

## EIGHT POEMS

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### Climbing Trees

William is eight years old and he wants  
to climb the backyard mango tree:  
his dad says "That's not something you talk about—  
just do it." His Mom says: "I don't think  
you're old enough to be climbing trees."

Some time later, mother and son  
are in the backyard. Suddenly  
his little fingers grip the lowest branch  
and he swings his feet over...  
then feet and hands work like mad  
and soon he's lost among the leaves  
somewhere near the top of the tree:  
"See," he shouts, "I told you I could do it!"  
And his mother says: "You be careful up there!"  
"Aw, it was nothing. I'm a born climber."  
"Alright, if you say so", Mum says  
"But come down now."

There is a long silence.  
"I said it's time to come down now."  
still no response, no movement'  
The leaves in the treetop are still.  
The world is listening in silence,  
until the world hears a soft "Mom?"  
"What is it now," she replies.  
"It's real high up here", he says,  
"I frighten to come down. . . ."  
his Mom laughs: "You hold on tight,  
I'm going to get your father."

And the father, who's pushing forty,  
and hasn't climbed a tree in years,  
looks dubiously at the lines of black ants  
crawling on the branches. . . .

### Bridges

All my life I have paused on bridges,  
assessing the differences between origin  
and destination: I look back there and remember  
approaches; I look ahead and dream of fulfillment.  
I grew up with bridges everywhere:

across gutters, trenches, creeks and rivers.  
 Sometimes my glance was downward, towards  
 the dark waters which reflected the structures  
 on which my life stood (sometimes there was  
 even the clear reflection of my face).

When the bridge I crossed took me forward  
 I was happy to enjoy the unimagined futures:  
 a feast of friends, lovers—a family of my own;  
 I crossed bridges to classrooms, churches  
 and far countries without thinking of memory,  
 experience, adventure . . . and without counting  
 all the gains and inevitable losses. . .

Whenever I crossed bridges to retrace my steps,  
 to revisit experiences, to rekindle friendships  
 it seemed like going home, returning to  
 the worlds I knew well, the places I grew up,  
 with all the families and familiars of my past,  
 of my commitment to stay—of my going away...

But best of all were those stops in the middle—  
 all forerunners to this poem—that awareness  
 of my bridged and bracketed reality, between past  
 and future dreams, waiting on time to take me  
 into its unforgiving arms and bless me  
 with yet another fragrant bunch of blossoming  
 tomorrows. . . . It is my bridges that have made me.

### **Wallflower**

Our Rebecca was the perfect daughter:  
 A's in almost all her subjects at school,  
 a wonderful help around the house—  
 both with domestic chores and looking after  
 her two younger siblings. As a parent  
 I had no complaint; her mother worried  
 a little about her lack of social skills,  
 and we both wondered that she had only two  
 friends (both girls) that ever visited our home.  
 "Well, I guess Becky is our little wallflower,"  
 I said, "and that's good enough for now."

When she was a senior in high school  
 she accepted a lead role in the school play,  
 a bright, fast-moving drama, with music and dancing.  
 "She's going to dance?" I asked; "This I've got to see".  
 —because she'd never even been to a teenage party,  
 as far as I knew. . . . But in the audience on the first

night, her parents watched in wordless wonder  
 as she danced across the stage: lithe  
 and supple were her movements—and only  
 a little restrained—our baby is coming out of her shell. . . .  
 then, when we went again on the penultimate night,  
 there was even more wonder: her movements  
 on the stage were not only perfect, and in time  
 with the music, but there was also a strange abandon  
 and a grace that made the audience erupt with wild  
 applause—and all knew that the applause was for Rebecca,  
 and not for Adrian, the dance partner she  
 so beautifully eclipsed on the floor. . . .

