

Poetry Series

r james sterzinger
- poems -

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r james sterzinger(9-11-56)

English major dropout. Writing off and on for 30yrs. bibliophile. Earliest influence was Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg. Eventually wandered into Beat and Li Po-Han Shan territory. Now I am back to Robert Frost and poets like Robert Lowell and Frederick Seidel, and Bill Holm, and Jim Harrison. as well as the poetry of Reynolds Price, who is my favorite writer, though my style is more Bukowski rather than anyone else. I also am a great lover of Ezra Pounds's work as well as Pasternak and other Russian poets. Also I think that Jane Kenyon is one of the greatest poets ever. Write now I am doing readings as well as looking to publish a chap book. the 'M' and 'SP' to whom many of my poems are dedicated takes on the roles of muse and friend. Favorite poems: Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket, Having it out with Melancholy, Take Something Like a Star. the Cantos, and Ash Wednesday and all of Joseph Brodsky's Christmas poems.

10-30-10 (For S. P.)

shorter days
wet damp indifferent days
to us fools who
believe in the permanence of
things. this is the season
when the leaves loosen
their commitment to time
to us to the trees
to do a beautiful red and yellow
lemming's death dance.

their dance is not for me. not yet.
I despise raking
this cotton wood's leaves,
would like to call in the cutter's chainsaws
bow saws, pruning shears;
to end this clutter of twigs, branches,
leaves.

still I love this dark wet tree's ominous
bark, this trunk, these bows:
arms tugging at the sky's corner
makes me feel like I belong
to this equinox this time
this place this quiet
to a corner of life
subtlety reminding me
that like the leaves
I will someday be swept
away.

who shuns death
never giving thought
to the trimming of time
has no business
sacking the fallen leaves,
dragging them
to the curb
for the trash man

or burning them in piles
of smoking heat and fire.

the whole of this October day
is awash on them
he who refuses the rake
misses a schoolboy's lesson
a remedial reading on the wholeness
of things.
all of life stumbles upon
the meaning of falling leaves.

r james sterzinger

A Birdy's Faith For M

now i am the one

out on the limb

singing my song

just because

you

believed

i

was comfortable

in my nest

of mud

dirt and sticks

you know?

r james sterzinger

A Measure Of Saving Grace...For You

Too little sleep
Too early rising
It's what I blame it on
Too many relatives coming through the door
Too early an hour.

On the way to a rare
Saturday church service
I cross North Minneapolis
In my red Grande AM
Listening to Charlton Heston
Reading Hemingway.

Harry is dying
Reflecting over a life
A life spent...
A life wasted.

As I pull up to the chapel
Walk up the driveway
A line comes to me
'He went to the chapel that morning
To save his soul
He knew he needed saving
He knew it was in his best interest
He didn't know if he cared, anymore.'

A good line
Not a great line
But it fit the morning
It might make a good opening
For a good poem
Maybe even a great one
No, just a good one.

I reminded myself to write it down...

After the service
I had coffee with a friend of mine

Told her about the line
She said, 'That's despair.
Despair is a sin.'
She smiled.
Despair, left
Her smile took it.

Would have made a good opening line,
But the truth be told,
I'll take a measure of saving grace...
Anytime.

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A Murder Of Crows

driving
on thirty-sixth avenue
half-way between
the hospital
and home
I passed
the casket company truck
making morning deliveries

on the hill
was a murder of crows
I thought
then what do you call
a truckload of caskets?

a circumstance?

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A Poem To Be Forgotten

lined up on the granite counter
two avocados
three tomatoes
and a lone carrot

the avocados soft round green
they lie there like two drunks
soft mushy
with a pulp hard hearts

the tomatoes are red
bragging and bold
full of seeds like
ready to procreate
sailors
after a six month
tour of duty

the carrot
like a phallic old guy
(never should have removed it
from the crisper drawer)

maybe i need to take a walk
then i will come home
put them away
open a can of soup

i need something a little less
bold a little less
obvious
a little less something

when you get alone
when you have a little too much
time you need to get
out or you come up
with the crap that will eat your soul

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After Emily Bronte

sitting in my back yard
on a beautiful
early november day
watching the wind blow
the falling leaves
from the trees:
yellow,
all over my damned
yard.

i realized
i was dead already.
dead as a stone,
not a soul around
just hanging there
waiting for god
to make her next move.

that's about the size of it
my kids have all gone away
for the most part.
my wife looks at me
if i am something
the dog left behind.

even if i am not dead
either god or her
or both
will get me in the end.

now as the nights
get colder
and shorter
and darker
it will be harder to hang on

but

on this sunny november day

i am still comfortable with being alive,
understanding this moment of grace.

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After Reading Rilke

I.

I shall walk the corners
Of reckless parting. I shall
Dance on the memories of light
I shall stalk the hem of the black
Widow's skirt and know
the partings of her heart.

I shall pry open the edges
of envelopes filled with sadness
open waves and oceans of bad news
And report.

I shall kiss the mouth of the Graveyard
Huntress. I shall mouth symphonies
of grief to the beauty of sunlit days.

I shall embrace tears as petals
I shall cast pearls before swine
With full vigor.

I shall read books that predict
My demise; I will embrace
The written word as a long lost lover.

I shall stare in silence and listen
To the morning bird's first echoes
His first mournful song. I shall
Tear at his crying, for his lost
Ones from the night.

II.

I shall sing dirges at sunlight
Skip and dance
Wild at the fall of night.

I will joyfully enter my eternal grave

I shall buy a plot for my rest
Behind gates. On consecrated ground
Before I am gone, this I will do.

I will choose my madness, choose
My chaos, kissing both of them
On the brow. They give me meaning.
They teach me my craft.

I will taunt dogs at night
I will love women who cannot
Love me back. I will cry over them.

I will curse the writings of demons
Yet I will get to know all of mine
One by one by one.

III.

I will produce incantations
Musings, songs, poems
That will never see the light of day

I will lose my heart and if need be
My soul to one I can only love from afar.

Then I will have truly lived with no remorse
I will truly have lived a life
One that only madmen and angels can dream of.

I will be written in the Lamb's Book of Life
Because He will understand how I wish Him
Even more than all of this
Because He is the one who has made me
Who understands my craft. I have read the Psalms,

IV.

I shall call this a life!
This is what I hope for.

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Alone As A Stone

my father visited me last night
we went for a drive

everything had changed
the streets were the same
barren, gravel, open.
new homes
no people
just the factories closed,
and the prevailing
emptiness as always.

eventually we turned east
the direction of the old home place
he cried as we slowed down
looked. went by. kept going.
it wasn't the same.

all the voices of spring
the running of the fields
the years of christmases
easters, first communions,
are ghosts now, will always be.

so is my father.
he touched me on the forehead
then i awoke alone in my bed
i am hundreds of miles from there now.

i am a million miles away from it all.
i too am a ghost and will always be.
my mind still haunts the passages
of my hometown. my home.

and as i write this i know
i am a rootless man
only a ghost, a specter
to the ones i know, a myth

my father is gone my mother before him
one before me miscarried and lost
though i live among the living
i am dead already so very dead

my life is a shadow,
no past no future just now
i am as empty as memory
as alone as a stone.

Father,
why must you seek the living
among the dead?

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An Agreement With God

I
understand betrayal
the kept
hands down
of a lover at her side
a embrace dead
never returned.

this writer's words
erased, edited
away by someone
who I thought was a friend.
who didn't understand
my toil
or how it would kill my confidence
(business is more important than art.)

that I would have to
spend Sundays in back of church
praying to a God who seems
to busy spinning his world
to remember me
drowning alone and desperate.
(my God my God
why hast thou forsaken me?)

I buried
a child a parent and a wife
all before I was forty
I have been locked in the madhouse twice
now I stupidly compose verse
while my heart howls at the waning moon...
the credits of a movie based
on a W. Somerset Maugham novel rolling up behind me
like the grave.
(I suppose if I end up in hell would it be a surprise!)

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Anais

Anais

I understand
now the beauty
the horrible
beauty of
relationships

they way you live
and die
with each chance you take

no relationship
ever dies
even if
life
breath
or night thrusting does

it becomes
the mortars of life
holding up
all our secret walls

some become
glorious cathedrals
like Notre' Dame

some become
glorious crypts
or private graves

am I right?

Anais?

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Andrew Wyeth, Painter, Dies At 91. For Jack London, For M

It is
Twenty-two below zero
Has been for two days.

The snow wraps you in,
Like a bride that has had second,
Maybe third guesses

'This marriage is not a good idea
This child may be stillborn
I have been cheated out of my youth'.

It is a natural succumbing to grief
The trees are not green
No flowers
No endless possibilities.
Death exists
Unicorns cannot,
Will not survive this cold
Are better to not have existed at all.

Too little light too little day
The landscape is cold
Dead and tired.

No masterpieces
No color
No painter's palate
It is the dead of winter.

Andrew Wyeth, Painter, Dies at 91
Says the New York Times.
My tea kettle
Cries with grief!

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Angus Dei

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis'

Baptismal Record:

that's not my signature.

I speak for myself, now

Confirmation,

no record of it

I have disavowed my Catholic Faith.

there is nothing

that can be found

that has my scribbled

signature

that says

I don't have an opt-out clause

I did promise once to a therapist

that I wouldn't,

my word is worthless

once to a nurse that I wouldn't

but I was forced to sign

to stay in the group

I told her the signature that is coerced

means nada

miserere' nobis

memento mori'

miserere' nobis

ah!

then there are the bull dogs!

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Anniversary

He wore a black tuxedo and
Pleated striped trousers
A smile: half Xanax
Half Wellbutrin or something.

She in an a-train gown
White, wreath of flowers
In her hair
Blonde as a two lies.

Seems like a waste of good
Money now. Twenty-two years
Of unremembered gifts, and cards,
One freakish night in a motel.

She waited, anxious for
His I voiced commitment
Now she can't stand his own sound
Telling him none would want him.

It's morphed into chaos
Something that isn't love
Something a kin to madness
Something more brackish.

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Answered Prayers?

... my day continues

after stopping for a burger,
fries and a coke

I drive to the nearest bookstore
and purchase
three new books

in Chile
they are picking out bodies
out of earthquake rubble
the west coast and Hawaii braces
for a string of tsunamis

my day continues

in Afghanistan yesterday
seventeen died
in a car bombing spree

I walk across the parking lot
enter my car
share the rest my fries with my dog
rub his ears, kiss his head

my day continues

like a disinterested god
I go on with my day
as others die

the rest of the world
always goes on
with its day

and we expect answered prayers?

r james sterzinger

Arjuna Waits For War

~ We have been told, O Krishna, that people whose
family traditions are destroyed necessarily dwell in hell for a long time.

Bhagavadgita

When in-laws are coming over

for Sunday dinner

stop over to North Regional

Library

Go on-line

pickup the New York Times

Review of Books

Reserve books

by Frederick Seidel

crawl in the corner:

read Pound.

My dear Arjuna,

put off going to battle

Stay it off

as long as you can.

Then start up

the Grand Am,

go home

the longest way possible.

understand this...

war can't be put off forever

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At The Edge Of The Woods

This dark night is
A night for brooding
And I will brood
As I look at the clouds
Like Whitman said
'Endlessly rocking'

I will stare at the stars
They stare back at me
I am sure, also
Brooding too.

As a friend dies
I think of my own death
For sure I will join him
I am well into middle age.

When I go I hope
I am at terms with it
Better than I am
At this moment in time,
More at peace with it,
As I walk this dark late
Winter night. I know

What I don't want is a thousand
People trying to pray me
Into confusion, for a healing
I won't get. For God to have
A change of mind.

I'd say 'Get them the hell out'
I just want to be comfortable
with whatever He decides,
Then make my amends..

Tonight however is
A night for brooding.
All's quiet.

I can smell the molding
Leaves,
At the edge of the woods.

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Autonomous

Autonomous

I am an autonomous region
in me have settled
bad dreams, ghosts
from the past,
things made of metal,
perfect as they are:
some shiny as a freshly skinned knee
of a child falling off a bicycle

I am an autonomous region
somehow alone,
yet controlled by you.
I am not ready to be free
to love or not,
to cry or not,
to be alone in the wind the rain
the snow
on holidays,
or not.

I am an autonomous region
God walks through me
looking for pretty stones
in the shape of bluebird eggs
in the shape of teardrops
in the shape of you
when you lived here
before you took your boat
and went to your own region
where I cannot find you
to this day.

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Before The Ousting

I skip my memories
like stones across the lake
build houses of them
that are good and solid
cement them in good
with shattered hopes
and broken promises of love.

my walls are good
high and tight
that's how I want them
it provides my warmth and security.

do not put your hopes in me
I don't love anymore
I don't cry
I don't risk love.

I spend my days
thinking of the worms that will
grow large and warm eating me
after I am dead
when my memories
will have their own burial

when I won't have to face the memories of her
your turned back and vitriolic rages
and the chances of love that I have thrown away
because I could no longer trust.

r james sterzinger

Blue-Eyed Boy Mr. Death For E.E. Cummings

There are days when I

like my blue-eyed boy

Mr. Death close

As a habit is

like the last drag of a bitter

cigarette left to dissipate

In the bottom of an ash barrel.

Fifty-eight years of days

seems short if you are ninety

I however this day

feel ready to go

like a hawk down on a prey

Like a snow white goose

heading south for warmer

climes.

Life has lost its sense

of manners now:

no please or thank-you

Just out of my way,

it's your fault. Modern folks

with the manners of stumped legs;

Missing hands. Hello's

are dead things now

like passing cars on freeways.

There is a wreck

on Highway 35

a death knell ringing

At Holy Cross Church. How

do you like your blue eyed boy

Mr. Death? Innocence

Portrayed this day

is the white snow of Christmas

and the last fading note

Of the locomotive train whistle

that has just passed by

on the way to the refinery.

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Boats For R

A friend of mine is near the end,
Soon the rowing will be over
for him. Soon we will cry, then
all go on without him. As I
have gone on without,
without the ones I have
loved. Parents, a wife,
one child. all gone. So what
am I suppose to do mourn?

I have done that. Weep?
That too. Curse God,
What would be the purpose? What
would be the gain?
I am the heretic of the bunch!

All the old gang are
praying for a healing.
A recovery. trying to make
God move.

Me, I believe
just like them or did.
Now I say, 'God is
what God is
I move no further from that.
Let Him do
what He will do

I must be content
with the consequences. Then
again
What of my own
rowing, my own death.

'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne
back ceaselessly into the past.'

F. Scott Fitzgerald

r james sterzinger

Borderline

it was decided
that we should discuss
my border-line
personality
disorder
to you
so you could understand
me.

RIGHT-O

you
use it
like a rotten piece of
meat on a hook
to lure
out my demons
into a feeding frenzy

and
they come out
don't they?

r james sterzinger

Christmas Banshees

some folks celebrate
Christmas by donning
trees with lights
brandishing needles
and stringing popcorn,
tinsel.

cooking turkey,
yams,
potatoes and ham,
good wine:
white and red.

large and small
gifts in fancy paper
that gets ripped off
like an old drunk.
price tags included for returns
things we really want.

hugs too are exchanged,
Christmas kisses
sweeter to be sure
and more appreciated than anything;
by grandma and uncle mike
who is a little 'grabby but kind'.

peppermint sticks
fruitcake
assorted chocolates.

hymns carols
midnight mass
candles and creche.

and then there is our house.

'GET THAT BATHROOM CLEAN...
THIS LIVING ROOM IS A PIGSTY...

TAKE OFF THOSE SNOWY BOOTS...
I BURNED THE BISCUITS AGAIN...
SHE'S TRYING TO RUIN MY CHRISTMAS! ! ! '

ahh, sweet memories
from long ago
that my family carries on
generation to generation!

r james sterzinger

Christmas Lament... For Tony

three-sixty-five
three-sixty-five
three-sixty-five times four
one day added
for leap year
not another day more.

we've been together
too long
we've crossed that divide
I should be ashamed
but let's keep that aside.

I've put up with your moods,
your color schemes 'till I almost died
but now I feel nothing more
but a little denied.

so
it's three-sixty five
three-sixty five
three-sixty-five times four
one day added for leap ear
not another day more

this Christmas you want
a necklace and a ring
I said, 'who are you kidding,
what hope would that bring? '

I suppose I could give in
buy you a reindeer on a string
though I couldn't do it for this relationship
but I would for a fling.

I am defeated and broken
my soul's in the rough
you made it all happen
shouldn't that be gift enough?

again
it's three- sixty-five
three-sixty-five
three-sixty-five times four
one day for leap year
not another day more.

I helped with your children
but they had to conquer and divide
they took you for loot
you swallowed their lies.

so I took your vinegar
to sweeten my tea
I read my horoscope in the paper
that's how I found your lover
you see?

I wish I could say I would come back
and that time would abide
but this carnival's gone
down to the last pony ride.

so I'll fake it for three
and hold on for four
I'll stay on for an extra day
not another day more.

because my dear:
it's three-sixty- five
three-sixty-five
three-sixty-five times four
one day for leap year
not one single day more.

