

Britt

Poems by Charles Brittain Fleming

Introduction

Photos

Cover photo and “Rest Stop” by Britt Fleming

“Buddha’s Boots,” “Say Cheese,” “Simon’s Doll,”
“Falling,” “Photophobia” and “Trini” by Gina Kelly

“Last Supper” by Peg Fleming

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On Donegal Cliffs

We stand on cliffs of Donegal, staring out
at Atlantic anger, whose foam becomes our wings.
We jump, holding hands, to cross the flood.
Your polished black boots slice the surface,
my lungs fill with brine, but our eyes
look straight ahead into the ale-dark sea.

Here our flesh transforms into the beautiful.
We wanted night and day, life and death,
one and zero, in the same instant, together.
To be in the storm, yet not consumed by it.
To hold each other tightly in a maelstrom
of wind and waves, eyes filled with future.
Smaller, smaller, until time no longer exists
and gods can hear our footsteps in the dark.

The Eleventh Wave

rock is hard, but she is deep
waves come, lick the rocks
worked into lather, they
shave the rough edges
and keep licking until he dissolves
or she turns to ice, breaking him

The Swimmers

We float in fresh lake water, stripped
bare to brain, skin and bones hidden
beneath blueberry bushes on shore.
It's cold. Our spinal chords hum tunes
to forget freezing, no stiff tongues
left to sing like loons around us.
With nothing but thought for movement,
we dream ourselves into existence.

The Conversion of Mass into Energy

I found you floating on a bed of algae,
singing Cinnamon Girl.

You converted sunlight into words
and amplified the echoes of seashells.

Our music fed the hungry, gathered
around us in bamboo canoes.

Soon, the food ran out, the moon
appeared in your hair, and you slept.

I stepped out of my skin, so that you could wear it.

Rest Stop

There is a thin line between panic and euphoria,
Marked, as it is, on mental roadmaps
Like the Minnesota-Iowa border.
One side looks and feels like the other,
But they are somehow different states.
There is, of course, more to a thing than its limits,
More than printed symbols behind glass,
Giving names to lines and points on a journey.
Both are unfamiliar notions, tales
Of strange places brought back by shaken travelers
Who tread their stony fields, and remember
Waking to storms of fear and beauty, swearing
Never to leave the quiet land again.



A Taste for Life

When you first had me,
I was shielded by humor
and ignorance. My armor
was cool, perfect
beneath the stroke
of your fingertip.
You were curious, hungry.

When you broke me,
the tasty interior
spilled onto your tongue.
Viscous questions
coated the roof of your mouth.

A smile on your lips,
I disappeared, and you
looked for another.

The Art of Oil Painting

Your face promises something more.
Your hands sing jazz lyrics.
Your point vanishes into bronze.

You are headless wings.
You are extra-dimensional.
You are the renaissance horizon.

I paint you with secret geometry.
I blend your light with skilled sfumato.
I love the way you fly into my room.

We first met in the baths of Rome.
We ran from fires of bellicose heavens.
We trace our footprints in sand.

Happiness is a Warm Spaceship

There is a coldness that begins in my gut, spreading outward.
I crawl grudgingly out of my cot, coughing and hacking.
Getting dressed, gathering my wits, and eating,
are, each morning, a monumental task.
Body and mind resist day's beginning.
I look out the window and shiver.

I don't recall ever feeling like this.
This trip was supposed to snap me out of it.
Confronting the cold, the vacuum, the horror.
Putting old ghosts to rest in their rightful places.
No. I'd rather hold you naked beneath thick blankets,
waking the next day to sunlight pouring from blue windows.

Venus in Leather

We both know what you want.
Slavery. Your own,
to be completely subjugated
by the woman you worship,
enough that you would die for her.
If it is her pleasure to torture you,
this is your release.
There is no equality.
One must be master,
the other, slave.
One must grovel before the other,
who will deny you,
threaten to leave you,

kill you,
make love to another
while you stand there,
naked, bleeding and helpless.
I will dress you in tight jeans,
torn t-shirt and boots.
I will ride behind you,
gripping your strong shoulders
with my long, thick nails,
and you will love every moment
they dig into your skin, and
I will love every tear
that falls from your eyes.

