

September Threnody

A Grief Sequence
in Three Parts

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Preface

I wrote all of these poems in September 2016, a year and a half after my wife Carol passed away suddenly and shockingly, on February 17, 2015. A random gift from a friend (as I explain in the introduction to Li Po-ems) somehow opened a floodgate and this is what poured forth, a darkly cathartic paroxysm of grief. I was often writing multiple poems a day, none of them prescribed, ceaseless waves of words I simply could not resist. By month's end, it was all over, leaving me exhausted and with these three very different series of poems. It's hard to believe the same author wrote them, they have that little in common. But they came, each of them, irresistibly, from some inner core or outer source that I seemed to have no conscious control over. All I could do was type, type, type, as fast as could, recording as best I could what this source wanted me to say. They belong together, I know in my heart, and if you can read them, despite their differences, as one torrent roaring down a deep channel that it both follows and creates along the way you will understand something of consequence not just about me and my unique experience with grief, but about grief itself, how it demands time and attention whether or not you have either available for it, how it insists on having its say, whether you want to hear it or not, how what it wants in the end is not just to speak, but to heal.

Part 1: Li Po-ems

Introduction

Last fall my friend Yan Pu translated a poem by Li Po, the 8th century Chinese poet, one of my favorites. Her translation just knocked my socks off, so beautiful, which got me thinking about him again. This past January her friend in England, Marian Orton, found my book *This Fall: essays on loss and recovery*, and it found her at a just the right time in her life. A few weeks ago she sent me a beautiful ceramic statue of Li Po, seated on a rustic wooden half-log lodged inside a golden-steel circle, which itself is perched up on a large wooden base. It is magnificent. When I brought it home I wanted to put him somewhere I'd encounter him often. As soon as I walked into my dining room, I knew where he belonged: on the table right across from me. My wife Carol passed suddenly and unexpectedly last year. No matter our schedules, we always ate dinner together. I am alone now, so having a presence on the other side of our table would be, I knew, a big upgrade to my dining experience. Almost immediately, first meal together, we struck up a kind of conversation (mostly, but not entirely, silently). Meal after meal, just Li and me. In late August I thought I would try to formalize this conversational pattern through compositions that combined his words and mine. The very first poem I picked brought tears to my eyes, so I knew we were on the right track. I wrote our first conversation quickly, and then over the next nine days the rest, all coming so easily, like talking with a friend.

#1: September 1

Li:

"The deep forest reveals a few deer,
the creek flowing conceals the midday bells.

No one knows where you have gone,
I lean against two or three pines, wistful."

Me:

Because last night I decided everything, today
I took the path we always took together,
the wide one, to the great green field, heaven!

At the head of the narrow way
down the hill, a small doe stood,
stared at me, perfectly still, so beautiful.

I knew it was you, stopped. Five minutes,
ten minutes, long, we stood still together
eye to eye, my tears streaming.

I couldn't bear for you to have to stay here,
this world, this nothing, so long, moved
toward you. You leapt away, heaven.

Li:

“What is this heaven?”

Me:

Where she is.

Li:

“Are the gods there?”

Me:

If no god is there
I will know there is no god
worth my knowing.

#2: September 1

Li:

"I leave Ch'ing Ch'i for Three Gorges. Thinking
of you
without seeing you, I pass downstream of Yu-chou.

. . .

Poor waters of home. I know how it feels:
ten thousand miles of farewell on this boat."

Me:

Some nights in my dreams
she is right there, no river-seam

carving gorges between thinking
and seeing, her high mountain and mine.

She never speaks, knowing words
are just broken-down boats
that keep me afloat, barely,
between here and there, flotsam
unable to go back, row home,
ten thousand miles upstream
where think and see are together again,
where there is no such word as "farewell."

#3: September 1

Li:

"Here, after wandering among these renowned mountains, the heart grows rich with repose.

Why talk of cleansing elixirs of immortality?
Here, the world's dust rinsed from my face,

I'll stay close to what I've always loved,
content to leave the peopled world forever."

Me:

Here, walking, you with me, and her,
we three, I say "I am no-not-alone,"
just these trees to believe me, wandering
solitary among them on the same small path
day after day, we three, these trees
what's left of my peopled world,
both immortality and the world's dust
rinsed from my face daily by rain, my tears,
so close to what I always loved, but not . . .
heart rich with everything but repose.

#4: September 2

Li:

"In Hsiang-yang, pleasures abound. They play
'Copper-Blond Horses,' and we sing and dance.

But it's a river town. Return to clear water,
and a blossoming moon bares our delusions."

Me:

The reel I designed in my dream,
smaller than her closed fist,
delivered a line to a tiny tub
100 yards upstream,
pulled a full-grown man
kicking to get free
through rough water
up the bank to her feet.
The other men tested
oohed, ahhed, went home.

So she set a second test
that no reel
in any man's hand
could meet.

I smiled at her guile
packed my gear and left,
without even one cast.

I do not know
how long she watched
from the bank,
mouth wide, waited
for my turning back.

I know how to sing and dance
in these river towns,
pleasures abounding.
A blossoming moon
soon enough
bares the delusion.
Clear water, a fair test
for a good man
with a good reel,
flows only downstream,
never turning back.

#5: September 2

Li:

"Sun rises over the eastern nook,
as if coming from the underground.

. . . .

Grasses never refuse to flourish in spring wind;
Trees never resent their leaf-fall under autumn sky.

. . . .

I will include myself in eternal heaven and earth,
become part of the Mighty Power of the world."

Me:

Just yesterday it seems
trillium carved starlight sparkle
into last year's leaf-fall dark,
up and down ravines too steep
for hungry deer to reach,
the rare rosy-fingered ones
gathered at the dogleg turn
I take, the way down,
each a little dawnlit day.

Today sunroots, eight feet tall,
hundreds and hundreds, lean
into the portal of my path,

a palisade I pass through,
coming from underground
out into Mighty Power:
the light, right now and right now.

Do not refuse, they say, season
to season, resent. Myself: included.

#6: September 2

Li:

"It's September now. Butterflies appear
in the west garden. They fly in pairs,

and it hurts. I sit heart-stricken
at the bloom of youth in my old face.

Before you start back from out beyond
all those gorges, send a letter home.

I'm not saying I'd go far to meet you,
no further than Ch'ang-feng Sands."

Me:

The one buddleia we planted out back
cost next to nothing, a buck.

This year there are seven, eight, ten,
so many, "invasive" they say.

So what, I say, so beautiful,
September now, seven-foot stems
cascade every which way, laden,
masses of purple florets bobbing,
butterflies all day coming and going,
swallowtails, monarchs, cabbage whites.

When they fly in pairs, they do not hurt.
Singles, maybe, the little white ones,
and I think you are almost with me,
now, so close, so out of reach,
letters home I cannot decipher.

I don't know how far I'd go to meet you,
further for sure than Ch'ang-feng Sands,
those thousands of miles, beyond the gorges.

The garden is so near. I see it from here,
and your face everywhere these days,
so full, we both, with the bloom of youth.

Next month, maybe, I will be old,
gray again, heart-stricken. Not today.
It's September now. Butterflies appear.

#7: September 2

Li:

"The night's lazy, the moon bright. Sitting
here a recluse plays his pale white ch'in,

and suddenly, as if cold pines were singing
it's all those harmonies of grieving wind.

Intricate fingers flurries of white snow,
empty thoughts emerald-water clarities:

No one understands now. Those who could
hear a song this deeply vanished long ago."

Me:

Once a lazy moon-bright night she listened
and I sang. Now, no one, pale white I play,

recluse they say, cold pines, wind-
grieving, hard harmonies, who cares

to hear, share songs with air,
notes fingered, white flurries floating,
intricate emerald-empty clarities
no one understands now,
my love, friends, all vanished long ago,
such sweet songs buried deeply.

#8: September 3

Li:

"Flourishing a white-feather fan
lazily, I go naked in green forests.

Soon, I've hung my cap on a cliff,
set my hair loose among pine winds."

Me:

Yes, let's let loose today, Li.
I cry way too much for a guy,
laugh like a moonstruck loon.
I am "tired of tears and laughter,"
twisted together licorice sticks.

It is summer still, forests
greener even than green,
knee deep in green.

If we meet another naked man
flourishing a white-feather fan
we three can walk all the day long,
lazily, hair set loose, caps hung on cliffs.

#9: September 3

Li:

"It's like a boundless dream here in this world, nothing anywhere to trouble us.

I have therefore been drunk all day,
a shambles of sleep on the front porch.

. . .

I pour another drink. Soon, awaiting
this bright moon, I'm chanting a song.
And now it's over, I've forgotten why."

Me:

Ah! Li, just me, you and the moon
tonight, that tight, sidewise smile,
tiny bright tuck in a big, black sky.
The moon, the sky: one "me," the other
"my life," but which I wonder is which?

