

red wolf editions

THE POEMS OF THE AIR

and Other Poems

ALAN WALOWITZ



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Alan Walowitz



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Preface

I know from much personal experience that most readers will skip the preface. Sometimes, I'll read a preface, but only after I've read the book. However, if the preface were at the end, it wouldn't be a preface, and few would ever know to find it there. In the case of a little book of poems such as this, a preface is hardly required. This one, *The Poems of the Air*, is unlikely to be read from cover to cover by anyone, not even by members of my family. Readers, if there are any, might "read around" in such a collection; they might read a poem here or a poem there that they like. This would make most poets happy. I will be filled with joy if you read around in *The Poems of the Air*.

Most of the poems in *The Poems of the Air* made their debut in Red Wolf Journal and have been collected here with the help of Irene Toh, the publisher of Red Wolf. For many years, Irene has published poets from around the world and has done so elegantly, with little fuss, and probably few thanks for her efforts. I know I haven't thanked her enough.

Irene has always invited poets who submit poems to Red Wolf to include what she calls "process notes" with them. These process notes provide poets with the opportunity to discuss the origin of their poems, or to place their poems into some sort of context. Some poets prefer allowing poems to speak for themselves. However, I do like to talk, and I've asked Irene to include process notes with each of the poems here, just as I'd provide a brief introduction at a poetry reading. Though this created more work for Irene, she's a very generous publisher and a kind person. Incidentally, she's also a talented poet herself when she's not busy publishing other poets.

Thanks to any readers who have made it through this preface. And even more thanks for reading around in *The Poems of the Air*.

The Poems of the Air

The existence of the Higgs Boson is one reason why everything we see, including ourselves, all planets and stars, has mass and exists – hence why it was called the ‘God Particle.’

–The Daily Mail

Here comes Higgs
with God riding shotgun!
So hold any plans for our lives
unfolding haphazard and ruinous,
now we’re full speed ahead
with the weighing and measuring
we never cared about in days gone by,
searching what keeps us plump and whole, –
and never even knowing
if this is the real Higgs
or some imposter Higgs, perhaps
the light-hearted one,
maybe even some other boson
we’ve just stumbled on
whistling past the graveyard
of this is where we’re headed—
who cares so long as we don’t go spinning
off the planet like a plate.

I used to keep my feet on the ground
with only floppy shoes,
my outsize nose, bobbing
with the joy of gravity neat,
inscribing lonely figures in the air.
But not so far or falutin’ as the one
who keeps the top shelf stocked,
up where the good stuff’s kept,
impossible to reach,
airy and uneditable.

First appeared in another form in Verse-Virtual

Process notes: My knowledge of particle physics is quite limited. Actually, much like the Higgs Boson, it’s almost undetectable. However, I’m sure the discovery of the Higgs, nicknamed ‘the God Particle,’ proved irresistible for many poets who are either relieved or disappointed that matter actually exists.

Reading *Catcher* Again

You don't like anything that's happening . . . Name one thing.
— Phoebe to Holden, *The Catcher in the Rye*

Phoebe—goddess of the light—
dares her brother, a more minor god
and permanently lost in the dark—
to name one thing he likes.

I understand the problem well,
having dwelt in dark myself:
and who can ever know for sure,
nor be brave enough to say?

Someone sends me a picture of her handsomest cat,
to check, I guess, for proof of life.
Eager to please, though mostly dead,
I venture: *I could lose my face in that fur easy*

*and it might make me happy—
though, perhaps, a little wheezy.*
Not good enough, I guess, to make light,
as she flies off to face the night alone,

where everything must be unqualified.
The trouble is, I want to stay outside.
Though *in* is where real joy might lie,
but hard to find here with so little light.

First appeared in Live Encounters

Process notes: I've probably taught *The Catcher in the Rye* to 11th graders a dozen times over the years. Each time I taught it, I read it again. This didn't stop me from mis-teaching it plenty of times. Years later, something invariably happens in my life to remind me that there was something I could have done, perhaps, a little better.

The bus to Riker's

begins at Queens Plaza with the mothers and wives
and daughters and sons—some obedient, some cranky,
many with eyes teary from the cold,
and snot running down
from the smoke of the city and the too-long day and all the waiting—
and pulled by the arm of their snowsuits to get on the bus already
though they'd rather watch the el rumble by
or the planes swoop low to LaGuardia.
A few carry gifts, some big as them,
in festive paper bound, the elders know, to be torn and inspected.
More practical in plastic bags from C Town or the K Mart
near West Farms in the Bronx. Just take the 44 over the big bridge
to Main, then the 7 train to here—to bus across the little bridge
where time will slow.

