

FLY BY NIGHT

SELECTED POEMS

1975 - 1992



PAT NOLAN

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re:issue press

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WHAT'S MY ESTHETIC

I brandish my esthetic
like a dry stalk
a beautiful dry stalk
but a dry stalk
all the same
some of the pieces
flake off and make
it lose its appearance
the regal simplicity
becomes more simple
what was isn't now
I'm content with that
mysterious still is why
not because I wanted
to say "Hey everybody!
look at my dry stalk!
You've seen them a
million times but you've
never seen one like this!"
nor did I want the wizened
reed to symbolize our own
commonality and plainness
or its apparent rigidity
even after death and all
no nothing of the sort
the first thing I pick up
after I've cast off the last
that's my esthetic

IN MEMORY OF TED BERRIGAN

Life wriggles across
 the microscope's slide
from left to right
 so I'm given to assume
though I only know
 one thing for certain
a scratched ass is a contented ass

the anchor of dogma drags bottom

whine and growl on
 the distant highway
machines hiss as
 they plow through
the orange air
 here it's only
the dominant silence
 of a beating clock

guitar riff winds down
 the scale of my nerves
 and for my ears alone

where I am stretched out
 in memory of Ted Berrigan
in the recumbent position
ashtray and book at bedside
that faraway look pen in hand

“I don’t want to confuse things with ideas now”

feeble buzz
Kerouac’s winter fly
in the corner of the window
 after the sun’s gone down
as I
 great reclining Buddha of evening
contemplate these illusions
 our past and future lives

SEASONELLE

The mist of November
days softens the hills
and the distance the
vineyards and orchards
rows of gold or rust
after dark rain falls
like a horror to mat
the fading landscape
the next morning's light
dripping from the eaves
as last night's full moon
had back lit the falling
rain like a pale dream
spumes of mist snagged
on the points of firs
struggle upward to join
the awkward seething mass
of the passing season

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

For your information, Frank O'Hara and I happened to meet on the same ocean liner back from the Continent. He was worried about some pieces of glass he was smuggling back to the States for his friend, Arthur Rubenstein. They were large, odd shapes of tempered glass for a monstrous dime store wind chime. The duty on them would have been prohibitive hence the scheme to bring them in with the paintings in the packing crates. It made Frank nervous. He smoked and drank and talked incessantly. Finally, we docked in New York, Frank all atremble as we approached the Customs shed. Fortunately, there was a circus ahead of us, and by the time we got up to the Customs officials who were by then inundated by tons of elephant shit, they just waved us on by, barely bothering with the formality of stamping our passports. Later on that night at a cocktail party, Shirley MacLaine came up and congratulated Frank on a job well done. Frank took the compliment with much aplomb, but after Shirley left to join some other guests, he did such a perfect impersonation of her saying some awful catty thing that those of us around him were totally astounded and delighted by this previously unsuspected talent.

SCUFF PROOF

Trust to faith
what you can
and
fuck the rest

the dimmer point of view

now I'm next to nothing
the words echo themselves

longing lasts

what arcane fantasies
there are
reveal themselves

I am less than more

ghosts anew
letters unanswered

old bed creaks of old limbs
old mind harvests youth

another
 light
 wind

“I am lost forever”
a familiar despair
more said than needed

as it were

no way to escape
a wide awake helplessness
oh big sorrow follow up!

drum beat
of wind-up clock
my late attentions

no doubt

if I could get
my sorrow to speak
I would be happy

lessons of a jokester

I air
teeth

RATIONALE DU JOUR

Palm fronds litter the side of the road
bones of a strange fish on an asphalt shore
just what I wanted to hear
days ooze with a terrific boredom
and a throbbing angst

looking for the edge
looking for a place on the edge
popular place the edge
live on the edge
nerves on edge
(no pushing)
over the edge
I need an edge
catch a wave instead

elongated necks and tiny brains
did Modigliani call it right or what
the aliens resemble us in that uncanny way
controlled as we both are by progress
science imitates art

if I have another cup of coffee
 I'll really be a mess
I think as I grind up the beans
I have to think of what I'm doing as running a business
to explain why I'm always staring bankruptcy in the face
I find myself deeply chagrined
 and other shades of chartreuse
I should really be more careful
of what I think do or say
a little practical paranoia never hurt
though I wonder what the people in the gray house
one street over and two blocks down
 think of me
I know their dog doesn't particularly like me
 clouds threaten
but that's not really keeping me in
I'm not afraid of my shadow
besides I already know
 winter's got six more weeks to go
(I heard that on the radio)
 not having it all
has been a source of great disappointment
 since I never expected any of it
I shouldn't be feeling so bad
another hour flies by
 and I'm that much
closer to washing the floor
or is it the bathroom today
but if I hadn't got up just then
I would have missed the smoke from the brush pile

drifting across the hillside to pattern
the bare willow and crooked redwood
in the purity of black and white
with bars of sunlight slanting through
in a continual shifting panorama
of utmost glory and just then wishing
for a camera instead of a coffee cup in my hand
no one ever phones to say

