



primer



Poems by Andrew Gent

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*M*₂₃orning

Memory

Rope, string, thread, strand...
What comes next?
What's beyond the spider's fine spinning?
The path of the electron
not magnified, for once,
but felt like invisible threads
spread across your path.
The wobble of a photon
burned into the retina
after the light goes out.
The memory of an old book
read in college
and forgotten. The memory resurfacing
momentarily, and the path it took
threading through the convolvulus
for fifteen years.
If you could see it, its path,
you could follow it backwards
to the place where it hid
all that time, and perhaps
you would find
the others: the lost,
their trails burning and flaring out
in a field of unknowing.

Better Living

“The learned pig did not learn its letters in a day”

It takes two days to teach a pig to read,
three days for a dog to talk,
four days for the family cat to drive a stickshift,
etc.

In one week, the need for fossil fuel is solved.
In a month, gravity itself is overcome.
In three months, we can send fruit into the future
to avoid spoiling and as assurance against times of famine.

One year from today
my shoes will tie themselves
and carry me to my job
which has already been completed
but gives me something to do,
traveling back and forth day after day...

Assembly Required

Are old wives' tales untrue or simply coincidence?

Barking dogs seldom bite.

This I have found to be untrue.

Have I been talking to the wrong dogs?

I am a bundle of rumor.

Hearsay and innuendo.

My system of beliefs

is not broken, it is unopened.

Still in its box

bearing the label:

Some assembly required.

Entrances & Exits

I have come to realize
these entrances and exits
work both ways.
Birth is the end
of a long voyage
in the dark, in a boat
a few inches shorter than the ocean
that holds it afloat.
And death, the beginning
of something else.
Again, in the dark
like the start of a long car ride
begun before dawn
with the children
still in their PJ's
unaware
of the destination.

Triangle in Yellow

“Wherever you go, there you are”

You cannot escape your own actions
or predict your intent.
Wherever you go, someone has just left
leaving you to wonder
about the wisdom of your choice.
Wherever you left to get here,
whatever you meant to escape, has ceased
and something miraculous is happening.
There you are, wherever you went
with whoever you met
along the way, like passengers
in a bus station that is mysteriously quiet.
No one has seen a bus arrive or depart for hours.
The man behind the ticket window is snoring
and a bucket and mop lean against the wall
near a sign reading *Caution: wet floor!*

Greed

Abundance breeds desire
for more than the next
person in line.

I am buying three loaves of bread
because I can afford it
and do not need to think
of the consequences.

Caution, or lack thereof,
is what we want to buy
our way out of.

I don't know how
and I don't want to.

I want the freedom
lack of fear affords
without the harm
that creeps upon us
when we are
unawares.

Poem

My diary is full of lies.
I wonder who put them there?

Arithmetic

Half of me is certain,
the other half divided.
One quarter of me
thinks he is being lied to
and the remaining quarter
is in dissent.
One half of what is left
(one eighth) believes
truth will out
and no matter what
I, as a whole, decide
the other eighth will
receive its comeuppance.
One sixteenth of my better judgment
is weighing all sides
and trying to ignore
the other sixteenth's rude noises.
One thirty-second and I
am barely able
to hold all of the pieces
together — quiet!
shouts a sixty-fourth
as one hundred and twenty-eighths
of me storms out, unnoticed
in the din I have created.

Poets

Legend tells us Robert Frost
used to milk his one cow
in the middle of the night
so he wouldn't have to
wake up early

being a poet
and disinclined to early hours.

i.e.
poets make bad farmers,
always thinking
of something else
such as money or art,
which they never have
enough of, or debt
having too much...

But that's an old story.
Let's get back
to Robert, who used to
hide quarters in the barn
in an attempt to
1.) cure his children
of a fear of the dark, or
2.) teach them not to be poets
who never have enough
money, etc.

We don't know if it worked, but
because they had to eat
Robert Frost became a farmer,
writing articles on poultry farming
and teaching at the local private school
long enough to sell the farm,
move his family to England
and never worry about money again.

Poem

My mouth is the ventriloquist's dummy
my hands speak into.

