

# 5 Poems

By Paul Bergstraesser

*Poetry Editor Hezekiah writes: Bergstraesser turns some piercing phrases. If his mind were a maze, I doubt few, other than he, could find their way out. I cannot think of many, who wouldn't do well to aspire not to write unlike this: "every egg sitting in the pure / white of its judgment." "Each spring blossom is cringingly / individual and we lump them together at our own peril." "We removed our suits? We're still wrinkled and can't mask the chlorine?" If you want to wonder you way around his work, read 'Whatever Keeps You Alive' first; it has a mind-bending, spellbinding motif. HS (Spacing is poet's own.)*

A Common Enemy

Pretending that other people are the problem  
kills us when we should be looking closer:

every leaf a critic, every lawn a critic, every jetstream,  
every single ounce of water, every egg sitting in the pure

white of its judgment. People are predictable: the ones  
who eat money, the ones who wear leather flying caps as a

condition of their Amelia Earhart scholarships, the ones  
who shower with one guy before prom and attend

the dance with another. Each spring blossom is cringingly  
individual and we lump them together at our own peril.

This is no acid trip turned dicey, the clouds suddenly pink and  
suffocating like some late afternoon cotton candy crime scene.

This is serious as a corporate memo redoubling our efforts to  
cut down all the trees because M. Nature needs a clean shave

every now and then and one day will thank us for it.

## Bipeds

You thought I was taking you to a cocktail party for swingers,  
But instead I'm pulling over and we're going for a walk.

I know what you're going to say: We are the least undressed people I know!  
Need I remind you of that one evening we stood shivering in the

Community pool watching the director's cut of *Forrest Gump*?  
We removed our suits? We're still wrinkled and can't mask the chlorine?

I've read all the literature on walking which suggests its healing power,  
How the ego is stripped away till all that's left is a horse with a rabbit

On its back. And I'm perfectly willing to assume the role of the rabbit,  
As per our last counseling session. But here's what I'm afraid of: You,

As George Washington, will refuse to bind with rags my blackened,  
Frostbitten toes during our walk, our Valley Forge. Or worse, that you'll

Crawl from the ocean, figure out what it means to breathe, and  
Immediately turn right back around for another million years, disgusted

By my lack of gills. I beg of you: Please see the mystery that surrounds us,  
Even if we embarrass it. I just want to be your 9/11 hero, lead you down the

Staircase and make love against a tree as it collapses beneath our feet.

## Whatever Keeps You Alive

I am hated in hospitals.  
I wish that meant I'm a

metaphor for disease, infection,  
a gob of bacteria, but what it boils

down to is just that I'm hated  
in hospitals. You see, I switch patient

charts when no one's looking.  
I loosen screws on gurneys.

I listen in on private conversations  
and share their grief room to room,

whispering the news into ears that  
are unblocked for the first time.

Oh, you say. You must be Death.  
Sorry, no. What about Cancer, then?

No, no. If I were a riddle, you could  
tie me to a bedrail like a gift shop

balloon and smile at me and feel  
pleasant after your visitors have

left, but don't look to me for  
comfort in the long night.

If, in the half-light of the nurses'  
station, you see me slowly working

my way down from the IV bag  
into your wrist, remember that

this is going to hurt me more  
than it hurts you.

## My 100-Year Plan

I hand it to you to read  
while I wait by the window  
thinking about my  
courage, my bravery  
against the backdrop  
of the birds this morning,  
whose lack of foresight  
is evident in their song  
and suggests a certain  
spinelessness that even  
the greats have never  
written about.

When you're done you  
say there's no dying in  
here, no disease, and I say  
yes, but there are 15 to  
20 brand new TVs, just  
think of it, which impresses  
but, ultimately, it needs  
some editing, you say.

So, I dig up 5 worms and  
line them up on the  
document and between  
the sun and the worms  
I hold a magnifying  
glass, thinking this is  
the kind of editing you  
mean.

More, you say, bigger,  
really have at it, and as  
I read through the plan  
again I cry like an old  
man who's lost nothing,  
realizing that you're  
right, there's no pain  
in here and that all  
pain is one pain and  
better to schedule it  
sooner than later, so  
I step into the day,  
into traffic, and wait  
for a bus to hit me  
like a freight train.

## Flight

I hang out with a group of people  
Who've never wanted to fly.  
And here at the meal we don't  
Discuss this. We talk about our children's

Schooling and trips we've taken  
With our families in airplanes—that kind  
Of flying is mere routine, another  
Subheading in the outline of our large lives.

The kind of flying I mean is the boiling  
Together of wax and feathers and affixing  
A pair of wings to our backs and preening  
In a mirror, readying ourselves to dive into

The ocean of wind that surges over the earth.  
It's never been a topic of conversation, not once,  
But tonight, like every night, I rise from the  
Foam in my drink and circle the table like

A mobile hung over the tedious crib of our tongues.

### **THE POET SPEAKS:**

*Apropos of my work and our times, I quote Franz Kafka: "There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can't do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe before you."*

### **AUTHOR BIO:**

*I was awarded an NEA Literature Fellowship in 2012. I have poems forthcoming in The American Journal of Poetry and Hole in the Head Review. In addition, I have had my fiction and nonfiction published in Another Chicago Magazine, The Barcelona Review and The Portland Review, among others.*

*At present, I teach creative writing and literature at University of Wyoming.*

