

**PUBLISHED POEMS**  
**By Margaret Menamin**



*Pan and Psyche* by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones

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The following sonnet won First Place in Rhymed Poetry, *Writer's Digest's* International Competition, 1994, and was published in *Writer's Digest*, September 1998:

### **THE SONNET WRITES ITSELF**

The sonnet writes itself. The poet may believe he holds the pen, but words take hold with their own fingers, pull his hand away, reshape his truths. He does as he is told.

His rhymes revolve, change partners, amputate their own extremities—which reappear, limp in his murky mind, regenerate themselves, stick tickly fingers in his ear.

His syllables rebel, kick up their heels, spin him in circles, jeer, turn somersaults and finally, as docile as trained seals, show him their Sunday-best iambic waltz.

He signs his name and realizes later he has been flim-flammed: He is a spectator.

The following poems have been published in  
*Iambs & Trochees*:

**THE HARPIES**

(First Place, *Iambs & Trochees*' Formal  
& Narrative Poetry Contest 2002)

1

Faith is the candy wrapper in the street,  
folded to form a multiflavored lie,  
waiting to lure the starving passerby;  
she is the sugar coating, thin and sweet,

that dares to label bitterness a treat.  
Faith holds the fraying rope that dangles high  
above the ominous chasm as you try  
to reach the distant mountain with your feet.

She is the mocking picture in the heat,  
burned on the thirsty brain by treeless sky,  
the pool that beckons to the fevered eye;  
she is the table grace without the meat.

Better to cast for angels with a sieve  
than reach for any promise she may give.

Hope is what sends you back to feel the whip,  
murmuring that the blow will not bring blood  
from what has bled near dry. When she has stood  
watching your strength die daily, when you slip

and sprawl beneath that grim monotonous tip,  
she will speak gently of the imminent good  
and chuckle from within her shadowy hood,  
listening as the flesh and spirit rip.

Hope keeps the prayer on the cracking lip  
of him who sweats atop the burning wood,  
awaiting mercy or miraculous flood;  
she floats the sea beside the sinking ship.

Death will stand by and make no pact with Hope.  
Better the window, better the knotted rope.

Charity, more tenacious than a leech,  
clings to the bones when she has sucked away  
the blood and flesh, and has her final day  
within what drying marrow she can reach.

She is the crone who makes the christening speech  
over the cradle of her tender prey  
and drinks his breath; she is the last to stay  
and strip the looted body. Let her preach

of duty, love and pity, each to each;  
she is the whore of guilt, and draws her pay  
like the last moisture out of burning clay,  
then turns her back and lets the desert bleach.

Charity picks your pockets from your birth  
and thanks you with a mouthful of cold earth.

## SONNET

If you must keep this assignation, must  
withdraw into that fine and private place,  
bequeathing desert, leaving me to face  
the suddenly stilled air, the lightless dust  
of what was color, I will mourn the rust  
of fragrant gloried greenness, set my pace  
to slower breathing, and forgo the pace  
of music. But I ask that you be just:

You must not take the poetry you gave  
again to one who could no longer sing.  
I will be strong, forgive you everything  
except you leave me voiceless. I must have  
some way to call you, some way to release  
my hounds upon your heels, some map to peace.

## WHERE ARE THE SNOW JOBS OF YESTERYEAR?

My long lost loves and late lamented beaux  
Were always Elwood Dowds or Cyranos,  
Dreamy romantics, gentle or flamboyant—  
In short, the things that husbands simply oyant.

Christopher drowned his sorrows in vermouth,  
Samuel was incapable of truth—  
But such a whimsical, creative youth!

John was a bookworm, and the things he read  
We loftily debated, so instead  
Of aiming for my heart, he turned my head  
(And followed me unerringly to bed).

James brought me gifts of roses and Chablis  
While Theodore wrote poetry to me  
And Edgar wakened me to Debussy.

And being so awakened, so I slept  
With all of them and lost them all and wept.  
But he who finally set my heart on fire  
Could fix a stopped-up drain and change a tire.

## FATALIST BALLADE

Now that it's something more than twenty years  
or thirty since I started turning gray,  
I realize how fast the deadline nears  
and find that maybe I would like to stay  
a little longer, so I've switched my gears  
and started living healthy every day.  
It hasn't done a lot to calm my fears,  
for something's going to kill me anyway.

I munch on broccoli and carrot spears  
and carefully ignore the cookie tray.  
I swallow only what my doctor clears  
and only eat the things he says I may.  
But every time another headline rears  
with one more recall from the FDA,  
some pill my doctor gave me disappears,  
so something's going to kill me anyway.

It's hard to keep it all between my ears—  
what's on the danger list and what's ok.  
This morning last night's cure-all interferes  
with something vital in my DNA.  
I hear the newscasts everybody hears;  
I read what all the warning labels say,  
but death digs in his heels and perseveres  
and something's going to kill me anyway.

### *Envoy*

Doctor, I know I should give up the beers  
and ought to lose some weight, but what the hey—  
I'll raise a glass and drink it down with cheers,  
for something's going to kill me anyway.

## FAIRY TALE

It isn't ever once upon a time.  
The witch is in the nursery right now.  
She taps three times and chants a secret rhyme  
and leaves stigmata on the baby's brow.

The years go on, and Daddy makes the rules:  
some idiotic contests, macho races;  
the girl grows pubic hair, and Mama schools  
her clueless victim in the social graces.

The suitors swarm around like bees to nectar,  
putting out feelers, sizing up the bait;  
and out of every hundred who inspect her,  
Daddy gives ninety-nine the castle gate.

Then who gets Papa's princess for a prize?  
The prince who is a reptile in disguise.

## OCTOBER

These lighted groves, this shimmering symphony  
of sumac-painted air that feeds my lungs  
have undertones of famine, swollen tongues  
that dry to colorless monotony  
and die unnourished by these autumn riches,  
too weak to swallow phantom dreams of food.  
These flaming trees will fall in fire and blood,  
unseen, unmourned by corpses in dark ditches.

