

Poems 05

And more would ride his holds low in the sea.

By night he made the stars his rosary,
Lamenting long to heaven's porchlights, pride
Still preened, comparing all his griefs to Job's,
Rattling his shackles like a tambourine.

*And did I govern badly? Providence
Almighty—was my guide. What choice had I
But execution of insurgents who
Defied the law? The gall of Bobadilla
Seizing private papers! And my house!*

The captain was uneasy in these waters;
He sought and took his prisoner's advice:
Northeast to catch the stronger westerlies.
This time of year Madeira was the landfall—
The only words Colón spoke on his journey
Of humiliation back to Spanish judgment.

The Admiral of the Ocean Sea could walk
The quarterdeck between arrested sleep.
At leisure, he reviewed how knowledge changed
A man. A man could also alter knowledge.

Of error/doubt could enervate his own

The Evil One beset all chosen men
Proportionate to greatness. Take the jinns,
Those cursed spawns of Islam loose on earth
To foul supplies and water, cause a plague
Or agitate the settlers' discontent.
Or pour malevolence in ears at court....

ENIGMA: THE GEMINI THING

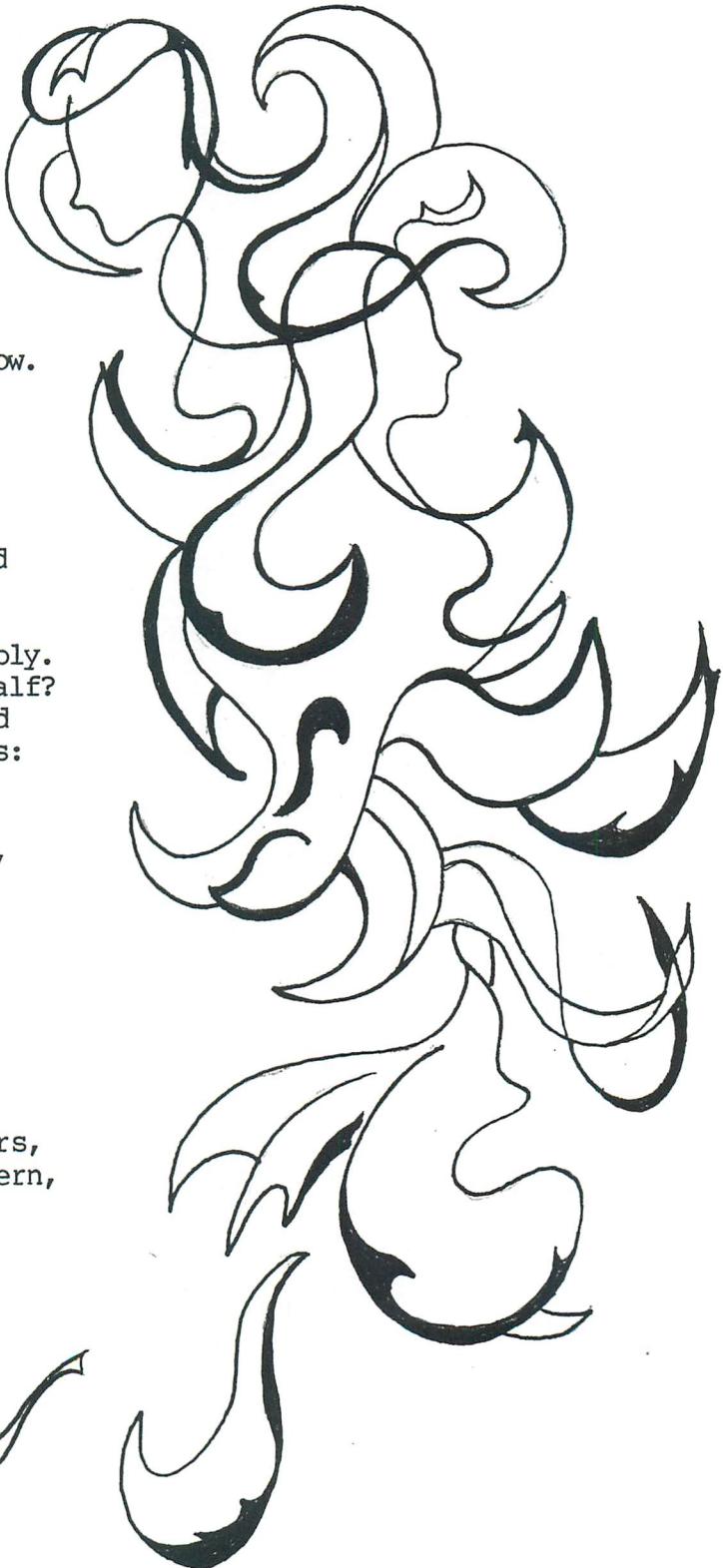
Once,
afloat in our own wine dark sea,
we were closer than lovers
sealed in long tropical night
where love was unknown
as enmity and dread were unknown.
When our small chances came
with the light, love was harder to know.

Once,
we were close in sweetened bathwater,
soft blankets, drifting in and out
of each other's secret sleep,
the long waking shorescapes. We shared
maternal premises, promises, her.

We looked through a glass darkly, doubly.
Was joy multiplied or diminished by half?
Eden knowledge came when we discovered
not our nakedness but our separateness:
Each became betrayer of the plural.

Year after year we severed, magnified,
savored differences, fleeing
the vertigo of center space,
the implacable pull where everything
impacts in equivocal being.

Yet no lancet can bisect
the design, not even two-edged words
plunged into ticking exactitudes.
A magnetic field holds us. Binary stars,
we reflect, conceding the path's pattern,
each repaired seam, each amended sum
still part of the same.



BYSTANDER: THE OTHER COLON

I

His astrolabe lay on the window sill.
Bartholomew stood staring at the dawn
With seaman's eyes from a garret oriel.
Below, the street awakened; tunny-mongers,
Garlic stalls and honey-hawkers stirred.

