

NEIGHBORS NORTH: Poems of Northern Chautauqua County

By Gerry Crinnin

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Special thanks and gratitude

To Jamestown Community college for a sabbatical

That allowed me the time to finish and assemble this book.

“The ordinary is the writer’s richest field. Its unexpectedness,

Its singularity, its infinite variety afford unending material.

The great man is too often all of a piece; it is the little man that is a bundle of contradictory elements.”

--Somerset Maugham

Good Example Spanish 101

If you are a girl

and you are pretty—

then you say it

“Yo soy bonita!”

like that.

Flag

No eager neighbor knows just who or which side,

But somewhere in my backyard, off the garage,

Opposite the power plant coal truck entrance

(and right near where a neighbor I never speak to

dumps bulk refuse the city refuses to pick up),

Irksome, the first shots were fired in the War,

I imagine to get the hell off my property, of 1812.

Gift

This hunk or half-brick of slate,
A slab of broken shore polished
Under glacier moon and lake
To gray ripeness.

A child found it at low tide
Like something to lift and love,
Anything winking from the sea
Being treasure and enough.

The weight of the earth is free.
A child's lesson is the same,
Is one of the boulder's lessons

To be held and beheld.

Call it moody forehead of rock,

Map to the inner isle of time

Or mini-tv on channel stone

With built-in traveling clock.

New Year

It was so cold the snow gave up in the streets

And turned into a goulash of salt, oil-dirt

And whitish-brownish. Thus spoke January.

Out in the backyard, though, what we paid for,

Deer tracks went all over the place, and the family

Dog was in her glory, at the end of her leash, baying,

Exactly. I had the green shovel over my shoulder

Like a smile and my son and daughter fell out wearing

Mongolian hats you know with twisted tassels.

My wife tells me in bed her secret joke of inviting

Couples over for the Super Bowl. That is so cold

We coil up and go away and back until we are warm

Again, talking of 6-foot sandwiches.

October

The leaves fell and fell together in wet enthusiasms.

Sacred symbols, squirrels heard them first and met

The falling with curious high gurglings, wee tones

Of mad aloneness, like even acorns were unwanted.

The sky seemed to want them all, far as I could see.

The Woodchuck

Bristles with wobbles,

Hoovers over lawnsapes

For yummies, so like a slinky

Herky-jerky into a culvert,

Perfect fur to sleep in,

Soft, gruff, spongy, dewy, chubby.

Ode To Jenn Suhr

Sixteen feet is not so far

To walk or swim or push a car,

But when you try to leave the ground

Gravity tends to push you down.

Then there comes through cloud and sun

In black and orange a special one

With seventeen strides she plants her pole

And hurtles toward Olympic gold

Up, up into the atmosphere,

Fifteen feet and ten she clears

Suspended for a moment, soft,

A thousand I-phones held aloft.

We who only hug the earth

May dance and tumble on the turf

But one of us has gone so far

To shrink the distance to a star.

Therefore let us lift our gaze,

Especially on bitter days,

Take courage, pride, and learn from Jenn:

Think about where she has been.

Cicadas

Their gibberish high humming serrates

The dusk like electric peckerwoods.

What ugly husks to buzz of words,

Nay-saying sisters parched and parchment

Glued to a tree, my little shed, under

The deck, grinding out the end of summer

With abdomens and antennae, bitter crisp.

Impossible to locate, they appear as this

Eerie potato chip, bug-sized uber-crunch

Attached to my porch and facades.

Dom

Has the first dollar ever made.

It hangs in his breakfast nook so obviously

A Ph.D. And when he retired from the janitor

Corps at Purina Chow with pension and borrowed

Tools and cleaning products, did he rest

His plastic knee-cap or heart condition?

The flower of his art had just took root.

After a lifetime of squirreling away, cursing

The IRS and noting each trash barrel extant

He turned, overnight, to empty bottles and cans.

Like a Grizzly, he first tore into the pickings

At our picnic grounds and ball fields. Woe

To recycling buffs who demurred: slapped
Away, growled at, backed off into their Volvos
And relegated to gas station or 7-11 refuse.
Santa in reverse, he returned with sackfuls—
The thirst of an entire town caught in plastic—
He volunteered at the largest grocery store
To round up stray carts (and forage freely)—
Only a junk genius could understand the world
One nickel at a time and sleep like aluminum.

He keeps a running count, close to five-thousand
Dollars Albany and Washington will never find.

That makes him a folk hero, like our Grandma

Moses. He'll take that.

Last Day Of November

There are still some trees holding on
Tightly to their curly leaves, so many kinder
Gardeners waving in the wind as pinwheels,
Kaleidoscopes, obstinate little spirits.

