

A FEW MORE POEMS

Poetry from 2014 and 2015

~

Keith R. Parris

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Black Knight Classic
San Antonio, Texas

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Poetry from 2014 and 2015

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Black Knight Classic

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Edited by: Janet K. Parris, Ph.D.

ISBN: X-XXX-XXXXX-X

Printed in the United States of America

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LIFE

Life, when we take a stab at it, can snarl and gnaw away one's nerve,
or howl with love's desire.

When we breathe in its raw, half-cherry-blossom fragrance,
half-pungent-smokestack perfume,

And taste its unequal portions of soothing nectar
and jaw-wrenching bitterness,

Life can craze the eyes and thrust itself into every crevice
of our madly fractured minds.

If we happen to turn and catch sight of it,
hustling beyond our reach,

Life can hollow us out like quarried stone,
or empty praise.

It can smother us in the soot of its factory furnaces,
blacken our souls,

And abandon us in its wilderness of disregard,
invisible even unto ourselves.

Life hurtles along. Dreams blur. The task of keeping up
with falling expectations

Can quash any hope of rising to meet life's abundance
of complexities.

Life can be abrupt. Its muscle can be snatched away
like dropped candy.

Even to touch its naked skin
can be forbidden.

But still, we lie awake for it, pray for it,
defiantly wait for it.

Before our appetite for it is lost,
replaced by despair,

That last, precious, dirty-little-rotten spoonful of it,
trembling past our lips,

Can evaporate from our already parched tongues like the sizzling
pickup lines of our youth.

It is our greatest torture to imagine giving life up
before we give in.

If only, at the end, we could hold on for a moment,
embrace understanding,
And have no cowardly rush of regret, no wish to repeat
or repair.
That would make all the years of having only a before or an after
seem more like having a now, as if *now* was, somehow, timeless.

CLEARED SOLO

That day, the day you first went solo, never fades, never slips away. Still standing there, your father, arms folded and eyes fixed, with your mother and sister by his side, crying and praying. Your younger brother is shouting, "Don't crash!" In you climb, alone, astonishingly alone, absurdly alone. Start engines and call for taxi instructions. Don't forget the checklist. Now, on the runway, so much asphalt stretching in front, as if losing itself in infinity. What? What did he say? The controller in the tower, what call sign did he clear? Yours... your call sign was cleared... cleared for takeoff. Push the throttles forward. Release brakes. Get your head out of the cockpit. Look around. At first, the world moves slowly, the plane barely rolling, but now accelerating. Then, forget all that extraneous baggage your instructor piled on. Flying by are the farmers' fields, their unending lines of fence posts. Unseen are the cows, black cows and cows with white faces, grazing, grazing, grazing, and the birds on their backs and around their hooves, pecking, pecking, pecking. You feel the wheels skipping, skipping along the smooth, black surface, the struts extending, the wings lifting, lifting, lifting, and below, the ground pulling, pulling away, falling behind, falling further and further, and you, alone, flying in air so calm you hardly notice. Check the gear, then flaps and airspeed too, before you forget and stop the presses. Look there! On the portside, a golden field rolls into the azure sky. To the starboard, there are no faces seeking recognition, no fence posts lining the fields, no sign of that rush or thrust forward into new territory to claim Cimarron. Here, in every direction, you are alone, madly and joyously alone. You are free, and you, you of all people are flying, flying solo.

IMAGINE WHAT REMAINS

What is
inside you?

What is outside

in the world?

Can you
take it in

and

survive

or

will

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H O P E

takes you

outside yourself.

FREE SPIRITS

Embrace Desire until We Die Fulfilled

The gale, the breeze, the evening's breath of air,
Belong no more to nature once they're tamed.
What life can soar when bound by endless care?
So, let our love be unashamed.

The threads that drew us near were blindly sewn,
By reckless passion, primal and inflamed.
What slave can fault a flower freely grown?
So, let our love be unashamed.

The lovesick pray to Venus for her charm,¹
But others worship deities unnamed.
What godly plagues condemn the rose with harm?
So, let our love be unashamed.

The Greek myths ring of lust and lurid deeds,²
A bride and child divine that Hades claimed.³
What afterlife can render fertile seeds?
So, let our love be unashamed.

