

Scott Holzman

Two Poems



The vast majority of the writing that I do is the result of a very specific process of commission. I work with a team of poets based out of Cincinnati, Ohio, USA on a program of nonprofit literary arts organization Chase Public called **Short Order Poetry**, which as the name suggests, involves writing poems very quickly and upon request. We travel to assemblies, conferences, festivals, and gatherings with a small fleet of manual typewriters. We set up in a public area and ask passers by if they would like to have a poem written for them. If they're interested, we find a quiet space to talk and have a seven

to ten minute conversation instigated by the question, "what would you like to have a poem written about?" From that starting point, we explore the participant's present headspace. They talk about who and where they are, what's important to them. We ask questions, take notes and details. After we've finished talking, we invite the recipient to come back in 15 minutes; we immediately get to work interpreting their story and composing their poem on a typewriter. When they return, they are given the poem as a gift. A personalized piece of art created specifically and entirely for them. The measure which determines whether or not the poem is "good" exists only in the head of the person for whom it is written.

While writing Short Order Poems, I hope to understand and appropriately represent the thoughts and ideas which have been shared with me- my perspectives and experiences are certainly present, but only minimally. I don't feel as though these poems are mine- rather a collaboration between myself and the persons to whom they are dedicated. I deeply appreciate that sense of joint ownership, that I have had the pleasure to learn from and experience so many different people, and that I have had the privilege to turn their stories into poetry. I estimate that since 2012 I have written more than 1500 of these poems, often

more than 30 or 40 in one sitting. They are immediate, urgent poems written under a sense of empathetic duress... and they constitute the bulk of my creative output.

The poems which follow this note were not written through this process, but I felt it was important to explain because the mindset of churning out writing focused on the feelings and desires of others has left an irremovable stain on my own personal work.

When I sit down to write now, my compass goes spinning; it is as if consistent exposure to the emotional energy of others has demagnetized me in some way, left me unable to direct myself through any internal geography of thought... but what has remained in a very serious way are the senses of urgency and immediacy that have seeped like mercury through my blood-brain barrier, fundamentally altering my approach to work. These poems are comments and explorations on no longer feeling at home in my own presence and perspective - being lost in thought, but sprinting.

IF I HAD SILK TO GIVE YOU WOULD HAVE IT

I ask us the question
For each and for all;

Instead of sleep
I clean.

The angle over figured
Is seen far and narrow

And into these eggs
I dream meat
To make father proud.

Give life if it is yours to give
Without taking; simple
Pleasure against
Heavy clouds.

If time and silence have their due
Then be done with them;

Is this what you mean
At all?

Sheets browning
How low morn

To make echoed
The cracking rock
And its face so stern.

At least
bad news
makes one very photogenic.

The wishing well
shouts back;

Tell only your own fortune
Save the telling
Be the truth.

If I had silk to give you
It would be yours.

come true as pith

pith factory

endless stream of celestial pith

walk or fly in a straight line

with your mouth open

don't anticipate
save your anxiety for

more honest knowledge
give me an orange

eager concern oh edward

bring me a whole tree
I'm trying at something deeper here
nobody doubts that the kid's got heart
you don't have to peel it

I don't care what kind

not in the dirt

put your hands on the table
well wasted work's

purpose is actualized if not realized in the terms of tomorrow's
roused rabble

I woke up like this

over and over and over again

meat waves

deposits of calcium

use a file to make them softer
and well put

place bank

ascending stone

a road

paper sack of earth and fire
mahogany street sign

my world

has a hat on it is a nice hat

it sometimes falls off

so slaked

I rise like lime
into thought

break things into working glory and glitter of providence
remove your shoes before returning to matrimony the
mud it gets everywhere the body flips itself over
steadies itself against the railing and rights once more
the man the myth the perpetually untrue unrealized ideal
pious like a well penny is stretched inward and erodes
frozen formula for the infant that time is eat your
prayers a broth of nightmare and floating we are more
murky equally flower water less practica

The kind of camping that I really like is the kind of camping that the kind of people who really like camping don't consider to be camping at all. I haven't checked recently, but I believe Gabriel owes me between six and seven hundred dollars. Pack a thermos full of cobwebs and drink it down - the stars are

silence we can see. In Romania I learned the trick for a nice picture perfect fire is to get a nice hot bed of coals going, and then feed it nothing thicker than your wrist - place the dry wood in a conical figure. pointing up.

The heat reaches out desperately
to hold hands.

Or, to have hands.
Or, to have a hand.

to have some say in actualization, a vote toward utility. The
table's four legs stand but do not breathe, a man leaving a diner
scrapes between his teeth

don't kid yourself no one is doing well

maybe you could be bones if you want to. Drink your milk like a good little boy. like a beautiful little baby boy, drink your milk.

Drink it up.

Immediacy
is a sweet but juvenile response
to suffering.

