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Poems

S. Tunde Gondocz

Ken Duffin

Lesley Choyce

Glen Sorestad

Rienzi Crusz

See next page for additional authors

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'THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH'*

FROM THE TERRACE

LAKE MORNING IN AUTUMN

GENTLING A WILDCAT

Authors

S. Tunde Gondocz, Ken Duffin, Lesley Choyce, Glen Sorestad, Rienzi Crusz, Grace Nichols, Mark O'Connor, and Douglas Livingstone

S. Tunde Gondocz

ME AND MINE

When I was young
All things were one of two things
They were either me or not me.

As I grew older
Things began to be a part of me
It became harder to distinguish between me and not me.

And when you came along
You were so much a part of me
It left me baffled as to what was me and not me.

And as you left me
I realized you would never be mine
I was very sad, but even more confused...

For if me equals mine,
I suppose not mine equals not me,
And if so, what were we?

Ken Duffin

RECURRING POEM

You enter my dreams
laughing and jiggling
immense, symbolic breasts
that burst beneath my hands.
You cry
and my face burns;
speak
and my ears explode;
touch
and my hands grow
from the stumps of another man's arms.

When I wake, I hear
a crow — kissing fog
from his mate's wild eyes.

Lesley Choyce

ANGER MAKES A COMEBACK

I am at work in the garden, the wind is horrendous.
Tomato vines break,
the broccoli cowers,
only certain weeds can endure the blast.
A helicopter slices sideways across the wind
searching the sea for fishing boats
caught unaware in the gale.

My anger comes back to me in the wind.
I had shucked it off
years ago,
thrown it North toward the tundra.

It races back to me now
like razored bits of glass
here in the frozen summer
where the North cuts me down
with my own ancient weaponry.

THE GARDEN

You arrived here on our ward
late one sunday afternoon.
They stationed you by the western window
and I studied your scalp,
planted with perfect rows of seedlings

carefully scalped into the barren topsoil
of your skin.

It could have been Kansas in late spring,
the crop so orderly, so promising;
but it was late in your year
and I worried if your stoney field
could sustain the harvest.

Glen Sorestad

AUTUMNAL PRELUDE

This morning the backyard
vibrates with the flash and pipe
of unfamiliar birds. The poplars
and the cotoneaster hedge tremble
with the host of newcomers that feed
on berries of red elder or mountain ash.

Others clamber the limbs
of the poplar and the silver maple
and pick parasites in the frenzy
of songbirds in migration.

Today's visitors are the first reminder
that summer's short hold on the prairies
is weakening into the long grip of winter.

SMOKE HAZE IN SASKATOON

Without warning smoke
from northern forest fires
has drifted south to shroud
the cityscape in eerie grey.
The smell of burning spruce and pine
overwhelms and reddens eyes.

This unexpected coup
is a pungent reminder that we
live in a small southern portion
of this land; the less occupied
three-quarters has just sent us
a sharp message.

Perhaps a century ago
the city awoke to a similar haze
rich with the sting of prairie grass
as hunters of the buffalo bones
blackened the plains with fire
to uncover the bones and turn
extinction to a final profit.

Smoke speaks the voice of destruction
and telescopes all time and place
into this morning of acrid grey.

LIAR

His heart sank with a rush;
in the eyes of his only son
the lie lay solid as stone.

In the suddenness of discovery
his breath clawed and held
and he struggled to the surface
from the confusion that threatened
to pull him under, a hot surge
that urged him to reach out
seize this lie, strike it down
shake it until it became truth.

The classroom's stale heat
stirred vague memories of shame
and in the eyes of his child
the lie gleamed with sharpness
a reflection of pools of the past
and in the silence of his shame
he saw the lie become his own.

Rienzi Crusz

THE ELEPHANT WHO WOULD BE A POET

High noon. The piranha sun
cuts to the bone.
Anula, the heaving elephant,
froths at the mouth.
The logging ends.

Without command
he eases his huge body to the ground,
rolls over,
makes new architecture
from his thick legs,
four columns vertical
to the sun.

The confused mahout
refuses the poem
in this new equilibrium,
this crazy theatre of the mind,

this new way
of looking at the real world ...
upside-down.

FRESH-CUT FLOWERS

Out there something is laughing
like a chained maniac,
something is laughing
the laugh of the hyena.

Out there something is groaning
with ribs split apart,
something is waiting
for the last mushroom cloud.

Out there something is giggling
in a red pinafore dress,
something is loving
like a frail Mother Theresa.

Out there something is burning
by its own arson hands,
something is crawling
for the last roots of earth.

Out there something is kneeling
before a color TV set,
something is praying
for the kingdom to come.

The crystal vase
preaches vermilion beauty:

Roses, a baker's dozen, stand
without their rooted hearts,
back to back, thigh to thigh,
face to fragrant face,

cold anesthetic water
for their feet,
two aspirins by the housewife's grace
to lessen their dying pain.

One terminal rose asks the other:
What is the something out there?

They call it civilization,
an art fashioned by the same hands
that have so carefully arranged
our own symmetrical deaths.

