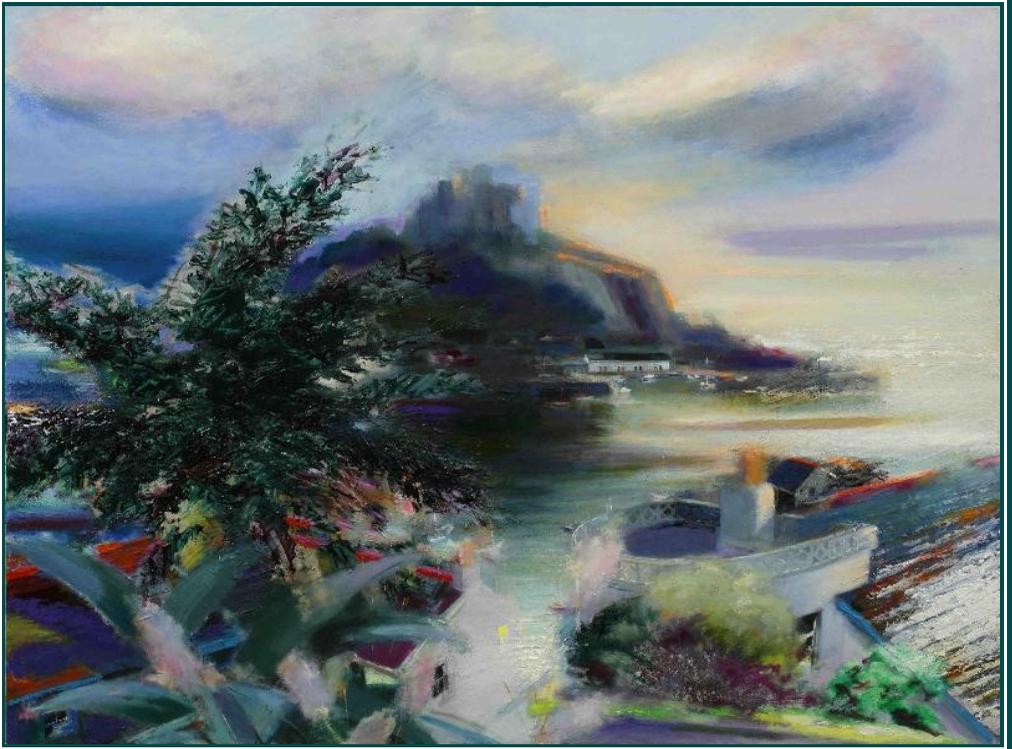


A Flowering Tree: Selected Poems



Frederick Turner

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Acknowledgements

The cover art is a painting by the British painter David Andrew, entitled *The Mount from Marazion*. My thanks to the artist.

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On Gibbs' Law

If hot solution, saturate,
Be set upon a ledge to cool,
Rayed crystals will precipitate
On dust no thicker than a molecule;

When the slow chilling of the night
Crosses the threshold of the freeze
The stars shine out as sharp and bright
As frostflowers in their fractal vortices;

The first white gas that was the world,
To ease the heat and press of birth,
Froze into forms as it unfurled:
The starry galaxies, the living earth;

Such pressure drives this crystal trance,
This thickening of art and hour,
Where order tumbles from the dance
Of dying syllables and forms a flower.

The Blackness of the Grackle

The grackle is black as sin, he is like a religion,
he is Satany-satin, slick as the sail of a submarine,
he's a heat-sink, the anodized fin on the cylinder-head.
The grackle collects the light, he collects information,
while about him the cosmos, slovenly, radiates energy.

The grackle recalls the black of earlier absences:
of the night, of the time when no eye recorded the lightfall,
of all other electromagnetic tones on the spectrum;
but he reaches back to bend those more primitive darknesses
to a greater sophistication: to state by not stating;

like the brilliant burn of the black of tropical fishes,
like the sable faces of certain macaques on display,
like the caves of the Ritual Primate, the funeral's raiment,
like subfusc, like Cary Grant's elegant easy tuxedos,
like the gold-crested lacquer scabbards of samurai swords.

