



When Poetry Paid

The Boom Years Of American Verse

Mike Finley

Contents

When Poetry Paid The Boom Years Of American Verse	1
Dear Friend	6
Second Law of Thermodynamics	7
'King of the St. Paul Poets,' Explained.....	8
New Poetry Setaside Program	9
Writers	10
A Great One	11
As We Get Older We Become Poets	13
Poet Wasting.....	14
The New Policy On Showing	15
Poetry Is Immoral.....	16
Poetscorner.com.....	17
Feedback	18
Why Poetry	20
The Poem Room.....	21
IF	22
What Else Could You Be Doing?.....	23
The Not Very Good Best Poem	24
Are You A Lover Of Poetry?	25
A Poet Scorned.....	26
Reply To The Poetry Editor From Mary Ambrose Culbertson of Fort Collins, Colorado.....	26

The Murdered Reader.....	27
You Should Have Seen Me, Wislawa Szymborska.....	28
Hafez: To Be A Better Poet.....	29
The Heights of Tài Shān.....	30
Questions I Ask.....	32
Building The Poem	33
I Know Who You Are	35
Mighty Poem.....	37
Critique.....	39
A Concise History of Poetry	40
Can A Poet Lock His Pickup Up?	41
For Robert Plant On My 66th Birthday	42
We Declare.....	44
For the Young Poets of Cleveland.....	45
Little Magazine Editor	46
The Thing Writers Never Learn, Or Anyone Else For That Matter	49
Cafe Extempore.....	50
My People	51
When I Dash Off a Poem.....	52
Hackery	53
When Poetry Paid: The Boom Years Of American Verse	56
A Poem in the Rolling Stone.....	60
Remainders	62

Like A Joke.....	65
Essence.....	66
The Favor	67
Poetry.....	68
*God Talks to the Poets	68
God Talks to the Poets	69
Every Song Is An Act Of Love	75

Dear Friend

Why do I twist your arm into coming to my reading
and make you sit through all that bother --
as if you needed to be tested, to prove you deserve me
when it is exactly the opposite way around.

What I should do instead is plunk your hand in mine
and thank you for your love despite, and not because of this.

What a gift that you indulge me as if this has worth,
what a generous pretense on your part that these stupid stories
signify more than our years of laughter does not --
as if there are other things in this lousy world
when we both know, as a matter of fact, there are not.

2010

Second Law of Thermodynamics

Every event results
in a change
or else it was not an event --
typically not a lot of change,
but at the end
you are a different person
by a bit,
than you were
at the beginning,
and the world is a
different world.
Neurons cross-strap,
new understandings
and associations
are formed, forever,
and there is no forgetting now,
no going back
to the you you
were before.

'King of the St. Paul Poets,' Explained

People always ask about the title and crown.

I try to reassure them that I don't think I'm better than other poets, that the title is hereditary, not earned in any way.

I point out that it was handed down to me

by my father Ralph Waldo Finley,

who composed rhyming verse from the daily racing charts.

It was given to him by his father,

my grandfather, William Butler Finley,

who popularized a form known as the loku,

consisting of eleven syllables and two exclamation points,

and before that given to my great grandfather Percy Bysshe Finley -- 'The Bisher,' everyone knew him as --

who received the title by legislation

for his stirring poem about the confluence

of 19th century agriculture and leisure, "The Rusted Plough."

And I say to those who are jealous of the title

that instead of begrudging me mine,

why don't they get off their asses and inherit one,

like I did.

New Poetry Setaside Program

Man at the door says he's from the National Humanities Office, to tell me about the new setaside program.

"I don't know what that is," I said.

"It's a simple concept," the man says. "Instead of writing all day every day, you agree to not write for a while."

"Why is that a good idea? Why would the government get into that?"

"Oh, it's a sound practice in many ways," he assures me. "First, it means there is less poetry in the aggregate. Gives demand a chance to catch up to supply."

"OK, I can see that. What else?"

"Well, it's good for you. You don't burn out your audience so fast. Lets newcomers get into the game a bit."

"I guess I can agree to that. But what about me, personally? How do I benefit, besides the monthly checks?"

"Mister Finley, that's the best part. You get to rest your brain. Your creativity gets a chance to renew itself. Just think how good you'll be after a few months."

"Yes, yes, I'm thinking about this. One last thing -- you're not just telling this to me, are you? Every writer is being offered the opportunity?"

The man's eyes widened. "Absolutely, sir. We're telling everyone."

"Who have you told so far?"

"Well, so far, just you."

Writers

Writers start out all right,
they pay attention to things and deliver reports
on the way things are,
it is a useful function they perform.
But then something happens.
Someone will say, you know, this is interesting, what you did --
and in a second you can see it all go bad.
They like the attention and so they want more
and tell themselves
“I could create lots of these reports,
they're not that hard to do
now that I know how to do it.”
And then they want readers
and then they want comments
and then they want praise
and then they want more praise,
praise dropping from the faucet
night and day like an endless drip.
until they are no longer reporters,
they are like debutants on a featherbed,
chins in their hands and their feet
wagging behind them.
“Tell me more about myself, tell me more!”
And they're not working for you any more.
You say everyone needs encouragement
but that's not true,
encouraging only encourages them.

A Great One

I never constructed a great one with my hands,
one that swept away cities like a runaway reservoir,
and people did not resist the surge
because the flood felt like it was their flood,
Because a great one feels like it knows you already,
has taken up your cause without you being awares.
A great one is compassionate yet ignorant,
It pays no union dues, it knows nobody's name,
It is courageous because it really doesn't give a shit
if it's corny and it doesn't care if it passes through
the baleen of some cleaner whose job it is to filter
nutrients through the narrowest possible slit
A great one is like a hammer-blow to the head
And the best of us feel we have been pummeled to mush,
Our heads like boiled bowling balls, pulpy
And we don't care, it's a plus in the overall profile.
A great one lays down its life for you with a laugh
Because it knows it can never die, its gestures
Cost it nothing, it is in a movie of its own life
And it is playing the part of itself.
It is always flush with cash because it is of a piece with riches,
It picks up every check and leaves twenty dollar tips.
A great one is generous in its heart because that is its pedigree
Like the people who have the good things of the world.
A great one summers on the cape and winters in the mountains
Because the air is better and the company convivial
And the pinchball on the atomizer is never out of reach
So that the voice is ever liquid and the timbre ever strong.
It is ushered into the waiting limousine
And speeds away to the next great moment,

The testimonial banquet, the honorary degree,
The reception line loops back on itself like an homage to infinity.
The great one acknowledges no competitors,
As it dips its bread in the back seat bowl and mops up the wine,
Yet we stand in its wake as it shrinks to a dot, teary-eyed,
choking on the blue fumes of its burning.

