

NEW WORK

Maybe the idea of The Artist
is to expose yourself
to risk
and thereby,
as holy victim,
to inspire others.

But my compunctions

point me to the periphery

where I can remain

out of focus

yet be able to breathe.

Here I need not ask,

continually pausing the work,

whether anyone is watching.

With that in mind,

as a timid exhibitionist,

I'll show my work,

although it's not ready.

FILE UNDER DEATH

Twelve other blackbirds,

Time to wash up,

Did you see that?

PRAISE SONGS REVISITED

(Recorded unimpressively at <https://youtu.be/I1F9-SJIFgs>)

When reading aloud, sing the italicized parts.

We never gathered at the river

but we lathered up in steamy hymn-sings,

our leaders whirling windmills filling ditches,

raising hormones to high pitches;

stiffening young men's resolve

with martial tunes—*Yes! We know!*

We know our sins are washed away!

We can be assured each moment of the day:

Chapter One Verse Twelve of John

is the Verse we rest upon—

sending believers—*Amen!*—into swoons;

making *amazing spaces* resound

with thumps of empty-headed sound.

But while *love lifting me* was quite dramatic,

I never found the Creed to be pneumatic.

Even when, *surrendering all,*

the sinners never missed an altar call

and you knew they'd nothing left to spare

when hands and feet went in the air,
I just sat still in puzzled pout,
wringing doubts and reservations out,
bringing them in from the fields of sin,
to let the devil's thoughts come in.
But though I fought them like the devil,
I swiveled from belief *in misery and pride*
into something less self-satisfied.
Mostly, demons do not care
once they've got you by the hair.
Let credibility have one more shout.
Redeemed! Now we need to rename it:
The Thief of Mind that leaves you in a bind—
forever after humming tunes without belief,
decades since the shouts have died.
Now, new young men, on a winning side,
march forth in *blessed assurance*, themselves unmade,
march *onward on a new crusade*
to thumps, and shouts, and descant tunes
replayed, replayed, and replayed.

COCKTAIL HOUR IN HADES

Agni, Loki, and Prometheus compared notes
after the plenary session.
Coyote was keynoter
from a subterranean dais
visited by anoles and olms,
mostly blind. A surprised spelunker
offtrack, seeking a high
by self-burial, came upon Pan,
tuning up for the evening's mixer.
He pointed to the tip-jar.
Later, as they warmed up, the delegates
gave each other kudos for contributions
to Hearth and Home.
Less was mentioned re the turn from fish-fries
and oblations to social media occasions,
Arctic heat-waves, and mental metallurgy—
although Loki made book
on when Greenland would rebound.

ALLEY STROLL

Less is of concern than you might think.
Eyes closed, but awake—
lineaments of faces,
the glowing residues of dreams
in afterimages—

I fade into the day.
Letting the ribbon of events unroll,
I take the daily stroll.

Like frothy surf, we stick to what we touch.
Knowing residues,
flutterings, and traces
of half-remembered hues,
decadent reverberations,
we tremble into being,
let the ribbon of events unroll,
and take the daily stroll.

Hanging flower pots and one-eyed dolls
dropped with unused skillets
in the muddy alley—
the couple having had enough,
enough of each other,
of squirrels gnawing through trash lids,
and of looping drum-track next door.
Less was of concern than they had thought.

And less is of concern than you might think.
This flattened, crisscrossed place—
site of such immensities,
such intensities, designs, resolves—
dissolves to the zero setting:
what I see when I'm not looking,
how blood booms, nerve endings
whine, as events unroll;
where I come to, going on a stroll:

A self behind the others, less
concerned than you might think,
who breathes and watches
things not so much lost
as lodged
inaccessibly out of reach
like a poem fallen
behind a bookcase, short of its goal.

OBSCENE—IS NOTHING SACRED?

I also see, and turn my eyes away
from spectacles of righteous violence
falling always upon innocence;
from vengeance costumed in a flag-display;
from scenes of smiling marchers, dress-right-dress,

about their holy business whipping women,
errant words and books, and getting even
with anyone to soften their distress.

I'm out, if *sacred* means you cannot speak,
and poems, like discarded microliths,
have served their end. But if going lengths
to render care in need makes us unique—
thus set apart—then I'll read my part
offstage: if need be, in burned words, by heart.

FOURTEEN BY ELEVEN

To Truman Rose on November 11, 2025

I find that I have nothing reliable to give you:
no insights, nor quaint maxims, nor certifying lessons
in arts or in dark sciences, bright ideas, pen knife
(it's useful when held hostage), nor secret codex, stolen
and tucked by a pope's clerk in a reliquary, hoping
the threat of it, held cunningly, would have kept him blameless
(it didn't), nor wise counsel, like Chesterfield's, to rub in—
emollients, strong salts, and astringents—nor warnings, guides,
nor guarantees. No. None of it. Empty all my pockets
of errors, mistakes, lessons I learned. See? None applies here.
You'll fashion your own implements, bright as any ever.

