



A Mind Full of Nothing

by David Bolton

For All Healers
Mind, Body, Soul

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A Humble Platter

In 2004, my first poetry book, *Twitchy Fingers & Itchy Eyes*, was published by Bow Wow Press. Seventeen years later, like the cicadas, I have returned with another collection of poems. In the introduction to *Twitchy Fingers*, I offered the poems on “a humble platter...the world as I viewed it from any number of perspectives.” *A Mind Full of Nothing* has the same intent. I wish to share what I have learned and experienced over the past 17 years.

Twitchy Fingers had four sections in chronological order, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Tokyo and Baltimore, places where I lived and wrote over a 30-year span. This time I decided to organize my poems not by time and place but themes: Darkness, Earth, Love, Passing and Spirit.

Songs of Darkness

Winter in Baltimore can sap the spirit, especially during an endless procession of grey skies.

January Blues

I am the no-place man
I exist in a shell of my own being
Life flows through perception
Blackbirds huddle on branches
Sleet rat a tats slate
Windowpanes weep
My new name is Popple.

Fingers curled around driver,
I anticipate flowers and fairways of green
Sometimes I rage at a small, white ball
Resulting in the toss of a club
“Easy Dave,” yep, that’s what friends say...

Winters ago, staring at slush and muck,
I oiled my glove with linseed.
At four, chin hovering on sill,
I traced drops sliding down glass
Couldn’t wait for the monkey bars and swings.
That playground seems centuries past
Must I be that different?

What is the sum of a man?
Yes, the empirical within, a recognition of darkness and light
The nowhere place and the everywhere place
At 21, I witnessed naked glory so high
That I crashed like Icarus
But, mama, that’s where the fun is!

What is a man but a collection of parts?
Entrances and exits, a few lines in between
Yet most beautiful on this God’s green earth
The blue eyes of a daughter, just out of the womb
Blue from another planet.

On *Isla Mujeres*, the isle of women,
I stood at the Maya shrine, limbs splayed for sacrifice
Full moon hovering 180 at the stroke of midnight...
On *Templo de Inscripciones*, a voice deep within
Cleansed me of sin and I walked to the river

Blessing the mushroom I was about to eat.

Today I do the breath of fire for the flow up the spine
the throb in the forehead and the tingle at fingertips...
I've walked with gods, chatted with the moon and kissed the sun
There are others like me
Seers, madmen, poets, a few cab drivers in between
San Francisco night, ribbons of streetlight, red and green perfectly timed
KJAZZ on the radio, riding on a cloud.

I'm the no-place man, nowhere and everywhere.
In backyard slush I swing my new driver
"Woosh! Woosh! Woosh!...
Like the breath of a woman, on the verge of ecstasy.

Lost in thoughts on a gray day
A wrong turn ensnares me in traffic
Crossing the parkway comes flashing lights
Blues and reds, passing sheriffs and state police,
then the county cars, Wicomico to Garrett,
Atlantic to the Appalachians
last, Baltimore Blue
the black hearse, the flag-draped coffin.
A violin and piano play on FM
and I remove my hat
Mendelssohn's duet, written as a 14-year-old two centuries past
a fitting tribute to this passing warrior
I read the headlines on the Internet
Shot by one of his own
An off-duty mishap
A drawn gun and mistaken identity
The police sure know how to put on a parade.

1/20/11

When I did volunteer work at the Gift of Hope in Baltimore, I befriended an older priest who manned the local parish; the rectory and church were at the end of a treeless street with boarded up rowhouses, interspersed with families struggling to survive. One fellow complained about the theft of his grill. “Junkie came into my backyard and made off with it, hot coals and hamburgers.” Couldn’t get much colder than that.

Desperate people, good people, living day to day. When the invasion of Iraq occurred in March of ’03, Father pounded his fist on the kitchen table, wondering why all those wasted billions couldn’t be spent on the poor. Out of that conversation came this poem.

Beware of the “Whited Sepulcher.” (Matthew 23.27)

That Which Is Not

Consider the preacher on TV
Finger thrust toward heaven
Hand grasping the Good Book
 he talks
‘bout the narrow gate
‘bout those who are saved
and those in a bad state.
His finger swoops down
cleaving the yea’s from the nay’s
this preacher on TV – secure in his salvation
phone number scrawling across the bottom of the screen.

Lots of people are clamoring for Jesus these days
like they’re old buds with the Redeemer
The football player crossing the goal line
the actor accepting the award
the billionaire pitching the latest tower;
in matters of war, the President takes counsel from above.
From the tarpits of the Carolinas
to the pipelines of Alaska
the Cross is on the march;
let us give praise to intelligent design.

Spiritual materialism
That which is not
Shiva’s dance of destruction and consumption
Perhaps there’s another way
not for the glory of the eternal me
but a path to the universal stream,
imagine a world free of desire
selfless and pure

Be that a dream for the naive?

Buddha chuckles at darkness.
The Maya, calculators of stars,
Found the divine in a mushroom
The universe opens like flowers.
Trees speak. Birds are crying.

See the Dali Lama,
harangued by a Pentecostalist
You've got to believe! cries he
The Dali Lama smiles and asks,
If Jesus is love, why the anger?

In the chapel at the Gift of Hope
Sisters in saris rain praise on Mother Mary
Their voices lift this traveler's spirit
These women tend to the sick, the ex-cons and misfits
Men of the street
Last stop in the slide.

I cook breakfast for the men
A small gift honoring my late wife
Once, as I looked away from the scrapple and eggs
I sensed down the hall an ancient passing
the Carpenter making another call.

