

# Poems

*by Kem Luther*

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## Catslide Mass

*Gloria*

Up, from the march of water,  
lapping at limestone cliffs,  
a green, garden peace  
floods this valley, murmurs:  
Seek no further. Cease.  
Here is once, always.

A kingfisher's sudden ratchet  
echos from the banks – question;  
barked staccato banter  
from a squirrel – reply;  
pause, then intermitted tapping  
by a puzzled downy;  
under all, susurrus  
of a river, awed.

Black caddis flies,  
thronging water-souls,  
blink on spruce boughs;  
light wind sets in motion  
the gimlet-leaved willow.  
In the ebullient rill  
rocks ply upstream (how?).  
From nodding green crowns,  
glories descend,  
soft hallelujahs fall.

Over cedar peaks,  
Heaven, they say--  
but not today.  
An angel,  
however careful,  
would shatter all.

*Kyrie*

Silhouettes of cedar  
loom in the August dusk.  
Wind-riffled poplars  
keep solemn watch.  
Against my cuffs,  
grasses whisper,  
gone to thatch.  
From the candles  
of balsam pine  
sallow-eyed grackle  
gazes, songless.  
Tree swallows glance  
in their sweep and swerve.  
A damselfly spins,  
steals a look,  
hastens on.  
To each I am open,  
a cracked book.

What in me  
there is to praise  
high-toned cicadas  
already hymn.  
But soon night  
and taunting crickets  
will number all my sins.

*Credo*

We startled each other  
when I opened the screen.  
He was first to act,  
I to conceive  
where the act would lead.

He bounds along the deck rail  
to where it curves toward me,  
small paws snapping  
through wheeling haunches.

At the turn, the choice:  
the nearest, flimsy branch  
ten of his lengths away,  
risk on the rocks below.  
But in his deep squirrel script  
it is written that he will try.  
My breath catches  
for what has to be,  
does not have to be.

A pause before the leap.  
He cocks, gauges, springs.  
His torso twisting, uncurling,  
until, at full extension,  
the sign of the great dare,  
the wait for judgement,  
a prayer to the frictive air.

One claw catches,  
pulls the branch down.  
Another finds purchase,  
a tuck and roll  
eating momentum,  
then a miraculous frog walk  
to a firm limb,  
always glancing back,  
black eyes  
accusing the cause,  
shaming the doubt.

*Sanctus*

This is winter, the deep.  
Hibernation  
surd and profound  
has taken me by stealth.

At the window I overlook  
a skiff of new snow  
pocked this morning  
by the leaping track of squirrels.  
Five quiet geese  
march steadily  
through the lidded sky.  
Olive finches  
scoop to the feeder,  
thieving chickadees  
steal what is given  
more freely than it is taken.  
On the ground a diffident junco  
scavenges oil-seed.

Were I awake  
all would be mine  
for having been here.

I move in slowest circles.  
I face no direction.

*Agnus*

The mantis god in autumn  
pumped a foam of eggs  
within our hedge.  
Now in spring I carry it,  
on budded privet branch,  
to stand in glass,  
a two-quart spectacle.

Mid-may the progeny emerge.  
Finding in glass palace sparse fare,  
ravenous divinities enact  
a solemn ritual of survival,  
the many for the few,  
eater and eaten  
invited as one diner.

Sayings of the wise  
argue a larger audit:  
*The grains are ground  
to yield the loaf.  
The grapes are bruised,  
the wine ferments*

But I am transfixed,  
seized by a gnawed leg.  
My cannibal eyes  
eat their fill.

When I was Greek

*Tomb 2, Vergena, Kalyx*

Now am I  
a silver kalyx  
cast for empty balance;  
deposited unquaffed  
I spill out blood-red wine,  
imaginings  
of partly-conquered lands.

O set me hollow down  
with such a ringing paeon  
that all who ride  
this kingly board  
may wonder  
by what God or hero  
I am drained.

*Iliad*

Where is Achilles?  
The hollow ships singed  
with the torches of Trojans,  
Hector scattering  
the Danaan host,  
Briseis fenced  
by King Agamemnon,  
Briseis that once  
Achilles had farmed.  
Do ten years of fighting  
and drilling and boasting  
mean less than the funk  
of Thetis' proud son?

On Illium's tower  
a Trojan boy howls,  
hides his face  
in Andromache's stole.  
Hector the wild,  
the high-crested stallion,  
has loosened the wit  
of his prescient foal.

Patroclus is whacked  
from Achilles' bright armor,  
confused and bejigged  
by Apollo the sun.  
In them he trusted,  
these gods of Olympus,  
but silly Achaean,  
he picked the wrong ones!

