

POEMS FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC

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FOREIGN

Home School

We lived in a fantasy of
brick terraces and reflecting pools
marble fountains and darting fish
beneath lofty cypresses and cedars,
hopping irrigation ditches from
pomegranate to orange grove
rose bush to pansy bed,
squeezing the jaws of snapdragons
just to hear them roar.

Outside the walls a feudal monarchy
catapulted into the twentieth century
by petrodollars, Anglo- American
imperialism and naked ambition,
a bedlam of wildcatters and con men
elbowing past long-sleeved clerics,
big-finned Chevys blaring around
donkey carts, a cacophony of
medieval poetry and early rock and roll.

Inside a life of calm and comfort
coffee tables strewn with Look and Life,
a waffle iron for Sunday breakfast,
a wringer washing machine that
had to be pounded back into shape
after it fell off the top of the truck
when the goat hair rope broke,
couches and chairs, a dining set, dressers
and beds, a cook, and a fully stocked pantry.

A good education was paramount
to first generation college graduates,
so every morning my sister and I would
mount the steep mud brick steps
to a classroom equipped with steel desks
imported from our Iowa school district,
chant "Good morning, Mrs. Ramsay,"
and pledge allegiance to the
48-star flag in the corner.

At first we picked up where we left off
in the workbooks we'd brought from home.
When the correspondence courses arrived,
we followed their spiral-bound guides
through stacks of textbooks
carefully selected to provide
fully accredited American schooling
anywhere in the hinterland
they decide to send us.

Gradually we dropped the pretense
of calling my mother "Mrs. Ramsay,"
and I discovered the joy of working
ahead at my own pace as long as
I took the tests and quizzes in time.
I particularly liked the history course,
tracking the sequence of historic events
on a timeline attached to the chalk tray.

Then one day I added a name that sounded familiar.
Cyrus the Great, king of the Persians.
Didn't we visit his tomb just the other
day on our trip to Persepolis?
Pasargadae, some really ruined ruins, not much
to see there but a stone shed atop a pyramid,
yet now I had a connection between
that spot and an abstract dot on my timeline,
and it all began to fit together.
The walls were about to tumble.

Swiveling in my seat
feet firmly on the classroom floor
my mind could wander aimlessly
out the window into the garden
soaring over the walls, the Koran gate,
the poets' tombs, the barren mountain passes,
the crumbling palaces of ancient kings,
pipelines and platforms, seeing the world
on a magic carpet of opportunity.

Outside the walls I was free to learn from
tracing airline flight paths at a window seat,
adult conversations around a restaurant table,

our Anglican vicar's translations of ancient inscriptions,
our house guest's experiences living among the nomads,
lying on our backs outside the satellite tracking station,
acquiring other languages by making up our own,
reading license plates to master the *real* Arabic numerals.

And inside was still safe at home.
I'd dreamed of tunneling under the wall
to escape the chafing safety and
security of learning from home,
to embrace the unpredictable.
Now I can appreciate the disabling
price that outside forces exact,
leaving one capable only of survival
and nostalgia for the happy days of
being schooled at home.

Old Man of the Mountain

Mysterious walled-in garden on the hillside
reportedly haunted by Sufi mystics
heretic hashish dervishes
twirling far beyond the range
of our satellite tracking station
high upon another hill

Tall cypresses and cedars
just visible behind their garden wall
hinted at ancient beds of roses
and a long reflecting pool
where the faithful recline and contemplate
the orbits of the sun and stars

I dreamt of sneaking out
disguised as a child beggar
tunneling under the wall
guarding our immunity
scaling the wall protecting
them in their infamy

I'd become invisible, an agent of
deception in their order of assassins
stealing through bazaar stalls
concealed in a whiff of incense
whisking past the unsuspecting
dagger under my cloak

Divested of my pretense
I'd be immediately arrested
and sentenced to my parents
once again a foreigner, a
guest of this country heedless
of the traditions I was trampling

Or perhaps I'd have made a friend
inside the garden who'd one day remember
the courage of the young *farangi*
who'd jumped the wall
and done their bidding just
because he was curious

Book

Grandmother used to say
that each of us has
a book inside
compiled of all the
stories heard round the fire
a book of ancestors and
events and the various
forces that play upon us,
forest animals and
spirits living and dead,
battles fought, lost and won,
and explanations of every kind
told over and over
so we never forget.

