

ANIMAL, PLANT, MINERAL

Twenty Recent Poems



Don Eulert

For Karen, and for the family that surrounds us

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Don Eulert

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*But nature does not simply represent reality. In its shapes of life,
it prepares the future; it offers alternatives. Nature teaches, though
what it teaches is often hidden and obscure. . .*

Loren Eiseley, *The Hidden Teacher*

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MARROW

it's bones

Colby by the creek found the lower jaw that fit the skull I found on the road

For awhile we speculated bear

for the size of its canine or extinct wolf.

His find on the bottom, now it can be seen as horse.

Its eye-sockets stare with light

from the corner window.

Dayna came back from her ride to feed carrots to Darwin's horses,
brought the skeletal head, first twelve vertebrae of a rattlesnake arm-thick
the flange bones three inches wide at the bottom.

Saving bones.

Karen digging strawberries to transplant their rampant numbers
shook roots running through a gopher's skull,

hooked knife-fronted strong the back teeth

tiny the bones around the eyes thin as a boutique frame

from Ch. Dior. These

skulls on the bureau,

deer antlers on the east moonlit window sill,

raccoon brainpan with complete teeth on the wall, its man-round forehead
beside the turtle shell.

Seeing my house strewn with bones you wonder if I am a hunter

Rub their smooth ivory

they are for the nights when we see ourselves as skeletons, to know

and love bone white and

tender fans inside that once held marrow

DEVILFISH

Something swims with dark wings
scoops air above surf
just north of San Elijo Lagoon

Between rolls of kelp, something
unearthly rises from the confused
depth and distances of water

Where the pink slope of beach
carries down the last August sun,
there's a creature with a whip,

beached bat from the kelp forest
hunger in swaying meadow grass,
its rubber-bulb

lips now scrape at sand,
Its great eyes grow larger
as waves sandcast the cape

Each time the lightning-tipped
tail lowers there comes thunder
to all who will watch and listen.

Air sighs through a gill channel
behind its eyes a last passage
for the sun if you kneel to it,
wreathed in water-palm leaves.

In and for all of us saltwater food
moves in small tides around cells

In us who know erratic or fast
things can break our shields
and kill us

This is devil worship
the lully fire mating water

CLEARING

Turning over earth for the new strawberry patch
and firewood too chaparral roots come out

from underground easy now, lumps of
heat stored seven years since I fired their tops

took the first crop, branch stubs and roots
all I could pry or rope out with the 1971

blue-horse VW squareback, roots that cook
hotter than oak could always be found in a pinch
in that playground.

In the new strawberry patch
trenching around copper roots from the sugarbush
to prune off the winding copper roots, feeling

underneath for a clipper-hold. How they lie
smooth on each other for a startling long way!

If for myself I undertake to till a small field
to its limits (as is said), a few berried friends

flaming souls may come of it, many strange uses
of love still attached underground must be felt

and then the hunch of muscles at their shearing

CHANGES

Rainfall Totals For the Year.

Santa Ysabel: 0.13. February 13,

went out to the full moon looking down
the sound of water over stones in the creek

For frogs and silver to stay all year,
rain has to start now; in March it cuts off

Plants have set small fast flowers, saying
how dry it's been before and will be again

I can wait it out, remember the ankle-deep
dust cool in Autumn night, splashing naked.

Rounded river-bed granite boulders wait
in this year's channel, and from older rains

wait three feet down under a skin of earth
built by oak leaves. My house sits on that

MANY BODIES

Garden pigweed pulled at the roots
come out a faint unzipping underground.
Orchard chickweed with a taproot skims
off the earth with a sharp shovel.

A black beetle that can make it rain
sits on a stone lifted from the firepit.
A toad blinks in its dugout, burrows back.
Coyote has been here since last time,
has left chicken feathers and its duff.

Caught a gopher in the knife-trap, shot
at an orange-juice can to get my aim
for the ground squirrel above the garden
at his post on the rocktop three days
snickering at my aim, the lift of
the borrowed .22 beside me while I lift
leggy snow peas trying to come back,
blossom-ends gone to the squirrel's body.

