

SELECTED POEMS
1963-2003

by Bernard Fraley, Jr.

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An Introduction

Just having a trunk full of old writings is hardly a recommendation for publishing a collection. But after over 40 years of writing I began wondering what might be sifted out which would be worth reading again. I selected the poems which readers had made comment about personal meaning and a few just because I felt successful in saying what I intended. I did not include every poem I have published in magazines because I have found that some editors' motives for selection have been suspect and in hindsight the poems just did not measure up.

I use the term "poem" just to facilitate getting past the "label" discussions. Most people refer to them as poems because of the broken line formats. I simply prefer to call them writings because I use as many prose devices as I do poetic and rarely aim for an academically defined format. The writings have been ways of remembering what we see, seeing what we remember and exploring towards a cognitive transparency to grasp or comprehend all that was really "there."

Some of this work, in various forms, has appeared in *The Art Herald*, *Levels*, *The Helix Intersection*, *The Ohio Camel*, *Poetry Today*, *River City Review*, *Still Night Writings*, *Tandava*, *Taurus*, and *Wind*. The following is a list of the collections from which the poems were selected with a brief note as to the themes of those books.

I hope you enjoy the entertainment.

Bernard C. Fraley, Jr.

Histories is composed of early poems published in the late '60's and early '70's

WORDL is a collection of playful "words in the cheek" type philosophies.

Things From The Tongue Of A Frog is just some crunchy humor you might find in the songs of an electric frog.

The Pygmalion Effect is about a photographer's relationship to his models and his art with the premise of "what we create in beauty, beauty creates in us."

Epona's Spring is poems about the horse, people involved with them and the metaphors of understanding.

Shrine Stories tell about ways we create totems and sacred or hallowed places in the world we experience.

Unconscionable Rituals, Conclusions of Affection deals with the ways of love and loss, the sometimes bizarre ways we learn to experience and express those emotions.

From the Notebooks of Rick's Cafe is from a time I moved into a white house because of a dream, a Casablanca type experience, and a time I spent sitting beneath a tree in the backyard, drinking wine, remembering the stories of old friends.

The Smokey Taos is the newest collection of poems looking ways and balances. It is a playful breaking of statements and words (smokEy) which tend to become formulaic and unattended when put into philosophical and religious doctrines.

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from Histories

Ignition Points

**When you're older it's knots, hard knots
Explosive and angry . . .
Young, it's just solid, open flame.**

**Like Dylan went to Guthrie's bedside
I once started for Patchen's bad back
in California, but dawdled east
of the Rockies while he died.**

**Michelle,
did either of us gain anything
we would not have gained anyway
or does it all boil down to politics?
to idealism that fructifies in unjust ways,
copable only as we come to it?
That -- what we did -- is no knot.
no regret. Just no notion of whether
I would hold anger now at things
which I may not have met
having made another way.**

**I climbed into the attic yesterday
to find a leak, found an empty
Spam tin . . .
"Who the hell . . .?"
I sat and thought of Denver,
frying Spam for breakfast
and you . . . until the rain stopped,
the leak unfound,
 waiting rampant
 for ignition.**

Sacrificial Farming

**He hunkered down,
reached to gather the dry earth
then letting it sift back. "Dust to dust,"
looking up at me. "Perhaps,"
he said, "perhaps this is the summer . . ."**

**"Cain began it here,
furrowed and lost."
His eyes scan the fields,
dust dispersing -- smoke
of bloodless offering in disregard.**

**"Hunger crouches in our doorway.
The earth has always been my brother
but his mien is slight these days."
Looking up again, "Sometimes
His blood is not enough."**

Therapy

**When the blade had cut my hand
all my life rushed to it'
stayed there,
squeezed balls,
steel springs,
itself: trying to force itself
back out to somewhere
one forgets.**

Unemployed Lover

**His rough hands unfold
reach out like a power itself
to touch her soft comfort
but then lay back without power, far,
without cunning,
with all desire or even malice
gone.**

**Remembering how soft hands were
before his life made them work
trying to call even that power up,
calling to become again.**

**Intention passes delicate, pauses,
struggles in sheets of unrest, claws
at fear, yearns to pull up out of her
a faith in his desire, a belief that
his rough hands will work again.**

from WORDL

E E E

Esoteric Enigmatic Eclectic

The e's have it.

