

The Long and Short of It

Poetry by

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Poems at Play

Stormy Weather

It's always somewhere else

A blip on the Doppler radar
somewhere outside of
my town
the Skycam shakes
as rain and hail hit the lens
and recorded thunder crashes through my television
better than any movie,

I watch the strip
of county names lined up in red
across the bottom of my screen
like brave little soldiers
one after another:
Watches
Warnings
Thunderstorms
Tornados
Flash floods

We clutch our flashlights and radios
Just in case
Line up our candles
On a commercial break
Keep the matches
where we can light them
in the dark

Ominous photos of green sky
and black clouds
are taken by brave viewers
in the eye of the storm
and presented for my warning
"STAY INSIDE YOUR HOUSE!"
the weatherman says.

And miss this?

I should be as lucky as they are.

The sky is only gray
in my yard
trees sway to a gentle wind
against the backdrop
of siren echoes
Their leaves soak up misty rain,
relief from the last days'
heat wave

I look heavenward
like a child waiting for Santa Claus
I smell the water in the air
condensing by the minute
as the temperature dives
and thunder roars
and the streak of perfect white-yellow
tears open the clouds
like a spear

and it's here
at last

Water once taken from earth and stream
returned
to land.
It's all part of the cycle
Nature's catharsis

My heart rejoices.
After any good cry
We all feel
so much better

Innocence

Sitting in the back yard
we blow bubbles of
soap and glycerin,
in perfect spheres,
watch reflected rainbows in their corners
that fly off to heaven
where promises are kept

We pretend that dandelions
are kisses of sunshine
and we make fun of the neighbor's yard
with the plain green carpet

We watch the little yellow suns turn white
and we pick some
to blow kisses,
to make wishes,
when the dandelions
go to seed

We say a prayer with each white petal
that disappears into that blue sky
so happy to share our joy with the world

We know the neighbors will love us
when the sunshine lands on their lawn

Casey in the Dugout

*A parody, and sequel to Ernest Thayer's **Casey at the Bat***

Once the field was emptied and the crowd had been dispersed,
Casey's loyal fans did yell at him and tell him he's the worst

The once compliant baseball fans became an angry mob
And those who'd begged for autographs, now called the man a slob

They said, "You're not a hero, you're a rotten little hack!
You'll see Infernos freeze before we're covering your back!"

But Casey kept his chin up, and his head remained up high,
those pissants wouldn't get to him—oh no, he'd rather die

Yes, even in the locker room the atmosphere was cruel,
the team mates that he called his friends were calling him a fool

Flynn called up his bookie—he had money on the game
"I never should have bet on you," the rookie did complain

And Blake, though not as angry, couldn't look him in the eye,
"We needed a true athlete, not an ordinary guy."

Casey said, "You lousy ingrates, I can't carry this whole club!
I suppose you'll say it's my fault, when Flynn is beaten by some thug!"

Though some just hit the showers, others beat him to a pulp
but Casey swore within himself, he never would give up

The last one in the locker room, Casey sat there in the dark
He conjured up revenge before he headed to the park

The plan was not to practice or improve his baseball skills
but only make them think he had, and bend them to his will

So Casey called the bookie, and he said, "I'll make you rich—
just meet me in the dugout at precisely 10:06"

He told him to tell no one—it was all part of the plan,
The bookie said, "whatever dude, your wish is my command."

So Casey taught the bookie how to work the pitch machine,
"They'll think I'm hot at practice, they'll forget this horrid scene"

But Casey was real tired, always having to do well
He was ready for the dark side, yeah this bookie sure could tell

The payoff was next Thursday, that's when Mudville faced the Bears
They'd never ever won a game, and didn't seem to care

"Their lucky day is Thursday," Casey said, laying his cash,
The eager bookie took it, and he tucked it in his stash.

He laughed, "Hell hath no fury like a shortstop that's betrayed.
It's been nice doin' business," and he scurried on his way

The fans forgot the strikeout when next Thursday came around
and packed 'em in to see the certain Mudville take the crown

But the Bears had really practiced when they heard of Mudville's fall
Their fans attended sparsely, but that team would please them all.
Against the mighty Mudville, Bears had tied the game at two,
Then a line drive went to shortstop, while our Casey tied his shoe.

