

SAMPLE POEMS FROM

Orion Sweeping

by

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Brick Books

Spring 2022

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verified with the corrected, finished book.

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We acknowledge the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund, and the Ontario Arts Council for their support of our publishing program.



Canada



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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.