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CONRAD GELLER

Ashburn: February

New ice lies heavy on the slanted roof,
the dark is hanging on, the wind is keen,
the fields are bare and dead. Where is the proof
that February mediates between
the winter and the spring? The low clouds pass
in pointed silence, while the mournful geese
make meager supper on the yellowed grass,
and over all, a deep, unhealthy peace.

Look up and scan the sky. Where is the light
long promised, still denied? To me it seems
that sickly sunshine cannot make it right,
that even April is the stuff of dreams,

and yet, it only takes one willow, bent
beside a stream, to hear an ancient call,
put out one shoot and shake the firmament,
to show that seasons matter after all.

JEROME BETTS

Ice In The Morning

Feet crunch on frozen ruts and humps
As glittering crusted grass is crossed;
White-beaded stems and brittle clumps
Spit tiny fusillades of frost.
Lane-edging puddles creak and star
And shatter, letting water rise.
Sound sharpens, tractor engine, car,
The doorstep cats' imploring cries.

Hay streaks the churned mud's hardened swirls
In hoof-poached ground before a gate.
Muck steams. Its wavering wisps and curls
Slant upwards, hang, drift, dissipate.
Tick! Tick! A robin starts to scold,
Fluffs out, then half sings from a briar,
But no red breast can quench the cold
Which burns the ears with wintry fire.

ELISE HEMPEL

A Walk in Fog

Ghost-white blur
before me, behind,
to suddenly find
the past, the future

shut to my navigation,
memory just dense
mist when I glance
back, imagination

a thick, dim haze
ahead, to be left
with a life of no depth,
just a half-block space

of light and clarity,
this eternal present
the dog with his scent
bounds through, guiding me.

ANNE LAWRENCE BRADSHAW

The Unmade Bed

Our bed's grown cold and you are gone,
the sheet's still wrinkled where you lay –
though if I trace a hand upon
the pattern of our old duvet
I almost see you lying there,
your laughing eyes and bed-head hair,
your so enticing 'devil-may-care'
attitude of *laissez-faire*
which almost drove me to distraction!
Making one thing very plain –
sanity lies in your extraction
from this once so calm domain.
And thus occurs the sweet idea:
I smooth the sheet, you disappear.

CHARLIE SOUTHERLAND

The Voluptuous Tale

The fight had started over nothing but
Her knickers flagging in the breeze outside.
A little pride is much the deepest cut

To heal. The line exposed what the gut
Expanded. What could I say? So, I lied.
The fight had started over nothing but

Her weight which I had said was fine. The jut
I noticed months ago had grown. I spied
A little. Pride is much the deepest cut

When cutting through the fat to flesh. The glut
Was more than noticed in the bed, my Bride.
The fight had started over nothing but

The way I groaned with her on top in rut.
She nearly did me in with that last ride.
A little pride is much. The deepest cut

Was when she locked me out. And when she shut
The curtains pouting all day long, I sighed.
The fight had started over nothing. Butt
A little pride is much the deepest cut.

QUINCY R. LEHR

Greatest Moments in Cougar Porn

If every poem has to do with love,
 then every video
concerns a neighboring desire,
 and all you need to know
comes down to similarities – a pulse
 that flickers into life
in front of a computer screen
 next to a sleeping wife.

Play with the thought of what you think she wants,
 a sequence of what-if.
Pretend her moans mean that she cares.
 Pretend you're really stiff,
and swear that she looks almost jailbait young
 (beneath the sheets, dim lights)
and that it's twenty years ago
 in more expensive tights.

But maybe it's the fib that feels like love,
 the lube beside the bed,
the unshared past conveyed in hints,
 the dyed hair on the head,
the fantasy behind the fantasy,
 the just reward of youth
with only wrinkles around the eyes
 hinting at the truth.

REESE WARNER

The Favour (after Catullus 11)

Orrie, you prick, I love you but
I'm gone and I'll be gone forever.
I left one thing undone: can you
do me a favour?

I crossed the sea, I had to, since
remote and wild was what I wanted.
Roses at home, I'm sure, but here –
still snowy whiteness.

And that's just where I landed. Then
it's miles and miles of empty forest,
waste land in green, and after that,
just grass and flatness.

There were these mountains, too, I crossed –
good-looking, icy – which reminds me,
that bitch I loved, could you go tell her,
and none too nicely,

she can go sleep the fuck with all
the limp-dicked knights, and preening doves
she wants, but this I know, she won't
find truth in love.

