

Classic Poetry Series

Gary Whitehead

- poems -

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Gary Whitehead(23 March 1965)

Gary Joseph Whitehead is an American poet, painter, and cruciverbalist. He is the author of *Measuring Cubits while the Thunder Claps* (David Robert Books, 2008), *The Velocity of Dust* (Salmon/Dufour Editions, 2004), *After the Drowning* (Finishing Line Press), *A Cool, Dry Place* (White Eagle Coffee Store Press), and *Walking Back to Providence* (Sow's Ear Press). His work has appeared worldwide in journals, magazines and newspapers and most notably in *The New Yorker* and *Poetry*.

His awards include a New York Foundation for the Arts Individual Artist Fellowship in Poetry, two Galway Kinnell Poetry Prizes, a Pearl Hoglefe Fellowship at Iowa State University, and a Princeton University Distinguished Secondary School Teaching Award in 2003. He has held artist residencies at Blue Mountain Center, Mesa Refuge, and the Heinrich Böll cottage in Ireland. Whitehead was the founding editor of the now-defunct *Defined Providence Press*. In 2004, he was the recipient of the Margery Davis Boyden Wilderness Writing Residency Award, and spent April through October, 2005 in a secluded cabin in the woods of southwestern Oregon.

Whitehead's crossword puzzles have been published in *The New York Sun*, *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times* and, most notably, *The New York Times*. He also has had his puzzles published in *Games* magazine.

Well known for his poetry, Whitehead is also a painter whose "oil paintings" appear in private and corporate collections in America and the United Kingdom. He currently teaches at the National Blue Ribbon School of Tenafly High School in Tenafly, New Jersey

A Cold House

I wake now to a house as cold
as your side of our double bed.

Across the threshold, in the dark
hall, the thermostat sparks

a blue star, and downstairs
the boiler thumps like a heart

revived. Hot water shrieks
through pipes till registers tick

like clocks toward a time bearable
and close. I dress in wool

and fleece, keep hands in pockets.
On the couch, our dog looks out

the bay window, his breath
on the glass making a bouquet,

gray flowers which bloom and fade.

Gary Whitehead

A Glossary Of Chickens

There should be a word for the way
they look with just one eye, neck bent,
for beetle or worm or strewn grain.
"Gleaning," maybe, between "gizzard"
and "grit." And for the way they run
toward someone they trust, their skirts
hiked, their plump bodies wobbling:
"bobbling," let's call it, inserted
after "blowout" and before "bloom."
There should be terms, too, for things
they do not do—like urinate or chew—
but perhaps there already are.
I'd want a word for the way they drink,
head thrown back, throat wriggling,
like an old woman swallowing
a pill; a word beginning with "S,"
coming after "sex feather" and before "shank."
And one for the sweetness of hens
but not roosters. We think
that by naming we can understand,
as if the tongue were more than muscle.

Gary Whitehead

A Used Book

When I open its pages my dog stirs
from his repose on the couch beside me
to sniff at the spine and trim. His gray ears
lift to listen, and I hear what he hears:
traffic horns, a teapot's whistle, the purrs
of the reader's cats on her old settee.

What was she doing reading such heady
stuff so early on a Saturday—sun
not yet risen, her lover still asleep?
The book, I guess, her company to keep,
and the cats, while the light kept its steady
course across her floor. Paris or London,

I imagine, though it was probably
San Francisco, a streetcar passing by
and fog rinsing the morning air. A gray
day then, much like any other. It may
be that she, too, drawn irresistibly
to its place on a shelf in a nearby

shop, blew the dust and bought it second-hand.
And perhaps her cats roused when she opened
its cover, catching the vague scent of dog,
and she got no further than the prologue
before she was off to some other land
where a man held a page against the wind.

Gary Whitehead

Full Of Blood, And Irrelevant

If memory had fingers, it would wring
from me each forgettable day we shared.

