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poems by

Duane Locke

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FLORIDA RAINS

These are the hot months of heavy rain:
the fish in streams under bridges
add upper floors to their houses,
the water puts on a brown robe,
goes on a pilgrimage towards a shrine of roots,
some drops soaked through deep sand
climb stairs of wood, fiber, sap,
watch the moon from a penthouse in a pine.
The rain gives some of the sky it carries
to cure the mallows' rheumatism;
the mallows stand up straight and leap.
The morning glories keep open their shutters;
in the music room the bees practice their dancing lessons.
The prickly pears put on broad brimmed hats
and light yellow torches.

PAOLO AND FRANCESCA

Paolo chained to an antique chair
embroidered with swans halberds
shoelaces pulled out of shoes
snails oysters sea slugs shell-less hermit crabs
grottos ivory legged centipedes
the door lock made out of turned away faces
the door carved on the limp of a walking cane
Under mummy cloth of fist three moonlit scales
A clubbed seal slid inside his brain
Beheaded people wept by a horse's skeleton
Red cloaked men rode on bicycles painted like palomino horses
His sword climbed out of the tower
slashed open a bag of dyed hair
the hair turned grey and twisted itself into a rubber ball
bounced on a tight rope stretched between columns

Francesca broke the teeth of her black comb
Her hair climbed the vines of the wind
The moon covered itself with black ink
She pulled a crimson cord and rain fell on her pin cushion
She looked for fleas on the oranges in the crystal bowl
She ran down a long and narrow archway to a window
A wild poppy floated in the middle of the Arno
A painted magpie flew from the ceiling
She tied the door shut with the court clown's umbilical cord
A turban bled on her fingernails

Her husband who had no name signed his name
on the wilted eyes of a magnolia
He covered six raindrops with black silk
His knife cut a cantaloupe in uneven slices

Black was painted over the spots on the dead peacock's tail
From the canopy of his bed hung three skinned chickens
He carefully painted his eyes on his mirror

Paolo pushed his helmet through the blue of a heated ribbon
He tortured the shadows left by crows
The sunflower turned her eyelashes towards his melted gauntlet
A cupid walked on the water in a glass
A river arose in the thighs of the road
On each of his fingers stood a paralyzed bellringer

Francesca's flesh turned the color of sackcloth
A goat nibbled on her fallen pearls
Two disembodied skulls peeped in the broken window
The ashes in the fireplace took off their black robes
A bowl of mango stomped on a stack of nightgowns
The yellow from sweet peppers leaped into her sewing basket
She breathed into the empty skin of an orange
The lute that hung on the wall was plucked by an empty glove
On the floor a severed hand came out of a white cuff
Her tears were the color of old streets
She sewed Paolo's horse to the white wall
Her nameless husband saddled the beach sand
spurred cocinas and sand fleas
chased the cucumber eyes of bobcats
Grafted the pictures of decapitated lizards on his side
His dogs tore the yellow from squashes
The ibis was wounded by his eye glasses
The moon dropped its grapefruit on the sidewalk
Six lawbooks carried him on their shoulders
His bare feet were kissed by blindfolded children
Their mothers blessed his masks
and stuck swords between the eyes of bulls

AN INSIGHT WHILE STANDING
ON A SPOT BY THE HUDSON RIVER
WHERE A BULLDOZER HAD DESTROYED
A GROVE OF ASPEN TREES

They knocked down
the trees
Their ballpoint pens knocked
down the trees
Their wives switched on
the electric lights
pretended the lights
were moons
Their wives stood
on pillows
pretended the pillows
were mountains
Their wives howled
like coyotes
They came home
shot their wives
and turned in their skins
for bounty

ONE'S COUNTRY

It is hard to speak of one's country.

No one knows what it is;

all that has been spoken
should have been unspoken.

The British should never have
built that museum of weapons
and put a plaque
where the Irish bomb exploded,
but should have played recordings
of the tower's ravens.

