

## Selected Poems from *Twice Alive*

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Courtesy of Forrest Gander & New Directions

#### *Author's Note*

What many of us learned in high school about lichen— that it's an indicator species for pollution (litmus, in fact, is derived from lichen), and that it's the synergistic alliance of a fungus and algae or cyanobacteria— is largely true, but simplified. Lichen ecology seems to have more to do with collaboration than competition, and collaboration is transformative. With lichen, which may be more related to animals than plants, the original organisms are changed utterly in their compact. They can't return to what they were. And according to Anne Pringle, one of the leading contemporary mycologists (with whom I had the lucky opportunity to collaborate), it may be that lichen do not, given sufficient nutrients, age. Anne and other contemporary biologists are saying that our sense of the inevitability of death may be determined by our mammalian orientation. Perhaps some forms of

life have “theoretical immortality.” The thought of two things that merge, mutually altering each other, two things that, intermingled and interactive, become one thing that does not age, brings me to think of the nature of intimacy. Isn’t it often in our most intimate relations that we come to realize that our identity, all identity, is combinatorial?

*Twice Alive*

mycobiont just beginning to **en-wrap** photobiont, each to become something else, its own life and a contested mutuality, twice alive, algal cells **swaddled** in clusters

you take a 3-lens jeweler's loupe to inspect the **holdfast** of the umbilicate lichen then the rock-tripe lichen then the irenic Amanita mushroom swarming with a kind of mite that has no anus then the delicious chanterelles called Trumpets of Death

supreme parsimony in drought  
lets lichen live on  
sporadic events  
of dew and fog, a **velvety**  
tomentum and the wet thallus

I crush oak moss between finger and thumb  
for its sweet **perfume** persistent on  
your skin when I touch your throat, so slow  
to evaporate, the memory of seeing  
**sunburst** lichen on the sandstone cliff

but if herbivores eat **wolf** lichen they  
die and if carnivores eat it they die  
**writhing** in pain with the exception of mice  
it is rarely possible to tell  
if lichen is dead or alive

the fuzz of **fecal** dust from  
lichenivorous mites  
triggers woodcutter's eczema,  
the bane of loggers knee-deep  
in **sweet** fern sawing down cedar

so evening finds us at this woods 'edge where  
at a dead oak's base  
shoestring-rot **glimmers**, its luminescent  
rhizomes reflected from the eyes  
of a foraging raccoon that doesn't yet sense us

air ghostly and damp clings  
as we step from our woods  
to look across the field toward the first  
lane of lit houses, their dull **pewter**  
**auras** restrained by wet haze

cordyceps— the brown of your eyes softened  
with rain and remotely **fluorescent**— dissolve  
into **slime** after a few days, whatever we thought  
we were following was following us, its

intention unlinked to our own

*AUBADE*

*for my mother and for all those who we lost during the pandemic*

Can you hear dawn edging close, hear · soft light with its vacuum fingertips  
· gripping the bedroom wall, an understated · what? exhilaration? Can you  
hear the voices, · if they can be called voices, of towhees · scratching in  
the garden and then · the creaky low husky · voice flecked with sleep  
beside you in bed · telling a dream slowly as though in real time, · and  
now, interrupting that dream,

can you · make out the voice, if it can be · called a voice, of absence  
speaking · intimately to you, directly, · using the names of those who were  
vulnerable · those who are gone · I know · you must hear it feelingly, a  
low vibration in · your bones, for don't you find yourself · absorbed in a  
next moment beyond your · given life?

## *Sangam Poetry*

Between 300 BCE and 300 CE, there was a blossoming of literature in Southern India that came to be called Sangam— or convergence. One of the two styles of that poetry is called akam— a poetry in which personal emotions, the nuances of love, are linked with landscape in such a way that human feeling is inseparable from the place where that feeling takes place. The scholar-poet A.K. Ramanujan translated and re-introduced much of that poetry— which might be considered now as a kind of proto-eco-poetry, a phenomenological poetry in which the human subjectivity merges with the world, with landscape. Because California, where I live, shares the same five basic landscapes that appear in the Sangam poems, I've written poems influenced by the Sangam tradition, but relocated to California.

*Wasteland (for Santa Rosa)*

Green spring grass on  
the hills had cured  
by June and by July

gone wooly and  
brown, it crackled  
underfoot, desiccated while

within the clamor of live  
oaks, an infestation of  
tiny larvae clung

to the underleaves,  
feeding between  
veins. Their frass, that

fine dandruff of excrement  
and boring dust, tinkled  
as it dropped onto dead leaves

below the limbs. You  
could hear it twenty  
feet away, tinkling.

Across the valley, on  
Sugarloaf Ridge, the full  
moon showed up

like a girl doing cartwheels.  
No one goes on living  
the life that isn't there.



*Sea: Night Surfing in Bolinas*

Maybe enough light · to score a wave · reflecting moonlight, sand ·  
reflecting moonlight and you · spotting from shore · what you see only ·  
as silhouette against detonating bands · of blue-white effervescence · when  
the crown of the falling · swell explodes upward · as the underwave blows  
through it · a flash of visibility quickly · snuffed by night · the surf  
fizzling and churning · remitting itself to darkness · with a violent stertor  
· in competition with no other sounds

paddling through dicey backwash · the break zone of · waist-high NW  
swell · as into a wall of obsidian · indistinguishable from night sky ·  
diving under, paddling fast · and before I sit · one arm over my board ·  
I duck and · listen a moment underwater · to the alien soundscape ·  
not daytime's clicks and whines of · ship engines and sonar · but a low-  
spectrum hum · the acoustic signature of fish, squid, · crustaceans rising  
en masse · to feed at the surface I feel · an eerie  
peacefulness veined with fear

after twenty minutes the eyes · adjust, behind the hand dragging through water  
· bioluminescent trails · not enough light · to spot boils · or flaws in

nearing · waves appear even larger · closing-in fast · then five short  
strokes into a dimensionless · peeler, two S-shaped turns, the · kick out,  
and from shore · your shout

it is cowardice that turns my eyes · from the now-empty beach · for with  
you I became · aware of an exceptional chance · I don't believe in ·  
objective description, only · this mess, experience, the perceived · world  
sometimes shared · in which life doesn't · endure, only · the void  
endures · but your vitality stirred it · leaving trails of excitation · I've  
risen from the bottom of · myself to find · I exist in you · exist in me  
and · against odds I've known even rapture, · rare event, · which  
calls for · but one witness