“put away that mop,

You’ve just won the Pulitzer!”

no letter arrives with a contract for the serial
and foreign publication rights
the only muse I know
is not being able to decide
whether to shit

or go blind

I feel like I’m chasing my hat in a windstorm
in one of those old silent comedies
the hat what I really can’t get my hands on
I get to my feet and raise the blinds
throughout the house to erase the shadows
winter over for now
nothing is ever only black or white
so let the housework begin
and once that’s done
I’m watching the wet fade from the tiles
an easy warm feeling overtakes me
as if obvious conclusions were a rush of blood
I is the harp upon which I play
a fine rain silver air

WRITER'S WORLD

Under Webster's
New Twentieth
Century Dictionary
(unabridged)
the other sock

EXERCISE

Just as I stood up
I sat back down
again forgetting
what I stood for

BECOMING ORGASMIC

“we’ll have fun fun fun
while it lasts”

suddenly you’re old

it’s all those little
deaths adding up

no risk no invention
inconceivable (said with a lisp)
but don’t force a line

uncut sentences barely gleam

WHAT'S THE POINT

Someone all of a sudden got married. It was an occasion to celebrate. Mom was there, younger sister who sipped a can of pop, Grandma, and Grandpa who had just been let out on parole. Grandma kept her fist clamped around a squat glass of whiskey neat. I said I preferred just beer. She agreed that I should save myself for later. We were gonna have chicken and ribs if we could get the meat thawed. Grandpa decided he had enough time for a shot. Grandma got the syringe out and started cooking up a spoonful. The veins in Grandpa's arms had about as much life as a used condom. He still had one good one at the back of his leg though. Some of the smack spilled into Grandma's drink. She saw that I was watching. She shrugged and knocked it back. Grandpa took his geeze like he was greeting an old friend he hadn't seen in years. In the other room, they were banging the ribs on the kitchen table to hasten the thawing.

NOT EVEN WEDNESDAY

Time transforms
certainly mere words

life's a struggle
nothing without

sound weary
a decadent stance

bare bulb brilliance
wall paper peeling

shifting decisions
which grain of sand

out scream kids
"QUIET DOWN!"

I dream alone
awake to your touch

you were gone
I was worried

you have to be here
to keep my mind off you

CLOSER TO GROUND

The past examples
the future events

we build on what we remember
forgetting is what we do best
the world a reminder of that
how close we are to earth
as we distance ourselves

mammal fungus

“ain’t nobody here but us ants”
(oldest work force known to man)
“insect” still insults
nothing but contempt for survivors
their myriad permutations
the compromise we can’t make

that’s the narrow view

gone in the time
 it takes
 a nerve to twitch
grand illusion spark
as with Newton
 cosmic ideas bear fruit

warm breeze
 a nectarine drops

VAMP FADE

“you macramé me, mamma,
you got me all tied up in knots”

broken needs

(something wet has blurred
the ink on the page)

soothing mercy

that stack of books
some open some half read
attest to history’s durability
and when those are gone
more will take their place

collect books and you collect dust

looking for something
significance in this moment
perhaps

not a clue
as Darwin had

piano intermezzo climbs the scale
my scales have dropped off
(you didn’t notice)
and I’m still climbing

see clearly maybe phantasm

AFTER DESCARTES

Thinking is highly overrated
the blank page in front of me proves that!
I'll never doubt myself again

why then do I
dick around

an apt expression
when applied
to most men

(press gently)

It's not that I mind
being stupid
it's the reminders I mind

BEAUTY

Fucked with it till it broke

I HAVE SOMETHING IN MY I

Within this polyphobic
badly spelled

universe

I a visitor travel

I got my suitcase in my hand
words threaten to jump out

from everywhere

there is a word for everything
and that's what's really scary

there is no corner

no nook or cranny

without a word

as I have just proved

forgive me

is just another set of words

out of nowhere

as can often happen

when you're trying

so hard to get serious

the landscape is made of words

over there's a tree some bushes

(or shrubs) a vast expanse

of sky smoke from a steam

engine traveling through

the maze of foliage

though itself unseen

the high grass and rock

outcropping the dip of

land down to the sea

behind a small motel

whose pink neon sign

flashing displays "MOT"

