

POETRY 2011

NEW POEMS

W.E. Butts
164-1 Maple Street
Manchester, New Hampshire 03103

12/30/11

In The Hands of a Graveyard Angel

“As in your Bosom you bear your Heaven
And Earth, & all you behold, tho it appears Without it is Within,
In your Imagination of which this World of Mortality is but a Shadow.”
-- William Blake

A gift from my daughter, this sepia photograph
of a graveyard angel, transcendent stone rising
into the late autumn sky, in its hands a carved wreath,
it stands at the edge of the cemetery she visits
Sunday afternoons to lay flowers on her mother's grave
and speak quietly awhile, but on this day
she takes this picture and sends it to me, a message
from that leaf-strewn, nearly silent place
where small birds take up the flight and song
beyond those years of failed marriage, foolishness and youth,
earth and stone, and within this photograph a shadow
of myself reflected in its atmospheric light,
homage to what must be borne.

Who Can Say?

10/23/11

When the boatman never arrived,
my father swam the long distance meet
as far as he could before
climbing into someone else's boat,
exhausted, yet redeemed.

Mother wanted me to join
the priesthood,
but Sharon Murphy's blue eyes
and long blonde hair
were more glorious
than any sacrament.

Those early autumn days
during recess in the schoolyard –
a reprieve from the rooms of ink wells,
catechisms and wooden rulers –
we boys died and were resurrected
time after time in our games of war.

Sometimes now I read
the evening paper,
tune into the 6 o'clock report,
all for the sake of learning
any news
that isn't mine to bear,
then I sit watching
late night TV, enveloped
by flickering shadows
of film noir want.

Who can speak of loss,
say what it is anyone needs?
Just listen
to those winter birds
call out the names for wind?

Brotherhood

10/11/11

No matter now he died before his name
and lies in an unmarked grave, Father the only one
to see the shriveled blue/gray boy lost that August
afternoon at the corner of Clay and Myrtle,
Mother slipping on a step, something loosened
and horribly wrong, weeks later, the child stillborn.
How do we speak for the missing breath,
call after the silence of one who is gone?

Summer evenings, a child at the creek bank,
I was the early cricket in an unseen world.
Those years I imagined him, the older brother,
the shade that followed me down
the tree-lined streets of my small town life.
I had been born from death into the world's mysteries
punctuated by barking dogs, Sunday dinners,
the many demands on a boy at play, and a past
somehow at once finite and eternal.

ACCEPTED 2011

PUBLISHED 2011

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WONDER

*Wonder and desire are how the self changes
into the camouflage of everything.*

-- Jack Myers

DRUNKEN BOAT

And so it is these unhidden wrens cry their high pitches
from the stark branches of a winter maple.

Even if I did revisit the past,
what could I change that wouldn't unravel
the cloth of who I need to be?

When, before the bells of wisdom and compassion chimed,
Buddha was asked why there was no self,
his answer disappeared into silence.

If I were to speak out now,
the one who would listen is gone,
and the self I am not is the sound of an echo
after the bells have been struck.

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ABSENCE & EVENT

Because you are gone
for a week, and I don't
want to consider loneliness,
I go out to the garden
and water the red roses
that have climbed
up the white lattice
trellises and now probe
through the small
open squares of their windows,
like the bright faces
of curious children.

Back in the house,
I quiet the need of our two cats
with a bowl of dry food.
I make coffee and,
for a while, read the newspaper
with its reports of war,
accidents, town politics,
and sad photographs
of the dead and arrested.

If you were here,
I might ask that we walk
together to the river,
where ubiquitous gulls
circle above the abandoned
mills and current's gray flow,
a few locals fishing,
and the occasional ducks
scrambling onto shore.

[stanza break]

Vermont Literary Review

But this afternoon
I'm alone at my desk,
where I'm writing
about the day's simple events --

and you are the space
between each necessary word.

