

BURNING HOUSE

poems

by Richard Lemm



Wolsak and Wynn

PERIL

“It’s not the end of the world,”
said my grandmother, crimping
the edges of the pie together
and gashing the crust for steam to escape.

“We thought the end was upon us
when the Germans, then British, used gas.
Then long-range artillery, and airplanes.
My own husband flying, dropping bombs,

leaned out his cockpit to see the Earth explode.”
She opens the oven, tilts back
from the heat, slides Mount Apple
along the rack. “Then we were rippled

with fear, kamikazes at Pearl Harbour,
rockets landing in London and who knew
where next, Seattle?” She gets a tonic water
bottle and shakes it, says, “*Blitzkrieg*,” unscrews

the top, fizz everywhere. “It settles,”
she says, pouring, and adding gin.
“Now you have those mushroom clouds,
the ships, the planes, on collision course

on the high seas, in mid-air,
but, my age? You’ll say *remember when*.”
The kitchen air, swelling, heats
up like the last days of Eden.

MY COUNTRY

1. Mercer Island

'Tis of a creek
when I disobeyed my grandmother and rode
my bike across the floating bridge
the lake named for our father, Washington
to fish for trout
one small mile from the city's pounding heart,
that creek now surely tubed and stalled
beneath the software empire's building code,
the mall where trout paté,
farmed, flown in, is sold.

2. Anaheim

Sweet orange grove and clover land
where cousins herded their livestock
bees from orchards
and hives, now swarming with the traffic's
drone, honeyed music and brand
name outlets and security guards.

3. From the Mountains to Manhattan

The liberty to shoot the lone
grizzly, last rapids, the moon
posing over Manhattan, footage of the skyline
falling, the venal and valiant
alike, weeping, of thee I sing.

4. Sportsman's Tavern

I sing my grandfather's pride
in his tavern, crowning the good
Singapore Sling with a cherry, the ring
of cash registers bringing the fruited
plain to our table, a brotherhood
of bartenders defending the state

of their union, and customers who stood
beside Lou Gehrig battling, Elvis enlisting,
and Sugar Ray by a knockout in eight.

5. Lumberjack's Daughter

My grandmother shedding her grace
into canning jars, turkey stews, pie crusts
bulging with apples, knowledge she traced
to a logging camp, the civil liberties
of her parents' timber rights,
the majesty of cedars and Douglas firs
lifting her voice in a green canopy
of song that spread
across the years to my spacious skies.

6. Sweet

My country still bright with the foam
skimmed off a sea of shining words.
Bright with constellations beaming
new parables to the pilgrims
tracking light from above: one if by flood,
two if by heat. Bright with the glow
of casinos near the purple mountains,
amber waves in the palaces of sports,
coins littering the fountains,
blue veins transfused with faith
in the pursuit of a rainbow
trout in a creek once more flowing
and wearing away beneath
foundations of the sprawl and ascension
of home

AGAIN, THE PSALM

Shamaa, Lebanon, Aug. 21 (2006) – Israeli soldiers in the hilltops watch as Hezbollah men on dirt bikes patrol the valleys, barely a mile away.

– New York Times

Again, the psalm is the shadow
of death, the valley home
by perilous home now churning
with splintered beds and bones
and molecules of wasted
atonement.

Once more, the voices blaming,
claiming greater grievances.
Who has least tasted honey and milk.
Who this time was first to render
flesh into martyrs, wives
into widows. Clouds of grief

billow where god's name is
relentlessly spoken. We crave still
waters, all factions cry, merciful
meetings in orange and olive groves,
a sky blessed with jet planes
full of tourists and pilgrims.

Again the roads are choked
with righteousness camouflaged
as tanks, as rockets launching
families into the safety of oblivion.
O lord, all implore, drive the thief
from our wells, our table, anoint

our heads bowed to the holiness of loss,
uplifted to the sirens of heaven.

RETRIBUTION

Hannibal's favourite elephant
hates the snow, the wind's icy needles
piercing his ears, the white howl
smothering the sky. This is not what
he crossed that vast undrinkable
turquoise pool to endure.
Tricked into believing he was
royalty, as elephants should be, rowed
by men across the sea, men
working the sails, men dropping
from exhaustion, straining to show
the elephants a landscape majestic
as them. You are mountainous,
said Hannibal, flattering him
onto the barge, at last
you will walk atop a world
worthy of you. Hannibal's favourite
elephant longs for the black
volcanic glass of the desert.
Hears the flat, cracked, bugling
notes of an elephant's soul
vanishing before its time. Sees
in the swirling snow the flocks of
egrets that escort the soul away.
He knows, too, the elephant gods
are not amused. Hannibal lied.
The gods will deny him
Rome, will roar in Caesar's ear
their demand that Carthage be smashed,
its rubble scattered across the sands.
That Hannibal's name be remembered
as a synonym for grandiose
failure, and elephant
ghosts in the snow.

FAITH, HOPE AND

What if faith is a knife
stabbed through your hand, so cold-tempered,
so primordial, the blood
petrifies like amber, trapping
the insect of doubt inside.

What if faith disrupts your life
like your ancestors' *aboiteaux*
giving way, so that when the flood
waters recede, the sun bakes
pyramids of mud above uncertainty

and archaeologists wonder
at empty shrouds and grotesque
markings on amulets and shards.
What if hope is what you owe
the animals and plants you've plundered,

skinning the earth's rank pelt
so you could arc with desire
until your bones, your neurons glow
with isotopes your own walled city
cannot contain. You melt

down and the pilgrims to whom you lied
about your empty vault, camp
around your fires, asking not for pity
but for the byzantine trap
of your mouth to open wide.

What if the next word you speak
is not charity but anvil or torque
or shape-shifter, escape hatch, velocity.
What if the canyon echoes back
pass, through mountains, unvanquished peak.