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On Art and Writing

A Flock of Words

How fleeting is the flight of birds
Compared to mine, on made-up words!
Vast verbal ventures fly me high
Above their wings—above their sky—
Above the reach of angels' thought,
So lofty are the words I've got.
Proliferation I can send
Beyond the universe's end,
Where birds and angels, so it seems,
Fly only on the wings of dreams,
And I, the master of the words,
Master the dreams, the angels, birds,
The flimsy few whose flight intends
To float to those far-reaching ends
Where language takes me—but I know
Linguistic lands where they can't go,
Because they lack these fragrant words,
Unknown to angels, dreams, and birds,
And all whose wings are not enough
To keep up with such heady stuff.
Wafting aloft, flaring with fun,
I leap the moon, the stars, the sun,
The past, the present, times not yet,
The known and unknown, and I get
No weariness from flying here
Above the mental atmosphere,
But elevated past all birds,
I'm wild with joy on wings of words!

Scriptorium

Worlds of iridescent gleam
all spring up glinting at the call
insouciant pens make, or they seem
to do: transform a drafty hall

into an arras-covered way
transecting palace corridors—
or granite boulders, flecked with grey,
to gravestones marking mythic wars'
highest heroics, men of myth;
or remnants of some long-forgot
mysterious monster's kin and kith,
frozen in time upon the spot;
One peep at some dark road reveals
where mullioned windows lend a flash-
quick view of Heaven; one more steals
a different twitch of the eyelash—
a glimpse of Hell—its portals there
right in the same dark road just viewed
as commonplace by those who wear
mere men's eyes to the interlude.
The glasses worn, instead, by scribes
can coalesce the simplest things
into the marvels of their tribes,
into the wealth of queens and kings,
into kaleidoscopic joys,
playgrounds of sound and touch and hope,
can turn mere scribblings and noise
into a length of golden rope
binding together known, unknown
and things not yet imagined still,
telling those tales their pens have grown
out of pure nothingness and nil
to shape breathtaking, worthy lands
and characters of dash, to cleanse
the mundane world with authors' hands,
the swordlike flourish of those pens.

Bookended

Sitting with my back to the window, I can see miles and miles away
because I'm in the middle of a well-thumbed copy of an old friend book
and visiting with all the long lost friends between the pages there...

Sitting with my back to the window, I can tell what's happening on
the other end of time because the chapters I'm revisiting open doors between
this moment and each other one set on that timeline stretching from the first
of times until the very last dot of the infinite...

Writing and Silence

My lines look too thin.

Words
shrink:
thought withers away
and leaves
only its spidery
crawling track, taking
sense away with it.

In this
pale wilderness, none
of my cherished dreams
holds water anymore; I
have reached that dry
and soulless place
where none
should follow, and now
even my feeblest breath
blows away
the last crumbs of

my wizened
words.

A Push in the Beezer
(For S.J. Perelman)

Surely one with that
basset hound face must
Grieve perpetually,
if not professionally,
or simply *be* aggrieved—
And the fierce bristle
of that moustache
guarantees
he'll brook no fools
Or even settle for
a slouch— yet there is
some small telltale spark of
Light glinting in
the corner of what should
have been a stern
or tragic eye—
His secret was out

the moment he put
pen to sheet and splashed
His inky laugh
with such ridiculously
grand verbal contortionism,
The day he first
grabbed some bizarrely
funny adjective
by its bulbous nose
And forced it
to give forth this strange
exuberant hybrid blend
Of genius and hilarity

**Noise in the Music,
Music in the Noise**

Facing a low screen, sitting
At a study shelf (not a
Table, really, but wide enough
Perhaps for a score), I hear
Little that is song, and little more
That is about song—art, even—

I hear lunch deconstructed
(Or microwaved); I hear
Who was drunk on whose birthday
And why we are all afraid
Of the big exam soon to be given
By the toughest prof, and then,
In a moment where the noise
Has muffled and lulled—

Just a little, mind—there is
A snippet sung,
Two measures at most, and
Answered by a
Small, unrelated phrase
Across the room—

In that moment, I realize
That all the buzz and muttering,
The laughs and coughs and
Softly spoken secret kindnesses
And the insecure cattiness and the

Menu for tomorrow's lunch,
And not least of all, the notes
On notes for rehearsal in
The afternoon, it is all
Music, in the end.