Oh terrible bright beauty! Can I bear  
your brilliant burden when the world is starving  
for less than this, when hunger's blade is carving  
deep blackened scars across the shining air?  
God, rend this tapestry and clothe the dead  
and seed the jeweled earth with common bread.

## **SOMEWHERE THIS MINUTE**

Somewhere this minute, even as I write,  
someone is killing someone. Gun or knife  
strikes like a poison adder, and a life  
goes out the way a switch turns out a light.  
Somewhere—and we will read it in a note  
in Monday morning's paper—someone's hands  
are reaching from the darkness where he stands  
in greed or rage toward someone else's throat.

I do not speak of war. I speak of you  
who itch for what is mine; I speak of me,  
afraid of what your unknown thoughts might be.  
Whether or not we do what we would do,  
somewhere this minute, even as I write,  
somebody's scream is strangled in the night.

### **A SOMEWHAT SHAKY SONNET**

Willie the Shake, of whom you all have heard,  
had real sharp eyes and even sharper ears,  
and he was pretty handy with a word—  
that's why his plays have lasted all these years.

He wrote of things that actually occurred,  
although, when he'd had six or seven beers,  
reality became a little blurred  
and his imagination shifted gears.

Sometimes his comedies were so absurd  
the audience threw sausages and jeers,  
and yet his tragedies quite often stirred  
the most hard-hearted reprobates to tears.

Now in his grave he turns when someone says  
that Francis Bacon really wrote his plays.

## HENRY VIII

Henry the Eighth was boisterous and bawdy;  
he knew the value of a dirty joke.  
He knew quite well the crudeness of his audi-  
ence, and measured every word he spoke.

He liked his wenches young and liked them gaudy  
but didn't chafe at matrimony's yoke,  
for any queen of his who got too haughty  
could be dispatched with one good cleaver stroke.

As King of England, he had powers so broad, he  
could hang his has-beens from the Charter Oak.  
Oh, there's no question that the man was naughty—  
an absolutely nasty sort of bloke.

Yet it's of interest, to say the least,  
that early on he trained to be a priest.

## TREADMILL BALLADE

You're born by chance, for better or for worse.  
You're quickly tossed upon a greasy-tracked  
slow treadmill, and you have to run the course.  
Life is a standstill dance, a rerun act.  
With every forward step you find you've backed  
up two steps, and you wonder what became  
of all the bound-for-glory bags you packed.  
The more things change, the more they stay the same.

You buy a tip-off from an inside source,  
for in the past that's all you really lacked.  
You put your money on a losing horse  
that hasn't run since Custer was attacked.  
Well, you and Lady Luck had no contract  
and you've nobody but yourself to blame.  
Life is a card game and the deck is stacked.  
The more things change, the more they stay the same.

You fall in love, you marry and divorce.  
Before you've said "so long, kid," you've been whacked.  
She takes you for your stake with no remorse.  
You're single now and how do you react?  
You curse the ill-starred day you ever shackled  
with such a ruthless, moneygrubbing dame,  
then out you go, more leeches to attract.  
The more things change, the more they stay the same.

### *Envoy*

Buddy, it's time you faced a simple fact:  
Life is a roulette wheel, a well-rigged game,  
and you're the croupier's mark, to be exact.  
The more things change, the more they stay the same.

## THIS WEEK'S TOP TUNE ON WBLU

I always knew you were a hopeless cheat  
but never thought I'd live to see the day  
you'd leave me for some woman on the street.

I knew that you were sneaking out to meet  
some bimbo at the Grits 'n' Grub Café.  
I always knew you were a rotten cheat

but couldn't you at least have been discreet?  
My next-door neighbor telephoned to say  
"He's left you for some floozy on the street."

She loved it. Cotton candy's not that sweet:  
"I thought you'd want to know her name's Renée.  
I always knew he was a lousy cheat."

They say a cur will chase a bitch in heat.  
Well, now you've slipped your leash and run away  
to sniff around some mongrel on the street.

Baby, your middle name should be Repeat.  
You've gone again, and this time you can stay.  
Goddam! I always *knew* you were a cheat,  
But *leave me* for some *hussy* on the *street*?

## THE HARPY

I think there is a harpy in my brain.  
She spoke to me again the other day.  
I wonder if perhaps I've gone insane.

At times I've tried to lose her in the rain,  
scream myself empty till she flows away  
but still there is this harpy in my brain.

The other day she spoke to me again  
and taunted me with news of my decay.  
I wonder if perhaps I've gone insane

or someone's stuffed my airways with cocaine  
and mingled quicksand with my DNA.  
I think there is a harpy in my brain

who hollows out dark avenues of pain  
inside my skull and paints them headache gray.  
I wonder if perhaps I've gone insane

or whether I should simply slit a vein  
and let her find another place to stay.  
I think there is a harpy in my brain.  
I wonder if perhaps I've gone insane.

## THE LAMENT OF MIDAS

Ai! Me and my big mouth! I might have said  
give me long life and health instead of gold.  
I could have ruled in dignity, grown old  
respected by my subjects, but instead  
my greed spilled out in heavy haste. I dented  
my teeth on twenty-carat carrots, gagged  
on bricks that had been bread, and bold tongues wagged  
that I would starve before the gods relented.

As if that weren't enough, I must insult  
Apollo to his face. By what mad whim  
praised I a horny whistler over him?  
Across the winds I hear the wind exult  
the gossip every smirking shepherd hears:  
*Psst! Pass it on: The king has donkey's ears....*

## WALNUTS

All night across my helpless roof they fall,  
volleys of unrelenting shot. I wake  
repeatedly from dreams of siege that shake  
me to attention like a bugle call  
and listen for the next green cannonball  
to target me. How many will it take  
before the weary rafters split and break  
the ceiling? What's the meaning of it all?

I am not welcome here. This house has stood,  
an arrogant intruder through the years,  
uncrushed but plagued by this sustained attack  
as squirrels run from wood to door to wood  
scattering shrapnel, gathering souvenirs  
and flinging oaths. The woods are fighting back.

