

Mystical
Hobby
of Christ:

The Poetry of Chris Toll

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Welcome and Introduction

Joshua Toll

It makes Safa, Ben and me so happy to be introducing my dad's collected body of work. We are so grateful to Buck Downs, Joel Dailey, Adam Robinson, Rupert Wondolowski and all of the other awesome friends of our dad who have contributed essays, kept the memory of our dad's poetry alive, and made this collected body of work happen. He was a unique talent and my most sincere hope is that more people will get to read his work.

What's it like growing up with a gifted poet as a Dad? I have cherished memories of going to see him read as a child, and being in awe because everybody knew him and it was clear that he was held in such a state of reverence. Later, when I could actually understand the words and what a unique perspective he had, I realized that his poetry was such a big part of who he was, as a person in this world. And I could appreciate his readings even more. He had this earnest, understated style that just let the poems speak themselves, to the point where the beauty of the words could almost bowl you over.

I also remember helping him with some of his poetry magazines and books – collating, stapling, proofreading (a talent I learned from him), and those are cherished memories too.

We miss him; we miss him; we miss him. It's been almost 14 years but I still feel his loss every single day. But I am so grateful to have had such a wonderful father, and I feel so lucky because we have his poems as his legacy, and his words live on. While I find myself returning to his poems a lot, especially since he's passed, the truth is that his poems, and especially some of my favorite lines, have always been very present in my life.

For example, one of my favorite poems has always been "Turning the Tearstained Pages of My Bible." To me, this is one of his greatest poems and a true masterpiece. The first time I read it, it just pierced my heart, took up residence there, and it's honestly never left.

All I want is a heart my heart can rest beside

My Dad had a way of just capturing the essence of life. This line has always meant a lot to me, and, at a certain point, I realized that it became my goal. It breaks my heart that he was no longer with us when I finally found the heart that my heart is now resting beside, but as my wife Safa explains, his poetry has been such a huge part of our relationship.

I wish that my dad could have met my daughter Vivienne. Her mischievous nature, her high-wattage smile, her warmth and curiosity, would have brought him so much joy. Vivienne is only two years old, but if she could understand this sadness in my heart, she would say, Daddy, don't be sad; instead, hold me and read me my favorite book! And somewhere, my dad would be smiling.

While I will certainly admit to being a little biased, when I think about my dad's body of work as a whole, I am struck by how imaginative it is, but what truly impresses me most is how much he had to say.

My Dad loved words and his poems truly celebrate the form. Interwoven through his work are many beautiful observations and even celebrations of the power of tapping into that mysterious and paradoxical undercurrent that animates all of my Dad's poetry. For example:

*Poetry is magic
where you create an invisible hypersonic freight train of many colors
out of three pounds of anguish ("Dancing with Bobby")*

Or:

*Poetry is the highest falling,
I'm trudging through an ice storm
to knock on your cabin door,
poetry is the rusted-out red Ford
abandoned in the dark woods,
& I love the open road
that runs from your heart to my heart ("Jägermeister in the Freezer").*

And my Dad celebrated the fact that poems are a special form. If you are feeling a bit lost, poetry can show you a path forward, even if it is not the one you think:

The poem won't heal a broken heart

*The poem will have a broken back,
stand up,
& show you how to fly. (“No Pressure, No Fear”)*

As beautiful as these lines are, there is so much more. In considering the human experience in its rawest form, in contemplating the universe’s possibilities, and in coming to terms with what was in his heart, my Dad charted a brave and authentic path forward, if only we could follow it. If you want to find the inspiration to live your life authentically:

*I’ll be a desperate 17-year-old bisexual virgin
til the day I die (“Is the Bear in the Woods a Catholic”)*

If you just want to know what do with your life, that’s easy too:

Love is so hard and it’s all we came to do (“The Abyss Has No Biographer”)

If you wake up and you just feel empty, sometimes it helps to know that others feel that too:

*God is so busy praying herself
She doesn’t have time
to answer my prayers. (“23 Palms”)*

And if you want an honest, raw, and beautifully real portrait of someone’s inner life, you have also come to the right place:

*Some lifetimes you feel like crying
from the moment you’re born till the moment you die (“Turning the
Tearstained Pages of My Bible”)*

Mostly what I want to honor in this essay though, is the endless compassion my Dad had for other people’s suffering; in this way, his poems have something real to offer to all of us, which is to be kinder to our fellow humans, and this lesson is undoubtedly needed now more than ever. But holding all of that inside, and expressing it, truly takes a special person.

And when I think about who I am, and my chosen path in law and life of helping people with some of their most fundamental problems, so much of my innate motivation comes from him.

*In my next life,
I'm coming back as daffodils in the spring* (from "Turning the Tearstained
Pages of My Bible")

I know this isn't over Dad, because you are still with us.

*I'm the clouds drifting over your roof.
I'm the traffic streaming past your windows.
I'm the floorboards creaking beneath your shoes.* ("The Road to Hell is Paved
With Good Inventions")

Dad, I love you, I miss you, and I will be looking for those daffodils.

Safa Ansari-Bayegan

Josh and I share the painful experience of losing a parent all too soon. As Chris resonantly wrote, *the ache in my heart lets me know you exist*. Fortunately, Josh was able to meet my mom, Susu, before she passed, but sadly, I never got to meet Chris. Even still, Chris has always been an important part of our story, his poetry punctuating the peaks and valleys of our relationship, including my wedding vows to Josh. Chris instructed us on that special day that *love forgives all, love outlives all*. We look forward to our daughter, Vivienne, discovering her grandfather's poetry and teaching her what he believed: that our purpose here in this life is to love each other fiercely. As Chris beautifully avowed, *love is so hard, and it's all we came to do*.

Benjamin Toll

There are some people whose lives seem to radiate on a slightly different frequency, people who walk through the world with a kind of mischievous wonder, who tilt their heads at just the right angle to see the hidden patterns most of us overlook. My father, Chris Toll, lived permanently on that wavelength. To encounter him, whether it be through conversation, scribbled lines of verse in cursive in his paper journals, or one of his esoteric poems, was

to step into an electric, unexpected universe where the ordinary became uncanny and the uncanny became strangely comforting.

For as long as I can remember, Dad carried poems the way other people carry a wallet – indeed, he lived his poems and carried them everywhere he went. He wrote about saints and galaxies, spiritual static and broken toys, cosmic blues riffs and malfunctioning angels. He wrote about whatever seized his imagination at that moment, which was often something no one else had thought to look at, let alone write about. The poems that fill this collection are traces of that exuberant curiosity, fragments of a mind that delighted in chasing ideas to their edges and then leaping off in new directions.

If his work sometimes feels “strange,” that is because he believed deeply in the value of strangeness. To him, strangeness was not a barrier to understanding; in fact, it was an invitation. As Edgar Allan Poe wrote (who also lived in my dad’s beloved Baltimore), “There is no beauty without some strangeness.” His poetry asked readers to step outside the narrow hallway of literal meaning and wander into rooms full of odd symbols, sideways humor, and spiritual treks. He trusted that readers would sense the sincerity beneath the eccentricity. And for those who stayed with him and allowed themselves to follow his mind into the back alleys of myth, religion, pop culture, and sci-fi, he offered a rare kind of companionship.

Growing up with him as a father meant living inside this beautifully off-kilter universe. He taught me that imagination is not something to outgrow; it is something to grow into. He encouraged questions that had no answers, stories that blurred the line between autobiography and fairy tale, and a way of living that found meaning not only in the profound but also in the absurd. Even as a parent, he remained unabashedly himself. There was no performance in his eccentricity; it was simply the natural expression of a mind that refused to accept the world at face value.

Watching him become a grandfather was one of the great joys of his later life. My sons, Dylan, now twenty, and Tyler, now seventeen, knew him only briefly. If you asked Dylan or Tyler what their grandfather was like, they wouldn’t reach for sterile words like “creative” or “unusual.” They would tell

you he was strange, a moniker he would enjoy. They would say he saw them not as kids to be instructed, but as companions in a strange and marvelous world.

Both boys carry a bit of his spark; they carry an inclination to notice the surreal corners of life, a willingness to laugh at the cosmic joke, and above all, a tenderness for the mysteries that surround us. In that sense, Dad's legacy extends far beyond his poetry; it lives in the people who loved him and learned from him.

The works collected in this book span decades and moods. They include provocations and prayers, jokes and meditations, experiments and exorcisms. They reflect the evolution of a writer who never wanted to repeat himself, who believed that poetry should surprise even the person writing it. Looking at the table of contents: "You're OK, I'm the Cum Stains on the Panties of Jesus," "Toasting Marshmallows in Hell," "The Holy Parsecs," "The Museum of Broken Toys," "Why Isn't Try in Divinity?" one sees immediately that this is not a conventional literary life. Dad embraced the unsettling and the irreverent because he believed that the sacred and the profane are always touching, and that the only way to see the whole picture is to look where others do not want to or cannot look.

He was, in his own way, a spiritual poet, though not of the tidy, reassuring variety. His spirituality was messy, humorous, questioning, and free-spirited. He saw holiness in broken machines, cosmic truths in bad puns, and flashes of divine revelation in the glitch between a thought and its expression. I fondly remember him asking me for the names of guns and various items he would place in his poems. Many poems in this volume push at the boundaries of belief, not to mock spirituality but to expand its vocabulary. He understood that mystery is bigger than doctrine, and he wrote to enlarge the space where mystery can breathe. He believed fervently that "The job of poets is to make the mystery greater."

But beyond all the wildness, the irreverence, and the cosmic playfulness, there is something else that threads through his work with devotion and reverence: Love. Not sentimental love, but a gritty, persistent love for humanity in all its

trembling confusion. A love for the wandering, for the seekers, for the ones who feel slightly out of place in the world. A love for the people who read poems trying to understand themselves, or the universe, or just what it means to be alive for this brief, baffling moment.

When I read his poems now, I hear his voice how he read them at the many poetry readings he took me and my brother, Josh, to as children. He read with a quiet grace, and weirdly quickly. But everyone loved to hear him read. He was sought after by so many Baltimore poets. And I am reminded that for him, poetry was not a performance or a career; it was an adventure he wanted to share.

This book is an invitation to join that adventure. It is a map of the places his mind wandered, faithfully preserved in ink. It is also, for our family, a way of keeping him close. Each poem is a small portal back to him; each poem is a reminder of the way he thought, the things he loved, and the joy he took in inhabiting the strange, beautiful world he created through language.

To those who are encountering his work for the first time: Welcome to this world of fantasy and wonder. You are about to meet a writer who will challenge you, amuse you, bewilder you, and perhaps comfort you in unexpected ways. To those who knew him: Thank you for remembering him with us. And to Dylan and Tyler: your grandfather adored you, and if there is any justice in the universe he so often wrote about, he is somewhere smiling to know that his words continue to travel, continue to be read, continue to spark wonder.

And so, with love, gratitude, and a deep sense of the extraordinary, I offer this collection of my father's poems. May it surprise you. May it unsettle you. May it make you laugh at the places where the universe glitches. And may it remind you, as he reminded all of us, that there is beauty in the inexplicable, truth in the strange, and love infused through all of it.

BLUE CONFESSIONS

(Apathy Press Poets, Tom DiVenti, 1988)

Art On The Third Planet From God

– for Richard Sober, Ed Bavis, and Tom DiVenti

The shootists ride a cold wind from Hell
They're earth, air, fire, and water
They hide automatic weapons in their notebooks,
they wear funny masks to the morgue
Invent, ye sinners!
There are many mansions in a single snowflake
I'm a sick motherfucker a long way from home
You'll meet my soul weeping on the twisted stairs
The door at the top leads to the silver pastures
in hymns the lonely stars sing
They thirst for the sake of righteousness

Exotica

Love is like Life – merely longer
Love is like Death, during the Grave
Love is the Fellow of the Reconstruction
Scooping up the dust and chanting “Live!”
– *Emily Dickinson*

I'm an infinite Alas
I shuffle memories
I was told the weight of one more dark eyelash would tilt the world
She wore a driven smile
beneath her lavender angora cap
She pumped me until I exploded on my belly
Your number is dark blue
Goodbye is my name
He met me in the street beside the club
He said, “Your tomboy hips drive me wild”
I said, “Do with me what you will”
He took me on his daughter's bed
The Ninas glide through the corridors of a starship
The astronavigator turns
and finds her head ringed by the tips of 20 swords
I borrowed his preppie Persian wife
Dancers swayed in the flames of candles
I got down on my knees,
pushed up her skirt with the big safety pin,
and licked her hot-pink panties
I loved you in a former lifetime, I'll love you again
You'll make me to shine like the sun
I knew the passion was going

when she said the gravel in the parking lot was uncomfortable
Once I could finger-fuck her on the jungle gym in the playground
Take my happiness
and add the militiaman with a machine gun mounted in a shopping cart
The sum is greater joy

You're OK, I'm the Cum Stains on the Panties of Jesus

The priest drove a stake through my heart
He didn't know I was a Venusian vampire
He should have driven a stake through my third eye
I've got the Cretaceous blues,
I'm the bastard son of a hundred maniacs,
and I lay my head on the holy radio and pray
I want to seize the microphone
at a born-again Christian convention,
read a poem,
and be stoned to death by Bibles
You bring your crippled forearm to the banquet
Jesus changes it into a saxophone
I howl at the full moon
because I know it excites the archangelic part of your brain
We shouldn't be so sad so many years again
We don't deserve to be so happy
Psychic gifts! Clairvoyant treasures!
We're changing from the inside first
When our feet are rivers,
we'll dance around a big campfire in Spirit Land

The Dark Pages

– for Ruth Pettus

*“I like men who are poets, you know,
but that doesn’t mean they have to write poetry.”*

– Marilyn Monroe

The first shall be fast
and deliver is reviled
Why is there char in charity?
God is not a Cook
On the Road we drink wine bit eat no bread
He is a Black Serpent with a Red Tongue
He *likes* for us to taste of His Tree of Knowledge
He is Light
We cannot see without him
Lord Byron aims the RPG-7
It’s not accurate for long distances,
but the rocket should cross four hundred pages
of The Norton Anthology
The explosion will take out Lord Tennyson
An assassin knocks on the mansion’s door
The turtle girl named T’ruth opens it
She’s been expecting him
She’s over nine hundred years old
She’ll live to be ninety thousand
Her mind sensed his starship when it phased out of hyperspace
The Men in Suits keep MAC-10s in their briefcases
If anybody aims a machete at their ankles
they’ll punctuate their love letters by emptying 32-round magazines
Who put the moor in bridegroom?
The apartment building blazes like an ice cube

The row houses are volumes in an encyclopedia of grief
Jesus has so much to wish for
He can be found behind the windows of junk shops
He won't go all the way on a first date

Nostalgia

1

Here comes the summer of 1985
The middle-aged husband and wife are crossing the street
They're white sacks of damaged genetic material
They wear red and green bermudas
The decal on their T-shirt is
BEAT
Michael Jackson in his red leather jacket and black leather pants
IT

2

The Libyan suicide terrorists
machine-gun the secretary in her cubicle
One of them kicks open the office door
They tie the personnel director to his chair,
stuff plastic explosive in his mouth,
tape it shut,
and laugh when his head blows up.
The Summer of Blood begins!

3

I want to teach creative writing at the Naval Academy
I'll make the midshipmen slit their wrists
and write PEACE with their blood
on the hulls of nuclear submarines

4

You pull the ripcord of a black parachute
and drift from the night sky
You're dressed in black clothes,
your face darkened,
a black typewriter strapped to your chest
Your mission is so secret you don't know it yourself

5

In The Club At The Center of the Galaxy
(AKA The Club Asshole)
the starship pilot looks away
as the amoeboid wraps a pseudopod
around a frosted mug of zamplix eyeballs
she watches three octopoids weaving tentacles

Just Say No to Nancy

I'm a hit man for Jesus
(He's scary
when he goes in McDonald's and gets the shakes)
I'm a grunt in the War For Drugs,
and I'm also a working girl
Art is more important than money
Keep saying that to yourself
and maybe you'll live it
My God's an atheist
(She fries up electromagnetic preachers for breakfast)
I read a page of the Bible over and over all night long,
and I have a vacation condo in hell
Captain America has an evil grin
as he sprays the oil the security guards will slip on
Who authorized the space-age plastic for his shield?
Listen, pilgrim, and listen good
We're going home
We'll join a big ghost
when your face is sunshine and my face is rain
I'll bring the war where I died with a spear through my heart
You'll bring the quatrain you write on your deathbed
Here comes our brother, his left hand's a rosebush
Here comes our sister, her right hand's a thundercloud
We study a tapestry where the tears you cried
on a Thursday in February
made a river flow on a planet across the galaxy

One Day At A Time, Sweet Jesus

The CIA director paces in front of his desk
He's wearing a wedding gown
The train trails exquisitely
as he orders the assassination of the lead singer of Angels From Hell
A gay Bigfoot shaman
has stolen the bodies of Rock Hudson and Liberace
He's performing rituals to resurrect them as sex slaves
I'm riding in a car
Ruth is driving
I blink
The inside of the car is filled with snow to the bottom of the windows
I look out
Children dressed in camouflage uniforms
are firing antiaircraft guns at flying saucers
if I couldn't write poetry
I'd be the first cereal serial killer,
a looney tune who murders mothers buying Cheerios
There is a God
She's a 13-year-old street child
giving a blowjob
to a fat-daddy middle-management android in his station wagon
(She likes to swallow)
Our eyes lock for a moment, and we drink volumes
Your skies used to be so true
Your soul is a treasure map from another planet

The Evolution of the Soul (Dance Mix)

1

Where were we
before we were so rudely interrupted by birth?
We were building the universe's greatest roller coaster
on the head of a pin in a cave on Pluto
(We were playing hooky from our astral lessons)

2

I fell in love with you
when my soul was cleaning its fingernails with a switchblade
and nodded in your direction

3

I'm a dopeless romantic,
I'm a prince in exile,
I'm a good soldier,
what's the war?

4

My job is cleaning the stained-glass windows of the churches in hell
You know I don't do windows

5

The left margin is the wall I'm executed against
Tear the filter off my last cigarette

6

"I'm surprised to see you in Club Metempsychosis.
When you banished me from Deneb 7
I warned you never to set a suction cup on the surface of Earth!"

Stay Hungry

My notebook is as tall as the night
During a televised speech,
a Ninja materializes beside the President
and lops off his head in midsentence
There are truths apprehended only by the swift
A nun is taking off her habit for the last time
She's following her heart
She'll take little white crosses
and drive straight through to New Orleans
Who will move me to tears?
Tears Moisten the mask of the Lone Ranger
Now he knows why the chrononauts abducted him
He loads his revolvers
He melted silver crucifixes and made bullets
A vampire in a cardigan sweater and a tartan skirt
stalks toward his motel room
Across the galaxy,
Seven beetleoids cluster on a hilltop
While their antennae sway in unison,
they gaze at a constellation named The Broken Harp

Dear Psychedelic Psychotic Seeker

1

I lived for years
between the lines of a poem
I slept on “terror”
My table was “tender”

2

I wake up with a champagne bottle
shoved into my pussy
I'm the loneliest monster in the world
Pornographic photos of the Virgin Mary
are scattered on the floor of the Batcave

3

I'm an armless woman
who wants to swim the English Channel
I'm a legless man
who wants to be a marathon runner
I'm a girl without a mouth
whose smile could cure cancer
I'm a boy without an asshole
whose fart could bring world peace

Deconstructing the City of God

God found a good attorney
and renegotiated Her contract
Elvis and Marilyn soul kiss
behind the throne the rain sits on
When we were babies,
Gypsy time travelers took us to the 25th Century
were psychic surgeons traded our hearts
Captain America is secretly a painter
His favorite color is the faces of the damned
He misses the blue
of the stockings Emily wears in her next life
His hand shakes with too much love
I my dream I read a tabloid
and learn the etiquette
for ballroom dancing with werewolves
The Beatles are selling cars and sneakers
That's a sin we can lay at Michael Jackson's grave
He doesn't care: when he jacks off,
the cum on his belly forms the face of the Virgin Mary
Bailey volunteers for a suicide mission
(She'll work 40 hours a week every week for the rest of her life)
Jeff hangs out in The Club Hell,
he likes the desperate eyes and their promise of romance
Loneliness has a law which is your face
I write my love poems with invisible ink
I leave a werewolf in the rain for you
if you want to know where I live,
get fucked up on four Dangerous Controlled Substances,
find the starship waiting behind a prison in the Holy Bible,

and go 50,000 light-years from Earth
My planet has pink sky and purple grass
My city in a bottle is on a shelf in a wizard's castle
Look for me in the clouds somewhere over Ohio
I'll be standing on the hood of an astral '57 Chevy.
I'll be preaching to dreamers,
My Christ picks her teeth with the cross Jesus died on

Curb Your God

The F-111 seat in my backyard
has served me well
through a hundred lifetimes of solitude
I open The Golden Book of Knowledge
Ah, a new page to pour my heart onto!
I've built a mansion on the dark side of Mercury,
it has a thousand rooms,
I'm calling my tribe to join me
Evil Ed II – Ed by Dawn listens to the wind
It tells a joke that breaks his heart
When he lights one of his weird cigarettes,
flame leaps from the tip of his forefinger
The X-Men are all women now,
Satan has the saddest eyes in the universe,
and Tammy Faye cries
whenever an angel falls off the head of a pin
Tom is getting ready for a higher plane
He tidies up the kitchen
It's not his fault
Nancy slams her head into the cleaver he's holding
Captain Kirk drives a pickup truck,
his best friend is a case of beer
Mutant tarantulas are plotting in the photon torpedo tube
I receive my poems through a KL43 encryption device
The operative has a brain tumor in his hypodermic syringe
He bends over the sleeping witness
The lonely Luddites break into God's computer room
They weep as they swing their sledgehammers
You're Jesus, Jesus is Buddha, Buddha is nobody
I need your tender thoughts to stroke my scary ideas

until my brain is your right hand
in the big ghost who'll be our home
when or poems are irises in the spring
I give my life to beauty, truth gives a life to me

Speak, Memory, Speak

1

Before I died of cancer,
I wore a wool cap in the middle of the summer
I got on a bus
To reach the change in my pocket
I tossed my Emily Dickinson book
and three pill bottles
on an empty seat
A pretty woman noticed me
She almost smiled

2

Does the top of your head ache when your lotus is blossoming?

