

DEATH TO FORTUNE AND OTHER POEMS

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PREFACE

The poems in this collection are the result of instruction, direction and encouragement on the part of many individuals, and some initiative and study on my own.

These poems reflect my interest in treating in poetry diverse types of people, characters I have observed and many I knew, involved in the ordinary and archetypal scenes that make up our lives.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to individuals who have favorably influenced me in the pursuit of writing better poetry. Special thanks go to my creative writing instructors Dr. Paul D. Ruffin and Dr. William Mills, my thesis director Dr. Gordon Weaver, and the members of my committee Dr. Bruce Southard and Dr. John Milstead.

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INTRODUCTION

The poems in this collection were written with an interest in describing the intimate but commonplace relationships between people, between generations, parent and child, siblings and between men and women. These relationships are marked by rituals and responses springing from archetypal, primitive urges or signals that stubbornly survive despite society's on-going drive to refine itself, to become increasingly civilized. This element of commonplace relationships is portrayed through archetypal symbols in a modern context: fertility, virginity, the struggle between men and women, the contrast between the sagacity of old age and the dangerous excess of youth, the ceremonial end of childhood and the entrance into adult life. Other poems in the collection explore the emotions involved in these relationships, situations and rituals: the love of a man for his son searching for a Christmas tree, a mother watching her infant son sleep, an adult dressing her younger sister on Easter Sunday, the thoughts of a woman washing dishes, a visit to see an elderly relative in a nursing home. Equally important is the representation of ordinary characters in extraordinary situations: a woman becomes more than ordinary when she is murdered, or when she falls

eighty-six floors from the Empire State Building. Three cocky teenage boys are killed by a huge replica of a bull at a hamburger joint; a middle-aged man dies of a heart attack in his own home. Death, though expected, is extraordinary no matter how it comes.

Many of these poems are anecdotal and the inclusion of dialogue is a characteristic feature. Though these poems are intended to be poetry, not drama, dramatic elements exist within the poems, in that the poem has a plot line, characterization and climax. Characters in these dramatic poems are similar to those in Coleridge, Tennyson, Browning, E. A. Robinson and Frost. Robinson and Frost, unlike their contemporary Imagists, used characters to act in imaginary situations, thus describing their philosophic views. Yvor Winters called Frost a "spiritual drifter" for this reason; he thought Frost's poetry showed no clear affinity with any school of thought.¹

Some of the poems that comprise this collection rely on the use of characters to perform the function of symbols within the context of their dramatic situation. Poetic craft is not sacrificed for the emphasis on dramatic situation. In poems where characters acting in a certain situation are foremost, the poems are often rendered in formal, metered verse or bear a musicality achieved through devices like alliteration and assonance. "The One-Stop Coin-Op" is a forty-line narrative poem in blank verse. The diction, however, is colloquial. "Virginia" is a

free verse poem of forty-five lines and relies heavily on alliteration. The free verse is appropriate to the poem in capturing the tense banter and fussiness of the old, witch-like Eva. Many of the poem's lines contain instances of alliteration and assonance to off-set the lack of a regular metrical form.

I believe that free verse is a valid verse form, but one that cannot be devoid of some internal pattern, especially in defining line breaks. In the free verse poems appearing in this collection, lines of poetry are broken in syntactic units or phrases. The tempo of natural speech dictates when these phrasal breaks should occur. Ezra Pound and other Imagists defended the use of free verse. In his essay "The Tradition," Pound points out that the ancient Melic poets used a system of free verse in "compos[ing] to the feel of the thing, to the cadence."² Pound said, "The movement of poetry is limited only by the nature of syllables and of articulate sound, and by the laws of music or melodic rhythm."³

The use of free verse can also be wrongly viewed as a "liberation from form," T. S. Eliot said. "No verse is free for the man who wants to do a good job . . . A great deal of bad prose has been written under the name of free verse."⁴

Thus, rules must exist for the use of free verse, like any other versification; those rules are set by the poet rather than by convention. The question of where the poet

breaks the line of free verse poetry is either answered by the use of artificial means like anaphora or by the sound alone, in which case, Auden said, "the poet must have an infallible ear."⁵ Miller Williams suggests the ending of a line of free verse should leave the reader "rhythmically pleased, but expectant. The anticipation created by the line's ending may be for the completion of a statement, which is to say, simply that the line is enjambed."⁶

A rhythmic expectancy is satisfied through the use of the regular iambic line in the terminal position in many stanzas of the free verse poems in this collection. The eleven-line poem, "The Old Woman on Twentieth Street," is composed of mostly irregular three-beat lines of syntactic units. The last two lines are metrically regular, emphasizing their ritualistic quality: "She turned her old eyes to the sky/And bore my belief to the sun." "Planting" is a free verse poem of sixteen lines and is broken into syntactic units. The poem has several instances of consonance. This poem is metrically regular with the exception of the penultimate line, composed of two anapests, two trochees with a feminine ending. This line is intended to contribute a feeling of interruption that complements the meaning of the poem. The poem returns to its iambic basis in the last line: "You say you're planting corn."

