

THE YEAR-GOD

by

Gerrye Payne



Ahsahta Press
Boise State University
Boise, Idaho

Acknowledgments

These magazines have published the following poems:

Colorado-North Review. "Machines"; **Creeping Bent**. "The Flicker"; **Descant**. "Visited"; **Kalliope**. "My Sister Is Bones"; **Kansas Quarterly**. "The Policewoman on Her Day Off in Winter"; **Mildred**. "The Dancer," "Gerrye, Wound Knower," "Ghosts," and "Under Plum Branches"; and **Tight**. "Invocation."

Editor for Ahsahta Press: Tom Trusky

The Year-God is printed on acid-free text and cover papers.

Copyright ©1992 by Gerrye Payne

ISBN 0-916272-51-6

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number:
91-71533

*for Richard.
and for Blake Andrée and John Carlos*

Contents

Introduction by <i>Robert Gibb</i>	iii
The Crane	
A Visitation of Cranes	1
The Crane	2
Sinking and Rising	3
Gerrye, Wound Knower	4
Visited	5
My Sister Is Bones	6
The Rifle and the Guitar	7
Under Plum Branches	8
Still as a Fawn's	9
The Dark Cave	10
Ophelia	11
Ghosts	12
The Bright Wolf	
Invocation	17
The Bright Wolf	18
Surprise Visit	20
The Dancer	21
The Father	22
Dreams after Visiting Her Father after His Stroke	23
Illumination	24
Conversation with the Dead	25
The Day of Wild Laurels	26
Her Father Appears, in the Guise of a Fallen Soldier	27
Reclaiming the Animal	28
Pilgrim in the Natural World	29
The Year-God	
The Flicker	33
The Year-God	34
Machines	35
Home after Visiting the Nation's Capital	36
Fire on the Water	37
In the Deer Meadow	38
Garden, Mid-July	39

Summer	40
Fog in Drought.....	41
On Her Way to Salmon Creek Beach. While Stopped by a Road Crew. She Reflects upon Her Relationship with the Vegetable World.....	42
Stag	43
Morning	44
The Old Circle of Laurels	45
Indian Summer.....	46
Morning Commute	47
The Fir Tree Lit by the Moon	48
Meditations in Flu Season.....	49
The Policewoman on Her Day Off in Winter.....	50
Ghosts on the Water.....	51
Return.....	53

Introduction

"The Year-God is here, /requiring transformation."

Ecological and mythical, the poetry of Gerrye Payne participates in some of the most significant, and hopeful, aspects of our current time of crisis. Amid the loss of forests and habitat, the threat of continued extinctions, global warming, and George Bush's New World Order, we need to remind ourselves daily of the fragility and evanescence of the natural world and of our own lives as part of it. Poetry, it seems to me, is eminently suited to this task, to helping us restore balance, harmony, a living sense of connectiveness, "a whole world of transfused light."

I believe we may be seeing the emergence of a new "Federalism" in poetry, a bio-regionalism, and that such an emphasis on place is a healthy and corrective one. As with the growing emergence of diverse cultures and voices, this poetry strikes me as a move away from the Hamiltonian and back toward the Jeffersonian impulse in American life (as "*Dreams*" puts it, "There were other lives"). More than simply a kindred trend, this poetry articulates the impulse, giving voice "to what is deep and what is present," paying witness to "the sky, the light, /the squawks and signals of unnamable life."

Gerrye Payne's place is a California we have caught glimpses of in poetry like Gary Snyder's and Kenneth Rexroth's mountain meditations; I hear something of Philip Whalen as well, and that sense of physical intimacy and generational continuity found in Joy Harjo's work. Consider, if you will, these lines which end Payne's poem "*Visited*":

Far away a crying angel settles back
in the ashes and cottonwood roots
of the old Waco graveyard where all the
family bones lie and are sometimes still.

This sense of heightened identification between the female and the earth, their reciprocities, runs through *The Year-God*. As she says in her poem "*Ghosts*," "I carry the earth with me." It is one thing for male writers to make such an equation (with its inevitable sense of assigning a role): it is quite another for the generative connection to be made by a woman. As such it broadens both our possible understandings of women and nature, of the female itself. In this regard, as in others, the fact of the "Other" is in a way synthesized into a fuller human understanding. In such

a light, even the familiar figure of Ophelia may be seen as part of a new context:

Her lover is flowers,
is the meadow grass,
is what the water says
rolling over creekstones,
is starlight,
is birdsong.

Payne also investigates the communality of family life, the sustaining power of the pastoral, matriarchal legacy, male energy (in a section titled "*The Bright Wolf*," where the male is seen variously as lover, father, "the hero the leaves mourn," and, complement to Ophelia, "the drowned man"), and the whole mythic, transformative richness of the seasons themselves, whose cycles make up the year of the title and characterize its divinity. It is against this vast backdrop of nature and time that Payne arrays her lovingly glimpsed vistas and intimacies, against which she holds them, that gives her work its tenderness and balance. Here, in its entirety, is her poem "*Under Plum Branches*":

There is jasmine in the pathway,
early in the evening, hyacinths.

