

Selected Poems (2003-2013)

In late childhood, I taped cut-out pictures of monsters on the inside of my bedroom closet door. I had a special affinity for the hunchback of Notre Dame:

Keeper

Guided from the village torchlights

to shelter in my boyhood closet

hunch my secret brethren:

Quasimodo

wrapped in a mothballed Nazi tunic

wheezes in self-pity

while the Wolf Man

Squatting amid

padded gun cases

blinks luminously

at Frankenstein's Monster

who rattles the coat hangers

and throttles his own neck

Back against the bolted door I cough

to cover every squeal

pledged in blood

to forever be

my brothers' keeper



A couple of examples of the affinity with Quasimodo as it manifested in middle age:

1

Facing the mirror

There has scarcely been a glimpse
of reassurance
in this lineage of faces
stretching backwards
through a half century
of Quasimodo devolution
Today's saggings and droopings
are met with the same gasp as
yesterday's pimples
Yet all faces are daily bound
by the same shock of unfamiliarity
the same clawing splash of lukewarm water
in the daily ancient ritual of
dousing expectations

FWT

Nostalgia

Body-mind

coarsening

like baobab bark

ears callousing

eyes narrowing

lips thinning

Yet behold these pristine

neural clips—

each affording

little squirts

of tenderness

which streak like tears

beneath a gargoyle's

marble eye

FWT

A ritual of teen years was watching the passenger train that passed nightly through my home village. Any glimpse of a passenger in a window of a sleeping car stirred a deep envy:

The boy on the platform

There is no escaping
 half-century old imprints
 of evenings spent scuffing feet
 against village store fronts
 watching for exotic licence plates
 or shivering on an empty station platform
 for the nightly passing
 of a ghost train

Who *was* that skeletal boy
 hunched under the dim light
 gawking up into the train window?

Why *this* shiver of fear
 when I catch his eyes
 in pulling down the sleeping car blind?



An early alert to the dangers of online binging— albeit through a slow modem plugged into the wall telephone jack:

In booting up

This rival consciousness,

thief of my long evenings, before which I hunch sticky-eyed

beholden to this angelic spawn

of adolescent onanists of mathematical bent...

this whirring, munching and groaning beast...

Is it like a happy cow, ruminating?

or in some squirming back-brain, are serrated jaws gnawing

and raptor claws clawing

at a cracking shell?



The following was prompted by a true story about how the internet made possible one man's desire to eat the flesh of someone who desired for his flesh to be eaten:

Cannibal lover

Understanding in a terrifying flicker

the insight of the Roman orator, Terence:

'all that is human is familiar to me'—

Does that include the desire of one man

to consume his own body parts

while being eaten alive?

No question that the dark desire

to taste

if not to choke on

one's own essence

is quintessentially human

FWT

A tiny tribute to neural Darwinism:

Natural selection

For every notional glimmer

shuttered from awareness

For every sloughed cell

and pruned neuron;

For every battered sperm

swimming tailless in circles

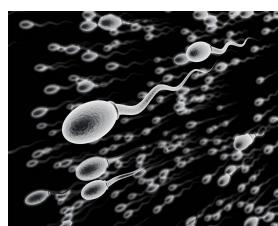
For every quiver of purpose

defeated—

I humbly gift

this idle moment of attention

FWT



*A reflection on the philosophical problem of 'qualia.' The notion that every individual experience of every sensation is **not** unique— seems to suggest that former experiences of the now-dead are constantly brought to life through reexperience by the living:*

Afterlife in toothpaste?

Leaning over the sink in
sudden remembrance of
one departed
who may have recently
tasted this same toothpaste
Does some aspect of a self
extinguished, endure
by the same taste in another mouth?

FWT

One of those moments of clinging to wavering reason like a drunken hillbilly to his bible:

Nub of hope

Even as nerves ping

in pre-snapping tautness

amid the robust bursts

of voodoo signals

from a tidal bore

of boyhood backwaters

Even in the throes of flu

and chronic sepsis

there is the nub of hope

By the blessings of

natural selection

the rot and deliquesce

may yet bare forth

a pearly bone

A seeming attempt to summon something of the faith of Druidic roots:

Springing eternal

What clinging faith is this
what balm for the healing stump
what salve for scars of connections
pruned off?

Why unshakable, this belief
in the blade of grass
wiggling though the asphalt
in the lab rat nosing out of the cage—
gasping for even just one whiff
of redemption?