The title poem, "Death to Fortune," is similar to others in the collection thematically in its use of the dominant symbol: a card game suggesting death comes through

a loss of fortune, or the revolving of the wheel of fortune, an idea prevalent in the Middle Ages. Also present is the link between eating and dying: feeding the life force during its waning. With the use of a single classical allusion, the river Lethe, it is also linked with other poems in this collection, such as "Planting" and "Nightmare." "Death to Fortune," twenty-nine lines of free verse, is broken into syntactic units of irregular metrical feet. However, the terminal lines of each stanza are regular iambic trimeter, a device used to lend an air of finality to each stanza. This poem, like another free verse poem in this collection, "Woman Tied to Tree," is different in its relative lack of alliteration, assonance or internal rhyme and near rhyme. The imagery and the diction used in its presentation received the greatest attention in the poem's composition. The images and the dialogue are rendered in colloquial terms appropriate to the excitement of the poem in its conveyance of strong emotion. In the poem, fragments of ordinary, conversational speech are isolated and juxtaposed, without respect to regular meter or alliteration, to other fragments with a sometimes brutal effect. Eliot said, ". . . Poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language, which we hear and use."⁷ Miller Williams suggested that poetry should provide, through its use of diction, an illusion of "energized conversation."⁸ This energizing is achieved through alliteration or through the use of a metrical

pattern or alliteration, or through image intensive language. In "Death to Fortune," the language of the poem is image intensive and suffices to energize the dialogue or colloquial diction into poetic diction.

The formal poems in this collection include some anecdotal poetry in which the form complements the content of the poem. "The Emperor's New Clothes," a Petrarchan sonnet, was rendered in that form to complement the dramatic situation, the satirical tone and the misandry of the woman in the poem. The Petrarchan sonnet, the same form in which Shelley's arrogant Ozymandine is ironically rendered, is fitting in a poem satirizing a young man's loss of virginity to an apparently older, sardonic woman, and his triumphant parade around the bedroom. Two poems written in terza rima, "Nightwatch," and "Nightmare," are poems about the strength of the symbiotic bond between mother and child. The interlocking rhyme scheme complements the protective attitude of the mother in both poems.

Contemporary poets are experiencing a return to form, Stanley Kunitz has said.⁹ This return does not necessarily designate a return to conventional form, however, it emerges naturally after a period of open form; poetry, poets come to understand, requires "a sense of closure to complete it . . . There has to be at least an exhaustion of the impulse that began the poem," Kunitz noted.¹⁰ This exhaustion necessitates the use of some type of formal element in poetry to provide strength to the poem. Kunitz has honed

his basic poetic unit to a trimeter line, because, as he says, "I like that stripped feeling."¹¹ Like Dickey and Roethke I reject the Imagist doctrine of the impersonal-- the poet is removed from his poem and he writes using a formulaic principle with which to evoke an emotional response from his reader. Dickey called this "propaganda."¹² He said, "We have lost all sense of personal intimacy between the poet and his reader," Dickey said. The poet writes in a style accepted by the New Critics under the dictum that poetry is autotelic." This, according to Dickey, is a "manipulation of art."¹³

The poems in this collection are not indicative of a removal of the poet from the object of the poem, though many are not subjective or confessional. This is achieved through the intimate use of the first-person-persona in poems like "On a Caption from Life," "Washing the Dishes," "Woman Tied to Tree," and "Death to Fortune." This intimacy with the object of the poem is intended to extend an intimacy with the reader.

ENDNOTES

¹Donald J. Greiner, "A Conversation with James Dickey," Frost Centennial Essays (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1974), p. 55.

²Ezra Pound, The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound (New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1968), p. 92.

³Pound, p. 93.

⁴T. S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets, (New York: Noonday Press, 1976), p. 31.

⁵Paul Fussell, "Free Verse," Antaeus, Vol. 30 (New York: The Ecco Press, Spring, 1978), p. 300.

⁶Miller Williams, "The Line in Poetry," Antaeus, Vol. 30 (New York: The Ecco Press, Spring, 1978), p. 310.

