In the Aviary
Poems by
Gerald Costanzo
In the Aviary
A Breakthrough Book

University of Missouri Press
In the Aviary
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Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment is made to editors of the following magazines and anthologies in which most of these poems, some in slightly different form, first appeared:


A few of the poems have also appeared in The Stone Drum Anthology of Young Poets, in a “trithology” published by West Coast Poetry Review, and in a chapbook, Badlands, published by Copper Canyon Press.

The author expresses his gratitude to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Carnegie-Mellon University for two Scaife Grants and for a Falk Foundation Grant which enabled him to complete this volume.

Thanks are due as well to The National Endowment for the Arts for a Creative Writing Fellowship during which time final poems and revision of the manuscript were completed.

Printed and bound in the United States of America
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For my mother

for Carla
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*In The Aviary* is the 1974 winner of The Devins Award for Poetry, an annual award originally made possible by the generosity of Dr.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.

15
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.

16
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 lilting, 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.
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.

60
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
	hing 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.