forche

This belongs to you alone.  
It looks after my life and yours without  
Asking questions. It holds me in my own  
Eye country near winter, going about  
With secrets you do not, could not, know.  
Clabbered with floes, the millpond will jilt  
And break the sky it holds. I know. I go  
To lead the young horse out, her body built  
Of chill brown rain. A passing train  
Veils her neck arc with thunder, raising  
Sorrel hair from skin of grass and grain.  
Our mouths, from which air leaves praising,  
Open. There is white breath between us,  
Between you and me, what we cannot discuss.

Nosing sisal ropes, the bay gelding waits  
To be shod with the smith's winter cleats.  
Already a late November wind opens gates  
And scuds barn floors. The horse meets  
His farrier with keen ears. The lean man's  
Wool shirt is woven with blue wood smoke.  
A leather apron shines at his knees. Hands  
Hold shoe and hammer steady until one stroke  
Strikes nerve. Rearing, the horse scrapes  
His high head, leaving blazed face hide on  
A loft joist. Swaying on his legs, he gapes  
Through blood, looking at me around his wound.  
It's hard to feed such a face, more difficult  
To bridle one without nail-sharp guilt.

Over the forge's fire, I melt  
From white to clear the pan of pork fat  
I rendered from side bark, gut, suet  
And skin. I smear the grease on the flat  
Raw face of the gelding. Blood still drains  
From the blue horn of his quicked hoof.  
I unsnap him from the tiepost, lead his stains  
Across the planking and outside to the roof  
Cast shade on the barn's north side. There  
A drift of snow stays hidden safe from sun.  
The hurt horse and I wade in to let his sore  
Hoof numb. Fretting the fence, the stallion  
Runs from the gippy track, fearing the scent,  
Blowing and fluting his nose in judgment.

The exploded marrow of chicken bone  
is the pupil of the gelding's eye opening  
To me. He's listless from standing, blown  
Into walking on, his face salve glistening  
Like ice. When he offers, I let him wander.  
Instead of riding, I spare his deadened foot  
And walk beside him. He leads to a river  
Banked with the snarled pitch of cedar root  
Craning out of the ground for a better view.  
Now he listens for the mare to lope the lane  
Toward us. Only the wind rouses to pursue  
Us across the tomb of ground. The horse's mane  
Stings into my face when he pauses, stands  
And turns his head, breathing into my hands.

It begins to snow flakes heavy with waiting.  
If we were in a fast car heading for home up  
The road, they'd seem to be driven into mating  
With the windshield. But we walk and they drop.  
Snow won't reflect us like the river does.  
Bend and see: it shows us instead the ancient  
Plot of grey that relieves us of ourselves.



But snow can shine where our image isn't.  
The horse wonders what I've stopped for.  
He turns to me and I to him:  
The salve of his face is a mirror  
Returning me to him as victim.  
It is not what I should speak of.  
I reach and push him away with my glove.

The flushed edge of horizon is the color  
Of memory. Over a year ago the vet knifed  
The horse's hide open, tugged at the gore  
Of glands and sinews, freed parts to lift  
From the scrotal pocket. The cords were thick  
As writing sticks. A winching, gritty sound  
Cut them through. I buried the lymph slick  
Parts with lime in the pounded paddock ground  
The gelding and I now cross toward the barn.  
We pass the light pole marking the place.  
Its beams poke my bedroom window to darn  
My blanket by night and whiten my face.  
In this horse breath weather I remember  
The warm hurt scent, the slit skin color.

Night falls in the open afternoon  
And I drag to the house through rising snow  
That pushes dark back up to encircle its moon.  
The nave of light and dark. The land's glow  
Blurs my eyes with cold and tears and dream.  
I see a sequence of women in the cured tamarack  
Of dock moorings. The sluggish grey stream  
Is dishwater waiting to be drained. Gazing back.  
The women stand in to their waists. Headbare.  
I enter my bright kitchen of the kill  
Where parings of potato scent the air  
With dirt. I peel lemon, trim chilled blue gill  
And count: two more fish heads, like gargoyles  
Glaring, will be nailed to the boathouse walls.

In sleep I see a horse with full nostrils  
larger than my head. He's breathing the lake,  
Snorting my hair into stalks, stems and tendrils  
Of woodbine and ivy fresh red with dusk. Awake,  
The lake rises from its bed, standing up sheer  
As a museum of water moving with light. You walk  
Into it deep, past breathing, leaving me here.  
Then the lake lowers, freezes, holds its ice back  
From the river's clear mouth the way a yellow flame  
Doesn't touch upon its wick. The candle burns  
In a kitchen window across the lake and lame  
Horses approach, scraping ice in root patterns.  
I awake and feel the press of a damp mattress  
Breathing, breathing up against my breasts.

