

# PIECEWORK

A Magazine of Poetry by Women



NUALA ARCHER

Fall 1986

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**GIFT**

# PIECEWORK

A MAGAZINE OF POETRY BY WOMEN

FALL 1986

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Red Dirt Press, Inc., is the result of the vision of eight women who wanted to provide more publication opportunities for women. We chose as our first project, the publication of this magazine of women's poetry, aptly named **PIECEWORK**, to draw on all the images of women's work that is done "by the piece": namely, ironing, sewing, factory work, etc. **Piecework** is dedicated to all the women who write poetry, sometimes in spite of their lives and families.

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### FEATURED ARTIST--NUALA ARCHER

In this first issue, we present five poems by Nuala Archer, as a way of recognizing the vigor and excitement she is bringing to poetry in our area. As an "outlander" who is fast becoming an Oklahoman, she gives us fresh insight into the land and its language.

Nuala, whose picture is on the cover, teaches creative writing at Oklahoma State University at Stillwater, where she also edits the MIDLAND REVIEW and the CIMARRON. She has a new book, RED MUD MUSIC, that is being published in Ireland, and Red Dirt Press, Inc., plans to publish it here in early 1987.

Born of Irish parents in New York, Nuala has lived in Latin, Central and North America and in Ireland. Her book of poetry, WHALE ON THE LINE, was published in Ireland in 1981. She has won several prizes, among them a First at Listowed Writers Week and the Irish Distillers/Patrick Kavanagh Award.

Cover photo by Ann Carlton

FROM A MOBILE HOME: SELF-PORTRAIT AT 31

Whatever about my share  
of the Irish hut dissolvin'  
from ear-shot for now,  
causin' even these doors  
to thicken an' thin,

my feet, shod in rubber scraps  
of truck tire blow outs,  
are nonetheless  
windows ajar  
an' I reckon what looks to you

like a furrin\* country hick--  
driftin' down the road's shoulder  
the way loosened teeth  
twinkle toward star pools  
in the planetarium  
of Okie scrub--

is me  
unchafin' my shadow,  
takin' swigs of air  
an' sun, lettin' the shine  
of it all return my face

to the far-spread edge of wings  
bright as a home awake  
an' stretchin'  
with kilterin' savvy  
from my feet's tearin' panes.

--Nuala Archer

\*Furrin: foreign

## SHOWER

Holy smokes, girl,  
you sure do like your showers HOT.  
Now what kind of complex is that?  
You're gonna scald yourself.

And what if I do like my showers  
hot as a desert, what's it to you?  
What's it to you  
if I like them hot as hoof-prints  
galloping across the red  
windshield of my breast?

a zodiac

of cinnamon you step out  
from the cataract into blue surrounds  
and as you do you notice  
the migration of fungi up beyond  
the shower curtain's magnets.

Ahhhh--that's better you say.  
My cramps have stopped clawing  
for the moment. Now if only I could  
stop the hankering of my yanked  
wisdom teeth. It sure's hell  
to eat these days, especially  
when, like last night, threads of zuchinni  
and celery get snagged between teeth  
here and teeth gone.

As you towel yourself dry  
gray spirals of steam lift off the mirror  
and from the misted glass  
in front of the Grecian beach,  
a miniature oil in blues.

Next you concentrate on distancing  
your gum's white swans  
from the clickety-clack of crowing dentures.  
Foam falls from your mouth  
and now the fogged picture is unveiled:

light

in the little square is atremble,  
a lace edging of foam at the border  
between sea and land gathers a woman, alone  
on the beach, into revery. Her brown  
shoulders relax in the tide's ribbing.

And now WE are visible in the mirror's  
haze where you have spelled  
our names with winking,  
sweating facial vowels  
and with consonants that drip like banyans  
in tropical rain forests.

--Nuala Archer

### BLOSSOM

sits at her window  
in Milwaukee. Maples, birch & elms  
are drunk: How many leavings  
it takes to be a tree!

Beelzebub has already spit  
on the blackberries. The vegetable  
beds are asleep. Heavy frosts  
brown the foliage but cannot stop the moon

from giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation  
to Blossom's 80-year-old trenches  
filled with Mary Washington  
asparagus roots. Planted near

the kitchen, at the garden's edge,  
the asparagus is perennial.  
Mary Washington & Blossom  
harvest each other.

--Nuala Archer

FROM A MOBILE HOME: NO SHIT? APPROACH TO THE BANQUET OF LIFE?

Now that terror has stopped teething  
at your doorstep  
you are willing to let the topics  
touch you. Its stillness is  
a dizzying salsa; its chemical jaws  
of fungi recycle nutrients to trees  
at rendezvous speed.