Studio 126

I was able to sit in absent thought
As silent and introverted as
A contented bat,
As night-stricken, too

For all the notice that
The others took of me:
All on three sides
And sailing through the air,

The burr
Of the electric
Space heater facing toward
The model's throne

The soft repetitive hiss and hush
Of graphite on fine
Toothy paper,
Of studious erasure

Meant, undoubtedly, as a cure
For something
(Or something else)

Those wing-rustle flips
Of paper pages
In the larger sketchbooks bound
For better things, and the tip,
The rattle and scrape,

Once in a quiet while,
Of stools or easels
Knocking and rocking gently
As the hands moved
Forth and back, forth
And back.

I Took Four Steps

1

Down the staircase from the street
Where the studio is hid
Keeping, as it always did,
Its secret vigil, brush and sheet
And pencils, boxes, cases, paints,
The model's throne, vacant and cold

2

Just now, when in the hoary old
Good days before the cellar's taints
Had chased out inspiration, will,
Customers, friends, all thought of light,
And put the artist's dreams to flight
Up toward an attic windowsill

3

So at the last I could not bear it
Anymore but took four steps,
And on, until I reached the garret,
Where tradition says to go
If Art would flee and I must fly,

4

Following her near the sky,
To leave my trials far below...
The twist, now that I've come to this
Great height and traded to improve
My artful fate with that bold move:
It is the cellar that I miss.

Work Patterns

As I am stroking the paint into place, I wonder
at the way the brush sometimes
defies me, the paint sometimes has a
mind of its own, the way
that on occasion I work as though
there is not need for worry or even
for thought, and find
at the end of some hazy hours that passed
almost as if I were drunk there is
a work of art worth claiming as
my child. Once in a while, the work
comes easily, seems natural, falls
into sweet rhythms and patterns so right
that to Labor at it is almost redundant; almost

the work this way might say that I
was the redundant one.
Most rarely, there are times
like tonight when as I
ply the paint and move it into place,
I grow dizzy,
and I am unsure
of whether the dizziness is cause
by chemical fumes or eye fatigue or leaning
too far over the canvases for too long, or is
the stealthy approach of some
trance-like state in which
I will be fortunate to find
that once again I have made a
surprising work of art and don't know
where the time has gone while I was
absent from myself.

Color Theory Revised

The color of kumquats once seemed to me
an impossible thing for nature to invent
and therefore a color to be
disdained by sophisticates who knew
that only Mother Nature could prove
a color worthy. Then I learned two things:
One, kumquats.
Two,
only a fool believes herself
a real sophisticate.

Glass Passages

Strange enough that someone saw at hand,
amid a million million grains of sand,
the only water truly born of fire—
that clarity, deep brilliant light and flow,
refractory and sharp and sweet, desire
that stops in time complete and whole, as though
to freeze all thought and memory and time—
and then took flame to capture its sublime
pure rectitude and stillness; who could know
the alchemy that could and would be wrought
by taming elements to strengthen, stain
and shape anew the crystal, blazing hot
sand silicates and yet somehow retain

such potency, such power that a strand
of history would through it then be drawn
to tell the stories, made so much more grand
in glass by tying evening back to dawn,
and in the light transmitted through that glass,
commemorate the ages as they pass.

How It Works

In Haiku,
Reality takes
Sudden swerves

Still Life in Careful Tones

(To Joseph Ablow)

Another kind of stillness is that
Of constancy
Of staying the course
Of quiet dedication to
Things that seldom
Seem to change
Yet on reflection over
An age of nearly
Geologically profound slowness
And dimly-lit glacier melt
Is constantly in motion
Changing meanings
Changing one's perceptions
Changing the universe atom by atom
Yet still is life
In a still life.