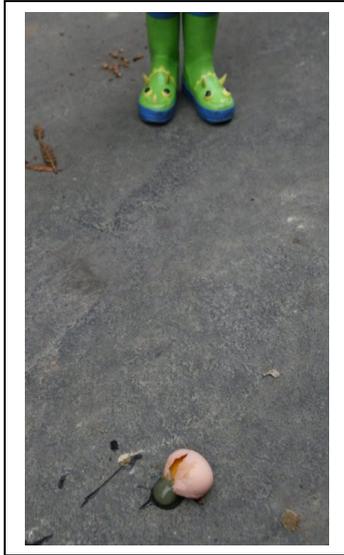
The End of the Universe

I watch the world recede before me.
Time disappears, space shrinks into a shell,
leaving only what is real where plastic walls
and paper doors once kept us locked away.
The light shining from one sun is enough.
We circle each other, loving
the last two stars alive.

Buddha's Boots

The Guardian was tasked to carry the cosmic egg to the temple of light.

There, a serpent would be born, who would breathe fire into the universe. Steadily, she walked in Buddha's boots, one to the east, and one to the west. But she tripped on a thought, and dropped the egg on hard nothingness. The white Yang ran out and became the sky. The yellow Yin oozed forth and became earth. The world was born, but a universe would never be. Thank God there's still a chicken.



Be Quiet

Sitting here in the bamboo grove,

Something rustles leaves behind me.
I slowly turn, and catch the dragon's tail

in the corner of my eye.

It is important not to face her.
A momentary glimpse will have to do.

We play this game until the moon
glows through the palms,
leaving her no place to hide.

Marriage by the Lake

She measured the depth
of his eyes, the lake
of his blue soul.
She found him
outside the dance,
sprawled in a meadow
that swam in the scent of lilac.

He touched her shoulder
and found it warm.

They gave each other words
and paintings that night,
spoken in a language
understood by the moon,
and written in breaths.

We Just Want to Sleep

Do you ever have nights where every sound is an echo,
and someone writes words on the inside of your skull?

Yes, I do. Nights that were never mine, stolen by angels,
who do pirouettes on my breasts until they hear last call.

On the first spring rain, do you run outside in pajamas,
waving a mason jar around in the air to can the smell?

I do. When the river is low, and tomatoes are thirsty,
I write a rain martini with olives, syllables and gin.

Is our consciousness a river between the boulders
of the world, therefore a contradiction of ourselves?

I think we begin in water. We shift between real
and not, as dictated by the mysteries of imagination.

Shall we, then, walk together by the shore at night,
listening for the echoes that travel from words to worlds?

Frida

Look at Frida Kahlo paintings.
Think of the suffering of woman,
of the pain of childbirth many have never known,
of servitude, sedation, sexual slavery
and a world of mothers, mother of worlds.

Beatings at the hands of pompous household dictators,
guarding small kingdoms from feminine intellect.

Fearful old men, cowering in their own semen dreams,
building brick walls against inevitable onslaught.

Women of courage, served up a la carte,
 because
 Adam lost a rib
 because
 Helen's face launched a thousand ships
 because
 Sor Juana removed her cowl,
 and looked at heaven.

Death of a Fruit

Tomato is fruit, only more,
beating heart pulled from
sacrificial chest, red planet
filled with hidden moisture.
Unlike avocado, she bleeds
small seeds from pierced skin.
Oddly, she craves to be cut open
and eaten at the peak of ripeness.
That's when I rub salt into her womb.