R. Porritt

### THE WEDDINGS OF THE MOTHERS ARE VISITED UPON THE DAUGHTERS

The veil looks like dried soapsuds or a broken  
lacework the sea leaves on sand. What  
do I do with a mutilated  
symbol: burn it, bury it, read it  
like entrails? Do I keep it  
for some heraldic sake or other,  
some hidden half-belief  
that dissolution may be mended back into use  
or that its use as symbol lies chiefly  
in its mutilation? Do I carry it out  
mixed with breakfast peels and shells

or show it to you  
 bridegroom  
 thirty years after, although  
 it won't wash.

Not the way my mother's did. Now there  
 was a piece of tulle, good strong cotton,  
 pulled from the scrap drawer and laundered  
 the morning of the wedding. Grandpa  
 used her marriage money  
 to pay a debt.

At my wedding everything  
 had to be perfect. *Weddings*,  
 you and I shrugged, *are for the parents*.

The lace gown.  
 The gossamer veil.  
 Match books with our silver names.  
 For Mother.

For me:

Humiliation. When Mother told me  
 Tessie couldn't stand up for me  
 I said it was because she was black.  
 She said that had nothing to do with it.  
 I said you and I would go in jeans  
 to the justice of the peace.

For me:

Recriminations, threats.  
 Each time they passed the cat's-cradle  
 from one pair of hands to the other,  
 the strings tightened. I was caught  
 in someone else's net. When I looked  
 in the mirror, I saw only the wall, the room.

Finally

compliance burned my lips. Shame rang me  
 like the tongue of a bell. I have never  
 been able to spit away the bitter taste.

Now our daughter tries it on at the mirror  
the lace gown  
and I see how you watch time  
unroll in two directions. Her dark hair  
waves down her shoulders  
the way mine used to. She even wants  
to wear the dusty veil.

*Whatever you like, we say.*

*Weddings are for the bride and groom.*

A redwood grove. A recorder trio.  
Their best friends  
standing beside them.

As I submerge  
the cloud of tulle  
the water in the basin  
fogs. I swish it gently  
in the suds, feel  
its crispness go soft.  
When I squeeze the water out  
it suddenly feels  
like a wad of nothing in my hand  
nothing but a matted white plug  
the shape of the inside of my fist.  
I can't shake it out  
to hang dry. Gently  
I try to pull open the netting  
but the holes are huge  
I cannot make a veil of it  
it's no longer tulle  
it has melted  
into a ruined bird's nest  
fine bleached bones of sea birds  
torn debris left from a ceremony  
the wet white strands  
of an old woman's hair.

Hadassah Stein

## THE LEAN SPIRITS

*"The hungry ghosts on the left, the lean spirits on the  
right cried aloud . . ."*

—Li Ho

## The House

He wishes he could wipe it all out.  
Alone, he can still hear the hooting  
from that village of foolish owls,  
wide-eyed pretenders to wisdom, praisers  
of their own little tree-holes,  
who searched out smaller prey.

Such dainty blinders, so little horse-life  
in that house of doubtful pilgrims,  
their suitcases heavy with long-cherished griefs,  
their bags always packed, never departing.

He still hears the choiring of those humbled angels  
who blessed each other with fearful mercies  
of wish and wishful forgetfulness,  
who shielded their eyes from brighter worlds  
where galaxies explode, and planets of the heart  
go plunging through phosphorous skies!

They were cautious. They dealt in sawdust love,  
and splinters of certain but miserly care.  
At night, the creature in the furnace banged  
the walls of its cage to get out,  
groaning to consume them with its smoldering claws!

Encircled by dangers, they locked all their doors.  
Moonlight glowed in their rooms like a gas,  
and yahrzeit candles danced with grief  
for the dead, whose way their wicks lighted home.

They spun out invisible webs of feeling  
to hold each other fast,  
in that house of stunted fingers,  
where each dragged behind him his shadow of lies,  
his dreary ball-and-chain.

### The Father

On weekend afternoons, a punctual darkness  
sealed the house like a pharaoh's tomb.  
The hallways were hushed, the carpet like moss  
in the daytime gloom.  
"Be quiet, your father is sleeping."

What frightening wars were these, the boy wondered,  
that drove his father to his ritual bed,  
what kind of world could it be,  
that had to be walled out  
and stilled with such care?

His father introduced him to the weird, gigantic  
country of coal-stained men in goggles,  
grimly silent, grasping acetylene  
torches; of monstrous buckets tipping to pour  
their molten torrents of steel.  
He taught his boy, unwittingly, how he tottered across  
catwalks that swayed above vats of shame  
and acid pits of failure.

