

GLENN HOLLOWAY  
913 E. Bailey Road  
Naperville, IL 60565

PANTHER IN THE GLOVE

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\* National Federation of State Poetry Societies is made up of individual state societies such as the Poetry Society of Georgia, Texas, etc. NFSPS conducts annual competitions and many member states have their own. The winners are published in small books of limited edition.

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.

### 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.

## 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.

#### 4.

## 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? Out 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 he did. 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.

## WARM BEADS

I'm late to the coronation.  
The strand of elliptical cut jade  
you gave me to go with my favorite dress  
wasn't in my jewel box.  
I searched away the time,  
knew I had to leave. The shiny wall  
of my shower reflected watercolor greens  
around my neck as I hurried to bathe.  
You'd added more beads and put them on me  
while I was dragging dream feet  
down another charcoal corridor  
with too many doors and none of them mine.  
The new beads, lavender, peach, white,  
blooming between the familiar leaf shades,  
glowed against my skin all those hours.

"Jade isn't always green," you said  
of the first string presented in a case,  
"but it's always cold--  
unless the wearer loves."

I feel the heat stored in each bead  
before entering where you wait.

## TROMPE L'OEIL

It means deception of the eye,  
this unique art form  
making us believe nonexistent things.  
Your den's north wall appears lined  
with shelves of brightly bound classics,  
a bust of Homer, a Ming censer, brass pots  
trailing ivy and florescence.  
The clever painter lies, then provides  
real scent of lilacs to satisfy the nose.  
But the hand that tries to grasp  
a volume of verse or feel jade's coolness  
resents being made a fool.  
And still the eye insists,  
forcing another tactile confrontation  
with flatness.

So must I resolve you  
in the brain's right and left privacy,  
in the unlighted offshoots  
that don't remember facts.  
Another artist has blued your eyes  
with faithfulness and burnished your skin  
with sweet shades. Your walk is smooth  
and the line of your throat is gentle.  
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.

## 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.

## 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.

## SALES FIGURES

Hot-wired for sound and motion, Hendrix sat in the outer office already tasting every word he and the man inside would serve. Two of his own kind waited in tan lounge chairs near Hendrix. They had traded small nods as each entered the arena. The clan was thinning. Once there would have been four or five grinning their clean-shaven double-breasted confidence at their rivals. Once they warred sportingly. Now it was kill and eat if they could. Lately Hendrix woke all hours of the night, a weird feeling in his chest or belly or down his spine, always trying to scrape sleep back over it till time to bathe and cologne the reek of failure.

Every morning he put on his well pressed lies, emulsioned the kink in his colon and headed out again to another reception cubicle, ten-by-ten designer spaces for people who worried their ties and wearied their creases. Now he declined the presiding blonde's offer of coffee, thinking about the clown in the inner office, imagining him swiveling around in his imported smoke chrysalis between his Wall Street Journal, his damn computer and his crystal decanter. Hendrix toyed for awhile with the idea of a clone or two of himself he could send to the other chambers he must visit; they could all finish in time for a golf match. One of them would have to win that at least.

He didn't play much anymore except when a client preferred to say "no" over the back nine. The embroidered bottom line of the executive encounter was always the same, over drinks, over lunch, over fair-traded joke stock. And however cerebral, handsomely holstered or steel-jacketed in necessity, it was always a scorching stinking lead slug NO going straight to the gut.

The inside door opened, ejected the first salesman, pale and older: The indecent exposure revolted Hendrix. The man lurched out into the corridor. The second salesman, suddenly infected by the same germ, lumbered to his feet mumbling, "You think he forgot his overcoat?" The blonde looked irked. "Maybe he's coming back," said Hendrix, vowing never to let anyone see like that into a torn opening. The second salesman gathered up the coat; they all heard the shot in the hall. Only Hendrix was sure what it was.

"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.

Glenna Holloway  
913 E. Bailey Rd.  
Naperville, IL 60565

### VILLANELLE IN VIRIDESCENT GRAYS

The line between neap tide and sky  
Has disappeared like rubbed pastels,  
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

They draw their graphic pattern high  
Across mixed hues; it parallels  
The line between neap tide and sky.

Light's changing moods intensify  
The foreground textures, sheen and shells,  
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

The pier shades truth while colors' lie;  
Imagination's stroke compels  
The line between neap tide and sky.

