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# Frozen Falls

Akron Series in Poetry

**I**





## Wellwood

This is what they have chosen,  
this little village of the departed  
cousins and countrymen  
not so far out on the Island

where my mother dreamed of retirement—  
a woman of property, with a stole,  
her children schooled and thriving,  
secure in the American elsewhere—

where the Rosenbergs rest in peace,  
whom I mistook for my parents,  
hiding myself beneath the kitchen table,  
a little spy among the limbs.

I've been twice to gather stones  
to place on their headstones as signs  
that the living recall the departed.  
By now they must be overgrown

with weeds and wildflowers, the odd seeds  
exiled by migrating birds. I should return  
and perform a son's duty.  
I've studied the route:

from Penn to Pinelawn Station,  
and a quick cab ride to the cemetery.  
The driver will wait as I tend  
to my business: say the words,

arrange the stones, tidy up.  
There is glamour in the waiting cab.  
There is glamour in the ticking meter,  
an orphan's glamour,

to count out for all to hear  
and peel off the bills, to say, casually,  
to the indifferent driver the way the big shots do,  
*Keep the change.*

## Hat

I've always wanted to wear one,  
lifting it by the crown with the palm  
of my left hand, off the little table  
I placed for it by the door,

snap-brimming it on the way out.  
My father wore one every day,  
ash-gray, a thick, black ribbon  
circling it, a mourner's band,

a touch of elegance to his  
otherwise dreary life, binding him  
to those other characters born  
at the turn of the century: Bogart,

Gable, Gary Cooper, silent  
as my old man. What did Hemingway  
say about Cooper?

*He beat me to the barn door.*

I love those empty phrases  
spoken out the side of the mouth,  
the hat at a jaunty angle,  
a dash of bravado. I can see myself

like George Raft near the end:  
ducking the tax raps, small-talking  
the high rollers and their ladies,  
flipping that coin, a little bored,

a little amused to have come to this,  
winking as they enter, winking again  
as they exit, tipping my hat  
like a stagedoor Johnny.

## Mercy Stick

Did your father ever stop and say: *Son,*  
*don't take the short end of the mercy stick?*  
Perhaps he was standing at the bedroom door,  
getting ready for the next day's shift,  
examining the scuff marks on his shoes  
the way seers examine feces,  
seeking the future in the old day's waste.  
And you could see something pliant, a switch,  
and wondered whether mercy was the stick  
itself, or the hand that lifts and swiftly falls.

## The Green Book

Who placed it on the shelf surrounded by  
Uris, Wouk, and *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*?  
Dried and flaking, the pages smelled like trash  
left out overnight in the rain,  
its green skin wrinkled and faded  
like the crumpled dollar bills my father pulled  
from his pocket and left on the dresser.  
What was it? Some thick slice of Shakespeare?  
The poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson?  
Tolstoi or Milton abandoned by a happier family?  
Memory returns only the double columns,  
twin waterfalls of words that poured down the page,  
the sources mysterious to me as the sources of the Nile.

## On a Long Strand of Hair Found in a Biography of Frank O'Hara

She bows her head above the book,  
sitting on the wicker on the screened-in porch  
facing the Sound. She's skimming,  
eager to get to the early sixties scene,  
the frantic mountings and couplings.  
Later she examines the webs tattooed along her thighs,  
peeking over her shoulder like a pinup girl.  
Poems live in those places where furniture  
and flesh meet. There in the burn and fade.  
After lunch, she carries a basket to the shore  
and stretches out and reads until she drifts to sleep,  
light enough to hear the wind moving its lips  
across the pages. Evening, he drives back from the City.  
Tie askew, drink in hand, he gossips about the gallery.  
She describes the odd trajectory of the career:  
the booze, the lovers, the politics of Art.  
*Art*, she says with a capital A.  
She says: *The days go by so goddamned quickly  
when you're here on your own. But then, you know,  
you reach an hour late afternoon  
that simply will not budge. The sun just hangs there,  
flummoxed, unsure of its instructions.  
That's nice*, he says, meaning the way the sun sets  
highlights in her hair. *It looks professional.*  
A cool breeze slips through the window  
and two mosquitoes blow into the room,  
shifting the weight of evening toward autumn.  
*Well*, he says, for no clear reason, *that's all she wrote.*

And the hair falls. Or had fallen earlier,  
pages tossed over it like spadefuls of earth.  
She rises and rubs the back of her neck  
and feels the slight swell and curses softly.  
She pours a nightcap to carry up with the book.  
As she ascends, she turns. *Wasn't it all  
just a little too full*, she says,  
balancing book and drink on the banister,  
twisting her hair into a chignon. *I know  
how it ends*, she says, *but I'll read on anyway.*

## Poem with Two Lemons

Here are two lemons for your poem,  
two sour souls in exile, eking out a living.  
What do they see, fresh off the boat,  
with their wide-eyed appraising gaze?

We have come very far to deliver them,  
traveling by night like undocumented aliens.  
Shall we place them on the kitchen table?  
We only want to do for you.

What do you see? Two bright refusals,  
two thick-skinned naysayers?  
Moonlight pouring through a high window  
molds a bowl for you. Dust motes

rise toward the light: a ladder,  
a tongue, whatever you want.  
When the dust settles down, do they resemble  
two veiled widows on a mourning bench,

their husbands dead in the Great War?  
We can give you their corpses, face up,  
unblinking, toward the sun.  
Who might have arranged them so,

two parallel lines reaching for the horizon?  
Was it someone with a sense of occasion,  
or did chance place them so?  
Do you suppose one man is your grandfather

on your mother's side, your namesake?  
Do you suppose he ever put  
a wedge of lemon next to a glass of tea,  
both atop a milk-white saucer,

all glowing with the mysteries of placement?  
Do you suppose he ever squeezed the lemon  
into the glass and watched a few seeds  
float slowly to the bottom,

and from his forefinger licked a drop of juice  
and made a face from bitterness,  
and his mouth puckered into a bemused *No*?  
This might have been 1906.

In the next room, his wife and infant daughter  
slept. Do you suppose he thought,  
a man could do worse than this,  
these few minutes' peace in the kitchen?

Do you suppose he picked the glass up  
with his thumb and forefinger  
and studied it in the lantern light?  
Did he think a glass, after all,

is merely a glass? Or did he hold it  
as close to his ear as the heat permitted,  
believing everything in God's creation  
aches with longing to explain itself?

And did he laugh, finally, a man alone  
in his kitchen behaving foolishly,  
and quickly sip the scalding tea,  
his mouth alive with lemon, lemon?