

Seeing Stars

A book of poems

by

Carolyn Wing Greenlee

“Seeing Stars”
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CONTENTS

Introduction...	v
Dedication...	vii
I Remember When Poetry First Rolled Over My Soul...	1
Past Haunts...	2
Past Haunts 2...	3
Change of Terrain...	4
Paper...	5
Upon the Passing of a Favorite Uncle...	6
When Mother Weeps...	8
December...	11
Fortune Cookies...	13
Feast Day...	14
22 Months...	16
How Trees Survive Winter...	19
Farewell...	20
Bonnalynn...	21
How Long?...	22
Gratitude...	25
Lunar Call...	26
Seeing Stars...	28
Donner Poem...	29
If I Have Seen...	30
Cat/Dog/Fog/Door...	32
Passover...	33
Spring Happening with Hedy...	34
Leash Relieve...	36
The Nobility and Equality of Common Purpose...	38
Connection...	39
The Truth of Rainsoaked Pine Mess...	42
On Crying...	44
Reconfiguring with Wings...	45
Writing a Book...	46
To My Father In View of the Comma...	48
Hope for the Future...	50

INTRODUCTION

If you read these poems in order, start to end, you will feel the rhythms of the last fifteen years of my life. They have been the hardest so far, with many losses including my mother, my husband, my father, and my sight. You'd think that could make a dismal bunch, but as I revised and revised, the truth came out in meanings I had not seen when I was in the moment, furiously writing poetry to keep from going under.

A friend of mine said she didn't want happiness; she wanted fullness with all of life's heights and depths. There is wisdom in that attitude, and shocking strength in that brave embracing. I didn't do mine perfectly, but I realize I'm satisfied with what I learned and who I have become because of, not in spite of, those hard times.

I call this book "Seeing Stars" because not everything is loss, even as we grow older. Sometimes we get something back. Sometimes we see something in a new way, and it's brighter and more cherished than when we had everything in abundance and the future was still a long way off.

Carolyn Wing Greenlee
Lake County Poet Laureate Emeritus
Kelseyville, CA
October, 2015

DEDICATION

To JoAnn Levy, my hero,
who knows all about life, loss, and writing a book

I REMEMBER WHEN POETRY FIRST ROLLED OVER MY SOUL

I had never been
in so many minds
not mine
yet finding my Self
inside
without having
to knock
I was surprised
drowned by
sound
rolling over my soul
as if I were a whisper
and only It
was real

PAST HAUNTS

There are holes in my history
where solid should be

Who knows what happened
in the first 12 years?

Insubstantial,
I drifted into junior high
where I lodged in
incompletion to this day

They say
you can never
heal those places
fill those spaces
I don't agree:
We can grieve
release
resolve
redeem.
We can say
This wound does not define me
drive me own me
We are flutes
not sticks
We are lace
that lets our faces touch
through the curtains
of our pain

PAST HAUNTS 2

How I have hated
rejected, ignored, despised
the pathetic little girl
dripping with need
I have tried for years
to disassociate
from her mewling
but from the ragged past
she stumbles after me.
I rush on
afraid to glance back.

Now You tell me
I must
accept her
love her
forgive her
embrace her
for I am still her
and she is still
me

CHANGE OF TERRAIN

Love feels like
a power person never there
except to demand
demean
or lavish riches that take my breath away
enslaving me with wonder—

It never lasts,
this sporadic gush.
Dry winds
fling me far—
few grains clinging together
enough to be considered
a soul

Why do I continue to crave
that inconsistent rain?
strain to spy a far off cloud
that ends up dropping only promises

Friends who have wandered
the same desiccated ground
beckon to a full cool place
splash me from streams
surging from the Throne
where True Love gives
unstintingly
consistently
unfailingly each day
and no dead thing
can ever suck dry
this newly supple clay.

PAPER

paper—
thin
accepting
accommodating
easily torn
flexible
bland
blank
mute—
can turn a sudden edge
and slice you
red

UPON THE PASSING OF A FAVORITE UNCLE
A POEM FOR UNCLE WOGGIE

Uncle Walter's
no longer of Earth
decades of telling others
what to expect
witnessing now
Eternity
first hand

Mom sat hours by the speakerphone
feeding him stories
between treatment and treatment
he devoured
the mundane long gone past
the markets, the laundry, clockweeds in the grass
now more delicious
than physics or theories of thought.
She will miss him
but she will have no regrets.

On his wedding day,
my sister kicked the bride.
What else was there to do?
She was taking him away.