This book we take
with us wherever we
go, adding to it and
embellishing here and there
building it up inside us
until the spirit moves
and spills it out to
intersect with other books
at the appropriate time
passing on to our children,
our wives and husbands,
our parents, our friends,
appended to their books
for better or for worse.

Some of us were running from
those who say books are bad
that there is but one book
for everyone because
too many books make you
doubt the One, but the
rest of us say the
more books the better
to see the truth within,
the more the stories intertwine
the more they align you with

our uncertain future
because there is no one
better suited than us all.

Fleeing hunger, brutality and disease,
urged on by dreams of steady
income, fast food and phones,
we crowded into this craft
built for half as many
buoyed by hope
ignorant of oblivion
undocumented, passing
between borders on
less than a library card
certain it must be better
couldn't possibly be worse
in the end to have enough
left over to send some home.

So when in desperation the captain
rammed an intercepting cutter
we all ran to one side hoping
to jump to safety on their deck,
our boat listing, tilting, rolling
over and capsizing, spilling
its cargo, the entire 900-volume
library of us, into the
freezing sea, pages flailing,
clinging to their spines,
the women and children's collection
trapped below drowning screams
and wails in silence, clawing the
hull as she descended.

First a few pamphlets
fluttered to the surface,
then a ream of cards
streamed heavenward
from the catalog,
fighting for the surface,
bursting into bubbles, until
the hold erupted in a
giant belch of tiny bindings

and personal belongings
bobbing useless in the waves,
leaving the survivors
with a tale we were
too horrified to share.

Slash and Burn

You may have this section of bush to farm
from here to here, all the way back to that tree
bring machetes and axes and hoes to clear it
stack the slash in piles for burning
when the fire consumes the piles and the smoke clears
have your women till the ashes into the red soil
watch their muscles rippling, buttocks protruding
bent almost as double as the hoes they hold
eager for the seed you spread so close behind them
heaping fertile earth into mounds for yams and cassava
rows for maize and beans to sprout when the rains come.

Keep the soil loose and free of weeds and it will bear
as many harvests as the gods intend you
when it grows old and toothless and the withered
mounds can no longer feed you stop weeding
and let it grow back to the bush it was before
I will mark another section for you to
clear and burn and till and sow and reap until
it too has worn itself out and no longer bears for you
then I will assign new ground for your old wives and
virgin daughters to till and you and your sons to sow behind
as our people have done for generations.

But first I must ask you to gather up containers
any kind you can find and meet the others
at the new road where a tanker carrying diesel
has overturned and spilled its precious cargo
over the tarmac into the ditches on either side
the more fuel we can capture the longer we can run
the generator that provides us with light at night
for radio and television and DVDs and cell phone charges
and air conditioning the houses of your chief.
When you have filled your containers, bring them here
to fill the communal storage tank.

And I must caution you not to smoke while collecting
lest we lose our entire windfall.

Mango

Giant wooden salad bowl
up to its gunwales in
rolling green sweetness
grinds into the beach

Twin paddlers
wade in grinning to
hawk their fruit to
tourists spread on towels

They won't sell them all here
but getting a better price
from the unsuspecting might
cover the cost of transport

To the market in town
and who knows maybe
the hostel will take them all
off their hands

Cool, soft and slightly
sticky to the touch
some so ripe their
cheeks are blushing

Others so green and firm
that when you strip away
the peel their golden hair
sticks between your teeth

Careful when you
bite into a ripe one
lest the juice run down
your arm onto your shoes

But ripe or not
no way to know
if this will be the one
to carry you to the

Heights of ecstasy or
dash you down in
swollen misery choking
on your own tongue

Maji ni Moja

*Long after eruption
turned trees into moss-
shrouded skeletons, rainwater
formed another crater at the
foot of the volcano,
a placid lake of clear water
surrounded by forest and fields.*

We always kept a Zodiac
docked on the shore
for water skiing, bass fishing, or
just to get to the float for a swim
to avoid wading out
because of the bilharzia-bearing
snails around the edge.

When they began reclaiming
colonial farms my father
moved north of Nairobi
leaving a son behind
to manage the place,
to control the destiny of
this soil, this water, these trees.

We always cared for our
people, piping clean water
into their quarters, providing
medical care, school fees,
an extra bag of mealies
on payday to make sure
no one went hungry.

The day we drove the truck
down to the lake
with the dogs in the back
I recognized them:
two young men
of uncertain ambition
looking for an opportunity.

