

Poetry Series

Michael Harmon

- poems -

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Michael Harmon

I began writing poems in my 6th grade class, when I was in love with my teacher, and discovered that appearing not to pay attention would land me in detention with her after school. However, my muse has been fickle: she stays for one year, then stays away for two.

Writing poetry seems to be like any other art, if you want to get better at it:

- 1) learn the discipline of the art;
 - 2) study the masters;
 - 3) read contemporaries;
 - 4) experience life;
 - 5) find ways to tap into your unconscious;
 - 6) respect yourself and others;
 - 7) compose works;
- and,
- 8) NEVER, NEVER, NEVER believe that EVERY poem you write is good, let alone great.

For me, good poetry has 4 M's: Music, Myth, Magic and Mystery; take away any of these and the poetry is less than it could be. Each of those terms begs the question, though, and I can't give simple answers at this point.

So, yes, I do believe there is good and bad poetry. However, good poetry is not always easy to identify; for example, sometimes I may miss important aspects of a poem. In contrast, bad poetry tends to be easier for me to identify; for example, it lacks one, or more, of the 4 M's, or displays an emotional immaturity (if the poet is an adult, that is, adolescents and those younger I would give special dispensations) , or a lack of command of the English language on the part of the poet.

As corollaries:

My advice for anyone who wants to use end-rhyme (which I often use) : be where you're going before you get there.

Also, I do sincerely believe that, no matter who the audience ultimately turns out to be, first and foremost, one should write for oneself. If it gets disseminated to a wider audience, great.

I like what Howard Nemerov said when he was asked what one of his poems meant: 'You never ask a poet what he means, you tell him.' (Mary Kinzie, A Poet's Guide to Poetry, The University of Chicago Press,1999)

I also like what Wallace Stevens said: 'All poetry is experimental poetry.'

Received a B.A. in English Literature from Long Island University in 1973. Moved from New York to Arizona in 1980, when I was 28. Received a B.S. in Computer Information Systems from Arizona State University in 1983.

Married and divorced twice, I have three sons, who also reside in Arizona.

Self published three chapbooks (one with two other poets) .

Favorite poems: 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' (W. B. Yeats): 'Wynken, Blynken, and Nod' (Eugene Field) (although I changed 'mother' to 'father' when I used to read this to my boys at bedtime, lol): and 'Orpheus Alone' (Mark Strand) .

Others in the top ten: 'Ears in the Turrets Hear' (Dylan Thomas) , 'The More Loving One' (W. H. Auden) , 'Human Condition' (Thom Gunn) , 'The Black Swan' (Randall Jarrell) , 'All In Green Went My Love Riding' (ee cummings) , 'Merlin Enthralled' (Richard Wilbur) .

Other poetic influences (besides the poets above) : William Empson, E.A. Robinson, John Crowe Ransom, Theodore Roethke, Karl Shapiro, A.R. Ammons, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Conrad Aiken, Galway Kinnell.

Favorite painters: Van Gogh, Edward Hopper, Georgia O'keefe.

Favorite book: One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish (Seuss) .

Works:

Chapbooks: Flowers for the Crone, Gallery of Days Past, Variations

Bernie Madoff Makes Sense: a Whimsical Observation

Giving it thought,
Bernie Madoff makes sense,
he only got away (until now) with
what the system was designed for:
the worst get the most,
the best get the least;
funds from the slaves at the bottom
flow to the master on top.
This system is old,
should hardly be news.
The powers that be,
were, are, and will be.
The pessimist smirks,
the optimist frowns.
So where are we going?
More Madoffs are coming.

Michael Harmon

Book of Leaves

It was an autumn project every year
when I was still too young to wonder why
I could not understand the reason for
collecting leaves to paste them in a book.

We took a long drive to a country place
where a book of leaves began when you were young.
The desperate colors, amazingly profuse,
graced the ground and limbs where leaves clung.

The air above the branches was ablaze
in daylight. The leafy gloom below was deep.
Callow judgments underneath the trees
would yield the leaves I felt I had to keep.