A Delicate Incandescence

A child has taken the warmth of the sun
Transformed it into the bloom of pretty skin
Tender and fraught with hopeful meaning
Lending strength an infant cannot own
And fire a youth cannot contain or even
Quite conceive and so we are compelled that see
Such strange gold beauty in a little one,
To draw close in and see if there is sun indeed
Captive in that little frame and if the urgent star
Will sear or only feed its living radiance to
Those drawn so near

Is it the child that makes us tremble so, or is
The mystery of sun the thing, or will we merely fall
Helpless at the end without regard and having
Never solved that one or cared
If any answer could prevail?
The key is surely hid in brilliance borrowed by
This youthful thief who steals
Our will, compelling us,
And takes our loves as well

Desiderio 1455

We may call him beguiling
without ugliness,
as his Italian cousins have
proclaimed him thus
'Si dolce bello'—
not for the delicate
soft-handed and ideal,
the state
of being lovely and pure without
regress; we speak
of *'il bambino delicato,'*
he, our love
and preservation,
for that kindness which
is far too kind to play us false,
that love
which (sacred or profane)
is yet so deep that it makes
the very stone to breathe
and marble lips
to flush
with endless kissing.

Angels Descending

A very delicate young lady who
was in the house would pose for him. She sat
in worn-out gentility, her thin back framed
by clinically glaring light from windows overlooking
streets scoured naked by war.

M. Degas with his failing eyes needed both
the harsh light
and the severity of her dark dress against it,

to know that she was there at all, that,
and her simple dependable faithfulness
in spite of everything.

She did have her dark dress on,
for it was the only one she had by then,
and waited mutely for the artist to come in;
everyone was silent in those days, except for
growling empty stomachs, anyway. She sat
already posed. When he came in,
he brought her royal pay: a piece of
horsemeat. She, dressed in her worn black
gown, a flattened silhouette in the window light
and silent in austere and weary need,
sat in that pose for him, and he, since he was
poor and hungry too, paid little mind
that she was eating the meat
quickly, out of her bare hands,
though trying not to move
too much, or indiscreetly,
eating it raw.

Galilee Chapel

(On Reflection)

The first thing I thought
On looking in
Was: Piranesi—

All those catastrophic, claustrophobic
Colonnades,
Those arches veering into
Shadowy space,
The piers and vaults and stairways
Angling away at nonsense grades—

This, though, is tempered with
Gold and light—
What is the message
Held therein?

Galilee, my Galilee—
There's a song in there which, oddly,
Echoes the origins
And reaches into

The gilded vaults
And ricochets to mar
The Piranesian gloom—

Furthermore, when I turn around
And look at it from the other side,
Much as the curves resist
And try to twist away
(Wrestling as
Reluctantly as the
Inanimate can do), I see
Relenting, see
The pillars march in toward me
Rather than away from me—

Now, in answer to
My Galilee,
In warmer gilded tones comes back—

And Thou, O Thou, my own:
My own.

Quiet Companion

In the cooler corners of my crooked little room
There gleams an iridescence that defies the chilly gloom,
The pale enchantment of an eye that never shuts in sleep
Or wavers in its glowing gaze, whose watch is wont to keep
A careful, mystic, present love that guards me from all harm
And teaches me her secrets when I curl beneath her arm
So I can rest in confidence with this companion, whose
Great beauty is to fill my soul, for that she is
my Muse.

How a Small Ill Grew into a Great One

I meditated on short forms
To learn their scansion, iambs, norms;
Yet, failing to descry their souls,
I wrote long poems full of holes.

High Goals & Low Brows

Nickel tickle pickle-puss
Havana banana kazoo
I wanna write dignified verses, but hey—
What's a poor rhymers to do?

The best and the juiciest gems among words
Are foolish and funny and fat and absurd,
So I'm stuck in the mode of ridiculous bunk.
So much for my dignity: let me write junk!

Dangerous Reflections

If I sit and write my daily poems
About the poems I sit and write,
Will I end up spiraling into tomes
Of my own invention one dark night,
Sucked into the shallow vortex wrought
By my own obsessive, concentric thought?

