

# POSSUM TO THE FLEAS and other poems...

By Shelby Stephenson

*To keep the author's dedicated spacing, Hezekiah's note appears after the poems.  
Eds.*

## POSSUM TO THE FLEAS

The dulled death I faked

Even as the automobile sacked

My babes clinging to my back.

Then I survived my rescuer

Who stopped in the road to pick

Me up on her way down to the Vet,

The Volvo's space in that cargo

A claustrophobia of rubbish.

I inhaled the rubber in the tire

Spare in its hovel; the battery-charger's

Acid in my nostrils, too,

And an avocado which escaped

A Food Lion plastic bag.

The worst, though, was to lose that joy,

Memorable as song-like poems

I crooned on my way to the moon.

Virginity crawled on into the usual.

When you fleas ascended as she

Lifted the lid, I expired in a whoosh,

My last wish – remember my name: Marsupial.

## MEMORY

Try lingerie rather than linguistics.

Or if you are looking for Truth, a climax works,

Though the letters prompt me to stop

Where Level Cross keeps Randolph County

Safe for a racecar (racecar).

I'm not palindroming anything

I know better than pop, for I am helpless

As a kitten on a spree, a free agent

Of sorts, crying for someone to put my socks away

In a drawer in a bureau I got

At St. Vincent de Paul decades ago,

An eight-drawer, certainly an antique,

For it's dressed with wheels and pizzazz!

Let the mules go free! Sure, they'll find themselves.

The reins shall go limp, the manes flow,

The wind shape music in the breaking wind.

Notice I am cautious of saying, "fart," for it jumps

The lines and makes a meadow for the smell like camphor

Or some pitch tarring the mindful forest

Full of mime-fields and dirty shoes.

There is no ambiguity here, no guide

To take you home or poet to hum

A song, maybe smell a scene or three,

Though once, when I was a lad,

My race filled with white parts of chicken manures.

Arrivederci: I have seen that yard before.

Your map is good as mine: Pam is a nice dubiety.

She does not turn redder when she solos as Pamela.

NORTH AMERICA'S ONLY NATIVE MARSUPIAL

The revelation of a pouch soothes humankind.

The babies snuggle like grubs and sniff

Like furry puppies to secure their nuzzles,

Eyes wide with clairvoyance.

Who started the cry that Opossum's ugly?

Her fifty-two teats come always ready.

Too much contemplation induces a lack

Of respect for the peaceful elemental.

The true view is the practical other,

Once you see the little ones ride their mother's back.

THE MAN SEEKING WATER LETS THE WATER-WITCHER HOLD THE VINE

1

"I just hold this twig in air,  
Out from me, like this, over immensity –  
This Y-shaped rod in the whole world's door?  
I call it doodle-bugging; it's my cup of tea.  
I am a water-finding champion, the Bird  
Of The Water-Witch – and I do not fail to be heard.

"Now a divining rod's my way: my wall  
Is cluttered with what pseudo-science empties in lens  
To make me look funny: well, my daughter Melissa is a jewel,  
A real water-witch: she uses any piece of lumber  
She finds, an L-shape, her favorite; she holds it in her hands:  
And I have seen that stick wobble all around.

"It's got to be a gift from on high,  
This vining-rod business, sort of like catching a musky through the ice,  
Or taking a bear ice-fishing and kicking his main artery  
To bring the warmth on in such a place,

Plus seeing the look on my daughter's face when none  
Other than a red-faced boy shows up with a mouthful of worms as solution.

"Son, I say, What's happening to you?

You know what he says? *Mister, like I say: you've got to keep your worms warm.*

Oh how me and Melissa make water-witching new

As that so the ground yonder might prompt

People to gather and heave sighs for the Word.

We court creation in a fallen world."

2

So I watched Charles; that was his name. He stood

With his daughter, as if Nature was all

Enraptured with just themselves, bone and blood

Crawling in their bodies to make the twig a self.

I said to myself: what foolery: still

I could not explain the ritual of the father and child

Doing this hand-number with a vine and making it talk,

The standers there rubbing their chins and frowningly

Subconsciously shuffling their shoes in the sand in quick

Respites harkening back to the first baby's cry,

A mess of senses focusing in the dark,

Awkward worlds, shuddering, fallen.

## PANTOUM FOR OLIVER

When I think of Oliver, I think of Listerine,  
A mouth void of any stink which might last  
Through the trials he put us through – yikes!  
For there was always more.

A mouth void of any stink which might last  
The usual flop-down-anywhere basset,  
For there was always more  
For a dog that wanted to be king.

The usual flop-down-anywhere basset  
Was not what to expect from Oliver's ramifications  
For a dog that wanted to be king.  
A dog-trainer who needed lithium

Was not what to expect from Oliver's ramifications.  
He wanted to be leader of the pack and that is why,  
Yes, a dog-trainer who needed lithium  
Recommended a choke-chain for Oliver, outright.

He wanted to be leader of the pack and that is why  
I gave him to the Moore County Hounds: the trainer was not lying.

Recommended a choke-chain for Oliver, outright,  
As he was not the image of some picture-perfect Rover.

