

Ars Poetica

*30 poems in 30 days -
NaPoWriMo 2022*

Irene Toh



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All that is sayable begins with these two modes of attention and their prolific offspring. Begins, that is, with the givens of experienced, embodied existence and the responses we offer the world in return.

—Jane Hirshfield

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#1

You dabble in poetry too.
Maybe I'd evolved so as to be more
subtle? Is that a virtue, good Lord.
It is, if you're trying to convey something
not easily put in words.
A poet friend compared poetry to
comic strips, a quotidian thing.
Ephemera we'd noticed along the way
in a car, a bus, or a train.
Nothing of great importance like
the sun on your blotchy face.

#2

A half wind blew me and the weight shifted.
I had been quiet then did a strange singsong.
What sort of cabaret, you and I?
The audience half tittered.
Bacchanalian wind then did lift me.
Not saving myself up—my daily affections,
my prayers, my everything.
Anything halfway true would be suspect.
It's like a drooling, a weeping, a lame saying.
Only say the words to make it real
like *hello, bye-bye, see you*—
your mouth wouldn't run dry.

O poetry, I'm not cancelling you!

#3

The world is firm and exacting,
keeps ledgers or lumps of knowledge
so as to contrive a solution to
a problem about which you're
probably mistaken.

So you'd began to shake with
wish fulfilment.

It does this at spasmodic spells,
let things quickly move, stall, fail, move slowly,
then suddenly, inevitably, till most everybody
dies, like tactical chess.

Things are not meant to be set in stone.
Every stone shall not be unturned.

#4

I won't have you simpering.
We're meant to take the bull by the horns,
make lemonade from the given lemons so as to
put all worry and dust to the shade.
All this we took in our heads. We arranged
our lives and our stance, and wait for the sun
to appear as it does.
What's in your head I asked.
One episode in the past repeatedly
would brace the cold air
as we feed the winter birds.
We learned by grace listening from
a deep place. When everything was said a bright shearing
off and we stood watching a magpie perched.

#5

After being boxed in for two years
we thawed ourselves out, returned to
the other part of the world of which
we were so fond. So absurdly were we
set apart, the desolation inconceivable like
being in exile. Was it a test? Or a joke
to be dealt with so recklessly?
The world in a stranglehold.
Didn't it go for the jugular in the days
when nothing came to light?
The mall was boisterous, a defiance,
a surge in sudden reversals,
a yes-we-need-to-overreach.
Unsullied in the moment,
crawling out of the pandemic.

#6

We took a wrong turn on the highway
and stopped at the road shoulder.
Turned on the GPS. It said *turn left*.
In good timing as we saw a car turned
into a slip road, through a half-opened metal gate.
Turned we did anyway
and curved toward our destination.
That was just one small triumph
in a series of missteps. The first,
our known breakfast place closed
so we went further down the bend to
a roti prata joint, gained a mind-blown
breakfast win. I could talk right over you,
gushing about the day, but self-control
is godliness, did you say?

#7

She put out an invite and then took it back.
That was quite enough but then
she put it out again. Part of the erratic
shaping of her heart, who am I to say
to have your head examined
but it does feel weird.
What had caused this formality
when I wished for nothing
except good wishes. We were friends but
somehow got cancelled. *Sharing our joy*,
that was asked and of course given.
Not that it's any easier to imagine what
the truth was—you were trying to make
a good impression for your daughter's sake
and I was trying to put one foot ahead of the
other, a relief out of all proportion.

#8

I meant to make a great clatter in my poem,
do spirals around your brain as if a great complicity
curled from mine to yours, dear reader.
The words stalled unless some force like wind
move them with a meaning not to be subdued.
And then with a lowered voice you asked,
what do you mean. I deigned to answer, *however*
you want it to mean. It would be transformed
by the world in each our heads. Let meaning spread
like the branches hanging over the river
on a night of stillness, rustling.

