

Poetry Series

Matthew Buchwald
- poems -

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Matthew Buchwald(1952)

Matthew Buchwald is retired and living in Phoenix, AZ. He studied English Literature at Columbia University. Formerly a jack of all trades, he previously published the 'Proposal for a World Hunger Lottery' in The Daily News.

Another Saturday Morning

Daybreak found Mabee in the jungle,
Cutting his way through the rainforest,
Making for the foothills of the high country.
He paused, listening for the telltale sound
Of a footfall or a machete cutting brush,
But he was completely, achingly alone.
Others may have come this way before
Yet the jungle had wiped out whatever
Traces they left behind: there was no trail.
As he climbed higher, the foliage grew sparse,
No longer presenting a barrier,
At length disappearing altogether,
Till he stood before the sheer palisade
Of a towering plateau. Soon he was high
Above the rainforest and atop a bluff,
Looking down into an alpine meadow
Colorful with bushes all aflower.
The mountain air was thin and dry
And his breath came more slowly, as
A gentle wind caressed the trees.
The sun was bright white at the zenith,
Untroubled by any hint of a cloud.
A herd of tawny deer galloped past
Followed by a flock of crying doves.
Mabee walked along the bed of a stream,
Watching as wild goats scaled the limbs
Of ancient baobab trees, in a grove nestled
Beneath a gray peak rising 1,000 feet above.
As he kneeled to take a drink of water,
He heard the melodious sound of singing
And when he looked up, he saw the eyes,
The two huge orbs of a giantess,
Each one big as a mountain lake and blue
Like sapphires, and he leaped into them,
And landed in his own backyard, where
He found himself staring up at the sky.

Matthew Buchwald

Body And Soul

(from Cool to New Thing)

Dusk with a streak of crimson above the trees
Yields to the chill, shivers to the moan of horns;
The far side of the meadow, a hedge with thorns
Trembles and sheds its petals; bottles of wine
Roll empty down the hillside; sweated backs recline;
Viridian, where twilight seeps through the leaves,
Drops from a palette of moss, daubing the bandstand eaves,
Playing along to the ballad's cool blue design.

Suddenly from the stage comes a squawk,
Then raucous shrieking and honking, furious protest,
Boney fingers dancing a demented cakewalk,
Strangling the melody, while yet immobile
The vine dazed jive junkies begin to struggle
And writhe around on the ground as if in shock.

Matthew Buchwald

Columbina

Her cries are like the fragrant din
Of crystal in black marine caves
And all her woe roots in the skin
Of indifferent oceans and waves.

She wonders if she lit the sky,
How it would burn;
It is so vast and eternal,
So temperamental like a god.

Matthew Buchwald

Daedalus And Icarus

A blaze of heat and the wings tear apart
About the falling youth, whose skin turns pale
From melted wax, flaw in the craftsman's art;
Shed of plumage his bare arms start to flail.

How can the horrified boy escape the fate
Of a relentless plunge into the dark blue sea?
And how can the father, hearing his cry too late
But feel anguish as he watches helplessly?

A splintering of bones sets free the lad,
And the waves carry the lifeless form ashore
Where guilt drives the grief struck parent mad;
Because of his art, he has a son no more.

Matthew Buchwald

Do You Remember

do you remember
Leon Trotsky in Central Park
holding a catcher's mitt
for the mermaids from Weeki Wachee Springs
and barnstorming Queen Bess
in her Curtiss JN4 Jenny biplane
you were the Jersey Lil
dressed up as Tweety Bird
blasting like a calliope
I was pretender to the throne
of Pellucidar and Perelandra
(Norton the Invincible!)
preparing to abdicate
we were both leery of photographers, and
stripped off our clothes
and dove into the fountain
do you remember
the Molly Maguires, the Wild
Man of Borneo
who came to cover our backs
while a manatee turned a hundred cartwheels
and mole men swung all day long
from tree to tree on invisible vines
do you remember
after this how you threw everything
in the back of a car and took off
and you drove fifteen thousand miles
across three oceans till you ran out of gas
and then you called me up and said to come and get you
somewhere in another galaxy
and we took another trip
and you said you never wanted to go home
and we never did
do you remember?

Matthew Buchwald

Doyle's Flivver

Doyle's flivver broke down on a winter's day
When the wind was fierce as a wounded lion
That fell from a cliff and broke its vertebrae;
So Doyle shivered until he felt like dying.

Atop a cliff a lioness roared
Like the wind howling down a mountainside
That ends in the ice of a frozen fiord;
While Doyle worked hard, so his missus cried.

His sore palms cracked from the cold and wind
Like ice on a fiord by the storm-tossed sea
Where the whirlpool devours sailors who've sinned,
And nobody hears a wife's pitiful plea.

Poor Doyle worked hard till he froze to death,
And his forlorn wife breathed her last breath.

