

Poetry/Politics/Imagination/Humor

"These are critical poems for whichever planet will have them."
-Anonymous



Eliot Katz is the author of 5 books of poetry, including, most recently, *View from the Big Woods: Poems from North America's Skull* (Cosmological Knot Press, 2007), *When the Skyline Crumbles* (Cosmological Knot Press, 2007), and *Unlocking The Exits* (Coffee House Press, 1999). A cofounder with Danny Shot of *Long Shot* literary journal, he guest-edited the journal's 2004 "Beat Bush issue." Katz is also a coeditor, with Allen Ginsberg and Andy Clausen, of *Poems for the Nation* (Seven Stories Press). Called "another classic New Jersey bard" by Ginsberg, Katz worked for many years as a housing advocate for Central Jersey homeless families. He currently lives in New York City, and serves as poetry editor of the online progressive politics quarterly, *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture* (www.logosjournal.com).

Front cover photo by Eliot Katz. Back cover photo by Danny Shot.

☞ Cosmological Knot Press

[back cover]

When the Skyline Crumbles

—
Poems for the Bush Years



by Eliot Katz

[front cover]

When the Skyline Crumbles



Poems for the Bush Years

by Eliot Katz

Copyright © 2007 by Eliot Katz

For permission to reprint any of the poems in this collection, or to contact the author for readings, questions, or additional copies, please email: ekatz57@earthlink.net

Thanks to the editors of the following journals, anthologies, and online publications in which some of these poems previously appeared: *100+ Poets Against the War*, *101 Poemes Contre La Guerre*, *Arbella*, *Big Scream*, *Boog City*, counterpunch.org, *The Final Crusade*, *Left Curve*, litkicks.com, *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture* (www.logosjournal.com), *Long Shot*, *MindFire*, mobylikes.com, *Napalm Health Spa*, *New York Nights*, *Poetry After 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets*, poetsagainsthewar.org, *Sanctuary*, *Van Gogh's Ear*, *Voices of Reason*.

Some of the poems in this collection, as well as some earlier poems and prose by the author, may be found online on Jim Cohn's Museum of American Poetics website at www.poetspath.com/exhibits/eliotkatz

ISBN 13: 00-JUST-KIDDING

∞ Cosmological Knot Press (369 Milky Way Road, Universe, UN 999999)

Contents

When the Skyline Crumbles...7
The Logic of War...10
The Basic Elements...14
The Weather Seems Different...15
Typing on Terror Alert, Memorial Day...16
One Year Later...18
Can We Have Some Peace and Quiet Please?...19
A Day in the Elephant Park...20
31st Street... 21
The Cakewalk...22
Broken Eggshells and No Maps...24
Talking with Lord...25
Eve Gets Angry with God after Reading Her High School Science Book...27
Death and War...28
Gregory's Last Lines...29
On looking at a Leon Golub print...31
Global Warming...33
A Half-Baked Manifesto for Reconstructing Broken Bones...34
Full Moon Over Falluja...38



Photocopy of watercolor collage, Poets Eyeing America, by Eliot Katz

When the Skyline Crumbles

Was sitting Astoria kitchen chair about to vote mayoral primary,
then would've hopped subway to work Soho's Spring Street —
turned TV on for quick election check when CNN switched
to picture of World Trade Center #1
with surreal gaping hole blowing dark smoke out a new mouth.
Witnesses still in shock were describing a plane flying
directly into the building's side
when a second plane suddenly crashed Twin Tower 2
and orange flames & monstrous dust rolls began replacing
the city's world renowned skyline.
Soon the city's tallest buildings crumbled, one at a time —
with 50,000 individual heartbeats working in Twin Bodies,
it was clear this horror going to be planetfelt.

I stared stunned at TV another half hour, called Vivian working
Canadian summer forest job to assure I was physically okay
& mourn together, then wandered my Queens neighborhood —
almost everyone walking mouths open silent, eyes unblinking.
Two women & two men on 31st Street cried into cell phones,
trying reach loved ones working the WTC,
a mover moaned Age Old Prophecy to his buddy loading the van:
"The world has changed, bro."

Wednesday I subway'd into Manhattan looking to volunteer
with bad back,
only found location to leave a donation check, all other slots
remarkably filled for the moment —
also wanted to sense the air fellow Applers were breathing,
smoke that torched bodies now tangibly coating tongue &
nostrils, dust burning all 3 eyes —
7th Ave above 14th St almost empty rush hour so our dead
could be counted, a clear road to the next realm,
perhaps a friend's friend miraculously uncovered alive,
given space to speed St. Vincent's Emergency Room.

Thursday I sat half-hour Union Square with a Tibetan group
meditating for peace
as mainstream TV helped lubricate America's war machine
hosting Flat Earth hawks urging 80% toward retaliation
against Bin Laden or any country harboring Bin Laden's cells —
even as academic analysts noted moments before those cells

now spread to 30 countries including U.S.
Fox News had hosted a discussion between the far right
& further right —
Newt Gingrich: The terrorists should be found & crushed —
Jeanne Kirkpatrick: We already know who they are, why wait —
a procession of military experts advocating carpet bombs & napalm.

