



Love,
Despite
the
Ache

POEMS BY

Chris
Pannell

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Prelude

*We defy augury. There is special
providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come;
if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now,
yet it will come. The readiness is all.*

HAMLET (5.2.215-18)

A Small Wooden House

In your heart is a small wooden house
and every morning tiny bird puppets come out
to wake you with their sharp, feathered calls.

Their voices, like a mother and father
nudge you and jostle – tousle your hair. And all
the while, a ticking clock.

One day the house collapses
you wake in shock, the earth has quaked
and you – in a futon bed – are at sea.

The same enormous sea
you crossed as a child, so deep and green
beneath the broad ship's churning propeller.

In the rubble of the house you search
for the wooden figures who named you
who called you awake, who fed you, so many mornings.

It is night. The music of their favourite recordings
plays, the falling chords swell into symphonies
in major keys. The rest of your life should be calling.

It is not.

Mother and Child

She holds his rosy head
in her cradling hand –
with the other she lifts his tiny body.
Sightless, he trembles.

The whole world
rests a minute, then tickles him.

Heir of her ambition, now bound in a blanket
the nails of his hunger are small
and sharp, so he can cling
to her when they travel.

Her obligation is a joy and she plans
to sweat and study and build
something of him
but there'll be no turning point
when he becomes like her.

He's already moving in another direction.
For the next few years, if her mind or heart
should leave him
he will die, and promptly –
but many crops grow in the human garden.
Boys burn bright and strong at night
and in daylight
sprout as weeds.

Two Photographers

*To pursue an image, even when the subject is close and compliant
can be difficult; to capture it well – a real achievement.*

JOHN PANNELL

We worked in the heat and sun
against the edge of the escarpment, trying to straddle
the drop that divides the city. He took
picture after picture.

His professional manner and classic cameras
reminded me of my late father – that I have
never stopped being the son of a photographer.

I was trying to recall what I had been taught as a boy
about direction of light and position –
the importance of background, how to compose.

I was pleased to be with this artist,
to be his subject, yet saddened by how much
I miss my father. The one who made the portraits
then left them behind, his own face hidden by hands
that hold the camera.

The one who taught me how to judge –
which eye to trust with the truth.

The Scrape of Bottom

When the earth rises and
hits the underside of your chassis
and you bounce to one side
skidding on springs you never knew –
almost into the ditch, then
you'll understand the suspension of belief.

As you wheel along
on three tires of confidence
scarcely fretting about whether
the fourth is still attached
to the out-of-sight far corner –
you are ready to meet
the out-of-control dump truck
of destiny.

Blocking your way are an oblivious
passel of pedestrians, dawdling, hindering
with their right-to-walk
your impatience and immortality.
The deafening scrape is followed
by silence, then a glance at your travelling companion
in your late-model sedan of good intentions.

Finally, you imagine the worst –
that when one of you falls in your living room
no one will be there to hear. Then, a phone call
ends the silence these words are trying to fill
the jangle of a tiny bell
the deathliest of sounds.

The Emptying Stars

Look for the girl with the sun in her eyes,

And she's gone.

LENNON-MCCARTNEY

“Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds”

Air

Sometimes a sign
of something.

In the schoolyard I swung
at a boy who ducked
and so, expecting his face
I connected with the air.

Above us that day, in what were once
the heavens, were also
dead uncles, grandparents and intangible gods
Connect the stars to see Orion
or the Southern Cross.

On Earth, announcers the size of mice
lived in little wooden receivers
my mother said. It was easier than
explaining radio as electromagnetic
wave frequencies below those of visible light
as my dad would say. I heard him when his
voice pushed air into my ear.
Singers and hockey play-by-play men
were on the air too, in far-off cities
where they'd been refined into pure message
an application of invisibility.

And when I learned signals could travel through space
between astronauts on the moon and Houston
I knew words and music would time travel too
even into memory
where they might be enjoyed
and then, as easily
forgotten.

Love, Despite the Ache

One dark-haired girl was so pretty
he could not let her pass again
so he summoned a smidgen of courage
to ask if she would see a film – with him
and his ache dissolved in her luminous Yes.

Years later an old cloth of dust had mysteriously
settled across my father's shoulders –
the nerve in mother's face was breaking –
shot.

She asked, through tears:
Am I cursed? For I was not always sour and miserable.

But what we witnessed thirty years ago
was the slowest of diagnoses
mother overtaken by a vengeful ghost
the specialist saying, You'll have to beg me to cut it
and she going to his surgery as clear eyed
as the girl of twenty who said Yes.

It's a shock that strikes, she said
then hides. I'm always the boxer who forgets to duck
being socked in the jaw all day.
God let me eat, let me tolerate the sound of my children
crying no, laughing no – let me put my ear
to their chests, hear their heartbeats
without you looking me in the face
wondering.

To my father, five nights before, she said:
It's asleep. What usually throbs is –
for the moment, patina and ache
almost gone. Let me love your body now
before mine goes crazy again.

In winter, when I was eight

my father and I would feel
the snugness of snow
around the house
without saying a word –
without reference to woollen or downy bed coverings
or fluff, or the float of dust in beams of morning sun.

Now I'm older than he was then:
bread crumbs and corn flakes have lately begun
to circle backwards in milk, are trying
to reacquire the crisp crunch of the package
as if Earth last night changed the tune and
the direction of spin on its axis.

The grapefruit he cut in half
and shared with me is too tart
though then it defined the breakfast of leisure
the sweet quintessence to which
all other breakfasts and all other sons aspired
as day after day we had to rush through
our first moments with each other
before he left for the city
before my school bus came.

You remind me of my brother Henry

my mother said, as she cut long green beans at the kitchen counter.
Her English brothers to me were mysteries, sailors, men of war.

At eighteen, I took a comfortable flight back to the country
that was home and away. Aunts and uncles spread across the map.
I was welcomed where I went. My mother had let story after story slip.

Henry in the British Merchant Navy. The Malta Convoy of 1942,
had to turn the tide of war in the Mediterranean, against German
Stukas screaming, diving, *death falling down upon you, and if they
didn't get you there were the U-boats*, secret, invisible, fatal.

At sixteen, he had been a gunner's mate. Their frigate
was sunk from under them. God plucked him from the oily water
at midnight, returned him speechless to Scotland: all nerves and
shivering, dressed in a bag.

My mother had watched
her mother take him in her arms.

At Sheerness a concrete seawall defends the town from flooding.
Wind at my face: then, up my back, like steel under sweater.
A sneeze. A freezing view of the wide, historic Thames.

Over a park pond, gulls lift themselves on the wind's back
navigate a watery sky like ghosts. You can be here or there.
The incessant sea.

Small buoys mark the shallow spots
where toy sailors with thirty-inch vessels
triangular sails like hankies, might go aground.

Men from the mill on their day off, happy
to be blown off their schedules of early to bed and early to rise.
They hold tired elbows and knees still, guide their models

of *Victory* and *Golden Hind*, move their surrogate selves
across rippling water, against a force that silently winds in the years
of their lives, like rigging on a reel, under a strong, bright sun.