## GLUTEUS MAXIMUS

Butt of all jokes and undeserving seat  
of early punishments more rightly blamed  
on my less evident mind, unfairly shamed  
for breaches socially indiscreet,  
recipient of stabs by vicious nurses,  
unmentioned in the best of company,  
allowed no meager shred of dignity,  
and not once honored in my selfish verses,

Yet I have long compared you to the moon,  
have marveled how unfailingly you shine  
as, uncomplaining, you uphold my spine  
while I spin out some mediocre rune.  
Accept my thanks, old friend, and do not sit  
in judgment on my lack of grace and wit.

## THE WINDOW WASHER

He trusts tomorrow to a harness strap.  
Dangling above the city on a scaffold  
he whistles Dixie. Gravity is baffled:  
He takes no notice of the dizzy map

spread out below him. Any day it rains  
his union grounds him, and on windy days  
he doesn't work because the scaffold sways.  
Adrenalin like vodka in his veins

shoots him up twenty stories of sheer brick  
where he may talk to clouds or throw his words  
to passing caravans of northbound birds.  
He never glances down. It makes him sick

as, far below, he pictures on the walk  
his body circumscribed with yellow chalk.

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## JACKHAMMER MAN

Nobody has to tell him how he'll die.  
His bones are loosening from their joints. The song  
about the bones is put together wrong:  
The shinbone's disconnected from the thigh

bone, all his bones are scattering like slag,  
he vibrates in his sleep. His molars shake  
staccato in their sockets when they ache.  
But it's a steady job—now there's a gag—

Like having hiccups on a trampoline.  
He grips the handles with unflinching fists,  
feels numbness creeping upward to his wrists,  
becomes a rattling part of the machine.

He know no grave will ever hold his bones.  
He'll be an earthquake threatening the stones.

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## WALLACE SAUNDERS REMEMBERS CASEY JONES

Sometimes at night I hear him. Plain as day  
I hear his whistle. Every body knew  
when it was Casey's engine coming through—  
that long, low wail that rose and died away.

He liked to blow that whistle, no mistake.  
I was his wiper, kept his engine clean,  
and I was proud of him and that machine.  
Sometimes at night I'm lying here awake

and hear him bearing down. I know that squall  
before he hits the saw-by, picture him  
hollering to the fireman—that was Sim—  
to jump. Then comes the crash, and then.... That's all.

But it's not over. He keeps coming back,  
trying to beat the devil on that track.

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## THE FIREFIGHTER

From his first box of crayons he chose red  
and wore it to a useless lump before  
the others, loved the hats the firemen wore,  
the blur of color as the engines sped,

the screaming sirens. He was like Ulysses,  
drawn to a fatal calling, but no tide  
pulled him from this destruction. Here inside  
collapsing walls, where flames like licking kisses

vie for his skin, he dimly hears a shout  
drift up to him from some green world below,  
some paradise he moved in, long ago:  
*We got the kids out, Mike. Get out, get out!*

His mouth twists in a prayer. The flames advance,  
reach out like arms inviting him to dance.

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## THINK OF US THERE

Hard-hammered peonies dissolve to streaming  
raw ruined ribbons in the pitted yard.  
Platoons of rain attack with blows so hard  
staid elms recoil and writhe, their torn leaves screaming.

Think of us there in that outrageous weather,  
Shaking and soaked like two unsheltered dogs,  
Breathing the ripe rich musk of rotted logs;  
picture us running through the rain together.

Think of us there in that consuming thunder,  
drinking the storm like madmen, two fools quaffing  
that wanton marinade, deluged and laughing  
in saturated hedonistic wonder.

Think of us there: out there in that vast roaring,  
rolling and naked, shouting, gasping, drenched,  
until this bone-deep thirst in us is quenched  
and we lie bruised and drowned in love's outpouring.

## LAWNS

Relax your vigil for the smallest hour:  
These coddled velvet banners will return  
to what they were and are. Walnut and fern  
lie patient in the roots. With every shower  
the blades grow wider and more primitive.  
Where we walked yesterday, tonight the backs  
of lumbering beetles toil along the tracks  
of species memory. The forests live.  
See, where the street lamps pierce the misty distance,  
cold drops evolve to fireflies as we pass,  
flashing triumphant tidings to the grass.  
Here is an old and infinite resistance:  
Attend your rounds. The grass is guileful, deep  
as orchards gone to thicket. Do not sleep.

## THE RIVAL

Beyond your shoulder stands your other lover  
With eyes cast down above a harlot grin,  
Pretending patient toleration of her  
Whose fragile covenant is wearing thin.  
She whistles like an ill-tuned violin  
Through ravenous and parasitic teeth,  
And you will go when she invites you in.  
*Where shall I go when you have gone to Death?*

She is the whore superior, disprover  
Of every mortal promise, origin  
Of all betrayals. She will coax and hover  
And brush her fingertips against your skin  
Until you grovel for her touch. And when  
The ruthless finger of this jealous wraith  
Crooks like a greedy scythe to call you in,  
*Where shall I go when you have gone to Death?*

No plea avails, no bribery will move her  
Who with her widow's hands is known to spin  
The webs that cripple time itself. Moreover,  
There is no love, nor has there ever been,  
However guileless or in debt to sin,  
She has not waged triumphant battle with.  
But you will go when she invites you in.  
*Where shall I go when you have gone to Death?*

### *Envoy*

I have my weapons; let the duel begin,  
Although I waste my body, blood and breath.  
You will lie down with her, as do all men.  
*Where shall I go when you have gone to Death?*

## RETROSPECTIVE

Does it come down to this for every man,  
these late grasshopper hungers that attack us,  
this knowledge that we stand outside the inn  
in whistling winter, hearing only echoes  
of old thin prayers dribbling off the moon?  
Do we contain from birth the clocks that wake us  
to find that we alone have sung the tune  
we danced our lives away on, bland as cuckoos?

More than all sins I may have blundered into  
or met wide-eyed and welcome, I regret  
the roads not taken, hills I have not been to,  
the songs not heard, and words not written yet.  
I miss whatever things I might have meant to  
the lives of people I have never met.

