



# Far Between

Poems 2000-2010

Tim Koehn

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# FAR BETWEEN: POEMS 2000-2010

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...because my poems are so few and far between.

Anne Frank, 25 March 1944

Far Between

*SONNET TO A JAZZ PIANIST*

Too tight is the mask of the fame few find,  
Wrapping faces not made for mass-made molds.  
But a secret wealth to many more is kind,  
If one simply commensurately holds  
That which uniquely holds all thread of him.  
The harmony there then is sparked ablaze  
With a candle's base blue composition...

The piano and place are black; but some rays  
Of the moon light fingers alit for sound.  
Then the near silent arc of a half-step bend  
Makes a song's feet glide under twilight gown,  
Up ivory stairs where shadows descend,  
    To meet God who steps down with milk, rag on key,  
    Coming forth to polish a cracked-up melody.

*2000*



*HOW WE HUMANS LIKE TO DO*

You know those little worlds that you  
shake up so the snow flies and it dances  
and kisses the rosy-cheeked creature?  
I saw one rolling down my car window:  
minute particles inside a dew droplet  
danced with such beauty my heart hurt.  
A longer brown thing and some green  
stuff were the blessed ones  
inside.

The sweet little world slid slowly down with  
maybe even eleventwelve flakes in al—  
jumped my insides! as the  
brown baton  
began to spinandspin as if  
asunlitfanbladeina  
sphereoftranslucentblue  
walllikesomedrinkingglas  
seswherethey  
curveand bend and edge—

the beauty was small—still big enough  
to make my heart hurt.

THEN I ROLLED DOWN THE WINDOW TO TALK TO SOME GUY.

*2000*

## *MY BEST ARTIST*

Is there a reporter who jots down how snow sounds  
And journals the smell of leaves on their annual fall to the ground?  
Who files a report called  
The Silent Shout:  
How Loud God Is in Really Big Clouds?

I can tell you:  
Not many

Because for that kind of case, one, through investigative lens,  
Would have to capture at least a trace of the unsnatchable, and go  
To the place where God's spirit skin-stirringly haunts,  
The place where your hair stiffens  
Straight like when blood starts from cold to warm

Amazingly,  
I have access to such a recorder  
She has been made my best friend  
My best artist

She goes out with her sketchbook soul—  
A kind of jail for all the beauty  
A prison built purposely poor, so what's inside  
Leaks and seeps through the floor  
And spills out the door, puddling in pools  
By way of brushes, tools, basins of developer, needles and thread on  
Spools

Pools that gather on tight canvassed white  
Soak into fabrics  
And emerge, refracting safe light

Article after crisp article  
It's beyond her to control output of such flawless testimony;  
My God, be gracious to grant that I be the first to read  
And then receive  
From glory's hand a slap fresh in the face  
And my breath stolen away  
By the same hand by which she was made  
And is forever pleased to stay

Just to hold her sketches scrawled from eyewitness accounts  
Then present them in some unearthly gold.

*2000*

*THE COLDEST DAY YET*

I'm never quite as bright  
As when clouds hang light and low;  
And my heart leaps for the dark ones,  
But the wind has yet to blow:  
They creep so still under heavy load,

Pregnant with what makes living—  
Things like blood and breath  
And drink made crisp for forgiving.

Then it breaks into pieces,  
And it all spills out—silver, white...  
Dead weeds are aged gold because a hole—  
A hole where corals and anemones grow.

*2000*

## *CROW'S FUNERAL*

Of burial this crow's deserving:  
Enough care to spade the soil,  
Eyes to admire iridescent shine  
Though his feathers lack the oil...

My ignorant instincts kept me  
With two lengths of gnarled twig,  
But too wary a basket they proved to be,  
So I grasped him, black and big.

A fair nape ruffed up as his head hung,  
Such beauty that hushes words:  
Nuisance atop the skeleton tree  
Was flawless among the birds!

My thoughts dared to drift:  
How fell this fellow? Why do ants now eat his eyes?  
May I suppose by the hater's hand,  
Mere mystery he despised?

Well, it matters not, for I knew I must,  
With hands delicate for the dead,  
Where earth smells damp under lilac shade:  
A cross to adorn his head.

*2001*

## WINDSTORM

Across the plain, I see the weed-herd is on the move:  
Bouncing and rolling, all but tumbling,  
Skeletons dry yet still life-full,  
Wind onward pushing with playful stumbling.

Like those weeds, the birds enjoy the wind:  
With great sweeps of flight, true to a tree,  
Branches bending, holding fast,  
Thinking, *There we aimed, but here we'll be.*

And those curious beasts stand there squinting;  
Straining necks and heads docile sway.  
Lazy eyes and noses sense all who pass.  
How do they know what's in the wind today?

For to the east strong winds are blowing  
Not knowing when they will find the west.  
Sweet mists of forgiveness and the wrongs of me,  
Grace off the throne in my soul manifests.

2001

Isn't that how God goes about?  
 Winter then spring, then wet then drought?  
 Bursts of untamed taste—all's seasoned well;  
 Can somebody tell me when summer fell?

Well, it fell, but then it was fall...  
 Then snow came up piling to trickle down walls,  
 So robins sprung up to tune their whistles  
 And tug up worms past warmth-waiting thistles.

