

WINNER 2007-2008 ANITA DORN MEMORIAL AWARD FOR POETRY

THE ACCIDENTAL CYNIC Poems by Gail White



The Accidental Cynic

PROSPERO'S WORLD PRESS
Flushing, New York



PROSPERO'S PRESS

Poems
by
Gail White

Copyright © 2009 by Prospero's World Press
All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, in any form except by reviewers for the public press without written permission from the publisher.

Designed by Michele Fairley
Printed in the United States by Country Press,
Lima, Pennsylvania

ISBN

PROSPERO'S WORLD PRESS
PO Box 774
Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania 19462

The Accidental Cynic

Gail White

PROSPERO'S WORLD PRESS
Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Light Quarterly

Cinderella's Sisters
Worker Bees
Updating Housman

Pivot

Eve: Who Learned the Consequences of Being the
Lady with Brains

P.M.S.

Beauty and the Beast

Snake Nation

On Being Southern

The Formalist

Essay Question
Rossetti's Wife
A Fax for Mrs. Browning

lambs & Trochees

Edna Millay's Goldfish
Parmigianino's *Madonna with the Long Neck*
To My Lover, Following Our Discussion of Poetry

Measure

A Sonnet Shakespeare Would Not Have Written

The Lyric

Mystery Writer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Soft-Hearted Cynic.....	1
Song Lyric	2
The Goddess Venus Assesses a New Religion	3
Song of a Rolling Stone.....	4
Forgetting the Lover Who Dumped You.....	5
Why I Failed to Attend My High School Reunion.....	6
The Librarian Wishes She Had Lived in the 1920s	7
Ballade of a Latter-Day Faust.....	8
Progress Note.....	9
Why I Read Victorian Novels	10
Jane Eyre for Modern Readers.....	11
Ballade of the Literates.....	12
What We Hold in Our Hands Is Only String.....	13
The Old Man Gives His Reasons	14
Dialogue at a Wedding.....	16
The Last Illusion.....	17
Clerihew	18
On the Death by Drowning of My Favorite New Orleans Restaurant	19
Ballad of Byron's Dilemma	20
L'Envoi	21
Moneysong.....	22
A Fax for Mrs. Browning.....	23
Open Mike	24
Eve: Who Learned the Consequences of Being the Lady with Brains.....	25
When They Met Again	26
Breaking Down in the South.....	27
Worker Bees	28
Ballade of Madame Bovary.....	29
Clerihew I.....	30
On Being Southern	31
Simone De Beauvoir to Sartre.....	32

Comparison	33
Teacher and Students	34
Post Diagnosis	35
Advice to Apprentice Ascetics.....	36
At West Chester	37
Forsaken	38
The Vampire Reflects.....	39
Ruined by Reading.....	40
The Father.....	41
Epitaph of the Unknown Poet	42
Ballad of Indignation	43
Parmigianino's <i>Madonna With the Long Neck</i>	44
A Complaint of the Times.....	46
A Sonnet Shakespeare Would Not Have Written.....	47
The Stages of Forgetting	48
Death by Poisoned Apple.....	49
Cinderella's Sisters	50
To My Lover, After our Discussion of Poetry.....	51
On Politicians	52
Beauty and the Beast	53
Emilia Reflects on Desdemona.....	54
Updating Housman.....	55
Some Lover's Ghost	56
The Cynic and the Baby.....	57
White Collar Blues	58
Crouching Female Figure: Pompeii	59
Double Dactyl	60
Essay Question.....	61
Mystery Writer	62
Triolet for the Buddha	63
Fat Cat	64
Consider the Lilies	65
Abelard, or Love Gone Wrong.....	66

The Panda	67
Brother Dog, Sister Cat	68
Allegory	69
Mr. Housman Forgets His Prozac Again	70
Edna Millay's Goldfish	71
Corinna's Not Going A-Maying.....	72
Traveling with Cats On a Snowy Evening.....	73
Miss Dickinson Goes to the Office	74
Rossetti's Wife.....	75
Ballade of the Common Lot.....	76
The Obvious:	77
Venice in the Rain	78
A Codicil to My Will.....	79

Dr. Alfred Dorn, Founder of the Anita Dorn Memorial Award for Poetry

Alfred Dorn, poet and critic, received his doctorate from New York University, where he studied as a Penfield Fellow for work in Renaissance and modern literature. A specialist in authors of the 16th and 17th centuries, he wrote graduate dissertations on Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser, and John Donne. He taught at New York University, Rider College, and the City University of New York. Dr. Dorn directed writing workshops for the Poetry Society of America, The Brooklyn Poetry Circle, and literary organizations in Texas, Arkansas, and Indiana. He has been featured on New York radio. Twice vice president of the Poetry Society of America, Dr. Dorn is director of the World Order of Narrative and Formalist Poets, which has sponsored poetry competitions since 1980.

Dr. Dorn's work has appeared in poetry anthologies and some sixty periodicals, among them *Blue Unicorn*, *Dark Horse*, *The Edge*, *City Review*, *The Formalist*, *Hellas*, *The Hudson Review*, *lambs & Trochees*, *Light*, *The Lyric*, *The New Criterion*, *Orbis*, *Pivot*, and *Sparrow*. As literary critic and art historian, he has published essays in *lambs & Trochees*, *Arts Magazine*, and other journals. In recent years, he published three books of poetry: *From Cells to Mindspace*, *Voices from Rooms*, and *Clair and Christmas Village*. He started Prospero's World Press in 2008 to publicize the literary works of relatively little-known authors and to acknowledge outstanding works of poetry, fiction, and essays.

The Accidental Cynic by Gail White

I've been writing poetry since I was old enough to hold a pencil and to print in block letters. Since I insisted on writing in rhyme and meter, and that was not the fashion, the world wanted none of me. Then around 1990 the Formalist Movement appeared and suddenly there were places that would actually publish my words.

After a while, I began to notice that I had a reputation as a light verse writer. Phrases like "the American Wendy Cope" were batted around. I didn't think of most of my poetry as light—after all, I was writing about depressing things like death and parent-child relationships—but if people enjoyed it, any term was fine with me.

