

Poetry Series

Tom Courtney
- poems -

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Tom Courtney()

Tom's poems 'Petals' and 'A Place for Me' were featured poems of the month at Poetry Deep by Ecaria on the website

He was awarded by the University of California Irvine Poetry Arts Project, for his poem 'Zams'. See

His prose writing "The Defector" was awarded by the Poetry Society of America in the Alice Fay Di Castagnola competitions. See

His Biblical study is included in the "Loving Strangers as Ourselves" anthology published by Mennonite Church and is available at

Tom moderates a Yahoo Group poetry group at

He enjoys live readings and has performed his poetry at Basement Coffee House & Showcase in Los Angeles, Espresso in Pasadena, Out Loud in Santa Monica, Gallery 57 in Fullerton, Iguana Cafe and Coffee Haus in Orange, Blue Marble Cafe in Costa Mesa, Alta in Newport Beach and more.

Tom's formal education is a BA in Political Science and an MBA in Finance from UCLA, with studies further in accounting, computer science, business law, creative writing and Bible.

* The PSA or Poetry Society of America, with headquarters in New York, was founded in 1910 by Whitter Brynner, George Santayana, Jessie Rittenhouse and Edward Wheeler; early members including Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ezra Pound, and Carl Sandberg. The PSA was responsible for the creation of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry.

Air Fire Water & Stone

Air, fire, water and stone
A Greek alchemy and a Greek tragedy
erupt one day in April in L.A.
in a year many years hence
and in a day eternally called the modern
What age has ever been less?

Have we at last come to the present?
or did we turn some corner
The future is rent from time?
the past is torn from its moorings?
and this place
the bed of our being
shall be recognized as that from which
we seek escape?

And will we ever know us,
when we survey the infinite ahead and behind?
and calculate with our mathematics that our moment
vanishes into immateriality -
infinitesimal
the breath of our lives lost in ignorance and ignominy?

Air fire water and stone
arise and fly in our faces
one day in April in L.A. and we freeze in ice
To see and be seen
All is stillness
All spins within this circle of the known and the unknown
All lies within the hands of God
as this human thing toddles in chaos

Justice flickers and flounders in a courtroom
and a nation weeps and tears at its flesh
One proud moment - a hubris that ignites a terror
a single emotional wave sweeps across the heavens
and cries that man will never learn
asks what comes from this passage?

Fire erupts in the air
Stone burns into ash - the elements shift and re-form
in the eyes of little children and the cataracts of age
Strength and youth fly in the night, apart from themselves
What sets this human apart from the animal?
This illusion of meaning
and the destruction of one-another
in jealousy, hatred and rage?

Earth's species flee by instinct
to survive another day
As the seed of the mighty pine swirls up and pops in the fire
One forest dies to give birth to another
Air fire water and stone

The speck and the behemoth roll and flounder
but only man tears his cloth and smears his chest
This curse of aspiration
This blessing of inspiration
are wrapped in neurological and isolated synapses
triggered within the law of lawlessness
Time races and falters - halts for all we know
then grinds over us as the wheel rolls on again

Lives, words and words, and lies
We lie buried within our data
swirling down into a vortex - split, punctuated and disjointed
Myths explode as God sprinkles tears upon
those which they called Hope

And after five days the weather report says
we had a light sprinkle over L.A.
cast forth from a dry and forlorn sky
and just to set us about washing our cars again
in this mindless repetition

Sitting upon this curb
upon this street
not seeing this place called metropolis
One might come to wonder how at all
the weather is known
What are these cycles of the elements

Air, fire, water and stone?

Tom Courtney

Airport

Some things take time
That is what people say
and get away with it
To see you walk away into the coagulated line
gulping slowly into the wide aluminum ship
suddenly so small
in the bristling steaming mist of the runway
So long for just two people
I stand as they pull the walkways under
beneath the tight-set wings
setting the controlled fire
lights flashing all along the earth
And I no longer care
because you never cry when you want to
I'm returning deep within
just to say Hi to myself
I spent some time
in a tropical wonderland called Marie
and wrote a book of poetry
in the dark of a mystical night
but now I'm coming home

Tom Courtney

All My Poetry

My poetry sets me back
into my compulsions
Deep within the womb of my mystery
into the envelope of my hidden life
a perilous journey
the music much sought-after
and much maligned

A recycled second-guessing
of ever-clichéd attitudes
wrapped into a trimmer form
of expression
drawn up into a piece
of my very flesh

Then draw my words
and spread my blood and bones
across this surgeon's table
Then wash it down and prepare
for the next patient

My poetry lies unknown
to me still
Can you know
me better?

Tom Courtney

All My Poetry 2

My poetry lies folded in the wrappers
marked for value sifted sorted folded filed
rejected accepted a line of strenuous dispositions
stretching from the keyboard to the kitchen counter top
And there the toaster pops up nouns
The pot bubbles with a verbal sauce
To my left some crusty prepositions browning nicely
I have some lightly steaming adjectives
mixed in with some adverbs for flavor
But a rattle heard a u tips over and pours out his contents
All over his neighbor poor I he stands up like a v
Next the i shoots his rocket pellet into outer space
and trenchant t tips over and stabs nubile n right in the head
And this letter goes and another comes
on this notion of mine
And the poetry comes and goes and flows across the room
from the kitchen to the eventual reward
placement into the new material file
And while the keyboard's still humming
and the waste paper basket 's filled with crumpled corn pops
Some crazy-wire insects crawl over the top
scrambling to regain their original designs
before they were so contorted
and pressed upon my page

Tom Courtney

Allie And Me

And that was Saturday when Allie came home
from college and she was so pretty
and she had her hair curled and long
and everyone couldn't stop exclaiming
how beautiful she was
and how she was once just a little girl like me
and how I'd grow up to be
like Allie some day

And we were all excited and rushing around
to take care of this and that and
Momma barely had time to talk to me
but that was ok because I'm old enough now
to know how things are
and I'm not jealous of Allie
because I love her too much
and she loves me

She sent me letters from college
and told me things about her classes
and the college buildings
her teachers and the boys

And I'm going to go to college just like Allie
so I was just kind of watching everything

And they would all poke me or hug me
like older folks do
and look for my freckles
and even uncle ray he's my favorite
picked me up and carried me around
which I like
because I don't have to act like a big girl
all the time

Like some of my friends
some of them try to act that way all the time
and I can see that actually they
don't know what they're doing

It's obvious that kids my age don't know everything
but you can see how everybody
is so caught up in themselves

And uncle ray says that I know more
than most people my age
and that means that I'm going to be
somebody important someday

Tom Courtney

And The Rain

and the rain came
sprinkled on my window pain
came to touch my heart again
when I met you

You were there babe
clutching at my soul again
hoping you could be my friend
and I love you

Rain, rain
come again another day
go and give your dance a play
but far away from me

Rain, rain
come and see the garden grow
come and dance, put on your show
your two-faced way

She was all I hoped for me
she was all, she made me me
until you came
I'm not the same

Now look and see the flowers grow
through wind and rain and sleet and snow
but this I know, that you will pass
just tell me when, that will you pass

But pass you will, and all will see
the sun will show a brand new me
the rain will stop, and I'll be free
I'll start my way, a brand new day

Tom Courtney

And You Think You Know What Politics Is

And you think politics is all about voter registration and issues
War, abortion, taxes, global warming, and medicare

You think politics is all those candidates running for office
and you think you know what politics is
Let me tell you what politics is

Politics is a dollar in my pocket and a rock in my head
Politics is a glass eye, shell shock, and schizophrenia
An impenetrable wall that eludes your touch
Politics is a big advertisement for coca-cola classic
And the drum beat of the daily news

And just as history is the chronology of war
Politics is the seismic movement of power
You feel it and they tell you everything about it that is
of no possible value

Politics is two guys slam drunk in some local dive
not knowing what society they live in or who they're talking to
because politics is not what you see on the six o'clock news

Politics is all the reasons it got all fouled up in the first place
Politics is why they misappropriated your money
Politics is all of t. S. Eliot's 'arguments of insidious intent'

Where words are cast about like frisbees in the air
Words like liberty equality freedom justice patriotism
the meanings bleached out by the sun
and contorted by misunderstanding and abuse
Illiterate we are in our native tongues

Politics is the mish and the mash of compromise
It' s the give and take of his opinion and hers
Politics is the confluence of the 'is'
with the 'what ought to be'

Real-politick is the reality of life as opposed to the dream
It is life's approximations instead of the ideal

And there come a man and woman of the caves and jungles
displaced just a little
to occupy the high rise office structures and condominiums
They have shed the mask of thickened hide and heavy fur
and don the satin sheen of this new hairless breed
clinking cocktails
sliding loosely into believing in ideologies

Politics is the enaction of survival of the fittest
Politics is the play of those best equipped for this world
with all the tools endowed by god
and played-out without any knowledge of his existence

Politics is getting along with life
while watching those less fortunate fall by the wayside
and you watch and pray
to save your guilty soul
and spare yourself the others' fate

Politics is not a two party game
structured opposition democracy and government in the making
Politics is the color of our lives
Politics is what we settle for
Politics is the yin and the yang of our work and our play
of life and its introspection

Politics is a stale joke in a smoke-filled room
Oh! I lost my wallet on the other street corner!
but the light is so much better over here

Politics is a lighthouse beacon shining far out
into the fog-shrouded night

And politics is a baby-blue tinted disposable contact lens
on the eye of a potato

Tom Courtney

Another Day

I find what you have written here to be very interesting.
You have written from the heart
and with some style.
You have told a story
and painted a picture with your words.
You have brought to mind things
And the thoughts of things,
and the very thing of thought itself.
You have entertained me, in a way.
I would have read your piece of my own choosing.
In your writing, you depict people,
and I can believe in them.
They cry and laugh, and other things happen.
You are quick to point out the irony.
You float glibly across our sensibilities,
while prodding us to think the more.
But most of all, you have a gift,
Which you have given us here,
that is, yourself,
which is, of course, most pleasing.
And I can see that you are a moral person,
but you avoid trouncing us with your morality.
A light touch, you question more than answer
and leave it to us to decide for ourselves.
You almost speak a voice universal,
one we all can feel,
if only we could express it,
and a feeling of the yearning to reach farther,
to see what is on the other side,
and perhaps, just for an instant,
to touch it.
And in all these senses,
You have written a very interesting work.
Your audience would applaud you
for your artistry.
And it is therefore with much chagrin
that I must tell you
that, with regard to the publication of your poem,
it surely will be published

and be read, with much appreciation.

And while we are pleased that you would contact our establishment,
we are not in a position
to take on your project
at this time.

I therefore find myself forced to offer you
This perhaps small consolation,
that there will be, indeed
another day

Very sincerely yours
What? What? What?
Publishers & Bookiers
New York, NY

Tom Courtney

Art?

art surrounds me i surmise
is sculptor tactful poet wise?

is beauty calculated far?
is mortal touching distant star?

where is this sense of what is grand?
is genius accident or planned?

this calculus geometry
this mesmerizing panoply

of human unfolding imperfection
in object, truth a near detection?

in contemplation of this life
the seeds in heart of buried strife?

in complacency a dullness born
in consistency I am forlorn?

a quiet sadness hovers near
in habit formed a crystal tear?

that we are never satisfied
our spirit lost our fervor died?

this mixture of the bittersweet
creates an awesome fiery heat

that drives us to the pen to wrestle
to find our dreams wherein they nestle

and keys that calm the raging storms
in many styles and shapes and forms

we study what we're yet to know
we sense another's urgent glow

then find it quite within our manner
to sing the song to raise the banner

to say what ne'er was said so well
to sketch the line 'tween heaven and hell

to find our heart to share our dream
to give it shine to make it gleam

we seek in art our hopes of love
we send on wings this lonely dove

to fly above our barren land
our heart's own life to speak to stand

to say to others it's just my best
before my heart and soul can rest

Tom Courtney

Ballad Of Croccy & Lizzy

A tale with two tails & a love tale true

Listen my children, and you shall hear
A tale of laughter and a crocodile tear

There once was a lizard who thought she could swim
And she fell in the water for her eyesight was dim

She struggled and floundered - this story is true!
Til her cheeks filled to bursting, and her pink turned to blue

And just when poor Lizzy was to gasp her last gasp
Up swam old Croccy and took her in grasp

He laid her up gently on the shoreline so dry
And then eyed his cousin and raised up his eye

If you wanted to swim, you'd amphibious be
I come in and go out, but you stick to your tree

We're cousins it's true. But we differ as such
So just lie here and sun some. The water's too much

And as Croccy swam off and lil Lizzy dried out
She regained her strength enough just to shout

Hey cousin! I thank you. I owe you my life
If you come to the forest, I'll sure be your wife

Tom Courtney

Best Way To Keep A Secret Is Tell It, Just Like That – Mixes In With All The Other Palaver – Nobody’s Gonna Listen, Believe You Or Even Care: The Secret

told the lady behind the counter
at the deli that I’m crazy and she just laughed and said no! But it’s true I really
am crazy
And she said you don't look crazy
And I said no I don't suppose I do
That's part of my problem though I look normalwhateverthat is but I’m not
I walk around in a world of normal people and every once in a while I have to
poke someone and tell them I’m not in the same world as they are and then they
don't think I’m crazy
but that I am crazy for saying so

And she leaned over at me finally and said
What is it you are crazy weeth? And I said

I’m bi-polar. You know, manic-depressive?

And her eyes glazed over like the hams and salami
You don't know what that is do you? I said
And she said
No I don't know. What is that? And I said

That's what I am, I’m manic-depressive
Andshesaid in hersweetest sleepy-eyed droopy-eyelid limpid voice
I’m sorry I’m very sorry you're ... whatever it is you said...

I tell you what (she said) ! ! Get far away! Just get away from it all for a while!
Take a vacation when's the last time you took a vacation?

Go drive somewhere in your car even if you don't know where you're going!
And I said I can't get away from myself I’m sorry

I have to take me with myself wherever I go he goes and I come
I go and he comes I wish I could...

Then I realized this was just too much about me and my words trailed off

What vacation did she want to/ need to take! ? What was crazy when crazy really came to her? What was it for her to speak her heart to a stranger?

What did all my words spun and flung so carelessly bite into I didn't know this lady

So I said well, yea, you know I'll do that

And she smiled it meant a lot that's what you have to give when you're In yourself

Gave her the response she needed to hear
heart to heart

Appreciate it really- your idea- I'll do it!
I'm gonna try and do that

And by the way
don't mind all my crazy talk
You know, I'm just a little crazy

And she said no! And I said yes! No! Yes! Ha haha

I am

And I could hear myself and how I must sound to her
Like some bothersome man who needs the attention - lonely most likely like men get when they think about it and probably - more than likely
They had too much liquor
The alcohol- and the way they talk
because they're drunk - they talk around women
And can't see the barriers and can't see that they're seen sloppy drunk they say

Don't pay me any mind, I'm just crazy
And then they tap the sides of their head like it'll rattle
and they grin
that awkward, hanging grin
When their lips and tongue are thick their heads spinning and the room is turning around them

And he thinks I'm putting on a pretty good show
I'm drunk and I know it
Don't show it too much

Want to be loose but not too loose and lose their respect and he thinks in the far
back of what's left functioning in that mind he's pickling

That because he can't see straight
that nobody else can either

But knowing they're pretty drunk they stumble and sway towards the door
because you don't score women when you're drunk

You just have some fun

And practice the lines you're too introverted to say sober you have some fun and
kill another night

Stumbling and waving as they go thinking for the life of them

I'm crazy to be this drunk but I'm a crazy guy

Until they wake up the next morning and find out they're not crazy at all just sick

And it's the same-ol same-ol: job, wife or kids a pale sheet pulled over the world
of lights and fancy

But I wake up the next day (I woke up one day, that is) and find out
(found out)

No hang over just a spill-over

a continuation of what I thought had been a bad experience

and now it's just my life

and life just kind of flip-flopped on me in the night

So I turned around walked away from the nice lady iknewjustasmidgenbetter in
the deli

to tap the side of my head and grinned at her

a wide but fading grin

attempting to leer

Tom Courtney

Beyond The Last Program - Secular Version

And so we step out
beyond the last program
beyond the parking spots
from the automobiles
now stacked like tiny eggs in little cartons
huddled together and locked up tight
against the cold

Passing the rough-cut
lacquered green-paint wooden signs
stepping off into the longer grasses
accompanied by the tunes of the first real crunching
of all my attitudes and preconceived notions
into powder

And on into the tall thin ravine
that nature filled so many eons ago
the fertile soil from many mountain rains
brings life up surprising us all around

And leaning against these heavy packs
so ponderous for city backs and shoulders
Our little trek into the heart of the earth
means nothing less than an extraction
from all our own creations

Now a tiny band of wanderers
stepping forward into day
this valley fools the eye
We seem to be standing still
as earth revolves beneath us
and the sun burns hotter and higher
Even as the heavens rotate
to fulfill our fantasy that we
are still the center of it all

Now into the deep
as deep as promise demands
These oaths we make only to ourselves

to stand on a higher place
to perhaps experience the closer presence
of the unknown

But what brought us here?
Why do we return now
Seeking something we lost in the past?

But here in this valley of light
It lies beyond
our understanding
and irrelevant
in marigolds
and the craggy faces
of the great rocks

Tom Courtney

Beyond The Last Program - Spiritual Version

And so we step out
beyond the last program
beyond the parking spots
from the automobiles
now stacked like tiny eggs in little cartons
huddled together and locked up tight
against the cold

Passing the rough-cut
lacquered green-paint wooden signs
stepping off into the longer grasses
accompanied by the tunes of the first real crunching
of all my attitudes and preconceived notions
into powder

And on into the tall thin ravine
that nature filled so many eons ago
the fertile soil from many mountain rains
brings life up surprising us all around

And leaning against these heavy packs
so ponderous for city backs and shoulders
Our little trek into the heart of the earth
means nothing less than an extraction
from all our own creations

Now a tiny band of wanderers
stepping forward into day
this valley fools the eye
We seem to be standing still
as earth revolves beneath us
and the sun burns hotter and higher
Even as the heavens rotate
to fulfill our fantasy that we
are still the center of it all

And yet He said so
More thoughts for us than the grains of sand upon the shore
I am not alone

and never shall I be

My hands are now irrelevant
to any progress here
Reach draw scratch or fidget
pouring water from a plastic spout

Now my swinging hands
swishing the stillness of the air

Now into the deep
as deep as promise demands
These oaths we make only to ourselves
to stand on a higher place
to feel the closer presence
of God

But what brought us to where we are?
Is it not our own technology?
Broadly defined the twist
of two fine wires?
The adding of a to b?
But here it lies beyond
our understanding
Because we allow God to be
And all we see is marigolds
and the highest of high
the craggy faces
the great rocks and no more
biology

So free
Have we indeed come this far?
What was it that captured us so
in another place another time?

