

Poems, 2010-2023

by

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St. John Fisher: Bishop and Martyr

“Well-met, Reverend Sir. We may soon make merry in Heaven.”

“Verily, for we have entered through a strait gate.”

---- Thomas More meets John Fisher in the Tower

*The head was off before the crimson hat
Arrived – Oh John, who fished for men, knaves say
You knew how death leaned close and it was that
That nerved your stout resolve to bark a nay.*

*The head was off – but on the traitor’s pike
Its grim and pinched façade grew ruddy young,
Aflush with Cana-wine. The headsman’s strike
Recalled another John – the dance and song
Antipas called – so plain folk whispered loud
Along the bridge and in the cauldron streets.
Then Henry paused, but donned his purple shroud
To churn again between infernal sheets.*

At this late date, staunch John, Rochester’s Rock,
Pray hard for shepherds who sell short the flock.
Your Tudor peers feared fire, the rough-hewn block:
They might have held against progressive talk.

Missa in Tempore Belli

sursum corda

By noon the Mall awaits,
though sad Isaiah warned
of orphans made and widows scorned . . .

the war we wanted disappoints

Gas prices stalled last week,
so squat new SUVs
ascend the crumbling clover-leaves . . .

the war we wanted disappoints

Let record markets quake
and cell-phones skip a bleat,
still Chinese shoes adorn our feet . . .

the war we wanted disappoints

Prime steaks on high-tech grills
incense suburban air;
both parties promise real health-care . . .

the war we wanted disappoints

As Persians strain at nukes,
wronged Kurds now lay for Turks,
and Chavez slips Big Oil the works . . .

the war we wanted disappoints

Take Google as your guide:
you'll find old friends, odd facts,
and disembodied carnal acts . . .

the war we wanted disappoints

With cable for our vine
and credit our fig tree,
we're free to be what we shall be . . .

miserere nobis

Fr. Gustave Depreitere Recollects

Note: On the 14th (some say the 13th) of January, 1903, a mysterious figure known as David E. George died of self-induced strychnine (some say arsenic) poisoning in Room 4 (some say 3) of the Grand Avenue Hotel in Enid, Oklahoma Territory. He had claimed to be John Wilkes Booth (some say he was).

First Friday Mass dismissed, my blessing gone
With them into the brittle cold of dawn,
The ladies of my “remnant” snuggled along
The stubbled field of maize toward Madison
And home. *Old Mrs. Vater’s City niece,*
Her smile askew, had not received. The cup
And paten cleansed and set aside, I sent
The Jarboe twins, pale Ralph and burly Fred,
To breakfast quick on Mama’s mush and cream
Before the tardy-bell’s stern summoning.

Then Fred was back: “Please, Father Gus, you’d best
Come see this man. There’s something *wrong* with him!”
His voice slipped out of pitch, betrayed real fear.

Half-vested still, I stepped out on the porch,
And there he stood and worked a rattan cane
Beneath his thumb compulsively . . . in dark
Broadcloth alone against that chill without
A flinch – black hair and eyes – charcoal mustache –
The face too white – soft collar wide and rolled
Like scribblers’ in a boulevard café.

He doffed and said, “Good morrow, Father,” bowed,
And seemed to want a special word from me,
Some cued response (recall how players on
The stage will try to aid another when
He’s lost his lines).

I stood there dumb, but he,
To move the scene, spoke like a biloquist
 (“Benedicite!”), smiled, and bowed again.

“You’re Catholic?”

“My Asia thought it so.”

His left hand took the cane, and with his snubbed
Right thumb he gestured at the early sun:

“What torch is yond, that vainly lends his light
To grubs and eyeless skulls?”

He never blinked,
Not once. It wasn't drink . . . perhaps morphine.

“Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,
By drunken prophecies, libels and dreams.”

I asked him who he was, and he glanced down:
“A creature unprepared, unmeet for death . . .”

I said I'd hear his sins.

“Oh, by and by
I'd have some speech with you.” He grinned much like
A burlesque Irishman, then limped away.
*I say he limped; which limb he favored was
Obscure.*

I felt the cold, went in to tea
And rolls I could not taste, reminded of
A carrion bird I'd seen near Bruges decades
Ago. Wings spread, it dropped off a low bough
And waddled toward a newly stillborn calf.

