

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 47

## A Field Guide to the Spirits

Poems by  
Jean LeBlanc





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*To those who haunt us,  
and to those whom we will haunt hereafter.*



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## Know Your Spirits

He never was the type to overturn a table.  
There was that time—but no, he is too much  
the gentleman to send that message, says you'll  
remember. There's another presence here,  
who could toss a chair or two, not in anger,  
simply to make us aware. Will any claim him,  
this unsettled visitor? No spirit ever says,  
*I loved you not.* For all the earthly matches  
forged in hell, every departed soul's a dear.  
Not one admits, *I am less dead now.*  
This message never comes: *Stop haunting me  
from your dark and winter world.*

## Great Interest in Our Underthings

The town's First Citizens had us stand on tables so they didn't have to strain. A close and scientific inspection, they called it. A windowless room. Great interest in our underthings. Fold upon fold of fabric in which to secrete stones, or iron, or wooden blocks. Every inch. And then went over us again. Finding naught. Greater interest still in foot and ankle, knee and. And. Hands that fumbled with. Stopped just shy of. Their faces so close to. Unconvinced, return to pocket, seam, and hem. Certain something had been overlooked. A squirm, a start, a sudden breath—little hints that they were close. Only to disappoint. *In the matter of veracity we have our doubts, but we could not disprove.* They searched and searched for secrets. We discovered theirs.

## What We Really Mean When We Say "Love"

Hate. But that's too easy. It's more than that. You got the way the rooted earth folds itself over the edge of the cliff, the cliff a good three feet farther back beneath, but that flap of sod holds on. You got the neighbor boy running down a hill and suddenly you think of the day your father died, the way you felt in that boy's posture—his of joy, yours of pain, the same thing. The coat on its hook. Buttonwood bark. The sheen on the buckets in the spring house. Go on and nod at the word "hate." But the taste of water from those buckets, it's enough to make an old man determine to see one more summer. Love means dying when the ground is froze. Love means digging that hole.

## Photographing Snowflakes

The right kind of storm, not so cold  
it's all pellets, but up near freezing,  
allowing the crystals time to grow,

spikes and spires and plates branching out  
in six directions, the desire for symmetry  
apparent, though rarely realized.

The ones that land upright—look for those,  
assuming you have eyes for something  
almost clear and tiny and easily broken.

Up near freezing, but not. They might  
last the few moments it takes to focus.  
And as for breathing, don't. Funny,

the word “ephemeral.” Just as you  
think it, it proves its point. Hold  
your breath as if the flake could hear you

getting close. Hold your breath as if you had  
discovered the secret to eternal life.  
Hold your breath as, even then, it slips away.

Katherine Wheelwright  
Nanny Naylor's Privy

*—excavated by archaeologists during the 1990s  
Central Artery Project in Boston, Massachusetts*

The biggest mystery is the bowling ball,  
a decidedly un-Puritan pastime. A lesson,  
perhaps, of what such godless pursuits  
do to one's immortal soul? Easier  
to understand the daily objects too easily  
lost from shallow pockets, or dropped  
from a string around one's waist: the keys,  
the belt buckle, the little pincushion.  
Still, the bowling ball has good company,  
what with all the mysteries down there,  
like a candle holder and pewter spoons.  
And it is a redolent topic overall,  
and makes one glad today of our privilege  
to flush, so as not, three hundred and fifty  
years from now, to be known by what  
we have left, *abem*, behind. Better to imagine  
from the hundred thousand cherry pits,  
a Boston summer, the harbor visible  
from the house back then, the sea breeze  
soothing the sleepers, full of mutton  
and fruit pie, even the child who had cried  
herself to sleep, knowing she was in for it,

having dropped her little goat-skin shoe  
down there, so sure that God would  
catch it, and give it back, now not knowing  
what to fear more: this evidence of God's  
silent wrath, or her mother's  
not-so-silent wrath to come.



