



**every evening
is december**

poems by j.lewis

**every evening is
december**

j.lewis

Copyright © James E. Lewis (j.lewis), 2018

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, retained or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

Published by *Praxis Magazine*

Address: Plot D49 Nsukka Street, Garki, Abuja 970001 Nigeria

“Walk Me Home” photo: © Geoffrey Lewis, 2015

All other photos including Cover: © James E. Lewis (j.lewis)

Other artwork copyrights are noted on the pages where they appear

Foreword: © Ama Udofa, 2018

Book Design/Layout: Laura M Kaminski



Foreword by Ama Udofa

There is an overused saying that “one picture is worth a thousand words.” What if, however, words and pictures went together, side by side? j.lewis’ works provide a compelling answer to this question. Following up his full-length poetry and photography collection *a clear day in october* with this evocative and visually striking body of work, *every evening is december* commands rather than requests introspection.

The poems in this chapbook explore, among others, themes of family, hope, and forgiveness. In “the other fathers,” the persona asks questions: “do you send a card/ to the half-remembered face who/ stranded you with questions/ that would never be answered...” The poem ends in a note to self to be a better father to his own child. A story of a tragic death that still haunts the family is told in “tractors are for men.” In “abyss,” “the weight of a single word/ is sometimes sufficient/ to shift the balance/ over and down.” In “sliding away,” the persona reflects on dealing with loss of a loved one to cancer, and its aftereffects on two generations, one having “...rode his horses across the new mexico hills/ looking for her, for himself, for answers” Having tried toing different path to healing over the years, watched her “slipping too/ less memory, less harmony, less energy,” he ends the poem in regret for being so much his father’s son.

While “follow me to africa” begins by touching on western view of the continent and its commensurate stereotypes, it becomes a personal plea for readers to give Africa a break from the stilted portrayal of life on the continent, because even after the cameras cut, “life begins and ends/ and begins again/ in the rainbow of the women/ who simply continue walking/ forward.”

This is the essence of *every evening is december* as it travels through multiple external and internal landscapes. As the reader joins the poetic persona on the road and reaches the edge of abyss after abyss – betrayal, frustration, loss, stereotyping, despair, loneliness – an opportunity for transformation takes place inside the landscape of the poem, a strengthening of resolution or a glimpse of hope. Whatever it takes to “simply continue walking/ forward.”

Ama Udofa
February, 2018

Ama Udofa studies Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, and writes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. In August 2017, his essay won The Igby Prize for Nonfiction. Same year, he was long-listed in The Writivism Short Story Prize. His writing has appeared at Praxis Magazine Online, Brittle Paper, AFREADA, Kalahari Review, African Writer, and in several other online spaces.

Contents

Foreword by Ama Udofa	i
creation songs.....	1
the other fathers.....	2
aging children.....	3
dark wolves howling.....	4
sliding away	6
hotel dreams	7
landlocked.....	7
The Temptations of Mary.....	10
follow me to africa.....	13
tractors are for men.....	14
death trap.....	15
hiding the truth.....	17
there were warnings	17
abyss.....	19
follow the colorado	21
janus	22
riddle of renewing.....	24
night life.....	25
a tale of talents	26
goodbye sounds like.....	27
red bridge	29
even devils suffer	30
walk me home.....	32
Acknowledgments.....	33
About the Author.....	33

creation songs

before there was earth to walk on
before the salted sea rushed
its brushed jazz rhythm against the shore
long before wind came sniffing
across the bamboo forest, searching
for the soft vibration of hollow tubes
music pulsed through the universe
pervasive and pregnant with possibility

when the earth grew round past containing
when it birthed every creature
groaning and spitting fire
beneath the labored pain
music whispered to the heaving globe
calming and quieting the bright flows
shushed the bellowing, trumpeting calls
of new born life, lulled them to rest

every creature knows those birth songs
chants them for each new generation
teaches all young things to listen
to the call of creation

but oh, the special gift to those
who have hands to hold, lips to breathe
across a hollow reed, a dried bone flute
releasing the haunting melodies
of first music, first lullaby, first birth



the other fathers

how exactly do you phrase
happy father's day
to the man who beat you daily
for existing
for not being perfect
talking too soon
or not soon enough

do you love him anyway?