So *The Accidental Cynic* was compiled to live up to my reputation. Much of it is unashamedly light. I frankly didn't expect to win a prize. But to my great delight it did, and the results are in your hands.

THE SOFT-HEARTED CYNIC

The kind of sentimentalist I am
can read unmoved of war and plague and fam-
ine, human woes ad nauseam,
but can't pass up a homeless kitten.

Damn.

SONG LYRIC

John Keats died at twenty-four,
Jesus at thirty-three,
they already had immortal fame
so how much is left for me?

If I take my diamond ring and write
my name on window panes,
will it stay in place for the tourist trade
or wash off when it rains?

If I should tack my name in bronze
to the trunk of an ancient tree,
if the oak tree lives five hundred years,
did I beat mortality?

If I were to climb Mount Everest
or invent the AIDS vaccine,
I could never outlive Joan of Arc
who died at just nineteen.

But if Earth's memory is short,
God's memory is long.
And I may ask John Keats for a dance
on the edge of an angel's song.

THE GODDESS VENUS ASSESSES A NEW RELIGION

Theirs is a god who heals the sick—
truly a crowd-compelling trick,
for now the people flock in droves
to churches and forsake my groves.
But here's the catch: their god neglects
the basic human problem, sex.
A million prayers may rise to Jove
for health or wealth—but more for love,
since both barbarian and Greek
believe their Loved One is unique.
I couldn't count the offerings
a lover to my altar brings—
from hair to gold to silk to wine,
all with a cry of "Make her mine!"
but those who follow Yahweh's son—
hermits and virgins, every one!
Their lips are thin, their eyes are red,
they never pass the night in bed.
Such healers are extremely pure—
love is a sickness they won't cure.
So in the present hostile climate
I only have to bide my time,
and though men call my cult a sin,
by some back door they'll sneak it in.
Healing the sick is very well
and so is saving men from hell,
but for along-term faith to cope,
it has to give a lover hope.

SONG OF A ROLLING STONE

When I was five-and thirty,
I thought that I was old,
my waist no longer sylph-like,
my hair no longer gold.
'Twas useless to console me,
or offer me champagne,
for I was five-and-thirty,
and death was on my brain.

When I was five-and forty,
my heart was full of fears.
When I was five-and-fifty,
I would not count the years.
But there've been subtle changes
in Nature's paradigm—
now I am five-and-sixty,
and I've got lots of time.

FORGETTING THE LOVER WHO DUMPED YOU

What! He (or she) had no more sense than that?
Burn all his things.

Go Shopping.
Get a cat.

WHY I FAILED TO ATTEND MY HIGH SCHOOL REUNION

Because it would have gone like this: Hello,
hello, hello. (You never liked me, did you?
Where was this friendship 15 years ago?)
you're looking wonderful. I wouldn't kid you.

About it—you look great. (*You hefty cat*).
And Jeffrey—are you married? Oh, you are!
Three kids? However did you manage that?
(For God's sake, someone point me to the bar).

Me? I've just spent the summer in Tibet
learning some basics from a Buddhist nun.
it's an experience I won't forget.
(*As if you cared*). More crab dip, anyone?

(You were the Great Class Bore. You're still the same).
Forgive me; I can't quite recall your name.

THE LIBRARIAN WISHES SHE HAD LIVED IN THE 1920'S

That was the life: bobbed hair and bathtub gin,
women who smoked and shocked the bourgeoisie
by living with their lovers—no “in sin”
but just in honest camaraderie.

Dorothy Parker held her own with men
at the Algonquin and in print or bed.
Edna Millay took drugs and lovers – then
went home to drain the sonnets from her head.

But I was born I nineteen-forty-five
when girls were good and children followed rules.
I learned the tricks I needed to survive,
and made a life of buying books for fools.

No gazer pierces my façade and sees
the wild young flapper, skirts above her knees.

BALLADE OF A LATTER-DAY FAUST

I hunger for immortal fame
(like every versish fool since Homer),
for Keats's craft, for Shakespeare's name,
for paid vacations every summer.
A Guggenheim's a pleasant honor,
and Nobel prizes, how I'd flaunt 'em!
I'd pawn my soul with great good humor –
but where's the devil when you want him?

I long for wealth, I lust for power
(power, of course, to use for good)
I'd rain my gifts, a golden shower,
on poor folk in the neighborhood.
As for my foes, it's understood
I'd use my power to harm and haunt 'em...
come, where's the pact? I'll sign in blood!
But where's the devil when you want him?

Where is the lame and cloven foot,
the forked tail, the glowing eyes,
the horns and other attributes
well known in iconographies?
We've done our level best to please—
how could we possibly affront him.
We almost beg on bended knees—
but where's the devil when you want him?

L'envoi

Prince of this world, perhaps you think
mankind grows cold, and faith's a phantom.
Give us a chance! Produce the ink!
But where's the devil when you want him?

PROGRESS NOTE

At twenty-one I wrote like mad
and Genius was all I had.

At thirty-two I wrote for fame
but Talent was the most I'd claim.

Now I am nearly forty-three
and write with mere Facility.

WHY I READ VICTORIAN NOVELS

Get away from me, slim best-seller in a miniskirt,
flaunt your meretricious charms at the reader
who wants only a one-night stand, who wouldn't
know a lady if she fainted on his doorstep.

Give me a story by Trollope: a novel
that puts on her best dress and comes to call
bearing fifty years of village gossip.
Or send me a robust Russian peasant
who knows that sin and murder and madness
deserve an investment of serious time.

A book should come with a marriage broker
saying, Look at this beauty! She brings you a dowry
of five hundred pages! She also writes poems!
What does it matter how old she is?
Would you pass up a mistress who's mastered the forty
positions for afternoon quickies with Youth?

JANE EYRE FOR MODERN READERS

My boss is an attractive older man.
He touches me and my heart gives off static.
I'd love to tame him, and I think I can.
Who gives a damn what goes on in the attic?

