

## SEVEN POEMS



*Sandra McPherson*

HAWAIIAN BUDDHA

*Slow down.*

—Lowell Fulson

How is it lived in,

mortals' ideal atoll  
where the immortal, in order  
not to appear as dead,  
has come to life in wood?

If you are the image of insight  
eyelevel knees, ox-shouldered,  
widebreasted Buddha—  
how can we too be burly?

I place at your feet an offering  
of noticing, which is not  
enlightenment. You  
glance down

with a limit of your own:  
you're seated but not enthroned.  
There are other steps  
and stepless places

to surrender shoes;  
and while there are other Buddhas  
who follow the curve  
of the heated sea

until it cools on shores  
of more ascetic supplicants,  
though not more naked,  
only you know

the soul growls  
in its fat sculpture,  
starved for too much.  
The mad devotee

pins herself  
in the hair of flowers.  
How small  
is the smallest thing

that wants to engulf everything?

*Byodo-in Temple*

MAN WITH A TAIL  
*Anonymous snapshot found among antiques*

In the garden our five-fingered hands  
seed and reap,  
that birth bed of so many  
model vegetables,  
carbuncles still originate  
on the odd tomato.

With people we take exception  
to the unplanned burgeon.  
This young man's outdistances his spine.  
With dragonfly lightness,  
slenderness, diaphaneity,  
it points due south behind him,

and his glance back over his shoulder  
helps the shadowy visitor  
to focus and forget himself  
and drop his fedora—  
shaped shade in the foreground.  
Its layer of touch cools the feet

of the fellow with the tail.  
The cauda is slim, straight,  
proportional, and naked  
as is par for a gentleman

of this terrain, sodden and steep.  
His immediate purview  
is marked by sharp white switches  
taller than he and woven  
in and out with others horizontally  
so as to suggest a palisade  
of equal parts  
protection and ventilation.

If there are spirits, they may  
pass through this residence of air  
the temporal tribe constructs  
over metaphysical domain.  
He knots a cord around his waist,  
fixes in his hair a pillbox hat

of basketry—austere enough.  
But because of his excess,  
he is never ancillary to anyone he knows  
or who has heard of his blest  
nature consubstantiating kingdoms.  
He could only feel balanced—

Proud and humble, really—  
to have Creation written on him.  
Down the Central Valley from me  
in a Lodi, California, pet shop,  
a pearly oscar comes to light  
with, on one fin, as discovered

by a Muslim customer, the “alif”,  
double “laum”, and “ha”,  
the word Allah,  
its calligraphic contrast  
set there underwater as power  
from an intimate far out in the universe

stirs the confining bowl of salty tropics  
and signs His name.  
We thought we had a right  
to horror and disgust  
based on a standard of our fleshy selves,

but we're not prototypes.  
We might, in truth, want to restrain

God from creating, we who claim  
ecstatic pleasure in the zephyrous  
cat's tail against our calves,  
who swoon to the upbeat

of the mockingbird's fan. But think of us  
as glass. Think of us as rubbery  
à la kelp. Think of us as balsa. Model us,  
even now. If he were formed  
of granite, an outcrop... Or if he were a comet  
with his admired entitlement...

Think like God: Augment.  
This invention was so long  
ago, and had almost seen oblivion  
except this science of images  
leaves us his lizard electrons,  
his sundial gnomon, his estate.

No one has ever seen it weary,  
no one has ever seen it old,  
ever seen it fail, or ever fold  
and break. Extra. Like  
desert-loomed camel tassels,  
sopranino to our common altos,

added offspring to warm  
when it gets cold,  
new track ran for the pulse, beautiful  
living tablets of fish skin...  
As time goes by, he is, I hope,  
an ancestor, copying and copied.

#### DESIGN OF DAYS

According to a short forehand passage in her diary it's Sunday  
morning.  
The husband packs decoys, will leave for hunting in an hour,  
be in the blind two days. She looks forward to learning  
why she calms down, reduces power,  
gets along on a less lethal current.  
She'll watch intensely, discover the new design  
of her days. What will go differently?

Thinks she could sketch the white pine,  
the unusual coastal snow muffling the waves.  
For the present it is enough to read Buson,  
his series of verses in the persona  
of a woman traveling the same road as he.  
“Fucking snow”, the hunter says. It coats his road.  
She gentles him, veiling for herself  
how frightening it will be, in time,  
for him to know, for her to see him recognize,  
which man’s voice she craves.

