

2015
SENIOR
POET
LAUREATE
WINNING
POEMS

MEAGER LEGACY

I don't remember much of Dad, there's little I can tell.
Confined to bed his final year, he died when I was ten.
I often lie awake at night, thoughts drifting back to dwell
on memories that linger, to recapture them again.

I hear his name; I wrote it with a Jr. at the start.
I used to try to emulate the flourish he employed
but never learned to master Father's signatory art.
This early failure may have marked me – shades of Sigmund Freud!

Whenever stocks got low he'd send me off to buy his "smokes" –
unfiltered Lucky Strikes – he lit up twenty every day.
In that far time the laws were lax; they'd sell to little folks,
nor did they warn that cigarettes don't lengthen life's ballet.

On Saturdays if I'd been good he'd slip me fifteen cents,
a double feature, Looney Toons, and news would take two-thirds.
Next stop, Old Fashioned Ice Cream Store; disdaining the expense,
I'd exit with a two-scoop cone. Perfection had no words!

He'd read the Sunday funnies to my sister, Joyce, and me;
the ape-man Tarzan, Katzenjammer Kids were favorite strips.
I still can smell the corn he popped, a fragrant potpourri,
we wolfed it warm, its melted butter greasing greedy lips.

My Dad had never prospered, left no nest egg when he died,
no life insurance contract, and my mom did not re-wed.
Thank God for FDR, whose Mother's pension saved our hide,
and when I got a little older I helped buy the bread.

I wish I'd had a father's love and guidance as I grew.
Instead, I've but these scattered bits, a fading residue.
Dad's lain long years, now next to Mom, their grave a modest shrine.
I wonder how his life, if longer, would have altered mine.

UNBROKEN

"Look at you! You're like me!" she said
as she held hand out flat, revealing
a partial amputation of middle finger.
"Yeah," I answered, "sandwiched
between a TV and concrete floor.
The fingers lost."
"My mom got mine in a car door."
We laughed how we both try to
conceal damage with the other hand.
We shared the likeness.
But we were different.
She had cancer, I did not.
She sat across from me asking for help,
I was the one offering information.

What in this world offered me this seat?
Why this position? Why this time?
I had problems; I had troubles too,
but in this instant, here I sat as aide.
Conscious of how quickly roles change,
guaranteed of nothing,
innately concerned,
unequivocally caring.

Black hand reached out in thanks,
grasped by white hand in appreciation,
both afflicted and flawed but not
incapacitated . . . so much alike.

THE THIRD PLANET FROM THE SUN

My tears fall like drops of rain; I hear my voice in the depths of the forest but no answering voice comes back to me.

*Chief Joseph
Leader of the Nez Perce Indians*

In this once beautiful land,
Indians canoed serene waters;
cared for the trees, hoed the land,
smoked the peace pipe, lived in harmony
with nature. Before we came – waving
our flag, our hubris, our *Eminent Domain*.

Now, like the Cherokees, we walk
a "trail of tears." We have been
up-rooted from the land, *our land* – our
heels dragging on this barren path to nowhere.
Our "Eminent Domain" now empty domain,
we are starving; thirsty for Mother Nature's milk,
the past, the simpler lives of the Native Americans.

Oil gushes our beaches; white gulls, pelicans, now
black, slippery, grounded – dead baby dolphins
wash ashore, shrimp with oil bellies float –
Trees, precious old growth where squirrels nested,
buffalo rested, now chopped, shipped –
All to grow back someday, they say.
Underneath it all – a thick layer of greed.

*Oh Chief Joseph, we do not hear your voice in the forest.
We are displaced, our priorities misplaced,
your ancient wisdom buried like hearts at Wounded Knee.*

The voice we hear is the media, the constant excitement –
The latest frenzy – brought to us all channels,
a baby down a well – Wisconsin, the Heart Land –
The anchor, a catch in his voice, struggles through static
to hear their man on the spot. There is some hope, he says.
We cry with relief when she is pulled up, blinking
into the lights, dirty and bewildered – *like us,*
tears in our eyes, reaching for our mother,
on the once beautiful Third Planet from the Sun.

