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PANTHER IN THE GLOVE

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\*National Federation of State Poetry Societies publishes a limited edition anthology of annual prize winners for the membership

## OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, dresser scarves, antimacassars  
no one wants, filling boxes, filling huge cotton prints,  
sleeves sloping like tents, hooks unfastened  
back of the neck, they string out  
death in rocking chairs.

Daily they fatten to fill their final boxes, paying  
out advice no one needs, paying  
out the slow twine, enlarging the old designs,  
straining fifty-odd years of wifery  
for a mite to impress the young ones  
tightening against their webs and cardboard,  
closing in with the last lid.

Frayed sheaths  
used awhile by knife-voiced kin  
who own everything in focus  
outside the net of squares and wheels.

On humid suburban evenings, on some deserted  
concrete patio, they group like toadstools,  
picking at the threads of the days' patterns,  
unraveling their mouths,  
honing their only weapons.

## BEFORE A POET KNOWS WHAT SHE IS

Eyes wild and light as a puma's,  
breast-buds flowered plump, up-tilted to summer,  
opal and nectarine heraldry of Erato in jeans.

Graduation brought three marriage pleas,  
bottled forest smells, soft wool and leather  
always close, mouths and arms she liked.  
New sums to sift at the deep waking.

The suitors spoke hoarsely of apartments  
and TV, bed, money, children  
and two promised a car of her own.  
She ran alone to wrap night around her.

Without secret pages,  
too unsure to say how warlock winds  
hurried her blood, how river tongues rhymed  
with hers and promised more. Too new  
to tell how strings and reeds in minor keys  
leaned her on shoulders of granite,  
closed her eyes with pine breath  
while wilderness sinew held her closer.

And her unnamed babies  
already lay in an outgrown box  
pressing blue gentians from ditches.

## THE BEST THING MY FATHER DID WAS LIE

People, all the pretty people lie so well and tell truth like amateurs in little threadbare theaters; it all comes out damp and gray, slurred and slurried, going away and coming back.

Where do you dig for truth? Cut on the parallax, in the center or the middle? There's a difference— one is this fence I'm on: the pickets are cut and dried, alternating black and white, scratching fact sore but not much truth.

People climb up here out of context to reach boughs of that old tree, maybe the Eden Tree, but the whole crop's wormy to the core. My father said conqueror worms were final ONLY truth.

He polished his lies like jewels, wore one in each eye, mounted a ruby in his tongue. His skull rattled with others stored for special events and Sundays. When some went out of style, he re-faceted, and none wore dim before him.

He mined the world for his rough material mine polished was dull beside.

We inlaid his coffin with his favorites; he willed the rest to me, never to go with fence-climbing, fruit-picking clothes. I keep them here because I don't know how to get rid of them. Worms have started on the box but the gems are still gorgeous and whole. I planned to sit here until all were devoured but it won't happen. Worms tried to bite the big ruby, sprung their jaws and died. Only harder stones can make dust of these. Or some marvelous ray. Until unequivocal then, the beasts will eat boxes and bones, the jewels will glitter, each its own irrelevance, and I am tired of watching.

All the real stuff is down there in either-sided sludge. Quasi—I must jump off right or left and grope for nothing absolute.

If only some almost holy wind would push.

YOU SHOULD KNOW SHOULD I SAY YES

I've never understood her well.  
She comes and goes at will,  
sometimes more than once a day.  
Now and then I turn and do  
a double take to make sure it really is she.

Her voice is alto soft; you called her shy.  
She's the one to marry, she's the one  
who doesn't have to win  
or even compete; she'd be satisfied  
with a bungalow, a hatchback, and simple country food.

This place is always crowded; I didn't see  
my other friend come in. I say  
"friend" because she's been so close--  
all through school in the same class,  
so many nights in the same bed.

Fantasizing about some boy she wanted bad,  
she never spared details. Her imagery would wheel  
through my head, center in my lower half and while  
I lay thinking how a slow hot cure would feel  
against my aching, she'd begin to fill

her mental shopping cart with perks and goods  
her favors could harvest-- as if the gods  
designed her just to be rewarded for her beauty.  
I'd call her nasty names and say her body  
was not meant to be used that way.

