

# *Selected Poems*

## *2013*



*Johnmichael Simon*



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## WHAT ELSE IS THERE TO THINK ABOUT?

You could look through glass bottles at galaxies  
chasing one another across fields of starry blossoms

Or stare at a piece of scratch-marked cave wall  
for half a century wondering which library of  
sharp-edged flints etched these inscriptions

Or if you were a fat and greedy child you could  
catalog all edible fauna and flora  
these for breakfast those for dinner and so on

But nothing simply nothing can come close  
to the ponderings on sun-filled spring mornings  
watching as a seed buried all winter  
hiding its thousand word vocabulary in the cold ground

Bursts forth its green-waving head and without  
any instruction manual smilingly becomes a pale crocus

Or the nights of frozen-hearted fear  
knowing that for all – cave painter, child grown old and feeble,  
short-skirted flower – the midnight executioner approaches  
implacably  
sharpening his sword, chanting his ancient formulas

No matter what else there is to think about  
in your shortening days

## COMPASSIONATE WOMEN

they take animals into their lives  
spend days, months, petting, feeding  
cleaning up mess, throwing out broken stuff

they kiss, cuddle and pamper as  
his lordship curses and growls  
they have themselves photographed with him  
make videos, become well known

eventually the beast attacks and devours them  
posthumously they become news items

it doesn't stop others from imitating  
doesn't stop town folk, mothers  
and neighbors who got scratched and mauled

from saying  
we told you so

## SMALL TOWN POLITENESS

*Hello good morning, we're polite so polite,  
lovely day isn't it, may we please have a word?  
And so are we sir, more polite than polite  
how can we help you? Oh please do come in*

*Some folks down the road say your son,  
your daughter, your husband as well...  
You must be mistaken, they're not that at all  
and now if you don't mind, I'm busy right now*

*Look ma'am just a minute, we have here some things,  
some things you should look at, your daughter, your son...  
They're liars I tell you, the scum of the earth  
inspecting our garbage and reading our mail*

*There's talk in the village, cross words in the street  
Now listen here mister take your muddy feet out*

*They're coming to get you old woman, be warned  
Take your things you low bastard, get out of my house*

*How dare you insult me you dirty old witch  
take this and take that, I'll show you who's boss  
You're a cheap lying devil, granddad get my gun  
the battle's begun and our honor's at stake*

*Well good day to you ma'am, we're polite, so polite  
And have a good day sir, the weather's just right*

## CADENZA

at night

he struggles to sleep  
wonders what it's like

darkness of nothing  
absence of light  
never to awaken

is it like a black fire  
or some pearly radiance  
where souls

bump each other  
like molecules of light  
in a cathedral

so many friends  
parents, spouses  
out there

singing their throats out  
in excelsis  
or simple, sorrowful

silence and darkness  
like before everything  
started moving?

and he wonders again  
why nobody ever comes back  
to tell him

until the birds start  
their crazy singing  
oh boy, it's morning again!

## THE GURU

On her podium, dressed like a man  
she dispenses insights gleaned from  
internet, newspapers and back-cover blurbs  
chewed up and regurgitated for her disciples

You can't see the outline of her genitalia  
or inhale the faint perfume of her  
personal relationships. She rises each day  
reincarnated, denying the wrinkles  
of her three thousand year old mortality

A host of hired accountants shovel bags  
of golden coins deposited at her feet  
by students, into sacks to be stored in  
time vaults and used to purchase  
food and ammunition in the days

Succeeding the next cataclysm. For an  
additional thousand dollars she will grant  
you a personal interview, during which  
she will debunk all the myths you've  
lived under emperors and clergy

Leaving you breathless for her  
final words of comfort which  
somehow never come

## SUBMISSION TIME AT THE OLD CORRAL

it's becoming more and more  
modern to smear yourself over  
pages that could conceivably  
have been used for some other  
purpose - papier maché for example  
or folded into darts thrown off  
skyscrapers, sandwich wrappers,  
foggy windscreen wipes or for  
removing something the new kitten  
left on the carpet with a grimace  
thinking that some poets could  
benefit from having their noses  
rubbed in it and then having NO  
repeated to them in a very stern  
voice. oh for a paperless world  
dogs write poetry on trees and  
other dogs stop to read them  
if they like them they write their  
own. who was it that wrote  
i think that i shall never see  
a poem lovely as a tree?  
scribble away boys and girls, god save  
the king, hip hip hurrah

## LONG HAUL JAZZ

Music written on the windscreen whips on

Arpeggios waterfall from rocky heights  
as underneath where a throaty engine sings  
its minimalist background drone  
double bass fingers strum a rubber-asphalt hum

Dashboard radio's on, announcer dreamy-toned  
beside her 5 a.m. machine-made coffee  
coughs into big city's tuning up

She puts the next discs on – Mozart and  
Charlie Parker, centuries apart, now rub shoulders  
in reassuring cadences  
along this winding black strip day

Outside blackbirds start their daily chatter  
stomach rumbles hungrily as roadside  
gas stop/diner lumbers into view  
engine sighs into silence, door slams  
bacon sizzles, coffee bubbles

Truck driver yawns  
stretches, burps  
six hundred miles ahead  
he'll oversee unloading  
turn and start his klaxon-horn road back

## EVENING PRIMROSE

These butterfly yellow flowers  
grow low and delicate on Sharon's cliffs

All day they listen, and then  
as a sinking Mediterranean sun

Conducts the orchestra  
of breakers, gull cries

They watch little children  
frolicking in the waves

That strum on the shore below  
then as maestro sun descends his podium

And mother moon  
puts on her pale lipstick

Stealing some yellow from them both  
they fold their petals into sleep

And dream of sipping milk  
and singing lullabies under the stars

Until night's interval is over  
and the clamor of the day resumes

Here in this fragment of a country  
where honey and turmoil live side by side

We close our own petals every night  
and dream of peace

## TWO, ONCE DAILY AFTER MEALS

Our son, she says  
does everything for that woman  
he's open, generous, honest  
and she treats him  
like a package insert.

She's always looking for  
contraindications  
things he didn't tell her  
about his past, our family.

*She keeps a beautiful home  
says father, and at the university  
she's very highly thought of*

And the way she interrupts him  
look how she bosses him around  
he does all the cooking  
she only sets the table

*She's very good looking  
folks think she's much younger*

She doesn't want children  
I knew it! All those years together  
mid forties, she's missing the last bus  
and he just smiles at her

*I asked him about that  
he said maybe in a year or two  
when she completes her doctorate*

And you swallow that story  
like syrupy cough medicine?  
Listen to her shutting him up again  
always getting the last word.

## FOR HIS NAME'S SAKE

There is only one person in the universe  
and he is a lie.

No throne his nothingness, no lightning bolt  
can describe his inscrutability  
his blind immortal eye.

Alone, he invents armies of children  
to disobey him. They reinvent him  
in multiple disguises.

He ignores their games.

Child, you are but a passing fable  
told by a drunkard on a stormy night.

Come, climb these stairs up to the attic  
meet your father.

Look, he is a bespectacled fellow in  
a yarmulke reading a yellowed newspaper.