⁷Eliot, p. 21.

⁸Williams, p. 310.

⁹Stanley Kunitz, "Action and Incantation," Antaeus, Vol. 30 (New York: The Ecco Press, Spring, 1978), p. 294.

¹⁰Kunitz, p. 294.

¹¹Kunitz, p. 294.

¹²Hyatt H. Waggoner, American Poets from the Puritans to the Present (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970), p. 609.

¹³Waggoner, p. 609.

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THE POEMS

MAN EATING THE SECOND APPLE FROM HIS ORCHARD

Pippin,

Small apple

I hold in my palm

Like I have cupped a breast,

I bit.

The sour juice stung.

Small apple lying hard in my hand,

I could throw you like Paris did,

And make a knot on my wife's head,

But I have eaten you.

She and I,

Our tongues rounded your curves.

We don't smile to hide our teeth.

SISTERS

Your head and shoulders peak
above your round belly
and the petals of your fluted skirt.
You show your secret like a shaman.
The flopping of the fish inside you
is a conundrum to me.
I press my elastic center,
a dry, dormant flower.
I watch the light unfold
the skin of your petals.

NIGHTWATCH

Children can be heartless and ninble as birds
easily slipping from their nest of bone.

My son clung to my walls without stirring.

He is sleeping while I stand in the half-life alone.

He came like a pearl between the lips of skin
of my stomach, like the mouth of an oyster, now sewn,

Joined by an itching scab, macabre grin.

I watch the fingers of my son's right hand
emerge in the dark like a night-blooming bud.

I check the quilt and quietly move the fan.

He sucks in his sleep and my nipples fill with blood.

ON A CAPTION FROM LIFE

"After plunging 86 floors
from the observation deck
of the Empire State Build-
ing, an attractive 23 year
old lies peacefully atop
the sedan she struck . . ."

--Life

I recline sedately on the hood,
a sprung bird, one nostril wing torn,
my head in a coronet of glass.
One foot protrudes from the nylon stocking,
but my legs are crossed, and the small fingers
in the white gloves are tucked in a fist of broken talons.

THE OLD WOMAN ON TWENTIETH STREET

The old woman squatted,
an Indian in her garden.
I watched her water her flowers.
There was food dribbled and dried
on her blouse, buttons missing.
I asked her about roses.
She parted the branches,
and like a midwife drew a blossom
from the tangle of thorns.
She turned her old eyes to the sky,
and bore my belief to the sun.

FOR MARY ANNE ON EASTER

I tie the sash of your white dress,
looking in the mirror at both of us.

I brush your hair,
dot perfume on your thin wrists,
behind your ear.

I pin the borrowed brooch
between the small swellings of your breasts,
and wonder who will touch them
under the protective moon of our mother's pin.

HUNTING A CHRISTMAS TREE IN TRINITY CO.

Vernon Gilbert bled to death
in these woods twenty winters ago
fishing on Tantee Bough Creek.
Waiting with his line in the water
he whittled a birch branch
and in the quick motion along the slender stick,
the knife slipped under the skin.

I dig up small bones between the railroad ties
as my father waits, scanning the evergreens.
I shake the bones like pennies in my pocket.
We walk along, the axe swinging between us
like a pendulum

until we stop in the cedar's shadow.

I climb the low branches to cut off the top,
when, in the light sifting between the trees
two deer step in the path.

We watch them wander farther into the woods
to drink from the Tantee Bough.

After the deer have passed, my father decides
I'm too small to handle the axe.

Like a leaf dropping to lie like these leaves
in the hallows of an animal's skull,
he says quickly,
come down, son.

PLANTING

The fire in the field
moves along symmetrical patterns
as if planned.
It weaves through nests of snakes,
surrounds mice and turtles.
I walk through the furrows
your tractor made.
A snake lies sliced.
A turtle struggles
through a flank of flame.
The sunset is distorted.
The colors simmer instead of sift
along the darkening field.
I see your long-legged wife move
like Vesta among the fires,
as you mow on your clanking tractor.
You say you're planting corn.

DEATH TO FORTUNE

"The last day of a
man's life is in
some manner death to
Fortune. . ."

--Boethius

I remember watching you bid
an unfortunate hand--you bid two
lost them all and sent me to bed.
I heard my uncles' voices from the kitchen,
louder than the musical whispers
parents make when children are in bed.
Half-asleep I heard you stealthily lose.
"I'm out, I fold," you said.

I was with you, watched you years later
in the hospital bed, under a mask,
impaled by a tube in your chest,
and smelling like the mist off the Lethe
--of mucus, plasma and ether.