What's lost  
in rain from fallen fruits & leaves  
becomes quickly quick again.  
Litter & debris are digested with  
delight. Every corpse is  
a cornucopia, an instant reason  
to feast. Here there's no deferred  
pleasure, no procrastination,  
no stiffs stashed away in closets.  
Not a single whiff of savings  
or surplus: bones & boles alike  
are broken down in a flash.  
Rot-inspired, everything  
is transmuted, returned in a rapid  
transport system to the worlds  
of the living.

In such a blur,  
boundaries between "the quick" &  
"the dead" dissolve: fuel  
extravagantly fruits from these patches  
of our hurtling planet. If you sit  
quietly & listen you can hear the hallabaloo.  
Or if you give a shit, stick around &  
watch the show-downs: your scat's a hit!  
Dung beetles & ottitid flies zero in.  
They feed & fuck. Such plums of luck!  
Dream honeymoons come true!  
Within a few hours the nuptial globes  
& homespun grits have been dispersed.  
The miniature scene of such vast  
spectacle--& all trace of your touch--  
has disappeared into motion

beckoned  
by the lush & light-guided tangle  
of tree-tops. How else can I tell you  
why I live in a mobile home--  
even in this tornado alley? In these parts  
it's the closest thing to a rain  
forest: it's a still passage, a light, wheel-  
away lode, a connective tissue en route--  
It's my way of rambling, of homing in:  
I can't say I've ever stopped looking  
for you--alive & well.

--Nuala Archer

FROM A MOBILE HOME: RED MUD MUSIC

And what she had to say,  
    What she had come 3000 miles to say,  
she forgot.

The rattling air-conditioner  
    cacophonized her breathing.  
Outside fat heat shimmered. I was  
hoping to let her know that I liked  
    her though saying it this way  
scudded the purple glitters.

She was tough and mean and her loss  
    of memory was like another kind of  
memory. A kind of music.

She went for a drink. Clinking  
    poolballs tuned the fork of another  
clickstone: arrowheads occurred to her  
like mathematical correspondences,  
    stone-grain acoustics. The beer  
was sweetly bitter and cool.

Her spectrum of hearing  
    was hair-raising. She ordered another.  
Jukebox music flared and

slopped. Outside again the sun's  
    red arrows streaked her black-as-green  
eight-ball eyes leaving amoeba

caves floating in front  
    of us both. There were moments  
of such loneliness that she cursed

herself for coming. I found her presence  
a relief. It was like watching  
someone give zero a wilderness  
of running room. In the vowels  
of my dream she coagulated into laughter  
cradling the calm  
of her anguish with the black  
viscous spit of her tobacco juice: foot  
to foot, knee to knee, hip  
to hip, shoulder to shoulder, lip  
to lip. Against itself  
her music strained. Each note deceived  
the next into existence: gathering  
intensity like a tornado. Her music  
carried me to my knees.  
Her music beat me down to her-  
self until I knew what she was saying,  
until I begged for mercy  
deep inside her lively brain.  
And by then it was all night and rain  
and neon light undefining as the  
memory of her mother saying, --Don't  
forget to pray. And by then red mud  
was clutching our tired feet. And  
by then red mud was wanting  
to eat our heart beat. And by then  
red mud was saying, --Just let me  
touch your sweet soft cheek.  
I was hoping to let her know that  
I loved her and by then red mud  
had us dicing with rattler bones.  
Red-mud-music-had-us-worrying-down-  
this-road-of-rain.

And in the middle  
of her mute missing and music  
I wanted to whisper, --What the hell's  
taken you so long to get here, where  
the hell have you been? And by then  
I wanted to kill these lines,  
my last red Rahab-ribbons. I wanted  
to throw them out some window  
of our lives. I wanted us  
to slide down each worded knot toward  
whatever joys so always and difficult  
to express. I wanted to shut-up and cry  
and without saying a thing I said,  
--Yes, babes, I feel  
like crying and I feel like lying  
down. Black-curd-ed-clouds  
are working themselves free in me  
and that yellow weed of lightning is  
tumbling like a lumbering  
dung bug rolling a diamond tooth, and  
your lightning's got me shot,  
your lightning's a red arrow  
in my eye holding my heart  
to your red makeshift mud and music.

--Nuala Archer

## PIECEWORK DREAMS

She did ironing by the piece:  
No one made a sharper crease  
Than my grandmother.

Pa had left and not returned:  
So she plied the trade she'd learned.  
And there was work for Grandmother.

She had a daughter and a son:  
And money?--There was none.  
But there was work for Grandmother.

She ironed ruffles by the mile:  
Ruffles were the latest style  
In the days of Grandmother.

She did ironing by the piece:  
Shirts and collars, skirts with pleats,  
All counted by Grandmother.

Those days of toil and heat are gone  
But the memories linger on  
Of the piecework of grandmothers.

Some did ironing by the piece:  
Some did quilting without cease;  
Piecework of our grandmothers.

Some did work in factory shifts  
With weary fingers moving swift;  
All the work of our grandmothers.

