Selected Poems, Stories, Essays

Michael Gogins

This book is for Mick.

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# Prose Poems

## Sleep

1. I sleep with a naked sword between me and my love. We lie not touching but dreaming of mutual death, our glittering wave that overwhelms the Western cities, the tidal wave a mile high and full of sunlight that shines between the floating houses and the dead things.
2. August 15, 1988...June 1, 1989

## The Anti-Monogamist Crusade

In the anti-monogamist crusade I've been rancher, soldier, prisoner, urban refugee, and finally poet. For I have learned the most fundamental trope. It is dislocation, exile.

Dislocation separates the meanings of one thing, say love, into the redoubled terms of metaphor: one flesh, two bodies. Dislocation analyses motives into the unity of opposites: promises, power. And so dislocation foreshadows the false denouements of our Empire. Despite the barricades of the Monogamists, the capitol is decked in white today. For today we celebrate our beloved Crown Prince's latest, in fact his seventieth, royal wedding.

My own complete dislocation has been accomplished not through my being dispossessed of my ancestral holdings by the tanks of the Emperor, not through my forced exile from our mountains of black pine, not through the drugs and alcohol of the slums, and not through prolonged meditation or other ascesis, though I have suffered all of these, but through faith alone. For only faith endures all change of body and state.

The wheel of the seasons returns me again and again to my task, as if I am being hammered on the anvil of the Sun. I am seeing all times becoming one time, all cities emptying into this one city wracked by civil war, and all peoples being pounded, despite themselves, by the clash of religions, into one people.

When he first began to study Yoga, my older brother lived for several months in a mountain canyon with the half-Cherokee woman from the plains he later married. Slide showing a half-cave in a red-rock cliff, propane stove and aluminum pots set along a slab of sandstone, plastic tarp for a tent, two smiling suntanned lovers. Later, he joined me in the capital, in a rented house of mud brick in the middle of a block. He built gliders of paper and balsa and kept a parrot, but his periodic months of Yogic celibacy infuriated her. I would sit with them through the winter nights, drink tumblers of red wine in the white lamplight, and look at her olive, high-browed face, for it was really her I liked. And the children in their pink and peach pajamas, cheap toys in hand, would come forward to examine me with solemn black eyes.

Eventually, my older brother was recruited by a fiercely polygamous sect. His wife divorced him in outrage, and returned with her children to the still-rebellious plains. He went back with his two new wives, as one of the enemy, to our conquered mountains. When winter came on, he was shot by our younger brother, who'd lost his own wife and lands to an Imperial.

Now the cold wind off the tundra blows snow so high it covers the first doors and reaches the thresholds of the winter doors on the second stories. In the loft where I used to work, I know that the windows are steaming up from the breath and perspiration of the operators, whose hands of tender flesh must screw together the titanium hands of robot after robot. At the end of the street, the black brine grinds its floes of ice against the granite piers. And through tubular bridges of light strung between the office buildings far above, traders and secretaries in pastel silks saunter to and fro, chewing nuts and spice.

I came here with nothing. Yet I am determined to rule, even if it is only myself, my inch square field of will. Sometimes I go out in my old stubs of charred plywood, the yoke I wore as prisoner of war. For I like to flaunt my rebellion and escape in the chaos of the enemy's very capitol.

Fear does not rule me, or limit my limitless ambition, though we all rightly fear the armored divisions. Nevertheless I have no wish to ape the repetitive conquests of our polygamous Prince with some futile victory of blood. I am revolted by the sophistries shouted in the markets by professional debaters, and by the riots incited by armed Monogamist missionaries. So I have chosen my own battlegrounds with care: poetry and faith, the decisive contexts of action.

This afternoon, after meditating upon the central figure, I sacrificed a pair of prayer wings. I touched them with a match, and they blazed up into wings of fire, wings of smoke, wings of glowing ash, which crumbled with the breeze into aromatic dust.

