



THE HERO POEMS

WENDY XU

THE
HERO
POEMS

WENDY XU

CONTENTS

YOU ARE NOT WHO THEY WANTED YOU TO BE / 4

I.

WHERE THE HERO IS ALWAYS LATE / 6
IN CASE OF EMERGENCY OPEN YOUR EYES / 7
WHERE THE HERO'S EVENING LITANY / 8
WHERE THE HERO CONTEMPLATES FORGIVENESS / 9
WITH THE WIND AT YOUR BACK IT'S A LOT LIKE MOVING / 10
WHERE THE HERO IS BUSY THINKING ABOUT YOU / 11
POEM ON THE EVE OF A PREDICTED RAPTURE / 12
IN THE YEAR THE HERO BECOMES A FIXTURE OF HIS LANDSCAPE / 13
WHERE THE HERO, AWASH, CIRCLES BACK / 14

II.

NIGHTLY THE TENDER THROAT / 16

III.

WHERE THE HERO, AFLAME / 22
WHERE THE HERO KNEELS BEFORE THE OCEAN / 23
A POEM AFTER FRANK LIMA / 24
FIRST PSALM / 25
THE HERO'S INSTRUCTION MANUAL / 26
WHERE THE HERO LOOKS UP INTO THE NIGHT / 27
MONDAY AUTOBIOGRAPHY / 28
IF YOU AREN'T BUSY I THINK I'M ON FIRE / 29

YOU ARE NOT WHO THEY WANTED YOU TO BE

For Cody Beckman

But after years enough alone, even the wicked sleep.
Clematis in a window box creeping the house, one thing overtakes
the next but is forgiven. I name everything in the sky Jupiter and you
its moon claiming a synchronized orbit. No time for specifics, no proof
that we have ever met. Your irregular thought patterns are seen
by a doctor, but when the actual untelevised apocalypse comes I don't want
to be ready, a capsized tugboat blinking in the harbor
is how you'll know I stayed. No advantage now to buying in bulk.
The isolated incidents of suburban shovel-crime in this neighborhood
mean it's ok to ask for help. Your courage changes the world. Your right hand
choking bottles like a songbird; sometimes hopelessness is a lie
feeding your sparrows to the dusk.

I.♦

WHERE THE HERO IS ALWAYS LATE

It begins with your name in a wave-swelled jar
throwing up salt. And the ocean, so sick of looking at you
all night rocking you in its arms, chooses an island

and calls it port. What did you ever know
of annulment? Of casting a wide net and hating
what's pulled in? No temperamental stars

to guide you, back home no faithful wife with hair
blooming a glossy raven

each night onto your pillow. You've imagined her often
after days of swimming, at the window
before dawn peeling a sunburn

from her skin. This is what heroes know nothing about.
There is only the storm.
The morning, too.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY OPEN YOUR EYES

This is not your death. From under a plastic surgical cap
you see them gently lift the heart

from her chest. Place it into a shallow basin; wash it
with care but this unsettles you. Like tenderly bathing

a child, they carry on cleaning the organ
and ignore you.

Today they came for you at dawn, sirens
calling out into the morning, ripping your windows in

tortured repetition while a medic
swings open two white doors, this room, this hall

made for your inadequate body. There are only
two things to do in an operating room: meet the eye-line

of your surgeon and try to hold it, or, imagine
a naked woman smoothing back

the splintered ends of your exposed valves.

This is not your death but a prelude, clinked out

on the stainless steel table where someone lays
down a clamp, a knife, where your silence

agrees to die without you.

WHERE THE HERO'S EVENING LITANY

The bed a moored ship.
Space is studded with revolving, monolith satellites.
I slide towards you on a fret-board of disaster.
Tempered stars.
Tempered fingers.
Disbanded chain-gang night.
I write you a song with my teeth.
Keel and rudder.
Thistle.
The bed among the bramble.

WHERE THE HERO CONTEMPLATES FORGIVENESS

For Brodie Miron

Before you there was your father who carried a hammer
& fixed things. Each night like a dark broom swept him

into bed & he dreamed of you, a slowly focusing photograph
of messy hair settled atop a red tricycle,

two buck teeth in dinosaur pajamas you sailed
across the living room floor like Magellan having spotted

the isle of beautiful women.
Later you too would circumnavigate

the thorny bramble of loss' island on foot, sometimes
with a cat named Tybalt & your friends who don't eat meat

except when they're eating meat. This is the trick: make a rule
& break it. Run towards love & don't come back,

like the blind circus starlet leaps from a platform & loses
her sequined gown,

you are an equally blind train chugging on. This is to say something
about *on track* & how you were put together right

in Michigan where the steam engines rollick
into morning, a flock of blackbirds dip & tumble while somewhere

your father sits up in bed. You ink a burning orange sky onto an arm.
Hitch the worn desert pony of your life to a post.

