

STEVE STRAIGHT

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## The Flag of Cucumber

*"May they all be united under the flag of cucumber."*

—comment by Gerald Stern at the 2002 Dodge Poetry Festival

That is to say, a flag to remind us  
of peeling thin scrolls of dark green skin  
and releasing the sweet aroma underneath  
as we prepare a salad for friends,  
not a flag that shows us films  
of broken soldiers staring into space,  
of peasants running for cover,  
of the tightly folded triangle of flag  
handed to a widow beneath a veil.

If not cucumber, it could be a flag of garlic,  
common to nearly every culture and  
celebrating the miracle of a life  
reproduced by planting parts of itself.  
I can see it, a pale white bulb stitched  
on a field of green, flapping in the breeze  
above every courthouse and town hall.

You'd think that after all this time  
we might have progressed  
to at least a flag of salt,  
a substance older than any state or tribe,  
or perhaps a flag of rain or soil,  
causing each year on the vernal equinox  
people around the world to parade as one  
behind marching bands and twirled batons  
or a procession of wooden flutes and guitars  
ending in fields at the edge of town  
for the ritual planting of seeds.

Instead we have flags of blind obedience,  
flags of lies as shiny as lapel pins,  
flags wielded like clubs to hammer the weak,  
flags of countries, of regions, of states,  
of towns, of teams, even flags of houses,  
as if separating ourselves from others  
were somehow a source of strength.

So far in our history the flags of loss,  
the flags of mourning, the flags of regret  
and even of shame have not been enough  
to bring us to our senses, and  
we have forgotten every pledge we've made.  
I fear it may come down to the flag of disease  
or the flag of drought, or the flag  
of poisoned water that finally unites us.

I would like it to be different, is all.  
I won't pretend it could be the flag of love,  
so volatile it snaps in the slightest breeze,  
or the flag of any god, when dogmas  
don't seem to deliver us from evil.  
But surely there is something to salute  
that contains liberty and justice for all.

Whatever symbol future humans choose  
for their flag, after the nonsense is over,  
let the fabric come from some fiber of corn, or rice,  
and let the flag be burned without complaint,  
for heat, or just for the pretty flame.

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**STEVE STRAIGHT** is professor of English and director of the poetry program at Manchester Community College, in Connecticut. His first book, *The Water Carrier*, was published by Curbstone Press, and his next book, *The Almanac*, is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press. He has given workshops on writing and teaching throughout the eastern United States.