He hands you a slice of bread and a pickle  
the bread crumbles in your grip to star dust  
the pickle is a comet dipped in green vinegar.

You turn to thank him and he is gone.

## HEADLINES AT BREAKFAST

*after the Beatles*

The weather so the Times says will be cool  
with scattered showers in the afternoon  
at five the radio will announce  
which numbers won the football pool

Fried eggs and Worcestershire sauce  
to start off a usual day  
fried eggs and Worcestershire sauce  
and a large cup of tea of course

The Syrian army pounded towns today  
and lines of refugees began their march  
oil's past the hundred mark again  
the priest's a homosexual so they say

Black holes are getting larger scientists claim  
the latest smartphones talk three languages  
we're very sorry to announce  
tomorrow's been postponed again

It's been raining steadily since eight  
my brand new raincoat's got a tear  
I think I'll wait a little while  
on days like this the bus is usually late

I'll have another slice of toast  
with just a teaspoonful of marmalade  
in Baghdad only two bombs went off yesterday  
and now my newspaper is closed

I couldn't really care for all that barf  
I'll turn the hit parade up loud  
or maybe go to bed for half an hour  
and in the afternoon I'll take a bath

## STILL LIFE WITH BEETLE AND DUCKS

*after Vincent van Gogh*

She spends a summer hour, this farm-born girl  
scent of mown hay mingling with her hair  
lying there under the stack watching a bug  
go about its shadow-etched excursion  
or strolling pond's brink as a scattering  
of ducks paddle-flies to glide another  
soft blue introspective landing

I can't do it, my mind pursuing fireflies  
across a sky of falling stars, or racing  
time's roller-coaster back to where  
dinosaurs roamed hugely before  
flame, smoke and falling heaven  
choked them into history's museum

Oh lure me down to you, farm girl  
haul my kite line in to rest beside you  
in this hay-fresh fragrance  
that bug is climbing faster now  
and soon he'll disappear leaving  
the two of us outlined against the shrinking sun

# VENI VIDI VINCI

That about sums it up  
Dinosaurs Ozymandias Al Aqsa

A tiny explosion  
in the Eastern sky

The statues on Easter Island  
unblinking at the heavens

Or perhaps an un-noticed mutation  
in a waterborne virus

Ushering in a new season  
of dust and velvet darkness

## MY WIFE AND I

My wife has supernatural powers  
she's telepathic, tells me what I'm thinking  
long before I even begin to think  
we've been together so long it's hardly  
necessary to open my mouth at all

She's terrific, washes the dishes  
hangs the laundry, thanks me for not thanking her  
gives me a never-mind-no-thankyou kiss

We live in a mouse hole in the kitchen  
at night we come out in the dark  
watch an old movie or something  
wait for the you-know-what that's  
getting closer all the time

I'm not telling her all these things  
she knows them anyway better than I do  
if anything happens to either of us  
I'm going to marry her again – save me  
a lot of trouble thinking of what to do  
which way to turn, how much I love her

She's clairvoyant too  
talks to cats and birds  
wish I could remember her name

## VERNACULAR

This poem has its own  
manner of speaking  
whistling while brushing dust  
from library shelves  
lifting its little finger  
at teacups and funerals  
a poem composed while eating a  
soft boiled egg each Wednesday  
(except on the 4th Wednesday  
of every other month when  
the library restaurant is closed).

It's indifferent to migrations  
of English to distant shores  
centuries bifocally displaced  
as it hides cheap rumours  
of Royal misdemeanours  
inside folded newspapers  
for reading in the Underground.  
Outside it's always raining  
as it has been the past three  
hundred years. Rhyming is  
permitted once a fortnight  
preferably in the men's room.

It pays no attention to echoes from  
other climes of twang and slang  
how railroads of actors and actresses  
dressed in crinoline and graffiti  
have spread twin tracks across  
great plains and valleys as  
at every station they descend  
shouting plain talk in jazzy rhythms  
infecting bystanders who run off  
to copy them into encyclopedias  
of smallprint declarations  
and candy coated insincerities.

All this while in the East beyond  
the clamor, an ancient scribe  
great grandchild of meditation  
dips a quill into a rivulet of ink  
and inscribes the same character again  
and again and signs it with  
a black or crimson brushstroke.

## BETWEEN FOREFINGER AND THUMB

Is this a legitimate pastime  
for a piece of charcoal  
cold from a dead fire  
or a quill dropped from  
a passing cormorant  
as it flies out towards  
the narrowing horizon?

Why should the ink in my veins  
the walls of this cave  
care about anything? As the  
waves write their endless  
white operas upon the shore  
the stars describe their patterns—  
creatures that never existed.

The blind map of sky  
looks down on us  
caring neither for philosophy  
nor guidance  
sharpened charcoal, dipped quills  
need to be held carefully  
between forefinger and thumb  
to inscribe these marks and scratches  
on manuscripts, canvases and walls.

This tidal urge  
our fingers obey  
and like the stars,  
the cormorant, the waves  
must keep obeying.

## ANATOMY

I.

I'm perfect  
from the tip of my osculation  
to the cornerstone of my  
toenails - perfect  
like a Geiger counter in ice.

II.

Thank you Miss  
I'll have a little more of that  
ectoplasm please  
it's good for the libido  
so deliciously liberating.  
What's that, your husband  
became a monk? Could we  
get together sometime, just  
the two of us? Friday after  
prayers perhaps?

III.

My friend Sigmund  
is translating Gray's original  
manuscript. Into German of course.  
He got down to a few inches  
below the navel, became fixated  
there - for decades scholars followed  
him to see what he was up to.  
I can show you what he was up to, Miss -  
5 o'clock, behind the Coliseum.

IV.

But I digress

we'd got around to the wishbone  
hadn't we? You know, some  
politicians spend half their lives  
as liberals, socialists even,  
until some rich uncle leaves them  
an apartment building or an oil well,  
then snap. Close your eyes darling  
it's like everything you ever imagined  
moving from back benches to boudoirs –  
bedrooms they call them these days.

V.

Home is

where the beating Laundromat is  
the absolute center of space and time  
24 hours every day  
even while the body is sleeping  
dreaming of Elysium  
background music of everything.  
What's love got to do with it?  
That's one of the best kept myths.

VI.

If you place your stethoscope here  
right here, don't be afraid  
you will hear the hit parade  
gurgling its way round and round  
like yesterday in a doggy bag.  
Fasting is good for the system  
it hushes the symphony until all you can hear  
is the Dalai Lama on his mountain top  
chanting his endless om.

VII.

Dem Bones

they always get in the way, don't they:  
clavicle, tibia, fibula, vertebrae, these days  
they have a machine that can  
photograph your silhouette in black and white  
a frightening thought but quite topographical really -  
with all the verve, passion and agony  
bleached out of it  
leaving only a grinning copy of you  
to show that you were here at all.

VIII.

Procrastination

does not necessarily mean  
missing the main course  
loin cloths were invented before  
tablecloths by Homo Vulgaris  
as any Scotsman worthy of his kilt  
will tell you, cutting into his haggis  
to expose a pair of tartan suspenders,  
wooly army issue socks and knobby knee caps

IX.