Freedom of Choice

Freedom starts with not having
your choices explained to you.
You are responsible
for what you decide
each morning. Coffee and donuts:
exploitation of the South American farmer
and the incremental seizure
of your arteries. A decision
you can live with
as long as you don't see it.
Going to work, calling in sick,
or moving suddenly
to Montana. Similar consequences.
Like dominoes in a crowded room,
no one can fall down
because there is nowhere to fall.
Decisions are made by your inability
to choose certain paths
— or is it your inability
to believe those paths
are available?
The room is suddenly less crowded.
It is time to leave,
the man to your left whispers
while appearing for all intents and purposes
to be asleep.

Buddha in the Bathtub

Buddha in the bathtub,
Tibet on my knee.
The water slowly rising
like a thousand devoted followers.

He is less than one but more than many
blessing the orphans of the kitchen sink:
the knives and forks waiting their turn
quietly, on the impromptu shore.

The Ganges, the Tigris,
the sacred waters of *Splish-Splash*
where cows, those larger gods,
rest their muzzy chins
on their own reflections.

He kicks the side of the plastic bucket with glee.
There is no joy deeper than this.

The Word of an Unstable Man Is a Bundle of Water

The mirror hears me but does not answer.
The answer sees my reflection
but turns away.

I am a bundle of water
carried in a straw basket.

I am not the man
whose word is to be trusted.
I am the other man,
the one blame follows.

Good Deeds Are the Language of the Soul

Or was that “the language of the soil”?

A typographical error

that turns us inward, away from the earth

that speaks to us in deed,

not philosophical treatise.

Earthquakes, rain, the sudden appearance

of a precious ring lost last summer

in the yard, now returned

for good deeds done.

Do we have anything to say in response?

Do we have words or the language to contain them

that anyone besides ourselves

would understand?

A New Broom Sweeps Clean

I will buy a new broom
Saturday, right after
I return these overdue library books
on Erasmus and Kierkegaard.
And after I buy my broom
I will stop for a haircut
(which always makes me think clearer),
pick up some fresh vegetables,
and send a letter to my best friend
who I haven't spoken to for five years.
I'm turning over a new leaf,
starting a new life.
As soon as I get home
I will put a hook on the wall
to give the new broom
a place of importance in my new life
so I'll know where to find it
when I start cleaning
the Saturday after next...

Carelessness Does More Harm Than a Want of Knowledge

for Malcolm

Want of knowledge
how to hold the two hands
on the toy golf club
and swing the little white plastic ball
through the plate glass window.
Want of knowledge
to say, *no thank you*
instead of screaming, full force
while admiring your reflection
in the fireplace screen.
Want and don't want
to know how the door latch works
and what and what not
to put in the video tape recorder.
Want and don't care
that bring us to
chasing each other around the house
until we collapse in a pile
laughing and not equally
assured we do not know
but will start over again tomorrow.
Day one thousand
and ninety-three.

The Whole of Virtue Consists in Its Practice

After Cicero & Robert Creeley

The good
practice.
Something I don't.
What is it
they do
in their rooms
at night?
All that noise
& disturbance
getting into position
to be good
or better
for someone
else.
The good
know how
and ingenuity
wasted
on rehearsals
for the beyond
or what's her name.

Who Does No Evil Is Apt to Suspect None

All of which is very nice
if we are saints
incapable of the occasional fall
from grace. But we suspect ourselves
of flaws both real and imagined:
The sin of getting up
before the dark beast of the self
has been properly caged and tamed.
The sin of thinking
of ourselves first, second
and sometimes third. Leaving no time
to help others.
The sin of omission
and the many acts
that follow...

The Greatest Remedy For Anger Is Delay

But there is no remedy for happiness
gone astray, for the glass
broken at the stem
then crushed in the hand like paper.
There is no moaning that can undo
the moaning that precedes it.
There is only what is said
and what goes unsaid
when laughter fails
in the mouth.
I am thinking of yesterday
but tomorrow
won't let me go.

Going to Ruin Is Silent Work

So I must be doing something wrong.
I can hardly hear myself think,
going from bad to worse.
Everyday a mirror breaks
or a sidewalk cracks
loudly. The neighbors complain.
We complain in return.
Going from unhappy to miserable
everyone's making too much noise
to do it properly.
So each day we start over,
clinking our chipped glasses
of orange juice
over the smoldering toast and spilt coffee...