BALLADE OF THE LITERATES

The Inquisition's on the loose
(the dying François Villon said),
and poets' lives are little use,
so watch your step to save your head.
Remember, when your comrade's dead,
he left a short but useful creed:
Until you lie upon this bed,
tell no one you can write and read.

Said Jeremiah (that old recluse):
The Jews have reached a watershed.
The King of Babylon's tied the noose
and Judah's hanging by a thread.
The wise will leave their wit unsaid;
a clever slave is never freed,
but pity spares the dunderhead—
Tell no one you can write and read.

When politicians wax abstruse,
you know the budget's in the red!
Be sparing of your sage abuse
and keep the IRS misled.
Hold all authorities in dread
and memorize in case of need:
"What books? We watch TV instead."
Tell no one you can write and read.

L'Envoi

Princes, the printed word is sped;
fluorescent screens have got the lead.
Now Apple reigns in Milton's stead.
Tell no one you can write and read.

WHAT WE HOLD IN OUR HANDS IS ONLY STRING

A father sends a kite up
which dances to and fro.
His toddler takes the kite string
and, laughing, lets it go.

The father says, "Oh damnit!"
The mother says, "Oh dear!"
The toddler laughs as Elmo
ascends the stratosphere.

Too soon he'll learn that losing
a friend is cause for tears,
and to regain his wisdom
may take him sixty years:

the non-attachment toddlers know—
that kites exist to be let go.

THE OLD MAN GIVES HIS REASONS

“Because I am mad about women,
I am mad about the hills.”

—W.B. Yeats, *The Wild Old Wicked Man*

The gently rounded hillsides
that are not over-steep,
within whose shady valleys
I feel the sunlight creep,
are like the shapely women
by whom I used to sleep.

The tender hills of springtime
are dressed in dainty greens.
They bloom with soft desire
like virgins in their teens
who need an old campaigner
to tell them what it means.

The flaming hills of autumn
are matrons in their prime.
They’ve been around the seasons
and know the tricks of time.
Their insolence of beauty
will tempt a man to climb.

The barren hills of winter,
stripped naked to the bone,
suggest the ancient magic
of Prophetess and Crone.
Austerity and wisdom
have beauties of their own.

It’s on the breasts of women
I’d gladly lay my head,
but from my first advances
they run to lads instead.
So in the clefts of hillsides
an old man makes his bed.

DIALOGUE AT A WEDDING

"Who would have thought she'd pick a younger man?"
"And foreign! Did they meet in Sicily?"
"In Rome. A tourist guide, I understand."
"Italian men—they could excite a tree."

"Well, he's good-looking, I'll say that for him."
"handsome enough, but not a patch on Jim."
"He only wants her money." "Is that news?"
"He'll be unfaithful in his wedding shoes."

But while they filtered her through many minds,
not one had mastered the essential fact:
A heart in freezing weather, like a cat,
will make a nest of anything it finds.

THE LAST ILLUSION

Children aren't innocent, just new.
They can manipulate and lie
as handily as I an you,
and if you think they can't be bribed,
try what a pony ride will do.

Children aren't innocent, just new
and feeble in coordination.
But their appalling strength of will
would wade through blood if power to kill were equal to
their inclination.

Young mothers won't pass on the clue,
so each one views with shocked surprise
the hate that flares in infant eyes
and wonders—will a spanking do?
Children aren't innocent, just new.

CLERIHEW

Thomas Hardy
could really kill a party.
In an effort to effervesce,
he would read selections from Tess.

ON THE DEATH BY DROWNING OF MY FAVORITE NEW
ORLEANS RESTAURANT

The corner of Canal and Carrolton
sheltered Mandina's, where for seventeen
years every Saturday they poured me one
black Russian followed by Trout Amandine

or the best shrimp loaf on the whole Gulf coast.
But now the watermark is at my eyes,
the floors have rotted, and the stolid ghost
of a decayed refrigerator lies

prone on the sidewalk. And I'm shedding tears
over a stack of dishes, one of which
I'll steal in memory of those seventeen years
that made their gumbo and my life so rich.

Come back, my love! Serve me on shining dishes
my weekly miracle of loaves and fishes.

BALLADE OF BYRON'S DILEMMA

"...what remains? The summer of a dormouse."

—Byron

What odds to beget or to kill?
What pleasure in water or wine?
To sleep and to drink and to swill
was never a project of mine.
To party, to dance, or to dine—
Friend, you're an ass for your pains.
Delete all the standing in line—
A dormouse's summer remains.

We're already over the hill
and heading for steady decline.
I'm thinking of making my will—
Would you care for the stuffed porcupine?
Undress and unbutton at nine
and head for the soft counterpanes!
Subtract all the time you're supine—
A dormouse's summer remains.

Beginnings and endings go ill.
As infants we whimper and whine,
the rest of our evenings we fill
with delights mor or less anodyne.
Those moments of sparkle and shine
When we thought we had talent and brains—
Were they only the fruit of the vine?
A dormouse's summer remains.

L'Envoi

Still, lover, I'm yours and you're mine—
Flush everything else down the drains!
Make hay while the sun can still shine—
A dormouse's summer remains.

MONEYSONG

Money won't buy you the moon and stars,
but diamond rings and enormous cars
and fancy drinks in exclusive bars,
can all be purchased with money.

the dog and the cat that you adore—
money won't make them love you more,
but it keeps the wolf away from the door,
which is why I wish I had money.

I'd have a fabulous London flat,
a house in Provence and a Persian cat,
and I'd give up being a Democrat,
if only I had enough money.

When all the sins of excessive wealth
had left me ruined, by speed or stealth,
I'd still have memories of my health,
and the fun I had with my money.

A FAX FOR MRS. BROWNING

We hope, despite your overcrowded schedule,
that we can still prevail on you to speak
at our June 1 Commencement Ceremonies
honoring Women's Education Week.
(Isn't it true that you attracted Robert
by quoting from Euripides in Greek?)

