Dust and Chrysanthemums

by Kenneth Pobo

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Dust & Chrysanthemums
by Kenneth Pobo
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Pineapple Glaze

An odor of ham
with a pineapple garnish--
I disappear from the table
except for my body.

Our ham, ruddy
as a bleeding armadillo.
The pineapple cuts me
in half, serves me to anyone:

my mother, deep
in a chair, her silence
a puffy cut;
my father smacks lips,
taps fingers, lids
sinking into his skull;
my sister Ella checks her
face in the knife.

Wednesday evenings--exact
as a pencil point. The meat
sogs in heavy pineapple glaze.
I tell them what I did
in school, stomach burning

until mother clears the table,
dishes sticking
to her careful fingers.

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Jennifer's Father

Me? I was never his princess,
and our farm was no fairy tale.
Trouble knew us like an address,
our meager crops about to fail.
My father had no time for time,
made me feel I was in the way,
so I befriended trees I'd climb
till I felt far enough away

from sullen looks, his Panama
hat slipping into a cornfield.
I knew how disappointed he
was, both eyes turning red as raw
meat. Drinking was his shattered shield,
and when he died, he died angry.

Jennifer, age ten, sings We're Saved Saved to Tell Others

Always this telling. Others
need to know. Need to be
clued in. Here's the map.
Follow instructions or
be lost. I'm lost,
but I keep singing about
the man from Galilee.
He's lost too. On the cross
he asked his dad why
He abandoned him.

Some dads do that,
leave at the worst time,
leave you hanging.

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Opinionated and Sophisticated

Two things you must never be,
Jennifer's mother told her--
opinionated and sophisticated.
These lead to costume jewelry,
gin, gossip. Yes,

mother,
but it's 1965.
1965!
I'm beehiving my hair.
Trouble?

You say I'll get in trouble?
Right! I'll try awfully hard--please
don't look at me that way,

St. Sebastian feeding spears
with his own flesh.

Jennifer and Mary Alice

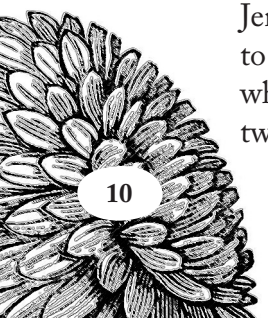
Mary Alice says Jennifer
should've married Mr. Gumm
in 51--"then you'd be happy."
Closed porch windows
on an August afternoon--
"stiff, stiff, stiff,"
says Mary Alice about joints,
ministers, amontillado.

Jennifer knows don't mention
Mary Alice's dead husband,
her three stillborns,
1947. Sometimes shade falls
between them. They drink
iced tea in Yogi Bear

glasses. Dahlias wash
against the drainpipe,

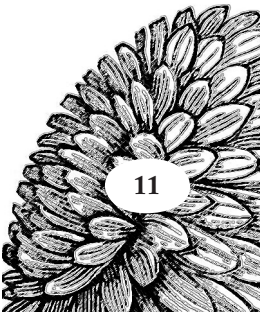
red waves. On the porch
the prairie vanishes
along a teapot's spout.
A basket

of photographs in Jennifer's lap:
two young women, arm in arm.
Jennifer shows that one
to Mary Alice
who bites a macaroon,
twists her yellow napkin.



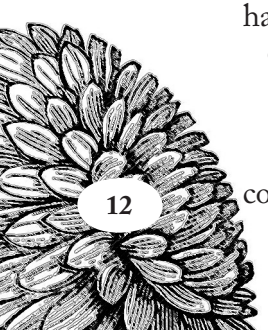
Jennifer Lovesick

you drive
up in your blue
truck
i shrink into
a violet's
eye
quiver
in the center
earth
more purple
than ever
when you come
to my door
my rug's
burning
wire
i stay
in the kitchen
read spice
jars count
eggs turn
off the kettle
which isn't
boiling you
come around
the back
call my name
let's find
some dark
corner where
we touch arms
maybe just sit
quietly cats
against crazy
pink wallpaper



