# ANYONE'S DUST | poems | Jed Myers

# **Anyone's Dust**

Jed Myers

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#### I Am With You

—in honor of my mother's first husband, killed in a war

I heard of a place near the sea, a tall rock face looking out over wide water—

at its base a small hollow forever in the wall's shadow,

where, it was said, if two people stood together and pledged a bond, it could not be undone,

though there be thousands of miles, battle lines, minefields between them or death come to one.

When there's trouble between us, I dream the cool shade of that spot under the great stone's gaze

where the surf's choruses come sifted through the shoulder-high shore grass and over the alcove's rim.

I am with you would be the words, I being one of us to the other, even while both our mouths may be closed—

I also

being the sea. And of course the wind shaking those silent rosehip rattles

like censers sending us the beach roses' scent-echoes,

all the blown atoms spun with every last ripple of care

that might lift from one of our promising tongues.

For years I thought of that open-air chapel as far from wherever I lived,

but I've traveled and heard those rushing sounds everywhere.

Did we stand together on that ground, just so long ago we can't remember?

Where *did* I learn this about love? That even embittered after the final petals have flown,

an intimate whisper tickles the ear, a quiet insistent song, the lyrics obscure—

as if the ocean were reaching you, though you may be inland, or enclosed in only fair condition—

to remind you of what you've known, what you are, still at that gusty altar.

#### Trouble's Voice

- It's the quiet again that's shaken me up from the night's deepest dream, where the old row house rocked me
- and sang like a freight car, like a refugee grandmother, into this blank hour of not a birdcall, no freeway drone, no
- intimate's snore, not a wind in its shifting factions among the trees, no whit of a whispered argument—nothing
- of what, as I grew, I found I could drift to, the night's giants stomping and swearing downstairs, the day's
- cocksure gods sniping and spitting over me while knees on carpet I leaned at my next gang-lord mansion of cards.
- The music that soothed me was gripe and seethe, tongues whipping across the table at crowded feasts, bang
- and clatter of angry kitchens—floating in that sweet-and-sour din, I grew like a circus kid who knew how to not
- let the air go still. We'd fill in the merest starts of silence with splashy refrains, flash a display over each new abyss,
- trained in exchanging abrasions. Stings at the surface would do. Call someone a name. Slap a cheek. There's relief

in such sudden hurt—it tips a heart back out of the grief-chasm. Now, in this dark's sheer lack of disturbance

no peace—I listen for trouble's voice.

Grant me, at least, a good grunted curse in the hall. Then maybe I'll sleep.

#### Ride at Woodside

Woodside Amusement Park...Philadelphia...constructed in 1897...continued operations until 1955. —Wikipedia

I ask, if you're not shaking this moment then what have you inhaled? Or haven't you

ever popped your soul out your hide and let the speed-of-life wind set the string of you humming?

I remember just one ride, battered old scab-red caboose by itself on a track

it took me on its long circuit it shook rattled shook me as if that should be fine. One other

child, she looked fixed on some constant out there she saw through the vibrating skin

of our hold. I began to hear in all that clattering metal racket my own wail and in

stomps Grampop, he's climbed on and sweeps the shivering sprig of me up in one muscled angel wing

I'm still trembling, naked twig again this autumn, older than he'll ever be. I hear him

whistling through those cigar-yellowed teeth of his sounding like the wind.
I'm not fooled. No I'm not huffing a thing but this smoke blown

in from the woods, and he *is* the wind you and I'll be

#### Unveiling

—for my brother

We step softly so as to not wake a soul, arrive either side, and each take an edge of the gauzy cloth.

