

Selected Poems

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Sonnet

On Meeting You for a Weekend on Martha's Vinyard

Once more you're left alone; I'm on a plane.  
My work takes me to Boston several days,  
Or more each month. And while you don't complain,  
I know you hate the time I spend away.  
Still, this goodbye was easier than most:  
You're meeting me to share some time alone  
Together on the Massachusetts coast.  
Our inn was once a whaling captain's home;  
How fitting we should meet within these walls  
That saw those lovers share their sad goodbyes.  
I wonder, did his lady's teardrops fall?  
Or hide, like yours, sequestered in her eyes?  
These scenes repeat, partings without end,  
And I am bound to you, like the sailor to his friend.

For Merry

In place of the gift  
I had forgotten to bring you:

A blue hemisphere,  
the empty half of a robin's egg.  
I found it,  
residue of creation,  
in the grass beside the sidewalk.

Haiku

What a curious raspberry branch  
with no spirits  
attached to it

Elegy  
For Isis

When I married my wife,  
you had already lived with her  
ten years. That is how we remained:  
The old, orange and white cat,  
and the new man in the house.

My wife loves cats; I like them  
well enough. But when you growled  
and clawed her favored Persian,  
a pampered, aging bimbo,  
I liked you quite a lot.  
You and I, we formed  
an understanding:  
I became your companion  
of second choice, and you  
my favorite distraction.

You would sleep in a basket  
on my desk while I worked.  
When you awoke and walked  
across the keyboard onto  
my lap, I would put you in  
the basket, and you would walk  
onto my lap. I'd put you  
in your basket with food,  
You would eat, and walk  
across the keyboard onto  
my lap. I'd put you back  
into your basket, turn you  
on your back, and rub  
your belly. Somewhere I had heard  
that hypnotizes alligators.  
Sometimes, it worked on you.

But sometimes, you just sat  
at the edge of the desk, and stared,  
with blue eyes so different from mine.  
I'd cup my hands around  
your head, and move them down  
your sides, smoothing your fur.

I'd stare into your eyes.  
You stared back, steadily,  
your strange mind like liquid,  
your Buddha nature,  
your defining contradiction:  
a tranquil mind enclosing  
a wild and dangerous heart.

When you became sick, I watched  
you grow thin and weak;  
the veterinarian thought  
your pancreas had failed.  
She gave us pills and iron tonic,  
and showed us how to "pill a cat."  
A process much like sticking  
a post-it note on a moving fan.

But it did no good: you fell  
from eight pounds to four,  
and the iron tonic you spit  
back at us hardened on your fur  
like rubber cement. Finally,  
we stopped the pills and tonics.

But I took you outside almost  
every day. You were  
an indoor cat, not used  
to the yard, but, since you were  
too weak to go far, I watched  
and let you wander.

You walked to the edge of the grass,  
where weeds and brush lined the property,  
and stared into the darkness.  
The small birds complained.  
You froze and crouched,  
Ancestral memories stirring  
your predatory heart.  
Then you grew tired, walked  
away and found a spot  
to sleep, alone.

No matter how weak you became,  
no matter how much of the day  
you hid in the cave beneath  
the blue, stuffed chair,

our walks stirred your spirit.  
And when I looked into  
your blue eyes, I found you there  
like always, bright and calm.

Eventually, you grew weaker.  
On our trips to the yard, you stopped  
exploring and simply rested.  
When you could no longer walk  
without weaving or falling, we decided,  
in our human wisdom, that the pain  
had grown too great, for even  
your wild heart.

I asked the veterinarian,  
if we could take you outside,  
into the yard behind her office.  
There, you seemed renewed,  
more alert than you had been  
in days, exploring each dark  
and hidden place. I followed  
you around the yard, until she  
and her assistant found us.  
I calmed you down, talking  
and smoothing your fur until  
you rested softly on the grass.

You were my companion,  
and you were my teacher.  
From you, I learned the essential  
paradoxes of animal existence:  
That selfishness engenders love,  
that action bears the axioms  
of wisdom, that pain summons grace,  
and that a wild heart  
feeds the tranquil mind of understanding.

## Poetics of the Quiet Man

I want to learn the poetics of the quiet man:  
The articulation of breath, the resonance of gesture,  
The rhythm of repose. I want to study  
The grammar that divides the space between sounds,  
The matrix where we fix words, colors and sense.

Fill every silence, leave nothing unsaid,  
the result is noise, ugliness, distraction:  
The brittle urgency of airports,  
Lit from every angle,  
A visual field without shadow or depth;  
The crack of loudspeakers, buzz  
Of conversation on conversation,  
All nerves and glare and purpose.

I want to learn the aesthetics of the unspoken.  
I want to unlearn fear, unlearn  
Anger; quiet the constant psychic  
Hum, the debauchery of spirit,  
The need to fill each space, each moment.

I want to relearn the elements of form:  
The line of a fence tracking the earth,  
The pattern of birds on the top wire,  
The chaos when they all fly up at once.

I want to study the poetics of the quiet man.  
I remember, as a child, struggling with a hammer,  
My father placing his hand on mine,  
moving it to the point of greatest power and control.

## Instructions for Using this Dictionary For Carla; High School Graduation 1991

Unlike most books you will read,  
This is not a book of ideas;  
It is a book of words and, therefore,  
it underlies all ideas.

It contains all poems and stories;  
essays and arguments;  
shopping lists, promises,  
letters, lies, and invitations;  
Thank you notes, excuses and regrets.

But, like most tools of power,  
it is dangerous and difficult to master.  
Therefore in using this dictionary:

Always choose your verbs first. These  
define actions and life must move.  
Too many people live within the confines of  
“is” and “have.” Prefer verbs of action over verbs  
that express state: “seize” is better than “want;”  
“struggle” is better than “hope;”  
“rebel” is better than “endure.”

Once you have chosen a verb,  
the prepositions are obvious. Once you begin  
to move, the direction of motion determines itself.  
It is usually a mistake to remain still until you know,  
fully, where you want to go.

Adverbs modify the meaning of verbs, and  
these are often chosen for us.  
Circumstance may require that we move slowly, or  
circuitously or sometimes painfully. Always focus on  
sustaining action and employ these modifications when necessary.

Nouns are less important than verbs. Unfortunately  
too many people emphasize things over actions. Use nouns  
to describe objects of slight but unique interest, as well as  
things of great importance. Give a slight preference  
to objects of beauty over objects of ugliness, but not too much;  
Many things are ugly for important reasons.  
Emphasize living objects like dogs, forests, people,  
birds and insects over inanimate things

like money, rocks, sunsets, water and buildings. These in turn are more important than abstractions like justice, truth, honor and love. It is better to express the abstractions through actions and the proper choice of verbs.

Use adjectives sparingly, if at all. An object's name should capture its essence; choosing the right name makes modifiers unnecessary. If you use them, do so boldly, confidently and in ways that startle your reader.

While, in general, one sentence should equal one thought, you may use conjunctions to combine sentences into more complex ideas. Prefer simplicity, but if you do combine thoughts do so in a way that increases the meaning of both.