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*In the Aviary*  
Poems by  
Gerald Costanzo







*In the Aviary*

*A Breakthrough Book*  
University of Missouri Press

**In the Aviary**  
**Poems by Gerald Costanzo**

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*For my mother*

*for Carla*

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## *The Devins Award for Poetry*

*In The Aviary* is the 1974 winner of The Devins Award for Poetry, an annual award originally made possible by the generosity of Dr. and Mrs. Edward A. Devins of Kansas City. Dr. Devins was former President of the Kansas City Jewish Community Center and a patron of the Center's American Poets Series. Upon the death of Dr. Edward Devins in 1974, his son, Dr. George Devins, acted to continue the Award.

Nomination for the Award is made by the University of Missouri Press from those poetry manuscripts selected by the Press for publication in a given year. In 1974, the manuscript of Gerald Costanzo was among three selected for publication from more than 100 invited manuscript submissions, and was subsequently nominated by the Press for the Devins Award.

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## I. First Poems

*Near Lacombe*

Fastened to his rocker,  
the old man rocked for hours  
making stories from his life.  
We heard his watch ticking  
on its chain and smelled  
the odor of his pipe  
across the dusty room.

What we heard was  
how hard it had been at first,  
coming west—  
how he'd been the one who helped  
discover oil near Rimby,  
making instant promise of the place—  
how his good wife had loved these  
lonely hours clean till her death.

And what we heard was  
nothing  
of what he thought he'd said.

*Saints*

You sense their presence  
everywhere.

They seem like beacons on  
a clouded sea: too far away  
to reach, too distant  
for you to see just what they  
lead you toward  
or warn you against.  
Sometimes, like scarecrows  
in high wind, they bend near  
the earth

                  stuffed with  
their secrets—

where you are a sharecropper  
hoeing patterns of  
purgatory.

*Building*

My grandfather was a builder  
who sweat words into stone  
then blasted with hammer and  
nails his plans toward form.

His was a poetry of concrete  
made poetry by his hand—  
though he told me once

before driving to work,  
when his heart exploded him  
off the road,

that he'd often wished his  
several selves, strangers that  
they seemed,  
might have fit better  
into his wrinkling skin.



*The Angels in Baltimore Cemetery*

On an edge of stone-crowded ground  
I stalk rising grace.

Chiseled robes, heads hang  
twisting, slithered  
where thin fingers in still prayer  
jab frozen air.

Wings uplifted in mist, they plead  
all presences. I shy  
like a child bewildered by his  
own cold breath—

watching as watched by signposts  
to living, monuments to the  
travelling dead.

## *The Sweeper*

Each dusk  
The ancient lady sweeps  
The patch of road  
Just at the bend near the  
Top of the hill  
Where her son  
In his old Ford went off  
Three years ago.  
Her broom and form  
Are equally worn,  
But stiff and steady as  
A pendulum she swings,  
Clearing the ground  
Of pebbles and dust—  
Almost forgiving the land.  
She dreams tract and strand  
Remade pure as possible.  
Then withered with  
Her task precise, she sweeps  
Back over the stretch  
To make sure.

*Potatoes*

Grandpa said potatoes  
reminded him of school.

Potatoes and school.  
He said he'd wake nearly

freezing, kindle a fire  
and throw two potatoes

on. Going to school  
he carried them to

warm his hands. To  
warm his feet he ran.

He said by noontime  
those potatoes almost

froze, said he ate a lot  
of cold potatoes for lunch.

## *Turnpike Game*

1.

Over a rise  
I come down on them  
quick—  
my lights hard in their  
mirror, I swerve to avoid  
two nuns in a Mustang.

2.

On into the night  
alone but for  
stars blazing through pine  
we trade passes  
prancing the regalia of  
Maine—  
honking each time,  
me to tell them I'm a fine  
Catholic boy  
and if I could stay we'd  
play this road till  
it ran out

3.

Slowing to turn off,  
I watch their lights blend  
and dissolving the chill  
yankee air—  
taken off  
like a bat out of  
Boston.

