

SLEIGHT WORK



W. Nick Hill

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BELLE LETTERS

W. NICK HILL



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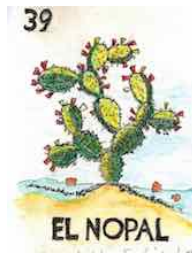
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CREDITS

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A Prickly Book
Artwork by BLA

For Barbara,
who brings the light

“An ancient Buddha said: A painted rice cake does not satisfy hunger.

Dogen comments: There are few who have ever seen this ‘painting of a rice cake’ and none of them has thoroughly understood it. The paints for painting rice cakes are the same as those used for painting mountains and waters.

If you say the painting is not real, then the material, phenomenal world is not real . . .

Unsurpassed enlightenment is a painting. The entire phenomenal universe and the empty sky are nothing but a painting. Since this is so, there is no remedy for satisfying hunger other than a painted rice cake. Without painted hunger you never become a true person.”

Here, in the midst of this dreamed sleight-of-hand, what could ever / tangle me in the world’s tether of dust?

T’ao Ch’ien

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NOTICE

I live in a desert at the mouth of a mine.

The rocks and geodes I leave out on the sand.

If something fits your hand

Go ahead with it.

Footnote of the Moment

The package arrives and we open it.

Inside the tissue wrapping sits a beetle
Frozen in amber as it then ambled
Along a path from there to here,

Its entire essence and being
Caught in a viscous moment
Of encounter with the unknown,

Pine resin pooled at the charred base
Of the forest that graced hills
Our ancestors revered,

People unrecognized in collective memory,
That compendium of six questions
To know who you are, or

How to know you've arrived
When you're only following the way
Into this present consciousness?

Then you must have always arrived
In your tissue bed caught in the matter
Of everything you can learn to consider sacred,

A beetle on a doorstep.

The Practyce

for Bill Mawhinney

I try to grab fragmunts
From the air, flutterbyes
With desygns like messoges.

Beautiful enough, black and tan
Whurls with red dotts
To dispel any anxius
Probeing into meaning.

They mean only to fulfil
A life cycle of their kind,
Bits of reality that colores
Mornings and darkens midnights.

The symbols wherl in air
Like fragmints of a Magna Carta
Draun up between cave duellers
And groto keepurs, and all their prole

Dance May poles and grab at air
Because they lookd all over
And found comely smooth stoens
To pile in heaps at the centre
Of a pathe lined with specimins

That hummed if you put your ear
To them who pleased the inner
Mekanism, prompted them
To circles upon circles,
Till a pilgrum came dizzy at center,
Had to lean against the central cairn,

Find balance again to walk out
Slowly enough to make up
Fragments of raw mining.

Preamble to My Plea

Invention stands at the other end
Of a line drawn straight from if,
Contrary to the fact of loam.

Recognize a faint pressure
The myrtle exerts on the flowering shrub
Pushing the branches out of their twig structures,
So a worker intervenes to fashion wood and leaf,
Sculpting in the soft between.

It is not enough to recognize this.
Cultivate the patience
To marvel at varmints,

The other side of pleasure
A garden can share with
The pagans who destroy it.

I feel like Sisyphus with a wad
Of words labored over till they tip up
Onto the ledge from where
They unravel to the bottom
The banner that reads A G A I N.

The one who says I that is not me
Appreciates the meaning of small gifts
Like spitballs on the screen of consciousness.

They serve as a framework,
The viewing pavilion,
The *mapa mundi* of if.

Be entranced by possibilities
A telescope reveals of the girth
Of black holes that lie about our feet.

A Popularizer's Confession

I stand and listen to the water stream
& drip through the coffee filter
for nothing more than the dark
bitter beginning of days.

I try to boil them down,
all the papers laid out before me
when I'm actually not just copying
one phrase after another
but inventing miniatures

the impossible way the *Clematis*
jackmanii weaves its tendrils
in with Madame Alfred C.
in summer because in winter
the thin arms barely reveal
themselves against the cedar
trellis weathered almost gray,
like henna on the hand of an old friend
standing close to the brook
that drips into the cup of memory

of course it overflows
& carries away the bridge on the Clearwater.
No morning glories at the Silver Spoon Café
to go with the usual this morning.

As simple as sipping
the dark hot complexity
from the cup of nebulae.

Take the Subjunctive

It's lying in the syntax, a mare of dusty color,
After a subordination, as one dangles, depends
On the first, though it could come last,
Yet it carries the payload and the dependent clause
Will only whip that truth into shape,
Whatever it may be.

It is subtle, more for diplomacy
As in fact whole utterances
Could hang from an unspoken
Declaration as in certain theater
Or protestations to the contrary,
When found with your leggings down
Around the turnstile of certainty.

Its especially shy when time's a factor,
When it's floating about
In future plans all in your own head
And you say with conviction "I will arrive"
As opposed to the time firmly established
By chronometers and such, manifested
In the full stop "Veni vidi vici."

Which frequently over the years
Has been known after Caesar,
In our times, Hitler, but he was Wotan,
Whereas the unpronounceable
Dresses like Loki.

That's "low key," as in the phrase:
If we were to choose a pilot to take
The ship down into Davy's locker,
Would he be a golden-haired boy?

Less than half said Yes, which does
Leave a doubt dangling
About the utterance of meaning.

Here

for you

I want to bask in the glow
of my accomplishments
which have been many
if we include my failures,
like the time before a group
of eager Catholics
I couldn't remember the names
of the characters in my own story.

How the protagonist lost his way
in the train station, saw the stars above,
took a bus in the other direction,
found work logging Paul's bunions,
came to know a burly girl with green eyes,
and now lives just down the street
from where he could have been
in the first place.

So I've set up here in this shop
with all my verbs in pint jars
screwed to the wall
along with washers,
bolts, nuts, and sink.

Syntax leans against the pegboard
where the prepositions hang
right next to adjectives like shimmery.

I have power words and spray washers,
a bench with a vise clamped on it
for especially rambunctious dangling
participles.

Every morning religiously I take up
my place here hovering over a page
with my trusty mechanical pencil
poised to pierce the carapace
and thus claim for my story
the phenomenon just passed,
the scintillating, the nonpareil
sage gumdrop for my best friend.
Enjoy!

Language on the Mind

1.

Monoglot, sounds like a dread disease.

What to do with the ghosts, for instance,

They go roaming all over the place,

Unquiet, they call out for justice

In the weary voices of their upbringing.