As We Get Older We Become Poets

We forget the names
of things we should know
That thing over there, it's a --
What *do* you call a thing like that?
Don't tell me, it's on the tip of my tongue
When in fact it's light years from my tongue
But the more we forget the more we become
like poets, each moment is new to us,
the impossible now just waking up
and stretching in sunlight
everything strange
and unknown

Poet Wasting

The main reason we hunted them down
was because there
was so dang many of them.
We're not a cruel people,
it would have been crueler
to let them live.
Put a bounty on their heads
and set them loose
at the onset of winter,
run them down before too long
and if you sent the liver
to the DNA
for testing and it
came back OK
you got to keep the whole thing.
It was hard at first, looking into
those plaintive eyes
then jacking the trigger
It wasn't their fault
they were so numerous,
all they ever really wanted
was to say a thing
so it lived a while
in the heart
but even that
got old
after a while

The New Policy On Showing

In the past there was no punishment,
unless you consider a stricken look to be punishment,
which is unfair because you can only
give stricken looks to people who show,
the faces you make have no effect on the people not there.
Starting January 1, this will change.

From that date going forward a fine of five dollars
will be levied against those who fail to show.

I can already hear a hubbub forming, asking
how can you charge people for exercising individual choice?
This is a valid point, except when you consider
the no-shows we are talking about.

They are so sensitive they will kneel in the snow
to hand us the money, and they will be prepared
to pay again and again over the years ahead,
because paying five dollars still beats having to show.

Poetry Is Immoral

When it's good it inspires mob emotions.
Think Battle Hymn of the Republic.
Mao Zedong wrote poems, not very good ones.
Though he did not attract critics.

Poetry is undemocratic by nature.
One person stands before a group.
The poet does all the talking.
No time is set aside for rebuttal.

Poems make us so sensitive,
unlayering experience into ever-finer slices,
until we stare at ourselves staring at ourselves..
It makes people spend too much time alone,
in cubbyholes and Starbucks,
ballpoints in our teeth,
words hurricaning in our heads –

When we would be
so much better off
if we were out and about
in the sunshine.

Poetscorner.com

My idea for a website
where poets can go to be abused.

Feedback

An acquaintance stood before a group
And read his poem.
I was taken aback, and sought him out.
The words you read, I asked him –
Were they what you intended?
Because it's sad, you know, you could have been doing anything
instead,
brushing carrots or changing the gravel in your fish tank,
something purposeful and good.
What you wrote, I tell him, it must have been a lot of work on
your part,
I can't help wondering
Why you did it.
Have you ever considered, I asked, whether your muse
is out to get you,
to embarrass you so badly with her nudgings
that you can't leave your house any more?
What did you do to her?
What accounts for her dislike of you?
Seriously, I am curious to know.
It's funny, you know, because life is full
of knee-slapping adventures
and outrageous coincidences
and fall down farting stories,
but then this is what we write about,
the cracks between words we don't understand,
the whimpering sounds we make when we want people
to know how sensitive we are
but we're not quite sure what we feel?
You know what I think we should be doing?

I think we should be laughing our asses off
at our ridiculous lives
and the bumpy journeys we've all been sent out on,
frypots clanging and us whipping the plastic reins
and hollering hobble-de-hoy!
We should be passing the jug varietals
and blowing cheap wine out our noses
at the incessant meddling of God,
not his callous indifference to our plights.
A poem should be like sticking your fingers
in the electric socket
and studying the star-shaped geometrical patterns
we make when we bolt out our arms and legs.
it should make us clap like toddlers
those little tin monkeys with cymbals from China,
we should be rolling our eyes
and hurling underwater.
Instead of writing what you've written,
This persecuted piece of paper you hold in your hand,
you should stand onstage instead
and flip a lightswitch a hundred times
till everyone sees green and magenta circles
blipping in front of their eyes
for the next half hour,
now that would be a poem.
But evidently we live in Minnesota
and have taken a holy vow,
and we'll say no more of this for now.

2009

Why Poetry

Other kinds of writing, people
are always in a hurry to get it done.
Make the deadline, ring the bell.
Come on people, step it up.
Poetry, that never happens.
Zero demand, less reward,
I tell you, this thing was invented
for the likes of me.

The Poem Room

It is a place of shame,
the only room with a lock
on the door.

To make it come out
you loosen your garments
and drop them to the floor.

There is paper there
for you to use,
one sheet after another.

But when you are done
how proud you are
of what you have authored.

You want to call people in
to show them what
you've made

and they smile
because they don't want
you to feel dismayed,

but in the end it is
the one thing you do
that is expressly you

IF ...

IF ... you want to be considered better than other people ...

IF ... you expect to be greeted with unusual deference ...

IF ... you want your judgment to be considered before that of
all others ...

IF ... you wish to affect a commanding air in every situation ...

IF ... you want to be believed no matter how many times you
have misled ...

If ... you want fame and instant recognizability ...

If ... you want celebrity and a pounding feeling in the hearts that
hold you dear ...

Don't ... write poetry.

Do ... get a dog.

What Else Could You Be Doing?

Instead of listening to this poem,
You could be jumping out the window,
You could be engaging someone
In a conversation that matters
You could be spilling all your secrets
You could be kissing the person you love
But have not kissed enough,
You could be eating a sandwich for the ages
You could be thinking of a song
That used to mean everything
And thinking what it means again
You could count your blessings, literally
On an abacus if need be
Instead of hearing me talk
You could be listening to your own heart
And doing what it tells you

The Not Very Good Best Poem

His language wasn't great and he read his rhyme
in a singsong way,
but what worked was that the poem was important to him.
It was about a colleague at work named Kerrie
that he had a crush on.
He saw her every day, and over the months her kindness
and her smile and her pretty face were like steak knives
planted deep in his chest.
He was so in love, he was in that place where she was the one,
and every time she spoke to him she hollowed him out,
scraped empty by her goodness and abashed by her beauty.
But Kerrie was married and seemed happy being that way.
What could he offer but his ugly face and stupid future?
He read his poem and sat down, and it was clear
the poem only deepened his despair.
How could he go forward, his seed would not find purchase
in the only woman he loved, it was like dying, it was dying,
his hopes were Osterized, his future disappeared,
he envisioned a walk-up apartment and pee-stained
underpants,
and he still had to work with her every single day,
yet I was more moved
by the poem he read than any other reader's.

