

Selected Poems from *Twice Alive*

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[read for The MUD Parcel Reading Series, Jan 21, 2022]

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.

Below a vast column of
 smoke, heat, flame, and
 wind, I rose, swaying
 and tottering on my
 erratic vortex, extemporizing
 my own extreme weather, sucking up
acres of scorched
 topsoil and spinning it
 outward in a burning sleet
 of filth and embers that
 catapulted me forward
 with my mouth open
in every direction at once. So
 I came for you, churning, turning
 the present into purgatory
 because I need to turn
 everything to tragedy before
 I can see it, because
it must be
 leavened with remorse
 for the feeling to rise.

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 Ff
Gg Hh Ii
Jj Kk Ll

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.