The boy watched his father labor,  
till the bulk of that man's grand designs  
shoved off, like an ore boat,  
for desolate coasts,  
and the last of his gains were scavenged by others  
from cooling heaps of slag.

But the father was certain  
that was merely the surface!  
Beneath it, he was still the Czar of Finance,  
lacking only the power and money conferred  
on foolish usurpers!

So why shouldn't that boy  
be the vassal to his schemes?  
His son would be his tool, would bend to his wishes  
as nothing in his life had bent before.

*He showed his son how to wear  
the grandiose masks of the dead,  
how to stare out through avid eyes, possessed.*

But the boy grew to hate  
those sawdust days, down on his knees,  
gripping boards for his father to saw, his knuckles  
white, and that man's face grown red, and strange.  
Blunt saw-teeth hacked and whined between them  
until the plank split  
irreconcilably, and the boy went a.w.o.l., unforgiven,  
from all his father's wooden wars.

Nothing was ever understood between them.  
For the boy, his father was a tattered screen  
the fingers of night stole through,  
a lesson in sadness, a lesson in the way  
a man can mistake cold stones for grapes,  
and spend his whole life  
fruitlessly squeezing.

### **The Mother**

Those grandfathers both were sailors, faithless.  
The father's father was a buccaneer  
who cruised the green seas of commerce, trading  
salvoes with his harridan wife,  
the wiliest pirate on the waters!  
And the mother's father, after leaving her the print  
of his drunken cat-o'-nine-tails,  
abandoned ship, rowed off to the slums,  
where he counted on sharp reefs of danger and squalor  
to stave off her pitiful landing-parties.

And that was her sorry, first romance.  
He snapped and clacked till sickness and age  
flipped him onto his back like a beetle.

Afterwards, she courted once again, and lost  
a bombardier brother to the North Atlantic.  
Water stole far too much from her.  
So she chose a husband of a heavier element,  
and gripped him like barnacles  
the sea couldn't budge.

When a son was born, she anchored his heart  
to her swaying, land-locked  
skirts, she filled  
his harbor with the generous milk of weakness.

She read to her children:  
stories of brothers turned into birds, shy  
boys who murder bumbling giants,  
and a tale of the would-be Empress surrounded  
by the siege of dust on dressertops,  
the washer clanking like the weapons of a Hun.

*She taught her son to love  
and obey the dead,  
to settle for only their rigid perfections.*

So often the father repeated, "Your mother  
is perfect." And indeed, she knew perfectly well  
how to show a weakened man,  
as he leaned on her shoulder, just where  
and how shakily he stood.

Yet if they accused her of blame or design  
she escaped like a sorceress, an octopus vanishing  
in a cloud of panicked, inky tears.

She didn't learn, she tried to train them  
to love her, understand her  
while wearing her bridle. The boy's anger  
smothered, a cat in a sack with nothing to do  
but flail at itself with furious claws.



Now she doesn't understand why she's so much alone.  
And her sadness is only too real —  
as if she were a young girl  
uninvited to a party,  
an orphaned mage trying to replace with spells  
her dear and abandoning, hurtful dead.

### The Son

Their evenings were lit by lavender lamps, with bowls  
of apples and wrinkled pears  
and night-long clicking of mahjonn g tiles,  
while he dreamed of other worlds in his room.

*Little skulker, little weakling, little ugly  
monster!* He wanted to change, to fly, he wanted  
to find the secret doors.

His feelings whipped about, exposed to the winds  
like bright shirts left pinned  
to a clothesline overnight.

He envied the rage of electrical storms,  
the elm-tops seething, red maples squatting  
low to the wind-swept grass!  
He wanted powers and secret revenge.  
But he was the one who was stalked.

*No matter how many times or whichever  
way a man turns, it is always behind him.*  
Dark things trailed him, even in daylight.  
Then one day, in the basement, he discovered a ring  
with a stone of aquamarine,  
and he read that the wearer  
can speak with devils.

In terror and night-sweat he saw himself crowned  
the Prince of Fire — conspiring  
with demons, stoking his powers

of flames that look small and insubstantial,  
sweetly-colored, but have  
the power to illumine and destroy,  
the powers of contagion and pain and brightness.

*He bargained for the double-edged  
knives of the dead,  
the weapons that comfort and cut the fearful.*

But you pay for those dealings,  
even though nobody else is deceived.  
Watching from outside the others' games,  
he felt long horns of arrogance  
push from his scalp, rough scales of disgust  
sprout from his skin.

In his exile, only oaks and elms brought him comfort,  
who held the bleak night so calmly  
in their branches, who let the evening breeze caress  
their gouged and alien limbs.

