



The Light Deformed By Monstrous Signs

Poems by Andrew Gent

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Some poems in this collection appeared previously in the following magazines. Additional copyright restrictions may apply as a consequence.

<i>Blue Buildings:</i>	“Orphan”
<i>Bradford Review:</i>	“Belief”, “Singing for the Fathers”, “The Sleep of Trees”
<i>Missouri Review:</i>	“Epitaph for Bice Donetti”
<i>Painted Bride Quarterly:</i>	“Poem (It’s stupid to be happy...)”, “After Visiting the Home of a Famous Poet”
<i>Poetry East:</i>	“Almanac”, “The Wake”, “The Blue Wind”
<i>Quarry West</i>	“Astrolabe”, “The Pavilion Filled with Wind”, “The Photograph”, “The Hunter”
<i>Southern Humanities Review:</i>	“Listening in the Dark”

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“I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth.”

— Frankenstein

One

Salute

Here's to the hospital
we will all wake up in
when we are too tired and gray
to prop ourselves up anymore
on the two crutches god gave us.

Here's to the man
you hope to meet someday
and the woman I do, also
ineffable, luckless
as two jokers in a deck
loaded with aces.

Here's to tomorrow
(I hope I never see it!)
and the next, unanimous
with bad news.

Yes! Here's to
it. Here's to
a fall of dull leavings
and even duller returns.
I say: here's to

remorse! I love you
for what you are not:
here, where I am
or anywhere, miles

out of reach
of these two hands
I promise
I will never use

to signal defeat.

Poem

Someone has put infinity in a box.
The snow is gone, the stars
are missing from the sky.
Our dreams escape us.

The color white is dirty.
One murderer after another
has lost hope.

Sin is no longer interesting.
But sleep is still here,
like a patient waiting to have his teeth pulled.

Someone has put infinity in a box.
How can we go on living
if God is so close to us?

In the street a child is playing with a box.
Inside: snow, stars, dreams.

Sonnet

Beginning with the glint
the gleam

in the eye within. The eye.

Dawn: like light from a candle
in the sleepwalking daughter's hand
seen under the door.

And the door: each of us
taking our turn

shoulder to it
uncertain quite

what it is we mean

i.e.
to force it open, or keep it
shut to her plaints.

Sonnet

Within the eye
within the eye

there is another
smaller, more perfect-

ly blind.

Within this eye
yet another

and so on.

Each forgetting
a little more of the past

until the last:

blue and floating
in a constellation of

day and night.

Sonnet

The curtain rises.

The candle
and the candle's sister.

The blink

growing in the eye.
The apple
we all lust

after so many years
to break (the seeds) open

out of habit
or (like stars) curiosity.

Which, it has been said,
killed the cat.

But not before there was language.

Sonnet

All the beasts in the fields
and the fish in the sea

are tired.

Those two haven't spoken a word for months.
Moping around the garden
they make everyone uncomfortable

touching their faces
gazing into each other's eyes.

You would think The World
was made for them.
Of course

to a certain extent that's true.

But the sun still comes up every morning
half fire, half light.

Sonnet

First audibles
from the mumbling earth.

She, of all people,
still hungry,
not thinking
of what she is about: she

sits up and speaks:

(although
history does not record it)

...and hearing this
He, also
not thinking,
opens his mouth

and replies, forsooth.

Two

Astrolabe

*"See therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness."
—Tractatus Aristotelis*

I always wonder: which stars point where?
I know —

The north star's up there somewhere,
like a grammar lesson
forgotten long before its rhyme is:

An imaginary line
drawn between two stars, leading —

But to what constellation?
And why?

I always thought my life was simple.
When teachers asked me what I wanted to be
when I grew up, I said
the same thing:
I want to be...

...I can't remember.
Just as I can't remember
which star is which.
I bought a map of the stars
thinking it would help me.
But there are so few stars visible
at night,
I think: they must point...