WITH THE WIND AT YOUR BACK IT'S A LOT LIKE MOVING

Towards a defining moment, or something similar. A strange cloud
of blackbirds throw shadows at the car, while Anne arranges
her pens on a table. To the order, say disorder. To a fair shake

at anything, demand more. Like vapors rise from the snow
you had a purpose once, hot-headed, indignant, Romeo spitting love
with a cherry stone in your mouth. Odor of cat vomit

whining at the door, your father steadies five cans
on a distant fence. Say *in the beginning there was a shotgun moving
the boundary lines of faith*, but in the dream of fire

you held me as I burned. Now watching a gutter-weed gulp rain
from the mouths of its brother, you are more than the conquest
of shadows in this drain.

WHERE THE HERO IS BUSY THINKING ABOUT YOU

For Tim Demay

The landscape of a Pennsylvania farmhouse, the thicketed white birch of the forest. A turtle sunning itself on a rock, but the rock is really another turtle. Intricacies of speaking about passion. Intricacies of speaking about God. An ear pressed up against the radio on a Sunday night in 1963. Summer in New York with the beautiful girls. A town suffering from a noxious gas leak, and the wind nobody saw coming. An antique store full of new things. Horses. The acre after acre of beautiful, unexpected horses. What Christ might have thought, had he been asked to think about you. An Egyptian rickshaw careening over a cliff in an action movie. The future. The dutiful exchange of sun and moon. Any kind of bird preening its feathers. The electric fence surrounding the house meant to keep out coyotes, but keeping you in. The horses again. The coyotes that watch the horses. The horses staring defiantly into the coyotes' eyes as the sun sets in rural Pennsylvania, a rock face coming into focus in the distance. The style of the hero having found his way again, coming into the house, dropping his hat, sweeping the girl up into his arms as a sunset lowers itself upon the earth. Intricacies of speaking about the silhouette of those horses against this sunset. Plumage of the night spilling open.

POEM ON THE EVE OF A PREDICTED RAPTURE

And if it is hard to live with my panic I remember
it is harder without. After the summer when Cody left

how many times did they tell me
I'd never make it? Coffee burning in a pot while

the windows flooded with ink. Father, it is torture sometimes
to have a heart. How many times did they bring me

the bitter songs? I admit that I believed in silence
as the purest form of love, the letters full

of pauses. My tongue recoiled from the sweetest fruits
lied to you. I admit I believed in men

as intricate constructions of my own shame.
How many times did they measure me

with needle and light? If it is hard to reason
with tenderness, how many times will I try?

IN THE YEAR THE HERO BECOMES A FIXTURE OF HIS LANDSCAPE

Between loss and sabbatical, spring

thick of ivy snakes

a juniper tree. I intended

not less than six ways of

writing you, careful,

face turned down into a book

of psalms.

Night opens to quiet symmetry where

I will sleep when you sleep

next to me. Instructions

we parse, small nations flower in

your mouth. You belong to

the horse

that bore you here.

WHERE THE HERO, AWASH, CIRCLES BACK

For Spenser Ford

Everything is anecdotal. Coffee on a Monday speaking
to friends in Korea while the computer stammers out

words they might have said, a video screen bearing vaguely
the shape of my shrinking face.

I do this as a form of fortune telling, as tomorrow I am unpacking
other people's things in a house in Amherst, Massachusetts.

The white trellises performing their structural duty long
after a mass death of orchids.

Everything is accidental. My friend lamenting his mustache
as the only remaining link to American living, the pretty Korean girls

join him for a glass of soju and mispronounce
his name. Suh-Pen-Ser in the bar becomes Pen-Teacher

or, Hello Kitty Teacher as a jab to his broken Korean.
Everything is repetition, accumulation, elegy.

Nightly the bedroom confesses to him a reverence
for open windows.

II.♦

NIGHTLY THE TENDER THROAT

I.

