

The Poetic Invitation

Exploring manifold experience in easy poems

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Abstract

Poetry can sometimes be seen as a difficult art form available or of interest only to those who are willing to understand complex illusions and arcane language. However there are poems, that I call easy, that offer themselves to prospective readers in simple and straightforward language. I argue that while easy poems offer little resistance to the reader's initial engagement with the text, they are as multi-layered and complex as 'hard' poems. This exegesis explores how a poem can be hard or easy and how easy poems can be explored seeking richness and manifold experience.

Thesis Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Paul Turley

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The Poetic Invitation – exploring manifold experience in easy poems

Introduction

In which I explain my project, my thesis and my methodology.

In this exegesis I focus my attention on easy poems, poems that offer themselves to the prospective reader as initially uncomplicated and undemanding texts. Easy poems use everyday words and phrases that, in the first instance, seem readily understandable to the prospective reader. The initial experience of reading an easy poem may suggest that the text, being readily understandable, has offered all that it has to offer. While it is true that easy poems can and do express themselves eloquently in that first experience, it is my thesis that all poems – including easy poems that seem simple, straightforward, accessible – are complex, nuanced texts that offer multiple experiences to the reader. Easy poems are written in plain, accessible language offering the prospective reader an immediate meaning with few barriers to understanding the language and images offered. Easy poems appear to offer their full potential on the first read.

For this project I divide poetry into two groups. I name the groups ‘easy’ and ‘hard’. This bifurcation is a fabrication for the purposes of this exploration; the poems of the world cannot be so neatly divided. However, I make this artificial distinction in order to offer a focus on some of the elements that make a poem hard or easy and then to highlight the experience of reading easy poems.

I am not alone in my bifurcation of the world of poetry. W. H. Auden divides poetry between poems that are concerned with truth and those concerned with beauty. Using Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a guide, Auden has beauty represented by Ariel and truth by Prospero. Although, says Auden, all good poems involve 'some degree of collaboration between Ariel and Prospero . . . it is usually possible to say of a poem and, sometimes, of the whole output of a poet, that it is Ariel-dominated or Prospero-dominated' (Auden 338).

Whereas Auden is concerned to divide poetry by *what* poems make the reader focus on – truth or beauty – I am concerned with dividing poems more by *how* poems cause the reader to have that focus. In this work I assert that hard poems use particular language in order to, amongst other things, draw attention to the language itself. Easy poems also use particular language, but the fact that the language is easy directs attention to the poem's narrative.

This exegesis is about easy poems and how they are read, or better, how they are experienced. To read a poem is to experience a poem. In encountering a work of art the reader/viewer/hearer experiences sensation, thoughts and emotions. Arthur Shimamura reminds us that our experience of a work of art is the combination of our sensations, thoughts, emotions, presuppositions and the culture in which we live (Shimamura).

My methodology for exploring these multiple experiences is to select a small number of easy poems and to read the text closely, paying particular attention to the voice or tone of the poem and the language choices of the poet. Close reading is, in one sense,

simply paying close attention to what is being read. However, as I explore later in this exegesis, choices (both conscious and unconscious) made by the reader prior to addressing a text will determine what kind of close reading will be engaged in. As highlighted by Practical Criticism, and later the New Critics, close reading begins with the assumption that a text is complete in itself and requires no reference to biographical, sociological or historical information about the poet (Mambrol): ‘The work is not the author’s; it was detached at birth. The author’s intentions are neither available nor desirable (nor even to be taken at face value when supposedly found in direct statements by authors). Meaning exists on the page’ (Delahoyde). To read a text closely is to seek all of the possible experiences offered by the text as given. This includes allusions and tangential possibilities raised by particular word and phrase choices. Close reading of the text as given avoids a hierarchy of readings and the problems of elitism and Gnosticism that I discuss later.

In this exegesis I seek to write, as much as possible, with the same kinds of everyday English words and phrases as the poems that I work with. I am seeking to mirror the accessibility of easy poems in my exploration of these poems. To this end, I use similes and metaphors in exploring the ideas I offer. Both simile – when something is described as being like something else – and metaphor – when something is described actually as something else – open up space in a text by illustrating and illuminating an idea. They invite the reader to expand their thinking about the text. Simile and metaphor also invite explorations of possibilities in the text beyond the obvious. For example, ‘O my Luve is like a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June,’ invites us to think about all the ways love might be compared to a rose with its scent, its redness (and all that colour might invoke) and its thorns (Burns). It is my intention in this exegesis to demonstrate that easy poems are *deceptively* easy. They can initially

appear as simple texts but I will show that on closer reading much more can be said about them.

My own experience of poetry and of literature in general shapes my interest in easy poems. Having exited school as soon as I could, at age 15, I took with me the belief that there were spheres of life, particularly the life of the mind, that were of no relevance or use to me. Poetry was one of those spheres. Poetry, I was certain, required a kind of attention that I was both unwilling and, I suspected, unable to give. Easy poems slipped through my certainties. I found myself reading some easy poems almost before I was aware that they were poems and before I could shut them out as ‘not for me.’ The plain and straightforward language of easy poems allowed them to be experienced before judgment was made. Experiencing and enjoying easy poems made it possible for me to imagine that I be interested in harder poems and other literature after all.

My reasons for writing a portfolio of my own easy poems for this work are twofold. I wanted to make poems that could be enjoyed by prospective readers who have their own limiting and negative thoughts about poetry. I also wanted to explore what can be said, hinted at, and inferred from poems built out of everyday English words and phrases. I want more people to explore and experience poetry of all kinds. Easy poems can be experienced for what they are and, at the same time, they can confound assumptions about what constitutes poetry and invite readers to begin to consider the possibility that the genre of literature called poetry is not wholly closed to them.

One – The hard poem and the easy poem

In which I distinguish between hard poems and easy poems. I argue that hard poems are hard for good reason.

There are poems that appear easy and poems that appear hard. Deciding whether a poem is easy or hard is often about the initial experience of the text. A poem that offers a straightforward text using common words and phrases and conventional syntax can signal to the prospective reader that here is a poem that can be quickly and readily approached and experienced: an easy poem.

Hard poems offer the prospective reader a different experience. By the choice of possibly unfamiliar words, complex syntax, unusual layout on the page, and perhaps length, the hard poem initially signals that to experience this poem, the prospective reader will need to commit considerable time and attention to it.

Easy poems can be distinguished from hard poems in much the same way that painterly paintings can be distinguished from other styles in painting. Painterly works are so named because they showcase and revel in their materiality. Intentional brush marks, unevenness in the application of paint, and other matters of technique are signs of a painterly work. The later works of Van Gogh offer a familiar example of painterly work. Like the painterly painting, the hard poem, particularly in terms of syntax, enjambment and vocabulary, signals that language, like brushstrokes, matters to the meaning of the poem. The words and images are not just there to convey a narrative but are themselves part of the experience of the poem. The language that hard poems use slows the reader's journey through the text. Peculiar turns of phrase

and uncommon similes and metaphors are evocative and hard to experience at speed. The language of hard poems jags or snags the reader's attention like a coat being caught on branches and brambles on a walk through the countryside. The hard poem invites the reader to give attention to the texture of the poem's language; the rhythm and the sound of the language. John Ashbery, a poet often cited when the hard poem is discussed, speaks about the poetry he himself wants to read: 'I don't want to read something I already know or which is going to slide down easily: there has to be some crunch, a certain amount of resilience' (Appleyard).

In his essay *On Difficulty*, George Steiner defines four ways in which a poem can be hard to read. The first two of these, Contingent Difficulties and Modal Difficulties, suggest that some texts can offer themselves as alien and unknowable. In the case of Contingent Difficulty, there is a lack of knowledge about words, concepts or references in the text that the reader will need to rectify in order to fully experience the poem. (Steiner 27). With regard to Modal Difficulties, the words of the text are well enough understood but the syntax and the way the ideas in the poem are juxtaposed gives the reader the strong sense of not being able to immediately 'get' the poem or indeed to even recognise the text as a poem: 'We have looked up what there is to look up, we have confidently parsed the elements of phrase – and still there is opaqueness. In some way, the centre, the rationale of the poem's being, holds against us' (Steiner 28). Contingent Difficulties offer us a way of managing those difficulties; new knowledge. Modal Difficulties leave us with an experience of ambiguity and even, according to Steiner, unease about the poem's purpose (Steiner 32).

“Getting” is an evocative term here. To get something in this sense is to capture it, to internalise it, to own it. A hard poem can never be gotten or owned in this way. To get

or own something is to have control over it and to be able to use it or manipulate it in any way the owner chooses. The hard poem signals to us that even as we explore its possible readings and understandings, we will never wholly know or be in control of the text. A solid, fixed understanding for the text will always remain out of reach.

While Edward Hirsh says that, ‘the task (of reading poems) is to grasp, to connect, to understand,’ the hard poem resists being fully grasped or wholly understood (Hirsh).

And that is part of the great joy of the hard poem. If we accept that the hard poem is hard *on purpose*, that it is inviting us into its language world and that our task is to seek connection and understanding but not to require or expect it – at least not wholly or immediately – then the hard poem can be fully and immediately experienced, just not fully and immediately understood or ‘gotten.’ It is this invitation into the world of the hard poem that I think Steiner alludes to in *Tactical Difficulties*: ‘It is the poet’s aim to charge with supreme intensity and genuineness of feeling a body of language, to ‘make new’ his text in the most durable sense of illuminative, penetrative insight. But the language at his disposal is, by definition, general, common in use’ (Steiner 34). Hard poems are hard in the best cases because the poet takes language in ‘common use’ and shapes it in such a way that it not only arrests the reader’s journey through the text but makes it new for the reader.

The hard poem, like the painterly painting, is, by its nature, somewhat elusive; it shapes language in ways that hold back obvious, straightforward comprehensibility.

The hard poem arrests our thinking by offering us an other than-obvious way of exploring its themes. It has an impact on our emotions by arousing curiosity and intriguing us, and even perhaps frustrating and confusing us. It challenges our senses with its out-of-the-ordinary approach. We do not ‘get’ the hard poem; we enjoy (or perhaps endure) the experience of it.