The ball rolled right through Casey's legs and out to Centerfield
The guy on third, he rounded home—the Bears fans loudly cheered.

The Mudville fans yelled "Bench him!" and the manager complied,
Saying, "What's wrong with you Casey? Damn, you didn't even try!"

Casey said, "Uh, sorry coach," and quickly scurried home.
He opened up a cold one as he waited by the phone.
Soon he met the bookie who dispersed to him his winnings,
He said, "Hey Casey, stick with me—it's only the beginning."

Casey said, "Ah, naah—this is enough. I'm retired, don't cha know."
And he booked himself a cruise out to the Gulf of Mexico.

Heading to the Park at Midnight

I snuck out my window
with my backpack
on my shoulder,
and disappeared again
into the black and starlit night

I cut through the back yard,
through the neighbor's yard,
to the schoolyard
where the moon shone
on the white lines of the blacktop

And the swings sung,
clanked a melody
that longed to be a lullaby

But I couldn't sleep
While the crickets planned their course
and I connected with the source
so high above me.

I believed that I could
pull and pump my legs
and soar,
until it wouldn't matter anymore.

And I never wanted to go back

I loved the danger,
stealing time,
when no one knew I was gone.

And I wondered,
who would care if I did?

So I jumped
into the sky, the black cocoon
and landed hard
leaving grass stains on my pajama bottoms
and pebble marks on my hands

And I took home all the scrapes
and bumps
as evidence
that I belonged to something
for a moment.

But I hadn't been prepared,
So I climbed
back in my window
back into bed to a dream
of my hatching day

when I would fly for real.

We Can Be Whole

I know how you feel,
Standing there, imprisoned by that counter,
Smiling at me as you sell me
Saxophone reeds for my teenaged son.

You have music in your soul.
That's why you took this job
At the Music-Go-Round,
Where you brave the guitars' discord,
The drums' misbeat,
Just to hear the occasional customer,
Who knows what she's doing.
Someone just right
To join your band.

You could say,
You discovered her,
Hidden in some scraping by, single mom
Who can only afford
To let her son play a saxophone
With dents and scratches.

I know, Honey,
Because if you want it bad enough,
You can pull anything
Out of that dissonance.
I know, because I can hear David Sandborn
From my thirteen-year-old's beat up sax.
The one he only plays
When I bribe him.

But that's all right.
Because all I got's
This half-way vicarious life.
Just like you.

I bet you stay sometimes,
Past your shift,
With the doors locked,
And the lights dim.

Polishing the horns.
Tuning the guitars.
Tweaking the place just as close
To heaven as you're gonna get,
Before you head to that gig,
Hoping against hope,
That the right person will be
At the wrong place.
Just like I am now.

Oh, I can relate to your halfway existence.
I can carry a tune,
I know a few chords,
And if I join your band,
I wouldn't be like one of those cute little chicks.
You see fronting half the other bands.
So you'd have your niche.

Honey, we can be whole.
We'll hit the club scene.
Tour the city, then the state,
Then the country.
Before you know it,
We'll be headlining at the XCell Energy Center.

We can take my son along,
He can play that sax solo,
From his eighth grade band concert.
Everyone will say,
"Wow! He's just like David Sandborn!"
And you would smile at me,
Tell me how it's all heredity.
The kid gets all his musical talent
From his mother.

I would stop and smile too,
Give credit where that credit's due.
Because before you,
It was all Tuna Helper and Twinkies.

I'll tell you, Honey,
From one half somebody to another,
We should do this.
We can be the biggest thing
Since Peter, Paul and Mary.
Only our answer isn't blowing in the wind somewhere.
It's right here, right now.
All you gotta do
Is drop the keys to that register,
And we can fly.
No more halfways.
We can be whole

She Thinks

She thinks that Love is
Prince Charming standing
at the bottom of her balcony
off to one side
so she has to cock her head
into the moonlight
while he fidgets
too tongue tied
to find words on his own

She will hear a reverse echo,
a whisper coming from a rustling bush
where her love is prompted by a dreamer.
He keeps his gaze on her smile
while he makes out which words to tell her
which song to sing.
He brings the kind of delight
that scares away rain clouds, mosquitoes,
and all the fierce guard dogs and dragons
of her heart.