CUBIST MOOD

Day fractured
 by tenths
(or variations thereof)
splintered wedges of glass
 from a clock face

shadows lengthen
 a landscape
half pale blue
 and dark
deepening silhouettes

that blur of edges
piece by jagged
 piece
where lines converge

chimney smoke
 lanky poplar's
last few
gold petals shudder

EXTRA ORDINARY

I live the life of a mystic though no one could probably tell. It's a private affair. My thoughts ascend like bubbles from a diver's mask. I am the architect of my morality. Unfortunately I had not accounted for the earthquake. But I am light of foot. I just jump till it's all over and I'm back on my feet. A myth has brought me here or back on the tennis court. I step back. I still have time. I don't look back. I am the star of this movie! I play a tree. I use the Stanislavsky method, the method to my mysticism. Then I play a bee. I fracture an antenna spinning out over a row of rose bushes. Whatever it was, I didn't see it coming, and now I pour it out, under a leaf, the dim honey of my existence.

COUNTERINTELLIGENCE

On the beach are bodies. On this particular beach, only one body, practically indistinguishable from the sand. Behind bushes, her sister. All is confusion. Andrei and I, suspecting that underneath a large drainage pipe is a trap door that leads to an ancient sarcophagus, decide to unearth it. We enlist the help of someone else. Digging, we find nothing and apply our shovels to the task of filling the holes we've made. Our helper says that indeed there is something there! He's convinced that he has heard the hiss of eternity deflating. He's mistaken, of course. It's only a covey of quail.

BLUEBIRDNESS

for Huncce Voelcker

Blue bird appeared suddenly
on one of the large
flat rocks in the garden
moved it's head with stop action precision
just as suddenly flew from view
to leave a hole
in the picture
it had just made
the rock
there forever

refuse to count
those friends
acquaintances
who have flown from this flat rock and left
a hole in the associations
they once made

how many isn't just a matter of fact
images called up
shimmer
transparent
in the quiet garden
of a morning alone

half yellowed stalks of wild grass droop
over the smooth gray abyss
stick figure
limbs flung abject

the faint tremors of beating hearts
bugs
 or a breeze in passing

I resemble those remarks
blade of grass
 the advance of the season
folly of importance placed on accrual
 all that stuff
 hits home

before long
stalk shadows fall across the rock
 that large recognition
 as dawn grows to dark
 deceptive in the half light
but unmistakable
 as the stutter of blue wings in flight

PRETTY BASIC

Through the pane
of unsuspecting glass
against which
a hanging pot casts
its clear shadow on
the otherwise white
glare of the dusty
window the green of
outside like a piece
from a larger puzzle

OXYGEN

Writing poetry
is a lot like
being a flower

you present
a visible surface
that is aesthetic

but it's your
ultraviolet appearance
that attracts

the insects
vital to your
perpetuation

MIDDLE AGE SPREAD

I should have
gone down
the tubes by now
but I won't fit

IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

for Andrei Codrescu

The way morning looked on the road to town
challenged my perception of how it used to be
sway of branch

overhanging tall fence

bright shirt

crossing up ahead

the swerve of gray asphalt downhill

I could be in an alternate universe

for all I know

and yet everything has that
irritating trance inducing familiarity
as I

shift into third

to make everything alright

I hate it when I do that

just get up to speed

and I'm already unconscious

anticipating another cliché

what I wouldn't give for a pen

that would do all the writing itself

and spare me the embarrassment

of self abuse

for one thing

I expect from existence

shocks and bumps

a series of ups and downs

a line graph of peaks

and valleys that comes in cycles and still

catches me not looking

that razor edge of uncertainty
in which nothing I do has meaning
nicks me with significance
 one morning on down the road

at the stop sign there's a large white rock
on the white line and a white haired man
in white shoes turns in his tracks and heads
back across the white bridge looking both ways
waiting for the white car to pass the sign has
 "the war"
spray painted in white letters along the bottom

"it's the ambiguity of hysteria I find fascinating"
the President said in a news conference last night

can I really change stations while I'm driving
or determine which end of the cassette to stick in
manipulate the foot pedals shift gears roll up
the window set the defrost and brush my hair in
the rear view mirror going around these curves

