

POETRY

The Tower

Moving by the power of these hands
 for my own pleasure
as much as the best of them
 inside a tower made for oil.
I am not someone they talk to
I am a woman passing
 out at the top
I am the animal of oil.
The trays lie marked in piles
 they gutted the tower.
My body moving inside of its clothes soundly
I go in at the bottom, come
to my companion below. My companion is mine only,
the bolts holding the trays connect me
where the violence ripped their caps off,
 over the downcomers
where the oil boiled and they took:
man to man—my absorption is temporary—
play the game, keeping my sex
not a man. I am not from another country
as much as any man fit the trays in
and pull them up by the pulley
but they make room,
 they teach me how to be number one—
to protect oneself—
 when in trouble.
I wear a mask,
 I inhabit this space
and I blow black snot at the end of the day,
a part of the craft
 every day; I climb up and down in the dark
through manways
owned by clean hands which do not know
and do not want to know
 its various layers
it slowly becoming
shape or hope alien

on the ground,
putting them back in
--that I must be number one...
of a material—any material, or structure.

Amaranth Pavis

Replacing Bleeders

I see the mirage through the eyes of tough guys
who hold each other's feelings cupped in their hands
who have seen their sexy girlfriends
turn into unstoppable moms
and the sweet moments disappear
as the goodies are packed into lunchbags
and the man cast his sex like a sixth sense
into the world. I can feel the thrum
through the air, and unravel
along the length of workday.

I watch the collapse of the nipple
lifted up from the coupling, the neatly bared threads
under the deft angle of the gouge,
the calculated hammer blows.
That backbone bent along the stress of a job
held to me through the sound of the metal
the burn of the rod—a brief nod,
the act of taking great pleasure in the material.
I can feel the puddle form and then the stiffness
take hold through my gloves.
—That's how it's done, ll a sweet fire
up the solid torso,
primed with thirty-eight years,
branching across his shoulders,
brief thanks to luck, smile—I was almost there,
partaking the taste of a man-sharing thing,
but I joked around,
cracking the nut of where I was found.

Amaranth Pavis

The Collection Plate

The air hose, color of the inside
of skin, rubber and long and fitted
with a male fitting
for the compressor, at the other end, a female
for the gun. Not a gun for war, but for work.
A hundred twenty pounds of air slam the cup against the nuts
of the stud until they loosen and spin—
the knock-knock goes into a long-loosened
whine good to the ear.

Hoses wired to the scaffold, two levels high,
twenty feet up to the top exchanger—
this heavy-handed transfer of cool/hot
or hot/hotter or cool/colder
that is a fossil of engineering,
a great cumbersome way of drawing energy
off, sending it down pipes into the sewer,
tapping into it as it rolls free
from a turbine far away...
Steel horses, stock still in cement saddles.
The internals, nothing but tubes—
rigid arteries baffled with thin plate
to direct the flow in alternating passes—
their floating heads, not heads and don't float,
a cap at the back of the bundle
encased in the dome of the shell—
the shell, the husk of this mortality
where the cooling or the heating
thing is pumped filling the spaces
between tubes—in the bundled tubes
the product—the product—
on the side is a plate
for pressure vessels, a complicated brand,
a pedigree. Four nozzles stick out,
the way in and the way out
of the bundle and shell.
We have straddled so many.
Working overtime in the pouring summer storm—
dinner soon—
stymied by the wrong size wrench.

One man going for the wrench
packs up the other tools,
two, high up, butter bolts.
Grainy human face, and human hands
precise inside leather gloves
and the slow moving bodies
inside the hooded rain gear
inset on the channel—the channel sits bolted
on the front flange of the shell,
in its depths the little round mouths
of the tubes spread over like lips
locked on the tube sheet.
The last thing, the cover plate
lies down on the ground—waiting,
big, round, three or four inches thick steel
with a machined gasket surface
to hold it all in.