**Mysteries stammering, slamming
Away like silent thunder
Oxymoroning us blind,
Obsessive, oblivious.
O, to be omniscient,
Paranomasticly prescient.**

**When I become cold in my sleep
I dream of opening a door - - -
There, the face of Evil screams.
I scream.
But there is only one voice,
A long eee in the first person
Present indicative tense.**

**Behold,
Let every ear see
How we cling to e,
How we sit at Its right hand
And say, "Depart from me
Ye wicked, unfaithful z."**

**(Yes,
even an e after we
discard the w.)**

**In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was the scream
Of a voice in the wilderness,
"Repent and be e.
Make straight the Way
For Art is narrow
And few shall be seen
through the eye of an e."**

Deliverance

You keep saying, "This is not the way."

Yet, no one comes to show you.

You stand looking out, neglecting duties,

forgetting all the things you have yet to deliver;

looking out seeing rooftops, no

streets visible except

the one that brought you here.

After struggling up all those steps to make

a delivery

you found this empty room.

Someone found their way out of here.

Someone was delivered.

The Great Wheel Disappointment

**Stand, Wheel, stand
up and show what
you are, can
be
do.**

**Great known Mystery,
heard we looking
to your prowess
gift
trick.**

**Stand (show) Up
you son of a
pitch your fans
come
wait.**

**You, Tool Simple . . .
truth refund us
throw you down
hill
sides
rolling,
bounding . . .**

A Progress

**invocations
of the past, irrevocable
as a groan is irretrievable
yet always feeding forward
to your arm**

**. . . your aching arm
sweating,
bringing down again
and again the machete
on blocking foliage.**

**The work, on and on,
always there like sweat
streaking your arm
your mind half in there
on the other side, half
on the point where all this
feeds forward
to**

**the machete; remembering,
regretting, re-examining,
recalling and repeating
it all up into your arm
that swings down with an edge of rejoicing.**

from Thing's From The Tongue Of
A Frog

Our Own Ways

**My pet mother hen
(armless of course)**

**unable to hold me
close to her breast,
expressed her sentiment
as she sat on me.**

**I can appreciate that,
now, long years later,
and regret that we ate her.**

Attenuated

**You notice the motions of
eating, lighting
a cigarette,
shaving, much
clearer, much
more in particular
when you are
unobsessed,
out of love,
or otherwise neutral
looking for nurture.**

Sapless Pine

**He held the corn cob in the air
pointing with his arm to say,
"Ma's gone up there
to use the phone."
and marked the cob by lay of thumb
as where roots of a tree might have begun
if standing in the field that spread up there.
"I like my trees
close round a home."
and drew the cob back to his chair.**

**He looked me squarely up and down
as if a tree shucked and bare.
"Ma'll be round
someday soon, but . . ."
So I began to leave him there.
He looked back out on the field
then threw his cob on out up there.
"I ain't Pa
and she ain't Ma, but . . ."
(as if the cob bayed like hounds)
"it'll be alright."**

Live Bait

**Lost in the shine of a moment's chase
from the flash of a minnow that rounds
a stone.**

**Contact sudden pain--caught!--
--that taste of metal-not-minnow;
--that hard final set of things just
there, jerked in, unspitable;
--that moment on a point
like a lump sum shiner
you are unable to swallow.**

**You jerk--
dive, running down deep--
jump up as to God--
shake to be loose
from the shine of a moment
and not die right there
by an act of living,
--brave and desperate
to eternally chase
the shinning minnow.**

from The Pygmalion Effect

Subliminal

**Feed into a pose
and what feeds back?
The heart,
where all things enter and depart,
is impeached by its own willingness
to move into a new position.**