We were walking under plum branches,
watching the sun.

Angels flew, small as doves,
in pink and violet light.

I watched the blossoms
fall into my hands.

In the back of your eyes
the sun was a fire.

We stood helpless,
rooted in the pathway,

still as new twigs
that suddenly blossom.

In its mixture of the elegiac and the erotic, of natural detail and immanence, the effortlessness by which memory becomes visionary state, in its joy and freshness, the poem itself becomes a node of radiant

expression, the experience of which we, as readers, may, in turn, give thanks. ***The Year-God*** is a resacralization of the rhythms by which we live, and, living, make, in the words of Seamus Heaney, "a seasonal altar of the earth."

Robert Gibb
August, 1991

The Crane

“So Hermes is credited with having invented the alphabet after watching the flight of cranes.”

—Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*

A Visitation of Cranes

Cranes in migration
write the ease of flight
across heaven.

suggest a muscularity
in shoulders
like walking.

as on that first Friday in spring
when I walked
a passage of lit leaves
into the meadow's mouth,
where spiraling fir-buds
illuminated the day.

when I discovered
wild white irises.
hidden dark irises.
blossoms conjured into
canoe for trips
down my wild rivers.

The visitation of cranes
is an alphabet of longing.
Hand me the empty page.
This migration portends love,
and I must write it down.

It is like walking,
like the foot-marks of birds.

The Crane

“Shall she imagine him then,
turning as he goes,
turning and saying,
‘Yes, you do not belong here.
Come! You do not belong here.’
The blue crane is a man,
turning as he goes.”

—“*Flute-Notes.*” Mary Moore

The crane
wearing his black feathers
and his white feathers

flew down
to her.

He was like a man
who throws back
his cloak of sorrows.

Into the blue sky
he carried her.
The earth below
furrowed and rolled.
It looked like
the bodies of giants.

When she flew alone
the crane knew
that she was safe.

Then he became Eros
who disappears at dawn
and returns whenever
there is darkness.

Sinking and Rising

A migration
comes to a standstill
when the crane
sights home
in the furrowed earth. He leaves

a sack of constellations,
a blue coat of skies,
his foreign alphabet

outside by the door.
In the morning
she goes out,
humming a dark language.

She picks apricots,
oat straw, forget-me-nots. Then

she rises, sprouts wings,
soars in the blue wind.

Gerrye, Wound Knower

(ger-4. Indo-European root.
"to cry hoarsely, also the name of the
crane, Middle Dutch derivative, kronen,
to groan, lament."

—*American Heritage Dictionary*)

Through large windows
the day is a golden field
ringed with oaks.
A jay dives low into the coolness
between twisting branches.
Last night I surprised
a thick shouldered buck,
his young antlers branching
into moony darkness.
He ambled out along the road,
heading the same way I was, west.
In the afternoon the fever returns.
Through large windows
the darkness comes
as if winding off the cliff road
into the sea.
I bathe my face.
Salt lines my eyelids.
The moon lies along
my skin, silver and white.

Shadowy night
will be my other name,
along with crane,
lamerter, croaker,
wound-knower.

Visited

Just as I rediscovered my childhood-grandmother's
still undigested complaints floating inside me—
I was driving home along Highway 12—
a snow white egret appeared by the side of the road.
Unimpeded, he gazed through all the traffic:
perfect stillness.
At home I watch two deer stretch for cherry blossom buds.
The cat has eaten another rabbit, and the dog
has rolled in the remains.
The sky threatens a deep grey storm. New oak leaves
float and flutter in fitful wind.
Far away a crying angel settles back
in the ashes and cottonwood roots
of the old Waco graveyard where all the
family bones lie and are sometimes still.

My Sister Is Bones

My sister is bones. fallen like a roadside deer.
ouroboric circle of skull on shin.

Her teeth pearl with dew.
Water does not penetrate the bone.

The drops are crystal spheres for divination:
This is what we
come to. a circle
in the field of stones.

But all the field is bluebonnets!
Live icons of resurrection.
on both sides of the road.
In our front hall hung an oil of bluebonnets.
a gold framed pocket of magic: "Those are
bluebonnets. It's the state flower." I believed.

Bones in a ditch of oak leaves
splinter and dry. pointing at the dirt.
Nothing comes up around them but yellow weeds
that make me sneeze. I long for the creeks and the river
where I watched ground disappear into muddy singing.
where cottonwoods stood guard
over all that dissolving.

The Rifle and the Guitar

The rifle and the guitar
stand in the corner of the room,
each a kind of blossoming forth
of a man's hands,
the man who walks outside.

The woman sleeps in her own
starred darkness,
almost dreaming.
A man moves into her,
draws her away from constellations,
from the round blankness of
closed eyes.

She wakes alone,
wondering, as the sun marks the edges
of her rising body,
of whom she has dreamed.
She lifts herself uneasily
into the day,
hearing, distantly,
the sound of hammering
in rhythmic, monotonous bursts.

Not understanding the
dark bullets, she perceives
the tracings of obscure
and formless knowledge.
She wonders what song
she carries inside.