A pause—two bags of tools
thrown onto the truck.
This truck has a welding machine and air compressor
whose hoses trail down.
The man disconnects both hoses
in the dusk of the thick gray rain,
and the sound of the weather
pushes against the timing of time
urgently. He climbs in the truck—
—Put the tools away—three, get the wrench—
four, hang the plate—five, bolt it up—six...ll
He counts a rhythm off
this is how jobs get done,
seven—eight then break, rest, go home with wages banked...
Drives off—windows closed on the rain
does not hear the call
he does not hear the man
who sees what is happening
the hoses caught on a stanchion
on the other side of the machines
pull taut and pull the scaffold over.
It is all muffled
in the duck yellow rain gear, in the straight wetness
--but the blood
and the red air hoses

chant through the rain
the change in things.
In the look that travels
the rounds like a collection plate
we put down chunks, eyeball, finger, thumb—stoics—
and publicly commit their retrieval.

Amaranth Pavis

Sisters, Oregon

Three mountains loom up,
Separated along the Oregon horizon
Like mastectomy patients
On recovery room gurneys,
The blue mists of late afternoon
Settling over them like hospital gowns
Over what is left
Of an old definition
Of womanhood

I pass above them, looking down
With the eyes of a surgeon
Or an angel, seeing scars
And the deep beauty
Born under the knife
Of living beyond the safety
Of happily every after,
And learning to love
Asymmetry

Susan Rolston

What Happens to Breasts

– ...that rose was once the earth...ll –Osip Mandelstom

The hole in the ozone is where they all go,
uncorseted, collapsed sacks, spill of jelly fish.

The fake ones are the eyes of bandits sneering over
low-cut bandanas, plump as soaked figs.

The real ones are endangered birds,
the parched ruins of an ancient aqueduct.

Some go one-handed, their Siamese twins cut apart, spears
aquiver with manly proximity to air and pulse.

What happens to breasts is what happens to us all:
either live in prison or go extinct.

Imagine the glossolalia of all the missing womanhoods
babbling in space.

Imagine the whip tail each girl fetus keeps curled in her chest
awaiting mammogram.

Sometimes I cup mine in my hands
and whisper:

Your final love tongue will be the scalpel
tracing primal paths of love and hunger.

Run away now, I say, and if you can find it, *try* to find it,
try to fly away home.

Anna Pollock

I'd thank you.

If I were a fish in the sea, I'd wiggle my tail and I'd giggle with glee.

I wanted to be a preacher.
Not a construction-
paper teacher, or a wife with an easy
smile, but a preacher, with a strong,
pleated suit that would stand for me
when I couldn't be so stiff.

I would have a long stride
and sit with my elbows on my open knees
to hand people tissues.

I would smooth my face with a razor
in the mornings and I would fall
asleep every night
with the Holy Trinity
sleeping on my stomach like a cat.

If I were an octopus, I'd thank you Lord for my good looks.

I wanted to be a diplomat.
At parties I'd pretend to drink sharp
brightly-colored alcohol with foreign
names like Mai Tai, and Manhattan.
I'd laugh with my teeth
my eyelids slow and knowing

my daughter, Madison or Blaire,
would have pink balloon birthdays
while I was at meetings
with stretched tables, scratching
at waxen cuticles of veneer

my wife would understand
and sign my name,
in grand looping letters, just above
her own on all the cards

If I were a crocodile, I'd thank you Lord for my great smile

Poetry

If I were an archeologist
I'd have a crooked part in my crooked hair
and I'd know everything about dinosaurs
or Indians
and I'd live among them with the name
they would give me

in town, they'd hate me
the ladies who stand by the tin walls
and breathe their dust,
they'd make fake dates with me
call my nose an old potato

but I would probably outwit a few
cowboys in Montana or
someplace like that

If I were a wiggly worm, I'd thank you Lord that I could squirm

A bear would be my pet and I'd live
in the mountains
my cabin scoured, my bone-creaks
ghostly voices echoing among
blank walls

I'd help lost people up
cragged paths, mouth a set line
no conversations
I would rescue raccoons
from traps. I would stay away

from cities and women
eat from a cast iron
bowl with a long wooden spoon
catching gravy drips
in the beard rolling toward my stomach
in gristled and gleaming waves

But I just thank you Father for making me, me.
I was a girl.
I prayed God would make me pretty.

