

## Stirring Up the Water

CAT RUIZ was awarded the Native Writer's Circle of the America's First Book award in Poetry for Stirring up the Water. Her poems have appeared in Chrysanthemum, Raven Chronicles, PoetsWest Literary Journal, Switched-on Gutenberg and in three poetry anthologies including The En'owkin Journal of First North American Peoples. She is a College English and Writing teacher and lives in Siskiyou County in northern California.



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# Stirring Up the Water

CAT RUIZ



CAMBRIDGE

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*For Joe Greer, poetry mentor and friend and for my mother  
whose love of poetry first inspired me to write.*

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>ix</i>
<b>I. Peeled Red Onions</b>	<b>1</b>
Peeled Red Onions	3
A Hawk Circled	4
Saturday Afternoon at the Fights	6
Uncle Ray Meant	8
The Calendars Were Still on April	9
Wish I Could have Saved One	11
Piano Dreams	13
The Final Days of his Dream	15
I was Told I have More Spanish Blood than I Wanted to Believe	17
Both Sides of the Border	19
<b>II. Smoke Rising</b>	<b>21</b>
Smoke Rising	23
Soft Clicking Prayers	25
The Little Birds	27
What About the Boy?	28
One Year Ago, Guernica	29
The Way to Atocha	30
I am Thinking of the Snake River Canyon Again	32
Medicine Place	33
Latitude 20, Longitude 160	35
The Orcas' Dance	36
Off Reservation Blues	37
Black Feathers	39
Under an Indian Blanket	40
A Short Collection of Poetic Stories.	40

II. Like a Lizard Blinking	42
III. How do You Wear Your Moccasins?	44
IV. Ermine Cape on a Saturday Night	46
Two Foxes, a Rabbit and an Owl	48
<b>III. Soaring</b>	49
Soaring	51
Bobby Morris and I	52
A Rope, a Rock and Me Falling	53
A Kiss	54
What Happened to Your Love Poems?	55
Fundamental Differences	56
Because I Was Not Ready For Forever	58
A Man, a Woman and a Blackbird	59
I Feel Your Essence	64
I Think You Were Mistaken	65
Those Letters	66
The Eternal Magnet of the Kingfisher	67
<b>IV. At the Edge</b>	69
From an Ancient Shard of Anasazi Pottery	71
At the Edge	72
Could it be the Hummingbird?	73
Copper Tracks	74
A Skin You Shed	75
How the Sea Breathes in the Morning	76
My Friends the Expatriates	77
Diamond Points	79
Coyote, the Trickster, Comes to the Zen Buddhist	
Monastery and I Realize His Buddha Nature	80
Mint Julep Paper Mache or the Labyrinth	
of the Swimming Pool	82

Why I Gave Jason B. an A on His Paper Even Though he Called Sherman Alexie a Hack	84
A Certain Stand of Poplar Trees	85
On a Theme of a Hot Summer Day	86
Beneath Bare Feet	87
The Seagull Let a Mournful Call	88
Each Page	89
Arrow Shoot	90
Today the Salmon	92
<b>V. These Places</b>	<b>93</b>
In Winnipeg	95
A Black Ribbon Says	97
Lone Egret	98
Take No Stone With You	99
Warm Springs	101
Morning of Hard Rain	103
Sevilla, España	104
A Tiny Group of Catholic Faithful	106
With the Seasons	107
At a Gathering of Friends	108
First Day of Spring	110
In This Simple Shelter	111
I Imagine it to be Hot and Dusty in Southern Spain	113
They Return Home	115
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>117</b>

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# I. Peeled Red Onions

## Peeled Red Onions

I'm watching the yard get swallowed  
by weeds, dandelions in full yellow growth.  
Dandelions in the form of seeds  
parachuting  
to distant corners.  
Tree branches are untested,  
and reach to fill the space.  
Bushes expand  
into themselves.  
The grass is dry, yellow and dying  
in the heat of a long, August afternoon.

Inside the house, I fit my published writing  
into another moving box.  
A box crisp and fresh that once held peeled red onions,  
twenty pounds.  
The seeds of my thoughts  
are fitted into this box,  
the dreams of what I thought I should be  
nestled deep inside.  
Should I tame them, I ask,  
those weeds  
that growth, these words,  
relegate my life to a printed page  
readers may forget on a shelf, or watch fritter down  
to nothing in a burn barrel?

## A Hawk Circled

*For Uncle Art McKay*

A hawk circled over the cemetery grounds  
after my uncle died.  
I'd chosen to stay outside the funeral home  
and remember him  
the way I'd seen him last,  
watching me depart the hospital room  
to return to my teaching,  
a wistful look in his eyes,  
but also a brave and certain look that must have been the same  
he'd worn when wounded in 1944  
as he lay on a hillside, waiting.

As morning sunlight edged over his ageless face  
I held a straw to parched lips  
with willing hands,  
and we knew it was our last  
cup of tea,  
before his breathing came in great swoops  
like the unfolding of a bellows,  
as coals turned to embers  
and I huddled beside a belief that this fire  
would not go out.

