

## Ashes to Poetry

### Morning is Broken

In the beginning,  
there was morning.  
And morning was only me  
and the dark  
and the quiet  
and the cat,  
who didn't even want her breakfast yet-  
only a scritch.

And then the breaking light,  
and the gurgling coffee maker,  
and the dry dishes in the drainer  
to be put away.  
But they were silent  
as they were stacked.  
They didn't break the stillness.

And then the radio,  
and the news and  
talking heads  
and then the computer  
and email  
and calendar reminders  
and New York Times  
and Weather Underground  
and Facebook  
and the day comes  
barreling in -

and I'm not quite ready.  
and then the message  
that you had died.

And I'm not quite ready.

and I retreat.

in the beginning,  
there was morning.  
and morning was only me.

## Ashes to Poetry

### This is the House That Jack Built

Jack was a carpenter.  
Born in Italy,  
he came to America in 1910,  
and for twenty years  
he built waterfront vacation houses  
on Cape Ann for wealthy Bostonians.  
He died of a stroke on his 46th birthday,  
and all that's left of him are a few houses  
and a fading black & white photograph  
in a box in an attic in Marblehead.

Jack was a cook.  
Born in Pennsylvania, he served  
with the 28th Infantry Division  
during the Battle of the Bulge in World War 2,  
and all through that battle he never heard  
the roar of bullets and bombs,  
only the clatter of pots and pans.  
And even though as the years went by  
his friends all told him-  
"Don't worry about it!  
Napoleon said an army travels  
on its stomach",  
he always felt guilty  
and a little embarrassed,  
and would never talk about  
what he did in the war  
as he sat on his barstool at the VFW.

Jackie grew up on a farm  
in western Massachusetts.  
She and her husband Peter  
ran a greenhouse  
in Brattleboro, Vermont  
where they raised orchids  
for upscale florists and hotels  
in New York City.  
The day that Peter died of a heroin overdose  
Jackie sat alone in the greenhouse  
all afternoon,  
listening to water drip from the pipes,  
and then she got up,  
and went back to packing boxes of flowers.

## Ashes to Poetry

Jack was a truck driver  
from New Hampshire.  
He drove tankers  
filled with unknown chemicals  
around New England for thirty years,  
and then his hair and toenails  
started falling out,  
he had trouble breathing,  
and he died in a small motel room  
in Nashua, New Hampshire,  
surrounded by no one.

Jackie was a waitress from Queens.  
She waited tables every night  
at a fancy French restaurant in Manhattan,  
and three times a week  
the maitre d' would bend her over a box  
in the walk-in freezer  
and screw her,  
and she never said anything,  
because she was determined  
that she was going to put  
her two kids through college.

Jack was a firefighter from Boston.  
He rode the hook and ladder truck  
for twenty-two years,  
and he played the dog races in Revere  
every weekend,  
and raised four kids,  
and 15 grandkids,  
and never regretted anything.

Jack was a sanitation worker  
from New Jersey; he hauled  
barrels of trash in Hoboken,  
and every night he went back,  
alone, to his one-bedroom,  
walk-up apartment  
and wrote poetry and short stories.  
The day after he died  
the landlord took it all,  
and stuffed it into plastic bags  
and put the bags out on the curb  
for the trash men.

## Ashes to Poetry

### In the Footsteps of Captain Scott

I would sell my soul for some heat.  
I was told that cold is the absence of warmth,  
but that does not even begin to describe  
the slicing polar blast that reaches in  
and drags my lungs right out of my body,  
smashes them, and leaves the splinters  
bobbing in the ice-current with the 'bergs.

I would sell my soul for a candle flame  
to pierce the Antarctic night  
and cast a shadow on the glacier wall  
and heat my last remaining fingers,  
grown sullen and crabbed and cracked  
with an unbreakable skin of frost,  
milky white like a baby's skin,  
but scraped clean of all innocence.

I would sell my soul for the kerosene  
that ran out three days ago;  
lamps and stove we have,  
but nothing but hopes  
to burn in them;  
and the hope froze solid  
the same way Dan and Tristan did;  
Unblinking eyes wide open  
this dark polar morning.

I would sell my soul for a match  
to burn those damned ship's papers  
I signed that got me into this place.  
Glory for King and country, they said,  
a grand adventure, and  
three hot, square meals a day.  
Fuck their glory and adventure,  
and fuck their damned king,  
I'd sell my soul for one last hot meal.

But the hot meals ran out the  
same day the dogs did;  
roast husky isn't mutton,  
but at the bottom of the world  
you can't pick and chose like a toff  
at some fancy London restaurant.

## Ashes to Poetry

I would sell my soul for the roaring fire  
of my mother's cottage hearth in Donegal  
and the musty smell of sheep,  
another chance to lie on the green grass;  
Lord, I thought the winters there  
were cold and uncomfortable;  
what a fucking fool I was.

I would sell my soul for London gaslight,  
the flickering iron-perched torches  
of the sordid, grimy East End,  
the warm caress  
of the brown-eyed bar maid  
serving more than beer,  
though the useful part of my anatomy  
is frozen too solid now  
to ever again be of much use to her.

I would sell my soul for some heat.  
I was told that cold is the absence of warmth  
but that does not even begin  
to describe the slicing polar cold  
that reaches in and drags your soul  
right out of your body  
and leaves you gasping,  
grasping for death,  
warm death,  
my final savior.

## Ashes to Poetry

### Ghosts-

my amazing technicolor ghost  
always told me it loved me  
before it hurt me.

people say ghosts  
are monochrome,  
two dimensional,  
dark, or light.

mine had colors,  
multiple dimensions,  
it was dark, then bright.

it told me it was proud of me,  
and then it screamed  
I should be ashamed;

I could not imagine ever leaving,  
and the next moment  
I was fleeing for my life.

my amazing technicolor ghost  
is dead now-  
except it lives in me.

it speaks to my kids  
through my lips;  
loves them,  
then hurts them,  
chilling my heart.

my amazing technicolor ghost  
always told me it loved me-  
before it hurt me.

## Ashes to Poetry

### Ashes to Ashes

I have a blank sheet  
of virtual paper-  
and a virtually blank mind.  
It's not that nothing is in there  
(though, sometimes, I wonder)  
it's that nothing that is in there  
wants to come out.  
Or perhaps there are things in there  
that I am not so sure  
I want to see come out.  
Things that could come out,  
but then I'd have  
to own up to them,  
confront them,  
deal with them.

And today seems  
an especially bad day for that.  
As was yesterday,  
as will be tomorrow.

So it is not so much  
Writer's Block,  
as Writer's Lock-  
I locked those things up years ago.  
Months ago.  
Weeks ago.  
Days ago.  
Hours ago.

And words are the key  
that will unleash them.

No wonder words  
are so feared-  
No wonder they burn books,  
and the writers of books.  
No wonder Silence  
is said to be Golden.  
Illusions are gold,  
and Reality is ash,  
and it is unnerving  
to sit in the middle of the fire.