

The 2River View

9.3 (Spring 2005)



The River Calls © 2005 by Mark Flowers

new poems by
Wendy Taylor Carlisle, Jefferson Carter
M. Chavez, Laylage Courie, Jen Currin
Paul Dickey, George Freek
Joy Icaayan, Mercedes Lawry
Nicole Poirier
M. Lynx Qualey

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November 2004

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The Oldest Profession

Virgin Eyes



Homage to Mountain Tea Lane © 2005 by Mark Flowers

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The Consequences of My Actions

I have one last chance to get salvation. The wife and kids are dressed to go to the church. She claims I neglect her. *You love that mahogany desk more than you do me.* Yes, dear, I am writing this poem. Well, if you must know, I choose to call it a prose poem. I rush out to buy cigarettes and a lottery ticket. I drive up to my own gravesite. Some of the people who knew me are already there, almost crying.

Write

Because of rain, your fingers becoming arthritic
Because of the freeway promising relief
Because of wiry hair
Because of the undone coming along behind
Because of chanting
Is it possible to choose?
Because the pain of outliving is a coal in the belly
Because we are held by the small cut
and the body is raked by sweat
Because otherwise swollen lips
work the hymn
Because it wipes off the idea of winter
Because the air is filled with letters

Skin to Skin

Skin cells move to the surface
as they mature, five layers basale to lucidum,
ending in the scaly corneum. Surgeons
must cut through them all to reach in,
the clock running on an operation
from the first incision, to the last stitch—
skin to skin—a whole skin.

A person's loved ones don't know this,
might have no time to imagine the cut,
while she lives in wholeness,
never thinks, *I could die*,
before she does, the shattering
so absolute that we, coming along later,
can only stand dumb
beside a bridge abutment
where someone, even this soon,
has put down bouquets,
fresh daises, a bunch of silk flowers
in their glass bottle and tied
drugstore balloons on the railing,
a flash to remind us that the skin,
a membrane, can be callus
or scab or petal or, in an instant, mist.

The Avant Garde

My son's legs hurt,
he can't hike or horse around.
He sits in front of the TV, icing
his knees & playing video games.
Here I'd like to admit
the personal lyric is dead,
the lie of the unitary self,
the poet as sensitive register.
Signifiers hit the window
like birds, smearing the glass.
Yes, the personal lyric is dead
but life goes on, ignoring
the avant-garde, the head games
& bad puns. Anyway, back
to the bourgeois subject,
my son's legs, which hurt
while he directs the wobbly,
red-caped character that signifies
himself acting in the world, this
character that runs everywhere
instead of walking.

M. Chavez

The Oldest Profession

She finds it difficult to breathe on all fours,
she's been hanging
like christ and her lungs are full.

She spews lust
at the guests,
they eat it
like pigs.

The heat of the spotlight
has burned her skin
to papyrus, she draws blood
back from the vein, writes
on the wall,
that she's pretty

and that it ought to be
worth something.

M. Chavez

Virgin Eyes

There's nothing to watch but the fields of little girls,
the flames licking their thighs, melting
sweet things.

They're falling
into dirt, onto asphalt.

Sticky, waiting for the kind
of boy
who would pick candy
up off the street and put it in his mouth.

When Birds Dream

When birds dream
it is of walking.

In their dreams
in a meadow or a forest or a city
 (ice floes burlap of desert carefully tilled fields lined
 with stones)
 (but never never the sea)
they put one foot in front of the other for miles.

This lasts all night
and is always exquisite
for there is so much detail
they've never seen.

Awake their breasts pump like bloody hearts
as they pummel their feathery selves into air.
So plain and vast the world seems!

The night's pleasure shapes their imagined souls
as an upright creature
whose every step proportions the earth
in its ideal measure
for progress
and contemplation.

It dwells
not in atmosphere not in air
 (never never in the sea)
but on earth where birds' souls
 (they imagine)
are on two long legs
released.

Why People Die

Because we are
trees and our roots miss them.

poppies pushed from the ground
with blood smeared on our mouths.

Because there is one river that does not empty into the sea.

Because only with beads of bone strung on sorrow do we pray.

Because doorways are made of
stone iron gold wood
and these things come from the ground.

Because habits (say
living) cannot continue.

Because bones must be scattered like clothing
before we are revealed to the lover.

Because only with ghosts do we speak truthfully
words accumulating over the mountains of our breast
wild birds push into the mist invisible flaps
startle us awake

The dead wring our hearts like dishrags.
They extinguish the lamps on our porches.
They feed rain through the screens.
They stand amidst the shadows of shaken branches.
They bend like the branches in a gesture of parting.
They bend as if casting pebbles or bones.
They mark the path of departure.

