

Classic Poetry Series

Claudia Emerson
- poems -

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Claudia Emerson(13 January 1957)

Claudia Emerson was an American poet who won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her collection *Late Wife*.

Background

Emerson attended Chatham Hall, the University of Virginia (English, 1979) and completed a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, 1991 at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Emerson is a professor of English, and Arrington Distinguished Chair in Poetry at the University of Mary Washington, in Fredericksburg, Virginia. She is a contributing editor of the literary magazine *Shenandoah*. On August 26, 2008, she was appointed Poet Laureate of Virginia, 2008 - 2010, by Governor Timothy M. Kaine.

Emerson's work has been included in such anthologies as *Yellow Shoe Poets*, *The Made Thing*, *Strongly Spent: 50 Years of Shenandoah Poetry* (*Shenandoah*, 2003), and *Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets of Virginia*, (University of Virginia Press, 2003).

Emerson lives in Fredericksburg, Virginia with her husband, Kent Ippolito, a musician who plays with various types of bands, including bluegrass, rock, folk, jazz, blues and ragtime. The couple were married in 2000 and together write songs and perform. Emerson was Guest Editor of *Visions-International* (published by Black Buzzard Press) in 2002.

Honors

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs Intro Award, 1991

Academy of American Poets Prize, 1991

National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, 1994 (As Claudia Emerson Andrews)

Virginia Commission for the Arts Individual Artist Fellowship, 1995 and 2002

University of Mary Washington Alumni Association Outstanding Young Faculty Award, 2003

Witter Bynner Fellowship from Library of Congress, 2005

Poet Laureate of Virginia 2008 - 2010

Library of Virginia Virginia Women in History, 2009

Guggenheim Fellowship, 2011

After The Affair

There was no one to tell, so it settled
in the lines of the house, in doorframes, ceilings, sills.

In the late afternoons that followed, she heard
what could have been someone knocking; a cardinal

beat its body against the living room window
as though desperate to come inside.

It could not see the space beyond the glass,
or know that it had been deceived again

into mistaking itself for something else. At dusk,
when the windows' slow reversal released

the bird, turning instead to her own face, unfamiliar,
terrible, she also knew the same desire

to fly into that room, that house, some other woman.

Claudia Emerson

Aftermath

I think by now it is time for the second cutting.
I imagine the field, the one above the last

house we rented, has lain in convalescence
long enough. The hawk has taken back the air

above new grass, and the doe again can hide
her young. I can tell you now I crossed

that field, weeks before the first pass of the blade,
through grass and briars, fog — the night itself

to my thighs, my skirt pulled up that high.
I came to what had been our house and stood outside.

I saw her in it. She reminded me of me —
with her hair black and long as mine had been —

as she moved in and then away from the sharp
frame the window made of the darkness.

I confess that last house was the coldest
I kept. In it, I became formless as fog, crossing

the walls, formless as your breath as it rose
from your mouth to disappear in the air above you.

You see, aftermath is easier, opening
again the wound along its numb scar; it is the sentence

spoken the second time — truer, perhaps,
with the blunt edge of a practiced tongue.

Claudia Emerson

Animal Funerals, 1964

That summer, we did not simply walk through
the valley of the shadow of death; we set up camp there,

orchestrating funerals for the anonymous,
found dead: a drowned mole—its small, naked palms

still pink—a crushed box turtle, green snake, even
a lowly toad. The last and most elaborate

of the burials was for a common jay,
identifiable but light and dry,

its eyes vacant orbits. We built a delicate
lichgate of willow fronds, supple, green—laced

through with chains of clover. Straggling congregation,
we recited what we could of the psalm

about green pastures as we lowered the shoebox
and its wilted pall of dandelions into the shallow

grave one of us had dug with a serving spoon.
That afternoon, just before September and school,

when we would again become children, and blind
to all but the blackboard's chalky lessons, the back

of someone's head, and what was, for a while longer,
the rarer, human death—there, in the heat-shimmered

trees, in the matted grasses where we stood,
even in the slant of humid shade—

we heard wingbeat, slither, buzz, and birdsong—
a green racket rising to fall as though

in a joyous dirge that was real,
and not part of our many, necessary rehearsals

Artifact

For three years you lived in your house
just as it was before she died: your wedding
portrait on the mantel, her clothes hanging
in the closet, her hair still in the brush.
You have told me you gave it all away
then, sold the house, keeping only the confirmation
cross she wore, her name in cursive chased
on the gold underside, your ring in the same

box, those photographs you still avoid,
and the quilt you spread on your borrowed bedâ€”
small things. Months after we met, you told me she had
made it, after we had slept already beneath its loft
and thinning, raveled pattern, as though beneath
her shadow, moving with us, that dark, that soft.