The double-date drive to Plum Island
in the pouring rain, windows fogged

like shower glass. I'd listen now to your
every laugh. That Sunday morning,

March, repairing a botched crossword
while our clothes rolled in the laundromat's

mechanical song. What shirt were you
wearing? How long was your hair then?

A year in retrospect is a checked list
written in disappearing ink and clutched

in a tight fist. Pick up shampoo. Take out
trash. Replace washer in kitchen sink.

How many hours did we pass together?
Given the chance to do it over, would we

do it the same way? And if memory
did have fingers and those fingers formed

a fist, would our times shine out,
red as rubies, full of blood, and irrelevant?

Gary Whitehead

Mouse In The House

For two nights now it's wakened me from dreams
with a sound like paper being torn, reams

of it, a scratching that's gone on for hours.
Blind in the dark, I think of my father's

letters, the ones composed but never sent.
They were addressed to his sister, my aunt,

a woman I never met but whose voice,
slurry and calling from some noisy place,

introduced itself one New Year's eve, late,
before my mother came and silenced it

with a click. She was one of many things
we never spoke of. But when the phone rang

at odd hours, I'd wonder if it was her.
That voice had resurrected the picture

in the silver frame, my parents' wedding
day: on the church steps the woman throwing

rice, blond and beautiful, showing no trace
at all of malice in her youthful face.

Now the awful sound, waking me again
like a secret, calls to mind the poison

I left out, and my mother on their bed
tearing a box of letters into shreds.

Gary Whitehead

Plums

I like to slice them along the seam,
blade balanced on the fulcrum of pit
—that density, like bone, inside the flesh—
and roll until it's cut clean through.
Then the twist as if uncapping a jar,

and I'm holding hemispheres:
the center of one an oval cup, the other
an egg I pluck from its sweet nest.
But always before I eat each smooth half
comes the urge to put it all back together.

Gary Whitehead

The Garden

In the garden of the mind the best thought
will never bloom as beautifully as this
lily, lemon-yellow and freckled red,

four tongues lolling out of a single mouth
and speaking the dead language of silence.
We each take a different path: you into

the fountainous splash of asparagus;
me toward the cosmos bouncing like paper
stars in the breeze. Marriages are like this:

raveled by proximities, recited
in the vernacular of habit schooled
with the patience of bees. We hum our way

through the years, recollecting sometimes
the days when our hands and mouths, grafted
for the first time to another's, flowered

what we thought must be a whole new species.
Rooted in the tilled beds of youth, exotic,
those revelations sprang in us full-bloom.

Then, with practice, we came to realize
that planting the garden was just practice,
that our tongues and fingers, grown familiar

in the light of this world, were made to tend.
And that if desire for the original,
the virginal, slithers sometimes beneath

the leaf, it is cold-blooded, warms itself
in the promise of what's still possible,
then leaves. We meet at the end of rows—

me back from the cosmic, you from what feeds—
and find with chamberless ease the rhythm
of wingbeats between the ribs of our hands.

Gary Whitehead

Tumbleweeds

Rolling nests of the prairie,
prickered and denuded and dead,
clutching at clumps, skipping across
asphalt, whole shrubs ripped out
and flung, and clinging together
like herds racing over acres.
I'd only ever seen them

in Spaghetti Westerns tumbling
quaintly across the painted backdrop—
props blown by big fans and collecting
off-camera against some studio wall.
But here, in Nebraska, they roll
for miles unless a fence catches them.
All day they crunched beneath

my wheels like the delicate skeletons
of small animals. One clutched the grille
and flapped there like a giant bird.
And I felt I could join them, easily,
as stripped as I am, as thin as I've become,
as determined as I am to roll onward.
But even as I dodged them, speeding up

or slowing down, I found myself
feeling satisfied when one met me head-on,
the tread turning branches to chafe.
I relished the champ of their blanched
bodies as my machine ground them to dust,
here where chance seemed perfectly arrayed
and where, once, the deer and antelope played.

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