

Classic Poetry Series

Bob Hicok
- poems -

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Bob Hicok(1960 -)

Bob Hicok is an American poet, born in 1960. He currently is an associate professor of creative writing at Virginia Tech. He is from Michigan and before teaching owned and ran a successful automotive die design business.

His first book, *The Legend of Light*, (1995) was chosen by Carolyn Kizer for the 1995 Felix Pollak Prize. This book, published by the University of Wisconsin Press, was later chosen an ALA Booklist Notable Book of the Year. *Plus Shipping* followed in 1998. His 2001 release, *Animal Soul*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has published two other books -- *Insomnia Diary* (2004) and *This Clumsy Living* (2007), both with the University of Pittsburgh Press. "*This Clumsy Living*" received the 2008 Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry from the Library of Congress.

His poems have appeared in such publications as *The New Yorker*, *Poetry Magazine*, *The Paris Review* and *The American Poetry Review*, as well as four volumes of *The Best American Poetry*. Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2008 and two NEA Fellowships, his work has also been reprinted three times in the *Pushcart Anthology*.

His works include the following: *This Clumsy Living*, 2007, the University of Pittsburgh Press; *Insomnia Diary*, 2004, the University of Pittsburgh Press; *Animal Soul*, 2003, Invisible Cities Press; *Plus Shipping*, 1998, BOA Editions, Ltd.; and *The Legend of Light*, 1995 University of Wisconsin Press.

A Private Public Space

You can't trust lesbians. You invite them

to your party and they don't come,
they're too busy tending vaginal
flowers, hating football, walking their golden
and chocolate labs. X gave me a poem

in which she was in love with a woman
and the church but the church
couldn't accept four breasts in one bed.
When I asked if our coworkers knew,

she dropped her head and I said nothing
for years until this morning I realized
no one reads poems: my secrets and hers
are safe in verse. I knew she'd have enjoyed

the Beaujolais and I want to meet Dianne,
Mona Lisa, Betty, Alice,
the name's been changed
to protect women who can't stand in a room
holding hands because you can't trust
heterosexuals to love love, however
it comes. So I recorded

the party for her, for them, the mic
a bit away from the action
to catch the feel of waves touching shore
and letting go, the wash of moods
across the hours of drink and yes, some grapes
were thrown and I breathed
the quickening revelation
of a cigarette, someone said "I gave up
underwear for Lent" and I hope

they play the tape while making love.
As if finally the world's made happy
by who they are, laughing with, not at
the nipple lick clit kiss hug

in bed and after, the on and on
of meals and moons and bills
and burning days of pretending
they don't exist. "Who's she? Just

a friend." And oceans are merely dew
upon the land.

Bob Hicok

A Shopkeeper's Story

I sell one bristle brushes. People
seeking two bristle brushes I send
to the guy on Amsterdam, who's in a rush.

I may have one customer a year
for my one bristle brushes, a one-eyed
lover of tanagers, she may have

one dollar to spend in the moment
light's neither day's or night's,
but one's where infinity begins. Whoever

she is, she's always painting barbules,
I'm always thinking, no one will notice
that they notice this, that her tanagers

move, that everything's alive. We talk
care and feeding of the one
bristle brush. Care exists. I thrive.

Bob Hicok

After Working Sixty Hours Again For What Reason

The best job I had was moving a stone from one side of the road to the other. This required a permit which required a bribe. The bribe took all my salary. Yet because I hadn't finished the job I had no salary, and to pay the bribe I took a job moving the stone the other way. Because the official wanted his bribe, he gave me a permit for the second job. When I pointed out that the work would be best completed if I did nothing, he complimented my brain and wrote a letter to my employer suggesting promotion on stationery bearing the wings of a raptor spread in flight over a mountain smaller than the bird. My boss, fearing my intelligence, paid me to sleep on the sofa and take lunch with the official who required a bribe to keep anything from being done. When I told my parents, they wrote my brother to come home from university to be slapped on the back of the head. Dutifully, he arrived and bowed to receive his instruction, at which point sense entered his body and he asked what I could do by way of a job. I pointed out there were stones everywhere trying not to move, all it took was a little gumption to be the man who didn't move them. It was harder to explain the intricacies of not obtaining a permit to not do this. Just yesterday he got up at dawn and shaved, as if the lack of hair on his face has anything to do with the appearance of food

on an empty table.

Bob Hicok

An Old Story

It's hard being in love
with fireflies. I have to do
all the pots and pans.
When asked to parties
they always wear the same
color dress. I work days,
they punch in at dusk.
With the radio and a beer
I sit up doing bills,
jealous of men who've fallen
for the homebody stars.
When things are bad
they shake their asses
all over town, when good
my lips glow.