His father and mother appeared not to notice.  
They wanted to keep what little they felt  
they had to themselves;  
they didn't want to see, to be parted  
from their autumn pillows, their wintry sheets.

But something had to find him worth taking, enfold him,  
even if only as prey. Time after time,  
the angels turned their backs.  
Even in the Bible, though, he found those others:  
*the terror by night, the arrow  
the flieth by day,  
the pestilence that walketh in darkness,  
destruction that wasteth at noon.*

The loved ones look through you,  
at fabulous things they imagine they want.  
They teach you to keep

your secrets to yourself.  
But the strange ones, the demons, are watchful,  
devoted. They gave him companions and fiery costumes,  
they taught him, and saved him  
from wandering naked, unnoticed, alone, through the dark.

### The Border

They huddled indoors, cramped and embittered.  
But outside, they feared, lay worse: winds  
with rotting teeth, night with its terrifying kisses,  
ravenous machines pushed close to the body,  
and blocks of deserted houses  
lashed by the rain's cold, dissolving whips.

They didn't want to hear their plans  
snap like dried-out stalks,  
to see themselves squatting like locusts, devouring  
the crops of their own, blighted fields.  
So they conjured rooms of enchantment, in which  
the bland were made beautiful, the crooked straight,  
the beaten revealed as glorious martyrs  
stunned on the altars of the world's imperfection.  
They tried to carve each other to fit  
the holes in their painful jigsaw puzzles . . .

But now, in this pallid circus,  
the elderly ringmaster looks pathetic,  
having lost his black top hat.  
The elephants seem bewildered, no longer  
knowing when to stand or kneel.  
The circus is pulling up stakes.

And the boy, grown older, gradually learns  
that the gifts of weakness, gifts of the dead,  
will hold no one's love for long;

that they should have seen their invented, lordly  
cloaks for what they were:  
shawls worn by refugees in steerage, soaked  
with a salt spray of tears and harsh brine.

Though his keel still drags in the sandbar of debt  
and lean spirits gnaw at his days,  
he's wending his way through the deltas  
of blame, laboring to make  
his peace with sunlight.

*In a dream of the border, they bar his way:  
"You must show us your credentials."  
So he proffers his lame leg, his fourteen  
crumbling teeth. But they say,  
"We're sorry, that isn't enough.  
You'll have to leave our country."  
Resigned to it, tired of his sorrows,  
tired of the old maps, he spreads  
his grey and heavy wings, unfolding  
a letter kept sealed for years.  
And lifting from the ground at last, he sees  
how yellowed are the little photograph faces,  
how softened and far those people who,  
it may be, can't cross over; who now will be left  
behind on the ground, counting  
their hoards of discolored tickets,  
where soon the terrible floods will begin.*

Lawrence Russ

**BLUEFISH**

I can't remember exactly when the hunger began.  
It started slowly, a vague hankering down near the ventral:  
"Wouldn't mind a little munch of something, a shrimp or  
two,  
That killy over there looks interesting."  
But nothing seemed to do the trick.  
I kept on munching:  
A flounder here, a porgy there, a few kelp salads.  
It kept on hankering.  
I began to notice I wasn't doing anything with my life but  
eating.  
And then all of a sudden—  
**KE-RIST!** It was empty down there!  
I shifted into high, opened by mouth,  
And careened into a school of mossbunkers.  
Left and right, I dived and rose, I slashed and tore,  
The head of one, the tail of another,  
No time to pick and choose, no time to finish.  
Something kept screaming in my head:  
"Fill it up! Fill it up!"

And it keeps on screaming.  
Anything in the way—boat hulls, bathyspheres—  
It's chop-em-to-bits-and-down-the-hatch.  
Sometimes we drive the baitfish onto the beach;  
Sometimes we go after them,  
Ripping at swimmers' legs,  
Hurling ourselves onto the sand.

But the funny thing is,  
Filling up is not the point.  
As soon as we're full, we vomit it up and start all over.  
It began to get to me.  
There was something down there that was turning every-  
thing into nothing.

The whole thing was a farce.  
One day I turned to my mistress and said,  
"Why do we do this? What's the point?  
We're just machines."  
But she was halfway down my throat before she could  
answer.

Even after that, there was no stopping me.  
Onward I slashed through the teeming water.

I'm older now,  
And I have left the school to hunt by myself.  
But still I go on,  
Blackness in the pit of my heart, cursing nature,  
As the endless ocean pours food toward me.  
But sometimes, even so, that nature gets the better of me.  
Sometimes, the wind torments the rip tide,  
The baitfish stampede to the surface  
While just above them the gulls scream in the whitecaps,  
And I, loving the wild white water, surge  
Joyous into the mackerel.