**skin, muscle, bone, nerve
Pictures conditioning desire
for bodies that speak louder than souls;
flesh & spirit as fashion and fad;
style as a source of value
against unaffordable ugliness;
the posed relevance to adolescent fatigue?**

**There is some dread or despair
I have never heard in your voice,
some lily-soft Ophelian loss.
Steam curls from your coffee
like a blacksnake ghost floating towards
your hand hesitating over the sugar.
You speak petunias, marigolds
and lavender ribbons like
the names of unborn children.
I am helpless and silent--
strobe seared into a pose
of watching this thing in myself
reform in relation.**

Resisting

**Shall we call this "Torso?"
Stieglitz would approve, I think,
a granite monument.
no allegory, no alibi . . .
just seed like grain.**

**In the white light I focus
down the enlarger
on a flipped flare of nostril,
on nipples proudly in that plane;
The navel subtly swelling in from
the feathery napped haze.
I go through the sternum valley
to clavicle hills, stop
down in the peaceful dark
beneath the nape . . . basins
flowing with throat and neck.**

**In the dark room
I try to remember the light.
My hand flutters in its beam,
dodging that left pectoral,
shaking as hesitantly leaving it
bloodless, breathless, grained
from the strain of pushing,
from heated solutions of hindsight,
. . . the ambiguous grays of memory.**

Shadow Work

**I cannot write as quietly
As you climb the walls
Of this garden.**

**The honeysuckle trumpets have pursed their
bells,
First Fall leaves hide the last wild strawberries,
I feel the moon raising darkness from my back
As I once raised your hair
Feeling like the First Man seeing
The dark, secret hairs of your neck.**

**But I have lost your specificity . . .
The name of any nature
Runs out of me now
Like a dark radiance.**

**Do I still, really think you saved me?
That was a compliment, like
"you really look nice in that dress."
Not mattering, really, that you did.**

**The sin was not in that.
It was in the lie
About what beauty changes.
How it saves everything.**

Possession

Photography requires light, a constructive relation to dark.

Largeness is a matter of lens; focus, more a matter of aperture than closeness; pattern is selection.

Recognition is like rhyme--a trick inventing familiarity.

**Even wading into the lake this morning
I could not coax the swans to take my bread.
They thought it more fragments torn from your letters.**

**I confiscated all your photographs,
tied them in a bundle.
I took them to the Grove of Epona's Spring.
I placed them in a ring of stone. Burned them.
Stirred the ashes and I found a knife there.
I cut my hand and placed it over the moon.
The sun bled. Tides changed.**

**The Appaloosa stands across the hill, lifts its head towards me, ears perked.
The distance is too far for understanding, the space untraversable.
---No further moments of synchronicity.**

**I want to walk and find a place not so secret
but not so much found. That is the uncommon thought of you---**

Object Model

**Move the light, perform the shadow,
insinuate ways of new forever;
Touch a prop, give a clue
as where to find you.
Subscription will be made.
Ways will be invented
to make the believable reachable.**

**We speak of proportion, integrity, clarity,
of nonconceptual apprehension,
incarnate archetypes in principled genera:
We, mere technicians of icons.
Where there are beliefs
acts will be made.**

**Turn your hips from the lens,
overlap your legs to thin them,
lower your chin to shadow the scar,
hide your hand to demonstrate pockets,
now**

**KICK
to make it candid.**

**Pins pull to fit, weights
pull creases straight and clean,
a pencil shades the nose bridge wider,
tape raises a breast to symmetry . . .**

**Do you ever think of this:
Greeting Pygmalion returning from prayer?**

**Selective focus and filter factors
enhance, abstract, define
your lips.
Pigments, gel rainbows saturate
your lips.**

**lips knowing how to kiss my fingers,
taste their complications,
discover their composition.
I assert my maleness.
I assert my hair,
my sperm and sweat.
You receive my tongue,
mouth it as a word,
"absolution."**