what do you say to someone
who made a deposit
and walked away without
waiting for a receipt
not caring if his seed money
bore any interest

can you love a man you never knew?

do you send a card
to the half-remembered face who
stranded you with questions
that would never be answered
at least not in this life
will your aching longing
supply a forwarding address

will you love a man you can't locate?

will you be man enough
will you stand up and make this vow—
i will be what he was not
i cannot condemn another generation
to the poverty of an absent father

aging children

why do songs last longest
longer even than the memory
of smells that call us home
my mother sang her mother's songs
as i sing hers to you
too small to join the chorus
but that will come

that will come
when time and growing spin you
make star trails in your sky
lullabies will fade to whatever
is popular at the moment
but in the isolated nights
always the little tunes

always the tunes
that cement you in place
along the branching scrawl
you will sing them to yourself
or to a budding leaf that you
yourself have molded
you age, it's true, but rhymes
and melodies do not

melodies do not
leave us alone or lonely
like sap that ebbs in autumn
rises again in spring, the voiced
love that taught a hundred mothers past
will teach a thousand yet to come
as children come, and come of age
humming softly, and softly fade away

dark wolves howling

Scene 1

there is a wondrous space around their home
an island in a wild sea of uncertainty
where nothing fanged or evil ever comes
nothing passes father's vigil

eight young to gather close, to nurse
to manhood, womanhood. eight to launch
into the wind-whipped ocean's peril
years and so much fear of what might befall
grind against mother's constant surveillance
as eight dwindles to one, then none

Scene 2

years of immediate vigil and surveillance over
preparations begin for their personal odyssey
travels to distant places. time alone.
and in the unsuspecting night, the wolves
slink in so quietly, so intimately, there is
no alarm until the wolfhunter frowns

this small dark body, here, and here
he points to celluloid that should show
bone, silhouetted breasts, lungs
clean and clear, with only the pull
of gravity and years to shape them

he pronounces the words carefully
but they have stopped listening because
every patch of whiter hue is winter's hand
every branching shadow, a tree that harbors
wolves, dark and menacing, red eyes burning
wolves on the rocks, wolves inside her
feeding recklessly, feeding at will
and multiplying.

Scene 3

wolfhunter swings his blade, claiming some,
but not every hungry beast.
he never understands how there can be so many
in such small places, how they can hide so well.
he calls the poisoner, readies the gamma guns

she takes the assault in stoic silence
week after week. she can't eat, can barely drink
but she resists. claims that no wolf, alone
or in swarming packs will take her down
before she knows that her eight
the ones she bought with such diligence
have survived beyond the sea's reach

message sent and answered – all are well

Scene 4

back in the eerie dark of the hunter's home
mother, father stare together at the newest look
inside the fortress she still keeps
see nothing good, nothing good. hunter bows out,
his last advice is to go home, rest,
say goodbye while you have breath for that

from deep inside the wolves howl louder

Scene 5

she is slipping in and out of this world
flirting with the next, checking for any sign
that what is eating her here might slide through
someone else's vigil and make heaven a hell
a smile comes over her, replacing the tight clenched frown
she has worn for two long years. she knows at last
how to win this war. opening the valves of every capillary
vein, and artery, she bleeds the essence of her old self
away, starving the fanged destroyers. with a tired sigh,
she steps effortlessly over a frozen river
into a wolfless world.

sliding away

my family is sliding away from me
mother slipped away twenty-six years ago
left dad hanging on for dear life
adrift in a year of confusion, he rode
his horses across the new mexico hills
looking for her, for himself, for answers
though he already knew that cancer had none

today was mother's birthday and i had forgotten
totally, completely, maybe selfishly because
i am so wrapped up in other slippages
children with mental illness who are never right
never quite near enough to wrap arms around
wrap hearts around, rescue, protect

the years have drained their mother dry
and i watch her slipping too
less memory, less harmony, less energy
she used to love bringing us to table, delighted
in new flavors, new twists on old favorites
today may be a simple call for pizza delivery
or just a bowl of soup from the microwave
i'm holding onto her, two-fisted grip, refusing
to let her slide away, slide away