The country I know is not in the archives,
not in the illusions spoken by retired colonels,
not in the empty words of history books,
but in the shadows,
those unrepeatable dark spots
made on the shore sand by sandpipers.

NEL MEZZO DEL CARMIN DI NOSTRA VITA

You go to strange roads to find a space
that built you. The roads never
have been paved, not enough traffic.
On borders a row of statues. Each
has a part missing, a hand, a leg,
or a head. Each has a label, but the name
does not correspond to what is named.
One says, "St. Paul in a trance after
falling from his horse," but actually
it is Naropa sitting on an antelope skin,
although in autumn it could be easily
taken for a Navaho sand painting. Those
who have observed through telescopes
swear it is a clothesline. The road
signs are bizarre. The arrows are bent
backwards and point to where you have come
from. The letters are faded, but a faint
outline seems to say, "Private Property.
Keep Off." But not a footmark or tiremark
has even appeared to press down the wild grasses
or disturb the inexplicable pattern of ruts.
Speculation holds the marks made on the sand
were made by herons, raccoons, possums,
armadillos, bobcats, and lizards — as they
were the only visitors ever welcomed. It has been
pointed out that the marks resemble
Egyptian hieroglyphics, or the Hindi text
of Kabir's poems, or the Persian of Rumi's.
It is held by a few that the signs
had no maker, but grew up spontaneously,
unexpectedly, overnight as Australian pines do.
Some say they are not signs at all, but
fallen pine needles. On the edge
near a new housing development, there
is what appears to be a "For Sale" sign.

The numbers are written backwards, in the handwriting of Leonardo. They are probably a phone number, or perhaps a secret code. When a cemetery was removed from the Northern tip of the island, a journal was found in one of the graves. An entry said the "For Sale" sign was put up by a boy on his way home from school. The boy did it to please his parents, and the sign had no meaning or reality beyond being a gesture to seek praise. The writer confessed that he was the boy and asked for forgiveness. When the sign is examined closely, it can be seen there are some indecipherable words written over and behind the numbers, but this is a different style of writing, written forward and none of the "t's" are crossed. It seems to be an ancient calligraphy, but there is a similarity to the original in the curves of the vowels. It was as if written by the same person after an injury, or something that made the hand unsteady. Many were asked, but none on the island had ever heard of the writer of the journal. There were the usual arguments about the authenticity of the transcriptions and translations. The journal was written in mixtures of French, Flemish, Italian, Latin, German, and Swiss-German. After the original handwriting in the journal faded away, a twig with two leaves sprouted from the binding. No real estate man ever went near. It was said that the palmettos and bay bushes were too abundant for anyone ever to build a tennis court a peep show a jail or a casino on this fertile region. Its very density caused it to be denounced or avoided.

Its capacity for growth even created envy and the public voted to stop the sewer line at its borders. Surveyors found it impossible to make a map. For often they found the palmettos where the bay bushes were supposed to be. Once a fund was sought to build a wall and shut this region off from the rest of the world, but indifference prevailed. The general consensus was that no one ever inhabited this place. Some said it did not exist, or at least there was no empirical evidence. But someone must have dug the ditches around it and put up piles of dirt at all possible entrances. At each possible entrance there were empty cans and old sandwich papers as if people out for pleasure had come this far and went no farther. There is no certainty when this debris from over a thousand picnics had its origin, or will have its end. It was even suggested that the ditches were dug to keep the grass from covering up the evidence of pleasures. The lighthouse keeper often bored with watching the complex motion of sea gulls and longing for a simple motion like the turning of a wheel often set his telescope on this area. He hoped he would see an automobile. He longed for something that could be mathematically analyzed or mechanically charted. But he never saw anything that ever made sense to him. Once he saw a bush start to burn. But there was no cause, and he looked the other way. He said no human or any domesticated thing ever frequented this place. Not even a stray dog. Once when he observed from a distance the whole place began to look like some radiant bird, but he surmised this happened because he had stood too long in the sun.

