

Dawn Song

For my Mother

Caught,
bedazzled in bright dawn
by the sun's pale rays
in the shadows time spreads
around these days,
what is it that I praise?

The memory
in these middle years
of seasons shaped
by childhood's first tries,
of us together walking out
past white apartment blocks
to shop for some sweet prize.

It wasn't long until
you stayed home and watched
while I went out
to the ice-cream store alone
for a nickel cone
of sherbet fresh and sweet.
I can taste it still,
In the sugar cones I relished
on melting summer days.

And this is the spirit song
inspired by those days
the memory's reprise of what
I set against the tears shed
in darker times than those
of fears met by love and strength
by night-lights lit to shine against
the raging bears I saw
in nightmares when I slept,
and everything released itself
from serenity and shape.

I cried. You came
with a quiet voice
to hold me in your certainty
that dawn would come

with sleep and time
to fix things in their place.

You built the frame of family
that I brace against these days;
Against the shock of towers dropped
into haunted deadly streets,
Against the nearing certainty
of that step into eternity
that looms beyond this praise.

We live our lives from day to day
though futures may look bleak
and memories, though dear,
may not be quite as right
as ice-cream cones to children are,
or dawns to those who wake.

But mother,
when the shades of night
are rampaging
through graying palls of time
and serenity is lost,
The memory of your loving care
brings comfort as it shines.

Grumpy Old Gay Cats

*Loosely derived from a photograph
by Harry Wilson*

Let's call them Fez and Tuxedo George
They met in '84, I believe, when
most gay sex meant death by AIDS,
and monogamy became one way
to live their lives for life by
avoiding a lingering death.
These gay cats were, like most,
secure in the closet then,
still are for most of us,
but they stood up for their friends.

Fez ran a family business,
while George, with his freer spirit,
did artistic things and dreamed.
They marched in costumes when
they stepped out on the street.
That's George you see in the pic'
dancing in calendar pages pulled
from Fez's overloaded desk.
Posted with all those days
he's dancing in the street.
Time was his obsession, then,
while Fez just made the bucks.
He liked high-end camera games
and so I choose to think,
that he could've made this shot.

They lived on the fringe of the Haight,
over Fez's Middle Eastern shop,
where he sold odds and ends from
that cradle of many faiths,
from the Tigris and the Euphrates,
from Egypt and from Israel,
Lebanon and Syria, Palestine
and Turkey, from all the Middle East.
And no one knew, for sure,
his genealogy, or religion. Whatever
he might be—Christian, Muslim, Jew—
they seemed all the same to him as
with Tuxedo George, he visited
their many young friends dying—
too many every day.

The Rainbow Coalition claimed
their allegiance eventually,
and reaching out to others hoping
for another breathing day,
was how they dealt with terror
lurking around the emptying corners
of their neighborhood in the Haight.
Through all these years of waiting,
of fighting to force equality
and funds for a cure for AIDS.
They lived with friends and enemies
making their lives together
against conventional prejudice
and intolerance everywhere.

George meets life by dancing
while Fez is still workaday.
They were a perfect couple
in the gay wild west they'd say
and lived that way for thirty years
until their wedding day.
So many years have passed.
So many friends are gone.
Living together, day by day,
they kvetch and grumble on.
But still in their hearts, they say,
they're gay young cats forever
lucky to have made today.

A Fishing Poem for Ron

*In memory of my friend
Ron Kovach, dead at 67*

Salt spray and deep-sea mist tonight,
break rainbows out of light,
but the upturned wakes
of boats that start
together into night,
and then run far apart,
following fishermen out
to different grounds,
to catch far different fates
give proof that friendships
formed in youth,
although they may persevere
as time together shapes them,
soon enough may fade
as work and separation toll,
families detain, and different
interests steer us toward
the separate paths we make
in the ocean's dark surround.

If fishing was like life
then what we caught
would strengthen bonds
despite the loss of strength
that time and entropy impose
upon our lives apart,
and I'd have known
that ends were near
in your boat over there
across the waves between
where rainbows failed you
in your pain, and I was lost
and distant here,
unaware, unseen.

Inferno at the Ghost Ship Collective

Gray skies. Gray days. Gray ghosts.
The coastal clouds blown in
over blackened beams of steel,
as we remember another inferno,
75 years ago, which pushed us
into war, into an era replete with
conflicts and great changes--
ending isolation.

But this is not like that, not another step
toward world-wide conflagration. No,
it's young people come to party here,
to rave among studios artists used,
working with friends who understood
their need to make it new, more real
than a life of steel consuming lives
they tried to escape by living collectively,
by giving their all to art, not to suburban work—
their belief was in their art, a fire from within.
It died in walls of flame consuming the building
around them, consuming their lives, their heat.
The collapsing floors that crushed them, turned
their lives and their art into a smoking black mess—
another news flash.

They lived and worked
where they shouldn't have been
to create what they couldn't afford to invent
in a safer, more generous space, a place to build
what they felt they were borne to present
to a culture largely indifferent to this,
a ghost ship ignored too long in life,
become the site of a disastrous dance,
an inferno of no intent, in an anti-war
betrayed by life, but now, at least
for a while, also remembered.

Driving past these ruins where
the otherwise homeless lived and worked,
we wonder how it is, that we know so little
about them, who or what they are in their hearts,
living there on the edge, making things new
for the street, dying for dreams, intent.

My Sister's Hands

These are my sister's hands
encrusted white and dry.
She sees the shapes inside
wet clay, and tries,
with rough-nailed artist's hands
and fingers stroking up and down,
around the shape of hands in hands--
molded, dried, glazed and fired by
the mind in motion there,
shaping space around the touch
of rough work-hardened hands
cupping gently as they soothe
our mother's final days in pain
failing to take her home again
to better days of friends and family
together, home again to free her from
those rough and trustless gray days
of failing health in lonely rooms
with dementia's isolation growing
day by dying day, alone, it seems,
where she can no longer raise
that sharp and loving shine, her gaze,
the open-handed reaching out
in praise of touch and love,
stretching toward completion in
the heat of living, of being there
as her long and loving days' shine
fades into heart's motion seized,
stilled into these gestures of
enclosing and release,
of ashes to ashes, dust to dust
becoming stillness stiffening,
absence and decay, love lost to us,
in an open hand reaching up,
releasing us, caressing fired clay.

*Inspired by "Clay Hands" a photograph by
Heshani Sothiraj Eddleston*