Winged calls begin to prophesy  
The storm this palette's blend foretells,  
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

They pose on pilings, preening dry  
Before their stippled rising swells  
The line between neap tide and sky  
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

12.

### A DIFFERENT ROAD TO SUN-UP

My mother would have muttered a certain chant all day.  
All the omens were there: Sickly sun  
plunged wide shafts into the ground, sucking it dry,  
giving no warmth, only taking, leaving a swath  
of cold-parched earthworms and clay crumbs.  
The first wind pried the shutters, crashed my lamps,  
spilling all my oil far from the green firewood.  
An alto afterwind was discordant whispers,  
slaps of chill, wavy scent of damp animals.  
Half of me gathered wolfsbane, racing decaying daylight;  
the other half swallowed drugstore pellets of sleep.  
I waited for it under a blanket  
my mother had woven her mystic symbols into.

Awakened by blackness darker than sleep, heavier  
than night, I tried to surface, swim up through it  
like a cave fish looking inside its head  
for its lost eyes. Night pushed up  
from all the world's old graves, smelling  
of all the world's old sins. A wolf night,  
diseased and howling. A night to grow everything old.  
I lit a trembling candle. Morpheus fled,  
leaving me an empty bottle, floating me in vertigo.  
But Pluto was there to breathe out my frail flame.

The charred moon smoked, reversed itself,  
revealing a death's head just as she always said,  
withholding its downshine, dripping  
ice sweat wolf sweat grave sweat.  
Black was nebulized violence and violation. Black  
stained walls and air, seeped into books to lie  
in wait forever. Trackless black where the wolf walked,  
bearded reeking black, silhouette of hills not there,  
of beasts clanning moonward, necks fletched like arrows.

I said my mother's name, her part of me  
clutched the stems of aconite, flung them on the bed.  
She rose in me like ether. I groped beneath fear  
for the incantations drummed into my childhood,  
stumbled and skidded over roots my father planted;  
some trailing tendril snagged and held.

Weed essence opened the flue; friction made a spark.  
Still sneezing, I relit the candle,  
snatched up the wolfsbane for a funeral pyre  
crowned with her hand-hewn table. Leftover night  
was stilt-legged shadows on a hearthlit stage,  
the usual cast with known names.  
I am no part of her or here. Tomorrow,  
I announced to the snickering flames,  
is the time to move back among my kind.

## SURGEON'S SESTINA

Beneath my closing lids the scene still waits:  
 A different jungle, a beginning rhythm,  
 My far-off forebear, undulating witch-man  
 With his mystic motions in the watered light  
 Of ancient moon and lake, the mark of blood,  
 The fetish fang and feather in his hands.

I recognize the language of his hands  
 Rehearsed in sleight, the primal chant that waits  
 Between each hesitation of my blood.  
 My sleepless pulse pursues the secret rhythm,  
 The alternating tom-tom, loud then light,  
 Systole—diastole, incessant man.

Alien incantations, feral kinsman  
 My atavistic cells recall; my hands  
 Have held the same thin chances up to light.  
 While devil-doctors dance, he watches, waits.  
 No, we aren't strangers, shaman, sharing rhythm,  
 Wild harsh cadence, current other than blood

That quickens with the questions—Brothers by blood  
 Minus our masks in breeding black— one man  
 Tonight. Hyena sirens punch their rhythm  
 Through my dream. The groping promise of my hands  
 Begins to stir; the twisted gauntlet waits  
 For fingers in the dark to locate light.

The new and sterile lineage of light  
 (Begot by stone incision, too much blood,  
 A thousand herbs and fire) seldom waits  
 For birth attended by the grasp of man.  
 Sorcerer, healer, leech, my licensed hands  
 Aren't far removed holding mortal rhythm.

Deep in the covenant genes, that rhythm  
 Made some conjurer's conscience reach for light,  
 Defy endemic demons, pledge his hands.  
 Some holy heathen swore in his own blood  
 To rising order on behalf of man  
 And medicine. The unresolved still waits

To pound in rhythm with the learning blood.  
 Sure shadowless light anoints awaking man,  
 Supports his hands; the sacred scalpel waits.