Because we must follow them
stone to scintillant stone.

Jen Currin

The Hand is Equal Parts Healer and Fool

Three suns rise—
three pears on the counter.
I don't care if you are hungry, ghost.
You don your red pants and shoes,
anxious to return to your museum.
But the house no longer shares your blanket.

Your child sneezes seven times
and opens his eyes,
reaches for bread.
I drink flowers.
We are spirits reduced to gestures.
We can be sure of nothing—

Your son and I agree,
we both saw the sun marry the sea.
Amber eyelids, a velvet curse...
We need no proof.
And this exhaustive list of wants
we can finally burn—

Jen Currin

The Mountain Highway

My beggar's spirit and I are one.
We agree to leave
in the morning.
About the time the road begins to whine,
I remember the bottle hidden in the blankets.
We can't turn back to the year of the dragon
where two treed men
might drop their webs over us,
so we brave the winding path
to the city of blood dancers.
We eat nothing, sing to the small dog
that might be a phantom.
A blossom in the room of my mind wilts slowly.
I cannot remember which coin
is our talisman.
Near the city gates, we join a masked procession
of incarcerated gods.
There is a small chance
we too will end up whistling.

Night Music

The sky is like a table
I'm hiding under.
But it's also made of glass,
and black clouds fall
through its cracks.
Scrawny sparrows peck,
luckless, in the dead grass,
and are routed by a swarm of crows,
who get what they're after.
Night arrives, it grows dark,
and the day is lost
like friends from my youth
who went places
with names I can't remember.
Then a lone star rises,
Flickering in the thick night:
It's what we're made of.
But it sees nothing,
And it desires nothing,
and soon it will burn to ashes.
It doesn't care.
It's doing what it was meant
to do. It rises.
It burns. It flickers.

The Persistence of Memory

The sun is a clock,
and so is the moon.
but what about the galaxy,
the universe? Meanwhile, frenzied
ladies in diaphanous gowns
dance with lizards
in a sunless desert,
where a skeletal hand,
rising from the cold sands,
sways like a pendulum.
I can remember my father,
dying, feverish,
on the edge of a coma,
constantly repeating
the name of his first wife,
dead more than forty years.
And I still remember
the ancient cleaning woman
on her knees in the vestibule,
spilling ammonia,
and the reek of disinfectant
filled the room, choking me
with its taste of wet ashes,
burning my nostrils,
stinging my eyes.

Catatonic in Prayer

The truth is that he's left his body, the raised arm
the slightly open mouth—that's no longer him.
He watches his audience from somewhere, smiling
at how they try to rouse him from sleep.
But if you stand close enough, you'll hear him
tell the stories of his years. Once, a flood came
to engulf him, and tired of running, he merely stood
and prayed he would float, like the rest of us.
That's him, prayer granted. No one should feel sorry,
not you clutching my hand in terror. The truth is—
he won't hurt us any more than the dishes you left
in the sink last night, the cracked ceiling waiting
to fall on our heads, the baby in the background
we forgot to feed again this morning. And we wonder
how we can press our skin against each other
while we dream of the years other people live,
how the tongue keeps still in the other's mouth
without knowing it's there. Or how we let cockroaches
crawl on our bodies even before we've closed our eyes.

The finale is what we wait for—he's dropping his arm
and the story's over.

Still, I have to accustom myself
to the air that fills with your fingers slipping
slowly, that neither of us will notice.

In the Mortuary

She is teaching me how to touch
the dead body in front of us, trying to peel
the eyes open. *Look*, she says
and then presses the scalpel through
the skin, carefully that not a drop smears
our hands. No, she won't stain herself with
me watching. That is not how her art goes.
Now, she's smiling. Perhaps in another world,
the corpse is smiling back, twisting his face,
mocking us both. And then perhaps
they will dance without moving, to a music
only they can hear. And she'll feel him
without touching, as if the slight wrinkle
of her fingers will wake him, make him breathe
and his eyes will flicker and he will say,
*The syringe in my stomach hurts. And why
is it I'm feeling so cold?* That—or when
she drops the scalpel, it will fall straight
to the floor, metal clanging against cold concrete.
And I will tell her—that's how it sounds,
a scalpel falling. Remember that. And I too
will remember that afternoon, how her hair reeked
of formalin, how everything else reeked of her.

Someday when I'm unafraid, I will tell her,
Look, here's what the living can do.
And I will cover her ears until every noise
is drowned and all the world is
but a fish view. I will stare at her and I will be
silent. For her, I will be still.

Looking at Van Gogh

Sunflowers drive against the blue.
Wind forces the stalks back
into flames. All about power
on this day of heat and moving air.
All ripped apart and put back with paint.

