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FROG VOICES

For Philip McCracken

The swamp is silent.

Dawn's slow voltage
reaches wild
currant, & each twig,
each slim living rheostat
feeds light to the blossoms.

Then one by one open the gold
& green-flecked eyes of the frogs.

Over the distant Bering Sea,
over resting
bowhead whales & sea birds at roost,
a missile punctures the brilliance
of morning sky.

Shivering ponds of swamp water
harbor a grim reflection
as the projectile descends its chilling arc.

Suddenly the frogs begin.
Their voices rise,
feathery trebles, croaks & trills
all weaving a shield
of sound.

When the missile explodes
the blinding egg of fire is enclosed
by singing, then is repelled
into cold space
beyond the range
of song.

James Bertolino

THREE POEMS

Lament

In a crook of pine
she sits, puffed
with old apologies.
Something like,
I'm sorry," pause,
"Why me?"

Close by, in pairs
cabbage butterflies
do tricks,
spiral up or zigzag
through the air
like limericks.

But the dove sits
talking to herself.
The sound—
a blue flute
or the lingering throb
of a wound—

leaves and returns
all day to the grey
cage of her chest.
She stays
perched, as if
on a nest

of empty eggs.
She fills
with whines.
The weight of her song
keeps her
steady in the pine.

June Birds

Almost everyday now it happens—
that splat against glass.

Seen from outside, these large
windows of my stucco house
float a mirage of trees and sky

like rooms mirrored to repeat themselves.
How they repeat themselves!
Since sunup, a party line of old news

ricochets, tree to tree. Now one
sounds his single song from the elm;
distant pines are a choir of mimicry.

Like lovers constantly needing
to reassure each other, themselves,
they give to get back.

Only the pitch, the emphasis alters,
as in: "I *love* you"; "I love *you*."
Any phrase, repeated enough,

is a small death. Undressed
and jeweled in white, I find them
silent in bushes, in beds,

or sometimes, on the cement steps,
only dazed and leaking
burgundy under the belly.

Daft by the berries' wine, June days
they sail blind. Lured by the bird
that blooms on a pane of glass,

like the body's echo
soaring back into itself,
they break whole on impact.

Loving you is like that.

How They Use Me

I listen when they talk
about me. My name
flies into their speech,
their dreams.

They say I am blind,
call the man led
by a dog's eyes
my name.

Darkness or glare
cannot blind me.
I send my eyes out
as a song
that sings back.
I send my song out
like hands that touch
the shape and the place
of things.

I have watched them
stumble in the dark
woods at night.
When I fly past
they call me
black moth,
black leaf.

And the man lost
in the dark maze
of his thoughts,
the man who living
with stones becomes stone,
has my name.

I swoop and sail
through winding caves;

I know my way.

Because they don't
know me, they say
I am many things:

across screens,
wings that blacken
a full moon;
a cape and teeth.

Women hold their white
necks in sleep, afraid
of wanting me.

I tangle in the loose
hair of their dreams.

I am not their dreams.
I am not their words.
I am what I am.

They need a name
for the darkness.
They take mine.

Jane Ellen Glasser

VERNICHTUNG

For L.E.

I was thinking how bored I had become
With most of my writing
And with much of other people's writing
Thinking how even what I write well I seldom live.

Michelina lived
For ten months inside Buchenwald.

She told me many sufferings. But she also told

How warm the ovens were at night:
 How she tried to walk near them.
 How she licked greasy smoke from her skin,
 And how it eased her hunger.
 How she welcomed the flames from the chimneys:
 A dependable light for her steps after dark.

It is true that she was very young
 And could not understand
 What was happening to her.

She said she wiped her nose always on the same sleeve
 An inch above the cuff so that her uniform might not be
 Oversoiled; so that she would not lose all self-respect;
 So she could garner, even here, some pride.