You had a life that many of us envy
(although your dad was something of a grouch):
No mommy track for poets, no glass ceiling,
no second shift of household cares to slouch
through, and no day-care-center problems.
Draped elegantly on your invalid's couch,

you entertained those eminent men and women
who sought you out. Then you had time to edit,
to read, to study Greek in solitude,
a vanished blessing. Finally, to your credit,
in middle age you achieved the perfect marriage.
Our girls could cry. Come tell them how you did it.

The big frog croaking in a tiny pond
believes he's heard on Venus and beyond.
The waiting tadpole, scarcely on the ground,
grins, thinking how much louder *he* will sound.

Eve, the day that Adam met her,
could see at once that she knew better.
The man was charming and correct
but not a massive intellect.
It wasn't long before Eve guessed
her husband really was obsessed
with that forbidden apple tree—
"That day we eat, we die," said he.

But Eve was sure that God's intent
was good, and that He only meant
to test their judgment and good sense
and not their blind obedience.
Confirming this, up spoke the Snake:
"I see, my dear you're wide awake!
Now, Adam—well—a good man—but—
he's thicker than a coconut.
The good Lord deals in hints and signs
and we must read between the lines.
He means for you to try all things—
insight is what the apple brings."

Our couple gave the fruit a try,
and Snake was right! They didn't die!
But when their garden hit the skids
they worked like demons for their kids—
like all the couples since, who slave
to buy the house, the car, the grave,
and toil without a moment's rest
because Their Kids Deserve the Best.

The moral is: If you have got
a mortgage on a house and lot,
the kids, the camper, that whole bit—
you owe it all to woman's wit.

WHEN THEY MET AGAIN

He: Bound for brand-new teaching job
with newly minted Ph.D.
She: Married to a CPA
and on her second pregnancy.

Once lovers, met by chance, they chat
of lives grown prosperous apart.
Like old unjealous friends, they praise
their new successes of the heart.

Each fancies that the other feels
a lingering flame. Their smiles are sad...
but both, on going separate ways,
thank God for the escape they had.

BREAKING DOWN IN THE SOUTH

It knocked me over to learn there's no such thing
as a nervous breakdown. My aunts and uncles had them
all the time. It was spoken of in whispers,
like drink, divorce and cancer. Aunt Leona
had a Nervous Breakdown back in '67
and never took communion again—she thought
the devil had her. Envious Aunt Leona,
sure of her standing with the Lord and Satan.
Uncle Eugene got violent when he drank
and ended up in a Home. They never said
whose home it was. Some people who broke down
looked fine to me, but still the fame and glamour
of a Nervous Breakdown hung around their necks
like a name-brand diamond. Now in middle age
I'm told my dismal state is just depression,
reactive, mild—here, try a little Prozac.
Damn it, I don't want drugs. I only want
to be eccentric, batty, somewhat daft,
covered by Aunt Leon's mental mist.
Again, my generation gets the shaft:
I'm due for a breakdown, and they don't exist.

WORKER BEES

Staring at fluorescent screens,
letting life pass by unheeded,
little better than machines
staring at fluorescent screens,
we'll pass on our altered genes
to generations who'll be seated
staring at fluorescent screens,
letting life pass by unheeded.

BALLADE OF MADAME BOVARY

Was it for this I learned to read
and write and bake a cherry pie?
I was romantic—"All I need
is love!" was my incessant cry.
But girls, however hard you try,
how long you work, how much you fret,
you'll meet the same reward as I—
A country doctor's all you get.

A wife is only fit to breed
her brats and sing their lullaby.
Oh, had I only given heed
to those sweet nuns who glorify
the Lord in prayer, and daily die,
I might have been a virgin yet.
But marriage makes the world a sty—
A country doctor's all you get.

I learned to do adultery's deed:
I took two lovers—one a sly
and skillful horseman (I the steed
he rode with such an expert thigh).
My second love was sweetly shy,
an easy fish in rapture's net.
But when I needed cash—good-bye!
A country doctor's all you get.

L'Envoi

Girls, never raise your hopes too high.
Lower your standards, and forget
the dream of catching a rich man's eye—
A country doctors' all you get.

CLERIHEW I

Gertrude Stein
thought Hemingway a swine
and offered to pay his airfare
to where there was no there there.

ON BEING SOUTHERN

At my poetry reading in Kansas City
the audience waits
for me to be Southern—drink bourbon
from a hip flask,
talk about race,
develop a moss-and-magnolias accent.
None of which
they'll get, which is just one more reason
why poets aren't rich.

What I'd like to tell them is
that half the poets
who ever lived are alive
today, and while we'd love to be immortal,
we're thrilled to just survive.
Especially Southern poets,
a threatened species like the giant panda.
So. have a heart! Sit there
and take your poetry from
a sense of duty. When you come South, I swear
we really will drink bourbon on the veranda.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR TO SARTRE

I never make unpleasant scenes.
We're free of bourgeois bonds. Which means
that you, my love, are wholly free
to relish infidelity

I do not cry when every spring
you have your adolescent fling
with some enchanting ingénue,
for am not I as free as you?

And I shall tell biographers
we had two freedoms—his and hers.
And freedom made our love endure,
We were so damnably mature.

COMPARISON

Keats was dead at twenty-four.
I expect to reach three-score.

Keats has earned immortal fame.
I'm still dreaming of the same.

Love forsook his lonely sheets—
We're much alike, myself and Keats.

TEACHER AND STUDENTS

By the sheer force of love he convinced them
that civilization fell by degrees
from Byzantium through the French Revolution
through World War I and down to these
degenerate times of ours. Awe-stricken,
these lambs who didn't even know
where they were when Kennedy was murdered
gaped and believed it must be so.

Every year he unfitted several
for life in the twenty-first century.
Smiling, he marched them off to failure,
which was his love's great victory.

POST DIAGNOSIS

So now they know. She, and not he, will say
who gets the cuckoo clock, will give away
the books, the silverware. So much to give
from two shared lives. But only she will live.