So my dear Miss, may I thank you  
for participating in this course  
the trajectory of which has been  
artfully concealed by generations  
of baroque painters. On Friday when hopefully  
after prayers or behind the Coliseum we will have  
our next tête-à-tête, I will introduce you  
to the Animal Cell, the Ovum, the Spermatozoon,  
the Sternococcus and the other Articulations  
of the Lower Extremity.

## BIG CITY POET

Rooted in concrete  
like some Manhattan trees  
she looks up to heaven  
sees only lines and rectangles

Sometimes she dreams  
her poetry is soaring  
like some celestial angel  
up into those mysterious regions  
she glimpses occasionally

But then her gaze reverting  
back to here and now  
she rides in elevators  
noticing how people avert their eyes  
and on the fifteenth floor  
beside a plastic potted plant

She overhears some cries  
behind a door marked *don't disturb*  
and wonders in a quick poem  
dictated to her smartphone  
whether they are arguing  
or making love

## LAVENDER

In the afternoons  
we play rummy on the balcony  
discuss politics, cost of living  
show photos of grandchildren

We sip mint tea  
waiting for an autumn sun  
to set behind the row of pines  
silhouetted on a hilltop

As twilight comes  
we kiss each others' cheeks  
promise to meet again  
next week perhaps

Or at the very latest  
in a fortnight  
weather's getting chillier

## AND SO THE OLD CAT HAS DIED

And the younger ones tread lightly  
over his favorite places sniffing for him.  
No more special menus of flaked fish  
minced chicken livers, it's back to  
dry food again and the bus still  
rumbles outside taking children to  
school (except those that are in  
the army now) and the sparrows  
approach the window again where  
he stood guard up on the table  
between the potted plants

Do the other cats miss him as we do?  
This empty gray space  
loping slowly upstairs to where  
his ghost on top of the refrigerator  
leaps - a bundle of aging fur with  
royal green eyes - leaps across  
the still open wound to land nonchalantly  
once again atop the kitchen cupboard

Today we notice that the brush still  
has his fur in it

## M E N U

This century's calling card  
mayonnaise on everything  
to cover up atrocities  
and other gruesome items

Short order cooks  
we sweat over burgers  
mass graves smothered in  
thousand islands, green cheese  
even dogs wouldn't sniff at us

Out in the rain again  
hatless, drenched and shivering  
we conclude - our menu is  
similar to it's predecessors but  
our ovens more efficient

We have automatic incinerators  
digitally programmed  
to burn up the truth  
before the inspectors arrive  
with their kosher certificates

At the United Nations greasy spoon  
they're handing out eggs and bottles of oil  
do it yourself salad dressing  
between vetoed resolutions

## EVERYBODY'S FRIEND

mister english accent  
doffs his hat at  
everyone he meets

explains impeccably  
in news announcer voice  
the way things are these days  
the size of jupiter  
and other things  
like what the menu says  
which way to reach the loo

his wife and children  
trail behind  
listening to other music  
they've heard it all before  
and frankly he's a bore

## BORDER BLUES

Beyond these orchards roars the road, winding between villages and hills, a writhing asphalt snake, southward it heaves, then east again, until it disappears leaving a constant echo in its wake.

Trucks rumble up and down the road, laden with sand from quarries, rocks and timber. Some are covered with tarpaulins and even binoculars can only guess their contents – bulky, ominous, concealed.

Dividing us from them, brothers from cousins, hard by the road, a wire fence, marked off by electronic posts, pencils in twenty yard segments the barrier which, in its way, despite seeming fragility shouts louder than a road can understand. It shouts ‘keep out’, ‘no entry’, ‘military zone’ in Hebrew, English, Arabic. Here only crows, mountain breeze and ants cross with impunity, heedless of the signs, the wires, the road.

Signboards pointing to the border bear the legend ‘The Good Fence’, and now and then a visitor, still uninformed arrives, asks for directions to the gate where women smiling behind burqas once peddled halvah.

Olives and pastel-colored squares of Rahat Lokum\*, their children and ours observing each other curiously like animals in a zoo. That was before the war, now gateway, smiles and kiosks are replaced with concrete walls

while children in their schoolrooms, so close yet not so close, chant ‘God is Great’, or sing of cypress trees that grow in Lebanon, unconscious of the irony – the trees, the birds, the ants and God – don’t really care at all.

\*Rahat Lokum – a sweetmeat similar to Turkish Delight

## WISDOM COMES FORTH

In sleep he invented driverless cars  
glatt kosher rabbits, boat trips to Mars  
his parents both frowning did not understand  
*“deficient in attention”, “hyper in his glands”*

At the age of eleven he wrote his first thesis  
refuting the lies told about God and Jesus  
discovered a cure for toenails ingrown  
invented a scent that smelled like grass mown

Determined to teach other kids how to think  
he concocted a potion that they all could drink  
which he sold for a quarter each very small bottle  
the schoolmasters vowed they would catch him and throttle

Then schools all closed down as the kids were too busy  
some teenagers took over running the city  
and a thirteen year old who resembled Bill Gates  
became President of the United States

And that marked the birth of a new generation  
the first time in history that kids ran the nation  
their new constitution said “let’s all have fun  
undoing the dumb things our forebears have done”

The moral dear readers is not fiction nor dream  
just give kids more respect and you’ll see what I mean

## GIRL SOLDIER

She sat beside me on the bus  
soldier girl from basic training  
rifle clasped between her knees  
the road was long to Tel Aviv  
a popular tune wailed from  
loudspeakers set into the stained ceiling  
a weak fan fought against the desert heat.

We did not exchange a word  
she less than half my age plugged into  
her own earphone wire snaking down  
inside her uniform. Somewhere before  
Beer Sheva she fell asleep and as the bus  
turned at a junction her head fell on  
my shoulder, a lock of corn-colored hair  
tickled my neck.

I could have woken her pushed her away  
but feeling fatherly left her there until  
the journey's end. She jerked awake lifted  
her head picked up her gun and khaki duffel bag  
stood up straightened her shirt and still without  
a word joined other soldiers leaving the bus.

My shoulder ached but somehow felt so proud  
that she had chosen it.