I heard the doctors' voices in the hall,
louder than our whispers in your ear.

". . . heart beating too hard,
what's left of it to work."

You awoke to feed yourself.

Your head shook in a weakened palsy
as you moved the spoon to your mouth.

Six months later you died without me
in your own chair before the TV,
and Mother waited in emergency
in a wheelchair someone brought by mistake.
She whispered to Mary Anne, the last one
left at home, you had passed away.
Mary Anne could hear the back-room voices
proclaim loudly in the empty waiting room:
"Take off his shoes, would you?"

THE NIGHTMARE

The battle beaten boy in the dark sidles
along the walls to my bedroom and my bed
leaving my son asleep and the toys idle.

Tonight he tears us from touching, nuzzling his head
between my breasts, elbows boring my sides,
I am lovingly held in someone else's stead.

This morning he wears his battle mask, and I,
who must serve my husband and little boy, am shunned
by this child who waits for darkness to confide

To me convulsive dreams of battles at home.
He robs me, like a she-wolf, from my son
to foster his visions of another Rome.

WOMAN TIED TO TREE

People remote in their lives
would never dream that you,
walking alone in a place they thought
was as safe as the chairs on their porch,
would find him there. They would never
have dreamed you thought of the chicken
thawing on the drainboard, or the blue paper
you stuck in the book you read last night.
And when they heard "sexually molested,"
they would never have imagined you felt
him shoved in your throat.
And never in a million years
would they have believed
when he tied you to that tree
with only a scarf would have told him:

My favorite place in my house
is where two clean white walls meet.
There is a table by the window,
and a vase of purple irises.

Or when you felt the first stab
between the clean plate of your chest
that you felt all your bones at once.
But would they have been at all surprised
if they knew that at age ten you dreamed
that a tall blond man cut you loose from a tree
and carried you off in a wagon full of flowers?

VIRGINIA

In the evenings, I make some tea and sip it
in the swing, watching through the birch trees,
waiting for my granddaughter Virginia.

Eva came by after supper.

She sits with her back to the road.

Her legs are thinner than mine,
with broken veins on the bruised skin.

Sweat draws her dress to her thighs.

Virginia is late, and Eva wants to talk.

Her back hurts bad.

She's fed up with Florene,

her son's young wife who cleans house

"no better'n a blind nigger."

Eva turns to scream at a truckload of Negroes

"Look at them blackbirds!"

I catch sight of Virginia

in her striped dress and white apron,

carrying her cap in both hands.

Walking home, she takes down her hair,

and carries the hairpins in the crown of her cap.

I'm tired she says, when she reaches the porch.

Eva spits at the milkweed by the steps.

"You don't know what real work is."

Virginia is quiet.

I take her heavy hair between my fingers.

Eva curls her fingers around the wicker armrests.

"I guess your family's proud of you making a nurse
since you turn up your nose at raising kids.

Guess it's the way Catholic folks feel
when their daughter makes a nun.

But I wouldn't miss the joys--"

Virginia turns to me,

"At night all I dream about
is hearts and veins and blood--"

"You ought to cut all that mess of hair off
so's it'll fit under your cap," Eva says.

She stands to leave, then shuffles to the steps.
Shorter than me, her spine curls from her neck
to her waist beneath the damp, dark dress.

Don't pay any heed to Eva, I say.

But I remember one evening a long time ago
Virginia stood before the oval mirror
trying on the wedding blouse I'd drawn
from the Cedar chest. I had brought it
to her one summer all the way from Iowa.

LOCAL MERCHANT LOSES YOUNG WIFE IN FLOOD

Before the sun could burn off the morning fog,
Hollis Thornton rode back to his farm where the rain
and river had stripped the land leafless and grey.
The house stood wrapped in a cast of grass and mud,
its windows smashed by uprooted trees whose trunks
had been driven in by the force of the flood, and his wife,
while Hollis was gone from the farm, was carried away
to a neighbor's field. The trees left standing held fruit
of infertile months of rain, a pair of pants,
a familiar dress, and Mae Thornton caught in the crotch
of a tree that withstood the flood, finally naked.
Since late last winter Hollis suspected Mae
kept a lover--closer to her own age--and now
her broken limbs cuckold Hollis again.
Her bare arms bound around the trunk like vines,
holding the tree against the passion of the flood,
that took her dress downstream to a neighbor's tree.
Hollis broke every limb to get her down,
and dragged her home through the riverbottom mud.