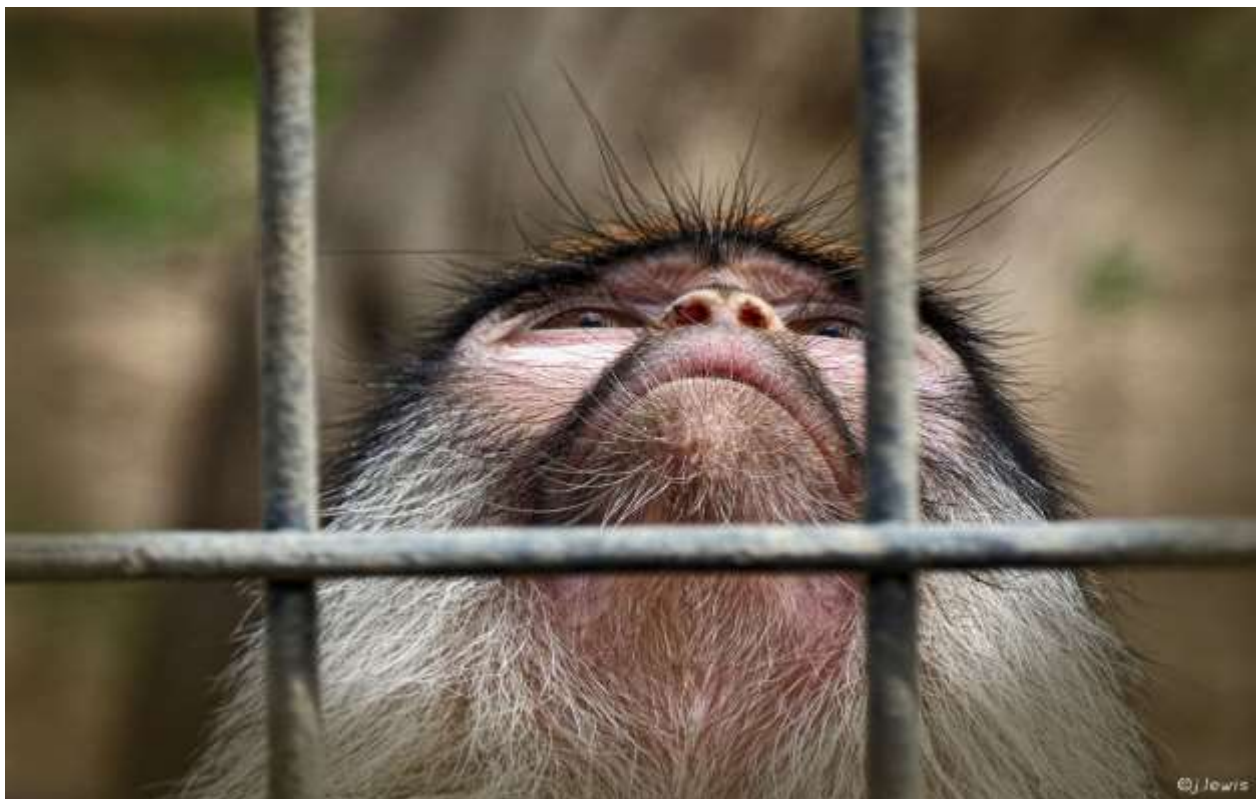
every conversation with father is a dirge
of regret. he wants his children closer physically,
emotionally. he needs the reassurance of touch
to know that we are not gone, that he still matters
he has entered the painful "if only" years where little
is golden, dreams turned to lead, to dust
and yet he fights, clings to life
with the same bulldog tenacity that gave me the will
to do the hard things that hard times require
i ache for his inability to love himself more
to trust, to forgive what might have been
feel the warmth of what is, and what will be
before he slides away

ache too, for being so much my father's son

hotel dreams

a weariness that time brings
to carpets, to walls
oozes into the mattress
permeates the pillow

once my eyes close
i am a ready victim for
uneasy, unearthly dreams
left by every traveler
who shared this tattered room

