



Far Between

Poems 2000-2010

Tim Koehn

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FAR BETWEEN: POEMS 2000-2010

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...because my poems are so few and far between.

Anne Frank, 25 March 1944

Far Between

SONNET TO A JAZZ PIANIST

Too tight is the mask of the fame few find,
Wrapping faces not made for mass-made molds.
But a secret wealth to many more is kind,
If one simply commensurately holds
That which uniquely holds all thread of him.
The harmony there then is sparked ablaze
With a candle's base blue composition...

The piano and place are black; but some rays
Of the moon light fingers alit for sound.
Then the near silent arc of a half-step bend
Makes a song's feet glide under twilight gown,
Up ivory stairs where shadows descend,
 To meet God who steps down with milk, rag on key,
 Coming forth to polish a cracked-up melody.

2000

HOW WE HUMANS LIKE TO DO

You know those little worlds that you
shake up so the snow flies and it dances
and kisses the rosy-cheeked creature?
I saw one rolling down my car window:
minute particles inside a dew droplet
danced with such beauty my heart hurt.
A longer brown thing and some green
stuff were the blessed ones
inside.

The sweet little world slid slowly down with
maybe even eleventwelve flakes in al—
jumped my insides! as the
brown baton
began to spinandspin as if
asunlitfanbladeina
sphereoftranslucentblue
walllikesomedrinkingglas
seswherethey
curveand bend and edge—

the beauty was small—still big enough
to make my heart hurt.

THEN I ROLLED DOWN THE WINDOW TO TALK TO SOME GUY.

2000

MY BEST ARTIST

Is there a reporter who jots down how snow sounds
And journals the smell of leaves on their annual fall to the ground?
Who files a report called
The Silent Shout:
How Loud God Is in Really Big Clouds?

I can tell you:
Not many

Because for that kind of case, one, through investigative lens,
Would have to capture at least a trace of the uncatchable, and go
To the place where God's spirit skin-stirringly haunts,
The place where your hair stiffens
Straight like when blood starts from cold to warm

Amazingly,
I have access to such a recorder
She has been made my best friend
My best artist

She goes out with her sketchbook soul—
A kind of jail for all the beauty
A prison built purposely poor, so what's inside
Leaks and seeps through the floor
And spills out the door, puddling in pools
By way of brushes, tools, basins of developer, needles and thread on
Spools

Pools that gather on tight canvassed white
Soak into fabrics
And emerge, refracting safe light

Article after crisp article
It's beyond her to control output of such flawless testimony;
My God, be gracious to grant that I be the first to read
And then receive
From glory's hand a slap fresh in the face
And my breath stolen away
By the same hand by which she was made
And is forever pleased to stay

Just to hold her sketches scrawled from eyewitness accounts
Then present them in some unearthly gold.

2000

THE COLDEST DAY YET

I'm never quite as bright
As when clouds hang light and low;
And my heart leaps for the dark ones,
But the wind has yet to blow:
They creep so still under heavy load,

Pregnant with what makes living—
Things like blood and breath
And drink made crisp for forgiving.

Then it breaks into pieces,
And it all spills out—silver, white...
Dead weeds are aged gold because a hole—
A hole where corals and anemones grow.

2000

CROW'S FUNERAL

Of burial this crow's deserving:
Enough care to spade the soil,
Eyes to admire iridescent shine
Though his feathers lack the oil...

My ignorant instincts kept me
With two lengths of gnarled twig,
But too wary a basket they proved to be,
So I grasped him, black and big.

A fair nape ruffed up as his head hung,
Such beauty that hushes words:
Nuisance atop the skeleton tree
Was flawless among the birds!

My thoughts dared to drift:
How fell this fellow? Why do ants now eat his eyes?
May I suppose by the hater's hand,
Mere mystery he despised?

Well, it matters not, for I knew I must,
With hands delicate for the dead,
Where earth smells damp under lilac shade:
A cross to adorn his head.

2001

WINDSTORM

Across the plain, I see the weed-herd is on the move:
Bouncing and rolling, all but tumbling,
Skeletons dry yet still life-full,
Wind onward pushing with playful stumbling.

Like those weeds, the birds enjoy the wind:
With great sweeps of flight, true to a tree,
Branches bending, holding fast,
Thinking, *There we aimed, but here we'll be.*

And those curious beasts stand there squinting;
Straining necks and heads docile sway.
Lazy eyes and noses sense all who pass.
How do they know what's in the wind today?

For to the east strong winds are blowing
Not knowing when they will find the west.
Sweet mists of forgiveness and the wrongs of me,
Grace off the throne in my soul manifests.

2001

Isn't that how God goes about?
 Winter then spring, then wet then drought?
 Bursts of untamed taste—all's seasoned well;
 Can somebody tell me when summer fell?

Well, it fell, but then it was fall...
 Then snow came up piling to trickle down walls,
 So robins sprung up to tune their whistles
 And tug up worms past warmth-waiting thistles.

