

Tempe Poetry in April 2005

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WAL★MART

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Moderator: Catherine Hammond

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James Masao Mitsui

Destination: Tule Lake Relocation Center, May 20, 1942

She had raised the window
higher

than her head; then
paused

to lift wire spectacles,
wiping

sight back with a wrinkled
hand-

kerchief. She wanted to watch
the old

place until the train's passing
erased

the tarpaper walls and tin roof,
she had

been able to carry away
so little.

The fingers of her left
hand

worried two strings
attached

to a baggage tag
flapping

from her
lapel.

First Published: *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*. New York:
Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1993.

James Masao Mitsui 2

Allowance

I am ten.
My mother sits in a black
rocking chair in the parlor
and tells stories of a country school
surrounded by ricefields
and no roads.

I stand in the kerosene light
behind her,
earning my allowance.
A penny
for each white hair I pull.

First Published: *An Ear to the Ground: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*.
Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989.

The East Watch House

Yesterday is a cloud of steam, and the train is out of sight.
Jill Ruthruff

I sneak outside in the thick snow
of the night.

I sneak outside,
the sky hangs like a canopy
and I step into my father's bootprints
that lead beyond the circle
of our porchlight.

Father inches into the silence
down the tracks,
his lantern bouncing
as it wavers out of sight.
Snow falls in curtains,
and I wonder if I love him.

Tomorrow he will tell me
about his overtime,
what he took to eat
and how he kept warm.
I turn back to the dim lights
of the house. I will know he is all right
if the trains keep running through town.

First Published: *An Ear to the Ground: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*.
Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989.

**You Are Beautiful & I Am Always Wanting To Come
Home To You**

for Lilly

In the church of my heart the choir is on fire.
Vladimir Mayakovsky

Sharing a Diet Pepsi with you is more wonderful than
watching the sun
touch a Mayan pyramid the morning of a winter solstice, or
walking down
the Rue de Rivoli in April. Partly because it means I can
button the back
of your French blouse. Partly because in my blue terrycloth
robe
you cause sunsets, and your homemade bread makes the
planet's best toast.
Partly because of your Slovenian passion for milk chocolate,
old glass jars, and driving highways we've never traveled.
Partly because our smiles merged under the banana trees
and white orchids in the Volunteer Park Conservatory.
When I am with you it is hard to believe that there could be
war memorials
or hunting licenses. Mornings, I smell the essence of Donna
Karran,
and I am grateful that people move from Cleveland to
Seattle,
that dreams can blossom into truth after 10 years. I look into
your green eyes

and I think of starry ocean cruises, fields of Skagit Valley
tulips
and all the Monets in the Jeu de Pomme. The fact that you
rock & roll
through my life takes care of bureaucracy & politics & long
lines.
And what good is technology when people can't find the
exact person
to hold as the sun settles into the horizon? Those who don't
understand
are being cheated, and what we share should be celebrated
each day—
which is why I wrote this poem to say that each night in bed
when we touch, we empty the world so we can be alone.

First Published: *The Poem and the World, Book 2*. New York: The Literary Center,
1994.

First Arizona Christmas, 2003

15 December 2003

Tonight you are at the Grandettes' practice and outside the office window the southwest sky performs its violet, pink and blue watercolor wash. I look for the javelina family on the berm behind our house that the electrician told me about this afternoon, or perhaps the coyote he saw tightroping a wrought-iron fence. Between crimping wires & testing voltage he marveled at the balance that these animals possess, while I thought about our pork roast of a Chinese pug, Kazu, who loves to december sunbathe on our patio.

I quit teaching four years ago and I feel more retired than when I sold my snow-blower in June. Every evening we have to remind the calendar to check what fun is scheduled for tomorrow. A string of old fashioned colored lights dangles an appropriate smile from our fence. There's no snow here, but a couple of blinking red & green bulbs and today's 70 degree weather have helped make our holiday dreams jump from the song and really come home. Last night at the Drama & Dance Club Christmas dinner I kissed you twice on the parquet floor and I felt more heaven than the thousands of icicle lights hovering above your beautiful black velvet dress.

