

Anna, washing. 2001

Genoways, Ted

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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

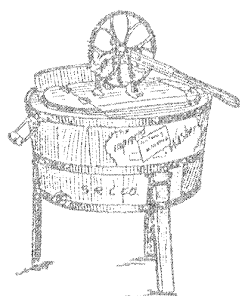


ANNA,
WASHING

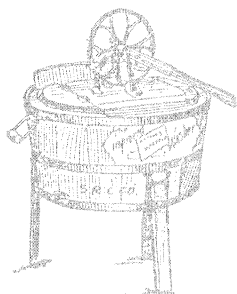
POEMS BY TED GENOWAYS

TED GENOWAYS is the author of *Bullroarer*, selected by Marilyn Hacker for the 2001 Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize, and two previous chapbooks, *The Dead Have a Way of Returning* and *The Cow Caught in the Ice*. He is also the editor of *The Selected Poems of Miguel Hernández* and *Burning the Hymnal: The Uncollected Poems of William Kloefer*. He lives in Minneapolis.

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Anna, washing



Poems by
TED GENOWAYS



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“One of the smallest businesses in early Eagle, Alaska, could have been Anna Malm’s Arctic Laundry. Anna, and her husband, Abe, were from Finland. Though they spoke little English, they decided to seek out their fortune in the northern gold fields, mushing in over the Chilkoot Trail. Though Anna was 54 years old at that time, she packed her load on her back the same as her husband, who was 19 years younger. Anna had raised Abe and then married him.”

—ELVA SCOTT
Historic Eagle and Its People

“Warrantee. THE ANTHONY WAYNE WASHERS are warranted to be well made out of good, dry, sound material, and to do good work better, easier and quicker than can be done on a washboard; they will wash clean and will not tear the clothes.”

—Sears, Roebuck & Co. Catalog, 1897

The Letter

Dear Anna,

you will wake to find me gone,
not to return. Please do not wait for me.

More than just my maid, these months, from dawn
until dusk, you have nursed my misery.

You must know, dear Anna: it isn't you
or Abe, or even my sweet boy dying
before my eyes . . .

Yes, I see him—it's true—
every night, but it's his mother's crying
that haunts me, watching her press those blue lips
to her gasping breast, begging him to feed.

If she had lived, it might not have come to this.

Now any house will have you as its maid.
Take care of Abe, and pray you understand:
raising a child is no place for a man.

Anna, washing

Aboard the S.S. Islander

nearing Dyea Inlet, Sept-1897

From afar, their search-light looks like twin globes,
floating both above and barely under
the water. The reflected cousin strobes
through the bow's wake. On deck, Anna wonders
if secretly the moon is swarming, not
ice-white and alone as she had supposed,
but packed with men, restless on rotted cots,
snoring and hot in foul, three-day-old clothes,
while below black nags buck a coal-fire roar
that keeps these endless tides turning. Quick gales
sweep down from the mountains as they near shore.
The south sun glows. Fast in his bunk, Abe scales
ice stairs to the moon, his year-cache carted
by comets. His gold-pans flicker with stars.

Anna on the Beach

Dyea, Alaska, Oct-1897

Broken crates rim the leeshore like driftwood.
Men scramble, clumsy as crabs, to rescue
their outfits from the coming tide. Where Abe stood
minutes before, a man—sunk in his boots—
clings to a tipped platform: his year's ration
(sacks of flour, dried soup, lard) skims atop
the undertow. On shore: Anna, washing,
whittling lye soap into melted ice, chopped
from the stream bank. Abe haggles with packers
over price per pound. From a man, beaten
and bound for home, he buys an old pack-horse.
Anna hangs pants on tent lines to freeze them
stiff and dry. She loads her washing machine:
ten thousand men—just me to keep them clean—

Sheep Camp

Chilkoot Trail, Oct-1897

Four days, downpour: now reports of the peak
in white-out, pack-mules—already half-starved—
frozen under drifts. Anna never sleeps:
drunks take turns grunting on a five-dollar
whore, then trip over their tentstakes or piss
on the flap. Mongrels move in barking packs.
And everywhere: horses—hobbled by sticks
across their flanks—fester with sores, their backs
raw from coarse-wool blankets and creeping damp.
The sun has disappeared. Somehow, Abe snores,
even when grumbling turns shout. Across camp,
someone fires a pistol. Cry of a horse.
Silence. Then laughter, more shots, a dull thud.
Hillsides echo. The horse thrashes the mud.

