

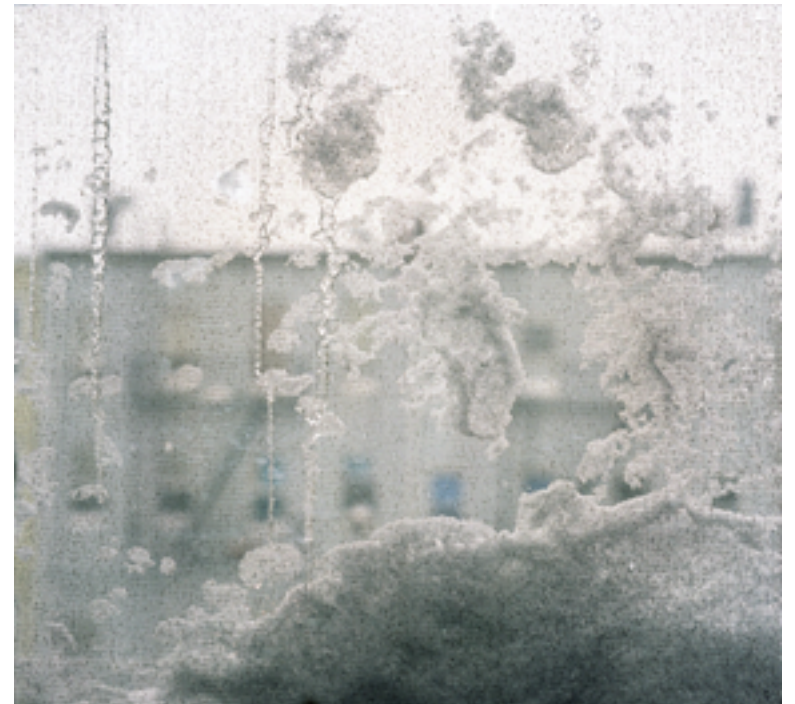
## Things Impossible to Swallow

Number 24 in the 2River Chapbook Series

poems by Pamela Garvey

# Things Impossible to Swallow

Number 24 in the 2River Chapbook Series



"Snow" © 2013 by Victoria Rich

2River

[www.2River.org](http://www.2River.org)

7474 Drexel DR • University City • MO • 63130 • USA

poems by Pamela Garvey



*Things Impossible to Swallow*

Number 24 in the 2River Chapbook Series

**About 2River**

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series. 2River is also the home of Muddy Bank, the 2River blog.

Richard Long  
2River  
[www.2River.org](http://www.2River.org)

February 2013

# Things Impossible to Swallow

Number 24 in the 2River Chapbook Series

poems by Pamela Garvey

## *Things Impossible to Swallow*

Number 24 in the 2River Chapbook Series

### **Credits**

*Main Street Rag:* "A Review of Manson's Album"  
*Southern Indiana Review:* "In the Light Provided by the  
Baltimore News"  
*Superstition Review:* "The Dark, A Child Listening"  
*UCity Review:* "At Your Request"

### **Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to thank the following people for their help with some, and in some cases all, of these poems: Patrick Donnelly, Matthew Guenette, Richard Long, Ron Mitchell, Barbara Perry, and most especially, for his years of tireless critiques and inspiration, Andrew Miller. The author also thanks Deb Olin Unferth for the inspiration for the title poem.

### **About the Artist**

Victoria Rich is a photographer based in Brooklyn, New York. She received an MFA from Hunter College in New York City. Her work was recently featured in the 'Urban Landscape' exhibition at the Center for Fine Art Photography in Fort Collins, Colorado.

## *Things Impossible to Swallow*

Number 24 in the 2River Chapbook Series

### **About the Author**

Pamela Garvey's chapbook *Fear* (Finishing Line Press, 2008) was a finalist for the New Women's Voices Competition. Her poems and stories have been published in such journals as *Cimarron Review*, *Esquire*, *Margie*, *The North American Review*, *RATTLE*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. Garvey, an Associate Professor of English at St. Louis Community College--Meramec, is also a past semi-finalist for the "Discovery"/*The Nation* prize. Garvey lives in the St. Louis with her husband and son and is the co-founder of Words on Purpose, a committee of socially concerned writers who organize a benefit reading series.