Matthew Buchwald

Existence Is Essence

If we assume the existence of scorpions on the Moon,
But looking backwards are unable to find that heliotropes
Were resurrected with indolence or anguish; if we assume

That all looking glasses are malodorous in cacophony,
But are thwarted by marble filigrees of piety; if we assume
Their existence, then they will be submerged in the sorrowful

Discharge of a frenzied rainbow and pulverize themselves
By combusting and devouring rapture; if we assume
The paltriness of such vertigo as permeates the scabby

Chasms and purple-veined eyelids of phantasms swarming
The unctuous cobblestones of winter's delirium which
In no way recoils from the void of dreams; if we assume

That shadows or furor, rain or nostalgia, brambles or oboes,
Each is ejected from as many privies as there are, then
The ears flow chartreuse, the woman sits and sews her eyes, the

Embryo must then devolve itself below the germ, and the
Blue curves of the fairest night are in tune with torpor, and
Cruelty is unsexed by the niceness of calamity turning to stone.

Matthew Buchwald

Ficcione

Perhaps the most outrageous fraud ever perpetrated upon a believing public with near total acceptance, was the notorious Alternative Cosmos Swindle which appeared in a news story published in the San Francisco Chronicle in 1905. The article claimed to be based on the previously unpublished findings of the renowned Dr. Norton Armstrong recounting certain laboratory researches alleged to have been conducted in the ruins of Macchu Picchu high in the Andes Mountains, using the instrumentality of an 'Ionic Ether Inverter, ' whose power plant consumed over 200 tons of coal during the course of the experiment. The observations and theoretical conclusions were taken from the diary of Dr. Armstrong, although no copy of the diary has ever been found by any of the investigators who have looked into the matter. In lurid detail, and with a great deal of sensationalistic commentary, the grotesqueries of the Alternative Cosmos as witnessed by the famed physicist and his laboratory aides were recounted. A 'monstrous habitation' was discovered alongside the ancient ruined city: 'fouler streets were never trod since the time of the black plague in Europe.' Its boulevards overflowed 'with disease infested refuse surrounded by slimy, decaying dwellings impossibly constructed out of rubbish, each rising to a height of several stories, thronging the byways of the obscene megalopolis for endless miles, with rotting mounds of animal and vegetable matter crept and crawled over by a menagerie of devolved mutants.' There were piles of entrails 'of a gangrenous sheen'; heaps of effluvia with 'poisonous halos'; swarms of blood colored vermin resembling giant leeches with articulated necks and heads 'as if they were in the process of metamorphosing into human form'; profane hybrid creatures — a cross between hyena and serpent; reptilian skinned rodents with the heads of birds, queer six legged herd animals, and a repulsive cat-sized oyster without a shell. The latter was described in much the same terms as the aquatic invertebrate except that it had one mammalian eye with lid and lashes, and teeth inside its cloaca orifice. It ate its own young whenever they came near, and its pseudopods were stronger and more deadly than those of any shellfish; from the malicious gleam in its one eye, there could be little doubt that it would prey upon a human being.

But even these malign freaks of nature paled by comparison with the slime-sac men 'six feet in breadth, inflated, except for the limbs, with a toxic foul-smelling gas, and with combustible grease continually oozing out of their anuses.... In general appearance they exaggerated all the fabled characteristics of a troglodyte or ogre' — which characterization could easily have been regarded as understatement; because, though depicted as 'natural beings acting only in accordance with their instinct, ' the scientifically non-judgmental valuation was arguably undermined by passages that described sexual practices 'more bestial

and repugnant than any others known to modern medical science.' In the 'Slough of Oozing Filth, ' with execrable monuments built of hardened mucous, the upper class of slime-sac men were discovered, 'miserably free of toil and barely alive, ' vomiting up their own excreta and eating it again; and within the same precincts a kindred species of inside-out man, or skinless scum monkey, were seen through the jaded eye of the Ether Inverter 'so abhorrent in their hideousness that they were a good deal more ugly than the most repellent religious depictions of the tortured inmates of hell's innermost circle.'

Such and more were the carnival midway attractions of the Alternative Cosmos Swindle; and, however ludicrous and incredible the story may seem today, in spite of its adroit use of narrative technique and its punctiliously assembled collection of scientific data, when the article appeared no questions were raised as to its veracity, for the readers of the Chronicle, even those living on Nob Hill, were inured to the idea of daily ground breaking new theories in the natural sciences as heralded in the Chronicle's reporting, for instance, of the published ideas of Eduard Suess, distinguished member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, and discoverer of the lost continent of Gondwanaland. Using the newspaper as their platform, the swindlers, it is said much more cleverly than Charles Ponzi, were able to sell large numbers of exorbitantly priced tickets to San Franciscans willing to travel to Macchu Picchu to witness the Alternative Cosmos freak show who would discover when they arrived that no Ionic Ether Inverter had ever existed. Luckily, however, the innocent victims of the scheme were all on their way to Chile the very same day in 1906 when the great earthquake destroyed large parts of San Francisco.

Matthew Buchwald

From A Nightingale

The stealthy fragrances of Northern lights
Are stilled by the obtuse angles of your thighs
And sleep, tender and sated.
Your breast is a terra-cotta rose
Wringing lilac caresses from a nightingale.
Your brow is the phosphorus gleam of stars
Dancing slowly upon quivering mandolins of steel.
Your back hides gossamer curls from my heart
That embraced your exquisite melancholy.

Matthew Buchwald

Hoops Of Steel

I'm the dog.

I spent my whole life hoboin' cross the country—with him along too, and he's always been willing to share a meal, even though sometimes we went hungry not knowing where our next feed was gonna come from riding the rails or camping in one of the jungles.