3

Julie was a Catholic high school girl
She was a 40,000-year-old 17-year-old
She and I were in her bedroom
She didn't take off her uniform
I sprinkled cocaine on her pussy
I was licking so hard I didn't hear the door open
I heard the cough
Julie screamed and jerked her legs away
I turned around
and the muzzle of the .38 was six inches from my forehead
I died when her father pulled the trigger

4

Rebecca was quite considerate to wear her sweater backwards
The buttons shine like searchlights
I lick her asshole until it gleams with spit

5

I'm a good soldier in my dream
I walk beside a carriage
pulled by genetically engineered narwhals
The Queen smells the rebels hiding in a thicket
She gestures,
and I give her my portable laser cannon
While she programs it to respond to her brainwaves,
I slip a proton disruptor bomb beneath the seat cushion

6

I'm standing on the shore of the lake I've cried
I study the sky
I try to connect the stars so the puzzle is your face

The Stations of the Cross

1

I burned my manuscript in my driveway
and pleaded with the night sky, "FILL ME UP!"
The moon adjusted his sunglasses
and looked for a more reckless girl

2

The insurance agent is slumped in a doorway
He sucks fire to the end of a bloodstained cigarette
He is eternal bliss

3

My head was a cathedral
A crystal voice opened the tabernacle
and walked out on the ice until it fell through
The coke cans dropped like depth charges
It was one of my I-want-to-cry-all-day days
The men smelled like gunshops
I was another girl they used up and threw away

4

Blue yarn, you are part of the tapestry
The yellow loves you and so does the rain

5

The Mad Scientist has determined where it all went wrong
He sets the controls in his time machine
for Auskorg, Norway, at 7 p.m. on January 1st, 1898
He can already feel the Uzi stuttering in his hands
He an already feel himself blinking out of existence
His quarry is Johann Waaler,
the teacher who invented the paper clip

6

Why is there a ledge in knowledge
and when will I leap?

7

I want to be as empty as a stone,
as generous as the sun
I pull on my panties
and roll down my socks like a Catholic school girl

8

The message is an outhouse, a weather vane
a rooster's head, a key
and a hand formed to make a shadow crocodile on the wall
The senior TV spokesmodel suggests a Vulcan mind meld
The sorcerer's apprentice is shy
She doesn't want to open her beautiful box of memories
and show the doll with a broken arm

9

After I died,
my left foot was a river
I held my lifetime in my cloud and hawk
The front cover was a woman's face,
a weeping willow was the back cover,
and the spine was a church with four gargoyles on the tower
I opened *The Book of Longing* and studied the ocean I had cried
The sorrows belonged to another boy, they didn't belong to me

10

My third eye is thirsty for music
The hunger in my heart is a yearning I can't even name

11

I love you and you
and you and you
and you and you and you and you
and you and you and you

12

Look for me in a dream
I'll be dressed in black
and have blue hair
I'll be in Psychic Overmind
at the corner of Heartache Avenue
and Religious Ideas Considered As The Sweat Of The Soul Street

13

I love your eyes
They're so young when they're far away
They're so old when they're close

14

My heart will overflow my body and flood the universe !!!
(Please)

Ecstasy, Etc.

I said I belonged to the Fisher
The soldiers crucified me upside down
I pawned my wedding ring for three dollars
The secret police attached electrodes to the genitals of Jesus
Between his screams
he groaned, "What is The Truth?"
My night begins with a white capsule
I'll be different for the rest of my life
A rifeman has the head and neck of a brontosaurus
Investment brokers open the golden book of your life
and tear out your dreams like pages they don't like
I'm sick of shit I can't see
I'm sick of shit I can't smell
I'm sick of shit I can't put my finger on
Let's bring the war home,
I've got ecstatic shoes, a mohair mind
You're a rock 'n' roll boy
I'm a working girl
You look like a secret agent
I feel like a crime
You're ten thousand years old
I haven't been born
In the wind the dead recite their multiplication tables
A cathedral times a taxicab
equals an old man beneath a bridge in the rain
with all his earthly possessions in six plastic bags
The pink gelatinous mass like a mound of pulsating mashed potatoes
engulfs the left foot of the Titan
He doesn't notice it

Two Crusaders are burying their battle-axes in his right shin
He ignores them
He swings his sword at the pterodactyls scoring his helmet
There's nothing sadder in the morning
than a rolled-up dollar bill, a razor blade, and an empty mirror
The most beautiful part of your body is your brain
You give my heart wings
I love every sentient being
in every universe that was, is, and will be
God sent me to do good work
God sent you to do good work
God sent me to do good work
God sent you to do good work
God sent me to do good work
God sent you to do good work

The Contemplative Life

1

I'm the first lean and hungry superhero
I wear a Catholic schoolgirl uniform
My name is Ironic Man

2

In the fifth stanza of a hymn,
a man waits in the lobby of a seedy hotel
He has an Uzi under his overcoat

3

Who put tempt in contempt?
Who took contempt out of contemplation?
Who put passio in compassion?

4

Jesus climbs down a ladder
The rungs are red sentences
His foot slips on "thirsty"
an he falls to his death

5

A woman sits before her typewriter
She rolls skyscrapers out of the carriage

She expects no mercy
Her life has been a vigil in the dark

6

I feel like a fishing boat
off the coast of Vietnam in 1975:
the ocean is so vast,
37 human beings are crowded on my tiny deck,
and I'm so sad

7

Does God have a sense of humor?
Look at a cactus

8

I'm Larry Talbot on mushrooms
A crystal cathedral spire
is growing from the top of my head
I'm a poetry commando
Step on my back
to get farther up the beach

Up All Night

I was born in a blizzard in 1979
when a Snowflake Diamond Sutra Sword
killed the man I used to be
Now I've got a mansion on the edge
Life is so beautiful
I sit in my blue chair and cry
You sit in my black chair
and the 7-D Jesus Healing Tapestry
explodes like a mushroom cloud from the top of your head
(He's got a Big Ear,
He's got a Big Fifty Dollar Bill,
He's got the heads of Jack and Bobby for steppingstones)
Judas has magenta laser eyes
He eats the sins of the MTV boys
who use women like toilet paper
Your essence is a thing of infinite beauty
It's a hitchhiker in your body
Valentine's eyes feed the sorrow of the world,
Ed had a nodding acquaintance with King Heroin,
and Dharma is a Club Charles nun
Truth is a wooden raft
After you've crossed the river of life,
you leave it behind
My principle of poetic composition
is present tense who falls in love with present tense
I love you when your eyes talk, talk to me, talk to me
Susan Holy War whispers in my ear
"The commercial is sexist, hon, cuz she drops the football"
David sez, "We'll be pure and crazy by the time we're 50"

I'm dancing with Bob in a Pythagorean snowdrift
I'm dancing with Bob in a graveyard
Hey Dan, hell will be me reading the same poem
over and over and over for all eternity
O sister, you're my buddhic twin brother
I leave a flying saucer in the rain for you
Listen to your heart, listen to your heart, listen to your heart
Don't listen to your brain
You live in my heart, where can you go?
No jesus, no buddha, no drugs, no alcohol no god, no satan –
O darling, we're on our own now

The Storms of Life

Billy is my tormentor,
he wears a long black coat,
he lives inside the Earth
where the giants with crystal brains sleep
Come on eggbrother,
let's take a walk through the Long Sorrow
Come on spermsister,
let's take a walk on the Shining Path
I don't do obsession
and I don't do long distance romance
I do everything else
Give me your wrongs I'll make them right
The electromagnetic preachers wear jet pilot glasses
The Stealth Fighter casts a shadow on the smile of Jesus
He's breaking an Italian cold cut sub to feed the MTV carpenters
Susan Holy War yawns and changes the channel
"The commercial is fascist, hon, 'cuz the cop is smiling"
Come on boy, throw your guitar on the bonfire
Come on girl, take a walk to the river with me
My dark majesty says, "Mutilated labs escape"
Valentine is a Club Charles priest,
Gail is an Admirable in the Martian Hyperspace Force,
and I'm the last watchtower in town
Wipe away the big drops of the Old World rain
Angels came from Earth's good twin planet in the Andromeda Galaxy
They're lying on top of the gray clouds,
playing harmonicas
and crying crystal tears
When you travel with Prince of Darkness Charters Ltd.
every day is Christmas

and every night is Halloween
Venerable Tiny is Baltimore's Buddha
He sits on you and slides under the door
Mr. Miracle jumps on the rocket sled
They haven't made a poem he can't escape from
Of course, he's leaving this one with a broken heart
It's funny how it all works out

The Echoes

For my punishment,
I had to stay in my room for twenty million years
and all I did was weep
Egomania take you to the Gate of Art,
it won't put you inside
I'm the Mystical Hobby of Christ
I died in 1975 of a gunshot wound to the head
I've got my bald wig on
I'm the evil twin Sister of Chris
He's on a werewolf religious retreat
He prays between his snarls
I scream when the cheddar cheese goldfish pour out
Warren is a Kennel in the Venusian Army of Love,
and poetry kneels before no king's throne
I say, "I'm not bitter,
I took the shits in ties out of my last poem"
Billy the Preacher says, "You can't be too bitter"
You see stuff and know things
Nobody's guilty and nobody's innocent
The revolution is long and hard,
and the scariest part is the war inside
Some days all I do is sit by my window and clean my rifle
Ron says, "You could crucify an ant on George Michael's cross"
Dicky says, "All I'm trying to do is nail some insane guy to the window"
Reverend Keith says, "My first band was Life Is Killer,
my second band was Why? Because We're Idiots,
my third band was Dead Like Buddha,
my fourth band was ..."
The greens warrior watches insect incest in the financial canyons

Susan Holy War shifts from 1st to 2nd
“That billboard is racist, hon,
cuz a black man is the only one wearing an ID badge”
When I build my Stealth Poems
I throw away the instrument panels and the linkages –
don’t tell anybody
I built a mansion on the wind,
I’m growing a monkey tail in the library
I left a fleet of flying saucers in the moonlight for you
You’ve always been a trouper – or is that trooper?
Let’s sit in my room and watch the crustal rain come down
Bob makes a damn fine curtain

Tribal Smelter

I write my poems, my poems write me
I write my poems, my poems write me
I write my poems, my poems write me
I write my poems, my poems write me
I write my poems, my poems write me
I write my poems, my poems write me
Bob wrings a red dimetrodon out of his guitar
I've been down to the bottom with a Batman babe,
she never takes off her cape,
I can't tell Night from wrong
I've been up to the stars with a crystal ball babe,
she puts me on my knees,
I can't tell wrong from Light
Rikki went to Switzerland for the Operation
Her new band is The Minimum Wages of Sin
She feeds the Voices tears on her pillow,
the Voices feed her hymns
where the favorite shooter of St. Tyrannosaurus rex
is Jamaican Hitchhiker On The Third Moon Of Jupiter
Valentine's got a nuclear umbrella,
he's got angel wings
He's stood in the dark corner so long
he can't believe the things he knows
One thing he knows is he never goes home with a girl
Another thing he knows is that his book will be a jewel for God's crown
(if God say on a throne, if God had a head, if ...)
God has attractive cobras for Her hair
Her favorite shooter is Life On Earth –
add the ache from a sick at heart

to the anguish from a bitter wife,
the despair from a starving child
the joy from a new love,
and the awe from a poem that's an invisible supersonic coat of many colors
Susan Holy War has developed an evil smile in her dotage (age 28)
“The commercial is fascist, hon,
cuz a fighter pilot is eating a candy bar”
The purple squid detective sloithers on a slippery path,
fills urs notebook with the name of Oddd
Why is scarcity scar city?
In the conditioned air of tiny office buildings,
fluorescent lights march to their doom
Muffy Saffo is Governor of the State of Sorrow
She knows a thing or two about the lower rings of hell (i.e., the human brain)
Her heart has goodness she doesn't know what to do with
She writes a letter to the Tao in her journal
“O my dear Unknown,
Art is the most important thing in the universe
If that's true – and I *know* it is –
why are Artists so messed up?
Yours through Hope and Fear, A Pilgrim”
I'm not a machine, I'm a Sex Goddess
I'm not a machine, I'm a Sex Goddess
I'm not a machine, I'm a Sex Goddess

TALES FROM THE HOME PLANET

(Fell Swoop, Joel Dailey, 1990)

When the New World Comes

You won't need no BMW
You won't need no IRA
You won't need no 401(k) plan
You won't need no hand grenade
You won't need no VCR
You won't need no Rolex watch
You won't need no Rolodex
You won't need no M-16

Intimations of Immortality

I'm weirder
faster
smarter
slower
scarier
more beautiful
than any Goddam god

Disorganized Religion

While you sleep
& have a dream
where you're riding a ten-foot-tall tricycle
past a swing in the backyard of your friends
& it's snowing in your kitchen
& you're writing in your reality journal
& you're looking for bug spray at the hardware store
& the manager is a werewolf,
a cockroach undertakes a pilgrimage
to the inside of your right shoe

Living With the Monsters

The Green Beret holds a grenade launcher
He has a blue head shaped like a manta ray
The knight in golden armor swings a morning star
He has the head of a purple mole with computer-enhanced eyesight
I love the archaeological patterns on top of the TV
when the soldiers pack their toys and move out

16, Pregnant, and Desperate

I marked my place in Jeff's book with a plastic knife
If the shoe fits, grow

I'm devoted to Art
I hope he leaves his wife

This poem is dedicated to the homeless man who hummed a
Christmas carol
as he opened paper bags in a trash can & looked for food

Why is a demon in demonstrate?
Why is a hero in heroin?

What does a huge glob of peanut butter on top of my bureau mean?
I couldn't find the answer in my Dreams Dictionary

I'm not lonely, I'm wed to the Night
I pray to Our Lady of Television

My wheels will swallow pearls & vomit rubies
If you want the cowgirl, Highway, you can have her

I get through the minefield between my kitchen & my living room
As soon as I step outside, a laser-guided bomb begins to fall toward me

The Moral Order

1

St. Jeffrey watches over me
He's everywhere
He won't let me die until I write 783 good poems

2

I made my head & now I'll weep in it
A reporter asks a question at the press conference
The Lizard King rips away his human mask

3

I'll think with my heart
Bless my daddy as he drives the company car
Deliver me to the one I love

4

The glow from the burning bridge will light your way
April forgets November
If you're lost long enough, someone will find you

5

The cockroach band is playing a backwoods waltz
They avoid the poison that would twist their wings
They gave up all they had to be where they are

Why is Reach in Reacher?

Why is an ion in religion?

Why is Go in God?

Why is won in wonder

& what did I win?

Why is a sin in sincere?

Why is try in poetry?

Why is an inn in innocence

& how long can I stay?

Love

The girl turns her head

& there's a boy just beneath the surface of her face

He isn't drowning, he's learning to swim

What the Wind Told Me

Something is hungry to be born,
something must die
– & what has to die doesn't want to
& is vicious

What the Broken Mirror Rejects

No more safe sex on lonely country roads!
A twisted loner is speeding in the Batmobile
“O God help me,” he hisses
as he takes a hairpin turn at 120
& the headlights wash across a pack of werewolves
She would,
but She’s sitting on the throne
in Her shithouse at the center of the Milky Way
She’s studying one of her toys –
a brontosaurus with the head of a tyrannosaurus rex
She’s planning a universe that’s *really* weird
This poem can only be killed by a silver bullet through the heart,
killing it isn’t enough
it must be burned at the stake or it will turn into a vampire
What is liar the lair of?
Some nights the only people in the Club Charles
are FBI agents, CPAs, & marketing majors
The middle-aged Christ wonders what to do
when he wakes up with a hard-on
After Billy the Preacher dies,
he has to smoke furry turds in hell for 40,000,000 years
This is the confession of a born-again puddle of puke,
a poem is a machine that breaks your heart,
& the bandits are wearing three-piece suits
Susan Holy War loves pillow talk
She puts her gum in the ashtray and says,
“This country was founded by outlaws & religious fanatics, hon –
don’t forget it
Let’s dynamite the banks & churches –

& see what kind of world we can build”
Loneliness has a claw which is my face
Send a blizzard to my little corner of hell in the crucifix museum
I've fought demons for so long I've become one
Muffy Saffo is beginning her post-graduate studies in loneliness
She has had two boyfriends
She stole a sweater from each one
She don't care,
she expects to be alone until the day she's dead
Valentine's got xerox outlaw literature in a plastic bag,
he's got the loneliness there ain't no cure for
The Mess is blessed yes yes yes
who lights a cigarette in a plastic hell on the interstate

What Lurks Behind the Holy Bible

The troll is drooling
Its breath stinks,
it's eaten too many Christians
The soldier from the 21st Century
doesn't mind the dust burying his feet
The troll's head fills the scope of his rocket launcher
He's back to back with his partner
Her finger hesitates on the firing stud of her laser assault rifle
She faces a purple elephant at the end of 50,000,000 years of evolution
Its thumb depresses a button on the haft of its sword,
& it creates a reality
where Jesus was an intelligent six-foot-tall praying mantis

My Flying Saucer Bible

I have a shy & a wild heart,
I start this poem on the envelope my father's letter came in
Bless me, Father, for I am wind
Why is justice just ice?
I have a troubled home life – & I live alone
My Jesus is wearing nylons & high heels
& parading in front of a mirror
I've been on the stairs with a Jesus babe,
she likes to lick my cross
Every loss is the promise of a greater beauty
I'm happier knowing you exist
O black raincoat sister, let's do dreams again – real soon
My soul is 10,000 miles tall,
I'm a teardrop on its cheek
A long time ago – when I began this poem –
I was all torn up inside

My Last Pill & Testament

Kill the poets, drink their blood
Kill the poets, drink their blood
Kill the poets, drink their blood
A twisted loner climbs out of the wreckage of the Batmobile
“O Jesus help me,” he whispers
as he wings his head and counts 10 – 20 – 30 werewolves
Jesus would, but He’s standing in front of a mirror
& admiring His new party dress
Do your shoulder blades ache where angel wings are growing?
In an alternate reality,
Jesus was crucified
with an arm across the shoulders of his twin brother
They’re using rock ‘n’ roll to sell clean kitchens,
never trust the government in thrillers,
they’re using the assassinated poet to sell a bank,
& war has gone to eastertime too
An eight-legged Christ is preaching from a web
I’m forming a citizens’ action group:
DSAD – Drunk, Stoned, And Driving
I’ve got a rosary and you’re on the cross
I’ve been at the end of my rope with a rock ‘n’ roll soldier,
she never takes off her headphones
I have stigmata from the reality
where Jesus was crucified
with spikes through his elbows and knees
I love you with the two hearts I have on a planet orbiting a binary star
There are 10,000 Lord Byrons now –
half of them own personal computers,
half of them smoke reefer,

half of them are tormented geniuses,
half of them are plastic army guys in the tall grass
with notebooks in their back pockets
you melt their heads with matches you stole from your father),
& all of them out dirty words in their poems
There are bluffs in my soul
where you can stand & see a hundred miles of me
I studied at the Bela Lugosi School of Psychic Vampires,
I'm the saddest woman in the Crystal Palace,
& by & by – oh yes, by & by – I'll christmas out of my christopher

A Lonesome Cowboy on the Protein Deprivation Trail

I know the darkness,
I love the light
I know the darkness,
I love the light
I know the darkness,
I love the light
I used to be so sad
A spore from outer space entered my body
& I grew a second heart
Art is not a product, art is process
I'm a priest without a religion,
I'm a religion without priests
St. Negativity is a marketing vice president
for a multinational corporation
He says, "Life is a joke & it's not very funny"
I'm not a voice crying in the wilderness,
I'm the wilderness
At a certain point, my "I" becomes your eye
I have to worry,
my great-great-great-grandmother was an outer space vampire
I'm a crime against God & nature
I've got a secret laboratory
where I break the hearts of wives of the Green Berets
My desk is on the surface of Pluto
I'm writing anti-poem bombs
that explode in the mind & make everybody a poet
I've got rocks in my shoes,
I'm going to meet the angels

Aren't you tired of living in the tiny fortress we call the body?
Aren't you ready to be born into someone bigger?

Turning the Tearstained Pages of My Bible

I pour a poem into my typewriter,
& out goes a part of my loneliness
Love has no rules
A young woman practices a dance step at a bus stop
Her two children sit on the curb
The older child holds a grocery bag as big as he is
A yellow leaf on the sidewalk breaks my heart
On Sunday morning,
the Powers That Pee
order three broken-down alcoholics
to carry a refrigerator up a fire escape
Weeping greens the soul,
& whatsoever you do for the yeast of these,
you do for me
I accepted death, & life accepted me
I accept loneliness, when will love accept me?
I'm laying out my book like a banquet for the sick at heart
The arm of a spiral galaxy
reaches out in hapless yearning
Some lifetimes you feel like crying
from the moment you're born to the moment you die
In my next life,
I'm coming back as daffodils in the spring
The sweet and sad faces from your dreams will find you
All I want is a heart my heart can rest beside

Cryin' Time is Over

Jesus is the lock,
you are the key,
& Satan is my bombardier
We're happy in my laboratory
We read St. Luke till we puke,
a poem lives or dies in the first six lines,
we read St. Matthew till we mildew,
& love has no borders
Doubt is how my knowledge grows
St Negativity moved to California
He's living in hell
He's wrestling with God
God has a billion billion billion arms, tentacles, wings
God is a cowherd playing a flute beside a stream
A flying saucer hovers above the suburban religious tract
A deflated Smurfs swimming pool
protects a motorcycle from the rain
I'm having a long & happy childhood,
I've been sad since the day I was born
When you turn one of my poems sideways,
you see the graph of a mood
The pirate ship I sail my soul in has outlasted rough seas,
I want to live on a continent called Spiritual Aspiration,
& I'll be the last blade of grass to enter the Pureland

Antiquity

If you want the new world to come,
you need to let part of the old world go
Start with your tears
You lie in bed
& sobs gently lift you & let you fall

The Pilgrim Processing

Banks are the new churches
With pointing steeples,
the old churches accuse the sky
The rain has a hole
in the sleeve of its coat
My heart is a little red fist
pounding on a big black door
The white statues of Mary & Jesus
stand like fangs dulled with use & age
A pigeon eats the chunks of food
in the puke on the sidewalk
across the street from a gay bar
Truth is a pathless land
The oak tree gives a lecture on loneliness
The stench of death has made a home
in a pile of rotting branches
The rosebud gives a sermon on faith
If Christ is petals snowing from a cherry tree in spring,
how does he prepare a mansion for me?
In my purple bookcase at the end of summer,
a praying mantis clings to *The Teaching of Buddha*
I look at my grave & I walk away,
my feet are made out of thunderclouds
“I don’t think I know what loneliness is”

The Lives of the Saints

I built a castle on a thunderbolt
I paced alone along the battlements
Despair was the cloak I wrapped myself in
June pulls on latex surgical gloves
& does sick sad things in the doctor's office
Claudine is the Sorrow & the Beauty,
she's the ladder from earth to heaven,
I start at her ankles
April already forgets the spring
Her face flares fiercely behind the blazing match
"I lost everything, nothing scares me now"
The cop isn't a cop,
the lawyer isn't a lawyer,
the suburban homeowner isn't a suburban homeowner
Susan Holy War pauses in cleaning her AK-47
"The commercial is sexist, hon,
cuz the wife bakes the apple pie
I just want a planet where everybody's free & equal,
where a woman isn't eating out of a garbage can
while a man is being driven in a limousine
with \$150,000 in his briefcase"
Reverend Keith been sick a long time
He writes a letter to the poet & sez
"Terror is my friend"
Love, O Love, I don't know what happens next

