

The Chief Poisoner Will See You Now

a chapbook collection of poems

Ron Louie



PDF Portrait Format: optimized for devices held vertically, such as a pad, tablet or even phone, but many devices will provide larger fonts when held horizontally.

Free DIY print format available separately on <https://CareGivingOldGuy.website>.

The late poet Robert Wallace taught that poems are best when read out loud.

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The character portrayals are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased) should be inferred.

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What the Magician Whispered

You may think it's here, or there, but it's not.
I try to make the transpositions zing.
Even before we've met, I'm ahead of you.
But I'm trying to please you. Really.

Productions and vanishes might just be
two sides of a coin; although our eyes
are seemingly made to look forward,
our minds can't help thinking back. Really.

What you think, how you choose,
whether it's conceptual, numerical,
or a value, it will be something I might
just influence with words. Really.

You might not want to be pleased.
If my method is transparent to you,
perhaps you see that I'm striving
to avoid disenchantment. Really.

Tonio: Telling Time

What did he already know, straddling his mother's broad lap, hiding his face, listening at our halting and stuttering and murmuring babble, the nonsensical sounds of statistics and "choices" rushing like noise,

perplexing his parents past their own understanding, shifting from one leg to the other, unfathomed, watching the waters well up around him, then spill,

Of the future, for the first time foreseen, far from the red-and-blue striped swingsets and the ants and the pebbles at the playground,

far from the bright candy wrappers at the deli, and his mother's silken neck, where he loved to rub his hot cheek?

Tonio turned, eyes wide, cried and clung a while, his tears obscuring the flood of our own fears. Slowly the quietness of the small room returned.

He had spied the box of silly, tattered toys; he wanted them, right now, endearing just for the present, silent of their own irrelevant past.

Matter of Fact

Her face was matter of fact when she heard the pronouncement. The neuropsychologist was her colleague; he remained professional, but slipped in some sympathy with the data, which I could not appreciate.

She didn't display a mask of depression, or Parkinson disease. Her face remained pliable, not pleased, but neither terribly pained, no exhibition of perplexity, or petulance, or surprise, a pensive look, retaining its complex grace, a quiet reserve, a solemn alertness, the beauty of humane consciousness, with no further expectations.

In her own practice, she had encountered early Alzheimer disease first hand: that wonderful younger woman, whose baby she had delivered, working in accounting until the numbers became exotic, then alien; she had told me about that patient, with shock, sadness, and resignation.

But I didn't understand this. I wouldn't. It was the guy, his tests, the setting. At home, I made her try to draw a clock, count backward, recite words, and copy intersecting rectangles. She tried, this good doctor who had always bested me in calculus, organic chemistry, and marriage. She wasn't angry.

So how could I be mad? She was setting the example, as she had done her whole life, her whole career, without pessimism or regret, or fanfare, just ready to go on, even though her words and steps might mutate, unpredictably, ever aware of the possible endpoints, with each of us now grappling this present moment, trying to recognize its identity.

Dedicated to IRJ; suggested by Meryl Comer

Retrogenesis as Oxymoron

Just reading the term “retrogenesis” caused me a paroxysm,
an unthinking oscillatory movement, twisting my neck
from left to right, slightly, with a concomitant rotation
upward from my red-rimmed globes within their bony orbits,

and a simultaneous utterance one might describe as dysphoric.
One would not call it a seizure or Tourettistic, exactly, but
how dare those scientists brain us by combining opposing concepts,
going backward while starting anew, make up your minds people!

But maybe their minds are really made that way,
starting not from zero but from some previous notions,
existing with a history, thinking backward before an astounding
action like taking that forward first bite of the apple.

Because Genesis I get, even though, strangely,
the etymology of genesis coincidentally
insinuates that view of a tyrannical
Deoxyribonucleic Acid, dictating to its lackey

transcriptionists and translators all the schemes,
subterfuge, and machinations that it holds so close,
in its own code, presumably written long before
it is awakened to unleash its autocratic power.

