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Ice Poems

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ANTHONY GROOMS
Poetry Atlanta Signature Series

ICE POEMS
Ice Poems

Anthony Grooms

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To Pamela,

For simple graces

I.

In Rousseau’s Garden

A red sun hangs
Over the black, verdant jungle
Beneath the towering cycads,
Among the lotus blossoms, the sansevierias and agave,
Between the columns of flowering cereus,
An ocelot attacks my silhouette

I never expected
That my death would come even before I was born
Dreamt of by a Frenchman
And sold for money

I have memories of its coming,
Of time flowing backwards like an eddy
Rousseau caught it in his strokes:
Feline—Feline of the yellow fang
And me running like twilight
From the thing the artist knows
A Wind

The Datsun is caught in the groove
In the distance the ridges are hung with haze
They are smoking the round hills roll up and pass
The muddy creeks the spotted cows—the angus
Of cows—The black sheep the horses
I am dreaming of a city of spires and shimmer
In my mind's eye I am seeing the city
I am seeing clouds Matterhorns and Gibraltars
Boiling sharp against the blue of heaven
Blooming razor rounded ice flowers
I am seeing clouds against the blue
Above the mountains beyond the hills
I am travelling dreaming of a city

In the distance I see gray smoke of rain
I am dreaming suddenly a cloud low
Falling like a curtain trailed by threads
Ragged angel it is a blackness
Night rooted up to take flight
It is rain battering milk white
Foaming on the windshield
The cattle disappear hail comes like glass
I am dreaming of the city

Out of a heaven of nothing out of earth
And sky the cloud dips a finger a bone
A ghost struggling to make a shape
It is two sinuous whirlwinds combining separating
Re-combining re-separating like lovers
One dances around the other
They become one thick-bodied whirling shaft
Kicking up the road the fences the sheep
The cows it is a whoosh of darkness a light a howl
A wrench I am jolted
The Datsun disobey's me I surrender to the skid
Into nausea I am airborne
I am going to die I say going to die

In the dark I slow to the pace of silence
I spin cradled in colors of blackness
Gray shrieks red screams
White light snatches of song of dream
Of casual talk I am not sure that I am upside down
I am on my side spinning as slowly as a thought

(I am reminded of a man in Norfolk
Who was sucked up by a wind
His car, lifted thirty feet above the ground,
Cavaliered in the ride he was thrown
Still in his car, he dropped like a stone
The legs went through the floor board
And were crushed, but he lived
Then there was the child in Alexandria
Who crawled out into the air beyond her balcony
And like a plucked cherubim, fell fourteen stories
She was caught in the branches of an apple tree
And flung, bloodied, into space and came to land
In the arms of a passerby
There was a parachutist, they say, from Charlottesville
Who fell a thousand feet and was caught
By nothing but the manicured lawn of a doctor
He sank to his waist every bone was crushed
And he lived then there was Dorothy
Who with Toto spun away from Kansas and then
There are those who die those who die)

I am not thinking of my mother
I think how ends come one way
Or another I will make the six o'clock news
I will be a found man an enigma come to rest
A name being withheld pending notification
I dream of a city
Of shimmering spires of glimmer I am rocked
In lullaby the arms of vortex
I dance I breathe storm
I dream spires colors
My Death

I see the Datsun (I think) shoot
As if from a catapult arch into clear black space
Across the round hills crash
Bury itself like a meteorite the cows
Gather huddle against the rain
I feel a dream of flying
And I wonder how it all ends

The Geckos

Geckos scutter across the walls
At sunset
And jump to banana leaves in the rain

Their smell is as earthy as death
Their rustle—quieting
I grow to love them

In my dreams I become the geckos
Sailing
On the wet breezes in the twilight

Like sleek missiles seeking insect
Victims
While the victims go about their work

And the death is a surprise,
Quick and clean—
The world goes on as before

I imagine I am in Antarctica,
Walking on the frozen hollow of the sea
It breaks and I plunge
Beneath the icy water,
Diamonds and hexagons float above me,

White as the clouds
Coldness peels away my skin
My arms stretch above me
I reach for the clouds and stiffen
I do not think of air

I think of cold
I am a chrysalis as hard as diamond
And I am becoming nothing
But a cold-made corpse, too cold to bloat
I look out through my stilled lenses

And watch as time settles
Like sediment in the primordial sea
And not being ice, but its victim
I, too, sink deep
Into the cold heart of Earth
Lament for a Green Boy

Your face as old as history, I remember you,
Unhappy green boy, a soldier for the right causes
Of old men. You, too, a believer in causes
Shall grow old and right.

You are barely pubescent; the hard lines unformed
Your mouth droops with shock, your eyes,
Worlds in themselves, see how Earth ends,
And you don’t believe it.

What word brought you across the sea?
What mother gave you to these unhappy times?
What wind? What breath of God? What commandment
Decrees: Live a horror?