She said they pulled her from the cattle cars
 And gave her with her uniform
 A dead prisoner's shoes. Real leather and laces.
 her family in Charleroi was poor.
 She remembers herself happier at that moment
 Than she had ever been or could be
 And wonders what it is
 She has become.

Is this where it begins? "*After the hints of what the
 poets meant
 But could not quite say?*" To know the pleasures of
 Auschwitz?
 To know in Hell the unencumbered joys of vanity
 and lust?
 To read *Abandon Hope* above the gate and also know
 There is no hope in Heaven?
 And is there poetry in Heaven, then?
 As there is on this earth: pleasure in Buchenwald?
 This is where it begins.

Michel J. Englebort

TWO POEMS

If I had sorted out all the quietness

Would I have known an animal was
stalking me? Though all the vast

Snow gave no hint of a nuance of
dark or shadow. The vast stillness

Of the air no aura of odour alien or
—what was it?

An avalanche was suddenly roaring
I was untouched, my eyes

batting away skirls of snow

There were other places we had

Cleared out—of soft fern or clawing
brambles. Lain there a time or two

Going back, how strange we found them
foreign as it were—though unforgot

If we went deeper (we did go deeper)
we found what we could never tame

Clawing wildly even as before the cave
of human dawn. Your blood came soon

When the moon was high. You were
pensive, finally in a rage. You broke

The thatched cage of the captive eaglet
you cried angrily, we

would never tame

TWO POEMS**Purgatory Pit**

a vertical cave
sunk in a timbered mountainside
so deep we could say a prayer in the time
it takes a rope to find the bottom

that summer day we backed over the edge
looking for a map of inner space
or a painting of a reindeer with an arrow in his neck
or the knowledge of what binds people together
besides rope

rappelling down and down
past the mossline and the daylight
past the shelves of schist layered in humus
booming waterfall spraying mist on our clothes

overhead the mouth looked like an azure moon
painted with green leaves
drops of water floating in a sunbeam
suddenly slashed my upturned face

we jumped on the wet gravel and shone the lights around:
two eyes glowed from a hole under a log.
a porcupine bristling shrank further into his hole.
broken quills marked the spot where he fell.

passing him at a safe distance
we balanced on a ledge that hangs out over this
toilet-bowl pit
leaped over the hopper thru another waterflag
dropped into a womb full of dripstone sculpture:
mare's mane, mushrooms, petrified bananas,
perfect cups worn in the stone one drop at a time.

all the silent history that flows in caves
while shipload of invaders dislodge tribes from the hills,
build and abandon towns,
vein the land with roads that the woods reclaim,
waves of grandfathers dissolving again and again in the
ground
while a thin layer of lime extends the stalactite's reach.

no revelations here:
we kept crawling thru jagged auricles
until we came up against the solid spine of the mountain;
beyond a fissure in the rock vertebrae
this underground river crashed and churned thru
unreachable canals;
the only thing left to do was go back the way we came,
a luxury the porcupine did not enjoy.

he watched us return thru the veil of the falls
and hook onto the rope
a brief dream of lights and voices
rising toward the daylight
where he used to sun himself on logs
then even the rope was gone.

May i die as well as he did
without pity or hope
in a hole beyond my comprehension
close to a network of underground streams
and a message of broken quills
preserved somewhere at the bottom of the sky.

Morris Cave

I thought of doing this cave alone
But i would have died there.
Three of us climbed the weed-grown stair
From the creekbed to the valley rim
And gazed out at the ridge across the gulf:
A vast stone ship plowing thru dim
Wraiths of mist; and we, standing on the edge
Of its foam-foliage wake—the self
Froths much too fast among these silent waves
To know the shore toward which that mountain moves.

This is the place we started from:
Trees perched high on the polished crags,
Moss-lipped falls fanning thru gray space
To a cattail mere, holes where the bats fly
When the sun goes down. Quarry long forgotten.
Climbed we then the boulders, opened gear,
Slid we into the cave mouth one by one
Feet first, on our backs, the stone
Cold as the grave and ribbed like a cat's throat.
I, the reluctant leader, wished me out.