They planned and prayed beyond the toil  
And pieced a dream on the red dirt soil;  
Our pioneer Oklahoma grandmothers.

--Jean Stiles, Owasso



Scene of a commercial laundry, taken about 1890. Lady ironing in foreground is Frances Reicheneker. Behind her, a man is bringing a tray of heated sad

irons. (Photograph from the collection of Jean Stiles, great-granddaughter of Frances Reicheneker.)

## OKLAHOMA SAFARI

Oklahoma, "Land of the Red Man,"  
And Woman?  
"Land of the Red Dirt,"  
The Woman, trying to wash the red dirt  
out of kids' clothes.

Now the challenge,  
to wash it out of my mind,  
after driving 600 meandering miles,  
seeing eroding, untilled red dirt,  
the condition of the soil  
reflecting peoples' apathy.

The small towns, becoming  
store-front movie sets for  
"The Very Last Picture Show."  
They sleep in semi-comas.  
What will happen to the  
neat old houses when the  
towns slip deeper into sleep  
and die?

The earth will still be red  
and the clothing of those who  
work or play on it,  
permanently hennaed.

The green of the trees and grass  
belies the dryness  
of the soil underneath.  
The soil that resists our tent stakes  
until pounded with a rock.  
Using one of nature's elements  
to force a plastic object  
into the heart of earth  
is easily justified--  
we aren't like other tourists--  
our mission, undercover park inspection  
on this 4th of July weekend.

The water of the Neosho  
is dark, murky green,  
its abundant algae  
provides a royal feast  
for the fish at twilight.  
The light green perch  
easily seen in the murky water,  
coming right up to our  
perch on the rocks to feed.  
With a green Okiebug lure  
we could catch a dozen.

Instead, we choose to watch them,  
to add our bodies to the masses  
of swarming, swimming schools of fish,  
as we seek to cool off after a day on the road,  
to wash the red dirt from our bodies  
in Oklahoma's Red and Green Country.

--Marian Hulsey, Oklahoma City

#### OKLAHOMA

Sunsets silhouette oil wells  
Pumping the horizon  
like dinosaurs doing obeisance--  
Worshipping the fruits of their death.

--Linda Knight Mayberry, Norman

## SUNDAY MORNINGS

She bakes pies on Sunday morning--  
The tune she hums and smells of cinnamon  
warm the early dark  
floured hands roll the dough  
thin and round

And she sees the hands that taught her  
caress the dough  
slice an olive branch  
atop the crust

Humming a childhood song  
she bakes pies on Sunday morning-  
a private religion

--Marcia Preston, Edmond

## FOR ELLA, MY GRANDMOTHER

The March sun played across the table at midday.  
Pressing blue-veined hands to hollowed eyes  
She saw the new mound that rose near  
The mellowed grave of their soldier son.  
"Like a thief in the night' they say,"  
her voice a thin croak.

At dusk the sun chilled the room with slanted light.  
Stiffening, she stroked the once-auburn hair away from tired eyes.  
Gripping the sides of the captain's chair, she slowly stood  
And looked around her in the darkened room,  
And approached the evening that awaited her.

--Margaret Hrencher, Perkins

## THE HUNTED

Bison grow fat  
on grassy, wind-swept plains,  
hunters on horses descend,  
dispatch arrows,  
death and slaughter reigns.

Butchering begins  
bison meat stripped, jerked,  
pounded, dried.  
Food for winter  
for tipis, the hide.

While back on the plain  
bison mill, restless,  
stoicly re-band  
Await that time later  
when hunters come again.

--Margie Snowden North, Erick

## THE WILD WEST

My yellow truck whips and bumps  
in the night, driving me across dark plains  
where I hear the sucking, sucking sound  
of the oil pumps pumping;

The wind winds round me  
in whirling high pitched sound  
blowing my brown locks red with dust  
as if it had always known my lust  
for a head covered with erotic red.

--Abigail Keegan, Oklahoma City

## HIGHWAY 66

red earth along the roadside  
and one star  
shadows of Okies and Arkies  
follow west

at dusk  
blackbirds perch along the wires  
whistle toward  
the last tail light

daybreak comes with  
a new name  
changing nothing

--Marcia Preston, Edmond

## THE FRAGILE DREAM

It keeps coming back,  
that dream in which I am a child,  
wearing a dress of aqua lawn, light as air,  
a bow on either side, one undone.  
And I am eating ice cream from a paper cup,  
a rare and lovely treat,  
the cool cream melting on my tongue  
in the sultry summer air.

And we are in an unlikely place  
for such sensory delights--  
the convent grounds, where we visit once a year,  
my aunt, the nun, in her black and billowy habit.  
We visit, too, the grotto of Our Lady,  
goddess of my youth, blessed of all women.

There is some connection here,  
though broken long ago,  
a piece in the puzzle of my life.  
I will not delve too deeply though,  
lest this fragile dream be shattered.

