

ACTIVITY SUGGESTS A LIFE: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

by

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INTRODUCTION

This business of bullying the language into verse has been a part of my life for only a short while. Not until I took my first creative writing course in the spring of 1978 did I discover that I could create, that I did have something to say that could best be expressed in poetry. In many ways, I am very much a novice in the study of the poetic tradition; even though I can discuss the process of versification and can recognize and define various poetic forms and movements in poetry, I am still learning how the poetic tradition applies to me and to my work. This volume of poetry is my first major effort at finding my own style and my statement.

Ellen Bryant Voigt has defined poetry this way:

The real
poem is a knife-edge,
quick and clean.

I would like for my poems to have that sharp, thrusting quality that characterizes the works of the poets whom I admire. Such poets as W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Ntozake Shange, Edna St. Vincent Millay, A. E. Housman, Galway Kinnell, and Carol Oles all have the ability to compress emotion and thought into poems that strike deeply into the mind and heart, and I acknowledge their influence on me. My attempts to imitate these poets are usually unsuccessful;

their influence comes more from their ability to compress the language into vivid image patterns and to meld words into a poetry akin to music.

The inspiration for my poems usually comes from three places. Lines or images from my reading often strike a responsive chord in my imagination; for instance, "In Praise of Equitation" sprang from my study of Peter Shaffer's unparalleled play Equus, "Melancholia" was inspired by an image in Sinclair Lewis' Main Street, and "The Hero" rose out of a description of the Punchbowl Volcano in an essay by Joan Didion. Sometimes I turn for my subject matter to pictures, as in the three-part poem, "Flight." "In Memory: Yukio Mishima" came in part from the dramatic pictures for which the novelist loved to pose, and from my fascination with the self-destructive artist. Finally, I sense a trend in my finished work and in the notebooks I keep toward a more personal poem. "Shooting Groundhogs," "Three A.M. Poem for My Birthday," and "Cleaning Cages" are the most distinctly personal poems in this volume. In working toward a more intimate tone, I am following the advice of Galway Kinnell, who told me that I should first look inside myself for my poetry, working from my own experiences to find the statement that I want to make.

Most of my poems are in free verse; there are, however, some traditional poetic devices that I choose to use frequently. Alliteration and assonance run throughout my work, and I try to use the repetition of sound to underscore the tone of the poem as well as to provide a unifying device. In the first half of "Cat-Scratch Fever,"

for instance, the "k" sound occurs seven times; the sharpness of the consonant echoes the clawing pain. Assonance is my substitute for rhyme (although I would like to master the ability to use rhyme naturally and effectively). In "Three A.M. Poem for My Birthday," there is a great deal of repetition of both the short and the long "a" sound. Paul Ruffin's technique of the rhymed closure is one that I admire; Part II of "In Memory: Yukio Mishima" and "Melancholia" employ such a rhyme.

Several of my poems reveal my fondness for the extended metaphor. "Cat-Scratch Fever" and "On Having Food Poisoning . . ." are reports on illnesses from the inside, and I felt I could express the experience best by comparing the illnesses to predators. In "Grandma's Hands," the passage of time is the predator that ravages beauty and hope.

As several of the poems in this volume reveal, I am working toward longer poems. Laurence Lieberman has said that he sees the longer poem as capable of breaking free from the limitations of the lyric to approach the scope and magnitude of the novel. I would someday like to write a sustained work, perhaps even a book-length poem, and such poems as "Flight" and "The Chosen" are the first steps toward that goal.

One of the most important poetic devices for me, and one that I consistently strive for, is the strong closure. In my own reading, I am most likely to remember the last line or two of poems, and of those poems which are my favorites, it is usually the closure that sends the shiver curling around my neck. Among those poems whose closures come immediately to mind are Auden's "In Memory of W. B.

Yeats" and "In Praise of Limestone," Ellen Bryant Voigt's "The Burial," and Yeats' "The Second Coming."