## IT'S A PANIC

i'm late for school again  
can't find my biology book  
dog's eaten my homework  
shoelace snapped

it's a panic  
kid's fighting again  
no bread for sandwiches  
dog needs feeding  
temper snapping

it's a panic  
can't find my glasses again  
or my prescription pills  
neighbor's dog barking  
one day i'm gonna shoot him

it's a panic  
where has the time gone  
where, where has the time gone  
it's almost finished  
and i still can't find  
what to do with it

## CONVERSION FACTOR

My husband's lips are Fahrenheit  
his heart is Centigrade  
his temper boils much higher than  
his chilly masquerade

Often I just can't figure him  
five eighths of what he says  
is thirty-two more that he shows  
or thirty-two points less

In vain I strive to calculate  
the meaning of his weather  
and if his words are from his heart  
or elsewhere altogether

## SHE WANTS EVERYTHING

child in me    butterfly blue  
    my pocket book  
a poem i wrote on the way  
    to a date with a jewish virgin

everything    the lies i told in school  
    my trek to katmandu fragrance of rice  
and limp vegetables    the way  
    the stars curl up and scream when  
smoking grass

she wants me hungry into her  
    circles me with forefinger and thumb  
her breath galloping on thick-veined stallions  
    empties me like froth remaining  
on an emptied beer glass    grasps me  
    in a stranglehold

now she says    tell me everything  
    tell me forever    tell me you'll never  
leave me

then she turns and starts a conversation  
    with a stranger who looks  
like johnny depp

## FROM A MOTHER TO HER DAUGHTER IN LAW TO BE

I raised him do you understand  
from sweetest milk to chicken soup  
I bathed him clothed him  
praised him scolded him  
and with a wetted forefinger tip erased  
some smudges that soiled his cheek  
and when he brought those birdies home  
for my appraisal, squawkers all of them  
with frowsy feathers and unpleasant accents  
I neatly clipped their wing tips  
disclosed how under those pristine feathers  
grayish and brown ones grew. How tenderly  
they held his arm gazed into his eyes  
a smelly lot indeed - smeared lipstick beaks  
yellow short skirted legs.

So now he's brought you here oriental fowl  
all blushing for my blessing. Out wretched child  
you're less worthy than all the others  
away do you hear me, how dare you steal my jewel!

Korea. Where in God's name is that?  
Oh how I wish you understood my English.

## FAÇADE

Nothing slips normally from your lips  
polite deceptions, clever little lies  
and made up things, asides and quips  
but not a word about what hides inside

Those lips painted across your face  
like a Picasso painting underneath two eyes  
one pointing east one west that show no trace  
of goings on behind your glib disguise

Silence would more become you clowning friend  
even a curse some angry howl or scream  
I'm sick of all your trying to pretend  
that neither hate nor love are what you mean

## ALONE IN MORNING'S AUDITORIUM

Every morning  
as sun ascends his podium  
and all the instruments of day  
stringed and piped and flowing  
winged and striped and growing  
clearer now – the music starts again

Although some of its chords  
and rising rhythms I know  
as I know the beating of my heart  
each morning  
I hear them once again  
freshly composed just for my ears

Listen  
a tiny bird  
somewhere at his wind-shaken  
microphone is singing  
his heart out  
and yes from somewhere in  
my dull flub-dub existence  
that old music appreciation class

I hear my own  
echoing reply  
yes, I'm here

## WE'RE STILL GOOD FRIENDS

and surely it's for tomorrow  
and tomorrow's tomorrow  
that we unraveled our love  
saying goodbye to each other  
meeting in elevators and  
on children's birthdays  
in hallways between our lives  
which slowly seem to stretch  
and widen as our past together  
yawns apart distorted now  
like Dali melting away

and surely it's for today  
and today's tomorrow  
that we try on new lovers like  
garments in changing rooms  
looking at ourselves in mirrors  
furtively making comparisons  
pulling at a hem adjusting there  
until we go our separate ways  
dressed like strangers holding  
strangers' hands and thoughts

it's seldom now but still comforting  
to pick up a phone and ask  
how are the children doing?  
is he or she asleep and how are you?

holding on to that remnant of affection  
that stubbornly refuses to go away

## THE COW

Someone left  
a cow at the top of a page  
in the copier  
on which he printed  
his heart's passion  
a poem of love and longing  
which it was his intention  
to read that evening  
to a small gathering  
of young students, mostly female  
all anxious he hoped to drink  
the Professor of Literature's  
urgent words  
drop by precious drop  
perhaps even one of them...  
but no, he shouldn't allow  
himself such thoughts

But oh, the best laid plans—  
a small jazz combo  
in the faculty of biology building  
drew all the potential ears,  
lips and fingers away and he was left  
in an empty classroom with  
unrequited love and longing  
and a Times New Roman cow

## EMILY

She had a way of using Words  
in Quaint Representations  
where common things and things absurd  
rubbed shoulders and dictations

And though she hardly ever stirred  
from bedroomed contemplations  
her musing Magic whirled and whirred  
delighting generations

How Capital we now exclaim  
at every mention of her name  
delight at lines she made Her Own  
and shiver Zeroed in the Bone

## BABUSHKA GIRL

Where is she now, where is she now  
cheeky clothes tight on her frame  
all eyes and shrieks and wonder  
sliding down banister, curled like a question mark  
then unspringing, flat as a board with buttons on

Where is she now, where is she now  
under oaks with Hemmingway and Omar Khayyam  
spring bright as a robin in her breast  
bees and boys a buzzing round her ringlets  
midnight rides, hair flying, foot flat on the pedal

Where is she now, where is she now  
blushing in heat, pushing her way to motherhood  
yet and again as cooking, washing, scolding, encouraging  
passing outgrown clothing down the line until  
the day when things no longer fit rebellious adolescent limbs

Here she is now, here she is now  
peaceful, profound, five different kinds of face cream  
no longer anti-age her wrinkles, dispensing advice,  
grandchildren's birthday presents, she can't use a smartphone  
but shares her memories like chocolate coated candies

## BUTTERFLY

*( to be read with a French accent)*

Ah yes, I am exquisite but that is not all  
on my wings alphabets, flashbacks that enchant  
catch me, paint me if you can  
one day a cocotte with sorrowful breasts  
the next a soaring celestial body  
dashing round the universe as clock hands whirl

I'm transformation embodied  
a song, lightning, a flutter  
in the pit of you

Chase me, capture me, hold me  
you know this feeling won't last for long  
but if you dance too close, beware  
I'll leave my wing dust on your lapel  
brand you mine for ever

Let's tango, boogie, cha-cha, quadrille  
paso doble, waltz me, slow me down

Now tell me you love me  
whisper it in my ear

'cos you know, quite soon now  
it will be time to move on

## FLYING NORTH

It's perfectly true, she says  
I see geese flying over clouds  
like compass needles

wheeling at times  
in spiral galaxy arms  
waiting for slowcoaches to catch up

as far below  
akimbo on a frozen lake  
nine years old, red skirt and scarf

skating in huge hissing circles  
she spots the flight and  
music dancing in her eyes

takes off and joins the whirling flock  
a weightless balloon  
their beaks and flapping hearts

now one with hers

later she tells friends and parents  
no one believes her  
except her grandmother

and she's been gone now twenty years

## RIVER

*when we dream of time's end  
it's like a frozen river  
a children's choir, a cloudless morning  
metaphors bend into melodies*

an then a moment of complete silence  
the hand of eternity  
reaches down  
and turns us into icicles

time flows  
milk, chocolate pudding  
oatmeal porridge, thick and sweet  
and then it thins out

into a broad stream  
where cows and sheep bathe bodies  
bound for packing houses  
to be salted, canned

shipped in huge trucks  
rumbling through the night  
time flows  
slowly at first then speeds up

we don't notice, we're too busy  
earning a living, having children  
teaching what to do, what is forbidden  
warning don't fall into the river

beyond its placid pools it narrows  
rushes between rocks  
dips, cascades  
suddenly becomes rapids

hanging on to fragile bodies  
hurtling towards a waterfall  
swept on, we pass a church  
perched on a hillside

in a flash it disappears  
but we have seen the steeple clock  
hands whirling now  
each year a minute, each week a second