Apricots are dropping their blossoms
fired too early, but the sun-syrup
swell and seed of many plums push open
slowly the calyxes on trees that came
with their snow and set after the freeze.

Choppd out brush and hauld it away
cleard the patch for melon and squash
watchd thin young earthworms slide down
killd the groundsquirrl trapp snails

The body of water in the creek dying
the protest of frog-song, late March
wind turns to the southwest and no rain
coming. To the north, the year's first
brushfire plumes a growing smoketree.

I seek an afternoon sleep, but my children
each come bodiless, something needed,
many other bodies each bearing messages.

I remember your eyes like fingers
on piano keys, your body and all we
sought. Crickets begin to sing already

at sunset something flutters over
trees west as I mind you. Overhead
it lifts butterfly transparent, size of a
dollar-bill, ragged-edged as a soul

YOUR PICK

I.

At the fragrance of the fern sage
I remember what I wanted to give you

and stop pulling handfuls,
prune one at a time
feathered branches, offering

choices

II.

"This sage is our orthodoxy"
talk with it

III.

Paste ground-corn spitballs
over the snapped open ends
of the Cleveland sage,

their hollow unused to light

Look down their tunnel
into tendrils and root ends

finally out the capillaries
of the granite we stand on

IV.

How was that again, if
I don't know how to talk to the sage right,

I can't talk to mySelf right?

--Vernal Equinox

RAIN-MAKING

Hearing a rumble we turn to the wind
sweet wine smell out of the thunderheads east.
We watch the sun overhead eat back rain,
its fire on the cross of our spine and arms.

Clouds with bruise-blue undersides drum
rain over the east mountain, a wet canopy
I long to pull over us and the sun, to
lift our open mouths skyward at the taste

to find a black beetle and tickle it
to line up these tall clouds of July rain
down the sight of the pointed tail
to the dust where it buries its head.

The windmill shifts
seeks the direction,
pumps up fossil water

The humid leftover of Hurricane Maria oils
our bodies, the roll of thunder and breeze lays
a cool blanket under the bony stays of sun

A hawk with a snake in its talons rises,
you "loose your love to flow" water salt
tears and wet is the globe in my cupped hand

THE FLIGHT

Your breasts lie lean and close to your body,
tipped with the strong-fleshed buttons of peyote.

Taken as peyote teaches out of ordinary thought
everything will mean other than it did before.

My eye is in a hawk riding the sage-smelling
draft of June's first heat coming up the hillside.

Your eye is the other eye. Only the air moves.

INVITATION

Lizards named by the color of the fire
that lines their stomach and whips off
their tails flicking incandescent
through dark leaves

have called you

Frogs climb through red blossoms
put on jester's costumes for a smile

Hummingbird's rapid wing-and-heartbeat
pulses in its ruby throat the sunset,

softening granite invites the imprint
of your body to return the day's heat

THE CHRISTENING (2)

Sometimes when you are with me I shut my eyes
you are a bright column of light, a fire-making.
For fire, for fire, for fire, be fire-bringer
return of old mind to the center for fire-boring
the waking

Coyote tried to make fire striking together shells
that fell out of the big dipper when it turned over,
he tried to use the pieces of stars that came down,
he was trying to dip up some fire shining on water,
he tried the grass and trees that had sun in them.

Finally coyote dug a little in the sand made it nice
and a woman came in there who moved like a swan
she came in there and lay down in the sun she was
a bright column of light, he got himself with her

so they were moving just right there was just one thing
and they turned that into a hawk with burnished wings
beating until they started a fire along the edges, then
the hawk was fire all over and it could be fire-bringer

THE CHRISTENING (5) "Changing Shapes"

As the ends of a line of sound, as the whisper
moving inside a snake skin we could being again.

We would need some deer-toe rattles then, a singer
to take us off to shapes where will can never go.

