

Novlets

LEE WARNER BROOKS

*On the 400th Anniversary of the 1609 Publication
of Shake-speares Sonnets—2009*

♯ LOVNETS ♯

Mary

She feels his eye upon her in the dances,
Heavy in a way she doesn't like;
She knows his name is Johnnie—Johnnie Francis—
And his older brother they call Mike.

It's Mike who is the fiddler in the band;
This Johnnie only plays a silly drum,
A calfskin on a hoop. She holds her hand
Along her throat—his glances seem to come

And tug upon the row of buttons there
From far across the room; it makes her feet
Go quicker in the dance; it makes her stare
Ahead at nothing, feeling incomplete.

But later, when he asks her if she'll go,
She cannot find the word to tell him No.

Slowly

I'll tell you later of their lovemaking;
It wasn't what you think—impetuous,
Or—How they met, that day, in Munising,
That's what I mean to tell—when some of us

Went biking on Grand Island. Hills were steep,
And trails descended into scree, or sand,
While just beyond a fringe of birch, blue deep,
Lay Lake Superior. They never planned

On this—a chain derailed—a chance encounter.
Conversation that began in haste
Was finished later—slowly. When he found her
On the dock, her fiancé had raced

Ahead and left her unattended and
Unsatisfied—as one might say—unmanned.

Married People

Even married people think of love
Sometimes, while waiting in a room of strangers
Watching someone pulling off a glove
Exposing naked fingers and the dangers

Of unguarded movements. Even married
People dream of what they never had
While working through another weary, harried
Afternoon; and sometimes they feel sad

While driving home from work; they wonder if
Decisions made so long ago were smart,
And when they pour a drink, they pour it stiff,
And speak the truth—and that's when troubles start.

Some day, they'll ask—What was I thinking of?
But who can blame them, if they thought of love?

Contraband

He passed her in the bottled water aisle
And noticed summer skin—not thin, but slim—
And no overt intention to beguile—
She's shopping now, oblivious to him.

Six minutes later, at the register—
A second chance. Although it only was
A stolen glance—he didn't stare at her—
She felt its pressure, as a woman does.

Her right-hand fingers moved to touch her ring
As if to say—*I'm married—Can't you see?*
But then he glanced again, while debiting
His groceries—so that she, unconsciously,

Began to tug and twist her wedding band
As if to say—*Oh damn! Get off my hand!*

**A Nocturne for St. Lucy's Day,
The Shortest Day of the Year**

—Reprise of a poem by John Donne

The shortest day is done; the longest night
Now well begun; St. Lucy's sinking sun
Can sink no more; the waning moon in flight
Has fled as far from earth as moon can run.

St. Lucy's "Day" did not deserve the name—
Say rather—Iron-cauldron-full-of-mist,
Or Candle-that-extinguishes-its-flame,
A twilit noon that night could not resist.

The lamps grow dim; a power outage grips
The hemisphere with shortages of heat
And light; St. Lucy's arid page now drips
With damp, as frost engages hands and feet.

My vigil of St. Lucy's night is done;
This dome, once lucent with your love, has none.

Star Death

Chillness settles in the windy dark
As winter sweeps the warm off of the lake
And lacework rafts of ice appear, embark,
And batter end to end until they break;

Still lying here beside you, though each night
Achilles reincarnate stalks my dreams,
Attacking from the dark—*I have to fight
Him or he'll kill us both!*—or so it seems.

In chiliastic sleep, my muscles tensed,
I lunged—*He swerves to hit me with his car!
I crack his windshield with a bat!*—I sensed
Your presence, even then—a still, blue star

Whose firelight pierced a billion years of space
Till chilled at last on ice as fine as lace.

Whooping

In the shallows of the Mississippi
In Moline, a crane stands looking north
Toward Iowa, and like a jaded hippie
He seems lost in fumes that issue forth

From dessicated features of his brain.
It's dawn; he has all day to fish and eat.
And though the river's feathered by new rain
And currents mimic minnows at his feet—

Despite the lightning on the Iowa shore—
The urgency is gone; he can't remember
What he used to rise so early for.
But he still sees uprisings in November

When the whole flock lifted like one wing
And females used to sip the sky and sing.

Sharing a Pear

Unblemished, freckled yellow, yielding—ripe,
Apparently. I pick it up. Its scent
So mild, no tang of citrus-grower's hype—
Instead, a rugged Robert Frost ferment

That rises from the orchards where this pear
Was once a flower. Let me take the knife
We used for slicing cheese and start to pare
A slice for each of these who gave me life,

To sever skin and then unmuscled flesh,
Releasing fragrant mists of fructose—sweet
As Jesus in the crèche, and just as fresh—
Recalling how my mother, as a treat,

Would feed me pear halves, canned in syrup—sweet
When sweet was all the flavors I would eat.

Shakespeare in Love

The lover does not love the one he loves
Nor limn his love's allurements on his heart,
No more than he would put on leather gloves
Before love's fleshly lucubrations start.