Baffled and wondering
We have brought ourselves to face
another eve with sun plunging toward the night
The night which bears much misunderstanding

And from beyond the tallest pine

the shadows now announce themselves
politely
arising and dancing to our tunes
They are the reflections of ourselves
emerging from our glass houses

We never could anticipate
the settling effects upon us
that our hikes through rocks and snow
and the variegations of this wondrous adventure
would create in us
that calls us to experience it
as God's creation

Tom Courtney

Bite's (The) On Me

I stopped in for a bite today
My local hang along the way
But little could I have surmised
The bite was his as I was wised

The little yapper sat content
He tore my cuff achieved his bent
I cannot blame. It was his nature
I'd be embarrassed by his stature

No larger than a healthy turkey
My legs were loose, my hands were jerky
I scanned the café for ownership
Some human form gave me the slip

I asked the waiter: dogs allowed?
He seemed unhearing in the crowd
I wagered louder: whose is this?
This ball of fur, he stops to kiss

The fast approaching customer
With snarling teeth a mangy cur
Then bolder now: proprietor!
Who is this greeter at the door?

This friend of man and friend indeed
If this is so I say take heed
We met a few short strokes ago
He almost took away my toe
And though I love the furry mutts
This winsome pooch left me with cuts

I seek his master to let him know
That little problems sometimes grow
That minor scratches I'll survive
But keep him leashed and keep him live

Tom Courtney

Breath Of Sea

Come and take a walk with me
down to the raging boundless sea
down to the surf-torn tides and sand
beyond the cliffs to the edge of land

Come to the sea horizon-bent
carved by the weight of sight and sound
To this pool of life we scarcely know
take my hand and come, let's go

Dawn breaks the gray-cast wilderness
time moves this restless space beyond
We – two simple creatures stand
to share the mysteries of our bond

Deep in sleep the sea meets sky
where rain is torn with relentless cry
where heavens open unto the night
The source of life beckons the light

We are too of ages told
Our first and last meet here as one
Oh sea of whispers cry and moan
your pirouette awaits the sun

I clasp your hand in wonderment
the bursting bells and tinkling light
This vast unceasing churning form
is truest true and rightest right

I speak in silence hollow sound
I yearn to cry out – draw you near
I think your mist will be my strength
and love will last another year

Tom Courtney

Bright-Sun Morning

Woke up to a bright-sun morning
Look what I see!
The day was a new dawn breaking
And I felt free – I was free!

I slept in a rumpled awning
I fell from grace
I fought with the demons clashing
But they were me, I can see

I am changing, I am changing
Ever changing, that's for keeps
One thing we have in life is life
There's no repeat

I got up to a clear sky cover
The air was new
I looked for my shadow's lining
I remembered you

I wonder, can you see? See to me?
You came to me
What did we have?
Shall we see?

I stood on a high rock mountain
We all climbed there
So now you can know that you have me ever
I loved you there

And I ran from the scourge of darkness
It came to me
I thought I had conquered madness
It was fantasy

And once I held your soft hand
Like a dove in a nest hiding
Your fingers tapered and so small
You can hold hands and you can't

I walked from the tough job's ending
I washed my hands
And put on my fresh clothes, standing
Another day, I'd earned my stay

And I will sleep
I will sleep and wake up new
The sun hides its burning ember
I think of you, where are you?

Tom Courtney

Butterfly And Bee

Once bee buzzed by the lilted butterfly
tiny wings afire with his speed
aiming for his garden target
rifling along in his usual haste
Butterfly was darting up down and sideways
as if suspended on a string
and pulled about by a drunken puppeteer
Bee had thought of speaking a warning
to local pedestrians those operating
in a different time frame than he
He had tried to say watch out move over I'm coming
but he got no farther than waa
waa and by that time he had come and gone
and all that someone like butterfly
would hear was waa nnnnnn, and so
Bee wondered about his early warning system
perhaps he'd buzz louder – one of these times
there'd be some collision – traveling ninety
leaves per moon dropp is a very very fast pace
And butterfly always slow to take notice
would hear the waa nnnn's from time to time
tilt a wing and turn to see who's zipping by
to see Mr. Tiny-Yellow-And-Black-Dot vanishing
into the faraway but he really didn't care
Something else was on his mind. There
was something else he'd been thinking about and
he'd merely forgotten what it was. And so
he turned and floated, turned and hovered
capturing the glance of the sunshine
upon his wings reflecting it
into my eye

Tom Courtney

Call In The Night

Call in the night
when the sun is a peach
wear your white cottons and sit down
next to me on this old porch

Let the rag-tag days of bitter milk creep in
around us in the glistening night
Your smile tells me of infinite variations on a theme
Come, collar your fears
and finger this drink we'll share
Touch for the moment
what we could have been

Your forehead melts as mine rises
in the dim evening shadows
Fevers of yesterdays
and the comings and goings of ghosts
in the bayous visit
where the light is sixty watts above

Your hair is loosely curled
and your hat band is mellowed
I love you I have to say
even though you move
before I can capture your glance
I love you eternally
not just for this moment

But you know it
and always have from the instant
our eyes met
Eyes know even across burning asphalt
ages barriers and business relations

But rude awakenings
and trenchant strangers leap up
and alter the balance

Another creature another wondering

fodder for my neuroses
when you never come
peeping in and out
in months without beginnings and ending
over and over again

I measure the years long too long
and then much shorter
then jumbled atop one another
while you linger on the fringe of my sensibilities
and throb in my pulse

I love you to a fantasy
when the moon rises
one too many times

And I lie alone
tucked in a pocket of myself
I recreate the world
for walking and running and screaming
as you never come

And when you call you are drunk
and say over and over
that yes yes yes how much
how terribly much
you do love me

Tom Courtney

Can We Rise?

Can we rise
from scratching on the wall
in smoky caves
with charcoal images
some portraying life
pictures showing death?

Songs of a man emerging
hands now taking to berry dye
to say with feelings
what words cannot express
from man comes his self-aggrandizement
his ignorance and his inspiration?

Can we rise
through the slow grinding of time
from pits in the earth
to the angles of thinkers
the open spaces of architects
the smooth faces of marble
and the idea of man?

Tom Courtney

Christmas Sells

Dashing through the mall
the last day's sale parade
Through the stores we charge
spending all the way

Bells on counters ring
credit cards a'flight
Oh what fun to laugh and spend
we'll shop into the night

Jingle bells Christmas sells
tingle all the way
Oh what fun it is to hide
the cost on lay-away

Christmas sells nothing quells
For opulence we'll pay
Oh what fun to slide into
financial disarray

Tom Courtney

Christopher

Christopher - my boy in passing
fast at stick-ball, playing, sassing
climbing fences, your array
of make-believe, of push and play

Of exploration, self and smile
of precious inches, joyous mile
Oh Christopher, my point of light
my dancing heart, my boy so slight

I see myself replayed and smile
knowing boyhood lasts a while
And I have moments: you have time
You dance on life; I play with rhyme

I turn the record once again
I set the needle - boy, aged ten
and then imagine I can play
my soul's own tune, my time of day

That I can capture your chiming bells
your softening echoes, like great sea shells
And just to see your shadow run
your gentle shape, your joy and fun

Oh Christopher! You sing my song
with notes so brief - a day so long
For can you stop the coming night?
Can you stay the passing flight?

So blithely unaware you are
of father watching from afar
of father knowing he can't hold
He stands to shape; he thinks to mold

So father fastens, fastens eye
He cannot think that youth will die
He memorizes line and form
His boy is wind - all rain and storm

He rides above the rules of man
if only in his father's plan
You're God's way of telling me
that what I love I must leave free

But stay, oh stop - just long enough
The time is dear; the way is tough
I cannot hold you, I am saying
Just live and live is for the praying

And miracle you are to me
is what, of course you cannot see
Strange resonance a father is
He vacillates with what is his

He tells himself: though I am father
I will not meddle; I will not bother
that fragile edge of innocence
til time is spent - all scrip and pence

Til moon has touched your wondrous eye
til bullfrog leaps for firefly
til tides have turned, and you've been you
my Christopher my one and true

Tom Courtney

Come Little Sister

This is the age of the electric transaction
Come on little sister, let me show you around
This is the age of the impersonal inquiry
This is the age of the manwomanman

This is the age of the newnude discovery
of the highways and low-ways and byways of life
This is the age of the instant impaction
and the ever-pervasive highlowhigh

Come little sister
and let me show you the cheap tricks
Let me show you the way that I got mine
Come little sister and we'll survive
We'll survive the upcoming nuclear blast

Come on my sister
Let's ride the fast train
Muse with commuters and grin at our sin
Leave this busted city in the rust and our dust
And all it takes is a quick flash in time

Look at the poster boards flashing the windows
Look at who's getting to the top of the heap
Look at who's sold off their souls to the devil
for a moment of glory
on the golden train ride

Passing the age of the newer discovery
rounding the bend of technology's fast face
leaping headlong into the arms of some future
burying the past in the unmarked graves

Hey come little sister
Say what you're thinking?
You're kind of quiet sitting there hair all ablaze
Fire in your eyes for the storms of tomorrow
Will you be ready when they come to collect the tickets?

Oh little sister you stir my soul
Will you venture with me on the clickety-clack?
Will you send me a message down from heaven
When all of our promises lie heaped in a stack?

I have a ticket to nowhere sweet little sister
And you hold the one true promissory note
Your wide eyes see what I cannot envision
as you and I fly through this glistening night

Tom Courtney

Comp 225a

And now I am to know comparative politics
i.e. the Atlantic area and all that that entails
primarily the American, English and French
when I barely know each nation alone

Another task to take me soaring
far beyond my comprehension and into
the realm of aching neck muscles
torn connections with my past
a task with dubious value in regards to
my future enlightenment or employment

A book a week is all we ask
and all critiqued. No analyses if you please
whatever I can to please those minds
far more advanced than mine

I tear the pages from the texts of my memory
and patch them together into an ersatz concoction
of grade requirements and manage to pass
my first upper division monstrosity with a b+

And I don't know why we are compelled
to study such tracts as detailed as phone books
and dictionaries

If all I have to do for the rest of my life
is to classify the classified ads
I have now acquired the discreet comprehension and technique
requisite for the task

Comparative political systems! Mish-mash
I'm in a political stupor
Mixed ideologies, parallel bureaucracies, personal histories
No man can say the ways of the world
I fear this politics is not a science

Let us all better muddle along
in our prejudices and instinctive inclinations

the true bedrock of democracy in action
The sorting and sifting of passion and intellect in history
will be seen in a time farther along into the future
than as of this sitting

Tom Courtney

Complaint

Next to my sleep my sheets tossed in a heap
Add night's twists and toil to another day's turmoil

A traffic of refuse runs mad through my mind
I can't sleep alone nor sleep with my kind

I lie in the darkness no sleep likely comes
I wonder what goes and don't know what comes

I can't speak of life any more than I fly
On wings clipped in heaven, with smiles that cry

With all of my knowledge it's true I'm confused
I'm taking what's given me I'm all that is used

And what is this state where I've come the full circle?
My mind's a wind eddy, my thoughts are a'swirl

I lie in this tomb, all the world's reversed
This life is a death, it's all been rehearsed

I don't find much rest in my wearisome state
Far be it from me, perhaps it's my fate

But the night is so late, the day was to do
The confusion and pain are only too true

The parts of this puzzle are hard to decipher
I'm signed up for life you could call me a lifer

What choice have I got? What powers are wrought?
In this land of fast food, this land of fast thought?

This place where we seldom have time to slow down
Fast groups and fast friends, fast beginnings and fast ends

I've seldom appeared to myself quite so grim
All that's been said and been done, I am him

I search in the dark for my missing soul
That shines like a beacon and hides like a mole

Each day is a welter of just who am i?
This question persists do I do or I die?

What place do I have in my life's interface?
With all that is holy, with all that is grace?

Explain to me please if you think we are fine
Just step up and speak. Put the toe to the line

We say how are you? And how do you do?
I'm fine just as well, just great thru and thru

I walk and I talk like a civilized being
I wear the straight jacket where nothing is feeling

I walk the dark alleys where no one is home
This abandonment of life is the grist of my poem

I can't see the suffering of others around
I'm far too immersed. In my own chains I'm bound

I'm selfish to the point of no probable rest
I'm too focused on me. I've failed the test

The stark walls of hi-rise, the courtyards of play
Melt far from my meaning. I've the devil to pay

This lament of my life serves what purpose or matter?
As for love or for grief, I've got more of the latter

I cry to my soul "say one meaningful thought"
It seems that I should, it seems that I ought

To give of myself to my sister and brother
God take me in dreams and put here another

Oh light in the sky, that arc light of night
Are you the lord waiting, can you make my wrong right?

Oh this I believe, that there's nothing I know
I'm uncertain whether I stop or I go

Wherever you are lord, make sense of this world
Please come to your people, a banner unfurled

We ponder and struggle, til pain stabs its point
You could take us all up, heal mind soul and joint

We hobble about, immersed in emotion
We search and we struggle to find the right potion

I play out my part til I'm drained fully clean
There's little that's heartfelt. It's plain to be seen

But late now the night. I can feel the heel
Of time's burning tablet, of dawn's turning wheel

And I know that someday, I shall leave this hospital
And so just for now, I complain just a little

Tom Courtney

Confrontation (The)

I pressed my face in the crowd tonight
I had to speak to the group
I had to tell them just what I thought
And stick my neck in the soup

I could have kept it to myself
I could have contained my fervors
I could have remembered that silence is golden
But I put my mouth on maneuvers

I was thinking I don't need this issue
This is minor for honor and face
But it wasn't my day to swallow my cud
And my speech lacked the style and grace

He said all the nonsense that started me
I reacted in the worst sort of fashion
I was bristling for a good confrontation
And I gave him my point and my passion

I said Mister please think your point through
No one threatens your fiefdom or reign
A junkyard dog is unwanted
And you're bound and determined for pain

I went on the list his infractions
And I told him just what I thought
But he shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said Fella
From my view I just did what I thought

And I walked away huffing but thinking
I can't really win at this game
If our paths deem to cross in the future
I won't be changed and he'll be the same

Tom Courtney

Consultations

All our consultations
in structured voices
the formulations of our ideas
and manifestations of yours and mine
our fine-wired deliberations
attempts to sway the masses
attitudes reflections affectations
I turn to you
you bend to me
affiliations
shared sensations
items on the agenda
blurred connotations
Go back and seek elucidation

After all the discussions have unwound
and wound up to the point
our aggregations of these ideas
and our imaginations
can't you just agree with me? !

and I with you?
I could seek another dissertation
but can't you see my
so familiar thing?

We sit in truth and fiction

I'm sure you'll tell me all
That is within you
You can see I hold nothing back
Ever onwards towards the elusive agreement
I can see it looming on the horizon
Ever upwards to a higher level
I can feel it, my hands gesticulating

Write it down! Someone said
Write it down! A charter
We're in agreement

Put it in a constitution
before it vanishes
into the thin air between us

Enumerate the points within it
Create the order that we
require for our governance
Shape the language of our covenant

Proud women and men stand forth
and count upon your fingers
We need ten bodies for our quorum
Each voice speak now
entreating God for His guidance
I have now said my piece
and sit in peace, and silence

The roaming growling essence is upon us
The simple majority is our mandate
Let us act quickly now
Governance is nigh
We are within it!
A conversation trivializes our process
Stick to the point!

We require clarity
Give me something we can communicate
Brevity
Yield us only what must be dealt
Continuity
Let's have with all our history
History?
We'll write our present deliberations
Into the textbooks
My pencil broke!
Has anything been left
To chance? !

Tonight the President
will speak to the nation
tonight on prime time the results
Of all our consultations

no elaborations are necessary
The meeting of our minds
is sufficient

The Congress is in session!
Let no one sigh within it

Tom Courtney

Conversations (The)

... and the best thing
would be to perform
One spoke as the two men sat
at the small table in the corner
amidst the clutter of dishes and voices
A single flower long-stemmed and fine
tipped to one side in the slender glass vase
And the waiters came and went
in their judicious haste
Outside the air well into spring
the sky a high dove's egg
pale blue and speckled across the center
The wine rich and earthy
and their chairs on the uneven boards
the voices mixed and melting
into a kind of foliage
in the room reserved for the foreigners
The two men sat in their business suits
learning to wear their disguises
and how to place the cup to the side
And the one man said
he would be a performer
and the other thought he's too intense
It isn't played that way
It's an accident he thought
And the soufflés came
and the salt and peppers went around
And the fans turned slowly overhead
like the twisting prop of a dying airplane
So when did you come here?
It was long ago
I came here for love
Didn't you?
Oh yes, in a manner
yes, the other said
nodding his head
I just have to find a way to express it
These things happen incidentally, don't they?
Yes, that is, if you pursue them

And it's best to know people
who speak in a foreign language
You can understand them more clearly
when you don't know
what they are saying

Tom Courtney

Dancing On A Day Moon

July-high moon
cream crescent in the almost-dusk
in this misty-white/blue
a brilliant haze this moment
just before night falls

This lonely street
along this long slow bend
to spring along across the top
of the disparate gray gravels that push
their heads up through the thinning
shiny black cover

Along this path I ride
foot down and round and round
the balances of all my existence
Sensing them as never before
exulting in a very personal freedom
and finding the clean clear water
that flows upon me
after the sweat has come and gone

It is my dance of purity
a ritual I've never understood
only accepted, and why?
It occurred to me
Did God at last speak to me
Dancing before a day moon?