Are You A Lover Of Poetry?

There probably is something wrong with you.
You have an appetite for grandiosity,
Or everything has to sound pretty to you,
Or you suffer from a profound fear of reality.
Your sense of self has been splintered
and you dwell in a solipsistic place,
making up your life on the fly.
Perhaps you are afraid of confrontation
and so you seek retribution on the page.
Or your anger at the world's injustice
has taken you to a place where
you need to be alone a lot, to smolder by yourself.
Or your attention span is not what it might be –
What kind of spider *is* that on your sweater?

A Poet Scorned

**Reply To The Poetry Editor From Mary Ambrose
Culbertson of Fort Collins, Colorado**

I hope you die today.
I hope it hurts a lot.
I hope your gut splits open
And your insides tumble out.

The fight goes not to the good,
Nor does the race go to the swift.
But let your last realization be
who it was you messed with.

The Murdered Reader

In a proper poem something changes.

The reader thinks of something he never thought of before,
or he remembers something that was long forgotten,
or he decides, god damn it, I'm not going to think that way ever
again.

A proper poem murders the reader.

Brain cells re-bootstrap and learn.

The old reader goes into the dumpster,
the new one grabs the baton.

It doesn't have to be anything major.

A crumb on the collar that needs brushing off, will do.

A good one and the reader will be packing his bags for Bolivia.

Because something has been added.

The old ways have been found wanting.

The murdered reader is set ablaze.

The old task completed, the new hands slap off the dust
and move on.

You Should Have Seen Me, Wisława Szymborska

The reading went OK, but in the last three lines I lost a word.
I was reciting from memory and suddenly I hit a wall.
It was OK, I wasn't too embarrassed,
I just pulled out your poem and read it.
No one said anything.
I'm old, my brain is old, these things will happen.

But oh my darling, you should have seen me
that morning, driving down 35E,
and nailing those lines at the wheel,
and punching the air with my finger,
voice rising and roaring.

Then a car drew close in the opposite lane,
and a woman your age glanced over at me,
waving my fists and shouting in the cab,
I maybe looked like a maniac, but not dangerous,
and you smiled lovingly, one stranger to another.

Hafez: To Be A Better Poet

From the Persian

1. Stop talking and listen. Listen to yourself listening. Then listen to that.
2. Pile all your poet hats in the back yard and light them on fire. Especially any with feathers.
3. Remove your name from everything you do. Anonymity purifies, fame corrodes.
4. Drive out your own noise by inviting in others.
5. Stop breaking sentences into lines. Just ... breathe!
6. Don't talk to other poets. One god per universe is the legal limit.
7. Stop reading poems. Read hands, faces, hearts.
8. Leave notes in unexpected places. In umbrella stands, in robins' nests, on piles of moist buffalo dung.
9. Unless it feels like a gift, don't give it.
10. Stop being a poet at all. And lose the sash!

The Heights of Tài Shān

The call went out that the magazine had received a \$5,000 grant to sponsor a poem competition, to see who could write the best peace poem reflecting the saying by Thích Nhất Hạnh:

“Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.”

Poets rejoiced at an award so handsome, and began ransacking their notebooks and manila folders for their best peace poem.

Others bent to the task of writing a new peace poem so transcendent they would be showered with a significant financial blessing.

Coffeeshouses filled with the sound of caffeinated scribbling.

Paeans to peace proliferated at each table.

"I've got it!" one poet said, and stood impulsively to read his work, a 45-line narrative about water trickling down the crystalline slopes of the holy mountain Tài Shān.

"It is luminous," one poet conceded, frowning. "But might it not be too specific?" another asked, prodding the poem for vulnerabilities.

Everyone sensed it would be a long climb to reach the top of Tài Shān. Many poets essayed the ascent, and all of them tumbled to the side.

Propitiations were offered, and rejected: no thanks.

In the spring of 2013, forty-six poets made the attempt. All fell into quarreling and despair.

Only one poet made it to the summit, a mother of two from the city of Redwood Falls. Her poem was simply a repetition of the

saying of Thích Nhất Hạnh: “Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.”

To which she added the single word: "Really."

2013

Questions I Ask

I always ask, what good is this?

Does it make anybody's day?

Is it fun or funny?

Does it contain useful information?

Is it fascinating on its own merits?

Is it a suitable gift?

Or am I just jerking off?

Building The Poem

A mighty gate groans open from the very first line,
This is your declaration that something great is under
construction,
and the reader is advised to pull over and idle his engine.

The opening stanza has a curse placed upon it —
it must be good but it can't swamp the boat.
You have to have something to follow it up.
And isn't that the problem with everything, the middle?
Being born is amazing, and going out again at the end is
dramatic,
but in between is where the good ideas are stifled
like sneezes into kleenex at funerals,
in between is where we sow sunflowers and salt
to keep people guessing.

And now the suspense builds, as the first plates
spun on sticks start to wobble,
and the performer furrows his brow
and glances up at the source of soonest danger,
all the while perched on a steel cable stretched taut
with one end in the scrummy tenement,
the other on Park Avenue.

This is a good time for the neighborhood clown
To roll out on his unicycle and reveal his broken heart,
with a brief digression about childhood disappointment,
and all the things you went without.

.

And then, not with a clap but something like a hush

as the crowd quiets and a white donkey
shambles into the courtyard riderless,
its ears poking through the old straw hat,
and dragging a rope of clanking cans by its tail,
between its clapboard teeth, where all can see --
a pink begonia as big as the world.

I Know Who You Are

Day after day
Like a lover with a wound
I keep after you

What have I wanted to give you all this time
That I keep making offerings
And promises of love

Why do I run to you every chance I get
And tell you again of my ardor

As if I had the answers
As if I had the cure
For all of the sickness
That walks through the world

It makes sense to me
That I peel away the mask
And see the damp light of your seeing

O my loving loved one
My huckleberry friend
Cast with me up the waters,
We float, hands close but never quite touching

How many times I have longed
To hold you in my arms
And give you kisses deep
My silent good companion

You the mind inside my mind
You the breathing presence
And though you have never spoken
I have wooed you all this time

My other, my angel, my flower
I write and you read
without words

Mighty Poem

There is a paradox in English, that some words mean the opposite of themselves.