He would be different. He already was.
No more Uncle Woggie. Too silly a name
for one who'd become so large.

Dear Uncle Woggie,
for years we could not play
as we did when you were young.

You had become
too grave.
You would have played,
I think,
if there had not been
so many mantles weighing you down.
Are you larking now
where Auntie Katie danced?
Mom saw her there, twirling
free from so much gravity.
Having passed from terminal to Everlasting
are you also going to give my mom a peek?

I do not expect to see you.
I am relieved for you
for whom life kept reducing
to its lowest common denominator.
All your words have been spoken.
Your thoughts now occupy
a different space.

I do not need you to appear to me.
I know you are where I expect to be.
For now
in many ways
you can never leave.
Playful and young
you live your Uncle Woggie life
in books of stories you urged me to write—
the plain mundane of now distant past
of markets
of laundry
and clockweeds in the grass.

WHEN MOTHER WEEPS

It's awful when your mother weeps,
years of words
too massive to pass,
blocking each other
like comics crowding the door

She emits some smallsqueak sounds
flees to her room to sob alone
embarrassed to be unable
to articulate
the whole of it
or at least
retreat
to the dignity of silence

I can hear her through the door.

I sit
eyes filling
wondering what to do,
myself a grandma
back to being six
or two

Sobs swell
breaking
surface tension
waves cresting
loud enough
for even him to hear

I warned him.
She can't keep up.
She doesn't want them here.
It's a woman thing.

He didn't hear
or didn't care.
Said the house didn't matter,
then mocked her clutter—
desk piled papers
she was doing for him.
I cringed.
She took off stumbling,
squeaking.

I go to my room.
I always go to my room.

Later she finds me
writing poetry
tells me
it's time for dinner.
I hug her.
She trembles,
resists her tears,
tells me
Go eat
says
You can't cry too
it didn't happen to you.
I tell her she's wrong.
I hold her.
She stands without fleeing.
Doesn't hug back.

At dinner
we talk about
something else,
Afterwards
he washes dishes.
She sits on the swing.
I take a seat beside her,
say it's been a strange, hard day
hoping she'll notice
she is not alone.

It doesn't bring us closer.
Nothing ever has.
Nothing ever does.

DECEMBER

September
We wonder
will she make 81?

November
she wants to see me
talk on the phone
I don't know what to say

December
She could make Christmas
anniversary 59

At year's end
with life counted in months
weeks days
how carefully I listen to the reedy voice
disappearing insufficient air

She knows me so strongly
long before memory
she has kept me
tells me
things I simply could not know
retrieves the deepest realities
if I care to ask
I pray
not to trespass
any closely-guarded ground

I listen
fearing fog will close her in
out of view
or hearing—
beyond her knowing
who I am,
who knew me from beginning
before I knew myself

FORTUNE COOKIES

Mine: People are attracted by your delicate features.
I, who get too much attention from
veterans fantasizing exotic Asian girls...

His: You will become more and more wealthy.
He, who invented at age 60 a machine
that has made him at age 85
richer than he's ever been...

Hers: You love life very much.
She, who is slipping away...

FEAST DAY

They sit down to eat
feast on treats:

Ha Ga

Shew Mai

Char Shew

Bao

Roast Duck

Roast Pork

*Chow Fun**

Wu Tao

They call.

I rise from your side.

You begin to cough.

You begin to choke.

I sigh

 sit back down

 a little too hard

Do you do this on purpose?

It seems like you do this on purpose.

I've been here a week.

You always choke when it's time for me to eat.

Everyone else is feasting

Do you do this on purpose?

It feels like you do this on purpose.

I watch the pump dripping

 slowly

 tastelessly.

I pick up the rod.

You still watch cooking shows
sniff kitchen smells
 trying to taste with your nose

I lean toward you gently.
“Could you use some suction?”
Your face is strained.
I’m ashamed.
 There is no *fun* for you.

**chow fun*: rice noodles stir fried with vegetables and meat

22 MONTHS

22 months ago
she could
still run
sign her name
sit up
eat
talk
slam doors
and had the lungs to
sob
loud enough to sound through the
quiteshut
solidcore
custommade
hardwood door
from the bed
where she'd flung herself
when she could still
fling

Reading the words
I wrote back then
to immobilize the pain,
I am in shock
of what's been lost
and gained
in the strained weeks
between

Wherever we place her now
she stays
a sack of potatoes
looking up at us

She giggles
when she piddles
on my wiping hand
or passes gas
when I reach to pull her
diaper up

She is helpless
as a newborn
but not as loud
or selfish
She thanks my father
calls him her Sunshine
says he's the best
pleased that
at last
she's first

My father says
What's different?
We'll go on like before.
You just can't move, that's all.
There's nothing wrong with your brain
Nothing's changed.
We're the same.