To dare his brother's theories required
A firm resolve. But Cristobal had primed
Him once again with promises and prods:
"Try Henry now," he urged. "Persuade the king
Of England with my charts. And speak of gold.

"If he refuses, go to Charles of France.
All monarchs and their experts can't be blind
To proffered bounty. Use your smoothest tongue

Their favor should be like a torch to hers."

Bartholomew still dreaded Cris's temper,
A riptide flaying caulk out of his hull,
St. Elmo's fire igniting in each pupil.
He hurried off to do his brother's bidding
But failed to gain investors for the voyage.

Perhaps his lack of faith diluted verve.
He was amazed the Spanish crown gave in
To hoist the royal aegis over sails
Of three good caravels, provisioned, blessed
And sent to reach Cathay in half the time.

II

Bart saw them for himself, the palm-cooled isles,
The estuaries claimed. And having gained
Them, how Cris coveted his driving dream
To push ahead for what his stubbornness
Still swore was near—the glory-goods of China.

His words became a sword, to dub or slay,
He helped himself to natives like fishes caught
In nets, or timber cut for ship repair.

In Castile's courts as one more future resource.

Where booted feet erased the bare-soled prints
Of centuries, one brother's voice proclaimed
That all was now possessed by lighter hads
Whose grasp would mutate races, cultures, gods—
And repaint continental palimpsests.

III

Bartholomew was not surprised to see
The ship arrive, the writ for their arrest.

The New World colony had failed. The sight
of Cris in chains disturbed him, yet his prayer

And die.

LOOKING FOR BIMINI

The soldier from Leon was tired of war.
The man called Cristobal Colón inspired

In 1493, convinced Colón
had shaped a secret course to Cathay's shores,
Juan Ponce, sails unfurled, ambition primed,

He heard the stories from the master seaman:
How alchemists could turn white sand to gold,
How certain peoples were exempt from age,
How tropic leaves predicted true events.

Then mounted his own search for Bimini,
The name Colón gave to the key he thought
Would open up the route to India
And China and resolve all mysteries.

The fringes of America deceived
Explorers once again. The lands they claimed,
The pleasant coves were never where they thought.
A continental mass lay in between
Their expectations and their empty holds.

The soldier from Leon pursued his vision
To claim new findings for the Spanish crown.
Still coveting the prize of wealth and youth,

He sailed for magic landfalls further west.

In April, 1513, he set foot

“Feast of Flowers II—*Florida*, his word.

Amid such lavish verdure all his men

Were certain it was where the fabled spring

Gushed out its blessings of longevity.

They camped near fresh sweet waters, drank their fill;

And told themselves it was an island Eden.

To colonize, subdue the Indians,

Provide a port for settlers and their goods.

The natives never knew they were misnamed,

But they were not receptive to the rule

Of unknown foreign kings and iron-hatted men

with swords. They had no words for ownership;

Their homes, themselves were part of living earth.

Collective wisdom told them to expel

The threat. They drove out Ponce de Leon.

The bamboo spear that pierced him, slowly took

His life. His expedition sailed away,

As other European men would come

And go. But Florida, the left hand thumb

Plunged in the south Atlantic, kept the name:

The meaning looped around it like a garland.

VITUS JUNASSEN BERING, 1681-1741

Some men are bred and shaped on ice-stropped wind,
Bone-racking cold, relentless thawless night.
Some men, though lured away from home, do not
Escape the chill. One Vitus Bering, born

He served with valor in the Swedish wars,
Was then assigned to cross Siberia,

Connection with the New World continent,
Unknown and vast. He found a narrow passage,
Now called Bering Strait. If land once linked
Those massive shores, it lay beneath the sea.
But Russia wanted trade routes, maps were needed.
Pacific exploration was essential.
Young Bering was commissioned to return
For more details of that precarious place.

His second voyage, he claimed Alaska for
Tsarina Anna (Peter now deceased).
His log describes rough edges of the land,
An endless rank of mountains marching inland—
Infinity of white. As spouting whales

Parenthesized his bow. Small islands lined
Alaska's coast (Siberians had named

Walruses and seals, the seabird clans,

The overwhelming wealth of fish and fur.
His landfall, Kayak Island, in a storm,
Revealed an ancient Innuit encampment.
He questioned natives, charted every course,
And wrote a lengthy journal of his journey.

From there he wandered south. Aleutian gales
Beset his craft, ran him aground, a spot
Now known as Bering Island. Food was scarce
And scurvy plagued them all. They wintered there,
Dug in the ground beneath the permafrost
Where Bering died within a month. But most
Survived on seal and otter meat despite
Blue foxes' raids on scraps. The packs attacked

Disease and blood-crazed canines took their toll.
In spring, the crew recovered parts enough
From wreckage of their washed-up ship to build
Another boat. They made it to Kamchatka.

Denied his presentation to the court,
His expedition still made history.
Discoveries by Bering spurred the Russians
Onward, all the way to California.

Was held till 1867 when
They sold Alaska to the U.S.A.

Dubbed "Seward's folly," "Bering's bugaboo,"
Two pennies for each acre—"What a waste!"

A CHANT ROYAL FOR THE SWAMP FOX

Grew slick beneath its rider, one went lame.
The point man's saddle slipped; the man astride

Immobilized, his mount stalled in the mud
Of sodden lowlands snarled with vine and bud.
Mosquitoes filled the space between scrub-oak
And rotting pine as British curses broke
The humid stillness. "May a seething pox
Take Francis Marion, the bloody bloke!
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox!"

The officer's anathema allied
Them—captain, lowliest dragoon the same,
Bogged down in muck and anger, punctured pride—
All itching for a chance to vent their shame.
Next day they killed some cattle at their cud
And three war-wounded stallions put to stud.

And children, stole their food, a counterstroke
Of Tory spleen, unsubtle as an ox.
But they still felt uneasy when they woke.
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox.