The following poems appeared in *The Formalist*:

### MEDEA IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

*A U.S. soldier was convicted yesterday in Germany of drowning her two young children in the bathtub in what prosecutors said was an “evil” attempt to get back at her husband, whom she suspected of being unfaithful. —News item, April 12, 2002.*

Did you think you had seen the last of me  
when I swept into roiling clouds and vanished?  
Jason, I warned you I would not be banished.  
Had you forgotten it was sorcery  
that sped you home across a threatening sea?  
Could you forget my alchemy, that finished  
your preening princess’ breath? Were you not punished  
when, kissed and slain, our sons lay at your knee?

I am eternal. I return, consumed  
forever by a jealousy more strong  
than mother love. Now suffer for your wrong  
as I shall suffer, for our sons are doomed  
to die and die again. The blood I spill  
is our blood, Jason. It is us I kill.

(Finalist for The Howard Nemerov Sonnet  
Award 2002)

## **THINGS I SHOULD HAVE DONE**

I should have left the restaurant at nine,  
before I altogether lost my grip,  
and caught the bus at Hollywood and Vine.

I should have ordered dinner with my wine  
and had a bite or two with every sip.  
I should have left the restaurant at nine.

I should have sent the chef a valentine—  
or something—since I didn't leave a tip  
and missed the bus at Hollywood and Vine.

I should have grabbed the raincoat that was mine  
and not the one that had the diamond clip.  
I should have left the restaurant at nine.

I should have sent a note to Kevin Kline  
apologizing for my Freudian slip  
and caught the bus at Hollywood and Vine.

I should have shut my mouth and paid the fine  
instead of offering some cop my lip.  
I should have left the restaurant at nine  
and caught the bus at Hollywood and Vine.

The following poems have been published in *The Lyric*:

**A MAN FOR ALL METERS**  
**In Memory of Henry George Fischer**  
**1923-2006**

The air was lighter where he launched his words.  
Balloons, released, rose higher. Heavy pines  
grew merry with the eagerness of birds  
aspiring to appropriate his lines.  
He drew outrageous phrases from his sleeves  
like colored scarves. They fell like jeweled leaves  
but when we reached for them, our hands were sieves.

His dreams wore metronomes. His pen kept time  
with puns and parables. His pockets rang  
with silver syllables; his clock ticked rhyme.  
He breathed on empty pages and they sang.  
Dancing the muses dizzy, an Astaire  
On paper, when he left we found a tear  
In daylight and a hollow in the air.

## THOUGHTS WHILE PAINTING A CLOSET IN AN OLD HOUSE

Wherever you now sleep, departed ones—  
whether in some more spacious, stylish berth  
or in that common dormitory, earth—  
rest easy. I'll inter your skeletons.

Here, where you hung your clothes below the stair,  
the starting-over smell of latex paint  
obliterates the lingering but faint  
reminder of your bodies from the air.

Here lies a button fallen from a coat  
that once, like hardy armor, challenged cold  
now many years forgotten and too old  
to penetrate my marrow. Still, a note

of dusty sighing filters through the hush  
that falls when, musing, I lay down my brush.

## THE TENANT

What is she scrubbing, scrubbing, day and night?  
in brief unguarded intervals the keen  
and unexpected sharpness of chlorine  
strikes me like kitchen knives. What woeful sight  
evokes the dampness that can never quite  
evade my nostrils? Is there some unseen  
calamity that sorry cannot clean,  
that bone-thin knuckles cannot render white?

Now, after midnight, long before the day,  
I waken to the ravishing perfume  
of fresh-brewed coffee rising to my room.  
I haven't used my coffeepot since May.  
Would she allow me, now that I'm awake,  
to come downstairs and share her coffee break?

## **TO THE WOMAN WHO DIED IN THIS HOUSE**

They are not here. Those other ones you seek  
have gone away, have wrapped their shadows tight  
around their backs and gone. Perhaps one night  
their strength deserted them, or one last week  
of echoes crushed their hearts. Perplexed, you peek  
from cloudy corners just beyond the light,  
a hint of motion catching at my sight  
as you drift toward the doorway. Moved to speak,

I would not tell you all that has occurred—  
how cold your kitchen is, or what new head  
tossed on your still warm pillow—not a word  
of how one came too quickly to the bed  
that once was yours. Whatever I have heard,  
I would be kind. Some things should not be said.

## THOUGHTS WHILE BURNING OLD LOVE LETTERS

The words of lovers are ephemeral  
as love itself. Comprising air and petals,  
they drift and droop and ultimately pall  
like April sprouts that end in August nettles.

The fervent oaths that bloom in fertile youth  
are seldom evergreen as youth supposes,  
and one day wisdom's cold, objective tooth  
chews frosty holes in valentines and roses.

Be careful what you write when you are young.  
At fifty you may find that what you've got  
is evidence that seasons sour the tongue  
and summer's passion vine is autumn's rot.

## PLEA TO MY MOTHER

Mother, do not leave me yet.  
There is too much we have not said,  
there is too much! I might forget

my childhood, lose that Margaret  
who woke to summer from your bed.  
Mother, do not leave me yet.

My childhood was a coverlet  
of stories stitched in shining thread:  
There is too much I might forget.

You were my rhyme, my alphabet,  
you held a light and walked ahead.  
Mother, do not leave me yet.

Stay with me now, and do not let  
the light go out by which I read.  
There is too much I might forget.

Hold up your lamp, sweet silhouette.  
Show me again the way you led.  
Mother, do not leave me yet.  
There is too much I might forget.

## LEGACY

*A firefly in the spider's web  
is phosphorescent to the last.*

—A. Dietz

The firefly in the spider's web  
is phosphorescent to the last.  
His thorax dries, his juices ebb  
but he perpetuates his past.

The stars that died before we breathed  
have joined the universal night  
and gone to ash but have bequeathed  
a legacy of living light.

And we, whose days are limited,  
must keep alive our little spark  
and leave behind, when we are dead,  
our poetry to light the dark.

