

How We Fall Apart



Poems by Rick Marlatt

Winner of the 2010 Seven CirclePress Chapbook Contest

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*As with all,
for Kina,
with all my love*

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www.antipoetry.com

Future Earth: “Peaches”
www.futureearthstudios.com

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www.nyquarterly.org

Pedestal Magazine: “November Father”
www.thepedestalmagazine.com

Perigee: “Balance”
www.perigee-art.com

Platte Valley Review: “Crane”
www.unk.edu/a/plattevalleyreview

Sangam: “Planet of Dreams”
www.sangammagazine.com

Seven Circle Press: “Frost,” “Gravity”
www.sevencirclepress.com

Slow Trains: “Letter to Trey Anastasio”
www.slowtrains.com

Whistling Fire: “Dialing”
www.whistlingfire.com

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*Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude*
-William Shakespeare

*Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the
floor of the sky.*
-Willa Cather

*We are like the spider.
We weave our life and then move along in it.
We are like the dreamer who dreams and then lives in the dream.
This is true for the entire universe.*
-Upanishads

How We Fall Apart

Having remembered
your descriptions
I slapped my forehead
imitating a kamikaze
satellite smashing through
the surface.

I can tell you down
in my core fear rotates
on an axis strung across
dark matters like what
triggers sadness is pain
because of necessity.

They say people
can ultimately change.
You should know I
tried to poison a rabbit
once by coating a carrot
with WD-40 & chucking it
behind the lilacs.

So here I am a weary ascender
on your tragic rungs
suspecting that particular
brand of magic where
on the roof I can breathe
less anxiously a little,
where night's barely concerning
and a thousand stars
are teaching me
a better way to pray.

Frost

I've always wanted to wake up glittering

to sparkle in the snapdragons

to sear diamonds up and down the skin of a sycamore

to bleed from the tip of Solzhenitsyn's pen

to etch stars into the brick of vine street's shelled apartments

to shower under sunrise the light passing through me

to hold the world down long enough

to swathe your body as it shivers below

to stitch my soft cold into each curve

to carve my name into your voice

to watch the vapor go to crystal and away

Gravity

Last night I dreamt bodies falling out of the sky

arms stretched outward
faces pure, naked

the sky emptying

dusting off its fingers

with hands that keep wanting to fly away

the taste of coffee from a woman's lip

the tickling curl of blood in nostril tip

its rain over toe knuckles its splay over the shower floor
its thin drain-ward swirl

I hear the metallic roll of a pen
in a silent room

its metallic roll and smack

the sunfish carve

sharp bodies into the water
synchronized, beautiful

and your whisper

at the beginning of wind

makes me think I'll collapse

synchronized, beautiful

the invisible force that pulls my body back into yours

our eyes dropping off into vacant worlds
the sky forever emptying
the light falling, falling.

Zen Instructor

They say he declined morphine during a hip replacement,
that he knocked a monk off his feet from forty yards away,
and when he stares into walls his body goes all blue in the dark.
I've heard he's a poet of haiku, a scholar of Hannibal the Great,
and a lover of all tasks requiring perfect fingers. Rhythmically
igniting the air around his shoulders with yin-yang calibration.
Impressive, yes, but I want him to teach me how to turn off,
to be still, make my stomach stop begging me all the time,
to not think about the war, about being late, fatigued, fretting
over the sex, mining the dictionary for dirty gems- *consortium*,
rueful, *hydrotherapy*. I want him to raise me in his hands
of white ash trees, shape me into a small moon and thrust me
to the ceilings of this blessed galaxy where all this clatter,
positioning, regret, and skirmish is only a fragment of matter,
random points riding a dead circle, pollen bits in a hail storm,
a swirl of dust, a cobalt retina behind a slowly closing eye.

Off Book

We rehearse faithfully
along the spine of a meadowlark.

Inside its cage
there's no refrigerator

and a raspy heart
sleeps in a nest of apology.

I stagger with reasons,
you leave every light on.

Step into the blue wash.
You do not have cancer.

With soliloquy
talon a pain in the sky.

With magic whisper downstage.
You do not have cancer.

Halve a grape with eagerest teeth,
eyes with inside jokes,

their punch lines ooze a longing,
a feeble beak is opening.

The woman pouring coffee
has a song like spring.

Peaches

Suspended like divided planets,
peaches haunt the amber space
in syrupy juice canned away
in dust bowl mason jars that wear
the seasons in galaxies of dust.
Aristotle and Rajchandra share
the idea of separated souls eternally
searching for their other half.
Suddenly the cycle from pit to peach
ferments a truth into this kitchen dusk.
Never has grandmother been so alive.

November Father

This time of year he's bringing
the combine back to life again,

shimmying up the feeder-house chamber,
his air wrench vibrating down the auger shafts.