Steiner's final difficulty, Ontological suggests that the hard poem is hard because it often makes quite different assumptions about the nature and use of language and the poem itself. Is it a public or private document? Does it seek to elucidate or conceal? Charles Bernstein says, 'Difficult poems are normal. They are not incoherent, meaningless, or hostile' (Bernstein). To the extent that hard poems are texts signaling that they require the reader to approach them prepared to make a particular kind of commitment to experience them, they are normal. There is a sense, however, in which it is not true that hard poems are normal. The hard poem creates – through the use of syntax, phraseology and word choices – an other-than-normal experience for the reader. The language of the hard poem is, 'private, allusive, teasing, sly, idiosyncratic as the spider's delicate web, a kind of witchcraft' (Oates in Jack).

There is a problem with naming poems 'difficult,' as Bernstein does. A difficult child or colleague is someone with whom one finds it hard to reason, someone whose motivation is hard to understand or someone whom one would prefer to avoid where possible. To call a poem difficult suggests that it is inherently problematic a kind of hostile text which, if it cannot be ignored, must be confronted. Either the poet's grasp of language and the idea of the poem is so inexpert that an interpreter or decoder is needed to make the meaning clear, or we might assume that the poet is being deliberately obscure. As the poet Billy Collins puts it: 'The willfully obscure poem is a hiding place where the poet can elude the reader and thus make appraisal impossible, irrelevant' (Henry).

I propose calling difficult poems hard poems in order to distinguish them along different lines than value or importance. I propose that the distinction between hard

and easy poems is like the distinction between hardwoods and softwoods. No value judgment is made in determining whether a wood is soft or hard. The wood in either category is essentially the same; all wood is cellulose fibre. What distinguishes one category of wood from the other is the density of those fibres. Some woods do not fit easily into either one category or the other. Hardwood has a dense structure and requires particular approaches to working with it. Softwood has a less dense structure requiring other approaches. So too for hard and easy poems: each is valued, each has different uses and each requires a different sort of approach.

The hard poem, with its offer of an other-than-straightforward experience, is not alone in our culture in terms of the way it communicates. Advertising and political discourse use language that is styled to elicit and persuade, too. There is generally a cadence to the language of advertising and political discourse that can be a signal to us that, like the hard poem, we will need to approach these discourses with a particular kind of attention if we are going to experience what they have to offer. However, whereas advertising and political discourse select language that seeks to highlight and prefer a product or position, the author of the hard poem often selects language that is, as Collins has it, “willfully obscure” in order to elude the reader’s immediate connection and evaluation. In short, hard poems are hard because poets have chosen to shape language through syntax, enjambment, metaphor and the other tools of the poet in other-than-ordinary ways. Poems that arrest the attention of the reader, that celebrate and stretch language, that offer novel phraseology, unconventional similes and metaphors are, as Bernstein says, meant to be like this.

Two – The easy poem and everyday English

In which I discuss the naming of easy poems and how easy poems can be experienced.

I propose describing the easy poem as one in which everyday English words and phrases make up the bulk of the text. I define what I mean by ‘everyday English’ and discuss the slipperiness of this concept.

Whereas the hard poem invites the reader into its world like a dimly lit unmarked door invites patrons into a small late-night cocktail bar, the easy poem invites the reader into its world like a flood-lit wide-open gate invites patrons into a weekend beer festival.

Geoffrey Hill champions the hard poem as ‘the most democratic, because you are doing your audience the honour of supposing that they are intelligent human beings’ (Hill in Shepherd). But if Auden is right when he says that ‘pleasure is by no means an infallible critical guide, it is the least fallible,’ it is the reader’s experience of the text that democratises poems (Auden 5). Steiner’s *Ontological Difficulties* invite us to pay attention to the ‘given-ness’ of a poem – easy or hard – to the fact of its existence as an artefact, a particular form of text, that is outside and separate from both its maker and its reader. I see no need for a false hierarchy in poetry. There is no need to justify the hard poem’s existence and no need to defend the easy poem. I suggest we accept Charles Bernstein’s assertion concerning difficult poems – ‘some poems just turn out that way’ – and go on our way (Bernstein).

With regard to poems that are not hard poems, I propose calling them ‘easy’ in preference to ‘accessible,’ ‘straightforward’ or ‘plain language’ (terms often used to describe these poems). The term ‘easy’, to my mind, puts the focus on a (seemingly) complete and immediate experience. The word ‘easy’ derives from, amongst other sources, the Old French word *aise*, meaning not difficult; requiring no great labour or effort. The easy poem is a text that in the reader’s initial experience of it contains few, if any, difficult words; consists of mostly readily understandable phrases; and seems to require little effort in terms of following where it leads. The easy poem, in contrast to the hard, is a transparent window on a part of the world that the poet chooses and frames. Easy can be synonymous with simple. Calculating two multiplied by three is simple in comparison to a calculation in trigonometry. Once a simple calculation is understood there is nothing more to learn: simple maths is easy maths. Easy poems are not easy in this way. Easy poems are easy in the way we talk about something ‘going down easy’, as in medicine or an explanation. This is easy in the sense of something that is engaged with or in without friction or resistance.

What makes a poem hard is its built-in resistance to a simple, straightforward reading. What makes a poem easy is its built-in obviousness; its immediate openness to an initially coherent reading. While we could say that an easy poem is initially easy to grasp, to do so would be to retain the ideas of ownership, domination and control that I have critiqued above. ‘Getting’ and ‘grasping’ are as antithetical to the easy poem as they are to the hard poem. Whereas I suggest the hard poem can be compared to the painterly painting, I compare the easy poem to the hyperrealist or photorealist painting (to choose perhaps the most extreme non-painterly of works). The hyperrealist or photorealist painting seems at first glance to offer an uncomplicated and straightforward image: it seems to look identical to the items or scene to which it

refers. However, like all works of art, the hyperrealist or photorealist painting is the result of choices: exclusion, inclusion and point of view, amongst other things. Like the photorealist or hyperrealist work, the easy poem can also be experienced in an immediate way. Easy poems use words that the poet assumes from experience in their own cultural milieu are likely to be a part of an average reader's vocabulary, provided that the reader too is a part of or familiar with that same cultural milieu. Hard poems can also restrict themselves to a common vocabulary. The works of T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas, for example, rarely require a reader with a high-school education to reach for the dictionary. It is not these poets' word choices that make much of their work hard poems, but that Eliot and Thomas take everyday words and craft them into other-than-everyday phrases. Easy poems take those same everyday words and place them in ordinary, everyday phrases. The language choices of the easy poem, at least in an initial reading, often seem to disappear or at least recede into the background, putting the narrative arc in the foreground.

I define everyday language and phrases in the only way that I can: language and phrases which are common and everyday to me and to people who, like me, live in western, predominantly English-speaking, liberal-democratic societies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The words and phrases used in everyday communication vary greatly even within this broad definition; sub-cultural and generational slang, technical jargon, political speech and advertising all use everyday words and phrases but we experience them as quite different kinds of communication. Language and particularly what constitutes everyday language is dynamic and difficult to pin down. Every year when the *Oxford English Dictionary* is revised, debate is kindled by the new words now included and by those removed because in the view of the editors they are no longer in common enough usage. How much

longer, for example will the term ‘pin down’ survive as an understandable phrase in a digital world?

This dynamism in what constitutes everyday language can be illustrated by the work of William Wordsworth who, at the end of the eighteenth century postulated, ‘an experiment, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart’ (Wordsworth 23). More than 200 years on, Wordsworth’s ‘real language of men’ is, as we might expect, no longer the language that men – or women – use every day. In his sonnet ‘The World Is Too Much with Us,’ his critique of the then newly industrialised world is as relevant as ever – ‘Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; / Little we see in Nature that is ours’ (Wordsworth) – and even his choice of diction and syntax is not that far from our contemporary every day. However when he speaks of a ‘sordid boon’ and ‘A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn,’ he is not using phrases that fit into today’s everyday language. So too language that I consider to be everyday within my cultural place and moment only has a limited shelf life (an idiom that, in a culture where online shopping is starting to dominate might itself have a limited shelf life).

There is a further complication when defining and talking about everyday English. ‘Paradoxically,’ writes Charles Bernstein, ‘any attempt to fix the ordinary pulls it out of the everydayness in which it is situated, from which it seems to derive its power’ (Bernstein 173). In his argument in defense of the difficult poem, Bernstein goes on, ‘If you transcribe everything I say, including the pauses and hesitations, you’d get a very dense, Joyceian [sic] text. Any attempt to reduce speech to a particular literary

style of representing speech, in order to claim that style as ordinary, is always a move away from the ordinary' (Bernstein 174). To this extent, the easy poem does 'pull' the ordinary out of its everydayness but I think we can suggest that the easy poem highlights the ordinary within that everydayness. The compactness and density of poems and the economy with which poems treat words always puts language on display. Easy to understand words and phrases placed into the text of a poem remain everyday communication but, by virtue of being chosen and placed in the text as they are, they invite the reader to experience them anew, to experience them as poetry. In the same way, land artist Andy Goldsworthy uses everyday objects from nature to shape his art works. The patterns he makes draws our attention to the beauty and rhythm in the everydayness of nature.

There is a final complication that must be acknowledged when attempting to talk about everyday English. While the words used in everyday English as defined above might be, by definition, commonplace, their meaning is never uncontested. Since at least the early twentieth century, with Ferdinand de Saussure's work on semiotics, we have been aware that, 'Once the common sense idea of words is broken down into signifiers and signifieds we can no longer suppose that intentions are directly and simply conveyed from author to reader' (Easthope 56). The writer is never in total control of her or his creation. Once the words and phrases are on the page and available to be read, how they are read and understood is beyond the control of the author.

With those qualifiers in place, I will address how the easy poem can be experienced.

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Three – eliminating a hierarchy

In which I critique the notion that an easy poem written in everyday English is only a simple and straightforward text. I introduce the idea of the manifold to explore an approach to the easy poem and I prefer the term 'experience' to 'reading' in exploring easy poems. I introduce the metaphor of the pearl as a way to think about experiencing a poem.

