

# Indiana Law Review

---

Volume 44

2011

Number 3

---

## THE POETRY OF MARY HARTER MITCHELL

### Nothing to Do with Dionysus

Rather than go to my dying mother's bed,  
I write an inconstant poem for her.  
What reason? What is it I am?  
If you drink from the sun,  
if your tongue scalds,  
the pain must form on something,

the form of which saves you.  
Because in ancient Greece  
the actors left the stage to switch  
their masks and voices, a chanting  
chorus covered the changes, they say.  
I say the art of the sons and daughters  
is all that holds us,

crossing, re-crossing,  
treading out tragedy.  
One dance across the stage  
becomes one line of a poem,  
the verse where the dancers  
turn. Millennia pass.  
A sadness without myth  
climbs into the lines  
as into a lap.

Between the stanzas  
the mothers are inconsolable.  
If the words do not turn and call  
us back the poems break out  
and dance up the mountains,  
their feet moving under the snow.

### Irrational

It was a pretty little pie  
I gave my mother:  
    fluted crust,  
    red cherries  
    in sugar.  
O, she did love sweets!  
O, we loved her, all her children!  
When we gathered 'round her bed—  
    nice family!—  
    and she died,  
in a twinkling changed and left us,  
I was thinking  
of the pie she never ate,  
how it pertly sat unwrapped,  
how it now was changed forever,  
    little circle,  
    sweet pretty little pie.

### Shell Game

If it is true that at death's  
    instant some aura escapes  
    from the body and is visible,  
  
briefly, then is gone,  
    I will never be quick enough  
    to love that soul before it leaves  
  
this world. I will be lingering  
    on the lips, not for words  
    but for cushion, the hands' stars,  
  
crumpling, the ears for their maze  
    of sticky valleys and not for any  
    admittance, the feet's crusty bones,  
  
the chest for its still precious heft  
    and hollows, after the looping air  
    has raveled away, even the skin  
  
folded thinly over the eyes  
    I will kiss. I plan already  
    to hold for as long as I can

to the still shape, the literal unhinged  
from eternity; and though thereby  
I may miss some pure

essence lifting like morning fog,  
like the top of a metaphor carried off,  
what else can we love, being human,

but this hull, this bass note, this  
altar of stones? It is more to us  
than any bright everything up into which

a soul can pour. At fairs I never could  
follow the pea hustled  
under the three scuffling shells;

I was always amazed;  
I was always tricked.  
That's what made the game pay.

When the jig is up we might as well  
be changed into something vaguely  
shining. Yet when the fingertips' whorls—

why in heaven's name so singularly  
wrought?—stiffen and drain,  
what earthly consolation can we find

in new whorls brightly spinning  
on the sun's old face?  
Mary at the tomb

would have stroked the hands'  
stars; she would have spat out  
holy wafers onto the ground.

### Profile

They tend to not be loners.  
Their neighbors usually know  
who they are.  
They tend to not  
traffic in weakness.  
They probably never were  
very hungry  
for food.

They know about weapons and politics.  
They almost always think  
in packs.  
They like to be known as  
someone  
not to be f . . . ed with.

They are usually  
religious: when provoked  
they like to take a deity  
off its shelf  
and set it on the table  
to be handled.  
They tend to not hear voices.

They are usually  
conventional; they often talk and dress  
very well.

It will do no good  
to report them to authorities.  
They probably are  
the authorities

and even if not  
you would turn them in and come back later  
to find them sharing coffee and jokes  
with the other powers  
and everyone wearing  
nice shoes.

You should know  
they are  
extremely  
dangerous.

### **Retribution**

Fisted, go from the execution,  
the missile crater, the body count—  
uncrumple your hand, it is  
still empty,  
and the red hole in the muscle of your heart  
is still a red hole  
in the muscle of your heart.

### Clearness

In the meeting-room plain as a close-eyed face,  
pure of symbols, undistracted,  
we worship in pews squared to simple walls  
and windows of almost invisible glass.

But this morning someone has set in our view  
a glass globe crowded with zinnias and cosmos.  
We sit and consider the flowers.  
Their stems arch crazily over each other  
and over their juttled leaves.  
They are red and orange and pink.  
The sun tips into the room and through  
their wheels of petals.  
Under the water the sturdy stems  
are covered with tiny bubbles.  
Over the water the colors tremble with seed.

The flowers are just the flowers.  
We sit and see where the cut green life of them  
pierces the tender membrane between worlds,  
the level skin where air sits on water.  
One could live like this.

### Palm Sunday

Hosanna!  
It's a rollicking damn-good time.  
We cheer, we  
shout along the streets, we  
wave the life lines, love lines, laugh lines  
of our unbroken palms.  
O God,  
we are guilty  
of such innocent, innocent times.

