



COME WHAT MAY



Victoria Rathbun



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Editor's note: these poems span the years 1975 through 1980 and are but mere representations of the poet's incredible talent.

Neo-Mimeo Editions

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Victoria Rathbun (1951-2009)

My very first conversation with Victoria Rathbun was about French cinema. This was in The Pit, a student cafeteria at Sonoma State University, early 70s. And we discovered that we both spoke and read French, and liked many of the same French poets. At that time, I was occupied with translating a variety of early 20th Century French poets. I was particularly taken by the precision of Jean Follain, the French magistrate and poet. I still have the pages of rough translations with Victoria's comments, suggestions, and corrections in the margins in her distinctive Lloyd Reynolds italic hand. She had a great sense of the poem in French and a terrific ear for how it should sound in translation. Eventually I settled on the more demotic poetry of Philippe Soupault and Victoria's help was invaluable in picking out slang expressions. Most of our communication was through the mail, the shuttling of various versions of translations back and forth as well as a smattering of her original work. She lived in the Bay Area after her stint at SSU, and I was planted in the boondocks working on my credentials as a recluse.. Victoria's poetry was a lot like her, smart as a whip and beautifully arranged. She was elegant, obviously, with an almost manic sophistication. Yet with all her style and wit, her poems were not widely available except in obscure mimeo magazines and an anthology of baseball poems, *Baseball Diamonds* (1980)—a rabid Giants fan, she'd adopted the endearing moniker of "pop fly".

--Pat Nolan May 30, 2026

LIPSTICK

Tonight there is no unison downtown
the rude boys & the rude girls
smalltime criminals planning cool capers
boys everywhere sitting at the counter
all shook up girls everywhere high heels
& raw deals perfect lipstick that betrays
A desire not to kiss forever or be kissed
But rather just to pucker up forever
Buttercup amid the grease & grief
As love sizzles on the grill, love
Like wasted money, love like wet matches
— it's temptation that orders drinks
& picks up the tab but it's love that
makes you take a pill read a book hit the sack
catch a flick cut your hair take a hike
catch a plane hold a hand slash a wrist desire
me
desire you desire everything that could have
been soft but refuses.

IT MIGHT AS WELL BE SPRING
(for Tom Clark)

Grandma dyed eggs cause it's Easter
Mister Smoke stood by his Oldsmobile
& lit a cigarette
Mom left
ten bucks
in a plastic pantyhose egg
painted with flowers
Dad got a raspberry red scarf
at the Emporium, Susan caught
a cold. Resurrection's not for me.
If Mister Smoke is risen,
then we're all risen
but I'd like to be anything
at rest
Not exactly
that railroad car
left on the siding
the comatose wino
benched under a V of newspaper
More like Zeno says, the arrow
is at rest
when it is flying
Somebody's asleep
at the center of the spinning planet,
and it sure isn't me.
But neither do I want to be
like dead movie stars wearing out sleep
tougher than a motel mattress.
So I guess I'll just take a nap
Dream something sweet
a Scotch a soft rain & a cocktail piano
like Zeno says
They can't take that away from me

GOT A LIGHT

It's comforting to know they still
hang out by their cars at the high school
smoking cigarettes while the lawn grows more
neatly
than the neighbors' harmonic fairway sprinkler

Evening, have a dinner at the steak house, take
in
a movie, maybe wind up at Stickney's
for a piece of pie, remind the kids about
homework

Why exactly this is comforting
eludes me. I smoked a million cigarettes
without finding the one I was
looking for. Personally, when I graduate
I'd like to be
some kind of
vacant lot. No rusty cars with cancer
No organic community cornfield

Just gnats, lumpy dandelions
& and occasional nighttime rumble
Summer leaguers shagging flies
in the weeds
the hot hungry roll & twist on a
grassstained overcoat behind the backstop
& and her first coughing cigarette after.

SPRING FEVER

It's light when you wake up.
Angels have steamed up the windows again.
Baseball fever has hit the streets. Passion
breathes down the neck of fashion.
It's a dead heat in the horizon race.
Perfecting a yoga that sucks in love like oxygen
I hyperventilate
& feel the great moments
Effervescing off into cuteness.
Out in the plaza
springtime has sent its madman
to play reveille
for the readers of the Wall Street Journal.
Revelation stalks us
down newly casual streets.
I'm terrified of toppling
headfirst into joy like a hitman's victim
getting a cement overcoat.
Bees with beautiful knees
jitterbug in the palm trees.
Love's like gilt-edged stocks:
Wonderfully negotiable.
I address the impish & eternal spirit
on the subject of quick money
in other words
Romance is such an efficient currency
that the velocity of its exchange
is making economic history!
Elegant shoes step out of our way
as we hustle down the street
dodging small-time miracles like fat raindrops.
But already I can hear
a morning lawnmower as it
cuts hothouse visions down to size.

