

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Christianne Balk**

**- poems -**

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## Departure

Thousands of tiny  
fists tamping the surface of the lake  
flowing like a wide  
river gone crazy, southeast, westnorth  
letting the wind push  
it around in its bed and the boat  
hull hugging the shore.  
What else can she do? Even the trees  
agree, shaking  
their crowns, throwing down their leaves as if  
she were their only  
child. Caught cold-footed in Magnuson  
grass, trying to cut  
free of the creosote-soaked pilings sunk  
deep in the shallow  
mud holding the water, holding her  
wake for a moment,  
furrow folding back over into  
confusion. Cascade  
gray crosscurrents! Sharp switching eddies!  
Unreliable  
shoals! Let the cloth argue with itself,  
gasping like a child  
with the air knocked out and the wind  
socking the center.  
Let the sail, shot-silk green and white, now  
snapping, billowing  
slowly draw her away from this beach  
marked with broken glass, rocks  
as smooth as plovers' eggs, and small  
stones splashed iron red  
and orange like the sky breaking open.  
Let the windows ignite  
flickering copper on the other side.  
Let the water be  
disked with silver from here to there  
churning as if roiled  
by the flanks of a great, gentle fish.

Christianne Balk

## Lauds for St. Germaine Cousin (1579-1601)

Blessed is the One who lifts the slow sun  
above this morning's raw orange edge,  
who moves the ewe to nudge her birth-  
stunned lamb into the flock's heat, who  
leads the hen to steer her keets as soon as  
they can walk into the insect-  
filled, high grass, guides the owl to tear fresh  
pigeon into pieces small enough  
to fill the owlet's gaping bill,  
and prompts the rat to lick the pup  
that's not her own and take it to her side,  
directs the swan to trumpet,  
bob her head, and raise her wings, quivering

into a living canopy  
above the nest built without hands  
by those who have no hands, just wings,  
wings that cannot weave but must and somehow  
do, just as I twist thread from the distaff's  
wild wether wool, skirted, sorted, scoured,  
and drawn into bumps of roving  
held awry until the sun lifts  
high enough to warm these slow fingers  
spinning fast and faster, dropping  
the spindle like a top, whorling  
fibers clockwise to pull the yarn  
taut and straight, plying many into one.

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## Shorthorns

Heavy-hocked, barrel-bellied,  
exhaling billows of steam, they wait  
while the corn, wheat, clover,  
and potato fields surround us, finished  
for the season. We listened to their hooves  
shift. Blue tongues lick black shoulders,  
impatient horns stab the ground.  
Soon Father will open the gate  
to where to the last crop sits  
sun-softened, stem ends dark, sinking  
back into the dirt. For pulling plows,  
for yanking oak and hickory grubs  
up by the roots, for heaving stumps,  
for stopping one night on the way home  
from town, for refusing even the buckled ends  
of harness reins raising long welts  
across their backs lathered by sweat  
and rain, for allowing us to grab  
their tails, for leading us like blind  
children away from the wagon  
perched on the edge of the swamp - - -  
Father comes, opens the gate.  
Bald face moves first, walking  
to the biggest pumpkin, lowering  
himself to his knees, placing  
his broad forehead on top, using  
his weight to crack the rind. Still  
kneeling, he scoops the mealy flesh  
into his mouth, chewing, while the other  
oxen watch us, soft-jawed. Father  
and I begin our dance, stomping  
up and down the rows, crushing the sweet  
orange spheres with our boots, and now  
they all begin to feed, bending down,  
rising up to gaze past the barn  
where the yokes, shares, and coulters hang clean  
and sharp, past the road to town  
over swamps now bridged with sedge sod  
tough enough to hold their weight  
and the wagons, up and down, lowering  
and lifting their heads, bowing to the fields.

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## **The Kitchen Shears Speak**

This division must end.  
Again I'm forced to amputate  
the chicken's limb; slit the joint,  
clip the heart, snip wing from back,

strip fat from flesh, separate  
everything from itself. I'm used,  
thrown down by unknown hands,  
by cowards who can't bear to do

the constant severing. Open and close!  
Open and close. I work and never tell.  
Though mostly made of mouth, I have no voice,  
no legs. My arms are bent, immobile

pinions gripped by strangers. I fear  
the grudge things must hold.  
I slice rose from bush, skin from muscle,  
head from carrot, root from lettuce,

tail from fish. I break the bone.  
What if they join against me,  
uncouple me, throw away one-half,  
or hide my slashed eye? Or worse,

what if I never die? What I fear  
most is being caught, then rusted rigid,  
punished like a prehistoric  
bird, fossilized, and changed

into a winged lizard, trapped while clawing  
air, stuck in stone with open beak.

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