#9

Things took on a regularity, me writing
back-to-back poetry.

My memory grew shaky. Yet dead things do
come up to the surface for an airing.

To them I said no thank you,
absorbed them like humus.

I wondered if at this age there's such a thing as
waiting for life to begin. Some say, *no such luck*.

Time carried too much load and our bodies are
full of crap. To our bodies we give thanks and say,
break down slowly so we can experience new worlds
or let an imaginary one glisten.

#10

If you want to see God's face
then look at a kingfisher, or a salmon
homing up into the spray. The heart,
as guarded as it is, knows what it knows.
From the abyss we're never quite safe
but for the seeing, before the dying,
any reason for being.

#11

The horse pitched forward, on and on,
till a hoof got bloodied in a jump.
Euthanise him! Collect the insurance payout?
The Welsh folks, half-coaxed, was enmeshed.
The dark horse won the grand race.
They sang “Delilah” in celebration and
I googled it and realized Tom Jones was Welsh.
Stories are what we’re after, post-pandemic
themes of community and connection.
The world knows just that much,
doesn’t know where it’s going with
inflation and Ukraine under siege.
There is a garter snake between the rails
and the world watches.

Note: Reference made to the movie, Dream Horse.

#12

We brought much food, sang some old songs
and caused the young ones to giggle.
You wanted to look at my materials and
read my poems, appreciated them while
the other friend, science and math inclined, paid
no attention except to the drawings I made.
It was good, shall we say, not suspecting
the decay. Shall we call it a values clashing like cymbals,
or signals, tenuous, untenable, how one lost control?
If we were still interested would it take more time
and energy than we're willing to risk?
That place became a graveyard.
No one wanted to say sorry.

#13

Having come this way looking, you too,
wanted to make music. The sibilant sounds,
the curtness of consonants, the pause before
the rush, the image that suffuses so there's no
need for words. The word is God isn't it?
This suited me too. Arranging the world by
the stories we tell, an assurance in language sawed
and well grained, right as rain. As squishy as shoes,
or mud, or the plump undergrowth;
as mossy as stones left unturned;
as muffled as a little cry.

#14

I write on the off chance that meaning comes like
the full moon's illumination. Isn't that what
you wanted me for and not let what had slipped
below the mind's surface be gone and
nothing gets written? You, dear reader, shall be put
out of earshot and left with not a thing to figure out.
It might leave me feeling cramped--
if I exuded excess glee with silly jokes or whatever,
I am just off kilter. I try paying attention to where
thought goes. Some days I grin and am
an amoeba floating in the sea.

#15

Is poetry an end in itself, something to look back on
when your face is a nest of wrinkles?

Would you be enthralled by what was written?

Will it be nothing of importance yet immense in
measuring some other immeasurable thing,
feelings once honored and then buried?

How very encouraging, a vessel that wasn't empty,
plastered with gold. So we write on.

The glamor of a ledger to say
we belong to ourselves, and each other.

Especially now, setting forth to the winter of our lives
was nothing going to happen?

We don't know just yet.

Please no spoilers.

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Everything we have lived and touched and learned from is
the knowledge brought to the moment of creative
making—emotional experiences, ethics, yearnings, heard
bird calls and tasted breads, the storehouse of learning.

—Jane Hirshfield

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#16

Once the house was full of my mother.
We trailed after her floral housedress
when she went through daily chores.
Voluble and stern so we'd cowered,
comforting when she sponged our fevers away.
A fraught relationship all the same.
Our ideas so differed in ways
that meant we were never close
except in that visceral way.
I learned to look out for myself.
If anybody's side was to be taken
it would be my father, the real balm.
His heart was there for me through the years.
He never pulled away even though
his later illness turned life into a dim sort of hole.
My mother did, hard, irrevocable,
setting us apart. I felt a strange tenderness
thinking of her missing my father
as the leaves became bare.