Now Yekaterina climbs the six flights to my roofless room. She sees how cold and sick I am in my Mexican blanket, how I shiver and speak deliriously of computers to link each mind, of golden scarabs that we could forge to monitor and feed our brains. She touches my forehead with her hot indifferent hand, and asks if my escape and my sacrifice were worth it. I remember meeting her at the gallery where she works downtown. That night they were showing a backwards-leaning throne made of oak trunks lashed together, far too big for anyone to sit in, and its seat was splintered as if by lightning.

“Worth it?” I ask. Her tongue is so pink! Above, a shell has torn away the roof. As the night breeze blows ice clouds across a crescent moon, plaster dust drifts down. I want to sneeze but am too weak. I think of campfires in the mountains of my birth, and how my father and I used to sit our horses under black pines heavy with snow to look down into the distant glow of this city, coals banked against the dark ocean. I think of the huts built everywhere here, their little fires flickering, even halfway up the great thick cables of the suspension bridges. And I wonder how my sister fares, who lives on the other side of the line of rubble dividing the quarters. But to visit her I'd have to pass those sandbag booths of dark-faced men who demand payment or a certain name, and I have no name but my own. Indeed, names are too dangerous --- I have no name at all. I have only these words, which swirl through my consciousness like the glowing sparks of prayer wings one burns as evening falls.

Deliriously I speak to Yekaterina of restoring the ruined fortunes of my family through canny trading. of ships I will buy, though our nation no longer has ships except for ships of war. And my family were ranchers and miners, anyway, who never smelled the sea. In my fever I describe the suit I'll order, with glittering threads of power, bulletproof panels sewn in its lining, buttons of jewel. “Worth what?...” I mutter, as the fiver rises in me again. Yekaterina brings me another cup of water from the pump in the yard below. I cough. But when she leans over and I sense the heat beneath her soft grey sweater I start thinking of marriage, of dynasty even.

The burning core which drives conquerors now burns in me, for I have tasted the very dregs of dispossession. There is no glass in the round windows of this beachfront apartment where I squat with my rough friends, where in the cold noon retsina burned our throats, and where playing cards still lie scattered on the black carpet. And the sea air in my nose reminds how in the summertime, before the fighting entered the city itself, my sister played her flute for coins on the boardwalk by the amusement pier. Last I heard she was shining shoes and fetching lunches in the stock market, scurrying beneath its glowing screens.

Dislocation has taught me that all empires, not only the Kingdom of God but even ours, are founded on the immolation of innocence. It is why one side of a street is brick row houses with plaster saints and olive-skinned kids hosing down a Pontiac under peach trees in October sun, while the other side is all cyclone fence and railroad tracks, where the bitter wind from the north plains blows trash into the fence, and cardboard huts huddle against the burned-out factories. But my fever confuses me: Do I want to be the innocent immolated one, or one of the cursed immolating ones removing their curse by immolating the innocent one?

Night falls, and battle satellites chase each other across the smoke-streaked blackness filled with stars. To celebrate the seventieth marriage of our beloved Crown Prince, the lasers of the city fire needles of green light up from the tower tops, as if to defend his bright illusions against nightmares in the outer darkness. But the black book I sleep on tells me that the only innocent one among us, knowing we cursed ones had no one else to immolate to remove our mutual curse, stepped forward and offered himself, himself and not another, to be bound between the oil-drenched wings of sacrifice.

I enter more deeply into his act as I taste Yekaterina's second cup of cold water, its grains of wet plaster gritting in my teeth. I suppose I should be glad she even thinks of me among our teeming surplus of unmarried men. Now she's saying, “A girl I know has been asking about us, if I would mind, and I said no....” I think of how I have so often contemplated, and even oftener postponed, my marriage. I remember mountain weddings of few words said once.

Anti-aircraft guns are clapping from the edge of the seaport, firing either against the monogamous quarter or in celebration of this latest royal wife. Yekaterina's face, her gallery girl's face, bent with momentary tenderness over mine, is lit by green flashes on the left side and by orange flashes on the right. I refuse her wildly, I refuse them all, I feverishly refuse till I should not only be loved but also love, once and only once, in return.

