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### Untold, Savored, Gold: Poems

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#### Recommended Citation

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Claire Cheney  
Poetry Portfolio  
May, 2006

*Untold, Savored, Gold: Poems*

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“You!” whose fine fingers fill the organic cells,  
with virgin earth , of woods and bones and shells

Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden* 1789

Impulse

*E conchis omnia*: or everything  
from shells. From deep  
swell of pearls and urchins  
the brain becomes.

Breath ignites each cell  
with mud and moss, stones and husks;  
rock breakwater, milk and reef.

The skull a spongy bed, a cradle  
for the late voice of God,  
blurred cadence of waves.

*December 26, 7:59 a.m.*  
the earth jolts  
the casing cracked. Plates lipped  
in iron, aglow  
with tremors, water  
hulks and swells, each fissure

a blue surge.

And each enclosed embroidery, soft  
pink and sinking to pulp;  
thatched roofs of sunken rooms and  
a chiasma of colors,  
violet hues of the drowned.

Hollow craniums  
arrive like conchs with the tide,  
bones and shells white bleach  
of sun.  
Rubble of salt-soaked, broken parts.

*What work now to do:*  
to find coconut husks  
a whelk, a sponge,  
a cavity to put these thoughts into.

Among weeds and tumbled cement,  
we wrestle with impulses,  
wing-like and wet, our minds

scuttling like hermit crabs in the crumbles—  
the transmigration of souls  
through ruined mangroves.

“White petals, creaseless and ambitious,  
may I break your even weave, loosen your knot”

Jorie Graham, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*

*Enquiry*

We can hear you  
sharpening your tag-teeth,

spreading your marmalade  
with iron filings,

gesturing as you walk  
to throw seeds

of our names.  
How can we answer back—

moisture, darkness  
hoof?

*Anemones*

Last night while I slept I swam  
through the Atlantic;  
diving off the Cape of Good Hope  
I glided, whale-deep  
over the arc of mountains—  
basalt filling metallic seams  
while fish gathered in my veins.

Brushed by scores  
of gorgeous arms my eyes  
gleamed white like your wood-bright  
blooms, wet blink of spring.

Plucked from the sands of Egypt, pressed  
like a poultice to Christ's chest,  
"consider," he whispers, wind-charmed,  
"the lilies of the field!"

Meaning you, Anemone,  
hoarded by Caetini in his garden,  
bright splay oh holy red.

But what to bring. A blue hat?  
Plastic bags? I had a map,  
the grooves of my palm,  
my skin to sense the light,  
a chilled descent.

You mark the flow of plankton  
I swim through,  
my pockets full  
of ocean-tones and gulps of wind,

each cell tolling some distant bell,  
bodies unaware of their cry  
and scribbled nebulae.

*Asparagus*

In white we watch the traverse of earth  
Of all our loam-ache we make

at last small crowns our long lily tongues  
still tucked and lilacs mulling

We know you are up there looking  
watching the melt wracked with slumber

resolving at last to get up and move rocks  
if only to see the white worms curl in on themselves

Again and again you come to this place  
pull back the grass touch our wild

tops make promises like the water does  
tracing its dirt labyrinth paths

collecting at last at the splayed landmark  
the place where spring keeps snapping

our green shoots raw in your hand  
selfish claiming the last word

*Peony*  
*for EJ*

At night the buds  
sway on a black screen,

ultrasound of ephemerals  
—false mermaid,  
trout lily, hepatica:  
green in the dark.

Black ants prowl  
the taut green globe,  
hunting this sweetness—  
antennae twitch  
like commas, blink  
and twine, preoccupied.

The growth comes  
budded and guttural,  
*a noiseless noise*  
*among the leaves...*  
gathers, takes root.

A squirm of stem,  
wavelength of leaves,  
spine as soft as a hand  
in sleep.

An instant. Shake  
the bulb so filaments sing,  
a chime of broken things  
in white glass space.

The growth comes  
as a stuttered dance—  
a trembling push, light  
and the little ants.

Swell up, blaze up:  
the summer terminus.  
Grip of gray-green haze—  
August's iridescence.

*Delphinium*

*To Marie Curie*

Ore Mountains above a town  
where corks and bobbin lace  
are made, stones gleaming  
like brass doorknobs.

Storm clouds announce dark blue,  
strokes of gold, Bohemia.  
Pitchblende secretes

a stratum of midnight sounds—  
hiss of cast-iron, shriek  
of owls, a hoarse  
unhinging. *Radium*.

In the rain, staked and tied  
with strings: delphinium.

Wet wind loosens  
buds from the nodes  
(those corset eye-hooks  
straining against breath),

each purple gasp of petals  
a violent moment, gape  
of wonder at *the pull*,  
the sudden yank back—  
towards what?

A dolphin leap of the heart  
unraveling *rare earths*,

high atmosphere and distant  
light, all the fragile cells  
tugging at their centers—  
granules glowing  
on fingertips,

and the wind—splitting  
and scattering the blue tower,  
gust of fringed  
and radiant wings.

*Lily*

Each night I die  
under the weight of air  
and the clipped warmth

White pines mark  
the edge of my house

the wide petaled space  
curbed in dark cords

Each word  
makes a spool of sun

winds the upright sexes  
folds up my hybrid-tongue

Each line around me

gathers the light claims  
one color  
and another thorn

and vermillion  
white and fledgling thrush

I risk that dusk  
has tucked each stanza  
in its blue envelope

that the light filling the other  
lilies has vanished

drifted out over the wet  
field let go  
its muscular voice

## Gentian

*let me guide myself with the blue, forked touch of this flower  
down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness.*

— D.H. Lawrence

Not the yellow smirk  
of hyssop nor the bright  
breath still pressed in the lungs

of Umberto Pelizzari  
as he plunged salt-deep  
two-hundred thirty-six feet.