--Mary Menges Myers, Oklahoma City

## DISSOLUTE RHYMES

Lightning bugs code the void  
terra as stars spell out neon  
acronyms and crawlers hump  
soundless amid throaty croaks.

I touch you turning, annoyed.  
It was only my percussion  
section letching, rump, rump  
rude symphonies, lost blokes.

Tentacles retracted and destroyed  
We resume our endless verbalization  
my heart, a swallowed lump,  
the Morse of your blood, a hoax.

--Jill Holmes, Stillwater

## ENCOUNTERS

Last night  
was something wild, something crazy--  
Like the wind  
Blowing through my head  
Something lost  
Now something dead--  
Your smile lingers  
Like your aftershave  
On my pillow  
By my bed.

--Linda C. Sherman, Alva

## HEARTBREAKERS

So he broke your heart,  
he broke it twice?  
Oh my gosh, he broke it thrice?  
What will we women ever do,  
with the likes of men like you?  
Loyal, loving, considerate we are,  
when all you do is play the star.  
We're sick and tired of games you play.  
We want some love and without delay!  
So to all heartbreakers who play the field,  
Just leave us alone until our hearts are healed.

--Kellie Shoemaker, Tulsa

## UNCERTAINTY

It weaves itself around me,  
familiar as a lover's hand  
which knows my soul's anatomy  
and all the points of agony--  
smoothed over by love's practice  
into a pulsing pain;  
a current of long standing,  
coursing gently through my veins.

--Kathryn Rojas, Midwest City

## WORDPLAY

How does one catch  
The nostalgia, the longing,  
For things as they might have been  
Might yet be or how does one  
Capture the immensity of joy  
For things as they are  
In words?

The poet, like a little crazy person  
Armed with a butterfly net,  
Chases after the perfect word specimen.  
And the words, millions of them,  
Like so many monarchs in migration  
Swirl and eddy around her head  
In profusion.

The rich display confuses mind and eye  
Each attempt fails to capture the hues  
Of pleasure and pain inextricably tangled  
Still she pursues with arms outstretched  
Eager to try every possible combination  
Probing the unfathomable mysteries  
Of Emotion.

--Annette Van Dusen, Oklahoma City

## FRUIT

You bring an orange, cool and sweet,  
To quench my thirst,  
A thousand gemmules  
Meant to call a keen-eyed bird  
Who would carry seeds to other ground.

What fruit, rough skinned and pungent,  
Poignant, have we made?  
Not the perfect sphere  
Whose civil curve I once believed.  
I did not know sectors closely bound  
Sometimes think of flying off  
To join the wind, the yellow sun.  
Turning restlessly  
They force the angularity that ruptures  
Or brings an asymmetric ease.

Its seeds are not entirely known  
For some ripen autumn brown and  
Teal wings carry them through dusk  
To germinate in distant dawn,  
And others take some hidden shape  
That swells dark locules  
Whose symmetry does shelter  
But cannot confine tomorrow.

--Margaret S. Ewing, Stillwater

## I BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND

My mother saw vague  
But dire threats  
To my existence  
But could not say  
Exactly what she feared.  
If I went to skate  
On the reservoir,  
She said,  
"More children are killed  
Each year falling through the ice!"  
Then, in summer,  
"More children are killed  
In swimming accidents!"

Our daughter wants a  
Late night walk to Quik-Trip  
So she can play Space Invaders.  
Her father says,  
"More children are killed each year  
In Quik-Trip robberies."

--Margaret S. Ewing, Stillwater

COURAGE, FOR WANT OF A BETTER WORD

In the wait  
    eyes become the color of snails and algae  
"What can you trust?"  
    becomes stenciled in your brain  
twin breasts naked  
    in the mirror look no different  
you had forgotten about them  
    like your wedding ring  
connecting you to newborn mouths  
    with hidden teeth  
and lovers' mouths  
                                    my teeth  
until the threat knots hard  
like a coiled snake in the path  
and you do not  
                                    move  
do not breathe  
                                    breathe  
put on your blouse  
wait for the report, read statistics  
remind yourself  
    a treasure is hidden  
                                    somewhere  
at your root.

--Kennette Wilkes, Edmond

## LAKE TEXOMA SUMMER

The red dirt road runs between yellow grass banks  
Where the sunflowers are all dusty.  
Cicadas scream in the post oak trees.  
The oak leaves are hard and shiny, cutting mitten patterns  
out of hot blue sky.  
The air smells of dust, dry grass, horsemint,  
tomato vines in a garden by a bleached gray farmhouse.  
Horseflies buzz around the cattle tank.  
This is the time of watermelon festivals, seed-spitting contests,  
firecrackers, catching catfish in the lake.  
Sunday mornings children wade fully clothed into the lake  
to receive baptism  
While the grown-ups sing hymns in cottonwood shade.  
Afternoons the women sit rocking on their porches,  
snapping beans in rhythm.  
Mondays we walk a mile to the postoffice.  
Barefoot in the dusty road, we stop to pick out stickers from our feet.  
Someone finds an arrowhead near a dry creekbed.  
We return with popsicles streaming down our arms in rivers  
of red cherry and purple imitation grape.  
Sand plums are growing by an old well. We stop to pick some.  
Someone throws a sour plum down the well. Long silence. Plunk.  
Then upward comes a whirr of beating wings  
As chimney swifts come boiling out  
like bats from hell.