Nothing, my green boy of the broken limbs.
No God, but old men. No heart. No father.

Amulet

My ear is my amulet
I took it from a little, shirtless gook
With a thin young beard

He was my first good kill
I saw him as he lifted his rifle
But I triggered first

Just two rounds—pop! pop!
They knocked him back
Like two good punches from a champ

I put his ear on a shoe lace
And wear it around my neck:
It gives me power,
Hearing the death that I can only speak
Homespace

My mother did not know me when I knocked.
She said her son was killed in the war.
It was only when I blurted my tears
That she opened the screen and fell

Into my arms. My father welcomed me as a hero.
They gave a cookout. No one my age came.
I made myself busy with the fire
So I wouldn't have to talk. When the fuel

Exploded on the coals, I heard screams.
In the evening the orange sun dropped
Into the haze of the blue ridges. August seemed cool.
Women and children laughed from the porch.

Men sat under the elms.
I watched the sky for the enemy.

Kid Sleepy

Kid Sleepy stepped out onto the avenue
To meet his man. "A dime," the man said.
The Kid gave him a ten dollar bill
And without a thank you climbed the stairs
To the little place he shared with Annie.
Annie cooked the works for him and
He belted his biceps with a twisted bandanna
And pumped the blood

Until the veins stood out and cried.
Annie slipped the point of the needle
Under his skin. It ricocheted off the vein.
She pulled it back and jabbed, stabbed
Into the heart of it. The purple blood
Seeped into the syringe, swirling
Into milky lady of the day. Kid Sleepy
Closed his eyes

(He had seen all he needed to see of the world
Of citizens.) and unrolled his wings and rose
Into seamless midnight where lungs sing like sirens
And Jupiter and that girl on TV and TV and that
Rainbow
Hills

Will there be sadder times than yours
Which were too brief and spawned nothing
But grief? What unhappy god made you,
My good haired green boy of the farms,
Man of the bruised arms and the high hobby horse?
You were born with the X against you
You could have been smothered in your crib
And I would have known no other grief,
Never known the risk of the heart in war,
Or the destruction of your self's own name until
You said call me the name of this place:
Call me graveyard, call me slum, call me junkyard.
Misery by any name is misery.

When will the knotting hurt of you dissolve?
When I have climbed with my load of your going to dust
Like an old woman frailed by work and stooped
Who loses her breath on the promenade of a hill
And reaching the top, alas, looks to see hills and hills
And more hills

III.

According to Your Nature

My love, you are like the clouds,
Snow-bright against the cerulean
You are lean and Herculean
And you are icy
Like the white core of a Nazi youth

Your smile hides angels
Who will not divulge your secrets
Your reach is discreet
It is the hook
Of the bejeweled swastika

I love the surface of you,
Every hard, blonde inch
You pinch, sweet fraulein,
My soft black heart
Between your charm and your uebermensch

My love, you are too bright
Like the clouds, you kill
Your steel eyes are too still!
Like all things that sparkle,
You cut
My name is Billy Sheehan
Who broke through the ice
On Blackmon's pond,

They pulled me up by my hair
My arms stiffened out
Like a crucified boy,
The face of an angel,

White like the ice
Which had stolen my color.
They beat on my chest
And blew air into

My water-filled lungs,
And then stood above me
And pronounced me dead.

That was the day I saved the world.

That was the day
My mother turned to the church,
My father gave up drinking,
My brother became a priest.

Had I lived—brain damaged—
I would have become a slur-face,
A hobgoblin child, fed
By the bitterness of ice.

A taste like the white rind
Of lemon would have shaped my words
For revenge on the sidelong
Glances and the children's pointy fingers,

On the cringed noses
Of lady teachers, on the mother,
Impatient with spilt oatmeal.
The father's shame,

The brother's inexorable guilt:
Each ice-formed syllable
Would have been spat to extract warm blood.
Only a wife would find the core

Of kindness in me
And for love
Or for desperation, bear.

And then, what would Billy Sheehan have become?

So hardened by winter—his heart—
So much shaped like a dagger
Of ice that even innocence
Would be slow to melt it?

Who did Christ really save by dying?
Mary Magdalene, a whore?
Peter, a friend who denied him?
They say he saved us all;

And so, I must be a savior too!
I saved a mother, a father, a brother;
I saved wife and a son

From what Billy Sheehan would have become.
Sadie

I call my son a son of a bitch
I forget how curses fall back
And reshape the curser

I become a wolf mother

I track him down by the scent
Of his sweaty soles
He is my blood gone too wild

I would tame him or give him back to god

Son of a bitch and bitch's son
Son of a son of god
And still for all he would be

He smells too much like a man

I will break my teeth on him
I will make him call me mother
I will squeeze it out of his throat
Squeeze it out between the howl and the bark
Squeeze it out between the tear
And the yellow eye

Mother!
Fur mouth—mother!
Curse me—cur—mother!