I gave him to the Moore County Hounds: the trainer was not lying!  
Some blunt responses those hounds moiled to rave  
As he was not the image of some picture-perfect Rover,  
For the rabbit-hunters wanted devotion.

Some blunt responses those hounds moiled to rave:  
When I think of Oliver, I think of Listerine,  
For the rabbit-hunters wanted devotion  
Through the trials he put us through – yikes!

*Poetry editor Hezekiah writes... We do not routinely receive pieces from the POV of a possum, but nor do we get a lot of Laureates. How pleased can we be when a dusting of fleas fines themselves a top dog? It is a pleasure to meet a modest man of great talents through his works on the page. (I or we had intended to showcase him two issues ago, but my defiling system leaves much to be desired.) Here he is now. I get the impression that Stephenson likes to cultivate scholarly contemplations along with stock colloquialisms which I find most engaging. A knight-errant and anointed court jester—where tongue meets cheek: POSSUM TO THE FLEAS relates a Volvo an avocado and a marsupial as one with the universe; or, in the least, it threads a delightful stereotyping. In MEMORY, “Try lingerie rather than linguistics. / Or if you are looking for Truth, a climax works,” “Palindroming” “racecar[s].” “The reins shall go limp, the manes flow.” ...Stephenson is “A mess of senses focusing in the dark,” “The usual flop-down-anywhere basset,... For a dog that wanted to be king,” ...we fleas are grateful.*

**THE POET SPEAKS...***When I was a boy dogs were as much a part of my life as fleas. We had 35 dogs. My father was a foxhunter.*

*We had a '37 3/4 ton Ford pickup. It was the farm-vehicle. It also was fixed to haul our foxhounds.*

*I wish I had known Slobbermouth, a dog (I can hear my father say) who could outrun the word of God with the Bible tied to his tail.*

*Some of the dogs of the 50's (when I was a boy--I was born in 1938) were named for movie-stars:*

*Bette, for Bette Davis; Bing (for Crosby); Bob (for Bing's brother Bob); Ginger (for Rogers) and on and on.*

*One was named Sing. She was a yarddog. The foxhounds were in what we called a dog-yard, fenced in: my father bought dogfood by the half-ton. We would dip the dogs in a barrel filled with a mixture to kill fleas and ticks.*

*I loved Sing. Somehow she got her back broke. I can see my older brother Paul take the .22 rifle and shoot her out of her misery. My father stood in the window in the house and looked the other way.*

*He asked Paul to put her out of her misery.*

*What I am trying to say is that I grew up with dogs.*

*Butler was a foxdog. He could run the fox during the day And at night in the fall we would go possum-hunting. Butler would not go off track until he treed the possum.*

*I did not know then that the possum was North America's only native marsupial. Possums are friendlier than cats. They eat acres of fleas. A mother can carry up to 22 baby possums on her back.*

*Possums are cleaner than cats too. I have a friend who takes her possum to church.*

*The water-witcher matter? I saw that: Charles and his daughter found water (my brother wanted to have a well dug) with a twig. I saw it move. Tremble. The twig*

*was just a stick for me. I cannot explain what I saw. The poem maybe says it better than I try to in prose.*

*Oh the poem for Oliver. Oliver was a Basset my wife and I bought when he was a puppy. He was territorial. And our vet said he could not understand that, saying Bassets lie around in the way. Slower than molasses he said.*

*My wife and I gave Oliver to a group of hunters who hunted the rabbit. I did not want him to nip my mother's ankles anymore when she walked by him lying on his Bean bag.*

*I have a friend, the actress Rosemary Harris, who loves animals. She told me this story after a reading I did from my book Possum. She said she was driving her Volvo and she saw a possum on the road. The possum had been hit by a car. She stopped and got the possum, put it in her trunk, she said, and rushed to the vet, stopped her car, lifted the lid, and "Fleas, Shelby, were ascending; my possum had expired."*

*I can see that now, realizing that fleas will not live on anything dead.*

*So I try to make all the things of the past sing. I realized years ago that I could not be born in a museum. My childhood: mules until the seventh grade; hogs in the pen and pasture (my most vivid memory is the yearly hogkilling); chickens in the yard (I believe Buff Orpington is a two-word poem).*

*And poems--Art--salvaged my life: there were two books in the house I was born in. I restored it. It sits in the hedge behind this one I am typing this to you. My family built this ranch brickhouse in spring of 1952. I can hear my mother say, "Paul, you spend more money on those dogs than you do on your family." My father right away had the timber cut in the woods and had this brickhouse built. My memories, the ones which settle and will not leave me, live in the old house. The yard was dirt. (This was before lawns.) The dogs were in the pen, mostly. And that's sort of the way it was -- and is..*

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Shelby Stephenson served as Poet Laureate of North Carolina from 2015-2018. Recent books: *Family Matters: Homage to July, the Slave Girl* (Bellday Books), the Bellday Prize; *Slavery and Freedom on Paul's Hill* (Press 53). Recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Achievement Award, English Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison, he is Professor Emeritus, University of North Carolina-Pembroke, serving as editor of *Pembroke Magazine* from 1979 until his retirement in 2010. He lives at the homeplace on Paul's Hill, where he was born, near McGee's Crossroads, North Carolina, about ten miles northwest of Benson.