Last night, like most, my sleep
a shambles, stopping, starting,
stumbling back and forth:
boundless dream, boundless world,
but which I wonder is which?

I don't drink much, but you sure do,
so let's take some whiskey straight:

To you, to that soon-to-be-goofball-moon
we just see a stitch of tonight, to me,
my life, a boundless dream, this world,
whatever makes the sweeter song
to chant, nothing to trouble us.
When any or all of it's over, I hope
we'll both have forgotten why.

#10: September 3

Li:

"Short and tall, spring grasses lavish
our gate with green, as if passion driven,

everything returned from death to life.
My burr-weed heart--it alone is bitter.

You'll know that in these things I see
you here again, planting our gardens

behind the house, and us lazily gathering
what we've grown. It's no small thing."

Me:

All the small things, you always said,
what you would miss most not being here,
that first taste of coffee in the morning,
the feel of a knee bending on its way
down stairs, and me I'd say, laughing,
Paul, from *paucus*, Latin for small!

You never said yes, but you never said
no, just laughed, too, no small thing.
Some days I think only of small things
so I won't recall all I now know,
my burr-weed heart growing bitter.

Some days I recall all the small things
so I won't forget what I love,
my burr-weed heart growing bitter.

Some nights, the perfect ones,
grasses lavish, passion-driven,
I sit in the back yard with my guitar,
sing songs softly, your chair
beside mine, empty,
but no, not in my yard,
only a chair I am "saving,"
a sweater maybe flung on it,
until the one I came with gets back.

From death to life? Crazy you say. Never.
I know. I know. But still,

It's no small thing.

#11: September 4

Li:

"Heaven's fragrance everywhere pure
emptiness, heaven's music endless,

I sit silent. It's still, the entire Buddha-
realm in a hair's-breadth, mind-depths

all bottomless clarity, in which vast
kalpas begin and end out of nowhere."

Me:

This morning I woke with
the scent of henna on my pillow.
A few times a year you used it
on your hair, toucan on the box,
the same gray ceramic bowl
you mixed it up in, the one
you had before we were married,
kept on the bottom shelf
of the skinny kitchen cabinet
next to the refrigerator, lightly
stained from all that black goop.

Those days, when we made love,
I would breathe the scent in deep,
skies-full of wild dark birds.

I never knew why you did it,
your hair always jet black, thick.
If you were here beside me
this morning I would ask you.
Why? Just once. Maybe
if I were lucky, you would tell me
everything that gathers in my head
now around that question,
those flocks of many-thousand birds
swarming restlessly, early fall,
how they whirl and wheel
as if they are one thing, liquid,
flowing around an invisible
solid center, what they want
to know before it's time to leave.

Or just many-stranded strong black hair
caught up in gust of autumn wind
fulsome with the scent of henna.

#12: September 4

Li:

"Alone, searching for blue-lotus roofs,
I set out from city gates. Soon frost

clear, Tung-lin temple bells call out,
Hu Creek's moon bright in pale water."

Me:

That moon tonight, sleek, white boat
sliding, silent, over still dark water,
I inside it trying to guide it, why?

Time, this deep, black lake
I float on, in, over, only one
moving: water, sky, which?

I set out tonight searching
again for something, anything
frost clear, nearby, far, no matter.

Temple bells call out, soon, when?
Sky, moon, lake, I, wait, glide, silent.

#13: September 4

Li:

"Raising my cup, I toast the bright moon,
and facing my shadow makes friends three.

...

Kindred a moment with moon and shadow,
I've found a joy that must infuse spring:

I sing, and moon rocks back and forth;
I dance, and shadow tumbles into pieces.

...

Intimates forever, we'll wander carefree
and meet again in Star River distances."

Me:

My shadow dances with me
just like you did, can keep the beat
when I won't. I had no idea.

Today, by myself in the woods,
sidewise to sun, it just walked up
beside me, on the left, we turned,
faced each other, and right there
on the sunlit forest floor
we did a little bit of jitterbug.

I know there is always dancing
where you are, those Star River
distances "don't mean a thing"
if they "ain't got that swing."
Some night when I can't sleep,
sitting out back, the moon
and me rocking back and forth,
I'll slip it off, send it up.

We will dance the night away,
Our last dance your favorite,
"Waltzing Matilda," Tom Waits,
so long, like forever, that voice,
the one I would have had
if I had been a better man,
maybe there I'll have it,
sing to you, cheek to cheek:

"Wasted and wounded,
it ain't what the moon did,
I've got what I paid for now.
See you tomorrow,
hey Frank, can I borrow
a couple of bucks from you
to go waltzing Matilda,
waltzing Matilda,
you'll go waltzing Matilda with me."

And you'll be my Matilda
filled full with thrills 'til the
moon sends my shadow
back down.

#14: September 4

Li:

"Heaven's fragrance everywhere pure
emptiness, heaven's music endless,

I sit silent. It's still, the entire Buddha-
realm in a hair's breadth, mind-depths

all bottomless clarity, in which vast
kalpas begin and end out of nowhere."

Me:

My kitchen clock tick-tocks,
shrill crickets still trill,
sirens whine by.
I wait to want to sleep.

My mind is not at ease,
un-silent I sit, each breath
a hooked fish reeled up
from mind-depths, bottomless,
thick with un-thoughts.

Yesterday, heavenly fragrance.
Today just impure emptiness.
Vast kalpas begin and end
out of nowhere. No one,
not even you, to notice.

#15: September 5

Li:

"Autumn wind clear, autumn moon bright,
Fallen leaves gather then scatter,
Dark crows settle and startle."

Me:

Beech tree bark is parchment
smooth, perfect for carving.

On one I walk by daily:
a heart, arrow-stitched,
meticulous script:

JC
loves
AW

Right beneath, huge letters
gouged out helter-skelter:

IT'S
ALL
FAKE

I wonder day by day:
one or the other betrayed,
hateful? Someone else
enraged, forewarning? Today
I wondered: Which came first?

All I know is this: Nothing
in this world is fake: love,
hate, rage: just decide
day by day which
your knife will carve in bark.

Li:

"When will we end our longing and meet
again?
That thought, this moment, suddenly
unbearable!"

Me:

Wind clear, moon bright.
Leaves, in piles, scatter.
Crows, cold, startle.

Nothing fake.
That thought, this moment, suddenly
unbearable.

#16: September 5

Li:

"Are hopes and dreams any different?
We bustle around looking for what?

...

A million miles azure pure--the eye
reaches beyond what ruins our lives."

Me:

Today, all that light leaning
into the hill on the high side
from azure pure September skies,
I saw for the first time all
the tallest trees! I've walked
this path now many-thousand
days, and today they were there,
everywhere I looked, up and down,
three feet wide at the base
some more, maybe four:
shapely maples, arms draped
over one another's shoulders
up there where light lasts daylong,
rocket-ship-straight poplars,
flames flaring on forest floor,
blasting past me into space.

I have no idea if they were here
yesterday, will be tomorrow.
But today I heard what they said,
not all those big things
they surely must know,
having been here so long,
not deep secrets whispered
close to my ear, and not, for sure,
hopes and dreams, no,
bustling around looking
for what . . .

Just this: "Look. See."
And today I did: so many
huge, true things standing
upright all the way to the sky,
right now, right there,
for someone, anyone,
me, say, to look, finally, see.

Li:

"Inexhaustible, Ching-t'ing Mountain and I
gaze at each other, it alone remaining."

Me:

Yes.

#17: September 5

Li:

"Wandering Autumn River in sorrow, I gaze into
Autumn River blossoms fiercely. Soon, it rivals
Yen-hsien for lovely mountains and streams
and for wind and sun, it's another Ch'ang-sha."

Me:

In these woods, at least here,
this sacristy of space
that holds, releases
every shed tear, it is not
sorrow I feel, not joy, either,
not anything I name.

I gaze fiercely, blossoms
in spring, summer's green-
steeped trees, and now, fall again,
these first few flutter-down leaves.

This is no place for grief.
Here I am cared for. Where
care comes from, or how,
is of no matter to me now.

You say your river rivals
that one, wind, sun, the same,
Ch'ang-sha, much fought over
in your day, and that one,
for mountains and streams,
Yen-hsien, wide-astide seaside.

Autumn River, wandering,
where a recluse-fisherman
drops in a line, lazes,
while you gaze, fierce,
into blossoms, I see
what you mean.

Li:

"No plans to go looking for such solitude,
I set out on a whim, never mind distance."

Me:

Like you, Li, I do not go
where there is no one;
I go where no one else goes.
Solitude simply follows.

Here is everything they seek
there: wind, sun, mountains,
streams, not others, of course,
all crowding around
to see, but you, Li, and me,
what we find here, free.

#18: September 6

Li:

"Spring breezes and their drunken guest:
today we were meant for each other."

Me:

We met once, breeze and guest,
meant for each other.
Then done. Months. Nothing.

Li:

"It's like a bird among clouds:
once gone, gone without a trace."