Now meadowlarks echo through a lazy noon,
 Saying horizon's heat-haze will come surprise me soon.
 So I dream big—like the heron's flap—
 Of the days the sun resists its night-long nightly nap:

I'll scramble rugged slopes; I'll splash a clear, green deep—
 Oh, the things I will do when cicadas tire of sleep!
 Ancient and fast, my blood burns alive;
 It has reached the rush of the Red-tail in dive;
 So sears the sun, so brightens the blue!
 But the mercury's weak reach gives just a fifty-two,
 A chilly fifty-two.

2001

A SPRING-LATE STORM

White-laden rope strung on the man-trees, now
tentacles on the road. They turned me back
near the river for fear of the sting
or the trunks, I guess...

I think it sure is pretty when we sit helpless,
when our dull, frantic teeth gnaw at the ropes.

...quite comic because I know the ghost who
blows them over. It's the one who whispers through
a busy crowd of puddles. In streaks and
flashes, its breath brushes the ripples:

Hey you *All of you*
Hey *Yeah you* *Nice try.*

2001

*A VISION OF THE CHRIST-CHILD AT PLAY
ON THE SHORES OF GALILEE*

*And he increased in wisdom and stature,
and in favor of both God and men.*

Sea-breeze, tickle the boy,
Brush lips pressed firm to form ancient melodies,
And gentle waves provide for his vessels to bob;
For they're chunked and chiseled out so meticulously.

Sea-breeze, can you see how the boy
Charts careful course for his fleet to navigate?
And overlapped his feet, his tiny tide-lapped feet;
He's hunched and hunkered small in such effortless state.

He does so well with his because he's done so well with mine:
He is my boy,
He is his father,
His is the womb

From which come dew and snow and through which he paths a line
For thunderstorms to span deserts
And ignite their bloom.

(Such shadows he will not rebuke on his death-day soon.)

Sea-wind, now build my ships,
Make sail to bulge, and make mast be towering.
For remember he may sweeping stern, billowed bow
That churn mountains in their wake, then leave them flowering.

GHOSTS OF MAYFLOWER GULCH

Down a corridor of tall, tall pines, through
Their fragrance lifting and snowflakes falling
(Big enough to blossom a spider line
Strung from bough to bough), we come upon
An old, old place: neatly stacked pine poles sunk
In a snow-bed and topped with pillowy eaves.
Dripping like water-lace, looking-glass ice mirrors
The calico and gray of the rust-worn wood prismatically.

Streamed white, one winter old, but stratified
In age-old ages, moves in through a collapsed
Roof and rotting window. And up the path
A snow-tongue hangs where rushing slurry once spewed.
In fingers from the snow, sedimentary
Ice continues, lithified in long,
Gnarled and corkscrewed whisker curls.

Backward and forward, time leads like the sky-hole
Spirits, burning bright and fast across the barren cirque;
Up with fluid ease, they fly the couloirs, lightning-white,
Then disappear in dark. Atop the toothed ridge they join
The Ghost of this gulch astride there, gray veiling
Its gendarmes, the holy basin-guards.

Below are what they often called gallows,
Tucked beneath the glacial slide of talus and hanging
Not they themselves, but what made or made
Not their sea-length prairie-trek worth its while.
For sorrow or both bliss and sorrow the nails
Cry rusty blood streams along the cross-beams

(The galvanized tin hurriedly cut;
An outhouse peephole lined neatly enough).

It seems to stir up other specters, like that of Christ
On his cross—to whom they swore the mother-load before
What began to look a lot like his blood on the beams.
They came and died and dug a long time ago, but now
Still haunt—in the rust, in the wood, in the snow.

2002

FACTS: NATURAL, SPIRITUAL

Not grudgingly graveyards
are off to farm flowers;
first feathers fall frozen,
then blue the hours.

Not sparingly spiders
are off to web weavings;
withstand they'll wet weather
to feel prey's grievings.

Yes, savingly Savior
is on to blood bleedings;
bent broken, bread brandished,
kill death the feedings.

2002

WINTER VISIT

Old crackling records—crunching like soles
On snow—sift out soft falling voices.
Like wing-wind from no wind, some gospel alights,
Gently, past steaming bowls
Shifting fog on the panes like a spirit might.

There, with flake-beard from berry fluff-crowns,
Is the stain for which ring their noises:
A cardinal saint suit with beak and eyeholes,
Like the one warm drip weaving clean-blood gowns;
Like the red drop reclaiming winter-white souls.

2002

AURORA

Some other horizon's light-cracks
Birth green shafts of dawn—sun-born
Still, but between black atop black;
They mirror the moon in the stubble-corn.

From pale glow to blood on deep dark
With no sign to mark the fade,
So soon returns the star-seine
And turns diamonds to water-jade.

2002

MORNING

Why record, describe, inscribe,
on this page, on my heart?