Now neutrals, even loyalists, would ride
By night to where the PeeDee snaked, untame,
Into the fetid marsh to fight beside
The gimp fox who lived up to his name.
At times with nary biscuit, nary spud,
In spite of heat, malaria and flood,
His band harassed the British, made a joke
Of their supply lines, left their stores in smoke.
Or Marion would trap them in a box
Exact a price, give their morale a poke.
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox.

Cornwallis said too many men had died

Must be erased. Guerrillas don't abide
By rules, he said, they pick us off like game.
He sent fresh troops, he armed the slaves, more blood
Ran bright. The colonists regrouped: Young Judd,
Three Johns, retired militia formed a spoke
To plague the royal rear beneath a cloak
Of cypress roots, palmetto spears—dark flocks,
So few, but multiplied enough to stoke
The swamps, a perfect place to den a fox.

More colonists arrived. Refortified,
The *ignis fatuus* burst into flame.
The vulpine Nemesis had always eyed
Georgetown. The time was right to aim
His partisans against the cannons' thud
As overhead they heard the grapeshot scud.
Without big guns his strike could not evoke

Grew weak, the fort in thrall to old flintlocks.
Then came Fort Motte, a battle in baroque.
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox.

At Eutaw Springs, the British finally broke.
Americans shook off their galling yoke.
The sword-and-ploughshare-man, war's paradox,
Went home where vixens bark and bull frogs croak.
The swamp's a perfect place to den a fox.

UNMAILED LETTERS OF A YOUNG
MAN MAKING HISTORY
1805

No one warned me I would be this cold.
Granite towers straighter than the cedars,
Couldn't climb such rocks for love nor gold.

Just as well one died—we needed food.

This must be where all earth's storms are brewed.

Since we've come so far we get to wondering
If we've missed the pass and lost the way.
Captain Lewis tries to keep us hopeful.
After dark I go somewhere and pray.

Ain't no human ever put his foot here,
Even animals avoid this place.
More than five days since we stood up level—
Longer since we walked a decent pace.

Wished I hadn't signed on when they told me
We'd be trailing after some young squaw.
Used to blame her every time we backtracked,
Hands and shoulders aching, blistered raw.

Then she taught us how to make a poultice
Out of bark and foliage she found.
Had to say it eased our pains and healed us.
Now we're plenty glad that she's around.

Hired another guide, an old Shoshone,
After we left parts the girl had known.
She still totes her papoose on her back, Ma.
Reckon she's got troubles of her own.

He's a chief, he let us make a trade:
Twenty-nine good horses and a jenny.
Spirits rose, nobody was afraid.

Two days later we were in tall trouble.
Thought we'd seen the worst of things last year.
Now we know we're lost, and more snow falling.
None of us has got the proper gear.

Sometimes in the dark I feel a tremble
Coming through the blanket at my back.
Never know if it's the ground I sleep on,
Or if fear is making an attack.

Danny is the smartest man we got here.
Shows us how to find things we can eat.
Better in a pinch than our good captains.
Nights he shares his warmth with my poor feet.

Daybreak, we start hauling, cutting, sliding,
Dreaming all these razor ridges end
Piled with slabs of meat and mashed potatoes—
Smooths our craziness if we pretend.

Ain't no northwest passage in this country.
Mr. Jefferson's beliefs are wrong.
Bad investment any way you slice it,
Even if we'd got it for a song.

Ma, I cried last night I got so hungry.
Some of us cooked up a mess of leaves.

Dreamed about our farm and all those beeves.

Every night we patch our worn-out clothing,
Pad our moccasins and sew up holes.
Every day the ice comes through the stitches,
Hurts just like we're walking on live coals.

Guess I'll never see you any more, Ma.
This high hell has claimed us as its fee.
Doubt if I can hold Dan up tomorrow,
We're afraid he's got a busted knee.

Lordy, Ma, we sighted us a river!
Maybe we can make it after all.
Bound to be some fish and game to feast on—
Thanksgiving will be earlier this fall!

TROMPE L'OEIL

It means deception of the eye,
this unique art form
making the willing believe
nonexistent things.

Your den's north wall appears lined
with shelves of brightly-bound classics,
a bust of Ovid, a Ming censer, brass urns
trailing ivy and lavender inflorescence.

Your clever painter lies, and you provide
real scent of lilacs to satisfy the nose
while the hand that tries to grasp
a volume of verse or feel jade's coolness
resents being made a fool.

Yet the eye insists, forcing
another confrontation with flatness.

So must I resolve you
in the brain's right and left privacies,
in the involuntary sidetracks
where facts fade.

The artist has blued your eyes
with faithfulness and burnished
your skin with softly inviting premises.
Sometimes my hands find warmth
and contoured strength
more than a match for sight's illusions.

Yet I know I'll touch again
that one-dimension coldness, feel
that unresponsive lack, try to read
by light and shadings never really there--
and face that depthless smile.

While all your old false colors
shame me for my blindness.

SAGANESQUE SONNETS, TWO YEARS APART
(In memory of Carl Sagan)

I

I still can hear him: "Mill-yons and mill-yons of stars!"
His voice, his style, his background videos,
His theories of asteroids and Mars,
The stellar grandeur, his persuasive prose
Commanded my attention and my time.
Dismissively, one night I shunned his fare,
But went right back like poor magnetic rhyme.
Avoiding future programs on the air,
Pronouncing them addictive, I denied
All access to my mind and closed the door.
Too many space freaks; no one's qualified
To speak of what defines the cosmic core,
A jigsaw puzzle no man comprehends.
I shrugged. We'll learn whatever God intends.

II

I'd read of other life forms, full of doubts.
And yet one scientist has made me quell
My skeptical response, no easy sell.
His studied speculation now re-routes
My reasoning; it drowns pragmatic shouts,
Then stirs up images of nonpareil
Exotic beings on some parallel
Who might inhabit other whereabouts.
I studied all of Dr. Sagan's theses
Then on the cusp of this millennium,
His bold position on unproven species
Persuaded me to recognize the sum
Of his beliefs. His logic rose like cream
To lift his words beyond the earthly dream.

