

Darklight

Also by Toby Olson:

Poetry

Human Nature
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We Are the Fire
Sitting in Gusevik
Still / Quiet
Two Standards
Birdsongs
The Florence Poems
Aesthetics
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Three & One
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Fiction

The Bitter Half
The Blond Box
Write Letter to Billy
At Sea
Reading
The Pool
Dorit in Lesbos
Utah
The Woman Who Escaped from Shame
Seaview
The Life of Jesus

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Shearsman Books
Exeter

First published in the United Kingdom in 2007 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

www.shearsman.com

ISBN-13 978-1-905700-23-3

ISBN-10 1-905700-23-7

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Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have appeared in the following magazines: *Colorado Review*, *Conjunctions*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Golden Handcuffs*, *Mulberry Anthology* and *New American Writing*. The fourteen poems of 'My Little Plane' were originally composed to accompany a series of aerial photographs made by the artist Diane Burko. In that context, the poems were printed below the title 'The Shadow Under the Shadow.' 'Reversal of Fortunes' was published in *The PIP Gertrude Stein Awards For Innovative Poetry in English 2005-2006* (ed. Douglas Messerli, Green Integer, Los Angeles / Copenhagen, 2007).



The publisher gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from
Arts Council England.

for Miriam

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Darklight

Darklight above the doorway
in both X-ray and photography . . .

but not the deep significance this time
or the surface

which vibrates in the eternal present.
It's the way of the world seen

and the one apprehended, blue moon
in a haze of yellow

[she was older than she was in reality,
the fire in the hearth had died away]

though on some days
there's a certain clarity of light.

I fear this kind of thing increases
as time goes by,

though it's not exactly like that,
maybe sad sack's meanderings, half blind.

And I think this means the end is coming
before too long. If it is possible

I will miss you. In the meantime
perhaps this undeveloped deep

in dated chemical's reaction
can rise to the surface

and also be interesting,
as delicate and sentimental.

I could ride forth on a pale horse
called Dark Lantern

whose light can be blocked off
as by a sliding panel.

Hesitation Waltz

Returned again to find that spot
 where I had rested. It was gone
or changed utterly, so that I could not sit
as pivot for consideration
 nor find comfort in standing
above the spot.

All this had been mine: window, table
and chair, that illusion
 of a virgin's intensity in seeing
each beloved distinctly,
the objective world.

A tube driven into a congested throat,
 the withdrawal of a cannula
for breathing, that moment,
then a jay's cry
 called song
which is made light of in poetry,
but is lighter than that.

Here's that rainy day,
 its first word, "maybe,"
held in Bill Evans' fingers for exhaustion
of what might have been,
or a big band rendering
of *Sentimental Journey*,
a medley,
blame it on my youth, so
sweet and lovely.

Once came to a place heady
with possibilities of tempo,
was crazy for intricate figures

in the cowboy squares.

That was dancing, fleetingly,
like the memory
of freestyle later,
an Arizona stumblebum.
What is revealed, but such hesitations
as we go down?

Yet it's still early May, clatter
of wet chickadees insistent
pin points of black-cap on the pine's needles
(be then
joyful?),
dissonant melodies over block chords,
a red sail in the damp distance,
considerations of tables and chairs.
I can't get started.

Rivers of memory, sea of memory, rainy ripples
on a golden pond, notoriously placid
and temporary, before the arrival
of the actors
and strife.
It's come from the desert of my boyhood
in some fashion. That boat.

These are the pines grown into a screen
at the pond's brink.

This is automatic writing.
The trees cry out
as the axe enters the forest,
"Look at the handle,
he's one of us!"
I could have discovered

that note thrown on the kitchen table,
but for the boy
 wobbly now at the gunnels
near the axe handle tiller;
he's fighting
the red sail and adolescence.
 "I'm leaving": her words
fluttering to linoleum in a household breeze.
I can see them,
in the mind's eye, through the window.

Once came in dreaming to the pond's brink.
 Once saw a girl's undergarments
in her spinning in a cowboy square.

 I was hesitant: *blame it on my youth.*
The pond was placid
in a river cast down by the moon.
 I could see the red sail, that bloody rag
of adolescence.

Watching a girl's undergarments in the mind's eye,
 no more than a stable speck in this imagination.
Yet it's still early May.
Dissonant candles
 shake like awkward dancers
in the cowboy squares,
 my sentimental journey.
I should light them at the tips
as we go down
into a moon river at this window.

