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apparition]

POEMS BY MAX GARLAND

MAX GARLAND's poems and stories have appeared in *Poetry*, *New England Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Best American Short Stories*, and many other journals and anthologies. His first book of poems, the *Postal Confessions*, was awarded the 1994 Juniper Prize for Poetry. Other awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the James Michener Foundation, the Wisconsin Arts Board, and currently, the Bush Foundation. Originally from western Kentucky, he now lives and teaches in Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

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[APPARITION]

Lines For The Cape Fear River

*If I could give you anything
quicker and truer than the river
swims the sky down
to the size of the living,
I would. If I understood
the glazed look of water
on the move, or make, or mend,
I'd fend off cowardice
and tell you how it feels
to fall for a river,
or a woman, in a world
where sometimes the light
skims the surface for years
before it catches the gulls on fire
as they preen and flail
from the pilings of the far shore
where it's always paradise.*

[MAX GARLAND]

APPARITION

[PARALLEL PRESS]

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It Was All Supposed To Be Holy and Magnificent

It was all supposed to be holy and magnificent.
They plump you up and toddle you out.
It's your oyster, the wide world is—
the paragon of animals, beauty of the lily.
Just listen how the language threads the air.
It's amazing what they've woven from nothing.
You'd think this life a living garment.
You, with your own name now,
that beads and rolls and waits
to be spoken, then quivers
like a raindrop at the end of a leaf.

I Drift Off During the Waning Moments of Methodism

In the beginning it was Sunday
and church everlasting
as if God carved the oak pews stiff
to save the mortal soul
from softness, yet

varnished them slick
to ease the slide
should I fall asleep
and down through the smoky
scuffs and patterns
of the devil's linoleum.

Or maybe I'm just distracted
unto drowsiness
by the Bible falling
word by word
like a fine lace of Elizabethan rain
on the tawdriness of my attention
in the waning moments of Methodism,

or maybe it's just boyhood's end
God watches through the windows.
There's a red shard of stained glass
he seems to favor, so we all appear
to be burning. Though at other times

God unveils himself in the pulses
of my mother's perfume,
so close and faintly drumming,
and then it's no longer Sunday,
and I don't know what to worship,

though a flower comes to mind
that I would like to marry.

Hold On Me

The year I turned twelve I thought love
lived in the blond straw of the manger,
the naked face of the moon,
and A.M. rock and roll—

four-beat bass line, embellishing
waves of doo-wop, the brutal equation,
of say, the *Miracles* singing—

*You treat me badly,
I love you madly,*

which made sense to a Methodist,
for wasn't life an earthly penance
for the faithlessness of angels—
fallen apples of God's just eye?
and wasn't that Jesus, stapled
to the hilltop, his broken heart,
our Valentine?

The year I was twelve, the stilted
grammar of greeting cards was love.
If you could just nail the rhyme scheme,
wouldn't human sympathy follow?

In other words, I knew nothing,
except crescendos and the closing
credits of movies felt like love,

and the way animals looked at you,
and that cut grass smelled
like what the word *unrequited*
would someday come to mean.

I lined my mother's lipsticks up
like so many beautiful bullets.
I'd never tasted a single kiss,
though I imagined one
hot as a wound.

*. . . don't like you,
but I love you,*

or some such anthem
crackled along the household air,
the year I was twelve.

Love was a brave little racket.

Through the back of the kitchen radio,
you could see it
in the glowing vacuum tube,
like a tiny bush that burned inside,
commanding the static to sing.

Elegy for the Sigh

Hardly anyone was sighing. There was,
in fact, a dearth of sighs,
the sigh going the way of the lute,
the bustle, the coat of mail.

Though many slept through turmoils
of love, and new fevers
swept through the spine at will,
shattering the lattices
of the ribcage,

hardly anyone suffered quietly
in the old style, schooled
in the art of sighing,

the way heroines in Bronte
could sigh, or poets
in English engravings, their soft
chins on their hands,
could sigh.

No one noticed the beloved
in things of little consequence.
For instance, the moon in daylight—
little broken wafer, waif-like,
waiting.

Hardly anyone waited,
like Jacob for Rachel—
six years, seven years,
like a stone in the field.
Hardly anyone trusted time
that much.

Though whole neighborhoods gnashed
and wailed, wept
and even found love,

and the operatics of passion continued,
thumping against the walls of motels,

hardly anyone knelt for it,
crept for it, moored
himself to the longing required,

though love drove on, like a wheel
or a planet, no one,

hardly anyone, stood by a window
or a river, breathing the crucial vapors,
spending himself in sighs.