I'd shame her, make her promise to behave, then we  
wouldn't speak till the next night  
when I was studying, my stomach in a knot,  
and she'd bring up clothes or yachts; she wanted it all.  
Next day I'd hear her laughing as I rode the El,

(cont.)

struggling with theses and a twelve pound book,  
her "degrees won't get it for you, babe," in the back  
of my head. So of course, you've met her,  
a cunning child with trailing scented hair  
looking lies from under lashes long enough

to blow in the wind. You've heard her voice, sometimes a knife  
out of its sheath. You've seen her eyes, wild  
and craving as a hawk's, cool fire like a cougar's willed  
to the art of pursuit, always weighing, always hiding  
something. And you've fallen into their orbit, unheeding.

But watch. The lids lower and raise and she's gone.  
Here sits a middling woman with nothing to gain  
by telling you this. I wonder why I did.  
Yet you must have noticed when daisies died  
and orchids bloomed on a hollyhock stem.

You've seen fawn eyes transmit praise and trust, then steam  
with sudden rage, and back again to blue-greened  
layers of velvet empathy, deep ingrained  
with kindness, reflex lenses of compassion. Right now  
she who cares so much is past tense, how long I don't know.

I share these eyes with her and her. I've confessed  
the complexities of woman. A blink. That fast.  
The change can happen with a syllable, a color,  
or slowly like the build-up of a chafing collar.  
Part of this trihedroness should be kept

in full sun; part needs to be tightly capped  
like fulminate of mercury, never stirred.  
The less definite one needs to be steered  
with a modicum of persuasion, a steady hand.  
Sometimes the hand must be my own, my conscience hound,  
or just the basic elements of selfhood.  
Are we so different after all? If you had  
a psychic scalpel would you sever  
all your prisoners, or keep them in the brew for savor?  
Think how each taste will flourish with more than one receiver.

## STRANGER

This is a never before hereness  
yet such an old village--  
not somewhere I would live.  
The houses look noxious,  
the streets abscessed and humpbacked.  
I know every cranny as surely  
as the sound of your voice  
calling my name.

Only yesterday  
we were expelled from a silver express train,  
booted off as if we didn't have the fare  
or some VIP claimed our seats.

I've heard about this place  
in rattling prologues to winter  
and from spider tracks behind the furnace.

You've ruckled these alleys  
with your flickering eyes,  
skewed these rooftops with your fever.  
Your jaw clenches the déjà vu of pain.

How can I stay?

But if I don't  
you might lose your way  
and no one else knows the road home.

## TROMPE L'OEIL

It means deception of the eye,  
this unique art form  
making us believe nonexistent things.  
Your den's north wall appears  
as bookshelves of brightly bound classics,  
a bust of Homer, Ming censers, brass pots  
trailing ivy and florescence.  
The clever painter lies, then provides  
real scent of roses to satisfy the nose.  
But the hand that tries to grasp a volume  
of verse or feel jade's carved coolness  
resents being made a fool. And still the eye  
insists, forcing another confrontation  
with flatness. So must I resolve you  
in the brain's right and left privacies,  
in the unlighted offshoots  
that don't remember facts.  
Another artist has blued your eyes  
with faithfulness and burnished your skin  
with sweet shades. Sometimes my hand  
finds heat and roundness much more  
than a match for illusions of sight.  
No place wanting softness or substance  
goes empty. Yet I know I'll touch again  
that one-dimension hardness,  
try to hold the light that isn't there,  
face that depthless smile.  
And all your old false colors  
will shame me for my blindness.

"LIKE A PANTHER IN THE GLOVE" --Emily Dickinson  
(For Emily M.)

"She was so thoughtful"--  
"So sweet and caring"--  
her friends recite in psalter tones.  
The ritual room of shaking heads,  
soft sibilance and carnation overkill  
thick enough to replace her bier  
light my anger like a torch.

At least no mawkish mass  
will ever fill a space like this  
once my lips are cosmetically closed.  
They could never muster enough charity  
to honey their tongues with me. What right  
have they to my name in their warm mouths!

Maybe she wasn't always wonderful.  
Or maybe she ran on low amperage,  
never knowing how it is to operate  
on your own hot crossed-circuitry,  
splicing with scorched fingers  
your own frayed smoking wires. Or maybe  
  
she did it all and knew it well  
under insulation of infinite grace.

In silence  
I will make myself her monument.

## COMMUTER TRAIN RIDERS

Let all the habitual passengers know  
in the dark of their heads  
that the 8:15 will pile jackknifed and jagged  
in a ditch tomorrow. Leave Gabriel feathers  
on their doorsills so they're sure.  
Some will ride it anyway, unable to crack  
their molds, ratcheted to their private reels,  
racked on indelible rails in sweat-fitted hides.