Of the steel blue lake where I intend
declarative architecture peeking
a sunset. Lifting color like ruined canvases
there are 72 names for God but
none of them *husband.*

~

Hyacinth in a window box we
sleep it off.

Filter everything through mythology

through suffering and
don't look.

II.

Had it been that I cracked the stunning red
of a pomegranate over the sink, tattered
leaf of a book which covered
your face instead.

~

Night dropping its husk onto parked cars
mist lumbering into rain into
more rain.

Of wanting to meet you for
more coffee.

~

The autobiography of love goes: *we meet*

and on every tongue a kindness
say *dear possibility*.

III.

Often you stood in the room and evaluated
its progress, one bookshelf leaning
against a brother

and tenderly propped up.

~

Some mornings we found the city demanding

nestled into its background becoming inseparable
a gray roof lifting up into sky
your sky lifting up like a hand.

~

No electricity since Monday you are
central Pennsylvania.

IV.

Thinking that tenderness had abandoned me my eyes
lengthen to shadow

morning as the fulfillment of night
your mouth preceding the blossoms.

~

I say *come away from the window*, here
to a chair where we can both sit.

The burden of dreaming while
you're away is always the same: hot nights.

A walk around the lake; the trees adding up
to everything.

V.

Of living through sons that finish
their fathers' wars, you

click off the news and are tired.

~

Bath water running onto a pale thigh

~

The neighborhood is quiet again your eye
becomes an onion

I say *and what is hope but joining the search
for youth.*

You ask me to speak your name
in the future tense and so I
say *want.*

III.♦

WHERE THE HERO, AFLAME

When the leaving is all that is left, love is shaped
like a cold cut turkey sandwich & demands
to be eaten. You're hungry after all, having watched
the fire burn for days & never running
for buckets. London was destroyed
in an hour because it was full of things
nobody wanted. & so, the enormous tyrants
of smoke rise up like a sigh of relief. Like a husband
who flees the family to write books about his family
huddled beneath the floor of a shoe factory.
When you come to visit & leave me
with a small, gold watch ticking on the floor
of the bedroom, its little arms circling
an unmoveable face. The kind of disappointment that face
might crack to convey. When you say you can't
ever pierce a thing directly through the heart, & so
you go around.

WHERE THE HERO KNEELS BEFORE THE OCEAN

You say *go* like a mouth full of grapes, but never mind, it's all happening at once. The man with the judge's robe pounds a gavel & decides for everyone in the court of public opinion. You are at home, packing a vegetarian picnic arranging the perfect squares of Swiss cheese. The man on the television has something to say about riots in a small desert country: if camels outnumber compliant citizens, how will the oppressive regime go on? It's too late. The albino peacocks don't feel welcome & have fled the zoo. The man with the final say doesn't say anything at all. He polishes his spectacles in a sun-washed Iowa home. You seem to think that by denying him, you become him, but this is a stupid idea conceived while pledging allegiance to a different state altogether; while considering how you might feel standing beneath the white church spires & a fishing barge hollers itself out from port. The man in the boat is surveying his lines of rope & how much he can spare to raise a flag. Blue. A frayed swatch of sky against sky which belongs to no one.

A POEM AFTER FRANK LIMA

Dear Frank: it's not working. The moon is gone
and has left life sockets behind. Pools of light collecting
in the streets. What am I if not a series of pages torn
from your book? Have we met? What of the art of forgiveness
which I gave up practicing? And of exercises where I listen
to my breathing. And I think: how do I know to keep
breathing? There are so many wolves
in your pages, and one wolf might follow another
to a different forest and make a life there. Were you writing
about wolves or men? What are you holding
in your hands, Frank? I can see that it delights you
your face turned up like a prayer.

FIRST PSALM

In the hotel lobby behind the plastic juniper vine a kiss
nobody saw. Aubade calling to us
from the street, if not now then I will never

wake beside you. Street car rattling
into darkness. To stop being grateful is
to be dead, fall asleep on the last train

to Brooklyn and navigate Coney Island
like a drunk with nothing to lose. Tell me
your habits, about loving women based on breast size

and the marginal psalms you repeat in your sleep. *Father*
I have trembled before you to the extent
of rewriting your name. Twelve angels

visit my sleep and in truth they all bear
her face, marble skin, teeth find a home
in the flesh of my neck. Your colony

of rooks building nests in my eyes. A sensible death
being one at her side, my hand
is a field growing toward her.

