

Nothing Else Matters

by M. D. Friedman

Nothing Else Matters

- for Barbara
who opened my window
to the breath of day

by
M. D. Friedman
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The Magic Way

few come this way
fewer still by choice
there is nothing here
nothing human to lie against

no touch to touch
nothing warm but
that which burns
inside

no comfort even
from the layers of flesh
that cover us
like sheets of glass

nothing lives
or fully dies here
the only light shines
lonely from within

there is still this ringing
silence here in the rare air
a churning and simmering
of shadows and whispers

a breathy hiss leaks
from the muffled murmurs
from the swallowed words of dark others
wistfully slipping by

yet I flourish here as myself
the nature of this place now seems clear
I was dying when I tried
to live as someone else

what doesn't last needs to pass
before the casting of what is real
the lost is serendipitously found
here where passions' gifts abound

Burlap

(or There Is No Such Thing as a Good Divorce)

Unlike with the sleek touch of satin,
you insisted skeptically,
there is no magic in burlap.
I had to agree.

Although a year before me, you had
pulled that trick of crystal and china off
with minimal upset, I knew
for me it would be rough.

Slowly I
set out
each place with
excruciating care.

I deliberately balanced
plate against plate in harmonious splendor,
the curve of the glasses orbiting
the bowls, all so intricately ordered.

Then I lingered until the fall of the amber light,
when each flash of the silver glitters ethereal,
gleaming like a stream wrinkled by twilight's final flare
languidly slipping down its dusky, bone broken banks.

I held my breath until the tawny shadows
of burlap engulfed the sparkling
mosaic of the goblets rich with burgundy,
until the bristles of the weave itself seem to breathe.

It's all in the wrist, I chuckled nervously,
plucking the beige burlap with a single smooth tug.
My entire patient placement abruptly asunder,
all that I had worked for lay scrambled on the rug.

Down in this shatter
of once noble glass,
down among the spiked
chips of the china,

down on this bleeding
bed of invisible splinters,
between the heady mists
and staining red of the wine,

wrapped up here in prickly cloth,
in the midst of this mess of my making,
we spooned scarred and swollen
in a flood of our kisses. Curve to angle

and cup to cup, we replenished
ourselves with a bounty
of exquisite emptiness.
It is true.

There is no enchantment here
in the scratch of the burlap,
nor any warmth still alive
in the silken folds of old satin.

Although passion stirs lonely in the bitter
scrape of glass against the wired cloth,
fresh magic smolders suddenly afire
as skin brushes skin.

Now His Own

-for Max

1.

When the steam rises
from rain in quiet
puddles of reflection,
the hungry night sky

darkens the way
like shards of black china
shattered on the shining
skin of the street
stretches

beyond the silk
of near white mist
and the hard glare
of the distant,

beyond what we know
of where we go
and what we've learned
from where we've been,

even beyond the frowning
edge of what we
sometimes call
the horizon.

2.

When the lid that
holds the fragile in
lays itself flat,
dimpled like a blown tire,

like an emptied womb,
its afterbirth of light
finally shed in triumph,
we wonder

at what we have started
in this day of our breath,
at what feeds on
what we leave undone.

Who is this child
we are birthing
into this storm
of inadvertent hatred?

Will this mirror
of strewn tears
reflect a path
now his own?

Eating People

–from the Loveland Reporter-Herald in an article about Emily Rogers-Ramos & the Loveland Museum’s “Teachers as Poets” Reading:

The following is an excerpt from her poem, **Eating People**.

I like squeezing the lime
which never goes in just one direction
and spooning the oregano
and clean white squares
of onion into my bowl.

Emily said the newspaper
had a typo, really
the poem was called Eating Posolé,
a spicy, warm and nurturing soup.

Indeed, she’s not at all a cannibal
but a teacher
who sees the world
through the eyes of a poet.

And Charlotte,
also a teacher and poet,
never partakes
of human flesh.

She speaks of how
hard it is to see
the dancing shadows
of the wild horses

on the mesa’s edge.
She hears but
seldom speaks of the
gurgling of the glue factory.