## SELF-CARVED EPITAPH

When I was twenty I believed John Donne:  
"No man is an island entire of itself..."  
But he was wrong. I wept— and the mass pool  
didn't rise. I bled— it didn't redden  
one grain of my neighbor's beach.  
I grew up, became a total island.  
My play has one brief role. My song  
is just a single perfect note.  
And no man's death can diminish me  
because I am not involved in mankind.  
Soundproof fog surrounds me, secession  
is secure. No one ever probes.  
Why, Preacher, would I send to know a thing?  
My house is built of sand and furnished  
with restful dark. I polarized the currents  
and tides of my sea away from my placid steps.  
And here I sink and die  
certain that no bell tolls and never will.  
None knows.  
  
It makes a nice refrain, a clang:  
None knows, none knows, none knows.

15.

### 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 blurted 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?

## MAJOR RHAPSODY IN F# MINOR

You didn't expect him here  
with silk hangings and life-size classic sculpture.  
He made no entrance, he suddenly was  
onstage, easy as moonlight, fitting with fountains  
and topiary as if here had always been his background.  
But when he moved and smiled, you knew--  
you knew he was a trumpet man.

Son of a thin rumpled line inhaling used smoke  
mixed with applause to blow from balloon cheeks--  
son of the hard-molded case followers,  
those rolled-up bus riders down the streaking nights,  
closing their painted eyes and seeing brass  
hanging over them begging to be snatched and hidden  
for a couple of nights' peace-- watching it  
turn to an armored snake in their jealous hands  
then hearing it tongue out tarnished laughter  
on three ribs, belling out morning and a hangover  
in some town they mispronounced.

You didn't see this loose-angled one pick it up,  
the instrument came like quick cell division  
from his lip. And the sound began--  
uncoiling slow, coming for you, crawling  
into your head, changing the texture of your bare arms.

You know that sound, mama. Nothing as simple  
as ever-popular heartbreak or phantom train whistles,  
nothing as definite as a tenor sobbing Eli, Eli  
or wild animals moaning up the moon.

His eyes ignite. Lightning arcs from his hair,  
striking the conductor zapping it into your gravity center.  
The sound, mama, leaching tones out  
of the marble statues, out of your wine glass, rearranging  
molecules, making them glow like neon fog,  
fulminating red and purple.

How much is music, key lowered now half a step,  
gone minor again, flowing that little groove  
where pain runs convex to the surface?  
How much is the glint of cut crystal hanging  
from mirrored arches, moving barely  
with audience breathing, striking flints in his pale eyes?

He is a prophet-- forecasting ruin, forecasting rain,  
predicting your heartbeat, willing it, playing

your spine like a keyboard, electrifying your long red guitar strings. He compresses a grain of hot salt in every pore, starts small internal combustions, all pistons at odds, then one enormous turbine synched with him, generating enough current to throb down the marble columns, revving the riderless carriage outside the fourth dimension, holding a seance with Gabriel and Gershwin, DeBussy and Berrigan.

His grin is sudden. He flats his fifths and goes south on a short bridge, tootles to the carved unicorn, blows out the chafing dishes along with the illusions so for a jigger of time you can stand it, draw your breath on the afterbeat, see that he is a real live trumpet man, not a sorcerer, not a fakir pulling the cobra out of your basket.

He is a child-- blowing bubbles of incredible light, each expanding on its own spectrum, merging with bobbing sixteenth notes.

He is Imperial Rome-- an announcement of gladiators, Caesar chariots, a boast of soldiers, an ancient fury. He is Africa-- black hunter cry, leopard stalking, impala bleeding, eyes looking out of water, eyes burning and curling edges of night, smoke rising, winding winged scales, sucking back into the bell, recycling.

He slams a fist in your throat, turns you on a spit and hamstrings you with blades of ice. He hustles the horn, wrestles it, shares it, his mistress and mentor, a panpipe saved by his kiss.

Feel the sound, mama? He's concentrating on all your edges now, honing sharp sharper-- quivering on a sill to somewhere, retiring to a glistening waver between turquoise and green, hanging on like dying gills.

He's a trumpet man, mama, more lives than a cat, more wind than a Texas twister.

It's all the magic horn, mama, that golden fetish, possessed and possessing, that haloed concubine caressed and polished, surrounded with plush. And you-- bleached, smacked, sewing a dress out of mill ends, earning your master's degree in martyrdom with that eternal alloy suspended between you, even in bed-- that icon he hocked once to buy you an emergency doctor in Dayton. And you sold your mother's ring to get it back.

new stanza

19.