Round about the Written Word

My prose is, I concede, sometimes satirical,
And my poems just occasionally lyrical;
Both are, admittedly, often so circular, you see,
Within their reason, as to be quite nearly spherical.

For Your Enlightenment, Look Elsewhere

Reading this brings you no merit
Beyond that should you compare it
To the IQ of a ferret
Makes you seem passably wise,
But no wit and erudition
Will be gained from the transmission
Of what's found in this edition
Whether in poetic guise
Or as textual, pictorial,
Silly doggerel, memorial,
Straight-up fact or allegory—
All are just the moment's note
On things that I find bemusing,
So let us require excusing,
Just read what you find amusing,
And enjoy the stuff I wrote!

Mission Soon Accomplished

If I should seem suspicious or you think me too reserved
To let my hair down and relax; if I make you unnerved,
Don't get all nervous and afraid—don't fall apart and cry—
It's not your fault that I'm this way: I'm not a super-spy.
There's nothing wrong or worrisome that you should fear from me;

No problem, nor is there a thing that's not as it should be—
Unless, of course, you would include on such a list of crimes
That I lie here in wait for you, reciting silly rhymes.
My mission, I confess to you, is simply to drive mad
Each person passing near enough to hear, however bad,
Each silly and ridiculous and impish bit of verse
I can dream up and spout at you; they go from bad to worse.
The only point in all of it, and you can rest assured,
Is that my secret will get out: I'm totally absurd.

Zero in, Zero out: I'm Done Thinking, Now

Vast emptiness and silence and that sucking black-hole sound,
Sheer nihilistic nothingness and open space abound,
But nothing has prepared me yet to deal with absent thought
So far as getting something Meaningful from it; I've not.
So, Nothing, nothing, nothing: that's all I have to say.
If you want more, you'll have to come back on another day.
I've spent my great invention quite completely and prefer
To take a break, relax, sit back, and hope you will concur.

The Long and the Short of It

How quickly pass the hours and days
and weeks and months and years,
And yet, how slowly pass our worries,
paranoiac fears;
This is the great conundrum that
presents in mortal time,
And quite enough of food for thought
in one quick, measly rhyme.

The Search Continues

Parsing paragraphs to find
The author's complete state of mind
Is no more useful than to ask
A Word how it performs its task,
If we assume we've read aright
What's only there in black and white.

Not to Worry, There's More in the Bank

Do not despair that I have set low price
Upon my intellect and all its blooms,
Its wild embellishments, creative rooms
Filled full with every possible device
Invention and intelligence can build—

My brilliance shedding dazzling insights far
As light can travel from the largest star—
My memory mansion's rooms are this far filled,
And yet I charge a pittance, just a cent,
For all the riches I have made to date,
And fling them with abandon, though so great,
Along the curb beneath your pediment.
Why would I cast my wealth thus at your feet?
Like pennies, I am also obsolete.

**In Which the Poet is Careful,
Yet Still Meaningless**

Be brief, and seize
The soul of wit,
Be clever and
Concise with it;
Quip quickly, now,
Because you should,
But don't assume that
Proves it's good.

Some Things Words Do

A poem, even well conceived,
Is not quite meant to be believed
So much as felt, as food for thought
Or an aesthetic juggernaut,
But even a less lofty one
Ought to provide a hint of fun

**If You Must be Tedious,
at Least be Mellifluous about It**

In the immortal poet's phrase,
No matter if the topic strays
From strictly epic or romantic
Off to something dull, pedantic
Or illogical, it sounds
Quite lovely in the swooping rounds
And swinging curvature of thought
The poet's pretty words have got,
So if you must tell boring tales,
At least make sure that each regales
Us with its language so we won't
Care if you say great things, or don't.

Lines Upon Lines

(or, Blank Verse)

The predicament of the pencil is,
It knows not how to write:
Without the aid of hand and brain
The page stays pristine white—

And yet, should something happen to
Make markings on the page,
I fear there is no guarantee
That wisdom will engage—

As you, poor Reader, can attest
Who to this transcript sank:
A page, howsoe'er lettered, yet
May stubbornly stay blank.