4/11/03

The 2004 Presidential Campaign was particularly vicious, thanks to that University of Maryland grad, Karl Rove, George W. Bush's "turd blossom." He managed to turn a war hero, John Kerry, into a traitor. And so it goes.

The Campaign

Slick lips spewing
 righteous lies
Iraq & 9-11, the mushroom cloud,
 weapons of mass destruction
liberation, smart bombs, pipe bombs.
Here in Charm City, broken glass dreams
eggshell minds shattered
murder on the 11 o'clock news,

But there's a new day for State
salute the flag, join the action
 war for peace, war for peace
while school roofs leak,
bullets ricochet off macadam
a cocktail torches a rowhouse family
 fodder for the camera.

easy chairs in the city
live, late breaking, the latest and greatest
 "I see a new America."
packaged . . . wrapped . . . positioned
pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.

in the streets
children cannot escape
 those tombstone eyes
that awful hunger
 vampire grey
brought to you in living color.

11/1/04

Through it all, there's always golf. Sometimes, however, the mind can meddle with one's focus, especially during a critical swing. My buddy Jim Merrill, a former golfer, calls this intervention "the will to lose." Wish I could take a broom and sweep the brain clean.

The Will to Lose

My golf swing mocks this preposterous
quest for perfection
I dream of pink underwear
and prance before the class
spewing Aristotle and ways of persuasion.
An Edith Piaf tune of no regrets
spins during my backswing
the past isn't past but a hack of turf.

A batting average of a utility infielder in '69
sticks to my mind like chewing gum on a shoe
I have conversations with a wife 7 years passed
seeking counsel on our daughter bound for Africa.
Orwellian images spin on the TV screen
winning is losing and war is our fate
"Free Iraq is within reach."
For whom? Who can make sense of it all?
Ronald McDonald?

the Oriole mascot, more like a maggot
a ragged bird of rubber reflecting the
team's demise
Zippy is God
logos are wisdom
secrets to my soul sit
like unclaimed baggage
I have the ticket
but can't find my way back.

8/5/07

As the great Leonard Cohen said: “You want it darker?”

Nightmare in November

I watch myself watch graphics flash the fall of the wall, first Carolina, but then there’s Ohio but that goes too and so also Florida, given up for dead as states descend in blood red and elephants in drag hooray their side.

Dawns a gray day, sleepless in Baltimore, watching myself watch silver raindrops slide down the pane; I wander to the porch, looking for refuge, drawn to the scent of fallen leaves, those ambers, yellows, and reds coating loam, such diversity.

Unreal city, unreal state, unreal country, unreal world, orange the new grey, like the confederacy, the South rises, all hail to *el hombre fuerte*, and I watch myself watch myself ponder rising seas, New York underwater soon, an end to union blue.

If this be a cosmic joke, this fear of the Other, a bad dream, something I ate, mold on a mushroom, the mind a balloon, what me worry, things fall apart, center cannot hold, wise words ascribed, no place to hide...

11/9/16

The final poem of *Twitchy Fingers & Itchy Eyes* features “The Last Epistle of Satan.” Here is a slice of his message from Verse II:

“Dare not deny my role
Evil symmetrical with divine
Lest the Word not be flesh
And the Passion not fashioned from scrolls...”

During this darkness, one must give Old Scratch his due.

**This
Late November**

Let's see through the wind-streaked pane
last leaves of maple burgundy, rippled skies
chill rain dancing on slate.
Hear silence ravish the drought,
 drop by drop.
even squirrels give pause to this aquatic peace.
old T.S. was right: winter does keep us warm
dreams do slip through cracks during this lack of light.
Touch the casket of bark. Remember Spring
when branches tilted sun-ward and hope sprouted anew.
now the change of seasons, yet within trickles a spirit.
Drink deep lest the soul turn brittle and weak.
legions of hate have penetrated Babylon's gates.
In all languages and passages, *El Diablo* entrances
 the hearts of the lost.
Remember Revelations: As light follows darkness
the Tree of Knowledge arises.

11/30/16

“Be Here Now,” the words of Ram Dass (Richard Albert), helped clarify my life. In these stressful times, it can be difficult to live by those words... only human to peer ahead, to lose sight of what's at hand.

Not in the Moment

I'm not in the moment
Made a wrong turn into the future
My anticipation of what can go wrong
Drains me of vitality and positivity.

So easy to fall into this rut
Doubts about projects seep into the brain
During the hour of the wolf and pillow flips
Let's try a yoga trick.

Lead with the breath, relax the toes
Relax the calves and feet
On the edge of sleep, the mind intervenes
Despite my plea for peace.

Yes, says the hungry ghost, suppose this or suppose that?
You win, I say. I accept this agitation.
This surrender grants a sweet interlude
In dreams, bullies of youth chase me.

Morn brings the sense of spring slipping past
Through the screen I have that far-away stare
 blossoms and diaphanous green
tweets of birds, buzz of bees fail to move me.

The mind spins its sticky web
'round and 'round it goes
Like a song stuck in the head.

4/20/17

And the nightmare continues.

Year of the Muskrat

The muskrat digs its way into a dam
Infestation threatens the foundation
Will there be a flood?
Will there be disaster?
It was an awful year, said the sports analyst
He was not talking about football.
In the gym, the grocery line, at the bus stop
Strangers are impelled to share their blues
Ain't this somethin', can you believe it?
We tell our better half not to lose hope
We'll muddle through
Haven't we done so in the past?

I remember '68, cities in smoke
The lies of a president and the loss of faith
Say what we will to mollify the passage
There's dread in the air
May we be wrong about this decline of civility,
Not to mention democracy and the rise of the racist creed
May this be a passing fancy, an historical fart
But this epidemic of conceit has no inoculation
And the muskrat keeps digging
His small claws churning the bulwark
Burrowing deep into the breach
No more we the people
Time to take to the streets.