Falling In

Growing up many
warned me
about walking on
pond ice even if
it looked safe
it might crack
and nobody'd
hear me
scream nobody'd
come
still so lovely
especially
in warm sunlight
especially treacherous
out I'd go
relishing ice
embedded leaves
cracks
I never
fell in
almost
wish I had
proven them right
almost wish
I'd have fallen
and had someone
jump in
after me
someone who'd fallen
hard
once before
and knew
how cold it gets
before warmth
comes again



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Jennifer at the Party

Twenty people talk for six hours—
word hurricanes blow up
to 150 mph

inland! Ready to drive home,
I know I won't sleep--
fierce chit-chat rains
against my mind, might

wash me away. I should've
evacuated when I had
the chance, but now all roads
are closed. I'm stuck,

no boards tacked up
to keep my eyes from
breaking.

Jennifer Bakes a Potato

Jennifer bakes a potato
and listens to Otis Redding.
Night taps against her shut window--

flurries blow cold as a wedding.
She sings to phony asters
on the table. Hope knows nothing,

she tells the potato. Pastors
tell us God sat down with the poor
who talked freely of disasters,

gave the Lord of Heaven a tour
of ruined rooms and cries of grief--
God, were You lost on a detour?

The poor find no relief,
yet You call yourself a King?
Yet You call us to belief?

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Spring Laundry

In winter, bunched up
in a dryer, folded
and put away, laundry gets

grumpy. Spring wind
puffs out what I hang
on the line. Fritillarias

try on red hats anemones
admire. After an hour
whirling seeds dot

my blue sheet, letters
the maple sent.
I breathe in

each piece, could almost
lick my socks,
wind's nimble fingers

stroke me. I undo clothespins,
put it all in a basket,
bury my face in fabric, sigh.

Over Dust

Tonight Jennifer's listening
to songs by Bill Anderson
and Jan Howard. Everything
seems happier. She's almost sure
her spirit resides in a steel

guitar. Harmonies make her feel
cloudy days are just hidden plums
in the sky's cellar or dark mums
sliding off the edge of August.
She decides to clean her house, must

gain a victory over dust.
The moon drops tiny azure crumbs
on her garden. Jennifer comes
outside to clean them up to just
gain a victory over dust.

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Jennifer Dances

On a magenta
tablecloth chocolate
chip cookies
and a vodka gimlet.
She pulls
the blinds,
dances in a white
slip with pink
gardenias lining
the seams. Neck
bobbing, she knocks
Consumer Reports
off the secretary.
Wind stupifies
oriental poppies,
kicks elms.
She drops
into Porter Wagoner's
blue eyes, roulette
wheel marbles,
stars.

When I Didn't

When I didn't have a garden,
I read about them,
asked friends how
theirs were doing. Now

I have a garden,
cosmos pink,
marigold orange.

Maybe Dorothy
felt this way when
her drab Kansas house
got Oz-bound,
black-and-white
dog-stealers
traded in for color
and witches who bubble

up out of nowhere. Even
at night, I see
tiny bloom wicks,
stem-riding fireflies.

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Jennifer's Dream Garden

At last, a good day to garden,
to dig a place for red blossoms
come June--oriental poppies
scream but demand no one's pardon.
I am happiest when spring comes,
reveling in my muddy knees.
In winter, I'm much too clean,
sweeping the gray but wanting green

saplings to pull the sun nearer
to themselves and to my chimney.
Today I'll gash the ground awake,
the hard black earth's foggy mirror
into which only dreams can see--
and dreams see through eternity.

Mary Alice Stung

Some call me a hornet.
I sting with my eyes.

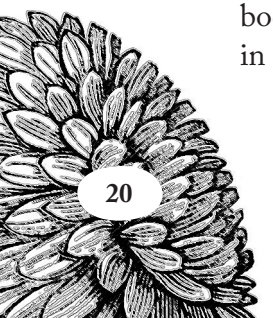
Actually, my life's a room
with a troubling buzz—
I check windows,
keep a swatter handy.