Thomas Frosch

**CORNSTALK WIGWAM****1.**

We cut the dead cornstalks—  
light yellow, almost white,  
the clay between them purple—  
while the chill air frosted our breath  
in the smoky Sunday dusk.

You asked if I wanted a wigwam  
made out of the tallest stalks  
and tied three or four around the throat.  
We piled others against them  
with their smell of old corn gone to sleep,

then lit a fire of the rest,  
a bonfire whose shadows climbed  
up the tall cone of survivors  
leaning together to house  
a small boy. Sitting at their center

I watched light flow between  
those sober, leaning ghosts,

those old chiefs who gave up their gold  
bracelets in the green heat of August,  
whose feathers were now only tatters

bleeding to the sky, to an air  
sweet with smoke and a cold longing—  
watched all diminish and go upward  
to the storehouse of the spirit,  
to the sun's granary where,

fat and red on the edge of the world,  
it fed on what the fires gave up.

2.

Coming from school the next afternoon—  
the stalks warm and sleepy with light,  
ticking and scraping—I sat again  
circled by the good, rich smell.  
The sun glowed through leaves

thin like veined paper,  
shaking like my grandfather's hands  
doing something difficult.

In my brightly-dyed goose feathers,  
red and blue, with yellow bow

and snub-nosed, cracked arrow,  
I burned in the center of that wigwam,  
blazing with colors that would run  
in the next rain or wash, feeling  
a coolness climb from the clay

under the warm hand of the sun.

I saw the stalks simmer yellow,  
glow almost pumpkin orange  
as the sun fed, fatter and thicker,  
a circle I could now look upon,



coppery on the horizon.  
I lit a new circle of flame,  
staring at it through the edges of my hands  
as its shadows licked my fingers.  
Feeling the flames move upward  
and the earth lie bare and clean,  
I pushed in bits of stalk  
which blazed, blackened, and crumbled  
to ash, white on the ground.  
My clothes grew bitter with the smell  
of burning. It hung in my hair,  
a darkness that I breathed in my pillow  
all night long as I dreamt of figures,  
dark, shaggy, swathed in mist,  
shuffling slowly about those flames.

**3.**

I carried the dream to school where sun  
lay restless on the backs of desks,  
spilling through the windows,  
spread in an October lake across the playground,  
the trees in flames above it.

I saw in the grain of the desk  
those polished faces peer out  
toward the sun and long to be free  
while the girl at the board made ghosts,  
clapping the erasers together.

The chalk on the board shrieked,  
broke and fell to the ledge.  
I scraped my feet in the yellow  
pool of sunlight on the floor.  
The faces dulled and grew brighter

flying out to each gold tree,  
 making its shape stand out sharper,  
 shedding a fierce light upon  
 those creaking chairs full of classmates  
 reeking of sun and chalkdust,

of new shoes and orange bittersweet  
 berries on the teacher's desk  
 like tiny shrunken pumpkins.  
 Her voice above us spoke of fractions,  
 waving like the flag

rolling an elegant S  
 on the pole outside. Now the trees—  
 sticks of fire, bronze arms—waved *Come  
 out, paint yourself with the sky,  
 gold leaves, bitter ash of earth*

*in war-play that will go on  
 into the cool, damp shadow  
 until supper shines a yellow light  
 over the faces of the family,  
 until the radio talks*

*you to sleep, and the smell of tobacco  
 circles from your father's chair,  
 declaring this lodge is safe,  
 and the dog sighs heavy at your feet  
 as the furnace whines and clucks off,  
 and you and the mattress are falling  
 into fire at the heart of the leaves.*

## 4.

I sat there in the garden  
 feeling the ground give up  
 the ghosts of radishes, carrots,  
 small green clouds of lettuce,  
 gleaming, savory onions—

all gone now, the dust warm  
and cracked, the path losing its edges.  
Only my tiny tree farm  
of maple, elm, and box elder  
standing six inches high,

keeping its wilderness going  
and the high, wingéd house of corn  
pointing into the blue  
above that wreck of a garden.  
I, the chief there,

watching the garden edge  
where it wavered against the grasses,  
themselves brittle in the sun,  
satisfied, snuffing the smoke  
from my cornleaf fire. Bright

with my dangling dimestore feathers,  
my strung ceremonial bow,  
and its single bluntnosed arrow,  
I scratched at the earth with a twig,  
making a little riverbed

in the dust for the rain to fill  
when it came in gusts in November  
and dissolved the path and rows  
to run yellow to the street  
bearing twigs, paper, and cornleaves—

before that cold day when my father  
and I watched the decrepit wigwam  
climb up itself in flames,  
its black bones crumble to the ground,  
sparks rise and disappear,

before the Hunter with his star-studded hatchet  
took a first step over the world  
while, dark and cool below him,  
the embers by now having gone,  
we stood watching his bright stride.

