

Classic Poetry Series

Christianne Balk
- poems -

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Christianne Balk(1953)

Christianne Balk is an American poet.

Life

She graduated in biology with honors from Grinnell College.

Her work has appeared in Pequod, Crazy Horse, Sulfur, The Centennial review
The Missouri Review, Sonora Review, Prairie Schooner Harper's, and The New
Yorker.

She taught at the University of British Columbia.

She lives in Seattle, Washington, with her husband and daughter.

Awards

1985 Walt Whitman Award

1994 Verna Emory Award

Alaska Council on the Arts travel grant

Birds, Converging

Sun salved, we sit on the front porch, careful
when we speak, watching the crows swagger near
the property line, dabbing – what. A nest
of grubs? Ice-wintered berries? New grass shoots?
Such purposeful pecking. They pause, sky-tipped.
Resume their work. Curious, we step close –
a starling twitches at their feet. One eye
gone, the other blinking fast, rib cage open
to the sun as the snow unravels from
our roof, soaking the lawn. Your arm touches mine
and all the words we had this morning fall
away like the empty husks piled under the feeder,
seeds cracked open by the birds, converging.

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Departure

Thousands of tiny
fists tamping the surface of the lake
flowing like a wide
river gone crazy, southeast, westnorth
letting the wind push
it around in its bed and the boat
hull hugging the shore.
What else can she do? Even the trees
agree, shaking
their crowns, throwing down their leaves as if
she were their only
child. Caught cold-footed in Magnuson
grass, trying to cut
free of the creosote-soaked pilings sunk
deep in the shallow
mud holding the water, holding her
wake for a moment,
furrow folding back over into
confusion. Cascade
gray crosscurrents! Sharp switching eddies!
Unreliable
shoals! Let the cloth argue with itself,
gasping like a child
with the air knocked out and the wind
socking the center.
Let the sail, shot-silk green and white, now
snapping, billowing
slowly draw her away from this beach
marked with broken glass, rocks
as smooth as plovers' eggs, and small
stones splashed iron red
and orange like the sky breaking open.
Let the windows ignite
flickering copper on the other side.
Let the water be
disked with silver from here to there
churning as if roiled
by the flanks of a great, gentle fish.

Lauds For St. Germaine Cousin (1579-1601)

Blessed is the One who lifts the slow sun
above this morning's raw orange edge,
who moves the ewe to nudge her birth-
stunned lamb into the flock's heat, who
leads the hen to steer her keets as soon as
they can walk into the insect-
filled, high grass, guides the owl to tear fresh
pigeon into pieces small enough
to fill the owlet's gaping bill,
and prompts the rat to lick the pup
that's not her own and take it to her side,
directs the swan to trumpet,
bob her head, and raise her wings, quivering

into a living canopy
above the nest built without hands
by those who have no hands, just wings,
wings that cannot weave but must and somehow
do, just as I twist thread from the distaff's
wild wether wool, skirted, sorted, scoured,
and drawn into bumps of roving
held awry until the sun lifts
high enough to warm these slow fingers
spinning fast and faster, dropping
the spindle like a top, whorling
fibers clockwise to pull the yarn
taut and straight, plying many into one.

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Shorthorns

Heavy-hocked, barrel-bellied,
exhaling billows of steam, they wait
while the corn, wheat, clover,
and potato fields surround us, finished
for the season. We listened to their hooves
shift. Blue tongues lick black shoulders,
impatient horns stab the ground.
Soon Father will open the gate
to where to the last crop sits
sun-softened, stem ends dark, sinking
back into the dirt. For pulling plows,
for yanking oak and hickory grubs
up by the roots, for heaving stumps,
for stopping one night on the way home
from town, for refusing even the buckled ends
of harness reins raising long welts
across their backs lathered by sweat
and rain, for allowing us to grab
their tails, for leading us like blind
children away from the wagon
perched on the edge of the swamp - - -
Father comes, opens the gate.
Bald face moves first, walking
to the biggest pumpkin, lowering
himself to his knees, placing
his broad forehead on top, using
his weight to crack the rind. Still
kneeling, he scoops the mealy flesh
into his mouth, chewing, while the other
oxen watch us, soft-jawed. Father
and I begin our dance, stomping
up and down the rows, crushing the sweet
orange spheres with our boots, and now
they all begin to feed, bending down,
rising up to gaze past the barn
where the yokes, shares, and coulters hang clean
and sharp, past the road to town
over swamps now bridged with sedge sod
tough enough to hold their weight

and the wagons, up and down, lowering
and lifting their heads, bowing to the fields.

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The Kitchen Shears Speak

This division must end.

Again I'm forced to amputate
the chicken's limb; slit the joint,
clip the heart, snip wing from back,

strip fat from flesh, separate
everything from itself. I'm used,
thrown down by unknown hands,
by cowards who can't bear to do

the constant severing. Open and close!
Open and close. I work and never tell.
Though mostly made of mouth, I have no voice,
no legs. My arms are bent, immobile

pinions gripped by strangers. I fear
the grudge things must hold.
I slice rose from bush, skin from muscle,
head from carrot, root from lettuce,

tail from fish. I break the bone.
What if they join against me,
uncouple me, throw away one-half,
or hide my slashed eye? Or worse,

what if I never die? What I fear
most is being caught, then rusted rigid,
punished like a prehistoric
bird, fossilized, and changed

into a winged lizard, trapped while clawing
air, stuck in stone with open beak.

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