She had her chance. Our love's now dead.
It's a cherry red, rag-top Mustang
stomped by some Hummer-driving kid,
dropped at the junkyard.

LEWIS TURCO

Unlovingness

An E. E. Cummings tailgater bluesanelle

Unlove's the heavenless hell and homeless home,
The unEdenic, undwellinghouse-type-home
Of seed in search of a bed of welcome loam.
The botanist of Eden could tell you that!
All botanists since Eden can tell you that
Unlove's the heavenless hell and homeless home
Where weeds will grow, not herbs, unless you sow
Herbs, not tares, unless broadcast you sow
Good seed to search for a bed of welcome loam.
Snakes love to slither among the vines of vetch
And stalks of weeds to find the apple, fetch
Us to the unEdenic type of home-
Away-from-home that has an ounce of marl,
A single, solitary ounce of marl.
Unlove's the heavenless hell and homeless home
From which we wish to be exiled, not enter,
To be in exile from and not to enter –
Unlove's the heavenless hell and homeless home
of seed in search of an ounce of welcome loam.

GWEN HART

Dress Rehearsal

How healthily their feet upon the floor
strike down! These are no pirates, really, but a band
of high school juniors leaping hand in hand
into the air in groups of three or four.
They wear their costume rags as if they wore
the gold of Blackbeard. All this started with a strand
of piano music. Now, I feel the sand
beneath my feet, and taste the salt-air of the shore.
The choreographed battle rages, and I know at length
how still these brown and brawny limbs will lie.
But when they pull me near I feel their breath,
and as they hoist me up I know their strength.
They brandish their swords bravely, heads held high.
They are most handsome now, when facing death.

JEAN L. KREILING

The Urge to Sing Along

The urge to sing along is never stronger
than when you hear the laughter of a child –
a tune you can't quite carry any longer,
although you'll try. You hear the helpless, wild
improvisation – not exactly sung,
but freed from ticklish lungs – more like a sneeze,
or like confetti tightly held, then flung
in handfuls at half-mad festivities.
It rouses you as fireworks would – a burst
of noisy light that redefines the skies,
then fades. The darkness deafens you at first,
but when involuntary giggles rise
again from children's throats, you hear the ring
of perfect pitch that tempts you, too, to sing.

LIAM GUILAR

King's Champion

1

The journey made, his duty done,
the invitation to remain was not refused
while winter raged and sulked
about the castle walls. Humming
a minor key in passages and towers
the wind fumbled the tapestries.

Beside the brazier keeping watch
on a land gone hard and white,
everything seemed dead
or waiting to be born. Summer,
stories they remembered
for this stranger from the south

who joins the winter games
and watches m'lord's daughter.
Nothing to soften the darkness,
until spring, then mounted, armed,
into bright sunshine and bitter wind
taking the princess to her wedding.

2

The journey done, the prize delivered.
The king's doubts laid to rest
in private conversations:
the land's well-run, the castle's sound.
So the wedding goes ahead
But first, obligatory festivities.

He is the King's Champion
and he kills not for pleasure:

it's just what he does. On the first day
he won everything and all the women
would have thrown their honour
in the moat to be with him.

On the second day he was undefeated.
When the Princess smiled he fled
risked his life on the point of a spear
and hurtled down the lists.
On the third day the stranger came.
Wind tugged the bunting, swirling the dust.

His shield was black, his armour black
his herald, dressed in black, rode to the stands
saluted the young King, and said:
My master says: this woman is my wife.
She is no maid. He claims his right
to prove this truth in combat.

The King called for his Champion:
You lied! You found the rumour true:
a Knight came courting for his Lord
and won the Lady's heart instead.
You will defend the honour
of this woman I must marry.

Your skill must prove her purity
stainless as the robes she'll wear
on coronation day. And if you fail,
I'll feed them to the royal pigs.

3

Spears shatter, horses buckle,
scrambling clear they pound away.
His enemy anticipates each stroke.
But he predicts the Knight's attempts.

A mirror image of himself,

who tip-toed passageways
who risked the terrifying consequence
and wanted his reward.

They paused. Leant on their swords.
Blood dripping on the troubled dust.
All summer long I had her, gasped the Knight.
We plighted troth. I am her spouse.

I know you did, the Champion replied,
and that is neither here nor there.
Her father won't acknowledge you:
he wants a grandson on the throne.

My master was impatient.
he proved if she were maid
the first night that she came
and that is neither here nor there.

