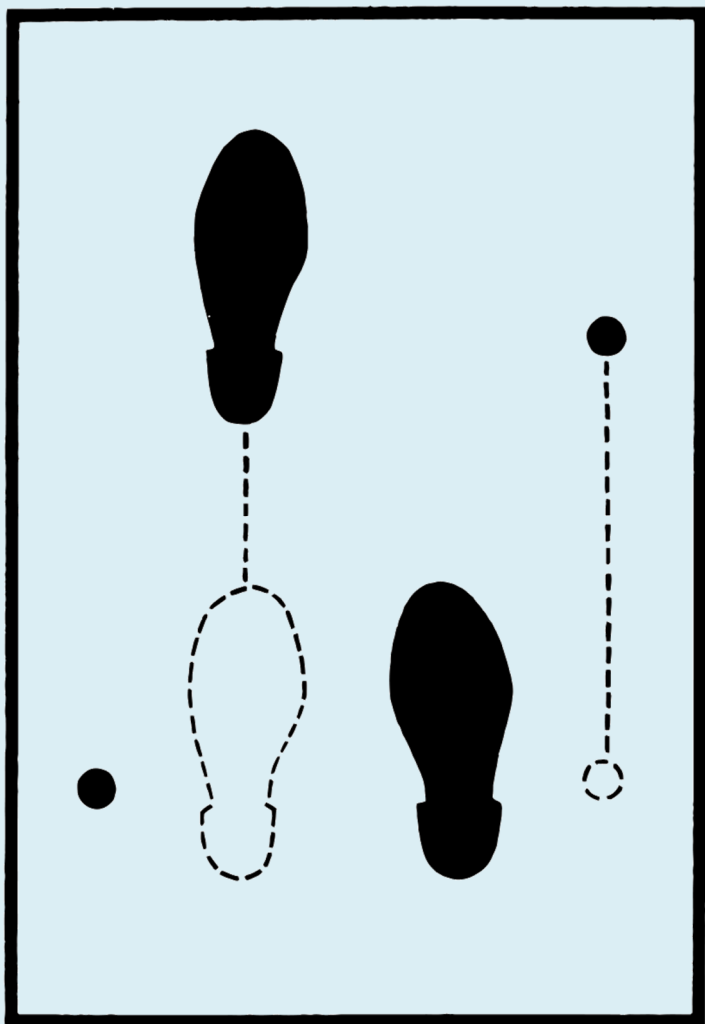


CRUTCH DANCES



POEMS BY
HARLEN WELSH

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MAAPs/BOSTON

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“Caladium” appeared in the Fall ’85 issue of *Yellow Silk: Journal of Erotic Arts*; “Klopstock!”, in differing forms, appeared as “Storm” in *Dean’s List*, *Snare* and *re:Ports*; “Word Processors of the Gods” and “Fugue #3” appeared in *Snare*; “The Museum Guard” was in *Trendy Rag*; “Lenny’s Chicken Wings” appeared in *Reiz Ende Strasse*; “Rear Entry” was rejected by *The Paris Review*, albeit with a personalized rejection slip, which said they liked it a lot; “Remember” appeared in *re:Ports*, as did “A Beautiful Place by the Sea”; “Remember” also appeared in *MAAPs* as part of an Instant Book; “Poem for Sunday Painters” and “China Needs an Emperor” appeared in *MAAPs*, as well as many other poems, although I don’t remember what poems appeared in which issues.

This book is dedicated to the following persons:

Kosta Demos, whose advice and direct input proved invaluable; Edward Batchelder, who has always been there for my better self, and who has perpetually refrained from passing judgement on the rest of me; Barbara Jordan, prized possession of the gods, who has brought me tea a thousand times; Pamela Jo Williams, my first fan, hopefully still waiting for *Filler for a Pornographic Novel*; Joe Spitz, cynic and moviegoer, who unfortunately for himself often sees things my way; Ann Kim, who wishes to remain anonymous; Brian George, author of the *Tibetan Yellow Pages of the Dead and Dying*; A.M. Fine, Cosmic Elder, who drinks coffee with zeal and eats the Styrofoam cup afterwards; Randy Pierce, missing; Paula Motroni, a perfect example of what Graves meant by The White Goddess; Keith Cuddaback, currently starring in the Radio Singapore production of *Attack of the Doll People*; Richard Spaffle, professional poetry heckler, McDonald’s regional manager and convicted exhibitionist; and, especially, Betsey, “My wife with the ...,” who puts up with so much, and so little, but just enough to nurse me back to health, may lightning strike again.