--Mary Catron, Oklahoma City

## THE ROUGH-EDGED STONE

I cast a stone into the sea,  
And watched a ripple flow.  
The ripple shifted, moved, and spread  
Until its center point was gone.

A greedy wave advancing, rising,  
Retreating, falling--never calm,  
Engulfed the rough-edged stone  
And began a perilous voyage.

Through abrasive slurry the stone was forced,  
Through coarse-grained sand and churning foam.  
Through crushing rocks and murky water,  
The moss-covered stone endured.

Tumbled about in savage storms,  
In powdery silt, in swirls of time,  
Round and smooth the rough-edged stone  
Returned to shore a polished gem.

I cast a stone into a pond,  
And watched a ripple form.  
The ripple shifted, moved and spread,  
But lacked the force to shape a gem.

--Rosa P. Lambeth, Oklahoma City

## THE ROCK AND I

The rock skipped silently  
across the placid lake,  
sinking with a plunk.  
As I lay motionless on one elbow,  
watching the widening circles  
disappear into the solitude,  
an army ant marched  
with a tickle across my hand,  
not pausing for a moment to wonder  
what those five peninsulas were.  
The dark pattern of the ancient hills  
mirrored their timeless image  
on the halcyon lake.  
I am an intruder.

--Susan Montgomery Taylor, Stillwater

## SACRAMENT

In the beginning was waiting for Phillip,  
waiting at recess  
and noon.  
Pulling dirty branches  
along barbed-wire fences,  
tasting dusty sunlight  
in an August burned all down to yellow fields,  
bony roads,  
reddened eyes.

Blessed are the meek,  
for they shall inherit the earth.

Summer days, he'd brake the Ford,  
light a Pall Mall.  
I'd dust off my skirt, swing open the door,  
look over the top at the half-fallen sun,  
then we'd ride on the dirt to Coweta,  
or we'd follow his map to the night.

Blessed are they that mourn,  
for they shall be comforted.

Beginning was waiting for Phillip,  
believing in one god, creator of all things,  
ruler of heaven and earth,  
scorched fields,  
cracked roads,  
baled hay,  
seraphs,  
and nineteen sixty-nine.

--Karen Bentley, Norman

## DEATH OF A FAMILY FARM

No more will the dusty pickup meander up the winding road  
Laden with pumpkins for Jack-O-Lanterns.  
No more will the wheat rise to the occasion and waft  
Heavenly odors of fresh baked bread.  
No more will the barn scintillate the toe-tapping  
Songs and square dance calls.  
No more will fantasies of winning blue ribbons at  
State Fairs lighten the work load.

Gone are the days of the sorghum harvest,  
With children vying for licks of goey syrup.  
Even the buzz-saw that once snarled and growled at  
Bare trees lies muzzled and silent.  
The clapboard house, stripped naked of paint,  
Now shivers with unanswered prayers.  
The pageantry of autumn is over, dear friends,  
And Winter's breath blows cold.  
Icy whirlwinds snap angrily at your barn door.  
Like giant marauding soldiers, silos, gorged  
With the pillage of the land, survey the  
Mutilated victims of an agrarian war.  
Funeral mounds of hay darken and rot, while  
Bundles of corn stalks etch the darkening sky.  
Fall is disappearing, lovers of the soil.  
Machinery, that rattled and hissed as it  
Tilled the black loam, now hibernates as a serpent.  
A scarecrow's lifeless form hangs grotesquely  
On his wooden cross like a mocking symbol of despair.  
Even the yellow oats, glittering like nuggets,  
Assayed as fool's gold, and all your hopes have  
Drowned in deep, murky ponds.



Autumn is extinct, tillers of the earth,  
    You have been fleeced like a lamb sheared clean!  
Fluttering birds ransack the fields, plucking  
    The leavings; while banks like vultures,  
Descend to pick the bones clean on the carcass of  
    What used to be.

Trusting fool, you blindly followed the Judas sheep!  
    The family farm is dying.  
Can winter be far behind, with its white shroud of  
    Snow to carefully wrap the remains and  
Bury your heritage?

