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STILT
MAN

POEMS BY DOUG FLAHERTY

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK



A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

STILT
MAN

Poems by
Doug Flaherty



PARALLEL PRESS • 2006

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ISBN 1-893311-62-7

Published by Parallel Press
Memorial Library
University of Wisconsin–Madison
728 State Street
Madison, WI 53706

<http://parallepress.library.wisc.edu>

The author would like to acknowledge that some of the poems in this chapbook first appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Passages North*, *Montserrat Review*, *Free Lunch*, *Baltimore Review*, *ACM (Another Chicago Magazine)*, and *Mid-American Review*. "Moonlight for Nightcrawlers" and "Getting Moody" were nominated by editors of two different magazines for a Pushcart Prize in 2002.

FIRST EDITION

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Dedicated to the memory of my late parents, Hazel and Doug

Time Bomb

I want to dress and undress you so fast
neither of us will ever remember. I want
my after-images to burn their brands
on your retinas. And I want my emotions
to shake your hand with an eternal joy-buzzer.
I want you to know—the boys with the most toys
own all the guns, the money, and your privates.
I want you to know that in truck-stop rest rooms,
machines dispense mint-flavored condoms
with spermicidal inner-linings. Some glow
in the dark for an *illuminating experience*,
while others offer stud-covered Rough Riders.

I prefer to enter you with words, spun from
the viscera and the heart. Mostly, I follow the path
less-traveled, and sometimes, like my mentor,
I want to grab life by the throat. I don't do pentameter,
and I don't do terza rima. I saunter with verse libre
through molars and bicuspid which makes my mentor
shake his mop-white head, though he grins when
I hunker down with tongue-wrapped vernaculars.
You see, I am barn-owl, hooting and wintering
on gray matter. I am apple tree you thought barren
before I flowered in your fireplace. I am the gum ball
which brought darkness when Billy Goyke choked
on eternity. I am the river bottom hungry as ever
for someone to bring home the sky. I am woodchuck
gone underground to record your last footfall.

I am the eraser of the third grader, rubbing her world
free from the elders. I am the mirror you look into
in hopes of not seeing the mirror. I am the stitch
in time minus my nine brothers. I am the fairest
of them all, for I am the one prophesied to tell you
how the sky is a buzz saw of wind. Birds, ancient kites,
drift asleep off course. I'm describing our lives, of course.

I impart reverence for the holy word, while dangling
teeth and eyeballs in your face. I want to take you
on a roller coaster ride without you actually throwing up.
I want above all to become a time bomb by which
the weight of a dragonfly could explode the universe.

Ancient History

A fish swam the moon, long,
long before an astronaut hit
a lunar hole-in-one. Long
before an arc-of-the-covenant
for two-of-all-species
was built to keep out water,
keep all others drowned dead.
Even earlier and higher still,
some might say a zebra streaked
across Orion, or was it Uranus?
The sudden flashing and swimming
gives way to a spent spear or barb—
clearing the shoulder-blades, missing
a fatal mark in the mouth, rendering
us fit for reproduction, unsullied
so we can fast talk our way
into someone's lap. This takes a toll
on vision—not a clue, as we tarnish
the phrase: *Oh, I see what you mean.*
We don't see, unless we learn that

Imagination is all we have between
ourselves and a dead spinning rock
a quarter million miles from our heads.
But if we could grab sight by the crotch,
if we had courage to look sharply back,
and if we were swift enough to reach
the first star, a radio at our ear,
we would hear Caruso sing *Pagliacci*.
And if we look even farther backward,
we might see humanoid lovers
sinking in a gondola on a Martian canal.
This is the glory of homo sapiens,
to look backward to the crab nebulae
or fifty miles down range, by buying
a map at the corner Citgo station.

For this is the way with human travel:
once a fish begins to swim, once a
tadpole flicks a tail, once a sperm cell
twinges before the ovum, a sign is sent—
subtle as a hair strand stirring an ocean.
Sure as the funeral director striking up the band.

After Father's Funeral

I must confess no answer to anything—
how squirrels find the exact location
of buried nuts, an uncharted road
map of their lives. Do they remember their kind
left behind on the roadway? I return home,
close a door against a lost continent,
and turn into an idea of sleep, to attempt
the unctuous sleep of a man who counts
imponderables until gates in the brain
open and close to inform—the refrigerator
groans and wheezes in the deep night.
When the machinery dies, will I bury it
in the back yard and hold a service?

