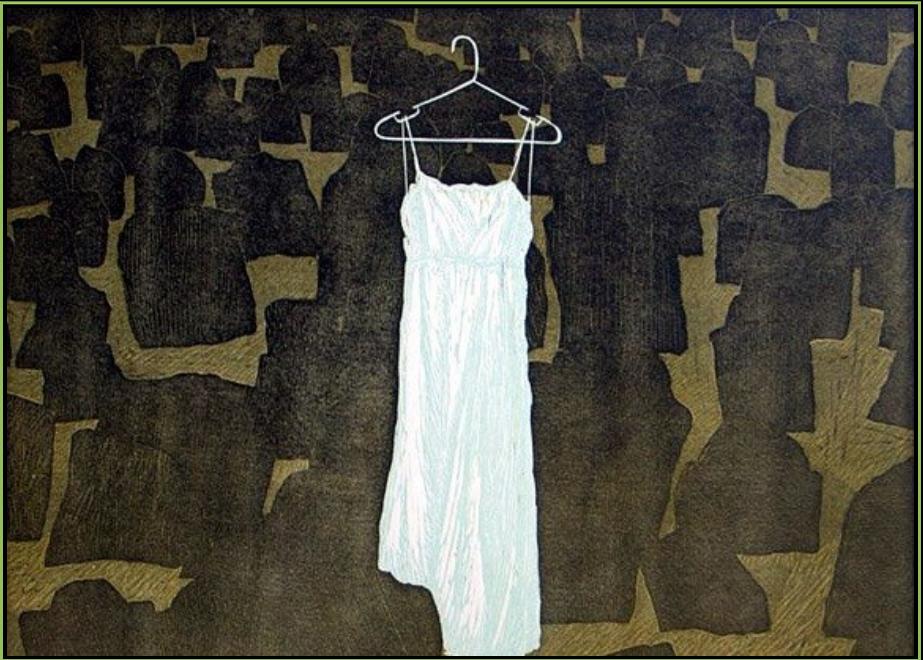


**Twenty Gently Used  
&  
Pre-owned Poems**

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*Because I said so: poems on the happiness and crappiness of parenthood*, ed. Kevin Patrick Lee (Garden Grove, CA: Aortic Books, 2011).

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## **Our Long Beach Back House**

Do you remember how that charming place  
where we first lived could barely heat the water?  
You'd fill your baths halfway, and in the space  
above I'd pour potfuls of what was hotter.  
You'd bring your knees to meet your chest, and I  
would carefully drop in what I had boiled,  
trip after trip until you were neck high  
in warmth and puffs of rising steam uncoiled.  
Between the trips I'd sit as you caressed  
my hands and newly filled-up pots began to bubble,  
and then I'd stand and you'd say I should rest,  
denying you deserved this little trouble.  
These days our water always comes out hot,  
but there are times I wish that it would not.

## **A Husband's Reassurance**

At four months in she hasn't felt a kick.  
This worries her, but I insist it's normal.  
She knows far more than I but likes to hear  
me say, "It's normal." Each week she lets me know  
what elements are being defined. Last week  
the fingerprints began to pattern; and now  
the taste buds grow acute, and it can slide  
its tongue out of its cheerio-sized mouth.  
She thinks that it's a boy because she craves  
more meat than usual; I laugh and say  
how I could picture both my son or daughter  
demanding that she eat a steak for dinner.

She's worried that she hasn't felt a kick.  
Her friend suggested that she drink a glass  
of juice and lie completely still. She's in  
the kitchen now, alone, stirring some type  
of fruit juice with our longest wooden spoon.  
Tonight there will be tears of one kind or  
another; but first she'll drink her glass, walk down  
the hall, and climb atop our bed, stretched out  
with hands positioned on her budding skin,  
awaiting the first flutter, the only one's  
assurance that can keep her mind from worry.

## **First Purchase after the Sonogram**

We called you “darling” months before we glimpsed  
your image on the monitor  
and claimed the pronouns “she” and “her”  
for you alone, and there, pressed up against

your mother’s skin, you were drawn out in sound:  
your limbs and digits, ribs and spine,  
assembling in a new design  
of “she” and “darling,” every movement bound

by photograph as our technician paused it,  
offering us each ashen still,  
the varied angles that will fill  
the little onesie dangling in your closet.

## **Ballet Class with a Blind Student Named Cricket**

“The world has never felt so pure before,”  
you tell the girls who leap into the air.  
When little Cricket leaps across the floor,

the other girls are careful to be sure  
to give her space, although she’s unaware;  
the world has never felt so pure before.

Because her blindness hinders her no more  
than Ludwig’s ears did him, the students stare  
when little Cricket leaps across the floor.