¹ Venus was the Roman goddess of love, beauty, sex, fertility, prosperity and desire.

² The Greek underworld, in mythology, was a place where souls went after death and was the Greek idea of afterlife. Greeks initially had no concept of immortality.

³ Persephone, goddess of vegetation or seed of the fruits of the fields, was portrayed carrying a sheaf of grain or corn and was wooed by Hermes and Apollo, but Demeter, her mother, rejected all suitors until Zeus, her father, permitted Hades to abduct her and carry her off to the underworld. While searching for her daughter, Demeter forbade the earth to produce until the cries of hungry people forced Zeus to demand Persephone's return. Before complying, Hades tricked Persephone into eating pomegranate seeds, sacred food of the underworld, which obligated her to return to the underworld for part of every year.

IN THE SOUP

Have you ever been strapped into a cold cockpit,
tucked in close formation,
wings overlapped with, maybe, 3 feet vertical,
weather enfolding you in its arms
and only a single red light,
blinking as you blink,
then, suddenly, trying... having to tell yourself that "Lead"
will emerge from pitch black clouds
before you're forced to accept that you are alone,
that the vision imprinted on your soul
might have quietly escaped your grasp
as you counted past three to four and five?

Have you ever felt your chest beg for oxygen,
felt your eyes crave a forbidden glance at the instruments,
those eyes hoping not to fall out of their sockets
as you hope not to fall out of your ejection seat and harness?
As more and more darkness smashes into your canopy
and night lights seem to grow infinitely brighter
with every second that ticks off your internal clock,
did you hear the words of reassurance
you mouthed into the oxygen mask,
telling yourself to hang on for one more thunderous heartbeat
and all will be right with the world,
that nothing is about to smash through that wall of clouds
and into your, pitifully small, piece of the sky?

Have you ever heard your backseater ask,
"What's that? Say again... you still got him?
Man, I can't see beyond my own imagination from back here!
I know we've been in as bad or even worse before, but,
maybe, we ought to give some thought to going lost wingman.
Hey man, do you read me?"
"You picked a fine time... Lucile," you think of shouting before saying,

“Got him,” for no good reason,
as you become aware of how tightly you’re gripping the stick
and how loudly the sound of your own breathing
is overpowering the ever present whine of the engines that,
for no good reason, seems to have become as quiet as the night.

Have you ever freed a clinched fist from its hold on the throttles
to slap the defog lever full forward
in hopes of stopping fog from devouring more of your sole window
only to have the thing spit a mixture of ice and water
into a face already leaking sweat from every pore,
along with every other part of your soaked and exhausted body.
That little, red, blinking light... “God... give it back,”
you almost whisper, almost scream.
That little, red, blinking light... “Please, give me one more little blink.”
Then, just before you’re reduced to a sniveling child,
there it is,
and there you are... a fighter pilot!

Have you ever known, now, it’s on to the tanker for night refueling,
another, slow, KC-97... almost VFR on top... but still... in the soup.

IF ONLY WE HEAR

There is a look to places we've been
and a feel to people we've touched,
to things of the past,
and there is a sound to those who speak
and even to those who listen,
if only we hear and take notice.

What does it matter that the blind have eyes,
or the poor, whose cries we no longer hear,
are weeping in the darkness?

How far down, deep in the ocean,
does a lone swimmer have to sink,
before realizing he is stone dead,
no longer a part of the living, except for
you or me laying a single, white sheet
over his fading memory?

There is sadness to loss,
to countless days and endless nights gone astray,
and there is sadness in abandonment,
in being left to weep,
to drown in one's tears,
alone, afraid and unknown.

Let us not think, however,
that those who have no voice
will never speak, that they will sink
further under humanity's vast surface
and allow their memories to be covered,
hidden forever, by solitary
and indistinguishable white sheets.

They can see the stars, even if less clearly,
and they can dream of someday reaching the surface,
and hearing the ring of freedom,
and even of things eternal.

They can come up from the sea, step upon land,
and plant their seeds of hope and desire.

They can make their claim on life's passage,
its possessions and promises.
There is an essence to all things.
All things prevail during their time,
but none are forever.
Even the tallest, the ones that tower over all the rest,
are brought back to life's roots
and rejoin the silent voices of the earth.