I was Going to Write the Great American Novel, but I Looked out the Window for a Second and...

My attention has drifted awry once again,
Has shifted from matters of weight among men
To things of no import, exceedingly tiny
And so insignificant—Hey! Look! It's shiny!
I set out to do some magnificent thing,
But what it was? I can't remember. The sting
Of memory loss in old age will be naught
Compared to the blank Inattention has wrought,
Distraction, and phantasmagorical dreams;
To focus and think is more *work* than it seems,
So, though I'd meant well and begun my great task,
My progress dried up like a sot's whiskey flask,
And instead of inventing great stuff, plodding darkly,
I did something else—Hey! Look there! Something sparkly!

Why She Does It

The able cataloguer'll
Produce the worst of doggerel
Because strict order suits her taste,
The free or random seeming waste
To such refined and organized
Beliefs. Add that it's hypnotized
Her not into the orthodox
Approach to meter; no, what shocks
Us is that rather than to hone

The wealth of poems to a bone-
Sharp, artful edge, she deigns to vent
Her verse as tidy excrement.

Aye of the Beholder

Teacher mustn't be too choosy,
Guiding student artists through
Projects in which they redo
The works of masters from Brancusi
to Vermeer or Frankenthaler
Or da Vinci; every student
Has a vision of what's prudent
And what fails, as artist-scholar;
Though they may have witticisms
And have skill and wisdom plenty
As artistic cognoscenti,
Few have true *twin* criticisms—
Expectation must diminish,
Open-mindedness then flourish,
So the student brain can nourish
New great art from start to finish;
This is what the child of three meant
When she said no one had told her
That the Eye of the Beholder
Never met complete agreement:
Genius art is the dominion
Of the Artist, true; and yet, it
Is the critics, I regret it,
Who know Genius is *opinion*.

Found Art

One night when I was overcome with dizziness
Right in the midst of business things and busyness
And felt compelled to clutch as though with strength Herculean
At anything nearby—there was cerulean
Paint lying in a tube right there by the easel
Where Rigoberto had been painting, that old weasel,
And in my other hand I took a sharp crayon,
The color that of those deep ruby rugs that monks pray on,
And though the hues might complement yet clash a bit,
I took the crayon to the tube and smashed through it—
Still thinking darkly of Rigoberto entirely
And how his arty muddling irked me direly,
Yet suddenly I looked upon this, my act cathartic,

And realized that it too seemed a little
Work-of-art-ic.

Alvin the Artful

From the day that he was born, he has been drawn to things
That make him want to skip and jump and stretch his wavy wings;
His destiny is in the works and he's a tool of fate
Designed to entertain, amuse, and if it's not too late,
To educate his artist friend in how to make him change
From skinny little squiggle lines to something rich and strange,
And older dragon, more mature, more layered, nuanced, wild,
And her, the artist, to more skilled—but happy as a child.

Definitive Thoughts

Aberration [*/æb.'bɛər.'reɪ.f(ə)n/ noun*]: the odd ursine meal.

Harbinger [*/'hɑ:r.bɪndʒ-ɜ:r/ noun*]: one who chortles incontinently.

Jasmine Tea [*/'dʒæz.men.,ti:/ noun*]: Thelonious and Tatum play golf.

Protuberance [*/prə.'tu:.bər.əns/ noun*]: in favor of liquid-cleaning one's brass instrument.

Rapscallion [*/ræp.'skæl.i.ən/ noun*]: green onion that induces stream-of-consciousness chanting.

Raisin Bread [*/'reɪ.z.,ɪn 'bred/ noun*]: what's the matter with cousinbrother Raymond.

Saline [*/'seɪ.lɪn/ verb*]: what square-riggers do over the bounding main.

Scalawag [*/'skæl.ɪ.wæg/ noun*]: opera house humorist.

Editorial Lines

The relevant portion of this text is the starting sentence and the next, so I won't add another verse, as it would only be that much worse.