Obsession on the cranial AM,
the bratty minibike of reality
stripping down the gears of my heart. . .
The universe accuses
me of not having made my crummy dreams come true
& sentences me
to stand here
with my sense of holiness blinking on & off
like a lighthouse on some rocky coast—
Just kidding, it's only the sign at the all-
night market
& my job is to stand here
helping the early-rising vampires
nail cans of Coca-Cola into the heart of each
poem
so we can start getting some sleep nights.

MONTE RIO VERDE

I came back to the city feeling
Deadpan Not enamored of cigarette
butts chopping wood or hitchhiking but
tired of the artificial light & night
streets shiny with wet

that used to make me feel immortal
as neo flashing on & off all night
as immortal as a Hopper
as American as a fast-food chain
as tough to surprise as the cop on the beat

This time it make me think of an early
morning backyard with stumps & lettuce
let go too far I noticed
gone bitter as the chill that struck me
when I stepped outside for some fresh air

SET THE ALARM

"Oh future—already in ruins before we meet"

--Andrei Codrescu

Dogs bark out in the suburbs
The moon is blonde
The world has been sweetened
& I don't like sugar

Not older but more insistent we know
the turf better the spirit of adulthood
is urbanely practical, yet winning -
like cold beer at
quittin' time or rather
a Dewar's Profile
"Liza introduced us to white rum & tonic"

& right now I'd like to punch
it, my heart that is, right
in the nose! For getting between me
& what I love!
For having a beehive hairdo so I can't see the
screen!



... I MUSTA BEEN NUTS
to think I could make it here without being
Spotted — even my Billy Martin drag didn't help
— so much for anonymity! From here on in it's got
to be SHEER NERVE — yes, nerves —
I've got a lot of those! Meanwhile, I can
creme-rinse them here 'at the NEW ENGLAND
HOME for the SPOILED ROTTEN — halfway
between the Ritz & the Rat. Radical

SHAMELESS LYRIC

This is a Type-A poem & I'm
an out-of-work assassin
who'd give anything for a
short-term, high-risk assignment.
Puffs of smoke hang over
The Financial District like
Unreadable smoke signals
Cue cards get shuffled
in the dark
Frosty red & blue neon
beats like my you-know-what
all through the night.
Gee, I guess I'm in love
with a world that's always
on the point of meaning something,
about to spring into significance
like a story I can't quite
remember reading in high school.
An Afghan pees on a palm tree
because this is California, & I
have to settle for that, not truth
but regionalism, while the moon
bleeds to death through a
puncture wound in the darkness & I
wonder if you think of me sometimes.

ARTLESS

Tea & toast
on the fault line are
as doubly welcome
as a lightweight topcoat
on a changeable day.
Reaching for the sugar
I pop open
the Valium instead
reflecting
Now that voodoo
is illegal for welfare workers in Indiana
& Roger Metzger's lopped-off fingers
have ended his career as shortstop
This is not
such a serious mistake.
Despite the preponderance of streetbound geeks
the shameless, witless, & heartless
Wild parrots still screech sweetly above
in the palms along Delores
& anemia is only for those
who try to read sci-fi
by TV light.
Please, I do not want to be a calico princess
a spiky punkette
or a three-piece suit.
Since I cannot be a major league ballplayer
Allow me to settle like haze over the stadium
pointless, starless, & hitless
Vast, sunlit, & serious.

OFF-SEASON

Palm trees make a brave arch
for the ragged marching band caged
in the playing field next door.
The dubiously hopeful melody of martial arts
drifts into the room on the breeze that
ruffles polyester curtains & reminds me of
every bleak & timeless shaft of afternoon
sunlight I've ever been nailed by.
Dead oak leaves used to litter the empty
garage of my imagination, distant airplanes
droned overhead on their way to the twilight

zone:

there phones rang, sparks jumped back & forth
from live wires of impulse, rock & roll
filled the streets where motorcycles roared
under madly intellectual stars.
Where I was, the kitchen clock
had stuck permanently at three pm
& the faint pop-pop
from the tennis courts harmonized with a
neighbor's chainsaw in an endless movie
soundtrack of defeat. To say, it seemed
like a choice between grace or grease
is just as simpleminded as I had to be
to follow the transistor radio out of
suburban valleys into the dismal worship
of lamp-socket voltage as its
lonely buzz bad-mouthed the safe life.
But now silent clouds glide by
swollen with vague enormity, like a
premonition of bad news. It's the
off-season. I give up on miracles

and start trying to imitate happiness
with the crude ingenuity of Robinson Crusoe
facing up to another long hot Christmas in the
tropics.

