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## Featured Poet

Bob Hicok

Man to man

Thirteen killed by a man in Germany  
and then himself.

Ten killed by a man in Alabama  
and then himself.

I have killed no one, I am behind.

Are they out there  
and we just don't hear them, stories  
of men who go crazy  
and mow the lawns of strangers?

What was he like, the interviewer would ask  
a neighbor.

Kind of quiet, she would say.  
You know: kept to himself.  
A nice man, really.  
And then he was just like, you know, mowing.  
Mowing and mowing and mowing  
and mowing. There were grass clippings  
everywhere. It was horrible.

A man kills his girlfriend and then himself.

A man dresses as Santa, kills his family  
and then himself.

On that day, I stood under a tree.

My standing under the tree  
moved a crow from that tree to a tree  
across the road.

When that crow moved, a second crow  
and a third crow followed,  
and I thought, I have moved the crows,  
and thought, when I followed, the crows  
have moved me.

I have done this a year now, gone from tree  
to tree by crow, shooting no one as I go.

A man paints his wife green and then himself.

A man scolds the tulips and apologizes  
to the roses.

A man gathers all the men in the world  
and asks why rock scissors paper

won't do, why rock scissors paper  
fire won't do, why rock scissors paper fire  
atom bomb won't do.

The sound of all men shrugging  
sounds like the sound of all crows  
taking off from all trees, like the day  
flying away from itself.

A man kills the day and then himself.

A man kills the sun and then himself.

I am telling you, Alpha Centauri, man to star:  
run.

\* \* \*

O holy stuff

My squeezable Martian died. He was a blob  
of flesh-colored & thin plastic with knobs  
of blue eyes and red ears that popped out  
a bit when squeezed obsessively  
because it was fun and I am seven  
times seven years old. The cause of death's  
unknown. He lies before me on "The New Penguin  
Factfinder," a decidedly British compendium,  
given how many pages are devoted to the Voous  
taxonomic classification of birds, shriveled up  
and in, as if he were heated and the air  
inside, of which Martian bones are made,  
escaped. I've no proof he was a he,

and in sympathy to the belief that the body  
must enter the afterlife whole, I've told  
my orange scissors there will be no autopsy.  
They only want to be of use. I've seen this  
in trees, the main suppliers in spring  
of the color I've named Resurrection Green,  
who, come fall, unfurl the dance  
of a thousand veils, and all winter, stand Spartanly  
in snow, as if knowing I need  
to look out at dusk and feel solitude  
enacted by nature, I love a cup  
of cinnamon tea with the stoicism  
of maples, since I'm here and self-pity's  
a sport we could easily add to the Olympics,  
Synchronized Woe-is-me. I look at my dog  
every time I leave the house and sense  
there's no scale in her mind  
for my leavings, each as absolute  
as each, her eyebrows rise and thicken  
and she wants to follow to preserve the "we"  
that is the shape she knows of life.  
Somehow, fidelity to her in those moments  
translates into not replacing  
my Martian, who, since we met,  
has reminded me of the dream  
in which I walked up to a lake  
with my eyes in my hands  
and pitched them in. They swam away and back  
into how I looked at falling apart  
differently then, there's no other dream,  
no other alien for me, this is love  
until I decide something else is, some twig  
or bottle cap I'll carry with an orange peel  
in my pocket back to him, to here,  
to the sextant and Chagall  
and years-dead roses in a vase, the sex

and kiss of every thing and now  
that owns me.

\* \* \*

### Pieces of how it was

When we went outside to smoke we stood  
in the same relation to each other  
in the circle then of nicotine  
whereas before the desire for nicotine  
defined the circle of her saying  
in the kitchen that “landfill”  
suggests land is empty and needs  
to be filled or his that by holding  
his wedding ring out and moving it  
back and forth he can slip his marriage  
around the sun as wind sandpapered  
the little light there was  
and brushed our smoke from its face  
I pointed at the ridge in my mind  
where I walked the next day and found  
the Happy silver Birthday deflated balloon  
I put under your windshield-wiper  
for telling me how we are  
and are not time-lapsed photos  
is the vision of memory that helped  
when your mother called you “nurse” and said  
nothing more to you ever  
while we waited for the cigarette  
to come around and you photographed  
a week later the Happy silver  
Birthday deflated balloon

beside the monarch wing on the porch  
just before Frank the mailman and you  
smoked what turned out to be your last  
since my parents have begun forgetting  
little by little who I am.