## DRIVE SOUTH FOR TOYTOWN

Past the magistrates court  
its concrete slabs gray with commandments,  
the office block where you worked  
for twenty six years with Mervyn and  
his reptilian jokes and overweight Brenda leaving her  
lipstick smears on chipped crockery

Past wrong turns, two divorces  
both somehow grotesque copies of a whiskey  
fumed father and a crimson-fingernailed  
mother screaming at each other in Yiddish

Past the hi-protein diets, your biceps and abs  
swelling in ironing-board emulation of  
Charles Atlas possessor of the World's Most  
Perfectly Developed Body and Clark Kent getting  
undressed in a telephone booth with Captain Marvel  
somewhere shouting Shazam through parting clouds

Past Lil Abner, Dagwood Bumstead, Acne Rosacea,  
your first date with Joyce Rosenblum, her kiss  
smelling of egg sandwiches, past forbidden  
glossy magazines, Lady Chatterley's Lover, Fanny  
Hill, hidden in a cardboard carton under the bed

Pedal faster now Noddy, feet flying, you're  
almost there. Toot-toot you shout, climbing the  
yellow ladder up to a whizzing bumpy slide,  
pushing your eager body on a wooden-seated swing,  
chains squealing as you fly higher, higher towards  
bird-topped trees, finally letting go of all those  
fearful, confusing memories and sailing off  
into the endless sky over Toytown

## SAINT - RÉMY

If you went there you would probably recognize  
the wheat fields, trees, sunflowers, rooftops,  
you might look at this simple bedroom, its wooden furniture  
and say, 'Yes, I know this place'.

Even if the bed is empty, has not been slept in  
for more than a century, there is no water in the jug  
and the paintwork is brighter than it seems possible  
you might still nod your head, your memory might fill in  
the details of a bearded face, wide brimmed chapeau  
and eyes that burn with indescribable passion.

But even if you stood after dark behind that same tree  
watching the lamps light up in village houses,  
the church steeple, hills rolling around protectively  
would you still see whorls in the sky, crazy can-can  
of stars as they lift their skirts at a cavorting waterfalling moon?

For that you might need something more than vision,  
something that would enable you to reach up  
to the wild madness in your own soul.

## GROWING UP IN BUTTER COUNTRY

Mondays I'm a bugle, smiling,  
yellow clockwork circled by triangles  
frightening clouds into shadows

I hopscotch planets, hurl Saturn rings on Tuesdays  
canvas after canvas of shimmering wheat stalks  
farmhouse rooftops, drawbridges, bouquets and chairs

Thirst overcomes me Wednesdays; you'll find me  
quaffing Guinness at the pub, rivers of it,  
translating Phoebus jokes into foaming Gaelic

What I do on Thursdays is my own affair  
slinking in downtown doorways,  
through broken shuttered windows  
thrusting and tonguing some naked after dinner mints

Why do Fridays always make me nervous?  
my popcorn packets burst, can't find my glasses  
get lost in prickly forests, my rays scratched by brambles

On Saturdays I lay out on the porch, sip hibiscus tea,  
read weekend newspapers, seek old friends in obituaries  
and contemplate hours remaining for the sky to fall

Sundays, thick, creamy and bursting at their seams  
my histories of glory hanging  
from a thousand splintered mornings  
I sign my name in gold, grin again and sink into the sea

## MENORAH

Children again we light our candles  
Gay chooses blue, Joey the white Shamash  
two blood reds for two Andreas  
and a flaming orange for little Lee  
which splutters fitfully at first then  
buckles and is consumed

Tommy chooses a grayish braid of wax  
that seems to last and last but finally  
totters and is extinguished

Should I tell you how  
each of their candles burned down  
before their time? Perhaps it does not  
really matter, all streaky memories now

Then, it was a game played between  
dreidles and doughnuts. Now, those of us  
remaining don't make any more bets

We tell stories of the Maccabees instead,  
serve low fat fritters, pack the grandchildren  
off to bed

Clean the wax off the menorah  
put it away until next year  
count our blessings

### **Glossary:**

Gay - killed in a road accident - age 24

Joey - killed in a road accident - age 20

Andrea - died from leukemia - age 60

Andrea - died from cirrhosis of the liver - age 47

Lee - committed suicide - age 18

Tommy - fell off a cliff - age 79

## GLOBAL WARMING

Seeking some sun and summer fun, we went  
to Ireland – the Emerald Isle  
the forecast said, bright and clear  
at this time of the year the weather's mostly fair

– it rained! On Wednesday afternoon there was  
a break, a parting of the clouds from five till eight  
and after that it rained some more

We went to Italy in May and June  
to miss the tourist season and the crowds  
but somehow got involved with heavy clouds  
that went from overcast to fog then covered the terrain  
with days of ceaseless rain  
it hasn't been like this two hundred years  
our hostess said shaking her head

To Swaziland we went, eight years of drought  
had bleached the country out, but how absurd,  
as we arrived as if they'd heard our wishes for a bone-dry  
week, the rain clouds dashed in dark and bleak  
and then it poured, the sand all turned to mud  
and we got stuck between the soggy map,  
the road – a river now – the windscreen wipers' thud

Eventually we got the hint. It seems wherever we decide  
to go, it starts to rain and turning  
ill fortune to gain, we're opening a company to aid  
locations where shortages of water plague their nations  
and for an ample fee  
we'll come there dressed for sun  
and with a little luck and chutzpah  
the rainy days will come

## C A T A R A C T

Where my eyeball used to be  
there is a glass with a fog  
everything is fogged – the jacarandas  
crying their purple tears

like soft rain they splash, blurring outlines, roads run  
into one another crying mauve war cries  
once I was young, believe me  
history does not lie – between my forefinger  
and my thumb I bent spoons, soft metal, soft as butter

I try on pairs of glasses, walk chalk lines  
across a quadrangle – look, here  
is a pathway I used every day to school  
now obscured by dust and rubble  
look, I see as clearly as a chameleon  
holding on to leaves, my sticky tongue  
climbs to the highest branches  
touching lilac blossoms  
I carefully slide down, know the way by heart

On page eighty of my notebook lives my grandmother  
wearing horn-rimmed glasses like a man  
I can't see her but she's there I know  
each night she puts her dentures in a glass of water  
it's blurred but I can see them quite well  
floating behind a mist of bubbles

A wise woman, she read her bible, had a saying  
for every occasion – her favourite from Robbie Burns  
“O, wad some Power the giftie gie us”  
(wiping her bifocals with a lavender handkerchief)  
“To see oursels as ithers see us!”

