

Testament/ National Poetry Month, 2013/ 25 Poems

by Gary Hardaway

01_Flight

To ask a writer
why it writes
is foolish, foolish
as asking a sparrow
why it flies. It flies
because it can
and because, by flying,
it is most wholly itself.

02_Curious

The cats repeat themselves
eyeing and sniffing the same phenomena
day after day because their paws
are ill-designed for holding pencils
and notebooks and not even T-mobile
will set them up with smart phones.

03_Wave Propagation

Small stones
skipped across
still water ripple
the shore with minute
but manifold alterations.

04_Kinesthetic Intelligence

Dancers have it. Stick and ball
athletes and F1 drivers, too--
an understanding of the body
in relationship with other bodies
and time down to the nanosecond.
Music can be said
to make it audible
and visible at the pointed tip
of the conductor's wand
and the flashing tip
of the violinist's bow.
Who do not have it
can only watch in awe
and applaud.

05_Pharaoh's Stool

Egyptologists
are mum on the matter
but that was some
holy crap.

06_Ghost Script

The poems arrive
spectral post
whenever they like.
Be prepared
or they'll return to sender

(address unknown).

07_Multitasking at the Cotton Patch Cafe

We can't chew and swallow
without the multi-hued glow
of multiple screens
and their flickering light.
Food alone in the twenty-first century
isn't interesting enough
to spark digestion.

08_Winter's End

I see the brown one first
the scarlet beak
the only signal
this is not some
sparrow, overfed-
and then, flitting
off to her right,
the consort, blazing red.

09_Roper RTW4640YQ1

The smarter the machines,
the less predictable their noises.

With the washer before,
you set a few dials, punched to start,

and off it went, filling and sloshing
and spinning until it's silence said "clean."

The new one clicks and chirps
in no known progression,

balancing stuff, conserving power,
locking the door against dangerous

human curiosity and forgetfulness.
I cannot read the replacement's voice

and in unsettled dreams, it chirps
and clicks out orders to platoons

of clever new appliances
in war against my peace mind.

10_Remedial Reading

Forget what Mrs. Walker taught
at Reinhardt Elementary School:

move your lips as you read
if you can't read aloud

unless it's an annual report--
your lips should never lie

and words should never
undermine your faith in words.

11_Inconvenient Weather

We should be grateful for the rain.
Especially, this small, slow rain

that doesn't swirl, terrifying,
through otherwise safe

and trim suburban streets.
With the sudden thrust

of April green, we can forget
our drought continues. When

cicadas cry in mid-July, we may
recall this cold, small rain

and long for its chilling
glaze of inconvenience.

12_Night Sky, North Texas

The contagion of shopping center lights
and freeway lights
and toll way lights
erases even Polaris tonight.

Fuck you, Commerce.

I want to know which way is north.
Your sprawl erases cardinal points
with glaring rates of growth
which cannot be sustained.

13_Archaeology

Robbing graves
to resurrect the dead
to bread and wine
and passions unbecoming
to demagogues and genealogists.

14_A Shower of Rain

You have at least
an intermittent belief.
It's otherwise impossible

to write much more than shopping lists
and pro/con arguments with yourself.
So, yes, there is a sprinkle of belief

that word may follow word
in a way that seems worthwhile
as word follows word, again.

15_Social Network Lament

Interesting people leave
and I wonder was it

something I said or didn't say
while they were here?

but then I realize
in a shame of mirror light

my voice aloud or silent
doesn't have that power.

16_Vitreous

Damn our small chameleon hearts
that turn obsidian-black and hard
then break to edges sharp as glass
and must then open tender flesh
to prove how sharply broken they are.

17_Warm Sap Haiku

Sunlight signals sap
it's time to flow again. A
florid world replies.

18_Vortex

What eludes provokes.
Life inside the mirror

must be better than this
life outside the mirror,

if only because reversed.
Dissatisfaction fuels

manifestoes, a painted
stark white canvas,

Ville Radieuse, sessions
with the Ouija Board.

What would balance look like
if there were no stasis

and a slow heat death?
Is contentment with the world,

enlivened by the appetite
for new flavors, new songs,

another choreography,
even possible with us?

19_Test

They test the siren in the park.
It dopplers through the neighborhood
as it turns through all the compass points.

It is only a test.
No imminent hail or twister
on this clear cold Saturday in March.

No incoming Stukas,
Migs, or intercontinental
ballistic missiles.