Blue to pleat shadows  
pull and engulf the gleams  
in flaming skirts.

Umbrella of sea-weight  
over the Mariana trench—  
blueness darkening,

blazing down through  
an echo rock-dark,  
words don't come out,

but pass away  
sinking dark-blue to dwell  
on the abyssal plain.

Hanging our heads  
tongued and flickering  
like cepheids we

blue flowers are lost to  
the dark red shift,  
family of bitterness.

*Crocus*

*After the Aegean wall paintings of Xeste 3 depicting young women harvesting saffron from Crocus sativus, a plant used medicinally for nearly four millennia*

Near the lustral basin,  
where wet plaster meets  
wet earth: a few purple blooms.

The girls have paused here:  
one in a diaphanous blouse,  
one with a bleeding toe.

Dawn comes blond and hairless,  
burnished in a lilac cape.

Then noon – hot light,  
yellow ocher of autumn  
when hearts immobilize  
like dragonflies, poised  
on the eyes of fish.

Sluice through wet earth  
to rush blood to the genitals,  
fill baskets with buds,  
yellow cusped in white.

\*

Small petals coil the fingers  
in a purple grasp, pistils  
smear each finger-pad,  
nerve to nerve.

Hematite blurs a vulval  
red, a smudge of paint.  
Shudder of umbones  
where new tissue grows,  
a flightless bird.

And two iris-eyes,  
two bulbs upturned; caught light

like winter aconite, the hood  
pulled bright and taut.

\*

At last a cascade  
of crocus from a ruptured wall,  
runnel of cilia plumed  
to every inner seam.

Small strands adorn  
her goddess face: creases  
splayed like prisms—  
the dart of swallows,  
a shiver of fish, dragonflies  
perched with wing tips touching.

Lip to lip the girls whisper in  
odors — the colors untold,  
savored, gold.

*Blue Violets*

How do you pray,  
all of you, crowded  
in the half-shade?

I've forgotten what  
blue or deeper  
purple your petals blush,  
what bruise.

I come with scissors,  
find a fragrance I beg  
from the stem, gulp  
through a wetness.

I can't blame you  
for your confusion,  
looking up at the black  
branches, studded with  
shrill chandeliers, the male  
and female pairings.

Are you hurrying?  
The canopy shifts—  
green fills in, laden  
with June.

You are no more blue  
than I am kneeling here,  
my hands in the dirt

grasping the thin roots  
and flecking the dirt off,  
cold and rich and  
mica-stunned.

I suck from your throat  
a sweet nectar,  
fill myself to sickness.  
You collapse like veins

as I pull the prayer from you,  
thin and colorless.

*Cyclamen*

The only place to put you  
is there on the windowsill  
over the radiator, wrapped in foil.

Grocery items: avocado,  
salmon, potatoes, white wine.  
I've walked down these aisles

with you, suggested lemon juice,  
the kind that comes in a plastic,  
squeezable lemon.

You've wanted me to look at spring  
like this: through glass and plastic,  
the sex of it, cold fluorescence.

On the end of silver stems we talk  
in a casual tone – white, pink, red,  
as though we'd turned inside out,

settled like corms into snow  
and ice, chills stunted by the tree-  
dark; slow pulse of circulating

heat, white snow white marrow.  
Staying alive would depend  
on turning right side out, making

organs out of new green leaves  
and blood out of roots  
and love out of leftover dirt.

Let alone, the distance twists  
and whines like cellophane,  
passes through anonymous hands.

Each shelf is stocked row by row  
with all things made  
and unmade, long corridors

of sugared delights, well-lit  
and gleaming in air-tight glory,  
each waiting to be consumed,

to be eaten whole,  
returned to that bulbous place,  
the wet dark home.

*Enquiry*

Our eyes cast downward  
to the dark dewed stems,

plain green design, where  
Theophrastus found

the soul of us – all  
our upward motion

dripping, anointed.  
Bell gleam and rollicked

we shade ourselves, we  
listen to the sun.

The loss of order,  
an aching brilliance.

What net of names, what  
indigenous end?

## Notes:

### *Enquiry*

Erasmus Darwin, 1731 - 1802, poet & physician, would prescribe iron shavings mixed with marmalade for his anemic patients.

### *Anemones*

See Matthew 6:28 – 29 “And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”

- The “lilies of the field” are considered by many scholars to be *Anemone coronaria*

See also the Song of Solomon 5:13

Francesco Caetani, Duke of Semoneta, was said to have 29,000 anemones in his garden at Cisterna. The flowers were very popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century

### *Peony*

“A noiseless noise/ among the leaves” taken from Keats, “I Stood Tiptoe Upon a Little Hill”

### *Delphinium*

Marie and her husband Pierre Curie announced their discovery of radium in 1898 after studying uranium ore or “pitchblend” found in the Ore Mountains above the town of Jáchymov, former Czechoslovakia

Marie was the first woman to receive a Nobel prize. She died from leukemia in 1934.

### *Crocus*

See “Therapy with Saffron And the Goddess at Thera” Susan C. Ferrence and Gordon Bendersky, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, volume 47, number 2 (spring 2004): 199 – 226, 2004 The Johns Hopkins University Press

### *Gentian*

Epigraph taken from “Bavarian Gentians” by D.H. Lawrence

The Mariana trench is the deepest known trench on earth, where the ocean floor reaches 35,840 feet below sea level

### *Enquiry*

Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, wrote the first known book about the plant world in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC. The Book was called *Historia plantarum* or *Enquiry into Plants*

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