7:45 COMMUTERS

We learned each other's names when it was clear
we were trained partners, ratcheted
to our private reels, riding the rails
twice daily in 2-piece hidebound suits.

Friday our train broke down.
In the dark siding of cerebral tunnels
we all knew we could slip from habit's fist,
unclench our shoulders at home for once
without endangering the planet's orbit.
I announced a long weekend was just the ticket.

No opiates of indispensability fueled that engine.
Rising like saliva of Pavlov's dogs,
the hidden imperative expanded its premises,
revved its throttle.
With the intensity of warriors,
eyes narrowed, some pushed out to a cab stand.

Soon the rest of us piled in a rescue car
come to shuttle us back to the station.
Addicted, hearing impaired, we responded
only to next train's boarding call.

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INFILCTION

An embryonic poem cold-nosed my spine,
sniffed each vertebra, moved around
like it was playing a keyboard.
Good stuff, fresh
from a high-placed synapse.
Surprising it would seep
into my musings, willing to settle
for an uncelebrated instrument.
Billy Collins must be out of reach.

I scratch an idle itch on my hand,
waiting for it to nudge me again--
no, hit me, inject me. In the gut
or the heart. Not that preoccupied pump
centered between two lungs, not that
mawkish condition purpling
drunken songs and birthday cards.

I want to contract a fullblown case:
The fever, inflamed nerve, the red rash.
A fingernail quiets the corporeal itch
but the condition clamors for attention.
A vacancy squirms to be filled,
colonized, overwhelmed, never cured.

Where does the germ come from? Where
does it go? I'm infected; I felt the sting.
Yet it's not unwelcome. I'll wait
without antidotes for its full development.
Even if it's the slow-incubating sort
I'll almost die of.

--Glenna Holloway

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The Definition of Love
"Is the conjunction of the mind,
And opposition of the stars."
--Andrew Marvell

MARVELLESQUE

I wasn't made for distant love,
Nor can platonic pairing ever
Satisfy me. I must leave
This place and try to lose my fever.

And if I fail? What other recourse
Is there for the captive mind?
Another love, that ancient curse
By which men always hope to mend?

In this millennium can we
Indeed be star-crossed? From our birth
Did some grim compass plot the way
For perverse viewers' casual mirth?

And are we hung on astral hooks
Like aging meat to mellow out
And tenderize? Perhaps in books
Poetic truth applies as ought

Some noble parable unread;
I only know the sky is plagued,
Its batteries are going dead.
The moon's already been been unplugged.

Refuting all cliches to meet
The one I mentally designed
Was chance. I wish we'd never met
And chance had never redefined

You into warmth, and breathing flesh
And more-- a window cleared to see
The orchard where our branches mesh
Beyond restraints old stars decree.

I'd much prefer to live my time
Not ever knowing there exists
Such perfect matching, chime for chime,
Of resonating harmonists.

The barrier grows high. I hear
Above horizon's arch the sound
Of clinkers scraping on the sphere,
And smell the scent of burnt-black sand. Glenna Holloway

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THE FLEDGLING

It's not natural to humans, he said.
Don't go thinking it's easy.

He'd seen my eyes close in take-off rapture,
seen me grin giddily at clouds, embrace
the wind, lick the taste of wild blue
off my lips in an open cockpit. I think
he thought a poet's head isn't grounded
in essentials, not geared to mechanics.
He frowned when I asked him to teach me to fly.

In the end, my pilot husband drilled me
relentlessly in the nuances of stick, rudder,
ailerons: The principle is simple,
the craft unforgiving, the air indifferent.
He made it exceedingly clear:
A plane always comes down-- controled or not.

After my license ("certificate,"
he often corrects me), he made me learn
"what-ifs," fine-tuning my technique.
But I missed the surging lift of freedom,
the zigzag thrill playing my spine,
accompanying the break with gravity.
The joys I reveled in on the passenger side.

Today I overheard him tell a friend:
"She's a born flier. A pilot for all seasons."

And I soared.

--Glenna Holloway

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EMISSARY
(Memo to Octavio Paz)

Dissatisfied with what you knew of death,
That dogmatist without an honest name
Who, proud with patience, coveted your breath,
You disconcerted him and skewed his fame.
Imprinting him with verbal vertigo,
Your hot synaptic sparks, your veinous ink
Exposed in him some things you craved to know.
Your molten poems formed a brazen link
Between galactic trees and graven stone--
Your chosen space to stand and pose your questions
Eye to eyeless socket. If anyone
Can match his stare, it's you. Beset his bastions;
You still speak for every slack-jawed soul.
Your pen predestined you to fill this role.

--Glenna Holloway,
SUMMER SHADE, 2001

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THE SUITOR

Sometimes I'd hear him talking to someone
Long after I had read him all the news,
Made sure his pills were down, put out the light.

One morning I asked who. He laughed and said,
"Just polishing the way to court a woman.
I hate to be refused when I'm all ready."

I asked about the lady-- when he met
Her, what her name was, where she lived.
"Don't be naive," he said, "we've yet to meet."

"My gripe is with her half-baked surrogates.
I've had my fill of false alarms and pikers.
It's her cold hand I want, no feverish

"Caress, no sighs. I crave her toothy grin,
A grip that won't let go. A woman sure
Of what she wants and flat-out wanting me."

I frowned to learn Dad pictured death as female.
His life's relationships had been the best,
His mother, sister, wife-- we all had brought

Him joys he often spoke of. Why would he--
And then I knew. Such close associations
Had conjured up the final compliment.

Each day his words became more like a lover's:
"Sweet stroke that changes everything there is.
No other gift on earth is so sincere."

Accustomed to a struggle, even from
The senile wrapped in pain and hopelessness,
What woman could resist his ardent pleas?

I heard him pause, a muffled privacy
Exchanged, my hand around the doorknob's chill.
She granted his last wishes as they fled.