DRAWN TO THE NEON NIGHT

She flies to the flickering light,
Shimmering in the neon night.
Borne by ambition's skyward flight,
She slips from sight in pure delight.

Nightly, she casts her luring spell,
And once I stood just where it fell.
Her wings spread wide like silver sails,
To lift us toward the midnight bells,

But she could not take me along her way,
And where she was flying, she dared not say.
So, I bade farewell to the one that nightly casts her spell,
Though it's hard believing it was not me, for whom it fell,
And I tell you it's not her leaving that causes my tears to swell,
But the emptiness in my dreams after I pray my love is well.

TO THOSE WHO WAIT FOR ECHO FLIGHT



From war to their wives, to their kids and lives,
Four went back to the air with their kiss and their prayer.
Morning was calloused, and cruel was the wind;
Pilots cursed the hour and strapped themselves in.
Storms swept into valleys, stretched out upon fields;
Clouds covered the farmland, climbed over the hills.
Now, there lie the flight lead, his plane and its crew;
There also the wingmen, most everyone knew.
The crew chiefs stand guarding where aircraft should be;
Families are learning there's nothing to see.
Carved into a mountain, buried under a chill,
The men are done flying; the engines are still.
The church prays in silence; in the squadron they sigh.
On the flightline a shiver wipes four tears from an eye.

POLAR

The half-heard regret,
After fighting is over,
Starts the long cold war.

TRADITION

Poetry once was like a vintage find
Whose body pleased the palate and the mind,
But now the poet's verse is bare
Of all the garments one expects that it should wear.

OPENED AND CLOSED

His poetry lacked convention,
And was unworthy of mention.

PERCHED ON THE PRECIPICE OF SIN AND SHAME

Night's concrete faces slept while Rachel stirred,
As pale as ash that fell between the black
Hearthstones. Her feet paced heavily upon
The remnant of a rug that hushed each step.
Her dress, a cotton print, her coat, a gift,
Were ready to depart before the sun
Could cast a shadow on her careworn street,
Or warm cold hearts that beat and beat again.
Abandoned by the innocence of youth,
Betrayed in barrooms lost among the words
That sang of lovers foolish with desire
And naked lies, living on fear and drink,
She perched beside old demons from her past.
How could she give another child this life,
Who, were it born, would bear her shame till death
And bear, as well, the world that evil breeds?
Her hand, unsteady on the rounded knob,
Was wrapped in haste a dozen times or more,
Before she passed beyond the gates of mind
And soul. Outside, she braved the hardened gloom.
She touched a trembling hand to trembling lips
And wiped a trembling tear rolled down her cheek.
Above her head, the clouds began to wail.
Around her feet, the leaves knelt silently
And caught the drops of rain and dregs of grief,
Until their ranks were joined and marched away.
She scurried past the city's trodden steps,
Beneath its barren trees, beside its waste.
Her hair fell wet above her vacant eyes
That stared far down the vagrant poor's last street
And up life's dead-end alley where ravens
Were scratching for food scraps that came each night.
The mirrored asphalt teemed with shiftless ghosts.
They spoke in echoes of the city's dying

Pulse, and every vision, every voice,
Floated down and drifted toward the gutter's
Edge. The gifted coat was overtaken
By the pious rain, and Rachel's breasts were
Touched by brazen fingers from the pious
Streams that groped their way along her body's
Length, like laughing, stumbling, drunks on cobbled
Stones. She felt it then, and stopped, and whispered
To the walls that stood so straight and steeper
Than her eyes could see, and to the windows,
Closed against the rain that fell like endless
Days, and to the doors that locked the darkened
Shadows out. "We are here. Please take these souls.
Please take these sins, this shame. Allow us in..."

*...For none but He could wish to bear our cross,
And none but He take notice of our loss.*

TANGLED

We are tangled in our lives,
Like flies within a spider's lace.
Passion's born but anger thrives,
On silent words that leave no trace.

A look can fetch a fond embrace,
Or betray what two hearts may hide.
The search for reason finds no place,
As untried as where truths reside.

WISDOM AND MADNESS

Wisdom walks with age-old cares
and gestures to be left alone,
While madness laughs and shouts at death
and carries on and on.

Wisdom seldom struts its stuff
or ventures down the alley,
But madness paints itself a clown
and often stops to dally.