An easy poem, as I have defined it, offers the prospective reader or listener a simple, straightforward, uncomplicated text, one that can be easily approached and experienced. However, it would be a mistake to therefore assume that such poems are *only* simple, straightforward and uncomplicated. Engaging with an easy poem is, as is true for all poems (and, indeed all texts), a manifold experience.

Manifold is built of two words, many and fold, and has within it a number of ideas that are useful when thinking about poetry. When making croissants, a baker will fold the thin dough on itself many times creating thickness, complexity and structure to the finished product. Poetry, and particularly easy poems, take often thin, unremarkable thoughts and ideas and fold them into each other to create strong, complex texts. Even the look of the poem on the page, with its use of enjambment or stanzas, can give us a visual experience of the folding and strengthening effect of the many-fold. We also use the word fold as a noun, a small fenced or covered area that provides shelter and protection for farm animals (OED). This usage too has resonance for poetry. A poem seeks to create a coherent, self-contained experience, one that encloses the mind of the reader into its world of experience, at least during the time the poem is being read.

Thought of in this way, there is actually no such thing as a simple or singular experience. What we take to be simple or singular experiences are experiences in which we determine – and have very often predetermined – which parts, i.e. sensory inputs, we will preference and which parts we will ignore in order to shape the experience. It is like the difference between listening to a conversation in a noisy environment with a hearing aid or with just the human ear. The hearing aid, a less sophisticated instrument than the ear, receives all aural stimuli and is unable to preference some inputs over others; the hearing aid ‘hears’ everything. It is, therefore, a manifold, a priori experience. The ear, however, is controlled by the brain, which, often unconsciously, blocks the stimulation that we have predetermined is unnecessary to the conversation; the ear ‘hears’ selectively. The experience is shaped by what is included and what is excluded. While it is obviously true that all experiences are – before they are mediated – manifold experiences, poems are very often shaped by their authors specifically to be manifold experiences. In these poems, manifold experiences, as Steiner puts it, ‘are the rule rather than the exception. We are meant to hear solid and sullied, both toil and coil in the famous Shakespearean cruces. Lexical resistance is the armature of meaning, guarding the poem from the necessary commonalties of prose’ (Steiner 30). While some of the poems I focus on in this exegesis are, I suggest, written expressly to offer a manifold experience to the reader, there are others here that offer a manifold experience that may not have been intended or foreseen by the poet. It is here that we could fall into the trap of deciding that there are two readings of a poem available. One is a simple or surface reading and the other a deeper, more complex and more thorough reading. The first is available to the casual, uncommitted reader, the second only to the committed, dedicated reader. This supposed hierarchy of understanding is poetry criticism as Gnosticism; there is secret knowledge about the poem or within the poem that is available only to the initiated.

Approaching the poem as a manifold experience avoids the trap of Gnosticism. It also avoids the problem of who is privileged to decide which reading takes precedence.

The idea of manifold experience gives equal weight to the experience of the poem's committed student and to the poem's casual or uncommitted reader.

There is a further trap in exploring a poem, that of seeking the meaning of a poem. In reading a poem we can seek to understand words, phrases, concepts and ideas within the poem and we can give our attention to the shape of the poem – its voice, its enjambments, the number and size of its stanzas – all of these help us experience the text and also help us to understand it. What we cannot sensibly do, I think, is ask *the* meaning of a poem. We can experience meaning within a poem, we can extract meaning from a poem, but to assume a poem has one particular meaning that must be extracted from the text or to which the text can be reduced is a mistake. A poem *is* its meaning. As Archibald MacLeish has it in the last lines of his poem 'Ars Poetica,' 'A poem should not mean / But be' (MacLeish). A poem is, like any work of art, an artefact, a thing in itself; it can only be. It cannot be reduced to its essence; it *is* its essence. Billy Collins addresses the hopeless desire to squeeze the meaning from a poem in the last two stanzas of his poem, 'Introduction to Poetry': 'But all they want to do / is tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it. / They begin beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means' (Collins). Like a piece of sculpture, a poem can be approached from different directions, which may enhance the reader's experience, but ultimately it can only be experienced as its irreducible self.

The idea of the manifold experience – that there are multiple experiences to be had with a poem and that none are to be privileged over another – not only frees us from

seeking hierarchical meaning but also allows us to enjoy the poem in the first flush of encountering it, in multiple readings of it and in seeking other experiences of the poem through close reading of the text. I use the word experience in manifold experience as an alternative to the term reading. If reading refers only to information gathering – reading only to achieve cognition – it is inadequate as an approach to poetry. Once cognition has been adequately achieved, the reading task could be said to be complete. Peirce suggests that reading with regard to poetry too often privileges the intellectual content of the text over the ‘narrative and descriptive aspects of the poem’ (Pierce 281). To experience something implies more than a cognitive understanding. To speak of experiencing a poem rather than simply reading one is to validate all responses to a poem.

As a metaphor for the manifold experience of easy poems, I offer the pearl. If we approach a poem as an artifact then we could approach it as we do a pearl. The development of a pearl can be compared to the development of a poem. A pearl begins as a microscopic irritant that gets lodged deep in the soft centre of a mollusc. A poem often begins when a word, a thought, an idea or a phrase gets lodged in the soft centre of the poet’s mind and cannot easily be dislodged. A pearl develops as the mollusc coats or laminates the irritant with layer after thin layer of the secretion nacre, (calcium carbonate). A poem develops as the poet surrounds the word, thought, idea or phrase with language, word-by-word, line-by-line. A pearl takes on its characteristic strength and hardness because nacre is made up of two layers. The mollusc layers hexagonal platelets of aragonite over thin layers of elastic biopolymers like a bricklayer lays courses of bricks to build a wall. A poem takes on its strength, its internal coherence, from the myriad decisions the poet makes in its construction concerning voice, structure, and syntax and other factors. A pearl is never fully

formed. It continues to grow while the mollusc lives. A poem too is never fully formed. It leaves the mind of the poet to continue its development in the mind of the reader (or experiencer). With enough layers of nacre the pearl takes on that prized characteristic of pearls: lustre. With enough shaping and choosing the poem takes on its own lustre.

While there is no universally accepted grading for pearls, judging a pearl's lustre is, for all grading scales, of central importance. Lustre is a difficult quality to write or speak about. *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers this definition: 'The quality or condition of shining by reflected light; sheen, refulgence; gloss' and 'Luminosity, brilliancy, bright light; luminous splendour'. The word luminous is the most helpful here. An object that reflects light is said to be luminous, as is an object that emits light. If the only description we have of something is that it is luminous we do not know whether the item in question exudes or reflects light. If a poem is luminous it both reflects the world and emits its own experience of the world. I reference this idea in my poem (included in the portfolio), 'Nothing But a Burning Light.' Pearls are luminous. While we know that pearls do not have an internal light source, the way the light hits the layers of nacre gives the appearance that the pearl is both reflecting and emitting light. This is the lustre that is so prized in the pearl. It is my contention that easy poems are similarly luminous.

Four – Some easy poems explored and experienced

In which I engage in a close reading of a selection of easy poems seeking the manifold experience that these texts offer.

A Farewell, Age Ten

While its owner looks away I touch the rabbit.
Its long soft ears fold back under my hand.
Miles of yellow wheat bend; their leaves
rustle away and wait for the sun and wind.
This day belongs to my uncle. This is his farm.
We have stopped on our journey; when my father says to
we will go on, leaving this paradise, leaving
the family place. We have my father's job.
Like him, I will be strong all of my life.
We are men. If we squint our eyes in the sun
we will see far. I'm ready. It's good, this resolve.
But I will never pet the rabbit again.

– William Stafford (Stafford 64)

This poem offers us a domestic moment; a son and father breaking a long journey call in on a relative who shows the small boy around a farm. In its one stanza this poem offers us this moment as if it were a photograph. Even its position on the page, almost square like a Polaroid, gives us the sense that the poem captures the moment like a snapshot. However, even in seemingly spontaneous photographic snapshots, closer inspection invites questions about what moment is being captured and how. Looking back, did that photograph – does this poem – capture something beginning, something ending, something precious, something tragic? And, given the choices around framing in both photograph and poem, what has been included and what has been excluded?

'A Farewell, Age Ten' is both delivered in the characteristic, concrete voice of childhood and the more abstract voice of adulthood. It offers us a moment in the

transition from childhood to adulthood as it moves back and forth between concrete and abstract language. Throughout the poem there are concrete, declarative statements: 'I touched the rabbit,' 'I will be strong all of my life,' 'We are men.' These concrete statements are interspersed with abstract phrases and adult concepts; 'Miles of yellow wheat bend; their leaves / rustle away and wait for the sun and wind.,' 'leaving this paradise, leaving / the family place.' 'If we squint our eyes in the sun / we will see far. I'm ready. It's good, this resolve.' In this poem we see the last moments of childhood and the first moments of adulthood.

In this particular moment the boy can still do what children do; he can escape the world of adults and participate in the exploratory world of childhood. He can be a child – learning by touching – but only when he is not being observed. His sense of self is changing and it begins to dawn on him that he must start to be careful not to appear like a child in the eyes of others. Only when he is sure no one can see him can he stop the hard work of making himself an adult, an adult who is self-sufficient and does not need to feel the soft fur of the rabbit's ears.

The adult world that this ten-year-old is entering is a male world and he is discovering what maleness means in the world of his uncle and father. In this world men are decisive and in charge. Hardness and resolve, not the softness and timidity of rabbits, are what matters. Men know what to do and when to do it. They do not hesitate.

Across the uncle's land his hard work and mastery are on display in the 'Miles of yellow wheat.' The uncle is a man in charge. He is the owner of the farm, the wheat and of the day itself. The father too has mastery. It is his job to make decisions about the journey. There is no room for the softness of rabbits or even, perhaps, the dream of the farm as paradise, a place for family, a special place.