Knowing now, knowing nothing else,  
they rattle their loose change, dash  
from center to corner,  
make deep fingernail tracks  
on the sides of their thoughts. They dip  
into the old bins to rummage for things  
they once put somewhere. One reads  
a certain book, one cleans the attic,  
fondling trophies. One prowls sleep with pills.

They do what they can with their morning faces,  
staring at the huge WHY that palls their reflections.  
Slowly, though not enough to be late,  
they go out and board the 8:15.

## VERNAL EQUINOX

I don't want to know it's spring--  
days as long as nights.

You and I began almost fifteen months ago.  
You wore your old hunting boots  
hauled from the trunk when your car stalled  
in the blizzard and you walked the rest of the way.  
Your ears had turned to American Beauties  
just out of the florist's refrigerator.  
The real ones never came.  
Under my long dress I wore fleece sweat pants.  
The church's vintage furnace picked that day  
to sigh its last. Only three guests arrived.  
We said our vows in the preacher's study,  
his glasses so fogged he could barely read his lines.  
Some people said it was a long achey winter.  
But we loved it away and started on our second.

Now I could tell them the sharpest pang is green.  
The coldest hurting is warm moist earth  
crumbling and parting for still more green.

You said I'd make you a winner.  
But all I did was make you a pair of boot socks  
make the bed  
make soup and deep dish pie  
then turn to answer that strange knock at the door  
and tomorrow's knob came off in my hand.

## CAT-WALK

Her name is Nefertiti, this tabby  
asserting ancient wiseness beyond our alley,  
suspending  
all my substance against the wall in her gaze—  
Secret lenses of Alice's looking glass eye-level,  
unguarded for an instant— Always I've known  
if I moved with dark quick as light  
I could descend one of those twin tunnels  
when they opened to receive impatient night.

As I entered (did she know?)  
the passage vibrated, still hot  
with her last wild leap from cellar to bookcase.  
My trackless feet swirled faint smells of fennel,  
toadflax and humus. Tiny sparks flared,  
died deeper in iris mazes of mist and whisper  
of small things hiding in crevices. I opened  
the first door. Ahead the shafts converged,  
a vaulted corridor of oak-bark, leaf-shine, sun-stain.  
Joy was magneto rhythm, intense probing prongs  
of root-forks and moon-shed. Next, a trophy room  
collaged with grasshoppers, shrews, bright wings,  
There were hoarded summers, spare willows,  
stacks of overgrown trails, adventures  
still wrapped in assorted fur and sensuous string.  
Convolutions of shapes and sounds  
changed and flowed on a weft of black,  
approaching, receding, on a vector of velvet.  
Green was a flavor and all other eyes a strong scent.  
Motion was a prolonged spring, a dive  
that never reached water, reversed upward at will.

Deeper was slow cryptic drumming,  
a sudden sinewy flash of untame gilt and ebony  
lancing through vines and scorched grass  
dissolving to jungle dusk.  
Another door. A sly stir in a chamber beyond.  
A brink, a river noise, a rush of olive and indigo.  
At my feet a beetle—  
No, a scarab jewel!  
And I returned to my place without crossing the Nile.

## AFTERNOON AMONG THE ARTIFACTS

If not for the small sign, I'd have passed it without interrupted interest in the other displays, without stopping at the thing that changed the world. It's called The Fat Man.

The name is apt— a bulbous unarmed twin of Nagasaki's Nemesis  
obsoletely catching dust and fingerprints in a museum on the fringes of Milwaukee.

Hard to think it a bomb or even a weapon, more like a time capsule maybe filled with swatches of our century's first third: a beaded flapper dress, a megaphone, a rumble seat. A tub for making gin or soup enough for depression lines— all things before my time but no more alien than this bulging precedent marking the floor with shadows, forerunner of smaller packages of streamlined rage. We went from atomic to hydrogen to nuclear with sinister interstices filled with equations that don't translate the same in every language.

I'm curiously detached. This is abstract art, this huge clumsy egg. It should be seething with metaphor. It should cry out with the voice of Isaiah over the wails of hell. I'm missing something. I've lost my hearing.

Maybe we stood too close to that first blast. Maybe it damaged our inner ears and eyes and all our inside senses, jarred spaces in our cortex so we can't relate one thing to another. The circuit arcs over the voids, sputters, skips. A cerebral non sequitur.

I wander among the airplanes, mostly wings of war, fifty years of progress in flight. I pause beneath an ultralight, stare at a lunar lander. By the time I return to The Fat Man, a kid has scrawled an obscenity in yellow crayon on its dark bulk. It won't rub off; it only smears. Maybe Eliot was too elegant. Maybe the world ends without bang or whimper, just one final blurred scatological curse.