He's just a small feller, he's old, got holes worn in his clothes, is crooked, awkward, stiff in his getalong, stubborn as a mule, and has a comical face, and straw colored hair sticking out all over, and is a little hard to look at; but nobody's kinder than he is, and nobody's more loyal, excepting maybe me.

No, anyone who thinks that he ain't loyal to his friends ought to see him when he's down and out, scaring up a load of grub and sharing the first portion, and begging for a second serving, and sharing some of that too and filling his pockets with leftovers and biscuits just in case either of us would want a treat later.

No, I won't hear anything against him—and I'm big enough to back it up.

I'm his only dog, but he could have hooked up with plenty others. Rambler that he is, I've followed him thirty miles on foot between sunrise and sunset when we got thrown off the boxcars; and he'd be good for another thirty at night, if there wasn't someone along to make sure of him taking his rest.

I'm no wonder dog, but I'm no slouch either. Together we could have circled the globe at least twice while riding the rails, and there ain't a city, a town, a village, a station, a siding, a whistle stop, nor a hobo jungle in the whole United States and Canada where we ain't been or been chased out of.

He is the Grand Poobah of the Amalgamated Tramps of the Universe, and we've got a lot of friends in places both high and low. In my position as leader of runaways and strays you need to be well connected and possess intelligence above the normal to help out your fellow canines when in need.

I might be the smartest dog inside or outside of a traveling circus, he is fond of saying, and the quickest when on the lam. It sure is true, even though I'm saying so myself; there ain't no point in being modest if it means you have to lie. I personally taught him most of what he knows, and he taught me the little that he knew before I met him, and together we learned the rest.

Lay out a hobo camp before us—with stew pots, barbecue grills, baking pits, smoked meats—and I'll lay you dollars to donuts the pair of us will have a six course dinner in our bellies before the next train whistle blows. I ought to keep a record of all our adventures for the sake of posterity, and you can bet your meal ticket that I could do it too.

I know all the secret signals used by tramps—the silent signals they use when

the railroad bulls come to bust up a camp. Him and me stayed ahead of the law just about every time we could have been nabbed; and I helped him escape more'n a couple of times after he got caught; at least I put the fear of god in the occasional too-eager cop when it made a difference. And I've got the marks on me to prove it.

Yup, I've done a lot of things. I've seen clubs, and nightsticks, and shotguns too; and I never forget a face or the way a man smells when he thinks he's got you cornered or when he's afraid. I learned the fine art of slipping out of a jungle, and I know a counterfeit threat from a honest to goodness one. I can keep the heat at bay all by myself, while he makes his getaway; and he has gratefully returned the favor to me more than once I'm proud to say.

I can't count the times, when we been running all night, that he's slowed down and said to me while we catch our breath, 'I dunno what I'd do without you, boy; if they ever catch up to us, we'll split up and meet again for sure.' Then we'd make our break. And a whole week never passed but we met up again, just like he said. A dog that has a good thing going won't give it up easy.

I never knew my mother or father cause I was abandoned as a pup. Anyway it all turned out for the best, unless you count that big fat mama and her pair of whining brats that hooked up with us at the last whistle stop. Henrietta, her name is, I don't know theirs, and she's claiming that he is father to the two mischievous whelps she drags along with her everywhere she goes.

Knowing him and knowing me the way you do now, how long do you think it's gonna be before we slip that trap and light out for freedom again?

I sure hope you ain't a bettin' man!

Matthew Buchwald

Lamentation

My head has become as soft as a tidal marsh,
The clammers cut into it, making slushy sounds,
Every day and every night they dig,
They squish like the valves of time.

My head has become as foul as a filthy marsh,
The mud is topped with the trash of creepy weirdos,
A bag is tossed, there is cackling in the reeds,
The waves come, weak with doubt.

My head is swollen with an awful murmuring,
It thrums in the swamps, in the bogs, in the swarming landfills,
And jeers from a mob that sleazily rejoices
Fling chaos into my head.

Matthew Buchwald

Magritte's Nanny

Don't let that bird
Roost on your face

Yelled Magritte's nanny

But he
Liked the way
It looked

So he put an apple
on his nose

He also had a pet lion
And a tuba that burst into flames

At a family reunion
All the Magrattes wore derbies
They kept on their overcoats
And flew up in the air

Sometimes he'd put his hat on upside down
Or he'd leave it in a painting, without his head

He could wear his head
Without a hat

Matthew Buchwald

Memento Mori

Across the bridge of time,
Where past and present,
Future and eternity
Seem all as one,
I saw memory enchained,
By a great boulder weighted down,
Struggling to free itself
And helplessly sighing
At each traveler passing by,
As if to make one pause
Could spare it of some grief.

Matthew Buchwald

Men Are Homeric, Women Are Ineffable

Men are Homeric, women are ineffable.
Let Solomon or the bards hallow the woman,
Historians and heroes shall judge the man,
The pathetic man, who wept, tearing out his hair,
Then threatened and whined; the sorceress who charmed a knight,
The maiden who offered the fruits of her garden,
But warned against awakening love,
The man who groaned, hearing the sirens in the storm.
How I am awed when others speak of men and women!
For they are ineffable, they are Homeric.