Under Plum Branches

There is jasmine in the pathway.
early in the evening, hyacinths.

We were walking under plum branches,
watching the sun.

Angels flew, small as doves,
in pink and violet light.

I watched the blossoms
fall into my hands.

In the back of your eyes
the sun was a fire.

We stood helpless,
rooted in the pathway,

still as new twigs
that suddenly blossom.

Still as a Fawn's

When we walked beneath the cherry trees
sunlight fell through pink blossoms
onto our faces, masking them.

Your lit face grew still as a fawn's,
purple. I thought your blood
came out of hiding,
shaped itself to flee,
became a face.

Watching you wear the light,
I didn't know if I was falling in love
or about to enter a long renunciation.

The air was scented
with transformation.

Waiting. I took a fallen cherry blossom
small enough to hold.

The Dark Cave

Oak branches twist and reflect the light
in this grey rainy May afternoon.
I'm afraid a car will drive down
between the trees and penetrate my solitude,
or that the phone will ring and shred my defenses.
Nuns build thick walls with their own hands,
wear gowns heavy and dark as slices of winter midnights,
install grills through which they slide
messages of negation to failed intruders,
guarding themselves.

The oak wears lichen sleeves and
silently holds the emptiness.
Now a doe creeps lightly through fallen oak leaves,
takes root in the meadow, steals my attention.
She slowly lifts curved dancing ankles up
from waving, still-green grass,
watches nothing, it seems,
in the air. She disappears
sideways into a dark cave of firs
that has waited forever
for her, there at the edge.

Ophelia

She rearranges the windows,
sees a new landscape.
She hones her vision on emergent
laurels, on oaks.
She imagines her clarity
to be like light
around each thing she sees,
like glass.

She imagines that she
cuts her hands
trying to hold on
to something,
something that says,
"I am vanishing."

And leaves her
with her own blood
pulsing forth,
mating with the air.

Absence kicks into her,
she rides it.
It kicks her.
Sleep kills it.
It kills her, too.
She doesn't remember anything.

Her lover is flowers,
is the meadow grass,
is what the water says
rolling over creekstones,
is starlight,
is birdsong.

Ghosts

1.

Especially outside granite buildings
in sunlight, when anyone would dream
of meadows or rivers or Lassen
cold and clean rising from
what we can't see but
carry like a pregnancy,

or in a bar, late
with friends, when
the imagined glass of brandy
rests undrunk
between us,

unsung bones stir and dance.

We give them clothes. Sometimes
they find hands and touch us.

2.

I carry the earth with me
on the floor of my car,
under my fingernails,
in the pores of my skin.

The earth clings to my food.
I distill the earth
to catch in my cup.

I give my son and daughter
to the earth.
They crawl the veins and root tunnels
and emerge in the garden.
They are beets. They are corn.
They will be harvested.
They will feed the dark sea.

3.
Open-winged herons sow
colored shadows
on our paths
on our heaps of dirt
on our fingers
on our tongues.

They are angels
seeding the stones.

The Bright Wolf

"...at eleven come the wolves, at
twelve the tombs of the dead open."

—German folk rhyme,
in ***Of Wolves and Men.***
Barry Holstun Lopez

Invocation

He leaps with the air.
follows disorder.
clasps a white feather.
binds his legs with multicolored cloth.
is genetic seed externalized
above a sea of blood.

No, we float on a blue lake
in bobbing canoes.

No, the sea is blood,
and the round voice of children
bubbles up at the center.
sings below angelic flight
arcing along a pale elliptical track
toward dissolution.

But now the sun rises.
and we who are suspended
between blood and flight
are shadowed by his whirling limbs.
This dark, passing icon
shapes my lips to speech.

The Bright Wolf

The bright wolf was born
a thousand times
from the man who was her father.
He flamed in Kansas.
Texas. Colorado. eating
what he could kill.
happy when alone.
with someone silently
like him, or as a man
on a horse pacing deep
into the mountains.
lyric aspen and spruce
entering his dark eyes
and shattering in his mind to dust.

Someone always loved him,
waited at home. illumined
by his extinguishing flicker.
that light where so many
small animals have drowned.
His child ran in the fields,
refused to sleep,
knew she would fly to heaven
when she died.
sulked when photographed.
carefully picked horses' hairs
off the barbed-wire fence
to cover herself with magical
evidence of riding, and
felt him alien as thunder.

The man who was the bright wolf
vanished when she was four,
turned to shrapnel
in her dreams, exploded
into a wilderness
as sharp and dry as himself:
he was always in motion.

ravenous, enraged, alone.
In her tamed, girl's body
she made him small gifts,
a bookmark or colored pictures,
to send over the edge
through the dark toward what
she hoped would be
his fire. but she never
really knew.

Surprise Visit

She remembers when raindrops
hit the swimming pool. Like a
prospective martyr, she waited
for lightning to strike.
swimming in circles to draw
the target. Only her father
came, as if from clouds.
He gave her fish to eat,
and she saved the bones,
still holding a trout's shape,
under her pillow, secretly.
In her dreams the spine
parted her hair and
combed through her skull.
Drowned, she was the princess
of incomprehensible seas.

