

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

The following material has been published and copyrighted by The University of Akron Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For course pack and other permissions or for more information, send e-mail to apeters@uakron.edu.

Fire Wheel



Akron Series in Poetry

2003 AKRON POETRY PRIZE WINNER

AKRON SERIES IN POETRY

Elton Glaser, Editor

Barry Seiler, *The Waters of Forgetting*

Raeburn Miller, *The Comma After Love: Selected Poems of Raeburn Miller*

William Greenway, *How the Dead Bury the Dead*

Jon Davis, *Scrimmage of Appetite*

Anita Feng, *Internal Strategies*

Susan Yuzna, *Her Slender Dress*

Raeburn Miller, *The Collected Poems of Raeburn Miller*

Clare Rossini, *Winter Morning with Crow*

Barry Seiler, *Black Leaf*

William Greenway, *Simmer Dim*

Jeanne E. Clark, *Ohio Blue Tips*

Beckian Fritz Goldberg, *Never Be the Horse*

Marlys West, *Notes for a Late-Blooming Martyr*

Dennis Hinrichsen, *Detail from The Garden of Earthly Delights*

Susan Yuzna, *Pale Bird, Spouting Fire*

John Minczeski, *Circle Routes*

Barry Seiler, *Frozen Falls*

Elton Glaser and William Greenway, eds., *I Have My Own Song for It:*

Modern Poems of Ohio

Melody Lacina, *Private Hunger*

George Bilgere, *The Good Kiss*

William Greenway, *Ascending Order*

Roger Mitchell, *Delicate Bait*

Lynn Powell, *The Zones of Paradise*

Dennis Hinrichsen, *Cage of Water*

Sharmila Voorakkara, *Fire Wheel*

Fire Wheel

Sharmila Voorakkara



The University of Akron Press
Akron, Ohio

Copyright © 2005 Sharmila Voorakkara
All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the Barbara Deming/Money for Women Fund for an individual artist grant which helped in the completion of this book. Grateful acknowledgment to the editors of the magazines in which the following poems first appeared: "Cleaning," *Cumberland Poetry Review*; and "Goat's Head Godhead," *Ploughshares*.

First Edition 2005
09 08 07 06 05 5 4 3 2 1

All inquiries and permissions requests should be addressed to the publisher,
The University of Akron Press, Akron, OH 44325-1703

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Voorakkara, Sharmila, 1967-

Fire Wheel / by Sharmila Voorakkara.— 1st ed.

p. cm. — (Akron series in poetry)

Summary: "Collection of original poems by Sharmila Voorakkara"— Provided by publisher.

ISBN 1-931968-20-9 (cloth: alk. paper) — ISBN 1-931968-21-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title. II. Series.

PS3622.O69F57 2004

811'.6—DC22

2004021384

Manufactured in the United States of America.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984. ∞

Cover painting: "Untitled," oil on wood panel, 12" x 16", by Cynthia Hartling, c. 2003

For John and my mother



Contents

Tow	1
The Holy Men of Jersey	3
Poem to My Father, Once a Vacuum Cleaner Salesman, Now an Ascetic	5
Tin Man	8
My Suicide Uncles	13
Dogs	16
In a Lost Language	17
Amanuensis	18
Ophelia among the Fish	21
Saint Breakdown	23
Helen of Troy	27
Menelaus	28
Helen Tells All	29
Life with Paris	31
Epilogue	32
Monologue of the Vanishing Woman	33
Mercy	34
The World's Smallest Woman Speaks	36
Talking to Myself	38
Bread and Cinderella	40
Audrey, the Laundromat Fury, Says	42
His	44
The Orchard's Daughter	46
I Grow Lighter at Night	47
Cleaning	49
Dusk	51
Reflections on <i>Toledo</i> , Black and White Plate, Page 518 in <i>The History of Europe</i>	52
Luck	55
For the Tattooed Man	57

