

CHECK-IN POEMS BY ELIZABETH SKURNICK



CHECK-IN

Winner, 2004 Caketrain Chapbook Competition

Jim Daniels, Judge

CHECK-IN

POEMS BY **ELIZABETH SKURNICK**

Expanded Second Edition

With an Introduction by Maureen McLane

CAKETRAIN
[a journal and press]

CAKETRAIN

[a journal and press]

Box 82588, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15218

www.caketrain.org

caketrainjournal@hotmail.com

© 2005, 2008 Elizabeth Skurnick.

Cover photograph © 2008 Eliot Shepard. Used by permission.

Printed on acid-free paper in Kearney, Nebraska, by Morris Publishing.

Check It Out

They snap shut with the satisfying click of the sleekest compact; they break open like perfectly shivered glass; they diagnose and recompose the heart's and mind's movements with a clinical yet sensual precision: these are Elizabeth Skurnick's poems. Imagine Barbara Stanwyck wisecracking her way into a 21st-century noir tableau; imagine Robert Browning revived in the form of a code-switching American heroine, her monologues polished, gleaming, and useful as an icepick. Here we are all Special Victims about to check in to the Special Victims Unit of the Heart's Police.

In a hypermediated world that prizes a cheap knowingness, these poems are actually, not aspirationally, sophisticated. They are unembarrassed about their precise brilliances; they know you are a grownup and they pay you that respect. Their range of reference and their formal virtuosity are dazzling but always anchored in a feeling, scrutinizing sensibility. The red pulps of the body and the mess of experience probed by the white heat of the sensuous intellect: these are Skurnick's poems, "small machines made of words," to invoke William Carlos Williams. Fasten your seat belts!

Check-In

Check-In.....	1 5
Observations	1 7
My Husband is the Husband of Five Other Women.....	1 8
My Husband is a State Trooper.....	1 9
My Husband is a Broker at Bear, Stearns.....	2 0
My Husband is a Dermatologist	2 1
My Husband Was a Spokesman for the President	2 2
My Husband is a Homosexual	2 3
Mt. Desert Island	2 4
Grand Central, Track 2 3.....	2 6
Tyringham, 1998	2 8
Last Rites	3 0
Angel Eyes	3 2
Two Women	3 4
Villanelle Noir	3 6
Six Men Sestina.....	3 8
Tenants	4 1
The Heart	4 3
Morning Song.....	4 5
Medusa in Oregon.....	4 9
Persephone in Hades.....	5 0
Wild Kingdom	5 3
Chastity in Gomorrah.....	5 6
Numbers	5 7
Inside, Out.....	5 9
Fourteen Poems from <i>Bit Parts</i>	6 3

Check-In

I'm just calling to check in.
Do I still have to check in?
Maybe this time I'll scoot past the manager,
Slip a five to the Dick
In the phone booth,
Stick a fat book in the fire door.

Or I'll sign a lease on a six-room apartment.
I'll buy a house that overlooks the Hudson.
Mort and the guys
Are coming over Tuesday
To pour a foundation for the outdoor patio.
Better watch your step.

I've been missing you all of these hours.
My love for you is red-hot.
That span between "Hey" and "Good-
Bye" was an elm tree
Burned to an ash-heap,
A sign blinking open and opening.

My love for you is the hotel register
Opened to the thirtieth page
Swimming with brown and blue ink.
My love for you is an overheated pool
And a swollen movie magazine.
My love for you is five o'clock in the morning.

My love for you is five o'clock
In the morning, two sheets
Of paper crumpled at the bottom of the can.
Someone left a bathing suit on the hook.
The air conditioner is turned up to high.
A car is pulling away from a door left wide open.

Observations

When Kathy leaned over, a pale puff of powder escaped from her bosom.
Juliet smiled and her entire face dimpled, the knees of a hovering cherub.
Nancy's legs crossed at the knee. She wore chinos—a white suit,
one occasion.

Louise had the doved, pink pout of a Modigliani.

Joan bent in, crooked, at the knees. She carried her lacrosse stick with
her always—swinging, walking.

When Katherine was pregnant, you felt that you were looking
at her underwater.

Micki was short and stocky; her girlfriend lean, almond-eyed. They
escaped in a jeep to eat Flurries at Friendly's.

Mags you barely knew. Black-bikini'd, she was French-cut, chlorine—
a streak in the knuckle-shaped swimming pool.

You wore your mother's suit, a handful of lotion on your nicks
and calluses.

—And what did they see when they saw you? And who?

*My Husband is the Husband
of Five Other Women*

Joy is the Mary Kay rep among us—

A redhead with a devoted following.

We are the ones that have followed:

Meta, the painter, and Belle, Basia, Anika

And I—all, like myself, stalled mid-degree.

I met my husband in a cafeteria.

He was standing amidst November's

Pies, bewildered by pecan and pumpkin and coconut.

Americans do not understand marriage,

I was told by an Iranian cabbie. I am the sixth wife

Of a sultan, I declared, waving my glittering fingers.

