

/dreaming, scheming, unbeseeming/

\verses, voltas, and diversions\

/harold jaffe/

for Sarah, Josh, and Mel,
for one set of reasons,

and for Hal, Ray, Dave, and Morrie,
for another

Writing poetry is for me an extension of my need to tell stories, an instinct as primal as breathing, or thinking, or looking at the world and asking ‘why?’ When I write, I draw from life—a bicycle ride, a chance conversation, a doomed love affair, an epic adventure—and leave behind artifacts of experiences and of interactions, of reflections and memories. At the same time, it is an opportunity to tip my hat to the writers whose works have influenced me, to take their words and ideas and make them my own—put bluntly, to steal. In each of these poems, there is a convergence of three paths, a meeting of three minds: mine, the one crafting these new pieces, stringing these words, whether original or borrowed, together; that of the author of the referenced work, the touchstone, the key; and yours: you, reader, you who ultimately digest, deconstruct, perhaps decipher the enigma within. As T. S. Eliot put it:

One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows.
Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface
what they take, and good poets make it into something better,
or at least something different.

When I borrow a turn of phrase from Shakespeare; when I mash together lines from William Blake’s *The Tyger* and Mary Oliver’s *The Summer Day*; when I see my own dreams of heroism through the lens of Cervantes’ *Quixote*, or Menard’s; I am trying to create that “at least something different”—to define my own style, my poetic identity, my own particular idiom.

Sometimes (rarely) these poems will be transparent, their language and purpose readily clear. More often they contain many layers of meaning, incorporating my own ideas and others’, and balancing comprehensibility against euphony and what Robert Frost called “saying one thing and meaning another.” Do they manage to strike this balance? Here is a puzzle, a symbol, a code; and what you read in it is only partly up to me.

Unreliable Narrator

In words there is a compromise of sorts
Between the symbol, what it represents,
And what the speaker means—to all intents
And purposes a case beyond the courts.
Take VILLAIN, for example: there's a word
Twisted, contorted, spun, and redefined
To make into a wicked state of mind
What once was but a peasant's rank—"Absurd!"
I hear you cry; I cannot but agree:
Who paints the villain evil, hero good?
Until the symbol's meaning's understood,
I beg you, gentle reader, wait and see—

And ask yourself: What makes words false or true?
That I, who speak, believe them?

Or that you?

Errant

In the suburbs, in the summer of Arcadia,
he walks in circles—sleeping? waking?—Quixote,
ever tilting at windmills (though he sees giants)—
and again with Sancho, Dulcinea, and Cervantes
as cicerone, he traces the bounds of this asylum,
studies the moon and stars, and howls like a wolf;

So when he dreams, it is of leopard, lion, and she-wolf
in a wood midway through life's path—Arcadia?—
and waking, shaken by these visions, he seeks asylum
from oneiromancy—he who named himself Quixote
before, even, the name was given him by Cervantes,
sees further by standing on the shoulders of giants—

and, ever tilting at those selfsame giants,
ever seeks adventure—honor—chivalry. Lone wolf,
single-minded in his pursuit, at least he has Cervantes
to guide his path, his quest. Unready for Arcadia,
the perfect beauty and simplicity it portends, Quixote
wanders aimless, errant, in and outside the asylum;

a refugee from dreams, he found asylum
in the castle in the clouds, amidst the giants.
It was there he gave himself the name Quixote—
it was there he awoke at last from dreams, wolf-
like in his implacable sanity. 'Even in Arcadia,
there am I'—within the pages of Cervantes.

Is Menard's *Quixote* truly richer than Cervantes'?
Is anyone surprised when those within the asylum
are saner still than those without? Or that Arcadia,
beautiful as it is, holds death? Here there be giants,
dragons, monsters, ghosts; but if you brave she-wolf,
lion, and leopard, then you will find peace. Quixote

went tilting at windmills; but who is as quixotic
as the one who dreamt him, told his tale—Cervantes
himself? The author behind the character, the wolf
in sheep's clothing; but better to live in the asylum
than go sane into your grave. So do you find giants
in windmills; heroes in books; and I am in Arcadia.

There in the wood Arcadia, I am the hunter, the wolf;
imagining myself to be Quixote imagined by Cervantes,
I neither seek nor grant asylum to windmills, nor giants.

The Pen & The Sword

It's post-dramatic stress—cuts like a knife.
A year can dull it no more than a day—
Now tell me, if you can, what's the half-life
Of memory? How fast does it decay?
And what's left in its place when all is gone?
Not nothing, surely! I'm no nihilist,
But, left without the strength to carry on,
I hear the siren call and can't resist.