The Anthony Wayne Washing Machine

The Scales, Chilkoot Pass, Oct-1897

Her washer sways against the counterweight
then sinks. The packer adds another stone,
watches it drop, then lift. Abe asks the rate
per pound again. Anna rests on the bones
of a boat. Around her: forks, one left glove,
spring-mounted seats, chains, cog-wheels. A woman
stumbles, strapped to a sheet-iron stove,
rises, rejoins the man-train worming
its way to the summit. Anna thinks, *If*
he does this, if—this once—he would bend,
I could pull him close, let his broad hands lift
my hems, close my eyes, remember Finland. . . .
The packer shoves her washer from the scale.
Abe shouts, squints at the slope, reckons angle.

A Letter from Eagle, Alaska

My dearest Marie,

The nights grow longer.
Abe leaves well before the sun and returns
after the candle at our bedside burns
itself out.

I would think him a ghost were
it not for his mud-caked clothes. I have learned
to judge his success by the stains.

Treasures

lurk in black sand. Abe once whispered those words
as if we were in church, or new lovers.

I rarely see him now, just a washer
full of his clothes and a leather pouch, pursed
by a drawstring.

In my dreams, my body turns
to sand, shifting in streambeds. I wait for
Abe to smile, seeing some part of me glitter.
I wake to him gone.

Please write,

Your sister.

Abe at the Ironing Board

Eagle, Alaska, 1900

He *shucks* the plane toward the plank's nose, blows
curled shavings away. He runs his thick thumb
along the grain. Two months, he almost froze,
whipsawing this green pine—the steady thrum
of jag-teeth dwindling to a labored gnaw
and spew: a hum, dull in his cold-numbed ears.
Now, he rounds this heartwood to suit Anna,
squints to cipher sleeve-width, the way he veered
through Whitehorse Rapids, churned soap-white with silt.
They jerked like shirts inside Anna's machine.
He stretches flannel from a worn-out quilt
over the place Mounties painted his name:
this board floats, they said, your bodies will sink.
Anna, on shore, dunked tubs for day's washing.

Soap-Making

Sept-1909

All morning, Anna leached lye from alders,
simmered tallow from the broken femurs
of moose. Now she hems cuffs of Abe's trousers
to match his shrinking stride. River-steamers
blow grey plumes, unloading last supplies
before freeze-up. Ice floes—pounding like clogs—
remind her of shapes spinning in lamplight,
how they rolled back rugs in the Redmen lodge,
Abe's overshoes awkward as syllables
of stumbled English. Her thimble finger steals
to her lip when she pictures the wobble
of his waltz. She walks to the pot and feels
its sides, cool enough to cradle. She takes
handfuls and pats out rows of even cakes.

Abe, Drift-Mining on American Creek

Feb-1912

Burning pit-fires each night, he picked inches
(maybe a foot) before next day's sundown.
By November, he needed a windlass
to hoist full buckets from the well-bottom,
a rope-ladder to clamber to his tent.
December: he hit bedrock and turned south,
shadowing the creek. Once, he halted—bent
in the tunnel—and listened to wind howl
at the hole's mouth. He gathered his bed-roll,
since then sleeps underground. Sometimes, he dreams
of breaking the surface, but—like a mole—
he can't see. Something blinding says his name.
He wakes—to darkness so total he floats—
grabs the rope, scrambles out into the snow.

Anna over the Mangle

I accepted Abe like a dirty shirt—
soiled, yes, but sturdy as corduroy.

Spring was worst—even reindeer moved in herds
to the frozen north. I cradled that boy
as if he were my own.

His real mother
dead—blue brother cord-strangled—because Abe
was too small to stay her deeper hunger.

I was twenty, a girl at their table—
washer of china, scrubber of underpants.
When his father ran, he left a hard loaf
of bread.