**I Believe! I Believe!
Help my unbelief.**

**Five foot nine with high defined cheekbones,
delicate chin, chiseled nose and wide set eyes set
on a slender frame with long, long legs,
the lucky size seven and a special look
of sweet or winsome, sultry or courtly, open or
rugged.**

**Quartz pours light on shadows, halogen making
shadows,
baffles direct, umbrellas diffuse,
rolls of seamless paper parturition.
Aperture binds radiance, shutters trap instances,
a prop displaces context and whets a new
conjunction.**

**All tools are sacred.
Or perhaps no more sacred or profane
than the task or result or
a round of drinks at day's end.
Symbols are born as tools themselves.
All art is finally private,
androgynous.**

**We come together praying our faith is enough.
do intimate things, do cruel things
as objects of the other's art.
We cast ourselves to exile
in the fathomless retina of situation
hoping for a spark of divine accident,
praying our fusion will net the ivory genesis.**

from Epona's Spring

Baptism

**The Dead glow in these night fields--
All who have gone before into
the cataclysm, the stumbling rocks,
the broken branches of accord.
The Appaloosa taught me;
from his language I understand
a word whispered among mares.**

**All she wants
is to be enough.**

**Down in the Spring of Epona
I stand mired in hoofed mud
too far from the center to drown,
too far from the banks to step out.
Sometimes we hang dreams from the soul
to be yanked up into salvation.
Dream of the gentle. Cure with the sudden.**

**Will I be there
when she wakes up screaming?**

**I put my face into the water,
kneel with my chest into the water;
I am an unlighted reflection.
The water shuts over my back.
What can we buy with our selves?
Wake up screaming at loss . . .
at everything come true at once.**

**All she wants to be
is enough.**

**The Appaloosa stares down the hill at me
then walks away into the dark.
I rise up baptized in stars,
my skin chills in vapor and fire
amidst the heaven's constellations.
The dead are making their way home
continuously
reborn. They say only everything is enough.**

**Her eyes burn with the bridges
we are crossing.**

Even After

**Wetness over the field
where mare-headed sadness
comes whispering as a mist.
All are here.
All is here.
Their whispers crawl over my shoulders,
in my hair -- infectious breathing
over my cheeks and chest.
I cannot understand the words
as if something presses their throats.
This is Epona, I think and turn
and watch the whispers enter our field
coming for us.**

**Let me demonstrate this:
The outside is all over us
destroying the signal of numbers
like a harmony of fire
slow in its brilliance and ash,
like lips wet with shadows.
Anger is from the presumptions --
disappointed or enforced,
scrawled in a drunken secret
unforgiven.
A blasphemy makes love
by its moral capacity
to die.**

**Llyne said something the other night
about a softball game,
dust on the shelf of her mother's picture,
and where was I tonight . . .
one more time late.**

From Shrine Stories

Shrine of Cups

**Spirit gives context, tortured by what inspires it.
Image can be understood as a momentary
summation
in a long process of accretion.**

**When I walked into the kitchen
she was standing harsh and naked
stirring cups of coffee with
garlic and cinnamon and nutmeg . . .
Her head turned,
eyes smeared like blackberries,
"The tractor he was driving overturned . . .
crushed him against a tree."
Is this the way love dies?**

**There is a relief in tragedy,
a mourning that is rage
never recanting the magnitude of self
or the blind energy of its collapse.**

**They kept her under sedation
several miles from here; a sense
of civilized order. It remained
too emotionally simple for me
to clean up the mess of coffee.
But I didn't.
I visited in the mornings,
glanced at it in the evening . . .
like a Shrine of Cups.**

**Sometimes imagination cannot translate itself,
is too astonished at its own disillusion,
at recognitions
that snap like static of crushed electricity.**

**Tonight,
my friend is afraid of
whether I went to the kitchen for coffee
to cry or drink or put
my head into the sink where
(it is said)
I broke glass and water . . .
water all in my hair
rinsing out black and bitter.**

Golden Horses

We have our affinities --
legends & ghosts of archetype longings
like blue dregs in the blood of glory.
Perhaps we even practice them
like match tricks or blacksmithing
or driving around at four in the morning
looking for a cafe with real-wood-top tables.
Nothing is apparent.
A dark braille of store fronts
reads like a characterless dream,
an overcast night that will not rain.