No—what the lover loves is love itself,
And what the lover sees in loving eyes
Is not her loveliness but laundered pelf
Of his desire in loving-fair disguise.

What does the gaze of fondest lover seek
Except a glass in which his own intent
To touch and take is mirrored back in meek
Obedience?—She must see what I meant—

But then, why does she yield to my desires?
Because—She loves the luster she acquires.

Once

Once you said you still love all the ones
You loved before me. Once you start to love,
You told me once, your loving after runs
Forever. This you could assure me of.

So all the ones whom you loved after me,
I gather you must you still love them as well—
How wonderful to love so endlessly!
Forgive me, though, for wondering—Can you tell—

How was it that your love for me once ended?
You were learning how to love a new
One then—Perhaps your love-rule was suspended?
Now, however, you must love me, too—

Again—along with all your other ever-
Loved ones—Twice my lover, twice as clever.

The Mood Pool

I'm fine. I'm totally submerged. I'm living
Just beneath the surface of the mood
Pool, breathing through a narrow straw. It's giving
Me sufficient air. I have no food,

Of course, but I've been living off the fat
Accumulated in my years of stronger
Swimming and of better fishing. That
Sustains me. Surely, I can last much longer,

Treading water, as I am, and breathing
Through this reed I've clenched between my teeth—
Although, at night, unconscious, as a teething
Infant would, I chew it. I bequeath,

To all my children, exponentially,
In equal shares, the joy they've given me.

This Is a Very Short Love Story

You made me fall in love with you—for this
I'm grateful. Otherwise I might have doubted
That my nerves retain their suppleness—
Although, in bliss, composure has been routed—

You are far too beautiful for me.
With years, I've learned I shouldn't volunteer
My defects, but they're here for you to see—
I hope your eye has not been too severe.

I haven't asked your name—still out of breath
At how I spoke, and how you stayed in reach
And answered—Ah! Your smile erases death!
And as for your bare shoulders on the beach . . .

How could I feel as if I'd been forsaken—
When I knew you were already taken.

Gathering*

Along the river, water mallow blooms
In white and lavender; I'm going there
To gather beauties for my empty rooms,
The kind of blossoms girls wear in their hair . . .

Along the river, as I pass, I leave
A wicker trap of willow twigs to catch
A yellow tench, and with tall reeds I weave
A basket for the water mallow patch . . .

Along the river, rotting rush-wool feeds
The water mallow blossoms; here I come—
I've filled my silken pouch with pepper seeds
And in my brocade pocket brought a plum . . .

I found a crane, beyond the water mallow
Patches, wading where the water's shallow . . .

*A poem not included in the *Shi Jing*, the Chinese classic of poetry (*The Book of Songs*).

Learning*

“When dogs or chickens stray, the people know
To search for them; but when their hearts have strayed,
They don’t,” so Meng Tzu said, “The few who go
To find their hearts—for these was learning made.”

What is this “learning” of which Meng Tzu spoke
Almost two dozen centuries ago?
If you recall your heart before it broke,
And what it held, you may already know.

It’s all about the choices that we make:
Remember what was precious in your heart
And take decisions for its precious sake;
In this way gentle learning has its start—

Don’t gain what’s small by paying what is great;
And once you find your heart, lock up your gate.

* This sonnet relies upon the 1998 translation
of *Mencius* by David Hinton.

Understanding*

My Lord the Sun, so bright by day, but gone
By night, said, "Who can say with me that death
And birth, the dead and living, all are drawn
From one deep well, one body, and one breath?"

My Lady Moon, so luminous by night,
Invisible by day, said, "Who can climb
To heaven on a flying-dragon kite
And linger for infinities of time?"

My Gentle Star, so far, and yet so bright,
At least on cloudless nights, said, "Who can roam
The boundless mists of space, forgetting light—
And life itself—within this spacious home?"

All three then looked around and laughed; their ends
Exactly coincided; they were friends.

* This sonnet relies upon the 1997 translation
of *Chuang Tzu* by David Hinton.

Rapprochement

By dawn the boats are stocked with nets and knives;
Men cross the coves to capes where Codfish goes,
While back in drowsy rooms their kids and wives
Sit down to eat and talk of *deez* and *doze*.

This coast is Celtic sod, the parish next
To westerly of Kerry and West Clare,
A scant two-thousand-mile reach, though vexed
Inveterately by a troubled air

Comprised of countervailing Westerlies
Who've vowed to blow this hard recusant isle—
Where fixity is twisted in the trees—
Across the North Atlantic, mile by mile,

Until at last the folk of Newfoundland
May beach their island on the Irish strand.

A Drinking Sonnet

A sip is but a kiss, a tender lip,
A precipice, a passage to a tongue,
A nip of otherness, a chance to slip
Beneath the neverness of sweets unsung;

And after this, the body of the drink,
The touch or miss, the grapple and the clutch,
It pours and glistens, faster than you think,
Until, the first glass gone—it wasn't much.