The Beneficence of Spinning Bodies	58
Palmer Method	60
For Herman, Second Grade	61
Mr. Hatpin, Meet Ms. Mannequin	62
Bridgewalker	63
Still Life with Falling Garbage	64
Kicking the Dog	67
They Got All-Nite Muzak Playing at the Strip Mall	70
The Transvestite and His Mother	71
Brother Zero	72
Men in White Suits	73
On Atlantis	74
Freaks	77
Man with Baseball Bat	78
Ditch Music	80
Goat's Head Godhead	81
The Monologues Men Draw	82
Big Sky, Little Man	83
The Flight of the Insurance Men	84
Apology	85
Emissaries from Other Worlds	87
The Last Nickel Dance	88

Tow

You want some real bad karma, go into the towing business.
—Waitress, overheard

I'm not sentimental. I know enough
to work a man while he's hungry. Promise him a donut,
but save it for later.

I'm not the fast hook that falls from nowhere, but believe me,
when that fist arrives, it's loaded with quarter rolls! Life
is that wind-up without notice—and

wham! No, I'm not given to regret as the chain unwinds
like a woman's perpetual length of hair, then reels in
Buick, Chevy, Olds. In my rearview: a crying wife, screaming kids,

the weedy husband in boxer shorts
running out to *demand*—pigeon chest with baseball bat, a shade
too late. Law says once the hook's in, it's

mine. I'm kept in the dark, which is best.
Good soldier, I have my orders,
and some things I'd rather not confess.

It's not sentiment that makes my little woman pound
the braid of my back, shouting *relax, relax*—but the ache
in my jaw when I think of my kid, pinning live

butterflies to a board, burning down the neighbor's
shed. His teachers tell me he's *tried things*
with the classroom hamster: *Is there anything wrong at home?* Hell,

the small fires that start
a family. I wasn't always this man with bad posture, done in
by antacids and a bed-wetting

boy. God knows, I still believe
the quarter-loaded uppercut counts for something
in the character of a man! *Junior, I'd knock you*

from here as far as straightening—
but wait—
my boy's got something hidden in his hands. . . .

He looks nothing like me. Damned if I know what's mine.
But blood is blood, at least by law, and the word of the law is this:
if you must slit the throat of thine enemy, do it while he's sleeping,

oblivious in his boxer shorts. Tonight,
the apartment block is lit by the rapid fire
of my tow light, light of aneurism and flashback,

that sets this weedy husband in stumbling flight.
Does my heart ache to see you
raise your bat and swing at the air of my remove?

Do I wince at the sound of your wife's sobbing,
at the sight of the twelve kids I wake and strand?
You might recede in the rearview, but believe me,

you will all collect. Revenge is not exact. It isn't sentiment
that moves me forward. No.
I'm watching my back.

The Holy Men of Jersey

By the audible vaudeville of laundry lines,
where the breath of the godhead snaps
bedsheets and girdles, they are called—
thin men—
to the brink
of miracle, to lift light as fog
off their unmown lawns,
to enter
the million-winged midsummer drone in the trees.

The holy men of Jersey ghost
the curtains. Bodiless
as instinct, their thoughts turnpike deep,
deep, where it's brainless and pure
medulla, primal and ancient doom.
They sleep late. Their day jobs grow
cold. They turn in their collars, they levitate

in cellars, they take up nightwork as janitors
instead. Ponderous, clear, they grow
hardly there they are so
pure, wrapped in the evangelical
tentacles of—

what?

What claims their naked bodies as they give up house and car,
as they contemplate the calculus of crows
on the lawn? In the black gestalt that quivers, rises:
they see Shiva, Vishnu, the oilslick arms

of a preaching Jesus,
and the holy men steal away—
strangers.

Their children, grown up, can't put foot
before foot for the holy
tracks them down:

God's
in their coffee cups,
in the chemical spring of their bodies,
in the cities of their bones,

burns blue and luminous, miraculous
as a gas fire raging through
rain.

They never look up.

At any moment, the sky will open
and the birds will pick them clean.

Poem to My Father, Once a Vacuum Cleaner Salesman, Now an Ascetic

*Fact: That the dust mites will
colonize, will conquer
the living room shag,*

*for what is not
food to them?*

*Smaller than follicle, particle,
what lives beneath
the eye's beholding
shall come forth from the floorboards and*

*infest, infest, infest! Madame,
I know each low kingdom, phylum,*

*fungus, spirochete, twister, in its
remote abode. Invisible milliseconds
are lifetimes to them,
for what, madame,*

is not desire?