All white they are, as though wearing sheets
Over pointy heads, they moan
Intoxicated with their own bile,
Makes a thin green edge on the bottom hem
Of their sheets that can blow up
All around them leaving
Views of their inner mechanism,

Garbage thrown down a ravine
On the border they patrol for
They've been told that ghosts
Would want to get over there.

Badges on their habits,
Little insignias of where they first
Killed beside the road some brown eyed
Next to a cholla that swallows the
Blood that won't stop flowing,

A memory banished back then
To the present and it haunts,
Puffs out the sheets in blusters.

It does have to be better somewhere
Else because there's no sitting in one place,
As if hot coals were under where their

Feet would be except they've got none--
A way to tell them apart from the quiet
Dead, the stones that from hunger
Dropped down.

2.

Other badges, scarlet letters
Say abortion for they know who
Done the raping and it's good stock,

So let's call it dominion to have those
Babies come into the world
Knowing their place.

A couple of them standing at a corner
When some ghosts appear odors
All around them like CAFOs,

These were homeless ghosts that robbed
Them even though they'd been
Told they had nothing.

"Oh, yeah," the head-sheeted one said
"Look at this" and he reached in,
Pulled out the twisted root of longing,

Threw it to the ground and they all
Watched as it scurried
Away, aghast by any other name.

As they were at a crossroads,
The guitar player sitting on a rock
Pointed North, where they trudged,

Glad to be told what to do
And where to go.

A Manual for Sleights of Hand

My preference has been technical magic.
Behind the curtain stuff, under the table,
Behind the back, in smoky rooms,
The switch, the double back, the snatch.

How to know what someone is thinking
Was my online business for a time.
I took the data from shopping surveys,
Crunched it in the special algorithm machine,
And told the spender to put it on all devices,
Collected the bit coin.

One still must honor tradition, regardless.
Mace and chain, pre-Merlin, gave way to an
Organic management of spells by hooded adepts.
The whole detour in the 18-19th with monsters
Clomping around, vampires, and the culmination
In giant apes able to devolve into Super Heroes
Like the wimp next door who can do a bit
Of the fly on the wall. My training
Led me to work elections.

I could remotely make a legislature
Into a gang of thieves, zealots, and bigots
By manipulating the drinking water
So Constituents became pawns in my field
Of expertise and they voted their pocket
Books just the way I told them to.

My latest effort made it clear to me, at least,
That it was time to withdraw, to disappear,
Retire to South America.
My own magic was going to make me

Into a dove from a hawk; I mean
The blown-haired menace
That moves easily from the links
To oval rooms, that's just bad magic.

Subtitled in a Foreign Tongue

I do not have anything more to add
And yet there it is belying already
A couple lines into it.

An ancient Chinese tells of a similar plight
From what I gathered in translation.

There is no hope
But spelling out the present
Over and over again
Till you die and then they quote you,

Him, probably not me.
Couldn't have been in that then,
Only the need is like.

Push past that sense there's no more
And you might come away limping.

But the wish of course
To break through
To the sweet core
Or break out
Into a jungle adventure

Just to get to another level
Where what you have to say
So intones the ecstatic fiber
Of the stellar fabric
That you star in place.

You, probably not me.
I'm just a pencil pusher,

The guy with the tick
In his wrist, can't shake it
Even though I wasn't born
With it, just made it up
When I was a clown.

I couldn't get the nose off,
And the big brown-toed
Floppy shoes began to fit my gait
In that wobbly neighborhood
Where I could sit on a bench
And watch passersby toss
Coins in my horn.

Survivalist Sonnet I

The big one's over, come and gone
there's nothing left, we're bereft,
no propane tanks, no highway cones,
no heritage remains herewith

to make with cheer these little songs,
all we can to cobble sonnets
with what we have at hand, some tongs,
like total destruction after sunset,

yet they help dispel the dreads
when we sing them from the crumbled porch
in unison, all us neighbors here on level ground.

Let's start from scratch, only threads
to follow with flickering torches,
walk forward, let our hopes abound.

Manualography

1.

The *Manual* sometimes sits for days
Even weeks at a time not ticking.

It could be said to be loyal,
Stands quiet on shelves,
Only part of it on display,

Holds up others of its kind,
Next to photos of children,
Few pictures of its own.

Once we all got into an argument
About sleeping in or on a red recliner

So a person should be able to get into
The covers of the *Manual* whose colors'

Indeterminate because it often has
A jacket on, especially when its new.

I've heard it said that someone
Really got out of a tiny boat floundering

In huge waves in the New World,
But not the *Manual*, always flat open,

Well, not always because that seems forever
And modern ones don't seem to last that long.

2.
This *Manual* could fit in a Kindle
And maybe that's how it should go into space.

However, if you've got your feet on the ground
You'll want this *Manual* in your hands.

There's no guarantees but it'll be there for you
When it's understood you need to get something

Out of it.

The *Manual* repeats some things over and over
Like reciting the love anthem of rainbows.

And doesn't even mention how the jelly
Oozes out of politicians with their fingers

In the air before a podium full of the excrement
Of large talking mammals.

The *Manual* won't do anything it's told.
It's so full of itself but you can dive into it

Anytime of day or night and come up
With a mouthful of whatsmores and neverminds.

And even though I can't give it anything
Except open and shut, it never tires.

It tells me something every time I look into it.
I love the *Manual* and I think it loves me.

3.

The *Manual* has a dark side.
Things it covers up without intention.
Has to do with relativity where its bulk lies
Or stands to cast a darkness
Because there is only one source
In this part of totality.

It's even hard to say.
Sometimes you have to put it down,
Out of sight, clear the air,
Start again.

Even the dark side of the *Manual*
Has teachings like X-rays
Of a dandelion which seems
To be a Chinese beauty beside
The sparkling stream in the "Odes."

This is hard to follow
Like a mallard paddling backwards
In the reedy little pond in the lee
Of St. Herman's gold spire dome

Or the relatively homeless dude
Smoking a cigarette in the park
Close to the plastic loo
Where his paramour's
Making origami
With the toilet paper
Provided by the city.

The otters come up on the beach,
Scratch the sand among the cliff-
Dropped logs, the earth shakes just a bit,
And they return to the kelp forest.

On the other side, a nuclear sub
In the little bay dumps its ticking shit.
That's why the shore birds
All look like gulls and scream
At the clams that squirt out
At low tide when the sea weed stinks.

