

Ten poems on *My heart—still full of her*
by Robert Nelson

Three of the following poems—‘Giving birth to myself’, ‘I am a camera’
and ‘Curtain’— were published in *Chasm Journal*, 2018

I once was

I'm the duchess, the courtesan, countess and maid;
I've frequented the courts and the farmyard and trade;
I'm a milkmaid, a diva, a servant and queen
I'm the beauty of coy and mysterious mien
who addresses the poet who wants to revere her
with swooning hyperbole styled to get near her,
to fashion her softness and ply it with charm
for the slyest intention to own and disarm.
I look back at my poet, my painter, my vassal,
my patron, my minion, my lord of the castle,
and tell him: 'desist with your flattering prate,
that confines me to such an obedient state!
your proposals to capture my essence and being
are vain and delirious, vague and unseeing;
you say you surrender your feelings to me
but it's only yourself and your pride that you see.
For depicting myself, you can give me the brush
and I'll render my own sweet complexion and blush;
you can leave me the paper, the ink and the pen
and I'll choose the description, the format and when;
if I'm cast as a subject of somebody's art
let the meanings be mine to the end from the start;
and this somebody's art I'll precisely define:
it's an art and a vision that has to be mine.

Giving birth to myself

To remember your birth without falsehood or doubt
as the time when you fearlessly pushed yourself out
is a game and a metaphor, awesomely true,
as your life is a project to squeeze yourself through,
to rehearse the delivery, strain and come forth,
and continue the same kind of struggle thenceforth
in perpetual parthenogenic affliction
to pass and escape the oppressive constriction
and never arrive at a rest or to know
a duration in which you were never to grow.
You're the figurehead leading the boat with your brow
in supporting the bowsprit and charging the prow
for a great oceanic departure, to split,
to divide the tempestuous channel and pit
and emerge for eternal and stretched reproduction
by spasm and labour of painful induction.
The awe of maternal relations is here
in your urgency, passion, anxiety, fear,
your protracted contortion and gasping for air
in a novel traumatic encounter with glare,
with the fierceness of life that emerges from gloom
while eternally seeking return to the womb,
to engender the next parturition or not
as the circle of all who were born and begot.

I am a camera

At the nib of my cottage, I stand by the lane.
I've erected a camera to serve as my brain;
it replaces my face and deletes my expression.
I've morphed into being my private obsession,
where camera and I have an intimate bond
to whose privacy both of us closely abscond.
To the prospect of seeing the world through a lens
I've included the film as my closest of friends
and whatever the sights that the camera might see
it's a faithful and accurate portrait of me.
But in staging this union that doesn't exist
I observe a two-faced disingenuous twist.
There's another device at the point where you stand.
It's a camera that waits for my touch and command:
It's a camera that's you, representing a scene
where I stand behind objects that then intervene;
so the camera that pictures me isn't the one
that would be my persona and myth that I've spun.
It's a happy theatrical whimsical conceit
where the camera's a clown and a fraud and a cheat,
where the genius of pictures is all about acting,
performance, the ploy and the lure of attracting,
the planning, the plot and the end that's unknown,
where whatever our guises, we stand there alone.

Muse

Can you tell me, O muse, what ideas you've been linking
what meanings, what pictures, what thoughts are you thinking?
Mysterious agent of cerebral love,
enigmatic ambassador sent from above
as a messenger proffering concepts and hope
in a figure, a symbol, a meme and a trope:
I can see that you're languid and tired today
and the thoughts that you think you're reluctant to say.
Your transparency beckons and yet it's the same
it's the same kind of candour that plays in a game,
where some obvious beauty withdraws and evades
at the point where it keenly presents and persuades.
You entice, you excite, you recede, you confuse:
You're a tease; you're a shy and tyrannical muse;
you would promise some theme that I grope for and pine
to latch onto a rhythm to reach the divine
and I fall for your masterly treacherous ruse
that you taunt me with, O unbelievable muse!
And yet this is my choice, to be lured and seduced
in the hope that some higher idea were produced;
and in fact I don't know if I'm forced or I choose.
It's the burden of lifting the air with a muse:
oxymorons and paradox, blithe contradiction,
a fable, a rock of a truth and a fiction,
a bid for sincerity, vaporous, sweet,
intertwined with a darkly capricious conceit:
the sublimity's yours in this sweetness and sour
where you offer to share your inscrutable power
but you tease me with all of your beckoning cues
with the vagueness belonging to sibyl and muse.
Do you even exist? Is the veil of your light
just a startling projection for blindsiding sight?
Are you me? Are you something inside that I use:
indivisibly cast as a daughter and muse?
It's our intimate alienation: I see
that my beautiful muse is both Other and me.