The ivy branches that grow
up against her castle
will hold him somehow
as he climbs them gracefully to her side,
and reality begins to take the place
of dissolving dreams
and the dreamer scurries into an enchanted forest
to awaken his beloved
with a kiss.
She will have no need for make believe
or fairytales
for he will love her whether or not
her fairy godmother comes
to turn the oversized T-shirt she wears to sleep
into a ball gown

And she will love him
even if he's afraid of the dark
and cannot sing
or if the mosquitoes still bite them
in the moonlight

It's all good.

Cinderella, Juliet, or Jane.
She'll still keep wishing
on a star.

Midwest Serenade

I set up my music in the stereo
for this night's meditation
captured seagull calls
the rush of the ocean
somehow I feel the light
from a distant lighthouse
shine like a beacon
within me
with or without emergency
In my mind I see the birds
climb through the sky
to conquer mountain tops
and I marvel at their determination
no obstacle too high
All my little chaoses vanish
with the sweet sounds
of far away

and I wonder
if those along the coast
ever dream
of my home

Do they see wild flowers and grasses
grace the prairie plain
look out and long for eternity
Do they listen carefully to their whistle
Hear the loons call out in the distance
The dissonant sound of wood ducks and Canadian geese
as their minds watch them fly
across the endless prairie sky
like a giant greater than sign

Do they shudder at the howl of the grey wolf
The babble of streams
The roar of the Mississippi
The chirp of crickets and croak of frogs
Until they feel starlight sprinkle on them
the way it does across the lake
like fairy dust
to take their sleepy heads
to my distant land

Between Time

In dark,
time between time,
while morning sleeps, I gaze
in quiet anticipation
for more

Forget
last night's sunset--
too late for yesterday,
a step before tomorrow's reach
I wait

until
the dawn breaks free
to catch left-over stars,
and swallow the last moon sliver
of night

A Celebration of Craft

Inspiration

The first line is the hardest

It sits there like
the metal crossbar
in front of the railroad tracks
where I am first in line

All my windows are open
The wind and energy
rushes from the train
The rails click-clack to
drown out the radio

Yet I am protected
inside my box
of fiberglass and steel
and when the caboose passes
and leaves behind a sandy cloud

I swoop my arm
out the car window
to capture
the world's debris,
pain and joy
to spill on paper
for you

Requiem for an Almost Poem

The lines came
in the middle of life,
No ink or quill in reach,
I tried to remember,

I tried to remember
each clever turn of phrase
that drifted through my mind
like spirits whispering

when life happened
and I couldn't reach the pen

I said them over and over in my head
like incantation,
like catechism lessons

And I fear God won't give them back

Like a shopper at a one day only clearance sale
I rummaged
like a vulture in search
of a bargain
that someone else would grab
if I didn't

the pressure built
like a forecasted hurricane
and in one swoop it's washed up.
The tide took my words to sea
to live with pirate kings and mermaids

and left me stranded on the shore
in mourning.

Almost

She can see it.
On the other side of the mirror
She yells through
one way glass, like a prisoner.
Like an animal behind a secret window,
she gnaws and scratches
like a rabid cat.

There's a port hole.
All they have to do
is reach through
the liquid atmosphere,
like something out of a Sci-Fi flick
and whatever was missing
is back,
the last piece of the puzzle
securely nudged in its place.

They don't even see her
through their rose colored glasses,
hear her over the echo
of opportunity's knock.
Yet, somehow, she'll get there
'round the back way.
Throw bones to the dog,
Fish to the rabid cat,
Fears to the Jabberwocky

By any means she can.

Because once she decides
what she wants,
there's no stopping her.
Even if she has to break down
the wall.

I Don't Want to Read Another Poem

Right now

I don't want to suck the honeyed essence
from your existence with my twisty straw,
delve into your life and your fantasies.

I don't want to suppose which parts
are true,
or light candles in my mind for you
to try and heal your scars.

I don't want to cover your body
with tracing paper
and run across your tattoos
with my fine point felt tip pen.

I don't want to follow
your regulated dance
spin in circles until the song is lost.

I don't want to grasp at strings
you lay before my feet
like stray pine needles
from a too dry Christmas tree
that the vacuum can never pick up
no matter how many times
I go over it.

No, today
I've had enough of that.
I will close my eyes
to your words and your heart
to the place under my skin
you touch as if you have been
peering in my window.