Bob Hicok

Another Awkward Stage Of Convalescence

Drunk, I kissed the moon
where it stretched on the floor.
I'd removed happiness from a green bottle,
both sipped and gulped
just as a river changes its mind,
mostly there was a flood in my mouth

because I wanted to love the toaster
as soon as possible, and the toothbrush
with multi-level bristles
created by dental science, and the walls
holding pictures in front of their faces
to veil the boredom of living

fifty years without once
turning the other way. I wanted
the halo a cheap beaujolais paints
over everything like artists gave the holy
before perspective was invented,
and for a moment thought in the glow

of fermented bliss that the bending
of spoons by the will was inevitable,
just as the dark-skinned would kiss
the light-skinned and those with money
and lakefront homes would open
their verandas and offer trays

of cucumber sandwiches to the poor
scuttling along the fringes of their lawns
looking for holes in the concertina wire.
Of course I had to share this ocean
of acceptance and was soon on the phone
with a woman from Nogales whose hips

had gone steady with mine. I told her
I was over her by pretending I was just
a friend calling to say the Snow Drops
had nuzzled through dirt to shake

their bells in April wind. This
threw her off the scent of my anguish

as did the cement mixer of my voice, as did
the long pause during which I memorized
her breathing and stared at my toes
like we were still together, reading
until our eyes slid from the page
and books fell off the bed to pound

their applause as our tongues searched
each others' body. When she said
she had to go like a cop telling a bum
to move on, I began drinking downhill,
with speed that grew its own speed,
and fixed on this image with a flagellant's

zeal, how she, returning to bed, cupped
her lover's crotch and whispered not
to worry, it was no one on the phone,
and proved again how forgotten I'd become
while I, bent over the cold confessional,
listened to the night's sole point of honesty.

Bob Hicok

By Their Works

Who cleaned up the Last Supper?
These would be my people.
Maybe hung over, wanting
desperately a better job,
standing with rags
in hand as the window
beckons with hills
of yellow grass. In Da Vinci,
the blue robed apostle
gesturing at Christ
is saying, give Him the check.
What a mess they've made
of their faith. My God
would put a busboy
on earth to roam
among the waiters
and remind them to share
their tips. The woman
who finished one
half eaten olive
and scooped the rest
into her pockets,
walked her tiny pride home
to children who looked
at her smile and saw
the salvation of a meal.
All that week
at work she ignored
customers who talked
of Rome and silk
and crucifixions,
though she couldn't stop
thinking of this man
who said thank you
each time she filled
His glass.

Bob Hicok

Calling Him Back From Layoff#65279;

I called a man today. After he said
hello and I said hello came a pause
during which it would have been

confusing to say hello again so I said
how are you doing and guess what, he said
fine and wondered aloud how I was

and it turns out I'm OK. He
was on the couch watching cars
painted with ads for Budweiser follow cars

painted with ads for Tide around an oval
that's a metaphor for life because
most of us run out of gas and settle

for getting drunk in the stands
and shouting at someone in a t-shirt
we want kraut on our dog. I said

he could have his job back and during
the pause that followed his whiskers
scrubbed the mouthpiece clean

and his breath passed in and out
in the tidal fashion popular
with mammals until he broke through

with the words how soon thank you
ohmyGod which crossed his lips and drove
through the wires on the backs of ions

as one long word as one hard prayer
of relief meant to be heard
by the sky. When he began to cry I tried

with the shape of my silence to say
I understood but each confession
of fear and poverty was more awkward

than what you learn in the shower.
After he hung up I went outside and sat
with one hand in the bower of the other

and thought if I turn my head to the left
it changes the song of the oriole
and if I give a job to one stomach other

forks are naked and if tonight a steak
sizzles in his kitchen do the seven
other people staring at their phones

hear?

Bob Hicok

Dropping The Euphemism

He has five children, I'm papa
to a hundred pencils.
I bought the chair he sat in

from a book of chairs,
staplers and spikes
that let me play Vlad the Impaler

with invading memos. When I said
I have to lay you off
a parallel universe was born

in his face, one where flesh
is a loose shirt
taken to the river and beaten

against rocks. Just
by opening my mouth I destroyed
his faith he's a man

who can think honey-glazed ham
and act out the thought
with plastic or bills. We sat.

I stared at my hands, he stared
at the wall staring at my hands.
I said other things

about the excellent work he'd done
and the cycles of business
which are like

the roller-coaster thoughts
of an oscilloscope. All this time
I saw the eyes of his wife

which had always been brown
like almonds but were now brown
like the crust of bread. We walked

to the door, I shook his hand,
felt the bones pretending
to be strong. On his way home

there was a happy song
because de Sade invented radio,
the window was open, he saw

delphinium but couldn't remember
the name. I can only guess.
Maybe at each exit

that could have led his body
to Tempe, to Mars, he was tempted
to forget his basketball team

of sons, or that he ever liked
helping his wife clean carrots,
the silver sink turning orange.

Running's natural to most animals
who aren't part
of a lecture series on Nature's

Dead Ends. When I told him,
I saw he was looking for a place
in his brain to hide

his brain. I tried that later
with beer, it worked until I stood
at the toilet to make my little

waterfall, and thought of him
pushing back from a bar
to go make the same noise.

Bob Hicok

Duke

He was hit back of the head for a haul of \$15,
a Diner's Club Card and picture of his daughter in a helmet
on a horse tethered to a pole that centered
its revolving universe. Pacing the halls, he'd ask

for a blow job he didn't want. The ward's new visitors
didn't know this request was all the injury
had left him to say, and would be shamed or pissed,
a few hitting him as he stood with his mouth

slightly open and large frame leaning in. His wife
divorced him for good and blameless reasons. He would not
be coming home to share his thoughts on film and weather,
or remembering her any longer than it took to leave a room.