What for humanity?  
Torrents of blood  
fill Illion's plain.  
What for divinity?  
Gods bicker, then dicker  
their servants away.  
We could be wiser,  
do better than they.

Undo Medusa  
and with a look  
turn me flesh  
for I am  
by all that is ugly  
bestoned  
to my brittle  
porcelain bones.

No trap I set to catch you.  
You came with plainest grace.  
The first thing that I noticed  
was a light about the place,

a curious cast of shadows,  
warmth where once was chill,  
then rising like an ocean  
when all the waves are still

love overtops the pediments.  
A tide to end all tide,  
flows into my temple  
and nestles at my side.

The mind that knows itself can be  
at once the fish, at once the sea,  
so Plato said.

But one who looks  
through both ends of the microscope  
breaks the law that Beauty broke  
when of her loveliness she spoke.

*Antisyllogism*

“I am a man.  
Men are mortal.”

So I am mortal.  
I would go logically,  
like Socrates,  
the end of a sound syllogism.

But Socrates went  
as he was:  
logical and *old*,  
a conclusion full of days  
as of reason.

From my  
undistributed terms,  
from my false causes  
nothing follows,  
just me,  
QNEED.

*Reparation*

Spare us your honesty.  
Better twenty masks  
of painted personalities  
than a ruse of simplicity:

Simple morality, calling  
kings what they are,  
stirring simple malice  
serving heads on platters;

Simple curiosity, seeking  
from ancient shepherds  
truths once hid  
by kind complexities;

Simple innocence  
at last evoking  
a jealousy repressed  
in moorish hearts.

All simple things disturb  
the fragile harmonies of fate.  
Reparations wind  
across the trackless spaces  
where Heraclitus frowns  
at smiling Buddha faces.

*Ceres*

My house is full.  
And yet you bring  
endless offerings.  
Shall I devise  
larger temples  
just to house  
a votive clash  
of love and things?  
Quit your lathe  
and wheel and loom  
Give rest to all  
the lesser parts  
and bring the best:  
your beating heart  
echoing in an empty room.

*Artemis*

She looms aft  
languid in the gloam,  
heaved over the horizon,  
on the remorseless  
mill of the gods,  
as though she were  
the world's bronze truth  
and we its tin words.  
The dark sea  
rises to greet her.  
In vain we point  
our bow toward Ithaca.  
Against such summons  
the pearled tears of my Penelope  
are weightless dew.

Quandam Physics

*Viscosity*

Out there,  
between the flung stars,  
wide expanses  
of next to nothing,  
an intensity of indensity,  
empty schoolyards  
where physicists play  
games of momentum  
and mass.

In the air, though,  
old ether rules;  
ranks of viscosities  
are trouble to our Newtons.  
Here swallows scull  
through fluids  
of the upper firmament.  
Fledglings step  
from tossing nests  
and walk on less than water.

And what are fish and fry  
but birds of graver ether?  
To them our air  
is nearly vacuum,  
reconnoitred  
by spawning salmon  
with popping ears.

Below,  
in the dense consciousness  
of rock and stone,  
the earth itself  
is rarest ether  
from core to crusty shale.  
Granite boulders,  
as they bubble upward  
in slow rows  
to frothy moraine,  
shoulder our ghostly lives  
with deep and cold disdain.

I am a watcher of clouds  
that roil through the roan sky,  
an auditor of pauses in the static  
of frantic conversations.

I see shadows move  
at the dead of noon  
and hour hands fly  
around shining clock faces,  
trees growing like beans;  
the moon is a blur,  
far galaxies spin.

I grab my seat tight  
and squeal in delight  
for the next dip and turn.

Steward, when  
six miles high  
you offered me  
the tray of clinking cokes  
for a mild moment  
a hundred tiny cups  
of grape communion juice  
swishing a hundred  
harmonious swishes,  
was hand-to-handed  
down a creaking pew,  
reconstituted God  
come to me friendly, free.

Fingers absentmindedly  
trace snaking lines  
of wind velocity.

Here an imperfect circle  
in whose centre  
I was born,  
and numbers that I touch  
as though in braille,  
quantities that argue  
the constant wind  
over this lonely place  
blows like nowhere else.

This I can say for the wind  
as it leached life water  
from the parched skin of the land  
until its substance  
was light and lifted dust,  
until the plow's furrow  
would not hold its sides,  
for the wind  
that bent the trees  
to sweep the ground  
that scraped from their roots  
the succouring soil.

This I can say,  
that as I leaned into the wind,  
my uprooted feet dancing a tack  
into the gusts, I knew.  
I knew that those who would go straight  
must veer a little,  
that not all secrets stay hidden  
in the sifting earth.

