

Utah State University

From the Selected Works of Gene Washington

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Ten Poems

gene washington, *Utah State University*



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TEN POEMS

IRAQ BLOG

O, the crossed mute mountains
The hollow dry valleys
The waste and litter of towns
The grass gone dead on hills
And the owl screeching all night
In the rain-sodden woods:
The war overtook us here.

Trout in river pools
Gently swaying
And the water curling out
Over the rocks
And a hundred crows
Squawking their landing:
The war overtook us here.
Falcons fall out upon
The wind and remnants
Of dead voices sing from
The sea. The sound of rivers
In long valleys flowing and
Trees in a haze of wonder.
The war overtook us here.

(2)

MOUNTAIN STREAMS

Forget the path or road.
Bushwhack through sage and willows
And walk into the stream.

The thing about a stream is
It knows where it's going, has a gift
For finding the shortest route.

A path or road can lose its nerve,
Peter out into a thicket or slough, divide
Inscrutably in two. I've stood at that place

And weighed the choices, weighed
And checked again, while mist crawled
Over the mountain like sheep.

When the stream divides
Both streamlets are equally sure.
Each wins its own way: the slick of moss,

The fast rush over an edge of rock
And each, if you let it,
Will take you THERE.

(3)

SPACE OF INFINITE LONGING AND ENDLESS FAILURE

It's the dreaming air that sends you off to your death
The dark silence stoking amber light in the distance.
And you're heading home, the truck at freeway speed,
The right speed that keeps your blood warm and cradles
Your heart . Your foot's steady on the accelerator, every
Peaceful thought you own kneels at the altar of your being.

Stars play accomplice to the magic of small towns,
Car lights hurtle by without sound: the names of towns
Thrown into the glass depth of your rear-view, where
Everything vanishes. Fourteen hours straight on
I-80 in three hours' time it will be her birthday,
You'll walk silently into the house, slip off your shoes.

Climb the stairs, undress, then slide into bed with her.
You'll make love, and stay up till dawn embraced in the age-
Old embrace. From Salt Lake City to Nevada, the darkness parts

Out for you, your truck slips through time. On the seat beside your own:
A veined roadmap of Nevada, a small velvet box, a bottle of warm
Red wine.

(4)

EXILED

Hear the wind die. The sea snap in the fog.
Far from the languid beach of innocence,
no campfire, no sitting place, no stars, no sun.

A thick sky obscures the sea-cliffs.
A low fog to mock my moon-lit home.
I live many-thoughted, stalled in hero-hood.

I launched in a shell of wood, a blinded rain,
alone a long time, I remember my native land,
the fevered struggles to do my fate.

My friends left me. Strangers question me.
My land lies mute beyond this sea.
My Self most nights keeps me awake.

(5)

TRAILHEADS

*After attending a memorial for young
skiers killed in an avalanche.*

Hearing the young voices in that long place,
Grieving in their loss, for their dead friends.
I sadly remember the faces, their grace,
My own friends, now gone, from the Winds,
Copper Mountain, Zermatt, Yosemite, Vail,
Trailheads now remote in sight, out of touch,
Steel Canyon, the Sinks, Sun Valley, Quail
Hollow, it was freedom vested by toil, gruff
joy, Mammoth and Whistler, not then having
Children and wives to care for, to look after,
We forced the high frozen surfaces, skiing,
Climbing, till we could go no higher, master
Of breathless air, scheming the next ascents
Of the blood, Alta, Cortina, Aspen, the Dents.

(6)

AN ALMOST KISS

We were fourteen (all hormones) huddles damp
And close, a nest of rabbits, hidden from sight
By tent flaps, while our teachers six-pack camp

Was pitched a hundred yards away. One night,
alone with me, Bob Murphy raised his hand
And touched my cheek. I shivered like a doe
For her first buck. He twined a loose strand
Of my blonde hair around his thumb. I know
I twisted with it. He removed my glasses
(No one had ever done that) and he said
that I was pretty. Afterwards, in classes
I would stare at the back of his blond head
And dream of nameless acts. He nearly kissed
me, but our friends returned. The moment drained
Away like runnels in the evening mist,
And came to nothing. Here, now it has rained
So much, that field, that clumsy, gentle boy
Come back to me, and I remember this:
The thrumming rain, the unexpected joy
I knew at fourteen, for his almost kiss.

(7)

SNOWFALL

A white robe
unfastens, slides
down, cloaks

fences, walls and streets
in satined silence.

THE MUSIC OF HERPES ZOSTER (SHINGLES)

The itching, tingling, twitching, aching, gladness sweeping through fifty bars, beginning with the zing of a single voice and rapidly gaining ground, embracing choir and orchestra, frightfully swelling into rhythmic upheavals and contrary motions to a fortissimo tutti, an overwhelming, screeching, bawling, bleating, pinging salvo, the mocking, exulting laughter out of the ABYSS.