It was never like they say it is, except once.

Meta and Belle became consumed with Tariq.

Anika and Joy stumbled onto the chaise lounge,

Lay in the curve of its bold appliqué—

Red and indigo halves of one discrete being.

I focus on Basia's underthings, picking them off

One by one—yes, exactly like the petals of a flower.

My Husband is a State Trooper

Because of a sideways shadow, the man in the car

 Behind me looks as if he has a crease for a head.

I know it is difficult to suspend judgment.

 I not only suspend judgment, but suspend

Myself in the bargain, wrung out as surely

 As the dishrag over the dripping faucet.

My days are filled with places to be.

 In the A.M. it is the kitchen. In the P.M. it is the kitchen

Too, but in between are the plastic aisles, silent, the gleaming

 Blacktop, the digitized display mounting higher and higher

As it counts off abandoned calories. My day, in this respect,

 Resembles my husband's, but I wish the numbers

To erase me completely. My husband wishes to become

 The man behind me in the car, slowing to evade

The ruby digits—not one who waits, each passage

 Glowing on his passive face. That his skin were a cage,

And I his keeper—holding the key to zip him up solemnly

 By day, and in the evening unzip him again.

Mt. Desert Island

I had an experiment to gauge the pitch of snails humming.
My love was Ricky: marine biologist, mole on right cheek.
His girlfriend ran every morning.
The Iranian and I argued in the minivan
And I told the lesbian, "I'm not a lesbian.
A woman's leg is art." She was Republican;
I drank Chablis in her 4 × 6 room.
I was fourteen. One of the girls
Had 1600s on her S.A.T.'s;
Another 800 in math. They weighed
Us one by one—"You'll need a large"—
And I was in love with the suit.
I was in love with the waves
And the motorboat's hum. On a visit
My father took me for nouvelle cuisine.
My duck was aged: "That's not enough."
The beige, fin-de-siecle suit
From the corner antique's:
"You've got enough already."
We caught dogfish. We dissected

Dogfish. We caught snails
While crabs scuttled in their tidal pools.
Madame, I would like to fuck you. No matter.
I am abhorred by a Canuck, embraced
By a Canadienne. I slept watching the shore,
Waiting for the Dramamine to kick in.
I could not train my eyes on the horizon.
They took us Mt. Snow
To see the constellations,
Where the Iranian
Biked every Sunday.
I lay with the lesbian
(a mystical experience)
And she told me the sequence:
Girls' Hockey, split tendon.
Was she really a lesbian?
When we traced summer graves
Out on Cranberry Island
The red spread like wine
On the dark, sleeping waves.

Grand Central, Track 23

I forgot to tell you it's almost time to go.
The sun has distilled its particular worn essence
And the glittering trout is flipped on the bow.

A man asks me what time it is. I don't know.
I have emptied my purse and wept in the presence
Of onlookers. I forgot to remember to go

Before eleven, when the steely arrow
Shot swimming to its underneath, tense
As a stream of salmon in reverse below

The laureled, relentless clocks. The sceptered row
Of columns dreams one o'clock, immense,
Inviolable. What time is it? I don't know.

This story concerns the night I tried to go—
Though many times I flopped into the silence
Of orange plastic seating like trout onto the bow

Of a lonely ship, and felt my breathing slow.
The frail, retreating stand of columns prevents
The clocks from telling me time and again to go.
At my feet, a glittering trout swims past the bow.

Two Women

The woman without
graces has a husband.
She has Volvo, sons
of three heights,
a club foot, glasses.
In fact she has several
pairs of glasses she's
purchased at Sears
of the half-moon variety.
Time, the woman knows,
is her worst enemy.
Dinners bisect Mendelsohn
and Metternich.
The sweater unravels
further each washing.
The hair refuses
to be smoothed.
The daughter holds
damp arms around her neck,
damp cheek to damp cheek,
at the shallow end of the pool.

The woman with graces
is thin stuff, thin stuff.
Thin are the arms emerging
from the cashmere shell.
Thin are the legs beneath
the linen sheath,
hard and knotty as pine.
Thin is the kid wrapping
each teetering anklet.
Thin are the letters from lovers.
Time, the woman knows,
is her worst enemy:
the buzzing cocktail phone
and the showered skull
emerging from its tiled chamber.
A whiff of ambrosial
compact and cleanser
between her and herself:
reams and reams of thin stuff,
an invisible knitting.

from *Bit Parts*

Ring.....	65
Rake	66
Bill.....	67
Something New.....	68
Ghazal (Morning)	70
Ghazal (Afternoon)	71
Ghazal (Evening)	72
Intersection	73
But Wait, There's More	74
Choose Your Preferences	76
Hi-Tech Hotel.....	77
You Could Marry Anyone.....	78
Back to Bed.....	79
You and Rick Ocasek.....	81

Ring

It's foolish to say I hear bells,
but I think that's the name—
“Bells” (“Bells 2”?)—playing
the day I met you, informing
the world that you're mine,
you'll come when I call, your
heart lit to the ceiling, loopy
with feeling—a brilliant cut
snapped open, snapped shut
in full circle, trilling, you
want me to answer. I do.