Thus *sanction* can mean either permission or impermission.

Now, one of our commonest words, *might*, can mean raw power, almost beyond measure, the might of the hydroelectric dam, the might of God, the might of Mighty Mouse, and on the other hand it is the subjunctive form of the verb *may*, meaning it's possible, conceivable, it could go either way:

Looks like it *might* rain; I *might* go to the dance with you; a locomotive *might* be a speeding hound, or it *might* not.

You can feel the power leaking out of that form.

The subjunctive *maybe* – it doesn't get less mighty than that.

And most poets take refuge in the maybe –

I *might* change my life.

There *might* be a God. A man *might* dream, who knows.

Poets are pussies, it's a well-known fact.

We languish daytimes on our sofas in our blouses and blue silk stockings,

chewing our hangnails, play Mother Might I and order out.

We are like oil paintings of sad clowns with bleared greasepaint that normal people can't look at long because it causes confused feelings.

And when we fight we are like women slapping because we are afraid to land a punch.

We think about flowers and our dead grandmothers and maybe we suck on our thumbs.

When are we going to fight like men?
When will we challenge ourselves not to be more sensitive
or to bear greater pain or to honor the past but to advance a
proposition
and make it stick? Why are we so miserable and insecure and
envious?
Who cares what fucking Frank got from the Carnegie Mellon
Fund?
Why aren't we being obvious, and sentimental, and funny?
Why aren't we getting drunk and falling down the stairs?
Why are so few poems about ballgames and tits when those are
what we love?
Why aren't love poems gushing out of us like springwater from
a stone?
Why aren't we thanking our mothers and fathers?
We should be endorsing candidates and christening bridges and
honoring the dead.
We shouldn't be going over anyone's head, including our own.
We should be clear as champagne and twice as fun.

A mighty poem is not a maybe poem.
It flows like rushing water to the sea.
A mighty poem is for everyone.
It tolls for you as well as tolls for me.
A mighty poem burns calories and works on
you until you have to stop and breathe.
A mighty poem is willing to pay the cost.
It says to you, get furious, or lost.

2011

Critique

I slapped the man's manuscript in my hand.

"The truth is, your work strikes me as entirely masturbatory."

He clasped me by the shoulders and a tear rolled
down his cheek.

"Finally, someone understands!"

2009

A Concise History of Poetry

In the beginning were the cave artists who marveled
at connections with beasts and with the sun.

Then came the Dionysians, who were feverish about wine and
the life bubbling around them.

Then it was the time of the scribes, who were literate
and wrote down everything God said and did.

Then came the bards who were quite insane but held the clan
together with words.

Then the epic poets, who laid out everything for us: gods,
heroes and men.

Then the age of idlers kicked in, strumming about their passing
pleasures,
the troubadours and their notion of undying love, so long as
youth lasts.

Then the Renaissance and the mighty giants strode the earth --
Dante and Chaucer and Libo and Shakespeare.

Then the diplomat poets, writing of their loneliness in the cold
mountains.

Then the wits who made it all a mental thing.

And then the romantics who made everything up in their heads.

And then the moderns who showed how disgusting
romanticism had become.

And then the postmoderns, who had no actual clue what they
were up to.

And then the poets climbing out of the ravines, marveling at the
beasts and the sun that still warmed the world.

2007

Can A Poet Lock His Pickup Up?

On the one hand, there should be openness.

The reader should never be stopped from entering the circle.

What then should I say, that the teaching stops here?

No one I know throws fistfuls of fives in the air

and none of us walks through the airport barenaked.

There is a balance that must be struck.

I do not like people peeing in my truck.

2016

For Robert Plant On My 66th Birthday

Found myself watching him on TV tonight.
He is old and wrinkly, and doesn't move too well.
But he is still kicking it, and the camera cut to young women --
who are *thrilled* by what he is doing.
And I have to think, why didn't that happen to me?
I wanted *exactly* what he got – love, adulation, honeydripping passion.
But I wasn't able to go there, in my writing.
It helps to have a big bottom, the drums and bass, I mean.
With the big beat, you forget about making sense, you just go.
And your lyrics only need to be fairy tales and dick promises.
I could never bring myself to do that.
In my mind my lines went deeper and more thoughtful --
about love and loss and wondering and such.
At least I thought so. I hoped so. But it didn't work out for me.
I estimate he has made \$100+ million from his art over 50 years,
and I have made maybe \$1500 -- no comparison, really.
This may seem like not the greatest injustice ever perpetrated,
but tonight it is the one I am focusing on.
He's just some white English guy, who really has no right to the blues -
-
and let me concede that I don't, either.
Now, I am sympathetic to the blues. I have never been sued by the
blues.
But there he is embodying them in some strange way. How I hate him.
Not hate exactly -- but he is truly awful, comfortable touching himself
in front of people, where I always pull back from that,
he knows he's hideous and he just doesn't care,
he keeps going in for his curly permanent, all that dope and all those
blow jobs
haven't made his hair fall out, and that seems wrong to me.
I pull back, it just doesn't seem to be what the eleven people at my
shows come for.
But just now I will be honest and say, 50 years late,

I too wanted to be a disgrace, I too wanted to be loved, like him.
despite never doing one kind thing, or shedding a single sincere tear.
I was always held back by my shame --
always held back by my shame.

2016

We Declare

Jefferson, Adams and Hancock wrote verse.

Ben Franklin was better than those.

But when it was time for “When, in the course”

They all had the sense to write prose.

For the Young Poets of Cleveland

Your readers are your babies, your treasure,
but don't treat them like babies.
They need to feel the thud of the hammer,
they need to feel the thump of the heart.
Talk like they are the best friend you have.
Tell them the amazing things you have learned,
Confess to the fears that rattle your dreams.
Grieve privately, then come back roaring
without hope, without god, without anything in the world.

Little Magazine Editor

When I was younger I sometimes pretended like I already knew the poetry editor and tried to implant some positive memory.

"This entry bubbled up at Meatloaf this spring, naturally I thought of you first, Tom."

See what I did there?

The false familiarity, the name-dropping, the harking to the past.

Editors may get confused and think they drank screwdrivers with grenadine with you one night on the white rocks up above the river as the two of you lay on your backs together ticking off the constellations.

You don't want to forget something like that, even if it never happened.

You may fool second-raters with this ploy, but not the magazines you really want to include you.

Here's the deal.

Poetry editors don't even want to like your work.