But his words,  
"I'm ready to go home,"  
words only strong believers say,  
believers in what lay beyond, made me unfold myself and stand.  
For to hold onto his dying fire  
would mean holding onto uncertainty  
and it wasn't his example to lie.

Now a hawk circles over the cemetery grounds  
where my uncle's ashes are buried  
and up high stretch two wings,  
a brave and certain look in the eyes  
that must have been the same he'd worn when wounded in 1944  
as he lay on a hillside waiting.

## Saturday Afternoon at the Fights

*Seattle, 1962*

My father watched the fights  
on Saturday afternoons.  
The fights, as in boxing, who could punch out who  
in a matter of how many rounds.

I guess it was his Chicago roots that pulled up  
by all that darting, springing and punching the sweat off brows.  
It was the only time he would sit down  
with me and a bag of peanuts  
and be nice and content  
for a period of nine rounds. He'd drop down in his chair,  
me in front on the floor,  
he'd forget all about screaming and yelling,  
telling me to stand in the corner  
for not saying "Thank you"  
loud enough for the two-faced lady down the street to hear  
when she offered me candy,  
making her gossip and my father blow up  
when he heard she'd said his family was a bunch of lazy old  
Indians  
or Mexicans  
or whatever we were,  
without any manners.

But I did like the fights.  
My father freeing peanuts from the shell with one hand  
while two men cornered each other,  
darting, springing, punching the sweat off brows  
in a roped off ring, a closed ring,  
kind of like a closed house  
which always came after.

“You kids outside!”

The doors would lock tight, inside Mum and Dad,  
their words darting and springing  
like fists.

Outside, we’d sit about the swing set in the backyard,  
keeping our long faces to ourselves,  
from the neighbors.

Me, I’d sit cross-legged on the grass,  
sink my chin in my palms  
and try to remember the taste of those peanuts,  
and all the while  
my sister would turn with the chains of her swing set seat,  
dragging one foot in the dirt  
and sing softly,  
“It’s Saturday afternoon at the fights.”

## Uncle Ray Meant

In our house  
a vodka bottle on the kitchen counter  
meant Uncle Ray was in town visiting  
and that Dad, who rarely drank, would drop the reigns  
for a few hours,  
if we were lucky, a few days.

Uncle Ray meant we could climb  
all over a ready lap,  
hear nighttime laughter, and eavesdrop on stories  
and jokes we'd repeat for days.  
Uncle Ray was fresh smelling cologne, hair slicked back like Elvis,  
evenly pressed slacks and a jacket to hang in whatever closet  
had room.  
It was waking the next morning to deep snores on the  
living room couch  
or to sneaking a peak at a dormant man's body  
cast across the downstairs cot like a sail fanned out in the wind,  
bare feet sticking out funny, black hair ruffled  
above a wool blanket until Uncle Ray finally got up at noon.  
It was Mum, all smiles, dropping bacon  
on a breakfast plate  
while Uncle Ray sat smoking  
like some sort of renegade king.

In our house  
a vodka bottle on the kitchen counter  
meant Uncle Ray was in town, visiting,  
and Uncle Ray always meant the punishment would slide  
until the vodka was stored  
and Uncle Ray hopped into his Chevrolet  
leaving us clinging to the smell of his cologne  
that wafted behind the retreat of his newly starched shirt.

# The Calendars Were Still on April

*For Dirk and Joe Greer*

The calendars were still on April  
when I went to his house in June.  
I carefully lifted the pages  
past the 15<sup>th</sup>,  
that day my old typewriter broke  
in the morning  
then his telephone call  
telling me his brother, Dirk, had died  
at three o'clock in the afternoon.

I remember he hung back for a few seconds,  
when I answered, "Hello."  
I could feel  
how hard the curtain had fallen,  
like a heavy brocade settled on the floorboards for good  
after a final drop.  
I knew he clung to the rope,  
although he couldn't pull  
the curtain up one more time and before us  
would play a continuation of his brother's world.  
Later, a glass fell from my hand  
and shattered on the kitchen floor.  
I swept up the pieces, but with consternation.  
Couldn't I get a stronger grip  
on what it was, my friend's grief?  
I thought of the ordered greenhouse  
filled with bonsai trees  
his brother, Dirk  
had sculpted even when the diabetes made his eyesight fail.  
Cedar, pine, maple trees twisted precisely  
into creations Dirk, as magician of bough and  
leaf had shaped;  
tiny limbs as elegant and practiced as a dancers.

I saw Dirk's genuine smile, holding the essence of  
a farther light, greeting me even when he lay  
prostrate in a care home.

But it didn't quite  
stick to the back of my throat,  
a brother's death  
blocking my words, his memory numbing my truth  
about life's impermanence,  
for the life of a brother  
hadn't just slipped from my hands.