Now meadowlarks echo through a lazy noon,  
 Saying horizon's heat-haze will come surprise me soon.  
 So I dream big—like the heron's flap—  
 Of the days the sun resists its night-long nightly nap:

I'll scramble rugged slopes; I'll splash a clear, green deep—  
 Oh, the things I will do when cicadas tire of sleep!  
 Ancient and fast, my blood burns alive;  
 It has reached the rush of the Red-tail in dive;  
 So sears the sun, so brightens the blue!  
 But the mercury's weak reach gives just a fifty-two,  
 A chilly fifty-two.

*2001*

*A SPRING-LATE STORM*

White-laden rope strung on the man-trees, now  
tentacles on the road. They turned me back  
near the river for fear of the sting  
or the trunks, I guess...

I think it sure is pretty when we sit helpless,  
when our dull, frantic teeth gnaw at the ropes.

...quite comic because I know the ghost who  
blows them over. It's the one who whispers through  
a busy crowd of puddles. In streaks and  
flashes, its breath brushes the ripples:

*Hey you*                      *All of you*  
*Hey*                      *Yeah you*                      *Nice try.*

2001



*A VISION OF THE CHRIST-CHILD AT PLAY  
ON THE SHORES OF GALILEE*

*And he increased in wisdom and stature,  
and in favor of both God and men.*

Sea-breeze, tickle the boy,  
Brush lips pressed firm to form ancient melodies,  
And gentle waves provide for his vessels to bob;  
For they're chunked and chiseled out so meticulously.

Sea-breeze, can you see how the boy  
Charts careful course for his fleet to navigate?  
And overlapped his feet, his tiny tide-lapped feet;  
He's hunched and hunkered small in such effortless state.

He does so well with his because he's done so well with mine:  
He is my boy,  
He is his father,  
His is the womb

From which come dew and snow and through which he paths a line  
For thunderstorms to span deserts  
And ignite their bloom.

(Such shadows he will not rebuke on his death-day soon.)

Sea-wind, now build my ships,  
Make sail to bulge, and make mast be towering.  
For remember he may sweeping stern, billowed bow  
That churn mountains in their wake, then leave them flowering.

## *GHOSTS OF MAYFLOWER GULCH*

Down a corridor of tall, tall pines, through  
Their fragrance lifting and snowflakes falling  
(Big enough to blossom a spider line  
Strung from bough to bough), we come upon  
An old, old place: neatly stacked pine poles sunk  
In a snow-bed and topped with pillowy eaves.  
Dripping like water-lace, looking-glass ice mirrors  
The calico and gray of the rust-worn wood prismatically.

Streamed white, one winter old, but stratified  
In age-old ages, moves in through a collapsed  
Roof and rotting window. And up the path  
A snow-tongue hangs where rushing slurry once spewed.  
In fingers from the snow, sedimentary  
Ice continues, lithified in long,  
Gnarled and corkscrewed whisker curls.

Backward and forward, time leads like the sky-hole  
Spirits, burning bright and fast across the barren cirque;  
Up with fluid ease, they fly the couloirs, lightning-white,  
Then disappear in dark. Atop the toothed ridge they join  
The Ghost of this gulch astride there, gray veiling  
Its gendarmes, the holy basin-guards.

Below are what they often called gallows,  
Tucked beneath the glacial slide of talus and hanging  
Not they themselves, but what made or made  
Not their sea-length prairie-trek worth its while.  
For sorrow or both bliss and sorrow the nails  
Cry rusty blood streams along the cross-beams

(The galvanized tin hurriedly cut;  
An outhouse peephole lined neatly enough).

It seems to stir up other specters, like that of Christ  
On his cross—to whom they swore the mother-load before  
What began to look a lot like his blood on the beams.  
They came and died and dug a long time ago, but now  
Still haunt—in the rust, in the wood, in the snow.

*2002*

*FACTS: NATURAL, SPIRITUAL*

Not grudgingly graveyards  
are off to farm flowers;  
first feathers fall frozen,  
then blue the hours.

Not sparingly spiders  
are off to web weavings;  
withstand they'll wet weather  
to feel prey's grievings.

Yes, savingly Savior  
is on to blood bleedings;  
bent broken, bread brandished,  
kill death the feedings.

*2002*

*WINTER VISIT*

Old crackling records—crunching like soles  
On snow—sift out soft falling voices.  
Like wing-wind from no wind, some gospel alights,  
Gently, past steaming bowls  
Shifting fog on the panes like a spirit might.

There, with flake-beard from berry fluff-crowns,  
Is the stain for which ring their noises:  
A cardinal saint suit with beak and eyeholes,  
Like the one warm drip weaving clean-blood gowns;  
Like the red drop reclaiming winter-white souls.

2002

## *AURORA*

Some other horizon's light-cracks  
Birth green shafts of dawn—sun-born  
Still, but between black atop black;  
They mirror the moon in the stubble-corn.

From pale glow to blood on deep dark  
With no sign to mark the fade,  
So soon returns the star-seine  
And turns diamonds to water-jade.

*2002*

## MORNING

Why record, describe, inscribe,  
on this page, on my heart?