There is a god within the second glass
Restoring hope and banishing the fear
Of evil; but the third one, let it pass—
To taste it is to know a devil's near.

The first glass is desire; the second, love;
The third one has no virtue I know of.

♯ LOSSNETS ♯

**As I Lay in Bed After Reading Translations
Of Some Clarifying Poems by Po Chü-i
A Series of Questions Crowded into My Mind,
But I Fell Asleep Before Writing Them Down**

Why should cottonwood seeds drift, and whiten
Pastures, when the snows of winter come
So soon? Why would our well-trained soldiers frighten
Foreign women, and uncover some

Who are no older than their daughters? Why
Was Po Chü-i content, though full of grief?
Was he pulled into orbit by the sky,
Or by the wine? Was it one red-stained leaf,

Or ruffling silk on t'ung wood, self-sufficing
In themselves? Or had his learned guest—
So long-awaited—come at last, so slicing
Dew drops spiced with moon-root made the best

Repast? And if I've nothing to acquire—
Why is my body weeping with desire?

**Breathing with Some Difficulty and Beset
By Dark Thoughts of Home After a Bad Time
With a Woman, I Slipped in the Mud
Along the Mississippi River Near Minneapolis
And Forgot What I'd Been Thinking Of**

I found their cave by the Ohio River—
Drunks exhaled their final fumes there. Turning
Toward the dark, they sank without a shiver
Into liquid flame, a river burning

With the kind of love they never found
In earthen life—this life some woman dragged
Them into. Well—we knew that it was bound
To end this way. As boys, their shoulders sagged,

They ducked their heads, impaled by carrion crows
That perched along their upper edge, with claws
That bloodied their already ruined clothes—
Thank God, I'm not like them. The only flaws

I own are mesotheliomas hung
Like black-dog diamond earrings in my lung.

**Waking in the Dark from a Nightmare,
I Thought to Write Down What I'd Seen,
But, As I Reached for the Light Switch,
I Knocked the Lamp to the Floor**

I watched my father, falling backward, pull
The darkness with him toward that half-dug hole,
Already bubbling poison. He was full
Of scars, his lungs strewn with asbestos, soul

Hard-bound and bent by sharpened steel, his hearing
Severed by machines, his circulation
Down to single lanes, and then—the searing
Shock of hemal stoppage—blood's damnation.

When my heart sustains its final hurt
And heaves to rest, its muscle felled and lumbered,
I will grip the hem of winter's skirt
And float above the commons, unencumbered,

Mounting last-year's horses there, to ride
Above the snows, and up the heavenside.

**Reflecting on How My Life Has Been Spent
Finding Things and Then Losing Them Again,
I Wrote These Words in a Spiral Notebook
Which Two Days Later I Left on a St. Paul City Bus**

A boy, he picked up lumps of metal—screws
And nuts and bits of plating punched and bent
To fit the Big Machine that fathers use
To build the world in which sons' lives are spent—

A puzzle-world of steel, its colors dull,
Its corners sharp, its leavings never green—
And yet he gathered them, a sentinel
On guard for pieces of the Big Machine.

Ignoring others' eyes, he watched the ground
For treasures as he walked, and pocketed
Each weighty, furnace-hardened part he found—
But never wondered what his mother did

When emptying his pockets—had she seen
The precious pieces of his Big Machine?

Reconstructing an Unremembered Childhood

He must have played in Little League—all boys
Did that. He surely saw himself as Mickey
Mantle—though, to see him now—no poise,
No strength, speed gone . . . Come on. Let's don't be picky—

Surely they took him to church, where smoking
Parents stoked the coffee-hour air;
There must have been a snug red vest and choking
Clip-on bow tie that they made him wear.

And in the summers—there must be some reason
Why a ridge of mountain seems to call
Him by a name he never had—a season
When his family travelled to a tall

And slanted land where boys in sneakers run
Full tilt to batter the beleaguered sun.

A Hike to Artist's Bluff

This morning, on the trail, I noticed that
You never once complained the trail's too steep
Or lingered with your lenses pointed at
The view. It seems so easy now, to keep

My pace, ignoring all impediments,
Because, as often as I looked around
To spy your camera—like a seventh sense
That knows what's beautiful—I never found

What part of me persists in looking for.
I never saw you; you were never there.
In fact, you won't be with me anymore.
I reached the rocky cliff, and walked with care

Along its edge of empty air, above
Its chasm's absences that once were love.

One Up

My wife is dead, I said—Don't speak to me
Of loss. The one I loved and long admired
Is gone—the mother of my children—three,
The youngest nearly grown. She always fired
My passions; she remembered what inspired
My hopes; we never spoke of "I," but "we."
We bought a lakeside lot; when we retired,
We planned to build a house in Manistee.

I'll give you "loss," he answered. When you see
The girl you loved, the wife you never tired
Of, reject your bed so she can be
With some wife's husband—When she's left you, mired
In your middling age, alone—Consider
How a simple funeral might be better.