The poems in this volume were written (and rewritten) in the sixteen months from January, 1979 to April, 1980. Those months brought great changes in my life, including my marriage, and they were a time of reevaluating both the direction my life was taking and the priorities I had assigned to the parts of my life. I feel that my work here reflects some of these changes; it reflects as well the ambivalence that I have toward many things, an ambivalence born of being female and questioning in a society geared to the male and the conformist.

If there is a single controlling theme for this volume, it is that we live out our lives in a series of traps. Every activity we engage in must come under certain limitations, and the shape of our lives is determined by how we view those limitations. This theme of the trap was not planned; it occurred to me after I was well into the work that the poems were an expression of many of my as yet unarticulated beliefs.

The poems here fall into three groups. The first deals with the limitations imposed upon us by our physical makeup. We must all submit to disease, aging, and death. The second group of poems relates self-imposed limitations. In these poems, I have tried to detail some of the activities that people choose in order to give meaning to their lives. The third group contains poems about the limitations that others impose upon us, or that we force on other creatures.

We are all trapped. The challenge and excitement come in how we choose to live in the traps, whether our activities are as meaningless as a caged hamster's running in circles or purposeful because we choose them consciously, aware of the traps.

W. H. Auden has said that the duty of the poet is this: "In the prison of his days, / Teach the free man how to praise." These poems are an attempt to explore the prison, the trap as I perceive it, and to sound a cautious note of praise.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTS A LIFE

GROUP ONE

FLIGHT

I

The Leap

impalas hang

between sun and earth

and the sky tents over them

flying banners of purple and blue

their black-tipped hooves stretch

delicately

precisely

through glistening air

velvet horns point forward

slicing the wind

the parched grass below hums

with their passage

it murmurs

come back

come back

II

The Dance

--for Edward Villedella

Fingers taut

toes stabbing at light

he fights to stay aloft

in this sea of air.

All

eyes, muscles,

blood, will

all surging upward

in one great spasm of joy,

he tries to forget the earth.

Given no wings,

he burns to fly.

III

The Battle

They are trapped in amber

a furious swirl of claws and fur

a tableau in burning sand

The cat advances

arrogant as a tank

And the baboon

flings himself to face

his death, flings himself

back

with nothing left but this:

one final shriek of rage

one fistful

DEATH OF A MOUNTAIN CLIMBER

As it should be:

the granite at your face,
all space below.

But the wind is not howling.

It is your scream you hear
as the unclimbing begins,
such a cry that might be calling
the faithful to prayer
as it echoes
off mosques of cliffs.

You obey.

You make your offering.

Your eyes close
in reverence.

Your broken knees
bend toward the sunrise.

THE HERO

--The National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii, where thousands of World War II and Vietnam victims are buried, is located in the crater of the extinct Punchbowl Volcano.

I buried my son
in a cloud yesterday,
beneath a row of white crosses
that dappled the grass of the crater
like sea foam,
then I crept
down the mountain
to a smoke-filled night
of dreams

where I saw him, his flesh
embered off,
sliding down to the sea
on a wave of lava,
coming to rest in the sand.
The water nibbled
the hot white bones,
then rose hissing
into steam,
clouding the bits of bright metal
that dangled
from one thin rib.

NOTES ON NEVER HAVING BEEN A DANCER

Easter pageant angel
with stuttering wings

Nutcracker puppet
tangled in strings
made of air

knees steadfastly knee-level
feet forever land-locked

an ostrich
nose-diving
off a cloud

CAT-SCRATCH FEVER

With meticulous care it
Sharpens its teeth
On your eyelids
Stalks, claws unsheathed
Inside your skull and
Crouches, purring,
Content in its possession.

Pain has such a delicate arrogance
It will not pounce on you unaware
It will wait for your recognition
Pain is no glutton
It always leaves you enough light
To watch it
Watching you,
Its round gaze slit with green,
Waiting

ON HAVING FOOD POISONING,
ONE WEEK BEFORE MY WEDDING

Caressing my neck like a mist,
this vampire numbs me with his touch.
His lips trail petals of blood
that curl delicately on my breasts:
my bridal bouquet,
tied with ribbons of hair.
His kiss flames through me.
He feasts on my marrow,
licks my veins dry

and leaves me,
a ravished bride,
wearing my bloodless skin
like an empty wedding gown.