He Knocks Boldly Who Brings Good News

The door does not answer itself
politely. I am born with scars
on my left ventricle.
I do not know
who was there before me.
Someone small, I assume.
Warm and wet
like pee in a bathtub.
Then the commotion
of Mother called me out.
The doctors cheered themselves on
for a job well done
and wrapped me in old newspaper.
I had arrived
without leaving anywhere.
Now I am preparing to leave
with nowhere to go.
I knock on the door for luck,
but luck never answers.

Nothing With God Is Accidental

Then it is intentional
which is harder to accept.
I prefer to see the world
as clear of intention
and operating by chance
in pure exhilaration
of existing.
Maybe I am wrong.
Maybe the world is
not so perfect
and the clock is off
by one tick
or tock
which would make everything
understandable.

The Wife of a Careless Man

My wife is a window
upon which the world looks
differently
at different times.

The fine reflection
changes color
as the weather changes
and storms
often lead to floods
that can be predicted
but not stopped.

My wife is a window
onto the scenes of my life
I must be aware of
but do not always
take pleasure in.

My wife is a window
and intricate lace curtains
to which I press my face
weeping, joyful
absorbed
by the light.

There Are More Men Ennobled By Study Than By Nature

Oh, I'm not sure
about that. There are many men
with no pretense
to nobility, but enamored
of nature — as in grass
and soil clung to the underside
of a leaf, unburied from snow
only recently and now
turned over, delicately,
like a petal of *she love me not...*
It is a coarse ground
with grubs in its belly
that I embrace.
It is my front yard
and my neighbor's
and the yard down the street
of which I sing
on my way
from the toolshed to woodpile
bearing tools my grandparents
believed belonged only to the idle rich.

Barn

In the theory of evolution
it is the empty building emitting a strange and eerie light.

The Spoken Word

How do we know
what Plato said?
Or Confucius? Or Ben Franklin?
We only have
what others say
about them. What is written
vs. the spoken word
while reclining
on a couch of fir boughs
under a statue
labeled "In Arcadia..."
No one can tell us
what was said
later the same day
while Socrates washed dishes
and Plato dried.

*A*¹²**fternoon**

The Self, Returning

Across the fields
in late morning
with the fog rising
like the aspirations of the grass.
Ankle high, white as ghosts,
it comes.

Starting Over

I stopped writing.
And then, one day, I started writing again.
Since I had given away my books
and sold my typewriters for scrap,
I started with a rock.
First, scratching words
with a kitchen knife.
Later, carving letters deeper
with a chisel and mallet.
If inspiration struck
when tools weren't at hand
I would hammer on the rock
with a smaller, sharp stone
or simply bang on the rough surface
with the flat of my hand.
After a month or so
I found I had no more room
for words on the rock.
So I began to write over
the words already inscribed.
Some days I sang to it
hoping it would absorb the sound.
Other days I would stare at it
confounded.
Within three months there wasn't an inch
that was not covered
with the writing and the crossing out.
The stone began to resemble
the entrance to a Celtic grave.
Symbols without meaning,
meaning without sense...

Winter Solstice

Hear the larger bones
stop turning. Forget the soul
and its weightless trappings.
Open your eyes and listen.

Ignore the lower mammals that came before,
the experiments, the trial runs.
Feel your own strength diminishing
as the casebook closes
and the sun, the solitary light
in the laboratory,
grows distant and more cold.

Cronies

The plural of crones.

Large white birds whose mating call can make clocks run backwards.

Evil disguised as friends.

Latin for a counterfeit coin depicting Caesar reading a telegram.

The maiden name of Eve.

A black metal from Eastern Europe.

Inhabitants of a Mesozoic Age who stood on two legs and carried stone briefcases.

Hanse

The handle by which a saw is pulled and pushed through the inside of wood.

A house in the woods.

Nickname of a boy lost in the woods.

Middle English for the day before yesterday.

Someone is working in a basement within earshot.

The semaphore of a hammer talking

to the gaggle of nails hung from the rafters in old pickle jars.