His picture of her future (tender, brave,
devoted) always ends beside his grave.
When his life ends, he feels—and she concurs—
nothing will go on happening in hers.

But she must look ahead—and while he sees
a mist of sweetly mournful memories
in that remote expression on her face,
she sees new uses for his closet space.

ADVICE TO APPRENTICE ASCETICS

Restrain the first impulse to speak.
This grows more easy in a week
or two. Most verbiage is waste,
ill-timed, inept, or in poor taste.
Restrict your sight. The ugliness
of modern life induces stress.

Control the wanton urge to hear
each sound that batters at the ear.
Fresh news is quickly mummified,
and music's noise since Handel died.

Thus reining every wayward sense,
embrace the dark with confidence.
Withdraw from earthy taste and touch.
Serve God—but do not trust Him much.

AT WEST CHESTER

Though critics have, in recent years,
declared rhymed poetry abolished,
in this one spot my lovely peers
will tell me that my verse is polished.

It's here we huddle from the storm
like Scottish sheep in winter weather
to keep each other's courage warm
and brave the critics' rage together.

and while no prizes may accrue,
and lack of pay tests our endurance,
I've never met a poet who
was in it for the health insurance.

FORSAKEN

Why did you leave me, Emily Dickinson?
Why did you leave me here all alone?

If I save all my poems and store them away,
will they be found, admired, and published one day,
my verses immortal, my flesh in decay?

Where did my faith go, Emily Dickinson?
Where, oh where, has Eternity gone?

If I dress all in white, if I scurry and hide
when company calls, will I be someone's bride
in heaven? Or will I have only my pride?

Why did you leave me, Emily Dickinson,
with only my family, who don't understand?

Love has to marry, verse has to rhyme,
but love has no gender, and life has no time
limit, loving the dead is no crime.

Why did you leave me, Emily Dickinson,
when I most needed you, why were you gone?

THE VAMPIRE REFLECTS

How do I know, when I walk out,
what face the living world can see?
Those who would shudder at a mouse
look calmly at a thing like me.

When I return—a morning star
whose nightly work has left no trace—
I touch the mirror that I keep
to catch my nonexistent face.

RUINED BY READING

What shall I do for my youngest daughter,
longing to cross the wide blue water
and offer her love to Harry Potter?
This is where learning to read has got her.
How can I say, "It's just a fancy.
go and console yourself with Nancy
Drew and the Bobbsey Twins already."
Learning to read at six is heady.
Maybe I shouldn't be a skeptic.
Maybe it's just that I'm dyspeptic.
Life can be extra-ordinary.
Daughter, go take your chance with Harry.

THE FATHER

Why should you come complaining
because I entertain
your worthless younger brother
now that he's home again?

In youth I left the banquet
to tend the growing vine.
For marrying your mother
I left my concubine.

And now I guard the harvest
and watch the reapers strike,
and you are wise and careful
and you will do the like.

So why should I be spending
my wealth on such a one?
Your younger brother did things
I wish that I had done.

EPITAPH OF THE UNKNOWN POET

When I was roaring healthy,
it made my spirit groan
to see what fools were famous
while I was all unknown.

But now I'm dead and buried,
my own immortal fame
and that of William Shakespeare
look very much the same.

BALLADE OF INDIGNATION

I'm driving through New Mexico, let's say,
facing the glories of the setting sun.
But just before I get to Santa Fe,
there *you* are, stranger, with your ganglion
sized brain and SUV that weighs a ton,
paying no mind to sunset's golden crown,
but nitter-nattering ninety-nine to one...
so would you kindly put your cell phone down?

I'm dining out, which is the perfect way
to make the brain cells sing in unison,
relaxing with my Merlot and filet,
when there *you* are with that damned cell phone on
your ear, discussing how some game's been won
and whether stocks are up or upside-down.
You're sharing all your life with everyone,
so would you kindly put your cell phone down?

Haven't you noticed it's a lovely day?
The kind that makes you want to jump and run?
But even jogging, you can't throw away
that cell phone, can you? Why, you've just begun
to give your boss a sales plan that will stun
competitors and make your rivals drown.
Look out, you fool! You're running down a nun,
so would you kindly put your cell phone down?

L'ENVOI

Friend, I'm no longer saying this for fun.
Road rage has made me rampage through the town.
I'm out of Prozac, and I have a gun.
So would you kindly put your cell phone down?

PARMIGIANINO'S "MADONNA WITH THE LONG NECK"

I am a young aristocrat
in the Uffizi Gallery.
Never mind Botticelli there—
his women all have too much hair.
Come over here and look at me.

Perhaps you think my neck too long?
I can assure you it's the style:
Long neck, long fingers, lowered eyes,
the curls, the pearls, the oversize
limbs and the enigmatic smile.

Parmigianino knew his trade—
art for the best society.
Observe how stylishly I'm dressed:
the crisper folds across the breast,
the subtler folds about the knee.

But (you object) the subject here
is Mary and her Babe Divine.
Who, seeing this Italian belle
would feel his heat's devotion swell
or kneel to worship at this shrine?

This is a theme beyond my grasp—
Love Sacred versus Love Profane.
I'm just the model, after all,
attractive, slender, rather tall,
and (with good reason) rather vain.

I know I'm not the virgin type.
Perhaps I've had my love affairs,
intense before they came to grief—
but love is love, however brief,
and even shallow faith says prayers.

My painter wasn't one whose church
is just the altar and the font.
He knew the church is people, too,
and patrons, all with points of view.
He gave the people what they want.

Look at me one last time. Admit
that precious few can paint like that!
Parmigianino set me here,
and chaste or not, it's very clear
I am a young aristocrat.

A COMPLAINT OF THE TIMES

(after John Skelton)

So much regulation and so few lives saved,
so much loud music and so little melody,
so many doctorates and none wiser made,
so much good counsel, so little liberty,
so much equality preached, so little shown,
since the world's beginning there was never known.

So much production of so many shoddy goods,
so little saving and so much money spent,
so many rulings so little understood,
such lavish shows and such poor amusement,
so many bureaus fat and purses lean
since the world's beginning there was never seen.