Being enthusiastic makes them feel weak, like they gave in to you too easily. They are as afraid of succumbing to fashion as they are of missing the fashion boat.

Basically they are just trying to keep the worst stuff out of their magazines, because their goal is to be seen as lovers of literature, but not slaves to any particular style, which is just another way to be weak.

Most editors know in their hearts they are failing, because look at the really good magazines and then look at theirs, and look at the good magazines' mailings lists and then look at theirs -- mostly nobodies and nitwits and hopeful hangers-on.

Editors opening their mail feel they are sitting in a room spattered with shit, and much of this is because they were trying to be nice.

There are different approaches you can take -- the most boring one is to announce, wearily, that you are submitting X poems, and that you published recently in The This Review and had an item in The Journal of That, and aren't you a classy item, ringing up these publishing credits until you taste a bit of your own vomit in your mouth, that's how real your bland braggadocio strikes even you.

But what else do you have? The poem? Give me a break, you know yourself from a lifetime of trying that no one is even trying to "get" things any more.

I mean, what's to get? Words on paper, an attitude, spare language, you're in.

Or what if you dug deep down into your soul and fetched up a panting masterpiece, heaving and twitching on the table? No one will even see it.

No one will get what you had to do to land that thing and now it convicts you with its intensity.

Best advice is just to grovel.

"Oh, thank you for the important work you do, I know no one appreciates it as much as you would like, but I want you to know that I appreciate it.

I am the one leper in ten who came back to thank the poetry editor for being so insightful and kind, for seeing light and beauty where everyone else just saw overwrought diction and suicidal tendencies.

And isn't that their true mission in the end, sponging the flecks of foam from your lips?

"We were touched by the elegy to the spaniel puppy that died in 1994.

The world is better that you never got over it. Next time, get him immunized.”

There is so much unhappiness here masquerading as wisdom and the preservation of standards, when everyone knows that in fact there are none.

No one knows where to break a line any more, or why.

That boat is not swinging back into port any time soon.

And yet, if we never share these thoughts, they would be like those trees you hear about but never hear, because they fell alone, in some faraway forest, and their life stepped out of them, and stepped away into the rustle of the pines.

Oh little magazine editor, why don't you stop hoping for better and embrace my work!

2012

The Thing Writers Never Learn, Or Anyone Else For That Matter

The thing we never learn is *why*.

In writing, we are rejected every day, but it is considered poor form to ask the editor why.

Editor -- is the writing poor? Is the point of the writing stupid, or obvious?

Or are you just looking for something very different, something your heart is set on, but even though you are among the most articulate people currently breathing, you cannot say what it is exactly.

Rejection is painful, and I understand editors are loath to be interrogated, especially from people who may be unstable or argumentative.

Writers are just supposed to figure this out themselves, using the same brain that wrote the failed piece.

But what valuable input it would be to get an explanation:

"It was OK but it didn't amaze me."

"I couldn't tell if you were an asshole or not."

"There is something seriously wrong with your whole attitude, that I can't quite put a finger on, but trust me, it's awful."

This is more than a problem with writing, it's a problem of your whole life, never getting the feedback that is obvious to others, but you never understand, because, to you, you are just normal, the taste of water in your mouth.

Something is wrong, and everyone sees it, but no one loves you enough to tell you the terrible truth.

2012

Cafe Extempore

The young poet decided to recite his work.
He had imbued it with properties of might.
Serpentine language, astonishing paradox,
fervent proclamations of his own arrival on the scene.
It would be ecstatic, ripped out of its time,
naked and heaving in the bright light onstage.
There he stood, before an audience of twelve people,
each one clutching pages of their own,
each one of whom had spent the week
the same way he did, filled with glory,
and he was about to learn a lesson about himself
in front of the last people on earth he wanted to know this --
pretenders, sad nobodies and goofy excuses --
and he shook at the podium like foil.

1981

My People

Sometimes I pause in mid-reading
and gaze out at the people who came to hear me.
You can see the profound experience in their eyes,
the sorrow and the joy I have put in them.
I know these people so well.
Yes, they've been around the block,
they've looked at life from both sides now.
Just think if you could take everything they know
and distill it into Essence of Amazing Knowledge,
and preserve it in an alabaster vial,
because the world so needs what they know.
What I'm getting at, the median age has got to be about 60,
and as I look at their ripe, beautiful faces,
all lit up with gratitude, wonderment,
mindfulness and generosity, I'm thinking:
How many more books are these people likely to buy?

2013

When I Dash Off a Poem

I throw down the ballpoint and say,
Take that!
You ignorant unaware world,
you thought you were complete
but I have added to you.
I have done my insolent dance
around your flaccid sombrero.
I snap my fingers over my shoulder and say
Take that, you who thought we were done.

2011

Hackery

When I write or read aloud these days, I usually feel pretty confident. One reason is because I'm getting old and don't give a damn any more what people think.

But there's another reason, which surprises even me.

You see, I may occasionally play a poet or author. But all my life I've written to feed my family. I've written journalism, books, web copy, magazine ads, billboards, ghost writing, direct mail, annual reports, puff pieces, you name it.

I did this because it was my obvious natural talent – creating sentences. Some of it was a little respectable, like writing articles or columns. But a great deal of it was pure hackery – writing for pay. I've put a shine on the messages of politicians, landlords, dioceses, prosthesis clinics, big box stores and hedge fund managers. Anyone who had a buck, had me.

I know I will never be among the pantheon of important writers in this region. While they were living vestal lives in the schools, I was hosing out troughs.

And yet, I count this sordid background as a major plus for me today. The reason is that hack writing is an education unto itself. These are some of the things I learned, which keeps me from sounding empty or helpless when I take the stage.

Writing is a message to others.

Poets often write to themselves or to the muse. Sitting in a coffeeshop, writing beautiful phrases. It feels good, but it's a solitary pleasure.

I hear poets say, “It means what you want it to mean.” You have to be such a great writer for that formula to yield good results. None of us are that good.

Writing wants to have a desired outcome.

Something to happen. A hack writer isn’t done until he/she’s made a case for success. What do you want to happen because of these words on the page? Operators are standing by. Sell a book. Stick in people’s minds. Do it today. Call now. The outcome mustn’t be vague, or merely suggestive. It’s got to nail your idea to the wall. Hack writing arises from clear intention. If the purpose is not achieved, you failed.

Hacks are slaves and they know it.

It’s hard to feel good about yourself after 7 p.m. if you’ve been wading through pigshit all day long.