In the fading light
another reflection I see
from another burning light
to see my tiny light
returned to me

I imagine and go and see
that I am part of this
and this is part of me
No journey now or race

this moon sees me

Tom Courtney

Dandelion

Dandelions, dandy lions, we call you a weed
You sprout and you grow, where we're seldom in need
Our weakness in life, to blame flower not seed

Tom Courtney

Defector

Call it by its name: murder
Oh political policy in a pig's eye
There's no policy except the party
They hid it so no one could see
but I knew I knew

The die is cast
The bus ride the incessant indoctrination
We jolted along past the collectives
Pinichov that pitiful stooge
was dictating to us. Imagine
all the same old manure. I realized
then for me there was no turning back

Farm after farm we passed while
Pinichov droned and around me blackness
for I knew what no one else could know

I suppose knowledge can be severe
I closed my eyes and covered my face
and wept

I saw no farms but one, the litvinov's
Yuri's will was too strong
Yuri was only a poor farmer
but he was the true patriot
Mrs. Litvinov had found him
His skull crushed and
his blood spilt from the house
to the center of the yard
where he lay in a puddle of black
his blood was black

It was the soil Yuri had fought for
He knew no ideology

And he lay until they were sure that
she would find him
And how do i know? Yes you ask

God save my soul
I am privy to such things

But they had not had enough
They would use Yuri as an example and
they brought Mrs. Litvinov to stand trial
as you recall

My father occasionally did a curious thing
He opened a file for me to see
He'd ask me what I thought of it
What I'd do if I were he
If I had his authority. I read of Yuri:

He was a traitor to the party and Russia
condemned for trading in the black market
trading in contraband at the expense of
the common people
those who sacrificed for the collectives
Then the Litvinovs were exposed as Jews
That file was routine KGB - my hands shook

following death by unnatural causes – unnatural
Indeed – an accident, Yuri had fallen
while patching a leak in his roof
following the heavy snows, he had been drinking
and lost his balance. I looked at father

Sensing that somehow he was reaching out to me
and had no words to express himself
I said Papa why is it good men fall?

They fall from roofs
They fall from positions of authority
They disappear and never return to their families?
Papa Yuri did not fall did he?

And father said no Yevi your good friend
and mine did not fall from the roof
And I said Papa
It was the hooligans, murderous thugs
What does a life mean to them?

But father said it is more than that
Much more

And I said Papa
It's the party boss – and demansk
Is a Stalinist stronghold – Yerchenko
He is the leading proponent of the old brutality

And father said he wields the power
He's corrupt he's blind and arrogant and dangerous
But it is more than just Yerchenko

And I said Papa the farm policy
is unbending uncompromising dictating from the top
And so it rises, yes? And he said yes

And I said without consideration of individual lives
we are spoon-fed force-fed the line
And father said yes ... but

And I exclaimed Papa how far does it go?
It is men in power – you have seen it
They are jaded and lost and
We are floundering in an intricate web

Papa looked at me and spoke as never before
Yes Yevi my son all these things are true

And I continued and I pressed him
How far does it go? I ceased
And he fell back silent in his chair
The life seemed to drain from his body
And he touched me in a way I
have never felt before

A man so cold and aloof and driven
so many years a man i barely knew
and now suddenly unmasked it was like
an introduction

And I spoke softly and asked Papa why?

But then I knew it was of the moment
that for which he had had no words

It is them and us - all of us
them and you and me
and his eyes were moist but steady

If you only knew him as I then knew him
I cannot say how proud I was
moment of ecstasy amidst the ache of ages

And the buses rolled along on farm day
Pinichov had been chosen for his charisma
not necessarily his subtlety
his devotion and obedience, less his tact
one of the pet dogs, his eyes would gleam
with his zeal for his purpose

Don't lose sight of the dollar
he would say
while stooping to pick up the penny
And he spoke of ages and lives and histories
meanings, unquestioning not knowing
any other way

He was one of the many cogs in the machinery
essentially as guilty and innocent as i
As I sat seeing the Litvinov tragedy
One tiny speck in an ocean of tangled nets
I cringed and clutched my hands together

The blood Yuri's blood was black upon my hands
dried clotted black. No more
If it is within my power
I made a private statement
I pronounced the words
and set the die it is wrong
but there it is as Papa had said

And as he said it he looked deeply into my eyes
He seemed to be saying that once
He had taken his stand and

He would live with it
He was what there was
But I still had a chance

He seemed to say that I was the more
The time he did not have
All this spoken though no words
passed between us
I felt all this and more

We sat huddled
close to the fire in the hearth
and a sudden downdraft
blew the ashes in our faces
brushing at them lightly paled Papa's skin
and from my father's place a ghost arose
to speak where life is gray and frail

As the ghost re-entered his body
Papa's vision sharpened and
he became the man of steel once again
Just as I was thinking all these things
His eye peeled away my disguises
and the blood rushed to my face

Then he rose and kissed me
and said be true to Yevi and to Russia my son
wherever that may lead you

Tom Courtney

Director Of The Moral Conscience

I will report to the President in the Square Office
I will visit my chair in Congress periodically, when I am not out on a junket
I will preside in the Supreme Court, once every full moon
I will ride herd on the press and media, before I have been put out to pasture
I will dropp in to pay a visit to our governors, but only as time permits, and of course, start with those states that have the most delegates
I may come calling at lower levels of governance, but seldom, as where seldom needed, seldom responding
And I will speak to the people, directly through the media and in the spirit

I will speak with many voices, I will say many things, I will question more than answer
I will raise concerns, issues that should be addressed
I will never attempt to persuade: I will leave that to director of propaganda I will merely tweak

I will bring little reminders here and there; I will occasionally come in the night and disturb your sleep
I will not push, as I am not an enforcer
I will ask many, many questions
You will get tired of hearing my voice
I will become shrill to you in very short order
You will wish me away, and I will come uninvited, until you forcefully cast me aside

I will go against the common grain
I will more often than not, be unpopular
I would never win an election, unfortunately
Perhaps it is best that I not endeavor to enter the campaign
I should really give up trying to influence those in office or running
They have mostly closed their ears anyway
I will eventually die off, for in our nation's youth, I was a formative force, because people remembered what tyranny was
They still felt the lash of oppression of man over man
They live at or near subsistence level, what we call 'poverty' now, but they felt rich, because I thrived in their hearts and minds
I gave them great strength, strength to think great thoughts, to dream great dreams and to accomplish almost anything. But perhaps I did too well, because with me came freedom. With me came social justice.

With me came prosperity

I fed the people too well, and the nation grew strong, and the new generations came,
Young ones never tasting persecution,
never touching injustice,
never without the latest media device,
never out of style in their manner
I did my job too well, and I helped raise up a people who do not know anything but affluence, wealth and power
And they have now forgotten from whence it all came
They run amok, seeking only new stimulations for their senses
They respect nothing of history, because they do not know it Yet in their arrogance, they think they know it all
And now, they have no place for me
No, sadly, I must withdraw my offer to serve: they do not listen
My job has been diminished to the point where I am compromised to occupy the post

I cannot, indeed, I will not serve in such administration
As I said, I fear I cannot be elected, and you will not want me on your team
And if you listen sincerely to me, you too will fall, at least in the eyes of the people
I am sorry that this is the outcome of it all
I tried my best to serve, but they have shown me their deaf ear once too often
And there comes a point with me, where if you shove me aside too often, you will not hear from me again

Tom Courtney

Drags (The)

Fire cracks and spits belches out ripping the air
exploding out of short and mean tuned exhaust pipes
from these exotic sleek now trembling and rocking
high velocity accelerators

Engines suck in liquid nitro-methane into titanium chambers
The cars seize from side to side before the Christmas tree
the starting pole of lights red yellow and green

And into of the parking lots
the popping and spitting strikes you
And if it gets any louder
you're off to the hospital
bleeding from the ears

And the rippling waves of sound
are deafening, you but you come
seeking protections medication
anything that it takes
just to return and watch the races

And you come seeking excitement diversion and escape
from an evening spent on the couch
sitting next to someone

who has spent a lifetime
perfecting ways to insult you

And the drags? You clench your ears
and embrace the pain

Tom Courtney

Dream Theme

Dream Theme. I word-searched my poems and short stories for the word 'dream'. What do you think?

Mesmerizing game it seems
wishing hoping chasing DREAMS
Stare at life – go right ahead
I do it every night in bed

=====

He DREAMS of curing troubled me
He says don't want and thus be free
he says to find internally
all that you need – the best to be

=====

I'm just saying people keep saying
It seems like a non-ending stream
I hear it all day til my bedtime
and then it goes on in my DREAM

=====

he postulates hypothesizes
He senses DREAMS he falls and rises
I am enough for here I stand
He looks for rock and finds quicksand

=====

The crest of the sun will crack a new dawn
the dew will hang on a shimmering lawn
the day holds a promise within its sunbeam
My bed a soft cloud and my pillow a DREAM

=====

Being what I am it seems

at least for now is not a DREAM
If I could change me I often try
the more I live the more I lie

=====

Those who DREAM
and those who build
and those who lust
just to have killed

=====

Jets flying in a sky of perfect white
speed speed speed through the frosty night
Horrorific clarity a blinding stunning killing re-creating light
The vast invisible opening at the speed of sight
Monstrous terrifying loss of human permanence cannot quite
describe the DREAM I feel that
holds me tight

=====

And I found you on a long and dusty road
I saw you away in the distance in a DREAM
floating like an image
something we cannot possess
you were there beyond my grasp beckoning
come to me

=====

And become again
what we once were
not so very long ago -
Strangers - only now
once lovers and dreamers?

=====

Here then in this space
where we stand for a moment

I hold my DREAM

=====

I can feel the DREAM my DREAM
It's somewhere here inside of me
a wondrous thing but can it be?
Oh yes I have it I cannot doubt it

=====

DREAMS do not require confirmation or agreement
I shall not force a confrontation
of concept or imagery

=====

Alone in a DREAM within as we are
enclosed and unencumbered free do I
wish to stay?

=====

Put a gauge upon my DREAMS the voice
beats repeats the drum unseats all
my notions

=====

I think now I cannot escape
and wonder when the change came
and why?
What drove me from my stillness to this madness?
And I think it could have been a DREAM
What business have we made
to frighten so our souls?

=====

I want to pretend the great metal presses
are really giant cookie cutters
They cut and print in chocolate and peanut butter

and I imagine I am not a part of all that I see
and only a silly dreamer

=====

Politics is the mish and the mash of compromise
It' s the give and take of his opinion and hers
Politics is the confluence of the 'is'
with the 'what ought to be'

Real-politick is the reality of life as opposed to the DREAM
It is life's approximations instead of the ideal

=====

And now still petite, a taller, slimmer one
sitting on wooden bench
learns to write in alphabet and speak in grammar
come night she scrubs her face and assumes her proper habits
and in moonlight sits with dolls - old familiar play things
and DREAMS of what? Becoming a woman? And more?

=====

The inspiration the perspiration
a brief island in time
for a curious mix of peace
and the intensest anxieties of youth
Mere teens tumble in
with the wildest passions
and the hottest DREAMS
Many with the perseverance
and fortitude to pursue them

=====

The moon alone hangs high
as a mirror for our introspection
where we speak without punctuation
simultaneously and unheard

Now surely this is a DREAM

sent squiggling out of time
to remind us there was a time
before our sensibilities

=====

And I don't know how it is
to sleep in a DREAM of angels
that melt, turn inside-out
and breathe fire under my skin
To see the blackness of the eternal void
open up with crystalline precision
and tell me it's time for my next fix
And I have no money
but I have my body to sell
if I can't panhandle or steal it

=====

Remembering five is now
a hazy DREAM
of running tanks and placing my toy soldiers
in the dirt
underneath a crusty cement overhang
extruded from the foundation of a house

=====

Young and trying Sheila
you and I put up in an old apartment
with worn and stinking grayish carpet
stashing away our DREAMS and our savings

=====

I dreamed of you
and I stand before you now from nowhere
I come and go in an instant
and I am really you
Perceptions differ

And what you see

is not the real me

I give myself to you
I break myself into words
that I may seek your pleasure
I may cease to be but

I came to speak to you
and now have spoken

=====

And seasons passed me by
Now I realize that some DREAMS you enter into
only to pass on into other DREAMS
the hallways and doorways of the mind
And now I have become old
but wise enough to know that you
don't look back anyway

=====

I dreamed that I was awake and
clutching at my bedding
imagined that I was married
with a wife and children
a house and job
and other things

=====

I gave them great strength
strength to think great thoughts
to DREAM great DREAMS
and to accomplish almost anything
But perhaps I did too well
because with me came freedom
with me came social justice
with me came prosperity

=====

Alone again
I always knew
it would be this way
So many times
and in so many ways
always captive to my heart
a tear on my cheek old fool
Oh fool yes and over and over
but so suddenly old
Ah it just crept up on me
Youth cannot imagine age
We never really know
Oh I was never young
it was just a funny DREAM
How very, very strange
to be ninety-four

=====

Don't interrupt this DREAM of life
by shaking me awake oh God
God don't ever ever ever once give me a clue
It's best that way send me to my grave
mumbling the portents and omens
the ruminations of old men
the stories of cloistered wives
the rhymes of little children
God stultify me in ignorance
and send me to the death I dance
on life in pieces of conjecture
and mumble to myself of hoaxes
drool on my pillow and scratch
the question God?

=====

It was after two
before James fell off into deep sleep
and soon thereafter that he entered his DREAM
A piece of his clothes was caught in the machine
and the machine was drawing him in

In a moment of thirty thousand pounds
of crushing force James arm was gone
The violence sent him into a stunning blackness
but it was not death
It was again the small room with one window
and the faint glow of neon
through the faded linen curtains

Wrenched like a dry cork
from a bottle of cheap wine
James shot up in bed drenched in sweat
and, drained, fell over on his side

It was the same DREAM
over and over again.
I know what this is, he said
I know what this is
and I can handle it.
It's nothing that wouldn't be natural
for any animal
taken from the wild
and put in a cage

This is what they've done to me
I was a good man once
and now I have DREAMS
like a child
like a child

Here's some elucidation regarding what I was writing about in several of the pieces.

I mis-labeled this piece. It is not poetry at all. It is flat out prose. Also, I only capitalized the word 'dream' for the posting, so people could scan without reading all, and the eyes would fall on the theme word. I just thought it would make it easier. Of course, I do not capitalize like that in the poem! And I just write what I like. Some of it is no good, but it's me.

Here's the thing about the kid's dreams. Two things, just my perception: I had a lot of nightmares as a kid. These are nighttime dreams, not daytime dreams we aspire to. Plus we need to remember we're inside the character's head. This is a guy named James, and he's saying this: (not us) and this is his perception, or

even less, his stunted ability to express himself, caught up in something he does not fully understand. Is that cool?

OH YEA. ON THIS THING, I worked in the forklift business, and one of my largest accounts was a microwave oven manufacturer, and the general manager gave me a tour of their plant, and I saw these huge these huge press machines with the people working on them. The engines would run continuously, and the worker would set the metal in place and then ENGAGE the clutch on the machine, and then all the momentum of this huge ROTATING MONSTER would cause a blade to come down and press the proper crease into a sheet of metal to shape it.

I did not mention drinking or alcohol above in my piece, but the fact is, that it's part of a larger story about a guy who does, in fact, drink too much. AND he is bringing the largest measure of his problems upon himself, as, perhaps, we all do. Don't we say, 'We are our own worst enemies?' Now we ask, if all writing is ultimately autobiographical, does the author have a problem with...? What and what? More in my next installment (I hope)

Tom Courtney

Dying For Love

From a million a thousand
I narrowed it to one
We married and ventured
til all came undone
Sometimes pairs lose it
what life is made of
And they go their own ways
while they're dying for love

She lay by the poolside
so sleek and alluring
A friend for some years
My thoughts were maturing
I called her sun goddess
shared the fire above
But I knew she loved women
She was trying for love

I met him at Roosevelt
He'd done time and done drugs
He'd been in a knife fight
even taken a slug
But I read him, his manner
He was eagle and dove
He was tougher than steel
And yes, dying for love

And I think that I've fought them
for all of my life
They raised me for better
I reveled in strife
In screaming and in silence
I could have thought of
the nature of parents
They're just dying for love

At night in the silence
full moon in its glow
I lie with my reverie

small creature below
til time has stopped still
and the silence will hover
Need I say? It's so clear
The night needs a lover

And surrounded by crowds
in the surging and ebb
At a sale in the plaza
the heart weaves its web
There's really no question
what we're all lacking of
We go bravely living
while we're dying for love

Tom Courtney

Egotist (The)

Next to myself baby
I love you the best
Though I'm my own favorite
you take all the rest

And you're such a sweet child
really my kind of gal
Call it sentimentality
Say I'm your pal

And I'll bet you're wondering
what makes him think
that his self-flattering attitude
doesn't make him stink?