And I do not know if I am foolish to do so, but it certainly loosens my tongue. I have learned the most fundamental trope. It is dislocation, exile. Dislocation separates the meanings of one thing, say love, into the redoubled terms of metaphor: two bodies, one flesh. Dislocation analyses motives into the unity of opposites: power, promises. And so dislocation illuminates the false denouements of our Empire. Despite the barricades of the Monogamists, the capitol is decked in white today. For today we celebrate our beloved Crown Prince's latest, in fact his seventieth, fallacious royal wedding.

The whole city is white, white everywhere, except in the one most needful place. For the Imperial groom and his seventieth teen-age bride, in the tinny box of television, in their heresy, are not wearing the white wings, the paper wings of monogamy.

1. October 15, 1988...June 3, 1989

# Verse

## Piano Microscope

My inflicted self's

Blow-blinded eye's no ear

Yet hears the sparrows on black wires

In rain as grey as rain

From fragile ink of sky

Let my torn Bible hide you

In her Martian shadows

With clock wings of feathery steel

And feel the mask of quilt

To sleep with beating hands

For the city of music

Is one white room

Where a child overinterprets guilt

And skips through bars of light

In sudden beats

So rise, pilots

Through circumstance of blank

And with piano microscope

Search the stockings of sound up

To their soft detonation

Where the deepest whisper turns

A brass knob without a legend

To open the bright mouth of duty

That shows no rank but

Obligation

Till that tender monster my blue eye

Roams in sudden streets of light

Cutting shadows down to make soft ice

And turning rays away

Back into ink

For when we die

There are no

Audible prayers any more

Just darkness full of

Answer

## Gently

Your face is a burning window in this rainy night,

My hands are looking blindly for your name,

My heart has a mouth for it crammed with honey and shame,

My voice is a broken commandment.

Love's the worthless thing everyone dies for,

The beggar who rules the world,

This burning dump whose flames dance forever,

Red slaves always dying chained to their dance.

Love, the destitute emptiness,

Love, the riddle crying for its lost voice,

Love, the enemy, love, the fool,

Love, the rebel king, lowering himself to serve everything.

The older I am the emptier I become,

Full of trembling air,

I, the mere echo of my broken vows,

Words spilled everywhere.

But love's still the song at the end of the tongue,

Syllables dancing naked and perfumed.

And love is the war at the end of the world,

The warrior loving the warriors.

The drowned book will swallow up its sea,

Dead ink reanimate dead mouths.

The mirror will shatter its diamond,

And the Sun will part the sky.

The kiss that strips away the masks of the face,

The touch that puts all the useless things down at the end of the world,

Gently

Will touch me.

1. January 14...June 1, 1989

## Black Scum in a Silver Cup

Going to share my life with you.

Here's my life, black scum in a silver cup, blood that's not half so clean as the pretty blood of Jesus.

If you want to share my life, you have to drink this cup, just as Jesus drank it down, just as I tell myself I too some day must drink, I really must force myself to share your black life.

And I will, for Jesus is helping me drink, he is standing beside me and inside me, his hands guide my hand to the blinding cup.

Be like Jesus to me, drink my cup, help me be like Jesus to you, help me drink your cup, there is only one cup.

In this cup there is reflected only a whipped face, for the veil was torn when the cup was poured, and God revealed a human face poured out.

Going to share my life with you, in the human face of God poured out, the bitter wine of the twice-born.

Then we will be able to sing the song we are already whispering, and how crippled we are will become a sort of dance, a sort of rejoicing.

There is nothing that will make you more drunk that this cup of black scum.

You could marry a cloud covering the Sun, a woman with no brain, a man with no legs, a child with a crippled canary.

Maybe you're thinking you'll never get married, but drink this cup with me anyway.

1. December 16, 1988...June 1, 1989