POETRY 2010

NEW POEMS

ASH

4/21/10

Here, the sheet rocker mourns, the bipolar son
of a mystic stays in a room far away, speaking in tongues,
the widow quietly folds her hands,
children of the father who last week became ash
sit together in their loud silence,
women deliver trays of food
and place them on tables draped in white cloth,
friends gather in their small groups of memory,
then it's my turn to speak. I know nothing of death.
I remember once, years ago, the daughter of ash,
having been called by the quick signatures of lightning bugs ,
brought me to an open field, where she discovered her name
among a constellation of stars.

WONDER

January 6, 2010

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THE PAST

10/21/10

TYGERBURNING

I've returned to the street and small hill,
the house where outside the boy still runs through the yard,
a child who has yet to learn shame and poverty's rage,
who reinvents his dead brother in games of war and perfect victory,
who doesn't hear the whispered names of the lost
until they drift into the storied song of birds filling the aged elm.

The boy's father watches from the kitchen window,
two hours before his wife, a dining car waitress, will come home
and then his shift at the factory next to the railroad tracks, whistle blasts,
and diesel locomotives pulling long lines of trembling freight cars
through the dark tunnel of his troubled thoughts, toward the next paycheck
he knows won't be enough, but just now, here is his son.

There are summer evenings after a rain, by that patch of lilies-of-the-valley
where they buried the family dog last spring, Father and son
bring shovel and coffee can to dig for night crawlers, and a morning
of fishing at the creek bank, when they'll sit by a willow,
talk about school and baseball, what the boy imagines of his life
after this town that grows smaller every year, all those Sundays and Latin chants.

I've been back twice since Father died, Mother's funeral and this visit
to the house restored and unrecognizable in its fresh paint under new shingles,
but I can hear the voices of children on the front steps counting cars driving past,
then there's a sudden quiet to the afternoon and I have learned a prayer
for the bright tulips Mother planted, that rose up each April like hands
waving in praise of what was greater than ourselves.

AT THE WILKES-BARRE/ SCRANTON AIRPPORT MEDITATION ROOM 10/27/10

A quiet hour in the votive light
of the airport's meditation room,
I'm left to reflect on the good nature
of friends and the comfort of their stone house
and walks along the river, and now these passages
of divinity and speculation bound in testaments
neatly arranged by design, not doctrine.

TYGERBURNING

What words might save me, in the time that's left
before I'm lifted above rain and thunderous predictions
of the world's religions? It's true, I believe I'll arrive,
everything just as I left it, and yes, it's also true I can't
give up those mistakes I might never get to make.
But there's proof the spirit sustains us; just listen
to those jazz compositions by Parker and Coltrane
we heard last night, while we sat smoking on the porch
of the Deer Head Inn, the noisy chatter of tourists
receding beneath an improvised flurry of melody and dissonance.
Consider yesterday afternoon and the faith of those boys
at Bushkill Falls, sliding down cascades into one pool after another,
like these passengers and I who wait to depart
in unnatural flight toward our separate destinations.

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MISE-EN-SCENE

The Isle of Shoals ,Star Island

Water speaks a film noir at the shoreline
this afternoon in island light,
the shimmering ocean pure cinema,
at once dark and luminescent,
like those 1940s movies
of mood and singularity,
and standing at the dock,
I think I understand the loneliness
of Bogart or Mitchum
as they search for clues
that might solve the mystery,
but already know things will never be right
between them and the women they have to follow.
So in a scene bursting with gunfire,
when the wounded PI falls out of the crashed Buick,
you hope, beyond hope really, he's survived.
And isn't it fitting that such tragedy
be expressed in black and white, underscored
by those ambiguous shades of gray --
the beauty we want, the life we think we need?
Meanwhile, in *Algiers*, Charles Boyer
as "Pepe," a master thief, looks into the eyes
of Hedy Lamar, the bejeweled and beautiful "Gaby,"
sitting across from him at the café
(she's all glimmer and gloss)
and quietly asks: "Who were you before the pearls?"
And I'm reminded of that homeless guy
in Albany, years ago, who warned me:
"Desire deferred sickens the heart."
Perhaps that's what our anti-hero means
when he tells the femme fatale: "You're like a leaf
the wind blows from one gutter to another."
But here the wind echoes azure
against the wharf pilings, all the wrong words
returned and changed as waves.