The sour drones of the ball game fading
in and out from a radio that sucks juice

from the wall etched with cobwebs,
the hollow cold of seared metal through his tattered coveralls.

An old man with river valley eyes
pounding out the rivets in his bearings,

grinding his teeth to make the gears run free.
With each knuckle scrape and head thump

he swears at the world like an old song.
Overhead a barn swallow shakes itself from an evening doze,

whisks out into the dying light,
from an abandoned perch dirt falls like powdered rain over his head.

It's a rugged christening. A welded-up love.
A Marlboro igniting in the almost dark.

Planet of Dreams

My all-time favorite is
the one where man can fly
and when I leave for Palm Springs
you swear to dream of me
every night and you do,
then above Denver, the sun
falls away into its sky so endless
and violet and I hear your voice
whispering like beginning of wind,
fly baby fly back to Nebraska
where Marlon Brando was born.

Anniversary Poem

Tonight the mountain
is a sleeping lion skull
whose inevitable breath
ghosts the curtains
of my small window.
I watch the metallic moon
align with ten years of us
and the difference in our hours
totals a lethal heaviness
with me on the coast,
you on the plains,
my emptiness boasts
stadium seating filled
to outrageous capacity
but the stage lies dark
as the heart of a dying marigold.
Lightning flashes from forever
but the thunder is a frantic
handless clapping that can never.
The desert between
me touching you
begs for a flood that is epic.
Picture the earth tilting just right.
Picture me sliding past cholla
clinging with racerunners.
Feel the ignition of river bed
bones rattling beneath your skin.
Breathe the return of salt
as I drown back into you.

Crane

When I stepped out
from the fortress of cedar

a thousand others
had swarmed upriver

erupting a song that shook
the deadest parts of me

there in the haunted blue light
only one remained

crimson letters slashed over
eyes of onyx pasts

lakes of gold splashed across
a ghostly grey side

I saw in those eyes
the pure fiber of instinct

restlessness independence
wild aspects of notion

then it took to the air
like a hallowed moment

its corrugated wings etched
words into the sky

a language I couldn't make out
a dream too distant to recall

For Perry in December

Of eyes watering in empty skies
I know a little of breathing pictures
of breathing unfolding vapors
in air that hushes throats of orange
numb sunsets and the dead ringing
of winter branches their orange
leaves weeping beneath my feet
with the river's voices whispering
through the snow saying yes this
shimmering reminds me of you.

Mantra

Everyone here loves winter
and the drifting snow flakes
shaped like question marks
encourage me to ask is it
because in this horizontal
world gravity is obsolete
is it the way the fireplace
crackles or must we return,
like Descartes,
to the impetus of our enquiry.
Is it the snow itself,
is there a center to its silence
where childhood secrets sleep
buried like tiny worn-out stars?
Today I divide them down
according to difficulty
and still they wear on me
to the point that this time
around I might be too much.
This is how I doubt all things
as far as possible with blue
planets of ice scattered
like impossible equations
so much grander when not
trampled on, dark little
rules left behind to regard,
evergreens beautiful
behind white facades.

Constructing Winter

Tonight the snow has worn out its welcome,
residing over the world in a swollen redundance.

The sleep I forgo is a well-trained sky
that keeps me awake without touching me.

What I think lacks caffeine, what I crack is a bad knee,
indifference boasts the most convoluted of specs

and what I yearn for is the breaking free
of my familiarly dry-walled superficiality.

The ancient eruption that flakes its dead skin
from above is an unfurnished floor

separating me from God in this trembling house
of nervous Januaries.

Tonight there's a ceiling to my prayers
and a wind that rakes me down to the bone.

My life damned up in the sour, combustible air,
eyes gone claustrophobic with stories.

Letter to Trey Anastasio

I.

finger lightning adore precise fret fire melting ice
snow-packed dread sweat hippies thousand
barefoot children blaze eyes wild bodies
float ghost-like into aura unmatched untapped.

Better in summer sweat weather antelope soul
prayers for rain to sop stoned earth slosh
sweat trickle to birth under ultra-wide July sky.

Fluid mind bend electric pow mind trance
whirling light heaven dance. Just like
four brothers running in apple
orchard bloom chiggers jumping high
starlit baseball, fending for ourselves, land rulers.

Notes, chimes rumble waves,
waves, tingle hot color
immaculate color sting tips of ocean
sky blue orange berry pond water teal
green, evergreen with its
dark hints of wind-crazed memory and
the power of now power of life
power breathing blood pumping
circulating air through scorched lungs
action imitation of holy.

II.

stalactite passion chant needled my blood,
reminds me of slanting snow piles ice
tight tree tips chai tea warm throat
in cool breeze.
Voice was warm too, warm like the girl

her hair long blond frayed on my skin liked to
look back couldn't tell where I ended
and she began one skin one pulse one body breathing hard.

