

The Dilapidated Heart

Roger Dickinson-Brown

THE ROMAN ROAD

There was a road here, long ago,
Where now September beeches glow,
Where the Roman ruin yields
Artifacts from the ploughed fields.
Old wind and rain have come and gone,
Effacing things. They will this song.
Here where September beeches grow
There was a road once, long ago.

HER LAST POEM

When I am dead, remember this for me:
Furious morning birdsong, wind on the sea,
A storm coming and a glass of old wine,
The grace of the color green, the clear-eyed fine
Smile of a girl, a grey horse in a stable.
Remember, then, when I will not be able,
The cry of stags, the delicacy of doves
And never me. Remember what I loved.

REMBRANDT

Sixty self-portraits of a plain face
With small embellishment and without pride,
Delineating what he had to face,
Painting dark golden what was trapped inside.

THE FOREST OF ERMENONVILLE

Into the deep green forest
Goes Jack, Romantic whiz:
Into Mother Nature,
To find out who he is.
I too go to the forest -
Hoping I don't get shot -
Not just for Mother Nature
But to find out who I'm not.

LOVE POEM VI

With ceremony I thee wed,
To act upon the marriage bed,
To have and hold to our last breath
And screw each other unto death.

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

ENVY

She looks at him in that admiring way
And I smile faintly, and then look away.

LUST

I was ravenous of all those fresh
Girls who had no names, but only flesh.

PRIDE

A dead have's better than a dead have-not:
The have lies under marble. But both rot.

SLOTH

He's not really a procrastinator.
He won't now, but neither will he later.

GREED

Although delighted with the rising sun
He would have much preferred a bigger one.

GLUTTONY

One dish for hunger and one dish for fun,
One for the road, and then another one.

ANGER

I swear to you this outrage shall not pass:
It is like blood, running down broken glass.

SKINNY SONNET I

I love you more than flies love honey;
More than the businessman loves money;
More than my dog loves everyone;
More than carrion loves the sun;
More than the butterfly loves its flower;
More than Bonaparte loved power;
More than bacteria love to spread;
More than the living fear the dead.
My love will last as long as taxes,
Long as the lover in bed relaxes
Airily in springtime breeze:
As long as laughter, death, disease.
And if I don't love quite so long
This is still a pretty song.

CHANGE

You who are not here and would not be,
You who don't, perhaps, remember me,
Though I remember, would you understand?
Before you turned away, I held your hand.

BAR-ROOM

Three magicians, middle-aged,
Past their passion, past their rage,
Prestidigitating, drinking,
While their little time is shrinking.
They are doing, just like you,
What so many try to do:
Make the huge, consuming past
Disappear inside a glass.

THE MAN MARRIED TO THE BAKER'S WIFE

She broke the heart of the artisan she wed,
Had no respect, treated their kids like rats,
Disappointed him in heart and bed,
Threw out his magazines, belched, starved his cats,
And deliberately oversalted the brown bread:
It cost a lot to win her maidenhead.
But she was his, so she was not all bad;
The wrong one, but the only one he had.
She was his wife, and so she was his kin –
A relative he couldn't live without:
It was her alabaster virgin skin
He got into, not wanting to get out.
Each day he baked and loved, despite his heart,
Not as impulse but as reason does:
His passion not a feeling, but an art,
His heart becoming what his duty was.

LOSS

le 9 décembre, 1996

Blue, white, red –
The old French lady's dead –
Below, beside, above –
She loved badly, but she loved –
Evil, cancer, harm –
Even old, she charmed –
Flee, flown, flit –
With her crystal wit –
Rain, mist, fog –
She was lonely, loved her dog –
Who, where, how?
Where's her doggie now?
Dog, cat, mouse –
Empty out her house –
Sing her, praise her, shout her –
We're alive without her.

WEDLOCK

Take yourself a wife!
Hold within your arms
The very stuff of life!
Penetrate her charms!
But age will mar her face
And it will wither you.
What the years don't erase,
Misunderstandings do.
Exuberance of flesh
Falters in duress.
Then, in your distress,
Marry loneliness.

