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Six Poems

JAMES A. WREN
San Jose State University

“Then, Not as We Were?”

Confronting a world where birds might no longer sing,
Where the wind is flagged, tired,
And the veil of darkness begins to weigh heavily upon us,
I give myself freely to slumber.

And as I do so

The harsh, the unjust, the discordant
Melt away the cacophony, leaving in its place
Residues, a single melody that all might enjoin.

As we comprehend our place in our world,
Accept,
Embrace lovingly our own responsibilities and actions
--spreading our wings for the very first time
so that we might escape the excuse of “then”

Only now are we able to cross the vast distances.

However long such a journey might take,
No matter the direction it might take us
Away from a world of inequity
--where the poorest
the loneliest and used up
all who find themselves lost or worse,
invisible to the unaffected eyes of other times, other places—
There remains an omnipresent music,

A song we learn as we bathe in the warmth of all we share,
Our humanity
Our breaking of stones and barriers alike
As we till the harden ground into a silken ash.

For if this song, once heard, goes without heed,
If we fail to raise our voices in unison

--doing as we have for centuries before, and
spending our every waking moment,
caught in the trap, a frivolous exercise of
stringing,
removing and
restringing again
our own instruments—
Then only silence and stagnation remain.

Better that our lyrics rise from the depths of shared truth
--that infinite healing lies in the repeated refrains of
the natural world--
As we grow together,
--in the awkward pauses initially or overflowing leisure that follows--
Sitting quietly, face to face,

As we begin to sway to a greater song called life.

Singing of life,
Simple and straight
--a reed flute, now filled with music—

One after another might leave the security of the darkest corners
Leave their doors ajar,
Their mouths agape and
Their eyes opened wide, ranging freely perhaps for the very first time

And we drink with a newfound joy
Forgetting our self, only to relocate,
Our reflections against the eyes of all others.

Knowing, striving, understanding
As we live, we can do so without fear,
Our heads held high in

A new world,
Global and all-encompassing

Its people no longer broken up, like shards of
A once-stain glass window,
Fragments of narrowly-conceived domestic walls.

Still, we must not forget
An earlier gloom, a foreboding, forbidden darkness
That permeated the very corners of our being and
Dared challenge the skies to hold dominion.

As my eyes survey all that was
All that could be, let our hearts recall the bitterness of old,
Wailing in unison with the force of the unsettling winds:

Do you not hear?
Not feel that electric thrill passing through the air
Alongside the notes of once-unspoken melodies,

Floating
Shore to shore
And beyond.

Or is it the “snap” we hear?
The voice of that trap
Its door shut, closed and tight. . .

Or worse, newer shrieks still heard among a few
Lamenting the discomforts of our world,
Recognizing, accepting

Our role
Our responsibility
Our ability to initiate change

Even as we see the pinchers pan in,
Close-up,
And the doors begin to shut, fast and tight.

Exhibition at a New York Gallery

Tu ne cede malis sed contra audentior ito

Raku Sculpture (ca. 11 September)

Cranes circle overhead

Elemental glaze

Anguished faces of recent events

Exposing self-doubt

The ineffable pink

A single lotus blossom

Stripped bare

Another child cries, drown out

Rumors soaked in rain

Humanity kowtowing

Bamboo sprouts

Against the horizon

Slowly dredged from the sulphur

Pits of arms and hell

Douched in bilge water

The ancient art of raku masters

Resurrected, resilient

. . .among the ashes

Broken wishbones and charred carrion

Prey

Seattle's Red Square (an installation)

A pristine fall gathering at first sight

No more than ten people

Swatches of red, edged white and black

Ribbons

Without words

Hands intertwined

Human circles

Formed by a

Few

The dozens, many

Friends among strangers, straggling

Silence and crashing waves repeat

Cawing of sea gulls swooping in overhead

Wiping a

Way for the tears

Overwhelming roars

A commercial jetliner passes from sight

In aerie unison

Heads snap nervous

Beseeching

A sky in the wake of calm

No peace

No hints of healing

Not yet

Relief from a world and

Uncertain promises, the terror

Knowing

We saw

What remained

Awakened forever

A Visitation (performance art)

Voluble matrons

Apathetic daughters in tow

Over deeper waters

Seizing

Women anointing

Promises of an infinite birth

Jerked out from under

Death and birthing abdication

Shaking the stars

For none and

To no avail

Threnody, Too

(To Astraea and Taylor)