Forward flash two kids two heads one dusty
blond the other red smile just like forever
just like their mother just like their father
just like the voice from the blue
tolls in my head throbs in my veins.
Smiling crying praying sad voice.

Night moon black sky star fire
fall air holds me stiff in quickness
crisp corn stalks wrap my ankles corn
dust in my nose smell of corn crackle
corn crunching through revolving chainsaw
jaws who grind spin crunch grind.
Windshield raindrops outside endless grey
endless wonder grey skies go on
in private expansive mellow. The rain will leave
then stare at stars' white fire. They teach.

III.

prints on blank page spirit like wet
pebbly sand vibrant toes hand prints
with grandpa, fresh cement under roof
musty barn dark walls dark barn
barn swallows soar sing for words.

Mine slip by fall unheard guarded
ancient haunted creek tomb. Silence
was my god in the face
my blue-eyed father the one
who faced hard winds hard years weathered
fingers of working man to match
stoic sad eyes sky blue while my love stayed
unexpressed mute unmade god I'm trying
to make up for it now still hurts, still hard

but the words are the sounds that set it
free

Pulling tears from dry crimson eyes like
forgotten bones soil soaked dust with my
hands, your words showed me how to use
my hands see healing in my hands
power they have, hands of healing, hands
of love, love to love a father love a wife
hold a wife hold the kids hold them tight
work like a man work like your father
love like snapshots space and time won't die.
Healing hands given light by the words.

First Snow

This morning my bladder
is a prima donna
who's publicly demanding I
return to the world

when I want nothing more
than to curl away
inside my burlesque notions
of seasonless dreaming

it's not that I've had my fill
of hey daddy it snowed
its not that shovel scrapes
don't facilitate clarity

it's I haven't finished praying
for thirty more years
or written a thank you to my
dead Spanish teacher

or pried open the sad rooms
behind my eyes
& my poetry professor made me
promise to read Kafka

yesterday they crashed a rocket
into the moon
with the hopes of discovering
possibilities of water

what would it be like to sear
beneath the surface
tap out a pulse where the center
begins to spin

earth's speed can vary between
700 & 1000 mph
depending on geographic location
they also said

so the places we've kissed are
like tiny universes
you're coming home later tonight
& I am going to tell you

Flying Tables

Like the retinas of small dreams
with their nanotechnology
you have to get to know her.

You suspect she lives
in the boot of an old soldier
a veteran of harmonious wars

where she ducks flying tables
at the callous trench of a scream
where purple is the new black

where her hair is true as a storm
her shocking shark eyes light
up all crystal in the dark.

Machine elves have eaten
their way through the heels
glass & metal puked to the street

from toes filled with angers
phone chargers in fire pits
memory clogged gutter flowers.

Their beard shavings slice
the toes of honest milk carriers
creating a stale artificial sky.

It's not that she doesn't try
to conjugate your verbs
or scribble you into her planner

her thoughts are blind alley bats
smashing into counterfeit loves
singing ultrasonic songs to your heart.

Items May Have Shifted

Midnight coffee is incredulous of men
 who believe in the safety
of an open journal.

Tonight I sit in Denver International Airport
 feeling the hours thin away into
unreachable boarding times

while cities call their children home
 and in this mobile consciousness
I am also a child.

I'm young in the fashionable way
 hipsters ride moving sidewalks
into platinum time.

Still young in the sense of a backpack's
 allegiance to balance
maintained by trapper keepers.

The old man reads travel logs to his wife
 who crochets a quilt embroidered
with excellent swans submerged in moments.

She stitches his words into an everything song
 that cradles the movement of bodies
through desirous spinning voids.

Outside the night is an usher
 with slender meticulous hands
and the runway is talking to strangers.

Dialing

You're singing the hometown blues again
same old tune

the one about mason brick high school Bunsen burner calamities
superimposed legacies dropped pass in overtime
gravel road midnight shadows
short years blitzed with heaviness

you still remember the old hometown-the holy city-
countless one way dead-ends intersected by big black billboards that
quote God

-I'm listening-

nothing hits you like words do
especially the right words

under a slow barrage of shredded white crystal funny how
despondence and ice get a mind cranking eyebrows scrunch
fingers like lightning
on cell phone keypad
are you listening?

how long has it been how've you been been a brutal winter back here
my friend
hay's all stacked up like the years all your almos'ts
just abouts-
same old tune

he knows you're listening,
every time you take a breath he can hear you breathe instinct to lips
mind to pause lungs to air life to flesh friend to
your momma's old 12 gauge with the bronze engraving-
July night moonlight dull thud water-tower ricochet
told you to pick a star
and he'd bring it down one shot one moment
one smoke trail to heaven

one long time ago
I'm listening

no stars tonight just silver shreds of silence from
destiny's black mouth
he thinks it was along this ditch you buried your daddy's Studebaker
last billboard's ahead half mile or so blizzard's blinded the words
out but they're still there
he can make out the scoreboard fuzzy yellow streak of numbers through
graveyard Evergreens two miles away home-team falls by one
same old tune
missed chances dropped passes shattered laughs
will teach you about failure