When I'm reading
the paper, a sting
corkscrews into the back
of my neck. I brush my hair
over the swollen red hill.

Later, in the garden, bees
on sedum's purple socks,
wasps in garage rafters,
yellowjackets lassooing
the picnic table.

I don't curse them,
envy their fierce flight.
Petals, wings age--

a single season
before hives rust,
body husks edged
in snow.



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Jennifer's Knees

Two dolphins swim
on a green kneepad,
Jennifer hears roots
whisper her name,

a pansy's breath against
her lashes. Planting
puts her fifty miles
from shore--nobody

can get you when you're
so far out, trusting
water to take you
where living things leap.

Jennifer Turning Green

Alex was my 80's
disco my 70's.
I've forgotten my 60's,

not because of drugs,
but because I was
"becoming quite a young

lady," Grandpa Bob said.
Alex, now a signature,
lives in Wilkes-Barre,

a loaded jogger. Each
ex-lover has a family
or a closet to come out of.

I worry about results—
another blood test,
another job interview--

I wait and wait, for a light
to change. To turn
green so I can go. Briefly.

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Deep Purple

This sunny morning I expect
turquoise morning glories
on my fence. Instead

I find a deep
purple with white
swirled in, a bloom
that defies the sun's
yellow pincers. Some

people want every morning
glory to be turquoise--

if it's not,
they yank it up,
roots and all--
my deep
purple morning

glory launches
her bloom rocket
over a closed turquoise
Canaveral--sky's

infinite panels
open at once.

B Sharp

Ben Franklins closed--
Jennifer feels like her piano
lost a key. Some music
disappears--you play
for years, know something's
missing. When a chain store
takes over, Jennifer says,
I'll never shop there!
but she does, buys
phlox flats in May, relishes
a silver grin of shovels in November.
Some nights a dream recurs:
a B sharp
chases her around
her bedroom,
a single note
hunting for a home,
her piano
calling, sheet music
in the bench
ready to go.

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Jennifer's Forgotten House Keys

My house keys,
scarlet tanagers
caught on a bramble
in a stranger's dream. I want

to get inside my house,
a heart that might defibrillate.

On the steps, I chit-chat
with this year's last purple
petunia. Sad flower,

locked out of summer.

Jennifer's Bone Trilliums

Our preacher yaps
and yaps--maybe his Lord
should've sinned.
He loves sacrifice,

but most sacrifices
are fireworks fading over
a lake. Sparks can't get us
to heaven, but they might
reveal angels in poplars

we meet on undersides
of ferns. On wet,
woodsy afternoons,
they spiral up from roots,

crawl through a green glass
window to hold me all night--
their tears, trilliums
swelling in my bones.

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Bad Hair Day

Women from well
beyond Plover come
over for
a henna rinse,
a tint,
a perm,
a pixie cut,
a pageboy,
a bob,
Meg says, bending
Jennifer's neck
back in the sink--
warm water,
white towel.
Meg pushes
her fingers into
Jennifer's kiwi head.
They move to
the chair. Meg
tucks a white
sheet around
Jennifer's shoulders,
asks how her cat
Daisy likes winter.
Fine, she replies,
ready for
stiffer curls.
For 21 years,
Jennifer's come

to Bright Lady.
Decades hum,
fluorescent fixtures.
Voila! Meg says
and Jennifer
examines herself
in the mirror,
a child seeing
a doll
in a window--arms
stick out,
gold hair, red
lips form
a silent O.

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Jennifer Middle-Aged.

Now, in middle-age
(middle? Between what?
Youth and old age?
Birth and death? Ha,
no middle to be had,

just flux) I want peace
of mind
and heart
but also of imagination--

still
leaping, slippery,
supple, that kind of peace,
but, I must confess,

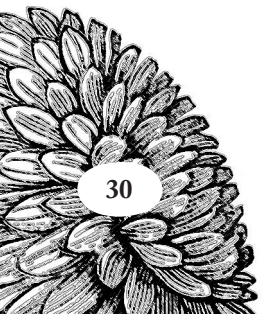
the cost scares me

Decline

In August ox-eye daisies
lose buds, yellow-centered
blossoms go brown. Each day

she cuts back four or five,
throws them behind
the azalea. In July
they wore white jump suits--
now their clothes aren't even
good nostalgia--they're rags

that soon no one
will want to pick.



