

Things of the Brilliant Earth

A Chapbook

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Step out onto the Planet.
Draw a circle a hundred feet round.
Inside the circle are 300 things
nobody understands and maybe
nobody's ever really seen.
How many can you find?

—Lew Welch

How do we know but every bird that cuts the airy way
is an immense world of delight,
closed by our senses five?

—William Blake

Author's Note

This chapbook reflects my struggle to appreciate the luminescence of the ordinary without cloaking it in symbolic or doctrinal significance. There's a bit of Buddhism poking around the corners here, and throughout an affectionate engagement with William Blake. For previously publishing some of the poems, I thank the editors of the following journals:

Better than Starbucks: "Grackles"

Bloom: "Maple" and "Against Lamentation"

The Bluebird Word: "A Full Moon in Winter"

Creation: "In a Time of Thirst"

Mediterranean Poetry: "Parc Güell"

The Road Not Taken: "Stones I: Chartres"

Sparks of Calliope: "Cloudbreak"

Urthona: "The Eyes of William Blake" and "Satori"

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To Make You See

I do not welcome you into my crannied heart
prickly with what I have felt and done or not,
with what I may still feel or do or not.

I invite you rather to look at the brilliant earth,
to see the work of hands that scatter seeds
and seeds that have been touched by wind alone.

I bid you be amazed at grackles wheeling,
at how the tender placement of one stone
dispels lamentation, anchors the world.

I see you leaning in to where I hurt
to run your thumb in sympathy along
my scars. I am leaving that be.

It is hard enough to see the wheeling clear
without dragging myself into the scene.

In Praise of Rye

In this summer of merciless white
the lawnmower sits idle
our field a carpet of chaff not fit for goats
but for every few feet a shoot of rye
spiking toward the sun defying Apollo
to say that we born of dirt
will not bend to your brilliance
will pester you time out of mind
though you manicure our mates

The rye does not belong here
It should wave in fields of its own dewtwinkling
to welcome the giggle of children
and the swish of scythes
Here in our dead lawn it is counted a vagrant
but oh how valiant in its vagrancy!

I watch these tiny spikes taunting heaven
and think of my grandfather master of roses
who called “weed” a flower in the wrong place
Some he’d pluck from crannies
with Tennysonian precision
others he’d leave be, robust volunteers
rubbing their renegade shoulders
with the Rosacean nobility

I am leaving my rye spikes be
I celebrate their bucking of solar tyranny
They are good and steady companions
working without pay or tending
and do not ask for anything
not even water

In a Time of Thirst

Rangy macho fence jumper
breaker of boundaries raker of sheep
whose wail says who owns the dark
whose scent so arrests our dogs
they chase it only for a blink
before cowering to us

This is Señor Coyotl captain of thieves
shape-shifting ghost of the Zuni and Apache
bane of herders and farmers
more wily than wolves

In this crushing summer will he be
sniffing for drink in our back yard?
If he scales the wire, am I predator or prey?
Would a 20-gauge shotgun do it
and could I?

My wife tender of greens sees it different.
Compassion more virile than mine
she asks only
where in this awful heat
can their pups find water



The Idea of Order in Our Back Yard

Edge of the porch, stone silent, a grasshopper rests.
Seen askance it seems less insect than insect
hunter: a beige diminutive frog. The legs, those
unlikely engines of explosion, are cocked
along the thorax in the same taut chevron
as a frog's legs are tucked against its body.

I'm not sure why I find it strange—Darwin
wouldn't—that this desiccated nibbler of greenery
should anticipate the limbs of its own predator.
Not sure either why our dog, whom you would not
suspect of coveting insects, pounces on them as
deliriously as any amphibian. With haunches,
one might observe, resembling frogs' and hoppers'.

There's a hint here about the Great Chain of Being,
or at least the long midsection between amoebas and angels.
Eat or be eaten, goes the mantra of Hell, and I recall
with some embarrassment I have eaten frogs. And
grasshoppers. Though not, so far as I know,
any huskies or hounds.