Snow has already visited, sleet came, dots
Of hail, drops and razor blades of rain/wind.

There are still some trees wearing hula
Skirts of leaves, ashes and maples with cowlicks
Brown and burnt red, a yellow orange flicker.

Tomorrow is December, a mother.

Forward

I honor the pumpkin, that noble gourd.

Pyramids of them altar the entrance

To Walmart, enough to turn guilt into warm pies,

The heads of old uncles, their ribbed folds, burnt

Oranges and white or yellow birthmarks near the

Cerebral cortexes sometimes cut too close and

Marked down in the ugly pile, 48 cents a pound.

It's enough that pilgrims still look at the moon

As they look at the pumpkin—edible, a bargain.

Gratiot Point

The beachcomber in

Ranger hat inspects

Many makeshift

Tepee skeletons and

Slate palisades

The sky lets out

A few fishbone

Clouds

The waves form intervals

Like they'd like

To be counted

One gull begins

But stops at nine thousand

Another gull rests, one

Feather telegraphs

A mother bends

Her cellulite away,

Scooping sand and

Pebbles to her

Daughter, tinier

As she runs

Everyone hails the

Breeze and burns

Longer, the lifeguard

Bronzes awake

Notes the beachcomber

Who notes the gull

Who notes the waves

The sun is somewhere

The sailboat is a far

Tooth in the deeper

Lake mouth.

Village Cemetery

After 6 months settling I felt it was time

To visit the cemetery, my neighbors.

So many buffeted obelisks, rubbed unreadable

Tablets, very holy books the way people

Touch them, tilted, open on the ground.

Looked at long, like Op Art, names come:

Nettie, Velma (Went Home), Caroline Blood,

Father Phineas, Conspicuous Gallantry,

Ebenezer, Mother Olive, Gettysburg. Now

I come upon the deathstone of someone

I met only last year—whiter, by far than

The rest—I won't say who—maybe in a

Hundred years.

Clap The Deer Away

We settled across from the cemetery.

ENGLISH was the first tombstone I saw.

A hundred crows combed the trees.

One deer was impaled on the fence,

19th-century wrought iron point,

In mid leap. She shook and belled

Before police put 2 in her head.

Another deer rammed the fence

And fell back into the street, steep

Right there, hit by a Honda, laid out,

A twitch before police put 2

In her head and she got up, twice.

I walk through the cemetery:

Rubbed out Ebenezers, privates

In the Korean War, a woman I met

Just a year ago in Jamestown.

I can see my house from this spot

Perfect, like in the brochure.

Someone must have shot it from here.

Tidings

I'm proud of the odd wood

I've gathered and piled

Up in corners down cellar

Like original pyramids, tilted,

Erred stairways to an offended

God probably, maybe charmed.

Whole trees, great and perfect souls,

Fence posts, pier heads, ground down

Telephone poles, incomprehensible totems

Scoured sacred, tidal knocked, a billion

Nudges toward shore,

Sticks, saplings, twigs a million,

Whiplike whatever wound into fists

Of seaweed, sand and carp-crap

All lugged home, garageward for sawing,

And later stacked, a thousand faces, pieces of

Sanity, or family, one or two thoughts at a time

I'll burn up, emit, wish for you in ashes.

Said Of Mrs. Gmerk

She was in the hospital for a surgery,

Then the orderlies dropped her

On the polio leg and she had a stroke.

She asked if she could go home to die

And her daughter took her emergency

Leave from her job—Stacy—she has a good

Job with the county—and she died a week

Later at 72. The inside of the house is odd

Because of the wheelchair path, no tub,

Doorways cut out, not really finished.

I don't know who would want to buy it.

One good thing: she had the giant willow

Removed from the backyard before she died,

Before it fell on her birdbath.

Muscles

Have I showed you the kitchen,

How it turned out? The wallpaper?

Isn't that beautiful? My son is

Putting in a new floating floor

They call it. Here's a square of it.

But it's just like the new dishes.

My family all says Why are you

Getting a new kitchen, new plates?

You're going to die soon. Like I

Don't know that when I see all

My friends. But I feel good today.

I made a jello mold for the Elks.

After The Blizzard

The refrigerator door finally opened: I walked out,
Upright for the first time, a tree with 5 leaves left
Against the sky, blue as described in dictionaries,
So fair. My neighbor suddenly appeared, a person
From summer or fall I started to know before wind
And cold put an end to saying hello I like your fern.
She led out two teeny puppies on leashes, beings
Who had never been outside or smelled our street
Full blast: they barked at the snow, backed up, barked
At their barks, the difference, barked at their breath,
Barked like laughing and crying, the first tears in their
Eyes, peeing and straining in radial dances. I waved
In their general direction and turned to my daughter

Coming up behind me, pajamas and slippers, another

Figure who leaped and alit with her arms around

The animals, crooning, washing her neck in their noses.