THE HERO'S INSTRUCTION MANUAL

For Josh Fomon

When Jim calls kennel the dog & don't throw up. & don't tell Jim
you want to throw up. Don't die on the spot still wearing undignified
penguin pajamas for your mother to find. Don't tell Jim
you've been waiting for months now, often needing to pray, often fancying yourself
a heroic captain's wife standing on a cliff while the waves roll, & quickly now,
wind billowing your dress like an awkward butterfly. Not yet,
awkward butterfly. When Jim calls exercise the first & only plan which is to forget
the laundry, let the clothes-pins bobble excitedly on a line, tell the book club
to get the hell out of your living room & fast. When Jim calls don't go back
to the pier by moonlight that summer, some bullfrogs having sung you
out of bed & surprisingly, sounded like harps. When Jim calls don't fall
to your knees & beg the Lord for anything. Be like a crab scuttling
from the smashed hull of a ship, dredged up with the wreckage after a thousand years
by oceanographers intent on putting failure on display. The galley moans
& creaks. When Jim calls don't peek out your window
at an indifferent sky, the horizon like a crumpled apology
catching fire.

WHERE THE HERO LOOKS UP INTO THE NIGHT

This poem begins with trampling through the underbrush
of a broadleaf forest in rural Pennsylvania while your brother

darts ahead to look for deer tracks. You are looking
for the perfect walking stick; you pick up suitable candidates;

run your hand over the smooth, tapered wood
of a junberry tree. This is the scene where the poem

begins, though it is always beginning; it is always
a russet dusk in rural Pennsylvania when you wander

away from the house & your mother's rough palms
sliding a sponge over the dishes. When you step into the cool

rising lung of the night in search of this stick, your brother
calls to you. He gestures to the sky where the moon

like a silver coin is sliding up, into place. This poem begins
when you see it. When you reach up into it.

MONDAY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The eleven year-old lip synching sensation from YouTube
is beginning another number, something
by Christina Aguilera and has changed into a sequined leotard

with fringe. I want to write you a poem
you'll like as much. In opening I will say *yes* all the flights
were sold out, but it was barely summer so

I called. A bowl of candied pineapple you didn't throw
at anything, look, you planted a tree
and it grew. Listen, Cody. When I closed up your book

it felt like disaster. Dinner that month was penne with butter
sloughed over the tongue when I said *one bedroom*
but built myself an office. Title anything truthfully

to watch it shrink; *Dear distance*, you win.
I sawed off the city and called it art. Love-letter like a gunman
brandishing your name.

IF YOU AREN'T BUSY I THINK I'M ON FIRE

Cody might be right about the end of the world. If we performed an elaborate ritual to prevent it, who could say we didn't succeed? The deer live on to cause another traffic jam, white tails flaring in the sun. There is no way to disprove you are infinite. I walk into a yellow house and a calendar says 1973; the ceilings are dragging wires from room to empty room. If we ordered the total destruction of other people, would we still need other people? Sunlight coming down like a yellow tambourine of leaves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is given to the editors of the following journals, for their support of individual poems in this chapbook:

ANTI: “In the Year the Hero Becomes a Fixture of His Landscape”

Boo: A Journal of Terrific Things: “Monday Autobiography”

Dark Sky Magazine: “If You Aren’t Busy I Think I’m On Fire”

InDigest Magazine: “You Are Not Who They Wanted You To Be”

Linebreak: “In Case Of Emergency Open Your Eyes”

PANK Magazine: “Where the Hero is Always Late,” “Where the Hero Contemplates Forgiveness,” “Where the Hero is Busy Thinking About You”

Cover Art: “Lion Rabbit” by GAIA (www.gaiastreetart.com), used with the artist’s permission.

Design by Ryan Formanek

Wendy Xu is an MFA Candidate in poetry at UMass-Amherst. Her poems have appeared, or are forthcoming from *The American Poetry Journal*, *ANTI*, *CutBank*, *Drunken Boat*, *Dark Sky Magazine*, *PANK*, *InDigest*, and elsewhere. She is the co-founder and co-editor of *iO: A Journal of New American Poetry*, and curates the collaborative book-review project **READ THIS AWESOME BOOK**.

(www.wendyxupoetry.com)

a H_NGM_N portable document format chapbook
www.h-ngm-nbks.com