Apparition

That's the moon come down to drink,
that apparition on the water. Or
it's the milk of human kindness
slinking like an eel.

Wind tears the cottonwood away
leaf by handsized leaf.
Small waves slap the pilings.

What *is* the proper number of kisses
for a man to leave the world?
The average depth of melancholy?
The approximate wetness of hope?

It's very expensive tonight, the wind
in the lakeside trees. I don't see how
I could afford to listen

if not for you in the world,
as the leaves sail in their numbers,
somewhere deep, quick and moonlike.

The Loon

The water winks open, the loon
is sewn onto the moonlit lake.
The lights of the far shore
could be anyone's necklace.
Wind rakes a little texture
across the surface. The loon
is the one live thing
on the lake, except the soul
which is debatable, and could
be the fading habitat of God,
or merely like this stain
the moon makes the water wear—
exquisite, migratory. *Dive*
you want to say,
but the loon is light as thread,
far away, and whatever you lack
cannot be wished under.

The Deer

There's a herd of fallow deer on the hill
with springs for hooves and wariness
for a world around them; a single buck,
his antlers far too much for him—
topheavy, necksore. The cost of attraction?
A tree sprouting from the forehead.

A little cattail swims in ditchwater.
Atop the milky silo, pigeons laze and putter.

It's light duty down on earth
some of the angels say,
though the old ones grin
with the pain of remembrance

as the buck lowers his lumbering head,
and the young deer scatter
just to watch him beg.

On a Day Like This

Thanksgiving: Rockford, Illinois

It's a springlike day at the brink
of November. Grass shines
an illusory green. Doves flail down
to the sunflower seeds and millet.
Not a door or a wing stays shut.
The golden squirrels of Rockford
are fat as housebound collies.
Pretty soon they'll need ladders
to climb onto the shingles
and bark out the code for joy.
What *is* winter but a ghost
of a chance? What is hunger
but a luxurious itch
soothed by the feeder's overflow,
the nailed up ears of corn, the plump
bitter acorns of the white oaks?
Some beast somewhere must know
better. Maybe *I* do. Maybe I don't.
I'd like for the grass to settle
this argument. I'd like this day
stained green in the mind for good—
no wind or night or need to remember.

The Day Lilies

Whole bees dart into the lilies,
but the day is a blossom too.
The lilies are huge yellow hybrids,
mostly. The bees are drowning in luck.
I wonder if it even seems like work
bounding from anther to anther.
I wonder if there's a wake
of pollen in the air, a thin
gold script to the hive
I can't see? A low wind
navigates the leaves and slick stalks
of the lilies. Six petals apiece
flail outward, mouthlike and deep.

And either it's just me,
or there's something in the flowers,
the stamina shot forth
bright as flares, the yellow petals
ascending to pink, backbending
and rippling out paper thin,
almost maroon at the edges,
that looks like astonishment
scorched halfway to anger,
as if even the lilies can't believe,
given winter in the bulb, the weight
and burn of ice, the long
blind watery climb to light,
a day is all they get.

Night Cicadas

Either something is gnawing its way
through a rivet, or the cicadas
have risen from their graves—
the thirteen and the seventeen
year cicadas, maybe the two
or three thousand year cicadas
for all I know, trembling
into song enough to scramble radar.
I feel it across my face and thought.

Life is short. Life is a day.

You can't accuse the cicadas
of not knowing their Leviticus,
their Isaiah. *And thou shalt
hum like a dark heavenly wire.*

*And thou shalt cling
to the texture of tree bark.*

*Sing forth thy fellows
from stupor and darkness.*

No wonder I can't sleep.
Over the okra beds
and bonnetheaded sunflowers,
over the limp frill of mimosa,
the cicadas ratchet up,
sustain, trail off,
then swell back to volume,
as if gathering the current
of all the slept years
only to let it go again,
unless this is my own mind
ground down to static, pulse
and wave and rasp of desire.

