

Selection of Recent Poetry

The daughter speaks

Thank you.

Thank you so much.

I wasn't aware I was vacuuming wrong all these years
or ruining my health by not eating breakfast
or that I would give myself a nosebleed
by blowing so hard.

No, really, I appreciate it.

I didn't know that some lanes on the bridge
are exact change only;
I might have got in one by mistake.

I really am tremendously grateful
to have my unthrift pointed out;
certainly that foil could be washed off and used again,
the same with that Zip-Loc bag,
and I could have gotten a second cup from that teabag
if I'd really tried.
How foolish of me to throw away hose
when a needle and thread would have fixed them just fine.

Yes, I know, someone has to point out these things.
You'd think I was born in a barn and raised by wolves,
the way I act sometimes:
pointing my muzzle at the moon,
marking my range with indelible scents
howling my defiance.

The Outer Side of Life (ed. Tom Davis). NC: Old Mountain Press,
forthcoming.

Sacra di San Michele

The tower of Bell'Alda stands
where the desperate virgin
leaped to her death twice
once to escape ravishing knights
and again to prove to doubting monks
that her virtue had saved her

May is cold here
grey and wet
as the sheep who graze unconcerned
a thousand meters down

Below this rain-swept terrace
panoramico
tattered shrouds of fog
wrap the bony shoulders
of the Mount of Pigs
like the lace-edged shawl she wore
when she plummeted
like a broken angel
to the sodden rocks below

Mountain High (ed. Tom Davis). NC: Old Mountain Press, 2008: 35.

Paso Fino

What I remember most

is not the fall itself:
the slow inevitable slide
over your shoulder

the tug of hackamore
twisting arm and shoulder
the white rush of fear

nor sound of bones breaking
the grotesque arc
of limb falling forward
the sight of bones through skin

No. Instead I see
the mincing return:
nostrils flaring
at blood scent

the sudden shudder of witherskin
and ripple of chestnut muscle
the largo rhythm of hooves
as you floated away

Cadence of Hooves: A Celebration of Horses (ed. Susan Jantz). Igo, CA: Yarroway Mountain Press, 2008: 342.

Edwina's Holiday

Seventy degrees on Christmas morning
and here I am
sitting on this damned front stoop
in my robe and curlers
smoking my Christmas cigarette
see what their nosy neighbors think about that!

She won't let me smoke in the house
what do you expect from those Carolina girls
and why my son ever married her I don't know

Can't even make a decent cup of coffee
and she'll probably try to poison me
with those damned grits again—
my traitor son even says he likes them—
these people wouldn't know a decent breakfast
if it bit them

She won't let me near her kitchen, oh no;
she's got to have room to fry her vegetables
and a turkey, for crissakes.
Who *fries* a turkey anyway?
Jeez, these people would probably fry
a peanut butter sandwich
if you gave them the chance

Well, I'm getting dressed
in my decent Cape Cod wool suit
I'll probably melt in it
but they'll see what a civilized woman
looks like on Christmas.

No wonder they lost the war.

Southern Mist (ed. Tom Davis). NC: Old Mountain Press, 2008: 23.

The hour before dawn

more deaths occur
than any other time
Soul bonds slip, all passion spent
Sky turns from black
to gunmetal blue
as Venus starts her sleepy transit
from the East

I know the time well:
Elvis was twenty years gone
that predawn when you said
I can't do this anymore
and left me grieving

And still some nights
I bolt upright in that dying hour
pounding heart painful in my breast
hair sweat-slicked on nape
wondering if I hear
your breath beside me

Night Whispers (ed. Tom Davis). NC: Old Mountain Press, 2007: 70.

Cedar Water

We could never wear our sneakers or our good suits,
only the old ones from the bottom drawer
of the barroom chiffonier:
discarded years ago,
their elastic shot, buttons popped,
held together with old laces
and scratchy brown string.

Gingham checks or navy stripes
or red and green sailboats
had all long turned
the orangey-brown tea shade
of the river water
and our eyes and skin.
"Mullica-colored," the aunts all called it,
"Don't you go getting those good suits
all Mullica-colored."

So we prowled along the bank,
fingers smeared with huckleberry jam
from sandwiches folded, not cut,
so the flavor wouldn't leak out,
watching eagerly till the tide
lifted Uncle Court's sneakbox off the sandbar
and the rotting ribs of the ore boats disappeared,
and we plunged headlong at last
into cedar water.

Sand, Sea and Sky (ed. Tom Davis). NC: Old Mountain Press, 2007:
16.

Bulltown

They disappeared off the map years ago,
forgotten deep in Jersey pines—
Bulltown and Cramerville, Hog Wallow and Martha.
Once in a while in a stand of saplings
a thicker clump of green
tumbles over hand-shaped bricks
where a fireplace crumbled.