Fetish

– for David Beaudoin

“Poets are invincible & pathetically lost”
The Poem is invisible,
you’re a constellation in my sky,
& poetry washes your feet with its tears
You’re climbing a shattered staircase
in the vampire saint castle,
I gave you my missal
with its icon gunman in the dark kitchen
of Really Mansion
My God is an alcoholic transvestite
weeping in a furnished room,
I’ve got a troubled head beneath my detective hat,
& my religion is love’s unfailing tears
I need special soldiers to reach Satan’s throne,
a red octopoid with a silver spear
takes the place of the head of a Tyrannosaurus rex
My werewolf Green Beret will trade his telepathic prayer shawl
for seven of your baseball ards from other planets
I’ve got a dream in my friend –
she always keeps three buttons buttoned

I Make God Go to My Church

1

A Bible lays open
on the dashboard of a car
in the parking lot of a mall

2

It's fun to play with the skeleton army
& find a dead fly
Its wings are tiny mirrors
where Jesus trims his beard

3

A poem should not be mean
except when it crouches in a darkened room
while a detective with a crucifix in one hand
& a revolver in the other
kicks the door open

4

Papa's in the attic, his car got a dent
Mama's in the basement, she knows torment
Sally's in the alley, she got so bent

5

The Word is my shepherd,
my metaphors are all mixed up,
& I shall remain haunted

6

Crouched in the alley & burned ten poems
Whispered "Fly"
Stood up & looked at the stars
Whispered "Give me more beautiful poems"

Toasting Marshmallows in Hell

In my dream,
the insurance agents use laser scalpels
to remove the angel heart
from Mr. Highway 61's chest
He screams so loud he wakes me up
I wish I could wake up
in a world where somebody loves me
The Ray of Active Intelligence governs Earth
In Daniel's drawing,
I have 15 fingers on each hand –
I'm standing waist deep in a lake of tears,
I've got politically incorrect stigmata,
I'm crying tears of blood,
I've got X-ray glasses
My title is Gentle Assassin
Poetry goes to places logic is afraid to
Billy the Preacher's scared,
he plans to stay that way
He hears confessions in the Cavern,
he nurses each drink as if it has to last an eternity
In the seventh Station of the Cross,
he's tied to a bed by a woman wearing a nun's habit
I feel like a teardrop,
whoever's crying me must be someone big
Susan Holy War gets up from the couch
& walks to the kitchen for a beer
"If McDonald's took 10% of the money
it spent on commercials,
it could feed the homeless"

In the orange glow from a streetlight,
the car window shattered by a junkie
is diamonds scattered on the sidewalk
Electricity is St. Negativity's friend
It holds him in its arms & rocks him to sleep
It doth make his bed out of night,
a starfield is his blanket
I want hope & fate gives me your face

I Am Not a Sociopathic Serial Killer

The professors say a poem should be “crafted”
I say a poem should be “crafty”
In Daniel’s dream,
I have 15 fingers on each hand
& climb the wall of a gymnasium
to retrieve a little girl’s red balloon
stuck against the ceiling
I give him a saber-toothed guardian demon
to pace his pocket
while he searches for me
in the malls of hell
Billy the Preacher holds services in the Club Char
He drinks as if he has a fire inside
His witticisms are so feeble
a 98-pound weakling kicks sand in their faces
In a just world he would give me F, M, & U
When he says I have the attention span of a gnat,
I wonder how the gnat feels
If I’m hypercritical enough,
I’ll vanish,
travel through hyperspace,
& arrive at a poetry reading
given by quivering blobs of purple protoplasm
St. Negativity takes off his cloak of darkness
& hands it to me
He says, “Wear my cloak after i’m gone
Listen for me, I’ll be in the wind
Look for me, I’ll be in the sun”
Buddha lurks in the doorway of an apartment building

He hides a sawed-off shotgun beneath his soiled raincoat
He knows which liquor store the Evil Jesus goes to
My quarks love your little quirks
There is no weird corner in my mind
who will not be a brother
for a weird corner of your mind

THE PILGRIM'S PROCESS

(Shattered Wig Productions,
Rupert Wondolowski, 1993)

One Nonillion Lifetimes of Solitude

I'm looking up at the stars
with tears in my eyes
& wondering if on a distant planet
a creature is looking up at the stars
with tears [?] in its eyes [?]
& wondering if ...

Heartache in the Spring

I walk through the crystal rain
The petals from cherry blossoms fill the gutter
I promise the new world will come
I don't know how, I don't know when
I do know why –
the old world is so sad and tired

Home Entertainment Center

There was a war in my dreams
& a fighter-bomber underlines the sky's screams
My God is a mathematical equation
sitting on a throne made out of rainbows
& weeping into Her x
Q knows too well
the twists and turns in the psyche –
James Bond puts on his tear gas bra,
slips his feet into machine gun high heels,
& applies his cyanide lipstick
He's meeting the Evil Batman
in the empty parking lot behind the Club Oblivion
The anchorman is made up like a trollop
He's beaming death rays from his eyes
A coat of dust will improve the Stealth Fighter
The werewolf sits down
on the ichor-soaked seat in a flying saucer,
sweeps tentacle fragments off the control panel
He's looking for a planet with five moons,
he's lost one too many brides to a silver bullet
The Dinosaur of Prague has a green Iguanodon head
He's preaching to a sharpshooter with a giant mouse head
Nightcrawler teleports to the crossbar,
steadies a heaving chest,
rips the nails out of wrists,
& hisses, "Let the new myth begin"
I am Original Sorrow,
I am love knocking on a door with tears in my eyes

The Murders

1

Take off your head when you stand in front of the burning throne

2

A mirror is my door, a serpent is my ladder, a raven is my writing desk

3

Take off your feet when you sit in the electric chair rocket sled

4

Jesus has a garbage can for a heart

5

My cross got lost in the wilderness & came back a thunderbolt

6

Lie in the fire & dance for a thousand years

7

The gray sky cries for me, I don't have to

The Law of Pause & Eject

Billy the Preacher spent a long night crying
in Heartache, Ohio
He's lost nothing & he's lost everything
Two days later,
a thunderstorm marches
through Coincidences are God's Practical Jokes, Maryland
A typewriter sits in a shopping cart in the rain
My thunderbolt is brought to its knees in the desert
& stands up on a cross
The nuclear family explodes
& electronic ghosts preach fear & teach guilt
Hate reads a newspaper
Ignorance takes money out of an ATM
Anger drives a sports car
The woebegone-to-California woman weeps into her pillow
She finds no comfort
in knowing she's a Hero of the Evolution
She gave up all she had to learn something new

I'm Waiting in My Sonnet with the Engine Running

The cars are smarter than people,
the bombs are smarter than the cars,
& the trees have learned to sing
Susan Holy War smiles,
slips a poison-tipped dart into her blowgun,
& whispers "Just cuz it looks like a poem doesn't mean it is a poem"
I'm so sad,
spring comes one second late,
& the crystal rain is playing a broken harmonica
A detective pulls the brim of his black hat lower over his eyes,
grips his .45,
& steps through the hatch of a flying saucer
Poetry is not a scalpel in the hands of a surgeon,
poetry is a raygun in the hand of a Bigfoot

The Holy Parsecs

The assassin sits by the viewport
Hyperspace washes her face
with the ghost of purple
She rests her head on her hand
& cries all the way to Earth
She calls herself the Anti-Anti-Christ
Her braided brain is hanging down her back
She finds the body of a murdered girl
& removes the top of the skull
She takes a thin cross section from the brain
& fits it in the telescopic sight
of her anti-matter Bible
She goes hunting cruel emotions on the astral plane

The Wind Has A Stain On Its Sleeve

With ancient wings I pray
The fire inside me
is hungry
for the fire inside you
I beg Jesus for mercy –
He face is stone
& He shaves me soul
Buddha's crown is an acorn cap,
he's built his castle
on the surface of the sun
I squat in the alley & burn nine poems,
whisper "Dance"
I stand up & look at the stars,
whisper "O Voices, I'm your vessel – make me perfect"
St. Negativity has gone to sleep
For a nonillion nonillion nonillion years
From the pores of his skin,
bubbles expand until they pop
Each bubble is a universe
Art carries you when you're too heartsick to walk
Love gives you wings to fly

The Rain Has A Hole In Its Shoe

With broken prayers, I fly
Yeapus stretches a tentacle
toward a toy starship
& mindspeaks,
“Mother, I find perfection difficult”
Daniel’s Jesus has a crown of thorns
& a Sacred Burning Africa
My Jesus has a purple monster head
Black faces blaze in the middle of the day
Poetry & truth are not mortal enemies,
poetry & truth are moral enemies
The army is brave boys & grave girls
& lunatics in camouflage
Lawyers steal the gold fillings from grammar’s teeth
The priest lives so far from God
Worry has furrowed his forehead
with wrinkles like the lines of a chessboard
Muffy Saffo looks out her window
She’s a long way past crying
Tears just fill her eyes
She wonders how long she’ll live in the universe
she’s always lonely in
I’ve got a Sacred Yearning Heart for you

The Untitled Season

Susan Holy War takes a suitcase
to the poetry reading
She arrives early
& lingers in the shadows
She's so nervous
she keeps unbuttoning
& buttoning her red cashmere cardigan sweater
When the room is full,
she steps forward
& announces,
"I exercise my demons in the poems I write
I have a nuclear device in my suitcase
If I hear *one* poem about work,
I'll detonate"

The Pilgrim Processed

In my dream,
my father wanted to eat at McDonald's,
my son & I wanted to eat at Taco Bell
We compromised
& ate one another's hearts

Who Wears The Bib In Bible?

The single mother
cleaning tables
in the food court of a mall
earns less in a week
than the lawyer eating a hamburger
earns in an hour
The driver of a Coca-Cola truck
wears a tank commander's sunglasses
Who puts laughter in slaughter?
I've got three hearts for you –
each one has been broken
The man will be the woman
& my soul thirsts for you
The woman will be the man
& your face moves me to tears
The high will be the low,
a thunderbolt is your right foot,
the outside will be the inside,
a rosebush is my left foot,
& crystal palaces will dance on mountaintops

In The Balance

Janet wrote her phone number
in lipstick
on my bathroom mirror
Two dragonflies mate
above the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot
The thugs wrap themselves in flags
They aren't happy to see you,
those are cruise missiles in their back pockets
They get drunk on the blood of babes
Mr. God comes home
& collapses on the couch
He had a hard day at His office
inside the sun
When the wind is wrong,
I can smell McDonald's four blocks away
Fear pervades the air
A smart bomb drops toward my Jesus
He has the body of a duck-billed dinosaur
& the hands of a rabbit after accelerated evolution
He holds a raygun He stole from a bodyguard of the Evil Emperor
A 10,000-year-old white man rules the world
When he needs a new heart,
he murders a 16-year-old boy
His tanks may rumble through the cities
My crack dealers will fight back to back with my crystal healers
Every cell in my body knows the new world is coming –
it don't care about fire & tears
Faith, Hope, & Charity are angels
They have black wings & wear purple robes

Faith has the head of a sheep & holds a flaming sword
Hope has a lion's head & holds an open book of blank pages
Charity has the head of a snake & holds an hourglass
I wake up on a rocky shore,
my bride gone & my heart in ruins
There's a nation in imagination,
that's where you should live

Snow In The ATM

I crouch over a cathedral
burning at the bottom of the sea
I dive up to the surface of scream
At the banquet,
the rich people eat Broiled Dolphin
I sit down
& my plate is full of ashes
Our Blessed Mother of Monsters
prays for Her intergalactic soldier
He has a misshapen purple sac
where his head should be
Seven small growling heads sprout from the top
Two little devil wings flap on the sides
He'd be a long way from home – if he had one
Churches are schools are bars
A detective is a priest is a poet
I gather my poems
& I hold a sheaf of ashes
The wife yanks off her wedding ring
& hurls it at her husband
“Fuck you,” she snarls,
“I’m leaving, I’ve never been happy”
I drown in a puddle of my vomit
on the back seat of a Cadillac
Poetry is quiet & dangerous –
it slits your throat
& you walk three steps before you know you’re dead

My Name Is Lesion

You're not a walking lump of clay
You're a talking spark of divinity
Veronica's mouth says no,
her body says yesterday
I need to look in the dictionary
for the meaning of "facetious"
I need to look in the dictionary
for the meaning of "sincere"
Why is evil live backwards?
The businessman gives a fighter pilot's thumbs-up
after he stops behind an illegally parked car
& honks over & over until it moves
Our Virgin Monster of Solitude
preaches to a vampire ne'er-do-well
in the shadow of the Evil Stealth Fighter
The Despot girls stop in the Club Star Search
They won't stay long –
they don't like to breathe the air
where half the people work for the government
Jessica pauses under the magenta spotlight
Her face is fierce & pained & hopeful & scared
She has far to go & half her life is gone
Heather smiles & puts her sweater on backwards
She is winter & she makes me night
The poem isn't the *words*
The poem is *behind* the words

Invisible Planet

People go to work
 & they're sound asleep

People sit at their desks
 & they're sound asleep

People go home
 & they're sound asleep

People watch TV
 & they're sound asleep

People go to bed
 & they live (O Broken Heart!) in their dreams

Under The Radio Galaxies

The heartache train
is rolling through a heartache valley
It left a heartache city
& it will stop at a heartache ocean
It carries a broken-hearted boy
He's leaving a broken-hearted girl
He stares out the window
& the night is crying
Oh, don't be sad –
a broken-hearted girl is waiting for the boy
& a broken-hearted boy will meet the girl

Unreal City

1

Heartache ripples
through the parallel universes,
pools,
& forms me

2

I sit in a dark cathedral
& tears spill from my eyes
while ghosts practice life & death

3

I'm wrought from shadows,
my words are smoke,
my house is doubt

4

I stand in a cold canyon
where giants drink beer like soda pop
& a metal river takes the long way home

Black Car

– for Jenny Keith

The weapons-trained attorney
coordinates the triangulated gunfire
that assassinates narrative
as it steps out the front door
The poem slips out the back door,
it doesn't care about goodbyes,
all it takes is a broken heart
The rain knows sad stories
It tells one or two
while it sits in the evicted easy chair
My '57 Chevy is held together by duct tape
I'm driving to Oregon
I expect I'll find sorrow there
The holy highway recites a prayer which is your name
The heart has seasons & some are cold

Driven

Elizabeth is a strict & sorrowful Catholic
She has a heart full of questions
& a mind full of doubts
She knows Original Sin
& practices often
She always wears red panties
(not that anybody ever peels her jeans off)
She believes a poet must be an outcast & a failure
She believes there's a lie in believe
Birth & death & birth & death & birth & death
The wheel breaks me and the wheel makes me
I wish I could be anything literally –
I might be happier
instead of a creature dreamed up on a Bad Morning
(vicious hangover
& a long long time until the end of the universe)
Villain & victim & villain & victim & villain & victim
The wheel is yearning & the wheel is learning
God is a twisted twisted maniac
using a baseball bat
to sodomize a bound & gagged 14-year-old boy
until the boy dies
– & God is the boy too

The Nap Of Reason

– for Tom DiVenti

Three pounds of anguish
drive 2,000 pounds of steel
I look like hell
& I feel like the Devil
The harmonica holder
of Travelin' Tommy Tucker
rests on his Bible
where a vampire climbs down from the cross
Tommy devotes an entire afternoon
to photocopying a toy cowboy for a flier
Why is ill in brilliant?
A rain (sick) of terror
washes the streets of Farmville
The Evil Batman is disguised as a feed store clerk
He goes to a different church every Sunday,
fires his evolution/devolution raygun
& turns the preacher into a pig & the congregation into sheep
You don't need rules to get to God –
all you need are the wings of love,
you can see as well with the heart as with the eyes,
& life is sad
I've slept alone for so many years
snowdrifts have settled in my heart & they don't melt
Who put odd in God
& why is it spelled wrong?

Principle Poison

A blood-splattered banner
hangs limp
over the land of the fee
& the home of the grave -
It must be nice to be called to Art -
I'm dragged, kicking & screaming
A woman wearing a dog collar
& a wedding gown
is weeping in the rain
The Evil Wallace Stevens has all the right words,
he doesn't have a pure heart
Heart by heart, the fire spreads
Close your eyes - I'm a cry inside
God clutches her black silk robes around her neck
& studies her face in a mirror
She's as confused and desperate as we are,
but - O Broken Broken Heart! - Her face is stars
I must believe there's somebody for me
My eyes drink your face & night is your hair
You're hungry for something you don't have a name for
I don't give in & I don't give up
I'm on my knees when I reach the end -
I've left two trails of blood

Neuron Stew

– for Richard Sober

The attorneys are movie stars,
the movie stars are junkies,
& – o yeah – the rain is blood
Roses float in the toilets
where the dinosaurs dance
A ballerina enters a dark bar
& orders vodka on the rocks,
an army of the homeless overturns limousines,
& – o yeah – the rivers are red wine
I snorted the dust off Satan's throne,
I am Music,
& I will be grief
You didn't come to a sad old town
for the narrow streets or the tiny minds
You came for the secret city you're building in your heart,
friend's face by friend's face

The Museum Of Broken Toys

Poets aren't born, they're made
– & they're made to be destroyed
St. Negativity opens a notebook
where the pages are night,
& he writes with a thunderbolt
A pale horse shivers in the rain
Some folks rob you with a gun
& some with a computer terminal
Your life is a prayer
& God is sleeping
Your prayer is a poem
& God is dreaming
My poems are one leap of faith after another –
except, of course, when they're leaps of despair
I see some lonely fossils
when I peek in your room
I see the place where martyrs go
when they believe in sin
Jesus wasn't a Capricorn
His sign was Octopus-Who-Flies
(He was born on a planet orbiting Sirius
& he wandered away from the mothership)
Listen while you write,
listen while you write,
& the poem writes itself
I used to be a good nun in England
I used to be an evil priest in Atlantis
The boys in black slip out of the shadows
They're waging a flier war

against the android corporate killers
O Scary Days,
O Starry Nights,
when I die,
I'll jump toward the light
& make my dark places straight
& my crooked places bright

Access Road Blues

Intelligent people are designing weapons,
the government is run by midgets & morons,
& bandits go to church every Sunday
Jesus is a broken branch,
Jesus has the neck & body of a green brontosaurus,
& Jesus is an unwritten book
Love is the law –
the heart breaks the law
& the heart makes the law
I lay with my love on the wind,
her soul is sky
I'm no picnic in the park,
she's no stroll along the river,
we fit together like two pieces in a jigsaw puzzle
Everybody is a little piece of god
& your god shines
when you see god in others

Broke Down Blues

I'm the he in hell
I'm the heave in heaven
I live in a cathedral
where a monster's saying Mass
& a lamb is growing wings
I'll fly away soon
I walk through crowds
and I'm a thundercloud –
it's been raining in my heart for years
All I want is a world without hate
& love without fear
Sorrow doth me the soul go green
to grow a land there
where I & my love may wander
You're crying in your room
while your Higher Self goes out for a drink
Your Higher Self is lying on dark clouds & weeping
while you drive your car on rain-slick streets
Why is a hug in huge
& why is tiny in destiny?
Love isn't a prison
Love is an open door
I used to be homesick & now you're my home
I didn't have a religion & now you're my church
Why is a Bud in Buddha
& why is us in Jesus?
The poem teaches me more than I teach it
Art is the bed I cry myself to sleep on

Jägermeister in the Freezer

Sister to sister,
sister to brother,
brother to brother,
brother to sister –
that's how the love goes round
Why is linger in lingerie?
I have the cunning of ten werewolves
& the strength of twenty vampires
I invent the darkness
where my mouth fills up with prophecy
& my heart fills up with light
Poetry is the highest failing,
I'm trudging through an ice storm
to knock on your cabin door,
poetry is a rusted-out red Ford
abandoned in the dark woods,
& I love the open road
that runs from your heart to my heart
I touch your hand
(O my sweet Unknown,
I'm already dead
& the pattern in the tapestry that was my brief life
is beautiful & holy & scary & comforting)
& sense the Hand of God
that lays a lonely with a sad

No Pressure, No Fear

The first shall be fast
& the last shall be thirsty
My soul laid sorrow
on top of sorrow
to make me
(oh I was an evil king,
oh I was a cruel pirate,
oh I was ...)
God dresses spirit in a human body
& says, "Here is a gift for you"
I fell in love
with the joy after joy
stretching like a mountain range
through your heart
We're like two breezes
cavorting above a glade
in the deep deep woods
Love isn't rules
Love is freedom & spirituality & passion
Love comes with a heart in tatters
Love goes true & deep & far
The poem won't heal a broken heart
The poem will have a broken back,
stand up,
& show you how to fly

BE LIGHT

(Apathy Press Poets, Tom DiVenti, 2006)

I. Stations of the Lost

Adapt or Die

A knife regrets deft deluxe verbosity.
The disdainful ombudsperson
crowns a slaughterhouse
with a cute cupboard for dogma.
The petite attorney and wary councilwomen
harpoon a pigpen
and usurp the phraseology
that loathes the elegant alcoholic ballerina
squatting next to an inconsiderate robot.
On a dank detergent afternoon,
the kerosene theologian
curses the lenient makeshift rapture.
A cheerleader bemoans the immortal mortgage kiss.
Beside a grammar difficult highway,
I brainwash my harmonica.

I Stuff Spam Into My Super Soaker

The quasistationary mobster
titrates megabytes.

A conspicuous allegation
inflates cryptographers
who electrify mercy.

The amoeba wrings a leopard
out of the maudlin guitar.

A nurse bedevils a helicopter
and delivers bologna
to the church cluttering a footstool.

The formal forgetful bellhop
smashes the clock
in a dour doghouse.

A committeewoman nurtures ardent despair.

Invasive Intellectual Principle

I fry my wristwatch.
Cavemen contribute gunplay
to the circumstantial playground.
A furtive bishop
proofreads the bisexual ecstasy hymnal.
A naiad debriefs ductwork.
The eclectic electric astronomer
resurrects an illimitable deathbed
that befuddles a nanosecond.
The schoolgirl cultivates her uranium uniform
and explores a benzedrine mansion.
A dadaist deludes a counterargument
and litigates plowshares into gravestones.
The pharmacist absolves a quasar.

Deviant

Housewives flirt
with churchgoing dwarves.
A nereid maladjusts the courthouse.
The elusive diffusive bride
aberrates the barbiturate afternoon.
A professor delimits sorrow
and congratulates the ocarina
that evades a nonchalant cyst.
The hebephrenic pilgrim
parses a boolean highball.
A statistician adjudicates a matchbook.
The bodhisattva transponds a galaxy
to the scrutable administratrix.
A coeditor deranges her bondage session.

Stop Me Before I Kill Again

The Museum of Inconsolable Hangovers
cries the rain. Cynthia cajoles Carol
into maldistributing fonts
as she topologizes fate.
The ant preaches constraint to a lion.
Catherine retrofits bliss
with a pluperfect fictive acrobat.
A downtrodden electronic alibi
devolves into paperwork.
Claire giveth erotica
to the incomputable intelligentsia.
A cat gambols through an agile austere diary.
In the inglorious amphetamine dawn,
Celia rues the lexicon
that demultiplexes a madhouse.

Connivance Lubricates a Waltz

A browbeaten songbook
berates a cobweb
and trades a convent
for cunning calculus.
The important ambivalent wife
defrosts her sweater.
A librarian superannuates perfume.
The desolate desperate snowstorm
propounds a cereal economy
to deform the immodest immoderate clown.
The sonnet factory soars over quicksand.
An atheist fondles an archival wig
while a midget debates a bonfire
outside an astral bordello.

