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Planting*

Fire ticks, pops in the wood stove before
another log falls into glimmering slopes.
Outside this door patterns
of coral and scales sprout on fencepost
and barbed wire. At dawn when the sun strikes them,
she lulus, her joyous breath traveling into trees.
Winter's luminous fog wraps her in its shell.

Star seed, stone seed, enclose the fields
and make her planting a gift to the sun.
Spirits send her desire each springtime
when the agent denies her warmth in the wood.

When she plants, spirits perch
on sunbeams around her. Making a mound,
she nestles the corn, beans, and squash.
Four days later, corn swells, shoots two leaves
like a serpent's tongue from earth
to sniff for rain.

She hums above that moist ground between drumlins.
Voices from the dark beyond this world
jeer to jar her ear and twine
around her day, until she cannot say
whose fingers pluck the seed,
whose fingers drop it in.

Stone seed, star seed, enclose these few acres
unclaimed by miners, farmers, and speculators.
Her desire opens Antares, the southern door of spring.
The agent keeps clinging to warmth meaning wood.

Roberta Hill's recent work has been published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Luna*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Her two collections of poems include *Star Quilt* and *Philadelphia Flowers*, both published by Holy Cow! Press and written under the name Roberta Hill Whiteman.

She lives her labyrinth of days,
hoeing, watering until green tongues tickle her ears.
She pauses for pine scent on wings of summer.
Corn calls thunder
bulging with rain on the rim of sky.
Late August she watches the black gates above,
where stars glitter so long, they whirl her
through a cosmos, gnarled as her hands.
Her only pleasure—to become a seed, a reed, a tongue.

Star seed, stone seed, guard her last journey,
thunder and lightning surging through stalks.
Her grandson is patting a puddle on concrete,
vaguely remembering warmth in lost woods.

*Previously published in altered form as a broadside for the reading
at Woodland Pattern.

—*Roberta Hill*

At Lame Deer, Montana

The gourd comes alive in the old man's fingers,
when he closes his eyes and leans into prayer.
His song flutters many colored ribbons
over fire-lit faces, before it rolls
through the night into sharp, sage air.

While cedar smoke billows through tipi poles,
the small of your back aches and heartaches climb
the spirals of your breath. Enough sighs,
the weight of death makes your body hum.
Belly, brain, groin, arm waver in rhythm

with coals, flickering in a dark abyss.
After midnight, a woman's voice rings out
as clearly as a mountain stream,
even though no woman sings.
Such warmth pours from singers and the drum.

First thunder above the lodge, then straight
down, green tongues of flame illuminate
the edge of human love. The hiss
of pitch escapes among the close conversations.
How often your memory keeps me there.

—*Roberta Hill*

Heat

Standing near him, you feel the electric charge on your arm
and believe love strikes a flint. Your legs prick at the closeness.
You dream that direction. Remember, we never know
the outcome of passion, only the sensuous wave rising in the belly,
heat generated a hall length away. You want to hold
him in your arms, to taste the salt and sweat of him,
to breathe his outgoing breath, to swing inside his touch, feeling
yourself fall then rise in joy and laughter.
The south wind is beginning to renew your life.
You hear the sound of his gait, its particular rhythm,
the jangle of keys, the lock unlatched, the door close again.
We never foresee the moment when affection ripens,
whether on a clear day in December
with ice on the window glinting good-bye,
or months later, looking across a field of light.
The east wind is returning after years of trials.
You were trying not to feel longing any more,
no more loss or grief. Blizzards covered the woman
you were, snow preserving your heart to free yourself from
Oh God, to the bottom of your soul, a painful time.
Rejoice—the warm wind is rising.
Rejoice—this intense love flows from the unseen source
into your legs, your belly, your arms, your hands, into the sparks
that shoot from your heartbeat during those rare encounters.
Remember, we never know the outcome of passion,
only the sensuous thrill rising from the ancient earth
into us, heat that heals us a hall length away.

—*Roberta Hill*

Mother's Only Daughter

Mother loved you more than she loved us,
heart of earth with the autumn sun inside.
The three of us sisters knew that you
lulled her Choctaw hunger, you,
the creamy white flower she stroked on calmer days.
You trembled under the full moon near the sultry streets
of Natchitoches and Saddle Tree, then
acted innocent while she dug peanuts
under solemn pines.