Lights on, using hands and knees,
Crawling thru crushed mud and gravel
Washed loose by the slow centuries
From giant marble layers—grovel
Among jagged villi, tunnel going down,
Belly-slither over boulders, bruised elbows
Going down squeezed around sharp cornices
(How would it be to suffocate or drown)
Breath came fast and heavy, water flowed
How far . . . something in the ceiling glowed.

One by one we wriggled into a room
Squat on our hams to rest. The headlamp
Like a memory of sun. We passed a beam

Along cracks in the damp walls, little drops
Leaking down my back. Strange kiva,
The groundhole exit hardly big enough
For an elf: hand front, lie flat, wild impulse
To scream or laugh, enter a streambed,
Twist and crawl yards over smooth-worn pebbles
Clutched in the fist. I could not lift my head.

The wet floor slanted upward, running miles
Under the land. In this hollow place
I lay on the marble slab and could almost stand,
My feet in the streambed, ceiling on my face.
A rock septum barred the way:
Crawl up the slab and down the other side
Committing ourselves totally to faith
The exit will not be sealed in a slide;
Time slowed to the stalactite's pace,
The sky was distant as a dinosaur's death.

Came we then to the chamber
Filled with water, stagnant, icy cold,
The river of fear; crawl in and sink
And freeze balls and belly, soak hair,
Drink mud and surge and slither like a worm
In the mountain's labyrinthine bowel,
Find the crevice, plumb thru it and emerge
Chattering and foul. An otter could do it.
We sat like monkeys blind and deaf and dumb
Not any less eager to embrace the tomb.

Testing the depth, Kyle sealed his clothes
In a plastic bag; and three times he tried
and still this side of the tunnel rose
Blinking and gasping from the chill.
I was content to lag, until i saw
Their light-beams shine beyond the ceiling's lip.
Further delay was conspicuous. No thinking;
Strip and pass the clothes-bags under the pool,
Go for it, take the plunge, submerge and claw
The rocks and whooping struggle thru the maw.

We took the next caverns in the nude
Dragging our bags behind us, lights front,
Skin scraping over harsh stone
Mud-men, elementals, eyelashes glued
Together by dirt, marsh-matted, grunt
For speech, ceiling-drips shivering spine,
The age-old rock impressed us, drawing blood,
Slow lover, intimately cold,
Unknowing of flesh; open shafts beneath
Our scrambling feet; grit between our teeth.

A chute slid us down to a coffin-size
Choke hole. We cut the lights and listened
To the waterfall beyond. The sound awoke
Measureless distance, utter darkness, the eyes
Drifted nowhere and the ears grew wise.
Caves multiplied in all their mythic modes,
Orpheus, Odysseus, the ice-age artist who
Conjured his antlered master from the antipodes—
We yielded, breathless, buried in the true
Unyielding *mater*—and pulled each other through.

Joyful and terrified. Then stood and wedged
Past portals; then: a huge cathedral flume,
The coffers lost in darkness, archways ledged
Like water-worn fragments of a broken stair,
Boulders strewn about beast-like in the gloom
Casting bizarre shadows everywhere.
The walls were a honeycomb of caves,
The giant halls tilted off the level plane.
A dreamscape terminus of cliffs and chasms
Vibrant with the purling of the stream.

We clung to the stone ladders and ascended
Like filthy angels toward the uplifted apse
When clambering over a shaft one-handed
I fumbled my light, watched it helpless clatter
Down the gulf, bouncing off the scarps,

The beam swallowed by inconceivable night.
Craig chimneyed to the bottom of the pit
While i crouched on my shelf, as if engraved.
He found it still shining, like an ad
For Dante flashlights. I knew i would be saved.

