

Poems in WordPerfect: R - S

by

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Poetry Collection
43 pages

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Reading Gerald Stern

What can this poet born in Pittsburgh
say to me? I expect him to caress
my trembling hand, to lead me into a grove
of mangoes. What we have in common is Jewish
blood, his diluted by living in United States,
mine thinned by a Christian father.
But our vision is the same – with that extra pair
of gloomy eyes peering from under half-closed
eyelids. Of course, I envy his success,
though fame might have turned me
into a teeth-rattling monster. Better
this way. Unknown, I can indulge
myself without the critics' scrutiny.
Noting Stern's flamboyance on the pages,
I give myself permission
to step on the gas in my poetic car.

Real fancy

In Greece, am a woman returning from the market
where I shop for a much older husband,
a fisherman. I bear him a score of children,
of whom survive fewer than ten.

My life is hard, yet in many ways simple.
I cook, bake, spin, I weave,
I sew, wash and iron,
clean and work long hours in the field.

On Sunday, there's church, an occasional
wedding, baptism, or someone's funeral.
When I die, another takes my place,
while I'm free to roam and dream,

making real whichever
past life I recollect.

Reality check

Ultimately, we'll leave,
like snowflakes, atoms.
Already, I foresee the time
when I'll not peruse the pages
of a beloved author,
nor hanker
after childhood's places
where a few people may be
reading my poems.
Translated into Czech,
I'll not be slimmer
or more joyful.
There'll be new concerns,
entanglements,
farewells.

I write this to console myself –
nobody else cares -
swearing to stop being a ninny,
to grow up at last
during the months remaining,
before I hit my 68th year
in spring, on the Witches' Day.

Reclaiming a baby

Where does it live,
the soul of my first
daughter –
the one who died
during childbirth,
blazing the trail
for her three sisters
so that they could
enter the world
without a Caesarian?
She would have been
thirty-five this summer.

Why did she choose
to enter the burden of flesh,
growing from a faulty embryo
into a small human,
doomed, had she continued
to breathe beneath
her hydrocephalic head?

I wish I had looked at her,
at least briefly!
My husband saw her dead.
Why did I not insist on
at least touching
the tiny, lifeless limbs,
those normal parts
of my little girl?

Records in heaven

All love is brief, I read
in a poem, yet memory lasts.
I close my eyes, to block out
light, awaiting - another feeling,
thought, sensation that will pass.
How amazing each life's panorama,
how different each sight!
All to be wiped away
in the viewer's ceasing -
unless indeed our days do fill
archives where benign hands
finger out-of-print pages.

Red oak

Beneath a tree, I attempt to rock
a heavy stone cradle, surrounded
by gravel merging with a rocky slope.
A cock crows three times, but no Peter
listens. The lake is lead towards
a beardless groom, where I visualize
goldenrod shimmering on dusty borders.
How I wish to live beside lavish vegetation
with an unmarried daughter,
who'll work near parrots in Central America!

Redundant

More than twenty years older, this month to reach ninety,
you sit in your room, attached to oxygen.
Sleep consoles you through the dark hours.
At day break, an aide comes to bathe, dress, and feed you.
For dinner, a nurse wheels you in your chair
to meet your friends-the residents at a small table.

The time between breakfast and dinner
you spend in the recliner, resting,
the right nostril distorted from the oxygen.
Blessed, you say you are, proud, not wishing to be again visited,
treasuring the time left while you remain on Earth,
talking to your father and mother and the attending angels,

who will carry you up on your soul's baldachin
at the time ordained. You write a good-by,
you quit redundant associations, of which I'm one,
you say, with anger. I hurt - for I thought I was a friend.

Reflection

Coated by moss,
soaked by rain,
the bolder remains
a landmark.

Crickets sing
far away,
the sunlight
in the thinning leaves
a mirror.
Autumn has lassoed
its claim.

When I leave,
the trees
and the paths
will continue.