THE EYE OF THE POTATO

is wise  
only opens when  
you're not watching

that noise that wakes you  
in the middle of the night  
could be one potato  
eyeing another

no wonder a potato  
can make other vegetables  
so nervous

did you ever notice  
how your canned goods  
rearrange themselves  
if you add just one  
fresh bag of Idahos

awareness is a subtle thing  
it opens and closes quiet  
as the eye of a potato

you used to say  
all manner of things  
to an empty house  
cussed at that clumsy chair  
that stubbed your toe

you never thought of  
all those eyes  
looking out from the kitchen drain  
the supermarket shelf  
your garden  
watching

Therese Becker

### THE WATER NYMPH SOLILOQUY

"See that scum floating by," you say,  
 "excrement from God knows where,"  
 as you tread gingerly  
 back to shore.

I lie spread  
 eagle on water, bathing suit flung  
 across your chair, sputtering.  
 "That's not scum you see,  
 just decayed algae;  
 it's food for fish and good  
 for opening shuttered pores."

But you have already opened  
*Ulysses* in your lap, your feet  
 tucked back into tennis shoes.

When I swim up again you say,  
 "The rocks are sharper this year,"  
 turning your page in finality.

I dive down to give a passing  
 catfish a brief retort,  
 "Rocks are my old friends,  
 their contour fit snugly around  
 my bare toes, under heel and arch."

"Come on in," I sing imagining love  
 among the swimming plants, water  
 prying my thighs apart, hands  
 buoying me up so high I am  
 caught by waves that pull  
 the two of us down river  
 into that good ocean from which  
 no return is required.

You answer by burrowing deeper  
 into your text, pretending  
 my voice can't carry that far

over water.

    Holding

my breath I go down to live, binding  
my legs in weeds, my voice scaled  
down to a lower pitch

until you shuck your trunks,  
tear those tennies off,  
until that old song  
rises to your lips, your eyes  
lighting on where I disappeared,  
your arms raised to take  
that first watery plunge again.

Mary Tisera

## TWO POEMS

### Late Revelation on the Coast Road

*. . . not some kind of excitement, but  
concentration on our everyday routine.*

—Suzuki-roshi

Off to the right, a hawk we hadn't seen:  
no spiraling dot, distant and featureless—  
this one soared shoulder-high,  
scanned the field in low arcs beside us.

*But their car hadn't caught up yet  
along the twisted coast road too slow  
with trucks grinding, too fast with angry kids  
out of school. A bad road; where were they?*

Its rocking flight a pendulum, a heartbeat;  
 the markings strong—white rump, russet below;  
 dark head, too small for those great wings.  
 Not a Redtail: too long, and flying too low.

*But we tried to recall how we'd seen them last—  
 she'd been curled in the seat holding her feet,  
 he'd adjusted his mirror, waited for us to lead;  
 but what was in their eyes? We couldn't say now.*

It settled on a coyote bush across the ditch,  
 folded its wings; a late nettle bloomed under it,  
 one pink blossom exploded at the dry plant's tip.  
 Harrier, we said; we were careful about this.

*But had we listened to our own goodbyes  
 shutting their door—see you soon, we said, as if  
 'seeing' were easy and 'soon' were anytime.  
 Now we noticed everything; it made us hushed—and  
 afraid.*

No prey, no mice creeping under the hot wind.  
 Nothing but tindergrass and scraping tarweed;  
 quiet except for that and the surf-groan below.  
 Then a far whine, red lights throbbing up the coast road.

### Learning to Float Again

*(for my mother)*

It's like loving my own child—sun-browned  
 and still unable to lie back in the pool.  
 For weeks now he's dipped a forelock,  
 letting it drip into his upturned face  
 with a tentative smile at the discomfort,  
 knowing he hasn't tasted the terror  
 of lying sprawled open to the whole sky.

He hopes that will placate his teacher,  
parent, and mostly himself—  
and knowing it won't, turns away  
to grind both fists into his eyes  
while I watch from the hot cement.

Who finally unfurls the great brown towel  
and folds him in when he staggers up the steps  
glaze-eyed and chattering his whole length?  
Who gathers him up and rubs his back hard,  
nuzzles the forelock smelling of chlorine?

I have him close, and in sunlight,  
dazzling against the white wall,  
we're warmed together in that moment  
after the shivering stops  
and before the need for words.

You'd notice him alone, but if you watched  
the failing and failing and didn't call advice  
you'd see two lives floundering waist deep  
in the false-green—trying less to swim  
than to believe in themselves, in water—  
like trust—so insubstantial  
they have to learn again by will.