CLASSIC POEM

When the hard slab of marble, fine and vain,
Smoothed by wind, wet with indifferent rain,
Weighs upon your once white, charming breast
That I once lay upon, and once caressed,
No one will then return to you to see
What has become of your own delicate grace
Except myself, lingering in this place,
This cold suggestion of infinity.

BOX OFFICE

The script, the tunes, the acting aren't much good:
Explosions, orgasms and Hollywood.
The movie titillates with sex and crime
But this is how we like to kill our time:
Snickering at the latest dirty jokes
And sobbing on the sofa with our cokes.

TO HIS CHASTE MISTRESS

You feel, my darling, that there's nothing wrong
In all the future. God made you beautiful,
Nature is generous and bountiful
And I amuse you here with a sweet song
Of my desire and your lovely youth.
Happy to be fresh, in love and free,
You will not hurry opportunity,
Though it be moving closer to the truth:
Your health and beauty are a perfect sum.
But as the future passes, and flesh wanes
Beneath a full, cold moon, you will complain
Of what you've lost, and what you know will come.
What will be left of us? Not love, not lust:
Some sins and virtues, and your virgin dust.

ON JONATHAN SWIFT, WHO

Spent adolescence seeking, loving, lusting
After the flesh he later found disgusting.

TO MY WIFE

I recall, across the years we've shared,
Just before our innocent wedding vow,
You at the mirror, a flower in your hair,
And your bright eye as beautiful as now.

HOMESICKNESS

Oaks, maples, big wood houses, harvest moons,
Orange pumpkins, maple syrup, snow, raccoons,
Sweet corn husks yellowing in lucid Fall,
My family, my mother most of all:
An album full of shades and distances.
I have become someone I never was.

SONNET 35: OLD LADY

A flash of nudity. He'd looked away
But she'd seen his emotion – delicate flower
Blooming, as she was then, and on display,
Long years ago. His passion was her power.
But her golden body ran to waste.
It causes him, confused, to look away
Now, not in modesty, but in distaste,
Though he tries to dissemble his dismay.
Hers is the wailing song of the once young;
Hers is the aging body that still thrills
To the intentions and the beauties sung
Of innocent youth, but that are now distilled
Into a concentrate of solitude:
The loneliness of her decrepitude.

LI PO

Work on words for years or for a day,
Hone and polish, then throw them away.

BACTERIUM IN LOVE

Whatever it is dreaming of,
It thrills (we think perhaps it does)
And concentrates on what it loves:
It spreads itself sublimely wide,
Surrendering as it divides
And delicately multiplies
In ecstasy. And so it dies.

CLASSIC EPITAPH

No more error, sin or grief or lust:
Old marble here does honor to her honor.
May flowers bloom in her dispersèd dust;
May pollen, earth and stone lie light upon her.

HUITAINE

Charme, grâce et style ! Il fait sien
L'art de dire et d'écrire bien,
Dit, avec élégance, rien.

FRENCHMAN IN LOVE

Darling, I love you in sea breezy Spring,
When beautifull pale Appril flowers grow
And stimule all my love in every sing:
Sea green of nature, where my feeling flow.
I love you more in summer brilliant flower,
More sat I ate sea evil bourgeoisie,
More sat tree shade in summer fruity hour,
More sat my proper word in poesy.
Zen, in sea pretty Autumn of our life,
When our age disappointment ave appear,
I weal turn steel to my one only wife,
What I steal love, across sea lonely year.
White winter snow falls ersward in extreme
Sharm: it and you and I are like a dream.

AUTHORISATION

She looked for tears, staining the virgin page
But there was only ink. Her future aged.
In the silence of a mortal womb
An infant died, with no name and no tomb.

AFTER MARTIAL 1.16

*Sunt bona, sunt quaedam mediocria, sunt mala plura
Quae legis hic. Aliter non fit, Avite, liber.*

Some of these lines escape the commonplace,
But some of any book is mediocre;
No doubt a lot just fill up space:
Some good, some fair, some dross, like cards in poker.

THIRTEEN WAYS TO WRITE A BAD POEM

Literary:

This verse ethereal is what thou hast.