Following the stream we came to the brink
Of a deep canyon, where the water gushed
In darkness to a hidden lake. We sank
On the slippery floor, enraptured, hushed;
I tied my lantern to my wrist. I gazed
Into fissures between beds of tilted rock
Where one could enter and be fossilized,
Clefts on all sides, bottomless and black,
And marble runneled from beneath, like snow,
Full of crannies we will never know.

And always, darkness and water and stone
Reticulated endlessly,
Stone hallowed into darkness by water,
Boundless, like the caverns of the sky.
We retreat from that sound, we human souls
Webbed together by curiosity
And common need, and common limits, found
By each of us alone. Retrace the holes
Toward day, heads down, hands outstretched, we creep
Like God emerging from the hills of sleep.

The trees were green, the quarry speckled white,
The moss intense and subtle, the cattails full
Of rippling color. Stalks waved and a flight
Of birds played in the mist, and the waterfall
Opened to the clean air. We bathed in the spray.
We dressed in warm clothes and picked our way
Among the slabs, the secrets of the earth
Already mute within us, overgrown
By weeds of mirth. The ridge moved afar
Behind moving clouds. We descended to the car.

Stephen T. Butterfield

SOUR GRAPES

"We shall not be using the enclosed manuscript. Thank you, however, for giving us the opportunity to consider it."

The Beloit Poetry Journal

I never wanted
my poems
published in your crummy magazine
anyway. I didn't sit waiting
for the mail all day. Hell no.
It's Saturday:
college football on t.v., some boxing.
I didn't even know
the mail was here 'til 6:00
when I checked for the newspaper;
I even read the comics
and started dinner
before I opened your damned letter.
And last January
when it was too cold to go out
my car was broke,
I tried reading your journal
(My Aunt Gerrie gave it to me
as a gag gift) and I didn't like
or understand
any of the junk you printed.
I didn't even finish it;
I got bored and watched t.v.
I wouldn't tell anyone
even if you did accept my poems.
And who would know? Nobody
reads your worthless rag.
I only know three people
who've even heard of it:

an old woman in Utica
who'll be dead by next year
and two drunks
who smell like State Street
and only write Christmas verse
and haiku about their pets.
Really, the joke's on you.
I found those stamps
on old wedding invitations
I never R.S.V.P.'d on
and I stole the envelopes from work.
I didn't even type the damn poems;
didn't waste any of my time.
I told my wife I'd take her to the movies
if she typed them for me
and then I didn't even take her.
I didn't even take
the letter to the post office; just left it
in my box and let the mailman do the work.
What do you editor guys
do for a living?
You can't possibly make money
printing lesbian poems.
I got a real job,
make 21K a year, own a Buick,
wear \$70 shoes.
I bet poetry editors wear sandals
(the ones with tire tread bottoms).
I didn't want your free copy
either. No room.
My bookshelves are too crowded
even for your skinny book.
Plus, I never would've read it.
Too junky. I read Neruda in the john.
And a free copy
isn't worth anything.

Buy beer with one.
Try jamming it in the coin slot,
pull the knob under your brand
and wait for cigarettes. It doesn't work.
I could've gotten cash
for my poems (my neighbor's cousin
works across the street from The New Yorker),
but I felt sorry for you guys.

Please consider these.

David M. Michalak

SUBMITTING

1.

I am on the beach beside you.
The hot sun coats us
in a rich brown lacquer, as the waves
turn white, curling at the soft edge
of the shore. The rhythmic slapping
pulls tenderly at the core
of our stomachs. If we grazed against
these waves could we
turn inside out? We rise and fall;
skirting along the border
where the concrete ends and the sea begins.

Sequins of sweat bead on our chests
and thighs. The wind passes over
and over dropping grains of sand
on us, a cragged mosaic.
As the last sea gull flies into the deepening
sky, we melt into the sand, leaving
our blanket and clothing behind.
When the sun breaks and the reds
and purples seep into the clouds
the ocean is boldest.

2.