How could he know the impossible,
see it again through brush raking canvas?

He took no care for consequence,
spent whole days howling
at the recognition of what flew out
of his hands and screamed.

Oh, sweet madness, how I'd love to have you in
for just an interview. To lean
into your eyes in search of clues.

Now the explanation takes on
a life of its own as I return
safely, to bask
in the wilderness of suns.

Nine Botanists Starve in Stalingrad

The wolf came out of the ice.
The men diminished slowly, was it
one at a time? Imagination was the nature
of their hunger, and then their death.
The seeds stayed safe, heritage and hope.
Eventually, wheat, corn, potatoes.
Science is neither benign nor malignant.
It goes on without nourishment,
becoming fields of marvelous green.

Nicole Poirier

A Poem for God's Apples

and these words:

red
smooth
belle fleur de lis

In her hands
the stain

a shapely
perfect fit

that one moment
everything belonged to her

Theory this

What use is language?

There are rituals used by squatters
in the far North, where evergreens
are their only weapons against intruders.

Stones fashioned in circles around the pit
are clues of closure and privacy.

I saw a woman once push smoke
through her feet, though
neglecting to ask how she did it,
I sat on the chopping block just admiring

the perfect way she skinned a bite of fish
off the stick with only two teeth.

Getting Rid of the Hiccups

Bad relationships. They're like the hiccups—the longer you let them go, the harder they are to stop. Mary understands those poor souls in the Guinness Book of Records, the ones who've been hiccupping for twenty, thirty years. They missed their window. After a year or two, there was no way for them to take a breath.

Karl treads downstairs, scraping a fingernail against his upper teeth. He pauses at the landing and slops his tongue around, then swallows.

Mary focuses on her spinach-flecked spoon. To stop the hiccups, you had to concentrate. You had to close your eyes and imagine that you weren't hiccupping any more.

She closes her eyes.

A full minute later, she opens them. Karl is sitting across from her, a fingernail working between his two front teeth.

The Odds

She was fine. Really. She'd known the odds; known that things hadn't been right from the start. When friends called to say, *God, I am so sorry*, she'd switch the phone to the other ear and say, *Hey* or *Yeah*. Then she'd ask about their kids, their spouses. She'd focus on the blurry wallpaper, her eyes so wide-open they hurt.

In the grocery line, women brightened with smiles. They'd glance at her still-swollen belly and say, *Aw. How many months?*

She never found an answer. She'd just shrug, open-mouthed, and air would rush in over her tongue, almost choking her. It would crash in, holding her mouth open, pushing down to her distended belly. She'd struggle against it, the women's eyes blinking and blinking, before she closed her eyes and swallowed.

Contributors

Wendy Taylor Carlisle lives and works in Texas. Most recently her poems have appeared in *Caesura*, *Ghoti Magazine* and *Unlikely Stories*.

Jefferson Carter is Writing Department Chair for Pima Community College. He's had work in *Barrow Street*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *CrossConnect*, and here at 2River. His sixth chapbook is *Litter Box* (Spork Press).

M. Chavez lives in San Francisco. "So You Want to Be a Stripper" was recently integrated into the play *Pure Gold Baby*, which opened last fall in Portland, Oregon.

Laylage Courie writes, performs, and lives in New York City. She's currently working on a tabletop arrangement for voice and debris based on Wallace Stevens' poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery."

Jen Currin has fled the States for Vancouver, where she is a member of the poetry collective *vertigo west*. Recent poems appear in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Mudfish*, and *42opus*.

Paul Dickey last appeared in 2RV in Spring 2004. Since then, his prose poetry and micro-fiction have appeared in *Cue*, *Sentence*, *Wild Strawberries*, and *magazine minima*.

George Freek has poems in *The Chaffin Journal* and *Coal City*. Other publications include *Waiting for Julia* (Playscripts), *Concerto Grosso* (JAC), and *In Stanley's Room* (Aviar).

Joy Icayan lives in the Philippines and is currently taking her undergraduate degree in psychology.

Mercedes Lawry has been publishing poetry for thirty years in journals such as *Crab Creek*, *Fine Madness*, *Mudlark*, *Poetry*, and *Plum Biscuit*. Her awards include those from Artist Trust and the Seattle Arts Commission.

Nicole Poirier is a freelance writer from Saskatchewan. She has other poems scheduled soon for future publication. She is currently writing and editing her first book of poetry.

M. Lynx Qualey fled no apparent persecution in the Midwest for a life in the Middle East, where she writes and wrangles a one-year-old boy. Her prose poems and flash fiction appear in *The Melic Review* and *Smokelong Quarterly*.



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About 2River

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry, art, and theory, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series. All publications first appear on-line, then in print.

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