-I'm listening-

what he said before-about black mouth sky-it's like the snow is little shreds
of saliva
spilling from gum-roots,
slowly coming down to swallow him his memories the town
tombstone trees tailgates with twitching toes twirling tongues
tired sky telling him he's had enough time
he wishes you would speak in his slow trance wicked winter dance
but this time's different this time he's uncomfortably numb
for the first time, he's scared
scared of the sky
scared of your sigh
scared of the multiple reasons why
fingers are frozen can't feel his face feet don't know
where they've been or where they're going
chest is pounding harder faster
demons like regret want out any way they can voices
like
poison itch make his brain scream head spin heart falter
knees bend
God he'll beg if I has to are you there? *I'm listening*
nothing hits you like words do
who knows if these are the right words but they're real
like the dropped pass
this gleaming laugh you once were

say something anything even if it's hang up and never again
that he can deal with but the silence is killing him slow
and painful
the silence will swallow him like forever
like you were never
like ascending the smoke trail of hometown blues.

Balance

Old Nebraskan men have grown used
to being the cartographic dot
between Omaha and Denver,

feeling out the weight of 1,776 miles
to Boston and San Francisco
on each arm like an eagle

casting off from a cottonwood top,
grown used to being a landmark
the world just flies over,

allowing women to pick up the slack
when they find it difficult to talk
about themselves or others,

everyone assuming their children
are dreadfully unhappy praying
in rickety, stale pews,

grown used to keeping it steady
on the sidewalk, one foot in a past
they remember romantically,

one foot in a future their aspirations
will never quite fulfill, their bright
eyes filling with snow.

Faith

What is it really that keeps you awake?

is it the streets now looking twisted under burgeoning clouds
is it the \$20 that no longer fills my week with coffee & muffins
some reports say over a million Iraqis have perished since August 2003
is it finally true that we've abandoned the era of virtue

I sat facing the wall in a contorted lotus
 until my legs burned off & melted into the floor
I prayed in transubstantiating tears during the sacrament
 until the woman in the next pew answered her cell phone
I squinted into my palm until the light bulb burned out
 then I was lost again
I was one with the earth
 until the ground vowed to be colder than the body
I started dreaming again but only at night
 did you hear Phish got back together

because I can call Nripesh in Nepal from the inside of my garage
 Sandhill cranes can't find the river valley their ancestors built
because I see towers in my sleep I can't ignore the oil between my toes
because I keep a lookout for karma street lights go dark when I walk by

I want to set things straight in this edge of the universe restaurant
curl up in the lap of this booth one ear inside my jacket embracing the dark
one ear to the interstate letting the east & west mantra warm me
 with its constant rumble of stories

I believe the sky is unafraid to weep with me
I believe it's safe to shower beneath the lightning
I believe I can chew without biting my tongue
I believe the rain will transform to sleet

I believe I feel close to something

About the Author

Rick Marlatt earned a MFA from the University of California, Riverside, where he served as poetry editor of the *Coachella Review*.

His first book, How We Fall Apart, won the 2010 Seven Circle Press Chapbook Award.

His poetry has been nominated four times for a Puschcart prize, and his most recent work appears in *New York Quarterly*, *Rattle*, and *Anti*.

Marlatt teaches English in Nebraska, where he lives with his wife and two sons.

About the Press

Seven CirclePress was founded in 2008 by New England poet Seth Jani.

It publishes both online and off, and aims to create a collective of the best voices from the independent literary scene.

It commits to no prescribed esthetic but has a strong inclination to view art as a means of promoting unity and meaningful interaction.

It has a strong online presence with the amount of visitors growing daily.

SCP publishes a select number of books/chapbooks a year as well as *CircleShow: The Official Journal of Seven CirclePress*, released biannually.

Poetry

"Full of brand new nanotechnology, old moonlight, paternal feelings, fear, genuine domestic love, freedom and the yearning for more of it, all communicated with accuracy and strange clarity. Rick Marlatt writes exactly the kind of American poetry -- plain spoken, electric, imaginative, sincere -- that I want to carry with me, in a book just like this one."

-Matthew Zapruder, Wave Books

"These poems launch themselves like rockets or prayers into an ethereal world, un-physical, pneumatic as breath. An act of sacrament. Rick Marlatt knows the power of the tension of opposites. And he doesn't so much exploit it as he does harness it. The poems go where they will because of this energy. They go both far and near."

-Jill Alexander Essbaum, Author of Harlot



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