## SUPERMARKETS OF OUR DREAMS

They're not divided into sections  
shelves, aisles, signs slung from cranial ceilings  
tea, coffee, sugar, childhood memories  
earthquakes, wars, myths and interpretations

No, it's higgledy-piggledy country  
a cluttered market where bulging-eyed fish  
float silently from grotto mouths  
and fire-breathing dragons pounce from  
teetering skyscrapers while in the shuddering  
buildings underneath we run like rats  
escaping Armageddon's wrath only to  
plunge into some new disaster

And the dream cars! Of every make and shape  
cars that you park and lose, cars that  
fall over cliffs, cars filled with chattering  
passengers and those you drive alone  
across some moonless night – abandoned wrecks  
in after-midnight junkyards

For adolescents, divorcees and other lonely  
souls, searching in vain for the soft goods  
department, there are the sexual fantasies,  
silk-shrouded corners where mannequins  
dressed only in their underwear beckon  
with wild promises of huge erections  
and week-long orgasms

And then you wake, your dog is  
scratching at the door, alarm clock's ringing,  
perhaps you have a hangover, your back  
is painful - need a coffee or an aspirin  
milk bottle's empty, today is Sunday  
and the shops are closed

## EMIGRANT

The Africa I left three times  
has left me now  
suitcases piled with clothes  
three sizes too small

Dressed as a smiling domestic  
she walked out and slammed the door  
there's no way back  
save through this camera's eye

My mother, there behind that door  
unreachable, looks out  
from her bedroom window  
in West Park cemetery

Still young and beautiful  
she parts the curtains  
watches trolley buses  
red for whites she calls Europeans  
green for blacks she calls Natives

Downtown a train waits by a platform  
bound for Sophiatown

Now comes a conjuring trick  
a word misspelled  
pieces of a puzzle that no longer fit  
the Africa I left three times  
and now revisit  
gone forever

## THIEVES

we have stolen  
we have plagiarized the wind

mimicking old syllables and manuscripts  
written by bards who in their jargon

stole them from the mouths of animals and snakes,  
whistling winds, thunder, waterfalls and birds

not a word we speak or write belongs to us  
all are as echoes and paintings on cave walls

songs composed of ancient notes  
rearranged by octaves of the wind

dragon-fire and star breeze while plays and operas,  
endless rows of kings and queens, villains and jesters

toil at their forgeries and reproductions - brazen thieves  
throats full of plunder stolen from the wind

## THANKS

My childhood is a book  
on which these words of gratitude are written

When I undress for dreams and when I wake  
and write them into poems

I hide behind the curtains of my memories  
and when I peep and watch myself, I am a child again

Walking to school in those days meant you had to  
cross the square with its benches where the old men sat

Playing chess, their fingers making moves  
determinedly removing slain pieces from the boards

And placing them in rows of black and white, silent observers,  
one of these players approaching ninety died recently

So on this page I give this prayer of thanks  
for his own childhood, removed from active duty now

But still somewhere behind the curtains  
watching us, our games of words and memories

Laughing at us, thinking perhaps it's all a joke  
told by some crusty old immigrants from Russia or Morocco

Who once were children too - kings and queens of their  
own futures in foreign accents translated into the here and now

## CAUSUS BELLI

It's counselor time we're thinking  
without a shadow of doubt  
our relationship is sinking  
we're trapped, there's no way out

It's not one of those toothpaste tube issues  
nor toilet seat left unclosed  
not about which way to stack the dishes  
or where the soiled clothes are disposed

Not a refusal to ask for directions  
when our vessel has strayed off course  
nor hogging the newspaper sections  
that has brought us to the brink of divorce

No, this time it's a life and death matter  
a question of principle no less  
that has torn our affection to tatters  
replaced marital bliss with distress

It's a bedroom thing that's the cause  
that's making our tempers so red  
a difference about closing some doors  
so the cat can't jump up on our bed

I've got used to the clock and its ticking  
the screwing of tops off the creams  
but this confounded cat and its licking  
has disturbed my most intimate dreams

So its off to the therapist with sorrow  
resolute irreconcilable and blue  
and I hope that when we meet her tomorrow  
she isn't a cat lover too

## MARKS ON THE KITCHEN DOOR

Our prince of bubbles rides his tub  
shaped like a boat, a rubber duck  
bobbing and jumping almost in his grasp  
he doesn't see tomorrow as we do  
today is captured in a rainbow ball  
that he with serious fingers tries to catch

We mark his stature on our kitchen door frame  
black pencil marks for him and following  
not far behind some crayon rungs denote  
a princesses crayon-willed determination  
to overtake him

Four decades pass, the kitchen clock ticks its  
metallic way into a new millennium and  
seeing that we're redoing the bathroom to suit  
old fogey's needs we ask the decorators to add  
a coat of paint to peeling door frames and come across  
our royal highnesses' indelible measurements  
pencils on tousled heads fresh in our minds as  
when they were inscribed - well almost...

The prince despite his PhD in medieval literature  
still hasn't got a job and princess after her last divorce  
and childless has joined a small New Age community  
praying for enlightenment while tracking UFOs

So no. Let's leave this kitchen doorpost as it is  
we tell the workmen. Who knows, perhaps they'll  
grow a little more conventional sometime soon.

## DANCE OF LIFE

Absorbed in some inner choreography  
I slowly walk the streets  
where images merge as in a dream

An autumn wind pipes oboes and bassoons  
people dash down avenues like leaves  
blown off the trees in gusts and whirls

They dance down sidewalks, linger by lamp posts  
cling to windowsills of cottages  
shiver in doorways, damp shelters from the rain

Fragrances of buns from bakeries  
leak out into the cooling air  
diners sit around in restaurants

Waiters hurry in with bowls of steaming soup  
watercolor palettes of rystafel saucers,  
hurry out with towers of empty dishes

Clattering collections on palms  
all forearms and elbows, arms outstretched in haste  
backing through swinging kitchen doors

In a flash of kinship I become all of them  
multiplied and many-hued, their accents, clothing  
ill-fitting dentures, eyeglasses, sore throats

Thoughts of furtive hands in darkened cinemas  
income tax assessments, laundry lists, birthday cards  
on dusty mantelpieces, letters from friends overseas

They are all mine! Rendered asunder by the wind blowing  
into every corner of me, I burst apart into a myriad  
flying fragments, russet, ochre, black, brown and yellow

I am Norwegian, Chinese, a Welshman on a green mountain  
a tribal dancer in Africa, I am children prancing barefooted  
in wooden huts, white eyes in dark faces, all smiles and teeth

I am a free-falling parachutist, floating down  
between the trees, branches almost naked now, their fall leaves  
rushing in the wind to distant resting places

## OLD SHOES

These walking shoes are scuffed  
and stained from mud and striding  
coming apart at the seams  
round the world and back they've been  
and when they're done  
I'll place them reverently to rest  
next to the body bags of kitchen peelings  
emptied cans, floor sweepings

Things that once were so  
bright and beautiful  
while up the road recycle bins  
glare haughtily as chosen people  
glass citizens plastic and paper folk  
preparing for new glittering lives  
returning to the promised land

I've spent so much discarded time  
wondering about the quality of  
darkness and whether journey's end  
is dust or smiling new tomorrows

Meanwhile machinery inside  
goes clanking on and bright new shoes  
still beckon from the shelves of stores

And deep in the forests' underground  
trees turn to coal and oil and there  
beyond the city limits a hill of garbage  
watered by a dozen rainy winters  
slowly turns green with grass and tiny plants