The metallic seizure has been stoppered
by the silence I gather in a house
whose construction I know as little about
as the timbering of my own body.
I believe I possess an atrium, but do they
come in twos like the ventricles—
those pumping Latin lovers I could not
sketch to save myself from execution?
Father contended that upon death, our skulls
were bartered with South Sea head hunters,
wax mask likenesses filled in at the funeral.

If I were to torture the tragic,
I would confess my words are ghosts
of my dead father who read me Aesop at six,
and beat me awake with fitful swipes
of blood and beast etched inside my head.
He was drunk the night of my birth,
not in celebration, but out of forgetfulness.
I stand at the bedroom window and scour
midnight splotches of moon across a sullen lawn

so often mowed, I have become a surgeon,
preparing for surgery, again, again,
like cutting through father's dark neural net
as he once stared, blinked into my poems,
failed to find his son hiding among the words.

Next spring I will bury my own head,
come fall, dig myself up like a tulip bulb.
Sleep will not come to ease my confession.
Driving home alone from the cemetery
I see him staring in the rear view mirror.
The son is a man upon the big man's demise
were the words he would have inscribed.
Alas, I did not know him very well at all.
My elegy bespeaks a strange architecture,
as foreign as the words I cut my teeth upon—
bicuspid, deciduous, molar—a wind-up
set of dentures chattering in a vacant skull.

Demolition

Something of my life might
yet be salvaged, I think,
something saved from my last
twelve billion or so years
from the time I was gas
and spinning dust—a long
time before iron settled in blood
and mucus was only a glint
in a dead smiling god's scheme.
I stare across the acreage at Neenah.
Late October light clarifies houses,
flattens perspective—I'm nearly sitting
on the fat lady's lawn two parcels away.
Embarrassed, I remind myself that Pol Pot,
Idi Amin, and Francisco Franco are still dead,
and intrusions closer to home are forgotten.
Iron in my blood throbs magnetic north.

What makes me such a part of everything,
so volatile, Gelnite is my middle name—
intense about explosions, millions of rug
rats devour millions of pairs of Nikes,
while millions of third-world kids
are sweat-shopped into palsy and blindness.
I would plastic bag my head, seat myself
naked in a bathtub half-full of water to
never have to say hello or good bye.
Never expecting to be recycled with more
value than a few molecules breathed
by a robotic drone on Orion, longing for a
memory chip housing the last song written
before earth collapsed upon itself.
Meanwhile there is the vineyard to tend,
and poems readied for when friendship fails.

I believe I have more late October yards
to stare into and lose perspective,
more judgment calls which validate my life,
contrary to all that is too much to believe in.
Face it: hope doesn't spring anything.
Hope is the refuge of dead abstraction,
faith the harbinger of blisters and boils.
Truth is a double-edged Teflon blade.
My headstone is left blank for a late entry.
I hear the demolition crew at the door.
Where are you going with your world?

The World's Tumor

A woman is delivered of a seven pound tumor.
She asks that it be swaddled and sung to.
The life within is the life without, she writes.
She wins the Philosophic Grand Ontological
Premise Of The Year Award. At the banquet
she spurns the vegetarian fare, consumes her
tumor—diced, sautéed, drizzled with Worcestershire.
How else would she consume her inner-pain?
I remember an old lady in Detroit, woman of color,
so filled with hurt, she arose from bed to die.
A man of no color in Memphis, so woeful over
the death of his wife, mashed his thumb with
a hammer to make memory disappear.

I have become bewitched by the touch of pain,
the way a child tortures a frog with a stick—
poking, probing to note the exact moment
death creates a god who can allow or take away
the last breath. Chance chooses to mouth
surprises the way the mailman pulls an Uzi
and says *Just kidding. I'll always ring twice
before firing*. Or the other day at the intersection
of JJ and 45, a blonde with wrinkles and
butterfly mouth side-swiped my car. We had
both been gliding a black-ice stretch
of neural terrain. She gave me her middle finger.
I declined, gave it right back, tried to shout,
but my window was frozen shut. Later I measured
her torment, the variety we all share, a growing
madness moving us a half-bubble off plumb.

