

Steven Cramer

Steven Cramer is the author of five poetry collections: *The Eye That Desires to Look Upward* (1987), *The World Book* (1992), *Dialogue for the Left and Right Hand* (1997), *Goodbye to the Orchard* (2004), and *Clangings* (2012). Recipient of fellowships from the Massachusetts Artists Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, he directs the low-residency MFA program in creative writing at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA.

The Benevolence of the Butcher

He's not history yet. He's as proud
of his work as a blood-spatter expert

breaking the code of sprayed gore.
Next door left, in the gourmet shop,

brie and baguettes; *Love-Lies-Bleeding*
in the garden center next door right.

Two witches, catty-corner, run
a crystal shop. Self is the artful

lies it tells itself, Mind is no more
than neural chuck. We know

it's only human to wait in line
for the choicest cuts, to forecast

when our number's up, to tense
what feels a lifetime for the shutter—

all that forbearance just to end up
a rat-eyed stiff. Blood-gouted

apron in a hamper, the butcher
drives home by instinct. At red

stoplights he clicks the seconds past
with his tongue, our strongest muscle.

A Photograph of the Titanic

When Travis came home from the monastery,
the ground had vanished beneath him,
and he went everywhere in bare feet

as if he were walking on a plane of light
and he spoke of his sleepless nights
and of a picture in *National Geographic*:

a pair of shoes from the *Titanic* resting
on the ocean floor. They were blue
against a blue ground and a black garden

of iron and brass. The toes pointed outward,
toward two continents, and what had been
inside them had vanished so completely

that he imagined it still there, with the sea's
undersway bellying down each night
as each day after compline he fell into

his bed, the dark invisible bulk of tons
pushing down on the shoes, nudging them
across the blue floor, tossing them aside

like a child's hands in feverish sleep
until the shoestrings scattered and dissolved.
Sometimes he would dream of the shoes

coming to rest where it is darkest,
after the long fall before we are born,
when we gather our bodies around us,

when we curl into ourselves and drift
toward the little sleep we have rehearsed
again and again as if falling we might drown.



Corrinne Clegg Hales

Corrinne Clegg Hales is the author of three full length poetry collections: *To Make It Right*, winner of the 2010 Autumn House Poetry Prize, *Separate Escapes*, winner of the Richard Snyder Prize from Ashland Poetry Press, and *Underground* from Ah-sahta Press. She has also published two chapbooks: *Out of This Place* from March Street Press and *January Fire* from Devil's Millhopper Press. She has received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and was the winner of the River Styx Poetry Prize for 2000. She teaches in the MFA Program at California State University, Fresno.

The Rich

When she finally got him to agree,
 my brother brought the chosen pigeon
 to my mother headless, dripping
 all over the floor, and dropped it
 in the sink. He was twelve,
 and didn't want tenderness
 messing up his life. His pigeons
 nested in the shed out back
 above the empty rabbit hutches,
 and hadn't been contributing
 their fair share. Animals,
 my father insisted, are for food
 or work or sale. No pets. No feeding
 animal mouths before our own.
 So our mother kept telling us
 how the rich eat squab—how
 squab is a delicacy—*squab under glass*—
 she'd say, making an elaborate dome shape
 with her hands in the air. *And squab is—*
believe it or not—just another word
for pigeon. She'd click her tongue
 and shrug whenever she said this
 as if the foolish rich had fallen
 for some easy-to-see-through scam.
 She plucked and gutted and washed
 and stuffed, and when she called us
 to the table it was sitting there hot
 and brown, no bigger than a sparrow,
 smack in the middle
 of a sea-green Melmac plate,
 under a clear glass mixing bowl,

a ragged sprig of spearmint
plopped flat on its breast
and bread crumbs tumbling out
from between its tiny crossed legs.
She was smiling. *The rich*, she said,
pay big bucks for a meal
like this, and when she lifted the glass,
all seven of us gathered around,
imagining we were them—breathing
the abundant odor of onion
and pulling slivers of meat
from the carcass with our fingers.

sounding under their hooves,
can smell the sharp smoke of dust in the air.
Now he can hear their dark voices,
the old voices of horses,
and the talk that is leather's.
And now they are climbing the hill,
that holy hill that is Geronimo's,
but he is not afraid.
His mirror is warning the others,
and we are the others.

Old Soldiers' Home

On benches in front of the Old Soldiers' Home,
the old soldiers unwrap the pale brown packages
of their hands, folding the fingers back
and looking inside, then closing them up again
and gazing off across the grounds,
safe with the secret.