And Retro I get, with the salient example of Lot’s wife, forever
a stark crystalline image, looking back to Sodom of all places,
a severe sanctioning for regarding the past, whatever there was to see,
whether she had tears or perhaps a glint in her eyes.

But retrogenesis, that portmanteau, for the progressive loss of abilities,
this term for the idea that this devastating deterioration
is the delight of development stuck in a reverse gear,
notably deficient in joy or accomplishment, I don’t get.

The Bard had a similar idea, though, centuries ago. Even with current
notions of neuropathophysiology, we still do not escape a “second
childishness, . . . sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

[Reisberg, B., Franssen, E., Hasan, S. et al. (1999). Retrogenesis... brain aging,
Alzheimer’s.... Eur Arch Psy Clin Neurosci. DOI: [10.1007/PL00014170](https://doi.org/10.1007/PL00014170)]

Status Report to Insurance: Incontinent

She is otherwise OK, eating a bit better, but still not standing. Sleep is interrupted; last night she was vocalizing at 0100, 0530, 0700; she seems to sleep quietly in between those times.

Assessing quality of life, one wonders how she might think of her own now, since she was a doctor who took care of Alzheimer's and other dementias. Now she needs hand feeding, with the application of mild pressure,

just to get the stamp-sized apple, or shredded chicken, or chewy chocolate into her inattentive mouth, eyes open, but gazing elsewhere, never at food, bobbing her head; if she accepts it and starts chewing, one might ask her

if it tastes good, one may observe an audible "mmm" and raised eyebrows. When she refuses food, with pursed lips, one concedes to the complexity of perceptions and physiology and the dueling agendas of the moment.

She even smiles sometimes, says "hi" and nods in seeming recognition sometimes, but sometimes seems irritated or angry, when her vocalizations have volume, tonality, and fluidity, a vocabulary of unfamiliar syllables;

she is perhaps quieter than the level documented six months ago. Her daily rhythms and tardive repetitive movements are all about the same, on fewer meds; the others didn't help or seemed to make things worse.

Handwashing 03:47

At this time of night, my hands
know what to do, stubbornly,
poorly pre-programmed
but compelled and automatic still,
with the cold bracing water
and the glop of scented soap
unable to break their rhythm,
movements purposeful and synchronized,
not just the deep creases of the palms
but the six webs between the eight fingers
counting the thumbs separately,
each grabbed by the opposing fist
bent with friction and twisted firmly
then sliding each cupped palm
around the flesh beneath the shortest fingers,
surprisingly cooler than anywhere else,
gliding across the dorsal latticeworks,
before moving down to surround each wrist
around and around to a vague spot
they both know, halfway to the elbow,
with an unthinking brushing of fingerpads
and thumbs against ten shorn nails
finally plunging it all
under what is thought to be a glistening absolution,
believing that traces of the past
can be further diminished.
The hands are now ready to be dry again,
ready to go again
no matter what just finished at 03:44.

Chief Complaint: He Predicts Earthquakes

Everyone there, except the pediatrician, spoke two or more languages. For each child, staff would list the medical issue, a terse “chief complaint,” using the parents’ own words, on why they were seeing a Western doctor, since the children didn’t, wouldn’t or couldn’t complain for themselves.

It’s a parent’s concern, via a native vernacular, through an interpreter’s ear, twisted with some medical phrasing, a flashing linguistic triple flip, leaving the doctor to decipher the situation for clinical intervention, a contorted tumbling run, with the expectation of a two footed landing.

And this one predicted earthquakes. Taller and chubbier than expected, the child hovered outside the door, apparently shy about entering the room, already crowded with his mother, an aunt, an interpreter, and a doctor. He predicted earthquakes often; but his uncanny timing scared people.

He spoke no English, hardly spoke at all, rocking, snuffling and shuffling, sometimes whining like a wet puppy trying to open its eyes. His own eyes closed when someone spoke. When they did open, they didn’t seem to see, or maybe they were seeing too much.

Did he really use the word “earthquake,” or was it “moving ground” in the language of his family, or was it more figurative? Did he feel dizzy, did he hear things, or was he trembling, perhaps having a seizure, or did he just have tingling in his toes? This lad was “special,” we all knew it, and each one of us already had an interpretation.