Claudia Emerson

Beginning Sculpture: The Subtractive Method

The girls sit before the assignment—identical
blocks of salt—and from tall, precarious stools,

look down into blank planes of possibility. In the end,
though, the only choice is to carve something

smaller. So they begin. Rough chunks like hail
fall before the rasps and chisels' beveled

edges. Salt permeates this air as it has
for years, the floor gritty, their hands, eyes,

even the skylights made opaque with it—
disappearing not unlike the way it is

subtracted from similar blocks, in the fields,
before the tongues of the horses.

Claudia Emerson

Bone

It was first dark when the plow turned it up.
Unsown, it came fleshless, mud-ruddled, nothing
but itself, the tendon's bored eye threading
a ponderous needle. And yet the pocked fist
of one end dared what was undone
in the strewing, defied the mouth of the hound
that dropped it.

The whippoorwill began
again its dusk-borne mourning. I had never
seen what urgent wing disembodied
the voice, would fail to recognize its broken
shell or shadow or its feathers strewn
before me. As if afraid of forgetting,
it repeated itself, mindlessly certain.

Here.

I threw the bone toward that incessant claiming,
and watched it turned by rote, end over end over end.

Claudia Emerson

Breaking Up The House

Every time I go back home, my mother
tells me I should begin to think now about what I will and will not want - before
something happens and I have to. Each time

I refuse, as though somehow this is an argument we're having. After all, she and
my father are still keeping the house they've kept for half a century.
But I do know why she insists. She has

already done a harder thing than I will
have to do. She was only eighteen -
her mother and father both dead - when it fell to her to break up the house,
reduce

familiar rooms to a last order, a world
boxed and sealed. And while I know she would, she cannot keep me from the
house emptied but for the pale ovals and rectangles

still nailed fast - cleaved to the walls where mirrors, portraits had hung -
persistent, sourceless shadows.

Claudia Emerson

Buying The Painted Turtle

Two boys, not quite men, pretended to let it go only to catch it again and again. And the turtle, equally determined, each time gave its heart to escape them. We were near the base of the old dam where the river became a translucent, hissing wall, fixed in falling, where, by the size of it, the turtle had long trusted its defense, the streaming

algae, green, black, red - the garden of its spine- not to fail it. They held it upside down, the yellow plastron exposed; they hoisted it over their heads like a trophy. I left it to you to do the bargaining, exchange the money for us to save it, let it go;

fast, it disappeared into deeper water, returning to another present, where the boulders cut the current to cast safer shadows of motionlessness. We were already forgotten, then, like most gods after floods recede, after fevers break.

We did not talk about what we had bought - an hour, an afternoon, a later death, worth whatever we had to give for it.

Claudia Emerson

Ephemeris

The household sells in a morning, but when
they cannot let the house itself go for
the near-nothing it brings at auction,
the children, all beyond their middle years,
carry her back to it, the mortgage now
a dead pledge of patience. Almost emptied,
there is little evidence that she ever
lived in it: a rented hospital bed
in the kitchen where the breakfast table
stood, a borrowed coffee pot, chair,
a cot for the daughter she knows, and then does not.
But the world seems almost right, the near-
familiar curtainless windows, the room
neat, shadow-severed, her body's thinness,
like her gown's, a comfort now. Perhaps
she thinks it death and the place a lesser
heaven, the hereafter a bed, the night
to herself, rain percussive in the gutters—
enough. But like hers, the light sleep of spring
has worsened—forsythia blooming

in what should be deep winter outside
the window—until it resembles the shallow
sleep of a house with a newborn in it,
a middle child she never saw, a boy
who lived not one whole day (an afternoon?
an evening?) sixty years ago in late
August. And as though born without a mouth,
like a summer moth, he never suckled
and was buried without a name. She had waked to that—
that cusp of summer, crape myrtles' clotted
blooms languishing, anemic, the cicadas
exuberant as they have always been
in their clumsy dying.

This middle-born
is now the nearer, no, the only child.
The undertaker's wife has not bathed
and dressed him; the first day's night instead
has passed, quickening into another
day, and another, and he is again awake,
his fist gripping a spindle of turned light,

and he is ravenous in his cradle of air.