Nothing wrong with being a slave, it’s just not got much dignity. Art writers have dignity, but it’s a very private thing. Think how satisfying it would be to serve your audience’s hopes and desires as effectively and as humbly as a slave serves?

Writing must be written. If you don’t write it, you’re just wearing the beret. Without deadlines, without purpose, without compensation – you’re not going to write much.

Hackery wants to please.

Giving people something they need is how we earn our daily pellet. Connect your writing to your own needs. Admit you want something, and know what it is. In a pinch, tell people so they don’t have to keep guessing.

Commercial writing knows it has only seconds. So it gets to the point. Many poetry readings end with that point still floating, unmade, in the bookstore air.

Advertising understands that people are hip to its bullshit. It knows there is a price to pay for lifetimes of lying to people. That's why commercials are mainly entertaining today – they don't want to get your hopes up. Does poetry possibly have a reputation it must overcome as well? Self-righteousness, political correctness, self-absorption, clinging to melancholia. All these and other traits bred into us must be surgically extracted somehow.

Finally, hackery makes you tough.

A writer chained to a table leg, condemned to pleasing idiot customers, becomes inured to the little slings and arrows that come his/her way. So hopping onto a stage is not a terror. And that's a joy, because you finally get to have your say. And what, after all the indignities you have endured, is the worst that can happen?

2012

When Poetry Paid: The Boom Years Of American Verse

For years I wrote poems the way everyone did.

I would sit under a tree and reflect on something. When something occurred to me I would write it down, make it rhyme, then dash it off to a literary magazine, which would pay me for the poem.

On a good day of reflecting, you could make \$500, if you were a reasonably good typist. The market was strong and the pay was good. The cliché simile in those days was "as sound as a poem."

But things changed. Masses of people turned off to poetry and turned on to television. The many millions of poetry readers dwindled to a few million. Writing schools, seeing a buck to be made, proliferated, luring unsuspecting poets in, without telling them that their markets had disappeared.

Computers, photocopy machines, websites, ballpoint pens and unrhymed verse made poems the province of the riffraff.

Rhyme, alliteration, and assonance vanished almost overnight.

Anyone could do the new poetry. But no one could make a living *at* it.

You see the results everywhere -- a drifting army of unemployed poets, hanging around railyards and bus depots, willing to do just about anything for a nice salad.

The best went into whatever field held allure for them -- management, ophthalmology, small motor repair. The rest taught.

As an upper-echelon poet, I would like to say I weathered this economic storm unfazed. But even I was affected.

First, my income sagged. Eventually I had to sell one of my homes; fortunately, it was one I had never visited.

Over time my Rolodex of favorite editors shrank, as one greybeard after another was driven into other professions, let go entirely or replaced by editors indifferent to poetic form.

I tried to fight back. I now reflected twice as hard as I normally did, hoping to make up the deficit in volume. Some days, I got headaches. At one point I joined the Poets Union, but I could not bear the environment of pinko collectivism.

So I came up with my own adaptation, which is to form strategic corporate poetry partnerships. My poetry agent scans the business headlines. When we identify a suitable partner, I reflect about them and write a poem that meets both our needs. The resulting poem makes a compelling observation about the natural blessings of life and imagination, plus it provides attractive product placement for the partner.

Most readers are not even aware of the arrangement.

The new approach proved a stellar success. I successfully partnered with companies in numerous industries now -- MetLife ("Actuarial Tables," *Antigonish Review* Vol. 47, No. 3; Dow Jones ("Head and Shoulders," *Massachusetts Quarterly*; Spring 1999; and Intel ("Silicon," *Poetry California*, February 2000).

Three short poems, \$115,000 in fees. On the printed page the corporate poem is no different than a noncorporate poem, apart from the logo.

Some readers -- there are always skeptics -- predicted that partnering would affect the poet's voice and diminish the poem's authenticity. While I can assure them this has not

occurred, and that my corporate verse is as authentic as anything I've ever written, the proof is in the eating.

To that end I provide you, these concluding and suitably profitable poetic postscripts. In the first example, I asked myself, if John Keats were to endorse a brand of beer, how would he do it? I think it would go a little like this:

On First Uncapping Stutrud's Brew

Much have I travell'd in the realms of ale,
And many handsome hops and bitters quaffed;
And many oaken kegs have I been fore and aft,
Which oracles bound to Ceres do foretell;
To the western wind have I hoisted seven sail,
Where mighty Dionysus shook and laughed;
And begged a token of hearty Falstaff,
Like a free card for getting out of jail.
How comes it that this beverage so clear
Obtains the sacred ripeness that is all,
An effervescence pyrotechnic to the ear --
I drink it down and hear the holy call.
For I have supped with the gods of beer
Silent, on a Summit in Saint Paul.

Millions Demand America's Purest Silver Dollar -- Shouldn't You?

These legal tender U.S. silver dollars feature a nearly 100-year-old design of Lady Liberty striding confidently forward while draped in a U.S. flag, while the other side depicts a majestic U.S. eagle,

thirteen stars, and an American shield.
But the clock is ticking. Timing is everything.
Our advice to you -- keep this to yourself.
Tear out the page if you have to, because the more people
know about this offer, the worse it is for you.
Supplies are limited and there is a strict limit of 40 per
household.
It's a coin flip you can't afford to lose.

The Best Canned Corn Around

For me, there is no better way to start the day
than opening a can of Libby's vacuum-packed sweet corn and
scooping them up with a clean soup spoon.
You wonder how they removed so much liquid from
the can without the corn going bad.
Delectable? You can taste the soaked-up sunshine
in every mouthful!
Libby's -- hot or cold, the best canned corn around

A Poem in the Rolling Stone

I was never famous or even popular as a writer, but here and there I had my moments. I enjoy telling people I have published in the trifecta of unlikely publications: Guideposts (published by Billy Graham), Paris Review (published by George Plimpton, somewhere in the middle), and Rolling Stone (published by The Devil).

Each has its own story, but here is the story on Rolling Stone, edited at that time, 1977, by Charles Perry. Rolling Stone was not especially literary, but it did use little poetic bits in its back pages, in the review sections, to make the columns balance. In newspapers these are called filler items, but I have generally tried to avoid that phrase. I knew that Rolling Stone readers were probably high, so I sent them short little items, such as I still write today.

