

Paranormal/Romance:
Poems Romancing The
Paranormal

poetry by

Denise Dumars

ROMANCING THE PARANORMAL BY DENISE DUMARS

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Introduction

Interacting with the paranormal used to involve mediums, seances, the Ouija board, tarot cards, and other familiar metaphysical devices. Today, we live in a world saturated with technology, yet simultaneously fixated on the paranormal. Ghost hunting is the new fad that seems to be ever-expanding, and so we now see the explosion of technological interaction with the dead: electromagnetic radiation detectors, infrared cameras, devices to record electronic voice phenomena, and even simple flashlights used as means of communicating with the dead, no table-rapping required!

Alas, times change, but the desire to make contact with the beyond, to span the gulf between our loved ones on the other side and us, has not. This book is a meditation of sorts on our myriad ways of contacting the dead, meeting them on their own terms as well as on ours. It is inspired by many individuals, both those on this side of the veil and those on the other. It is about a special kind of love that we have for those who are no longer with us in our plane of existence...unless you believe, of course, that they are with us still in non-corporeal form.

At the end of this book you will find a list of books and other media that I recommend to serious seekers, whether you “believe” or simply find the idea entertaining. I recommend these sources to writers of

the paranormal in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

My dearest hope is that someday one of you will read from this book with or for your loved ones on the other side.

And as Dylan Thomas has written:
“May death have no dominion,”

Denise Dumars
Lughnasa, 2012

Dedication:

For all my departed loved ones. This is
for you.

Note: when a poem's title is in quotation marks, it indicates terminology used in the paranormal research community.

Acknowledgements:

The following poems were first published in *Letting in the Dark*, Yellow Bat Press, 2003.

“Below Ground”
“Now and Then”
“The Rose Maiden”
“What is Forgiven”

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Book One: Cartographie of the Undiscovered Country

Western mythology views the other side as a distinct location, very remote and hard to get to and therefore impossible to map or explore, as Shakespeare alluded to when he called it “the undiscovered country.” European folklore calls it a place “beyond the veil,” and it is thought that twice a year—usually around the first days of May and November—the “veil” grows thinner and that border lets fall its ectoplasmic razor wire.

These dates when the veil is thin are commemorated across our country whether we realize it or not. For example, the capitol of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, was named for a somewhat bloody Maypole rite the French observed the Choctaw enacting, while in Mexico a hybrid holiday was formed when the Spanish observed an indigenous holiday welcoming back the spirits of the departed, which they then combined with the Catholic All Saints/All Souls’ days in November to create *El Dia de los Muertos*.

The Protestants who settled much of North America didn’t count on a wave of impoverished Irish bringing to our shores the fine old Pagan/Catholic holiday once called *Samhain*: Halloween, now the second-most popular holiday in America. Where I live in California, the Day of the Dead, as *El Dia de los Muertos* is known to English-speakers, is as ubiquitous as Halloween and the two usually form a long weekend of celebrations both sacred and secular, both welcoming the spirits of the departed and scaring ourselves silly and partying. During this time and near

the beginning of May—especially amongst people who identify themselves as pagans or Wiccans—people continue to try to contact those who have moved to Shakespeare’s Undiscovered Country and are apparently unable to leave a forwarding address. And now, enjoy the journey.

“Infrared”

Mapping the heat
of the heart
in the phantasm’s cold spot
separates the living
from the dead.

But what about ghost hearts?
Confused, rooted to the spot
sensing an absence
but not remembering
exactly what is missed.

When you walk into
the cold
of their empty knowing,
they hone right in,
and you feel a searing pain.

You scream,
running feet arrive
phantasm retreats
as other ghost hunters
rush in.

“What happened?”
They ask, astonished,
but you cannot explain
the galaxy of heartache
you experienced.

“I just saw a spider,”

you say. They click
their tongues
and go back to their
EVPS
while you still feel
the spirit heart's assault
reverberating
like an echocardiogram.

As the song says,
"A heart dies every minute,"
and the dead ones seek the living.
Eres tu mi amor?

“Parallel Worlds”

You're sitting on the couch
Eating cheese crackers
(It's ok; they're organic),
Watching a scientist on TV
Speak about parallel worlds.

He says, in a parallel reality,
A dinosaur may be walking
Through your living room
Right now.

You shudder; something passes
Between you and the coffee table,
And you might as well
Be watching the Rose Parade
It's suddenly so cold.

You realize it's not a T-Rex
From another dimension;
It's your ex—
He's having a bad dream,
And you wonder,
In the other dimension
Is your ex still an ex?

And so far as the scientist knows
There's no way now to tell you
That in that other reality
The two of you
Never even met.

Conglomerata

Now that publishers
Have consolidated
Into a few big conglomerates—
I wonder, what if ghosts did, too?
It would explain
The undifferentiated ectoplasm
Streaming from a medium's mouth
As from a messy roll of cheesecloth,
Or a tangle of meaningless contracts.

Sinister thought:
That unfurling, pus-white streaming
A conglomerate
Of the thwarted shades of lovers
Only hurt and anger still existing,
Balling like a fist, incorporating
Each other's pain and resentment,
Growing ever larger.

Or, as with the real-life
Conglomerates, growing smaller:
Weaker spirits swallowed up,
Wisps of wailing silence
Unmouthed into the roiling horde,
Brought into the light,
But best left dark,
Dense as a black hole now,
Unstoppable.

Where does love go
When it dies,

But the body lives on?
And when the body corrupts
As each of ours must do,
Does that festering love
Reconnect, perhaps inflame,
And join the darkening army
Of the conglomerate?

Pray to the mercies
That each of us may die unsensed
By the incorporating blackness
Of lost love,
Forgotten, best of all, our own
 remains discrete.

“Residual”

Some spirits are residual
Like the shadows on Hiroshima walls,
Victims of the atom.
The residual hauntings
Move in repetitive arcs
And predictable patterns,
Like holograms
In Disney’s Haunted Mansion.
You cannot reason with them,
And they cannot see or hear you.

They might as well
Be spectres of every invective
She blasted him with
Before she left,
The epithets he always hears
In his head
After a shot and a beer,
And because there is no one there
To exorcise them or to say
“Shut the hell up, bitch!”
The residue plays forever
Since he doesn’t
Believe in ghosts.

“Phone Calls from the Dead”

You can actually get them these days,
Pre-recorded,
So you won't be forgotten
On your birthday.
Thing is,
You never know when a phone call
From the dead is “live.”
That's what I don't like.
I mean, what if the phone call
From the dead
Wants you to come on home?
Where is home, anyway,
And if you cannot find it,
Will the caller
Come for you?
Last night I dreamed I asked my father
For Linda's phone number.
“Isn't it in your cellphone?”
He replied.
“No,” I said. “When she died,
I didn't have a cellphone.”
I asked again for Linda's number.
He said he would get it for me,
But he never did come back.

Ghost Riders

They're not what you think.
Transparent Hells' Angels,
Dude may have weighed 280 in life
But now weighs less than a feather.

A last member of the Hessians'
"One percent" is on his oxygen tank today
Telling me how he saw his late friend,
The one Jim Carroll wrote about,
Who came looking for him
Right there in Intensive Care,
Transparent as a hooker's raincoat.

You don't tell him that you've seen them
As they laugh through red light cameras
Disappearing into the Milky Way
Out around Yucca Valley,
Heading toward the honky-tonk
At Pappy's Pioneer Town,
Leaving you in the dust of life

Out where the sky
Is vaster than the afterlife,
Darker than the demons
That compelled the ghost riders
To leave the mainstream world behind
Even while they were alive,
None fearing the end
That inevitably comes too soon.

You taste salt and Reaper Ale

On your tongue, grow claustrophobic
Beneath a sky you had no idea
Was so fucking crowded,
And the hollow roar
Of phantom engines nearly drowns out
The Gram Parsons tribute band
At Pappy's, and you are the one sad
Mutherfucker alone in the crowd.

You could disappear
Into the tarantula darkness
Of the Mojave,
A vision quest
Beneath the great chaotic
Smear of the night sky,
Or you could stop awhile
And listen to their voices
Before going back to the bar,
"Last call,"
Just too damned ironic,
Then the long, dark
Lonely road home.

Don't worry; they'll be here
When you travel the dark highway
Again. You'll start to feel the freedom
Of coming and going as one pleases,
Without corporeal limits.

It's a trap; don't believe it.
Every one would come back full-throttle
Sell his weevily soul
For just one more taste of Jack Daniels
One kiss from the girl singer
In Daisy Dukes.