ON HOWARD FRANKLIN BRIDGE

Hundreds of carlights on bridge, stalled,
greyhound track opening.
Three skimmers out for a night flight,
slash openings in the dark water.
On the island reluctantly shoveled from the bay
a row of planks tacked to one another
and a cement mixer that cries like a coyote at the moon.
Now that the herons and terns have been chased away
industry lays its eggs.
The lights inside the condominiums
pat their paws on the card players' faces.
The cars will never move, racing forms
propped on steering wheels.
On the other side of the highway fence
a lone sandpiper strolls slowly
down the small strip of moonlit sand
and turns over clam shells.
In each uncovered spot
a door to the earth.

STARFISH

Benevolent, benevolent beyond all those
who strive and attempt to be bountiful,
benevolent and indifferent starfish,
you know my presence only as a shadow,
a vibration in the absence of light,
a thief of the sun, one who changes
the color of your mud, you know me
as a threat, a danger, an intrusion,
an excrescence, a mistake of evolution;
but as I gaze at your orange body
under a thin covering of green water,
you give me life, a sacred state of consciousness.
I cannot explain you, all biologists have lied,
but starfish, I am transformed by your existence.

AN EVENING IN LJUBLJANA, YUGOSLAVIA

Across the street the sky has red hair
and combs a Siamese cat

A friendly voice is telling me
about clocks wild flowers woodpiles and cathedrals

A stout woman loads a pitchfork of silence on a cart
A girl in blue hoes the rows of quietness

Chickens not confined by commerce to cages
peck the rain from a pile of hay

Old wooden barns arise out of radiant fields
The light becomes a flock of sheep

The moon is covered by hop vines
and brightened by Sljivovica

Stone houses run towards me
and leap into my bones

PAST MARIBOR, YUGOSLAVIAN MOUNTAINS
AT SUNSET

The light is a wild flower
that never had
a stem

Its leaves
are the dark glint
of two lovers
on a disappearing road

The petals are colored
river green and waterfall silver

Its pollen
the raw gold
of a rock

Its roots
under the hoof tracks
of cows

A NIGHTINGALE IN ROTHENBURG, GERMANY

A buff
envelope placed in a
yellow
mailbox

A house martin
feeds
young
in a nest on
Rathaus

Behind a half-timbered ochre
and blue plaster
house
the unseen source
of a song

the now
the only eternal

THE HAGUE

The Hague was built out of light,
a crystal light
washed on stones by the wind.
The brooms and their dust
have halos.
In the windows, large and always open,
the light is lace.
The moon never departs
but stays all day in a flower pot.
The avenues leisurely stroll
and lovingly hold the hands of canals.
All houses
are Vermeer paintings
hung on the sky.

A POEM TO VERMEER

You, lucid and secret,
precise and mysterious,
realist and visionary,
You who changed
a girl's body
from a thought, a concept,
an allegory, an illusion
into preciousness
and flesh. You always
clothed your figures
and presented the nude
better than Rubens
and his ego imprisonment,
You understood the divinity of woman
better than Bachofen or Neuman,
You who saved the sacred
from its death with the death of angels,
You who found the sacred lived
in the edge of a broom, tacks on a chair,
nails in a wall, the tip of a walking cane,
braid on a cushion, or a neglected shutter.

You understood the language
of interior walls
before Utrillo understood
the language of outside whitewash and plaster.
When you put yourself in a painting
you turned your back
and became unrecognizable
to those who identify
by the obvious and illusory.
You are known
for you are
the wood of the easel,
the book cover,
the fall of the cloth
over a chair,
the fold in a curtain.
You knew
objects exist
not to be owned
but to
create us.

DUTCH LANDSCAPE, NEAR AMSTERDAM

Windmills, red brick houses, cabbages,
artichokes,

 goats, cows, pigs, sheep,
black birds in deep grass,

 cherry trees,
rows of trees with thin dark trunks,
and then

a solitary tree
by a ditch of silver water
and in the
tree's aged hand
a green candle
with a flame of rain.

