

NATURE'S MAW GIVES AND GIVES

MARY BURGER

DP

SOME OF THESE POEMS HAVE
APPEARED IN THE FOLLOWING JOURNALS:
CLAMOUR, IDIOM, MIRAGE #4 PERIOD(ICAL),
TINFISH, TROUBLE

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“No one need be thrown from a bed.” --Anselm Berrigan

- 1. NATURE'S MAW GIVES AND GIVES**
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- 3. YOUR GOLDEN GATE**

NATURE'S MAW GIVES AND GIVES

**ESP. IN BEING AN ENTRANCE, A PASSAGEWAY,
A CONSTRICTION, OR A NARROWED PART,**

there was no there there.

we	she
raised	smiled
her	more
head	

surprise surprising

there

her. sunny. yellow. head.

called also “apparent

horizon”

the act, the state, the place,

of junction

obvious/untrue

we saw her throat, it wasn't there

LAUGH OF THE LARYNX

stiches are kisses,
“my lips are sealed”

the throat has lips, the throat smiles
your smile lasted 47 yards down stairs, over curb

he searched the dog's paw
for glass slivers

stitching “I'm sorry” into her throat
two smiles now

paws dance. paws run away
your smile all over the street

ASK LARRY KING

I never

Nightline
Letterman

never leave things

just ask my houseguest

never leave the house alone

things I never leave a mess
lie

so *baseball, oven, catcher's*

gaping

couldn't, *thick*, I couldn't

fingers/

fingers
though

leave a mess,

one throat gaping like a water bucket

I gave her that smile

I

WIVES AND HUSBANDS RARELY SAY “I LOVE YOU”

the smile often also means confusion or embarrassment

seen as an attractive quality.

, “happy crying,” is a sign of life.

In the back streets of

the well-known love hotels.

AROUND THEN UNDER THE BAY

a sleeping goldfish

flash of petals
off the surface
didn't make a carp, then

it was there, white

I want you to know something
I'll tell you

predators;
it's us with cans of spray,

You hope you won't hurt people; really
you hope they won't hurt you.

Now just roses or a reservoir. If we could only find the death camp

we'd feel better. I
said "apotheosis" without really knowing
what I meant. Sometimes I'm wrong: like

child porn.

I learned what a lung was
from the American Cancer Society's

county fair display. A spiced
geranium, bloodstain
on the flag;

not divided but that
people don't know what they're seeing
when they look at you.

TWO CHILDREN, "GO" AND "TO"
FOR C. T.

Crusaders
Vikings
Football players
Ballet dancers

Bergman's hooded Death

is there anyone who doesn't know about the epidemic?

pink
girl with daddy uncle neighbor friend, is that
why we like children, her
bare legs

boy
whooping on the trampoline, eyes
pull us out of balance and back in

is there anything
you wouldn't do
to stay a minute more

Children

the fiercest moralists. Repeat the obvious. Explain
the dangerous. When all

you can say about a person is their age
down the corridor you're telling me,
"Be patient," and I'm like, "But you
don't know what it's like for me."

As if knowing would make it any easier. What to name the baby.

I'D RATHER DIE WITH YOU THAN LIVE

An accident.

to love

you had to wreck a train to get

you had to wreck a train, you knew
she would be hurt but she'd survive, she'd know
you did it, would you

pounded

phantom limb

I brought my birds' nest
broken knees

still living in the ghost limb

**IN HER HAIR ALL DAY UNTIL I TOLD
FOR HOA NGUYEN**

the rest

a little sad, but
one dry leaf, she thought

Now
anywhere I put my foot down
there's the ground , that's
Having it

not paying for indulgences "Gravity,"
she said, we doubled over
laughing really, that's all we are here, we are. She
cupped hard berries sour tongues – we
puckered now, because how

good they'd be, when the juice-red swallows
up the rest. Nature's maw
gives and gives, you

have to know how to use that.

CRISIS FLOTILLA

CRISIS FLOTILLA

vote by candlelight
a wooden church
small flags
stapled to sticks

the company fires
too many
power shuts
down for weeks
in a storm

tea on a Coleman stove
in the kitchen
early sleep

talk radio
hosts ask “do you think
the company has taken
too long?”
invariably the callers answer
yes

broken signals
passengers
are crowded, hostile
delayed, many
experience

transit rage
it rains

alarm clock
radio
lights
television
stove

rain swats a face
pants paste to thighs
watch crystal traps a small drop
tiny goblet
rare drug

small candle in a wooden church

labor over an elaborate meal
shared effort
for loved ones
a contract
mutual satisfaction

the telephone

the next election
our polling place is changed

sheets of plastic, cardboard, sticks
in trees
above the water's edge
sandbags against braced doors

somewhere
a president weeps

ambition and a wardrobe and \$200 hair
a dress with stains

The FBI
investigates
a closet

No, no, no, I'm not a political animal in that way. Although I admire people who are. I feel rather envious of people who can believe so utterly in something. I can't, myself.