On Friday night, 3000 New Yorkers, mostly young,
candlelit Union Square
to mourn the victims & stand for peace with signs like:
"War Is Not the Answer" &
"Honor the Dead; Break the Cycle of Violence" —
CBS-TV covered the event as another cute show of
the city's spirit of togetherness
sandwiched between two dozen stories of a flag-waving public
meat-hungry to support Bush Jr's rush to war.

After years of U.S. missiles flying into outward shores,
a decade after dozens of thousands of Iraqis cruise missile'd
to death under Father George
the war has now come home, where it's apparent to all
what a senseless random murderer
is the one-eyed giant Terror
how it eats its innocent victims screaming alive, feet flailing
how it breaks the strongest of backs, rips flesh wide open
how it tosses arms East, legs South, skull & genitals
North & West
how it forces hardened athletes to dive head first 99 floors
to a concrete death softer than its iron teeth
how it leaves no paperwork behind to comfort the living
how it answers pleading mothers & weeping babes
with a knife to the belly, glass shards to throat
how it burns a skyline of fresh bones to fragile white ash.

Now, we walk memory's long marathon to honor our dead
now we watch a million New Yorkers work courageously
to meet the initial test,
daily tasks small to heroic, delivering socks, pulling two-ton girders
off fallen firefighters atop creaky broken floors,
ignoring fear everpresent, unknown particles filling the air.
Now we see whether Americans can meet the next human challenge:

Protect the innocent & reject Terror in all its disguises,
even strutting on TV in our own leaders' garb?
Or merely act a mirror of its latest highrise profile?
The sometimes bitter juices of justice, law, human rights, & peace?
Or shot after shot of eternal bloodthirst?

mid-Sept. 2001

The Logic of War

1

A group of Bush Sr's US-armed
fundamentalist freedom fighters
compared to our own founding fathers
have become Bush Jr's evildoers
who need to be smoked from their caves--
and the *National Review* philosophers
say postmodern theory has wrecked
the planet with relativism?

2

How come if we stop shopping
the terrorists win?
But if we create a million hungry refugees
through bombing
the terrorists haven't won?

3

Because the World Trade Center was attacked
any Bush-initiated response is considered beyond reproach.
Locked in the Language of War, it's impossible
to find another way out.

4

We are fighting to preserve freedom
a cause so important almost no dissent
can be televised

Where's the discussion in mainstream press whether
investigations, intelligence, freezing assets, police action arrests
plus a more democratic egalitarian foreign policy
would have been more appropriate
and effective in the long term
than war?

5

Although a person's terrorist links may be as-yet unproven
he or she may be denied a civilian trial
given a military tribunal exclusively for terrorists
at the sole discretion of one who stole highest office
with the help of five civilian judges.

6

A 15,000-pound bomb is called a daisy cutter

7

Every day ticker tape moves across bottom
of CNN's screen
updating the latest estimate of WTC missing
presumed dead
now hovering around 3,000.

Each day *NY Times* features an obit page
with individualized moving stories
of victims of 9/11's inexcusable horror.

Through tragedy described on personal level
we are learning the Preciousness
of Each Human Life.

Bin Laden on videotape gloats heinously
over high American civilian death counts
he calls blessed terror.

Every day we are learning which human lives
are precious to whom.

A New Hampshire professor has completed a study
estimating over 3,700 Afghan civilian deaths
from U.S. bombs.

Not a single mainstream NY paper or TV station
covers this study or derives
their own tally.

Each week I see one or two articles on the web
about starving freezing refugees
forced to flee the bombing
300,000 shivering in Maslakh, 100 dying each night,
230 buried in Dehdadi, mostly kids
judging from small size of burial plots.

The Pentagon says it is pointless to attempt verify
Afghan civilian deaths.

Every day we are learning that the value
of human life is relative
to how many steps removed one feels
from the dead one's relatives.

8

On Fox News, Bill O'Reilly says Afghans
are responsible for crimes
of their government.

Does anyone remember Vietnam?
Blessed terror of the Nicaraguan Contras?
Angola's Unita? Salvadoran death squads?

Thankfully, no other country's military
blamed me or my friends for those.

Didn't the U.S. cold war government help create
the cave tunnel training camps
for which Afghans are being bombed?

One of these centuries leaders on all sides will learn
to leave the gods and people out of it.

9

Our newest ally Pakistan supports terrorists
that have stormed India's parliamentary gates.
The U.S. sensibly urges India to show restraint.

10

Those who remained in cities, & survived, celebrate.
In a refugee camp, a mob has beaten Robert Fisk,
only major Western journalist in country
writing against massive bombing
because he looked Western & didn't speak their language
& his driver looked like George Bush.