“I’ll be there right away”

I now pronounce you:

prosper and proverb

With the power invested in me, I expect commensurate equity. I want to dance around in a little kimono and sensible shoes. I want to not worry. Instead I shake the mirror with my head and attempt telepathy - “there will never be enough justice in this world” - but I’m met alone with only one blank stare. I could tell you a secret right now, but I’m not going to

because 19 years ago, something unspeakable happened

and enough has been said about that already

and it has been slathered in ketchup

and it has been wolfed down by wolves

and it has been mimicked

and it has been mimed

and it has been trotted out to run its race
over and over again

and it has been celebrated

and it has been lip stuck
has been made up in beautiful make up

and it has been regretted

and it has been castrated
its configuration has been called into question

and it has been killed
and then punished post mortem

and it has been silent

and it has been brave

and its teeth have been whitened

and its morals have been set aside, they have been placed in a glass full of solution that sits next to the sink, waiting to be refilled. In my dreams I am an old woman who had a hard life. I have learned to say little, so I disappoint myself less with each passing year. I took a job translating road maps into something more elegant - my greatest achievement was

one fewer fold.

My fingernails grew out of spite for excess of the everlasting. Undeserving squatters in articulate beams of awareness-

I learned there are worse places to be for Christmas, than cold in Ohio.

I cried when I learned that Martin Luther King had been killed.

I procreated and when the police asked me questions, I looked them in the eye.

Pause here.

[the following line is to be sung to the tune of "California Girls", you know the part where they sing "I wish they all could be California Girls"]

"Fuck me how you would want
to fuck yourself"

Maybe with a stick of butter
the boat I was born on
is the same boat
that brought me in the one I abandoned at an early convenience.

Is it possible that we evolved not from apes
but
bananas?

Could I grow to be
irreversibly accepting
and would I be better off for that?
Would I be more than my slips of mind,
confusing softness for The Singing Knives?
Not treating broken people
like refusal
or the gray hairs cooked into my soup
like victims of circumstance?

Very rarely does it occur to me
that I would like to stab someone
if I don't already have a knife
in my pocket or my hand

O angel with your flaming dick,
I do not care for your latin.
Let me ask you one question:

could you please
share with me the meaning
of the word "bone"
because I'm not sure

I understand

the spirit
with its head
against the wall
mumbling something
about

how

nobody would ever describe a bra cup as half empty.

Everything is intentional,
some things are simply
less obviously so.

Hearts don't break
for free anymore. Dog
heart horse heart palm

please teach me to sit and stay

If I had silk to give
you would have it.

look upon the work that I plan on doing!
ye mighty, and tell me how cool I am.

sound the alarm
all men to arms

to their strong
and hairy arms
with anchors on them
or maternal memorial

the sky, some siren,
is bulging. Paradise
is feeling older
than it used to.

We still pray for favor
but we don't get our hopes up.
Our hands shake more than before,
which sounds a little bit like applause.

Now might I call you:

worship and begging

With the power vested in me, hitherto unknown, I pronounce words with absolute certainty.

The bones are ringing - the sanctity of forever is under attack and the concept of always sounds like a childish joke that was funny the first time, but after so many years draws only rolling eyes, trying desperately to get away. I don't hate you. I don't know what that means. Let's put a pin in it.

Expecting nothing
insist on goodness.
Expecting goodness
demand to be great.
Expecting greatness
require perfection.
Expecting perfection

I don't sleep very well

anymore.

I need to eat this avocado tomorrow
it is getting soft.

When you approach a landmark, you make yourself more near to it.
It's features, once vague, come more and more into definition.
You get a sense of size, scope.
Many other senses - beyond sight.
If you don't take me into a micro-scale,
it stands to reason that the closer you are, the more you understand.
A lit skyline becomes buildings a forest becomes trees.
When you sleep on the ground, you feel roots in your back.

When you get closer to concepts, they seem sometimes less likely.
What you trusted, believed in, existed within and alongside - looks broken.
You see the cracks, the flaws.
The theoretical becomes poisoned in practice.
A beautiful face with bad breath,
you lean in and realize the kiss won't be worth it.
The angel's wings have wires peace is a rotting corpse.
Eternity is revealed as one day at a time.
Goodness looks convenient, and little more; which is fine.

What do we do then,
with hope?
There's a whole ocean out there
drink it up.

Fuck it.
I'll drink to anything-
Let every celebration be an excuse
for itself

It's important to have people in your life
whose advice you appreciate
but don't have to feel bad
for ignoring

"Thought is an arrow"
"Feeling is a circle"

Dharma factory, crowded floor-
some thousand people

and the most spiteful om I've ever heard.

This here is holy water, I told them:
I blessed it myself. And their bubblegum
muscles twitched.

Prayer is a heavy chain
Knowledge is splintering wood.

The national mascot
is a devil's advocate.

There are days when I wish
I could mount my own head
as a trophy on the wall.

You really think I want
to climb that mountain?

Laughter is how we let each other know
that at this moment
we do not think we are dying

In celebration or assurance

If I had silk to give
it would be yours.