“Wait till we get to the middle
before you light that up, but
let’s get rid of these dogs first,
they’re all over me, just chuck
them over the side, they can use
the exercise swimming to shore, no way
they get back in once they’re wet.”

They were waiting for us at the dock
before we could drop the tailgate
the taller one confronted me:
“Why are you washing your dogs
in our water? The water we depend on
for fish? The water we drink and
carry back to our village for cooking?”

“Your water? This lake belongs to
everyone, my friend, to you, to me,
and to my dogs who are no dirtier
than those kids playing in the mud
on the shore.” I was doing my best
to stay even, backing toward the truck.
“Why do you insult our children?”

“The lake is larger than us, *ndugu*
bigger than my farm or your village
deeper than anyone can imagine, so how
can two dogs swimming make a difference?”
“Because *maji ni moja*, water is one,
the filth of your dogs spreads throughout
the lake and no one can stop it.”

“Water is one means plenty for everyone.
And if you’re here to collect water
where are the buckets to carry it home?
Don’t you have a standpipe in your village?”
“Not us, but our mothers and sisters
come here to collect water.
Again you insult us!”

“I meant no disrespect, to you
or your family. Now stand
aside and let me pass.” With much

spitting of gravel and grinding of gears
I steered the truck around them and
sped off up the hill, wet dogs barking
furiously from the encaged bed.

In and out of court for years after that,
one trumped up charge after another
until they finally wore me down.
In the end we abandoned the farm,
knocked about here and there
eventually settling down under
where the climate suited us.

“Caravanned around the country
doing a bit of this and that,
ended up growing coffee again,
up here in the mountains. Not an
easy go of it. But that’s another story.
One more glass and time to sleep. We’ve
got a big pick ahead of us tomorrow.”

*Dead and dying coffee trees
surround the farmhouse,
now a luxury hotel;
a nature trail rings the lake
where ecotourists float canoes,
and snails feed on the deflated Zodiac
sunk amongst the reeds.*

Cattle Post

Wicker weaver nests
hung from thorny branches
like Christmas bells
ringing in a new
year of drought

Dust devils dance
between the acacia
kicking up their feet
when the wind blows
twists in the heat

Back half of pickup
drawn by donkeys
hauls 50-gallon drums
from the bore hole
to their enclosure

Sawtooth backbones
visible ribs and hips
akimbo they're already
gathering at the gate
hoping for some relief

Intending to Write

At the other end of Lac Léman
where the lake returns to a river
a dog-leg foot bridge links
the soon-to-be banks of the Rhône
to a tiny island inhabited by ducks and swans
and a guano-crowned statue of Jean-Jacques Rousseau
gazing out into the lake, pen poised, pensive
as the swans and paddle boats arc round
the *jet d'eau* at the end of the pier

Indolent schoolboys gathered on the benches there
drinking beer from paper sacks and hurling
taunts up at the old philosopher:
“J. J., you old shithead!
All you ever do is sit there in your chair
looking inspired as hell
but you never write a thing.”
As fearless as we were foolishly
ruthlessly invincible.

Convinced we had all the time in the world to write
or paint or compose and still take off
from our studies whenever we wanted
to go cartwheeling round the globe in search of experience
despite the draft and the drugs and the politics
waiting to swallow us up like gentle Miguel
who legend has it paddled into the middle of the lake
stoned in a storm never to be seen
or heard from again.

I think I see him approach the bench
a bottle in either pocket of that old
brown leather jacket he used to wear
and hunch over strings he'd tuned to
pluck the mellow out of any anguish
while I scribble furiously in my notebook
as the swans and the paddle boats arc
round the *jet d'eau* at the end of the pier
making up for lost time.

Félicitation

Now why would he say that?

Been walking the streets all night
ducked in here at first light
for an express and a croissant
and a lean into the zinc bar to relieve
the nail working its way into my left heel.

Congratulations for getting off the street?
Before the flics recognize me again and demand
Votre passeport! or a *carte de séjour*?
Before the African sweepers roust me from my bench
with their big twig brooms?

Congratulations for selecting
to dodge the draft in exile?
Hitching, riding the Eurails
posing as a Canadian or an AWOL airman?
Hiding in crash pads by night, in plain sight by day?

But no one was watching me.
Everyone's eyes were on the TV
where the eagle had just landed,
unfurled its flag and we had become the first
nation on earth to put a finger on the moon.

Dimensional Shift

The businessman sitting next to me noticed my grip on the armrests.