Is it so I'll remember? But
how could this slip past me:

pale-eve starlings like jungle bats
clumped tightly on bare bones

and knuckles of trees, fingers
blazing like new yellow willow-shoots

with the lamp-light of a short sun
buzzing about the branches?

Is the welcome wound that sears
past my brain's skin so healed

that I have forgotten how the sun sunk
up, swallowed by the upside-down

ocean, furrowed to the west by God's
wondrous wake, fire on the ripple-crests?

Unseen every day, the blanket-oats
smell dry when wet

and fade cream to gold
beneath overcast aster. Oh well,

never will all be relayed
of these mundane glories replayed.

2002

NUMBNESS AND ORANGES

I'm scared of being
paralyzed, but there's
a numbness I love.

Love, though, hapless
for this one—knowing
best effort serves to dull

And cheapen what
I mean (I *love* to
pause the press of

A crescent orange
before capsules
burst to the corners

Of my tongue,
but for this I need only
peel and eat; see,

Love is hackneyed).
But this numbness
comes a timely gift,

Its billows to my
nostrils. Unforeseen,
when the wind

Outside pushing feels
itself pressing back—
out from the inside:

taut balloon
skin finally relieved
by drinking the ocean

It swims in.
Hair rocks, shifts,
sways as all seas' kelp;

Limbs ride the rise
of currents off
unfathomed floors

To hurry fingers
to catch the drag
and rake the sand
when the tide pulls.

2002

BY TENDER FRENCH WHILE PREPARING DINNER

By tender French while preparing dinner
I was reminded
of their voices like soft circles
when sun mixes with leaves.
Reminded of our second wedding, summers
skipped and birthdays un-thrown found in
garden meals with starlight for dessert
and a light-shafted hollow with water
irresistibly cold. We were shown
the bride in the snow-white borrowed by
the dandelion heads in the orchard on
the hill in the sky. So we returned when
the fruit was ripe and ready to pick.
And the harvest they allowed made us
stain our legs in fallen cherries and,
like sunflowers, bow our heads.

2003

VERMEER

walls
soft
bare

age
long
breaths

delicate trickle shimmering
lapwings skimming
flashing their feathers
pearl-tipped

and dragonfly wind-
mill wings swath
their paradox: furious
chase at tip
yet slow-strength base

passing train of
present, still
pool of memory

his
gleam
too

touched me.

2003

LAUTERBRUNNEN

The sun was
(That made and lit the droplets)
White-shrouded miles of granite
Wall gleaming,
A spooling off from flat infinite stone, and
Pieces of water silver-threaded,
Breaking off from powdery rain trails
To pool again, then run rivers gray,
Full of melted ice and mineral
Like squeezed juice from a pearl.

Up to find
Them, then, by clog and clank,
We watched fairy-tail dwellers
Harvest in clouded lofty green,
In the loft of still-birthing mountains.
After toothpick toy bridges, freshly
Smashed, we side-stepped their
Heavy babies. Then many thumps
To the floor of their cradle.

The day done,
We waited for the pink to come.
But only electric yellow colza below—
Like stars only seen when one doesn't
Look. And not the boulder babies,
But the immense black-wall mothers
Asleep to singing crickets
And white noise of the threads.

2003

LA POISSONERIE

Bulging bulbous
eyes above big
lips of bass,
tender creamy
flesh bunched on
frog femurs,
a flash of opal
zebra stripes on
piled up mackerel,
cold, gray-hazed
metallic flecks
that once caught
sun shafts
and splintered
them in the blue—
inedible delectable
sights squirm
my hunger for life
whether they're
blackened, boiled,
baked, fried,
or sautéed with
champignons,
crème fraîche
and vin blanc.

2003

BOURGOGNE

Like a mustard cane glaze
Off a hot roasted fowl,
Burgundy's bounty

drips.

From one hundred clouds hiding
Each its own sun, it leaks
Brighter than one bare and

drips.

Onto ancient gnarled beeches
Stretching horizontal
Branches it

drips.

In beards of moss, then droplets
That pool in oak jewels
On splayed leaf-hands it

drips

From their tips to seep through
Leaf carpet and grow up
A river that flows and

drips.
Down vine rows and shimmering
Globed fruit till Charolaises'
Creamed skin it

drips
Along each rib to bead barley
Hair that shakes its rain-crown
Then

drips
On wild poppies' scarlet
Paper petals that lend
One vein per diamond to

drip.

2003

SHE BREATHES PARIS

“Wanna come? I’m
going to see the Eiffel
at night,
lit up.”

...But in the heavy
creaking chamber after
the latch clink, her
breath lives suddenly
and grows beside me.

All the glow from
the only-ships-sea that
washes to pink
the black from the Bodies
and makes the roofs
a miniature city

comes bursting through
the fleeing curtains
to inflate her gorgeous
lungs.

Her exhale sprays
the stars back to sky,
splattering some on the
ceiling as they squeeze
out the window.