FWT



Taking exception to T.S. Eliot's denotation of the cruellest month:

September

What is it in autumnal air
that so hardens capillaries
of dying leaves?

What is it in the dimming light
that renders the blood
more dark and viscous
squeezing in rising pressure
through prolapsed valves
to palpitate in the final torment
of Indian summer?



An example of the tendency to ascribe the skewed imbalance of hope-despair with the skewed imbalance of summer-winter in my northern homeland:

Mid-winter yearning

What of that nostril-filling
female fecundity of the swamp?
Of the heat shimmering up
from hot pine needles and railroad tar?
What of the whiff of wild blueberry in coal dust
amid the trill of whippoorwill?
Even in this reek of boiled cabbage
and chaff of eczema
I affirm a loyalty
deeper and fiercer
than winter's bitterness

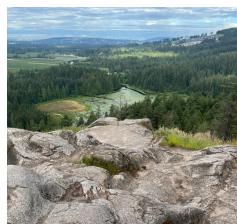
FWT

A moment of reflection from a nearby forested lookout where I often paused to offer gratitude:

A passing thought at the High Knoll

Who can avoid classifying
every encounter with beauty—
that compulsion to pin down
and mount its drained artefacts?
Whether the impulse is to possess
or to share
no higher honour
is due than to those
who leave the flower unpicked
the shutter unclicked
the words unspoken

A jangling fool's cap
is tipped here
by one moved for once
to keep his beak shut



For a very special little dog, who died within a year of this tribute:

Alone at the doorway

Fumbling at the lock
eager to reappear before
the little dog
howling behind the door

In that instant between
gnashing and clawing
in the walled-in sentience of
utter separation
when desperate longing
for the departed
wrenches into joy unbounded
in the beloved's return—
What more need be imagined
of heaven and hell?



A couple of reflections on the chronic insomnia that worsened in my final working years as square pegs grew evermore wobbly in round holes:

1

Counting the hours

How many times
must I jerk up between midnight and 4:00 AM
to gauge the forward jerk
of the red numbers?
How many grippings of heels
squeezing back towards the dark
back to the blessings of the smiling dead

Ever affirming that the remaining hours
will lapse more slowly
ever reaffirming that there is yet time for sleep
that the minutes before the alarm
may yet be divided,
and further divided
into hopeful segments



Waking up on a very cold morning

Like the trader before the bear-clawed big board

counting down minutes against losses

I lie with one eye on the clock

purchasing snatches of sleep

with the currency of shrinking hours

calculating the dwindling of capital

the line of credit exhaustion

One hand on the calculator

the other in the top drawer

fingering the pistol grip

waiting for the bell

for the settling of all consequences

of bankruptcy

I can't remember whether the assumed fuckups that prompted the following pieces justified the intensity of paranoia they triggered:

1

Could it really be worse?

After the bloody flux in which
the tubing is untwisted and stretched
after every organ liquefies and gurgles out
after brain matter is smeared on toilet paper
and the puddled coil seeps back though the trap
will shock finally exceed shame?

2

Sting

Nothing quite stings
like shame, flung
like a handful of ants,
full in the face

The following two pieces were also prompted by stresses at work. The wonderment was in the will to endure:

Hanging on

Squeezing knees on the bruising bronco,

ribs cracking with every buck

white fingers shivering

yet determined to hold on

and wince a smile of victory

Like John McCain saluting the crowd

With his torture-broken arm



Landlocked Sailor

Never at ease on the tiller

barely grasping the clues

for adjusting the grip

against the jerkings

of blasts and cross winds

I have oft times

zig-zagged

though squalls

steered blindly

through fog

circled rudderless

and taken on water

bailing just enough

to stay afloat

FWT



Vipassana meditation would no doubt have been more efficacious in lowering blood pressure than Ramipril had I the discipline to form a daily habit:

Beginning meditation

Before the skittering feet

wobble the wheel

so wildly that it screeches

and seizes up

Before the tiny nose

detects electrical fire—

I must train this little rodent

to take ten deep breathes

FWT

Guilt and regret for bearing the greater responsibility in breaking old ties:

For an old friends, long out of touch

What is this prideful will to seal the
tomb forever?

As though the precious artefacts
are vouchsafed
amid bat shit and poison spores?

As if some convivial reunion awaits
capped by clinked glasses
of Brompton cocktails?