And the man, mama, with the hard harsh mouth,  
dead weight in the bus seat, little slivers of life  
telescoped into battered cases and collapsible stands.  
Trumpet man. Pitched all shades and angles like shadows,  
worse for women than drifters. Gone too high too often,  
a pile of feathers dripping wax on the downers,  
always patching to fly one more set too near the sun.

Was there a man at all?  
Or just a flared gold phallus that seduced you  
and crammed you in the gears of a music box on wheels,  
hurled you across the bad-weather map  
into broken-john motels with lint bedspreads  
and the boozy corners of never-quite-level halls  
full of lurching bodies and bad acoustics?  
Trumpet man. Inseparable composite of flesh and reed--  
cold spite for your touching,  
hot pipe to all we know of paradise for his.

Tears emptied, he mounts the god syndrome  
like mercury, surpasses sound, no longer protoplasm  
and metal but some new alchemy entering  
the last panging tunnel you sealed and secured.  
Driving deeper, blowing down your barricades  
like Joshua, playing what no mortal ever played.  
Peeling off new notes like bright blisters,  
exorcising the orchestra, resolving each chord  
with light, nebulizing fire.  
White consumes you, turns you immaculate,  
unhurting anymore.  
The trumpet fluoresces with his phosphorous eyes,  
confetti light orbits his head  
until his image blazes beyond seeing.

You open your eyes as the waiter pours champagne,  
hear something shut like a latch, focus absently  
on an alabaster herald you hand't noticed before.

## CHICAGO

Yeah, you've heard of it--  
3 million strong, the Loop, the Cubs,  
boating on the lake, Sears Tower, the Chagall Wall.  
"Something there is that doesn't love a wall,"  
the poet said. I know what he meant--  
even if it's invisible. Here on the southwest side  
most of them are too visible--  
warped with the weight of graffiti,  
bullying up to the next one to rub off dirt  
and slough off a few more bricks or concrete chunks.  
That's the one thing that never stays where it falls--  
bricks and pieces of masonry are good for breaking  
windows and heads. It's a simple equation--  
deprivation makes some people mean.  
Whatever gets smashed is a stand-in  
for the wall they can't beat to rubble.  
City fathers keep talking about how new jobs  
and renewed pride are gonna tear down the stockade  
of poverty, crime and neglect,  
just like they got rid of the old stockyards.  
But poorness is more than lack  
of tollgate fees to get through the barriers.  
It begins with the ancient walls of the womb  
and discovers the greatest heights  
in partitions of the heart.

## WAS THERE A CHILD NAMED YOU OR ME?

Were there really  
satin-green bugs with wire-hairy feet  
that made current zigzag down your spine  
when you closed them in your palm?  
Was there a vine that grew valentine leaves  
and mini-potatoes for doll plates?  
And easy-to-break chocolate rocks with insides  
like sugar compelling your tongue to the test?  
Were there tiny tunnels in the suntanned meadow  
where you fished for pale humped "camels"  
that bit and held the spit-and-mudball-baited stems  
of fescue? And farther on, a waiting pond flocked  
with yellow-green paisley that hid small swimmers  
trading tails for legs? And wilding wispy smells  
each matched in your mind with a color...

When was it over,  
that swift season of knowing  
and being  
all there is  
eye level in the grass?

Or is it a dose of strained fancy  
force-fed beneath the sanded surface?  
But wasn't there for sure a certain crouching path  
where you couldn't see ahead and you backed off slow,  
tightened by little corkscrews of warning in your middle?  
Still—the field tilted and swayed—  
somehow you went that way without knowing.  
The soft fronds closed behind you  
and the brambles made you shield your eyes.

## YOU ALMOST MADE ME SORRY

Don't think I believe  
you've changed.  
For awhile I was impressed  
with your strange skill,  
your spring-loaded will  
to survive, the way you flourish  
despite the odds.  
You seem so disadvantaged,  
the archetype underdog,  
under bush and porch,  
under log and boot and tire.  
Deprived of wing or claw  
or even fin, forced to move  
on basest bone design,  
made to dine deformed,  
unarmed, on ghastly meals  
seasoned with your own rage—  
I was near ready to forgive,  
to reason you a victim  
of legend's libel till I recalled  
you're party to an ancient contract  
and credit for success  
is nowise yours.  
For a moment last night uncoiled  
beside the lily bed, your eyes  
betrayed you; a freak Freudian slip  
of your slit tongue and an unnatural  
warmth belied your touch.  
You're still very much his emissary.