*For Four Newsmen Murdered in Saigon*

May, 1968

The sickening hush. Your auto  
caught in idle in the humid noon  
with tires and windshield shot out  
and surrounded by your riddled  
bodies. These penalties for  
point of view are accurate report

even in death. The street stinks  
of terror and dust. In a moment  
cowering refugees emerge from  
hiding and quickly pass,  
mumbling with stunned tongues  
of watching you become the means

of your lost existence.  
You might have been five dead—  
but one, stumbling like a frightened  
fawn at open fire, has a feigned death  
full account and lived  
to tell us how it is trying to tell  
us how it is.

*To One Dead at Twenty of Self-  
Immolation by Fire*

The breeze I set to blaze  
consumes me. Whirling, I fly  
in a whisper of ghosts.  
I flee in this burning the shadow  
of myself; the flame of my mind smeared  
with mercy, with heaven.

An angel liting, I'm dragged  
down only by the weight of my promise,  
the weight of my ashes—  
to struggle to rise like Satan  
in the depths,  
wings washing the air with fire,  
but frozen to the waist.

*Toward San Francisco*

for Carla

We come here to forget  
the ash-damp summer Boston,  
a baby daughter who should have been.  
Five days across the scorching land,  
still all our thoughts,  
our sparse words are interrogative.  
Exchanging Spock for guidebook and map  
we accept what direction we can get  
for two turned tourists  
once so well prepared for parenthood.

Heading into the Sierras past sunset  
a cool breeze soothes the wound  
that time will heal.  
I watch your sleeping face  
scarred far too old  
wince in the wind . . .  
and I drive on, dreading another night  
spent apart from myself.

## II. In the Aviary



*The Death Team*

“In death you relax totally  
There are no more worries.  
You have finally made the team.”  
—overheard from a conversation  
between two elderly men

In death you relax  
totally; there are no more  
worries. You have finally

made the team. Reclining,  
you float outward, abandoning  
that flesh stitched together

by bones you once called  
yourself. You wheel into the  
circling dark, joining

the other members. Together  
you summon squads of the living—  
bid them rise out of themselves

as you have done, engage them  
as contestants in death, your  
game, successfully and forever.

### *South Moccasin*

At daybreak we found ourselves  
in the South Moccasin Mountains,  
weary and descending toward a  
distant coulee. Mountain goats  
mocked us and ran. Behind us,  
Surprise Creek had gone dry.  
Here every sound startled itself  
along some ridge or rim. We  
could see straight on for miles, but  
couldn't make our bodies get there  
though no one dared say we would  
die. You kept shouting for help;  
Old Ned cursed the burning sky.  
Our lives hung out ahead as  
we followed, wide-eyed, believing  
everything and more our echoes said.

*In the Aviary*

High above you some fool  
in a biplane is seeding the  
clouds. You curse him  
aloud. You threaten him  
with the flak of your fists.  
Further along, three  
archetypal owls out on a  
limb begin hooting at you.  
You pelt them with small  
stones, consistently missing.  
A parrot from the bushes  
calls you a fly-by-night  
something-or-other, and two  
Snowy Egrets cough soot  
on your shoes.  
Deeper into the beautiful  
garden, vultures circle your  
heart like apostles of grief  
marking time.

*The Poem About Blue Loons*

This is the poem about Blue  
Loons: the one where they

drive their perfect cars  
into the city facing the same

hazards we face. The lady  
Loons have bees in their

bonnets and the gentlemen  
wear feathers in their caps.

Though the roads are paved  
with good intentions, they

blow their own horns, and  
though they travel unnoticed,

their presence is no allegory,  
They take their own sweet

time. They have axes to grind.  
They love fine kettles of fish.

## Grasshoppers

“Atomic radiation gets the blame again as monster grasshoppers make a shambles of Illinois.”

—*TV Guide*

Suddenly they appeared,  
addicts for everything in  
Illinois. They removed  
Peoria in a minute, the populace  
drowning in a liquid with the  
sharp odor of tobacco juice.  
In Carbondale  
grasshopper eyes were seen in the  
distance, luminous as astronaut's  
visors. Then came the end. Chicago's  
buildings were crushed in a holocaust  
of mandibles. They scuttled  
Skokie. Moline was a maelstrom  
as they moved toward the borders  
where, in the face of signs reading  
Welcome to Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri,  
Iowa and Wisconsin, they collapsed dying  
to their gargantuan knees.