# HELLO PRESTO GOODBYE

*for Tommy*

Danny Kaye sang it, his sweet Jewish lips  
in tongue-twisting velocity  
roller-coaster – *hello children*, and now he's gone

When I was young  
listened to Nat King Cole  
drank my first beer, drove a Morris Minor  
with an indicator that flipped up automatically  
amazing! and yes quite *unforgettable*  
and now it's gone

We smoked illicit cigarettes behind the garage  
the war in Korea came and went  
Basil Goldblat said don't worry  
when we're old enough to get it  
there'll be a cure for cancer  
he died at fifty of a heart attack

All those names jiggling around in my head  
come spiraling out each time some loved one  
or acquaintance goes

And now hardly a few loops of the roller-coaster  
pass by and we shake our heads shed another tear

*You can't live forever* said the daredevil pilot  
as he adjusted his goggles climbed into the cockpit  
of his red and yellow single propeller plane  
and for the very last time looped the loop

## NOW

a swathe of possibilities  
two miles thick  
each atom  
a billion years  
forward and back

and we  
the dinosaurs  
and dreamers  
telescoped into  
some bones  
and books

implausible  
to believe  
that this  
ever existed

the faintest  
echoes of  
Adam and Armageddon  
disturbing for  
a single moment

the place  
where *was*  
and *will be*  
intersect  
and move away

into the stuff  
where legend  
and illusion  
play their game  
of tag

## WE THE REBELLIOUS CHILDREN

How strange to think that gods grow old  
and triangles perch on their points

How breathing in and breathing out  
the universe expands and shrinks

Some children draw their firework flowers  
upside-down or hanging from a chocolate sky

They haven't yet been shown the way to think  
grimacing and blocking ears they talk gibberish

Jump off the end of their flat worlds  
tumble into never lands of peppermint trees and

Candy striped umbrellas hopscotching over  
centuries of scholars chained to rusting quotes

As we rebellious children in our time  
strive unsuccessfully to show them how to

stand  
in  
line

## UNWRITTEN

Locked inside this leather and brass hinged box  
that Wilfred carried from page to page  
of his plastic-encased and coffee stained  
forties-issue identity card

are library shelves of novels never penned

And Julia her fingernails still painted crimson  
three decades of lipstick and hair brushing  
are almost but not quite enough to  
hide the swell inside her cream angora  
cardigan where her wrinkled yet sweet-scented

neckline plunges into memories of moonlit balconies

They wait their lonely evenings out watching the  
latest sitcom, playing solitaire, doing their  
crossword puzzles, reading the novels of some  
favorite author - Anthony Trollope perhaps

They wait through nights of erotic dreams  
and we wait with them watch them finger  
notebooks, pencils hesitate, then shake their heads

Oh muse, Pandora, ghost-writer, confidante  
confessor, hand them a key a wish a wand  
unlock that suitcase, free those soft-centered  
chocolate stories, tiptoe downstairs on sleepless  
nights, open the fridge, browse in the pantry

enjoy a midnight feast

## MOON MOTHER

My mother lives in the moon  
I know it because I've seen her there  
on sleepless nights tidying up, painting stars fluffing up clouds,  
whistling softly to her two  
poodles named Jupiter and Venus

To come and eat their lunch just as she did the day before  
she went to have that surgical procedure from which  
she never returned

The moon is where she writes her poems, her letters to  
newspapers, does good deeds says kind words,  
tells stories about her childhood,  
adds items to her animal stamp collection

She got out of breath when climbing hills  
the doctors said a valve replacement  
would be necessary just a week in  
hospital they said and you'll be like new

The book of stories she'd written, arrived from the printer  
a day before. She addressed all envelopes by hand  
I drove her down to the post office  
to send them out - just in case, she smiled

You can't blame the doctors, they're only human, I know that,  
even though I hate them with their smug  
superior airs that they know everything

The doctors say that it's a man that  
lives up in the moon but I know it's  
my mother tidying up, addressing envelopes,  
smiling - I'll be back soon

## FLOWER CHILD

she never told him the truth  
instead she said his father  
had not returned  
from the battle field  
with names  
spelled at times with a K or a C  
or cut-off, clipped  
her tongue choking on make-believe  
foreign syllables

*had never existed*

she swore she'd tell him  
when he reached eighteen  
old enough to understand

*those crazy years*

guitar and alcohol music  
perfume of grass in the nights  
and the wild days  
coming, going, exchanging  
intimacy, just a bunch  
of careless denim teenagers

*one of them was there*

for sure in a graying photograph  
of all of them she kept  
inside a copy of The Fountainhead  
they all looked alike  
young, defiant, writing a novel  
or tracing tattoos of a clean new world  
inside her thighs

*it could have been any one of them*

it doesn't matter any more  
on route 90, two in the morning  
she overturned her purple and yellow  
Volkswagen into a ditch

her son went on to be an officer  
decorated for bravery  
and later a scientist  
a surgeon  
a famous author or poet  
one of those...

someone his parents would have been proud of

## BOBBIE AND GLORIA

They were both such beautiful babies  
chubby always smiling, two cherubs  
who'd been cut and pasted from  
a glossy magazine and it didn't seem  
to matter all through childhood

That their dictionaries were  
color-in books until age eight  
and that they smiled their way through  
failing grades and how they sometimes  
wandered off with strangers

Fingered inappropriate items in stores  
and closets, still looked like Barbie dolls  
at age sixteen complete with dimples  
short skirts, breasts that sometimes  
popped out at the pool or when they  
stooped to pet a kitten or a pup

Bobbie's mother forbade her to continue  
dating those smiling simple boys she  
met at special school then when she  
disobeyed arranged a quick abortion  
with a private doctor

Kept her on an affectionate maternal  
leash, monitored her comings and her  
goings, who she meets and who she greets,  
dreadfully unfair - while Gloria's parents  
smiled and repeated - she'll grow out of it

As she handed out to strangers those  
little cards that she'd penned with hearts  
and kisses, smiled when she went for a two-week  
vacation at the coast with a man twice  
her age she'd met the week before

Then was hospitalized for months with  
unidentifiable psychosis, spent the next  
half year on anti hallucinatory drugs and at  
the mental hospital met a young man  
she married at a religious ceremony

Who soon forgot to take his medications  
spent all their social security on cheap  
glittering goods and lotto, fathered four  
children in eight years after they'd  
joined that sect who wore modest clothing  
mumbling prayers recited daily in their  
junk-filled two-room council apartment

After the separation when Gloria's husband  
was hospitalized for yet another time and  
after the social workers found a foster home  
for the kids she couldn't handle any longer

She stepped off a busy sidewalk into traffic  
her leg crushed by a passing truck that couldn't  
stop in time and after many months in rehab  
now hobbles around her aging parents' apartment  
visits the children once a fortnight  
still smiling her pink middle-aged simple smile

Bobbie still lives with her mother, takes in  
dressmaking alterations, doesn't open these days  
that decades-old photo album she still keeps  
in a drawer in her bedroom

## OBSERVERS

i am both the first  
and second person of myself  
i talk and when the you inside  
replies, i listen

not as a child or pupil  
nor as someone in a  
temple or a courtroom

but as a friend

it's not always easy  
to make a judgment  
the world and all its voices  
are not good listeners

they struggle, argue,  
shout each other down,  
plug ears to drown discussion,  
hear only righteous mantras  
their truth a world that's flat

we are both judge and jury  
are we not confabulo  
rarely give our final verdict  
on questions and beliefs  
that long ago those  
flat world mantra chanters  
have sealed in lead and blood

preferring to remain  
simply observers, exchanging  
viewpoints like scholars  
on an expedition  
back and forth we sway  
this way and that  
pendulums to the world

## SUNLIGHT ON THE SIDE OF A HOUSE

*For Edward Hopper*

Here are gas stations, motels, restaurants, theaters and railroads,  
here are houses, swathes of color sharp against the sea  
windows looking out and looking in. Observing. And here  
are men and women caught brightly against the canvas.