Best to come in low over LaGuardia,
to see Riker's as it was, once an encampment
for a travelling show in the day—a big tent, torches that lit the night
sometimes minstrelsy, sometimes zealotry, sometimes both—
but always empty now the time you're flying in late
from Cleveland or Bentonville or Issaquah or any place
willing to do some business, unless you find yourself here,
warm and drafty, on the bus for the long haul, the pitch and yaw,
the heat coming up through the vents,
the cold of the windows, the writing on it with your finger,
then the wait at the gate.
Waiting, that's what there is to learn
in this life—no matter, a train, a gate, an answer—
then you might get where you're going
and hardly know what to say,
then, no matter what the words were,
the long bus-ride home.

Process notes: I became aware that there was a public bus to the infamous prison on Riker's Island when I was stuck in traffic one night near the approach to the 59th Street Bridge. Traffic, that's a 1st World Problem isn't it? I probably have no right to write a poem called "The bus to Riker's."

Listen:

My life called out to me
from some place deep inside
where even years and years
of help or love won't reach.

Listen: you've got to change your life.

So, I fired the gardener
and began to mow myself,
then, lay among the blades
and invited a poem
to cut some comfort in me,
instead of waiting, always waiting,
to be taken in parts,
the rest of me scattered in the wind
and never to be whole again.

But I woke up aching anyway,
and found the words that stuck inside
were so much like the rest of my life:
I was alone, it was the middle of the night,
and even if the bars weren't closed,
there was no place to go.

And another voice called out for me
this time sweet in its insistence
and sang of all the sad and lovely poems
that would surely come of dying
before getting what I want.

And the voice took me by the hand
and held me in its arms.
And the voice was gentle.
And I wanted to believe.
And the voice didn't threaten or cajole.

And it only said,

Why don't you ever

Listen?

Process notes: Some readers tell me this seems like a washed-out knock-off of a Mary Oliver poem. I must've been aware of Oliver's poetry when I wrote this one in 1990, and I'm sure I was affected by it. I might even have tried to teach "The Journey" to students. But teaching that beautiful poem is as foolish as is writing a poem "after" it. "The Journey" is a poem that must be felt, and not ruined with excessive teaching or imitation.

Then

Was a long day, by any measure,
though we didn't think to measure, then.
Unlike now when, we note,
the days speed by like calendar-leaves in an old movie.
Some say this comes with age, but others insist from lack of desire.
I say the latter, though It didn't seem to matter,
the way this day seized, as if all the oil in it had been drained.
Still summer, though near the end, days limping
to meet the equinox, this one bright and pretty,
no augury of fall in the air or much on the ground,
the few early leaves swept neatly to the curbs,
the neighbors having wordlessly agreed
this would make all the difference,
temper the coming darkness, stem the night.

Then, we waited at the Community House
that had been arranged for just such times—
nothing else to be done, we figured,
but be at the end of a long line of strangers
similarly inclined, not able to think of where to be,
in a world so eerily quiet. My wife and I,
our daughter in tow, young then,
snatched from school early, and no one—
not the principal over the loudspeaker,
not her teacher, not even us, quite able to explain
or make her believe what happened might ever be righted.

Finally, then, after minutes of waiting that seemed like years,
a sad-faced lady emerged in mussed pinafore.
She was young, but at that distance,
looked like she had been at war,
and speaking, then, as loudly as she could muster.

What did she say? What did she say?

asked one to the next down the long line like a telephone wire
though already frayed from the front,
and now from the sides, much like us all.
Got more than we need, she said, then.
Most are gone, we think.
Could try again, tomorrow.
But, maybe, call before you come.

First appeared in Verse-Virtual

Process notes: It took me a long time to write a poem about September 11th. I was lucky that my experience of it was far enough removed that I could only write authentically about being where I actually was, safe at work, and not far from home. But my daughter Jamie was nine years old then, and how could I explain to her what I could hardly understand?

Look,

Three generations of a Bronx family died Sunday when a speeding SUV carrying seven people — including three little girls — vaulted off an overpass and plunged 60 feet into the Bronx Zoo, killing everyone in the car.

—NY Daily News, April 30, 2012

most days I travel south on the Parkway
never even see the Bronx River though my mom says,
she took me fishing once I was a kid
and this time of night can't see nothing
even if there's water down there—

—the el's on my east,
but a train hardly comes
and on the west's the zoo where I hardly go
now that I'm always nights
but tell you the truth,
I could stand to calm there an hour some day.
Ten bucks for parking's a joke
considering what I make—

then I get close to the place
where the minivan drove crazy,
hit the Jersey barrier,
then flew high over the iron rail
and into a part of the zoo they don't use no more—
good thing no one was below, —

traffic slows to a crawl looking and looking
though it's already two days old
and this ain't some pisshole
where nothing happens, this is the Bronx.