**Finney Coyle's Heart, Like a
Giant Squid Deprived of Meat,**

Is sinking through the mesopelagos—
Where seas soon quench the sun's last feeble trace—
And now, the bathypelagos, morose
And lightless, surely ocean's hell-most place.

His pie-pan eyes, once lunar bright—the beams
That lighted him along toward his prey—
Are powerless against the massive streams
Of benthic black that sweep all gleams away.

These ropey tentacles, with their barbaric
Hooks—these arms, whose suckers once could grip—
Like untied laces drift in hyperbaric
Cold that crushes each appendage tip—

Those longsome arms embraced enticing flesh
His raptor's beak could carve and swallow fresh.

Moon Wrecks

A waning crescent, two days shy of new—
The moon's reflective sphere now floats so near
The rising sun it's all awash in blue.
We only see a fossil's edge from here

A curving coral ridge as pale as bone
So vaguely sketched upon the wine-dark sky
That many captains sailing through this zone
Have run their craft aground before they spy

The lunar iceberg, most of it submerged
Beneath unconscious vacancies of space—
Trajectories of hope, now all converged
In wreckage on the moon's umbrageous face.

When we explore that shore of pure eclipse
We'll find a graveyard filled with crews and ships.

Mud Hounds

Your moods have shredding teeth, like dogs—They bark
Like hunting hounds—the vermin treed, the blood
Scent so enticing to the brain, the dark
Primeval of the throated pack, the mud

Of winter fields bedraggled on their legs—
What they were bred for, killing for the lust
Of it, to shake and crack the neck like eggs,
To tear the bled-limp fur-sack as they must—

Your moods have ripped me, limbs apart; my spine
Persevered at the neck—paralysis
Awaiting death—the rush of warm red wine
On frosted grass as frenzied beasts do this

In rude remembrance of their lord and master—
Would that I had lost your love much faster.

Like I Was Really Lonely

No one came, just as I hoped you would.
You came, and yet I couldn't understand
Why only you were missing—What's the good
Of that? I want the whole unholy band

Of absences—Will I be one of them?
I've been so lonely—longing for a group
Where I'll fit in at last—la crème de la crème—
Curmudgeons of the sort who never stoop

To leave the house, who won't pick up the phone,
Who won't sign up, who won't attend the meetings,
And prefer to stay at home alone
Neglecting holiday and birthday greetings.

Thank you all for coming—All that rot—
And for the invitation—Thank you! Not!

Jewelry

I have many worries—you—are only
One of them. If you had only wanted
To, you might have been a gem—no lonely
Heartless costume art, no jewell haunted

By a evil setting—lost in drawers,
Abandoned in deposit boxes, left
Behind by the deceased, or dropped on floors
And rolled beneath the dresser to a cleft

Against the wall—I've known encounters of
This kind—you'd have been only one of them.
If you were meant to love me—if your love
Had been the diamond precious to my REM

Delusions—if it dangled on the spangled
Banner's hem—then—we'd still be entangled.

Another Divorce Poem

Today is Dead Cat Day. I know this now,
Although my calendar did not reflect
It. Even if I'd seen it coming—How
Would that have saved the cat? I did detect

A whiff of stench around the patio,
But only once I'd finally settled in
To weed around the paving stones. Although
A rake turned up its tines beneath my skin,

It failed to prick the thumb of thought, until
I nearly touched her where she'd gone to die
Beneath a yew bush. Now my senses fill
With it—this smelly skin-bound slush of fly

And maggot. Heavier than I'd expect—
Unbalanced—hard to shovel with respect.

Thick Blood—1

Whence comes this thick blood?—As if our skin
Had been peeled back, the air congealing all
Our ghostly vital fluids there within
And turning blood as black as bilious gall.

The Kings of England sent us to the tree
And hung us by the neck till nearly killed;
Then slit our abdomens' deep cavity
So we could feel our living organs spilled

Into the chilly air; and then, believing
That their victims still felt pain, they hacked
Us into quarters, thus at last relieving
Agony—by blessed death's impact.

Perhaps we feel the pain those deaths cut short,
A debt still owing to the Royal court.

Thick Blood—2

Resistance to disease or fickle change,
Agility, endurance, heavy bones
That never break, propensity to strange
Enthusiasms, fondness for the stones

That jutted from the fertile fatherland
We carry in genetic memory,
And for its green ancestral field and stand
Of trees, its infinite expanse of sea—

And this—the black corrosive liquid trapped
Within our brains like whiskey in a keg—
All came from distant ancestors, gift-wrapped
In microscopic codes of sperm and egg.

Do we survive despite this caustic liquor?
Or live because it makes our blood flow thicker?

**A Nameless Rose
Would Smell So Sweet**

To name your joy's to lose it; I will not
Name you. Apparently, I have no joy
To spend. That may be why I've never thought
To speak your name aloud, which would destroy

My claim to sympathy. How trivial
My sorrow is—unless it flows from loss—
No one respects the common chemical
Depression, a complaint the casual toss

Of medication in its general
Direction can alleviate. True loss—
Abandonment, divorce, or burial—
Affixes each who lost it to a cross,

An honor rooted in unquestioned merit—
Only those with nameless joys can bear it.

