For Rosemary

Gene Wolfe
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poems by

Gene Wolfe

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About These Pieces

I have had no training in poetics and have achieved no success in it, as the verses you are about to read show quite clearly. If you dislike most of them, I can only acknowledge that I do as well. And yet I am glad that they are to see print at last, and thus be preserved, little flecks of a frequently muddy soul in amber. So much of my life has been destroyed already, so many of the things I dreamed about and toiled to create left out in the rain. That I think is the chief difference between men and women: even men who do not write work in paper.

The first four poems were written for Rosemary Dietsch, who became my wife on November 3, 1956. "The Computer Iterates the Greater Trumps" is the only one of my poems that is at all well known. I believe it first appeared in TASP. It won a little poetry prize, and has since been reprinted once or twice. "Why Private War" is my sole attempt at children's verse. The editor to whom I sent it wanted to reject it out of hand, feeling (he said) that it somewhat lacked the necessary innocence; but he was persuaded by his co-workers to accept it.

As I was selecting these—I did, I swear, discard the very worst—I was struck by how autobiographical they are. They were written, or most of them, in moments of intense emotion; and the emotion was frequently despair. If you are inclined to forgive their author anything, please forgive him that. He does not flatter himself that they will comfort you when sorrow strikes; but he reminds you that your own may supply some small solace, as these verses have at various times during the past thirty-odd years solaced him.

Gene Wolfe
Barrington
Illinois
Agnon, Isaac - Lucifer
December Twenty-Fourth Nineteen Fifty-Five

'Tis the night before Christmas, and all throughout our place,
The doors are all open, no fire in the fireplace.
Looking out of the window, I know that I'll see
The red rose a-blowing in the little rose tree.
Proceeding down Vassar, I know that I'll hear
The palm fronds a-rustling in a wind brought by reindeer.
No, Houston at Christmas is no place for snow,
And Cuba gave birth to the weather we know;
In Houston at Christmas the red rose is blowing,
But the Rose that I love's in a land where it's snowing.
January Nineteenth

Now the seas roll down on the empty town,
And the shadow ghosts draw nigh.
The wild wind sweeps where the ivy creeps,
And the snow comes drifting by.
The spell of night seems to kill all light,
So the dark may never leave.
They stalk the street on phantom feet,
Then stare at the moon and grieve.
What demons are these that between the trees
Seem to flicker to and fro?
That feed on the dark of the street and the park,
And feeding slowly grow?
What town is this where the spring's sweet kiss
Is a thing that's never known,
Where the soft snow lies where the shadow cries,
White as a desert bone?
It's the town that lies behind my eyes
And here beneath my hair.
Where my thoughts creep round with never a sound,
But hope to find you there.
Then the birds will sing in the May of spring,
And the flowers bloom so fair.
And my thoughts will dance and dream a chance
That you may wish to stay there.
February Twenty-Eighth

Unconsciousness is near to death,
So can it be in keeping
That this which moves in gentle breath,
Is not sighing, only sleeping?
No! God and Fate shall not be mocked,
The lady's made for kissing.
Let Destiny not here be rocked . . .
Rose! Think of what you're missing! !!
May Ninth

That line up there inspires a verse,
And I suppose I could do worse,
With many empty lines to fill,
And such an empty mill;
So I shall sing the page away,
Then kiss to make the blue stamp stay,
And seal it up and send it north,
To where you dwell, there to put forth
To you (my hope, my dream, oh, my ideal!)
Each tender thought of love I feel.
Six A.M.

Wearily I am up and it is not yet day.
The fields are dark.
When next I come this way—
But wearily I am up, and it is not yet day.
Book Report With Dragons
(In the Wake of the Sea-Serpent, by Bernard Heuvelmans, D.Sc., F.Z.S.; Hill & Wang, $10.00.)

Not all are gone, we are assured.
Science has collated the reports, and finds
Their frequency not much diminished.