I protested the war as a risky gamble with millions
of innocent Afghan lives
but understood this one had more justification
than Vietnam or Iraq
and am quite happy to watch the fascist Taliban flee,
music being played,
& women walking Kabul's streets w/o burkas.

11

What idiot wouldn't realize terror attacks
would be a gift to the American Right
as well as mass murder untold sentient beings?

If the terrorists attacked mainly because
they don't like our individual freedoms--
then by supporting the president
in all his foreign & domestic policies
don't we let the terrorists win?

For now, we are teaching the terrorists a clear lesson
that you don't solve your gripes with bombs
unless you're the world's only superpower.

Oct.-Dec. 2001

The Basic Elements

Turned 45 while low back spasmed first time in few months--
body getting old, but at least concepts of life
becoming clearer:

everyone on planet has 3 basic needs:
material (food, water, shelter, medical, solid spot of earth);
spiritual (creativity, religion, therapy, meditation, love, purple skies);
empowerment (via elections, movements, razor blades, or bombs).
Sex overlaps the categories & humans rarely choose
the healthiest alternative in any field.

Deep in their heart everyone knows 2,000-year-old concept
of a sole omnipotent god
is a fiction centuries outlived.

What keeps monotheism alive? Some say fear of afterlife--
I think fear of censure by other human beings for revealing
what lies deep in the heart--
one's honest skeptical thoughts thrown aside
for sake of church, mosque, temple, TV news picnics--
and thus thousands still die every year for praying
to a god with different sized shoes.

We've known long before Argentina that IMF austerity
will not solve globalized poverty
and yet defenders of a free market that isn't free
still fill all our top op-ed pages.

As for the bombs used when Democracy's Highway blocked,
everyone now understands that's a problem--
when it's others doing the bombing.

Life on the planet is obvious
but not in the same way
to any two folks--
that's the challenge of building love
the dilemma of a world growing colder
even as global warming infiltrates our core.

2002

The Weather Seems Different

It is snowing in Athens tonight & Apollo with ice in his beard
is having a difficult time singing
About six twin engine miniplanes have crashed coast to coast
in empty fields & a Bank of America building
My love, you know that death is both a separation
and a permanent glue
You know that I am the son of a patient duct tape expert
and the daughter of a wine never allowed to age
Love, we are all things to each, we are needy in just the ways
each other needs but doesn't yet comprehend
In the open fields of Somalia there are civilians running circles
freaked out shivering they might be next
From a satellite 10,000 miles above earth, like an empty chair
with telescope
a disembodied human eye stares at us & stares at Colombia
he is looking below the oceans for new caves
He is looking for people who are not yet in favor of empty chairs
placing nuclear-tipped dynamite in empty caves
The danger is real, one can feel it in the air
even if unsure from which directions it is borne
We are all getting older, we have realized this year it's time
to get serious about ducking death's temporary wings
Time to get our 10-dimensional affairs in order; between your
big toe and its chipped nail
there is a fire-breathing vulture just waiting for the dimensional wall
to collapse even for a millisecond
History repeats itself but sometimes as a young student pilot
unsure how to create an effective farce
My dear, the vulture escaped for my birthday last night
it was in our bedroom pecking below the sheets
It has eaten us alive and regurgitated us back into this world--
time will tell whether we are healthier than before

2002

Typing on Terror Alert, Memorial Day

Back in my younger days, I would have nights like this,
sitting down at the typewriter, body energies churning,
but no inspiration, nothing that might even pass for an idea.
So I'd go out, head to the bar, drink a little tonic with my gin,
happy to know that other nights would come
with subject matter presented in outstretched hands.
But now, I'm older than all those greats--
older than Keats when he rolled over on tubercular bed,
older than Shelley filling lungs with last watery seconds,
older than Mayakovsky with gun to the brain, older
than Plath, Christ, I'm older than Christ--so now I know
the planet can take back its pulse at any moment.
Now I know there's no time to waste, no time to gloat
about future times, no time to go to the bar
and tell people they may not have much time.
Now I'm a mid-career poet, whatever that means--
perhaps that I have a few books and I sit down & write--
so, here I am writing with my eyes closed, tapping
these revered keys, imagining how long the lines grow
before I decide to hit the return. Now I'm a pro
who can sit down at the typewriter and pray for the muse
to come, but not wait on my hands till she or he arrives!
So, where are we? We are home in Astoria listening to Coltrane
in a city on alert in an era with its eyes closed shut--
we haven't been watching very closely, dear reader, have we
all these years? Nah, we can shake & bake, we can
nail 3-pointers at the last second to send the series to LA,
but what have we learned about this world when our leader
can stand on TV, unelected, mouthing 2,000-year-old clichés?
The FBI's experts all ignored their own agents' alerts
about these deranged killers, so what do they expect us to do
with such vague warnings? Hey, stop trying to scare me
and answer the friggin questions about what you should
have known & when, okay?