The Dancer

She is under the oak,
kicking acorns out of the way,
making circles in the dust, lightly.

Is it nearby or far away,
that sound of bells?

The wind comes.
Here it is, touching her
turning arms. Light-diamonds
shift all along her skin,
but her eyes are closed.

She is dreaming now,
a sea-voyage where her lost father
comes home from drowning,
his eyes wide open,
his hands, marked with coral scars,
pulling her close.

A snake rises out of the earth.
Its ringed body moves to the tree,
lifts and climbs,
circling higher and higher.

Her feet move slowly now,
but her arms are trembling.
The sea rises in her.
It is her blood.
She will always dance.
She loves the drowned man.

The Father

The father believed he could not be
a father unless he lived at home.
He visited when business trips occurred
near his children's residence.

His daughter had fallen in love
with trees instead.
She got sick when he came.
Her stomach forgot
how to hold on, threw off
everything it usually craved.

He invested in horses,
highstrung, admired through binoculars.
She looked into the horses' faces once,
puzzled, but silent,
deeply attuned to one-legged, rooted,
solid, black-barked trees.

Years later, when the father nearly dies,
when he can't tell which team is which
on television, and waits, clumsy
in the desert hospital,
for his brain cells to re-connect,
she remembers that she loved him,
weeps, longs for him,
immobilizes herself with a book
and tea, waits it out,
doesn't go to him.

Thinks, it has always been
too late for us.
finds comfort when she reads or dreams
that Hercules once carried,
long ago, a
cornucopia, and a flowering stick.

Dreams after Visiting Her Father after His Stroke

1.

At the homesite the view stretched out for miles,
forever. Scrub brush covered flat land that's woolly
from tiny white blossoms releasing pollen
over stubby branches and green leaves. The driveway
was fenced with fresh white railing, and fed into
a square cut pad, also contained by white.
Straight out from where the front door would be
(the new driveway came up from behind) was a birch tree,
new planted, slanting against the empty, dissolving sky,
white splattered with grey, the only tree for miles.
"Maybe this is Lapland," she thought.
"I'll miss the old trees, here, in the high country."

2.

In the afternoon the cars of daughters
arrived at the red brick building
built on stone at the edge of the sea.
Glowing in descending light,
they have come for the fathers.
Guards bring them into the courtyard.
It is not so different now to be a daughter
and to be a mother. The fathers are broken.

3.

Purple streaks along the edge of the water
lay still. A green bird lifted its head into clear air.
All the light gathered to one bright coin that
skipped along the surface and vanished.
There were other lives; one step in any direction
could have taken her to what was lost, forgotten,
or never dreamed of. But the light bound her to
that moment as it disappeared at the edge of the water
that rose and retreated in steady heartbeats.
The little leaves woke up.
What is deep and what is present
fluttered in the air.

Illumination

On the table two candles sit in
the line and swirl of opened oak:
flames are will-o'-the-wisp over
tracings of water.

Water paths are unpredictable.
To light them gives hazardous memory.
(A face floats up, calm, with sad mouth,
eyes covered with mist.)

At night she feasts with ghosts
who sing secrets soundlessly.
give only the image.

Flickering light almost warms.
It shapes shadows into acrobats,
sword swallows, fire-eaters,
lovers who have drowned.

Conversation with the Dead

She knit the question.
the unspoken longing.
into a coat to cover her
from the morning sun.
as if he had offered
his own dark garment
so she might know
the bones he carries.

While the leaves of the pear tree
gather light and dance.
she shuts her eyes.

She draws the night
from her own darkness.
from arterial ink.
from the salt-scrimmed
underlids that bind her eyes.

In the faint pelagic thrum
of this imagining.
the bones yet remain bones.
Still. she speaks.
But who could follow
the tight, illogical knot
of screams?

This coat is lined
with wind and dust
and absence.

The Day of Wild Laurels

Wind in the laurels sparks spiraling wheels as if
a thousand arms came unhinged while mourning a hero.

Too hot for a fire, the morning is chilly enough
to make her wonder if she's growing old.
Finger joints speak in random cadences.

A broadwinged hawk floats in circles above the oaks,
goes high as his mate slants down the steel grey sky.
They make black shadows on the windshield of the car.

An inch into the ground she calls garden
two dozen peas reside, awaiting their moment.
She'd rather watch the earth for shoots than eat.

Love-crazed cabbage-moths circle cradle-shaped
broccoli leaves. The neighbor's dog barks,
training the puppy who babbles along.

Who is the hero the leaves mourn? In all
this singing morning, who has been lost?

Her Father Appears, in the Guise of a Fallen Soldier

Running, her legs are loosely twined ropes
knotting and unknotting themselves.
The bell over the gate speaks in tones
random as shadows on the oak-dappled hill.
Her lost father sings to her, is a loop
of milky light between the bay trees,
oh, oh, oh, oh—and then is disintegrant
mud and bones, offering her legacy.
She is not afraid, but steps into a
previous brave body, remembering how,
years ago, the wind poured down
from the spruce woods onto her face,
and she didn't turn away.
Facing him dead she receives his
riddling, dark light,
wears it like fluttering ribbons
from wars she'll never fight,
his wars, the ones that left her orphan.