The lonely walkers of the beaches,
The child-sprawling holiday families,
Still unexpectedly (numbly) see “”

But we’ve, I note, fewer sightings now
From sail-driven Rule Britannia men-o’-war.
And tea-clipper skippers have, perhaps, gone blind. . . .

So that one wonders if such things are not akin
To the author’s Category One: The Super Otter
(Inked by good Parson Egede—not seen since 1848)
And little marked, extinct.
Looking Over The Valley

Looking over the valley at night
(Something I did never, nor thought I could—always some other)
I feel myself an eagle.
Not on a flag.
Not on a seal.
Not on a shield.
An eagle in reality, a fierce thing and hunted; braced for the bullet.
For The Strawberry Girl

Now Mother's Day divides the May,
And you, so dear to me,
Sit wrapped in joys of girls and boys,
True Mother, as I see;
But I recall when we were all—
And no one else there'd be,
To watch our bliss or hear our kiss,
And you were dear to me.
The Computer Iterates The Greater Trumps

DIMENSIONS Trumps (21)
Do 1969 I = 1, 22
N = 22 - I
Trump (N)

Trump (21)
The Universe includes by definition all,
That Man has seen since his great fall.
God's calling card this, upon our silver Disch,
On what table? In what house? In what hall?

Trump (20)
The 666th Judgement, and my screed betrays
Unlearnt foreknowledge of those coming days.
The angels come to smite the sea and land,
The anti-Christ for us—and slays.

Trump (19)
The Sun the dancing children love,
Casts down his radiance from above.
Fusion, fission, no remission;
So small a house, so large a stove.

Trump (18)
The Moon, stillborn sister of our Earth,
Pale-faced observes the living birth.
Soon, soon, the sister's children come,
To plow and plant that stony turf.

Trump (17)
The Star, sky-ruler by default,
Pours out two waters: fresh and salt.
Naked, bare-breasted girl, and (whisper)
Magna Mater of the Old Cult.
Trump (16)
The Falling Tower, smote by God,
Thunders in ruins to the sod.
Master, it needs no wit to read this card.
Master, you must wait his rod.

Trump (15)
The Devil straddles his searing throne,
With power in his hands alone!
He says,
We have been shown; we have been shown; we have been shown.

Trump (14)
Death in this deck's no gibb'ring shade,
But naked peasant with a blade;
Think on that, thou unfought people! And Remember whence these cards were made.

Trump (13)
The Hanged Man hangs by his feet,
Knew you that? His face, so sweet,
Almost a boy's.
He hangs to bleed. Who waits to eat?

Trump (12)
The Wheel of Fortune; cause and effect;
God will save his own elect;
The wheel turns until it stops—
The bitch within runs till she drops.

Trump (11)
Sworded Justice weighs us men,
Then, sordid, weighs us up again.
Weren't not more justice just to slay?
Slaying sans guilt to slay again?

Trump (10)
Fortitude with hands like laws,
Clamps shut the writhing lion's jaws;
Ignoring his beseeching eyes,
Ignoring his imploring paws.
Trump (9)
Taking two hands in the Tarot game,
Temperance, with Time her other name.
Pouring light into a golden cup.
Watering our wine. Drowning our fame.

Trump (8)
The Hermit with his lamp and staff,
Treads all alone his lonely path.
He who hath no one,
Know you who he hath?

Trump (7)
The Lovers mean birth as well as lust,
Read ye that riddle as ye must;
Men from semen, O ye people!
Dust from dust from dust from dust.

Trump (6)
The Chariot's a Gypsy car,
And we the happy drivers are,
With whip and reins and endless pains,
So far, so far, so far.

Trump (5)
The Emperor for worldly power,
To shake and scream a fleeting hour;
To this a bribe, to that a bullet—
Remember, Master, the Falling Tower?

Trump (4)
The Hierophant, the Pope, the Priest;
Today we fast, tomorrow, feast.
The bridegroom was with us yesterday;
The Hierophant remains, at least.