WE STUMBLED TO THE SINGING SEA

We stumbled
to the singing, rock-edged sea,
where memories are found more than lost,
 washed ashore and combed by you and me
 in the tidewrack high upon
 the dune-cropped strand.

We sifted, searching for shells that once
mothered pearls and found chords that go
 with words that brought us there
while we lyricked inner hymns, to dreamcatch
 distant squalls and scudding foam,
 tempted scuttlings of ghost crabs
 just beyond our fingers' reach,
 and probed loose rafts of
green-nubbled Irish moss souging in the
tuck of restless tidal pools, each
 shepherding other memories,
 other seas, within the forgiving ebb.

When we left, retracing roads, we
echoed surf and reprised
glitterings of the sea but soon
 all faded into the sorting of mail
 and retrievals of messages.
 Yet the sharp salt air and the
Irish moss kept with me then
 and still now. It's
tough to wash away.

TREE BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD

Lone tree by the side of the road
defying winter's blast.

Bare branches bend and sway,
grow stronger in the storm.

Lone tree by the side of the road,
with the first warm rays of spring
dry limbs awake, hope revives,
buds appear, whispers of coming beauty.

Lone tree by the side of the road,
summer breezes stir laughing leaves,
gentle showers soak buried roots,
branches grow lush in sun's warmth.

Lone tree by the side of the road,
touched by autumn's frost,
green leaves give way to red and gold,
God's glory to declare.

Lone tree by the side of the road,
silent, yet you speak.
"Stand strong in every season.
Let your roots grow deep,
deep into God's good soil."

AUSCHWITZ, BIRKENAU, 2003

I can only tell you what I saw there
It was the mundane things
Mounds of human hair stacked as high as one could see dusty aged
My eyes fixed on one small curl of fading black hair

Hair reflected in the light of a glass case like shadows drifting on a cloud
Mountains of eye glass rims stare back at me
Stacks of suitcases strewn like garbage

The name Weiss on a piece of luggage
Pairs of shoes stopped-dead in time
Like footprints set in cement
Plastic body parts legs arms limbs
Removed from the handicapped before...fill a room
Huge black doors opened wide
Peering into a brick oven
Ashes in a drop pit white as death
As I exit the gates
Sound of crushing rocks echo
Like a train running over ties and gravel...

SPRING GREEN BOY

I paused to rest from burning leaves,
I felt an urge, a thirsty need,
so as I stepped with one foot down,
I saw a small thing on the ground.

Something green moved very fast
and I stopped short to make it last.
As I looked slowly with my head,
I saw a green thing still as dead,

sitting with its head held high,
waiting for me to go by.
But seeing a new friend, I sat
and calmly I began to chat,

as if I knew this spring green boy
that brought an old friend newfound joy.
He turned his head and listened low
until he seemed to want to go,

then moved with his slick lizard green
and showed his bright red slitty thing.
He moved his four legs on the ground
in front of me and then turned around.

He flicked his tongue as if to say,
"I'm glad to meet you on this day."
Then cautiously he climbed a bush
and hid himself among the lush

red springy blooms and took his seat
like a new groom soever neat.
He sat so proud, so high to see
and showed his red again to me.

I think I found a new spring friend;
I hope, I dream, he'll come again.

MY FATHER’S WOODPILE

My father cuts his firewood
His chain saw smokes and spits
Though he’s four years past fourscore
A lot of wood is split

Beneath the searing midday sun
His energy is waning
Still he stalks the timber
Intent and uncomplaining

Sweat pours off in rivulets
Wood chips pierce his skin
Though covered in shavings
He stacks it to his chin

I wonder why his woodpile
Never seems diminished
Every time I visit
His work is never finished

Then in an epiphany
It’s all precise and clear
Why, when the day is oven-hot,
He’ll gamely persevere

Whoever hears my father’s prayers
Would never take a man
With an abundant woodpile
Stacked by his own hand

He fights to free his jammed-up saw
Soon it’s extricated
Once more he attacks the log
His purpose unabated

I view this self-reliant man
Who never seems defeated
And wonder: Can I face the day
His woodpile is depleted?