Finish your beer; say a prayer;
Give them the middle-finger salute
Or any other gesture
You feel is appropriate,
And let them fade, fade,
Headlights lost in the Milky Way.

“EVP”

The paranormal investigator
Suggests trying EVP:
So, Aunt Shirley would
Prefer to talk to a machine
Rather than to her nephew?

Since when was she so fond
Of technology?
The only high-tech thing
He ever heard her praise
Was the infrared nail dryer
At the beauty salon.

But maybe that explains it:
The registers below or above
Human hearing
Can capture her *kvetching*
From beyond the grave
Electronically, subatomically,
Even when our ears cannot.

Small mercies, perhaps,
Our limited senses,
And maybe nature knew
We should not extend above,
Below,
The registers of frequency
Which life was meant to hear.

But it turns out
That it's not Aunt Shirley

On the EVP recording:
It's a man, first saying, "Go away,"
Then, "Help me," and at last,
"Get out. Get out. Get out."

They always say the same things
On those recordings.
Did you ever wonder why?
Perhaps Aunt Shirley
Has met a nice gentleman
In the hereafter.
If so, then the words
Suddenly make good sense.

Milk Jug

For some reason,
in most paranormal TV shows
somewhere in the scene
there is an old-fashioned milk jug:
One of those steel containers
that looks timeless,
that could have been made yesterday
or a hundred or more years ago.

They say that time is like that
on the other side. Simultaneous
the past, the present,
and possibly, the future.
Ever wonder why
people ask the spirits
of the Ouija board
for predictions?

Think about that milk jug.
Where have you seen it before?
When will it be made, in the future?
Go look in the corners:
is there one in the room
that wasn't there yesterday
and if so, how did it get there?
No, really: go check the garage
and then come tell me
that you didn't find a thing.

Ash Cold Grey

Ash hash marks lace filigree
Fireplace grate pressed tin
Ceiling bell that has no clapper
Scrape cane tip chair leg

Bone china demitasse
Flies across the room
Smashes into the wall
Falls to the floor, *cremains*

Hash ash grey webs cobs
Welsh lace doll porcelain
Sunken face cold
Grey spider eyes

Meet my dust-choked scream
Meme echoing
Dust cold grey ash hash marks
Lace fade print lint bone

China pony ground
By rocking chair there
By the China doll
Bone china from Shanghai.

Crash hash pad San Fran
Scream team and glaze
On bone china cup
Lip slips lip cut

Ash wine deep red
Throb knob dark sob
China pony dry eyes
Go on now go die.

Blooded

Thick blond-blood *ristras*
in bunches dried crumbled *chiles*
over the transom, *la puerta*.
We call our empty home
Rancho Salsipuedes
(leave if you can!)
beating veins and capillaries
thick with pooled red
inviteusininvitusininvitusinin
vitus invictus
a blood-red hibiscus
blooms near the door,
agua fresca jamaica
ruddy residue
at the bottom of a pan
a smear of Revlon Red
on the mirror thickwithdust
besame besame besame
the ancient mattress suddenly sags
open sesame!
The front door flies open
and *Magia Roja*, an ancient
coffee-marked paperback,
appears on the dresser
and the stained-scarlet shell windchimes
start to sigh:
(suspiro suspiro suspiro)
(don't say blood)
tormenta de polvo

Below Ground

So this is where they take us
when they go down below
to the chamber of Anubis,
Inanna's realm of the fleshless,
chambered nautilus of the soul.

Strip from me my cloth epidermis
the spotted hide ruined by the sun
the lip that muffles skull
against skull,
a river of scarlet burning

with each kiss.

Sex smells of humus
and the sweet gloxinia
that is the mouth of death.

Once we are bone,
the gods gather us up
and recombine our last dry essence
with gold, vermilion, tourmaline
to plane the brow, the chin,
the structure of the once-loved face.

We have gone from humble
to exalted, calcined rictus
to gilded mask. The gods are kind
to us in death, give us back our hearts,
our beauty,

the jeweled robes of forever
to hang upon our Osiris-green limbs

And in this silent place
we do not miss the words,
the sun, the warmth of flesh
or know the growing older
of the universe,
the decay in planets' orbits,
and in all living things.

Bring Out Your Dead

1. Toadstool

The little green frog
told me to lick him:
How could I refuse?
You appeared to me,
a mushroom from beyond,
saying “Take a little bite,”
not knowing I had already
had that forbidden pleasure.
There was so much you didn’t know,
didn’t care for. About the rest of it,
my mother was wrong.
We could have shared
the Amanita throne, but I
was afraid to ask, did not want
to upset the fungi cart.
Now, as they always say, it’s too late,
and the French Market is a ghost
of its former self, but in it
some of your lost morning
glory sees the sun, the ever-river.

2. Doctor Toxic

The bats have rabies,
and you gave that man
the shirt off your back.
Guatemala’s forbidden zone
beckoned—you heeded the call,
and I’m proud of you for that

and for so many other things.

So I buried your heart
in New Orleans, a snake
in a cage for a friend.
I kept your soul for my own,
knowing that the Yucatecan jaguar
who coveted it
will just have to find some satisfaction
in the gift of that ugly, loud shirt,
and a memory of strange innocence
and wonder at the wide, wild world.

3. The Yellow Rose of Texas

You got away with a lot,
knowing that the chips of time
eventually would have to be cashed in.
But by then we'd spent
all of yours in Las Vegas,
and so you had none left to trade.
Beautiful corpses—what a crock.
We buried you beneath a yellow rose,
so the earth would refresh you every spring,
bloom dewy-golden, we cheat 'em and how,
each new season hunting for free cocktails
and laughing at the rubes.
“Medium pimpin,” we laughed.
Yeah, that's your legacy,
strange beauty and finding freebies
raising my glass to you
every single time.

Backhoe Pet Cemetery Gothic*

For David Parsons

Was fiddling with the air conditioning
on a route I rarely take
when I drove by Pet Haven pet cemetery
where a backhoe was digging
And I realized
that the dust from the pet cemetery
was being pulled in
through the air conditioning vents
and I thought about how
even in life we are in dust;
“Dust to dust—“

What was that backhoe doing?
Digging up forgotten pets
whose humans had gone
to their own rewards,
no longer paying for perpetual pet care?
“Always room for one more,”
as the saying goes
and suddenly I was afraid that
a desiccated cat or mummified dog
would be flung from the backhoe
onto my windshield
as I sat frozen at the stoplight.

I fiddled some more
with the air conditioning,
not knowing that the next morning
my cousin Gail would call
with news of the death of her cat.

“I am dust and water walking,”
said Osiris, and in ancient Egypt
it was believed that pets upon passing
played in the afterlife
in the fields of Bastet.
And my friend Francisco suggested
that Gail
Put some of those silhouettes
Of pets in her car’s back window
As a memorial
To all her kitties
Through the years
With the words,
“Meowin’ in Heaven.”

*See References and Recommended Reading

Djehuti in Las Vegas

I take measures
to see that there is accuracy,
he says. I have never enjoyed
the math.
*(I am a creature of language:
This you decided, Scribe,
when you gave me voice
and pen and page.)*
My own preference
would have included date wine
and my lovely wife Sesheta
enjoying the poolside sun
with her paperback novel
at your desert oasis
while I watched the roulette wheel
for illegal tampering
and forced myself not to read
another's poker hand.
But that was not to be:
My colleague Mayet and I
have work to do,
and your death depends upon it.
Trust me: you wouldn't like it
if I forgot to write down your
negative confession: "I have not stolen,
I have not committed murder," et al.
And after you have done
I must see that your answers
are carefully recorded
in the book of your heart
so that it may be weighed

lighter than a showgirl's
feathered headdress,
and the face of Ausar
will then be yours to see,
beyond the stars. Trust me on this:
it'll be a better afterlife
than that depicted in *Forever Plaid*.
Now, *Shu!* I must
get back to work.

Devil Wind

Where were you
The night of the devil winds?
Malibu burned
And the cliffs of San Pedro
Claimed another life;
A fine old
South Bay tradition—
Bone breaking over blue.

As Malibu smoldered
We did our best
To calm each other;
How badly did we fail?
How much more did we hurt
Each other as the devil winds
And the fires
And the sandstone cliffs
Claimed their territory
Pushing us closer together,

Farther apart.
The impermanence
Of the evening shared
With the gulf between our desires
And our infirmities
Threatening even this
Meager time together.