Wisps of smoke are flung
to dormant chimneys...

“That’s OK,”
my late reply—
she breathes Paris.

2003

INFANT DEATH

There are eyes enough to shift the sea—
In this life, but in death forever—
For him who dares to bend and breathe

Over a small pine box to see—
And quit his air's quiver—
Eyes enough to shift the sea.

They're glazed like low gray about winter trees,
Finger mists that lend a shiver
To him who dares to bend and breathe.

We're told Christ risked, too, like Emily
(What I should have seen never),
These eyes enough to shift the sea.

But somehow he kept his wheeze—
Man's skin realized then severed—
As he bent to barely breathe.

Maybe that's why I hit my knees,
Viewing—cold and delivered—
Eyes enough to shift the sea.
I dared to bend, beheld, and breathed.

2003

HOMEMAKER

Mother sees shapes of homes
about and lets her Lord sway
himself, his feet unshod,
on the swing of her heart's
front porch. With God's toes
on wide paint-chipped planks,
she is as sure as a chapped hand
with its anticipation of a coin
of cool lotion, or of being
slipped in the space between
icy linens. So she will whiten walls
for those who won't ever watch
or marvel how she makes
a meal of misplacement.
She will sweetly let her
sweepings soil again, and now
having swept once more,
she will peer through the simple
steam of her mug of water boiled,
and declare decoration:
there—past dense, dead branches
and bunched below the eaves—she'll
see banks of geraniums bouncing.

2004

RUNWAY ECLIPSE

From a nocturnal outpost of never-sleeping
cities I can call her to look
at the same eerie earth's shadow sleeving
the same weakling moon,
but she's already in bed
and its singular slow wink is on
a windowless wall.

Before, it was beneath the brooding
of collision control,
pillowed by exhaust and sinewy sheets of cloud.
But now it shifts
the covers and begins to slip beneath
the sideways lid of night.

Lashless, it steadily lifts,
and a crescent coin of liquid
is now a full-on disk—
ploughing the sky, it leaves folds of black earth
that bring gulls to peck an absent eye.

So our union
will pass eclipses
to pour through our west-facing window
like a street lamp to a pool on the floor,
then sink its pale skin in the mountains,
pushing up a greater light
in that half of the sky where, before,
it was blinked out
but did not die.

2005

ODE TO PINK AND GREEN

Two running race stripes
Coming on white wall
From the corner curved glass
To an iconographic stall

All east-LA-gorgeous
A little louder and Mexican
Until I sipped the black drink still frothy
And then

It was symphony of urbana
Trash truck trumpet of God
From each coast to past island
Tucked where ancients and Dutch trod

I fumbled and mistook
Its name—Lupe’s—for “wolf’s”
But it was just as tried
And beautiful

In a lover’s china plates and cups-in-dish
Waiting for the latch-clack to float
And then her foot-splash

In Sweden's western-shore workshop
Where God does his making of the greens
From fell-shadow-blue blacks
To marsh-tuft-blond-stem pinks

In the stock of a chic, stark wine shop
Slipped in walls in cylindrical holes
Lit like liquid of Christmas tree lights
Sent from striped South African hills

See
In all cities sunk up in the bedding of night
In all sage and sagging tables
In all fades to fall

And on your way to all around the world
You may see them in blinks
Off and on
Illumining the mist bands
Atop cloud-top topography
Finding themselves in the tide of pre-dawn

2005

CALL ME OLD-FASHIONED, CALL ME MAN

Warmed by a surge of wanting for my wife,
I oddly now am comfortable to sleep.
But then her almost-snoring warmth of life
Turns and it's impossible to keep
My hands from the horizon of her shape.
To me right now she is topography:
In exploration I may not escape
My sex in its sixteenth century,
With its blazons for women sold and bought
For their sun, wires, coral, blah, blah, blah.
Well, earth is not "unconqueréd"; I'm not
Vespucci and she's not America.
Besides, I doubt Hero, Lucrece, in bed
Would whisper the kind of words mine just said.

2006

PSALM

That I can enjoy you here in peace,
hovering between your buzzing winds
between a day I saw you in slugs
and another lashed by the frantic uncertainties
imprisoned on the earth,
 is cherished, I'm telling you—
not programmed like the gurgle of a suburban sprinkler
or checked off by the clock.

This comes as the spillings of a jeweled existence too full.
So, Oh Lord, have my spillings, for you are my fillings,
my juice,
my joy,
my jewels.

2006

SUNRISE

This morning, cloud arms reach across the hunched earth—
you stretching for the soap.

I feel
your breasts measure
my back's flank and angle, and watch the sun cling—
now water on your lashes,
stark rays risen and fanning.

I look long enough so you'll flash when you're gone—
in the nighttime of every blink.

2006

PASSING TOPEKA

Nothing much lives here
except
America's decisions
—smack in the map's middle

among people long-since
ape-like
and segregated still—
and a slow blink warning

planes of an oversized
dome:
big things in a small place.
Mexicans waiting in Wranglers

and reptiles:
a crowd of cowboy brims
curved like the autumn-
hued sliver of moon.