The spot marked in red where it went flying
and there's a bunch of plastic flowers on the side
and a photo-guy is carrying his boxy camera
on a path along the Parkway
and what looks like a regular Bronx guy,
cool in camouflage, is leaning over the rail
to look down, but don't know why—

the van's gone,
the abuelas and niñas gone,
the mother who was driving and the titi gone.
I'm no rubber neck; I just want to drive, get home,
but the people that got to look they look

and make it stop-and-go and dangerous as hell for me,
and what, I'm not gonna slow down and look?

and, God, those kids, such a long way down.
Jesus, Lord God, in heaven
will you only look down sometimes
and take the goddamn time to

look?

Process notes: It was a horrible accident that caused so much rubbernecking on my drive home down the Bronx River Parkway in late April 2012. We can't resist looking at the scene, even after there's nothing left to see. What loss. Seven humans killed, generations.

Brief Stop at the Whitney

We'll text our friends,
and tweet our acquaintances—
time to take photos of the Hoppers
and post them on Facebook.

Then, at leisure on the bus, we can see
if the Nighthawks are secretly snarling
or their beaks are empty as sieves.
We'll blow up the naked woman
standing in the sun and examine her skin.
Does she have the texture of a reptile
or does the canvas poke through
the pigment like a knife?

Time enough for the others in our party
to study the floor plan for the rest rooms,
eye with envy the nearest exit,
cross their arms over their chests,
to keep their anxious hearts from bouncing out
and bounding down the stairs like a Slinky,
a pram gone wild, or a Dali if, God forbid,
they choose to proceed through their time here
with such little intention.

First appeared in another form in The Lost River Review

Process notes: It's difficult these days to see major museum exhibitions. The wait, the crowds, the tickets! Waiting your turn to get within hailing distance of a painting you've always wanted to be in the same room with. Some visitors—God bless them—stay only long enough to take a photo and move on to the next. What are they thinking as they move so fast?

Sabbatical

Being a good boy never was so easy:
the tables set, the garbage taken out,
the mothers not ignored.
And even now, years since being good
failed to be its own reward;
the cats are fed, books properly stowed,
the wives have been laid,
sometimes left satisfied.

I'd rather I knew how
to curl up in a corner with some trash.
Take the time I'm owed easy.
Let the clock on the wall
beat a lonesome tattoo.
Let the auditors scour the books
and track the embezzled hours.
Let doctors search for the pulse
that sleeps deep inside my being.

I'll wiggle a toe
when they carry me out
should I decide
I'm staying.

Process notes: It's such an irresistible gift when they offer to pay you to do so little. All those months in 1982 and I did little but household chores. I wrote one poem.

Fall River Transfer

The night my father told us we were moving again we had gathered in the kitchen—he was known for being late and we were good at waiting. Some smoke was left in the air from where the fat had hit the bottom of the pan and the windows were open unseasonably wide. In the evening chill of the third week of April, we could already smell the magnolia my father insisted on planting out back. Same as when he was a kid, he would tell us, so we'd always remember. Look out my window; I've tried not to forget.

All I could look at, then, was the wallpaper starting to peel in the corner near my seat. A tiny edge of avocado pointing right at me had so far gone unnoticed, but there'd be hell to pay. The baby was complaining he didn't want to eat and played in the corner on the floor. My sister said she was tired of waiting, though my dad doted on her. She lit a cigarette and mused that maybe she'd get married though no one paid attention anymore, or could stand the boy she was seeing, the one who once hid a gun beneath the front seat of his car.

All I worried about was going. I didn't know where Fall River was—though I knew there must be shirt-mills and maybe a bridge where you could cross, or could tumble a long way down. The last time it had been Manila and for days I overheard all that talk of tin roofs, mother-of-pearl, and abalone washed up on shore, free for the taking. My mother tried to assure me: You know it never happens. But how would she know how it feels? She asked my sister for a cigarette, not her first of the day. Nothing much ever happens here. But just enough so it feels like it does.

Process notes: I don't think my father ever wanted to move for the sake of his job. He was as much a homebody as I am. But whenever the subject would come up, it would create great anxiety in me. My sister denies some of the events portrayed in this poem ever happened. She's probably right.

My Friend's Nose

for Brian B.

