Holy Light

Robert G. Brown

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Robert G. Brown
Duke University Physics Department
Durham, NC 27708-0305

email: rgb@phy.duke.edu
phone: 919-660-2567
web: http://www.phy.duke.edu/ rgb

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Introduction

Web Publication

This is the *third* of my books of poetry published on the web. The first, Who Shall Sing, Whan Man is Gone, was one of the *first* books of web poetry to be published back in the mid-90's when the web was young. The second, Hot Tea! has now grown from a handful of poems into a complete book. It is time to start a new one.

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I'm offering the poetry in online form for two reasons:

First, it in principle lets just about anybody in the known cyber-universe browse the poetry as often as they wish, absolutely free, or print it out to be able to read it when they aren't near a browser, or read it out loud. At the same time it preserves my right to make a profit from my own work (if anybody does) and prevents me from ever being in the silly position of having to purchase a book republication of my own work from which I've derived no gain. This may sound silly and impossible, but without careful licensing it is neither.

Second, I am one of a growing number of artists (software, prose, poetry, musical, visual) who *rebel* against the stranglehold of the publication and entertainment industry on individual artists. At a time we should be experiencing a cultural renaissance of truly universal proportions as the web extends a "voice" to every human on the planet little by little, we see that industry, with its immense profitability threatened, turn more and more to distortions of the laws intended to *protect* the artists to simply extend their reign of extortion.

There are some lovely websites that detail just how easy it is for a musical group (for example) to cut a deal for a CD, sell it *successfully* (hundreds of thousands of copies with millions of dollars in gross revenues) and actually *lose money* by the time the recording industry is through with them. It is perhaps not as bad in the paper publication industry, but we live in a world where the author, artists, or musician who makes as much as 10% of the *net* revenue generated from the resale of their own work is *exceptionally* fortunate.

So I say *screw* it. In a year, two years, or ten years the cyber-universe will include everybody on the planet and books like this will be commonplace, as will an entire counter-culture of music, poetry, prose, and visual arts. Some sites may have a button to click like this one: where anyone who wishes can *contribute* a small cash payment directly to the artist, along the lines of throwing a few coins in a hat or the electronic version of an open banjo case on a street corner. Others will be content just offer their work for the pleasure of it being read or otherwise enjoyed. Unlike the street, however, content on the web must be sought out. This work will never thrust itself upon you as you pass, unaware, on some street corner.

About Me

I am a theoretical physicist currently employed at Duke University in the Physics Department, where I teach various bits of physics esoterica to graduate and undergraduate students and conduct original research on a variety of topics. I am married to a rather beautiful physician (Susan F. Isbey, M.D.) who is an internist in private practice in Durham with a subspecialty of infectious disease (a *way* cool branch of medicine). We have three charming sons, aged sixteen, twelve and seven months as of this writing (they were only just born to nine when I first wrote this introduction many years ago). We also share our house with a cat named Luci(fer) who is very tolerant of boys and dogs. The dogs are represented currently by only Buttercup, a fat yellow lab with no hips, and Satchmo, a black border collie mix who is both sweet and slightly nuts.

In addition to a Ph.D. and B.S. degree in physics from Duke University, I completed the work for a B.A. in philosophy (Duke at the time didn't formally recognize a double major in humanities and sciences). I have completed at least masters level work in mathematics, and am a systems and network administrator and (Unix or DOS) systems engineer/computer consultant in my not particularly copious spare time.

So how did a perfectly ordinary computer/mathematics/physics nerd like myself manage to write three books of poetry? What do physics, math, poetry and philosophy have in common? More than you might think – see some of the musings on my philosophy pages. And anyway, nerds read books!

I have read approximately a book (full sized novel) a day for at least twenty of my forty one years of age, and gave up the book a day thing only when kids, my own writing, and a compulsion for doing New York Times crosswords intervened. I write extensively, both professionally (I have a long list of publications in *Physical Review* and elsewhere) and for fun. I have been writing poetry since the age of eight or nine, and many of the poems in this work date back to my college days. My favorite poets are W. B. Yeats (da *man*), A., Lord Tennyson, and T. S. Eliot in roughly that order, although I also enjoy Blake, Kipling, and many, many others.