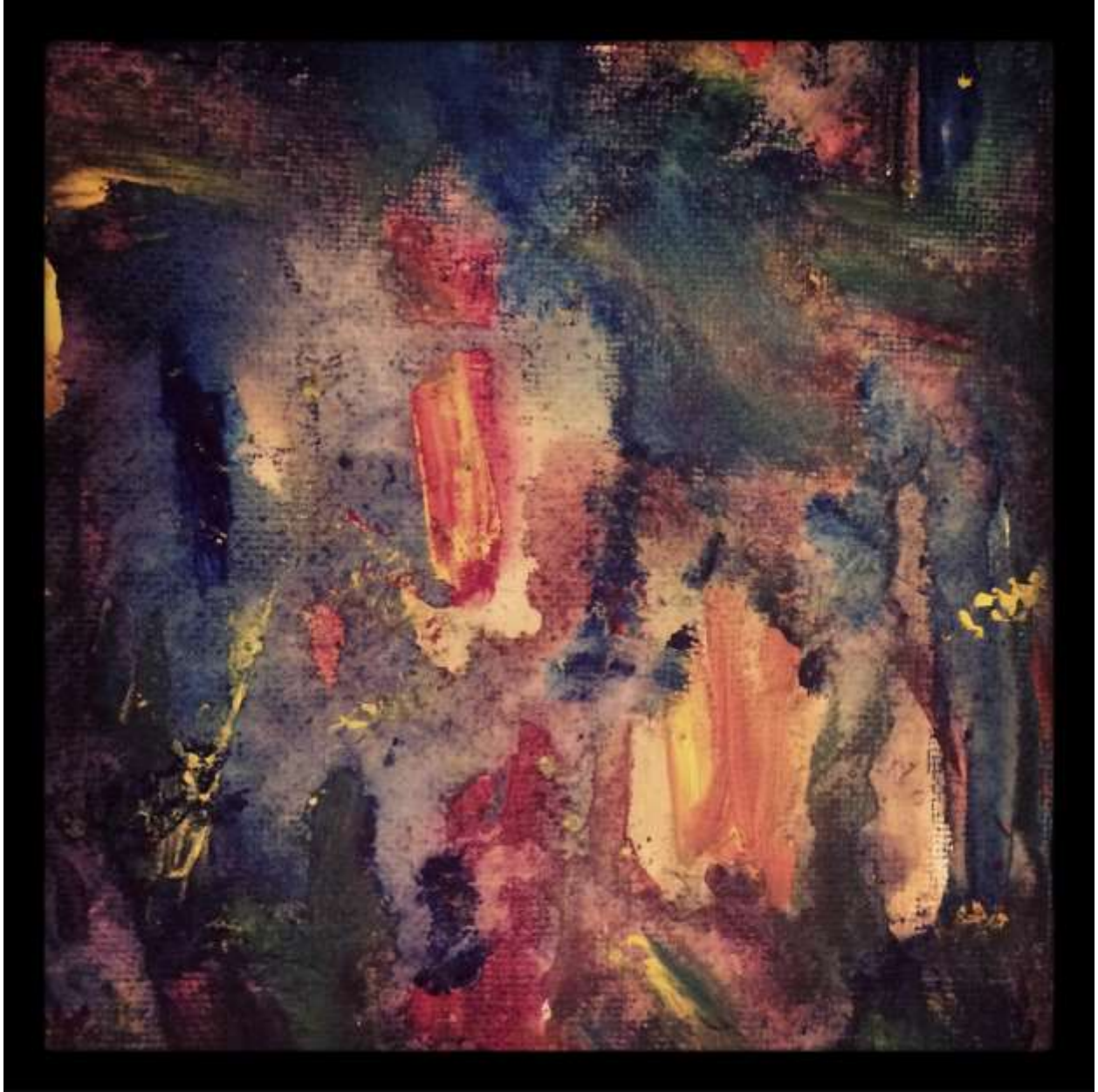


landlocked

two lanes go through my town
faded shoulder stripes
double yellow warning in the middle:
DO NOT CROSS
and here or there the makings
of yet another pothole

yesterday i closed my eyes
trying to remember
the sound of seagulls
the kick of salt spray
heavy odors of a low-tide beach
and nothing came
nothing came





"The Temptations of Mary"
Acrylic on Canvas
Amy Buchert © 2016
used with permission

The Temptations of Mary

Prologue

Serpent broods in darkness, silence.
Ponders his next move, remembers
lessons well-learned in prior battles.
Frontal assault and direct rebellion
are tactics to avoid when fighting gods.

Subtlety brought early success
abused the innate trust of woman,
by packaging the proposal
in fifty percent recycled truth.
In well woven lies, it's hard to tell
one tapestry thread from another.