The one that got accepted was called "Eating & Flying," and it was about a stoned observation while flying in an airplane. I was not stoned, but the observation was. The simple gist of it was that the clouds outside the airplane reminded me of the steamed cauliflower served on the tray-table. (This was back when airlines served hot meals.)

I was delighted to see a poem of mine in Rolling Stone, especially under a review of Linda Ronstadt, thought at that time to be the world's most lubricious woman. I told all my friends. I told myself that I was on the fast-track now, that Charles Perry's judgment would vault me to the front line of American rock and roll poets.

The more I thought of it, the more impressed I knew Perry was with my amazing little snippet. Then the subsequent issue of the magazine came out. Thumbing through (to suss out the competition), I found my poem all over again, this time nestled under a bounteous photograph of Dolly Parton, and a review of her latest album.

What was I to think? Either Charles Perry really liked the poem, or he was in the early stages of dementia and had forgotten he used the very same poem in the previous issue or it was just filler to him, and did not matter all that much. Here is the masterpiece in question:

Eating & Flying

The one reminds me of the other:
a silver sleigh traversing piles of cloud,
and the tinfoil peeled from a steaming lunch.
The cauliflower is so familiar.

Remainders

Copies of my poems went on sale at Odegard Books,
The precise word is remaindered,
Marked down from three ninety five to just the ninety five,
And it hit me that this gambit by the bookstore
Was just what people had been waiting for.

Sure, you expect people to hold back,
Especially at today's prices. Three ninety five is
A piece of change, no doubt about it,
And there must be people who thumb the book
And pat it with one hand as if weighing the
Poems against the expense, the expense against
The poems, take one step toward the cashier
And then fail in their purpose, put the book back
In the rack, and pick up a copy of American Poetry Review,
Beautiful things wonderfully said,
For under three dollars, a wonderful buy, instead.

But who could balk at ninety five cents,
Why, that's less than a dollar with a nickel left over,
You could buy the poems and have enough to
Handle the sales tax, nineteen for the poet and
One for the State of Minnesota and its beautiful
Forests and waterfowl.

[Actually, all nineteen don't go to the poet. I was
Promised a ten percent royalty, which meant forty cents
On the full price, and the fine print here says
When a book goes remainder there isn't really
Any royalty at all, but I don't care, I didn't

Write them for the forty cents, you see,
I wrote them for this feeling I'm having right now
Of breaking through, of getting out,
Of seeing the birds I'd stored in the box
Fly out of it, white wings fair
clapping the morning air.]

Ninety five cents for thirty five poems,
That's less than three pennies apiece. Here's one
About some weeds growing in sidewalk cracks,
So what, it's only six lines long but at three cents
Who's going to complain? Here's another,
A beautiful lyric, a love poem connecting
To the Italian futurist movement of the nineteen-teens,
It was published in a number of respected magazines,
For less than three cents you won't need a vacation tour
This year, just read the words and feel their awful power.

Or the final poem, I call it "The Light," which was all
My life in sonnet length, how there were things
I thought I always wanted, but when I got them they were
Different, or I was unable to recognize them -- such pathos
As would melt the stony heart, and I lay it all down
For you, vulnerable, small, the shattered clown,

The paper trembles with the grief of truth,
Because here it is, softcover renaissance,
And all it costs is three lousy cents.
My ear to the ground I can detect the build
Of momentum, people swearing off bad habits forever,
People afraid to look one another in the eye
Now looking and seeing the pain and love that had been there

All along, now reaching out, fingertips touching,
The sting of tears collecting in the corners
Of millions and thousands, the soft collapse
Of a hundred brittle barriers of reason and attitude
Finally available, the incandescent word
At prices the masses can afford.

Let us go now, you and I, to Odegards.
For life has many sales but few true bargains.
Let us take the silver coins and hand them to the person
And remember to ask for the receipt, if you're a poet
Your whole life is deductible.
Oh daughters of Homer gather round his knees
And hear him sing his saltstrong songs.
There are myriad of you there,
A speckled galaxy of brave little lights,
Fresh washed garments tucked under your knees,
Eager for instruction and keen for meaning,
He cannot see you but he hears you breathing.

1977

Like A Joke

A good one is like a joke.
It begins and it ends and in between
It triggers a shift in expectations.
You thought A, but it turned out to be B.
So you are fooled, which is always good.
Our presumptions are what make us hilarious.
The change overtakes us like a choking fit
and for a while we oscillate between
a clench and a release,
a test of our virtue, a test of our strength.
Then it parts and the new information
washes over us, blessing us
like a blossoming field.

Essence

It's like we start with the premise,
Let's write this thing so nobody likes it.
Nobody likes the line breaks,
Nobody likes the fancy language,
Nobody likes the fact that you do the talking
And everyone else has to sit there and listen.
Nobody likes the weird punctuation.
Nobody likes the rhyme – well, a few weirdoes do.
You will wind up in a basement with a group of nine
Pissed-off losers more or less like yourself –
waiting for you to sit down so they can stand up –
because your work is OK in its limited way
while theirs soars on the wings of angels,
and that one moment when you speak truth to the world
like no one has ever spoken it before,
and when you die you really won't
because your words will live on after you
like a beautiful smell that won't go away.

The Favor

If people looked to poems
the way they look to music,
that wonderful expectant feeling
when the saxophonist is about to explode
like God blowing his nose
or the singer shakes her head
and her sweat pelts the front row
like Shamu, or the wink of the offbeat
that has everyone laughing,
and the drummer banging away
as if nothing had happened.

Music we can listen to for hours on end,
the delight just grows in us,
the love envelops us,
but poetry, well, forty minutes
is a long time to think,
and when the event is over
and the skronk of chairs tells you
it's time to go home,
it's no mystery who did whom
the big favor.

Poetry

It's like we start with the premise,
Let's write this thing so nobody likes it.
Nobody likes the line breaks,
Nobody likes the fancy language,
Nobody likes the fact that you do the talking
And everyone else has to sit there and listen.
Nobody likes the weird punctuation.
Nobody likes the rhyme – well, a few weirdoes do.
You will wind up in a basement with a group of nine
Pissed-off losers more or less like yourself –
waiting for you to sit down so they can stand up –
because your work is OK in its limited way
while theirs soars on the wings of angels,
and that one moment when you speak truth to the world
like no one has ever spoken it before,
and when you die you really won't
because your words will live on after you
like a beautiful smell that won't go away.

*

God Talks to the Poets

Hello and good evening to you all.

I want to thank all the poets who responded to my summons,
and for staying after the regular meeting.