Trump (3)
The Lady Hierophant, good Pope Joan,
Who will not let the truth alone;
A scholar killed her yestereve,
Today she's sidling toward the throne.
Trump (2)
The *Empress*, *Nature*, loving and cruel,
Grim mistress of the one hard school,
Mistress of microbes,
Breaking each tool.

Trump (1)
The *Juggler* points both drawn down and up, in mastery of
confusion;
First in all the deck stands he, creator of illusion.
Sword, coin and cup before him lie,
And on his face, derision.

Trump (0)
******FOOL******
errorerrorerrorerror
2323232323232323232323
Monday's Class

Will I forget the sudden little bump,
The racing puff of dying grey,
The lump
At the throat, the crying child?
Fiancée the kitten under the wheel,
Racing, dying, the child crying.
Maybe We've Been Doing It Wrong

or
You Can't Turn The Clock Back, But If
You Put Off Winding It Long Enough It's
The Same Thing

Let swine run unmolested on every city street;
They'll eat up lots of garbage, and though it isn't neat;
Blocks let to swineherds might accrue,
A welcome urban revenue.

Let gentlemen take swords again, ungentlemen stout staves;
That each may best protest the way the other man behaves;
And run his taxi driver through,
Or deck a Harvard rowing blue.

Let us all, in short, recommence those proprieties,
That made things more interesting for prior societies;
Nor yet remain content to lose,
Our vices' virtues.
Oh God Mother I Want To Ride The Turtle’s Back Again

Oh God Mother I want to ride the turtle’s back again,
Under a glass dome with Flash Gordon and the Queen of the Sea.
Under glass clear and thin skimming the reefs; glass like the cover on the wax fruit at Grandmother’s
With the Sea Queen whose city lay beneath another larger but the same.

I know I did it once. I can feel still in my finger ends that cool hard friendly shell.
And my eyes seeing fish past
The man’s bronze shoulder—the woman’s twined hair
The reins of whale leather wet where they penetrated the glass by grommets.

As I muddled the Sea Queen in my mind in the closet—Stacked with other coloured Sunday Funnies Grandmother kept
To entertain her grandchild with the coloured fans from Funeral parlours—with that wicked Queen Coo-ee—oh whose
Skeezers from a glass-domed island fought the Flatheads of Oz.

And Oh God I would do so again.
Under the glass with Gordon; smelling
The good smell of candy orange slices (keep all that sticks)
In a cut-glass bowl.
The Talent

I found a magic silver kite,
I longed to see it shining bright,
Among the winds, against the sky,
Among the birds that fly so high.

I brought it to a magic dale,
I launched it with a silver tale,
Oh, look, if you would wonders see:
It shines below—my kite flies me!
Markets

Universe, Shadows, and Death are open,
And we poor men must choose a door;
Which, lies behind's beyond our ken—
The grave's abyss, the shadow's shore?
Against each wood we press our fears,
And tremble at the music of the spheres.
On The Bus

I've always liked ballet,
I watch it every day,
The dancing in the street,
In and out, in the street,
Dodge and Plymouth, Chevrolet,
I'll watch their *pas de trois* today.
A Flash Of Insight

God and the picture-takers
Seem alike image-makers:
Squinting at the world,
Pushing us closer,
Fixing faces in a film of hope.
Solar Myth

I saw Camelback wreathed in white,
As if it stood beside some bay.
The desert drank of rain last night,
The desert drinks of rain today.
The prickly pear is wreathed in white,
A cotton shroud of fungus blight.
So Phoenix spreads, and will not burn.
To Melville

Light is the soul of a star,
The shadow of God.
What then is darkness, is night?
Is not that black in its way bright?

How bright the midnight wave!
The breath of God?
No, but of the angel of this Earth,
Coleridge-caught between the Pole and Perth.