**SOMETIME NEAR MORNING**  
**A Villanelle for December**

Sometime near morning we were granted snow  
and white forgetting pardoned our despair.  
My senses tell me all I need to know.

While we slept heavily or tossed below  
the burden of old wrongs we chose to bear,  
Sometime near morning we were granted snow.

Whatever ache I knew a day ago  
lies blanketed and sleeping unaware.  
My senses tell me all I need to know.

The daylight cracks like breaking of a bow.  
The hour's a phoenix risen like a prayer.  
Sometime near morning we were given snow.

The day strikes ringing peace with no echo,  
nothing to smudge the harmony of air.  
My senses tell me all I need to know.

The crevices of grief no longer show  
their scars across a shadowed landscape where  
sometime near morning we were blessed with snow.  
My senses tell me all I need to know.

## THE CATERPILLAR

At the scarce mercy of all footed things  
I pleat my steady way across the grass,  
daring to live as if this life will pass  
and I will rise to face the next on wings—  
yes, wings!—to ride the wind, to dive and light  
on eager, fragrant blossoms. Oh, to share  
the elegant dominion of the air  
with sun and lark! I dare to dream of flight.

But in man's shadow I must crawl and wait,  
who do not have the luxury of bones,  
who dare not warm myself on sunny stones.  
One careless step, a random blow is fate.  
Still, I believe my promise. Fools, louts, swine,  
you have your hope of heaven. I have mine.

## SONNET TO EDNA

I am content, who never heard your voice  
or felt your pixie face awaken flame.  
The sober photographs above your name  
speak nothing of the sweet and bitter choice  
your pale sad girls and doomed boys had to make:  
to love you for your holocaustic hair,  
your proud and perfect breasts, your cruel fair  
sardonic mouth, or for your poems' sake.

I have your essence here in black and white  
before me as I drink this potent wine  
but I was never conquered by a kiss  
and never gave my soul to feed a line.  
Therefore I am content, and ponder this  
without your form between me and the light.

## **SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY**

You say I need to get a good night's sleep  
and I agree, but it will have to be  
when all the books of poetry I keep  
beside my bed are wrenched away from me  
and locked up in some cellar hole so deep  
and far away that, should I find the key,  
I would not find it possible to creep  
from bed at dead of night and set them free.

For I would hear them, loud as marching bands;  
against the bolted door would hear them beat,  
a rhythmic hammering of metric hands,  
the measured tread of strong iambic feet,  
and I would run to yield to their demands  
and bring them home, and find surrender sweet.

## JOHN HENRY

He did it for the men because he knew  
damn well that if the steam drill won the bet  
they'd every man of them be paid and let  
go on the dole. He did it for the crew.

The solemn men stood idle as they brought  
the monster to Big Bend. Now, shaker, ready!  
*Lord, give me arms of iron and keep them steady,  
and let me die before I quit,* he thought.

He swung two hammers. Sparks like falling comets  
flew from his blows, *a-right! a-left! a-right!*  
in deafening cadence. When he'd won the fight  
he dropped, too spent to cough, too weak to vomit,

his heart too overcome by pain and pride,  
and, Lord, he laid his hammer down and died.

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## A SNOW LEGEND

Whatever followed me through sleep  
now hurries through the wood unheard  
without the option of a word.

The snow in mute remembrance weeps  
its icy jewels on the thorns.  
What is the voiceless thing it mourns?

The wind unwinds a trailing veil  
That snares and snatches on the trees.  
What bride casts off her robes and flees?

The wind unwinds an ancient tale  
of one who waited, still and white,  
and froze upon her wedding night.

Now snow grieves soundless for her sake  
who pledged herself to glittering cold  
and felt its brittle stranglehold.

Today the virgin bones awake  
and flee their pall of winter moss.  
They leave no prints to mark the loss.

## WITH LOVE, ALL THINGS

“Love you?” said I.  
“When pigs do fly.”  
I turned away  
without a thought,  
he walked away  
without a sigh.

But by-and-by  
the postman brought  
a box one day  
—not very big—  
and in it lay  
a tiny pig.

A little pig  
of china wrought  
—oh, dearest of all darling things!—  
a small white pig  
with wings.

## THOUGHTS WHILE READING HENRY'S BOOK IN BED

Beware of taking poets to your bed.  
There's something in a rhymers that's averse  
to prosy pillow-talk and, what is worse,  
to sleep, perchance to dream (as Shakespeare said).  
Bedeviled by bold badinage and led  
by pungent puns, you count sharp shafts and curse  
the sheepish smiles sly similes coerce  
from languid lips that yearn to yawn instead.

Beware of bedding down with budding bards  
who trample truth with multimetric feet.  
Take unversed dolts for sleeping pills or lovers  
although, depending how you play your cards,  
you still may get your words' worth of deceit.  
They're liars all who lie between the covers.

## GETTYSBURG – APRIL

Where woods are spattered with redbud  
and creeks are roused again to flood  
the drums of April stir old blood.

Forsythia like mortar fire  
explodes above the human mire  
that turned to ash upon this pyre.

Oh, we were heroes blossoming  
with blather such as schoolboys bring  
to meet the skirmishes of spring!

We found our peace as warriors must.  
our drums are still, our rifles rust;  
we lie together, equal dust.

We sleep together, south and north,  
not knowing what our blood was worth  
that feeds the restless roots of earth,

that stains the drooping buds and spills  
like flares upon opposing hills  
these cannonades of daffodils.

## VILLANELLE FOR A PERFUMED LADY

O perfumed lady, pass by me  
in your white skin and April shoes,  
smelling of rain and eternity.

Spread in your wake a galaxy  
of hyacinth and lilac hues,  
O perfumed lady. Pass by me

aloof, say nothing. Words would be  
redundant of such certain news,  
smelling of rain and eternity,

stirring white waves on a sidewalk sea.  
Let the pervasive voice you use,  
O perfumed lady, pass by me:

Your passage vibrates with poetry.  
You breathe a weather of cloudburst clues,  
smelling of rain and eternity.