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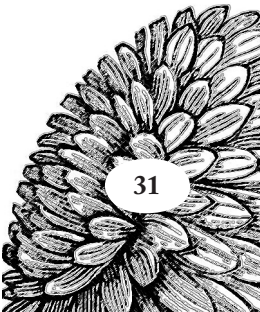
Jennifer's Chrysanthemums

October Sunday afternoons
I tell chrysanthemums
secrets. Ants, tiny walking computers,
patrol stem and underside
of bloom. My garden

gives the news: Extra, Extra,
a flower's its own
headline--with autumn here,
I watch what stays open,
what stands in winter's way.



Jennifer Scraping

All summer I wanted
winter. Now I'm
scraping ice off
the windshield.
Wiper blades stick,
frozen chunks above
each wheel,
slush-black.
The more I scrape,
the faster it fogs
over. I give up,
go inside. Spring
will clear the windows
until birds shit on them,
and there I am,
out cleaning among
sudden violets.

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Jennifer at Fifty-Six

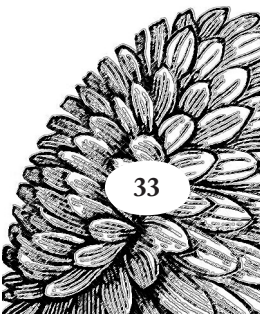
In a mauve cotton print
she bumps against furniture,
smell down each hall.
Behind shades, she locks
each lock, closes each window,
unplugs her phone,
doesn't answer the door,

tells her dishes secrets:
the chipped china
serving plate knows her better
than anyone except Mary Alice,
her oldest friend, an abacus
counting up wounds.

7:15--she drinks tea,
eats cinnamon toast.
By 7:50, hair, a hornet's nest,
her index finger scrapes
the piano for dust.

She might catch up on
game shows, yawn
when someone wins
a new car or a Barbados holiday,
but she dances for whoever wins
furniture, later beats

her rugs. Spotless, her house
is ready in case someone
should find her keeled over. They
would know this house
could have been behind
door number three all along.



Feet Falling Asleep

Mary Alice wonders why
her feet often fall asleep,
like when her cousin Rosemary
calls from Connecticut with news
about the Haband Shoes sale--
patio shoes, ten bucks.

Sometimes her feet fall
asleep during a comedian's
monologue or if she sits
in the wicker chair
sewing all afternoon.

She frets about her feet,

is loyal as a curtain,
but even Jennifer won't say
she's been sitting
for so many years--her feet
are only following orders.
Some dusk-haunted days
she looks like a girl,
face frozen as when kids
played statue maker—
she never moved
so she won, became

a human knot under
a cherry tree, petals
sailing around her,
sky confetti.

Now she can't wake
her feet. They tingle
and she hobbles out
to the kettle, stands
before the stove,

caught in her kitchen:
the Morton Salt girl,
looking out,
going nowhere.

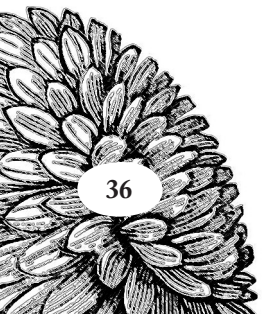
Fresh Croissants

Trust ground only--
Jennifer says.
Earth never burps
one secret. Roots lock pebble
mouths shut.

How soon
your body
goes under stone,
bone against bone.

Here in the cemetery
Jennifer breathes
easily. Ella
hates to go,
but they have tea afterwards

in wicker chairs: steaming
croissants, breath
on a cold Wisconsin morning.



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Jennifer Hears a Harpsicord

I stare at red and white
petunias--my mother's

skirt. Colors dart,
she only danced
with my dad once,
a Scott Joplin rag, loved

petunias maybe more
than us. I enter
a petunia's cave,

hear a harpsichord--music
between buds and petals.
An angel's belly moon
shines. On red

and white wool, I fall
asleep, dream, dance.