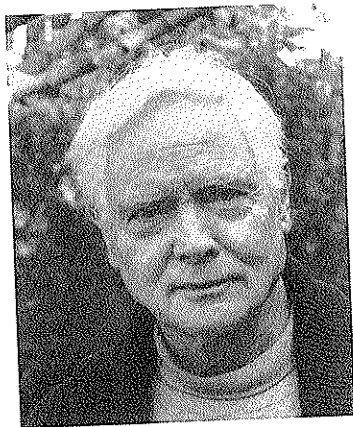
Laundry

A pink house trailer,
scuffed and rusted, sunken
in weeds. On the line,

five pale blue workshirts
up to their elbows
in raspberry canes—

a good, clean crew
of pickers, out early,
sleeves wet with dew,

and near them, a pair
of bright yellow panties
urging them on.



W.S. Merwin

United States Poet Laureate W.S. Merwin was born in New York City in 1927. From 1949 to 1951 he worked as a tutor in France, Mallorca, and Portugal; for several years afterward he made the greater part of his living by translating from French, Spanish, Latin, and Portuguese. Merwin has authored dozens of books of poetry and prose. His many awards include the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for *The Shadow Of Sirius* and the National Book Award in Poetry for *Migration: New and Selected Poems*. W.S. Merwin has lived in Hawaii since 1976.

No

Out at the end of the street in the cemetery
the tombstones stared across the wheeling shadows
of tombstones while the names and dates wept on
in full daylight and behind them were the hill
sheared off two rusted tracks under a black
iron gate led up out of pure darkness
and the unbroken sound of pure darkness
that went on all the time under everything
not breathing beneath the sounds of breathing
but no they said it was not the entrance
to the underworld or anything like that
in fact all the houses along the street
had been paid for by what had come from there
in the days of the negatives of the pictures

To Paula in Late Spring

Let me imagine that we will come again
when we want to and it will be spring
we will be no older than we ever were
the worn griefs will have eased like the early cloud
through which the morning slowly comes to itself
and the ancient defenses against the dead
will be done with and left to the dead at last
the light will be as it is now in the garden
that we have made here these years together
of our long evenings and astonishment

Blueberries After Dark

So this is the way the night tastes
one at a time
not early or late

my mother told me
that I was not afraid of the dark
and when I looked it was true

how did she know
so long ago

with her father dead
almost before she could remember
and her mother following him
not long after
and then her grandmother
who had brought her up
and a little later
her only brother
and then her firstborn
gone as soon
as he was born
she knew

The Song of the Trolleys

It was one of the carols
of summer and I knew that
even when all the leaves
were falling through it as it passed
and when frost crusted the tracks
as soon as they had stopped ringing
summer stayed on in that song
going again the whole way
out of sight to the river
under the hill and hissing
when it had to stop
then humming to itself
while it waited until
it could start again
out of an echo warning
once more with a clang of its bell
I could hear it coming
from far summers that I
had never known
long before I could see it
swinging its head

It must go something like this:

First, one cell flares in the brain. Then
the two cells next to that. Then more and more.

Until something far off begins to flicker.
Manhood, the last fire lit before the blackening woods.

The weak one separated from the pack.

The painted bird. The bird, painted.

Latin

Words slip into a language the way
white-green vines slide between slats in a fence.

A couple opens the door to a restaurant,
sees the orange and black colors everywhere

and the waitress grins, "Yeah,
a little Halloween overkill, huh."

Overkill, a noun for all of us
fidgeting under the nuclear umbrella—

but for that instant, it just meant too many
paper skeletons, too many hobgobbed balloons.

I know a woman who is tall with dark hair
who makes me think of honeysuckle

whenever she opens her legs. Not just the flower
but dew-soaked music itself *honeysuckle* like a flavor.

And I remember the first time years back
when LaTina told me what it was we had

between our eight-year-old front teeth
that April afternoon, our hands wet

with rain from the vines. "Honey sickle," she said,
while the white flower bloomed from the side of her mouth,

and I had a new sweetness on my tongue and a word
I'd never heard before. How was it decided in the beginning?

This word for *this* particular thing,
a sound attached to a shape or a feeling forever.

All summer long the cicadas don't know
what we call them.

They sneak from the ground every year after dark,
break out of their shells right into the language,

and it holds them like a net made of nothing
but the need to make strange things familiar.

All summer long they rattle trees like maracas
until they become part of our weather—

quiet in rain, crazy in hard sun,
so we say *those cicadas sure make enough noise, huh.*

And the noise of that sentence heard ten-thousand times
becomes a name for *us* the cicadas keep trying to say.