The Wake

(for Franz Wright)

The glow before the match
ignites. The sound of a dead man
dragged across the floor
in the room above me.
That fraction of a second
when I look over my shoulder
and see nothing: then
I see. Several women
in the crowd have begun to weep,
their limbs dissolving
inside their clothes.
I had forgotten how much
they meant to me, these mourners.
The silence that follows
any second, any heartbeat.
The air closing in
on the flame
like the wake of a speedboat
out of control, or
heelmarks in the dust
of an empty room: minus one.

A Few Old Saws Worthy of Consideration

Thinking about why your father
got up and died
quickly leads to
buying an extra coffin just in case.
Your first philosophy lesson
begins with the empty chair beside you.
Some of us, the whole,
are the reflection of the others,
pale and thin.
When we arrive, days late, without flowers,
we are like spectators at a graduation.
In your case, I know you will be gone.
Your journey
always begins this way: the sleepwalker
slapping himself awake
in an unfamiliar section of town.
You do not try to go back.
Instead you find a room
and start again.

The Nine Murderers

The nine murderers were waiting.
(The tenth was a ray of sunlight.)
One murderer said to the others
our bus is late, as usual.

No one spoke.
They were still waiting.
Polishing a silencer,
counting on their fingers.

Another said
our bus is late, as usual.

(Meanwhile, they had been strangled
by a ray of sunlight.)

Orphan

My face has been crossed out in the photograph
they will take at my grandfather's funeral.
I can already feel the needle
they will use to stitch the black clothes
on me. They say until I am old enough
I will not be allowed to take these clothes off.

But I try to tell them
I don't know him. Why
should I be the one
to carry all these strangers with me?

They say it is not my grandfather
or my grandfather's funeral,
but the lesson I must learn.

In time, they say, I will be free
to do as I please. But until then
I must walk hunched over
as they have shown me.

I beg them to close my eyes
but again they say no. On the windows
they have painted the rain.

Snakes and Ladders

I've been bitten by the snake
and my niece shrieks with glee.

Three rows back now,
I have little chance of winning —
although I doubt if she cares:
just as long as we don't stop.
We'll play this game five times
before she's satisfied.

She has the animal instinct.
Clutching the dice like teeth
in a Maori medicine man's necklace,
She knows this magic by heart:
the ladders lead to riches;
the snakes, a fatal fall.
She knows it: just as she knows
the way to build a house
and not have it
blown down by the wolf.

I wish I knew her secret.
Once again
I am the victim of the snake,
and she, the master.
We play on.

Poem

It's stupid to be happy in August
with the rent due and the tv on the blink.
The weather's sadly predictable:
humid with no change in sight.
If I decided to visit a friend
I know no one would be home.
Everyone's taking a vacation
although they haven't done anything for months
and they won't go anywhere but stay home
and refuse to answer the door.
I make another large drink and hunch down in my chair.
That's why I love my friends.
This miserable world's their brainchild.
And if they heard I had run off to Tahiti
or joined the Armed Forces, they would be appalled
and truly concerned for my welfare.
But that wouldn't be for weeks
and by then it would be
October.

When Will I See You Again

Between the x and the y
Death makes its home.

Let me repeat that:
Between the x and the y

Death makes its home.
In the taverns

They are singing, tonight.
Old men

Follow the torn and ragged path
Of their sons' geometry.

I do not want to repeat
Their story:

Between the x and the y
They are singing, tonight,

When will I see you again...

Dust

A story told
from only one point of view.

The room
the story occurs in.
Not actually the story,
which we do not know,

but the consequences
of it. The heroine,
alone in the room
and the sound she makes
sobbing into a large white handkerchief.

Ah, the sound
as it disturbs the air.
No... the air
coming to pieces
and those pieces

that never quite come to rest.

You Can't Do What Has Already Been Done

(For Joseph Cornell)

The parakeet with one wing
erased by a photograph
has flown away.
Its cage had a hole in it.

It was covered in gauze,
old newspapers,
scraps of cloth.
A man chases the bird around the room.