12/31/17

Times of madness call for humor, the sharper, the better.

Mala Hierba

Begin morning coffee, Synthroid, aspirin and vitamin C, fish oil, garlic and a turmeric dash in the spinach smoothie. Only then can one absorb headlines landing in the dawn, like the Pink Floyd dirge, only the lunatic ain't in my head; it's spread across the printed page.

Another mass shooting, your thoughts and prayers please. Trump dis and Trump dat, like Lear, raging at the wind. Out vile jelly. Only the blind can see. Stay tuned on You Tube, next up "prison's gritty realities," brought to you by a host of maladies.

It's enough to make your teeth itch. Which means it's time to weed. This postage-stamp backyard, framed by a mossy stone wall and oak, holly, maple, and pine, softening the urban clamor, the distant highway rumble, planes from BWI, sirens and the chug of a night train.

Past the wall and trees, boys thump a soccer ball. Robins abound on the ground, pecking at worms, squirrels steal from the feeder, and a young rabbit munches clover. Bunny, keep those ears pricked. A bushy-tail fox could trot along the wall, or a horned owl could swoop from the branches. It's a jungle out here.

I fall to my knees, rooting out treacherous vines, incestuous chickpeas, wayward grasses and invasive species. Over the ivy-coated fence, Virginia creepers have launched a heart-felt assault, encroaching the yard in a single night, slithering over periwinkle and down the wall, ubiquitous for space, smothering trees and everything in between, a fascist plot destroying diversity. Clippers in hand, I scale the wall and slide past the fence with murderous intent. Among the brambles, thorns and poison ivy grow the roots of this madness. Here, I make my stand.

5/30/19

Songs of Earth

The Humming Oak

I hear the voice of cicadas
a humming, a giant om
from larva and dirt they emerge
scarlet hat-pin eyes,
translucent wings
this cacophony of copulation
unchanged since T-rex
I hear the voice of cicadas
I hear the voice of Shiva
birth, sex, death
cycle without end.

6/3/04

Here is an experience in which the mind was full of nothing. Mother Nature is a great teacher for revealing what I would call the True Self.

All Along the Fault Line

A pine high in the Sierras
a spot of green among glacier-carved stone
a bonsai overlooking Spooner Lake,
roots splitting boulder.
Ah, to walk with old friends
to be one with the wind
to cease the chatter of the mind.
Before a meadow speckled
with the colors of Seurat,
we stood in a butterfly cloud,
a thousand flickers of orange and black
 rising from the path.
Amidst birches, we smiled at dancing doubloon leaves,
two middle-aged couples with ailments indeed,
but our hearts still quickened
over what may lay ahead.
We felt our senses keen
an overlook humbles the eye.
Craig uttered Wordsworth,
about the world being too much
with us – yet for time short and true
though we may not be pagans suckled in a creed
we lost ourselves in the mystical vastness.

*-- Dedicated to Denise Becker and Craig & Susan Rock
8/23/04*

The Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia has the highest tides in the world, 60 feet. Makes for a dramatic scene, every day. Hypnotic.

Low Tide

My soul is driftwood on basalt
Washed ashore, stripped to bone
Lines of time run through me
All color washed away
Bleached white and gray
Neither demanding nor grasping
A witness to the tides.

-- Delap's Cove, Bay of Fundy, Nova Scotia, 8/10/06

Most of my adult life I have sought out high places. I cherish the memory of climbing with my young family the 8,000 steps of Tai Shan, one of the seven holy mountains in China. Mountains are great teachers. In the high desert of Utah, the land was waiting with a lesson.

Do You Want to Be a Bird?

Wind from the valley sways Douglas firs.
At 10k, cedars mark their passing, victims of a beetle.
A speckled carpet, meadow flowers rushing through the season.
What to say to a 1500-hundred-year bristle cone?
I finger the emerald-green bristles on a sapling
Its inexorable roots winding through rock
What be its shape come 3000 AD?
A raven caw answers the silence
She floats over hoodoos, riding the currents.

-- *Cedar Breaks, Utah, August 2010*

Each season in life has its gifts. Now that I have reached “the age of maturity,” sometimes I must remind myself of that adage. It’s not easy making peace with the passing years; the magic of ordinary events can show the way.

Squirrels in the Attic

Squirrels stuff their cheeks with garden grass
among dead flowers they claw their spots
this rush of an impending season
makes me pine for burning leaves,
laughter of childhood friends,
Mother’s rose scent as
she kissed my cheek just before sleep.

During this stretch of falling darkness
memories lace the mind and regrets rise:
times I acted small, a twist of a dig, words that cut
selfish needs, the heart gone cold...
I ain’t no saint, nor the Devil’s seed
this be no dirge, no rumination of has beens
but a simple recognition of passage.

I had tea with Kubla Khan, debated Hemingway,
smoked with the queen and flew to the moon
now squirrels fill my dreams, grass-stuffed cheeks
strutting down the street, sheer audacity!
rewards could be few this seventh decade
no golden stars as in the first grade
yet consider the pleasure of a cultivated eye.

A dewy web sparkling in sunlight
a praying mother laying eggs on a screen
even a stinkbug on the ceiling or a solitary cricket
oh, the feathery touch of a grandson’s kiss
a sweet breeze on the cheek
this autumn scarlet
gives succor to my retreat.

10/2/12

I took up golf in my forties. Like a virus, it gets into your blood. Two years in a row, I traveled from DC to St. George, Utah, to give a short speech on behalf of the telecom association I worked for and play in the golf tournament as the “D” player in a 4-man scramble. Two years in a row at the banquet I was branded the “World’s Worst Golfer.” I deserved the citation the first year; the second, not so sure. Then again, dear daughter Stephanie did say I was “wretched” after accompanying me for nine holes at Pine Ridge.