Outside, a many-speckled power
plant's pink steam
takes direction through the dark
summer sponged by our skins.

2006

LET THE PASSING PALMS

Let the passing palms
mark the frames of this motion picture:
scenes moving through morning
and volcanic haze that would dust the brows
of coconuts if not for their frond-umbrellas
collecting the gray snow. Membranous wings
play the score and the thwack of rice sheaves on wood.
Merapi looks on like a ghost in the sky:
It coughs its woolly cloud of ash,
its *wedhus gembel* companion, as they say,
its dark and “dangerous sheep.”

Across the set run paddy-bank footpaths
and agriculture-veins that may even flow
from Weld County
to Holland
to here,
their patterns
now scrawling the script of this place:

Sowing and reaping
in the same sentence—slipping in seedlings and beating out grain
in neighboring plots of buffalo-broken, ash-blackened soil.
And so it is, in this season-less place,
when the earth makes heaps of the houses.
The piles are props broken
for an unlikely cast
(appearing
apparently
in no order):

Hope plays a flock of egrets lifting
from one field to another
like a scattering of white leaves.

Miracle plays a smile
and Impossibility a capiz shell wind chime
tinkling in a light shaft
from a window of the one room left standing.

A frantic but singing bulbul caged above the front door
is played by most everyone—

from Shrug to Allah's Will

to Longing for Places in Pictures—

but Stick Figure Crying "*Ibu*"
Rendered by a Small and Steady Hand
plays that cage door
cracked
and unlatched.

A riot of ruddy feet
for a soccer ball is Resilience,

and many are Generosity's roles.
They are chickens
on a threshing floor, foreigners on church-tile,
and a free-loading rat in the rafters.

Then us—a little spooked by the staggering gamelan
(summoning a many-limbed demi-god
to the *wayang kulit* man, so with one voice he speaks

the many-timbred epics in Java's three-tiered tongue)—
some kind of specters
ourselves. We hover about the somehow-still-living,
hearing their mouth-music, understanding—maybe—
their eyes, hoping they'll see we're white but loving.

How can we play a part? Acting is a kind of lying, but—
we will not act this smile.

And the audience knows and returns it.

For here is a man

propped against his alley fence, a line of struggling

banana trees his back yard, saying

(and we hope we have tears not simply

from the smoke of a whole island burning its garbage),

“Jesus bless you and your family for coming here.”

Truth are his eye-wrinkles and Beauty plays his face.

Their lines say:

only a Director divine—Incomprehensible—

would dare to flash our names

when the credits roll.

2006

FINALLY, FALL

When it starts to come,
that which is infinite—which
makes the shutter and jerk

of plants unveiled in lapsed time—
shows omens. And life lies
frozen like a storyboard frame

where the felt weight of words waits
in punctuated bubbles. Lines of text
appear as teeth marks

in the flesh of an un-ripened pear—
the space between, the clean break,
is as white as paper.

A nighthawk drops through the floodlit
ceiling of Friday: night football
players not knowing

its marionetted wings could bring
feathers this close to facemasks
then pull away like a bat

caught in the cold.
A moose shows its shovel horns,
stalking the shore in pine-shadow

black: a spectacle
less savage than its own image
moving on the empty eyes

of a lake house.
A moon-cloaked elk ghost,
bounds from its haunt,

imprints its shape on a car's panel
with a noise as loud as a dream's door
that slams shut one's sleep. Then it proves

its apparition:
it's not dead;
it's gone—

except the moon's eye
in the rear-view that follows ahead
like the headlight of a car not there.

Franklin's Gulls are flocking,
making the earth their sea and eating the evening
insects with their perfect blood bills.

A sunbolt holds back a hemisphere of cloud
but is swallowed
in the gold-tinged front of change.

2006

A MISSOURI THANKSGIVING

I walked a Mennonite furrow—
midnight trees in creek creases

folded in fields like Mennonite dough.
Snow came off quilted till

in patches at a time
singing melting a capella,

running moon down the hill.
Push-pin stars pinned a feather-cloud

shawl to a blue-black sky.
The lights of day were hedge apples

under gray, cardinal on corn stalk
sway, and gleam from a shad belly

flung under water churned by wind
that made the boughs bounce

and bend like the undulating prayers
of a King James tongue.