That noon I found the church unduly dim;
The sanctuary lamp had guttered out.

The Reluctant Thomist Teaches PHIL 101

. . . on our very hearths and in our gardens
the infernal cat plays with the panting mouse,
or holds the hot bird fluttering in her jaws.

– William James

Bear's hot breath on the hiker's face –
Shark-slice along the diver's thigh –
Bee-barb deep in the baby's thumb –
Worm-crawl across the inner eye:

*was Wordsworth wrong
and Darwin right?*

Storm-surge fouling the harborside –
Long bridges swaying way to stress –
Dark-tailed twisters abducting herds –
The Big One roiling up the West:

*was Leibnitz wrong
and Voltaire right?*

**Live-In Boyfriend Abuses Child –
Veiled Girl Trips Bomb in Marketplace –
Judge Says No to Hydration Tube –
Clerk Disappears Without a Trace –**

*was Rousseau wrong
and Calvin right?*

Is Evil deprivation of the Good?
I'd like to think that's so, if I but could.

Emeritus

You hope this is the only price to pay
For five decades of gin, a pack a day,
Young rash reviews of those you'd barely read,
But blamed (and claimed thereby unearned street-cred).

The papers, articles, quick books ensued.
Citations spread the brand; you were pursued
By big state schools, the Ivy League, think-tanks
With catchy acronyms – a nation's thanks.

Now tiny brown Hispanic women bring
Your pills. You lurch at every land-line ring.
(It's not the boys. They have their lives apart
And years ago disdained the scholar's art.)

Your daughters come and leave just when they can.
That willing mentoree has found a Theory man.

Migration

Old 81 was still two-lane;
September weeds, drought-dead,
Had gone to seed along the ditch
(or dip that passed for one).

The low-set sun leached out the road
ahead just south of town
And turned it to a klieg-lit screen
a-crawl with silhouettes
Escaped from some bad 50s film:
Slow spiders, rank on rank,
Marched east behind their shadow-selves,
sun-cast beyond surreal.

Most saucer-sized – hirsute and fanged
for sure – they seemed immense,
And so you swerved and risked control,
but caught yourself in time –
Survived the scene, but carried it
'til now; now pass it on.

An Extraordinary Evening in Enid

i.

Note now how time grinds down,
so tired it barely turns;

Hopper shadows on the Square
stall like Panzers in the East.

Late afternoon resists the gloam for all it's worth.

Stars strain to come when day dies hard.

All grows still with readiness –
subject to the long horizon.

ii.

Skeleton Station . . .
no name for a place
that craves a future –

Better a Lady
out of Tennyson.

iii.

Just shy of the 98th Meridian,
on the Rock Island archipelago,
a not-quite-landlocked prairie town.

iv.

The creeks don't count –

Black Bear and Boggy, Skeleton again –
steep trenches by August,
but for sudden gully-washers
that disinter (now and then)
worn molars of mastodons.

v.

Springs – clear and clean –
watered bison since the Pleistocene.

Then herds up from the tricky Red
that wrapped around the shanks of steers,
long-horned, lanky,
pulled stragglers off,
and lost them in tight swirling troughs.

vi.

Soon human life aplenty, itch and twitch,
yearning for sudden wealth and Kingdom Come:

Land-Office here and there a gypsy witch –

chicanery

usury

larceny

&

popskull run

vii.

Russian winter wheat
Crude oil thick and sweet

Money made and mansions built
(Not without a smidge of guilt)

But first framed houses from the North,
Dropped off the cars in numbered parts,
Assembled on the site from dawn to dark.

Brick bungalows in time, and Craftsman homes,
Aligned along a strict Platonic grid
That let you know just where you were,
From whence you came, not where you'd get.

viii.

Once,

in one
just when
what they
were doing
was done . . .

a rogue gust out of Kansas
(or some affronted ghost)
slammed a door they knew they'd latched
BLAM! against the kitchen wall.

They sprang apart with banging hearts.

ix.