Reclaiming the Animal

1.

In the early quiet, after she drinks tea,
dark herbs floating in water,
she walks the path up from the road,
through tan-oak and hazel. The earth is dry.
Leaves cover her path. She passes the big fir,
jumps the head of the canyon, walks into and through
domed arches of laurels. She walks in deer prints
to the dry grass meadow. It is hot there, burning.
She picks a yellow apple from an old tree whose
fruit is spicy and flecked with birds' peckings.
The deer path leads back to where she started,
the road to home, and now she runs, juggling
unwieldy raveling knots that dance in air,
are tilting bright ellipses.

2.

In her dreams wolves run
on the edge between land and water.
an edge that glows dull red
at sunset or dawn,
like old blood becoming new.
Grey wolves are like the grey land
touched with color where water comes
to hold the light.

3.

A stone rabbit sits on her window ledge,
the color of oak bark in shadow.
It looks up as if to say,
"Show me the garden."

Pilgrim in the Natural World

The shadows under her hand are
wings of water birds
who visit her dreams.
That trick of light asks
reverence, asks her to let the ground
bite into her knees. But
the water birds want her to dance,
fly, believe she's free. At the same time
the earth, intimate with her skin
and with her bones, asks her to rest
in a dark cloak.

Now she makes one request
before this darkness and this light,
that her dreams and her knees
shake hands.
the crane,
the rabbit,
emblems of the natural world.

The Year-God

“The Year-God cycle starts with the birth of the Divine Child...[who] represents the awakening of a new-born spirit of vegetation.”

—Marija Gimbutas.
***The Goddesses and Gods
of Old Europe***

The Flicker

The flicker who was nosing into wet grass, again and again, looks at me. In a moment when dream is possible, prayer is a boat heading toward the rapids. Quizzical bird roots in a muddy place, out of her trees where sleek jays weave knots of blue and black in random phrases across January oak limbs. Fog destroys distance, dropping wet and cold, until a corridor of emptiness occurs. I wonder if I have the courage to stand here on my redwood porch, which is, after all, a tree split apart. The flicker's slightly curved beak mimes laurel leaves. Floods of images race through my mind and out and dissolve into uselessness. Buddha's no help. Joe Campbell's no help. The rabbit who sweeps the moon's no help. The crane's no help. My palms together are sliced with nerves. I'm tossed into the world perpetually stumbling.

The Year-God

The sun is strong here in February,
and warms the rack of bones I hang upon.
Swirls of ambivalent forms refuse to
commit themselves to this or that,
won't say yes or no, remind me of
orange fungus on the rotting log
shifting from itself to bright dust
as I watched. The Year-God is here,
requiring transformation.
Twining together like abandoned sisters,
clinging to the porch rails, wisteria branches
thicken and knot themselves into buds.
The cherry tree sends new twigs above
the deer cage, under last season's
brown leaves that look too big still
clutching middle branches. Unmanageable
gophers periscope among the roses, graze
on weeds like overfed cats. And the pruned
roses shine with a green gloss between
their thorns, up to the cut edges.
Winter tips us off a cold cliff,
and we can't hang on.
Spring will get us,
her wet mouth open,
waiting.

Machines

Machines sit to hand, vortices of possibility.
Under their blank gaze biological life
flares and dies, is ashamed.
The neighbor's tractor hums, clearing brush,
inventing geometry in random chaparral.
Severed nerves hurt, I burn. In the
deepest circles of my lungs cells blow breaths,
shadow-flowers expanding out, dissolving.
Their scent hangs on the water of my tongue
and then disperses into air. I dream that
a slender saint, a gilt, translucent blossom,
slides into the mudhill of this earth.
No, it is an acorn dropped from the oak
that shades my porch. Typewriter, refrigerator,
tractor, all dead, unmourned, still buzzing,
throttled ghosts, ache for birth, ask for
my hands to release them, ask for what my fingers
together. Gothicked up toward clouds that
forgive me with their rain, refuse.

Home after Visiting the Nation's Capital

This morning a young deer nosed yellow grass
in front of the garden, his shoulders heavy with masculinity,
expanding antlers soft with shedding, velvet fuzz.
He doesn't belong in a modern revery,
too tough, too soft, too empty all at once.
Yet here he is, not unlike the white spider on the rose petal,
the crested jay, the beige-pawed field rat pursued by a cat.
This is where I live, in perpetual stimulation
from beasts, wind, light, oak, mud.

In Washington a large woman, hands on her hips, beamed
at the girl in a shiny pink dress with its big, soft bow,
in the parking lot of the homeless shelter Sunday,
Small boys dodged by, chasing each other.

A face appeared as if winding out of nowhere.
"I'm not anyone," he seemed to be saying, "Got change?"
His presence uncoiled like dispersed smoke.