They tell me I'm foolish—
You dishonest, user,
A fraud, unreal

But none of this is true.
They envy the way
We find comfort
In each other's wracked and damaged bodies,
In the grit-filled wind
That sticks in everybody's craw,
A word of pity here,
A word of condemnation, there.

There is no help tonight—
No answer in the devil winds
While symbols of rich mens' lives
Burn amidst the waves.
We burn for each other
And for once I will not care
What the mirror tells me
Or the hands of the clock
Knowing each gentle touch
Is a weapon against
The burning loneliness of night,
The empty bed
I must lie down in,
Dry as a Santa Ana,
The devil wind
Inside this time.

The Pomegranate Orchard

*Inspired by a recent discovery recounted in
Archeology magazine.*

In the pomegranate orchard
Ivory whorls amongst the green grass
The Western scientist adjusts her scarf

Trowels and dentists' picks
Pull bone beads from the fresh whiff
Of chlorophyll in summer turf

They are revealed
As metacarpals and phalanges
Fine and ancient fingers
Of surplus courtesans sacrificed
To the wall

No memory of the names
Of apricot-cheeked young women
Bought from good families
Never given a choice
Their voices still scream
From the sharp beaks of Horus falcons

Sudden hot gusts presage the arrival
Of the windhorses of their souls
And the Uighur workers grab their
prayer rugs
And flee to safety, *Inshallah*

The foreign archeologists
Feel suddenly in their blood
Their ancestors' fear of the Wild Hunt
And the *Bean Sidhe* death keening

Remember me remember me
Forgotten lips are whispering
From winding sheets of ruby silk
Long since merged with yellowed clay

My blood is in the pomegranate
Drink the sour juices
To know the bitterness
Of my short existence in the world
Feel the useless aching tears
And gritted sand in my eyes
As you tell your people
Knowing they will never understand
And see through my eyes
For just a moment
Soul transported on the back
Of a spectral mount
Into a limitless blue sky.

Waiting for Peckinpah

Yes, this is Mexico,
Yes, I am drinking absinth
From *La Checa Republica*.
Yes, Johnny Cash is on the juke,
Warren Oates is my prom date,
Ernest Borgnine is my dad.
Dr. Lucas serves me Lucid—
My cat eyes on the label.
Love, we are in trouble here.

Peckinpah would want tequila.
He would want Miss Yellowjacket
In her golden pleather glory,
He would want the Maya girl,
Shy and full-lipped, he would.
He would lift the vodka bottle
Shaped like a *cuerno de chivo*
And blow the whole lot of you away.

I'm waiting for your song
I'm chewing wormwood and posing
For photos with the *Vato* and the *Narco*
Who are in a drinking contest—
One last tequila!—with the Fed.

Red linnets swim behind my eyes
And I'm thinking of how to get out of here
Before the whole place explodes
When the Hexmaster appears,
Carrying the carcass of a deer.

I examine the contours
Of the pain that confounds me.
We are between the worlds here
And no one knows that each
And every one of us is already dead,
Our blood pooling for the last puma
In Tijuana, the oblivious jaguar
Which has already consumed
Our lives so far,
And once we are gone
There is no one left to remember.

What is Forgiven

In the song the mariachi sings
is power: money to burn is evil
and as the *maquilador* lights his cigar
with a hundred-dollar bill
the ashes fly up to heaven,
even as the souls of the dead
come down, to visit and embrace.

In the calendula fields,
a girl's cinnamon skin is dusted
with gold petals. The boy
dressed in white feeds her
a sugar skull. Someday
we will all be dead, and this
is solace: elders embrace us,
bring us home in bony arms

whisper in their thin, dry voices.
It is still too hot for sex
but on the coast the fog comes in
like *el vampiro's* dark cloak,
a breath of icy moisture,
condensation on a margarita glass.
In peppery staccato,
a machine pistol spreads
the tang of blood and horror
in the air; this too,
is forgiven.

Those who can do so
look the other way, do not hear

the Bronco speeding away,
the women's wailing. *Abuelita*
has gone to the *panaderia*,
has brought back *pan de muertos*,
and marigolds to welcome back the dead.
No one remembers her dead; they died
so long ago even the names
are unfamiliar: *Rita, Blanca, Simon*.

A brindled kitten plays
among the markers. Old stones
are overturned; the money
for *caridad perpetuo* has gone.
Abuelita carries turkey with *molé* sauce
and white rice and black beans—
they were Blanca's favorites.

Taxis arrive outside the gates
bearing wealthier mourners,
and the drivers wait—the rich do not
wish to commune long with the poor.
Behind a rich man's crypt
a *SIDA*-infected *puta* gives solace
to a lonely man whose wife is dead,
somewhere a pit bull growls.

What is *not* forgiven
is the orange-and-black intrusion
of the *Yanqui* Halloween,
the costumes, the *calabazas*
hollowed out not for good stew
but for lanterns. Paper witches
fly while corporeal *brujas* hide,
burning *canela* and orange peels
with sugar to appease the angry dead.

Somewhere a policeman takes a bribe,
a boy slaps a girl, but these things too
are forgiven, and the hollow keenings
of the dead mix with the incense
and the cooking smoke. The odor
of decay rises even above the exhaust
of Volkswagens, *autobuses*, and the
brighter cars of the American rich.
And they, too, are forgiven.

Home

What do the dead look like
when they appear to us?
A chipped facade,
the label of a bottle of Lilac Vegetal,
the tiny christening dress
or tatting in the skeletal hand?

Are all the dead ecru,
regardless of race,
or are some dove grey,
terracotta, or umber?

What will I be telling you
about them
when the first one speaks—
a death rattle,
a forgotten language,
or a lost dialect their only
way to communicate?

Would they be transparent
like the striped ghost cat
that flew across my doorstep?
Are the dead
never human at all?

Would that one would answer
such questions
before summoning them,
bringing their journeying
back to a place

they most likely never really felt was home,
not at all, not at all,
in this regard,
just like the rest of us.

Epistles

Write to the dead
letter office.
Expect
your check to bounce.
Know that the SASE
will never get back to you,
and if it is retrieved,
expect it
a hundred years hence
or a hundred years in the past.
Expect
a general lack of caring—
what does the daily minutiae
mean to them?
Are the dead, perhaps,
in the blogosphere?
Check the comments
to your latest posting.

An acorn from one
of the Sacred Oaks
of the *Acjachemen*
fell before me
as I wrote this—
a spirit
replying to my query
or an angry squirrel,
warning me away?
We'll never know
for certain.
So scent your epistles

with Devon Violets
and wait for a sign.
If a pack of talcum
explodes on your clothes
at the drugstore,
then I'm afraid
you have your answer
at last.

Wasting Time

Why waste time
with the living
when the dead are so much fun?
Ask them how to play cribbage,
crochet, make elderberry wine.
Play canasta with them and bocce
draw with pastels and whittle,
write in calligraphy
with scented lilac ink,
fly a kite or a balsa-wood glider.
Sleep in tents, cook on a bonfire,
dress in gypsy skirts, dye your hair
with henna, tint your lace with tea.
Read beeswax dropped in water—
use the Ouija board,
but never with unbelievers.
Affect an old top hat
wear someone else's jewelry,
read all the index cards
posted at the general store.
Learn how to make
cock-a-leekie, and bake
raisin pie,
sit by the window,
and watch the live but unlively
living world go by.

The Truth About the Fallen Soldier

For Samantha Henderson

The random words make little sense:
roll that tumbler
bait that game
drop that fish
stave that skull
rot that foot
write that tome.

He came back
in spirit,
dressed in an overcoat—
did the sleeves have chevrons?
Corps devices on the shoulders?
Did the cuffs have braiding?
Did he wear a khaki cap?
What about a helmet?
You'd think that after that—
he'd look a bit worse for wear,
but the Great War
is poorly remembered,
unless of course you were there.

He sits alone on porches,
stands with military pose
and knows that no one gives a fuck
and that he died alone.