He's wrong.
Nothing's the same.

She calls me her angel.
She never called me her angel.
I climb in beside her
daring to match my grown-up frame to hers.
She doesn't complain.
I hold her like the cherished child
she never got to be
ask if she's afraid to die
surprised to be so close
we've never been this close
She sighs
closes her eyes
holds me like the cherished child
I never got to be

HOW TREES SURVIVE WINTER
WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY MOTHER
MOTHER'S DAY, 2000

Do trees weep
lost leaves
when they stand stripped
casting less than
half the shadow
do they mourn
their former
glory?
Or when the first frost
snaps at their
proud array
do they say
Come quickly, Sap.
No regrets.
Abandon all vulnerabilities.
Concentrate
all green
centered
grow down
deeply
endure
in this
still safe place
await
the time
of blossoms

FAREWELL

I suppose it's a good sign
when you leave behind
a hole where you have been,
a place
no one can fill,
a space
your size
your shape
your depth

I suppose
if it closed
as wounds
scabbing over
fast and hard—
you could pass
to pleasant memory
and that would be that—

but it remains
a space
your size
your shape
your depth
a hole in my heart
that only you can fill,
an open place
that longs,
belongs
to you

BONNALYNN

The last step tripped you up
Landed you
on your head
Landed you
on your way
to the End.

You were the alto
with the smiling face
welcoming me
to the pew
next to you
Meds and age
had run you frail
but not your heart.

Your last step caught your foot
but your life went straight to Him
Who stumbled plenty on His last steps
to the Cross that has now made you whole.

HOW LONG?

UPON HEARING OF THE CHARLES BONNET SYNDROME

It wasn't bad before

twenty

thirty

forty years

snapping pictures

catching light

gathering words

shelves of works I said I'd read someday

I don't remember when I stopped seeing stars

It's not all black

Sometimes it's gold

but mostly

it just

isn't

I see patterns now—

neon curls

comet swirls

They say my brain

wants to

entertain itself

making up

what it doesn't get

Last night I saw my cat

They say I'll see

visions

scenes

stored up vivid memories

Days go by
and every day
I feel I haven't done it right.
I haven't stopped to look or paint
or sorted everything I saved

Under mylar
all pictures feel the same

if I could keep this much
it wouldn't be so bad
Now every dusking
says

How long?
How long?
every night
declines into black
and
more black
a rehearsal
harbinger
decree

People lose much more than I
and still I whine.

Why can't I do this better?

How long
horsetail clouds
flicked white across high blue?
How long
beloved faces
cavorting cat

movies
zoos
How long till cones and colors go
and all that is swift
shades to sound

Oh fill, eyes!
Fill and fill and fill
not with tears
no
with all that noiseless flies on silhouetted wings

I am alone
in this
unpredictable
patterned
made-up stuff
cats not there
and gold that does not make me rich
and colors I knew
are no longer true
F8 F16 F22

How long?

GRATITUDE

Be present.

Do not devour.

Savor flavors.

Feel flowers.

Notice the breeze

 easy on the skin

 gently lifting hair

 bringing fragrance in

Chew.

Do not act as if

nothing smells

and everything tastes

 the same

**LUNAR CALL
FOR JIM LYLE**

The moon rolls around
and the seeds go Yes!
the bulbs go Yes!
the trees go Yes!
The moon rolls around
and the earth says Yes!
at least
in my part of the world

The moon rolls around
and the seeds wake up
the trees wake up
the bulbs start to push
The moon rolls around
and the grass pricks up
at least
in my part of the world

The blossoms start
and the buds nub out
even if the winds lash the branches bare
“It’s time” they say
“and we must obey
the stir
the urge
the Grow”

The Call comes deep
The Call comes soft
The Call comes strong
in the secret place

The Call comes sure
The Call comes true
The Call goes forth from the moon

and the seeds pop up
the blossoms roll
the green shows up
everywhere
and the flowers come
wild flowers come
at least
in my part of the world

SEEING STARS

A VALENTINE FROM MY FATHER

I saw stars last night.
They flickered in and out of the Nothing Place
 like names on the tip of my tongue
 like words I can almost remember
After years of not looking up
I was content to gaze at day
admiring clouds too big to miss

I have learned the paradox of loss
that treasures what's left
more than all I had before
 final grains of rice
 final whispered words...
Every day I hope
to hold onto what I have
but I don't.
That's the way it goes:
with this
you never get anything back.

