

Classic Poetry Series

John Perreault

- 7 poems -

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John Perreault

John Perrault is a lawyer, teacher, poet, and balladeer. Over the years he has performed his songs and poems in numerous venues throughout New England, including The New England Folk Festival, The Maine Festival, The Prescott Park Arts Festival, Chautauqua, Writers' Day for the New Hampshire Writers' Project, The Maine Writers Conference, The Seacoast Writers Conference, Passim, The Stone Church, and countless libraries, schools and coffee houses. He is the author of Jefferson's Dream, The Ballad of Louis Wagner and other New England Stories in Verse, and Here Comes the Old Man Now. He was poet laureate of Portsmouth, NH, 2003 - 2005.

Works:

The Ballad of Louis Wagner and other New England Stories in Verse (2003)
Here Comes the Old Man Now (2005)
Jefferson's Dream (forthcoming)

After Silence

After science,
we have
perfumes of
various sorts.
And then the
month,
I don't know
why,

Nor do I know
the colors,
without
warning,

 without
warts,
of the
expanding.

It is as if I
am invisible;
it is as if I
am dead.
The air passes
through me,
moving through
my head,
 as
I stroll down
halls.

Look at my
hands:
they are
animal hands
and yet they
are glass.
And my bare
feet
are attached
to my legs.

My brain is in
codes.

You are triple,
You
are glass.

What
you buy
is

who you are.

And
yet the
allegory
continues.

Even
without credit.
Even
without cash.

There
is no air.
There
is no death.
There
is no sex.
There
is no class.

As to that,
find what
could be only
not
what was dream
in this wide
world
outside the
scheme

and then some
handsome
partners in
crime
will pass the
time
from hand to
hand.

A tall and
handy
and then some
favoring weeks
might be my
by and by
between the
cheeks.

Blessed are the
damned

by cruel
society.
Society is
species.

You, you could
count the
years
and count the
hills.
You could count
the armpits.

Blessed are the
mothers
who eat their
children
and the fathers
who, in a time
of reward,
will have no
sons.

It was better
if not cleaner
on the beach-
early morning,
when you were
the only dog.
the only car.

And you,
you
thought you
were glass.

Blessed are the
children
who have no
language:
language is
government.

Either I am big
or I am huge.
I have no love
or glory;
I have no fear

-until all

three
descend on me
and once again
I reappear.

John Perreault

Boomerang

Why is everything I do in my life like a boomerang?
I throw the paper airplane out the window
and the wind sends it back.
I spit against the wind.

You bought me a fur boomerang for my birthday.
I hate you now. You are so rich.
You are such a consumer.
And I hate your boomerang.
But I can't throw it away.
It keeps coming back and hitting me
in the back of the head.

In a rooming house I lived in once
I knew a boy who had a handmade boomerang.
It was fifteen inches long.
What a beautiful gigantic handmade boomerang.
Every Sunday he practiced throwing it away,
in Central Park, by that sailboat lake.

People always talked to him and followed him.
Everybody wanted to see his boomerang.

...But boomerangs are dangerous.
When you fool around with boomerangs
you have to know what you're doing.

Congratulations, incidentally, on the birth
of your brand new baby boy boomerang.
How amazing
that no matter where you leave him
in the morning he is always
in that basket, on your doorstep.

I had a dream about a boomerang race.
I lost.

But do I really know what it means?
Do I know what anything means?

I kiss your amorous aluminum boomerang
and the edges are so sharp
my tongue gets sliced,
my words get sliced
and my lips are able to smile in two directions.

And I think it would be nice to own a boomerang store.
Glass boomerangs.
Australian aborigine boomerangs.
Rubber safety boomerangs.
Regulation boomerangs for boomerang contests.
And even automatic talking doll boomerangs.

But why is everything I do in my life like a boomerang?
I throw away my life
and my life comes back.

John Perreault

Readymade

The Venus Fly Trap

(1) A Beautiful Plant!

Its dark green leaves form a low symmetrical rosette. Each leaf is tipped with a lovely pink trap.

(2) Eats Flies And Insects!

Each pink trap contains a bit of nectar. It is this color and sweetness which attracts the unsuspecting insect. Once he enters the trap, it snaps shut. Digestive juices then dissolve him.

(3) Eats Flies And Insects!

When the insect has been completely absorbed, the trap reopens and prettily awaits another morsel.

(4) A Beautiful Plant!

Traps will bite at - but not off - 'more than they can chew.'

(5) Feed It Raw Beef!