Why I Hate Golf

This swing, this stroke of stick
reflecting a quest for rhythm & flow,
the “slot,” elusive as the grail.
a perplexing test of character:
the harder one tries
the greater the chance
shots go awry
enough to
make a grown man cry
toss a club into a pond
or maim a goose with a finicky iron.

This devious game, so simple are its tricks,
it calls for a soft grip
a touch of Zen from tee to green
a mind not cluttered with negativity
no what ifs
but movement of the hips
a wrist flick, the crack of the whip
simple physics gives that sphere a ride
a soaring arc into the sky.
as sure as butterflies in spring
that sweet spot will lure this sucker back.

3/23/11

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow...

During the Darkening Moon

eat and drink to the brim
sate this Dionysian itch
smoke a little in between
nothing like a toke after pillow talk
nothing like laughter in December
not bad for a lad on the verge of his 8th decade.
So, how do you like your brown-eyed boy now, Mister Death?
might your blade ache?
have I spent too long in the parade?
perhaps I taxed my liver
burnt a hole in the stomach,
caused lung cells to rebel...

as sure as I be a professional driver
a five-year survivor in the steel ballet
I'm also a professional imbiber,
stuffing the gullet with cake, cookies, and chips
anything within reach, roast beef rolled in cheese
a chicken wing, cranberry smoked salmon
fruit tarts, fudge brownies and cream brulee.
how fine the cab for a stretch or
a martini, straight up, sparkling before the fire
and how was your day in the withering light?...

warmth climbs the spine
feel as good as an Om in spring,
now the parties have ceased
the candlesticks and silver put away
the conversations committed to memory
I stand sated and at peace
ready for a fresh breeze
all things in balance
as it was meant to be.

1/2/17

All that food and drink over the holidays led to a relaxed state. As the *gaijin* (foreigners) say in Japan, “You gotta have “*wa.*”

The Ace

The golfer placed the two-buck ball on
the tee and looked out at the green.
Below lay treachery, Loch Raven’s finger, an aquatic tomb.
Removing the two-buck ball from its perch
He rummaged for a weathered piece
one at its best when dogwoods bloomed
a sphere bearing scarred dimples, the residue of a bet or two
a better choice for sacrifice
but what of this? thought the duffer in a scan at the cavity
this, on the fourth day of the New Year
every bit of length needed to reach the green.

To its proper place returned the two-buck ball.
an eight iron clasped in the hand
an empty head, no intention save the swing.
the 8 hit the sphere clean
he lingered over the tee till
lo and behold, an arc magnificent,
toward the flag floated the ball
puncturing the soft green a few feet east
a pause, then gravity’s pull
down the slope rolled the white magic
vanishing like Houdini into the cup.

*8th Hole at Pine Ridge, 122 yards, 8 iron.
Witnessed by Rick Bogdan & Darrell Holloman,
1/4/17*

Stony Run cuts through my Baltimore neighborhood, Roland Park. The sights and sounds of the stream sooth the monkey mind. No matter the season, I love losing myself in the natural world around me. Halfway between Cold Spring Lane and Wyndhurst Avenue stands a Japanese garden, just off the park. One must pause to gaze at the arrangement of stone, plant and sculpture, centered by a round disk suspended from an oak branch.

How Fine It Is

to stroll through snowy Stony Run, a woodsy strip wedged between streets, removed from steel and concrete; to hear the hiss of flakes gliding through space, to perceive clarity of color; summer's light too bright, now the exquisite softness of black, grey and white, a reward for fresh eyes that see oaks raised in supplication: for whom? for what?... from a garden tree strings an eye winking, awake, asleep, awake, asleep, recalling the old botanist that worked this stretch, patrolling this plot on a tiny tractor, rooting out invasive species, allowing indigenous to breath; this gentle elf has passed, but the plants of his hand live on.

2/12/17

17 years after Kathy's passing, memories of her still live in my heart.

The Ghost of Love

Pissarro was right about light
fresh edges instead of summer smudges.
I crunch through snow between sunbeams
crystals of blue, purple and red dance,
conjuring a snowfall centuries past
my bride on cross-country skis
cheeks aglow, strawberry lips pursed in
concentration as she negotiates the slick.
I see her gliding down the slope
how beautiful, how young and sweet
I see her taking my hand for balance
as she did on Fuji, coming down from the snow-capped maw
her eyes failing in the descending darkness
but she trusted her touch in my palm
she knew I would get her off the mountain.

3/17/17

In the first Carlos Castaneda book, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, the sorcerer spoke of the difference between "seeing" and "looking." Those who practice the latter miss the magic of everyday existence. The words below reflect one of those precious moments of clarity.

Meanwhile, Cross Country Skiing Through the Mind

i come with expectations of gliding on powder
not frozen clumps sticking to wax
no gliding on this path
over yonder the howl of a generator digs at my brain
must concentrate on the smoky breath, no destination in question.

trudging over the railroad bed, i think of Old Abe passing through,
from Gettysburg to Springfield, swing low sweet chariot.
peeling a tangerine, i eye a crumbling water tank and picture
union blue, wondering if the soldiers fished the Gunpowder.

'round the bend the eyes perceive a pastel sky
an azure slice in this clouded state
i gaze at a field at rest,
caws cut through crispness, black dabs on white
when i am empty, i am full
wherever i go, there i am
i am the river's song
i am the fallow field
i am snow on the west side of trees
i am geese flying low in the breeze.

2/1/18

I composed this during the spring of 2020. Writing poetry and fiction helped lessen the stress of the pandemic.