The Fat Man is supremely indifferent. I try to multiply thousands of lives by millions of next time, by megatons of now. How far past kill is overkill? What is now? When is today? Is it the decade or the afternoon? Or the last minute?

(While I'm Trying To Write A French Rondeau)

YOU ASK IF I'VE FORGOTTEN HIM

I think of him when lightning splits  
The pines astride this ridge then hits  
The thicket wall still rolling fire.  
Brush flares, rain hisses, makes a spire  
Of smoke, a claim. It rarely quits  
With that, but smolders in the pits  
Of sticks and limbs till all my wits  
Are stoked, so after I retire

I think of him.

In warming times each year this blitz  
Re-scars my woods. I search for bits  
Of green around charred wounds, then liar-  
Like, hail life as something to desire.  
All winter when my likeness fits,

I think of him.

## OCTOBER BEFORE SLEEP

Night's fir-lined quiet  
seeps into my tent and sleeping bag.  
I open the skylight flap of canvas  
for cool star sparks to pour through.

My squarish shadow steeps  
in wild dissymmetry as native noises  
begin dividing the dark.  
Eyes closed, I label them--  
strumming legs, ballooning throats,  
tiny claws scrabbling in leaf mold,  
random breeze bumping low branches.  
The exercise satisfies the faint  
what-ifs left over from childhood.

It has been decades since I was here  
but only I  
am different. A loon on the lake  
crazes the horizontal sounds,  
his cry a blue ice peak  
on my spinal graph.  
I smile and roll over slowly  
into the semi-warmth of acceptance.

Chopbooks art:  
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in a ditch tomorrow. Leave Gabriel feathers  
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into the old bins to rummage for things  
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a certain book, one cleans the attic,  
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They do what they can with their morning faces,  
staring at the huge WHY that palls their reflections.  
Slowly, though not enough to be late,  
they go out and board the 8:15.

## LAST UNCLE

In my dandelion days  
I had five tall men  
who swooped me to their shoulders,  
swung me, made me squeal deliciously.

In my frantic floribunda days  
they began leaving  
and I let them, without ever learning  
of the last year of the Cavalry, without feeling  
the bees' warmth against the glass lab cases, meeting  
the queens, tasting the special honey,  
without watching the wet hands at the potter's wheel  
but always reaching out my own for prize-winning pots.

Once in my pastel hollyhock days  
it served me to serve with the cognac  
what I had heard without listening— how one had flown  
the early U. S. Mail, had twice met Lindy,  
had crashed in a swamp but saved his cargo.  
A dry-box tidbit with only a faint aroma  
of rich ragout. Because I was always  
singing in the choir, collecting carnival glass,  
photographing children in the garden.

And now in my tearose days  
there is one. My faded luggage is crammed  
with empty pages  
as this jet closes an east to west arch.  
And I wonder if he'll feel like talking.

## A VASE OF PINK PLUM BLOSSOMS

The dull clay coil in my potter's hands  
obeyed my fingers, my will,  
but only casually.

The relinquished form lusted after light,  
rearranged its gray molecules in sun,  
reveled in its experience with fire.

Still an apprentice,  
it drank deeply of earth's unguents  
flowed over its flaws, then healed  
and ripened in the last lap of hereditary heat.  
Today it came into its own  
first flowering  
alloyed with pollinated sisters of the soil.

## OLD PLOWMEN

The big oil painting was eloquent with humanity  
in bib overalls and ladder-back chairs  
with the color worn off. Country store barrels  
foiled the four practiced sitters  
like family ghosts in the background.

In the upper left, Thadeus Ock idled his thick sole  
against the obligatory pot-bellied stove  
so I could smell the scorch. "Hunh, that's just as likely  
if you spell sole with a 'u'," Clayburn Gilmer chided  
from the foreground, sniffing. And Thad replied, "Naw,  
I'll make it to heaven, all right. Doin' nothin',  
stayin' outa mischief, that's how."

A sensitive brush caught sly turns of lip,  
leprechaun eyes, impudent toothpick, poised Barlow knife.  
"What about sins of omission, Thad?" Doc Benson drawled.  
(He wasn't a real doctor but folks gave him the last word  
on ague, constipation and male maladies till they forgot  
he was just a farmer too. For one thing, everything of his  
still worked at the time; for another,  
he recommended "a modicum of sour-mash bourbon"  
for a multitude of misfortunes.)