O Lilith, Lilith, are you she  
sent as my nemesis and my muse?  
O perfumed lady, pass by me  
Smelling of rain and eternity.

## MY DREAMS LEAVE CRATERS IN THE SLUMBERYARD

What do I wrestle that I sleep so hard?  
I wake up bruised. My shoulders pit the bed.  
My dreams leave craters in the slumberyard.

My blankets are in knots, my pillow marred  
and twisted like the hangman's wretched thread.  
What do I wrestle that I sleep so hard?

Do I uproot mad forests, coming scarred  
to morning from the wreckage I have fled?  
My dreams leave craters in the slumberyard.

Perhaps I challenge windmills, cry "en garde!"  
to toothless thieves who wager on my head;  
What do I wrestle that I sleep so hard?

I wonder if I struggle heavenward  
or simply elbow for a crust of bread?  
My dreams leave craters in the slumberyard.

I have no memory of having sparred  
with any foe, no hint of having bled—  
what do I wrestle that I sleep so hard?  
My dreams leave craters in the slumberyard.

## THE SUNLESS HEART

Cold has no definition of its own,  
but is because it isn't. Nonetheless  
when warmth withdraws it leaves an emptiness  
as tangible and comfortless as stone

and wholly resident within the bone.  
Its tentacles invade like virus, press  
with grim unswerving resolute ingress  
upon the ash from which the fire has flown.

What heavy lack, when all that glowed is gone!  
So, when your light and motion evanesce,  
must that most present absence dispossess  
the sunless heart in which you lately shown.

**COMMEDIA**  
**Thoughts on an Antique Lamp**

Beneath the china lamp post Columbine  
raises her pretty mouth for Pierrot's kiss,  
her features fixed in boredom or in bliss,  
awaiting the eternal anodyne.

She waits in vain, for he cannot incline  
his blue-capped head beyond a hairbreadth miss,  
and neither appetite nor avarice  
will bring him nearer to his heart's design.

In brittle, futile tableau they repine,  
suspended in a glazed paralysis.  
How many decades have they stood like this,  
a fragile, not quite finished valentine?

The following poems were published in *Poetry Digest*:

**WILL SHAKESPEARE MAKES SMALL TALK**  
**On a Midsummer Night**

Now come for me, Titania, for I tire  
Of mortal grossness. How this lumb'ring world  
Doth trespass on my ribs! Sweet nymph, conspire  
To draw the night about me and lie curled  
With me in close community of leaf  
Or haunt the grottoes of a walnut shell.  
Come, lure me to your bower, dainty thief,  
And give me slumber in a cowslip bell.  
Within your strange white arms, O queen and sprite,  
Would I, diminish'd, heighten, and my words  
Spread iridescent in the morrow's light  
Like peacocks sudden-hatch'd from hummingbirds.  
Now comfort me, Titania, who must say  
If I breathe gossamer or if I bray.

## LESSON IN REALITY

*Someday we shall discover that thought has  
substance and that love and hate are as  
material as the rays of the sun.*

—Edgar Wallace

There is much substance the distracted eye  
dismisses as intangible. We feel  
the spine of mercy crack beneath our heel  
and pity in our veins solidify  
to garrote-wire as greedy clerics try  
to teach us charity cannot congeal.

What crushes us or bears our weight is real.  
The foot strikes hard against the leaden lie.  
We gather blocks of hope and heap them high,  
shoring them up with girders of raw zeal,  
and then one heavy day as thick as steel  
we shinny up, push off the edge and fly.

## PRURIENCE

This wind has been around. A vagabond  
that boasts of brief encounters, it sheds rags  
of recent rendezvous like luggage tags:  
gold ginkgo, sweet gum, pin oak from beyond

the treeless avenue's periphery.  
Promiscuous and travel-jaded flirt,  
it lays indifferent hands upon my skirt  
and whispers of its wanton odyssey.

I am not caught by such frank insolence  
but, whetted by the sly delicious sound  
of gossip (ah, this wind has been around),  
I am voracious for its confidence.

I covet secrets. Thus I sell my skin  
to learn what limbs the wind has frolicked in.

The following poems have been published in  
*The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*:

### **A PLAGUE OF ANGELS**

My house is infested with angels.  
Tiny creatures, smaller than bees,  
they swarm through my rooms  
ever since Christmas  
when they flew off the tree  
and scattered like shining sand  
into the air.

They sleep on the carpet  
and impudently ignore  
the menacing growl of the sweeper.  
I find them in my pockets  
hiding from my startled hands.  
They go through the wash  
and come out singing.

They fall out of my books,  
calling my attention  
to long-loved poems  
and old abandoned dreams.  
Here is delight, they say,  
back here, where you left it.

I have called an exterminator  
but he says his license  
doesn't permit battling angels,  
maybe I could try a bug bomb.

Here's one now, swimming in my tea.  
Have you ever swallowed an angel?  
How does a doctor explain  
wings on an ultrasound?

## THE CARPENTER

My grandpa's sweat was pungent with black soil  
that furrowed in the wrinkles of his shirt,  
and sharp fresh sawdust drifted from the dirt  
as I inhaled the trademark of his toil.

He was a carpenter. Weekdays he labored  
at building houses, farmed on weekends. Sundays  
his pulpit was the framework for our Mondays.  
He talked to God as if their pastures neighbored.

At night I'd curl against his chest and smell  
the history of his day. "Dear Lord," he'd pray,  
"we thank you for your helping hand today."  
I fell asleep to old hymns, heard him tell  
about a carpenter less real to me  
who preached along the shores of Galilee.

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## THE MECHANIC

1

On Saturday Mom washed Dad's coveralls,  
the final load of laundry for the day.  
By then the water, nearer black than gray  
and slick with grease from engine overhauls,

broadcast its blend of bleach and gasoline.  
I forced his work clothes through the wringer, pinned  
them up to dance their freedom in the wind,  
and, last of all, we drained the tired machine.