The grackle's a black hole, the earpiercing wince of the anvil,
the pure click of an incompressible fluid imploding
and hitting itself as it meets in a clap at its center,
the creak and the splitting of timber, the crack of a timbre,
the berserker's shriek, the rip of heavy silk tearing,

in his strut, his effeminate deadly swagger, his waddle,
his enraged samurai waddle, his overdetermined,
his strenuous Hachiman entrance, the birdgod of warfare,
his lumbering takeoff, a jet fighter-bomber clearing
the runway under the maximum payload of armament;

and in all that blackness—matte-flocked as it would seem to be—
there seems only one thing that is radiant: his gold-milled eye,
like madness, hysteria, overcontrol, hyperthermia,
it's a concave disc to dissipate waste radiation,
the amberbright stare of a warning light showing at midnight;

till all of a sudden the whole point of the metaphor,
what his natural similes meant, is revealed in a flash,
as he spreads his wings and sinkingly measures his glide,
and his back blazes and flows in a wave of iridescence,
as a current discharges, leaving a blob in the eye:

his elegant dress, that requires no pigment to swagger,
but lets its grain fluoresce with waves of diffraction,
like a crowd drilled with cards to form the face of a leader,
like a blind, a burst of X-rays, a gold-trimmed bookedge,
reveals on the earth a sudden parcel of sky.

Spring Evening

Above the baby-powder clouds
The sky is china blue.
Soon, young and chattering, the crowds
Of stars come pushing through.

And this is the first dispensation,
The setting up of the odds;
This is the eve of creation,
This is the time of the gods.

To Ariadne

I am your elder lover.
I know not what to say.
What image could recover
your manner and your way?
For what is like you, who
are colored like all things,
Taking their colors to
the dark quilt of your wings?
Should I describe your speech,
whose thousandth part might be
Fractioned again, and each
more branched than any tree?
When nothing that you are
speaks openly or free,
How may so dark a star
be gauged by one like me?
My elder mistress, you
resemble but one kind:
The winding of the clue,
the labyrinth of mind.

On the Pains of Translating Miklos Radnoti

*(The great Hungarian poet shot by the Nazis in 1944.
His mother and twin brother died in childbirth.)*

And now I too must wrestle with a brother
Whose dead limbs cumber me within the womb,
Whose grief I pity, but whose cord of nurture
Glides dreadful and unseen in this blind gloom.

That angel, who took Cain to be his mirror,
Knew how to die, knew how to share a grave;
Sometimes he almost overcrows my spirit,
His great feathered wings beating in the cave—

My elder brother died as I first opened
My lips in speech instead of in a scream;
Now he returns to claim the voice I borrowed,
Now he returns, the hero of my dream.

How can I share the lifeblood of our mother?
How can I let his dead voice steal my breath?
But how indeed could I deny my brother
Who, reckless, bought my birthright with his death?

For all alone among that generation
He kept the faith that I have made my name,
That ancient grace, that hard emancipation,
The love of form that touches us like flame.

What can I do but open to his service
The pulse and wordstream of the mother tongue?
Thus I subdue myself and hear him singing
Out of the land of shades where none have sung.

Could I, the western democrat, professor,
Father, essayist, of middle age,
Be given any greater gift than this is,
To share the passion of his vassalage?

The Dolphin Hotel and Epcot Center

Michael Graves creates and Disneyworld
Absorbs the immense insult without scar.
The force of evolution is unfurled:
Consciousness stammers, awed, touched, jocular.

○ lights of ancient pylons across water!
○ all the coarse simplicity of how
The past renews itself upon the altar
We made the present be, the dead dry now;

○ shaking artificial lights against the lake,
○ music breathing perfect from the arbors,
○ Paris, Casablanca! ○ how fake
The real thing becomes, its lights, its harbors;

○ guardians of the future, one in three:
○ Mickey, Donald, Goofy, sing to me.