From my point of view though
I can see it quite clearly
what I love best is inside
and it's all mine or nearly

But don't get me wrong love
When you entered my life
you made me think girlfriend
I almost thought wife

I caught myself though
Guess I liked myself more
I could have got shackled-up
but home life's a bore

With all I've got going
me and myself included
I really don't share well
I'm not that deluded

It's a tough choice to make though
You're a beauty for sure
We're like clams on the half-shell
like oysters hors-d'ouvres

But I'm single for good reason
I'm a loner it's true
sort of character-flawed
I love me more than you

Tom Courtney

Errant Demise

1. People that know me
had grown to despise me
flies lit upon my face
the air was stale
I was stale
and yet

I chose to revel in it
I figured
there was nothing one could do
to change his fate
but at least
I could treat scorn with scorn

I knew they scorned me
It was obvious from their blank expressions
I didn't pretend to know everything
but some things you could just sense

Now my situation is not that difficult really
That is what people always say
ignorant people actually
for we are all marvelously complex

And it is to that complexity that I say
I may be aberrant
but at least I have not lost my personality

But please
don't misinterpret these feeble words
I am not making a political statement
regarding the banality
that creeps into our lives

Or as to its source or causes
or even as to its implications
far be it from me to say

2. They all wear masks

the hallways are like aisles in a clothing store
the foyer resembles a grand ball
the count and countess
are disguised as peasants

And the feeble and disinherited
dress up as kings
looking around I realized
the stupendous irony of it all
Everyone is wearing two sets of masks
the second set being the ones
they don't take off at night
I was so wise

3. I knew there were fleas
jumpers that's what they are
lively critters little acrobats
They bred on the animals we tamed
and brought into our homes

I had never seen them actually
they hid away in the carpeting and upholstery
for no purpose except to breed
all part of the harmony monotony

Whichever way you will have it
whatever suits a man is what I say
Our affairs don't bear closer scrutiny
that is where madness begins

I won't go spiraling off
the way some do
I'll be contented with my lot

4. The windows were smudged and covered with film
One day I carved a large round spot
in the pane to see out
And the next day I didn't care
One's opinions were one's own
and best kept put with minor exceptions

I was fidgety and my head itched

I lay down and stared at the stain
in the ceiling

Tom Courtney

Every Ounce Counts

Step up to the scale today
Time to weigh-in time to pay
For all those croissants for all that pie
For every day you do you die

Eating seems no fun no more
What once delighted's now a chore
We crunch and chew on tasteless fiber
No more a glutton no more imbiber

Times have changed from days of old
Clean your plate mama would scold
Then in she'd bring the chocolate cake
Or lemon meringue a prize she'd baked

And life went on, and we grew stouter
We had no reason to ever doubt her
But now I'm harried cholesterol
High blood pressure one and all

Too much too much, we cannot fake
Our appetites this vast intake
And doctor says you must not smile
Until you've walked or run your mile

Let's face the facts, the time has come
The mighty ounce has finally won
He shouts in loudest decibel
You must be slim, you must be well

The battle of the bulge goes on
From soup to nuts filet mignon
All the goodies we behold
Are measured first, the hot and cold

Today the question of which fork
To pierce into the piece of pork
Though etiquette is fast upstaged
The war on fat is loudly waged

The table's turned, now less is more
My lo-cal spills, a crashing bore

Tom Courtney

Evolved Or Created?

Evolved or created
the same

I am an animated dirt clod
with a short and brutish life
Selfish angry and yet proud
My sanity become my inanity

10 billion years or a thousand days
the same

I cannot rise up beyond myself and touch another
I cry and die daily to live a better way
I cannot reconcile myself to second best
And I am furiously impatient

I search for strength in my weakness
and for friendships from my prison
I value information but I want relationship more

Sometimes I hate cool, stylish and charismatic
Because 98% of us aren't
and the 98% of us who aren't really are
and the 2% of us who are really aren't

I want to be real
I want to make a difference
I want to give back
And am not sure that I know how
Or if I did that in fact I could

A crazy man
desperately trying to escape himself
wanting to make a difference
to give my own life meaning

Go to every cyclone
every earthquake, every hospital, every grave
and work, give, love, care, embrace
But know
know above and through it all

I didn't do it for them
I didn't even do it for us
I did it for myself
Yes, I did it for myself
And tell the awful truth
Finally
tell the truth

The truth?
The truth hurts
but
it beats fooling
myself

Tom Courtney

Foiled Again

Have you found the paradox?
The stealthy critter to outfox
the logic of our better minds?
the cautious facts a person finds?

Have you had the good snafu?
the missing sock in your left shoe?
You tried to get to work on time
You found a nickel lost a dime?

And have you ever found out later
Your sharkskin suit was alligator?
Your cashmere sweater soft and fine
was hanging on the wrong sale line?

You got it home and hung it dry
It shrank from large to small to fly?

I stepped out to the street today
I had a plan to see what may
intrude upon my best-laid line
The day was night - it was the wine

I like to have excuses now
to blame the fates, the sacred cow
The Neilson rating and E F Hutton
all conspired to lose my button

Powers that beyond me be
are ever acting – set me free!
Let me have my interaction
with others sharing my infraction

Those who broke eternal rules
Chalk it up – the best of fools
have thoughts of what we try to be
The final measure will not see

Whatever we had set in motion

All confusion – such commotion
You see I only ask the question
The answers bring my indigestion

The best laid plans of mice and men
will come to haunt me once again

Tom Courtney

Footnote

So much is a footnote
We pass them in reading
The text stands alone
or generally not needing
These secondary thoughts
these fine thoughts exceeding
the first thoughts related
and placed in our reading

Tom Courtney

Gift (The)

Stripped down, played out,
run around, left over and set aside
She said to love another
as if anyone could just pull a trigger

Standing in a bus stop reading
advertisements – graffiti sensing
the cold, hard seat
immersed in the swirling gasses
This is a long road
and getting longer
Can the balance ever be reset?

Or staring at the many autoed people
alert, dancing in pirouettes amidst the lanes and lights
reading the signals ahead and to the sides
glancing expressions – attitudes wrapped in bundles
of nerves traversing optical fibered pathways
to end-up like Christmas eggs – shiney-sparkley
and never opened?

Traffic moves in pulses of coagulated blood – i trip
over aluminum siding at the drug store door
cursing the inanimate
spilling my syrupy drink into wide circles
of candy asphalt

Only the freshly-alone see the patches
put upon a broken world – the cracks
in the veneer – the long, long distances
and the ever-so-short moments

Glimmering lights flicker in musty air
the choked and stifling word – debatable:
the space of our lives so often broached
confusion?
Whose cart is this?
I'm sorry but where do you find those delectable porcelains?
You're from oh? ! Ohio? No?

Your dog?
Your child?

All the machinery goes on - you think
and bite your tongue: you have your hobbies ...
Fall into the balance - now - again - once - and forever
Opportunity only knocks and when
you recognize it, seize it - above all the distractions

Sit back and learn yourself
Begin with introductions young-some one
She gave you so this gift

Tom Courtney

Goodnight Mr. Oliver

The sun settles into the hills
behind the hospital compound
And the long shadows fade
into the dimness of the evening
The old man moves slightly
shifting in the chair
lifting one hand
placing it over the other
The hands now like dry leaves
rustled by a waft of the air
more sensitive to the cold now
So funny he thinks
alone again
I always knew
it would be this way
So many times
and in so many ways
Always captive to my heart
a tear on my cheek old fool
Oh fool yes and over and over
but so suddenly old
Ah it just crept up on me
Youth cannot imagine age
We never really know
Oh I was never young
It was just a funny dream
How very, very strange
to be ninety-four
My skin's becoming transparent
Maybe that's the way I'll go
One day the light will just
shine though me
And I'll be gone
and the staff will come looking
Oh Mr. Oliver!
Have you seen Mr. Oliver?
He was sitting there
as usual in the garden
Look here's his blanket

and his cup of water
Oh look, can you see the funny light?
The evenings get this way
Sometimes in autumn
Perhaps he wandered off
Oh Mr. Oliver!
It's time to come in
for the

Tom Courtney

Graffitied

build a wall
You labor long
With diligence plan
With mortar strong

The task is all
The process new
Each time you build
With all of you

You wrench your heart
To place the last
Then comes the can
Graffitied, passed

This poetry
Comes from your life
Not another's
Triumph and strife

You want to say
What's just and true
You search your soul
And then just do

Trusting spirit
Experience and mind
That you may write
Discover and find

What 'oft was said
But ne're so well'
Your precious flower
Your child heart's well

Then venture forth
Present to group
Turn up their nose
And call it poop

You slowly turn
They gave you gall
You'll go and build
Another wall

You know it takes
Some time to mend
Your heart's been stabbed
They tear and rend

Whatever seen
They cannot do
Presents a threat
They can't let you

The snide remark
The one-line quip
In envy snap
And crack their whip

Those who dream
And those who build
And those who lust
Just to have killed

Unknowing blithely
Slicing through
It's just the same
Graffitied you

Tom Courtney

He Believed

He believed in the wind
the wind rain and snow
He believed in love
that it's something we know

He believed in the summer
the best years of life
He believed in hard work
and he believed in his wife

He didn't know politics
He didn't know art
He didn't know science
Maybe he wasn't that smart

But he made his stand
in the best way he knew
And he died just that way
in the field of blue

In the field of white
in a field of deep red
He stood up he stood up
and they shot him quite dead

Johnny my Johnny boy
You believed what they said
You believed and believed
and now you are dead

And they say you're a hero
We need heroes like you
They wrapped you all up
in the red white and blue

Johnny my Johnny
Why'd you do such and such
They cut your life short
You gave up so much

Tom Courtney

Hello Jello

Hello Jello, how are you?
It's cold in here, I'm turning blue

But aren't you happy, as they say?
You laugh and jiggle on your way?

Not so! You see I'm molded fast
I'm stored upon this shelf to last
And I will tell you my complaint
Would you embrace this chilled restraint?
You never saw – it's plain to see
That jiggle's all I'm free to be

Well since we're friends, I won't preach
But buck up now. It's each to each
There's worse for you than behind the door
It's warm out here. You'd coat the floor
You'd spill your bowl. You'd exit high
You'd roll up, out and into sky
Then splatter to the ground below
And ... I'd be covered head to toe
Then all that would remain of you
's a big orange puddle of sticky goo

So count your blessings, Mr. Jello
Your jiggle's jolly, your manner mellow
Your sweetest nature is your call
You're true delight to one and all

And Jello never spoke a word
Was all my talking overheard?

Tom Courtney

Hiroshima

You stood at the small rusty pump
because Mommy gave you a chore to do
Mommy said to go and fetch water
for breakfast we'll prepare hot noodles
while Daddy's still sleeping
and Mommy's in the kitchen
and Mimi's at the rusty pump

You were a good girl that day
and every day, for that matter
Sometimes mommy would scold
but you always tried
and you never wanted to disappoint
anyone

And the sky was such a bright bright
blue that day I think it was in August
You wore your flowered white dress
that day the one with the tiny blue print
because the night before
Mommy had set it out for you

And you never knew what came
to visit that day
Six-year olds are only taking care
of their chores and little things
You never knew what came
wobbling down out of the sky

because it brought fire
It brought a big big really big fire
and because it took you away

Tom Courtney

How Day Is Done

Habit struck my hand today
I felt its sting - I pulled away
It said: get up and grab your drawers
Shower shave and close the doors

Your daily task looms large ahead
(I left my other self in bed)
What is this way? How can it be?
A shape walks on - some form of me

I am the nineteenth fabricator
I build the fifteenth elevator
I sport the cables, cut the rod
The channel's ready - I give the nod

Another workman pulls a lever
This metal box could rise forever
encasement taking one and all
the fat and slim the short and tall

To cubicles and conference rooms
these neatly-girdered plate-glass tombs
They write and check and test and measure
all we call our worth and treasure

Count and tag and tie and tote
til plan's complete - another mote
to water-in our magic castle
The way is rote, the manner facile

The day is done - I've done my time
King Lear, Macbeth have played their rhyme
The play's complete. The time is when
I'll sleep, get up and go again

Tom Courtney

How Did You Know?

'At sea once more we had to pass the Sirens, whose sweet singing lures sailors to their doom. I had stopped up the ears of my crew with wax, and I alone listened while lashed to the mast, powerless to steer toward shipwreck. Odyssey, Book XII

And how can I thank you?
You showed me I'm wrong
You stood up for what's right
and withstood my frown

You nestled your nose
up next to my ear
and sang me so sweet
that I couldn't hear

You raised up a bunch
of our convicts as kids
gave bread to the homeless
Was it something I did?

to join Achlys Adicia
unknowing my fate
to enter your world
now the hour is late

You were terror before terror
and when coming of age
They could not contain you
there's no kind of cage

And you had your plans
don't let life get to you
You got to life first
You made yourself true

Then you came up to me
and spit in my eye
I turned to the onslaught
what is this? why?

Then your mouth covered mine
you rattled my teeth
You tore off my collar
I was hung up like beef

And just when I thought
that I knew you so well
you changed all the rules
so that I couldn't tell

And all this is fine
but how did you know
how I craved for your sweet soul
but needed your show?

Tom Courtney

I Can't Say

I Can't Say

And I can't say, but I am told
That man is kind, but he is bold

He looks to you and looks to me
But in his way says set me free

I want what's best for all of us
But I come first, so what's the fuss?

As long as I can have my say
The rest of you can get your way

I wouldn't call it selfishness
'cause human nature made this mess

And if I get some more than you
You'd do the same as foot in shoe

So this is man! He has his style
He'll always walk the extra mile

He'll always lend a hand in cheer
He's fast a friend and comfort near

He walks my path, our footprints merge
While we can share this selfsame urge

But God looks down on man it seems
Makes light of plans and dashes schemes

So even with my dearest friend
It's said there is a will to bend

That even friends must compromise
And give to get the more so wise

And I can't say, but I am told

This story is of ages old

And so it's true when patterns grow
They teach us life, they let us know

In all experience, they say
It's best to watch the proven way

And I'm just thinking, is this true?
Is it me for me, and you for you?

Well hazard never stopped a man
I thought I had a kind of plan

I think there's truth to what is said
But finer ways still lie ahead

And I can't say, but try I will
With all my heart and all my skill

Tom Courtney

I Found You

i found you, one day, like a petal on a tree
shimmering in the breeze, twinkling like a star
and i found you one day, standing next to me
shining like a moon beam. almost touching were we
i saw you. you were eternity, and i was free

soft and hard, cool and hot, timid and wild were you
i touched you and you strained, trying as if to see
i thought we would exchange: you gave and i gave me

nestled in a grove of elms, far in the deepness of time
covered in blossoms, honey-swept, crisp and serene
i found you with a smile, just a smile - for me

and i found you on a long and dusty road
i saw you away in the distance, in a dream
floating like a ghost, something we cannot possess
you were there beyond my grasp, beckoning
when i awoke, i found you sleeping peacefully

and how can i express what it is you mean to me?
perhaps it's better that i myself can never know

and you have given me much more than happiness
you see, i found you in my memory the other day

where will you be when we turn the corners? i wonder
bending around life's byways. i cannot see
i'll have you where i found you on that day.
when the breezes blow lightly in the air
or a mist rises over the ocean on summer's eve

i'll have you forever just as you'll have me
the way it was back once when we were we

Tom Courtney

I Think I Am

Who am I? Seems mild enough
What's the material? What's the stuff?
Questions asked since ages old
Libraries of thought once writ unfold

Reams and reams of the printed work
Layer upon layer the questions lurk
Just beyond the mind of man
He presses on as best he can

He postulates hypothesizes
He senses dreams he falls and rises
I am enough for here I stand
He looks for rock and finds quicksand

His essence seems beyond his measure
His thought and instinct – all his treasure
are wrapped and folded tied and bowed
Philosophy is what he knowed

He's sure – unsure he's bold and meek
His nature seems to be to seek
He looks and thinks and ponders deep
He trods the shallows climbs the steep

I'm conscious conscious, hear him cry
He fixes mind on his mind's eye
His very logic perfected math
Then leads him down a wayward path

He questions what still lies beyond
In all creation what's the bond?
He says: I think therefore I am
and finds his thought ad hominem

My thought is just my higher brain
My instinct has a truer reign
And wherefrom instinct? Biology?
With due respect, anatomy?

He knows of heart – a truer course
is more than likely at the source
His will - desire – leads him on
when mind is baffled almost gone

He asks for strength and knows that root
bears mighty bough from tiny shoot
He says I'm free to choose my way
but cannot change the night to day

He cannot ask another hair
a single molecule of air

And actor in the play am I?
or audience to a kind of lie?
He often says in fact I know
the nature of this splendid show

Contents himself with simple songs
the constant rights the laws the wrongs
and tucks himself in to bed each night
and closes shop – he knows he's right

I wish I had that fortitude
that strength of faith that attitude
But I am not that chosen one
I question moon and star and sun

I toss and turn in restless sleep
I find it hard to make the leap
from knowledge that we say we know
to who I am – and thus I go

Tom Courtney

In The Passing - Long Version

In the golden rods of twilight
In the gleaming air of dusk
The gentling hews of nightfall as I walk
The song of little sparrows
floats off in time immemorial
across the universe
and to the farthest places
we shall never know

They sing to raise me in my stumbling step
My feet bathed and brushed in the gentle grasses
The giant walks staunchly by
across the tips and spears

Just one of us
One spear speaks to another
Yes, but heavy-set, or rather, isn't he?

The breezes speak in the rustling leaves
Bathe my skin with the scent of a thousand flowers
I see myself approaching in the distance
beckoning come to me

Oh lost stranger
Boy here I am
Will you awaken too soon
to know of heaven in the distance?
Your shining hair
extending hand
Me to me
across the heavy distance
and through the infinite space

Palm to palm you say
The loneliness needn't be
The universe is spoken
through the hearts of lovers
All time and space
and earth and sky and god

are passing here
within the breath of angels

I hear the music of the grasses
alone in this meadow of the sun
Sweet pasture of dandelion and flower
as evening takes the greens and limes away
and brings the grays and golden browns
of rest

And the soon-to-be grasses-of-tomorrow
are quick
to erase the memory of my heavy shoe
in the passing

Tom Courtney

In The Passing - Short Version

Breezes speak in the rustling leaves
bathe my skin with a thousand flowers
I see myself in the distance
beckoning come to me

Oh lost stranger
I am saying
Will you awaken too soon
to know of heaven in the distance?
Your shining hair
extending hand
Me to me
across the heavy distance
and through the infinite space

Palm to palm you say
The loneliness needn't be
the universe is spoken
through the hearts of lovers
All time and space
and earth and sky and god
are passing here
within the breath of angels

I hear the music of the grasses
alone in this meadow of the sun
sweet pasture of light
as evening comes
the world turns

Tom Courtney

Infatuation

You know that special someone
who draws you in beyond your interests
in health and sanity?
with the inexorable force of sex?

And every fiber of your being is saying
you will never meet another one like her/him
and you very well may not
to your benefit or detriment?

And he/she's somehow flawed – too perfect
from the beginning to the end – a disaster?
a woman/man to throw your well-organized
and comfortable life completely out of kilter?
He/she smiles
and you can feel the beguiling beginning?

You see the perfect mouth
that perfect form to fit your own embrace?
the strength and the weakness of her/his calm?
his/her fervor – the sparkle of her/his teeth?

A wilder and stronger love
than you have ever known before?
At least since the last time around?
and the time before that?

He/she will come to dominate your most intimate
and private moments and your money?
You can already see it in her/his eyes?
as he/she stands there before you
with her/his liberated confident stance
hands firmly clasped to his/her hips
feet slightly apart – body language
pounding in your brain?

