

Spring Cleaning for Poets

by Con Chapman

Spring comes late in New England, so we're behind the rest of the country when it comes to spring cleaning. I tackled the garage last weekend, we did the patio and the backyard today, and as we finished up my better half made the sort of helpful suggestion that always casts a pall over the rest of the weekend.

"Can you do something about those four stanzas of three lines each at the bottom of the basement stairs?" she asked.



"That's a villanelle I'm working on," I said, and if I sounded a bit miffed, I was. "What do you care? It's not in your way—you never go down there anyway."

"I nearly broke my leg stepping over it when I was bringing up the lawn furniture."

That sealed the deal—around our house it's safety first, last and always. We keep one of those flip signs in the front vestibule: "543 days without a major household accident," and we turn the card just before going to bed each night.

"Maybe the poetry is starting to pile up around here," I said.

"Starting to?" she asked dubiously. "We agreed that poetry was going to be your thing—along with garbage and changing the cat litter—remember?"

"Okay," I said, recalling our longstanding division of labor. "I'll do a poetry clean-up tomorrow."

The next day when I took stock of things I found that the clutter was worse than I thought. There's the big notebook I take on the train each day and the little notebook I keep in my desk drawer for moments of late-night inspiration—those were full—but I also found scraps of poetry in my winter coat pockets, in the console of my car, in my brief case. All of them possessing *some* merit, some lyrical element, but none of them finished, none of them formed into a literary whole.

There was children's poetry—"Fuzzy, buzzy bumblebee, hope he doesn't land on me!" There were lines that expressed the tragic sense of life: "Something is born, and something dies." *That's* not going to find its way into Reader's Digest. There were recollections from my boyhood growing up in a small Midwestern town. I was enamored of them all when I wrote them but I had to admit they weren't going anywhere.



Eliot: "I just picked Ezra Pound's pocket."

Still, I hated to just throw them out—what a waste that would be! I try to maintain a pretty small poetic footprint; like e.e. cummings I don't use capital letters all the time, I sometimes write *haiku* with lines of 5, 6 and 5 syllables (nobody ever notices) and I frequently

recycle other poets' best images. As fellow Missouri poet T.S. Eliot once said, "Mediocre writers borrow, great writers steal."

They didn't really hang together, though, my many fragments of inspiration. I needed some guidance that only the best poetry can provide, so I turned to this month's issue of *plangent voices* magazine, at \$3.75 your best entertainment value. If your tastes in entertainment run to the obscure, the impenetrable and—in the special Christmas double issue—offensive poetry.

You'll see why this is important in a minute.

Call me bitter, but when I was removed as editor of that forlorn little rag in a bloody coup (I was treated for severe paper cuts at the student infirmary—\$10 co-pay!), I had it headed in the right direction. We had doubled our subscriber base from one to two (thanks Mom!), we had cut our backlog of unresponded-to submissions from 2,348,274 to 2,348,251, and we had adopted a tough anti-favoritism policy that would become a model for the non-profit poetry (but I repeat myself) industry. If, for example, a poem was approved for publication by an editor who had already slept with the author, a second anonymous editor had to sleep with him/her as well. Then and only then was the poem deemed worthy of publication.

plangent—as it is known to insiders of the poetry game—had lately become a fierce advocate for so-called "flarf" poetry; poems assembled from the results of odd internet searches such as "rubber bustier" and "discount tire sale" and "Vic Wertz" were combined in an aleatory fashion, producing results that were sometimes striking, and sometimes . . . crap. Just like regular poetry!

But I didn't need to go to the internet—I had random, unrelated scraps of language sitting on the desk right in front of me. So, I took my scissors and created this reusable, dishwasher-safe poem from my winter's worth of poetic fragments. Enjoy!

Fuzzy, buzzy bumblebee—

I saw where Scott Joplin played his ragtime to trail-weary cowboys.

The Citgo sign, rolling up and down like a windowshade,

A cynical tongue in one so young—

They dropped Eddie on his head, we said.

Ah, the mistakes we make when we are young!

What were they thinking, my dad and mom

When they decided to call me “Con”?

The crazy ladies to whom I send poems

excite me by long-distance pheromones.

The cats sits on my lap, langorous, while

helicopters and gulls circle overhead.