“Your first time?”

“No, crossed over once at age ten. With my mother and sister.

The city was in two parts then, East and West.

Porter from one side struggles to lug our bags into the middle

Baggage handler from the other loads them onto his cart.

Guns pointing from both sides.”

“I meant your first dimensional shift.”

“Yes. They say it’s like walking into a mirror.”

“Right. You see yourself coming toward you. Nothing unusual until your outstretched fingers disappear into the glass.”

“You’ve done this before?”

“I have business on the other side. A small shop. And family over here.”

“Doesn’t it get to you, being in one place and suddenly another?

Isn’t it hard to get used to? Doesn’t it take time to adjust?”

“The land is the same. It’s just the buildings that are different.

And the people, of course, except for those of us who can travel.

It’s like you turn sideways, and then you vanish.

Only you’re still here. Or there, actually.”

“How can you be in two places at the same time? It sounds crazy!”

“Think of it as being in the same place at the same time.

Here is the same as there, only in a different dimension.”

“I can say the words, but I just can’t bend my mind around it.”

“Fasten your seat belts and prepare for departure.

Please refrain from talking. Words may interfere with the shift.”

“That was quick! Passing through in the blink of an eye. Everything the same yet different. Are we there yet?”

“Both here and there, yes. How do you feel?”

“Strangely the same. What’s all this I read about shift psychosis? Doesn’t seem to be happening to me.”

“It’s more of a problem with multi-dimensional shifts. Just shifting from one dimension to another has minimal impact.”

“I never understood why they need all these dimensions.”

“Creating a separate dimension for us brought peace. But then splinter groups started raining rockets down on everyone. The only way to appease them was to give each their own dimension. The diplomats who shuttle between them were the first to suffer.”

“Makes you wonder if the psychosis comes from the shift or from the people they shift between.”

“Probably both. But I never asked. What brings you here?”

“I’m on assignment. Hush hush. Article about dimensional travelers. Why we do it and what happens to the peace if we don’t.”

“Ah, a journalist. And most likely a spy as well. Will I be reading about myself in the morning paper?”

“Depends on where you pick it up. Or when.”

“All I ask is that you be kind and objective. The shift has brought us peace. We can’t go back to the way it was before: dodging stones and bullets in the street, wondering if the person sitting beside you is wearing a suicide vest.”

“Not to worry. Enemies occupying the same land, yet invisible to one another? A truly elegant solution. It’s been a pleasure.”

Clearing Bush

Behind the termite mound
where we played king of the mountain
stood a tangled triangle of untouched bush
and after one too many noses bloodied on
the mound, Uncle Bud our house father
decided that clearing that corner of dense
underbrush would be a better way for us
to vent our pent up adolescent steam.

So one morning he assembled all the boys,
older ones in front wielding axes and saws,
us behind swinging cutlasses and weed whips,
the littler boys following up with forks and rakes
to drag the severed stalks and limbs into piles
surging forward into the tangle
singing Sunday school songs
leaving an emerald wake behind.

Skinny arms and legs stained yellow and green
boiled pink in the steamy sunshine we were
jubilant at our progress beating back the bush
good triumphing over the evil inherent in nature
for the glory of God and His Personal Bodyguard
protecting us from iniquity in this forsaken land
when suddenly we stopped and stood stock still,
tools hanging useless at our sides.

In a doll's house of twigs a wooden shape
embedded with cowrie shells glared out
from under a roof of wigwam palm, held us
transfixed in uncertain awe. Some of the
bigger boys advanced, axes raised as if
to smite the Serpent before it slithers away when
Uncle Bud raised a hand and said, "Let's take a break."
He left us suspended in the chlorophyll haze.

He returned with an old gardener who
shook his ebony head and said
"Is bad, is very bad, cannot be undone."
"But surely you do not believe..."
"Should leave well enough alone."

“But our work here is not yet done.”
Though eager to complete the task, Uncle Bud
deferred to the gardener’s sage advice.

A deacon in his church, the gardener’s roots
extended deep into the community
putting him in position to pass along
to any secret priests among them news that
this tiny shrine had been disturbed, yet
trembling with apprehension, loath to put
his father’s new-found faith to the test
against the ancient forces of the forest.

We quickly raked our slash away and left
the little fetish house exposed to sun and rain
retreating to the dormitory for showers
and a change of clothes before trooping
into the dining hall for prayers and supper
homework and sleep undisturbed by the
distant anger of an impending storm
about to rip through the remaining trees.