Claudia Emerson

Fire Drill

Bells sound them from sleep, and their imaginations
rise, recite all they have been told: the curtains

of fire, the beds, nightgowns, their hair, their hair.
They've practiced this escape before

and know to close the windows last, descend
the darkened flights of stairs in practiced wordlessness

to line up, barefoot, on the dew-wet lawn,
face the building, pretend to watch it burn.

Claudia Emerson

Frame: An Epistle

Most of the things you made for me—blanket-chest, lapdesk, the armless rocker—I gave away to friends who could use them and not be reminded of the hours lost there, not having been witness to those designs, the tedious finishes. But I did keep the mirror, perhaps because like all mirrors, most of these years it has been invisible, part of the wall, or defined by reflection—safe—because reflection, after all, does change. I hung it here in the front, dark hallway of this house you will never see, so that it might magnify the meager light, become a lesser, backward window. No one pauses long before it. But this morning, as I put on my overcoat, then straightened my hair, I saw outside my face its frame you made for me, admiring for the first time the way the cherry you cut and planed yourself had darkened, just as you said it would.

Claudia Emerson

Funny Valentine

She had been a late and only child to parents
already old and set; none of us had ever

wanted to go inside that hushed house
and play with her, her room too neat, doll-crowded.

We did encourage her later, though, to enter
the high school talent contest—after we'd heard

her singing My Funny Valentine in a stall
in the girls' bathroom, reckoning the boys

would laugh, perhaps find us even prettier
in comparison. Still, we would not have predicted

those wisteria-scaled walls, the one room
we could see from the street with its windows

open year round so that greening vines entered
and birds flew in and out—bad luck, we thought,

bad luck. By then we were members of the ladies'
garden club, the condition of her house

and what had been its garden a monthly
refreshment of disappointment, the most

delectable complaint her parents' last
Coup de Ville sinking in tangled orchard grass

and filled to the roof—plush front seat and rear—
with paperbacks, fat, redundant romances

she had not quite thrown away—laughable,
we laughed, unphotographable—with wild restraint.

Claudia Emerson

Homecoming

The camera is trained on the door, no one
in the frame, only the dog sleeping. And then
finally, I see this was to surprise you,
filming your arrival, the dog's delight. Only now,
six years distant, can this seem scripted, meant:
the long, blank minutes she waited, absent
but there — behind the lens — as though she directs
me to notice the motion of her chest
in the rise and fall of the frame, and hear

to understand the one cough, nothing, the clearing
of her throat. Then, at last, you come home
to look into the camera she holds,
and past her into me — invisible, unimagined
other who joins her in seeing through our
transience the lasting of desire.

Claudia Emerson

Orchid Anatomy

This evening's study the anatomy of the orchid,
the greenhouse glows—jut of glass at the third story

of the science building—a small, tended jungle
thriving in its humid room. Wearing identical

lab aprons, they lean over the misting table
or peer into the daintier air-orchids

in order to name and sketch the parts,
committing to memory the sepals, inner whorl

of petals, the column where male and female
fuse, and the sticky, stigmatic surface

of the pouting lip where birds, moths,
and bees would land if allowed this sterile

world. Each wall even the vaulted roof
a canvas, all their breathing dissolves

into the ordered atmosphere of this
one, sustained season—until, if seen

from the outside, the glass's weeping would
render them recognizable but changed,

their bodies, braids, aprons, the green leaves running
into a pleasing, impressionistic bleed.

Claudia Emerson

Photographer

It began with the first baby, the house
disappearing threshold by threshold, rooms

milky above the floor only her heel,
the ball of her foot perceived. The one thing real

was the crying; it had a low ceiling
she ducked beneath—but unscalable walls.

Then she found with the second child
a safer room in the camera obscura, handheld,

her eye to them a petaled aperture,
her voice inside the darkcloth muffled

as when they first learned it. Here, too, she steadied,
stilled them in black and white, grayscaled the beestung

eye, the urine-wet bedsheet, vomit, pox,
pout, fever, measles, stitches fresh-black,

bloody nose—the expected shared mishap
and redundant disease. In the evenings

while they slept, she developed the day's film
or printed in the quiet darkroom, their images

under the enlarger, awash in the stopbath,
or hanging from the line to dry. Sometimes

she manipulated their nakedness, blonde hair
and bodies dodged whiter in a mountain stream

she burned dark, thick as crude oil or tar. The children's
expressions fixed in remedial reversals,

she sleeved and catalogued them, her desire,
after all, not so different from any other mother's.