How does one diagnose human earthquake prediction, at any level: as misconstrued, or statistical aberration, or savant-like behavior? Or explain cultural expectations of conduct, or communication gaps in children while using different languages, or the deliberate limitations of a medical mindset, all whilst using fewer syllables?

So we did what we usually do, approach understanding clumsily, not knowing if such a complaint could ever be resolved, or how, or to whose satisfaction, or the child’s own wishes, with so little help to offer, recording an uncertain prognosis, so awkward to translate,

entering the clinical elements anyway, using terms that burnish our bronzed mode of medical thinking, closing our own eyes, trying to comprehend his vision, or the way his world might move.

A Bird Twitches, Then Disappears

Dull, heavy, and palpable, the single sound disrupted a reverie. Through the glass, I saw two birds, grey, white and brown speckled.

One was standing, alert, head cocked and scanning. I'm not a birdwatcher, but even I could tell that the one lying on its back appeared unnatural.

It was only the size of my open palm. As I watched, its intricately spiked right talon twitched once, then remained still. There was no sound.

Moments passed as I stared. Was there a liquid at its beak, or around its head? The standing bird had already flown away, needing to be elsewhere.

I could not recall a bird shriek, or cawing, or the rustle of a flock or even a single bird's fluttering; the thudding appearance became a silent intrigue.

I looked down at my own open palm, to gauge its size, to gauge the bird, to gauge this moment as the bird lay still.

My palm was the perfect size to cradle the creature, as it seemed to be attaining perfection. The open hand was also the perfect size

to have swatted that bird down, if it ever had that intention or inclination, or skill, in need, or in cruelty, or in jest,

the perfect size to have proffered a tenderness, a soothing caress; from cruelty to gentleness, all human intrusions.

As I regarded my palm, its creased and mottled flesh,
the faintest susurrations arose, and when I turned,
the bird had vanished, leaving no trace of its being.

The fictions now multiplied:
the quietest predator had swooped in,
carrying away its still warm prey,

or the bird was now resurrected,
perhaps just stunned for that moment,
oblivious to observations and opinions,

the victim of an atmospheric
collision, or concussion, whether
romantic or hostile or accidental.

Or was it that improbable bird, so fallible
as to tumble from the sky, debunking
the dogma of an impeccable Nature,

possibly so senseless with pleasure,
the soaring ecstasy for once
quashing its forceful mandate to fly,

choosing to abandon control, aimlessly
allowing fate and wind and gravity
to have their own stochastic ways,

now suddenly compelled to awaken, to rustle itself,
and finding the apparatus unbroken,
restoring breath and the blue sky in ascending;

or was it all the rapture of a reader,
generating a perception of grounded things
out of the nebulous thin air of a silent morning.

Here's How It Will Go

The chest cage and diaphragm, with expansive spirit,
cooperate one last time,
the discomfort at the depth of the intake
a reason to pause, with a sense of fullness
if not quite fulfillment;
there may be a last perception of aroma
attending the secretive swirling
within those dark cavernous hollows,
and maybe I will still hear
my own last letting go
my sigh in accepting that pain or fear or relief,
that last passive expulsion of vital and toxic gases,
from the elaborate labyrinth on which I've so long depended,
without seeing it, or knowing its real intricacy, hardly even aware of it,
throughout all the hoarse wet wheezing,
and the dry coarse coughing, and
whatever eloquence and beneficence I could muster,
to balance the ugly exclamations to which I duly confess,
the controlled expressions of my limited emotional range, or
the uncontrolled expressions of my limited emotional range,
as if those vocalizations, the manipulations of airy elements,
were some essence of me, and who I was for those moments,
defining some idea of me; of course, yes, I would have that thought,
even as the oxygen, lasting through that final breath,
is conclusively released from its captured exploitation,
allowing that thought, perhaps, to somehow seem to cease.