North Sea Storm

Zuidzande, Zeeland, August 1993

For Marleen van Cauwelaert

The wind that blows across the polders blows
The end of one age, the birth of another.
Turn of the century weather.
It blusters by the eaves and throws
A scarred branch at the chimney-stack
Over and over.
We hear it in the attic bedroom, twitch and crack,
Secret, invisible, speaking of the sea.
The mourning doves take shelter in the lee.
Over and over they repeat the track:
It's too true, Tookturoo,
It's too true, Tookturoo.
My friends and I are plotting the next century.
The wind that blows across the polders blows
A branch of ripened pears across the sky;
Hesitates, rises, swings across and falls.
The overloaded apple-tree
Can only jerk and shake.
In all this dreadful pother
Something must surely fall and die;
Something must surely come to be.
The storm is whining at the walls.
The grasses on the dyke are all bowed one way.
The little orchard glows
With green, with green beneath the cold grey sky.
It's too true, Tookturoo.
Something is stretching itself awake.
The wind that blows the northern sea
Will blow us all away.

The wind that blows across the polders blows
Day into night, night into day.
It's too true, Tookturoo.
It's too true, Tookturoo.

Sestina Upon the Cosmological Anthropic Principle

For Gregory Benford, on reading Timescape

How did the first untracedness know to fall
Into the masks of first, second and third?
Did space, then, freeze out of necessity,
Finding betweenness gave a space to play?
Could mathematics force a being for time,
To map the branching of its schedule tree?

How did the forked light learn to form a tree
Of forces, as the cracked symmetries fall?
What chose one branch upon the tree of time,
Matter above its twin? Why not a third?
How did the particles that pair and play
Outcrystal light into necessity?

The atom's hymn to pure necessity
Makes it the heartwood of the cosmic tree.
How then did fated atoms learn to play
The game of chemistry, and so to fall,
Mating two essences to make a third,
Into a new receptacle of time?

The universe, addicted now to time,
Begins to weary of necessity;
Two musts mutate to an enfranchised third,
The fertile seed of the selective tree,
And life bursts forth in all its spring and fall,
And ghostly liberty begins to play.

Life's sexing shapes its swift-infolded play
Until its twinned snakes crack the egg of time,
And mind in human form performs its fall,

Slave-master of its own necessity.
Now swells the strange fruit of the human tree,
Not order, not the random, but a third,

This self-reflexive, agonizing third.
This is the meaning of the endless play:
The flower drives the root-tip of the tree,
Mind reaches back along the stream of time
To tune the stringings of necessity,
And wring a coiling springtime from a fall.

Springtime from fall, two fusing to a third,
Traceless necessity gives place to play.
All-branching time is but a flowering tree.

On the Precolumbian Zero¹

For Rosa Maria, Sergio, Alejandro, Vivianne, and Marisa

Cloaca of the sea, its salt perfume
Is all the money in Time's purse.
The zero is no cipher, but a womb.
Its fruit is nothing but the universe.

The zero's not an absence, but a glyph
That's always pregnant to be said.
The splay-head moguls grasp the rods of if,
Wherewith they join the living and the dead.

The only thing that nothing cannot spawn
Is nothing. You would need a god
Greater than master Tlaloc, to undawn
That first day as it bursts forth from its pod.

But still the naught's as silent as a clam;
The dark canals of Xochimilco
Dream in the rain behind their mountain-dam,
Cloudy volcanoes over Tulyehualco,

Where floating gardens swamped with azure flowers,
Shut fast as caracols or shells,
Wait for the morning light through the small hours,
And Sunday's twenty centuries of bells.

¹ The zero of the Mayans, Olmecs, and Aztecs was devised six hundred years before it first appears in the Old World among the Hindus. It is represented by a shell, *caracol* in Spanish; in the vigesimal system of counting, it is denoted by the suffix *-alli* for multiples of the base twenty. Carved on stelae it became a flower, or *flor* in Spanish, *xochitl* in the Nahuatl language.