10/19/10

Tygerburning

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MISE-EN-SCENE

The Isles of Shoals, Star Island

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5/25/08

THE ANNUAL RICHARD MILHOUS NIXON PIG ROAST & FOURTH OF JULY CELEBRATION

Each year we gathered at the summer field
in Eastern New York, the Berkshires rising above
hemlock ravines. We came because we had survived
a decade of Vietnam, Watergate and White House scandals,
riots that had turned whole city blocks to smoldering despair.
And still we danced, rock music then our true religion
in the collective spirit of half-naked bodies and chemical haze,
or we circled, like a tribe, around the roasting animal.

POETRY EAST

But some nights I wandered out into the crepuscular flash
of lightning bugs, those mythic lanterns of the meadow,
listening, for a while, to a chorus of crickets, and the soft voices
inside tents pitched on the low hills nearby, murmuring toward sleep.
O brothers and sisters, how those years we loved the natural world,
and too all the rituals and totems of a changed empire.

Once, I stood with a friend on one of those hills after a rain,
and the sky, I swear, opened itself green, while a woman in the valley
below lifted off her cotton print dress with an almost paradisaical grace,
and danced there in the yellow clover and honeysuckle,
ecstatic and glorious now in the unimpeachable new light.

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~~Accepted~~ 09
Feb 2010

ART LESSON

How many times
did I spoon the last taste
of hot fudge from the bottom
and sides of a tulip sundae glass
at Mrs.Ellis's coffee shop,
the portrait she'd painted
of her dead husband,
Gus, no longer dressed
in his white apron, but elegant
now in glowing oils
and dark, vested suit,
hanging above the lunch counter?

POETRY EAST

She was childless,
hair silver and long,
arranged in a high bouffant,
a portly woman in her sixties,
who only wore purple
or black, and her smile was kind.
All through my childhood,
I brought her my drawings:
crude sketches of houses,
cumulus clouds settling into the low hills,
faces and hands, barns in the fields,
our small town's creek,
the willows that lined its banks --
where boys reckless with summer
dove from a stone bridge --
and the birds that flew over them.

And she'd take me then
to help me make choices
from the glass display case
filled with art supplies:

(continued)

jars of tempera and tubes of paint,
charcoal and illustration board,
brushes and pastels, tin trays
of bright water colors.

She showed me the imaginary
lines of perspective, how to rub
shadow into light, the proper
placement of eye and ear,
and reminded me often
of the need to erase.

And so I came to learn
both patience and flourish,
and how putting pencil to paper
was just the beginning
of what I might see.

PORCELAIN

Early Saturday afternoon, in winter,
Mother and I are walking
down Elm to the gray and white house
of the Stevens sisters, who were so frail,
I remember, the dust-swirled light
passed through them. "Be careful,"
Mother warned when, in the curiosity
of a four-year-old boy, I picked up
the Boston terrier from the mantel
and turned that tiny figurine
slowly over in my palm. It was then
one of the sisters reached for the collie
and beagle, and when she placed them
on the lace doily draped over the rolled arm
of the button-tufted high back chair,
I saw how the inside of her wrist
had become a small, colorless leaf.

THE TOWER JOURNAL

I sat down and soon they were
gathered by me: the Austrian shepherd
and chocolate Siamese, the bulldog
and English setter. And a golden palomino
stood near a grazing brown foal,
while a barn owl, a blue bird,
and a white-throated sparrow
quietly rested. Even the turtle dove
and humming bird were there, and then
I was raising the birds above my head,
and I sang for them too. And I barked
for the dogs and whinnied for the horses,
and the room filled with flight and the new
sounds I had made for them all,
as those three women watched over me.

Later, while they chatted over tea
and I drank hot cocoa from a thin china cup
painted with tiny roses, snow fell
endlessly outside the frosted window,
and I had held those many things
which I knew now would not break.