‘A Farewell, Age Ten’ with its theme of hesitation at the loss of innocence is reflected in much of William Stafford’s work. In what is perhaps his most anthologised poem, ‘Traveling Through the Dark,’ the practical work of disposing of a dead animal shapes the poem. However it is the loss of another way of being present in the world that is at the heart of the work. In the third stanza the protagonist hesitates in the work that must be done, the decisive, deliberate work of men (in Stafford’s male-centric world). In the still warm side of the deer, ‘my fingers touching her side,’ the poem traces all that is lost in the mechanised world of ‘the steady engine’ and the ‘the warm exhaust’ (Stafford, *Traveling Through the Dark* 43). In ‘A Farewell, Age Ten’ the folded-back long soft ears of the rabbit stand in for all that is being lost. In his transition moment, in the arc of this poem, the boy talks himself towards what he knows is inevitable – manhood – where the job and its requirements are beyond question. He decides not that manhood as such is good, but ‘this resolve’ is good.

Sentence structure in this poem highlights the shift between concrete and abstract thinking characteristic of children at this age – 11 of the 13 sentences of the poem are declarative and certain. The sentences are concrete, the language of immaturity, but they are also decisive, the language, as this boy sees it, of men. Only two of the poem’s sentences use imaginative, illustrative, language, leaves that ‘rustle away and wait,’ and ‘leaving this paradise, leaving / the family place.’ While this is the abstract language of maturity, it is also the imaginative, dream-like language of childhood that invests places and things with magic.

The boy is resolved to be strong and accept the inevitable. The child is resolved to become the adult, the boy is resolved to become the man. The individual who has, up

until this point, like the wheat, waited for things to happen to him – as all children must – is resolved to be decisive like his two role models. This resolve is both welcomed and mourned. In that inevitable step, the ‘we will go on’ of line seven, the boy knows that something will be left behind. He doesn’t quite know the extent of what is now lost but he knows that when he arrived at the farm, he was still a child, albeit self-consciously, able to play with the pets while the adults talked. By the time he left, if he ever handled a rabbit again, it would not be to pet it.

This is an easy poem in the way I have defined easy and it illustrates my thesis. The poem consists of thirteen concrete, simple sentences. Only four words, ‘rustle,’ ‘paradise,’ ‘squint,’ ‘resolve’ might be considered to be outside of the most basic vocabulary. Each sentence has enough of a link to the previous and subsequent sentences to form an easily followed narrative and the subject of the poem can be quickly experienced and enunciated. At the same time, this poem offers itself as a manifold experience, proffering readings that include the straightforward and inviting contemplation on the complex experiences of growing from child to adult with the unease and novelty which that change brings. ‘A Farewell, Age Ten’ can be experienced as a poem about place and, at the same time, about the world beyond the poem, the world coming. My poem ‘The Full Stop’ also follows this trajectory, beginning in the concrete and soon finding itself in a world beyond the immediate.

The Full Stop

In the end,
perhaps,
the Americans
have it right.
They call it a period,
a momentary pause.

Naming it a full
stop though... who
can be so certain
that they've reached
the end when like
the old man said way
leads on to way and
so on and so on and
so there is no ending
really at least not for
another five billion
years or so and even
then when our roaring
light finally goes out a
billion more will just be
firing up their own hot
and brilliant dawns

– Paul Turley

In the first stanza of this poem we experience the speaker's uncertainty. The first line gives us the beginning of a declarative statement, almost a cliché, as in, 'in the end, when all things are said and done.' However, even before the statement is finished, the second line qualifies it with 'perhaps.' 'Who / can be so certain,' the poem asks. Perhaps, certainty, given enough attention and examination, always becomes uncertainty. Perhaps, the Americans – one of the more certain nations on earth ('One Nation under God, indivisible' as The Pledge of Allegiance has it) – are correct when they pause rather than end (U.S. House of Representatives). Perhaps, the speaker says, with an allusion to Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken,' when one way leads to another and another we can never really be certain of the ending.

The second stanza is one long, unfinished question that, apart from an ellipsis in the second line, contains no punctuation marks to slow the torrent of thought. There is no question mark at the end; it is as if the questioner runs out of energy or is overwhelmed by the enormity of the final thought. There are a number of places in the second stanza where the text could, or even perhaps should, be punctuated with a full stop or a comma but, as the poem says, 'who can be certain?' From the first line, this poem can be experienced as a quiet acceptance of the interminability of existence. The poem may also offer an experience of uncertainty and anxiety. Who can be sure when a thing is done and ended? Things we think of as complete might not be finished, the unexpected might still happen and only a foolish person would say that something has come to a full stop. Uncertainty about where to place a punctuation mark becomes the symbol of all that appears complete but might not be. Nothing can be relied upon to be settled. This poem can also be experienced as a text of hope. Even things that seem inevitable might not be. Even our sun, which has something like 10 billion years of energy left before it explodes, will release its energy to new suns in other parts of the universe; the energy goes on.

This next poem offers us at least these two experiences.

Turtle

Who would be a turtle who could help it?
A barely mobile hard roll, a four-oared helmet,
she can ill afford the chances she must take
in rowing toward the grasses that she eats.
Her track is graceless, like dragging
a packing-case places, and almost any slope
defeats her modest hopes. Even being practical,
she's often stuck up to the axle on her way
to something edible. With everything optimal
she skirts the ditch which would convert
her shell into a serving dish. She lives
below luck-level, never imagining some lottery
will change her load of pottery to wings.
Her only levity is patience,
the sport of truly chastened things.

– Kay Ryan (Ryan)

Kay Ryan's *Turtle* is a witty poem that can be read as a gentle laugh about the absurdity of the existence of turtles – at least from the point of view of human beings. It qualifies as an easy poem in that it announces what it is about with its title and offers an easily identifiable narrative.

Solid, like the animal it describes, the text of *Turtle* sits squarely on the page. Like the turtle, the poem is hides some of its shape at first glance. Although the poem offers us ten rhymes or near-rhymes only two appear at the end of lines; the rest, like parts of the turtle, are hidden. Given firstly that most species of turtle live in water and come onto land only to lay eggs and secondly that the poem makes no reference to water, apart from 'four-oared' in the second line, and thirdly, in the United States, the poet's homeland, all species of turtles are generally simply known as turtles, I have taken the view that the poet is writing here about tortoises, the only land animal in the *Testudinidae* family of turtles. The difficulties involved in the turtle's locomotion are echoed in the poem's syntax: 'dragging / a packing-case places,' 'she skirts the ditch' and 'She lives / below luck-level,' are all challenging phrases to say aloud,

reinforcing the clumsiness of the turtle's gait. Even the first two lines have a kind of stumbling gait to them. They offer us a syntactical trial as we pick our way through the hard consonants and the abrupt words (except perhaps 'barely' in the second line, which, with its drawn out second syllable slows the line and recalls the slowness of the turtle) as if we were crawling across of field of gravel. In the final line of the poem, to underline the hopelessness of the turtle's plight, we are offered a rhyme that has its echo outside the poem. Horse racing is often called the 'sport of kings.' Perhaps there is no greater contrast in the animal kingdom than one between the slow ungainly land-locked turtle and the swift, graceful land-roaming racehorse. Horses race for kings, while turtles must be patient and know themselves only as 'chastened things.'

If a reader is seeking factual information about the turtle, this poem will disappoint. While the poem seems to offer us the 'axle' level view of the life as a turtle, it is not much concerned with the actual beast. The poem is silent about how life might actually be experienced by this particular animal. Nowhere does the poet extol the possible virtues of an animal having a hard protective shield or how that evolutionary idea might contribute to the very long life that turtles frequently enjoy. Rather than a treatise on the turtle, 'Turtle' is a lamentation on locomotion and all the hazards that can trip up a small creature. Life, for the turtle, according to this poem, is one long struggle. The poem's silence on the benefits of being a turtle and its relentless focus on the difficulties of turtle life offer us a different experience of the poem in which the subject is not turtle life but human life. 'Who would be a turtle who could help it?' The implication is that no one would. But the turtle is not able to choose. It must accept its lot; so must human beings. We too, so this experience of the poem has it,

are as helpless and hapless as the turtle in the face of life's difficulties and, so, 'below luck-level,' we must accept our lot.

For all its artful and playful rhyming that delight on first reading, 'Turtle,' in this experience of the text, is a deeply anxious poem. It is a psalm to powerlessness, a litany of stuck-ness. It is a poetic expression of the old adage, 'there but for the grace of God go I,' and it is not at all clear that the poem believes that there is such a thing as God's grace. One slip on the skirted ditch, one false move and at any moment the thin threads of money, health and status that keep us dangling above the chaos could propel us too onto the other side, being the statistics rather than reading them. The poem suggests that only the luck of the genetic lottery determines whether a person will experience life above or below luck level. There is a deep fear in this poem. This fear is underlined by the gender the poet assigns to the turtle. It is the gender that in most human cultures, for much of human history, has not been the winner in the lottery of life. And for many women, in many parts of the world, the possibility that they might be able to rise up out of their assigned status and roles is still often beyond imagining. They are below luck-level.

While 'Turtle' is not a sonnet, it is offered to us in a sonnet-like single stanza. And while a sonnet usually offers us a rhyme in the final couplet (here the rhyme is with the 13th and the final line) the final two lines do suggest a sonnet-like turn. But it is a half-turn at best. 'Turtle' can be read as an anti-sonnet and perhaps even as a reply to Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 29'. In that sonnet the poem's speaker is able to shake off the disgrace he feels about his lot in life by focusing on a particular person and can, 'like to the lark at break of day arising,' rise above his despair and, at the final turn, decide that he would not change places even with the highest and most privileged in the land

(Shakespeare). In 'Turtle' by contrast, the turtle is stuck. Nothing (still assuming we are talking about the tortoise) will change her circumstances. There will be no transformation. The turn, or half-turn, is the advice given to all oppressed people, 'yes, you are right, things need to change, and we'll get to that when the time is right. Have patience.' The best the turtle can do is to keep her head down. And, in this experience of the poem, the same advice is offered to us.

'Turtle' has an echo in my poem 'From the Window.' Like 'Turtle,' both of these poems present a simple narrative corresponding to the title, and, at the same time, addresses other things as well.

From the window

From the courtyard window
of the prime minister's office,
the bit of the world you can see
is in good shape.

The grass is green and bright,
the paving is free
of fallen leaves, the garden
borders are neat.

There is shade when you need it,
plenty of manure on
the beds and usually someone
is trimming.

