

# Poems



**John Harrity**  
1990-2012

## Transplant

Even when I myself am transplanted  
and flee from this scorched Earth, this  
concrete jungle  
to the countryside, for a  
quiet tree-like existence  
spent stooped over apples,  
smelling them,  
the old city will still be here.

Its alleys will still fill at night  
with sickly, junked and jostled denizens  
searching through the cold sweat of the  
bricks  
for some warmth, some intimacy.  
The old buildings, their foundations  
loosened  
by time and the long winter winds,  
will still lean against each other  
like the huddled and silent steadfast  
holding out the vigil through the night  
for some distant morning.

I should like to grab the whole city  
by its uptown skyscrapers,  
each house by its chimney handle,  
rip them up, their  
copper plumbing dangling beneath  
dripping water like roots  
sling them over my back,  
a knapsack of architecture  
and carry them out of here,  
down the long and desolate interstate

(the road disappears in darkness behind me,  
tapering grey like a shark fin. Is it changed  
by the darkness?  
Is it a dark road, or a road in the dark? Will  
it be changed when the sun beats its happy  
chant into the asphalt?)

to some sunny hillside  
that looks out on the sea,  
where I will plop them down, like an  
old dying tree in fresh soil.

Maybe this time  
there will be no highway escape pod  
and everyone will be stuck together,  
trapped by beautiful meadows  
to sweat out the illness.  
Only roads and avenues of sweet grass,  
without armies of rubber tires barrel over the  
Earth.  
The metal pipe roots will stretch and bend,  
twist around rocks and through deep clay  
to some new under ground river

and maybe  
through the holes of our old homes  
the abandoned sewer underbelly  
things hidden for so long beneath floor  
boards  
will finally see a little light.

*"I think that this poem is about the  
desire to escape from the landscape of  
our problems. They will still follow us,  
but internally, and we have to deal with  
them. When inner demons are tied to  
external things, we think we can escape  
from them by leaving the setting we  
associate with them."-John Harrity*

## Dingy Inn Dreams of Cambodia

The curtains, pulled shut  
over a neon sign humming  
meditative on my window,  
smell like the basement union hall  
where my father drank bad coffee  
with the machinists, all smoking.

Their red folds bring me other places too,  
the scent of fruit juice and faint gasoline  
floats from some lace by the wall and  
thoughts of distant cities and jungles  
run through my nostrils and then  
I remember  
the airport carpet  
my fire escape  
from quiet unpainted walls and these  
dead car-choked streets.

A light bulb hangs  
from the ceiling.  
Its naked electric corona  
washes out stains and  
small details on the wallpaper  
I close my eyes and its  
hollow glow changes and grows,  
becoming the sun that poured in  
through my pores on broken temple steps  
and slid off the backs of  
stoic beggars and monks,  
the same light  
that turned floodwaters  
into rice paddies.  
I carried it home with me,  
smuggled past Customs  
in channels of grey matter and synapses  
burning the backs of my eyes.

Suddenly, steady thunder stirs me  
and I remember  
The sun does not swing  
when a train passes howling.

I can hear zippers and  
shrink-wrap ripping and  
shouting announcers through both walls so  
I go back to sleep in the bathtub  
wrapped in my bed sheets.

Later, towards morning  
as dark night fades to glowing  
I am woken by  
bare feet scuffing sand on old tile  
and a low drum  
chanting like a voice.  
Echoes, maybe from dreams,  
but I hear them drifting  
from the floor and drain  
perhaps reverberating  
through empty pipes  
that run under lawns and strip malls,  
all the way to the ocean and  
somehow, beneath the waves  
to another shore.

## Angkor Wat, Cambodia

I step through the ruins at dawn  
they wander out waist high  
from sheet metal rubber tire living rooms  
It is hot, and they dress lightly  
in the thin and washed out  
clothes of American children  
They shout their  
books gifts postcards flutes

One clutches a paint thinner can  
wrapped in  
a rust stained yellow rag  
and holds it to his nose.  
He speaks slowly.