ASH

7/16/10

Friends gather in their groups of memory
 and celebrate the bodiless click and song
 of a darkened wood, the restored house
 with its three windows edged by blue,
 red and crystalline squares of stained glass,
 the raised arms of a luminescent green Buddha,
 think also of those lost years, a woman
 in a predawn acid high running in rain
 through the city's cobblestone streets, her long cape
 flapping like the wings of some flightless bird,
 moonlight and a barroom's neon glare
 across the hood of a white '55 Ford in summer,
 a 1930s Buck Roger's poster and a question:
 "Is this man really 2,000 years ahead of his time?"
 and that Z.Z. Hill lyric: "Woo Wee Bop!
 Baby I'd chop / off my right arm for your love."
 Now children of the father who last week became ash
 sit together in their loud silence, the widow
 quietly folds her hands, someone delivers trays of food
 and places them on tables draped in white cloth,
 then it's my turn to speak. I know nothing of death,
 but I remember once, having been called
 by the quick signatures of lightning bugs,
 his small daughter brought me to an open field,
 where she discovered her name among a constellation of stars.

THE TOWER JOURNAL

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ASH

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and celebrate the bodiless click and song
of a darkened wood, the restored house
with its three windows edged by blue,
red and crystalline squares of stained glass,
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think also of those lost years, a woman
in a predawn acid high running in rain
through the city's cobblestone streets, her long cape
flapping like the wings of some flightless bird,
moonlight and a barroom's neon glare
across the hood of a white '55 Ford in summer,
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W.E. Butts

BOYS AT THE SATURDAY MATINEE

1/03/08

We were happy those afternoons,
with our boxes of Dots,
watered-down sodas, and bags
spilling over with popcorn,
even as the sudden dark
and slow slide of curtains
silenced our laughter
and screams, while we waited
for a Saturday matinee serial to begin:

THE TOWER JOURNAL

*Black Arrow and Captain Marvel,
Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon,
The Green Hornet and Dick Tracy,
Red Ryder and The Lone Ranger,
or any one of a dozen others*
our saved quarters let us follow
for twenty minutes each week
into new episodes of heroes, villains,
kidnappings and impossible escapes,
and always a beautiful woman
who had to be rescued.

But sometimes it was hard to figure
who the criminal mastermind really was.
And despite how many times we saw
a chapter end with the hero
trapped and certainly doomed,
we argued his fate until we returned
to be transfixed again
by those metaphors of good and evil
that rose up like truth, like faith,
before our cheers and applause,
our eternal and communal praise.

THE GIFT OF UNWANTED KNOWLEDGE

6/6/09

Pub 2010

Because every evening, ten miles east,
small men guide their nervous horses
to the starting gate, afternoons in our town
my father leans over a pockmarked bar,
checks the history of losses and wins
posted in the latest racing form, collects
the folded slips and wrinkled bills of barroom regulars.

Here, at the dust twirled Eagle Tavern,
it's 1958, and light glows amber in their glasses
of Pabst Blue Ribbon, Black Label and Genesee.
Where else could faith assemble when the factory's gone,
but in this dark cathedral of last chances? They know
the odds are never with them, but place their bets
like a devoted Sunday congregation.

CONNOTATION PRESS

Outside, the sun is gleaming proudly on the hood
of a new Edsel driving slowly down Main Street.
A few loud boys waving Hubley cap pistols
run from the 5 & Dime, falling then quickly rising
into the repeated resurrection of their play,
as troubled, speechless shoppers step back now,
worried in their sudden search for safety.

And I am one of those running, screaming kids,
toy gun in my hand, freed from school to an afternoon
that needs killing. We had learned what doesn't survive:
Sputnik a cinder descended from the atmosphere
of stars and other planets, Roy Campanella,
once called the best catcher in baseball,
crippled by his car's bad slide and crash.