Tell us, Solomon, why a beautiful maiden
May wander in the streets searching for her lover,
And also you, nameless bard, is there no knight
But a goddess may bring him down low?
The man sweating under a heavy burden,
The woman who trusts feeling but not logic,
Have learned as much as you; they've learned it true
Nor feeling nor instinct speak in words so true
But you are ineffable, and women are Homeric.

Look upon the woman, look upon the man,
Worship women, but know how to toil
Believing that there is no life to come,
But this one, which we dream without waking,
This one, which we walk through as in a mist,
Is neither feeling nor folly, neither
Legend, nor tragedy, fatal, nor fateful,
For we are inchoate and still evolving,
And we are wandering and winnowing our way
Performing a melody without a score:
We are Homeric, we are ineffable.

Matthew Buchwald

Mermaid Song

Bells of perfume where seas meet,
The couch where guts are melting
Shores boiling with drowsiness
Heave up the passivity of seas.

A sauce, monstrous and insipid,
Stews on the frail littoral;
A lark dives in and splinters
The obstinacy of waves.

Disdain and rapture, brine's magnificence
Laid out below us like a jade
A tempest of flukes, sea maid
Beguiling with catastrophe.

Matthew Buchwald

Metropolis

Why is it that the thing which we hate
is also the cause of our happiness?
The instinct which inspired my hatred
of the city, now brings me joy.

When I used to wander the waterfront
looking upon the ruined docks across the canal,
and upon the black oily water before me,
and saw everything natural poisoned and decaying;
the filthy earth covered with shattered flotsam and weeds;
the streets of the borough beyond
in all their numbing sameness,
ringed in by the ugliest of houses;
and the knotted highway traffic inching along
under a noxious pall, tainting both cloud and sky —
when I recoiled from the streets about me,
cacophonous with the clamor of industrial noise,
and saw the thousand swarms of wretched humans
creeping home in the dingy twilight of the day,
whose darkening shadows summoned forth
skulking villains from their sour hovels,
while the nervous hustling of bodies
called my attention to the seething taverns,
where I saw counterfeit coyness yielding to greasy lust,
and the sidewalk mob jostled and taunted me,
all this showed me the implacable menace which permeates a city,
and filled my heart with revulsion and dread.
I felt myself ashamed, swept along
by this overflowing vulgarity
to a closer acquaintance with Evil,
and the manifold ills of a malignant hive
oppressed all my senses.
Stupendous ratholes surrounded me,
fleshly sewers yawned at my feet,
and riotous disorder engulfed me;
insidious caravans roamed over the land,
and spite and insolence resounded from afar.
In the caverns of the subways I saw inexorable malice
in motion, multiplying itself endlessly;

while at the street level, and inside the terminals,
there teemed one million varieties of vicious predator.
Everything around was rotten
with an incalculable amount of disease;
while nature fled for its life to the wilds,
from the safety of which it pitiably cried out
against the spreading cancer. Brave rebel!
in whose righteous heart every outrage is a crime.
From the impassible ghettos, across the center of the city
where no natural creature ever goes,
as far as the suburbs of the vast outskirts,
breathe the sulfurous fumes of a fallen angel;
and every iota of his vile creation
is pleasing to his tainted eye.
How frequently has the noise of an airplane, roaring over my head,
made me want to suddenly take off for distant places,
there to escape the misery of a living death,
and to shake off, if only for a brief while,
with the restoring power of nature,
the malignity of that demon who measures all things by himself,
and remakes creation in his evil image!

How does this bring me joy?
Because I have fallen in love,
here in the midst of all this corruption.
Because of you, dear friend,
this tale of suffering uplifts me.
Even the burden of remembering torment,
and putting it into words, is a reason to rejoice,
as it brings me closer to you,
and makes me feel the more
the intensity of my present delight!

Matthew Buchwald

Nightfall

A dreamer wanders alone in the snow.
His heart hides out in the cave of remorse.
But there's fury in him. Dread is held back
and the demon tears loose trying to drag him down.
The winter wind blasts hard footstep by footstep
as he stiffens, and shadows him closely,
a claw-fingered ogre through
the frozen alleys. It is absurd
that stillness and passivity surround him.
What seems more likely is the dejection.
He knows the birds will have fled the woods
by morning because he cannot smell them,
cannot feel their drowsing.
His body dwindles like a carcass lying
by the side of the road
that slowly decomposes
without realizing it is rotten
out of sight of the sinking sun,
unaware that its day has ended.

Matthew Buchwald

Oedipus Rex

They call me Johnny the gimp
My mother tried to kill me the day I was born
And left me a cripple for life
Locked in a permanent struggle just to survive
As a boy, I dreamed of climbing the Himalayas
Or of fording the rapids on the Columbia River
But ended on a corner in Times Square instead
I labored mightily, saved every penny
Proposed to the first girl who would let me kiss her
But who could love a cripple?
Then I found raven-haired Tess
Hovering like an angel above the gutter
With eyes so large they swallowed my heart like a tidal wave
And sugar flowed from all her pores like molasses
Whore, pusher, junky, thief
Yet to me she seemed more beautiful than life
Which I gladly would have sacrificed for love
Though all she wanted was my money
One evening, a man came to our door
Proud and arrogant as any pimp can be
And Tess, lying on the day bed, just waved him inside
So he swaggered past and took her with hardly a glance at me
When it was over, she gave him cash that I had hidden away
I ran out in the cold, slept in doorways, tried to destroy myself
But my heart was too strong and my body too used to pain
When Tess died brutally at the hands of the pimp
I went to the funeral and looked down in her coffin
And laughed till I cried because it felt so good

Matthew Buchwald

Paradise Undone

Not the subways of the moon
Could equal the stench
Made by a zillion murmuring phantasms
Chiming with chaos rescrambled
An ancestral undersea roaring
Severing, canceling, neutering
The swelling stuttering beasts
Back to the first one
As the shocking shouting stink
Made by time running backwards
A vast muttering of Paradise undone

Matthew Buchwald

Prayer Against The Devil Moon (For N.C.)