In the dark of the book
Trees come to life in flames,
Their silhouettes shimmer,
Quaking aspen, or drip like willows.

In ancient times these images
Would be light, clear, and soft
Like silk over a balustrade
Shifting in the breeze.

In these times we crossed a line
& now the shit's aflame on the front porch.

The *Manual*, a black box of secrets
Big as night whispers
In a wind storm: Scribble
Signs on the walls of these canyons
Where horses run to mark
The sand stone with our presence
Because our heart opens to the sky
As if we were born of shale
And humble dirt that holds us
And our corn upright.
Kernels like answers.

The Past Looms

A big pit to fall back into

Only dipping
Toes into it, hot and cold
Together, bound to a
Level of comfort
That is, not too far back
Or an escape,
That's what's allowed
In History books.

To fall all the way back

--what's meant by backward--

Where you never come back from
That's big fear.

The past is hell
Keep out of it
That's what they say
On the back porch
Before the light goes
And the lightning bugs
They can see in the dark
Between the cicadas
And the night sounds,

Train in the distance,
The new day lurking
Behind the curtains
That billow a bit
In the muggy cool

They don't care to know
What can't be done
About that blaring
Covered over by shades
When the light goes
So fast no bullet
Can catch it
Before it fades again

The future has no handles
No blockade will hold back
That dog of sun pulling
On the leash.

Some boys in Mexico
Laid a rock down
On the track and
You'd like to think
A rose came out of
The wreckage, the sweet
Prick of time derailed
Enough to clear the track again

But it was the past
On its side steaming
Through its steel ribs
Escaping into air
Back there in the murk.

The Wall

A barrier so mysterious it has many names.
A razor-thin edge between me and my image of you
That soft limbs thrust through so insistently
We go out of our mind into the realm
That was meant to sparkle in the vastness.

A reminder we can bring into the society of savages
A soft little plaything that might grow into one
Who draws magical emblems on the walls
And railroad cars west of here.

One who can take your hand and guide you
To the chair where the story can be heard
About borders not meant to be guarded
But entered into like trusted neighbors
Come to visit on a hot afternoon.

Those who fear the loss of light from deep
In the universe unless it shines only on them,
Those who step on toes, spit in your eye,
Shove you aside, call you Biblical names.

Those are now the teachers of civics
In the corruption of dreams
At the school of your choice.

Crooked Is the New Straight

On days when there's no letter in the box for me,
I press on regardless, yet something's awry.

The orange cat sits funny, the sun looks bulbous,
I hear no music, the sky appears strained,
Friends call underground, it all seems too normal.

There's no manufacturing a mouth to utter
Anything worth knowing, except for the soft drones, of course.

I'm going to take this array of nonsense
As a sign for how to begin differently
When the cops get here to check my authenticity tag.

I'm a foreign alien sent here with papers all blank
And stacks of currency from another time.

They can't figure out where to deport me
Because they're clueless about origins.
I've told 'em before it was here, where else?

They claim to misunderstand, even when
I write it out on a windshield in the rain
With my back arched back over the hood.

"The bearer of this device is the orphan of a royal family.
Give him a break". They still don't get it.
Break my fingers, break skulls all around me.

They're very literal. It's unpresidential.

Cartouche

Was the name for a vial
To carry poison if they learned
Your true identity, and you needed
To end yourself quickly
To avoid the fire licks all the way
Up to the scalp of flame.

Not hard to fathom then
That it also became the word
For a tomb, the narrow kind
That slides into Neapolitan niches
Of thin cadavers on the mainland.

Language crossed bodies of water,
Like on rafts of red ants,
Changed as only strings of syllables can,
Came to be the cartridge loaded
With enough to power a lead trajectory
Into an enemy's living zone switch.

Consequently the belt that crisscrossed
An up risen *huarache*-clad agave cutter's torso
And displayed a personal arsenal of *cartuchos*
To fire at the deniers of native burial rights
On vast commended estates was called *cananas*
 --Sounds like bananas--
But more full of mortification than potassium.

So the speech that most clarifies how the digital
Post-modern age became a medieval fair with live
Ogres at feast in Rudimentary Castles lusting
For young objects of desire has been preempted by itches.

The Marxian discourse isn't wrong,
Only anachronistic.
The diatribe beside the guillotine is timely now.

First, target the populist poor
Who carry the dog-legged satrap
On their shoulders
Towards the rally
He taxed them surreptitiously
To pay for it with.

Once they have been neutralized,
Masses of liberals with pitch forks
Can commune over the campaign
To storm the board rooms,
Drag the nauseously rich captains out
Onto the *Enterprise* open deck,
Push them off into the deep
All tied together like a bundle
Of coin wrappers adrift
Into the sparkling cosmos.

Deep Inside a Proustian Sentence

Deep inside a Proustian sentence,
A fly on the wall of haughty salons,
(A novelistic voyeur) laughs up a sleeve
At dirty jokes footmen exchange at the door.

Your wrist, so thin,
The wand of a fairy godmother
Waves over a malady in the punch line,
Does produce a toad of a *duc*
The jokes butt against.

The fraternal and sororial order of poets
Pulls away in a swan-encrusted bark
Full of lutes and sac butts
To begin the annual *fête sur le lac*
In the *maudit* sub-community.

Cynicism runs rampant
Among missionaries of free trade
Who see the bottom-line as the principal
Trope for monopoly in the 3-D version
Resurrected since *les neiges d'antan*.

A fair damsel also good at baking buns
Has become bedridden. Where would she go
Anyway these days on the isle of love
Where little poets lay around in the grass
Their tablets and social medias?
Where stand ups make fun of abortion
And the suicidal decision,
Where a society has gone viral for
Celebrating the modern edition
Of gallows humor across the board

On electronic devices powered up
For that jolt of surprise.

Look down at the log across the gravel
All gnarled and beige and brown.
How banal death on your own block.

Anti-Ecclogue

When you've ben trying to get something out
For such a long tyme, it can freeze in your mouth,
Become a boulder, lodge in your gullet,
Make a kneeler out of your self, precious self
That sits on its little throne within.

Maybe you do have to go to a buolder shrinker,
To a gullet bustre, a rock puoller, a large stone extractor,
Otherwise it could drop down,
Kill off the whole ego of the thing.

Yet it is no longer you that far down.
An archetype of the fool in the dark corridors of the bone shop,
Miming its way toward the pox after some black robes fell down thru
The cracks above the truth here below.