Still I could steal into the pain  
two months later,  
feel the resistance, the reluctance  
to fold the calendars up from April, to May, then June.  
The warmth of morning almost camouflaged  
the pictures, the dates,  
the mistaken probability  
that nothing had happened here.  
But his brother was there in numbered days  
of an earlier month,  
for on those numbers  
was a constancy amidst the gloom.

For me the typewriter broke, the glass shattered,  
but sibling lives live on  
as does my truth  
about how it is before a telephone call  
at three o'clock in the afternoon.

## Wish I Could have Saved One

I am at the store and I'm looking at a headline,  
the headline  
a picture of five little boys, five,  
drowned in a car  
that landed at the bottom of a canal.  
Five little boys whose two mother's got out  
of a two-door steel trap and swam.  
Two mothers desperate for help  
above the water.  
I stand there looking at them,  
five boys,  
their faces floating in the murky depths,  
and I hear one of them cry and I think,  
I wish I could have saved them.  
I wish I could have dove down into that murky crypt  
to all five of their muffled screams,  
To their wide, dark eyes losing time when they saw me  
take that one boy's hand,  
maybe my boy.  
He'd have the others, a chain of too young lives on my line;  
we'd wind our way up to the surface  
like a strand of prayer beads.  
And I am remembering  
years before  
of driving to the clinic  
my hands sweating the wheel,  
the hot air coursing through the open window, my throat dry.  
How a swallow flew into my path and I hit it and started to cry.  
Then later, the doctor telling me that only my heart  
was beating  
even though I heard two.

And I'm looking at a headline,  
the headline  
a picture of five little boys, five,  
drowned in a car  
that landed at the bottom of a canal.  
And I think, maybe I could have done that. Yes, maybe  
I could have saved just one.

## Piano Dreams

The old piano  
sits alone, neglected in a dingy corner of the basement  
collecting dust, used as a catch-all  
by my blue-collar father  
because mother, who knows a piano's worth,  
won't let it go.  
Her hopes for it were much loftier  
than a basement once,  
much classier dreams of spacious upstairs rooms,  
where polite voices  
wafted like chords out an open window  
above a spacious lawn below,  
and tea poured into her special china cups,  
all the welcome ladies sipping,  
while Franny or me in soft, frilly dress  
played the piano polished and sworn  
to its good duty.

Instead the old piano's fate  
remained a basement,  
some ivories now missing,  
its tone still full,  
if a bit flat.  
Forty years without a tuning  
and the occasional absent tapping  
can't undo a decrepit state,  
or make up for music  
voided by old tin cans filled  
with nails and scraps of sandpaper  
huddled atop its surface over the years,  
its unproven melodies  
lost in endless television blare.

I can see the old piano one day  
riding off in a used furniture truck,  
each bump hitting a last true chord,  
ivories shaking loose like the fallen rubble  
of piano dreams.

## The Final Days of his Dream

He'd flown out to Newfoundland to end his life  
with deep eastern seaboard forests  
sliding sharply into steel grey  
Atlantic waters, a seascape  
to wash over his thin, ailing body, calm his crushed Metis spirit,  
a transformation  
new places can bring.  
These were the final days of his dream  
plans devised in a rest home  
on hollow Manitoba prairie afternoons,  
library books spread out before him, begging him  
to fly  
into rustic island province photographs  
where his lover once disappeared  
in a month  
that cycled past with the moon.

But the Newfoundland streets climbed  
too high for weakening legs  
and the wind, tightening its fist behind his back as he stood behind  
locked doors,  
made his frustration steep into anger. He was too tired to fight now.  
So he hid stubbornly behind the darkening shade  
of autumn  
waiting for a taxi to remove him, fast,  
to a place where he could  
still see  
the final days of a dream.

En route back to Winnipeg,  
he saw himself well,  
the virus no longer in charge,  
for his soul, like his bones never liked the Newfoundland cold.  
Although his body slept

his inner eye could see  
out the window  
past the bright October leaves  
to a road running swiftly before him,  
a river flowing home,  
a quicksilver river,  
transformed by the light of a Manitoba half-moon.

## I was Told I have More Spanish Blood than I Wanted to Believe

My dark skin is stretched over a swollen ankle  
propped on a table in the lobby of the Hotel Catedral  
while the maid cleans my room in central Mexico,  
Morelia, Michoacan,  
where not a word of English is spoken  
in the hush of Spanish preservation.

The grey stone steps are ancient, hard,  
Colonial.

Yesterday, I was told I have more Spanish blood  
than I wanted to believe.  
It must have been the curse of condemnation that turned my ankle,  
the conquering spirit that blended one high step into the lower,  
my ankle warping in the silence.

The sun shines down on the solarium roof  
making it creak.  
Spider plants bedeck the black, wrought iron fence.  
Colonial.

The heathen wouldn't have known different  
like I don't know  
except for what poured from the words of lost relatives,  
the Mexican pride in blood:  
Spain.

Each cathedral has its square of low stone walls, and benches  
where one can sit and stare at time and blood passing.  
Colonial.