\* \* \*

Is as the sacred form of to be

Christmas morning and I imagine  
“The Boy Who Cried Wolf”  
is descriptive of these clouds  
I hold responsible for the thought.  
Millions of you are out there, driving  
already to your grandmother’s  
or home, behind the wheel  
or passengered to the side  
or in back, boxes  
in the boot, bows and silver  
in the stoppage of time, everything closed  
but the highways. On this day,

when everyone is somewhere, it feels  
as if anywhere can be nowhere,  
I have an entire mountain  
to myself. For the snow, there’s a word  
I’m looking for, a military...  
scout. This is the scout snow  
for the actual snow to come,  
a military word, a few absentminded  
flakes, life is about

to fill in. Since this

is my sand box, I name the color  
of winter grass

Threshold, a form of gold  
mixed with sleep, name the winter field  
Window or Cup or Spoon, name this tendency  
to name

Embrace, as if suddenly  
I'm an emissary of the group hug,  
when most of all, I'm resting a moment here,  
in the trough of the sine wave  
of sun, as you unwrap or drive  
to unwrapping and I lean  
once more toward horizon  
explaining, as if to a child,  
what a gift is.

\* \* \*

Together, apart

The half apple, bitten accidentally  
with symmetry, appears on the red plate  
as white wings  
seeded at the center, three scraped  
by the knife as it traveled through  
to here I am, now, looking  
at an apple scalloped by my mouth  
to flight,  
where shall we go, we ask every time  
we look at each other

across years  
or table, I am undone  
by the number of buttons sometimes,  
of miles just to get to you, under it all,  
warm as staves from the fire.

Bob Hicok's *This Clumsy Living* received the Bobbitt Prize from the Library of Congress. A Guggenheim and NEA Fellow this year, his new book—*Words for Empty and Words for Full*—is due from Pitt in Spring 2010.

**from Poet's Bookshelf: Contemporary Poets On Books That Shaped Their Art**

*poet Bob Hicok*

*Chilton's Manual for a 1968 VW Beetle*  
Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*  
*The Antaeus Anthology*, ed. Daniel Halpren  
Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*  
*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. in chief, Paul Edwards

*The Chilton* manuals are guides to car repair. If you've owned a Bug—one of the originals—I don't need to tell you why this book was so important to me. If you've never owned a Bug, you're smarter than I am and can forego reading this list of books that have mattered to me. I can't remember how many times my red Bug with mag wheels and theoretical heat broke down on the highway, but like all good *Chilton's*, mine was grease stained and kicked more than once into a field.

I loved *A People's History of the United States* before *Good Will Hunting*. Along with Barbara Tuchman and David McCullough, Zinn writes history with a narrative flair. I also admire his admission that he writes from a particular perspective, that his aim is to speak for those less often heard: "Thus, in that inevitable taking of sides which comes



from selection and emphasis in history, I prefer to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves, of Andrew Jackson as seen by the Cherokees..." I first read this book in my early twenties, and his approach was radically refreshing.

*Antaeus* was one of my favorite literary publications, but I came to it late in its life and after reading this anthology. This is one of the first books of poetry I read. One of the oddest things about this book is that I like many of the poems by poets whose work I don't generally care for. I think Halpren got the best a poet had to offer. My copy is covered in a fair amount of duct tape—not duck tape, for those of you who read with colloquial eyes. I can't remember why *Antaeus* was closed down, but I say here that I'd like it back. Please.

I own two copies of Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, for reasons of forgetfulness I think but also I couldn't pass up buying the second copy for \$4.00. As the introduction states, "Since publication of the first edition in 1926, *Art Through the Ages* has been a favorite with generations of students and general readers, who have found it an exciting and informative survey." Poets are dilettantes, I am a poet, I am a dilettante. I'm also drawn to the arts, particularly painting, as many poets—slaves to the image—are. Whereas most textbooks have the effect on the mind that English cooking has on the stomach, Gardner moves with spry thoroughness through the development of Western art. And the book does not stint on images.

Paul Edwards is the Editor in Chief of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Editor and Chief is a more satisfying title, don't you think? Certainly such a person would get the best parking space. I enjoy this affair in four volumes, covering Abbagnano through Zubiri, because the mind-body problem is something few people want to talk about. I like reference books, and this is my favorite example of the species. Can't remember what bee was in Hume's bonnet, who the heroes of deontological ethics were? This is the book for you. As Americans, we are enthralled by action and afraid of deliberation. Poets feel they're overlooked: name a contemporary philosopher. Self-reflection may be the highest art; I like to be reminded we are capable of at least trying to take ourselves apart.

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