GRAVITY PRESUPPOSED

First hill, long fall-trail, catch edge, twist ski over forward, knowing something, something bad coming, turn ankle, knee queer, think-hear break, break, circle round, old stone sky, think panic "o god what broke." Enswathed snow skid shoulder, hip whirl colors collide, head stars in orange disguises, thud think tree. Sense pain numbed burn, hear still unsquirreling woods, set face stoic, babble other voice, almost weird, "don't worry, no one ever breaks anything almost never x-country skiing especially here."

MENTAL GEOGRAPHIES OF AN OUTDOOR SWIMMING POOL IN THE SUMMER OF 2009.

"I really think having a swimming pool symbolizes being a writer"

Helen Fielding, author of *Bridget Jones' Diary*.

I sit here, beside the pool, listening to the voices, "When you think of a swimming pool think of Hugh Hefner, Tom Collinses and hammocks." "I absolutely loathe swimming pools." "Welcome to Hydrophobic Hollywood, to 'Sunset Boulevard (1950)' 'The Great Gatsby (1974),' 'Swimming Pool (2002).' There is a surface here and there is what goes on beneath the surface. There is an anxiety of pools and the tranquillity of quiet water.

I look across the pool and imagine I owe it. If I've got it, I should flaunt it. Suburban utopia. "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree/Where Alph, the sacred river, ran/Through caverns measureless to man/Down to a sunless sea." I've got my own pleasure pond where summer afternoons and lime daiquiris ease by. Ludivine Sagnier, the actress, dreams here, her body opening languidly to the sky beyond.

I'm here, in float-swim mode, sun and chlorine assaulted. Someone's kneed up, sprawling an extreme reading stance. Overheard: "I'd give an arm and leg for a beer right about now." Someone listens for a bedazzling message from that light-struck girl. Pinned by sex, someone sips air and rotates a glittering tan. Someone stretches herself out into what she was the day before. Someone's heartbeat elongates at legs

slicing the humidified air. I'm here, on the diving board, hair thinning, too late for a new crop. I watch this pool, imaging it an inverted hill, one way to the bottom. No place to stay for long. No mystery to that, a last watery silence. There's a water bottle, chaste and blue-brittle, at the end of a lane. A sudden hand batters its stillness, elevating it into a sort of proof. After the dearth of water, I'll lock myself in a room,

unchallenged. I'm in the air, fixed between board and pool, in a sort of flex-flux. Correct me if I'm wrong, but there seems to be, wave-like, the scent of sun-tan oil and sweat in the air. I'm sitting here in a common tongue. Somewhere, there's snow. Somewhere the possibility of ice appears, inexplicably. I who believe in love for a classless society rise to move. When you think you're becoming the past tense, recall our sentences,

beyond English. Places, resting on time's shore, come from somewhere, "Hey, Jeannie, would you like a part-time job?" someone yells at the lifeguard. "What kind is it?" she yells back. Someone in flappers, distrusting his feet, swims past me, me who would stoop to anything for more buoyancy. Jove turned Io, a river maid, into a cow. She, deluded by his radiance, seems to have concluded, somehow, that being

shagged by an old man, would further her godly career. She couldn't swim, after all, before she met him. He, of course, could do it all. Swim, fly, float, walk, wade, glide, slide, ski, run, throw thunderbolts. Swimming on his back, someone bangs his head on the wall. A revelation of sorts. Some deep-sea fishes have mouths larger than the rest of their bodies. I don't suppose there's anything like that

here, though the pool is a little murky at that end. Most people here seem to have at least the purpose of staying afloat. Me too. But I'm also plotting a trip to Vegas, which will then be followed by a spell of idleness and intemperance, suitable for the end of this season. I'm on the water-slide, looking down, without specific instructions, ready to see something next. What? You want proof? Then imagine the

pool down there is a wide sea, let there be there a cargo ship of zoo-animals, a monkey, maybe, a parakeet, a zebra or two, a maneless Tsavo lion. "Man eating lions makes for a very good subject." Add to that—it's your choice— "The favorite bird songs of Australia." That fat woman down there, humming a tune on a flotation device, provides us with the general idea. The ship sinks. At this point you're welcome to tell the story

your own way. "They all drowned." But here's another way. You, the narrator of the story, find yourself on a lifeboat containing a parakeet, a monkey and the lion. Now I'm a realist, I deal in the real, the inconsequential, etc., in leaden aftertastes, in a wave with the measure of nothing else. Note the mutual awe and animosity that's starting to develop between the lion and the rest of you. . There you are, at one