*Flagpole Sitter*

Remember? I perched  
atop those flagless  
poles of the Fifties  
and waited. This  
was at carnivals,  
grand openings of gas  
stations, and state  
centennials. I was  
up there with my summer  
cold like a kid hiding  
in his treehouse from  
mom. You waved  
when you passed, wondering  
why I did it. When I  
broke the record I came  
down and slept for  
weeks. I was all the  
rage then. But I  
knew no fame or any reason  
for my act; only  
as with a man who keeps  
both feet on the  
ground, the alleged  
fact of time.

*The Problems, The Models*

“Let us build models of our problems that we  
might visualize them clearly.”

—from a Sunday morning  
religious program

Let us build models  
of our problems that we  
might visualize them  
clearly. Let them tower  
above us the way Grief  
looms over a widow. Let  
us determine what we can  
see in the beautifully  
tormenting eyes of Agony.  
Let us learn first-hand  
that Anxiety has a wart  
on her nose, that as  
a fact of her life  
she despises children as  
much as adults. Let us  
know once and for all  
that wherever we are  
one of the eight faces  
of Despair is always on  
our side.

### III. At Irony's Picnic



*To Chronicle Small Beer*

Start with a clean  
slate. Grab a bull by  
the horns. Then smell

a rat. Next, chase a  
snake in the grass. Sow  
wild oats on a pig in

a poke. When the wolf  
in sheep's clothing  
arrives, rest on your

laurels. When queer fish  
like ruin stare you in  
the face, tickle them pink.

## *Badlands*

In the midst of the badlands  
cowboys sipping coffee from  
tin cups squat around a fire.

An organ grinder moves among  
them, his monkey soliciting  
grub. Their horses are poker-

faced and even the cowboys  
grow stoic. They pretend they  
imagine all this. Smoke from

their fire pirouettes toward the  
moon. Cattle are everywhere  
seeking spring range. The organ

grinder farts. The monkey  
chuckles, and the cowboys chew  
their platitudes just like on tv.

*My Kindergarten Girl Friend*

My kindergarten girl friend  
had fat cheeks and chubby legs  
but she was sweet. My thoughts  
were of pulling up her dress;  
not kissing in the coat closet  
or grabbing her pony tail.

I imagine she's married now. I  
see her husband harried at breakfast,  
belching yolks of eggs she's slung  
and swizzling his hot coffee.  
She stands there in her tattered  
robe, hair in pin clips, scowling.  
He looks up and says

ya know, you used to didn't be  
a bad lookin' woman.

*Dude Ranch*

There ain't nothin'  
here but divorcees and

dudes. No dogies or  
coyotes, just the

hot springs pool and a  
sauna. Every nite

there's a hoedown on  
cable tv. When ya come

they drive ya out on  
a rattle-trap stage and

step ya down to a fiddler  
playin' whilst the head

dude is sayin' Howdy  
pardner, the name's

Buck Lorenzo. Welcome  
to Woodpecker Valley.

*When the Twain Finally Meet*

They will walk in moonlight  
by the skin of your teeth,  
one saying O Darling,  
I'd rather be right than  
President!

They'll collide like lucky  
stars at the tip of your  
tongue, inevitably announcing  
their ways, coupling like  
bodies of knowledge.

*Measuring the Tree*

*Once a year, for the past seven years, a little old lady drives out near St. Thomas Episcopal Church and measures a tree. The Reverend Armand LaValle and his wife do not know who the woman is . . .*

*—The Boston Globe*

But they share her  
intimacy with the tree.  
They feed it fertilizer

and they feed it air.  
They water it late  
at night and in winter

they offer prayers against  
foul weather while the  
sun hangs, a dim lozenge

of light on the horizon.  
Once each year for seven  
years they peer against

the frosted rectory panes,  
and the lady comes.  
Driving out of the south

she parks her coupe at  
the roadside and edges  
toward the tree, measuring-

tape in hands delicate as  
a seamstress. Who could  
deny one measure of God's

world is in inches? She  
embraces the trunk to learn  
its growth.