They've taken the blade to Brian's nose again—
and enough already, many of us say—
the plastic surgeon's done a helluva job
sewing him up and matching his seams.
Say what you want about these docs—
though nowadays they're on the clock—
it's talent the way they manage those itty-bitty stitches
on Brian, who's small, and enough like a gnome—
but, even with the cutting,
has a shapely nose a little more than befits his size,
along with a great laugh which he needs
all the times his various parts have been opened
and poked and pulled upon.

Now my friend's been sold this piece of gold
he glues right on his lid
to keep it closed when he blinks, which
they claim will keep his eye from leaking.
But Brian's always pulling my leg—
I've never seen him weep except from laughing,
so he must keep any sadness to himself,
much like his fortune in baseball cards
and all the treasure he hides, but nobody else wants
and would likely languish forever on eBay, if they allow.
Some think this eye thing's only a trick to make him
even more valuable than he is,
which many of us already find
to be quite considerable.

Process notes: Brian's nose is doing fine, as is his eyelid. I think he always wanted me to write a poem about him. I'm sure this one changed his mind. What are friends for?

1-800-4-Cancer

My wife loves to talk about her work, but I don't love to listen.
Who wants the tales she has to tell?
With her pay comes the horrors she's gathered that day:
People call the Cancer Hot Line and trade their woes for facts,
though the facts are always sad.
One woman called to find out what *malignant* was.
What her doctor wouldn't tell her, the Hot Line would.

I don't think I could.
I don't even like to hear the word,
though I like to say words are my work.
She says, *It's crazy, these poems you keep making.*
I know she's right, but the making's what I like:
the click I make when I close the door behind me;
the music I make when I'm rattling these keys.

But, then, right in the middle, the telephone rings.
It's my wife wanting nothing again:
She says: *I just have to talk to someone well and sane.*
She says: *It's an epidemic and it's closing in.*
She says: *Cancer. It can make you fucking crazy.*

I'm no doctor. There's not a single cure in my head.
But I notice if I wait enough,
the ringing of the phone will stop.
I'm an ostrich, I know, and sometimes I'm crazy.
But even she finds me easy
when left to these poems—healing me
and of my own tentative making.

Process notes: This poem first appeared in the anthology *The Cancer Poetry Project 2: More Poems by Cancer Patients and Those Who Love Them*. It's more about writing poetry than it is about cancer. But those who work hard on behalf of those who have cancer, including my ex, deserve attention and praise. Though my marriage probably could have used some more of the former.

Woke

Why not write a poem? I ask my wife with her MFA.
She claims she's got better things to do—
like sifting the litter box,
or watching Nadal peel off his wet stretch Nike
after one more win, and pull on his million-dollar watch.
Or she'll even spend time among her fellow woke
who are out to wake the rest of us.

The cats wish she'd sift the litter more,
and leave the world and Rafa alone.
Though she'll read my poems if I insist.
But, then, as we're sitting in some Spanish joint,
she tells me what a great cook Rafa is,
and I ought to help her win the vote,
and if she ever writes a poem
it would have telephone poles in it.
This, a strange admission,
coming as it does extempore and unasked.
She says she likes the way they connect the world,
yet stand tall and, kind of, above it all
and are fully-fashioned, but out of wood.
Though I know she thinks most of what's made by man,
or even man-imagined
is turning us to ruin.

She says, *Why not write your own telephone pole?*
I tell her, poets don't borrow, they steal—
and you might decide you need it back someday.
Never, she promises. *Things out here
where it's real are much too serious.*
But, she says to me, *I bet you put a telephone pole
in a poem sooner than you think.*
Then, she looks at me as if I've been cheating.
Never, I swear. And this time I really mean it.

Process notes: My wife is quite a good poet. However, she's not writing much poetry at this time of her life. She told me one day—and would probably deny it now—that if she ever wrote another poem, it would have telephone poles in it. Hmmm. She prefers playing tennis, teaching her students how to be better writers, and making the world a better place.

Jugs

first got said by Paul whose older brother Don
said it to him before he said it to me.
Don never said anything to me
except “not home” from the kitchen window
when I’d come to the side to call for my pal.
Their father, Gordon, a banker at Green Point,
all the way downtown, a subway and bus—
but always took the 3A to 227, which only comes on the hour
which was never quite on time
but he’d wait for it like clockwork.
Nodding once in his worsted wool as he walked by
black felt hat straight as if nailed to his head
to make it home for dinner every night at 6
served by Pat, Paul’s sister, also mostly wordless,
who was studying to be a nun. Even if I try,
I can’t recall their mother, Mrs. H, calling him in,
but I can see her at the side door looking unhappy—
she might have been from someplace else
the way she always wore her hair pinned back
and a fancy apron on her dress.
Far as I remember, I never asked Paul
what his family talked about over dinner.
To tell the truth, Paul and I never talked much.
When we weren’t outside having a catch,
we mostly studied his father’s National Geographics,
wordless and thrilled, in the basement
while his sleek American Flyer headed at breakneck speed
toward the headless woman
we always laid across the tracks.