Moth Waltz

My head hangs as I feed
quarters into the Circle K
water machine, filling

plastic gallons, capping
one, insert another
under the tubular spout;

liquid splashes out, a splat
splat onto concrete, green
against dark green: I follow

an arc of moisture
like its webbed mate
to small pools, dead

moth, wings white
like thinned milk—
folded fans of silk

spotted with jet dots they lie
spent in their gowns after
night's Black & White Ball,

when all swirled
to light—a buzzing
florescence in three-quarter

Nadine Kachur 9

time, mixed with moans of car
motors, the drizzling
rain: a life span—papery

gestures measured
by a summer.

Nadine Kachur 10

Summer, Phoenix

In the late-waking
dream, the oleander
needs water: it's nine, hot,
the smell of thick green
steams through canoe-shaped
leaves, white flowers
bloom heavy with dust;
I tame the wild hose
(florescent yellow)
it turns in turns
kinks and knots;
its pinhole leaks
hiss moisture, rot
out roots of my nearby
agave—I spray that city
water in hard arches, fake rain
hits the top branches, cold
back-splashed drops spot
my shoulders and shirt; the nozzle,
tweaked to play rough, guns
a stream—batting around
their oleander heads as would
a tough wind; rivulets
follow the foliage-line down,
make their wake darker, verdant—
mud pools at the bottom, beneath
boughs now lush, dripping
heat into the earth.

Papago Sunset

The nighthawks take flight
too soon, they flit

like bats—

shooting phasers
open-mouthed over arroyos

calling
songs
of false echolocation:

peent pee-tawh, pee-tawh—

they are not real
hawks;

I am not really
here, circling
buttes.

Near the horizon,

the sun ignites

creosote

soft-haired buds—
a thousand thousand foot-candles

flaming, smaller suns
peering
between twigged branches.

Tomorrow, and the next
tomorrow, it begins again—
the hawks, the sun, the fires.

Mortuus

I'm gone a month, I guess
she didn't see
she was giving too much
water, not enough
light—never
opened a blind.
And I paid her for this
house-sit gig, to rot
my potted plant a little
each day: sour the soil,
toughen its crust—
forming that smelly yellow fungus
worm-like bugs love to weave
through like dog-less tails,
wagging and waving. It wasn't
the first I've buried—terrible
mother; inverted vessel returns
earth to earth, root in the air.

An Historian

A time alive
all light, air,
weeping.

Here was, yes, dark
west
in a land

always off a back road
from a mountain
toward no one

you could hear then (most
whom your mother heeds
up near the salted sea

oddly present here). When
are hours? Where do numbers
give you space? You're not free

on other planes. (Who's rising
before your own
vision? What's not

known less?

Witness

You are weak. You are raising the girl by her arms.
Years prior you had quit the trade school or left danger here
too quick,
Yet telling all and everyone that wonderful chance you'd
missed, before you sang
The perfect song without ordinary sound melodies, for when
you sang
Though only the once, it was in flawless harmony, you align
Your students, those few that you will teach the song parts,
For you were so sorry. Though they knew much, you might
hold
You knew you did not, for the truth might act as that truth in
dying
With all seeing, and perhaps hearing that perfect sound,
Which soothed you least, a frequent hum, that drum-tight
skin, that softer chord,
One Father. Here are the facts showing where the end
Surrounds you and to sing: You were so sorry. You will to
save
The few. You will to save their souls' way.

Fossorial

The day before my older brother turned three
a mass of gray clouds swept down the north
corridor, unprovocative mitten of Wisconsin, railing
into Chicago like a runaway train. Snow fell mad
in a vertiginous trance deep into night
where a wind took up off that magnificent lake
throwing snow drifts, six forbidding feet high
against the front doors of east-facing houses. To unlock
the entrance hailed an avalanche.
Shonie and Morrie Stein could not make it. Bob
and Gloria Weisberg would not. And the ballroom dance
lessons my parents signed on with them
– cancelled. The dance studio roof
caved in, a névé collapse, the compacted snow brutish
and unreceptive to the tentative arts. But the birthday
dinner,
fashioned for these adult friends, went on.
Deficient, the serving utensils against such presentation.
Atop doily'd platters, cheddar chutney canapés
berthed between Parmesan artichoke hearts.
Turkey tetrazzini calorific in its silver-domed
chafing dish; underneath, small warming votives
flickering like whispers. The centerpiece
a pretty chocolate torte, candleless
beside a gravy boat brinked with raspberry sauce.
The three of them ate. My mother opened my brother's gifts.
Red drum. Cowboy hat brimmed in leather stitching.
A shiny brown hobbyhorse; my brother hugging it.