Tears Made Flesh

Perpetual melancholy
employs chaos processors
to bemadden the zoo
where a zebra inveigles a gazelle.
The tactician loses her barrette
and the theoretician adores her angora beret.
A spider knits a sparrow
while an exorcist excoriates the truculent fossil.
A drugstore loiters in the apathy epidemic.
A bartender mollifies the careworn pornographer
and an eavesdropper nullifies the carefree doctor.
The despondent castle goes on a crusade
to consecrate the wind
before a grammarian captivates handcuffs.

A Black Girl Dances by the Cigarette Machine

My poem debugs grief
and becomes devout and manifold.
A bandit forbids sordid prayers.
A cityscape blunders into a locksmith
who defrauds a crucifixion
and steals drastic caustic software.
A chaplain weeps in a wheelchair.
A commando worships the adverbial grip
confounding an odious copious dungeon.
A droll tolling invents the circus
where nausea ponders dishwater
and a broken frozen quark extols the nervous cage. Coffins crawl
toward a gunfight
and a gaunt cloudburst daunts glory.

Primeval Casuistry

A dictum darkles and amuses a calendar.
The congresswoman casteth a mighty chord
on the shallow shopworn jubilee.
The indiscreet infamous bard desponds
when dynamite donates thirst to the epigram
that dereferences the nadir of a pittance.
A choirmaster appends indefinite businessmen
to a gruesomely splendid divorce.
An astrophysicist fiscalizes the abnormal angstrom,
the overmodest dramatist potboils amnesia,
and a linguist meanders through a pathetic galactic isotope.
The ingrate invokes incorruptible vitriol
while a highwayman somersaults along a rainbow.
A puppeteer cancellates opulent accidents.

Inculpable Skullduggery

A conundrum improvisates a brief afterlife
when the census deposes a necromancer.
The cutthroat snivels in eerie typography,
a hangman admonishes the airtight testament,
and the sanguine bibliography instructs heresy.
The architect implores a grandmother
to expunge a bedimmed carnival.
The parade of cowards bankrupts misery
while an accountant freewheels through a supple cocktail.
A valedictorian stickles lackluster sin,
the bastion of osteopathic thugs confutes grace,
and the bittersweet dictionary dishevels a hovel.
In the paramilitary travesty cemetery,
a corrigible psychoanalyst mourns cozy fear.

Humid Intrigue

A tailor earmarks the literate apology,
the marionette pirouettes on an iceberg,
and a wastrel deducts a viola from a proverb.

A troll controls the tollhouse.

The comedian acculturates an otiose brakeman,
a myth accumulates breadwinners,
and the atavistic insomniac supplicates courage
to intoxicate the elegiac ecosystem.

The actress decompiles her spouses
and expounds her cashmere charms
to a stadium holding cameramen and clergymen.

She announces, "Beatify your swordplay
and acquaint the netherworld with the ionosphere.
The rude nude occludes disquietude."

The Awry Sky Soothsays

Downtown creeps downwind
from fluent flippant alchemy.
The chairperson deploys a rifleman
to borrow an unkempt vowel
when woe collides with a cotillion.
An avalanche wiretaps a boorish volcano,
a bodyguard refuels the toastmaster,
and a maelstrom slithers into autumn.
The flautist vilifies a crossbow
and deflects a besotted misnomer
as she barnstorms from arena to ruin.
The concise epic crowd dotes on a unicorn.
A pirate maroons the skylark
where truth skulks behind a chalkboard.

Neutrinos Preserve Persiflage

Eventide contorts a tiresome threesome
when the pensive moon calibrates a war.
A sculptor shudders,
a secretary sneezes,
and they jitterbug on a drawbridge.
The moron in a spacesuit nibbles a chalice
and quibbles with inconstant bacteria.
The stockbroker counterfeits doomsday,
a hippopotamus slumbers beside the campfire,
and a cherub brings a sixgun and brimstone.
A bridesmaid schemes to discomfit the debutante
who importunes a bleak typo.
The monk leaves a pumpkinseed ajar
and the impudent mountain evaporates.

Antares Blues

A boathouse chats with a smokehouse,
dust resents rust,
and a battleground woos bravado.
The troubadour wrestles a molehill
for a bedridden rainstorm.
Covert verse corrodes a fishpond.
The schoolteacher burps with inhuman skill,
exhumes her laudanum honeymoon,
and smuggles a shipyard
into the ineluctable brewery.
An auditor reaches for her sidearm,
the headwind collects imps,
and a beatnik transmutes a dreadnought into a jetliner.
The stormbound bloodhound activates a scriptural lantern.

2. Seven Lifetimes of Bad Luck

Make a Wish

I built my mansion
on a falling snowflake.
Eddy Poe he's got a cap of snow.
Poison pits hold Voices to their ears.
Your sockets need mending.
A flock of pigeons wheels above the rowhouses –
One Mind in One Mind.
There's happiness meant just for me I still haven't found.

As for Medication, There's a Little I Would Ask

The bride speaks in subtitles,
the groom speaks in sermons,
and twelve gunmen attend the nuptials.
Why is beg in begin?
Who put art in start?
Cages stalk beauty,
the puppets forgive coincidence,
and dead rainbows gather at the river.
Why is a sin in sincere?
Who put grim in pilgrim?
Why isn't fur in Lucifer?
The ambulance howls in front of the bank,
a cat is playing a doll's piano,
and the superhuman cathedral dances on a mountaintop.

The Road to Hell Is Paved With Good Inventions

1.

The laboratory in the flying saucer
is so bright and sterile.
The werewolf can't find a place to hide.
He crouches beside the circular hatch.
Soon the floor will be awash in purple ichor.
His captors are about to learn
just how wrong things can go
when a full moon rides the night sky.

2.

The Special Agent has lost so much.
She holds a flashlight and a 9 mm pistol
and kicks a door open.
She wishes she could pray to God –
but all she believes in
is what she can capture in her beam of light.

3.

The ninjas glide through the corridors of a starship.
The pilot turns
and finds her head ringed by the tips of seven swords.
The starship lands in a clearing.
The ninjas slip out of the airlock
and enter the forest.
The trees have red bark and purple leaves.
Each leaf has a mouth and howls at the five moons.

4.

I'm the clouds drifting over your roof.

I'm the traffic streaming past your windows.

I'm the floorboards creaking beneath your shoes.

The Lard's Care

Our Farther,
who farts in heaven,
hollow be thy name.
Thy bug rum dumb, thy pill be done
in birth as it is in leaven.
Give us this day our daily dead.
And forgive us our pets,
as we forgive our sweaters.
Read to us but not in a temp agency,
and eat liver for us at the eel well:
for thine is the checkbook,
and the skyscraper,
and the story, for a river.
Say when.

My Cough Syrup Life

— *for Rupert Wondolowski*

I fool the schools,
I fail the trails,
I hate the gates,
I sob the jobs,
I load the roads,
I bore the stores,
and I scream the dreams.
O my comrade-in-yarns,
we fight the foes in the alleys,
we fight the foes on the mountains,
we fight the foes in the sewers,
and all we do is lose.
I've got a castle dancing on the corona of the sun.
You've got a heart with wings.

Unknown Zone

Two roads divorced in a yellow wood,
and I was abducted by a UFO.
Lenny's got a broken red cart
and paint-by-number plots.
He's sent his Bible on vacation.
He looks out an open window
and drains a cough syrup bottle.
The waitron unit locks the bathroom door
and snorts the lines she lays along her credit card.
Fred "The Executioner" Nietzsche is a pro wrestler.
As he shambles toward the ring,
the crowd chants, "Killer! Killer!! Killer!!!"
He doesn't lose – and he never will.
Later, when he sits in his SUV and weeps,
his brain releases bad amino acids.

Old Fiends

— *for Amy Peterson*

Me and my buddy Billy Collins
we sit on the top row
of the bleachers
out beside Highway 61.
Billy says, “If it ain’t broke, break it.
I sing the body with tics.
Penelope comes and she licks.
The Good Bored willing
and the meek don’t rise,
I’ll sleep in my true love’s arms in my next lifetime.”
I say, “If it’s broke, break it again.
I sing the body with ticks.
Shirley leaves and she takes her psychics.
I write the poems I can
and I write the poems I can’t –
when I’m sick at heart, my poems carry me.”

My Muse Is an Ancient Scrip

I am Music
and I will be grief.
The Mutated Microphone is my mortal enemy.
The Electric Voice is my trusted friend.
Tears evaporate,
the rain limps home,
and rivers hurry to the ocean.
Your voice is woven all through the wind,
we were born to be together,
and another broken heart takes wing.
Why is the end in friend and rue in true?
I'm surrounded by an army of Guardian Poets,
Night flows from my pen,
and a drunken ballerina dances beneath them lonely stars.
I've died – and I have to go on living.

Between Iraq and a Bard Grace

— *for Dawn Culbertson and Mark Harp*

I fight a candle
and nurse the darkness.
I mark the dawn
when my art breaks.
The voices in the wind
they stumble on their way to leaven.
The Monster-in-Thief hires a finger of fire,
Fascism steals in on little cat feet,
and the dead boys and girls write them books of tears.
My book is a sheaf of ashes.
My mission is so secret I don't know it myself.
I'll meet you on the pathless path,
the Light lives everywhere now,
and you're all I ever wanted.

Dancing With Bobby

A plan's reach
should exceed its gasp,
or what's heavin' in the gutter for?
Chaos is my friend,
inertia bargains with dust,
and eternity loiters
where the hamburger wind bums a smoke.
When will a calypso be in apocalypse?
Why is less in a lesson
and when will less become a blessing?
Poetry is magic
where you create an invisible hypersonic freight train of many colors
out of three pounds of anguish.
Loss settles into my heart
and I take the math of least resistance.
When there is no more hope, there will be no more fear.

A Mansion Bestirred by Stars

I'm a Hobby – Cures is yours.
I work in the Dark –
and no one comforts me.
Sometimes my church is invisible
and singing a hymn at dawn.
Art is the highest falling,
I heard the call,
and I've never turned back.
My Jesus is a transvestite
passing as his girlfriend's girlfriend
in the food court of a shopping mall.
My notebook has a broken spine.
Sometimes my church is on its stones in the rain
and begging for mercy.
You're a prayer just the way you are.

Satin Rules!!!

I went down to the crossroads,
it was midnight,
and I made a deal with Santa.
There was something dammed in me
and now the dam is broken.
Marjorie buttons her leather coat,
smiles,
and says,
“Boy, you had a hungry poem.
I threw half of it away.
I am the bottom.
When you get to me,
you go no lower.”
O my Gored, O my Poured, O my Soared,
don't leave me here alone.

The Untied States of America

Many are galled,
but few are frozen.
Last night, before I went to sleep,
I forgot to take my eyeballs out.
This morning I put my hands on wrong.
I won't get out of this life alive.
Ellen drives a hybrid.
She wears sunglasses on a cloudy day.
She's resigned to her winter fate.
Why is ma in Armageddon?
Why is a path in apathy?
Elizabeth not only drinks her martini –
she likes to quiz it.
She wants to scrawl the truth on a cocktail napkin.
She already knows her job in hell –
she'll be gift-wrapping sin.
When I say I'm in the depths of despair,
I mean the depths are somewhere far far above me.

How To Write Poetry

It's a moonless night.
I'm ten samurai
attacking a fortress.
I know where the treasure chests are.
I leave so many widows
legend makes me into a hundred samurai.

Lock and Load Blues

A half-full baby bottle rolls around
on the floor of a bus.
A mother puts on body armor.
Why is a den in hidden?
Why is light in flight?
A son hides an IED
inside the rim of a discarded tire.
God is almost Good
and the Devil is almost Evil.
A father eats steak off a china plate.
I have five hearts –
three are on fire, two are broken, and three have wings.
Your heart is a book – be kind.
A daughter comes home in a bodybag.
The blizzard needs to find a new trade.

The Best Loved Poem of the American People

What light from yonder window aches?
There were times I was so handsome
I took my rum court there.
I've got seventeen senses
and my name is lesion.
Jeannie she's all done with cryin'.
She's idling in the parking lot of the Fifth Third Bank. She spreads a
map out on the seat beside her.
There's a big big country to get lost in.
Tonight the fat old moon will plot with them ruthless stars. I've talked
to my notebook for so many years
now my notebook talks to me.
I'll feel with my brain.
I'll think with my heart.

LOVE EVERYONE

(Open 24 Hours, John Coletti
& Greg Fuchs, 2006)

Under Pressure

Jesus is the lock,
you are the key,
and Satan is my bombardier.
We're happy in my laboratory.
We read St. Luke till we puke,
a poem lives or dies in the first six lines,
we read St. Matthew till we mildew,
and love has no laws.
A flying saucer hovers above the suburban religious tract.
A deflated Smurfs swimming pool
protects a motorcycle from the rain.
I'm having a long and happy childhood,
I've been sad since the day I was born.
When you turn one of my poems sideways,
you see the graph of a mood.
The pirate ship I sail my soul in has outlasted rough seas,
I want to live on a continent named Spiritual Aspiration,
and I'll be the last blade of grass to enter the Pureland.

Armageddon 4: The Final Battle

I'll give you sleep
if you give me health.
The black ops agent is scarred and scared,
he doesn't want to be the one-man army
who assaults Wolf Mountain –
home of the castle where the SS werewolf troopers lodge
(it was hell designing skis for those big paws).
He hears “their” many fingers drumming on the time machine.
“Their” faces are a blur like smudged newsprint.
“They” fed him Evil Pills (they don't seem to be working).
He wants to go home and sleep for a hundred years,
one cat against his chest and one cat against the back of his legs.
I just want the End of the World to come
before my case of cough syrup expires.

End Times

I begin a poem by not writing half of it.
Sow, don't yell.
Sometimes the rain walks funny.
Black is white,
the personal is political,
and up is down.
Sometimes the wind cries in its sleep.
The neurotic is erotic,
good is bad,
and the sexual is spiritual.
Sometimes the rocks scream by the side of the road.
My heart aches,
the killer whales are singing,
and I make you into a constellation I can steer my ship by.

How Can A Statue Cry?

I'm a devil in a red dress.

I'm a child of light a long way from home.

To all things there is a season –
and I have winter for the rest of my life.

U.S. Army transport planes are bringing in the heroin,
you is me,

and I just want the clay to dance.

What if all of a sudden we were linked,

One Heart One Mind One Soul? –

every sad, stupid, worthless thing you'd ever done
would stand out in the sunshine,
eyes all filled with tears.

Set one more heart ablaze with the fire of love
and magic will happen.

Social Anxiety Disorder

The TV people talk
but there's no sound.
Faith waits in conditioned air at a stoplight.
A teardrop slips from behind her sunglasses.
My Inner Child is a shut-in.
Hope leaves town in her boyfriend's car
(too bad he can't come too).
She's dyed her hair black
and she's wearing one of her mother's dresses and a man's shoes.
You're various vicarious creatures
wondering through curious precarious afternoons.
Charity wears sunglasses, a red mohair bra, and black silk panties.
She points her camera at the mirror in a lost motel room.
She'd smile – if her lipstick could remember how.
Oh, them crystal raindrops will be falling
and they began as tears.

Dedication

Lucifer is Jesus
and Money has a harlot
testifying from every box.
I've been on my knees in a rough patch.
Anne is delivered to the Sweater Chateau.
I pull on angora gloves and type my e-poem.
Don't be afraid –
every river gets to the ocean.
The Path needs to have a Heart.
Don't forget to bring your tears.
I found the heart of darkness
and built my home there.
Your greatest enemy, darling, is you yourself.
Give me all your pain and sorrow.
Love and do what thou wilt.
I get off at Bozo Hell.

O Professor Of Sorrow

Some poems are gifts,
some poems are wars,
and some poems are prayers.
I'm a vat of bubbling bitterness.
I love each one of you so much it hurts.
I'm crying them fat old raindrops
while a murdered serial killer
wipes away the tears of the scared dead children.
Two wrongs make a night
and I make it long.
We're evolving at the speed of love,
the holy place begins beneath your feet,
and everybody's saved or no one is.
Your face is writ all through my heart.

One Planet One People One Love Blues

Automatons drive new cars,
hoodlums wear uniforms,
and a January sobs
in the lobby of a skyscraper.
My anima wants an enema.
Your animus is waiting for a bus.
Why is fat in fate
and thin in think?
The sky is full of flying saucers,
dinosaurs count pieces of funny green paper,
and without Hope, I'd have no home.
I'll lay out wonders in your grave,
the stone angel holds a broken sword,
and all evil vanishes.

A Pity Shaved Is A Kitty Yearned

If I'm 70% water
and 30% dust mites,
how am I talking to you?
I go to a poem to forsake my narrative thirst.
The newsman is made up like a tart.
Give me a fever long enough
and a place to stand
and I'll move the world.
This old hare she's got me on the moon.
I'm praying to the Devil.
Saint Annie waits for you in the House of Song.
I'm sick of my heart aching
from the moment I wake up
till the moment I fall asleep.
I thought I would have hit bottom by now –
but I'm still falling.

Rejection

The Face on Mars speaks me.
April holds a flaring match
to the end of her cigarette.
Her hands don't shake – too much.
She exhales and says,
“I've lost everything,
nothing scares me now.”
You can know my speed
or you can know my location,
you can't know both.
May she ain't so kind.
She loves the secondhand smoke
and the thirdhand romance
in the Club Chuckles.
She nurses her martini
as if it had to last till the end of time.
The Voices are a comfort to me –
except when they're a curse.
June has come to uncertain terms
with certain desires.
She pulls on a pair of latex exam gloves
and hands another pair
to the good mom sitting on the bed.
Their smiles are so reckless.
Together they fasten handcuffs
around the wrists of the doctor.
I've lived too long, I know too little.

Help Me Jesus

Faster festers in Easter,
buds explode,
and – listen! – the dead sing in the wind.
Whirlpools of ignorance
sit around electronic campfires
and children fill the bars.
In the beatific backwards pink glow of Cocktails,
I drink the hunger
for something I've never before been hungry for.
O Beautiful Benighted Bipedal Sentience,
live in my sentence –
if you love long enough,
Love will move a mountain
(O Heart, please thaw).

Walk Softly And Carry A Pretty Guitar

I have never cried.
The first shall be fast
and the last shall be thirsty.
A ghost lingers
and chants a poem into my ear.
The Jungle sleeps beside me.
Father of Darkness, Father of Light,
all I have to do
is drink soda pop out of a can for 30 seconds,
and I get paid thousands of dollars.
Love waits on a porch,
tears fill Love's eyes,
and Love opens a door.
Every ending is the beginning of a greater beauty.
I often cry.

Split A Piece Of Wood, I Am There

The administrative assistant drives home
and parks in front of her house.
She takes her Bible off the dashboard,
sits in her car,
and reads the red words.
Her heart aches every moment she's awake.
The bank teller knows secrets.
She asks the full moon,
“In all this world,
is there anyone for me?”
The detective puts on her pearl necklace.
She's standing at the top of a precipice,
and all she's doing is looking into a mirror.
The accountant gets ready to go out dancing.
She slips her feet into fuck-me-up pumps.
She practices her I-swallow-cum smile.
The Night has a heart,
it's hers,
and, oh yes, it's been broken.
The attorney presses the down button
and waits for an elevator.
She's in a hallway under doomed fluorescent lights,
and she's sinking into quicksand.

Anxiety Subfactor

The class bore stumbles into war.
His heart's not connected to his brain.
His mouth isn't connected to anything.
Dust gathers on the Bible.
I'm a vampire in a church.
I'm a black hole –
nothing escapes from me but poems.
The black hole at the center of the Milky Way
is a gentle one –
it isn't devouring as many stars as it should be.
I've been praying to the universe,
the universe finally answered,
and the answer is you.
Art is the bed where I cry myself to sleep.

There *May* Be Snowballs In Hell

The Heart's grown fat on fantasy
and kindness is not the yield.
Karma chalks the walk
and caulks the talk.
Her tears used to be so few.
Bile is style,
the Bible is libel,
and Night is flowing from my pen.
Fate lets her eyeshadow do the talking.
She turns her head –
her left ear,
with 13 silver rings climbing up the rim,
vows undying love.
The men are beautiful,
the women have white teeth,
and candy is the fuel for cars.
Kismet whispers the same prayer every night,
“O Love I've never met,
when will I wake up in a universe I'm happy in?”
The rivers stand up and demand redress.
I dress you with my eyes.

Permanent Fatal Errors

The bread is pretense,
the butter is hypocrisy,
enjoy.
I'm not afraid of monsters,
monsters are afraid of me.
The midget is insane.
He holds a press conference.
He's got a computer chip in his head –
every word he speaks
comes from the assassin in a secret room.
The assassin's face is shadow
shifting in shadow.
Hymns fill the wind,
Money sits on a throne,
and I'm writing with a stolen pen.
A long long time ago,
before they learned to shine,
them stars up in the sky had broken hearts.
Nothing lasts forever –
not your joy and not your sorrow.

Hell Hath No Furry Like A Woman Porneed

Christina is snarling on the bed,
she's on her hands and knees,
and all she's wearing is a mink coat.
Why is a table in indomitable
and how many plates should I put down?
A man plays a saxophone
in a bus stop shelter
on a rainy Saturday night,
the street is deserted,
and he plays real sad for free.
Sometimes I feel like a motherless motherboard,
swerve would be an answer
if two of the letters were different,
and there are as many truths
as there are stalks of wheat in a sleeping field.
The luminous ratio turns on the numinous radio.
I wanted to fly, I'm learning to crawl.

Reincarnation

One day,
a long time ago,
I stood on a beach in New Hampshire,
bent down,
and picked up a perfectly smooth oval stone.
When it was cracked and jagged,
a desperately bitter man had thrown it
from a cliff in England.
The stone had rolled along the ocean floor
and been carried by the tides to my hand.
O Heart in Disarray,
that stone was an emblem for the law of karma.
You can have some mighty crags and fissures,
but lifetime after lifetime after lifetime
they all get rubbed smooth.
No one is forgotten and no one is left behind.

Poetry 101

—for *Travelin' Tommy Tucker*

Why is pain in painting?
Why isn't collage a college?
When is obsolescent incandescent?
I've got a thousand dreams gone
as I step to the stage.
Your home is in the spotlight.
You're living on the wind –
and you can't fly.
Songs are your food.
Gravity blesses you and rocks you to sleep.
O Faith Without Tears,
O Love Without Hope,
O Sorrow Without End,
I have promises to weep
and parsecs to crawl before I leap.

Just Say Know

Under a black umbrella,
a boy kisses a girl for the first time.
Beneath a gray sky,
a woman packs her suitcase,
leaves a letter on the kitchen table,
goes outside,
and locks the front door for the last time.
In an empty conference room,
a man punches numbers into his laptop
while he talks on his cell phone.
The highway is his home.
I write with my wheels.
I been wrong so long it feels like right to me.
O Restless Reckless Heart,
will I ever find peace?
The pace is quickening, my dear friends –
make sure the cards aren't made out of antimatter
when you sit down to play poker.