In the Portrait Gallery were John Brown, Sojourner Truth,
and Walt Whitman's ghost drooping over dying boys on cots.
War doesn't work. The Peaceable Kingdom's lion grinned at me
from a back hall. It is easy to daydream.

Now the white spider is wrapping a stumbled bee.
The jay screams, flying toward the cat's bowl.
I try to layer all of it into one picture, but mind dithers,
hopping from one foot to the other.
An enormous wind rises from the Pacific, and I imagine
that it blows all the way to Washington.

Fire on the Water

for Barbara Meyn

There is a shine on the sea today.
a golden line on the horizon,
silver sheets glistening,
too bright to look at long.
A gold roofed city of houses and
great halls unfolds up from the gleam
and like an assemblage of cards,
collapses, burnt dreams
into a pool of flame.
And I long for my golden city
where I might hear music
subtle as rose-scent.

You might wonder at the conjurance of this place
by a practical Capricorn
sitting in a square Volvo
on a solid cliff above the sand,
why real birds whose silhouettes
dot the sky's tapestry
with ceaseless random stitches,
the clouds' water-colorish drifts,
the heart's roar echoed
in the sea's, why these
do not construct a space
that houses such hope as mine,
that is, simple,
fit for hewn logs—

and I'd have to say that the same
work-a-day heart that
roars in whispers sings
its opposite in moments
like now
when there's fire on the water,
and the cormorants' cries
though loud
cannot contain
a sudden leap toward heaven.

In the Deer Meadow

Sacred-gaited deer thread through willow scrub.
Their ears glow red, lit from behind by dawning sun.
I put my weight upon this moment,
hurl myself onto the doe's back, press my face
into her tan, furred neck. If there are ticks buried
here, let them drink my blood too, in token of
sudden leaping. Calliope howls.

The sun heats the brushy meadow where the soles
of my feet shred on bleached stalks. My stomach
tears against brambles, blood is warm down my body
as it opens, as the deer meadow opens my body.
I thought I could hide in cool shadows,
but I must run, run streaming, hot, my head
jerked back in the grimace of birth.

Garden, Mid-July

From the seeds snake roots, a radiate
death-white work, nets in the dark.
Opposing masks ride on that weave,
the comedy and tragedy of first sprouts,
of leaves like hands that have forgotten
to be clenched, of black, slick beetles
and those flecked with greenish camouflage,
of tendrils winding to become sea shaped,
curved to urgency. Our narrative is above
the ground, but fed by what doesn't even hum,
or fascinate, or wait for cheers.

Summer

Light in new oak leaves: a handful
of bright netting, my senior prom
dress, a stretch of foam
along the sea's edge.
This is where I live, what
was ornament
now is heart. The simplest task
is home.
Grass shoots disappear into
planes of light and shadow,
and then the breeze stirs them
from anonymity to sharp
stalks again. Corn field
in miniature bears seed
of itself in a thousand tints
and shades of green.
Abiding in this great slow heart,
I sing a pale song of silence,
and of my own white bones
whose pulse
at the marrow
heals the darting snake of mind.
The bee that hums at the window screen,
stunned by summer, rings sugar-scented
blossoms, the dandelions' small suns,
the white iris, circles the light.

Fog in Drought

With ninety-five per cent humidity, it seems futile
to water the garden, but everything except the roots
are wet. Oaks knock down fog that muddies the surface.
We see who has passed by looking down: deer, rabbit,
the neighbor's dog. This much water translates into
thin knowledge that turns to dust if the sun breaks through
as late, even, as four o'clock.

When it's sunny all day the world traipses by incognito.
Bucks play at dominance until hunger is a greater goad,
hunger for stray cherry leaves straggling past the fence,
for violets, even for marigolds, hot and bitter, downy
bites of sun wavering between brilliance and dry dirt.
They'd never eat marigolds except in drought.
Today the deer pass like shadows in drifting clouds,
edging up to the border of fenced garden,
damp fur rippling over bony shoulder and haunch,
mysterious, hungry.

On Her Way to Salmon Creek Beach, While Stopped by a Road Crew, She Reflects upon Her Relationship with the Vegetable World

Her body seems preposterously huge
beside a weed: this evanescent
white globe soon blown but now
contained, joined, centered,
perfect dandelion.
Clumsier than any beast she sprawls
beside what is and doesn't hurry.
She feels herself a million shreds
or chips at angles with themselves,
clashed. Even her garden
mocks her, for she has chosen
those plants, forgotten
to take what's given.
Beside the blank fogged distant sea
birds race and never drown.
But here is the intruded stop sign, saying,

Wait
before
the sea
opens.
Stop here.
Rest.
Surrender.

Stag

There is roundness in my throat, egg-shaped
emptiness, translatable if I were a painter
into circular gestures of magenta or teal against
bland, nearly white stretched canvas sized
with rabbit-skin glue, or into dark potato shapes
tasting, it would seem, of dirt, of converted
light, of mulch-rubbings, of worm-trails.
But now a small stag comes out from the egg,
walking *en point* as if from a shadowed cave of fir-boughs,
flecked with sun through laurel leaves, antlers
balanced on a golden head, nervous with emergence,
suddenly huge, the golden eyes wild. He fills this room
with scent of wet fur, with wire-fine shrugs
that stir the air, with quick huffs and snorts
that must become my new music.