Garden of Earthly Delights

I've traveled many places, seen amazing things
the funeral pyres of Varanasi
the Tomb of Lord Pakal in Palenque
sunsets over medieval rooftops in Arles
Taishan steps rising into clouds
the Big Sur River gorge in spring
Nevada Falls in Yosemite
the tides at the Bay of Fundy
Plaza Garibaldi in Mexico City
San Francisco streets in my taxi
the top of Fuji, a maw at my feet
the glaciers of the Andes and Machu Picchu magic
fog rolling over Point Reyes
the hoodoos of Bryce, the sandstone cliffs of Zion
the Lincoln Memorial on a sharp blue day
the Cayman Island coral reefs
Winslow Homer's rough sea
Rocky Point's 11th tee overlooking the Chesapeake
Camden Yards on a soft summer night.

Now, in confinement with my beloved,
I crave the faces of friends,
shared laughter, sarcasm on the links
I miss playing with the grandchildren
there's Zoom, but that won't do
I will miss eating crabs with my daughters
Greeting their childhood friends at the solstice
Hard not to feel that the virus
has stolen a slice of life.

In the garden awaits a patch of peace
fresh emerald grass, white dogwood petals, the scent of lilac
the march of flowers, leaf and seed
soon basil, tomatoes and beans
hummingbirds, bumble bees, and fat robins feasting
along the stone wall skirts a fox
even a horned owl, high in the pine,
under the bluest of skies, I celebrate life.

4/20/20

I carry in my wallet an ID card from the “Maryland Medical Cannabis Commission.” Once I mistakenly produced this laminated card instead of my driver’s license when the pharmacist asked for identification. Must have been something I ate... quite a change from the days of nickel bags and Mexican skunk; never would I have imagined seeing weed legal. Helps me glide through the days.

Here’s a short, short story I had to include.

An Edible Tale

So I went down to the basement to get the vacuum cleaner. I paused at the golf clubs and got into a conversation with the 3-wood. “You and I are going to have a good time this year. The hell with the driver!”

Having eaten a “medicinal” an hour earlier, I completely forgot about the vacuum cleaner till I realized I was talking to a golf club and not getting much of a response. Uh, where was I? Oh, yes, the vacuum cleaner.

Been a long road to reach this point in time.

2/11/21

Songs of Love

Kathy spent her last months in the Gilchrist Hospice in Towson. Newly opened, it was more like a hotel than a hospital. She had her own room that looked out on a garden and a dedicated staff attending to her needs. Usually I came by for lunch and read aloud a chapter from *Angela's Ashes* or *'Tis*, not exactly books full of cheer. In the evening I came with wine, and we would watch the news together.

When alone, she spent hours absorbed in the classical music on the radio, eyes closed, lost in another land. Sometimes I would enter the room and pause to look at her peaceful face, so angelic.

To Music Ethereal

A moonlight sonata, a flute
soft as a baby's bottom
a fugue to set the mood, and I picture you
on that hospital bed
propped by pillows
plastic radio perched on the shelf
your eyes at half mast,
absorbed in the sounds of the past
Sunday evenings you protest
talk show into the night
so we switched the station
to music ethereal, hearts of space.

6/3/18

Love Is

Love is not confined by space and time
Love is not liberal, conservative, communist or fascist
Love is not an ornament, worn on occasion
Nor is it technology, a gadget, or the latest fashion.
You cannot use up love.

7/26/19

Funny how life turns out. Through the '80s and '90s, each New Year's Eve Kathy and I, along with Leslie and Stephanie, would wear our Sunday best and go to the Wallicks. Bruce, Barbara, and their daughter Rachel. The Wallicks knew how to throw a party. Among their interesting collection of guests, people I saw once a year, was Denise Becker, there with her two boys, Ben and Dan. Through the years we became mildly acquainted; at some point I think Kathy may have given Denise advice on dating. I wasn't privy to the conversation. Denise had a husband for a while and then did not. I do remember her throaty laugh. If someone had told me that the tall blond would be my future wife, I would have scoffed at the possibility. Already had one, thank you. Downstairs was bedlam, a dozen kids and no parents. Short of a broken bone, the adults left them alone; we were free to graze the incredible spread and have intelligent conversation. I remember talking to Denise, but she does not remember talking to me. Figures.

The months following Kathy's passing were tough at times. I decided that the summer solstice would be a good time to signal an end to the mourning. I wanted a big party. My Dawg softball buddy, Dave Pugh, a graphic designer, conjured the name, Bolstice, and put together a postcard, creating a smirking sun as the Bolstice logo. I signed each and put them in the mail, hoping for a good response. The big day arrived; the weather was perfect. A good 70 to 80 people turned up, including friends of my daughters, fraternity brothers and their wives, the Riverdale crowd, Dawg softball players, even Eva, the desk clerk from the Gilchrist Hospice. Had a crab feast on the wraparound porch, four bushels piled high, followed by a softball game on Friend's field. The party went into the night. I was grilling chicken at 10pm and loving every minute of it. So much life. Great to see Leslie and Stephanie smiling and laughing.

Around 2 am, the last good-byes were shared. Everyone had left except one person, Denise, who I understand had been reluctant to come, but Barbara Wallick insisted. Evidently, the two had a few laughs in the basement with the bong... had a bit of difficulty when they decided to rejoin the party. At the top of the stairs, the knob refused to open the door. They ended up crawling through the mud room to escape... turned out they were turning the doorknob the wrong way.

Anyway, there she was, saying she had too much to drink and could not drive. She lived in Fallston, 50 minutes away. So we settled into the rocking chairs on the porch, watching the lightning bugs and listening to the crickets. I found her easy to talk to. She had an inquisitive mind and a Philly sense of humor. Before she left in her white Toyota sedan, I asked her out.