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Communion Time....For D.A.

this week a little
too primal a little
too guttural letting
the deep animal
in my chest
in my brain go
hunting for what
violence its
sense of retribution
could chase down

(I stuck back at
those I am committed
to love wholeheartedly)

now Sunday I stand here
crouched in the back left
corner of the cathedral
waiting and watching
others peacefully walk
to receive and eat the field's
wheat and be satiated

(all the while my inner man
ruminates like a lion
in the tall grass thinking
about those I have
rendered apart)

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Dark Corners...For Audre Lorde

Through the brightness of black bows
Through the avenues of bright flowers
Through alleys of garbage day trash cans
I walked my dog through the late night.

Lately, I go through places and neighborhoods
I shouldn't go through late at night
They run kitty-corner to where I use to walk
Well lit areas where inspiration for good poems came.

Now I prefer dark corners, places I cannot see
Places, dark as pitch and sticky with inspirations
Alleys with shot out street lamps
Pop can broken beer bottles
That may or may not shine in the moon light
That may or may not reflect the stars.

Except for one Keatsian poem and another by Frost
I no longer request the stars
I no longer wish for other night lights for companionship
I prefer the dark corners of alleys and the edges
Of streets. Like the hems of a witches black gown
Or the robes of the reaper who will soon
Catch up with me and my days.

Someday all that will be left of me
Will be left over poems that no one will read
And all the dark corners I walk down now
Comfortably holding me in the are of my deepest of sleeps
Waiting for a resurrection that may take forever to come.

When that resurrection comes
I won't need those dark corners anymore
I will let them go
Then my eyes adjust to the light
With all the others waiting with me side by side
With any luck it will seem like a day.

r james sterzinger

Dear Frank O'Hara

Dear Frank,

thank you for your concern.
i have recovered quite nicely
from my fall.
i just can't seem to sleep so i

spend my nights counting
the cracks in the wall.
listening to the cars go by
and wondering...

i remember
when i was young
i met a beautiful mexican girl
near the ocean
her hair was as dark
as a raven's love.
i wonder whatever became of her
she had the smile of a waning moon.

be careful walking at night on the beaches

.
again
thanks for your
concern,
Lana T

thanks for your
concern.

r james sterzinger

Dear Robert For Diana

dear robert,
you are so very right,
the woods are
lovely
and dark
and the depth of that
dark is great indeed.

i risk everything
when i travel to that woods.
the wind it whistles
come in, come in,
do this thing

still like you
i stay on the road
stare at the edge
a bit afraid to go in.
the pull however is getting stronger
how did you resist
hang on
keep going?

my promises are all
broken
either by me or others
and i am so tired
so very tired of it all.

come to me
dear robert
teach me how to stay on the path
before it is too damn late.

r james sterzinger

Devotions On Emerging From Battle... For 'M'... Who Wanted To Know Who 'she' Was

she set the terms
of negotiations

so I left her
to do what she did best
leaving me cold
alone indifferent

I fell in love again
with another one
who couldn't love me back

sang my own forgotten opera
set the lines to the music
heard the music in my head
hung my dreams in minor keys

now I am comfortable
drinking wine at back tables
hurrying off to nowhere special
becoming a shadow to myself
well dressed in indifference

uneasy to the virtues of love
to love itself
I no longer send letters
no more poems
all the ones I write now
are like the swallows
they fly, circle
return to the nest

the books I cherished
lie unread forgotten
orphans that marked
better times
happier indulgences

she walks where she walks
between her world and the shops
I between my indifference toward love
and indifference toward life
indifferent toward the seasons

let the dark come now
let the shortness of days come
let the sun brood behind clouds
let the stars fall
go out.

r james sterzinger

Distemper

in the mow they lived their short little lives
born six in a litter
within a week
there would only be one or two.

what didn't fall and died of broken neck
were plagued with distemper

we kids would climb in the mow
(we weren't suppose to)
and we'd move the moldy bales
of straw and old hay
out of the way
dig out the survivors
of the first wave

then we would take
our mother's wash cloth
and slowly wipe away the brown green glue
that pasted their new eyes shut
we would pry their eyes open
and line them up for lunch
on their mother's belly

within a few days
they were all dead
we would bury them
out behind the old milk house
near the fence of rusty barbed wire
careful not to touch the fence
because it was electric and rusty
and the fear of tetanus was implanted into
our heads by our mum.

there was a lot of fears in those days
measles, whooping cough
drowning in the creek
at the back twenty acres

even the ladder to the mow
had two bad steps
we had to be careful...

we took care of those kittens
till each last one died
buried as many as we could find
before dad could

he was less sentimental
he would take them to the dump instead.

crosses of sticks covered the area
behind the barn
do unbaptized kittens go to limbo?
well, limbo's gone
so God only knows where they are now.

we gave them a Christian burial though
turned the mow into a sad little hospice
learned that life is short
and the best way to live it
is with eyes open
and to die facing it
the same way

we learned it
accepted it
grew from it

now the barn is gone
the mow, the hay, the cats.
parents are gone too
buried in St. Mary's Cemetery
west of town

we brothers and sisters
still call each other infrequently
talk about Christmas past
the kids and the grand kids
send each other
birthday and Christmas cards

but only I remember the dead kittens
they God haunt me
and there sad little lives
curl up cozily
between the darkness of my poems
and the memories
I shouldn't lay hold of
anymore.

r james sterzinger

Doggerel At 3 Am

my whole life has been a lie,
but it's really not my fault,
you cannot lie if you never were
I guess that's my gestalt.

I never really made an attempt
to ever be just free.
I tried religion,
I tried poetry,
but just couldn't ever find me.

I got sidetracked long ago
I cant really even say when,
it's like saying what came first
the chicken or the hen.

so each day I walk through life
I do stumble and blunder,
and now that I am middle age
I stare out the window and wonder.

will I ever be free to
find out who I am,
or will it be over just too quick
and I will be forever damned?

so ascribe to me
my meaningless verse,
I guess it's all for naught.
I came in naked,
I'll leave that way too,
because that's all I've got.

r james sterzinger

Donna Summer

Nitrous Oxide
Novocain
or the meditation techniques
you learned from the
Buddhists
at the Shambhala
temple
is not
strong enough
to break the
concentrated pain
that you feel
as the dentist
tunnels like a
crazed miner
to the nerves in your jaw
to clean out what you trust
is decay in your left side lower
molar.

you are going on blind pain
and blind trust
hoping you might make it out
of his chair alive

then comes Donna Summer
disco through the muzak
speaker above your head
her 'boogie oogie oogie'
drowns out every other pain
this butcher dentist
may have created.

what you wouldn't do
for just a little
brandy and
Rachmaninoff
now

r james sterzinger

Dreaming Of Isadora Duncan

Walking with her through Avenue Champs E'lysees'
Her long blood red scarf taken by the breeze.
A ragged beggar stops us
From his soiled pocket he offers to sell
A tincture, made from the breath of fifth-century saint.
She implores me to pay, she has no money,
I reach into my raincoat, give the bum a few francs
Opening the bottle to my lips
I breath in heavily
I awaken, stare at the ceiling
For a long time.....

r james sterzinger

Ecce Ancilla Domini

Ecce Ancilla Domini.

'Behold the Handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to Thy word.'
The Angelus

The bells from St. Mary's still rings in the twilight
though I am a million miles away
from my hometown in which I was raised.

I hear them this early evening,
somehow they ring out this end of day
that falls, lies, then drowns

into the waters off this big city river bridge
where I sit alone,
just thinking

across the river
Ophelia closes her shop
the books standing alone, now
in perfect attention
waiting to be held
waiting to be read

I understand the books

this river's light and its reflections hold me now
and that, that is good
like the light always seems to be
though its passing will silence
the mourning birds
deepening my melancholia
like the waters of this river....

still, for now
the light shines
as the Angelus Bells ring

the light dancing
across the waters of this wide river
(Mars and Venus ascending)

that sameness of light reflects
in the eyes, the smile of Ophelia
who closes the doors
on the books
in the shop
who wait to be held
who wait to be read
who wait to be understood

as we all do
or hope to
before the Angelus Bells
ring us out of our days....

r james sterzinger

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who wait to be understood

as we all do
or hope to
before the Angelus Bells
ring us out of our days....

r james sterzinger

Envyng The Egyptians (For Cecil B. De Mille)

a frustrating day,
a too long day.
wife turns on the religious station:
Ten Commandments.
after yelling about kids
and me
I envy the Egyptians,
drowning,
as I keep swimming...

r james sterzinger

Every Woman I... For William O. Everson

every woman
a rosary bead
all the same
yet all the different prayer

every woman
a different prayer
all the same
yet a deeper crisis of faith

every woman
a deeper crisis of faith
all the same
but greater the gift

every woman
a greater gift
all the same
A reflection of a greater God

every woman
a rosary
a prayer
a crisis
a faith
a gift
a reflection of God

r james sterzinger

Every Woman Ii... For William O Everson

every woman
I make no judgement
large small fat thin
old, young
though not too young
(I am an old man)
I accept as a beautiful landscape
a work of art to reach
to touch
to be gazed upon

every woman
a rosary I wish to pray
a set of beads I wish to tell
with aching fingers...
a sacred set of mysteries

every woman
a beautiful field I wish to roll in
a field of flowers
of mown hay
a harvest to be taken in for winter

every woman
a warm summer pond to lie into
to be held caressed
every gully every turn
a new sense of wonder

still

every woman a rosary
sacred silent deep
an offering from God
to God a whisper
of a promise

r james sterzinger

For Annshalike

the miracle of Christ
in the crib,
in the cave
the center of all things
with shepherds and animals
then getting away
to Egypt
to safety
seems to me all the more
poignant
this year

In North Minneapolis
just a few weeks
before Christmas
someone
took a girl
probably the same age
and beat her like a dog
baby inside her
killed too
then left her frozen
in a garage.

somewhere
Rachel weeps
a new Herod sleeps
content:
that the girl
and child
are no more.

where the light
shines
it shines
where the darkness
hangs on
it builds a home
a garage

a place to stay
that place kills
babies
and mothers
that are babies themselves.

there the darkness is great.

r james sterzinger

For Dido..After Neruda...So It Seems

I stare into the darkness
at my glasses
on the night table

they are old
wore, and no longer fit
the way they should
but tonight they are
my crucifix
my holy grail
my precious gift

tonight
I look at them
with awe
with new respect.
tonight
I look at them
like a dying man at a miracle

today through them
I saw your smile
through them
I saw my reflection
in your eyes.

your smile was framed
in your hair
and the light that twisted
through the vines
of the window.

my glasses are old
are out of date
I need a new pair.

but today
I would not trade
that moment

or those glasses
for all the gold
of the gods
in heaven
or hell

r james sterzinger

For Eliot

your smile brings the dark
that I peer into
I think this
watching you
walk out of sight

I prefer
not to see you
bonny lass
not coming
not going

how did Christ die:
they say the weight
of the world
was on his shoulders

my sins
are remembered
in your eyes.
In you
all my madness
and loneliness
seem justified

I will Salinger
my heart away from you
I need to attempt
a resurrection.

r james sterzinger

For John Berryman In Mendota Heights Mn

the real artful dodgers
are the poets

those lying
never to be trusted
unreliable narrators

except:

the vast lost
of them that stare at
the abyss of truth
with existential
angst and wonder...

which is why
they are sorely
disrespected here
in America

because here truth
is as individual
and as scattered
as the wind blown leaves
under the Washington Avenue Bridge
where John Berryman

jumped

on a cold winters day

of coarse
their are a few
who say he slipped

so who do you trust?

r james sterzinger

For Kay

someone
cool blue
pure and deep
has rescued me

someone
has pulled me up
given me back
my Keatsian fire

someone
has pulled me up
shown me the stars
given me back my hope

someone
has renewed my vision
embraced my quest
caused my heart to dance
like a leaf in a whirlwind

someone
has given me hope
opened my horizon
in her smile my life is recreated

someone
cool blue
pure and deep has saved me
has reminded me of miracles

someone
as distant as a galaxy
as the morning star
has shown me beauty
but like the morning star
I can only be amazed

I belong to the past

it chains me
to my madness
to my melancholy
sure as an anchor.

r james sterzinger

For M In Greece

my wishes sit side by side with you
as you leave these Americas
to join family who are waiting for you
near the Aegean's blue waters.
my wishes carry with them
hopes of deep safety and Godspeed
as you fly to the land of Titans
and mythic gods and warriors
The Spartan warriors are long dead
their descendants lie on beaches
now ripening themselves as olives
and the words of Homer
and Aeschylus lie sullen in books

II.

Here I wait on the edge of another
winter me, lemming anxious
knowing I should travel someplace
the brown autumn leaves are in agreement
they curse at me in a dry smoker's whisper
as the wind wakens them
from the cottonwood: 'It's too late for us too damn late'
I hear them, but give them little regard. I
know the dangers. I have always known the dangers.

III.

Here I sit in the Twin Cities as permanent as marble
a lesser art than the statutes and busts of marble
that inhabit the museums that your eyes will see
face to immovable face. Their fragments and torsos
more a work of art than me.
They however can't pray that you are having a great time
and that God will give you safe return
I can, but that is God's art His will on me....

r james sterzinger

For Michael Dorris

no ends no means no justification
life had become a spider's web
folding and winding around itself

when the great writer's magic
dissolved with his life
he took drastic measures
to come to the story's end, his end

whether he was guilty for his crimes
or even what the crimes were didn't matter
he was cornered by the dark angel who
takes all matters in hand

they found him in a cheap motel room
then filled the papers with all the tawdry details that could be found
his books now are falling apart on library shelves
his art ends with an asterisk

(so we crucify the art with the artist)
every edge of life has its beauty
one wrong turn with the side-show man
will get you so pushed into the margins

where the pills the booze the noose and the oven
will make more sense than losing your soul
that you have poured into your painter's canvas
or between the words of your iambic pentameters

in this Plasticine world who is left
to judge us Michael
who is innocent enough
who is artist enough?

with so much nothing
being made up to be art..
this day I pray that your soul
will be saved your soul that lies

between old book pages
that are being weeded off the shelves
that are being forgotten
I run my finger down

the spine of your book
that lies next to the table
where I write this
wondering what you were thinking
on that last tour to Dartmouth.

r james sterzinger

For Most Folks Deception Is

for most folks deception
is a pitch-black
dark tunnel
which is curiously
filled with angry words
from a heated argument
with pain that sizzles from
a knife stuck in the back
that reaches through
to the heart.

deception for me is
yellow
hot yellow and white
it burns like
a thousand suns
and blinds everything
i see
and it knows
it just seems to know
everyone of my sins laid out
like money on a dresser
like clothes before school
like a loved one who rests comfortably
in bed
while i am up all night
with insomnia
not being able to sleep
or nurse away this pain
by any means necessary
to dull the edge.

r james sterzinger

For Richard B.

that fall when
Richard took a gun
and blew out his poet brain

was the roughest of times for me
i had lost the love of my life
he was my favorite poet

when i read of him
how they had found his body
i almost cried
but couldn't
i was tapped out

did his gruesome death
keep me hanging on?

he was 49
i am 53
i owe him something

i have always been a little slow.....

r james sterzinger

For 's P'... Because She Asked

1.

she asked you for a happy poem

then while eating lunch

you cracked a tooth and

lost a filling in another....

2.

at fifty-two

missing teeth

isn't all that bad

as long as the sun shines

the flowers are sweet

the wine is still cheap,

friends are forgiving

birds still remember their tune in the morning

and the dentist will see you early Monday...

3.

the magic of days
is still reflected in the promise
of the eyes of children
lighting candles
on Sunday morning
at the Orthodox Church
because they believe in Jesus and mommy

4.

God proves He is good and believes in you
because you just got away with writing a poem
under the choir loft
on a Sunday morning
while the sun shines through the stain glass
at nine am with the choir singing...

5.

the little one year old girl with the perky ponytail

and the big brown eyes
that just drooled on her daddy's shoulder
has smiled at you,
reminded you,
that maybe you aren't such an ugly old toad
after all..

6.

now isn't that the beauty of God?

r james sterzinger

For The Birds

like the pigeons
on the skirt
of the hospital roof
next door

walk along the edge
cooing and crapping
in the sunlight

just don't step off the edge
without your wings open
crash
and leave a mess behind

because
that's what they
will remember you for

never for the cooing
you did on the skirt of the roof
in the sunshine

r james sterzinger

For The Cutter

the wrists of pleasure
opening
draining what's left of me
my life
gone
my love
gone
my muse
gone
me
gone
winter has indeed set in.

cold dark desperate
me.

this morning my muse
came to me in a dream
she cried 'its all over
its all over! '
this crying jag
all over me
and
i wasn't worthy
i knew it like
a communicant
stuck in the pew knows it
down to the marrow
down to the bones
down to the soul.

love gone
muse gone
it's all gone.

now it is indeed winter
my soul
gone
all that i feel

is this cold
this unrelenting cold
and the terror coming
through the walls.

there too is this feeling
'i'm not going to make it'
it is true
irreversible
i hear the death train...
'blow your damned whistle,
here i am, come get me
i'll bet the gamble,
take the risk
bargain with god
face to face! '

let's end this...

r james sterzinger

For The Muse Who I Do Not Know

A ladies blue and white panties
A small size four
Now how do I know that?
On the end of a branch. Hanging,
On the edge of the ravine,
Near the pond.