Refusal to hope and crave

Fear grows beside the longing,
the perpetual longing for a mother's arms.

If the bird lowers himself into the boggy field,
roots and worms will make him
somewhat satisfied. It's all a matter
of direction, force, intent, a case
of trying again, of not going back.

Sing, sparrow, your humble song!
The chirps will stir a desire to dance
in your swollen toe, move the tongue
somewhat, but that will be
the extent of the commotion -
no dizzy gallop towards
the piece of poisoned lard
stuck in the bird feeder
for the starved songster to peck!

Rejecting shame

Looking for a photo of you
that displays
your chiseled features
in the HIV! Alive newspaper,
I find instead your article,
a protest against the District's
again rejecting requests
for the much needed
needle exchange.

I must tell you: when
you hold yourself as an example
of a once drug addict,
dissociating from the past
as if it were a flattened
animal carcass on the road,
I cringe, for that bloody flesh
is one I nursed.

The three rapes
and one attempted murder
you cite as if they'd happened
to someone else, not
the gentle child
whose gifts blossomed
in the wilderness
of my neglect.

Yet, how I admire
the banner you carry,
survivor, in the battle
against AIDS!

Remembering

As decrepitude sinks in the flesh,
blurring the senses, I think of you,
my first ardent love, absconded
from this world by a willful hanging.

For yourself, you may have chosen the best.
Vain, you'd have found it very hard to bear
the steady pricks and humiliating pain of aging.

While staging your exit, you saw few gains
and much defeat repeated over and over, in remaining.
Your mind drove you until the final gate
where you surrendered to insanity.

In your present place,
perhaps, this life's events
need not be remembered.

Renate's grandchild

Sitting on a boulder in the reservoir,
I keep my thoughts on things
bright and beautiful - babies,
one of whom arrived like a streak
of lightning at 1:30, this second
March day afternoon, a boy, despite
a chest of drawers full of pink dresses,
the doctor having misinterpreted
the ultrasound. It's Renate's first
grandchild, and already she worries -
about him being nameless. I suggested
Parsifal, she Lohengrin. Why not call
him Wagner, I said, to solve the dilemma,
while acknowledging his heritage?
My two-month-old granddaughter Morgan
was taken to the doctor this morning.
She may be started on Albuterol
to ease her bronchial spasms. She's to
celebrate her great grandpa's ninety-first
birthday in Cincinnati, but will not
the flight hurt her tiny ear
in which the doctor found some fluid?
Do fairy mothers, papas, grandparents
suffer such frights for their young?
Surrounded by the invisible world,
I imagine baby divas snuffling and
choking in the shrub, their caregivers
rocking them, fearful.

Rolled up sleeves

It was a bleary-eyed night, like a sheet of vomit
hanging on the line, stiff with early frost.
First, in a dream, I was jealous of Rosemary,
a good friend, for sleeping with a man
who'd cut out my heart
and ate it raw without saying thanks.
Awake, I was surprised the open wound
would hurt so, for it has been years,
since I saw his face.

Through sleepless hours,
I rattled in an empty box,
a joke, blown like prairie grass
in the middle of nowhere.
I wished to step out, quit,
but could not find one pinhole.
No light slid in between any slats,
and there was nothing to sit on,
not even a latrine.

Past six a.m. my eyes fell
like spiders exhausted by spinning
into a cracked mug of stale beer -
but here I am two hours later:
not young, not exactly a Venus
rising from a shell, but myself,
a country woman, with rolled up sleeves
throwing chicken feed from my apron.

Rules of good fiction

English teachers name it the Dark Moment,
that spell of fear, when disillusionment
squirts bile in the mouth,
the gut somersaults and the heart
taps the chest floor with erratic feet.
Dark Moment indeed - to be succeeded
by the Climax, which brings an unexpected
triumph before the well-made ending.