Drive-in gospel

Had me waiting

Several days I

Now feel so sad—

A bad cold, every

Thing went

Through, sudden-like

And a boy loved

Very much,

Carrying me

Across sky and

Hospital,

Totally in

His hug,

Warm holds

Tighter I fight

Strength in his

Arms, feeling me

Worthies him

Self my all life

Spilled, spending

His arms

Him, no, never

I worry

None and all,

Thinking I died,

Understanding every

Nothingness, cold

Feverish, sudden

Like clear

Feverish

Jakarta Daydreams

(To Tjan and Ibeng)

parking the car

in the basement boom-box

bombed echoes, he do not know what

is going on, a bit confuse when

we see us get round windows

finding out

happening all around

offices operate with castrated precision

as usual, the

traffic, open

at one side/

--long queue stick-people stuck in drive—

slowly passing

by your embassy

so, yesterday

in Jakarta, a *bom* explodes

our office

a few hundred feet, metered away

white

big

clouds-like

mushroomed with heads and ears

heated by sounds like

closed thunder, our building shaking like

having an earthquake seizure

horrible, how many people

dyed batik and some even injured

peace of humans

scattering around

these places, cars

motorcycles burn

fenced ruins

leaning on diplomatic shadows

windows, the glass surrounding

the buildings mostly destroy

one, friends

hurt, peace because he worked to close. the windows

and our private TV stations used that

holes shot more cameras into/

confounded embassy

why people deal

kill in

words traded, centered

Bali-bailed J. W. Marriot

Australian-sheeped businesses

what next

looking I think

for windows and widows

and winded,

won in sluggish singsongs

now

Recognitions and Revitalizations

In a world returned,
Reinvigorated,
Where everyone is deemed vital, important

Old arguments cease to wield power,
For the very words themselves convey little meaning,
Having died out before springing from the tips of wagging tongues.

As one joins with the many,
New melodies break forth, and
Differences fade, eventual disappear
--like stains bleached in sunlight.

As the oldest of tricks gives way and are lost forever,
A splendid synergy of voices prevail,
And a redoubtable new order is rendered in splendor.

Only then with a new morning come
Darkness will vanish
And music universal
--like crystal-clear rains
breaking through the cloud cover,
pouring forth an endless stream of vitality—

And we shall not know what is upon us, or
What it is.
--only that is not ours but remains an integral part of us,
a perfect sweetness to off-set the bitter of earlier times.
A sense of charity in sharing reborn
Rises within the depths of our being,
And the world is created anew.

Pulled into an awesome whirlpool of
New beginnings and much-welcomed endings,
Might we revel in a newfound circularity of which we are,
One and all,
Vital.

In pleasure or in pain,

I can no longer stand to the side,
Hide in the shadows for fear of
Shrinking as I
Relinquish my old ways.

Bear witness now, as
I plunge, head-first, into far deeper waters than I have ever tread

--into a life, some may someday judge, well-lived.

And as I do so,
From the depths of evening silence,
Stars begin to smile, then laugh uproariously
As they whisper among themselves in unbroken perfection.

As our individual trysts promote a marvelously complex harmony,
Our songs swaddle the world as we might now conceive it
In blanket sleep, restorative
--a sleep that leads to further enlightenment
Even as it gingerly nudges us deeper and deeper,
And the ineffable pink of lotus petals begin to droop.

With sunlight, morning gives way to the ripple of birds in song
The lotus pushes through the murk and gloom
To rise again.

Even the butterflies stretch their diaphanous sails
Upon seas of light
As the perfumed jasmine and lilies, likewise, rise up on a crest of waves.

As the penetrating rays of light shatter golden with every cloud,
As rainbows scatter their treasure in profusion,

We find ourselves armored
--secure with the strength never to disown or deny another
nor bend in submission to the insolent might of injustice.

A tremendous joy possesses our hearts,
As seeds of hope become sprouts worthy of nourishing our soul,
As buds of potential blossom, giving way to individual gifts of beauty,

As the fragrance of ripening flowers spread far and wide,
Reminding all of a renewed fruitfulness and abundance
That make for the brilliant texture of the fabric of our being.

Lingering overhead,
The air grows heavy with such perfumes
--and with the sweet presence of
promises kept and renewed in union.

As old wounds heal,
We finally accept our rightful positions, together,
at once and
as one.

As we strive to make this, our world, a better place
I hear muttered from the shadows:

Is this a promise
fulfilled for one and all,
Now and forevermore.

Uninsured

Hysterical laughing, lunging up and down in bed, even the planks in the floor give way and my legs again squeeze closed, tight performing a dance meant to fool only old men to shriek not in ecstasy but lamentations echoed against four chilled childless walls with screams of blood--worse of murder--erect themselves, but ever so supple to the touch, only now supported by my two swollen hands limp and hiding the conveniences of unpeeled masks that whisper mockery, hold down my shame. No going back. Only retreats to the streets where pedicures and pedestrians tram no notice, seen drunk I despair down alleyways, stumbling into highways sideways meant for sleep and another day urged my head beneath a pillow of dizzying rings setting my ass afire sobbing before my eyes sunk deep into my head wide-opened newspapers transfixed crucifixions burnishing against storefront windows widow the hunting haunting portraits sprinkled of spectres injuring my insults, parsed without progression, direction overwhelming, viewing myself and vying for my attentions confused fashions and the lights survived chaotic intentions in hysterical laughing, lunging ...