He liked ham. Kept newspapers in drawers and under his bed,
each unread page hand-pressed flat. And when it snowed
he leaned into one of the sealed, unbreakable windows,
a cheek to the cool glass as he held his fingers

over his mouth and moaned low and constant like the sound
of a boat on the far side of a lake. When he died
they cut him open to see how his habits had been rewired
and so tightly looped. Having known him they were afraid

of what can happen when you cross the lot to the office
or pull up to a light and thump the wheel as you might
any hour. If you stare at the dyed
and beautiful cross sections of a brain, it's natural

to wonder how we extract the taste of coffee
or sense of a note accurately found and held on an oboe
from this bramble. On Duke's slides they circled
the regions of blight which explain

why almost all behavior we recognize as human was lost,
but not why a man who'd curl into a ball
like a caterpillar when barely touched, could only ask
for sex, for intimacy, for the very thing

he could least accept and lived twelve years without,
no embrace or caress, no kiss on the lips before sleep,
until he died in the lounge looking out on winter sky
that seemed eager to snow all day but didn't.

Bob Hicok

Epithalamium□

A bee in the field. The house on the mountain
reveals itself to have been there through summer.
It's not a bee but a horse eating frosted grass
in the yawn light. Secrets, the anguish of smoke
above the chimney as it shreds what it's learned
of fire. The horse has moved, it's not a horse
but a woman doing the stations of the cross
with a dead baby in her arms. The anguish of the house
as it reveals smoke to the mountain. A woman
eating cold grass in Your name, shredding herself
like fire. The woman has stopped, it's not a woman
but smoke on its knees keeping secrets in what it reveals.
The everything has moved, it's not everything
but a shredding of the anguish of names. The marriage
of light: particle to wave. Do you take? I do.

Bob Hicok

Feeling The Draft

We were young and it was an accomplishment to have a body. No one said this. No one said much beyond "throw me that sky" or "can the lake sleep over?" The lake could not. The lake was sent home and I ate too many beets, went around with beet-blood tongue worrying about my draft card-burning brother going to war. Other brothers became holes at first base at war, then a few holes Harleying back from war in their always it seemed green jackets with pockets galore and flaps for I wondered bullets, I wondered how to worship these giants. None of them wanted to talk to me or anyone it seemed but the river or certain un-helmeted curves at high speed, I had my body and flung it over branches and fences toward my coming sullenness as the gravity of girls' hips began and my brother marched off to march against the war. I watched different masses of bodies on TV, people saying no to the jungle with grenades and people saying no to the grenades with signs and my father saying no to all of them with the grinding of his teeth he spoke with. I'd pedal after the nos up and down a hill like it was somehow a rosary, somehow my body was a prayer I could chant by letting it loose with others like me milling around the everything below five feet tall that was ours, the everything below the adult line of sight that was ours to hold as long as we could: a year, a summer. Until the quarterback came back without . . . well, without. When the next Adonis stepped up to throw the bomb.

Bob Hicok

For Three Whose Reflex Was Yes

Nobody I know is a god. A mother and son
fall into the river's million hands, the river's
smash and grab. They go under, climb the ropeless
water up, wave, open their mouths and scream
wet silences as they slide back under.

A man jumps in to save them, leaves the edge
as a needle into the river's muddy sinews, a woman
jumps in to save his vanishing and the mother
and son and is stripped by the flood, her pants
drowning right beside her, another man jumps in
to save them all and a woman jumps in after him
to save them all plus one, cars arrive and people
get out and leap into the river, the river's being filled
with whatever's in their pockets and their hands
and their eyes, with nickels and dollar bills
and bibles and sunsets, the beautiful brush strokes
of this beautifully dying day, people pile
like a river inside the river, they keep coming
and diving in, they keep feeding their breath
to the water, which is less, which is thinned,
until the mother and son rise on a mound
of strangers and dead, the sun warming them, blessing
their faces slowly dry.

Bob Hicok

Full Flight

I'm in a plane that will not be flown into a building.
It's a SAAB 340, seats 40, has two engines with propellers
is why I think of beanies, those hats that would spin
a young head into the clouds. The plane is red and loud
inside like it must be loud in the heart, red like fire
and fire engines and the woman two seats up and to the right
resembles one of the widows I saw on TV after the Towers
came down. It's her hair that I recognize, the fecundity of it
and the color and its obedience to an ideal, the shape
it was asked several hours ago to hold and has held, a kind
of wave that begins at the forehead and repeats with slight
variations all the way to the tips, as if she were water
and a pebble had been continuously dropped into the mouth
of her existence. We are eighteen thousand feet over America.
People are typing at their laps, blowing across the fog of coffee,
sleeping with their heads on the windows, on the pattern
of green fields and brown fields, streams and gas stations
and swimming pools, blue dots of aquamarine that suggest
we've domesticated the mirage. We had to kill someone,
I believe, when the metal bones burned and the top
fell through the bottom and a cloud made of dust and memos
and skin muscled across Manhattan. I remember feeling
I could finally touch a rifle, that some murders
are an illumination of ethics, that they act as a word,
a motion the brain requires for which there is
no syllable, no breath. The moment the planes had stopped,
when we were afraid of the sky, there was a pause
when we could have been perfectly American,
could have spent infinity dollars and thrown a million
bodies at finding the few, lasering our revenge
into a kind of love, the blood-hunger kept exact
and more convincing for its precision, an expression
of our belief that proximity is never the measure of guilt.
We've lived in the sky again for some years and today
on my lap these pictures from Iraq, naked bodies
stacked into a pyramid of ha-ha and the articles
about broomsticks up the ass and the limbs of children
turned into stubble, we are punch-drunk and getting even
with the sand, with the map, with oil, with ourselves