Who could  
deny her quaking wrists,  
eager for the feel of bark?

*At Irony's Picnic*

Silence is sight-reading  
Swahili. Sin lumbers by on

stilts. Where did he get  
that Hawaiian shirt? those

rose-colored glasses? Down  
by the lake Desire is fondling

Regret's mother. Jealousy  
and Happiness dance the mazurka.

Justice, wearing the same  
old swimsuit, is cutting the

ballyhoo. Irony himself  
isn't even here.



## IV. An Author of Pantomime

When the Dish Ran Away with the Spoon

*Hey, diddle, diddle,  
The cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon;  
The little dog laughed  
To see such sport,  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*  
—Mother Goose

Yes, as it inevitably occurs,  
the dish ran away with a  
spoon. She was a stunning  
platinum blonde who wore real  
diamonds. He was a ruddy-looking  
guy: obese, balding and grateful  
just to have her on his arm.  
He was a guy of whom the passersby  
all said *whatever does she see  
in him?* Well, they abandoned  
that merriment and got themselves  
a room. And the love they made  
was precisely the kind that leaves  
a little dog laughing  
should he see such sport,  
the kind that leaves a cat to  
his fiddling and a cow jumping  
over the moon.

*The Hot Pants Polka*

In this poem blue is a  
symbol of evil. 7's are

flocks of giant  
uncontrollable birds

winging their ways north.  
Music simply means

you are dancing the Hot  
Pants Polka, like it

or not. The church  
at the end of the last line

suggests that once you  
begin looking for them

wonders never cease. The  
curve in the road is the

one before you get to  
Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

What isn't here is everything  
your mother wanted you to be.

*The Answer*

Think of it in terms  
of the pale glass slipper

of memory. Remember  
your first cigarette? How

you swallowed as if your  
whole body were starving for

smoke? Perhaps the answer  
lies somewhere in the

sudden convulsion of failure.  
Have you defined your terms?

Did you like to tease small  
animals as a child? Have

you thought this thing  
through to the end?

## *How to Teach Creative Writing*

Blindfold a member of the class. Lead him to a map, asking him to place his finger on it to determine a suitable location for his story. Discuss the possible failings of the story.

—paraphrased from the  
*English Journal*

Then blindfold the  
map, asking it to place  
its thumb on a student

to determine a suitable  
setting for human life.  
Discuss possible failings

of the life. Blindfold  
another member of the  
class, asking him to

record his impressions  
in a journal. Tell him  
you are the commander

of a firing squad. Tell  
him he's about to be  
shot. Shoot him.

Before adjourning, throw  
his body into a river  
on the map.

### *Varmint Calling*

(Contests held in the southwestern U.S. in which prizes are awarded for the best vocal simulation of the prey of coyotes)

First you take a deep  
breath. Then you imagine  
yourself a jack rabbit, wounded  
or diseased, remembering

distance and speed.  
Your heart races. Your  
brain is knotted with  
panic. Death is a dream of

your stumbling through  
thicket, through sage . . .  
the sounds you would make  
as the varmint brings  
you down.

*Making My Television Debut in the  
First National Bank of America*

The little lens, its  
little light  
bloodshot as a color  
photo of Mars  
discovers me. I'm  
starring as myself  
standing in line.  
I'm playing the part  
perfectly! Then my  
two left feet expose  
themselves. Suddenly  
I do my imitation  
of the new teller's  
right breast.  
I begin to act  
suspicious. Now I'm  
over here in the bank  
aquarium, we fish  
frenzied as Russian  
pianists. Next  
I think I'll be  
Desperation rolling  
up his sleeves, or no  
I'm the Eleventh  
Hour rearing my ugly  
tattoo.

*The Bigamist*

He lives to learn  
the loopholes in his  
speech,  
the way the easy journey  
from Memphis to Mobile  
makes him forget  
one-half of everything.  
Darlings, as sure  
as there are two of  
you there are two of him  
walking among us  
somewhere, disguised  
in his accustomed  
civilian clothes.



