

# 4 (four) poems poemS poems poeMs

By James Fowler

## **WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...**

*'Thanks for the look.' Fowler says proffering his work. You know you're in trouble when a lecturing Professor-Fellow goes colloquial-rogue on you. And for once, I was right. It's not easy resisting genius when it's causally tossed in your lap. Get a load of this guy. It's hard to imagine that he's tethered to a tenure-track. I know I've seen all the same 70's movies, but his first work distills them—he's a bonspiel of spellbinding toe curling. (I just love when institutional thinking collides with a rebel angel possessed with original thought.) If you don't love Jimmy, you've cliqued on the wrong e-rag. Prepare to be cerebrally hijacked. I'm not even sure the lines I have captured are the ones I love best, "...Most lives just / ripple the surface, / and angry neighbors hear / I've called them gravel / in life's rock quarry." Why do the next lines echoing so callously cavernous: "Some guy with his last name / takes up a whole bookcase shelf." If you're on some schedule to sharpen a jar of pencils or sift the kitty's litter box, skip him, don't take my words for it...I'm just another one of those "lit-crit hyenas" attempting to "tickle." (To maintain poet's spacing each poem is on its own page. Please scroll down.)*

## **10 Sure Things from Gritty American Movies of the 1970s**

1. It's a race to the bottom between New York and New Jersey scumbags.
2. The blonde bombshell is actually a brunette named Angela who's cagey enough to slip the closing dragnet.
3. Every third garbage-strewn block has its stripped Ford. Expect a foul smell from the trunk.
4. After flashing a badge, street Santa chases the junkie/pimp/hood into an alley and threatens to go to town on his ass if he doesn't start talking. The junkie/pimp/hood swears he *don't know nothin'*, but he always does.
5. Havoc erupts under the El or down in the subway.
6. Chances are someone's cousin will pick a fight at a wedding reception or birthday party.
7. The divorced narcotics detective is on a liquid diet, keeps a squalid apartment, and spends a good portion of each day beneath flickering lights of a greenish cast.
8. Look: here comes Bundled Woman with Headscarf and Glasses, perpetually pushing her handcart down the sidewalk.
9. All main characters left standing will report to the abandoned warehouse or dilapidated factory for the ceremonial spraying of bullets.
10. Closing credits scroll to the sound of a desolate, knowing trumpet, preferably one that has been pawned several times.

## Tension

It is a problem poem.  
I teach it primary colors,  
and it finger paints the cat.  
Acquiring language quickly,  
it prefers code talking  
to plain speech. I catch it  
whispering secrets and lies  
to the garden gnome.  
Born with one name,  
it calls itself another  
it refuses to divulge.  
Willful misconstruction  
soon proves its métier.  
I say, *Most lives just  
ripple the surface,*  
and angry neighbors hear  
I've called them gravel  
in life's rock quarry.  
I spend ever more time  
cleaning up its messes,  
checking its headlong plunge  
into free association.  
*Let's talk about roses,*  
I suggest, and off it goes  
on sub-rosa resistance,  
Rilke, and Sarajevo.  
*You hardly know your  
own mind,* it sneers.  
*Hijacker!* I accuse.  
It can scarcely wait  
to be free of me,  
free to muddy my  
most crystalline sense,  
shove all meaning into  
the slough of uncertainty.  
*Outlive and undermine,*  
its adolescent plot.  
Decades down the road,  
how it will squirm  
to find admirers

tracing family likeness  
in its singular features.

### **Waiting for the Monsters**

They knew to work the shadows,  
wrap themselves in fog, lurk beneath  
the surface. Until closing minutes  
you only got a stray claw or tentacle.

Otherwise, it was all eerie theremin  
and victims' horrified recoils.  
When the dodgy thing did finally  
slouch forward, it often disappointed,

itself a victim of tight budgets,  
short on curdling power, not grotesque  
or novel enough to justify  
the teasing, commercial-laden grift.