Her/his chin juts out
His/her hair flashes in the light
She/he breathes a misty breath across your eyes

and has the world turning his/her way
from that moment
and you don't even know her/his name?

And did you wish this to happen?
didn't you?
Didn't you fall right into it?
as if on automatic pilot –
essentially leaped?
But did you ever stop to wonder
if this particular one could give you love
in return? Probably not
You didn't want love in return

Aren't you seeking an object
on which to pour out your passion
and a toy to place in a bottle
a trophy to place in your trophy case
with your other awards and conquests?

Are these love affairs not born
deeply in your person?
born of the calm
and the obsession?
Or the feverish ego and
the calculated interest
despite the seeming
spontaneity?

Tom Courtney

Insomnia

Mesmerizing game it seems
wishing hoping chasing dreams
Stare at life – go right ahead
I do it every night in bed

The doctor tells me – do not so
Should use the day to live the show
Can't store it up inside for night
You'll never sleep til morning's light

He's right you know – I stare at space
I think of running – win the race
And everything I haven't got
Just brings me to this very spot

So speak to me I say to self
You man or beast or gnome or elf?
What drives you to this blackest hole?
You have a life – you play a role

You see I really do not know
where I've been or where I'll go
The busy pace of every day
keeps thoughts of me so far away

I pillow-down – my faithful marriage
alone now in my fateful carriage
I put me to the rest each night
and come to face the same old fright

I face myself each night in lying
and find that I've not stopped the trying
to win some race – seek some solution
and what I got's this mind's pollution

Try thinking more in morning light
the doctor says you're doing right
Find peace amongst the falling leaves
Be grateful sleeping under eaves

Some have much less than me and you
You'd never miss a dime or shoe
You've all the world to skate away
Forget yourself – consider it play

My doctor is a kindly man
I'm sure he does the best he can
He wants for me the best of life
He wouldn't wish me all this strife

He dreams of curing troubled me
He says don't want and thus be free
He says to find internally
all that you need – the best to be

He drives a Porsche marked Dr. J
He proves his worth most every day
He says that happiness of souls
is simple – look and change your goals

Tom Courtney

Jenny 1

And Jenny this night is darkest
as I'm standing in the rain
You taught me every pleasure
brings with it its own pain

I thought you were my lover
You were sweetness in my tea
You were honey in my coffee
Now you ain't got time for me

You brought me in one stormy night
You were warm and laid me down
You swept away my darkest fears
You made my head spin round

You took this poor boy for your time
You caught me in my sleep
You caught me with my 'fences down
I gave up not a peep

And I guess you never planned it
that you'd tear my heart in two
You probably never thought that I
would fall in love with you

And it's not your fault you're heaven
to this poor boy from the farm
You didn't conspire to take my soul
when you took me on your arm

And it seems a longer life ago
that you sat upon my knee
When I walked the midnight alley
and you shinnied up a tree

Then I went to work and off to sea
with sparkles in my eyes
And came back home to Tennessee
weary of the lies

And meanwhile you had grown up
from that tomboy to shining star
Your daddy's bright-eyed baby
has come along quite far

One wink, a blush, a giggle,
and I was hooked upon your line
You were just too old for ribbons
and just too young for wine

But I'm thinking all this in the rain
with the taxi meter on
That I had you my brief moment
and once again I'm moving on

Tom Courtney

Jenny 2

I look and I wonder
Where Jenny was sent
The postman has come
dropped the mail and went

The sun risen sky filled
the evening it set
And all of this happened
with no Jenny yet

I look and I see
that my Jenny has gone
The night came and passed us
and left us with dawn

The morning unfolded
its bright golden blues
And the wind whispers yes
we are just passing through

Tom Courtney

Jenny 3

Jenny come softly
My arms wish to hold you
My cheek yearns to press against yours
My heart is your victim come gently

Jenny speak softly
in the cool of the morning
You slip between sorrow and joy like an angel
Say to me lie to me tell me you'll leave nevermore

Jenny the clouds dance above you
A red kite soars and dives in your hand
Children frolic and play like there's never tomorrow
But we had tomorrow didn't we Jenny
yesterday?

Tom Courtney

Johnny Boy

He believed in the wind
The wind rain and snow
He believed in love
That it's something we know

He believed in the summer
The best years of life
He believed in hard work
And he believed in his life

He didn't know politics
He didn't know art
He didn't know science
Maybe he wasn't that smart

But he made his stand
In the best way he knew
And he died just that way
In the field of blue

In the field of white
In a field of deep red
He stood up he stood up
And they shot him quite dead

Johnny my Johnny Boy
You believed what they said
You believed and believed
And now you are dead

And they say you're a hero
We need heroes like you
They wrapped you all up
In the red white and blue

Johnny my Johnny
Why'd you do such and such
They cut your life short
You gave them too much

Tom Courtney

King Of Microwave

Forge ahead Ahab kill the mighty white beast
and wander Ishmael for a thousand years
Ten thousand times to cut and strip the blubber
of the great white fish not knowing its vulnerability
Fiddle and fumble as we do
who would ever expect we might succeed
and succeed so well that we kill off
that from which we live?

We will make no more microwaves
in the city of industry here
In these acres and acres of wheels and gears
From the throbbing and pounding
the great heart has seized
and a resounding silence has come

And I used to seek the night in its cool, crisp shadows
and now it seeks me with its burning heart
From celestial calm to a kind of human fever
I think now I cannot escape and wonder when the change came
and why?
What drove me from my stillness to this madness?
And I think it could have been a dream
What business have we made
to frighten so our souls?

I want to pretend the great metal presses
are really giant cookie cutters
They cut and print in chocolate and peanut butter
and I imagine I am not a part of all that I see
and only a silly dreamer

The clear cool night used to suckle me
in all the persons that I think I am
Hidden deep within - singular voices cry out
I am your child I am your mother I am dad
And now the night hums like many factories
I have seen the forming machines
churning-out microwaves

the thirty-ton press
driven by the broad belts
and the wheels and the bulbous off-center cam
that swings around and around driving the cutting blade
lending it its mighty momentum
The sheets of metal placed
and the great clutch engaged
The blade comes down, striking and forming
bending the steel to drive one crease
into some engineer's blueprint
of the now common household appliance

The hum and roar the clank and hiss
Hands scampering in and out like sea crabs
in and out as the blade rises and falls
In when the light turns green
Out when the light turns red
And now an infrared beam stops the blade
if hands are slow or wrong
The times are mostly past of fingerless and armless men and women
in the world of microwave
This is a mutation and adaptation to the times
of the smoke stack industry to the realization
that this is bad for business

A simple rhythm gathered from a universe of forms
So simple for progress to be made
All geared-in as we are and so to speak
and wondering if it is our nature
that drives us on

And so one day when unfurled in my daily purpose
and wearing the uniform of industry
I pass the king of microwave
The real estate signs are up and the windows dark
weeds high around the once grand porticoes
The trades have descended like big birds
to feed upon the dead
not judging, merely supplanting
The signs saying ask for Jack or Nellie
Boarded shut, the jobs are gone

The air whistles through the naked boards
and the flash and thunder of the night is stilled
now and forever

I come to seek myself as I always do almost as a stranger
and I'm not so sure he speaks to me this time
he's been heavily laid-upon this once-thought immortal one
and I learn it's harder to go back
than to just plunge ahead, onward, farther
flowing down the stream

And somewhere amidst this cascading water course
I'm catapulting down along the pristine and demure mountainside
There is an icy-eyed one that's leaping up
leaping and diving up and ever up
how can this be? this fish is marvelous
He obeys celestial law and swims a thousand miles
as if it were an inch because it's all in the motivation
all in the commitment of the heart

We ask what natural purpose we are heir to
We say we explore the limits of the mind
We teach we move and climb with method
with skill and direction and I wonder
The rust and dust
The broken homes and handless men
and countless stories simply untold
Don't they scream a muted cry
if we listen once into the silence?

So what crime to say what future comes?
What violation to say we've come this way before?
What, a felony to say we have alone ourselves?
One broad and eternal moment that never changes?
What madness to gaze upon a clear, still night
to consider what the condition of my heart?

Tom Courtney

Land Of The Rock Wumps

The Weasel was wheezing one day
perhaps it seems odd to say
The sun went into a hole in my hand
and the moon came out to play

A very big Nerf strode up just then
just as the Air came out
I was holding Wendell upside down
to see if the Bug would come out

I thought it would help to warm him
He sipped at the Hot Choc-a-rumpus
He must have recovered completely
as he left with nary a thump-us

Oh whistle me, whittle me every way
down to the Lazy Old Sea
I'll have to go fishing or swishing or wishing
and see what I have to see

Patty fat, porky fork, ribble de do
when my work is almost through
I have to attend to my own affairs
and only the daytime will do

So Wendell, he's my soft, fat friend
His nose is pink and moist
His whiskers twitch at every move
He's pound for pound Top-choice

The day the Great Rock fell
it shook us all around
I fell out of the tree and plunk
I met a very new friend on the ground

Pardon me, I'm Terwiler, a Fosfit
in case you didn't know
I'm probably quite a bit too fat
on top, as well as below

You see, the Light split open the Air
and Rock Wumps must take their chances
So then I'm off, I almost forgot
to the river, by happenstances

I probably couldn't explain to you
why we find our affairs this way
It must seem odd to you, as you're
from the Land of Night and Day

And I know you can't speak Woofie
but we speak it with native tongue
If I say grab-o-lilly-o-lip
the words can be spoken or sung

So welcome! Come along with us
I've got no place to go
You're free to visit us any old time
but your Real Things call, we know

And we know you are the Humans
We have you all on our List
and you know us: we're your Daydreams
We're here, then we're gone like the mist

Tom Courtney

Life (The) Of Me

I want to tell the life of me
the long the short the strife of me
I want to tell it how it came
I want to praise me cast the blame

I want to stride on oceans blue
and walk through vales wet with dew
I long to sense it draw it near
when time was long and I was dear

There was a time when I was true
when I could not but rightly do
A time when boldness pinioned me
I found that action set me free

I never stopped to dissect plot
staunch in character brusque in thought
Tough I thought I was I once when
the birds sang clear and I was ten

I want to tell the tale to me
who I was once and cannot be
when things of every small detail
a puppy's spit a kitty's tail

A bag of marbles cat's eyes too
a patch of red on trousers blue
a bigger house than now I see
where walls were mountains and waters sea

And walkways to and from the home
gave me freedom far to roam
down to canyons dense in trees
forests taller than the breeze

Open meadows clear in light
wide-eyed wonder without fright
Now I want to chase that dream
when I was young when milk was cream

That time when I could never know
that it would pass and I would grow

“Young people are in a condition like permanent intoxication, because youth is sweet and they are growing.” Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC) , 'Nicomachean Ethics'

Tom Courtney

Lithium

There comes a pounding pounding
And it sounds like li-thi-yum
I can hear the sound a pounding
Pounding like a kettle drum

It fades and then returns to me
This thing called li-thi-yum
And it has a crazy rhythm
Kinda makes me want to hum

Li-thi-yum li-thi-yum
Pounding in my ears
Like a kettle drum

Li-thi-yum li-thi-yum
It has a crazy rhythm
Kinda makes me want to hum

It's just a simple crystal
I don't know where it's from
It crept into my life one day
When my life was on the run

And lithium calms my nervousness
How? It's a conundrum
Plays me like a guitar
I'm the guitar, it's the strum

Li-thi-yum li-thi-yum
Gotta get it in your blood
So put it on your tongue

Take it with your meals
The only drug that heals
A couple capsules every day
Seem to chase the blues away

And can you come together?
It can change your weather

Cloudy, stormy fair today
Our little friend has had his say

Mild, balmy tropical
You're lucky take a pocketful
Of carbonate, be on your way
Ugly moods have had their day

And oh my my li-thi-yum
I'd li-ke a can of spr-ite
I'd li-ke a can I'm thi-irsty
And y-um y-um it tastes just right

I'd like a diet lithium
And I'll take a diet sprite
It helps me with the calories
And lets me sleep at night

And who's behind the LCD?
The wonder of technology
A tiny alkaline battery
Supplies all the electricity
So our good old friend lithium
Can vibrate consistently
At a constant rate per second
That of eighteen hundred thirty-three

And oh the modern wonders
Of our technology
That lithium used to measure time
Has time to measure me

And so perhaps that's why i hear
The beating of the drum
When I count my pulse and wonder
Is it me or li-thi-yum?

Lithium has a rhythm
Lithium has a rhyme
Lithium has a motion all its own
It's so sublime

Momma bakes a cherry pie
Who's the apple of your eye?
Stick in your thumb
Pull out a plumb
All good boys
Take li-thi-yum

Gimme some I want it
I want it gimme some
You can have your Budweiser
cause I'll take lithium

Yum yum lithium
When you gonna take me home?
Momma told me don't be late
Are you my lover or just my date?

Yum yum lithium
Papa mixes you with rum
Half a catfish pie for me
And I'll be better, just you see

Lithium, I hear you pounding
It's like a kettle drum
You crept into my life one day
When life was on the run

Lithium the Beautiful

Oh beautiful
For drying eyes
For clearing of my brain
For medicine perfected to
Alleviate the pain
Oh lithium
Sweet lithium
You gave life back to me
And count thy pills
For my refills
From lab to pharmacy

God Bless my Lithium

God bless my lithium
Salt that I love
Come inside me
And guide me
To a place that I can say is home
From them madness
Of the mania
To depression's crushing blows
God bless my lithium
My own heart glows

The Lithium Induced Manner

O say can you see
Some improvement in me?
Where we previously failed
Psychoanalytically
Whose round shape comes in jars
Which are sealed vacuum tight
Gave relief through the night
To the sad sick and healing
And depression's black stare
Caught us all unaware
And proved through the night
That we need better care
Oh say does that lithium induced manner yet save?
E'er the shaman has a fee and the bill he won't waive

Tom Courtney

Lost My Point

Come let's see what lies beyond
this asphalt jungle of which we're fond

Beyond the cement and the steel
beyond the bars and a cheaper deal
beyond the smoke and stench of man
away from the streets we didn't plan

While we've still time, come let's go
I know a place where time moves slow
There is a place beyond our cares
There is a place of lesser fares

Fanciful, foolish! I hear you say
You speak in jest there is no way

I know your feelings, how real your fears
You have your ways - no wasted years
You say there's joy, there's all you need
You've found the love, escaped the greed

And well for you, how fine to hear!
You've found good fortune, you have no fear
Then far it be from me to say
That you should hear another way

I won't relate the litany
The evening news expresses me
The daily press
relates the mess

I cannot add
a way more sad
It scorches and depresses me
I thought that I could set care free

But come let's see what god has planned
We all can seek, strike up the band!

I want to walk in nature's way
I want to run and laugh and play
I think there are moments when spirits die
not physically, appearances lie

We die when we have failed to see
another's point of view could be
a point of truth - if not for me
is just in fact what others see

I thought I heard my voice, my lines
a haunting echo of ageless signs
It's not the message - an advocacy
It's just the emphasis - the urgency

So mark me then and stay my motion
Stop the mission, he's self-promotion
Squelch the portion of this man's sermon
We'll hear no more, he's not a pure man

Chastised now I'm on my way
with no conception that it will pay
But I'll find solace - I've butted-in
In consolation I could have been

A much more common situation
I could have sought recrimination
Sent you out subliminal meaning
No rebuttals, you swallowed unfeeling

Undermined you, sent you poison
In PG rating is no less noisome

The preferable tactic in democracy
is commercial success- save the hypocrisy
of trying to pass our messages off
as altruism- you choke and cough!

We understand the ways of money
We're numbed to accept it - isn't it funny?
and there's a reason we understand
We've come to accept the lay of the land

The way it is we learn our lessons
as long as the nuggets fool our impressions
as long as we've been entertained
The message is clear, the victory is gained

And so it's likely I've lost my point
I've gotten my nose all out of joint
I'd meant to take a walk a while
and try and conjure up a smile

Forgive me as I've rambled here
indulged myself and bent your ear
And what it is we mean to say
is sometimes lost in just this way!

Tom Courtney

Love In L.A.

And I don't want to know what's in it
Just mix it all up, and plop me right in it
And a one and a two, and it's in that we go
Love's got a recipe, you'll never know

Just give me a chance, that's all I ask
As worthy a man, I'm up to the task
Ready for all that woman has waiting
Wishing and hoping, anticipating

Been single so long, I can't remember
A bachelor so long, it's time to dismember
This most basic of man's institutions
I'm looking for answers, seeking solutions

The woman appears a tempting approach
The practiced convention with plenty to coach
Mom wants it, Dad wants it – add subtle heft
To the argument – do it – not much is left

And the women are nice, as they come and they go
Some that pass by you, some that you know
The colors and shapes, the temperaments, sizes
A wink and a glance, sweet talk tantalizes

The women of species outnumber the men
The rooster should have it so good with the hen
The woman of species is quick to outwit
If you stand to greet, then she'll choose to sit

Would be simpler by far if they'd let you try
The rules that you'll be expected to buy
A lot of romance is intrigue of unknown
While dating who knows what seeds can be sown?