Yet, as I look around
my students all seem to have
a chunk or two
taken out of them.

There must be
inadvertent
predators
everywhere.

Perhaps it is the way
we continue to do
what was done to us
that bites,

the way the hungry
machinery of education
sucks down the creative
oils of our children

like so much surplus milk.
As this world
changes
explosively,

why
do we keep
whipping
dead horses?

The Making of the Desert

We must act to ensure continued economic growth for our citizens
- George W Bush, June 2001 in reference to Global Warming.

In these last blistering days
before the growing desert devours
what is left of green,

we wonder at this monster we have made,
we reflect on what we have
inadvertently created from our greed.

So this barren plain
ridden raw by wind
is where our quest for more

and more now ends.
The hungry sun like fire feeds
on what our selfishness will breed.

never winter song

never have you shone
so beautifully warm
promise me softly
our winter poetry
will speak now only
of crisp morning crystals
fired by the sun

birth my sweating spring
with your dreamy music
that repeats no phrase anticipated
crack the dark lightning
that shadows our dizzy dance
as we drip green mists
from our fingertips
strip the procreative swaddle
from this untamed fire

I walk by the grass we laid flat
with our languid liquid loving
now I remember how
the touch of my tongue
trembled your skin
how this picnic of flesh
fed the flames of our soul

The Opening

There is this shining place
from which everything spins away.

It is from here that I fall
into loving you.

When we are together,
I hear the echoes

of those things we let go of
smacking into the black water far below.

When we first touched,
I did not know

from where this hollow splashing
came. Is it from within

or behind?
I am still unsure.

Each time we kiss,
my mind reels like a top

when the string is yanked out.
Fragments of the great wanting

whirl out from the bright center,
splinters of what could be.

Shards of brittle hope are tossed
glittering upon the unforgiving glare.

It is here from the calm of this vortex
that I see us loving each other.

Now is the time to step into the midst
of this tempest of tearing blades:

to fix those shredded sheets
like a tail to the kite that rises from our desire,

to swirl our steaming breath out
from the thunderous drumming of our hearts,

to beat out a dance of delight
in the hot night of our longing,

to slam out the syncopation
of panicked hooves caught in lightening.

This is the place given to those
who have always cherished love.

Within lies the treasure for which we endure
the pain of the opening.

The Communion

We are dining in a meadow of light
on a blanket of skin woven from our touch.
We have both fears and desires
that feed so ravenously now
at this picnic of our souls.

In our hands we hold a chalice.
Dare we drink this strangely radiant
elixir of our communion?
Will we speak together those words that
catch like straw inside our throats?

I see you cry now,
sudden tears that seem so out of place,
and yet I understand this mix of joy and no return
that binds our feet as we try to walk
this endless plain as if it were our choice.

Your tears, I realize, are tears
of the long wanting fused with a fear
that this happiness is too intense to last,
too precious to fall like rain upon
the scarred fields of our longing.

But there is more to consider.
We know this as a gift from where we belong,
a treasure we must nurture and care for,
a chance we may never have again.
Your tears end as remarkably as they appeared.

We feast now in this sacred meadow
on a blanket of skin woven from our touch.
There is nothing else but this kiss that endures.
We drink it in now and breathe as one
the heady luminance of our communion.

The Kiss

These words,
what would be told
if they could be freed from print?
If they could be written by hand
in a flowing cursive,
warm as melted butter,
if they could run like ink,
down in a single line
across your naked skin,
if they could shimmer
like a moonlit stream
cutting across your shoulder,
flowing down the angled
fold of your neck,
what colors would they spill
as they spiraled around
your rising breast
like a swirl
of Autumn leaves?
What nuances
would they bleed
crossing your body wetly
over the supple
skin of your belly?

What images
would they silhouette
surfing the curl
of your hip,
skiing down through
the dark valley
where your Mound of Venus
skirts your thigh?
What boisterous songs
would they sing arm in arm
like drunken college boys
staggering down the back of your leg
looking to get laid,
whirling like a dervish
encompassing your ankle
like a rustling bracelet of lace?
Would they warm to your touch
like scented oil spreading across
the velvet sole of your foot?
What rhymes would they weave
diving off your toes,
kicking into back flips,
landing with astonishing gentleness
on your trembling wet lips?