Grackles

We saw a thousand wheel against the sky,
their grating music bringing in the night.
They dropped in swift contention onto wires
and fought for footing in the thinning light.

Marveling how they looked like dominoes,
silhouetted like a massive saw,
we forgot the tango taps of dominance
that bent the weakest to an avian law.

Or did the hand that turned the wheel as one
oversee as well that ragged run?

Stones I: Chartres

The sun was high that day in northern France.
Three workers sweated near a pile of stones.
“What is your work?” I asked. Without a glance
one man replied, “I am carrying stones.”

“Your work?” I asked the second man, and he
turned almost imperceptibly to say
“I’m leveling the wall. Can you not see?”
I saw it then, that blinding summer day.

“What do you do?” I asked the final man.
I never heard a voice ring out so clear.
“We do what must be done and what we can.
In time they’ll have a fine cathedral here.”

If I had that man’s eyes I would not fight.
I’d walk in peace by day and sleep at night.

Cloudbreak

A lone beam of sunlight, javelin straight,
breaks from a cloud to irradiate our garden.
The paraphernalia of work are suddenly luminous:
wheelbarrow, rake, gloves for a moment aglow
while a trowel, eater of soil, flings back a flash,
blinding me like I've been punched by a
phosphorus fist.

Watching the beam emerge from the riven cloud
I recall Victorian tableaux like the finger of God
steadying Jacob's ladder or comforting Jesus
in Gethsemane as Peter denies him.
Was it such a beam that made Paul stumble
or augured a victory for Christ at the Milvian Bridge?
Things that drop from the sky
suggest origins wondrous.

In this garden, though,
I see only tools: wheelbarrow, rake, gloves,
that specular trowel. Things of the brilliant earth,
pointing only to themselves. But in the sweep
of the visible, wondrous enough.

Just a Tree

In a college parking lot on Union Street
a lone tulip poplar commands a rectangle
of what geographers call machine space.
It's not notably different from the town's
other trees, the beeches and elms and maples
of the mid-Atlantic seaboard, except that
one autumn evening a lifetime ago,
on a psychedelic saunter on fraternity row
I saw it for one crisp hour with a mystic's eyes

Maybe it wasn't an hour but only a minute
or maybe it was a decade with the clocks
cracked wide, one of those spots of time
with time driven out to play a game that
nobody wins within vaporous walls.
The tree did not shimmer. It was not
Yggdrasil or Annie Dillard's tree of lights
or even the pious Kilmer oak. It was just
a tree that for a moment stole my tongue
and raised me a little bit off the ground.

My eyes had worked that way once before,
as I stood barefoot in Georgia's moist red earth
watching the mighty kudzu swallow the pines
as it must have done in a Jurassic dawn
before the last saurian sighed or the first mammal
squeaked. I saw my smallness then in the sweep
of things and thought if I died right then
that would be all right.

I would gladly part
with whatever brain cells are required
to see the material world that way again.

The Idealist

“A series of footnotes to Plato.” You might think
that line had settled Plato’s reputation
so he could RIP forever muttering *gnothi seauton*,
trading bon mots with Socrates, sneering at Sophists.

But I feel sorry for the toast of Athens,
hobnobbing with Sofia in the capital of the world,
acolytes shadowing him tipsy as moths,
yet never truly easy in his own skin.

You give the guy a peach, he doesn’t eat it.
Observes, omphalo-skeptically, “This particular
peach, besotted with attributes, lures us from the
changeless peach of the mind.”

Wouldn’t a man so furiously rankled by matter
have been chafing nonstop at his own physicality?
I ate a peach today with my ephemeral molars.
I did not question its peach-ness. It was delicious.

Parc Güell

In the sand the little girl has crushed
a spider. Now, a long elastic stretched
between two chairs, she plays a game
with legs, some elaborate Spanish cat's
cradle until, winding and turning, she catches
herself in her web and falls, laughing.
In the plaza: young boys playing soccer.

