

Leaves
of
Light

Poems by Charles Michael Burack

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ONE

In the beginnings
I am
and in the endings
I am
every finish but a pause
every start but a push
or pull
of infinite pulsations
of endless cyclings and recyclings
birthings and buryings
bloomings and bustings

All I see is I
I
is all I see

ALL
always all

Always EACH
always all

Each a part
a portal
a pris m

Enter a
leaf you are
there Enter a root
you are here
Branch trunk
fruit

tree
of
life

Earth is sun's dark
condensed rays

Sun is earth's light
loosened dust

Waves dis solve
into p a r t i c l e s

P a r t i c l e s
da
n ce
into waves

The curve of surf
slides ahead
of surge
and back of
sink

Who leads?
who follows?
who?

Pick a piece
a portion a
point
and follow it
through
all the way
through
til you

return
to that place
having been
everywhere
and
nowhere

Infinite s

t

e

p

s

from ev

er

y

HERE

to

ev

er

y

THERE

An

i n f i n i t y

of infinite-
simally
small points
in every
infinite-
simally
small
po
in
t

Every
vacuum
a
womb
of
being

I am the mother and the baby
and the flow of joy between
I am the mammaries and the milk
and the mouth that sucks blind

I am the soldier and the gun
and the corpse at his feet
I am the black earth crimsoned
and the dull gleam
in the unliving eye
I am the general who gave
the command
and the wife who weeps
when the messenger arrives

The trees are my thick hairs
the mountains muscled bone
the seas fragrant sweat
the winds my living breath

I love the fly as well
as the fawn
the soil as well
as the sun
the ladder equal
to the sickle
the mole as much
as the man

I pulse
 like a liquid
 snake
 through the veins
 of
a leaf
 and redden
 the rose
 in
 spring

Where hands held hands
 I was what I was
Where hearts meet hearts
 I am what I am
Where lips will touch lips
 I will be what I will be

In the pause before the pulse

In the stillness after the leap

In the potential between the acts

I reign in silence

Can you see
 an apple without seeing
 the branch the sun the dirt the ants
 the spring rain the clouds the nearby lake
the distant sea the farmer the trucker the truck
 the steel plant the rubber plantation
 the market
 place?

I
burn and burn
consuming myself
spreading out my wealth
that all may be
light

Everyone
a ray
rooted
in my burning
heart

Everyone
a root
arrayed
with my fire

My heart
a bright home
an incandescent loam

All am I
All ah All
Allah All

Elo-him
Elo-her
Elo-all
El-o-all
El-Om-all

OM
am
I

ShalOM
I
shall
be

Shantih
Shantih
Shantih

OPEN TO YOU

In prayer and
meditation
I keep hearing
I am to open
to your
presence
wisdom
and love
in all things
at all times
and not to walk
a single
narrow
path

ALL IN THE SAME MOMENT

Buddha fountain bubbles
Prayer wheel rings
Heater booms on
Power saw buzzes
Meditation legs ache
All in the same moment

SWEETGUM IN SUMMER LIGHT

Like a great green diamond
atop a tall granite pedestal
you flashed your life so exuberantly.

And I, a passerby, suddenly felt
heart clench and eyes tear.

Walking on I wondered: was it awe
alone that so shattered me?

Or was there also a touch
of envy?

SQUIRREL SCIENCE

Miming the squeaks of squirrel
seems to stir his curiosity
and turn him into scientist.

He experiments with sound,
suddenly stopping or starting,
testing or investigating,
if I'll continue aping him—
I do.

At length he grows silent,
perhaps tired of inquiry
or certain of knowledge
or satisfied he's in control.

VOICE OF THE WOODS

Just days before
millennial turn
I sit cross-legged
on rickety planks
suspended
by young redwoods
high above Land
of Medicine Buddha
witnessing
in joy and peace
the surrounding trees, birds, bugs,
sky, flickering sunlight
in timeless
repose
...
then hear
Voice of the Woods
and am filled
with quiet
excitement.

It feels like a sacred
calling:
these marvelous creatures
beckoning me
to speak on their behalf.