I will not stop and wonder when
you stuck a camera on the inside
of my ear to record my fear and fantasy
before I even noticed.

I will stop and chase my own boogiemmen
under the bed,
adjust the pillows to my liking
and tell them bedtime stories to fit my mood.

I will tune you out and whisper sweet somethings
in their ears, and yours,
until I'm fully prepared
to give you another turn.

Finding a Place

Fade to Black

You flew in through the open window
with your patchwork Technicolor cape
the superhero suit
you put together from thrift shop finds
and pulled me out of the burning building

I didn't even know it was warm

but you took me through the sky
over tall buildings
and changing atmosphere
through sun and rain
and snow and hail

we sailed

You always wanted to be Superman
and I was your chance
to play the rescuer
I felt safe beside you
You in your silly suit
I felt as normal as never
but it didn't matter

we flew

we flapped our wings
like chickens in the sky
we never should have made it
two feet off the ground
but we flew through space
surfing on Saturn's rings
the Universe was ours until

you dropped me

And I bounced off the clouds
each pillow fell into place
and I was fine
aside from the fear

that you'd forget me

but you didn't

I could still see the way
the corner of your eye
reflected off the birdbath water
while I waited on the balcony
eyes skyward like Lois Lane

I screamed your name

And you came
sometimes
and sometimes the black engulfed you
and I cried
missing our funky chicken dance.

I tried to build wings
from the feathers that fell from the sky
knitting them together
with my own gray hairs
pulling and tying in angry desperation
until you landed on my balcony

and we embraced

The whole world melted
I felt protected
as you took me on a reprise
through the air
and I notice the sequins you added
to your ensemble
and the way we reflected
in the night sky
like swirling comets
until you set me down
gently this time

and you took off

I watched the flashes of color

from the silver sparkle foil
on your suit
wrote notes on paper airplanes
and soared them into space
where you seemed to swat them
like mosquitos
that fell back on my shoulders
like snow

so cold

I longed to be back
in the burning building
and I wondered if the fire
had only been in the furnace
and I had been safe
all along

I launched the last letter
with my sling shot
balled up tight
off like a rocket
so hard and far
you could never send it back
my one last word,
goodbye
before you fade to black

Permission

She wraps herself inside her flannel tomb
to ward off chills that rival winter's breath.
She wonders how she'll dare to grant herself
a chance to move outside her inner shell,
and pull herself from self-inflicted death.

She cannot tell them why she should deserve
the privilege to search for confidence.
There's always someone better, so she thinks.
Her tears well up and stab like swallowed knives.
She wipes her eyes to slowly face the day.

Yet, still, behind a failed distorted glass,
beneath the muck that's wrapped around her heart,
there grows a soft and subtle seed of hope,
that only wants to see the light of day.

Tomorrow, she will find a string of pride,
and braid together strands to grant her strength.
And bit by bit, she'll bring on Doubt's demise,
forgetting all the days she almost quit.

Lurking

I press my ear against a water glass,
keep my eye on the keyhole
to discover your secrets,
hoping your life will bleed
like the red sock
in the washing machine of my mind
and leave me stained.
It covers my skin
like a soft pink blanket
so even as I look in the mirror
there is evidence of you.

I am the clank in the heat register,
the creak in the floorboards,
the wind in the trees.
I peep in your window like Tom,
buzz like the fly on your wall.
I'm right there
with the dust bunnies under your bed.

Why should I get a life
when yours is right before me
all blatant?

You will never catch me.
No matter how many double takes you do
or booby traps you set
I will never trip them.
My professional precision will keep you
guessing,
looking over your shoulder
at nothing.

Or is it something
after all?

Control

Nothing will get me

I will not fall for
all the right moves
false promises
orchestrated smooth talk
silky silver tongue designed
to get me
on your good side.

I know your smile's agenda

The way you sneak
your way in
slither into the hearts of women
with sentiment

I will not fall for it

It is a means to an end
that left unchecked
could mean the end
of me

Your fabricated gestures
are there to impress me
Your bright personality
and sense of humor
a coat you wear in my presence
and quickly hang on the hook
when I leave the room

I ask not what about me
inspires this
What makes you fight
to be better than you are

I am in control

My heart and mind happily
in check
So I will never have to know
the you
behind the mask

Yellow Bird

I saw you this morning again
perched on the bird feeder in the yard
and I peeked at you
like an old friend
through my kitchen window
I stayed silent
knowing my presence
would frighten you

Yellow bird
where do you go
when the crows and jays
come around?

