

POEMS

WRITTEN

UNDER

DURESS



Harlen Welsh

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So near that the fish in the aquarium
Hung close to the glass, suspended, yet he never knew her
Except behind the curtain. The catastrophe
Buried in the stair carpet stayed there
And never corrupted anybody.
And one day he grew up, and the horizon
Stammered politely. The sky was like muslin.
And still in the old house no one ever answered the bell.

—John Ashbery, Silhouette

SINCE POETRY IS LIKE

feeding pâté de foie gras to the geese, at least
in the movies the woman will always be drawn
to the vampire. This when the french doors open
tragically, under the breath of Listerine desire.
Catagories are more than kind to us
during the nipple engraving of a coin. Something
for Caesar, something more than a purseful
of chocolate-covered defense mechanisms
spilled out onto the table like proverbial beans,
one's heart, or the Song of Roland,
alliterated only by the tumbling dice of wrestling
bear cubs born in captivity. Here one is gambling
as if on a putting green of purple felt; you know, the way
or whatever that material actually is. . .

In this way, a poem is a fugue of confused colors,
meanings that shift, contiguous peninsulas
jutting out from still more peninsulas, an endless array
of Floridas so cruel in their ambiguities as to leave us
standing alone in the asphalt of a street
abandoned by the parade. The song that was shouldered
by the crowd tosses quietly now, tethered in the bay
of your arms, audible for moments, through the holes. And so
the great yearning for the sedentary life
transfixes you like a nail. Your myth of independence
is carted off by birds over the marshes, lost to the ducks
and to all things which fly south for the winter.
Brass animal conduits feed the fallow vein.
Meanwhile, matriculating clouds vitiate the memory of the air,
Generating a sense of the claustrophobic, distances

which crush us with the weight of all that is blue.
How salient the bats are now. The beating of their wings
no longer reminds us of the battery-powered desk fans
of summer. Those were the billowing evenings, parachutes
as vast as circus tents, when the innuendoes joined hands
forming a chain of volunteers, closing-in on the invisible
man that poetry sometimes is. It is a lasso effect: beaters
in the bush trying to trap a Tasmanian devil (since they
don't come in crates from Australia anymore, like in cartoons,
but are more extinct even than that!).

A Pilgrim Amorist Ecstatically Languishing

Puts one foot in front of the other.

It is a sacred wig
That flutters through the canyon
Through the quiet spaces
Between the beasts, like a dinner guest
Shattering plates.
Under the sun, the sundial cracks.
The fragrance of the year
Is beckoned back into the bottle.

No, tonight it is scotch, scotch and exhaustion
That has placed me over the edge just enough
To cling onto such dubious branches,
Like an old and rotting shirt, emphatic
In the pending weather.

. . .one foot in front of the other
and tied that way. An awkward
position, perhaps, but it parts the buttocks
ever so slightly. . .

You have become a rift to drift in
Like a palsy. Here you have strayed
And here you shall stay
As if waiting for the train to a ghost town.

Nothing At All

for Brigitte

like women, thoughts
hard to live with
meander
come at you all at once
like when you retire
to your iron maiden
closing the door behind you
and the edge of your desk
is sharp too
the chasm between it
and the wall
is endless

streets receive your feet
like calm waters receiving autumn
timber, and since I go home at dawn
I must go against the current
as only battered salmon
lay eggs
civil servants know nothing
of this
nothing at all
of the tributaries of sidestreets
that coalesce in my brain

the pain of being alive
and all that rot
getting old so old
nobody needs to hear it
she simply says
but dear, you look so good
in handcuffs

Figures In A Landscape

My poems exist before I write them.
This disconcerting state of affairs could be
rectified, perhaps, if I were to toss my work
out the window, releasing a thousand white gloves
upon the wind. Fliers.
Then I could start all over. From scratch,
like a bird pawing the sand.

Unfortunately, the mechanical muse is my creditor.
She tries to climb in through the window.
Those who can sleep like logs, do so. I must pace
the wooden floors of my imagination, doing my
Mr. Dithers-waiting-for-Dagwood-to-arrive-at-the-office
routine, and this goes on for hours, until my candle
refuses to burn
at either end.

As in a game of pik-up-stix, the winner is the one
who gives up fist. He shows he's smarter than the others
simply by not participating in such a foolish enterprise.

In this way, I keep my special

distance. I want to see you there, at my desk,
with quasars in your eyes. I'll be there, as usual,
and it will do us both some good. Here we are,
in the geometry of the moment, as in an oil composition,
and I'd like to spend the remaining ten minutes at ground
zero, deciding something important.

It's like talking
through a saxophone: the labyrinth of our emotions goes on,
seemingly forever, yet there's an end in sight for us all
where the painting

begins.

only a mattress burning
could release such crows

afternoon rag

the rag on the wall
hook outside my window
in the air shaft hangs
there like a rag
on a wall hook
outside my window
in the air shaft

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

But numbers go on forever, don't they?!
Imaginary numbers, like imaginary friends, help

Us out in times of need, of turmoil. Of the
Complex numbers, the primary numbers, the positive,

There are always the empty sets. (Sets, not sex.)
The numberless heartbeats of the entire human

Race.
Our days are numbered.