*Comment to TLR: Its syllabic form is 14 X 11 in honor of your birthday. See Marianne Moore's poems for more syllabics. The clerk's story is a fiction about Poggio, the papal nuncio who discovered the Lucretius manuscript *De Rerum Natura*, a favorite poem of mine—about atoms. Ask your uncle about the Latin. Unlike novels, which must be continuous narratives, a poem can use a bit of story the same way it uses a bit of rhyme. Lord Chesterfield is known for the sententious Letters written to his son, compared here to nostrums. If you think that this is not much then you've gotten the point.)*

BOTH SANTA AND GOD ARE ALWAYS WATCHING

Santa and God watch you
Day and night
And listen to your thoughts
And take notes.

Who else watches? Angels
Saints and ghosts,

And devils, I would guess,
to even out

the Crew on You.

So many watching
guarantees
an audience.

DELILAH DEPOSED

To start, the temple-wreck is not on me.
No way did I beguile, entice, or lure
that creepy cat. Of that you can be sure.
I did my act. So what? He couldn't see
I wasn't making up to *him*. He's dense
as a pile of bricks—the temple now,
in fact. All the shouting, and the row
he made about his hair? It's all past tense.

Don't think I can bring you up to date.
What he did for what was in his head
or on it, or what he thought he heard me vamp—
that torch-song that we do when it is late,
the bar closed, and high time the scene was shed.
No shave would make him any less a tramp.

A GROVE OF THOUGHT

A grove of thought
Changing leaves.
Old age:
Going to funerals.

Hurriedly ready to go in the morning,
cap on the head, backpack on the porch,
showered by scurrying leaves,
the soul detaches.

Scattered like hands at the foot of the cypress,
needles mat the ground.
Stripped trunks with leathery cones
await spring's sound.

A grove of thought
Changing leaves:
Old Age.

Arrived on time
for the occasion:
Being.

FILL IN THE BLANKS

In posterior life—
that is, witless survival—
you fill in the blanks

by acting as witness
to your own dismemberment.
It raises questions.

Are we particulate
and unequivocally divided
or a dismembered oneness?

It's hard to hear the chord
such writhing multitudes and churning
unsettled strivings would play,

the whole, resolved at last—
some kind of many-layered, changing
and changeless resolution

diminishing through leaps,
chromatic shifts, imperiled tempos,
to an uncertain cadence.

Hearing voices
is the old routine that lifts the lid
on existence

by certifying that a rationale
rumbles along in the background
like muffled dinner conversations

as you serve yourself another roll
buttered to cover the dry
gummy routine of distraction.

THRENODY

In mem. Susan Ann Rose Knight, J.D. 1957-2025

Written on a last train ride to Oklahoma, September 15-17, 2025

Trying to Remember

Too much intention to recall
gets in the way of setting down
the ways you linger in my mind.
I cannot force remembrance,
pawning valuables to afford
invaluable though fragmentary thoughts,
but only await your arrivals:
pungent, incandescent, brief, and partial.

Rootbound

Here's a last jig to swing
your part around,
to jump beyond your linger
by re-fingering sound

measures in a jigsawn-wiggling-dance.
Put some nowhere in your linger.
Reel off-step and real off-key—
no stance but circumstance—

a round, I said: So fling
your part. Let linger go
and jump with limber leaps.
Jig outside the whingeing,

lingering, wearying whirl
of squirreling round the tree,
the stinging, eye-full tour
of your identity.

Memorials

To show we're incorruptible and linger
somewhat, despite malingering
from action at the front;
deriving income from deceit behind
the lines, like these, we want
a traffic-circle with a monument
to interrupt the flow of never-
caring careless living
carrying on without us, but
let me be a memo to your heart,
a receipt you find when desolate
of never-ending gratitude for being.

Takotsubo

We did not settle things between us.
Now never will.
The things unsettled do not need us.

You stole your hand and left the deck
I cannot play.
Short of cards and breath, we break

the beating heart we shared between us;
can never fill
with gems, nor cannot spade delay.

Comment

Poems are always puzzling, I suppose. Dickinson's poem about the kinds of grief begins, "I measure every grief I meet with analytic eyes." Yes, poems are about feelings and relationships, but they may also be analytical. Poems puzzle with different meanings for words, allusions, and changes of speaker. Takotsubo uses the image of a deck of cards—diamonds (gems), clubs (beating), heart, and grave-digging spade to allude to the incompleteness of the relationship—a shared heart—broken by death. Takotsubo is the lobster-pot shape taken by a heart in a kind of heart attack that suddenly leaves the victim short of blood and breath, sometimes called "broken heart syndrome." Susan's shortness of breath at her death is the immediate reference, but the special family-reference is that Mom always complained of "shortness of breath." We grew up hearing that phrase, referring both to the results of her thoracoplasty and to the tuberculosis and

emphysema that kept her mother in a sanitarium for most of her adult life. In a way, “Rootbound,” the jig-poem is another version of the more famous poem by Mary Frye, “Do not stand at my grave and weep.” In the “jig” poem, the deceased is talking to us, while in “Memorials,” several kinds of people have their say—a veteran and businessman who want public memorials to themselves, and the poem’s narrator, who has a more humble and personal memorial in mind. Watch out for changes of viewpoint. The speaker is not always playing the same role. All this puzzling about what the poem means causes you to slow down: which is the point.