Death Certificate Instructions

“The cause-of-death information should be YOUR best medical OPINION. A condition can be listed as “probable” even if it has not been definitively diagnosed.” [CDC https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/blue_form.pdf]

You are not to write: “old age,” “infant prematurity,” “heart stopped,” or “wouldn’t breathe;” “lost the will to live;” “recalled by his God” or “became overtly inert to be subsumed by her elemental universe.”

You have a responsibility to the accuracy of the statistics, so that each of us count for something, even as just a data point that may ultimately represent a person to a future curiosity, which might wonder at the documentation of death, the texts revealing how the form filler was taught to judge the event.

There are four lines in Part I. If you can opine, summarize why this person, once living, is no longer living, the ultimately fatal “chain of events.” Do so tersely, not mentioning kindness, meanness, bliss or agony, refrain from recounting laughter or tears, the subtlety and nuance of understandings and misunderstandings, but why, in your estimation of linear causality, the person is there, while you are filling out this form over here.

The example is instructive: “Line a. Immediate Cause: Rupture of Myocardium; Onset to Death: Minutes.” One is not to write “broken heart,” even though cardiologists say there are myriad ways that hearts can break. Hearts can be mended, they tell us, not forever; no one says that, and it’s not usually explicitly stated that all we have is just temporary.

The other lines are to list sequential underlying causes, listed backwards, so that Line a. is “due to (or a consequence of)” Line b., then Line c., then Line d. Other specialists, now with perfected hindsight, can chime in with their own ideas about such a death, from the geneticist, the pediatrician, the surgeon, the psychiatrist, or pathologist, even though this person’s companion or family might really know best. We must acknowledge that the patient or family may chose to not reveal everything, or anything.

There is no fifth line for the necessary antecedent condition of all death, which is birth, certified or not. The death certifiers would rather not think about how to consider a leg just after amputation, or how religious persons or politicians around the world might conceive it differently, although please realize that a stillbirth requires a completely different form.

Part II. is a blank box for “other significant conditions contributing to death.” Probable conditions are allowed, a conventional diagnosis is implied. The example uses diabetes, COPD, and smoking; those persons were a classic stereotype for a certain generation as we form-fillers developed of our current mode of etiological thinking.

For probable conditions, one is not to write “free spirit,” “innocence,” “stubbornness,” “willful ignorance,” “cowardice,” or “heroism.” Do not list “living” as a condition, or any joys, distress, needs or wants, the uncertainties or boredoms in the daily duty of life. Do not note a frameshifted personality, creating that person’s uniquely mutated point of view, the antecedents which may have led to the singular sequence to summarize on this form, about this person’s life and irrevocable death.

“IF FEMALE:” has its own box; two of the check box choices are: “Not pregnant, but pregnant within 42 days of death” and “Not pregnant, but pregnant 43 days to 1 year before death.”

The certifier knows that women are more than a pregnancy status, but the statisticians evidently have a job to do, this is how they chose to do it, and make us count days here. Perhaps we need explicit instructions, since it must be known that we fail, on our own, to make each day count.

“MANNER OF DEATH” is yet another box to be checked: “Natural / Homicide / Accident / Pending Investigation/ Suicide / Could not be determined” are the options. They do not include “fighting all the way,” or “serenely”; the certifier need not be present at the moments when death was imminent, then apparent, or when examined to a certainty.

Couplets to a Pre-Existing Condition

O Solomon! what wisdom is needed for that physician
who deals with a child and a “pre-existing condition”:
of all known miseries, the one that presupposes
a definable beginning, and presumptively imposes
a linear relationship of time
to illness, with no respect for the sublime
that turns lugubrious, ending with antecedents circular,
and predicated upon a bureaucratic vernacular;
Which for the peripatetic pediatrician
presents a peculiar imprecision:
when caring for very sick children or infants,
with cystic fibrosis or leukemia, for instance,
whose spirits hold hostage parental emotions;
are these children just some post-conceived notions,
begging their epistemic question, with exons existential,
full of knowing and pre-knowing, (the code confidential)?
Can we now really judge origins, without pre-maturity,
or assess a person's, or a population's risk-pool purity,
and not mock the politics of self-determination?
Yet Media-tricians trumpet the research's implication
for these progenitor cell products in our age of new genetics;
these innocently assorted alleles, (admittedly, at times pathogenic),
whose critical pre-existing condition is birth,
with no consideration of bottom-line net worth?