What are we to make of all these highly specific pieces of visual and verbal information? Their relations to each other, in the inevitable “meaning effect” produced by reading, feel increasingly and skillfully overdetermined as one moves through the book. The work’s manic intensities are displayed in its limitless diversity, while puns and coincidences of image and language occur at every turn. It feels as though the synthetic text had been generated in order to provide unity to the images, which would otherwise remain unrelated. Writing is serving here as a tissue of unity sutured together against improbable odds.

pneumonia
the doctor's waiting room
transport in a pickup in a flannel robe
oxygen tent
pipe cleaner arts and crafts
different rooms for boys and girls
resentful nurse
ice cream at bed

between agency and environment

not prior to its narration

change—from what to what

a boy and his robot
a boy and his dog
a boy and his dolphin
a boy and his bear

a good boy
and his loyal guard

intelligent, protective,

the earth or its simulacrum. dangers.
the ubiquitous abandoned mine
the loyal companion
perceives, responds, alerts, escorts, accompanies,
reunites

gentle, reliable,

Colorado, California, Florida
and outer space

immortal, expressive

a good boy
and his good world

exotic vehicles

the Everglades. a hydrofoil

mangrove thicket

alligator always

out of sight

almost

the boy, the dad, the boat,

the special guest

the bear

the alligator

snaps

the bear

responds

ignoring threat

of injury

or more

to save

a human life

predator

vanquished.

the boy

must not be harmed.

abandoned mine

violent weather

hostile wildlife
or evil men.

the guardian

the noble lie

mattress dragged in from the street
books molding on a basement floor

noun – perception
adjective – affection
verb – action

rain inside the collar
down the neck
water stain
highlights a breast

masking tape X's over windowpanes

deck

party: wine

and frozen cheesecake

summer bar pianists and drag stars

afternoon

of violent winds

Loma Prieta the year before

“whole side of an apartment building

down. you could see

clothes in the closets, hats

still on the shelf. just-”

his fingers tapped the air

counting hats

“beautiful”

cruising in the hurricane

“I blew Bob while Bob blew me”

roof ripped
from a beach motel, yellow
insulation shredded
in a tennis court's chain link
beds
in the road
three-walled rooms filled with sun

drag queens in sunglasses
tape X's over eyes

Sontag said
an essay is one voice
fiction
is many

afterwards, tree roots
bulge from an upturned lawn
newspaper photos

China. President
Nixon.

Needles
used for medicine.
A wall used
as a street. Streets
dense with bicycles.

The moon. China. Places
a man could go
on television.

A wall
as long
as a country's invaders
when threats came over a hill
on horseback
and a stack of stones
held them back.

A moon.
Dust.
Rock.
Men.
A vehicle.

A man and his bear.
I knew the bear was death.
In the end,
my only friend
was death.

A man and his friend.
I saw him
get his head cut off.

after that
it didn't matter
if I lived or died.

I ducked,
the blade hit him

meat completely white
with maggots
if you didn't eat it,
you would die
the first time, I threw up
I knew the bear was death
in the morning, many times
I couldn't see,
mosquitoes stung my eyes.

and there was nothing but the bear
I was the bear
I was death
but I was not dead

just the face of the bear
I was filled
with the face of the bear
rump rippled over his heavy frame
he was all that was left
he wanted to eat

I was like him
only weaker.

after he'd lost everything
he came back
with money he'd gotten wherever
and said, "Deal me in."

the bear was the game.
the game was death.

YOUR GOLDEN GATE

BLUEFISH

We heard of people catching fish. But never anyone we knew. Still my brother insisted. Enthused. In retrospect, he was perhaps the only person ever to persuade my father to do something “for fun”. We acquired poles, hooks, lines, lures, tackle boxes; after a season or a year, traded up to better rods and reels. We packed tackle and picnic food into the car on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon and traveled to a muddy creek or a stocked, artificial lake. We fished for bass, trout, pike, pickerel, walleye, with spinners, hand-tied flies, and fresh worms.

In what must have been three or four summers, I remember only two catches. Once, a young bluegill with a mouth barely large enough to close over the hook. I eased its lip over the barb and for a few hours kept the fish alive in the empty worm carton filled with water—surely a throwback to the goldfish I won in multiples each year at the county fair and brought home in plastic bags; till then, my only live fish experience. I forget what convinced me finally to put the bluegill back. My brother’s eager and therefore suspect admonishment that it was actually *illegal* to remove a young fish. The ranger with his Hanna-Barbera hat (Yogi Bear? Smokey-the-Bear?) striding along the lakeside, intermittently pausing to greet a fishing party and inspect a catch. Persuaded of the situation’s gravity, I released the young trophy apparently unharmed.