Sometimes I see a stranger glance.

When he was five and cried, no one said *love*
as if *that* were why two people married.

I have no one else, he said. I agreed.

Anna at the Ironing Board

Dec-7, 1913

She wraps a towel around her hand and takes
the iron from the stove. She was soaking Abe's shirts
last night—in blue-bag mixed with hartshorn flakes
to fend moths—when she heard his snoring first
grow shallow and weak. Collars turn wan
as snow on unbroken ground. Fifteen years
she scrubbed mud from oilskin and spent denim,
while beyond the Forty Mile, his scattered
tailing-piles grew round as burial mounds.
She holds the iron close to her cheek, feeling
its glow a moment, then takes his shirt down
from the drying-rack. She rubs on sealing
wax to hold each crease. Two men swinging spades
sift for gold in black sand turned from Abe's grave.

Anna at the Equinox

Mar-22, 1914

She misses him mostly in the morning,
how the bed groaned—as if eased by the heft
of his leaving. Today, without warning,
he appeared as a bloodstain on a shirt cuff,
two hairs curled under the lip of a cup.
It's not him Anna finds herself missing,
but space where he had been: the metered chop
of ax through cordwood—how, while drifting
through space between blows, she eddied toward
the damp hollow on his side of the bed.
Whole nights she lay listening to him snore,
ticking seconds. She kneads sourdough bread,
wrings the wash. To her sister Anna writes:
From now on, days are longer than nights.

A Letter from Eagle, Alaska

Sept-12, 1919

My dear Marie, how I've missed you these years
since Abe's passing. Now to hear of your loss. . .

Come live with me.

By the time you were here,
it would be spring—I could cover the cost
of your ticket from Seattle (I've heard
they have a train from Skagway now). Whitehorse,
they say, is comfortable—and steamers
run the Yukon for small fares.

Half my chores
would be enough to keep your mind busy
(and never let your hands rest). I do hope
you'll consider it; you know the best way
toward healing is occupation. The soap
always needs making, my hands raise blisters
from mending.

I'll send tickets,

Your sister.

Low Water-table

Eagle Pumphouse, Jan-1927

Anna shoves their sled under the spigot.
Marie grabs spinning rigs, fastens the pump.
A place far below permafrost, dug out
by pick and shovel, moans, then seals the sump,
drawing trickles from the rusted downspout.
Marie tips each pot—then slowly angles
it upright. Her fingers, curling around
the handle's iron arc, summon pails filled
with cloudberry. Breezes traced Marie's breasts,
her dress rippling like water over shoals.
They skirted reed grass till they fell, hard breath
rasping. *His name*, Marie said, *until told*
is no secret. Anna grinned, shook her head.
Now, dry inside her throat, she says: *Arvid*.

Abe's Caution to Anna

There are no grub-stakes in heaven, no one
to hazard his pick-axe on a dead man.
Too late to bribe open the gate-wrought-iron,
not pearl like they said. Sweat earns you nothing,
just debts. The man with a deck names his game.
That my claims were empty only figures—
you're right—but, Anna, I know just the same
the sole men assured work are gravediggers
and thieves. So maybe you lie there tonight,
hating me for everything—short-lived days
of winter, your hands hard and cracked with lye—
but had you once—*just once*—seen a star blaze
from the night-hollow of your own gold-pan
you'd know why, come spring, I grubbed out again.

Anna at Rest

Oct-15, 1932—The sisters were buried in a common grave. . .

From her bed Anna can hear shovel blades
upturning the frozen plot. *Marie died—*
they tell her—*just before dawn*. She'll be laid
to rest when they sink six feet or decide
to quit trying. Weeks now, Anna's drifted
in quilts. *Pneumonia*, doc said, glacial-melt
collecting in every gasp. Shirts stiffen
on the drying-rack: men ashamed to call
only for laundry. Outside, their spades take
turns picking soil, iron splitting quick-glow
from granite like sparks from the fire they make
come sundown. On Anna's wall their shadows
move shapeless as aurora-cloud-spirits,
like two ghost-white dresses in her closet.



ANNA, WASHING

by Ted Genoways

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