If I could keep them out,
sit outside
in the lawn chair
with a few seeds
in my outstretched hand,
a special treat just for you
I would be there.

I'd like to think
that I would let you land
on my palm,
I would keep
a steady platform.
not shake from awe
when you have come to me.

Through force of will
I would bear the little pangs
as your bird toes dig into my flesh
and your beak draws blood
as you eagerly eat your fill

I would connect with you
as an equal,
blood bird to human
looking for seeds and crumbs

in other people's yards
biding our time against all the bigger birds

But my conditioning cries to me
and we both know
if you flew to me,
offered yourself into my hand
I couldn't resist your capture,
and I would cage you
just to track
your every move.

And so to keep you wild
and free
I stick by my window
track the days
you come and go on visits
while I keep myself imprisoned
in my house.

words

They're just words
symbols with sounds
aligned in patterns
to create
meaning

From the time our children are born
we wait for words
watch our babies' mouths,
decipher their cries, coos and babbles
into imaginary intelligible
language

We think of words
like life, love, hope
and future
we wrap our hearts around
"Ma" "Da" "Ba" and "Hi"

Then they say
goodbye.
Little by little
they face the world
of sticks and stones
and broken bones.

You pray your words
protect them-
Everything you've ever said
Hope it's not all
in one ear
and out the other

Their words get to you
as they break away
discover hurtful things to say
and you wonder where
they've picked up
these harsh, piercing words
that cut you deep like

broken pieces of glass

You tell yourself it's
only a phase.
You take the little verbal lashes
Because you know
growing up is hard

All you can do is listen and
keep talking

Because
when all is said and done
nothing stabs
like silence

Speechless

I can't talk right now.
My mind is full
with indistinct hope
and fear
and disappointment.
The weight of the world spread out
like a blanket on the beach
sun baked, dark colors burn me
from the light that soaks in.

My words have dissipated
like water vapor in the sky
floating miniscule
beyond the range of sight

But I feel them,
and I think maybe something inside me
would like to break the rules,
smash the globe that holds status quo
and walk through a hundred thousand
pieces of glass
to feel
invigorated.

But in the meantime,
the pressure builds
as I collect the world
like the dark clouds
that form slowly from lake water,
river water, oceans and tears
waiting for the right moment
to speak.

Rush

Let the wind drown out
the world
while I fly
blind at
deafening speeds and
disregard my life

I'm suspended

my own blood
presses hard
against the inside
of my skin

my bones sing out
old spirituals
songs to free myself
from my own prison

I glide

angels breathe
across my back
shout
"faster!"

The whip
cracks through my mind
like Belmont stakes

There is no law
or sanity

only balance
as I strive
to make it
past my next mark

Poetry of Conscience

Spin

You spin
around and around
your eyes are glazed over
like blueberry donuts
your hair is mostly matted
but smooth in places
where you brushed it
yourself

It could be so beautiful
if you'd just let me help you

But you scream at the sight
of a hairbrush
in someone else's hand
push me
bite me
run away
cry

You only speak in song
scraps of nursery rhyme
your mother sang before
she sent you away
for your own good
or hers

I don't remember why you are
the way you are
if the cord was wrapped around
your neck
or if your mother drank
or if something else
happened
to make you Ward of the State

You like to wear calico
simple sundresses
from the girl's department
although you're forty-three

But you seem so happy
in your nursery school world
always dancing
always singing
the wrong words

I'm supposed to help you
act your age
but I can't bear to disturb you

I take you to Walgreens
so you can learn
to buy your own shampoo

You sway within the confines
of your seatbelt
bang on the windows
of the minivan

From the rear view mirror
I tell you to be careful
but you just laugh
point at the people
and dance

You try to spin
in the parking lot
wander off
but I take your hand
guide you to the store
where the people stare
and point
and whisper
and I notice

more than you do.

A few months ago
You were aimless
Stared at the bright lights
in the drugstore

as if they were disco balls

You were mesmerized
Spun in circles
Until even you were dizzy
And had to sit
on the cold tile
to find your balance

But now
you know the drill
head straight to aisle three
All I have to do is point at your shampoo
and you grab it.