If there are no insects in your house, you can feed the traps tiny slivers of raw beef. The plant will thrive on such food.

(6) Instructive For Children!

Youngsters especially will enjoy growing these exotic plants. And if, somehow, you can convey the thought that many of life's alluring enticements can prove to be traps, you will have made a priceless investment!

(7) Easy To Grow!

They thrive in glass containers and develop traps in three to four weeks. They will beautify any room in your house.

John Perreault

Shoe

A road can't be as sad as a shoe is sad
when a shoe can't read.
I can't read either.

And I have given away all my clothes
and gone away so far
that no one will even remember that I've gone
nor how far I went when I was here.

For a road can't be as crazy as a ranch is mad
when a ranch can't sing.

I cough. I spit. I jump up and down
and I run around like a headless rooster.

Me too. I am not lonesome. I am gregarious.
I make friends with the curbstone even.

But a shoe can't be as pretty as a wheel when it's turning
or a tunnel uncovered by chance.
And a shoe can't be a lobster.

I am as free as a belt or a bell or
a dog on a leash
gone crazy with the aroma of flagpoles.

John Perreault

The Ballad of Louis Wagner

The fog peers in the windows, passes 'neath the lamps
Settles in the doorways and huddles from the damp
Slips inside the houses, rooms, the sleeper's bed and dreams
It rolls him over, turns him out into the shrouded street.

Dreamer, listen to the river, rubbing at the docks
Through the smoky loneliness on Ceres Street we'll walk
There's someone waiting for us, where the tugs are tied
His name is Louis Wagner and he's waiting there tonight.

Over there by the warehouse, a shadow like a stain
A man and around his neck, look! A silver chain--
He is pointing at us, fingered us, it's Wagner's laugh all right
Shh, he's about to speak, God look at his eyes.

"A night like this, just like this in march and it was cold
John Hontvet and Ivan Christensen had come in from the Shoals
To sell their catch and buy some bait and have themselves some rounds
Oh those crazy fools had left their wives on the isles of shoals alone.

And they wanted me to join them, to go out baiting trawls
But in my mind flashed silver there had been some talk about
Last summer out on Smuttynose and I was Ivan's guest
Well I heard him whisper to his wife: 'let's hide the silver in the chest.'

So I left them in the alehouse, pulled by an undertow
I grabbed my hatchet, shoved the dory out and I set my back to row
I rowed that dory through the night twelve miles out to sea
Twelve miles out and twelve miles back, it seemed eternity.

I see the trees on Gerrish Island, looming from the shore
The swell is building under me and I'm digging in the oars
And a sickle moon comes cutting cross my shoulder from the east
Colder than the hatchet blade lying at my feet.

It's all Darkness over Appledore, darkness over Star
Darkness over Smuttynose, pounding in the heart
And those women out there waiting, Anethe, Anethe and Marie
And Karen, Ivan's sister, she was so good to me.

Lunging Island to my left, Malagar to my right
Smuttynose lies dead ahead, I can just make out the light
And the rhythm of my rowing, it is coming faster now
The halfway rocks just off the stern and death just off the bow.

Louis, Louis Wagner, rowing through the night
Louis, Louis Wagner, the noose will fit you tight
Silver chain around your neck, silver in your eyes
Silver in your Judas soul, that never, never dies.

"Well the wind now whipping from the west and the swell will not be tamed
The ocean building to a roar and the mind will not be changed

This boat will have its landing, this sea will have its flood
These hands will have their silver, and the devil will have his blood.

One lamp in the window, a beacon 'cross the ice
Safe harbor for the weary, safe keeping for the night
Comfort for the sailor, wrecked upon the sea
Terror for those gentlefolk who once befriended me.

I'm gliding into Haley's Cove and there's not a soul in sight
I grab my hatchet and I climb the bluff headed for the light
The snow is sucking at my boots and the ice gnawing my hands
But the blood is boiling in my veins; the blood, do you understand?

I smash into the cottage, my hatchet swinging wild
Anethe leaps up from sleep and her eyes are like a child
She screams 'God, John, God!' running from the room
I grab her in the doorway, the axe glints in the moon.

Fire racing through my brain, explosions in my eyes
Anethe lying on the floor and Karen screaming: 'Why?'
The axe, the blood, the sky, the moon, the pounding of the sea
the howling of the crazy wind, the wind or was it me?"

Louis, Louis Wagner, raging in the night Louis,
Louis Wagner the noose will fit you tight
Silver chain around your neck, silver in your eyes
Silver in your Judas soul, that never, never dies.