So, I'm not *just* a technogeek. I am, at worst, a generalist-geek. In addition to the specific fields of physics, mathematics, general computing, philosophy and literature where I am professionally competent, I am a better-than-average fisherman, possess the skills required to build a house from the ground up (I worked construction for a while), operate an extensive kitchen/house garden, can do intermediate level auto servicing and repairs, and am a house-husband who does all the cooking and more than half the housework and child rearing in favor of my time-bound physician wife. The amazing thing isn't that I can write poetry; it is that I ever have *time* to write *anything*.

About the Poetry

Holy Light is just being begun, so there isn't (yet) a lot to say about it. I expect that many of the poems will have a Zen cast to them, a religious feel to them, as that is what currently inspires much of my thoughts, writings, and hence poetry these days. The first one, *Manjusri and the Dragon*, certainly does.

Manjusri is the version/avatar of the Buddha who is armed with a sword to fight against the "dragon" of desire, of greed, of a lust for things. Meditating upon Manjusri, one is supposed to visualize his sword cutting away your attachment to things. However, this vision of Manjusri as "other" is itself an illusion, a device to help those who are far from enlightenment to struggle with their personal "dragons". In reality, in this meditation Manjusri and the Dragon are both puppets that you make dance upon a stage of your own imagining...

Feel free to let me know what you think of these poems. You can send me email at rgb at phy dot duke dot edu, or send me paper mail at the address given in the Copyright notice at the beginning. If you *like* them, and find yourself returning to read them from time to time, feel free to drop a dollar in the metaphorical hat above, and I'll gladly tip my next glass to your health!

Short Poems

Manjusri and the Dragon

Manjusri fights the dragon, but
He's just the dragon's tail puppet...

A Zen Question

Kill the Buddha!
Good Zen advice.
So then, should we
Kill the Christ?

Coward Koan

End all suffering?
Die the final death?
The Buddha was a *coward!*

Fire

The center of self is like fire
Turns hours into ashes with flame
Its spark is the heart of desire
It gives to the shadows a name.

Relativism

Relativism is the form
which says that in the face of storm
the good in faith always conform
to the norm.

They through life are blown along
away from weakness to the strong
as they discover from the throng
what is wrong.

In Rome, do as the Romans do!
If they can do it
why can't you?

Winter Prayer

It's three degrees
Too warm to freeze
My boys are begging
On their knees
That it will snow
And cold wind blow
And school let out
As white piles grow.

But all this rain!
It's such a pain
It will not snow
That much is plain.
So off to school
'Cause it's the rule
And Mother Nature
Has been cruel.

Longer Poems

At Your Feet

I miss my father's arms that held me
Miss my mother's arms around me
Miss the woman that I married
And the sound of her heartbeat.

I miss the baby that she bore me
But cannot hold to comfort crying;
Now here I lie in sorrow dying
In the middle of the street.

(Refrain)

I once stood tall, but now I'm falling
Shoulders bowed, in pain I'm falling
Falling to my knees, I'm falling
Falling, falling at your feet.

From my home my country called me
Sent me to this ancient Eden
Tore me from my humble heaven
In the hills of Tennessee

Then a nameless bullet found me
Tore right through my precious body
Snipped the thread that ever bound me
To a life that was so sweet.

(Refrain)

I once stood tall, but now I'm falling
Shoulders bowed, in pain I'm falling
Falling to my knees, I'm falling
Falling, falling at your feet.

A single tear for lost tomorrow
Ain't enough to hold my sorrow
And my torn body echos hollow
A miracle turned to meat

Now the light is slowly fading
Though the sun is brightly shining
And my memories finally ashes blown
To dust upon the street

(Refrain)

I once stood tall, but now I'm falling
Shoulders bowed, in pain I'm falling
Falling to my knees, I'm falling
Falling, falling at your feet.