Repeated figures of the dance, actual
 in the memory: cowboys looping
near a flash of undergarments

below crinoline,
notes spilling
to a wash of sawdust near a household table,
“I’m leaving,”
gone into the death that is memory
 of a boy’s boat under red sail
at the pond’s iris, her face
 then rising like the moon itself
through seaweed.

This is the danger zone of the virgin.
This is automatic writing.

 These are the spot’s projections
on the pond’s moonglow surface,
 a carousel of shadowy faces,
my dream girls, under glass.

Yet in this rain, old interlude, other
seeds germinate invisibly
 in that sodden garden, awaiting
the new chicken-wire fence
and rabbits, some wholesomeness
of hard work
 beyond thoughts of dream girls
as women,
 or a few popular tunes: *slowpoke*,
heart of my heart, *red roses*
for a blue lady,
 hesitant *deep purple*
in a cowboy waltz tempo.

The cardinals have arrived,
 their insouciant arrogance tentative
in first flowers wavering

on delicate green stalks, daffodils
heavy in a freight of rain, goldfinch,
red red robin,
a mix of wild bird seed in the rickety feeders,
that geometric pattern
of quick chickadees lifting
some invisible net of crinoline,
gold spun, and the weaving traces
of my neighbor's
black cat through hay.

It's early May too in that distant desert:
what buds, what boy? Each memory
only a fake of hesitant music,
be it squares
or the bright blindness of *moonglow*.
This is automatic writing,
"as the axe enters the forest."
Try to forget it, in this
burgeoning.

But we were dancing, or she was
spinning alone on her own spot, elsewhere
and ecstatic,
within that isolate figure,
one of many,
characteristic of a cowboy square,
unaware of those spectator figures,
to the far corners of the hall
and the one rocking us gently,
that childish wrangler and his allemande girl,
the hum of the world turning
under the sawing fiddles and guitars.

We fumbled around in our bodies,
got crazy over supposed slights
and adulteries.

We went to the movies
for those common agonies,
traded a few awkward kisses
in a dark alcove in Tucson
that time we drove there for a school concert
in your mother's car.
Even then,
given such virginal passions,
this was not exactly clear.

I remember the ice-cream cones,
at Castle Rock below Copper Man.
It was early spring
and sundown:
your eyes, your face!
We licked our chops,
at the taste. *That* was sweet.

There was even a boat with a red sail,
a boy in shadow at the tiller
on a pond in desert oasis,
Saint David,
not exactly golden
but still water
fed from a deep wellspring, no pines,
but willows at the brink.

"I'm leaving," going off to Texas
for another teen life.
The tiller wobbles

under his hand in a quick breeze.
Enter the axe.

I'm through with love
(for a little while
at least).

All this is part
of the disposition of the figures in the dance,
 though they are not actors,
so long as acts of memory
 are discounted,
as well as an old man's garrulous
enthusiasms
in searching elsewhere for his spot.

Beyond the window now,
in fog and rain,
the sun sets this evening like clockwork,
a common perception
recently.

And if the world doesn't hum
in its turning, I seem to
and imagine
that pine, skeletal
 in slow advancing,
as it fades back into shadow
and the axe flashes
 at the pond's brink. Here it comes.
It is one of us.

Swiss Miss

Lingers now in peace upon the swollen tide,
ruby-throat fallen from sky in the last few hours.
This information: unblemished, on her good side,
not sleeping, and Swiss birds won't eat thistle.

After the circus and before investigation,
the fliers linger on imagination, the Bohemian
Waxwing juggler, those quick Chickadee tumblers.
The Swiss detective wears wingtips.

Lisalot, I miss you, I didn't mean to release you.
Flights of fancy and flocking in the banquet hall,
while the river, beyond filmy curtains and balcony,
runs to the lake, carrying her body as if sleeping.

Ladies and gentlemen, if you will please quit chattering,
if you will just try hard to remember, the details,
anything in the recent past. It shouldn't be difficult.
Time was I loved you, dear Lisalot, I never dropped you.

Check everyone's wrists, the nature of their shoes and
identification. Is there residual powder in anyone's palms?
Check times of arrival, those missing, each performer.
Remember, Swiss birds won't eat thistle.

Was it the proud German, Finch? That week in Luzern?
You flew as a hummingbird from the bar then, in Bern.
And check also the Limmat River, send in the clowns.
Embraceable you, sweet ruby-throat, I've washed my hands.

Feathered boas and short tights in the banquet hall,
Madam Vireo, the contortionist, and her dwarf entourage.
Check for splinters, look most carefully under the nails.
Lisalot: tossed high up in the contest in St. Gallen.

We were the rage of the competition, the odd birds
who flew out in our nature and faked danger theatrically
after those months of practice, home in Furna. I never
looked at you closely, gripping your ankles, in that way.