King of the Lilies

I'm considering the lilies again
as Jesus recommended back in 1959
from the pages of my grandmother's Bible.
Jesus spoke in blood, a beautiful English.
Why take ye thought for raiment?
Jesus was a regular king of the lilies.
When I consider them again, and
I'm thinking of the day lilies now,
jagged and bright as blown apart kisses,
I'm amazed at the slippery back-dive
of petals, and how quietly the pollen
blazes away, like the fall
of a tiny unspeakable language.
I think the point of the scripture was *faith*,
as least in my grandmother's reading.
She prayed so long and hard for so little,
the wake of her going still sounds
like the riffling of hymn-books and Bibles.
Or maybe the point was simply
God provides, infuses, aspiring
always toward some blossom
of pure poise. Or maybe
the point was still forming
in Jesus' mind as he spoke.
Maybe even doubt is a little divine.
He'd just come from the wilderness,
after all. He knew his life was a day
nearly done. He knew the people
were ragged, love-scarred. Would *despair*
be a better flower? I'd believe in a Jesus
who considered that, Grandmother,
as he looked at the fields of lilies afloat.

There You Are

Strange how loss has a weight,
how a thing *subtracted*
bears down, bows the will.
Say a man walks from your door,
or life, or say it's a woman
because what is poetry
at a time like this
but the cadenced rerouting
of the personal? And
in that walking away
flows the shape of the door
and the road and the air
which is *nothing*, and yet
there you are, poetry
being what it is,
bowed by the burden
of a single self, a wholly
unprovable entity.

So what *is* the weight
you feel? Is it just
the theft of lightness?
Was the poet right who said
love is a buoyancy,
an amendment to gravity,
the weight of blood
and bone repealed?
So that only the loss of love
reveals the heart's true heft
and measure.

Or is it just the weight
of memory that oppresses,
like a door through which
she is always walking
in her dark shoes
and particular laughter?

There's a kind of fierceness
that reminds you
of driven snow. How sweet
a thing to brace against.

But isn't memory itself
invention, *airy nothing*,
as Shakespeare wrote? Or is
the context scrambled here?
Or was Shakespeare an invention,
just shaped from the shadow
of a man waving goodbye,
or say it's a woman,
poetry being what it is,
a way to speak a loss away,
plea for lightness,
impossible door.

Linden in Winter

The linden is not so embraceable now
that the wind barrels down
from Alberta, swift
and fierce as God on his way
to some other portion of history,
someplace more Biblical maybe,
more in need of wrath, though
given the cold, the ripping snow,
maybe wrath is not the word,
but *will*, the sheer blind will of wind.
You can trace it across the weather map.
You can read it in the crazed dance
of the finch feeder, or the powder
swept from the garage roof
back up into the white sky.
The linden is stripped for the cold,
except for a few tough bracts,
a few blown about seeds.
The rest is down to the bone—
trunk, branch, and branch again—
stiff, skeletal, all the *s* words—
stoic, stern. It even sways a little,
though just enough to stand.
You could build a way of thinking,
or at least a train of thought
on how wind buckles the storm door,
drives the snow into drifts
against the diamonds
of the neighbors' chain link fence.
You could almost lean a life
on the emptiness that saves the tree,
how wind grazes the corridors
of what's not there,
and leaves the bones alive.

Questions About the Linden

Should the linden consider itself
more of a basswood or candelabra?
More a way station for the winter
juncos, or map of the light
of the last forty summers?
I think of the body's trees—
prophetic tree of bones,
rowdy tree of blood
with its one red root,
tree of the nerves
that leaf into the impulse
to fathom, even fear
the trees of blood and bone.
Should the linden be more
a mirror of that? Or left alone
to dwell on its own quiet god
whose blessing is absence,
whose will is unknown,
whose angels are wrecked
in the silhouettes of branches
forbidden to believe or forget?

Jet Lag

I pace the carpeted aisle of the air,
drink my cup of trembling juice, unlace
my shoes, eat light, forego the wine,
follow all the airline advice,

but still the heart lags miles behind
as I fly west from Shannon. The body
won't accept the gift of extra hours—
bonuses of daylight,

birds unroosted, stars put back
in their boxes. Though the *mind*
would steal time if it could—
longitudes flicking by like fenceposts,

years hoarded into great slippery piles;
the *body*—old shoe flung over the water,
lumpy Calvinist, is already preparing
to come down hard, mope and muddle for days.

I can feel it from here—being home,
but *not* home; being home, but not quite
being. I hold my cup. I pace the air.
I stand on the lawn gone haywire,

waiting for the unearned hours to pass,
waiting for the laggard heart—poor pilgrim,
dutiful pigeon, still lumbering
through the fogs over Newfoundland.

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