All this revelation from decoding just one
pumping finger—poetic shadows of cosmic events,
moments of close encounters in which the blood sings,
and we teeter-totter on the edge of a black hole,
as if we were no more than a malignant growth.
When will you go inside your tumor, your
tumultuous pain, and write me a poem?

Pain

Should I care about your pain,
your messy divorce, where Yllonda
was awarded even your football jock strap?
I don't feel your vertebrae, a barbed
electric fence. Your pregnant prize-cockatoo,
disqualified from the nationals? No sweat.
I could disclaim the psychic scars
like the doctor who says: *You're in pain?*
I don't feel a thing. The words, a joy
buzzer unwinding in your viscera.
Why should the world care about one
bummed-out, millennium-ending yuppie?
The Black Plague destroyed over half
the citizens of Europe, while an occidental
bandit and his frolicsome rogues hacked
forty million people in five years.
Why should we strap on one person's pain,
wear a hand-me-down hair shirt?
Not guilt, not belief, not anal retention.
We should share, the way the genes arrange—
I'll scratch your fill-in-the-blank,
and you scratch mine. There are verbal twists
to the old refrain, but the bad guys don't refrain.
Antonio Porchia, an Argentinian woodcutter
holds the answer: *You say you are*
killing me. I say you are committing suicide.
Believe this. We are mirror-images of each other,
built to ward off evil—silver backed, reflecting.
Let Yllonda keep the jock strap. Let her try it on
some late night in front of her full mirror. Let her
cry for what they both have missed—each other.
Behind her in the mirror, she spies the poet.
I am one of the good guys, I tell her. I come
holding a tin cup. Let us drop our hurt
like angry, jangling coins. Your pain, true coin
of the realm. I will spend you, neighbor.

Default Mode

I assume a dramatic presence, shape-shift
into a centipede with a lot more shoes to drop.
This country leaves me a bag of neurotic twitches.
My father always said I was a half-bubble off plumb,
but I told him he was comparing kiwi to kumquats.
He laughed, executed a one-handed hand-stand,
intoned that sexual intimations turned him spermicidal.
I told him Shell oil advertises that all you do is
Pay, pump, and go, making them the first
fossil-fuel bordello in town. In the event incidental
humor is detected, please stop rejoicing.
I turn skitterish in the rush to judgment—
how can we live, knowing the best thing we
can do before the dawn's early glare is to hurry
our own death to stop calamity. The situation:
World War II, three French resistors scuffled over
a dropped cyanide pill as the gestapo rounded them
up for torture. If only there had been a time-machine,
we could have saved them. Where was your time-machine
that bloody Sunday in Birmingham? I lost my map
to Jonestown. More recently, my computer defaulted.
I was twelve minutes late getting to Oklahoma City.
Yet, in spite of time warp, reconfigured events, scant
chance to-save-the-now, we know which is mightier:
the word is all we will be left with, if we live.
The sword will kill and bleed us an easy exit.
The whole world might be a stage, but most of us
have forgotten our lines. Hit with the right words, we
can be kept around to be hit again and again. Consider:
Descartes—*I think, therefore I am*. And Sartre—
I am what I do. And Sinatra—*Shooby, dooby, do*.
Is this a great time to be alive, or what? My father
laughs and undoes his hand-stand. Too much blood
in one spot for too long can make a man think.

Far Away

Every Thursday morning for ten minutes, I stick my head up my ass to see life from your perspective. Now I know why everything looks dark to you. I suggest you wear a lantern strapped to your forehead. I'm *not* casting aspersions! I only cast with sinkers and bright, feathery bobbles. Forget looking at the distortions in the water. How far away does the sky look? Say, June 17th of any year, plunk in the middle of Neenah—75 degrees, de-clouded atmosphere. I would say *azure*, but that is a clichéd companion for sky. Please fill in the blank with: a) powder, b) baby, c) tangy, or d) menstrual. Remember Claude Monet, post-modernist that he is, clues us in as we tip-toe down memory boulevard: *When I paint a sky, I know it won't be blue.* I call forth analogy, dear reader—sorting out particulars between mind-space and land-scape, that great divide, inward between your ears, outward to the crab nebulae. I know the distance to the center of my unconscious equals the length to the nearest star. This is how we establish equilibrium and homeostasis.

