

SAMPLE POEMS FROM

# Orion Sweeping

*by*

Anne Marie Todkill

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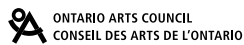
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Brick Books  
487 King St. W.  
Kingston, ON  
K7L 2X7

[www.brickbooks.ca](http://www.brickbooks.ca)

## Strontium-90

Campaigning for peace,  
their mothers gathered teeth:  
too big for fairies now,  
but we can show the President  
how wrong a thing is war,  
how poisonous the test bombs  
blooming in deserts blowing closer.  
What use, the baby/milk/deciduous teeth,  
once shed as easily as leaves or tears,  
unless to mail proof that death's particulates  
have fallen on pastures, are rising like sap  
in the tender limbs of children.

How sensibly the mothers of St. Louis  
washed, dried, and sealed these tokens of belief  
(whiff of blood, perhaps bacteria); and  
thinking how quickly time gathers into years  
(indulging, no doubt, in some relief:  
all done, the hot-cheeked days of teething,  
bitter discipline of weaning) wrote intimate truths  
on the survey cards (months on breast,  
on formula, where born, where in utero)  
while their gap-gummed warriors, still shocked  
by the tug when the worried root released,  
tongued the small craters, noted the metal taste,  
and pinned on their badges: *I gave my tooth to science.*

## **Toward a definition of wildness**

The fox before you saw it.

The fox before it saw you.

The fox before it knew it had been seen.

You, before you had thought of the fox.

You, in the moment of seeing, when you were all fox.

## **Yard duty**

When I release my puppy  
on a gang of winter crows  
it is not because I hate them  
or believe they're less entitled  
than the finches I mean to feed,  
but only to admire  
how athletically she springs  
and never catches  
the blue light flashing  
from their wings.

## Orion sweeping

Approaching midnight,  
you on a ladder  
planted in the berm  
that slumped from the solar panels  
before rain and graupel  
made this sticky amalgam  
that will foil our clever plan  
for photon capture  
after days of snow,  
our batteries and comfort  
running down.  
So I brace the ladder  
at this crazy hour  
while you get the job done,  
preparing for sunrise  
on the second longest  
night of the year.

The array rears  
against the blueprint sky  
like the wings of a satellite,  
gargantuan contraption  
for phoning home,  
while you, apologizing,  
send avalanches down,  
plastering me, stuccoing the dog,  
who shrugs off her surprise  
with the usual equanimity

(she loves the cold, the night,  
the trace of mice on the ground).

I take my chances,  
scanning the sky  
while we plunge at a thousand  
klicks per second  
toward the Great Attractor  
and constellations  
dredge the near horizon  
of blackened cedars  
oh so slowly. There, Orion,  
whom some call Winter Maker,  
belt and dagger sharp as ice,  
pitches backward, one-footed,  
to load his bow; and you,  
Winter Sweeper, thin as a diagram  
underneath your duffed  
silhouette, aim your pushbroom  
against the dark, leaning  
to the edge of the glass,  
swinging, one-footed,  
in your orbit  
for the moment  
undisturbed  
by the reckless earth.

## Wash day

After forty-seven years  
the laundry tub gave out.

Just like that.

*Finally*, my mother said,  
like she'd been waiting for this day  
to dispense her standard line:

*Well, nothing lasts forever.*

Just think of the uses  
for that phrase—infatuations,  
lilacs, good ice for skating—  
the curiously strong lozenge  
she always had ready  
to clear our minds of grief.

(Cool as peppermint she was,  
the day I left my husband.)

But I'd have to say  
that in the family inventory  
of things that didn't last,  
the double concrete laundry tub  
was the most surprising.

It sprang a leak and we said  
*It was bound to happen eventually*  
as if we really had believed  
that such a simple thing could fail.

*Those modern detergents*, my father said,  
*were eating out the wire mesh*  
*all this time.*

The sound was quite a shocker:  
metal on stone,  
rising from the basement  
while they whacked the thing  
into pieces.

Clang

                    forty-seven years  
            clang.

*Tough as the dickens,*  
my father said, resting  
the sledgehammer on the floor.  
When my mother took it from his hands  
he showed her where to land the blows.

## **Nursing home**

The people in the ceiling  
were explaining something  
important but unclear.  
I was on my way home, you said,  
but I wound up back here.



## Appointment at the cancer clinic

She thought she ought to wear a dress  
the way she used to do for Mass:  
white cotton gloves, a little straw hat,  
girl-sized handbag with a metal clasp  
she liked to fiddle with, snip and snap.  
She had business to transact; pictures  
of angels with devotions on the back;  
a nickel for the collection basket;  
in case of embarrassment, a Kleenex  
Pocket Pack. On the back of the pew  
there was a latch where, if she were a man,  
she'd hang her hat. Light freckled her hands  
through the raffia brim; her thoughts  
stayed hidden; the strap was bothersome  
under her chin. She swung her feet, couldn't  
relax; her mother whispered, *Ants in your pants.*  
In the presence of martyrs she didn't dare laugh.  
She thought then of sacrifice, penitence, shame,  
and slow ways of dying, perfected by saints.

## Marco Polo

When I was housebound, ill,  
commotion announced you  
like the knife-grinder's bell,  
Dixie-Dee chimes, the tinkling  
of camels: children, wagon,  
skipping rope, dog, strung together  
in your sidewalk caravan,  
bearing fruit from distant gardens  
(kumquat, persimmon, lychee—  
*Ever had one? Like orgasm, you said*),  
a cargo of novelties, sweet plum pastries,  
tales of family, theories of art.  
On your views of a darkening world  
I tried to sprinkle salt.