Before she left that Saturday for the last show,  
 she said she'd be late—post-performance party.  
 I think I heard her come home in the wee hours,  
 but must have drifted back to sleep—until  
 roughly awakened by my wife, her voice full of  
 anxiety in the dark: "I heard voices in her room",  
 she said, "and then low and rhythmic sounds...  
 I eased open the door quietly, and there was Becky  
 In bed! Making love! With Adrian! The lead actor!"  
 "You sure?" I asked. "Of course I'm sure, go break it up!"  
 "Why? I'm happy that she's no longer the wallflower!"  
 "But. . . . but. . . ." "No buts":

*"Now she's got the nerve to take the chance,  
 Let the little girl dance..."*

### Heritage Site

As we entered the ancient village  
 there was a striking Chinese vessel  
 (all delicately carved and polished wood  
 and bright red fabric) anchored not far  
 from the shore of a small lake. . . .  
 And an ancient entrance archway,  
 crowded with carvings of people  
 and Chinese letters in high relief;  
 with several curved, roof-like structures  
 adorning the top—stood on the shore  
 of the same lake, surrounded by  
 a few tourists taking lots of photos...

But for me the real village was elsewhere:  
 deep into its narrow paths between high walls  
 one would suddenly stumble into an alcove  
 full of lush green and growing plants  
 in old stone and metal pots. That spoke

of the wonder of the village's ordinary life  
 and the people who lived—and still live—it.  
 Slimy gutters, a-trickle with discoloured water,  
 low and narrow arches, opening into tall courtyards  
 filled with washed yesterdays, hanging on lines,  
 catching the same morning sun that visited  
 and warmed the village all those years ago...  
 And high and spacious halls, draped with  
 tall red curtains with gold-embroidered letters  
 that could not speak to me, except to say:  
 "This is China—who and what are you?"

Then, between the village walls and the rising hills  
 at the back, were fields filled with the  
 limitless green crops that fed the populations  
 forever, traversed by small flowing streams  
 on which the ducks swam: those same ducks  
 that we saw in the market-places, dried  
 and hanging, waiting to feed the hungers  
 of a world so different and so scarcely known  
 to folks like me. . . .

### **Oboko's Mistake**

Oboko was the best-looking African slave boy  
 on the plantation—and everyone said so—  
 only fourteen years old, he was hard-working  
 and respectful. His troubles all began  
 when he caught the eye of Master Lawrence,  
 the plantation owner's seventeen-year-old son:  
 Lawrence strutted about the fields with a whip  
 and a large knife tucked into his belt:  
 he was 'master' and wanted all the slaves  
 to know it. He started picking on Oboko, cracking  
 his whip across the boy's back, and smiling  
 when the red blood emerged: "You think too much  
 of yourself, slave boy", he would say, "Now  
 get back to work—a lash on the back is no reason  
 to stop!" But the truth was that Lawrence was gay  
 and admired Oboko's perfect young body. . . .  
 So time came when he forced the boy to go  
 with him to the store-room adjacent to the sheep pen,  
 and there he made him undress, played with his  
 privates and forced Oboko to do the same to him.  
 The slave noticed that Master Lawrence did not  
 lash him during or after these trysts, so he  
 decided to put up with them. . . . That  
 was his mistake . . . ,

One morning, after Lawrence forced the boy to suck his privates, Oboko had a coughing fit and Lawrence became worried the noise would bring someone to investigate. . . . After a while, when nothing happened, he calmed down and said to Oboko: "Bite me here on my calf", as he rolled down his long sock. Oboko tried to do as he asked, only to hear: "Harder! . . . bite me harder!" So he gave him a real bite that left bloody tooth-marks and must have hurt: "Good", Lawrence said. Oboko was in shock: "I'm sorry to hurt you; why did I have to do that?" "so that I'd have an excuse for this", Lawrence said, as he drew his knife and plunged it between the boy's ribs on the left side. . . .

After Oboko's body had been handed over to the slaves for disposal, and Lawrence had shown everyone the savage bite on his leg, he was confronted by his older brother Frank and the plantation overseer: "For him to bite you there", Frank said, "He'd have to be almost on the ground . . . why didn't you strike him with your whip, instead of knifing him to death?"—"Oh you don't understand . . . it happened so quickly!" But Frank remained dubious: "I don't trust you, Lawrence—and the boy was such a good worker!" Lawrence got angry and stormed off, shouting over his shoulder: "Why all this fuss, for Christ sake, he's just a dirty, black fucking slave-boy after all!"

### **Sanding**

The grandson is coming for a month:  
my wife insists that it's my job  
to sand and paint the old cradle. . . .  
So I return from the hardware store  
with four grades of sandpaper (two sheets each—  
no idea why four, nor which grade  
is best for the job), so she is happy  
to see me preparing to work on something  
that doesn't require sitting at a desk  
—and with paper that cannot be written on.

