

Tempe Poetry in April 2001

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Moderator: Catherine Hammond

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Paul Morris

Letter from Berlin

Liese, I first saw you beneath
The pollarded plane trees on the Lindenstrasse.
You sat at a street table with Willy Karzin,
Sipping Berliner Weiss mit Schuss.
A bitter scent of almonds hung in the spring air.
I started over to you and the sunlight struck your hair.
You were suddenly in light. I closed my eyes
As the wind chilled my face.

Soon as I posed you in a doorway to a hinterhof.
I left the camera, moved your small hand up the frame,
Then kissed you and you were shy.

Paul Morris 2

We walked along the rivers at dusk.
Past the men smoking outside the long dairy sheds,
Each with a milking stool strapped on.
You recited Pindar, told me of your passion
For boxers and bicycle racers. We dozed in the grass.
You gathered wild mint as we talked, braiding a necklace
I ate off your neck that night. I remember.

Your face held a violence while you slept.
Mornings you pouted that I misused you in your dreams.
A month after you stopped painting you left.
I came home at dawn from the skating party,
The windows open, the house full of snow.

We had all gone to skate naked
On the Halvelsee that day. Wearing only hats
We circled the street café in the center of the ice,
The naked waiters with red napkins on arms.
Ivory geese began to honk in the beech grove
As a brass quintet tuned up in a tiny gazebo.
The pale smoke of the instruments freezing
To an elaborate lacework on the brass bells,
Each delicate line a phrase of Schubert or Mozart.
When they finished *Die Forelle*, one man discovered
His silver mouthpiece frozen to his lips.
He was finally one with his instrument!

I set up my camera and tripod near the boathouse,
Working as the snow began to fall.
I was under the hood when cries started
And I saw a dark stain broken in the center
Of the ground glass.

Paul Morris 3

It was your brother.
Later the prints were stark in contrast,
Hard-grained, white and black without grays.

Yesterday I found the negatives of that year:
A basket of Havel eels, whitefish, and pike perch.
The old Jew who sold books on the Ku-Damm.
This family of squatters in a burnt pump house.
Here an Aquarium Society meeting. The party
At Webers where women danced with women
And the men smoked hashish and played banjos.
A nude of you wearing a feathered Karnival mask.

I went back to the lake with my camera.
Twisted cables and wooden pulleys
Led to an uneven circle of dark water,
The ice edged with sharp notches.
They pulled his hard body onto the snow
As I ignited a magnesium strip
Exposing the film. Delicate lines
Of blue ice began to trace his smooth skin,
Hair bristling like silver needles
Until there was no man there, only
A curving form engulfed in the harsh light.
I closed my eyes and the cold wind hit my face.
How I want to say goodbye to you.

First Published: *Black Warrior Review* 13.1 (Fall 1986)

Paul Morris 4

The Wire Man

He followed Charlie Parker everywhere,
Slinging a forty-pound wire recorder
Into the nightclubs. He wanted every note
From Bird's Selmer. One morning
It hit him as he watched the ice melt
On the hood of his car—all the music
Floating off forever.

Leaning against a back wall,
He listened and changed the wire reels
As the smoke swirled under Parker's
Driving alto and hard reed.
Long lines welled up from that man.
Bird would just stand there and play snakes
Until that club became a goddamn reptile house.

It was all there on the wire reels:
Good nights when Fats Navarro and Mingus sat in,
Trying to keep up with Bird's tempos;
The hours when the junk was good, too good
To waste playing music. Bird was spinning,
Walking the edge of the stand.

When the wire man read in the newspaper
How Bird choked to death
Watching the Tommy Dorsey show on television
As Nica's place, he pulled down
The boxes of wire reels,
Then he began to wrap the wire around his foot.

Paul Morris 5

The next reel followed ankle to calf.
Silver wire turning until he was armature,
Pulsing with the nights of stale clubs,
The snowfall of Benzedrine inhalers,
Pawn ticket stubs, narrow needles
Lining an empty saxophone case,
The fabric the color of hospital pajamas
And a sheet of music covered with changes.