#17

I saw fresh faces on the bus, satchels slung,
chattering away, and got a fleeting sense of
my youthfulness past, and thought of
the sixty year old smiling public man
in Yeats's poem. Isn't seventy the new old
when there're pills to dam up that improbable faint light,
that broken rhythm? Perhaps a day when you woke up
to birds not singing, left you a chill.
You wondered where they went.
Of course they won't tell.

#18

We walked in the pitch dark, always stepped
on the shy mimosas, jumped across drains walking
that mile to school. My dad had woken us
up to make me and brother a glass of Milo
and I had my eyes closed changing into
a white and blue pinafore.

Somewhere down the road the sun turned brazen.
Then it was some food and a chocolate bar at recess
and ice lollies sauntering home.

I learned of the birds and the bees in primary six,
found it to be disgusting, shrieked across the hallway.

Mad giggles as someone had passed
an adult magazine down the line.

Existential questions reared its head.

The days when we knew nothing much in
a childhood gone for good.

#19

Maybe you thought I'd quietened down.
Not quite. I had been writing in secret,
not wilfully, but heeding the voice
countering the other one saying,
this work is so peripheral it is
practically frivolous. Still would you grant
that it is some kind of unicorn.

Like travelling to Neptune—Brad Pitt's father, the
astronaut who'd been furthest to a planet
in our solar system. Granted that's sci fi but we're
imagining it as a real story now.

What I try to do here keeping tabs,
speaking what's not been spoken.

Note: Reference made to the movie, Ad Astra.

#20

My east-facing window caught streaks of orange.
The morning thick with expectancy.
The halo of sun, the moon grown distant
until it returns—a formality of behaviour,
a conventionality that reigned.
Some things are unquestionable
yet who's to say? Sun, moon, stars,
and the laws of nature. Other things
we negotiate with, in the context of more things.
I don't mean to disdain conservatism but
openness, the heart be the gauge and if
there is no heart then where are the rays?
We are beings characterized like this:
stuffed yet starved, laden yet bare, repeatedly
injurious like grime, something sun must have
known about for a long time.

#21

The tide had gone out.
We stood in the mud flat.
Just last week a man was swimming,
bobbing his head beside the mangrove;
now the aerial roots stood in clumps.
Things could change in a week,
or a day, or a blinking second.
Once I had gone out with Tom,
that was his name I think.
I corrected his essays, and then we'd been
out once to the sea, bobbing around like
that man. It felt like a first date,
as rudimentary as a stair.
And there was my dad asking me to
hold my liquified breath under the dark.
I cleaved to him and learned to be one,
a swimmer. Why do I stitch up the past,
between the deep blue sea and me?

#22

She said she never reads fiction.
Not all the underground bounty she'd
never found useful nor practical—only
I said so, she'd never understood.
That is the meaning I take from the motley
crowd, those who haven't tasted those
congealings you know by heart.
What are congealings she asked.
Blobs of meanings residing in words,
particularly those that would take the top
off your head, as Emily had said.
Then you would be imploring.
A moody silence would prevail
from which you would emerge with
feathers or horns or a tail.

#23

It was a curse that turned her head into a barrage
of snakes. She sitting there in the temple defiled,
hissing like a demon. Her moans multiplied,
her breath molded into fire. She changed into
a Gorgon myth. Wasn't it female rage that turned
against her? When she became a horror wouldn't
she be spurned, wasn't that the same as a woman
whose face was scarred with acid so a man's gaze
turned stony on sight? In the Piazza della Signoria
stood a statue of Perseus flaunting her head.
A sorry end, as if to say her demons had been slayed.
Her ghost stayed with us as a twisted fate
for a story that had long stayed.