I hadn't intended to fall in love so soon after Kathy's passing. On our third date, we were slow dancing to soft jazz in the garden patio of the Baltimore Museum of Art. *Admit it*, I told myself... you're smitten, totally and fabulously smitten. I do believe this is what Kathy would have wanted for me... to be happy.

An Easy Space

You ask for a poem
to mark this valentine
a bit of simile and rhyme

a lyric or two saluting
lines of symmetry.
Bogie & Bacall
Tracy & Hepburn
Fred & Ginger
Though our love is not of the silver screen
I'll say this:
There's magic between us
It begins with a kiss
not just any
but one that sizzles
from the soles to the scalp.
Always the touch
the flutter of tongues
fingers on flesh
feet doing a duet
spirits that celebrate
our bodies
our appetites
our humor.
We create a movable feast
to coin an Ernest phrase
laughter by candlelight
swaying to a jazz beat
hugs by the sink
conversations over caviar and chocolate
caresses on the sheet
we share an easy space
a canvas most sweet.

*– Valentine's Day, 2005, Dedicated to Denise Becker,
part of the Marriage Ceremony, 5/19/07*

Autumn Love

In the shank of summer days,
we convene in the garden
in winter we click glasses by the fire
you are my ballast, my confidant, my best friend.
Might this fly slide to half mast, heaven forbid,
or crumbs nestle in the corner of my lip
your discreet signal rights the ship.
You sense the whirl of my thoughts
an ancient plot, an archetype's journey
an impending election, litigation over slain white pines
green murder at high noon
leads
to keys overlooked
reading glasses orphaned
grocery lists left behind
No, I am not doddering fool.
my distraction comes from ADHD
whatever that means.
I cherish your Philly wit as you ask
Who's home in my brain.
We met at the right season
not during the ebullience of April
nor the lushness of June
but by September light, no longer blazing white,
but softened through decades of pruning.

11/4/16

In 2001, I bought a '99 Toyota Celica convertible in honor of my late father. The man did love his convertibles. Every third of June, I'm in that black Celica, cruising through horse country, heading toward a familiar destination.

When Roses Flower

When roses flower and honeysuckle sweetens the breeze
when birds chirp through dawn and dusk
when fireflies rise in the gloaming
when trees are at their peak before the heat
I leave the city in a black classic
cruising through a valley of vast estates
equestrian centers, and Sagamore's grand span.

Up the road unfolds a lane winding, distant rolling hills
splashes of green, hawks riding the sky, an impressionist dream.
Beckons a graveyard... pleasure ambling among weathered stones
reading faded names and dates, picturing what life was way back when.
On the windswept crest grows a spruce, near a cairn row marking
children centuries past.
Here, she rests,
my wife on this third of June, her day of birth.
what would she say to this old man on the marble bench?

Shards of past crowd the mind, the ups and downs of two decades shared, from initial enchantment, vows in a real estate office, honeymooning in Haiti, first house and baby, two years in Japan, a second babe, and how she appeared on her 40th, between Kobe and Shanghai, at the ferry bow, her slender foot crossed over the ankle, face aglow in the sunset, at peace with who she was.

How are the girls? she would have asked. The thought of their sprouting, nineteen years removed from her last words, makes a man want to weep. I wipe the marble clean, rubbing away dust and bird dew. Ripples of black and green shine anew.

6/3/19

Songs in Passing

Sometimes the sweetest things in life are the most fleeting.

Reflections of Mortality

At 26, nearly drowned in a whirlpool
at the bottom of Big Sur gorge
a maelstrom sucking me down
a thousand hands jealous of my breath
my pack an anvil to the breast.

By the grace of God I
kept my head, removed the pack
and swam toward that Easter eve light.
now, three decades removed, can't help but wonder:
was it fate or the luck of the draw?
who dies young and who lingers on?

A year after my spat with death,
San Francisco cabdriver still,
I befriended a boy of five winters
Sean had his mom's charcoal eyes,
eyes you could drown in.

Between chemo bouts,
in precious remission,
took him to see "the Big Trees,"
redwoods as old as Christ.
beneath the canopy
the boy rode my shoulders
reaching for sunbeams –
who's to say his time
wasn't as full as mine?

Time's so elastic for mortals
subjective and reflective of space.
From the moon, full overhead,
the Maya calculated the starry cycle
ending and beginning in the same place
numbers infinite, zero at its zenith.

In Palenque, a pyramid with a secret
a trickle of drops seeping deep
a slender path to the heart
in the sepulcher stands a counter relief
a warrior passing from one life to the next

spirit leaving flesh, soul assuming wings.

I was there for Sean's passage
from child to ancient
during those labored breaths
a red angel appeared before his eyes
Sean said he wasn't scared.
she had come to take him home.

Dedicated to Sean Kokochuruk (1971-1977)

-- 4/11/04

Cheers, Mister Death

Had a bud, Jim was his name
up and died on an emergency gurney
flat-lined – dead as flounder on ice;
beyond frantic scrambling
electro shocks to the chest,
ol’ Jim found himself ambling,
strolling toward light
quite pleased with his state --
‘fore his daddy crossed Jim’s path
holding a palm aloft
not this time
not this time, boy.
Over a Manhattan
cigarette poised behind the ear
Jim spilled his fate
“I was mad coming back,” said he
“Barkeep, another drink, please.”

12/21/04

As I age, I find myself attending more funerals than marriages. The final sendoff has been an inspiration for several poems. I try to celebrate the life lived.