Cynthia Schwartzberg Edlow 17

After they tucked him in bed it was my father
who turned, suggested something about a sibling. Perhaps
some refreshment. A gentling daughter. Contingency.
He must have known I would climb out of that house,
a delving spade and the book of seasons strapped upon my
back.

His thick tame hand guided my mother into my life.

First Published: *Willow Review* 2004—2004 Willow Review Prize for Poetry

Cynthia Schwartzberg Edlow 18

The Dry Cleaner's Daughter

The dry cleaning business had its own mythologies. My
Jewish

father, unceremoniously, called his Viking Cleaners.
Perhaps he forged himself the plundering marauder
of Devon Avenue, where stood Selma's delicatessen,
Mlodinoff's photography studios, and the pastry-luring
Gitel's bakery; all quaked from the reverberating wake
of his landship station wagon, its suspension sprung,
wheezing

and harrumphing along the potholed road, its interior stuffed
with bundles of the *kehilla's* soiled ensembles of finery.
Great care readied the clothes for cleaning. Buttons,
shrouded with satiny cloth, zippers zipped and waxed,
hooks

detached to safeguard gossamer fabrics from vicious snags.
Next, the pockets, reviewed — and there, from the sundry
folds

of faceless pockets, sometimes my father extracted intricate
filigreed gold

mezzuzot, and forthright silver Stars of David, and one
exceptional piece,

brushed brass, in the shape of the holy tablets, encrusted
with striking Judaic stones signifying commandments.

He reserved them in a cigar box a year or more.

No one remarked on or claimed their vanished valuables.

These he brought home to me, as offerings.

Tendered as if in secret.

Cynthia Schwartzberg Edlow 19

A brooding girl, emoted: where were people arriving at
or returning from that a sea engulfed them, seafoam
prickly in their lungs, and the choice was made not
to display their *mezzuzot* the entirety of the evening?
No one removes gold cuff links midway into an event.
No pearl cluster earrings wantonly set aside.
Anyone would inquire as to their whereabouts.
What coerced fine Jews to shed these symbols, place them
in outerwear's abundant depths and go on, blithely,
about their occasion? What amplified quality of
an evening had they? Did the company they kept, who
professed to care for them, care for them any more or less?
Was the wine spectacularly replenished, the dance
simply one degree more rousing? Could they
title their handicap?
The Christian does not remove the cross and stealth it away
in trouser or skirt pockets. A likeness of
the young Jewish journeyman is proudly displayed
around the neck. The crosses are large.
What is it disconcerts us
for being us?

Cynthia Schwartzberg Edlow 20

I now know my father drove that wagon
for his family's sake. From out its windows wafted
premonitions and resignations in brocades of gray
cigar smoke. I was seven when I discovered Jesus Christ
and his mother were Jews. I confess I
was confused. I surmised he'd grown up the same
old way, the kids he'd hung out with, cousins, siblings, the
whole citizen block, families squabbling, embracing. He
knew,
but any Jewish child knows the riotous arousal
they simply walked in on. Options were afforded him.
Would he, elocutionistic, peripatetic, charged and emitting,
with his Jewish buddies in tow, have removed all vestiges
of Jewish ornamentation, as he wound
his way up and over, on the road to Capernaum?
And in his travels, if he stooped
at the dusty roadside to hand a darkhaired
girl some cloth from his family tree, she
would have needed nothing of instruction, less
of intervention, and deliverance but an anathema.
It was a given, a corolla of nimbus,
a thing to be held onto in its immoderate beauty.

First Published: *Jewish Women's Literary Annual*, 2003

Yards

I

That a wife came with the old world
baggage of her mother before her, and
that babies would grow up to be people
so they needed to be prepared for it, and
there had to be a common language in a family,
not a family of babel, of glass doorknobs and
back porch lights, and of unshared meals.
Not that he didn't love his family
but he didn't know what to do with it.

II

Meander around to that place
where you set foot to ground that
cultivated you. That ache in your heart
for the past is natural.
It's the desire, and the failure
of desire, to move
the misshapen forward.