Is it so I'll remember? But  
how could this slip past me:

pale-eve starlings like jungle bats  
clumped tightly on bare bones

and knuckles of trees, fingers  
blazing like new yellow willow-shoots

with the lamp-light of a short sun  
buzzing about the branches?

Is the welcome wound that sears  
past my brain's skin so healed

that I have forgotten how the sun sunk  
up, swallowed by the upside-down

ocean, furrowed to the west by God's  
wondrous wake, fire on the ripple-crests?

Unseen every day, the blanket-oats  
smell dry when wet

and fade cream to gold  
beneath overcast aster. Oh well,

never will all be relayed  
of these mundane glories replayed.

2002

NUMBNESS AND ORANGES

I'm scared of being  
paralyzed, but there's  
a numbness I love.

*Love*, though, hapless  
for this one—knowing  
best effort serves to dull

And cheapen what  
I mean (I *love* to  
pause the press of

A crescent orange  
before capsules  
burst to the corners

Of my tongue,  
but for this I need only  
peel and eat; see,

Love is hackneyed).  
But this numbness  
comes a timely gift,

Its billows to my  
nostrils. Unforeseen,  
when the wind



Outside pushing feels  
itself pressing back—  
out from the inside:

taut balloon  
skin finally relieved  
by drinking the ocean

It swims in.  
Hair rocks, shifts,  
sways as all seas' kelp;

Limbs ride the rise  
of currents off  
unfathomed floors

To hurry fingers  
to catch the drag  
and rake the sand  
when the tide pulls.

*2002*

*BY TENDER FRENCH WHILE PREPARING DINNER*

By tender French while preparing dinner  
I was reminded  
of their voices like soft circles  
when sun mixes with leaves.  
Reminded of our second wedding, summers  
skipped and birthdays un-thrown found in  
garden meals with starlight for dessert  
and a light-shafted hollow with water  
irresistibly cold. We were shown  
the bride in the snow-white borrowed by  
the dandelion heads in the orchard on  
the hill in the sky. So we returned when  
the fruit was ripe and ready to pick.  
And the harvest they allowed made us  
stain our legs in fallen cherries and,  
like sunflowers, bow our heads.

*2003*

*VERMEER*

walls  
soft  
bare

age  
long  
breaths

delicate trickle shimmering  
lapwings skimming  
flashing their feathers  
pearl-tipped

and dragonfly wind-  
mill wings swath  
their paradox: furious  
chase at tip  
yet slow-strength base

passing train of  
present, still  
pool of memory

his  
gleam  
too

touched me.

2003

## *LAUTERBRUNNEN*

The sun was  
(That made and lit the droplets)  
White-shrouded miles of granite  
Wall gleaming,  
A spooling off from flat infinite stone, and  
Pieces of water silver-threaded,  
Breaking off from powdery rain trails  
To pool again, then run rivers gray,  
Full of melted ice and mineral  
Like squeezed juice from a pearl.

Up to find  
Them, then, by clog and clank,  
We watched fairy-tail dwellers  
Harvest in clouded lofty green,  
In the loft of still-birthing mountains.  
After toothpick toy bridges, freshly  
Smashed, we side-stepped their  
Heavy babies. Then many thumps  
To the floor of their cradle.

The day done,  
We waited for the pink to come.  
But only electric yellow colza below—  
Like stars only seen when one doesn't  
Look. And not the boulder babies,  
But the immense black-wall mothers  
Asleep to singing crickets  
And white noise of the threads.

*2003*

## *LA POISSONERIE*

Bulging bulbous  
eyes above big  
lips of bass,  
tender creamy  
flesh bunched on  
frog femurs,  
a flash of opal  
zebra stripes on  
piled up mackerel,  
cold, gray-hazed  
metallic flecks  
that once caught  
sun shafts  
and splintered  
them in the blue—  
inedible delectable  
sights squirm  
my hunger for life  
whether they're  
blackened, boiled,  
baked, fried,  
or sautéed with  
champignons,  
crème fraîche  
and vin blanc.

*2003*

*BOURGOGNE*

Like a mustard cane glaze  
Off a hot roasted fowl,  
Burgundy's bounty

drips.

From one hundred clouds hiding  
Each its own sun, it leaks  
Brighter than one bare and

drips.

Onto ancient gnarled beeches  
Stretching horizontal  
Branches it

drips.

In beards of moss, then droplets  
That pool in oak jewels  
On splayed leaf-hands it

drips

From their tips to seep through  
Leaf carpet and grow up  
A river that flows and

drips.  
Down vine rows and shimmering  
Globed fruit till Charolaises'  
Creamed skin it

drips  
Along each rib to bead barley  
Hair that shakes its rain-crown  
Then

drips  
On wild poppies' scarlet  
Paper petals that lend  
One vein per diamond to

drip.

*2003*

*SHE BREATHES PARIS*

“Wanna come? I’m  
going to see the Eiffel  
at night,  
lit up.”

...But in the heavy  
creaking chamber after  
the latch clink, her  
breath lives suddenly  
and grows beside me.

All the glow from  
the only-ships-sea that  
washes to pink  
the black from the Bodies  
and makes the roofs  
a miniature city

comes bursting through  
the fleeing curtains  
to inflate her gorgeous  
lungs.

Her exhale sprays  
the stars back to sky,  
splattering some on the  
ceiling as they squeeze  
out the window.