THE OUTSKIRTS OF FLORENCE
WERE ALWAYS THERE

You leave the Contessa,
her villa,
 the dark fireplace,

the dark beams
that cross the old ceiling,

 You walk
 down a
 narrow bumpy road,
 each side
 unknown flowers,
 gigantic
 green pods.

Suddenly
a pink wall stands up;
on the pink wall
three shadows,
three washed socks.
You drop into
a day buried
within
and hold
its radiant breath
in your hand.

SWISS ALPS

With eyes I did not know
I had
I look at snow

Higher up
like the shirt
of a formal suit
the river frozen

Nearer
a waterfall stands up
and speaks
from behind
the dark wood
of an ancient barn

Before
a bridge of snow
no one
crosses

Beneath
far below
a slope of wild flowers
that still glow
and grow
inwardly

I belong to this mountain

I REMEMBERED GIORGIO DE CHIRICO
AS I WALKED DURING NOON
DOWN THE VIA DEL QUIRINALE
TOWARDS THE VITTORIANO MONUMENT

These
squares
in
Rome
actually
are
hallucinations.

The
realists
painted
illusions.

FLORENCE, ITALY

When I came from the darkness,
a mountain tunnel, I noticed
the light wore an old robe,
read manuscripts: misty villas,
misty domes, misty walls, misty towers.

I decided to give the text of my self
to these scholars of light.
The current canon of my years was found
to be a copy of the compiler's life
and referred to someone else.

The light that came out of the olive trees
when the wind upturned their top leaves
confessed each olive tree had a twist all its own,
each interpretation would be biased, based on the twist;
but since my moments were these pale flickering greens
above the darker leaves, and since my body
was the bark and its quest, each exegesis would be correct.

In Florence the polychrome light, Prato green,
Carrara white, Maremma pink, Giotto's Campanile
rang out its explications, and I understood better
the cryptic passages scribbled on inner pages.

The light from a Ghiberti door
gave my life a gold border;
I became more careful
of careless finger marks.

The head scholar of light, the one
with the most titles, the light of evening
came as the white and green marble
of Santa Maria del Fiore
and wrote notes on a thousand index cards.
Each note said, "He is in love with Florence."

BOBOLI

The gardens now closed.
I stayed too long
in the Pitti Palace.
I was fascinated
by the gold designs
on ivory doors.

I have become
a connoisseur
of artificial grottos:
Hellbrun, Ludwig's,
and wanted to inspect
Buonlamenti's.

But actually I wanted
to follow Dino Campara
into his "giardino spettrale,"
feel like autumn
in summer.

But too late,
tomorrow
I will climb Assisi
and stand
once more
in the dark
by candles.

I go out
by the overfed dwarf
who sits on a turtle
and stand before
the Pitti's stones.

I feel their brown massive music
creep through my shirt.

THE ROADSIGN SAYS
WE ARE NEAR DACHAU

I have been
observing commonplace
people

They never eat
liver
in any form

Have anchovies
removed
from their pizzas

Think Las Vegas
and Miami Beach
are great places

Know the price
and model
of every car

Their children
are land
developers

Their greatest joy
is
killing
animals

We are always
near
Dachau

THE BORGHESE GARDENS

My eyes limped
from shadow to shadow
of the white statues
arranged in a row,

a beheaded stone swan,
trash
in a dry fountain.

Rome is a bare
flowerbed.

By a recess in a wall
surface peeled and speckled
I saw an old woman
feed stray cats:
grey, calico, tabby—
both classical and mackerel.

Rome began to bud.

AT MAINZ, BY THE RHINE RIVER

I look at this grey-brown river, rapid,
boats instead of legends, and think of
long-haired wet girls and a dwarf
who renounced love for the power of gold,
not its glitter.