We two must give up being deer for sixteen chimes
cut from the toes of deer that danced at night,

empty bone-bells strung up tight with mescal strings
knotted through and wove to hold them right to ring

The way the maker worked on them she does again
with rocks and prying sticks and red flint awl to drill
the way she wants to make this shaking song for them

We bound and shake as bells as drums of deer we run
on August whispers of air we are only sound, sound.

In this song you see some other animal waiting,
some body who lived in you already comes singing.

SUNDAY AFTER EQUINOX A MARCH SUN-

bum on the back, Spring's a bend-
over work. Small flowers to see,
potatoes left over winter in the loam bed

hot enough already for muskmelon hills
a pat on the flank of the earth.

You wrap your body's shadow over white
threads showing out of the root-ball
of tomatoes for transplant,

bearing
a beating heart into a different body,
applying a dark poultice.

You pull leek for milk soup, I feel around
to weed grass from under strawberry
patched in a swale where grass is used to grow, we

each did these things, with each step
bowed to the cut of the hoe's blade.

Afternoon my shoulders glow with sun,
but on you woman who worships leaning
from the hips, low on your back flame rests

Thus bend Fiddleneck submitting a field of gold,
thus curve the season's wild white Forget-Me-Nots
rampant this year in clearings and old burns

PRESAGE

Seeing cows in a far pasture you laugh first
remembering, "Look! aren't those cows *dancing*?"
you gasped in our grass-crushed lair when you saw.

So cows can always dance now if they want to,
having accomplished it on sun splintered hills
south across Hatfield Creek.

Also cows remind us
what the wind's semaphore spelled with flags
of Wild Oat, what Fiddleneck bowed to beg to say,

and (for the blind) what fingers of air traced
on skin. Yes the horizon sighs closer
when you sink to the ground

being alone
is only part of it

Starting from cows it ends
in a future. I heard you offer it to a world-
sick friend who had heaved herself dry of image,

a picture of two bony bodies wrapped
on a rocky hilltop in late summer sun, seed time

among the many dismemberments surrounding them,
purple veins in the mouth of drying Ground-Pink.

CRICKET

A long afternoon rain in August
such as never happens in the high desert,
yet for the third time I have it, alone.

Lightning, above mist
down this valley

True rain spears
through the drizzle

Between invisible thunderstorms
I prune the bottom branches of apricot
grown long and dipping to ground wet
and over-exuberant new green ends.

Tonight the fog lies in the oak-tops;
already saturated they cup it, sprinkle
to the reaches of their root-rings
big drops come down

"Music is falling around us!" I wish to say
to you, an arm around each other to listen
and smell this fine sogginess of leaves

and hear the cricket lively singing
from a place to be warm and dry
inside the open window of our room

EARLY HIGH DESERT RAIN, OUT

Fire season. But this September bursts,
rain leans through oak umbrellas all day.
In slicks I dike the washed-out dirt road,
hear April in the creek's cleared throat.

California sage greens up of a sudden,
Monkey-flowers open for a second bloom,
emerald moss ruffs the boulders' shoulders.

Water swells everything with feasty smell,
"all flesh is grass." The springhouse
floods ochre soup, a hillside's offering.

Light breaks through just before sunset,
leaves point and color. An owl weaves
down the creek's street, knowing creatures
squirm under wet leaves, wanting out in it

like the first Russula mushroom and me.

In last light out with chainsaw to the pine
that didn't make it through the drought,
whose brown needles now hurt my eye turned
to green. The incision draws flinches
of sap under the bark. Its hummingbird
almost takes my ear off

After dark the lamp-lit window flecks with insects.
Two little white-bellied frogs suction up
hand-by-hand, throats pulsing.

the alive
 out under the stars leaves drip
 my fiftieth year

LOOKING FOR FIRE

--Autumn Equinox

Sunset a blaze flight of the peyote bird
rainbow through oakleaf lattice it went,
the last summer sun. Now our tended fire,
versatile creator and destroyer in a form
we can talk with and listen while we wait
for the sun to loop under and come changed.

A lizard paddles out of the ashes, rattles
into dry leaves. We will take this as sign
that a fallen fire promises regeneration.