.com

The merce in commerce is a hidden god.
Mercury flows through fiber-optic nerves
Billions of floating points in every second:
The market breaks and rallies, shrinks and swerves,
Its operations complex, rich, and fecund,
Its dark thought unimaginably odd.
There he is, youthful, in his petasus,
Sandalled with wings, golden, light-spirited,
And in his hand the snaked caduceus,
Wherewith he joins the living and the dead.

Prout's Neck, Maine

Who set these woodgrained stones just so?
Who trims the bilberry so fine?
Who dwarfed the pine, who set the glow
Upon the pink-horned columbine?

The bleachy driftwood, stamp-pressed whin,
The foot-played pebble xylophone,
The mallow lined with hyaline,
Who stops them getting overgrown?

Who sees to it the brilliant green
The wave takes, as it rears to break,
Is darkened into serpentine
And then dissolved to wedding-cake—

Yet paints its haunches shining blue?
It's all of you. It's all of you.

The Lady's Impatience

She:

I thought you'd grown out of this sort of thing;
So now I must endure a Valentine.
I am your wife. I wear your wedding ring.
I'm not a moon, a pearl, a columbine.

He:

But I can see the other side of you,
The bloodred jewels hidden in the mine,
The thousand feathers rustling in the dew,
The unselfknowing glint of the divine.

She:

Your old effusions always said such things.
You should be grateful. I gave up a lot
To live with you. But Juliet I'm not.

He:

A poet can see the rubies of your wings,
And nature knows what miracles we begot:
How can I help it if your beauty sings?

The Slave Forgers

The Nazis pumped the world with ten-pound notes.
Mauthausen printers set their flawless stamps—
Etched with fine waves and whorls and asymptotes
By Ashkenazi slaves starved in the camps—
On fine rag paper with a watermark,
Bearing the King's face and the British lion;
Seeking perfection, stared their lenses dark
While life bled from the ancient dream of Zion.
And the world's flow of gratitude and gain,
Poisoned by perfect art, was like to shrink:
Money that's not sired by the sovereign
Is as a bloodstream watered down with ink.
Just so today bad thought drives out the good:
Postmodern simulacra served for food.

View from the Metroliner

Abandon them. Leave them to rot,
These grimy precincts dying here,
Each boarded mill, each tire-choked lot,

Each torn fence patched with razorwire,
Where even hope no longer comes,
Beside the oily Delaware,

Where tidal flats cut off the slums
Along the Eastern Corridor,
Their shattered windows, rusting drums;

From pasteboard-peeling Baltimore
To Trenton, Newark, Hackensack,
Each oozing sump upon the shore,

Dead baby doll, wrecked Cadillac,
Each hopeless crime and reckless blot
Cries out to heaven on the rack,

Where nothing is but what is not,
And everyone has turned his back;
Abandon them. Leave them to rot.

On the Funeral of Princess Diana

Midwife to the mob that made you,
Mourned by eyes that would invade you,
Crucify a butterfly,
Princess Di.

Solace of the broken-hearted,
Dearly bought and dear departed,
Sweet tear in the nation's eye,
Princess Di.

Now you lie upon the altar,
Strangled by the people's halter,
Virgin by vox populi,
Princess, die.

Teacher Who Killed Sons Dejected

—*Newspaper headline*

It casts a certain pall on the occasion
When one recalls such contretemps to mind;
Lear did not brighten up the conversation
With his downcast remarks on humankind.
King Oedipus must have put quite a damper
Upon the bright festivities at Thebes,
Nor was Medea quite the happy camper
When talk would drift away from crested grebes.

So let us all remember not to tamper
With the light-hearted mood that should preside;
Forget the toddlers that would gaily scamper
Where, later, they unfortunately died:
And cheer up, everyone, for heaven's sake:
We're all entitled to the odd mistake.

To Milton

Milton, you are too greatly with us still.