A logical oddness is necessary
in the slender, numbing edge
slid between threads of will and desire.
Remembrance of a letter not yet written
to tell Toronto
I will not be there this summer.
juxtaposed with the image of a lake
from my last trip back through Montana.
Friends I know now have friends there.
The world has changed subreference.
Minnesota, Horse-Head Lake,
the Jewish girl with gifts
of 3 meerschaum chess pieces
and a Hebrew dictionary.
Today,
during the telling of this story
I noticed our reflections in the water,
caught between sky and earth,
a double-reversing end-frame of mirrors
that keep telling the same story,
everything changing,
never concluding.

**I am attracted to these things I cannot touch.
I cannot be touched by them.
Little Golden-Eyes does the trick of her wounds
but we are safe,
it is stigmata,
the suffering is not ours at all.**

**Just before sunrise
this insomniac affinity of images
sums up to a waffle house.
My face reflects back
from a cup of dark coffee,
from a Formica white table-top
patterned with golden horses
leaping.**

from Unconscionable Rituals,
Conclusions of Affection

Resuscitation

**Death is not a thing--it is nothing,
not even the noise of a dream.
When your stomach lay against mine
I had hoped to learn again
how to breathe in my sleep.**

**Cicadas are rare now--not the year of their birth.
Not since I was a child have I seen a humming
bird,
they have left the colored bosoms of my mother's
garden.
In the dewed air of this morning there is only a
brief,
unblaming, unsigned note, "I had to leave."**

**Violence renders a more complete departure--
A blow to the chest forcing the air of you out.
I find a forgotten lipstick, stand before the mirror
and paint great blossoms on my breast,
make shrill, rasping noises in my throat.**

Another Night

**Droplets hang from the blade grass
needling the night,
fireflies pop like bells struck
then slowly immersed into the nights ocean.
Stillness--no more, no less than any other
evening of no significance,
As unparticular as this glass of wine
(how many, what number is it in a lifetime?)
The moment burns away like another cigarette,
Its smoke undulating like a tan and riverous
body.**

"I saw her," says the Night.

"You were dreaming,"

I say to the dark.

I should make some lawful form

to capture all of this, preserve

Like those blooms closed upon the fence line--

hanging like torn under things

This night is another empty crib--

Fairies or Giants have kidnapped the contents.

The dark and I continually discuss its legend.

I tell the Night that I cannot honestly say,

"There is no one who will remember you better."

Sincerity never made a thing true.

Portrait Calories

**There is a madness
in the taste of flesh around your ribs,
a sweetness in the gnaw of your thumb.
Even at my age
there are still places taken on faith,
but know, here, that you carve my face,
furrow it with the mean etcetera, etcetera . . .
ascetic only in premonition of complications
of the visionary diet you bring me.
Your mascara underlines run down my shoulder,
my ear catches in the holographic language
of your thighs, your neck, all the succulent
notes of your laughter crying,
"Everyone, sometime, has loved and been loved
wrongly."**

**You stare at the back of my hand,
at the line-map of my face
as if they were paths with no exit.
My throat and ears blister with the gorge
of silent nap around your cheeks. What do you
say?
I cannot see your tongue's movement
behind the teeth of that vowel.
How does that word taste?
Spit it into my mouth,
let me hum it down the curve of your back.
I hunger for the desire in our destiny,
your hair in my teeth. . . the violence
of our sating.**

Sunday Meditations

**The Presbyterian bells ring
reminding us we need not rise,
that we can stretch luxuriously into sheets
of devoted warmth.**

**You stir unawaking, perhaps feeling
the light that crowns your ear;
I think of all the differences
between what we say and mean,
watch the blue curtained light
spread down across your face.**

**What is desperate must define beauty--
for a moment, I want so desperately to hear
the little-girl noise of your laugh . . .
but do not wake you.**

If I could only make something this lovely . . .