Allusive:

Gertrude's pigeons, Proust's cakes, Shakespeare's past.

Obscure:

I piddle on the purple moon, and you.

Egocentric-masturbatory:

I turn in bright me, and the world turns too.

Prosaic:

My aunt served him a cup of breakfast tea.

Sentimental:

Love, your caresses are soft symphonies.

Pornographic:

My Love! My God! I live to fondle knees!

Precious:

Ah! The exquisite *paleur* of the quail!

Political:

Fashionable senators in jail.

Personal-Confessional:

Though it's a subject Sévigné avoids,
Let's chat a bit about my hemorrhoids.

Mismetered:

I think I've only occasionally heard,
From time to time, a much more confusing word.

Misrhymed:

This is a sorry misrhymed couplet a-
Bout the incompetence of a writer.

Pseudo-experimental:

Broken cor
ners of me
tric lines bore
me. This po
em has no
wit.

LETTER

Today I got my hair cut
And I paid some debts;
The penicillin's working;
I deposited some checks.
My children's grades are better;
Last month's magazines are read;
I've written to my mother.
I've begun to get ahead.

*The cold wind blows
And rotten is the rose.*

Take the time

That God bestows.

My arthritis is now stable;
I'm paying off my loan;
I'm reasonable at the table
(I'm down to sixteen stone).

I'm learning to apologize;
I've straightened up my room;
I've started taking exercise
To hold off doom.

*The cold wind blows
And rotten is the rose.*

Take the time

That God bestows.

I've assembled all my scribblings
And been nicer to my wife,
Trying to improve things
In an imperfect life.

Despite the situation
I try not to complain:
I'm taking medication
Against the growing pain.

*The cold wind blows
And rotten is the rose.*

Take the time

That God bestows.

TO A DYING FRIEND

I write to enter your illness, to bestow
Some of my own sorrow, to talk, although
I know you can't hear me as you turn away
In the unspeakable silence of decay.

WITCH'S SONG

What is ancient once was new.
I was a young girl, much like you,
Who wandered free in a spring field
Where perfumed grasses bade me yield
To my loved one, who came by day,
Then came by night, then went away.
Where's my beauty now, my grace?
I remember a young face.
Go tell my lover what he knows:
Fresh love, like April, comes and goes
While witches mouth, in disarray,
Mouldy truth from yesterday.
I am old who was a girl,
I am from another world,
Trying still to make you hear
Words about to disappear,
Words that fail and fade away,
Words that wail of yesterday.

BLOODY MARY

If I fought change, it was for lack of pride.
I loved the dead. Who was I to deprive
The past of presence? Bloody Mary died
Trying to keep the implacable dead alive.

APRIL POEM

I write to you with anguish, my old trust,
Nasty, and worse in bed, but a handy whore
Who keeps a tidy, proper metaphor.
The pieces of our past sift with the dust.
It is dust without a proper name.
Write back, before we die. This is the world.
Spring dust glitters, dust of an emerald.
These are the scribbled letters that remain.

ON THE THEORY OF THE INFINITY OF THE FUTURE

Sequence is limitless, but not the past:
The sources of the future didn't last.

AN OLD MAN CONTEMPLATES HIS GRAND-DAUGHTER

adapted from Ghirlandaio's painting in the Louvre

She is lovely face and form,
White teeth, and her complexion warm
As sunny cherries, full of now,
Like a lover's pretty vow,
Like biting into ripened fruit,
Like letters brimming with good news,
Like flirting with the absolute,
Nothing in the world refused
Her, fresh in hope, delight and trust,
Far from corrosion, far from dust.

LA VEUVE

Après sa mort elle prit un amant,
Meublant sa solitude, et l'aimait bien.
Ce n'était pas ce que c'était avant,
Mais c'était vivant : c'était mieux que rien.

THE BEAST WITH TWO BACKS LEARNS TO LOVE

While we moaned, the pretty thing had force
But no character: her face was coarse,
Anonymous as buttocks. Then discourse
And conversation came, and intercourse.