Be calm, coalesce, let the feelings emerge
Don't question emotion, why stifle the urge?
Go ahead, plunge right in, there's nothing that's new
Whatever comes up has been tried before you

So the advice it is legion, each one's got his say
But I got solutions, and that's my own way
Don't think what you're doing, it's not of the mind
Just be your own self, and find your own kind

For starters I have an approach to the quandary
I'm going to check out the babes at the laundry

Tom Courtney

Marathon

Marathon starts in the sweat of night
when you twist in the sheets
like a fecund peach
Something swells inside your chest
and you know that you
have put yourself to another test
one you are puzzled to justify
And you have slipped into thinking
that now you know what pain is
because you've set the limit
You say that come what may
there'll be no worse than this
You've pulled off a coup
and taken control of life again
And you say that this is courage
And a voice says this is fear
But the seed and sperm are joined
This fetus you have carried before
Soon another heart
will throb against your own
And the moment is passed
You sigh
standing before a cool blue moon
A new life is created
You have another year
A fantasy within a capsule
and marathon ticks within

Tom Courtney

Ming

A curious remembering
A story beginning with its ending
A tale only now taking shape in my mind
A breathless, still-born, mute form
emerging from the daily drumbeat of my pain
pushing its way up through the insulation
I put upon it to protect myself from myself
as I continue to draw upon time
to mend me and teach me
A story about Ming
and a story, I think, about myself

And she is of me now as I speak of her
trying to express her manner, her method
her way, her voice, her touch,
committing myself deeper than if I could just forget
I am spelling-out the name 'Ming'
I am sitting hunched over my coffee table
rattling this ersatz plastic keyboard
face flushed red with blood
My cheeks are wet to my neck
I am immersed in her as one thrown out of a space capsule
spinning, tumbling, turning into the unknown
the umbilical cord cut
haplessly clothed in all the futile elements of my science

I am writing a poem to Laura and she is really Ming
and I am at sport with my demons once again
captive to the beast of my obsessions
I am not over her yet
though I measure the day now in wider spans
though I can be distracted from the thought of her
and even as I have easy restful nights

But I must accelerate this process
this inevitable tearing-off of bits of me
the rebuilding of myself around a stronger image
growing upon a stiffer shoot
I am going to live without her and become happy

This is simple
and I think of freedom
and a green, grassy slope that will hold my head in my hands
a sun that will toast me to a fine, healthy hue
all of this some day

That I have failed at forgetting must be
a deep, abiding part of me
that now seeks a peaceful oblivion
ultimately through the remembering
and the retelling

And though I find myself writing again
this time of Sonia
it is Ming that is churning me
and driving me on

Perhaps I have it best
to have run a rocky race
perhaps without an issue I would have
very small words to say

And I have come to say to you Ming
come to me now in the night
when I am weak and sentimental
when I am apt to fall for your beguiling ways
your sweet-talking lies
glib to fool myself at your behest
and fooling me less now I think
Do not come to visit me in the day
Call on me instead when you exercise
your full powers upon me

Take me to that place I have decided never to go again
I have searched myself to the point of knowing
what it is I must do
I only know that you have burst your bounds
terrible force
and in so doing
have relinquished your secret

Tom Courtney

My Book

I'm writing again
though I've nary been able
But I'm pecking away
and hunched o'er the table

Got plans to submit
There are words for these for feelings
What essence? What truth?
The thought sends me reeling

I'm carving out passages
Searching for words
Keeping it simple
Write in halves - no in thirds

I'm writing again
Seems it's never complete
What I 'm trying to say
What it is got me beat

But I look to the words
I've come to the pen
To search for the sense of it
Starting again

There's a kernel of truth
Hidden deep somewhere here
The plot is disjointed
The meaning unclear

But like cake in the oven
Each dog has his day
My book has it's place
(It's not finished today)

Tom Courtney

Ned's Night-Time Adventure

There once was a young boy named Ned
who wouldn't say put in his bed.

His mother had kissed him at eight,
tucked him in and pulled the sheets straight.

And darkness filled all the room 'round,
so that Ned could hear nary a sound.

He should have been sleepy, he knew,
but outside the winter wind blew.

And how could the day end just so?
Poor Ned still had places to go!

And even if destined to sleep,
there were wishes and dreams he must keep

They played and built castles all day,
then at night had to put them away

They could never grow tired of tag,
nor could a puppy's tail wag its last wag!

It's hard saying goodnight to friends.
Little boys prefer beginnings to ends.

Ned still had some growing to do,
and each day he started anew.

And these were the usual things,
that made up his summers and springs!

=====

Tonight was a cold night in winter.
They had stacked wood and made the logs splinter.

And while the pillow tousled his hair,

outside a storm blustered the air.

Big tree branches scratched the night air.
Ned was glad that his parents were there!

Ned knew that the fire still burned
in the big room. Alone his heart yearned.

He knew that the embers still glow.
If he waited, then no one would know!

As he lay, his awareness was heightened.
To his eyes, the room gradually lightened.

So Ned said his prayers and he waited
His plan was still there, just belated!

=====

Ned listened for sounds in the house,
but his parents were quiet as a mouse.

They tip-toed about without sound,
but Ned knew they were up and around.

At long last the steps made a CREEK!
Ned could tell there were two sets of feet.

He lay stone-still, his heart pounding,
his thoughts and his visions abounding!

Ascending, the sounds turned to the right.
Ned could hear his parent's door shut tight.

The light from the crack in the door
was flicked off and then was no more.

=====

So now was the time for decision.
Ned's plan would require precision!

His plan was to make it downstairs,
but before him lay pitfalls and snares.

And the first was the sound of his feet,
he knew, as he slipped from the sheet.

Little boys know how to make the door CLICK
but just when the big clock went TICK

He knew how to hold to the rails
and step where the boards had no nails

And bundled from head to tip-toe
Ned set out for the big room below

Ned stood at the foot of the stair
The fire tinged the chill in the air

=====

A flame flickered and the embers glowed bright
Ned stepped forward his feet feeling light

Then he lay down and drew up his feet
it felt good to lie close by the heat

Darkness deepened and cast its long palls
and shapes great and small danced the walls

Ned's eyelids grew heavy and then fell
but there's more to our story to tell!

=====

Day came now to visit the boy
but now the Real Things were a toy

His school was a great stone-built castle
The guards wore a steel helmet and tassel

The spires of the castle rose high
past the clouds and far into the sky

Ned's teachers were all dressed up as knights
on big stallions, could give you a fright!

And somehow the boy was the King
which was not the only strange thing

His mommy and daddy weren't 'round
and he was the one that they'd crowned

A fair princess was imprisoned up where
a great dragon had captured her there

In this land where time had stood still
Young Ned found a test for his will

=====

Well, there wasn't so much he could do
So he set out to see the thing through

Ned started to climb the tall spire
step by step, and it seemed to grow higher

He could hear then that someone was calling
and he climbed on with no thought of falling

When he finally came to the top
two big bolts on a door made him stop

And poor Ned spoke as brave as he could
"Never fear! This door is just wood! "

And then from the shadows, a great roar!
The great dragon rose from the floor

A terrible green monster in scales
His huge claws were sharper than nails

He blew clouds of black smoke all around
belched hot fire and shook the whole ground

Then he spoke, and he said, 'I'm to dine!
And you'd make a fine morsel, with wine! '

=====

The mean old dragon took aim
and shot directly at Ned with his flame

But Ned saw it and jumped to the side
There was still no place he could hide

And the flame burnt the locks off the door
Ned leaped in and lit on the floor

'We have only one hope, ' the princess said
Quick! Or we'll both wind up dead!

'Cut a lock from my hair, and count three,
and we'll sail from this place, be set free! '

So Ned scattered her hair like a sail,
and they landed safely, though shaken and pale

The dragon had set the place burning
It was clear there would be no returning

The two had no moment to spare
with the smoke and the flames in the air

=====

When the fire had finally died down
Ned discovered he'd misplaced his crown!

It must have been lost in their flight
as they fell through the air in the night

And the princess had lost something too!
It seems she had lost her right shoe

And a king with no crown must go home
while a princess with no shoe cannot roam

=====

As Ned stared into the fire's ember
he started to faintly remember

Here was carpet, not grasses that grow
and no castle, just the wall and his shadow

And whether kings and princesses come out
in unsure. Now the fire was out!

And quite suddenly, the big room was chilling
and with change of heart, Ned was now willing

to crawl off to sleep in his bed
and nothing more need be said!

Tom Courtney

Never On The Moment

Never, never on the moment
Have I spoken words so potent
traced my footsteps called to mind
scorched my memory tried to find

Just the perfect measure section
part of my whole predilection
Yet and yet I seem to falter
bloody-kneed before this altar

Imagine saying my conclusions
Falseness rightness, all confusion
Guide me forward steady me
Form the awful remedy

Now that turns me to the womb
Nor could I but choose this tomb
Or want this shredded bones and flesh
and find me heaped upon the trash

I warned me never take the step
but I was proud or blind – inept?
I was caught up in some history
water flowing deepening mystery

Blackened muddied I must be clever
or I'll be speechless now forever
I'll tremble, screech and cry and quiver
but then I'll stand and so deliver

From deep within these hallowed words
a poetry of lurid curds
of sodden grasses rotten logs
of steaming passions mighty bogs

To surmise what is everlasting
through the sowing, reaping, thrashing
Churlish words for tender ears
for timid heart and blinking tears

And I at best can only tell
such a story very well
The truth of it is up to you
for conscience dictates what is true

And you will say I think I see
if in fact he spoke of me

Tom Courtney

Night (The)

Tonight is black and blue
my face pummeled by so many frowns and curses

The night is shimmering in iridescence
a strident silver
my pockets stripped clean of the golden silences

And the night draws me in with a mesmerizing force
tugging at my loneliness my fears my cravings
tickling at my wounds

The night says it will offer companionship
but will it last for more than a few hours?

The night cries that I will be brave
when I am set free of my shadow
But how long can this last? I wonder
not into the light

The night says I will satisfy your cravings
and feed your obsessions
But how long can I live on
this vacuous junk food?

And the night promises that wounds heal like magic
when the dressings cannot be seen
undressed in the arcane alleys
when the satin flux of neon
puts a gauze upon the sore
and when the bright lights and happy sounds
the carefree attitudes
and the careless people gather
to pay tribute to their brief escape
from the day

Tonight the night calls to me
with a voice that penetrates my clenched fists
time and time again I have sought not to hear

The night knows what sweetness
I have supped upon seeking refuge
it knows where the aches and cramps
of my work encroach
and where my frame is tired and anxious

And the night says come to me
I will make you forget for a while
all the things that made you man
and you will become a god
to the ends of the earth

Crowds will adore you
and you will adore yourself what you see
and even the day will appear to adore you
until of course the day comes again

And knowing telling regretting and rethinking
all that my heart cries to me
has not eased the fever

Some deep yearning comes out
of this inexorable cycle
in answer to my deepest covenants

The forms that break out
jostle and joust
make alignment to express themselves
to burst the straight jacket
I have put upon them

And time turns steadily to dusk
when the forces will leap up
and change my face

The night is scarlet and black
I still have a choice
but my heart is wrenched from its socket
my feet lie in quicksand
my mouth is parched
for the sweet waters

And the night beckons to me
once again

Tom Courtney

Old Mr. Grumble

And this is the story of old Mr. Grumble
He lives just a stone's throw, a toss and a tumble,
Down 'round the corner at the end of the block
He sits in his house and stares at the clock

Old Mr. Grumble! He's the meanest old man
He sits in the window and spits in a pan
He lives all alone except for his dog
Folks say that he found him one night in a fog

And the two are a pair, just took to each other
This mangy old man and his four-legged brother
They say that he built his own house with his hands
Not an angle is straight, and yet, there it stands

The paint is all pealed and the yard is a mess
Who is old Mr. Grumble? It's anyone's guess!

Some say that he came here a long time ago
Some say in a storm through a fierce blowing snow
People can't remember him not living there
That grumpy old man with the long grayish hair

When old Mr. Grumble comes out for his mail
He grabs it and goes like he lives in a jail
The postman was once unfortunate enough
To greet him and smile, but he turned with a huff

'Late as usual! ' was all he seemed to have said
As he scuttled on off, just shaking his head

I don't think he's so happy, this crabby old man!
We all avoid him whenever we can
He's as close to a hermit as anyone knows
Wears a shabby old hat, all you see is his nose!

He comes into town every once in a while
I saw him in front of us in the grocery store aisle
Oh hush! Momma, it's him! (My momma was there.)

I grabbed at her dress, felt a change in the air

The time seemed to stop, like a silence it hovered
The store seemed a cave - a great rock uncovered
We all stood stone-still, with a feeling of dread
I thought that someone was sure to dropp dead!

Then suddenly it burst, this suspenseful bubble
When his grocery bag broke open - it really was trouble!
And the poor man just stared, as if in a fog
His fruit and his nuts and all of his grog

Fell tumbling down all around on the floor
His monthly supplies - all he needed and more
And we all just froze - we were stuck like with glue
Then I bent down to see something just hit my shoe

A big, red ripe apple it was hit me flush
When I looked up - Mr. Grumble had started to blush
We had all expected Mr. Grumble to... Well, howl
We had expected not a lot less than a growl

So I reached down and handed him his apple that dropped
As another rolled by at my feet - then all stopped
The apple he took and just rolled in his palm
He looked at me, said 'Thanks". The whole world was calm

And I saw that a tear had welled up in his eye
He stared at me timidly - friendly, and shy
I couldn't imagine that I was his friend
But maybe an old broken heart can still mend

And I was so young - what could I do just a kid?
I don't know if there was something I did
But I think something happened that moment that day
I think Mr. "Grumble" just floated away

He just floated away to where old Grumble's go
When they forget what they're mad at and don't even know
And we never saw 'Old Mr. Grumble' again ...
'Cause we all know him now - his real name is Ben

Tom Courtney

Once More Good Night

Say once again a good-night to the night
Day passes evening will take me in flight
See ever-lengthening shadows emerge
surround and encompass: night's on the verge

Soften and dampen the spikes of the day
countless encounters – confusion, dismay
Say just once more I'll sleep this one through
I'll awaken from blackness into the blue

Say that I'll leave all the heavy stones set
Say I'll fly by them. Have no regret
Sleep ever comes and melts all my sorrow
Bright skies and new tries arise on the morrow

Just as the tide washes that which we cherish
the unwanted demons and ghosts also perish
What portion of strife I have buried today
will fast slip from memory in the new day

And much that has brought me to think that I grieve
lies deep in some fabric, the warp and the weave
But stepping alone into time's silken fold
must bring in the new and cast out the old

And all that I need is one deep still night
to hasten my courage and banish the fright
So on to the new day with stars in my eyes
and faith in my breast that the spirit still flies

The crest of the sun will crack a new dawn
The dew will hang on a shimmering lawn
The day holds a promise within its sunbeam
My bed a soft cloud and my pillow a dream

Tom Courtney

Once Upon A Table Top

Once upon a table top
There sat a cup of tea
For a little man whose table top
Had only chairs for three

And once upon a midnight air
There shined a light above
That little creatures from around
Had never seen or heard of

The little man came out to look
And blew smoke from his pipe
I'll say that that's the brightest star
Or a fruit that's just been ripe

Well said the sparrow responded
I've seen the light before
But i never knew what to call it
And i never knew what for

So in to the little man's house
All the little creatures came
Cause they loved his long white scraggly beard
And he said he had a game

A game the creatures clamored
To get inside the house
There was nary a thing that they loved more
'cept cheese declared the mouse

But there was barely room inside
With the table and the chairs
So the bear sat right down on the floor
And the bird floated on the airs

The squirrel climbed up anything
He could to sit on top
And the big-eyed fish plopped into the sink
Saying I hope that waters don't stop

And when it finally seemed that the house would just burst
And all the little creatures were in
The little old man sort of scratched at his beard
He barely knew where to begin

So he said, once upon a table top
This is a funny place to begin
Where the salt sits next to the pepper – pop!
Let's start with imagining

Tom Courtney

One Of Us

Was she one of us once? We wonder
as someone pulls off the newspapers

They shake their heads and nod and fill out forms
has this become some kind of stark ritual- cold emotionless?
or simply common?

She has no identification but marks and rings- cheap and tarnished
all her fingers yes, her veins collapsed from intra-venous
dear God! Such prison bars and now such freedom!

Her hair thick and clotted- oh! with who knows what?
I have not seen this type of thing so much I think
Once a man lay face down in the street
curled like a fetus -I won't go on -
I saw two men beating on one.
We stood high up
the seventh floor the office building where I worked
having coffee at the windows watching

What can be done? this woman dead - I wonder
not how she could come to die
but that she lived so long.

Image! ! No, not now! Not while I stand in uniform!
Go! Get away! I bat at you and blink my mind
re-focus upon the faces and my routine
go! I'm not afraid of you! just ashamed

The tightening of my throat the welling behind my eyes
the trembling coming up my spine now showing clearly in my fingers
look away! Oh God! Don't cry of all things! Some fool!
You're supposed to be a professional,
your purpose is to gather the facts
You've come to gather information: what story?
what story?

I am sorry I speak to no one
The trap was well laid for me

The image draws me in,
I hear it crying, soft and ancient
wistfully speaking to me:
"I am not a presence ... I am only you
the song you sing is the song of ages
born anew each moment
Come, come now, come in, come see
come; for we scarcely have this moment"

And though no one sees I am folding
like the empty aged newspaper from yesterday
bending along the well-worn creases and blown at the edges
trying to hang onto my familiar shape
I am going despite my resistance
despite my heart-felt reluctance
My soul screams at me that
I am also the victim

And far, far away in time, in ages past
in other worlds than this - a tender girl
hair shining and brightly tied in pigtails
bouncing balls about a play yard
One big and shiny red comes softly to meet her palms
and then rebounds and comes again

And now still petite, a taller, slimmer one
sitting on wooden bench
learns to write in alphabet and speak in grammar
Come night she scrubs her face and assumes her proper habits
and in moonlight sits with dolls - old familiar play things
and dreams of what? Becoming a woman? And more?

Yes! ! But a day comes. things fall
And the tender green shoot is bent
as another tree is plowed under at the foundation
Come a vile night, atrocities fall
Deathly rings dance and sting
Depression comes in floods
Blackening waters swirl, a turgid spin
We lose perspective

And suddenly violently like steel striking against steel

again and again that same darkness the lightness of day
surge and flow now in maddening disarray

See! just see how this hallowed body is plundered
for this lifetime!

And what are we to expect from one another?
I cast my eyes upon myself - so much indifference?
The pride in things we're given and what we take
What we call our accomplishments
The pleasures of our good fortune and the time of day?
a quickness in our gait
a professional demeanor?

I walk away from the scene, now stung bitterly into silence
I am a story-teller
a giver of facts and many fables
I move not earth or sky, nor barely shape the wind
I have a chance to hold onto myself
perhaps I will

And was she one of us once?
Indeed! A beggar at the wealthy gate
I've passed her way many times before

Tom Courtney

Only A Sailor Is Free

The brave Skipper Nelson would sail up
to the dock in his leaky old boat
and step off into the twilight
in his thick fisherman's sweater and coat

He called Nancy his belle his sweetheart
She would greet him and see what he caught
and she was so young and so pretty
that her honor could never be bought!