We heard our fathers, late at night in their darkened houses,
sleepless and bitter, so many things already gone.
We skip flat stones across the surface of the murky creek,
lie shirtless beneath a lowering sun and cool breeze.
If we have questions, they are here in whatever light
is left to hold us, each one his father's son,
and to know what's next is not what we expected.

Pub 2010

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3/30/08

THE OTHER LANGUAGE

Even her worried voice couldn't bring me
to answer the morning I hid in weeds
by the willow, some child's wrong idea
of his importance in the known and safe world.

CONNOTATION PRESS

Or perhaps it was a simple insistence
that my life mattered, that Mother would,
if I were really gone, after all miss her only son,
and regret those scoldings and rules.

But I came then to understand silence's bitter ache:
Mother turned away at the kitchen stove,
her darkened thoughts of a cold river
and drowned boy shadowing the sun-filled wall.

When Barbara Jean stepped from the line
of high school cheerleaders and leapt
into the brisk October air, calling out each letter
of my name, I ran gladly with the others
onto the field of end runs and tackles.

But what was announced over the PA that afternoon
we stood assembled at the gymnasium rally,
navy blazers and striped ties, our season's ritual
of recognition and awards: the President
shot and yes, dead, startled everyone quiet,
and then so strangely alone.

Once, I watched my father and his deaf mute friend
speak in the quick conversation of hand and fingers,
saw how it was we might become our own words,
and for years after Father died there were nights
I dreamt back his voice, but woke to my loud cries.

[stanza break]

At Sunday Mass with my parents, I had believed
those mysterious Latin chants would save me,
held as certain scripture the impossible
stories of a favorite uncle, learned the lessons
of home and school, and listened for the truth,
as I do still, of who we are that has not been said.

Pub 2010

"ODDS AGAINST TOMORROW"

Kallett Theater, 1959

July 17, 2009

Here are three men driving through the fast fall-off
of noir light and shadow, following the Hudson River
toward a small town bank outside Albany
that the disgraced former policeman swears will be an easy score,
and you can tell by the look in their eyes
and grim set of their mouths they need to believe it:
the Harlem musician tired of crooning to the ofay crowd
in smoke-filled bars; the racist war vet, just out of the joint
for hitting a man so hard he killed him but, he reminds his girlfriend,
he didn't mean to do it. Something snapped and he can't remember.
Now they're at a lake's gray shore, close-up
of a half-submerged and ruined china doll, the ex-cop
tossing stones at a crumbled can. In the nearby woods
the veteran points his shotgun at a startled rabbit,
and we have to wonder why he hesitates, until
the frightened animal scurries away, he shoots,
and then we understand. Of course, the robbery goes wrong.
We already knew this plan wouldn't work: the ex-cop dead in an alley,
the musician and veteran running past the rail yard into the looming rows
of oil terminals, and a confrontation that had to happen.
But it's what the camera shows us next that makes us
sit up straight. In a scene reminiscent of Cagney's finish
in "White Heat," they climb on top a tank and fire simultaneously
at each other, the screen exploding in flame and rising smoke,
in the aftermath, their scorched bodies laid side by side.
And in this time out of time we know failure,
desperation, even greed, each of us unrecognizable
in the darkened theater of our collective breath:
student and teacher; housewife and sales clerk;
grocer and mechanic; the teenage couple
necking in the last row. And "Who,"
the first detective to arrive is asking,
"can tell the difference?"

CONNOTATION PRESS

W.E. Butts

CIDER PRESS REVIEW

EVERYWHERE IS EVERYWHERE

for Rustin Larson

These days, words from the gospels
and old hymns are rolled out on screens
across eternal Midwestern sky.
Somewhere, between Iowa City
and Cedar Rapids, driving along
miles of nearly vacant road,
past cornfields that were once ocean,
rows of glittering pumpkins,
and Amish farmers riding their slow carriages,
my friend and I are discussing
transcendental meditation and Dutch women,
high school football and local politics,
the recently sanctioned shooting
of overpopulated deer, with bow and arrow.

I look out as a flock of finches
rises and falls in thermals of blue air,
then rises again high above the bowed heads of cattle
grazing in an open field edged with hay bales,
and the offering of road before us
repeats itself like some chant
from a prayer that would take us home forever.