In the real world we hoard work, passion,
illusion or some form of faith
to pump order into inflamed veins -
rape, incest, murder at times blunting
the scarlet fangs of betrayal and death.

In good fiction,
the character confronts the problem
unveiled at the story's beginning,
though he must not
turn into a Superman
and do something extraordinary,
beyond his ability.
It's called believability.

Let's try to face our trials
until they too end.

Russian doll

Mornings, I pry open
the sticky lacquer
the colors of which
have been fading
and dip in for another,
also robust, painted
bright doll, whose back
creaks from night
journeying. If she lies
limp and dream-empty
and time allows a further
"Off with her head!",
in this vulgar peasant
I discover
a somewhat smaller
identical twin
in whose belly
I then fish
for the tiny,
but alas still
lacquered me.

Samson betrayed

Show me my breath
is worth the effort
and that the compartments
of the day deserve tribute.
Glaze me over with your brightness
so that I can stand
like a good vase
on a mantle.
Cast the darts
in my brain
into your crown.
Teach me to accept
the turning of the wind,
the unpredictability
of the hurricane
ransacking
the wheel of fortune.

Sanctuary

Glory to them, the boulders from an earlier century,
the fifth perhaps, or from prehistory -
how much they've absorbed, how light I must seem,
while sitting on them, one-by-one,
resting, then resuming the trudge
along the winding paths of nature's sanctuary.
Compared with them, I flutter like a day fly.

Certain creations are made to endure;
some, like moths, circle a brief light
before plunging into darkness where
death offers her guiding hand
that leads to a transformation.

Sandy Bar Ranch

In the dusk's fold, pierced by holes
through which time, in one loose scroll,
with the humid heat of the day, the moist
velvet night was oozing, we sat on a rustic porch,
enclosed by vegetation, thumbing, page by page,
through the book of hurt, daring the silent,
the unspeakable, to tear the secret parchment.
Slowly crept from the deep, then in a leap,
sprang out a mountain lion, its fangs stained
by the blood of the past, and the spirits encircling
us sighed as our hearts sped forward.

Through the pain was born
a shy - like halting steps
after a lengthy illness -
new way of relating.

Santorini

I remember saying farewell
to that humpbacked whale
of an island,
thankful
to be spat out
from a small boat
on the choppy ocean.
Feet firmly planted
on a steady ship,
I gaze at the weird
black volcanic sculptures,
jutting like demons
from the waves.
Staring at the island's
summit,
I remember myself
standing there,
a girl,
seeing the tidal wave
nearing, monstrous,
devouring my family,
my friends, in one sweep,
leaving me desolate,
a survivor.

Millennia later, I weep
for my native Atlantis,
as Santorini recedes,
growing smaller.
Desperate, I cling
to the sight of it,
yet want to forget
the volcano erupting
and the unleashed horror.

Saying yes to disappointment

"Man proposes,
and God disposes,"
my mother used to sigh,
in Czech.

With this ancient proverb
she once more holds my hand,
guiding me
in the maze
of a new disappointment.

I walk a hesitant step forward,
three steps back.

Scary

I remember a public television program
portraying us as turning into cyborgs
in the near future. Like the models
in a recent fashion show, in ten years
we are to wear computers attached
to our head - all for the sake
of receiving immediate data
about anybody and anything
found on the planet -
privacy being nonexistent.

Searching

After four months when humid heat
diluted feeling, swelled the body,
I've sat down again with a yellow pad.
Akhmatova's early poems
flutter round my head,
touching me lightly,
pastel butterflies.
What do I have to say, and why?

I walk towards my soul
on a country road in deepening dusk,
though the morning air,
chilled by autumn,
guides my pen.
In the window a deer,
munching the leaves of bluebells.
Its eyes visit mine like open hands.

Seeing the cup half full

I pray for you,
young woman never seen,
daughter of a neighbor.
Last night, your mother
told me that cancer
is again growing in your body,
having killed your father,
and sister.