THE ONE-STOP COIN-OP

I owned the coin-op on highway ninety-four.
It had the only pin-ball machines that worked
In Trinity County. At noon on Saturdays
The laundry was packed with women and rowdy kids.
The Ainsworth kid, Wesley Tatum, and James Nash
Were there the Saturday they were killed in town,
The day that Melba Denton came in to use
The pay phone in back to call her husband Frank:
"You know that bull on the top of the Tastee Freeze sign?
The wind blew it off, and it killed three kids in a car."
Madame Lafcet was there that day, washing
Her clothes and leaving sequins in the washers.
The higger women came in, and sent their kids
to Harvey Markel's Seven-Eleven next door.
Alger Sagely was washing clothes alone.
Since Clara Sagely passed away, he's stuffed
His dirty laundry in a galvanized pail,
And carried it up here on Saturdays.
He usually left a slipper in the wash,
And it banked against the sides until the washer stopped.
That Saturday Alger sat against the west
Wall, with a finger in his nose knuckle
Deep, and waited, staring into space.
Tatum said, "Goddam, old man, you make me sick!"

"You think that's bad," said the Ainsworth kid, "he pulls His goddam nuts through his britches. Watch him, you guys." Alger Sagely stood up against the wall.

The boys forgot him fast, turned back again To their pin-ball, bumping their hips against the machines. I called to Alger, "Your washer's on final spin."

He pushed past the nigger kids busting my pop Machine, past the rows of washers, to the boys And grabbed one of them by the shirt, and said, "You want to die?" He said it three times before The kid could shake him off, but they were all Cursed. They cussed the old guy. Tatum said, "leave us alone You old prick." Alger's washer stopped without slowing. "You run along and leave old folks alone."

Nash tugged the boys to the door. "Let's blow this joint And go somewhere to get a hamburger."

THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

Wrapped in the lavender sheets, she lay beside
the man, who, tired as Balboa on the beach,
sighed and leaned toward the bedside table to reach
for his cigarettes. He turned to her to confide,
"I don't know what to do now--I can't decide
whether I want to smoke, shower or sleep.
How does it feel to be the one to teach
someone everything he knows?" He seemed to derive
some joke from what he said, and jumped from the bed.
He pranced naked before the full-length mirror
with a pork-pie hat he's found in a trunk, squashed flat
on the crown of his head. She sat propped up on pillows.
He saw that she was watching. "Like my new hat?"
"It seems to go with the rest of your get-up," she said.

THE NURSING HOME IN TEMPLE

We stopped at the Zatapeks for lunch,
four miles from the intersection
where four nurses were hit by a pick-up.
Grandma said she heard everything from her house.
Steve and his brother rushed to the wreck,
where the brains and flesh had been flung
on both sides of the poorly paved road.

At four we stopped in Temple
to see Aunt Birch--we hadn't been there
since Uncle Bento died.
She lead us through the garage, littered
with rusty parts, oil rags and cans
where Uncle Bento shot himself
'all over the ceiling,' they said.
Inside Birch's grandkids played a game
on the floor in front of the TV.
We drank coffee in the kitchen and ate kolaches.
"Colonel Mustard in the hall with a revolver,"
the girl on the living room floor crooned.

At six we went to the nursing home
to visit with Grandma Kohut, who deafly
watched us talk in the lobby
beneath a picture of the Last Supper.
Suddenly she screamed, "The nurse stole my teeth!"

Grandma said she meant the nurse had taken
the old woman's dentures from her drawer.

"What would that young girl do with an old woman's teeth,"
she crooned to herself. "I think she's crazy."

WASHING DISHES

At twenty-three, I washed the dishes
with only a light over the sink.

A moth hovered under the bulb,
then fell into the dishwater.

My husband said he thought I was cute;
he meant because I compared a moth
to Icarus. He said maybe
I could write poems--like I would get
up to make bread and never leave the house,
and keep my poems in a bedroom drawer.

At thirty-three, I washed the dishes
with my daughter standing near the sink
on a stool. She said, "You wash dishes
like washing a baby." I thought of the baby
sitting in the sink, his chest against
my palm and I said, "Babies feel more
like the pages of an open book."

At forty, I closed my eyes to do
the dishes, to feel the round hollows
of pots or cups, like a Cezanne
still-life. My son, passing through the laughing
said, "Look! Helen Keller doing
the dishes. I said, "Did you know

she could tell the difference between
white and purple lilacs by their smell?"
My son closed his eyes and moved his fingers.
"That's a joke. That's the way Helen Keller
would holler falling off a cliff."

Seven years later I get too hot
doing the dishes. My china plates
fly from my hands, break like clay pigeons.

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