Lying among the leaves
I uncovered other evidence more
Evidence. Beer cans and rubbers
It's a beautiful view here
Very romantic!

Ah, Romance is a dead
Art. You can love someone
Twenty-three years and
Never get an I love you or
A hug from them.

What other lies do I
Suffer myself to believe in?

A young lady's blue and white
Panties hang in the woods
Like a suicide victim.
They match the blue and white
Of the sky. Isn't that
Romantic. Think about it!

I double check the area
Looking for a body. It is
My morbid nature. It is
How I feel about love.

A little further along
A woman's sweater
Blue-green with holes
Size, two or three. I again
survey the landscape, stare into

The dark dirty waters of the pond.
It may be best if
She drowned. It's how I feel about
The ambiguities of love.

Two people and a mutt walk by me
The man tall, thin with dark hair. The
Woman fat, blonde, round. They don't
Know that I am watching. Like you do
When I come home from the night shift.

Ducks mate for life. A lonely drake
Mallard, sails alone. Something familiar in it
To me. The ambiguities of love.

We argued this morning again.
Gutted each other with direct
Slashing movements. Here
In the park happy couples and families
Walk don't see me
In the trees. I feel like a murder
A stalker, something even more
Sinister as I write this.
I feel somehow that I am the guilty one
The one who was with the girl
In the blue and white panties
A dirty old man, A user
I wasn't, but I feel that cheap.

Sometimes poetry can spoil a walk.
Sometimes you trip over a muse.
A muse who you will never know
Who left her panties behind.
Either way, the art of it all
Leaves you feeling dirty and
Cheap.

.

r james sterzinger

For You M In January

last year
winter was softer,
easier...

you and I
were just you and I
walking across the street
from the church

your coat with fur hood
was white
all I saw though
was your brown eyes
the breath of your words
hung like morning frost
like unique snowflakes
that only I could see
could hear...

I seldom see you now
I am not impervious
to the cold
any longer

r james sterzinger

For You On Your Birthday...For My Brother Russ

When I was young and he was younger

Still, we both believed in God and

The imaginings of mind and marble.

We believed that all would work

Out. That God would provide.

That beauty was in the obvious.

It wasn't. Like all good

Mastery, Like all good

Art, everthing takes its

Time, its toll.

Even rainbows take

Painting and Imagination.

So does love.

Sometimes you have to

Remake and re-imagine the

Possibilities to make a life,

To find love.

So the potter takes the vase

That was ready for the kiln

Breaks it, remasters the clay,

Till he gets what he wants.

That's art, That's life.

That's how love and God

works. Even redemption

Takes time.

So we hang on.....

r james sterzinger

From The Death Of The Last Minor Poet In Minnesota. (After Bukowski)

This morning
While I was
Walking the dog,
A birdy in a short
Black dress, a
Red coat with
Black knee high boots
Approached me.

I walked by
Crossed at the crosswalk
Came up the block.

She must of thought I was a pervert,
A terrorist,
A Republican or a stalker
I guess.

Because...
She ran up the knoll
Across the parking lot
To get away.

Honey, take it easy,
I thought.
I'm relatively harmless.

You see...
I'm the last minor poet of
Minnesota.

I'm just
Out here
To pick up
Inspiration,
And dog do-do
And get away

From my wife.
Who doesn't understand me
Anymore than you do.

r james sterzinger

Ghost Walk

I talk to my ghosts
they come to me
at late night walks.

they come up
through sidewalk cracks
and knot holes in trees
dripping their sadness like blood
from the veins of leaves.

they are wisps
of cigarette smoke
they come to me on soft breezes
they whisper to me my sins
reminding me of memories,

memories and guilt
I would rather forget
I say my late night prayers
asking for forgiveness from them
that I know I don't deserve.

r james sterzinger

Graveyards

what i want
will keep
me
from being buried
in consecrated ground

what i want
has no light at the end of
that tunnel

what i want is no thought of you
or God
just worm fodder

now that is an end
i could really put my faith in

i want to take a leisurely stroll
off the edge
of a flat earth
i want to go
where there is only flat rainbows
or no rainbows at all

a place where only a black wind
blows
a place that feels like
love spent

a place where love
no longer haunts me
like ghosts in graveyards

r james sterzinger

Grit And Spittle

in the center of my father's farm or the remnants of had been a farm. before
inflation and change had made it impossible
to make a living, on forty acres I sat. to the east to the creek, the springs, the
north the remains of a woods, the west, the end and edges of steeple of St.
Mary's pointing straight up from the middle. there in the center of the field I sat
on the foundation and floor of an old shed, with the horse drawn rake and plow.

in between the fields of buttercups and weeds
the redwings trilled
the crickets hummed and all was covered with the incense of dust and pollen all
offered to a God who praised work with no reward.
even the honey of the wasps had the grit of gravel
the same grit and gravel that compose the folks that lived there
the gravel and grit that their God mixed with spittle as he created them

there in the fields in the wave and waves of pasture I drowned. drowned in
dreams drowned in sadness my head occasionally gasping for air. butdrown I did
I drowned there an early childhood a belief in a fat man in red suit who slid down
chimneys the kind we didn't have. drowned under an overworked father's weight.
drowned in between a mother's over-stretched love

still I miss the fields which belong to others now, the old house gutted and
rebuilt. dreams thrown away to make new doorways and windows and stairwells
for other dreamers, dreamers who refuse to sit in the middle of fields graced with
the incense of grief and grit.. dreamers who now dream in other places with
other stimuli... ones like me when i was a child are never to be found in open
fields of these slowly shrinking towns...

in those days...my mother hung her broken dreams with the dish cloths and
diapers on the line..I remember

r james sterzinger

Haiku Of Sorts

with a conscience
as black as grease
she lubricates the anger
till it rolls
till it rolls
till it chuffs
like a engine

no brakes now!

a new fight on old things
anger like a locomotive
(hard and fast)
deaf to the clack of the rail
to the Eternal Conductor
that blows the whistle...

r james sterzinger

Hamlet Faces His Midpoint

I look over the edge,
my legs start to totter
what's all this madness
against self-slaughter?

That I'm fifty-three
I am alone as a stone
there's a darkness over me
I am dead to the bone

I totter to the ledge
I stare to the eyes of
the black lady's daughter
what's all the madness
against self-slaughter?

the clouds are thick
they are heavy and dark
what's madding is
it's shining at the park

the young cuties are out
I'm a ghost to them
the only mistress that knows I'm about
wears a long dark hem.

I look to another day
I wonder what's the bother
why can't God decide
to agree to self slaughter?

r james sterzinger

Hazel's Alone

the clock
in the kitchen
reminds me
that I am alone
again
and ever again
the quiet seeps in.

I need a cup of tea.

the only thing that whistles
at me anymore
is the teapot...
the only thing
that shows any warmth.

I feel as alone
as the winter chickadee
nestled in the bayberry
watching the woods
silently fill with snow.

as lonely as any Christ on a crucifix
face contorted, weeping
my face against the window pane
the chickadee remains
the world turns white.
my breath fogs the glass.

the crush of winter cold
of being alone
is seeping in my bones...

and my tea is ready.

r james sterzinger

Hesperide For M

I am finally ready
to confront
a most untidy
Augean Stable

I really want to get back to
some sort innocence
I may or may not have had
as a child
that I have lost
somewhere, somehow
like a pinch full of pennies
out of a blind man's cup

all of my thoughts rattled away
long, ago
they had the chutzpah
to take me where they went
and went I did
a long way down
a road that was never mine
in the first place
but was more of the devil's own.

but now I come home
having met a Hesperide
who gave me apples
of sunrise
to take with me

so I smile now
while the rain drowns
the marigolds outside
in the blue planter
that is cut from
an old blue barrel

so I smile now
while the thunder claps

and others run for cover
under beds with the dust bunnies

so I smile
because she gave me gold
while I was stuck mining coal
caught like a canary in a cage
desperately
trying to hang on
not wanting to die
quite yet.

she gave me gold
not because she had it
but because she had been
down that same path
and had the map
that showed
the way home

r james sterzinger

Hey You Two....For A And L... Who Will Never Understand

they
those two
they hate the paper
the books
the poetry
they don't understand it at all, never will.

they
those two
they hate the pens
the twenty-some notebooks
the book reviews lying on the floor
in corners stuck
between Hemingway and the Bible.

they
those two
they hate the verse
written on snippets of bus tickets
written on chunks of cardboard
written on receipts for gas, food, more books.
that litter the desk, the floor
like dirty snow, no flake the same.

they
those two
the carpet needs replacing in my office
books, papers are thrown in boxes
or thrown away it's garbage to them.

they
those two
ask me, 'how many more books you gonna need?
how many have you added since I was here last?
you are not quitting your job for this poetry stuff are you?
are they paying you anything at all?

hey,
you two
I'm not quitting my job
I'll work in the factory forever
I'll buy the cars, the deck, the new flooring
I'll buy the birthday gifts the Christmas trees
I'll show up for the family functions...off and on.

hey
you two
I'm not quitting my job
my life is my job you and you are my job
this poetry keeps me from punching out
going to that other big nowhere...permanently.

but, hey
you two
for now until that time
it also keeps me
out of the bars
out of the streets
back alleys, the shelters
with the soulless
whose poetry though unwritten
is also a part of their lives
like mine, is mine

r james sterzinger

Hipster Head Bob For Alan

the old days
the music I
played long and hard
off of deep black as night
stereo records was rock n roll

loved rock and roll
thought it was the be all
the end all

in the bars, in the clubs
me and the boys
did the hipster head bob
it truly was
the only dance we could do

(though I cut the rug with
a few cuties if I was drunk enough)

but for us it was the hipster head bob
and we bobbed our heads ups and down
up and down to the Styx to Journey
even to the Beach Boys and the Beatles

we bobbed our heads like drunken turkeys
(we were drunken turkeys)
and we really bobbed to the Beach Boys and the Beatles
because that's what the girls liked
and we wanted to show them we were cool

thirty years later
its Puccini, its Rossini
its Benjamin Britten and Wagner
its Rostropovich and the long dark notes
that come from his cello that makes me tick

the girls are gone and are mothers
and spouses of others

and this morning its Puccini
and the hipster head bob
is a million miles ago

r james sterzinger

Hope... For You And Lublin Church For M And Laura..Because Now They Know

Hope... for You and Lublin Church

the empty arms of midnight
offer no promise.
little does,
except the things
you may put hope into.

even a basket for the eggs.
you may put the browns
next to the whites,
but there is no guarantee
that you will make it
from the yard to the kitchen,
without breaking one or two.

the tomatoes in the yard
for instance,
their skins are bright green,
their bodies round, solid
by the time they turn red
the worms, the canker
may get to them
and you will have to
pitch them in the manure pile.
there the flies will have them
for dinner,
but never you.

the hay in the field,
may burn to stubble
without rain.
the hay in the field may mold
with too much rain,
either way you are left with dust.

weasels have gotten
to the chickens before,
with one or two
dead in the morning,
the perfect new calf
lies broken in the straw
last night one of the cows broke her chain
and stepped on his back.

in the hog barn
we always lose
two or three.
some get laid on,
some get bitten,
some are just runts:
it's to be expected.

so where do we place our hope
on the farm?
we place it in a God
we do not see,
we place it in each other.

this is the place I have come from,
though I have moved far
from farm and family
and even faith sometimes.

still, I do
I place my faith in the God
who I do not see
and in you
who I do see
and your smile
at me
on Sunday mornings

there is no guarantee
there will be more than that.
but your smile,
and my foolish notion of God,
gives me hope,

that there will be.

r james sterzinger

Hospice (For Robert Lowell)

I
worked in this hospice
 once
and when we took
 the dead
 through
 to
 the morgue
we had to walk
 through
 the
 cancer wing
 where all
were hanging on
to their own thread of
 hope.

 we
 came through
 like a battle flag
 a clarion call
 like the truth
like harsh reality
like a common bond
 like fate
 much like
an all embracing
warm black envelope
 for a letter
 that no one
 wanted to read.

r james sterzinger

Hymn To Abduction...With Thanks To Norman Who Inspired This

The evening sigh pours
Out of me
Then lust
Then contempt
I have no recourse
I mumble
Grow bitter.

The night opens
It flushes out the light
Low at first
Light, like a hummingbird's song
Then the darkness settles in

Personality
Hope light and love
Are engulfed
They are seated down
Made comfortable.

Then love is ripped from hope
From light
Love, is taken by the neck
(Or at least what I recognize as love
It might be a bad abduction)
And it is strangled passionately
Like a rose to the frost!

Love takes courage
I use to have that courage;
You know?
Now I run from the battle's call
I am wounded,
Running
I am a coward!
Remembrance of you
What could have been

Chases me like a pack of hounds.

I have taken to the river now
The waters are up to my neck
Will I get away?

r james sterzinger

I Have Become Mortal At Last

I go this morning to walk
The sun an orange globe
It bullies the night's clouds
Adds this day, to its count of days.
The morning's air: cool
A whisper of a breeze
Bows the branches in the trees
I would like to think they are waiving at me.
But I know better, much better
No longer guided by God,
Or sprites, or spirits,
Guided by logic, by science. now.
There is no room for symbolism
For Saints, only for the me of me
The idea of me as it,
Makes us all the more alone, desperate.
I need to see a doctor she says
'You need to see what is going on'
The pain in the guts, the tingling
In the fingers and toes isn't miraculous.
I have come to this point in life
Where one counts the days
The years have taken care of themselves
They have washed away the truths of memory.
Sealed in the middle of every stone
Is the heart of the matter
Every simple thing is elegant bones
And like the rock, someday, I be willed into particle.

r james sterzinger

I Like Hemingway... For Alexi Who Knows And Alicia Who Destroys

I like Hemingway
he wrote of life of death
of youth
of booze
he wrote of the madness
of being a man
he wrote of how you go through it all
when love becomes incomplete
when booze is not enough to take away that pain
when death stares you in the face
when you make that commitment
to follow that black angel
wherever she will lead you

death faces you everyday
it wears the faces of wives
it resides in the eyes
of the animals you hunt
it resides in avenging angels
whether they live in Spanish Bulls
or men on the other side of battle

I like Hemingway
he showed us that life
is an art
is a craft
and in art must lie truth
and if there is no truth in it
it isn't worthy of the ink
or the paper

I like Hemingway
he showed us
'this is the path to being a man
to accept what you do
and live with the consequences.
and never ever abandon yourself

or you craft.'

he showed us how
to take it to the ring
take the punches
take the knockdowns
and never ever snivel

I like Hemingway
he showed us the only one a man needs
to truly trust in
is himself
and to live with the joy of life
and the path of destruction
that much of it is the same, anyhow.

I like Hemingway
because he had the moxie
to show us
that when the bull
and the madness is too much
you need to look heaven in the eyes
and have a worthy exit strategy
because that too is art
and counts for something
it is life's finest art.

r james sterzinger

I Look Into Your Eyes

i look into your eyes
and i want to tell you how i feel.
i don't want to corrupt or ruin you
so
what i will do is paint dreams of you
place them in large manila envelopes that will never be opened
by anyone.
they will be sealed
like the secrets of god.

r james sterzinger

I Remember Me Once

i remember me once
young and searching for love
that naive

i remember me once
damn sure my love would beat the odds

i remember me with you
warm compelling enticed

i remember me
and that's all i have now
the rest buried
between your eyes
and forever

r james sterzinger

I Sleep Late

On Mondays
I sleep late
always... well, not always
not today, not this one

Today, I have to go
to the dentist
two broken teeth

five centuries later
I know why the Mona Lisa
doesn't smile
you get old
it all starts to go
mind memory
knees teeth

mouth numb
mind numb
I sit in the chair
waiting for the Novocain
to take full effect

the dental assistant gal
knows my wife
I am not sure what she knows about me
I am suspicious though

as she and the dentist
and I wait
she talks about
her weekend

her daughter is running
for Miss. Something or other
I hear about judges... floats
girls... awards... ribbons
more floats.... parades,
scholarships

on and on.

when you get old
things fall apart
patience wanes
and the things
that sedate you
make your life more bearable
like booze, like Novocain

like inane conversations
that you have to listen to
just so you can have a smile
that holds up
when the clouds come in
and darken the day
when you really wanted sunshine

r james sterzinger

I Wanna Touch God

i wanna
touch god
where he lives
if it's silence
or vibration.

i wanna reach
out to see
if he is real.
like when you
skin a knee
or break a beer
bottle on the side
walk and hear it
smash.

i wanna smell god
like the sun when it's
hot and yellow.

i wanna see god
like emptiness.
that rainbow moment
when something means something:
when the east is pitchblack
and the western sky
is just right.
yeah!
like a rainbow.

i wanna touch god
feel him
like bactine in
a cut.
i wanna feel him,
strong as loneliness.

i wanna feel god
like when i hurt.

when i see something
like that dead crow yesterday...
like roadkill...
like when that true love one died,
the one that haunt's my dreams...
the one i really DID love.
the one i haven't gotten over yet.

r james sterzinger

I Will Miss (For W. S. Merwin)

I will miss the voices
of the wind in trees
on sunshine summer days

I will miss the voices
of the birds, morning sparrows,
the crows: their feathers, dark as storms

I will miss the voices
of the children at play
hanging upside down on summer slides

I will miss the voices
of all the hungry ghosts
of all my cats, that I have in memories

I will miss the voices
of new babies crying
that interrupts alleluias and church sermons

I already miss your voice
though you are here and we talk
I care for it that deeply.

r james sterzinger

I'D Like To Fall In Love....For You

I'd Like to Fall in Love One More Time

I'd like to fall
In love, one more time.
Get lost in the milk of it,
Drown in the brine
I'd like to fall
In love, one more time.