### 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.

(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.

LAST UNCLE  
Glenna Holloway

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 days 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 reaching out my own each year for the fine pots.

Once in my tearose 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 pastel hollyhock days  
there is one. My faded luggage is crammed with empty  
pages as this jet eats space from east to west,  
and I wonder if he'll feel like talking.

## LONG NIGHT HOMESIDE

I should learn to speak Japanese.  
There may be something more to say.

You smoke too much in Kyoto  
under the blue tile roof of your father.  
Why did I leave? Why did you stay?

Out of cigarettes and choices.

Bored and huddled again on the prickly davenport  
with my stewardess indigestion,  
moon caught in the bared oak at my winter window.

Look. Two tiny stars, more alike than different,  
impaled on California twigs  
going unerringly to the heart of the matter..

Like haiku. Like shokwa. Needing no embellishment.  
Impelled into jet-lag sleep on a wingless plane,  
prodding grounded dreams while a jilted sun  
hits bottom beyond the eastern arch, jarring  
our paper fortunes near the gold pavillion,  
jolting my moon free.

And at my periodic waking, the escapee  
sheds no light on the fate  
of lost pierced stars.

## 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.

Secrets steep in centuries of varnish,  
never lost but seldom found by pigment plasterers  
distracted with siren abstraction  
to the scrambled margins of revelation.

An instant of atavism—  
the brief bright flux of a guided hand—  
maybe lingering only the length of an ox hair  
while we sable-sweep the spectrum for lifetimes,  
search and bleed our brushes, shading with lotus  
that fades without the missing medium—  
humble surrendered umber, disciplined earth,  
infused pulse that defies dimensions,  
even the fourth.

Star-stretched palimpsest of all between.  
light and dark, beaten and stroked, stilled  
but not stillborn—this is the goal and the gift—  
total abduction through a canvas door.

### COEFFICIENT OF GRAY

The familiar voice, slightly altered,  
rebounding from a satellite  
and strained through miles of copper wire  
into my private hearing  
pauses for me to make the same journey.

Once there was a warm mouth  
charging the air with moist vibrations  
caressing the spiral of my ear  
so close I could feel each movement  
and inhale the sweetness.

Now through a cold invention  
the hollow message arrives  
segmented, unwhole, unclear.

This is not progress.  
The fault is not electronic  
and the sound does not originate  
in smiling.

## 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."

## IGNIS FATUUS

- I Men marvel at her hair, corona bright,  
 The color of a winter waxing moon,  
 For she is strange and wild, a child of night  
 Who loves the swamps where twilight lurks at noon.  
 I followed her until she disappeared  
 Through sedge and slimy pools of brackish black;  
 She always raced ahead where ravens jeered,  
 Past dying pines and past the diamondback.  
 She led me faster, luminous and lithe,  
 Through devil's darkness cleft with wisps of fire;  
 Behind me came another-- with a scythe--  
 But still I stalked her in footprintless mire.  
 Men say her eyes fluoresce with blue-green flame--  
 I must embrace her once, must know her name!
- II Come searcher, learn the real will-o-the-wisp,  
 Come slog among mutated mud-grown trees  
 And wait for wind's unwinding snake-tongue lisp  
 To wrinkle stagnant water near your knees.  
 Here latent night seduces natural time  
 Though fronds of sun still penetrate tall ferns  
 While copulating vines grim-greenly mime  
 Your myths and struggling gods, your snarled concerns.  
 Again illusion spreads elusive light--  
 A solar trick, not what you risked to see.  
 Stay, brace for total dark and call it right:  
 The Ignis fatuus, lure's apogee.  
 Hold fast to scientific explanation--  
 Pale viscous blaze ignites mind's conflagration.
- III Old Jonas knew the country called "Big Deep"  
 That muddied up the margins of his state.  
 He served as guide for forty years to keep  
 Adventurers from snakebite/quicksand fate.  
 Then Jonas went off fishing. Two teams tried  
 To cross the slough, explore the worst quagmire.  
 Some came back sick and hurt, three others died.  
 When Jonas heard, he vowed not to retire.  
 He knew the jack-o-lanterns danced out there,  
 Those freakish flares that made men lose their way.  
 He knew the legend, knew the truth to spare,  
 Enough to be the expert of his day.  
 Still, men pursued the elf fire, watched night burn--  
 Till legend won-- the guide did not return.