American people--somewhere in the tradition of Whitman,
I come not to damn but to praise, you are the spoon
of the crop, you are the pencil at the racetrack,
you are the needle's eye that stirs the soup, you are everything
I ever asked for down at the local hardware store, you are the
purple tears in John Coltrane's horn, you are

always who you are and never who you are,
you are a big peoples, you are the wind that circles
around my neck, you are a vegetarian's choice of desserts,
you are all things to no one, everything to a few, you
laugh like a quasar galloping across the universe,
you sneak through your secret compartment unnoticed,
you trip onto the balcony, you are a prize-winning
dancer of klutz, you waltz to your grave in sneakers,
you are always yelling "shut up" so that you can use your
free speech, you are a cricket player who has brought
the wrong equipment to the game, your neglected haystacks
have provided a soft landing for many of my friends, you are
among the quickest the most inventive the directionless,
you are writing an unforgettable tune that no one can play, you
are a great peoples with truckloads of kindness rolling
just below the surface of your highways, and veterans
or not, I love almost every single one of you, I will keep
doing the best I can to write one more poem before I die.

2002

One Year Later

A year after 9/11, we still inhale the dust of our dead--
still read *NY Times* portraits of a Springsteen fan,
a lasagna home-cooking specialist, a woman
who would do anything for family & friends--
we still mourn our losses one by one,
as it should be, here & everywhere.
Yet expressing low-level radioactive concern for innocent deaths
outside America has brought atomic rebuke
in cosmopolitan circles larger than expected:
When those towering guardians of our skyline psyches collapsed
and 3,000 innocent and experienced souls were crushed,
I dove deep into the blue mourning pool
with empathetic swimmers all across America,
still trying to keep a backstroke going, balanced
between a weightless hope & a sprint of despair.
But no matter what they say on those 24/7 right-wing talk shows,
I just don't think we honor our dead
by inventing new generations of mini-nukes
& thermobaric bombs to suck the air from caves, launching
a prime-number series of pre-emptive wars
beginning with Iraq,
designing carnivoric computer programs to chew up private letters,
or registering a million roving urban snitches to spy
on neighbors from Orwellian TV repair trucks.
Is it blasphemous now to advocate new foreign policies
condemning bloodsoaked terror across the board,
curing the plague of weapons sales across the globe,
ending Cold War-born hypocrisies that describe "our" terrorists
as freedom fighters, "our" death squad dictatorships
as fledgling democracies?
We who call for more democratic & humane foreign policies
to make America more loved and just
are not blaming this beautiful land & people
for a mass murder unjustifiable, just including America in
with the rest of the species, full of generous medicinal spirits
and countless noble historic acts,
as well as cancerous murders almost too painful to recall.
Isn't extending the generous and the noble
still one acceptable way to honor our dead?

Sept. 2002

Can We Have Some Peace and Quiet Please?

The belligerent voices are yelling in the streets & on the radios calling for the big bombs of peace to fall, the smart bombs, the bombs that have passed their college entrance exams. It's Orwellian the way everyone claims Orwell for their side--these days everyone is fighting on behalf of Orwell and God. Years ago Don Rumsfeld & Saddam Hussein met in the corner & exchanged secret diplomatic handshakes--it is only after peaceful gestures like these that the missiles can fly. In the meantime, the time between the world mean as is and the world we mean to become, the endless rains are Yehuda Amichai's tears watching men still violently beating their swords into plowshares and back into rifles & remote-control fighter planes. On the corner of Spring & Broadway, a taxicab driver threw a baby lamb out the passenger-side window--everyone in a two-block radius ran away screaming. In New York City the yelling is so loud and the quiet so quiet that everyone I know, just below the surface, is scared out their wits, knowing the violence these days that can follow an apparent peace. They are calling Senators with empathetic American voices, urging earthly generosity and kindness, which the corporate media & our elected leaders interpret as a vote for pre-emptive strikes. The next century's gods have not yet been born and the last century's are no longer able to show a child the simple magic trick of pulling its fingers away from a newly lit flame.