Here's what I read at the luncheon after the funeral for Denise's father. I had the pleasure of getting to know the man during his final years. One Sunday afternoon, I recorded him in his apartment as he reminisced about his life. And what a life it had been... reminded me of my Dad; both were children of the Depression, WW2 vets, and successful in their line of work. They also shared a memorable sense of humor.

1918

Here's to Joseph Vare
Part of the Greatest Generation
A dying breed
Linebacker, soldier, and patriarch
Salesman, golfer, and Boy Scout
Dancer, singer, and painter
A fatherless son early in life
A teenager who rejected a Michigan football scholarship
Dashing his dream of being an M.D.,
to feed his family during the depths of the Depression
You could count on Joe Vare.
When his country called
He left his three-day wife
To chase Rommel across the Sahara.
Coming home three years hence
He sired eight, never paying his bills late.
A proud man who launched a union of insurance brokers
One tearful Christmas Eve he patrolled a street corner
Hustling a sale to get the family through the year
You could count on Joe Vare.
He worked out of his home amidst the chaos of children
A mass of contradictions, all too human with a temper and strap
He brought home pizza, two slices a kid
Took them on Sunday rides in his big sedan.
Hard to believe that vibrant voice is still
So he laughed at his own jokes
made stupid comments at the wrong time.
Old Joe chuckled in the face of decline
Even when he put his pants on ass backward
Calling it a fashion statement,
This, from a man who dressed to the nines
Toward the final curtain, as memories
Peeled away like layers of onion
He viewed hallway-walker traffic as cars rushing by
He regaled the nurses with one last line

Flashing that winning grin, hustling one more ride
This from a man who button-holed buyers
On the lot before they drove the new car off
“You need to join my automobile club.”
You could count on Joe Vare.

4/14/11

In the thirty-some years I have resided in Roland Park, I have encountered a cast of characters. One of the most memorable was Frank Thomsen, a jack of all trades in the neighborhood. So many people, particularly senior citizens, depended on Frank. My fondest memory? Had to be Thanksgiving, '99. My wife Kathy was in a hospice. She wanted to come home for Thanksgiving. Frank acted as chauffeur that day, even carrying her up the steps.

When throat cancer invaded his life in 2018, he persevered with his Thursday-night poker games, a 50-year tradition in the basement of that big house in Tuxedo Park. He continued helping people in the neighborhood and made plans for the Thomsen New Year's Day party, an epicurean event not to be missed.

Denise and I visited Frank in his man cave a week before he passed. From above, the pitter patter of grandchildren could be heard. Though he was in pain, he poured himself a glass of port and launched into animated conversation that lasted an hour. The man got everything he could out of life.

I read this at his memorial.

A Salute to Frank Thomsen

You are a father
You are a lover
You are a friend
You are the Alpha male

You are a worker
You are a poker player
You are a fixer, a cleaner, and straightener
You are help in time of need

You are the neighborhood
You are the New Year's party
You are oysters, beer and laughter
You are shrimp, stuffed turkey, conversation and platters of cheese

You are a brother in more ways than one
You are a grandfather
You are a god to dogs and cats
You are Baltimore, hon!

You are blood and flesh and bone
You are a spirit, part of the light
You are a soul riding the river of life
You are stardust, forevermore.

12/8/18

How I Want to Go Out

I live life to the core
Juice dribbling down the chin
When this fleshy vessel runs aground
I want a long Om as my last breath
From the heels to the crown
From the spine to the stars
A melodic chord
A vibration across the astral plane
Carrying this spirit to sacred shores.

12/30/12

Which brings us to Varanasi, holiest of the seven sacred sites in India. Buddha gave his first oration here. Over 2,000 temples grace this 3,000-year-old city. The city borders “Mother Ganga.” For two millennium, pilgrims from all parts of India have traveled to the shores of this sacred river to cremate their loved ones.

In a longboat, Denise and I were entranced by ancient architecture and the crush of mourners. Our destination? The Dashashwamedh Ghat. They say the holy fire that lights the sandalwood has burned without interruption for 1,000 years. 24/7 families carry shrouded bodies on bamboo litters through narrow streets; flesh is coated with ghee to ensure a thorough burn. The body is seen as a shell, a cocoon, nothing of value. Best to dispose of its ashes in the Mother Ganges. It’s considered bad form to weep.

Sparks flew into the night. Next to the pyres was an illuminated stage. Priests in orange robes were raising and lowering what looked like flaming Christmas trees, their salute to Lord Shiva and Mother Ganga. The chaotic beat of drums and the screech of horns matched the movement... faster and faster the flames spun. Time ceased to exist, only “here and now” in its rawest form.

Later, we pulled away from the noise and smoke. Prabhu, our guide, directed the boatman to a place of solitude, a good distance from shore. The engine was cut. Prabhu lit the wicks and handed out the paper cups. Each of us cradled our flame. I thought of dear Kathy, who died far too soon at 53. Denise thought of her two siblings, Pat and Mark, whom she had lost that past year. Prabhu, who recently lost his father, sang an ancient prayer. Then each of us placed the cup in the water and watched the flame float away. I was surprised by the intensity of emotion. My wife had been dead for 18 years. Yet I felt I was saying farewell one last time. The boat was silent as we returned to shore.

Death in Life

Strip a soul clean.
Run the cut deep.
Let that wound bleed.
Death sets one free.
Especially in the Ganges.

10/25/18

Songs of Spirit

I saved the songs of spirit for last. I have traveled far on my earthly journey and have more to go, so much to learn and experience. When I was a young cab driver in San Francisco with aspirations of writing “the Great American Novel,” I had the benefit of hearing a Buddhist monk speak. “Either you learn your lessons in this life,” he said with a smile, “or you learn them in the next.” Not sure about death and rebirth, but, along the way, I did absorb a few lessons that have served me well.