So much to bed, so little marrying,
so many new police and no less crime,
so many churches built, so few prayed in,
so many new dollars not worth a dime,
so much speculation on so little ground
since the world's beginning there was never found.

So much change of fashion and no beauty gained,
so many weapons so little justified,
so much economy so badly explained,
so much self-praising with so little pride,
so much prophecy of ruin and so little heed,
since the world's beginning can no scholars read.

A SONNET SHAKESPEARE WOULD NOT HAVE WRITTEN

Horace declared he'd built a monument
to outlast marble (meaning poetry)
and Shakespeare penned a burning testament
to love that finds its immortality
in poetry alone. While nowadays
a bard with living parents might have two
fans for a lifetime's work—which never pays.
And I'm dismayed not for myself, but you.
Though you deserve the fame of Britney Spears
or Paris Hilton, yet for all of me
and my intense endeavors, I have fears
(like Johnny Keats) that when I cease to be,
however many sonnets I may write,
my love you'll be forgotten overnight.

THE STAGES OF FORGETTING

1. Wanting Him Back

Fantasy: He returns, carrying roses.
He's so apologetic he could weep.
He loves you best. He begs you to forgive him.
You buy it. Maybe he's not such a creep.

2. Wanting Him Dead

Fantasy: He goes fishing, falls in, drowns.
A bus runs over him. It kills her, too.
Or maybe you could get away with murder:
Brain him with lamb chops. Afterwards, make stew.

3. Transcendence

Reality: You find that you can cover
the entire bed. You don't need him to work
the VCR. And what a lousy lover
he was! You smile, and then forget the jerk.

Unfortunately, nothing you can do
will zap you right past stages one and two.

DEATH BY POISONED APPLE

When the old woman came to the door
offering apples shiny as kissed
cheeks, brighter than pennies,
how could she resist?

She lived with seven men who gave
her devoted hearts.
At least she could make them candied
lemon peel, jam tarts.

She was used to housekeeping now,
a muffin-soft bed
her masterpiece. Her past
was rich, remote, and dead.

What could she want besides
an innocent doll's house life?
The prince roaming his land
in search of the perfect wife.

Will find her undefiled
in a sparkling crystal coffin.
Perhaps a kiss will arouse her,
if he tries often.

CINDERELLA'S SISTERS

Who would have thought we'd end up in the convent?
Regan and Goneril reformed at last!
But we, like most who find this place convenient,
can't face the future or escape the past.
Oh, she was generous and so forgiving!
We could have made good matches—so she said—
with aging dukes who would have gone on living
just long enough for us to wish them dead.
We really tried. We visited the palace
and praised the rooms, the service, and the food.
Call it humility or call it malice,
we couldn't stick. Whatever attitude
we tried, we couldn't seem to get it right,
and so we got religion, out of spite.

TO MY LOVER, AFTER OUR DISCUSSION OF POETRY

When you came in last night and said, "What's that
you're writing?" and I answered, "Poetry,"
you told me that I couldn't feed the cat,
much less indulge in truffles and Chablis,
on what I'd earn by that. So now I know:
you need a higher income in your bed,
a lawyer or a lade CEO.
The worst you think of me has now been said.
While you're at work tomorrow I'll clean house,
pack luggage, do the laundry and my hair.
When you come home, you'll find that I've moved out,
taking my unproductive life elsewhere.
We're through, my love. But since you knew no better,
I've left this poem and not a Dear John letter.

ON POLITICIANS

The politician,
like the tabby's young,
attempts to clean his backside
with his tongue.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

I disliked children, even as a child—
those vexing, nattering, excluding things.
Animals, on the other hand, were mild
and tractable. I loved the tapered wings

of birds, the softness of the household cat,
the slender flanks and melting eyes of deer.
Animals need our tenderness. And that
is why imprisonment is pleasant here,

where the rough beast attends my every need
and only asks to see me twice a day.
I brush his coat and warm his bed and feed
him chocolate drops, and I'm content to stay.

He's kindly natured, though his face is grim.
He won't risk children who might look like him.

EMILIA REFLECTS ON DESDEMONA

My mistress thinks no woman would deceive
her husband. Well, they would. A dozen. Scores,
hundreds. The lady can't be that naïve.
And not all women who deceive are whores.
One small means of revenge is all we've got,
and good wives use it charily and well.
These husbands are a disappointing lot—
hers is no prize. Already life is hell
with him, and they eloped a week ago!
It's accusations, jealousy, regret,
and his abuse is not just verbal. No—
today he slapped her publicly. And yet,
"Lay on tonight my wedding sheets," she said.
The Moor must be incredible in bed.

UPDATING HOUSMAN

In simpler times with simpler creeds,
Malt and Milton served our needs.
Now Proust does less that Prozac can
To justify God's ways to man.

SOME LOVER'S GHOST

I'm here beside you, but it's not the same.
I'm out of time, although I'm still in space.
If only you would call me by my name,

I'd step out like a portrait from its frame,
and we could look each other in the face.
I'm here beside you, but it's not the same

As when I was alive. We've lost the game
that lovers play while they can still embrace.
If only you would call me by my name.

I could respond. My dear, I'm not to blame
if you keep looking in an empty place.
I'm here beside you, but it's not the same

For you, I know. There's nothing to inflame
your love in me, nothing to spark the chase.
If only you would call me by my name—
But it's too late. I'm sorry that I came.
I didn't know death was so commonplace.
I'm here beside you, but it's not the same.
If only you would call me by my name.

THE CYNIC & THE BABY

Marlene has brought her baby (eight
weeks old) to meet her office mates,
who duly gurgle and exclaim
"Oh what a darling!" "What's her name?"
"Look at those eyes!" "Oh, could I hold
her for a minute?" "She's how old?"

It seems a small and noseless pulp,
able, for skills, to blink and gulp,
but in its flannel sheath I see
the upstart shoot supplanting me.
The brain inside that fuzzy head
will read and brood when I am dead,
add up its checks and order drinks and say the Opposition stinks
and ponder love and fame and chance
while I am fertilizing plants.