His wings are streaming cloud;
His feet have trod
The paths of Luck, his leman;
Her wails whales, his semen, seamen.
After The Runaway

The road unrolls like a mechanic’s tape
Marked with cracks and train tracks.
I drive, and think on rape.
O, bright eye, bright my
Daughter, thumbing the prairie;
Child, please, do you be wary
Who stops for you.
I come for you.
I measure for miles.
To My Wife

I’ll buy you a Valentine, next year;
Encircled with lace.
The lace made of leaves,
The leaves made of lace.

I’ll send you a Valentine circled with hearts;
The hearts like a frieze,
Surrounding the verse,
The verse graved on leaves.

I’ll find you a Valentine airy with birds;
Singing the verse.
Encircled with leaves,
Graven with words.

I’ll buy you a Valentine.
Next year.
Connect The Dots

Secrets of the universe
Spattered on a windowpane,
Diamond drops of runic verse
Writ and wiped away again.
Silver spells compell the spirits’
Patt’ring laughter. Here it? Hear it?
The Traveler

Now I live here in our village,
On our island in the sea,
Where the people think our village
Is the only place to be.
“All the world,” they say, “is water.”
And “The world,” they say, “is sky.”
And: “God put me in our village,
Though I sometimes wonder why.
For it’s wide and weird and frightful,
Stretched from sea to shiny sea;
It’s not narrow, it’s not cozy,
It’s not really right for me.
There’s the strangers on the east side,
That you wouldn’t want to meet,
And they dine on human marrow,
Just across the village street.
My own block’s okay by daylight,
But it’s different after dark,
With the things that lurk in shadows,
By the big trees in the park.”
And: “Son, walk around our village,
Once at least, before you die.
It’s a long way out to Farside,
But you’ll make it if you try.
Try to get home before dinner,
Tired and worn though you may be,
When you’ve hiked around our village,
Made the circuit of the sea.
For the world, you know, is water,
And the world, you know, is sky,
And the rest is just our village.
You should see it ’fore you die.”
So they talk, here in our village,
And I hear them every day;

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But I went once to the shoreline,
On the lip of Village Bay.
Then I looked across the water,
And I saw a sudden spark,
Where another wide, weird village,
Fed its cook-fires in the dark.
And beyond that lay another,
And beyond, a hundred more;
And my cupped ear caught the singing,
Of the sirens 'round our shore.
I can't tell them in our village,
What they know to be absurd,
But they listen to my singing
Of the siren songs I heard.
Letters

I sent you one letter, two weeks ago.
Today I stop looking. No
answer will be
returned to me.

I sent you an I
I’d trade for U.
U O, and will not pay.
You’ll have no more for A.
Last Night In The Garden Of Forking Tongues

Old blind brick poet
Telling of his journey:
"I feel it, I know it,
Though I cannot see
Rhine or Nile. All the while,
The waters seep to me.
You see?"

We see, or say we see.
Mocking his politics,
Playing word tricks.
(Oh, God! Please banish
Forever high-school Spanish.)

Me? I see
Him tease with Heine.
The Nile, the Rhine
Grow watery mazes,
As when he praises,
Our English. (*Dim’s*
A lovely word, according to him.)

Clearer and clearer
Is his mocking mirror;
Mirror-mocking’s his, *si,*
Clearer and clearer.
So famous for his
Mazes is Senor Borges.
Old People Die Like Toads

Old people die like toads
Flattening out; who needs?
Old people end like old roads
Petering out in weeds.

Dead? Dead I’d like to sail
Thrown up by shouting boys.
Dead dwindle to a trail
Of boy whispers and wind noise.
Our Speaker Tonight

I fled into a looking-glass
Because I could not stand my face,
And swam in molten silver there
And flashed like fire from place to place,
Until I met a girl of gold
Who smiled at me and ran away,
And now I tramp from place to place
And talk of her to you for pay.
British Soldier Near Rapier Antiaircraft Missile Battery
Scans For The Enemy

I know you, my old friend! My God, to see you now . . .
Buck? Buck, is this the end? Why, I remember how
Poor Grandma save you every Sunday,
Knowing her son would bring me someday;
How she would laugh her gentle cookie laughter,
To see me jump around and holler after
I'd finished you and Flash—the way I'd dash
In spaceships only I could see.