**But ultimately, I
am the only artifact of my creations.**

**It is hardest
knowing that I am only a place along your way.
If I explained this sadness
would it make a difference in your own?**

**Just now,
if I should reach out my hand
and touch you, prayer
would be such an excess to faith
in the content of your grace.
If a man's life amounts to only his last moment,
then this is the gift of you:
to live singing beyond words,
to leap in the light of your ears.**

from Rick's Cafe

almost nothing

**You carry almost nothing with you, now.
Maybe a smell, a color comes to you
but you almost cannot remember her name.
And your fingers unconsciously twist
in the hair of the cat, caress the meerschaum
trinket
while your eyes have drifted to the horizon but
cannot make out what you were doing there.
It all goes away from you
as if you were traveling.**

**But you are still there,
like a grove in the mist,
like the center of a goat's eye.**

where-fear

**What is this where-fear?
Look here. Look here.
Even now you turn away from
watching the horizon fade
into a predetermined omen.**

**Going? What?
Today . . . Rain?
Another year of drought - - -
A husband withered into desert farm.
Outside the screen, browns of absence,
everything consumed--nothing to process
lucidity.**

**You turn away from the door
no longer expecting visitors, escape
or even forbearance.
The land is radiant agony
crying to release or be released..**

**Sometime back your father said,
"No woman is worth the dying."
and left this farm finally to you,
you gave the man
you want to leave
before he stops believing
you are this where.**

women rise

**Women rise before suns,
Sometimes, before men
who are not husbands
prevent them.**

**Men sleep thinking
later of the time
Women know as now . . .**

**Dozing on the sofa
will she now
let him in?
Is he
now?**

**She touches the face of her dog,
everything helpless in morning.**

from The Smokey Taos

Braille

No soft song

No plain voice

No thorn throttled plan

but is

a braille image of is

caught in peaks and depressions

where the light and is

survives in a breathing dark

and sprung-fingered epiphany

Anonymous Dial Tone

**a call made anonymous
in non-address
still connected**

**guid m lost in m help m
e run up this wall, over
beyond It talks like wha
thas to do with
it, s
circumstamince**

**that is afterwards
as foreground
talk**

**to m
e, I've seen your point.
I are these words's
if your business
is**

A Cinderella Story

**I have carried this shoe forever
since this morning on the trace,
down the falls, over the trail
understanding nothing, a little.**

**a tennis shoe left in the trailside--
an unpagan vernacular, flotsam
in the world flowing through the world**

**confirming nothing of the illusion but the
illusion,
the opposite of "to listen" without listening
to something for**

**It is not my shoe.
It is my shoe.
Everything oneness
as a Word cannot understand
the voice that utters it.**

**Experience as a verb,
communion and consummation
impinging on awakesness
searching for a fit,
a union of travelers.**

Pronouncement

**These are my gratitude's:
an inland that runs far solemn
tiding the far shore in prelude,
the premonition of a dark, liquid radiance
as soft as a hummingbird's song.**

**your child-hands trembling and challenged.
driving the strangeness out of shape,
the cognitive becoming transparent, undisonant
droplets of specifity splashing
on the thighs of mathematical pines.**

**and always your balance to me.
Stand in the year of your laugh
and do not a more thing awesome.
This mantle of your grace
teaches the braveness of love.**

Up, Down and Out

**In a do-nothing wait
wishing only to be more than Did
as from a high hill
watching tombs
completed architecture
and the inscribed gist.**

**Vacant, vast native thoughts
of a world descending into valley,
the unseen hair of complications
in woodland water reflections
of the moon, even in what Is
scooped out by hands.**