



Crafting Wings

Poetry by
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2017 chapbook
Publications

Acknowledgments

Alliterati, “The Shape of New Words”
Amethyst Arsenic, “Our Secrets”
Burningword Literary Journal, “Now and Then”
Chantarelle’s Notebook, “Back Home,” “Magic”
Chicago Literati, “Ruins and the Dream”
Clementine, “What Joins Us”
Connotation Press, “Let Death Keep,”
Connotation Press, Living Poets, “One Morning,” “One Step Further”
Earthspeak, “Winter’s End”
Fresh Water, “As It Is”
Poetry Matrix, Living Poets, “Our New Voices”
Pure Francis, “The Pressure”
SP Quill, “What Never Falters”
The Stray Branch, “Our Symmetry,” “Our Promises”
TAB, “*Illusions*”
Vox Poetica, “The Descent,”
Waterways, “Line of Duty”
Whistling Fire, “A Light That Clings,” “The Seeker”
Wilderness House Review, “My Slender Oars”

Biography

Joseph Murphy is a retired communications executive who lives in Colorado. He has been published in a number of journals, including *The Ann Arbor Review*, *Northwind* and *The Sugar House Review*. Murphy is also senior poetry editor for an online literary publication, *Halfway Down the Stairs*.

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Winter's End

In that spring's first true gleam,
Lightening creased the walls
And thunder gathered the rarest of fragrances
Into its mouth.

The water from my tipped bowl
Spilled down a mountain the height of a weed; the breeze
Read aloud evening's first page.

It was then that rain rose from the soil
And a star descended
Through the roots of these words.

The evening became brighter, quieter:
No minute hand's clatter broke through;
No wheel skidded past.

Time became nothing more or less than time.

I cast my lines ashore: sang as prow and sail burned,
Knowing my wounds would heal.

Thoughts that had been tightly woven spun loose.

That evening's warmth lingered on my bare shoulders;
The scent of damp loam sweetened the air.

In that enormous space,
Our past seemed no more than a whisper
Sensed at the edge of sleep.

The Shape of New Words

Something new rises as the first rains enrich the soil:

Words, believed lost, well up
Past freshly shaped leaves;

Missing verse ascends through the flowering brush.

What was unfinished is ended; secrets
Curl from the sky's cuff,
Forming a lyric
Sung by weed and stone.

Lost languages burst from a crisscross of roots;
Rising through the rain's nib,
To be written on breeze and bark.

Voices that leap from a sea cliff's clay
Enter our throats,
And we begin to track
The orbit of their sounds.

Forgotten pages appear in our hands.

We begin to whisper rhymes
Written by the dew; by salt spray
Billowing from bees' wings; by a gleam
Reflected on a polished cup.

Our mouths can now shape the newest of words.

We need no longer pry them
From the fray of regretted lives; heal
Their scorched hands; shelter them
In the well of our mingled blood.

The Descent

As evening drew up I lingered outside,
Waiting for what might jump
From mind to page.

I must wake the slumbering body of these words.

A stirring has begun!

At my feet, a willful phase
Reshapes a patch of light:
In a thought or two, it's become a door
I swing open.

Down I go.

I enter a grand chamber:
Clouds protrude from roots; flesh and leaf
Reflect identical images.

Shaping my language into a ladder, I descend further.

It's quiet this far down. Still. Lovely.
I just breathe. Perfect.

But I must return.
I'm not yet ready for such peace. I can't stop
Pestering my words: tapping them
On the shoulder; sorting
Through their memories; unfolding
Their maps.

The Seeker

My cares seemed an illusion
That mild day: fists
Unclenched; clarity;
Renewal.

I'd begun to sift
Through clutter and symbol;
Rethink my track,
Ear to ground.

Rising, spirited, determined:
I knew I'd find you; breathe life
Into your chalked image;

Coax hope from the grit; restore
My dust-covered globe.

I soon began to sort
Through phrases I'd broken,
Hunting for the right one
To wish upon.

I hadn't yet begun to wonder
Which illusion I'd live: the brilliance
Of our joined bodies,
Or a glance
Milled from thought.

My Slender Oars

I want to pitch out my oddly-shaped parts,
But they keep out-reaching me;
Out-living clarity.

One piece wills its way up, slips past.