An anti-ecclogue to honor the wish that persists
To make music for a world that should have seen itself by now
In the mirrors abounding and thus fathom
That the tools of tradition have been melted into pixels

That doesn't even mesure on the face of time,
Rather click over in the backlit display.

Soon, when the currunt goes, battereyes will light
The way to retro-guilds of spring winders,
All the way back to students of the sun
Who placed a stick in the ground to tell them
Wen siesta and wen to go back to work on the ballad

Of the shepherders in the hills on the moon of Mars,
The planes of potatohes, the perls of doo,
From the Nazca lines where the ships furst landid
To the fervent preyze of yur bewty.

Big O' Tree

Big O' tree
In the backyard
Standing there since
Who knows when.

Ugly old thing
That's got too big
To do anything about.
So we have to let it be
Till it dies out.

That day we'll take it down
Careful so the gnarly wood
Hurts no one in its fall
And we'll burn the logs
And watch the mean little flames
Give up that dingy smoke
Comes from embers
Bright with release.

And the ease of ashes
Gone back to cleanse the dirt.

Big O' Tree
We remember you here
Like a white-haired colonel
Licking his fingers.

Masculinism

You find yourself in a room
With a bunch of others like you.

It's a pleasant room with safety bars
On the windows and beige-colored
Curtains on spring-green walls.

After awhile there will be always
A couple of guys who can't sit still,

Who pace the room,
Tap on the glass,

Ask you to agree something's got to be done,
And they start to tell you shit to do.

These two guys, and a couple more
Heming and hawing behind them,
Tell you to clean the floor, the glass.

Then they have a change of heart.
Commence to be polite and ask
Would you pile up those blankets.
Oh, look, some moth holes in 'em.
Somebody to mend them, please.

Soon coffee's a concession
And music, so you need to buy
A pair of headphones, the best
You can 'cause your music
Sounds heavenly, like a chorus
Welcoming you to eternal love

And that's your capitalism,
Said Berta, the Trotskyite
In Norwalk where she kept
A splendiferous garden,
Two little muff-ball cats

And a stack of *In These Times*,
Which made her smoke even harder
Over the mistakes of the enlightened left
To bring economic justice to the globe
As she gazed out at the astilbe
And hostas glowing in their beds.

An Early History of Style

The cave mouth sounds
In all directions

To the listener in loin cloth
And grease.

It began with collecting river rocks.
They sat in a pile over there
Till we knew what to do.

There were some who strapped them
To clubs, it's true.

We were the ones
Who stacked them in cairns
And sent good vibrations and
Heartfelt messages into the sky.

The clubbers gave us leftovers
From the last mastodon.

We're supposed to sing them songs
And tell stories to make them laugh and cry
In exchange.

They have sometimes all lined up together
In what they call My Kingdom
And they rank each other in phalanxes.

We have to go along, not their prisoners,
Exactly.

We do for them and they do for us.
But it's not sustainable, we all know it.

So we invented the two step
To get through it with style.

One Two
One Two.

The Root of a Smile

The root of a smile
you'd have to say
if someone wanted to know
what tastes like roasted
Shangri-las with a little
salt of the earth
or hanging with Fritz' in crowd
till you had to throw your sock at them.

Better yet the rounded pleasure
knowing I've pulled
the knit cap down over your eyes
once again here in the hallway
before crackling snow on the front porch
under the dim yellow bulb
on our way over to skate on the river
lined with dark, bulky trees
who keep their distance.

It all seems like treasure hunting
at sunset in the garden
your great aunt fussed over,
its green bamboo stakes
beside the shovels in the tool shed
being of not much concern to her
until they became arrows in a fantasy
you concocted as a boy about Indians
before tea with the *Times*
and the antimacassar neat behind her.

Find yourself on your knees
in that dark searching for the answers

to questions of botany,
the whole plant, roots and all,

So in the light available you can understand
that indeed it has no teeth.

On the Mountain Top

astronauts adrift in space
only a synthetic anchor
between outpost and home,

the current scene in the societal imagination,
whose projections delight the most advanced humans,

how the monstrously skilled and clever space traveler
has gotten into a kind of inescapable trap:

to come around, face himself,
in the reflection in hyper glass,
the hero who will somehow get back home
on account of innate human powers,
a superb animal of the genus homo
who has become a fabulist of ways
to not confess on his knees
such ambition to be God
that he and she have got the non-human
world on its knees beside them

but rather to dedicate their dreams,
their most psychic powers
to prove he's a man with her beside him,
or vice versa, and someone waits at home
while the other drifts.

If you knew me,
You'd tell me to make a song of it
Or a puppet show like
Standing here at the top

With a coat hanger wrapped in tin foil
Offered up as high as I can reach
To tell them to come home safe.

I Had To Climb the Stairs

I had to climb the stairs
To join the emperor alone
In his chamber except
For the baby in his arms.

We had a brocade exchange
The memory of which
Hides behind a thin gauze.
My inability to recall the details
Surely not as important as
Attending to the reality
He made sharp by tossing
The baby high in the air,
Ever higher until I stepped in,
And caught the bundle
Which all assumed
Was the baby Buddha.

And I understood too
That was the moment to
Go back downstairs
With the package only
To encounter there a woman,
Wife to the royalty left behind.

She presided over a ballroom
So as I moved through
The dancers the evil woman
Forced her eye-glassed face
Into mine and recited
A "Moonlight Sonnet"
From 7th Century China.

I took it in and marveled at
Its clear images of the moon,
Bright illusion beaming
On the door step
Like morning dew on jade.

But even as I did so I knew
The brocaded woman wanted
To trap me like a firefly
In a net of verses
Though I puzzled
Was this to avenge my breach
Of the emperor's right to throw
Babies into the air careless
Of other lives? Or rather,
Was she simply a zealot
Who passionately forced text
On me that I couldn't top?

It truly was a different register,
So beyond me,
It sang arias as if in Romance.

When you ask now
"What was that music?"
That was the dream.

Singing to the Rain God

Please hear this.

We adore you, some of us,

A couple times a week.

Can we do better?

You mean, Lord, like three times?

And that will do it then?

So, four would be even more,

That's what I'm hearing, Sir.

For a .01 inch day of drizzle.

And the soaking downpour

Goes for how much?

You'll deliver between now and then,

Unless we pay a special premium

For next day air, thunder's extra.

We'll take it! You accept cards.