Piano Fire

How she must have dreaded us and our sweaty coins, more
than we hated practice, the lessons, scales, the winter-hot parlor,

her arthritic hands, the metronome's awful tick. She lectured
to us about the history of the piano: baby and concert grand,

spinet and player had come across oceans in the holds of ships,
across continents in mule-drawn wagons, heavier than all the dead

left behind. On her face we could see the worry: all the struggle had come
to this, the tacky black upright she had once loved haunting the room

it could never leave. And her piano was now part of a mute,
discordant population doomed to oldfolks homes, bars, church basements,

poolhalls, funeral parlors—or more mercifully abandoned
on back porches where at least chickens could nest, or the cat have kittens.

So when she could no longer play well enough even to teach us,
she hired some of the men to haul out and burn the piano

in the field behind the house. We watched the keys going furious and all at once,
heard in the fire a music-like relief when the several tons of tension

let go, heat becoming wind on our faces. We learned that when true ivory burns
the flame is playful, quick and green. And in the ash, last lessons: the brass,

clawed feet we had never before noticed, the harp's confusion
of wire, the pedals worn thin, shaped like quenched-hard tongues—loud, soft,

sustain. We waited with her until they were cool enough to touch.

Claudia Emerson

Pitching Horseshoes

Some of your buddies might come around
for a couple of beers and a game,
but most evenings, you pitched horseshoes

alone. I washed up the dishes
or watered the garden to the thudding
sound of the horseshoe in the pit,

or the practiced ring of metal
against metal, after the silent
arc—end over end. That last

summer you played a seamless, unscored
game against yourself, or night
falling, or coming in the house.

You were good at it. From the porch
I watched you become shadowless,
then featureless, until I knew

you couldn't see either, and still
the dusk rang out, your aim that easy;
between the iron stakes you had driven

into the hard earth yourself, you paced
back and forth as if there were a decision
to make, and you were the one to make it

Claudia Emerson

Possessions

I sent you a list of what I wanted, and you boxed it up carelessly, as though for
the backs

of strangers, or for the fire, the way you might

have handled a dead woman's possessions—when you could no longer bear to
touch

them, the clothes still fragrant, worn, still that reminiscent

of the body. Or perhaps your lover packed the many boxes herself, released from
secret

into fury, that sick of the scent of me

in the bed, that wary of her face caught in my mirror—something I said I didn't
want,

where I would not see myself again.

Claudia Emerson

Second Bearing 1919

I have asked him to tell it—how
 he heard the curing barn took hours

to burn, the logs thick, accustomed
 to heat—how, even when it was clear all

was lost, the barn and the tobacco
 fields within it, they threw water

instead on the nearby peach tree,
 intent on saving something, sure,

though, the heat had killed it, the bark
 charred black. But in late fall, the tree

broke into bloom, perhaps having
 misunderstood the fire to be

some brief, backward winter. Blossoms
 whitened, opened. Peaches appeared

against the season—an answer,
 an argument. Word carried. People

claimed the fruit was sweeter for being
 out of time. They rode miles to see it.

He remembers my grandfather
 saying, his mouth full, this is

a sign, and the one my father
 was given to eat—the down the same,

soft as any other, inside
 the color of cream, juice clear

as water, but wait, wait; he holds
 his cupped hand up as though for me

to see again there is no seed,
no pit to come to—that it is

infertile, and endless somehow.

Claudia Emerson

Spring Ice Storm

The forecast had not predicted it,
and its beginning, a calming, rumbled dusk

and pleasant lightning, she welcomed as harbinger
of rain. Then as night came she heard the world

relapse, slide backward into winter's insistent
tick and hiss. In the morning, she woke to a powerless

house, the baseboards cold, the sky blank,
mercury hardfallen as the ice and fixed

even at noon. The woodpile on the porch dwindled
to its last layer; she had not replenished it

for a month and could see beyond it windblown ice
in the shed where the axe angled Excalibur-like,

frozen in the wood. Still, she didn't worry
beyond the fate of the daffodils, green-sheathed,

the forsythia and quince already bloomed out—
knowing this couldn't last. But by afternoon

she did begin feeding the fire in the cast-iron
stove ordinary things she thought she could replace,

watching through the small window of isinglass
the fast-burning wooden spoons, picture frames,

then the phone book and stack of old almanacs—
forgotten predictions and phases of the moon—

before resorting to a brittle wicker rocker,
quick as dried grass to catch, bedframes and slats,

ladderback chairs, the labor of breaking them up
against the porch railing its own warming.

Feverlike, the freeze broke after two days,
and she woke to a melting steady as the rain

had been. The fire she had tended more carefully
than the household it had consumed she could now

let go out, and she was surprised at how little
she mourned the rooms heat-scoured, readied for spring.