My foot casts a shadow  
across their faces as  
I step over them.  
I have temples to see.



## Slave Ship

I saw a drawing today  
of a slave ship cargo hold,  
of 500 people chained side by side  
not men, women and children  
only figures, outlines and shadows,  
diagrams, blueprints and  
bills of sale.

Expressionless and calm,  
not sleeping or speaking,  
only staring ahead,  
hands rested at the sides or  
in the laps like paper dolls.  
Two in row Z, compartment 18,  
fig. 3.5 have their heads turned  
toward each other as if  
talking politely.

We turn magazine pages,  
right to left, right to left,  
we fold our laundry quietly and  
push our shopping carts down the aisles  
and watch the news at dinner and  
think that tsunamis are sad  
but that people are no longer  
chained in the dark, together  
in a ship's hull beneath the water.

Like the captain on the decks above  
who heard only the persistence of waves  
against the wood,  
or the driver who hears only the drone of his tires  
over the asphalt,  
we see only the t-shirts and televisions  
on our shelves,  
and metal is more soundproof than wood.

## Hartford Stays

When I came up, the city in my mind  
was always in a summer heat wave,  
never winter, beautiful and crowded  
like stacks of colored plastic bottles  
filled with sunlight.  
Shoes hurt my feet, so I  
went without them, pushing my soles,  
flat and wide, into the dirt, roots  
between my toes, dragging them  
across cement, textures ringing  
on my skin like instruments harmonizing,  
the simple pleasure of stepping off of  
asphalt in the sun onto shadows.

Sometimes now,  
when my mind feels small and dark  
I have to go out to the street and  
listen to cars driving by,  
voices from living rooms,  
someone running out of sight,  
wind and electricity humming  
through lights and wires, horns and  
drums leaking from a basement  
down the hill, until I am here again,  
connected by the quiet music of  
a neighborhood, the sound of  
things changing or not changing,  
with or without me.

I miss ignorance, not knowing  
that the future is advancing, that no one  
sees or hears the way I do, that  
everyone is lost, even when  
they are not. I used to follow  
without doubt, but now  
I observe and define, stepping  
carefully, safe. Streets and people  
seem the same everywhere  
and my memories are disordered and  
blurred. I move like a ghost, invisible  
and blind, and the world seems to be  
waiting just ahead, calling back  
softer every day.

Lately, I have been riding around sidewalks  
on a bicycle, thinking about nothing.  
I am remembering how  
to forget, to trust the bike  
after the ground seems to fall away  
when I let the brakes go down a hill,  
the way thought falls apart as  
the sun flashes in my eyes  
through branches passing.

When I get home, I  
think about how my children,  
and theirs, will feel  
the same things that I do,  
thinking our times were different,  
that things have changed.  
Sleep comes, and I feel  
the whole world turning at once,  
the same speed beneath.

## **Sonny**

I met Sonny in the psych ward and  
did not think of bright days in parks or  
light pouring through trees  
His leather jacket  
leather hat leather skin  
are folded gently downward  
He needs new kidneys  
and teeth

I came back in April,  
June, '99 and then '03  
Sonny smiled every time  
and tried to talk but couldn't.  
His words fell softly from his mouth,  
dismantled  
and his eyes are glossy like his sunglasses  
and  
gravity has grown him into  
a pear.

His olive face would look much better  
in an arm chair  
than a hospital bed.

## **An In-patient at Donnelly 2 South**

As I sit in the tepid halls of  
the psych ward I can feel the  
troubled breathing of men who left  
their homes to pull at their hair and  
sit down screaming in front of anywhere.

One glides past me again.  
He walks to the window and turns,  
afraid of what he's kept from  
he steps with his torso cocked back like  
he is proud of his belly button  
and a smug grin peels through his beard  
though his eyes are desperate  
and as he wheels around  
and silently moves through tubs  
labeled "Soiled Linens"  
I can see he has wet himself.  
He always looks me in the eyes.

Outside he was the guilty peripheral vision  
of passersby who did nothing  
in here he is the lonely project  
of pink shirted night shift nurses  
who long to put their children to bed  
themselves  
and wake him up clean shaven.