Great, Wait.

No plastic?! Have to be

Wooden nickels sourced from trees

Grown since the last full cut?

What about financing then?

We've got some collateral

Down in the Amazon,

For a carbon swap, right?

Anyway Gary had told me "if you look

At a thing long enough,

A grain of sand becomes
A crystal palace”.

I wanted to believe him so bad.
Looking with care took over my eyes
And the object of my gaze:

A mud puddle remained brown
My feet in the bottom with the pebbles
While around my head
Flew *joya voladora* hummingbirds
Whose straight beaks penned
Golden curlicues in my hair

And ripe figs dropped onto my palm
To hand out to all the passing parade of neighbors
With their dogs playing on their leashes,

With the orange cat who stares into
Their growls with the patient demeanor
Of a wild big game hunter.

Then I spied the burly bronze ants
Excavating under the patio pavers.
They threw up mounds of grainy sand
As if they were earth-moving caterpillars
In the process of constructing
An out-of-sight Formica casino.

We're desperate; we'll try anything.
I mean, I don't like winter
But we're used to some water
And like things pretty much as they are,

We've been told the ice is melting
Fast as a landslide elsewhere
And the rebuild rate in the Caribbean

Is now up to 8 years, still
We want those days on the beach, don't we?

In the sun working on our tan
Because we're awful white, some of us.

Comfort Zone

My metabolism is an event
where I live easy,
unlike the slug in the sun
on the long, dry pavers
while I sit in the shade,
look out at Happy Valley,
only missing my project
which could be imagination
roaming for glacial erratics,
diamond pipes, El Capitán,
wild fire smoke.

I can no longer write
about relationships
or tender moments
with your baby sitter,
I've discovered rocks,

the mantle under the craton,
Missouri over Malawi,
migrating polar ice caps melting,
True North could have
once been East toward
the Iapetus Ocean stretching on
as you've seen water do,
on the other hand, the planet
under foot has my attention now.

The Lost Steps back to Paradise
time after now cannot be found
in the myth of Evermore.

I've wriggled my way out
into experience;
there's no way back.

The Wayward Moon

It's a bright sunny early autumn morning
As I sit on the throne and notice the shadow
Cast by the bas relief of the white metal
Cover says "Caution: High temperatures . . . "
On the wall in front of me though
I'd have preferred describing from a different setting.

Still, there is a spot of sunshine just
To the left of the rounded cover,
A point of brilliance I can't shade with my finger.
It's a kind of luminous anomaly that means something
About the physical world like a black hole.
A point of light in what otherwise would be a total eclipse.

A hole in the shadow so mundane it's relegated
To the room of ease that thus becomes
Akin to the hole in the tablet Mayan astronomers
Had made to measure time by an equinox
Simply to have a single certainty in a baffling world.

Later, we're sitting out on a deck at Point Hudson
In the fresh fall sunset with a blood moon
Coming to perigee as the sun was going its way,
The Olympics silhouetting in dryness
That has significance people argue over.

In the burgeon dark our crooked fingers
Crisp and crackle in the air to point out where
The moon should be just above our fears
It was the end of the world. How is the moon
Not yet visible at this hour over the lurid horizon?
So rather than go all the way to rapture or some other such

Uptake into the beyond, we decide it's pollution,
So naturally that slow small smoke we'd gotten used to
Created this aberration, and it's simply a matter
Of time before the cries of "There it is" --like a barn owl
On the tip of a spindly Arctic Yellow cedar-- puncture
The night chill. We breathe easy again for a time.

Personhood

The sense of I
in whatever language you will,
the cage in which it lives
and if it has never lived in the woods
or even in the great cities,
merely seen ghost-like sparrows
on the charred branches outside the window,
it has to imagine downstream of Lennon.

There may survive some few
and when they greet each other
in the great burned-over area
they could bow
and they'd have to learn
how to talk to each other
without the one bumping the other off.
That's how we got to when
the big fires started.

Still, there were many lilies at Giverny.
Makes sense to keep that in view
even as we walk this red plain
where Gila monsters look like
ice cream bar palette sticks
glued together and sprayed with glitter.

Titles And Endings

A Dove of Other Floods

Traceries of Petty Thieves

Scrabble in the Jungle

A Warrant For Tenderness

You Said When You Returned

Willful Regard

The Sunset of Your Smile

Incestuous Proverbs

Yogis in Love

Children of the Anthropocene

Black Targets

Automotive Marshmallows

Bodices and Codpieces

The Thrill of Algorithms

Lazy Afternoons in the Accelerator

Tweaking Martian Canals

The Long Shadow of a Needle

And the hens grew quiet.

He never saw her again singing joyfully.

A troubadour he was not.

Wolfgang gazed on the treasure, then walked away.

Marjorie held the ribbon up for all to see.

The children watched the cow bob up in the flood water and out of sight downstream.

Whether Draper found his wife we'll never know.

Fidel saw Raul cut the ribbon to open the Mall of the Americas.

Revenge is rarely a happy ending.

The old gentleman, now in rags, returned to his library of chivalrous books.

When the forest marched on the castle it was done.

Leonard sang *Hallelujah* and then came home.

They died on the stage before the curtain fell.

O hateful tyranny, hold me till we are one.

This puzzle can't be solved. We have to call the contest off.

The Face of Our Fears

Tsagiglalal

Courage to etch on stone
The face of our future,
Destiny's countenance,
Wide-eyed watcher
Of all that appears.

Accept that life,
Scratch out its contour
Under the open sky
In this sacred place
Guarded by rattlesnakes
And the harsh rock,
Blunt buttes of basalt
That remain secluded from
The shade of cottonwoods
In view of rushing water
That carries salmon
Whose generosity sustains
Its fellow creatures
Eagles, humans, bears,
Spirit that too much like air
Also feeds the people pictures,
Sparks of story, the first script
Prompts the chanters use
To sing the anthem that hums here.

Salmon generosity implies
Rapacious osprey that flies
Over these buttes, cleaning them,
A society of reciprocities
That blends away into timeless reaches,
Let's say the magma of what
Comes today as a beginning

To forgive rock plugs
That pierce the horizon,
Mute sentries of what messages
Remain, scripts of ancient plays
Whose lack of authorship challenges
The star system.

Frontier Schooling

Apparently
The first test
Of cooking
Is boiling
The egg.

Too little
you get runny.
Too much
You get hard.

In fact,
It's been widely
Presumed women
Can chef
So they know
That how hard
Is really a matter
Of taste.