## LONG WAY TO MORNING

Every night after the light,  
after the meaning and memory of light,  
it closes in slow thickens rises  
making prison around my bed. Impenetrable  
something nothing. I see it  
by what I can't see because of it: no more  
thin dark-on-dark blazonry like goblins rampant  
posing for half-reared children,  
no draped rectangles or bars sinister  
on the ceiling. No more  
wet marigold smell tire whisper,  
small breeze banked off my headboard.  
I am contained whole like once when I crawled  
frown first into my father's sleeping bag.

This I don't touch. I know I can,  
know it won't burn draw back as if.  
Circles of pyrotechnics explode  
behind my compressed lids. My bones soften,  
sweat marrow melts short circuits  
my overstrung guitar strings. A Rebanna drum  
bombards my bed beat for this big exercise,  
this long rehearsal. One night I'll reach out,  
embrace it hard. Only sleep  
is the final fear What I've never met eyes open  
all senses pricked  
like a wine connoisseur's tongue

What I've never met  
properly armed.

"WE MAY INHALE DESPAIR" ...Emily Dickinson

This stark cubicle stays closed:  
No green grows; only the walls  
Are tender. Your prodding finger knows—  
But found no entry,  
No valve for compressed dark to drain.

This cold crucible stays filled:  
Refined slag, a purity of dross.  
Your hopeful hands bruise  
And now they ache with losing.  
On your way home, gather for pressing  
All the dying anodynes from this old garden.

## URBAN TAPESTRY

My oar dollops the water, ravels the reflection:  
Bridges above me—giant warps over river,  
lanes, tracks, the yarns of my childhood.  
Creeks were my flosses, keeping my linings  
from fraying, keeping me close  
to the ways of catfish and beavers. My origins  
were up there in a garden-patch bungalow  
once atop that burrowing segment of superway—  
Now the new tunnel, breechloaded with cars,  
blasts a volley of steel across the bow  
of my small boat. The half-hoop of iron bridge  
steadies the warning appliqued on carbon sky.  
An oil barge passes me, rocks me  
under the new span, into its shadow and roar,  
and I think of the old hilly thunder  
prowling the pinestand across the county,  
unmuffled by rows of stacked people-bins  
thwarting its rounds and teasing the lightning.  
The barge slides the river, a disease-bearing  
shuttle, its slimy wake smearing the bend  
where my slow fever sweats  
the bones of my old home lie. Torn memories  
underweave the weft of the city,  
and I've run out of thread leading to freedom.

## 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.

THE SOCIETY BLURB SAYS: "TYCOON ENTERTAINS JR. EXEC & SOUTHERN BRIDE"

Off the press before the event, I stare at the caption  
(and my new name misspelled below) as we taxi  
to the tycoon's mansion. "Stay close, my husband,  
it's not my kind of evening. How important is this job?"

Gold brocaded, satsuma-sheen on my mouth, a roll of wit  
under my tongue, I confront smiling lies  
looking back from antique crystal and silver, haloed  
in his moneyship's gimmicked pastel rays,  
his paternal-satyr beaming. You programmed me,  
my husband: I fill dialogue balloons  
like prescriptions, watch them float, watch him  
take them. I open my sequined jacket,  
fan warm Chanel, try not to gag on escargot.

He is pious dimples and cloven hooves, custom-foiled  
with wife, fame, belongings. He wants me to know  
how he adores classical music, how fluent his French.  
We sit orchestrated, smoke-haired, blue-toothed.  
The napkins fluoresce. You and she sit silent,  
gone dark like deactivated robots. His.

His voice is wet stucco, his  
expensive scent an affront to greenness. His  
zealous shoulder crawls my skin. I can't  
see your face behind your wine glass, my husband.

Oh, give me back mimosa trees  
and my old upright Steinway. Let me be barefoot  
on the side porch, cleaning bream, watching  
my father's hands at the potter's wheel through a spray  
of scales-- turning to spatters of contrived light  
coloring our host and me while I search  
your silhouette for the shade of your love.

The tycoon embraces my hand with both of his, expectant  
unlimited clay, throwing me on this wheel,  
winding, coiling, turning me toward his imported suns.  
My husband, will you light up  
if I tell him to go to hell? Will your eyes come on  
if I brandy my spinning into this design  
and go with him?