Morning

Purple plums sit on a yellow china plate.
Dark Baltic blue paper napkin lies crumpled on the oak table
that glows through smooth, deliberate grain.
Morning goes slowly, perhaps not at all.
Curling laurel leaves collaborate with wind, signify
a whole world of transfused light, whispering, bunching, releasing.
Two-colored rose, striped in blood and milk, leans and grows old
in a blue stone pot dashed with yellow streaks, sun on the water.
Perhaps morning is a constant state we carry with us,
is an amulet to life, especially in a drought year,
when all seems alien, desert,
foreign to half light where everything is cool,
swimmable, meditative.

The Old Circle of Laurels

In solitude I find my place.
the old circle of laurels.
Big shadows are the sides of a room.
windows and walls at once. Tented. shaded.
I expand like clouds to fill this space.
Pale under-roars of machinery across
dry hills sound like Pacific waves.
The ferny meadow used to hold wild iris.
An ancient pear tree flames red leaves
in August fog. offers one golden fruit.
Our house once was a skeleton of forms
the sky entered. Birds and clouds
floated through our living room.
Fallen feathers of flickers and jays
celebrated like birthday candles
what was done and what would come:
every day the sky. the light.
the squawks and signals of unnameable life.

Indian Summer

The sun hangs in perspicuous laurels, leaves
glinting emerald toward light summer grasses
specked with violet-blue eyes like a child's dropped beads,
where spiders have spread white nets for picnic suppers.
It's late now. Morning no longer hums in the fir-ringed meadow.
What will be reported on the news has happened,
flags will be lowered and folded, with or without cub scout pomp. It's long
since the wisteria lay in a fragrant lavender heap
on the porch's floor, victim to sudden sea-wind.
My body in its regalia—I should say skin, flesh, and bone—
can't stop, but here is a gap before night comes,
a washout where trees and bushes have grown.
I imagine it so.

Morning Commute

Black and white rooster rides the fog. He's a
bird Nijinski. I brake fast. His tail
curves back behind scaly spurs, glints
in the damp. Three hens meander after.
speckled, clucking, pecking at pavement.
In ten minutes I'll be nose to tail
with a thousand cars, all newer than mine,
none, perhaps, blessed by chickens
who couldn't care less. Rustling
oaks conspire to keep me here.
but the car runs on toward its own kind,
as if magnetized, or in heat.
I emerge from a canopy of branches
into the white light of sun through fog.
Cows make grids of black and white and
sheep are sleeping with their lambs.
I pray for blowout, fire in the wires,
plugged plugs, a flood.
But the Volvo rolls true. I slip into place
between a silver truck and a red sedan,
pull in my eyes and ears and skin,
dog-paddle in this shining metal sea.

The Fir Tree Lit by the Moon

Under cover of darkness.
the husband leaves the house.
His car, like a great
humped snail-shell.
glows faintly
as he warms it.
When he has gone the sun comes up.
Before it wakes her, he has followed
the ridge down to the valley where
light moves through his breath
as he walks from the car.
Each morning the sun stabs her awake, she
rolls closer to the edge of the bed to
avoid it all, the
oak rustlings
the woodpecker
the solitude.

She imagines him
contemplating whales,
or mentally constructing cabins nail by nail.
The whales have blue backs, she guesses.
The cabins are by elliptical lakes.

But such conjectures, she decides,
cannot explain his coming home each night at dusk
carrying in his throat some new darkness unsung.

And there is the fir tree
lit by the moon, which they stand to watch
through the kitchen window.
That silent, illuminated spine.
What they both see.

Meditations in Flu Season

Jays squawk. harsh. unmelodic.
reminding me to heal my shyness.

A whale breaches. arching
from sapphire and diamond.
reminding me that passion is
the child of the sea.

And what does the wind say,
lost in spikes of yellow grass
that have eaten too much light?
The wind says we are all the same.
and sounds like the cough
that woke me at three
and gave me starlight.

Trees in the hillside
desire their own life,
as I do mine.
They grow from darkness.
Clothed with the fur
of spiraling lichen.
leaning this way and that
to balance an upward thrust
into the air, their leaves
are outward-turning mouths
drinking rivers of light
that silently feed
incessant out-coming.

The Policewoman on Her Day Off in Winter

Having wandered past the shops.
having sat on the stone fence,
having pondered the inner surface
of wind-stirred iris leaves.

what is left
for you to do?

There are others to keep the law.
the weddings, the measurings, the
proper actions of children, women, men.

Here there are clouds spread on a blank sky.
Here water pools in pathways after rain.

Here you discover that your feet are wet,
that your hands, clenched, hold nothing.

Now the whole world, it seems, rises from your pulse.
Egrets from the lake, displaced by the storm,
cry out, hang in the wind.