In layman's terms, inside is outside, as Buddha informed me not long ago under the spreading lotus. When we chow-down specifics, cut meat to the bone, we externalize it's all a game—a cosmic crap-shoot played out on a political Ouija board. The game's the thing. Consider the analogous traits of golf and fox hunting. Some smart-acre termed golf *a good walk spoiled*, with golf carts to drive to the scene of the crime like huntsmen and horses after the harried foxes. The white, round bald critter hides in a hole if the hunter is lucky. Club the white beast which refuses to die. Let the dogs have their day.

Some would have us out in the open with targets
printed on our t-shirts, compliments of
the friendly, sporting folks at the NRA.

Now where are we? Maybe at a point of divergence,
needing help from Yogi Berra, another postmodernist
who knew his way around the acreage,
who knew life's ambiguity *and* opportunity:
If you see a fork in the road, take it.

Mixing It Up

I will do anything for attention
because my attention span is so short,
stuck in a holding pattern over Trinidad.
At first it sounded like mice clawing
across the plane's roof, until I reconsidered
the rhythm. It was Bonzai Buckaroos—
a Japanese cowboy kick-boxing team
and a flamenco stripper named Jalapeno
mixing it up at the outdoor sushi bar.
E. coli dropped in, got us to use our barf bags.
Someone whispered *ice water*. Sounded like *lice swatter*.
An alligator-wrestler wearing a new wrinkle
told me it took a lot of work to wreck a nice beach.
I echoed back: *Lot of work to recognize speech*.
Now do you appreciate the intricacy-of-phonetic-
identification-patterns-in-robotic-application? I don't.
Words give me tribulations up the yin-yang—

what's my colon doing at this moment?
What would that dirty organ say if it could speak?
How about the propensities of the pancreas!
I suspect sperm cells are tunneling an escape route.
For good reason the medulla oblongata makes me queasy—
all that nervous tissue at the bottom of my brain,
mildly disturbed by a 1996 cabernet sauvignon.
Maybe I'm flying too high for my oxygen supply!
Language to me is a means to bend sounds like metal,
like the gravity force applied at 33 thousand feet.
Poetry is the opportunity to kick sand in the face
of a ninety-eight pound weakling, take the girl,
the money, *and fly Venezuela*. Pure fabrication.
You caught on from the start, I suspect. I mean
the part about a beach and a sushi bar being located
just outside the aircraft. However, the part about E. coli,
barf bags and the Bonzai Buckaroos is all true. However.

Between you and the lamppost, I would rather address
a figure-of-speech than my bladder. I suspect relevancies
when they are deeply hidden. No matter how deep
the figure of speech, it's no further away than your lips.
But my bladder. Well, for propriety sake let's move
to externalities—the scrotum—something in plain view.
I tell ya, puppies, we can fly just so high on metaphor.

Subsets

I was about as excited as a syphilitic paraplegic when I discovered my sewerage bill was based on amount of water I used. Lately, I've been driving to Tillotson to take a leak. Sometimes I go over to the Open Pantry in Windigo to do what I've been told the bears do in the woods. I'm nobody's fool and you're a nobody, too. I love the interplay of words and subsets. Listen to me—*subsets*. You would think I knew something about semantics or philology. When it comes to word sounds, I don't know my bilateral fricatives from my double diphthongs. Well, think upon word nestings—*Can the woe of women manage the man age*. I love words so much I read a page from the dictionary each night before I send the nightlight to its maker. I read every word on the page, then cry for all the syllables which define me. *I am* the words. There is no delight without framing sounds which engorge me as much as an old Anglo Saxon singing out *Ick bin swithe swithe horney toady*, as he chases sheep over the dusky, boggy moors. Rhyming back then wasn't what it is now. George Starbuck once told me a word that rhymes with *orange*, but I disremember. I've forgotten a lot of important stuff over two-thirds of the last millennium. How about you, dear ones? Ennui sets in, fifty years of writing left to right in linear columns. Why can't I become a Chinese character? Sun 日 Moon 月 would be a pleasant change of pace. Maybe I could become a woman 女 or a rice field 田. I'll go with rice field because it looks like a window, and I could be my own vision in or out of something I will or won't care to become.