Clear as the glass of a portrait of two people

hung in a bedroom closed ten years before

and left as is, as was

Spicule

Smaller than dirt.
Small enough to fit
between two atoms
and catch fire.
The flare and smoke
of a match
seen from 15,000 feet
then gone.

Newton said
that matter is neither created
nor destroyed.

At this height, from this far away,
all that movement
looks like the shimmering
of a finely polished bell
trembling in the sunlight
moments before being struck.

Dyspepsia

No idea what it means
or how it was arrived at.
The long halls of medical buildings
where faint and annoying music
scrubs the walls clean of meaning.
Behind one of the unmarked doors
—a private office, a broom closet, or a secret temple—
men in lab coats contrive words
for what happens to us
and for which we pay them great sums
to diagnose and counteract
before we return
to our real, less-than-perfect lives.

Iwis

I have heard of animals
with wings that cannot fly.
I have also heard of fish
white as bone, lit
by the lack of color
in the bottom of caves.
Who makes this world round
and the next one square?
Who chose three dimensions
for us then formed a fourth and a fifth
for himself? Time. Death.
The result is the same:
I sit in my living room
watching my son play on the floor
and no one can take this moment away.
No one can make it stand still.

Hokey-Pokey

The rubber horse
disappearing into the sunset
colored handkerchief
of the big shot
charlatan
soothsayer.
"I'm Pokey" said the ever smiling
orange beast.
"You're full of it" snarled
the plastic Dr. Doom
of the articulated limbs.
"Oh no!" cried Gumby
and the playroom fell silent
as the trapdoor closed.

Awless

Without the tools
to look blameless
and uninterested
we put up a tent
to shield us
from our own surprise.

Blinded
by too much exposure
we stand, mouths ajar
like tiny holes
that stand in for stars
in the medieval sky.

Druid

I am remembering words,
relearning the language
I was born with.

Tapping the exoskeleton
of extinct species,
I am a janitor with impossible dreams.

A backyard paleontologist
in the attic of my childhood education.

I am kenning the lost and misplaced
objects of earlier affection.

Table saw: the oxymoron of dull and sharp
that can do no worse
than stub your toe in the dark
but will cut your hand off
by the solitary lightbulb of a basement workshop.

Pereneum: the stage where we emerge
and merge in plays of miraculous origin.

Fish wife: an allegory
of love and hate, told in loud voices
to teach children
inappropriate lessons.

I am humming a tune
made up of runes and obscure rhymes
I am trying hard to find the music to.

Hotel

This is the smallest room known to mankind.
Mice walk around with their shoulders hunched over.
The spiders play cribbage in one corner.
I can't believe anyone built a room this size!
It must be an accident. An empty space
between two intentional rooms that failed to meet.
If you can find the door, you need a magnifying glass
to see the handle. The windows were painted shut
with one stroke of the brush. Although,
I must admit, it's quiet.
It may be the quietest room
I've ever stayed in. Totally quiet
Except for the *chink, chink*
when the spiders drop their playing pieces.

Cows in a Field

Billboards for the revolution:
names like Marx and Lenin
printed so badly
they're just a blur
of black and white.

And,
of course,
in the distance
the obligatory silo and barn.

Later the Same Day

Please,
may I get down from the table?

I ate my vegetables,
I cleaned my plate.

I married the woman
I love and held the same job
for ten years.

Oh, I did not think
these lessons would last so long.

I wish the bell would ring
so we can go outside
and the schoolmaster take off

his black hood.

True Life

A voice in the bushes scoffs.
Damn those squirrels!
Can't keep their noses out of
other peoples' business. True life?
Never heard of it. I'm a picture
of American domestic bliss
leaning on my rake, seemingly
oblivious to the yelps and howls
of children (some my own, some not)
terrorizing the neighbor's cat.
But "true", nothing doing.
Kicking an acorn husk
mindlessly
from one paving stone to another
and back again, I have the time
to consider, but not to correct.
To think, but not to conclude.
Before anything serious
can occur, it's time
to be getting on your way.
Come again,
whoever you are.

Time Transfixed

After Magritte

In the slow stillness that dust instills
we understand the yearning of the axe to meet wood
and complete its peripatetic journey.
The logs split and stacked
on the back porch
where nothing, even the momentary
death of a late mosquito in the spider's web
strung between two blocks of wood
can interfere with the progression of everyday life
and the speeding train, heard in the distance,
is nothing but a passing fancy
with no why
or wherefore
to get to.