Who would have thought that linty sludge would cut  
a deepening ditch as years went by? Come dark,  
Dad brought his fiddle out and played "Joe Clark"  
or maybe "Irish Washerwoman," but

he'd always play one just for Mom, and she  
would always want "The Waltz You Saved For Me."

2

Some days Dad let me go to the garage  
where he was patching up a worn-out Nash  
for someone who would pay him not in cash  
but beans and cabbage. Coaxing some old Dodge

to limp a few more miles, for years he lay  
like Michelangelo, his face upturned  
to engines leaking motor oil, and learned  
not to draw checks on "See you Saturday."

Long after he hung up his old shop cap  
and let computer diagnose the ills  
of strange new models, he explored the hills  
in his old pickup. Then a worn deathtrap

came at him from the wrong side of a crest  
and drove the steering column through his chest.

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## FAMILY REUNION

We have come here to see the burial ground.  
Now on our faces dead remembered men  
display their monuments, and once again  
I watch my uncles dying. Look around:  
We have become our ancestors. We move  
reluctantly through predetermined paces,  
shocked at the death-heads on each other's faces.  
We do not voice our fear; we speak of love.

Here, among trays and tables, children come  
laughing like bells, not knowing they will die.  
We see the end their faces prophesy,  
know they will blossom sweet as fresh wild plum  
and then become ourselves. We witness here  
the coming and the going of our year.

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## THE QUEECREEK MINERS

They had agreed that if they had to drown  
they'd lash themselves together, that to bind  
themselves would make it easier to find  
their bodies once the water had gone down.

Hoarding their warmth in stagnant, fading air,  
they wrote their wills and scribbled their goodbyes,  
leaving their last thoughts for the living eyes  
of ones whose lives they would no longer share.

So, trapped and freezing in the flooded mine,  
they waited. And the nation held its breath,  
wanting a miracle but steeled for death,  
until the message came: "They're saved—all nine!"

Then came the nightmares, fearful, agonizing:  
night after night, the water rising, rising....

(From *Blue Collar Sonnets*)

## AT THE FLEA MARKET

Grabbing my childhood with both hands  
I clutch *Wonder Woman* to my heart,  
spin a magic lasso across the parking lot,  
soar to Paradise Island  
on an invisible airplane.

I am sixty-five.  
I am ten.  
I can stop bullets with my wrists.

I cradle Betsy Drink-and-Wet,  
pouring my past  
into her straight-through gut,  
remembering she can pee anything  
from orange juice to ink.

I coax an extra Christmas  
from a string of Bubble Lights.  
In this precarious glass  
the fountain of youth  
*blip-blip-blips* forever  
unless you pull the plug.

In the far corner  
under the *Shop Till You Drop* sign  
Death watches and whistles,  
waiting for me to come to his table.  
Let him wait. My Buck Rogers ray gun  
will hold him off

**PEACE**  
**Kosovo 1999**

This is our past and future. This is peace:  
The helpless fall, the butchers kill and kill  
and irrigate the fields with blood until  
some other killer brings them to their knees.  
Wild flags fly out; the living ghosts wave V's  
to photo scavengers who antlike spill  
across the reddened slope of every hill.  
Now, for a while, the screams and trembling cease.

This, then, is peace. Do dead men understand  
that this is peace? God bless the flag that waves  
above these souls who did not choose to die,  
for this is peace. Why do these restless hands  
break through the shallow soil of hasty graves  
as if not done with reaching for the sky?

## MARISS JANSONS CONDUCTS

He takes the stage the way a captain feels  
the deck for sea worth, steadiness and size.  
We half expect to hear him click his heels.  
Instead we see the *Wasserkönig* eyes  
and watch the wrists that arch and dip like swans  
into a lorelake of languid sound.  
Gliding above the ripples of Saint-Saëns,  
he draws us into depths where men are drowned.

An incantation splashes from his sleeve  
as rising waves throw terrifying notes  
against our startled senses: We receive  
a spume of splintered crystal on our throats.  
Then—crash!—the sea is rent with sudden thunder  
and we are at its mercy, and go under.

## **PAVANE FOR A DEAD PRINCESS**

**Diana, 1961-1997**

You were not meant to tread the stiff legato  
composed to move a clockwork figurehead  
around a dying Camelot. You fled,  
attempting to outrun the stale ridotto  
and, whirling faster, ever more staccato,  
bring your own galaxy to life. Instead  
the minuet drags on, and you are dead.  
Dance and escape: Oh, brave and futile motto!

The minuet drags on. The dancers grieve  
on cue and choreograph your final hour,  
toss dry bouquets to you who chose to leave  
the fading masquerade of pomp and power,  
and, scarcely hiding their relief, receive  
two tender princes to the dusty tower.

## LITTLE PRAYERS

1

God bless all people walking in the rain—  
the old, the cold, who may not know again  
another silver April. God be kind  
to coatless poets following the wind  
in thistled byways seeded with lost words.

God cheer the knots of chilled and dripping birds  
that huddle in gray hedges along lanes.  
God bless small noses pressed to windowpanes  
and postmen waving to them through the rain.  
God bless all people walking in the rain.

2

God bless all children clutching fragrant crayons  
in fine firm fists this fresh fall morning; bless  
their fuchsia trees and fierce magenta lions  
and revel in their rainbow earnestness.

3

God bless the chocolate ladies on the bus  
whose rich low laughter trickles over us  
like melting fudge and puddles in the folds  
of their bright wrappers: reds and greens and golds  
like brilliant foil. God bless the candy box  
that spills these sweets along the city blocks.

4

God keep the silent bagman and his garden  
of cherished refuse gleaned from curb and door,  
and give him strength to carry just one more  
mysterious and necessary burden.

God pardon  
my empty hands that move among the poor  
and do not lift a discard from the floor.

**I WANT TO MOVE**  
**(Heard at a Bus Terminal)**

I want to move, she said.  
Get out of this part of town.  
*Ghosts wandered behind her eyes*  
*like smoke in burnt-out buildings.*  
But there ain't nowhere to go.