We're safe as houses
and unmoved. We grow
accustomed to the sound

so when the real

emergency emerges,
we can shrug it off.

20_Tree Yaupon

She hates the yaupon especially
in April when it flowers.

They drop, pale green and yellow,
full of pollen, to cover the pool deck

and coat the surface of the pool,
a shrunken Sargasso Sea come inland.

They clog the skimmer basket
and fill the small Polaris bag.

They track into the house in broken
star shaped buds across the tile and carpets.

The yaupon is my favorite
of our trees. I like its dome

of leaves, its shading canopy
above the grill. I hate the pool.

I want to drain it, punch big holes
in it's peeling plaster bottom,

fill it with crushed stone, sandy
loam and top soil and plant three

yaupons on an undulant, kidney
shaped lawn of fescue and ivy.

21_To Resurrect the Name of the Dead

The hard shell of Linear A remains
uncracked and we still call
these splendid dead "Minoan"

based on Mycenaean stories
of a king, his labyrinth,
his Minotaur. Crude brutes

and opportunists, Mycenaeans
can't be trusted. Neither can
sub-literate Dorians who descended,

outbruting them. Crack the shell,
archaeo-linguists. Let the language
breathe a little once again.

Return to Europe's great first nation
nouns and verbs. Let it speak
once more it's own self-given name.

22_Testament **Part 1 of 7**

I am the last to honor time before
the scarred and angry warriors from the north
attacked and brought their cunning, sullen gods.
The torchlight flickers off the stone above,
the ceiling of this ancient cave the scarred
have not discovered yet. I write this, sure
of nothing, in the fading letters of

a dying language. Were I practical,
I would use the words and letters as corrupted
by the northern simplification
of expression we worked centuries to make
complex enough to capture nuance
the scarred declare unnecessary art.

Their nouns are few and stark.
Ours are numerous and dappled
or subtly shaded and shadowed
by circumstance and possibility.

They first came ashore from ships
so small and clumsy one should call them rafts.
They wanted gold or silver, perhaps a few
of the fine bronze weapons they had heard
about in Troy. They offered cheeses, wine,
young breeding goats, and crudely woven wool.
Or, so it was remembered, by those who met them,
before the Calamity, long before my birth,
before our beautiful circular city,
north across the small finger of Sea,
vanished under Earth's dark spit;
before the swelling of the Sea washed away
our Seaside ports and villages; before the plague
that follows the death of so many together
spread among those the swelling didn't take;
before the five dark summers, when the sun
dimmed and the crops died, blackened in the fields.

23_Testament

Part 2 of 6

The cunning take the thread of fact and weave

a tapestry that lies to their advantage.
From the faceted complexity of Canossis
comes a labyrinth. From our ceremony of respect
for mindless force we can't control
but only evade with grace and knowledge,
a monster in the labyrinth. From a king--
chosen, not born, nor thrust upon a race
by murderous alliances-- a cruel tyrant
delighting in the suffering of others.
As we, weakened-- beloved faces reduced
by death to less than half-- were forced to hear, recounted
by the scarred and angry Mycenaeans.

One must learn to give the Bull the things
it needs: space, grass and grain, his mates
and offspring, and elude the things
its momentary fury wants- your death
and those of your sisters and brothers.
One must sadly learn to treat the lion
with similar evasive regard. But our
diplomacy, once revered along
all shores of the Sea, collapsed and died, rebuked.

24_Testament

Part 3 of 6

Our ships once teemed along the shore
like pups at their mother's teats.
After the swelling of the Sea, the dead
outnumbered the living and the shipwrights
died where they lived, along the Sea.
We had looked at water and the things afloat
and learned the happiest shapes and properties
of hulls. Our ships swam shallow in the Sea,

which made them quick. Our rudders thrust themselves
into the Sea, deep enough to make us
nimble but not so deep as to catch the weeds
that flourish under dazzled water.
After the swelling of the Sea, our ships lay broken,
far inland, ribs exposed like those
of whales ashore, rotting in the sun.

The bodies of the dead lay broken, too,
and bloated. Who survived could not know them.
We piled the pieces of ships and pieces of men
and burned them. Smoke arose to dim the sun.

Perhaps the Earth, Sea, and Sky were done
with us and chose to tatter all we were
and leave it to the Mycenaean swords
and fires to obliterate. What we were
lies ruined and mysterious-- evocation
to the unkind imagination
of the Brute-- alive now only
in the children of concubines and rape.

Against that, this testament, scratched
with misshapen styluses, made
from memory by unskilled hands,
with a pallid memory of ink.