I mean, of course, that only I could see
Them then. Buck, my old friend,
It's good to see you, end or no.
We all must go
Into the trash at last.
(Gosh, didn't we go fast!)
How was the climb, from Grandma's to a page in Time?
To Be Continued

You pine tree towering above,
I see green covers flutter at the blue;
The wind that sighs of war and love,
Cries for the infant who will write you.
Why Private War

or

"Why They Pinned This Name On My Progenitor"

There breathe no dragons anymore,
And throttling bears is such a bore,
It's always sopping at the shore,
And you're too young to get a whore.

Yes, earth seems full on every score,
And even stealing from a store,
Brings but your weary sigh, "What for?"
Yet wait, O child I adore!
There yet remains the secret lore,
That lurks behind the Men's Room door.

There you may learn of Slaves of Gor,
The functions of our human spore,
The Hammer of the Great God Thor,
And other things good folk abhor.

And you shall learn, by metaphor,
And scribblings of some gay graffitor,
As o'er those winsome walls you pore.
(I know it well, I know it sore.)

So, little man, learn one thing more.
Add but my number to the corps
—'tis XXX XXX-XX54—
And this old hand shall spill your gore!
I'll pour your guts out on the floor,
Nor will I like you, furthermore.
L'Envoi
Kid, I'll forgive you long before
You hear the splash of Charon's oar.
Then great God's mercy I'll implore,
And wrap me in a mantle poor,
Bind rueful brows in mandrigor,
To please the judge and each juror;
Recant like an ambassador,
And break each grave, judicial snore,
With many a penitential roar.
The Riddle

Across the sea, across the land,
Across a lady’s lily hand,
Traveling golden, without feet,
By wind, by wave, buy farm, buy wheat.
Science-Fiction Poem

No earth I own,
No earth owns me,
No Earth I own,
Though here I be.
My passport names another star,
Where brothers not for burning are.
On An Album Cover

You know another week'll
Take us to the fin de siecle,
So why'd we let the movie houses
Duck out of running Mickey Mouses?
That flash up in the corner means
Last reels flashing onto screens;
The news is reeling—needs a crutch;
We say It Doesn't Matter Much,
But wouldn't mind a Porky Pig,
Now that the fox has played her gig.
How Beautiful With Springs

How beautiful with springs it lay,
And pirate galleons in the bay,
And footprints graven on the beach
... and nearly, nearly within reach.

Now I am old enough to buy
Tickets that let explorers fly,
And it recedes among the lost
Storm wrack that the years have tossed.

I fear no grave—it is such boats
That bear us where the island floats;
And funeral blooms for me shall be
Its palm-heads lifting from the sea.
Rosa Damascena Bifera

The rose whose blossoms paved the streets
When kings came marching in fetters,
Tousled, perfumed, twice born sweet,
Rome has fallen, but this endures.
The perfumed petals sifting from above,
To smother Caesar’s enemies with love.

Persian Yellow

In the object letters of the east
This was love without hope.
An art, like love, now much decreased;
A hope, like art, diminished.
Now “Iram indeed is gone with all its Rose,
And Jamshyd’s cup; where, no one knows.”
*Rosa Centifolia*

This cabbage rose no Roman past retains,
Its eagles burned, its marbles laughed to dust;
Four hundred years tradition yet remains,
With nodding flowers sweet as nothing else.
Silk blossoms Saffo never felt,
Born of foggy mornings on the Scheldt.

*Rosa Gallica Officinalis*

The tomb is opened and the dead air breaths;
Gold bracelets glitting in the digger's hand.
(Those blossoms on the floor whose withered wreaths
Endured six thousand years to see this end,
The funeral ornaments of an Assyrian king,
Bloom by my mail box every spring.)