Wisps of smoke are flung  
to dormant chimneys...

“That’s OK,”  
my late reply—  
she breathes Paris.

*2003*

## *INFANT DEATH*

There are eyes enough to shift the sea—  
In this life, but in death forever—  
For him who dares to bend and breathe

Over a small pine box to see—  
And quit his air's quiver—  
Eyes enough to shift the sea.

They're glazed like low gray about winter trees,  
Finger mists that lend a shiver  
To him who dares to bend and breathe.

We're told Christ risked, too, like Emily  
(What I should have seen never),  
These eyes enough to shift the sea.

But somehow he kept his wheeze—  
Man's skin realized then severed—  
As he bent to barely breathe.

Maybe that's why I hit my knees,  
Viewing—cold and delivered—  
Eyes enough to shift the sea.  
I dared to bend, beheld, and breathed.

*2003*

## *HOMEMAKER*

Mother sees shapes of homes  
about and lets her Lord sway  
himself, his feet unshod,  
on the swing of her heart's  
front porch. With God's toes  
on wide paint-chipped planks,  
she is as sure as a chapped hand  
with its anticipation of a coin  
of cool lotion, or of being  
slipped in the space between  
icy linens. So she will whiten walls  
for those who won't ever watch  
or marvel how she makes  
a meal of misplacement.  
She will sweetly let her  
sweepings soil again, and now  
having swept once more,  
she will peer through the simple  
steam of her mug of water boiled,  
and declare decoration:  
there—past dense, dead branches  
and bunched below the eaves—she'll  
see banks of geraniums bouncing.

*2004*

## *RUNWAY ECLIPSE*

From a nocturnal outpost of never-sleeping  
cities I can call her to look  
at the same eerie earth's shadow sleeving  
the same weakling moon,  
but she's already in bed  
and its singular slow wink is on  
a windowless wall.

Before, it was beneath the brooding  
of collision control,  
pillowed by exhaust and sinewy sheets of cloud.  
But now it shifts  
the covers and begins to slip beneath  
the sideways lid of night.

Lashless, it steadily lifts,  
and a crescent coin of liquid  
is now a full-on disk—  
ploughing the sky, it leaves folds of black earth  
that bring gulls to peck an absent eye.

So our union  
will pass eclipses  
to pour through our west-facing window  
like a street lamp to a pool on the floor,  
then sink its pale skin in the mountains,  
pushing up a greater light  
in that half of the sky where, before,  
it was blinked out  
but did not die.

2005

*ODE TO PINK AND GREEN*

Two running race stripes  
Coming on white wall  
From the corner curved glass  
To an iconographic stall

All east-LA-gorgeous  
A little louder and Mexican  
Until I sipped the black drink still frothy  
And then

It was symphony of urbana  
Trash truck trumpet of God  
From each coast to past island  
Tucked where ancients and Dutch trod

I fumbled and mistook  
Its name—Lupe’s—for “wolf’s”  
But it was just as tried  
And beautiful

In a lover’s china plates and cups-in-dish  
Waiting for the latch-clack to float  
And then her foot-splash

In Sweden's western-shore workshop  
Where God does his making of the greens  
From fell-shadow-blue blacks  
To marsh-tuft-blond-stem pinks

In the stock of a chic, stark wine shop  
Slipped in walls in cylindrical holes  
Lit like liquid of Christmas tree lights  
Sent from striped South African hills

See  
In all cities sunk up in the bedding of night  
In all sage and sagging tables  
In all fades to fall

And on your way to all around the world  
You may see them in blinks  
Off and on  
Illumining the mist bands  
Atop cloud-top topography  
Finding themselves in the tide of pre-dawn

*2005*

*CALL ME OLD-FASHIONED, CALL ME MAN*

Warmed by a surge of wanting for my wife,  
I oddly now am comfortable to sleep.  
But then her almost-snoring warmth of life  
Turns and it's impossible to keep  
My hands from the horizon of her shape.  
To me right now she is topography:  
In exploration I may not escape  
My sex in its sixteenth century,  
With its blazons for women sold and bought  
For their sun, wires, coral, blah, blah, blah.  
Well, earth is not "unconqueréd"; I'm not  
Vespucci and she's not America.  
Besides, I doubt Hero, Lucrece, in bed  
Would whisper the kind of words mine just said.

2006

*PSALM*

That I can enjoy you here in peace,  
hovering between your buzzing winds  
between a day I saw you in slugs  
and another lashed by the frantic uncertainties  
imprisoned on the earth,  
    is cherished, I'm telling you—  
not programmed like the gurgle of a suburban sprinkler  
or checked off by the clock.

This comes as the spillings of a jeweled existence too full.  
So, Oh Lord, have my spillings, for you are my fillings,  
my juice,  
my joy,  
my jewels.

*2006*



## *SUNRISE*

This morning, cloud arms reach across the hunched earth—  
you stretching for the soap.

I feel  
your breasts measure  
my back's flank and angle, and watch the sun cling—  
now water on your lashes,  
stark rays risen and fanning.

I look long enough so you'll flash when you're gone—  
in the nighttime of every blink.

