

Waving Mustard in Surrender

poems by

Al Ortolani

NY
Q Books™

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
New York, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
P. O. Box 2015
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10113

www.nyq.org

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First Edition

Set in New Baskerville

Layout by Raymond P. Hammond
Cover Design by Christina Sinibaldi

Cover Illustration: "Surrender" by Jacque Forsher | www.jacqueforsher.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014915666

ISBN: 978-1-935520-99-3

Contents

I. Cussing Bill Mazerowski

- Kisser / 15
Suicide Squeeze / 16
Soaring Fins / 17
Brothers / 18
Eliot Ness Pisses on Crime / 19
Highway Signs Are Painted Green / 20
Hitching by Night across New Mexico / 21
Another Tornado Warning / 22
Playing Mafia Wars on Library Computers / 23
Spinning Donuts with Grandfather in His Old Ford / 24
The Second Generation Visits Vietnam / 25
Maslow's Hierarchy / 26
Wild Life in the Big City / 28
Jesus Examines the Blueprints / 29
T-Ball on the Boulevard / 30
The Velvet Revolution Reaches Kansas / 31
Touch / 32
Cataract Love Poem / 33

II. Turned Against the Sleet

- Farm Notes / 37
Winter Solstice / 38
Winter Dance / 39
Subsistence Farming / 40
Discovering Rose / 41

Auction of Small Ghosts / 42
Tacitus Silent at Last / 43
Thomas Paints a Fence / 44
Ramsey Recalls His Fear of Snakes / 45
A Mother's Omen / 46
Orion in the Sweet Gum / 47
Pick-up / 48
Tuning Her Guitar at the Safe House / 49
Bumper Sticker / 50
Digging Up the Septic Tank / 51
Applause for Widow Audubon / 52
Neighbors Don't Understand / 53
Poem for Sale / 54
Michael Hogard's Wake / 55

III. Bucket and Broom

Buddhists Call It Monkey Mind / 59
Cinderella / 60
Hansel and Gretel Get the Word on the Street / 61
Lorca Deep Fries a Turkey / 63
Change Comes to Cabbage / 64
Passage to Saturn / 65
Boys Dig Through Neighbor's Trash Only to Become Beset by
Great Mystery / 66
After Johnny's Drug Overdose, Wally Keeps His Memory Alive By
Begging Cookies at Truck Stops / 68
No Account Gordon / 71
While Taking Tickets at the Drive-In Theater, Wally Discovers the
Cost of Chivalry / 73
Teen Age Jesus / 74

Merit Badge / 75
On Christmas Morning at Mother's You Wait in Line to Use the
Bathroom / 76
Old Boy / 77
The Proper Fish / 78
Goldfish below Ice / 79
Goldfish with the Faces of Old Men / 80
Crisp / 81

IV. New Start in a Meat Wrapper

Performing the High Wire / 85
Beans from Apple Butter / 86
Union / 87
Papa's First Trumpet / 88
Studied Traffic / 89
The Only Photograph of the Boy as a Child / 90
Renting a Chicken / 91
Animals We Kept / 92
Sometimes the End is a Beginning / 93
Shoveling Snow at the High School / 94
First Night with Cyclones / 95
Dear Badass, / 96
The Gift / 97
Deep on Punt Return / 98
During Hard Times, the Boat Maker Resorts to Football Helmet
Repair / 99
Tupperware / 100
Kite String / 101
Legacy / 102

V. *Waving Mustard in Surrender*

Waving Mustard in Surrender / 105
A New Arrangement / 107
Heat Wave / 109

VI. *Wax Lips*

Seventh Grade Communication Arts / 113
Straining Tea / 114
English Class Angler / 115
The Professor Busts a Local Meth Lab / 116
Biology Lab / 117
Walking the Cemetery with a Three Year Old / 118
Listening for Bees in the Floor of the Old School House / 119
Among Bees / 120
The Teacher Canoes through 7th Hour / 121
At-Risk in Bonehead English / 122
Tough Cookies / 123
Wally Steals Oscar / 124
Bracket for Normal / 125
Birding in Squalor / 126
It's a Jungle Out There / 127
Brainwashing as Self-Help before Spring Break / 128
Three Hundred / 129
Noble Silence / 130

VII. Beyond the Bean Rows

Second Rain / 133
Canoeing in Ice Storm / 134
Hiking Richland Creek / 135
Great Blue Heron / 136
Deep Wood Koan / 137
Unlikely / 139
Secrets / 140
Reading William Stafford in a Snowstorm / 141
Fletching / 142
A History of Leaves / 143
Return / 144
Henry's Romance / 145
Hawk on the Practice Field / 146
City Council Hires a Cannon / 147
Sunday Ducks / 148
Root of the Forgotten / 149
Peas from Carrots / 150
Cat in the House / 151

Acknowledgements, Notes, Thank You, About the Author

Acknowledgements / 156
Notes / 160
Thank You / 161
About the Author / 165

Kisser

No time for self-pity
on a baseball diamond
with so many dusty
ground balls short-hopping
the infield. Sometimes
you have little more
to respond to than
a quick crack of the
bat. If for even
a second, you take
your eye off the ball,
you're flattened, the
hot shot smacking
you in the kisser,
and then, there you are
lying on your back,
alone between second
and third, adrenaline
pumping, the other
dug out cheering.
You remember Tony Kubek,
downed by a pebble,
being carried from the
field in Pittsburgh,
the fifth grade boys
crying into their gloves,
cussing Bill Mazeroski
when he kissed
the ball in the ninth.

Farm Notes

Afternoon brings early ice.
Took the stock trailer to Gilpin's
new auctioneer. Old man

Gilpin's down with gout, done
with livestock. Cut out a few head
to get through the winter.

Stopped for gas at Bo's. Shelby
walked in with Maria on his arm.
She set our boy on the counter

while she fished through her bag
for cigarette money. The boy has
mom's eyes. I can see them

clear as the photograph
on Pop's nightstand. She asked me
if I was a big-time country star, yet.

I asked her if she thought the boy
knew me. She handed Bo a five
and said probably not

I was just another
stranger to him. No words
for that. She took her change

and left. The boy watched me
all the way to the car. Shelby
nodded, followed them out,

collar turned against the sleet.
We leave for Terlingua next week.
Maybe meet the guy from

Mesa Records. Snow and ice
comes early. Won't last with the dirt
still holding October sun.

Seventh Grade Communication Arts

For 25 cents the boy throws
himself across the hallway
and slams his head against the lockers.
He uses the money to buy candy
at the PX across from school.
He shows up in my fifth hour with a bag
of red licorice, wax lips and a welt
on his forehead. He has
a twitch in his eye.
I tap his action verb worksheet.
He slides the sack in his backpack. Later,
I notice the red licorice in his lap.
He's nibbling like a rabbit.
I remind him to put up the candy.
The next time I look
he's wearing the wax lips.
I reach out my and he drops the lips
in my palm. I toss them in the trash.
Hey, he complains. How can I smile
if you trash my lips?

Cat in the House

The night after they buried her mother
she crawled into bed and pulled the quilts
up to her neck, the light left on to read.

The cold slipped in behind her, between the wall
and her back. She had her book
broken at the spine, flattened
like sleep, the page
unturned. Death
milled around the house.

She could hear it jumping
from the counter to the floor, scratching
at the base of the door, overturning
bowls, jiggling spoons
left in cups.