With a nod to one another we lift the white fabric—day splashes onto the polished gray, what stands

for our earliest love, light-sharpened shadow letters and numbers carved deep enough our grief seems

to bleed from the rock. Dark streams weave in the air around us like swarms of tiny flies, buzzing high dirges,

a kind of company on what loops we'll follow from here—old commutes or cheap winter seats to Cancun, empty

eyes out for fresh fill-ins—we'll stay stuck on repeat, our dazed longing easily caught by the bored bus driver,

half-asleep checkout clerk, laughing gull guarding its garbage heap, even the gnashing cash machine.... A shame,

how this loss you'd never bring on and couldn't stave off you still take as a sign you caused the pain. It was

no one. Look, in the unmasked stone, it's time playing the daylight. Time winding all the way back, and up close,

notice, her house burns to the earth, her first husband blows in a land mine blast, her aching

wrists freeze at the crib rail over the infant's wail—it's in the glinting stump, here on these ill-tended grounds,

grass tall, hedge barely groomed, sky a rowdy gallery, gang of cumuli, pack of grinning voyeurs.

We take the rabbi's Aramaic cue, keep staring through the granite screen and there, also, our innocence

wavers with the shade of the beech swaying over the grave. And isn't that us now, jumping up and down

on the night-blue sofa, you and I each other's clown? It takes nothing to keep our small selves in stitches.

#### The Transitive Property of Despair

Those deft hands at furnace and anvil. I got a feel for it in metal shop. But

it's grown industrial—stamped-out molds. Still the bearer must steady the barrel.

I remember. I won a stuffed llama for a scrawny kid on the Santa Monica Pier.

I exhaled down the line of my sight and into that shining yellow balloon.

He wasn't mine, but I wanted him to hold some soft ally at night.

The little wanderer must've stood in for who wasn't there. I didn't think of it

then—didn't ponder what wishes or dreads I'd sped through the translucent

latex skin of an arcade's bulb-lit cartoon sun. At the end of a long breath

not much more than a click, hardly a recoil, and *pop*, I'd punctured

one human loneliness. Was it the boy's or my own? Or had I just daydreamed

my nail-biting son's back home? What do I assign to a young news-shadow

in a slowly advancing troop, pinned as I picture him now to a riddled wall,

hope hammering in his chest for a next blind, perch from which to break through by a few well-placed shots—and what's behind *his* target's smoke-hazed face?

No god we've forged yet says that part.

#### To Rise on Earth

-after Jericho Brown

Water of us once shined in the Tigris. I saw this last night in a room in the sun.

Yes, last night, a room deep in the sun, where inside all that light was a pool.

In all that blazing fusion, a pool, a birthing oasis, cool and still,

a bottomless uterine spring, and still I can see its clear fluid rippling to life,

see the life-ripples writhing their way clear to rise on Earth, these splashes of sun

that we are, star-flashes. And the surprise bloody show where we meet in the river—

my sickle sword, your blood in the river. Water of us once shined the Tigris.

#### From Pictures of Beautiful Bakhmut

They won't find all the bodies. They can't comb the ruins and not themselves

be felled. The dead's limbs, innards, brains that held unforgettable days for years—

even the lost's long-dutiful bones—break down under rain and boots and the pressing

tread of steel vehicles, the crash of more missiles, thud-roar of more collapsed walls.

In fresh charry rubble, in blood-damp dust, parts of homeland defenders mix

with what's left of boys trucked-in from other lands' towns they'd never left

till this. Stirred with bits of men promised good pay to come kill here. Blend

in flesh-nourished ground. Grubs, worms, molds, roots thrilled to drink broth

that'll fill spring's flowering stems—these wildly grateful for men's fatal courage.

I can't call it beautiful, though I know it is beautiful—the soon-green field,

whether or not they till. Whatever they do or don't build. Barn, armory, school.

Uncountable human molecules strewn beneath the feet of the young. And the old

who'll never leave. Who are now weaving slowly across the front lines, foraging

through the crumbled homes. Those eyes, at once craters and oasis pools

in their faces' creased terrain—they shine that flinty glow of the earth's grinding.

#### Anyone's Dust

—following the Kakhovka Dam blast

I'm distanced, speechless. My tongue will not reach the front line of my teeth.

People crouch on sudden rooftop islands in Kherson where the Dnipro widens.