Scene one

Mary sits alone, brooding over 'the visit'.
Gabriel has come and gone. For us, the record is silent
on how he appeared. Did he descend as angel of light,
speak in thunderous words only she could hear?
Or did he merely knock, a stranger with
a gentle dignity that compelled her? Only Mary knows.
She contemplates a visit to her cousin in the country.

Scene two

Well past two in the morning, Mary cannot sleep.
Every line she rehearses mocks her.
How can she ask this carpenter she loves
to believe when she herself questioned
the simple biology of never having known a man?
'God,' she whispers softly, 'what do I tell him?'

Scene three

The heat in the room is suddenly unbearable,
and as she stands to fasten the curtains back,
sparks, smoke, and a stench of sulfur

fill her tiny chamber. No heavenly messenger, this
apparition in red can bring no blessed announcement.
Lips move in a fiery face, but the words form in her mind,
"Mary, Mother of God. Why are you troubled?"
"Why not be troubled?" she counters.

"Surely they will believe you?" the voice mocks.
"Tell them you didn't, that you knew no one."
She knows the penalty for unwed girls
who shame their families,
shatter godly laws for pleasure.
Knows exactly what she has not done.

"What will you do?" The heat intensifies
around the devilish figure
as thoughts crowd her mind.
"I don't know, I don't know, I don't KNOW!"
Tears flow as the specter gestures,
right hand pointing down into darkness.
"There is a way out, Mary.
Fall into the welcome night,
where sins are buried forever.
No need to stay for the stoning."
Mary shivers as hellish death clouds her mind.
She feels her baby stir, kick hard.
She faints.

Epilogue

On a hillside over Bethlehem, an angry serpent broods
beneath a bright new star.



follow me to africa

away from the hollywood scenes
the misleading lines that
are spoken so cleverly
that poverty is just
background to the story

away from movie sets
where massacres are lies
and every bloodied extra
stands and goes to lunch
when the cameras cut

away from news channels
ranting about ebola
barking about scientists
barred from their own conventions
for fear of the unseen

follow me to africa
where color moves across the sand
across the land
where life begins and ends
and begins again
in the rainbow of the women
who simply continue walking
forward

tractors are for men

there was always one
 sometimes two
we knew them
knew not to climb up
tires twice as tall
as we were
into the hard metal
seat without a spring

there was danger
in the air
 in the rust
 in the smell
of oil and dust

we knew the story of the cousin
before we knew phrases
like 'dropped in gear'
and 'popped the clutch'
carried in our hearts
the story of that day
when he did both

careless, some said
key left in like that
but never aloud
around my uncle

we heard the story
of the tractor that
roared to life
took the gear and clutch
mistake and simply
did a back-flip body slam
and the cousin screamed
once
 only once
 but it carried

to the farmhouse
to his father
whose anguished piercing 'no!'
still swirls around the yard
the door, the barn
and troubles his dreams



death trap

mosquito in bathtub, early morning
flew madly in a tight circle
barely three inches across
rising to the level of escape
and no higher, no straighter
descended to rest for seconds
then traced again the whirlwind path
in the opposite direction

i thought of children's games
spinning for the sheer delight
of dizzy falling in the grass
laughter and friendship caught up
in the twirling fun

mosquito alone was a puzzle
a curiosity that nagged at the part
of my poor brain that always asks
"why? why does it happen that way?"
leaping unbidden to analogies
asking me to explain the times
when i have flown madly in circles
reversing course, unwinding
always missing the easy path out
so visible over the horizon



hiding the truth

he painted our winding road into a distant perspective point
more watercolor than realism, details merely implied, but
always the promise that over every hill, around each bend
he would add another scene, the two of us moving inseparably
through life's panorama

the last two years, he painted a lie along the center line
rich sunshine yellow. added clouds whose shapes
i failed to recognize, bright edges of deception over
a coquette sun, peeping, hiding

he knew his palette was running dry, but never shared
mixed tears into the background wash to keep me from the truth
until the day he dropped his brushes, stranded me
at the ragged edge of color, grief bleeding off the page



there were warnings

in the run-up to the moment
when the world was ripped again
shrapnel and smoke
tears and terror
death and destruction rained
down and sideways and through us