POETICS

Like an animal
the word
hunts the poet,
paralyzes him (to other choices);
or, the poet the word?

In either case,
there is a killing
and a resurrection,
like the Digger Wasp
that paralyzes the spider,
lays a single egg
in its belly,
and waits patiently
for its waspy poem.

Grace Nichols

We the women who toil
unadorn
heads tie with cheap
cotton

We the women who cut
fetch clear dig sing

We the women making
something from this
ache-and-pain-a-me
back-O-hardness

Yet we the women
who praises go unsung
who voices go unheard
who deaths they sweep
aside
as easy as dead leaves

Maybe the thing is to forget
to forget and be blind
on this little sugar island

To forget the Kingdom of Ancestors
the washing of throats with palm wine

To not see that woman — female
flesh feast coated in molasses
laid out for cop-cop ants to eat

Maybe the thing is to forget — to forget
and be blind on this little sugar island

Night is her robe
Moon is her element

Quivering and alert
she's stepping out behind
the fields of sugarcane

She's stepping out softly
she's stepping out carefully
she's bending she's stalking
she's flitting she's crawling

Quivering and alert
she's coming to the edge
of her island forest

Now, with all the care
of a herbalist
she's gathering strange weeds
wild root
leaves with the properties
both to harm and to heal

Quivering and alert
Quivering and alert
she's leaving the edge
of her island forest

From an unpublished collection, 'I is a long-remembered Woman', dealing with the spiritual and revolutionary journey of a slave woman who rises above the harsh reality of her situation.

Mark O'Connor

'THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH'*

1. *The Crusaders*

Their gravestones edge a mound of soil
brought from the hill of Calvary. No one records
what weeds it grew in that first Spring, but bones
were rotted free of flesh in a single night.
And their chapel depicts 'The Triumph of Death',
work of an unknown master-victim. Its theme:
The World — As Hell Would Hate To Have It Known.

2. *The Perished*

Invisible on the left wall
death with bat wings and world-long sickle nips
the leaning poppy-heads of fine-gowned ladies. Below
in an Eastern land angels and demons cruise above
three crosses, picking off their proper prey,
while a hunter finds royal carnage in a wood.
The horse protrudes its neck in horror at the pile
of lords and ladies, jewelled and wigged,
jumbled like apples in a barrel. Souls
float up from their mouths as naked babes to where
the Heavenly Fleet — like a naval battle canvas —
sort it out with bat-winged lion-clawed demons
that fight like tow-trucks for disputed cases.
The priest's soul like a toddler leaps for angel's
arms, while a devil's claw hooks off a foot;
and from calm bier and clasped jewelled hands of age
a Pope's soul goes whistling up to Satan's jaws.
— No lace or gold can keep the spirit in
when its true master calls. But here's one

that flips like a paper dart between Hell's
and Heaven's hands, until a snake's curled teeth
seize on its ear with glee.

3. *The World of Fools*

A lady's hands tease out her lap-dog's lips:
— the old saint points; her fingers turn
to her own heart. A monk with fiery eyes
gives a true-love kiss as he draws
a masked and hatted woman to his cell, cowl
tucked like a bib around his chin. A jewelled
snake with red underparts lithes out
from his swollen belly. Yet Satan weeps
and good lions stand on guard as the holy hermit
milks his goat that juts her haunches like a loving girl.

While giant centipedes crawl out of wombs and ears,
a golden girl, the dream of hopeless boys,
is hauled away, back arched like a fitch-cat,
to prove fine women burn as well as other fuel;
and bound and spitted flies
with the same grace that damned her worshippers.

Stirring dust, while princes pass,
the hermit's staff finds out the skull
of a good man gone to God's eternal now.

4. *The Judgement*

Opposite is the ending.
Cherub flotillas float with oarlike trumps.
The saints, all newly rescued,
join the old hands serenely reconciled
to see the devil get his due. The good King
draws his wife up from the grave, but an emperor
caught sneaking in, is trampled down
in his green-gold cloak where faceless forms
scrabble at the hatch of Heaven.

Stout Sergeant Raphael draws a trembling sheep
out of the Hell-bound dung-soiled flock,
and Michael's sword says 'It is just'.

5. *The Damned*

Beyond,
dukes and emirs tumble down that pit
where (since evil hates to think) a mindless
cow-headed Satan laughs. Among caged sodomites
a hooked claw rips out guts that fall unwound
into another sinner's mouth.

The Envious pull the new damned in with glee,
helping to saw off breasts and knees. Gourmets
around a table sample their own blood;
or, bound like pigs, observe sweet food,
while snakes constrict their throats.

Faith yields to repeated image,
in a universe of converging proofs. The as-if world
of art occludes the real, wakes childhood
terrors, compressing the mix as a diesel
piston forces the spark from sheer compaction.

The four walls close like coffin lids
with their unwearying shout that all life veers
from Heaven to Hell, that every glance not bound
to Heaven plays to a pack of leering crowing fiends.
Each thought that doubts this one recruits
for the devil's torture-stacks.