Funny, how my risky habit  
of pouring it straight from the box  
prompted your gift of salt-shakers,  
thrift-store rescues, wrapped  
like Christmas ornaments  
in old news.

Looking for logic, I shuffled them  
on a shelf: cow, pig, chicken.  
Chicken, egg. Egg, eggplant.  
Potato, tomato. Cluster of grapes.  
Twinned silos, corn-coloured,  
from Sunny Saskatchewan  
were the only set: no

Tweedledum and Tweedledee,  
black cat and yellow dog,  
left and right mittens,  
Santa and the Missus,  
but the way such duos  
tend to wind up:  
missing a sidekick  
at the end of the match.

## Assisi variations

### 1. *The wolf explains*

The arrow snapped in my shoulder.  
It itches now, stinks, and I cannot reach.  
You might pity me, at least—as he did,  
thinking me gaunt from scarcity  
when this untongued wound  
makes me too feverish to hunt.  
*Do not blame*, he said, *a starving animal*.  
He called me brother, set down between us  
dry bread. How brave they thought him,  
parleying with the infamous *lupo di Gubbio*,  
child-killer, crossing two sticks as if  
to baffle me. Bewildered little man,  
blind to the old injuries from snares  
I've been robbing all my life.

To clarify: the child's disappearance  
had little to do with me. The path is steep.  
Girls stagger up with their bloody bundles  
and throw them over. The women said,  
*The river swallowed the child*. An unfortunate  
account, since I'm the one who eats.  
But all I did was watch from the thicket  
while he picked stones with his stubby hands,  
his sandals untied. An odd gait, clumsy.  
How should I know why, when one shoe  
fell, I stepped forward, as if with a dog's  
mind, to retrieve?

*2. The father justifies himself*

All I know is he stole from me,  
made an ass of himself  
before the magistrate,  
disrobed in the village square,  
standing like a poor jack  
with his pitiful attributes  
hanging like giblets  
under that filthy hairshirt,  
and now he is begging for stones.

He hasn't been right in the head  
since he was thrown  
into that hole in Perugia.

He used to be such a happy boy  
with his fine wardrobe  
and foreign poetry.

*3. The sultan recollects*

How do I recall him?  
Threadbare, unkempt;  
a gaze that guttered  
like a flame.  
He gestured, babbled,  
brimmed with tears.  
By this we understood  
he'd come to preach.

It was the sixteenth month  
of the siege.

When I arrived from Cairo  
they were battering the chain tower,  
building mangonels, stealing cattle.  
They advanced with eighty ships,  
raining stones; masts snapped  
under the weight of armour.  
We poured fire from the walls;  
they quenched it with acid and gravel.  
Then, Paderborn's floating fortress,  
cloaked in hides, unwieldy in the rising Nile;  
ingenious, the revolving ladder,  
by which they gained the tower,  
and then unchained the river.

News of my father's death  
came to me from Acre.

We built ramparts, scuttled ships,  
harassed with rocks and arrows,  
robbed them of sleep. Our raid  
near Burāh failed. Lost to water  
and the blade, a thousand heads  
hurled back at us like stones.

They dredged the blue canal.  
The same brought stormwater,  
filling their tents with fish.

They fasted, prayed, repaired  
a bulwark with the drowned  
and horses slaughtered  
for this purpose.

In their camp, pestilence;  
in mine, conspiracy.  
I was obliged to flee  
until my brother came.  
By then, we were surrounded.

I offered Jerusalem,  
compensation,  
a thirty-year peace.

They preferred to skirmish,  
to starve, to siege.  
They bedevilled us  
with their machines.  
At Fariskūr we feigned retreat,  
rounded, killed four thousand Franks.

I offered terms.  
The floodplain was dry;  
there was no grain  
within the city walls.  
Again, the fanatics stalled.  
We tried all means until  
an empty watchtower  
betrayed the truth.  
They entered the famished city,

looted, took slaves and women,  
baptized children as they died.

Dogs gnawed on corpses. The living,  
three of eighty thousand, lay beside.

For eighteen months they squabbled  
and debauched while I built a new city  
at Mansūrah. I raised my offer.

For Dumyāt: Jerusalem, Sidon,  
Tiberias, holdings in Syria.

But now their craving was for all of Egypt.

I trusted time. The Nile  
and my brothers' armies  
gathered strength.

Finally, from Fariskūr,  
three hundred ships,  
many thousands of men  
intent on Cairo, herded  
by their own rabble  
into a bottleneck of land.

We tightened the snare.  
Then we opened the dykes.

They surrendered  
for dry ground,



pomegranates,  
bread.

I was a builder before then:  
dams, schools, improvements  
to the Citadel, the dome  
of the Mausoleum. Uncounted,  
the stones we knocked down  
in advance of our enemies: palaces,  
defences, the walls of Jerusalem.

Yet here you come to reminisce  
about your little man of the book  
as if I might remember nothing else.

Once or twice, perhaps, I wondered  
what happened to him since.

He declined my gifts; accepted food.  
I lent him the key to my prayer room.

#### *4. An embroideress reflects*

*Punto d'Assisi*, so called: derived from  
more than one ancient technique, but not,  
as these vendors imply, the gentle Clare's invention,  
nothing to do with her oh-so-spiritual boyfriend,  
not a replica of an altar cloth she made,  
but an opportunity seized by a women's guild  
to build a cottage industry

on the holy reputation of this place.  
The motifs, too, a pastiche of dates.  
This one I'm stitching now, the griffin,  
symbol of Perugia, his first enemy and captor,  
muddies the history, don't you think?

No doubt Saint Clare would approve  
the abstinent technique: the voided emblem,  
white on red ground, the dark outline  
of thread containing so cleanly  
the exhausted space of love.