

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