

Selected Poems

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Published by William A. Stubblefield

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For Merry

In place of the gift
I had forgotten to bring you:

A blue hemisphere,
the empty half of a robin's egg.
I found it,
residue of creation,
in the grass beside the sidewalk.

Haiku

What a curious raspberry branch
with no spirits
attached to it

Elegy
For Isis

When I married my wife,
you had already lived with her
ten years. That is how we remained:
The old, orange and white cat,
and the new man in the house.

My wife loves cats; I like them
well enough. But when you growled
and clawed her favored Persian,
a pampered, aging bimbo,
I liked you quite a lot.
You and I, we formed
an understanding:
I became your companion
of second choice, and you
my favorite distraction.

You would sleep in a basket
on my desk while I worked.
When you awoke and walked
across the keyboard onto
my lap, I would put you in
the basket, and you would walk
onto my lap. I'd put you
in your basket with food,
You would eat, and walk
across the keyboard onto
my lap. I'd put you back
into your basket, turn you
on your back, and rub
your belly. Somewhere I had heard
that hypnotizes alligators.
Sometimes, it worked on you.

But sometimes, you just sat
at the edge of the desk, and stared,
with blue eyes so different from mine.
I'd cup my hands around
your head, and move them down
your sides, smoothing your fur.

I'd stare into your eyes.
You stared back, steadily,
your strange mind like liquid,
your Buddha nature,
your defining contradiction:
a tranquil mind enclosing
a wild and dangerous heart.

When you became sick, I watched
you grow thin and weak;
the veterinarian thought
your pancreas had failed.
She gave us pills and iron tonic,
and showed us how to "pill a cat."
A process much like sticking
a post-it note on a moving fan.

But it did no good: you fell
from eight pounds to four,
and the iron tonic you spit
back at us hardened on your fur
like rubber cement. Finally,
we stopped the pills and tonics.

But I took you outside almost
every day. You were
an indoor cat, not used
to the yard, but, since you were
too weak to go far, I watched
and let you wander.

You walked to the edge of the grass,
where weeds and brush lined the property,
and stared into the darkness.
The small birds complained.
You froze and crouched,
Ancestral memories stirring
your predatory heart.
Then you grew tired, walked
away and found a spot
to sleep, alone.

No matter how weak you became,
no matter how much of the day
you hid in the cave beneath
the blue, stuffed chair,

our walks stirred your spirit.
And when I looked into
your blue eyes, I found you there
like always, bright and calm.

Eventually, you grew weaker.
On our trips to the yard, you stopped
exploring and simply rested.
When you could no longer walk
without weaving or falling, we decided,
in our human wisdom, that the pain
had grown too great, for even
your wild heart.

I asked the veterinarian,
if we could take you outside,
into the yard behind her office.
There, you seemed renewed,
more alert than you had been
in days, exploring each dark
and hidden place. I followed
you around the yard, until she
and her assistant found us.
I calmed you down, talking
and smoothing your fur until
you rested softly on the grass.

You were my companion,
and you were my teacher.
From you, I learned the essential
paradoxes of animal existence:
That selfishness engenders love,
that action bears the axioms
of wisdom, that pain summons grace,
and that a wild heart
feeds the tranquil mind of understanding.

Sonnet

On Meeting You for a Weekend on Martha's Vinyard

Again, you're left alone. I'm on a plane.
My work takes me to Boston several days,
Or more each month. And while you don't complain,
I know you hate the time I spend away.
Still, this goodbye was easier than most:
You're meeting me to share some time alone
Together on the Massachusetts coast.
Our inn was once a whaling captain's home;
How fitting we should meet in that hotel
That's known so many greetings and goodbyes.
I wonder if his lady smiled as well
As you, with sadness only in her eyes.
These scenes repeat, partings without end,
And I am bound to you, as the captain to his friend.

Poetics of the Quiet Man

I want to learn the poetics of the quiet man:
The articulation of breath, the resonance of gesture,
The rhythm of repose. I want to study
The grammar that divides the space between sounds,
The matrix where we fix words, colors and sense.

Fill every silence, leave nothing unsaid,
the result is noise, ugliness, distraction:
The brittle urgency of airports,
Lit from every angle,
A visual field without shadow or depth;
The crack of loudspeakers, buzz
Of conversation on conversation,
All nerves and glare and purpose.

I want to learn the aesthetics of the unspoken.
I want to unlearn fear, unlearn
Anger; quiet the constant psychic
Hum, the debauchery of spirit,
The need to fill each space, each moment.

I want to relearn the elements of form:
The line of a fence tracking the earth,
The pattern of birds on the top wire,
The chaos when they all fly up at once.

I want to study the poetics of the quiet man.
I remember, as a child, struggling with a hammer,
My father placing his hand on mine,
moving it to the point of greatest power and control.

Instructions for Using this Dictionary
For Carla; High School Graduation 1991

Unlike most books you will read,
This is not a book of ideas;
It is a book of words and, therefore,
it underlies all ideas.

It contains all poems and stories;
essays and arguments;
shopping lists, promises,
letters, lies, and invitations;
Thank you notes, excuses and regrets.

But, like most tools of power,
it is dangerous and difficult to master.
Therefore in using this dictionary:

Always choose your verbs first. These
define actions and life must move.
Too many people live within the confines of
“is” and “have.” Prefer verbs of action over verbs
that express state: “seize” is better than “want;”
“struggle” is better than “hope;”
“rebel” is better than “endure.”

Once you have chosen a verb,
the prepositions are obvious. Once you begin
to move, the direction of motion determines itself.
It is usually a mistake to remain still until you know,
fully, where you want to go.

Adverbs modify the meaning of verbs, and
these are often chosen for us.
Circumstance may require that we move slowly, or
circuitously or sometimes painfully. Always focus on
sustaining action and employ these modifications when necessary.

Nouns are less important than verbs. Unfortunately
too many people emphasize things over actions. Use nouns
to describe objects of slight but unique interest, as well as
things of great importance. Give a slight preference
to objects of beauty over objects of ugliness, but not too much;
Many things are ugly for important reasons.
Emphasize living objects like dogs, forests, people,
birds and insects over inanimate things

like money, rocks, sunsets, water and buildings. These in turn are more important than abstractions like justice, truth, honor and love. It is better to express the abstractions through actions and the proper choice of verbs.

Use adjectives sparingly, if at all. An object's name should capture its essence; choosing the right name makes modifiers unnecessary. If you use them, do so boldly, confidently and in ways that startle your reader.

While, in general, one sentence should equal one thought, you may use conjunctions to combine sentences into more complex ideas. Prefer simplicity, but if you do combine thoughts, do so in a way that increases the meaning of both.