I enter—but instead of dark and light,
At length the conflict proves to be between
Extraordinary and mundane. Are right
And wrong an act? Not even that: a scene:
Of hopes and fears, the sins I can't condemn—
Umbrella. On a street corner. Two AM.

Ghazal for the Moment Before You Wake

Here still in dreaming, in between the realms, believe
everything—have no doubt—until you wake, believe;

Breathe, in out—feel your heartbeat, tha-thump, 80 bpm
pumping blood and air—it's a give and take. Believe

those wisps of dream that stay lingering: keep ephemera;
keep insubstantial memories, epsilons; even fake believe—

but you science-skeptic, you reason, you who doubt:
guess and check, yes; but for god's sake believe

something, anything! Hold, if only to dreams and doubts,
keep reason's faith, and till illusions break, believe.

There in dreams and waking I find you find me lost
and found, still wandering the land of make believe.

Santiago

I can't transmute the elements or change
The shape of living things; I can't create,
Destroy, transfigure, vanish, levitate,
Or otherwise nature's order rearrange—
But I can speak and scrawl and sign and sing,
And make of sounds and sigils words and voice,
Determinism seem the same as choice,
And vagabond stand tall as any king;
And what it is that's found in words and names,
No less than magic spells, homunculi,
And immortality, can answer why,
Can raise the fledgling phoenix from the flames.

There, in that place where magic still exists—
There words are gold, and we are alchemists.

Perennial

Alone, recumbent on the far branch of an old, old tree,
older by far than me myself, I lie, waiting, not thinking, peacefully,
not waiting, even, for anything to happen, but just for the branch,
for the tree, for the waiting itself, within a dream within a trance
within an evening reverie.

Tell me, if you can recall, in what language did you first breathe
your bated breath? And in what tongue or through what teeth
could you describe the quickening of the beating of your heart?
What key could turn your wild and precious life from art
into the falling of an autumn leaf?

Years are like leaves. They start out fragile, small,
and change color, texture, size, dimension, twist and fall,
pile up and vanish, reappear; and some get burned while others
get pressed and kept between the pages and under covers,
treasured like memories of old lovers.

And like years, leaves, as you run through them, leap, fall and such,
make a magnificent crunch.

*—in mnemosony, in between
remembrance and the music
ecstatic, in neurons firing and
atoms colliding, in glossolalia
and languages unspeakable,
unspoken, undreamt of, after
the dream ends but before
waking up, transitional, like a
compass spinning, disoriented
but inevitable, just under the
surface, the interface, just
beneath and beyond and
inside of, there—*

Intermezzo

On nights like tonight, when eyes move more slowly, we stay up all night riding succubi bicycles through frozen, mostly-empty streets—

forgotten by our brothers and sisters and parents, chasing and chased by our demons that only exist between broken nightfall and fallen daybreak—

clouds drift uneven, spread lattice-like like pie crust, like patchwork, like moonlight, percolating, making us go all misty-eyed—

we've got no idea where we're headed but following after chimeras following after us, we fall for a dream that will never be found—

at the crossroads, steadily pedaling back beneath a banner of moonbeam, clouds breached, we meet triple-aspected Hecate—

who, illuminating our moonshine silhouettes, inspects our specters skeptically before returning us home—

home, to our brothers and sisters and yes even our parents who wait, in dreams and words wondering:

when will we ever return? Back where we started, before bicycles and succubi, nightmares and wrong turns and fingertips frozen

in the place between.

To the Lake

When Sarver, Nafis, Condon, Jones, and I
Went off to that beconsonanted lake
To walk and wade and climb and leap and fly
And stumble on adventure by mistake,
The day seemed calm twixt water, shore, and sky—
A passing duck left ripples in its wake—
Yet what beneath that placid pond might lie?
What might the day's, the water's quiet break?
O, from no danger shall we ever shy,
Nor ever an adventure fain forsake!
But rather seek to quest and question why,
While quests both old and new we'll undertake—

So onward, friends, to Lake Chargoggagogg-
manchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg!

*—between the time it takes for a second to pass
and the distance a secret travels in a year
greater than wonder, or wondering, or wandering, or words
more than less than nothing at all
than silence, broken by ballistic vibrations
the displacement of gravity and galaxies' elasticity
next to almost nearly when beginnings start to appear, here—*

After the Storm

The island, in the season of the storm—
The grey persists eternities on end.
It has a certain beauty, we'll pretend,
And so believe that function follows form.
Now as the earth thaws, as the air turns warm,
Now soon the equinox will round the bend—
The storm has passed; what magic it can lend
Is lent; what burdens we can bear are borne.

