

## Diana Hartog / ELEVEN POEMS

### Frog Contest

False start —

false fronts, saloons, a booing crowd, the green contestant  
carried back to a line drawn in the dust

•

Playing leap-frog  
a boy crouches  
tailbone tucked

•

Mention of a dragon in Japanese linked-verse  
is limited to ‘ . . . once every thousand stanzas.’  
No restrictions on frogs.

•

Freed by a kiss  
he lowers himself into the cool muck

•

Applause swelling for the hypnotist, the frog  
leaps from the stage  
to regain his seat in the second row  
where he sinks down, warts and all,  
and reaches for his wife's hand

•

Hind legs dangling, the old poet  
treads water, obscure among the reeds.  
Famous pond

A tiny monkey weighing just 200 grams and thought to be extinct has been rediscovered in south eastern China, says *The People's Daily*. The “ink” or “pen” monkeys were once kept by scholars to prepare ink, pass brushes and turn pages. The highly intelligent little creatures, who slept in desk drawers or brush pots, evidently added to a scholar's reputation for eccentricity.

# Ink Monkey

He's a great help.

While I think  
 he grinds the ink-stick in the shallow well: the rhythmic  
                                   shuus . . . shuuss . . . shuuss . . .  
 soothes. He spits again . . . Shuuss . . . shuuss . . . the liquid darkening.

A strange hunched creature, trembling at every task.

He can't write. Not poetry.

Oh, he can wield a brush

and stroke a character

— even a string of characters —

rewarding himself with a raisin for every page

turned. Scribble scribble.

Scribble scribble scribble. Off in his own world.

Ignored (the best lot for a poet), and fresh from a nap in the upper left-hand drawer I forget everything I've been taught

— cooling my tiny brain —

and begin:  
dip my tail — just the tip —  
into the ink.

## The Couple in Room 212

The tv flickers mute, the remote  
knocked to the orange shag carpet  
by a wing.

Leda, sprawled naked across the sheets  
— mind a blank —  
stares up at the ceiling's watermarks. Turns her head  
towards the high window and the plucked moon  
above the motel.

Swans-down in the ashtray. Pillows flung to the floor.  
Thank Jupiter for maid service.  
No need to pick up after him  
in here,  
or in the bathroom,  
where he treads damp towels  
and hisses in the steam.

## The Lipstick Tree

Halfway up the steep path, arms full of groceries,  
I slowly and expertly  
press my mouth to the bark  
of the slim birch,  
to the patch blurred red  
with lipstick from so many practice kisses,  
so many years of living alone on this mountain,  
I have to lift my chin to reach.

## Christmas Eve

There's always the chance that a shopping cart  
abandoned as a car backs from its stall between parallel white lines  
will start rolling.

### DO NOT LEAVE CHILD UNATTENDED IN CART

is the warning every shopper grips, when pushing a cart down the aisles.  
The cart's child-seat, if empty, can be collapsed, or its rigid plastic flap  
lifted to cover the two openings where small legs normally dangle and kick.

Sometimes across the vast expanse of a parking lot you'll see snaking towards you  
a caravan of empty shopping carts, thirty or more, rammed one within  
the other and steered, far at the end, by someone wearing a name tag  
pinned to a bright nylon vest as he herds the carts back inside.

If it's raining he'll wipe each cart's handle with a rag.

Walmart, Pak-N-Save, Costco: all the superstores stay open even later after  
Thanksgiving,  
every night leading up to Christmas Eve.

For shelter he stands beneath the overhang,  
staring out at the acres of automobiles, glistening under tall hooded lightposts.  
Letting the strays accumulate.

from JELLYFISH SUITE

Sea Nettle

The poison  
Loosens the muscles hinging the jaw  
till it sags,  
tongue slack, saliva pooling,

and you'll find that

any attempts  
fail;  
any attempts to reach the roof of the mouth and speech;

one's gaze compelled to follow the ascension of sheer Being  
— veil over mystery over veil —  
tentacles whipping in slow-motion, pale ruffled mouth-arms trailing  
as the jelly leaves the scene of the crime, wholly innocent

of its beauty's sting: deadly as Love-at-first-sight,

and only human, you might, but *don't*,  
take it personally; don't make  
my mistake.



## “Egg-yolk” Jelly

So named  
for the morning after a quarrel, rising exhausted

to the Nothing  
left from “Nothing left unsaid”, transparent as the matter  
in *What’s the matter?*

— or merely the day’s first expectorated  
phlegm, drifting in the basin;

surely what the brain loses when it loses its mind,  
this listless blur that randomly

gathers to a pang a semblance for one pulse . . . two . . . even three

before it dies away  
so tattered and diaphanous

you’d never guess

## “Gooseberry” Jellies

— drifting in the current, tiny light-bulbs  
of feeble wattage flickering along  
loops of filament,

jellies the size of a lit pen-light  
traveling in the dark of a woman’s purse  
in case of emergencies, in her ninth month

before her water breaks,  
the foetus floating along in the womb,  
buoying her fears, lids closed over bulbous eyes.

Eyes that open on a cry, blinking in the glare, squinting  
as you lie in her arms  
against a white hospital gown smelling of bleach.

Both of you gasping for breath.

You’re so little, and know so  
little beyond instinct, you assume — with a feeble, flickering brilliance —  
that you’ve both washed ashore  
together, and — from the fierce tenderness of her embrace — that  
little as you are, you’ve saved her, your mother.    *You.*

## Quince Jelly

*Silly*, to take pride in a half-dozen jelly jars, filled, sealed  
with hot paraffin that clouds as it cools and slowly  
hardens towards the center, the wax already opaque  
but still soft

— you could poke a finger;

trembling — the jelly inside — when disturbed,  
and such a beautiful color, an ethereal amber but pale,  
pale and translucent; the color, say,  
of the soul, freshly entered through  
the top of the infant's skull;

the soft fontanel finally closed  
to the light streaming down  
as the bones knit together: *That will have to do.*

## Portuguese man-of-war

The name is in the helmet — transparent, empty.

Adrift on the surface tension.

The man-of-war, a cousin to the jellies,

boasts a transparent crest, or coxcomb,

and glistens in the Mediterranean sun.

Again, no major organs, no heart, no eyes to speak of,

only the primitive reflex

and of course

a hidden agenda

reaching fathoms down

and inviting a closer look

in the greenish, mote-hung gloom: a curtain

of dangled knotted stinging cells

to be brushed aside as we would

a beaded curtain serving to discourage flies on shore.

Empty. An empty helmet. It takes no brains to float, adrift on the surface calm.