there were moments that mattered
instances ignored that in looking back
were telling us about the lapses
that made all this mayhem possible

like the slow, silent suffocation
of methane in a mine
greed and godless hunger for power
have seeped through every country
every culture, quietly and consistently
pushing out the breath of life
the sense of community, of humanity
that ties us together
until we collapsed en masse
our uncomprehending eyes
astonished to find warnings
written on the wings of dead canaries

abyss

i have seen the abyss
from the closest edge
stared into the darkness
that has no bottom
that waits to devour
whatever
whoever
stands too close
it is so easy to lose
a fragile grip
the weight of a single word
is sometimes sufficient
to shift the balance
over and down

i have seen the abyss
from somewhere below
shivered in the chill
of love and life gone wrong
felt my neck-hair rising
rigid with the fear of destruction
of losing even myself
in this chasm of nothingness

i have seen the sun
rising above the rim
of this canyon of despair
cried with joy
at the unexpected redemption
as i stood again
on the edge of the abyss
facing into the light



follow the colorado

path of least resistance is the proffered explanation
for the winding, bending, doubling back in horseshoe turns
colorado river coiled, writhing across the map

in its lazy wandering in and out of seasons
and through millenia of erosion
river has descended to confinement
former easy path now the only way
from mountain to sea

i am the river, through and through
the easy paths chosen, the hard rocks
that refused my persistent advances
softer soil that yielded to my seductive babbling
life etched deep into canyons of habit
too deep to escape, too familiar to leave

and so we reach our endings
the colorado and i
following the relentless pull
of gravity
of eternity
calling us seaward
calling us home

janus

i feel no need to wait
delay the celebration
for the passing of the old
the coming of the new

every morning is january
i stand quietly
examining my heart—
in the mirror
is an eager face
eyes forward and shining
embodiment of hope
that tomorrow
or even the rest of today
holds the fulfillment
of promises made
to or by me

every evening is december
my silent introspection
looks back at me
with a longing face
eyes dim with the mist
of memories already old
a reflection on the sorrows
of today and yesterday and year
sadness for the loss
of promises broken
on or by me



riddle of renewing

evergreen should always mean
a tree that doesn't lose its leaves
not deciduous, nor bare in winter

but then there comes this riddle—
where does the forest floor
find its deep carpet of needles
tapestry of life unwinding
in tans and browns and grays
on their way to humus
providing life for the next
generation of giants

here is the wisdom of the question—
that which would continue green
must daily release anything
everything no longer needed
forget yesterday's yearnings
focus on feeding the present
so tomorrow will not want

i would be an evergreen—
past deeds scattered on the wind
forgotten in favor of nurturing now
quietly letting the good i have done
become nutrient soil to my soul
and to those sheltered seedlings
sprung from me

night life

when blankets have been pulled to chins
like shop front doors rolling down
to kiss the sidewalks goodnight

when street lights and bedroom lamps
slide into darkness leaving
a neon sign, a night-light glowing

when the soft hum of the city
is echoed in the rhythmic breath
of sleeping family

then is the time i feel alive
mind open, alert, hungry
bringing together the day's events
street-sweeping the news
from gutters and corners where
the details try to hide
seeking out the little things that matter

then is the time i open books
read, think, pace, write
stand at the shadowed window
reveling in my solitude
these honeyed moments of owning
the stillness of the night

a tale of talents

*"And unto one he gave five talents,
to another two, and to another one;
to every man according to his several ability"
(Matthew 25:15)*

and that's how it stacked up
the master, who knew which servant had the most moxie
gave him the most to work with, and without saying a thing
left him to sort out what to do with such a treasure
well, of course he published a book of poetry
which sold out and doubled his money within the week

mr. mediocre got two talents for seed money
not a huge deal, but enough to pay for a workshop or two
get a chapbook printed to place outside the synagogue
where anyone with a spare shekel might enjoy his words
two months later, not only has he recouped two talents,
he's jingling two more in his pockets

ah, but the man with one talent, what of him
one talent won't get you published, or educated in the ways
of scribbling out some chiasitic masterpiece
so he bought pens and paper and wrote
little verses that captured his heart
the smile of a child safe in her father's arms
solemn scenes when God spoke peace
to a grieving widow stripped of friends and family
daily observations that shaped him
into a quiet, determined disciple