If you stand near the desk
and look up, you can
see a small wedge
of a mostly cloud-free sky.

– Paul Turley

In 'From the Window' I wanted to juxtapose the experience of the gardens at Parliament House Canberra with the activity that takes place in the building itself. The manicured well-bounded gardens are peaceful and conform to the rhythms of nature. The building, in contrast, is a frenetic place where the dramas and unpredictability of politics and governance are played out. The 'you' in the poem could possibly be a visitor to the Prime Minister's office who is seeing everything, both inside and outside, with novel perspective. He or she could be a worker in the midst of a busy day who, for whatever reason, breaks concentration on the tasks at hand and sees a contrast between the inside and the outside environment. Or, perhaps the 'you' could be the Prime Minister his or her self.

The poem has four stanzas, each a separate sentence. This placement on the page echoes the ordered neatness of the gardens. The text has the tone of a political speech with short, declarative, uncontroversial statements that invite agreement from the

reader. Like many political speeches, the tone is upbeat. Apart from the final line there are no modifiers to the seemingly obvious declarations being made.

The first stanza sets the upbeat tone and echoes the kind of announcements governments frequently make: often more general than specific, more aspirational than actual – ‘good shape’ is difficult to quantify or assess. Like many political announcements, this first stanza is highly qualified, careful not to claim too much: ‘the bit of the world you can see.’ The second stanza reinforces the hoped for ordered and optimistic world that fuels so much of politics. It is the idea that with the right balance of regulation and freedom the life of the community can be properly and permanently organised. In the third stanza the aspirational rhetoric escalates. The utopia offered in the second stanza is functioning (usually) as it was designed to do. Everything and everyone is embraced in a world of plenty. Everything and everyone is protected and equipped with what it needs to flourish. In the final stanza, from next to the desk – the symbol of the power and organisation of government – we are encouraged, as governments often entreat us, to look forward into a (mostly) positive future. This poem can be experienced then as a political statement that can be read as a hopeful manifesto and/or as cynical political spin. In the same way manure when spread across a garden can be experienced as a life-giving mixture that enriches and makes the earth fruitful. The same manure, when mounded in a heap can be experienced as a foul-smelling pile of shit.

The poem can also be experienced as a test of contrast and longing. Contrasting the claustrophobic, sealed and pressured world within the office with the open, airy, natural but cultivated world of the garden. Perhaps ‘you’ are longing to escape the office – with all its complexities where decisions must be weighed against competing

demands – for the simplicity and straightforwardness of the garden. In the garden things are as they seem; the grass is green, the leaves fall and are swept, the trees provide shade. Things operate as they should. While governing is full of vagaries and uncertainties, ‘you’ only have to look outside to be reassured that the world of the garden at least ‘is in good shape.’

There is another experience that this poem invites, one that is less optimistic than the other two. The whole world is not in view here, only the ‘bit’ that can be seen from the prime minister’s office. By restricting choice and shaping the view one takes, it can look ‘in good shape.’ However, this view is of a ‘courtyard,’ a walled-in world that invites comparisons with garrisoned, gated communities that achieve their ‘good shape’ by excluding those who are undesirable, and who might threaten the good order of the contained world of the courtyard. The enjambment of ‘the bit of the world you can see / is in great shape’ invites the reader to wonder what shape those bits of the world that can’t be seen are in.

The grass in this world of the poem isn’t just grass, it is lawn – exemplary grass, ‘green and bright,’ echoing the kind of hope always expressed at the start of a new government sponsored project or legislative initiative, before it is exposed to the complexities of real experience. The grass is ‘green and bright’ because of the force of will of those who are in charge. The fallen leaves, those who fail the test of greenness and brightness, are whisked away. ‘The borders are neat,’ enjambment on its own becomes an ominous read in a time of mass forced-migration, Australia’s and other nation’s anti-refugee and anti-immigrant policies and practices, the US President’s desire for a border wall and some of the impetuosity behind Brexit: those in charge will decide what, how and when something crosses those borders.

In the third stanza, in this reading, shade doesn't provide protection but cover in the sense of obscuring or deemphasising. Shade becomes the ever-ready tool of those who have the power to decide what is covered up and what is in the spotlight. Shade can also mean the often-present public disparaging or discounting of someone expressed in the term to 'throw shade.' Similarly, manure, in this reading, is transmogrified from a life-enriching substance into a suffocating blanket of meaningless shit that stifles and smothers. In the last line of the third stanza, rather than health-giving pruning trimming becomes the slashing of programs and budgets to punish and control those who do not 'shape up'. In this experience of the poem what could be ordinary and straightforward becomes what Orwell called political language: 'Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind' (Orwell).

In the final stanza it becomes clear that the garden of the prime minister's courtyard is a garden green and bright only for those who are lucky or rich enough to be able to 'stand near the desk,' close to the centre of power. Not only must you stand near the desk, you must 'look up;' you must adopt the stance of the worshiper, the believer in the rhetoric and largesse of the government. However, even with these two qualifications, 'you' will only be able to see 'a small wedge' of sky. And even that will only be 'mostly cloud-free.' In this reading even a firm grip on the lever of power does not guarantee a trouble-free existence. The clouds are never far away.

Whereas 'A Farewell, Age Ten' can be experienced as a movement between two contrasts – abstract and concrete thinking – in 'From the window,' the second of its two places, the prime minister's office and the rest of Parliament House, is essentially

absent. The reader is invited to contrast what is actually described about the garden, with what the speaker seems to imply – and the reader is left to imagine – is the opposite inside the building. Like ‘Turtle,’ ‘From the window’ leaves much about the experience it describes outside the frame of the poem.

Conclusion

In which I briefly review what I have attempted in this exegesis.

In this exegesis I have artificially, for the sake of this work, bifurcated poetry into easy poems and hard poems and I have argued for the importance and manifold nature of both. I have argued that easy poems offer the prospective reader an immediate, complete experience *and* other more nuanced and complex experiences. I have also argued that there is no hierarchy of experience with regard to easy poems – no surface meaning and deep meaning. Instead I have argued for experiencing poems rather than reductively searching out a poem’s meaning. I have argued for manifold experiences of easy poems. I have also explored some of the complexities around speaking about language as everyday English. With these thoughts and caveats about everyday language and easy poems, I have concluded this exegesis with explorations of a small number of easy poems seeking the manifold experience they offer to the reader.

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The Morning Fires

Paul Turley

The Morning Fires

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The Camp

The campsite was on crown land,
just near the sign that mandates
no littering, no camping, no fires.

Around the small fire three men
sat cross-legged in the cool dust
drinking in the crisp morning air.

Their shelter had a tin roof, two
walls made of poly tarp and a
third made from a large sign
that spells out the punishments
for drinking on crown land.

The men greet me wave me over
on my morning walk – they invite
me to sit and drink.

I tell them I must go to work.

They say tomorrow.

I say perhaps.

The next day I have an early
meeting and don't take my walk.

The day after, when I do, they are gone.

The only thing left, a dead fire,
the sand and a large sign lying
face down in the dust.

All The Ordinary Numbers

Don't worry that you cannot count all the free-tailed bats
streaming out on the wing at twilight

or that there aren't enough names for each of the shades
of ivory in a crystal of salt

or the shades of grey in a gull's wing or the late winter sky
through which it rises.

You cannot explain generosity to a jacaranda tree
while it carpets the world in lavender

and it's okay. Do not be
concerned.

The world, without your calculations,
multiplies and transforms.

When the winged seeds of a sycamore
launch out into the wind

they will all come to find a place
to rest on the earth.

The Sea Oats

She started with charcoal
but she could never get the lines right.

She moved onto pen and ink and then water
colours, mixing and remixing the paints
but she could not capture them.

She bought a camera and slid the results
across the table at dinner
trying to reveal them.

Even a video could not
hold them.

Now if you are with her,
especially in the late afternoon light,
she will take you silently by the hand
climb the dune and only stand there.

If there is a slight breeze
so much the better.

In The Covent Gardens Tube Station

While waiting for the lift
to take you to the surface,
you will stand closer
to another human being
that you do not love
or are not related to
than perhaps at
any other time in your life.

Breathing the shared air
you will not be sure
where to look, so together
all of you will raise your eyes
to the lights on the lift
that will bring you liberation.

And sometimes, down there,
193 steps beneath the
ruins of the Romans,
the bones of Saxons
and the electricity grid,
the lift will seem to take
far too long.

While behind you
the roar of mechanical wind
will signal the arrival
of another trainload
of middle-distance-gazing
travellers urging you closer
to the steel doors.

In the tense silence
you might offer up a tight prayer
to the beards of Victorian engineers
who, in their well-worsted certainty,
built these caverns
to last the world long.

And haven't they held out
well enough
against all the rained-down horrors
of the twentieth century?

And like a miner who has
survived another shift
in the bowels of the hard earth
and is now desperate for the wind,
you will listen to each creak
as the steel cage
rattles you toward the light.

And it does not matter
that your shift has lasted
only 15 minutes
and that you have passed it
not in the dirt and muscle heat
camaraderie of rock breakers
and shovelers,
but in the tight company
of map-clutching tourists
and well-dressed paper workers.

It does not matter.
You too want to emerge
on the surface of the world,
laughing and alive
and the breathing the sweet
clean air and walk
shoulder to shoulder
through the glistening streets
and shout all your fellows
a pint.

All Their Given Colours

*By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us, Luke 1:78*

Dawn doesn't
so much break
here in the Mallee

as it oozes.
A slowly
blossoming glow

that envelops
every leaf,
stone and creature,

nudging
the world to
uncurl, enticing birds

from chorus
to cacophony.
Warming the ground

for scurrying and
the air for the
sour scent of saltbush.

And we squint
and kneel and
watch the shadows

become light and
the tiny flowers open
to reveal all their given colours.

9/11 Six Years On

I am standing in the desert
on a ridge of quartzite
glowing in the moonlight.

The shards standing bleached
and clean
like a tiny city with oxide red
bleeding down its sides.

300 million years ago,
this was all
a jagged mountain range
higher than Everest
now ground to dust
and this one bleached rib.

