

# **variations**

**poems**  
**by lewis levenberg**

**for navah**

thanks to sophie and the circus.  
collaborations/splits are forthcoming.

## CONTENTS

poem (park bench)  
poem (oh no)  
accomplice to catricide  
six haiku  
Next–  
poem (couplets on your hair)  
short poems  
At Colonus  
fluxus  
something else  
something else again  
how the water breaks on daylight  
poem (match)  
what my twitter feed might look like  
poem (enemy)  
detail  
ways I've failed you  
refrain

**poem**

you sit on a park bench  
and open a novel.  
the book's spine  
doesn't trace the bench's contours.  
no one smiles at you, and yet  
your mood swings into wonder.  
wood grains split, slats warp and splinter.

rain, and you go home.  
you water the palm tree too often,  
you splash your face.  
you stand up straight,  
you dry your eyes.  
you name an art form, light  
a cigarette, drink a black coffee.  
you break down, disappear  
into thin history.

the edges of your hands,  
no longer fingers, rub your face.  
the edges of your memory,  
no longer dreams, break, warp and splinter.  
nothing's closed.  
you rise up singing.

**poem**

oh no, here comes that  
nature-in-the-city riff,  
that smell-of-spring-rain  
cleansing repetition

comes that same old  
patchwork-quilted streets  
turned aqueducts routine

that classical mirage  
that water forms  
on cobblestones  
of pillars mirrored  
hazy in the steam

that gathering-storm cliché.

here comes that tired romance  
oh no, sirens overheard  
and tv's flickering  
hi-pitched whine

discordant harmony  
disunity for white ears  
not quite post-  
racial emergencies

the strained  
do-not-invoke  
your-name-in-vain  
motif.

what rain?  
what now?

oh no, that modern  
apologia for the absurd  
arrhythmic patois

pattering outside the post office  
kissing the sidewalk  
behind the supermarket  
falling like-dead-leaves  
under the barren oak tree

oh, apology  
for muttered greetings  
flung among the buses  
full-of-empty-people

oh no  
sorry for that lyric  
splashing these sublime  
and filthy puddles  
into something sung

here-comes-the-sun  
for lonely  
damp pedestrians  
who need that something-sung  
that something sweet

that present to yourself  
sweet cotton-candy  
on-a-rainy-day

a-rose  
by-any-other-name  
like any other day

then what?  
now what?

oh no  
the voice we know  
reciting where to go  
if only to get dry

## accomplice to catricide

when i was young  
i had a cat, Pierre.  
he used to cross park avenue  
to sit in his favorite tree.  
the tree had pink, fuzzy  
pompom blossoms,  
and a trunk that rose in  
gnarled knots like an old  
carpenter's knuckles.

one thursday when Pierre  
was coming back from across the street,  
he was run over. i don't know who  
the driver was – they never leave a note.  
it was a hit and run. except not for Pierre,  
who crawled out of the road.  
when i came home from school,  
i brought him inside but  
he died soon afterward.  
we buried him behind  
the garage. most thursdays  
are rainy.

when the thunderstorm  
let up last thursday,  
i crossed park avenue  
to smoke a cigarette  
and i watched that  
tree across the street.



behind me, dogs began to howl at the rain  
while the smoke tree just stood there, silent  
and embarrassed, like an old carpenter  
wearing a tutu to his murderer's trial.

i flicked away the cigarette  
and everything grew still:

the raindrops, the wind,  
the smoke & steam & sweat of the city  
hung weightless, and the howling  
ceased, and in that moment,  
a long flash of lightning split the sky.

the old carpenter flexed his knuckles,  
shook his thistles, crouched,  
and leapt like Nijinsky,  
solemn and silent,  
to meet Pierre  
waiting thickly  
like judgment day,  
smiling like the thunderbird.

the moment broke.  
i turned, and rain fell  
and the tree was still alive,  
yes  
but still,  
and still mute  
and behind us,  
a dog howled again.

## six haiku

i got to shaking  
across the subway platform  
from you, and you said  
get to shaking way  
over there, away from me.  
got to shaking still.

she walks with her head  
held up straight in the rain. her  
posture is perfect.  
it's always perfect.  
so that, when you see her,  
you forget to breathe.

every word conjures  
just like every rock must breathe  
every breath a name  
every sound music  
every movement of the eye  
becomes repentance.

Next –

The great American poem  
IS,

I swear,  
composed in one fell swoop,  
over the course of several  
sleepless hours,  
fueled by alcohol and sugar,  
stained with nicotine and blood,  
and coffee-colored, and uneven  
and blotchy like a sweat stain,  
and wrinkled.