Before we had arrived, the wind had blown
a million crisping ones into a pile.
You watched me run and eagerly leap in.
And as you watched, I wanted you to smile.

And as your son, I needed you to laugh.
But driving back, your male silence forebode.
The point at which our lives were cut in half
was no more than a few years down the road.

My book of leaves, untouched, continues to grow.
It opens by itself, and then it shuts.
Why do my thoughts always drift towards you
when some new sadness burgeons in my guts?

Michael Harmon

Customer Services (aka Complaint Desk)

This isn't the war that I wanted.
I would like to return it today.
I paid a good price, but I think
I wanted the one that was cheaper.
I wanted the one that was quicker
To assemble and then put away.
Besides that, some parts were missing
And it was so hard to assemble.
The instructions were easy, at first.
"Clear space for part A and then hold it.
Drop C onto D, leaving A
Undisturbed". But, then, they got crazy:
"Part B must align with Part A,
But stay at right angle to D,
Though D is a subset of A,
And C is a subset of B..."
Despite that, I managed to put it
Together, after buying more tools
And costly parts I had ordered.
But once I had put it together
It took up so much of my house
In order to keep it inside
I had to move other things out.
The first thing to go was my son,
And all of his personal things.
His music, books, awards,
Posters, games, computer,
And extra clothes had to go.
The photos of him as a baby
And films I keep in the closet.
It took up so much of the space
The dog and the cat had to go.
It blocked out so much of the light
Even the plants withered up.
The dining room table, the sofa
And the bed my wife had selected
Were just too bulky to keep.
Finally, my wife had to go
When she found it was trouble to sleep.
This isn't the war that I wanted.
I want the war where there
Is nothing to lose if I lose it,
Nothing to lose if I own it.
I want to exchange it for one
With no more collateral damage.
It's too late to bring back my son.

Michael Harmon

First Law of Parody

Whether striding high as an abstruse tome,
Or diddling down in deeps of clear vulgarity,
A parody may be a worthy poem,
If the chosen poem is worthy of a parody.

Michael Harmon

Gluttony

It is the rich that eat the poor.
Rich eat their hearts in every war.

Rich spice their food with human hurt.
Rich eat their wallets for dessert.

Rich eat their steaks through every peace.
I've never seen their eating cease.

Michael Harmon

Remorse

1

A job worth doing is worth doing well
echoed down from parents like a knell.

2

When nine, Joe goes to summer camp.
Athletic, agile, quick, he is a champ

at many sports. Though shy, he makes some friends,
a heavy, large-eyed boy no one defends

among them. Other boys decide to call
him "chubs" and "bug-eyes", and love to watch him fall;

being neither athletic, agile nor quick
he often trips in games. They think he's thick

because he's fat (meaning they think he's dumb) .
He looks to Joe for equilibrium.

But assailing Joe for a poor choice of a friend,
they hector him; Joe yields at the end.

Let's do a good job on him, the rest all say,
and make a hell for "bug-eyes" on the last day.

3

The last day of the camp is finally there.
Joe and his friends are waiting in their lair.

They taunt the heavy, large-eyed boy beyond
the bounds; they hear their laughter correspond

to tears falling from large eyes. He turns
to Joe, screams "NO! ", and runs away. Joe burns

the look, the tears, and scream into his head,
wipes his grin off and wishes he was dead;

he called a friendly boy "bug-eyes" and fat.

4

And since that day, when Joe remembers that
from time to time, he journeys down to hell.

Some jobs are not worth doing, even well.

Michael Harmon

The Bully

So often did his dad knock out his light
When he was small, and still survived, that when
He boasts his father beat the coward out,
He really fears his father beat it in.