Curtain

There's a curtain behind me whose thinness and lace
are a symbol that toys with the depth of my face.
I am backlit and almost a dark silhouette
that is balanced by light in a perfect vignette
but my presence that stares at you doubles your frame
through a parley of veils in a whimsical game.
In the curtains that blinker and open my mind
there are handsome unconscious enigmas to find.
I am holding a doll. As I fondle the strands
like the hair, it collapses and flops in my hands.
Unsupported, the head would roll over and loll
in the spiritless substance of being a doll,
a pathetic and derelict harbinger, pleasing
but only for morbid recalcitrant teasing,
as if the desire to be girlish and mild
makes a stubborn resolve for remaining a child
and perversely renouncing the adult potential
to clinch reproductively all that's essential.
Fertility's curtain derides the conception
and mocks the predestined with taunting deception.
The doll is a keepsake of infancy's dream
that seduces the grand biological theme:
It's a monster, a bogey, a fool and a troll
as the prospect of motherhood slinks to a doll,
where I clutch at the token predicting my fate
for supporting a shroud of mortality's weight.

My ghost

Could you whisper your secrets and tell me the tale
of the future when all of my faculties fail,
when I cease to exist but a presence goes on
in the space where the me that was living is gone?
O mysterious proxy, my envoy in time
who continues my business in shadows and mime,
such a taciturn delegate looking like me
and translating my pulse as my heart's appointee,
immaterial surrogate, pensive and fond,
who continues my mind in a time-space beyond,
my ambassador pressing my interests abroad
upon wings that ethereal freedoms afford:
can you act as my substitute, holding my place
in a future that doesn't catch sight of my face?
Can you act my successor, perhaps represent
my benignity still among broad discontent
in a world of attrition, disturbance, confusion
where things that are solid resemble illusion.
O ghost, you are tangible, more than a thing,
by unstable conditions that wobble and swing;
my indefinite place-holder, fill them with breath
in the infinite absence that follows my death
and inhabit this vacuum of grieving and strife
with enduring suggestions of permanent life.
As my agent, you'll travel wherever you need
in your living the life that I'm never to lead.
But I see, pious ghost, what is spookier still
and delivers a shiver and petrified thrill:
this my ghost is my daughter. My daughter, it's you.
You're a me who continues and forms me anew.
You were born to a cycle of gladness and dread.
You establish my joy. You announce that I'm dead.
It is harder for you. Take your leave and then flee.
If you stay, you're my daughter condemned to be me.

Thousand yard stare

I am shell-shocked, unfeeling, exhausted, depleted.
My steps are retarded. My eyes are defeated.
I stare at my onlooker blankly and see
my despair and the emptiest blackness that's me.
How my pallor stands out, like the child that I hold
in a light that is cruel, unforgiving and cold!
How my uprightness contrasts with limpness in her
who is slumped as if dead, without even a stir!
What lugubrious duties remain to be done
to fulfil what I wish I had never begun?
This unbearable starkness shines deep in my mind
to which but for this brightness my sight would be blind:
in the jarring refulgence I witness myself
in the way I unconsciously handle herself:
it accounts for the paralysed way that I stare
in confronting the truth of unspeakable glare,
as I realize profoundly in darkness and dread:
in the wicked unconscious, my daughter is dead.
Then who did it? Who wrought this despicable pain?
Who's the murderer? Who is so sick and insane?
What detestable ugly suspicions abound
till the cause and the ghastly assassin be found!
Let me scrutinize deep in my terrified eye
where I fear that the nightmarish killer is I.
Is it I who's the criminal? I was the one
who unconsciously angrily brandished the gun;
some resentment took over. I ceased to have hope;
the affordance of reason and love couldn't cope.
Underneath, I succumbed. The compulsion was bad.
My composure imploded. I yelled. I went mad.
Like Medea, vindictive and spiteful and wild
in my dream I would just do away with my child
when it changed in the moment. The blade made no prick.
I was bearing my daughter because she was sick.
I am still indisposed. Could I heal her? But how?

In this trance I'm unable to succour her now.
It is almost the same as if using the knife
when I'm forced to support the decline of her life.
Or perhaps in this stupor I misunderstand
the untenable weight that encumbers my hand.
There is nothing so wrong as we seize ourselves still.
She is neither my victim nor mortally ill;
it is only that time takes her childhood away
and maternity with it each hour and each day;
because yes, we grow older and gratefully grow
and yet not as the infant or child that we know;
we progress, we move on, we displace who we are
and from where we began we're abducted so far.
I cling onto my girl but no longer today
because time has the right to take girlhood away.
It is also a trauma, a breakdown, a lapse,
where the muscles that hold our composure collapse
and my petrified uprightness only avails
in the clutching of time that the moment curtails.
But it's not vanitas; it's specific to me
and maternal control with its anger and glee
with its love in abundance but damage as well
to the outermost borders of heaven and hell
where we stand on the list and take stock of emotion
that flatters and shatters maternal devotion.
O motherhood, fierce and impossible task
that the angels and demons and destiny ask,
there's an magic delight at the end of the play
when my daughter jumps up to rejoice in the day.