My dream is of night. Lights
spark along the water and extinguish.
Boats moan like dark women dragging
their heavy bodies. The moon
is a chunk of cracked ice
and slowly melts toward dawn.
We are undressing. The moist air
makes our clothing stick. Careful
against shells we crouch down
and shed like snakes; our new skin
glistens beneath the rich sky.
I have several names for you: Laurel,
Sparrow, Lavender. How gentle!
Brushing the cold sand
from our thighs we watch the supple
waves lap at the shore. Beside us
the pier groans deep into the night's
velvet throat. Your eyes darken with love
or pain; all the names we forget and remember.
Sand crabs scurry and go out
like small flames. I can taste the salt
on their hard red backs. Hands entwined,
we walk evenly into the ocean's
black mouth, lapping and swallowing.

Susan Pinkwater

TWO POEMS from *HAWKER*

Gyp, My Loving Big Black Pig: An Acrostic Poem

Gyp goes with me everywhere:

You'll find him in church on a Sunday

Pillowed upon clean straw, to the east of the altar

Muffling his whiffles, reserving grunts of pleasure,

Yeasty eructations, for the noisier hymns and carols.

Lively and contented, wiggling his quirky tail

Over the coombes and vallies, he trots behind the

Vicar as he visits his parishioners—

In house, in cot, in glebe and pasture,

Never once despoiling a humble hearth-stone.

Glad to be sociable, he jiggles his globular testes.

Brushing a floppy ear means he wants a good scratching.

In storm, in sun, the elements ne'er dissuade him:

Gloriously he wallows in the finest muck-holes

Believing he's in Paradise, awash in tarry ichor.

Later I must scrub him and oil his hide with suet.

After that we'll take our tea with good Dorothy Dinglett.

Coarse he is outside 'tis true, but within he's all refinement.

Know, ye cynics, and be warned: and model your own
deportment

Pig-wise, Gyp-wise. You'll surely feel an improvement

In manners as well as morals. And when you next
devour pork

Grant a special whiff of thanks to Black Gyp and his tribe.

Tamar River Cornish Pie

Dorothy Dinglett's oven entrance
is like a vast church door:
rye loaves emerge, and barley
buns and sweet oat cakes.
Last of all, upon the board,
steams a magnificent pie,
a hillock of brown dough
reeking like a small volcano
with vented savory puffs of vapor.

"Wait," says Dorothy Dinglett.
"We'll open it up anon."

When the dish is broken
we are astounded at the tumble
of oysters, conger-eels, and pilchards
mixed piece-meal
in clotted cream and butter
seasoned with garlick, salt, and spices.

Old Satan himself, they say
would never cross the Tamar
for fear he would be cast
beneath a savory Cornish crust.

Robert Peters

ROM

(After Jan Yoors's memoir, The Gypsies)

for Tim Correll
Te avel angla tute.

I.

To now shut
my mouth and muffle
the moan rumbling up
my throat so my body
bursts into a hum homing
outward, so I tremble
with my own silence.

And if in the wish
of that silence someone
else is laughing, someone else
tossing a picked bone
into the snow, chipping off
the beefscraps blackened
on hatchets, balancing
a spoonful of peas
for the doves, if silence is
a fogswept breath without meaning
blame the nightfall that lets
snow whitewash around us
the old lies
lied into truth.

I would sleep if I could.

I would make a home
in silence freezing
to punctuate the grope
that I breathe
and am bled by slowly.

2.

Over the snowed hill
sloping westward a locust grove
froze darker and thickened
in the bloodlike dusklight
softened by fog while, overcast,
the night locked in.
We were cold and made camp.
We found ourselves lost there.
We were curling hovels
into the tick and downing
Vodka stolen in town
knowing nowhere in particular
is somewhere to go, is cold enough
to burn our hope in.

And when you came to me
from the river with water
in a bucket and moonlight
trapped in the ice
floating on the water
and the echo of horsehooves
still rippling in circles
under the ice I called you near
and your name came out
of my mouth in a cloud
that rose slowly and turned
into your body.