Me:

I never remember exactly the face
of someone I love. Only later, a trace.

Li:

"I hoard the sky a setting sun leaves . . ."

Me:

Sun sets for an hour,
gauze-clouds, layered lightly,

every color eye has ever seen,
or one color through many eyes:
what's left in the sky after light
memory hopes to hoard . . .

Li:

"I can't tell anymore. Which is long and which is short,
the river flowing east or thoughts farewell brings on."

Me:

Impossible to say exactly when day
turns night, is not now but then,
not farewell but what farewell brings on.

Li:

"Over Heaven Mountain, the bright moon
rises through a boundless sea of clouds."

Me:

Tonight a bright moon rises,
same clouds, different boundless sea,
sunset sky unremembered.

Li:

"I sing, watch cloud and moon, empty
song soon long wind through pine."

Me:

Cloud and moon, long wind,
soon empty song sing.

Li:

"There's nothing left now--only this West River
moon
that once lit those who peopled the imperial
Wu Palace."

Me:

Moonlight moves through air,
then nothing left,
not even memory of moonlight.

Li:

"And somewhere, high in a tower tonight,
a restless woman cries out in half sleep."

Me:

We always know exactly
when a lover stops loving.
Just listen: tonight, restless,
she cries out in half sleep.

#19: September 6

Li:

"Staying the night at Summit-Top Temple
you can reach out and touch the stars.

I venture no more than a low whisper
afraid I'll wake the people of heaven."

Me:

Sky so Star-River-near tonight,
no moon, yet all-night light.

Words back up, breath
holds, not even a whisper,
so no stars get jarred
awake, make people of heaven,
reach down, stay the night.

Li:

"No noise, no confusion--all I want is
this life pillowed high in emerald mist."

#20: September 7

Li:

"Are hopes and dreams any different?
We bustle around, looking for what?"

Me:

Last night in a dream
an old lover told me again
everything wrong with me,
why she was leaving with him.

I woke bereft.
Those who hurt most keep
seeping in through sleep,
come and go as they please.

I fear who waits for me
upstairs tonight, Li.
I fight to keep sleep away,
eyes tired, trying to close
even as I type this line.

Li:

"Are hopes . . . any different?"

Me:

Hope goes both ways:
holds out for the god
I don't now know,
holds in the devil
I do know, wish-maker,
looking . . . for what?

#21: September 7

Li:

"Facing ten-thousand-mile winds, autumn geese
leaving,
we can still laugh and drink in this tower tonight,

chant poems of Immortality Land, ancient word-bones.
The clarity of Hseih T'iao reappears among us:

all embracing, thoughts breaking into free flight,
we ascend azure heaven, gaze into a bright moon.

But slice water with a knife, and water still flows,
empty a winecup to end grief, and grief remains grief.

You never get what you want in this life, so why not
shake your hair loose on a boat at play in dawn light."

Me:

Those geese: letters from home?
When home is azure heaven, they will never
make it, wind ten-thousand miles facing.

These poems: my knife slicing water
over and over. Grief remains grief, flows.
You get what you get in this life, not want.

Word-bones build poems. But breath,
yours, hers, broke long ago into free flight.
Immortality is not a Land I know how to find.

I can gaze into a bright moon all night long
laugh and drink in this empty tower,
shake my hair loose at play of dawn light.

But nothing, not even clarity, reappears.

Li:

"We the living, we're passing travelers:
it's in death alone that we return home."

Me:

I had a home here. Now, adrift,
passing, the way looks long

Li:

"Bleached bones lie silent, say nothing,
and how can ever-green pines see spring?"

Me:

Word-bones lie, too, Li, or say nothing.
Like ever-green pines, they never see spring.

Li:

"Before and after pure lament, this life's
phantom treasure shines beyond knowing."

Me:

I want to believe you, Li. I remember
when "before" was, treasure beyond knowing.
But tell me: when is "after?"

#22: September 8

Li:

"At our gate, where you lingered long,
moss buried your tracks one by one,

deep green moss I can't sweep away.
And autumn's come early. Leaves fall."

. . .

"Hsien Mountain rises above emerald Han
River

waters and snow-white sand. On top, inscribed

to life's empty vanishing, a monument stands,
long since blotted out beneath green moss."

. . .

"There's a flake of rock on Chiang-tzu Peak,
a painted screen azure heaven sweeps clean.

The poem inscribed here keeps all boundless
antiquity alive--green words in moss brocade.

Me:

This summer was so hot and wet
moss is everywhere, fallen logs,
flagstone steps, sidewalk cracks,
layered on forest floor,

so soft, thick, lavish, I want to
caress it lovingly, lie in its lap,
linger long on its lush-forever green.

Footsteps, monuments, words,
whatever these poems are,
swept away, buried, blotted out
vanishing. No matter.

Love rises like Hsien Mountain,
sweeps clean heaven's painted screen,
brocade boundless,
flows like Han River
shining by snow-white sand,
carves lines inscribed to life.

Li:

"my ruins of heart,
thoughts of you unending."

#23: September 9

Li:

"9/9, out drinking on Dragon Mountain,
I'm an exile among yellow blossoms smiling.

Soon drunk, I watch my cap tumble in wind,
dance in love--a guest the moon invites."

Me:

9/9 here today, too, Li,
no holiday to climb
Dragon Mountain, get drunk
on chrysanthemum wine,
yellow blossoms smiling,
cap-tumble love-dance,
no, just another day, unless
I make something of it
finish this book, say,
write one last poem,
a long one, call it done,
20-some poems in 10 days,
not in your league maybe,
"100 poems/gallon of wine"
Tu Fu says of you, but
for me, 0-for-20-years
going in, not half bad!

OK, back where it started,
those chrysanthemums, not wine
yet, that was later, took time.
I'll rewrite the first poem
I made just for her, this time
"I" and "you" instead of "he" and "she:"

*Crazy as the wind I was and wanted,
for myself, nothing; but for you:
the most glorious chrysanthemums,
armloads of yellow held loose, huge
blooms oozing dollops of sunlight;
behind them, my smile, so wide
no one, not even you, could ever hope
to resist; then I'd run toward you
through the tall grass, in slo-mo
maybe, my dozens of chrysanthemums
bobbing every which way, crazy
as the wind I was, and wanted.
Or so I told my florist in the morning,
who recommended roses, or a nosegay--
anything but crazy, but chrysanthemums,
but what I wanted, was: the wind.*

That florist was a moron.
What wind we were!
Crazy every which way.
Your sunlight dollops,
my smile wide. I wanted:
Nothing but for you.

Even on this dark-as-your-hair
night, late summer heat stifling,
no moon, stars haze-hidden,
leaves leaden, locked in place,
nothing running even slow-mo,
if I stand stock-still long enough,
focus just at the edge where
check-skin meets with air,
it's there. Feel it? There, now,
there! a little breeze, a breath,
mine, yours, who's to say,
what's left of all that crazy wind.

Li:

"Yesterday was our grand scale-the-heights day,
and this morning I'm tipping the cup again.

Poor chrysanthemums. No wonder you're so bitter,
suffering our revels these two days straight."

Me:

Today is still today where I am, Li,
not yet yesterday. My cup stays full
no matter how often I tip it,
mums not yet poor here, bitter.

I would take this day two days straight,
revel in it every day, forever.
9/9: tomorrow always on the wing!

Li:

"Success or failure, life long or short:
our fate's given by Changemaker at birth.

But a single cup evens out life and death,
our ten thousand concerns unfathomed,

and once I'm drunk, all heaven and earth
vanish, leaving me suddenly alone in bed,

forgetting that person I am even exists.
Of all our joys, this must be the deepest."

Me:

You look so relaxed there,
lounging on your log
on my dining room table
looped in a halo of gold,
cup hoisted to welcome me
every time I sit down to eat.
Maybe you drink all day long,
forgetting you exist,
all heaven and earth vanished,
when I'm not here, too.
Or maybe, like me,
you remember everything,
every single second of every
single day, today, yesterday,

even tomorrow, the one
that never seems to come,
ten thousand concerns
unfathomed, long or short,
that flood of life that recedes
every night, same way,
suddenly, in bed alone,
the forgetting, the deep,
I-am-less joy of sleep.

Li:

"How is it you've gotten so thin . . .
Must be all those poems you've been suffering
over."

Me:

Actually I've put on a few pounds,
maybe enjoying meals more
now you're around.
I must just sound thin,
old siren winding
down whining.

Li:

"This is music enough. Why tell
flutes and pipes our troubles?"

Me:

You're right, Li:
When old flutes and pipes
get tired of blowing out
the muck we blow into them,
time for a change.

I have a new guitar,
let's give it whirl:
"Fairy tales can come true,
it can happen to you . . ."

Yes, Li, to you.
And to me, too, me, too.

Li:

"Boundless, I can dwindle time and space
away, losing the world in such distances!"