I'M HAVING SOME SHAPE SHIFTING PROBLEMS
(Rock Heals, Jamie Perez, 2008)

Benevolent Magic Begins With Me

My daddy
was drumming
out of the trunk
of his car.
My mama
pulled her cardigan tighter
and stared at the door.
Tears filled her eyes.
My true love
leaves four guns for me
on the shelf
in front of the box office window.
Her tattooed girlfriend
has a knife
hidden in her boot.
I wake up in darkness

Land of the Fee

I am the Clay,
Uncouth,
and a Knife.

Follow me.

A siren has a nervous breakdown.

Gravestones are singing
in the key of regret.

The moon repeats one prayer over and over,

“Find me soon.”

The rain limps into town.

23 Palms

The Word is my shepherd.
I shall be wanted.
My courthouse
works on a crossword puzzle.
Why is fusion in confusion?
Why isn't dance in coincidence?
My meat packing plant
trademarks its bad brain waves.
God is so busy praying Herself
She doesn't have time
to answer my prayers.
My rainforest
has cried and cried and cried,
it just can't cry no more.

The Chord Is My Shepherd

My Road leapt weptward.
I shall be vaulted.
A sapling grows
where a dumpster used to stand.
My cemetery is dancing
with a skyscraper.
The Voices in the wind
rehearse the lullaby they sing
when a salamander dies.

My Condition Defiles All Forms of Medical Treatment

O Secret Reader,
heal a rock
and droplift it
into a limousine.
My gas station
pours sand
out of its shoes.
Earth is changing
into a sphere
of emotional energy.
I'm a whirlwind in a madhouse.
I'm a madhouse in a whirlwind

THE DISINFORMATION PHASE

(Publishing Genius, Adam Robinson, 2012)

Insulator Drive Blues

A glacier
hotwires my supermarket
and leaves the city
in a hurry.
Good and evil
is an illusion.
My cathedral
blows its brains out
in the graveyard
behind a prison.
The struggle
is between light and dark.
My slaughterhouse
mixes a martini for the moon.
Be light.

National Poetry Month

April holds a flaring match
to the end of her cigarette.
Her hands don't shake – too much.
She says, “I've lost everything –
nothing scares me now.”

Land of the Fee

I am Clay,
Uncouth,
and a Knife.

Follow me.

A siren is having a nervous breakdown.

Gravestones sing
in the key of regret.

The moon recites the same prayer over and over,

“Find me soon.”

The rain limps into town.

Edward Hopper at the OK Corral

I live in the city
inside electricity.
My Saint of Forlorn Tomorrows
caresses blonde fireworks,
digs her tongue into the right ear,
and starts her ablutions.
Batman faces them demons inside
in the center of a helipad
on top of a bank building.
Alarms clang
through the Museum of Letters Written in Poison.
A vampire lifts his head,
the warp core breach is imminent,
and blood drips from his chin onto the nun's wimple.
He becomes mist and flees down a corridor.
Spider-Girl hugs a gargoye and sobs.

Faithful Furtive Bourbon Burden

An immaculate incalculable poem machine
matchmakes copious odious odes
with porous corporate perjuries.
A gagwriter punctuates sorrow
while he prowls a pilgrim electron.
A philosopher disburses devout pigeonholes
to imprison drunkards in mythic tailspins,
a cannibal parishioner exculpates a dragnet
that demotes a despondent truculent checklist,
and an infernal squadron downgrades an enigma
to an implacable imprudent impure virtue.
Matchbook heartbreaks and haphazard blasphemies
corrode at a corroboree on an asteroid.
A librettist conjures a shopworn afterlife.

Benevolent Magic Begins with Me

My daddy
was drumming
out of the trunk
of his car.
My mama
pulled her cardigan tighter
and stared at the door.
Tears stood in her eyes.
My true love
leaves four guns for me
on the shelf
in front of the box office window.
Her tattooed girlfriend
has a switchblade
hidden in a hollowed-out hymnal.
I wake up in darkness.

Working for the Redshift (Peachpicker Blues)

I'm the sin in singer.
Why is tiny in destiny?
I'm the cure in obscure.
Why is a trip in triple-crossed
and where am I going?
I'm the yes in yesterday.
Why isn't destiny in clandestine?
My Saint of Long Dances
stands in the Valley of Cash and Cash Equivalents.
She addresses an empty world,
"The future is unwritten.
My heart belongs to the Great Unknown.
O Voices in the wind, I'm your Vessel.
Make me beautiful."

23 Palms

The Word is my shepherd.
I shall be wanted.
My courthouse
works on a crossword puzzle.
Why is fusion in confusion?
Why isn't dance in coincidence?
My meat packing plant
trademarks its bad brainwaves.
God is so busy praying
She doesn't have time
to answer my prayers.
My rainforest
has cried and cried and cried,
it just can't cry no more.

My Name Is Writ in Water

My bookstore
wraps six kilos
in plastic
and hides them
under a back seat.

My airport
turns on the TV
and falls asleep
in an easy chair.

My insane asylum
plays solitaire
all night long.

The Chord Is My Shepherd

My Road leapt weptward.
I shall be vaulted.
A sapling grows
where a dumpster used to stand.
My library is dancing
with a skyscraper.
The Voices in the wind
rehearse the lullaby they sing
when a salamander dies.

I Expand Before Nebulae

Why is just one year
in yearning?
My Saint of Second Glances
puts on her lipstick.
I am lost in the dark wood
and you becalm my mansion.

Truth Is a Pathless Land

Banks are the new churches.
With pointing steeples,
the old churches accuse the sky.
A meteor shower has a hole
in the sleeve of its coat.
My heart is a little red fist
knocking on a big black door.
The white statues of Mary and Jesus
stand like fangs dulled by use and age.
A pigeon eats the chunks of food
in the puke on the sidewalk
across the street from a gay bar.
If Christ is petals snowing from a cherry tree in spring,
how does He prepare a mansion for me?

My Condition Defiles All Forms of Medical Treatment

O Secret Reader,
heal a rock
and droplift it
into a limousine.
My gas station
pours sand
out of its shoes.
Earth is changing
into a sphere
of emotional energy.
I'm a whirlwind in a madhouse.
I'm a madhouse in a whirlwind.

Load-Out in the Rain

A budget analyst
cleats the lies
who wear adult diapers.
A hospital
lingers on a bridge
and studies the heedless river.
Three chords knock me down
and three chords pick me up.

Strange World (I'm Too Sad)

The centipedes are the size of crocodiles.
They circle Caa'rong, a Green Lantern.
She's a walking rosebush
and each flower contains an eyeball.
She points her power ring
at the largest centipede.
If fur were in insufferable,
I might discover an inn in infinite
(O Deluded Dilaudid Deadfall,
I can find fur in insufferable
and there will always be an inn in infinite).
Caitlin drives a junker on the interstate.
All her possessions are in the trunk.
Her hair's tied up in a pink bandana.
Her heart left a while ago,
now her body is leaving too.

Song of Magnetic Service

The wind whispers
to a weeping willow,
“You won’t be lonely forever.”
We buy our wedding rings
in a pawnshop.
The past will be redeemed
by the love to come.
You have bluffs in your soul
where I can stand
and see a hundred miles of you.
I have a hundred years of sorrow in my eyes.
O Holy Heart,
you will be my joy
on the day the world ends.

The Third Station of the Double-Crossed

I build my mansion
on a thunderbolt.
Attorneys are movie stars,
movie stars are junkies,
and rivers are blood.
Why is justice just ice?
The first shall be fast
and the last shall be lost.
Love has no rules.
A woman wearing a dog collar
and a wedding gown
is weeping in the rain.
My mission is so secret
I don't know it myself.

Why Is Go in God?

Sleep is my keep,
my chant shall be haunted,
and I wake up with clean monsters.
Live would be love
if a scowl were different.
I repair a fable
and it wanders the galaxy.
Power towers are marching.
I made my head and now I'll weep in it.
Stone boxes hold coffins.
A woman stands on a bridge,
tears spill from her eyes,
and she asks a constellation,
“What am I being saved for?”

A new poem by John Keats was recently found in France. The poem was written in French and hidden in a prayerbook in a nunnery. Although no one is sure why, the speculation is it was written in French as part of a plot to seduce a novice. He uses the word “flail” in the poem – a flail is a medieval military weapon and it was a metal ball with spikes attached to a chain, which was fastened to a wood or metal handle. It could be quite lethal (unfortunately, not against vampires – and how our hero lost her lightsaber is another poem).

What Have You Done for Global Warming Today?

by John Keats (translated by Chris Toll)

My evil twin sister is me.
She digs through the pockets
of her leather coat
and adds a blue monkey
to her cocktail monkey collection.
The muscles in my highways ache.
O California rainstorm,
an empty pill bottle is my telescope.
Cortez discovers a movie theatre
in the jungles of Guatemala.
The front doors are smashed open.
A Jedi jumps from the top of the popcorn machine
to the candy counter
and whirls a flail above her head
as she battles two lesbian vampires.
Will you shoplift with me, Jesus?

II. The We in Weep

The Pilgrim Dreaming

I'm in a suburb of Cleveland.
I'm talking to a monitor in a mailbox.
The husband and wife are wearing pig masks.
They say they won't deactivate the force field.
Missiles are screaming over my head
and destroying houses a block away.

You Can Know My Position or My Momentum –
You Can't Know Both

Ouija buttons
her red cashmere cardigan.
She waits on a platform
for a train.
A small black suitcase
stands beside her.
The suitcase isn't hers.
Karma places C-4 charges
around a shopping mall.
The moon's not out.
Her heart is full.
Utopia chain-smokes
outside a bus station.
She longs to live in a state of grace.
Her heart has goodness
she doesn't know what to do with.

Carbon-Based Lifeform Blues

Art is Religion.

My Higher Self

lies on top of gray clouds

and plays a harmonica.

Oh yes, she cries some tears.

Religion is Philosophy.

Why is grim in pilgrim

and why isn't a pill?

My liquor store dances in the rain.

Philosophy is Art.

The job of poets is not to explain the Mystery.

The job of poets is to make the Mystery greater.

Bless This Glance Around

What doesn't thrill me
makes me hunger.
Cupidity buys new shoes.
A blue plastic bag
is caught on a tree branch
and filled with wind.
Error wears a human face.
I mend a snowstorm
and it loses an orchestra.
Love comes with a walker.
Ruth is a beauty and her sleuth is moody –
that is all Marian knows
in her lonesome hotel room.
The Good Joker
lards his horde of poker chips.
Help me, Universe.

Server Is Too Busy

(Bob Dylan Plays Heath Ledger in Heaven)

I'm a digital pilgrim.

My wren and me,

we've dined for years

on just one crumb of bread.

Why is mire in admire?

The chained chairs groan,

buds explode on branches,

and the sun is singing.

Why is a lion in nonillion?

Once the Eternal Teenager Gland is activated,

there's no turning back.

Why is weep in sweep?

The Bad Joker

cards his ward of summer lips.

My Melancholy Rapture drives a car in the rain

and my Inconstant Castle sneaks into a movie theatre.

Is the Bear in the Woods a Catholic?

A friend of the backbeat
is a friend of mine.
The hard times are behind me,
60 is the new 16,
and 28 is the new 53.
A priest opens a door,
opens his black umbrella,
and steps into a hymn.
I hate reality,
the Society of Sarahs finds a trophy in entropy,
and your eyes say, "Yes!"
The Indifferent Joker
guards his hoard of paper clips.
I'll be a desperate 17-year-old bisexual virgin
till the day I die
(my friends will snort my ashes off the kitchen table).

Correspondence from Emily Dickinson to Arthur Rimbaud was recently discovered in a farmhouse in France. The three letters were hidden beneath the false bottom in a china cupboard. Emily and Arthur were both Farsi scholars, and they particularly loved the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám. This group of letters was occasioned by the publication in 1872 of the third edition of Edward FitzGerald's translation of the Rubáiyát. Emily and Arthur were dismayed by the translation's continuing popularity. Emily wrote, "Edward FitzGerald is a plodding Pedestrian while Cars on the Interstate roar by him! Enclosed is my humble Attempt to show the Wonders contained in the Verses. Giants will stride the Earth again. Let us be in their Number." The letter concludes with four stanzas written in French. The two other letters are devoted to personal matters. Perhaps the missing stanzas will be discovered in the future.

My Ruby Hat

(a translation of the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám)

by Emily Dickinson (translated by Chris Toll)

I live in 256 Dimensions.
A Prophet devours a Candle –
A Leopard sleeps with a Lizard –
The Word is on the wing.

I treasure every Grief I eat –
Butterflies collect stamps –
The Blue Algebra interviews Lightning.
A Bottle of Wine is my Wilderness –

I have the Gift of Second Sight –
Despair guzzles Gin's Alphabet.

A Spider kneads a throne on the Moon.
The snoozing Singer writhes.

I'm a Cobbler trying to build a Cathedral.
Restless Leg Syndrome afflicts Mathematics –
The Event Horizon thirsts for an Earthquake.
I refold the Rain nearer to my Heart's Desire –

The Shaken Is My Shepherd

— *for Adam Robinson*

This is a completely false story.
I fell in love with a professor
who had a scar
racing across her face.
We got married
and moved to Montana.
Why is cry in cryptic
and when will I stop?
In the tiny skyscrapers,
fluorescent lights march to their doom.
The Electric Voice is my friend.
I am washed in the blood of the iamb.
O Haunted City,
I drink the light in every face.

Follow Your Heart

Silence is my teacher.
When the wind has a mouth,
I know a pterodactyl
from a hand grenade.
My ghost sister poem
interrogates music
until it steps out of its tattoos
and becomes a cathedral.
Why is fix in crucifix?
Saint Geraldine tells her rosary
as she stands on an overpass
above an interstate in the Holy Bible.
Why is late in disconsolate?
The Muse lives within.

Irregular Galaxy

Chaos is my preacher.
A Big Voice pours through me.
My ghost brother poem
questions prose
until it vanishes
and leaves a rose.
I build my castle
on a noctilucent cloud.
Dust bunnies attend a webinar.
My church is on its stones in the rain
and begging for mercy.
After the gnome robs a bank,
he showboats in front of a surveillance camera.
The Muse lives without.

In 1845, 14-year-old Emily Dickinson read “The Raven” in the New York Evening Mirror. The poem enchanted her. She resolved to meet Edgar Allan Poe and began a correspondence with him. In the autumn of 1847, she attended Mary Lyon’s Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and boarded at the school. Being away from home provided her with the opportunity to journey to the Bronx and stay with Eddy in his cottage. He had arranged for his mother-in-law to go to Colorado on a ski vacation. When Emily arrived at the cottage, she was surprised to learn Eddy had invented a time machine. He kept it in his locked study on the second floor of the cottage. He and Emily took several jaunts into the past and the future. On one of their trips, they visited Baltimore in 2002. They spent a few days in the city and went to Normal’s Books and Records. In one of those sad jests time travel is famous for, Emily discovered her Complete Poems and saw the lonely majesty of her life laid out before her. I purchased that volume in 2003 and found a folded sheet of paper in the back of the book. I opened the sheet and stared at an eight line poem in fierce handwriting. Beneath the poem was the unmistakable signature of Emily E. Dickinson. This was Emily’s first poem, but I have numbered it as her last.

1776

I've lost Everything – I've lost Everything Twice.
I bought a Sniper Rifle from a man named Don.
I've got a Holy Bible gnawed by Mice –
I want to dance like they did in Babylon –

I'm crouching in an Alley – I'm tossing Dice.
I like to watch TV and eat a Bonbon.
I'd marry you – but I suspect you have Lice.
I'm breaking Codes in the basement of the Pentagon –
—Emily Dickinson

Electricity Is My Friend

Bless me, Monster,
for I am a hymn.
Why is a dent in resplendent?
The ghost of a full moon
haunts the sky.
In the bathroom of a motel room,
two federal marshals
wash the blood
out of hundred dollar bills.
Why is ire in desire?
Autumn sips her coffee.
She cannot be consoled.
Why is a descent in incandescent?
Art is the bed where I cry myself to sleep.

I Can't Stand Along the Watchtower

Many are stalled,
but few are frozen.
Emily sits on the edge of my bed
and says, "You can't go on
without an image from your dreams."
I throw my saddle
on a spider's back.
Why is a path in antipathy?
Why is Ant in Antichrist?
Anger drives a midsize luxury sedan
and a cheetah sleeps on an adverb.
Ruth doesn't belong in a poem
unless she's wearing a wig
and paying cash for a train ticket.

No Blues Blues #43

I call my sickness the Guest.
The Guest will speak now.
On the steps of the Winter Palace,
the guards turned
and fired their carbines
at the Reptilian Overlords.
I used to be the King of Hell.
The Overmind of a praying mantis
loves your Higher Self.
A robin retires from a branch
and resumes his Intransigent Grace.
Jessica the Christ will have miracles
crackling through Her fingertips.
The ache in my heart lets me know you exist.

Love Your Enemies

— *for CAConrad*

I've come to create a new driven
and a new mirth.
A pornbot waits in a meadow.
Her ship is coming in –
and it's not from this planet.
A seagull flies through the rain,
soldiers smoke cigarettes
outside a hotel,
and Jane has handcuffs in her purse.
Walk a mile in my moccasins
and you'll be a big mess.
Satellite dishes drink stars,
a church falls asleep in front of a TV,
and you're a prayer just the way you are.

When Will a Kiss Be in Kismet?

I take my guitar into a forest,
find a clearing,
kneel,
and play to the trees.
What is liar the lair of?
Three women sit
around a dining room table
and put together a jigsaw puzzle
that shows a Bigfoot
visiting Baby Jesus in the manger.
Why is a hero in pheromones?
I'm everywhere and nothing,
Paradox is my toolshed,
and I can't help the way I am.

Listening to the Sex Gods of Mars

Jackson Browne
was famous long ago
for playing an electric violin.
In Psalm 547,
Peter Pan
leads an army of Yodas,
a swift tumbles
from her paper prison,
and I button your cardigan.
A waitron unit
locks the bathroom door
and uses her driver's license
to chop up a blizzard
on the edge of the sink.
I write poems now
so that noday noI will write rosebushes.

Bad File Handle

An old crow gossips
on top of the sign
for a used car lot.
Why is a tic in didactic?
I'm a sentient bag of gas
in a crystalline city
that rides the winds of a planet
orbiting the primary star
of a triple star system,
and I'm weebegone.
Why is a loss in colossal?
The scars will shine for a long long time.
O Broken Broken Broken Heart,
one loves more and one loves less.

One night I was in the Club Charles – just me and one of my demons out for a few drinks. I was sitting in the banquette nearest the door. My cell phone rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and accidentally dropped it. It took a funny bounce on the seat and slipped into the crack between the bottom cushion and the back cushion. I dug around for it. I found it – and I also found a sealed envelope. The envelope was incredibly old. In bold script, Para A. L. was written on the front. I stood up and stepped closer to the window. In the backwards pink glow of Cocktails, I opened the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of paper. I gingerly unfolded the sheet. A poem was written in Portuguese. Beneath the poem was scrawled a signature – Eddy Poe. I contacted my mother’s niece who lives in Richmond, Virginia. She told me, in the summer of 1826, when Poe was 17 years old, he traveled to Brazil. He took only the clothes he wore, a greatcoat, and his foster father’s sword. He forged identity papers and said he was 25. He enlisted in the cavalry, and troopers and officers soon noted his ferocity in battle. I showed the poem to several Poe scholars. After some research, they concluded he wrote the poem for the wife of a wealthy merchant. They also concluded an angry mob chased Poe into Venezuela. How the poem ended up inside a banquette in the Club Charles is a mystery.

Money Never Weeps by Edgar Allan Poe

(translated by Chris Toll)

The time machine flickers.
Tiny explosions devour the control panel.
A blue-skinned sentient biped
Lies in a slowly growing puddle of green blood.
Brainwaves operate the omnidimensional rifle.
A brave stands inside the treeline.
He keeps killing white devils on the beach
Until the big wooden ships sail away.

The Queen of the Vampires mounts her skeleton horse.
She has assembled an army of zombie shamans.
They storm Jerusalem and rescue Jesus.
No cross is erected on top of Golgotha.

I trade my rare coin collection for a bottle of absinthe.
O Dark Beauty, I meet you at the cotillion
Where a graveyard dances with a shopping mall.
I love you in life and I'll love you in death.

III. The Ion in Redemption

Why Is the If Cult in Difficult?

Susan puts a suitcase
in the trunk of her hybrid.
Her heart has an ache that's come to stay.
Robert teaches his children
how to wash the dishes.
His heart has an ache that won't go away.
I open the night and find a blizzard to get lost in.
I have an ache where my heart used to be.

All Is Suffering

The smell of gunfire
fills the Bible.

Why is less in blessing?

An unhappy wife
rams a forklift

into the door of an art gallery.

Why is harm in harmonica?

In the basement of an abandoned convent,

a CIA-trained mountain lion

guards a storeroom that contains bazookas

from an alternate timeline

where a massive asteroid didn't smash into Earth

and dinosaurs became intelligent.

Why is a Bib in Bible

and what will I be fed?

Elizabeth straps on a bulletproof vest.

A new poem by Sylvia Plath was recently discovered in England. The poem was written in German and it was found beneath a pile of cardigans in a cedar chest in the subbasement of a London antiques store. No one knows why it was written in German. She uses the words “morning stars” in the poem – a morning star is a medieval military weapon and it was a metal ball with spikes mounted on a wood handle. This would be an odd weapon to bring to a fight with a vampire, but perhaps our hero is thinking a vampire is really not much of a threat if the head is pounded into pulp.

Writing Groups of the Future

by Sylvia Plath (translated by Chris Toll)

My evil twin brother is me.
He locks the bathroom door
and whispers into a luscious ear,
“Forget the bar.
My heart is chaste
and your heart is chased.”
My pharmacy
has to juggle a lot of stoves.
O Maryland blizzard,
a cat is my writing table.
A Jedi clenches morning stars in her fists.
She’s trapped the vampire hitman
in the laboratory of the Fortress of Solitude.
He’s half fog and half leopard.
He balances a blowgun on his paw.
Will you ride the ferris wheel with me, Buddha?

Binary World Blues

1.

I've been 12
for a very long time.
I've loved a million lies.
The Voices in the wind,
they sing to me.

2.

A priest melts crucifixes
in a crucible on his stove.
He pours the molten silver
into molds to make bullets.
His revolver lies on top of a Holy Bible.

3.

A pre-op transsexual parks her car
across the street from a bank.
The sorrow of the world fills her face.
She loads a sawed-off shotgun
and pulls on a Michelle Obama mask.

I'm Not Here

I'm a conduit,
I like distortion,
and I'm an army of ghosts.
The Word is my leopard,
my font shall not faint,
and I lie down in sewn pastures.
A stone angel comforts three bear cubs.
She has broken wings.
My Satan is coughing blood
into a handkerchief,
my Jesus is a lonely transvestite
living in a motel room
just off the interstate,
and my God is you.