when the master asked for an accounting
he got his talents back from the five and two guys
doubled in value which pleased him no end
they slapped each other's backs excitedly
smirking just a little as the 'one talent poet'
presented the master with the return on his singular gift
a handwritten volume of illustrated poems

to which came the unexpected response
well done, beloved, well done
i knew your heart when i gave you less

so you could rise up and do more
come sit with me and let us read
your book of life together



j.lewis: every evening is december

goodbye sounds like

when you are the passenger
no dash-mount panic handle
car and driver
taking the corner hard
hearing tires complain
in their own peculiar voice
shouting goodbye to pavement
soon to be abandoned
stomach tightens
and a frightened breath in
betrays you to the one
who grips your heart
hard like the steering wheel
and then to emphasize the ride is over
raises both hands and lets you go

the screeching screaming warning
of impending separation
takes so very long
to fade away

red bridge

there was a vague point
at which he stopped counting
the hours, days, and weeks
since rejection...
nothing specific to hail
and say hooray, hoorah;
she doesn't matter enough
to keep this calendar vigil

all that ties him to her
is a vivid photograph
of a red bridge
where they fed giant koi
and marvelled at how huge
each fish had grown

and in perfect
unintended symbolism,
the bridge,
that blood red bridge
is absolutely empty



even devils suffer

despite the carnelian wings
that ought to lift you to places
where you might deal deception and death
i see your brawn has melted into hungry sinews

of course you know that acorns are no sustenance
when there are faithful quiet saints to feed on
but you are an enigma planted here
gripping the green, perhaps in agony
perhaps just meditating on
your next assault on truth

and still my urge to nurture
bids me offer food and drink
i wonder what becomes of those who succor
anyone in need, ignoring the color of the wing
the darkness of the eye
the scars that evil leaves



Illustration from an Italian book of proverbs made by the engraver and painter Giuseppe Maria Mitelli (1634–1718 (from publicdomainreview.org))

if kindness be a sin

they are, as a group, despicable
murderers, rapists, dealers, drunks
supposedly the worst in all of us
that has found expression
often in violence

i am accused, myself
not of such heinous crimes
but of ignoring their weight and
speaking in softer tones, using
words like "mister" and "please"
or worse "how can i help you"
when those around me know
what i consciously choose to not know
that the person before me
just last week, took someone's life

my willful avoidance of knowledge
shields me from a rush to judgement
allows me to offer healing and comfort
to those least deserving
just as i seek healing and comfort
in my imperfection

it is my doorway to evening prayers
wherein i plead forgiveness
for every transgression but one
if kindness be a sin, oh Lord
then may i be a thousand times condemned

walk me home

black and white photograph
small boy seen from behind
one hand held out
walking a dusty path
oblivious to the future
to danger and disappointment
to delights bigger than he

you project onto him
your own tired journey
yearn for that moment in life
when you were trouble free

but i know that boy
because i am that boy
who knew even at four
that something was missing
that an empty hand
on an unknown road
is terribly wrong



Acknowledgments

The author and *Praxis Magazine Online* would like to thank the editors of the publications where some of the pieces in this chapbook originally appeared:

poems:

aging children – *Poetry Breakfast*

goodbye sounds like – *a clear day in october* (Empire & Great Jones Little Press, 2016)

landlocked – *a clear day in october* (Empire & Great Jones Little Press, 2016)

red bridge – *Sonic Boom*

riddle of renewing – *Gnarled Oak*

photographs:

'walk me home' (Geoffrey Lewis, 2015) – *A New Ulster*

'red bridge' (j.lewis, 2015) – *Sonic Boom*

About the Author

Writers are readers long before they pen anything, and j.lewis is no exception. He doesn't remember a time in his life before books. Prompted by classic adventure tales like Robin Hood, he wrote his first poem at the age of eight. Three pages in a Big Chief tablet, metered and rhymed. His mother's response was "who *really* wrote this?" He hasn't stopped writing since.

By profession, Jim is a Nurse Practitioner, and his compassion for those in pain influences many of his poems. He is also an amateur photographer, and loves to pair his own photos and poems. His first book of poetry and photography "a clear day in october" was published in 2016, and is available from the author. (<https://www.jlewisweb.com/books.asp>)