I'll become Confucius, a real Chinese character.

I'll bet he never paid a water bill in his life.

Imagine *him* sneaking into Manchuria to take a leak.

Making Them Tonal Shifts

My daddy said it all: *I am large,*
I contain multitudes. I make tonal
shifts where the sun don't shine.
This is your mind on words:
should-a, would-a, could-a, folks.
Shift. Become a moving target—
harder to hit. Harder to pin down
and interrogate. Shift like improv-
jazz where the moon is aglow.
To note: what shifts is more than tonal.
Possibly our concentration decides
which of two sub-particles will
enter a minuscule hole in a partition first.
Where there's a will there's a lay.
Conversation turned from particles
to particulars: . . . *She's sleeping with him!?*
Wow! What's he like in bed? Why, anything
you'll give him. Why ask rhetorical questions
when the end is plainly in sight? There I go.

Cynthia told me that Bob had gone to the well
one too many times. And Bob responded:
Since it's Tuesday it must be Belgium.
You know, we are all telling too much—
I admit to having had lust in my heart.
Do you have anything in particular to say
about baby batter or splitting the atom?
I mean, seminating the ovum, over easy
with home fries on the side. I'll take
mine black with sugar, thank you.
Obversely, I'll be your mouthpiece, dentures,
and I'll wag your dog, create a very serious
indiscretion or two, on your behalf.
Conversely, I need you as a soto voce
sort of nonplused-agent of the
Collateral Damage Suppression Team.

I want to leave my mark. Like the market—
I want an all time high. Might become the guru
of tonal extreme—make a two hundred foot jump
with a three hundred foot bungy cord.

Those Who Speak

There are those who speak
to themselves only. They mime
inside their minds, sometimes
oozing forth like indigestion,
sometimes a low gurgling, a faint
perhaps feint mumbling. For they are
the weakly articulate. Some sit at counters—
elbow on counter, hand gyrating at the wrist,
gesturing to the air around a red torn vinyl seat.
Often I have caught you pacing this inner-space,
spouting your desperate philosophies.
An old woman whispers banalities into a receiver
in a booth posted *Out of Order*. I want to speak
for her, grab by upper body, plead that
life is mythic, a trip through the archetypes.
I want to shout that sound will save us,
but too often I am shriven dumb from air
not even the hands can shape into form.

Before the diner closes, I sit on the empty stool
the old man has been addressing. He is stilled.
We aren't human until we speak, not alive until air
thrums our ear drums into understanding.
I believe I have his attention now. He looks placid.
Our life, a story etched on every bird wing,
replicated in every river droplet. The text, as old
as the first Indian who sang her newborn awake.
If we believe what the mothers tell us,
we know the child is washed in cedar water,
rubbed with corn meal and tree ash, rubbed
over his new body lying in darkness. He hears
the woman drink from his bath water. If we
believe what the mothers say, we know
we are caught up in sound between the meal
of her fertility, the ash of consumed skin.

I turn to the old man, tell him it's okay to cry.
Like a dead parent, caught in a time warp,
I begin to croon the old woman a legend
which makes her smile. Tell me again.
She hangs up the dead receiver, and I tell her.
The fathers told us how sparrows
ate a fill of berries, beat wings, dropped
seed across river. Years of growing,
parted by waters, grew into flaming briar.
If we believe what the fathers say
about seeds cleansed in dark stomachs,
and if we start out, heading due north,
knifing our bodies against the current,
we will fill a bucket by last light of today.
If we believe in the guts of words,
roots contained in memory's seed,
then we will know that the sparrow
is a bullet in the heart of the living dead.

An Ado About Death

We are all connected by cat's cradle thread,
by spit, duct tape. The whole planet hangs by a hangnail.
My hanging begins to unwind as I trim
the deranged blue, billow-headed hydrangeas
as if they were prima donnas or *prima facie*
evidence of my giving two weeks vacation to tend
an ancient woman I call mother—insensate
at the moment of birth, both of us caught in a time warp
blue funk of vestigial ether, gauze, swaddling,
and unctuous ooze of afterbirth, blue veins, blood,
placenta and umbilical. My cord is of special worth,
longer, thicker, more dangerous than most,
stored in a pure silver box, wrapped in yellow silk.
All things are tenuous except my will. My vision
is of all and everything, all in one breath, one moment.