A second time, a sizable haul of rainbow trout—I remember a number in the teens—plucked from an overstocked quarry where the fish had to shoulder one another aside to reach food strewn on the surface, and a hook and line was only slightly less certain than a dragnet to yield success. Later that evening, posing for snapshots with the catch laid out on a table. Battling squeamishness to follow my brother’s demonstration in gutting and cleaning, slitting the fat silver belly and scraping the far too medical organs, sawing off the head and tail, yanking out bones like folded umbrellas, ribs pressed against the spine. I pondered my brother’s declaration that he was going to become a *taxidermist*, the term as arresting for its novel phonemic mix of dentals, gutterals, and sibilants as for its meaning. Tax-i-derm. Stuff *animals*? Real animals? Bob’s gleeful narrative of stripping skin from carcass, cleaning flesh from bones, reconstructing the whole thing with stuffing and wires, sewing the skin back in place, finishing off (in his chronology) with convincing glass eyes, all gleaned from some Scholastic paperback or Boy Scout manual, all related while we carved somewhat patchy fillets out of the less-than-feral trout, left me quietly impressed with my brother’s exotic ambitions, and somewhere between suspicious and excited that the world held possibilities for adventure and intrigue the likes of which I’d only begun to guess.

Water in those lakes and fishless streams invariably brown; brown because churning with bottom silt, though the current itself never particularly rapid or turbulent. A lazy brown. An inevitable brown. A uniform dun palette that suffused water and land. Though we didn't know "dun" when we were there. Knew faint chlorophyll frosting of algae on the swamp; picked out tomato-red berries on a leafless bush at 300 yards. Over all a blurred blue mantle, discolored wool.

Shut-ins without memory of a wider world; oily iridescence on the coffee stands for night and day; crackle from the radio carries the smell and smoke of crowds. Posture in an easy chair counterfeits dancing, running, sex's spasm and release. At sunrise on a windowpane, a face turns to the wall.

The same brown in small South Bay rivers swelled with winter rains was not sleepy or commonplace. Waterways threatened to spread over banks and up to sandbagged doors. Many did invade, occupy, and destroy, though not the ones I saw firsthand. Only trash in trees a startling distance above the usual water line betrayed the near-disaster that receded before I came. Plastic bags; some clothing, blankets, cooking things dragged from hobo camps that flourished under almost every bridge along the muddy stream; sticks and other natural debris, all wedged together in the forks of trees, as if some sprawling, sloppy colony of birds competed to save the dirtiest waste the river dragged by.

But it didn't flood, not where I could see, not where my car, my floors, my books or furniture could be affected. The crisis remained news items and occasional worried conversations overheard in hallways or checkout lines. The simultaneous imminence and absence of disaster reinforcing the impression that the world which appeared remained separate from the world in which my life took place, the question of which was the consequential and which the apparitional.

RUSTED

We believed we'd stumbled on a pure aesthetic gesture and even the convincing discovery of the water pipe's working capacity failed to daunt our enthusiasm.

Because we didn't know what to do with it we decided it had no function, except to entertain us. But even in our perfect solipsism we lacked the hubris to implicate ourselves in the structure's inspiration or creation. So we decided the creator had made it for himself, an audience of one, wearing canvas overalls with a claw hammer in the hammer loop, hauling 5-inch weatherized pine beams, galvanized steel bolts, and empty 50-gallon drums to place them just here, at the crest of only this hill.

It seemed worth arguing, that something we couldn't understand could not be understood. That this private yet extravagant gesture, as elegant as it was sturdy, as fanciful as it was squat, had been lying dormant these many years, from the time it last felt the approving twinkle of its creator's eye, until this moment an unknown but certainly large number of years later – certainly as many or more years as we were old, to ensure the proper degree of wonder – lying dormant until this unexpected and unsuspecting moment when we, thrashing around in indiscriminate delight at our momentary quarters, should stumble upon it and bask in the same purposeless satisfaction as that imagined genius.

It was part of our credo: flight from use value and commodity exchange. We believed the most extravagant, precise, deliberate, but utterly nonutilitarian gesture to be the most perfect. To acquire or develop advanced training in some craft or science, then apply it to something completely nonfunctional, seemed the height of heroism.

We agreed on this, or we thought that was what we were agreeing to, for the brief time that we were a we. We ate sourdough from a dumpster. We looked at a book about a woodcut artist who seemed to have an interest in 30's-era labor politics and the solitary lot of the artistic persona. We were covered in the same red dust as the car. We had to push the car up the hill to get there, but we believed it would be easy to get down.

Water did come through the burst pipe and run into the rusted barrels when we turned the spigot. But by that time we'd already taken the photographs of ourselves sitting on the thing and grinning.