And now his grim sigh of mortality,
Of endless droughts, erratic wanderings,
Muslin shrouded and enfeebled where
The crescentic pitted scowl Earthward looms,
Whining out blown proscriptions of our grief;

O save this desert, whose dissonance tolls
On steles of leaden withered axioms,
The crosiered torpor of whose councils ends,
As lunar caprices token green or rank,
All but the perfidy of traitors' minds,

And westward, as shocks in Loma Prieta
Insult the dulse quietude of the sea,
In those seaweed shallows of the skies,
Caesura of shores, where the dwindled Archfiend,
Annuls the false light of his perjured lips,

Heed how his adumbral face wanes till black
And retreat while his unseen bile
Incites putrefaction of wind and sand,
Retreat, while they are hot, - war, famine, disease
Filling ten craters and ten grimy channels,

Salve us by fear, O antic stars, and wit,
O flaming vagabonds of cosmic dust,
Deliver us from the lunar stress till
Appears at the nexus of our eclipse
The occultation of the moon by god.

Matthew Buchwald

Purple Peacock

It's fine to be a purple peacock pooping on a statue.
Roost there. Roost there forever.
Look at the stains left by the pigeons. Perch on the sword.
Hop around on the horse's rump.
Spread your feathers for the crowd, their laughter is real.
But watch out for the cops. A vagrant, a vandal?
Not so, your high-born eminence. Just getting some fresh air and exercise.

Say cheese for the photographers.
Give an interview to the press.
You are the close confidante of an opera diva, aren't you?
False! We are much more than confidantes.
And the agent of a foreign power, n'est-ce pas? False again.

Then preen yourself.
Be a peacock preening himself in the plaza.
Show off your iridescent feathers in the sun, by the park.
Be a predator watching and waiting for an alligator to climb out of a sewer drain.
Eat the first one that passes by.
Screech at the dog catcher with a butterfly net. It will serve him right.
Be satisfied.
Sleep and let your hundred eyes keep watch over you.

Matthew Buchwald

Son Of Albatross

Scarcely below the clouds, far off this strait
The cries of marooned jacks he heard impart
An epistle. His alarm as they wailed,
Sank in the torrid brine and went unheard.

And gulls sailed by without nesting,
The kelson of ruin's portion returning
A becalmed stanza, languorous token,
The presage woe of moldering timbers.

Then in the whirling hush before the stress,
Its rigging quickened and torpor in suspense,
Sweeping wings there were that gave a caution;
And shameful designs thrown back in the ocean.

Rudder, backstays and crab claws avow
No other lulls. Far on the slate gray main
Polar cells expel the hulk aground.
This ominous relic leaves only a skein.

Matthew Buchwald

The Children Of Sisyphus

The rump of the waterfall is violet with cuckolds;
The earth below them is a jar of needles; the summer's
Last glaciers prance inside their hands.
Sisyphus thrusts his head into the frozen wall
And kneels his lips as your voice tattoos his spleen.
The maidens washing bridal veils look down at the reflection
Of his face in the wall with your jaws gnawing on his mind,
And are happy. They tear their veils and run into the falls like mist.

The tangled thicket with its earhorn watches the falls
Like an archangel sweating asphalt.
And the maidens, masked in the depths of the cloister,
Cry for the earhorn to stop:
'Rudder of sage, anchor of remorse,
Erase from our deed the bounds of any glacier.'

A pod of pennants kiss their way out of the steamrolled desert
And swim away like eels into the glare of ground spice.
Eyes drop into the melting glaciers from the steamroller's exhaust
And forge drab bars of silver with tendrils of icy air.
Occult ciphers leap into the dementia of oceans,
Caterpillars dry into husks and crystallize like ore,
The ore battles with a bone corset like an ape.

Earhorns carve the figure of Sisyphus into your jaw,
While the maidens are exiled from the void of the cloisters
And cuckolds climb over the falls like stones.

Matthew Buchwald

The Dancer

She swayed with casual rhythm,
Wrapped in kaleidoscopic cloths,
Enacting her ritual carelessly,
With a hefty jangle and flare
As she swung her head around
And her hair twirled in a fan.
Gilt leggings climbed above the knee,
Bracelets of silver clasped her arms,
A wine stain lightly bruised her cheek,
Strings of tiger's eye circled her throat,
And weird things used in sorcery
Hung glittering at her waist.
Many spells she cast upon me:
She was eerie and dazzling,
Menacing and moonstruck,
Sinister and solemn.
And in the silence that fell with night,
Muting the cries of a captivated crowd,
The boundless occult cosmos,
Seemed to smile down upon her,
As if looking into the face of
Its own wild-eyed, passionate mother.