2002

A Day in the Elephant Park

Bush's spokesman Ari Fleischer tells the world press that nobody but nobody wants to avoid war more than President Bush. We are sleeping in a park, being run over by hundreds of giraffes--occasionally a stray elephant smashes our foreheads into the wet ground. We feel lucky to be alive, but we think the new massage toys are a little too rough. We are trying to use paper cups to hold back the waterfall of war. When we wake up under the overbearing sun, there are Parisian vultures circling overhead. These are the old softy vultures, the new more courageous vultures are on their way flying from former Soviet republics where leaders have time to shake our administration's hands in between show trials and contemporary confessions. The giraffes have long necks, they are beautiful. There are bombs that put on the most dazzling light shows any of us have ever seen. We have our TVs tuned to CNN, to Fox News, to MSNBC, we know that a lively presentation of Independence Day fireworks is due to surprise us any week now. Have you ever seen how much water those elephant trunks can hold? It's a miracle of nature--God is definitely on the side of these mythic mammals and rough sex toys. In the White House they are mouthing a lipservice mantra against war, but sending in a few hundred thousand troops just in case. In a few weeks, it will be considered irresponsible and dangerous to keep those troops in the desert without letting them loose for at least a moderately heartpounding calisthenics routine. At first, the claim was that Saddam would never let UN inspectors have unfettered access, now it is the lack of evidence that proves the evidence exists. The goalposts have moved, so the UN can be bribed or disregarded, though Saddam's disrespect for the UN is cited as the main excuse for war. I think Bush & Co. have an understandable paranoia--after all, Saddam is a tyrannical former U.S. ally with reason to want revenge--but even honest paranoia isn't a convincing rationale for bombing the people one is pretending to save, or for declaring bankruptcy of the imagination by declaring the immoral precedent of preventive war. So, instead, a thousand possible reasons are placed into a digital mixing bowl and it is you, my friend, who will pick the last excuse on the back of a raspberry-flavored playing card. Colin Powell says that if Saddam uses biological or chemical weapons the U.S. just might use nuclear bombs to prevent a holocaust. Even the giraffes and elephants stumble around the park trying

to figure that one out. Whether we are able to get a good night's sleep or not, the smart bombs are in the back room packing; if you'd like to know what underwear they're wearing, stay tuned to CNN at ten.

Jan. 2003

31st Street

On 31st Street, Astoria,
I ran into an old woman
who'd lost love ones
in 17 wars.
"How do you smile?" I asked her.
"My shoes are too tight,"
she answered.
"I think if I keep walking
one day they'll stretch."

2003

The Cakewalk

The cakewalk
has become a bit sticky

some Iraqis have turned
their daisies

into rifles
& hand grenades

seems many
don't like tyrant Saddam

nor foreign invaders
dropping cruise missiles

and cluster bombs
In Basra the water supply

has been cut off
and we are seeing

the possibility
of humanitarian disaster

war should never
have been viewed

as a latenight poker game
initiated by those

too zealous
to send their own kids

into urban combat
It'll take millions of patriots

& internationalists
(truthfully the same folks)

to throw the lunatics
out the White House

Until then we are facing
more weekends from hell

as well more spring days
filled with thousands

marching down Broadway
for a democratic peace

This is one of the two
oldest stories on the planet

(both originating here)
Let the battle for ideas

replace those young corpses
growing cold under desert moons

2003

Broken Eggshells and No Maps

They have captured Saddam in the bottom of a spider hole unshaven & sedated, broken eggshells & poetry books littering his lair. On the TV news networks they are pretending that it no longer makes sense to have taken an antiwar position, as if the capture of Saddam can bring back 10,000 lives, can cure the broken eyesockets, can eliminate the uranium cancer threat, can put the torn pages back into international law books. It's a good thing one more tyrannical leader is behind bars, but now it's unknown whether the violence will slow or grow, perhaps more Iraqis eager to resist the occupation knowing the risk of Saddam climbing back on his thrown has ceased. Or maybe the Americans will be more widely loved, I think it's unlikely but maybe the next elected body will request being made the 51st state? It's really unknown, there are no maps made for this part of the new century, the monuments are being shaped, but no one can agree on the best material to fill the mold. Vivian, we are doing our best to love each other in an imperfect world. If we wait for perfection I will be 1,000 pounds heavier and the dust from our bookcases will have long since learned to read for itself. So we go ahead and try to improve our own government, get one that will not suck up the healthcare, welfare, housing, world hunger, and clean water money into a vacuum pump of tax cuts & pulse-emitting, flesh-burning weapons that won't work or should never be used. There is no set formula sure to work every time. We set the temperature to a "stop Bush" setting and then leave the room and go to a few meetings and readings and rallies. When we return home, we check to see whether the cake has arisen.

2003

Talking with Lord

I was in my Astoria bedroom listening to Bob Fass
on WBAI radio, 1am,
when General Lance Lord walked in to convince me
of the need for America to take over space.

"But space," I claimed, "cannot be owned.
As I said in a long poem years ago,
'landlord is a homosapien lie
told to degrade the universe'."

"Son," he said, "keep spouting your poetic philosophy,
& paying your rent."

"But once you put nukes in space, killer lasers,
spherical gravity bombs,
you'll just as likely destroy America
as save it."

"Son," he said, "there's a destiny that remains
ever so slightly beyond your comprehension
You're right, though, these may just as easily kill you
as come to your rescue."

"Why not reserve space for peaceful purposes?
Savor our atmosphere?
As Einstein and Russell said in their manifesto
fifty years ago,
'Remember your humanity, and forget the rest?'"

"It's impossible to walk in another man's shoes,
or to wear another's destiny.
You, my naive friend, will never understand the need
for nukes in space."