Others follow, press forward,
Bruising my thoughts;
Having their way
With the curve of my wrist.

I dream of a beach at dawn;
Fire still smoldering within a circle of stone.

For a moment, the blare subsides,
But soon I'm rubbed raw
By doubt.

Outside, the rain has stopped; street lights illuminate
What the age considers real.

But I'm bowing to another half-lived night.

I want to pitch these sheered bolts
Before the rug comes loose;
The sand hardens.

I'm working, pulling, hoping
Relief will follow,
But the past keeps unfurling,
Jamming my slender oars
Against the stone.

One Morning

The light rain launches its scented keel
Into the wake of this line
And well-hidden cares
Splash free.

A shaking begins.

My shadow's husk splits open; snapping
The weakest strand
Of what I've feared – a start.

Memories twist loose;
The gnashing ends.

I can hold steady again: hand on bell cord,
Ready to pull,
Regardless of the breadth
Of my hopes.

How fine to hear a familiar bird's call;
Rain tapping gutter.

Everything appears right:
It's time to step up,
Turn the knob.

The pine floor
Should seem firm again.

The Departure

At the very edge, we lean out further.

We're looking to return
To a narrower path; to step from a well-lit world
Into the flickering light.

What a steep grade before us;
What shallowness we've endured
During these half-breathed lives.

We hope to persist, no matter:
Prows pointed toward that depth;
That new land.

On the edge, fear shakes its rattle:
Harder, harder.

Our fingertips become stuck
Beneath well-tucked corners;
Between stalks and buds
Too carefully arranged.

We keep questioning;
Changing pace.

We've leaned out further than we care to say.

What's ahead
Will either restore our vision
Or blind us.

The Pressure

A banging emanates from within a vase; a menu
Froths and snorts; a button seethes.

The handle of a pan begins to roar.

At the edge of a curb, a muddy hatch swings open
Exposing a sluice.

I've tripped into it!

I'm pitching, head long, numb;
Rungs snap; bones
Splinter.

Then — nothing. Nothing.

Then — a sigh.

I wake, as if in another's skin; part the curtain,
Turn the tap,
Drop a coin in the meter.

Walking swiftly, I draw strength
From evening's smallest detail;
From the husk and seed
Of memory.

The beast, once again, lies trapped within the fabric.

Good enough for now.

Line of Duty

When the first shot was fired,
Blood fell from desk tops and beach rose;
From a jar's lid.

Sea-rounded stones and spines of books
Ignited; a lark's nest frayed.

Another death in the line of duty.

Great decisions made, the lofty walked on.

Some said their bones have the grit
Of a stone wall; of a palisade
That can't be breached;

Others spoke of blood
Running from the nibs of their pens.

But we fit the yoke to our shoulders, not to theirs.

Blood has begun to ooze from glass cases;
Cover the feet of mannequins;
Wires short.

A robin, tearing at these words, draws back, startled.

We wait for what might crawl forward,
Hoping lives will be spared;
Our tethers shortened.

Another disfigured in the line of duty.

Times Like These

This is no time for excuses.

You can't seem to center yourself.
You walk on, but head down, troubled
By a worn cuff.

Your shadow languishes
As you fumble with a shoelace;
Sit too close to the wall.

You thought times like these were long past.

You want to get out; push back;
Stand beneath a moonlit sky.

But where to begin?

Clouds will gather – you're sure – but when?

You imagine the rain's first moments: your thoughts
Purged of guilt and fear.

Regardless of what part
You must cut away, it's time to step up,
Reemerge.

As It Is

A wave shimmers loose from a shell's gleam,
As if to coax these words
Toward open water;

As if meaning could be pried
From sound; shaped by another's lips
And heard.

As if it weren't mad
To gather images as others do shells,
Pressing them forward,
Line after line.

As if those images had the strength
To wield, carry; to reach
Past the brain's hollow; to emerge
Through a willow leaf's surge
Or a worm's skin
And whirl back alive through one day's
Dog-eared page.

As if that page could burn in the beak of things,
Breathing or not;
Plumb the source of a dream; measure
One night's width.

As if that dream were to shake me awake,
Offer images chipped
From the breadth of another's sleep.

As if those images could wriggle up,
Surface within my reflection;
Change the way I imagine.