I think listening to the guys behind me. There's a problem
in Alpena with an inventory control system, some switches
are being counted twice, switches for what I don't know—
switches of humor, of faith—but the men are musical
in their jargon, both likely born in New Delhi
and probably Americans now, which is what the flesh
of this country has been, a grafted pulse, an inventory
of the world, and just as the idea of embrace
moves chemically into my blood, and I'm warmed
as if I've just taken a drink, a voice announces
we've begun our descent, and then I sense the falling.

Bob Hicok

Go Greyhound□

A few hours after Des Moines
the toilet overflowed.
This wasn't the adventure it sounds.

I sat with a man whose tattoos
weighed more than I did.
He played Hendrix on mouth guitar.
His Electric Ladyland lips
weren't fast enough
and if pitch and melody
are the rudiments of music,
this was just
memory, a body nostalgic
for the touch of adored sound.

Hope's a smaller thing on a bus.

You hope a forgotten smoke consorts
with lint in the pocket of last
resort to be upwind
of the human condition, that the baby
sleeps
and when this never happens,
that she cries
with the lullaby meter of the sea.

We were swallowed by rhythm.
The ultra blond
who removed her wig and applied
fresh loops of duct tape
to her skull,
her companion who held a mirror
and popped his dentures
in and out of place,
the boy who cut stuffing
from the seat where his mother
should have been—
there was a little more sleep
in our thoughts,

it was easier to yield.

To what, exactly—
the suspicion that what we watch
watches back,
cornfields that stare at our hands,
downtowns
that hold us in their windows
through the night?

Or faith, strange to feel
in that zoo of manners.

I had drool on my shirt and breath
of the undead, a guy
dropped empty Buds on the floor
like gravity was born
to provide this service,
we were white and black trash
who'd come
in an outhouse on wheels and still

some had grown—
in touching the spirited shirts
on clotheslines,
after watching a sky of starlings
flow like cursive
over wheat—back into creatures
capable of a wish.

As we entered Arizona
I thought I smelled the ocean,
liked the lie of this
and closed my eyes
as shadows
puppeted against my lids.

We brought our failures with us,
their taste, their smell.
But the kid
who threw up in the back
pushed to the window anyway,

opened it
and let the wind clean his face,
screamed something
I couldn't make out
but agreed with
in shape, a sound I recognized
as everything I'd come so far
to give away.

Bob Hicok

Happy First Anniversary (In Anticipation Of Your Thirty Ninth)

I don't have much time. I'm an important person to chickadees and mourning doves, whose feeder was smashed last night by a raccoon. Soon I'll be wielding duct tape, noticing the dew, wanting to bathe in it, hoping the awkwardness of yesterday (three instances of people talking with bear traps for mouths) never repeats itself and we all go forward as if to a party for a five year old who refuses to smash candy out of a burro. It's too cute, the burro, too real for him not to ask his mother, can I keep it, and when the other children cry, they're given lake front property, it works out, this is what I see for you, the working out. Think of the year behind you as a root or think of going to Spain and feeling sorry for bulls or don't think, this isn't the SATs, don't think but stay. Stay happy, honest, stay as tall as you are as long as you can using giraffes if you need to to see each other above the crowd. I have these moments when I realize I'm not breathing, my wife is never why I'm not breathing and always why I want to lick a human heart, remember that each of you is half of why your bed will sag toward the middle of being a boat and that you both will sag if you're lucky together, be lucky together and acquire in sagging more square footage to kiss and to hold. And always remember that I hate you for being so much closer than I am to where none of us ever get to go again - first look, first touch, first inadvertent brush of breath or hair, first time you turned over and looked at who was surprising you by how fully she was there.

Bob Hicok

Her My Body

about the left nipple
of the woman in the bathroom.

She is drying her hair, the woman
whose left nipple is sore.
We looked this evening
for diagonal cuts
or discoloration
or bite marks from small insects
that may be in our bed.

It is a good bed, a faithful bed.
A bed that won't be hurt
by the consideration we gave
to the possibility of small
though disproportionately
strong insects in our bed.

The blow-dryer sounds like a jet
taking off. The first time
I flew to Brussels, people began
the journey happy but ended
with drool on their shirts.

She is drying her hair
though she has never been to Brussels.
Drying her hair
though she could be petting a dog.
Drying her hair
while having red thoughts
about what the pain in her nipple means.

I would not dry my hair
in such a moment but I am bald.
The body of the woman
has many ways to cease
being the body of the woman.

I have one way

to be happy
and she is that way.

I would like to fly with her to Brussels.
We would not be put off by the drool.
This is what happens when people sleep.
We would buy postcards of the little boy
who saved Brussels when he peed on a fire.
We would be romantic in public places.

For the moment
these desires can best be furthered
by petting a dog.