--Glenna Holloway

ADDIE AT EIGHTY

It's hard, she said,
always being so damn grateful
for snow shoveling
or getting a couch moved
or rides downtown. Later I could tell
she was scolding herself for saying it.

Once she told me how some nights
she'd think about white lightning,
the kind the sheriff used to make
and stash away for years to mellow.
You knew, she said, no birds or frogs
ever fell in it, nothing died in it
and it wasn't tinted with tobacco juice
posing as bourbon.
It was kind of a slow pure white
that smoothed your smile, she said,
and made you forget about stuff
that shouldn't matter so much.
It took some of your breath away
but left your tongue intact
and contented your throat and belly
like a good honeydew melon only warm.

Maybe that's how it oughta be, she said,
to grow old.

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TABLE SETTING

Last night your only daughter prepared
all your favorites-- wild rice and roast duck,
pink champagne, centerpiece of mauve asters
for our gourmet silences to orbit.

Exuberant bubbles flung themselves on linen,
condensation crept down cut glass. I tested
my words for doneness, thoughtfully tasted
each seasoning before my tongue released it.

I hoped you'd be pleased with the good things
I served. I sheathed my knife edges, quietly
swallowed your rummaging fork remarks.
My voice stayed in the alto range all evening.

How long do mother/daughter banquets last?
I left your premises years ago, a lone moth
escaping the cakes in your closet.
Still we feed at these movable feasts.

Between bites you sat staring off,
oily opalescence gaining on the entree,
our trailing sentences.

I smiled and touched the flowers: "You once
made me a velveteen dress the same color."

You said you didn't remember that at all,
and shades of purple just reminded you of pain.
You ignored a second helping
of my dated tidbits, then sniffed

at the current kettle and declined the ladle
designed for your grip. Why
must you keep saving the old torn giftwrap?
Slipping it under my pillow at bedtime, fanning

the mustiness of it as I shower, fluttering it
against my windshield on the tollway.
Then after last night's table was cleared,
leftovers saved for another venue,

you unsnapped your purse, picked
at the foil-wrapped roll under your tissues,
and offered me a broken lozenge
coated with the lint of love.

VERNAL EQUINOX

I don't want to look at spring--days as long
as nights, green reaching for sun.

You and I began our oneness in winter.
You wore your old hunting boots
hauled from the trunk when your car stalled
in the blizzard and you walked to the chapel,
your ears turned to American Beauties
just out of the florist's refrigerator.
The real ones never arrived.
Under my long white dress I wore ski pants.
The old church furnace picked that day
to sigh its last. Only three guests made it.
We exchanged vows in the preacher's study,
his glasses so fogged he could barely read.

Some people said it was a long achy winter
and green was slow returning. But we loved it
away, loved the pale spring, the quick summer,
stretching our arms to embrace the next cold.

Now half our wholeness is buried. I could tell
them the sharpest pain is green.
The coldest hurting is warm moist earth
crumbling and parting for more green.

You said I'd make you a winner. But all I did
was make you a pair of boot socks and mittens,
make the bed and soup and deep dish pie,
then turn to answer that knock at the door

when tomorrow's knob came off in my hand.

FORTY DAYS OF DROUGHT

Sun was the peen of a smith's hammer.
We were heated red but not flattened. Sparks
bounced off the rim of prairie nights.
Aunt Vi and other old folks called it
heat lightning. Nothing to do with rain.
Aunt Vi visited kin, sharing her Mason jars
of last year's green largess.

The earth rattled like a giant gourd
full of dead seeds. Three counties surrendered
dust to corkscrew breezes. Wind-coils tightened,
etched our windows with looted loam. Our land
sifted into drawers, beds, books, iced tea glasses
as we sipped and pressed them against foreheads
and cheeks. Our teeth gritted on words. Our dreams
scorched, incurled like spores that wouldn't sprout.
Aunt Vi seasoned the meatloaf with grated irony.

Stubborn Midwest faces refused to dry in lines
of rancor. Something in the genes: saturnine,
satirical, sudden-turning on a family joke,
giggle to guffaw to knee-slap. Old roots twined
below the water table, fused around bedrock.

We listened to Sinatra, Bach, Garth Brooks
while anvil-heads gathered and thunderclouds
bloated without spilling their promises.
Our prayers the reverse of Noah's, we made
ourselves quit gazing up at the glare
as if our eyes were necessary to the process.

Monday, Aunt Vi vowed she was having rain pains
in her barometric big toe. Noon gravity tugged
the cumulus into a shape like Italy. It sagged.
Lean. Black. The boot's tongue flopped down,
licked away our silo. We found it later
a mile off in a single shiny wet spot.

Aunt Vi always could tch! better than anybody.
She said that crazy auger drilled a hole in the sky.
Tomorrow, she announced, rain would pour through it.

It did. Honest rain all across the state.
She nodded, gave us her sassiest "Told you!" grin.
Just before her heart serenely stopped.

TIDEWISE JESSICA

Jon still wants to marry me. I said no,
put on my clothes, left him to his own element.

Let his brine bitch have him. No more green vertigo
for me, trailing in his bubbles, yawning
in green carbonation, backpacking my breath, sloshed
in an endless cocktail with bizarre garnishes,
tails swimming by. No more struggles
to keep going with plastic frogfeet swizzlers,
legs and arms begging to quit.

And the stinging saline green jealousy.
I could cope with a real woman. A rival voice,
an unpredictable harridan with hazel eyes. Yes,
sometimes his kisses do taste like her.

Some nights I dream him down where she pulls him
on her coral altar, winds him in kelp, writes
his elegy in squid ink. Some nights I feel
her eel-slick hand pulling mine,
hear her humming C-sharp arias my cells remember.

I think of that tale of love and sails
And watch the gulls dive down.
And I know, I know, that girl could be me
At dusk when the water looks brown.

Go home, go home, you can still resist.
Ignore his eyes, his words.
Keep adding up that negative list;
Stop gazing up at the birds.