--Delores McDaniel, Harrah

#### AT AUCTION

I bid for the stitches  
She, yesterday made,  
And smooth out the quilt  
that she once gently laid  
On the bed of a grandchild  
As he childishly prayed.  
I trace the neat seams  
And study the pattern.  
I ponder her dreams  
By the light of her lantern  
As she quilted and sewed  
Small pieces together,

Building blocks of her life  
And possessions, in weather  
Unfit for field working.  
But frugal with time  
That is no longer hers ---

She has now left behind  
An armful of treasures  
That an auction made mine.

--Marjorie Brannon Skeen, Carnegi

UNTITLED

I see the gleam  
Of crystal clear skies  
Against a deep blue  
Bowl, while the  
Yellow sunlight  
Streams bands of  
Lightbeams down--down  
Through soft fluffy  
White clouds  
Down -  
down

Toward the green rolling  
Hills of prairie grass  
And the bright red-orange  
Earth of Oklahoma--  
A hawk circles high  
In the sky, while the  
Wind carries her  
Sad pitched scream  
Down to me --

And I feel the spirits  
And ghosts of past lovers  
Of this earth,  
As the constant  
Wind caresses me  
Wrapping around my  
Body, moving my hair  
And playing across  
My face into a soft  
Breath --

And I feel  
A closeness and  
Kinship with this  
Good land - sweet  
Land - land  
of the Red Man -  
Land of the  
Pioneers!

--Mary Ann Schuster, Ponca City

CORDELL, OK, 1950

Gypsy and his spirits move silently  
in the windless night  
into the Circle

no protection at their backs,

the movement of the blind dog  
carrying luck in white teeth flashing--

Running free

i stalk the moving shadows  
under the night sky,

smelling the closeness of earth,

weaving me into memories

of jagged animals

lurking in stone shelters.

--Kathryn Bell, Beggs

UNTITLED

I was assigned this tree  
I came here to stand  
    watch Tuesday late  
    here, on the cold stone steps

Have you ever  
    counted twenty-two  
    leaves  
    freed by the wind

One fell onto my chest  
I'll wave it  
    never touched the earth

When it rests  
Everything stands still again

I see the clouds change guard  
    in the sky

You'd like it  
    here, I'm scared.  
--Janet F. Reeder, Stillwater

AVA GINA

Feathers caress Ava  
Under a rising moon and  
    Cedar trees.

Kisses dance between us and  
Her eyes are aflame with  
Early evening's passion.  
Rapture is my song.  
Her lips are my oasis as  
Again she offers me her  
    Rare summer wine--  
Daylight succumbs to dusk.

--Cedar, Tulsa

## FAN TAN AND OTHER GAMES

On winter nights, we played Fan Tan  
and, for the occasion, my oldest brother  
made fudge and then oh-so-grudgingly  
doled it out. My youngest brother  
seldom kept us blocked for long--he  
liked to win but was too kind. You could  
coax a six or eight from him just by  
looking sad. I fidgeted a lot or whined  
and pouted. Now and then, had cause to  
gloat and did, smirking and counting out  
loud the number of pennies I'd won. My  
middle brother grew annoyed by all  
of this and, in the end, he'd go off  
by himself and invent one of his  
complicated games of solitaire.  
He never would explain them;  
to this day, I wonder if he could.

--Katherine Privett, Pawnee

---

### letter to my newborn son

when writing a letter to my son I would stop,  
mid-page. the less put down, the cleaner the taste.  
let him find the rest, wherever he may,  
friends, his first betrayals, jobs  
and sex, and the good he will do, despite all else.

what I, alone, would have to tell you  
(you, so new, with still the dust of woman, soft about your sleep)  
is that I have sung songs for you  
the oldest songs, words like waves,  
and I will remember the words long after you forget them  
and long after the light of my world fades from your eyes  
and into your soul,  
replaced by your own  
stars, daughters and sons.

--Laura H. Smith, Bartlesville

## STRIP SEARCH

When I told my mother I was a poet  
She broke her body of silence  
I know what you should tell    What  
I can't    It's too hard    But if  
I could write    it would be about  
a mother who loses her children  
Was taken away from them when they  
were young    because you felt like a fire  
drill and hot noise    your husband couldn't read  
road signs and speech became sacred  
then they think you're crazy  
and everything is an unusual response    Write  
a story about being locked up like animals  
or old people    deloused & forced  
to strip    no privacy    no belts  
no perfume    no beauty on an open ward  
50 beds in an asylum

--Brenda Catron-Grievess, Oklahoma City

## RAPE

Little sister  
the children know  
the terror is not in the rape of atoms  
splitting open in hot shame  
and the terror is not in the potent missiles  
paraded to John Philip Sousa  
nor in the five-sided military madness,  
the terror is in the poised finger  
at the button  
and the eyes cold as death  
and the passionless watching of the face  
as it melts.