#24

As you lay down at night bits and pieces of
your mind would trickle down like a leaking
faucet, and you'd thought of everything,
tried to keep down the unruly sensations while
staying very quiet—isn't that what alone feels,
a prodigious solitude until someone,
something let out a whistle.
You're marked by some kind of a muddle
till you swing yourself up. A stark bliss laying down
post-exercise counteracts what ageing does:
snarly-like it secretly stings you. You imagine
there're still years and years of life left.
Sometimes you think not so, and it's too much
the moment everything goes dark.

#25

A crowding like a gathering of birds
in a murmuration swooped this way and that so gamely,
isn't that as boggling as the world's fiercely exploded
population? Ever since God had said, go forth and
multiply, we had gone on with it, in ease and aplomb,
nonchalantly multiplying.

And now you say, apocalypse? Isn't that
a particularly hated word that makes
no distinctions between anyone's creed, or beliefs,
or morals? It's a leering bang, isn't it, like
the planet *Melancholia* colliding with Earth
and Kirsten basking in the moonlight,
an exquisite blossoming bride?

No, that would be too mean.

The sun shone today,
sending special greetings.

Note: Reference made to the movie, *Melancholia*.

#26

It was around the beginning of May.
A ceremonious flowering, a different kind of air
to make up for the tawdry, a seediness that beset
the old, full of woes. Old men curled in beds,
a world entirely strange to me! To be put through the
paces of repeated needles, probes and scans,
and a need for cuts and bypasses!
All come undone!
The tasks asked of one have diminished.
Angels blew trumpets harking of the other lair.
Things you'd never guessed reaching this end.
You listened to the birds out the window,
ramshackled but whole, entering extreme endurance.
Love fell like a snow blanket for all your days.

#27

The flares of gold in the afternoon set us
on edge so we coasted till the day got dark.
These ways of coping were permanent. In a room
crowded with observation, personalities got into a deep
mix. Me with my pen, you with your wise sympathies,
drawing us aside. Us with our sly hopes, and silent
boycotts. You were importunate. I had my defaults,
and depletions. The young me wrote a poem about
oblivion. Deep sleep as sound as a whistle.
To be nothing, is that sleep?
Then to be so awakened.

#28

She wouldn't be in the thick of it.

The religious part, the kneeling to prayer
to beseech God.

Because she felt more thickly layered but
sometimes she wished for the same
argument, the conviction vividly held.

All that Edenic story, that whiff of religion
discarding all other ways of being
got her flustered.

Now that she saw the pieces coming together,
there's no more disclaiming.

It's God's presence in spades.

In a cold and muted place there was dispersed
warmth in one form or another and
people lucking into each other.

#29

Poetry dovetailed nicely into in-between spaces.
For me it started off like that. Then it became idly
persistent, in the moonlight sparkled like diamonds.
It left a feeling of tingling contentment.
In the morning it would have an attitude, a presence
when I sought to make form out of language. Always
some incommunicable and pressing thing,
a consciousness veering off into the ineffable, a whisper,
a guise. Language being big thumps on the reality
we make, the alliance of alliances, else why bother
to be precise? It's how we look to negotiate to be
ourselves and not blubber and to loud-mouthed
propaganda bow.

#30

While you're preoccupied, a subplot—was there
going to be more of that—or a long intimacy,
a blow-up would happen, brewed for at least
a decade, that would be cause for a life review,
a parcelling off of this and that. Those things
hardly spoken of till the end of things.
You would be chastened, wet as if hit by
rain and wind throttling through the trees
so branches broke like fallen limbs.
Swiped at offhandedly so ruinous you stood.
You looked at your fat watch—time it is for
darkened ease, a non-existence.
At the appointed hour sunlight streamed
through the mottled leaves.
The dipping sun dried you out
so clean and dripping.

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As a horse crops grass or a pear tree makes pears, we make statements. They come in different forms - some are propositions, some are suppositions, some are narratives, some are similes, recipes, questions. All are ways we cross more fully into being, plunge into a reciprocal engagement with the scouring, altering outer... a statement is how we declare our place in the world.

—Jane Hirshfield

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