Helpless romantic is not your style,
Despite your waking sighs.
He'll only hurt a little while;
She'll soothe him with green lies.

Look whose lying. You know you can't leave him.
Shouldn't have let him teach me to dive, shouldn't
have listened to that sea chantey rhythm,
wave patterns, hypnotic as a symphony.

But when I look inside my head like a cave fish
searching for its lost eyes, I feel cold walls
of dead-end grottoes narrowing around me.
No color, no music. No afterward without him.

The bay is a crucible of melted steel. I can see
his mainmast, a gnomon on the lunar dial.
My small rented boat is magnetized. I listen
to the oars against the tholepins as I go out again
with no more choice than the moonstruck sea.

DEFINING A DYNASTY

This ancient white jade carving almost breathes.
Did mortal woman ever have such surface grace,
such serendipity of line and mass?
The sculpted knee alone makes
normal female joints resemble hobbled hinges.

The figure is a fishmonger, wearing
fresh-caught treasures in a net
about her shoulders like a jeweled stole,
a cornucopia. A master work. Unsigned.
The artist, lacking narrative, relies
on skillful detail to convey her
like a lyric verse. Her spirit makes the song.

The subject's hands are metaphors
for everything that is enough,
her loins for generations' expectations.
Her cheek bones frame contentment
as fine cloth drapes perfection.
Only woman could portray such heights.

But what lost age so gently treated
commoners, what times serene enough
to leave no mark but beauty on its peasants?

I hear you, sculptor. Life was never thus.
Your model-- flawed and bent, her fingers
gnarled, her voice a rasp from hawking crabs,
her belly often hunger-bloated.

The more grotesque and cruel truth became,
the grander was the vision, the epitome.
And woman always stands in every necessary pose
to keep hope reproducing.

Ah carver, and the multitudes you speak for--
you captured and conveyed the holy secret,
the unremitting power
always there to meet the need--

Always there and swearing to continue:
Female strength-- the world's enduring lap.

TO THE MUSE OF LYRIC POETRY WHEREVER YOU ARE

If Erato is dead, likewise the rose
And tender symbolisms of the heart,
Then blame the pseudo poets hacking prose
Who never knew the higher forms of art.

The rappers, punkers, slam-freaks play a part;
Some audiences like their angry shows,
A stab at neo-chic. Could be it's smart
If Erato is dead, likewise the rose.

Some have no words of beauty or repose;
They live to overturn the apple cart
With acid verse and voice that overthrows
The tender symbolisms of the heart.

If strident modern minstrels try to chart
New ground with sleaze, or posture in the throes
Of repetition like an aging tart,
Then blame the pseudo poets hacking prose.

Instead of seeking what tradition knows,
Some writers glorify the poison dart,
Or borrow heavy-handed angst from those
Who never knew the higher forms of art.

While clumsy bards find buyers at the mart,
Spare us their bogus literary pose.
Give us another muse, another start,
Its root in ancient music as it grows...
If Erato is dead...

APPRENTICE ARTIST

Ages ago, images ago,
rich with awards for painting iris,
I was content
with replication: Brushstroking
floral vitals at their peak,
shape and sheen of the premises,
exactitude of shade
and light's promises. The whole canvas
conspiracy of dimensions in space.

Late midlife, accustomed to acclaim,
I suddenly see unguessed galaxies
in purpling standards,
in the coupling gold of bees
and bearded petals, the exposure
of lavender junctures. Nodes
of knotty secrets ripen beyond
the reach of sable hair.

There are planets and fetal faces
in blue-veined white,
moons, lungs, bones beneath
syrup of pink, dust of maroon.

Pale scent of yellow
fades from my sleeve. Armies
and godsmiths, false prophets
and poets, beauty and sin abide
in furling dampness as tropic pigment
fails. And falls.

But the patient stem,
the central stalk of knowing,
slightly twisted now like wire,
supports a forming: bulbous and female,
upright and male, soul and marrow
coveted within sculptured endings.

The captured subject seethes
on an inner pallette, ruckles, stretches,
then surpasses all invented armature,
clawing its way to the surface
of my newfound clay.

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CALLIGRAPHY BY NIGHT

Three migrating cranes
Brushed their inky strokes across
Chicago moon's empty page.
In silvered silence
We read their cryptic verses
Like an ancient haiku scroll.

--Glenna Holloway

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JAMMING YOUR FREQUENCY

I love jazz, some rock, some reggae.
But there's a beyond, gone past

wonder-making, outa your tree, off the sky.
Know what I mean? You can't escape.

It invades your head, dissolves your ear plugs,
unzips your sleep & jars your eyeballs.

Mod instruments outa Star Wars backlabs
& lowtech basements, electronic graffiti,

expanding old sounds, expounding a new tune,
losing it, looking for it, never finding it.

It finds you, burrows a new entrance, V-shaped,
reedy sweet, Z-shaped pounce & pulse.

Fingers tearing chords outa clashed colors,
cinnamon-breath pushing hot quivering viscera

outa horns. Vibrato of the brain, brass
bashing your long arterial highway, scaling

your rib cage, riffing your spine,
mega-decibels blowing, billowing out your brain,

blaring you relevant, playing you right down
to your rattling white bones. Making you smile.

--Glenna Holloway

Forgetting It

Last year I gave him ties and goofed.
This year I gave him shirts and gaffed.
Next year he just won't GET a gift!

IMPEDING

I must leave off the Christmas pudding
Lest my proof have too much padding.

Hurts Like Helly

These long festoons of holly
I gathered where it's hilly
To deck my halls so highly
I poked my fingers holey.

Slant Rhyme Polemic

I've vacuumed yet another shedding tree,
got shopping finished on the sixteenth try
plus baking cakes and cookies by the tray.
The jolly tra-la season? It ain't true!

FOR SHAME

I make no progress with reducing
While racy writers keep seducing
Me with steamy squibs of spice.
Let's censor menus; they ain't nice!