RADIO TIME

7/10/08

"Is low the moon, but high the wind"

--Chuck Berry

A howling dog, transistor radio crackling,
Chuck Berry: cars, girls and school,
and there, from the nightstand in my bedroom,
something close to revelation.

Ex-con – Kansas City joyride, broken down
car and jail, yet this skinny black man
and his guitar knew how to be sixteen.

SARANAC REVIEW

And here, too, the gravelly voice
of George "Hound Dog" Lorenz,
who each evening on WKBW – "the greatest
station on your dial" – proclaimed
"The Hound's Around," and reminded us listeners
if we were "hangin' around the corner,"
we were "doggin' it." And I was transfixed

as that DJ spun those forbidden records
through the airwaves: Fats Domino,
LaVern Baker, The Moonglows, The Five Satins,
Ann Cole, Joe Turner, The Clovers,
Little Richard & The Upsetters, Etta James
lamenting "All I Could Do Was Cry."

And so it was I came to hear again
those historians of desire, prophets
of a change that would soon be mine.

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revised 8/20/09

CONSIDERATION

After a week of travel and family,
as we drove last night, a shrouded moon
graced the late December sky. A line of Canada geese
suddenly reinvented itself, a V pointing
toward the Berkshires that rose above
the curved road, and we were returning
to our old need and comfort. Past the marsh
and barren field, I saw, among the shadows of firs,
the lit windows of a house in a clearing
on the mountainside. I thought of those who might live
in that place, and wondered if it were true,
that each of us is also everyone. Soon, we too
would be home with our talk of work and money,
how we both should change, those private arguments
only years of a good marriage can endure,
our small celebrations and redemptions.
I watched traffic ahead exiting toward the promise
of food and sleep, considered passion
and the simple belief we go on.

SARANAC REVIEW

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6/23/08

APPLES

In October chill the earth-tart scent
of fallen apples brought me to her,
sweet Molly O'Brien, the rich girl
who lived in the white Victorian
with gingerbread trim, largest house
on our street, sprawling front yard
and single apple tree. Those afternoons
I could almost forget how Father returned
each weekday morning covered in factory dust,
Mother steaming in a dining car kitchen.

SARANAC REVIEW

We were twelve, this good-hearted child and I,
and never spoke about the overdue bills
or grocery credit, the dinner and basket of fruit
the Ladies of Charity delivered to my door one Christmas,
how I hated their cheer and flowered hats.

Many years later, hundreds of miles from that town,
when I went with friends and their children
to pick apples, in that orchard I thought of her again,
as trees yielded what they could no longer bear,
that we might remember kindness.

EIGHT BALL
for Jack Myers

There's a Buddha on my desk,
and he's laughing.
We of the West believe
if you rub the Buddha's belly,
good fortune is certain.
But none of this matters
tonight at the pool hall,
here with a friend --
his shrewd eye and steady hand.
Again, my shot
misses its intention,
and I'm moving inevitably
toward some final chance.

The Buddha was a gift
from my wife.
I believe she meant it
to point out the way
to be different from the self
is to be the self.

For example, the sly
yet generous-hearted manner
with which my friend approaches
the green table and stands,
for a moment,
like a Chinese monk
meditating at the edge
of a quiet field,
is exactly who he is.

He understands
what's important
is more than knowing
what will happen next;
that paying attention
is how we come to the small globe
about to spin away from us,
and call it "safe."

Café` Review

"Eight Ball" was previously published in *The Aurora*, and was reprinted in *Sunday Evening at the Stardust Café* (First World Library, 2006).

POETRY 2009

NEW POEMS

A STORY OF SILENCE

Revised 8/09

My wife returns
from her evening walk,
and tells me a story
of silence:

*You enter the park
and are surrounded by roads,
but there is no traffic.*

*Clouds are above you,
but there is no wind.*

*You remember
a century ago,
citizens gathered
at this stone memorial
to soldier and sailor,
cheering the explosion
of gunshot and fireworks.*

*Starlings and sparrows
hid in the trees.*

You are what happens next.

