

Classic Poetry Series

Eric Torgersen
- poems -

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Eric Torgersen()

Eric Torgersen has published poetry, fiction, essays and a full-length study of Rainer Maria Rilke and Paula Modersohn-Becker. He also translates German poetry, especially that of Rainer Maria Rilke and Nicolas Born. He was born in Huntington, New York. He has a BA in German Literature from Cornell University; after two years in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia, he earned an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa. He retired in the spring of 2008 after 38 years of teaching writing at Central Michigan University. He lives in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan with his wife, the quilt artist Ann Kowaleski. His next book of poems, *Heart. Wood.*, will be published in 2012 by Word Press.

A Vacation

On the streets of Mérida, beggars and vendors
of shirts and hammocks and panama hats.
We perfect our no. But there's always something
we can't help saying yes to: I want to join
these men on holiday on the ferry to Isla Mujeres,
laughing and teasing, knocking off one another's hats.
Each lays his head on the shoulder of the next
and they sleep a while together, in a row.
Then they wake up and laugh and tease some more,
pour water on the one who turns his back.

At Chichén Itzá it's the cenote, the huge
natural well they must have built the city for.
Books tell us all we need about the buildings,
the almost fascist, inhuman Toltec grandeur
of the space there, but what can a book say
about the cenote which no one built?
I want to stay there.
On a clear night it would hold a lot of stars.

A lovely young girl is screaming mama! and papa!
on the ball court. Mama and papa are cultured and rich
and their daughter's lovely name is Le-ti-ci-a.
She'll grow up a beauty, but she's only eight
years old now and everyone still loves her.
She throws rocks at her pensive, well-behaved older brother.
Next year mama will make her keep her shirt on.
The book says that virgins were thrown into the cenote.

A bus in the ditch and a semi truck on its side
that blocks the whole road, burning.

I dream in our house on the prairie we're surrounded
by Indians. It's her fault they've crept up so close!

But when I dream a madman wants to kill me,
leaves weird notes and drives his bus
full of bizarre electronics across the lawn,
when he's got me on the bus and grabs a big axe

and we wrestle and I dig my fingers into his face,
it's the face of a neighbor at home I hardly know
who came to the door once with liquor on his breath to talk.

Eric Torgersen

After Gaetan Picon

All seeing is joy
when it is simply seeing.
It is from the mind
that the trouble comes.

When it is simply seeing
the eye is lucid, whole;
the trouble comes
when the mind divides.

The eye is lucid, whole,
illiterate, agnostic;
where the mind divides,
the worm of blindness enters.

Illiterate, agnostic,
the stunned eye falters;
enter the worm, blindness,
the serpent, text.

The stunned eye falters.
It is from the mind,
this serpentine text.
Only seeing is joy.

Eric Torgersen

Already Dead

A crackpot gringo in Guatemala told me:
when the pilots of the suicide planes began
their dives down at the ships they were already dead.
Coming from him, a smug didactic metaphor.
Remember Joplin's 'Mercedes Benz,' on Pearl?
The reason we found the final chorus so moving
is that when she shouts everybody! but no one joins in
and she goes on singing alone she's already dead.
When JFK took Marilyn Monroe in his arms,
each could tell that the other was already dead.
How they wept! It was love in a great tradition:
two corpses holding each other, crying if only
I could live for your sake o my beloved. They went
from that place bravely with deaths to finish for everyone.

Eric Torgersen

An Apple From Walt Whitman

There's never been a poet where I live,
but I grew up in the shade of Whitman's name:
born in West Hills—our hills—he would have walked
our paths along the crest. I walked Whitman Road,
crashed the Whitman Drive-In, stole a book
from the sci-fi rack at the Melville-Whitman Pharmacy,
even played lacrosse against Whitman High;
we lost three times, the guys from Halfway Hollow,
to young men with Whitman in white on their varsity jackets.

My mother tells a story about Thanksgiving,
back when kids went begging in rags and blackface:
how Carrie Wicks's sister said she got
an apple from Walt Whitman, right at his house,
an old man with a beard. The big kids laughed,
knowing the white-haired caretaker was no one.

I set no foot inside the Whitman House
or Leaves of Grass till after I went away,
but I'm better having grown up with the name,
the house and hills of a poet everyone knew,
a poet big enough in the mothers' stories
for a girl to believe he came to the door with a long
white beard and smiled and handed her an apple.

If a poet the size of Whitman named our few
square miles and a few in Jersey it's going to take
a lot more big ones to hand us all a welcome
sweet as a Thanksgiving apple from Walt Whitman,
white-haired care-taker, seed of mothers' stories,
Appleseed of our poetry: nourishment, shade.