"Anethe, Anethe Christensen, her lovely golden hair
All smeared with blood, all splashed with blood oh god, it was everywhere
And Karen, gentle Karen, she just wanted to be my friend
She made me well when I was ill, her blood is on these hands.

Marie, Marie she got away, she ran barefoot through the snow
I followed her tracks through the craggy rocks but the moon was falling low
I couldn't find her anywhere and I went back for what I came
But in the chest I only found this piece of silver chain.

Oh this icy piece of silver chain and there was nothing more
I threw the chest against the wall and I smashed the bedroom door
I ripped apart the still-warm beds, I tore up every shelf
I cursed the very universe and then I cursed myself.

I stumbled down to the dory and I flung the hatchet in
I shoved off for the mainland fighting time and wind
The dawn was breaking bloody red when I rowed into rye
I threw myself down on the beach and I hung my head and cried.

And I made it to the train to Boston, but nothing was the same
and every woman on that coach kept whispering their names
Anethe, Anethe and Karen, they was with me all the while
And so they took me back to Kittery where I had to stand my trial.

Well the judge was steaming on the bench and the jury numbered twelve
A thousand eyes inside that room condemned my soul to hell
I was seated in the dock, Marie was on the stand
And right behind me, I couldn't look, were the eyes of John and Ivan.

Well the judge looked toward the doorway, and the jury disappeared
And a hush rolled through that courtroom like a fog across a pier
and the judge he banged his gavel and the jury took their seats
and the foreman stood and he pointed at me and he said: 'guilty in the first degree!'

Oh the sun had not yet risen, there was a moon still in the sky
They took me from the prison with the sleep still in my eyes
And the moonlight on the gallows made that noose like a silver chain
And as I fell I heard Karen pleading: "Louis won't you be my friend?"

Oh, Louis, Louis Wagner, hanging in the night Louis,
Louis Wagner the noose now fits you tight
Silver chain around your neck, silver in your eyes
Silver in your Judas soul, that never, never dies.

Well Karen's question gets no answer, for the wind's beginning to rise
And the fog's rolling out with the river, look at the run of the tide
And now a moon, a sickle moon, is rising just offshore
And out beyond the tugboats, listen you can hear the dip of his oars.

Dreamer--in March at Portsmouth harbor, when the night puts on her mask
And the fog prowls the dripping street you might hear a stranger laugh
You might feel a bloody finger, jabbing your moral soul
For Louis Wagner is bound to relive what happened on the Isles of shoals.

John Perreault

The Ballad of the Squalus

I ran into an old time sailor, up on Market Street;
We had a cup of coffee, his last name was McLees;
He fought in the Pacific, on Portsmouth submarines;
I asked about the Squalus, this is what he told me.

"Squalus was a diesel sub, built at Portsmouth Yard;
Gearing up for WWII, our crew was pressing hard;
Running her through sea trials, May 23rd, 1939.
In a whipping wind we went out again, with 59 men inside."

Yes my friend, 59 men, only 33 survived;
How many thousands broke their backs
just to make this ship a prize?
I could tell you of the Stickleback,
and how the Thresher died;
Two hundred years we built the boats,
Portsmouth paid the price;
Ah, the Portsmouth Yard;
Down at Portsmouth Yard.

Just outside the Isles of Shoals, Ollie Naquin in command;
I see him now up on the bridge, 'Stand by to dive all hands!'
Bow planes swing out from the hull, klaxons wail and whine;
Tanks for ballast open up Squalus makes her dive.

Battery engines take us down, intake valves are closed
Board lights green means everything is steady as she goes;
Now this jolt! A yeoman jumps, happens all on a sudden;
Rips his earphones off and cries: 'The engine room is flooding!'

'Blow the ballast! Blow the tanks! Blow the bow and turn her!'
The bow comes up just a little way, but there's too much weight asternship;
She tips back on an angle, tilting ten degrees to forty;
Slipping down, she's going down, shorting out the batteries.

'Dog down the doors!' Naquin shouts, and a seaman grabs the bulkhead;
'For God's sake wait!' a sailor cries, and seven men scramble forward;
There's water up around our knees, before the bulkhead closes;
Twenty-six men on the other side I can still hear their voices.

Silence at the bottom of 240 feet of water;
Darkness cold and icy calm Naquin gives the order:
'Men, still yourselves, try to rest, save the oxygen;
We'll float a marker up to spot us, but for now the wait begins.'

'Listen -- I hear something, like a rumble in a fog;
Men take hammers bang the hull, bang like hell by God;
They're up there looking for us, I know It in my bones;
Those guys will risk their lives to get us out and bring us home.'