The Barbary Coast

I am the simmering Cimarron,
the madam of damask,
the overripe crimson doll
all whalebone stays
and coconut candy, full
wind-whipped chapped cheeks
as red as bitten lips.
Here is the Yangchow girl:
her chamber celandine and celadon.
See how daintily
she eats her breakfast *congee*
from delicate bone china
with narwhal ivory chopsticks.
She who is seen from the window:
coral lips and Derry green eyes,
calico muslin, broken blue china,
weeping willow, Gold Rush widow.
We lived in penury
died in misery—
the romance of it all, illusion.
Trapped by ill repute,
corsets, bound feet,
when there came the shaking
came the fire
came the panic
1906 our forever prison:
One of us scalded
One of us fallen
One of us burned
our shadows on the wall.
Listen: delicate rappings still come

from these walls, ironic laughter
from these dark chambers, shadows
still seen in these windows, and
doors just keep latching and unlatching
like the unlacing of a well-worn frock.
Look for us and you hope to find
suggestions of your version
of the long-gone past:
the ragtime piano,
the flocked wallpaper
the cloying sips of absinthe
and forbidden puffs of opium
in our so-called pleasure den.
But there was no pleasure;
that is all in your heads,
your blessed naïveté
which covers our charnel house
with wedding-cake frosting,
seed pearls, and gilded tin ceilings:
this was no *belle époque*.
But the truth is that
we would never want you
to know or feel our misery,
so we are pliant and ever-willing
for you to puff the rice powder
onto our singed complexions
to tint our leathern lips with
juicy rhubarb, to drop the belladonna
into our drying eyes
if this is the image of us
that you most desire,
a memory's revisionist history.
Perhaps best to keep it
in your minds
the way it was not

but maybe, just maybe,
were it ever possible
the way that maybe
just maybe
it should have been.

Double Dog Dead

Let's go on and pretend
that the world is still trying.
Keep your head, but
you're better off dead
if I'm a betting woman
and I am. Spin the wheel
and see what Fortuna
digs up. Double dog dare
I'm really not here
so whatever comes up
it is the winner.
So tell me, mandarin:
black tortoise,
green dragon,
vermilion phoenix—
the serpent
is waiting in the wings.
Double dog dare
double down and I don't care
you're already there
at the end of the line.
Zen at the start; lost in the heart
and mix the wine in with the blood
confection and bitter, bitter rejection
I'm not all perfection,
so spin fortune's wheel again,
lift her up now as then
I'll meet you
at the finish line.
Double dog dead
that's the hand that you held

and the dice are made of bone.
It's better than gambling alone—
when the house of the dead
always holds
the best hand
every time.

Wine Is For Forgetting...

...Hawaiian shirts
and Belgian lambic
...Matching dresses
and Shetland sheepdogs
...Scottish kilts
and Irish coffee
...Andrew Marvell
and Margaritas
...Lillian Hellman
and *Gertie the Dinosaur*
...The spring rains of Mars
and the carnival of spirits
...keep the stemless glass filled
and remember that the wine
is technically not a “spirit”
so please do not use that word
in my presence
so long as my presence
is not transparent.

The Rose Maiden

*“The musical summons
rouses the Rose Maiden
as she wakes to her bridal.”*

—Victorian wedding day poesy*

She wanted to be the Rose Bride;
we could not stop her.
Now the thorns
have rent her tender thighs
and the blood shoes
have her dancing
through the night
to music beat by bones.
She cries forgiveness
as we reach for tattered edges
of her gown, mourning-purple,
staining the delicate ecru
of its antique lace.

We did indeed attempt a rescue,
but she had already tasted
the mould-verdant cake
concealing drops
of pomegranate within its sweetening
heart. Now we cry
as she dances on skeleton feet,
fingerless as Sedna,
wailing while unseen hands
pull whole hanks
of her hair.

Awake to your bridal!
They called her
and she answered.
Now we wear our funeral suits
and mask the stench
with daylilies and tea roses
waiting for the sin-eater
to arrive and cleanse
this site. There was nothing
we could do, we'll tell him,
as he eats the last flyspecked
crumb of cake
from her torn bosom
and we sniff our nosegays—
every maiden
discreetly dropping
her poesy ring
in the dirt.

*A *poesy* is a short phrase or lines of poetry inscribed on the surface of a piece of jewelry. Poesy rings, usually gold rings with an inscription on the outside, were popular from the 16th through the 19th centuries, traditionally given to the bride-to-be by her fiancé, who usually composed an original text for the ring. They began as wedding rings in the late Medieval era and later came to be considered either engagement rings or what we call “promise rings” nowadays. They are making a comeback here in the 21st century, often made of less expensive materials such as stainless steel, and are given for various reasons, such as Mother’s Day gifts, friendship rings for your BFF, and so on.

Afterlife

Haven't you ever wondered
why no spirit ever speaks
of the afterlife when
haunting us or when they
have been summoned
at a séance—there is never
a word as to whether
there are white and periwinkle
lilies of the Nile,
Mr. Lincoln red roses,
or bright orange tiger lilies
alongside a picturesque creek
with a rustic bridge across it,
chairs and marble tables
(the latter not the least bit reminiscent
of headstones, though)
in the garden, hanging baskets
of bursting pink
geraniums and fuchsias,
sweet jessamine, lemon,
and orange blossoms
scenting the breezes
while fluffy golden retrievers
and a colorful tortoise
with a baleful smile
rest in the shade
by the creekside,
a few golden speckled koi
swimming slowly by.
Does the Mourvèdre

never run out
or cause a headache,
the crème brûlée
never pack on the pounds
and is one's favorite music
always playing, be it Beethoven
or Parliament or Johnny Cash?
Does no one have to tolerate
another's taste in music?
But I am also worried
that there might be
only white roses—
the kind one used to wear
to church on Mother's Day
if one's own mother had died,
and people who look like those
in an ad for a dating website,
expressionless, emotionless,
lost in white batiste summer dresses
and crisp navy-striped seersucker
suits and Panama hats
who drift aimlessly by.

Does no one ever notice you?
Of course not—you're not dead,
you ninny! Why should anything
they do in their afterlife (not yours)
be anybody's business
but their own?

“Mel” Meter

What the hell is that?
This is real life,
not *Ghostbusters*—
you don't put souls
in a box.
Edison tried, they say—
I'm sure Tesla did
as well. But now,
sensing ghosts in 3D,
heat and electronic signatures
simultaneous—I don't have
the words to describe it,
but then, neither do
the ghost hunters,
as none have been able
to get the *ecto* in the chamber
or the *plasm* in the can.

“Heart Monitor”

The heart knows
what the mind refuses to believe—
the mind moves in mundanities
clouds and clarifies
to fit its constricted parameters.
The heart, however, has
a memory—an intuition factor
in its simple muscle sense.
Reality is what is empirical—
not that which is intuited
by the results of a monitor
when it records the heartbeat
of a person who sees a spirit.
The heart knows—despite
what the popular songs may say,
as does the brain.
Yet it cannot be understood
by human metaphor.
One feels the heart
in the blood, a barrier
not shared with the brain,
conveniently enough.
So go ahead—monitor the heart—
weigh it like Ma’at
in the afterlife,
and let Thoth record the stats.
It cannot be understood
any other way, for once the heart
is measured, and the soul
is on its way, there is no
more measuring, and no

more empirical data
for the corporeal ghost hunters
to compute
on their heartless monitors.

“Plasma”

Some like to donate it.
Others manifest it at séances
the world made incandescent
and shivery in the liminal spaces
between matter, soul,
and this lymph-like substance
of the ether, the elliptical
orbit of the love
between the living
and the dead,
the *matériel* understood
by the ethereal.
Captured in the act
of becoming or ending
or somewhere in-between,
it should be seen
as too revealing, laid
too bare for the mundane
ladies in their puce felt hats
with crooked veils
and soiled lace stained
with dimestore make-up
and the precious gents
in chartreuse shirts
and raw silk jackets.
Witness, do you say?
Plasma, stuff of life,
as intimate as all that?
I say it is. I say such “spirit mediums”
have overstepped the bounds
of good taste

and I hope that every so-called
“plasma” reading meter
on every show which breaches
the etiquette of the civil discourse
between the living and the non
shall show nothing, nothing,
nothing, to the superstitious
who crave audience
in public
with the private exhortations
on this side of the veil
and the beyond.

Unsinkable*

For Peggy Wheeler

A heroine in Ireland,
little-known in the U.S. A.
Molly Brown was not
the only unsinkable person
on the Titanic. Some say
they had to throw Mary Sloan
onto the lifeboat,
for she wouldn't leave
until she felt sure
the passengers in her care
were safe. Her diary
is history: our best
recollection of the iceberg,
the yawning of the chasm
(really not so big)
but big enough
to bring down man's hubris.