STILL LIFE: MEN AND BIRDS

The two venerables entered
through different park gates.
Padding slowly.
Cages balanced carefully, riding high.
One red; the other, green.
The birds a flash of animated yellow.
Birds and their habitations
relieving their masters’ Maoist black.

Like lines of purposeful soldier ants
marching for their hill with hard-won booty,
the two old men and their makeweights
made solemn way to meet at last
beneath the favored cherry plum.
The bowing went on and on in pantomime.
When they knew it through—
and they did know—
they hung the cages
at places worn by handles’ hooks,
then sat upon their bench beneath.

The two old men talked gently for a time,
telling, Chinese-fashion,
of the important century
observed to pass
since they’d met the day before.
Did they have to talk in Mandarin?
Were they blessed to share a dialect?

When the proper time had passed,
they stood to ballet through
exercises and Tai Chi.
Their hands were birds in flight,
bobbing roses
Magic filled those hands with scarlet silk,
flashing silver swords. Those old men
danced themselves as beautiful as birds.

The birds had conversed throughout,
canary trills counterpointing
masters’ studied grace.
Did they have to talk in Mandarin Bird?
Were they blessed to share a dialect of Bird?

FAR OFF, THERE'S LIGHTNING

Outside here dusk is coming. Summer's sun
is going down in flames. My Love comes
out with drinks and sits down next to me just done
with laundry. I've been dealing with the drought
out in the cornfield where I irrigate
for lack of rain these past two months. I pray
for rain before my pond dries up. A spate
of thunderstorms passed north just yesterday.
The weatherman threw up his arms last night
on television, but the Almanac
tells me relief is coming, that it might
just get here by tomorrow if the track
continues building out of Little Rock.
She rubs our feet with veggie oil to keep
the chiggers off. Her light white linen smock
hangs loose and moves around with her. I peep
at things unseen and smile at getting caught.
I fling florescent Frisbees at our dog
who never tires of the game. When I taught
him, he was just a pup. Now, he's a cog,
an aerobatic whiz, our canine kid.
He wears me out from throwing, brings one back
for one more try and I know if I did
he'd keep on going, cutting me no slack.
We listen to the bullfrog's mating sounds,
their cadenced croaking, silent interludes.
We watch the lightning bugs make all their rounds.
The whippoorwills begin their whistling feuds.
She drinks a Miller beer; I sip sweet tea
and we hold hands and sing some silly songs
into the night when Venus shows and we
find Mars, its reddish glow where it belongs
far off into the starry milky sky.
We hear the jets cross overhead and look
for their contrails reflecting as they die
in passing through the quarter moon, mistook
for cirrus clouds. We count the satellites,
a game we learned to play some time ago.
There is a bonus earned for meteorites,
redeemed and claimed upon request, you know?

FISHING IN WINTER

"What we know of the light, we learn in the dark."

~ James Carroll, "Surviving the Dark Winter Solstice,"
Boston Globe, Dec. 8, 2008

We cut through the ice, one
frozen word at a time.

THE HEART REMEMBERS

We take for granted many things:
our parents' love, a bird that sings,
the fragrance of a lovely rose,
each dawning day that comes and goes.

We live our lives without a care
and hope that all our days are fair.
We are not thankful for each breath
and push back every thought of death.

But somewhere down the line we find
a change occurs in heart and mind.
We glide along, then something bad
comes to our lives to make us sad.

We lose a loved one or a friend . . .
a broken heart is hard to mend.
It's then we realize the years
will hold not only joy, but tears.