MELANCHOLIA

". . . damp fingerprints in the air."
--Sinclair Lewis

I turn and he is there once more
I stumble on his feet
 they have taken root in my floor
He leaves his laundry in corners
 everything grey with a week's wear
and his egg-splattered plates
pile up in my sink
The goodbyes drag on for hours
and when I finally shut the door
I turn
 and he is there once more

GRANDMA'S HANDS

hung like bats
from her thin arms
and fluttered behind her back
in the light
to hide
what eighty years had done.
They spread their leathery wings
over the crackled picture
of a bride,
her hands as pale
and smooth as tulle.
And at night
they clutched the sheets
and seemed to listen
for voices I could not hear.

THREE A.M. POEM FOR MY BIRTHDAY

Last night the bathroom light
froze the cats
playing in the trash
with the grey hairs
I plucked out yesterday.
Trying to wash
this week's wrinkle
away, I watched the water drain,
winding slowly
and always down.
And as the March wind
scraped branches raw
on the window,
I went to bed,
clutching the headboard
like a shingle
hanging by a single nail.

GROUP TWO

CLEANING CAGES

I squat over rain-
drenched dung,
shovelling out the cat cage
for the spring.
The white fur
tufted on the wire
blurs the sunlight
slanting warm on my face.
Curled neck to knee,
I turn the earth,
shoving shredded grass
and sullen worms
into the sun.
So long in the cage,
my muscles beg to stay bent,
but the sun is going down
behind the fence and the house;
I crawl out
past the water dish,
where a floating beetle waves
as a cat slaps it
with an indifferent paw.

(for Andre the seal)

FOR A PIECE OF FISH

he would bark like a dog

shake hands

jump the hoop

and the sea would shrink

to two brown pools

too dark for us to see in

reflecting only ourselves

laughing

throwing fish as we cry

roll over

pose for a picture

play dead

LILLIAN AND THE LOCKSMITH

When Lillian met the locksmith
she saw that here were
 limitations
 locked spaces to define her needs
 jammed bolts no key could release
Don't ever leave me she crooned
and his hands were hard
as he padlocked
cold steel
around her thighs

THE COCK-PIT

I descend alone
into hot smoke
where night sweat is slick
on leather-lined walls
and bodies.

I join the ring
of silent attendants,
their wet tongues flickering
as they size up the dancers,
wait to join the dance

the man-dance
of groin to buttock
the loin-thrust music
of flesh against flesh.

an eyebrow arches.
hooded eyes trail me
through the smoke.

an arm circles
my chain-wrapped waist.
no longer alone

I climb
into the night.

As the proof and expiation, Bayard Sartoris hacked off the hand of the man who had murdered his grandmother; he placed the hand on her grave.

--The Unvanquished, William Faulkner

THE HAND THAT HELD THE GUN

arches now on his grandmother's grave,
taken root in the weeds.

The skin is prickled into bark

by a hundred suns,

and where the wrist

once met its grey-coated arm

is a twisted, blunt branch

of gristle and bone.

The knuckles whorl

around the pitted stone cross,

and the yellowhammer

in the tree above

sings with joy

of vengeance fulfilled.

IN MEMORY: YUKIO MISHIMA

I

Bushido: The Way of the Warrior

The warrior hurries through the snow,
pausing to sniff the steaming
red droppings that crackle upon the ice
and fling back in their wetness
the shrill light of the dying sun.
He thrusts the sword before him
to torch the trail into the frozen night.

Hunched and dark, its breath
a labor of frost,
the prey waits. It lurches
to meet the light.

The warrior lunges, a shriek
of triumph stinging the night.

The sword cuts a shape upon the air.

A bloody mirror wraps itself
around the warrior's feet.

II

Kendo: The Way of the Sword

The hilt must be wrapped in white cotton cloth
to sop the blood so the blade
does not slip, the deed be incomplete.