They're coming, a relentless tide—
babies that sweep my life aside!
Youth can't be stopped—no law nor creed
will stultify this urge to breed.
But to last I can refuse
assent to lives I did not choose,
refuse to cry "How soft, how cute!"
when knives are hacking at my root.
Baby and death have toothless jaws—
each smiles, but oh it gnaws, it gnaws.

WHITE COLLAR BLUES

I thought the office jobs were just until
I made it as a writer. Hoo ha. Here
I am , 20 years later, no inch nearer
to any goal except the famous hill
I'm almost over. What the hell. I still
write in the evenings, and I beg to state
that at transcribing doctors 'I'm first rate—
medical words, a marketable skill.

And if I take a sour look at my friends
who've won the prizes I once hoped to win,
if I'm at odds with literary trends—
well, like my betters, I can wink and grin
at my defeats. When all illusion ends,
desire of greatness was a godlike sin.

CROUCHING FEMALE FIGURE: POMPEII

At first they were not much afraid,
but hour by hour the ashes fell,
layer on layer overlaid—
the soft gray snow that falls in hell.

When panic came, her mistress said,
Lucilla, take the child and run.
But when she stumbled, both were dead.
Ashes had eaten up the sun.

Now, in an iron carapace
of ashes, here she crouches still,
shielding in vain her charge's face
while tourists photograph their fill.

Could God explain in layman's terms
what vices necrotized Pompeii,
when urban gods and rustic herms
were ashes in a single day?

No law, no logic eases pain
or stops the tidal wave of death.
Sinai and Etna both can rain
ashes that suffocate our breath.

DOUBLE DACTYL

Higgledy piggledy
Thomas Stearns Eliot
found postwar culture a
world gone to smash.
Gad, if I read one more
Anglican-lamaist
poem, I shall bust. Would you
fetch Ogden Nash?

ESSAY QUESTION

I should have been:

- a) pair of ragged claws
scuttling across the floor of silent seas.
- b) giant squid
- c) Moby Dick
- d) *Jaws*

Choose one or more, and state your reasons, please.

MYSTERY WRITER

Everything shapes itself into a story.
The outboard motor jerks—could it explode?
Coral snakes—too much like an allegory
of Eden. Never mind. The omens bode
no good at the Cat Show, where the Siamese
with five blue ribbons suddenly falls dead.
The rich aunt with a lingering disease
will find a strange young doctor by her bed.

The writer's skilled with poison, pistol, knife,
knows where to stash the inconvenient spouse,
and rambles unselfconsciously through life
as though it were an English country house
where all the guests went shooting grouse and died,
while the mad hostess faked her suicide.

TRIOLET FOR THE BUDDHA

Anger, ignorance and lust
cause the fires that keep us burning.
Don't they raise a lot of dust,
anger, ignorance and lust?
We're so eager to combust
we never have a chance of learning:
Anger, ignorance and lust
cause the fires that keep us burning.

FAT CAT

My cat, no Lassie, looks at me
with eyes whose green tranquility
could watch me drown as long as she
had just been fed. She ought to be
a grand Episcopalian cat
with blue jay feathers on her hat,
who flips her furs across the pew
while blandly disregarding you.
A cat who gets her every wish,
who knows what wine to have with fish,
imposingly, serenely fat,
a white-gloved Southern Lady cat.

For cats who have a sense of worth,
there is no higher form of birth.
We rather may anticipate
to reach the nobler feline state
where fame and wealth are trivial things—
to purr on popes and shed on kings.

CONSIDER THE LILIES

Be not concerned about your dress.
The fields are decked in loveliness,
and as God clothes the grass with dew,
no doubt he will bedizen you.

Take no thought for what you wear.
Reflect how soon you will not care—
How beautifully the grass will do
its quite work of clothing you.

ABELARD, or LOVE GONE WRONG

My altered cat runs out the door
and rackets round the yard.
Because he'll be a stud no more,
I call him Abelard.

But when he meets a lady cat
with soft and yielding paws,
he doesn't quite remember that
he's not the man he was.

He climbs her back and bites her neck—
he recollects the game.
But still he meets a fatal check—
result are not the same.

(How often, when romances end,
it puzzles cats and men
to know why last night's lady friend
will not step put again?)

Now other cats with raucous glee
cry out their mating song,
while Abelard sits home with me
and wonders what went wrong.

THE PANDA

The panda bear was never meant
to flourish on this continent.
At best it can digest a few
green shoots of succulent bamboo.
It's young are born so very small
it needs to be marsupial.
The animal so plainly jinxed
should properly have been extinct,
yet no fund-raising propaganda
works half as well as SAVE THE PANDA.
Why? Because we can't resist
this furry, fat contortionist
whose two heart-melting blackened eyes
could win the Hallmark cuteness prize.

The moral is: If you've a cause
for which you need the world's applause
and pots of cash, or all is lost—
be cute. Be cute at ANY cost.

BROTHER DOG, SISTER CAT*

Dog is dumber than a TV husband,
trusting as a cuckold in a Shakespeare play,
faithful as a nineteenth-century butler,
sentimental as a drunk on New Year's Day.

Cat is cagy as a fortune-teller,
loopy as a starlet in a 1930s role,
sensuous as smoke unfurling round a stripper,
elusive as conviction in the soul.

*second verse by Barbara Loots.

ALLEYGORY

(On the "Trap, Neuter, Release" Feral Cat Program)

He dwelt among the alley-ways,
he dined on mouse and dove,
a cat whom there were none to praise
and less than none to love.

A crabgrass, by a garbage can
half hidden from the eye,
wild as a loon, when only one
is flapping through the sky.

He lived alone, and few could know
what changed his mating whim.
But Lucifer is "fixed"—and O
the difference to him!

MR. HOUSMAN FORGETS HIS PROZAC AGAIN

When I survey my neighbors
who fancy love exists,
I know not what prevents them
from slashing at their wrists.