The real life is having found God in a dust mote
riding the inside loop of a cat's-eye marble. So aqua green,
cloud-downy white center slit, you clench fists and cry.
You realize you *are* God, and cat's-eye, *and* dust mote.
So, when the house lights stare madly at the dark,
I wish to abandon this wooden womb, lop the floral
heads for a touch of irony, cast that birthing
cord, loose-strung from a local tree, to sing out
swing low. Death's duty—hung by a cord,
minus the medicinal slap on the back for bad luck.

Nothing to say about our birth, should have
something to say about death—1-800-KEVORKIAN!
There is *something* to what the poet said: *Death is
the mother of beauty*. All that is precious, made more so
because we know we're goners. We don't even know
about free will, but we act as if we did, as if we do what we
think we want to do, sometimes. Even the *maybe* choices
will fade like blackboards being slowly cleaned. Tabula rasa by
any other nom de guerre would stink goodly. Your whole

life a blue sky-wide-cartoon-puff from a farting airplane,
smoke-trailing your name into the cumulus nimbus.
When it comes to the eternal slam-dunk, believe it brother,
the door knobs couldn't be deader. Though unlike us,
they will get hand-jobs for the next century or more.

Common Guilt

Incest. Snake. Apple. Murder.
And we aren't even through *Genesis*.
Words stem from guilt,
seeded in memory far back as amino acid.
My malady curlicues to the beginning,
to the original forbidden fruit
encased in a guilt-ridden chastity belt.
The drip of water? Another domestic-bind—
first note struck in memory before we
brain-stemmed a song—tonal, atonal, or anything
shy of blowing across a grass blade to summon
a woolly mammoth to stampede us into
the monkey trees to nurse our pangs.
I am a bull. Taurus. I blow my own horn.
I put my hoof down. I am tongue-in-cheek,
whimsical when facing our animal nature:
curiosity hiked its skirt and showed off
pink panties edged with lace. Curiosity
leads to arousal. The word *panties* neither
looks like underwear, nor sounds like the noise
a crotch-cover makes. What does this tell you?
It tells me to flip the bird to death *and* life
for both are the enemy—the life given
to you, and the one for the taking away.

*We interrupt these teleological musings
to blast late breaking news into your cranium:
We are informed of verdicts inconsistent
with involuntary manslaughter. Some
put on a positive spin and call it Providence.
Was death a foreseeable outcome? Just wait.
Talk dirty to Death and make her come.
The poet says *death thou shalt die*. I like that.
But what do poets know about death? We keep
writing ahead of the undertaker. The old folks*

would say *there is a wolf at the door*. I only wish there were. I'd invite him in and we could smoke and drink, talk about girls we met on the way to grandmother's house. I like *that* story, almost as old as *Genesis*, concerning a cannibalized granny, a transvestite wolf between the sheets, and a virginal red-riding-hood about to be eaten. My onus is now upon you. Cough up!

Sex Life of Insects

For you I'd become a nymph.
Kiss my thorax, tongue my wing buds.
Wink my way, I'll be your pupa for life.
If I were a naiad, you could swim my ocean.
I might be a silverfish, a springtail.
I'm heavily into nectar feeding.
Maggots are the larvae of flies. I'm not
squeamish at feeding time. Sometimes I like
my eight feet on the ground. I'm from
a higher order. You can call me
Daddy longlegs. Tonight I'll be a sucking
leafhopper. I'll jump your bones.
When I'm a rose chafer, you're my treat—
engorge me in your blood stream.
Let me grub, I'll be your black blow fly.
I'm an aphid spewing my honeydew.
My scutellum is conspicuous. I'm a horny
potato bug, a pepper weevil in heat,
a woollybear when you're supine. I'll rustle
up some endearments: you can be my little
mealybug, rose midge, my leaf roller,
violet sow, bristly rose slug, spittlebug,
coddling moth, short-hole, my citrus thrip.
I'm one hungry bronze birch borer. For you
I'd become a jumping spider, weave a web,
sing Wee-Willie-Winky, and voulez-vous
you snug as a queen bee in my bed.
I'll put ants in your pants, give you the old
heebie jeebies, hotter to trot than a mule team
packed with fleas. Tonight, my honeymellon grub,
my antennae will be twitching the stars.