One of my neighbors moved,  
went over to the north side.  
they didn't want nobody over there  
from this neighborhood.  
They treated her so bad  
she came back here.

They think we got blood on us,  
got death on our skin  
like a disease that's gonna shake off  
on them.  
They think we draw bullets to us  
wherever we go.

I'd like to get out.  
It's hard stayin here now.  
I keep seein it.  
I look out the kitchen window  
and see him down by them trash cans  
folded over like a big sack.  
Two years it's been rainin on that spot  
and it ain't washed out the blood.

There was four of them came for him.  
Knocked on the door real polite  
and called him outside  
and then they shot him twenty-two times.

I miss my son, she said,  
and I keep seein it.  
I'd like to move.

**TO THE DRIVER OF THE 71C WHO LEFT ME STANDING  
ON THE SIDEWALK IN THE RAIN WITH A CRAMP IN MY FOOT**

Oh you pretty boy  
I love the way you wave  
with your patty cake hand  
you can get out of that cheesebox  
and wave at angels if you want to  
hunker down low and look straight up  
they ain't gonna stop for you  
'cause they don't see your uniform

I love your smug smarty smileful  
of pat authority  
your just-doin'-my-job-ma'am-smirk  
got God on your side boy  
yeah sewed right on your sleeve  
only God just waved at the angels  
and the angels winked

your dumb lurching beast  
shows me its insolent backside  
2 MCH 2 PRK

Is it 2 MCH 2 SK  
2 STP 2 YDS FRM D CRNR  
4 1 10 YR RGLR?

I do better on the second run  
almost beat you to the terminal  
nine blocks in eight minutes  
pedestrian transit powered  
by compressed natural rage

I want to tell you  
oh you pretty patty cake boy  
I hope you drive up Forbes  
in heavy snow at rush hour  
every Friday afternoon all winter

I hope you're on all weekend  
when everybody in Wilkinsburg  
grabs a bus to the regatta

On your way home after work  
I hope you get stuck in traffic  
and sweat three hours for a cold on  
while your refrigerator dies

I want to tell you  
WAY 2 GO  
yeah you pretty blue boy  
you got a LONG WAY 2 GO  
just ask me whichway baby  
come on, ask me

## DANCING IN PITTSBURGH

Wander down Ellsworth and look for this:  
Two kids in an improvised jazz ballet  
pause to sit on a curb and kiss,

then rise, clasp hands, form parenthesis,  
return to their sidewalk hi-de-hey.  
Wander down Ellsworth and look for this.

October drenches their limbs in bliss  
as they explode in a *releve*,  
pause to sit on a curb and kiss

again, ignoring the traffic's his,  
then reprise their pas de doodah-day.  
Wander down Ellsworth and look for this.

Unhampered by coyness or artifice,  
undaunted by Pittsburgh passing, they  
pause to sit on a curb and kiss.

Coryphées graced the Acropolis,  
Bacchantes frolicked on Crete this way.  
Wander down Ellsworth and look for this.  
(Pause to sit on a curb and kiss.)

The following poems were published in *Only the Sea Keeps*, an anthology of poems about the tsunami, published simultaneously in the U.S.A. and India.

## **THE TSUNAMI CHILDREN**

Poseidon, forced suddenly from sleep,  
rears up and lashes out at men and lands,  
unleashing all the demons of the deep  
to seize the children. Helpless in his hands,  
they strangle as their throats are drowned in salt  
and mammoth fingers strike like heavy stone  
across their fragile ribs; their common vault  
the graveyard kingdom of Poseidon.

Below the waves the stolen children cry  
for vanished mothers, mourn for summers missed;  
their voices call for glimpses of the sky.  
They weep for bruises that have not been kissed,  
unfinished stories with no endings known.  
The sea king paves his halls with new young bone.

## COMPANY

*The tsunami scrubbed away six feet of sand from a section of beach, uncovering a small cluster of long-buried boulders carved with animals, gods and servant girls.—News story, March 21, 2005.*

Never forget that the dead are lonely.

More than the ancient instant statues of Pompeii  
those who were buried at sea  
desire dust, long for the scent of decay,  
the conversation of recent tenants.

Say what you will, the dead are jealous  
of what the living know.  
Atlantis sends its grievances to the sun.  
They come back to us as rain,  
tap at our windows and beckon,  
pull us away from the lamplight.  
Tell us, tell us, they hiss,  
we have forgotten our flesh.

In Mahabalipuram gods and servants  
thrust their heads from the sea.  
The tsunami has brought news.  
Around their feet the latest captives  
learn the language of coral.

The following poem was published  
in *Street Beat*:

### **AMERICA'S MOST LIVABLE CITY**

I came here  
to give it all I've got:  
years of spinning straw  
into gold  
turning water  
into wine  
twisting words  
into dollars

I came here  
and walked up Grant Street  
and down Smithfield  
and around Market Square

and I smiled when they said  
not right for our needs  
and I smiled when they said  
we use interns  
and I smiled when they said  
overqualified  
and I kept walking

we don't need magic they said  
can you mop floors  
and I said sure  
and they smiled when they said  
sure  
and I kept on walking

Tonight I take Grandmother's cameo  
from the box. There's an ad  
in the paper:  
the city's oldest jewelers  
want my past

Does anybody in this city  
want my present?

The following poems were published in *Southwinds*:

### **YOU CAME WITH SUMMER**

You came with summer, blossoming among  
my vineyards slowly, and so slowly traced  
your fragrance on my mouth that I could taste  
and crave your sweetness long before it stung.

The heavy wine of other seasons hung  
upon my palate, testament to waste,  
before the musty flagons were replaced  
by one fine vintage, delicate and young.

You went with summer, leaving on my tongue  
a haunting flavor not to be erased,  
elusive as champagne and gently laced  
with something bittersweet that burned and clung.

I stayed to see the sparrows going south  
and raise an empty glass against my mouth.

## **BARTER**

I touch you  
telling myself  
you need to be touched by someone.

You let me touch you  
telling yourself  
I need to touch someone.

How unkind to each other  
we are, being kind.