Evolution

The spine is a ladder
we climb
from invertebrate
to lung fish.

The cartilaginous rungs
formed by erosion
of those who preceded us:
father, grandfather,
Mennonite, and amoeba.

One cell, two cells.

White cell, blue cells.

We form ourselves
in our own likeness
moving upwards
towards homo erectus
as if there were no other
direction
possible.

Happy

Happy is he
under his cloud,
happy in his cave
twiddling his thumbs,
painting stick figures
of deer & antelope on the wall,
making up stories
of discovery and conquest
to tell his innumerable children.

He is happy
and his children are happy.
The sun burns through the acid haze.
He drives, happy, his miserable car
to his miserable job
and, happier still, achieves greatness
in the shuffling of paper
and the signing of forms.

At night,
he sits among his family
watching television
saying “shhhhh” two or three times an hour
happy & fulfilled
in his chosen profession
as human, breadwinner, and earthling.

Theory of Relativity

I can shovel snow off my driveway
twice as fast as my neighbor
but it takes me three times longer
to catch my breath when I'm done.

A high-school drop-out with a pickup truck
can clear the driveway in one fifth the time
but crushes my shrubbery in the process.

Should I pay him \$30 for this efficiency?

Life is relative

to the amount of effort you expend
divided by your expectations.

When I think of you
in your nightgown, my values
are wiped clean
like a schoolroom blackboard.

I can either recite my sins
a thousand times each
or calculate the earth's weight
and your relative contribution
counterbalanced by the effort
to raise you in my arms
and carry you to the bed.

How Do I Love Ye?

Let me count the ways:

1. In the kitchen, making coffee
in 2 cracked mugs at 3 a.m.
you are as beautiful as 4 angels
driving a Chevy 5-speed
stick shift, dual barrel exhaust
on blacktop licked clean by rain.
Of the 6 senses, none
can compare to 7 minutes
with you. I have 8 cents
in my pocket, which isn't enough
to call you, at 9 at night
for the 10th time to tell you
I have 11 excuses but 12 reasons
to want you back, my good luck charm,
my lucky number 13, my 14 year-old
in 30 plus years of living!

Resolution

As a resolution
for the year 19__ whatever,
I decided there will be
no more singing.

No more waltzing within myself
as if the room were filled
with light and the dancers
dressed in other than rags.

I am not fooling myself. I know
each step costs me
its ounce of flesh, its dose
of some yet-to-be-determined
disease, such as cancer
or nuclear devastation.

But still my silly bones
go on rejoicing! Each moment
I am not dead, or obviously dying,
I think: "it's not so bad, this life."

Even the constant need
to breathe (which gets harder)
has its small colloquial charm.
Like a disreputable uncle
at a family reunion, it demands
its five minutes of attention.

But I have decided
there will be no more gladness
in contradiction to the facts.
There will be no more singing
until the singer is good and ready.

Proofreading

Advice is a red pen
writ large
on paper
marked and crossed out
many times.

What is needed
is more paper.

What is needed
is a fresh color
and the words
to work it.

Gatherers of Stone

The stone does not reveal its age.
Except to geologists,

those lovers of gray matter
with veins and faults.

Diviners of a fragment of leaf
in hardened concrete,
the stories they peruse
are ancient and unreadable
even in translation.

When they die
their shadow is buried beside them
under a blade of grass
bearing their name.

Ahead

What lies
must we tell ourselves
to stay in one place
so long? How we promise
a new life, a new job
in five years... ten. How
the house, the car, the kids
demand attention. How debt
begets debt, and “we are better off
than we were four years ago.”
How much dirt must we eat
before we realize we are waiting
at the wrong gravesite?
No matter how hard
we try to hang on
standing perfectly still
the earth’s revolution propels us

full speed

Probability

The science of wise men
rolling dice
for two days
until they roll snake eyes
three times in a row.
The inevitable taken by surprise.
Predicting chance
by increasing the odds.
It is unlikely
I will meet anyone new
sitting in my den tonight.
But I leave the curtains open
and roll dice
on the off
chance chance
is waiting to hear from me.