But not woman's spirit.
And you are like her,
you know, unsinkable,
unflappable
in the face of dread
and the piling up
of the dead
and though those
with the name of "Sloan"
now count as having
the blood of heroes

in Belfast, against
the sand and heat and fire
you, too, have been
the heroine
through smaller
yet not less frightening
obstacles along the way.

You can't know how much
I admire you,
or see in your tenacity
that which I hope I can be:
the one to inspire the
rising from ashes
of the forest,
the dust devils of the desert,
the beneficent ocean
mild and grateful
by compare.

*Mary Sloan, from Belfast, Ireland, was not only an heroic employee on the Titanic; her account of the disaster is also the primary source material from which most accounts of the sinking of the Titanic are formed. She was a cousin to writer Peggy Wheeler's grandmother.

Caliente

Yes, it means hot,
and it usually is.
The Caliente casino slot machines
have *calacas* playing bingo for a theme;
the happy dead of *El Dia de los Muertos*,
not the sad dead of the *Norteamericano*
cemeteries, but sometimes
the frightening dead
of the life-size, realistic
Santa Muerte statue
in the botanica
a few blocks away;
death seated on a throne
dressed in lace and satin,
grin rictus within the *mantilla*,
upside-down pentagrams
in bas-relief upon her chair.
Books on black magic,
and red and green
and even white,
two boys with machetes
whacking open coconuts
for a glass of juice as an offering.
Outside, Hare Krishnas chanting
on *Avenida Constitution*, and
a man with a portable grill
makes sweet pancakes
to eat out of hand,
to remind us
that we are of the living,
and not the living dead.

Municipal Cemetery

At the tomb of *Juan Soldado*,
a kneeling bench and a plaque
recount the miracles he's performed
for the people of Mexico,
this poor soldier boy,
an *indigeno*, framed for a crime
he did not commit.

The cemetery is tumble-down
open tombs, bright rose and blue
decorating crypts, the happy colors
of Mexico everywhere
with the weeping mourners.

The floor of Juan's tomb
is marble, and candles flank
his photograph,
a cross in many colors
and a statue on top of the crypt
in his likeness.

A relative of his
is a U.S. Marine,
and the undocumented poor
pray to Juan
for safe passage across
the forbidding border.

The testimonials to him abound:

“Thank you for healing me,
helping me get my papers,
helping my papa get a job.
Thank you for making my illness
go away and confounding my doctors.

Thank you for bringing my grandson
home, for commuting the sentence,
for helping my baby thrive.”

The testimonials are on paper,
wood, in marble, stone, plaster.

Down the broken pavement
from the gates,
a woman with her husband
and small child
kneels on a Disney-print
blanket. The father holds
the child and spreads
the cloth before her
as she takes each step
on her knees, lying down
and kissing the ground
after each few painful steps,
crawling to the tomb
of Juan Soldado,
asking for whatever blessing
we would not feel comfortable
asking her to share,
but knowing, in her penitence,
it must be serious.
We say
that we will pray for her.
She and her husband smile
and the child squirms her way
from her father's arms
and runs to play in the graveyard,
as here, in Mexico,
it is the most natural thing
in the world.

At the Amboy Crater

Desolation—
here is an alcove
where a lost lizard
finds shade.
This cinder cone
anomaly,
ring of fire
in earthquake country
no volcano
is ever truly dead.

Sand of champagne color
rock black as basalt,
red ants swarming
the hills and holes
of the serpents
and tarantulas.

Desert landscape
is never hospitable—
everything here
is a warning.
a line of what once
was lava breaks
like the vertebrae
of a dinosaur.

A precipice,
a wadi, waiting
for death to die,
perhaps,

a vision quest
a paraphrase
for never finding
water
substituting
creosote,
the perfume
of the desert
its astringent hope
after the briefest rain
is all the proof of life
a dormant volcano
needs.

Bodhisattva of the Desert

A video poker victim:
four aces on a five-cent bet,
a nugget found in Searchlight,
all lost in the machine.
A hoodoo man plays
the Hexbreaker slots,
a green moon appears at sunrise
Le Tourment Vert absinthe
four dollars, says the artificial voice box
of the husk of a bartendress.

Coyotes stupid in the dusk—
headlight-runners,
Kachina cries
as they are hit
and an aviator is lost
over the desert
where it's so low-tech
that nobody knows about it.

No one here is a rock star;
everyone's a bluesman
with holes in his pocket
or a rodeo clown
making an entrance for him.
It's 20 past zero
in Cal-Nev-Ari,
do you know
where your biplane is?

With an offering of pommelos,
oranges, papayas
and a book of Buddhist prayers,
Bodhisattva of the desert,
great lady, queen of compassion
feel my pain, my fear,
help me
keep me safe and prosperous
not dried and dead in the desert,
with the other phantoms here.

Gone is the soul
of this building: just a squirrel
and a Chihuahua remain,
searching the dust
trampling the offerings of flowers
and the wreaths of sage and cranberries
in the desert Christmas snow.
The pilot would never be found
but near an unnamed wash
a lotus cup, a prayer rug
the peace of the salty aridity
of mirage pagodas
one artist paints Kwan Yin
the goddess of compassion,
behind her,
and a smaller Buddha.

A man named Shivers
says his bull is named Apollo.
He sits in the only
café in town.
The bar is red leather
cracked and the waitress
eats a chocolate cherry

leaning against the worn wooden
wall. She complains
about the computer not working
and it's only then that I see
the gold and red temple lion
and the clear quartz crystal bodhisattva
on either side of the cash register.

The road's washed out
by a sudden storm
and the man who sells turquoise
to tourists is angry,
as he needed to get to Laughlin
today. He stands in the doorway
watches rain falling on sand
takes out his pocket watch.
No one's shouting
but everything's a rout
lost, funny, grim,
afraid to ask the big question:
How does one express gratitude?

Grape Leaves

Arbor rust—delicate tendrils
and the messy webs of widows,
dust of heat and sweat,
exploding nation of raisin song.
Untidy fingers remember robin's-egg-blue
Chevy trucks with dented bumpers
sweet and golden-reddish ale,
the peach and apricot cordials
in the ruby glass
the crocheted sleeves
of the vintner's mother.

His men would not drink wine:
they preferred a dark and fizzy
emblem of night's journey
from gloaming to *medianoche*.
With salt and lime
they'd drink the beer
as red as the cordial stemware,
but in rough tin cups
or chipped ceramic mugs
with donut-shop logos.

None of them would try the vintage
or pop the occasional grape
or chew the cloying-sweet raisin,
for in the shadowed arbors
they had seen the ghosts
of silver spiders
the vintner still mistook
for tips of vines,

and they knew those spiders
had in life stung their *compadres*
sent them to the hospital
and sometimes to the morgue.

Let the man and his mother
drink the death and the poison—
the cruelty of nature
and indifference to pain.
Wrap the leaves around meat and rice
and chew the suffering,
swallow down the lost
and forget that life is fleeting,
a sad joke to some,
to others, an absence of all meaning,
but the deepness of the colors
of the red, the violet, the black
of mortuary draperies
and velvet settees
when at last, hats off,
they know they will pay
their respects, regardless
of having received any
along the way.

Victorian Fantasy

So, in this fantasy,
the ghost floats a foot
above the Persian carpet,
her satin-slipper-clad feet
revealing the hem
of an orchid tulle
and burgundy organdy
dress, a velvet ribbon
around her waist,
white skin visible
at ankles and wrists
and throat. Her skeletal hands
reach toward me, imploring,
as her blonde hair floats
on unseen currents
in comely curls.

But she is not, you see, beautiful—
her skin is drawn and bloodless,
stretched tight, bleached leather,
and her eyes sunk far into their sockets
cheekbones almost ripping
through the face.
If she is trying to warn me,
she has only succeeded
in terrifying me,
and so I wake up
from the nightmare.

Thank goodness!
Now the room fills

with the smell of tuberose,
lovely dust motes dance
in the sunbeams
and she peeks most childishly
from behind a sheer drape,
blue eyes sparkling
in the golden daylight,
her gown flowing serenely
around her, and I smile,
and when she smiles,
I see
the inch-long incisors
just a moment or two too late.

Two Poems About Medusa

1. Gorgon, Why So Blue?

After the painting *Medussa*
by Roberto Perez

Gorgon, why so blue?
Your field of glorious green flames
a haven for butterflies
and a trap for unsuspecting
warriors. Do your tentacles
reach down into the sea
to tickle Neptune? His sense
of humor seems to be lacking.
Or are you simply sad
because the rich have used you,
abused you
as a mere logo?
Protect us, Medusa,
as in the days of old.