I'm also working on this theory.
That sometimes a part of the body
just hurts.
That the purpose of prayer
is to make the part of the body
that sometimes just hurts
the little toe or appendix.

Something vestigial or redundant.
Something that can be jettisoned.
I have no reason
to use the word cancer
while petting a dog.

Here is a piece of a second
during which a jet is not flying
nor is it on the ground.

I'm working on a theory
that no one can die
inside that piece of a second.

If you are comforted
by this thought you are welcome
to keep it.

Bob Hicok

In Michael Robins's Class Minus One

At the desk where the boy sat, he sees the Chicago River.
It raises its hand.
It asks if metaphor should burn.
He says fire is the basis for all forms of the mouth.
He asks, why did you fill the boy with your going?
I didn't know a boy had been added to me, the river says.
Would you have given him back if you knew?
I think so, the river says, I have so many boys in me,
I'm worn out stroking eyes looking up at the day.
Have you written a poem for us? he asks the river,
and the river reads its poem,
and the other students tell the river
it sounds like a poem the boy would have written,
that they smell the boy's cigarettes
in the poem, they feel his teeth
biting the page.
And the river asks, did this boy dream of horses?
Because I suddenly dream of horses, I suddenly dream.
They're in a circle and the river says, I've never understood
found things, why would leaving come back
to itself?
And a girl makes a kiss with her mouth and leans it
against the river, and the kiss flows away
but the river wants it back, the river makes sounds
to go after the kiss.
And they all make sounds for the river to carry to the boy.
And the river promises to never surrender the boy's shape
to the ocean.

Bob Hicok

In The Loop

I heard from people after the shootings. People I knew well or barely or not at all. Largely the same message: how horrible it was, how little there was to say about how horrible it was. People wrote, called, mostly e-mailed because they know I teach at Virginia Tech, to say, there's nothing to say. Eventually I answered these messages: there's nothing to say back except of course there's nothing to say, thank you for your willingness to say it. Because this was about nothing. A boy who felt that he was nothing, who erased and entered that erasure, and guns that are good for nothing, and talk of guns that is good for nothing, and spring that is good for flowers, and Jesus for some, and scotch for others, and "and" for me in this poem, "and" that is good for sewing the minutes together, which otherwise go about going away, bereft of us and us of them. Like a scarf left on a train and nothing like a scarf left on a train. As if the train, empty of everything but a scarf, still opens its doors at every stop, because this is what a train does, this is what a man does with his hand on a lever, because otherwise, why the lever, why the hand, and then it was over, and then it had just begun.

Bob Hicok

Learning To Swim

At forty-eight, to be given water,
which is most of the world, given life
in water, which is most of me, given ease,

which is most of what I lack, here, where walls
don't part to my hands, is to be born
as of three weeks ago. Taking nothing

from you, mother, or you, sky, or you,
mountain, that you wouldn't take
if offered by the sea, any sea, or river,

any river, or the pool, beside which
a woman sits who would save me
if I needed saving, in a red suit, as if flame

is the color of emergency, as I do,
need saving, from solid things,
most of all, their dissolve.

Bob Hicok

Man Of The House

It was a misunderstanding.
I got into bed, made love
with the woman I found there,
called her honey, mowed the lawn,
had three children, painted
the house twice, fixed the furnace,
overcame an addiction to blue pills,
read Spinoza every night
without once meeting his God,
buried one child, ate my share
of Jell-o and meatloaf,
went away for nine hours a day
and came home hoarding my silence,
built a ferris wheel in my mind,
bolt by bolt, then it broke
just as it spun me to the top.
Turns out I live next door.

Bob Hicok

Mortal Shower

I met my butt in a Pittsburgh
hotel room. My face
still looks like my face
but not my butt, my hair

no longer resembles an ad
for Jell-O pudding, people thought
it was chocolate pudding for years,
so thick

and rich. There was fog
in the bathroom and then not fog,
I faced my face
and then not my face, the mirror

staring at my ass
winked at the mirror
staring at my face

and the future was defined
as an effort
to use the word sag in my resume.
Have sagged, will

sag, am looking for a position
in which to maximize my sagging
potential. I once cared
what went on back there, about

the extent of grip and rise, just
as some birds crave
the reddest plumage, and I propositioned
mirrors, watched women's eyes
follow, turned in shop windows
to see if my pants
fit their purpose. Then love

and car payments, love and the sofa
needs to be moved, love and her grandmother

dies, my grandmother
dies, love
and she comes home and I'm thrilled
by her coat and voice
and the brown habit of her eyes. She

likes my ass and lies
about its travels, how it's lost
focus, and there are wattles
to come, please God
if dentures
only partials, may Depends

be cheap in bulk and the earth
generous with its telepathy, I'm

in Pittsburgh tonight

and with her,

mirrors don't scare me,
room service is a gas
because she's alive, I'm a giant,
a tight-assed
titan because she's alive
and says

come home, the Honda needs
new brakes, a robin flew
into the window today
but shook it off, just
dizzy, stunned
by reflection.