*An Author of Pantomime*

What the black  
tights and black

slippers tell you,  
Sahib, is that

for the present I'm  
top banana or anything

I wish to be. I waste  
no breath. I ruffle

my hair a bit. Here  
is my magic wand,

my *pince-nez*. I'm  
skating along on

thin ice and then,  
without apparent

effort, I put one foot  
in the grave. I'm

masquerading as death,  
Sahib, I'm speaking

to you in your native  
tongue.

## V. Life in These United States

*Playing Character Roles at  
the Lyric Theater*

Miss Melody Tent dashes  
past, late for her

part. The audience makes  
its strange slow sounds

the way earth settles  
in a land refill.

Guy Lombardo invites us  
to be his neighbors

in Apollo Beach, Florida.  
We set out, navigating

the floodlights  
through cheap glitz

into the realm of the  
purely stupid.

*“What Youngstown Needs is Good  
Representation”*

Let this represent Youngstown: Let  
there be strangers taking the shade

on impossible verandas. Let them  
be eating the dusk with the finest

of silver. Let them be decked out  
in lobster bibs, with appropriate

manners, and plenty of catsup  
on hand. Let them sip civic pride

in the moonlight. Let them reflect  
on their days in a concert of

various desserts. Let them retire  
to discussions of the Department

of Public Works in their dreams.  
Let an adequate darkness digest the

long hours of their sleep. Let  
Youngstown be represented by this.

*Life in These United States*

It goes on, official Washington  
holding its breath, the official

middle class holding its breath,  
the official impoverished holding

their breath, the unofficial  
aristocracy which everyone knows

is official holding its breath,  
conservatives, liberals holding

their breath, strippers, farmers  
and queers holding their breath,

all of us holding our breath,  
awaiting the inevitable result

of holding one's breath, wondering  
how long life in these United

States can go on with our holding  
our breath like this.

*Humor in Uniform*

Yes, we've heard the  
one about the GI on his

way to a bus stop who  
ducked into a bakery

because it was starting  
to rain. We've heard

the one about the  
chaplain and his wife

concerned with protecting  
their children against

parental abuse, &  
we've heard the one

about the ship's party  
and the Crete national

softball team. We can  
even imagine what those

wet, dirty marines, with  
mud-covered boots, thought

when the opened package  
revealed your sister's gift.

*Everything You Own*

Sometimes I think you're  
from the South. You speak

with that drawl. You move  
slowly as if taken by heat.

There are burning desires,  
strange elevations you

never overcome. Everything  
you own is in your

pockets. I see you in the  
drugstore down on Main,

sipping soda, spitting  
tobacco, mopping your brow.

You could tell me what this  
country needs.

*Growing Up in the Depression  
of the Seventies*

It's what happens  
when the politicians

are in cahoots with  
the hooligans. Beans

go up. Bread rises.  
Money does a jig

under the table,  
recalling its numbers,

living in the past.  
So many of us become

petty thieves even  
crime doesn't pay.

It's what happens  
when there is nothing

left in Ft. Knox but  
an old magician

squeezing water from  
coins.



## *Vigilantes*

There was a time in  
Their country when they  
patrolled the streets  
of villages on horseback,  
lynching murderers and  
thieves at gatherings  
so formal they called them  
neck-tie parties.

They wore sure thin smiles  
as they yoked violence  
from shadows to the  
light.

When law broke down in  
their towns they bent over it  
and looked with pity deep into  
its giant eyes. They offered  
it smelling salts and soothed its  
wounds. They stroked it,  
they picked it up, they took it  
into their own hands.

Why He Writes Poems Instead of  
His Congressman

Because a congressman  
enters his Cadillac  
as if it were a woman.

Because senate pages  
believe in *Reading  
Dynamics*.

Because Indians are  
no longer a symbol for  
anything but themselves.

Because the flag  
refuses to be worn as  
a shirt.

Because deep  
in the night all over  
this land

people in love  
with the sounds of their  
own voices

have taken to  
writing everything  
down.