Me:

Yeah, yeah, I know. I can, too.
Dwindling space and time,
might sound hard but it's not,
especially at our age,
dwindling as we speak!

Lose the world? Sure,
I can go for that,
at least the world

handed out to us here,
so near to nothing
I can't believe anyone
takes it seriously.
If you don't lose that,
for a while anyway,
get up where it's clear,
you'll never even know
a real world is there.
But until you get
back down again,
all the way in,
what you saw up here
won't much matter.

You can stay drunk
as you want, Li,
long as you want,
float your little boat
through great gorges
all the way to Timbuktu.
But there's still a here
here, a now now.

I'm no space-time Einstein,
but sooner or later,
you have to look to see,
take the path to make it.

So how about, for once,
we try to beef up time
and space, fill it, full as
we can, real me and
real you, at our real table,
putting on pounds so
we take up more space,
sing sweet old songs,
nothing in them but
perfectly pitched noise,
to mark off one now,
then another, and another,
all that time is, really,
a rhythm, a wave, moving,
one we make and ride
in the making: now, now,
now, marking note by note
all the time it takes.

Li:

"I bow, then bow again, deeper, ashamed
I haven't an immortal's talent."

Me:

I think we both
can take a bow now, Li.
Immortal's talent?
Out of my league, too.

Ashamed? Well, elegy
gets old, at least for
those who listen.

Let's call it off today,
9/9, your wine-wine day,
my stop whine-whine day!

Right while I was typing
that stupid joke, yes:
RIGHT! NOW! WOW!
Feel it? the air,
the instant I made myself
laugh, moving again,
not fast-forward-fast
maybe, totally tomorrow,
but not just a little breath
either, tickling cheek-hair;
this one's a big one,
wind, then another
and another . . .

Tonight, Li, I'm not in love
with anyone but me.

And I have a feeling,
when I wake up tomorrow,
it won't still be today.
It will really be tomorrow:
9/10: the rest of my life.

So what-say,
after I come back
from my morning walk,
if you're not too hung-over
from all that mum-wine,
when I sit down
here with my oatmeal,
we just talk about sports,
those Buccos, lost another
tough one. I'd like that.
I think you might like it, too.

Part 2: Harvest Moon

Introduction

"To be honest, I was a bit shocked. Yes, I see a different side of you. Many times I laughed out loud; in between I was suddenly silent, too, and my heart was tied by the words you wrote."

Marian Orton

I wrote this series during the five-day cycle of the "harvest moon." I walked out into my front yard during its waxing phase, as I often do to view the full moon—which always comes up on that side of my house—because I find it so invigoratingly beautiful. It was such a clear night, the moon so big and bright, that it just kind of hijacked my head, which it held captive for the duration, those next five days. I wrote compulsively, propulsively, long, languorous, loopy poems, as you will see when you get to them, like nothing I've ever written before. Many times I laughed out loud; in between I was suddenly silent, too, and my heart was tied by the words I wrote.

9/15: Now I'm on this side of that

The moon tonight is full, so full, I mean really full, overfull, of light, yes, and of itself, that look of surprise on its face, not quite Munch's "Scream," more like, hands to cheeks: I can't believe it's so dark and I'm so bright!

Then the crickets (I didn't notice them at first, that huge moon taking up all my headroom) but now I've settled down, the crickets, pretty loud, a singing sound, so pleasant, not like last night, all those eyes crying. I guess the moon makes all the difference to them, too, a singing-out-loud night like this.

So today I'm thinking, god, I can't take it, this world, "too much with us," WW might say, but no-o-o-o, "too less with me," PK says back, yes, too less, way-too, today, than yesterday, and yesterday way-too than the day before, and, god, tomorrow, if that's way-too, too, well, what's even the point thinking it through to . . .

(If you've been on this track you know pretty much where it goes, just follow it like I did all the way today to . . .

. . .THE END)

OK, now I'm on this side of that,
full moon bonkers with light tonight,
crickets crooning like there's no tomorrow,
well, I'm thinking: Why should I care?
Yes. Thinking: Why should I?

9/16: I just couldn't stop

So this morning I just couldn't stop
laughing, I mean couldn't stop.
I think it was knowing how now
for some reason I happen to know
way more than you're supposed
to get to know while you're still here,
and I'm not sure how it happened,
maybe it was "just bad luck,"
what that doctor told me
when "a couple tough weeks"
turned into months and months
of misery and I still see his face,
that half-smile flash frozen
into his cheeks hoping I'd
laugh instead of lunging at him,
throat-throttling, and I don't remember
if I laughed, but I'm pretty sure
I didn't strangle him or I'd be in more trouble
now than I am knowing just this much,

and, sure, I could tell you some of it,
if you pushed hard enough, thought
you could take it, but then, like they say,
well, at least one of us would have to go,
and I'd prefer not to have it be you,
so I'm off now to the woods,
my walk, all those trees,
well, they already know
all of this, I know, for sure,
way more I think, too,

so if I happen to start blabbing
instead of laughing, at least
they won't be like,
yikes, Munch's "Scream,"

and I'm thinking ahead to the ones
I want to walk by today, hoping
they'll be where they normally are,
which is no sure thing in my woods,
that big black cherry, flaky-shingle
bark up and down, so charming,
like a fairy-tale dollhouse
I could walk into for a little kiss
and one of us would wake up
and the other wouldn't still be a frog,
but I can never find the door,
and believe me I've walked around
and around it lots of times looking
and I never, ever find the door,

or that monstrous oak right out
in the open, six feet at the base at least,
like a ten story leg, so long
I can't see what it belongs to,
so I just guess from that huge foot,
two-foot toes grasping ground,
one side a brontosaurus maybe,
head way up there somewhere,
munching on, what, who knows
and the other side a couple of elephants
leaning into each other, still asleep
leg-locked together, so sweet,

and I always pay close attention
passing, in case one of them decides
to take a quick step and I have to jump
out of the way, but not too far, hoping
I can get a glimpse of what's been kept
secret all these years under that big foot,

or the heart-shaped poplar up the hill
chain-saw toppled last year,
too near the power lines,
at least waist high just lying there
on its side, all that it knew
slowly spewing back to the universe
bit by byte by megabyte,
terabytes of it still left there on the ground,
and I think if I sat with it for the rest
of my life and listened close enough
I'd overhear a bit of what it now has to give
back,

but today is my only whole day
this week to do absolutely nothing
and I'm in a hurry to get on with that
so I keep walking toward a voice,
a real one I promise, a woman,
on the phone maybe, just talk-talk-
talking, and then the three of them
walk up single file on the one-lane path,
that fluffy poodle-doodle dog up front
then her, then him, her husband, had to be,

and I can't tell if she's talking to him
or the dog and what does it matter
anyway, either way it's all still love,
and tomorrow maybe he'll be up front
hearing what's rushing up toward
the back of his head from her, and she says
to me, don't worry he wouldn't hurt
anyone, and I assume she's talking about
the dog, though I can tell instantly
(I am that good at this, really)
that the guy wouldn't either, just happy
to be out walking today with these two,

and then the little "bridge,"
hardly a bridge, two steps long,
the tiny "brook" running under it,
hardly a brook, two steps wide,
heady today with yesterday's rain
going over the rocks with a hard
"glug, glug," like pouring a two-liter
bottle of coke into the sink fast
because it's too flat to drink,
and I know right then that this poem
is over, all I have to say today,
down the drain or under the bridge,
whatever, even though you waited
all this way thinking you'd get to know
something you don't already know,
not just glug, glug, glug, glug, gone . . .

. . . except on the drive home,
a big truck I'm following, on the back door,
a ten-foot, full-color bottle of coke,
not the two-liter job like your fat uncle
in too-tight pants but the Marilyn Monroe
one (yes, I am that old) with the waist
you just want to put your arm around
for a long, slow dance all the way home,
all those dew-drops on the dark glass
like maybe her voice would be,
whispering into your ear, I mean my ear,
something that means nothing
and everything all at the same time,
one breathful of it carrying more
than I or all those trees
could even hope to know, now or ever,
and the slogan high up on the right side:

Love it!
Again. And again.
OK. I will. I will.
Soon as I get home.
Can't wait. Thanks.

9/16: THINKING! Whew! Who?

So there, right then, last second or two,
I was thinking of her, I mean
thinking! Really THINKING! Whew! Who?
No way I'm telling you that because then,
well, like I said earlier, one of us
would have to go and this time
I'd rather it not be me, not at least
until I get done with this thinking.