When my father was alive he would tell us
that the man who sold bootleg whiskey
from the back of his truck outside Hattie's store
lived here with his wife—what was her name—
and their eight, no nine, kids, most of them boys,
all gone now, of course.

He could still see the man sharp in his mind's eye,
in the old black Ford truck with one green fender
and the kids in buffalo plaid coats
handed down one to the next—
he had a great memory for details, my dad—
all I see is a scarlet bloom
on the stubborn climber rose
where the doorsill used to be.

Looking Back (ed. Tom Davis). NC: Old Mountain Press, 2007: 23.

Christmas 1965

The year that grandmom died
we decorated late
but still tacked red celluloid wreaths
in every window
strung aqua teardrop bulbs
on the blue spruce out front
lit them doggedly every night
and prayed for snow.

The Sunday before Christmas it finally came
six inches between Mass and dark
and when the last dish was dried
we climbed over the dogyard fence
and trudged up Ramsey's driveway
then round the block to see the show.

Forty years gone: I can't recall
my grandmom's voice, only
the echo of her bedside bell.
But I can call that evening back
as sharp and keen as pain
when slipping knife meets bone.

Wood smoke curling against a slate-violet sky
the old house huddled far from the road
the sting of flakes on cheek
broken pine tang on the air
and splashed against the unmarred lawn
the shining velvet stains
the soft scarlet aureoles
of wreathlight on snow.

Home for the Holidays (ed. Tom Davis). NC: Old Mountain Press,
2006: 36.

The Trail to Never Summer Ranch

Snowball, saxifrage, sky pilot
cinqufoil and arnica, king's crown, clover
fleabane, lousewort, gentian
colors sharp and fresh in the alpine light
millefleurs like medieval tapestry
dot the meadow that rises up to the sky
silvery fingers of ice-cold streams
inches deep, no more wide
entrelace delicately down the flank
of weathered rock

I pick my way up the wandering track
careful to place my feet
on bunch grass only
not for me to tread
on the mountain's glory
lest the entire range
crumble down in outrage
at such lèsé-majesté

This is not my country
These are not my mountains
so high, so cold
so unconcerned
They do not care that their thin air
burns my lungs
Their sheer light burns my eyes
their frigid beauty binds my heart
Only that they stretch,
yearning, for the sky
they always have

Mountain Time (ed. Tom Davis). NC: Old Mountain Press, 2006: 81.

Rue de la Condé

When the waves crash on this shingled beach
the sound the pebbles make evokes
the Blue Dog's claws
when we walk the graveled paths
of the Ursuline garden

Thyme and rosemary tinge the air
and haltingly I voice my pain
the fears that stab in the night so hard
I can't even draw breath
let alone roll over

She fixes me with her golden eyes
her voice rough as chicory inside my head
"Cher, you dream too hard.
You got to learn to dream easier
or you bleed to death inside."

Her claws click across the stones
as she trots down the allée
back of the Court of Three Sisters
When I turn to ask her what she means
Superior laps coldly at my feet

At the Rock 'n' Bowl

the kiss you snatched
as you swung me round the corner
tasted of oysters and hot sauce
cigarettes and stale beer
hot desire fusing us as we danced
to the rhythm of the *accordion*

You can't stay strangers long
when Kenny and the Iguanas take the stage
pouring zydeco like liquid fire
over the clatter of balls on maple lanes
You saw my tapping foot and grabbed my hand

and we two-stepped round the floor
as long as they played
gasping for breath and laughing
as the voodoo wreathed around us

Later skin to skin
we lay in a tangle of thrift-store sheets
I watched your eyes fade into sleep
and pressed my ear against your chest
hearing our hearts pounding together
to the beat of a distant *accordion*

Elysian Fields

No point putting the dead in the ground
they won't stay more than a month or three
before they push back up and demand their rights
stone houses and flowers
brass markers and candles
all the trimmings

My friend Shirley found that out
when she tried to wrap daddy up in walnut and bronze
and get him out of her life with a concrete vault
It wasn't six weeks before they called her at work
said he'd popped back up
and wanted her to haul her ass down there
do it right this time with an angel on top
show the old man some respect

Now she drives down every Saturday afternoon
leaves the bingo cards and markers in the Buick
and pays a call just like the old days
tells him all the news in town
and before she leaves pours a glass of rum
for his Saturday night repose

And every week when she comes back
that rum is gone from out the vestibule
sure as can be
the old man likes his liquor.

No point putting the dead in the ground
it just aggravates them
and you know how her daddy was
when you cut off his booze
it just brought out the devil in him

Storyville

The tourists all head to Marie Laveau's
or Reverend Zombie's for their fill
but the working girls up on Iberville know
for good ju-ju you gotta go
to Storyville

A ten spot brings you to a mildewed house
where Madame Sylvie unwraps her cards
from a grimy scarf
and fans them across scarred mahogany
Cups, wands, towers fall from gnarled fingers
brows narrowed she makes her demand
"Give me your hands, child."
She engulfs them in her mocha mitts
sees the lines that run deeper than
the creases on her ageless face
"You know what these here tell,"
she says in a voice colder than steel
"Why you come here when you already know?"