(that's not a question)

piano bell throbbing bass
heart saxophone voice
 in chaos time

music makes me sentimental
 I lose all sense of reality
imagine me in the driver's seat
the focal point of all attention
center of the universe

or if nothing else
lead singer in a rock band
that's me on those harmonies
as well as lead vocals
guitar solo and fancy footwork
I've got wheels as they say on the street
and still manage to stay a legal
three seconds behind
the white car up ahead

wicked electromagnetic shadows
from overhead power lines
interfere with the signals
it's as if the illusion of being
experienced a slight shift in frequency
the pops and hisses of white noise
indicate how easy it is to stray
from one world
to another

"beam me up, Scotty"

close enough to read that bumper sticker
too close and brake in a hurry
glad I was awake enough
if that's what you call it

brought to consciousness
by the guy ahead of me's
sudden left turn
but for now it'll have to do

BACK TO WHERE I STARTED FROM

The day begins late
the sun ablaze above
the eastern ridge already
and coffee's not even made
the damp cool of morning by now
gone the young growing tips and
shoots of the planted yard
pierced by yellow light
a pale shimmering green
myself I find my cutoffs
in the pile of cast off
swim wear from yesterday's
swim and slip into them to get
aroused by their damp tight fit
and day's promised brightness
a grasshopper disguised as a
discarded clothes pin makes its move
to a patch of bare parched earth
the one single thing to do today
I will plan slowly and carefully

INNOCENTS ABROAD

My family and I had been accepted to study at the Academie de Musique Francaise but once we enrolled and started attending classes we realized how mean the French were being to us because we were Americans. They only allowed me to play the tambourine and my daughter the triangle and my son the wood block. My wife sang with the chorus but was only allowed to move her lips, not actually sing the songs. One day I went with my daughter to pick up her literature assignment from her American literature professor. Her professor was Oscar Levant, the famous pianist. He gave her photocopies of some obscure poems by William Carlos Williams to study. William Carlos Williams! I started to cry with joy. This made up for all the wrongs we had suffered at the hands of these snooty French. When I awoke I had tears in my eyes.

AFTER BASHO

Frogs as big
as armchairs
their splash

AUTUMN TANKA

for Philip Whalen

Cloud scatter
bands morning sky
river mist lifts

elegant pampas reed
found on the way home

Taking laundry down
leaves vibrate shake
in the gray air

those two old pines
live for each other

I could follow the road
or drive off into the golden
haze of sunset

my regrets accumulate
with each rendezvous

Slender bamboo
leaves dried and yellow
on the gray bathmat

picture perfect
this mock wilderness

Rich late light
calls me out of doors
I'm a stick in the mud

every breath
a lesson in physics

Half brittle hanging
leaves clatter in the wind
applauds for autumn

a spider's patience
shows among the shadows

Going by the clock
day whispers away
my cup never full

nothing worth watching
light plays at the window

The breeze announces
the fall of leaves
and miniscule drops

giant walnut stripped bare
holds a clear view of the sky

Season's first rain
Can't help but
feel unprepared

plaintive cry
kettle before coffee

Startled quail bound
over a bank of brambles
at my approach

walnut's last leaf drops
to the frozen ground

White cat Buddha
in green wheelbarrow
glazed with rain water

a speck the wind
swept into my eye

(the empty house's uneasy silence
of telephone rung unanswered)

but that's the way it is
you say what you don't mean
and mean what you don't say

“girl when you call my name
(I) salivate like a Pavlov dog”

(bass drum beat on first word)

hummingbirds at it again
little tiny winged sex fiends
doing what they do best

the refrigerator it takes a strong man to open
“nothing for sure but this brand new tattoo”
and why did I want to wait till later to write
“the old folks around here like to circle
this twilit neighborhood their Cadillacs
on idle they slow boat around the block
their excuse for an evening stroll”

just lazy I suppose

like last night
I should have written
“doubt”
when I had it

PAT NOLAN has published in numerous magazines, including Rolling Stone and The Paris Review, and in various anthologies as well as publications in England, Italy, Canada, and Japan. He is the author of fourteen books of poetry, including *Cloud Scatter*, *The Nolan Anthology Of Poetry, Vol. II*, *Thin Wings* and, most recently, *Untouched By Rain* from Empty Head Press, 2005. He is the recipient of a Poets Foundation Award and a Sonoma County Community Foundation Grant. He resides along the Russian River in the redwood wilds of Northern California.



re:issue press note

Doris Green Editions originally published *Fly By Night* in November of 1992 in a limited edition specifically for the author's readings at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado and at The Poetry Project in New York City. The reissue of this selection of poems is faithful to the original. However, a few modest editorial changes were made, the biographical information was updated, and pagination added. Surplus covers from the original edition have been recycled and cut down to fit the current format. The hand-sewn Japanese style binding and the folded leading edge of the page are unique to this reissued edition.