HITLESS

Not allowed to drown in blue perfume
Splashed instead
by a cold & interested breeze
outlining a diamond-bound feline
in silk

Passion stalls out
between red lights

The thinness of nylons over spring's slender
ankle makes you want to take a good grip on it
& slug one over the fence

In this town the wind
never stops blowing, never releases you or me
or the sports page from its distant grip, never
lets the stars hover daintily like an
acupuncturist's needle looking for
the essential hit.

The Louisville Slugger of million-dollar legs
couldn't paste one into the upper deck
on a night like this.

In my apartment
it's quiet except for steam heat
that hisses & sputters
without real anger.

Cologne's in the refrigerator
as if it were already summer.
Seabreeze rattles the windows.

Across town
a glow from the ballpark
against the fog.

EYES TOO CLOSE TOGETHER



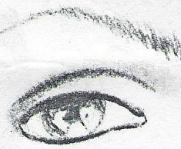
DELINQUENT LEPTONS



EYES TOO FAR APART

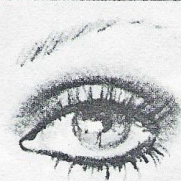
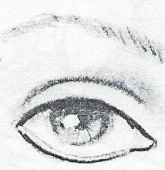


DROOPY EYES



Victoria Ratham

Gloria Frym



BULGING EYES

ALMOND EYES

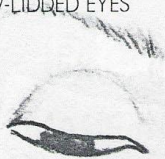


reading poetry Dec. 10
at 8pm
Cortland Corners



DEEP-SET EYES

NARROW-LIDDED EYES



301 Cortland
(between Mission & Bayshore)
SF / Bernal Heights

WRITIN' IT OUT IN SF

Cold Days in China. We wear the people's shoes.
Walk the people's walk. Not afraid to ask
the tough questions, like why me & how much.
Global poster war calls for death to disco.
I'm looking at God like Teng Hsiao-P'ing looks
at a Harlem Globetrotter
who's at least twice his size.

North America's hung over on the eclipse
accessorized to death

"I realize I'm not a great ballplayer
but I know I can help this club"—Marc Hill
I want to hear the baseball bat of hope
go boom. The wind cuts through your
jacket, the moon's made of jook,
the sports page seems to say, let's get literal
tonight.

Gringo sky gives way to a grim downpour. Streets
hiss

let's be cool tonight, let's be cruel tonight.
I'm okay, you're okay, disco sucks,
but life is on the mend. I can see it all now,
pagodas & golden arches, rivers of chili oil—
this lineup of nerve-wracking spices is too
tough

a reminder that life goes on in a million
locales

I know nothing of. There's exotic allure
among the vegetables & terse wisdom
in the eyes of fish thrashing at the Canton
Market.

Let's turn our back on what we love tonight,
it says let's diversify tonight. Fish flop
under the knife of my imagination. Hardheaded
men

carve up the Chinese markets.
I love you China because you wear the
uniform of the Future
you let me be anonymous
& you never say you're sorry.
Inscrutable as Willy McCovey you remind me
that once we start murdering our
idols we wind up having to kill everybody—
Guess I'll be here for a while,
up against the Great Wall,
caught between the fork
of love and the knife of shame,
putting out brush fires at first
base & learning to speak English. I play for the
Brain Damage Team. We were born in the fifties.
We'd kill for thrills. And we're not shy.

COME WHAT MAY

At moments
we know an inexplicable serenity
The sea an unmade bed
The light like spilled champagne
Ivy grows
in an office abandoned
for the weekend
All book-bindings are gilded
All leather smells of knowledge & work
We know nothing of time
as we sip our air
like fish philosophizing about water
like light falling come what may

Victoria Madison Rathbun passed away at her home in San Francisco on May 30, 2009. She was a California native, born in Portola Valley. She attended Reed College and the University of Oregon before graduating in 1974 from Sonoma State University with a bachelor's degree in European studies. She earned a second bachelor's degree in French from San Francisco State University in 1987, then obtained a master's degree in French from Middlebury College in 1989, studying in Paris and Vermont. In the remarks to the poetry anthology *Up Late, American Poetry Since 1970* (1987), editor Andrei Codrescu placed her among a group of poets designated as the "California School" which included himself, Steve Carey, Keith Abbott, Pat Nolan, Gloria Frym, Steven Lavoie, Gail King, Michael-Sean Lazarchuk, and Jeffery Miller.