Better than any, you knew Paradise,
And knew it pagan, sweet, arcadian.
In England's green and pleasant land we might
Have planted groves to Pan, to Vishnu, Jove,
To Quetzalcoatl and the Bodhisattvas;
And the rich cream that's milked from England's meadows
Might have drenched strawberries of happiness,
Of painted genius, music, theater.
Your pen wrote Cromwell into being, and drove
Titania, Thammuz, Proserpine away
Wailing among the shades of Hades, drove
Our English grammar into iron rails,
Drove out hypocrisy and Robert Herrick,
Plucked off the white plume from Prince Rupert's helm,
Murdered the Irish in their poor green glens,
And brought the axe down on King Charles's neck.
You brought Augustine's tearful self-concern,
Saint Paul's sincerity, and Luther's scorn,
And closed the theaters where Shakespeare played.
So powerful was thy "Thou" that after thee
No servant, lover, pupil or enemy
Might ever know himself to be a Thou
And the world faded into common "you".

And I am faithful to you yet, my noble Milton.
Your parliament became my nation's House,
Your Protestant right reason gave me science,
Your published epic wrote my role of poet.
No one wept more than you did when the axe
Of northern freedom and resentment

Struck down the sacred groves of Arcady;
Satan's republic, Pandaemonium,
Founded like Washington upon the Styx
You chose as home; you were the anguished spy
Who with your honeyed words corrupted Eden.
What other thing could England do than conquer?
Cook with his clocks and fire-forged musketry
Sailed through the chaos of the southern seas
And showed the Polynesians that they were
But lonely savages upon a storm-swept shore.
And I too follow Christ and his great light
Beyond the horizon of all I have been;
Twenty-five years ago I pledged my troth
To the starred flag of the rebel constitution;
I have grown wise and know Lucretius' terror
Of meaningless and empty luxury,
The boredom of Tiberius the god,
The dead end of an endless arcady.
I seek that precipice of mind and soul
Where Ends rear up above the far horizon
And death's dark blazes into blinding light.

But will we play with Jesus in the flowers
And steal the milkmaids' clothes while they go bathe?
Will we in Ulysses's nakedness,
After the deluge of the last great storm,
Behold the ballgame of Nausicaä?

Habits

First we make them,
Then we break them,
Then we make ourselves anew;

We're completed,
Self-conceited,
Find there's one thing left to do:

Break the habit
Of the habit,
Let ourselves be made by You.

Terminus

Behind the corner, over that far hill
Where the last train pulls into the last station
And steam expires into the gold dusk chill—
That's Peace Of Mind, the final destination.

And somewhere up ahead, the traveler,
Who now must haul his bag up on his shoulder,
Knows there's a place nearby where old friends are,
Friends who are never getting any older:

Some kind of cottage with a southwest view,
A kitchen-garden, as the mail insisted,
Grape-arbor, and an outdoor barbecue.
Who might have thought that such a place existed?

Halfway he stops and looks back with a sigh.
A plume of smoke still towers in the sky.

To All My Friends

That day we shall have time to ramble all day long,
Drink through the evening without drunkenness,
Stroll in the market and choose the best aubergines,
Read and reread each others' manuscripts,
Cook complicated meals with stocks and seething-pans,
Split seasoned logs and set them for a fire,
Draw each others' portraits, finish the argument,
Tell fortunes, label the old photographs,
Make fun of all each others' worst absurdities,
Disagree violently on films and plays,
And wake at dawn to pull on heavy hiking boots.
And in that place, my very dear good friends,
There will be mountaintops and bays and woods and breezes,
And little theaters and haciendas,
And bougainvillaea that covers up the dark verandas,
And olive groves and palms and fields of wheat.
This will be the place of free time, the place of death,
The sweet suburb of everlasting life.
The star that warms it will light up the giant orb
Of which this is the moon. Friends, until then,
Forgive my anxious travels and my vicious stress,
My rare and hurried letters, my duress,
My distantness, the flickering of my eyes.
I've not forgotten our old happiness.

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Frederick Turner, Professor of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas, was educated at Oxford University. A poet, critic, translator, philosopher, and former editor of *The Kenyon Review*, he has authored 27 books, including *The Culture of Hope*, *Genesis*, *Hadean Eclogues*, *Shakespeare's Twenty-First Century Economics*, *Paradise*, and *Natural Religion*.

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