Let's build a ship and sail across the sea,
Back to the realm of maps, the world of man;
Let's burn our books, forsake this sorcery,
Release both Ariel and Caliban—
But though new tempests blow our ship off course,
We sail. *Now I want spirits to enforce.*

Sonnet 18 Revisited

Shall I compare thee to a winter's night?
More cold thou art, and bitterer by far;
And yet, if I should see you by moonlight,
Reflected off the orb from Phoebus' star,
I'd trade a thousand years of summer's joy
For just one hour at thy frigid breast,
To hold you close, my mistress, cold and coy,
And even frozen count myself as blessed.

But thou, whose icy heart no words can thaw,
Shall reign as winter queen forevermore;
My own heart, all frost-bitten red and raw—
Yea, even now, your touch it hungers for:
For, not quite frozen while an ember burns,
It strives to pay the due December earns.

Friends With Words

On the ride back from New York we sang along to show tunes—*Les Mis, Fiddler, Avenue Q. 24601!* we cried. *To Lazar Wolf! Schadenfreude!* It was your turn driving when I nodded off, dreamt I heard you ask, “How’s everyone doing? All right?” and maybe I sang back, asleep, *Oklahoma, OK.*

Back home, a game of Scrabble was proposed. *OK, but no checking in the dictionary!* one of a long list of rules you had to ensure we played it right. Last turn: I drew letters, picked the solitary Q—and no U’s anywhere. You laughed with undreamt-of depths of cruciverbalistic schadenfreude.

In retrospect, I tell myself, that schadenfreude should have been the first sign things were not OK. Still, in a million years I never could have dreamt that you were stringing me (or I myself?) along. If I had asked you—if we had had an impromptu Q & A right then—would I have wanted to be right?

Old Star Trek episodes got us talking about right and wrong—the Prime Directive; the schadenfreude displayed toward Picard and his crew by Q; whether it was, from an ethical standpoint, OK to screw with the space/time continuum—along which must lie every dream you ever dreamt—

and speaking of every dream you ever dreamt, did you ever go through the looking-glass, find right turned into left, and yourself the story’s hero? Along with dreams of flying, the mind’s schadenfreude, showing what cannot be, shows nowhere clearer. OK, I exaggerate, but it’s at least near the front of the queue.

‘Our everyday alphabet will have no C or X or Q’—
it sounds silly now, but who could have dreamt
this future? We said *Everything will be OK*,
but everything is not OK. We are not all right,
and if you think we are, it is with no *schadenfreude*
that I tell you: Don’t expect me to play along.

Still, reflecting on the Q, pointless without U along-
side, I wish you had been right. Free of *schadenfreude*,
we are at last OK—or maybe that’s just what I dreamt.

Farewell

If tragedy were comedy, I’d cry until I laughed,
And if romance be awkwardness, I’ve long mastered the craft—
But as the former’s neither and the latter either/or,
Your pardon for this doggerel I must, in faith, implore.

You’ll please excuse my forwardness (or else refuse forthwith)
As I attempt to phrase myself with gallantry and pith,
For though you have me at a loss, you’ll find (or so I hope)
A clear and simple meaning in my mind’s kaleidoscope:

I stake no claim to poetry; I take no aim at art;
I know not where is fancy bred, or in the head or heart;
Yet now I find my heart and mind just as the poet wrote—
And if a bit I’m smitten, then, to wit, it’s you who smote.

This is no song of courtly love, nor courtship its intent
(The nonsense tripping off my tongue is not quite what I meant);
So please accept these lines as admiration, nothing more—
Unless reciprocated—in which case, dear, *je t’adore!*

consolations after an apocalypse, part i

in the ruins of babylon, in the ashes of mammon, of moloch, and
of baal, the dust has not yet settled,
the topless towers of ilium are still burning, the topless towers of
manhattan are still burning—
my lord, my lord, why hast thou forsaken me? why dost thou
forsake thyself?
where are the snowdens of yesteryear? where are your million
bastard children,
who sacrificed their own children on mount moriah, who wrote
your name in fire and blood,
who carved your face into the earth and carved their own into
mount rushmore,
who waited in ghettos and suburbs and wilderness unbounded
for a word or sign or dream that might never come,
who waited on the edge of the vanishing frontier and the ever-
expanding shore of ignorance, who stared into the abyss and
blinked,
who stood on the shoulders of giants and stamped their boots
into a human face forever until they got tired and had to sit
down,
who transfigured topaz into diamond, raised up the tay rail
bridge, and to their astonishment discovered themselves to
be poets,
who filled books—shelves—libraries—cities with the wisdom of
the sages of babel, of kulyenchikov, of chelm,
who plugged in, turned on, tuned in, dropped out, and watched
the revolution on youtube in lifelike hd technicolor only to
have the video get stuck buffering and refuse to play,
who saw things in black and white and demanded they be seen in
shades of gray,
who dug mud from the banks of the vltava, of the mississippi,
and of the styx and built themselves a golem to defend
against enemies real and imagined only to have it collapse
under the weight of the word on its head,