I'd like to fall
In love, one more time.
Run my hands through her hair.
Jump in
With both feet,
Do it on a dare.
I'd like to fall
In love, one more time.

I'd like to fall
In love, one more time.
Hold her
In my arms, breathe
In her air. Look in her
Eyes, get lost
In her stare
I'd like to fall
In love, one more time.

I'd like to fall
In love, one more time.
Find the one
Who will keep me
Captivated.
Who will enrapture
Me, keep me
Satiated, I'd like to fall
In love, one more time.

I'd like to fall

In love, one more time.
Let my eyes cloud over,
Get hazy. Make it work,
This time, not fall apart,
Like it did before,
When I got lazy.
I'd like to fall
In love, one more time!

r james sterzinger

If Happy Little Bluebirds Fly (For J And S) And Alexi Too

I.

When did my thirst for anything
Beautiful, collapse
Turn dry and cynical?

The muse
With the pool-blue painted eyes
Has asked me
For one more poem.

I have none
To offer
Nothing comes
No meter no rhyme
No hope.

II.

You
Begin to lose hope when
You
Discover that
Pearls are nothing more than sand and oyster spit
The elixer of life is just his blood and your d.n.a.
And nothing more.

Hey, God
Will not appear just because
You have faith
Your chimney wasn't
Big enough for Santa to slide
Down. Daddy locked
All the doors on Christmas Eve.
What was delivered could
Be taken back if we kept the tag.

III.

But still

A hobo's life is a prayer we do not see.
Cardinals sing at 5: 00 a.m. after
They wash there faces and comb their hair.

Jesus still appears on potato chips
And dies for your sins
On cross-melted cheese curls.

Your old ugly face still gets
Kind smiles from nymphs
Mailing letters out of cars
While you are waiting for the dog to do
His business with a bag in your hand.

Flowers still bloom in the oddest places
Just for the hell of it.
The young can still charm,
The wine can still be red and good
And:
The muse,
With the pool -blue painted eyes
That asked you for another poem,
Can still motivate you to write
A poem like this.
So it's somewhere over the rainbow,
And good-night Judy Garland
Wherever you may be,
Wherever you may be!

r james sterzinger

If Someone Is Going To Save Me

if someone is going to save me
it won't be the street preacher
at the Farmer's Market
giving his take on Christ
between the rutabagas
and the tomatoes

if someone is going to save me
it won't be the televangelist
on the television, on Sunday
hawking his latest book
on the apocalypse
that isn't coming by Tuesday, anyhow.

if someone is going to save me
it won't be the shrink I had with
the pills they gave me
or the week that they tried
to pull me back
from the knothole I really
never resurrected from

if someone is going to pull me back
it will start
with the smile I get
from Viv
who is eighty and then some
who is always happy to see me
and always sees me
when many of the others don't

she always smiles
always looks to see
if I am under the corner of
the choir loft...
as I am

when we walk through the church
on Sunday morning to say hello to the priest

she tells me she feels a little shaky
and I always tell her 'I'll catch you.'
and I will, if need be

and we talk about her grand-kids
and great-grand kids
the dog she misses
and the husband she misses as well

then I think to myself
she is as close to the love of God
I may ever see
I also think
that her long gone husband
must have been the luckiest guy
on earth
and I envy him
even though he is dead...

when the week has played out
and it wasn't anything I had hoped for
I go to church
and when I see her
I feel someone
just might save me
in spite of it all

r james sterzinger

If The Creator Will

I have to wonder who I am
While cleaning the hairbrush in my hand
Taking the broken strands away
Is it still a part of me or DNA?

I feel right now the way I was
When I woke this morning. Yet because
Something has been pulled away from me.
Am I still myself, or am I free?

So I must cling to belief in soul
Because the days and nights will come and roll.
Then someday when I lie upon the hill,
I will have a going on. If the Creator will.

r james sterzinger

In Your Eyes...For You

When I see myself through your eyes
I see nothing in myself worthy of redemption
Nothing to save, nothing to be delivered.

On those days the poems don't come.
I roll over in bed
I sleep late
I put the movie on the tube
I sleep through it
I want no inspiration
None.

On those days
I turn on Doctor Zhivago
For the fiftieth time.
I know the outcome
Omar will have a heart attack
Julie will go beautifully to the gulag
Stieger will pawn it all.

My darkness is your darkness.
You like to wrap me in it.
Then the poems
That you don't understand
That you don't like
That get in the way
Don't come.

The branches on the trees are gray
They drip of gray
The rays of the sun give a gray light
I think of curses
I think of your mannerisms
They become ticks
Seconds on the clock
They rinse the day away like rain

You always need to win
You always do

Don't you.

Somehow it will all trickle into
My fault
And run down the eaves
And into the manholes
Forming rivers of poems
That I will never write.

r james sterzinger

June 8th,2009 For Ezra, Wyatt And Kurt

three days before my first reading
I am out in the rain
the air: cool deep thick
I feel like
a bedbug
under a wet mattress

the gray of the sky
wraps between the black boughs
then around the green leaves of the trees
that stand as sentry witnesses
in the corners of my yard

June is indecisive
July knows what she wants
August sits pregnant in the heat
September shuts down like
a lover who's had one last fling
and despises herself for it.

this is early June
this day's made it's decision
wet, damp, sullen
'so it goes, ' said the dead writer
'so it goes...'

three days before my reading
I look to between the wet black branches
two mating squirrels are fighting
their squabble reminds me of my own

three days before my first reading...
I roll my poems through my head
walk across the yard to the shed
I wonder who
cleaned Auden's gutters
in the spring?

r james sterzinger

Just Before Jerusalem

I have a bitterness that runs
Deep. when Jesus cursed
The fig tree, it
Gave nothing sweet.

No good fruit
No wine pours from
Me, not at all.
So I have been told.
I am comfortable with that.

It seems, however to me
He was cursed too.
Going to Golgatha
Stripped, striped
Beaten near to death.

You have to hit bottom
For a resurrection, for an
Attempt at salvation.

To rise, to ascend
To save, to understand.
I am comfortable with that
It makes sense to me.

Right now though
I am cursed, bitter
You were right my dear Amy,
What are patterns for?

r james sterzinger

Ketchup Suicide

I prefer Heinz
I prefer Hunts
I can't stand this runny stuff

what kind do you prefer, Ron?
cheap!
I like to drown my food

when you want to drown
you don't ask
what kind of water you want

r james sterzinger

Kick

at fifty-three
a man should be content
a boat
a wife
children mostly grown
a sense of direction
at least some ducks in a row

me
at fifty-three
i am just beginning to look
Ahab on the deck
smelling the wind
today's mood
i need something to kill

listen to the wind
amigo
it is all a dirty trick
life, love, substance

this is why
god has made it
impossible
to kick yourself
in the ass

r james sterzinger

Lazarus Riseth Again... For Gore

got out of bed
went to the shower
Lazarus, Lazarus
who riseth thee from the dead
I thought.

middle-aged overweight
(some)
not giving a damn
(a little)
who is this man
with a bad haircut
looking back at me?

the mirror doesn't lie
like I do to myself
old eyes that need
glasses now
hair thinning
(one way to get rid of a bad haircut)
and then
the tea stained teeth

what all doesn't work
as well as it once did?
I say as I look down.
I seem to have abandoned myself

I have one chore this morning
some potatoes have rotten
on the bottom of the bag in the hall

I fish out three juicy stinkers
and three with mold
throw them in the garbage
sack them up.

put two more
in the microwave to eat

the rest in a shopping bag
back into the hall

then I take the stinkers and molders
out into the alley
in the rain
with only a ratty bathrobe on.

I go back into the house
put cheese on my potatoes
write this poem

“Style is knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a damn.”

Gore Vidal

r james sterzinger

Leghorns...For Mary Oliver

Leghorns.....For Mary Oliver

a bouquet of red roses
for my lady friend
who will soon
die of cancer
brings to my
memory

the white leghorns
hung over piece of stump
which my mother beheaded
with black-handled butcher's
knife or father's hand axe

let them run then
headless through yard
until bled out or over
the white feathers

these roses today bled
incarnadine through the window
of the flower shop
cooler where my friend Angela works
where I purchased them
at good-friend discount

I carry them wrapped
in newspaper
walking through falling
and fallen snow
trying not to slip

thinking of you and snow
now....

for the moment
chickens and roses
are unimportant

r james sterzinger

Like A Distant God

I paint you black
I paint over you with
a smear of the brush

one cover
another coat
when I see you now
I will not look up
when I see you
or a shadow of you
I will remove my glasses
so you and the distance
will never again exist
mean anything to me

you are the crosses
of battlefields
anything that meant anything
will be carried by the dead
but not by me

I can't bear the thought
of you
the itch of you
the wanting of your company

how I will remember you is
how I will remember church candles
bright light beauty
then ash

I will carry my own light now
fall in love with second best
someone who will love me
that I won't have to love back
like a distant God

r james sterzinger

Losing Faith In The Muse

what will i do when i find out later on
that the poetry
that keeps me
holding on
is mundane
twaddle
and isn't art
but flaunting
my madness in public?

will i brood in madness
get committed again
or go ruthless on myself
and cast my soul
far from the eyesight
of g-d?

r james sterzinger

Love Played Out

our love played out
like a cheap romance novel
each end battered, torn
fantastic love making once or twice
at the end of one or two
chapters
but mostly a hell of a lot of words
going nowhere.

our love played out
like a Raymond Chandler book
fast talk and violence
zippy one liners
you looking sharp and smart
me not giving a damn
every chapter a crime scene baby
nothing left but sadness and the morning

our love played out like a mystery
who done it. who killed who
or wanted too.
we counted up the total of dead
you. me. our love. any spark.
something lying in the ditch:
an evidence of something
that tied to something
that we no longer recognized.

our love played out
all we had was the words
when they grew to be too much
we wrote the rest in silence

our love
it just played out

r james sterzinger

Magdalene And The Pear

along the path near the inner edge
among the mix of last falls
oak and elm leaves
lies a half eaten pear
the outer skin still green
with blotches like a thrush's egg

the meat inside still white
with a hint of yellow
like a seasoning of black pepper
a hive of ants
run to and fro over it

they embrace it
like Magdalene embracing
the Savior's feet
salvation must be taken
when salvation comes

r james sterzinger

Minneapolis North Side Christmas

'O come O come Emanuel, and ransom captive Israel! '

Arnold Schoenberg's Verlarte Nacht playing loud while I travel
from Robbinsdale to Nord' East
then back to Golden Valley to work
as words come to me this Nativity Poem Season

Highway garland ribbons wrap the North Side
in its concrete bows and tar driven efforts.
Washington Avenue North Side double running with Ninety-Four
which many years ago gutted fine family neighborhood,
hastening urbane separation-decay cutting north through
family homesteads and family Christmas memories
Lyndale sad faces sullen at bus stop waiting for a little of little.

Neighborhood of Plymouth Avenue shops and Jewish shop owners all gone now
last ones bailing out after sixties riots and burning down of property and hope.
Streets changed now. Plymouth housing projects and Pilot Heath Center anchor
area
where Penn Avenue busses go west past abandoned dilapidated
boarded up Synagogue. Stars of David on each point, barely hanging on while
snow begins to fall.
Fatherless children and de-husbanded wives go into Pilot Center seeking
heartless help
while abandoned by the system. Un or underemployed men go see Perry
Shannon
for probation reporting.
Further south Floyd B. Olson liberal governor of change stands silent
looking north up Penn toward bus stop where public Metropolitan Council bus
unloads pregnant teenage moms.

Broadway bus stops unload shoppers with gifts
bought from the first and second ring suburb Target stores.
Men congregate near THE CITY wondering where
they will get promised presents for son and daughters
or where they will have traditional Christmas Dinner.

Lowry Avenue got needed spruce up last two years
fallen crack houses gone now

The bridge is gone now too, so Lowry goes nowhere
like homegrown Santas who have to decide whether unemployment
checks will cover gifts or Christmas Dinner but not both
like the avenue itself, no one is going anywhere.

I leave Cathedral library where I volunteer and cross over Plymouth Bridge
take Lyndale Avenue South to Highway Fifty-Five where last
Wise Man with walker and crutch like a forlorn Tiny Tim holds cardboard sign
looks for a few dollars to pay for necessities to take with him to Sharing and
Caring Hands.

As I stare at him I think of Annshalike who was pregnant and found dead weeks
later
on frozen garage floor, double killer never found. Her pretty face now graces
backside
of Aldrich Avenue bus bench.

Jacques Brel now playing from track to track, as I wonder
Is there any help for you North Minneapolis?
or will your tears flow into ever deeper river toward Dubuque
toward St. Louis, to Memphis, Baton Rouge, New Orleans
out to the Gulf? Will the hope of Christmas find the hearts of your
sad little ones, your sad strange ones, your sad hopeless sons and
daughters, strangled by banker economics?

I don't know about the rest of the cities along the river to the gulf,
nor the Cities through out the Republic.
Minneapolis is my home.
The people here show something of a resilience.
The children of North who have little still smile in gas stations
buying candy with found in couch quarters.

On Twenty-Sixth Avenue I drive through
one of the worst of neighborhoods.
Here flowered wreaths of victims stand on corners.
This street I choose to drive on toward Sunday church
out of sure stubbornness or in search of inspiration.
Here is where I continue to see hope.
Children and moms and dads pour out of Salem Baptist on Sunday late mornings
arm in arm. Little ragamuffins smile at red licorice whips as if they were bought
with a million dollars. Store front Lowry church kids look happy with little of
nothing.

The Christmas lights of North shine in the eyes of dark eyed smiling little ones
and that is good indeed.

Snowmen decorate the worst public housing complexes and section eight housing
Street Corner gangsters shepherd mom from the bus stops out of love and hope
Out of St. Anne's on Twenty-Sixth, an ever enlarging Hmong Catholic
congregation
has saved the North-side Church for now, while white European Madonna stares
over all
and smiles.

Across the river you can hear the Christmas bells of St. Mary's Orthodox,
Of All Saints, of St. Constantine's of others, pealing on Christmas morning.
Hispanics now come out side by side with white folks of Eastern European
descent from of St. Cyril and Methodius,
all believing the same Catholic faith anyhow.

When all you have is hope, hope is where you stake yourself to the ground
so the flood of tears and sadness doesn't wash you away.
Hope sets itself between I-pod headed bus riders: the music can't drown out the
sound of hope.
Hope waits at bus stops, in the libraries in sad little houses and free clinics.
There you will find Christmas creche shepherds saintly new mothers,
angel children sing: Hark The Herald Angels Sing! while I-pods play Black- Eyed
Peas.
On the bus stop of Olson Memorial new saintly Marys wrap dark eyed babies
in first Christmas swaddling polyester twill blankets.
On the corner of Penn bus stop bench bewildered black Joseph has same
lost look as one on Orthodox icon.

Many Jesuses of all colors and sexes walk on frontage roads and streets.
Today he appears as African-American Cutie with dark eyes,
dark fur coat and pink and white plastic purse with widest of smiles.

So as Brel sings, the words in French that I don't understand,
I say the morning prayers that I forgot, for all the people in this poem.
I wish them all the merriest of Christmases, and the ones that are wouldn't want
me too.
I wish them the best, without their permission.
May they be warm and safe and full of hope!
May the light of Christmas lighten their hearts!
My hope is their hope, my prayer their's also!
I stake my Christmas happiness to theirs!

My soul is staked to their souls!
We are one searching for the same hope
the same Santa!
The same Christ in the cows feedlot bunk!

r james sterzinger

Moon Light Star Bright

after she told him
how lousy he was in bed,
in life in all the rest,
he went out to the deck
and stared at the stars
in the eastern sky.

the points of light that shown
came from thousands of years ago
maybe more, maybe less

that dark
how long does that take to reach
from there to here?

light or dark
it all takes time
you don't usually see the effects of it
right away

marriages that once seemed
bright with optimism can and often do
fart out and morph into something
that even God doesn't recognize.

he realized most things take time
and starlight once it takes off
you can't claim it back

so he looked at what was
and thought about the beauty
from a long time ago
and accepted that it
was surrounded by all that night now

so he thumbed through the attorneys
in the yellow pages
so the dirty work could begin
because she had reminded him that he was no star

in the first place
and didn't care how he felt
anymore.

r james sterzinger

More Guts Than Anyone

working on a poem after I got home

right on Broadway and Fremont in North

with cars roaring and guys with pants half mast

girls in tight jeans etc

walked this black cat, walking like he owned all of North Minneapolis

fearless, like a panther.

will make for a fine poem

r james sterzinger

Morning Poems

in the background
either silence
or a soap opera

next to me
a cup of tea
a half eaten sandwich.

if a word
gets me stuck
I look out the window.

if a love scene
comes on the television
all else stops.

the wash needs doing
I go to the basement
throw in a load.