The dark has come.

Another stubborn day is done.

Alexandrines

Was Brooke a girl who let herself be passed around
Or called the shots? It's hard to tell. There was some talk
Of love-child luck: They'd married, but her mother walked;
A maiden aunt and grandfolks took her up. Doyle'd found
Another bride, a one-time Country balladeer
Who wanted children all her own – no souvenir.

Home was a vast converted boarding-house that must
Have lodged its share of ghosts (those sudden, wintry raps!).
She knew compensatory love, slow rusty taps,
Spare rooms, steep stairs, and grown-up conversations hushed.

A canny child grown wiccan-wise invites notice;
Junior year, she opened like a creamy lotus.

No need here to catalogue the string of lovers:
Quick Jimmy first, then Mark and Kip . . . there were others.

A wood-sprite wild – yet in a fundamental sense
She managed to retain an orphaned innocence.

Cremins

Little left of her at last, once the chemo failed
and the blind curandero's brittle herbs gave out.

Still less of her left,
vaporized in a corrugated pasteboard box.

(Allow at least an hour at 1200 degrees.)

It's said they grind vestigial bits of stubborn bone
and sift the grit into a sturdy vinyl bag
where it awaits – God grant – the vaunted well-wrought urn.

Remembrance is the
amber-egg of
yesterday's
ellipsis,

Enough
leaven to
lift
even a loaf that
never was,

Keeper of
emended
expectations
now (at last)
entered into.

The Hidden Eye

Surveillance tapes in tandem caught it all
(or almost all): Code punched, bar raised,
Leisurely left turns up successive ramps

Onto the roof. He parks and locks the truck,
then calmly hoists himself atop
A narrow cinder-block restraining wall.

Arms now half-lifted like some puzzled bird,
he steps back twice and vanishes . . .
No hidden lens to catch the long fast fall.

This poem is more true than verse should be,
a jerky take on mute reality:
Self-murder spins a network of survivors,
who view the act as self-accused connivers.

Their Last Pagan Easter

Late snow across the southern plains
Laid waste their Spring Break westering.
Retreating east, they chose toward dark
A needful knotty-pine motel
Along State Line in Arkansas.

Back in the day, one knew the drill:
She gloved her hands to hide the ring
That wasn't there; he gave false names.
Then they, the sole guests registered,
Were honored with a gift to mark
That date they'd managed to suppress.

Their hostess – old, half-blind, blue-eyed,
Godmotherly – handed the girl
A clutch of lilies, white and gold,
Salvaged from Easter services
At Zion Freewill Baptist Church.

Her son, past middle-age, flesh slack
On heavy frame, stood counter-side;
His slanted gaze was cold – and wise.
He pulled the key to Cabin 8,
Which proved a musty, umbrous space.

They'd thought to spend that night like they'd
Spent Lent, in carnal Mardi Gras,
But something came between them in
That narrow bed. They rushed to leave
Before first light – turned south toward home –
Quite unaware they traveled now
On two diverging paths to Rome.

A Cautionary Tale

Our Grandma Delie's eyes grew wide and weird
When she passed on that germ of Ozark lore
Gleaned from her own granddaddy's sister Sue.

*To wit: A catamount back in the slough
will sometimes scream so seeming nigh you'd think
it was a woman set upon by thieves –
or worse. But stop your ears; bar the shutters.*

*There was a man name Gentry Goode, and good
he was – no better man you'd ever seen –
who heard that racket late one night, so he
lit out for them black woods like house afire.*

*He took his gun, but that big dog of his,
it stayed behind, which should have tipped him off
that something queer was up, and likely would
if making haste to halt the meanness weren't
the only thing he had in mind right then.*

*That painter must have hit him from up high.
She snapped his back just like a pully-bone.*

*He lasted for a spell, a day or two,
then give it up. His wife and them three gals,
they tried to make a go at first: fox got
the hens – the cow went dry – that long drought killed
the corn. She had blood kin in Marr right pleased
to lend a hand, but bitterness set in.*

*Miz Goode claimed Gentry was too good by half,
too quick to help some woman in the dark.
She cussed him hard for his big tender heart.*

Grandma looked up at us: “You all take care
To learn what voices call you out at night. You hear?”