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*True, there are occasions
For white uniforms and a special language
Kept secret from the others.*

– John Ashbery

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POEM FOR JOHN WIENERS

I, too, wear out the streets of Boston.

But I run my hands along the fuselage
of your early work

as though it were a Buick.

FUGUE #2

Vines intrude from the east
The Blond One walks among them

Engendered as a thicket clusters,
The Forest (off which we are

but a branch) and the enmity
of the ensuing hells, mix.

She is the death of the blossomed hearth
Extinguisher of and the wyvern scent

We have only to set the Beastie free
On a Wednesday of over-turned tarantulas

And they shall be wed on copious beddings
Of frost, caught in the jaded net of comfort

Asleep in the dry sun force
Lying on its back like a starfish in Kansas.

FUGUE #3

It is a long sleep that awaits us
inside the inflatable god.
Nothing in the mirrored lakes
come morning, come the long procession
of sectional fear.

Service rendered, you have prepared
nine bodies by noon. By three o'clock
tea is about to be served
in a secret preparation concocted
of scotch and other chemicals
made to look like tea.

No tyre marks lead away from this village.
Everyone sleeps late, practising
for the Darkness Pageant,
and life passes them by
in a car with the windows rolled up.

FUGUE #7

The flying squirrel, nailed
To the barn door, suffers.
It is a warning to Rocky and his friends
Not to come this way.
For this is the way of history, which says,
Look to me as down a long dark corridor.
One doesn't, you know; instead, having
Tagged the mis-shapen bird called hindsight,
We merely send it on its way, hoping
That it will turn up again in some other
Sanctuary of recollected thought.

“KLOPSTOCK!”

Once and only for once, there it is,
The sky
As in a Penguin Classic.

October slower than a barge.

The low amorphous sun smolders there.
Beyond it, and the clouds arrive

As if on a field of valor.
Here is a room from which to conduct
The storm. It is somehow bearable

That we should pass through rain
Like this.
I have been through worse

To see you.

CALADIUM

after Breton

My wife with the face of a Federal building
My wife with the face of a zebra
With the face of a jury foreman delivering a verdict
With a face behind a wedding veil of baby's breath
With the face of a clock
With a face for every hour of every day
My wife with a brow of lintels initialed by architectural deviance
My wife with the eyes of a pilot and the glance of staves
With the eyes of a spider
With eyes that move behind a portrait on the wall
With the eyes of a ferret
My wife with the teeth of a saw and the tongue of a bird
My wife with the tongue of fire
With the tongue of a key slowly turning in the lock
With the tongue of a philosopher and the tongue of a shore
My wife with the tongue of a quirt
With the neck of the abyss and the shoulders of "Them thar hills"
With the neck of a lamp and the shoulders of a road
With the head of St. John the Baptist on a tray of hors d'oeuvres
With the head of a saint and the brain of a well
My wife with the head of Belgian lettuce
With the head of the house
With the head of a canopied bed where fantasies are implemented
My wife with the brain of a flower
With the brain of a burning village
with the brain of Christmas
With the brain of Lex Luthor in the Pyramids of Hell
My wife with the brain of an island
With the brain of Hieronymus Bosch
With the breasts of Jupiter and the nipples of the moon

With the shoulders of Quasimodo's girlfriend
With the shoulders of a shrugged responsibility
With the shoulders of a lynx and the biceps of a thought
With the bust of Artemis and the breastplates of the gods
With a bust as in "California or ..."
With the bust of a cherub and the heart of a glove
My wife with the heart of a meadow
With the heart of a bomb planted in a public building
With the heart of an Aztec in the hands of a priest
With the heart of a leopard pulsing in the night
With the heart of darkness alive in the sun
With the heart of a beehive in the hands of a nun
My wife with the hands of a fallen dynasty
With the hands of a blindman in a tactile museum
With hands drawing curtains in the window across the street
With the hands of a sapling with the hands of an oak
My wife with the hands of a widow
With the hands of a child and the nails of a lemming
My wife with the nails of the "True Cross"
With the nails of Sally Bowles in "Goodbye to Berlin"
With the nails of climbing irons in bed
With nails like complicated surgical instruments
With nails like secret pen knife letter openers that are actually combs
With the nails of Nosferatu wandering among the tombs
With the nails of Howard Hughes reaching for a Kleenex (toward the end)
My wife with the nails of Liquid Paper
With the nails of a gypsy scratching her bush
My wife with the bush of moss on the north of a tree
With the bush of diamonds lingering from the rain
With the bush of the savanna and the bush that doesn't match her hair