2006

AFTER HUGHES

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

BOOM—

Communitistic bulk of dilapidated brown-
stones-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Heads bobbin' in the wide streets; I'm the only white
one-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Bangladeshi on the corner sellin' cherries by the pound

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Buy a picture of a slave lynched ten feet off the ground

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Haze buzzin' 'round the weeds where someone used to live

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Like the ghost-gray image on a glass plate nega-

tive-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

After Hughes I'm thinkin' *sugared-over syrupy sweet*

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

'Cause Apollo's on a vein pumpin' straight from 42nd

Street-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Dreams are unshelved items strewn across a deli floor

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Rung up and out the door before they find out who they're waitin'
for-BOOM
cla-kack
clack clack cla-kack

Dusky sash across Manhattan trippin' up my memory's feet
BOOM-BOOM
cla-kack
clack clack cla-kack

Tied tight by the 8-year-olds who taught me this beat!
BOOM-BOOM
cla-kack
clack clack cla-kack

BOOM-BOOM
cla-kack
clack clack cla-kack

BOOM-BOOM!

2007

IN ARABLA, RECITING SHAKESPEARE

I was convinced of the music
of poetry
when apart from the party
on the tide-drained beach
I twirled her under
the arch of my arm's reach.

Our recitations were
as awkward
as those breaking
waves on the Gulf,

but still

without thinking

we danced to their rhythms
or the poetry
or both.

2008

GIRLS AND ME

Italiana, with green eyes like the shutters of her country, who can only properly pour her spirited speech into her phone if she takes it from her ear and holds it to her mouth, imploring it to listen—she is no doubt a model but isn't embarrassed by the fleck of guacamole at the corner of her mouth that almost matches her uncanny eyes. She comes back to my table after ten minutes in the bathroom to wish me good luck in Calabria, her feet aligned just so under all her angled features. Afro-Cuban waitress, too kind for her beauty, eyes light, shimmering brown. She's unavoidable. She sits the Italiana next to me as a congenial gift, but I wish it's her. The Latina, too, with perfect shoulder blades—her smile likely says that she thinks no one thinks she's beautiful. Crista, clean and small, perfectly plays the part of not playing a part. When she plays her bass, she wears black net tights and wonders why the boys won't let her be. *Haven't they seen a girl in a band?* she says. Well, yes, but... Elizabeth, cleaner and smaller, up from two hours of sleep on a community center floor, bright and perfect, dark-rimmed glasses and white scarf, speeds me to the station through rain with ease *parce-que je suis une femme*, she says. Anne-Laure, mother from Mauritius, and more flirtatious, less Swiss, I guess. Elsa who can't stop moving to some secret music, hair so thick and springy and always pulled up so her big hoop earrings can always bounce too. She rocks her legs back and forth even as she eats her ciabatta. Her favorite flower is a *Rose de Noël*. Jessica, infectiously happy, so frank about the pimple on her nose, so sweet that I covet it all for me, but it's for everyone. And then

Ecco le mie amiche della spiaggia. Lucia, la sola persona che parla Inglese in Scalea—bella pelle e bello sorriso. Tina, famosa per suoi ciglia. Veronica, la cucitrice, troppo carina e parla Russo. Mama Maria—sono senza parole—molto buona cuoca e perfecta... Voi siete una benedizione da Dio!

I could fall in love with all of them—
maybe I have.

But their faces are fading. I sit backwards for the whole length of Italy—Domodossola to Scalea—so I'm leaving something, not going somewhere. And all I'm left with is something invisible like the soothing pressure of angles not quite natural: a plane pushing higher, a banking train. I let them go; I let it push me like a companion to the window so I can sleep.

2009

JANUARY

A January of jilted dreams
In this, the first of Mays
Since I've seen myself it seems
Through a Mediterranean haze.

I walk the snows of Lebanon,
Striped white shoulders of scree
Like strands to string my life upon
Of cirrus up-conjured for me.

I've seen the same striations
On mackerels' opal backs
That break a brine's summation
Into vast and the lined with black.

Emergent as they are—
Patterned skin or patterned ground—
A lone, unblemished bar
Is only by its inverse found.

So in supernal contradiction—
Alpine here and, there, that shore—
I stand in a sort of fiction
In this May month, my Janus, my door

And think, as it swings, of beginnings,
Of middles, of snow, of sod,
Of stripes, of the world, of its spinnings,
And the beauties of a two-faced god.

2009

CARRYING ART

Winter trees to me
will always be
upward lifted hands.

And what was, I thought, impenetrably
A wall with glow worms and dark stories
now frames, with many angled joints,
a snow-laden vineyard, a town below,
a great gray lake, and mountains beyond.

In their tangle of fingers so many
things reside—
a joy, a sorrow, and just now over
a heron glides...

Then in some ice-jagged canal cutting through furrows,
he's hunched over like a ragged gray wizard
and I see him from a passing train.

His gray is matched above, but the eye must pass
seasons: sodden green, then green and gold, then old
grape-leaf gold, then, signaled by gray, pillows
and painted white of snow on evergreen bows.

It was there, far above there,
where I carried art.

It was unfinished, two-and-a-half meters wide,
and caught the wind like a sail,
or a kite if it had been smaller
or I had been taller.

