

BURNING
MY BIRTH
CERTIFICATE

BURNING
MY BIRTH
CERTIFICATE

Poems

Pamela Sutton



THE ASHLAND POETRY PRESS

Copyright © 2018 by Pamela Sutton

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical reviews, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission of the publisher. For further information, contact the Ashland Poetry Press, Ashland University, Ashland, OH 44805, www.ashlandpoetrypress.com.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-912592-81-7

LCCN: 2017959417

Cover art: *Sunset on the Plains* by Albert Bierstadt, courtesy of Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, gift of Charles Kincaid in honor of his wife, Edith Kincaid, 1961.0006.

Cover design: Nicholas Fedorchak

Acknowledgments & Notes

The author gratefully acknowledges the following publications who published early versions of the poems in this book.

The American Journal of Poetry, forthcoming “Big Tree, USA”

Prairie Schooner, “Organic Mask” and forthcoming “Burning My Birth Certificate” and
“Afraid to Pray”

American Poetry Review, “World Without Glass,” “Gnat Season,” “Today’s Nudes” and
“Love, and a Bit With a Dog”

For Mabel Clifford McDaniel

Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Plainsong Rain	1
Primitive, Equine	2
World without Glass (after 9/11)	3
What I Want from the Hand-Built Log Cabin on Lac du Flambeau Indian Reservation, Which You Sold for No Good Reason	5
Looking for Ray	7
Bhutan Archer	8
Gnat Season	9
Today's Nudes (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)	10
Tolkien's Lost Chapters	11
The Mouse Lemur	12
Organic Mask	13
Burning My Birth Certificate	14
Night Mowing	15
Half-Notes	16
"Big Tree, USA"	18
Thirteen Ways of Looking at Martin Luther King Day	22
Angels	24
Citizen	26
My Black Pearl	27

Rain in Guangzhou	29
The Last Supper	31
Question for the End of the Century	33
Aurora Borealis	34
Ice Skating With the Ophthalmologist's Children	36
"Love, and a Bit With a Dog"	38
My Syria	41
Everything	42
Before the Strangling	43
Gray House	44
Absolute Ceiling	46
Medical Earth	48
City Bird Sursum Corda	50
Remedial God	51
Before Co-Dependency	52
Bone House Broken	53
Compass of Fire	54
Dream Garden	56
Dream of Me	57
Afraid to Pray	58
Skyward	60
The Boy Who Loved Planes	61
Dragonfly	62
Stickball (or Why I Love You)	63
The Unborn Dead	65
After the Blizzard	66
The Absence of Trees	68

“Most of my symphonies are tombstones.”
—Shostakovich

Plainsong Rain

for W.S. Merwin

When a singular voice
Blends into plainsong rain
I feel clean and whole.
I want to begin again.

How did I find your instructions
To build a sanctuary of wet leaves?

Primitive, Equine

The towers falter impossibly and implode. A team of muscular Clydesdales breaks loose from their harnesses and tackle. As in a waking Guernica nightmare I chase the giant, panicked horses all over the Kentucky farm. My boots slip over and over in muddy vermilion clay. My palms blister then bleed from sodden rope. Their silvery feathers redden with mud from hoof head to fetlock. Their necks arch and spring high and away like oblique bridges breaking. But I must catch and calm the horses because in their frenzied terror they could become deadly. Horse power. Hooves like mason's mallets kick out at me. Blinding-bright squares of rain flood the farm as I rope one horse, only to lose another. Blue-black sky pours reams of sparkling handwritten opera. I spin in erratic circles trying to catch the soaked pages as they crumble into my hands like papier mache. Horses and rope and opera. Tornadic Clydesdales. Ears laid flat against their heads; intelligent eyes wide and white with lightning; broad hooves kicking out at me, and within the darkest depths of me: primitive, equine. Wet music falling; never caught and collected. Never silenced; never heard.

World without Glass (after 9/11)

This is not,
beloved daughter,
the world I roughed-out for you—
world without glass:
all windows shattered;
all mirrors broken;
bad luck forever.

We are left only with stone. And names.
Aethelstan sounds like Afghanistan;
“stone” sounds like “stan.”
And “stan” means “place.”
If the stones ever cease to bleed,
I beg you wipe them clean
and learn to read
the first idea of heaven:
Skara Brae; the Stones of Stenness;
Sunkenkirk; and Stonehenge.
Enter into that ampitheatre
and worship rocks an astronaut
stole from the moon—there:
“between the woods and frozen lake
the darkest evening of the year.”
Worship the feldspar and spotted dolorite;
the green-stone and blue-stone.
And from these stones learn how to write.