The Lesson

What *lesson* does the baby born
who dies in the light of its second morn
learn from a punishment of false fruit reaped
in the myth of the fall from perfection? Its
ears hear not the anguish torn from those who dared
to tempt the fates with love unearned
bestowed on filmed eyes, stilled heart,
tiny body of hope brought to abrupt ending.

Who can think mere burdened cross
carries weight enough to pay the due
on all the pain? Quick death, foreordained
with loaded dice (in glib illusion of sacrifice)
is no match for the suffering of cancer victim,
eaten inside until they slowly suffocate
no match for the "witches" burned alive
no match at all for billions of years
of animals suffering a single fate
no match, no match for the rivers of tears.

No simple garden is this Earth.
No simple myth explains its birth.
No simple promise of hell or paradise
supported by dozens of legends and lies
makes up for the fact that *all life dies*
more often in pain than not.

There is, in fact, only one way
true *justice* could be schooled
in the random dance of being.
If all things, all hearts, all pain, all joy,
are *shared* by One who is not aloof.
All evil, all good, both darkness and light,
all past, all future – under just One roof.
This only could make it all right.

Longer Poems

Sam Versus Sue Haiku

The following is an actual Haiku War between my thirteen year old son Sam and his mother Sue that occurred around the end of February, 2009. The story is that we were driving somewhere at night and one of us in the car – memories are confused as to just who – referred to police cars as being 'sharks cruising the asphalt'. Why, it might have even been me (although both of them deny it)!

Wherever the line came from, Sam grabbed it (or came up with it, depends on who you ask) and turned it into 'sharks cruising the asphalt *sea*' (which did have a nice ring to it, whereupon his mother (who was popping out lines of her own around the same time) preferred asphalt *jungle*, and all at once a storm of I'm-one-up-on-you free verse haiku bounced around in the car, mixed with a certain amount of argument (in which I did not participate, it being beneath my dignity and besides I was mostly driving and trying to avoid the sharks).

Anyway, we came home and Sam was very quiet for a while we as we sat together in our den, then he grabbed a small pad of paper and scribbled and produced his version of the poem in Mike Myers I Married an Axe Murder style beat-poet haiku (as that was the rhythm they were both using, da-da, da da-da, da da da da da da da, da da da da da, complete with the attitude and an imaginary cup of espresso in hand).

Sam:

silent and stealthy
the sharks cruise the asphalt sea
in the dark they wait

His mother applauded his efforts, but then grabbed the pad and wrote *her* version:

Sue:

silent stealth in chrome
sharks cruise the asphalt jungle
silently they wait

This irked Sam, who grabbed the pad and promptly wrote on, triggering the following rather hilarious exchange:

Sam:

my mother the thief
remora on my body
she stole my poetry

Sue:

my son the ingrate
he sucks all my life juices
viper at my breast

Sam:

we fight, we fight hard
but this jibe is pointless pain
I will win, you tramp

Sue:

you insolent pup
you have met armageddon
your mistress owns you

Susan's writing was deteriorating as she was giggling, almost in hysterics over Sam's replies as she wrote, and the word "pup" above looked (on the paper) more like "perp", the "you"s like "yon"s, and the word "owns" was all but illegible o-something-something-s. Sam tried to read it, couldn't, and had to ask for a translation. Truly miffed at this point, Sam replied:

Sam:

your handwriting sucks
I wish I could read it well
your nurse must hate you

at which point we *all* collapsed in laughter and the two of them finally quit. (My wife is a physician, in case I didn't mention that, and actually has very good handwriting for a doctor.)

There it ended (for at least that day), with Sam having the last word. And here I immortalize it. It is evidence of *something* that needs to be preserved. The literacy and surprising talent of youth? The strangeness of my family where we speak in rhyming couplets (or sometimes – as demonstrated above – in more complex verse forms) in everyday conversation? A bit of badinage exchanged by two people who deeply love one another and are willing to exchange crafty insults in free verse to prove it?

rgb:

my family's odd
children duelling us both
in cruel haiku

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