Thad and Jerry Holman addressed sinning by default  
with square-boned shrugs. Jerry, haloed  
in Kaywoodie smoke, added, "Reckon that's better  
than actin' like a Pharisee makin' a big to-do."  
A tobacco juice exclamation point seconded the comment.

The composition was sufficiently humble with grays  
and blues; a muted palette of ochers and umbers  
suspected the subjects of things  
their own left hands hardly knew-- filled silos  
for an injured neighbor, prize calf to a new widow,  
kidney to a cousin, ready hammer and lumber  
for the storm-damaged church belltower.

The artist's knowing stroke unstilled life  
and sound. The faces defied canvas and time  
that tried to reduce them all to sameness,  
contain them in dark stained wood with mitered corners.

The gavel banged on my attention from the front  
of the hall. The bidding was over. Afterward as I paid  
the price, the auctioneer came over, wondering aloud  
why I outbid the collectors. Had I known the artist?

"No. I watched him once. Bothered him probably."  
I walked toward the picture I'd already entered  
through the door he painted decades ago.  
"I always wondered what happened to this work.  
That man on the left-- the one peeling the apple--  
he was my grandfather. The apple was for me."

(While I'm Trying To Write A French Rondeau)

YOU ASK IF I'VE FORGOTTEN HIM

I think of him when lightning splits  
The pines astride this ridge then hits  
The thicket wall still rolling fire.  
Brush flares, rain hisses, makes a spire  
Of smoke, a claim. It rarely quits  
With that, but smolders in the pits  
Of sticks and limbs till all my wits  
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In warming times each year this blitz  
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The Fat Man is supremely indifferent. I try to multiply thousands of lives by millions of next time, by megatons of now. How far past kill is overkill? What is now? When is today? Is it the decade or the afternoon? Or the last minute?

## KING TUTANKHAMUN: ONCE THERE WAS A BOY WHO LOVED TO WHISTLE

Young pharoah, I studied your museumed effigies  
catching light and oblique dark,  
posed on the threshold of blue and saffron,  
paused in the old dreams from the head of Horus:  
Morning renascence out of a lotus—  
rolling across the arch of heaven on sun wheels—  
rafting under-earth rivers near shoals of Osiris  
wrapped in the shawls of Ptah.

Mortal eyes are splendored with your accessories,  
a glut of gold and gods.

And everywhere your face with your ankh-eyes  
reflecting on your mirror world.

(You must have seen eyes when yours were closed,  
always on you, looking full at you from anywhere,  
a thousand replicas to fill your own.)

I saw you at the bowstring—hunter, warrior,  
hero-murals of a king, a moral for your subjects  
foiled with lapis, carnelian, turquoise, ivory.  
And in the end, failed by the vulturine wingspan  
and flared serpent hood.

But back in the trailing edges of light,  
beyond the artists' tales and the godsmiths' tolls  
before you changed your name, there was a smiling boy.  
I saw him clearly through a tear in the papyrus,  
rollicking barefoot on sands old when legends began—  
You on an ungilded afternoon, learning how to whistle.

It is he beneath the priceless mask—  
Amarna child with puckered mouth framing melodies  
for the songless ibis, and turning Selket's head.  
On moon-chilled desert I can hear him  
softly behind the myth of death.

## THE INTERLOPERS

Beneath inverted black jungle  
of water hyacinth roots underweaving my hidden bayou,  
my diver's lamp the only hold with my world,  
I disturb a concert of stripes: hundreds  
of inch-long fishes silver-slanting right or left  
as my hand directs. A king size mud cat  
like Genghis Khan eyes me from the olive drab floor.  
And overhead! My lost boat! Impounded  
since last summer— clamped listing in a wet/dry vise,  
sun-half of bulbous green vases feigning  
innocence with flowers; night-half of fringe  
and garland chain, propeller upholstered in velvet.  
I rip away the slimy grip and feel  
hairy stalactites creep closer, more determined  
than topside kudzu. The gasoline-fed screw might  
thresh a yard before losing. A new spring army  
of trees wades out to make a stockade.  
Roman-helmeted herons patrol  
the spreading perimeter above with lances.  
Here, the mighty Khan rules, guarded by turtles.  
And I, slave to light and lungs  
must fight myself free.

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Japanese Sedoka 22.  
PANTHER

CALLIGRAPHY BY NIGHT

Three migrating cranes  
Brushed their winged strokes across  
The waxing moon's empty page.

In silvered silence  
We read their cryptic beauty  
Like an ancient haiku scroll.