Philosophers in Battle #55 (A Wedding Song)

— for Rupert Wondolowski and Everly Brown

The girl is more octopus than tiger,
more tiger than raven,
though these creatures
don't exist – exactly – on her planet.
Her name is eop'Soo.
She is a diplomat and an assassin
and she's five years old.
She wakes from Deep Dream.
She greets the viewscreen
and a gas giant floats below her starship.
One of her tentacles clutches a relic from Old Earth.
It's an action figure of Mr. Negative –
all he did was read comic books
and turn good things bad.
Her attack pod is more prayer than metal.
Under the cloud cover of the gas giant,
will-o'-the-wisps surround the pod
and fasten it inside a maelstrom of liquid hydrogen.
Her Guardian is on the other side of the galaxy.
He's a vampire who used to be a werewolf.
He knows white magic and the black arts
and he lives in 327 dimensions.
He shuts his eyes and wishes – he's across the galaxy.
Her three hearts love All That Is.

Occult Climate

A calm inhuman quasiorder
orchestrates steep deep sneers.

A haiku patrol resurrects a rare ache,
a ghoul adulates fictive bisexual fingerprints,
and a barbarian parboils a boatyard liturgy.

Cavemen titrate their pokerfaces.

A cowpoke squanders a corset barbecue,
starlight contorts contrite airfields,
and a lovelorn gangster cheerleads droll keyholes.

A cryogenic spy and an inexpert cartographer
conjugate irksome chilly cantos.

A carload of recluses obstructs a sepulchral brainstorm,
a locksmith abducts a diffident proton,
and a debonair conquistador razes a waltz.

Why Is Try in Poetry?

My usual audience
is two alcoholic nuns
and a clown in a biohazard suit.
My metaphors are mixed up.
You can see
as well with the heart
as with the eyes.
The rowhouses
stand like mismatched volumes
in an encyclopedia of grief.
Why is love backwards in evolve?
A detective grips her raygun tighter
and kicks a door open.
Raindrops are calling to the last in love.
Them tears are a school that consoles.

Welcome to the Fortress of Solitude

— *for Bill Merrick*

Rain fell into my father's hot chocolate.
I inherited his blood.
It's gasoline.
He didn't forget to give me his tears.
A ninja does a double somersault
and lands on top
of the head of a Tyrannosaurus rex.
She buries her spear in the dinosaur's right eye.
An Apache fires a shotgun
at the creature
with five eyestalks that never stop moving.
T.S. "Tough Stool" Eliot weeps on a precipice.
He would have buttfucked Billy Miracle,
but Billy couldn't sit in a speeding vehicle
and drink coffee without spilling it on his shirt
at the same time.
Being drunk was no excuse.
An assassin whose braided brain hangs down her back
materializes in front of a British commando.
His right hand claws at the crystal knife in his chest.
He disappears and the assassin catches the falling knife.
It killed his mother before he was born.

The Abyss Has No Biographer

The rain,
heart in ruins,
staggers out of town.
My Saint
of Wrong Prepositions
buttons her black skyscraper.
Who pays the rent
in incoherent?
My Soul is a scrap of lightning.
My poems are thunderbolt
laid below thunderbolt.
How long can I stay
at the inn in innocent?
Love is so hard
and it's all we came to do.

My Transitive Estate

Rain sits
in the evicted easy chair.
A yellow leaf
on the sidewalk
breaks my heart.
Why is us in Jesus?
Laura sits
on my cedar chest.
She wears sunglasses,
a gray cashmere cardigan,
and red silk panties.
A poem is a machine
that breaks your heart.
Why is a Bud in Buddha?
In the woods behind a monastery,
flakes of rust brim hunted eyes.

Perfect Love

When stars steal the sky,
after the electronic campfires
are quiet,
a collection of antimatter logarithms
(BKA Jesus)
walks through every doorway,
stands over every bed,
and lays a singing hand on every brow,
“O giant in chains,
O darling,
let the eternal divine feminine energy
awaken within you.”

LIFE ON EARTH

(Fell Swoop, Joel Dailey, 2012)

I. Why is If in Life?

Download Universal Anguish

– for Joel Dailey

The sun sings
while it makes its rounds.
Why isn't lunch in melancholy?
God is an atheist.
The moon and the stars render tender judgments.
A woman stands across the street
from a liquor store.
Her red sweater is stained,
and there are holes in the knees of her black jeans.
She aims her XM25
at the locked door of the liquor store.
If a constellation were different,
lonely would be lovely.
Jennifer the Christ plugs in her purple guitar and says,
“Where two or more electrons gather in my name,
there I am too.”
The baby dinosaurs scabble from their nest
as a flying saucer lands.
The circular hatch oscillates open.
A rabbi steps out.
His right hand holds a cutlass
and his left hand holds a raygun.

The Disinformation Phase

My mission is so secret
I don't know it myself.
Rain sits in the evicted easy chair.
The Muse lives within.
A meteor shower has a hole
in the sleeve of its coat.
The Electric Voie is my friend.
In the tiny skyscrapers,
fluorescent lights march to their doom.
A woman asks a constellation,
"What am I being saved for?"
Jessica the Christ will have miracles
crackling through her fingertips.
Art is the bed where I cry myself to sleep.

Revenge in the Unknown Zone

A dolphin weeps
beside a cold fusion calculator.
The wind plays a harmonica
in a valley
where a heartsick galaxy don't go.
My sonnet waits in a car,
with the engine running.

Love in the Unknown Zone

A bank robbery
gets on a bus.
The solar system
packs a suitcase.
My haiku goes wrong
and wrong again.
I hallow your illimitable face.

Bible Studies (The Way of the Ion)

1.

A spider weaves a web
around a crucifix.
Catherine works her broom
across a crater on the moon.

2.

At the gates on heaven,
St. Peter
has a beat-up electric guitar.
The Good Thief is on the bass.
Raphael the Archangel plays the drums.
If you can't dance,
you go to hell to learn.

3.

Jesus is happy
when I let him wear my sunglasses.
Jesus is sad
When I blindfold him with my checkbook.

4.

At a table lit by a single candle,
a bride and groom kiss.
They don't notice the water.

It has almost reached the top of the table.
An anaconda swims by.

A Legend of the Old World

The most difficult reptilian porn star is Friedrich “The Hammer” Nietzsche. On a Saturday in April, he buckles on his rocket pack, flies to Virginia, and teaches werewolves how to use smartphones. On his birthday, he ambles into Club Chuckles, orders a Stoli martini from the charming bartender, lifts a toast to no one, and says, “I write with my wheels.” On Christmas, he steps into his time machine, steps out, and tosses the inventor of the paper clip into the abyss.

Out of Memory at Line 21
– for David Franks

A Nazi flying saucer
is stored in Hangar 18.
An ex-cop ex-con
pilots the flying saucer
to a planet
on the other side of the galaxy.
He extracts poison
from an imprisoned equation.
Satan is an agnostic,
I build my mansion
in the valley of the shadow of death,
and nothing is impossible at 3 a.m.
An ex-circus strongwoman
picks the lock of a back door.
An ex-MI5 operative
hands a syringe
to an ex-Homeland Security special agent.
She bends over a bed.
The Word is my leopard
and your shoes are galaxies.

Why Isn't Try in Divinity?

An inventor
hires an orphan girl
to maintain the robots
on his estate.
I make m heart an open book.
Her only qualification for the job
is her skill with a raygun.
Why is a diary in incendiary?
The domestic staff is a coven
of lesbian vampire witches.
Two lifelines rae side by side.
Trust me – in an alternate universe,
you're truly loved.
The nun who writes plays in the locked attic
died on the surface of Mars.
Now she has a cheetah's heart.
Your heart is a seed.
Let it break.

My father was in the OSS. He never told me what he did during World War II, but I suspect he was an assassin. He had haunted eyes. When he died, my stepmother gave me a cardboard box. She said it was filled with his journals, assorted newspaper clippings, and some of his favorite books. I was going through a divorce at the time, and I didn't open the cardboard box. Perhaps I was waiting for a certain emotional stability. Now I've burned through two more marriages. I may never stand on solid ground. On a recent Saturday afternoon, I finally pulled off the packing taped and lifted the flaps.

The cardboard box contained no secrets – my father was a private man. But I learned he parachuted into Poland after the German and Russian troops invaded. He joined the Polish Underground State and worked with code breakers to defeat the Enigma machine that sent and received the messages of U-boat captains. T.S. Eliot was already working with the code breakers – he had a special gift for language. He was fluent in Polish, and he loved Poland. My father became his friend. T.S. Eliot wrote a few poems in Polish. One of the poems was in my father's cardboard box. Here is the translation:

Light for Sure by T.S. Eliot (translated by Chris Toll)

I walk down a corridor in a starship.
A vampire
has hijacked the starship.
When she stepped out of the airlock,
she was wearing a blood-soaked wedding dress.
After she drained three crew members,
she locked herself in the bridge.
She is my quarry.
The starship is sentient –
half joy, half imagination, half metal.
A turtlegirl named T'ruth

lies on top of a boulder.
She clutches a proton disruptor bomb
and surveys the trail below.
The Queen's hovercraft will not pass.
A small white cat walks beside me.
She has dragon wings and can breathe fire.
She would die for me,
A castle built out of devoured stars
floats in the black hole at the center of the Milky Way.
God paces along the battlements of the castle.
She has forgotten how to pray.
I fashioned my robe
from the vestments of a hundred priests
i killed on a hundred planets.
I carry a sword forged from the brains of evil robots.
Love forgives all, love outlives all.
When I'm gone, listen.
I'll be singing in the wind.
I'll be singing to you.

The Dead Feel Sorrow
– *for Joe Hall*

So much defends
Fred's wheelbarrow
lazy in the rain
beside a stricken kite.

Digital Channel is Encrypted

Bles me, Farther,
for I am a din.
a lonesome undertaker lies.
The Great American Sonnet
smokes a cigarette in the rain.
I've got a head full of heartache.
O Voices in the wind,
I acquit my ancient desires,
a wild sorrow has married me so far,
and I ain't getting any older.
Why is a thin king in thinking?
The Giant rolls up the bottoms of his trousers.
He grips his harpoon
and opens the door of a refrigerator.

2. Why is Art in Earth?

Possess Nothing

The moon is no ghostly galleon,
Ann hunts her grave through a cloud of smoke,
and I am besotted with liberty.
Why is easy in queasy?
A boy is running a meth lab,
a girl has \$80,000 in her backpack,
and an ambulance takes a time machine back to City Hall.
Why is a cat in cathedral?
Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Buddha
gather for a poker game.
Buddha sits on the back of a hawk,
Jesus sits on a mushroom,
and Mary Magdalene sits on a spiral galaxy.
We were born to be together.

Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol vs. Sherlock Holmes:
A Game of Shadows vs. The Girl
with the Dragon Tattoo
– for Adam Robinson

Buffy the Vampire Slayer falls in love with James Bond. When Buffy and James fail to stop a nuclear explosion that destroys San Francisco, Ghost Protocol is initiated – Buffy and James lose everything but a private jet and an unlimited supply of fuel. Iron Man bathes in the blood of virgin boys. His assistant, Dr. Frankenstein, collects vintage Star Wars action figures. Iron Man and Dr. Frankenstein are suspects in the explosion. Buffy and James dress up like Catholic schoolgirls and – during the course of a tag team strip chess match – attempt to trick Iron Man and Dr. Frankenstein into confessing.

This is How We Make a Broken Heart

Approximately 13.7 billion years ago,
an antimatter scientist
dropped an antimatter test tube.
In the summer of 1966,
Bob Dylan
steered his motorcycle
into a curve.
Beneath a lilac bush,
the FBI sniper took aim.
Behind the tinted glass of a limousine,
the imposter memorized the lyrics
filed in a loose-leaf binder.
My poem comes from far away
and it's going far away –
I'm just in the middle
like a lonesome TV station
with no employees.
The Angel of Death
has a black leather trench coat
draped around her shoulders.
She steps out of an elevator
and pulls her suitcase behind her.
An accordion folder full of legal briefs
balances on top of the suitcase.
Her black wool sport coat
lies across the accordion folder.
The sport coat falls off and hits the floor.
Side effects include unusual dreams.

When I stand up from my dead body,
my face is a howl of stars.

Love and Let Love

My church
fries an armored car
for breakfast.
My gazelle
grazes on a museum
beside a quagmire.
My superhuman parable
quaffs a shopping mall.

Protected Mode: On

My snow leopard
Disavows the perjury
of a ham sandwich.
My fugitive mansion
hides inside a cave.
Wizards thwart a plot by werewolves
to kidnap my petulant courthouse
and hold it for ransom.

Stack Overflow at Line 1

Light fills my page.
The Good Tasha Yar
and the Evil Tasha Yar
sit at a table
in Ten Forward.
The lipstick of the Good Tasha Yar
glows with a supernatural ardor.
Why is air in despair?
A serial killer
washes his cop's uniform
in a laundromat.
I remember boarding a galleon
and laughing with glee
as my cutlass slashed a fat belly
and guts came pouring out.
Sherlock Holmes
hides the God particle
inside a snuff box.
He slips the snuff box
into a pocket of his waistcoat,
strides from his flat,
and disappears down a fog-haunted street.
I philosophize with a sledgehammer.
The elf is eight feet tall.
He wields a sword in each hand,
whirls through the foot soldiers,
and lops off their heads.
The knights know fear.

The dead love the battered black van
of the Door + Way Church.

I checked my email in the monastery courtyard. The old abbot hurried toward me. He said, "Are you English?" I smiled and replied, "No, I'm an American." He said, "That will have to do. I must give you a letter." He handed me a sealed envelope. "This letter has been in the monastery for over a century. I had forgotten about it until I recently found it behind a bookcase. Please take it."

I thanked him and walked through the monastery gates. I sat down on a stone bench across the road from the monastery. I examined the envelope. On the front, in stately script, were the words, *Open in the Event of My Death – Alfred, Lord Tennyson*. The back was sealed with wax. I carefully broke the wax seal. Two sheets of foolscap were inside.

Hastily penned lines filled the first sheet of foolscap: "What a fantastic night! I must transcribe these events while they are still fresh in my mind. It is early in November in the year of our Lord, 1890. Less than an hour ago I was riding in a coach with my friend, Bram Stoker. We were on a road in the Carpathian Mountains. Bram was planning to write a Gothic novel, and he had invited me to join him as he explored Transylvania. Tattered rags of clouds raced below a full moon. Wolves howled.

"Suddenly the driver slewed the coach. It stopped and stood athwart the road. Bram and I peered out the windows. A group of nine eerie figures blocked the road. They had odd bulbous heads ill-concealed by their floppy hats, their clothes were a bizarre mix of clown costume and pirate gear assembled by a blind person, and their peculiar revolvers glowed. Bram pushed the door open on the opposite side of the coach. He scrambled out and then pulled me after him.

"He said, 'Dear friend, hasten back to the monastery we just passed. I will hold the brigands off!' As I retreated, he clambered to the roof and ripped the paulin away from a mounted Gatling gun. Howling like a demon from Hell, he began firing at the unearthly bandits. From the road, in response, rays of blue light sliced through the night. Then I stumbled around the bend and lost sight of the incredible scene.

“I am now safe within the walls of the monastery. But what if Bram fails and the loathsome creatures attack this sanctuary? I dare not sleep! I will compose a poem to calm my nerves. I will write it in Latin so the monsters will not be able to decipher it!”

The narrative ended with a bold signature: Alfred, Lord Tennyson. A poem in Latin filled the second sheet of foolscap. Here is the translation:

You May Call Me Al by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (translated by Chris Toll)

Dear Past, this is my lonely epistle.
Sometimes I'm particles
and sometimes I'm waves.
The Jedi is a five-foot-tall frog.
Her name is KwaLekLekLek.
She stands at the top of the White Cliffs of Dover,
the English Channel behind her.
Duty is a brute
and the loot is broken flutes.
KwaLekLekLek has studied Earth,
she has studied Earth until her heart aches.
Still she is surprised to see Jack the Ripper
sitting in a saddle
on the back of a saber-toothed tiger.
A coiled whip dangles from his right hand.
Weeds grow through the cracks in the parking lot
of the Highway Church of Christ the Riven.
Behind Jack and his tiger,
ten more saber-toothed tigers sit alertly.
Jack is smiling.

KwaLekLekLek loves impossible odds.
Her lightsaber shimmers to emerald life.
Emily Dickinson is my personal Jesus.
I have encumbered every cobweb
and slumbered every bone.
Jack's right hand moves quickly.
The whip flicks out
and wraps around the lightsaber's hilt.
Jack yanks it from the grip of KwaLekLekLek.
She does a triple backflip
and dives toward the water far below.
Dear Future, Orion the Hunter stalks across the sky at night.

Just like Emily Dickinson's Blues

– for Jamie Gaughran-Perez

I'm happy
when my notebook
has a broken spine.
A coke-addled priest
waits at a country crossroads.
Rebecca the Christ
misbuttons her wool cardigan.
A vampire hitman
crouches behind the Batmobile.
Saint Julie is chewing gum,
the trees have learned to sing,
and war has gone to Eastertime too.
The planet will be free
when the last homicide detective
points her raygun
at the last pedophile.

Why is a Hug in Huge?

Oh, the knights dragged me from my throne
and threw my crown to the floor.

One knight swung his mace
and smashed the crown.

Another knight ran his sword through my chest.

A poem lives or dies in the first six lines.

A woman wearing a black mohair beret

and a black leather catsuit

crouches behind a tumbleweed,

lifts her infrared binoculars,

and searches for lifeforms near the entrance

to an underground flying saucer base.

I didn't have a religion

and now you're my church.

This is the time of accelerated knowledge,

a tiger guards the Invisible Man,

and I've never stepped inside a wine bar.

The planet will be free

when the last movie star uses the entrails of the last serial killer

to strangle the last millionaire.

Seven Lifetimes of Bad Luck

I don't know
who's writing with my hand.
Elizabeth sits in my easy chair.
She wears sunglasses,
a buttoned red cashmere cardigan,
and nothing else.
I don't know
who's speaking with my mouth.
Monia waits in a train station.
She stole her mink coat.
She's leaving on the 11:59.
I look up at the stars in the sky
and I've got tears in my eyes.
In the Fourth Stage of Grief,
a nun tightens her black leather corset.
I feel like a prayer nobody's praying.

The Great American Novel Takes a Nap in the Shade

Nathaniel is a drag queen and a rodeo clown. To supplement his income, he moonlights as a hacker for the CIA. Rumors suggest his underground bunker is in the Catskill Mountains. He really lives in a bungalow on the outskirts of a small town in Ohio. He shares the bungalow with his boytoy, Jeremy, who used to be a trapeze artist. Nathaniel is dedicated to at least one typo in every email. Jeremy raises Angora goats., Nathaniel doesn't know how to love without a piece of rope in his hands. His world changes when he meets a shy college girl in a hardware store. Her name is Anna. She plans to be a Rhodes Scholar. She steals a sweater from each ex-boyfriend. She moves to the bungalow, and Nathaniel begins a pilgrimage from bed to bed.

The Crystal Grid is Activated

Fascism leaves on little cat feet.
A young woman,
her hair prematurely gray,
sits at her laptop.
Why is a law in claw?
The Ghost gives a hand signal
to let the flying saucers land.
Why is yes in eyes?
A detective takes her laser cannon
off the back of a prehistoric crocodile.
She and the prehistoric crocodile
have formed a telepathic bond.
Why is the past in pastiche?
Clarissa the Christ
puts on her black leather domino mask.
I know you by heart.

Supplement: Essays and Interviews

“Don’t Worry, I’m a Professional”

Megan McShea

Always, Chris Toll

David Beaudoin

I Got to Keep His Bible, It Now Hums in My Bookcase

Rupert Wondowloski

Publishing Chris Toll

Adam Robinson

Droplifting “I’m Having Some Shapeshifting Problems”

Jamie Perez

RE: CHRIS TOLL

Joel Dailey

Meetings of Chance: Codrescu to Toll to Downs to Coletti

Greg Fuchs

Memento Baltimori

Tom DiVenti

OPEN 24 HOURS ORAL HISTORY: The Editors Serve the Words

Jane Sprague

Introduction to BE LIGHT

Justin Sirois

Interview for Shattered Wig Review

Rupert Wondowloski

“Don’t worry, I’m a professional.”

Megan McShea

Chris Toll took the stage at a reading at the Baltimore Hostel once, and his first words were “Don’t worry, I’m a professional.” I loved that line, that deft icebreaker, evidence of its own truth.

One thing about Chris’s poems is the expansive, easy, sci-fi spirituality they offer. How to be a believer here on the outer planets where we so often find ourselves. Typically, I believe in very little for very long, but his poems still have that effect on me, just in a very specific way and only while reading them. Then I retract back into my non-believer life, but knowing I can return to that space he made with his poems is a comfort, a gentle force that pulls me in.

When he put out *Love Everyone* – the cover a gathering of believers holding hands beneath a sky riddled with flying saucers – there was an impromptu reading, and he told us he’d read it all the way through and that it wouldn’t take long. I read it now and notice all that weeping. So many singing, aching hearts. Taking it in all at once like that is like getting in a clown car with an infinity of weeping clowns, cartoon villains, punk beauties, and robot deities, all manifested from word play. Hilarious, unnerving, and then as if by magic something deeply true always bubbles up by the end.

He had these notebooks where he’d compose and refine his poems. He’d write them out longhand, and rewrite them to make changes, the whole poem written out again by hand. He’d keep doing this until he was satisfied. He had high standards. The result is that each of his poems like a burnished gem. These little sets of lines that carry you along their wide, wild emo-narrative arc and set you down perfectly done and on purpose. No side trips or excess. No chaff.

I instigated a collaborative writing group for a while when I knew Chris that was great fun. The writing group did not have high standards. It was what came out, how it came out, when it came out, and that was it. He adapted to this, sportingly, but when I put out a book of our group writings, there was

one piece we'd written in a parallel writing game that, unlike most of that group writing, would have borne his name alone. It pained him to let something go out so unrefined, so I left it out. This piece was called "Nothing Golden Stays." I offer the title now as testimony from the beyond.

He helped edit my first book. When I got back the marked-up manuscript, I – an amateur – felt each red mark like a blow. I couldn't believe he suggested *different words!* Honest to god I took offense. (Now of course I know that I should be so lucky to ever have such attention to my writing again.) One edit made me laugh, though. My thanks to him in the acknowledgements, in which I thanked his "fierce red pen." He crossed out fierce and wrote fearless.

The night I learned Chris had died, the moment I learned, I looked up and saw a large cloud in the distinct shape of a giant squid pass in front of the bright moon, wholly glowing. You can't tell me he didn't arrange that for me.

What if the poems in those notebooks of his are all one poem that he just kept trying to get right his whole life, writing it over and over, pausing at different iterations to say it out loud, share it with us. Would that make it all more like a prayer? I wish I could ask him about this theory. Or maybe I'd just ask him, Chris, tell me: why is aye in prayer?

Always, Chris Toll

David Beaudoin

Next year, 2027, will mark 15 years since Baltimore's Christopher Roy Toll, aged 64, stepped outside of time and into the Greater (I hope) Beyond. It seems longer, as the hours can slow in an empty room. And yet, he's right here, in my head anyway, leaning against a wall, cradling a fresh Yuengling like the Baby J., bemused smile fluttering between mustache and goatee, horn-rims framing the kindest eyes. In short, he's a presence who keenly persists within my presence.