*You are those unheard
voices in houses nearby.*

*You are the children
riding their bicycles.*

*You are the pleasure of flowers,
the caterpillar beneath the small rock.*

You are the space between branches.

*You are the song
in the throat
of the tiniest bird,
before the song
has been sung.*

THE CARDINALS

revised 8/20/09

My wife and I have bought a home,
and soon will become like these birds at their nest
in the maple. From beneath the skylights
of this small, third-floor apartment we often lay
under passing moon, weather, migration.
And looking through binoculars now
at the scarlet male and subtle sensuality
of his buff-colored mate, I'm bearing witness
to a testament of beauty and returning flight,
and feel a sort of prayer come over me:
the way she worships his dance around the amber,
sunlit leaves which serve as instrument
to their song; the stately rearrangement of his robe
when her presence fills the air he rests in.
I open the window and listen to the lyric
they never fail to repeat. And so it is this afternoon
I've made a discovery, not of absence,
but of that which rises and remains.

ACCEPTED 2009

SIMPLY, THIS

6/3/08

Leaves ready for raking layer the yard,
sparrows hidden in the lower branches
of our maple tree chirp their desires;
the day is a mood of clouds
and a lyric of light at the window.

NEW HAMPSHIRE MONTHLY

I come to the kitchen and the small meal
you've made ready, now at the table,
our afternoon ritual of bread and fruit:

an act so simple, it is all.

PUBLISHED 2009

THE LAKE

NEW HAMPSHIRE MONTHLY

I don't know how Father managed
that summer I was five,
on his factory pay,
to bring us to the glistening lake
and white clapboard cottage
for a week, its small rooms
filled with early July light,
and what seemed to me a thousand birds
singing through the open windows,
past the waving flowered curtains.

Perhaps he borrowed the money
from my uncle, who would
be dead a few years later,
at fifty-four, the only time
I ever saw my father weep.
But we were happy those days,
my parents and I,
by that lake called "Silver,"
and in its bright water
that returned us,
redeemed and shivering,
back to our currency of air.

Each afternoon, I walked
along the shoreline,
gathering shells and stones
from where the wet sand
touched a mysterious silence
that somehow
echoed through me,
even on that final morning
of clouds and rain,
when we left for home.

"The Lake" is reprinted from *What to Say if the Birds Ask* (Pudding House, 2007)
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AMOSKEAG

Now we've come to the rise
and swell of river, gray surge

2010 POET'S GUIDE TO NH

and insistent swirl after a week
of high tide and flood; the green-leafed

tops of trees just above the water,
clustered like tossed flower bouquets,

emerging from the sunken island,
and I wonder how our particular dialogue

of need could be anything more
than the mist that sprays the low air

and riverbank, or shorebirds
circling the aftermath and ruin of storm.

SAVED

My father dealt antiques,
an avocation those times he wasn't
at his factory shift or teaching me,
his only son, some necessary skill
of boyhood -- fingers on the seam
of a baseball, earthworm on the hook,
the knife blade slicing away
from my apprenticed hand that gripped
the beginning of something truly made.

2006 POETRY SOURCE (Iowa)

JAZZMOUTH ANTHOLOGY 2009

People said he had a kind of knack
for recognizing the real value
in the obscure, the worth of wood
beneath aged, peeling paint, the possible
mechanics of those things broken.
And sometimes he'd bring me to that place
of auctioneer's chant and distant past,
mystery of language and the highest bid.

This is where I learned men and women
came to live by code and signal, how
a certain gesture was a promise given,
and wondered who would sit again
at the roll-top desk to turn on the student lamp.
Was there a woman to work the spinning wheel?
Who would gather now at the oak table
to share supper and the day's events?

And when Father and I returned
home with all he could bargain for that day,
there'd be a collection of used books
for me to choose from -- Alexandre Dumas,
Zane Gray, Sherlock Holmes, a dime novel --
some adventure that would take a boy
to bed with a flashlight to read
through the late hours under the covers.