Getting Moody

On most Mondays, coming off an eclectic week-end, I turn esoteric. By mid-week, say around two p.m. on Wednesday, the orientation is clearly eccentric with tangy hues of modernity. Who says fun with language dies after grade three? Let that person go to the blackboard and write *I am a dumb schmuck* four hundred times in forty point italic New Times Roman. I mention script, because poets should keep current on how their work appears on the page, the web, the side of a bus—prettier than hen scratches or pock marks left on bar tops by over-wrought dice shakers. So much depends on chickens and wheelbarrows and rain slicks. So much depends on mental ambience when wording. Getting moody is the prime occupation of the poet. Sulk like a slinky descending a staircase. Whoop like a whoopy cushion at the established order. Be as ballsy as the steamy scenes in *Deuteronomy*. Pare the nails, sit back like a chilled green bottle. When the mood kicks in like one of the Pleiades stroking your cheek with her blowsy wings, the words appear like the cryptic messages floating up from the 8 ball that says *yes, maybe, no, sometimes, forget it*. Sometimes, but not as often as desired, the words froth-up like verbena in the troubled interstices between synapses. I intuit that it is a simulacrum with you, as well. But should you fail to grasp the internal linkage, I report what a five year old girl from Fond du Lac confessed to me last month: *When I grow up, I want to be hatched from an egg.*

Unknown Origin

Your teased hair, like a housefly,
flutters in a web. Tug lightly on the ear lobe
to invite the world in. Out of ear shot the inner
bone vibrates—a wave, like a shark fin,
a black hole begins its probe. This is poetry—
still birth on white sheets, genetic blueprint.
We are speaking of infection: frozen black scrawls
live inside the surrogate. Consider the following:
the lithe pink tulips open wide their vaginas.
Your total life impacts on whether the
erotic tulip image excites or repulses you.
Personally, I am very fond of the image, yet
one would think such elegant seasonal florals
would welcome me in French, at least pronounce
their proud genus in Latin. Sorry to digress.

Venus isn't so very far after all. And *after all*
is all I've been after. My laugh scares me,
and an owl forgets to interrogate my motives.
I forget my name which chisels exclamations,
expertly as some old timers blow smoke rings.
I meant to say that poetry is like a winter evening
up-country, when the Big Dipper seems so close
I want to grab for it, when a bird of unknown origin
cuts vision and redirects me toward migration.
It's then I notice a woman wave from a cabin.
But I don't wave back because I'm hiding behind
my paper and pen. It is poetry when I can't figure
if she waves at bird, or constellation. Perhaps she is
lonely, or greets her reflection. I know. She is
a poetic digression, desperately signaling for help.

Stilt Man

for Carlene

Amazed by how length and height
can be transformed into depth—young men
like I once was, cloned to clip bra and panty ads
from Penney's and Sears' catalogues, at night
sneak photos of Nordic blondes and brunettes,
topless African Dinka ladies from *Geographic*,
to rub themselves mattress sore, while Jesus
fluoresced and quaked behind the bedboard.
There was the amazement and pain, aroused
by two-dimensional space. Exquisite feeling,
but not fully-seeing breasts for the brassiere,
at sixteen, prone to torturous timing—
awaited the signal of a murmur or a sigh
to undo a three-dimensional snap or clasp,
stare down two Saturday-night-specials
with fire-power to render impotency,
or at least incompetency. Even in late years,
flesh-laden female skeletons can render
a male magically rigid and spastic all at once.

Remember? When I enter at your bidding,
I make peace with the world and groan
such shock waves, neighbor houses tremble
as if built on stilts, built like legs I try
to walk upon after I rise from you, a sun
burned on a fuse to near-extinction.
The stomach walks away, slack and strained.
I am a sac, drained, birthed from your flesh,
hold breath like staring at 3D images,
never to go blind, rubbing rods and cones
against magic sheets of images which
hone me into ecstasy when the eye muscles
relax and I enter the holiness of depth.