The wire man's family managed to hush it up
But they did the realistic thing.
The unrolling filled two truck beds
And all the fine wire filled with Bird
Ended up on a 900-acre farm in Kansas
As electric fencing. And no matter
How high the clef of moon
Strides through that five-strand fence
Or how many eighth-note sparrows sit,

That charged fence still hums
And will knock a man over.

First Published: *Fever Dreams: Contemporary Arizona Poetry*. University of Arizona Press, 1997.

Virginia Chase Sutton 6

November

The sudden sweep
of wings most unlikely,
seven ordinary birds

rushing the narrow corridor.
They fly towards the locked door
where they bank and turn,

a lovely arch in this stillness.
One breath lifting past
our rooms, down to the dayroom,

beyond the soda machine.
One more spin. We stand
and watch this exhalation,

outdoors strangely indoors.
During the final trip
one small bird loses its way,

plows through the nurses' station,
stops dead in the staff room. The others
leave it behind, of course, aim

for the open door, no doubt
headed for the Pacific Ocean's
scented wind just blocks away.

Virginia Chase Sutton 7

We're stunned. Does
survival arrive uninvited,
and what about the lost bird?

No wild wing beats, no
noise. A patient shoulders
her way in, and between

her cupped hands I glimpse
one bitter eye.
She walks to the patio,

half a ruined tennis court
surrounded by a locked
fence, grassless, without

flowers. She sets the bird
on cement. It hops
a few times before

it finally unruffles
its wings and lifts directly
into the damp air.

Virginia Chase Sutton 8

Lemons

I wash dishes, smell lemon
faintly from the sink, think
of you yesterday, how the same
pale scent hovered as we talked.
Glinting glasses, plates, stack

the counter. This morning I picked an armful
of lemons from the backyard tree.
I rinsed the dust away, piled them
in glass bowls beneath my kitchen window.
They look like broken stars against

the cracked blue sky. Once
I made a lemon meringue pie.
I remember the crumbly crust,
buttery filling and cloudy crown.
Broiled in the oven, sugared brown hills.

I wonder how you like the mix
of sweet and sour, where you hold them
on your tongue. I'm looking
for a lemon, not perfection, one
a little banged up. In my hand

the fruit is heavy. As I peel,
the rind is steady as it unfurls, down
down to the fruitful disorder of you.

Virginia Chase Sutton 9

I Want a Love Poem

Millions of tiny throated blossoms wave with wind
outside girlhood's window, already beginning
to die as I clip them into vases, purple and white

everywhere, full blown lilacs glorious in their
brief bending. Don't forget the love-drunk bees
so stuffed with passion they topple down the chimney,

crawl on the living room carpet to die. Listen: do you hear
their faint whirring? See the gypsy fortuneteller
in her glass cage, illuminated only by quarters?

She jerks to life, flurry of red and gold scarves,
enormous baubles on her fingers. She deals a card
with your secret, are you passionate, indifferent,

or cold? See her grow dark? It's the new century,
love, and those poems I once knew are lost to me now.
I remember a smudge of sentences, line breaks

all wrong, but each true to its own fragrance.
Now I'm writing love poems—should I ask the obvious
questions? I'm drifting on the edge of my new

black dress, slashed low to my electric cleavage,
an underskirt of red tulle. How it shivers, so lavish
someone must say beloved. Perhaps I spend

all day in bed, my lovely skin, beautiful still,
tangled in a sheet of passion. Will you write
a couple of lines on a card, slip it under the door?
Just a word or two like *oh love* or finally, *you*.

Jeannine Savard 10

Published from *Snow Water Cove* by Jeannine Savard. Carnegie Mellon Univ. Press
2005 (Classic Contemporary Series) and used with permission. ©2005 Jeannine Savard.