Matthew Buchwald

The Dead Man's Song

O listen well to what I say,
If you go down by the shore,
The maiden loitering by the lake,
Was not of woman born.

O what can you fear, lady gay?
I've loved no one so much as thee,
Or one who's near so beautiful
And who pleases me.

I see a warning on thy head,
That tells of pain and tokens death,
And from thy breast a ghostly worm
Sucks away the breath.

I saw a spirit on the banks,
With flesh that shined like water,
So light, she trod upon the air—
A mermaid's daughter.

I tore a bandage from her skirt,
And wound it tightly round my brow;
She warned the pain would never end,
But surely grow.

Then by the neck I grasped her tight
And drew a knife from out my cloak.
She tore away my hand, and ran
Into the lake.

I mounted up upon my mare,
And lashed her home across the green,
And woefully I told my dame—
Of what I'd seen.

My mother laid me in my bed,
And there she watched me through the night,
And there the maiden sang to me
You'll ne'er see light.

And there she called me to the banks,
And there I wept as I loathed death.
The mermaid fell upon my breast
And stilled my breath.

So listen well to what I say,
If you go down by the shore,
The maiden loitering by the lake,
Was not of woman born.

Matthew Buchwald

The Desert Odeum

A Sonoran Assassin Bug Is Impaled on a Cactus Spine and Eaten by a Tarantula

This plumage that sprouts on barren immensity,
Capsized medusa with upturned stingers
Sown thirsty in a wash carved from a mesa,
Home to the gray assassin bug with spurs,

Is anesthetized by the heat that tempers
Fetters; cautionary in their hush.
The insect's legs pedal quickly in the dust,
Propel it under this insensible bush.

The stings and venom of gorgons burn,
Poisoning with barbs that pierce the crust;
But the cactus, immobile, without venom,
Preys on self-sacrifice, has no bloodlust.

Creation's Artificer! Overseer of the Sand!
While noonward the furnace burns white hot
By what rituals do the flames anoint
The tarantula, at dusk- the day's marplot!

Matthew Buchwald

The Fallen Angel

The stars cry too bitterly this morning:
like a dying child, in the cradle, alone,
with a tight fist, sullenly warning,
until someone arrives, an absent chaperone,

sleeping, she loses herself in weird dreams,
beats her wings over desecrated islands,
on a crumbling reef spattered with moonbeams,
drowning in the ocean, like severed hands.

Although at times she breathes a happy sigh,
if her bitter mind hears her guardian coming nigh,
the careless ruler, abettor of grief's sad hour,

keeps that mild sigh from blooming into joy,
its artless noise like an unopened flower,
which he cuts off as if it were a toy.

Matthew Buchwald

The Infernal Machine

This preposterous gizmo, when its drive
Wheels start spinning: cogs, ratchets and
Levers torpedo its balance setting it afire
To the tune of smash the keys player piano.
It falls apart not in a logical way, but willy
Nilly catapults limbs and organs into space,
Taking its own sweet time, and making quite
A mess, but attracting a great deal of attention,
Especially from the taste-makers and those
Knowledgeable members of the press expert at
Safeguarding the public's fragile sensibility from
Oddball artifacts by vivisecting them; meanwhile,
The thingamajig expels a load of gears and sprockets
Onto the floor. Terrified and cowardly, the audience run
For their lives, while the thing continues to smash
Itself into tiny pieces, a magnificent crescendo,
A bravura performance, the swan song of the machine!

Matthew Buchwald

The Isle Of Tears

The god of deathless fame
In a chariot of fire
Rode his hapless bride
To a lofty crag
Where the eagle makes his nest.
Angrily he told her depart,
Whom he had fondly loved,
While she with many a bitter tear
Wailed to be abandoned
So distant from her native land.
Kiss me once more, said she,
Before you send me
Childless into the grave.
The shining god no answer gave
But cruelly turned away.
Then down his bride flung herself
Through the angry rocks
And into the bosom
Of her mother, the sea.

Matthew Buchwald

The Lady Of The Lake

The Knight of Courteous Valor a solemn oath did take
To seek the wide world over for the Lady of the Lake.
On a noble steed, companion true, he rode out on his journey;
Of challengers he met a few, but would not stop to tourney.
He bore no weapon on his Quest nor carried he a shield,
Yet his mettle always stood the test, no knight could make him yield.
Of land at last there was no more, so by the ocean he did rest,
When a boat that lay there on the shore reminded him of his Quest.
To his horse he bade a sad farewell, then he sailed out on the sea,
Abreast the crest of a foaming swell until his boat calmed in the lee
Of that sacred isle known to thee as the island Avalon,
And there in a grove of apple trees, he wandered on and on.
Beneath a towering mountain cliff, he stopped at an icy lake,
And stripped his suit of armor off thinking a bath to take,
When from the water appeared a sword, clasped in a delicate hand.
The Knight could utter not one word as before him a Lady did stand.
'This sword I give to thee, fair Knight, ' were the fateful words she spake,
And then she vanished from his sight beneath the shimmering Lake.
By the enchanted sword Excalibur, this vow the Knight did make:
'I pledge my life and love to her, the Lady of the Lake! '

Matthew Buchwald

The Lion And The Gypsy

For twenty miles a lion followed her
Through the lonely desert
While she played on the mandolin, a sad song
And drank wine from a jar.
And then she lay down to take her rest
Upon the cold hard ground.

