

GREGORY ORR

# The Caged Owl

*New and Selected Poems*

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Thank you. We hope you enjoy these poems.

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# Heart

---

Its hinges rustless,  
restless; opening  
and shutting on trust.

—

We guard it;  
it guides us.  
Gods lack it.  
Vacant their gaze.

—

Doctors listen  
to its cryptic  
lisp.

From *sacred*  
to *scared*— a few  
beats skipped,  
a letter slipped.

—

Cavity and spasm;  
a spark can start  
it; parting stop it.

Such a radiant husk  
to hive our dust!

Here

---

Here's green, here's the tree  
of being  
showing the world  
renews itself:  
these leaves are proof.

Here's the abyss  
waiting with its  
kiss of shiver  
and bliss.

This is the picnic  
under the stars; this  
is the portrait of grief:  
what we are.

## (Trauma) Storm

---

Hunkered down, nerve-numb,  
in the carnal hut,  
the cave of self,  
while outside a storm  
rages.

    Huddled there,  
rubbing together  
white sticks of  
your own ribs,  
praying for sparks  
in that dark  
where tinder is heart,  
where tender is not.

# Screaming Out Loud

---

Before, you curled inward  
around hurts and scars;  
braille of battles  
seldom won; fissures  
and wristroads  
a razor made.

Stutter

from tongue-stump  
unable to utter  
its woe.

Still,

your body was mostly  
intact, and you  
told yourself:  
I'm a lucky husk.

And now, you're shattered,  
hurtled outward:  
shrapnel of stars  
and a weird music:  
bone in the wind's throat.

# Tin Cup

---

Here's a tin cup  
furred with rust.  
Here's a bad heart  
I've lugged this far.

Begging? No.  
Hauling with me  
all a mortal has.

You think I'm grim  
and thin, wizened  
as a dry stick.  
You think I've come  
to bore you  
with a long story  
of torment.

And yet I swear  
I love this earth  
that scars and scalds,  
that burns my feet.

And even hell is holy.



# Bolt from the Blue

---

## 1. BOLT FROM THE BLUE

Gash in the azure  
fabric—

Lightning crack  
of ravish.

What's touched  
is trashed—  
ash and blast.

To rip the sky  
then vanish.

Tatterflag  
I raise—  
shredded blue  
above  
dazed battlements.

## 2. STRUCK

To die and yet  
live after—

how hide  
that shatter?

what mask  
of bold  
or blank to wear?

## 3. NEITHER

Zigzag nerve zap—  
harsh torch-touch

that scorched  
like a skim of frost,  
turned bones  
to smoke—it  
scarred the heart most.

Can't halt what starts  
from that marring—

jarred into knowledge  
of gist and pith,  
crux and thrust,  
it keeps  
a tight grip;  
neither weaker  
nor stronger,  
but wiser, harder.

#### 4. ELEMENTAL SCAR

First choice—  
to nurse  
or spurn  
the hurt?

Second,  
how live  
with all  
the soft  
parts  
burned away?

Bare tree  
branded  
on the heart—  
dry twigs  
and wizening.

Neither sun

---

nor rain

assists—

to grow

at all

is to grow

slowly:

to force

the petals,

to *will*

the buds to leaf.

#### 5. THE DANCE

That lightning stroke—

a rainbow bolt—

tore right through you

and is already

speeding past the stars.

All this you see—

dance of dazzle

and debris—is aftermath.

## What I'm Saying

---

What I'm saying isn't exactly news  
and to say it bluntly is no big deal:  
once you decide to live, you have to lose.

But what if you could simply refuse  
by claiming that life itself isn't real?  
What I'm saying isn't exactly news—

the Buddhists think this world, hooked on adieus,  
is just red dust. If that's true, why feel  
that having to live you also have to lose?

Well, because we're bodies, bodies whose  
mortal bruise is time's kiss and time's seal.  
What I'm saying isn't exactly news.

The luckiest among us live in twos.  
Yet love has tied them to a burning wheel  
once they decide to live. They have to lose

because time's only tempo is the blues.  
It's what we're born to, what our prayers conceal.  
What I'm saying isn't exactly news—  
once you decide to live, you have to lose.

## The River

---

I felt both pleasure and a shiver  
as we undressed on the slippery bank  
and then plunged into the wild river.

I waded in; she entered as a diver.  
Watching her pale flanks slice the dark  
I felt both pleasure and a shiver.

Was this a source of the lake we sought, giver  
of itself to that vast, blue expanse?  
We'd learn by plunging into the wild river

and letting the current take us wherever  
it willed. I had that yielding to thank  
for how I felt both pleasure and a shiver.

But what she felt and saw I'll never  
know: separate bodies taking the same risk  
by plunging together into the wild river.

Later, past the rapids, we paused to consider  
if chance or destiny had brought us here;  
whether it was more than pleasure and a shiver  
we'd found by plunging into the wild river.

# Paradise

---

Life is random as a rolled pair of dice.  
What those thrown cubes will show no one can know,  
yet everyone thinks he wants paradise.

By which she means cool drinks, the largest slice  
of all the pies. Money, too. All the dough.  
Yet life's random as a rolled pair of dice:

seldom the same number will come up twice  
in a row. Still, "Show me the rainbow!"  
everyone thinks. He wants a paradise

where everything is calm, sexy, and precise.  
Some setting that's removed the risk and woe  
of life's randomness, so the pair of dice

(one a burning coal, the other a lump of ice)  
cancel each other's extremes. The glow  
of what everyone thinks she wants: paradise,

is what ensues: something lukewarm, something "nice."  
A world in which volcanoes never blow  
isn't my idea of paradise.

Love life's randomness: the rolled pair of dice.

## Some Part of the Lyric

---

Some part of the lyric wants to exclude  
the world with all its chaos and grief  
and so conceives shapes (a tear, a globe of dew)

whose cool symmetries create a mood  
of security. Which is something all need  
and so, the lyric's urge to exclude

what hurts us isn't simply a crude  
defense, but an embracing of a few  
essential shapes: a tear, a globe of dew.

But to what end? Are there clues  
in these forms to deeper mysteries  
that no good poem should exclude?

What can a stripped art reveal? Is a nude  
more naked than the eye can see?  
Can a tear freed of salt be a globe of dew?

And most of all—is it something we can use?  
Yes, but only as long as its beauty,  
like that of a tear or a globe of dew,  
reflects the world it meant to exclude.

# Some Notes on Shadows

---

*for Sophia*

My shadow and I—  
the other world  
pressing up against  
this one—cheek  
by jowl.

Shape  
of my grave  
right there at my feet.

—

The shadow each object  
casts is its shape  
distorted  
by mortality,

or simplified  
by that fate:  
struck dumb  
by the knowledge  
it will someday vanish.

—

Does the shadow  
emerge from the object  
or the object from the shadow?  
Which came first—  
the chicken or the tomb?  
the womb or the egg?

—

I walked at the very edge  
of a high cliff—  
for once,  
my shadow



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