## Marie, sans Pierre

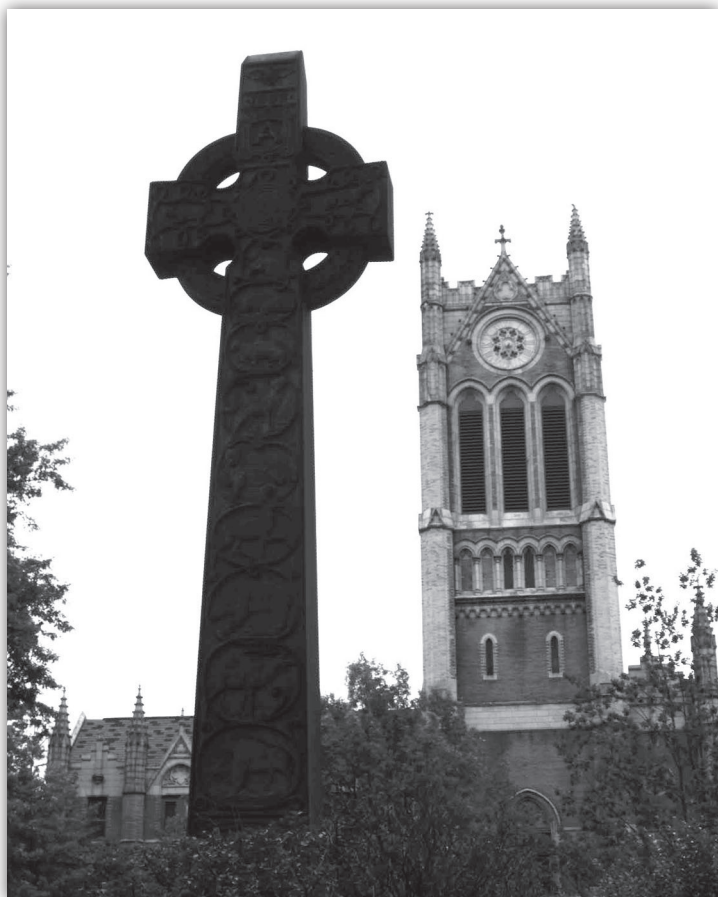
After the commotion, after the men's shouts  
and the women's screams, after the untangling  
of hooves and loosening of clothing,  
after the blood on the cobblestones,  
after the last utterance of *mon dieu*,

to stand again in the laboratory, amongst  
the familiar *accoutrement*, to see, perhaps,  
the pencil he had left on the bench, intending—  
*Non, ne pense pas, seulement travailler,*  
*travailler pour deux.*

## Last Words

*Yes, yes, Billy—you go down that side of Long Pond, and  
I'll go this side and we'll get some ducks—  
—John James Audubon's last words,  
spoken to his brother-in-law William Blakewell*

When the water was not too high, not too low,  
we could stretch out on the soft wide planks  
and watch the river light dance on the trees,  
a tunnel of trees, a dense, greenshadowed life,  
an amber sunbeam here and there, and birds, and birds,  
and insectsong, and the slow pull of the river,  
The Ohio by flat-bottomed boat, just current and hope,  
and someone would strum a banjo, and we would doze,  
too young to feel the ache in the bones, even chill nights,  
even after jumping overboard to push our floating world  
over snags and sandbars, downstream, down,  
a herd of deer swimming across, the owls on patrol,  
the freedom, the freedom from freedom, each evening  
the same last words: *Today, then, we have seen it all.*



## Hope, Hunger, Birds

*They are very much their own enemies, in this way, for no birds are greater fruit-eaters than themselves; they are even voracious feeders when they find a berry to their taste, actually destroying themselves, at times, by the numbers they swallow.*

—*Susan Fenimore Cooper, Rural Hours*

Like the cedar waxwings, so delicate-looking,  
so dapper, but oh what profligates, what gluttons  
both for bloom and for fruit, not knowing, it seems,  
when to stop, stuffing themselves on juniper  
until drunk, then flying into windows, breaking  
their necks. Like a songbird, my old heart,  
still believing it will see another spring, craving  
every tender blossom, wanting more.

When are we too old for love, I wonder?  
When do we look ridiculous, making eyes  
and sighing, feasting on hope, unaware  
that an excess of that fine feeling can,  
like fermented fruit after the first frost,  
kill us sure as grief? Does one die smiling,  
drunk on hope, one's little neck snapped in two  
against the pane? One cannot be warned off.  
It is impossible to say, "Not one more dream."  
Tell the bobolinks nesting in the meadow  
that the railroad just mapped out the right-of-way,  
and you will see them, on the morrow, gathering

long bits of grass to make some small repairs.  
Then see them in every last frantic, swooping whirl  
above the heads of the crew come with picks and shovels,  
until the meadow is no more. And what of hope?  
I must believe we carry it with us, on that final flight,  
a length of straw wrapped in our beaks, hearts bursting  
as we sing, *I shall make another, make another, make another life.*