In its folds are hidden little  
nuggets of wisdom received,  
it is impeccably spelled, and there  
are several parenthetical asides  
making reference to all sorts of  
philosophers and saints and  
cultural icons and popular songs  
and classical paintings and  
it does go on, doesn't it?

This is not the great American poem.

The great American poem  
IS

built on a solid foundation  
(this is the first metaphor, a spatial  
and manual-labor reference, I hope  
you note), and elegantly brief,  
like a haiku about a barn  
(this is the second simile, you'll  
pardon me [this is the first internal  
rhyme], I hope). This is not the  
the great American poem. This  
this is a tribute, only a tribute.

The great American poem  
does not abuse the reader,  
does not strain their eyes,  
it is not epic, it does not make  
listeners yawn when it is read  
in a pleasant tenor voice at an  
inauguration or a convocation  
or a graduation or a coronation  
or a poet's funeral.

The great American poem  
IS,

I believe,  
easily set to music. It follows  
a simple, conversational rhythm.  
There are line breaks where  
a breath makes sense. It lends  
itself to repetition. Its use of  
imagery is bright and vivid,  
but there is an underlying  
violence, a subtext (if you will)  
of conflict, something between  
person and nature, probably.

The great American poem  
IS

already completed, meticulously  
edited, and probably stuck in your  
head by now. This thing (you are  
evidently still reading, on the other  
hand, and which I am sure you are  
likely to forget about just as soon  
as you put down or turn off or get up  
from the book or TV or radio or computer  
or poetry reading on/it/at which  
this thing you are [perhaps surprisingly]  
still dealing with), this thing is not  
that poem, but that great American  
poem is coming up, next, right after  
these messages.

**poem**

I found a piece of your hair in my beard while your  
mother was here from New York

your hair and mine  
co-mingled – so did we.

I guess that stands to reason  
since you stayed with me

while your mother showered,  
read a biography

of Alexander Hamilton,  
and went to sleep

in your apartment,  
or so I imagine she did.

all I know is that  
I found your hair,

and pulled it out slowly,  
trying to hear it over

the hum of appliances  
and the swish of tires

on Wisconsin avenue.  
don't worry, I was gentle.

it didn't break. I saved it  
for a moment, then let it

float to the floor,  
and listened to you

brush your teeth awhile.  
some nights I lie awake

and think of all the hair  
I could have saved, collected,

built a shrine around,  
re-gifted back to you,

but then again, that might not  
be a good idea. most nights  
when I lie awake  
and listen to you sleeping,

I have bad ideas.  
that was one of them.

don't hold my bad  
ideas against me.

I save them for  
an awkward conversation,

some cold morning when  
we don't have much to say.

## short poems

1  
space man  
and the whirlwind  
meet in music

2  
coming back  
to folding up  
to cold rain, but the window open anyway  
from blank cards filled with thank-you notes  
for birthday wishers  
long since gone offline

3  
the weather of his discontent  
another quarter-hour  
when the sun comes slouching  
into courtyard corners  
it should never visit  
then leaves with a shudder

4  
(the science of longing)  
is a slow and painful  
experimental process  
of elimination



5  
guilt is every second  
hand ticking,  
the second hand  
cancer I am giving you

6  
)and bricks  
and bricks  
and shadows  
and nothing (explodes

7  
watching you  
watching tv  
I am a stranger  
in my own body

8  
visit my blog,  
text me from work.  
poke me on facebook  
so what could it hurt?

9  
some days I see my skin  
and think of wilderness.  
would water and tobacco  
taste the same?  
my palms shift like sand dunes.

10  
space man  
and the whirlwind  
dissipate in music  
leave this evil city

11  
I got my wine and I'm smoking  
so I feel like a poet  
but a week's gone by  
and I ain't written nothing

12  
I am abiki and orisa at once  
tracing the never ending cycles  
the mandala of the sun and the earth.

13  
be, and go on being  
breathe, and go on breathing  
be real, go on breathing  
eat and read and go on,  
breathe, and be a real thing

14  
are we moving?  
are we anywhere?  
road, rise up  
road, rise up  
we are creatures of habit  
we are creatures of habit

15

somewhere between  
common ground and the limit  
lies the void, the pre-creative  
post-coital mess,  
the music where space man  
and the whirlwind meet again.