She trusts your voice and hand amid the corps  
of hopeful dancers swaying here and there;  
the world has never felt so pure before.

Her mother waits just past the corridor  
and sees the mirrors and walls completely bare.  
When little Cricket leaps across the floor,

she sees a sea of eyes and hears the roar  
of crowds who’ve come for her from everywhere.  
The world has never felt so pure before  
when little Cricket leaps across the floor.

## An Early Lunch at La Valencia

—*Prospect Street, La Jolla*

He tightened up his boots at 4 a.m.;  
by 5 he'd started work at his new site,  
    where damp and gritty light  
    encased him and the other men.  
The coastal side of this hotel on Prospect  
    had long been winter wrecked,  
    but they would build it up again,  
dismantling structures into separate piles,  
removing junk while salvaging old tiles.

He worked on walls left standing by machines  
whose clumsiness serves only to demolish.  
    The tiles when neatly polished  
    once again would gleam the greens  
and blues of summer waters. He loosened each  
    within the careful reach  
    of sledge and chisel breaking seams—  
his arms outstretched, accustomed to the sting  
of staying parallel between each swing.

He'd stripped down to a long-sleeve shirt by 8;  
at 9 he and the others broke for lunch,  
    assembled in a bunch  
    and seated on discarded slate.  
He'd seen most of these men at other sites—  
    shared bread atop the heights  
    of scaffolding. They'd congregate  
whenever time allowed, anticipating  
breaks for laughing or commiserating.

This time he ate while watching waves below,

oblivious to conversations stirred  
at hand, for he observed  
the patterns formed by swells in tow,  
how each crest crumbled at the very spot  
that broke the one it sought—  
where dark unmoving patches showed  
him crowds of rocks beneath the water's face,  
the hidden causers of that breaking place.

A wave will always peak then shatter right  
as it has crossed a depth half its own height;  
the place of impact switches when  
the tide rolls in or out  
or when the rocks and sandbars shift about.  
He'll work this job weeks more, and then  
he'll work some other site—  
a different scene first met in gritty light,  
a different spot to break for lunch again.

## **Bird Watching at the Coast of La Jolla**

*—for N. A., per jocum*

The landscape can't be beat. The coastline boasts  
the most attractive beaches in the west,  
whose waters I grew up in and where hosts  
of pelicans and cormorants would rest,  
their fish-filled stomachs working to digest.

But now a more voracious avis stays  
affixed to cliffs and shores where it pursues.  
The coast is overrun with popinjays  
who perch and brood in nests with ocean views,  
all feathered by their BMWs.

## Catullus to Varus, Regarding a Mutual Friend

—after the Latin of Catullus 22

That Suffenus, a guest in both our homes,  
is charming, full of wit, and quite urbane,  
and he produces piles and piles of poems.

I think he's written thousands, maybe more,  
but unlike us, he doesn't jot them on  
recycled paper or scratch-bits before

the lines are set. He types on nothing less  
than sheets of cotton, watermarked, then binds  
the bunch in vellum at some self-serve press.

When they are read, Suffenus, that deft, shrewd,  
and handsome guy, sounds like he should be milking  
cows instead, or doing something else as crude.

What should we think of this? That same dear friend  
who seemed to be a clever man appears  
inept the moment that his poems are penned,

and he is never more elated than  
when writing poems, delighting in himself  
so much. We're all deceived now and again

like him, for every one of us is known  
as a Suffenus, entitled to delusions,  
but others' faults obstruct us from our own.

## Horace to Postumus, Regarding a Somber Truth

—after the Latin of Horace, Odes 2.14

This course is rough, my friend, my long and valued friend;  
the years speed by, and no degree of honest living  
    can lessen wrinkles, make age more forgiving,  
    or force unyielding death to bend.

No gifts—regardless of how great, no matter when—  
could quiet tearless Pluto, who, beyond the lines  
    that mark his dismal water's edge, confines  
    the strongest and the cruelest men.

Assuredly, that surface must be sailed across  
by all, each one of us relying on the earth  
    for sustenance, if we're of noble birth  
    or farmers of those very crops.

With pointless caution we'll avoid the violent ocean  
and pounding waves, or any conflict too severe;  
    when winter's harmful weather strikes, we'll fear  
    the cold with bodily devotion.

The black rivers, meandering with sluggish streams,  
must have their visitors—where crowds of murderous wives  
    and cheats who stole or swindled in their lives  
    perform grim tasks to match their schemes.

Your house must be abandoned with your stretch of land,  
and certainly your pleasing wife, and all of these  
    magnificent and labored-over trees  
    you cultivate by your own hand.