end of the boat. There they are, at the other end. First, a spell of self-pity, right? Then, watching the lion eat first the monkey then the parakeet, fear, panic. He looks a hungry look at you. You'd die for a gun. Or a fish to throw it. Whistling or singing doesn't seem an option. You can't count on, in this kind of sea, seasickness to detract it. Now the lion is a beast known for its precognition. It knows

that you're going to look at your watch and give into a mortality-based inanity, say, "life's uncertain" or "at least I'm clean." Whatever. We know it's now the time for the necessary flight of personal security. Around you, the sea glistens like some silver, slithery sea-serpent, its skin pulsing rivulets of young codfish. It is all strange, from here to that—what looks like—a fragile surf line. On a sea of rocking, yet composed,

waves, out of the shelter of a rising wave, into the shadow of the merciless, flat panels of darkness fall. Too late to admire the fact that the lion devours its prey by the code of every noble brute, not unlike that of some angels, yet more fastidiously, honoring its prey. I'm now in descent on the water-slide. The surface of the pool is just there, an eye of eye-beams, ready to reject all predicates. Over

to the left, on a flotation device, a friend waves at me and says, "you look cute in your salmon colored suit." "It's nothing to write home about." Heart-slaves heave around, no big deal. Being of sound mind, I pull myself up from the surface of the water, the wetness slipping from my hands. Leave the pool what it is as it was, even though nearing dissolution. Somewhere, a

yard is quick, needing a trim. Mothers, hitched to bored kids, appear, always eager to oppose drudgery. The air's going cool, the shadows turning, the water glittering. a fat glossary of possible exits from counterfactual, yet sayable, worlds. I'm here rescuing a drowning swimmer. "To drown is to suffer or inflict death by submersion in water. It is the result of asphyxia from inhalation of

water during the violent efforts to breathe." Drowning, rescuing, whatever, a piece of cake. I, of course, had dropped in feet first. It's hard not to see the grief in his struggles. Pardon me if I have the wrong word: some mad prophet, he is, enacting the contortions of a body in possession of a message of pain. The goddess Athena, who had a neck of astounding whiteness, set her

suitors on a crazy mountain. I'm behind him, "if he be clutched round the neck, the rescuer is to put a hand on the chin of the rescuee, pushing back violently." Stroking backwards, we pass the length of a pool-side lounge, cooler over here, I'm getting used to them, his shrieks, the screech of muscles, a throbbing façade. In his paper read before The Royal Society of Glasgow in January of 1903,

Professor Schafer gives the relative exchanges of air under different methods: Natural respiration—supine—Which this is. —>13 (Number per minute), 489 c.c. (Amount of air exchanged per respiration), 6357 c.c. (Amount of air exchanged per minute). Drowning, a perfect price to pay in this environment, us thrashing a soaked up-against-ness. I'm here, on this lounge, awking and eavesdropping on a

couple of young female cell-phoners. To me, this is creation, these murmurs of holy flesh. How were those parts put together, what parts left out? Over there, a blind radio sings. in downward orbits, falling in demonic swarms, we've overheard, "was that a garlic clove in my kebab?" Someone over there is a salmon fisher. He looks into a lesser world here. No boats, synthetic or leather, to hoist, no shoeing

his head in a canoe. "Let's in, into a darker hemisphere." This pool is not what it once was. A rude heap of stones, wood, rubber, plastic & sand. He looks again, waves starting to invent an afterwards, the last 79 pages are still unread, the gills of the salmon hum. If you sit next to him, he might tell you about the woman he never found. Right now the weather front's not moving, "Would you toss me more oil?"

Last night, in the dark, something came close to me, from the street outside, the sound came slowly, out of a world of water, three forms, pushing one another into a pool. I had met the forms through the torn design of a dream. A pattern of crossing paths, a labyrinth, perhaps, a fountain, and a following stream. How many hours have passed—since turning in my bed like a lazy swimmer, reluctant to enter the dark of morning.

I look right, attracted by a blue and white garbage truck out front. Unseen, the fisherman looks again, thinking of water, of how the light adheres to water, how fish adhere to water, water to time. By now the front is going, faster and faster. fish float from predicates of history. "I can handle it." I'm here, skipping stones over the surface of an empty lane. "The projected object makes a certain number of hops

and ricochets over the surface of the water until the speed gets too low and the stone sinks, being heavier than water. "I receive from this stone an image less than sharp. What I have seen and know of this pool is now hidden inside—become mere amenity or dreams. I now move slowly away from a light losing knowledge of how it might return to the beginnings of memory. I dip my hand in the water. The wound

in the water heals. The water's drying on our faces. What we had here grows small and retracts. I'm here. Over there, a dark sliminess I call Tina scissor-laps a twilit alley. Panting an appreciative sexism, I feel the tow of the dim puzzles of her passing forms. I'm here, a wet comedy of manners. The others are all there. Persons with a slick tarpaulin pool-cover glide past. We obey more commands than we hear or know.