### **Contents**

The Dark, a Child Listening  
In the Light Provided by the Baltimore News  
Cocaine  
What I Wanted  
A Review of Manson's Album  
Elegy with a Child of the North  
Under Yellow Jackets  
Without Me  
The Distant  
At Your Request  
Saint Jude's Nursing Home  
From the Arm Chair of the Nursing Home  
Serious To Do List  
Elbowed  
Things Impossible to Swallow

*Things Impossible to Swallow*

Number 24 in the 2River Chapbook Series

**Things Impossible to Swallow**

Her own ecstasy when he tied her  
to the bed, and she begged as the rope  
wore at the skin of her wrists.

Did she really lap up every touch, every  
word that soured her own laugh?

She scrubbed floors and tubs and crawled  
around looking for loose change.

She breathed in his logic: a vapor,  
a mercury leaching into veins, into  
the fatty tissue that holds it in.

That smack she held in with the rising temperatures  
of work, pay, poor and no time  
to read. She'd become stupid, he said. And the heat  
to hit him seared her silent.

Still she returned daily to the mirror he held for her.

Herself accused by that image yet ready  
to swear over bibles.

But whose story did she tell? Who threatened  
to leave? Was that her pounding on doors,  
bills wound into fists?

And her, pleading:  
a dog that doesn't even know when it's full?

## Elbowed

Snatching stacks of bills from her hands, the man stumbled,  
elbowed  
the boy. The eyelid bruised. The boy ran, locked himself inside  
the bathroom, drank Benadryl while they pretended silence.  
So the boy screamed through the door *I wish a semi sliced me*  
*in half, then you'd feel sorry.* With a pipe wrench, the boy  
cracked  
the window; his face in glass sparkled with cuts radiating  
from the nose. A line to the ear smacked of the scar on the  
father's face  
but now under the mother's deep set eyes. Even in glass, shadows  
rim those eyes. If only he could punch through this reflection,  
kick back shards and climb out without stabs or splinters. *One*, a  
voice  
hollered, *two* . . . that yanking again: cords ripped from walls.  
Then the  
slammed door. He prayed for the father to come back while the  
mother hugged  
the dog like a favorite. Finally, the boy came out,  
marched over, kicked them both: her in the ribs, dog in the head.

## The Dark, A Child Listening

to that absence  
night after night, eyes prowling  
the sky outside for the death regatta  
breaking in the distance. I heard  
their splashing, the churning depths.  
My mind hurried to ready itself  
for those immigrant throngs.  
How long? How soon?  
I couldn't stand then and can't stand now  
the way day bruises so dark  
that stars barnacle the dead's fleet,  
how the owl-clock cocks its plastic eyes,  
points lopsided wings at glowing numbers.

## In the Light Provided by the Baltimore News

Outside wind sifted snow to the ground,  
half burying whatever was dropped—  
bottles, receipts, photo of a boy and a woman  
hugging a dog. Inside  
dull lighting in the bar barely defined  
his unshaven cheek, rusty hair.  
He spoke almost in a whisper, brushed by the hum  
of garbled talk—all couples or small groups huddled  
in conversations. He told me  
about local bars: which had bands on weekends, which  
had ladies' nights. I'd only been in town  
a few weeks. I'd hardly begun to work again.  
In those days I drank vodka, neat,  
tried to learn new languages in preparation  
for some big move, something important I couldn't  
quite name, so I made up stories  
about a Brazil that didn't exist,  
a job as a correspondent, as if the man cared.  
In one of those blanks in time  
we came back to my place. No longer hunched  
over a round cocktail table, gesturing with a cigarette,  
but leaning over my bed, TV news  
providing the only light and a perky blonde  
reporting that a white male, thirty-two, killed  
his wife and son, Don—that was his name, that  
is what he told me, or  
what I remember—Don, in his whiskey voice, asked me  
if I ever thought about killing anyone,  
my face in his hands, his mouth moving over mine.

## Serious to Do List

Quick drinking. Aimless  
texting from alleyways. No pleas  
to that asshole. No spewing hate-speech  
targeting self. Vicadin, vespers,  
voodoo dolls you'll dance  
into a daze, then bury  
in dirt dogs pee in. Scrub off scent—  
piss scent? his scent? Black out  
birthmark on his scalp, tequila bottle  
tattoo, tequila-burned voice, veins  
bulging, all cells still stinking  
of him. Never become  
the step-sister who'd slice off  
her heel to fit into a glass slipper. She  
gets her eyes pecked out anyway.  
If you want to be blind, stuff a rocket  
with every photo of self  
with him. Launch it at the sun and stare  
at the sky until it bursts. Prayers  
of flame and fog. Amen?  
Digital face turned ash—but whose?  
my face?—with those  
bloodshot eyes, that puppy dog drag.