I sort little
everything comes out grays
the colors lose their luster

my poems
are regular things
like wash in a basket

made up
of movements of the day
and common moments.

.

r james sterzinger

My Coat... For Norman (If God Wills It So)

I wear my bitterness
like my comfortable
old coat that
I refuse to
throw away
because I know
its smell.

it keeps me warm
protects me
from your cold
accompanies me
on long walks
that seem to have
no end.

the collar turns
up just right
so the sun never gets
in nor the cold
nor prying eyes
that wonder what
I carry in
my deep pockets.

I carry in
my pockets
snippets of
grocery bills,
and on the backside
wild accusations
and poetry
written in red
smeared ink
that challenges
God like
a spoiled hurt
child would.

my coats wool
blend is a
hair shirt
to me and its
itch helps me
to repent of
the anger I feel
when I storm
out of the house
in blindness
with my dog on walks
with my tail
between my legs
after another
yellow hot fight
with you.

my coat has holes
in its pockets
where my spare
change falls out
like poison from
an old wound
festering.

I look like
hell in my old coat
like Lazarus coming
from the tomb,
like ash
from a smoke stack,
like Belzen,
like Buchenwald,
like sadness.

the worst
thing in the world
is to die
expecting mercy
and
when not finding mercy
is to find in your heart

such searing anger
that any hope or love
you may have nailed,
have crucified
your humanity on
is burned away
in some reverse
alchemist's process,
that there is nothing left but
true murderous thoughts:
thoughts of contempt.

the backward side of love
we all carry,
we all carry;
stumbling toward eternity...

which
is why I wear my old coat
on my shoulders
like a friend,
who holds me like
a friend
when I cry out my tears
of joy and sadness
when no one is around
but me and my dog
on long walks
at midnight
when my children are in bed
and you tell me you
need some alone time
and I fit in
like a St. Bernard
in a shoe box

my old coat and a walk
parachutes me down
to the ground
where I am safe
and can go on.

it keeps me from Jarrell jumping
into traffic
falls on the ice
and Gadarene madness
that may overtake me
when the patches will
no longer hold the needles
thread.

r james sterzinger

My Heart Fluttered... 'I Have Remembrances Of Yours...

My heart fluttered
As a hummingbird
When I first saw you,
Met you,
Got to know you.

But now
It is winter
Time to close
The doors, shut
Windows
Put up plastic,
Light a fire, burn everything just
To keep warm.

I shouldn't,
I mustn't,
See you again.
Yet I still know so little about you,
But my sin, but my sins.

'in thy orisons be all my sins remembered.' W.S. 'Hamlet'

r james sterzinger

My Home

the land where I lived
and cut my teeth is gone
what memories I had
are between the roots and the dirt.
the hills I ran down are gone
leveled out like my family's
laughter.

the house that slept in
whose windows couldn't keep out
the cold, where I would etch
my name in frost
has been gutted
and there are no drafts

and the memories are all mine
and when I like the house I lived in
has serves out its time
my memories will lay to waste

and that is good
the way it is meant to be

r james sterzinger

My Parents

my parents lie
side
by side next to
each other
in a Catholic
cemetery
in Central Wisconsin

a little narrow path
winds up through
that cemetery
and if you follow it
all the way to the west end
where they both are buried

there you will see all the people
that use to come to our house
at Christmas time
or Easter
or baptisms
and first communions
and play rummy...
all together
just like they use to
a long time ago in our kitchen.

it's nice to think of them
all dead together
so they are not alone.
I guess that's the good thing about death
in a small town
the folks you lived with
don't have to be invited over anymore

and my parent are together there
side by side
unlike they were in life
and some how that tickles me
as a big tear just plopped

in the middle of my keyboard
as I write this
and feel alone
with the house quiet
like I will be
sooner than I care to think

r james sterzinger

Neglect

many a night now
I get these bouts
where I cannot sleep
and I succumb to a
grief that bears a mirror
that challenges me
to take a look-see at
myself and wonder
where the hell
did I go wrong?

so I tap away at the computer
and crank out meaningless verse
that makes as much sense
as a monkey on a skateboard.

her death and your
neglect have made me
into something
I would rather have not become.

I have become an old toad
that watches and bides his time
waiting for my own death
wondering when it will happen
and if everyone will slobber after me
when it is too damn late.
I'll shew them out of my hospital room
you know
have them pack up their circus
just so I can die in peace.

you see I got it all at thirty
figured it all out
every bit
how life is precious and beautiful
that love is the most important thing
but as I watched her die
no one else seemed to get it

except me.

so I isolate myself with
a cup of tea and soda crackers
talk to my dog
and watch the chickadees
watch the snow fall
and wait for offers in the mail
praying that this life is but one go round
and nothing at the other end.

you see everything puckers up and dies
either in the fall or the winter
when the ground is too hard
to bury it all away
but it all makes sense
and has a comic irony
like angels in street corner Christmas windows
unsaid rosaries hanging from rearview mirrors
or a lonely child's mitten in the snow.

r james sterzinger

Night

who's going to save
us from ourselves
we travel around each other
preying on each other
singing on Sundays
for what?

you know
its save the whales
its He's my president now
and I need to support him
its we need to revive the economy
you know.

oh, so much twaddle
so much twaddle.
who's going to save us from ourselves.

ah, Marie,
as you lie asleep
our love making complete
I stare at the ceiling
where your children
are asleep
I wonder
who's going to save us
from ourselves

I get out of bed
put my robe on
go out to the deck
light my cigarette
stare out at the stars
and embrace the silence
until it and me are one

it is midnight now
a little too late to think
about these things

a little too early too
but I can't sleep
I can't

for right now
here between
the smell of your perfume
still on me
and the end of this cigarette
burning in my hand
filling my lungs

I just want to
think how much I love
you Marie
and this crazy life
and for this moment
save the stars
and let the world keep turning
by itself without me
if need be

and if I die this moment
it would have been worth
it all
all the sadness
all the stars that shine
a little dark in the light
Marie
like the stars that flicker out and die
you have helped me to hang on

r james sterzinger

Night Tones

the night speaks
in hushed tones
now

the birds
have gone to bush

the bats have taken
to flight
they murder moths
in the light
it's their calling

crickets scrape and cry
the mouse looks for seed
the dew tangles itself
among the spider's web

the stars burn the light
they can't afford to lose
can I?

I go to the stove
light the pilot
boil water in the red tea kettle
make a cup of pekoe
sit on the deck
alone

night is night
it is what it claims to be

r james sterzinger

No Muse No Poems No Hope (W/ App. To E. E.)

love for me
(at 53)
is a
locomotive
puffing soot
and
oil into
the sky
(burning up like my prayers) :
just like my
prayers
(and my hopes)
while i wave good-bye
to the empty windows
with no one looking.

left to stand on the platform alone.
(my wrists are the tracks)

i
am going to take a shower
contemplating a razor
to shave with
i guess...

r james sterzinger

No Time

I don't have time for this

I don't have time to write
twisted meaningless verse
I don't have time for rhyme schemes
I don't have time for iambic pentameter

don't have time for fooling around
don't have time for spell check
(c'mon fingers push the right keys
make it happen)
don't have time to be Keats
Shelley Byron
don't have time for romance
I don't even have time to seduce
listen to risqué jokes talk like a fool

I don't have time to paint the house
cut my lawn cut my hair
walk the dog
I don't have time for this

I don't have time to make amends
tell you I am sorry
we can make this work
that we were to last forever
it's meaningless
and I don't have time

I don't have time for an affair
prayer meditation deliverance
suggestion or hope...
not even I dimes worth

I have got to write while the muse whispers in my ear
get it down figure it all out later
I am getting to damn old to wait
friends my age are dying off
(will I be next?)

I have to write get it down get it out
before my time runs out
before death notices me
or before I am sitting in home somewhere
where a nurse calls me by my name
and I don't know who I am
hoping that my pants stay dry
and wondering what's for supper

r james sterzinger

Not A Gift...For S. P.

she told me
writing poetry
and being a poet
was a gift.

ah,
dolly, I said
it's not a gift
it's a vision.

and

any prophet will tell
you
that having visions
will get you
kicked
out of the tribe,
thrown into a
pit,
leave you to rot in prison,
or send you out to the desert.

where you will listen
to that still small voice,
go mad,
and write damn fine verse.

that maps the territory
of the human soul,
and the recesses
of the human heart.

r james sterzinger

Not Much Of A Poem, Not Much Of A Memory... For Al Purdy

we bought two picture books that day
one brown one red
the covers in faux leather

in between the pages we
put in pictures
of you me
memories
we were going to want to save

memories I know longer have
oh, there is a few
our first home,
the second,
that's about it.

I don't recall
when you bought
those huge glasses
at twenty-five you were
already close to blind.
I vaguely remember something
about that

I don't remember
my arm around you then
when you looked frail before
the transplant that was suppose
to save your life
but didn't

the hell of it all
is I don't remember
much about you at all
a year after your death
I couldn't recall your voice
the way you laughed

my mind locked you out

I am the carrier of your memory
your longest deepest love
and I failed the job

you are dead to me
twenty-five years later
the most I can recall with clarity
with a singular vision
is where you are buried
near the church we went to
that no longer exists

now you are truly dead
a place where I can't reach
nor touch you
a place you can't come back from

I have stories of you, true
how much of me
are these stories?
how much you?
I am as unreliable
as they are.

the only two things
that are reliable
are the spaces between the pictures
and that you are dead
as they say
like a door nail
like a coffin nail
that I know for sure
that memory
is the only one
to be counted on.

r james sterzinger

Now The Monster Comes!

now the monster comes!
the wall of religion
that herded him in the pen
it is all gone
no god no religion
he has thought them through
has destroyed them

now the monster comes!
his walking stick is with him
it will travel the distance
with him. the stick is his wand
his magic. it is his belief
that love is dead
is cold, hard as steel,
not made for him.
this thought is what binds and blinds him

now the monster comes!
he aims to take me
where I do not want to go.
his depth is my depth,
what roils under his flesh,
roils in my soul.
his journey is my own

now the monster comes!
he has taken my prayers.
my love they are his
nothing no longer belongs to me
his image is before me
his shadow swallows me up.

now the monster comes!
I rest in the crux of his arms
with him I will go
it was a matter of time
he has been looking for me
and has found me again

I have no hope
he wears it for me
on the soles of his shoes.

now the monster comes!
I must let him take me
finish his work
do his thing
hopefully he will complete
the job this time,
so the ones that I embrace, that I love,
that I care for won't go under
with me again.

now the monster comes!
I have done his bidding.
I have let him in,
my love.
cut the ribbons that bind me to you!
I was but a shadow
the real me like him
is a terror in the night
you will be forgiven by god
for letting me go!

r james sterzinger

October: For A. D.

What may have just flown
Over me might be the last
Robin of fall or maybe not.
It is hard to tell.
There may be another one
However, I doubt it.

This early morning sky
With its honest hint of rain
Offers in itself no betrayal:
This season is passing
Winter will arrive
In its own good time.

The yellow and brown leaves
Have dried, have fallen down
Their time has come to conclusion
I know why they fall, yet
Somehow I feel they have failed
Themselves without contrition.

Everything fails, falls,
Has its own death:
Whether it is one's own personal faith
In God, the Republic
Or in the silly notion that we
Ourselves shall last forever.

r james sterzinger

Olga

she told us she was ready to go. still
we didn't want that to happen. her mind
was fading in and out. seeing people
she had known in the past.

while her room filled with well wishers trying
to keep her in this life, I muttered a prayer
to the ceiling, hoping for safe passage
for the trip.

its not fair for death to take
loved ones from us
its not fair for us to keep them
here when they are packed, ready to go

this weekend we buried Olga, she
lay so still. her brocaded wedding dress
displayed next to her casket.

people commented on the beauty
of the dress, the lace, the hand stitching
how wonderful she had looked in it.

my thinking turned to how she left
unafraid ready to go like a saint of old
like the last line of a well written myth.

r james sterzinger

One For The Trains

trains
that blow long lonesome whistles
at three a.m.
should have empty boxcars
with their
sliding doors
wide open
to catch the night air

once when I was drunk
in the back of a car
I heard one
it sounded as lonesome as a prophet
in a desert.

I didn't cry that night
but I sure felt that I could
and it was dark
so no one would have known
but me and god

r james sterzinger

One More

one more prayer from the cripple
one more bargain with the big
Pooh-Bah up in the sky
one more loss of faith
one more distant star dead
cold, burned out
forgotten as I am to my own self

one more prayer from the cripple
one more desperate plea to heaven
one more bit of bitter hope
that he'll take measures into his own hands
and break the impasse that makes love
happen, makes it all ring true.

I brew another cup of tea
and try to fill words into a poem
that lacks intimacy and imagination
what can be expected of a coward
what hope can a man have who feeds on
memories and fear like a cannibal

so let the snow fall
I will grow older, softer around the middle
stay in bed late
so that when I meet my angel again
I can say I did my repentance
for leaving her die in that
lousy hospital
while I did nothing but pray that she
would die in peace

you know you can't blame god for
his lack of desire to cooperate
in a life you have given up on long ago

yeah, well....

r james sterzinger

One More Shot For The Gipper...(I Guess) For Jerry...Because He Knows

after coming home from work,
after walking the dog-
I take my clothes down to the washer,
and throw on my ratty old red bathrobe.

after putting water in the teakettle,
brewing a bland cup of pekoe,
I sit in front of my computer.

middle aged, overweight,
ignored, beaten, broke down.
I think of falling in love-
one more time
I think of holding a beautiful woman's hand
one more time.

she'd be my age,
maybe broken and beaten like me-
but she'd be beautiful to me none the less.

we'd drink weak tea,
or cheap red wine, like I like.
stare into each other's eyes,
kiss, hold hands on the couch,
give it one last mournful shot
just because we're romantics,
just for the hell of it.

there's always hope.
there's always madness.
there's always rainy nights,
to write poems of hopeless hope
that keeps you hanging on,
knowing you know better though.

r james sterzinger

Parallel (For Karen)

Because we were parallel,
We had spent days
Together. Holding hands
And giggles.

Because we were
Parallel, we swam
In the river, did things
That scared the fishes.

Because we were parallel,
We argued and
Bickered, only a little. (We
Made up a lot.)

Because we were
Parallel, we cheated
At cards just the same
And cut our enemies with
Sarcasm.

Because we were parallel
You were as much
My mother's daughter as I
Was her son.

Because we were
Parallel your tears
Became my tears as I watched
You slip away.

Now that you are
Parallel with the earth so
Someday I shall be,
A thousand miles away-
Content to be parallel
With you,
And the earth,
Not with the distance.

Because we are parallel
I will follow
You there too.
You see,
I am afraid of death,
No longer.

'Cast a cold eye On life, on death. Horseman, pass by! '
William Butler Yeats

r james sterzinger

Peaches

Ode to Robert
(For Robert Frost and for Kay M.)

O, Robert
it is true
it is true then
that love doesn't come a second
time.

because
the same sun
you saw reflected in her eyes,
that ripens the peaches
on the trees...
rots them
none the less.

and nothing gold
really does stay
including one's sanity
but what stays
as long as steel
and slowly
too slowly rusts away
is the messy entanglements
we have weaved
when summer is gone
and the winter settles in tight
at the end of love
at the end...

r james sterzinger

Pentecost....In Memory Of Mandelstam...For M

this night
this terrible dark night
I walked alone into the kitchen
turn on the light. From the hole
in the screen a moth had wedged
himself in. His legs hairy, his wings
dark, he has become excited
by the light. I get a glass of water.
I drink deep, he stays focused on
the light like God.

today you and I had tea
we talked about many things
I focused on my deep depression
you listened. I knew you had never
heard me that dark, that lost
that ominous it was like I was already
rattling my bones in an ossuary
somewhere. I looked into your eyes
I knew you heard me You
understood where I was
coming from.

I open the window
let him flutter about the room
up to the bulb
dancing under the halogen flame
like he knew what Pentecost
was all about.

Then I shush him out
the door into the night.
he and I have an understanding
about grace

r james sterzinger

Poets.. (For Mark G And Ron S) ...Whoever They May Be

poets should be
thrown over ships
made to walk gang-planks
be shot out of cannons
or punched out in ten rounds
rather than wringing their hearts out
for family members that will never understand
lovers who will never return
or winter days that seem to go on without end.

r james sterzinger

Poles

Two block from the church
it stands arms held out from
itself, a slow mist falling.

This electrical phone high-line pole...
stands circled in sidewalk cement
next to the old railroad trestle, that is crumbling.

The trestle still has its use
cars caring timber, from the mills
in the north, oil tankers from the Dakotas.

This pole's a yardstick of measured time
(its and the world's) , counting the hours
and the days by the inching of shadows that seldom fail.

Time is the only thing reliable
it wears out shoes and souls
indiscriminately, it lays no claim to contrition.