Odeling

Winter sent two days of wind-bash, its card,
Straining aluminum, vinyl, the woven plastic
Skirt around the trampoline, wrung shreds. Any
Tree caught bent wrong in a counter-gust broke
Something or stooping to pick it up got hit harder.

Then the snow came down, drop fall and sideways,
A hale blizzard from the plains, a crazy uncle with
Sacred ear hair and a twist of light in his eyes,
Beethoven snow, silence and its antidote
Whorling on, spreading out like a mother.

When everything outside was gone, the sigh

Official, I got up to turn off the light but the light

Was off. My daughter asked, do you smell the Spruce?

A Christmas tree is a girl in the house.

Carpenter Ants

We know each other better than opposite

Genuses. They drop on my head if I open

Certain cupboards or I pinch slower ones

In the thorax wham and throw them away.

I will spray anything at them, on them,

I would spray the national anthem

If I could discover their original hole.

Still, they travel at night in my mouth

Or like puppies curl around my Pop Tart,

Recede into linoleum when they feel me

Fumbling the kitchen light, a comma flash.

Everyone else brought in professionals

But I am too cheap and fascinated

To gas them outright, snuffed by beagles

Specially bark-trained in infestations.

I can just imagine what they're building

Without my permission: an aphid gulag,

The royal necropolis, a center for their art.

Lake Erie

It laps at its little pebbles today,
Latest candidates for sand-hood,
Fish jaw, the piece of floating pier.
Algae is young, green puffs
Hiccupping to and from shore;
One little boat waves them away.
It's like cheating to be a great lake,
To have so much fresh water.

Lake Erie

This morning the blue rhymed perfectly

With Mediterranean, a feat of hue.

The normally clunky and ill-named sailboats

Rocked on the water like Jason and the Argonauts,

Derek and the Dominoes, KC and the Sunshine Band.

For once the seagulls barely hated me; I moved

Freely among them like a neutral gopher.

We formed a line where tidal pebbles had rushed

And leaned toward symphonic recordings of calm.

One of us finally became self-conscious

And poked the living eye of a dying carp.

That was it. Eco-war was back on, in spades.

Outdoor Inspection

The driveway is broken,

Especially the apron, where it's humped.

It's only a place to park the cars, hell,

Let it go, and the garage floor is buckled.

The roof is about to change, to not-roof,

But there's another roof under that.

The foundation is cracked—I'd say settled.

I've squirted everything in there

From Portland cement to toothpaste

So it's not going anywhere.

Something is living under the back porch

Without a sound but lifts the dog's black head.

My son explains it all from a new game:

“Darkness turns into land, when you discover it.”

Journalist

Who will die today and be buried on page 2

Of the Evening Observer? Does the moon

Pull at their bodies, the last couple eye drops

Behind their lids, through the fine stitches?

Clothes they bring to the funeral home, what

Gown, shining tie, whose hose are they buried in?

Was she a life-long member; Was he a veteran?

I was taught in obituary school you get an F

For missing even a middle initial; it has to be right,

All the t's crossed. And the I.

To Dunkirk/Fredonia

Drive south from Buffalo on the Thruway,
Enjoy the gradual lack of eyesore, only
A few state troopers hiding in the copse,
The farms and fields and Native American
Totems, dreamlands uncarved rolling away;
You're flying is a car past Pennsylvanians
And Michiganers, Ohio plates, thrumming
The steering wheel to the gospel thump of
Miles, rumble strips, all the forward-moving
Motion you could drive for all time not lonely.
Then, near the end of New York, whumps
In the road, potholes and lumpy fixes wake
The driver: you will get off at Exit 59, pay,

A left and a right past the miracle mile,

Slow down and park in front of my house,

Across from the cemetery, just down off

The closed food processing plant, and you went

Too far the other way if you get a hit of

Purina: you can often smell them chowing.

This Dog

In her pure sleeping and waking eye

She views the camera with yawn nothing.

It has no smell. Thus her

Huge relaxed nose with every pore.

At 9 years, at 63, she has good hair,

Salt and pepper, mostly pepper faced,

One eye is creased into the couch.

It's different, when it's your own dog,

How far you'll go into the retina

And rods to plumb how you look

In the little reflection. You smell.