Searchers grab the orange buoy, now they're dragging grapnel;
A diver's boots land on the hatch, they're lowering down the life Bell;

33 men brought up above, after 39 hours of dying:
Four months later 25 men towed in for identifying.*

September 15 1939 people lined up at the gates;
Waiting for those shiny hearses, carrying their mates;
Wives and lovers, sons and daughters, standing in the Kittery rain;
They've stood out there like this before, and they'll be standing out here again.

McLees he sipped his coffee, stared out at the rain;
"I don't get out so much today" he said, "this town has really changed;
guess I just lost touch of time, 'bout that time to go;
Why 26 men, and not 59? That I'll never know.

Squalus sat in drydock rebuilt and recommissioned;
Engine room they called the tomb, well that's all superstition;
They rechristened her the Sailfish, but she's the Squalus in my dreams;
Every night I go back down, inside that submarine.

John Perreault

The Metaphysical Paintings

1. The Enigma of Arrival

We are nude beneath our costumes
as in the false myths we have been forced
to memorize
and there is a mistake in your eyes.

We are not aware that at last
the last official has arrived.

Since the sky is false
I tell you falsely of my absence of feelings.

And you stand there staring down
counting the toes
that peek from out beneath
the hem of your theatrical robe.

2. The Melancholy of an Afternoon

The two of us make love
in the form of identical vegetables,
in shade,
oblivious to noise
and vanishing parades,
oblivious to flags
or that which tries to harm us
from the top of the industrial tower.

3. A Grand Tour

A mistake. It is a tower and not a tour
that does not crumble.
And we will make arrangements now
to take a guided tour of this tower
and soon find out that there are no stairs
and when you get to the top
there is no view.

4. Departure of a Friend

I see you lying on a candy-striped towel
face-down,
reading a book of small pictures,
a book about Michelangelo.

Goodbye.

But the time is wrong.
We discover that the train has already left.

It is a false goodbye.

Our shadows become one long shadow
that touches a pool.

Why is it that the railroad station is at times
so quiet? So empty?

5. Nostalgia for the Infinite

I will miss your loose-leaf notebooks
and your figs.
I will miss your calculated mistakes
and the pictures you sometimes liked to take.

We are still saying goodbye.
Same time. Same light. Same railroad
station.

Are you about to enter this different tower?
Are you about to become another?
A railroad engineer or a policeman?
Are you about to vanish?

6. Love Song

O how I have loved you,
O great and classical world,
the way a child loves his father;
but now the time has come
to escape your betrayal.

Only the geometry of a green sphere.
Only the surgery upon a puff of smoke
can save us from more primitive forms
of this industrial sadness!

7. Mystery and Melancholy of a Street

At that time of day when guardian angels
have retired for the day,
as a small girl with a hoop,
I am menaced by the shadow of a guardian angel.

My substance is of shadow.

I let this angel follow me into the bowels
of an empty moving van;
I am raped by the sun.

I take off my shoes.

I wipe the sweat from his brow
with the hem of my Communion dress.

8. The Enigma of Fate

One move of the invisible queen,
one shout from the top of the stack,
one hand for the future,
and the spilling of seed.

One road through the labyrinth,
one turn to the left,
and the spilling of seed.

9. Melancholy of an Autumn Afternoon

We are still saying goodbye.

10. The Naval Barracks

At an early age, I was expelled
from the Naval Academy.
How well I remember those long Euclidian walks
into the sunset
at the end of a geometrical day.

Accumulations! Neat debris!
The magic of an ammunition dump!

The false perspective of my souvenirs
returns to haunt me.

Patient arrangements of frustrations.
Private mottos.
Public demonstrations of the insatiable
and the obvious!

11. Purity of a Dream

The purity of my dream can only be maintained
at the expense of the present.

I make a billboard in celebration
of our new found spring.
All the buildings start walking up the highway
to look at it.
They crowd around.

Now that I have made this billboard,
I can carry your picture around in my brain
in a small green suitcase
as I fall asleep
on that small train puffing into the distance.

12. Masks

I like this room. I like this movie of myself.
This view of the antiseptic town.

You are my mask
and I am yours.

Empty!

13. Hector and Andromache

At last we are together. Our dreams like our shadows
have at last combined.
We observe the higher mathematics
of our consistent departure.

We interfuse.

The geometry of our inter-relationship
has become like the demolished city
and the preserved city

a train station that arrows towards
a new release of political crime,
a vertical of deliverance.

John Perreault