
Poems

Taipei Nights

Mist in the small alleys like white veils covering the dirt
whiffs of sweet tofu broth
steaming and white
and tofu vendors
pounding the paths between
low brick walls
their calls in the night
like the pathos of tofu spread thinly on brick
City dwellers
a bamboo flute cries unexpectedly
from an open window
like a swan stifling in pollution
heavy incense wafts from a miniature temple
and in the shadows someone mourns
 the day—lost
 profit—lost
 a lover—lost

This, the city of loss
of disappearances
where friends meet in groups
treating each other to meals
toasting always toasting
with shaoshing rice wine
the amber liquid of polite conversation
obligations like chopsticks
useful and abundant
and the serving girl
clicks her chopsticks

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cutting yard long noodles
friendships like noodles
long but cut
with a violent clack of the chopsticks
The city of disappearances
where plum blossoms
fall over the garden wall
into the gutter
and dissolve like watercolors
city of disappearances
where art is wrapped up
like so many little dragon dumplings
and promptly devoured by schoolboys
city of buses
to anywhere
buses full of rain-stained windows
like veils and white tofu
blurring the loss
of the friends and the swans, the blossoms and art
City of resigned women
taught from childhood
how to obey and endure
and anyway too tired at the end of the day
to mourn.

Gail Tirone

In The Empty Hall The Show's Over

Rows of red seats endless in the auditorium
red endless from alpha to omega
leico lights
gouging holes in the dark
the black stage like a concave world
devoid of heroes
and the camera skeletons impaled on their cold metal stands
the lone schoolgirl
returning to search
for a forgotten umbrella
and me shaking in the wings
sucking on my metal pen
while turning out poems on concave heroes

me licking metal and shaking
while waiting for my lover
who's backstage with his operatic wife
(that tiger bitch)
receiving congratulations

The clapping over
the curtain raised
the stage lights exposing
—all that is ugly—
ugly from alpha to omega
as I keep shaking
in terror of confrontation

The show's over
and I've been dismissed
like the schoolgirl who calls out too often in class
without raising her hand
like the bowing, aproned servant
or the secretary always at your disposal
like the subordinate being obsequious

The show's over
and I'm lonely
neglected by my busy lover
lover busy giving orders, stage directions
busy accepting congratulations
busy making impressions and money

The show's over
but the irony's just begun
when who do I run into
of all people but
my lover's wife
that monument of rusted womanhood
rotund and matronly
and also neglected
as we take solace in
the McDonalds across the street
a communion of resent
I look up from my window seat
to find her eyes boring into mine
as the ice cream curdles before even hitting my stomach
My concave hero licking and ticking
the alpha and the omega
ice cream and rust.

Gail Tirone

Portrait of Charles 1930

“He’d be working in a gas station near St. Louis if he hadn’t had a stroke of luck.”

—Unnamed socialite, 1930

Not your ordinary gas station attendant, this man in coveralls with the fair and flopping hair, the wide smile, bending down to ask if you want Regular or Ethyl—“and what about your oil?”

His name is Lindbergh. Not so long ago he flew planes over the state fairgrounds—wild loops, acrobatics, wingwalking. And at night he flew the mail to Chicago, bailed out a few times when the weather got rough. In fog and rain and snow

he floated down in his harness, twisting and turning, for the plane would spiral, sputter and spin, coming at him. But luck seemed to be with him. Then, in '27, they asked if he would enter the contest—33 hours or so over the sea—safer than flying the mail, they said, just follow the ship lanes, make sure there’s a tail wind, good weather, take along enough fuel. Just steer straight ahead! It would lead on, they said, to fame, possibly glory, maybe riches. It might lead on to ‘greatness,’ whatever that is. “Nope,” he said, wolfing his burger at Mac’s diner, on the edge of the airport. “It’s about time I came down to earth. A man’s got to be realistic, get him a good job one of these days, something steady.” He clangs the zinc nozzle back against the red gurgling pump. Then he stoops

to check your tires with his gauge, gives each a kick.

David Ray

The Prayer

“Fourteen years dropped out from under me, and I knew just where we were then, and where we really belong, and where we always ought to.”

—James Agee

James Rufus Agee, the prayer for today is how
 to let the guilts of the past go,
 not to browse through a sheaf of old snapshots,
 ponder how right you were together, you and Alma in an open
 car,
 breezing along at Monk’s Farm,
 you wearing your railroad engineer’s cap
 of striped ticking down over your thick unkempt hair,
 Alma with her scarf, cigarette, smoke caught in the air,
 and all hands relaxed, gone limp as the car breezed along
 in New Jersey past the telephone poles, shacks
 in the background, a loading dock’s roof jutting out
 and the maples catching the light of that year. You say
 you were wonderful then, belonged always together
 but that now life has got too thick to solve.
 Can’t you try to get back, you say to her, there where the car
 barely moved yet took you into the years?
 In the backseat sat your friend Delmore, looking far offstage,
 with only faint interest. Would you call him back too,
 saying the years were nothing, insist he return from the dead,
 sit again on that prewar seat ridged like the shell of a scallop—
 and not one of you step out of that car ever, twist
 the steel handle, hear the latch click, feel the half-
 door open. And what do you say to the years themselves?
 Next you’ll be writing the years, the progression of nights,
 one after the other. Rufus, that is not the way to go about it.
 not past midnight, not with the drink in hand. Try the prayer.