There Is Nothing Else

nothing else matters
but your arms
opening for me
like a hot oiled bath

nothing else matters
but your lips
melting into mine
as they shape to my desire

I brush against you softly,
now where I feel
your naked longing pull me,
my hand fills with the warm

goodness of your breast
I drink in the chocolate touch
of your sweet swollen nipple
nothing else matters

we let the ringing phone
fade like distant thunder
in the peace that follows
we join in total bliss

I pour my soul into yours
like a pitcher filling a vase
and then the vase, the pitcher
over and over again

we spill over the edge
not from lack of care
but we are suddenly overflowing
over and over again

our bodies glisten
as if oiled by the moonlight
my fingers slide down
the curve of your hip

and then make
that slow turn
to please you
nothing else matters

the honeyed steam of our love
thickly curls into my lungs
nurturing and intoxicating
pumping wildly through my blood

I am healed
made whole
by our love
there is nothing else

there is no one else
no one has ever
made me feel like this before
like nothing else matters

Coma

(A 40 year old man wakens after a 19 year coma
to meet his 19 year old daughter.)

You say you are my daughter,
yet you are no older than I.
Am I still in the time of my dying,
when from the sudden screech,
my head marbled the windshield?

As I slept like a seed on the wind
wanting only black earth to root in,
what floods of blood have surged and waned
leaving the furrows of my dreams
enriched in layered humus?

Will I sleep tonight again to find myself
swirling through your hourglass curves,
sifting through the crystal opening,
like you, the flesh of my making,
falling from my womb of sand?

Feasting in America

I don't remember what I ate that day.
The floor was bowed as if
the weight of indecisive feet
settled it into a tired smile
smoothed by spilled
grease and friction.

I don't remember what I ate.
Perhaps lasagna,
certainly peppercinos
on a wonderful salad.
We were moving Dad
that morning

from a temporary nursing home
in North Miami
to a nicer place close to Mom.
His roommate, a raving old Jewish racist,
stung the Black orderly
with a bitterness found exclusively

in the beaten and senile.
Dad, silent and staring,
intently chewing his lower lip,
had not been attended to
when we arrived at 11:00 am
that muggy Sunday morning.

Many of his clothes were missing.
His front teeth,
knocked out when they revived him
from the near drowning,
were still missing.
I think he knew me as his son.

He walked with the slow shuffle
of Parkinson's decay, his back
round as a snail's shell,
bent as if he were leaning
over an imaginary cane.
It was an authentic Italian deli

worn but not changed
from years of business,
holding on as the neighborhood changed
from Italian to Jewish to Black to Cuban to Haitian,
always heavy with the smell of garlic,
an olfactory landmark in a world of flux.

I remember walking in line
along the dull glass cases
filled with waves of lasagna and piles of hot sausage,
sturdy blue bowls of pasta, white and red sauces.
Our talk was of fresh, steaming bread and how Dad
always said you can tell a good restaurant by the salad.
I don't remember what I ate that day.

A Good Dog

It was white steam curling over the pot's lip,
the bumping cobs of corn bobbing in bubbles,
the thick, sun-warm, bleeding slices
of Beef Steak Tomatoes and, especially,
the yellow butter's languid pose

that signaled summer was finally here.
The previous November just days
after his twenty third birthday my brother was found
under a pile of decomposing leaves face
down in a deserted Missouri wood.

We heard it first on the St. Louis news:
After a month missing from a St. Charles's Radio Shack,
two employees found shot in back of head,
execution style, motive still not known
for the lunch time abduction.

For the first time that summer
Dad phoned Mom to "put the water on"
he was coming home with freshly picked sweet corn.
It was the only time I remember Mom forgot
to add her secret spoon of sugar to the pot.

We sat at the table closer than normal
around a small basket of wilting memories
gnawed by a nagging emptiness
not discussing that which
never made sense...