The relatively brief period of 5000 million
Years, when intelligent life makes a cameo

Appearance on earth, tries its grand experiment
And fades.

The cellular integers march on.
Even the stars must know horizons.

Even the violin of Nero
Vaporizes at Ground Zero.

Uniform Anatomical Gift Act

a prosepoem for Bill Knott

As if reaching for mousetraps, we grope through our coats
For the keys to our cars. It's a difficult thing when
Your fingers brush against someone else's arm. . .

There are provisions for which we find no easy answer,
Provisions such as what organs or parts
We'll donate to science or humanity
In the case of prominent death. Under the Uniform

Anatomical Gift Act, donation takes effect
Upon your death, and that's why they want you to fill out
the sticker right away, and affix it to the back
Of your driver's license. A lot of people die in cars
Nowadays, and this way both cars and corpses can provide
Spare parts.

I got my driver license late in life,
At the age of twenty-seven.
This was a momentous occasion for me,
As I had actually thought that I might be
One of the few people left in the world to die
Without one.
Previously I drove illegally, the source
Of a great deal of childish satisfaction
Leaving the sunset far behind.
When at last it arrived in the mail, at first I was excited.
I was pleased with the photograph of myself
And gleeful at the prospect of exceeding the speed limit
With only a minor fine to pay in retribution, should I
Experience the rare inconvenience of being pulled-over
By the authorities. And then I discovered the orange tag
Enclosed with the license, to be filled out
At my discretion, should I so desire. . .

The very concept disturbed me no end, and I tried
To shrug it off, muttering something to the effect that
I'd donate my genitals but for the fact that
I use my genitals so much I don't think they'll be
Of much use to anyone by the time I'm
Done with 'em. One slip attached came inscribed
With three addresses for the Kidney Foundation,
Donate my kidneys? I drink too much for that!
And I could make a bad joke about how my heart has been
Broken too many times to be used again. . .
O yes, there are provisions for which there are no easy
Answers. We all must cut something off
And share it with the others.
That's what poetry's all about.
As if reaching for mousetraps, I use my fingers: I need them
For my work, and I'll be typing in my grave.

POEM

If you stick a pin into a Barbie doll
You'll kill a receptionist downtown.

SCREWDRIIVER

I've got my new pack of German cigarettes, but where is my hidden bottle of vodka, the one I keep for these emergencies?

Today I pictured myself in a baseball uniform, radio in hand, all prepared to listen to the game. We know how much I like sports. To cheer myself up I promised myself a new notebook or a disposable lighter, something cheap and pleasing like that. So where is this new pair of jeans I need so much, or the few pairs of socks, or that clean shirt that needs pressing to remove creases instead of wrinkles? Where are those fundamental things a person needs to feel remotely human? When I lived in Paris it was a practice of mine to purchase a red carnation fresh every morning, before beginning the day's adventures. The old lady I bought them from had a broad smile and a way about her that made youth seem dignified and the elderly feel young again. She was a wonderful woman. The last time I visited Paris she was no longer there. Where is she now? Selling flowers in heaven, no doubt.

Nowadays, I must shave every morning, and if you cross my mind I invariably nick myself in the process. Sometimes I do it deliberately, to disfigure myself, to remove any anxiety connected with whether or not I'm attractive enough for you. I no longer wear flowers in my lapel. But I know already that you don't like me for my looks. Still, I'm wondering if you like me at all. Usually, though, I ask myself, where are the new Trac II blades that I deserve? Why haven't I bought them yet? Ouch! Where in the blazes are you tonight, Debra? Who will you be with and why don't you call? Where are the fundamental things that make us feel human? Things like Lloyd's of London, premier classe tickets, and a paycheck that leaves something behind after the landlord has passed. What happened to love and affection and your interest in me? There are moments, my Beatrice, when I feel as though you are more preoccupied with your beauty than I am. I'd break my typing fingers to do your nails, so I can hardly blame you. What hurts the most is, after I locate the vodka, where in the hell did I put the orange juice?

PLAYING DOCTOR

For all my time in foreign countries, at last
America has become one too. I live in cheap
Hotel situations and jog to the pier at sunset.
I have gone to the parks to gather tanning agents,
As there is no such thing as a quick tan, and now
That I have a tan, like a new paint job that doesn't
Alter the condition of the car, I'm only covering
Five years of moon-bathing in Massachusetts.
As I cross the bridge from Sausalito, San Francisco
Sits there like a pile of coins, and I feel like
Scrooge. I am healthier now. Drying-out has done
More than wonders. For me at least, I'm thinking
Purely in the lower case. Everything resides in
The palm of the hand. Like a syringe about to be
Administered, the words are at the tip of my tongue.
I've got advice for everyone. Like any artist,
I want my word to be indelible as the image on
The Shroud of Turin. I dream of living on Russian
Hill, with a sniper's view of San Francisco. And yes,
The quotes do keep coming back; those I don't want to
Hear anymore. "Ravens are the seagulls of the dead"
Said Pindar (no he didn't). I saw a lot of ravens
In Massachusetts. I still read the obituaries daily,
For news of my death. Obituaries are for people who
Can't get their names in the paper otherwise, but I'm
Still kicking—Life throes! Don't swallow paperclips.