Anyway, what's so bad about that?
Take that Galapagos turtle I was reading about
today online, the one who's well over a hundred,
stuck in a zoo until he was my age, I mean,
really, literally, MY AGE, stuck ALONE in a zoo!
and then they let him loose back home,
to make up for lost time, do his best,
get the numbers back up, 800 little turtles
out there with his name on them now, they say,
and he's still going strong with the ladies, sweet,
except one article called him a "dirty old man"
because, what? you tell me. And why
I'm wondering aren't young men
ever dirty, like right now, when they're
thinking about her, just like I am, I'm sure,
except way more so, because in my head
she still has all her clothes on, I know,
I just looked again to be sure, and,
really, all I was going to do was
ask if we could hold hands, really,

that's all, for a walk in the woods, maybe,
have a few laughs together, that's it,
pretty tame, I'd say, or lame, you might . . .

but, hey, don't get me wrong, if she
was up for more, I'd be up for more,
except holding hands is enough more
to get me thinking right now, been so long,
and I'm sure she's way too busy anyway,
a little dinner, dance a while,
back to my place, hers, either way,
spend the night . . . yeah, right!

OK, now I'm done thinking about her.
I need to go out and mow the lawn.
This summer sucked that way, so hot
and rainy the grass never stopped
growing the way it's supposed to,
mid-July, August at the latest, and now
it's September and I'm still mowing
once a week or more, just like
this "thinking" was supposed to stop,
I thought, mid-July, August at the latest,
now, September, well into it even,
it still won't stop growing, huh?

. . . and another thing, that guy
she's going to be with tonight,
well, I was him once, and I can tell you,
or her if she'd bother to ask, but she won't,
he's got pretty much one thing on his mind

and it's not her, hasn't even started
yet to "think," believe me, and another
thing I can tell you, or her if she'd bother to ask,
but she won't, I have, I mean I really, truly have.
So who's the dirty old man now, I ask you,
tell me, who's the dirty old man now?

9/17: The rest of this is not a poem any more

So I'm like five minutes into my walk today
and I'm already going, OK, Paul, gotta
get that poem going, gotta, gotta,
20 years is a lot of time to make up,
and my head is warping into it and then
I thought, there, right there, that's
the exact reason I quit writing poems
20 years ago, that gotta, gotta, gotta,
until there's nothing there except a foofy
white dog yip-yapping, look, over here,
I'm pretty great, and really, aren't you
just A guy-who-walks-in-the-woods guy
without me? me, I make you
THE guy-who-walks-in-the-woods guy,
they read me and think, WOW, you,
and without me they don't think of you
at all, not one half-second, and that
damn little PITA dog is right,
but so what, I think, yeah, you're
pretty great--if I do ALL THE WORK
to MAKE you pretty great, and besides,
why would you think you're even
pretty great, what have you ever done
for me, you, yeah, you, I'm looking
right at you, and those others, too,
the ones I turned into book after book
I sent out a million times and what?
nothing, a million form letters:

Dear Chump: Thank you for sending us
your reading fee so I don't have to
really try to sell anything, and SASE
so I didn't have to walk across
the room to shred up this POS
ms., I mean your work, I didn't
even bother to read, or did I?
don't remember, so buy our new
books: *My Grandfather's Life Sucked*
and Now I'm So Sad, Let Me Tell You!
and *I Put In a Few Real French Words*
To Make You Think I Know What
Surrealism Is . . . anyway, you
(I mean you mean dog over there
now, not that letter-writing guy),
you won't get anywhere today
unless I say so and right now
I'm not saying so, I'm gonna stay
here, right here, over here,
where I am, my walk, the one
I got to take all those 20 years
while you and the rest of your
snippy-shit friends sat around
in someone else's posh parlor,
a real poet maybe, books, one
that took you to the hair dresser,
fed you chopped steak from a china bowl,
I'm telling you, all I have to do is say

STOP

and you're done, yeah, you can bark,
but without me doing the work
that's really about it, and I'm saying

STOP!

So now it's 8 minutes into my walk,
and it's just my walk, and the rest
of this is not a poem any more,
and as soon as I looked here, now,
in front of me, well, one of my favorite
trees, which I would have missed
if I waited another two seconds
to say stop, that tree, like one tree
for about the first 18 inches up
and then it's two, but I can never tell
whether it was one that turned into
two going up or two that turned
into one going down, and today
I see this flat stone, wide and long
as my foot, jammed down between
the two trunks about 5 feet up
and I think, no way that stone
got up there on its own, someone
forced it in there, for what? oh, of course,
so this just-another-tree-in-the-woods
might turn into a Robert Frost poem
someday when the trunks grow over
that stone and it looks like it's part
of the "twin-tree," their "shared heart"
or something, but who I ask you,
whoever you are who put that there,

is going to write that poem, me?
I don't think so, I'm not even a poet
any more, not for the rest of
this poem at least, because this
is not even a poem, it's a walk
in the woods, and I'm just A guy
not THE guy, and I can tell you for sure
that Robert Frost isn't going to pass
this way any time soon, so I just
grabbed that stone and wriggled it
out, took a while, it was jammed in
pretty good, and that tree, I'm telling you,
I heard it, said "ah," that's all, "ah,"
not thanks, it's no poet blowing
smoke, but I knew it meant thanks
because now it was back to being
just-another-tree-in-the-woods
and now just-another-guy-in-the-woods
could look at it every now and then
wondering whatever he wonders
until he gets along on his way . . .
and about 10 feet down the path
I turn around and those two trunks
are in full embrace, no space at all
between them, just a graceful
serpentine seam, the way true lovers
splice together after long separation,
so grateful just to be close again,
like that Klimt poster, "The Kiss"
everyone had on their dorm room
wall back in the 60s, two people,
but so entwined with one another

that after two or three tokes
you could swear there's no line at all
and you think that will be me
this weekend, with her, or her,
but it never was because
there was always that flat stone
someone had jammed in there
and neither one of you knew
how to get it out, then one day
you do, and you fall into an embrace
just like that one, two into one,
for it seems like forever, but
it's not, because one day someone
up there says "enough is enough"
and jams in a rock the size of
Gibraltar and says OK, Paul,
let me see you yank that one out,
and I can't, so I turn around again
and get along on my way . . .

STOP

and now I don't hear any dogs at all,
at least not the ones that can't write
themselves into poetry books,
on their own, need me, sure,
but don't get me wrong, I like dogs,
real dogs, I mean, not simile dogs,
already smelling of poem, real dogs,
that one yesterday, say, poodle-doodle
leading the way, that one didn't
bark at all and wouldn't hurt me,

or Sadie, say, Bridget's dog,
who loves her no question,
misses her when she's gone,
welcomes her home, poses
for all the pictures she wants to take,
a dog with pizzazz, razzamatazz,
even that high-pitched bark, well
it's charming, and she can make
it sound like words if you try hard
enough and listen carefully, I mean
her own words, not mine, not
some poet hearing all that whining
not here but over there and thinking
OK, gotta, gotta, gotta, or who
the hell is gonna care about me,
well, I'm here to tell you,
all of you, you unwritten poems,
I've been around long enough to know
that even if I get you pretty great,
and I don't get that form letter
back, but a real one, nobody
and I mean nobody is gonna care
about me one whit anyway, just you,
you lazy, barky little things,
over there, never here, always
over there . . .

STOP

9/17: All these silly silences inside

I woke suddenly with you still on my mind,
harvest moon, last night's light,
the time we spent together
out in the front yard, so sweet,
yet how might I continue to write,
my mind asked in my last dream,
with all these silly silences inside?

It is 4AM. I was sure
you would not still be here.
But the bright pool of light
on the silk rug in the sunroom
stuns me as I walk past,
that pale glaze on the grass
out back, your so-soft touch.

I am sorry I am so shy.
I never understood why words
left when light shone down.

I know now, at my age,
what I should not say to you
and why: "I love you," never,
how it stirs up still-still
water, little waves rippling
across a too-dark sky
lapping fine-sand shores,
brittle white, wearing
thin edges thinner.

I know how silly silence
sounds from my side
of the table, that restaurant,
dim as this moonlit night,
so romantic, my heart
full to overflowing,
needing to be free
of the weight
of those three words,

and I knew not to say them,
but I did anyway,
as I always do, just
pushed them right out
into the soft light,
all that hope and fear,
no place left to hide,

and from the other side
of the wide-open sky,
those vast still waters
of togetherness
stretching out forever
as far as I could see,
well, silence, statue
smiling stiffly, staring
back, saying nothing
at all, and everything
at once, not silly
that silence, I will tell you,
nothing silly, except maybe me,

if you were there that night
outside the window looking
in, trying to fill my head
with silence instead of
those three words,
fool, I knew, as soon
as I heard them.

And for some reason
we went on eating.
Now, again, sitting here,
all these years later,
filled with a silly silence
that tries to hide those words
in its dark waters, down deep
where even I might not
overhear them . . .

such a fool, I tell myself,
every night, every hour of every night,
even in my sleep, I tell myself,
a fool, so full of love rippling
through my dreams,
and when I wake like this,
4AM, wanting just to say
the only three words I know,
the last three I remember,
you are here with me
listen, smile, but sweetly,
reach out and touch me,

all anyone needs
when those words
can't echo back,
just one soft touch that says
I know, I know, I know,
and I will hold this moment
forever in my heart,
those words so sweet to hear,
chalice for my joy
and sadness, always with me,
and when we part tonight
I will kiss you lightly
on your lips,
so soft and warm still
from the few words
they let pass between us
here, and mine, forever
silent, you know, but still,
still, this dark water.