There is no authentic language
for my praise.

some people live and they eat only lemons
star pucker dead bird scout ground eyes
grave envy witness me witness grass stain
talk againain
everythinging
some softness
muscle me bad boy
write down your muscles

make a list

and repeat it over and over again
if you can't seem to sleep

convince me againain

every thing ing

hashed and hushed

and hashed out

secret quiet lemon life a kitchen tree

where gasp of bloom hushed itself

long swallow a curling scroll

When I walked through the door and it was night time, I knew that it was your door and your night time - I found the light switch in the dark on my first try. I found it on my first try because I believed that it was yours. There was a moment where I did not believe, and in that moment, I could not have found the light switch. When the light came on, I knew that the door and the night time belonged to you because my faith was rewarded - and I knew my faith to be a valuable thing because it was rewarded. Sureness brings sureness

I guess

we decide for ourselves.

There is a song for triumph

and a song for the haunting,
they have been sung with shovels
some quarantine constable
not optional; possible.

Our greatest fear may be
that history will not exist
to vindicate us

so dress for the grave you want to rob,
not the grave that you are robbing.

ON BEHALF OF THE TIRED METAPHOR

A bird in flight gentle and stern
floats lazily carrying a springtime banner
 sprig of flowers
loosely, but with purpose, in its feet.
It rises like rain, red-brown feathers
small against a sky that seems
paint being stripped away, layer by layer
getting lighter, and relieved
of its burdensome blue, the color of expectation.

Its wings flap occasionally,
more out of instinct than effort
while it flies around the straight line
that it could never follow.
Soft brittle thing
 appears undeniable
while serving its purpose.
It looks like it was born in the air.
Its feathers are perfect,
hollow bones balanced and
wrapped with the thinnest skin.

Taking cue from something so subtle
it has no name, the bird drops its banner,
 a seed, and a season begins. It lands
 on a branch, and on its perch paused.
Mouth open, in a stupid
but sweet kind of way.

It has no voice for questions, no voice
for answers, no voice for prayer,
for others, or for dignity,
-only song. So it sings.

And if I were tall enough to reach it I'd smash that little fucker with a baseball bat
and leave it dead on the sidewalk.

Have you observed how long dead birds tend to stick around? They sit mangled,
though rarely bloody, in the same spot for what feels like forever. Many people

notice, some people have a reaction - half a glimmer of a mortal thought, brief disgust, or sadness.

Maybe someone takes a photo, makes a painting and then puts it on the wall - slow memorial to the realization that we might never learn how to fly. Morbid curiosity, more permanent relic given respect in the death of becoming. The allure of grotesquity, uncanny and broken - wrong in the way we all will be; but not dangerous. An image to have, not to hold, and to leave behind. A thin spot in the simulacrum, eats up our attention in such a way - we don't know why we care; or even how much. It all becomes funny eventually.

At some point somebody, forlorn at the sight of death or addicted to order, comes by with a plastic soda cup, empties the ice out and uses a leaf, or some other shit from the sidewalk to scoop the bird up. Walks solemnly to a garbage can and drops it in. Throwing something away can be the kindest thing in the world. Mother would be proud but maybe we're all mother in some moments.

Elements of forward and back,
gone and together all at the same time
we do an odd little dance, don't we?

The disco ball is rigged
with explosive devices
there is room for improvisation

here in our low rent city
a penny for your sparkling thoughts
some glittering robin

sarcastic magic all
sterling silver
in the neutral space

Inspiration is not natural breath
it's asthmatic wheezing of logic leaps
an expensive buffet you have to cook yourself
and then eat with your hands
hope the trail of crumbs leads you
to somewhere you've already been
so you can figure out how to get home.

Every time a bell rings
some average person
has wings thrust upon them

and all of the sudden
they're expected
to be pure graceful beings
not allowed to hesitate
in the face of label

Lord as my umpire
I am not ready for a visit just yet.

We sometimes speak
of "eye opening experiences"
suggesting that it was not we
who opened our eyes
but the experiences
and I can't shake the vision
of some celestial fishing rod
with its hooks in our eyelids
quickly being jerked back
with trophy hope
and our faculties lie
floundering in the hand of
some unrecognizable being
until we are suffocated by the rarified air of inevitable realization
that overexposed and out of context
we dry ourselves out and shrivel
into white blindness
we can't close our eyes
we can't close our eyes
once we lose control of our sight
we cannot choose what to see, even
for the sake of some higher call
we don't pour ourselves into
we evaporate
and like clouds retreat to our bars and our books
becoming backdrops
for future acts and actors
writers and artists;
birdsongs- every one.

Swallow
bring the spring with you then leave.

Scott Holzman is a writer, poet, and curator from Cincinnati, Ohio, USA. He is the executive director of Chase Public, a collaborative space for art and assembly focused on the prioritization of empathy and gift-giving in creative practice. He is one of the principal writers and interactive process designers of the massively collaborative poem “Seven Hills and a Queen to Name Them” which was dedicated to the city of Cincinnati, tattooed on 263 people and inspired more than 50 public artworks.