Fragments

your ugly car
still parked on the lawn
that last bag of groceries
still on the back seat
more rotten than Denmark

.....

papers pile up
like a cord of wood
burglers and cops case the joint
eyeing the place suspiciously
thinking it's a trap
which it is, ophelia

.....

i haven't watered the lawn
the grass is dead
more yellow than a raincoat

.....

you wouldn't believe my appearance
ophelia
perhaps the brochures are right

.....

i haven't gone out of the house
since you left
i'm being very faithful
like a dog that gets erections
when you kick it

.....

i wanted to touch it
to run my hands along its curves
to see if it was as cold as you were

.....

Transit Vagrants

I'd light a cigaret to make the train come quicker,
but I've got more time than cigarets. Cancer
is an occupational hazard we all must deal with, and
it's kind of enjoyable, in a sick way perhaps, but
enjoyable nevertheless. (E.g., the carcinogenics of
a room. Be it any sort of drinking establishment,
we're guaranteed, to an extent, a certain kind of time.)

I have carried this glove like a patriotic duty
into war, have suffered to keep it clean, unpunctured.
Outside of all that, or deeper within, possibly, I
in my own good time have come to realize that I am in
the midst of a great contortionist: the antics
my brain must go through to justify myself. Things
are sad, we must suppose, and life more difficult

than it should be. Pretty music is sadness. It crumples
in my heart like a ruined poem, tossed into the trash,
the wastebasket full of air, unimolecular Styrofoam. There
is a moiré effect in this, like prison stripes superimposed
against the bars of a cell; the can seems full even though
there's plenty of room for all, if only we'd step on it,
crush the bottom layer to the bottom, where it belongs.

We seem to follow the lady's glove through its various stages, from swan boat to grasping wave, and, in The Book of Heavenly Minutes, it's not the craft we admire, so much as the ideas. If each icon represents a stage where we can act out our fears and anxieties, I would say that

the sets were designed to collapse in upon themselves, like a house of cards with a candle deep inside. This image forms, to the best of my knowledge, a picture of the soul: Egyptian cracker dust. Somebody always has to come along to ruin everything, by opening a can of sardines in front of

the guests, or by playing adult party games nobody in his right mind would luau to. It's the same lp, over and over again. It's not as if we were riveted to our seats because it had been raining nails all along. For myself I can say that I don't want to read about, discuss, or otherwise give

vent to concepts such as this. Gill fungus was never my bag. It has nothing to do with reading the paper, which, like poetry, tells you nothing, unless you happen to care about what events transpire in either realm. The blame would seem to fall like a guillotine blade, on that very human need to separate the chaff

from the wheat; to protect the chaff, to frame every painting in its compliment, so that the painting itself is forced into the background. The world of art to them is in another country; over there, across the bridge, for example. Not that it is very far away, but that any version of public transportation destroys

any prospect of arrival. If they must go in at all, most people would prefer to enter The Garden of Earthly Delights with a book in hand. Or a knife. O but one day, the paintings will enlarge their boundaries and swallow us all. In our sleep, even. We'll be lost to the city then, happy as mechanical difficulties

can be, and the parable will unravel itself like a ball of yarn chased by a cat. Although for now the cat is cute, curled up as he is on the bottom of the tub. (I have a cat; his name is Caliban. And soon I will get rid of him.) When I am more solvent, I am nevertheless allergic to all the prospects. The

latest in a long line of good looks, as in highway magic and highway robbery, girls are better than signals at making traffic crawl. Better than collisions! On its hands and knees. That which didn't appeal to the corpse was the clamoring over fences along the obstacle course which makes up to us for the

abbreviation of our lives. Our lives together. And you, referring to yourself, say, "A kitten sleeps peacefully in the chamber of my heart. Like a locomotive, the spectre of the past is at work on its loom." And in vented whispers, "I am the host of the alien spore." It is a white glove test, and you failed.

Whatever A Catalyst Is

She doesn't work here,
The muse. She plays

The poetry of Catalyst—Roman poet
Of the lewd sublimity?—the closing line

Was composed by a child of 100% Dakron
Polyester, from Akron, Ohio. Like a child

Of 100% Dakron polyester, from Akron, Ohio, I too
Feather along through life, passing myself off

As I do as some sort of vestibule. That and my
Last vat of responsibility to the House of Wax

That school was. Is this any way to run a
Chamber of Horrors? The vast plain of irrationality

My familiar terrane. What I mean to say is, first
You beat around the bush until the poem is

Cornered, then you move in
Like a dog-catcher.

