

10 POEMS

By Emily Strauss

Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Here is an anthology, a gathering of wildflowers, nosegays, picked fresh for your perusal. 'all the way home past the flower market / where roses in clay urns dozed in the heat...fingers that danced on the strings,' Strauss' poetry ignites with quite a unique spark. Don't miss: "First the rain, then the moon" It ranks with some of the best verse I have never read. 'I was exhausted, filthy / hadn't bathed in a week'—and this is the least fragrant line, but it is one of the most absurdly erotic pieces I have never encountered. 'I smiled, said to the dark / 'don't worry'. 'My space insists that I skip along, but don't miss a beat: 'better dark to see into sadness—' 'a dog running home / in his dream twitches his legs, 'I could go on, as I am wont to do, but suffice to say, Strauss is surfeit with fine lines and staggering stanzas. (Spacing is poet's own.) HS

On a Bus in Guadalajara, 1964

On a bus in Guadalajara
a mendicant with a guitar
sang *La Malagueña*
in a voice so beautiful
the girl showered him with pesos,
urged him to sing again
all the way home past the flower market
where roses in clay urns dozed in the heat.

A young beggar with a tattered shirt,
deep brown skin, dark hair,
with a guitar battered and stained,
fingers that danced on the strings,
a pure voice like the wind, crying—

she paid him more and he sang again
until she could breathe in the song
before she got off at Minerva's fountain.

She would have taken him home
but he was only a beggar
riding the buses for money
with his guitar and his voice.

The old woman still remembers his music,
the ancient bus with torn seats,
humid mornings past the flower market—
sorry now that she never bought
armfuls of red and pink roses.

First the rain, then the moon

he came to my bed
unexpectedly
after the fire burned out
everyone had gone to sleep

he came to my bed
quietly
after I scaled a peak
for once in my life,
I was exhausted, filthy
hadn't bathed in a week

he came to my bed
apologetically
slipped under the blankets
cold hands on my thighs, whiskey
on his breath, I sighed

he came mumbling about something
he had read in my journal,
wanted to know me better
I sighed more

he came hard and fast
gasping
sticky hot under the covers
under the full moon
after the rain

he left just as suddenly
his weight lifted off me
turned, said to the light
'don't fall in love'
I sighed again

he left, a silence hung
under the moon
I smiled, said to the dark
'don't worry'.

Dawn a Black Curtain

The wan moon lingers in this frigid morning
while great loss trails my sleep,
pulling me back to dreams of destruction.

Moonlight enters the bare windows,
pure blue in the silence of dawn,
the bed smells of wood smoke and coconut oil,
three blankets hold the light away—

better dark to see into sadness—

memory a thick black curtain against waking.
Finally I rise in a heavy drape of despair
watch the visions recede until the stage stands bare
light a fire, begin to warm my stiff hands.

South China Sea: Summer

Bounded by a thin white line
the gray sea and sky merge
a backdrop for this dull earth,
haze later thinning to let
the wan sun filter through
narrow lanes where farmers
bend under poles of bananas.

Fishermen sway on wooden
decks as if on land, weaving
fine nets, sluicing the oiled
surface of the ocean with fish
entrails the gulls dive for
and gobble whole, screaming.

Small islands emerge from the haze
offshore like a giant's footprints
breaking the glassy sheen.
Garbage washes up, clinging
among rocks with waves rolling
languid in the breathless heat.

The midday glare reflects
on the junks anchored offshore,
clean salt smells lingering in wet
holds, men sweating in grimy shirts
fan themselves with palm leaves,
infants swing in cloth hammocks.

Clicks of mahjong drift ashore from
open windows, tea cups in saucers,
a baby's whine, a dog running home
in his dream twitches his legs,
soon cooking fires will heat rancid oil,
squid and peppers, the sea rolls by.