Outside the trees beat on the door
that opens into the sky. Clouds
sway like a flag left out
since the war.

The bird has escaped.
The man is calling to it,
holding his head like a bandage on a broken egg.
He won't let it get away again.

The Fallen Idols

Trying to sit down in a moving car
is what it's like to be poor!

All the seats are taken
and the driver's asleep.

The accordion has fallen from its case
and lies torn and battered
under the tumult in the aisles.

My heart has as many arms
as a scorpion:
my loved ones do not suspect.

At each stop, the dead
are tossed to mongrels who await our arrival.

There is no time
to catch one's breath
as we hurtle through the streets.

Next stop!

Nails

They send me nails.

Inside the hammer sings
the martyrs' song.

They sell fish
and fear the water.

They send me nails.

I Want to Smoke

I want to smoke every time I see a pastoral scene with cows,
their eyes in front of them like the line at a welfare office.
I refuse to pay my taxes when I see a man in uniform,
the buttons polished like bullets — the circus has more clowns
dropping babies into buckets filled with confetti!
The pedigree dog has gone mad.
The mothers cry: More! More!
Soon, the dog is gone
and the bandmaster raises his baton...
Quiet reigns over the streets like a highwire ballerina.

While Vultures Circle Overhead

The poor sky can hardly hold itself up
we have come to expect so much of the natural world.
Bruised and beaten at every turn
it cries to be set free.

It cries against the trees
under the executioner's axe.

It cries against the deer caught in headlights —
half in one world and half in the next.

It cries against anything — heaven or hell —
its tears can reach.

We have used every kind of weapon against it.
The poor sky can hardly hold itself back.

Postscript

198_,

when the train crashed headlong
and war was imminent,

signs leading towards recovery
were announced nightly

to be possible... That year

we stayed home
and read in the paper

what was being said.

We did not go out. We did not write.
Our friends

too, were astonished.
Hating to put this fear

into words.

Three

Lyric

Deep in the heartlands
the house pulls at its anchor.
On the porch a radio cackles like hens
before a storm. The wind, the wind
that can be seen coming for miles,
catches in the branches of a tree
while the soft artillery of cows
wade in through the tall grass
whispering you, you, you...

Belief

I hold my hands out when it rains
to convince myself it's true. This is no lie.
My fingers are scarred by my faith
in candles. Since I must sleep alone

I leave all the lights in the house burning.
But this only holds for when I sleep, mostly
I prowl the streets convinced I can overcome my fears
with darkness. But no, I scrawl your name a hundred times

on the backs of buildings, then cross them out.
And, when I do sleep all night, every night
the same thing in my dreams. Of course
dawn is the hardest, coming so slowly,

relentlessly. There is no escaping it.
And, as a last resort, since I must sleep alone,
I draw your face on the pillow
then smother it, convinced

you never loved me.

The Photograph

Age is a possession of the Fathers
Who keep the secret from us

No one told them the lies
They are so fond of

Mumbling, falling down, they know

Pointing to the blur
In the last row

“That's the one”
He says

His face shot away
By sleep.

The Pavilion Filled with Wind

The pavilion filled with wind is in ashes.
My eyes water as if someone were covering them with their hands.

My mother never warned me about these trials
I would have to bear alone.

I drink to make me happy, until the bottle's dry,
and try to count the fingers on my right hand.

But they are white, it's true,
and I can't see them in this light.

I save the labels off soup cans
and try to buy a new car. They are not happy

when they see me coming. They drag their miserable bodies
around the showroom on crutches

calling me every name in the book.
The pavilion filled with wind is in ashes,

they say, he has come back.

Wish

The angle of trajectory
of a lash falling into the eye of a man shaving
in the reflection in the lips of a woman he loves
on a train speeding past the station where he must get off
before his life is altered irrevocably. He is asleep
and dreams of the cigarette he is smoking
as he stands before the firing squad.
The smoke drifts lazily up into the windless air
and a fleck of ash settles into the corner of his eye. It stings
and he can't make out why he is there
until he remembers the train and the woman he has never met before
who is getting off now, and he would follow her
except for the pain in his eye which is the lash that woke him
like a bomb which must be dismantled
before it dissolves with a tremendous howling
taking the man and the train with it.