I was about to sadly give up protesting Lord's
irrational obfuscations,
but realized I don't get this close to power very often
so decided to give it one more try:

"What the fuck are you talking about!" I yelled,
thinking extra volume might
break through the general's denial.
"Your philosophy is gibberish, completely incoherent,
lies used as rationale to put
our entire species at risk!
Get off your bomb-making machine!"

With my last yell, the next-door neighbor started pounding
on our common wall,
& General Lord disappeared, leaving behind a flyer
for next week's military ball.

2005

Eve Gets Angry with God after Reading Her High School Science Book

On the fifth day
after the Big Bang,
God brought forth
beasts of the Earth,
including dinosaurs
all shapes and sizes.
On day six, God created
Adam & Eve, blessing
them: "be fruitful
and multiply."
Next day, God smiled
at his intelligent design
and rested.
Adam & Eve
learned quickly
to run for their lives,
trying weary best
to avoid pterodactyl's
swooping claws,
Tyrannosaurus Rex's
heart-pounding footsteps
& meat-shredding
molars, the long sharp
tusk of Triceratops.
Eve was the one
who expressed
their anger: "Why
the hell couldn't he
give evolution
a few million more years
to kill off the dinosaurs
before making us?"

2005

Death and War

On the last car of a late night N train
I asked Death how it managed
to move so quickly
during wars.

"I'm not sure why," Death answered,
"but ever since Hiroshima
my skates glide faster
over the cool Earth."

I asked whether it was possible
to tell the difference
between a civilian
and a young draftee.

"No difference."

I said from my own perspective
there was at least something different
about a playful child
struck by stray cluster bomb.

Death glared between my eyes.

I debated with Death about the merits
of a bullet, a car crash, & a baseball bat--
It confessed the first case
of pediatric AIDS

had almost bounced back & shocked Death
to death.

Approaching the last stop, I asked
whether it ever thought,
despite a difficult economy,
to look for an easier job.

Death laughed & pointed to the front page
of today's *New York Times*.
"Watch your step, E. Katz,
but don't make it obvious."

2004

Gregory's Last Lines

He was a poet of silk and the shredding of silk.
No earthling nor deity remained immune from his probing questions.
When the academy turned its head for a pulitzer second
he slipped an enlightened humor worm into the gut of poetry
that hasn't yet wriggled its way out.
With fountain pen tears he mourned the nationalism of the nation
even as he hosanna'd the home run.
He fooled death, coaxing it into the soup of life
every time but for one.

Writing in "Many Have Fallen" about American soldiers
marched by Army into radioactive bomb blasts
Gregory wrote: "All survived / ...until two decades later
when the dead finally died"--
a last line of stunning poetry enough to make the top
of Emily D's head pop off.

In 1983, Andy Clausen brought him to carouse
our New Brunswick bars.
We stopped at my kitchen table electric typewriter,
where Gregory pulled his pocket notebook
and tapped out a piece for *Long Shot* magazine.
The poem was called "Delacroix Mural at St. Suplice."
Deep into typing, Gregory stopped & asked
what thought I of his last three pencil'd lines.
I eyed his notebook, said I liked 'em but not as much
as the rest of the poem.
I thought he might write three new lines on the spot--
but instead he stood up, waved his left hand suavely
& declared the poem done at what'd been
the fourth-to-last line:
"I know the ways of god / by god!"
He knew how to end / at the ending.

I had the chance to read him "Ode to the West Wind"
on his cancer bed:
"If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"
After approaching mortality's last breath in summer,
he arose to see another new year.
Now, I hear his ashes will be buried in Rome's cemetery,
a neighbor of Shelley & the one whose name is writ in water.
In "Getting to the Poem," Gregory ended:
"I will live / and never know my death."

Who can say whether he was aware of that golden moment
when the breath says "no"?--
but he damn sure got to the poems.

Death, Gregory knew your secret name,
he knew your habits, your weapons, your games--
now give his verse the life it deserves
& do what you will with his gilgamesh hair

2001

On looking at a Leon Golub print

Like the best prophetic artists he gave a body to human error, a body both real as a rifle & alive as a dream. Leon was one of those generous souls who insisted we view our own demonic creations up close. The first exhibit of his I saw was in lobby of Brooklyn Museum. He'd photocopied his giant canvasses of post-1960's American-led halls of horror-- Vietnam, Central America, Southern Africa-- onto life-sized transparencies hung loosely from ceiling & swaying calmly in open-door New York City breeze. When looking at an individual piece, one couldn't help but see gun-butt, iron-boot torture with American pedestrians strolling nonchalantly behind the scene, going casually dressed lives as our leaders bankrolled foreign bullies with exploding helicopter dollars & giftwrapped prisons stuffed full of our country's two-plus centuries of uncivil liberty's rarely free press. A few years earlier, as a Golub fan from seeing his work in books, I'd written out of the blue, a poet-stranger asking whether he might consider donating a drawing for front cover of my first book. In thinking of artists whose work I'd admired from afar, I figured I'd take longest shot first. Leon was teaching Rutgers, and I was a New Brunswick poet & activist, so hoped he'd enjoy references to Hub City's homeless & utopian democracy in youthful attempts to carry on a Whitmanic tradition. He called a few days later & invited me to visit studio & choose among his latest 4 or 5 pieces.