Scattered all around
are the shattered bodies
of a thousand broken bottles,
the jagged angry scraps
of pain and despair.

Bruce Springsteen on my
iPod sings in my ear,
My City of Ruin,
and in the last light
of the sun,
the broken glass glints
like a field of diamonds.

Ten thousand miles
and six years from
the falling
the only burning here
is the sun on the far ridge.

A Supermarket In Alice Springs

Old Territorians from the once wild north – their skin all sun-bashed and blotched – squint in the white light and wander the aisles dazed, their carts loaded with two-minute noodles and toilet paper.

Tanned women in uniform polo shirts with only a few minutes between work and home slalom through the aisles homing in on Coke, chips, magazines and microwave dinners.

Whip thin Germans in designer frames and hi-tech running shirts buying bottled water and toothpaste wait at the checkouts in hiking boots counting out their alien money.

50 year-old social workers in vegetable-dyed organic cotton skirts search for what they can't get at the co-op, insisting on their own bags and the 10k drive to their blocks out of town.

Young travellers from the south in familiar surroundings for the first time in a month joke in triumph and relief and provision themselves with power bars and water for the mysterious road north.

First Australians in threes and fours move through the store in single file collecting what they need and talking to each other in bursts of language as they wait for their turn.

Grey Nomads fresh and pale at the start of this year's circuit wear serviceable hats and shorts and search for their favourite brands shaking weary heads at the prices.

Tall station boys in dusty RM Williams moleskins and hats the size of Texas lope up and down loading up the monthly rations of pasta, flour, sugar and batteries.

Primary school kids in every shade of skin bounce around the aisles in excited little complex knots rapidly expelling a day's worth of educational steam.

Their older cousins released from the big schools with not the price of a packet of cigarettes between them hunch in whispering scrums near the main doors guarding their new secrets.

Out in the carpark, ordinary mortal vehicles are squeezed for space by ancient Toyotas bristling with spotlights and jerry cans and new silver-wheeled behemoths clicking and glinting like tanks.

Soon the shopping day will be done, plastic bags will rustle like tinsel
in every house in town, each long-travelled item re-shelved in
cupboards and fridges to vouchsafe another week.

The doors will slide locked, the money will be wired to the coast,
the night people will restock the shelves and out in the car park two
Somali boys will chorale the shopping carts under a big desert moon.

Kurt Vonnegut

As far as I know,
Kurt Vonnegut
never saw Uluru.
On the day he died,
somewhere
in New York,
probably squinting
into a cloud of
Pall Mall smoke,
I was squinting
in front of
that huge desert stone.
It was all fire-red
in the last minutes
of the day.

Some Germans
who were also there,
watching beside
their rented motorhome,
had the news of his death
on their radio.
They had never heard
of Mr. Vonnegut
although they were
from Dresden,
the city where
he hunkered down
and became a novelist.
That place lit up
all fire-red
in the last minutes
of the war.

The Full Stop

In the end, I think
the Americans have it right,
calling it a period.
A pause.
Between one muse
and the next.

Naming it a full
stop though...
who can be so certain
that they've reached
any kind of conclusion

when,
like the old man said,
way leads on to way
and on and on;
really,
there's no
full stopping,

not for us,
not,
at least
for another
five billion years or so
and even then
when our roaring light

finally flames out,
a billion more
will be firing up
their own
bright and brilliant
dawns

Backstage

three men in overalls
hailed on the ropes

beyond the curtain a
woman leapt above
the stage like a cricket

I've Never Kept Pigs

In the serious office
and in the hum quiet car,
I've spent my days

scrubbed and earnest,
firing messages to space,
parsing the morning nods.

I've smiled in meetings
and ordered lunch and
worked on projections.

I have not been ankle
deep in wet earth, my
fingerprints dense with

dirt and my nose filled
with the hot smell of live
beasts.

I have not stood in my
old hat and boots with
my hands on my hips

squinting into the
coming weather.
I've never kept pigs.

I've only swiveled
in my chair and made
long strings of winking

twos and ones, watched
through plate glass, the
city turn in front of a dying sun.

The Desert Dawn

The sun blowtorches the rusty ruined ridge
and scorches the sand at your feet.

The temperature climbs ten degrees in an hour –
it will be forty by noon and still be going up.

The heat hammers at your forehead
like a migraine trying to get in.

In the distance the land shimmers and
turns liquid to your squinting eyes.

And while you stand hunched against
the bright heat seeking the shallow shade

of the only tree for miles around, under
your very feet, a world of creatures

prepares to wait out the day in the lee of
rocks, waiting for a teeming twilight.

Piton

Hammered into the rock
it becomes the thing on
which everything depends

but soon enough another
is fixed further on and you
will have to reach for it

leaving behind that
moment from which
everything once hung

A Queen

It is two in the morning
I can't sleep.

I watch a program
about the Queen
at Buckingham Palace.

And I notice that
everywhere she goes
she carries a handbag.

Marching over the
Persians in court shoes,
a carefully matched
handbag swings
from the royal forearm.

She inspects a painting
and banquet preparations,
carrying a handbag.

She is walking around
her own house and she
is carrying a handbag.

In the dark kitchen
I make myself
a cup of tea.

The program
says that the Queen
has 350 servants,
many houses,
and her own helicopter
and she is carrying
a handbag.

Sometimes gloves
and a hat,
sometimes a crown
and everywhere
a handbag.

I guess, surrounded
by guilt and bowing
and soldiery,
even a queen needs
something to hang on to.

Border Crossing

In the desert town at daybreak,
in front of the last sheds
of the industrial estates,
before the no-mans-land
of broken bottles and
burned-out cars
slowly turning the colour
of the parched ground,
the western guards –
all uniformed in blue shorts
and goatee beards –
stand and smoke
in the galvanized iron shade.

Across the glittering shards
and the rusted relics,
the eastern guards sit
in small clumps
in mulga shade,
stirring small campfires.

As the day gets going,
the crossing gets busy.

Toyotas filled with families
and secret paintings
cross for fuel and supplies.

Government crosses in
the other direction,
their Toyotas crammed
with computers
and secret forms.

Everyone knows
where the border is.

Everyone except the wind,
the bleaching sun, the sand,
the roos and all the night
creatures.

Bulldozers and concrete
are always eager to push
it out.

Mulga, sand, and the
never gone wind creep
it back.

Two worlds scraping
against each other –
tectonic plates, lurching,
and grinding.

At night it's quiet,
flickering campfires,
the occasional shout,
the glare of arc-lights
and the wind in the
chain-link fencing.

Carrots

Carrots live a double life.
Above they send up bright green shoots
that soften and feather
and sway in the breeze like miniature forests.

But underground, in secret –
little round pegs in round holes,
they concoct brews to trouble the sleep
of avaricious opticians.

And in their perfect rows, forging their
little coloured swords, they devise campaigns
to promote the colour “carrot” and plot their revenge
against the oranges.

Doom

Did the man who tended to his flax and fretted
over his ox in the shadow of the lord ever wake
on his straw bed at dawn feeling the weight of
morning doom as we here do hip-deep in Google
and bathed in screen light tense with the news
from everywhere schooled in everything that
can go wrong? Was he cold under his huge blanket
of starlight? Did he kick at the castle walls and
feel how readily solid things can crumble? Was
he like us, heavy with all that we are certain
is possible and sure of the fate of empires?

The Suit

Owner's dead,
the op shop lady said.
Didn't plan on it,
I'm guessing;
the suit's almost new.

Probably didn't imagine
he would live forever,
just didn't expect it
to happen so soon,
what with a new suit and all.
A wedding? A funeral?
A conference?
Something worth
a new suit anyway.

Not this though,
stuffed into
black plastic
and dumped.

He's gone.
I'm in his suit.
Fits pretty good too.
Looks fine.
It's wool.
It'll last forever.

Columba's Bay

Pebbles the size of a baby's toe
the size of a wren's egg
the size of a heart
the size of bread
thigh deep on the shore
delivered up from the deep factories of the sea
where the rhythm of the universe
carved each one
and herded them here

Do the same forces herd us here
to the edge of Europe
to hear the suck and swell that 100,000 years have heard
to imagine the New World
out over the edge
to feel the sea gales slice
through every layer
to stand unsteady on moving ground

Drawn to touch them
like they were the heads of toddlers
our ears are filled
like the ears of monks
and kings and quarriers and cows
with a hollow crunch
as we stumble to the waterline
where everywhere are jewels
and we scoop up handfuls
and finally know ourselves to be truly wealthy

And we fill our pockets with treasure
and carry it across the globe
willing to jettison clothes and books
to get just these to the places we are living
to have them soft and hard on a table
in their singular
indivisible selves
testament to an ancient earth life
that knows us like a vein knows blood
and we touch them and wipe them of the dust
from which they and we all came

Amesbury Archer

The Amesbury Archer was buried at Amesbury near Stonehenge around 2300 BCE, about the time Stonehenge was being built. Tooth enamel analysis suggests that he was born in the Alps region of central Europe. He was buried with the tools of an archer and metalworker.

Before Thomas Cook booked his first
tour, before Jesus walked in Palestine
or Roman soldiers tramped through
the wilderness of Gaul,

this man walked from the mountains
we call Switzerland to the island we
call Britain. Through dark forests of
beasts, along an

unnamed Rhine, past an unknown
Paris and across the waters, to
the great stone circle of the henge.
And there he stayed.

Perhaps the secret stones busy
with their silent purpose addressing
the universe and ordering the
spinning world

were doors for him or a rock at his
back, a mountain once more to
lean against. Perhaps this is why
he stayed,

deciding that this place was the
place where he would be from.
Here he would lay down his bow
and ply

his metal-shaping trade and
here fashion himself a life. And
that is it. That is all we know,
all we ever know,

except that he did that thing
that we all do if the stones of
our lives are aligned just right,
which is,

at the end to lie down and go,
with a few small possessions
around us in a place that we have
made to feel like home.

The Fire Next Time

And who among you
longing for warmth and
safety would not light a

little fire in a small room?
And who would not light
a candle to dispel the

shadows of the night?
But as every child must
learn, the dancing light

is always danger. Even
the sputtering flame
burns. It is all fire.