Precisely this dilemma brings him here:
To prove the beaten boy is not a wimp;
To reinforce his boast and soothe his fear;
"See, I can walk (ignore my little limp) :

"Not only can I walk, I will fight back;
You force my wrath, by seeming weak or wrong,
To target what I think you (read "I") lack;
My arsenal has power; Look, am I not strong! "

And any challenge will provoke his rage;
The shattered child's complex will engulf
The psyche. But, sadly, now, despite his age,
For he, consumed by shame and anger at himself,

Refuses to confide to all he still relies
On bullets of shame and an angry child's gun,
And always to himself denies he knows
His sadist and his masochist are one.

Michael Harmon

The Craven, a Craven Parody of The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe

Once upon a midnight, dearie, while I blundered, bleak and bleary,
Over my own faint and spurious verses of poetic lore-
While I padded, and was slanging, suddenly there came a banging,
As of someone gently banging, banging at my freakin' door,
'Tis some visitor I'll murder banging at my freakin' door-
Only this and nothing more.'

Ah, succinctly I remember it was in oblique December;
And each stanza was a member of a verbal dinosaur.
Eagerly I wished to borrow; -vainly I had tried to borrow
Similes or, in my sorrow, plagiarize a metaphor.
But I had a hard time finding what I was really looking for:
Kinky sex forevermore.

And the vile, vacuous verbiage nestling in each purple passage
Drilled them-filled them with bombastic errors never made before;
So that now, to kill the cheating of my art, I stood repeating
'Tis some visitor whose beating entrance at my freakin' door-
Some late visitor whose beating entrance at my freakin' door; -
This it is and nothing more.'

Presently my rage grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
'Sir, ' said I, 'or Madam, truly your forgiveness I abhor;
But the fact is I was slanging, and so gently you came banging,
And so faintly you came banging, banging at my freakin' door,
That I couldn't help but hear you: -here I opened wide the door; -
Garbage there and nothing more.

Deep into that garbage peering, long I stood there blabbering, sneering,
Cursing, making faces no normal person made before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the garbage gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, 'Ignore? '
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word 'Ignore! '
Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my rage within me churning,
Soon I heard again the banging somewhat louder than before.
'Goddarn! ' said I, 'Goddarn! That is someone at my window lattice;
Let me see, then, who thereat is, and this mystery explore; -
Let my art be left a moment and this mystery explore; -
'Tis someone there and nothing more! '

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stoic Craven of the saintly days of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of 'Lord no lady! ' perched above my freakin' door-
Perched upon a bust of Dolly just above my freakin' door-
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this bearded guy beguiling my bad fancy into smiling,
By the cave and stern decorum of the countenance he wore,
'Though thy chin is sure unshaven, thou, ' I said, 'just aint no raven,

Motherfreakin' prissy raven stinking from some shoddy shore-
Tell me what thy lordly role is on the night's Plutonium shore! '
Quoth the Craven 'Troubadour.'

Much I marvelled this ungainly guy to hear discourse so plainly,
Though his answer had a meaning—at least it wasn't Stevedore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no mere neurotic being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing guy above his freakin' door,
Shaved or not, upon Dolly's boobs above his freakin' door,
With such role as 'Troubadour.'

But the Craven, squatting lonely on the pair of boobs spoke only
That one word, as if his role in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing further then he uttered—not a face hair then he fluttered-
Till I scarcely more than muttered 'Other poets have gone before-
On the morrow he will leave me, as my poems have gone before.'
Then the guy said 'Troubadour.'

Startled at the stillness broken by reply inaptly spoken,
'Doubtless, ' said I, 'what it utters is its only stock and store
Caught from some unhappy bastard who was sad and always plastered,
Always last and never mastered what in hell we're living for-
But who coaxed the Crave repeating that one word he did adore-
That one answer, 'Troubadour.'

But the Craven still's beguiling all my mad soul into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of guy and boobs and door;
Then, upon black velvet sinking, I betook myself to drinking
Whiskey unto whiskey, thinking what this ominous guy of yore-
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt and ominous guy of yore
Meant in croaking 'Troubadour.'

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no expletive expressing
To the guy whose fiery eyes now burned into my Dolly's core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining,
With black velvet liquid lining that my stomach bloated o'er,
But which velvet liquid lining that my stomach bloated o'er
Shall not be drunk by 'Troubadour'.