So in the Winter of our days,
we find the strength to change our ways.
We cultivate an ancient art:
to cherish memories of the heart.

ASHES OF OLD FIRES

Once we faced the sun –
sunlit children
dancing in golden warmth
with no anticipation of the quiet orbit
slowly turning us to cold darkness.

We ran to the horizon
but could not win the race
as bright young love
ebbed with no defense
to save it from the twilight

petals spinning from a prodigal flower
yielding weakly in the darkening spiral

And before we were one
we were gone.

Old love still smolders warmly in my heart,
but I am left with embers of desires,
as I await the sunrise of tomorrow,
and write your name in ashes of old fires.

SWAN SONG

We joined hands at the waterside
With joy, each other's time to bide.
Swans floated neck and neck in grace,
as we sat beaming, face to face.
We swam, each, in the other's eyes,
in liquid pools that empathize.
And tread the pathways of the mind,
in step and style, one of a kind.
We shared the wine and broke the bread,
and from the heart, our stories read.
We stopped the hands of time a while,
and sunned our souls in friendship's smile.
And now, my friend, the time has come,
to add the moments in a sum,
To wrap our parcels in a bow,
and take our leave, get up and go.
But, oh, dear friend, be that it may,
Our paths again shall cross someday.

SACAJAWEA TRAVERSES YOSEMITE

William Clark and Meriwether Lewis
Passed my campsite this morning.
Sacajawea,
Wiggling her toes in the brook between us,
Followed some yards behind.
Clark’s eyes
Hawk-pierced shadows beneath pines ahead.
Lewis studied
A bit of leaf cupped in his palm,
Trusting Clark to find a way.
Sacajawea strolled,
Waiting for her explorers to turn up something requiring
Her attention.
Pine shadows wrapped them close
And took them.

Bark boats with leaves for sails
Braved brookish rills and rapids;
Silken waters became the Missouri for a day.
Chirping cries and splashes followed the boats as
Clark mapped shallows and bends with his mind’s eye;
Lewis - distracted by a new moss – stood one foot booted and one bare;
Sacajawea smiled at her vessel’s leaps and plunges.

York’s call -
Much like a mother’s –
Summoned them to their camp.
Single-booted, Lewis turned without looking up,
Rubbing mud between his fingers.
Clark hoisted Sacajawea onto his back and marched stoically
Toward lunch.
Sacajawea, icy drops of brook water dripping from her toes,
Tilted her nose to the clouds -
Just as a princess
Should.

JEW AS NOUN

Publication withheld at poet's request.

SENESCENT LOVE POEM

A turn of the century cools me.
Hot from sensual years, we’ve
grown tempered together now.
So I say take my antique rose
wrinkle-pressed in our adventure book,
a flower turned brown, flat, and brittle, too.
If parched and wrinkled blossoms anger you,
then spread cherished compost memories
on the roots of times gone by.
Our past grew from polar stories,
once watered, now dried, and saved
as relics for travelers heading home.
See, dearest love, I too am wearied
by rheumatic fingers and achy joints
brittled by yesteryear’s stormy lines
in living’s back-story melodramas.
I think, untimely now, on the span
of a keepsake rose, once quite red.
Here, hold it, my ageless one while
we both flourish in our present tense
without scarlet petals of willful youth
or thorns to sting our umbered hearts.

THE WIDOWS

In November, they visit the graves
bent on housekeeping tasks
of sweeping the leaves
tidying up, discarding faded wreaths
furled umbrellas nestle
underneath their arms;
mums fill the jars they bring.

They brush aside brown foliage,
search out the rectangular outlines
covered by summer grass
light votive candles
watch flames flicker
say Pater Nosters and Ave Marias

and sit on cold stone benches
held by a reluctance
to leave for coffee shops
movie house, and malls.
The cold travels up toward their chests;
they pull their coats tighter,
remain till daylight begins to dim
then leave trailing amens like beads.