The careless spark will
roar an ancient forest
to scorched earth in any

unguarded moment and
in seconds ignite even
the quietest of rooms.

And we should cut our
firebreaks and conduct
our drills but we must

never forget that any
thing can burn in a
single heartbeat.

Anything.

You Can't Have Your Cake and Eat it Too

But why would you want to have it?
Just to watch it rot and ruin?
There is enough of that.

You stack corn or wheat in a barn.
You take hardtack or salt pork on a journey.
But cake is for the pause, for the marking of moments.

We raise our forks and we give a nod
to the notion of the passing days.
Cake is a momentary joy.

Cake has one great purpose.
Cake has come into the world to make us happy.
What are you waiting for? Polite permission?

Your other life to begin? That one perfect moment?
That you have cake at all is such surprising good fortune!
It's been just bread before, and it might be again.

But here is sweet cake. What else is there to do?
Slice it up. Hand it around. Open wide.

From The Window

From the courtyard window
of the prime minister's office,
the bit of the world you can see
is in good shape.

The grass is green and bright,
the paving is free
of fallen leaves, the garden
borders are neat.

There is shade when you need it,
plenty of manure on
the beds and usually someone
is trimming.

If you stand near the desk
and look up, you can
see a small wedge
of a mostly cloud-free sky.

Desert Country

If you have ever lived in desert country,
in the sand and the rocks and the silence
that burn themselves into the retina of
your brain and become a ghostly
backdrop to all that follows, this is what
is going to happen to you.

You will wake one day in some dark
room with the cold rain and the traffic
battering your door. A million souls
surrounding you, sleep-breathing in
every building square to the horizon
and the nearest dirt –

if you don't count the don't-walk-on-
the-grass park – is a long train ride
away. All around is brick but you will
see only the desert shimmering and
desert oaks standing grey and gnarled
on the horizon.

And you will know yourself ruined
for nightlife, shop windows and the buzz
hum of anything but distant road trains.
And you will know yourself starved only
for emptiness.

Literary Exhausted

I am literary exhausted
she mis-texted. But per-
-haps she literally was.

Worn down by the long
list of must-read-now
masterpieces published

in this month. Worn
out by what she knows
she is missing while she

is catching up. Literally
bombarded by the western
canon, I wonder if

sometimes she might
just want to wave a
white sheet of paper

above her head
without a single
word.

At The Setting Of The Sun

In that book where all
the characters trudge
through alien lands on
their long journey home

and at the end of every
uncertain day stop,
stand on a rock and
watch the sun set,

they are always silent
and anxious for those
few moments as the
sun disappears.

And even though now
we know about the
earth turning away
from the sun

and we are pretty
sure about our
eventual turn
again

back into the
light, it still
looks like
the sun

is going
away.

A Dish For One

If you find yourself alone
in a restaurant waiting,
it is essential
that all the others,
carefully arranged
in couples and groups,
do not mistake you
for a lone diner.

You will, of course,
have your usual props;
book, phone or tablet.
But these are going to be
nothing like enough.

Every few minutes
you will need to
raise your arm
in an exaggerated
weary sweep,
draw back your sleeve,
examine your watch
for a moment
then slowly
shake your head
and mug a frown.

When the waiter arrives
offering to remove the
second place setting,
you will need to grin,
look mildly confused,
then wave your arms,
as if you were flagging
down an ocean liner.

You will have to say,
'late,' loudly and
shrug like a
Gallic bureaucrat.

At this point you should
begin reading the menu.
Ensure that you are
deeply engrossed so that,
when you see, out of
the corner of your eye
your companion rushing in,
you are ready to
make your choice.

Will you try the popular
not-noticing-absorbed-in-reading
-looking-up-in-surprise look
or the always reliable
huffily scowling,
mono-syllabic grunt?

Unquenchable Fire

Come out from your reeking cities.
Come, bone and skull. Come, dust.

Come now to the great river. Come
here to water, the start of it all.

There is no time like the present.
There is no time but the present.

You can talk yourself hollow,
waiting for the world to change.

Talk less now. This, here, now.
Where water has carved its way.

Bring your encrusted body.
Trudge through the mud to here.

No more mean exhausted spite.
Be done with fending and stabbing.

Here is water. What is to prevent you?
Have you forgotten yourself weightless?

Do you not remember the cold clean?
Wade in now. Curl your toes.

Open wide your arms. Float free.
It is not the going down that you fear.

You know the dark well and its grinding.
It is the rising up. It is the crystal

streaming water, the deep breath
and the sun full on your face.

Other People's Poems

I've spent most of the morning
reading other people's poems -
so much nicer than fiddling
with my own.

We're supposed to read, aren't we?
And it's gone well mostly,
except for the growing tension
in my shoulder blades

prodding me that I should be
returning emails so that those
in the small world of my
responsibility

will know that I am doing my part.
We must each do what is necessary.
We don't want this to fail
do we?

None of us want to be the one
who flips out and never comes back in.
The one who just gives it all up
and lives in a hollow

back from a beach somewhere
carving runes onto the bleached
face of washed up whalebone
or be the one

who drifts through the shelters mumbling
Milton and singing out Shakespeare around
the financial district for change
do we?

That Moment

If every one of us
comes blood-red
wide-eyed and
roaring alive into
the world then
maybe every
birth is a
creation and
every bed or
shed or palace
is for that
moment
the garden

A Mistake

I think I made a mistake
not the one where I wasn't born fabulously wealthy
and extraordinarily generous
but the one where I didn't become a minor academic
in a small respectable Midwestern American university
and fill my rooms with books
and write my poems to the sound of the late afternoon leaves
and do it for forty years
and live in a wood-framed house among trees
and wear corduroy and fine-wool scarves
and occasionally fly to conferences
maybe even to England to read some poems
and talk about Yeats
and after forty years of this with my children writing
that they would be home for Thanksgiving
retire to my old leather armchair by the window in the pale fall light
and try to remember how long ago we planted the beech tree
in the corner of the yard.

Dodging A Bullet

The first time I
remember seeing
real army uniforms
they were sagging
and mothball-smelling
on the back racks of
the surplus store.

They were frayed and
worn and shed like
lizard skins by boys
my age a generation
before.

I was toying with the
idea of a field jacket
with the regimental
patches removed
or a heavy wool
great coat that would
wrap me in anarchic
mystery.

I tried on an American
infantry helmet that I
thought, cleverly,
would be an ashtray
for when I would soon
be able to afford to begin
my career as a smoker.

I inspected a Luger
(genuine) in the glass
case and a patch
of sergeant stripes.

I settled that day
on a rough olive-green
knapsack on which
I planned to draw a

large peace symbol
in permanent marker
in the hopes that it
would not fade;

or at least not until
I was too old for
the parades and
I fell from the lists
of those who must
be always ready.

Diamonds

The earth is so heavy
it can crush
weeds into diamonds.

Some mornings
the weight of it all
even after orange juice

and a sharp talking to
is more than enough to
squeeze the juice out of me.

Some mornings I have to
wait for the weight to lift
just so that I can do

all that is required.
Perhaps though
even with the help

of coffee I have it all
wrong. Maybe all of us
are waiting

for the weight to shape
us crystalline bright
sharp and precious.

Nothing But a Burning Light

*As far as I can understand
It's nothing but a burning light
from What is the Soul of a Man? Blind Willie Johnson*

What you see is not the world
but the world's light reaching
to you from everything.

The things of earth are hidden
behind a blaze of light that is
streaming from tree and stone

and every power pole and shatt-
ered roof. Light leaping off the
red-headed girl, the frog's back

and the black, oil-slicked road,
the stubble field, the afternoon
jeweled walls of the office.

As if everything is making its
own light and beaming it
directly to you, everything

shines. The first kindled star,
an old man's skin, a grey
morning, an evening traffic

snarl, a hard winter's night, the
broken alley-glass, every
common bush. Look, what

you see – all you see – is
the bloom of your bright days,
the light of the world,

everything, everywhere
always glowing like the
nightlight in a child's room.

Musical Chairs

The game of musical chairs has the following rules:

place some chairs
in a circle facing out;
find some music;

play the music;
when the music
starts, get up;

walk around the
chairs in the same
direction as every
-one else;

when the music
stops, choose a
chair; sit on it;

when the music
starts again take
away a chair.

After each round
take away chair.
It will go on like this.

Calculate

You are fifteen
and a half,
sitting with the gang
every lunchtime.
How many lunchtimes
do you have left
to dance the small circle
of test and impress?

You are forty
two, hunched
over your desk,
promoting yourself
once again.
How long,
if you build the extension,
will it delay the day
of your release?

You are sixty
seven, cutting the front
grass close
and raking the leaves.
How many more times
are you likely
to smell the petrol and cut grass
and feel the trembling of the little motor?

Leonard Cohen And I

Leonard Cohen and I
sang together for forty years.
He wrote all the songs
but we sang them together.

Although sometimes
I would perform by myself.
Rarely whole songs,
mostly just a line or two

over and over for a week,
then nothing for months.
At other times Leonard
just sang quietly

while I got on with work
or love. I suppose we've
aged, our album covers
are worn and creased

but in the photographs
Leonard is as lean and
dark as ever in his crisp
white shirt and Italian suit.

On Hats

'if you want to get ahead, get a hat.' hatter's advertisement, late 1940s

And if it were only that simple,
I would personally own a store-front full.

But I suspect that even then,
those old-young men, fresh back,

admiring rabbit felt fedoras
in gleaming post-war windows,

might have suspected
that it was all far more complicated

than even a fine head covering
could manage to manage,

no matter how rakish the angle
of hat to head.

But in those days,
after all the horror,

anything between you and the
screaming sky

must have seemed like
the sensible thing.

And while replacing a whole
heavy demob suit

would have stretched the
ration book too far,

a halfway decent hat
might just have been enough.

*See my newish hat.
See how it sits.*

*See how I am unshattering
my life,*

*shaping my own hat
to fit me,*

*shaping myself human
again.*

And if on the
long road back,

that hat gets molded
and crushed

between sweaty,
restless fingers,

when the young
-old men wait,

learning that a willingness
to do what was needed

is no credential now.
at least a hat

can be relied on to keep
the rain off for a bit.