She kept you well hidden in the back
of the bin, but we knew that a yam
was the only real daughter, well-behaved,
adaptable and sweet, the right color, not brown
but golden, and with enough of her heat, you
mastered her tricks. You pulsed in soil

and fit her palm. We pulsed on top
and ruined her plans. If you weren't rooted,
capable of rot, your swelling would have given
her cause for alarm. She would slip off your coat
and tell us stories of all those who had you
in their grip, how you freed them, fed them,
loved them true.

You store the memory
of her fierce cuisine, that pan of hot southern fried,
popping as it flew, glasses bouncing off
counter tops, shattering, shambles springing up
for us to live through them. Smelling you,
I come to the full measure of my childhood,
tasting its gold strength and letting the rest fly.

—*Roberta Hill*

Cicada

for Ernie

1

Before you left our pillows, this bed
to drive to the Twin Cities, you showed me
a cicada, fresh from its thrall of seventeen years.
The brown hull hung on your tire tread,
while the green being, too tender to fly,
trembled with the weight of gossamer wings,
struggling to adjust to the brightness of its time.

You carried him to the alder tree
whose leafy shadow made the yard an arbor.
After you left, his buzz song eased me
through lonely afternoons of sun and wind.
Desire changed his skeleton.
Desire—that green shoot in a gut.
That tendril twining with memory until new life emerges
on the opposite side
from where we first supposed. He lured his mate
to the arbor. Even after you were gone,
all the years you loved me
still sounded.

2

I walk the smudge-colored hills
as sun lifts icy rime to mist, mist to thinning siris,
then the sky bolts hard blue, foretelling deeper cold.

Today your voice spiraled hoarse
with feeling over the phone.
I dreamed myself beside you,
touching the cool wash of your skin,
resting my head in the hollow of your shoulder,
your heart beating loudly against my eager ear.
I long to drink the wonder of your warmth,
your body near and certain as this sun.

3

Cold autumn rains we argue
with ghosts inside our car.
Flicking off and on, tail lights punctuate our replies.

By spring, on humid nights, I sit in a darkened room,
stricken by chafing irritations.
On mornings, anxiety spills over the margins
of our faces until we recognize
between us the hurt some couples never lose.
We flake away our anger. It may yet
come between us, although
I pray each time we'll dig inside
for roots to keep love green and twiggy.

4

I've been a distracted wife,
scattered by the minute trials of city living.
Parking tickets I lost will lead
to our arrests. All night
I flounder in the swells of office buildings,
in currents glimmering with faces
that belong either to neon or grouper.

My spirit wanders down a spiral stair,
returns to her home on the floor of the sea.
She opens the trapdoor
beneath the puckered sand and retreats
to a forested land before her earth-time.
There hawks whistle as they fold.
There mountains thick with mist
remember her first name. Your voice calls
to her fathoms above in a raging world.
You see, beloved, I had to leave grids and squares
where heartaches glisten in shards of glass.
I had to reach the underground.

5

We aren't blood, bone, matter,
but filaments born in the tide, coiling toward life.
At every moment, desire saunters
through those passages you've painted.
There in the dark, the flash of fireflies,
neon glowing in moon wash, caches of memory
arriving far from our human ways of knowing.
Dreamers with moth-bright eyes
and furrowed cheeks gather in my living room.
See this common stone, now look,
a shaft of sun, a nudging wave. Truth
takes a path of wonder in a world where spirits enter.

6

You want a wall of glass where dark and light explode.
You love the rag-stock folks who wrap themselves
in rasping wind on Robert Street.
You love the sirens of St. Paul, its easy women.
I want fields of corn that rub whispers
in the sun before next equinox.
I need waves of blackbirds, chittering in trees
October afternoons. They descend and scour eaves,
the wide swathes of still green grass,
until I'm forced to find the meaning
of their iridescent hoods,
of the niggling intent in their black-yellow eyes.

These hills in autumn haze
already take the weight of winter.
I can't believe how long
I've gagged on civilization.

7

Patience is hard to practice there
in dense angles of distraction.
Dreamers want our blood to endure
even if you, dear mountain, can't shake off
the deaths they've always offered us, bottles
with despair that mutilate our spirits,
the way they program us to expect a sloppy end,
played tragic on their screens, pretending death
inevitably finds guardians of earth before
they reach their purpose. I'm not first
to go claim as kin
the cicada. Now years of silence
between us. Some day we'll greet the strangers
we'll become, stranger even now the rooms
we once called home.