Say Cheese

Give us that big, happy smile
Wide open for all the world gives-
great strength, powerful weakness,
loud laughter and words,
crying, vomiting, kissing,
a big kiss for us all,
the huge beautiful truth,
bigger than stomach,
bigger than heart,
bigger than you-



On the Lake

Walk out onto the lake in the late afternoon.
The further you go, lower sets the sun, red,
maroon, scarlet, purple, colors without names.
Walk out naked, on ice, in January, in Minnesota.
Please do this. Walk out onto the lake, naked,
walking towards the line where ice meets sky.

Skin complains, cold sucks heat from an alien
walking in a world where myths turn to steam
and every transgression curdles into phlegm,
every pain writes itself into memory, every pleasure
swims inches beneath your feet, walking
towards twilight, cold, naked, dissolving

into particles of love, hate, envy, guilt,
and sin, on ice. This is how I want to die.

The View from Above

Heavy stones hold us to the world,
But winds carry what isn't bound
To places far above the level plain.
If we would just lift anchor
And take flight, as others have before,
To join the silent squadrons
Held steady by singing strings,
We'd see the distant earth below,
And know that we are made of light.

The Juggling Act

When I was younger,
hopes hovered like spheres before me,
always within reach.

These many-colored orbs whispered
hold us

but with each attempt,
slipped further away,
and led me around the world.

Years later, they still float before me,
closer than ever.

My hands engage in artful play,
deft and studied,
in what would seem to be an act.

With each subtle movement,
the balls come closer.

The prize at last
is almost mine.

Empty Stage

Good evening.

There is nothing here.

Echoes. Heel-scuffed floor.

Scarlet curtain hangs,

hiding certain things.

Shadows on backstage door.

An audience of seats,

breathless.

Non-Understanding

I Don't understand Tao
or Zen
or Jesus Christ
Greek philosophy charms me
Germans. complicate.
I understand
salt on the tongue
wind in my ear
cat's claw rips my skin
scent of basil, garlic
hands in cold water
warm wet tongues
buds in April
compliments
absences
or nothing.

Simon's Doll

Mother. From egg, I exit.

Like egg, smooth walls hold me,
in my warm water world.

Walls that grow closer every day
in comfortable darkness.

**Songs touch me from beyond
in gentle, loving waves.**

**I turn and listen to your voice,
Mother, leading me to light.**



Embracement

To keep herself warm at night,
she holds onto brightness kept in bottles,
collected on summer seashores, blessed by gulls.
She looks out long on what's left of light,
stirred by memories made more real by sorrow.
In her world, there is no now, no tomorrow.
There are paintings of faces, floating
in the branches of leafless trees,
their mouths moving slowly in prayer.
She can feel their arms around her,
but only hears the voice of the wind.

His Beautiful Death

The hot tea moves us, pushes blood to extremes,
as clouds would cover mountains before spring rain.
A thousand horses gallop through our veins,
music thrown from strings caressed by kind hands,
drums driven to riot, voices crying wounded,
eyes flickering ciphers. We feel ourselves adrift
on plains of soy, salted wings beating fog.
Flying takes the mind, holds feet to wine,
carries us to theaters beyond this time,
through seven and thirteen, to land softly
on a bed of barley, with pillows filled
with swollen seed. Let's watch the sun leave us.
Let's sing to his beautiful death.

The Storm

A child born of heat
rises, building up
over warm waters.
The wind picks up,
blows harder,
boils and explodes into cumulus.
Violence from the south
turns from white to gray to gold
to crimson,
pushing northwards, driven
by humid gulf stream gales,
fast and loud, to embrace
cool disposition.
A soft boil begins.
A dance of gray and gold,
not seeking -- driven
by a sultry past,
his rage dissipated
on thirsty earth,
the passing
of another breath.

Sketches in an Intimate Venue

I wrote your name on my arm last year
with a pocket knife. Now it's a poem,
recorded for life as a jagged scar.

I draw your silhouette on the kitchen wall
with a flashlight. My eyes burn each time
you turn to look at me and smile.

I watch you carve skaldic incantations
beneath the ice with a candle
held tightly in the pale vellum of your hand.