The rich will offer no apology
except to Hades,
but when they meet Him,
they will beg.
Forgive us, Medusa,
loll your tongue at us
and laugh,
lion-faced,
full-breasted,
as you watch the parade
of the dead

go down below
in darkening
pomegranate shades
while you stay
your cheery turquoise,
cobalt, seaspray green
and breathe
through the canvas
to our living, modern world.

2. The Gorgon

The gorgon with wild power
in her hair, strong as bronze,
my gilded one.
Beautiful as the lion's mouth in ecstasy—
bring your brazen cup; I am greedy
for unwatered wine,
I have a stranger's zeal
for intoxication and knowledge
of the ways of finer folk.

I know your eyes
that see me in my dotage,
love of excess and the sloshing
of the eyeless cup—all eyes
red and green, the sad
barbarian crone
with wild auroch licks in her hair,
eyes like the jade vases of the east,
the temple dogs made of nephrite,
the bitterness no more a mystery
than my stopped monthly blood,
or the clear eyes of younger men
who no longer look my way.

I put away the gorgoneon shield—
It is no longer needed.
Mother Medusa
has seen to that
for I can no longer be seen.
Swirling wind and water darkness
upon dark, smoke for hair
and sighs for words now,
a coffin in the air
tangled in your wild, wild hair.

Book Two: Traversing the Kalunga

There is no city in America so concerned with the relationship between the living and the dead—at least in most Americans’ minds—than the city of New Orleans. This preoccupation most likely came about because of a variety of factors that came together to create—no pun intended—the perfect storm which coalesced into a fascination with the dead and the obsession to contact their spirits there. Those factors include the necessity of burying the dead above ground due to the high water table—creating cemeteries that are referred to as the Cities of the Dead. Add to that the hybrid religion that came to be known as Voodoo or Vodou, which, being based in African beliefs, gives great respect to one’s ancestors. Add as well the mass deaths in the city over the centuries due to tropical diseases, hurricanes, floods, fires, wars, and uprisings. Throw in a few devil-worshipping pirates, some spectacular murders, the odd consumptive debutante, a suicidal writer or two and, well, where else would you find a streetcar whose marquee announces “Cemeteries” as its destination?

Some West African cultures envisioned the gulf between the living and the dead as a vast ocean, called the *Kalunga* in the Kongo tongue, and their attempts to navigate the treacherous waters of that ocean in order to contact their loved dead—especially those brought by force to the New World across an ocean quite literally treacherous—must bring up enough emotions to drown the Crescent City in tears, again and again. In Book Two, therefore, I have a variety of mostly New Orleans-inspired poems, many of them alluding to

Vodou and other Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin hybrid traditions, as well as alluding to my own ethnic heritage within the Acadian diaspora and my own loved dead in New Orleans.

“Heat Signature”

I didn't sign up for this—
So be careful what you sign.

A few suggestions:

—Do not sign anything in blood, not yours or
anyone else's;

—The words “in perpetuity” should never appear;

—If there is a fee, be careful of “riders,” no, not
ghost riders, but riders stating your
contract has a time limit, such as an afterlife clause;

—If you do sign the contract, never drink thereafter
from an open offered bottle, or leave your drink
unattended at the bar.

Just trust me on this—now go.

I'll see you later

In the gloaming

At the crossroads.

Got a Little *Guedé**

I got a little Guedé
Ridin' in my head
I got a little Guedé
Tellin' me I'm dead.

I got a little Guedé
Smokin' a cigar
I got a little Guedé
Says I won't get far.

I got a little Guedé
Dressin' me in black
I got a little Guedé
Trimmed with purple rickrack.

I got a little Guedé
Leads me to the plot
I got a little Guedé
Says he's all I got.

I got a little Guedé
And I'm all alone
I got a little Guedé
Carvin' my headstone.

I got a little Guedé
Writin' names in a tome
I got a little Guedé
Come to take me home.

I got a little Guedé
Ridin' in my head
I got a little Guedé
Tellin' me I'm dead.

*The *Guedés* are a family of Vodou psychopomps that communicate with the living during Vodou rituals and occasionally appear to those who are about to die.

Dementia Diloggun*

Doctors map the memory
and worry about the wrong things.
Now/then/Great-Grandma/The Beginning/
Experiencers all at once seeing your face/
the face of your great-aunt, the one
 you found,
Sindee, in the steamer trunk, and looked into
your own face there, the only person
 in the family
you truly resemble. Cowries cannot see
that one of us is different from the other:
that the ancestors are here and now and
 not just then
so that they rendezvous on the Table of Ifa
demanding recognition, cognition not
 of human time
but of the world of the past/present/future
palimpsest—all levels visible—
black/beige/tan/golden
are you *her*, are you *her*, are you *her*,
are you *here*.

**Diloggun* refers to a type of divination used amongst practitioners of Afro-Caribbean religions such as Santeria and Vodou; the “Table of Ifa” is another reference to this divination.

Mam'zelle*

I wanted to talk
to the Québécois couple
but the tour guide
wouldn't shut her mouth.
I tried to find my family,
but they were in St. Vincent
de Paul, not St. Louis #1,
but Mam'zelle was there
in all her glory,
tennis shoes *ofrenda*,
plastic flowers,
a copy of *Atlas Shrugged*.
Turn around three times,
do *not* defile her crypt
with brick dust or
other markings;
your petitions are not
graffiti for the dead.
Leave instead a gift
of Carnival beads,
coconut water, Rhum
Barbancourt or what
you will. Make your wish,
cast your spell,
but watch for muggers.

We turn the corner
after the tour group has gone
and see the surname
of the Québécois tourist's
family around the other side

of Mam'zelle's tomb.
We come upon the grave
of Mr. Chicken Foot,
all black beads and cigars,
statues of Ellegua—Papa Legba
here—and a container of War Water,
petitions praying for protection
tied up with red ribbon.
So add yours along with the rest
at the tomb of the man
with a star-spangled chicken foot
at the apex of his tomb
and don't forget to buy one
as a charm before you leave town—
and if the TSA asks about it,
just say "Dat mah Voodoo!"
and you'll get it back
posthaste.

We went back again to visit
with Mam'zelle, but I didn't want
to ask any favors from one
who should be left in peace.
What will she tell us
if and when the dead return?
How can we make it up to her,
the legends and the rumors,
the slander simultaneous
with the asking of favors
and the respect forgotten altogether?
The dead do not call out to us—
we call out to them.
Mam'zelle is always silent.
Haven't you ever wondered why?

*In her day, Marie Laveau was often referred to as “The Widow Paris,” but if you call her “Mam’zelle” today, any Vodou practitioner or New Orleans resident will know who you’re talking about. Her crypt, that of the family Glapion (her second husband’s family), is in St. Louis Cemetery #1 on the edge of the French Quarter. Do not go there alone.

Bourbon, Voodoo, Sex

“Bourbon, Voodoo, Sex”
—a sign posted at the Long Beach Bayou
Festival

Shuck a buncha crawfish
old guys wearin’ too many beads
sins from the Quarter blending in
with Guitar Shorty’s licks.

Plastic alligator
around an underdressed gal’s neck,
Voodoo fetishes on hats
and fleurs de lys everywhere.

“Where’s da w’isky?”
a small man made of shadows asks,
his bright Hawaiian shirt out of place here
or not; the others don’t see him.

Purple hats and spats
on the gents in the Second Line
“What part of Lou’siana you from?”
Asks the Shadow Man.

Then he is distracted
by the bosom of a woman in orange
who stands out amongst
the purple, gold, and green.

An Indian in a ribbon shirt
with shiny braided hair
is sitting in the Cajun dance pavilion
looking at me.
He sees the Shadow Man

and waits for me to answer him.
I don't.
I don't want these people
to see me talking to the dead,
especially not a dead man
wearing a Hawaiian shirt,
looking embarrassingly a lot like
Uncle Remus' Tar Baby.

I have to tell the Shadow Man
That there is no bourbon,
only beer, but even so no Abita
or even Dixie. I buy a Longboard ale
(hell, it is Southern California!)
to share with the Shadow Man,
but his hand passes right through
the red plastic cup, insubstantial.

Then the crowd is on its feet
rushing to the main stage.
Dr. John is gonna sing,
play two pianos, shake
his *asson*, call down the *loa*.

A blonde is dancing in front of me
and Shadow Man places his
unseen hands on her waist.
"I walk on gilded splinters"
and we all sing along.