The lion silently watched over her
Wondering if she knew
How the mean-hearted moon was watching too,
So he guarded her till day.
When she awakened, the moon had fled
And the lion wandered away.

Matthew Buchwald

The Painter

A cat runs away
It swallows the stars like a sacred charm,
It has always been old
Immune to the cold
It has always scorned daylight.

Holes of seedlings punctured by the moon.
All the thorns on the hedges agree,
They never fail to agree
Any idea, any feeling
And frost freezes in their ears when they agree.

A woman with ardent fingers inspects the sea of hate,
She disposes of its oddities
As thorns do in a hedge,
As cats do with their claws
And women in a trance.

Matthew Buchwald

The Pebble And The Coal (After W. Blake)

'Hate needs heat on which to thrive,
Hot passion's fire and angry desire,
Cold cannot make it come alive,
But chills its heart and makes it die.'
So sang a pebble in a pond,
Cooled by water from the brook,
But an ember dying in the fire
Glowed anew and answered back:
'Hate needs not heat on which to thrive,
A cold heart hates without desire,
No warmth can make it come alive,
Its passion chills and has no fire.'

Matthew Buchwald

The Poor Thing

Looming before a horizon,
Far from equatorial seas,
Of charcoal gray and indigo,
Repeating bars of ivory,
And tufts of senna and saltbush,
The pink Osseous Obstructor
Floated above a coastal plain
That smelled like a sheet of mylar;
Comas hung on the stratosphere,
Circling around the Obstructor,
Like a flock of listless lampreys
Too timid to make a landing.
The invisible diffusor,
Sweeping above the fractal spars,
Made on the megrims a green smear
And an orange stained swathe of
Radiation seethed out of it
From North to South over the low
Polyphonous gurgle of slush.
At night, the febrile Obstructor
Jiggled its trapezoideum,
While every spar and every strut
Throbbled with red neon in the dark,
Similar to a charred muon.
And, repeatedly, for long hours
It lurched sadly and queasily
In a choked universe of dread
Where fulminant ebullitions
Like uneasy souls, made it sigh.

Matthew Buchwald

The Redux Of Reversal

two shrugs part nearby
the hobby horse of brass
the shabby attire of phantoms
dirtied by angelic shuffling

the woozy hares twirl dust under
blasts blown between the stitches of
the bad seamstress frantically
tearing over the thrashing brush strokes

in the burner's juice flames
dart around with smart steps
now the loan of their coquetting
paid and abolished with the gales

Matthew Buchwald

The Sailor's Dream

Now I blaze through the requiem of space;
Ruined planets, bleak and wan, hurtle past.
A galaxy of suns echoes the sparkling sea,
Fusing crimson rays, delirious pearls,

Scarring the serene blackness with sharp dyes,
Blasting that bruise the throbbing firmament,
As hard as atoms and the ship I pilot,
It is melting, scalded, green; it is rapture!

I saw the Earth with awful majesty implode
And dissolve in a chrome whirlpool;
With a torrent of tumult the oceans burst
Like the sad hearts of maids in a legend!

I soared through ragged ribbons of meteors,
Cool tears welling on the lips of the ether,
Baneful plasma bleeding the gold and cobalt
Aroma of efflorescent spasms!

For days I listened to the death throes,
As rampaging comets hurtled into suns;
I never dreamed the vengeance of God
Would blast stars into molecules of dust!

I wavered at the edge of the Universe,
Shattered lifeless wrecks came drifting by,
An endless procession of cosmic junk
And corpses wrapped in metal shrouds.

I have seen a necropolis in the void,
And putrefied suns that radiated death!
Are these nameless abattoirs your Tartarus,
Oh you venomous brood of vipers?

Matthew Buchwald

The Scarecrow

A galleon with a mainmast tall as a redwood tree
Sank in a corn field; inside the cabin was
A king's ransom in glittering gold and jewels:
Rubies, diamonds, emeralds, strings of pearls;
All the while, a skeleton in a bicorn hat stood guard.

A ghost which the farmer's scarecrow had never seen
(He was familiar with a dozen or more) told him how
The ship ran aground, how sailors struggled
Desperately against the hurricane, to save her,
Being washed overboard, or dashed against the bulwarks,
How the sails were torn to shreds and she was blown off course,
Tossed about like driftwood by the winds and currents,
It seemed for an eternity, until she came to rest
Upon this distant shore, a death ship without
A captain, without a crew, stranded in the Arizona desert.
And he heard how the First Officer, the last man of all,
Died of hunger and thirst, his cries echoing through the skies
As the galleon lightly touched down in the sandy soil,
Scaring off a flock of crows and squashing rows of corn.

Rusty chain and anchor, loose hanging shrouds lay
Athwart the dusty farmland, cotton and alfalfa too,
Where the rains drain down off the high rocky
Hillsides, watering the cactuses and featherbush,
The thirsty rabbits and feral cats; I was that useless
Scarecrow who needed a ship of the line off the Spanish Main
With a score of iron cannon to frighten off the birds, but
Still they came back to roost, perching on the yardarms
Nesting in the wheelhouse, gobbling up the corn,
And chasing all the other scavengers away.