Shadow of the Ox

Clouds steamed above the still tractor
While the black tongue of an ox
Wrapped itself around the petals
Of pink campion. . . I awoke
To the drowse of musty violets,

To the neighbor's blind baby
Playing spoons on her mother's roasting pan—
We were lost every time she missed,
Every time the dog barked. I thought
I saw the man I love
Standing beside the ox, a light
Breeze between them, then shadow
Swirling above their heads like fish,
Fins locked.

Boys on a riverbank
Have tangled their lines and will be hours
Haggling over their catch. Vines
Waved out of their depths
As though they were the dead entering

The afterlife. Music as it is heard
In the second waking is large
Like the world, wind in strings
And the arrangement of memories
Drifting backward, sea-weary
Out of time.
Sunfish clipped from the line, light

Jeannine Savard 11

Along a corridor of silver birches
And the ox grazing in an autumn
That is all seasons unknown to grief.

Jeannine Savard 12

Published from *My Hand Upon Your Name* by Jeannine Savard. Red Hen Press 2005
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Grand Canyon

—for Lorrie and Barry

We drove toward nearness
on the far edge of day. The canyon
itself, a substantial hagrider
of time, all up and down: Vishnu
schist, limestone, shale, and quartz—
a nitrogen fix of one billion years. Fossils
and juniper berries clinging on top.

But it was the filling up I wanted, the sun's
magenta-gold in the belly and down further
to where we pulse, the vein of the river,
then the upsurge to the rim of the brain,
a vertical light, then screech owls
from our hearts!

The man leaning beside me at the rail,
thumping his thumb against his nose,
says he's a "Floor Dick" at the Tropicana
in Vegas, hands me a few free lunches. He loves,
he says, "The Polyesters," "The Lost Lucks,"
who don't know when to go home. His wife,

all red leather and reptile, drop-laughes
like the quarter slots and slides along
the open. I catch no one's eye
and stare down the tilt of my finger
to the earth's crust. You wouldn't have known, how
all layered in wool,
our lives still escape us.

Jeannine Savard 13

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Slow Waves

In flight between Phoenix and Vancouver
I let a stranger sleep on my shoulder.
He didn't intend it but his body leaned
then dropped over like a sack full of sand

and plump quail. I thought of the desert,
my own thirst, but how like a mother,
I'd never disturb him. He needed the rest,
an hour, I thought. I listened to his breath:

sea lions in their rookeries
roll over stars spinning
with night through a circle
of slow waves, my own breath
rising with his and sea otters anchoring
for sleep, kelp wound 'round our bellies

While lightning jags through the sky
the veins in his hands jump on his knee.

I wait for him to wake, to see himself
given over

to a stranger holding a book with one hand,
pretending not to notice him clearing
his throat, straightening his hair, and resuming
the low profile of his large Pacific nature.

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Castalia

Castalia, the pool at Delphi
and Castalia, the Blue Hole in Ohio.
They say neither has a bottom. So what if
she's right, the American woman up the hill.
What if the two do connect and Columbus
did travel the complete wrong direction.
The correct way—not west, not east,
but down—straight through the center
of the earth. Enter at Delphi

to surface just two miles north of the Clyde-
Sandusky Road. The woman, standing near
a laurel, introduces the organ grinder as her lover
and traveling companion. He cranks out
Clair de Lune over and over and never
once looks toward her. *This is all
so simple*, she says. *Swim
either way*. She talks about taking
off her clothes, something about the scramble
of yellow flowers on Mount Parnassus, men
racing naked in the stadium farther up the path.
The organ grinder's cat with only three legs
rubs his stump against my ankle. I don't
want to talk to this woman.