*I suppose everyone knows
that unfinished art is the artist standing naked,
but a different naked than the finished.
It's the difference between skin laced for a lover
(or fully exposed for a medical something) and the marvel
of the human form, brazen and beautiful.*

Nonetheless, it wasn't my first time,
but it may have been my last. Now pushed,
now pulled, by this painted sail, the person laid bare
in my hands, I finally laid her down with sore
biceps and tried to look at it all.
And there was too much so I told at least
the undried paint (layered over what may or may not hold me):

“Tell me you had some cream in a chocolate thimble in Gruyere
...and then...and then Venice with colors and cold air.
Piazza San Marco. The yellow of the chairs
and skillful composition. And of course those are
the same ball-lights hanging in the upside-down arches
that hung right-side-up in our bathroom.
And the yellow.
And what an odd and perfect
color reflected in the rain water.
And the yellow again, joined by blue, and
the movement of hard hats in a gondola.
The same blue that made the moored boat join the shimmer
of Canale della Giudecca. The door buzzers and even the orange

of whatever someone was drinking on the sun-drenched table...
and the everything...and the snow.”

*It was as almost-frightful and familiar
as the click and tap
of loose strands against childhood windows,
things tossed in the same winter wind.
And at times back then
those pane-tapping things
were the bony knuckles of trees.*

*And what brought fear then brings peace now,
but the peaceful then is scary somehow.
But this is just one paradox of change
—that tales and magic lands hold the fearfully strange.*

Having seen some Gruyere, some Venice, some snow,
I was back to the snow at hand...We had lurched
and staggered up an exposed ridge, strapped (except for me)
with avalanche beacons. We made a sidewalk over cornices
on either side, mounting in treacherous places their sculpted crest curls.

Any exposed skin was pricked to numbness by wind
*(and it's good to crouch in terror before nature,
in a terror that as little as a light shaft might mend).*

A makeshift cross was at the summit
—in a kind of glow—
materializing through horizontal snow.

*And then I didn't see it, but Jupiter, too, was on the upslope.
I saw him later in France through a white-bearded man's
white telescope.*

*It was a thumbprint of bright
and its fingers, some satellites,
were perfect pinprick fingernails of light,
one on the left and three on the right.*

And then the steep, pillowed backside, taking it in sweeping
turns, a gradual descent through darkling forest and glade
with happenstance chalets. And finally through silent pine
corridors dark with the full night and lavish flakes again
that were lit in the warm twin shafts of headlights.
The mountainside farmstead, layers peeled off
and steaming on ice-cold entryway tile,
a vat of thick soup and checkered bread with rosemary

—and me, in front of a wood stove sandwiched cozily
between women I've wanted—and they've wanted me—
but now I can't have, and if only
on the inside,
I laughed...

And then I was standing
with the one on my right
on a train platform weeping
at God the Great,

her cold black hair tangled
in wool and my fingers
while behind, almost unnoticed,
bare-branched trees lingered
against moss-flecked cliffs
and let loose their crooked songs.

*Then the train carried
us:
two unfinished works
to stand naked before the world.*

2009

ALL I NEED

All I need
Is the shadows of leaves,
Cats lapping at puddles,
Clothes lifting on breeze,

Clouds
Shifting shapes
On and off the moon,
And a blue bright light
Telling rain, *Come soon.*

All I need
Is tea with sage,
A bent beached table,
A wind-whipped page

To read
On and on
How our human heart stirs,
While, across, a friend's face
Gives me hers.

All I need
Is guitar and drum
To pound out praise
Where there might be none,

To play
On and on
Till strings twang, skins burst
Bringing brazen best
To tell off the worst.

All I need
Is what makes a bird,
Fuel to make wings flap,
A voice to be heard,

To cry
On and on
With color and crown
Until a wind too big comes
And blows me down.

2010

I FEEL A LIST COMIN' ON

I feel a list comin' on—
With so much beauty come and gone.
Yet there's still so much that's still so strong.
I feel a list comin' on.

And if I don't record this,
There'll be other things I'll miss,
As magic and mundane as my lover's kiss.
If I don't record this.

So—I saw the moon and a street light,
Each with its own piece of night.
I got them all mixed up, moon was so bright.
I saw the moon and a street light.

I slept in my clean white bed—
Head at the foot and feet at the head.
It was so soft with my limbs all spread.
I slept in my clean white bed.

I was naked (I should've said)
In that clean, wide, white bed,
Like you come in at birth and go out when you're dead.
I was naked (I should've said).

I watched the world wake up one day:
Bird's first cry and sun's first ray.
It made me jump in the sea and the salt and the spray.
I watched the world wake up one day.

I felt the air and I felt the sun
Make a strange mix that made them one:
My first sure sign that autumn had come.
I felt the air and I felt the sun.

I saw wisps of clouds way up high:
Pale pink and blue with palms nearby.
I had waited long, so they heard me sigh.
I saw wisps of clouds way up high.

Then that very same Moon that played with the street light
Came through a crack in my curtain the next night.
She, naked as I—and my bed still white—
Sank into pink as the world woke up bright.
I felt the fresh air and up came the sun,
And for then and for there, my list was well done.