As if it were enough to witness
The world as it is,
And still wish to set a sea-shaped fin
On dry land.

A Light That Clings

I wake in the half-world of our time,
Willing the whittle of my thoughts
Into a wind-shaped mask.

So much takes shape as I sift through these words.

Here's a once fallow wish
That's taken root
On my tongue's brim; a sprout
Ascending through the sway of this line.

Here's a sweetness that won't recede
As I press forward; the weave
Of a well-felt moment
Removing a shard from my torn cuff.

Here's the sea's pitch and pull; the roiling
Of winnowed dreams; a light that clings
To the nib of my thoughts.

Nothing seems shallow;
Limiting.

What Never Falters

When thorns rose from the shadow of an herb,
A startling burst from these words
And a syllable's orbit
Parsed a bend in my thoughts.

I continue to press the levers of sound:
Hoping to animate a long-dead sigh; fathom
The curves and shapes of leaves.

I keep sea-smoothed memories in pocket;
Renounce the surge and pitch
Of asphalt; sway
As edge meets center at breath's core;

As a green stalk
Twists through the blade that chafes me,
Through the reigns
That churn thought and vowel,
Though what spins
And never falters.

Now and Then

The sky's crisp blue curls through me,
Drawing these words
From the chaff of the world.

I'm tossing through my past's what and when;
Trying to rejoin its parts;
Wondering whether this maple's shade
Will ever cool me.

I breathe deeper, pause; try to patch
Past lives together; erase chance; but so much
Remains shapeless, strewn.

Perhaps it's best not to reweave frayed skins.

But I'm trying to gauge the wealth of these days.
Is it high or low?

I'm also looking ahead,
Wondering which part of beyond, if any, I'll share;
Or whether the shadow of this maple
Fits the tree.

Crafting Wings

The sky seems stretched thin.

I can hear a rumbling; a growling. I've begun to adjust;
Pull in my lines; set a safer speed.

People gaze past me,
As if I weren't here. No matter.

With or without a hand in mine, I sense
A great opening; a brightness.

I'll resize my hopes: slip out;
Go forward, renewed.

I'm past the high wire's midpoint; for now
No regrets.

But I'm not sure
I'll have the strength to continue;
Time enough to finish
Crafting these wings.

That First Touch

Morning seemed unscathed,
Full of desire and consent:

A sparrow above the near hedge; a breeze
Cooling my opened hands.

But I knew I must ignite
That collection of years
We'd shunted between us.

For too long, I'd done nothing
To amend that odd story of ours,
Seemingly inscribed
By another's pen.

For too long, we've gripped
A broken rung; exhaled
Such tainted air.

At edge of our divide,
We still reach out,
Believing our first touch
Can be relived.

I promise to begin
To be as kind as you've been
From the first.

I'll smooth the wilt of your cares
However I can.

Our New Voices

A scent, hinting of brine and beach rose, has begun to rise
From our fingertips; from the hue and tone
Of well-recalled mornings.

We still shape our divide;
Bear the burden of who we've become.

But it won't be long before what we've gained
Becomes as true to us as light.

You've done so much to stand firm; to hold on.

What had been stunted has begun to grow wild
In our long untended places, regardless
Of all we've tried to ignore.

That's the length of it: We're breaking out,
Putting an end
To narrowed dreams.

Let's believe our future will out-weigh
What we can't relive.

Let's hope our new voices
Continue to gleam.

Our Promises

The brisk of early spring cools our neared faces.

We've begun to frame loss
And wound; judge
What to do without.

Our new portrait
Includes a worn hinge,
A chipped dial — but also
A smoother blend
Of color and breadth.

We've begun to set out:
Sails mended; swells
Lower, gleaming.

We seem weightless; the width of an echo.

I've pressed our shadows
From their hiding place; pitched memories
That obscured our path.

We've begun to lean out; unfurl
Our promises.

Ruins And The Dream

Debris disfigured the skin of our dream; grime
Darkened my pockets.

But when a still-standing arch
Came into focus,
I hooked my desire to a rusted spike
And returned to you.

The harness on my shoulder became transparent.
The load I'd packed, though full,
Seemed lesser so.

Though much remains undone,
I'm ready to persist; a heart-shaped stone
In hand, our totem.

We can still glance back
At our well-sketched dream
But the blank pages we treasured
No longer exist.