But last night I forgot
I had stopped looking up
and there they were
bright & dim & many
flickering in and out of the Nothing Place
 like names on the tip of my tongue
 like words I could almost remember

DONNER POEM

They say there's no way
you can know what you'll do
when snow piles high
and you can't get through.
But I'd rather fade
with my belly aquiver
than fight for a bite
of somebody's liver.

IF I HAVE SEEN
CHARLES BONNET SYNDROME

If I have seen
I can keep
this blue
lake under summer sky
lupine
collectively asserting their
upright buds
primly purpling over
drop-off cliffs
red dirt
violent under
sword blade grass
pale
new
promised
spring

If I have seen
this green
deeper than sleep
fragrant as morning
before dry noon
bleaches peach and lavender
to pristine egret white
I can keep dark detail
sketched in fractals
same
and not the same

Do not neglect
the blacks
the grays
thin fog
young dawn
subtle mottled
sea-smoothed stones
whispered shades
settling day
in silence

In my time
I have thrilled to
yellow dusted contoured hills
so common after miles
that I forget to say
oh look
oh look
oh soak
my eyes
in butter color
It doesn't last for long.

But even if I cease to see
I will know you
by your scent
by your sound
I will know you
by your song
And never
see you
fade

CAT/DOG/FOG/DOOR

cat & dog
 in & out
 of doors
 of fog
 I let them out
 let them in
 and on
 and on

cat marauds
 proudly dragging home
 mauled trophies for others to admire
dog is old
 poops wherever
 forgetting her manners

Lord,
am I just like them?
wanting out
wanting in
marauding
dragging ragged trophies home
pooping wherever
forgetting my manners

PASSOVER

They would have eaten.

He would have broken
the bread unleavened,
striped and pierced.

He would have given
the Cup of Redemption.

They would have sung
and after, gone out:

This is the day the Lord has made.

I will rejoice and be glad in it.

He would have led them
into a garden.

They would have slept.

He would have prayed.

He chose to be broken
like matzo unleavened
accepting the Cup
of the Consummation.

He would be beaten

He would be hidden

He would be brought out

Lamb of Redemption.

Blood on the doorposts

Death passing over

matzo now broken

striped and pierced

Perfect Redemption

Cup of the Kingdom

I will rejoice

and be glad in it

**SPRING HAPPENING WITH HEDY
IN OUR FIFTEENTH WEEK TOGETHER**

She watches me now
and sometimes lies close
on her own.

They said this would happen.
I thought it would not.
She's too stubborn:
I'm too strained.

But I don't get to be
the only one
not lovable enough—
exception to the tried and true
sixty-some years of proof:
You do the work.
You take your place—steady at the helm.
You be the Source.
Insist.
Persist.
Correct-reward-and praise.

It happens
like little buds pushing
bare sticks to blossom.
It happens
like lilies
from cold dumb globes
spearing through spring soft soil
gallantly green and white.
It happens
like leaves.

It happens
because
it happens.

It happens
because I want to
want her to
want to
so much

And she does
now
because
she does
like blossoms
like lilies
like leaves

LEASH RELIEVE

Every day
four times a day
every early morning
to night after dark
I take you
out.

You
sniff the morning
sniff the evening
sniff the noon
and afternoon
stare down the distance
where scent of deer has passed.

Ten minutes they say
but you're not even trying—
you're greeting the morning
regarding it
a new delicacy,
offered promise of
pleasures yet untasted.

Four months
I have watched you
four times a day
savor the air
in all its complexities
overtones
and meanings.

I take you out
so you can
Do Your Business.
I tell you
it's for you
but
I stand
feeling evening on my skin
and sometimes
even
see
a star

**THE NOBILITY AND EQUALITY OF COMMON PURPOSE
A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL OBSERVATION**

Plastic bags are needed now.
Large or small, they're treasures now.
Clear, opaque or in-between—
Valued, all, in my esteem.
White or blue, red, yellow, black,
Safeway, K-Mart, Nordstrom Rack,
Produce, bread bag, merchandise,
Not too thin is really nice.
Twice a day they do their work
Picking poop up off the dirt
Showing in all matters fecal
plastic bags are proven equal.

CONNECTION

Nearly two years
I've waited
looking in your
small brown canine eyes—
do you see me
as more than
the food lady
who takes you
good-smelling places
where you don't get to eat?