Claudia Emerson

Stable

One rusty horseshoe hangs on a nail
above the door, still losing its luck,
and a work-collar swings, an empty
old noose. The silence waits, wild to be
broken by hoofbeat and heavy
harness slap, will founder but remain;
while, outside, above the stable,
eight, nine, now ten buzzards swing low
in lazy loops, a loose black warp
of patience, bearing the blank sky
like a pall of wind on mourning
wings. But the bones of this place are
long picked clean. Only the hayrake's
ribs still rise from the rampant grasses

Claudia Emerson

Surface Hunting

You always washed artifacts
at the kitchen sink, your back
to the room, to me, to the mud

you'd tracked in from whatever
neighbor's field had just been plowed.
Spearpoints, birdpoints, awls and leaf-
shaped blades surfaced from the turned earth
as though from beneath some thicker
water you tried to see into.

You never tired, you told me, of the tangible
past you could admire, turn over
and over in your hand—the first
to touch it since the dead one that had
worked the stone. You lined bookshelves
and end tables with them; obsidian,
quartz, flint, they measured the hours you'd spent
with your head down, searching for others,
and also the prized hours of my own
solitude—collected, prized,
saved alongside those artifacts
that had been for so long lost

Claudia Emerson

The Bat

We didn't know what woke us—just something
moving, lighter than our breathing. The world
bound by an icy ligature, our house

was to the bat a hollow, warmer cavity
that now it could not leave. I screamed
for you to do something. So you killed it

with the broom; I heard you curse as you
swept the air. I wanted you to do it until
you did. I have never forgiven you.

Claudia Emerson

The Mannequin Above Main Street Motors.

When the only ladies' dress shop closed,
she was left on the street for trash, unsalvageable,

one arm missing, lost at the shoulder, one leg
at the hip. But she was wearing a blue-sequined negligee

and blonde wig, so they helped themselves to her
on a lark—drunken impulse—and for years kept her

leaning in a corner, beside an attic
window, rendered invisible. The dusk

was also perpetual in the garage below,
punctuated only by bare bulbs hung close

over the engines. An oily grime coated
the walls, and a decade of calendars promoted

stock-car drivers, women in dated swimsuits,
even their bodies out of fashion. Radio distorted

there; cigarette smoke moaned, the pedal steel
conceding to that place a greater, echoing

sorrow. So, lame, forgotten prank, she remained,
back turned forever to the dark storage

behind her, gaze leveled just above
anyone's who could have looked up

to mistake in the cast of her face fresh longing—
her expression still reluctant figure for it.

Claudia Emerson

The Physical Plant As Prologue

Everything here measures: weight, effort, sin—
and everything costs in this seclusion

of daughters, the place an ark—its hold
all of a kind in an archaic, combed

order: straightened teeth, trained spines, the chapel's
benches in rigid rows before crimson

kneeling pillows, slim beds in dormitories,
the muted ticking of practice rooms, the stalls

just-mucked, the halls humid with breathing.
And in the brushes, their hair—enough to line

the nests of a hundred generations of birds.

Claudia Emerson

The Polio Vaccine, Chatham, Virginia, 1964

It was not death we came to fear but her life,
her other birth, waking remade from the womb

of that disease. One leg was withered, a dragging-
numb weight behind her, one shoulder humped—

a camel's—and what did we know of that foreign
beast but ugliness and that she carried in it hard

faith like water. And so we did what we were told:
outside the elementary school, the long line drowsed.

We saw gleaming trays of sugar cubes rose-pink
with the livid virus tamed, its own undoing.

We opened our mouths, held it on our tongues
and, as with any candy, savored the sharp corners

going, the edges, until at last the form gave way
to grain, to sweet sand washing against the salt of us

Claudia Emerson

The Spanish Lover

There were warnings: he had, at forty, never
married; he was too close to his mother,
calling her by her given name, Manuela,
ah, Manuela — like a lover; even her face

had bled, even the walls, giving birth to him;
she still had saved all of his baby teeth
except the one he had yet to lose, a small
eyetooth embedded, stubborn in the gum.

I would eat an artichoke down to its heart,
then feed the heart to him. It was enough
that he was not you — and utterly foreign,
related to no one. So it was not love.

So it ended badly, but to some relief.
I was again alone in my bed, but not
invisible as I had been to you —
and I had learned that when I drank sherry

I was drinking a chalk-white landscape, a distant
poor soil; that such vines have to suffer; and that
champagne can be kept effervescent by putting
a knife in the open mouth of the bottle.

Claudia Emerson