How precious
and undefended
they are!

How imperiled
are all
without human
words!

Daily they speak
to us
in their own
eloquent ways
yet we do not hear
or wish to know
what they're saying.

What a great responsibility,
what a grave and urgent duty,
to voice their beauty,
their wisdom, their right
to be!

Surely they're pleading,
Cherish us! Protect us!
We are your relations!

FORBIDDEN FOODS:
Childhood Memories of Paradise by the Lake

I. Breakfast

The stove smokes and sizzles like an altar
as Aunt Fran, aproned in white and yellow,
ministers to eight thick strips of bacon
that wiggle, palpitate and pop, their meat
tanning dark red, their fat translucent gold.

When color and crunch reach perfection,
her spatula swoops down and scoops up
the glistening slices whose amber beads,
alive with heat, drip drip drip into the pan
and hop and sputter in diminishing arcs.

Near the stove, layers of paper towels
curl up like sheets torn from holy scrolls.
On these she places the strips in rows,
covers them over with several more layers
and pats them gently with her wrinkled hands.

As she sets new slices on the skillet,
I lift the covers, pilfer two fat fellows
and gobble them down guiltily, savoring
the essence of their forbidden flavors.

She winks and smiles at me—but Mom barks,
“Wait til breakfast!” and Dad, aroused, looks up
from his newspaper and stares vaguely
at me, like a rabbi interrupted
during Talmud study. He sighs and then
returns to reading. In Michiana Shores

he accepts Aunt Fran's indulgent rule
and for a month grants us pagan pleasures.

II. Lunch

Towels dangle from necks, and beach chairs
loop over shoulders, as we hurry home
from the lake, silently contemplating
what surprise Aunt Fran will serve for lunch.
Yesterday's treat was hot corned beef that Ted,
the butcher, trimmed extra lean. Ted smokes fat
cigars and talks out the other side of
his mouth and wears big white aprons blotched with
every shape and shade of blood and mom says
he cheats on poor Jean, his short plump wife who runs
the register sitting on her wood stool.

We linger in the yard for the big tan
Cadillac to return and run to meet
it parking beside our Chevy wagon.
The window hums down, and we hear, "Hi boys!"
and reply, "Hi Aunt Fran!" The door locks click
open and Aunt Fran bustles out, toting
her big beige purse with the golden clasp.

In the cavernous trunk stand three full bags
carefully placed by Johnnie, Ted's six foot
three son who, Cousin Babe says, is turning
into a lady's man just like his dad.
I grab a bag brimming with packages,
and my brothers do the same and follow
me along the sidewalk, up the green steps,
through the long living room, to the kitchen
table, where we plunk down our heavy loads.

Unwrapping the crisp white parcels feels like opening birthday presents or Christmas gifts (though we've never celebrated that day). Inside is a World Series roster of meats: ten thick sirloin steaks, one massive tenderloin roast, four whole chickens, a dozen slabs of babyback pork ribs, and two colossal kosher salamis.

Bob and Al watch as I reach in and pull out the last white package. "It's hot," I say, feeling the heat through the paper. "It's hot," says Bob, rubbing his hands together. "Hot," says Al, his face brightening to a red ball. I break the seal and unfold the paper. "It's ham," I shout, and they applaud wildly as if I'd introduced the Beatles.

Aunt Fran looks on, beaming and blushing.

MY CAT'S ADVICE ON JOB HUNTING

Get up at dawn—it's a new day.
Feel the sun on your face,
stretch, breathe deeply, shake
yourself awake. Eat a good
breakfast high in protein. Drink
some water. Go outside for some
fresh air. Take a little relaxed
walk and notice the way the trees
look, the plants smell, the wind
sounds. Above all, enjoy

yourself. Remember each moment
is an adventure. Always
keep your eyes open—the world
ever sends you signals. Listen
to the sounds, the voices,
the vibrations. Feel them
along the length of your body.
Flee the dangerous presences,
investigate the inviting ones.

If something seems really
appealing, check it out
some more: smell it, walk around
it, touch it, give it a little
lick. Stay with it as long
as there is something alive
and enlivening. When you sense
the attraction waning,
move on. Do what you like.
Repeat what you love.