*Elegy*

A graveyard of gravestones  
reposes in this landfill,  
memorials to their own demise  
among clumps of sumac  
and shrubby poplar.

Many are marred:  
there a Smith chiseled  
beside Smythe, here  
a Coper (Cooper?),  
and Johnso gapes  
from this marble face.  
Some, struck perhaps  
to their stony gut  
by the weight of the name  
they were assigned to bear,  
parted, chipped or cracked.  
Others seem whole;  
did those who ordered them  
miss a last appointment?  
Or did they change their minds  
about granite immortality,  
casting their lot with tales and books  
and sifted memories?

The silence about these rocks  
suggests no sacredness;  
finding my contemplation  
merely worldly,  
I shift across  
to the other slope  
and leave by the lower road.

A harvest moon.  
Wild geese call in the twilight.  
The hairs on my neck bristle.  
I would fly I would  
were I not  
promised to the rock.  
Like dry yellow moss  
I wait the rain.  
Never enough  
Never too soon.

*At Rembrandthuis, Sonnet*

How scored and scarred we are, how striped,  
as though we bred between peeled poles.  
Our limbs are lurid lectures in anatomy.  
Our spread-out sinews tableaux  
where painters school physicians.  
August-worn foliage, chewed, reduced  
in nibbles, carrion for a thousand  
hungry species, Cain-marked and consumed.

For every portrait limb caressed in lace  
A farmer's hands, my father's hands, which chaffed  
my child-soft fingers with their rough embrace  
were gauge of truth. Let lesser Rembrandts leave  
the gaze askant, see carcasses less red:  
the master dares to look upon the dead.

Do not speak  
for anyone but yourself.  
The promises you make  
will outlive the earth.  
Do not listen  
to hear yourself praised –  
in the weakness of age  
you will lose  
your dignity  
before  
the desire of it.

The lies of reputation  
never come too late.  
The timing of love  
is impeccable.

*Autumn Lady*

You are a field  
of proud goldenrod  
set in purple aster  
and laced with the wild, white flowers  
of stubborn Queen Anne.  
You have the back-sweet flavor  
of ripe tomato,  
the tart snap taste  
of a winesap apple.  
You bloom in your autumn.  
This is the season  
for which you were made.  
Be a blaze  
against my cold  
my winter arms.

*Contextual*

Love  
we breathe,  
compassion  
we walk in,  
knowing it  
hardly more  
than we feel  
the muffled march  
of blood  
within our veins.

If once we knew  
what hunger  
inclines one life  
to another,  
why lonely souls  
think death  
less lonely,  
we would know,

that love,  
large wrapping  
all our huddled  
lives about,  
finds beauty  
in strange plainness  
rarity  
in quantity.

Terminal velocity,  
they say, is why  
a mouse falling down a well  
no matter how deep, bounces,  
scrambles to its feet  
and skitters away.

Do passions too  
feel such bounds?  
Does envy cease  
increasing? Does hate recoil  
when forced too far?  
Is every fear  
fused for safety's sake?

Will love as well  
seek once its speed,  
then sink relaxed, a callous  
and comfortable nearness,  
to creep away  
at the dark bottom  
half noticed and half felt?

O let the gravity of love  
exceed the margin,  
though it blast me hard  
against unyielding stone.  
I would rather die  
than be alone.

## Songs for Mystical Children

My father, watching  
the six o'clock weather,  
divining the signs  
at the south picture window,  
with your knowledge  
of highs and lows  
and unpredicted snows,  
with your twenty years  
at the blaring altar,  
from chair and bed  
watching the weather,  
spare me all,  
the glare ice,  
the blinding squall  
of wind and snow together.

My father, walking  
on crystal winter night  
by cold Orion,  
the dipper dipping  
the north horizon,  
tell me of ancient weather  
when it mattered  
to horse and boy  
and long-haired cattle,  
my father, my priest  
of the six o'clock weather.

The tooth exhibited  
on your trembling fingers:  
what does it mean to you  
to lose these human parts?

You don't remember  
how we feared the worst  
thought we had lost you  
to a late frost.

But now the fruit is set  
I will listen to your excitement.  
And talk about sly and generous fairies  
and teeth to come.

Guard your fine skin,  
ten fingers, supple joints.  
Soon enough you will find  
these fickle fairies  
don't really cherish  
worn and punctured parts,  
or failing senses  
lost along the way.

Ride a roan horse,  
fly at the speed of anger  
over burned fields  
and cindered ruins;  
be the cause of change.

Ride a grey horse  
and do not rein  
to the pull of rapid fun  
and clean alternatives;  
be two-minded, quiet.