Charles Atkinson

### DESERT STARGAZE

Whenever I have too much to drink  
I tell the same story.  
Can you guess which one?  
Have I already told you  
or have you heard it before?  
Perhaps the same thing has happened to you.



We are at the table after dinner.  
Silence outweighs talk  
but we stay, drink more wine,  
smoke more cigarettes . . .

We are waiting  
for something  
but we don't know what it is.  
I begin by saying:

I was in Arizona with Ann,  
working on the reservation.  
We decided to hitchhike to Tucson  
even though we had a car.  
Well, you know what southern Arizona's like.  
Right?

But we didn't.

We were going for the fun of it.

So we drove off  
the reservation to Globe.

Pulled into a gas station parking the car  
under a light.

It was Ann's idea. It seemed  
pretty smart to me although looking back  
I can see other good ideas we didn't think of.  
We could have stayed home!  
(I pretend I wish this had never happened.)

We began our long trip south,  
riding through Oak Creek Canyon  
stretched in the back of a pickup.  
We were happy. Oak Creek Canyon  
was a rusty red carpet unrolling  
at our feet and we didn't even have to walk  
to get across it.

At Snow Flake darkness  
took us by surprise. The darkness  
came too quickly and it worried me—  
we were so unprepared. If we hadn't  
expected this, what else could be coming?  
Darkness is, after all, predictable.

Our next ride pulled over. In the front  
sat an old man. He was driving  
his granddaughter home.  
When he had to turn off he turned to us  
asking if we would pray with him.  
His concern worried me. It worried Ann  
some too. It seemed, she said, so much  
like an omen.  
He left us at the juncture.  
At the beginning of the desert.  
At the top of the road that goes straight  
down to Tucson past the Arizona State Penitentiary.  
That too seemed like an omen.  
Then he flagged down a pickup for us.  
Does that seem strange to you?  
Has anyone ever done that for you?  
Gotten out of their car  
to get you your next ride?  
It may look like kindness but think  
of it as interference.  
We were at a crossroad.  
To this day we do not know the true value  
of his gesture.  
By now it was darker and getting cold.  
We threw our stuff in the back  
climbing in up front. Ann first.  
We were going on  
our impressions—  
white pickup, rifle across the back,  
huge driver in white overalls (spotless), six-pack  
on the floor unopened. No signs of danger.  
But our sense of the driver was confused  
by the old man's concern.  
It threw us off.  
We were thinking of him  
when we climbed in.

I leaned out the window  
into darkness toward lights

clustered in the distance.  
I was filled with longing  
but the lights held themselves in,  
were not robbed by the air of clarity  
or brilliance.  
I thought I could touch them.  
I thought I could touch the stars  
that night too if I had wanted.  
It seemed that way. It seemed to be  
up to me. I wanted to be rolling  
through outer space, holding the stars  
in one hand and the lights in another.  
I wanted this to be possible.  
But Ann was moving next to me.  
Something was wrong.  
Movement drew down my eyes  
to his hand rubbing the inside of her thigh  
as if it had been there for awhile.  
And she was being polite. Trying to say  
no thank you  
and move away. I said: "Get your hand off her!"  
He turned his head slowly like a reptile  
sensing heat and wanting to be sure of where  
to find it before he moved.  
He asked if I'd like to get out.  
"Pull over and let us out."  
He pulled over and let me get out.  
I'm sure Ann thought she'd be getting  
out too. I know I did.  
When my feet touched ground  
he pulled away  
I ran grabbing the back of the pickup I was hanging  
on the tail outside with my arms while we  
tore down that desert road she jumped out  
rolled through prickle/dust I pushed off  
stumbled to a halt.  
Then it got quiet.  
Brushing off, walking to meet, we realized

it wasn't over. He had stopped.  
He had gotten out.

Do you remember what it's like out there?  
Nothing for miles  
to the eye of a visitor except cactus  
and we were visiting—  
had no idea where to get help,  
which cactus yields water,  
how to squeeze shade out of a stone,  
which way to run. The stars looked  
like they might be able to help.  
They looked close enough to touch,  
but just you try it.

He was standing where he could see us  
and see his truck.

He was waiting.

We tried to figure out  
what was coming  
when he asked if we'd gotten our stuff.  
Just like that: "Did-ja get chur stuff?"  
No. "We left in too much of a hurry."  
"Well come on and get it."

Sure, I thought. Sure!

Ann touched my arm.

I knew what she was going to say  
would be true.

She told me it would be all right.

I wonder how  
she knew. Was it his hand?

Had his touch been gentle,  
tentative,  
questioning?

I asked him why he had done that,  
thinking words would help  
make sense of it  
but he never answered.