Dog Yawn

It's like she's barking into herself:

The jaw breaks backwards, the eyes

Slit shut,

The fangs fly away from each other,

The ears freak back and

Drop (she shakes her head,

Circles the rug, licks her segmented nose).

Walk

This is a young cemetery.

These maple trees exclaim in yellow

Above the barely tumbled headstones

Like busty cheerleaders, our athletes,

The dampness under their arms.

Only the squirrels, one hundred generations

Of fur and scrabble and understanding grave

Diggers and mourners and disturbed nuts

Understand the full solemnity of what's gray.

They stumbled upon the darkness and found

A way to tell stories.

Backyard Bird Recordings

Pretty good pretty good pretty good

Big pleader, pleader, big pleader,

Tiddlywink

Tina!

Tina!

Tina!

Lulu?

Lulu?

Lulu?

Eek

Jerry jerry jerry

EEK

Poem

Woodchucks tolerate woodpeckers who
Tolerate squirrels who tolerate robins who
Tolerate sparrows up to a point and mice
Just do their blind thing at night under
The guns of owls. The big slugs are safe.
I would make such a bad critter not knowing
Where to run or fly. I hope my karma is more
Like an earthworm phase where I just poke
My head out, upchuck for the good and back-
Wag into the mother tunnel before dawn.

For The Touchy

I hate haircuts like bad whistling,

But twice a year I find Mister Lavana

With an empty chair and unabrasive talk.

“Make mine like yours,” I say, cinched.

He has no political answers, no wink

Or slander. If he speaks at all, he loves

His family, teachers, all. I’ve let him

Buzz me almost down to boot camp.

Voting

I love signing the big book, like God's.

Two of my older neighbors are always there,

Pat and Pat, reckoning each face and address.

I'm voting for THEM, I say, a plate of brownies.

And the booth! Walking into, onto that stage,

Lighted chromium, the vaudevillian lever and

Red furled curtain sweeping closed, alone.

I would buy one of these stand-up confessionals,

One of these mini recital halls, the smallest theater

For putting on dramatic monologues, and by dint

Become the president of my country, my closet.

Turkey Buzzards

The past few years I've seen clumps of them:

Transient clowns hunched over a branch,

Staring into Lake Erie after chowing carcass.

My kids run at them and how they florp,

Flup away, the irk of big retractable wings,

Dark characters at the ends of the beach.

Now a whole flock lives in town, overhead,

Gliding on swirlicues of air all about

The giant coal-powered steam plant, eerie

On top of old smokestacks and dynamos.

They found enough road kill, lake offal, land

Fill and dumpster pastry to call this home.

They already remind me of neighbors: aloof,

Red-faced when you sneak up and say boo.

Mrs. Chebka

Her backyard is favored among the slugs.

Early in the morning skunks

Dig a hundred up in neat gouges.

Some call them lawn shrimp, cockchafers,

Grossed out to hell. Baby beetles is all.

Ear Mouth

The chipmunk makes his chipping.

A grackle says grackle, and his eye

Grackles. Catbirds cry and go meow.

A ground hog hugs the earth so

Her belly is dewy. Deer are the dear,

Wine grapes their eyes, here and gone

Like wine. Worms chew through herbs

Of the dead and will rise at night,

Fragrant soil on the lips of people

Who will people the world and send

Their child to other children, open

Mouths proclaiming O.

Newton Street

After droughty days and lawns turned straw

The weeds stayed green and spikily rose;

Only round the houses and staked-out plots

Did mostly women play a spigotted hose.

Hence impatiens won a day, few lettuces,

Peppers hot as the joy of cicadas.

Then came a tiny rain, the sky barely bruised

And nary a worm in his tunnel made to turn.

It came and went, nominally wet and burned

Off in a reservoir of pent-up heat,

Nothing doing, until a heavier cloud cruised

Overhead and made hard water at our feet.

We stood on the deck of our house, our ship
Of boards stressed and strained and sun-curly.
A sparrow alighted, dry, brown, scrunchy,
Sipping the greatest brew off his tiniest lip.
He let out a cry in 4 liquid syllables;
We yahoed him away in crazy people.

It has rained now an afternoon into evening.
Everything is back to normal, a sweetening.
Three cicadas impale themselves on mesh
Wrapped around the bottom of the house
To keep out toothy chipmunks and groundhogs.
Some of them make faces or moon us.

Dunkirk Observer

Cloudy, windy.

A stranger on the pier trembles

In a yellow rain slicker. I guess

That's how you impress loneliness.

Wand This

“Have you

seen my boyfriend,

Illuminado?”

Shrubbish

Plants will not

Discuss their phlegm sacs—

I don't care if it's hogweed,

Soapnut or pome tree.