## Schizophrenia

*for my brother*

His mind was a  
brownstone boulder  
crushing his shoulders like  
sleeping alone crushed my father.  
He was a cold junk soldier  
who called his voice God's  
and carried a plastic bag purse.  
Though his head was  
unhooked from his eyes  
the fires he felt kept him warm.

Was he insane or just  
a shaman flung forward  
in time by accident  
into my mother's womb?  
He wore orange hairnets and  
shaved his head  
leaving an uncut  
clump of hair  
in his blind spot.

His hands held his head under  
water until  
we drank it for him and  
I can still hear the  
thousand holy dollar store trinkets  
clattering around his neck.

I drank orange juice with him while he  
smoked my grandmother's cigarettes  
on our porch and every night  
I listened to him  
whispering over radio wires  
under his blanket.  
He could hear the  
night sky speaking and  
all we could see were  
airplanes and satellites.



## Graffiti

I will  
leave my painted gravestone burning on  
tunnel walls for tramps and seagulls to run  
their eyes over in the morning light before  
the hot banana sun comes and washes it out.

And I will  
use my fingers to carve a name  
into city forest trees so that when  
roots cover me like grey paint and police tape  
the bark will remember  
and before  
the wind from office building alleys  
blows away our gallery  
of stickers and posters  
we will have struck a note  
at least inside ourselves.

I will trace my shadow on to shop windows  
to block out the mannequins.



## Walk With Me

I climb fire escapes of the mind and  
spit spray painted poems at the wall  
plugging colors into cracked cement pores  
to trap this city's ghosts in the bricks

From this perch I pray with pigeons  
to the haze at dawn and to  
wails carried on dirty wind  
running through alleys like fingers through hair  
and when I sigh my breath  
evacuates clouds of thoughts  
hanging between buildings,  
I see them rise like heat  
writhing and reaching  
dismembered mental tendrils  
and I know they are not trapped by this atmosphere  
but gravitate towards alien transmissions  
from local constellations.

Our lands have been salted and  
made infertile by empty bottles  
and bullet casings,  
the soil supports no roots and so  
we must plant seeds in ourselves,  
watering them with our own mystical  
rhythmic verbal flow.

This fevered howl is echoing from  
every sewer and every storm drain,  
from every empty factory and dying block, from  
the fronts of bodegas  
and behind every fast food counter

because this city has its own brick sound system  
words reverberating from our hollow bodies,  
wind voice instruments  
and pipes crawling up the sides of buildings,  
chicken wire fencing wrapped around yellowed grass.  
because rust is just the Earth in backspin,  
rewinding and rewriting our metal compositions

But sometimes these streets are too cold  
and the houses seem huddled,  
leaning and pushing,  
and sun light can't penetrate this condensing  
landscape,

we stay lit with electric lamps that spill out  
onto the asphalt which  
only absorbs and  
gives back nothing  
and sometimes, these towers only  
seem to pen me in  
blocking out distant hills

lighters flicker silently  
in a thousand dark side streets,  
and rocks are the last things fire should touch  
I hear their drawing breath like  
the final sighs of cancer patients  
but this infection is distributed  
like vaccinations against remembering  
handed out in delicate blue bags  
from stoops where the only law sits,  
like kings on thrones, not in blue but red  
not badges but bandanas  
not robes but hoods  
and the tools of the trade are  
sold at every gas station, pipes as  
small glass tubes with a  
tiny paper flower.

I'd like to grab this whole city  
by its chimney handles and skyscrapers,  
rip them up, their  
copper plumbing dangling beneath  
dripping water like roots  
sling them over my back,  
a knapsack of architecture  
and carry them out of here,  
down desolate interstates  
raw sewage draining out behind me  
in long lines, a dark rainbow  
poison drawn from wounds.

I will replant it under untainted skies  
in fresh soil  
with good nutrients for growing and  
tend to it every morning until  
one distant sunrise  
the pipes will stretch  
and bend around rocks  
to some new underground river.

