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
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 brissels
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 out 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
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
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

Bob Hicok
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
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
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
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
round things, why would leaving come back
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
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

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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
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
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?
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
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  
beyond 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.
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 lusher 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