But after this fire's up and night comes
another lizard skitters out between us
waddling, shaking wattles. I pick it up
to see if it burns, back in my palm, you
stroke heat of blue-green on its throat
and let it go find a place to burrow earth
before night slows this paleozoic threshing
against our hands cupping an old excitation.

At the balance of the year before midnight
in a sight down the burrow of bodies, fire
under him over her surrounds them
as of burning bush and branch. We can move
the light of sunrises and sunsets between us
into the cave we make and out a common mouth,

practice darkening and dawn. We cannot fail
to love changes, the sheath of summer fire
discovered in the hollows of our bodies filled,
lattice inside cells of dried grass filled
with light and its smell even the damp ground
smells of it, full of billiononic star memory

SHOWING THE COLORS

If you've seen a claw-hammer vicious cock
mounting a hen, still this is unbelievable.
Or you could picture a favorite pet's skull
laid bare from eyes back to neck.

That is all bone
showing on the young silver pheasant
brought last week to get fertile eggs.

Between the rooster and his 8-year-old
female nothing had been going on, but she
flew at the newcomer's crown with hooks
right and left into the corner she took her.
Dazed or willing the new hen crouched and
took pick axing on top of her head, fearful
it was, she didn't let up or the new one
didn't fight or run to her hideout box
or fly up to one of the rails.

Which she did finally. Passing, the old lady
still stabbed her for no good reason. This
from the hen who for years obeyed her color
invisible when squatting on bare earth.

As in the paintings when his line served
emperors of Chinese court yards, the male
fluffs his silver feathers, royal purple
plume, pushes out his blue satin shirt.
His full helmet of red wattles engorges,
glows.

For this curve of long white tail
feathers in play with pin-striped capes,
they took a name in definition of beauty.
The fight has excited him; she is submissive.

Left alone for two days, what have the three
of them committed? Her head is bone. Over
her ears and eyes clean white ridges shine.

Yet she sits alive on a bar, this cranium
moves to follow what moves, her eyes blink
watching as they ignore each other and her
of the crimson collar color of drying wine

TREEHOUSE

Since this two-legged tree's crown bears a structure
walled and windowed, wherein voices light desire
move in and out, it might be said that mind has come
to oak,

with a thigh through the house on the way
to the cortex, with a hole in the floor where
a mother rat wanting to litter has chewed a passage.

Each mind by nature has a niche where animals
and spirit move freely, a periscopic lens
wherefrom to pore at the ground,
a night-gnawed opening for wind and droppings.

At night I hear the pack-rat clatter, heaping cedar
shingles the size and shape of Moses tablets
in the corner opposite where we stored them.

LOVE POEM

I am looking for a place on your body to leave
some mark that does not require pain to stay

Your lean flanks lead to fall, to maple trees
turning to flame they could line a hillside
in North Dakota leading on to wheatfields
in the Canadian steppes drifts of white snow

Your mouth that sings sunrises of wet grass
maps bridges of amber and incense across streams
across paths small animals make on mooned' nights

Under your nipples runs a heartless flow
of wildflowers, the blood of birds in flight
outside a fast train window. Your bones truss
a mine gem-full of summer lightning storms

A white spider with only air to start its web
hangs swinging on your breath at my shoulder

It looks for the missing earth and its weathers
that have gathered hidden under your bent knee

POISON OAK AND MOON

For three weeks scald-spots appeared random
in time or places below a breast behind a knee,

islands in bias-relief colors grew and shifted
magma erupting the blood-stream's good intent.

Now your quick body slowly returns from fever
and your leggy dance into moment comes back.

Thus we could rejoice ill-health has taught us
again of nature, even a plant it may be eats us.

This night you dream of us in a hushed map
empty at the edges, then catch yourself--

This is my dream which you have overheard, my
head is bleeding, a sort of health coming out.

You wake from the moon burning your body, say
"Look!" and see us sleeping in a slight arc

in impersonal light that washes bodies apart
from each other and expectation enabling love