Your smarter heir won't pause to drink your vintage labels—

the wine you guarded with a hundred keys; he'll stain  
the pavement with what's harder to obtain  
than that poured out at royal tables.

## **What I Would Have Said to Mike Standing on the Edge of the Coronado Bridge**

*—for B. C.*

Get down from there and hear me out.  
It's difficult for you these days.  
I don't doubt that, and I don't doubt  
you want your pain to go away.

It's difficult for you these days  
because you're drenched in agony.  
You want your pain to go away,  
and most of it will fade, you'll see.

Because you're drenched in agony,  
you'll towel it off with others' help  
and most of it will fade. You'll see  
all burdens ease the more they're held.

You'll towel it off. With others' help  
allow yourself some time to know  
all burdens ease the more they're held.  
That, you have barely seen. Don't go.

Allow yourself some time to know  
there's much to live for in this world  
that you have barely seen. Don't go.  
You'll soon forget about the girl.

There's much to live for in this world.  
I don't doubt that, and I don't doubt  
you'll soon forget about the girl.  
Get down from there and hear me out.

## To Gerry Locklin, Professor Emeritus

*—on his retirement from over four decades  
of teaching at Cal State Long Beach*

I've read that most of Schubert's works remained unknown in his brief life, that decades passed before a symphony or opera gained a portion of the praises now amassed.

This is the case with many artists who don't get to realize the impacts made by their results, the efforts that pass through each generation with their worth reweighed.

But this is not the case with you, who's seen his many printed poems and fictions clutched by eager hands, and what is less routine and what can never be assessed or touched

remains imprinted on your students' minds, an admiration that securely binds.

## **Rubliw for Tom Waits**

Hey Waits,  
Keep loose the gates  
and flood this land with crates  
of tunes that pipe our candid states.  
Your blend of word and melody creates  
a sweet and sordid joy that skates  
across our dirtied slates.  
Each age awaits  
such greats.

## Mr. Updegraff to Mr. Updike

Dear Mr. Up,

I've yet to place a book  
of fiction on the shelf, but if I do  
and it gets lost among your many works  
(perhaps a tired librarian mistook  
our names—a careless browser reinserted  
my slim book not to the left of you  
and your long row, but left it to fight through  
that endless sea, or else to drown in words  
as well conceived as any in the room),  
please know that I am honored by the fact  
that it would be misplaced in your great stack;  
not many shelves would have as fine a tomb  
as one  
built by the masterworks you've done.

But maybe it would be correctly filed,  
a foolish child next to such stately men,  
an ant beside a brotherhood of beasts.  
Then it would be content against your pile,  
unless some Updesmaff or Updice beats  
the little volume from its spot. Pretend,  
though, that such a thing will not occur. Then,  
when we have headed for our last retreats,  
our final writings having been compiled,  
perhaps someone, in search of you, will see  
my book and slide it out, or possibly  
she'll come for me but take you down the aisle  
instead,  
ensuring that we'll each be read.

(Note: This poem was written in 2005 and first published in 2008, a few months before John Updike's death in January 2009)

## **A Too-late Letter to Thom Gunn**

—*T. G. (1929-2004)*

Dear Mr. Gunn,

You've helped me loosen up.  
I used to think that syllables combined  
to form some thing in likeness to a cup,  
some holder that was rigidly defined.  
Instead, you've demonstrated that a poem  
in structured verse is not composed of clay,  
nor is it chipped and fashioned from a stone,  
revealing patterns from what's cut away.  
The likeness of a cadenced poem reflects  
the composition of musicians' notes;  
unbruised, unbent, each well-placed word collects  
within a frame of ink that somehow floats.  
Your lines succeed because they clearly show  
that verse is not a chopped up paragraph  
in which words run without a pleasant flow.

Indebted to you,  
Derek Updegraff

## The Edge Where Atlas Stands

A routine blood test with my dad's oncologist  
had brought me to another waiting room.  
As resolute as any to resist  
the storm, my dad—though he is not immune  
to everything as we  
young men once thought our fathers were—  
fought through immeasurable hours to endure  
his chemotherapy.

Across from where I sat, a mother and her son  
were talking as I read a magazine.  
It looked as though each loved the other one—  
while speaking, they kept little space between  
their laughter and their smiles;  
though his condition was severe,  
she managed to conceal a parent's greatest fear  
as he went through his trials.

After his veins were freshly stuck, my dad returned—  
(the much-used catheter was recently  
removed out of his chest). We quickly learned  
his white-cell count was rising steadily,  
but we could not yet tell  
the damage of the storm until  
more tests and time progressed. I pray the waves keep still  
and never, never swell.

Our choices are our own, but things are set so none  
can choose another body's burdens or its strains:  
a mother can't switch places with her stricken son;  
a healthy son can't shoulder all his father's pains.