Where Babies Come From

Yes, I know where
babies come from
but your appearing
all suddenly in a
gush of blood and
water and balling
your red fists and
bawling your

blood-white mouth
and me standing
drained, not from
effort but all that
hard wanting. Flat
-footed, dumbled,
weeping, astonished.

And then them asking
me if I would hold you
and sure I'd never
have the right or
the strength or the
courage or any thing
I really needed, they
had to ask me again.

Suddenly knowing
nothing about
anything at all and
you so slippery, I
put out my shaking
hands to hold onto
you gently and
tight.

A Small Gift

I could have been gone in the dark. I could have crossed Stix in the night. But I didn't.

I woke up. Yes from confused, fevered dreams but awake and listening to my own breathing,

watching the sun and shadows play on the bedroom wall and listening to the children arrive

at childcare next door. Car wheels crunching the gravel, little voices chattering and squealing.

They enter the day all in a rush not even knowing how eager they are to expand.

Not questioning that juice time and nap time will gloriously arrive as it always does

and that Miss Carter will tell them when it is time to go to the red mats on the floor

and without hesitating they will lie down and close their eyes and try hard not to squirm.

But for now they swarm out onto the play equipment like it is the just found surface of Mars.

And as they give themselves to the sandpit and all its coloured buckets, I will give myself to the shower

like today it is my own private jungle waterfall, and I will decide that this day will be a fine day.

I will do what needs to be done
and even without Miss Carter
it will be all right.

And In The Hour Of Our Death

Another one from the Great War has gone today.
The nation has only two left now.

Living history they call them; whatever that means.
Slumped, breathing in and out like the rest of us.

Whittled down to the weight of children. Wrapped
once more in wool they squint at the camera.

Leached, shriveled like old fruit they could float
full away but for the medals holding them to the earth.

One trembles and weeps quietly for boys ninety
years gone, his constant ghost companions.

And him too, almost ghost, mostly history, whispering
the last stories of his life and waiting.

The other remembers nothing. Ypres and Verdun
as distant as Carthage. His children no better known

than Lloyd George. He will be leaving soon just
as he arrived, naked and without fear.

Introductions Are Unnecessary

I first met you
in ghostly photos
from the womb

where you lay
curled like a
vague white

question mark
and then later
like a shrimp

and then like
a tiny hippo
and then your

fingers unfold
-ing like a fern
your body filling

itself up with
everything it
needed

while across
the globe
I waited

by my phone
to discover
that you are
a boy.

On The Death Of My Friend Glenn Boyd

Another dead Kennedy.
Another disturbance in the Balkans.
Another profit hike for the banks.

And Glenn Boyd my friend.
Gone this week
a late-twentieth century death
in the night
six floors up
in a television-lit hotel room
alone.

There is a chasm in the web of things.
It snaps and swallows at random.
Turkish earthquake victims,
Indian train passengers,
children walking home from school,
and Glenn Boyd my friend.

There is a break
in transmission.
A loss of signal.
A white dot
on the screen.
A quiet metallic click
and silence.

Old people die.
It is the way of things.
In the circle of family,
quietly breathing wise words,
stroking the heads of grandchildren,
passing on the family silver.

Not this.
Not halfway.
Not on hotel sheets with no smell
and the distant hum of air conditioning
and scrawled phone numbers and agendas
and crumpled business cards
and plane tickets home
and the television
flickering out
over Swanson Street.

Merchant Copy Customer Copy

The thin sheets separate
in the waiter's hand,
like the two halves of
a love charm.

Keep your half
forever - swear to it
and I will too.

He tucked his into
an apron. I slipped
mine between the
covers of my wallet.

Because You Are Late

Because you are late and
because I am already my usual anxious self,
I begin to think the dreadful thoughts.

Not of the big terror – the slow strangling of the planet –
but the everyday horrors that we have received as our lot.

All the crushing of each other with vehicles.
The puncturing of ourselves with guns and knives
and the silent waiting for all our cells to betray us.

I sit at the table alone fiddling with my phone.

I call you but it goes to voicemail.

You are driving, I tell myself, and wisely don't pick up.

Then I panic. You are not late or a sudden statistic somewhere.
I am certain now; you are never coming.
No, you are driving north
in a sports car with the top down.
You are with Shaun.
You are wearing a short skirt
and your long legs are all tanned
and stretched out with your bare feet on the dash.
And you are laughing into the wind
with your long blond hair flowing.
Your hand is resting lightly on his thigh
and you aren't wearing any underwear.

Breathe, I tell myself.

It's winter, I remember.

Your hair is short and grey, I remind myself.

The traffic is bad at this time of day.

I know you've not seen Shaun in a decade.

But I know you do like a short skirt.

Wax

Sealing wax, in all those swashbuckling novels I read back then, turned out to be a wax to seal documents and not a special coating to seal ceilings. And while I have known this for years

still now, when I hear those two words which, since I am not a scholar of the middle ages with all its mud and ermine, is not that often, I think, ceiling wax every time.

It's just stuck there in my head. And I feel just a bit sad that such a thing as wax made to seal ceilings and give them a lovely soft shine does not exist in the world.

I Googled ceiling wax and waited that micro-second while all those thousands of happy sneaker-wearing-foosball-playing-no-evil-doing minions skateboard around Palo Alto

rushing to my aid. "Did I perhaps mean sealing wax?" They tell me, helpfully, that ceiling wax is just a misspelling of sealing wax. I know this but it's like that Judy Blume novel

where the little kid thinks that the bowater plant is some huge, gloriously exotic tree that, one day, if he lives long and well enough, he might reach on a quest.

But we readers know the truth about that Bowater plant and all of its tainted belching. And we never want the boy to go and see for himself.

We want to imagine that through all the long years his lovely mistake will make him smile under dark clouds and he will pause and imagine it glowing soft in the far distance.

Green As Grass

He didn't say to her that the grass was as green as verdigris
or the dark green of a school boy's wet blazer
or as green as copper in a mountain stream
or as green as cheese mold
or like the thick green velvet of a queen's tasselled cushion.

He did not say it was green like the seaweed on a coral reef
nor jewelled green like those tiny fish
not the almost green of lichen-covered boulders in the rain
not bright soft tree-moss green
not the bleached dusty green of olive trees
not the teal/brown green of eucalypts
or the translucent green of a child's birthday jelly
not camouflage green or combat green
or shell-casing green or machine grease green
not green like emeralds or cat's eyes or exit signs
or billiard tables, or traffic lights

It was green she said
just green?

Yeah,
just green,
he said.

She picked
a blade of green grass,
ran her fingers
down its spine.

She heard the wind.

She looked
down at her shoes

They were scuffed a little.
The gloss was gone.

The Drive-In House

Remember that house we used to see, the one on the hill that overlooked the Drive-In? And how we heard that the Drive-In people wired up a speaker so the owners could watch the movie anytime they wanted to?

I wanted it to be one of those cast aluminum ones that used to hang from the passenger side window, before they invented FM radio and you could wind your windows up tight and keep the flies out.

I'll bet that every night they would have opened their curtains wide and turned off their lights and sat in the safe dark of their own little theatre with drinks and snacks just over there in the kitchen.

The Letter Bison

Everyone had one.
The neighbour's
was a wire frame
with a spray of
gilt ivy leaves.

At Carl's place,
it was a plaster
dog pulling an
overflowing cart.
They were all

always crammed
full. We had the
letter bison. A
slot in its high
bronze-green

back held all ours.
Everyone had
something to
squeeze all the
torn envelopes

of their bills and
reminders.
Always on the
kitchen counter
or near the phone,

somewhere where
they'd always be
reminded. Not that
anyone around us
needed it, not

with the month
ticking away again.
Sometimes when
my father forced
another red one

back into the tight
slot bulging with
more than it could
manage, I wished
that the letter bison

would lift its heavy
heavy head and
take off for the Great
Plains never to be
seen again.

I Will Tell You Why A Table Is A Good Thing

If you come home late
on a winter's day,
when things are quiet,
and place a steaming cup of tea
or coffee on a good table
clear of everything
except perhaps
for a colourful bowl of fruit,
rest your forearms
on its surface
and watch the waning sun
light the rising steam,
it is possible to decide
that this -
for this moment -
is the best
of all possible worlds.

Cooking

I know some days it's hard enough
but really it's a wonder we can do it
at all - walk a straight line - I mean

on the slippery moving curve of this
fast spinning lump. With wave after
wave of gravity trying to push

us under like it was punishing us for
standing up. Even the solid earth is
all roiling and boiling just below the

cracking crust. Any minute magma
might burst out and cook us all, just
as we are cracking eggs and

making supper or getting upright
again in a bright day radiant with
solar flares.

The Morning Fires

The smokers stand like silent
angels wreathed in holy smoke.

Watch them kindle their tiny fires,
passing the flame from hand

to hand with sacred care.
Still able to worship in public.

Shunned but not yet outlawed,
their solemn ritual, a single

moment of stillness in a
faithless, clamorous world.

Watch them cup their hands
around their little fires, kissing

the embers to life, again and
again. See them tend their

brands, fulfilling their silent
offices. Watch them conjure

the holy incense, in praise
of all the fire gods and

with each breath give
thanks as the smoke rises.

Again, Advent

It is November. The bright
screen of my phone tells
me so. A month ago it was

July and I was keeping my
head down through the
cold days. Tomorrow it will

be January and I will be
wondering again what
Christmas was all about.

Just a few months ago,
last November, I decided,
this year would be different.

In Advent, I told myself,
I would wait in expectation
for something new to be

born in me. For Christmas,
I said, I will live in holy
peace and also good will.

Now another year's charged
through pushing its weight
around like it is the most

important thing in the
universe and last Christ-
mas might just as well be

a thousand years ago, or
two, for that matter. Back to
the start of it all when they

had no blind clue what was
going on. When one day
bled into another and peace

was as likely to come out of
a clear night sky as out of
the trumpets of the empire.

So this November with the
calendar picking up speed,
Jingle Bells jangling

and peace as possible
and as unlikely as ever, I
will turn my phone to

silent and turn my eyes
to the stars because even
now, you never know.