2010

LE BALLET DE LA CHAUVE-SOURIS

We walked through feathered ferns
And tufted grass, blond and green,
Then to the utter brink and turned back
To see what could be seen:
Above a cushioning cloud
And insignificant amidst the trees
Was our unlikely peach-colored cottage
Perched above vast terraces of tea.

A small dog had led us there,
Waiting while the weather changed,
His springy paws pausing
And squinty eyes squinting
In a mist that became a smatter of rain.

We were guests (and had the option to fear),
And the dog's small companions made
It intimately clear: a toad warming
Beneath my discarded jeans, a snail
Sampling the bright pink soap
(By his slimy means).

But we did our tactful best
To make it ours, knowing very well it wasn't:
We lit some small candles. And on the strand
Of colored lamps that had been hung from the eaves,
Some bulbs were lit while some were burnt:

So we changed the ones that were
With the ones that weren't. Then we sat back
And learnt that with little delay,
The all-wall window had been made a stage
For some obscure nature play—this
Would be The Bat Ballet.

The winged dancer must have been waiting
For her cue, for out she fluttered to find
The moths that fluttered toward the light,
Drawn by colored halos
In the cloud-bank just behind.
The close night-cloud drew the light,
The light a moth, the moth a dancing bat,
And it all drew us as back we sat, kept the curtains
Un-drawn and watched on:

From spectators to backstage,
It was us (with toad and snail, and dog curled tightly,
Nose to tail), a bunched-curtain window frame,
A mist-speckled pane (to keep back the rain),
A black and delicate marionette,
Exiting, entering, stage right then stage left
(Then the eave where lamps sent timid glow
Into a featureless backcloth clouding the world's end,
Another edge of the same brink where ferns curled over
And grass over-bent)...

So really nothing much
To cushion us from the unknown—
Except a small beauty:

Le Ballet de la Chauve-Souris.

But then is it ever different
When we make a home out of you and me?

2010

A DAY WHEN CREATURES FOUND THEIR WAY

*As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells—*

-G.M. Hopkins

It was a day when creatures found their way—
By fate perhaps. A fish was first to fly
For freedom when a fraction of his shoal
Made frantic fin-prints in the sloping sand.
He flapped, flipped, cut a channel through half-mud,
And as the hand went beach to burlap bag
With yet another of his frightened friends,
A rogue ripple leapt up and helped him in.
(He'll never swim so close to shore again.)
Then five white-cheeked and winged musicians—
Magicians who break day's heat into song
And make a dust-choked desert breathe—were next
To fly from cage to crowns of palm to free
Not just themselves but, too, the me of me.
They had beaten black feathers, wings and tail,
Until they tattered, not a little like
The litter that scattered in the gutter
Beside the supermarket dumpster, where
A man makes ignorant income from this
Miracle: that behind wire they still sing.
I suppose poor pay but small attention
To the imprisonment of precious things—

Just like the rich. Since I'm considered such
(And it's much, much easier to free birds
Than people), I readily bought them all
And promptly lifted every latch, then watched
(What is there more moving than what I watched?)
Five lives that once were bound and now were free,
Singing from the top of the nearest tree.
So new and immediate were their songs,
I hoped they paused, like the fish, to not forget
That one should stay far, far away from nets.
Before, I had tried to reason with the man,
But he just couldn't understand the worth
Of native birds, or maybe English words,
Or both. Let the act stand then symbolically,
For captive tomorrow, five more might be.
But might justice this once have the wherewithal?
The one tattered the worst was also small.

So the spirit pent up in me that longs
To lift, though grounded still, more lightly went.
I crossed the highway to the sea to put
Tactful space between the deed and me.
But then the sea again reminded me: that day
A fish had been given his life again.
He played out somewhere there beneath those waves,
A boundless texture: green and blue and gray.
That's when a friend nudged me and said, "Aren't those
The kind of birds that you just bought and freed?"

“You’re right,” I remarked, “but that’s sort of strange—
Five together like that I’ve never seen.”
We’re so quick to call out coincidence,
So who was I to think that the wilder ones
Might see it fit to offer thanks to me?
The birds I often praise, but this time *they*
Lined up atop a light post and let free
A bold and bubbling *thank you very much*.
I stood there humbled, not sure what to say,
Even thought, *Was it possible at all?*
But there to persuade, lagging close behind
Was the little one, so tattered, so small.
Like him, we’re all creatures who day by day
Break desperate wings to find a desperate way.

2010

TIM KOEHN is a teacher and freelance writer currently working in Lilongwe, Malawi. His wanderlust has taken him throughout Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. In the classroom, he does his best to explore literature's record of human experience and make it real for his students. In the summer, he divides his time between Cyprus, France, and Colorado, relishing the natural beauty of each. He wishes he could be tirelessly aware of everyday wonders and always content with the present. Read more at timjkoehn.net.