Bob Hicok

O My Pa-Pa

Our fathers have formed a poetry workshop.
They sit in a circle of disappointment over our fastballs
and wives. We thought they didn't read our stuff,
whole anthologies of poems that begin, My father never,
or those that end, and he was silent as a carp,
or those with middles which, if you think
of the right side as a sketch, look like a paunch
of beer and worry, but secretly, with flashlights
in the woods, they've read every word and noticed
that our nine happy poems have balloons and sex
and giraffes inside, but not one dad waving hello
from the top of a hill at dusk. Theirs
is the revenge school of poetry, with titles like
'My Yellow Sheet Lad' and 'Given Your Mother's Taste
for Vodka, I'm Pretty Sure You're Not Mine.'
They're not trying to make the poems better
so much as sharper or louder, more like a fishhook
or electrocution, as a group
they overcome their individual senilities,
their complete distaste for language, how cloying
it is, how like tears it can be, and remember
every mention of their long hours at the office
or how tired they were when they came home,
when they were dragged through the door
by their shadows. I don't know why it's so hard
to write a simple and kind poem to my father, who worked,
not like a dog, dogs sleep most of the day in a ball
of wanting to chase something, but like a man, a man
with seven kids and a house to feed, whose absence
was his presence, his present, the Cheerios,
the PF Flyers, who taught me things about trees,
that they're the most intricate version of standing up,
who built a grandfather clock with me so I would know
that time is a constructed thing, a passing, ticking fancy.
A bomb. A bomb that'll go off soon for him, for me,
and I notice in our fathers' poems a reciprocal dwelling
on absence, that they wonder why we disappeared
as soon as we got our licenses, why we wanted
the rocket cars, as if running away from them

to kiss girls who looked like mirrors of our mothers
wasn't fast enough, and it turns out they did
start to say something, to form the words hey
or stay, but we'd turned into a door full of sun,
into the burning leave, and were gone
before it came to them that it was all right
to shout, that they should have knocked us down
with a hand on our shoulders, that they too are mystified
by the distance men need in their love.

Bob Hicok

Other Lives And Dimensions And Finally A Love Poem

My left hand will live longer than my right. The rivers
of my palms tell me so.

Never argue with rivers. Never expect your lives to finish
at the same time. I think

praying, I think clapping is how hands mourn. I think
staying up and waiting
for paintings to sigh is science. In another dimension this
is exactly what's happening,

it's what they write grants about: the chromodynamics
of mournful Whistlers,
the audible sorrow and beta decay of Old Battersea Bridge.
I like the idea of different

theres and elsewheres, an Idaho known for bluegrass,
a Bronx where people talk
like violets smell. Perhaps I am somewhere patient, somehow
kind, perhaps in the nook

of a cousin universe I've never defiled or betrayed
anyone. Here I have
two hands and they are vanishing, the hollow of your back
to rest my cheek against,

your voice and little else but my assiduous fear to cherish.
My hands are webbed
like the wind-torn work of a spider, like they squeezed
something in the womb

but couldn't hang on. One of those other worlds
or a life I felt
passing through mine, or the ocean inside my mother's belly
she had to scream out.

Here, when I say I never want to be without you,
somewhere else I am saying
I never want to be without you again. And when I touch you
in each of the places we meet,

in all of the lives we are, it's with hands that are dying
and resurrected.

When I don't touch you it's a mistake in any life,
in each place and forever.

Bob Hicok

Prodigal

You could drive out of this country
and attack the world with your ambition,
invent wonder plasmas,
become an artist of the provocative gesture,
the suggestive nod, you could leave
wanting the world and return
carrying it, a noisy bundle
of steam and libido, a ball of fire
balanced on your tongue,
you might reclaim Main Street in a limo
longer than a sermon, wave at our red faces
while remembering that you were born
a clod hopper, a farmer's kid,
and get over that hump once and for all
by telling A Great Man's stories—
the dirty jokes of dictators, tidbits
of presidential hygiene, insights
into the psychotropic qualities of power
and the American tradition of kissing
moneyed ass. Your uncle would still
call you Roy Boy, pheasants
sun themselves beside the tracks,
waiting for the dew to burn off
before their first flight, and corn
grow so high that if you stood
in the field you'd disappear, the fact
aiming your eyes down the road.

Bob Hicok

Report From The Black Box

For Flaco

A cooler

head of lettuce prevailed, but when the actor
asked his question and paused
for us to watch him pause and think
inside the pause, I almost answered
as if we were in a bar, just the two of us
and a balcony and spotlight. The two of us
and programs and makeup and a sofa
from the director's living room and the black/
womb/agora/séance of theater inviting us to feel
together alone. I recall I don't recall
the question but its scope on his face
was immense, as if he were the Milky Way
asking am I pretty, am I here for sure for real
for long and my breath was the quiet yessing
of tall grass against the shoulders of a cat
stalking the night. I actually opened my mouth
before I actually thought you will be stoned
and not in the good way, not with stones
of tongues, stones of fingers against my forehead
but the play was messy and tangible and full
of the etceteras I am full of and why
wouldn't I want to talk with that is a question
the poem is asking you to answer wherever
you are without me is the problem
theater solves, since we sit together
in the dark with the dark because the dark
deserves a face a soliloquy a lover a bow
at the end. When I always wonder if the players
regret that the lights come up and they see us
as we are seeing them as they were,
what a weird mirror that is, showing one side
sudden appreciation and the resumption
of loose ends, the other the vast
and devotional possibilities of being kidnapped
by a dream and which side is which side
are you on?