*2006*

*PASSING TOPEKA*

Nothing much lives here  
except  
America's decisions  
—smack in the map's middle

among people long-since  
ape-like  
and segregated still—  
and a slow blink warning

planes of an oversized  
dome:  
big things in a small place.  
Mexicans waiting in Wranglers

and reptiles:  
a crowd of cowboy brims  
curved like the autumn-  
hued sliver of moon.

Outside, a many-speckled power  
plant's pink steam  
takes direction through the dark  
summer sponged by our skins.

*2006*

## LET THE PASSING PALMS

Let the passing palms  
mark the frames of this motion picture:  
scenes moving through morning  
and volcanic haze that would dust the brows  
of coconuts if not for their frond-umbrellas  
collecting the gray snow. Membranous wings  
play the score and the thwack of rice sheaves on wood.  
Merapi looks on like a ghost in the sky:  
It coughs its woolly cloud of ash,  
its *wedhus gembel* companion, as they say,  
its dark and “dangerous sheep.”

Across the set run paddy-bank footpaths  
and agriculture-veins that may even flow  
from Weld County  
to Holland  
to here,  
their patterns  
now scrawling the script of this place:

Sowing and reaping  
in the same sentence—slipping in seedlings and beating out grain  
in neighboring plots of buffalo-broken, ash-blackened soil.  
And so it is, in this season-less place,  
when the earth makes heaps of the houses.  
The piles are props broken  
for an unlikely cast  
(appearing  
apparently  
in no order):

Hope plays a flock of egrets lifting  
from one field to another  
like a scattering of white leaves.

Miracle plays a smile  
and Impossibility a capiz shell wind chime  
tinkling in a light shaft  
from a window of the one room left standing.

A frantic but singing bulbul caged above the front door  
is played by most everyone—

from Shrug to Allah's Will

to Longing for Places in Pictures—

but Stick Figure Crying "*Ibu*"  
Rendered by a Small and Steady Hand  
plays that cage door  
cracked  
and unlatched.

A riot of ruddy feet  
for a soccer ball is Resilience,

and many are Generosity's roles.  
They are chickens  
on a threshing floor, foreigners on church-tile,  
and a free-loading rat in the rafters.

Then us—a little spooked by the staggering gamelan  
(summoning a many-limbed demi-god  
to the *wayang kulit* man, so with one voice he speaks

the many-timbred epics in Java's three-tiered tongue)—  
some kind of specters  
ourselves. We hover about the somehow-still-living,  
hearing their mouth-music, understanding—maybe—  
their eyes, hoping they'll see we're white but loving.

How can we play a part? Acting is a kind of lying, but—  
we will not act this smile.

And the audience knows and returns it.

For here is a man  
propped against his alley fence, a line of struggling  
banana trees his back yard, saying  
(and we hope we have tears not simply  
from the smoke of a whole island burning its garbage),  
“Jesus bless you and your family for coming here.”

Truth are his eye-wrinkles and Beauty plays his face.  
Their lines say:  
only a Director divine—Incomprehensible—  
would dare to flash our names  
when the credits roll.

*2006*

*FINALLY, FALL*

When it starts to come,  
that which is infinite—which  
makes the shutter and jerk

of plants unveiled in lapsed time—  
shows omens. And life lies  
frozen like a storyboard frame

where the felt weight of words waits  
in punctuated bubbles. Lines of text  
appear as teeth marks

in the flesh of an un-ripened pear—  
the space between, the clean break,  
is as white as paper.

A nighthawk drops through the floodlit  
ceiling of Friday: night football  
players not knowing

its marionetted wings could bring  
feathers this close to facemasks  
then pull away like a bat

caught in the cold.  
A moose shows its shovel horns,  
stalking the shore in pine-shadow

black: a spectacle  
less savage than its own image  
moving on the empty eyes

of a lake house.  
A moon-cloaked elk ghost,  
bounds from its haunt,

imprints its shape on a car's panel  
with a noise as loud as a dream's door  
that slams shut one's sleep. Then it proves

its apparition:  
it's not dead;  
it's gone—

except the moon's eye  
in the rear-view that follows ahead  
like the headlight of a car not there.

Franklin's Gulls are flocking,  
making the earth their sea and eating the evening  
insects with their perfect blood bills.

A sunbolt holds back a hemisphere of cloud  
but is swallowed  
in the gold-tinged front of change.

*2006*

*A MISSOURI THANKSGIVING*

I walked a Mennonite furrow—  
midnight trees in creek creases

folded in fields like Mennonite dough.  
Snow came off quilted till

in patches at a time  
singing melting a capella,

running moon down the hill.  
Push-pin stars pinned a feather-cloud

shawl to a blue-black sky.  
The lights of day were hedge apples

under gray, cardinal on corn stalk  
sway, and gleam from a shad belly

flung under water churned by wind  
that made the boughs bounce

and bend like the undulating prayers  
of a King James tongue.