Wisdom never asks the price
as though an afterthought,
Yet madness chases every sale
and still..., great madness can't be bought.

RAPTURE

Our eyes perceive but half the scene,
And ask the mind to add what's in between,
But in the spring our heart sees more,
Of nature's beauty and of love longed for.

Let not reflection cast your image from my eyes,
Nor clouds obscure the underbelly of the skies,
Where brilliant stars bestow the charm of two worlds onto one,
And passion fills the air with sweet perfume 'til rapture's won.

FIRST GRADE TEACHER

Each year, a group of children comes to me,
All seated in a class,
With eyes afraid of each new mystery,
And minds that open for discovery,
But given all the days before they pass,
I see them, each one, differently.

Some are short and some are tall,
Some look too heavy or too light,
And some have names I can't recite,
But if you ask me those I like,
I could choose the ones that walk or run or ride their bike,
But in truth, I'll say, "I teach... and love them, one and all."

SCRAMBLE

PART I - ARRIVAL

I remember deadheading home, dreaming,
Recalling familiar faces and Friday nights,
Imagining my seldom-awakened,
Almost abandoned, apartment, awaiting my
Arrival on a weather-delayed return,
And I remember being rewarded,
With hardly enough hours to claim for crew rest.

My girl had waited, read books that would bore a cow.
She had slipped into every uniform she found
And lost her patience with my reel-to-reel.
She had held me tightly in her mind's eye
And, in my bed, wrapped herself in loneliness,
Until she bathed in a shower,
Suddenly wet with expectation.

But at this moment, I was being freeze dried,
Dragging a dark and indistinct accomplice, haphazardly,
Through the buzz of security lights,
Cracking and crunching a path
To the mistress that owned me,
Possessed me in a primeval age
Where belonging made being worthwhile.

A dusting of powdery flakes
Had covered the concrete expanse
That poured through the protective gates
And spread its tentacles among the pines.
My watery eyes captured the glint
Of ice crystals, being roused from
Their slumber on a high, bare branch.

A swoosh of feathers startled me
As I felt, more than heard,

A fellow warrior diving on
Unfortunate and unsuspecting prey,
Scurrying through the darkness
In search of a hasty, last supper.
I stared, and I cursed the battle

That raged in my head.
I waded into a fog that lay,
Ominously, between the end of fading dreams
And the rustle of life's reality.
My world never curled its tail
Around a shaggy, crumpled-up piece of carpet
Or collapsed in front of a crackling fire.

It never turned its soft underbelly
Toward the gnarling teeth of its enemies.
Already, it was barking and yelping
While its echoes reverberated
Off the almost hidden revetments
That sprouted from the forest floor.

Our planes were sheltered in scattered bunkers
That smelled of burned kerosene,
Industrial cleaners,
And concoctions that no one cared to ask about.
The massive doors that guarded their privacy
Were slow to accept encouragement

And, when prodded, impossible to corral
Before plowing into their steel pilings.
We had been warned that we were not invincible
And that these doors didn't respect rank or age or sex.
They consumed whatever they caught
And they caught whatever got in their way.

Alongside runway zero niner zero,
I was welcomed by the squadron's alert hangar,
With its two, cavernous, fighter bays and all the
Supporting actors necessary for our mission.

The face of this Hotel California
Was tattooed with insignia,

And covered with camouflage, and steel-reinforced concrete.
Our alert birds were always armed,
Cradling sparrows, sidewinders,
And high-explosive, incendiary gifts
For greeting any viper
That crawled into our backyard.

Each plane was hooked to its support system,
Ready to be reborn,
Ready to rise and engage in living and in dying.
I threw my flight bag onto the tarmac
And climbed up to the cockpit.
Dislodging and tossing down the remnants

Of the previous owner was easy.
Introducing myself and shifting to my gear
In the cramped, instrument filled compartment
Was another matter altogether.
The bucket was cold steel,
A cannon shell wrapped in canvas,

And the harness straps resembled
An octopus captured in a fisherman's net.
There wouldn't be time to do any housekeeping
After the claxon growled,
And the rhythm section in my chest
Hammered out a faster beat, a beguine with the devil.