These days we still brace for  
the ghastly strike, now from  
berserkers wearing common faces  
but lunging from underworlds yet.

The *Terror Theater* of childhood  
that spiced dull Saturday afternoons  
has opened its doors, spilled its guts  
into public paths and spaces.

Closer to home, we count the hours  
until that most secret ambush  
distorts loved features, thickens  
the tongue, and turns confident stride

into halting lurch. How horrid  
we'll feel for recoiling then.  
Adults must have kept from us  
that the monsters keep coming.

## An American Original

Disintegrating by easy stages,  
life work practically finished,  
he puttters around the canal-backed yard,  
tending almost year-round hibiscus.  
He likes their brazen red, recalling  
the ruby blood on his father's hands  
as he pruned *the goddam holly*.  
The subtropic is his reward:  
modest boat at the slip,  
sea bass or sunfish whenever,  
happy hour 5-7 nightly on the patio  
joined by his main squeeze,  
common-law by now he supposes.  
After their combined track record  
neither stands on ceremony.  
That line applies: perfection of life  
or work; choose. Wife one bailed  
when full of his Mailingway b.s.  
(turns of phrase her chief attraction).  
Spouse the second preferred half  
the property to all his love,  
minus a small percent on the side  
she and her lawyer never discovered.  
If anything, these Solomon chops  
made him more productive, determined  
to replenish the counting house  
as if no blow could floor him.  
Always the instinct for what would sell  
and tickle the lit-crit hyenas.  
Yet now he bristles at autographs  
and treats his agent rudely,  
a case of professional prickly heat.  
Some guy with his last name  
takes up a whole bookcase shelf.  
Last week at a gallery he nearly  
snatched a mask off the wall  
for a crazed banshee dance.  
In mockery of his image he wears  
a floppy sunhat and white powder  
on his nose (a rich shift there).

White, glaring white, bones-at-noon  
white, this place's answer to snow.  
He doesn't walk the same beaches  
as the bronzed immortals;  
still, his orgasms and aura  
stack up nicely next to most.  
The next minute the breeze drops  
and his old man's brag goes limp.  
Better to nurse wounds quietly.  
Swirling a Manhattan, he conceives  
an out-of-character piece about  
this chump who's haunting himself,  
though it's likely been done before.

**THE POET SPEAKS...** *If these four poems have anything in common, it is the employment and send-up of masculinist grit. Sometimes that quality can produce worthwhile artifacts, like the hard-hitting crime dramas of 1970s American cinema. It runs the risk of becoming a toxic caricature though, as the novelist in "An American Original" has come to realize. Boys may have an appetite for the safely grotesque and violent ("Waiting for the Monsters"). Mature men, however, properly socialized, keep a check on monstrous egoism, aware that human afflictions are brutalizing enough without the added burden of homicidal aggression. Even the problem poem personified in "Tension," with its drive to achieve complete postmodern freedom from authorial control and defined significance, may ultimately be self-defeating in its perpetual adolescent rebellion.*

*As for influences, I appreciate the melancholy-tinged larking of Donald Barthelme, Max Apple, and Billy Collins. That said, any writer's influences are legion, extending beyond the literary into other arts, or even reaches of existence not thought artful at all.*

*I've spent much of my adult life engaging with poetry, as author, teacher, and editor. Here the tensile, lyrical, resonant possibilities of language are at a premium. I imagine that what a poet feels in crafting a sound poem is not unlike what a luthier does in constructing a tonally rich acoustic guitar. These instruments then pass into other hands for ongoing play.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** James Fowler teaches literature at the University of Central Arkansas. He is author of the poetry collection *The Pain Trader* (Golden Antelope Press, 2020). His poems have recently appeared in such publications as *Futures Trading Magazine*, *Transference*, *Cave Region Review*, *The Poetry of Capital*, *Elder Mountain*, *Lullwater Review*, *Aji Magazine*, *Evening Street Review*, *Westview*, *Glimpse*, *Cantos*, *U. S. 1 Worksheets*, and *Dash*.