—*Roberta Hill*

Cactus Song

In the Valley of the Sun, heat thrums in white.
waves as succulents contract, ribbed stems
and spines needing moisture. Your voice
inhabits my hotel room, the air, the tiny bones
inside my ears. Two thousand miles from home

in desert exile, I feel dry to the touch, dry as clay
in the fire pit, as blue cactaceous skin, my voice
a splinter of one who has not spoken in years.
Parched, my wanting almost makes you
visible, reassembling you from memory alone.

Today an elder from Tohono O'Odham sings
with his rattle, urging corn kernels to grow.
This is how we retain what is precious, the love
of a thousand years, as a people's memory of rain
calls each delicate shoot through the sand.

Now he sings for fruits of saguaro and cereus,
draws buds to the surface, their fleshy scales
tipped burgundy and green, flowers tucked inside
like swans. I wonder if love forms nubs of those buds,
the way I am a cactus that holds you as water.

—*Karenne Wood*

Something Is Always Taking Us Away

In memory of M.P. (1962–1985)

by moonlight, leaving no evidence
 A two-lane road, named for someone forgotten
(not a mark on you, they said)
 it is not dangerous. We know
from laughter, gathering upward
 we traveled this way every night
like smoke in an Indian car, no drivers swerving
 as workers cut through the crushed door
to rearrange roads, no bayonets aimed at our people
 their machinery burned against chilled air
when telephones work, while a lamp
 twisted into your seat, your face
shines, and there is no disease in the blankets
 still as snow on the windshield
no alcohol, no succession of suicides
 you could not see an ordinary truck
too soon, something taking us
 wedged within brush, watching you
gently, without the earth's tremor
 through headlamps. Nothing warned you
no roaring of cannon, when death is
 not the darkness, not the wipers, only
a patch of ice on a back-country road
 a truck driver's face, frozen, surprised.

—Karenne Wood

Amoroleck's Words

*You can't take a man's words.
They are his even as the land
is taken away
where another man
builds his house.*

—Linda Hogan*

You must've been a sight, Captain John Smith,
as your dugout approached
with Jamestown's men
sporting plumed hats,
poufed knickers, beards, stockings,
funny little shoes.
You might have looked, to us,
well,
uncivilized.
We fought you, we know,
because you wrote it down.
One man was left behind. Wounded.
At your mercy. Among your shining goods—
mirrors, knives, firearms, glass beads—
where was mercy? Maybe you left it
in England. Eager to learn, Capt. Smith,
you asked about the worlds he knew,
whether there was gold,
why his people had fought
when you came to them "in love."
He told you in his dialect,
which no one now speaks.
You recorded his name. His words.
Not his fate.
Of all the words our people spoke
in the year of your Lord 1608,
only his answer remains:
*"We heard that you were a people
come from under the world,
to take our world from us."*†

—Karenne Wood

*from *Red Clay: Poems and Stories*. Used by permission of Greenfield Review Press.

†Last three lines from John Smith's *General Historie of Virginia*, Book 3. Amoroleck was the first Indian of the Monacan Confederacy to speak with the Englishmen from Jamestown and was captured by them near present-day Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1608.

James "Don Santiago" Kirker, "King of New Mexico": His Vision

For Cormac McCarthy and Ralph A. Smith

*He would look for spiders, and make them fight together, or throw
flies into the spider web; and then he watched that battle with so
much pleasure, that he would sometimes burst into laughter.*

—Colerus, *Life of Spinoza*

Green grocer to hair raiser
glaring from the daguerreotype,
lips crimped stammering
arms crossed blurring right hand

tucked for gun or flask, wired
to the coiled world, eye-pits
reading the horizon's waves,
nostrils heat-flared for them

flooding down ranges, Mimbrenos
Mogollon boiling funneling
through the Valley of Spirits churning
Bibles cadavers mirrors mules—

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow"—
rushing one tidal wave
out on the Janos plain
galloping upsidedown with lances

stroking hummingbird head
tossing pollen for luck,
black pelts flowing silver
painted yippers my Shawnee

bloodhound Spybuck in front
they smack into our wall
of fire arroyo-popped,
and the boys set to barbering . . .

cathedral bells ringing
crown and ear harvest hanging,
we parade the City of Mules
to flowers and mariachis

our g-stringed Tarahumaras
poking sky with scalp-capped
Remingtons, Big Nigger
and his runaway slaves jabbering

Nuñez the Fat, Chuly the Creek
and Chevallie, my pajama-clad
stylists setting up camp
in the bullring, summer 1846.

Now, an old man run out of words
I dust tomatoes in Pleasanton,
finagled by nameless grandspawn—
the only mystery is that there is none.

