

# Feeding the Fear of the Earth

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“Reaching across time and space and cultures and genders, Patrick Lawler gathers characters as diverse as Christopher Smart, Ed McMahon, and Rosa Parks. Ecological and ethereal, political and historical, philosophical and physical, this astonishing book is a place where anyone who has walked the earth can rub up against anyone else. A place where the light of their sometimes painful, sometimes humorous encounters reveals our connectedness as earth unfolds around us. Lawler’s sensibility is woven of brilliance and tenderness.”

—Linda Tomol Pennisi, author of *Seamless*

“Patrick Lawler is a madman. His poems remind me of the cosmic yet earthy hair-dust of profound, secret talk vibrating still in napkin folds at a café table once shared by Marcel Duchamp, Mahatma Gandhi, Madame Curie, Mickey Mantle, and Hélène Cixous. Lawler exhibits startling leaps of imagination that reveal the interconnectivity of all elements of the universe and knows that the true purpose of the poet is—as Gary Snyder has described—to ‘hold the most archaic values on earth.’ We visit the body of his remarkable poetry like stepping into our lives anew, with respect for the chalaza of an egg inhabiting the in-between of many journeys. Sit up straight, close your eyes, place your hands palms up at the juncture between the thighs and the hips, and peer into the pineal gland otherwise known as the third eye: Lawler’s extraordinary poetry is already there, intuitively known to us, vibrating like a foreign yet profoundly familiar dawn, arising from and dissolving back into a continuous generative source, what we might call love, or bliss, or—as Lawler himself describes—‘How birth sometimes looks like something else.’”

—George Kalamaras, author of *The Theory and Function of Mangoes*

“In Patrick Lawler’s brilliant *Feeding the Fear of the Earth*, the Earth itself is the poet’s playground. But in playing with cultures, geographies, myths, and histories, Lawler is deadly serious. This is a poetry of dazzling and disturbing invention that shows us what we didn’t know or didn’t want to know or had forgotten we knew about the world we inhabit. ‘Everything we once feared we must fear again,’ writes Lawler. ‘And everything we once loved we must love again.’”

—David Lloyd, author of *The Gospel According to Frank*

## BIO:

Patrick Lawler has published two earlier collections of poetry: *A Drowning Man is Never Tall Enough* (University of Georgia Press) and *reading a burning book* (Basfäl Books). He has been awarded fellowships by the New York State Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Constance Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts. In addition to being an Associate Professor at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry where he teaches Environmental Writing and Nature Literature, he teaches creative writing courses at Onondaga Community College. He is also part of the Creative Writing Program at LeMoyne College, where he teaches creative writing, playwriting, and writing for performance.

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## Whole Poems by Patrick Lawler

In Cambodia they have a thriving industry  
in wheelchairs and artificial limbs.  
Thousands of landmines are hidden  
in pockets of earth  
throughout the country—Claymores  
and Chinese models.

In the '50s my father broke his back—  
fell off a ladder while he was welding  
at a chemical plant. For years  
he had to wear a back brace and fight  
a Workman's Compensation case  
he barely won.

If you walk in Cambodia, you are in danger.  
The antipersonnel detonating devices.  
The trip mechanisms. The booby traps.  
The Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks says:  
"Install the Claymore facing the center  
of mass of a kill zone." The fragments spray  
and rip and cut. With patient malice,  
the mines wait for years,  
thinking all the time their meaning  
is undermined until finally  
they exuberantly burst. The Chinese model  
is propelled upward out of the ground  
and reaches a level about the height  
of a child's face.

With his broken back, my father didn't work  
for years while my mother saved  
Green Stamps and we lived in a cellar.  
Instead of a house, we lived in a stump.  
A cave with a flat tar paper roof.  
With tiny rectangular windows—too far  
above our heads, too small to let in any light.  
Green Stamps like moss  
grew all over the tables.

The ex-soldiers and farmers and mothers  
and school children drag the lower parts  
of their bodies like sacks  
along the roads to Phnom Penh.

My father's back brace looked like the rib cage  
of a prehistoric reptile—like something  
you'd find in a Spanish monastery  
during the Inquisition.  
I didn't want to look at it.

There are two messages here:  
whatever stays in the earth is dangerous  
and whatever stays in the earth will save us.  
And, of course, there's something else.  
In a lab in Massachusetts researchers  
are growing human ears on the backs of mice.

Scientists grow the tissue by first creating  
an ear-like scaffolding of porous,  
biodegradable polyester fabric. Human  
cartilage cells are placed throughout the form,  
which is then implanted on the back of a  
hairless mouse. I wonder

what would grow out of my father's back.

I've always been aware I had a certain destiny.  
Right now, I'm supposed to be in Cambodia,  
making artificial limbs. I'd make elaborate  
prosthetic devices. I'd gather gears and grease  
and grinding things—levers and wheels.  
I'd work with tubing, haywire, parts of a red  
bonnet. I'd make limbs from small engines  
and balsam and wax. I'd make windmills.  
I'd work with putty and glue, with tintype  
and spokes, guitar strings, and plastic.

I'd gather kindling and gourds—  
the insides of clocks, tassels, colored ribbon.  
I'd whittle crutches into ships.  
I'd gather things that sparked  
when they rubbed together. I'd take out  
the thin insides of pens for veins.

What I want is delicate machinery to carry  
pain. What I want are carousels  
for fingers, music boxes for hands.

I say: Rise. Get up. Please, walk now.

But my father digs his way down into  
his house, and my mother dreams of birds,  
collecting them in books. And me?

Whole legs grow out the backs of mice.  
Whole poems rip out the back of my father.