Ghosts on the Water

The waves arch
like necks reined in.
Boys fish back at the dock
where the water is quiet,
but the fish are "fucking
going out!"

Here at Salmon Creek Beach parking lot
I wonder what it is I wish to catch.
Others sit in bright cars
as if waiting, or, perhaps,
themselves caught.

Masses of lupine jump in the wind.
No Camping sign makes a shadow
that looks like a slot in the earth.
Could we tumble through
and camp in the underworld?

Poets, including myself,
have memorized archetypes,
catalogued ghosts,
used them, tamed them.
Still, I am helpless
when the sea bird, off
to the left, out of vision,
cries in a broad stroke of
noise that layers many tones
and densities, that sounds like
the eerie creak of the barn door
half-hung on rusted hinges where
there used to be a stage coach
road running between pines,
in country where all the natives
were shot in a bunch down by
the singing creek, except for one,
a baby hidden in a tree.

No Camping sign flits. hums.
We obey it. leave after
a few minutes.
leash the dogs.
shoot wolves.
cuss the fish.
pray for the dead.

Return

1.

On a walk at Salmon Creek Beach we found
a dead walrus. Her face stared out
toward the sea. The rest of the great body
backed tight into a dark crevice
in the cliffs, as far as it could reach.
The sand-colored walrus looked like a
great soft stone between jagged rocks.

2.

Our dog dragged herself on two good legs
off across the east field,
down to where the laurels are crowding
the firs, and the brush is thick,
past the dry yellow grass until
we couldn't see her at all. She
worked herself far down into the
wet, cool, dark under the widest fir.

When we followed, her clouded brown eyes
sparked out at us,
her face all we could see, holding steady,
the rest already starting to look
like a pile of leaves.

3.

My grandmother's eyes glinted at me
from her face that floated, a pale
balloon in the row of faces
tethered to their metal chairs,
lined along the hallway,
backed into nowhere.

Tell them to go away
she muttered, *go away.*

It takes a lot of concentration
to back into nowhere
as if it is someplace
dark and familiar and
smelling like crushed verbenas,
and the black dirt steams
in a hot Texas sun, and you have to squint
to see at all, but the far back porch
is cool in the afternoon,
under the cottonwood trees.

Born in 1942, Gerrye Payne spent her early childhood in the Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas, Texas, except for two years in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado. She moved with her family to Sacramento, California, where she attended McClatchy High School. A painting major at the University of California, Berkeley, she also studied poetry there with Gary Snyder.

Gerrye Payne now lives with her husband in western Sonoma County, California, where she works as a psychotherapist. She is the mother of two children.

Her chapbook of poems, **Green**, appeared in 1962 from Dennis Weir, Berkeley, and her book of poems, **An Amateur Plays Satie**, in 1984 from Loon Press, Santa Rosa, California. Her mixed media art pieces, often incorporating poems or fragments of language, appeared in numerous exhibitions from 1963 until 1977.

Ahsahta Press

MODERN & CONTEMPORARY POETRY
OF THE AMERICAN WEST

- *David Baker. *Laws of the Land*
Conger Beasley, Jr., *Over DeSoto's Bones*
Linda Bierds. *Flights of the Harvest Mare*
Richard Blessing. *Winter Constellations*
*Peggy Pond Church. *New & Selected Poems*
Wyn Cooper. *The Country of Here Below*
*Judson Crews. *The Clock of Moss*
H. L. Davis. *Selected Poems*
*Susan Strayer Deal. *The Dark Is a Door*
No Moving Parts
*Gretel Ehrlich. *To Touch the Water*
Julie Fay. *Portraits of Women*
*Thomas Hornsby Ferril. *Anvil of Roses*
Westering
*Hildegard Flanner. *The Harkening Eye*
Charley John Greasybear. *Songs*
Corrinne Hales. *Underground*
Hazel Hall. *Selected Poems*
Nan Hannon. *Sky River*
Gwendolen Haste. *Selected Poems*
Cynthia Hogue. *The Woman in Red*
*Robert Krieger. *Headlands. Rising*
Elio Emiliano Ligi. *Disturbances*
Haniel Long. *My Seasons*
*Norman Macleod. *Selected Poems*
Ken McCullough. *Sycamore•Oriole*
Barbara Meyn. *The Abalone Heart*
Dixie Partridge. *Deer in the Haystacks*
Gerrye Payne. *The Year-God*
George Perreault. *Curved Like An Eye*
Howard W. Robertson. *to the fierce guard in the Assyrian Saloon*
*Leo Romero. *Agua Negra*
Going Home Away Indian
Philip St. Clair. *At the Tent of Heaven*
Little-Dog-Of-Iron

Donald Schenker. *Up Here*
Richard Speakes. *Hannah's Travel*
Genevieve Taggard. *To the Natural World*
*Marnie Walsh. *A Taste of the Knife*
Bill Witherup. *Men at Work*
*Carolyn Wright. *Stealing the Children*

Women Poets of the West: An Anthology, 1850-1950

*Selections from these volumes, read by their authors, are available on
The Ahsakta Cassette Sampler.