Of honey they go off—

For food, wounds, soothes

And kills bacteria, cosmetics,

Bees getting 7 million

Miles to the gallon, mead.

Some plants are just so full of

Regurgitating ants.

The Library Of Reed

Once some hairy hippies and chicks
Came in from the city, in from the sticks,
Paid their tuition and blazed up their weed
And entered the glowing Library of Reed.

A temple of tomes, pamphlets and sheaves,
They played as in a pile of LSD leaves,
Opening to lines of poetry, a magical need
For the tactile charms of the Library of Reed.

Then technology came, another being,
And the young embraced a byte, a screen,
The pages, their smell, the accidental read

Receded apace from the Library of Reed

Until all of the words, on all of the pages,

Everything sublime and outrageous

Bled and gnarled into a giant seed

Buried beneath the Library of Reed.

There it is, an edifice; and now they plead

For Edgar Alan Poetry in the Library of Reed.

Health Club

And then on my way out

A woman stopped me—

Her simplicity, her bosom,

Her white bonnet hair—looked

Me straight in the eye and

Said, “Henry Cabot Lodge.”

The strange is good.

The Dollar Store

Is always

Short of ones.

Fixer-Upper

Hum me the benefits of radiant heat.

Stain the heart pine a darker color.

My father uses a sprayer he found

In the wind, hauled on skids.

Nail the hearth board with the tongue out.

Do a mature solo on scissors jack.

If you plan to paint your legs, straighten

Your substrate like a pro.

Turn the twin dispenser and ladle the mud,

The sheet goods, with your home hands.

Enjoy the light and dark grain, we always say,

Glue it and screw it.

D & F Plaza

The Four Seasons is gone. I never ate

There, but they say the fish fry was

Pretty good, and the big fish sign always

Calmed my eyes at the aggressive red light

Where Central meets Millard Fillmore.

I think it was John said a video

Place is going up but I can't see it.

It's a clearing now, less hungrier space.

*

The book store was a bold idea, born of

Single stubbornness, one vinegar note

Against the base oil of tanning salons,

Dollar stores, liquor and greasy foods.

No one bought into fine arts or poetry.

Erudition formed the first clearance rack.

Books on scrapbooking and sex sold well,

And a Hallmark feel fell over the place,

Inspired now with easy-to-find titles.

Many scanned the poems of Leonard Nimoy.

*

This was a functioning putt-putt golf course.

Looks like a giant casserole thrown out,

Overgrown in industrial dust, spiked

Weeds and wheelbarrows full of jettison.

The clown's mouth was right about here, against

The gnar of pricker bushes, a free game.

Mrs. Deet

She called the police on us regular

When we first moved in, when we didn't mow

Right, we parked wrong, mailbox flag awry.

She later admitted when I helped her up

With a broken arm screaming in the driveway

After carpenter ants engulfed her overnight

Her good fortune in the annals of Neighbor.

Now we have each other eating out of each

Other's palms. Do I need an extension ladder,

An extension cord, unlikely bread of zucchini?

Saint Widow, what can I do but tote

Newspapers to your curb, tend your refuse,

Sink the birdbath pedestal to your exact depth

Wish?

You're still rowdy—"Those goddamn kids"

I've heard you mutter like my sister

When they wake you up exploding out the door

7:59 A.M. and laugh. Don't worry,

I'll probably kill the peonies between our property

I'm often thinking, crawling with spiders.

Arrested Migration

Canadian geese, so beautiful, and stupid,

Our major roadkill their sibilant carcasses.

The coal-powered electric power plant pulses

Hot water here enough to keep Lake Erie supple,

Take off and runway for the laziest fowl, kids,

Mothers emerging from steamy waters waddle

Light-headed, beaks raised, across the freezing

Median on Lakeshore, hood ornaments.

On The 13th Day Of Christmas

The great white bird of snow

Looks like a bunch of swear words

Three days into the streets. Muck

Stains crisscross the whole miracle.

After salt trucks or plows ram by

It's troubling to look up and say

Stars never really hurt from cold and

Trees have no problem being beautiful.

Darkness can be kinder in this place.

Who rigged red bandanas around the lights

To run like a redneck submarine or

Night-patrol hippie dirigible? Rocco

Shakes the martini a long chromium time.

Without jukebox radio or space for bands

He pours full music into a lit crystal.

Who drinks these must go gorgeous and blind.

Power Whisper

It was lightly blizzarding in the parking lot
But they made a handsome blur, holding on
To each other's mittens, mukluks to mukluks.
The ends of their scarves flew at each other like
Yarn in love, like woolen underwear and flannel
Sheets going at it, the wind and the snow.