And still I am the mother of the bastard

Helena

I am the old whore
My crime is not that I was too dear
But that I was too free

When the apes
Had had their hairy hours with me and rose
Glistening

I had nothing of them
Except the stickiness of their half sons
And the dream

Of the slim waisted youth
Who glistens of his own sweat and hardness
And who lies

Long after the heavy bellies
Have buttoned their trousers and belted
Their liquors

And have made their excuses
For their own too-smart-to-understand
Wives

Loneliness is a bank roll
When you have visited every city in the world
From the mattress

To the toilet seat
When you have tasted every pink nodule
Until the taste

Is gray
And your own made up face is drawn too red
You lay

And spend each dollar
With a wet finger and the hot, salty smell
Of the young boy
The Man Who Lives Above Me

The man who lives above me is a juggernaut of flesh
I hear his ponderous knees creak my ceiling
The lamp globe sways as he rolls from knee to knee
His cathedral voice stutters my panes
Chips of plaster drop like stars
He is uttering in tongues
His hands clap—I look for lightning—
He is singing praises in a language
More ancient than Hebrew—the original tongue of Babel

I flick the channels
From sitcom to sitcom
To the latest babble, music video,
It does not satisfy me

At the top of the narrow stairway, I knock at his door
His cologneed sweat greets me
He takes me into the darkened upper room,
Into the musk, and we pray
He tells me what I must say
And I say it again and again until it fills me
He anoints my head with oil
His heavy hands crown me—they shake me
He says the fire of God is passing through me
Fire is passing through me—I am hot
I am hoping it is God
I sing the blessings, the praises
Then I am tongue-tied and I want to be swept away
I want to die in grace
I want to see the face of God
The fat man cries
The room is knee-deep in his odor
He sings, spraying me with spit
He hugs me, washing me in his sweaty love
He says I am saved
I am saved I say and I repeat I am saved

It is late when I return
The talk shows are on
I shower and lie naked under the fan
The national anthem plays and then there is fuzz

Above me the fat man squeaks his bed
In the morning his alarm goes off
In the evening he comes home from work
At night he prays
IV.

Prayer

My knees are my talisman
My voice, an amulet on a chain to gods,
A gritty wall, a scrap of echo,
First to the father
Then to the son
And then to the lowly mother

I genuflect—I rub on oils—
Bolster me against earthquakes

It is as a grit
Between the two parts of the knee,
Not just grief, but the tooth of grief,
The ever-rising fear
That the fatness of the land
Will burn up and blow away

I genuflect—I light candles—
Spare me the volcano
Spare me the quake

If man were like a god
He would kill himself for greed
If god were like a man
He would waste away to nothing
But the hollow voice of begging
Against the scraping—the wailing—
Of the gritty earthplates,
And against the pathos of hope,
And the ever-rising land tide

I genuflect—I light candles

The world slips around the sun
And I shiver in the wake

Psalm

MY GOD my God, I have become small
contemplating the sky:
2 How the moon falls in its path
around the planet; how the planet bows
to the sun.
3 What kind of satellite am I?
where is my path across heaven?
4 When I fall, do you catch me?
When I rise, do you rejoice?
5 Will you reduce me to hydrogen
and make me elemental? make me one
with the Lord of the simple and
unseen?
6 Would I then be pervasive and dark?
would I then, knowing nothing
but the thin wind of space, know to
celebrate man?
7 Could I then, with a hollow heart,
and the distance of stars in my breath,
sing the praises of man?
8 I sing him what he is: little
creature full of space.
9 I celebrate cortex and marvel
at whatsoever this animal has wrought:
10 A world as white as hydrogen and
crowned with its glory.
11 He has dominion over all beasts,
yes, even the angels.
12 Celebrate man.
13 Celebrate the tundra of his heart;
Celebrate his whiteness and love destruction.
14 Yes, celebrate man.
15 He is space between the elements of dark.
Yet, he is winter upon the planet.
16 My God my God, how excellent is man.
Clouds

What elegant fishes the clouds make
Slowly, they boil
From sturgeon to heron,
From minnows to a multitude of doves
They are Gibraltars of fishes,
Continents built on God's watery air

They are the vagrancy of nice
And the ennui of goodness
Their power, like a feather continent,
Is enormous and soft

Prone and broken angels,
They are the faces of deviltry in grace
Dolphin and dauphin
Eel and crocodile's tears
What they teach of grace,
They teach in the strata
Of fins, wings and doves—
Fishes and loaves—
Alto halo, stratus sanctus
Ascendancies,
Descendancies,
And the vague epiphanies
Of deep-sky anglers

Sky flowers
And icebergs against the deep blue,
They are unfathomable
Souls dispossessed of care