Ras Tanura Terminal

for Gary Snyder

Slender peninsula of sand
hangs like a glottal stop
in the mouth of the Gulf
where a seafaring Japhy
Ryder once packed bearings
in line to take on bunker.
Twin pipes form a zig-zag
tight rope toward tankers
waiting in a tepid bath of
sea water trapped under a
cloudless sky thick with humidity
to fill their holds with sticky sludge
from the nearby refinery.

I'd often ride out
on my ersatz mountain bike
trunks hidden under
long-sleeved tee shirt and
Dockers, cut off at the knee to beat
the heat and the religious police,
ducking through hedges
occasionally caught in
fishing line bird snares
left by Filipino vagrants
looking for nothing
more than a little protein
in their diets.

Knapsack packed with
snorkeling gear, I'd seek
out a deserted spot
on an abandoned beach
once mined for sand
to run away from,
jog along the strand
to reefs of tar-laden
rock and marvel at
the black marble rainbows left there
by spills never reported because

who cries over oil spilt in a gulf
that nobody ever visits?

You could actually make out
a fish or two in the sandy muck
among the seaweed streamers,
jellyfish, rocks and dead coral.
Never saw shark or a barracuda
though a Scot who used to work
suspended in a harness dangling
paint cans and brushes
on the platforms farther out
toward the Sea Island said he'd
often spot them fifty feet below
circling like inverted buzzards
anticipating slips.

Contractors and ARAMCO families
alike inhabit this artificially crude
international culture sequestered
in compounds where even
the water is manufactured
where visions from the dunes
meet the artifacts of sidestepping
the industrial revolution
in air conditioned offices
with an undercurrent of spite
for whatever it is you do behind
closed doors is your business as
long as you don't attract attention.

Out to sea the thickly painted container
ships crawl out of this dead end gulf
toward the pirate-infested waters beyond
deserted but for their skeleton crews
resting below the shimmering heat
while on shore prerecorded prayer calls
stretch between minarets
over the tangle of hastily erected
power lines and illegal satellite dishes
of our humble encampment all
watched over by those hidden cameras
of benign neglect so closely connected to
the thirsty world beyond our reach.

00:30

stealth Blackhawk landing
on mud roof awash in death
to America

DOMESTIC

In the Headlights

Steam rising from the still
warm flank of the doe.

Antlers tilting quizzically,
the buck licks and nuzzles
her to get up, then bolts across the road
to join the others.

Horrified driver sobbing,
stricken in the jaws of her
car door as gentle strangers
gesture us around.

Thanksgiving

Thank you
for the punctured propane tank
pinwheeling through the rapids
like a loose fire hose
finally lodging under our
ruined bridge, spent.

Thank you
for the foil of pine beetle pheromone
tacked halfway up a trunk
shining through the night
above the waterline to remind us
that we were safe.

Thank you
for the muffled grind of
underwater boulders
stumbling over one another
in the dark
making sand.

Thank you
for the relentless drone of
dump trucks building us
back up to
where we were
before it all washed away.

And thank you
for our debris-strewn brand
new beach where
morning deer pick their way
between bleached branch and
rock skull.

Follow Me

Everybody loves me.
The flagger takes the brunt,
standing there with nothing but
a yellow vest and a stick with a stop sign
on top between him and a Panzer division
of former FEMA motel moms and
hitch-hiker dads, briefcase in one hand,
gas can in the other,
finally back in their homes
now stuck in line in the canyon
while we move heaven and earth for them
blasting and scooping and pile driving the highway
back to better than it used to be.

The flagger really would rather be
one of those lollygaggers with a shovel
who scoop up stray shrapnel tumbled
down the fresh scree onto the roadway
so he'd at least have the luxury of motion
to keep his feet from freezing to the
scarred tarmac.

You can smell the impatience build
hear the accidental tooting of a horn
as they nudge closer to one another
when all of a sudden I appear
leading a convoy from the other direction
tuck in beside the flagger and we pretend
to talk to supervisors on our radios.

Renewed hope starts a few engines
as soon as I turn around,
magazines and laptops are stowed in
anticipation of the flagger turning his sign to
Slow and following my flashers
past the cones, around reclaimed roadbed
and newly erected retaining walls,
down into the valley for supplies,
pick up the kids, and even if
they have to stop again along the way
for a dump truck to finish loading
it'll be OK because they're already
on their way past it.