BEQUEST FROM AN ARTIST WHO DIED IN SPRING

Pale trees march up the shadow side of morning.
Somewhere doves are mourning
in shades of leftover winter like the pigments
I blend. I can't remember cinnabar or amber.
The wind casts about for a storm to smear
the umber sky. There is a void in my canvas,
old friend. It glares
through missing colors looking for meaning.

My palette lacks your softened medium
and ripe touch. I move my easel nearer the window
and mix more viridian as you once told me. "Green
is empathy," you said, "leaf, light, laughter."

The scene outside is no longer
what is happening under my brush or behind my eyes.
I paint with light never captured before,
an intensity of knowing. From the old focal point,
the old hue, a new value emerges.

Mentor and source, you will always be missed.
But empty space is vital to design, (ours and His)
how well you knew. And something in its center
will goad me to work; the slow collage of time
will guide my hand around it
and tame each stroke with faith.

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A Hex On My Neighbor's Green Thumb

Glenna Holloway

May your shovel break, may your fertilizer bake,
May your droughts be long and dusty.
May moles make holes, may blights take tolls,
May your pruning tools get rusty.
A killing frost on the hybrids you crossed,
May your pink chrysanthemums sicken.
A pox on your phlox, may your seeds fall on rocks,
May your aphids and mealy-bugs thicken.
And to add to your woes, may you slice up your hose
When you run your power mower.
One last incantation--while you're on vacation
May stinkweeds grow up to your door.
Next Garden Show they'll surely know
Just who should get first prize--
My brow of sweat is twice as wet,
And twice as green are my eyes!

COVERT CABIN, UNMAPPED ROAD TO SUN-UP

Twenty-odd years since I saw the place.
My triumphant shout jarred the green-filtered air
when I found it. First forty-eight hours
a fast blur. Sawing limbs, salting fish, chinking
both windows. Proving my survival skills
to my long-secret self. Even planted spring hopes
next to mother's wolfsbane-- which I call
winter aconite, little more than a weed--
now usurping the realm, her once glorious garden.
Just before escaping civilization, I bought bulbs,
certain this lonely swatch of Saskatchewan sky
never blued over daffodil ruffles.

Diminishment set in the third day--
as if my being, my body
didn't displace the air, the essence of space
I occupied. My feet failed to leave tracks.
"Surroundings" imply you're among things-- life,
nature-- you exist. You're part of the verb "to be."
Forget cogito ergo sum, nothing was stretched
or hollowed out by my presence. If anything
barely altered the natural superior order,
it was my muddy Jeep with Michigan tags
half hidden under the shaggy spruce forest.

Third day shadows multiplied, magnified. Shadows
not matched with solids. Shapes not fathomed.
My mother would have chanted in three tones
for hours. Omens from old tribal tales appeared:
My hearth flared, a single orange tongue licked
high in the chimney. It hissed, fell back, died.
Sickly sun plunged wide shafts in soft earth,
sucking it dry, giving no warmth, only taking,
leaving a swath of cold-parched earthworms
and clay crumbs. Strange paws signed the ground
by my door. Day dimmed. A lone bolt of lightning
split a balsam trunk. My calendar fell
off the wall. A wolf wailed.

(cont.)

The first wind pried the shutters, crashed
a window pane and my lamp, spilling precious oil.
Alto afterwind mourned between slaps of chill
and the wavy scent of wet animals. In a race with
decaying day, my mother's half of me gathered
brittle bunches of wolfsbane. My other half gulped
the dose of drugstore sleep I never expected
to taste. Still dressed, I united under the blankets
she wove, each patterned with ancient symbols.

Awakened by blackness heavier than night, I tried
to surface, swim through it like a cave fish
looking inside its head for its lost eyes. Night
pushed up from the world's old graves. A wolf
night, howling. A night to grow everything old.
I lit a trembling candle. Morpheus had fled,
leaving an empty bottle. I floated in vertigo.
My frail flame flickered out.

The charred moon smoked, reversed itself,
revealing a death's head just as she always said
it someday would, withholding its downshine,
dripping ice sweat wolf sweat grave sweat.
Black stained the air. Trackless black
where the wolf walked, bearded, breath-stealing
black, silhouette of hills not there, of beasts
moving moonward, necks fletched like arrows.

I spoke my mother's name, clutched fistfuls
of wolfsbane, scattered it across the bed.
She rose in me like ether. I groped
for her incantations drummed into my childhood,
stumbled and skidded over forgotten roots
my father planted. A trailing tendril snagged
and held. Weed essence opened the flue;
loud involuntary friction made a spark.

Still sneezing, I felt matches in my pocket,
found and relit the candle, snatched up
the aconite for a funeral pyre
fueled with her hand-hewn cedar medicine chest.

Leftover dark was stilt-legged shadows
on a hearthlit stage, the usual cast
with known names. Tomorrow, I announced aloud
to the sniggering flames,
I will move back among my kind.

SOUNDS

I always say more than necessary,
sing all the verses of a song,
clap and shout an extra "Yay!"
at a good play or concert.
Forgive me for babbling.
You can discard at leisure
what you don't want to keep.

I'm afraid of silence--
mine or yours or the earth's.
And if I hold back some of what
I feel, you'll never know
how much joy you've generated.
So much
it leaves no room for silence.

I always say more than necessary,
hum an extra measure of a song,
breathe another sigh.
You can discard at leisure
what you don't want
along with dried up ballpoints
and crossword puzzles you solved.

I was born afraid of silence--
mine or yours or the earth's.
And if I hold back some of what
I feel, you'll never know how much
love you've generated.
It just leaves no room for silence.

NOT A GOOD DAY FOR FISHING
(Larus marinas)

The surf is nervous this morning. And you,
a lone black-backed gull, hang over me
and my needy creel like an old decision
I want to clear out from under.

Another angler arrives; his reel wheezes
expectantly. I think I recognize you, missing
some feathers, wise-eyed, watching his lure
splash the rumpled sheen beyond foam fringe.