____Less

I am charmed by your attention
like a witness hypnotized to remember
the name written on the getaway car:
Wash Me. I am appalled
by your lack of attention.
When you are awake
your thoughts write a litany
of vices on my shadow:
use____,
worth____, aim____, sleep____.
Until its illegible again.
By noon its so dark
I can't drag it around anymore
and lie down to wait
for this depression that follows me
(i.e. my shadow) to pass.

But at night
your attention thrills me,
pleases me, frightens... etc.
Like a mime with his hands tied behind his back
reciting my personal triumphs
backwards. This is how I sleep:
sleep____,
aim____,
worth____,

you____.

After a Long Spell of Rain

Somewhere our bones
have famous ancestors.

Perhaps in the unwritten
history of science

one of us was the first
example of the use of tools: the hammer.

Or in medicine, the first splint
for the first broken leg.

My family has a long tradition in education
and must assuredly

be descended from the headmaster's cane
that stung the first student's hand.

I can sense it.
When I lay perfectly still

pretending to sleep,
I can hear them chipping away

at their latest invention.
Especially on gloomy evenings

after a long spell of rain
I can feel their experiments

approach a terrifying
and possibly disastrous conclusion

under the harsh light
of the laboratory

of my left toe.

True or False

It is harder to love you
than not to love you.

The wind must suffer
the words
I call my own.

The dead are never sad.
Their tears
are tears of joy!

It is harder to love you
than to stop loving you,

than to go on loving you.
I swear it's true.

Air Series

I

3-cylinder rotary
Kicking like a horse in the hayloft. Suddenly

You are alone

Ten seconds over the barnyard
And everything is looking up.

II

Dear Sir,

This is my last warning: your superstitions
Frighten our children. My roosters
Crow at two o'clock in the afternoon
And the cows refuse to give milk.
If you don't cease work immediately
On that infernal contraption
God will surely visit His wrath
Upon us all.

III

You would give anything
To understand "escape velocity"

As a final solution
To the gravity that holds us together.

Insisting air is only half
The weight of the body

Only half the weight
Of a wing.

IV

To be certain you label everything:

Pig stenciled in blue
Across their enormous backs.

Cows grazing the inscription grass.

While above
Birds drag tiny banners of air.

V

Dear Sir,

You have gone too far.

VI

You measure the wind
With your wind instruments.

Too much.

You lie down naked, alone.
Flying.

Among the Ranks of the Living

There are singers
each with their own
particular wo

(reader! This is not
what I meant to say. Believe me,
if I had the choice

to list,
in order,
every wight and creature

from the smallest
peeper to the tousled
Asiatic black bear's

growl, there would be
no weeping allowed!)

laying my head
next to the hapless snake
in the grass

I offer a duet.

No more moaners in the trees!
No breast-beaters among the ranks

of the living. Each leaf
tuning its one string
to the final
E

when we will put our shoulders to the wheel
raise our voices
and sing

lo! lo! lo!

A Trick of the Light

It's bone-talk: getting down
to the least audible,
the hum and drone
of it.

I mean,
each dawn the wind
does this: photon by photon
it lifts and carries
like a wrestler getting in shape.

But it's not so simple.
For us, it's getting
to where one corpuscle
wants to marry the next

build a little house
and settle down.
Think of it
this way:

five minutes in the sack
and your alibi's blown.
So it's back to
drawing the wagons
into a circle

and inviting the neighbors in.
It's back to going to bed alone
after a quiet evening
and not sleeping
or going to bed together,
every cell humming,
and not letting on.

Love Poem

The sound it makes,
the poem,
(you can't hear it)
is a singing.