And the ones
That are soft
In the very middle
Not everybody
Likes those
Kinds of eggs
'Cause they already
Learned how
Hard tastes.

Vignettes of the Fauna @Morro Bay

A snowy egret poised like a statue
Of Diana, the huntress, entirely classical
When she snaps up the prey and swallows
With that long gulp all down her thin neck.

Crows out in the gusting wind buffeted
Out of a glide, they bob like rafts
In the river of the atmosphere expending
Whatever energies they have for the business
Of flying, not an allusion to ecstasy.

Otters in the churning bay roll and roll
And dive with their rock in the pocket
Under an arm though it's thought
Not to be play, simply practical
Housekeeping chores like crab smashing,
Still they look to be awfully playful of creatures.

The surfing ducks at the end of the Embarcadero
Seem deadly serious as they head back into the waves,
Shake off the foam after they go under
And glide back up the slick sandy slope
Only to slide down again into the surf.

It may be play but it isn't fun,
Not a smile on their straight little beaks
Breaking through the foam again and again.

In Freedonia

A likeness of someone you'd swear
Wasn't you has found its way
Into official documents
That would have not only you
But all those now called dudes,
Used to be guys, fellows, gents,
And lately, gals, pacing up and fro
With fire sticks to vouchsafe
All who enter because the in crowd's
All in a tizzy over where some
People can stand, even if they're frizzy.

And there are factions, fractured from the hole
Whose hearts go all over even on to sleeves
Over how she's my brother, or he's

—Their basis rests on how that likeness
Goes deep into skin and innards
Where us be cats in the dark with
More or less the same meow—

All the way to them and us
With them so hairy it's offensive,
As clear as the apple in your throat.
It moves when you swallow
Standing stiff at the gate.

All the while we're out here peeking
Into the place where things get done.
All holding hands so the energy level
Is high in the whole that has been missing
The while now as we lift our voices
Up in song Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck.

That seemed really to have sent off
A red contingent to the far left.
Consequently the entire spectrum
Shouts each other down
While badgers with bulging backpacks
Loot the whole business from the back
And steal away into the wide daylight.

They appear on the broad boulevards
In beige Brooks Brothers boxers
As up to date with rabies shots as they can be,
Service animals for all those who can't live
Without their best friends.

Arboretum

For a long time he's been speaking
Directly into stone faces on cliff sides
So they'd bear the smile when morning
Light made it possible again
To think something might last.

A lapidary vocation presented itself
When he heard the sounds of the earth
Naturally, the long groans the strata
Make of limestone and gneiss.

To clarify, it was to time he spoke,
An anthem in a box canyon that could ring
In the hearing of whoever veered from the path
Leading straight to the illusory center.

He always tried to give voice to the moment
That swirls around feet of clay shuffling
At the door of surprise where knobs
Turned sideways to open the inside of a window.

Each cedar etched the green around its branch,
Azalea pastels wave gaily next to wooden gates
As old as forests with swept paths of gravel
That lead to calm beside a pond, bridges rounded
Up over the flowing water.

Such a place teaches looking with intention
Fixed on what is presently being,
A stone lantern whose light shines out of itself forever.

elemental

live

bubbles in water, air in water

water in air bubbles boil

crystals in water

water in crystal sheets

hoarfrost under lids

water flows floods

air blows blasts

neglect water

air

at your peril

air apparel

heir apparent

dead

dirt

Break the White Surface

Beneath the veneer, now plastic and digital,
The ghosts of what was here before
Have come alive again,

They say: "Back down,

Listen to the messages
To know that all over you
The god Xipe Totec
Has laid the flayed skin
Of your enemies,
Abject in blood,
On the remains
Of the purest profit,

the trophies
--wives, apartments--

All the perfumed trash
Money machines defecate,
The flotsam cream that piles up
On the tiny bays between armored shorelines
And land protected by toxic optimism.

That at the end of this tunnel
The light some see there blinks
On the miniature transmitter
Of the backup system's red warning".

I've been talking to myself
As if somebody else --calmer, smarter, wiser.

She tells me
"Go soak your head"
To get the bugs out no doubt.

I can't question a voice like that,
A body inside a person
Like a poison in a survivor

You'd have to carry it real careful,
The Wages of Fear in your old truck,

Nuclear bombs in a free society,
Racism among cousins, distant, perhaps,

Like walking barefoot on a rock beach,
Real slow, you'd have to be upright
But not stiff which could cause a spill,
Stiff spilled would leave acid burns
On your (inner) privates.

No jumping for joy, unless the vial's sealed
In which case you could fall over
Without spillage of the venom
You hold dear and tell yourself
To tolerate contradiction,
Even the best of you.

Like when I thought badly of you
Who is my better half.
That's love with a touch of strychnine
In its heart, makes it stiff against knocks.

Keep it stiff, I was taught.
Keep it mighty white.

The Invisible Cage

"... que jaula me das . . ." A. Storni

lies on a stack of 3 x 5 cards
the red line and the blue like bars
its umbel retracted
into the repeated iterations
of star bursts in the cameo green
of Queen Anne's lace

formerly a white florescence
that fanned out like the fussy
fabric in a lady's fan
not an imagined history in chivalry
but your walking colonel dad
come to off the door of its hinges
in a pique over some concept
worth dying for pulled into
a bonnet shape by the summer drought
all around this salty bay
big enough for the Nimitz
under Big Blue

cowering in your door-less room
now an open book but not
a public library reading room
where you were making strata
of self in the protozoan age
of personality, you laid down rocks
and gauged reservoirs of caution
for the deeps of standing water
lest you get in over your head
while romancing the hairy ape.

You learned to wire the door open,
come and go as you pleased,
the umbel closed in a bun
at the other end
of the plant's ballet
that opens hand to palm
before your puff,
free as the wind.

She Who Goes Before

Among the little people, big striders
Poo poo the virtues of quietude
But if we all turn our backs on big,
It's like a giant facing the other way.

Us small characters are already
Hiking off knowing well
There's no escaping infinity.

It's the myth you follow that
Creates a woman Dante said
Was Beatrice who takes you
By the hand through the dark wood.

And rises up like hyacinths
On a chill morning between rains,
Too sweet to last though she is not defined
By flora or fauna of old places
Where hollowed out forests nurtured
Faux rabbits, porno badgers,
Chickadees that glowed near the feed
Sack that hangs from the burned out
Metal frame of the guard house
On the desert estate of faux billionaires
With tattered gold curtains
Hiding them from view as they
Gnaw on shiny bars of plutonium.

