

**Aaron Anstett** □  
*Pikes Peak Poet Laureate 2008-2010*

## SELECTED POEMS

### MAN SAVES OWN LIFE

In the morning, before breakfast, I save my own life,  
then walk around the house all day a hero.  
Friends come by and ask how it feels.  
I say it just happened. I couldn't help it.  
They'd do the same in my shoes. I don't tell them how,  
before I knew it, something raced down my fingers  
and my feet. Something made me strong.  
It crowded itself in my arms and my heart  
and filled me up with as strange and kind a feeling  
as I could remember, and suddenly I knew nothing  
but I had to help that guy. It wasn't words. No voice  
told me. It was more like light behind my eyes, weight  
pressing in from every direction. High notes pierced me,  
and it was clear what I had to do:



### AFTERLIFE

Perhaps the four-color photograph of a lube stop and car wash,  
like a heaven above the numbered days and months of a giveaway calendar,

is heaven and shall be our dominion forever, with glare on the glass doors  
and lettering spelling something. Maybe the man with indistinguishable features

standing on a sidewalk runs things, and those driving vehicles somewhere  
for eternity: heaven's emissaries, the interrupting angels, who veer

from this to that world. In the few scraps blown in after the asphalt was swept  
and the pyramid of mortared cannonballs in the park off the highway,

where the swings hang absolutely still, as if painted there, we find our joy always.  
And there, on the photograph's left edge, the birds eternally arriving.

## **PRAYER FOR SAFE TRAVEL**

God bless cars with red cellophane tape over brake lights,  
padlocks for trunk locks, different color doors, lumber for bumpers,

windshields zigzag fractals those who outlive lightning wear  
everywhere under skin, nearly insignia, tributary maps.

Keep them distant from auto impound's concertina wire,  
corkscrewed as cartoon pigs' tails or paper streamers from exploding

party favors. Leave their drivers untroubled. When we follow  
open-frame trucks with several green, missile-size bottles

upright and wobbling, extinguish our cigarettes, dispel all fear  
and static electricity. Let us clearly see the diamond-shaped flammable

symbol, its twist of white lines a burning-bush flicker, its number  
3 religious, as promise to spare us while climbing

hills behind dump trucks of jostling rubble and rebar  
or vehicle carriers stacked with those spectacular wrecks.

## **MATTER**

Matter goes by its many aliases: pine tree, matchstick, missile whistling  
increasingly distant from its silo and signal. All over America,

someone puts 40 cents of gasoline into a 15-year-old car, has beer and peanut butter,  
sleeps in an arm chair outside her room in a work release motel north of town,

wakes on heating grates, wonders how the flower knows what shape to take,  
watches the scrambled pornographic channel, prays hard. Only, scattered

on the land, fire, that natural redhead, is and acts, undoes the field mice  
and grasses, makes the old book's pages frailer. We must turn them carefully.

## HISTORY

No one in this world remembers making love in 1648,  
though somebody must have, maybe everyone did,  
or recalls the exact angle to which a sparrow bent a pine branch afterwards,  
shaking loose a little rain nestled in the needles there,  
or can say with certainty what that sounded like,  
whether breath, or skin against skin, or nothing.

## INDEED I WAS

Skinny then, little more than skeleton,  
naked next to an actual skeleton,

my *memento mori* 3-D X-ray. The professor lifted  
each bare limb then made me mimic the skeleton's

positions, asking the anatomy art class to see  
the bones in my skin matched the skeleton's

poses. Easy to see so early and cold  
on plywood stage in a studio how soon I'd be a skeleton,

what little dress of hair-on-end flesh above tibia and ulna,  
cranium, mandible, fluorescents on the skeleton

and me merciless, and a square of skylight sun.  
Charcoal and pencils scratched. I didn't ask, "Whose skeleton,"

or exclaim, "Alas, poor \_\_\_\_\_,"  
the palm of my hand open like the skeleton's,

eyes above easels everywhere, clothed legs below.  
On their sketch pads I imagined me and the skeleton

synchronized: tai chi, Rockettes, country line-dancing,  
me on a bar floor, skeleton

kicking my undressed ribs. "Now, Mr. Anstett,"  
Professor Something said, "if you could embrace the skeleton..."

## NEEDLING

1.

In our bodies, we move uniformly.  
No one owns a rickshaw tattoo  
that actually clatters, hip to rib,  
dust rising off the skin.

2.

Across my torso,  
print a flesh-tone color tattoo  
of the word *Invisibility*.

3.

Think of people  
with their own names emblazoned  
as if they might forget.  
Call me anything:  
alphabet braceleting one wrist.

4.

Circling an ankle: many nations' monuments.  
She stepped from the bath like a giantess.

5.

An old man's arm tattoos,  
green like just-before tornadoes  
and the taste of anesthesia.  
Once, nothing shone so brightly for him.

6.

Tattoo two lungs  
and I'll return yearly  
to have them darkened.

7.

How bare the body looks  
around the first one.

8.

Best, for me, the flaming prophecies:  
*Stick Knife Here, Born to Die*,  
the ones redundant at autopsies:  
stream of air bubbles  
rising from the mermaid's red mouth  
on a drowned man's palm.

## **COUNTRY**

*for Carol Morrison*

A man asleep in his work clothes  
shall not be lifted bodily  
to float like lit and falling newsprint  
and wake in flames as a voice commands him.  
A headline won't print that morning  
across his vision, telling him how to live.  
A luminous ampersand does not tattoo  
itself on his sternum, joining everything,  
spinning landscape that extends  
from the fingers of each hand  
when he turns to find some matches,  
all he can see and farther  
as he smokes the day's first cigarette.  
Cattle graze out there, and other animals,  
bones in their stomachs.  
His name's stitched over five shirt pockets,  
four clean ones and the one he slept in.  
He wears it now, lifting each fifth part  
to his eyes for inspection: cracks  
and misprints. Some grand blueprint  
does not emerge on a napkin  
from the parking lot lunch cart.  
His burrito's the same as ever,  
hot above the asphalt.  
His children sit in a classroom  
he sat in. The teacher spins the globe  
and stops it with her longest finger.  
She's picking the country where someone lives.