Usually, I don't think about it, with the world too much with us, etc. But in pausing now, this feeling him palpably *here* best illustrates how intense an impact he left in me, and in the lives of countless others.

A pure poet, his art and life were forged as one, much like his collaged figures—half toy soldiers, half dinosaurs—adorning the top of his TV at home. Although he held a full-time job as a proofreader at a local print shop, you wouldn't know it, because Chris was always ON—on in person for most every local reading, on for his literary (and non-literary) friends, on for younger poets who needed an encouraging word, on for editing others' work, on for it all. In an October 2012 group post on the *HTML Giant* blog, organized by the poet and Publishing Genius editor Adam Robinson, I wrote:

“From the time I first met him in the late 70's, Chris was always (as they say) on the Poetry Case. He carried the torch brilliantly for poetry in our fair burg, promoting and publishing other poets, editing lit mags, sponsoring countless readings, and generally being the Guy Who Always Showed Up For Your Reading. Generous does not even begin to describe him.”

Today, my admiration for Chris in this regard has, if anything, grown. And then, there's his poetry. I often enjoyed watching uninducted members of the audience react to Chris not reading but incanting his poems. He read swiftly, like a subway blurring by a platform, each declarative line as sharp as stiletto,

slicing a new wrinkle in your brain. His rat-a-tat-tat delivery would leave you breathlessly wondering what you just heard, compounded by his masterful mix of junk culture imagery, Joycean puns, and common expressions turned inside out. Consider this:

I'm Waiting In My Sonnet With The Engine Running

The cars are smarter than people,
the bombs are smarter than cars,
and the trees have learned to sing.
Susan Holy War smiles,
slips a poison-tipped dart into her blowgun,
and whispers, "Just cuz it looks like a poem don't mean it is a poem."
I'm so sad,
spring comes one second late,
and the crystal rain is playing a broken harmonica.
A detective pulls the brim of his black hat lower over his eyes,
grips his .45,
and steps through the hatch of a flying saucer.
Poetry is not a scalpel in the hand of a surgeon.
Poetry is a raygun in the hand of a Bigfoot.

Disjunctive? Sure. Surreal? Most definitely. These tropes were part of the grander design of Chris' poems, which were extraordinarily consistent in their form and expression. But also in play was a passionate clarity informed by a profound sense of empathic "crazy wisdom." In this regard, he was closer in spirit to the 12th century Zen Buddhist "mad monk," Ji Gong, than any other person I've ever met. Through his seemingly random approach to a poem, Chris tapped a deeper core of belief in the impossibly possible. He was a hopeful, deeply spiritual man.

Nobody knows what's coming, when the leaf will shuffle off the tree. But those who plumb the core of their souls throughout their time here sometimes snag a glimpse. The night before he passed, Chris sent an email to the poet

R.M. O'Brien (now Param Anand Singh). "i will explain this as best i can," he wrote:

"i know i'm nobody – i'm a snowflake and i'm drifting toward a bonfire –
i know this well – i'm getting hot.

BUT

everything we do at every moment is critically important – every deed at every moment in every day should be a living prayer – if we pray hard enough, we will have a New World – and we will have it sooner rather than later."

Amen, Chris.

I Got to Keep His Bible, It Now Hums in My Bookcase

Rupert Wondowloski

I am now one year older than my dear friend, poet mentor, the Emily Dickinson of Mars, and spiritual advisor Chris Toll was at the time of his premature death. I thought of him as an ageless imp of a grand old man, always seeking new poets and readings, a beer can in his hand, his other hand contemplatively rubbing his thoroughly clean bald Lenin pate where his other worldly messengers landed.

As events unfold on a fresh US-led war in the Middle East I slog through the year-end bookkeeping for my book and record shop and think of him.

Bookkeeping was his daytime counterbalance to setting his and other souls free at night. His outerspace gnostic poetry that often touched down on Baltimore streets and in its bars, most often the Club Hell (Charles) knew no chains, but he worked with great discipline, carrying a poem in progress in his shirt pocket to live with it as he honed it and brought it fully to life.

Chris's *Open 24 Hours* magazine was the first place to publish me back when I had hair and a persistent thirst. It was the ideal home of words to me. Moving to Baltimore in 1984 I got the pleasure to become friends with Chris, first meeting him at a large reading at the 2640 Space, St. John's Church, which still to this day houses all forms of artistic expression. I eventually even got to visit his Crystal Palace on Calvert Street and partake of his beloved sacrament of Jägermeister. A bonding moment almost equaled by watching old Twilight Zone episodes there with other friends.

By the late '80s I started my own literary magazine, initially with comrades. It wasn't quite the hallowed poetry halls of *Open 24 Hours*, a little more of an arts carnival and absurd scream at the absurd world, with primary focus on poetry and prose. We had the honor of having Chris be a guest editor on an early issue. He drew frowny faces on rejected submissions.

His *Pilgrim's Process* on my press was one of its most finely tuned transmissions, with Chris overseeing the printing, doing the cover art himself.

Chris and his poetry were a constant through the shifting landscape of poetry in Baltimore over the years — the legendary Red Door Hall, which was sadly right before my time, sessions at the Cultured Pearl and Tell-Tale Hearth in Sowebo, Punch House, 14 Karat Cabaret, Shattered Wig Night, Minas in Fells Point and then Hampden, Michael Ball's i.e. series, Param Anand Singh's WORMS, the Shakemore Festival, and near the end of his life the Upward Spiral series Chris and Barbara DeCesare started up together in York, PA.

For all readings Chris would line up which poems he would read and in what order and run through them for a few nights before the reading. Then hit the stage like a stealth surgeon parachuted in behind enemy lines.

Another constant with Chris was his love of Bob Dylan. I grew up in the '60s and '70s with two older brothers who are musicians and who turned me on to Dylan as a pre-teen. I always considered myself a huge fan, had a few years of listening almost exclusively to Bob until I discovered punk and jazz, but my knowledge and love of Dylan came nowhere near Chris's. A decade older than me, he actually got to see Bob on the Highway 61 Revisited tour.

I had taken an oath in the '80s not to see Dylan live, that it would taint the glory of his early masterworks. But when he was having yet another rebirth in the early 2000s Chris invited me to see him at the Patriot Center. It was Chris, I didn't hesitate. It was a long held truth that Dylan was not usually a relaxed or smiling performer, but that night he was obviously having a blast. There were bleacher seats on the sides of the venue, but the middle was standing only and we kept moving forward until we were close and had a great view. It was before Dylan got arthritis and started playing only piano, he even did a wonderful solo acoustic version of "Boots of Spanish Leather". He pulled out a raucous cover of Neil Young's "Old Man", a song I'm not crazy about, but that night it was a standout.

As the show ended, the PA started playing Johnny Cash's version of Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus". I couldn't have asked for a better Chris exit song.

Sometimes, even in the strongest long-term friendships, some demon will arise and tear it asunder. I had the misfortune of getting on Chris's bad side late in his life. I had said yes in haste to doing a poetry reading and then after hearing all the details behind it and realizing it was the week of my soon-to-be wife's birthday I backed out. Chris felt I was backing out because there wasn't publicity behind the event. One of my favorite living authors at that time, Blaster Al Ackerman, had lived on my couch in my group house and in my shop for years, I had long ago dropped any teen dreams of poetry filling my wallet or my bed. There has only been one Ginsberg and he had to run about nude quite a bit and move in many celebrity circles and demonstrations for years to attain Full Ginsberg.

His renunciation of me was Arctic in its intensity and to be honest, more agonizing than when my mother disowned me for going to New Orleans Jazz Fest instead of participating in Mother's Day. Chris and Blaster Al were torch bearers of artistic integrity and I truly felt like I'd be creating in darkness and moving awkwardly in our circles if he thought I was an imposter.

I can't think of any one action or moment where I worked my way back into his heart, I just continued writing and reading out and attending events, my evil slowly being diluted by the spirit of our community. Although, come to think of it, the end may have come when I read for him and Barbara in York.

I just know that to my soul's relief we were soon going to movies again, an activity he cherished, him crossing his arms over his chest in the darkness like Dracula getting ready for sleep. And having great conversations over meals.

Just a few nights before he died, he, my wife Everly and I had dinner at a restaurant on Harford Road. Afterwards our conversation carried over into the night in the Dunkin Donuts parking lot. Chris excitedly pulled out his cellphone and played "Early Roman Kings", a song by Dyan released in advance of his soon-to-arrive "Tempest" album. We all listened to the entire

song in the comforting September chill. “We should do this more often,” Chris said before driving away in his ancient VW Bug that good friend mechanic Harold kept in proper running order.

These were cherished last moments with such a powerful poet who brought so much gentle mystery, both classic and oddball odd into my life. Not to mention unexpected beer through the nostrils laughs. His death a few days later broke the heart of Baltimore’s art world. His memorial gathering was packed, standing room only. “Knocking on Heaven’s Door” by Dylan opened the service.

Publishing Chris Toll

Adam Robinson

When Chris Toll found out I was going to walk around Baltimore and hang up poems, he volunteered to help. I didn't know him yet; it's how we met. This was 2006. I thought he looked a little funny, and anyone who wants to walk around hanging up poems must be a nut, but I took a risk on friendship. It paid off big time. He was much better and bolder than me about posting the xeroxed broadsides. I tried to do it on the sly but he took his time pulling scotch tape. We rode around in his green VW bug. The engine was in the back and one time we got rear ended, so it was especially scary. Chris hopped out, looked at his car and the other driver and just said, "Be more careful."

This might only be peripherally related to his book, but Chris loved to pee outside, and he'd often pull over in Mount Vernon or wherever and take a leak. It made him young, younger, and more than that it connected him to the essential things about life.

A similar thing could be said about his manner of dress. His work outfits were a refined business casual—almost dapper in slacks and pressed shirts, maybe a sweater vest. Out on the town, by contrast, he'd often wear cut off jeans and an oversized tee shirt—outfits that showed off his brash tattoos. The one I think about most said "All Evil Vanishes" in bold letters on his forearm.

I think these details—where he peed, how he dressed, the location of his car's engine—indicate a style he was curating for himself, one that matched his poetry. It was considered and meticulous, but irreverent too, and it prioritized, above all, vivacity.

Chris and I both worked in Baltimore's Inner Harbor so we would often meet up for lunch. He'd bring a tidy sandwich, something like chicken salad with cranberries on nice bread. Also, wrapped in two plastic grocery bags, he'd have his manuscript. He was visibly excited to show me new poems for the book. At the time he was banging out those tricky found poems—how they

were doing a renovation at Club Charles and underneath the banquette they found this long-lost Emily Dickinson poem, wanna hear it? Here it goes.

My only editorial suggestions were on the order of, “Well, gee, are there too many guns and swords?” In response he would explain to me that the meaning wasn’t IN the words, it was BEHIND the words.

We would also meet up at the sushi place over by UBalt and he’d bring his poems (inside a manila folder in grocery bags), redlined in his loopy handwriting, and he’d call himself a berserker. A good editor needs to be a berserker. He told me that prose needs to be full justified, which didn’t seem that berserk. He put his pickled ginger right onto the sushi roll. And Chris always paid. He took out his phone to calculate the tip every time. He was very generous.

Chris worked for weeks on the book cover. It got great feedback. Everyone was interested in the subject of his collages: dinosaurs and aliens and fictional characters. He was extremely proud of his skill with an exacto knife. He had his collage photographed and the file he sent me was like 300mb. We didn’t know what we were doing. Then the printer trimmed the pages wrong so we made them redo it. I still have boxes that say “TOLL GOOD” or “TOLL BAD.” At the release party Chris gave me the collage, expensively mounted and framed. It’s hanging in the Publishing Genius Reading Room. You can see the depth of the layers if you look at it in person. It’s deeper even than 300mb can capture. The meaning is BEHIND it.

My band, Sweatpants, played at the release party. Chris asked us to cover Springsteen’s “Atlantic City.” He insisted on it, really. It goes, “Everything that dies someday comes back.” But you know what’s really crazy is Chris started telling me to introduce him to people as “my friend the ghost.” So that’s what I fucking do.

Droplifting “I’m Having Some Shapeshifting Problems”

Jamie Perez

Out at a poetry reading sometime around 2005, Buck Downs handed me a chapbook he’d published. It was a single sheet of paper folded and cut to make a little book with 6 internal pages, along with a front and back cover. I was immediately taken — the format was brilliant. Buck was sure to tell me who he’d learned it from, but I’m bad with names.

At the time I was publishing a weekly online poetry magazine called Rock Heals and was thinking a lot about access in poetry and art. One of those early promises of the Internet. I loved poetry magazines like Explosive that were just stapled pieces of paper — easy and cheap to construct, begging for wide distribution. I had to add these folded books to my toolkit.

I started publishing “minichaps” in 2006 and Toll showed up in the third of the series, “It Was Real Close and Squishy” (2006). Billed as “the little anthology of Baltimore poetry,” Toll’s “Insulator Blues” closed out the collection with poems from Rupert Wondolowski, Miriam Stewart, Justin Sirois, LB Crain Bender, and Marianne Amoss. A love letter to the people I most often saw and hung out with at Baltimore readings circa 2006. Because time and space are always folding and rhyming (Toll knew this better than any of us) Buck and Toll would publish a split book together *Be Light / Recreational Vehicle* (Apathy Press Poets) that same year.

In later 2007, I asked Toll to do a minichap that would become *I’m Having Some Shapeshifting Problems*. Details are lost to time, but I’m betting I heard him read “23 Palms” for the first time at the i.e. reading series and snagged him after to get him on board. Because Toll was Toll and is Toll, he was quickly game.

I know we were talking about droplifting them from the get-go. He even drops “droplift” in the last poem “My Condition Defiles All Forms of Treatment.” I think that all started with an NPR segment about the Droplift Project — a

group of musicians who were surreptitiously dropping their CDs into major retailers for unsuspected customers to find and acquire.

What I remember most? That Toll folded the minichaps more cleanly and precisely than I thought possible. It almost unnerved me. Mine were always a little slapdash and I loved that look, but it wouldn't do for Toll. These books were tiny pristine gems to him.

And Toll droplifted with unparalleled commitment. I know the Barnes & Noble that used to be in the Inner Harbor was one of his favorite targets, slipping copies into mass market paperbacks and bestsellers. I've always wanted to hear from someone that was surprised by Toll's little book tucked between the pages of their purchase.

RE: CHRIS TOLL

Joel Dailey

I would often begin letters to Chris with, “Dear Chris, hello,” echoing Ted Berrigan, whose poems we both admired, “...it is 8:54 in Baltimore & 12:06 in New Orleans—how is this possible?” Chris & I published one another’s works for over 20 years, his poems in my magazine *FELL SWOOP: the All-Bohemian Revue*, & my poems in *OPEN 24 HOURS* & in various one-shot magazines Chris cooked up with surprising titles like *WEREWOLVES SLEEP WITH THEIR MOUTHS OPEN*. We wrote, published & thrived in the so-called Small Press World, but we had never met—until 2012 when Chris confessed that he’s never been to New Orleans but wanted to visit, so we set up a reading for him at a French Quarter bar & I hustled to get *FELL SWOOP* #120—the Chris Toll issue, *LIFE ON EARTH*—ready to roll.

Chris arrived, we walked the Quarter, fed on shrimp po’boys, consumed the red beans & rice, had the Café au Lait & square donuts at Café Du Monde, traced Whitman’s steps through the French Market, stood reverently by the Mississippi. His reading was a success; then Chris signed & lettered 26 end sheets of *LIFE ON EARTH*, with a wonderful collage cover by, yes, Chris Toll!

Little did we know that *LIFE ON EARTH* would prove to be an ironic title; shortly after his return to Baltimore, Chris was found dead in his apartment—natural causes—64 years on Earth.

For the past two weeks I’ve been re-reading all the Chris Toll books & chapbooks I have. He inscribed one, “Joel, you are one of my most perceptive editors. *Fell Swoop* is a continuing source of admiration & wonder. Am I getting too mushy? It’s this new pen!” In another book he wrote, “Hi Joel! Thanks for your friendship & support—lo!—these many years!” Chris was a generous & steadfast soul. I can’t put into words how valuable those two inscriptions are to me—yet invaluable are the terrific poems Chris left behind, a trail providing access to his unpredictable imagination.

What a welcome happenstance that Chris Toll's publications have been gathered up & newly presented in one volume—waiting for you!

Meetings of Chance: Codrescu to Toll to Downs to Coletti

Greg Fuchs

Sometimes you must trace a thread back to the beginning to untangle the knots. Though that risks more tangles. Nobody owns memories. They are free to be misremembered. Nonetheless, they form our consciousness—mine and yours.

Once we were teens who lived for rock-n-roll, thrift store wing tips, tapered chinos, three button jackets, beat poems, and getting obliterated. Just after the night we penned poems on paper plates while stars fell all over Gulf o' Wasted Youth Spring Break Florida the *Times-Picayune* featured on the cover of its Sunday magazine a third generation bushy mustachioed Romanian New York School poet. The story: Andrei Codrescu was coming to town, a gunslinger armed with a pencil from the Lower East Side by way of Ann Arbor through Bolinas on the way to Baltimore as an endowed professor at the state college. An apparently enlightened decision made by the regents with the mad hope of disrupting the historically dubious Southern gentlemen's and ladies' English Department society. Sitting in my usual Sunday morning teenaged ennui I privately thought that it would be cool to study with Codrescu. After arriving on campus, the following autumn naively ready to dazzle the faculty with our brilliance, we eventually did take classes with the 3rd Gen NY School Writer Local Paper Cover Story. It changed the course of our lives or at least detoured us from fulfilling our parents' dreams.

That summer before freshman year started, in our pursuit to be cool at school we wrangled a 3 AM-6 AM overnight slot on the college radio station where we were spun an eclectic mix of favorites to no one like black snakes crawling through village greens at night who go drink and pogo. The deejay before us, John, a narrow long-haired ginger who preferred mid-western post punk driven by heavy drumbeats and steered by piercing guitars, knew by our vibrations that we should meet his friend Buck Downs.

Buck and John circulated Allen Hall from the cave-like basement office of the New Delta Review to the floor-to-ceiling sunnily windowed Southern

Review, writing papers and poems that confounded the last remnants of believers in the lost cause of the new criticism, but not Codrescu. He encouraged them to write like they talked, make books of their own, and to correspond with others who were threading the pop art verse that spread out like a great tapestry from Tulsa, east to New York City, west to California down to New Orleans, up to Detroit. Mostly coming out of *The Sonnets* by Ted Berrigan, which he collaged from his reading of great and small American literature, initially published on his own C Press. We all are literarily fragments of this guy, but Codrescu was an actual disciple then friend.

We only had a pencil thin idea of what we were doing—deejaying late at night, writing occasional poems, and trying to make class on time. Buck in his avuncular style guided us toward verse and prose that sounded like us or at least spoke a language that we understood; wasn't overly academic or overtly intellectual but smarted with a wit that our adolescent brains could dig. Next, we were sewing and stapling our own books and journals. Seemingly out of nowhere we were asked to join the New Delta Review thus corresponding with writers from all over the country, a preponderance of whom came, not strangely, through Baltimore, and staying up late editing. We even began reading aloud our young poems in a post-hippie collective on Chimes Street and a gallery that was not on purpose a tomb of Jim Crow cruelty—the city fathers had reactionarily filled the public pool with soil making it a grassy knoll edged with original tiles marking the depths after the civil rights amendment became law. There was always a lot of literary gossip, like Alice Notley was offered the job before Codrescu, but she didn't want to raise her two young sons down here. We didn't know that we were beginning a life-long vocation, but we did believe we were threading a line inspired mainly by Berrigan and his friends like Joe Brainard, Dick Gallup, Ron Padgett, and Anne Waldman.

As quickly as our scene coalesced it just as suddenly dispersed. One afternoon Buck showed up at our apartment with a load of books and materials. Buck had decided to curtail his pursuit of a doctorate, instead take the Master of Art and split for Washington, DC where he could crash with an old friend, play music, write poems, really master the art of words instead of

interrogating them to death inside the academy. Soon after, I began a several year rambling journey that brought me home, then to Spain, over to Albuquerque, back to the state college, then up to San Francisco, finally landing in New York where I've stayed ever since with intermittent breaks in New Jersey and Philadelphia. Not long ago I gave my dreaming of becoming a writer son the *Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics* by Lewis Turco which Buck had passed to me from the back of his pickup and traveled with me all these years. The poetic threads weave a tapestry the size of our world.

One of the draws to the capitol region for Buck was *Open 24 Hours (O24H)*, Chris Toll's journal published in nearby Baltimore inspired in 1980 by Codrescu, who was teaching a class at the Maryland Writers' Council. *O24H* published a recurring cast of local, regional, and national writers including some of Buck's earliest poems. Many of the authors published were friends of Codrescu, too, like legendary Jeffrey Miller. The *O24H* authors were interlacing strands of Feminism, New York School, Pop Art, Punk Rock and any other disestablishmentarian writing you may imagine. The stance was anti-academic and non-commercial but always up with friends. Which meant a young writer not only had a chance to publish but also to connect with other writers leading to readings and making more books together. This scene seemed to offer more opportunities than the university. Simply, a real life of writers was more appealing than one of quietly desperate committees and cocktail parties.

Buck bought a house on the edge of the District near the old stadium. He had a good job until he didn't, editing an annual directory. The kind of publication that would gradually cease to be printed as the internet absorbed all the information in the world gradually obsoleting most editors and production staff. In the early days Buck also lead his own band where he would sing his poems while snapping portraits of the audience with an SX-70 Polaroid camera. Buck was a walking, talking pop art experience. He was gradually building a small press empire on the first floor of his duplex row house in the back part of town. Regularly mailing his poems on postcards and sewing small collections to sell at readings. Occasionally, Buck would invite friends to come and read at DC Art Center where he was a board member. Buck at any age just

always seemed like an old master of the avant-garde. Kind of like William S. Burroughs to the Beats—always economic and authoritative in speaking and writing. You just knew Buck knew what he was talking about, even if he didn't, at least that was the comfort he provided.

It just seemed obvious that when Chris Toll tired of the hassle of publishing a small press literary journal he imagined passing it on to Buck. Anyone who has spent any time in the arts in the aftermath of trickle-down economics is well versed in its impossibilities, especially if the words and works do not decorate well the homes or habits of the rich and famous. For a while through the 1990s Buck continued *O24H* in the style of Toll—a xeroxed, stapled collection of friends who wrote poems like their wild lives or lived their lives like wild poems. Yet, the bureaucracies of publishing can get an editor down. Buck gradually found less fun in publishing others than he did himself. So, he started telling any friends that would listen that he wanted to shed *O24H* for an eponymous publishing vehicle—Buck Downs Books.