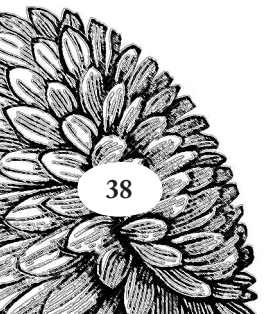
Jennifer on a Quiet Night

My mother left me
these gems on my neck.
Save them, old women
said. I dance in
their ruby light.

At 75 I dance more
than I did half
a century before
I became a skinful
of calendars.

So many say,
Jenny, be careful.
Careful breaks the branch.

An apple tree, I flirt with rain,
swing green leaves--
buds swell. I'm almost
ready to open.



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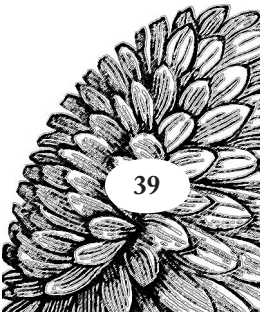
Jennifer's Tendrils

Brian says, "Aunt Jennifer,
you're only 78. You could
still travel to Oslo and meet
a handsome man." At 14 he

hates caution. I'm always
cautious. I blame the 1930s,
a burning house, me

trapped inside. Decades grew
kudzu fast, covered
my life. Now I barely open
the door. New tendrils

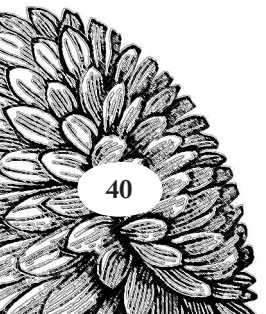
squeeze my windows shut.
Each year I come
a little closer to roots.



Jennifer Inside

the house a passion flower,
a red star,
blooms in the blue glass pot—

the end of another year,
red against silver frost
on the window.



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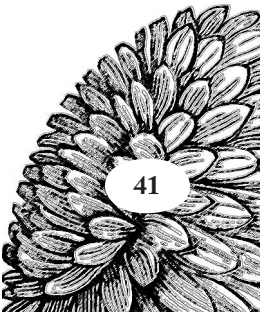
Of Course Life Is

Of course life is
suffering--some monks
learn how to laugh
from some deep place
inside a hibiscus
or depths of moonlight
on a cat's ear. Silence
nabs me. Let it breathe
through my skin, teach
the ways of balsam.



Waiting

She spent decades
waiting, feeling stood up.
But no, she thought,

I'm not expecting anybody.

Paramedics found her stiff and still,
a broken glass at her feet.
A stroke.
Arrangements waited

for phone numbers to awaken
in her desk's black book--
the spinster aunt scratched off
Christmas card lists. A nephew

distributed her things
to the local thrift shop, sped
forms through courts, got her buried.

When he returned to his family,
he said, She didn't leave us a thing.

But for her, waiting became grass
ice, birds, and damp. Waiting
for her company, Earth
welcomed her with violas.

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A Wake Asleep

I didn't know Jennifer's
last name. In the morning
she waved when she walked
her basset and I got in
my car for work. Her rusted
metal pipe smile
looked like it soon would
burst. When it did, she died.
I went to her wake because
Friends got pre-empted.
"She looks like she's asleep,"
a red mouth said as I walked
up to the box.
A cosmetician had erased
the smile. Her lips,
a line in the sand daring us
to step over. We had already
taken her dare just by being born.

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Kenneth Pobo has seven full-length books and twenty chapbooks published. His work appears in: The Fiddlehead, Grain, Mudfish, Hawaii Review, Caesura, and elsewhere. Catch him on Saturday nights on widecast doing his Internet radio show called Obscure Oldies. Things he loves: the garden, northern Wisconsin, owls and loons, Tommy James and the Shondells, and his favorite lyric poem "Binsey Poplars" by Gerard Manley Hopkins.