FWT

Some reflection of a possibly Calvinist tendency to count oneself among the irretrievably damned:

New Year's regression

Here is Scrooge waking from a Xmas hangover

with a snarl and baring of yellow teeth

Shaking off the nightmare of redemption



FWT

Commitment to a new relationship at the age of fifty-five was a privilege deserving depthless gratitude—not notwithstanding memory's occasional taunting:

On the verge of re-partnering

How many plates need be set

at the new table?

What extra closet space

is needed for the other couple—

the ex-spouses

who in ghostly presence

demand room and board?

FWT

A pessimistic take on the long-term prospects of a species seemingly determined to cook in its own effluences:

Tough Love for Mother Earth

What pity's deserved
for a shameless whore—
raped by her own seed
while begging for more?



A thought on the transition of late middle age to early old age:

Spider Glory

Never ceasing to wonder about the sentience
of the male spider, fucked to death—
Never ceasing to imagine that his last instant
must be more intense
than the sum of this awareness
tweaked out over sixty-five years



A sober reflection on weighing the alternative to living with all metrics in inexorable decline:

Elderly blood work

In a life-stream sieved for sixty years

the ebb and flow slows

in a darkening pool of sludge

The coagulates sink

thicken and coarsen

the red merges with the black

while against the hot surges

elasticity strains

and capillaries harden

in patterns soon to be fixed

as the lava-tombed imprints

of Pompeii

A couple of takes on a guilty habit of old age somewhat analogous to adolescent masturbation:

1

Reading the obits

In upwards of six decades of apprenticeship

of self-torment

here is the latest pleasure

to be the rolled in the mouth

and dribbled into the spittoon

of self-disgust:

acknowledgement of the obscenity

of outliving one's betters

FWT

Of the connoisseurship of obits

With increasing frequency assured
by the iron law of actuary—
as long as awareness persists
the news of the death of contemporaries
will be received
with ever more nuanced
shock and sadness
solemnity and fear
while on a blank page
letters that spell the most shockingly
familiar name
swim gradually into focus

FWT



One of rare optimistic imaginings of the final moment of sentience:

Final Curtain Call

In the instant before dark
might one be so lucky as to feel
like the child
waking from a deep and satisfying sleep?
What more of the sublime
need be imagined
than rubbing eyes in the window
at the first sight of bare ground
and snowbanks magically receded?
What sweeter launch into oblivion
can be hoped for
than the impatience of
fumbling to button a shirt
hurry outdoors and catch—
the first sniffs of spring?

A more comic turn on the usual morbidity:

Potential uses for my ashes

Make a charcoal finger painting

Draw stick figures of Dick, Jane and the Grim Reaper

before a smiley sun

Use like Comet to clean the sink wherein I last gargled

Mix with gunpowder and rock salt to pack a shotgun shell

For the next Jehovah Witness at the door

Smear a bit on the middle of your forehead

and peep at hard-core porn through my *bindi* eye

Finally, take a little stab with moistened fingertip

And taste my essence

Is there something of earth, salt, smoke,

sour or acridness?

Any unpleasant aftertaste?

If so, just rinse and savour

a sweeter memory

Prison Suite (*excerpts*)

The following pieces are fragments of what was planned to be a longer series of poems. The intention was to explore the analogy of entrapment in drudgery (due to bad choices) and imprisonment without parole:

1

On the Inside

A doctor says he can operate

fix something in my head

but in my guts

and in my veins

I can feel the tumours spread

The shrinks they keep on probing

trying to understand

but they'll never get inside this brain

until they hold it in their hands

A lawyer's talking retrial

says new DNA's been found

but they can lock me here for a thousand years

on what's rotten underground

No matter who pulled the trigger

who was the vulture,

who was the prey

no matter who was the patsy

it was the weasel who slimed away

Where the drone is always in the skull
where the skin has a chemical stink
where darkness is sharp fluorescent
where the third eye never blinks

Sixty years on the inside
where hell is just routine
if you're living a lie on the outside,
you know exactly what I mean



Devour

They make more holes

to fit more tubes

They keep me raw

they keep me lubed

They feed me dope

that knots the veins

seeds the tumours

twists the pain

Pumped up double

sucked out dry

ice-cold sober

white-hot high

The flesh still jiggles

alive within

devours all

outside the skin

Guantanamo

I hijacked every plane

built every bomb

designed every vest

strapped them all on

I love torture

love to obsess

love to grovel

love to confess

FWT