The Professor of Medicine Demonstrates Conversing with a Patient, Displaying Vocal Nuance to Impart Subtleties, like Empathy, a Humane Concern, a Willingness to Be Helpful, along with Erudition and Experience That Implies a Practical Wisdom, a Contemporary Respect and Affirmation for a Person's Uniqueness, Projecting a Sense of Enveloping Confidence with Confidentiality, Plus a Tacit Presentation of Principled Honesty and Ethical Care, Which Many Will Hear, Though Few Will Really Understand, an Interpreter's Dream but a Translator's Nightmare, with the Clearest Conveyance of Meaning When Intoned, While Deliciously, Ingenuously Ambiguous When Written to Be Read, Although Never Meant to Be Recorded in the Medical Record

Uh-huh.

Cassiopeia's Dust

Abstract: A dilettante admires a constellation from a hot tub, and considers it the next day. Is it a prose poem, creative nonfiction, or "light" verse, phenomenology, astrophysics, metaphysics, half-lit paronomasia?

A photon hit my retina. Again, again; others also hit. The sensation seemed continuous, albeit twinkling, rather than as discrete and separated points. It was like dust, but I did not blink.

It came from a thing I would call bright, in front of me, over my head, on a dark night; it is said to be a star from the cluster of a pattern I learned to call Cassiopeia, and just in a similar way, I learned about my retina, and I learned about photons, and I learned that some consider them a duality of either wavering or unwavering continuity or perhaps some discretion, meanwhile calling attention to my own uncertainty, and from a source thought to be over 10,000 years away, if one could ever travel at the speed of light, traveling for at least that long, starting before my retina existed to be hit, somehow seeming yellowish to me, when I perceived it, if you made me explain that almost forgotten moment, using the prosaic unmusical vernacular that you are reading as I am using it today. That moment might have been poetic.

Using the word "again" implies a passage of time, but I am not counting. It is as if the photon that hit at least one of my retinal rods, and started the cascade of physico-chemical neuro-electrical events that culminated in my striking down, with my left fourth fingertip, the key for the letter "w" on this keyboard, already the next day, to finish the word now, was aimed for that rod. Perhaps the photon distinguished itself, then extinguished itself, right then, or perhaps, like a visitor in disguise, now seems native, absorbed in my own fabric somehow.

Maybe it was not a single photon or many photons, but another energy some say is also emanating from Cassiopeia, bathing my whole being but evading the notice of my other senses, without an evocative hum or aroma or taste or texture or temperature or pain, motivating my biological machinery from sedation to this creation, although no matter nor energy was created nor destroyed, I do not think, in typing this, but I really have no way of knowing.

This whole conceptual construct might be debatable, if one would bother. The construct fits into my head, if that's where a construct can be found, if findable, and if a construct has dimensions, if measurable, to be fitted, as I am using the word right now. Yes, some demand that reality be measurable and repeatedly so, but as I write, again, I am not counting.

Good science allows me to declare that I am being conditional about it all, and about how I am communicating this way, allowing an exercise of my seldomly used subjunctive voice, as if there were a statistical aspect, perhaps a freedom, if that is how one can characterize a possible lack of pre-determinism, involved in my typing this period.

How you might read this or say this, with what sound or accent of your own, with what connotation or nuanced memory, is of minuscule interest to me, yet here I am typing it for you. If human bodies are made of stardust, or at least contain star photons, from stars like Cassiopeia A, as that remnant might be called, does it follow that this conceptual construct, perhaps labelled a prose poem, perhaps creative nonfiction, is then necessarily stardust, or not necessarily.

In Confidence No Longer

for David J. Gale

I wanted to confide in you just now,
even though we hadn't talked in over a year.
I talked then, without much confidence, and you listened,
because you had to, unable to move, the rhythm of your
tracheostomy and ventilator providing a semblance of reply.

