

JOURNEY BREAD

New and Selected Poems
by

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I am not done with my changes.
Stanley Kunitz

PREFACE

This book began life as a New and Selected Poems. But as I looked through my previous books for poems that still spoke to me, I came to think that almost everything had been published too quickly – that I had missed the point or not dived deep enough, that there was more (or less) the poem wanted.

So I began revising, slowly and at length, sometimes feeling as if I had never seen the poem before. Almost everything called for revision. As a result, many of these poems have changed substantially from their originals.

The second thing that happened was that poems from different collections started speaking to one another, drawing closer to one another and away from the original group.

I struggled against this fact for a long time, thinking a "new and selected" book should be organized in a certain way. But finally I decided to let the poems gather themselves into their own patterns and see what happened.

What happened was that I found myself looking at a kind of narrative – but with gaps in the story. So I wrote some new poems.

In the end, this book has become a memoir of sorts, a final dance with some old and new poems, and a late-in-life reflection on the journey that brought me here.

In memory of Stanley Plumly, 1939-2019

What the River Says

Who cannot go straight will go crooked.

Who cannot stand will go bent.

Who cannot sing must speak in a whisper.

Who goes alone will hear voices.

Who cannot let go must carry.

Who bears and is broken breaks open.

Memorization

When my father explained his work to me
I already knew what fission was.

My third-grade teacher fissioned us into teams.
Flashed cards. Shouted.
Five seconds to answer:
7 times 8!
Ruth!
Five! Four! Three! Two! One!
Wrong!
My team always lost.

A brain can be a cloud chamber
full of random events.
And shame is easy to memorize.

Later, my mother drilled me with flash cards
in a hotel room in Sweden in a rage
because I still could not memorize
the multiplication tables

yet I remember clearly
how it smelled there beside the vast gray lake
and how in the empty dining room
light circled as though in clouds

and I remember the feel
of my mother's anger
and what she wanted from me.

In college I passed statistics
only through the patient tutoring of the professor.
A young man, worried and awkward and kind.

Well, I was pretty. I do remember that.

In the end I worked out a way to cheat
on the multiplication tables
and I have used it all my life.

The numbers are shaped like the bones in my body,
though I cannot tell you how.

Perhaps I knew, once –
but memory slips away now
like a fish you see moving under water,
sliding past the hook.

Yet I believe what we know in the bones
will stay with us –

like the face of a young man
kind and awkward in his stiff professor's suit
and not much older than I

and how I must have looked,
sitting across from him in my new spring dress –

oh, pretty, and quick, and brief as a breath.

Jill and the Beanstalk

Jill is up the beanstalk.
Only the chime of beans in a dry pod.

She is so small now
that she is hiding from the Ogre
within the glitter of His eyes.

She might be His very shadow,
wrapped in His own black hide
exhaling His very breath
of rot and gnaw...

*no no He has smelled her
He is coming*

but she takes up what she has found
and runs!
She is bringing her heart back, brave girl!

And with her own bright hatchet
she chops chops chops
through the roaring and the sky shuddering

she chops and chops
she keeps on chopping
she keeps on chopping.

The Cabin

That morning I finally got away
I took some clothes and my grandmother's picture
and Duffy who was never his dog

and drove north up into the Los Padres Forest,
a place he had never been.
I found an old green A-frame half hidden by pines
and as soon as I could, I moved in.

There's a lot I'm skipping. I want to get to the blue jays.

The cabin was one tall room with a big window.
Up a rickety stair was a loft where I slept
under another window, stars hanging over my head.

The only heat was a pellet stove.
All night long I listened to the trickle of pellets
and watched the slow firelight moving on the cedar.

The day I moved in, a dozen Steller's jays
were leaning from the piñon pines, yelling
and waving their crests.
They seemed to be expecting me.

They'd hang out in the piñons or on the railings
and chat back and forth while I sat in the sunshine.

I spent a lot of time just sitting in the sunshine.

I wasn't writing yet. For so many years
it had not been safe for me to write anything down.

The place smelled clean, like pine pitch and granite.

I could leave a notebook out on the table
and nobody would go through it.

I could write down exactly what I was thinking.

Maybe you know what I mean when I say
it felt like shooting off a gun
to write things down like that.

It took two hours to drive to work but it was worth it.
I had a dog with a loud voice.
I could lock and bar the door.

And there were the jays.

Reversing the Spell

Always the fish
with their tricky wishes.
Throw them back, throw them back!
And the gold ring with them!

Up here on the mountain
there's nothing to wish for –
so high, so clear,
the light so near.

Pale blue butterfly
on a sticky orange monkeyflower.
Two scrawny bees
plowing pollen.

No silver slippers,
nothing you dreamed of
sliding through your fingers
like herring.

Only, in the ochre dust,
a round red seed.
But don't plant it!
You know what that leads to –

easy climb
fool's gold
oven door
bloody harp –

the necessity of an axe.

Inanna Returns

She comes out thin as a root,
two black cubs shambling after.

She comes through the bright meadows,
through bee song

to the place where he sits
on her throne,

smeared with honey
and fat crumbs, smelling of sex.

And she says:
Now you go.