When Sister, our dog, snuck in to beg the summer food
she only just sniffed anyway, one stern look from Dad
and she sulked to her place by the kitchen door.
She laid down in trained disappointment,
persisting, almost human, a good dog.

Upon Turning Fifty

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
-W. B Yeats from Sailing to Byzantium

When I was young,
I bragged my soul
was 2000 years old.
I felt wiser than my age allowed.

I know many who when younger
suffered heart attack and stroke.
When younger, I knew many that
suicide and murder wasted.

Now I just feel my age.
I no longer brag
nor would ever trade
wisdom's water for my salty youth.

I just feel lucky to feel old.
Only last week 200 volts of current
glued my hand to this microphone.
My burning fingers contracted

so tightly `round
this screaming wand of death,
I had no control,
no way of letting go.

The jolt flopped
me down onto my back.
I jerked and flapped,
a caught fish on a concrete shore.

Juiced excruciation
jaws clinched down upon a spark
muted cries wrenched electric,
I writhed fetal on the cement floor.

Then a young stranger
risked my fate, and
from my charred, charged,
stubbornly disobedient hands

tore the searing pins
and needle stabbing mic.
I lay a sputtering,
stuttering ball.

Electrocution leaves you humble,
clinging to life with open hands,
I have learned to drop my pain-filled past
like crumpled paper upon the grass.

I live afresh my ragged poem,
rip revision after revision
yet somehow seem to stitch together nuance
to patch my tattered magic sail.

My soul
of colored crystal
rocks like a ship
upon an endless sea of light.

I relish
the honeymoon groans
of wooden masts
as my sail fills and flaps.

For now I am borne
forever onward
happily refreshed
by each new breath.

Peaking

- for Mariamne

1.

A tender foot bent on rocky ascent,
she tottered up the zigzag trail
like a child beaming in her first steps.

With my shoulder on a spiraling pine, I waited,
and when in gasps, she had caught her breath,
we together climbed to rest in a place of view.

The leveling of our breath deepened the silence.
Swaddled in mist, the peaks trembled
and glistened like the surf pressed by the wind.

Lost in the murmur and spray of see,
we were pierced by solar needles,
racked across cold rock.

A quake of sun cracked our silver spines
and spun the red silk out:
web to web we quivered upon the rising warmth.

Closing my eyelids pulsing with gold,
I hugged the whirling panorama.
(I etched the scene in bone.)

Her words buzzed like a mosquito in my ear:
The mountains are oceans frozen
swarming with sparkles of cooler life.

2.

That night, high in the thin air,
zipped together in down,
in a puffed up bundle atop the crisp mountain,
we lay bare and entangled as fossil in rock.

The steam in my skin craved the cream of her moon.
As soft as milkweed, I climbed
with my tongue-tip, switchback after switchback,
her shimmering ridges and peaks.

Her giggles swirled by
like tiny salt feathers on a wild gust of moans.
As a lower star gleamed from the depths of her breast,
her moon-coaxed waves overtook me.

I had searched for more than a reflected heaven,
but I found only flesh translucent in moonlight.
I found my bones' shadows
cast blue on the ice.

Parting Shots

It's not working between us.
You're too old.
You're too immature.
You're really not my type.

I'm not ready for this.
You're just too intense.
Doesn't anything matter to you?
You never take anything seriously.

I'll miss what we had.
You try too hard.
You just take, take, take.
You have never really tried at all.

I just need some space.
You're smothering me.
You won't leave me alone.
You take me totally for granted.

It's not you it's me.
You deserve someone better.
You deserve something more.
You deserve to rot in hell.

We have nothing in common.
You even hate yourself.
All you care about is yourself.
You're a selfish bastard.

We've just been pretending.
I hope we can still be friends.
I hope we can still be friends.
I hope we can always be friends.

Naked in New York

I can never get naked in New York.
My first time there was for the World's Fair.
We had seen the World of the Future, and now, nearly 40 years later,
I still don't have a video phone to catch my girl friend rising wet from her
bath.

I was 12 that first time, enthralled
by the seediness of the city & the big hotel.
That night my parents went out & left us,
my brother & I tried to find the bell captain.
We had read Catcher in the Rye, so we knew how it was suppose to work.

