

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Chris Forhan**

**- poems -**

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## **Chris Forhan**

Chris Forhan grew up in Seattle, Washington. He earned an MA from the University of New Hampshire and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Forgive Us Our Happiness* (1999), co-winner of the Bakeless Literary Publication Prize; *The Actual Moon, The Actual Stars* (2003), winner of the Samuel Morse French Poetry Prize; and *Black Leapt In* (2009), chosen by poet Phillis Levin for the Barrow Street Press Book Prize.

Publishers Weekly noted that in *Forgive Us Our Happiness* Forhan's "happiness is mediated by wry glances at the mythic . . . and the demotic." Often elegiac, the poems in *Black Leapt In* address a son's early loss of his father, and the strange yet familiar experience of coming of age. Lawrence Raab commented that the poems in *Black Leapt In* "have in them something of Theodore Roethke's excitement at being alive in the physical world—how much there is to see!—as well as Roethke's certainty of the darkness threaded all through that world."

Forhan's poems have appeared in *The Best American Poetry 2008*, *AGNI* online, and the *Paris Review*. He has received a fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts.

## A Child's Guide to Etiquette

Never put your personal spoon in the common jelly bowl.  
Spread your napkin upon your lap. Do not grasp.  
Eat what meat your fork can get to; the rest of the lobster must be given  
up for lost.  
A girl must lay her silver down while still a trifle hungry.  
She must not eat unchaperoned.

A boy does not take a girl's arm on the street. The street is no place for  
devotion.  
He must not allow his mother to lug the coal up or sift the ashes.  
If he does, he is a cad. A boy is shiftless, a vulgar bounder. He is not  
excused.  
He wears a dark suit, but not in a theater box. In a box a tuxedo is worn.  
In a box a boy keeps his thoughts to himself.  
A girl keeps her hat on until she is seated. The theater itself wears no hat.

Snow is a hat worn by mountains, the tallest of which do not remove the  
hat in summer.  
Sunlight settles like a shawl upon the hills and dewy berry fields.  
The sun is not a wag or hail-fellow-well-met. It does not loaf or shirk.  
It keeps its face funeral-ready, as you should.  
Away you go in the car. Father and Mother. Puff and Baby Sally.  
Away you go into the country. Spot and Jane.

Jane is a proper girl. She avoids provincial phrases and slang, as yep and  
boy friend.  
She says not yes but yes, Mother, and arranges rosettes in the icing.  
She wears a high-collared simple dress and carries amid the lilac, on her  
head a crown of stars.  
She may stop dancing when she wishes. A boy must dance until the music  
ends.  
He must scold his bold friend.

A boy is clothed in a purple cloak, is brought up on charges, agrees to  
them with the air of one much pleased. He raises his hat to his  
father.  
A girl, in the presence of her father, removes her breasts.  
She removes the washbowl's plug so the waste water drains completely.  
A boy need not detach his hands, but he must not thrust them into his  
pockets.  
A clothes brush must be packed for the train, and a plain dressing gown.

Away you go. You are on a train. You are speaking with courtesy and  
reserve in the dining car.  
You are slipping off your shoes. You are leaving them for the porter.  
The porter will pocket his tip discreetly.  
The porter will polish your shoes in the night.

Chris Forhan

## **Billet-Doux**

She reads by the light of a guttering candle  
and likes the feel of each page's gilt edge  
as she lifts it slightly at the corner, readying

herself to turn it. If the wind whips  
the sycamore branches outside her window,  
if her nightgowned shoulders shudder once

from a sudden chill, so much the better,  
and the book must tell of children toiling  
for bread and pennies in a textile mill,

or tender brothers doomed to sharpen  
their bayonets in opposing armies,  
or a family of refugees, dust

in their mouths, gazing with longing at the far  
shore of a river. And I long only  
to be the author of that book she reads

whose page glows from the same dim  
flame that illuminates her face,  
the author whose thought she contemplates

as she touches a fingertip to a word  
to mark her place and turns her head  
toward the kettle that has begun to whistle.

Chris Forhan

## **Gouge, Adze, Rasp, Hammer**

So this is what it's like when love  
leaves, and one is disappointed  
that the body and mind continue to exist,

exacting payment from each other,  
engaging in stale rituals of desire,  
and it would seem the best use of one's time

is not to stand for hours outside  
her darkened house, drenched and chilled,  
blinking into the slanting rain.

So this is what it's like to have to  
practice amiability and learn  
to say the orchard looks grand this evening

as the sun slips behind scumbled clouds  
and the pears, mellowed to a golden-green,  
glow like flames among the boughs.