--Kennette Wilkes, Edmond

## SOLILOQUY

from the castles of our hearts  
fly unfurled flags of independence  
won from hours and days of honest effort  
years of bloodied fingers  
hanging on to the ends of their collective ropes  
most women i know have strong grips  
few have time  
or faith enough  
to let go  
the moat has become too deep to cross  
the sea too treacherous to chance  
we need a boat  
strong enough to hold us up  
light enough to catch the wind  
and sail us high  
across the moon  
landing lightly down  
time caressing earth, mother-land...  
solid to walk on  
standing...at last.

--Lisa Amos, Oklahoma City

## MARRIAGE

This is a song about nuns and whores  
for all the women  
who find men beautiful  
who find the body of men  
surrounds their day & work & perception  
until in self defense  
they open their bodies  
to allow the law into their lives  
to hold them in dependence  
for their need like stone or sorrow  
drenched by daily research in social security  
& religious persuasions & money needed  
Women do things first to stay alive  
then for their children & then to be held  
in hope and pleasure & sometimes for love  
that they could forgo all the rest  
that they won't  
have too, when they open  
their arms  
sometimes they feel it's all right  
sometimes they'll smother under  
the burden of trying to be women  
Just women in this time  
Women who need it all

--Brenda Catron-Grieves, Oklahoma City

## NAKED LADIES

1

Dark drips from girders onto the tracks,  
gathers itself into heaviness,  
shudders and falls diminishing  
across the glass: the strata shifts  
as station lights snap on against dusk  
and the woman my mother would have been  
had she chosen New York, the world city  
instead of children, crosses the threshold,  
sits down beside me;  
without looking I see  
the same chapped forehead clash  
at the edge of brash hair,  
the beaked British disdain, the sniff--  
her hand falls across her skirt,  
same peeled color, same  
wadded mitten shape in the cold car:

she blows her nose,  
wipes the ledges of her cheekbones,  
I know the insistent sniff, the fisted kleenex  
as well as my own name, as well as  
the smeared blue behind her hornrims  
as in the photograph from 1963  
where she sits in a rocking chair  
a toddler locked in her striped arms  
as to defy the flash that stops time  
in mockery: the child is no child,  
is not yours alone.

The doors flash open; I am pressed out  
and walk home;  
Sixth Avenue overflows its outlines  
and blurs into rain.

2

She dropped down on the blithe grass  
and bent her head, eye-level  
with the cluster of Naked Ladies,  
framed by a burlesque of squash leaves,  
that spurred into flame, unhooding darkness;  
and morning answering, poured like milk  
into their cupped hands:  
she who never believed in God  
since her father died, prayed  
into the trembling mouths of lilies.

3

Once more the ghosts of human absence  
stiffen on the clothesline,  
and your mother halts  
in mid-glide on the porchswing,  
her hands still in mid-snap  
above the bowl of stringbeans in her flowered lap,  
a word hung in her mouth as dust hangs  
above the burned road to the cemetery.  
Look up: freeze: at the trees bruised green  
forever; as I, crouched singing to the dust,  
one hand gloved in orange cones of blossom,  
looked up and left time to dry on my lips,  
to speak now in the white flash of its opposite.

4

Train howl echoes across train thunder,  
wind chimes pitch  
in the dizzy, humid, weed-like air  
beyond the screendoor:  
my mother's strong hand  
that is movement not touch strokes my hair,  
eddyng behind my ear to flow  
down the back of my neck:  
she murmurs the legend of birth,  
how I came from a dark island in a salt ocean,  
after years of counting silence  
and her blind prayer in her mother's garden.  
She marvels at the whirlpool of my ear.  
Her voice breaks as the sea arches its neck  
and lulls, looking back, to shape the sand:  
I WILL BUILD YOU A BOAT OF MIMOSA WOOD.

--Robyn Perry, Brooklyn, NY  
(originally, Bartlesville)

**AMERICA'S BIGGEST RACE WAR**

**Tulsa, Oklahoma, May 31-June 1, 1921**

we scream against the all persistent lies  
we lift our pens as though they be black bones  
we will offend those Whites who turn their eyes  
to read the empty pages of their tomes  
we hear the dour, dulcet, Southern laughter  
while touching sweaty lives of dusky souls  
we taste the vacuum "Civil Rights" leaves after  
idleness frustrates their untouched goals  
five and sixty years the fiery crosses then  
lit hills--gossip of Black/White lechery:  
so hundreds died...but now some speak again  
to "inch" THE GOLDEN RULE Our Century...

--Ruth Sigler Avery, Tulsa

## VACUUM PACKED

Premenstrual tension, burnt dinners, cold ashes  
Cold, hard, blue eyes  
Sterility reigns, the rabbit didn't die  
The baby died  
Didn't die, never lived  
We're not living  
The cats grow old and fat and stupid  
The ivy rots  
I didn't will it to live  
But children say, "Take me home.  
Take me with you."  
Rain falls on the petunias  
Wild animals grow old and wirey and smart  
Black musicians look you in the eye  
We ride the music  
And fight the lack of oxygen in the styrofoam packaging  
We'll claw through some day.