Time

Surrealing Time, slow-reeling on the screen
Of consciousness your suasive technicolor
Videos, your audios of keen
Invidious inanities, all duller

Than the dust beneath your slowly grinding
Mill. One sorry season turns upon
The fleeting next; and whether we are finding
There delight, dejection, or have gone

Beyond them both, your slowly turning wheel
Keeps rolling—no fast forward, no rewind—
And though in times of stress we think we feel
It stop . . . that pause is only in the mind.

You roll the film until the last, absurd
Rhyme-stealing scene, the final line and word.

Thus Always

Sic semper tyrannis! Thus Booth cried,
And dropped the smoking pistol as he slashed
At Major Rathburn's arm, then boldly tried
To leap, but caught his booted foot and crashed

Onto the stage—thus breaking his leg badly.
He'd envisioned it a thousand times;
The real event, however, had been sadly
Out of kilter, like a broken rhyme.

Intending to declaim, then shoot to kill;
Instead, he fired his shot and after spoke
His rebel's line, which Lincoln, lying still,
Thus never heard. The would-be hero broke

His leg, and Yankee hearts—and, thus, his own—
Tracked down and shot on southern soil, alone.

After the Greeks

“*Kuklops*” his Odioussness y-cleped me,
Observing on me singleness of vision
And the circularly single ye
I had afore succumbing to incision—

Oh, Dissingest! Who set afire the stick
And spun her glowing mordant tip smack through me,
Pierced her pupil’s black and plunged me thick
In such a pitchful ache, such gleamless gloomy.

On these latter days the hunt be hard
Though sit me ever still and wait for food
To stray all stupid-like into me yard
And though me double ears be double shrewd.

These bones a-clatter on me cavern floor
Was meaty bits when they was living yore.

Wanting

Bejesus gone, the customs of the clan
Look crazy. Woman, she just ain't the same—
She lost what once belong to make a man
Get up and make a song about her name.

It used to be bejazzments in the air
Romagnetizing woman's hair, and eyes
Electrolyzing bone; and just a flare
Of hip be like a hook to hypnotize.

That woman, just a girl. It ain't your voice
She listen for, but Momma, and her friend.
That thing you wanted—that don't be her choice;
She want a baby, and the coin to spend.

That woman on the far side of the river—
What she want you can't no more deliver.

♯ GODNETS ♯

Turning North on I-75

God's beard? I thought—Or only fuming cloud
Formations shading the metropolis?
Or—Is the west side burning, and this crowd
Of cars a slurry of bituminous

Coal rushing down a chute to feed the flames?
I see, beyond the smoky gray, a blue
Papyrus sky—inscribed, perhaps, with names
Of the elect—I hope, of me and you.

The flowing cirrus script is graceful, but
I can't decipher it. Still, as I exit
Heading north, the sun begins to cut
The thickest clouds—a shaft of gold connects it

To us—Someone—*JESUS!*—striding right
Toward us, through a valley filled with light!

How the Gods Get So High

I cannot see the gods to whom each drop
Of brain-oil trickling from my nose and ears
Becomes a sacrifice; I cannot stop
The constant pressure of the creaking gears

They crank to crush the olive in my skull;
I can't detect the savor of the smoke
The oil makes—it's imperceptible
To me—but to the gods, a single toke

Of burning human brain-oil extract is
A bright intoxicant of high degree,
A pleasure drowned in caverns measureless—
The sacred Alph, the Xanaduyan sea.

I cannot see these gods, but by my head
I know them, who on honey-dew hath fed.

Guantanissimo

From shared pain come shared meanings. And joy—
That demon-twisted respite from the pain
That shapes our meanings—only can annoy
Us and distract us from the truth. The brain

Forgets itself, and loses force—and yet—
Despite the blandishments of happiness—
Which smiled in that entrancing way and let
You slide your hand down further and caress

The rounder flesh beyond—your mind still craves
The meanings only misery provides.
No—we don't share our joys; we share our graves.
And we don't care for toys, or virgin brides—

We worship God, the truth, the torturer
Who holds the knife, the torch, the drooling cur.

Coercion

Norrie Frye observed that cogently
Constructed verbal sequences can seem
To have inherent power, inerrantly,
To cause us to assent, which we may deem

To prove the presence of a unity
Of consciousness or reason, a conception
Called the *logos*—a community
Of spirit from which there is no exception;

And from here, with one small step, we leap
Up to the notion of a deity—
A motion that, while slight, runs sheer and steep,
And counter to the force of gravity.

Though bully words coerce men to assent,
Do any stones or stars know what they meant?

Flightless—On 9/11

Black coffee spilt in small white cups, a lot of
Steeply jungled mountains in the distance,
A glowing sea—a scene we never thought of
Till that day. Without devout assistance

We would still be wrapped in self-delusion;
On that day, those lightless souls, who up
Till then were luckless, too, and in confusion
Boasted of their lust for death, blew up

The comfort we once took in numbers and
In towering symbols of our super power—
Our reveries fill beaches with white sand,
A continent away from zero hour.