Eric Torgersen

Back

Keep the tale, it's free, just bring the book back.
Eat the fish, but bring the line and hook back.

No one out here lives by bread alone;
relish the coq au vin, but send the cook back.

Don't let a warning chill your lovely days,
just lock the door, please. Don't invite the crook back.

Accept this praise for a game well played, my friend-
and checkmate. Much too late to move that rook back.

What makes you so sure your puny dam
could hold even this innocuous little brook back?

Sure, you were young, and clueless, and unnerved.
Too late to win the dear one you forsook back.

A day will come when you'll be held to account
for every gift you gave and then took back.

Get that look of stunned surprise off your face.
You tried to shake the world. The world shook back.

How do you know she's still there, Eric? The Beloved,
that slut. She's ditched you before. Go on, look back.

Eric Torgersen

Case Studies: I

You thrust into the coffin
where your young wife lay cold
and even more hauntingly beautiful
for the tragic manner of her death
every one of your unpublished poems.

The poet in you, you wanted
the gesture to say, had died with her.
You would not love again.
This is the nineteenth century.

But seven years have passed.
There are men with shovels.

If you do love again, how much
do you love yourself,
her memory,
your enchanting new mistress,
poetry?

Eric Torgersen

Chanson Américaine

If I, as I drive the Caravan
with its nagging blister of rust
on the driver's side door
home from the office on the day
the odometer turns over 153351,

if I, with my wife at work
and my daughter away at college,
slip into the cassette player
the Johnny Mathis Greatest Hits
tape I have just bought
at a yard sale for a quarter,

and if hearing that voice,
its luscious rise and fall,
which my mother loved as much
as she loved her romance novels
from the lending library,

I sing along, the words
coming effortlessly,
to Wonderful, Wonderful
and am happy-happy!-

who shall say I am not
that mad poet of my youth?

Eric Torgersen

First Shot

I said I was hunting deer. I knew the trails, the split tracks and pellets of shit;
circles
where they bedded down together. I faced a buck once, for almost ten minutes I
think;
I moved first and it left me. I ran home to think.

I had a bow, target arrows, a target on straw. My father said be careful, and I
was, but
I sneaked my bow and arrow to the woods. I surprised a tiny rabbit near a hole.
It
froze. I had an arrow on it. I moved and it ran for the hole. I never shot.

They had a blanket, in a clearing of wiry grass that sloped to the north. He had
her
down, her hands all over his back. I thought I knew her. They hadn't seen me.
I notched
an arrow. His head turned my way, vague, like he needed his glasses, and
maybe afraid.
I got scared, I wasn't sure what it was; I shot my arrow, my first shot, wild I
think, and ran.

I waited for something for weeks, for more than weeks. I couldn't answer
questions. I
thought I saw her a few times, later. I never went back until I was sixteen,
almost, and
nothing was there but I only stayed for a minute.

Eric Torgersen

Holy

Whitman felt his ribs and found the fat holy.
Poor mad Smart found Geoffrey the cat holy.

Growing up on Yankee turf I found
a Mickey Mantle Louisville Slugger bat holy.

A grown man now, I do confess to finding
one pose you strike on your new blue yoga mat holy.

I have not one objection to your calling
the old man in the robe and pointy hat holy.

No reason, if it helps you stalk the tiger,
not to call its trim and pungent scat holy.

Would you please shut that squalling monster up
(although in theory I find the little brat holy)?

I still recall how Allen lightened up
the crowd at the reading by saying, "It's not all that holy."

Can we agree to stop calling every last thing
that makes our little hearts go pitter-pat holy?

Perhaps someday I'll take the begging bowl
and call each last flea, tick and gnat holy.

Don't be so pleased with that so-called self of yours, Eric,
till you call the fires of the Benares ghat holy.

Eric Torgersen

I've Come To Be One Who Cries

I've come to be one who cries when the plane the guys built in shop class on the TV news is going to fly and everyone's there, parents, little kids, the teachers not even dressed up, the mayor and the principal making speeches, the shop teacher saying these are real fine boys, the guys standing around saying it's gonna crash, putting their arms around girls and the teachers don't stop them, the band playing the school song while the pilot gets in and checks everything out like you're supposed to, finally kicks it over and taxis to the end of the runway with a drum roll and everybody screaming already, and it goes off the line like a dragster and takes off! The band starts 'Off we go, into the wild blue yonder' and the guys are slapping five and grabbing girls and telling each other it flies! that piece of shit flies!