Oh sail away, won't you sail away?
It's a sailor's life for me
The ocean is rolling with beckon and call
and only a sailor is free, is free
Only a sailor is free

The Skipper held a dream down deep in his heart
and behind his scraggly white fisherman's beard
and under a kindly manner, his mind was set
to go after and conquer the fish that he feared

So one night the Skipper came not to the shore
nor did the light find his boat in the mooring
But the high walls of water and the bright sea sun
held the secret of the Skipper's sail and oar

The Skipper drove straight for the open seas
with tiller clasped in a firm skipper's stand
Every article of his ship ware had yielded
once at least to his time-toughened hand.

And he knew his boat well, or ne'er would he sail
more an extension of his will than his hand
He merged, becoming one with the motion and mist
and passed far beyond the sight of the land.

And blackness of night on the sea was intense
In clearings of weather, he found bearings above
The shining stars formed his beacons of passage

and he read them as one puts a hand in a glove.

On that dread day, daybreak came red and clear
In the stillness, the chilled boatman wiped his brow
The silence above and beyond earth and sky
bode ill of a force lurking deep `neath the prow.

Hours passed, the heat rose, the time dwindled on
The Skipper shielded his eyes and yielded a yawn
Sleep came upon him, as the day trickled by
and the visitor came between darkness and dawn

Feeling it, he jumped, the boat seized to the side
Both oars rose from the water to fly
A gale tore the mainsail and toppled the pole
The poor man knew not if he'd live or he'd die

In midday, the sky became darkness again
A spiral fountain swirled up and took him inside
The fish in the water rose high up above him
and the curtain of heaven fell down to the land

Brave Skipper, sure! He'd faced nature before
He had strength in his forearms and steel in his oar
He feared not commotion, the wholesale uproar
He took the fierce lashing and came back for more

Yet this day stung him down deep in his heart
His long journey had somehow taken him here
He had driven his life for this one awful moment
and now he would know the extent of his fear

A necklace of emeralds, the islands lie scattered
Where children crack coconuts burnt brown by the sun
Play water games and collect fishes' teeth for trinkets
Their land is for play, and the sea is their fun

Oh sail away, won't you sail away?
It's a sailor's life for me
The ocean is rolling with beckon and call
and only a sailor is free, is free
Only a sailor is free

Tom Courtney

Petals

And so
after gaining all the world
we shall lose each other?

We failed to heed the admonition:
putting our stores in earthly treasures
coveting our bodies and our minds
losing the spirit we shared?

When we had vowed
in the depths of our hearts
in the holy sanctuary
and before God and family
we shall part our company?

And become again
what we once were
not so very long ago -
strangers - only now
once lovers and dreamers?

We spoke the words
repeated so many times:
you and I for all eternity?
You and I?
We need another word for 'we'
We are not 'we' as once together
We are only you and I for time

Perhaps like petals
tossed before the winds
of the same flower
We bid the stem farewell
cast adrift and lost
amidst the tumbling rains

The petals fall
and find their resting place
They will some day find the soil rich and sweet

becoming part of it themselves
again

And even as the flower
finally melts into the sun
the old stalk turns
and falls to the side
the roots wither and turn to dust,

Another flower will come
and new petals will spring forth
again
there when the elements are right
as surely and inevitably they must be

As the meadow is large
and the sky is ever full

Tom Courtney

Place (A) For Me

Winds buffeting sea rocks
covered with a sea of white birds
like a powder, waves
lunging against the land
straining away the earth into silt
narrow trails twisting around stout brush
dropping precipitously into the hollows
winding down from the land's cover
to where the waters have bitten off the face
cries from above the haunting gulls
tiny scattering, clustering, scuttling sea crabs
and the world of tide pools below
the sun withdraws the blanket of night
from across the far horizon toward the shoreline
bringing with it colors to the colorless
the cliffs stand high above an unnamed stretch
of beach where the playgrounds
are less hospitable to man
less convenient and unmarked
by our penchant to organize and build
And knowing this I come to this place
take the extra effort to be alone
take the extra thought to be together
with myself
I come here in the morning
when the air is still and within minutes
everything within me has changed

Tom Courtney

Place (The) Of Writing

I have journeyed to a place
From which I find there's no escape
The essence of my arteries
Tells me my blood unlikely frees

Me from this so unlively spot
Til I have ground the perfect dot
Upon the table of the writing
Through the fuss, the fury, fighting

Just to state my meager effort
Sprout the wings a bird of feather
Grind my snout into the dirt
A grunt a huff no proper word

Can come to me in moment now
I might as well become a cow
Or moss upon a shining rock
The way I sing the way I talk

What sense of mine can I convey
But pass the feelings on the way?
Through awkward script and jotted note
The fasted form the formless bloat

The efforts I have taken measure
Distance of my pain and pleasure
Mark my spot no more than dung
Which turns to earth reborn unsung

Tom Courtney

Poet (The) You See

I wouldn't be doing my job
if I didn't tell you what
I'm thinking
now would I?

What we believe?
I cast my eyes around
and see but magic and illusion

I am the figure of my own mind's eye
I am what my mind wants me to see
I see all of reality through this filter
and tell you how it feels to be me

And we say we communicate
We often serve our own purposes
and we often delve far into perception

I stand to spell out my story
I am hopeful of presenting myself to you
and I am open to your suggestion

And I am just someone
who draws distinctions
someone who again blurs the lines
I am an illusion of a poet

So you may discard me at will
but we have met once before
and we will meet again

We never walked together
but you entered my mind
in a sparkle and a twinkle

And I stand before you now
coming far from nowhere
I come and go in an instant
and I am really you

because perceptions differ

And what you see
is not really really me
I don't know maybe you disagree
but I approximate it

And now I give all this to you
I break myself into so many words
that I may seek to find your pleasure
that I may cease to be but

at least I now have spoken
I came to you so suddenly
and now return into my silence

Tom Courtney

Remembering Five

actually

All my younger years finally scrambled
What I really remember
and what I've heard repeated so many times
or just told myself
Remembering five
holding the trembling wounded sparrow
frail little one unable now to fly
yet never to be tamed

Remembering five
colors blotted on my mind like a Picasso
bold etched forms speaking and speaking
to me, as they are turned at the edges
bits and pieces cast aside
and rearranged
perhaps a tie or filler some imagination
now and again and forever
I am seeing a different picture

And maybe that was his genius Picasso
brilliant artist that
he painted by earliest essence
just exactly as it is

Now one memory jostles
with another
vying in my mind for equal time
jealous rivalries
Someone received favored treatment
and those of my youngest most insecure
requiring the longest to endure
They require
the deepest poignancy, the boldest splash
to even hope to remain
alive in my mind

One day a fragment lost
next another small detail

then a piece of the patchwork quilt
the jigsaw puzzle
slips away

Older memories tending to blur now
at the edges
accuracy giving way
to my imagination
Old memories now called to attention
no longer on their merits
now answering instead to sentimentality
or my ambition, my insecurity

Remembering five is now
a hazy dream
of running tanks and placing my toy soldiers
in the dirt
underneath a crusty cement overhang
extruded from the foundation of a house

A red bud tree
a large gray cat and superman
who arrived one day
wrapped in an oblong box with bows

And superman flew everywhere
into the trees and closets
behind the sofas and down
the intricate hallways
across the yards to visit Davie Crockett
and even into bed
where he would sleep
with his cape securely
tucked under

Five tugs at me today
and I hear five say
Hey, I am as far back as you can remember
and you have an obligation
to keep me clear
in your mind
already

I am nearly gone

Most of me you lost
in the rough and tumble years
pushing your way through school
a maze of so many classes
joining sports teams
doing homework
and discovering girls

Yes, it was there and all along the way
you gained all that – all of that
and lost most of me
in the process

And hey
I share something with all your other years
please try a little harder
to remember to remember five because
I'm just five once
and I don't happen again

Tom Courtney

Revelation

I think I 'll write a poem
the reason being that I have so much to say
so much wisdom to impart
how could I hold myself back?

I used to think that I was perfect
but I found out that I wasn't
so I fixed my only flaw and now I am

I used to believe the world rotated around me
that Copernicus took a step in the right direction
the sun didn't revolve around us
the sun revolved around me

I used to rule the world
my own little world I thought was so big
I don't rule anymore. I found out
if you cannot rule over yourself
you cannot rule over another

Take off the mask
You've worn it for so long
Take off the mask
May be that nobody's home at all

You can't even remember
who is really at home inside
and that's OK. Start a new day
life's a process of discovery

People will laugh at you
People will see your nakedness
People will not understand
what it is you had to do

But it's time to come home
Home beckons her faint and fiery voice
What does it matter? What is the world?
You have found truth and peace and rest

Tom Courtney

Ristorante

Ristorante (the Evening Out)

I want to see the skyline
all lit up and twinkling in the night
sit on the patio of Ristorante
where the little round tables are clustered
up on a tiered deck with ficus sycomorus
in tapered redwood planters
and Chinese lanterns sway in
the gentle breeze
and there'll be a menu of overpriced entrees
greasy hors-de-oeuvres and flambéed salads
The service will be lousy
and I'll have a hard time getting water.
but it will come
in a well-worn glass
with a lemon slice
and I'll wonder how they can serve a meal
on this veranda facing the bustling city

I'll gaze blankly at the wine list
hardly recognizing anything listed there
not really knowing the chardonnay
from the Chablis
or the BV from the Wente Bros
but I know the red and white, the pink
and how to order the house wine
by the half bottle or the liter
I'll taste the wine in its fullness
swish it around in my mouth
and get a good taste and remember
you really can taste the wine

In the winter they'll hang the overhead heaters
and they'll never close for the rains
because this is L.A. and it never rains anyway
they built the downtown to bring the people out I'll be one
but I need Mary or Judy or Terry or Debby
or Mark, Ray, John

to chatter away with about the facts of modern existence
The ambience will be perfect
We'll have a perfect evening
though the food was cold and I got gas
and spent the rest of the evening
with cramps in my abdomen
wishing I had just gotten enough to eat

Wondering after all this time why
the ambience of elegance
in this charming, quaint and sophisticated
overpriced little side walk Ristorante
has never rubbed off on me
never made me the carefree stylish bon-vivant
like an the others who frequent
these places into the wee hours of the morning
working hard to keep a little circle
of friends together amidst the disintegration
of social life in the big metropolitan cosmopolitan

Why is it then after all these days
now when I can see it all as a game
that the image of myself as a part of it has faded?
somehow I can't absorb this ambience
Somehow I just don't need the service
as the waiter wheels the desert cart around
the crinkles, puffs and squiggles
Somehow I don't really need the coffee after dinner
I'll be going to sleep in the not too distant future

What can I take of this \$85 dollar go-around
with the shadow of myself I must be chasing?
In the final measure I'm much more comfortable
in my home
where I can come and go as I please
and I can help myself to the water
and I don't have to be referred to as sir
I don't have to pretend to be living it up
These things run through my mind and yet

That night we had a marvelous time
Somehow that particular night

was special
She laughed at my silly jokes
He reached across the table
touched my arm and called me best friend
The warmth of friends made the table glow
My sister in law was overdue
for a little of my tenderness
after all the long silences she withstood from me
He said a lot of the same old things
I could have predicted
I said some of the most meaningless things
I've ever said
She wore an unappealing hairdo
and I was never sure
if I was parked legally
We spoke of mundane things
referencing the prices of show tickets
mouthing platitudes
that we had heard the critics say
And none of us, I am quite sure
could recognize really good acting
if we saw it
We fell back onto the safe ground
of what appealed to me or you
because that is where
art and entertainment meet

Tom Courtney

Say Say Say

People are saying and saying
That's what I found out today
Did you ever notice how people keep saying
Like nothing can get in their way?

I'm just saying people keep saying
It seems like a non-ending stream
I hear it all day til my bedtime
And then it goes on in my dream

It seems there's a lot of us saying
What it is that we've got on our minds
I don't know what keeps us all going?
Perhaps that there's something to find

What I find is that people keep saying
But my feelings express something more
There seems to be something that's deeper
I've got to find what's at the core

Perhaps it's a stroll in the forest
Or a nice long slow walk on the beach
I need silence from all of the saying
Some relief from the progress of speech

And I don't always find disagreement
But there's something I don't understand
The way of the words is alarming
The supply far exceeds the demand

And people keep saying and saying
Perhaps it's the way of the world
The congress keeps yea-ing and nay-ing
Conversations are hurled and swirled

But I'm beginning to see more about us
We're expressive, loquacious – we talk
We cry scream burb gurgle and la-la
Long before we can get up and walk

Epilogue:

My essay seems to have gotten quite lengthy
I'm guilty of what I attack
Now I've gone and made me self-conscious
They'll say that it's terseness I lack

Tom Courtney

Seasons

Summer brought us bright around
friends in heart and family near
Charm we found amongst ourselves
and life was high with faith and cheer

Autumn rolled up from behind
before the bright lights dimmed away
a cooling in the evening air
a stiffness in the rusty gate

And winter comes. We brace for you
You make no pretense with your cold
chilling yet strengthening – part of the cycle
carrying the seed of our youth in the old

Spring – hush – listen, silence and sound
From the crusted snow a forgotten muse
that where we once had failed and fallen
there might still be life anew

Tom Courtney

Sheila

Sheila your presence
is hovering near
in this late night confusion
in my mind
I see you
our common living room
our common bed

You stand hands on hips
scolding a stuffed animal
we named him Mr. Dorchester Duck
He is our sedentary irascible child
who never flies except
when heaved just so
He takes to the air at parties
and loops landing awkwardly
acquiring cataracts on plastic eyes
from the hard corners of coffee tables
Sheila he doesn't fly any more

Young and trying Sheila
You and I put up in an old apartment
with worn and stinking grayish carpet
stashing away our dreams and our savings

Sheila your scattered remnants carry illusions
that steer me off my course
in this late hour of the night
you and I - partners bonded and rent

Never take a pet!
little dogs and cats die
many times
and long before we will settle in

Here a piece of you and there another
You haunt me after other lovers
You creep into this night
and lie lightly by my side

you come to me again
and softly stroke my forehead
bathing me in my own water

Sheila you were my holiness
and that was my mistake
Why we could not live together
Why we could not do what was spoken
Why we could not live what was written

We could not foresee illness
We knew not anger, fear and pain
but we taught those things and more
to each other

And I often wonder
if you were you happy once?
and were we happy once?
for just a little while
once in a while
or maybe now and then?

But leave me now I have to sleep
There is a strange thing
called mo(u) rning

Tom Courtney

Silly Things

a daily moment
Two worlds now
Without and within
Without so without
So introverted
What can I say?
What can I know?
What else have i?
I imagine that I see
from this narrow window
Checking myself again
Now it's my trauma
When I will break again
A foggy shroud thickens
I'm a vessel cast off
Drifting in stillness
Writing of nothing
Thinking in miscalculations
I am unable
to command your presence
Slowly deeper within
Knowing and unknowing
A shadow now a whisper
Fare thee well
for I shall not remember
I am thinking only
silly things

Tom Courtney

Song Of The Wind

I am all around you
I have never left
You know I am in and out of your house
every chance I get
up and down your alleyways
without a thought of yours or mine
I seek out the remotest spots on earth
and inhabit them
You will find me there
at long last in your trek

I am wandering and searching
like you in a manner
I look for a change in the weather
some imbalance in the pressure
my invitation to come rushing in
You may see me as nature itself
and it's only natural for me,
enforcing and obeying the laws the same
I am the wind

Always in motion
You cannot still me
though I am captured in every shape and form
I am permanent in the quality of my transience
Where could we meet for a talk?

We have a lot of catching-up to do
You haven't spoken to me
in a very long time
though I sing you to your rest most every night
You could take a moment off the pace
step aside and sniff the air

I am often thought to be the lonely one
a solitary presence that is true
But I am very much at one with myself
and require no other why should I?
It is you who seeks a partner

It is your nature more than mine but
You can speak to me any time
you know

Shall I take the blame
for not calling on you of late?
Perhaps you say I haven't blown the leaves
swirled them across your yard just so
or swayed the tall and tender grasses
bent the slender trees along the shore
Shall we say I've been remiss?

Though I blew across the coral reef
My mighty waves tore the roof
off of the ocean floor?

When I hung slack
you thought I wasn't there?
You sat in heavy traffic
I let your sweat come pouring out?

Perhaps it is I then?
I need to ride cool
across the moisture of your skin?
Bring you clouds in all their seasons?
Push your kites high into the sky?
Stir life out of every bud and blossom?

I am doing what i can in my way
though you may not think it

I know a time
You stretched and raised your tiny hands towards the sky
You danced and laughed
just because I felt so good
You used to call me friend
then when your little arms were wings
your body the frame of a great jet plane
and you soared across the skies upon me
We touched hearts high above the city
far beyond all care and worry

And so it goes with you? Yes
and so and so for now?
I see you have engagements more pressing
and you have found communion
with another more like yourself
you think than I?