About six months before he died, he told me of his cancer over lunch, said he'd like to give me a print, that I should call in a few weeks. Again, he laid out 4 or 5 choices & signed one I picked. Nancy was there & I looked at this studio, loving human interactions by a couple who had influenced America's visual art for as long as as I'd breathed on this beautiful blue planet. This was way we were supposed to live & grow & grow old. This was the way we were supposed to rip away curtains of denial & terror, take an honest look at way blood flows up, from core of the earth until it reaches soles of our feet, then up through night's vibrating thighs, spotted belly, lion-hearted voice box, to base of neck that refuses to alter its vision for sake

of the highest bidder, the skull that spends its life building a dream to outlast the letting go of tin & flesh. His brush was always sharp as a razor & broad & compassionate as a velvet safety net. The print I chose had 2-1/2 male figures shown from shoulders up, one black, one & a half in red, with text up center & across bottom reading: "How close can I get to Rome? or am I kidding myself?" I am looking at that print now-- figures drawn part representational even classical, & part modernist abstraction--& I am pondering its multiple & circular meanings: How close can the artist get toward being recognized among the classics? Can the black man in picture ever hope to join the pantheon or even literally visit the Italian city without raising unfair suspicions in times like these? Given a white canvas background, does the full face painted in red signify a white American, or is it a universal face painted blood color of five centuries of America's crimes? And what in name of Michelangelo is that half face doing, perhaps waiting for an audience with courage or humor able to fill in the missing parts? With brush strokes & scraper, Leon painted the paradoxical heart of humankind into the thread of his canvasses. What was born, built, or bombed could all be partially erased. Fantasy is all-powerful, but Leon still refused to leave out the fragile bones, an artworld mix 20 years behind the times and 60 years ahead. Staring intently at the print in our living room, it is easy to see Leon's face within all the figures, seeds of possibility that even brutality reveals. The eyes that saw this world so clearly from so many different angles has now found another. Our new century grows with a dialectical mix of yellow cluster bombs & food can drops--with each piece of flesh that blows away, a new seed implants in the living art.

Global Warming

The world reads icy newspapers
Whatever the politicians say in fine print no longer matters
It's the way the pages will yellow in the end
Finally, we've seen lava seeping through concrete walls
Finally, we've seen the rains launch upward
If thunder begins inside our own bodies, where will we hide?
They will say the question hasn't been studied enough
They will say the burning sensation is only in our imagination
They're right; and yet where does one go to escape the imagination?
To our death, that's where!
From the cemetery, the corpses no longer care what car we drive
The thigh bone in far corner prefers a Ford SUV
The skull on the left loves the roominess of a pickup truck
Even from their graves, the little ones with cancer'd spines
are asking adults for help.

2006

A Half-Baked Manifesto for Reconstructing Broken Bones

I told the Pentagon's one-eyed guy
this damn war'd bring thousands
of innocent deaths & hot new recruits
into al Qaeda-affiliated terror firms
but he still lives in the Cold War & loves
to hear the sound of young ones falling.
Now the exploding corpses in uniform & out
are food for the birds.
Now 200-ton nation-destroying bombs
send sacred iron pillars to break bones
& knock down homes
across the floating extinction of continents.
"Only acknowledge your iniquity"
said Jeremiah in the voice of god
but the president is coughing & scrambling
his syntax trying to explain his & his nation's
past microbiological mistakes.
The Attorney General has turned
into a granite fossil while kneeling in prayer
& compiling neon McCarthyite files
on infants & toddlers of antiwar marchers.
Maher Arar was tortured in Syria's breadcrusted dungeon
despite Ashcroft's assurances heard echoing
through the background noise
of a high-speed human rights blender. Cheney still claims
Saddam was Osama's late night lover, Rumsfeld says
the word "Guantanamo" with the smug grin
of a man who knows it makes no difference to rusty
corporate news anchors whether his lies
are big or bigger. The century's most pungent
smog-filled bill is nicknamed Clear Skies Initiative,
Healthy Forests offers loggers a free supply
of chain saw blades. An energy reform chauffeur
drives a cab full of tax breaks to summer homes
of those fillet-prepared to cook the globe
over a medium flame. The national
crime prevention brigade has developed a no-fail economic
blackmail scheme to garner flak jacket U.S. immunity
from world's most progressive war crimes court.
Even the rose-pedaled immune systems of children
are not immune from Bush team's sour medicine,
where "education for all" is laconic code