It is now one claims there is comfort  
in the constancy of nature, in the wind's way  
of snatching dogwood blossoms from their branches,

scattering them in the dirt, in the slug's  
sure, slow arrival to nowhere.  
It is now one makes a show of praise

for the lilac that strains so hard to win  
attention to its sweet inscrutability,  
when one admires instead the lowly

gouge, adze, rasp, hammer--  
fire-forged, blunt-syllabled things,  
unthought-of until a need exists:

a groove chiseled to a fixed width,  
a roof sloped just so. It is now  
one knows what it is to envy

the rivet, wrench, vise -- whatever  
works unburdened by memory and sight,  
while high above the damp fields

flocks of swallows roil and dip,  
and streams churn, thick with leaping salmon,  
and the bee advances on the rose.

Chris Forhan

## Last Words

The night sky's a black stretch limo, boss in the back  
behind tinted glass. You could say that.

Down here's a dungeon, up there's the glittering  
ring of keys in the sentry's fist. The self

exists. Beauty too. But they're elsewhere.  
You could say that. Or not speak till commanded to.

Dawn, alone on the porch, I watch  
the one map unfold and flatten before me—

same toppled TV antenna in the berry vines,  
same cardinal, bright wound in the pasture grass.

My wound is my business. I've wearied of it.  
From now on, morning will be attended

by its own noises only, evening will approach  
without palms in its path. Let the horses

steam in the field, the sun-struck  
river blanch. I'm boarding the troop train

Chris Forhan

## Late Meditation

Night again, and I'm not impressed:  
the blurred cedar, blowzy in her black dress,  
the bat's manic acrobatics -- he tries too hard --  
the hooligan raccoon routing in the brush,  
and above all this the familiar, gaudy  
glitter of the stars. Once I felt invited  
to praise these things. Once I felt obliged.  
Inviolable night, I said. Love's rustling curtain.  
My hornbook, my slow ship to stow away on.  
It took a long time to discover night  
is a slate one writes on with the chalk  
of desire. Look. The moon is thin as a dime.  
It goes, and the sun comes up shrunken, low,  
something to poke with a broom  
and plunk, hissing, into a water bucket.  
What I said, I'd like to take it back.

Chris Forhan

## **My Almost-Daughter, my Nearly-was Son**

Those overtime nights in the ice factory, eyeing gauges, greasing gears: that's one thing. And the hours of clarinet lessons.  
All that rain that blathered on the patio, leaves  
lifting and twisting, a demented semaphore. I hired myself  
to crack that code, kept busy not conceiving you. I peopled  
the past, got safely sad about that. I hammered together  
a hut in the back of my brain to crawl inside and rest  
from the labor of making it. My almost-daughter, my nearly-was son,  
I was frugal, I made you wait till you grew  
into the idea of waiting. See? These words hurt no one.

Chris Forhan

## Prayer's Before Sleep

Straight A's on arithmetic quizzes, your cheek gets ground  
into the concrete down here, Sir. Thank You

for sending only Your smallest monsters to find me  
and Your giant silence, thank You for that, within it

I accept that the Beatles won't sing in my rec room ever  
and my gerbil will not unstiffen and nibble through his shoebox.

My teeth--I'd forgotten them--the braces are working,  
don't worry, and my hands, my back, no problem. I will bear

Your son across Thornton creek when You send Him  
should You lower Him into my neighborhood. Let

the capsule of astronauts splash down gently,  
let me stay friends forever with William and Phil

and with Jenny, a discovery of late, by Your grace.  
If Dad and Mom laughing today is Your doing,

thanks. My sister's no bother, really. You haven't yet  
taken my soul in my sleep, You let me lie in my bed like this,

the window lifted. Whatever that sweetness in the breeze is,  
as if it's still summer, thank You for that, and for the Beatles.

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## Vanishing Act

my father is having to leave the house  
with delicacy, easing the dead bolt open  
in the dark. The house exhales him.  
I'm thinking of a driving lay-up, of a girl  
in homeroom, blue necklace, brown skin.  
Transistor radio on my pillow, volume low.  
I know some things, not enough. My eyes  
are closed, I'm listening hard, that song  
again, Knock down the old gray wall,  
my father standing beside his car—gone,  
key in his hand, snowflakes in his hair.  
At dawn, an Indian head test pattern will stare  
from the TV, the freezer will churn out  
its automatic ice. On the windowsill  
an iris in a vase will have taken  
the last water into its cut stem. I will  
notice it, how it is there, and had  
stood there the whole time, that flower.

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