I think about dying sometimes,
not the sudden death in the movies—

the red hole in the shirt, the eyes
open like magazines left on a waiting room table—

not that, but withering slowly like a language,
barely holding on until everything

I ever did or said is just gone, absorbed
into something I would never have imagined—

like Latin. Not lost completely, but moved away
from that bright, small place

between seeing and naming,
between the slow roll of ocean

and the quick intake of air
that would fill the word *wave*.

She is a stamp in it, the tapping of boots
 At the porch steps, another cover. Not spring
 Or summer. Just her advancing, multiplying—
 —falling through branches—there's a flurry of her.

Blessing Blue Crabs

Smiling white teeth, television
 host pleased with her face, her
 there-you-have-it filling the screen.
 One last shot of the elegant restaurant
 poised a few miles across town, its proud-
 bellied chef & owner, spit-polished silver,
 glasses clear enough to ring.
 Goodbye to the women who blessed
 the blue crabs with hymns, who undressed
 the trapped bodies from blue-tinted shells,
 lifted the meat from its legs, sealed
 flesh for markets, who weren't invited to
 sit at the linen-clothed tables of the fine
 restaurant featured on the cooking program,
 a "must-stop" for indulgent diners
 passing through the Low country,
 who, still in uniform, sang
 stridently in the cannery kitchen,
 who spoke barely above whispers to cameras
 stationed outdoors for interviews, against
 the backdrop of foamy sea, whimsical sailboats,
 who posed at picnic benches propped for the occasion,
 supplied with paper napkins, who sampled
 the chef's famous crab cakes, a cup
 of water to wash them down.
Yes, they are delicious. What else
 could they answer without accusation
 of ungratefulness, their dark fingers
 shaking away the delicate crumbs?

Discovering Girdles

I don't know what to do with this contraption
 of polyester & cotton, troublesome lace. Black,
 white, another woman's nude—whatever the color—
 its trick is to hide flesh, to constrict the skin
 like a bit of truth, a secret buried in the garden
 of women's undergarments. A prepubescent girl
 signals her mother to quiet, to lower what must be

her first bra, & yes, it's fine & can she go now?
 My mother's concerns for me were body odor &
 virginity—how to smell like a flower without being plucked.
 Robust women filled her church, their stomachs
 suffusing the linen of long dresses doused with perfume.
 I do not know how to behave, publicly
 contemplating these hip huggers that wouldn't matter
 to those women, reaching beyond the fitting rooms of Earth.

February

First waking to the gray
 of linsey-woolsey cloth
 the vivid spotted dogs
 the red-fox cattle and
 the meeker-colored horses
 flattened in snow fog

first waking into gray
 flecked with common cock-
 crow unfolding the same
 chilblain-bruised feet
 the old shoulder ache
 Mama every day

remembering how you won
 the death you wished for
 the death you sidled up to
 remembering how

like a child in late afternoon
 drained from the jubilant sledding
 you were content to coast
 the run-out to a stop

booted and capped in the barn
 joy enters where I haul
 a hay bale by its binding string
 and with my free hand pull
 your easy death along.

*On Being Asked to Write a Poem
 in Memory of Anne Sexton*

The elk discards his antlers every spring.
 They rebud, they grow, they are growing

an inch a day to form a rococo rack
 with a five-foot spread even as we speak:

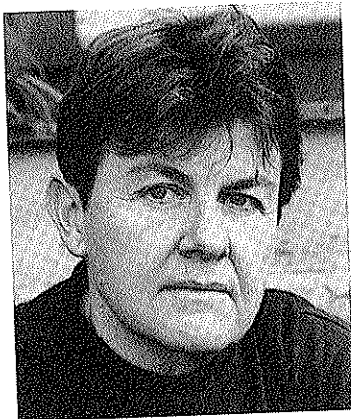
cartilage at first, covered with velvet;
 bendable, tender gristle, yet

destined to ossify, the velvet sloughed off,
 hanging in tatters from alders and scrub growth.

No matter how hardened it seems there was pain.
 Blood on the snow from rubbing, rubbing, rubbing.

What a heavy candelabrum to be borne
 forth, each year more elaborately turned:

the special issues, the prizes in her name.
 Above the mantel the late elk's antlers gleam.



Kay Ryan

Kay Ryan became the U.S. Poet Laureate in 2008. Her most recent books are *The Best of It, New and Selected Poems* (2010), *The Niagara River* (2005), *Say Uncle* (2000), and *Elephant Rocks* (1996). Her awards include the 2004 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize from The Poetry Foundation, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an Ingram Merrill Award, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Ryan's work has been selected four times for *The Best American Poetry*. Her poems and essays have appeared in many journals and anthologies, have been used in the funny papers ("Boondocks"), and one was permanently installed at New York's Central Park Zoo. She lives in Marin County, California.