Pub with an Open Door, Summer

Ducking out of the glare for the bounty
inside. The stale jokes. The acrid smoke.
The barmy scent and whirring fan and ashes
on sleeves. The landlord about his ancient
traverses, clinks of change and brown teeth
rabbiting on. "Shut up and deal, ya daft git."
The abundance!

Freeze this tableau. That old woman with
the hat, this old man trembling in Glen Plaid,
the petty mafioso with the Eighth Avenue ring,
all the gyrating world's puffers and loons,
every fact flowering into a truth. Do not
speak. Feel the muchness of summer.
The whirring fan!

Trellis and Rose

Against a weathered cottage wall
a trellis proudly stands
fanwise stretching up its arms
to thorn-scratched hands.

Come rose it says and gentle come
and my good servant be
that I may lead you to the light
and you a wonder be.

*Says rose but I am born of earth
and fed by rain and sun.
No sinews drawn by brain or brawn
may compass where I run.*

Yet I would fix your vagrancy
in elegant repose
that all who pass may marvel
at the symmetry of rose.

*By nothing wrought may I be caught.
I serve not wood nor wire.
I will wander still from shore to hill
when fencing sinks to mire.*

With wire and wood and hardihood
the trellis makers try
to show soft rose the path that leads
into endless sky.

And yet from each cottage wall
their labor is torn away
by thorny branches winding winding
seeking their own way.

Gardener's Reply

We are not arguing with eternity.
When scouring time pulls all we've done to ground
we begin again. That is enough.

I do not mind that roses are unruly.
When wood and wire, leaf and thorn entwine
the work is not a battle but a dance.

Dirty nails and blood-flecked wrists are minor
recompence for the gift of being asked
to serve the green.

We are not building granite monuments;
we are giving life a path. If it choose to follow
another, what of it?

If the candle goes out light another.
We plant and push and trim against the day
we have. That is enough.

Stones II: Tower

After a passage by J.R.R. Tolkien

An ancient tower once and faraway
had fallen wretched into disrepair
I found it on a frozen winter day
and wondered at its desolation there

It stood alone, no fence or cottage by,
no door to keep a savage weather out,
within scarce room to breathe and none to lie
down. Not a single window to look out.

I took a winding stair up into black
unable to conceive why anyone
save lunatic or saint would break his back
to place in this dead field a stone on stone

The stairway stopped and daylight humbled me
for from the top I looked out on the sea

Maple

For my brother Greg on his 71st birthday

A chunk of wood, softball size, has found a final harbor on my desk. Boldly asymmetrical, it reveals, turning in my hand, two sawtooth planes, a confusion of knotwood, a crevice of crustaceous bark. Depending on the light and angle of vision, it shape-shifts, presenting itself as a carrier flight deck, a Southwest mesa, a spaceship, a fish, a dog asleep, the mouth of a cave, an avalanche, or the cliffs of Dover.



But these are whims that come to adult eyes, those worn doors of perception that guard the seen, allowing only bloodless Truth to hobble in. With my eyes shut the doors are cleansed, and I feel the unseen: an old tree's broken heart. A silver maple taller than our house, it sentineled our lawn throughout our childhood, so stalwart that on a street lined with maples, we called it The Tree:

The Tree whose leaves we raked into autumn's forts,
whose lowest limb we dangled from so often it became
a parabola, babyskin smooth, whose branches laddered
us into a leafworld where Truth lost dominion
and the mind's eye ruled, where the trail was marked
with the initials of puppy love and good footholds
and spent birds' nests that pointed us up, up, up
until house and lawn disappeared,

where in the thinnest perches dutiful children
could escape earth for a while, flee a mother's protection,
remaking ourselves as Iroquois scanning
the suburban horizon for council fires or swaying
fearless aloft in a clipper's topgallants,
looking out in wonder for the edges of the world,
hanging on tight then shaking the branches, mimicking
the Atlantic gales of our father's war

until age or beetles or disease outran our shaking
and chattering men with chain saws took The Tree down
scattering the lawn with flecks of our childhood
and this wood chunk, massacre's survivor, this one
only, rescued by our mother, handed to me just before
she died, this one only so I would not forget that something's
beyond the sky in a summer breeze, that one could do worse
than be a shaker of trees.