*2006*



*AFTER HUGHES*

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

BOOM—

Communitistic bulk of dilapidated brown-  
stones-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Heads bobbin' in the wide streets; I'm the only white  
one-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Bangladeshi on the corner sellin' cherries by the pound

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Buy a picture of a slave lynched ten feet off the ground

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Haze buzzin' 'round the weeds where someone used to live

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Like the ghost-gray image on a glass plate nega-

tive-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

After Hughes I'm thinkin' *sugared-over syrupy sweet*

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

'Cause Apollo's on a vein pumpin' straight from 42<sup>nd</sup>

Street-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Dreams are unshelved items strewn across a deli floor

BOOM-BOOM

cla-kack

clack clack cla-kack

Rung up and out the door before they find out who they're waitin'  
for-BOOM  
cla-kack  
clack clack cla-kack

*Dusky sash across Manhattan trippin' up my memory's feet*  
BOOM-BOOM  
cla-kack  
clack clack cla-kack

Tied tight by the 8-year-olds who taught me this beat!  
BOOM-BOOM  
cla-kack  
clack clack cla-kack

BOOM-BOOM  
cla-kack  
clack clack cla-kack

BOOM-BOOM!

2007

*IN ARABLA, RECITING SHAKESPEARE*

I was convinced of the music  
of poetry  
when apart from the party  
on the tide-drained beach  
I twirled her under  
the arch of my arm's reach.

Our recitations were  
as awkward  
as those breaking  
waves on the Gulf,

but still

without thinking

we danced to their rhythms  
or the poetry  
or both.

*2008*

## GIRLS AND ME

Italiana, with green eyes like the shutters of her country, who can only properly pour her spirited speech into her phone if she takes it from her ear and holds it to her mouth, imploring it to listen—she is no doubt a model but isn't embarrassed by the fleck of guacamole at the corner of her mouth that almost matches her uncanny eyes. She comes back to my table after ten minutes in the bathroom to wish me good luck in Calabria, her feet aligned just so under all her angled features. Afro-Cuban waitress, too kind for her beauty, eyes light, shimmering brown. She's unavoidable. She sits the Italiana next to me as a congenial gift, but I wish it's her. The Latina, too, with perfect shoulder blades—her smile likely says that she thinks no one thinks she's beautiful. Crista, clean and small, perfectly plays the part of not playing a part. When she plays her bass, she wears black net tights and wonders why the boys won't let her be. *Haven't they seen a girl in a band?* she says. Well, yes, but... Elizabeth, cleaner and smaller, up from two hours of sleep on a community center floor, bright and perfect, dark-rimmed glasses and white scarf, speeds me to the station through rain with ease *parce-que je suis une femme*, she says. Anne-Laure, mother from Mauritius, and more flirtatious, less Swiss, I guess. Elsa who can't stop moving to some secret music, hair so thick and springy and always pulled up so her big hoop earrings can always bounce too. She rocks her legs back and forth even as she eats her ciabatta. Her favorite flower is a *Rose de Noël*. Jessica, infectiously happy, so frank about the pimple on her nose, so sweet that I covet it all for me, but it's for everyone. And then

*Ecco le mie amiche della spiaggia. Lucia, la sola persona che parla Inglese in Scalea—bella pelle e bello sorriso. Tina, famosa per suoi ciglia. Veronica, la cucitrice, troppo carina e parla Russo. Mama Maria—sono senza parole—molto buona cuoca e perfecta... Voi siete una benedizione da Dio!*

I could fall in love with all of them—  
maybe I have.

But their faces are fading. I sit backwards for the whole length of Italy—Domodossola to Scalea—so I'm leaving something, not going somewhere. And all I'm left with is something invisible like the soothing pressure of angles not quite natural: a plane pushing higher, a banking train. I let them go; I let it push me like a companion to the window so I can sleep.

2009

## *JANUARY*

A January of jilted dreams  
In this, the first of Mays  
Since I've seen myself it seems  
Through a Mediterranean haze.

I walk the snows of Lebanon,  
Striped white shoulders of scree  
Like strands to string my life upon  
Of cirrus up-conjured for me.

I've seen the same striations  
On mackerels' opal backs  
That break a brine's summation  
Into vast and the lined with black.

Emergent as they are—  
Patterned skin or patterned ground—  
A lone, unblemished bar  
Is only by its inverse found.

So in supernal contradiction—  
Alpine here and, there, that shore—  
I stand in a sort of fiction  
In this May month, my Janus, my door

And think, as it swings, of beginnings,  
Of middles, of snow, of sod,  
Of stripes, of the world, of its spinnings,  
And the beauties of a two-faced god.

*2009*



## *CARRYING ART*

Winter trees to me  
will always be  
upward lifted hands.

And what was, I thought, impenetrably  
A wall with glow worms and dark stories  
now frames, with many angled joints,  
a snow-laden vineyard, a town below,  
a great gray lake, and mountains beyond.

In their tangle of fingers so many  
things reside—  
a joy, a sorrow, and just now over  
a heron glides...

Then in some ice-jagged canal cutting through furrows,  
he's hunched over like a ragged gray wizard  
and I see him from a passing train.

His gray is matched above, but the eye must pass  
seasons: sodden green, then green and gold, then old  
grape-leaf gold, then, signaled by gray, pillows  
and painted white of snow on evergreen bows.

It was there, far above there,  
where I carried art.

It was unfinished, two-and-a-half meters wide,  
and caught the wind like a sail,  
or a kite if it had been smaller  
or I had been taller.