19

At Colonus

*after Joe*

1

and as I wander  
blind and limping  
through subjunctives  
cursing meaning

(let those curses teach you what contempt  
remains)

my daughters spit  
and whisper, *yes*

*is this yes?*

*this yes is.*

*this is yes.*

*yes is, this is,*

*is yes this?*

*yes, this is*

*this yes.*

Ismene cries.

2

Ah, Antigone, fuck Buffalo!  
give me a cane and leave me  
here to die among these liars.  
fuck your brother (bastard!)  
and why not? and what if?

let these ragged lyrics die.  
let poets now praise famous tyrants  
for there be no balm in Binghamton,  
there be no balm in Washington,  
none in Elizabeth,  
no last looks.

3

I am not dead yet.  
for the greater good of letters,  
and for learning how to love,  
I call on Aries the destroyer  
to fulfill these curses now.

so leave no trace of me  
though I was here,  
this frozen field,  
this yes.  
this is.

the chorus comes,  
bears witness  
at my feet.

21

## **fluxus**

find or wait for  
    one good thunderstorm  
go  
    out into the storm  
come  
    back inside  
and open  
    an umbrella.  
  
repeat.

## something else

the robin that flies straight at the loading dock, wheeling at the last moment, turning 180°, in the air, over less than six inches, to land on the pole where the awning is torn, turning, turning, into the gap between fabric and cinder block where its nestlings sit, hiding, incessantly chirping, disappearing from view with a worm in its beak, reappearing a moment later, flying off again, a straight flight over the steaming asphalt parking lot thick with cars and trucks, disappearing into the heavy leaves behind the dumpster, doesn't seem to see me sitting here beneath its nest beside the loading dock, wondering what is wrong, why the machinery isn't working, why my mind sits and grows rust like these unstarted cars, grows mold like a swamp dumpster, chirps without language, incoherent, like infant robins, helpless and insatiable, and full of human stenches, how it does not think to build even a nest in vacant spaces underneath my brain, where anything could grow, if anything looked through these wrinkles, thinner lines, something is falling apart

## **something else again**

and the voice of trees is not what you'd expect: no ancient groaning. it's a wave of chirps, like crickets, or tiny baby birds. think of the leaves, passing a message one by one. it's audible. it's tangible. this voice of trees carries for miles and years. it sweeps from streets to forests. they speak most at dusk, and dawn, and and and listen. these are not complaints. the trees are winning. maybe not everywhere, all the time, but on the balance, in the long run, overall, these voices will replace the radio. after the internet, the trees will still communicate by leaf and waving. but trees will die, the same as every one (except your self)



### **how the water breaks on daylight**

how thirty dancers dressed for swimming  
synchronize their careers to an advertising  
jingle. Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday  
Thursday Friday Saturday every day. on one  
Sunday during the stories this ad runs for  
birth control, and then febreze. Wednesday  
again, and Monday soap. Tuesday and Friday  
was the opera but we stayed in, ordered pizza  
or Chinese, talked about what was on the news,  
a new car loan, how three or four wet dancers  
step out from the circle, shed their shower caps  
for string bikinis, form a new ring close together,  
metaphors for uterine implants by hot tubs.  
tired of routine but willing to risk infertility?  
control of birth with easy surgical implants,  
the benevolence of science and convenience  
of culture. for a chance at fame, but only for  
the few willing to lay bare for review, to sacrifice  
what revolution told them was no longer repressed,  
clarify, name the target audience, name the project  
ring like gold, commitment to forgotten liberation.  
freedom from ideals, the loss, the waste, the slow  
death, obscurity for those who don't want any more  
children, march toward distraction and regret dying  
alone, for what, for how these thirty dancers  
drown...

**poem**

how much work  
for a simple  
match, between  
the idea and  
attempts to show  
it practiced, a match,  
lit and burning down,  
touched to a notebook,  
rage at the impure  
lost language, spent

### **what my twitter feed might look like**

- chose a new dish soap today. it's all-natural or something like that. would say I like the scent but it's unscented.
- last night we under-tipped our waitress by mistake. today I went back with five dollars but she wasn't there.
- my favorite frying pan is seasoned so well that I almost never have to grease the steel.
- he spoke about interpellation and smoked his pall malls
- my beard grows to my toes / I never wear no clothes / I wraps my hair around my bare / and down the road I goes
- HELLO WORLD
- ...

**poem**

today I made an enemy  
instead of making change.  
I had no cash in the register,  
and he, with eyes askew  
and burning, dilated with rage,  
demanded that I *answer* him  
*be a man* and  
*do my job*.