Similitudes

i.

As when an old road –
pine-lined and winter-bit –
narrows to a nub
that opens on an emptied field
stripped of hay, fog sliding in . . .

ii.

Like that gravid moment when
the concertmaster's obligatory applause
drops off
and a naked oboe
floats a single perfect A
across the acoustèd hall
so hurried final tuning can begin . . .

iii.

Not unlike the first warm day
in a chilly semester
when the drab girl on the fourth row

abandons her turtleneck
for a tank-top,
and thick, tri-colored tattoos
slither down from shoulders to wrist,
ready to swallow her now-cadaverous hands . . .

iv.

Rather like the yearning
of a boy abed, manhood aborning,
who thinks of the plump girl
asleep in the house at the corner,
brown-haired and bursting,
bitter-mouthed,
and discovers something surprising about himself . . .

v.

Like those forlorn carts
in outlying Kroger lots
left by feckless folk who shan't be bothered
to return them to the near rack
that gravity and wind at times turn to missiles
aimed at unoffending SUVs . . .

vi.

Resembling that fat mole

to the left of Grandma's nose

with wiry hairs, thick and black,

that made them think she just might be a witch

and so effaced the total trust the young ones should have felt,

but now would not . . .

vii.

Like the bespangled (but bent) old-lady

who misjudged the high step

and cracked her hip from tip to stern

then moaned aloud

to the lilting waltz . . .

viii.

Quite like the view

from the hospice window

where she watched the snow pour

across the Great Divide

turning night to dim day

beneath the new streetlamps . . .

ix.

Akin to the thrill

on election night in radio days,
when all seemed to depend
on the Far West
and how California came in –
with Illinois still up for grabs . . .

x.

As when the starved lizard,

grown dark-green against the ivied-wall,
spots a spider in distress
and leaps to catch her whole
between his jaws,
unmindful of the jay who's seen it all
and intervenes,
taking both in tandem . . .

xi.

Terrible as that morning when,

taking your little dog
on his early pug-waddle,
out of nowhere a tan pit-bull

(tail gone and ears close-cropped)

stood suddenly above him,

and all the world stopped –

until your rough neighbor

broke the tableaux,

whistled back his beast,

laughing at you and yours . . .

xii.

As in the drought

that turned the Brazos

to a muddy ditch

and drove coyotes into town

to poach on puppies unattended,

while shameless hawks

patrolled the parks –

glared at passersby

from atop

shattered pigeons . . .

Bonny Jean

I never liked being photographed. I just happened
to be good at it. – Jean Shrimpton

These pics drew dollars, pounds, and yen,
Hawked perfume, haute couture, shampoo
(Which in itself falls short of sin) –
The Face they pimped . . . that was not *you*.

In one, an English Oval cocked
Aside your head, your tousled hair
A fetching mess, those wide eyes locked
Onto the lens return our stare.

Yen breeds its yang, as dark craves light:
Two pages on, you're posed in prayer,
In prim kerchief, hands gloved in white –
A chastened Carnaby Saint Clare.

Recto: You sport a boy's billed cap;
Verso: You've donned a fur-trimmed wrap.

Here you're draped on a gelding's back;
There you consult a pearled compact.

Dark hair piled in serpentine braids
Will elsewhere drift on balmy trades
Or fill a broad-brimmed summer hat –
You were not there in all of that.

The gorgon glares, and sirens sing
A tune that renders persons things,
Yet one more reason why the wise
Commend the custody of eyes:
*Shun each commodified desire
That warms itself with borrowed fire.*

Dear Jean: I'm glad you chucked it all
For cloistered peace in wild Cornwall.

History on the Quad

Tattooed and texting,

the future hurtles at you
on a scarred skateboard.

What did Hegel say?

*Perish in the collision
or contrive to leap aboard!*

Instead, you stand aside

&

go about your former business.

Secession is a kind of witness.

Summer Incident: 1967

One July, stringing pipe in sandy loam
Across a Major County ranch, the crew
Kept notice of the Hereford bull who dogged
Their lagging trek along the right-of-way.