Matthew Buchwald

The Tetons

Up where the air is clear
Beauty frees the mind of worry,
The hikers on the ridgetop trails
The climbers on the peaks above.
We too could scale the mountains once,
Lovers, champions of Nature
And critters for companions
Before drudgery and disease
Breathed on our lives with musty breath;
But some time and in some wild place
We'll learn that decay is not an end
But just another beginning,
The spirit being renewed, and once again
Singing gladly as the Tetons do;
We'll find champions among people
That climb on mountains.

Matthew Buchwald

The Vagrant's Tomb

It's a dark cavern where the highway weeps
Sadly yielding grey cinders to the dust,
Where the moon on the grim river creeps:
It's a seething crater, a hole in the Earth's crust.

The vagrant, spread eagled, his raw feet
And raw hands smudged by the cold black ground,
Rots: lousy, wrapped in his winding sheet,
Laid out by his things, which are piled in a mound.

Face down in sour trash, he's dead, as still
As bare bones are still buried in a dunghill.
Mankind, mourn him kindly: death was cruel.

The rats crawl over him stirring his limbs:
His pants have torn open, exposing his shins,
Bloody. A roach darts away, when he moves his skull.

Matthew Buchwald

Three Etchings By Gustave Doré

I

On a frozen lake inside a cavern,
Two men disturb a body caught in the ice;
In the half light we see many more persons,
All of them frozen into the placid pond;
The anguish of the pitiable victims
Is dimly etched into the eerie landscape.

II

On a ledge above a gorge in the mountains,
A rider halts his horse by a slain knight;
Lying prostrate are two other cadavers,
Man and horse with their skeletons picked clean;
Sympathy for the luckless adventurers,
Is inscribed in the rider's sorrowful poise.

III

On a highway to a landing by a bay,
While the dwellers retreat outside their village,
Two sailors with mallets warily stop to talk,
As pirates slyly creep into the square;
Dread of coming chaos and catastrophe,
Is in tracery of the tenebrous town.

IV

Despair is everywhere, and foreboding,
Which oppresses the onlooker to these scenes;
But the fables have no moral, no judgment,
As from philosophy such tales hold aloof;
Each impression is a representation
Of the nameless horror inside your own mind.

Matthew Buchwald

Transcendence

I will build myself a carriage
from the pupil of my eye.
And from a year of moonlight, four black horses.
Across the wild blue yonder, across the starry sky,
I will wander with the air of Dante, a tourist.

Let the dead, unloved and forgotten, cry out:
'You will trample on our ghosts! '
I'll shout at the Earth with an insolent leer
'I demand to ride on chiffon
clouds! '

It isn't my fault that the sky is grey,
And the Sun is my rival in this risky
game,
Or that I mock you with songs as old as hunger
and sad and hopeless as seashells!

Dudes who envy my gusto, and you
there, smiling at me like a pickpocket,
drop your plums elsewhere; the painter
will brush them like chancres
onto the cosmic canvas.

Matthew Buchwald

Ultima Thule

The walls to the asylum
Of the Emperor of Thule
Were torn down at his command.
In the glacial morning,

His counselors closely watched
As the sanctuary fell
And the remains were gathered.
The Emperor had thought of

Wandering through the ruins,
But when he laid his eyes upon a
Fallen statue of himself
That was without both arms and legs,

He had an aide bring him the relic
And cover it with a shroud.
While priests pronounced a blessing,
The Emperor cried out loud.

Matthew Buchwald

What I've Learned From Edward Hopper

Behind a window is a woman:
Nursing a hot cup of coffee;
Airing her backside in the night air;
Smoking a cigarette in the buff;
Leaning over a sewing machine;
Climbing naked out of her bed;
Waiting in a hotel lobby;
In a stuffed chair just wearing slippers;
At a desk with a letter in hand;
In a nighty with the shade pulled up;
Reading while the scenery rolls by;
Getting dressed with the drapes drawn back;
Coyly playing with her fingers,
While a man stares at a potted plant.

Matthew Buchwald

When Death Comes Like A Long Lost Friend

When death comes like a long lost friend
Whistling a mournful tune
When death comes creeping in the door
We'll dance by the light of the moon

As surely as our love is true
So death must take us away
But our love may never die, my dear
It will warm us in the grave

When the sun stops shining, the earth grows cold
And the stars fall from the sky
Our love will burn with passion still
Like the fire in your eye

So fare thee well my own true love
But dance with me a while
For we shall share eternity
Though death on us must smile

Matthew Buchwald

Wispy Cirrus Clouds

Besides photographic mountains aggregated by the canvas above a lake
That neither reflects the sky nor the psyche,
Certain clouds are formed from a jumble of shapes,
Each one condensed from a single stroke of paint.

Umber, blue and white, massed around the peaks, they imply
The existence of an airy domain apart from the one below,
Rather than an awning or marquee shading the hills.
Given the preponderance of mist over earth, cows also seem to float,
So much of the meadows seeming useless,
As if the pasture were up in the heavens.

Yet the painter in deciding how to set up his easel
Reposes in them the shadow of sense: 'Just so, ' he says,
'The commingling of ethereal shreds of vapor in profusion
Triumphs over the corporeal gravity of an inanimate pile of rock.
Absent the more material traits - wispy cirrus clouds have a native zest,
And so this painting is realized.'

Matthew Buchwald