Then, methought, the air grew fouler, pungent from some unseen prowler,
But it was this guy on Dolly making dumps upon the floor.
"Crap! ' I yelled, 'What are you doing? You are—I'm not misconstruing—
Making my place stink just like a cesspool now and furthermore,
Who would do this kind of thing upon someone's apartment floor? '
Quoth the Craven 'Troubadour.'

'Toilet! ' cried I, 'Don't you use it? Use the toilet! Don't refuse it!
I don't give a damn just how you dropp your turds upon my floor!
I don't care to watch you toil! It makes no difference how you coil it!
Get thee to the bathroom toilet! Go there! Go there! I implore!
Go there! Go there! To the bathroom! Go there! Go there! I implore! '
Quoth the Craven 'Troubadour.'

'Toilet! ' cried I, 'Go and use it! Use the toilet! Don't refuse it!
You don't even try excusing taking craps upon my floor!
You just keep on with the plopping! With no clear intent on stopping!
Now you've got me almost hopping mad and nearly whopping sore!
Who would make a spectacle like this that no one could ignore? '
Quoth the Craven 'Troubadour.'

'Be that word our sign of parting, poet fiend! ' I shrieked, upstarting—
'Get thee now into the toilet or the night's Plutonium shore!
Leave no hot dump as a token of that lie thy soul has spoken!
All my anger now you've woken! -quit those boobs above the door!
Take thy face from off those pups and clean your crap from off my floor! '
Quoth the Craven 'Troubadour.'

And the Craven, never flapping, still is crapping, still is crapping
From the golly bust of Dolly just above my freakin' door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon that is creaming,
And the track-lights on him streaming light his feces on the floor;
And my role from out those feces that lie steaming on the floor
Shall be like him-Troubadour.

Michael Harmon

The Food Song of M. Anjay Harmon: a Parody*

Let us go then, Josephine
To find fine food fit for a queen
And served to us at some elegant table;
Let us go, through Tucson's culinary feast
And move from West to East
To find that ambiance with a bill of fare
Worthy of a gourmet millionaire;
When you have found that most elusive venue
With delicacies galore throughout the menu
You will find in that place time to say to me
"Oh, do not ask 'What is it? '
Open your mouth and taste a bit! "

In the room the servers come and go
Conveying entrees apropos.

The savory smells that waft into our anxious nostrils,
The savory aromas that infiltrate our anxious nostrils
Insinuated into the caverns of our noses,
Insufflated such vapors into such thrills,
(Let spice foreshadow in the air what spice will fate the meal!)
Slipped from the kitchen, we had a sudden whiff,
And sensing we were beings who respire,
Swirled all about our table to let us sniff.

And indeed there will be time
For the pungent scent that comes with every treat,
Rubbing spices on our anxious nostrils;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a tongue to greet the courses we will eat.
There will be time to wait, anticipate
And time for all the spoons and forks in hands
Which lift nice morsels from each serving plate.
"One for you and one for me! "
And time yet to fulfill our aspirations
By completing countless mastications
Before the taking of coffee or tea.

In the room the servers come and go
Conveying viands apropos.

And indeed there will be time
To order ("What to choose? " and "What to choose? ")
More than once the menu we peruse.
("All these delicacies? How can we lose! ")
[We will say: "How the time is getting late! "]
For indulging in a decadent meal, we can hardly wait!
For finding such comestibles to make us salivate.
[We will say: "But how the time is getting late! "]
Do we dare
Disturb our server now
And with a reckless quiz:

"How much longer must we wait? ' and 'When will you bring the chow? "

For we have had them all already, had them all: -
Have had the quiches, soufflés, dainty dishes,
Measured life by gastronomic wishes;
In kitchen, fine restaurant, and banquet hall,
Beside bay windows of a dining room.
So what should we consume?