*I suppose everyone knows  
that unfinished art is the artist standing naked,  
but a different naked than the finished.  
It's the difference between skin laced for a lover  
(or fully exposed for a medical something) and the marvel  
of the human form, brazen and beautiful.*

Nonetheless, it wasn't my first time,  
but it may have been my last. Now pushed,  
now pulled, by this painted sail, the person laid bare  
in my hands, I finally laid her down with sore  
biceps and tried to look at it all.  
And there was too much so I told at least  
the undried paint (layered over what may or may not hold me):

“Tell me you had some cream in a chocolate thimble in Gruyere  
...and then...and then Venice with colors and cold air.  
Piazza San Marco. The yellow of the chairs  
and skillful composition. And of course those are  
the same ball-lights hanging in the upside-down arches  
that hung right-side-up in our bathroom.  
And the yellow.  
And what an odd and perfect  
color reflected in the rain water.  
And the yellow again, joined by blue, and  
the movement of hard hats in a gondola.  
The same blue that made the moored boat join the shimmer  
of Canale della Giudecca. The door buzzers and even the orange

of whatever someone was drinking on the sun-drenched table...  
and the everything...and the snow.”

*It was as almost-frightful and familiar  
as the click and tap  
of loose strands against childhood windows,  
things tossed in the same winter wind.  
And at times back then  
those pane-tapping things  
were the bony knuckles of trees.*

*And what brought fear then brings peace now,  
but the peaceful then is scary somehow.  
But this is just one paradox of change  
—that tales and magic lands hold the fearfully strange.*

Having seen some Gruyere, some Venice, some snow,  
I was back to the snow at hand...We had lurched  
and staggered up an exposed ridge, strapped (except for me)  
with avalanche beacons. We made a sidewalk over cornices  
on either side, mounting in treacherous places their sculpted crest curls.

Any exposed skin was pricked to numbness by wind  
*(and it's good to crouch in terror before nature,  
in a terror that as little as a light shaft might mend).*

A makeshift cross was at the summit  
—in a kind of glow—  
materializing through horizontal snow.

*And then I didn't see it, but Jupiter, too, was on the upslope.  
I saw him later in France through a white-bearded man's  
white telescope.*

*It was a thumbprint of bright  
and its fingers, some satellites,  
were perfect pinprick fingernails of light,  
one on the left and three on the right.*

And then the steep, pillowed backside, taking it in sweeping  
turns, a gradual descent through darkling forest and glade  
with happenstance chalets. And finally through silent pine  
corridors dark with the full night and lavish flakes again  
that were lit in the warm twin shafts of headlights.  
The mountainside farmstead, layers peeled off  
and steaming on ice-cold entryway tile,  
a vat of thick soup and checkered bread with rosemary

—and me, in front of a wood stove sandwiched cozily  
between women I've wanted—and they've wanted me—  
but now I can't have, and if only  
on the inside,  
I laughed...

And then I was standing  
with the one on my right  
on a train platform weeping  
at God the Great,

her cold black hair tangled  
in wool and my fingers  
while behind, almost unnoticed,  
bare-branched trees lingered  
against moss-flecked cliffs  
and let loose their crooked songs.

*Then the train carried  
us:  
two unfinished works  
to stand naked before the world.*

2009

*ALL I NEED*

All I need  
Is the shadows of leaves,  
Cats lapping at puddles,  
Clothes lifting on breeze,

Clouds  
Shifting shapes  
On and off the moon,  
And a blue bright light  
Telling rain, *Come soon.*

All I need  
Is tea with sage,  
A bent beached table,  
A wind-whipped page

To read  
On and on  
How our human heart stirs,  
While, across, a friend's face  
Gives me hers.

All I need  
Is guitar and drum  
To pound out praise  
Where there might be none,

To play  
On and on  
Till strings twang, skins burst  
Bringing brazen best  
To tell off the worst.

All I need  
Is what makes a bird,  
Fuel to make wings flap,  
A voice to be heard,

To cry  
On and on  
With color and crown  
Until a wind too big comes  
And blows me down.

*2010*

*I FEEL A LIST COMIN' ON*

I feel a list comin' on—  
With so much beauty come and gone.  
Yet there's still so much that's still so strong.  
I feel a list comin' on.

And if I don't record this,  
There'll be other things I'll miss,  
As magic and mundane as my lover's kiss.  
If I don't record this.

So—I saw the moon and a street light,  
Each with its own piece of night.  
I got them all mixed up, moon was so bright.  
I saw the moon and a street light.

I slept in my clean white bed—  
Head at the foot and feet at the head.  
It was so soft with my limbs all spread.  
I slept in my clean white bed.

I was naked (I should've said)  
In that clean, wide, white bed,  
Like you come in at birth and go out when you're dead.  
I was naked (I should've said).



I watched the world wake up one day:  
Bird's first cry and sun's first ray.  
It made me jump in the sea and the salt and the spray.  
I watched the world wake up one day.

I felt the air and I felt the sun  
Make a strange mix that made them one:  
My first sure sign that autumn had come.  
I felt the air and I felt the sun.

I saw wisps of clouds way up high:  
Pale pink and blue with palms nearby.  
I had waited long, so they heard me sigh.  
I saw wisps of clouds way up high.

Then that very same Moon that played with the street light  
Came through a crack in my curtain the next night.  
She, naked as I—and my bed still white—  
Sank into pink as the world woke up bright.  
I felt the fresh air and up came the sun,  
And for then and for there, my list was well done.