Then the German, Finch. Or was it that Harlequin, Jaeger?
Take but a moment to consider, Swiss birds won't eat thistle,
then take each one into a room, backstage, and ask questions.
Lisalot, my darling partner, little Swiss Miss, I warned you.

[General atmosphere: the river, ominous mist over the lake,
the Swiss detective, maybe elaborate cages hung in the hall.
He could be innocent, an accident. She could be a strumpet.
His hands, or he stands at the rear of the line murmuring.]

Please stop chattering. Defend your heads against the cages.
Prepare, please, your stage and real names and associations.
Have you been with the circus long? How well did you know
Lisalot? Things like that. What can you tell me about thistle?

Then, in Grindelwald, we were eager. The Eiger rose majestic
above the chalet, your hair silk feathers in my fingers.
Lisalot, you called my nose a beak, humming softly in laughter.
Almost love birds in an alpine cage! What becomes of me now?

A dwarf stands upon the shoulders of the Strong Man, Hawk.
His real name is Meadowlark and it's taking far too long.
He opens a few cages. Pandemonium! The fledglings can't
fly well, and feathers and death squawks flood the Hall.

[I too have been crazy in jealousy. Our cat, Flicker,
and the foreign sock he discovered under our bed.
I wanted to kill you, quite seriously, or myself then.
You, strumpet; I the virtuous dove, already in mourning.]

Attention, please. Attention! Can you please settle down?
Lunch is on the way. We'll be serving thistle today . . .
That's right, it's a joke. It's seed salad, and flesh
for those inclined. Thank you for your attention anyway.

Lisalot, Finch or Jaeger, it doesn't matter; even exotic
Bachman, warbling MC, whose song might have seduced you.
Just as I was beginning to touch you, take you under my wing.
Better had you avoided hunger, throat swelling with thistle.

Be sure, now, to check the empty cages, secreted places,
keep an eye on the ground feeders, as well as flycatchers.
Close all the windows. The ones under suspicion might
seem without guile. Clearly, this was a crime of passion.

Thistle: in his pockets, in his cuffs, in his hair; also
there is thistle in the matting over muscle on his arms.
I smell thistle! It's our detective, perky as a sparrow.
Thistle's stuck in ducts, visible at the corners of his eyes.

[I too have wept around thorns, stuck in rageful weeping.
Somehow love is indecent, if ethical considerations apply.
Yet the moves of your glorious legs. I can't describe them,
but in metaphor: legs of a hawk hanging down at landing.]

Okay, I killed you, thistle in the muesli. I'm sorry.
The last thing I wanted to do, etcetera. It was a mistake,
but I am not innocent. Lisalot, even if a dozen young men
had slept with you, even then I would still love you.

From the dead: Fuck you! I was no willing object of such
sentimental crap. I had my own agenda, and you killed me.
Christ, is it gentle here on the waves, almost exquisite,
to sleep deep on my side upon water, no man beside me.

Please behave yourselves. Miss Pelican, stop with the soaring.
The line grows shorter, and I grow increasingly satisfied.
Miss Pelican! It's a long way yet to Tipperary, but one bird
ate thistle, and thistle hangs around. Miss Swan, that's enough!

Lisalot! Your body turning cartwheels in the air, blah, blah,
your orchestrated clothing, tights forcing men into despair.
Your hair: innocent as chick-down or a diaper, blah, blah.
What can I say now? I still love you. I offer the proof.

[Your orchestrated clothing to say, I am here, look at me.
Perhaps love of necessity contains jealousy. I told you to go,
go, get out of here, only because you slept with another.
This is not love, but hypocrisy. Let me die in your arms.]

Difficulties among flycatchers, high wire and trapeze.
Count Scissortail comes to blows with a certain Phoebe,
a ruckus about relatives and partners. Madam Vireo is miffed,
sends out her dwarfs. The detective calls once again for order.

Quick as water up from the well in Furna, my sister,
news of incest on the high wire throughout the village.
It never happened. Check the quieter Towhees, their feathers.
Lisalot, each gesture, each flight, each time I caught you.

[Atmosphere: the hall a complete mess, feathers and blood,
empty as this apartment, the fled nest, no Lisalot, no you.
Thistle weighs him down, a loadstone, as much as absence
pricks like needles in our pillows, my clothing, this chair.]

You're next, last in line. Raise your arms. Wait! Where
are you going? Come back! Check the curtains, the balcony!
[Beware of extremity, hopeless desperation, and suicide.]
Then check the river for her brother, Pigeon, no kingfisher.