—*Rawdon Tomlinson*

The Fish Dancers (Quileute)

It is late morning along the coast
and the Indians are out at sea.

Fishing.

But what I like about the horizon
are the dark clouds that shield the sun.
And in a region where it downpours
more often than not, I am drawn
to three men in a cherry-red canoe,
who sway with the current. They dance
with the very fish they seek,
as if their lurchings and the creakings
of their craft could lure their prey
into the boat.

Things haven't changed much here
since the conquerors first appeared.
The Quileute men own nothing modern.
No motors to their boats.
No hint of hurry.
When the buried sun breaks through,
the river ripples sparkle like diamonds
as they pull in their limit.
They dance toward shore
while they fillet their catch, much
to the delight of their secluded village.

*Teahwhit Head, Washington
September 1999*

—Mike Catalano

Mike Catalano's work has appeared in *RATTLE*, *Paris/Atlantic*, *Clackmas Literary Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and past issues of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*. He was the editor of *Melting Trees Review* from 1995 to 1998 and spent the last two years on sabbatical, mostly among North American Indian communities, researching material for *Silent Thunder*, his poetic novel.

**Gray Wolf
(Navajo)**

He could track the wind
across the prairie,
hear the mating calls
of caterpillars
on threadbare baobabs
and smell ants farting.
So keen were his
cloistered senses,
he could teach Braille
with his natural eyes, removed.

While *brujos* chanted
monotonous mantras
and bucks imbibed
their conquerors' deaths,
Gray Wolf reigned atop
an Oklahoma mesa,
sipping a shrinking cosmos
without blinking.
Even the flies,
accustomed
to sustained stench,
hesitated,
as if by instinct,
knowing that
their reconnaissance
was being dissected.

*Northwest Oklahoma
January 1999*

—Mike Catalano

On the Other Side

It was Anne's idea not to discuss
the life and lives lost,
the bone-weary children fleeing north,
the crush of failure
when the soldiers caught him
so close to the border.

And Joseph agreed
not to remind Anne
of her short life, long captivity,
and slow death from typhus
so close to the end of the war.

Instead they talked
of butterflies and clover,
tulips and irises,
the taste of berries, honey, and jam;
the sweet songs of little birds.

She spoke of rivers that flowed to canals
and canals that grew into rivers.
He told her how the sky once stretched
unbroken above the plains.

She sang a song of Chanukah;
he voiced an ancient chant, summoning
the lives they'd loved

before the war
before the war.

—Joan Wiese Johannes

Joan Wiese Johannes is a teacher and writer and has published poetry, creative non-fiction, and articles in magazines and journals, including *Jam Today*, *Wisconsin Poets' Calendars*, *The Windless Orchard*, *Moving Out*, *Plain Songs*, *Cat Fancy*, *English Journal*, *Wisconsin River Journal*, and others. Active in the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets and the International Native American Flute Association, her music has been published in the flute song book, *A Kokopelli Circle of Friends*, her lyrics in *A Kokopelli Christmas*, and her poems in the songbook *Feathered Pipe Memories*.

**“Take It to the Cedar”
(Doug Expounds on Blackfoot’s Quotation)***

The flute and musician become one
a union

natural
instinctive.

Once alive, a tree-being
the flute lives again
a blend of wood and breath,
your breath
part of your soul.
A baby’s breath,
a sleeping mate’s deep sleep
are life itself.

Music is the path
to the higher ground
reassuring
comforting
confirmation of what is truly good.

Take your problem to the cedar;
create sound

relaxing
tranquil

Receive a sprinkling
of flute water blessing.

*A found poem inspired by Doug Holly’s handout for participants in the Renaissance of the Native American Flute workshop taught by R. Carlos Nakai and Ken Light. This poem was first published in “Voice of the Wind,” the newsletter of the International Native American Flute Association.

—Joan Wiese Johannes

Since Carving the Flute

Now that we have been intimate,
I see wood differently.
I study grains;
wood becomes poetry
as it trips from my tongue
cherry mahogany sitka spruce

I marvel at the work
of these inexperienced hands,
recall how shavings circled
beneath my chisel
until a rabbit jumped from
the block of stubborn oak.
I can't quite believe
my hands have given voice to wood.

I practice patiently,
breathe in sacred songs,
make promises remember
ones I could not keep;
commit to this cylinder of cedar
and to the rabbit who sits on top of it,
as vigilant and quiet as
I need to be.

—*Joan Wiese Johannes*