Yet, to enter your world of silk-arousal,
I am confused by the silent music your legs
contrive to tease the air, and I lumber about
the living room, mouthing gratitude and longing—
childlike and lost like a holy man. I whirl
through days of lost light, until I am
born again through a needle's eye, after
beating my body into submission
at the wailing wall between your thighs.

Moonlight for Nightcrawlers

At twilight, the poetry is put to bed and cat falls asleep in the corner. I shut off the lights and listen to the dark. Someone turns on a switch inside my head. I walk naked to the barn where I milk fifteen imaginary cows, wearing mother-of-pearl horns, bestowed by Isis on her 1994 World Tour of Winnebago County. Then I lope to the far pasture and enter the grape arbor where I drink the milk of young virgins. I am landlord of this domain, my booty a golden honeycomb lifted from one of five white boxes, inhabited by wingèd lovers who flutter millions of kisses. When I read my poems I sense I've gone over the edge. Can you sense a metaphor ahead? Maybe the image was too dark, or on-coming headlights distracted. Perhaps I was too heavy-footed and the car danced outside the yellow lines. I am often given to night-dreaming behind the wheel before news intrudes, and I forget that my blue veins are only a host of secondary roads on worn out maps.

Three crackers from Texas chained a black man to the bumper of a pickup, dragged him to death. Come over some night for a beer. I'll run the VCR, show blood in the road. Could have been you at the wheel. That's why I had a talk with himself. If you think you can weep, feel the meat sandpapered on pavement, come on over. I forgive you. But not myself. I am the keeper of words, the maker of the holy hush. I should speak out. I hear the chains jingling, *Oh, unholy night*. I scare myself at bedtime all covered under white sheets. The old rugged cross is aflame in somebody's heart. And then I return to the drug of words about virgins, golden honey combs, and a flutter of kisses.

Moonlight is milk to the nightcrawler. Tree roots
click like false teeth in a jam jar on the ebony
night-table of the dead. Come to think of it, I like
that part about moonlight milk for the nightcrawler
much better than false teeth and dying. When writing
poetry, a bit *like* dying, one has to know when to stop.
And when to screw silence to death where it resides.

Salvation at York Beach

Would you meet me off a jut of coastal-rock
near midnight in rain, yellow-slicker,
collar rolled against the wind surge
off the white-nippled water, hands cupped
to ear-shout the dirtiest deed of your life?
No five dollar confession, no descent to the knees.
A quarter to light a candle, watch smoke
curlicue toward an absentee landlord. Jesus
is not listening tonight. He is playing poker
and has turned off his cell phone. He is smoking
an oscuro maduro-wrapped Fuente cigar—
a big one. He above all knows the pleasure of
taking on flesh, of mutating beyond spirit.

We are very wet, quaking in the cold off Maine.
*We have all killed everything in the universe
with our thoughts, I shout. We have all loved
everything on this planet at least once.* All the
known and maybe a bit of the unknown—love—
for a nanosecond, maybe more. Like children
we once tried to eat all the mud pies, the toy
cars and the dolls. Finally, we insatiates
tried the books. Someone bit a chunk out of
Raggedy Ann's behind. Ink-drool and a smile.
Years later kids shot their schoolyard playmates.
A mother drowned her two babies on God's order.

What darkness can we both leave off this coast,
where nearby, a shop window displays two sets
of robot arms, a couple in a futuristic kitchen,
pulling out confessions in steady chromium arcs,
rich skeins of yard-long butterscotch taffy.
Let us leave only the sweet for the ceremony.
We are now so wet, you shout, this is baptism.
Let us sing Zippidy-Do-Da to the sea, while holy
water zings in our open mouths, rich as blueberries
down by the high-tension lines, plonked in tin cans.
Sing with forgiveness. Hum us across the water.



DOUG FLAHERTY has published poetry in numerous magazines including *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *North American Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Northwest*, and the *Harvard Review*. He has published four full-length books, six chapbooks, and has been represented in ten anthologies. Flaherty has read at thirty universities in the United States plus the University of Mexico and the Peacock Theatre (experimental branch of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Ireland). The poet received the MFA from the Writers Workshop, University of Iowa, and taught modern American literature and poetry writing for thirty-five years at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

Stilt Man is the forty-first chapbook in the poetry series published by Parallel Press, an imprint of the UW–Madison Library.

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