

On the Chicopee Spur

Poems

Al Ortolani

NY
Q Books™

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
New York, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
P. O. Box 2015
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10113

www.nyq.org

Copyright © 2018 by Al Ortolani

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Edition

Set in New Baskerville

Layout by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover Design by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover Photo: "Thunder Snow," by Blane Reeves,
Selected by Ava and Rider Middleton

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018935429

ISBN: 978-1-63045-056-4

Contents

poncho over my head

- Death is a Sneeze / 17
On the Chicopee Spur / 18
Downspout / 19
Alleyway / 20
Broad Leaf / 21
Turquoise Stone / 22
Pearl Harbor Day / 23
Remodeling the Cinema / 24
Helium Balloon / 25

waking at 3 a.m.

- Butterfly Weed / 29
Green River Soda / 30
Ghosts in the Creek Bed / 31
Box of Rags / 32
Wife and Cat / 33
Visiting Family / 34
Oliver Claws the Door / 35
Suburban Hermit / 36
William Blake Saw Angels in a Tree / 37

lightning at midnight,

- Sleeping with Magnum / 41
Spooning / 42
Faulkner at Christmas / 43
Scrooge / 44
Solstice / 45
Johnson County Exit / 46

Blue Collar / 47
Bone Cold / 48
Frozen / 49
Key Card Dawn / 50
Chicken Feet / 51
My Irish Mother / 52
Black Beads 1 / 53
Black Beads 2 / 54

winter morning—

Scudding Sky / 57
Girls' Choir / 58
Tool Shed / 59
Through the Screen Door / 60
Temple of the Ford Ranger / 61
Charleston Midnight / 62
First Seed / 63
Cleaning Out the Rock Garden / 64
Stonecrop / 65
Green Painted Walls / 66
Wall Dogs / 67
The Story Begins with a Dog / 68

clouds thread

Brushing Latex on Mrs. Ford's Second Story / 71
At the Trading Post Bridge / 72
Orion's Belt / 73
Spring Snow / 74
Home Opener / 75
Shooting Hoops for Beer / 76

Thieves at Night / 77
Tailgating at the Last Supper / 78

old photograph

Monofilament Whiskers / 81
Grub Worm / 82
The Styrofoam of Stuff / 83
Across the Wooden Fence / 84
Light in the Back of the House / 85
Passing Period / 86
Beige Jesus / 87
Pine Tree Morning / 88

snow falling

Stone Fence / 91
Kayaking the Upper Buffalo / 92
Metal Bailed Bucket / 93
Last Float Trip on the Gasconade / 94
Swimming Deer / 95
Hunting Morels / 96
Black Bear / 97

high on Mt. Sneffels

Acknowledgements / 102

Death is a Sneeze

Little poem that makes me no money. Little poem that I cannot eat or barter for rent. Little poem in the roadside weeds beside the early asparagus, the first clover bloom. A short sneeze of haiku, pollen septum. Monkey mind has me in its grip. I want to hold something, to accumulate, to own. The job drags. The sky grays. The air cools. Little poem in my backpack, you are scrawled in pencil. It took a page of notes to find you, lead scratch marks, margin doodles, a line, a syllable crossed out, chucked into the mulch pile. The spring wind cleans the patio. Nothing remains but three lines. Yesterday, I cut the grass. Today, I'm wearing the same grass-stained pants, my old shoes double-knotted for the next step.

april grave,
daughter spreads new seed
 over turned earth

On the Chicopee Spur

My daughters and I pick blackberries in the shadows, the July night coming on hot and heavy as a canvas awning. The first lightning bugs blink in and out between thorns. As I dip my head into the thicket for berries, a man walks slowly up the tracks, his denim overalls and plaid shirt too heavy for the evening's heat. He keeps between the rails, minding his way, watching his shoes, and as he passes, he gives me a barely perceptible nod of his head. Several times I stop and watch as he continues over the trestle, the rail line bending out of town into the bean fields.

deepening
the night between blackberries

Two days later, I read an obituary of a man found dead on the Chicopee Spur. The grainy photo appears to be that of the man from blackberry picking. Possibly, it is my over active imagination, but when he had walked by me, his features blurred. The light wavered over him like it will over a mirage.

sewing a button
her fingers
 wait
the needle's return

I didn't say anything to my daughters. They were too young for an old man's misfortune or a father's premonition. I start them slowly on blackberries, immerse them in thorns and chiggers.

blackbird—releasing
 cattail

Downspout

Rain this morning—I lay in the darkness of the bedroom and listen to water drone off the roof, gurgle in the downspout, patter into the hostas, the house itself as quiet as a church. I'm reminded of a friend who recently surrendered in her struggle, chemo against cancer. Now, she waits. If we are linked soul to soul through our compassion, our sameness, then we all suffer. How can I rest so selfishly knowing her grief, her singularity, her morning bereft of illusion? Does anxiety toss her like the wind—a single leaf on a rain-wet tree?

stirring the rain into my coffee June's cold spoon

Alleyway

I was too young to remember the ice truck, but I did chase after Charlie the milkman with the kids from Ohio Street. He kept the milk bottles chilled with blocks of ice from the plant on 6th. They jingled and clinked in wire crates whenever he walked them from the curb to a back door. The truck itself was cavernous, as deep and as cool as one of the strip pits west of town.

drifting in deep water,
a cold current embraces
my dead man's float

Occasionally, he'd take his ice pick and lop off a fistful of shards for us to suck on. Other days he complained that the heat melted everything too fast. He could barely get through his delivery. Once, he shut the thick, galvanized door in our faces without so much as a word. The cool wind carried the scent of sour milk. One girl with rangy legs and a mean lip said that Charlie was a prick—crazy wife or no crazy wife. Blue jays squawked overhead, riddling the trees with question marks. Greg stuck a grass snake in her face.

summer morning,
retreating darkness curls
inside the garden hose

Broad Leaf

Mourning is the price of love. My sister writes as we enter the month of November. It is the month our father passed away. I find her images in the yellow leaves, scudding clouds, boney limbs. Our childhood yard is gated, tomato garden overgrown with plugs of broad leaf, Dad's aluminum ladder on the side of the house, speckled with the last paint. Today's wind is warm, a touch of sun spots the lawn. If I don't leave this bench, I will miss my grandson's birthday party. His happiness is too young to turn to dust.

cardinal at the feeder,
the concrete Francis
holds an empty bowl

Turquoise Stone

I sit on the toilet chewing tobacco and thinking about reincarnation. My shoes are old. They stick out from under my jeans like duck bills. To maintain my health my wife insists I must walk 10,000 steps per day. My Indian belt has many beads, turquoise stones; a silver buckle rests on my shoe. I spit into a cracked coffee mug. When I was a boy, I had two invisible friends that I talked to in quiet moments like this. They offered advice, kept my secrets. They lived under the clothes hamper between the sink and the tub.

auction day,
the old house
drained of memory