With the burning bush of Moses
With the bush of a houseplant that prefers Bartok to Debussy
My wife beating around the bush and then, finally, getting
to the point
My wife with the bush of ghosts
With the legs of the Beast of Baluchistan
My wife with the legs of a crawlspace
With legs that taste of the desert and smell of the “Unknown, Feared Other”
With legs that rise like columns from the sea
With the legs of an Amazon encased in glove leather
With the legs of a boy in sneakers back from Dolores beach
My wife with the legs of a tripod on the edge of a cliff
My wife with the sex of a camera
With the sex of a lizard in heat
With the sex of a delicatessen
With the sex of a magnet
With the sex of an anchor thrown into the sea
My wife with the sex of an armillary sphere
With the sex of a cabin boy
With the sex of a pair of scissors
My wife with the sex of a woman made of glass

POEM FOR STARVING NATIONS

Go ahead, sleep through history; fall off
the Ptolemaic bridge.

Every dream
of all the ruined nations

bleeds into your waking hours. Relax,
it's as natural as a cancer – healthy

in its own way.
Go ahead, sleep through history.

Sleep facing the east
and face that way forever.

As the last leaf falls in Ethiopia,
and as the song of the Nile

drains from your ears,
have a cigarette

and sleep through history.

POEM FOR NEW ROMANTICS

The wind
in a vowel

eventually breaks through
to the eroding passageways
of our neglected memories.

Puja flowers
and followers alike
have withered on the altars.

I got
a rug burn
fucking you there.

As if they were in front of me
I can see your panties (all 7 pair)
lined up along the foot of the bed

like a calendar of
THINGS TO DO.
The embroidery is faint but legible,

like Lord Byron's signature
at Sounion.

ALL OF MY POEMS ARE FOR BILL KNOTT

Except this one.

REMEMBER

A necrophiliac
is someone

who only wants you
for your body.

GOT A JOB

typing the m's on the m&m's

THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST

(202) 456 • 1414

EGGS

You can tell when they want to be beaten.

WHITE HOUSE

Dark shadows.

THE MUSEUM GUARD

Tonight to think of nothing
but what you'll do

in front of the portraits
having covered their mouths with tape.

CHINA NEEDS AN EMPEROR

It's a problem when you love the chair
you want to break
more than you hate the person
you want to break it for.

WORD PROCESSORS OF THE GODS

We can't all of us perspire aristocracy
into our favorite work clothes. But

I do.

I feel like a deposed Russian prince

writing in exile.

This alone is a great effulgence

and lights my way to the typewriter
late at night, at the helm of the universe.

CLASSICAL NIHILISM

We are given one knife,
and along its blade we live
our lives, the moments of which
are as vodka poured into a lake.

Stones unturned hide nests of snakes.
We pass through sewers to achieve a higher order.
Acid rain eats through our umbrella.
The song of the earth has changed keys.

Peace is what we want,
not the peace of cemeteries
but peace that comes over you
once you know that it's too late; the kind
of peace one feels
knowing one keeps a gun
near one's poison,

just in case the drugs don't work.

POEM FOR SUNDAY PAINTERS

I used to paint with a steady hand.
As a child I had it down.
Mine was a busy temple.

Now I'm no worse than what they do in Rome.
Every nun, pregnant with Jesus, turns up
on my doorstep, broad and white as newly stretched
canvas, and that's when I think of you.
For ten days with no obligation, the oracle
spoke to me, gurgling in a kitchen sink in Torrence.

Nothing short of moving back to the hibachi gods
of California could save me from this fate.
Still I remain unmoved. Jesus had a house
in Torrence. I've let all the limos
drive off to heaven without me. There is a whim
which destroys everything we love, even our masterpieces,

which is why, with eyes as open as ball fields,
I can weather time. With nerves of stainless
steel, I apply my brush

to the back of your canvas.

WHY COFFEE IS SOMEHOW WARMER WHEN YOU'RE AROUND

I have a white spot
just above my left breast
it is where an angel brushed me
with her eyelids

on the day we finance our hearts
sometimes we just stare at each other
like watching re-runs of Gilligan's Island
laughing mechanical laughter too

across the plateau of coffee
cups and ash trays
where we lean like giants
at a game of chess

occasionally somberness occurs
though we try not to get too heavy
because you wouldn't see me
if I were nothing but problems

I know this and you know this
but it's okay because I like you
in your new dress (new to me, at
least), and the day is like a month

of Sundays. At the edge of the table
where the buttons of your blouse
vanish into your lap like a frame-by-frame
sunset made of quartz

angels are cool to the touch
but white-hot
to look at
like stars, moonstones

and the glint
in your eyes
that says,
“Debra!”

