

Classic Poetry Series

Mark Wunderlich
- poems -

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Mark Wunderlich()

Mark Wunderlich (1968 –) is an American poet. He was born in Winona, Minnesota and grew up in a rural setting near the town of Fountain City, Wisconsin. He attended Concordia College's Institute for German Studies, before transferring to the University of Wisconsin, where he studied English and German literature. After moving to New York City, he attended Columbia University from which he received an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) degree.

Mark Wunderlich has published two collections of poetry, most recently *Voluntary Servitude* (Graywolf Press, 2004). He worked on his first book, *The Anchorage*, as his MFA thesis at Columbia University and finished it while living in Provincetown, Massachusetts. There he was friends with the poet Stanley Kunitz (1905–2006). A third book of poems, *The Earth Avails*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press.

Wunderlich has published individual poems, essays, reviews and interviews in the *Paris Review*, *Yale Review*, *Boston Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Fence* and *AGNI*. Wunderlich has taught at Stanford, San Francisco State University, Ohio University, Barnard College, and Columbia University. Since 2004, he has been a member of the literature faculty at Bennington College in Vermont, where he is also a member of the faculty of the Graduate Writing Seminars. He lives in New York's Hudson River Valley near the town of Catskill.

Difficult Body

A story: There was a cow in the road, struck by a semi--
half-moon of carcass and jutting legs, eyes
already milky with dust and snow, rolled upward

as if tired of this world tilted on its side.
We drove through the pink light of the police cruiser,
her broken flank blowing steam in the air.

Minutes later, a deer sprang onto the road
and we hit her, crushed her pelvis--the drama reversed,
first consequence, then action--but the doe,

not dead, pulled herself with front legs
into the ditch. My father went to her, stunned her
with a tire iron before cutting her throat, and today I think

of the body of St. Francis in the Arizona desert,
carved from wood and laid in his casket,
lovingly dressed in red and white satin

covered in petitions--medals, locks of hair,
photos of infants, his head lifted and stroked,
the grain of his brow kissed by the penitent.

O wooden saint, dry body. I will not be like you,
carapace. A chalky shell scooped of its life.
I will leave less than this behind me.

Mark Wunderlich

Prayer For A Birthday

My privilege and my proof, pressing your eternal skin to mine—
I feel your fingers touching down on the crown of my head

where I pray they remain during this life and in the next.
The intricacies of your world astound me.

You flickered through the rooms where my mother dwelt,
when I was naked and formless as a seal, sensitive

to the tides of her body. I did not come too early onto land,
did not emerge until my days were written

on the translucent pages of your enormous book.
The great lid of your eye peeled back to see I was not yet whole.

I remember today the day of my birth.
Your words washed that which clung to me from the other side,

bound to me the promised ghost.
I was dipped and sponged, cut free,

delivered as I was like a lamb lodged in his dam. Tears and pain
were her price, and I was handed over to be wiped with straw.

You built me, bone by bone, counting
the hairs that would one day thatch my crown,

building cleverness in my hands, weakness in my knees,
a squint and a taste for cake. You showed me

the dip of a man's clavicle, arrow of ankle and calf,
weaving in me a love of those bodies like my own,

yet not mine. When you turned to your next task
a shadow crossed the room stirred from the muddy banks

rimed with ice. In the spot where my skull was soft
it set down its stylus and inked a bruise—

a scrap used to blot a leaking pen. Since then
my mind has raced toward the brink, spun

and knit and torn out the same silvery threads
only to wind them up again. Still, the bargain

you made without my consent has left me
here to ponder your airy limbs striding through the sky,

the red rustle of your gown. A season ago, I looked out upon the verdure
of the small meadow below the house—boggy in parts—

the pollard willows gnarling and sipping from gnat-speckled pools,
the turkeys scratching under the sweep of green

as it prepared to die back for another year, littered with mute papery tongues.
You are easier to see when you denude your world with decay.

And so I saw you there, flashed in the shallow water,
parting the curtain of the willow fronds and warming my face with light.

My mother and father call me and sing,
sweet and tuneless, their voices worn down by your turning wheel.

You have kept us together for half a man's natural years,
these last the tenderest as their bodies

break and their minds dip deeper into dust
to bring forth the features of distance.

My day will be spent here, in the middle of things,
feeding split logs into the stove, cats coiling through rooms

as the snow ticks at the windows' double panes.
I will read a book with snow at its center,

in a forest lost inside a forest in the north, the sun
an afterthought in the darkest days of the year.

I am thankful for all that buffers me from the cold,
all that binds me to my clan,

though I see a future strange and tuneless
as I push forward into the mind's blinding field of white.

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The Bruise Of This

The night I woke to find the sheets wet from you,
like a man cast up on the beach,
I hurried you off to the shower to cool you down,

dressed you, the garments strict and awkward in my hands,
and got you into a taxi to the hospital,
the driver eyeing us from his rearview mirror--

The blue tone of the paging bell,
the green smocks, metal beds,
plastic chairs linked

in a childhood diagram of infection,
and when they wheeled you by
there was a needle in your arm,

the bruise of this
already showing itself,
and rather than watch gloved doctors handle you

in their startling white coats and loose ties,
I took a seat outside and waited,
time yawning, thick and static--

and made clear to me in the bright light of speculation
was time's obstacle in the body,
and those things I could do that might cushion it.

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White Fur

In the town of my childhood, little of note ever happened
so when the albino deer was found drowned in the slough

having been driven onto the punky ice by dogs,
the game warden brought the dead beast to the school.

I might have been seven or maybe six years old.
I suppose we were made to line up—

since that is how we were moved from place to place—
and were directed out the industrial doors

to admire the animal sprawled in the back of a truck.
We gathered around it, its whiteness a world

bled of distinction, its eyes pink and drying
in the prairie air. We were told we could touch it

and these many years since that March day, I can still
see my hand, pink and small, buried into the white fur

of the buck's neck, crackling with static
and coming to life with the electric surge

that animates all things. Later, the buck
would be mounted and placed in a glass case in the bank,

which is where the town kept things that were precious.
Behind it, the art teacher rendered the bluffs in oils

with the fussy hand of a miniaturist, and the buck
remains there today, in perpetual imitation of itself.

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