Meagan Evans

Hell's Kitchen

There's a sign
in the window
of a dark old bar

*Beer as cold as
your wife's heart*

Someone has written
= Sarah Dodd was killed
and robbed here many times'

Who knows what it means
this cruel thing,
scrawled in red
under the window.

Lori Kagan

Aphasia

greenflat
haircut
hedgehog
matt matt
laydown
freshblade
trim

up stick
letter word
blink
call
note

round
cold
in my hand
hit hard
bit

flap wrap
jinglering
wind stick
down

ball
cup cup cup cup cup
almost-a-tree
seed mother
brown

Kelley Jean White

Mercury

And now mercury a hazard, too,
the spinning silvery beads our fingers
 toyed in second grade, again as
sophomores, the play became scientific,
 we found it on the periodic table,
watched it climb in spring, the fevers
 it gave us, the bouncing ball in the
doctor's sphygmomanometer, syllables
 cantered off our tongues, the planets
circled around the sun, but when we were
 young, it felt like they circled around
us, and mercury was for fun, or reassurance,
 momma's flick in the wrist, the wait,
keep your mouth closed, her eyes redlined
 on the meniscus except now glass
thermometers are rare as Momma home
 with a glassy-eyed kid, bed covers
rumpled by toy soldiers, Barbies, or Chinese
 checkers—their whirly swirly
marbles Crayola bright, fever right.

Kathryn Gahl

Wheeling Him

Father, in the hot grove
where air is rooted,
the trees are poised glumly.

That is the point! they keep saying.
Posture is an honest sentence,
the body speaking its untold history.

I think they want you aware, father,
enough to at least feel
your own slumped shoulders,
and learn the hidden words
forming them.

Think back, they say,
to the shapes of living figures.

Remember that oak
you planted with love
that got tall on the curb
and what her body kept saying.

Walk, walk to me,
walk to me...

and how many times
you rose to obey
that calling language of her leafy hands.

Therése Halscheid

At the State School

where humans cry out like seagulls
and seagulls sound almost like weeping women

one resident—slim, placid—sits
always in the same place at the same picnic table

staring at his right hand as if to marvel
while snorting and whinnying like a horse.

Overhead the red hawk circles and dives
past fields that turn to ponds in April

and beckon to woodchucks and Canada geese.
We hike our two miles out and back

on a path shaded by oaks and flowering crab
as birds with black wings and bright yellow bodies

goldfinch! flit after wild blue asters in a patch of
waving weeds. Every so often, a scream.

Could be a person, or a box truck delivering meals
squealing to a stop. Could be the trash truck

picking up diapers that overflow dumpsters here.
Strange twisted faces. Someone in a stocking hat

stands at the curb in August waiting for a bus
that never comes. Once a young man, coiled

in the window, grilled me with eyes
wanting to break through the glass to freedom.

Then a dozen bluebirds swooped by---
almost touching your shoulder, my hair---

as if they knew someone we loved was dying,
we needed their song.

Jean Tupper

Aging Mannequins

Once mannequins stood where we sit
in the front window of Cianfrani's.
Even then crape myrtle used the breeze
as excuse to shake out sparrows,
to send them back to courthouse ledges
over the Georgetown square.
Nothing here changed while she
wore the straw hat with red roses
all the way to Vietnam and back
to this Texas of United We Stand.
Perhaps the red silk wilted a bit
under the security gods' official stare.
On the window a flag decal
releases its claim one corner at a time;
still it stays on like our troops in Iraq.
In the headlines a grieving sister claims,
—We prepared for this.¶

—I tried to prepare.¶ She's back in an earlier war.
His name drops like a fly in from July heat.
I dare not touch the son, last child grown but
still at home. He wears the bulky demands
of that skeletal young man of long ago.
Feeling unprepared for small-town America
out the window, or lazy mornings of window-dressing
on the flavor of the day (syrupy as the smile
of a 1960's mannequin); I upend my cup.