I kept it strict:
no pet, no talk, no play,
no interaction of any kind
except with me
so I would be your everything
and you'd want only me
Black stallion on the desert isle

You do your job.
In the long run,
isn't that enough?
It has to be.
I said yes to you
for better
or at least
for good.

But Monday night
as I sat trying to
settle my soul with
the gorgeous wild horse,

elegant ebony
grand piano legs
churning blue lagoon
following the boy
snuffing to fill
his huge heavy head
with more of
whom he loved,
you came
snuffing,
rubbing your face in my lap,
butt up,
churning upside-down,
still snuffing,
then plopping,
still touching...

Did you know?
Did you know it would be tomorrow,
the call before dawn
when it can't be good?
When you sniffed the bed and
wagged your tail
didn't you know
he wasn't really there?

Do you know what it means to die?
Do you understand beyond the
vacancy of chair
comprehend within
the wracking
wordless wait
as friends empty the room
honoring the airless

unspeakable
twist of
fundamental
universal
nothing unnatural
consequence of birth
while I try to ignore the
outrageous
unreal disconnect
from what has been for better
and worst
and worse

but in the blue of our own room
night of drizzle and no stars
no more thick cable of worry
stretching unbearably three hours north,
you come
sit before me
looking up
I kneel
You put your
black as grand piano legs
on my arms
small round canine eyes
brown
and sad
as mine

THE TRUTH OF RAINSOAKED PINE MESS

This morning
when I went out
I saw rain had pounded
parts of pine
to the ground
redbrown limp
and everywhere

I'm thinking
what's next
plan the service
pick the music
write the life
choose what to say to
sliver it into
words charged by the
column inch

For years I've thought
always elsewhere
bracing for the next ill wind
Now
walking the dog
thinking what's next
I hear the multiple callings
of Vees flying south
my mother's only
really happy memory
and I'm past
and I'm thinking next week
but underfoot
the redbrown litter lies

sticking to my shoes
tracking in my house
truth of today
unrelenting:
I'm pounded to the ground
with no way to fly south

ON CRYING

You think you'll never stop crying.
You think that
when you're young,
wondering how you'll be
when you get the call.
You think you'll sit howling, rocking,
horror coursing
But you don't.
You sit unblinking.
You wish you'd not just erased
his voice from the answering machine.
You think of the last words,
the last hug, the last call.
You think of the worry
and how
now you don't have to.
You sound calm when you talk
most of the time
it isn't like you thought
You don't cry continuously
and sometimes
you feel normal
sometimes

RECONFIGURING WITH WINGS
THREE DAYS AFTER MY FATHER'S DEATH

They say you're always a child
in your father's house.
Will I become a grown-up now?
Fast melt within the chrysalis of pain

You don't see it, I suppose,
eyes gone runny with all the rest—
Not till after
when you've fought free
struggled from the transparent shell
do you understand
it took all that
for this
to begin

WRITING A BOOK

**AFTER COMPLETING “ETERNAL RIVER, VOLUME III,
THE NEXT THIRTY YEARS”**

Writing a book is not as hard
as digging a ditch
or fighting a war.
but writing a book
can take your eyes
steal your sleep
pillage your past
Writing a book
can keep alive
things that were
that might have been
forgotten

Writing a book requires time
the sacrifice
of what is now
Writing a book
means sitting inside
hands on the keys
eyes on the screen
while evening breeze
speaks sweets unrepeated
but time
requires
writing a book

Writing a book
can keep alive
things that were
that might have been
forgotten
things that ought not be
forgotten
or
remembered

Some things of mine
ought not be forgotten
though they're harder than dirt
or fighting a war
things worth
the digging
the fighting
the grind of
past eclipsing
sweet-smelling evening
for some things of mine
ought not be forgotten
and there's no other way
save
writing a book
harder than dirt
or fighting a war

TO MY FATHER IN VIEW OF THE COMMA
FOR CASEY CARNEY
IN HONOR OF OUR FATHERS' DEATHS II-9

I saw you last night,
all of you—
Mom cooking
you tinkering
Dennis watching
all of you talking and
walking
though you couldn't
I'm certain you couldn't
I'm certain
you
couldn't

I thought you were dead.
said
Aren't you dead?

How could you be
here
and me so near
as if years
have no holes
where you used to be

Perhaps
as they say
it's not what I thought—
not a stop
but a pause
nothing more
nothing less
nothing else
not a sob
but a breath
just a breath
just a
breath
or a sweet
soft
sigh

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Wind shifts

Change sails

Pay attention

No more nonchalance

Keep going

Give thanks

Hope stays close

to sweeten the

unknown



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