Having no glass, we are reduced to narrow
open windows and violent weather.
Therefore, make much of the light.
Braid the stone. Be certain
to carve your Letters out
rather than pounding them in. Though
more difficult, your words will be hypnotic.
The future will clamor
to place hands upon your story

about how we once had
a world with glass:
the crystalline morning we thought was ours—
and how it burst
into broken wings and desert wars.

What I Want from the Hand-Built Log Cabin on Lac du Flambeau Indian Reservation, Which You Sold for No Good Reason

Mail me the bus-sized boulder
that could never be moved
by dynamite or bulldozer.

Send the owl's midnight question:
"Who's there? Who's there?"

Fed Ex all the Ojibway dances—
their drums re-threading each bead
of my blood into a dream-catcher.

Email the smell of knotty pine.
Twitter the iridescent hummingbirds
jousting for nectar.

Box up the sound of the aluminum canoe
cutting through rough current and glass.
Throw in the patterns of water-spiders
walking upon the still water.

Send the quiet stones; each full moon;
and every sun that ever set
on White Sand Lake.

Don't forget to Overnight the loon's weeping
and the eagle's height at noon.

Above all, Express mail the thickest log dad ever split:
so thick he had to fling it backwards over
his shoulder then heft it forwards onto
the chopping block again and
again and over and over until
the dense core cracked

in half; then fourths;
then eighths; then kindling.
I am a lost child alone
in a black metal forest sharp and cold:
black because gone, because sold.

Send fire.

Looking for Ray

Spinning a mirror between my palms
the word “brave”
the word “man”
twirling faster, faster seeing
a face and the words “brave man.”

Banner of smoke unfurls like Batman’s cape
over Gotham City. Then the sinking
feeling of floors collapsing—
doors opening to clouds,
to reams of bright paper—
confetti nightmare parade;
ninety interlocking stories
melting beneath my feet;
tectonic plates sheering the ocean floor,
wrestling the God be-deviled sky,
dropping through gloves of liquid metal,
grabbing doorknobs locked forever,
climbing staircases spiraling
through windows shredding light,
holding the incandescent words
“brave man” “brave man”
torching the air from my lungs,
branding the heart in my hands;
landing in the twisted sheets
of my soft, warm bed
that will never feel safe again.

Looking for Ray in the cereal aisle
of the supermarket.
Still looking.
Looking for Ray.

Bhutan Archer

Count the waterfalls soaring like infinite
arrows over Taroko Gorge.

I embrace each sharp child.

Make hideous the pageantry of war,
which is not lovely. War is not
a red cardinal marching among
white blossoms.

My father was a soldier;
his father was a soldier;
his father was a soldier.
Get the point?

Bhutan archer! Splinter my tears
into fletched ocean waves.

Set each wave on fire.

Gnat Season

One brown gnat scuttles between letters on this page;
a second draws a dotted line across the inside of my wrist:
cut along the dotted line....
And now I see a whole tribe floating in my coffee.
Why do they die just to ruin my skinny vanilla latte?

It is South Florida's season of brown gnats, and I hate
the season of brown gnats. Their ochre-bald heads turn up
to look at me and my visceral rage at their tenacity.
They are only the size of Lincoln's eye on a penny
or the dot over the letter "i." Killing them all would
cleans the world forever of dirt sewn in sweaty broadcloth.

But I choose not to kill them. They are silent and do not bite.
Their population is their pestilence: one of me; billions of them.
From here each gnat looks like a perfectly cut scarab—
oily diamonds spilling from one place to another.

They gather on this page as if to codify an urgent message:
something about coffee or coffee-brown dung water:
something about thirst greater than the fear of death.

Today's Nudes (Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

are nothing like yesterday's nudes
surfing on an open shell blown in by Zephyrs.
Melancholy ripens in her pearlescent gaze. She
knows the flowers tossed in celebration at her feet today
will be buried with her tomorrow.

Today's nudes are nothing
like the Sabine women rising up from an
800-year-sleep of chiseled outrage. Marble muscles
twist awake in the Florentine sun.

Today's nudes appear and vanish at Google-speed.
Satellites lasso and tether a blindfolded woman in a circus pose.
See the red rubber ball stuffed in her mouth
and strapped tightly in place around her head.
See her suspended in mid-air like a female piñata.

Or, today's nudes are erased from head to toe in chador;
then buried to the neck in sand whittled from the coldest stars.
Watch the hand-thrown stones sculpt her face, instead of
the other way 'round.