Death Sentences
Also by Toby Olson

Poetry
We are the fire: a selection of poems
Unfinished Building
Human Nature
Darklight*

Fiction
The Life of Jesus
Seaview
The Woman Who Escaped From Shame
Utah
Dorit in Lesbos
At Sea
Write Letter to Billy
The Blond Box
The Bitter Half
Tampico

Memoir
The Other Woman*

* Shearsman titles
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For Miriam

forever
SAMPLER
Inspiration

The cat is out of the bag,
and the music is Bill Evans, not the trio,
but alone.

Somewhere along the line,
under the strains
of *My Foolish Heart*,
the people in this room
are filled with ideas.

There is no room,
and there are no people.

This is my inspiration.
There is only Bill Evans.
How quickly does the weight of time come down upon us.
Foreclosure:

Christmas, Passover, Independence,
and roses
wilting in the pot you may have placed for them,
the various frustrated markers.

And long gone too
the freshness of things discovered:

the texture of your hair,
your beautiful toes,
my finger pressed in the wetness of your armpit.

What is romance?
Outside
the winter wind is cautionary
snow flakes into wet drops on the window.

Soon the shovel, the broom,
those thoughts of you while digging
in a daze.

And yet a chickadee, shivering on the feeder, alert,
his last dance
to music I had thought to cling to,

Keith Jarrett’s fingers in “My Old Flame,”
as if the keys were lips,
other songs, another fall,
maybe another spring.
Love is the answer:
    the gone ones answering
in the earth’s ripening,
should spring
ever come to this troubled mind,
should the living forget those haunted
images of the dead,
so the dead might live in the common memory.

Last week, justice was in the offing.
I aimed to shoot the rabbit
but missed him.
    He had chewed at your flowers,
his nature.
Only in mistaken weaponry was he spared.

What is death?
    What is the nature
of these endings?
The flowers multiply before wilting
as do the rabbits.

Undeterred:
That waking dream
    of a delicate young man in glasses
in uniform, in book camp, and the bastard
Chief Petty Officer
finding a bit of soap in one ear.
He removed it brutality with a pencil,
    then forced him into the shower
in his clothing, his glasses, in front of all of us.
He wept then, water soaking his uniform,
    mingling with tears on his dignified face.
He had lost the terms of his life.
He had lost his life.
Would that I was older then,
and had this rifle.

Nights like this:
I'll be standing there with someone new,
threads of a silken scarf in memory in my fingers,
other lips that I might kiss.
Our thrill is gone.

Maudlin:
The books you gave me,
many unread. Your various accomplishments
seen but unseen.

And in our moment of parting
you were alone in the bed
six feet away.
You were always alone.

So much sabotage
on our long road home:
women and drink, my failings, my insanity.
I would ask for a moment of forgiveness.
Too late. At the end
you didn't know my name.
Who was I then?

There's a poem in here somewhere,
a kind of fiction that I remember
or imagine,
visiting Walter's farm.

Dinner and talk, fine wine,
and in the morning
out in the yard, close to the silo, with the shotgun.

“Too many pigeons.”

Doing something destructive? I don’t remember.

I raised the gun awkwardly into the sky. Three pigeons fell to the ground, two dead, one struggling to leave this planet, there in the scatter of hay and straw.

“You have to kill her,” Walter said. “It’s humane.”

I couldn’t do it. The passage would be her own, as yours was.

That night I returned to the pigeon’s resting place, then went to my bed in the old farm house. I slept the sleep of a wanderer.

About pigeons and rabbits, a guy in a shower, a chickadee, the tassels on your hat, a rifle and a shotgun.

About life and death, about dreaming, about the picture of you with your new bicycle, about memory:

the dead’s messages written into the skins of the living.
And the last story:

In the early morning,
    before the living rose up,
I carried you to the car,
    then drove to the cemetery.

The place was empty,
but for the birds,
    those mourning doves
you so loved.

And in the earth,
in front of the stone marker
upon which your name was carved,
    I dug a deep hole
and buried your ashes
among tree roots and stones.

You were not there.
Death Sentences

1

Stumbled among stones until
toes wetted in surf’s gentle wash
having come here to the edge
where pipers plow with pointed beaks
only to dash away
leaving momentary excavations
that pucker then disappear
as memory holes
in which past life might live
and die as all things possible
become nothing
here at the end of land
just inches beyond stones that were
Flint Granite Quartz and Glass.

2

Subdued danger of the brown-tale rash
and clothing for outside adventure
otherwise luxurious living
as days turn into years
and months are theatrical characters
whose presence is accusing every day
although unbidden
in this crucible that limps along
until the old man swallows up the young
and he who was a fraud and fake
discovers his flagrant character
too late for correction
out on the porch in perfect weather
where he sits and weeps.
What price vocabulary of the living world
few names for flowers trees and dogs
that bloom and move so certainly
until windy weather cars or saws possess them
lest they stay and become a prophecy
of what’s to come
days without end of gorgeous weather
which the moved along will not savor
here in the pleasure of trials and tribulations
as the mystery train travels
into uncertain futures
and even the sick at heart
look out the window to see
rows of lilacs and coreopsis blooming.

In Truro when the time was ripe
which is a metaphor
including all passengers
even those blinded by ambition
there was a house set against storm
in which a woman once lived
then died leaving parcels of her life behind
in bags that relatives sorted
in preparation for a yard sale
of worn cutlery and dishes
dresses and furniture
and jewelry impressed with her scent
who had lived in the way we all live
and will leave in the same way too.
Back to the sea
where they fish in sunset
and never see it for what it is
clock of the earth’s turning
a possible message
for those facing into the glow
who are struck blind when they turn
until their world comes into focus
transient and then fixed
for the time being
all this before the inevitability beckons
and legs start failing
even when standing still while fishing,
hauling up dark bottom dwellers.

They who are here are no longer here
yet those who are gone
are still truculent after passage
into cocoons in memory’s storage
where light footed and dancing
they break through that webbing
and after hours of drinking
in fake celebration
do the living stumble intoxicated
into their beds and the nightly
death sleep which presages
until they rise up in the morning
the rot of night in their nostrils
empty of memory.
Much of the dark preaching goes unnoticed by the fidgeting children
pew locked and longing before the sepulcher teaching and the threats
while those who know better are praying for the eternal
that is already there outside these confines in trees and sun and ever changing grasses beside the concrete parking lot and the cars that will in time enter the living earth as will all people and this steeple when preaching is forgotten.

Back to the sea again those gentle swells upon which gulls sit and wreckage washes up to be examined so that the distant past might live again in reconstructions of the sailors’ mess a wheel house and old coins whose value is found in imprints of kings and monarchs from foreign places that no longer exist but in the fascination for a cleansing by retrogression that will turn the clocks back and the dead will become the living though in the same frustrations that the living now inhabit.
X my only love
harken back to sea wrack
in childhood on these beaches
where plovers still run and fishermen
cast out their plugs that search
in deep waters for a kind of offering
so that families might devour the sacraments
brought up
and you left the table
hungry for ice cream
melting into death on your fingers
and all your friend are running forward
or away as sun sinks
and the moon rises.

A story in which there are no characters
but for the sun’s wash on everything
that is not human
but can act that way in yucca
dipping its long spear as if nodding
and the small nest the snake approaches
with an attention
humans might mimic in metaphor
seeing the world from the ground up
to avoid the dying pines and oaks
that will in time fall away
as what is now becomes a desert
and all that seemed possible has its ending
here there or anywhere.