Two voices
(or more, a chorus)
where voices are known to be extinct.
Starting in the bones,
the sheets on the bed,
the very air

the singing is for.
Yet such singing would kill us
were it not
for being mortal

(Ulysses).

The Blue Wind

I would like to say a word or two for the wind.
I would like to hold up this blue day
until we are filled with gladness. I would like to tie you down
and feed you the blue wind until you are sure

it cannot escape us. I would like
to drive my car into the river and swim
for the sheer joy of it. Of this I am certain:
I would like to be signposts counting the miles to you

for the blue wind. More than anything
I would like to be the reasons you get up in the morning
and the reasons you don't, when you don't.
I would like to know why

you have never heard of the blue wind
and why you refuse to believe it comes, as it does,
day after day. I would like to smother our grief in a sack
already filled with bones. I would like to go on

singing and dancing long after my bones
are dreary and dust-covered... Believing
one dream is better than another
because it begins and ends with the blue wind.

And now
while you are sitting comfortably,
I would like to say a few words for the wind.
A few dismal phonemes for the life-giver, the breath-taker,
the wind.

Four

Taking Down the Wind

It begins by taking down the nails
that hold the air in place.
Then silence is packed away
in a sack used for carrying grain.
Next comes the rain (although it is rarely spoken of)
sorted and wrapped in the finest silk.
Quickly, before they can fly out of reach,
gather the birds, stray clouds, and the clock tower
in the village square where it chimes the hour.
Once all this has been done
the wind will come quietly.



It begins the same way:
taking down your footsteps
leaving you nowhere to go.
Next it takes down the stars
(don't be afraid) it has done this
many times before. Soon it will begin
to wear away at your sleep like a brick
thrown from the silent clock tower
is worn away by the air it passes through
until all that's left is a handful of sand.
When it reaches the ground, collect it
for it will be needed later.
Don't be afraid. It is only the wind,
returning.

Epitaph For Bice Donetti

(After Salvatore Quasimodo)

The clouds took her by surprise.
Lying in a field five kilometers north of Musocco
where the road to Tindari bends around an old elm tree,
she was watching the wind play among the branches
when they came for her.
Not real angels though,
but a child's impression of angels
with huge silk wings and a halo woven from wild daisies.
O traveler, as you pass this place where an old elm tree
and a stone wall guard the entrance to a field, stop a moment
to think of the one who died too young to be anything but a plaything
for the wind, the reason an old man writes words
on a piece of paper. An old man like any other,
a dreamer
struggling to wake.

The Sleep of Trees

I don't understand the sleep of children.
The tears still in their eyes.
I don't understand a sadness

so pure it is water,
and not the voices
I have come to expect
the clock cannot alter.

The trees are not our enemy.
Standing guard over the dark house
as I do, but for better motives.

The small one's tiny hands
bunched into fists that hold nothing.
I don't understand how it is
we have learned to go on.

The sleep of trees is constant
and will not be threatened.

Almanac

Rilke said: there are only two words
and all the rest are misprints.
The guitar with one string
makes a strange music.

Looking at it a different way
poets speak very little
saving up their words for later use,
i.e. politicians make bad poets.

If you close one eye the other thinks it's alone
and sees only what it wants to see.
The tyranny of the poet.

Rilke said: green was one word
and the other didn't matter.
He held his hands over his eyes.

Folding Chairs

Truth is only part of what we must learn
before we die. I have been sadly misled

until this moment. I would gladly give up
one world for another: any world you choose

for the next, also of your choice.

But,

Truth is only part of what we must learn to forget
before we cease to go on living.

I hope I make myself clear.
I have not led a happy life.

Often, being alone
was enough

to leave permanent damage
where before my conscience had been clear:

a horse whose rider is asleep,
a shuffled deck of cards

with no particular game in mind.
That is why I have come here to speak to you tonight.

I am not the president of a great country. Neither am I
a famous philosopher who can speak freely

of what he believes and what he does not believe.
I am only the man you see before you now.