He needs her father's castle
his lands, his loyalty, his men
to keep the northland settled
at this stage of his reign.

What matters is not
the truth of your claim
but this ritual proof
we both know proves nothing.

He had not trained to parry words.
Edge striking battered metal
slashes the knight's head from his body.
The Champion paused to breathe,
and bleed, then straightened up
and turned to the applause.

The King and Princess came in finery
to stand above the metal and the meat.
A royal gesture had it dragged away:

blood spatters on the Ermine
from the puddles round her dainty feet.
He took her hand. Gentles, the liar shamed,
tomorrow this false-slandered lady
shall become your Queen and mine.

j. tate barlow

All You Need To Know

How past tense works:

What was

she is

becomes

she was –

so cut

and dried

when someone's

died.

CONTRIBUTORS

Conrad Geller is a Bostonian now living in Northern Virginia. His life was once saved by the Canadian National Health Service, for which he is grateful.

Jerome Betts lives in Devon, England. His verse has appeared in a wide variety of British magazines and anthologies as well as UK, European, and North American web venues such as *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Angle*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Light*, *The Asses of Parnassus*, *The New Verse News*, *Per Contra*, *Snakeskin* and *Tilt-A-Whirl*. He now edits *Lighten Up Online* in succession to Martin Parker its founder.

Elise Hempel's poetry has appeared in many places over the years, including *Able Muse*, *Measure*, *The Evansville Review*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and Ted Kooser's *American Life in Poetry*. She won the 2015 Able Muse Write Prize for Poetry, and her first full-length book will be published by Able Muse Press this year.

Anne Lawrence Bradshaw works as Writer Liaison for an American publication based in California, and in her free time she is wife, mother, and author of poems and short stories. Her work has been published widely online recently, or is forthcoming soon from, *Eunoia*, *Yellow Chair Review*, *Zetetic*, *Quarterday Review*, *Pigeonholes*, *Tincture Journal*, and is also available in a few UK print journals (*Orbis*, *Acumen*, *Artemis*).

Charlie is a farmer living in North-Central Arkansas. He bales hay, cuts lumber on his sawmill, hunts and fishes. He is published in *Trinacria*, *First Things*, *The Amsterdam Quarterly* and has poems forthcoming in several other journals. He's been nominated for a 2016 Pushcart Prize.

Quincy R. Lehr's poems and criticism appear widely in North America, Europe, and Australia, and his most recent books are *Heimat* (2014) and *The Dark Lord of the Tiki Bar* (2015). He lives in Brooklyn, where he teaches history.

Reese Warner is a lapsed classicist, and consequently programs computers

for a living. He emigrated to Canada in 1995, but since he only moved from Chicago to Toronto, it's not one of those heroic emigrations one reads about and admires, just a quickie from one large multi-ethnic city on a Great Lake to another. He writes both poetry and prose, which has appeared in various places, mostly small (but celebrated!) Canadian journals.

Lewis Turco is the author of over fifty books, chapbooks, and monographs including *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics* (UPNE), and his latest collection of poems, *The Familiar Stranger* (StarCloudPress.com, 2014). His epic written in Anglo-Saxon prosody with bobs and wheels, *The Hero Enkidu*, appeared from Bordighera Press in 2015.

Gwen Hart teaches writing at Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, Iowa. Her poems have appeared in journals such as *Measure*, *Mezzo Cammin*, and *Valparaiso Poetry Review*. She is the author of the poetry collections *The Empress of Kisses* (2015 X.J. Kennedy Award winner, Texas Review Press) and *Lost and Found* (David Robert Books).

Jean L. Kreiling is the author of the recently published collection, *The Truth in Dissonance* (Kelsay Books, 2014). Her work has appeared widely in print and online journals, including *American Arts Quarterly*, *Angle*, *The Evansville Review*, *Measure*, and *Mezzo Cammin*, and in several anthologies. Kreiling is a past winner of the String Poet Prize and the Able Muse Write Prize, and she has been a finalist for the Frost Farm Prize, the Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award, and the Richard Wilbur Poetry Award.

Liam Guilar lives in Australia. His most recent books of poems are *Rough Spun To Close Weave*, published by Ginninderra press (ginninderrapress.com.au/poetry.html), and *Anhaga*. He runs a blog about poetry and related subjects at ladygodivaandme.blogspot.com.au.

j. tate barlow moves to the music, and favours the key of Eflat. Singer, composer, mother, lover of the extraordinary ordinary – *c'est elle*. Born in Toronto, uphill from a great lake.