## *When Guy Lombardo Died*

New Year's Eve went  
with him. On December 31st

all of the people on the  
earth's dark face

forgot how to dance.  
Days later when they remembered

to Fox Trot, there was no  
need. In the minute of midnight

gravity was suspended. The ball  
atop the Times Square Building

refused to descend. For the  
first time rain swirled

unimpeded by bodies to the  
pavement of those streets, the

air a vacancy of kisses and  
noise-makers. In the morning

people came from their houses  
with no hangovers, and stone-sober

proceeded with the old business  
of the world.

## **VI. The Meeting**

*Report from the Past*  
for Ted Hammett

This is the past,  
an intimate diamond,  
reappearing.

This is a flame dark  
as birth.

This is pleasure  
stranger than water  
or pain.

This is the voice of  
history saying  
*I keep repeating myself,  
please forgive me.*

## Revenge

*In all Eskimo communities . . . a murderer rears as his own stepson the son of his victim—and when this boy grows to manhood he may be the very one to exact delayed blood vengeance upon his foster father.*

—Peter Farb  
in *Man's Rise to Civilization*

1.

You, my father,  
my father's murderer,  
carried me on your back  
through this frozen land.

I have burdened you  
with my growth  
as your guilt would ease.

I rose a dozen winters  
before I learned the dark  
secret we share; I have loved  
you with all my growing.

2.

You taught me  
to trap, to stalk and  
kill game that I might  
live.

You were my lord of  
summers when our people  
are still—

when ice melts  
and water lies deep out  
over the tundra, leaving the  
land impenetrable as our  
beings.

You taught me  
to survive the bright nights  
my father bled.

3.

Into my life,  
inevitable as death,  
his line reaches; his blood  
moves ever deeper than  
your teachings.

I spend my nights  
preparing, body and spirit,  
to meet you; faces  
for grief.

I face these trembling  
hands which must tomorrow  
murder you, my hero, my  
curse, my stranger  
father.

## *The Last Night*

Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce pursued by the United States Army, 1877.

(Joseph, surmising the Nez Perce could not regain their land, attempted to lead them to Canada. In a brilliant tactical retreat the Indians eluded three detachments of U.S. troops and traveled over 1,000 miles to within thirty miles of the Canadian border where they were overtaken by forces under General Nelson Miles. The survivors were removed to Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.)

1.

For weeks they have stalked us  
through our mountains and across these

plains. At night we watch their dark  
fires grow, closing in like warlords

of winter. Our feet die with the length  
of days. While the white moon looms

we shiver and are awake.

2.

Smoke of burning damp grass hovers  
about us like death. Our wounded speak

of traveling. They have only words to give,  
and we from the strength of our dying bones

must return only words. If the dawn has  
healed us, we shall circle back though

the waiting sun be a scavenger.



3.

This night near the fire I watched  
maidens descend from the heavens. They

circled about me, white-robed, bounding  
to music of the flames. Their light

feet dazzled the brittle land, drew  
bright shoots and stalks from the ash

till the flames split my vision to dust.

4.

We could harvest our dreams in  
the warm sun of day; work our flesh with

the smell of new earth. But day will  
return to find us retreating, scuttling

about burning everything we could not eat.

*The Smallest Thing on Earth*

You awaken to find  
you are the smallest

thing on earth and where  
does the smallest thing

keep itself? The slightest  
breeze tips you over.

Everywhere the grass is  
talking about you and

what it says is anybody's  
guess. The birds, your

former friends, keep  
mistaking you for something

good to eat. As it is  
your life is more fragile

than water in the hands  
of a bucket brigade.

It has come to this: In  
your dream you are walking

to the end of the world to  
learn the secret of size.

*Hunger*

An owl shuffles in the  
cold eye of the moon. In

low ground blind mice  
are alive. Even hunger is

as old as these hills  
where everything known

is a risk. What can we  
learn from the dangers of

this world, like driving  
through mountains in rain—

from loving and later  
like orphans of night

from trekking the slow  
depths of sleep?

## *The Meeting*

Somewhere along the road  
you meet up with yourself.  
Recognition is immediate.  
If it happens at the proper  
time and place, you propose  
a toast:

*May you remain as my shadow  
when I lie down.  
May I live on as your ghost.*

Then you pass, knowing you'll  
never see yourself that way  
again: the fires which burn  
before you are your penance,  
the ashes you leave behind are  
your name.





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