The inadequate curtain forced us to pretend our privacy.
Did you think that I was poor in masking my private
prognosis? I didn't tell you that I had seen worse, with rare
recoveries, so displaying a muted optimism was genuine.
I wasn't consciously playacting; you were better than I'd imagined.

An intern could have predicted your months after that,
with sudden changes, acute transfers, and modern remedies,
but not your unspeaking steelcore resistance to demise.
So when they found you, and said it was a heart attack,
our retreat into disbelief was just as unsurprising.

But I wanted to confide in you just now.
There wasn't much you confided in me, I know;
there was no symmetry, no bartering nor premise
of equity in our sharing; some might have called it fraternal,
familial, or paternal. Maybe an exploitation of friendship.

There was no one else in the rest of the world
in whom I would confide, for so many things.
You accepted the additional burdens with grace.
And I wanted to confide in you just now.

Mrs. C.D.B. Stewart, Amongst Writers

Her measured cadence, slow, articulate, and taut-lipped,
swept all of us forward with meticulous craft.

Demarking caesuras with shallow breaths,
she spoke as one might read, with that imperial
and literary accent, the remnant of a once-bright regime.

Echoes of her vanquished brash voicing,
now rasping and plying patrician pleasantries,
enchanted our huddle of aspirants.

“One need not concentrate...,” she would intone,
“on discovering the aching secret of life;
rather, focus only upon its gritty details;

for the truest secrets lie therein;
you may look to the balm of that vast ocean, but study
its cresting wave of debris, its intricate teeming debris.”

She would pause, with a smile beyond any embarrassment,
or diffidence for homilies, or awkward pretensions of a phrase,
no longer annoyed with a need for uniqueness.

And she insisted upon her pleasure in gin and cigarettes,
even after the chest pains, the wheezes,
the anxious refrains, when her lips then surrendered

their purest azure hues, like the warm effusive waters,
upon which she loved to dwell, aboard the civil yachts,
running free of the shoals in the sun,

erratic, hot rushes of breeze
billowing their spinnakers to sea.

Extended Verse in a Flailing Villanelle

Now is that season for any good human to ponder in wonder
at what time really might be, with its alarmingly arbitrary significance,
and what being a good human really is, recognizing blemish and blunder.

Habit twists a watchless wrist, in an awkward fleeting flounder,
interpreting the symbols absent there, frustrating a timeless indulgence;
now is that season for any good human to ponder in wonder.

Savoring the march of minutes, ancients once created a tempo counter,
the measurements never obsolete, then as now forever a present sense,
of what being a good human really is, recognizing blemish and blunder.

What must one still do, how must one do what and with what order,
is such a vexation, as this very moment is commandeered by pretense.
Now is that season for any good human to ponder in wonder.

Numbers impose a sequence that tally a human's reckless squander,
revealing how little one has thus far done, one's feckless incompetence
at what being a good human really is, recognizing blemish and blunder.

The stroke beat of cadence meanders astray, the format is broken asunder,
the posturing of prosody dissolves in purposeful impudence.
Is now that season for any good human to ponder in wonder
at what being a good human really is, recognizing blemish and blunder,

and finally abandon this flailing villanelle, one of obvious impotence,
too frail for any illusion of lightning, or any delusion of thunder?

Missing Any Thing

for K.I.

That blade of grass, that one, grew, but I missed it.
This tree, beyond embracing, grew wider, but I missed it.
You grew too, I was there, but I missed it.
Now something else is happening,
It seems the opposite of growing, for you.
For me, it's palpable, it's measurable,
it's almost inconceivable, but it's unavoidable;
vainly missing no thing, every thing, any thing.

It's Not Now Fashionable To Regret What I Didn't Say

By now I haven't said what others might have said
to you
but they said it to others, not you
or maybe they wrote it, and said it better of course,
what I wouldn't say, not
that I couldn't say.

But now I remember everything you never said
to me
that I thought I wanted to hear you say, because
you would never write it, but no one could ever say it
better, at least for me, I realize that now,
even if I wouldn't hear it then.

And now I barely remember anything I did say
to you
as when we tried to peer through the jagged dingy window
of that old house we both admired so much
or tried to squint through the lace-like cracked glass
of your smashed parked car, rammed by some idiot.