I shrug. "The girls up on the Tenderloin,
They say you see what others don't."
A long silence fills the room
"Burn candles, child, burn candles,"
falls softly from her lips.
"And leave by the door you come in by."

Walking back up towards Basin Street
fate drips from my palms like Spanish moss
the music slinks after me like a beaten stray

Tatterdemalion city

you wear your age so well
cover your creases with cerulean paint
slap wrought iron and beads over your scars
brazen it out on the morning after
with a wry grin and beignet sugar
all over your front

no pockmark so deep that thick mascara
and a feather boa or two
won't cover it up as you stagger home
at 4 a.m. on a stranger's arm
after a night you'll smile to regret

tatterdemalion city my sister
teach me to strut like a old drag queen
mask my heart behind the glitter and throws
swagger on like it doesn't hurt

"Suite: New Orleans, 2001" [five poems]. *More Than Words* 1.1
(2005). Available online at
<http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/morethanwords.htm>.

Poems Submitted for Publication

Blues

blue azure cobalt
peacock lapis lazuline
cerulean indigo verditer
turquoise cyan ultramarine
the sea east of Cozumel
the windows of Chartres
the sky above a Colorado plain
your eyes in summer

The Art of Books

For Paul

She asks me why my poems speak of knives
Only the good ones, I say,
not wanting to unlock
the word-hoard in my breast

tell her like the artist
I draw the outline of my pain
in lines precise and sharp
shape it to my will

with words my acid
I etch these sheets
in measured strokes
cut and shape my scars

stab the binding soul-deep
lace it in language
bear witness to the journey
though who can say where it will end

Second Sweep

for Dick O., 1951-2008

Silverblack water sliced by the paddle,
Glacier-cold, deep, satin-smooth,
Sliding under the canoe's wooden breast,
Parting like the hair of Gomez Addams,
as you propel us toward
the mouth of the locks.

The moment shatters.
Motorboat driven by a red-faced rube
tears the surface into shards,
tosses us to our knees
and nearly in the drink,
then roars away
without apology.

No pause on your part.
Just a string of perfect,
acid, utter profanity
that you hurl after him,
a knife through his unfeeling heart.
I have used it many times since
but never with such *brio*:
I will not forget.

Dia de los Meurtos

Make an *ofrenda*
an offering, an altar
candles, skulls, *cempasúchil*,
candy and sugar cones
fruit, photographs
una cerveza to call them back

Write their names on slips of paper
mutter prayers like an old woman
beg spirits to slip back through the veil
return to the realm
of flesh and family

Veladoras flicker
like the skirts of the dancers
graceful, desirable
always just out of reach
under Janitzio, the arch of heaven

No matter how hard I dance
how high the flame
it cannot drive the cold from my bones
cannot unburn what the flame
already has feasted on

The Ball Player

Late afternoon shadows
somewhere between the Baths of Caracalla
and Trajan's column
A cobbled street curls up the hill
it has embraced since the wolf twins' day
Anonymous wooden gates the only punctuation
to steep windowless walls
of crushed travertine foundations
medieval pavers
crumbling Republican stucco

All is silent around me
and then: *thump thump thump*
leather ball on ancient brick
His profile is pure Etruscan
and would suit
a ragged toga and sandals as well
as the too-large FC Milan jersey
and well-worn Adidas
that drape his skinny frame.

His eyes meet mine, suspicious,
then turn back to the pursuit of the ball
thump thump
Such matters always weightier to boys
Than wandering strangers
Interrupting a private game

I would freeze it forever:
From somewhere behind the walls
An exasperated female voice:
Giovanni! Andiamo! Presto!
And his reply, old already in the Sibyll's day—
Momento, Mama. Momento.

Gatti

Today I have walked from the Spanish Steps
to the Baths of Caracalla
and back to the Palatine Hill
Near the Coliseum I buy panini
from a vendor's cart
and sit to take it all in
The weight of time, crumbling columns,
fountains that pour out long-dried springs

They find me there
first an opportunistic tabby
and then a grey striped tom
with a ragged ear
And when I throw the first scrap of cheese
they eddy around my legs, dozens of them,
some silent, some vocal--
*Give us our due. You feed your soul;
Now fill our bellies.*

A few brave a paw on knee;
One garrulous tom momentarily occupies my lap
but disappears when airbrakes squeal.
I look up to a chorus of Nikons and Sonys
in a red and black bus
Japanese tourists snapping the picture
of the island of woman
in a sea of Roman cats.

Somewhere in Tokyo
or Osaka or Hokkaido
Yoko shows her pictures to her friends
*Look. Look at cats in Rome.
Look at the lady feed the cats.
I did not know there were so many cats in Rome.
I did not know the ladies had red hair.*