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Revised 8/09

THE DAUGHTERS

The daughters have brought shells
and stones back from the ocean.
They lie quietly on the desk,
collected, as the good children
they have always been.

To keep them safe,
I must rub the Buddha's belly.

BRICK

POETRY 2008

NEW POEMS

THE DAUGHTERS

I.

The daughters have brought shells
and stones back from the ocean.
They lie quietly on the desk,
collected, as the good children
they have always been.
To keep them safe,
I must rub the Buddha's belly.

II.

Distant, but still the breeze
cools the water's edge,
and still they listen for circling seabirds.

III.

Far away now, they sleep,
small bodies luminous and settled
in the shoreline sand.

IN THE HANDS OF GRAVEYARD ANGELS

“As in your Bosom you bear your Heaven
And Earth, & all you behold, tho it appears Without it is Within,
In your Imagination of which this World of Mortality is but a Shadow.”

-- William Blake

A gift from my daughter,
this sepia photograph
of a graveyard angel,
transcendent stone
rising up
into the late autumn sky,
in its hands
a carved wreath;
it stands at the edge
of the cemetery
she visits Sunday afternoons
to lay flowers
on her mother's grave and speak
quietly awhile,
but on this day
she takes this picture
and sends it to me,
a message
from that leaf-strewn,
nearly silent place
where small birds
take up the flight and song
of resting angels,
and earth and stone
are left to hold us both
in its shadow and luminous grace.

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revised 2/5/08

EVERYWHERE IS EVERYWHERE

for Rustin Larson

These days, words from the gospels
and old hymns are rolled out on screens
across eternal midwestern sky.
Somewhere, between Iowa City
and Cedar Rapids, driving along
miles of nearly vacant road,
past cornfields that were once ocean,
rows of glittering pumpkins,
and Amish farmers riding their slow carriages,
my friend and I are discussing
transcendental meditation and Dutch women,
high school football and local politics,
the recently sanctioned shooting
of overpopulated deer, with bow and arrow.

A flock of finches rises
and falls in thermals of blue air,
then rises again high above the bowed heads of cattle
grazing in an open field edged with hay bales,
and the offering of road before us
repeats itself like some chant
from a prayer that would take us home forever.

revised 6/17/08

THE DAUGHTERS

I.

The daughters have brought shells
and stones back from the ocean.

They lie quietly on the desk,
collected, as the good children
they have always been.

To keep them safe,
I must rub the Buddha's belly.

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cools the water's edge,
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PUBLISHED 2008

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TESTAMENT

This morning, when I woke, you were
already gone, and outside the gray sky
had lowered its wet, dark hand
over the houses on our street.
Birds gathered on the lawns
like old friends. When was it
I first learned to take in loneliness
like breath? When my brother was born,
he was already dead. Jesus had sacrificed
himself for my sins, and was gone.
Uncles and aunts took up their coffins
before I knew their old stories of barges
and trains, and so it was up to Father
and Mother to make me whole
with history, until they, too, left.

If it's true the dead live in us, then don't
I also hold their emptiness as so many
prayers I repeat those late hours
I might stand alone by the window
of a rented room in a strange city,
neon glowing like a false god?
Or perhaps I walk down a country road
at dawn to a river bank, where the mist
begins to rise like some new faith.

I've come to believe in the living
and their sacrament of speech; how each word,
in the telling, is its own necessary story,
which is yours, which is mine.

BIRMINGHAM POETRY REVIEW

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THRUSH & SQUIRREL

Suddenly a squirrel scampers along the edge
of the tall wooden fence, a hermit thrush,
high pitched, in pursuit, and you laugh
because it seems like such play,
but at stake are the eggs in their cup
of moss, leaves, and rootlets, the four flutes
you might never hear silent now inside
the thin walls of their shells. And you
understand why this must be your life,
the melodious song you wait for certain
to flicker, after all, through the absence
your body will one day become.

THE FOURTH RIVER