Art school brought me to the East Coast after a few wild years in San Francisco. Martha Rosler told me that she accepted me into the documentary program partly because of the recommendation letter written by Codrescu. I was a hobo jetsetter in my early New York days. I crashed with my old friend from home who found himself alone in Brooklyn after the love of his life left him. From there I would train to New Jersey to sleep in my studio a few nights a week. Then I got some work with newspapers and photographers in Philadelphia. For several years I travelled and worked between Phila, New Jersey, and New York. During that time, I regularly attended events at the Poetry Project at St. Marks Church in the Bowery, which was the home of the New York School that felt so influential upon my own work. It was there that I met John Coletti who became a great friend simply because he told me he loved my book, *Came Like It Went*, that had recently been published by Buck Downs Books.

John and I spent a lot of nights hanging out after work, going to poetry readings, and trading lines in notebooks. We imagined ourselves heirs to the revolutionary energy of the mimeograph era of artists running off books in

secret locations before photocopiers appeared in every office. We warped and woofed the thread from Tulsa to Morningside Heights down to the Lower East Side all the way into our post-Tompkins Square Park riot waiting on a stoop for a friend scene, which was being dispersed across oceans with Alice in Paris or staying upstate for part of the week while burgeoning in Brooklyn. No one had a mimeograph machine anymore, but we had computers, laser printers, and internet boomtimes unknown to us at the time to be soon shattered by planes crashing into downtown buildings. Like poets before us when you got nothing you've got nothing to lose. John and I agreed to take *Open 24 Hours* off Buck's hands. Our plan was to make books of our friends that were anti-academic and noncommercial but would be fun to staple together then give away at readings. The impetus never changed just the machine. Encourage and publish your friends with whatever you have at hand—mimeograph, xerox, or laser printer. Do it for fun not money. Though sometimes it feels good to get the money. Buck always counseled to keep your day job, it's the best way to inform your writing and keep yourself free to experiment.

Buck gave us the rights to *O24H* and helped secure a laser printer. John bought a heavy duty stapler. We recruited our painter friend Jonathan Allen to create covers. Finding the writers was easy—they were our friends. The difficult part of the job was finding the time to edit and design between attending and hosting readings, cracking up, hanging out, overhangs, romance, and working for a living. We maintained the managerial style established by Toll and explained by Buck to Jane Sprague when he was interviewed about the transfer of *O24H*: “to always appear to be on the verge of quitting, in order to ensure that the arrival of a new issue was not to be expected and therefore a delight.”

We launched our version of *O24H* with a reprint of *20 Poems* by Steve Carey, basically a replica of what Alice Notley published in 1987. Everything we tried to accomplish was an acknowledgement of our friends and mentors. Somehow, including Carey and Toll, John and I published 10 books: Corina Copp *Sometimes Inspired by Maguerite*; Joel Dailey *Nutria Bounce*, Betsy Fagin *For Every Solution There Is A Problem*; Erica Kaufman *Civilization Day*; Arlo Quint *Days*

On End; Mariana Ruiz Firmat *Another Strange Island*; Dana Ward *The Drought*; and Dustin Williamson *Gorilla Dust*. I went rogue with two later books: David Kirschenbaum *The July Project 2007*; and when my son Lucas was nine years old, he was in a group performance at Dixon Place downtown, so we put together a collection of his poems for the reading, *Science, Nature, Cats, & other Critters*. I thought it was comically apropos to our lineage because of the legend of Eddie Berrigan's first reading at the Poetry Project also at the tender age of nine. Finally, we left some on the cutting room floor: Brett Evans' and Frank Sherlock's collaboration *Ready To Eat Individual* was swiped by Bill Lavender; filmmaker Stephanie Gray's *New Poems* never found the time; Christopher Lew, a curator that I met through Denize Lauture at Camille Billops' and James Hatch's loft in Soho, sent a batch of poems; and artist Will Yakulic's pencil rubbings of graffiti carved into tables at the Grassroots Tavern, a pub on St. Mark's Place that poets had been drinking with John Fisk—the original weed dealer soundman secret funder of the Poetry Project—since Paul Blackburn hosted readings at Café Le Metro in 1965.

Namedropping gets tiresome. LANGUAGE poets deservedly took New York School to task for it. I can see why, proximity to greatness doesn't amount to much but nearness. I'm not trying too hard to seem cool. Just trying to show that we weaved a thread that Codrescu inspired in Chris and Buck—hang out with your friends and publish each other. Whether or not it works in terms of publishing or art world status matters not. At the risk of cracking corn, what it does is make is your life richer with love.

The book that meant the most to me was Chris Toll's *Love Everyone* with a cover by Jon Allen—five flying saucers hovering a ring of people holding hands at the base of a mountain that could be an ocean. It was the beginning and the end. It was an homage and a command. Chris stitched together the incarnation of a magazine which represented a real working scene of friends who wrote poems without institutional support. Like Codrescu inspired Chris, he inspired Buck, who then entrusted the lineage to us. I wanted to honor Chris. Regretfully, I didn't really know him. We had exchanges by email, and hosted Chris at a reading in Philadelphia. Mainly Chris was a legend to me. Sometimes humans are better in the abstract. However, every

poet that I ever met or read from Baltimore had nothing but praise for Chris. By the time we were making *Love Everyone*, I was buying a house in the Bronx and could see that our days publishing friends would soon end. Like Charles Bernstein said of *The Sonnets*, Toll's twenty poems are "part collage, part process writing, part sprung lyric." Toll's poems "set one more heart ablaze with the fire of love/and magic will happen" representing the best of American poetry, ultimately reminding us that there is only one true commandment in all the new testament—love everyone.

Memento Baltimori

Tom DiVenti

The world's largest Christmas garden is closed and shuttered.

There's not a day that passes where I don't remember Chris. Not so much for his poetry but for the way he conducted his life. He was one of the most gentle souls I've had the pleasure to share time with. I loved his word play. He'd find meaning in words within words. For example, "Who put 'mean' in meaning and why are they so mean." That was his sense of humor. He was a fierce ally who had my back through the good, bad, fat, and lean years of living as a poet and writing poetry in Baltimore.

Chris often told me, "One can never be too bitter." I'd laugh it off as a joke but understood his sentiment. There were many times I felt bitterness and resentment toward real and imagined injustices and slights. I took it personally. My friend Jennifer Blowdryer, a NYC writer, told me years ago, I sweat the small stuff. I did. That happens when you grow up being told by those you love that you'll never amount to anything and you're a loser. No disrespect to them. They showed love in their way. They couldn't grasp my secret desire. They didn't share my vision. Being an outsider in poetry and society was a hard way to go. Trying to survive in a profession that has no income, no rules, and no promises of reward for a better life is futile. That's the nature and license of poets and art in general. It's always been a blessing and a curse. I'm anti-social and gregarious simultaneously.

These days I say, "One can never be too bittersweet." Poets are way too sensitive, absorbing the suffering of the modern world at large and never feeling at ease. It's a thankless occupation. We're not given the choice of being a poet as opposed to anything else, and I choose poet, but I don't recommend it to anyone. It's a solitary endeavor. It doesn't occur automatically. You can't pull poetry out of your ass. Poets are outside, observing from within. Poets have no code of ethics, laws, or rulebooks. There's no standard protocol or procedure. Poetry lives. It's eternal. Poets wish to dwell among the immortals and laugh with the gods. It can't be taught, but can be learned by experience.

There are too many ghosts we must live with. My memories are filled with dead friends, family, musicians, artists, and poets. I've no clue why I'm still here. I'm amazed that I've survived a life of excess with total disregard for my well-being and safety. I was raised in a lower-middle class world only to reject it for decades of even more poverty, times of homelessness, and reckless abandon. Somehow I always landed on my rosy feet. It's a great mystery. I don't deserve to be this happy and joyous. Then again, of course I deserve it, and everything else too. The world, the oyster, the bowl of cherries and the slice of pie. The gods smile and luck abides. What time I have left will be spent slowly. To savor my existence and all it has to offer. I no longer feel a need to rush around, hurry, or be pressured to compete with others in an imaginary arena with half-dead gladiators. No rattling of swords or gnashing of teeth. If you live long enough you earn the right to take it easy. I can guarantee that Baltimore had nothing to do with my survival, but it's the city I survived in.

Baltimore has its moments. A city cannot make or break you. Now this city is like all the other cities across the country. A cookie-cutter mirror image filled with corporate logos and brand marketing. Isn't it a pity what a town without a city can do? Our TINYTOWN is disappearing. The world's largest Christmas garden is closed and shuttered. Baltimore was just voted American's most unattractive city by some travel and leisure magazine. Strange, since it looks like every other major metropolitan center. So the entire ugly megalopolis called America is a real beauty of an eyesore. There is hardly enough left for the quaint factor or the cute quotient. Our city is one big methadone clinic, homeless shelter, and soup kitchen. Tourism is up. Bus tours are rolling. Sightseeing and guided walking tours are happening more and more. It's a real-life tale of two cities. The one that was manufactured for gawking tourists and conventioners, filled with overpriced restaurants and trendy shops and then there's the one the rest of us live in. The one with the junkies and panhandlers. The one with racial tension so thick you can feel it in the air. The one with block after block of boarded-up row houses and abandoned storefronts. This is where fantasy meets reality in the city of bankrupt dreams. Life is loss. Even cities die. Or the way we imagine them to be. I leave you with some final thoughts. A quote from Charles Bukowski, another great American poet: "We're all going to die. All of us. What a circus! That alone should make

us love each other but it doesn't. We are terrorized and flattened by trivialities. We are eaten up by nothing.”

OPEN 24 HOURS ORAL HISTORY: The Editors Serve the Words

In June 2003, Jane Sprague, on assignment for Boog City, did a short history of Open 24 Hours Press. These notes were culled from e-mails that she sent to John Coletti, Buck Downs, Greg Fuchs, and Chris Toll.

Sometime after the year 2000, John Coletti asked Greg Fuchs if he would like to help him publish poetry books. Fuchs thought it was a good idea and that they should resurrect Open 24 Hours, which was a 'zine last published in the mid-1990s by Buck Downs in Washington, DC. Downs inherited the 'zine from Chris Toll, who published it for almost ten years in the 1980s in Baltimore.

Jane Sprague: How did you get started with the press?

Chris Toll: I was taking a poetry writing class given by Andrei Codrescu. It was offered through the Maryland Writers' Council. Another student, Kate Pipkin, and I decided to start a magazine. Andrei thought it was a good idea and gave us spiritual support. We couldn't decide on a name. We wanted something clever and resonant. Then one afternoon, as I was leaving the job I had at the time, I drove by a gas station. Across the metal awning over the pumps were giant letters: OPEN 24 HOURS—the perfect name—all poets should always be open 24 hours. The magazine *Open 24 Hours* was born that afternoon. This would have been in 1981 or 1982.

Sprague: What is the history/lineage of Open 24 Hours? Previous authors and books? How many? What years?

Toll: The first issue came out in 1982. I don't remember the month. There were 16 contributors—mostly friends of ours (Kate and me)—also some students from Andrei's class. Also some poems by Jeffrey Miller that Andrei gave us. A very low-tech affair—xeroxed and stapled, no cover—one page is just incoherent scribbling—ah, those were the days.

The second issue came out in 1983. A little better presentation. We had a wrap-around cardboard cover with a nice nighttime photo of a 7-Eleven's Open 24 Hours sign. There were 36 contributors—still friends, some of Andrei's friends. The first page proclaimed: “The editors established *Open 24 Hours* to serve the Words.” We were so idealistic.

The third issue came out in 1984. That was a special year. I remember it well. I was sure I was going to die that year. Another wrap-around cardboard cover. The front photo was a matchbook from Po-Boy Truck Stop & Restaurant stuck in the ashtray of my VW. The matchbook read, of course, Open 24 Hours. There were 43 contributors—still friends, but also some local poets, a few small press poets. People were beginning to notice us.

The fourth issue came out in 1985. The fourth and fifth issues had my favorite covers. I had become addicted to the *Weekly World News* and read it religiously (maybe I thought in some strange way it was directly responsible for me not dying in 1984. The mind is strange.) So the cover was a collage of headlines from *Weekly World News*, such as Husband & Wife Get Sex Changes, Double Operation Saves Their Marriage, and 1 in 200 Americans Is From Outer Space.

The fourth issue was our most ambitious yet—there were 84 contributors—still friends but now many small press poets (I had started exchanges with other small press editors—the magazine was definitely becoming known).

The fifth issue came out in 1986. This was the last issue that Kate worked on. I would have you talk to her too, but I don't know how to contact her anymore.

Another collage cover with a few cryptic panels from daily comic strips. My favorite (from *Weekly World News*): a negative drawing of Jesus (so he's black) with the caption: “Take this picture outside & stare at the nose of Jesus for 33 seconds, then, direct your eyes to the sky. The radiant face of Jesus will appear clearly, beginning a series of wonderful mystic experiences for you.” Another big issue, 84 contributors, mostly small press poets. A typical poem (by Ann Meyer):

“Skating On Saran Wrap”

we have a good house
some chairs
and gravity holding dishes to the table

so don't come over
and fuck things up.

The final issue was the sixth issue. It came out in 1989. I knew I couldn't go on so I had it professionally typeset. I also had it professionally copied at a print shop (previously I had always copied it at whatever job I had at the moment). The front and back covers were beautiful collages by a crazy junkie friend of mine. There were 97 contributors, a full issue, local people and small press people.

Sprague: How was the magazine received? I mean, how did people find out about it, contact you, etc. etc. And when you say local poets—local to DC or B-More or...?

Toll: I did all the distribution. Baltimore at the time had a thriving poetry scene so I would pack my magazines in a plastic bag, take my plastic bag to a reading, and sell them or give them away (I was never much of a businessman). I also placed some in local bookstores. And I traded quite a bit with other small press magazines—so *Open 24 Hours* would get a good review—and poets would contact me. By local poets, I mean primarily B-more poets, DC poets never really noticed the magazine. If I categorized the way things broke down, I would say the first three issues had a focus on local poets and the last three issues had a focus on small press poets.

Sprague: Who are some of the poets whose work appeared in previous issues of *Open 24 Hours*? And when did it become a small press as opposed to a magazine?

Toll: I thought you might notice that I didn't list many poets—that was intentional—I thought the focus of your article should be on the current incarnation—my involvement was 20 years ago. Devi Bendit was a local poet—she's gone now like an autumn leaf into the Great Unknown—God bless us all. Todd Moore was a small press poet. Is he still writing? I guess so, I don't know. To list the names seemed like stealing ghosts from places where they rest happy. I'll send you #6. That will give you a good idea of the kind of roster we assembled. OK?

I always saw it as a magazine. I didn't see myself as a chapbook publisher. I didn't have the resources (time, money, or help) to do chapbooks. Of course, this was in the Dark Ages before computers (there were computers around, I just didn't have one).

Sprague: What caused you to pass the editorial mantle or pause the printing?

Toll: The demands just became overwhelming. The mail was a flood, I simply couldn't handle it. I had no one to help me and I needed some help. I just needed some time off. But I like to think that all over the country the issues have been saved and are remembered fondly once in a while.

Sprague: How did you attend to editorial or aesthetic continuity?

Toll: I had a good feeling about Buck (Downs) I thought he would do a good job with the magazine. I wasn't really concerned with continuity with my vision. I had no expectations that Buck would concern himself with honoring my sensibilities. He had his own vision for the magazine. That was how it should have been. And I'm very happy that *Open 24 Hours* has started again. *Open 24 Hours* is a good name. It is a promise and a vow.

Sprague: I wish I could see the previous issues. Who's got them, I wonder? What are you doing now? As in writing, publishing, teaching, jobs of the weird, etcetera.

Toll: I think I'm probably the only person in the entire universe who has all six issues. The following is in no way a reflection on you. I'm sure you're a wonderful person. The following is in every way a reflection on me and my anal retentive tendencies that are as wide as the Mississippi River but I really can't let you borrow them. It's not you, it's me. I hope you understand.

Right now I'm working as a proofreader for a pharmaceutical company, yeah, it's as horrible as you think it is. I'm looking for work, of course. I'm always looking for work. I keep developing philosophical problems with the jobs I get. I've just decided to devote this lifetime to being an artist—it doesn't matter that no one's heard of me—what matters is my heart. By my own lights I've been successful. I published a couple of one-shot magazines back in the mid-90's. I'll send you copies when I send #6. I still write. It comes, it goes. Months of silence, then three poems. Every poem of mine is the first poem and the last poem. At this very moment I'm working on a spoken word CD with three other poets. Possible titles: *Throw The House Out The Window* or *I've been wrong so long it feels like right to me*.

Well, that's all for now. If you have more questions, please ask them.

CODA: Open 24 Hours is a promise and vow

Sprague: Tell me your version of Open 24 Hours.

Buck Downs: O.M.F. XJDailey introduced me to the gritty absurdism that was Baltimore poetry, late '80s vintage, when he turned me on to Chris Toll and his 'zine, *Open 24 Hours*. Then I moved to D.C., and for the first year and a half I lived here, all the poets I met in D.C. were these scrubbed-exposition turds who clot the institutional scene. But in Baltimore, a generation of poets were keepin' it unreal in a variety of ways. Chris Toll, Richard Sober, Tom DiVenti, Sandie Castle, Danny Lindenstruth, David Franks, and plenty others were working and practicing in a landscape that came to be known as "THE CITY WHAT READS".

Chris's *O24H* always included one or more of his Christological collages, exploring the palpable connections between salvation and abduction. His managerial style was to always appear to be on the verge of quitting, in order to ensure that the arrival of a new issue was not to be expected and therefore a delight. It is an attitude I try to cultivate in my own work still.

Callow youth that I was, about the second time Chris said he was not going to publish *O24H* anymore, I volunteered that he should pack up all of whatever he had of *O24H* stuff and I would come get it and take on continuing the mag. I mainly tried to do the same thing but with a cast of younger poets (i.e., my friends).

Sprague: The questions still rattling about in my brain are: how was the magazine received? I mean, how did people find out about it, contact you, etc. etc. And when you say local poets, local to DC or B-More or...?

And: who are some of the poets whose work appeared in previous issues of *Open 24 Hours*? And when did it become a small press as opposed to a magazine?

Downs: The mag was recieved with all the attaboys and/or rolled-eyeballs appropriate to such an undertaking, depending on the receiver's inclination to like scruffy xeroxed poetry zines. Distribution was pretty much nothing but word-of-mouth & U.S.P.S. back in the late 80s. We had maybe a dozen institutional subscribers and about the same number of people ordering/subscribing. Metazines such as *Umbrella* and *Factsheet Five* were important compilations of what's-up? in the days before content agglomeration. It was a pretty common practice among fans of the small press to read through an issue of *F5ive* and pick out a handful of things that sounded cool, mail off some "well-concealed cash" and receive strange printed ephemera in return.

When I say local I mean D.C.; I suppose when Chris says local, he means Baltimore. Of course it is a fuzzy demarcation and don't I wish it was fuzzier.

Names you could see in *O24H* that you might also see elsewhere would include

Alice Notley and Bruce Andrews. The meat of the matter for me was the poets coming over the transom whose names remain unrecognized, e.g., Robert Head, Jessica Freeman, Tom Hibbard.

What gets dull about a poetry zine? Acceptance letters, rejection letters, complaints, praise: all the shallow social dynamic of submission and authority that are built into the magazine enterprise. So why books? I guess being able to abandon the pretense of "scouting the field" and concentrating on a limited number of writers seemed like a good idea.

Introduction to BE LIGHT

Justin Sirois

Fearless in the face of pan-galactic fascists, Chris Toll, the asp Rasputin of fanged philosophy and bleakly luminous verse, tastes our paranoia with a forked tongue, gorges on chubby ears with venomous, dual-fanged points, rattles a warning of end times nigh. He, the body that I know, is immortal through a language that he's poisoned, shot, stabbed, clubbed, castrated and finally drowned into a brief, gurgling epithalamion howling lonesome consonnets of the freshest myofibril rip. Am I saying Toll is a murdering cannibal? No! He devours our leftover stanzas and arranges spewed innards (his own and ours) into a precise dribble on the paper of the planet; thousands of light years away, ancient broods view them through telescopic tubes, they know earth is not to be F'd with. But it's not all end times talk. From either casket or cave, this Nosferatu molts tears of delicate lust, pulls mercy and beauty out of our mercury cyborg harmonicas humming with drab grammar, leaks this cornea liquor into solid phonetics for us to glug. There's despair here, there's courage in the mug of it too because when you're as honest and generous as this, you have to stare into the empty meridian in the mirror just as these collected pieces do, with spitting grit and a barbed pencil near. Toll's deviant hymnals assassinate the conventional parts of us that should have been executed centuries ago; they follow stumbling precepts to the river with a pistol and a cleaver. I'm proud to be a coconspirator in his fiery academy against the true enemy. Who is that again?

Interview for Shattered Wig Review

Rupert Wondolowski

My assignment this issue was to interview poet and editor, Chris Toll. This task in itself would ordinarily be quite pleasant, except for the fact that Chris has fled to Tennessee, running from men with laptop computers. Tennessee is one of those parts of the country that make my testicles seek the solitude of my upper abdomen. Luckily the trailer park where Chris lives is friendly, peopled mainly by retired circus performers and convenience store workers.

When I arrived at Chris's trailer his common law wife Luanne was still sleeping off the effects of the previous night's celebration of Chris's birthday, so we slipped down the block to a near empty, dark bar.

Wig: Well Mr. Toll, let's start off grandiose: What is poetry?

CT: Poetry is opposed to logic, bitter enemy of reason. There are 3 things a poem has to have: Humility, Terror, and of course, Love.

W: Where did poetry come from?

CT: It came from the caves where we tried to scare the animals away. We sang before we spoke to identify with nature and to exert control over nature.

W: When did you start up your magazine *Open 24 Hours* and why?

CT: I started it around 1982 with my friend Kate Pipken after we were inspired by a class we took with Andrei Codrescu. The best part of doing a large circulation magazine was getting unsolicited treasures. One of the things that got to me was I tried to become more and more sophisticated on a limited budget. My current magazine projects are undercover, lowkey. My motivation previously was to contribute to literature with a capital L. Now I'm doing it because I like to cut and paste.

W: What was the first thing you wrote and what made you write it?

CT: I wrote an imitation Bob Dylan song when I was 16. Soul hunger made me write it. The only way to fix what's broken inside is through art.

W: Do any events from the early days of Baltimore poetry stick out in your mind?

CT: I saw Ted Berrigan read at the Red Door Hall with Andrei Codrescu.

W: Would you say there's a certain school of Baltimore poetry?

CT: The human capacity for bitterness is boundless.

W: A certain strain of mutant religious obsession pops up in your writing. How would you describe it?

CT: I think most intelligent people think they can't believe in religion, but I think it's something we haven't tapped yet - that it's a great fountain. The Bible isn't prison, the Bible is a flying saucer. Jesus isn't a cruel judge, he's a lonely transvestite. My spirituality has grown into a strange mushroom.

W: Who are some poetic inspirations?

CT: Vallejo, Rilke, Emily Dickinson (the ideal, she only published 3 poems in her lifetime), Neruda. Some books that have strongly affected me are *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* by Rilke; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, by Nietzsche; *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ*; and *Images Are Dangerous*, by Rob Brezsny.

W: Any last words before the ether overtakes us?

CT: Disorder of the senses. Alcohol and drugs are necessary evils. The poem moves forward not by narrative drive but intuitive leaping.