III

Beneath spring's yellow-fingered forsythia
the little wrens and turtles wrapped in handkerchiefs,
buried tenderly in shoeboxes,
have gone to earth.
At the fenceline, rosebushes
rupture with soft purposeful buds of enchanting color.
Someone – impossible for you in all ways

but one golden one – will knock; have inviolate recognition.

Await

the curative. The trees bear food.

IV

And so the pear is good fruit. Try the pear;
why not the pear *and* the dark, picked cherries? The
nutritive day crows with chance. Cleave without rue.
When your person approaches the entranceway,
like the brilliant dog, perpetually awash
in jubilant earnest,
ridiculously bound to him.

First Published: *Barrow Street*, 2004

The following poems come from a book called DOG LANGUAGE that will be out in fall 2005 from Copper Canyon.

Cocktail Music

All my life a brook of voices
has run in my ears,
many separate instruments
tuning and playing, tuning.
It's cocktail music,
the sound of my parents
in their thirties,
glass-lined ice bucket loaded
and reloaded but no one tending bar,
little paper napkins, cigarettes,
kids passing hors d'oeuvres.
It's drinking music,
riffle of water over stones,
ice in glasses, rise and fall
of many voices touching—
that music. Husbands grilling meat,
squirting the fire to keep it down,
a joke erupting, bird voices snipping
at something secret by the bar.
It's all the voices collapsed
into one voice,
urgent and muscled like a river,
then lowered, as in a drought,
but never gone. It's the background.
When I lift the shell to my ear,
it's in there.

Tech Help

My bonsai teacher says to *quit doing it like a girl*.
I'm pruning the root ball of a *Podocarpus*,
or Buddhist Pine, trained semi-cascade.
The first time Dad fell,
the femur broke in eleven places
due to his artificial knee (titanium and steel).
A rod screwed to the bones in thirteen places
didn't work, and the graft stayed weak.
For two years he fought his wheelchair
into near-submission. The grand finale
was him riding it down two flights of stairs
without tipping over or falling out.
The nurses loved him.

The last time I called Tech Help
I got George in Salt Lake, at work
at six in the morning their time.
He was very helpful.
I offered to write a note for his file,
but he said, *It's OK, Chase*.
Your compliment is enough.

Cinderblock

On the first warm day,
the aides fret about his pate,
fetch his hat. I push him
out the automatic doors
into the pallid sun.
Dad thinks we should
*stay put until all the Indians
are back in their teepees,*
but right now he's off to teach
a Latin class. Where are his keys?
They're a few miles away,
in the past, where he's no longer
active in the community.
I steer him along the asphalt paths
of the grounds: bark mulch,
first green shoots,
puddle of coffee by a car.
I loop around so he can discover
the pile of construction materials twice,
the word *cinderblock* coming to him
more quickly the second time.

Don't Waste That Fuel

Dad says everything was fine
until I threw a wrench into the fire.
And no, he does not want
help turning the goddamned
wheelchair around.

Eliza shows him where Portugal is
on the map. France, Italy, Greece.
Dad wants her to point out
the 'Saint Katharine Line.' What's that?
*It's the line between 'Thou shalt have dogs'
and 'Thou shalt not have dogs.'*

Paper cup of juice, banana.
While the aide thickens Dad's juice
for ease of swallowing, he says,
You're a good-looking woman.
Don't waste that fuel on a lawnmower.

Dog Biscuits

After my father's cremation,
my sisters and I agreed
to bury him privately
when the ground thawed.
One will plant a flowering tree,
one see to the stone and its cutting,
one call the grave-digger and the town clerk.
It'll be just us, the daughters,
presiding over ashes that could be
any mammal's, or those of any love
dispersible by wind.

Let's bury the secret violence to his dogs,
Pompey and Tara, Juba and Molly,
their ashes already gone to this ground.
And his "escapades," as Mom called them.
Here withers that branch of the tree.

Let's bury the ring inscribed
in perpetuum ave atque vale (translated
"hail and farewell" by my father,
"hello, and goodbye forever" by Mom,
a token dating back to the First Separation)
and a tennis ball for canine shades.
Your Dad is with his dogs now,
said more than one person at the funeral.

It'll be just us, the three inheritors,
on a raw windy day in Death's kingdom,
lifting our eyes from the hole
to the mountains hazed with spring,
saying *in perpetuum ave atque vale*,
minor god of our father.
Let's each of us drop a few
dog biscuits into his grave.