There's just a few things I want to discuss with you.

These are things that have been on my mind for some time
now,

and I thought it would be advantageous to lay them out clearly
so there are no misunderstandings.

First of all is a matter of protocol.

Please don't high-five me when you see me.

It is a presumptuous thing to do
and it implies we are in complete agreement about things
and there are times that is just not true,

Second, more than one of you has thanked me
for the inspiration I've sent your way, or a muse or something.

I just want to say on the record right now
that I have never sent any of you
any inspiration or muses.

The truth is that I am very busy with a number
of very pressing matters
and whatever you dream up to write down in your journals

is on you, and not a product of me.

Hard to believe, I know, but in this case quite true.

A concomitant idea is that I get a lot of mail from you,
full of instances in which I'm saying something to you,
which you then pass on to your readers,
and the problem here is that I did not say any of those things,
and there is an issue here that amounts to intellectual theft,
and I will just say I have some of my people looking into that,
and you should not be surprised if sometime in the future
actions are taken against the more egregious offenders.

I have made a list of some of the common offenses
we've been noting, and if you don't mind I'd like to read them
off to you so that there are no future misunderstandings.
I've broken my remarks down so that they address
different groups of poets.
If you hear your group mentioned, it is my hope
you will pay close attention
and alter your literary behavior accordingly.

Surrealists and solipcists ... What in the world are you talking
about? I went out of my way to create a word in which
everything evolved pretty logically. I did this for a reason, so the

universe would not be constantly freaking everyone out. And now you come along with your divining abalone and quacking orchid, deliberately undoing the rationality of the plan. I can't tell you how dismaying it is for me to see you chuckling over this stuff, and wondering what people will make of it. and just between you and me, here's what they make of it – nothing. They roll their eyes and never pay a moment of attention to you again.

Contrarians ... Doesn't it trouble you, that audiences always look at you like confused dogs, tilting their heads? I'm not sure what to tell you, because you'll just do the exact opposite. Oh, wait, I've got it: Much success to you!

The tenured poets living off grants and fellowships ... what can I tell you, except that a giant griddle has already been prepared for you, and a generous slathering of BBQ sauce. You were lucky to live a life without work, but you can make it up to me on the other end.

I call this next group the poor pitiful poets ... you know who you are. Someone has died, or your boyfriend has broken up with you, or you lost your job. I'm sorry all these things are happening, but if you think a poem about how shitty this makes you feel is going to make things better, you're missing the point.

Alcoholic poets ... you think people can't tell you're smashed? That's not Captain Ahab talking, it's Captain Morgan. Sober up and try again.

Then there are the suicide poets ... I know you suffered, and I'm sorry things didn't work out. But come on, people, you had one bad day and threw it all away. If you were really poets, wouldn't you have some perspective on that day? And if you were really

poets, interested in the well-being of others, is this the message you want to send?

Worse than the suicide poets, though, are those who fawn over the poets who off themselves, as if they were symptomatic of the age, propitiations to Moloch, or something. People, these poets are sad cases, but they are not to be celebrated for tipping over the Monopoly board. Do you want everyone to be as sad as them?

Meanwhile, I want you all to consider that the whole world is depressed – don't everybody look at me that way. I intended that you would all throw frisbees to wolves and dinosaurs and no one would ever die, but you had to eat the fruit, didn't you. Jerks. Anyway, if everyone is pretty depressed as a baseline, what good is your miserable poem going to do anyone?

Next up, the rustic poets ... I'm glad you like the birds and flowers, I like them, too, it's great handiwork if I say so myself. So I'm awfully flattered, but, really, is this the bravest thing you have in you, smelling cherry blossoms and celebrating burrs sticking to your sweater?

Wisdom poets ... where do I start? First, I never set any of you guys up to dispense wisdom. That's competition, and you ought to know by now how I feel about competition. And anyway, take a look at yourselves. Is there anything about the way you live your life that would make you a likely source for wisdom? You live like goddamn idiots, hate to break it to you, but give you a ballpoint pen and you think you're the arbiters of night and day. You're not. And frankly, it comes off, to me anyway, who am actually wise, as a tad pretentious.

Finally, a word about form. I'm not saying my own book was so great, but it has sold over 30 billion copies and been translated

into every known language, including Klingon. Not too shabby, for poetry, am I right?

And while there are exceptions, like the Psalms, I did not bother to make the thing rhyme. I wanted the stories to be clear so I laid it down as straight as I could. There's a lesson here, people. If you have to start inverting word order to get that last word on the line to rhyme, until the sentence is twisted into an unintelligible knot, and you're rhyming flight, night, sight and fight – hey big payoff, am I right? There's a reason people hate you, and it's because you spend all your time on this bullshit and next to nothing on the reader's needs and wants.

Which brings me to – what else could you have been doing instead of spending your whole lives jaggging off onto your Moleskin notebooks...

10 ideas for what you might be doing instead ...

You could have found something to say that people could have used ... something to brighten their day, or teach them how to live or suffer ... you could have told them how to make a soufflé that doesn't sink in the middle ...

You could have written something that cheered you UP, instead of bumming others OUT ...

You could have written to someone who you know, who you care about, instead of a bunch of indifferent strangers, waiting for their turn at the dais ...

You could have said things that really matter, instead of stuff that makes you sound edgy and cool ...

You could have talked about things outside yourself, instead of me, me, me – meaning you ..

You could have told us who you really are, not the person you wanted us to think you are ...

You could have skipped and laughed, instead of being a giant deflatable buzzkill ...

You could have told us a story that would say everything you want to say ...

You could have been thankful instead of being a bitch ...

You could have kept your big fat mouths shut, and loved the people you love that much more ...

That's all I've got. We're going to release you back into your element now.

Here's a final do and a don't.

Do take the things I have said to you to heart.

Don't make me call you together again.

Because if I do, bet on this – it will make a poem like you have never heard, and you will wish it would end, but it won't.

Every Song Is An Act Of Love

It begins with caresses -- solo notes are plucked,
a feeling forms, the plaintive first hints of melody.
And then a breath, and a repeat, like knocking twice
when the first knock goes unanswered.

Now I pledge my troth, committing at the bridge,
my hand at my heart drawing your heart to me.
Now I am dipping low, I am grasping for leverage,
I will pivot on a seventh and lift it up again, hard.

And there is the bridge, and there is the title
repeated again, this time louder than ever.
The string is pulled, the confetti explodes --
Surprise speckles every face!

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