On disability and medication
for seizures,
gathering operations,
with new radiation
therapy pending,
you teach high school graduates
to read and volunteer
at the public library,
making new friends,
not feeling a victim.

See-sawing on a spring day

Up and down and side to side sways the see-saw,
but the one who is afraid, the heavy woman,
always outweighs the other, made of spring air,
though the hair of the light woman shines
like the brightest robin, readying to fly.

Children play on the jungle gym, shouting.
Squirrels chase each other in a mating dance.
The park is shedding the shreds of winter garb,
daring the unsteady March day with crocuses.

Birds chirp. Dogs test the ground, sniffing.
Once more nature rolls like a round toddler
down green slopes,

while the heavy woman, the one who's afraid
on the see-saw,
heaves herself off the narrow seat,
waving farewell to the bright one,
and slinks like an old sheep
home to dull safety.

Self-medication

Again, I am resorting to words,
despite the saturation with so many
verses at a poetry reading of four people
less than twelve hour ago.

Awakening early: headache,
leg, hip muscles aching
after babysitting the grandchildren
and two hours highway driving
in heavy traffic. I wanted a dream
to explain what I felt and why.
None came. But even a lame
poem comforts me.

Seventy

Today, I don't miss
what I had before.
Today is my 70th birthday -
a still morning,
sunshine on new leaves.

Today, I don't miss
what I never had,
what will not come my way -
loss, guilt and desire
far away,

Lurking to return,
no doubt.
Today,
I exist, enjoying
my faculties
and senses.

Shades of hunger

The finger freed
from turning the pages
of a book filled
with stimulating words,
each line a poem,

the body glows,
as if a delicious meal
had been consumed.

Where is the sadness
of parting with a writer
accepted as a friend
skilled in juxtaposing
fruit-laden branches,
folk dances with letters
written by artists
in far away lands?

In the way I leave books
a man I know discards women,
turning to their sequel
with a keen appetite -

after a night's sleep
ready to enjoy
a new feast.

Shedding light

Beyond time you radiate -
from a heart that stopped
beating, light into
the universe. I am glad
you're now more fully with me
and ready to be summoned!
Today, in the shower,
and not yet knowing
you were dead, I surveyed
my substantial body
with new-found reverence -
for I thought of you,
thin, due to cancer,
the shell you've discarded,
like her skin the snake.
Sheltered

On the third day of storm Fred
light drizzles
over a new foot of frozen snow.

The plow is due
in the afternoon to free us
from an igloo of ice
in which both the electricity
and telephone still work.

There is much pleasure
in the white enclosure -
the stillness, leisure!

Cocooned by books,
TV, radio,
I sense time swirl,
carrying us,
though sheltered,
away.

Shifting gears

She's had it. Writing
a poem each morning
solves nothing.
It merely delays the angst -
till after one breakfast
no verses are written.
Then the fear hits.

She'll plunk herself down
at the computer
and plunder the unborn
short stories and novels,
shifting gears.

If she doesn't fret about time,
aging, completing a project -
she may tire of writing
ten or hundreds of pages
of prose - and rush back

to a pad and pen,
eager to write a poem
each day.

Side-roads on Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving - its arms of rain
are opening to receive prayers.
Still in an armchair, I anticipate
the landscape crossed in the coming
hours, the busy highway, then smiley
faces, food, and the secret side-roads
leading to loved ones far away,
scattered like balls of mercury,
after an accidental dropping
of the thermometer. Consequences
have a tendency to multiply. Like
dandelion seeds they blow where they will.

Silent companions

I long to roam free
as I did when a girl
inhabited the body
that I now call mine -
free in her mind
among the spreading fields
owned by her father,
framed by a sky whose
high glances reflected
the yearning of the child,
who too early learned
to turn away from grief,
to deny pain. The green
or golden wheat, cherry
and apple blossoms,
the glistening peaches,
apricots and plums
her silent companions.