For even to such halfwits
it surely has occurred
that live when love has vanished
is painful and absurd,
and death's to be preferred.

And so at every wedding,
while others toast the bride,
I brood and sulk and glower
and think of suicide.

It's then I would change places
with lads in Ludlow Jail,
who'll swing for bloody murders
and blame it on the ale.

But if in heaven's sideshow
all love were not a sham,
I'd be a happy, careless bloke
and not the schmuck I am.

EDNA MILLAY'S GOLDFISH

The world stands out on either side
no wider than the bow is wide.
Above the world is stretched the sky
no higher than the water's high.

The fish that bears a gallant heart
can push the glassy walls apart,
and with a visionary soul,
may glimpse Atlantis in his bowl.

But he whose heart is parched and spare,
even in water grasps for air,
and he whose soul is thin and flat
is candy for the family cat.

CORINNA'S NOT GOING A-MAYING

(The Lady addresses Mr. Herrick)

I like to sleep on these fine spring mornings
or lie in bed dreaming and half-awake
and here's some fool under my window babbling
about Aurora. Oh for heaven's sake!

I don't intend to deck myself with flowers
and walk about spangled with gems of dew.
The other girls can play at being milkmaids.
I'd feel a perfect fool. And wouldn't you?

But to your pastoral theme of sticky greenery
you bring in kisses as a counterpoint
and talk of early morning assignations...
Aha! I think we're coming to the point.

Life is so short! you cry. But on this subject
enough (enough, already) has been said.
Death's night is long, but last night isn't over.
Pack it in, Bob. I'm going back to bed.

TRAVELING WITH CATS ON A SNOWY EVENING

I've no idea whose woods these are,
but I'm not getting very far
From Albany to NYC
with two cats yowling in my car.

These blasted cats must think it queer
to stop without a sandbox near,
but listen, guys, I'm twice your size,
so use the woods or else, you hear?

They give their big round eyes a blink
to ask each other what they think,
and I can tell they'll make life hell
and plan on driving me to drink.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
The car is slowing to a creep.
Why did I try to cross NY?
I'm breathing cat hairs while I sleep.

MISS DICKINSON GOES TO THE OFFICE

Because I could not stop for lunch,
it kindly stopped for me.
The lunch tray held a lemon sponge
and watercress and tea.

I head a fly buzz in the slaw,
immortal for an hour.
The tea was hot—a small Brazil—
although the cream was sour.

Since then 'tis centuries, yet each
seems shorter than the day
I first surmised the weekend was
five working days away.

ROSETTI'S WIFE

He wants his poems, now: the ones he buried
with me, to be a sacrifice of love
forever. There you are: that's being married
to genius. That's what you're dreaming of,

you silly girls who think it was great luck
to rise from milliner to painter's model
to poet's wife. You marry and you're stuck.
Give me an artist for a man who'll coddle

himself. Oh, he's in love with his ideal
and thinks it's you, but it's his bag of tricks—
even when I was dying, he could feel
that I'd be perfect for his Beatrix.

And then? They're all alike, poet or hack—
he digs you up and grabs his verses back.

BALLADE OF THE COMMON LOT

“Tout aux taverns et aux filles”

—Villon

Are you a dot.com millionaire?
Maybe you've staged a corporate raid,
or filled an editorial chair,
or opened a stand for lemonade.
Labor, profession, job, or trade,
whether your means are great or small,
whatever way your cash is made,
women and whiskey drain it all.

Taverns are open everywhere,
pouring the drinks in bright cascade.
Women in silken underwear
seem all too easy to persuade.
Temptations touch you can't evade—
who can resist her siren call?
She takes your cash by ambushade—
women and whiskey drain it all.

None but the rich deserve the fair'
beauty is fortune's accolade.
Wine is a cure for every care—
only the poor does drink degrade.
Money can make your whims obeyed,
it causes Troy and Eve to fall.
But here let's call a spade a spade—
women and whiskey drain it all.

THE OBVIOUS:

No matter how the bills were paid
in spring, we'll be in debt by fall,
either by getting drunk or laid,
women and whiskey drain it all.

VENICE IN THE RAIN

Well after dark and in a pouring rain,
fools for the arts, we made for St. Mark's square.
Losing our way, groping it back again,
we made one lucky guess, turned right and there
it was —St. Mark's Cathedral—its façade
still floodlit, and the four small porphyry
tetrarchs who huddled on this house of God,
Byzantine models of diplomacy,
embracing, hands on swords. We must have stared
for half an hour while it rained like hell,
mad for mosaics, until thunder-scared
and soaked, we sloshed our way to our hotel,
to laugh in sunshine on the following day
when our four ruined shoes were thrown away.

A CODICIL TO MY WILL

Forget my sorrows by and by,
and trifling things that made me cry,
but recollect on my behalf
how solemn things would make me laugh.

About Gail White

Gail White was born Lillian Gail Brockett in Pensacola, Florida, on Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945.

The child that is born on the Sabbath Day
Is fair and wise and good and gay,
(And those born on Easter Sunday have second sight.)
—*Folklore*

She grew up in Pensacola, on the tail-end of Gulf Coast culture that features seafood and carnivals. Her idea of a beach was shaped by the miles of salt-white sand along the Gulf of Mexico. (Other beaches simply do not measure up to this standard.) She attended college at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida where she acquired a baccalaureate in English and a life partner.

She married Arthur White, historian, architect teacher, and a walking Wikipedia, while attending the university. With this resource at hand, Ms. White seldom needs to visit another information source. For seventeen years, she claimed New Orleans, the head and fount of Gulf Coast culture, as her home. More recently, she and her husband live in Breaux Bridge, in Louisiana Cajun country on the banks of Bayou Teche, surrounded by Cajun cooking, books, and cats.

Her dream is to die as an eccentric resident of an English village.

Other poetry books (Winners of the 2007–2008 Anita
Dorn Memorial Award for Poetry) published by Prospero's
World Press

Joseph Awad *Late into the Night*
Afred Nicol *Elegy for Everyone*