Hot Evening Blues

(loosely after Jules LaForgue, "A Hot Evening")

feet baking, arteries throb in my ankle,
under my chin, at my wrists

hands swollen and wet, skin wet—
what if I were a military musician

laced tight in a uniform, blowing
into a trombone on a bandstand

or a fly on a wet tile floor, or a sponge
encrusted on a sea bed, watching fish

a blue cornflower on a piece of Delft
china in a dark room of an antique shop

or a flower on a chintz pillow in a prim
old maid's parlor, or a heron...

Violence at Dusk

At dusk, the start of deadly night
when shadows unmask our deepest fears,
men are led to violence, without a right

to see the shining of the sunset's light
on women let loose to shed their tears.
At dusk, the start of deadly night

the blood red skies watch men fight
the ghosts of day. Born of angry seers,
they are given to violence, without a right

to peace. Men mostly live holding tight
to the whispers of death that appear
at dusk, the start of deadly night.

A wife may view his naked fears as trite
yet for those men to whom folly endears
stars align only to violence, not right.

Dusky pink descends as if the bright
western sky can sanctify us in arrears
at dusk, the start of deadly night.
Men are left to violence, without a right.

Path of Totality

I stood on the forest road
as the light dimmed
birds turned silent, suddenly
I couldn't see, the day dark

I called the dog, removed
my sunglasses, glanced at
the sun's glowing disk behind
a thick Jeffrey Pine trunk

for a moment it was dark
standing silent under the trees
I saw a bright star,
then the disk brightened

a little, and a little more
the forest dim but
coming back from
the silent shadow passing

and I walked on
in the August sun
warm again on the road
but cool under the trees.

Driving down Dirt Roads

First, animal tracks— deer, buffalo, coyote
wore grooves on the land, and humans followed
them to water and berries. Much later men on horses

gouged into the mud with wheels and wagons, cut
deeper tracks, hauled shoring timber up to mines
high in the canyons, mules labored along side.

The trails crossed gullies and mesas, going
somewhere new, always new, always seeking more
until the men hit their ends and stopped

at the cliff's base, ore veins inaccessible. Defeated,
most men quit and returned to the flatlands
but the faint scars remain, overgrown, wavering

parallel ruts in every direction to destinations
unknown, prospects unmarked. Their roads still
challenge me to follow as they cut through wire

fences—I explore the ranges, drive the same
dusty paths, cross washes and slopes, find a stone
chimney, its cabin long gone, some men stayed on.

Full Moon Setting over the Tracks

Late winter full moon sets at dawn
over the western hills just turning pink
beyond the tracks where abandoned rail
cars display graffiti painted over thousands
of miles from Elko to Barstow.
Now they sit rusting, the industry of them
faded on the sidings by the open
fields littered with homeless camps.

If they wake early the sky forgives
and bestows a sheen of pale
white and coral onto the beaten
land. For a moment great peace
covers the slow trains sliding
through town, used needles
in the dirt lie in uneasy rest
moon disk arrested in its descent.

Losing Sight of Land

The storm darkens
will not reveal the lost trail.

I run through a field of stones
lose sight of the ground underfoot

lightning flares but too fast
to see the path

adrift among boulders I flee
something that follows

lit by a spark
for a moment

the storm black and thick
I am lost on solid ground.

THE POET SPEAKS: *The poems here represent over 25 years of my writing, and show a variety of my attempts to portray the world. Some of them are personal, some real, some fantasy, some formal, some naturalistic, all imagistic. I think that's my primary purpose: to draw pictures and images that relate what we see outside ourselves with what happens inside our psyches. My influences are 20th century, from the Modernists of the 1920s to the Naturalists like Jeffers, Snyder, Mary Oliver, and Galway Kinnell.*

BIO: *Emily Strauss has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry, which she has written since college. Over 450 of her poems appear in a wide variety of online venues and in anthologies, in the U.S. and abroad. She is a Best of the Net and twice a Pushcart nominee. The natural world of the American West is generally her framework; she also considers the narratives of people and places around her. She is a retired teacher living in Oregon.*