25_Testament

Part 4 of 6

My daughter's sons and fathers hunt for me.
I trust she won't disclose my likely
hiding place, although enslaved and shamed.

But time itself is after me. I slow
with age and pains of wear and elusion.
The jars of brined olives, wined figs,
pickled octopus and squid, grow fewer,
daily. I can only write against
my end of time and hope the parchment
and papyrus will survive the damp
and find both kind and comprehending eyes
before the sun itself grows weary
and extinguishes the last of day.

We once saw giants in the clouds and in
connected points of stars, and named
them, gods. We placed them in their high-halled villas,
on the mountaintop, to game and frolic
with our lives-- eternal adolescents.
Once we climbed the mountain, we learned that clouds
are insubstantial vapor and the stars
are points of light that turn as we
through repetitious day and night.
The Mycenaean sweat and slash below
the clouds, servants of capricious gods
and narrow, brutish appetites. They smell
of dirt, semen, ashes, blood and dung.

26_Testament

Part 5 of 6

Before the Calamity, the Sea took
my husband, captain of a quick and agile ship.
I say the Sea, although it may have been
the savages that live beyond Iberia.
Exchange holds risk and reward, fraternal
twins that rise and fall at ends of the scale.

His ship did not return. I joined the other
widowed or solitary women at
the House of Memory and Teaching at Malaeis.
My toddling son and daughter learned with me
the memories and wisdom of the old,
the passions and poems of the young,
the triumphs, confusion and sorrows of those in between.
We grew together. We knew the beauties and
pomposities of neighbors, their frailties and strengths.
Then, the cloud. The crack and rumble, like thunder.
The sickening back and forth of the ground.
And, later, the swell of the Sea, its unbroken
wave, higher than the walls of the great
House at Knossos, surging, with its death,
a hundred ship lengths inland. Sudden cries.
A crash of ships and houses. Then, the silence.

Who could stood up and looked and cursed their eyes.
The cries and whimpers of the undead cursed their ears.
Who lived breathed in the death and found their bodies
broken in ways invisible. Salt and bitter the only tastes
on the tongue. Decay the only odor in the nose.
The astonishing silence and whimpering
the only sounds the ears can hear. The cold
of dead skin the only sensation on the flesh.
The dark smoke of pyres the only sight.
The rivers ran salty, dead fish and the unrecovered
dead the only cargo floating toward the Sea.
The undead sorted as they could, repaired
and scrubbed what wasn't ruined, salvaged stone
and timber, hinges and handles. Small boats fished
and netted what they could. A pantomime
of order, effort and routine. The songs,
all dirges and laments. The dances but foot
following foot unto exhausted sleep.

Who lived were lambs, stunned by clubs before
the knife tip bleeds the veins before the feast.

27_Testament

Part 6 of 6

Mycenaean warriors thought us priestesses
in thrall and service to our gods. Their superstition
saved our lives but not our rooms and lovingly
stored and labeled tablets, scrolls, and layered
poem-leaves. Ours, and all the Houses
of Memory and Teaching, restored, were burned
to ash and broken stone. No superstition
saved our sons and brothers. Blood and bodies
stained the roads and courtyards.

We were a people, whole and happy, once.
We were enamored with the repetitions
and surprises of the world. Our bodies, first,
and spirits, after, were broken by
the forces that hide inside the Earth, Sea
and Sky. Our remains were scattered, then,
by knowing choices of joyless brutes
who stand like men but are a cunning plague.
We were Athlanti. We were Canossis. We were
Malaeis, Phaestos, and Thera, city of the circle.
We were fleet and nimble ships, the leapers of Bulls.
We were language and curiosity, exchange
and memory. Now, we are the stories
scarred and angry men, insecure
in their own leadership and worth,
will speak around a fire on ground not theirs.

28_Regarding Revision

I find this April's voice
doesn't like last April's notes,
or even February's,
and mucks up all the chords
to suit his own thin apparatus.

29_A Specific Case of Hydrogen

When specific conditions prevail,
hydrogen finds its oxygen
and manifests as part of a tear.

30_Stomping the Big Ozarka Bottle Flat

Recycling makes me think
of bio-mass and critical mass
and mass extinctions
as my imaginary dolphin friend
chokes on the plastic rings
of a six pack.

I dream of benzene rings
and polymer shrouds
and endless coal fires
under earth.

Periclean Greeks
had no plastics
just littered the world
with tragedies.