I've got my hat on in the kitchen. When did that happen? Am I going

somewhere? There, an emergency train came in. Some made it on.

I've lowered my lids. I know, had I grown into the skin of any

one of those saboteurs, I'd have planted the same bomb. And, suckled

on twisted history, I'd aim the missiles to pulverize my neighbors' hospitals.

I'd've been guzzling other facts. But on screen at my table, an old woman,

to her shins in brown water in her house, huddles two lean dogs trying to climb her

out of the icy wash. Here, June sun spills through the panes and drenches

bright the ten million specks that float and sink like silt or ash in the air—stunned

powder of things. Each tumbling fleck of this dust could be anyone's.

#### **Beach Roses**

Maybe it was that I saw lightning flicker in the great gray mass of cloud the pilot called some weather to the north as we sped up and lifted

uncannily-as-ever off, that got me seeing the crash ahead. A first after all these years riding such lunking sky-gallopers

without much forethought. Maybe it was just my getting older—losing hair, height, friends, the rough rhythm of funerals picking up—

that sparked the vision, as we veered toward the strobe in its shroud of storm, of our drawn-out collision and break-up, all of us and our beastly craft,

on the long ground of seasons to come, the wreckage spread out on a rocky unmeant landing strip of crags, cancers, strokes, overdoses,

aortic ruptures, skulls cracked on steering wheels, and our rocketing raft's metal fatigue, the scrapping of its carbon-spitting engines, collapse

of the empire and its control towers, its stinking forges .... As the plane came level at thirty-two thousand feet, I saw a band of red

light on an obsidian edge, and thought the rest of my breaths would be a little less desperate if I could remember, remember we've been plowing

endlessly into the end. I'd hurtle home to my love's arms, let the city night rumble inside and around us, let us fall apart as our hold fails, as these old muscles give out and bones go so porous they'll snap like dry sticks, as the crash tumbles and takes us down

and down to the sand the surf pounds let us, went my embarrassed fool prayer like a radio broadcast I imagined out

to the spinning of chaos everywhere, let us possibly remember, the terrible accident of our going to powder, your panics and torn-up knee,

my memory lapses and languor, the fits we throw hard as Jerusalem's stones at each other, the wars we were born through, these are the opening

flower, our love's erupting bloom. I saw them all in that blood color on the horizon from my seat on Flight 23, speeding home

in one instant of the explosion, those beach roses bursting forth out of the crests of dark dunes, and those were our rosy children, blood's blossoms

grown of the debris we leave of ourselves. I prayed to know it so damn well I'd have set it fast in my soul, but I'd land and forget it.

# Recipe

Once you've left, I'll make a broth of our pleasures—

the still-fresh tingle of each other's fingertips down our backs,

thrilled hum in our lips being held at a petal-thin distance,

feral soothe of lying belly-to-belly—

then stir in a chorus of gusts through firs,

sun's flourish in spring willows as we watch the boats' evening parade,

violinist's refrain in the dusk where we've gathered friends for our not-wedding—

I'll season with flecks of our mute hesitations,

crushed husks of a handful of secret distancings,

some tiny sharp spikes of critique from a jar I've kept on a rack hung from a rib—

and simmer a good hour, any night the chest aches in this kitchen for you.

Oh, I would

ladle you out a cup—

#### The Tradition

I know—it's only my wishing. My furious wishing, blind as the light itself—

that we all could see, in the wide mouth of the raised voice, in the shaking of the raised fist, in the sightless

beam of the glaring eye or the searing flame of the pointed finger...the terrified hiding, the helplessness, and the lie.

My mother—born to wanderers fleeing the blood storms sweeping an empire east of here, swaddled nursed

gowned in blame's linens, wrapped woven and stitched snug into a hard-earned inheritance of bitterness—

she'd learn to live in her husband's cold city bravely enough by her stabbing wit. We'd stand indicted, new charges by the minute.