Bob Hicok

Sudden Movements

My father's head has become a mystery to him.
We finally have something in common.
When he moves his head his eyes
get big as roses filled
with the commotion of spring.
Not long ago he was a man
who had tomato soup for lunch
and dusted with the earnestness
of a gun fight. Now he's a man
who sits at the table trying to breathe
in tiny bites. When they told him
his spinal column is closing, I thought
of all the branches he's cut
with loppers and piled and burned
in the fall, the pinch of the blades
on the green and vital pulp. Surgeons
can fuse vertebrae, a welders art,
and scrape the ring through which
the soul-wires flow as a dentist
would clean your teeth.
And still it could happen, one turn
of his head toward a hummingbird,
wings keeping that brittle life
afloat, working hard against the fall,
and he might freeze in that pose
of astonishment, a man estranged
from the neck down, who can only share
with his body the silence
he's pawned on his children as love.

Bob Hicok

The Maple

is a system of posture for wood.
A way of not falling down
for twigs that happens
to benefit birds. I don't know.
I'm staring at a tree,
at yellow leaves
threshed by wind and want you
reading this to be staring
at the same tree. I could
cut it down and laminate it
or ask you to live with me
on the stairs with the window
keeping an eye on the maple
but I think your real life
would miss you. The story
here is that all morning
I've thought of the statement
that art is about loneliness
while watching golden leaves
become unhinged.
By ones or in bunches
they tumble and hang
for a moment like a dress
in the dryer.
At the laundromat
you've seen the arms
thrown out to catch the shirt
flying the other way.
Just as you've stood
at the bottom of a gray sky
in a pile of leaves
trying to lick them
back into place.

Bob Hicok

The Semantics Of Flowers On Memorial Day

Historians will tell you my uncle
wouldn't have called it World War II
or the Great War plus One or Tombstone

over My Head. All of this language
came later. He and his buddies
knew it as get my ass outta here

or fucking trench foot and of course
sex please now. Petunias are an apology
for ignorance, my confidence

that saying high-density bombing
or chunks of brain in cold coffee
even suggests the athleticism

of his flinch or how casually
he picked the pieces out.
Geraniums symbolize the secrets

life kept from him, the wonder
of variable-speed drill and how
the sky would have changed had he lived

to shout it's a girl. My hands
enter dirt easily, a premonition.
I sit back on my uncle's stomach

exactly like I never did, he was
a picture to me, was my father
looking across a field at wheat

laying down to wind. For a while,
Tyrants' War and War of World Freedom
and Anti-Nazi War skirmished

for linguistic domination. If
my uncle called it anything
but too many holes in too many bodies

no flower can say. I plant marigolds
because they came cheap and who knows
what the earth's in the mood to eat.

Bob Hicok

The Smiths, As I Understand Them

There's a box at the hospital in which to deposit
children unlikely to win the Nobel Prize.

They cradled their son past that box,
though he'd been born with a pillow factory
where his heart should have been.

That first night, they took turns
putting ears to his chest, listening to feathers
being sorted, and wondered what kind of birds
lost their lives so the blood of sleep
could dream through his veins.

Doves, she hoped.

Roosters, his father said, surprising himself.

At the school for special children, his best friend,
a girl whose collar bones were the shadows
of bears, kissed him somehow
from the other side of the teeter-totter.

The boy whose eyes were lighthouses said, now
you have to get married.

Twenty years later, when they did, they came back
and made love on that teeter-totter, in the middle,
rocking slightly up and down, though the far ends
never touched the earth.

Their daughter knew none of this
until one day she cried
because she could not tip over or fall down
like the other kids at school.

Her mother, while explaining the conception
of the girl's incomparable balance, braided her hair
into an actual swan, a black swan
who made the girl feel her head

was a pond on a windless day, which is what
she wrote in her diary: My head is a pond
on a windless day.

Leading the diary to write in its diary,
I didn't have the heart to tell her
I felt a breeze, and in that breeze
I smelled a storm, and in that storm
I heard the screaming of trees, for the diary
had been raised to keep its thoughts
to itself, with perfect penmanship,
in the belief that words are bodies
who would admit, if asked, "my experience
of the transcendental has always been
a secondary one," but go on, still,
to do the work we've asked them to,
to hold everything our arms cannot.

Bob Hicok

Toward Accuracy

We're high enough that what I call fog might be cloud.
Not Everest high, or Chomuolungma, "Mother Goddess
of the World." If we named things what they are,
our sentences would be monsoons, long rains of sound.
Morning is "the time I suspect I am a horse," dusk
"the light which treats our shadows like taffy."
The number of times my name changes in a day,
from "looking at the world with eyes of wood rasps"
to "feathers have replaced my bones," rules out
the wearing of name tags: I wear a chalk board,
thesaurus, that book of whispers, of meaning sex.
"There's a woman who smokes a cigarette
now and then, who picks tobacco off her tongue
as something moves along the fault line
of the horizon, knees pulled to her chest,
her breath wearing a dress of smoke"
is one way I think of you when I think of you.
And when I think of you, "wants to be a candle"
isn't romantic but accurate, wicked light
leans in, away, writhes to get out of, to leap harder
into what it is.