An Unlikely Story

I put my head down on a book
to catch forty winks
and a year passed.
I read the newspaper. A decade.
A short story. The century ended.
A novel. A new millennia.
I went to the library
and Christ was checking out
an armful of philosophy books.
Kant, Spinoza, Wittgenstein
spilled from his arms.
“How long’s it gonna take you
to read all that?” I asked.
He smiled. “Years”
he said. “Years”
and headed out across the lake on foot.

Envelope

Who invented this container?

Paper disguised as paper.

A hat with its owner's name and address
written on the brim, turned inside out.

The world's smallest filing cabinet
with only one name in it.

Death warrant, birth certificate,
or subscription renewal.

Carefully loosen the flaps,

unglue the seams,

and spread it out on the table.

It is the Wright Brothers' first airplane.

The skeleton of a bird that ruled the air
before the time of man.

Quantum Mechanics

I have no patience
for children, pets, or imbeciles
like me. I have no room
to forgive the spilled milk,
the broken coffee cup, or the innumerable
dents in the car door.
What do they think this is?
A doorstep? Or are they too busy
to care what happens
to the shopping cart
affecting a chain reaction
through the parking lot
until a stray electron
large, dented, and out of control
rolls past the last empty parking space
and across the highway
in search of someone else's car
to ignite. The driver's face exploding
with surprise.

How the Chinese Write

Down, to start with
as if gravity had something to do
with the way words work.
That a conscious lifting
and carrying is necessary
to keep the conversation going.

And then there are the letters.
Words, really. Drawn
in miniature, stylized
like wood block prints
with the rain drawn
as long narrow vacancies
placed deliberately
side by side
the length of the page
until the writing is done.

Mad Ghazal

The wind is outside.
Do not answer the door.

I have seen the corporate beast lie down, wounded.
I did not have a knife in my hand.

Pearls do not glow in the dark, they hum.
Hum de-dum de-dum-dum-dum.

The cave was dark.
Merrily, the insects sang.

When the wind came back,
my wallet was empty.

Blood

I have blood on my hands.

Simple,
as a bird

crazed by the reflection
in my living room window
— now gone.

Sometimes I wonder
if he planned it.
Chipping away at the glass
like a prisoner
digging a tunnel with a spoon,
a monument to foresight.

It is surprisingly heavy,
this blood,
like the clothes of the drowner.
It is difficult to tell
if the body is still
inside them or not.

I suppose I could have stopped him,
warned him off
if I had kept the curtains closed.
He never knew
how much this tiny death
would mean to me.

But it's too late.
Beating the earth down
over his plot behind the garage,
like an insect trying to shake off its wings,
I do it
to keep the cats
from getting at him.
Also, because I can think
of nothing better to do.

I am glad to be a sufferer.

Glad
that this poor bird
chose me.

Blind, stupid, tired.
Chose me.

Before the Dance

Before the dance
there is the desire
to escape

the laws of physics.
The tensing of the fingers,
the imperceptible
clenching of the toes
in the shoes
or the dirt
floor of a hut
where the dance is made.
There is the influx of air
that precedes the heart beat
and the rush of air to escape
the embrace
of drum and stick.

Before the dance
there is the need
to dance. And before the need
there is the belief that need can take shape

in form

and motion.

Sinker

It's the pitch
approaching
slower
than physics would allow

only to drop
out of reach of a
perfectly timed bottom of the ninth
out of the park grand slam.

Bamboozled by the obvious,

you begin to doubt your senses.
If you could see it coming (you ask)
why didn't you get out of the way?

You are the happy victim.
One minute, walking down the street
the next minute, ecstatic.

There's no excuse
for the pastimes of the smallest creatures:

the fisherman, sitting in a boat
alert and unrewarded
long after common sense calls him in

and the fish who hears the splash,
sees the gaudy improbable lure,
knows better, but swallows it

hook line and

Simple Story

My son is herding snowflakes.
Not cows named “snowflake”, snowflakes like cows
swirling and drifting around his head.
He directs them
like the slow, lumbering animals
they are, until they come to rest
in the pasture (known to others
as “the driveway”). Then he scoops them up
and eats them. God-like.
Oblivious.
Happy.