Fingertip caresses
of moonlight on
the back of my hand,
along my arm
resting here with you,
me, in that pool
of your soft light
in the back room, glowing,
another little moon,

and I know, I know, you will be
back tomorrow, sit with me,
all these silly silences still inside,
how I might, yet, continue to write.

9/17: It's that line

I was just about to drive over
to the farmers' market,
but now I'm not going to, I mean
I'm REALLY not going to.

It's not the drive, gruesome
at 4 PM Friday, all the rush going
everywhere else at once
or how hard it is to park, gnarly.

It's that line, the idea of getting into it,
those 10 people in front of me,
thought-bubble tomatoes floating
over their heads, or behind me,
well, I can't see them because
I'm so focused on the sellers,
so slow, two of them, walking
with her, her from this end
of a forty-foot table to that end,
waiting to hear, a basket, wait,
no, just three of those tomatoes,
how much is it, make change,
stopping on the way back to sit
on the back edge of the big truck,
flatten dollars into a tray, drink water
(OK, it is really hot out, so OK, water),
and I'm thinking if I concentrate hard
I can push the fast-forward button
of farmers' market time and get up there

before I'm more wilted than I'm afraid
that head of red lettuce I have my eye on
will be by the time I get there.

Now if the guy would drive over to my house
and drop off all the things I like to get,
carrots, beets, corn, beans, green or yellow,
but yellow if you have them, snap peas,
any fruit you're picking right now, all of it,
squash, garlic, even tomatoes, which I'm
kinda allergic to if I don't cook them a lot,
that would be great, and I'd tip him good,
just don't make me stand in that damn line;
of course, he doesn't make me, I do, so
no, I'm not going to, not this week at least,
one line too many today in that way too-
long lifetime of lines waiting for her, her,
to make up her mind, thought-bubbles
I'm fighting to pry my way into,
but they're always already all full
of tomatoes, forty feet of table,
me sitting in the middle, and, well,
it just those three tomatoes, not that Paul,
not today, just those three tomatoes please.

Me, I take everything, all I can haul
to the car without having to go back
and wait in line again, bags and bags of it,
enough for today, tomorrow, tomorrow,
and you, for sure, if you were available tonight,
I'd take you in a second, twice if I could,
and I'd wait in a lot longer line to do it, too,

so, what-say dinner tonight, I'll make it
for you, all these bags I hauled, no,
OK maybe some other time . . .

So tonight I'm gonna make french fries,
out of a bag from the freezer
burnt crisp just like I like them,
lots of ketchup, maybe an egg,
I have that, too, sounds good,
and tomorrow, well, I don't care
about tomorrow because today
you wouldn't come over and
no way now I'm going to wait
in that stupid line, no way, just because
there happens to be a tomorrow.

9/17: Except for this, so far

Everything I read these days depresses me,
even if I wrote it, except for this, so far,
this doesn't depress me yet, so
I'll keep writing it until it does . . .

9/18: I just had to take off my pants

It started to rain just when I got in the car
this morning to go to the woods for my walk,
not hard enough to stop me, not even close,
but I got pretty wet, wet enough
that I just had to take off my pants,
soaked through just on the front side,
which, if you walk in the rain, you know
is how it goes, unless it's a total downpour,
the cost, I guess, of "going forward"
in this life, clammy on the thighs,
and I'm only telling you this because
I was almost totally silent on my walk
today, which is not how I usually am,
so I need to get this down fast before I
forget it, which is already happening . . .

I didn't even notice that until about
3/4 of the way through it, in that section
with the huge oak and the huge poplar,
and I tried to remember if I had said
anything out loud so far, which
I always do now, lots of it, and all
I could remember was swearing,
once, right at the top of the first hill,
which I do every day, same place,
without even thinking about it,
because it dawns on me again
that Carol is not there with me, so
"FUCK!" "SHIT!" "GODDAMMIT!"

LOUD, or "jesuschrist," soft, and today
I remembered soft and thought about
that Berryman poem where the guy
on the street whispers "christ"
under his breath and all the passersby
behind their rosy-pink glasses can't tell
if it's a prayer or a swear, and believe me,
and you can because I don't wear
pink glasses anymore, it's both, that one
and all of them, they're always both,
as in "hey, how 'bout some help down here,
oh, yeah, right, I know, when hell freezes over,"
and that jesuschrist, that was all I said
out loud today because it was raining,
which is why I was telling you all this.

I just kept it all inside my head today,
and what I was thinking about most of the way
really was "silence," maybe because
yesterday I wrote about how even if
the only three words you know are "I love you"
sometimes you wish you had just
kept them all inside your head . . .

So I spent most of my young life silent,
really silent, like this family story about me
my mother told, how I didn't start to talk
until way late, cried continuously for year one,
then shut if off at the main and was just placid
for year two, "low affect" they might say
these days, and she wanted me off diapers
but I never said anything, so every so often

she'd take my hand, off to the bathroom,
 and I'd sit there and either do it or not,
 so one day she takes my hand and I say,
 you don't have to come today, I can take
 care of this myself, and she's dumbfounded,
 having started to worry that I was dumb
 in more ways than one, and she asked,
 why didn't you talk before this?
 and I said, because I never had anything
 I wanted to say until now, and I can tell you,
 that is how I was, then, now, exactly,
 and going to school back then, well,
 you never needed to talk except to say
 Torricelli, or 7, or predicate nominative,
 so that's pretty much all I said, and I was
 so good at that, I mean fantastic, that
 teachers stopped asking me anything
 because they figured I knew it, so why
 not put somebody else on the spot,
 and today I was thinking, yes, I bet
 that's exactly why I got fantastic
 at that, so I wouldn't even have to say
 that much, and college, well, back then
 they hadn't invented student-centeredness,
 so all I had to do was say manifest destiny,
 or $y^2\sqrt{x^2 - 3}/\sqrt{2}$ or
 irregular Pindaric ode, and they'd
 leave me alone there, too, but obviously
 when I got into this line of work
 I knew I'd have to say more than that
 because you can't, for example, go in

on day one, fold your arms, and wait
for a great course to uplift itself
like one of those push-button
umbrellas, or stand up at a conference
and just say "epideictic," well,
you could, but I'm guessing it wouldn't
go that well and pretty soon you'd be
silent on your own dime, and I didn't come
from a family that had enough dimes
for that, so I taught myself to talk,
the point being, for me at least,
what I told my mother 65 years ago
is still true: I have to have something
I want to say to say anything,
and now that I'm thinking about it,
I'm going to SAY those three words
when I WANT to say them
no matter who misunderstands,
and I. A. Richards might say that "rhetoric
should be the study of misunderstanding
and its remedies," but I'm here to tell you,
Ivor, you can study misunderstanding
all you want, and I guarantee you won't
find the remedy anywhere in rhetoric,
not for this one at least, and really,
not for any of them, the ones that most
matter anyway, because you know what,
misunderstanding doesn't start with
words, you mean this, I mean that, and
"we need to talk," that kind of thing,
no, it starts way beforehand,
like the one all those years ago,

that one started before either
one of us even learned how to talk,
and I'm thinking if she saw me
here now with my pants off
she'd misunderstand that, too,
and for some reason I'm swearing again,
LOUD, into the WABAC machine,
at her, and I know it works
because now I remember on the street
walking home alone that night
I heard all this swearing, LOUD,
and I swear no one else was there but me . . .

It's just pouring now, I mean really pouring,
and you know what, when I'm done
with this I'm going to go out for a walk in it,
just around here, like Carol always did
when it poured and I didn't want to get
drenched in the woods, and she'd just walk
normal right through it. I'd see her coming back
up the street, soaked through after an hour
in it, that floppy hat she always wore
rain or shine sagging, walking like it was nothing,
the way she walked through all the rest
of the pouring rain in her life, just head up,
OK, this is how this world is, and me,
I'm going to keep walking and walking,
not going to speed up or slow down
because in the end it doesn't make one bit
of difference anyway, and you know what,
there are probably 10 or 20 other things
she did all the time that I never did

when she was here, and I'd be thinking
why do you do that, care so much about that,
whatever, and now, you know what,
I do them all, all the time, and, well,
what more can I say about that that you can't
figure out for yourself. . . jesuschrist

9/18: I was just thinking

I was just thinking about entropy,
and I can't tell if what I'm thinking
comes from Pynchon or physics, but, hey,
even for him, what's entropy but two
stories bleeding together toward chaos,
me and him thermodynamic today,
and I have this idea that the brain
is a super-anti-entropic machine
absorbing all sorts of little things,
perceptions, words, everything,
and synthesizing them into complex
systems, day after day, year after year,
lifelong and then, wham, you're dead
and the rubber band or magnetism,
whatever it is that holds it together
stops holding and that stuff blows
right back out into the universe
a big plume of smoke, or like that poplar
I talked about yesterday, a slow leak,
but still, sooner or later all that packing,
in school, thinking, loving, all of it,
unpacked, wham, and it's gone . . .