Something New

Not light as you'd know it
But pale creeping blue,
Membrane sheathing bone

Or the peel of an egg
With its heart thrumming beneath.
More a starter engine for light.

If there were bones, they were polished bone,
But what is the bone that flowers?
What is the rib that breathes as you sleep?

I am always walking among the flowers.
I turn the wheelbarrow of dirt
And it grows a thousand fingers.

Now it is merry with something like hair.
I am something that splits, too—
A trod that shakes the ground.

Walk among the furrows.

I call you so on

and such as and so on.

You will call them as you like,

That speechless pinwheel crowd

Trained at you, below,

Slowing in some kind of drink.

Stand up. Look alive.

Stand up.

Grasp for purchase.

You with the stuttering

Heart, gasp for purchase.

That's the sign.

Something else I've made

By mistake and not by design.

Choose Your Preferences

The catch is that you can't.
Scrabbled down to bedrock
That sunblanched

Array—narcoleptic tree
Beside the dust-kicked barn,
Stiffened scrub-brush crabgrass

And the dusty paths, rusted
Shovel tangled in a line
That laps the bright horizon.

Against the sun, one antique user set
Forty miles from any living thing
In a backlit ring. And with its

Descant hum, information
Gathering, one bright cloud
Primed to thunder over.

Hi-Tech Hotel

Valencia, Spain

Laptops in the lobby
And a spangle-steel

Frieze on an angle:
It is. Conceptual,

Your hotel. Intellectual.
I can't figure the knobs

In the shower or why
Cut-glass divide is the style.

I need doors. Privacy.
Performance anxiety,

You've said. The nightstand
has programmable light

For the bed. And four feet.
Dirty feet, spread on that white.

Acknowledgements

Barrow Street: “My Husband is the Husband of Five Other Women,” “My Husband is a Broker at Bear, Stearns”; *The Delta Review*: “Two Women”; *The Iowa Review*: “My Husband is a State Trooper,” “My Husband is a Dermatologist,” “My Husband Was a Spokesman for the President”; *The Ledge*: “Six Men Sestina”; *The Melic Review*: “Chastity in Gomorrah,” “Persephone In Hades”; *New Haven Review*: “Rake,” “Ring,” “Bill,” “Choose Your Preferences,” “Wait, There’s More,” “Ghazal (Morning),” “Ghazal (Evening),” “Ghazal (Afternoon),” “Hi-Tech Hotel”; *The Pinch*: “Something New”; *Shade*: “Grand Central, Track 23,” “Mt. Desert Island,” “Tyringham, 1998,” “Wild Kingdom,” “Tenants,” “Angel Eyes,” “Check-In.”

Elizabeth Skurnick's poetry has appeared in the *Iowa Review*, *Barrow Street*, *The New Haven Review*, *The Pinch*, the *Delta Review*, and the anthology *Shade* (Four Way Books, 2004). Her light verse has been featured in the Vintage book *Best of the Blogs*, on *New York* magazine online, and on NPR's *Weekend Edition*. She is the recipient of fellowships from Yaddo, Ucross, the VCCA, Blue Mountain, and the AWP Summer Seminars and Sewanee writing conference. "Grand Central, Track 23" was recently chosen for the Poetry Foundation's Poetry Everywhere series. A book of essays on young adult fiction, *Shelf Discovery*, will be published by HarperCollins in 2009.

POETRY \$8 US

“Brilliant, compassionate, gorgeous and deeply funny, Lizzie Skurnick’s poems are concerned with what it means to be a human, and a woman, at the awkward beginning of the 21st century. The spun ‘T’ of Skurnick’s poems—from the bored wife of a dermatologist, to a slick-talking private eye, to the wisecracking heart—is one smart cookie, who observes the world brutally, and with love.”

Eliza Griswold, author of *Wideawake Field*

“Elizabeth Skurnick writes like Tom Waits trapped inside the body of a desperate housewife. Full of wry humor and libidinous musings, the poems in *Check-In* are both sharp and sly.”

John Lewis, *Baltimore Magazine*

“They snap shut with the satisfying click of the sleekest compact; they break open like perfectly shattered glass; they diagnose and recompose the heart’s and mind’s movements with a clinical yet sensual precision: these are Elizabeth Skurnick’s poems. Pivoting between the masks of comedienne and tragedienne, Skurnick veers smartly between the ludic and the abyssal. This is erotically alert, urbane work, perfectly at home—which is to say, perfectly uncomfortable—in the ‘no-places’ of our times.”

Maureen N. McLane, author of *Same Life*

Check-In was the winning manuscript in the 2004 Caketrain Chapbook Competition, as judged by Jim Daniels.

CAKETRAIN

Box 82588, Pittsburgh, PA 15218

Contact: caketrainjournal@hotmail.com / www.caketrain.org

Cover photograph by Eliot Shepard