For now I know that when you wouldn't even look
at me
no one could say there would be this present perspective,
embracing us both, of who we were for each other, or would be,
since here you are, and I am here,
but we can no longer talk, or even listen, the way we could.

Counting to Himself, Again

In the non-erotic intimacy of that moment,
undressing her, drying her, enduring the wait,
he was naturally counting to himself, again.

He knew that it was a device for distraction,
silently counting backwards, with un-numbered
missteps and restarts, the seconds fleeting anyway,

and that serially subtracting by threes or sevens
was not a practical skill, but a tester's earnest
attempt to discover a person's conditional status,

as if the journey had already begun down that slide,
not fast enough for fun, or terror, or even relief, yet so
futile trying to claw a way back, the ride imperceptible.

Knowing someone is sliding cannot halt the slippage.
Counting down is not retrospection, it's just something to do,
as artless as typing away at ephemera non-metrical.

For the duo in the non-erotic intimacy of that moment,
one of them is counting again; perhaps now both are,
driven by a single shared subconscious pulse.

Our Dancing vs. Wrestling Moves

It looks like a “staggered stance lift,” if a referee were to score us, although I’m trying my best to be gentle, picking her up from a deep chair, her eyes half-closed.

Maybe the scorekeeper thinks I’ve asked her to dance.

After all, we have music playing, and as the lift proceeds, I’m counting out loud, “one and two and three and…” Her legs don’t quite buckle, and I can feel that she’s trying.

She used to smile, like a reflex, when she could dance, sometimes swaying just by herself, some inner music to which I never had access, so it’s not that different now.

Maybe she is smiling; I just can’t see because I’m holding her up too close, my arms flexed like biceps curls, under her arms. It’s sometimes wet where her face rests against my shirt.

I don’t look down to see if she’s moving her feet, but at least they’re not obviously dragging. I’m concentrating, overthinking my own balance, trying to prevent a fall.

A sense of syncopation pertains, as we cut across the carpet to the couch, prepared with three pads, the top one wet-proof, and three pillows. The move is to turn her, then lay her down.

Maybe the official thinks we are finally on to wrestling.

Ancient wrestlers were legendary: the Bible had Jacob, wrestling his Angel all night, while Heracles grappled Death. Greek goddess Palaistra championed the art and the skill.

We are not now being Biblical, or Olympic, or even competing, but the quotidian sequences, the maneuvers, and the holds all get the intimate job done; we clinch the end of the round.

Maybe the timekeeper neglects the bell, so the music plays on.

Isolation Cocoon, May 2020

After Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream

Spinning, what you will, in heeding that swarm of guidance, creating your own shell, then transforming, as you will, within that isolation, still seems like an almost unconvincing, almost unnecessary nuisance.

You had chosen this situation, if it is fair to say there was a choice, when there was no viable alternative. Your cocoon can feel so safe, an illusion perhaps, but reality provides nothing less vulnerable.

The walls are thin enough to allow you to breathe, and to vaguely hear or feel vibrations, even though their meaning cannot be known. Light penetrates, and darkness, too; the changes remain obscure.

Ruminating on that former lifestyle, you can digest time thoroughly, like those last memorable green leaves of Springtime, then so succulent, and satisfying, but to what end you know not; not all cocoons survive.

Time, space, being, identity, the interpreted past, the fancied future can all be consumed within your insatiable capsule; chrysalis or cocoon, distinctions no longer matter; each benefits from a covering and distancing.

Complacency or contentment allows a concentration on one's only certainty, the presentness right now, in this cell-like confinement, because emergence would require several just preposterous miracles.

Emerging from an Isolation Cocoon, 2022

“The caterpillar does all the work but the butterfly gets all the publicity.”

~Attributed to George Carlin

The security layers started peeling away, seemingly too soon. Once constricting, every movement and moment a struggle, who would guess that the loosening would be so worrying?

Preposterous miracles had manifested themselves, albeit imperfectly; so one emerges, reviving afresh in the sunlight, imbibing the unmasked scents, even as the serial-killing fiend remains free.