I never got naked that time.
Seven years later I hitched back to New York.
I was on my way to Boston
to visit a girl friend
who had told me to see other women.

I stopped in New York to visit an old lover
who I had told to see other men.
I was hoping we could be friends.
She took me to The Last Tango in Paris,
and, when she parked in front of her parents' house,

She without a word or a kiss
unzipped my pants
took me into her mouth
& gave me my first taste
of oral delight.

I never got naked that night.
Nor the night after that
when in Boston
I told my girl friend
I had taken her advice.

The Virtues of Beer as a Breakfast Food

No doubt it had been a rough night. Fred was hungry, drained, and running late again. Last night, the online hookers had swarmed over him like flies over an old out house. He had ran sadly into their vague, virtual arms out of a nagging emptiness and now felt like a football stadium several hours after the home team had lost the championship game. He could feel the winds of his emotions rocking the dripping plastic beer cups under the bleachers of his dreams. He could almost hear the echoes of the crowd whining for just a little more a little too late. It was 10 years ago last month when the bank had sent him home early with the severance check after announcing the "big merger." He had gone home to find his wife working on a merger of her own with Bob, his best friend from college. His check was quickly depleted by the move and the divorce, and his kids quickly forgot him, or so he liked to tell himself. Times seemed to just be getting tougher. Last night at the King Soopers, he had to leave his normal dinner of bean dip in the soda aisle to pick up a 12 pack of diet cream soda on sale for the same two dollars. And now he sat staring down into a dry bowl of Fruit Loops crowned with the stale crumbs of the last of the Lucky Charms. There had not been milk in his refrigerator for weeks, maybe months, yet this remnant of cereal was all he had between now and his shift at the foundry. He checked the frig again. Miraculously, there was still a half of a quart of Schlitz somehow left. It would have to do. He poured it over the multicolored rings and whistled as it floated the sweet magic dust of the Leprechauns. It would definitely do. Today would be the first day of the rest of his life.

A Pair of Apple Poems

1. This apple was left by the poets in the workshop basket. Frosted with wax, random speckles of gold flecked its dull skin like leaves fallen on the dank green duckweed of a muddy pond. Leaning to one side as if it understood the poets' unheard musings, the apple attended to the scraping of their pens, as if fruit could be plumped up on a diet of raw ink, as if an apple could mysteriously feed on their fidgeting dreams, as if, from the magic of their words, it could extract a life of its own and suddenly fall far from the tree of its beginning. The noises of the poets were strangely reassuring to the apple. They were shrewdly musical. The rhythms reminded the apple of when, in its youth, it had danced with abandon, profoundly shaken by the clicking branches fencing in the wind. Although those biting storms in the nights of its forming terrified the apple, slicing to its core, these grating sounds of the human poets now flooded the apple with a strange sense of warmth and comfort. This apple, picked to sell before it could find the ground on its own, now lay cool in my dry hand. Quietly green, packed with the hidden power of sunlight, its sweetness obscured, firm yet fully imperfect, this pome is somehow now drawn to my longing. I know this now by how its stem whirls toward me, how its yearning digs into me like a root, how its seeds find my mind dark and fertile as an old horse pasture. This apple still thinks it is falling. Even after enduring the rough passage and assiduous gnawing of my mouth, it falls into my blood.

2. This apple fell on Einstein's head. It was puzzling. Gravity had already been discovered. Matter and energy had been seen only yesterday leaving the cheap motel together. So what was this knock on the noggin about? Was it just the routine buzzing of the cosmic alarm clock checking if anyone was still up? Why not a simple phone call then? Was the Fibonacci star of its seeds somehow plotting to plant their pervasive pattern in the gray furrows of the great brain? Although I am sure he grasped the full gravity of the event, Albert shyly released a half smile as if he were just mildly entertained. It was the reluctant yet irrepressible smile of a man who was at the same time amused and relieved that he had passed gas unnoticed. "Not every discovery has meaning," he was heard later to say. It was a great moment for the apple, who had, after all, received only the smallest of bylines for the force equally exerted on Newton. Einstein understood such things and knew the fingerprint of interconnection when it pressed down on him. If nothing else made sense, it seems, at least, that apples are always falling on great thinkers. Albert took it as a compliment. He kept the apple and pared it for lunch. And so he laid its core bare, exposing the vessels of the next generation to the ravaging wind and drying air of truth.