INCIPIENCE

Music is her toy.
Heartbeats are her joy.
She knows her parents' voices;
In them she rejoices.
She moves with her mother's motion,
Grows in their commotion
And enters the huge bold
World nine months old.

FOR A MAN WHO DIED YOUNG

As soon as he was born, huge religious
Circles, grammar, squares and nomenclature
Drove his character beyond his nature,
Moving him farther from the rest of us.
Against the shifting light, the green, the sea,
All his life his well-dressed outline broke;
With elegance and tact and grace he spoke –
Even in rhyme: a gentleman was he.
Only now we give him back to Mother:
Still, relaxed and rotting in his clothes,
His atoms gone where he no longer knows,
His corpse now mute with his becoming other.

OLD SNOB'S OPUS

Though others found my work absurd
I hung upon my every word.

SONG OF THE ANCIENT BEAUTIES

To Snow White's Stepmother

Even if she had died, another young,
Tender and beautiful thing would have sprung
Up there, from the drops of rose-red blood,
The huge inevitable coming in the flood
Of the world's beauty. You made two mistakes. The first,
Trying to stay young: Grotesque Disease
Of the Permanent Rose. And then, the worst –
O most pernicious of psychologies,
Remaining sin of the most virtuous!
Your own failing beauty could have been
As good as hers. Your ego came between
Who you were and what you had not seen!
And now your golden hair has turned to dust
And both of you have joined the rest of us.

THE OLD WOMAN AND THE BRIDE

Elegant girl, surrounded by smart friends,
Your pretty lips an adolescent smile,
Your beauty moving to unconscious ends,
Simple, innocent and juvenile:
Your gestures are all fresh. Young as the sun,
Alive as flowers in your unconscious hand,
Your doing will not ever be undone
And everything is going as you planned.
You are not thinking of the day you'll laugh,
Confused, behind a hand of shriveled leather,
Moving ever farther from your birth,
Moving closer to your epitaph,
Nor of the day your mouth will close forever,
Nor of the day it will be filled with earth.

ON A PRETENTIOUS LOVER

Truth and beauty dwell in sex,
Making simple things complex:
His turgid love goes unrequited
But at least he's expedited.

LA PLUS BELLE DÉCLARATION D'AMOUR QU'IL AIT CONNUE

Un jour d'hiver, elle lui a dit,
Il fait froid, chéri, viens dans mon lit,
Et le pauvre, un peu gonflé, a dit,
Un gros plein de soupe comme moi ?
Et elle a dit, dans son désarroi,
Mon amour, tout ce que j'ai, c'est toi.

TO HIS DEAD MISTRESS

I was young when we rehearsed
The huge force of the universe.
We followed it without distrust.
We followed footsteps in the dust,
Undeterred.
Now I'm old, and I distrust
Everything, because I must,
Though I still hear inside the wind
The gorgeous meaninglessness in
Those gods we served.

THE METEOR SHOWER

Narragansett, Rhode Island, August 12, 1997

What is consciousness that knows
The self, and is not self? I know I know
Not, but conceive of God, although
God flees this ego out of which I grow.

LE ROSBIF AMOUREUX

Je rappelle l'éclat de ta jeunesse, Miel,
Là dans le fin printemps de notre belle amour ;
Le banquet des délices, et le piquant sel
De notre sentiment, qui est encore piour,
Et je vois comme si c'était hier, toi et moi,
L'été de notre aventure d'amour vécoue,
Et jamais je n'oublierai la première fois
Que je t'ai trouvée dans mes bras forts, toute noue.
Nous aimons encore, gardant de belles traces -
Les frêles feuilles vieillissantes et brounies,
Dorés et rouges, sèches mais pleines de grâces :
Les délicatesses de notre automne ounies ;
Amour, même en blanc hiver je serai émou
Par tes cheveux, tes beaux yeux et ton charmant cou.

SALVATION

The trees my father planted have grown old.
This place, where roses bloomed and failed, is bare.
Winter, absence, ice are what they hold –
Frail grace, of which, alone, I am aware.
I don't know if I've found you in this air
That shifts and fills with empty light and cold
Wind blowing, but I believe you're there,
Vague, on the edge of something like this prayer.