I sigh and start stroking the rails;  
the old paint grows dull and misty  
and I begin to see the sand  
of a brilliant beach, empty and beckoning,

on which someone has drawn  
 the picture of a teddy-bear:  
 I kick sand in its face and watch  
 its helplessness as I erase eyes  
 and nose and fluffy brown ears:  
 sanding is fun! I uncover  
 veined wood, like grooved rock  
 beneath beach sands . . . and I am filled  
 with the joy of sanding.

I sand the rails and the head-board  
 with its painted animals—and the legs...  
 Suddenly I am sanding the world,  
 destroying all its comforting familiarity,  
 until I am left with raw,  
 bleeding surfaces—with the unvarnished,  
 undecorated happiness of a new life. . . .  
 She looks at my vigorous work and frowns  
 she looks disapprovingly at my face,  
 my eyebrows thick with dust,  
 my hair turning white. . . .

Why do I feel that I have won?

### **Top of the Meniscus**

It always seemed to me that there was  
 something not quite right with 'the Bruiser':  
 tall, fair-skinned, blue-eyed sixth former,  
 his real name was Desmond and I've never found out  
 how or why he achieved that strange nickname.  
 He was always very good to me as I struggled  
 with my seven fifth-form subjects. He would smile  
 as he tried to clue me in to simultaneous equations;  
 everyone said he was the brightest spark  
 in the sixth form and was bound to win a scholarship.  
 I was happy, though surprised, that he took the trouble  
 to help me with my Maths and Physics;  
 he couldn't believe that I was headed for the Arts sixth:  
 "You mean languages and English Lit and  
 Ancient History? You're crazy, man, what kind of job  
 will you get with those subjects?" He seemed  
 almost hurt, as though he felt rejected. . . . But he still  
 spoke to me about the sciences—reminding me to read  
 from the bottom of the meniscus—except  
 if the liquid is mercury. . . .

It was the Bruiser who encouraged me  
 to start going to those senior high-school parties:

college boys and convent girls, dancing and flirting, although my dancing skills were minimal and I'd never flirted with a girl. . . . But the Bruiser was on the floor every dance—all the girls seemed to love him. . . . When I asked my cousin Waveney she said: "Oh he's gorgeous—those blue-blue eyes—the girls all love him, but although he dances with us all, he's never kissed nor cuddled any one of us. . . ."

Yes, there was something strange about the Bruiser. late one afternoon, up in the detention room, I tackled him about all this as he was trying to help me understand the secrets of calculus. . . . "How come you never kiss, nor get really excited with any of the girls?" Those blue, blue eyes looked strangely at me, and he said, very quietly: "Kissing is serious, it's not for dance-floor flirtations, it's for expressing real love." And he suddenly pulled me into his arms and kissed me: I remember thinking it would have been wonderful if he'd been a girl, but I was dumbfounded and confused, and all I managed to say was "Desmond, you're . . . you're . . ." "Yes", he said, "you were reading me wrong: I am mercury, you have to read the top of the meniscus." And I saw tears in his eyes. "Don't worry", I said, "your secret is safe with me." I looked into his moist eyes and as he smiled, I understood: those eyes, those bright, beautiful, blue eyes—are gay!

### **Encounter at Night**

Walking home to my daughter's Toronto apartment along a lonely cement path late one night in October, I was enjoying the solitude and the cold night air, thinking about my writing and planning for the next day's contribution to my growing manuscript of poems. . . . But suddenly, quite nearby just off the deserted path, I see one of my daughter's less reputable friends: a surly racoon, looking defiantly at me.

I was in no mood for any nonsense, and if he'd moved towards me I would have slugged him with my rolled-up umbrella; but he remained squatted on his carpet of autumn leaves, glowering at me—not unlike her other friend, the one who often walked this same path, stepping among the trees to smoke his ganja joints

and looking suspiciously at me (haven't seen him recently—guess these nights are too cold).

I used to like racoons, they look kind of cool  
with their black blindfolds and striped, fluffy tails;  
but this one looked downright sinister in the yellow glow  
of the path lights. . . . If he'd given me half a chance  
I would have belted him proper. . . .