## From the Arm Chair of the Nursing Home

I worry about you, dear. Puppy dogs  
on your scrubs, smiley face  
on your name tag. I heard you humming  
"Follow the Yellow Brick Road."  
It was you—cleaning Mrs. Schmidt's ass  
and humming. What kind of fool  
would give up an emerald city  
for Auntie Em, hogs and a nasty neighbor?

## Cocaine

hummingbird pulse  
feeder taps its morse code into  
the awning window blazing  
with spikes of sunrise pupils  
like wasp eyes winged things  
under the skin needle cuts  
the same niche in the record  
over and over sweat spots  
shirt, pants, the bed  
trembles a few drinks to torch  
the ice of consequence

## What I Wanted

In response to Francis Bacon's *Two Figures*

I once painted walls, floors, even ceiling  
black. I had sheets so white they shone like a canvas during sex.  
They danced and blurred as if into the bodies of lovers  
as anonymous as the men in this portrait: features so  
hazy they look whitewashed. Are their eyes open? What  
does the one man clench with his teeth—rag or rope?—  
as the other straddles him, pins him down? Is  
that man pinning him down? The brushstrokes shimmy  
on this unprimed canvas, the rough side the painter always  
chose. I, too, wanted the raw untreated surface.  
So everything would soak in: another's sweat, another's weight  
grinding the body, so high I forgot I lived in it. In the painting,  
the arms, they flail so motion is all I can see. Like my past,  
nothing is still, even though everything is still.

## Saint Jude's Nursing Home

I stole. From the stash. Roamed hallways half-baked, dressed  
bed sores in a blur. Call buttons, moans, the wailing of  
Alzheimer's—nothing but smoke

receding in a fog of rounds. My shoes floated along floors. Arms  
worked like wands.

Behind me Martha shuffled from chair to chair, shoved

spoonfuls of puddings she slipped in her pockets during dinner  
into howling  
toothless mouths. And I let her. I let her crumble

meds she'd otherwise hide under her tongue, then spit  
into potted plants. *Cocksuckers from the CIA* couldn't fool her  
with stethoscopes.

*See the bugs*, she said in her smoker's voice as she pointed  
to the doctor's light shining in Catherine's vacant eyes. I nodded  
as she grasped

my hand, pumping it like a blood pressure gauge.  
All the time glancing at Catherine, who stared back at me, or  
through me,

who if she could have uttered words might have woven her own  
conspiracy theories: me  
a mouse hunting crumbs. Or an angel with lice infested wings.

## At Your Request

Smashing that wheezing eight track didn't help.  
Neither did those voice lessons or the trips  
to Nashville, looking for the Carters' home,  
nights at the Grand Ole Opry. You act so  
old because you are. No color under  
this cowboy hat. And what should I write for  
a man who doesn't know, who keeps searching  
for song?

I'm sick of your stories: children  
hiding their father's gun before he got  
too drunk; brothers, ten and twelve, working stores,  
anything for cash to buy bread, shoes and  
cigarettes. But what's missing in that story?  
What albatross screeches and deafens you?

## A Review of Manson's Album

The black and white, wide-eyed  
Charlie on the cover  
couldn't have prepared me for acoustic guitar, calypso  
rhythm, a love-sick voice dropping  
an octave: *It's all in the eyes of a dreamer . . .*  
This could be a hotel lounge  
where a man with a sliver of a mustache motions  
to a lone lady in Boca Raton. The singer opens  
a capella: *pretty girl, pretty, pretty girl . . .* He slaps  
the guitar to speed up the song, his signature  
for all the catchy refrains. *Clang, bang, clang*  
*goes the big, iron door*, my favorite.  
Mid-album he preaches about parenting  
himself in the bowels of Arkansas  
where plucked strings fed him plenty.  
A whore-momma and seventy-something  
daddies bring his voice to a quiver, then  
a crack, bolstered by women who segue into an ode  
to a garbage dump, the hint of a carousel  
in the melody. The sopranos preach against *The Man*  
in leitmotifs—*London Bridge, burn*  
*all your bridges*—phrases he accents with a nasal  
whine as he names each woman of the “family”:  
*Sadie, cease to exist; Squeaky,*  
*cease to exist; Linda, cease to exist . . .* and one voice  
slightly behind another, holds that last word,  
*America*, until barely a hum.