And we have known the grub already, known it all—
The bones that force up to our mouth the towel,
And when they lie expelled, and wrapped within,
When we are queasy why that could befall,
Then how should we begin
To spit out all the gristle of the meat and fowl?
And how should we resume?

And we have known the fine already, known it all—
the consommés, gumbos, fricassees
[But in the lamplight, nothing can displease!]
Can scent of vinaigrette
Ever cause regret?
Bread lies in the basket, wrapped up in a shawl.
And should we then consume?
And how should we begin?

.

Shall we say, we have gone at dusk through Tucson's streets
And kept alert for smells arising in the air
of top cuisine prepared in classy kitchens? ...

I watch you, Josephine, awaiting food.
You are the pinnacle of pulchritude.

.

And the afternoon, the evening, slides so tastefully!
Fed by glad waiters,
Risotto ... pasta ... or new, young taters,
Placed on the table, here beside you and me.
Should we, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to ask if it suffices?
But though we have eaten lime sorbet and chocolate tort
Though we have seen main course [grown slightly cold] brought in upon a platter,
It was no (Edith) pilaf—no great matter;
We have seen the moment of our hunger flicker,
And we have seen the patrician waiter leave the check, and snicker,
And afraid we would be short.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the shrimp, the casseroles, the tea,
Among the concoctions, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worthwhile,

To have chewed more of the manna with a smile,
To have squeezed the lemon on the rice ball
To roll it in some overwhelming curry,
To say: "I am Julia, come with more bread,
More bread for you all, I shall leave it all"—
If one, putting a piece of brioche in her head,
Should say: "That is not what I want at all.
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worthwhile,
After the nibbles, the edibles and the varied eats,
After the chowders, after cappuccinos, after lettuce falling on the floor—
And this, and so much more? —
It is impossible to eat a rank sardine!
But as if an unseen server dipped it into gasoline:
Would it have been worthwhile
If one, lifting a slice of bread out of the shawl,
And turning toward the server, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I want, at all."

No! I am not a foodie, nor was I meant to be;
Am an attendant fool, one that will do
To pay for dinner, cook a meal or two,
Advise the queen; no doubt, an easy mouse,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Impolitic, overcautious, unmeticulous;
Full of low hunger, and a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the spouse.

Our hunger flags... Our hunger flags...
We scrape the uneaten food into doggie bags.

Shall we stay here for awhile? Do we dare to eat dessert?
We shall rub our bloated bellies, and eat until we hurt.
Then, we have heard our better angels blurt:

"We do not think you should ingest much more."

We have seen the servers moving to and fro
With sweet, salty, savory, succulent morsels in a stack
On heavy trays they hauled from somewhere in the back.

We will treasure these past moments as we sit
and see and swirl and smell and sip our wine
Till servers bring our dinner and we dine.

*of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot

Michael Harmon

The Whisper

Lips move, the whisper leaves.

Among the countless leaves
Of diminishing forests of the world
Countless whispers float in all directions on countless ripples
In the ever-rising waters of the world.

Among the countless ripples
In ever-rising waters of the world
Countless whispers fly up on countless wings above the world
Into the ever-darkening heavens.

Among the countless wings
Through ever-darkening heavens
Countless whispers fall back again. Whispers going nowhere,
Finding nothing,

Try to, but never return.

Michael Harmon

Three Things Not to Forget*

A ground up cow tastes like good fun
when grilled and served upon a bun.

Some strips of pig will make you beg
for more beside a chicken egg.

A turkey, well, is quite a beast
carved up on one's Thanksgiving feast.

*a parody of William Blake's "Three Things to Remember"

Michael Harmon

Voice Lesson

In the preface, there were phrases.
But I had no voice.

The Voice of the Ocean, Cloud, Rain, and River,
Whispered Water.

The Voice of the People, man and woman,
Pleaded Us.

Become, the Self,
The Voice of Conscience, cried.

Then, Love's voice
Whispered, pleaded, cried:
I've met someone.

That someone was a someone with a voice.
Without a voice, I could not sing.

Michael Harmon