Voodoo and sex:
we got 'em.
Bourbon this time—
gonna have to wait.

Now and Then

Now and then an earthquake comes along
to break the wedding crystal but
more likely, the meteorite that hit the cat
on the head in Arizona is only a portent
of what's in your horoscope.

At least that's what they tell me.
for now, I'm riding in Death's coach
about to turn back into a pumpkin.
No, that was the coach, not Cinderella,
my students say, but I'm no Cinderella
and they know it.

I dip the coin of the realm in lotus tea
buy "Copper Penny" eyeshadow
luxuriate in a cool bath
and lie really, really still
while Baron Samedi stalks me,
knocking on the door at 2 AM
then laughing and running away.

What is keeping me up nights?
Now and then it seems to be a message:
the other night my dead cousins arrived
and they and their brats filled the house.
When I woke up I realized
I hadn't been a very good hostess,
but then pumpkins rarely are.

Someone wants to cure me.
Another wants me dead.

I skirt the borderline
between the two in clinic chairs.
The doctors shake their heads
but none of them see
the skeletal man who waits patiently.

A dark and rutted road screams out
into the desert, red dirt and scorpions
mix with flames and the memory
of silver saucers spinning in the
once-blue air. If they are coming
so save us, they have come too late.
If they are coming to destroy us,
they'd better get in line.

“EM Bubble”

Safe and secure
surrounded
swarmed
rivers of alchemy—
ruins of a likeness—
rumors of darkness—
(cliché to say
“on the edge of town”)
sources of bad juju
luminescent fighter
in the green
of the old battlefield
ghosts of the Chalmette
women in blue
death of a cloud,
Sunday Indian red,
salty tamales
at a shack
and a too-sweet Snoball—
thinking about the Em bubble
we created calling up
Jean Lafitte
the old slaving, thieving,
murdering bastard—
don't you know
you can't contain the dead?
Stupid mortal. Stop
watching TV and
breathe the fragrance
of magnolias
and the rich loam

of the grave
and then tell me
what ghosts you see
in Lafitte's Blacksmith Shop
over your absinthe.
Shocking
who we consider heroes
to be
out of all the loved dead
on that battlefield
and the names
that will never
be known.

Brown for Brown and Green for Green*

“Brown for brown
and green for green”:
You can’t fool the Hoodoo Queen.
That “black cat bone” came from a chicken;
Hoodoo Queen’s no city Wiccan!
She knows rare bulbs from common mulch;
Throws fake “Adam and Eve roots” in the gulch.

Brown for brown
and green for green,
don’t try to fool the Hoodoo Queen.
A hummingbird can bring one love—
but not while hovering up above.
Only when dead, dress’d in a “hand”
anointed with sweat from your man’s hatband.
So don’t go get PETA on the phone
unless you don’t mind sleepin’ alone.

Brown for brown
and green for green,
who dares laugh at the Hoodoo Queen?
Ceremonial Mage, and his “Great Work”?
Hoodoo Queen thinks he’s a jerk.
New Ager, she channels Bronco Billy?
Hoodoo Queen just thinks that’s silly.

Brown for brown
and green for green,
if you wish to contact the unseen
or want to win at games of chance,

or find yourself a new romance,
no substitutes will ever do—
she knows the truth—and so do you,

Or you wouldn't be here with cash in hand
steppin' 'cross brick dust into an unknown land
where no one believes the Wiccan Rede,
but can surely tell *chia*- from *tickseed*.**
So I suggest you hide your brush and comb,
flush all nail clippings down the "throne,"
for the three-fold law don't apply to her;
nature's curios can either kill, or cure.
Only the Hoodoo Queen knows for sure.

Brown for brown,
and green for green—
ain't no one fooled the Hoodoo Queen.

*As Catherine Yronwode explains in *Hoodoo Herb and Root Magic* the poem's title refers to a common practice by unscrupulous wholesalers of herbs and roots who believe that the urban magickal community won't notice if cheap substitutions are sold as expensive herbs and "natural curios." In most cases, they're right. But not all...

**According to Yronwode, Cheap chia seeds are sometimes sold as more expensive tickseed. "Tickseed" is another name for *Coreopsis*, which in the hoodoo tradition is an ingredient in a gamblers' hand wash, since the round yellow flowers resemble gold coins.

The Bridge

*The intersection where a city
professes its love
for a cold black river.*

—“Bridge”

T. M. Göttel

When you say “the bridge”
it all depends on who
you’re talking to.
This could mean a swift recovery
of death memory,
All Saints in all-white.

Or it could mean
the Sunday outing
going to see the old folks
in the Lower Ninth.

Or to the newly resettled,
it’s just a rickety old road,
might as well take the ferry,
see St. Louis Cathedral
from the river.

Now no one in NOLA
hears the word “bridge”
without fear; a place
of death and dishonor,
once a connector,
now a divider.

They're talking about
shutting down the ferry, make
the Big Muddy just a sight
below the rusty bridge
as you drive across.

Drive across
death every day
for those who remember
(and no, not every
bridge is thus,
but it's a symbol, see?)

And without a ferry
maybe no point in
crossing at all;
folks moving out
of Algiers, the history,
the beauty (Mon Dieu!
the view!) the magic
and the memory.

Maybe a bridge
is a memory.
And people
do forget.

On the Way to Algiers

You've got to avoid bridges—
they aren't protected by ghosts
in New Orleans,
as they are in Mexico
and on the bridge
is where you meet the Devil
especially in this Catholic town.

Look across:
the river's brown, blue, or green.
Look down:
it's black, lookin' back.

Lookin' back—
that's what they do here.
Present? Irrelevant.
Future? Won't come.
Look back:
the past is prettier and prettier
like no Mardi Gras Indian
could ever hope to be,
though all their ghosts
show up each year
on St. Joseph's Day
to see the outfits
of those living,
so good to be home again.

Walking

Of course one would expect
ghosts in the dark,
in old and woeful places
but in broad daylight
a haunting is more pronounced,
like a mugging, or a murder,
more frightening for its brazen
attack with no cover of darkness,
no cover at all.

Just the opposite, let's say,
of a UFO experiencer's episode
of missing time:
time, rather, suddenly slowed down,
a quiet come over the busy streets
and suddenly I am the only pedestrian.

How can this happen? Where
did everyone go? The rush of traffic
blocks away, but no traffic, this time of day,
on Rampart Street, at the edge
of the French Quarter?

Silence and a musky heat
dankness and a sudden cloud of cold,
the sky obliterated by a silver net
cast over the normal street,
if anything in this place
can ever be described as "normal."

And here, perhaps, the warning
of keeping to myself
being where I was supposed to be
which apparently was not here,
not now.

Dashing back into the Quarter,
into a overly air-conditioned restaurant,
I ordered a po-boy sandwich,
an iced tea,
and drank with shaking hands.

It took me awhile to calm down,
to noticed that the reality inside
this place was not the reality
without. The sun appeared
and the voices of tourists
and residents normalized.

I cannot explain this—
the collecting, perhaps,
of more minutes into an hour
than are supposed to be,
checking my watch against
the clock in the café,
not believing what either of them
told as supposed time,

arriving back,
before I had even left.

Witch Doctors

Masters of religious icons
call out to the void:
physicians of fire and earth
the money to the ninth power
of the crescent moon.
They did not always succeed
in selecting diamonds,
the piper,
or the jack,
to prove their powers
of divination
of summoning
a whole book
conducive to concentration.

With incense-droned prayers
were these early magisters
to foment the standard procedure
of coming across the telephone
line to get a clear response
from the kingdom of the dead.

The woman brushes her long hair—
her boy, the son of a black god
the alleged Christian slave trader
may never find out about—
as she acquires courage,
perseverance, and fanaticism
of the secret society's leader
while wrapping carefully
her *tignon*, because she knows

that in their evil brotherhood
lie the individual rungs
of a ladder reanimating
the ancient Sultanic laws.

She never told him
of the aether of the other bouquet—
the one that signaled Satan,
gave rise to modern cartomancie
and if you get beaten
by an enemy and the next star
that you see
is Sothis, then luckily,
Isis has your back.

They partied while discussing
what your money would give them,
could give them, to understand the world,
because your individual
sorcerer reaches
the oracles the alchemist
is working on
in his laboratory reading
the 36 “four” cards
of the Immortals
and so she revels
in the theology of the *vévés*
while Roger Bacon forms
a relationship
with the cards—

Stay with me
stay with your
nobility and status:
characteristics of the practical

summoner of more demons
curdling from fear—
or to see the results
your heart expects to hear.