One day is not like the next to the pole.
in its body it carries its markings
such as did Golgotha's cross, and Christ Himself.

These nails, once hammered in with deliberate,
intent have become hundreds upon hundreds
from garage sales that seem unimportant now.

These nails mark the time of families whose
children's clothes have been out grown, or the goods

of couples who were downsized into nursing- homes.

Couples who are gone now,
the dead have no use for things
once they are gone to what awaits everything.

Nothing of criminal pretense
can be ascertained by the posting of sales
on the hard- wood body of this pole.

These hundreds of nails that will not
be removed are only that markings
of that true criminal: time.

Time who makes yesterday's children
the elderly, it makes me miss my parents
and my wife her father on this Memorial Day.

The signs have blown away, the nails remain
reminding me this moment of the passing
of time and the sins I commit indiscriminately.

Being indifferent to the passing of days
and of loved ones, may be sin, but all is mercurial,
Arriving at church, I hurry in, I need to question God on something.

rjs

r james sterzinger

Promise (For Robert)

God said he'd never flood
The world again
You know
I wonder what that means
Do we take Him at his word?
Is He serious?

I have seen the Red River
In northwest Minnesota
Wash away the lively hood
Of thousands to Hudson Bay.
I have seen mamas and babies
Washed away in Singapore
In typhoons,
Never to be found again.

Did he mean turning out the stars
Flooding the night?
I have seen nights as black as ink,
Dark as coca-cola.
Grey days that went for weeks
The lights always came back on.

I have had days of border-line
Depression go on for a lifetime
Though. I have had it for years
And years now the days keep
coming; thicker, faster.

I have hung on,
Like a overboard man
To a yellow raft.
Eyes fixed to the horizon,
Where I have seen days
Of more more more.

I have an ark of books
And have gathered poems,
Two by two

Mated them to my madness
Waiting for God to make his move,
Tethered to nights
Sad and thick with aloneness.

r james sterzinger

Quando Sono Solo....For M And For Sergei R

Quando sono solo
e mancan le parole
tu mia luna, tu sei qui con me'

(When I am alone
and words fail me
my sun, you are here with me)

From the chapel, still in the light
Still alive, walking down the path
After a summer morning service
Sky, gray, wind, north-northwest, and cool
We walk down the path toward our cars

She turns, asks, as the wind plays with her hair
'So where do you want to be buried? '
I point to the left
'There, near the road'.
Knowing, full well if
Christ returns from the east
As they say He will, I am in trouble
Though, I seem to always be on His left.

I leave go down toward the west
Rachmaninoff plays on the car stereo

Home now.
A bluebird lies dead
On the sidewalk
I bend over, stare at him
His eye reflects the light
His beak still bright orange
His feathers, blue, rich like the sky
Between the clouds
Dead, to be sure, but still beautiful
I bury him in the back, safe from cats

I am a little sad for him
Only me to morn

This is being alone. This is grief...

I, myself, am quite happy today
Thinking someday of being bones
at Stinson Blvd., near the black gates,
Near the chapel.

As long as on summer mornings,
The choir's chants yet wind around the stones and crosses
Incense clouding in the air
Lying still with friends and others.

Knowing after coffee and maybe a brownie
You will look to the left and smile
Remembering, when you asked,
Where I wanted to wait eternity.....

r james sterzinger

Rachmaninoff On The Northside Of Minneapolis

Driving through the north side
listening to a very old recording:
Rachmaninoff.

each note seems to fit
on a day such as this

as the music plays
i think of the poet
Wallace Stevens
who worked a regular job
like me

figuring out his verse
working it out on his way home
each word made to fit
like stones in a wall

suddenly my thoughts turn
toward you who i don't really
understand any more than i do
every note of Rachmaninoff
or every nuance of Stevens

it all works for me today, though
Rachmaninoff,
Stevens and you

and the composer
and the poet
and you my friend
from Moscow
have made me smile
and i have a feeling
that my depression
has lifted today...
for a while

this winter sky though

is as dull and gray
as an old butter knife

and the bells at the church
are ringing out as sad requiem
for a man who has died

r james sterzinger

Rain Changes To Snow...A Doggerel For 'M' And Beth

she says's it's raining
out no mo'
so I guess this rhyme
has got to go

the white stuff's falling
she say's it's snow
I wrote about rain
but it had to go

so the poem I worked on
with so much pain
must disappear
just like the rain

so the rain has turned
into flake
this poem is over
it's my mistake...

sorry...

r james sterzinger

Red

this is as positive as I get
I'm here to tell you I love you
but yet I haven't left
I'm writing my goodbye
upon the birthmark of your back

it's written in red
I'm already dead
the hounds are on my track

your beauty burns
we all take turns
upon the wrestling mat
we all get silly
when the girls get frilly
and it's our turn to bat
but the fans they cry
when the umpire dies
don't ask me what I mean by that

it's written in red
I'm already dead
the hounds are at my track

I told you I loved you once
I told you once again
you told me you loved me too
but it was all pretend
so now I saddle up the horse
I won't be coming back

it's written in red
I'm already dead
the hounds are on my track

the sex was great
but I can't relate
to the aftermath
I had the power to

take a shower
but settled for a bath

I went to the mirror
I thought I'd take a shave
looked to lines around my eyes
I thought I saw the grave
it was no surprise
I took the blade
I held it like a prize
but I've done that dance
I've had my chance
that game was already played

and it's written in red
I'm already dead
the hounds are on my track

I'm not sure it's God
or karma or fate
but I know what I know
that the hour is getting late
that's how it goes
the pony shows
the pounding and the smack

it's written in red
I'm already dead
the hounds are on my track

r james sterzinger

Repentance

Twenty-three minutes before
I have to go.
Thinking of you a hundred miles
Away. Why do I keep up
This charade this dark
Comic book lie?

When I see you I bury
My feelings like a love
In a grave, emotionally
Convinced of my doom
Walking into hell.

That is how it
Should be, praying to God
Bowing to the devil.
That's love I guess
How I've understood it
All along.

I will not
Persue you though,
I will not be responsible
For your life.
So I'll take my love to
The grave you'll
Be saved, and I am content.

Holding to your memory in
A place I do not wish to go
Like your arms,
Like your arms.

r james sterzinger

Rest

I am bound to sleep now
bound for rest
fastened to the dark
where unless for nightmare
I am not afraid

bound to sleep where I may
feel what I wish
so what I don't wish
kiss who ever I might
I shall feel no anguish

bound to sleep
bound to go mad in a dream
bound to touch death
skirt the edge
lay out my hand to the reaper

bound to sleep
bound to die
bound to the earth
my grave
my simple home
where I will rest or wail
bound to become the earth
leaching into some other existence

r james sterzinger

Season

I.

the birds now decide to leave
the trees shed their leaves
we wrap up the plants
search the skies for change

II.

soon the girls wrap themselves
in furs like beautiful cocoons
while we men scrape snow
warm up cars, curse
dead batteries and slippery
roads. I myself
walk the silenced streets
it is the time I am to be
found among what is dead
,

III.

I dislike the winter
I have a distaste
for snow for cold
but the dark works for me
the night lights give me comfort
this quietest season gives me peace
my desperateness finds hope
under the crunch of snow.

r james sterzinger

Separate Graves

(For You)

the less I knew of you
the more I could love.
the more I finally found out
the greater the grace between.
and in that greater night
in that dark I found my light
so now I walk away from you
still in love but on a straighter path.

now you are distance,
and I am distant,
no longer mesmerized
by your enchantress web.
what it thought I saw in you
I find I understand no longer
yet, it all has come
to make perfect sense to me.

and now though you are half a world away
today the cold and the snow and the bleakness
of this day joins us
my thoughts have turned toward you
my guess is you will always be in my remembrances.

of deep graves
neither our own
and yet our own, still

someday too, we will be buried
on hill sides,
you in yours, me in mine.
polite, but dead as we were in life
there again we will keep our distance
we will be distant
in separate grave yards, eternal homes
somehow distant, somehow still together
shh, no one must know.

r james sterzinger

Shadow...For Ali

my shadow
lies grey
mute to the wall

it says
nothing
like you will say
nothing
when you come back
into our room

my shadow
sticks to the wall
has nothing
to add
but silence

when i turn
off the light
and roll back
to sleep

he will be gone
walking this house unseen
lonesome as i am
muttering to the plaster
as i have

r james sterzinger

Shelley's Loss...For Simeon

'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' Shelley

Poetry is better than law I told him
Law changes and means nothing anymore
He disagreed.

Name me one lawyer that became a poet
Give me hope I said
'If the glove don't fit you must acquit, '
Johnny Cochran, he said.

I came to a compromise-
I wasn't going to win-
You know Kipling
I know Frost
You like rules
I like free verse, I said.

That is the way we settled it.

I think he will make a fine lawyer someday
I will still be struggling to write meaningless verse
We settled it.
I lost the argument.
I saved face
That is all a poet can hope for.

r james sterzinger

Sisyphus....For M

she wants me
to turn my mind
toward the light
my eyes maybe
even a little deeper than that
my poems are too dark she says

what I won't tell her
that much like Atlas
this is how I have chosen
to shoulder the weight
of my world
nurse my confidence wounds
that are large and deep

more than a few doctors
therapists and pharmacologists
have tried to extract my devils
a few Pentecostal pastors too
(with mixed results)

now I drive across town
to the Orthodox Church
where my priest and I
examine my sins
and my life
and dissect my spiritual growth

we get into it all
put it all under the microscope
like entomologists
trying to kill the roaches
that have moved from my psyche
and have taken over the control board

but she has asked me
to turn toward the light
and though today is dark
cloudy, with a hint of rain

she has told me her story
and I shall take a chance
change my outlook
change the way
I write these poems

like Sisyphus
I shall again put my shoulder
against the boulder
and roll my darkness up the hill
so I can see the horizons
stretched before me

like that apocalypse
angel in the end
that rolls it all
into a scroll
I shall (try to) turn my mind
to poems with a brighter
hint of light

my private mountain
may crumble though
and maybe, just maybe
the shredded
pieces of me
will heal
or at least mend

because someone
decided to challenge me
to do so, has shown me
it can be done
like no one has before

one never knows
what pool God will give you
to wash your blind eyes in
so you can see the light again
does one?

r james sterzinger

Special Providence

a pair
of yellow tits sang
forgotten songs
in a tag alder tree

the winter snow
knotted and twisted
through the branches

hope was small
full of imagination
it kept the small mice
from foxes

kept sparrows
alight on branches
or maybe the faith
to do so

my mother's love kept me alive
her crazy one
the child
the one who left the nest first

they said the Lord
watched over sparrows
on my way home I
hoped for the same protection

hoping the night
wouldn't swallow me whole
as I walked in the snow
between my own dark thoughts and
The angelus bells
that rang from St. Mary's
every night at six.

I still hope
for the same

my faith is the same
as then
but my hope is on the wane.

'There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.' Shakespeare's Hamlet

r james sterzinger

Squab-Ble For Alicia

I am like the pigeons
on the skirt
of the hospital roof
next door

I walk along the edge
cooing and crapping
being warmed
in the sunlight

just step off the edge though
for no apparent reason
without your wings open
crash
and leave a mess behind
that no one
wants to step in
nor pick up
on any given
sunshiny day

that's what they
will always
remember about you

never for the cooing
you did on the skirt of the roof
while the sun was shining

r james sterzinger

St. Catherine's Lament

This morning
I saw St. Catherine
On the corner the street
Not in religious ecstasy
But in a state of
Disbelief

Looking deep she found
Her solace now in me
Guess her hope was found
In an unrepentant thief.

I saw St. Margaret
Crying in the street
Looking for love, looking for relief.
She said, ' We have so little time
So our liaison must be brief
So I lay down beside her
And clung to her faith
Naked to the reef.

r james sterzinger

St. Peggy

Ah!

Catholic boy I once was,
Once and always one
Today I think of you, St. Peggy.
Dead these forty-two years,
Minus one.
You with sea salt green, or
Was it blue eyes?
I remember them only as being clear.
Clear as new ice
Clear as raindrops and tears.
Your skin, white and lucent
Like the souls of the deep
Like the drowned, washed out
Yet still possessed by beauty and time
Which is where you are.
Sleep, now. I will remember.

You and Diane were my only friends
Then, long time ago
I took an interest in you two
Having shook the dreams of first crush/love
Margot: dark eyed first grade temptress,
Who with dark hair and spit curls and rotten little teeth,
I pledged my soul to, and then quickly forgot.
A secret love known to my uncles who teased me over her.

Peggy, you and Diane would talk to me when no others would.
Diane, with big round cherub face and giggle
She your laughter, while you played the straight role
Only smiling..

That summer, I a boy of ten.
My mother called me to the backyard porch,
Needed to tell me something.
You had cancer, would not be coming back to school in fall.

We missed you that whole year, until spring
Though we prayed Angelus prayers

For you health, recovery and safe return to class.
That April, we were told you would be coming back
To ragamuffin classmates soon, and you did.
Your skin was even more lucent and white,
Blonde curled crooked wig on your head.

That Good Friday I prayed rosary to God and His Mother
Continuously all day: stared to the clouds
Never got an answer for anything that I wanted
It honed the edge of disbelief that I carry now
From church to church.

You came to school off and on.
We your classmates slowly watched you fade:
Then you were gone.
Your thirteen year old body,
Could take no more.

Before then
I had not known death
Not real death.
Except in farm cats and dogs
That were rabid or bounders
Of course there was Margaret's dad.
We went to seem him at funeral home
But, he lie in state, looking more like wax candle
than corpse of living breathing human.
I had never met the man until then, anyhow.

Now forty-one years later
Hot August afternoon I think of you.
Why? I don't know.
In middle of my own middle age,
thinking of my own death? Perhaps,
But I doubt it..
Then why? My depression rearing up for another
episode? Doubtful. No, today I think of you and pray.
For any salvation that may come of it.

Catholic boy I was, and always one
I know my hagiography
I know the saints,

Which stories true or myth?
I know only reliable saint
The one I am reminded of today.
8/13/09

r james sterzinger

Staring At Stain Glass Before The Funeral

Only the purity of the falling
Snow, will mark your going.
Not the petals of roses. True
Roses are not in season.

The empty trees wave,
Folded arms in the cold,
The missing leaves, portray
Our unanswered prayers.

I ask my question to God, I
wonder why He takes one so young
So loved. So needed. One who is
A part of us all.

The winter light through St. Michael's
Halo, gives me my answer I need.
Seasons are seasons. Question, if you must:
Keep the Faith.

r james sterzinger

Stone

what good are my memories now
father gone mother gone
i have no home
why was i so restless to leave
what was i migrating toward
i never did come back in the spring

i lost my path my way
i had to leave so young
i was barely sixteen
what i hoped to find isn't here
thirty seven years later

the love i thought i would find
turned bitter. i have nothing
that i left with, save
my name. the one i'll leave
on my stone

r james sterzinger

Strings

it's either the rest home
or the noose

she tells me
you can't feel that way
feel what way
sweetheart?

everything has strings attached
everything moves with in it's own direction
everything falls apart

what I feel, I feel
if the masses run around happy
what's that to me?
I don't drink their booze
I don't take their drugs
I don't listen to their god

I married two times
the first one is dead
I had to sit and hold her hand as she died
strings attached
you bury the ones you love

the second marriage
has ground me up
spit me out
strings attached
big strings attached
house payment
child support
all tied in a bundle

someday's I feel
that I would like a big string
around my neck
but why let her win?

r james sterzinger

Talking Bones

Talking Bones

'Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! ' Ezekiel 37: 4

Third week in May and there
In the yard a white coat
Of Frost, I come down the stairs.

I let out my old dog
Out of the kennel.
He stretches, checks his limbs, like me
We have become old and are
Amazed to see that everything still works.

My wife who is sound asleep
Says: 'Old bones are affected
By the weather changes.'

I am apt to believe that, as I am
Of most things. I know my bones
They creak, they speak to me,
Saying, ' Remember, when you

Played in the fields and down
By the stream and your mother
Was afraid you would fall in
And drown? '

At least that is what they talk
About today. Somedays I am
Told by them of other memories
Some are fond, others not so much.

When we old and alone
When are children are gone
We old folks listen to our bones
They say to us, ' Remember
My friend, you were young.'

r james sterzinger

Terms Of Endurance

we don't ask
for those guarantees
of anything but love.

the warranty of a new
car is but for miles served,
no true loyalty intended,
everything forgotten.
trade-in value
negotiated.

we stick a kitchen knife
into our old toaster,
it gets the burnt bread out.

in twenty years time
we have gone through three
washers two dryers
two furnaces
it's all that subtle

unanswered prayers:
where is God's accountability?
where does prayer lie
the collection plate end?