Process notes: We knew very little about sex when we grew up during the 1950s, but it was on our minds whenever we could glean any little information—from an older friend, a magazine, or from our own imaginations. For boys who knew so little, we talked about it a lot.

Summer is absurd

the way the heat and your words
weigh me down.
You know so many and wield them well.

But soon September when the edge of a breeze
will set me free,
the way your words never would.

Like a little boy, I have so many words
spinning in my head and don't even know
what all of them are for.

And this must be how you lure me,
babbling such nonsense,
so far from my home.

Still, when I string some words,
absurd as these,
and attempt some sense

of the summer mess I've made,
if I start to think of you—to tell the truth—
I don't think of you at all.

I swear, I never do.

Process notes: This poem never quite grew up to be what I wanted it to be. I've always had difficulty knowing what to do with myself during the summer. The other ten months were easier—everything was mapped out. I still don't know what free time is or what to do with it.

Census of Dreams

The dream is a lie, but the dreaming is true.
Robert Penn Warren

Where are you calling from tonight?
Another place I haven't been awake,
but play the perfect host
adrift in a world I claim I never made:
I nod, tip my hat, and soon I'm gone.

Sure, the dream feels real—
enough to wash me from the first of dawn,
through day's uneasy peace,
till creak of porch in stale night air
stills an unrequited yawn.

But end of another endless day,
brings no rest I dreamed
and fills my head like a waiting room
where lost friends are counted
for the long journey home.

Instead, all peace I sought gets dashed
on a jagged thought, skipped breath,
late night call and no one there.
And you, last dream to the door,
ask nothing but to leave alone.

Process notes: This is a poem begun in 2010, a census year, and abandoned till now. It's a love-poem, a dream-poem, a getting old-poem. Aren't they all?

Yoga Nidra

for my daughter

Most nights we descend to a meadow
but tonight she forgets I'm afraid of heights
and the holes a ladder makes in air
and I look down and fear I'll fall
through to the dizzying ground
so I dare not move up and into the ether.

But each step is a color, she insists,
and sounds so sure I want to believe
though both color-blind and fearful,
I reach for insight, but find
only lack of will, when I rise against both
my terror, and my better judgment.

Aliyah, I recall, is the name of the voice
I hear in my sleep and she means to move up,
same as her name, though sideways and spinning
is the way she travels early mornings, howsoever
much I remind her, and with great portent,
that up and awake are not one and the same.

She hears me clear but stays locked
in that space she's carved
between wake and sleep,
entwined in the covers that might even catch her
if she happens to fall, meantime thinking
who dares allege this is not the way to live?

Once out of bed she says to me,
You don't know shit.
And, as she peeks over my shoulder
where I'm writing about our journey,
You don't even know what a poem is—
And this is the proof, she dutifully submits.

Process notes: This was mainly written during one of my attempts to meditate. Yoga Nidra tries to help us tap into that magical place between wake and sleep. During that meditation, I was hearing the voice of my daughter. She was in high school at the time, and she was impossible to wake up. Apparently, she either didn't think much of my poetry then, or she just wanted me to know how she felt about being awakened at some ungodly hour, let's say, like noon.

Time and Distance

Two trains leave Whoville and Anytown at noon
and we're told to determine when they meet,
not to mention if the bodies will be laid aside the tracks,
or they'll be carted off in refrigerated trucks—
so much for the beauty and synergy of math.
Then, soon as we realize it's not us on a train
bound for oblivion, it's only our canned goods lined up
on the patio table to be scrubbed and bleached,
and we watch as the labels fade in the warm spring sun.
After a while we can't tell the garbanzos from the pigeon peas.
Yes, we hoped for the taste of some future hummus,
but maybe those nasty limas could be sufficient for now—
if only this doesn't turn out to be the rest of our lives,
and it's just another maddening and unscheduled stop.

Process notes: I hate math and lima beans and needless deaths and washing my groceries.

Syrian Wedding Ghazal

Four guest rabbis set out on the parchment the caterer's men have laid and smoothed like a putting green; then the cantor holding the mike, now not the nightclub singer

he started out to be, but a fellow making love, shyly courting Him in a window above. As he advances side to side, his Hebrew *Beauty and the Beast* fades, folds into

Sunrise, Sunset arranged for strings alone. And here come the olds—the Jiddohs, the Siddohs—and violins make the tearful Klezmer mold itself 'round a Mizrahi syncopate.

