

Vita Brevis

A Chapbook

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Author's Note

It's widely assumed that humans are the only creatures aware of their own mortality. If that is so, that awareness, and not those quaint infatuations "intelligence" and "morality," may be the true key to our uniqueness as living beings. The knowledge that life is short has probably inspired more poetry than daffodils have. This chapbook is a brief contribution to the *memento mori* tradition. The following poems have been published:

"Cliffs of Donegal": *The Road Not Taken*, Fall 2021.

"To an Atheist": *Ancient Paths*, June 2023.

"Writ in Water": *Verse Virtual*, March 2024.

"Under an Azure Sky": *Mediterranean Poetry*, November 2022.

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How the World Came to Be

This is how the world came to be
as they tell it in the songs that were made
before any songs were written down
when there was nothing to write with
not even a charred stick
for scratching on stones.

It was four friends who brought the world into being
Fire and Earth and Rain and Wind
and this is the way it was done

First was Fire. Only Fire. Fire filled all space
and all time before the world came to be.
For a thousand years upon a thousand years,
Fire fed upon itself for there was
no air to breathe, no wood or flesh to eat.
Nothing could live in Fire. Not the cockroach
or the salamander or even the bird that
some people say can rise from ashes.
Fire fed on itself until the flames
grew faint and sparks flew into the sky
where they became lightning and then
the sun and the moon and the stars.
And so Fire's work was done.

Then came the second friend, Earth.
Earth as ash, as dust, as dirt and rock
and mountain. The breath of life was in Earth
and the nature of Earth was form.
For a thousand years upon a thousand years
Earth breathed life into form
and shapes that could not be counted
rose from the dust. From the weakest
to the mightiest, the beings of Earth
crawled, walked, and ran. From ant to
mouse to lion, Earth brought forth
all beings whose home is the land.
And so Earth's work was done.

Next came Rain. In mists and deluges,
the third friend gave water to the land.
For a thousand years upon a thousand years
Rain fell, until the dust was green with
grass and flowers. Rain gave clouds
to the sky and snow to the mountains
and flashing streams to the valleys
and finally waves to the oceans.
In every place that Rain fell, shapes
that could not be counted found a home.
From the tiniest fish to the great whales, all
who lived by water were the gifts of Rain.
And so Rain's work was done.

Last came the friend called Wind.
With soft breezes and wild tempests,
for a thousand years upon a thousand years,
Wind shook the trees and grasses. It turned
the oceans into foam and made shapes that
could not be counted to ride on the air.
The honeybee was born of Wind and the
butterfly, the songbird in the fluttering bush
and the hawk on high. When the air was
filled with wings and the clouds were dancing
Wind breathed a final breath upon
the world the friends had made.
And so Wind's work was done.

In this way the four friends
Fire and Earth and Rain and Wind
each giving the gifts of its own nature
brought into being the shapes that cannot be counted

This is how the world came to be
as they tell it in the songs that were made
before any songs were written down
when there was nothing to write with
not even a charred stick
for scratching on stones.

Highway of Desire

Every waking hour is a diamond in the storm
Every burden light as falling snow
But when it's raining roses and you only feel the thorns
There's a light on a lake that you don't know

You say you got to hang on until your ship arrives
Towers don't reach heaven in a day
There's a juggler on the corner but you just close your eyes
Say I'm going to the carnival one day

One more cup of coffee around the fading fire
Waiting on the secret to appear
Every step you take on this highway of desire
Another step away from being here

Every shard of moonlight, every glint of dew
Every baby blinking at the dawn
Like that pretty little one-horse town that keeps outrunning you
While you're checking out the map it's here and gone

Eyes on the horizon, pedal to the floor
Making for the border by nightfall
The world whipping by you while you're banging on the door
Trying to force your brick into the wall

One more cup of coffee around the fading fire
Waiting on the answer to appear
Every step you take on this highway of desire
Another step away from being here

Cliffs of Donegal

I climbed a hill in Donegal to look out on the sea
where a lean and hungry wind shook its locks at me
The sea swept friendless to the West, salt spray lashed below
yet I saw not rocks nor isles blessed as that wind did blow

But this day's weather's all you have
fair wind or biting rain
Once it's filled the parting glass
will not be filled again

Between a world yet to be born and one that's long since died
we shake like seabirds wreathed in foam above an angry tide
Taste what you can, share what you will with the hungry and afraid
and listen for the piper's trill in the space the wind has made

For this day's weather's all you have
fair wind or biting rain
Once it's filled the parting glass
will not be filled again

The Venerable Bede

Our life he said is like a tiny bird
That flies through an open window into a hall
Where a king is raising a goblet to his mouth
And leaves the hall through another window
Before the king has taken one sip of wine.

Perspective

Eighteen hundred years ago a Greek
named Polyaeus, author of a treatise
entitled *Stratagems*, brooded on mortality.
“Hope forever steals the little time life
allots us, until our last dawn overtakes us
with so many dreams unfulfilled.”

My father had that saying framed on his desk,
brooding on it himself until he died.
Whereupon I made myself a promise:
I would not let that thought hobble my days.
I buried it in a closet, shrouded in papers.
Out of sight, I chuckled, out of mind.

No dice. Squirming in his flimsy coffin,
Polyaeus was as noisome as ever. So I
dragged him out, thinking to turn stick
into carrot. I have him winking at me now
on my own desk, pledged like a grinning
skull to shame me into labor.