And I was just thinking, everything
I spewed out this year, books, poems, songs,
like a 4th of July sparkler,
a million blazing flecks of light
zinging out, every which way,

and I keep thinking, a guy like me,
what the hell is going on, and last week
I mentioned to somebody how maybe
I'm about to die and my insides
are trying to get out fast as they can,
on the record, so they won't just evaporate
into the ether, what a waste, all that work,
hey, they're saying, it was hard to get
this together, and I want to get said . . .

Then I was just thinking that maybe
I did actually die last year except
I don't know it yet and neither do you
reading along here like, yeah, a live guy
wrote this, not some smoke-pooof
wispig away after all the sparks from that
4th of July sparkler have sparkled out,
nothing but a bent over, gray-hair
stem that if you touch it turns to ash
right there between your fingertips,
so maybe everything in me is flashing
back through the motherboard
into that great hard drive in the sky
except for some reason I get to leave
behind the heat I accreted in this stupid
almost absolute zero of a world,
and you say, no way, that's not possible,
well let me tell you, I know a thing or two
about what's possible and not possible
now, and lots of what you have listed
under one of those belongs under the other,

and that's all I'm going to tell you about that
because, well, like I said, one of us
would have to go, and since I'm thinking
today maybe I already have gone,
that just leaves you . . .

9/19: And now, right now, I'm calling this one done

That moon tonight looks a lot like me,
not quite altogether, beach ball
the day after, half flat on the left
side of its head, migraine maybe,
air gone missing. I have no idea
why we both went from wide-awake,
light brimming over everywhere,
puffy-checked kid with such a smile,
to saggy, dimmed down, looking out
through vague, smudgy haze
that either seeped out or seeped in,
about as much light as that night-
light I use now, not because I'm
afraid of the dark, because I'm
afraid I'll get afraid of it if I don't.

Kind of a relief, really, so intense,
too much pressure to keep
the air in, pour the light out,
teaching-head heavy instead of
TV-head light. Hear that hissing?
the air still going out of that moon
from last night, my head, this book,
five days in and it's already half-
flat, like I'm stuck in all of Zeno's
paradoxes at once, the half-way one,
faster and faster to go slower
and slower, a book in 20 days,
then a book in 10 days, now
a book in 5 days, and I'm just

saying, I can't write another book
in 2.5 days, no way, I have chores
to do today that I put off to finish
this one, I teach tomorrow all day,
so you tell me, where does a book
get written there? and even if it did,
you know as well as Zeno does
that sooner or later I'll be writing
like a million books every microsecond
and I'll still never get to "done,"
and the arrow one, zinging along
so fast but each instant a standstill,
so which is it, zip-zip or zap?
time turning into space or
vice-versa and that's summer
in a nutshell, so stop-action
day after day you can't remember
anything that came before,
so fast it's like it didn't even happen,
and the race one, that tortoise
slow as those stones sliding
over mud in Death Valley
when the wind blows and
no matter how fast Achilles runs
he can't ever catch him
with that too-big head start
he gave him, so if I'm Achilles,
and maybe I am for all I know,
I'm thinking, I'm going to make
a cup of tea and let that tortoise
sweat it out wondering whether
I'm gonna catch him at the wire

because he's too slow to know
that can never happen, no way,
and I'm not even running anyway.

And really, you could argue
this is not even a book, just another
half-book, like the last one,
that long line of half-books,
my history, and I was just trying
to decide whether to put checkered
or decorated in front of history
but the only way it sounded
like a poem was if I used both
and you can't because you end up
with two half-thoughts that can't
ever add up to one thought
each racing on a different track
toward half-books, and I'm
calling this one Paul's paradox
and, ditto, a cup of tea, Achilles,
let them run as long as they
want, because so what if I get
another half-book, it's a
whole-book world I work in,
and maybe that's why
I never got anywhere
in this poetry racket:
the only box you get
is just too damn big for what
I have to mail in, and sure,

I could unroll a half-book
of bubble wrap, and I got
a headful of it, believe me,
thousands of little pressed-
together polyvinyl pierogies,
keeping this bit of empty away
from that one, and you need them,
really do, because if all that empty
got together at once in there,
there would be trouble,
no way to say where this empty
ends and that one begins
on that long shelf of books,
the ones Aristotle named:
"this is this and that is that
and don't mix up them up,
OK, because it took me a lot
of work to get them apart like
that," the superhighway right to
wwwdotbubblewrapdotedu,
and for some reason I can't
seem to write one whole one.

But don't get me wrong,
I have no bone to pick with wwwdot,
not at all, because if it weren't
for wwwdot I'd be, what?
Emily Dickinson shoving stuff
in a drawer, where it dies, or I do,
and if I'm lucky, I mean like
lottery-type lucky, some
huge doofus like Higginson

(give me a break, Tom, what's with the Wentworth?) swoops in, scoops it up, says: don't look at her, look at me, too big a prick to stick my neck out for her while she was here and would have loved it, maybe even me, and hey, all I'm saying is if she says to me "I love you," I'm outa here, like lickety-split, not even giving her the fake statue act, just, well, you know, she's wacked-out as all hell and those poems are like, WTF? but, hey, now she's gone, looky here, slicked up by me, they look like a good whole book. I'm so-o-o smart. Well, no, Tom, you're not, YOU are NOT!

And I know enough now to know it wasn't always this way; take Parmenides, he hardly wrote even a half-book, and he's on Amazon, OK, I know, someone has to write a long preface and add lots of notes and there's tons of white space so it doesn't just end up being 10 pages and when you pick it up you think "it's just two covers bubblewrapped around empty, I got totally ripped off . . ."

or I could just talk, not bother
with all this typed-up hype, like
Socrates, say, never wrote down
one word, just yakked and yakked
with anyone he could track down,
and I would love, just love, to be
yak-yakking like that with smarties
about the soul, say, but the way
things work where I work I could sit
in my office with the door open
now 'til the cows come home,
feet on my desk, and not a soul
would walk through that door
to talk about the soul, all of them
crouching over desks behind
closed doors writing whole books so
they get to stay in the whole book
building here with all the other
whole book people, the ones
I mean who might wave, weak,
rushing by my office while I'm
waiting, but if all Plato had was

Protagoras: wave

Socrates: wave

well, there you have it,
nutshell around nothing, so . . .

I'm going to go for a walk. I'm back.
And first thing I noticed was
now all that air is out there was room

in there for me, I know, because
I was there, all of me, on the drive over,
not me talking to me, or pretending
I'm talking to you when, get real,
you know and I know you're not there,
no one is, not for a half-book
at wwwdot, I mean me just happy
being me, and the drive went so
slow, maybe not slow as that time
in the WABAC machine I smoked
some laced weed and it took me
a week to drive three miles home
and I was almost hoping I'd get
pulled over so I could ask the cop
am I really only driving .01 miles/hr?

Then I got there, and
the sunroots I walk through
right when I start are all
just slumped over now,
like their air was out, too,
a few flecks of yellow
still stuck up on the stems,
but summer on the run,
and that was the last thing
I can remember seeing
on that walk because
it was just me seeing,
not me seeing so I could
pretend to see you
seeing me seeing.

And now, right now,
I'm calling this one done,
and now, right now,
I'm calling lots of things done.
You might be one of them.
All I know is I'm not.
And this is not

THE END

because, like I said: Now
I'm on this side of that.
And when I say now,

I mean NOW.

Part 3: In the Dark

Introduction: September 28, 2016

"They make the backs of my arms cold and my feet numb and then my head feel like a planet."

John Kennick

On the morning of September 24, I woke up after a fitful sleep with the first two poems in this series fully composed in my head, waiting there in the dark, thus the title. I have no idea how they got there like that. I just went downstairs and typed them up. The rest of the series came to me just like that, out of the dark, though mostly while I was awake, inviting me to type them up. As I thought about this later, I could see it was the classic "descent into the underworld" that is conventional to epic poems, even its duration, three days, standard for a trip down to the dark. I love "dark" poems, both reading and writing them. I hope you will find something to love here, too.

9/24: In the Dark

This morning I wrote a poem
so dark I knew I could not
allow you to read it.

So I erased every word,
starting with the last,
the end, where everything
always starts, not letter
by letter, delete, delete,
delete, until nothing is there
but white space, no, I feared
each delete might leave
a shadow deep enough
to decipher in the right
kind of light until, yes,
there is that word again,
and that one, and that one,
drawn back into the open,
so I changed every single
one into another, not opposite,
or one a parlor game clue
might open a track back to,
the enigma machine of my head
spinning in a code even I
could not calculate until
one by one by one, each word
was another that it could not
in its wildest dreams believe
it could become, "tomorrow,"

say, made into "clouds," "fear"
into "into," just examples, those,
so you will not think that "fear
tomorrow," is now "into clouds."