Crouching Aphrodite

What an intimate lovable miniature world
into which you are tightly and tenderly curled!
To contract yourself thus and to make yourself small
you have tucked yourself round in a corporal ball,
where your body is fenced by the arch of your back.
You're complete in this span. There is nothing you lack;
it's a universe made in a twist and a curl
that defines this chameleon shape-shifting girl,
an imaginary space where you're making the frog
or you burrow down low like a wrigglesome dog.
In this space for yourself lies the richest of themes.
There is room for no other but only for dreams,
a completeness in feeling yourself in the round
in a tiny abridgement so close to the ground.
And yet even in dreaming you're licenced to peep,
which is stripped from our senses whenever we sleep;
you look out with a languid and somnolent eye.
You are thinking: this moment, this being is I
and there's someone who's looking who knows that my pose
is conceived for a message and not for repose.
You're already so small and you make yourself smaller
—'I'm cute if I'm tinier, not if I'm taller'—
and shrinking to something so tiny and light
is theatrically styled for inspiring delight.
This diminutive toy Aphrodite belongs
to a world of enchantment and dances and songs
where my baby retreats to her innermost core,
an imaginary self that we prize and adore,
to prepare as you captivate, win and disarm
and get up as the goddess of consummate charm.

T(og)ether

As we face one another, my partner in guises—
reflecting our shape and our texture and sizes—
we act like a mirror, where all that I see
is a self-same but alien image of me.

Most unnatural symmetry! Abstract and real
both familiar and distant, we show and conceal;
beneath bandages bundling our presences up,
we detach, we uncouple, divide and hook up.

There is someone inside—in both me and in you—
but our bond makes each psyche a half out of two,
indivisibly shared so that both get a portion,
identically split to an even proportion.

Then tell me, O double, what hope can we find
for autonomous life in this tenuous bind,
this umbilical link without womb or vagina
that makes indistinguishable mother and minor?
We're married inscrutably, one to the other
where both are combined as the child and the mother
or anyone else who gets near me and knows
how we feel in this mutual reciprocal pose.

The alliance and symmetry aren't what you'd think
where we gain a completeness by sharing the link.
If I tug on the cord you'll be pulled out of true.

I would also fall over together with you.

Our support isn't stable, like column or wall.

If you lean either way, I will stumble or fall.

If I say we're together it means we're apart.

It's an axiom binding the strands of the heart.

So we stare at each other and try to divine
what the tapes of our union embalm and enshrine!

How our mummified pause, our paralysis, still,
has disabled our powers of feeling and will
as we honour our stiffness with feeble salute
and call out with a yell that's eternally mute!

The gaze

For depicting depiction I've fashioned a scene
where a typical representation is seen.
A photographer's there and a model who sits.
They await the critique that the camera commits.
Without acting, their roles are unseeing and dumb,
without growth in the meme that the shot will become.
They're consumed with the anxious and minimal ways
that the camera both captures and peddles the gaze
and invites a return of the eyeball from you
who submits the regard to eternal review.
To be such a photographer isn't for me
because neither the model nor artist is free
but symmetrical conscripts who can't contravene
the habitual commands of a soulless machine.
I escaped from this chamber, this camera inside
where an exit and intimate growth are denied;
I extended the circumstance, busted the room
that confined my ideas like a cerebral tomb
and called out for the metaphor—new invocation
restoring my heart to its wild palpitation—
I crossed to performance and eyeballed the roles
that historically structure the shape of our souls.
I considered the archetypes, matching their traits,
connotations and values, conditions and states
and constructed the photograph once at the point
where theatrical lies and the truth are conjoint.
So instead of depicting these types as they are
—like a nurse in the ward or a silk at the bar—
I translated their force into something more mild:
the ingenuous awe that belongs to a child.
My adorable children would act in each part
that transferred a reality into an art,
where a paradox lurks in the sign of authority,
rank and their titles, their inferiority,
grandeur and loneliness, weakness and power,

the tramp on the beach and the lord in the tower;
these roles became emblems that questions infuse
when they walked on a platform with infantile shoes,
where the swagger and strut or the pathos and gloom
absolutely transcend their distinctions and doom,
where the glorified adults as child are bereft
and the theme of their being is all that is left.
This tremendous ontology hangs in the air
through the costumes and the props that my histrions wear
in their shape-shifting oddness that no one expects
in a flatness that only inversion reflects.
In my final address to the dubious gaze
I directed the strangest of mystical plays
where it isn't a child but a toddler instead
who is charged with the lines that some poet has said,
where my babies in bandages gently perform
what is never to heal or to grow or transform,
where they're locked in a role and a swaddle-like skin
for protecting the vulnerable layers within.
It's the guise of the mummy, the living and dead
that are bundled together in infantile dread
as they shoot their performance to stage their goodbye
since as babies we're born and as babies we die.