### Burning Bush

This is the one miracle  
you must believe:  
past the pain that shuts the mouth  
is another pain that opens  
the mouth, the burning alive becomes  
both a screaming in

and a sign.

Some say it was yellow leaves  
or the low sun.  
From my blackened tuft of sticks I open  
my mouth, I say  
no, no! the leaves were green as young mint and it  
was fire.

### Creation

I hold with those who say the world begins  
in fire on ice, a day like today, in a word  
exhaled warmly onto a mirror  
of polished silver awareness—  
our work to be weaving with all we sense, hemming  
with all we love, fine fabric  
to drench in the wet breath  
of the open Mouth.

Fish ribs bleach and dissolve  
in a lake of sky, sun dazzles over  
the rolling brightness of snow,  
a blue is sunken  
like ink into the downs both shallow and deep,  
and from cold pasture  
trees muscle up raw iron,  
gray, thinly gilt, and weeds are caught  
like brown needles in the softest  
white cloth.

### November

a wide gray lowers  
over what is left  
in the cold  
whole fields of hollow  
stems rattling  
in ragged rushes and leaves

their many browns broken  
even to dull red  
and yellow  
broken in waves  
across whole shaken fields

poor scavenge

a wind ahead of the snow  
drives into our faces  
the children start coming home from school  
in the dark

something old in us  
wants to store hard things  
in close places—cellars, shelves  
pour dry seeds shooshing into sacks  
heap shells and sheaves in rooms, near  
but out of the wind

for a heaviness pulls at us now  
we swallow cider the color of bloody gold  
sweet, sweet as cold apple blossoms  
we wait we live  
hard by the counter-weight of the store  
we live hard by

### Poet

I pressed Clara's flowers  
in the unabridged dictionary  
years ago  
in the pink and yellow times  
and have just again found them  
in the press of words.

She danced on a luminous stage  
in pale pink slippers,  
youngishly tossing our hearts,  
and afterwards her grandparents gave her  
yellow carnations,  
which she has forgotten.

This is what I do:  
I close and open the book.  
It is a slow career,  
but I do it: I press and then look  
to see  
what holds.

**April, Contracts Class,  
First Year of Law School<sup>1</sup>**

In law school you are learning what to sight  
and it should move you.  
In other life, sighting a robin  
is something you can do, but  
in law school, it seems, you have to cite  
what someone who is not you has seen.  
In other life, you can taste and smell what nourishes.  
*See April. See also love.*  
*But cf.* you decide this spring  
how many classroom windows to leave open.

In other life promises, covenants,  
can be deeply part of who we are;  
but here we make a brief-long study  
of broken promises by people—  
we don't know who they are,  
Party A, Party B, appellations—  
about widgets—we don't know *what* they are.  
*See Corbin, Williston, Murray.*  
*See also Moses, Mohammed, Mao.* It is time,  
past time, to wonder

what I am doing here, because I have  
tenure, and it scares me to be so secure  
(and doesn't that sound just precious  
to a worker newly fired from the factory  
moving where it's cheaper), and also because  
criticism is cheap behind these sturdy walls;  
*see, e.g., feminism, Marxism,*  
critical legal studies, critical race theory,  
and the voices that haven't yet made it even  
into the footnotes.

*But see, e.g.,* should a feminist  
prefer, to that label, an autobiography?  
Should she talk about her children? Should she ever  
profess an interest in family law?  
Should she smile and speak softly  
and nurture across her desk with its vase of flowers?  
Shouldn't she rather kick ass,

---

1. Originally published in 52 J. LEGAL EDUC. 312, 312-13 (2002). The *Indiana Law Review* thanks the *Journal of Legal Education* for granting permission to reprint this poem.



get off on the Uniform Commercial Code,  
and computerize her outline of the role of contract law  
in Western civilization

(roman numeral two sub A, sub seven, where does family go?  
where does love meet work in the linear outline? sub children  
hyperlink)? I do not profess to understand  
all the abbreviations: *e.g.*, someone I love is dead  
and every birthday I have now  
is a going away.

*See also* children growing up;  
country long gone to war;  
and hatred, finely tailored as a lawyer,  
going to political conventions.

*See also* too many students want it all  
in declarative sentences,  
of one piece, whole, with handles,  
as if that would be truer.

*Cf.* what we, wrung out, would settle for now  
as good enough law.

Finding myself here—"professor"—  
what to profess?  
to build a career, or a life, on the urge  
that only some people have

to drop their eyes to the footnotes?  
to make a community among those journeying  
between the text and the questions:  
    by what and whose authority?  
    and what else is there to say?  
and even then to dispute the whole like a mystic  
(not everything is in sight)?  
finally to profess  
in all the voices that I have:  
yes, this is what we are doing? For now.

*But see:*