This I remember, imagine,
years on from your six-month
stint, traveling

door-to-door, cold calls,
door in the face or the foot
inside, and you

condemned to spend your days
prowling quota in suburbs, seeking entrance
at the kitchen.

Even now when I hear of some miracle spot remover
on late night TV, I'm made to sit up and listen, to think
of your later transcendence,

to say nothing of your desire
to be clean.

Your ten fingernails grew
pink as a cat's mouth

as you rose from the trappings
of your heavy product sample,
then took begging bowl and martyr cloth,

seeking immolation and
humiliation,
and even *that* was better. In which sage life

will I find you? You should know
that even now I'd like to shed
this plain milk carton of a person

I was born to, go whizzing off into
light or aftermath, that often,

I, too, am struck
by the illuminations off
aluminum siding and wish myself
elsewhere;

that I have followed Moonies, Krishnas, Jehovas, swamis
of Utopian Free Love
to coffee shop chapels
in search of the substance
to lift my shadow;

that I can sit, squat as a Buddha,
at the bus stop for hours

and have yet to find a vehicle
that will take me anywhere;

that *hope*

and hopeless

is the mantra of my breath, as I
walk and walk and am never
born again.

Tin Man

1

Let me tell you

about daylight hanging
by a rope from late branches;

how the lawn lay down
and died at the doorstep.

How my old man kept grave watch at the canning
plant is an ordinary
story, of no
known moral, only a brief hiccup
in the long shelf life of anger
and sketchy employment,

growing no-shows and

Fuck you. I quit. But

shut up. The dogs in all stories
are at the throat of something bigger
than history
has to offer:

Did hounds hasten at the sound
of his arrival each evening? Did he send out
a blood-whistle to call them to his shadow?

No. No and no and no.
No taste of blood ever entered
the picture, no thread lingered
at the threshold of their lips. Just this:

my father in the guard booth
beneath a punch card of stars,
while the clock dripped

job
job
job,

and he refined his doctrine of
hemorrhoids, boredom, and postnuclear
endurance. History has no more to offer than my old man
peeing just out of view of surveillance cameras,
and talking loud into the mammoth vats long past closing,
not even a night shift for company, the sound of his footfall

his only comfort, a sound no greater than
himself.

Unless you count the keys—

and who can? Millions jingling on a Saturn ring, and each one meant
to throw an unmarked lock—broom closet,
utility, boiler, and beyond them

black doors to rooms full of barcoded tinned goods—big
as god and just as bombproof, ratproof.

When the stock market crashes, when your money's
no good, what will you have left?

Cans

to be sorted, labeled, sent on many-tendrilled
missions,
nourishment for gourmands
in underground bunkers.

What more do you want?

2

Life is good:

space heater, lunchbox, canned laughter
from the mini-screen TV.

Years later, I have a bigger picture of it all:

the watchman is tiny
against what he watches. On the corporate water tower, a
giant—a blown-up, ordinary
man—dressed, no less,
as a vegetable, a smiling galumph
in vitamin green.

The watchman, less than a mote
in the giant's eye,
has time

to let his teeth go
and his hair begin to weep,

has time to
loosen his belt, sit back and
think, think, think:

how best to beat his wife? With a bent
spoon? A broomstick? His angers

are tiny and
many, have appetite,
and if he demands silence,
puts his fist down in his
castle, dammit, to gag-rule the living
who all around him
conspire—

it's not a lot to ask:

a silent wife and children on tiptoe.
No, it's not a lot to ask.

3

History tells us we all live
to see another day, when the doormat scratches
welcome, welcome
across the dawn-wet soles of his shoes.

No apocalypse, no mushroom,

though my father pulls his sheets high over his head
very much like a frightened man.

History says:
it's the little wars
that kill us.

All afternoon, the trees eat themselves in effigy.

Daylight
blows its brains out,
and so his shift begins.