I shook  
but looked him back  
and called him *sir*  
and did believe  
he'd wait for me  
to get off work,  
as he said,  
and *have*  
*a god damn conversation*

## detail

you sip a cup of ancient apricot  
tea so bitter you involuntarily  
yelp, inhale sharp and fast,  
purse your lips and close  
your eyes tightly against  
its false warmth.

unsoothing and shockingly bitter,  
this tea that dries your throat  
tastes right with your after-work  
cigarette. you read a book  
about culture and politics on television.  
you suspect that you don't deserve this.

you try to find a sitting position,  
rest your back and neck without  
falling asleep, and you grind out  
your cigarette slowly, languorously  
like someone younger and more  
consumed by their desires.

you wish for a hat. you run  
your fingers through your hair.  
a great gulf yawns between you  
and your lover on the couch,  
sipping their own tea  
in their old yellow t-shirt,

looking at puzzles, looking at you  
intermittently, thinking of them,  
watching you, watching tv, still  
covered in the dust of work,  
still wearing the same old shoes,  
for no reason, now that you're home.

you sip the bitter tea again and feel  
somehow less bitter than maybe you  
should. somehow you give thanks –  
for your lover on the couch, for having  
the next morning off, for the old watch  
you can still hear ticking across the room.

## ways I've failed you

my love, how have I failed you?  
please don't let me count the ways

I've said *i love you* without  
feeling so in love or lust, the ways

I close my eyes, open my mouth  
without a metaphor for us

like fire – burning is the art.  
the ways I don't give presents

unrequited between birthdays  
just cards once in a while, the ways

I let you follow me and not your own  
dreams to this flat forsaken city,

and the second hand smoke, ways  
of living halfway between cold

formality and cheap convenience,  
and I'm bad at sharing small talk,

I sleep late, work only part-time,  
want solitude, prefer books to plays, ways

I can't be honest when you ask *what's wrong*  
the ways I look down, apologize for anything,

even this poem that you will never read.

## refrain

and i have seen perfectionism  
and the dead dream  
of the masterpiece  
destroy the conversation.

curse my generation.

and i am a gong  
inspired, ringing  
through the sister-cities  
hollow, starving  
gong vibrations  
calling withered visions

curse their children.

bitter curses! rising  
spittle and invective  
foaming at these iron lips,  
this brass hole gaping  
shivering with fury  
cracking under my own  
free and swinging weight  
and ringing  
and inspired  
incomplete  
and cursing privilege  
and cursing damnation.

i have seen  
their children



curse me back,  
imperfect prophet,  
ageless, blind,  
acidic, fuming.

solder, spit  
and spite hold me  
together now.

i curse longevity.

they dream of bloodshed  
they dream war  
they dream assassination

i curse politics.

they tear their arms off  
sublimate their tears.  
inchoate howling  
takes the place of song.  
take drum and gong  
away, and they  
curse calculation.

they curse rhythm.  
rhythm, they curse  
rhythm, they curse  
rhythm, they curse...

what redemption now?  
what closure?  
they curse progress

curse tradition  
curse regression  
curse infinity.

and i have seen abandonment  
and apathy both glorified.

and maybe this is right  
and maybe this is true  
and maybe this is just  
and maybe this is good  
and maybe broken.

they curse work  
the strange  
impossibility  
of wholeness.

curse the void.

i sing the fragment  
ring the broken gong  
awake the dead dream  
solitude and silence  
lasting, fallow peace.

they break their hands  
opening hyperspace.

i sing imperfect  
sing the body digital  
turn my stare  
from screens

to stars  
to sing  
the surfaces  
of death, of death, of death...

from deep dead dreams  
i sing the splinter  
recognize the memory  
of seasons  
sing the skin of things  
the imprint and the residue

imperfect  
i sing  
what is left  
when dreams are dead  
of waking  
working  
watching me  
a stranger  
in my own body.

i sing consumption  
sing the one-time-use.

and i have seen me singing  
and evaporating  
playing death  
playing the self-afflicted  
illness  
curse the cure.  
curse remedy.

i sing the danger  
and the risk of action.

sing the body privilege  
of making something small  
a curse, a blessing.

pause.

the structure disappears.  
and there is nothing  
in its place.

i curse cacophony  
curse symphony  
curse melody  
curse form

i bless cacophony  
bless symphony  
bless melody  
bless contradiction.

bless unstable,  
asymmetric song  
of imperfectionism.

pieces of the master  
scattered over  
generations,  
kept in songs  
and curses  
coded bit by bit

into the body  
of this death.

i curse and bless what i have seen.  
i curse and sing a dying dream.



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