You opened your shirt.
You opened the home
clothes lock into the heat
our bodies keep hidden
beneath pockets
and your breasts in silhouette
on the canvas tarp

were dark enough to gather
the little bit of light
that our bodies burned
into the moment.

3.

Some still sawing
a heavy sleep in half
because their humble dreams
were too awkward whole.

Some were running back
bareass from the river, almost blue,
some shaking out shirts, gathering
spoons, spilling soup on ashes,
some girls ladling
a leaky bucket of milk
discovered poppyseeds spotting
a slight sweep of snow
and a crone with a black kerchief
covering her nose
bent over supposing them an omen.

They weren't.
The tip of a black braid
dipped into a ladle. The number
tattooed on a hand
curled around the mouth
screaming something about time
being dust, about dust being
stolen by a hunchback
from ruins, the number on a hand
once crushed between a boot
and the snow

waved us forward over
road moguls at campside
and iced puddles and over the Nowhere

our home is dragged out of
like a dead ghost
exhumed from a monument
of Plato, forward
with horse snorts in chorus
and the creak of wood-freeze
and the crunch and squeak
of hardpack underwheel
hastened with each shake
of the rein, each whipcrack.

our teams reeled beneath
snowed trees arcing
a tunnel of the road, through wheatfarms,
women plucking hens
in a roadside barn, nettles stewed
in flour browned in goosefat
chewed slowly on the threshold
of a stone house edging
the remains of a grove
and through woodsmoke
lost in the shadows of clouds
and through the linear
pulse and hope of becoming
what by nightfall
no one has become.

4.

To stand on the edge
of a darkening pond, to lean
into the dream of a home
on the freezing fringes
of a pond whose darkness
a dim star pocks, whose darkness
the lie the moon is
whitens.

If these mutely solemn trees
want to creep back
beneath the black surface
of the pond that doesn't
concern me now.

I cannot gather stillness
enough to move my mouth,
and yet this dreariness mopes
up the nooserope hanging
my heart, and leaves my body
the only thing trembling.

Not even the tufts
of black birds stuffed
into the night where
bared tops of trees
tore wounds, not the mouse or the owl
or the frozen sun rising
over houses with stone chimneys
lipping thin seeps of smoke,
with everyone dreaming
except Jesus Christ, who couldn't even
die without his body.

I think life loves
living the lie of
becoming.

And I think the breath just
barely out of my mouth
will drift with the fogpatch
gathering on a slight
draft of light that bled through
a seam on the horizon.

Frank Graziano

WISPS

She sits at the window looking at webs,
a room full of jewels.

If she could slip through those strands
without breaking the shiny beads—

on the other side
she'd do wonderful things: Say *silk*
and it would spin from her mouth,
say *wing* and she'd fly. Oh *friend*,
flower, father!

The door opens. He walks in.
Fingers move through her hair,
down her back—

When her mother calls
she doesn't understand
supper, hurry, wash.

*

She just chalks on a board,
lines weaving round and round
till a pattern takes hold,
tiny face in a maze—

He was rubbing between her legs,
saying *Hush, hush*
though she didn't make a sound.

That night she ran
till the sheet held her in knots.
Her hair was so tangled the next morning
her mother cut it.

She remembers the wisps falling
down her neck, her back,
that fine net of shivers
dropping over her body.

BETWEEN HILLS

The old Ford flew over Crematory Hill,
stunned mole, groundhog and rabbit,
crushed teasel and Queen Anne's lace.

The liquor-sweet freedom of the evening
drained out of the man behind the wheel
struck sober by his own blood.

The hill was pathless and high.
He rose out of the wreck staggering,
as prostrate to the incline as a holy man.

I met his world the first time
near wooded hills whose grounds held
the winter's moisture all summer.

Juice from tomatoes broken on dry dirt
and the cool skin of newly dug potatoes:
the good seemed to come from down under.