I don't hold you
to your love or the vows
anymore.
endless love they say
is a character of God.
the endless search for love
is the character of man.

love is the character of both.
hang to it while it is there,
be ready to find it
when it isn't,
hold it to no

terms of endurance.

when it is there:

lie in it's arms

hold to it tight.

r james sterzinger

That's Just The Way It Was

at the west end
of my daddy's farm
we had a place he called boot hill
and there all the dogs who were just about
my only friends in my childhood are buried.

they never died of natural causes
dogs didn't when I was young
Skipper my collie got rabid
I watched dad shoot him
next to the barn
Coco was a cocker
a bounder my dad called him
so he was put down too

Friskie got mean..he got the same
Sport he had cancer
so after he was shot
we put a cross on his grave

and

then there was Charlie
Charlie was my buddy
I liked Charlie
I liked Charlie a hell of a lot
but Charlie like to attack our pet goat.

so one day as my dad was mowing the damn lawn
Charlie and I went after that stupid goat
my dad plugged the poor bugger
right in front of me
I wasn't very far away neither
a twenty- two bullet did him in

I never forgave him for that
but he said he was sorry
Charlie is out there with the rest

the cats are out behind the barn
like the Lutherans
in my home town
the Catholics had their space
the Lutherans and the rest
had their's...

r james sterzinger

The Angel Of Suppose...For Her

the angel
of suppose
smiled at me
as I crossed
the room
to leave
and go to work

I wondered
to myself
what was I
suppose to do
with that smile?

I have an unreliable
memory
that doesn't hold
and the angel's smile
was just too beautiful
to put haphazardly
in a pocket.

I lost a rosary like that once
a crucifix on a chain too
several fine pens
a fine book of poems by
Mark Doty
and a girl's phone number
when that sort of thing mattered

the Buddha was right
the sadness of life
is the impermanence
of things

but the angel of suppose
smiled at me
as I crossed the room
so I wrote this poem

to keep that beautiful smile safe
the only way
that I can.

r james sterzinger

The Black Bride

this black bride
holds out her warm
woolen shawl
beacons me come
I will show you love

I come to her
I know her well
more than mother
more than friends

she is dark, warm
she is all crow
her eyes are raven's eyes
in her I see my reflection

she has been with me longer
than anyone, welcomed me
from my mother's womb
saying come, you will be
my child, I came to her arms
she has been mother, bride
seer, and saint

stood by me at fifteen when
I was alone nursed me when
I was rejected talked to me
when true love died

in every maddening thought
in every poem she resides
she takes her place between the stars
when I look up to them
on sleepless nights

she welcomes me now
I am like carrion to a crow

r james sterzinger

The Boxer

you hear the count
over and over and
still over again.
you see the wave of the hand

sweat beads and falls
down your face puddles
to the end of your nose
one two three

you cling to the ropes
like summer wash
in a wind storm
four five six

you can feel
knees start to give
buckle. this is not
your body nor your soul
seven eight nine

the room and ceiling pull
around, down on top of you
the air is dead damp unforgiving
TEN! OUT FOR THE COUNT!

she has just walked out
she turned she smiled
you cannot love again
ruined man

r james sterzinger

The Complexities Of Beauty...For Someone

when the bright sunshine competed
with her smile
and lost

when the late night stars
refused to shine
out of deference to her eyes

when the wind played with her hair
and the breeze whispered love

take that day again, and remember it
hold it, embrace its every detail
tie the memory to you
like a satin bow

never, ever let it get away

so when you are as alone
without her as you are now
the walls won't close in
the gun will stay in the case
the bottle in the cupboard

you won't do anything too foolish
just because you remember

you had the complexities of beauty
in your reach for a moment

r james sterzinger

The Crazy Man On Drew

the crazy man on Drew
straps a broken bicycle helmet on his head
rides in the rain and the sunshine
and he's old and fat enough to get to get
an attack, but he doesn't
he peddles home in the dark

the crazy man on Drew
walks his dog at midnight
sits on the wall at the hospital
curses at his beagle
cries in the rain

the crazy man on Drew
has a wife and kids
but they have no use for him anymore
unless the flowers they expected that day
didn't arrive
then they call him...
he will listen

the crazy man on Drew
is someone's husband
but that romance has been dead long ago
it shuffles now like a bum
with a grocery cart
looking for cigarette money
in the trash

the crazy man on Drew
goes to church every Sunday
prays to a God
who is all but disinterested in his outcome
the crazy man knows it
but prays all the same

the crazy man on Drew
knows that when he is dead
that his ex by then

will toss out all his books
to Goodwill
he knows it
but what difference will that make
when you are dead, anyhow?

the crazy man on Drew
knows that under the beauty of a rose
is a lot of pricks
and a lot of dim bulbs
make a very bright light
and there in lies
the truth of life after all

the crazy man on Drew
knows he will do something rash one day
hopes like hell
that God will forgive
his friends won't take it hard
his family will forget
and the grave will be silent.

r james sterzinger

The Dance...With A Line From Frost....For S. P.

All in all
It's a dance towards end
Let's promenade
My tender friend.

The leaves fall joined
One by one
They dance to death
In the dimming sun.

Like them too
We shall fall and die
Not by one by one
But by and bye.

I'll ne'er trade
One minute here
Hoping a thought
Of you is near.

So seasons drift
To die, I suppose
But, 'the secret's in the middle
And knows.'

Though the Frost be gone
He still plays his prose
His voice still speaks
And this he knows.

Live each day dancing
Until the end
Then miss me deeply
My dearest friend.

r james sterzinger

The Dark End

the dark end
the end of love
the end of romance
did it ever exist?

so what's the problem?
Say Ernie!
what do you do when it sputters out?

when the balls you had
that machismo swagger you had
or thought you had flutters down
like a shot quail?

you never had it, fool!

take one more walk
open up the fence
take a look around
it all means nothing

you are more acquainted with your devils than god
a god as distant as the cold rings on
an October moon
what is love?
you have heard of it
it's not ever meant to be yours

the hunt is over

Ernie
when did you make that big leap
you can't come back from?

r james sterzinger

The Female Of The Species For Terri And Ali

the female of the species

1. your never know, you know?
yes, your really never know
behind the beauty
behind the smell
behind the batting eyes

the whole thing can lie dormant
ten years, twenty years
but then one day you truly
understand her
and what makes her tick
and germinates the monster inside

2. his sis- in- law severed her man's finger
in a door
it may have been the only part of him
that was redeemable for the judgement
but she did it.

3. so her sister decided it would be a fine night
to release the self same judgement on her spouse
that night he found out
he was a lousy lover
his kids hated him
and his Spanish was equally lousy.

so he went to the deck
and stared out into the stars
pins of light in a sea of dark
he figured then that maybe
that was good enough for God
all that vast space
all that little light
all that infinite
but it wasn't going to float his boat.

there was that much space

and void
and that little light
from his side of the bed
to her's on any given night.

so he resigned to love
her no longer
to move on
to regroup the mustard
he had inside
before she came along

before the house
before the dog
before the kids
before it all got so crazy and distant.

4. that's how God does His stuff
He doesn't heap stars one on another
Halley's only comes every seventy-five years
the biggest of oceans are separated by
continents of rock or ice

so he made the decision to move on
Ahab, be damned
if you drown you drown
it's a simple act really
everything congeals, then falls apart
it is the natural order of things.
it's the way God does business
and we must too
for our years are shorter than His
and we have the female of the species
to send us off, to send us off.

r james sterzinger

The Gathering

a belief is god
keeps me on this wheel
my belief about love
tells me not to feel

I.

I sit alone today
I am going over
pages for a reading
a seminal cloud of gray
hangs over me
like an instant
like a target
did I really write this
what spiritus didn't inhabit me then?

the moment is broken
I go about to inquire again
did I really write this
was I this happy
this much under the spell of someone?

a belief in god
keeps me on this wheel
my belief about love
tells me not to feel

II.

something about this moment stands familiar
I have been down this corridor before
I see the light on the end of the hall
I shut it off
like feelings like life
I touch the bulb
it has begun to cool
and so have I
so have I

a belief in god
keeps me on this wheel
my belief in love
tells me not to feel

III.

I have a late lunch a cup of tea
it is darkening toward twilight
I think of you gone
I think of my broken relationships since
those dead those I wish dead
I take another sip of tea
it has grown cold
When me?

a belief in god
keeps me on this wheel
my belief in love
tells me not to feel

r james sterzinger

The Gift I Got

i was born in a small town
hopefully unless i am truly damned
i won't die there
won't be buried there
won't have to go back
a lot of us that lived in one
feel that, but then again...

i can skin a rabbit and cook it
same with a deer, but don't want to now.
i can fall asleep in the leaves
walk miles and miles and never get bored
save for my own thoughts that go rolling around

i can hear hymns of bird and cry
pass by open fields and know
that the smell you smell when you roll by
is the smell of money

i can drive a tractor
i can pick up any rock
call it a thing of beauty
i can wade a creek
i can appreciate a gun
as well as watching my prey get away

but back in my small town
the pretty girls were what got away
they went to bad boys
who didn't pray rosaries
or went to church on sunday

ahh, but now
when a pretty girl smiles
at me, though i am old
i can take it like the gift
it is. melt in it
make a home of it.
in a small town

they all knew you
and the smiles were rare

so when you smile at me
i take it that god is generous
good and giving
with love as smooth as a swallows flight

r james sterzinger

The Heart (For Ali-Ba)

the heart
has
four
chambers.

which one
do you
keep your love
in, my dear?
i can't
seem to find
it.

your love is a
fraud much like
death, it must be kept
at a distance
at least held off
as long as possible.

i have endured
your crucifixions
in your heart...
the smallest of places.

r james sterzinger

The Mall

twenty-three years ago,
the mall stood there,
the stores half empty,
an earlier recession,
always a bad location.

the mall became a strip mall,
now the most of the stores are empty too.
where the Montgomery Wards anchored,
that is now a cancer radiation center,
death being the only business,
that remains a constant.

the theatre,
became a two dollar show place,
then it closed for good.
the sparrows and pigeons and made it a home.
the neighborhood mice,
live in the walls, between the insulation.
in spring they eat the fallen berries,
that fall off the old ornamental trees

we have been through the changes also, my dear.
twenty-three years in this neighborhood,
twenty-four years as a couple.
our love that was naive and hopeful then,
now it is neither.

when we met I was the pursued
you were the pursuer I was worth the effort
now that too has transmogrified or metastasized
I am not sure which.
to you now I am all effort, an effort to live with
not to love, let us not delude ourselves.
I am still the romantic, still the poet
I still see you as beautiful,
then again I wear glasses now.

shall we too remodel, restructure, change

hope for better times?
no, I don't think so
too many things that don't belong in us
have moved in.
this film has been played out.
even our children who sit in the cheap seats
have seen it all too much.

the elder ones have moved out.
you and I are their bad stories or poems too
(if one would even want to follow my path
they have heard too many of your rants about me.)

let's make no effort at the rebuilding.
let's end it. tear it down.
make it a space for a quiet end.
I will miss you for a while, then not at all.
who knows, you may miss me not at all,
then after a while
either way, I don't care.

everything in this day and age changes
it's all for the better, for the good.
the other day I asked you,
'I think you'd rather have me dead.'
you said, ' what has that got to do with anything? '
what we had just ran out of gas,
got old, got tired,
like the mall did.
nothing left for gain,
nothing but my memories,
alone, while I write out this poem.

r james sterzinger

The Marrow Of Morning (For Haven)

Everything for granted taken
never considering a sparrows
fall. in a world too busy too fast
for consideration we've lost

This miraculous edge:
the blessing of rain or love
after an excruciating drought
of either, or both.

The buoyancy of a kite straining,
to be held up in a summer's wind,
a world of clouds, the passing of storms;

Or maybe even could it be
that still, breath of God
that a newborn craves barely
holding on to a corner of her new life?

We have taken too much
far too long for granted
forgetting to remember
there are to be lessons learned:

Over there, right there,
in the field's lilies
in a sparrow's free fall
in the marrow of morning
and of mourning.

r james sterzinger

The More You Love

for twenty-four hours
I managed to smile
twenty-four
an incredible feat

I was completely happy
I was completely unrecognizable
no one seemed to know
who I was
my goodness who is this man
who stole Ron?

twenty-four hours later
now I merely smile
my tea-kettle whistles
I fill my cup
dip the tea bag
up and down
up and down

twenty-four hours later
I am content to smile
look out the window
watch my son go off to school
in three years he'll be old enough
to go off to war.

twenty-four hours
I had a reprieve from my thoughts
now I am back to earth
prepared to take my losses

the more you love
the more chance at loss

r james sterzinger

The Old Home Place (For Eunice)

I.

Everything was held together by
Duct tape, rusty nails and good luck.
It was only forty acres and we rented it all out
But for the five
Where the old house sat.

The barn and milkhouse
Had no water
The granary that we used as a
Garage smelled of mold and pee and
Droppings of passing tom cats who
Would visit on there way to God knows where.

In the early weeks of April
There would be kittens in the mow
Amongst the moldy hay and pigeon droppings.
They would only see the world for an instant, those
Kittens, for soon as their eyes were open distemper
would paste them shut
After a few weeks
They were all gone
Either falling from the mow
Or from the distemper.

We would bury them in a small cemetery out back
And said prayers over them that had no hope of answer.
The same prayers that we said for ourselves.

r james sterzinger

The Only Love Poem For You

my love for you
is but a dream
a dream that will never be mine
my love for you is but a hope
so far away it is more like
myth

my love for you
will never be put to verse
to kiss
to embrace
because it is but a puff of air
a wisp of cloud
it is illusion

my love for you
bears down on me
because I can never have you
my love
and in there
lies the madness of it all

r james sterzinger

The Plover's Dance

in the spring
on the Wisconsin farm
where I was raised
between the cattails
and the creeks Porky and Dill
the plovers came

unlike the redwings
and the grackles
who sang songs
to court their mates
the preferred method for the plover
was to sweep
their mates off their feet
with a festive dance

there in the previous years grass
we could see the little
Arthur Murray dance maps
cut into the ground

they danced
the waltz the schottische
and the polka
for hours on end
after all
it was Wisconsin

they made their nests
on the ground
laid eggs
raised their young.
when fall came
and they would pull up stakes
fly south
then return in spring

and we would again find
their dance steps

in the soft moist earth

one year though
a different set of plovers moved in
beside the others

they danced the rumba
the tango and the cha-cha
dances that were never done
in the creek bottom before

the next year
the plovers didn't return
I like to think
that maybe they found another place
where polkas were more plentiful
and they could again mate the way
they always had.

but again maybe they didn't
once you go city
it's hard to go back

r james sterzinger

The Question At Five A.M. (For Anjani)

Life's a measure of gain and loss
What we have, how much it cost
The dance it comes in minuets
How it ends is anyone's bet
We have ceremonies under steeples
Have a family made with damaged people
Then we find another muse
Divorce our wives, the old excuse

All the lessons we're bound to learn
The easiest ones will get us burned
We'll find our friends we'll hold court
Some we'll take to the grave
How many though we will abort?
It's all there is in life's big game
All that's left is our battered name

We get old we slough off skin
What we have left goes to next of kin
Life is just an embarrassing tale
We break all hearts before we set sail
The whole thing causes me to pause
Wonder even if it's worth the cost
To make all this worthless rhyme
To die one increment at a time

So forget that I don't call you on the phone
I guess I'd rather die here alone.
So dying's the end of all this fun
My muse too has left
This poem's done.

r james sterzinger

The Quiet Ones

everyone loves to brag
how they are the man
how they can bed more
women. how they told
this and this witch to
go to hell. how they
had the balls to buy
the motorbike, the car
the beer... the whatever.

those guys go to their homes
their wives who married them
worshipped them
they got the alpha male
don't you know
they, those wives and their
children now have desperate lives

seek out the alone the internal the
quiet man the one that has no friends
doesn't want one doesn't
need one. the man who screams
his prayers at the stars.

when he opens up his heart
he opens it singular.
he loves deep and hard
you can break his heart
with a singular thrust
a great stroke
like a warrior
like an executioner
like an artist.

r james sterzinger

The Shore Of Grief For R.P.

This summer twenty-seven past
The one that I lost you
Grief comes back to me
Again as a slow wave
Rocking me to a shore
I had long ago committed
Myself to swim away.

The far side of that yesterday
Appears to me in this early
Morning light as my cat sleeps
Quietly next to me. I get up
Rub her ear she looks at me
Grateful, or so I believe
For rescuing and mending
Her from the beating
She had gotten from another
Feral cat looking for its
Own kill.

I sail these days through waters
Just as choppy as those that summer
You died. Your body that I loved
We covered with early fall cold earth.
Where your soul went I do not know
I have wavering beliefs on that
Subject, that is for another time.

Its the loneliness now I am
Concerned with, that empty
Feeling that I feel here in the
Early morning. I a rescuer of
Cats of others but not of you
Or of myself. I keep washing
Up to that shore of grief
Much as any dead sailor
From any given battle
Knowing that I will wash up
There until age old loss of memory.

Or my death itself leaves me
Out alone on my own
Shoreline hoping in a God
Who will rescue me.

r james sterzinger

The Shore Of Grief...For R.P.

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The one that I lost you
Grief comes back to me
Again as a slow wave
Rocking me to a shore
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Or my death itself leaves me
Out alone on my own
Shoreline hoping in a God
Who will rescue me.