Beloved—we don't need to travel there—
Darkness spills his shadows everywhere.

The Poet's Lexicon of Edible Plants—Fear

Metus vulgaris. Hardy weed that thrives
In brownfields and disturbed terrain, in regions
Overrun by human kind. Survives
Where propagated by the old Norwegians

Who transported seed on Viking ships
Along with spears and battle axes. Roots
Are edible; remove all reddish tips,
And boil like potatoes. Tender shoots,

If gathered early, may be eaten raw;
Eschew the stems and leaves of full-grown plants.
The flowers—blooming white, soon after thaw—
Once dried and steeped like tea—induce a trance

Pursuant to which potent influence
The species varies from its common sense.

The Prophet

My brothers all—A god has passed through me
And moved my tongue! I could not hear the words
He spoke—The god displaced my clarity
Of mind and ear with sounds like feeding birds,

So I know nothing of the lines he read—
Of flights, you say? And fallings from great heights?
Collapsing towers, blazing with our dead,
Who mingle with the stars on desert nights?

I only know the visions of these things
That passed before my mortal sight, as waking
Dreams, just as the god compressed his wings
Within my chest and crushed my lungs, still aching

From unwanted visitation—Blame
The god, my brothers! Show the god your flame!

Creed

There is only one reality,
One consciousness, one life, and only one.
Believe in borders and security—
Deceive yourself—the truth is, there are none.

But there are many deaths; we reproduce
And then must needs make way for spryer seeds;
If we did not, long since—we can deduce—
Life would have starved itself; instead, it feeds.

It's bio-logic—separate entities
As such are temporal accommodations
Destined to shuck off identities
And then descend to biodegradations.

One life shines in the endless dark of space;
The dark has yet to dim its living face.

Painted Dust

I felt it as the smallest bending inward
Of my head hairs in the dark—as if
I'd strayed into a cave, descending sinward
Toward Hell's lightless fires—a razor's cliff

There in the dark that only Grace could save
An errant step from faltering over—It
Was only that small pressure, in the nave
Of Satan's lowly ceilinged Church of Shit

That warned me my eternal part was dying,
Slipping at the chasm's edge, and falling
Toward the chanting demons prophesying
Wealth out of their golden throats, and calling

For more war, more torture, more unjust
And palling lust, more death, more painted dust.

George Herbert

The priestly poet, praying but not finding
God, exhorts us—*Once more pray! Get down
Upon thy knees!*—insistently reminding
Us to brave God's unresponsive frown;

*If thou hadst lost a glove or ring, he asks,
Wouldst thou not look?* And so it's up to man,
It seems, among his other daily tasks,
To search for God as humbly as he can.

And yet, *What woman* [or what god] *who has
Ten coins and loses one, won't light a flare,
And search until she finds it?* So, whereas
George Herbert's God shuts out the sound of prayer,

The God of Jesus seeks the sinner out,
And, when he finds him, makes a joyful shout.

Pricked Out

Absurdly, stuck while pushing through a pricker
Thicket, I called out. It seemed as though
A presence flickered up in answer, thicker
Than the arid mountain air. We know,

Of course, that deities cannot exist,
That consciousness as such is just a seeming
Iridescence, like a rising mist
Above a lump of dampish sod left steaming

In the sun—a condensate of brain
Tissue. This density, though, brought a sort
Of orderliness to my thoughts—a sane
And quickened clarity. Though life be short,

Its prickers, like mosquitoes, pierce the skin,
Extract our blood, and stick their poison in.

A Bestiary for the New Year

I meet this year as if emerging from
The needle's eye, by which I mean that I,
Unlike most camels who aspire to come
This way, have no desire to deny

My camelarity. The elephants
Who weep beside the wizened waterholes
Of Zambia, the tube worms by their vents
Of hydrothermal smoke, the purblind moles

Who claw the unseen mud—we're all explained
By what we lack, like Galahads in search
Of what will fill this grail we found—sustained,
In this, by Loss—the altar of our church.

Your faltered heart has strangely filtered mine
And made sweet water from acidic wine.

No Room at the Inn

The place to be reborn is soft, but hard
To find; a star-burnt country, strewn beneath
A stable's feet. Consider that canard
About the mustard seed—sown in a sheath

Of soil, the least of seeds becomes a tree
So large that all the heavens' birds have come
To nest within its branches. I can see
A deal of meaning here, my love, that some

Would say may touch man on his hardest part—
His head, that is—but soft, my lady, have
Compassion on your countryman—have art
To ply and delve with me, and so to salve

A soul that wallows in its flesh—subsume
My hardened longing, so—relent; make room.