I want to return
to those open fields,
lie under the willows
and birches, confiding
the life-long void to
parents who remain.

Soldiers

Last night the loneliness
of the whole earth fell on me,
and I felt buried alive
under its great weight.

Last night I did not hear
a single song of the nightingale,
and the berries I tried
to comfort myself with
tasted bitter.

But sleep did lure me
out of my dank grave.
Through dreams it led me
in its divers ways
to the familiar gate,
an awakening.

Now, gazing into a gray sky
through dusty leaves,
I think of friends, children,
and unknown young soldiers
dying, mutilated, in futile wars -

and wish I could
stuff my thoughts and feelings
in a trash can
and stand under the hot sun
like a tree, until old age
or a storm fells me.

Somewhere high above is a God of love

When night opens its hushed flower,
creatures of the ocean bed spring out
to hunt, stretching tiny muscles,
displaying fantastic bodies and colors.
The community of crabs, fish, and corals
mates and feeds in an orchestrated rhythm,
while on land man struts, polluting "his" world,
spreading death among all species.

On beaches, newly hatched turtles
scuttle in panic towards the sea,
driven by instinct, fearing birds
that watch them with cool eyes,
scooping down, guillotine
beaks serving their hunger.

Special birthday

They came to celebrate me,
as in two days I'd turn seventy -
acquaintances and friends.
With the family, we were twenty

people set on having fun
in the cool afternoon sun
on the patio my oldest daughter
built with my son-in-law.

An English friend taught me how to tango.
Little Morgan, too, wanted to learn
and followed her mother's steps, intent
on the rhythm of the mumbo.

When the cake was brought –
some more merriment,
for Ian blew out the candles
before Morgan could.
While she howled,
we re-lit them.

She puffed fast,
accomplishing her task,
her body on my knee tense,
shaking,
while Genna wanted to eat the one blue rose.

Much-loved daughters and great
in-laws, old and new friends,
thanks for affirming my living.

Spring snowstorm

Is most of memory selective,
serving a purpose?
To test the theory,
I throw heart-wrenching scenes
against the Sunday window
and watch the past
mingle with dancing snowflakes,
for again, the early spring
has been thrust
in the snout of winter.

No church this morning.
Snug between books,
in an armchair,
I try to regret nothing,
such as not meeting you,
recollecting your otherness
and the opposing direction
a cold wind, blowing
where it wanted,
swept you.

Still crawling

Tired of bearing
the weight of events,
I'll leave Kosovo,
NATO's bombs
poised against the Serbs,
the threat of World War III,
the Albanian refugees
like wounded deer
about to freeze in the mountains,
locked in the TV.
I'll walk away
from the world's foolish leaders.
The Albanians would benefit
from airlifts of food and blankets,
not strikes that will tear them
bloodily apart.
I'll become
a devotee of oblivion,
watching old comedies.
I'll stop praying to the Virgin
bending down
with a worried smile.
I'll guide my hand
round the contours of the furniture,
dusting,
forgetful of earthquakes
and other disturbances,
the President hanging on a tree,
flames lapping at his entrails,
and think of little Ian and Morgan.
I'll show them
new photos of cousin Karuna,
who wants to be a basketball player
like her Papa, while still crawling -
and believe that the silkworms of mercy
are spinning over the Earth a cocoon.

Still life

Dressed in black,
you loll in sunlight
at the little table,
the gift you'll leave behind
when you progress
to the isle
where thirty-four years ago
you first blinked your eyes.

Britannia once more
will spread her green carpet
for you and London's
teeming millions
will drain
your élan.

Through the closed window
I gaze at your bulging briefcase,
ashtray, coffee mug,
your small face bent over,
distorted by the glass
that separates us,
my myopic eyes straining
to hold you
for a precious while,
while your spirit urges you on.

On your way,
you pour
loving glances
like kisses
to family and friends.