## Automatic Writing

The first time a spirit took my hand  
and guided it across the page, even I  
was doubtful, thinking the effort  
must be mine and mine alone.  
But how to explain the presence,  
the touch, the sense that my own arm  
was, for the moment, not fully  
in my control—I was the scribe,  
while the volition came from without.  
I am pleased when a spirit  
has me pen, *Darling, I love you still.*  
Sometimes, there are the mysteries  
to solve: *Look again through*  
*all the drawers; the key you seek is there,*  
*unless it was discarded with my things.*  
Often, a note of comfort is passed:  
*We wait for you; take your time.*  
Two spirits seize me, one right, one left—  
*We are all young here*  
and the other, *.llew era eW*

## The Way To and From Forever

You are not certain, not certain at all, but sometimes it feels as if you have found it. For a moment, you and the heron share a little stretch of shoreline. You witness the first flight of a damselfly, wings newly wings. A few fish the length of your forearm pause in the shallows. There are more hints, if you wait for them, of this path you never really leave. Maybe, too, you have a friend who listens when you say such things, who holds one of your hands while you reach the other out beyond the singularity, to pull you back or fall in with you. The heron flies off, low over the water, as if challenging you to follow. You cannot. But you watch as gray-blue bird becomes gray-blue horizon, and you think, *That I can do*.

## Ptolemy Prepares to Read a Friend's Astrology

Once they know you know the stars,  
they pester and pester. I try to explain  
there are many things that shape  
the future: where they were born,  
what metal object they last touched,  
the interwoven fates of everyone  
in their household: spouse, children,  
aging parents, servants, dogs.  
Influence upon influence. Still,  
they ask me to tell them their stars.  
And so, I tell them. *Watch out*  
*for the chambermaid with watery eyes.*  
*Sell her to your enemy. The goats*  
*you receive as payment—turn them*  
*loose in the street before they overrun*  
*your yard with fleas.* Practical advice,  
words so general they go home nodding,  
glad that they have seen ahead, pleased  
the night sky is a great book, the gods  
swayable by an old man with a few charts  
and a scholar's crooked back.



## Free Will

You can get married on the balcony  
where the realish Romeo wooed  
the realish Juliet. Best not to read  
too much further into that story. If  
you're marrying in public, chances are  
your families are not consumed  
by a blood vendetta. Chances are  
the priest has not slipped anyone  
a potion to mimic death. Still,  
you'd have to be more than a little  
brave, to step out onto that balcony  
and not imagine you hear, at the end  
of the lovely vows, *Thus with a kiss I die.*

## How Else Could Kate Fox Know Your Secrets

unless the spirits themselves were spelling them out for her—for all—to hear? Even the most hardened skeptic leaves a little shaken, having heard described the way a lover touched palm to cheek, how that touch led to the most delicate of kisses—*delicate*, and then the spirit spells out *intimate*, and chairs are overturned, whether from the spirits aching with earthly desire or the no-longer-quite-so-skeptical wanting to put an end—

Kate Fox goes all translucent, as if joining the spirit world, becoming one of them, and another insists on being heard, and another, and still do you not quite believe? Your lover knew all along that you thought at first, *What funny little fingers, funny little hands*, but not long thereafter you worshipped those hands, as they found their way, found their way, found their delicate, intimate, secret way.

## To Live Like the Polypody Fern

No better companions, moss and rock,  
sun and rain. Find a place just *so*,  
the light not *too*, the shade not *very*.  
If you must be exposed, be secret.  
If you are tucked away, declare  
yourself the arbiter of green.  
Gneiss or limestone, either or.  
To have been admired by Thoreau.  
To have known what it feels like  
to unfurl. The deep quiet of woods,  
the pileated's persistent din.  
To live like that, between earth and sky.  
Sometimes the good is in the getting by.

## March Conversation

This time of year all the world's a slough.

Gone milky with mud.

A feckless fen.

Snowmelt can't sink in, liquids every field.

Wanton water seeps into every seem.

Unseemly, to be always so wet, yet cold.

The ice retreats.

Gardeners retreat, as well.

Too soon, too soon.

Cold frames fill.

Tendrils blanch and curl against false sky.

A good hard frost sows seeds of remorse.

I saw water tumbling—*tumbling*—down a hill!

First storm fills the Narrows.

Ducks in the street.

To our knees in mud, to our knees in trout.

Your father say that?

Grandfather.

Bless his sodden heart.