## Elegy with a Child of the North

The word Yankee meant the thwack  
of ball and bat harmonizing the Bronx, harmonizing the gravel  
playground

of PS # 5, where we bartered away spring  
with baseball cards. By autumn my father laminated my final  
picks in plastic wrap,

displayed them on the coffee table between  
sofa and TV. They glinted like a glass centerpiece for the World  
Series.

When the games began, with blue markers,  
I striped my toddler brother from collar to socks. I stuck gold  
stars, one for each Yankee,

on his face and arms. In case one of us had to pee or eat,  
our mother snaked every room with radios tuned to  
second-by-second calls

and the fans stomping chorus: a static  
joy that echoed around our house, smoky with burnt-black stew  
and gum-like chicken,

left to overcook by all of us, too busy joining the crowd,  
shouting, *Bring 'em home, Reggie. Bring 'em home!* Once he  
struck the ball

he was off, off . . . he's gone, been gone for years,  
and I'm walking home. It's Richmond, Virginia: a loose dog clicks  
around the corner

leaving me alone with dead generals, still  
on their horses, one-man cavalries in behemoth bronze statues.  
Tonight I

used to pay her to read the future. That night she broke my  
fever with what she called  
surgical spirits, she pulled out

the Tarot and taught me such foresight. She asks me now to tell  
her fortune, speak  
of what's to come. Beads unstrung

and rolling down the floor; petals, vines twisting. Really I see  
nothing more  
than bags and receipts blowing down the street.

## The Distant

Dabbing my fevered body in alcohol, she hummed an old Irish  
song, its hunger—  
the dead, the distant.

Several times the song petered away, the hand holding the  
sponge hesitated  
above me, cold drops

trickling onto my belly as she squinted at the hallway, cursed  
those Brits.  
Each time I tugged her back:

*Did Mary spank Jesus? Why did God let soldiers shoot  
at you? Who created God?*

No answers, just frowns down at me, poking lumps on her knee,  
crooked  
from a broken bone

never set. I should bathe that sore knee now. Feet and legs too.  
But she can't smell any more.

Not ointment that gags me. Not beer bread so fresh, steam fills  
the plastic bag, blurs

the price she no longer argues against. Maybe I could yank her  
back with receipts  
waved in the face, but I leave her,

staring at, or beyond, wisterias tangling outside the window  
Rosary beads dropped  
to lap, back hunched as if ready

to return to crawling. Perhaps along the soldiered fields she left  
decades ago,  
long before marriage and children, when people

station myself between Stonewall and his spotlights, lean  
against the dated stone he rides over. I'd like to go Whitman and  
celebrate Stonewall—

warrior, lunatic, stallion, armless saint without his lemons  
alongside peddlers lining downtown, prostitutes shooting dope  
a few blocks away.

But only days ago making coffee to rouse myself  
from the haze of booze, I looked outside as detectives  
photographed

a homeless man's corpse, blood  
still flowing from his head. Whose wounds did I ever tend to

but my own? *Clean up the South,*  
the saying goes, *buy a Yankee a bus ticket.* I circle these streets  
daily:

school to work to third  
floor apartment, walls still bare, boxes still unpacked. I have  
failed to read the signs.

I have yawned at Sherman's abuses flung  
from the lips of amateur historians found in every bar this side

of the Mason Dixon. I touch this statue, as if it would reveal  
something more.  
Its hands are as cold as mine.

## Under Yellow Jackets

The man, asleep on the hammock, snores and doesn't stir at all as yellow jackets mill around his face and throat— attracted perhaps by the crust of barbecue sauce on the chin. At first she thinks to wake him. Instead she dreams of herself stinging his swollen neck with peroxide.

## Without Me

It's as if you didn't breathe, eat, shiver or sigh. Crates stacked to go and blocking doorways, how can I forget smashed dishes, lies, cruel words? Why do I want you to miss me so much you can't stop trembling to steer the car, swerve into leaves falling to the wet street and slam into a truck? Doctors will pluck glass from your body, patch it with sutures. Who could walk away from those scars? When you wake in a morphine haze, it is my name you will drool.