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.