Blandeur

If it please God,
let less happen.
Even out Earth's
rondure, flatten
Eiger, blanden
the Grand Canyon.
Make valleys
slightly higher,
widen fissures
to arable land,
remand your
terrible glaciers
and silence
their calving,
halving or doubling
all geographical features
toward the mean.
Unlean against our hearts.
Withdraw your grandeur
from these parts.

The Fabric of Life

It is very stretchy.
We know that, even if
many details remain
sketchy. It is complexly
woven. That much too
has pretty well been
proven. We are loath

to continue our lessons,
which consist of slaps
as sharp and dispersed
as bee stings from
a smashed nest,
when any strand snaps—
hurts working far past
the locus of rupture,
attacking threads
far beyond anything
we would have said
connects.

The Best of It

However carved up
or pared down we get,
we keep on making
the best of it as though
it doesn't matter that
our acre's down to
a square foot. As
though our garden
could be one bean
and we'd rejoice if
it flourishes, as
though one bean
could nourish us.

Grazing Horses

Sometimes the
green pasture
of the mind
tilts abruptly.
The grazing horses
struggle crazily
for purchase
on the frictionless
nearly vertical
surface. Their
furniture-fine
legs buckle
on the incline,
unhorsed by slant
they weren't
designed to climb
and can't.

Then the geese flew over,
and he stopped talking. Everyone stopped talking,
because of the geese."

The sound of their wings!
Oars rowing, laborious, wood against wood: it was
a continuing thought, no, it was a labor,
how to accept your lover's love. Who could do it alone?
Under our radiant sleep they were bearing us all night long.

Snow Landscape, in a Glass Globe

in memory of Elizabeth Bishop

A thumb's-length landscape: Snow, on a hill
in China. I turn the glass ball over in my hand,
and watch the snow
blow around the Chinese woman,
calm at her work,
carrying her heavy yoke
uphill, towards the distant house.
Looking out through the thick glass ball
she would see the lines of my hand,
unearthly winter trees, unmoving, behind the snow...

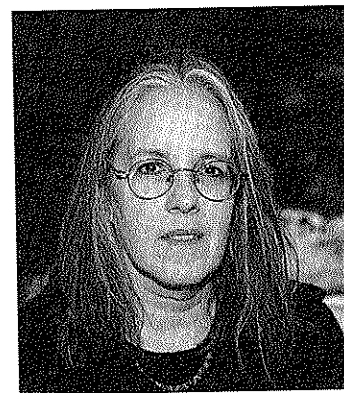
No more elders.
The Boston snow grays and softens
the streets where you were...
Trees older than you, alive.

The snow is over and the sky is light.
Pale, pale blue distance...
Is there an east? A west? A river?
There, can we live right?

I look back in through the glass. You,
in China, I can talk to you.
The snow has settled; but it's cold
there, where you are.

What are you carrying?
For the sake of what? through such hard wind
and light.

—And you look out to me,
and you say, "Only the same as everyone; your breath,
your words, move with mine,
under and over this glass; we who were born
and lived on the living earth."



Judith Vollmer

Judith Vollmer is the author of three full-length collections of poetry—*Reactor* and *Level Green* (University of Wisconsin Press), and *The Door Open to the Fire* (Cleveland State University Press)—and the limited edition collection *Black Butterfly*, awarded the Center for Book Arts Prize. She is the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and residency fellowships from Yaddo and the American Academy in Rome. Vollmer co-edits the poetry journal *5 AM*.

Early Snow

It was coming down hard so the teacher motioned the flute
then the piano quiet and the children sang

a cappella, teacher's voice was gone, they screamed and worked
their lungs & shoulders like gulls, they swooped and cranked

it up, it was wonderful being all alone,
they could hear pauses, one by two by one, then she

ran to the edge of the world, opened it and thrust the dark
sleeve of her dress out & down into the whirlpools

and when a flake landed crisp & complete on the black
wool she ran to every desk then back for more until

she showed every voice a new jewel, an alien, autotelic
shape. What would you like to be, or who, or would you

go with the wind sweeping the parking lot & small bank of trees.

Spill

Before, I spoke of clear things,
shadows on white tile, men in paper suits
mopping the radiated water with Kotex pads
trucked in through the security dock, 1960. Now
I see blurry grasses swaying in dusk, the starless