Men have died screaming of it.
It is a fancy to expel the world.

**The Triumph of Death* is a gigantic mural painted by an unknown artist on the inner walls of the cemetery chapel beside the Cathedral of Pisa.

FROM THE TERRACE

What's to see in Enna? Sicily. The high
belvedere shows all, from the Syracuse quarries
where Athens died, to Odysseus's Wandering Stones
that block the straits for Greece. Families stroll
by the edge, and blonde Etna spurts
her melt-rock a kilometre high, over slopes where
last year's flows still scald.

It's so easy
to stray from the advised Archaeological areas
into a desert of roaring Fiats and Hondas
where urchins soccer tin-cans.
But let's finish the tour ...

The town has two statues: one to the slave
who called his brothers free, and soared
beyond Roman swords to the rocks below.

The other in the public square
where citizens stroll with their rightful wives
and young girls with swelling breasts fall in step
with permitted cousins: the frightful rape
of Proserpine, the crime that Enna wears
like fame. From lap and hand the flowers fall.
The faithful hell-hound leers with all three mouths.
Her averted face detests; but the off-balance
thigh hints whitely at the swell of haunch,
since flesh has no other world to see. How can she beg
another lover from this god whose breath is rotting meat,
whose tongue is forking snakes that eat like worms
into her ear?

But look in vain for that fair field where Pluto's car
broke through the flowering turf. The grove's a motor
speedway now, circling a green eutropic lake. 'To link
the past and present worlds', the brochure says. Avernus
boasts a bar and riding school.

Hell is not mocked.

His envy stands a moment wrestling beauty
as the spider holds the bitten bee, till venom takes.
He sees contorted lines blot out
the face of classic youth, and skullbones rise
from shrieking cheeks. The nymph's long legs
besmirched and bloody, soften, quiver
with delicious blood, while on black stubble
unrepulsed the haggard mother sobs.

The girl's of course a myth,
perhaps an aspect of her mother, Earth, Demeter,
Harvest. The misused hills are her eroded breasts.
Noise and foul air and warning shouts complete
the vision of a timeless rape.

Douglas Livingstone

LAKE MORNING IN AUTUMN

Before sunrise the stork was there
resting the pillow of his body
on stick legs growing from the water.

A flickering gust of pencil-slanted rain
swept over the chill autumn morning:
and he, too tired to arrange

his wind-buffeted plumage,
perched swaying a little
neck flattened, ruminative,

beak on chest, contemplative eye
filmy with star vistas and hollow
black migratory leagues, strangely,

ponderously alone and some weeks
early. The dawn struck and everything,
sky, water, bird, reeds

was blood and gold. He sighed.
Stretching his wings he clubbed
the air; slowly, regally, so very tired,

aiming his beak he carefully climbed
inclining to his invisible tunnel of sky,
his feet trailing a long, long time.

GENTLING A WILDCAT

Not much wild life, roared Mine leonine Host
from the fringe of a forest of crackles
round an old dome-headed steam radio,
between hotel and river — a mile of bush —
except for the wildcats and jackals.

And he, of these parts for years, was right.
That evening I ventured with no trepidations
and a torch, towed by the faculty
I cannot understand, that has got me
into too many situations.

Under a tree, in filtered moonlight,
a ragged heap of dusty leaves stopped moving.
A cat lay there, open from chin to loins;
lower viscera missing; truncated tubes
and bitten-off things protruding.

Little blood there was, but a mess of
damaged lungs; straining to hold its breath
for quiet; claws fixed curved and jutting,
jammed open in a stench of jackal meat;
it tried to raise its head hating the mystery, death.

The big spade-skull with its lynx-fat cheeks
aggressive still, raging eyes hooked in me, game;
nostrils pulling at a tight mask of anger
and fear; then I remembered hearing
they are quite impossible to tame.

Closely, in a bowl of unmoving roots,
an untouched carcass, unlicked, swaddled and wrapped
in trappings of birth, the first of a litter stretched.
Rooted out in mid-confinement: a time
when jackals have courage enough for a wildcat.

In some things too, I am a coward,
and could not here punch down with braced thumb,
lift the nullifying stone or stiff-edged hand
to axe with mercy the nape of her spine.
Besides, I convinced myself, she was numb.

And oppressively, something felt wrong:
not her approaching melting with earth,
but in lifetimes of claws, kaleidoscopes:
moon-claws, sun-claws, teeth after death,
certainly both at mating and birth.

So I sat and gentled her with my hand,
not moving much but saying things, using my voice;
and she became gentle, affording herself
the influent luxury of breathing —
untrammelled, bubbly, safe in its noise.

Later, calmed, despite her tides of pain,
she let me ease her claws, the ends of the battle,
pulling off the trapped and rancid flesh.
Her miniature limbs of iron relaxed.
She died with hardly a rattle.

I placed her peaceful ungrinning corpse
and that of her firstborn in the topgallants
of a young tree, out of ground reach, to grow: restart
a cycle of maybe something more pastoral
commencing with beetles, then maggots, then ants.