Lead your wits
to the nobility of Aeolus
who wore a cape
in the hideous form
of a demon name *Bathshaitan*
and in the book I wrote,
the nine acknowledged
and the nine who were not were
flambeau neteru, weres and skraelings;
Wepwawet and Djehuti—
save my bloody soul!

Ia! Ia! Tindalos!
gymnopaedie
cruir
courier
coeur
of Giza,
the lion sphinx
and djinns of the lamb
cry “Aya! Aya—ai!”
and we are supposed
to understand.

Diaghilev
would not have
been so obfuscated,
so obdurate,
and when Cthulhu
sits under the Bodhi tree

I myself
will be on the other side.

What are you trying to tell me,
witch doctor?
Am I a shaman,
a fakir,
a writer of spoken tomes
of power
the computer tells me
is a language
I shall be moderating
and formatting the last known
new expression—
and what do you have to tell me
good byte...good bye...book *surya*...
good bye?

About this poem: This poem was partially written by the process of automatic writing, and partially by the process of bibliomancy utilizing two books I chose blindly: *Weird Ways of Witchcraft* by Dr. Leo L. Martello and *The Playing Card Oracles: A Sourcebook for Divination* by Ana Cortez. It seems clear to me that Roger Bacon must be one of the “witch doctors” of the poem’s title, and I did not know when I wrote it that Roger Bacon studied the works of an Arab writer named *Alhazen*. Alhazen is known as the father of modern optics; I both chose the books and then later wrote this poem with my eyes closed, revising it so that it makes as much sense as it does, which may not

be much. I have never seen Alhazen referred to as the possible model for H. P. Lovecraft's "mad Arab" Abdul Alhazred, the fictional Yemeni author of the *Necronomicon*, but obviously my unconscious mind made the connection myself when the name of "Cthulhu," one of Lovecraft's Great Old Ones, sometimes depicted as the Devil in tarot cards, showed up in the poem. According to Lovecraft's fiction, Cthulhu was worshipped as a deity in, among other places around the globe, Louisiana.

The Road Home*

After the painting *Camp After Katrina*
by Therese Fink

The open road:
you never learn from rivers;
and the ruins in the scene
predate Katrina, predate
the hurricane that predates
Katrina, and we all know
the kind of history that repeats.
Camp seems like fun
camp seems like childhood
not the aftermath
of wandering
by those who lost their homes
in Ocean Springs, Mississippi
while all eyes
were on New Orleans.
It seemed like just a suburb
of Biloxi, just a shadow
of the rollicking Gulf Coast,
all brag and blather,
rolled-up sleeves
of the workers
and the silk cuffs
of the gamblers.
Mark Twain would have
recognized this camp:
all camps are more alike
than they differ,

and for many, a roof
is a ready home.

Those of us
who live in desert
cannot understand
the rains: the high water
drowning what it gives
life to, what we pray for
here in the world of dry.
But your world—
A spring! The ocean!
It's enough water
to make a desert rat cry.
We'll never understand
the threat of water
and the blue-tarp sea
of people waiting
on the notion of some giving
and some never knowing
of any road home,
of any road home
to Creole cottage
to blithe Bienville
(new signage!)
but know the tears,
the endless tears,
the rush both to
and from
the water
both to
and from
home.

*The painting *Camp After Katrina* is the artist's tribute to families who lost homes in Ocean Springs, MS, due to Hurricane Katrina. The Road Home is a program to help homeowners who lost or had their homes severely damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in Louisiana; how much it has helped is debatable. New Orleans now has only two-thirds the population it had before Hurricane Katrina, and rents in New Orleans have almost doubled. For more information on The Road Home, see www.road2la.org.

Pirate's Alley

The colors of Pirate's Alley:
—absinthe green
—parrot yellow
—blood purple
Will you be my Mardi Gras baby?
Not my own child,
but a changeling,
child of a fairy green as my eyes,
our *carneval* child,
not of the flesh.
I am here, Light, here,
in the dark of Pirate's Alley
with Lafitte and your poppets,
another type of sacrifice.
Now, they say the "toxic baby"
is a cocktail,
so sacrificing brain cells
is my duty.
How many have done so here
and there and more around
all the tourist haunts
until the tourists themselves
are ghosts,
a bad reminder
that history appeals
to some folks' baser instincts.
But not mine.
When I say blood I mean the real thing,
not some corn syrup dyed.
So go play your tourist games
but leave me out of them

the ghosts have already had me
on the cobblestone menu
of the crypt that is Pirate's Alley
and the lies that never die.

Criollo en Blanc

It's a strawberry lager,
sweet sunshine of summer,
and we are the only ones here.
A black & white spider,
checkerboard pattern
reappears as if
from nowhere.
You flick it away,
put your cameras in the trunk,
I get out my notebook
and we head into the café.

It's a strawberry lager,
sweet sunshine of summer,
and outside,
Lone samurai warrior
rides a *ronin* skateboard,
finds a boy dead
in the middle of the street.

Light drizzle and sizzle
on the steaming macadam
the boy by the cemetery
the skateboarder shakes
the blonde waitress screams.

His brother was a soldier
his father played the trumpet
his sister could dance the bounce,
but for him
it's all over
with the last rays of evening

and the words that were lost
while we were in the café.

He sang in the choir
he got “B’s” in math
he smoked marijuana
when Momma wasn’t looking
he wanted to go
to college some day.

Now his ghost rides
with the skateboarder,
with a strawberry lager,
sweet sunshine of summer
and hangs around this tavern
with the blonde waitress
and her admirers,
and some people speaking
a confusing patois
of French and Spanish
“*Criollo en blanc!*”
someone yells.

The Haitian cab driver
won’t stop here anymore,
though his stomach rumbles
for he sees the boy’s ghost
like a faded sign
for sweet strawberry lager
in the sunshine of summer
on the heat-bleached boards
of the café’s exterior,
and now we know why
we are the only ones here.

Magic

For Francisco Arcaute

We have a saying about New Orleans,
based on a famous comedian's joke.
Our version goes like this:
in Los Angeles, you can always find magic.
In New Orleans, magic always finds you.

And we knew it the first time we visited:
Vodou *vévés* in the gang graffiti,
Guys dressed like Baron Samedi riding bicycles
near the statue of Jefferson Davis,
the ghost of your long-lost love
walking down a street in the Bywater
at dusk.

Later we began to understand:
it's all around us, in the air, the water,
the tiny green lizards out behind
the Court of Two Sisters.

A parade permit costs a lot,
but if it's a Vodou parade there's no fee:
shake a rattle, crack a whip,
march down the street drinking 151 rum
and people will throw beads,
then wonder why the photos they took
don't come out right.

The wrought iron, too, is twisted into *vévés*,
and everyone denies everything
but then, that's just the South,

denial a bigger river than the Mississippi,
appearances everything; perception, unique.

On Easter, a little-person couple,
the man dressed as the Easter Bunny,
stopped us on Decatur.
The man said, "Did you find the eggs I hid
for you? I hid them really well!"

I have no explanation.
Ghosts, they come and go.
Desperation never really leaves,
however, and not everyone
has "the sight."

A witch on Royal Street
wouldn't let me in: she
didn't know who I was,
which means she didn't know
her business.

In California,
you need a car to find magic.
In New Orleans,
it drives a cab, takes a walk,
rides the streetcar,
holds a cocktail.
We always run into
a wedding to bless,
a funeral to mourn.

And if this
is the only thing
we keep doing
then I guess you could say
we're doin' it right.

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Websites:

For a list of the best websites about the paranormal,
see: www.topparanormalsites.com.
For more info on New Orleans as well as a guide to the
locations in *A Confederacy of Dunces* see my website:
www.DeniseDumars.com

Ghost Tours, New Orleans:

Bloody Mary's Tours, www.bloodymarystours.com
New Orleans Ghost Tours/Haunted History tours:
www.hauntedhistorytours.com. There are many such
tours, each with its own advantages and drawbacks,
but for my money, this is the best one.
New Orleans Spirit Tours: www.neworleanstours.net.
Tours by Judy: www.ToursbyJudy.com.

About the Author:

Denise Dumars is a widely published author of poetry, short fiction, articles, essays, and reviews. She has had a variety of occupations, including library technician, film journalist, technical editor, literary agent, and college instructor. She lives in the beautiful South Bay area of Los Angeles County, but her heart is in New Orleans.