Falling

A falling leaf, I grew from the same tree
as many other leaves. They fall, too.
I spent the summer collecting light
and dancing in the wind. Now, my stem
weakens, my skin flushes, waiting
for the final gust. When it comes,
my descent seems like many years,
floating on a sea of cool air.
I know it will be a soft landing.



Starbaby

Another source of light
Crawls across the grid,
Breaks though the silk
And begins to live.

A world, a mind, a space,

Yearning to return
To the unknown place
Where it was born,

Surrounded by others in stages
Of growth and dissolution,
A tide of time and matter, it is

The rock, the spark, the fire.

When darkness gives life to light,
It begins to pull it back
Into the warming deep
And always brings it home.

The Techniques of Linear Perspective

Take all the lines on earth,
tie them together on a nail.
Play mathematical games
with Pythagorean poets.
Now, put this in your blender:
If Leonardo found a camera obscura
on sale at Best Buy, and took a picture
of Jesus at Nye's Polonaise,
would the last snowflake fall?
Well, he did. It melted on Hennepin,
turned into a tear, and flooded the Internet.
That's all I had to say. Going for a walk.

Some Might Write Sideways

This could potentially make reading difficult, unless you are one of those whose minds will never recognize arbitrary confines.

But some might write sideways, while others would really confuse things, by adhering to grounded orientation.

Some might prefer to write upside-down. of creative writing (words) on a page. was observed for the presentation such as would occur if no standard - right? They prevent mass chaos, They make things easier for us or the rules have changed (again.) It could be that the world has flipped, Why are you standing on your head?

The Difference between Poetry and Drawing

Lines drawn on paper.

We recognize some as letters.

Others as skin, eyelids or flower petals.

Or clouds. But the lines in R feel nothing like your arm.

L doesn't smell like your neck, but is the beginning of love.

When you paint life red with a brush, it looks like blood,
and blue is the color of my eyes in spring.

Next time you paint or write,
don't forget the lights.

Neither Shall You Covet

It was the sideways smile, a notion
in your eye, the way your hips
would move from side to side.
I once caught sight of your white
shoulder- saw how it turned and shone.
I knew you would never be my own -
as one owned me, yet even in prayer,
your intentions were always clear.
While I sought to cleanse my soul
of a dark imagination, you returned,
an unclothed ghost, a succubus,
planted in my heart by hell's own hand.
Now with coiled collar you stand
awaiting tight and final truth
to free you from the world's embrace,
and me, from what I could not bear.

Photophobia

The pain is not from light
But what it illuminates -
The love of darkness
In your dim corners
That haven't smelled day
Since you were a child.
Someone opens a window,
Disturbs your sleep, and
Like a thief, steals your fear.
This bright ray removes muck
From forgotten channels,
Erases cracks from mirrors,
And releases buried veins
Of temptation, gods, and sin.
Some burn and fall, others
Soar towards the source,
Away from the fear of light.



Ponte Rotto

I walked along a Roman road
Built to keep Allemanni out

Bridges bringing legions
But ruins remained, inscribed

Imperial proclamations cut
Announcing completion of

Stood for one thousand years
Finally began to wear down

Leaving a few wise words
In the cool outer provinces

Along a Roman wall
Two thousand years ago

Burned when they fled
With bold, straight letters

In everlasting stone
Another marvel of Rome

Until pillage and weather
Fine marble and mortar

And some stray languages
Spoken by savages.

Ghost in the Toyota

I drive a pickup down the road,
thinking distant hills are breasts,
where grains of sand feel like thighs.
Where the highway enters a valley,
you wait for me like an exclamation point
at the end of a long sentence.
I reach out to hold your hand
and desert wind removes our clothes.
We stand there, nary a tree in sight,
not even a grape leaf to cover up
your prickly pear or my saguaro cactus.
A bus from Iowa drives slowly by,
its passengers on a tour of ghost towns.
Everyone takes pictures of the spirits.
We turn and walk to the top of a hill
to watch the sun set on our world.