## Postbellum

*—on my dad's return to the classroom*

It seems as if mere days have passed  
since I was sitting in your chair.

A sly imposter masked  
by your same chin, decked in a suit  
and tie and shirt like you would wear,  
I was the substitute

who'd come to hear your students give  
the recitations they'd prepared.

I'd listen and relive  
my high-school days as each would go,  
seeing myself, awkward and scared,  
reciting Cicero.

But you have managed to reclaim  
the role that no one else could fill,  
and you, who overcame  
such cruel adversity, surpassed  
my comprehension of a will.

Now I, seemingly cast

of a similar mold, remain  
amazed by strength and faith displayed  
despite your length of pain.  
Know this: no orator of any year  
could tell of all the impacts made  
by having you still here.

## **Our Unmet Stages**

She sleeps there on the couch, exhausted from  
a morning of demi- and grande-pliés,  
exhausted from her students overcome  
with dreams to dance in their most-loved ballets.

She grips a pillow as her legs begin  
to twitch. She thinks about her many girls  
whose dreams will have to bend or break within  
the coming years, as each harsh fact uncurls.

Life's sweetest days are spent embracing stages  
that were never built for us to use,  
when passions weren't funneled into wages,  
when talents didn't guide the routes we'd choose.

There is no tenderness in skill's selection;  
praise God there is in those who ease rejection.

## **On Winter Beards and the Length of Seasons**

With April on its way, I shaved,  
and I was only slightly shocked  
to see a double chin emerge.  
Three months, I thought. Three months of weights  
will sharpen it again. Three months  
will thicken up the arms and pecs.

A season's length is adequate  
for self improvements, whether they  
are realized or brushed aside.

It measures expectations in  
a manageable dose. It fuels  
the hope that what waits just ahead  
will not resemble this. And then  
it fools us with a different scene  
so we think all is not the same.

## First Spring in Columbia, Missouri

—after the Latin of Catullus 46

At last the spring revives more pleasing weather.  
At last the clamor of the dismal sky  
is calmed by the delightful winds of Zephyr.

Before too long a sultry surge will roast  
this Midwest town. Let's go somewhere. Let's tour  
these plains then jet to California's coast.

At last my mind is stirred, at last inspired,  
craving to wander in this warmth and coolness.  
At last my feet awaken with desire.

Take care, dear friends, all you who first set out  
from home on well-mapped paths but now return  
by roads that form an unexpected route.

## Between Pit Stops at Late-night Diners

*—Be wise, remove the dregs from the wine, and with the  
space of our lives being short, prune away long hope.*

Horace, *Odes* 1.11

Sweetness,

You're right. Our route looks vague, but I  
will always long for scrambled eggs and toast  
at 2:00 a.m. with you, for the dark roast  
of diner coffee with loose dregs, the sigh  
of harnessed furniture, the fickle sky,  
and for sharp winds colliding with the coast,  
but I will long to keep long hope the most;  
its limbs get pruned enough by passersby.

Let's let ours thrive among these grounds suppressed  
by U-Haul traces and uncertain jobs  
and pack it with us if we find it's time  
to move again; let's douse it with the best  
of cheap champagnes, then marvel as it bobs  
among treetops, magnificent, sublime.

We'll keep it in its prime  
always, our sweet long hope, caressingly  
maintaining it against adversity.

Now in uncertainty,  
let's keep each of our shorter hopes at hand  
but not neglect the long ones we have planned.

## Long Beach Madsong for Elizabeth

Remember when I'd pick you up  
in my Buick?—we'd cruise the town  
and hit our favorite haunts,  
those bars and restaurants  
we'd revel in till they'd close down.

How few were our concerns back then;  
you'd work your morning shifts, I'd clean  
and lock the same café  
at night, and we would stay  
attached each minute in between.

Oh how we snubbed frugality,  
exchanging tips for wines that cost  
ten bucks or even more  
down at the corner store  
your studio and Broadway crossed.

One roof now—but watch the door tonight;  
I'll pick you up to cruise this town,  
like days before this mad  
man wore a tux or had  
his mad gal in a wedding gown.



**Derek Updegraff** teaches literature and creative writing courses at the University of Missouri, where he is completing a dissertation on Ælfric of Eynsham's *Lives of Saints*. His poems, translations, and short stories have appeared in *Natural Bridge*, *Metamorphoses*, *Light Quarterly*, *descant*, *The Chiron Review*, *The Lyric*, *Blue Unicorn*, *The Deronda Review*, and elsewhere. A native of San Diego, he holds an MFA from Cal State Long Beach. He currently lives in Columbia, Missouri, with his wife and two daughters.

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