THE BELLS OF MONMARTRE

never ring.
They are made of air
that smells of the sea
and hang over a mountain lake
in the heart of Paris.

BARBIE & KEN I

In the Mannerist tradition, Barbie's
beach blanket is blowing down the beach.

Ken runs to chase it.

Distortion occurs where the heat waves quiver up
like invisible cobras from the sand.

New, Bendable Legs Barbie comes out of the sea.
She asks herself, "Where's Ken?"

LENNY'S CHICKEN WINGS

he was one of those deformed kids
grew up fat with inner tubes
goose-pimpled, glasses
thick as bottle bottoms
hiding a face
not even his reflection in the toaster
could love
had hundreds of dried yellow chicken wings
growing off every part of his body
handles lifting him in all directions
at once, carrying him nowhere

after the first amputation attempt
they discovered that the dried yellow
chicken wings grew back almost
immediately, like lizard's tails
though they never seemed to grow back
fast enough, as far as the Chinese
restaurant was concerned
having purchased Lenny
from a passing drunk

NIGHT PORTER

for Joe Spitz

Joy Division?
Here there can be but one bordello.

I watch you through the wire,
They forgot to shave your head.

Your government issue
Party dress
Is not festive.

And though the guards may come
And go, they're not talking
Of Michelangelo; they're

Talking knockwurst and Christmas,
Valentines and beer,

And the use of women
In porch swings

As army stuff.

POEM FOR HART CRANE

A drowning man gets to the bottom
Of what's troubling him.

A BEAUTIFUL PLACE BY THE SEA

Because a man must leave his coffee
to walk beside the sea,
the call of the dark card can be put off
till after breakfast – held like a wolf
at bay. The twin monuments
of salt and pepper

are left on the table at home.
Let them confront the eggs.
While everyone sleeps oblivious

to the red sky of morning,
the ocean leaves its hieroglyphs
and sailors check their moorings.

All night the light from faraway stars
collects in the tide pools
interstellar debris, driftwood. Life

springs to life as you pass
in the transmigration which continues
of ideas and where they begin

at the other end of the universe
only to wind up here. Your pockets
are full of them, crust

of midnight mineral deposits
sleep
you haven't washed from your eyes.

White marble and the breath of stars
the breadth and width of the Cosmic Desk
this you carry with you wherever you go

from the ugly restaurants
putting out their garbage at dawn, along
the stormy calm of morning

through to the center of this dead town.
The life and limb of lobstermen
is the only thing coursing through this water.

This hour belongs to no-one, dies like a stopwatch
open to the tides. Only the cormorants see it
while they dry their wings in the impossible air.

A WEDDING IN THE CORN

for Pammy & Peter

Defined by the lexicon
Of Indian summer,
By long winters spent keeping each other warm,
By the deafening noise of spring,
By the life-well of the ocean,
Beneath that picture-perfect postcard blue sky
Of summer, defined

by harvest, to rest
For a place to stand on the corn mosaic floor
Of logarithm, two loves collide
Like threads of cloth which span the loom,
Approaching each other from perpendicular sides,
Threads which mesh in passing, invisibly

Mixed, inextricable.
Shaped by all these contours, love, at last,
Comes into its own.
And then it is time to share it with the others.

That is when we marry.

The Spirit Crow does wedge itself
Between this sky, but it is autumn now,
And everyone is welcome.
Even the Land o' Lakes corn goddess
Is up to her ears in silk.

And while Cupid sneaks around
Planting love bombs in everybody's luggage,
These two have somehow managed
To put the atom back together.

I have seen love like this, cupped it
Like a firefly
To warm my hands. I brought it to school
In first grade for show and tell.
I have fashioned a sunrise in my hands
With love like this.
I have held love like this,
Like handling porcupines
In caves of interest. I have felt love
Like this, and formed a pearl around it
So it wouldn't hurt me. I have had love
Like this and kept it secret
Kept it like a mistress, kept it
In the sky.
I have seen love like this extinguish
The flames of the moon.
I've seen it carve its initials
On every tree in the forest.

That love that I have seen
Is a sun that burns forever, regardless,
And lives close to us on the horizon.
To turn one's back to it
Is to live in sadness,
That sun defies us,
Keeps coming up
Every day, no matter
How many blinds we pull, no matter
how effective our prescription sunglasses

Are advertised to be.
Hey!
Better to live one's life on one's back,
Prosperous in lawn chairs
By the pool; salamanders among tourists.
That's what honeymoons are all about.

And so we are married where we store sunlight
In the finishing nails
Of autumn.