This Tree, This Truth: A Chant Cycle

There is earth within us
As we are within her
There is sky over us
As we are within him
There is water upon us
As we are within spirits

The truth grows from seed
As light feeds our leaves

We rest in darkness
As night feeds our dreams
We wake in silence
As thoughts fill our days
We think of others
As they search for us

The rain begins to fall
As we thirst for truth

Our limbs gain strength
As they fill with love
Our roots reach deeper
As they seek a source
Our skin grows thicker
As winds blow against us

The wind calls our names
As we begin to speak

Without one, there cannot be the other.

The continuity of Life
And the certainty of Death
Without one, there cannot be the other.

The stubbornness of Day
And the insistence of Night
Without one, there cannot be the other.

The universe of One
And the inevitability of Zero
Without one, there cannot be the other.

The enticement of Heat
And the invigoration of Cold
Without one, there cannot be the other.

The seduction of Up
And the sensuality of Down
Without one, there cannot be the other.

The comfort of Full
And the vastness of Empty
Without one, there cannot be the other.

The warmth of Here
And the security of There
Without one, there cannot be the other.

The touch of You
And the sensation of Me
Without one, there cannot be the other.

The inner one asks to be heard
Her heart pumps life through the body
Her lungs breathe life into the body
Her mind imagines life outside the body

The body provides
Smooth muscles to lift water
Strong legs to walk the earth
Steady eyes to discern light

But a fearful creature hides
It builds barriers to deny nature
And erects walls to hide the body and mind

The outer one asks to be heard
His healing light points the way
His heavens call us with song
His darkness separates the worlds

The worlds provide
Warm spheres of life
Fiery suns to nurture us
Eternal spirits to move us

But an angry creature screams
It swears at the earth and sky
And commits violence upon itself

The whole one asks to be heard
To strengthen the eternal body
To walk from world to world
To care for the fearful and angry ones

Trini

**Had Manet found you,
clothed in marble shadows
beneath the grove's oak,
as I did that summer day,
he would have known each stroke
before it touched the canvas.**



The Fountain of You

I am on my knees. Your river
Falls through my thirsty lips,
Your cool, wet enlightenment,
Your fragile temperature
Freezes nerves behind my tongue.

I am somewhere down here below the table,
Forgotten by the party crowd.
Every crumb tastes like caviar,
Salty, Russian and small.

But I've always known how to swim,
Unclothed, arms and legs kicking,
Unshelled oyster in outgoing tide,
Holding on to slippery earth.

If you should happen to think of it,
Pour some mellow wine into my mouth.
It will remind me of our last walk
In the silent streets of St. Paul,
Before we were taken by the sea.

Walking a Pug through a Pet Store

When I was born, I had a pug nose,
 Like Winston Churchill, only
 To this day, my nose is still squat,
 So who came first — man, dog, or what
Flat nose, bulging eyes, tongue licking behind.
 ‘ello, Prime Minister, would you like more?
 No thank you, I’ve London Blitz on my mind,
 But...perhaps I will shite upon the pet-shop floor.
What is this, if not diplomacy? To leave
 A calling card that retail staff will not forget
 Steaming on the mercantile aisle,
 To one man, a message; to another, something vile?
Too many questions for the canine mind,
 Or for mine, looking for friendship and food,
 Long wet tongues, sniffing hairy butts
 Like a library of scents, for anything good.

A Landscape of Secrets

With every crumb of time
the fear of death
will kill you,
-flare in the August night-
a confused, left-handed little boy
beyond exhaustion in the city of delirium.
I'll meet you there at midnight
in that sidewalk café
on Wahnstrasse-
the authorities could recognize us on sight
(assume a nom de plume for now)
-whisper in my ear like a lover.
They'll never notice us
beneath baseball caps,
our branded t-shirts tucked in tightly
to reptilian frames,
girded with braided belts and burnished buckles,
normal, healthy Americans who follow the news,
follow the leader, fall asleep to the 10:20 weather
-taxpayers, workers, pragmatists,
unlike the darkly clad
seeking crucifixion at the gates,
martyred to screwing delight
for the tyranny of a word.