for stripping schools of the last sliver of union-made paint.
 Ending hunger for this shrink-wrapped administration
 equals sending starved kids down
 to nearest bootstrap sermon. If you ask for citizenly explanation,
 their public relations spokesman
 sighs it's all so undecideable
 some weird kind of post-post-structuralist
 vague, ungraspable reasons overflowing
 horizontally across basement floor here
 vertically thru 50-foot castle roof there, somebody
 they are unable to identify has placed a mile-wide pothole
 along the highway of American ideals.
 Their made-in-Miami rubber bullet pellets
 are the only justification they offer, locked & loaded
 for rampaging gangs of idealistic teens.
 There is no signature at bottom
 of any interdepartmental forms,
 no one with beating cabinet heart is available
 to speak softly at the flag salute funeral, the documents
 the investigative committee has requested
 were shoved through the corporate paper shredder
 a long time ago. There are no answers for questions
 of who never knew. Who told Novak?
 Who forged Niger?
 How Enron money? Who slipped the 27 lies
 into Bush's State of the Union speech?
 Why's a Chinese semi-conductor company
 paying brother Neil 2 million technophobic bucks?
 How did we get from Civil Rights Act
 of 1866 to here?
 O that my head were waters! Lack of sleep
 has become breakfast too many mornings.
 The Earth has been sighing
 through our open flesh wounds a quarter-million years.
 The sun misses its beloved.
 Our bodies self-destruct.
 Our poets in the snowy cities deconstruct.
 Run--the horse--cave belly ache--
 corn never roots wish--
 no end then beginnings--
 cut wire whispering--
 Which of the wanting Grand Narratives
 are they talking about now? O lamentations!
 O Jeremiah! O Blake! There is no longer
 a good excuse for our innocence!

Back in the 1980s I told the poetry world
 it was reconstruction that held the greatest
 unfulfilled emancipatory potential.
 I was looking for the 14th amendment of poetry,
 a verse to reverse Plessy v. Ferguson
 for good, a new way of seeing to flip
 the notion of original intent on its head, judicial doctrine
 meant to invisibly disintegrate the most utopian
 midnight desires of post-Civil War era.
 Much humane good has been done in this country,
 the ideals of democracy & unimprisoned talk,
 the vote & the vatic blues,
 the fight against fascism and mass migratory movements
 for peace & australopithicene-ancestored rights,
 the jazz trumpet & long lines
 of bebop hiphop verse. An expanding nutritional belly
 of sometimes sustainable mirth, quantum-eyed inventions
 of some melodic medicines & humming machines.
 But it is still reconstruction that is most
 in need of a 40-acre rescue. Yet I have grown
 older & occasionally smarter
 & can now also say "long live
 the language poets"
 & the 10,000 other international schools,
 so many diverse linguistic loves capable of digging
 up useful glory. As Nicanor Parra said,
 too much blood has been spilled
 under the bridge to go on believing only one poetic
 road is right. Whether a kitchen mirror to the real,
 or Ernst Bloch's anticipatory illuminations,
 Isaiah's admonition holds: "do not shed innocent
 blood in this place."
 In my most transparent moments
 of realism, there is a purple horse labeled a long shot
 at the last moment reaching its neck
 across the finish line first.
 In utopian fantasies I see thousands of multicolored shirts
 marching peacefully in the streets
 to throw Bolivia's president out
 of the country, to send Georgia's electoral thief
 home with embarrassed eyes dangling.
 I see a new global trade organization
 exporting the idea of taxfree nonviolent presidential topplings
 whichever corner of Earth they're well deserved.

I see a Geneva-negotiated peace deal
between Israelis & Palestinians that at first offers only
a full-throated birdsong organizing tool,
but within a short time
is being implemented step by step by a less stubborn age.
I see a new president of Brazil
altering the map of incomplete bridges.
The TV Reporters of Record have tried so hard
to convince us we have no choice
but this George, too, will be dethroned.
Love, you and I will unlock our x-rayed suitcase
of buried laughter, the jobs promised
will be there for all,
no longer will any engendered group be sacrificed at altar
of an idea. Isaiah, we take the plowshares
in our broken hands.
The wound bandages itself. The burnt day care center
is rebuilt from its ashes. Our poems
have become immune to the scissors.
Reparations for slavery's non-biodegradable shackles
& native America's broken treaties will be paid.
The next plague is already cured.
Our most peaceful surrealistic phrases mean
what they say. The Human Rights Act
of 2050 is passed!

2003

Full Moon Over Falluja

Well, now we know they are lighting up the night sky with white phosphorus,
better able to see midnight skin melting into bone. What country is it
that would send such harsh chemical fire into a neighborhood?
In occupied territories of Palestine, a father has donated organs of his son,
murdered by Israeli army, to a congregation of six, both Jewish and
Muslim. If this doesn't shame the violent of all nations into melting
their weapons, what will? Tonight, let children of earth sleep in peace
under a full moon, let skin remain the body's best organic protection,
let bones stay cool and covered--in a thousand years there will be
plenty of time for our skulls to rest in warm earth & give thanks.

2005