Stone feet

The white house on the hill
fingers a rosary of wishes,
as it's molded, folded
like an origami crane.
Cranes nested behind its chimney
when I was little.
As the main dwelling and the adjacent
buildings that used to shelter cows,
pigs, horses, hens, pigeons, grain,
sheds, a laundry, room to grind turnips,
three floors of deep cellars
are emptied, molded, refurbished,
the house calls to me
over thousands of miles and an ocean.
It wishes me to guess its untold secrets,
decipher the six centuries of faces
alive in its massive walls
and to resurrect the bell
from the remnants of the Roman church
in whose grave
the feet of the house are planted.

After the murder of countless high school students near Denver, Colorado

On the table rest three bilingual
volumes of your poems,
Pablo Neruda,
collector of used objects,
lamerter of lost friends,
serenader of loved women,
worshipper of democracy,
the vast Pacific ocean.

Today's world is different
from yours, Pablo, smaller,
more cruel, two-and-a-half
decades after your death.
Are you aware that soon
we'll reach the millennium?

You may have decided
never again to visit
your native Chile,
or Madrid,
Paris,
Isla Negra
and other places in which
you delighted before death
led you elsewhere.

Let me drink from the wide glass
of your words!
Strengthen me
by your robust wisdom
so that I may see peace
sail white wings
above the children
killing children
in large numbers!

Summer bridge

Already I know the gift I shall bring you,
the latest book of verse of a poet I love.
You will not disappoint me;
you will be waiting
and it will be spring or early summer.
My gift will strengthen a bridge that will span
a friendship between two lands.
Already I lift my eyes towards you.
Already you are stirring a small coffee cup
in a restaurant in the heart of Europe.

Summer photographs

While Granny is holding
baby Genna, Ian lies curled
in the paddling pool
beside his sister,
displaying his naked glory,
long slender limbs,
penis recoiled like
a water lily.
"I'm warming myself,"
he says, having spent hours
in cold water, and
wanting more attention.
They gaze at each other
in Morgan's tepid puddle,
noting the sameness
and the differences.
She follows him, naked,
on all fours to the sandbox,
plump buttocks shaking,
which makes her mama laugh.
Even if all the cameras
had been used, we could
not have captured these
moments, the elusive beauty
of young children, exploring
in August sun.

Ian's now fishing in his pool,
filled deep with cold water,
cut grass and drowned insects.
Morgan, propped on determined
short legs, grips the rim
of Ian's pool with her left hand,
splashing with the right.
She falls in, head first,
despite Elizabeth and me
kneeling right beside.
I freeze, seeing her underwater.
But after a few gasps
against her mama's breast,
Morgan begins splashing
in the pool again, undaunted.

Summer's end

Already, the day has showered
several blessings, such as bacon
and eggs, the hurricane threatening Texas
downgraded to a tropical storm,
memories of last night's dream
in which my ex-husband walked
towards me, young, committed,
the shock, the intense concern
that stirred me for his emaciated frame -
all proving that there's feeling
remaining in my heart and taste buds
and that the mind continues
to spin complicated webs.

Surveying the land

In the valley
where the Klamath River
sings an alto course,
the butterflies are asleep,
the chilled leaves huddling,
reluctant to stir
after last night's storm.

Where a wide double rainbow
arched the blue
above the mountains,
a long-fingered sun
is weeding out round clouds.

The Old Geranium Lady
in her garden gloves,
rubber apron and straw hat
must be wheeling her plants
from the greenhouse,
her dogs barking, about to chase
the birds and crickets
over the glistening ground.

My daughter, in her cabin,
is reading the autobiography
of the Dalai Lama.
Soon, she'll take me climbing
to survey the sixty acres of land
she owns with three other city escapees -

where, on the mosquito infested clearing,
her house is being built,
where she plans to have a baby
in a year or two,

and where I might also migrate -
into a cabin with a toilet -
to help her care for my grandchild.