This Poem Has No Epiphany

Epiphany comes only once a year—
But camel-keepers knelt down in the straw,
And certain shepherds heard the midnight clear
From nearby hills—they gathered all they saw

To mind, to tell that waiting son or brother
Who was left behind to watch the sheep:
*A peckish newborn, his long-staring mother—
And her husband, starting from hard sleep*

*To see this band of foreign travelers
Bust in, all wrapped in desert robes, belts creaking
Leather, buckled gold, and leopards' furs—
We shepherds backed away—the strangers speaking*

*Their babellic tongues—the stable air
Fell sick with odors never tasted there.*

My Name Is Legion for We Are Many

When next the unclean demons intricate
My mind, I'll bid them enter in a herd
Of swine, whose cloven brains will goad them straight
To Galilee to drown. With one strong word

I'll will it; then, the demon legion will
Decamp, each shade alighting in a single
Pig, inciting it to climb the hill,
Fall down the cliff, and sip the kool-aid—mingle

Where a minnow-catching boy would wade
Had pullulating corpses not polluted
That sweet sea. But when the cleansing's made—
And clefted, porcine minds have been occluded,

Swart with death—Where will the demons flee?
Do demons die? Or doth death cleave them free?

Easter

Lord, let me die on Easter morning, early,
As the sun arises in the East,
While ungendered angelic forms with curly
Hair, in dawn's chromatic colors, feast

Upon the buttery non-caloric light
That cuts through glass thick-coated with hibernal
Dust—They feast, and sing their joyful, bright
Uplifting Easter hymns, while in the vernal

Warmth the lilies of the valley bloom,
Forsythia and daffodils bestow
Their sunny yellows, and within the room
Wherein I lie, the trumpet, flute, oboe,

And violin all raise their treble voices
Higher, as my Easter soul rejoices.

Monk

Immured within his solitary cell,
The monk, like other inmates, has one thought—
Of wings to carry him away to dwell
Beyond the spider's web in which he's caught.

His every prayer and deed arise from this—
The longing for escape from sticky spider's
Webs of drudgery, and from the kiss
Of forced obeissance to enfeoffed insiders.

Yet he calls the wings he longs for "faith,"
The walls that hem him in are "discipline,"
And that bright land of freedom—where the wraith
Of longing flees the spider's web—is "sin."

And so we learn that hating life is "pious"—
What we need is tighter weed to tie us.

Whitefish Bay

*And then God said—Walk down this stony beach
And let your hands and eyes select the stones
That seem most beautiful—that make you reach
And clasp and hold them to the light; their tones*

*Of red or green; their curves, like wooded hills;
Their ragged edges, cliffs beside a road
Through mountain passes; and their glittery rills
Of mica, like a snow-fed stream or lode*

*Of silver ore. Pick up the ones that make
You drop the rest. Then pick a hundred more
Cold asteroids of loss that make you ache.
Last, pick the best, the one that you came for,*

*And throw that stone far out where water's deep.
Now—come to me, remembering what to keep.*

Driving East on I-94

When I saw them in my rear-view mirror—
Massive flumes of channeled sunlight, flowing
From the clouds—These thoughts became much clearer:
Where this line of traffic must be going;

Why Greek temples had those fluted pillars
Holding up their roofs; and how our freeways
Got so flat. Without binoculars
We see how every day, in two or three ways

We must die and die again. When I
Heard soothing woodwinds in your words, my ear
Concluded flutes should all play truth, not high,
And should be tubes of wood, not silver. Here

It is—the gentleness of splintery grasses,
Godliness in wintry underpasses . . .

♯ LITNETS ♯

**The Poet Is Chastised for Always
Writing in the Same Form**

The sea speaks only Greek. The poets speak
Mostly of wine. His wife says, "Listen—Homer!
Always with the dactyls! Can't you tweak
It sometimes? Always the hexameter!"

And how come seas must always look like wine?"
And Homer, such an understanding sort—
"Well—now you mention it—it's true. My line
May get monotonous—too long? Too short?"

A mite predictable? Too much the same?
Yet—all the best songs are recited in dactyls!
And—I just read an article?—The name—
Escapes me—but—it says my lines are fractals!

Very hip! And then the sea, to me,
Is 'oinops'—that's its 'epithet'—you see?"

Saint William

It snowed this day of April twenty-third—
The holy day of English poetry,
On which we sanctify the wilful Word
Who cast aside his servant's livery

And went a-hunting in the nobles' wood.
While ambling unrepentant o'er the mead
He took a hart, and then, like Robin Hood,
Distributed the venison to feed

The poor who hungered there for righteousness
And thirsted for the everlasting life
That eloquence bestows on comeliness.
The Word has carved our portions with a knife

Fresh-whetted on the spinning stone, while snows
Of blessing fall upon the blooming rose.

Survival

It's said bad writing yields a bitter grain
Which harvesters would sooner leave alive;
I heard a sickly poet once complain,
The worse you write the longer you'll survive.

So when fine poets leaf out in the spring
The Reaper plucks and eats their tender shoots,
Not waiting for what season's end would bring,
The lavish blossoms, followed by the fruits.