Her eyes, wet limestone, sharpen.
Nothing to this, the woman tells me.
I'll change your breathing toward the sea.
We could travel in a group. Air

Catherine Hammond 15

presses hard against my lungs. I move
my leg away from the cat. *Four
or five of us, if you will, all holding
hands, like old Esther Williams, making
stars and pinwheels in the water.*

You were six,
the woman says to me and I don't know
how she can possibly know this.
*Niagara Falls. That particular day you are standing
behind those falls, looking out through the spray. Water
pounds down with the force of every single
thing that hasn't yet happened in your life, and if you knew,
oh my dear, how could you
breathe another solitary breath.
You comment the few drops of water
reaching your face must be rain.*

Your father says, "Don't be silly."

*"We're standing beneath the largest cascade
of water in all of North America," your mother explains.*

*You say nothing. Together you go up the elevator.
The door opens to the outside. Those drops—
remember—how they fall warm on your skin.
How they cover your whole shining face with rain.*

First Published: *Mississippi Review*

Catherine Hammond 16

The Ocean, a Dress

Even now, the woman must wear the ocean,
a dress crumpled in the back of her closet
(put it on, the voice whispers). Having learned
lessons of salt, her eyes stare into distance.

Whatever she means to say, she says nothing.
Oh, she can talk about the sharp ping of milk
hitting a steel bucket, warm froth filling
her mouth. She watches for disguises—

lightning pretending to spread itself on water's
surface—while penetrating through to the heart.
Wind's caressing the undersides of leaves (don't
dare speak). Braiding and unbraiding her hair,

the woman considers singing—silence is always
the presence of some other thing. The man never
questions her absence—foam at her collar,
starfish caught in a sleeve. *Do you think*

I do this on purpose? she refuses to say.

First Published: *The Laurel Review*

Catherine Hammond 17

When a Woman's Hair Catches Fire

This first, kind touch provides
the flint. The moment her hair
flashes to flame, the woman

escapes. As a lizard does, by breaking
its own tail. Walking around with her hair
on fire, the woman learns to avoid

theaters, dark concert halls.
She may never again hear live
Mozart. She sleeps alone

with an asbestos pillow. Nights
the woman cannot sleep, she goes
to twenty-four hour grocery stores.

After midnight, she may witness other
bodies on fire. Only once does she
speak to one of these. A man in front

of the celery bin. His burning
has spread beyond hers. His eyebrows,
the hair on his arms, flaming fine

and blue. His fingers touch her face,
arc the fragile bone of her cheek.
Later, she is not certain what

Catherine Hammond 18

he told her. Something
about the sun's tracing that exact
same curve across the sky,

deep red at each end of the path.
The woman has learned
to read her own signs. Already

she can feel the heat of her lashes
preparing themselves. They
will ignite, and soon. Her eyes

forced open for good.

First Published: *Chicago Review with a Pushcart
Nomination*

Catherine Hammond 19

Ici Hall

We sit with hundreds of waiting
travelers on the baggage carousel
at Charles de Gaulle Airport. The power
went off hours ago. A young woman—

we both noticed her last night on the plane,
her breasts falling from the pink tank top—
crawls onto the conveyor belt
into that dark cavern

searching for her backpack. She needs
to be somewhere besides Here Hall.
I can't watch the living
statues—the mummy outside the Louvre,

the mime standing in the rain
for hours at Deux Magots. Next to the church
there is a white box—small, two feet square—
with a plaster head resting on top.

The sign asks for donations
Pour restituer la statue.
Only—there's a woman inside.
She never moves.

Her dog stretches and wanders
back into shade. An insect
I don't recognize flies
through the hotel's open window.

Catherine Hammond 20

I listen to water from a fountain,
birds outside in yellow forsythia
and in bushes I think are azaleas.
A car comes up the road

you walked down.
A bull snorts from a nearby barn.
From above the dam on the Indre
I see no movement, only smooth

reflections of pale willow. Water
has to reach the spillway for white plumes
to rush past violets and tiny yellow flowers.
Later, we sit on the stone bench

carved to look like bark, ancient oak.
Moss grows near your hand. Together,
you and I breathe as slowly as we can.
Still, we know—and here.

First Published: *National Forum*