*Immigrant Sea*

Aroused by her inaccessibility, he aches for more  
of her life to live inside him. Watching

the breakers, standing so close he can feel  
heat coming off her wet scalp. What is

his relation to this person  
before him, so familiar and foreign? The way

he searches out her face, he searches out himself. Gusts  
thrash crests of swell, spring grasses twirl

circles in the sand where they stand without speaking. She  
wants him to know it's all charged, even grass

positive, pollen negative, so when grass waves,  
it sweeps the air for pollen. He feels electricity all around

as though the wild drama of the coming storm were already  
aware of them, foreigners on this shore. Little

sapphire-blue flowers speckle the dunes.  
He wonders if he has let himself flatten out

into a depthless sheet, like escalator stairs, whether in the end  
he'll disappear underground without the smallest lurch

of resistance. But when her lavish face turns toward him  
beaming, the corners of her eyes wind-wet,  
he yields to that excess, he reappears to himself.

Aa Bb Cc  
Dd Ee Ff  
Gg Hh Ii  
Jj Kk Ll

*In the Mountains, Placer County*

... whose blunt finger, its hornblende-nail clipped,  
circles (so lightly across the crevice knob)

And her green delight of serpentine  
laughter (as their tram swoops) over the trunk valley

Car door slammed behind her, she faces the cirque  
in denim cutoffs (risen to her pudendum)

And sees no gap in the pleasures nestled  
in his eyes watching (her eyes watching)

Above the mission of his face, they swing like  
church bells (for mass always sways outward)

A taste of jaggery and warm pennies (oh no,  
oh no!) in a wet score grooved by glacial erratics

Where, he asks, as she initiates the uplift, and when  
did you learn to do that? (decamping downslope)

A rattler riding its coil (her torso on her hips), she leaves  
chatter marks on a succession of moraines

(Dark paired suns) the aureoles dilate  
as suction-eddies whirligig along the melt stream

When the supplicant slowly bends, long  
thighs separate along the joint plane

No undertow of doubt, every part willing, the forest  
encroaches ashen earth (when her knees begin to jerk)

*Unto Ourselves*

Even when we realized we'd stopped, in every  
essential way stopped moving forward, when  
we came to see we were descending, even  
more tightly bound to the vortex  
as images rushed by in front of us and a blue  
whale rotted on the sand in Bolinas, its stink  
drifting southward where dozens of barnacled  
forty-foot grays, dead from starvation, began to hulk  
against the shore, the white-tufted foreheads  
of waves smashing against those  
knolls of oily decomposing flesh, it was  
everywhere we looked if we cared to look  
out over bitesize squares of cheese  
and Saintsbury wine into the hum  
taking place under a coved moon, or cared to  
listen to clumped wild-rye  
shushing the dunes  
while pulverized rock shrieked along fault lines  
in decibels so muted only the soles of our feet,  
conducting the ground's sound  
up into our tali, could register what  
was happening

right there where our lives had been  
cut off from themselves and become something else  
drained of substance, steeped in the privilege  
against which we protested with those we called  
our friends— the ones who lately seemed

Aa Bb Cc  
Dd Ee Gg  
Hh Ii Jj  
Kk Ll Pp  
Qq Rr Ss

to contract backward from our greetings,  
giving us to suspect  
that they too sensed something askew, the  
skip at the center of ourselves or just an  
inkling of abyssal unhappiness was it? concentrated  
into the early evenings  
like one of those spectral white  
fallow deer introduced to the headlands  
that began to outcompete  
native species and so,  
before they were slaughtered every one  
by hired hunters, inciting  
arguments about what was native if  
all systems are given to change. Maybe  
our ear twitches. Maybe the deer's ear  
twitches. But we still can't quite  
make out in the dimness  
what we're looking at, can we?

Nor is there interim from the tumult of in-  
coming, the masticating chores, ping-  
pings begging immediate response, the sheer  
overabundance of the present  
shame which plugs up each minute and  
stands in now for whatever it meant  
to live oneself before every gesture  
became performance for an audience  
we imagine never to be finished  
with looking at us. And as for the budding-out

of being we'd called passion? or the sensual  
moments phrased into our gait  
when we were coming to feel something,  
when our shadows merged (not as  
romance, but the real consequence  
of our mutuality) with  
shadows of conifers along the steep  
ravine, and completely naked and  
without relief, the world parsed us  
into the inhuman where rosette  
lichen surged across rocks lacking nothing  
that might be needed to answer  
for our existence?

By now, some of us,  
outmaneuvered by the economy,  
were lying around Dolores Park like fallen fruit  
waiting to rot. Others found themselves  
receptive to a trivial, self-justifying kindness.  
What with coral belching up its algae, the constellations  
receding, the awakened tundra, how could we bear, we  
wondered to each other, even the weight of  
our own sorry initiatives? Life, someone  
countered, is pure gratuitous magnitude. Just  
look: the light is there, grace itself. But  
it was already noon and as we looked,  
the colors of the hills began to blanch,  
and all around us, in the field of the visible,  
we sensed, without speaking, duration's ebb.