Against a headwind you follow his plastic fish.
Yep, same old stunt. Treading air,
your gullet and practiced patience wait
for a strike on barbed steel.

This fellow hasn't seen your act before--
just a big gull splitting
September's hot glare a few feet up
where our eyes can't stay.

Yep. Suddenly it's you who are hooked.
He winds you in, flapping
like his mackerel, your pinched treble
snared on the end of a line.

I fish my tackle box for the wire cutters.
Again.

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CHEETAH IN A ZOOM LENS

The cheetah ambles past her watching prey,
dark-spotted precedent, designed for speed--
a chase machine, a disappearing breed.
Her head an expletive, she seems to pay
no heed to nervous hoofs. She eyes a stray.
The healthy bucks set off the herd's stampede,
releasing her like brakes. Intentions freed,
she starts her sprint, this cat who hunts by day.

High shoulders knotted like a hairy fist,
hind quarters pushing 60-miles-an-hour,
she overtakes an antelope in dust,
a desperation try since twice she missed.
She can't always succeed despite her power.
This time she heard her cubs and knew she must.

--Glenna Holloway

PILGRIMAGE TO BLUE

The ripe moon mounts a steepled tower,
hailing the appointed time for celebrants
of some ancient rite my cells seem to remember
here in the high blue watching places.

A summer-shedding coyote flings itself leanly
into the chase of shadows, silent as a star shooting.
Tollways vanish in the ash patterns
of a potter's cold fire. Custom-made cacophony
is buried under the humps of hogans
listening to Venus rising.

In the morning I'll inhale turquoise horizons
unscaled by tall containers stacked together
by corporate cliff dwellers. I'll move slowly
through granite halls posing for the centuries,
staging endless similes under the direction
of wind and water, enclosing nothing but samples
of light and a lone hawk's treble. I'll search
for the shine and sharp of obsidian and ocotillo,
I'll touch sand, pinyon, and a sweating pinto.

Leaving, I'll stop, turn and stare at pronghorns
just as they wheel back to stare round-eyed at me.

Undiluted azure anoints me now, my mouth tastes
of royal. And the crimped mass of wires and coils
within me loosens like the brittle clench
of a resurrection plant in rain.

OF PAINTERS AND PAINTINGS

The old ones knew, the ones called masters--
revenants in ruddle and ocher, compost
for composition for the newly damned. They live on
in owl eyes and refractions of rain, still knowing.

They faced edges and ends early, they vanquished
borders by discovering the nature of limits, learned
siren abstraction is no surrogate for knowing
all dimensions, even the fourth.

Impressionists waiting for the brief bright flux
of a guided hand, maybe lingering the length
of a sable hair, fall captive to colors
and shadows on the false margins of revelation.

They are legion, forever lost, sweeping the spectrum
for lifetimes, searching, bleeding their brushes,
shading with lotus that flares and fades
without the missing medium: the humility of umber,

the sand and sea pulse that defines surrender
and triumph, defies time. An enlightened few stretch
their palimpsests on points of stars, on pinnacles
between life and death, light and dark. The secret,

steeped in centuries of varnish, waits willing,
liberating all who see. Grasped and stroked, stilled
but not stillborn-- the goal, the gift:
Contact and abduction through a painted canvas door.

--Glenna Holloway

LEAVING OUR BOAT FAR ABOVE

All day we cruised this ripe Bahama blue.
The engine cut, our dolphin escort bids
our bow-waves farewell, turns and arcs on cue.

They have no need of compass, charts and grids.
They disappear in froth like playful kids.

We dive with morning, slowly we go down
through gilded glare, a curtain-rise of krill.
Festoons of light define us yellow-brown.

La Mer, the mother of us all, life's mill--
we recognize our need for fin and gill.

Beneath the sea our bubbles play their part
in this collage now sudden silver-slashed
with black-masked angels practicing their dart

and pivot, coded greetings sequin-flashed.
My senses can't retain the treasures cached.

Increasing time each day the sea is home
to wetback aliens, small and monochrome,
entranced within our turquoise catacomb.

THE ROAD NOT FINISHED
(An Evening's Chance Encounter)

New in town? I'm Hart Crane. Haven't seen you at any of Sam's soirees before. He mentioned you write poetry too. Are you blessed or cursed? Is booze a boon or bondage? Is sex driving, draining or definitive? Do you wish I'd shut up and go annoy someone else? Why, thank you. Glad you liked "White Buildings." No, I've never been to Africa but I don't shy away from images of other cultures-- twisted horizons, a carcass quick with flies, another man's stinking shoes. Poetry transports you anywhere, anywhen, anywhy.

At present, I owe my best work and my life to Sam. Priceless Samuel Loveman, New York bookstore owner who reads his wares and understands what he hawks. One Manhattan night like this-- good company, wine, music, laughter-- I suddenly deflated like a punctured tire, wobbled to the edge of the roof garden-- intending to jump. And there was Sam-- a fast firm grip on my arm from behind. Relentlessly, silently pulling me back. And I hated him for it. The next day I couldn't thank him enough for saving me. It was an epiphany. And my stanzas, my verses transcended mere rhetoric.

Oh, the reprieve won't last forever.
And I'll never be the mythos master I want to be.
But for now my words are alive again--
singing, pulsating with illumination
of all the colors in white.
Words are all I've got-- the same weary words
everyone has, but I strip off their linty clothes,
pry up layers of plating, pierce the rusty armor,
expose their nakedness shot with pumping veins
or sometimes the multiple faces
of flashing amethyst-- like a just-split geode
I'm the first human to see.

You say you know what it's like to hit bottom?
Most poets do. Seems to be part of the package.
Don't blame your parents. Mine couldn't bear
each other beyond eye-blink attraction
and the first belch of fact. Caramel-coated cur are
for a mother, hide-bound ledger book for a father.
They can't help who they are.
You can't help who you are, poet.