Notice their body language as they read their books,  
their newspapers. It's indifferent. They sit at tables, stand on  
boardwalks, looking solemn. In empty city streets, 24-hour diners  
or waiting for subway trains. Solemn.

Until suddenly you realize they're not speaking to each other  
or when they do they're mouthing only clichés, going about  
their lives in black and white, like sunlight on the side of a house  
dividing the light from the dark in horizontal or vertical lines.

As if all their worlds are demarcated by a ruler or a set square;  
clichéd solemnities, lonely, gaunt and disillusioned. That's America  
you think, you never see their faces close up, they're always  
looking down, looking away, even the nude, always the same nude,  
on a bed or captured in a strip of sunlight streaming in the window.

She is like the empty side of the house or perhaps a lighthouse;  
naked there in her loneliness up on her naked hilltop  
blinking on and off, off and on, a strip of red and yellow  
across a wide blue ocean, sky somehow palely unhappy about itself.

## **SOME NOTES ON THE UNIFIED FIELD THEORY**

Look not to whitening bones or silent ground  
avenues of riderless steeds buried without sound  
words and worlds and wizards washed away  
by seas and silt choked rivers bloodless without neigh

Nothing really dies Confabulo, look to the particles  
named and renamed as quarks or quanta, indefinite articles  
dividing and subdividing while emptiness between them grows  
like Aristotle's questions recently returned from outer space

A song sung by a dinosaur still echoes in the ears  
of creatures in a universe some say has disappeared  
while hidden somewhere parallel where legends are entwined  
their DNA plays monopoly between the folds of time

## NOTHING MUCH TO WRITE ABOUT

Jeremy H. awoke in cold alarm  
an angel was sitting by the bed, notebook in hand

Tell me about your life – just the highlights please  
and for God’s sake try to keep it clean  
I’ve heard some stuff recently that caused even the Old Man  
to puke and you’d think he’s heard it all

*Does this mean that I’m...* said Jeremy shivering  
Let’s get it down, the angel said and then again, Let’s  
get it down and licked his finger to glue back  
an errant page that, shaking in the wind,  
was trying to flip over by itself

Come on, time’s short. *Well,* said Jeremy  
*I was born..* Let’s skip the first five pages, the angel  
cut him short. Most of them are similar anyway  
unless you were abused, composed a symphony  
or wrote a novel – did you? *Can’t say I did*

Travel? *Not much, I’ve lived here all my life*  
Work? *I’ve done the same my father and his father did*  
Married? *One wife who’s nagged me now for fifty years*  
And what about your fears, your tears, affairs?  
*Nothing much to write about, the usual more or less*

Jeremy. The angel, now impatient. I’ve lots to  
do tonight, there’s been a train crash in the Punjab  
two hundred injured, dying...

*Well let me think, I did once win the egg and spoon  
race, even wrote a poem about a dream I had – was  
published in some magazine, forget the name*

Go back to sleep, the angel said, I’ve done my  
best on your behalf. We’ll talk some other time  
and meanwhile you can write your epitaph

## SMALL PRINT

there are too many words

in parliamentary debates  
bible commentaries  
mortgage contracts

to unravel my confusion

and so I  
listen to Bach  
say I'm an atheist  
sign anyway

how many languages  
can a man  
not understand

before he goes  
tone deaf

## GREEN OPTIONS

We're contemplating buying an electric vehicle soon  
one that could complete a trip to Rangoon  
or some other distant destination  
on a single charge (or two or more)

On second thoughts it might be better  
to get a Toyota with rear-mounted electra  
that without a sound pushes the infernal combustion  
in front or maybe the other way round

Thus getting more miles on a tank full  
for which we will be most financially thankful  
on our trip to Rangoon  
or other distant destination

But hesitate thinking it might be better  
to wait for someone clever to invent  
the engine that runs on water and thus prevent  
the acceleration of global warming that  
has been causing much consternation some mornings

At news of tsunamis and typhoons over there  
in places not far from Rangoon  
or you know where

Of course we could purchase a horse or  
braving the heat consider using God forbid  
our feet

Yes! Let's have a green-conscious demonstration  
a march to Marble Arch  
or some other distant destination

## DISPROVING THE THEORY

to all of you  
who claim  
size does matter  
i maintain  
despite all your chatter  
mistakenly admiring  
even desiring  
the stronger or the longer

now herewith present  
the evidence  
hard to ignore

the dinosaur....

while despite the cataclysm  
in their protected prison  
underground  
cockroaches  
hardy guys  
of no great size  
and no bellowing cries  
still go about  
their love life

without a sound....

## PAPARAZZI ON PAGE TEN

Here come the chocolate éclairs  
The Moulin Rouge the Escher stairs  
Here come the barbeque days  
The fashion shows the hit parade

Here comes the Klu Klux Klan  
The Fuller brush man the second hand van  
Here comes the market collapse  
For a twenty a Barbie to dance in your lap

Here comes the news of a rape  
Wrapped round a commercial no way to escape  
Here comes the gun control act the loser you backed  
The legs of the stars getting out of their cars

Here come the results of the tests the pains in your chest  
And a few stones to put on the place where you rest

## CANDID CAMERA

Do you still remember all the fumbling  
unboxing foil-wrapped spools with sprockets  
the winding, slipping, missing, grumbling  
bulky Brownie cameras that didn't fit our pockets?

The endless stocks of 24 or 36 exposures  
and all those filters, tripods, meters, lenses  
getting aunts and cousins to say cheese and hold poses  
exorbitant yet gladly paid printing expenses.

No more! Now digital we take thousands of shots  
and all the tourists everywhere hold silver cubes that click  
we download to our own PCs ten million pixel dots  
upload them to the Internet and out thick albums kick.

But wait, the end is not in sight, our kids are twinkling elves  
their smartphones have two cameras that do a double act  
so while they're snapping friends they photograph themselves  
don't care their pictures facebook-bound can easily be hacked.

The next step isn't hard to guess, some whizz kid will create  
a camera so miniature, some tiny silver chip  
that can be planted on his nose to photograph his date  
as while they kiss she operates the camera on her lip!



Johnmichael Simon was born in England, grew up in South Africa and has lived in Israel since 1963. He has published six books of poems and several collaborations with partner Helen Bar-Lev and other poets. His poetry has been awarded numerous prizes and is published widely in print and website collections.

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