Truth has nothing to do with it.
And despite all you may say

to change my mind, I will never
give up my position

at the back of the auditorium.

The Hunter

Nights
Spent out in the blinds
Or the back of a pick up

Struggling
With the imaginary deer

Hundreds of them!
Stretched out on the hood

You cannot understand
How you will ever get them home

And the blood so clear
You can make out each star. Look!

Bent over their perfect bodies
You can see the moon

Your face
Slowly emptying

The laughing birds.

Prayer

For nothing turns out the way it's supposed to.
For everything expects
more of us than we expect of ourselves.
For some things lurk
in dark corners
waiting for us.
For us
having nothing is better than having everything
if we must work for it.
For if I say the wrong thing
I know I will be forgiven, and won't have to ask.
For God
who needs it more than we do,
sacrificing himself and having no one to talk to.
For Belgium
because they haven't started a war for a hundred years.
For France
because they wish they hadn't.
For Africa
because they will.
And Germany
because they did, and that's all I can say.
For the Ten Commandments
are out-dated. Period.
For the Twenty-Seventh Amendment
doesn't mention "abortion", but is still needed.
For the way we live our lives
everyman is on his own. Television is bad
but ignorance is slavery, which is worse.
For if I had it all to do over again
I would have no choice.
For yesterday
is better off without us.
For today
there is nothing science cannot explain
or do anything about.
For nothing
is more important,
will ever change,
is all we have,

so help me.
For God
may never believe
I'm telling the truth.
For I find
I have more to say
than I would ever have thought
possible.

Singing For the Fathers

(for Lux and Ryan)

Singing for the fathers
who are mine and yours
does not cure them.
We know — Also

we know,
buying them dirt
to lie down in
makes them weep.

These are our fathers
who will not be consoled
easily. Staying up late
in the kitchen

drunk telling stories
they have told
a thousand times
and putting them to bed

is another reason.
Singing for the husbands
of our birth, the fathers
of our fathers. He and I

together at the top of the stairs
we hold on for dear
life: doing this little dance
we call Father and Son

Embracing.

Elegy For the Dancer

The spokes of the cart: the wind
pushes uphill

For the first time the blue hunter
steps out across the river
rubbing the sand from his eyes

For the first time the animals
lay down their sack of bones
and go

Quietly
as if obeying the signs
of a man far off, mute

And: yes,
dancing.

The Experiment

In the bath
my legs are distorted by refraction.
As if I had looked down
and mistaken them
for the legs of the person sitting next to me.
When I lift them out of the water
they are mine again, familiar and mute.
I imagine this must be what it's like
to be in a wheelchair,
but quickly cross this out
as unnecessary and cruel.
Still, I repeat this experiment
several times — surprised
by my attention,
happy to have them return
each time.

After Visiting the Home of a Famous Poet

Just off the highway
behind a white picket fence
is the house.
“Home of the famous American poet”
says the sign out front
and that I believe.
Fame makes us respectable
whether we want it or not.
The house is closed today
but through the window
we can make out a table
with one sheet of paper
and a pen.
As if a vindictive maid
got tired of his ravings
and threw the whole lot out.

I want to lie
and say it is beautiful
but no one lives here now.
Cars rot out in the yard
of a house nearby
and down the street
is a Chinese restaurant
equally out of place.

As we are leaving
we spot another house
five miles down the road.
The windows are boarded up
and several hand painted signs say
trespassers will be shot.
Here is another American.
I want to stop and ask
if he knew the poet
who was his neighbor.
But that's another lie.
I am tired of poetry
and this American means business.

Listening in the Dark

On evenings like this
I can hear the creaking of the oarlocks
on the boat the moon uses to row out to the horizon.

The woman I live with
is in the next room reading
and I will not disturb her.

It is a small sound
like a door left ajar
shifting in the wind.

It is impossible to tell how long I've been sitting here.
I know the moon is a dead thing
and moves without thought or feeling

but tonight I can believe
it is working, that moon,
to do what it has done a thousand times,

pulling into view.