who sang and wept and prostrated themselves and offered sacrifices of blood and flesh; of body, mind, and spirit; with all their heart and all their soul and all their might, despite or because of your implacable silence in response,

who cried crocodile tears of salt and blood and amber, turned to the stars, and laid their lamentations before a sky not merely empty but deserted, abandoned—foreclosed on, boarded-up, auctioned off at a fraction of the price and torn down to make way for shiny new condominiums, glittering ciphers of an american dream they tried to spread around the world but couldn't coax, cajole, or threaten to get out of bed,

who invoked you by name, age, sex, and race and, consecrated, declared endless crusades and worldwide jihad, waged your million holy wars against parents and children, friends and lovers, against each other and themselves; who lost sight of the ground they stood on and, blind, pulled down the pillars of the temple of dagon on the heads of israelites and philistines alike; who came to bring peace but, in some way they could never quite explain or understand, ended up with a sword—and, too proud or ashamed to admit defeat, declared that had been their purpose all along,

who hated, built monuments to hate, and taught their children to do the same; who loved with passion, urgency, and abandon, loved so much they felt they would burst it; who did,

who waited in parks and plazas; who waited on battlefields and in refugee camps; who waited in schools and hospitals and prison cells; who waited in smoke-filled back rooms, in ivory towers and figurative and literal corridors of power; who waited beneath glass ceilings and outside the asylum; who waited in silence unbreakable as well as in sound and fury; who waited with increasing impatience and only occasional outbursts of violence,

embattled—embittered—empty—
embraced by and embracing a cynicism not just justified but demanded, required, enforced by a clash of civilizations and collapse of cultures they could not navigate or comprehend

in a world that, regardless of whether it was the best or worst of all those possible, was the one they inherited,
who divided, conquered, mongered fear, war, and fish to all possibly common denominators, who incited the vulgus mobile to riot and rampage, proving again and for all time that democracy is, indeed, the worst possible form of government, aside from all those others people have tried from time to time,
who stole from you fire, who stole from you gold, who stole from you knowledge of good evil and ultimately salvation itself, only to realize too late the pyrrhic nature of their victory,
who in scattered quiet moments in darkened corners and crevices; in the sancta sanctorum and only on the holiest day of the year; in places more private than sex, more private than prayer, more private than home, dropped every curtain, carapace, and façade and wept,
wept wordlessly, without words or voice or even sound, who did not beg, implore, or petition but stood silently, tears tracing chaotic rivulets down their faces, not expecting or believing or praying but waiting, waiting and hoping for you to appear at last with a kind word, a tissue, a mug of cocoa, something, to dry their tears and take them in your arms and tell them, truthfully or not, that you love them, unconditionally and infinitely, that you always have and always will, and that in spite of all ineffable and inevitable evidence to the contrary, everything will be all right

Commedia dell'Arte

An actor is a liar, head to toe—
You do believe me, don't you? After all,
I'm one myself, so oughtn't I to know?
We run and trip and graceful-graceless fall;
We make the stage a world, the world a show,
And costumed, masked, go answering the call,
Resisting whispering demons that would tempt
Us shatter the illusion and the wall.
When all the world's a stage, no one's exempt:
We wait to hear our cues, then off we go—

—but now my mask is off, my beard's unkempt;
I stand misquoting Shakespeare on the O:

*In heaven and earth are more things than are dreamt
In your philosophy, Horatio.*

RECOMMENDED READING

Agha Shahid Ali
Dante Alighieri
William Blake
Jorge Luis Borges
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Robert Browning
George Gordon Byron
Magdalena Cervantes Cassel
Miguel de Cervantes
G. K. Chesterton
Emily Dickinson
Allen Ginsberg
Adam Gottlieb
Hafiz
Victor Hugo
C. S. Lewis
Mary Oliver
Daniel Pinkwater
Sylvia Plath
Rumi
Gil Scott-Heron
William Shakespeare
Alex Traskovich
Kurt Vonnegut

What is a poet?

An unhappy person who conceals
profound anguish in his heart but whose lips
are formed that as sighs and cries pass over
them they sound like beautiful music.

— Søren Kierkegaard

“Not altogether a fool,” said G., “but then he’s a poet,
which I take to be only one remove from a fool.”

— Edgar Allan Poe