Family Picnic

Father's battered
tuff shed abandoned
on unfamiliar sand
confused with debris.

Daughter's shattered
picnic table lodged
under this or that bridge
we're not sure where.

Mother's punctured
propane tank spinning
like a pinwheel hissing
froth in chocolate water.

Little sister's insistence
that they should have
purchased flood insurance
when they could.

Boots

in memory of Richard Brautigan

“You okay?”

Wind knocked out of me
flat on my back
in the orchestra pit seeing
the poet’s concerned
face looming over me

Seconds before I was
jockeying around the podium
for a handshake or an autograph
when my boot heels slipped
into the footlights
and I went over

What could I do but deny
any injury, pick myself up
and scuttle off sideways
having thoroughly humiliated
myself before an idol I had
somehow hoped to impress

My hopes of sharing the bottle
of cheap port I had brought him
dashed—luckily I’d taken it
up to the podium earlier
before the reading began

I never wore those boots again
and made a point of keeping
to myself in the audience until
the day I read his body had left
a lasting impression on the floor

The Guitar in Blow-Up

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeza1xeWKM>)

I gave away all the cassettes
I'll never play again
hundreds in crates of wood
plastic and cardboard
and kept only the compact discs
in their jewel cases, some thin
some thick, row upon row of them
though now all my music is suspended
in ones and zeros on flash or spinning
media, like ants in amber

I still keep a shelf of vinyl records deep
in the recesses of my wiring closet
they used to be the backups for my cassettes
as the CDs now back up my MP3s
just in case I feel the need to hold
some scratchy Cat Stevens
in the warmth and comfort of its album cover
after all the cassettes are gone
and the hard drives eventually crash

Books can also give me warmth and comfort
when I touch the paperbacks I'll never read again
arranged and rearranged corresponding
to forgotten creases in my brain
I just might need to access someday
holding their spines in my palm
to get the paternal feeling that I own them
like the slender neck of an electric guitar
before you bring it crashing down upon the amplifier

Books and records have copyrights and
authors have the right to collect royalties
until they die or outlive their usefulness
but I can't own the ones and zeros that
comprise the books upon my shelves unless
I painstakingly scan each page myself
(as I've already attempted for the cassettes and vinyl)
or buy them back from their new digital owners
and make these paperbacks my backups

The Yardbirds owned everyone in the room
as they rocked and screeched to a crescendo
that could only end smashed to bits on the stage
for the fans to descend on dragging by the neck
clawing the body dangling from the strings
up from the bowels of the club into the streetlight
to be dropped indifferently into the gutter
when they ran on to the next great thing
tangled on the roadside like a broken cassette
lost, but I have the DVD and hopefully
it will soon be available for streaming

The Blue

Jesus was a carpenter
a common man
Krishna was a cowboy
out in Hindustan
I'm a bit of both
but I don't understand, just

What's keeping me from breaking through the blue?
How many miracles are dreams come true?
Why can't I be holy, too?

I'd climb the highest mountaintop
to see the sun
I'd walk the sea of Galilee
with anyone
I'd make myself a martyr
if it could be done, but

What's keeping me from breaking through the blue?
How many miracles are dreams come true?
Why can't I be holy, too?

I've wandered as a mendicant
without a name
I've lost myself for hours inside
a candle flame
I've gone beyond my senses but
I feel the same, oh

What's keeping me from breaking through the blue?
How many miracles are dreams come true?
Why can't I be holy, too?

My kundalini's rising but
it just won't peak
I'll have to check my chakras
for a power leak
or maybe I could make it
as a Jesus freak, 'cause

What's keeping me from breaking through the blue?

How many miracles are dreams come true?
Why can't I be holy, too?

I've written to the Editor
to get the word
He said I write the blankest verse
he's ever heard
I wonder why my universe seems
so absurd, hey

What's keeping me from breaking through the blue?
How many miracles are dreams come true?
Why can't I be holy, too?

If I could catch a glimpse at what
it's all about
I'd find myself in selflessness
without a doubt
and take my rightful place among
the most devout, so

What's keeping me from breaking through the blue?
How many miracles are dreams come true?
Why can't I be holy, too?

I've searched the ancient manuscripts
for saintly quotes
I've tried out every discipline
and antidote
I'd hate to end this song upon
a sour note, but

What's keeping me from breaking through the blue?
How many miracles are dreams come true?
Why can't I be holy, too?