If some are lionized, and die too early,
What of those who write and are rejected?
They're like Chuang Tzu's tree, so bent and curly,
Carpenters pass by it, unaffected—

The stone rejected is the cornerstone;
The twisted tree, ailanthus, stands alone.

Digitalica

The obsolete technology involved
A pale absorbent surface into which
A thread of dark adhesive was dissolved
And then reconstituted stitch by stitch.

Among its many defects, this technique
Relied upon a biological
Receptor, which was shown to be too weak—
Extremely slow and unreliable.

The new technology, as you perceive,
Transmits my data, coded for detection
By an implant programmed to receive
Without a bio-chemical connection.

This sonnet was not written down or read
But digitally transferred to your head.

Twelve

I landed in this hilly Indian town
Of fish and manioc; I found a shack
To live in on a road that circles down
Along the shore and then comes slanting back.

I learned some words to share with those I meet.
Their answers I don't always understand
But every time I pass them in the street
They smile kindly and hold out a hand.

That's all the conversation I desire;
I have twelve gospels—Twelve are all I need.
At night, I sleep beside a glowing fire;
By day, I pace my stony yard, and read.

And when I feel impelled to answer back
I sit and make a page of white and black.

Writing Life

In secrecy I ply my makery
Two dozen blackbirds ovened in a pie;
A baker's decade bent on bakery
And acres plowed and opened to the sky.

My home's an uffish hoard of vorpal verbs,
Of frabjous rhymes and frumious adjectives;
My manxome nouns sit fuming on their curbs
Beyond where beamish Boy Iambic lives;

I mail out clues to slithy gimble toves,
Who can't attack the crust of brillig truth;
They send the mimsy back in oaten loaves
Each hard enough to crack a tulgey tooth;

I knead the dough of cheeriocrity
I kneel before the jabberwockracy.

Master of Fine Arts

The female's smaller than the male and subtler
In her weather-dusted markings, while
The male attends us briskly as a butler
Or a liveried footman, in a style

Expressive of a most ebullient air—
Or so the eye informs us—though the eye
Knows nothing of the life of birds—not where
Their flutterings have their impetus, nor why

The female likes a song pitched somewhat higher
Or with grace notes that much quicker—We
Could teach the male, with mini-discs and wire,
To sing a slightly sharper frequency—

And if we do, will she be satisfied?
Or say—by flying off—our master lied?

Blue Hair

This sonnet was not always ash and bones,
With ice-blue hair and winters in her eyes;
She did not always speak in faltering tones
As if anticipating her demise;

No—she was once a charm for love, emerging
Newborn, rosy, plump, with wispy hair,
Dilated eyes, and tiny fingers, urging
With her softest cries our tenderest care;

And such we earnestly besought to give her,
Lavishing our best laetificant
Upon her, hotly striving to deliver
Her from metrical malnourishment.

And yet, poetical agility
Could not stave off her stark senility.

The Poets Utter the Unword

Until I felt it vibrate in my throat
I didn't notice I was noticing
The *hunh!* the poets make—more like a note
Than any word, and not like anything

I'd call a comment or applause, and yet
That voiced involuntary sound we make
Is praise—perhaps the highest you can get
From fellow poets—very hard to fake.

It happens when a poem ends correctly—
With a quiet *click!* as all the pieces
Seem to slide at once, yet indirectly,
Into place, as if its hidden creases

All aligned and made the whole device
Unfold in sudden colors—*hunh!* So nice!

Disarming Handshakes

The classical handshake, as demonstrated
On King Pentheus: Step One—His mother
Grasped him by the ears and separated
Head from shoulders. Two—One of two other

Sisters braced her foot against his splayed,
Decapitated form, then gripped and wrenched
His arm till the entire shoulder blade
Broke free. Step Three: The final sister, drenched

In gore, tore off his one remaining arm.
The Anglo-Saxon handshake, as devised
By Beowulf: Grip hands, and squeeze to harm—
Burst every bone—and when the beast, surprised,

Attempts escape, hold tight, so he must crack
His shoulder off to flee. Don't give it back.

Wooden Ships

Scorn not these sonnets, critic—You may find
Them sounder than you know, all clinker-built
On silverballi keels and snugly-lined
In oaken plank to sail in salt or silt;

Their counter-curving lines of ghosted grain
And rows of brazen bolts with sunken heads
Align along a stem that cuts a lane
From pier to shore through sun-drunk infrareds.

To measure out our pace, we turn the glass
And drop the log, then count the knots by feel
At each five feet of line. When four knots pass
Three times, we turn and double down the reel.

Yea, though our craft be small, our ocean's deep;
For every wind we lose, we get to keep.

NOTES

“Learning”—I rely on David Hinton’s translation of *Mencius* (Counterpoint, 1998), at Chapter 11, Master Kao, Book One, Sections 11-15.

“Understanding”—I rely on David Hinton’s translation of *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, §§ 10 & 11 (Counterpoint, 1997).

“Coercion”—Northrop Frye’s observation can be found in Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* 9 (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

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