David Ray

Early Forties Song

The two women swing arm in arm
in the photo I have of them
white as forbidden chocolates
after heat.

The married one holds my interest,
strikes a pose like a match
at the end of a rationed Lucky Strike—
the other merely tags along,
a single run in silk hose.

Somewhere there's a war—
so there's war everywhere.
Though some think not there
but where the men are,
where all that blowsy red
just oozes with trench mud,
where magnolias pitch on scarlet swishy skirts
any green sailor would be sick for.

Necklaces from the Pacific
clicked like empty shells.
The dangerous one thought she heard the sea
“hang about my neck like a rosary”
but it was only blood
quickenened by her first wine ever.

At the end of a week of rivetting
she wheedled an old man with rouge
to snap the pictures.
Each pose she was so happy
not yet to be my mother.

But war acts catch up,
strain a marriage so far apart.
Adultery and war make such a loving couple,
it frizzes your hair.
Swings.

Kay Murphy

Fame

A novel you've been reading for a while
 Permeates the weather's
 Bas relief of twisted trees on a flat hillside
 The motifs of recapitulation and self-respect
 Make you notice a nod and a collar,
 Branches strung with literary devices,
 Parched front lawns dewy in patches

 How you haunt me,
 Approaching the third anniversary of the insult,
 A fuse tucked in January, talking with recent strangers
 And pushing a saucer to the left.
 They always bring you up in conversation
 Like a divingbell, and one has so few chances
 To reminisce nowadays, living in the past.
 I wish they would meet you, and dislike you.

 The long paragraphs make the afternoon sodden,
 Make me glad when evening shatters.

 For a while, I'll no longer mind
 The walk upstairs. The pause on the third landing
 Has its own otherworldliness, like a silo.
 Some embarrassed solace to be found hidden in
 The mess I made of the kitchensink:
 The fork elopes with the butterknife
 And the spoon in such a quandary
 As to be neither soup- nor tea-.
 Leaving dishes until the morning, thank goodness
 Isn't a privilege confined to national holidays.
 Everyday brings belated wishes.

 One of them even does an impersonation of you.
 It encourages the tinted lights to do their version
 Of lights never flicked off, surrounding the person
 In question. You, redundant you
 Sat in a compensatory, neverending shade,
 A darkening sham that was *the* darkening sham.

 The drawer opens, as if it were time for a bottom drawer,
 I call the drawer from across the room.
 It answers to the honorific.
 Shirts are stacked neatly, like unused typing paper.
 You sat in the shade and differentiated
 Between outer space and outer time.

Jeffrey Jullich

Highrise

A duller blur up there, hardly
 absorbed into the white innards
 of the second . . . fourth bright window, the
 kitchen's pale ceiling
 clogged by what might've been predicted:
 Oddly lit drapery, conspicuously
 askew, drapes suspended
 in a rough draft, shudders
 that necessitate hands on a pillory

Seeing
 countless last moments
 deliquesce

everywhere. Although it feels important,
 the first of anything, of whiter views
 housebound at the back of the calendar,
 a distinct lack
 de-centers the falling epitome.

Convince the breakfast plate
 the day has not begun
 on a sour note. Instead, bittersweet
 sense of a gulf you
 can possess, and declaw.
 I at times wonder

how you interpret
 these human conditions, umbrellas
 and, now, long-awaited
 dehumanization we've shared
 since, as it's called, breaking up
 in much the same way:

One apex
 of the evolutionary ladder facing
 the uncertainty principle.

Tomorrows that are already here
 glitter on the fragile silverware
 that knows its place.

Jeffrey Jullich

Riding With Keats

He is so light that his patient horse
 might carry him for a thousand years,
 this little man whose hand
 clutches quietly at the reins.
 When we ride each morning
 along the Tiber, I see
 the ardor of his bowed face
 flash over the dark water,
 I watch his eyes that watch nothing
 glow and deepen with
 the slow immensity of words,
 I feel his whole body grow
 into another language,
 the sweet and awkward syllables
 of its solitude.

Our horses' nostrils quiver
 with each quick breath
 of rising wind
 as if they smelled the coming snow.

But what will come with the snow?

The storm of a thousand hooves
 plunging across the piazza,
 the ghostly hailstones chiming
 in a dazzle of blue crystal
 under our stunned feet,
 the sudden hush of deep drifts
 closing endlessly
 over the loneliness
 of our long ride together
 through this hardbreathing silence.

Rita Signorelli-Pappas

Deep Autumn

Deep autumn now. The cicadas
 have called it quits. The bamboo
 failed to overrun the lawn
 again this year, and we killed
 a lot of centipedes—they breed
 like sin, and never turn useful
 or lovely. The monsoon came
 and went. The mosquitoes stayed,
 needing our blood to breed—they
 always stay—their only attitude
 is greed, their gratitude, disease.
 Now a pair of mantids, autumn's
 sleekest hunters perform green's
 final ritual upon our window screen:
 He circles her immensity for hours,
 anxious for an opening. She eyes
 him, abdomen atwilt with eggs.
 The maple leaves have all turned red,
 and afterward, she carries him around
 awhile, spent husk of summer, attached
 to everything except his head.

John Quinn

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David Ray's *The Touched Life: New and Selected Poems* is published by Scarecrow Press. A new collection, *Sam's Book*, is forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press. He teaches at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. For 1987 he will be a visiting professor at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.

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