Insist on having what really
feeds you, body and soul.

Whine and persist in whining
until you get it. Be willing
to eat what is offered but
keep asking for what you really
desire. You need to let others
know you're serious and determined
to get what you want. But

you have to be sure you really
want it. Don't think too much.
Stop making those crazy lists
of pros and cons. Use your senses,
your instincts, your intuitions.
Let your head follow your belly
and heart. Keep yourself clean
and well groomed. Make sure
you get your head and back rubbed
at least once a day by someone

you love and trust. When you find
the job you really want, stalk it,
observe it quietly, study
its movements and patterns
and then pounce before it gets
away. Pounce, and if you miss,
pounce again, and if it gets away,
then seek a fresh opportunity,

forgetting the disappointment
of failure but remembering
the approaches that helped
and those that didn't. Keep honing
your hunting strategies—the better
they become, the better the job
you'll land. The more skilled
the cat, the juicier the catch!

SCREAMING SEA

Sunk
in silent
depths
of nature
meditation
devoted
to well-being
of all beings
I suddenly
hear
the heart-
crucifying
cries
of sea
creatures
screaming
in agony
from all
the toxins
and trash
desecrating
the Earth—
a chorus
of anguish
so urgent
I feel I
must
do something
anything
soon

RISING LOTUS

Midstream in meditation
my thoughts suddenly center
on you
and I feel my lotus
starting
to
r
i
s
e
!

SANDHILL

Between the lake and Aunt Fran's house stands
the sandhill, rising above the tallest oaks
and embroidered with jade and emerald vines.
In early morning I begin my expedition up
the slope along the broad path that snakes
among the filigree of leaves and stems
and roots. Hunched over I climb like a chimp:
arms swing to and fro as toes sift the sand.
I rise and sink, rise and sink, while gold
cascades fall and flow beneath me. Squirrels
on every side track my progress with furry
periscopes, and jays perched above me
laugh and whistle at my slow ascent.

Panting I arrive at the hill's bald crown
and scan the surface for yesterday's prints:
a swirl of feet, a blurred body, more feet,
another body with fans for limbs. Inspired,
I slump down and roll around and around
squirming like some prehistoric creature
I read about in Dr. Zim's dinosaur book.
Breathless I lie on my back and listen
to my heart gallop, then canter, then trot.
Uncounted minutes drift with the clouds;
the sun warms my throat; the sand cools my nape.
Up again I race to the meadow's edge where,
belly down, I search the seam between lake and sky
for traces of the city we leave each August:
tiny gray silhouettes waver in the distance.
Nearer in a lone swimmer glides beyond
the bobbing red posts. He floats and plays
like a sea lion, then swims back to shore.

Down the winding trail I dash, swerving right
and left, right and left, flying over roots,
tilting into the sand, churning up a zigzagging
storm that dogs me down the hill. As bottom
nears I leap forward, tumble down, tumble over
and over and over again in wild motion,
more motion, hilarious motion. Then stop.
And breathe again. Unroll. And watch the hill spin
around and round as in Disney movies.

SHIVA

I

I dance on bones
of illusion
overbrimming
the world

Where my feet fall
gluttonous jaws crack
haughty necks shatter
mean ribs splinter
rank shanks pulverize

All dissolve and return
to bubbling cauldron
where new world brews
stirred by stern-eyed chef
who too dissolves at dawn

II

Whirling whirling whirling
my pith bleeds outward
in widening spires
till surfaces flush clear
and perimeters perish
and all permeates all

III

Leaping from skull to skull
like a child
hopping from stone to stone
I am at one
with life and death

MY CHILDREN

Walking these hills alone,
the sun a blinding white eye,
I see my precious children
and feel myself the father
I might have been.

My eldest son,
New Year's surprise
over eight years ago,
lanky and timid as a reed,
eyes keen and curious
as his mother's dark orbs,
clings to my left hand
to brace his frame
against the golden shock
of daffodils
trumpeting spring.