--Debbie Newman, Bartlesville

## STATISTIC

Ten days, waiting for the stop  
Of the blood. I wrote  
Before I knew. Each night, drops

Pool and stain the morning,  
Signal your indecision. Then  
The bleeding begins in earnest:  
I kneel on the kitchen floor

Betrayed, the contractions  
Sweeping me clean of you.  
I would catch you inside,

Make you well. I don't want  
A number, I want a child.  
I don't want to write poems,  
But sing lullabies.

--Teresa Sanders, Glencoe

## UNTITLED

It never fails to amaze me,  
how I can be caught off guard  
time and time again by her familiar face.

I glance up and there she is  
rising large and luscious, the color of copper,  
leaning casually against the blue-black sky.

She follows me with those sultry eyes.  
Drawing me to her, my heart races  
as she slips her golden arms around my neck.  
Pulling me close, she lightly brushes my lips.

They say there is a man in the moon,  
but you will never convince me of this.  
The moon - she is a lady.

Silently she glides across the sky,  
draped curvaceously in drifting clouds.  
Now warming my heart with her  
daylight brightness  
now chilling me with her  
thin, icy sliver.

I glance down at you, there  
lying close up against me,  
your hair spilling across my thigh.  
She shines back at me, in the  
reflection of your upturned eyes.

She whispers in my ear, even as you speak  
promising me strength and assurances,  
feeding me with her constant changes,  
always faithful--ever-present womanchild.

From West to East, her heavenly body  
winds its way around the earth's waist.  
New, half, full and old  
she weaves her timeless webb of mystery

And I can tell you I don't have the answers,  
only questions can I offer.  
"Reach inside yourself," I say  
as she nods in silent assent, above us.

--Robin J. McRae, Oklahoma City

## THE RIVER

Moonlight on the Mighty Meghna River:  
peaceful, deceptive and soft--even romantic,  
shields us from the cheap and raucous sounds of day,  
when a one-armed baby beggar sits atop a bridge over the river  
his tin begging-bowl set out before him.

Dazed, dishevelled, he sits between the limbless leper  
and the destitute woman with ten children  
with always the flies buzzing around for company.

The River in daytime: swift, cruel,  
revealing the bodies of dead stinking animals,  
tiny fishing boats with hopeful men, a million diseases.  
Rotten brown swollen river, how you have changed!

Wretched coughing of thin children  
with stick limbs and swollen bellies,  
lack-luster eyes staring dully out at the mean river, mean world,  
where there is no comfort, no clean soft bed,  
and even their mothers steal their food!

The cries of rickshaw wallers yield fat and wealthy passengers  
hauled by sweating sinewed limbs to the mean river,  
creaking rickshaw wheels, trundling over dusty roads.

Big, beautiful brown eyes of Moslem women  
gaze out from crowded cabins in isolation.  
In hot black ugly burkas they look like crows,  
but for their eyes.

The rains come and the river changes and swells,  
thunders powerfully along;  
now truly the Mighty Meghna,  
six miles wide in places,  
coursing swiftly to the delta  
carrying melted snows from Himalayan hills,  
feeding the hungry land,  
crashing through riverbanks,  
streaking the faces of the beggars on the bridge  
and the hungry children  
and the black burkas of the brown-eyed women  
with mud.

--Maggie Needhan, Oklahoma City

# Poetry for Kids

**AHHHHHHHH!**

The creek is running  
swift and sweet----

Would feel so good  
to cool your feet----

But look.....  
see how the crawdad goes,

Try not let him  
pinch your toes!  
--Darla Lowrance, Altus

**GET TOUGH**

Did you see that crazy fly----  
tried to get  
into my eye.....

Guess I showed him  
a thing or two----  
I hit him hard  
with my left shoe!

--Darla Lowrance, Altus

## HALLOWEEN

Pumpkins glowing in the dark,  
Creatures running 'cross the park,  
Shouts and laughter in the night.  
Kim is screaming--"Hold me tight!  
Mom, it's really scaring me!"



Someone's banging on the door.  
We quickly tip across the floor,  
Slowly opening to take a peek;  
Creatures yelling, "Trick or Treat."  
"Mom, it's really scaring me!"

I see a clown, a cat, a bear,  
A ghost is climbing up our stair.  
"Let's give them candy, Kim," I said,  
"I'm sure there's nothing here to dread."  
"Mom, it's really scaring me."

I think I better ask them in.  
"Take off your masks," I said to Tim.  
"You, too, Danny, Mike and Sue."  
They all laughed and hollered, "BOO!"  
"Mom, they're really scaring me."

Off came the faces, one by one.  
Kim's eyes lit up like the sun.  
She clapped her hands and danced with glee.  
"Oh, Mom, they were not fooling me!"

--Diana Stansburge, Skiatook



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