Bob Hicok

Translator's Note

There is a tradition in Laparone that the first man to wake each morning must sweep shadows from his porch lest night pull the long limbs of sunlight into its mouth and devour the day. Serto wants to be the broom melting dark and light in the moment of their divorce. This teases the translator with a feast of moral and technical difficulties. For example. There is a widely chattered rumor that the arm Serto lost in the last battle for Muipo, now passed by Zedefi rebels from base to base in the Chimasta mountains, reverts to his body in dream and chokes him to death, his last breath the word benudok. In Kuntolo this means something like traitor/savior. The aspiration, for which there is no simple English equivalent, in fact no comparable word in the Romance "pallet," is to hold in one unit of language the complex idea of the man or woman who saves a village or clan by a putatively faithless act, the virtue of which only he or she is aware. In the first sentence of *Kiloso dak Vermoso* or *Swallowed River*, Serto injects the legend of his missing arm into our imaginations in words of necessary misinterpretation. *Ekiu zar sedru dok erchulo tubuso* can be translated one of two ways—The arm rose and embraced the sun or The arm rose and devoured the sun. Given Serto's standing as a world writer, the opening sentence is a challenge to translators to base the tone of the novel on the seesaw of a single word. By the time Mersatta, tortured by the dream of the arm, hangs himself from the 300-year-old kloson tree in the square of his unnamed village, it is clear the arm has been the novel's narrator, and that if *erchulo* had been translated

as embraced, Mersatta is to be forgiven,
as devoured, Mersatta should be left to rot.
Further complicating matters is that sometimes
the narrator is the arm but others a tongue
or foot, there is an entire chapter called
Bukosaman or Metronome, where the narrator
becomes, without reference until the last word
of the chapter, the gold buckle of General
Cuntare's belt. As always with Serto, we are made
to wonder, knowing so much about his life—
the shuttling of rebel messages as a child
along the honed ridges of the Chimastas,
the rape of his mother, shooting of his father
before his eyes, the sudden appearance
of a wealthy uncle who shipped the boy
out of the country into the arms of the Treost
Jesuits, his return as the lunatic pen
behind the incendiary pages of *The Undressed
Land*—if we are not being asked to wear
the complexity of his guilt and decide if he,
the supposed informer at Muipo, is a child
of reverence or scorn. Out of this tempest
I have essentially written my own book. Mersatta
still dies but is happy to let the sway
of his body replace the wind's tick-tock.
The arm which haunts him has nothing to say
about the revolution but wants to come home.
At the end the two are reconciled into a single
body of death. After that the country is quiet,
rebel come down from the mountains
to discover their families have long ago left,
packed rivers and wheat fields and nailed
a note to the barbershop saying Don't follow,
after twenty years your eyes can no longer see
our skin. Then the rebels take the mountains apart,
I leave them with mouths full of dirt, hands
clawed to nubs in bereavement, and Serto
in the distance in the guise of the Guitano,
a sea famed for placid waters but hiding
the Judas teeth of rocks.

Unmediated Experience

She does this thing. Our seventeen-
year-old dog. Our mostly deaf dog.
Our mostly dead dog, statistically
speaking. When I crouch.
When I put my mouth to her ear
and shout her name. She walks away.
Walks toward the nothing of speech.
She even trots down the drive, ears up,
as if my voice is coming home.
It's like watching a child
believe in Christmas, right
before you burn the tree down.
Every time I do it, I think, this time
she'll turn to me. This time
she'll put voice to face. This time,
I'll be absolved of decay.
Which is like being a child
who believes in Christmas
as the tree burns, as the drapes catch,
as Santa lights a smoke
with his blowtorch and asks, want one?

Bob Hicok

What Would Freud Say?

Wasn't on purpose that I drilled
through my finger or the nurse
laughed. She apologized
three times and gave me a shot
of something that was a lush
apology. The person
who drove me home
said my smile was a smeared
totem that followed
his body that night as it arced
over a cliff in a dream.
He's always flying
in his dreams and lands
on cruise ships or hovers
over Atlanta with an erection.
He put me to bed and the drugs
wore off and I woke
to cannibals at my extremities.
I woke with a sense
of what nails in the palms
might do to a spirit
temporarily confined to flesh.
That too was an accident
if you believe Judas
merely wanted to be loved.
To be loved by God,
Urban the 8th
had heads cut off
that were inadequately
bowed by dogma. To be loved
by Blondie, Dagwood
gets nothing right
except the hallucinogenic
architecture of sandwiches.
He would have drilled
through a finger too
while making a case for books
on home repair and health.
Drilling through my finger's

not the dumbest thing
I've done. Second place
was approaching
a frozen gas-cap with lighter
in hand while thinking
heat melts ice and not
explosion kills asshole. First
place was passing
through a bedroom door
and removing silk that did not
belong to my wife.

Making a bookcase is not
the extent of my apology.
I've also been beaten up
in a bar for saying huevos
rancheros in a way
insulting to the patrons'
ethnicity. I've also lost
my job because lying
face down on the couch
didn't jibe with my employer's
definition of home
office. I wanted her to come
through the door on Sunday
and see the bookcase
she'd asked me to build
for a year and be impressed
that it didn't lean
or wobble even though
I've only leaned and often
wobbled. Now it's half
done but certainly
a better gift with its map
of my unfaithful blood.

Bob Hicok