Hadn't we broken the China cup or the promise on purpose? Weren't we the selfish ones walking in late,

the chicken and rice cooled on the waiting plate? Who'd argue? We'd wear our long strings of sentences like many-looped necklaces. They'd clink against our bowls of tepid soup. Father, brother, and I, all bearing the ancient shames—

hadn't Abraham raised the blade over Isaac? Hadn't we all somewhere been slaves? And what was it for which we were all

to be hated?

My father seemed to work the curse off with his endless efforts at earning. I took the example to heart, but also

fought it—

what was my crime? Meanwhile my brother kept quiet, the tradition alive and singing

out in his dutiful silence. Wouldn't his having swallowed the wound in our mother's seasonless broth make him as righteous

as she was?

I grew more plagued with my own disputes and refusals. Who'd ever been pure victim?

She was, she was sure.
This morning, I'm thinking, the loved ones in Gaza, dead, whichever side fired the missile—

the hand of the war. And hasn't every last family fed on murder's flatbread, keeping us blind as the light that lands on the rubble, all in miraculous unassuming brightness, the kid decapitated, hospital hit, the fury symmetrically righteous,

no one sorry for what they did. I stood by my shrunken mother at my father's grave, and she swore,

he ruined everything.

## **Walking Stick**

The open gate may be the faint sunrise or dawn's violet shade on the long grass.

The way on may be the cracked asphalt road by the landfill. Or follow the frog chorus echoed off the banks of the slough.

Welcome may reach you through that rosy bruise you don't know how you sustained,

by the current coursing its fissure between hemispheres behind your eyes,

or on the sloshing bloody bilgewater that's filled the quiet inside your ears.

The air might carry a mix off the freeway, a river of messages only a bottomed-out soul like yours can hear

clearly in moments like this, like Joseph's his hours alone in the pit, his clay enclosure a great instrument's resonator,

so he knows

somewhere calls him from here. Even if your house for now is a torn nylon shell in the scant shade of a disheveled eucalyptus

I've just sped by as part of the roar on the 110 between LA and Pasadena, even

though you keep trying to close your life down for remodeling, maybe, a way—

# a crow comes

to know you, a kid with a walking stick tromps not too close and nods some days ... in all this bramble of hiss-and-growl, a music.

# **Owning It**

It being so early, or is it

so late, no tremor in through the panes,

in this underlit quiet I get

to tour the internal terrain, to investigate

all the hushed-up insurrections staged

under the skin, those suppressed

swells of rebellion. At the time each

may've seemed just an insistent twinge

or an ache, you know how a tendon

along the side of a knee complains

when you've taken the first steep hill

since winter—well, looking back

in this unrippled stillness, I witness

the ruins of deadly fights. Lives

and lives I crushed, sealed off, torched

and barrel-bombed, and the news never

surfaced. Oh, there was a cramp,

a few days of lumbar spasm, those clams

or an oyster that didn't agree with me. So

no front-page stuff. Truth is, I was

the next little despot, the Putin, Pol Pot,

the umpteenth ape at the top who refuses

to be relieved of his post. I was far

from conscious enough, nowhere close

to seeing my part. I was so sure

the toxins were osmosing in

from outside, the dollar-bill ink,

the micro-aggressive polymer snippets

in everything we eat and drink. I never

figured my nature was trouble. But I had

hollered my hollow heart out

nose-to-nose with my mother, my kid,

lover and friend. Let my tongue whip

gashes across my father's chest. Why

wouldn't I, in such fevered blindness,

also slice down the most innocent

uprisings inside this fiefdom my flesh?