Eric Torgersen

Locked

Children tattooed, pierced and studded, dreadlocked;
parents panicked, indecisive, deadlocked.

Mother to daughter: live as you must, if you must;
for just a bit longer, keep the door to your bed locked.

Son to father: teach me what you know,
but I won't agree to keep the door to my head locked.

Mother to father: where have you been, and where
have you kept your thoughts and all you might have said locked?

They'd come so far, and then she saw, in him,
the door to their life, their home, their daily bread locked.

One night in a fiery panic dream he ran
and found the door toward which he'd wildly fled locked.

Aging, but at long last ripe and ready,
she found the on-ramp to the road ahead locked.

They learned too late the cost of keeping that cellar
full of truths that could not be gainsaid locked.

The young return. Too many find the way back
to lives in the country for which they fought and bled locked.

Eric, old friend, as you try each door in the mind,
will you wake one day to find the heart instead locked?

Eric Torgersen

My Blindness

Once I woke up in the dark and thought I was blind. There was no light at all.
There's always some light.

Blind, I was calm in that perfect dark. Friends would come, and I'd tell them
what they had to do. It would be all right.

I'd go back home, but dignified, and I'd know my way perfectly in the house,
even on the streets. I'd only been gone a few years.

I'd have them read me strange books, and they'd love my strangeness, thinking
this is what it was, we knew there was something. They'd loved it a little
already.

There at home in my great dark I'd find a single purpose, and begin.

But you know this: the light came.

Don't laugh at me. I live with so little blindness. Such a long way I've come. So
little blindness.

Eric Torgersen

New Leaves

In the kitchen window
the coleus I cut down to stumps
to make cuttings for friends
is spreading new leaves to the sun.

Small hairs
the light catches
rise from the new leaves;
red seeps into green
along the veins.

The newest
is brightest.

The plant
cocks intelligent
faces
at the sun
and looks and looks and looks.

I would visit my friends
but feel troubled and shy.

Eric Torgersen

No Dancer / Still Walking

In one of the open-air restaurants
along the beach at Progreso
three shy pretty Indian girls
danced for us with trays bottles
glasses balanced on their heads
and I picked one out I always
pick one out

Back in Mérida at a juice
and licuado stand a woman
fell down was helped toward a chair
fell down again and a blind man
brought his dog to dance
for money for the crowd around a woman
who couldn't even walk

I've never been much
of a dancer at least not with anyone
looking but I can still walk
take my pick of the dancers
no blind man with cup and dog
that can dance has worked the crowd
around me yet

Eric Torgersen

Oh

we find it
and photograph it

bury it out of sight
and try to sleep with it

tunnel the earth
for one of its hands
to lead us

as if
we could follow you

as we followed to Bedlam
and part

as we followed
past Live

but you give us the slip

Eric Torgersen

Open Stage Poetry Reading

After the one that sings, and after the one
that can make up poems of a kind right on the spot;
after a girl who didn't . . . walk very well,
took five minutes to get from her seat to the stage
then read one poem with hardly any words in it
and halted the whole way back in a staggering silence;
after the bald one's rhymes about this teeth;
a woman got up whose poems won't write down,
it's all in the way the voices in her come out.

We went to a medium once, and a woman locked
in a trance let a dead man come inside her and talk.
She held herself like . . . a woman being a man.
That's what it was at the open stage poetry reading,
and I left without talking, I hadn't come expecting it.
What could I have told her, I think it's a dead man?
It wasn't something I wanted to get that close to.
I could never do it myself, let a dead man come in-
or would it be, into me, a dead woman that would come?

Eric Torgersen

Re: That

That was no language that was your life.
That was a punning linguist.
That was the headline Author Gets Off.
That was an offer of amnesty and amnesia,
a garden variety fantasia,
a sobriety test and I'm sorry, you passed.
That was in love with the history of the West,
in league with mastery, in line with most of the rest.
That was a linguist's boast.
That was no language boat and you broke it.
That was a love boat and kept you perfectly dry.
A boat in the sky.
That was a scheme with a name on it.
That was to blame and too blind to see.
That was me too.
It was you.

Eric Torgersen

Scenario

Had enough of the old lonesome-and-blue scenario?
Up for a shot at the old I-love-you scenario?

Man enough to leave your comfort zone
in the good old get-drunk-and-screw scenario?

Let's be real. Love hurts. Even you, you stud, you.
Sure you can handle the old boo-hoo scenario?

Don't even try to guess what she really wants;
get ready for the old you-don't-have-a-clue scenario.