The road's other side gives me a dove,
a soft grey, almost a black collar, unafraid,
back crossed by stem shadows, strolls from pink roses.

The morning was small farms, frontyard
dark purple roses; lavender, cerulean
pillows air on old stone windows.

My blood still beats with the ancient rhythm
it learned from walking on cobblestone streets
that climb towards a tower and a moon.

I still possess the rainbow colored light
I picked up off the floor
at the Cathedral of Cologne.

LUDWIG II

I became exalted when I saw the island
Ludwig bought to save the trees.

While at Schonburnn I was made happy
when I overheard
that the mayor of Vienna was forced to resign
because he wanted to cut down fifteen trees.

I admired Ludwig when I learned
he dined with his horse
He found the conversation never as boring
as when he dined with Bismarck
and other practical people.
Ludwig used his brain's right hemisphere,
worshipped Wagner's operas, read good literature,
hated hunters; therefore
he was slandered by the transcribers of his diaries.

My salary will not allow me to live where I want to live,
in a Neuschwanstein, Honenschwangu,
Linderhof, or Herrenchiemsee,
but I can live somewhat like Ludwig
by dining with my Abyssinian cat named Dan Di Lion.

PARIS IN THE LATE SPRING

What I remember most about Paris

I have already forgotten Maxims
Moulin Rouge Champs Elysees
Tour Eiffel The Place de la Concorde
the omnipresent movie "Emmanuele"
even the Maison de Jean Giraudoux

Still lingering in my memory
are the Africans from French Colonies
who sell on the steps of Sacre Coeur
beads drums other things made in the suburbs

I cannot forget
the lights in tunnels under highways
that change the color of coats
and make everyone look like a corpse

I do recall
the Louvre's Redons and Levy Dhumer's
man with seaweed hair
and his old man in the snow who gripped bamboo

And I remember
Sunday at Notre Dame
the organ played
I was a window
and had a new brain

But what I remember most of all
was a dragonfly's sunlit wings
holy light
on a dark iron spike

VENICE

Late summer, late summer green water.
Reflections. Swallows always above.
Black and white cat on bank.
Monet and I should have been born in Venice.
We came too late. This gondola plays
an accordion and a guitar. The gondolier sings
about Roma, Firenze, and Napoli, never Venezia.
Rilke came to Venice. He did not want
to hear German spoken. Lived at Palazzo Valmarana.
The brown stains on the peach walls deepen.
The purple pali darken. The empty wine bottle
on a sidewalk table glows. A pair of rubber gloves
that hangs on a clothes line glistens.
I came to Venice because I did not want
to hear anyone speak English. The vaporette
speak English. The bridges are crowded with
Americans. Although I am in this gondola,
I am in the cage with the canary that sings
from the balcony. Like the canary
I do not sing to those who own me,
those who lean against walls that crumble and sink.
I sing to the stone snails atop
Santa Maria della Salute,
to the Scala dei Giganti's marbles,
to those blue tinted grey bricks
where the pink plaster has fallen,
but most of all,
I sing
to the cross of light
carried on the shoulders of darkness
in San Marco.

AFTER WALKING BY THE STATUE
OF PARACELSUS IN SALZBURG, AUSTRIA

I stand on a bridge
between the old and the new city.
I stand over rapid brown water,
and long for a rhythm,
not the rhythm of the Mirabell flowers,
not the rhythm of the Mirabell trees,
but the rhythm
of the roots
of the wild ferns
that grow from the cracks
in the Mirabell wall.

FROM A ROAD BETWEEN ROME AND MILAN

Flatland vineyards
Upper leaves
wind isolated
move together
Bottom leaves
deeper green
sparkle on
brown goats

A black hat
edge missing
floats
through long field
of sunflowers
towards the forest

An abandoned old
stone house
crumbles
into dark chickens
and flashes

A long sack
dark patches
sun stitched
walks
through wild poppies

Dark sun
Cloud
separated from
other clouds
has a rainbow
all its own