(9)

KING MINOS

Icarus is gone. Your palace sits in
an ambiguous quiet at the edge of
the sea. You breathe softly in the
long hall. Your sandals creak.
You touch the old keys on your

belt. The ceiling of the hall shows
dimly in untroubled blue and gold.
An evening light falls through
high jeweled windows.

Feathers and wax lie scattered
on the floor. You turn and walk
up to the top of the eastern wall.
You know you shouldn't be here.
Dusk starts wandering into dark.

You put your hand on a parapet.
The surface of the stone is cool.
Out at sea, fog starts to calm
the surface of the water.
It's too late to tell Icarus what
You know.

You would describe yourself as
middle-age, an ordinary
sort of king. That boy followed more
commands than he heard or
knew..

Darkness takes the
outer wall, a tree hangs in its
autumnal leaves. Why wait here?

The queen waits for you below.

(10)

EMPTY TOWN

A town empties,
a rift opens in time,
a faucet drips,
a leaf drops from
an eaves to a patio.

No one comes to listen,
if they did, they would
hear the wrong sound.
Bad acoustics fill the
empty town.

A gate opens in
the sun, a linden
tree blooms.

No one comes to silence
the emptiness.

Boulders wear
away in the winds'
fast tide. Oceans
round the rough
edges of the land.

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WOODS WITH EARLY MORNING CROWS

E 0600 N: 566 & 553 N 600 E - BEG 3 RDS E OF NW COR LOT 6 BLK 50 PLAT A
CERTAIN CITY SVY

That's it, in the black and green, black witch of the waving scarves the vertical and
the incline, with something up its sleeve,
something in mind, arrayed with differences
in nature's vegetative persuasions. Yet we
may think of it as an act of grace, self-nourishing.

BEG 3 RDS E OF NW COR LT 7 SD BLK & TH S 45 FT TH E 160 FT M/L TO W LN OF
THE CITY'S NORTHERN CANAL

There it is, standing up, not like those other clowns, stumbling round, body-stunted
acrobats of thumbs. That's it, running in place, waving its head, making a save of the
season, sucking hot air from a patio, picking a surface to reveal.

BEG SW COR LOT 7 BLK 50 SD BLK N 9
RDS E 3 RDS S 9 RDS S 3 RDS TO BEG WITH R/W 1 RD WIDE

No ceiling's there, between earth and sky, no surf's up, mixing sand and scraps,
music or half-brained fishes. Over there, downtown, history's growing a new
mystery in a postmodern mall. But here time stays in shapes more linear than we
expected--embracing white carnations of snow the morning we arrived. Later
another kind of white we could not name.

BEG NE COR LOT 7 SD BLK 50 S 83.5 FT W
100 FT S 53 FT E 100 FT S 12

That's them, flapping, yelling the spaces open, roost-taking riot, doing what it takes
to be forever known, making the coming hour their own. It's almost enough to make
you believe they're popping something, strung out on caffeine. But it's too early for

coffee, that first smoke. The Pleiades have yet to fall, helter-skelter on heads and tails, too far the starlight to come this low.

(10)

THE RECIPE

Dearest Aeëtes, send me very quick,
That famous recipe of yours, for pig,
I expect my guests to dock this week.
Turbot-mushroom-honey-sweet fig.
Stuffed pig, grossly teemed with fat,
Boned straight through the mouth,
In a rich bed of spiced fishes wily sat
(Trojan swine, that's to the far South.)
Advise me on seating and presentation,
Arrangement of plate, of wine amphorae,
Where seat the Greeks, the Phoenicians?
Should the poets sing with lyre or cithara?
Pork's much better, heavy, thick and greasy,
Good health to all, your loving sister **Circe**

Day as empty as a house
when your mother is not at home,
your syllables are loose circles blown
about barely forming words, your seconds
amount to nothing without a mother's saying
But you're lovely, standing there
in your hair and dress.

BOTTOM OF THE GLASS

Seen through the bottom of
the glass: rain.

Thought on, found less.

Cabernet Sauvignon straight from
the box and bottle: unmixed.

6:00 pm: the news.

Greasefire: maintenance shed.

Ramp closure: I-15, etc..

Fast rush on the tonsils.

Seen through the bottom
of the glass: sun in the street.

Felt on, thought less.

NUMBER

0

Love what?

Errant thief of everything

1

One what?

No Hands.

No collection

Of stars. Something dark pervades it.

2.

Metaphor is ritual sacrifice.

It kills the look alike.

No metaphor is homeopathy.

A healthy cell

Exhibits contact inhibition

3.

These temporary

Credits will no longer be reflected

In your next bill period

4.

"Dark" meaning

not reflecting
not amenable
to suggestion.