Ride a brown horse,  
know the weight  
of fate, the feel  
of strong disappointment;  
be dark and full of fear.

Ride a black horse;  
thrill to the snap  
and reach of life  
supporting a small self;  
be more than you ever can.

But once,  
once before you've grown,  
ride a white horse.  
Pray without saying,  
ride without knowing,  
be with your mount  
one act, one motion,  
one galloping horse-and-woman.

Burn less brightly, Liebling.  
Dim your light a little  
now and then.

The firefly you handed me  
that August night,  
the one, you know, whose tail  
glowed with steady radiance?  
It did not glow  
for love of you.  
No, you injured it  
when your joys came together--  
his to flash,  
yours to catch.  
Now failing essence gives itself  
to strange and constant light.  
Child, burn not so bright.

An earthquake shakes  
the tipsy ground,  
tumbles buildings,  
heaves them down  
onto fragile  
thin-shelled folks.

When Humpty Dumpty  
took his fall,  
Humpty fell  
and not the wall.  
Can Red Cross gauze  
mend broken yolks?

Theatres of less and more  
are playing just outside my door.

Can I be what I am not,  
open my door, crack my heart?

Winds that ring my scone about  
will gust a little candle out.

*Arithmetic*

When Christopher Cat had all of nine lives  
he cared very much for none.  
Two lives were spent on eating sour fish,  
three more on tease-dog-and-run,  
another pursuing a fine Persian wife,  
and two fleeing half-Persian sons.

When one life was left then Christopher Cat  
regretted the eight that were gone,  
and wished he and lived his lives so well  
as those who had only one.  
When that life was past, then Christopher died  
a death that was nine lifetimes strong.

*Eli at One*

All my hair knows where to grow  
upon its field of skin.  
A plumping pumpkin is my skull  
and all the pulp within.  
My hands find out the fairest place  
to ripen on their vines.  
And as they turn my joints stake out  
perfect contour lines.

I plunder cenozoic time,  
consume ancestral space.  
No thought so mighty as the blaze  
enkindled in this place.  
Genetic fire is in my bones,  
tinder my caress.  
Come climb upon these altar stones,  
come feel me burn and bless.

Only one wolf ranges  
where the wolf pack prowls.  
Through the throat of one wolf  
the newborn wolf cub growls.

Desire of only one wolf  
snarls in rut and heat  
along the forest traces  
where first the young wolves meet.

When old wolves seek the river,  
to sleep upon their paws,  
only one wolf rises,  
to lope through Asgard halls.

Rabbit seeks his thousand holes.  
Hedgehog won't come out.  
Tonight on moonlit fields  
Wolf begins to hunt.

*Wiegenlied*

Sleep, my child, my little one, sleep.  
The oceans of night are wide and deep.  
The shores of the morning are far from your cot.  
Perhaps you will find them, perhaps you will not.

Between there and here are the storms of your dreams,  
the fear-driven waves, the dark, where it seems  
that light will not come, that day will not dawn,  
where hope is all lost, and sweet love is gone.

The risk that you take is the risk that is mine.  
In hardly two hours I follow behind.  
Look for me there, out on the high water,  
two boats and one voyage for father and daughter.

A man sits at his counting desk,  
a man of strength and power.  
A man sits at his grey steel desk,  
counting hour by hour,  
counting soldiers, counting guns,  
a number at each breath,  
putting life against a life,  
death against a death.

A man sits at his counting desk,  
a man of wealth and power.  
A man sits at his wide oak desk,  
counting hour by hour.  
He numbers men who number guns,  
he barter near and far,  
trading lives for maps and flags  
with words of peace and war.

I sit at my counting desk,  
and count the men of power.  
I count the men of strength and wealth,  
the men who deal in war.  
The first man has his numbered guns,  
The second has his power.  
I have just my counting desk,  
counting hour by hour.

I found your Dr. Seuss book.  
I found it on the floor!  
I put it on the second shelf  
beside your closet door.

I found it on the hallway floor  
and put it on the shelf,  
where it's mostly 'sposed to be,  
but wouldn't be, if not for me!

And...if...I...find...that...book...again,  
and...if...it's...on...the...floor...

I'll put it on the shelf again,  
beside your closet door.

As often as you leave it there  
or anywhere at all,  
on the dusty stairs again,  
along the upper hall,  
I'll seek your precious book,  
my love, and put it on that shelf,  
where clean and high and safe it lies  
and you will find it when you look.

I fret about this picking up,  
but books are easy-finding things,  
hardly lost, just left behind  
and not put back by running minds  
with younger, better thoughts to think  
than where a book belongs.

Girls have books to make them wise,  
fathers, daughters, for exercise.