

GREGORY ORR

The Caged Owl

New and Selected Poems

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This e-book edition was created through a special grant provided by the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation. Copper Canyon Press would like to thank Constellation Digital Services for their partnership in making this e-book possible.

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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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