So if you miss my song this time
we'll meet again
another day when you're not so busy
some day when you've got more time
and you'll think of me
We'll meet again
old friends
in our good time

Perhaps you'll gaze up high upon the mountains
and there I'll lie
or perhaps I will surprise you
there in your old coat pocket

Tom Courtney

Stand On The Rock

Boy stands easily on the smooth flat rock
Pond shines around like his first set of teeth
and the mountains of sky
and the razors of conifers surround

Sunbeams press his skin and drown
the phantoms of a sleepless night in winter
For a moment he thinks, I am whole

He looks from a thin rutted trail looping their campfire
to the girl. He smiles for the thin black glass
she holds she cradles in slender fingers
She snaps the shutter flies across the light

He shifts his stance, I am your baby you married me
Come step over the moss in fumbling hands
and faces rounder smoother wetter
pressing sunbeams from the corners

Now the plastic rectangle pressed in plastic
strangles memories of him and her
And half the photos discarded
and half and half again the scenery
then hands and feet
at the hands of unknown strangers

Boy opens again the large slick binder
A long time ago and far away
she holds the camera

Tom Courtney

Star Child

Star child
so far away alone
standing on the edge of the universe
You can't be reached
You can't be played
You can't be preached
You've traveled so far
You are the only one
You think

The earth lies in wait
your virgin touch
your imagination and faith to burst forth
Soon you will emerge
from the cocoon of your pain
Alone inside, you will find the way
if you can
And you can
only if you will

My prayer is not for you
though I love you
My prayer is for
the idea of you
who you alone were meant to be

You are one of us forever
Come, come near
One of the holy, ever dear
You are the lost unknown and unimagined
as of yet
Find peace
in a still moment passing

And the universe will dare you
though it has scared you
in your secret/ secret now untied
Tell your story star child
you will not happen again

And I love you as you never know
and I pray for you
to pray for me once too
For I was once
star child

Tom Courtney

Student's Dream

I just had a dream (It was late, late at night)
And dreams are... Well... You know...
They're things that leave us wondering
Just where we've been (and where we'll go)

I just had a dream (It was late, late at night)
And people were in it, I think, that I know
The place and the time were changed from the day
Because things were too easy and time moved too slow

I'll tell you a little about my dream
My memory - impressions it left on me
The real facts of life were changed (and quite so!)
Because our work was all done and we were set free

The place was... Well... Kind of like the sky
And we could all just... Well... Kind of fly
Or just... Well... Float by like the clouds above
And all we had was just... Well... Love

There were no classes, jobs and such
And no more stress (at least not much)
No worries about the time of day
No deadlines, schedules, bills to pay

No broken pencils, mis-filed works
No missing staplers, other quirks
No messy copies, paper jams
No production reports or final exams

Our work was all done (but life was not through)
Just time to reflect on great things to do
I thought it was spring break (or so it would seem)
Because then I awoke. It was only a dream

Tom Courtney

Taken To Seismology

This poetry
is an exercise I engage in
that engages itself in me
It's a pursuit
that I don't entirely understand
As I sit
before a smiling gleaming keyboard
and try to grasp
the ethereal poetic process
the more I focus
on it all
the more my mind goes blank

I can't fight it
and I'm driven away
back into my daily routine
to the distractions
of a scratchy old phonograph record
played to the program on the tv
with the sound turned off
There's something boiling
on the stove
and a bunch of socks
turning over in the dryer
I'm jotting down notes
and sticking them
to the pantry door titled
things to do and groceries
thrifty or work
There's even one titled
ideas for poems

There's things
on there I wrote
while in the fast lane
on the freeway
I can't read them
and have no idea
what I was thinking

And it's only
when fully immersed thusly
in my world
when I've completely
forgotten whatever
I thought I had to say
a poem happens

The thing comes
crawling up
from somewhere
in my subconscious
And the way
of the words
continually baffles me
I wonder
how deep
in the earth
this process
begins

And I've taken
to seismology
I look to Cal-Tech now
with a keener eye
each time
the earth moves
shatters the relative calm
And I'm becoming somewhat
of an amateur scientist

So what is this then?
a poem
I feel like there's
a poem coming on

The poem starts
in a place deeper
than I know
And sensing it
I grope towards it

trying to bring
this strange sensation
into consciousness
It percolates upwards
towards a thought
and finally emerges
glimmering in the midst
of all the rest
of life's minutiae and detail
aAnd lo and behold!
I think I
have something
to
say

And the poem rumbles through
without invitation or warning
takes control
for its dreadful and
fleeting moment
then passes on
all on its own timetable
brings its own
definition style and fury
leaves when it has decided
to do so
and promises
no answers
or returns

Tom Courtney

Things We Say

Life goes on
I've seen it all before
People come and people go
Perhaps I am more fortunate
The crisis passes

All the funny pieces all the segments all the pain
I was too frightened to go insane
Fear welds the scattered pieces of the spirit
and pain brings the mind into focus

Looking now at the wide white walls
I see the long thin cracks in the plaster
and read the names of the presidents
administrators and the donors
They gave their lives
so we could live

I'm all right
I'll be well again soon
I'm getting better, really
I am
I am

Tom Courtney

Time To Say Things

Hey Han
Know what happened today?
Yeh all over the news
Did you see the Nikkei?
Yeh. dropped 9.38%
Yeh, biggest one-day drop
in 20 years
Yeh, U.S. goes down
we take everyone with us
How much you lose?
You mean today?
Don't know yet
Probably about 6000
Amazing
Yeh
In three days about 24,000
I figure
Thought I was retired
Have to think again
How much this year?
Don't know
I figured last 12 months
78,000
Oh, I'm down more than that
Oh, sorry
Why'd you invest at all?
I wanted to learn about it
Expensive lesson, Han
Why'd you?
It was that or CD's
Oh, so what now?
Don't know
Wha'du you say?
Here today gone tomorrow
Time to say things
Huh?
Time to say things
When you play the game
You either win or

You say things
Oh, yeh

Tom Courtney

To Pay My Way

The Ides of March are nigh upon us
Earthquakes come to tremble on us
Floods and droughts all have their day
And alternate in disarray

Crowded urban centers find us
Collisions, traffic jams all bind us
Into modern day turmoil
The kettles burn the pot's a' boil

Tempers flare and nerves are frayed
Oaths are said and words are prayed
Save us from vicissitude
Spare us this short interlude

Upon this planet, time we spend
Just give us peace and let us mend
Man and woman, priest and child
Proclaim the chaos, find life defiled

And was there ever once a day
When sweet wines flowed like Beaujolais?
When gentle streams ran to the sea
When we had time for you and me?

The harried pace of modern life
Is close to madness, full of strife
And will we live to see a time
When we're complacent composing rhyme?
Away from TV- video
Without the late late late late show?

The pace of life is faster now
We question which and what and how
We're racing quicker to and fro
And barely know which way we go

The icing on our cake is sweet
But factories make this chemical treat

We indulge ourselves in luxury
We barely need how can this be?

We work and sweat and strain for leisure
And find that life is hardly easier
What progress are we making now?
We'll soon have milk without the cow

Gadgets designed to ease the task
Pile up unused one needn't ask
We cannot shop without coupons
We have no hams without Poupons

I say I cannot keep the pace
I'm tempted to dropp from the race
But I have bills and notes to pay
And mouths to feed without delay

I work to buy the car I drive
The car I need to stay alive
It takes me to my work each day
So I can live to pay my way

Tom Courtney

Trout

High mountains
cold and dark against night
Shuffling feet
along heavy planks of pier
Pulling ropes of bow and stern
Tiny boat undulating
to currents of moon-lit waters
Fishing tackle stowed
poles boxes bait
livelings wriggling in sawdust
cheese balls in oil
and dancing metal lures
to sparkle feint and run
Casting off by oar
Pulling at the tiny motor
Rope and crank rope and crank
Choke and rope
Chug sputter chug adjust
sputter whirr
Clanking of metal against metal
Cutting straight toward the deep
into the quiet
A muffled skimming
Waves slapping prow
Ball caps life preservers
coffee soft drinks sandwiches
They are off for the game
of fishing
before sun rising
to dropp enticers into deep
running spinners in shallows
They play the game
of reading trout
father and son
and being quite possibly
as close as they
can ever be

Truth

Interesting

Most poetry is fiction
not history
The content stories lives depicted
are not facts
They didn't really
happen

Poetry is for the most part
the product
of my imagination
It happened in the neurons
History, as perceived, happened
in the world
Science, as understood, is
how the world is

Yet I believe that
good poetry expresses
a purer, at least a different, form
of truth

It is therefore my aspiration
to push aside the so-called facts
the science history and
the mountains of this
information-age data

and enter into the world
of my imagination
to deal with essences rather than
objectivities, not to narrate in type
but to paint pictures in words

I will speak plainly and simply
I will tell you my story
I will share with you my truth

Unique

I wander through
this solitary moment
time-drawn at the edges
burning in the middle
knowing this is me

Heaved upon myself
to become what I am
and to continue becoming

And I want to understand
and wonder to describe
this strangest of experiences

Sensing that I am
not that different than any other
yet unique

Tom Courtney

University

In fifty years the university
from a quadrant of four founding structures
to this immense and complex sprawl
a true city within a city

All this set in elegance and beauty
shaded walkways and flowered gardens
towering eucalyptus
giant brooms sweeping the sky

Here within the campus
the school of higher education puffing and churning
an engine of the society
immaculate heroic romantic
and almost practical

The red sandstone buildings
of Southern Mediterranean style
stand grand and stately
and barely able to contain the fevers
of armies of undergraduates
advanced battalions of post grads
seeking credentials honors vocations
A great ant hill a bee hive
a honeycomb of the hearts and minds

The inspiration the perspiration
this brief island in time
for a curious mix of peace
and the intensest anxieties of youth

Mere teens tumble in
with the wildest of passions
and the hottest of dreams
many with the perseverance
and fortitude to pursue them

I return to the university
after spending six years there

I come to walk the Janss Steps again
to linger where I had been forced to hurry
and to hasten
where I had spent so many interminable nights
in solitary studious oblivion

I am now through with formal education
(I say) and interested only
in reminiscing

And I find myself examining the faces
of the still-enrolled, still captive
passing through I read deeply
into those faces

I am looking for advance signs
of the inevitable crumbling of idealism
and I find myself looking earnestly
for any cracks in their stout armor

Unable to help myself
I am seeking to dress my own
unhealed wounds

Tom Courtney

Unless

I don't know how it is
lying there on the sidewalk
emaciated, arms shriveled from intra-venous
inspected now as she is

I can only imagine how it feels
to sleep on asphalt
with newspapers for a blanket
cars roaring and screeching
unceasing echoes of night in the city

and quiet stealthy intruders
in the forms of insects and strangers
I never slept there. she did

I don't know
it might have been
a lengthy custody dispute poorly contested
to lose my children because of
a vaguely misunderstood disorder
unable to manage my affairs
or alcoholism, physical abuse
laid over the mental torment

I really don't know how it is
to stick a dirty needle underneath my skin
or how the vomit spills up my throat
as I crouch down in a corner

And voices pop and bop and jive and jostle
in another room, people I never knew
and only see for this evening

And I don't know how it is
that the city clears the streets
of bacteria and humans
technicians jotting down notes
peeling off sanitary stickers
sending the multi-lighted vehicles

at hundreds of dollars a minute

Taking this dead woman now
into their business
after the last spittle has dried
on her lips and the scavengers stolen
her cheap rings

And the stench of urine
curls around my head
in the fluorescent gray-blue light
in the tunnel

I don't know how it is
as I turn, crunching a pebble
into the concrete
under a hard leather heel
looking for my door handle
How could I?
I have only seen it
as tonight and the night before
and tomorrow

And it only hits me
when I've made my way through the maze of automobiles
and the rest of my daily routine
and returned to the splendid condominium
easing my shiny German car into the garage
hitting the transmitter button
and dropping my briefcase on the clothes dryer
loosening my tie and leafing through the mail
reclined upon the couch
how it is
to live without running water
or to lose the taste of food
because I eat coffee and cocaine

And I don't know how it is
to sleep in a dream of angels
that melt, turn inside-out
and breathe fire under my skin
to see the blackness of the eternal void

open up with crystalline precision
and tell me it's time for my next fix
and I have no money
but I have my body to sell
if I can't panhandle or steal it

And I don't know how it feels to look up
at the tanned and glistening faces
shooshing up and down the corridors
and know that I don't belong
and lost so far
I really don't belong to myself
it's a mystery

And how she felt
in the tedium of that long day
that followed every night's ride
on the tip of a steel syringe
soaring for a moment
far above the pain and compulsion
But I think that Julia did
or was it Nadia, or Marie?
there's no identification
because she lived it

And knowing that that's not quite living
living with the realization
looking at the failure that it's all become
I really can't say that I know
unless

Notes: "Unless" was published in an anthology of writings "The Black Whole" by
Down in the Country Press. See

Tom Courtney

Vapors Of Myself

And then I realized
there are meanings with which I must deal
vapors floating over the vast basin
I rise late in the morning and face the sun
a fierce desire burning high and consummate
leave the dreams of myself with no parting word
The great holy inner being rages on
and the light calls to me now come
the one of inside scarred in forgetfulness
Well into the day I come to the river
to see the melted rain spots flow into the earth
All the water has direction
All the motion has come before
All there is to ever fathom as my life
now dense like the jungle tangled wild
My thought can only be single buried rising hopeful
towards the day to ever be and be forgotten
I gather seeds pods spores leopard heart
pumping gurgling the leopard's blood flows
I breathe into my fist the ground fails me
and will not support my weight
the sky bursts open before my inclination
I need only speak the word and the word was i
I had to be before all was washed away
I had to speak feeble fluttering heart
rising from the tombs of my ancestors
I rise for the time to ever be
in God who gave us the earth and heavens
and man who gave us fragments of meanings
and vapors of myself

Notes: OK, we seldom do this, but here's what it means (to me.. haha, as if I knew!)

Rising in the morning symbolizes desire, or desire 'defines' rising.
The river is water, which symbolizes fulfillment of the desire, as in drinking the water. But in imbibing fulfillment, I want to know more, take the next step: what is the source of fulfillment (in life) ? This plunges me into a complicated, tangled inquiry. I feel overwhelmed, as entering a strange new world. Seeds, etc. and

heart are sources of life, but leave me still questioning. I have found the sources of life (biological, at least) , but now, at the culmination of my journey, I fall (the ground fails me...) I cast about, realizing I write my own journey: I must find myself! I desperately look to my ancestors, to God and to man (mankind) , and what do I find? ...

Better, don't explain so much, that's the beauty of poetry (?)

No, I don't think so.

I think any effort to be artistic involves a commitment to communication. Without communicating, you have self-absorption, arrogance, and ultimately you have lost your opportunity to create community. So be it, for now at least. Anyway, I hate... (ouch, I hate the word hate too. I want to stop even using that hateful word.)

I was saying, I have emotional trouble with 'art' I cannot understand, don't you? That's why I try to explain my silly poem here. Peace?

One final comment. I don't necessarily 'like' this poem. It seems to me that poems just sort of happen. They are like children: we don't have complete control over them. They can delight us or disappoint us. But I guess we love them, even as we see our imperfections in them!

Tom Courtney

We Didn'T Choose The Book

I came to see you better
in those final days because
you are my mother and
it's hard to get that in
perspective because
it's just a little bit too big
although we try
every chance we get
to tell mom
hey Mom, you're the greatest
love you Mom
my mom is my best friend
and mom's rule

But mom in the final days
although we didn't really know
that you would slip away from us
quite so suddenly
that one Sunday morning
it was afternoon when I got the call
my sister saying that you
just didn't wake up in the morning
and so we closed a chapter
on life and opened another
which we have yet to write
but mine will be filled with you
still because I remember
walking with you one arm
on yours just for love
and just to steady you. You
walked stiffly from the hip surgery
and you just get a little smaller
as real old age comes on
but just the physical part
Though you could say
everything starts to go
that's not really true
because Mom, you know
because you know

that love never forgets
I'll never forget but I mean
you you never forgot love
although eventually you couldn't
remember much
well you would remember
stuff, but it got busted up
disjointed but Mom, it's cool
We we didn't choose the book
did we? No, we we didn't choose
the book, we just scribble
some little things into it

Notes: I write a lot, so often times I get something like this, which isn't very good. And yet it's like a photograph of me, so it has some value, at least to me. Also it is a stepping-stone perhaps in between good poems, and I would not have reached my next 'good' poem unless I had written this one.

Tom Courtney

What Do You Think Of?

What do you think of when you think
poetry?

What is the essence?

Is it the rhyme or is it the meter?

Is it the style or is it the flow?

Is it the content or is it the message?

Is it universal or personal?

I think

poetry is all these things

Poetry is

more concise than prose

less concise than silence

more profound than chat

less profound than a sigh

spoken in the day

whispered in the night

floating in the breeze

etched on a stony heart

breaking a heart with a phrase

building a hope with a word

translating perception into reality

and reality into perception

giving you me and giving you you

taking what we need and saying what we can

bold and shy, flamboyant and grave

bristling, shimmering, glistening, shining

hiding and teasing, sure and unsure

wandering and waiting

waiting and wondering

trying and succeeding

trying and failing

expressing, painting

pointing, hoping

dreaming, doing

doing, saying

saying, spoken

spoken, written

written, read

experienced, lived
our journey
our so-strange journey
with no destination
no looking around the bend
just walking in our way
our amazing way

Tom Courtney

Who's Coming To Dinner?

Who's coming to dinner tonight?
The silver and china are out
Guest that I am in this house
that used to be mine

Who's come to travel through
the twilight of our life?
when time's become confused
and all our affairs
rearranged according to consequences?

Who's coming to dinner?
as the heart quickens with every breath?
The charts have all been laid
once now and for all
here where the lines of our faces
curl and curve to a melody
written and ripened in time

There is a strange party
that moves in the candlelight
that hovers in the twists of a grandmother's hands
and whispers into the silence

A house was built
in the common manner
The walls stand dry now as foxes at the death
The hunter counts the place mats
and pulls his stallions up

Deep within the holes
of this endless aftermath
the rain cries out that it can come no more
and the hallways dematerialize
scampering away into the ground
You have a family
but you got caught not knowing

The moon alone hangs high

as a mirror for our introspection
where we speak without punctuation
simultaneously and unheard

Now surely this is a dream
sent squiggling out of time
to remind us there was a time
before our sensibilities

Tom Courtney

Will-He?

Will-he? Lives inside my head
And so he joins me in my bed
He rises when it's time for me
And I see him and he sees me

Will-he? Is my own best friend
I talk with him to heal and mend
He never knows what I will say
Because I change from night to day

And Will-he? Is my counselor
He listens long, and I'm a bore
But will-he? 's right there in my lane
I spew and spout like I'm insane

And Will-he? Listens calms me down
He tells me not to wear my frown
He tells me what I need to know
So I can make a proper show

If not for him, I'd jump the ship
I'd slide and fall, I'd step and slip
I'd rave and rant and fulminate
I'd vent my spleen and spout my hate

It's good to have my friend inside
A place where I can go and hide
Someone that I can complain to
When I'm beat up all black and blue

And Will-he? 's nice he speaks to me
He stands guard of my sanity
When I'm distraught, can't stand the strain
Will-he's there, my upper brain

Cerebral cortex, his real name
Of dielectric, phospholipid fame
But I'd feel sad, you think it's silly?
I just prefer to call him Will-he?

Tom Courtney