Such caution sometimes breeds a carelessness.

In any case, a joint of sixteen-inch
Swung wide and bobbed on the lowering boom,
Then slapped upside Old Homer's thin hardhat
Not once, but twice. Before he fell he did
A brief St. Vitus dance. The Red Cross kit
Was hardly meant for this, but Cleo Springs
Lay nine miles to the east, so Homer lived.

He lived, but never was again himself:

No longer Dread Dean of Stern Tool-Pushers,
Quick to run off college boys and slackers,
Who knew just when to curse or to conjole –
A legend in his day and to his kind,
Who'd always brought the hard jobs in on time.

California Dreaming

i.

Tawny girls, tired surf:
The sun drowns at Torrey Pines –
Sealight rusted gold.

ii.

The stern Pacific's buckling wall, last seen
As they walked that hill in Del Mar,
Gave nightmare a new tint – aquamarine.

Comment: Somewhere (I think it was in the liner notes to a Glenn Gould recording), I read that Beethoven's bagatelles were constructed out of "chips from the composer's workbench." The observation seems apt. What didn't make it into a sonata or quartet might, with sufficient dressing up (or down), be turned into a miniature that could stand nicely – if modestly – on its own. I suspect many if not most poets do much the same thing – do a bit of detailed work fitting together fragments that never found their place into a sonnet or ballade. My little diptych "California Dreaming" is one venture along those lines. I like to think there is an implicit hinge that links the two metrically dissimilar tercets (one a lowly haiku, the other consisting of 10-8-10 irregular syllables and rhyming *aba*). In borrowing my title from the Mamas and Papas, I was trying to suggest at least a tenuous connection of the sort, and certainly both sections do touch on atmospherics and color. In any case, the degree to which these six fugitive lines qualify as a poem remains the reader's call.

WBC

Our Little Uncle

Woodrow Griggs
15 Oct 1916 - 8 July 1917
-- marker in Hite Cemetery, Randolph Co., Arkansas

An early miscarriage, then two stillbirths --
But this one lived, a tussling boy quick at
The teat. They called him for the President
(A Democrat this time, who knew the South).
Precocious was a word they never used,
But judged him *quicker than a scalded cat*,
For he was that and some. He strained to talk
Before he turned to crawl -- took all things in.
Pleased with himself (and them), he'd possum-grin
And tap his fists in telegraphic glee --
Until first summer's fever came, broke off
All games for good, consigning him within
An oval frame above his parents' bed.
There we, small nephews, nieces, older than
He grew to be, slipped in to puzzle at
Our mothers' brother's lacey cap and gown.

Modern Age (Winter 2021)

Unnatural History

"Are we so soon forgot when we are gone"?
-- Joseph Jefferson's "Rip Van Winkle"

We're not unlike some Serengeti herd:
Young lions cull a wildebeest,
and unperturbed the herd moves on.

The same it seems pertains to Academe.

Long gone that gallery of grins
-- our old department heads --
that once took up a wall,
and astral names pale deans once conjured with
now go quite unrecalled.

New comets flare then fade,
and unperturbed the herd moves on.

Compensation

Adopt a feral cat and you'll get gifts,
For every mouse, three wrens, a robin's wing.
Outback the house, late birds decline to sing --
The tenor of the leaves grows low and drifts
Into a monody. Set out no seed.
To still what moves fulfills a feline need.

Adapt to modish hermeneutic ploys,
Diminish Blake, Shakespeare -- and Bellow too:
Young editors are like to welcome you.
The dean is pleased. New sauce tastes rich, but cloys
When pangs and thoughts of pending final things
Catch you up short. The feral future springs.

Old Emerson says all things even out.
That seems the case with cats who wield the clout.

Theme in Want of Variations

Post oaks in winter strive toward lowered skies.
Leaf-shorn at last, their witchy branchlings strain
To reach and rend the tarp that darks the day.
Beyond that boney grasp, the gray remains.

Priest to Penitent

This scarcely counts for anything at all --
Late shamed chagrin for old *faux pas*.
Unspoken acts still moist with unregret?
Now see things straight! We're not there yet.