Then I gathered up every copy
of every word I had typed,
burned them, and it worked.
Except for these traces
left on my fingertips
that will not wash off
no matter how hard
I try, and all they can do
is wait until tomorrow
when I might type
a whole different poem
that deletes everything
of me except
these fingertips,
now forever mine
because they cannot forget
what I asked them
to do today, for you, so you
would not have to read
the poem I wrote this morning.

9/24: The Hard Part of Being Alone

I am alone now, I say,
to myself mostly, because
alone is one word no one
else can hear, silent
in every sentence that says it.

And the more I say it,
to myself, the more
it sounds like the only word
I no longer need to know.
In the middle of the night,
say, while I dream, of her, you,
everyone never again here,
when I eat, you with me even,
my food turning only into me, never you,
when I talk, say, the sounds
of my words echoing in the places
they came from until they make
no sense even to me, take up
all the space between us,
and then when I listen, ear so clear,
so near to your lips, only one
or two of your words turning,
quickly as they can, into mine.

Alone, the word
we are born with,
the language of I am;
the language of "you,"
of "together" of "share,"
the one we work
so hard to learn . . .

and today that foreign
tongue of mine, tied
in knots, no matter
how hard I try to say
I am not.
I am not.

9/25: A Hole, A Hill

1.

Today on my way to work
I notice that big boulder
built into the bottom of the hill
has been pried out and rolled

about five feet off to the side.
Behind it is a dark hole
receding into the hill,
a crowd gathered around it.

Someone says that last night
they saw a blinding light,
just for a while, then nothing
but a winding sheet in a pile.

Someone says they saw
something moving around
but by the time they got there
it was too dark to tell what.

Someone says that while they slept
they heard a beautiful music
in their dreams and thought
they were making it themselves.

Someone says he lost his voice.
Someone says she found hers.
Someone says they smelled roses.
Someone else felt their soft petals.

Someone says they saw the sky
opening its eyes, the moon,
just glued up there before,
dancing in circles with clouds.

Someone saw a shaft of light
coming down like a long pipe
from a single star. Someone saw
a dark ladder heading only up.
Everything, they say, is about to change.

2.

A little girl, three or four,
short black hair, peddles
her trike down the hill
on the other side of the road.

She has fierce, wise eyes
and says she is not lost.
She watches us as if
she has seen all of this before.

No one seems to notice her
so I go that way instead of this,
walk back up the hill with her
to her grandmother's house.

She will not let me
push or pull her little
bike, peddles hard
the whole way.

I smile, exchange pleasantries,
"It's a nice day, isn't it?"
"You are very strong
for such a young girl."

I laugh because she does not,
not at anything I say,
just fierce eyes, strong legs,
determined to do it herself.

She says the crowd
around that hole in the hill
was there yesterday,
is there every day.

She says the same people
come out of their houses
and look wide-eyed
as if they never saw it before.

She says they always say
exactly the same things,
and by the end of the day
the boulder is back in place.

She says she will ride down
the little hill tomorrow
to see it all again. No matter
how often it happens,
she says, nothing ever changes.

9/25: This Dark Is Mine

Every night in the woods
these trees reach out,
caress one another,
leaf to leaf in summer,
shadow into shadow
twining on the ground
all winter, multiplying
moonlight, starlight,
what care is, not giving,
taking, just there, always
in the air, a way of prayer.

The light we reach into
day after day, not
destination, wisdom,
I hear them say, simply
where we find what
we need to survive.
Down below, in that dark,
we are rooted, share
everything, care
for each other, rear
our young, prepare
for storms, wind, cold;
there, the trillion tiny
highways from here
to everywhere,
how we live as one,
out of your sight,

not out of ours.
Look now to what
holds you deep down.
There the dark is yours.

At the top of the hill
where I always first feel
what today I decided to call
a holiness in this place,
the tall, lean poplar
on my right, speaking
for all the trees,
their collaborative voice,
said: Take care now,
Paul, this dark is yours.
Show no fear.
It was always there
waiting for you, the way
from where you are
to where you go.

Take heart from us.
We will meet you here
every morning, cheer you,
the September daylight
so bright, so clear,
this light we love and use.
But we are specialists
of the dark, know all
its ways. Remember,
so do you, so do you.

9/26: Just Between You and Me

A little vortex of wind
in the corner of the stone wall
swirls up a few barely-there
petals fallen from the fading
planter-box impatiens.

They twirl around in circles,
wild with desire, chase
one another, fast forward:
"Be with me! Be with me!"

Then it all settles, as it always does
after a few seconds, separate petals
lying stone-still, nowhere near each
other, nothing moving, not even me.

9/26: Too Little, Too Late

Just when I walked into the woods today
it started to rain, light, a few drops,
smatterings. Then it got real dark real
fast, the rain coming hard, heavy,
big, black sheets of it, like when you walk out
waist deep into a settled sea and all of a sudden
dark waves are breaking way over your head
and you need to decide right then
what you're going to do about it.

I took a few more steps, but soon as
I heard the first rumble of thunder
I turned around. I don't think I'd mind
getting struck by lightning, all over
in a flash, but when you've been
in the woods in storms, trees thrashing
around like crazy, wishing they could go
anywhere but this, branches crashing
down all around you, you can't help
but think you might end up under one,
for a day, two maybe, until someone
came by, all that misery of waiting,
thinking, so I turned back, headed home,
cars throwing up wakes like motorboats
through the water pooled up on the road,
wondering how wet the back room
would be, all those windows left open.

By the time I got home it had stopped,
as it always does, everything you do
to avoid it, too little, too late.

9/26: This is not even a half-book yet, but I want so bad to be done with it, because I'm already where I needed to get, and I really think I wrote enough so you can get there, too, if you want to . . .

There is a dark only poems can get to.
I wrote as many of those for you
as I had in me, today, this month
my whole life, all there for you to find.

Then there's that dark another layer down,
the one I was so hoping to find again,
willing to write a hundred pages of poems
in a month to get to it, and I'm there now,
finally, there, a dark like the most perfect
late September night of your whole life,
10 PM and you've been out in the yard
for two hours already, shirtsleeve warm,
a dark your eyes are acclimated to,
watching the stars flicker on one by one
then tons of them, overwhelming
the sky, swathed now in layers of dark,
a tiny slice of moon off to the left,
just enough to overfill you with
the dark that all that light makes
visible, and I could try to tell you
what it is like, a dark that makes
no sound at all, a dark that absorbs
and quiets all thinking, a mile-deep pile

of soft, black velvet, say, that you just
lay back into and you're settling
deeper and deeper down in its warm
embrace, or a lake no one else knows about,
looking-glass still and you're 50 feet
deep into it looking up and you can still
breathe and see every bit of dark
in the whole universe beginning to end.

Then you are happy. Then you are there.
Then you are done with the poems
you needed to write to get you there,
for today, this month, next year, forever,
having used them so beautifully, just
what they are good for, portals toward
a dark so gentle, so sensuous, you can spend
this night, every night, the rest of your life
cradled, tenderly, in one another's warm arms.

Today's Coda: Dream a Little Dream With Me

So now I know for sure I'm in the deeper dark, because I had this funny dream with "good" and "bad" and "I" in it, and "good" was in jail because "bad" tricked her and then "bad" tried to trick me so that "good" wouldn't get out of jail, and "I" got so mad "I" tried to kill "bad," but "good" fixed it so she wasn't tricked, she is so smart, and "I" ended up in jail for trying to kill "bad," meaning "I" got to be with "good" and we made love right there like let-me-never-tell-you, and (unquote) I knew, yes, now, finally I am out of danger-dark.

And then I had another dream, just now, where "good" wanted to know why "I" was in jail with her, because she didn't know that "bad" had tried to trick her, didn't even know "bad" existed, and when "I" told "good" "I" was there because "I" tried to kill "bad" she wanted to know who "bad" was and why she tricked her and "I" told her "I" would explain it all to her tomorrow, if she was still in jail with me, which "I" hope she is because when she hears who "bad" is and how "I" tried to kill her, she'll be so happy . . . and we'll make love again like twice-let-me-never-tell-you.

And if we do, and "you" really want
to know what making love with "good"
like twice-let-me-never-tell-you
feels like, just come to my next dream
and "I"ll tell "you," because "I" really do want
everyone involved in this to know everything,
and "you" are involved because (unquote
everyone) you had to read this whole book
to get here, so you have every right to know
who good and bad are and how good
it feels for me to be with good again for good.

Acknowledgements

All lines quoted from Li Po are from David Hinton's translations with the exception of the last two passages in poem #1, invented for that conversation, and the passages quoted in poems #1, #5, and #15, which were translated by Yan Pu.

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