Now a gasp, the little girls throw those bold colors to the ground with each studied pose and a smaller boy in miniature tux, obedient but frozen now, even as his mother pleads—

he won't be cajoled—she sweeps him up before he turns more sad than sweet. Then, many retainers—maids, matrons, groomsmen, ushers, assorted honorees, —

all happy by profession or disposition as each holds a momentary mid-aisle pose. The groom with his parents, who've forsaken second spouses for this resplendent event;

then the bride, ah! almost forgot, accompanied by Dad, Mom, half step behind, but such a glow. Whose wedding is this? Though we've been told, we might not know,

as the groom comes to behold, choose his bride, join the legions that have stood beneath the canopy, enrolled—happy or not—in this enterprise they likely won't get out alive.

Process notes: On a rare occasion, I've attended an Orthodox Jewish wedding and found myself sitting alone among the men, as my wife sat on the other side with the women. This always feels a bit odd to me, but also seems the perfect time to take notes for a poem. Despite my natural cynicism, this one was really quite an event, the bride lovely, the groom handsome, and the food and drink sumptuous. (Jiddohs and Siddohs, by the way, are Grandpas and Grandmas in Arabic, transliterated as best I can.)

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer' lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Summer's Lease

This is the summer we grow old.
The grass overgrows
out of all proportion.
Grapes rot on the vine or fall
before our best intentions.

This is the summer
your bones speak of rain,
then fail to straighten
in the sun.
My head wearies of work
I've left for last,
and eyes in their sockets
lead a life of their own.
I doze and dream myself
awake and young.

This summer
this house still over-run
with photos and mirrors,
finally useless to us;
what was at odds with what we see—
and the clock's
infernal ticking.

This is the summer we grow old
and the children—
we tell ourselves—
have gone before.

Some things we have
in this life for sure:
one another,
and knowing, at last,
we won't know
what we are.

Process notes: The title is borrowed from Shakespeare, Sonnet 18, *Shall I compare thee . . .*, which I was assigned to memorize in junior high school—a good start, you'd think. The poem was written when I was very young—in my 20s. Now that I'm old, I don't think much of the poem, but I'd like to think I got a few things right about aging. In fact, right about now, I think I need a nap.

The Dead Sing Brokedown Palace for Ken Kesey (May 8, 1984)

The last we ever saw the Chief—
after he took good care of McMurphy,
broke his neck a couple of places
and broke out into the night—
one hand was latched to the bumper of that chicken van
the other hitched to a tree to keep the wrestling team inside
from sliding off the cliff in the worst snowstorm
the Cascades had seen since '58.
But by then the Big Injun was getting small again,
worn down and laid waste by the high-talking hucksters,
and pickpockets, and card-sharps,
but along with it came this hard-won but unspeakable wisdom:
Ain't nothing we can do to make things right.

Still, Kesey, he's gotta live with the death of his wrestler-son,
another twenty-one years, a sentence he could never do sober or sane—
till one night in Eugene, Kesey sitting in a box over the stage
with the smoke wafting off the rafters in waves
the Dead turned to him—for all their shambling harmony,
close as they ever got to as-one—and sang:

*Fare you well, fare you well
I love you more than words can tell
Listen to the river sing sweet songs
to rock my soul*

The Deadheads were stone-silent as if there were ghosts in the bleachers
and the silence enveloped Kesey like an embrace.
Then—finally—he knew: Art needn't be a fist to the face.
In fact, maybe he'd been wrong about everything,
and maybe, just maybe, and against his better judgment,
he might begin some merry madness all over again.

Process notes: This story is legendary and, like most legends, I don't know how true: How Ken Kesey, the author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, found some peace when the Grateful Dead played "Brokedown Palace" for him after the death of his son who had been a collegiate wrestler. I guess the reader can decide how true this sounds, though I like to believe it.

Heading Home

Call off your dogs.
A seller I'll be and happy—
or whatever you want—
if you give me a moment to think.

The highways of America stare
open and ready. And potholed,
you might say. But life is entrapment
avoiding being trapped in them.

Let me rodeo a moment.
I'll convince Uncle Harry or anyone
that a cow's life is just as my own,
waiting to be hoist and weighed.

I won't wait on your reply.
for I don't fear as you grow closer
and I grow old
we might emit some same syllables.

I'll be ugly only
when our mouths move the same.
Uglier,
I'll be home soon.