A coal miner rests on white satin.
His hair is black, eyes closed,
cheeks blushed as red as when he lived.

They called him a good-time Charlie.
On payday he'd look at his check and say
to the other miners, "When's payday?"

A once-over at the hospital, then jail.
I've listened to the story so often
I can hear the door's clang echo down the hall
where only the sound went free,
the aftermath of a tolling bell
floating above the trees like a soul.

Sometimes I slept between him and my mother.
I sucked my thumb and fondled the chenille.
Their breathing slowed almost to a stop.

They say he hung himself with his belt
in the jail cell and I want to know.
And was it love, cowardice or hate?

What difference can a dead man make?
A spaghetti dinner with the miners.
Just an innocent Friday night drunk.

"I've disgraced my family" a cell-mate
heard him say over and over that day.
Was it as dark as the mines in there,

or did a window above his head let in
too much light on the gloom and guilt?
Black-faced miners rise on the shaft at sunset.

I've never seen inside a coal mine.
At Mammoth Cave they gave us hard hats
with lights and I tried to imagine:

under the earth the devils of the Bible
swarm like the letters on the page
as the believer goes blind with fatigue.

Black shiny coal and the pick-axes
pounding through the cold corridors.
Lunch underground among rumbling walls.

Danger in every unusual noise, death.
It is night all day but for the single beam
darting from their heads like a large eye.

My mother felt the first pains of birth
walking with a friend up Bessie Ann Hill.
Led back down she had me in the old iron bed.

He walked up alone to the descending hours.
Iron bars, a bed hung on the wall like a shelf—
humpty-dumpty ready to jump and no last words.

If the king's horses and men couldn't hear,
then grace hovering with no face in the cell
surely heard a prayer, a final song.

He used to play the guitar in the front room,
sang songs about peace and green valleys.
In the same room miners sat up all night
with lamps glowing gold in the corners.
The open coffin resembled a treasure chest
of crossed hands and cloud-white sheen.

She lay in the iron bed in shock this time.
We kids were scattered with friends here
and there like debris from an explosion.

Death had its way and it hardly shows.
We flourish like grass on a grave.
What difference can a dead man make?

A black-faced miner rises at sunset.
The survivors wait at the supper table
and never say grace over the empty plate.

Barbara McInturff Wuest

SHELL MOUNDS

*"Among some peoples children on the day
of birth were so taboo that they might not
be put on the ground." —Ernst Cassirer*

I. Turn of the Century

Trees have melted to circles
in shell; no roots, no
Caloosa chanting
their voices

shrunk to a drum
and the drum-head gone to rags in the shell-heap,
no frame of bone where calcium traces its patterns:
an absence of music

in this slow and settled clock of shells
popping down each others' backs
as night air thickens them.

Mangroves settle the moonlight, turn
sawgrass down around their roots,
and raise the tide. Oaks grow taller: buoyed
giant seeds. Obelisks of branches
squash the water. They are rising
permanent as the dead, heavy as Creation
in a wooden book. Their voices ring
the thick oak trunks; history's
packed along the sap and rough bark grooves.
New moonlight pulls it, simple
in a calendar of stone.

II. Road-Building. Boom-Time.

Square 1920's trucks
 back into everything; who said
 a convict ever learns? Flat bush
 rolled underwheel around the slough,
 then jammed reverse, as trucks
 humped backwards, tailgates shelving
 into hills.

The dead cracked abalone

open in their mounds;

backwash of hot exhaust on oyster shell
 steams like feast-days

when women gathered

their brown circles over the fire
 gleaming on their knees.

Short hot shells steam

open on the coal

steam spatters. Dusky fish thrashed
 open in a never-drying pile
 beside the fire.

No one would hold hands

if they could eat: they sat together breaking wafers
 of shells on common ground.

Square trucks

buck up a pyramid, then
 scoop it down. They shift low-low, grind off;
 their wheels run flat on one-lane corduroy.

