

GHOST PAIN



POEMS

Sydney Lea

G H O S T P A I N

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FIRST EDITION

G H O S T P A I N

This book is for Donald Sheehan
—who hears so many voices so well, especially the most important one—
with love and fellow feeling.

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

I am inexpressibly grateful to T. R. Hummer, editor of *The Georgia Review*, who believed sufficiently in this book's entire second section, "A Man Walked Out," to publish it in its entirety.

I'm likewise indebted to other editors, whose magazines first issued the following poems, in the same or slightly altered guise:

The American Scholar: "Finds"

Ascent: "Blues in Another Time"

The Atlantic Monthly: "Children, Singing" (part II of "At a Solemn Musick")

The Christian Century: "Hole"; "Transport" ("Hole" was the magazine's nominee in the poetry category at the 2004 Associated Church Presses Awards Convention. It received the first place vote)

The Connecticut Review: "The Jetty"; "The Author in March"; "In a Time of Torpor"

Crazyhorse: "Nowhere"; "Was Blind But Now"

The Hudson Review: "Evening Walk as the School Year Starts"

Image: "Ghost Pain"

MiPo (online): "Suite in Mudtime"

Nightsun: "Gradus ad Parnassum"

The Prose Poem: "Plume on the Ceiling"; "Plume Had a Sore Finger"

The Southern Review: "Wonder: Red Beans and Ricely"; "Football Against the School for the Deaf"

Shenandoah: "Epidemic"

The Texas Review: "1959"

The translations from the French all appeared as well, with moderate variation, in *Someone Wants to Steal My Name and Other Poems* by Henri Michaux (ed. Nin Andrews, Cleveland State University Press, Cleveland, 2003).

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The Author in March

Remnant, rank corn snow
perspires like dirty dough.
What few drab birds there are
don't fly up very far,
So hard do the clouds bear down,
Not much to this splotch of a town—
Flue smoke, smalltalk, clutter.
Last autumn's leaves clog gutters

And the brooks look choked with steam.
Swollen by ceaseless rain,
Their chalky gullies hiss
and mutter under the mist.
A dead hare's stiffening
within its pellet ring.
Tracks show puddle-rimmed
so that small scents stain the wind:

Coyote, fox, and 'cat
may take some heart from that,
Poking their hungry maws
into the prints of paws,
those runes of professional fear.
A barred owl whiffles near,
the night air's autocrat.
Day shades into black.

By a smutted stove in his nook,
an author imagines a book.
There's a chair; a lamp; a desk.
He's sleepy before his task.

His dented teakettle ~~weird-~~
~~odd break~~ *ly* shudders, as if scared.

He draws a green shade down,
thin bulwark of his home.

"I believe..." begins a phrase.

Sleet clicks along the eaves,
his old clock tocks and plinks,
there's rustling under the sink.

What an inventory.

What is a counter-story?

[He waggles his puny pen.

How might he truly begin?

I

Was Blind But Now

1959

I thought I was storing it up. I guess I did.
I didn't know a thing.
I was a slightly fat, a slightly handsome kid,
sixteen, on scholarship, away
from the new hegemon.
France was still coming to
—from the war and the war.

He didn't say World War
One or World War Two or World War
anything. He spoke of the *Guerre de quatorze*,
which dismasted him. He drank up
what I'd bought him and he shuddered.
He adjusted his instrument
—some crude banjo-y thing—

on his stubbed right thigh. Badly and long,
he sang of the *Guerre de quatorze*.
It lasted so long
and it was bad. An idea—suffering—
fired itself through my frame
like the pastis I'd ordered
in my not half bad French.

If I could just stay right there like that on that bench.
Those slight waves lipping. That gravel strand.
St. Jean de Luz. That breeze and mollusky stench.
That sun melting on the far Low Pyrenees.
If the people around me could just keep keeping quiet
like that—not because the music was good
but because it was long and awful

and was his and was theirs and was soulful.
If that warmth could run down into both my feet.
If it could stay like that, just slightly rank and tearful.
If it could just be this light forever.
If every eye could be wet but mine
and that of someone's daughter, which kept shooting at me,
 though I couldn't determine whether to flirt or rebuke me.

To make a soul—I could *tell!*—would be so easy.