Process notes: This is an old poem, from around 1972. I think I wrote it when I was convinced I wanted to be a Jewish cowboy; or perhaps I was just going through some extra, late-adolescent rebellion—which has continued right through today.

Hailstorm (August 1, 2011)

The rages of recent days settle upon us,
grow into practical comforts:
those we'd trusted to allay the silence are silent;
one-time lovers barely recognized in the hall;
what might have been called kindness once
—a nod as we pass, a door noiselessly latched,
Such a handsome tie—become particular annoyances.
As is this sudden sun, the way it nudges us unwilling
into a mood we've lost the context for.

So let's remember with nostalgia just yesterday
when the rain turned to hail the size of lab rats,
translucent, fat and blind—
they made that scurrying rat-tat-tat on the roof
and those death-defying dents in the parked cars
and even the ones trying to escape
though there was nowhere to go.

It's harsh weather that could comfort those
who lose sight of what life is about—
ducking shards when the glass shatters about us
even in the so-called safety of our homes.
Here's real running through the rain
and not even vaguely romantic.
The drops, suddenly so visible,
might turn out to be much less hazardous
to our long-term health and well-being.

Appeared in Red Wolf Journal prior to appearing in The Story of the Milkman and Other Poems

Process Notes: The hailstorm of August 1, 2011 was a frightening event. The sky darkened and soon the rain turned to hail, and some of the hail was the size of baseballs. My car had both front and back windshields shattered, as well as a side view mirror. There were dents all over any car left outside. Skylights in homes were shattered. Roofs had to be replaced. All within a space of less than a half-hour and only within a two mile radius of here. I think the poem tries to capture some of the fright of the event, as well as some of my amazement.

You Are Home

My father paces the lobby of the Hotel Le Monde, a little outside of Brussels. The prints, in the style of the late Flemish school, stare down at him, but the people inside them are too busy, too joyful in their village life to engage the lonely soldier come to set them free. The war sputters to a close a few hundred miles to the east and my father lights one cigarette after another and crushes each, half-smoked, beneath his impatient heel. He is lost inside, his buddies upstairs, for them the war brought closer to an end in the arms of the *jeune filles*, who wear their boredom like the cheap perfume in their hair. The world will be appeased that they can hardly see themselves in each others' eyes, the light failing outside, the lamps dimmed by elegant rags torn from more innocent days, now too painful to recall.

My father stares at the clock hanging crooked on the wall. The time is not right, but he allows himself to think of his wife and daughter who wait for him on the other side. He wishes he knew them. For all his jokes, his practiced ease, he knows little of women and the world they make. But he is certain where they are is home, and he wishes he were there, and he wishes he had not come to this place which has only made him more lonely, more certain that something unnamed and terrible will happen, that he will miss his own life, that he will never be home.

And I am his son a lifetime later and have finally been born. I have wandered from woman to woman and you laugh and say I'm like a man looking for a home. Some nights I even dream myself standing at your door. It is already dawn and I can hardly remember the dangers of the battlefield, the mines I have dodged, the unsteady rat-tat-tat of the gunner at my heels. I ring your bell and ring and ring, but you never answer. For all my false bravado, my derring-do, I cannot knock, I cannot demand, I cannot beat down your door, though I know, and have always known, you are home.

Appeared in Red Wolf Journal prior to appearing in The Story of the Milkman and Other Poems

Process notes: This has always been a prose-piece, from still another time in life when I was trying to make sense of myself. I figure I can call it a poem if I want, and no one will care but me. As W.C. Williams sort of said, Who will say it is not?

The Sequel

*They will call him brave.
“Penelope”—Dorothy Parker*

The universe is telling us plenty—and some of it true—
but what to do with all the conflicting information?
These days I lash myself
to practiced habit and established form.
You’d be surprised
who’ll watch a guy muck about in quicksand
when he hardly gives a shit at all.
Sometimes I stop and browse
the cards and letters you fans send.
I like the ones that read like fortunes best:
Don’t seek so hard.
Settle down.
Feel free to be old. And even more poetic:
Come joyfully to the fruits of home.
What you’ve read or heard
might have once been true:
the glossy smile of native girl on travel brochure
could send me hot and frenzied
in an entirely new direction.
But I always choose Ithaca now—
hapless suitors, wife gone grey,
son who doesn’t know me.
Cowardly? I admit, but comfort of a kind
what love and duty will have us do.