No, it's worse. I'd toast the thrum

in my gut's murder plexus, order open

the inner gates, and with a curse bless

the pogrom called down unprovoked

on the million hidden hopeful children

thriving on my breath's oxygen. I

could say I learned from the world, but I

see it now, I was born ready

to turn this way, to burn and shackle

and starve and brand and gouge

whoever in me uncrouches, unbows, who

rises to dance with the doe by the hedge,

who kneels again to offer the rabbit

a few strands of grass from his palm,

scats jazz with the pair of pacing crows

holding out for his sandwich crust, nests

his head on his gramma's belly, hears

her tell, in a soft tissue-conducted

rumble, how the autoimmune-diseased

body of Europe seized up several

strains of itself to erase with arrangements

of rifles, trains, fences, and poisoning

chambers, so systematically well.

# **Simultaneity Sonnet**

I empty the sink of our late-night cups The dead are lined up in white sacks At last a stamp on the thank-you note No sound where that building's collapsed We had salad and local oysters Most are on foot in a long cloud of dust I walk by the lake and watch the ducks They thought safer perhaps in that church I'll straighten up and call my brother It's the worst thunder then just loud ringing I'll look at the news then the crossword Sleep these nights is a distant dream Clouds over the trees play the light Where to go now is a figment

#### **Dust Record**

Because it's late and the aching knee and its coconspirator the torn rotator cuff keep nudging me in the dark, and because in the dark I can see others who've wanted to love well driven to groans and bent like my grandmother

lugging the groceries in past closing elevator doors, pushing the Hoover, chopping roots then crouching to baste the roast in that little oven her sacrifice altar, because I see those fallen short of their hopes to ready their young

for the open, my father home off the train slumped at dinner, mother grimacing worry and hate as she sets each plate before a tormenting beloved, none of us nurturers getting that mix of trust and hover quite right—see us all

in the dark, wishes like lit matches. Look, a bitter one laughs on a shore, another weeps on a letter, one unsheathes a blade—and I can feel it, the slippage, these nights a wind in the trees decides it'll play dealer blithely shuffling our cards,

and this century-old house's creaks mimic a weighed-down wagon cracking a wheel in the muck. Late enough I feel the scrape and whittle—the shearing of cells, rain jeering the paint off the siding on the south wall. Late

for my remedial lessons in gentle, for the front door a season unslammed, for my demons and I to do lunch and get some things settled. Let's say it for once—the gravitons will win our souls from the angels. Late to plead

elsewise. So I'll waste days on trails in the wetlands—it's March, the marshes' skunk cabbages flop open exposing those yellow-cowled bog sentinels—still I'll be up scribbling at dawn in my squinting haste

to get this report finished and sent before I'm turned in like the others. Earth air sun, all in their clocklike cahoots at this not-so-very-slow mass murder—hear that rumble and grind, schist to which we'll be handed over?

Before I'm disappeared, I'll mark the sky from a muddy bank, leave a scar on the moment like a pierced heart carved in an alder with the pearl-shanked knife I got from my grandfather. One message for many, for all the torn-shouldered sloggers, throb-kneed hauling their lives along the gouged road—time signature cut in the light over a dwindling pond, indifferent heron standing there as if in its tailored uniform as it paces that drift-log in the shallows it listens

intent on transmitting my note. Look, fog-colored wings beat away slow across wind and ages and the dead reeds to be lost in the shred—late, on one of these breaths a fresh stroke enters the dust record, love's book.

#### West of the Steppes

Look, the two of us in our machinewashable hang-dry hoodies—lost

where we'd swear we belong, tucked under our thatch of trust, our pocket

nest on a flung patch, and it holds so far. Through the roof, same moon

in its dumb beauty that never looked down on the scrabblers we couldn't be

here without—their bodies their best levers against the stony ground. Same

spun island at whatever meridian love held out. Now look at us, bent

over our store-bought rakes and spades, our turn at itching to last. We scratch

a plot no blood can own no matter our dance of devotion or knives—just

as it was. Still, we crouch. We gouge the dirt. Pea vines, beet greens, allium

stars .... Tiny purple blooms crown a cauliflower. Look, we can't be far

west of the Steppes—one more kitchen garden grown on the wealth of bones.

Nights, hid out from the torch crowd, close as I get to your heart, I breathe—

you, loam-and-sweat-fresh, on this bed we've parked on a powder of lives.