She agrees we need to switch to muscular
Columbian dark-roast. Men in dark suits with narrow ties
once loved us on display. They return with coffee nerves.
—Are we ready?¶ I finally ask.
A Boy Scout prepares to open the door
for two aging mannequins.
Even he may be an illusion.

Victoria Garton

Doll-Dressmaker's Manikin

(Flemish. Probably early eighteenth century.)

she smiles or would. Past tense of begin necessary to her
address. Widow-black in an unlit shadow box, late
as we were to her text. Inside an imperturbable shop
with generations of Mesdames. Who dress her with what
is never her own. As her hands for slender wishes customers mis-
represent as their own. Shapes of fingertips come out
of corset to end a sentence. Might slowly copy the sensible
world with articulated wrists in another tongue. Her lazy
left eye and rolled wings of coiffure in need of repair.
Hands pierced above each middle digit, she could be made
to hold the heaviest brocades aloft. Undressed to her
chipped bodice, her fingers fallen to shadows of teamed
sawhorses gavotting about her lower body. Six or seven
legs around: motion studies never to arrive at a like
arrangement. We suppose she was moved with some
difficulty, bringing her from the miniature to our own.
Then we were suitably ashamed for having touched her.

Go on, ask her about the film.

Nancy Blouin

Caltrain/Coltrane

for m.

you are tickled pink, somewhere
by your work
brow furrowed, knitting some kind of
next-generation compression algorithm thingy---
so that even the sonically challenged amongst us
may dance

*I'm remembering a salty night at a sweaty joint
called trax
visiting friends
there was one song i liked
was it you spinning?*

you quest, mad scientist, to cobble the ultimate
digital replacement
for those analog beats that twang time like a taut
rubber band shot across the morn
 riding the caltrain listening to 4 Hero
 walking down valencia reading about my hero
 coltrane
 and his love supreme
opposite directions, pulled
in opposite directions, like a rubber band
released

I remember what it was like...
one timorous kiss
temporal unmasking
the late hour that stopped for one lengthy (glorious) heartbeat
but i wasn't leaving without that specific touch
at least once

so that even if I never saw
you and your conformance bitstreams
again
i would have something to tell the flowers
inside my cube
something about snow and ice and how lovely it sounds
blood rushed ears
breath captured in the air

suspended like bay fog at dusk
scratchy eyes forgetting to blink
visions of snowblindness
sake drowned stoned cold
never to forget
the silence inside your head
everything
crisp, still, clear, remastered
when she melts

you

Lorna Mabunda

Indigo Blues

You caught the blue note in my voice,
the falter in my usual cadenza---waves
jarring a little too hard against the dark
syncopation of bass charged with that black

recurrent theme: the rhythm heaving
to swell, threatening to sweep city
into sea. I am lost in indigo, my chords wander.
and only fervor, like the Dutch boy's finger,

holds this solo together. What you hear
is cracking, is seepage. My fractures too many
to bandage and no one to mend me.
You know my fear of drowning; this fissure

leaks. I hold an ocean within these walls,
though I wink like Amsterdam, if the dam breaks---

Celia Stuart-Powles

The Japanese Maple

spreads its feathered head of flame across the wet, black earth,
pummeled by weeks of wind and rain.
It is the neighborhood redhead collapsed by the front door---
drunk,
disheveled,
and dazzling,
anyway.

Brenda Howald

Miss Lucille

for Lucille Clifton

says poems spin in her like bees
in a hive---her body a gentle host
to the warm buzz of need.
She carries sound in her bones
like rich women do class
the skin seeping loveliness
even in the off-season.
I am neither host nor rich
though I too have a story to tell
sounds to birth into sense
God knows---
I too have a story.

Lauren Fanelli