We lower our heads as we trudge past,
Whether out of shame or disinterest
And quickly return to our thoughts
Concerning high ideals traded
With a currency not linked to ego
Strings of testosteronic brinksmanship

On display in the museum just shuttered up
By the rear guard of a dying megalopolis
In the great state of denial
On the way to Evenow.

After Particle Fever

Beauty is a number
for some and some
singing and dancing
around an open fire
for others some
language serves as a
constant like I love you
which of course implies
so much else picayune
kinds of things if you
stand back and look
for the bigger picture

when we squeeze
our faces together
in the curtained booth
and smile buckteeth
and braces.

Post-Tang Dynasty

Something from Chinese I read made me think a person gives birth to herself.

Later on, eating snap, crackle, pop it came that blue was beautiful, red too

But not so much.

I or you sense the contours of the earth goddess

As a particular instance of the brook and pond where tadpoles squirmed

In the sun beams like corridors in a hazy empire of mud.

You looked up from that borderland to gaze upon a sylvan scene

Painted on a bottled-water truck, surely a sign of the times that though it seems normal

You decided for yourself was awry.

You could dedicate time to the techniques of industrial art, automotive design,

City planning, social work, all for the need to drain the swamp,

So what to do with all that brackish water

But purify it in brushed stainless tanks while those dark squiggly-precursors

To the chorus of peepers desiccate slowly like eyelashes beside tears in the basin

Of our nostalgia for fads.

Or you could chain yourself to the trees that'll have to come down

And trust the nymphs will tickle your feet in the night

So in the morning you could start all over, choose cocoa puffs with little marshmallows and a whole different set of prizes:

A Wonder Girl statuette and flashlight, a tin metal button says HONEY,

Or a windup drone with an AI chip that can repeat words like
Pollyanna

As it hovers over a dried up old creek bed, a surveyor's filing
Needed for the mall where you can get that Chinese book:

"Advice for Mandarins."

Survivalist Sonnet 3

to Bill Richardson

Beach logs can kill, so imagine 'em
in a tsunami come hightailing it back
toward the coast like a giant totem
with a Thunderbird's claws out to attack.

The ancients knew and tried to spell 'em,
the lessons of how raven opened the crack
to reveal all the little people at the rim
anxious to move onto the land, to foul the bivouac.

Legend says there's no way to staunch the flood
once the shell's been opened wide
as Raven looks askance at the future blight

where humans multiply and also shed more blood,
rage against the light on that huge tide
that washes 'em clean out of this plight.

Mycological Care

Giant fungi splay hyphae
and fingers together in a mycelial embrace.

They reach to each other
under great bad land deserts,
across vast expanses;
underground the silent anguish
of the disappeared
echoes in the bells of certain plants.

Children soldiers who have fallen
into the net touch its fiber links
that vibrate the subsoil so slowly
yet nematodes and mites stutter
from the shock.

Its spores make a rest home
for the young women who plow
the Chihuahuan under-desert
in their storyless decay.

This mushroom that cleanses acres
and brings the elements together
knits the net to mend it
out of its inhuman kindness.

Those Godless Wretches

If only we had god's work to do.
There could be toil and prayer
That were time everlasting
And the peace that comes in surrender.

I would have been a copyist,
Taking great care with each letter,
Each stroke a mark infinite
In the expression of love
For each creature alike because
Each was made in the image
Of the Way that made all.

Unending care for the nib,
And the ink, the Vellum blank
As each moment that awaits.

This has been a life's work
On guard against the slip
Of the stylus, or drip, smear
Of the blackest ink in error.

We puzzled over mis-
Shappen figures that in the instance
Had to be itself part of perfection,
Which can't be grasped, hence
Some words came out
Backward or misused
So it began to be hinted
A devil force lurked in the very things
Of our task: pen, ink, parchment, scribe.

Man herself was perfect
So as to admit mistakes
In the script that shocked us
In those deep quiet libraries
Behind stone walls on grill worked
Shelves of tomes, of all tomes in the world,
They contained writings then
That in their letters hid the truth
In a forest of marks, impenetrable,
The source of all learning
How could we have come to this present
Smoldering and charred clearing outside the walls?

Ultimately it must be woman
For she carries the spark that some
Would kill even when it was just
A hum in a body's breathless song.

We have sought to worship her,
Keep her from stray seed,
But aliens have stolen her away
And try to people their own planet,
Those godless wretches lost in space.

The Neo-naturalist of Chimacum
for Ike

looks real close at sea shells
from the Salish Sea
then fashions those slides
into brass portraits
of our natural moment.

He doesn't judge
except for the accuracy
of his molds in red goo
that guides the molten metals
to their solid truth

when he can polish a sand dollar,
pitted and disfigured by the acids,
shine it brilliant like fragile.

Survivalist Sonnet 4

In terms of size, the big one could be
a trike over at the head of concrete stairs
or a great wave down Happy Valley,
or the Hawks losing the Super Bowl, despair.

No, ours was just one day we seemed unlikely
to find common ground again in our affairs,
let alone that itchy fission in our back alley,
the kind you had under the bleachers after the rally.

In spite of all that, we found no one else
mattered as much as we who had been so fond
before, and out of that affection renewed our troth.

As you might expect we rock here in place
looking off in the distance at the golden pond
between snoozes imagining scenes full of sweat and froth.

Tea in the Inner Garden

To feel comfortable I need a billed cap
to sit under the Morello in the afternoon sun
with you and chat about the garden,

how the robin cadets, rawboned and awkward,
spend far too long on the ground
when the burly, orange cat Zeus prowls,

how maybe they're the ones broke off
all the dogwood's top branches
leaving it leaderless in the west garden, damn it,

how the sock ties you propped the spindly
apple branches with to the rusty
wrought-iron trellis were like
felt butterflies drooping in the heat,

how the scarlet runners behind the sweet pear
climbed with red ribbons in their dogmatism up
past the top of the stringed stakes
leaving their helpless tendrils to sway in the air
like cobras mesmerized by an unseen flute,

how bright nasturtiums line beds toward blueberries,
floodlight of orange-yellow for frothy peas
at the end of their season not yet tan and papery,

how the tea in our cups has soothed us
and it's time to go inside and make supper.