WITHOUT AMEN

How father cut the forest down, his front-end loader that could drive no faster than a bicycle, he drove through city streets right to our door, in the tiny woods he yanked out boulders, pushed down trees, piled all the brush and branches in one rubbish heap. The ones that were too large for him he hired someone to cut down.

On his tractor was the one time he looked small, broad corduroys and course-cut silver hair. I made a wigwam of the branches, green-walled humidior. Leaves withered and sap dried; arms of light reached in and scoured like dry sand.

Orange line follows the horizon as she mimics the earth's curve, line that marks the turn from stars to stars pulls the curtain black then blue, fish eye follows from beginning back again.

How an orange turns its shiny pocked face, shutting out what isn't orange, holding juice and germs of its profusion.

Child sets herself on fire to know how it is to be the sun, to burn without discrimination.

Eye to the fishbowl ceiling; stinging hands and cheeks and knees, blind feet mapping a ragged crevasse.

Tiny forest apothecary, spotted bottles dug from a careless dumping ground, I played the Indians and settlers alike came for tinctures to cure ringworm or to lead a stray eye straight. My horses, branches dropped from wild cherry trees, waited tirelessly, carried me like a cry in the dark.

For days the steps on our back porch were caked with heavy tread. Every day and sometimes twice she swept them off, every day he came in from the mud again.

By the end the yellow tractor showed easily between the trees; slim maples the only ones. In the end we took him with us. We didn't go too far.

YOUR GOLDEN GATE

The obligation of the living? Verify, in solitude, the veracity of perception. Resolve the discontents of desire and repulsion. Find value, pleasure, and significance. Or anything at all.

I labored through undergraduate Heidegger, I romanticized high school Camus, and I believed in the achievements of the mind. Did I understand then that the obligation doesn't end? Illusoriness of perception. Disorientation of desire. Disruption of time. Infinite potential, infinitely vulnerable. Each realization the seed of its own demise.

Every day the opportunity to decline the obligation will arise. Caltrain pulling into the station, engine and five cars, unimaginable weight, a stopping distance of 500 hundred yards. A few steps from the end.

"We're all terminally ill," he said. Bravado wilting even before his voice trailed off. True. Death pursues us all. But with him, the fight was fixed. Melting 40 pounds to leave a skinny caricature. Hawking a charlatan's varieties of pain. Cultivating nausea so every meal became a test of devastating wills. Eat-vomit. Live-die.

Shudder with each arrival of the train. Three steps. Five seconds. No more.

And the world around absorbs. It happened not infrequently—perhaps once a month—someone stepped out, drove—stumbled, misjudged?—an accident, an intention. Often by the time the news reached us—undistinguished survivors, involved only in the momentary inconvenience of our commuters' delay—not enough information survived to form a judgment. Accident, intention. We knew only that it's not hard to see a train coming. It's not hard to anticipate the consequences of lingering a moment too long.

Simplicity of the action momentarily absorbs the complexity of the act. A few steps. Live. Live? Sometimes finality is more than fluctuating imbalance. Desire. Dread. Dissatisfaction.

I know what I like.

At 18, the scorn of an arrogant college rogue at my mention of Kahlil Gibran. Lingering suspicion that I

really don't know what's going on. But, I protest, I also know Spinoza. Kierkegaard! So. A weakness. For turmoil radiating from impassioned thought. A confusion—I could—of sentiment for sense. Inevitable, maybe, to reevaluate choices in the light of new revelation. Or maybe—rotate the lens a degree. Refract light differently, change the perception of unchanging material. Do we learn? Or just change our clothes?

So foolish. So easily fooled.

San Francisco exists to be beautiful.

The decision. Three steps.

Every encounter with danger, with elective cataclysm, an obligation to choose again. Seven-hundred-foot waterfall. A pile of broken boulders at the end.

The choice, to say no, to examine and relinquish what is known. Should that be exhilaration? We risk to know our choice is valuable. Not gambling, not surrender to uncontrollable fate. Not disabling the will, not harnessing hopes and agonies to what you can't control.

Leaning over a waterfall, facing an oncoming train. A test. To see if you can.

Smooth granite mountaintop. Icewater stream spreads out before it plunges down the side. The mountain's edge a shallow river bed where water and tree line merge—some trees submerged up to three feet. Immediacy. Eternity. Agitation. Calm.

Wild confluence of time scales—Rock that traces half a million years. Trees at fifty. Sixty. Five hundred. More.

Water.

Measuring the minute. Season. Hour of the day. Pulling down against eddies and swirls.

Roiling pooling dribbling recording on this rock. Instances become tableau. Freeze melt flood drought drops currents torrents draw with particles and particles each day.

A vague sense of agency. Less of control.

A test. To risk a little every day. To make sure you want it still. Invite opponents to attack. Risk gravity, velocity, impact, mass. Some can't live without the challenge. Some can't ask.

Is that the will to live? Or something else again?