VERY TECHNICAL POEM

I've lived my life among paper and pens,
comments in the margins and books as friends,
as if seeking, not intrinsic rhymed facts
beyond my being, nor gestures nor acts
done, nor the sublime, complex confession
of love, but lucid paper expression.

LOVE

I sit in a three-star restaurant, my late
Middle-aged cheeks at work, and my fat belly –
The usual rhyme here has to do with jelly –
Prominent, my bald head bent to the plate.
Good food! My aging, compromised delight
Finds, twice a day, its rendez-vous in need:
Meat and cigars and wine. It is a creed
I've entered into almost without a fight.
I get by on what my money buys;
Meantime old Mozart Masses ring in me,
Rembrandt, Cervantes, some lucidity.
And yet: the slender waitress shimmers by
And she is lovely. There was a time I meshed
Myself, like her, in joys of another's flesh –
Long ago, before I learned to pray,
When what I did meant more than what I say.

SHOPKEEPER

The old man sits in silence at his door,
Watching a fly buzz: one fly, dropping in.
He knows that when he's dead, there'll be no more
Small shops to do your local shopping in.
Watches, washing machines, screws, nails, plugs, wires
Crowd dusty corners. Much will never be sold
To the old ones who come: the sick, retired,
Lonely, the poor who have no cars, the cold
From off the street. She knew, before she died.
He's happy that she isn't there to moan
About his failure. When she was alive
He was cruel to her. Now he dines alone,
Dreaming of her he never quite deserved
And all the customers he does not serve.

from **Jonathan: #32**

(May, 1972: At the Cemetery)

I walk on ground
Above you and your eyes
Are withered and the sound
Of insects, if it reaches, dries
Within your ears.
Earth is alive below
My feet and your name veers
In what wild air and grasses grow.
Jonathan, what you
Require in your stead!
Wind and frail air strew
Memory against the dead.

from Jonathan: #39
(May, 1972)

I came to the cemetery:
boys had wandered there, mowing the
long grass; now I brought white daisies
from the boy's aunt. On the road they
culled the whites and greys of a killed
possum. Here they moved with the wild
strawberry blossoms and the ferns.
The air shifted. Violets burned
the ground. Maples and pines were laced
with loud birds. I knew them; they did
not know me. Agent of loss, I
turned to articulate, and white
flowers gave light to constant stone.
All wild things were sweetly growing,
pines and maples. I was alone.

LOVE POEM

My wife, for economy's and beauty's sakes,
A pretty woman, taking what she takes,
Picks not-yet-dead white flowers from the trash
Outside the church - vestiges from the Mass
We've celebrated here these thousand years -
And makes a thing of charm and life and cheer:
Three things that last a day or two, unstable,
On the old oak of the polished kitchen table.

from THE CAGE OF THE EGO

...Each of us lives in a little cage;
The inside is like gold.
Outside is iron and rust and rage
And in it we grow old....

CLOWN SONG

Now it is spring and now it is summer,
Winter follows May.
How we got from one to the other
Is what I try to say.
The dandelions are gold and moist
But as I turn they die.
Who turned there before they lost
Gold, white and turning dry?
And now is a time of flowers and flies;
I can't see time in place;
Though yesterday is memorized,
This was not my face.
I do not know who sang this song,
Though she resembled May.
I go, and you will come along:
It's what I tried to say.

AT NAPOLEON'S TOMB

Silent, he abdicates
Inside concentric walls.
The crowd reverberates,
Loud in marble halls.
His death made half the Empire weep.
Now he waits forever in his sleep.

OLD SNOB XVII

Posed above the *vermeil*, he reflects:
How could they serve *sauce blanche* with shrimp and sole?
Sometimes he has the feeling he's the sole
Heir of the great cooks. His gold watch reflects
Roses and porcelain. He thinks his shit
Superior because of what went into it.

LAST POEM

The thing in all the universe which most resembles God is silence.

- Meister Eckhart

Having said something very small
I put pen down. Silence is all.

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