Horses Midstream

The Methow moves slow in the heat,
A western sapphire above,
Buffalo hills buff stubbled green
Down to the lowest point,
An enigmatic wandering
For streaming water,
Sometimes rippled tan grey brown,
Almost invisible, like the breeze.

The pleasure you take throwing
Tied illusions so they don't appear
To the rainbow shirking in the flow
Except for what he has to bite
That costs him some desperate struggle,
Racing up out of the gill element,
Flash of rouge against that sapphire
In the blind brightness,

To shake the grasshopper
Foam and rubber legs,
Yellow on orange,
Off into the silver ripples.

You do begin to realize the way it flows
While you're standing in the same currents
And wonder who, from the sharp, cold artifice,
Will unhook
And release you.

Neo-eager

There's a complicated way
to get to you, squeeze you.

It involves curlicues and serifs,
arabesques of syntax, interdependent

subjunctives, and Latin passives,
garish commas, full stops.

I can never remember correctly,
so I stand here in the cold

watching the air ripple above your lodge
in the event you might appear

before my mumbles and smile,
"Good morning, beaver,"

eager and speechless once again,
in the dawning of your light.

inter est

thee thou

A wedge of greed has penetrated
the space above here, kept free for anyone,
the public space, the in-between,
with all its handicaps and privileges

it remains true the place where all
prosper should guide our thought
and that it doesn't can be demonstrated
by science, that discipline of unbiased
and by a ruling order tolerant of difference,
that favors debate over debauch
of the few on the goods of all.

Alas.
Means wings in Spanish
for soaring above, wishing it were there.

These are acts of vision,
like learning to walk straight
after your feet forgot where to go;

While bending over backwards under the apple
in that mythically gnarled version
of the game summer plays over the prairies.

Makes *Jurassic Park* look silly,
Those fake amphibians growling
at trees, throwing smaller beasts
over their shoulders as they move
through the valley in search of
the object of desire.

Good grief. Today's dinosaurs
don't have two fingers of forehead.
When they swing their tails
as they turn for the choicest morsel,
chunks as big as Manhattan
fall away into the tepid waters
of Slave Lake where they've jetted
after the rainbow colors

of the irradiated lake trout,
with all the latest gear.

Soothing words, what is needed now.
Calm the wildly palpitating heart.
We are having a heart attack.
So step back from it and gaze up there
at the roots of heaven. Relax.

You don't need training to die.

In Memoriam

I put all my letters to you
In a radioactive box
So they would flame on in a way
Even after all the lights were off.

I've known a few astronauts.
They mostly float by on tethers,
Kind of distant as friends.
They need to be tied down to dinner.

One year they gathered all together
In a bare log lodge on a mountain top.
They tethered themselves together
And I don't think they thought it through
But of a sudden they floated off,
Like a segmented worm in a star chamber.

They never came back but a few tweets
About how lonely it was getting
Out there in space, how the silence
Had to become a cloak of comfort and ease.

I wonder if it's like when you back away
From the precipice deep in the back country
And prepare yourself to live with bears,
Know some of us will be eaten in the dark.

After Hyde's *The Gift*

Breathe it in and with your panorama lit up just now to the scope
of the cherries' effervescent blossoming into the ether,
their tiny china on a weather-beaten wrought iron pea-colored table
with chair,
a scent of July in vague Lapins where the leaves would have been
were it a *Camellia sinensis* whose tiny white flowers ain't tea;

something you have to pass on, give away with an authentic gesture
over palm fronds shadowed against the wall
in a mauve kind-of-awareness
that brings out Matisse in the Mediterranean,
probably at siesta like a breath you have to give away
to make room for the next

and recognize that's the way energy flows,
like the random steps of the Egyptian Walking onion,
its scallion agglomerations all over the garden in clumps
the wandering Buddhist monk gave us an age ago
that continue on walking around us all this time.

Translate from the breath into an object of delight
like the scent of Japan in the white frills on a purple plum
in the springtime when it should be
and make sure somebody else gets it.

Survivalist Sutra

He was so naïve at one point he thought governments were businesses, sex was for how you got somewhere, stars were for hitching to, earth was flat, but that it would bounce back.

He realized about the bathroom remodel, therefore, that he was of no strong feeling one way or the other. So he found he was being given the task to try to accept the way it was going to be; then find a narrative that explained how it looked so cool.

He was emboldened by the fact that they had engaged the process of choosing tile wholeheartedly during the amount of time judged tolerable — driving to Hadlock a couple of times, comparing colors and styles, which took I'm guessing 3 hours—though they had looked online at some patterns and were well aware of the existing colors and styles they'd grown accustomed to though I can't recall how they came to pick the "look" of it in the first place, but they learned to live with it.

No matter, a question of accepting and explaining or justifying what you've done. And in that process of accepting the inchoate bathroom with all your heart you can create the beauty she or he is. Not sure if a bathroom has a gender; must have all of them, they.

Anyway it's done and it's a beaut.
Otherwise,

You'd have to tear it all apart again
And start from scratch.

And then it would come to that point
Where the job might begin to veer off
Toward ugly in the remodel,
So it comes to you that

Maybe just accepting what is
Is the best you can do?

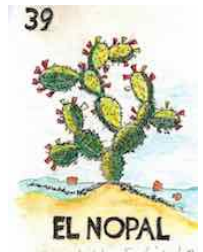
But that's conceding power,
The way to stay oppressed.

Granted that we have become powerful
In this process so how have we
Avoided the circumstance
That by the nature of things
We are oppressing others
Except by being gentle with the hands?

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Walter Nickerson Hill was born in Chicago, raised in São Paulo, Brazil, and has spent lots of time in Oaxaca, Mexico. He shared Latin American culture with U.S. college students for a long time. Author of numerous academic reviews and articles, he has also translated the work of noted Latin American novelists and poets including Alvaro Mutis, David Huerta, and Miguel Barnet: *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. His English versions of poems by Mexican Jorge Fernández Granados' *Principle of Uncertainty*, appeared as *Constructed on Coincidence* (*Mid-American Review* 2010). He is currently translating Gary Lemons' *Día De Los Muertos* into Spanish. Hill has one slim award for a chapbook and will have three collections of poetry after *Sleight Work* comes out in November 2018. He lives on the Olympic Peninsula with his wife. Visit <http://wnickhill.net>

Someone who's not much for poetry thinks this isn't much like
anything she's seen before. It's tricky.
You have to judge for yourself.



A Prickly Book
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