*2010*

## *LE BALLET DE LA CHAUVE-SOURIS*

We walked through feathered ferns  
And tufted grass, blond and green,  
Then to the utter brink and turned back  
To see what could be seen:  
Above a cushioning cloud  
And insignificant amidst the trees  
Was our unlikely peach-colored cottage  
Perched above vast terraces of tea.

A small dog had led us there,  
Waiting while the weather changed,  
His springy paws pausing  
And squinty eyes squinting  
In a mist that became a smatter of rain.

We were guests (and had the option to fear),  
And the dog's small companions made  
It intimately clear: a toad warming  
Beneath my discarded jeans, a snail  
Sampling the bright pink soap  
(By his slimy means).

But we did our tactful best  
To make it ours, knowing very well it wasn't:  
We lit some small candles. And on the strand  
Of colored lamps that had been hung from the eaves,  
Some bulbs were lit while some were burnt:

So we changed the ones that were  
With the ones that weren't. Then we sat back  
And learnt that with little delay,  
The all-wall window had been made a stage  
For some obscure nature play—this  
Would be The Bat Ballet.

The winged dancer must have been waiting  
For her cue, for out she fluttered to find  
The moths that fluttered toward the light,  
Drawn by colored halos  
In the cloud-bank just behind.  
The close night-cloud drew the light,  
The light a moth, the moth a dancing bat,  
And it all drew us as back we sat, kept the curtains  
Un-drawn and watched on:

From spectators to backstage,  
It was us (with toad and snail, and dog curled tightly,  
Nose to tail), a bunched-curtain window frame,  
A mist-speckled pane (to keep back the rain),  
A black and delicate marionette,  
Exiting, entering, stage right then stage left  
(Then the eave where lamps sent timid glow  
Into a featureless backcloth clouding the world's end,  
Another edge of the same brink where ferns curled over  
And grass over-bent)...

So really nothing much  
To cushion us from the unknown—  
Except a small beauty:

Le Ballet de la Chauve-Souris.

But then is it ever different  
When we make a home out of you and me?

*2010*

*A DAY WHEN CREATURES FOUND THEIR WAY*

*As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage  
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells—*

-G.M. Hopkins

It was a day when creatures found their way—  
By fate perhaps. A fish was first to fly  
For freedom when a fraction of his shoal  
Made frantic fin-prints in the sloping sand.  
He flapped, flipped, cut a channel through half-mud,  
And as the hand went beach to burlap bag  
With yet another of his frightened friends,  
A rogue ripple leapt up and helped him in.  
(He'll never swim so close to shore again.)  
Then five white-cheeked and winged musicians—  
Magicians who break day's heat into song  
And make a dust-choked desert breathe—were next  
To fly from cage to crowns of palm to free  
Not just themselves but, too, the me of me.  
They had beaten black feathers, wings and tail,  
Until they tattered, not a little like  
The litter that scattered in the gutter  
Beside the supermarket dumpster, where  
A man makes ignorant income from this  
Miracle: that behind wire they still sing.  
I suppose poor pay but small attention  
To the imprisonment of precious things—

Just like the rich. Since I'm considered such  
(And it's much, much easier to free birds  
Than people), I readily bought them all  
And promptly lifted every latch, then watched  
*(What is there more moving than what I watched?)*  
Five lives that once were bound and now were free,  
Singing from the top of the nearest tree.  
So new and immediate were their songs,  
I hoped they paused, like the fish, to not forget  
That one should stay far, far away from nets.  
Before, I had tried to reason with the man,  
But he just couldn't understand the worth  
Of native birds, or maybe English words,  
Or both. Let the act stand then symbolically,  
For captive tomorrow, five more might be.  
But might justice this once have the wherewithal?  
*The one tattered the worst was also small.*

So the spirit pent up in me that longs  
To lift, though grounded still, more lightly went.  
I crossed the highway to the sea to put  
Tactful space between the deed and me.  
But then the sea again reminded me: that day  
A fish had been given his life again.  
He played out somewhere there beneath those waves,  
A boundless texture: green and blue and gray.  
That's when a friend nudged me and said, "Aren't those  
The kind of birds that you just bought and freed?"

“You’re right,” I remarked, “but that’s sort of strange—  
Five together like that I’ve never seen.”  
We’re so quick to call out coincidence,  
So who was I to think that the wilder ones  
Might see it fit to offer thanks to me?  
The birds I often praise, but this time *they*  
Lined up atop a light post and let free  
A bold and bubbling *thank you very much*.  
I stood there humbled, not sure what to say,  
Even thought, *Was it possible at all?*  
But there to persuade, lagging close behind  
Was the little one, so tattered, so small.  
Like him, we’re all creatures who day by day  
Break desperate wings to find a desperate way.

2010

TIM KOEHN is a teacher and freelance writer currently working in Lilongwe, Malawi. His wanderlust has taken him throughout Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. In the classroom, he does his best to explore literature's record of human experience and make it real for his students. In the summer, he divides his time between Cyprus, France, and Colorado, relishing the natural beauty of each. He wishes he could be tirelessly aware of everyday wonders and always content with the present. Read more at [timjkoehn.net](http://timjkoehn.net).