The Super Bowl of the Muse

Let's turn it on.
I mean really turn it on.
Let's turn on it.
It's time to turn it around.
Let's watch it
from the inside.

Let's turn it over before it's over.
This time we'll turn that flashing
fat screen upside down.
We'll strip the cold fire from its flicker
and tickle its underbelly as it
jiggles topless in an electric dance.

Let's over tip the dust bunnies,
those cheerleaders of neglect,
as they shake their chalky booties
bristling with blue light.
Let's spark their sequenced g-strings
stuffed green with sweaty money.

Let's transform it all
until it turns us on.
This is the New American Dream.
It's never over until the Fat One sings,
and this time we'll listen to Her words.
It's Her song that matters now.

It is the Super Bowl of the Muse.
The Big Game in the Big Easy.
And this year it's even bigger, better, bolder.
It's more colorful, more electrifying,
more engaging
and less real than ever.

Can you imagine?
Even the commercials have something new to say:
A hairy Alan Ginsberg doing the shimmy
bulges out from under
his red, white, and blue
shrunk flag tank top.

Crowned with a rainbow of fireworks,
he gulps a cold diet Pepsi down,
like some darkly sparkling stolen nectar,
as if the red, white, and blue can itself
were filled directly from the wet dreams of virgins,
our Alan simply belches OM, twinkling his timeless grin.

It's all happening now.
It's Super Overtime.
We're into Sudden Death.
So let's rock our rockers.
Let's roll it over in the fake green grass of our imagination.
Let's rewind the rerun

and fast forward it to the end.
This is our new beginning.
Let's put a giant magnifying glass
over the top of the Superdome
and burn it all up.
Let's tear down the old goals.

Just imagine 100,000 people
all paying big bucks just to sit with the big cheese
in this quaking maze of stands and fans,
all snapping their fingers frantically
and pounding their feet for more poetry.
Millions more all having Super Slam Parties.

Think of it:
poets going to Disneyland!
Everybody everywhere stopping everything
for a single afternoon.
Even people who don't like poetry
feigning passion,

munching down word chips
dipped in dark image,
taking off on hot wings,
sporting inky berets
to impress
their own fickle muse.

We are all so entranced
by how the fresh blood still
sputters from the cheap shot
in s l o w m o t i o n over and over,
we forget our own surging turmoil.
Again we angrily boo the fumbled phrase.

Yes. All of America out of control
cheering wildly for more
graceful word play.
The yellow flags of syntax
thrown down without penalty,
we can almost taste sweet victory.

What's a split infinitive or even a sentence fragment
when the Great Win is in sight! Oh yes, just think of it!
Everyone everywhere screaming at once,
slurring their meaningless slogans into a single soulful chant,
throwing their hands to the sky
in an endless human wave.

Our real heroes are still on the field,
still taking their licks for the team.
Slamming themselves into each other
like bugs flattened on a TV screen.
And now we who sit and watch from above,
spring to our feet in one overwhelming motion!

Cross-eyed from the hard hits,
shaking from exhaustion,
dripping Gatorade,
smeared with mud and blood,
the players below still
frantically guard the gridiron,

falling finally forward
into one great groping
greasy flesh pot,
melting down like a pile
of ice cubes
abandoned and draining.

Counting down the final seconds,
we above stumble and stomp in unison,
drunk on our own inner revelation!
Pregnant with joy, swollen with pride, we flail about
beer bloated and convulsing in syncopated stepping,
sinfully drenched in the sweet sweat of our synergy.

In a single moment of satori
it is finally too clear
that despite all the hype,
the money and noise,
there has never been anyone
else down there.

The final buzzer
screeches as poignantly
as a virgin bride
learning how her new husband
is not the gentle man
she thought she married.

Who will play
the Winner now
that the harsh
light of truth
has finally turned
upon us?