Grouse Song

Grouse spins inward, dances
the one wing limp-dance –
the hunched,
knee-favoring,
stiff-hip-lurching two step.

Round and round she dances,
wing drag like a thumb joint –
and the dragged part,
flightless,
makes a spiral in the dust –

a whorl, a shell-shape,
an ear.
What you must follow
is not the bright breast exposed
to arrows
but the dragged part –

the lurch,
the dark thing hidden,
which you thought dead.

There is the pivot, the way in –
the still place

where she falls
down and down,
until she touches
where flying cannot go.

Fat Time

Under purest ultramarine the raised
goblets of trees overrun with gold.
We should be reeling drunk and portly as groundhogs
through these windfalls of russet, citron, bronze, chartreuse.

Everywhere color pools like butter, like oil of ripe nuts
like piles of oranges under a striped tent.
Oh, let us be greedy of eyeball,
pigs scuffling in this gorgeous swill!

Let us cud this day and spend the winter ruminant.
Let us write fat poems, and be careless.
Let us go bumbling about in wonder,
legs coated with goldenrod and smelling of acorns

so that in the unleavened winter
this vermilion spill, this skyfall,
will heat a spare poem, dazzle the eye's window –
feed us like holy deer on the blank canvas of snow.

The White Queen

Comes the White Queen worrying
and hurrying to keep up and losing
her hairpins. Mind pieces slip
out of their sockets.

Because it is all held together with hairpins –
the old kind, meant to be invisible –

and they were invisible –
I didn't know they were there holding my mind together
until I started to lose it.

Someone whose name I should remember
talks of the sweet dishevelment of love,
but this dishevelment is not sweet.

Or perhaps I am wrong, perhaps I should –
no, *could*, because one should speak only in possibilities not rules
–

but where was I

I *could* perhaps experience this dishevelment as sweet –
this coming apart

or opening up, which is a more appealing concept –
the mind dropping hairpins,
not in the process of falling off in chunks

but of opening up. Light through the
empty.

So this dropping off of things –
of memory, cleverness, concentration –

perhaps is not matter for grief
but sign of expansion.

If poetry cannot be made
perhaps it will come in as a gift:

Joy creating everything,
even this –

even the White Queen –

silly, and confused
and showering silver hairpins
so beautiful and full of light.

Having a Drink With My Daughter At the Casa Del Mar

She is a Renoir rising from this gilded half shell, a shining
Van Gogh sunflower, a tree full of August apricots.

She throws the banners of her laughter into the coffered ceilings
and the castle awakens. The waiters leap to serve her.

Outside the window, a Breugel: skaters and strollers and dogs
and a sun just beginning to drop over a stitched seam of surfers.

Lights go on in the fish place down on the pier, where we used to
go
when she was a baby, when living in Santa Monica was cheap.

I think of that restaurant in the Trastevere, where every night
she toddled into the kitchen to visit, bright and uninhibited as a
robin.

I remember my body shaking, and her crowning at last – no
saintly
Botticelli with angels but black-haired and vivid and yelling like
Kali.

Now I pray to the gods of fresh tablecloths, clean slates.
My sins seat themselves around the table, waiting to be served.

Sudden Oak Death

Down the long body of California,
ramalina drapes the dead shoulders of oaks
with her bent hair.

Behind her veil ooze black cankers
of *phytophthora ramorum*.

We are in plague time now,
these dead too many to bury,
shrouded in lace the color of smog

fallen like kindling
over the stucco-colored hills

behind dry lakebeds
where are tattooed the lost shapes of reeds.

Here I name them, the old friends:
live oak, scrub oak, white oak, black oak,
coffeberry, huckleberry, buckeye, laurel,
manzanita, toyon, madrone, sequoia.

In the fires, even their roots will burn.

We leave our children a place with no eyelids.
They will die thirsty,
telling stories of our green shade.

Goldengrove Unleaving

Years and years I've come to you like this –
sliding in to touch base, dirt in my teeth.

Years and years I've leaned against you, breathing.
Green skin. Sap-stuck. Fissured as I am now.

You wore willow and I climbed up weeping.
You put on god tree when I needed gods.

Still, it's strange to find you waiting
back here where we began. Years and years

round to the smell of root and dust and tannin –
as if this life I've made so much of

were nothing but a squirrel's flimflam.
Once I fell through a vortex

of spinning aspen leaves. It's taken me a lifetime
to know the place for home.

Journeying West

Journeying west to a new country,
women mark the trails with the things they leave behind.
Fans, little papers of rice powder, fine-laced shoes, tucked
petticoats – almost at once they find
things they can do without.

Mired in the silt of rivers,
they leave the familiar anchors of mirrors and featherbeds,
the barrels of salt pork and windfall cider
they have put up against winter.

Then, muddled by distance
or the way the prairie continually withdraws from them
or because the stars here blossom in strange places
they leave behind the failed compasses
of letters, of bibles

and somewhere in the desert
they abandon the shallow graves,
the broken axles of memory and desire.

So in the end
women leave behind everything
but what is in their heads.

And then even what is in their heads –
climbing the next rock, the narrow trail,
smelling water and going to it –

in this way women cross the mountains
and bring themselves down to the sea.