The barn and the plow are glowing,
And here we all are,
Here we all convene, listening
To the earth

Through ears of corn.

DYING OF LANGUAGE IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

This is a poem for birds with only one wing.

– John Wieners

I want to write a simple poem
Simple as a homemade bomb
And to walk down the alley
Of Beirut, strolling casually,
The way I do when idling
Down the aisles
Of an office supply store.
In the end,
Good will be served,
As if correction fluid
Could fix everything.

I want to write a simple poem, a crutch poem
A poem you can wear in your button
A poem so exact you won't need to read it
A poem as sure and handsome as the M-16
That is the object of your embrace
A poem that plagues you throughout the week

And spills over into your weekend
A poem like your marriage
That you can never get away from
A poem for the hard-of-hearing
For the blind to read with their fingers
A poem for anyone crawling around in a glass.

A poem like a bullet hole.

I want to write a broken poem,
A poem with padded walls, crossbeams
And a pit. A poem for vacationers
In Hell. A poem with a floor
Of endless sorrows, a poem for despots
Immortal and lifeless,
Who sit so peacefully upon the burning
Furniture in a room.
I want to write a broken poem, a poem
With a door kicked in by the secret police
A poem of fractured teeth, irreversible
Head injuries,
And bloody sidewalk cafés.

But let me write a nothing poem
A poem for ten minutes from now
When this book goes off in your hands,
A poem for perspiration
Behind the Levolors of well being,
Where the lead torturer waits for the doctor
To revive his latest corpse
So he can kill it one more time.
A poem for American dollars
In the graves of Somozan hunchbacks, dollars stuffed
Into Baby Doc's overnight bag, or safely packed away
In the valet of a 3rd World courier
Aboard a condoned terrorist flight
Of the imagination,
Of the self-styled Machiavellian
On his way to his Swiss bank account of love
To the Real Estate and Star Wars investments
Of CIA/KGB-backed dictators who enjoy their work
And keep time-shared condominiums in Manhattan.
A poem for monsters with gold cards.
A poem for broken people, for mountains leaning on sticks.
A poem for victims of gossip, yellow journalism, and vengeance.
A poem for official jargon
And its double agent double-edged
Clientele.

For lovers of slow death.
For emotional cripples with barbed-wire heads.
A poem for those who create hunger
On forgotten islands
And live secretly in Miami, Bel Aire, Rio
And Paree.
A poem for politicians.
A poem for vegetarians, like Hitler,
Who got his way after all.
For the policemen of the earth
For the gangsters who pay them
For all these birds that fly crooked;
Cowbirds
A poem for anyone rotting in an unmarked mass grave
A poem because of the Tylenol scare, a poem for the Ukraine
A poem because I got a free coupon from the American
Tobacco Institute,
Because Marcos got himself re-elected
in Hawaii
And because I want to, and tyrants do what they want.
Because this is it.
Because this
Could be Beirut
And because I'm dying
Of language
In the Nuclear Age.

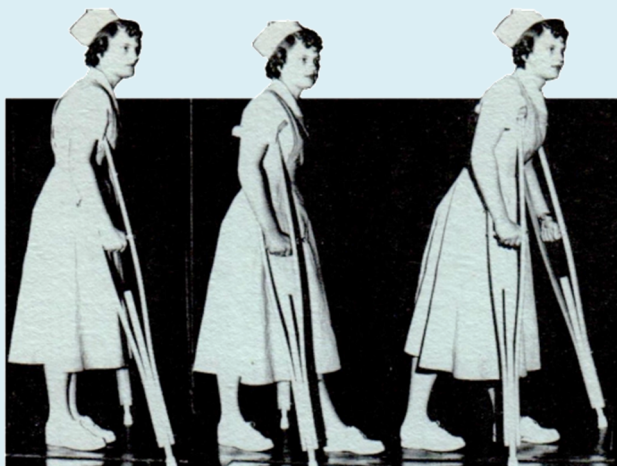
REAR ENTRY

Early this morning, shortly after dawn, I caught myself reading a passage in *Ecce Homo*, entitled, “Why I Am So Clever,” in which Nietzsche says,

“Early in the morning, when day breaks, when all is fresh, in the dawn of one’s strength – to read a book at such a time is simply depraved.”



Harlen Welsh was born in North Bend, Oregon in 1954. He has done what he had to and will do it again, if necessary.



“Terrific. . .Tight, sinuous, surprising! More ways to entertain you than a dancing flea.”

– Andrei Codrescu

“Tough, funny, passionate and smart. Christ!”

– William Corbett

“Insufferable. . .”

– Bill Knott