

Jean Burden

Selected Poems



Jean Burden

September 1, 1914 [Waukegan, Illinois] –

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Burden studied under Thornton Wilder at the University of Chicago, from which she graduated in 1936. Her first poems were published in 1939 in *Poetry* (Chicago). She married David [] in 1940; they divorced in 1949. Soon afterwards, she had a “four year, tumultuous love affair” with the British philosopher and interpreter of Eastern thinking, Alan Watts. She served as West Coast editor of *Faith Today* and for nearly 50 years (1955–2002) was the poetry editor of *Yankee Magazine*. She also wrote multiple animal-care books under the pen name Felicia Ames such as the bestseller *The Classic Cat*. California State University established the Jean Burden Annual Poetry Series in 1986. The Jean Burden prize from the Academy of American Poets is named in her honor.

Naked as the Glass. New York: Clarke & Way, 1963

Taking Light from Each Other. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992

On the Early Morning Bus

If I close my ears

I can hear their voices, softly in another key,
sift through the epidermis, follow along the blood,
bloom into knowledge on the bony tree.

Three Audubons, female, old in years,
busily riding between town and bird,
reckon the damage of the recent flood,
 talk loudly of spring;
and how today with polished lens
they plan to stalk the Godhead in the linnet's wing.

The young girl with the child
covers a yawn with her fist;
shifts her weight a little; straightens the pinafore;
waits for Time to fold back the door.

No one knows when I avert my head
I have memorized their heart-beats in
 ventricle and wrist—
and buried their dead.

The Atomic Age—Pasadena, California

If there were time
these seedlings planted in the spring
might grow as high as tufted palms
or the phallic cypress, pruned for height. .
But there is precious little that is measured by the clock;
only the small, the child-like thing—
the school at eight, and lunch at noon,
and sleep, perhaps, at night.

Trees take longer—longer, often, than a man,
less than a rock.

Here behind the neat privet hedge,
where the jacarandas strew
their lavender and lace,
we can pretend we do not know the time.
But in the lily pool is the same distorted face
we saw in the morning Times,
and in our ear the voice saying,
this is the way the world ends.

Do you prefer your poison sweet?
Turn the dial.
Life's arranged by Freddy Martin
with Alka-Seltzer in the vial
Have you the Frigidaire you've dreamed of?
Have you the bats and snakes you've dreamed of?
Yea, verily.

We did not bother to circle the date
on the calendar behind the door.
We knew it was Sunday, nothing more.

While the fissure widens underneath the creeping bent,
and a faint wind blows in the tufted palms,
we plant our seedlings, sure of sun,

and wait a timeless, clockless eon
for beautiful Bikini to bloom beside the rose.

But the Child Was Born Dead

This was grief a woman knows
is native to her kind,
a hard, familiar stone to hold
when hand knows more than mind.

Here, if she were wise enough,
was music in a shell;
were colors of a winter tide;
the sanctus of a bell.

Divorce

What lies bleeding
is the third—
not you
nor I—
but what was created for a time
by us.

So trinity becomes
duality again.
Astounded,
we turn and stare,
measuring the distance between us
by the body
of our heir.

Solace for the Living

Claire

would have been eighty-nine in April,
the sexton's wife observes,
reading the memorial leaflet in a whisper
behind the book of Common Prayer.

Death was a blessing,
we hasten to agree;
and the organist slides to Schubert
in a lower key.

The men from Crippen's
(affiliated with Forest Lawn)
their handkerchiefs like picket fences in a line,
recognize the Rector's sign,
and push the casket down the aisle
behind the pall-bearers, two by two.
One Crippen man forgets to genuflect.
After all,
yesterday it was a Baptist in Malibu.

The eulogy is in good taste,
and brief;
with emphasis upon "returning home",
and Claire (ageless and wise!)
likened to an autumn leaf.

So with Mozart's Allelujah
and the fourteenth chapter of John;
with wreaths (in season) tied with satin bows,
we wind our separate griefs in garlands of green,
and hide the dark angel's face
with gossamer and rose.

Until You Come Again

Until you come again, the fountain will not play;
the water in the urn
will dry slowly from the rim,
and where the young tree waits for day,
the leaves go brown upon the limb.

Within the square and sunless court
we wait for your return;
bounded by wall and hedge of straw
I pace a narrow mile
between a sleeping tree, a sandy pool,
and an idle Eros
with alabaster smile.

Connection

(for Hildegard Flanner)

We are talking of Hopkins and Joyce,
of cicadas and tree
frogs. You from your hilltop
500 miles away explain
in your delicately explicit way
the difference in their night speech.
I stretch languidly between
the sleeping cats and smile
at the faint indignation in your voice.
“Anyone can hear it,” you say.
“All one has to do is listen.”
Then suddenly we hear a sound—
not kin to frog or insect—a squeak,
a whisper, a lilliputian squawk.
“What was that?” you ask, alarmed—
you who once bashed two rattlesnakes to death
in less than a minute,
and thought it no great feat.
“Probably only a snide comment from
some faulty silicon chip,” I say—
I the expert, who knows so much about such things.
“Or the CIA?” I venture, warming up,
thinking of le Carré and all those other spooks.
“They don’t tap poets’ phones,” you say severely,
though anyone can tell you’re not quite sure.
Crackle, squeak, chirrup, snap.
We lose a word. It could have been important.
Is there between two people, no matter
how connected, always a third?
There is no time to wonder.
“Are you there?” you ask. “Can you hear me?”
And back across the fragile line,
speech thinned to a hiss,
comes the stranger’s answer: *Yes,*

oh yes, oh yes.

For a Yellow Cat at Midnight

As though drifted inland
in some dark current of your own,
you settle against my side,
cumbrous as day or a warm stone,
and I wake to find you there.

Why at night, small lion,
are you so much heavier than by day?
Only this afternoon
you slept, upside down, in a lap
already full of books and child,
and you were a tawny feather,
a fluff of sun.

Now pulled hard to the earth's center,
as though to a final place
(lion, are we older by a night?),
we wait for sleep,
held fast by separate stars,
ponderous with what we do not know,
caught in a common dark.