Tell her, "I'll always honor your personhood."
What's more of a drag than the old I'm-a-person-too scenario?

It's never not a good time to say, "My bad."
Don't lean too hard on the old I-never-knew scenario.

Caught in a little white lie? You're in deep shit
if you trapped yourself in the old I-swear-it's-true scenario.

Make sure she's down with each new trick in the sack
or you'll run smack into the old that's-taboo scenario.

Like what you're getting, but not sure she's The One?
You can string her along with the old don't-rock-the-canoe scenario,

but sooner or later it's gut-check time in Texas
and there's no way around the old we're-through scenario

unless you've got the cojones to suck it up
and go all in on the old I-do scenario.

Don't say Eric never told you: lovers
and poets live or die by the old make-it-new scenario.

Eric Torgersen

The Lone Ranger Rides Off

Thank God he's gone,
on his horse
of all colors-

we can take up again
the lives
he rode shooting into

in the blind
mask of belief
in the legend of himself-

and why should we have
to think we've failed him?
ransomed

these lives of ours,
let him ride off
with his guns and his needs

into other lives,
quiet as ours,
further west-

why should a woman
blame herself
for not knowing

how to ease him
down
off the horse of his differences?

Why this guilt-
we can't spit it out-
for all he will learn

when the bright
horse fails
beneath him,

when he comes,
hat in hand, palefaced,
blinking

in our daily sun,
for our blessing,
for a place among us?

Eric Torgersen

The Man Who Broke Up The Dinner Party Answers

It made me feel small, like a husband,
and I never married, never owned

a table worth turning over, china
worth shattering, linen worth blood

from the cut hand I sucked and cursed
and wrapped in a torn shirt, in a pocket.

Can't they make it new again, those bees,
those communist women at their weaving?

It was only the long lines, the slow,
enforced pace, solemnity, cold white glitter;

I was only too proud to eat cold history,
to stand in the breadlines at the tomb;

I only declined the feast in the mausoleum
as Yesenin did, who wrote his regrets in blood.

Eric Torgersen

The Piper

No, he never led them far away,
willing as they were to follow
and not to go back.
The mountain never opened
to take them in.

Just over the mountain
he left them.

Having heard such music,
they believed,
they could never again be the children
of that sad town.

Somewhere ahead must lie,
they believed,
the joyous land from which he came.

But they did not believe
that they might find it without him.

Some, in the end, went forward
and some went back.

You may know them and their kind
by a small empty place
in the corner of the eye
in every town where the young
pine for a distant land,
in every land
where they mourn the remembered town

Eric Torgersen

The Story Of White Man Leading Viet Cong Patrol

The Story of White Man Leading Viet Cong Patrol

-AP Dispatch, Des Moines Register, August 4, 1968

The slain enemy resembled
an American Marine
who was 18 years old
when he disappeared.

The violent episode
was one of the strangest
in this strange war.

*

For a moment
the two young men--
the American Marine
and the white man
in the uniform of the enemy--
stared at each other.

"He had an AK 47
automatic rifle
but he just looked at me."

Gordon fired
after a moment's hesitation.

*

Several of the Marines suspect
that the unknown white man
whom they call "the Caucasian"
could have shot first
but deliberately held fire.

At the debriefing
everyone was afraid
to say what they had seen.

Anonymous submission.

Eric Torgersen

When They Draw Us

When they draw us, the children,
as great beaming sun-faces
balanced on sticks, waving sticks,
can it be that they see us so soon
with a clarity we believe
comes only with age?

They draw us out
of ourselves, our trembling palaces,
into the fragile worlds
they play, dream, fear into being,
as if they know even now
we will be going.

Eric Torgersen

Yet

Hang him from a tree he hasn't hung from yet.
Fling him off a bridge no one's been flung from yet.

Send succor, in whatever dark disguise:
a hornet's nest he's not gone running, stung, from yet.

Early fall, and not one branch the wind
has not stripped every leaf that clung from yet.

Recess. Winter. Second or third grade.
A frozen pipe he hasn't freed his tongue from yet.

The drought seems endless. Spring. No dropp of rain.
Just parched soil no shoot has sprung from yet.

Find it in some corner of the workshop,
some damp rag no last dropp has been wrung from yet?

Probe the dank recesses of the cellar-
not one cask he hasn't yanked the bung from yet.

He'd have it be a tower, not a steeple-
the height in him no bell has rung from yet.

Not by wit or rhetoric alone
will Eric find a voice he hasn't sung from yet.

Eric Torgersen