New roads

still need improvement, all downtown.
 This shell rolls flat on sand. It chokes
 the gophers, lies down still.

Good shell roads won't washboard
 at the corners; we know moving fast
 is smooth.

No Indian
could move this way, on grease,
and fast as garfish over crushed old shell.
This Model A, flat-out, will peak
at fifty-five, and even more,
if this land weren't
so damn flat.

III. Off-Shore.

Coastal shell-mounds are shaved
flat. Sealed off by mud-flats, out
in the bays, they rise
low-profile, off-limits now by law.
Out there, the dead sit solid
in their shell-lined wells:
the dead jaw looped over kneebones
pensive as huge knuckles propped under chins,
their wholly tight arrangement
foetal in its upright grave.
Thighbones are clean, erect,
tucked under trees and short brown pampas grass.

IV. Newborns.

Only the grown
dead squat in shell. Caloosa knew
the child too fresh from earth
should not be buried, should
scatter its sweetness in grasses—
open to the air that
breathes.

V. Winter Solstice

After a child's death, what
slow expiation? Under knee-high grass
this low mound, horse-shoe oval, loops
to our right, forever held fee simple.

Seven hundred seasons of rain
have slowed its crest to a simple swell
of turf and creepers thin
as rawhide thongs. To our left
the wood rails buckle up hill
to the temple-mound: a winding
corduroy road of shell steps under
oak-boles, rough as a wolf's head, gray
shag in dens of solid leaf.

Mosquitoes clamber our boots as we climb
the last high mound. You hold my wrist
as if your palm could shape my blood,
could shift the past up forward, future,
where an oil of new atonement gathers
clear as any choice. Our lives could
change.

On the last high point of the temple-mound
trees leap for sunlight; ripe vines
wrap their highest limbs, as ladies
might dance in a bright pavilion, lifted arms
and hands linked sudden on the chosen
man.

North of us, the burial shell
loops on. Under our boots the worshippers
slow chant a vein of solid sand; our loss
is a lump raised up in dark; our bright
arms link the crest of solstice: still
one day could change our lives.

A. McA. Miller

WHEN SHELLS

 mound
the earth,
life centers:

Indians lived here
on mollusks, conch,
oyster, whelk

 shells
buried deep
the dead,
crosslegged,
scalp to sky
skeletons,
bones, shells
curled, curved

 under
the brave lengthened
in the slender girl

 felt
the earth give,
shells shamble,
grandmother folded

 in
any storm
the mound rode
solid.

You take me
in sand,
under the bridge
thick concrete ceiling
beams full
with pebbles, shell,
bone
pushes
on me.

After,
 I slip up
 the sandy incline,
 touch the ribs
 of the bridge,
 feel a car
 hum over:

it could be grandmother
 passing,
 the long way home.

Carol Mahler

POEM CHAIN

I see you've kept some careful records,
 Calling the grubs hardly
 syllables at all; but a meal
 for the starling.

And she, for all her squabbles,
 a pure morsel for the owl,
 who feeds the soft eyes
 to her young

as they nest in blood in the old church spire.
 Your notes are thorough: in time a woman
 (could that be you?) snares and plucks
 and stews the owl.

She lifts a spoon to a man's lips.
 An eye is floating there like a split
 doubloon. Could we stop now?
 You smile. I sip.

Edward McCrorie

THE SQUIRREL ON THE LIMB

She'd go just so far
then the limb would pitch;
she'd run back
to where the trunk
comes to three great arms;
Run! she'd run so fast
then stop as if some thought
had got caught,
take quick breaths
before she could go on
to the lash of branch, the thin part
where she'd look down
and the earth would rush at her;
she'd start
go back
start
go back
go again, halfway, the pause,
wind pushing that plain brown fur
straight out from her small wild body
always always
the same limb, the same risk,
then back to the niche
that makes her so wild.

Rebecca Roberts