Drone

*You're a brain drain
You go on and on
Like a blood stain.*

-Marianne Faithfull, with Tim Hardin

Gotta admit I really loved my job
taking the steps two at a time into the trailer
waiting for my desert eyes to adjust to the dark
a wall of satellite imagery on rear projection screens
my station a clutter of keyboards, trackpads,
joy sticks, headgear, everything I'd ever wanted
as a kid building models and playing video games.

You go on and on

We weren't just keeping an eye on the bad guys
we were doing something about it; when some crazy cleric
issued a fatwa, before his followers could start packing
pressure cookers into backpacks we'd be on it, surveilling
their every move ready to take them out the instant
they move into range, or at least we were
before they lost interest, lost their nerve, lost the resolve
for permanent solutions to persistent problems.

You go on and on

Now I'm in business for myself, not really black ops
though I still have a few leftover scores to settle
more freelance consulting on an as needed basis
keeping the world safe for democracy as we know it.
Delivering packages pays the bills and keeps me sharp
ready to strike should any of those who refuse to
go along with the measures our democratically elected
legislators insist on shoving down their throats
go too far.

You go on and on

Dealing out instant karma can be somewhat satisfying almost like having your own private rocket launcher during rush hour or one of those auto alarm eradicators they used to advertise on Saturday Night Live when you can be half a world away and not even hear the blast or the screams or the sirens just turn your bird around and bring her home to rain terror from the sky another day on another high value target.

You go on and on

So now how am I supposed to react to these small town vigilantes with their high-capacity magazines gone fully auto, licensed to kill my birds? Ignore them? Or add them to my list of HVTs? This could really get out of hand if they figure out how to track them, how to trace them back to me escalating into a full-blown shooting war drone on drone in the homeland, kill after righteous kill until justice is served or eliminated.

You go on and on

Children's Crusade

I do most of my recruiting at the arcade
where they're easy to pick out,
the ones who hang back from the others.
It looks like they're just texting:
they're really on a whole nuther level.

I don't waste time on
the fancy dressers, the tight jeans,
the cute kids who talk a good game.
the minute the chips are down
they're on the phone to Mom and Dad.

I like the loners, the ones
who think for themselves.
Harder to convince because they
ask so many questions; recruiting them
can drag on for days.

But if you're patient,
willing to put in the effort,
they'll stick around, even contribute,
turning tricks no one could have
expected or even predicted.

They don't complain when you
lock them down in a cramped trailer
somewhere in bumfuck America.
In fact they'll amaze you with
some of the shit they cook up.

You can turn them loose in town
and they won't run amok
shoplifting and bating the locals.
Most likely they'll just hang and be
waiting for you to pick them up again.

So focused and in control,
no waiting around for you to explain:
I've never had a client complain.
They'll try anything and keep at it
until they've got it down.

No hesitation, no preconceived notions
to get in the way, no crises of
conscience or qualms to distract them.
Their objective is to win at all costs
with no regard for truth or consequences.

Which is why the DOD pays
top dollar to get their underage
asses in their control room chairs.
And it's up to us to find the
most ruthless and relentless.

It's easier than getting them to join
a cult or sign up for a trip to the Holy Land.
I don't envy those guys in Africa
who have to use drugs and torture and
teach them everything from scratch.

These kids come preconditioned
to bring death and destruction
on the unsuspecting half a world away,
earning their scholarships the easy way,
exempt from hazard pay.

Lost

Something missing?
Something I'm supposed to do?
Can't be sure
I seem to have forgotten
what it was
where it was
Like losing track of
how many laps I've swum
caught up in counting
strokes and making turns
dangling in the ganglia of
one-two-three-breathe-

Something I've lost
or something I've forgotten?
Like brushing my teeth or
rinsing the shampoo
out of my hair I keep
looking for it, wondering
what it looks like
or where I put it,
whichever comes first.
I suppose they mean well
but what the hell was I
looking for anyway?

Something about pushing a button
in the bunker every so often
the first thing to go
and the last thing to look for
where could it be? Hiding
under the stairs they'll
never find me but
what if it's somewhere else,
whatever it looks like,
supposing they find it first?
So what can they do to me
that hasn't already happened?

Something like a shopping bag
fits over your head
secured with Velcro
I vaguely remember
the plastic tubing
from a hardware store
the gas grill refill somehow
connected but they
won't let me near
the gas grill anymore
And a need for secrecy
can't ask for help.