Oregon Rainforest, Dusk

A hint of earth in the crystal air,
hundred-foot Douglas firs taunting heaven,
light dappling a thousand shades of green.
No flutter of leaf or wing dispels the calm,
just a slow pebbled stream, whisper and hum,
tuning your busy mind to the sound of forever.

Why, in this primal peace, can I not hold my own?
Why this ceaseless inner chatter? Am I still that boy
who read *The Way of Zen* in a summer field
while contemplating how to impress his friends
by trapping empty mind in a cage of words?

See how the river finds its way to the sea
without a syllable of help from you or me.

The Eyes of William Blake

I would like to see with the eyes of William Blake.
In rebuking the Corporeal Eye as no window to infinity,
he imagines an empiricist taunting him—“When the Sun
rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat
like a Guinea?”—and himself replying “O no no,
I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host
crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty.”

I would like to see with the eyes of William Blake.
Not for the host so much as for the radiance of facts,
the galaxies gushing up from each grain of sand,
the heartbreak fragrance of each withered bloom,
the stark thisness of what is, hard and gemlike,
blazing in clouds, in dirt, in tigers and in rain.

I would like to see with the eyes of William Blake.
I wonder can it be done without benefit of angels.

A Full Moon in Winter

The flat soft pallor of this night's moon
sidles noiseless to my window
turning the slatted blinds I have not closed
into ebony and silver prison stripes.
Whisks of moon lean in beckoning
but I am snug though sleepless
and I've been out there before
when the ground was painted ashen
and the air had surrendered its breath
to windless mystery.

Human eyes cannot bear that color.
What creature would be afoot
at such an hour? I hear no owl's wings,
no coon-rattled bins, no feline squawking,
only my wife's gentle breathing, best of
consolations, until—there!—some distance
away, the thinnest of whines flutters
the ash, as Coyote scopes the ground
for skittering fieldmice.

In safer light, tomorrow,
I will find his calling card, the berry-pocked scat
he places in driveways as if to say:
Come, drowsy brother, break fences
with me. I will show you a moon
you have not seen before.

Mother Earth: A Lament

When the tallest tree is toppled
and the smallest creek is dry
a blind owl circles
in a sulfurous sky

When the fields are fenced and barren
and the signatures are dried
who will tell the children
they cannot play outside?

When all the fish are taken
and every river sold
what starving voice will tell us
we cannot eat the gold?

Sing it from the mountain
and the broad unfruited plain
how brightly shines the sepulcher
in pestilential rain

Six Ways of Looking at a Buzzard

Nothing more elegant aloft,
envy of eagles.

Nothing more grotesque at table,
lacerating roadkill.

Down in the Louisiana bayou
Monsieur Carencro.

Shadowing the desert of Sonora
Señor Zopilote.

A gaggle of ghoulish lumps,
hideous as orcs

*Soaring forever, says Lew Welch,
above thee o perfect*



Against Lamentation

wild green of hope and purple of mourning
crimson and burnished gold of majesty
who do you mean to dazzle with these colors?
will you paint the pine or dye the sea?

at the swaying bridge of San Luis Rey
a jackdaw carried away a pilgrim band
their mouths full of honey pockets of salt
far below the river sparkling silver

why do you seek the seed that is in your hand?
verse after verse yielding no fruit
the tree that does not die needs not your tending
though you may water it if it please you with your tears

Is not the world solid? Is not the world light?
Is not the world shining? Is not the world bright?

Satori

As a cat prowls the meadow
at a certain distance
we do not distinguish
between foliage and feline.
Grass and savaged mouse
melt into one. We register
only field—what Govinda sees
as he kisses Siddartha:
the tale told before time
of mutable forms
where regret and desire vanish
into whiteness
humming.