#### Little Believer

When I was five or six, by the earliest light, I'd gaze at the faded white wallpaper across a narrow room from my bed.

Like a winged scavenger at ease on updrafts, from what seemed thousands of feet over an arid expanse, I'd scan

imagined bands of migrants, each soul tinier than one of those red mites that crawled the pages of old books. They were nothing

but visual static projected on dim stains and ridges on that paper glued to cracked plaster, but high on my reverie's wind I was sure

they fled the wrecked houses they'd lived in. Little believer I was, dreaming eyes open. I even enlisted

my kid brother into the ranks of my trance when he scampered in. Parents posted in their remote country down the hall, useless

to answer the call, we'd seethe in unison, we the new nomads' protectors. I wince now to see how ready our hearts were for murder.

But with our two gods' battles each evening downstairs when they thought we were sleeping, their shouts tying our intestines in knots,

the desert nuclear tests, missiles aimed down on our heads, radioactive mutation dust in spring's showers—lucky I guess, my grand delusion. The displaced amassed on sand in what scant glow skirted the vinyl shades, and we generals led

the holy campaign to sweep the paper land free of false claims. After that we felt safe enough, through breakfast.

## To a Younger Poet

—for Erin

Thought of you as I wove through the giants—battered old firs, towers poked full of dark alcoves by beetles and birds—

along a creek edged with silver ice, toward the lake. And so many monsters lay dead, thick torsos bent limp

on the ground's contours, saplings risen through the moss shrouds. Thought of you again at the lake's shore, mirror

banks offered down to a harbor of cloud. Heard myself murmur We can't be in that world of no word,

*no story*. The lake valley won't write its own few lines on the crash of the next immense conifer, won't praise

the fungal-and-rot savor of death's local nectars, won't rhyme to the trickle-cadence of crystal-encased fern tips ....

We're the ones who'll twitch and bristle with dread and thrill, itching to scrawl. We're the enthralled interpreters,

letters like black blood in our fingers pressing to spill. And troubled enough by lessened light to turn back, on the path

I passed a great tall trunk, apartments carved in its ridged wall—in one shadow a bird flinched. I thought, might live the night.

# **Throat Singing**

Let the breaking down go slow I say back in the throat as if my prayer had any pull

slow

so you and I could amble once more once more our little loop trail where rabbit deer

coyote

forage fallen apples under twisted lichened trees let us fall to our pieces slow

the half-moon winking us its long hello above that row of poplars please let us wear down slow

or ought I ask to bow out fast no trouble for the ones I love no half-demented scuffle

when I'm lost across the park yes fast enough no endless huffing toward the last exhausted breath

now I'm left wishing just for love's presence your hand that knows me and let the clouds I see

through the glass be my example how

to join their slow slow dance across the sky

the atoms spinning fast

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The Inflectionist Review: "To Rise on Earth"

Lily Poetry Review: "To a Younger Poet"

the museum of americana: "Ride at Woodside"

Nimrod International Journal: "Recipe"

Northwest Review: "The Tradition"

Southern Poetry Review: "Dust Record"

What the House Knows (anthology, Terrapin Books): "Trouble's Voice"

Wordpeace: "From Pictures of Beautiful Bakhmut" & "Owning It"

#### About the Author



**Jed Myers**' fourth book of poetry, *Can't Be Far*, a finalist for the Sally Albiso Award, is forthcoming from MoonPath Press. His last collection, *Learning to Hold*, won the Wandering Aengus Press Editors' Award. Prior collections are *The Marriage of Space and Time* (MoonPath Press), *Watching the Perseids* (Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award), and five previous chapbooks. Recent honors include the Northwest Review Poetry Prize, the River Heron Poetry Prize, and the New Millennium Writings Poetry Award. Work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattle*, *RHINO*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Poetry Review*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *The Southeast Review*, and elsewhere. Myers lives in Seattle, where he's Editor of *Bracken*.

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