A *kaleidoscope* of butterflies is what one calls a mass fluttering; that term could well apply to humans here, self-identifying their variants and varieties of existence, behaviors, and beliefs.

The excess of losses has been unthinkable, and not to be forgotten. Preventive interventions were knowingly imprecise, but lacking protections from denials was also hazardous for the republic's health.

Poets have long lyricized ideal truth, but the pandemic taught how fragile truth can be, the fragile beauty of a glistening bubble, buffeted almost to bursting by a cacophony of ravenous twittering.

Yet one can now stretch out shimmering wings, so to speak, with the brash confidence befitting a monarch, fully expecting to start a new cycle in life, despite the circling shadows overhead.

The Chief Poisoner Will See You Now

You are looking at me, little one,
perhaps wondering who I might be.
Even though I might seem friendly,
you seem wary and frightened, not yet
used to seeing strangers and busy places.
Someone thought maybe I might help save you.

I offer to give you poison.

They have not told you, because they do not know
how sick you really are, meaning how close you are
to an unexpected conclusion that no one wishes for you,
not even me, whose feelings you cannot know.
Someone must trust that I have fortune-telling skill;
maybe they heard I have seen others this sick.

What I have is poison.

Why you are here, why they brought you now,
why you got sick, how it is that my offering is poison,
why sweets or being good or smiles won't work as well,
are all good questions, which I cannot answer.
Who you are, who you will be and what will happen
are all good questions, which I cannot answer.

I do know poison, and can give you details.

I am not saying you must be poisoned here.
Here is where you are. You can go elsewhere.
But someone asked me, and I honestly know of no
better or faster way than poison for the effect
we presume you want, without your saying it.
Poison might do for you; it is not for everyone.

The poison stands ready.

People speak of belief in this circumstance;
belief is not required for poison to have effect.
You may not believe me either, or the story I can tell
about how poison might cure, the irony and oxymoron.
It is just a story, serving an irrational need, but
you will ultimately decide its reality or fiction.

We have poison, you or someone tell us when to start.

Poison is not given lightly, one does not take it easily.
As Chief Poisoner, I will be nearby often enough,
but I must tell you, I delegate many tasks,
especially the manipulation of euphemisms.
Words I use might seem harsh, like bitter concoctions,
but are used, of course, for effect.

We have poison, but no promises.

Your circumstance is not unique,
but you, little one, are unique. I am not flattering you;
we respect your specialness, your individuality, and
therefore cannot predict all the effects of poison on you.

We can use chocolate syrup sometimes,
not always, if you really think that might help.



Acknowledgements

(poems previously published, edited here to fit format)

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Time Frog Continuum, not included here, is a haiku cycle published by OrigamiPoems.com: https://www.origamipoems.com/images/Microchap/2022_Micro/Ron_Louie_-_Time_Frog_Continuum_2022_June.pdf

Readings available through links:

Audio reading, The Chief Poisoner: <https://soundcloud.com/antiphon-poetry/the-chief-poisoner-will-see-you-now-by-ron-louie?in=antiphon-poetry/sets/antiphon-issue-24-poetry>

Audio reading, Matter of Fact: https://cdn-links.lww.com/permalink/wnl/a/wnl_90_3_2017_12_08_louie_848168_sdc1.mp3

CDC Podcasts:

Isolation Cocoon, May 2020: <https://tools.cdc.gov/medialibrary/index.aspx#/media/id/482525>

Emerging from an Isolation Cocoon, 2022 : <https://tools.cdc.gov/medialibrary/index.aspx#/media/id/730951>

Ron Louie lives in Seattle. He is a clinical professor of pediatrics (hematology/oncology), an editor, and writer. He sometimes does pocket magic. This is his first collection of poems.

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His work as an Alzheimer home caregiver is the subject of blog posts on AlzheimerGadfly.net and CareGivingOldGuy.website. The chapbook is available on the latter website.

If so moved, the reader could consider a donation to the Make-A-Wish Foundation, <https://wish.org/akwa> or the Children's Oncology Group Foundation, <https://thecogfoundation.org>.

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