We've twisted loose
From that wild first touch of ours;
Come to terms
With who we've become.

Light that hardens the chipped frescoes
Can't penetrate our hopes.

We're alert again, balanced;
Ready to attempt, to sooth;
No longer fearing the limits
Of what remains.

Arms Akimbo

So many blades to sheath.

I picture your unease; the ill fit
Of clarity; our remorse.

What to weigh after such a loss? Nothing left
To draw from my sleeve.

I can barely reach
The topmost latch; exhale.

Which way to lean
After such affliction? Stuttering back
Would deepen the bruise,
Regardless of intention.

But I've begun to sense the roar,
The spill-over; a cadence
Of angst and hope.

I've begun to discern
What best to clench; to prize.

I'm ready to reenter the ring.

Back straight, arms akimbo,
I'm hoping your applause
Can quell my fears.

One Step Further

A crisp memory shakes loose from my shoulders.

I step across its dream-shaped hollow,
Piecing together what's left.

I see your shadow in its waters;
Watch as that memory's mouth
Moistens in the here and now,
Becoming yours.

I'm not sure what part of our past
You'll disdain or regret
That instant I regain my balance; nor what part
You might desire to restore.

But my hope's bright skin now rests against yours.

I can sense you're mending me.
You've begun to untangle that sharp-edged vine
That tightened around me;
Twist open the latch
That bloodied my hand.

You've given me the will to reach up, cast off.

I'm no longer concerned with loss
Or what might fade or shatter.

I'm rising to you, through it all, one step further
And I'll be there.

What Joins Us

We've crossed the shallows; dressed
A spate of wounds.

Sand no longer breaches our up-turned eyes.

But what will we make of what we share? A huge room,
Warmly lit? Or a paste, hardening
As the years pass?

Will our keel hold,
Heady with what we've reclaimed
From torn pages?

Or regret weight down our opened hands?

We must relearn how best to speak; renew
The wealth of our lungs.

Come. Step forward.

I'll do what must be done; there's no undoing
That swath of luster
Linking your lips to mine.

Our Secrets

For Frances

1.

Our words have scarred our mouths.

We can't shake loose from what jabs us;
From a clutter that cuts short our stride.

Down-turned faces greet me; tender shoots
Tremble in our hands.

I'm trying to rub the soot away;
Speak freely again.

I promise to cast our lines ashore,
Force open the rusted gate,
If you step back,
Rejoin me.

2.

The stars return to their places as I quicken my pace.

My heart is ready to rise to yours,
But my thoughts remain stiff,
Hard to unfurl.

Please don't offer me flowers
Only the blind can heal.

The breeze has begun to ignite
A little known fragment of our days.

How quickly the losses burn!

How easy it was to retreat:
To clutch the same twig,
The same dried leaves.

Hands joined, we kneel, no longer faltering.

We find ourselves on a ledge,
Neither willing to return
Without the other.

Calmly, we begin to share our secrets.

Back Home

I twirled a dried leaf, drawing memories
Of syrup and cinnamon
From the sight of mildewed apple
Set in a porcelain bowl.

You'd have it your way: No more excuses; discoveries.

I lingered on that stretch of beach we'd walked
One well-spent morning,
When we'd paused
To ponder our lives.

We agreed to measure
The breadth of our hopes
Before casting off.

We'd first probe the light
Then the larger dark,
Unconcerned
With what might take shape.

Magíic

Her moist lips reflect once-concealed stars.

She cups her hand
Around the moon's edge.

She has returned and her sighs are no longer a burden.

Her eyes were a jumble of misplaced keys;
Her lips a bird,
Pecking at a snow-covered twig.

She can now sip her tea and is eager to talk.

Her fears still linger,
But the stones seem to glisten
As she steps forward.

Coda

Let Death Keep

When I lowered my ear to the ground,
Light burst from my fingertips
And the walls around me chimed.

I've kept my drapes tied open;
Eyes above the edge,
Back straight.

I still sing a scale made from sea foam
And rice; from desire, silence.

I've etched each instant into my palm: don't ask
What I've been
Or might become.

Think of this: a thread closing torn fabric;
A passing breeze.

Let death keep its precious cloak:
Each new breath
Smooths my forehead,
Revives hope.



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