My *Guy-In-Back* had joined me and finished
Observing his morning prayers and duties.
We had to keep our appreciation
For this rarefied job up there,
If we wanted to continue our enjoyment
Of stroking the burners and pressing our luck.

Europe hadn't morphed from its wintry cocoon,
But the calendar had cried out,
"The 'hammer and sickle' is sewing its oats."
The fist of the Bolshevik would be testing our readiness
And our resolve. It could fill the skies
With thousands of heavenly blips,

Causing untold anxiety
Underneath the mountain that housed
Those who had abandoned civilization
In favor of another make-believe existence.
They counted the blips, watched their comings and goings.
They held our leash and tossed our bone.

Each spring, we adversaries,
They a sword and we a pen,
Created our own intricate ballet.
They, striking down the boundary,
Drawn on twentieth century parchment,
Defying us to take our pen

In hand and draw the line again, challenged us
To safeguard honor and our adopted motherland.
The fathers of this storied soil,
Beating their drums of sovereignty,
Acted their leading roles in this the greatest show
Ever staged for a world insane to see.

I didn't feel like playing big-boy games
On a morning made for rest.
I had just returned from two weeks' duty, admiring senioritas,
Drinking red, red tinto, and eating calamari and cabrito.
My guts felt like they were drowning
In a pool of peppers and olive oil.

PART II - DEPARTURE

I wanted to find an old newspaper
And to extract the last shard of
Undiscovered information
From its smudged ink before I fell
Into the nearest thing to oblivion
I could find. I didn't need a supporting role

In some preacher's empty casket sermon.
I trudged each step up the worn stairway,
Acknowledging the surviving roaches
And trying not to trample bombed out spider webs
That spilled their pale bounty across the dark off-roads
Of my asylum. I bypassed breakfast,

Checked the weather, survived a mandatory
Mission brief and turned my rapt attention
To the squawk box, a repeater
Tuned to command and control.
Sweat was demanding a seat on my brow
When I caught the first report of activity.

The evil empire was stirring,
Running up the clock like some adventurous mouse,
Jumping across to a table and down to the floor
To nibble at a piece of cheese.
They were looking for cracks in the wall,
Trying to find something to show for their efforts.

My stomach was uninterested.
It gnawed away at its own displeasure,
Complaining that I had abused its friendship
And needed to find a replacement
For it, or myself, before the world
Went inexorably wrong.

I listened to the controllers' voices,
Reaching for authority, cracking,
But not quite breaking, and spilling themselves
Onto a floor littered with uncertainty.
I took a long breath of resignation
And looked around at all the faces,

Fresh from the breakfast table.
Words were dripping down their tongues.
Every "stick" was smiling, ready-made for flight.
What could be worse than twenty-four hours
Of boredom? I dragged myself away,
From the names I would later still recall.

I wanted to see myself, in the mirror,
And to remember who I was.
The guy I saw reflected a trace
Of the image I had worked in obscurity to achieve.
I pushed my stomach to the recesses of my mind,
Splashed my face and slurped cool water.

The water, escaping down the drain,
Reminded me to attend to other
Urgent needs. I washed, dried, and patted my face.
I felt like worn-out wash-and-wear.
"Are we flying yet?" I yelled.
The question flew into unambiguous obscurity.

Our controllers were reporting positions,
Distances and altitudes. They were discussing
Our squadron and giving our call sign.
The blips around the border had snaked back
And raised a single head. It was searching
For a place to strike. You could feel its hiss.

One had to wonder. Who would get
The cheese, and who would get the mouse?
A nest of vipers had gathered
About two hundred kilometers from

The Buffer Zone and loitered there, as if
To wave their red flag, before turning west

And inviting the bull into the ring.
Were they only going to taunt,
Dare us to chase false echoes and search for shadows?
The answer came on a singular word, "*Scramble!*"
The claxon belched its discontent
Like some irate, half-starved, sergeant,

Chowing down on raw recruits.
The fall of our boots left but brief
Imprints upon our cobbled path.
We scrambled for the firehouse pole,
Fought to breach the exit door,
Each warrior eager to fire his engines

And fly into battle with his wisdom and his warplane.
Already, I could feel the gear retract
And break that last, tangible connection,
That affirmation of earthly union...
Already, the treetops gone... the clouds below...
Already... free.