Prayer to Mother Teresa

When the tragedy of humanity
renders this spirit leaden,
I consider Mother Teresa
this Albanian Agnes
- who, upon insight,
took a leap of faith
relinquishing comfort to nurture
the naked and wretched
the lepers, trashcan children and maggot-ridden.

She drew strength from the light of Creation
that she perceived in those hungry hearts
their tears of gratitude washed away shame.
She created a home, a cocoon, succor for the dying
and restless, dignity for those who had reached the end.

In her long journey of the soul,
She said she had lived in darkness for 50 years
her beacon a single experience on a train
a voice cutting through clutter.
in the lowest of the low she found peace
that transcended the boot, fist and sword
let her sacrifice, her leap of faith
nourish the desert in our souls.

– *Dedicated to the Missionaries of Charity at the Gift of Hope,
Baltimore, Maryland, June 23, 2005*

In *Bone Games*, author Rob Schultheis reveals his addiction to extreme challenges that push the body to the breaking point. I can understand why some people climb mountains, run 100 miles across the desert, or surf those monster Tahiti waves. The greater the risk, the more one feels alive. Twice big brother Bill sailed Pegasus, his 54-foot wooden race boat, from Hawaii to ride those waves, as high as a two-story building. The second adventure nearly killed him. No surprise here. He built a skateboard before there were skateboards. He owned the hills in Druid Hill Park. Then came motorcycles. I remember riding on the back of his 750 Kawasaki through Topanga Canyon, doing about 75. Bill was totally in control as we leaned into the turns. Such a rush.

Drive, boy, drive!

In '69, graduating in June, drove coast to coast
that pushbutton Charger sure could fly!
How 'bout cruising down 101 at 101
a single finger on the power-steering
Hey, I was One A, nothing to lose
the jungles of Vietnam loomed.

I did not fulfill that death wish
Nor did I fight the Yellow Man
I still like to drive fast
leave worries in the rearview
till they're specks on the deck.

So, old man, pedal to the floor
no glue on this worn shoe
there are galaxies to explore
hairpin turns for steering the mass
no stopping this machine.

11/11/11

A Clear Space

September amber on stucco
clean timber lines, rooftop tiles
a chord
struck from above,
ringing in the Angelus.

a wanderer, a passing stranger
stuck in the details of the day,
pauses
to absorb
this exquisite instant.

9/8/07

A Birthday Tribute to my wife, Denise, who turned 70 during the pandemic.

I See You

I see you in sunlight, rays dancing on silver locks that flow past your shoulders

How beautiful you are

I see you when you lay near, the slope of the nose, the curve of the chin, lips so delicious to kiss

How beautiful you are

I see you raising “*chi*,” arms stretched east to west, aligned with the breath

How beautiful you are

I see you with Bradley, a nine-year-old creating an electronic world. He senses your interest and lets you in.

How beautiful you are

I see you on the phone, listening, questioning, and available for hours on end to brother Chris, a caretaker saint, allowing him to vent and lament what might have been.

How beautiful you are

I see you kneeling at the demonstration. Black Lives Matter. No truth, no justice. Didn't realize how long nine minutes could be.

How beautiful you are

I see you make art, necklaces and pendants for friends, free association cards to celebrate birthdays, or, a simple flower arrangement, not a stem out of place.

How beautiful you are.

7/7/2020

Meditation is a powerful tool for “centering the self,” the process where mind, body and soul are in alignment. Meditation can be achieved through movement, as in the martial art of Tai Chi. The slow, graceful flow of the body activates the “*chi*,” Chinese for energy. It puts one in a different state.

Of course, you can also sit in the lotus position (I sit in a chair) to meditate. Settling in, I become aware of the mind’s incessant chatter. Takes a while to settle things down.

There is no goal or destination in meditation. The path is the way. Peace.

Lotus Flower

through movement comes stillness
through stillness comes movement
breath creates the passage
should the monkey mind chatter
let concern pass like the clouds
in moments such as these
comes
 a respite
a clarity:
see the world
for what it is.

10/30/20

The Breath of Fire is great for flushing out negativity. Supposedly it cleanses the blood. Don't know if it's true, but, to paraphrase Mick Jagger, I know "it's a gas." Been doing it for years, since my days as a cabdriver in San Francisco. Served me well during critical times.

When I was 26, I found myself stuck in the Big Sur River gorge. Nearly drowned. Had to spend the night on a narrow ledge, away from the current. The temperature dropped and I could see my breath. To warm my body, I did the breath of fire; then I could steal a few minutes of sleep. Shivering, I repeated the discipline again and again. In the morning, I felt energized; I climbed the steep rock facing and made it back to camp.

Below is a poetic description of the process. The last five lines sum up my approach to life. *Sat Nam*.

Breath of Fire

on my knees
palms meet above the skull
a draw of blue
 a release of red
in and out, yin and yang
stomach pumping
nostrils flaring
a sudden stop
hold that breath!
up the spine
the *kundalini* rises
fingers tingle
the third eye glows
release and spread the arms
sing *Sat Nam*, whose name is Truth
I bow to the Goddess
I am your warrior
 your servant
 your vessel
do what you will.

10/29/20

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed this mystical journey. As you know, I chose not to charge for this book. As long as you give credit to the author, feel free to pass on my words, these seeds of wisdom. May they outlive me.

On this 17-year journey, I have had a wonderful companion, my wife, Denise. When the first draft of a poem came off the printer, she was my initial audience. Her keen insight helped me see my work from different perspectives.

I also must thank Susan Lau, whose “eagle eye” checked the copy. She’s the best.

I welcome you to contact me at writeventures@gmail.com.

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