My soft round daughter,
St. Valentine's gift
just six winters ago,
big-hearted like her mother
and sporting eyes blue as ice;
she swings my right hand,
points with hers and asks
can she pet the pretty dog
coming toward us.

My wet-cheeked baby boy,
conceived in spasms
of thoughtless bliss
two summers ago,

sleeps on my back
like a papoose
and dreams of next summer
when he can run ahead,
more wild and free
than his mother.

But as I near home
my unborn children vanish
and their mothers disappear
and I shudder at our sins
of aborted dreams
and cruel convenience.

SWEETGUM IN WINTER LIGHT

Young
pear-shaped
sweetgum dropping
deep pink and yellow flames
on grass and sidewalk while nearby
older tree still clings to last green embers,
its base lightly speckled with shades of salmon
and saffron, its crown orange and rust-red like
harvest time. . . . I realize so much of the delight
I take in these trees is the bliss of the Infinite
appreciating its own
creation.

THE TREES OF LIFE ARE FALLING

My prayer walk
 through the park
Is assailed
 this morning
By grizzly
 grinding sounds
Of chain saws
 buzzing, buzzing,
Buzzing through
 hearts
Of eucalyptus,
 the latest
 victims
Of human
 progress.

In the name
 of electric
 force,
For the sake
 of modern
 civilization,
Tall trees
 are being razed
 to the ground
For they grow
 too near
 the lines
 of power.

Holy, holy, holy
 is the Lord
 of Hosts.

Heavy, heavy, heavy
is my heart
of flesh.
Killing, killing, killing
are the machines
of men.

The trees of life
are falling
The trees of life
are falling

So we can indulge
our comforts
And fill
our pockets
And consume
the Earth.

Even though I walk
through the valley
Of the shadow
of death
I will fear
no evil
For You are
with me.

Yet the cogs
of commerce
continue to turn,
And the chips
of technology
hum faster and faster
out of control,

And the engines
of greed grow
more and more
insatiable.

The trees of life
are falling
The trees of life
are falling

When will we cease
to eat
From the Tree of Power
and Progress?

OYSTER

Cold and chaotic currents purl
and jostle her this way and that,
dash her fluted workshop
against the sea's scalloped floor,
rocking the sphere of her secret labor.

Yet within her wondrous lab,
she silently perseveres
in expressing her liquid loveliness,
translucent as blood soaked in sun,
and layer by layer, year by year,
transforms the once irritating atom
of rough rock, dust of sea,
waste of ages, into startling
globe of enameled light,
the sea's own brilliant moon.

MY BEST BOOK OF POEMS

My best book of poems
never passed through hands
yet composed they were
one miraculous morn
in bright summer air
by creatures I met
on slow meandering walk
up neighboring hill.

Simple exquisite words
tongued by flowers, trees,
rocks, curbs and cars
revealing rare insight
and eloquence—
each poem unique
and concentrated
like a dazzling haiku.

Thrice I asked myself
should I record these gems
for future inspiration
or would pen and pad
stifle their freeflowing
genius. . . . I chose
to listen and marvel
in amazement.

Yet the very next day
I regretted my decision
and strained in vain
to recall the precious
voices.

Again and again
I visited them
but they were silent—
their wisdom lost
forever
to the winds . . .

O, how I longed
to be or become
a reader of breezes!

AIR WISDOM

All life glides
by grace



We float
in invincible
oceans of air



Emptiness is full
of ethereal force



The invisible connects
as well as cleaves



The odor of a thing
reveals its relative
rot or robustness



Unseen currents
bend trees
and boil oceans

A sudden breeze
can sweep your life



Calm clarity resides
at the center
of spiraling violence—
return there!



Let mind wax sky-vast
and wane sky-empty
while watching thought-clouds
and mist-moods glide by



A storm is ever
circling somewhere—
await your turn!



Twisting uproots



Bee-wing winds in Boston
stir storms in Bombay

Ethereal porters
carry
living waters



Know the invisible
by its vibrations
in the veils of life



Dark space paves
light's highway



The nectar of ether
is ever nourishing you



Be a spruce
supplely swaying
to spirit's
undulations



For freshness
seek the heights