IN HER IMAGE

*French postcard, circa World War I*

In agreeing to be the crucified woman,  
she knew she would need to hang there  
with no pockets, no purse, no pearls.  
She would know how to stretch into it  
when the time came. Did she enjoy  
an innate ballerina who could express  
befitting grace? While still her bearing  
should look disciplinary, chastening.  
Express duress. She must suffer  
while blooming with a boast of pulchritude  
the lighting director could work with  
At the tryouts, the rest of us were already  
too mangled with practice nails, and slivers.

She stepped right up, and now she is holding on.  
Jesus as evangelist from girlhood, a young savant  
known for finespun sayings and secrecy  
revealed as sorrow. Her death would fall  
somewhere in her menstrual cycle,  
slightly split into those two lobes  
which make apricots and peaches  
superior to the moon. Lustrous,  
a stage-curtain rope knots right over  
pubic hair. Feet bound with ribbon,  
a satin tether to appeal to some, she  
ails ungaunt, her edges sled-round,  
cambered. Coifed in the same style  
as her carnality: in even waves, marcelled.  
Are agony’s good looks art’s job,

or labor's contract, or sex's by swoon?  
Whatever, they're hers. And the age's.  
Real senselessness, stupefying power  
over lives, eventually tore men's  
faces off. Their leaders made millions rot  
millions. Many choked on rats' mud.  
Flies had no teeth for skulls  
so there it stopped. What did this have to do  
with our sacrificing, sacrificing our breasts  
barely between a triangle of bleeding nails?  
How we numbed evil. How unbearable  
we made goodness feel.

#### A GENTLEWOMAN

"I couldn't yearn", she marveled.  
Before marriage, with a nervous edge  
she'd written poems that her teacher praised.  
They excited and needed her; she made them  
burn and be. But ever since the ceremony,  
they had stayed away. She saw herself so changed  
by love, the page waved off her wedded ink.  
Maybe it stayed, that way, truest. Stanzas abandoned  
the elegant young bride because she couldn't yearn,  
she said.

"I am seething with ideas", she breathes  
and looks across the flitting birds and blowing herbs  
of the courtyard toward the locked door  
of her studio, her wheel, her tiles, her paints,  
her remembered subjects, objects that she poses.  
She supposes she'll quit cooking. But she grieves  
her works are never fully realized. She knows  
art, has collected figures gripping figures galloping,  
trees that blaze in red and sagey open spaces,  
bezels and cants of hills, stipples and stains  
of seasons. Hands of geniuses tremble  
her walls, and her will. In widowhood  
she's back at her source, though frail  
in her cashmere dressing gown and wing—  
shaped diamond brooch. She leans forward,  
stressing, "I am just seething with ideas."

GIVEN AND RECEIVED

When April's  
grape tendrils  
tackle our small  
St Francis,

they knock him over  
when they only  
hope to use him  
as a brace.

I find such undoing  
hard to face.  
Should I  
see the tendril

laughable  
for what it's done,  
toying with  
a holier, heavier

avatar and messing up?  
*All I did*  
*was love,*  
there's not a one of us

can't say,  
*and a saint landed*  
*on his back,*  
gazed up

through  
determination  
in the guise  
of wine's leaves  
and lay perfectly  
unable to rise.  
*All I do is love,*  
the profuse fuss

of the garden swears.  
Another year,  
a snail climbed  
that adamant goodness

to rest out  
April storms  
in tolerant,  
durable arms.

APPROACHING ROBERT HAYDEN

Of men remembered in the Capitol, who is marble, who  
Is bronze? I know Fulton gets to sit  
To monkey with his mock-up steamboat. A traffic  
Of pedestals, a history all elbows.

Or all transport: great early airplanes—  
Belief in the flight of hooped costumes, baled corsets—  
Are leashed to a ceiling and buoyed up by a citizenry  
Breathing. Outside the Carter White House

The screech of a loudspeaking hawk  
Frightens starlings into using their airpower.  
And there's a man visiting inside whose choices move me  
I'd like to compliment—but I delay

The President in a handshake more easily  
Than brag admiration to a blind stranger.  
At breakfast there's a second chance: he sits  
Hearing the fountain, warming the plants

And reading the *Post* or, rather, rubbing it  
Across his glasses. Words are camouflaged in his eyes.  
But bother him? And so I don't, I speak  
To B. J. Lofty and his white Chrysler cab:

"To the sculpture garden",  
I go my January way; it's the start  
Of a decade, Balzac wears seven veils  
Of snow, Hayden moves into his marble shack.

1980