Right there in the Walgreens
we celebrate.
I let go
and let you dance and sing

You run to the same lady
who called you "retard"
in the parking lot.
You call her "mommy" by mistake
though she's ten years
younger than you

She tells me I should watch you better
keep you home
if you can't behave yourself
learn some manners

I take your hand again
and lead you to the line
I hand you your money
to buy your shampoo

you throw it at the cashier
She tries to hand the receipt
to me.

I tell her I'm not shopping

You are.
And her eyes glaze over
like blueberry donuts.

You look at me
and sing your scraps of songs
and try to spin

But I hold you back

Her eyes glaze
but in that moment
yours don't.

You smile and sing
so proud
and I notice
You are so beautiful.

The Show Must Go On.

twirling on chiffon
you were born to fly
it was in your blood and smile.
you balanced, fearless
as if no other choice
had crossed your mind

and the children watched you soar
in an act gone right
so many times before

you were a child yourself
when they trained you
raised under the big top
just like your own children

and then the scarf gave way
and you fell from your ballet
thirty feet to a concrete stage

and they sent in the clowns
to distract the Saturday afternoon crowd
from the pool of blood around you

that night you died from your injuries,
and the show went on
the next day
with your friends,
your family,
swinging over and around
the spot that took you
as if no other choice
had crossed their minds

Torn

His life lies behind
a theatrical mask
half black,
half white,
like lilies laid on ash as

h o p e
b r e a k s
d o w n

Bells jingle out hymns
of praise and mourning
on bright colors
geometrical shapes
to outline moods

And some laugh
from greener pastures

He stands with a painted smile
drawn from a time of
knights and kings
a royal servant slumming it
with the common folk

We'll never really know
what he scrapes
off the park bench
or the scars he leaves
in the basin
when the paint comes off
at night

We'll only remember
the pockets full
of wildflower petals
he left scattered
across our playground

The long streams
of green
and blue
and red silk scarves
He pulls from yellow pockets
A perfect ending
to a show
too many passer-bys see
only from the corners
of their eyes

Never looking close enough
to notice
if the scarves are torn

as she nears the end, she knows

She is not a winner.
This is not a marathon.
Just another Sunday morning
5K run to honor
the cause of the day.

She received her T-shirt
at the gate,
like the rest of the runners.

It hangs down on her
past her knees,
like the rest of the charity shirts
in her closet.

Like the cause,
Like the race,
it's too big for her

But she tells herself this race is different.
No matter what it takes,
this one she'll finish.

She remembers promising
the same thing
last time.

With her calves faced inward,
bones twisted, lopsided from birth
she forces her feet into the starting block
and she's off

The wind from the other runners
knocks her down,
and most keep running,
don't even look over their shoulders
at the gimp girl
picking gravel from her bleeding knee.

A few offer splashes

of bottled spring water
to wash the wound

She says, "keep running—
that's what you came for"
And they pass her,
walking or running,
as if she's standing still.

She struggles,
trips over her own feet,
scrapes her arms
and legs,
endures the sting
of her own sweat,
and the sideline volunteers that try
to pull her
into the quitting lane.

She almost gives in.

She thinks she must be a nuisance,
stretching the event longer
than anyone ever anticipated.

The shoulders are laden
with the sick and weary,
the ones that gave up
before the end,
the ones she's joined
too often.

She keeps going,
runs along the nearly empty
city street turned track,
watches the sun set
after even the news crews
have gone home,
and hours have passed
since the winner crossed
the tape.

She can barely see
the finish line,
the fanfare cleared away,
all that's left is a thin chalk line.

She falls again,
and as her wounds resurface
she thinks,

"Not this time."

She rises once more to cross
the finish line,
and she knows
she won't take home
trophies or prize money.

Nothing but a free t-shirt
and her pride.

to wish upon a man-made star

on the fourth of july,
somewhere in my quasi-modo nation
a bell ringer plays
"let there be peace on earth"
over and over,
just off key.

I picture Hugo's hunchback man
with a distorted face
there in the belltower
in the country I long to love

and I pray tonight,
amidst the manufactured multi-colored stars
that drown his songs with their glory,
that the gypsies will rescue him,
and that we will all still feel his song resonate
in spite of the night's explosion