First appeared in The Story of the Milkman and Other Poems

Process notes: “The Sequel” has gone through many iterations. It started out being about my postman, who always seemed to me to be a happy man. But who can tell how happy anyone else is, when we can hardly tell about ourselves? The poem ended up being sort of about an Odyssey, a frequent, perhaps too-frequent, subject of poetry, hence my nod to one of the best by Dorothy Parker in the epigraph.

News Flash on I 495

Silver Alert, the sign says.
Some old guy's got loose on the expressway again,
not kidnapped by strangers
or dragged off by kin professing their love—
some place he never wanted to go.
He knows where this is heading.

Life is funny and sad, this perfect loneliness we seek,
at bars on the corner, glazed over, head bowed;
in cars on highways, the radio jacked up so high
we never have to think;
settling in at rooming houses the middle of nowhere
for as long as it takes.

Left alone is what we say we want, but
if the world won't get a hard-on for us,
we don't know where to turn or how.
Might as well drive straight to the end,
if there is an end.

If not, I'll be right home.

Process notes: I was driving on the Long Island Expressway one day and saw a sign that flashed the words: Silver Alert with the make, model, and license plate number of a missing person. It got me to thinking about the senior citizen who might have run away.

Offerings for the Dead

Second thoughts sometimes detract
from who you figured you might be
in the distillery of your dreams—
you'd help those in need, comfort the afflicted,
mourn the dead, or at least offer compassion
to those who had been much closer
and in words they could easily take in at a time like this.
A sincere "I don't know what to say" often turns out
to be better receiving-line chatter
than "My condolences, Ma'am, though
I don't have the faintest notion who you are."
Such expressions are often distracting,
and you end up in a handshake that knows no end,
or, God forbid, you hug a stranger
for much too long, and in this dance you have nothing more to say,
and instead begin to babble tidbits from the past—
memories that might just as well be inventions—
and before long you're blubbing when
all you wanted was a little silent weeping in a corner,
far from the sight of the deceased, who you really liked,
your voice cracking at the seams and any thing
real you were planning to say jumbled and fumbled
like your own worst vision of yourself,
a kid whose mother dragged him to a wake—
where he might at least have learned something useful
for later in life when his mother is gone.

Appeared in Red Wolf Journal prior to appearing in The Story of the Milkman and Other Poems

Process notes: I was recently informed that a well-loved poetry teacher, Colette Inez, had passed away, and I just started writing. I didn't know what the poem would turn out to be. My guess is she would have approved of a poem that doesn't know where it's headed at first. It's certainly not meant to be a memorial for her; she would deserve much better, much richer; it's much more a memento mori for myself. alanwalowitz.com

Revision

You must change your life, Rilke said.
But what did he know about moving toward a fence
in such ragged order, armed with rocks and kites,
where live arms will greet you,
their 19-year-old bearers trained in this same theatre
and are in receipt of their rules of engagement
and memorized the battle plan
like lines in a drama where the outcome is certain,
which will only make the ending more rich, more real?
Yet, how can you tell what these supernumeraries will feel
once the curtain comes down, and the dead
are not mannequins and are moved instead
to the theatre of the ground?

Much like this nation where I'm told,—
Even if I'm the son unable to ask—
I can return any time I'd like,
I've been on this earth the allotted three score and ten.
I assure you, from vast experience,
to change a life requires more than one's full portion.
But to revise, to see yourself again,
that can be an everyday miracle, if only we'd try.
Some of our fathers tell us we're not quite chosen,
but just to be certain, we had better be better
and a light unto the nations.
This is hard work, the toughest there is,
but, didn't I hear God say, in some unrecorded verse,
Hey, pal, isn't this what you signed up for?

Appeared in The New Verse News prior to appearing The Story of the Milkman and Other Poem

Process notes: "Revision" was written in response to the chilling and bloody events during the spring of 2018 at the Gaza-Israel border fence. I'm sure I didn't get everything right in the poem, both biblically and historically. But I know the pain I felt when I watched the news and saw the deaths, the bloodshed, and the way we humans so blithely move away from the hope of peace.

About the Author



Alan Walowitz is from Queens, NY which is only a hundred yards away from the window where he does most of his writing. As friends and family are well aware, Alan doesn't like to get too far from home. He's proud to be a Contributing Editor at Verse-Virtual, an Online Community Journal of Poetry. His chapbook, *Exactly Like Love*, comes from Osedax Press. The full-length *The Story of the Milkman and Other Poems* is available from Truth Serum Press. Most recently, from Arroyo Seco Press, is the chapbook *In the Muddle of the Night*, written with his friend, the poet Betsy Mars. When informed that his 50th year of teaching would be on Zoom, he decided to try poem-writing as a full-time preoccupation instead. He's waiting to see how his new career works out.