I know it was important
but where do you start
when you can't remember
if it was something you forgot
like feeding the cat,
if the cat is still alive,
or something misplaced like
glasses hiding on your nose?
Just a fragment of imagination
drawn to the strangely familiar
red exit sign at the
end of the hall.

Bodhisattvas Contemplate

for Tom and Gisela

*Existence is suffering: Do we only escape this
cycle of birth and death in cessation of suffering?*

Oh, the souls!
lost along the way
irretrievable, suffering,
life made of pain

Oh, the aspiration!
to stay with here
not rise above until
we all go together

Oh, the emptiness!
the reaching out
the grasping
fingers close upon themselves

Oh, the web of deception!
that ties together
every news event
every commentary

Oh, the greed!
the self-interest
that takes away
only to add unto itself

Oh, the insanity!
the untold terror
of our visions heading
down the drain of consciousness

Oh, the bliss of pain!
exquisite familiar touch
reuniting us with the
essence of existence

Oh, the idiocy!
the stupid statements made
the ridicule you heap up
and wallow in

At the bottom of a well
how do you do when they ask you
except to say OK on your way
to the unthinkable?

Does it get easier
with practice or
is it the same old
same old over and over?

Can we go it alone
or are we expected
to wait politely
holding the door?

How can you help them
who cannot even
themselves? I ask you
how can you help it?

Sentient beings
just short of enlightenment
choke the corridors of our
waiting rooms and morgues

Should we wait for them?
or jump off the bus, promising
to catch up with them
when they reach the inevitable?

Emptiness is form is emptiness is
gone gone gone beyond
gone altogether begone
Oh, what an awakening!

Oh, the lost souls!

The Cloud

My mother loved to fly.
The first time she flew
she took rolls of photos
of a silver wing,
a magnificent cloud, and
a glimpse of the earth below:
these became known as
Mom's flight pictures.

She never took a lesson
claimed she was no good at numbers
but took advantage of every
opportunity to climb into a cockpit,
taste the thrill of takeoff,
brace for landing, and
marvel at the landscape spread
out beneath her even if it was just
another airliner taking her from
point A to B.

As a child she'd heard that
clouds were for the angels to rest on,
reclining, plucking their harp strings,
singing ethereal hymns for eternity.
Now that she could see both sides
she knew that clouds were there for everyone,
that a cloud could be a handy
place to hide inside of
when pursued by the ones and zeroes of
outrageous fortune.

Like when it comes time
to save this sliver of imagery,
where does it go? Certainly not dropped onto a
laptop hard drive or stick of memory but flung
somewhere into the far reaches of this volatile
storage unit they call a cloud where
it joins with other devices in
the giddy joy of barnstorming
the fluffy towers of fake permanence,
climbing and diving and buzzing the ground,

fearlessly wingwalking into the wind,
tears streaming past grinning ears,
loving every minute of not knowing where
you'll be next or who you'll meet or
what they'll think.

Sometimes it obscures your vision
when unannounced a cloud drops down
and envelops you in the midst of a conversation
you were trying to maintain, so, rudderless
you drift in and out of visibility,
on instruments yet clinging to the stick,
pedaling as fast as you can,
struggling to get out of going through
all these things again and again.

On those occasions it helps to turn
your gaze out the window to the con trails
curling in the blue over rising desert thermals
to remember the excitement when first you
set foot inside one of these silver clouds
so many years ago. Where was it you were
going? Does it really matter? Destinations
and events blown about, crashing into one
another, forming new fantastical shapes,
scattered about but somehow held together
like bits of puzzle caught in a dust devil.

The last time my mother flew
was in a two-seater over
the mountain she could see
from her care facility window
when she became the cloud
of ash puffing out behind
the tail of the tiny plane.

No Poem Today
(read Hafez instead)

Reclining in a tub full of no poem today, guzzling wine ensures this fool of
no poem today

My verses barely scratch the surface, except when I intend to pull off
no poem today

Well versed in the other masters, at your feet I drag up a stool of
no poem today

Better soak in the senseless bustle of bees, or drunken doves who coo of
no poem today

Even aspiring artists admit there's no coming up to the cool of
no poem today

Face it, there's really no point resisting the rule of
no poem today

Watch the cat trap a patch of sunlight and coil its tail around a pool of
no poem today

Jim, you must submit to the school of no poem today.

Not Creative

the Not Creative
wildfire is currently one
hundred percent contained.