Paper and brush should be within reach.

Choose your last word with care.

Your blood will be the ink
and cannot be erased.

The long sword must be sharp
and your helper strong.
The body does not part
with the head willingly.

This is the way.

After you plunge the short sword
deep into your left side,
draw it across the abdomen
firmly. Sit quietly

Else the stomach will heave
as a volcano disgorges
the earth's entrails.

Later, after you have touched the brush
to your blood

and painted your death-word,
before you signal for the long sword,
Then will be time to say
I bore my death before me.
It is the way.

GROUP THREE

ACTIVITY SUGGESTS A LIFE

filled with purpose, he said.

I nodded and sipped my beer.

My shoes needed cleaning, I saw.

Take me, he said, I've been

searching for my true self.

But now, he said, I'm just being.

Someone opened the door

and the odor of pot crept my way.

How nice for you, I said, and wondered

who had burned the holes in the carpet.

SHOOTING GROUNDHOGS

Here he says grinning
it's time you learned
and rolls down the window
Just sight down the barrel he says
The groundhogs sniff the air
their heads black bumps
against the mounds of barren field
My finger jerks on the trigger
and a hot shower of shells
drips to the floorboard
The bullets lift each
and their bodies
turn like prayer wheels in the wind
They fall in twitching clumps
and he drives on
the cooling shells rolling back and forth
under my feet

A WINTER JOURNEY

I

Sunrise

I wake alone,
my skin mottled
from dreams of ice.

Shivering at the window,
I watch a sliver of light
claw the sky.

Cloud feathers break
from the night.

The road dips into darkness
then climbs again
to find the sun
now risen,
the glaring eye
in a neon peacock's tail.

II

View of St. Louis

I watch through a window
smeared with winter rain
as the Mississippi slices the town
like a dull scalpel,
laying bare the blackened stone
of houses, broken bones
grating one end upon another,
their marrow turned to dry rot.
The wind rattles the blinds
and I try once more
to light the damp wood,
try once more for the fire.

III

Illinois Barns at Dusk

Stolid dwarves stand sentry
in the fog,
perched high
above the stubbled fields,
staring lidless
through the night.

Fire trembles
in their eyes,
luring me
to their warmth.

But these northern lights
mist through my hands,
yellow diamonds
melting to ice.

IV

Return

Here in the thirstlands
the earth moves,
the sand shifting
from winter to warm.

I walk with dust-devils
over the Texas fields,
watching the land shiver
into pale green.

The sun glints
off feathers of racing birds
and the spring comes,
carried screaming on the wind's back.

IN PRAISE OF EQUITATION

"Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? The glory of his nostrils is terrible. He swallows the ground with fierceness and rage. He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha." --The Book of Job

at the flick of leather
I circle and bow
prance and stamp
for the bits of bright ribbon
and the steel in my mouth
that never comes out
and I nicker in my oats
in the straw at night

and remember
the trumpets

THE CHOSEN

"Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more. I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!"

--Luke 12:48-49 (RSV)

I

The Road to Jerusalem

The lizard flicks a tongue
toward the lily
Across the chalky road
an old man nods in his beard

Sheep jam the pens
beside the limestone temple
The air is bleached of all sound
but the hush of palm branches

And above the town
where rocks lie
like banked ashes
a man on a white colt
waits

II

The Thirteenth Apostle Greeted Judas

"Now this man bought a field with the reward of his wickedness. . . . The field was called in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood."

--Act 1:18-19 (RSV)

He stands mute

at the foot of the tree

below the body twisting

slowly in the night wind

the robe stained with supper wine

flecks of ash in the creases

above the bulging eyes

Clumped in the darkness

below the hill of skulls

the eleven wait

He steps slowly

over the coins strewn like seeds

lying washed in blood

III

Pentecost

a vast bellows
fans the room
and human candles dance
like ghosts in the flames
speaking words not their own
with tongues seared
by the wind
telling tales of the death
of kings
dreaming dreams of a cross
an empty tomb
and a dusty road
lined with palms