Dead Relatives

Dear Aunt Gertrude rests beneath mossy oaks,
Salem Menthols, Harlequins and coffee on her table,
Reading by the light of mother's kerosene lamp,
Its membrane murky, a luminescent flora.

To die a virgin, without habit or higher calling,
Immersed in sultry romance, unverified, faithful
To the virtual, unrequited literature only
A Lutheran spinster truly understands.

Karl Brittain gave me a slide rule full of lines.
He used it in spherical harmonics at Georgia Tech
Before the CeeBees swept him up for service.
On Guam he was struck softly by a ricochet bullet.

The sniper performed honorably until dispatched
And Karl dreams of calculations in concrete,
Dogs passing through his years in a canine parade
And my grandmother, certified public angel.

Kathleen (we called her Kat) read the New Yorker,
Played Beethoven, Rachmaninoff and Mozart,
Let naughty Ogden lay about for those who read,
Spoiled me with too many yesses and Dr. Suess.

She read me pages of illustrated Greek mythology,
Of Herculean exploits as real as Cronkite's news.
She led me through worlds beneath her fingertips,
Their sleeping gods now silent as paper on shelves.

Last Supper

Between Two Harbors and Grand Marais
Deer run, road kills and a wolf
Thick-coated and beautiful
Well fed on the dead with the ravens
Looks at us over his young shoulder
And strolls across the highway.
Others watch and wait in the trees
Studying the danger of metal beasts
And the sudden carnage they unleash.
There are ripe, red berries on the other side
That draw them from the snow-caked field
And shoreline homes, where wastes unsealed
Announce by scent a winter's feast
To end craving with one more meal.



Awake

Eyes open, tired, wondering
why this again
Reliving the past, fearing the future
a pounding heart will not rest, pursued
a sleeping mind will not wake, forgiven

Voices beneath lights announce
the passing of last call
Bringing closure to nocturnal rites like
a prostitute's orgasm
randomly turning fall's pages across the pavement

Lips

There is a time and place preferred
not beneath fluorescent lights

nor contained in gray-clothed walls
where windowpanes are made of mud

and February's cruel breath beats soundly
on your naked, unbaptised lips

please, do not lick them

2:46

The smell of incense and rain. A chorus of echoes, some laughing, some crying. Dark tears, like oil. Minds, connected by threads. Minds make love, connected by threads. Threads, invisible and warm, vibrating. Threads of trust.

The moon is full. Her face glows through branches.

When I woke in fear, did you feel it too? A burning itch digs under my skin, concentrating on knuckles and ankles. Beating, itching drums on the soles of my feet. I sweat, and throw off blankets. The sweat cools quickly; I shiver. A cat cries to come inside; I walk downstairs and open the back door. She thanks me and runs in. The wind enters my house and wraps her arms around me. She whispers a song in each ear. Wind, sent to me by the moon. The moon, full, on the warmest night of the year, so far. My lover breathes her tongue into my throat. Her hands reach into my lungs, into my bloodstream, into my heart. I dream of dreams. Take these dreams, my moon, my muse. Please, take them.

You: planet. Your mind: atmosphere. I will make her writhe. Yes, I will show her drunk, and cobalt eyes, and smallmouth bass. At 2:46 A.M.

Comet

Coleridge, crucified, wearing a crown of pens
On his right, Rimbaud, bleeding ink
On his left, Kafka, nailed to a desk
Black blood collects in pools

They scream to the setting sun
Slaves to art, touched by eloquence
lower crosses on ice
gently pull out the nails, and
set them free

Sun gleams on Constantine's sword!
Songs of kings echo in city streets!

Now stand
stand on ice,
in the middle of a large lake, in January
looking up at unobstructed heavens
the Milky Way,
the planets,
the stars,
distant galaxies
insignificant?
quite the contrary
YOU are a galaxy
Tonight, I am a comet.