This gambit is working out better.
What had been taunt is now exhortation.
Like the metaphysical poet racing the sun,
Polyaeus gives me license to sally
with time. When that last dawn arrives,
with any luck I'll be too busy to notice.

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Erit Hora

(after Ezra Pound)

Go, then, my little ones, like guppies after whales
Like leavings thrown to puppies or petals in the hail

Go find the hall of some great king whose word all must abide
Present your papers to the fool who lacerates his pride

Say there that in a hundred years none of this will matter
Neither royal summons nor a serving maiden's chatter

Say too that on a distant day shining like the sun
One man wept from bitterness, another held a gun

As a girl captured fireflies caging them in laughter
For every child who went before and those who would come after

And say that someone's eye was there, blinking though his tears,
To watch that moment as it passed the border of the years

White Birds

White birds on the water
Black birds in the sky
Mountains are for climbing
For those who cannot fly

One man in a thousand
Knows the reason for
The troubles that the changing winds
Blow against his door

One man in a million
Can sweep them all away
Lie down with the grasses
Dance upon the sea

So if you've had some fortune
Lay your money down
It cannot buy you passage
On the last ship out of town

The mountain still will stand there
When you're far away
So take a lesson from the sun
Dance against the day

White birds on the water
Black birds in the sky
Mountains are for climbing
For those who cannot fly

To an Atheist

What does it profit you, Sir, to needle
those down on their knees?
What's the payoff for slinging that sly smile
against their door,

that Voltaire grin fixed at aloof
that pillories the priest
and sends the child clinging to its nurse
weeping to bed?

Is there not enough misery afoot
to check your dagger,
to make you halt for one moment
of irrational mercy?

And should you prove correct, what then?
What laurels will you drag
to our common destination, to the earth
that governs us all

in the end? What tale will be told
of your passage here
devoted to ensuring that innocents
abandon hope?

The Garden Encircled

Coyote riding a pale horse
in no pattern I could see
I called him, “Señor, adónde vas?”
He did not answer me.

I saw he was hunting for fissures
in the encircling wall
to slide a moonlit knife edge
to where the ripe fruits fall

But if the wall’s bravado
is then the garden cursed?
Beware, the stumbling prophet warns,
the shadow walker’s thirst

I had not wit nor force of arms
to stay that fearsome slide
The garden’s now a wilder place
Coyote mocks our pride

Writ in Water

Just after Labor Day, 1958, when the Everly Brothers' "Bird Dog" was topping the charts and the rebellion against Batista was nearing its end, I was studying Latin in a New Jersey high school named, like many others, for Teddy Roosevelt. Our teacher, a stocky matron nearing retirement, wore her grey hair tucked up with pins and slouchy sweaters and the cotton anklets favored by Sinatra fans. With the casual cruelty of the young we called her "Bobby Socks Hearn."

One day she shared her memories of a trip to Rome she'd taken in the silvery years between the wars. Did she show us slides or postcards? I don't remember. What I do remember is that, after dutiful stops at the Forum and the Colosseum, she made her way to John Keats's graveside to read the words he had ordered cut in stone. No name, no dates, just *Here lies one whose name was writ in water.*

We were a carefree clutch of fourteen-year olds. What could we make of this ancient woman whispering those ten syllables, then weeping as if she had lost a mother or a child? The plain sad truth is nothing at all. Stifling guilty sniggers we stared at our desks, twenty dewy faces oblivious of oblivion and of the dumb ache brought on by scouring time, be you an old woman in socks or a prince of players.

Youth and Age

Who does not know that youth is a sweeter thing than age
Who breathes the new day's dawning as expectations rage
Who sends the small bird laughing into the falcon's gyre
And scorns the guardian fearful of desire

Who does not know that age is a richer thing than youth
Though winded by the journey and wounded by the truth
Who measures every struggle by the treasure of its pain
And smiles at the ripening of grain

Under an Azure Sky

Old black dog watching the surf roll in
Children on the ramparts, castles made of dreams
The wind is in from Corsica scenting the air with pine
As the old dog trembles, nearly blind

It all comes down to this
Under an azure sky
Salt on your tongue, the wandering and the young
This is what it all comes down to

On every hill a fortress, on every beach a child
Poppies in the meadows, laughter in the foam
In the shadow of our hungers we raise the ramparts high
As the old dog dozes in the sun

Tutto arriva qua
Sotto un cielo azzuro
Sale sulla lingua, giovani vaganti
Tutto arriva qua

Did these waters sparkle when Columbus was a child
When the sound of arms and canticles rode the wind?
Did he pray for glory, fingers full of sand
Like an old dog barking at the moon?

It all comes down to this
Under an azure sky
Salt on your tongue, the wandering and the young
Tutto arriva qua

Epitaph

Water breaking on the shore
I hear the creaking of a door
With heavy heart it falls to me
To leave this goodly company

To any I've cut by word or deed
Or left adrift in hour of need
Whatever solace I've disturbed
I ask your pardon, undeserved

To any I've touched by kind regard
Or made a cheerless hour less hard
To any I have soothed from pain
I ask you pass it on again

For all do tread a twisted way
To shed the darkness of the day
Say this of me when I am gone:
"He sought the fountain in the stone."

Water breaking on the shore
I hear the creaking of a door
The hour comes to meet the call
Then strike the sail and peace to all.