It may be he uses his hands to talk.

It may be he uses a sign language  
Ann learned. Would I  
know it now too if I had gotten  
in first?

In an hour we had our next ride.  
Another pickup—red this time.  
He told us we were lucky.  
“They never find bodies out here,”  
he said, “just bones and bits  
of cloth impossible  
to trace or even date.”  
I leaned out the window searching  
the side of the road  
for signs of human passage.

Sheila Dietz

## TWO POEMS

### Clara and the Law

When you were eight, in Hawthorne,  
in the spring, when the mayhaws whitened  
everywhere, you the doctor's lone child,  
standing in your own white  
before the ash mantle the day  
the doctor came home  
without the sister he delivered  
to someone else, oh you were incensed  
and you raged at him, small dark sky  
with your thundery eyes all against him:  
*Why was she not for me?*  
And he explained.

When I find a baby you see,  
it is inside a hollow log.  
And it is small and crying terribly  
in someone's woods. And it belongs,  
dear Clara, to the land. It wants  
its mother, the one whose steps  
shook it awake where it lay,  
pale spore inside a fallen tree.  
Only the woman will do  
whose particular earth this is.  
No Clara, not your sister  
but someone else's born in their  
woods. I've looked in ours  
so many times, carrying my medical bag  
hopefully along. But all our logs  
are full of dust, a fine brown  
powder that catches light,  
falling through my hands.

All right, you said. I understand.  
And you returned to silence  
as before, before the ash mantle  
with its wood hand-picked  
by your grandfather who led his men  
to the swamp, and pointed out  
the trees to fall. That August  
renters moved next door, a young woman  
with auburn hair, her husband a blur  
as you watched her from the grainy  
dark of your porch, watched  
her dresses swell, until the morning  
she was confined, and you saw  
your father coming home across  
the yard without the child  
who screamed over the twilit grass  
that night, and the next, and would  
not stop, though the lady crooned,  
and held him in her arms. And then,

one afternoon after school, you stole  
next door, and into the baby's room  
where he slept in his white gown,  
and you picked him up, so softly  
he didn't wake, and you tiptoed out,  
full of passionate errand, carrying  
your little brother across town  
to the landlord's, where his true  
sisters and brothers played,  
loud among the heavy oaks.  
Then you thrust him into  
his mother's arms, and you said,  
with a tightness in your throat:  
*Here, this is yours.*

### Freezer

Where eyes of round have forgotten  
the quick knife that made them,  
how the butcher stared against the light  
as he leaned in his smeary apron,  
separating the parts of a carcass  
which yet knew something of what he did;  
that pain is gone. Where pale ears of corn  
have forgotten how the wind used to dance  
in their stalks, how the bees would hum  
in the close indigo. Where okra has frozen  
in green fingers which point  
to the hearts of calves, grazing  
in the rising grass of high summer  
not noticing that the egrets have begun  
to leave, any more than they noticed  
that their mothers had disappeared  
or that the moon was slow orange all week.  
Only the freezer knows the truth, the end  
Of all such stories, after the ends

our mothers tell us as they smile on our beds  
before they turn out the lights:  
the last home of animals and gardens;  
the dark, the cold, the waiting to be eaten.

Lola Haskins

### COMING TO COLONUS

Tobacco flecked my father's shirt  
as he weeded the drive with a worn hoe;  
what his hoe had broken and edged up  
his rake spread out and teased and rung—  
a pleasant knell in hot July.

He would surprise his young son  
by boasting that the job was done.

And the lake shattered at four—  
From what? From wind? From starlings?  
The birds churned up the gnat swarms  
leaving brief spirals like those  
that hung behind his heavy oar.

Narcissus and crocus grew at dawn  
and nightingales in ivy sang.  
The place meant something to him,  
so he retired there and tried  
to weed the drive with his worn hoe,

his pipe reversed and bright with sweat,  
and he repeated often, "Not yet."

The dirt had grown between his toes  
like wounds and smeared his ankle grooves.  
His toenails thickened into talons



not to be scissored through. Afraid  
to lose his balance, he measured steps.

Afraid to sink, he cramped until  
my hand beneath his head released him.  
I gladly soaped his spotted back,  
the rubber garland of his belly,  
his time-rubbed, loamy legs.

I washed his hair and squeaked it flat,  
assembled him upon the mat.

When I lifted him above his shuffle,  
he was relieved of weight and flung  
his feet in kicking dance; and when  
he cramped, I rubbed the muscles down  
his adolescent, quivering bones.

My brother photographed him once,  
dressed up in velvet smoking coat  
and carrying a cane. He was king  
of the lawn, tilting his head to hear  
the protective rustle of the trees.

P. Evarts