21/7/2011

r james sterzinger

The Snows Of Kilimanjaro...With Apologies To Ernest

he was made wrong
blame his mama
blame his daddy
blame God
either way
his septum was messed up

he couldn't get
a decent night's sleep
the older he got
and the longer he needed
to sleep
the worse it got

so he told a doctor
to 'fix it.'
'fix it so I can get some sleep
before the next thing goes out
like my prostrate
then I will be up all night
never getting any sleep either.'

and one girl
and one girl
wanted to help him mend

and one girl
and one girl
wanted to get him in the end

so a cat fight ensued over him
and after he got better
he still couldn't sleep
because he had to sleep
with one eye open
so he wouldn't end up like Van Gogh
missing stuff
ending up

the same way his septum did
in a garbage bag at a landfill
or worse
is there worse?

you see women are like that
they divide and conquer
divide and conquer
they'll even do that
to a divided man
a man torn in pieces

Hemingway knew that
better than any of us
he had the women
he took to the bottle
he divided his septum
with a double-barreled
twelve-gauge

and just like Hemingway's hero in
The Snows of Kilimanjaro
our hero learned
it's best to accept things
the way they are
whether its women fighting for you
women fighting for you soul
or hanging on to the last minutes of life

that's what a man does
it's all that matters
in the end anyhow
am I right?

r james sterzinger

The Symmetries Of Flowers In Concrete For M

The Symmetries of Flowers in Concrete for M

stopping at the new bus stop
on Broadway and Penn
(cold gray morning)
three great metal daises
have sprung up from the ground
over night though hard frozen concrete

put up by construction
workers no doubt
concocted by some two-bit
commercial hack artist
who received healthy
government grant
while welfare mom who waits for bus
with children who go without

light turns green
I drive across town to deposit
two books into library deposit box
I have come early so I could miss you
but would accept my blind
luck and equally blind
happiness if you had been
here but you weren't

after I dropp the books
into slot I climb
back up ice banks of snow
across the street to my car

leaving behind books
leaving behind you
leaving behind heart
last vestiges of a mundane childhood
follow me into the Grande AM
I wipe away tears from under glasses
and negotiate my turn

on Thirteenth Avenue.

r james sterzinger

The Symmetry Of Things

I.

the theory is
if you move away
they won't die

the theory is
if you don't love
you will never get your heart broken

the theory is there was
one shooter in a sunny day in Dallas
one God created the heavens
one big bang then a million stars...
one love for a life time

it's never the theories, not really
it's the outcomes

graveyards are filled with outcomes
summer skies are dotted with balloons and kites
or they use to be when I was young

II.

in the end, it's all empty
everything dies, everything fades
I from you, you from me
it's the symmetry of things

in 1963 the nuns
had us pray for the president
Pluto was still a planet
mom always told me everything would be alright

the nuns are gone
the president didn't make the cut, our or children's prayers didn't
Pluto fell from the sky, or was abandoned
does it really matter?

in the end everything goes, fades,
turns up missing
I from you,
you from me
I miss the thought of you already
and I will miss this world and you
when I find myself fading as a memory
someday

until then though,
I will hang on to you
the memories of you
the light in your eyes
the smile

then when my memories fade
and I slip to the grave
I will truly have a reason to be gone
the theories will be over
the only fact remaining
that I loved you
but that may only be a theory, I have told no one

III.

of course there is that theory
that there is a judgement
a theory, that we will all come back
there is that theory

if you choose to believe it

I can only be sure
of how I feel
in this now, this 3 a.m.
in this alone, this dark, this silence.

r james sterzinger

The Witness (For M And For S)

THE WITNESS

Come to me and hear
What i have to say in words
Some I hold so dear
Some fly with the birds.

With you I may fall in love easy
Or choose to let it die,
Sometimes my soul is breezy
Sometimes to the wind it cries.

So take my hand and guide me
You who could be friend or foe.
Take my heart from inside me
Though my heart you may never know.

I rejoice in love quite madly
But it dies with winter bite
iI take my losses badly
Howl my curses
In the middle of the night.

So with me is what you get
My love may be bright and bold
There may be sunny days
Or I may turn winter cold.

The painter uses brush and paint
Sometime turpentine
I may portray you like a saint
Or wash you in the brine.

r james sterzinger

This Is A Reflection Of My Faith

as I went to cross the street
I came up to the light
on the corner

I pressed the button
in denial like St. Peter
one-two- three times
so I could cross

this is a reflection of my faith

I walked through my neighborhood
past the radiation clinic
my parents both died from cancer

my father cancer of the lung
my mother ovarian cancer
that metastasized to her brain
is this how I will go?

this is a reflection of my faith

I went by a house
that still had its Christmas lights on
it's May, they need to come down
I thought

this is a reflection of my faith

I crossed the parking lot by the store
a pretty girl smiled at me and my dog
I have been married twice
I turned away with no response

this is a reflection of my faith

r james sterzinger

This Morning I Went To Take A Walk...(York Avenue)

This morning I went to take a walk alone
Just the dog, no cell phone.
To walk amongst the fallen leaves,
That had last night sailed from the trees.

I went past a house on York Avenue,
Saw the blood-red leaves still covered in dew.
A man had been murdered there last New Year's Eve,
Now no one was about, but the blood-red leaves.

Alas, he is dead and buried under ground,
And no one here to think on him just me and my hound.
But I thought to myself, 'What the heck,
Maybe someday a stranger too will send his respect.'

When I myself am nowhere around,
Not a memory of either me or my hound.
A stranger's nod and a cleaning of leaves would suffice
To do well on my grave, before the winter's ice.

r james sterzinger

Thrift Store Girl

at the entrance of the thrift store
stood the girl, sixteen, maybe
if I had to bet a dime, closer
to twelve or fourteen I'd
blue eyes barely
peeping out beneath her
baseball cap, hair pulled
back in a blonde bun
all told about eighty pounds
soaking wet, as they say.

on this girl's neck a love
bite, yellow blue
and green like a large butterfly
as if someone had tried to
suck her brains out.

her fresh beauty
damaged, degraded like someone
pounding spikes into The Mona Lisa

the devil's that haunt us
in the excesses of sex
and love cheapen us all
who cannot help to still
to believe in it.

r james sterzinger

To A Bunkshooter...For Richard And Carl

the evangelist slipped
fell broke his hip.

he was scheduled to go
save and heal in India
but there is no making it
now

sadly his wife can't help him
she has a bad back
so he is in the nursing home

not wishing him
any ill will
I found it all a little amusing.

he told me once
'be like the Apostle Paul
content in all things.'

Minneapolis 5/29/2009

r james sterzinger

To Be Obsessed With Dalliance

To be obsessed
With the female form,
Must not be the quest
Must not be the norm.

To be obsessed
With dalliance,
To tell her things
To take one's chance.

It may and can
Destroy with a fling,
A young man's dreams
Before they take to wing.

The heat and steam
Will bustle and brew,
Destroy your vision
With one sweet mew.

The doorway you
Wish to enter in,
Lasts but for a while
And THAT'S the sin.

Because a woman's love
Is a terrible thing,
It melt's the snow
It freezes the spring.

Don't doubt me
I know whence I speak,
I lost my soul
When I kissed her cheek..

I fell once in love
With a courageous thump,
When she turned aside
When she bared her rump.

Then for a year
She wound her web,
Then took my soul
And left our bed.

Like steam leaving
A tea kettle pot,
She took our love
Destroyed the lot.

Then off she went
With her smile and charms,
I found her again
In another man's arms.

We divided every thing
We had,
Now my children call
Another man dad.

So be careful when
You choose to dance,
You may be like me
Lost in circumstance.

r james sterzinger

To Irène Némirovsky...For M

when the cold comes
under the door
when fear wraps around you
hang on to the hope
of love

pray
induce spells
whisper incantations at the wall
find beauty
trace your finger
in dirt

you have come
forward to the understanding
of the silence between
the words

now they cannot touch you
whatever comes
you can't touched:
not by trial
not by prison
death itself can't get to you

always hang on
to the magic
and the hope that is love
for that is life

r james sterzinger

Today I Cut

today i cut the muse loose
and a million poems with her.

like a lover dead long ago
i cannot place a stones throw of hope
in the destruction it would take to hold on to her,
i can't keep up with what i am meant to be-

so i cut the muse loose.

and i will become old and sad
and climb into bed with someone
who will except me status-quo.

my muse will never grow old will always praise my work
and become a part of my biography
that no one will get.

my poems will become silent prisoners
who i must kill.

r james sterzinger

Today This Soul

Today this soul turned fifty-three, one
Foot in the grave, my heart
With thee. My mourning walk gave me
Pause. Thought of
The grave and what I've
Lost. That I am nearer to my
Repose, the grasping to heaven
The last dead
Rose. I'm torren asunder should I
Stay. Or should I just
Throw my soul away?

r james sterzinger

Tough Times....Commissioned

Tough Times

time's are tough
tougher than hell
and when the times are tough,
well, the tough get going
that's what they say,
anyhow.

well,
with the economy is in the crapper
the president having a beer summit
with Budweiser
not even a descent California Port Wine
times are tough, indeed.

even if times are tough
a man has got to remember
what Hemingway said, 'A man
can be destroyed, but never defeated'

well,
Hemingway was a darn fine writer
a hell of a man
an even a better drunk
but everything peters out
love, life, the car
and when you can't rely on transportation
it really screws up love and life

well, with the country in the dumper
those in charge deciding to give us
other people's money
for anything inefficient.
well, you have to move fast
before they realize the screw up

so Saturday me and my wife
decided to take a drive

to the dealer
to see what we could get

sure as there is a Kenyan
in the White House
there it was
a cherry red Aveo
four passenger
hatch back.

small enough to
keep people out
big enough to carry
a case of decent beer

I went in,
asked the man
What will you give me
for that old run down thing in the parking lot?
he looked at me
'that old yellow thing? '
'no, ' I said
'that still runs
what about the thing next to it,
idiot! '

she over heard me
I had to walk home

tough times.....

r james sterzinger

Trifle

except for the year
of dissolution
and one trip
to the mad house
I have lived twenty-one years
on this corner.

no one really knows me
and this cold winter
the trees and the sky
remain silent to me.
something usually speaks
to me...at winter

it tells me
'hold on hold on'
there isn't that voice now
but I do hear voices my dear
Josephine
it says:
'let's end this nonsense.'

I stare out my window this morning
it is so damned white
and where I write
my books suffocate me
their words choke
I feel them grate against my skin

I need a cup of tea
and silence
maybe I'll walk
among the dead flowers and trees
and mourn my passing
either today or tomorrow.

and in the obits
no one will still know me
I only know myself

r james sterzinger

Tunnels....For Karen

a girl i knew once said
'you have beady brown
bedroom eyes.'
she made me smile.

we made grand love
we became slaves
we chained ourselves
to each other
we became mad, spent
we exhausted the days

she's dead now

now my eyes are tunnels
they receive no light
they only reflect the darkness
the days are what they are now
without pattern, without shape
bending toward eternity
like shafts of light
through winter trees

but my eyes remain
as they are impervious
to the light
i only see in shades of gray
now

r james sterzinger

Turtle Suicide

The large mushrooms. Hang
Like suicidal turtles.
On the dead,
Oak by the pond!

r james sterzinger

Two-Thirteen A. M.

from you from her
and her and her

my survival now consists
of disentangling myself
from any meaningful constructs
from love from the thought of love
from pearls earrings smiles
hair and hope

the thing that drives this romantic
is the thing that drives directly
to the past. and what is the past?
isolation.

now I stare back at you
the collected you's
wanting nothing
nothing that entangles me in love

I am a star without an orbit
a moon alone
darkness for the sake of darkness.

that will cause me someday
to burn out to snuff out my own light
to incinerate what was and could have been

it is the way it was destined for me
preordained before time
my time what
a glorious waste it will have been

most poet's are asked when they got their
poetic voice. 'never had one'
I just want to find my voice
but at fifty-three it's a little late
for all that

so when I am dead
my ghost will be trying to find me
trying to hone my craft
my final judgment will be me
much like Peter, cursing and swearing
'I don't know the man! '

27/04/09

r james sterzinger

Veins For Sylvia

Her love was the worst
Winter, cold, indifferent
Ice
Went for a walk
Kicked the remaining dead leaves
White and crested over
Vein maps I will follow

In my element
Cold, bitter
Dark skies brooding
Hint of something
That could bury
Something that could kill

I cross over the street
Filled with blind disdain for you
For the driver at the crosswalk
Because you and he have cut me off
Because he missed

Something about winter
Brings out the madness
Cutting across places
I don't belong

Willing to get reckless
Willing to break with someone
Willing to hang from some place

Winter divides the strong
Kills the weak

I am willing to go either way.

r james sterzinger

Waiting For A Train...For 'M'

A snowflake crushes its only
Life into the parting of your
Scalp and dies there
Making its choice gladly.

Its extremely cold, waiting for the
Train, riding from apartment to
Innercity and back.

What was the depth of your soul
What was your hope and mystery
Who sculpted your fate
Who extinguished your little girl dreams?

On the platform its cold
Early morning light ribbons
Pell-mell from street to station.
What mother conceived, what
God, time and matter formed you?

You, out of what
Image and likeness. All of it
Shrouded in deep mystery; your finest
Art. How many artists have tried to
Capture you?

What blues, What confidence
What casting of bronze
Could take you? Nothing!
Primitive, that's for sure.

My thoughts collapse and
Suffocate thinking of you
Walking the streets of gray to the
Station, with the flake of
Snow on the part of your
Hair giving up hope
Me too, gladly
Crossing myself as I cross the street.

20-21/6/08

r james sterzinger

Walking In Traffic For E.E., And The Blind Man I Do Not Know

when
i
go for a

w
a
l
k
i
take my dog
(you) see

we
go(in)
and
o u t
of-traffic
he takes care of
me

when (eye) i
cross the busy

streets i
make sure my
dog does it
safely

i
have these

randall jarrell
(moments)
my dog
takes care of
me

r james sterzinger

What I Can Do Out Of The Goodness Of My Heart...For Awhile

What I can do out of the goodness of my heart:

I can smell the flowers in my neighbor's garden
On a wet April day
While picking up after my dog
At four a.m.
And the neighbors don't know it.

Pick up broken booze bottles
By the kiddie park.

Say unheard prayers
For dead sparrows.
bury them next to my children's
Hamsters and parakeet
Because it would be what I'd want,
If I couldn't fly anymore.

Wrestle soft bunnies from
Tom cats at one in the morning.

Hustle roses to my mother's grave
When ever I get to my hometown
Even though it connects to bad memories.

Tell folks how cute their baby is
Even though he isn't
And it really doesn't matter
Because he has a light in his eyes
That justifies a belief in God.

Not telling the old guy with a bad memory
My name isn't Joe but Ron
Though he's heard my name fifty times
Which really doesn't matter
Because my grandfather thought I was my brother
And I knew he loved me none the less.

Not telling a girl I know
That I have a crush on her
Because it would bugger up her life
And I am no damn good anyway,
Though she thinks I am worth saving.

I can not curse
The dead in graveyards
Though they gave me burdens
I carry everyday and can't let go
Without tears.

I can wrestle butterflies from spiderwebs....

I can read Lowell's
Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket
And weep at the end
Because it is just that damn good!
I can read Pound for the same reason
Though he is slowly being forgotten
Because of bad politics
Not bad art.

Transform words into poems
That when I am dead as Dickenson
Will be wedged in my notebooks
That no one will hear.

Not argue with street-preachers...

Eat cling peaches from a can
In front of the television.

Pray for the dead
Everytime I walk by the hospital,
Pray for those who are passing through
Their own nightmare to the end of things.

Let the kids at the bus stop pet Bowzer
And lose my train of thought
When I had a poem better than this

Going on in my head.

Get to work late
Because talking to the old lady next door
About her kids that are too busy for her
Is more important than being late for work
And getting written up for tardiness
By my boss.

Give money to beggars
Because I have extra
And the booze they will buy
Instead of food
Will give them faith in humanity.

Give spare change to
Two grimey urchins
Who are short on money
For gummy worms
That went up in price.

But....
What I can't do
Out of the goodness of my heart is...
Forget that you were taken away
And how I sat home alone
Wondering what the hell
Happened to my life
How I took the blame for too many years
How it has caused me to come unravelled
In the corners of what's left of my mind.

r james sterzinger

What Sonny Liston Taught Me

what force mitigates these changes
what Vesuvian energy burns
the year's days away then
snips away the threads
of this man's life?

another year runs short
another year questioned
I ask the bigger questions
while all the while living the life
of a less than careful, less than
exact man.

what I wouldn't give
to live an unexamined life
to be like the horde
rolling toward a chaos
that completes this length of days,

I was once young
I now carry my swagger in this tired beaten
boxer's body that looks like it's
been knocked out one too
many times.

the test of life
is not what you are willing to gain
it's what you are willing to lose.

r james sterzinger

When The Muse Calls... For O. Ray Who Knows And Understands And For Kay

when the muse calls
cut your hair
get the bleach
assume another identity
start smoking if you don't
quit if you do
drink so you don't hear her

when the muse calls
get a change of address kit
get an unlisted number
find a girl who will break your heart
mutter and ramble to yourself
while walking the streets

when the muse calls
read Zane Gray novels
listen to talk radio
watch CNN
hit your hand with a hammer
fall down stairs

DO IT DO IT NOW! !

because
if you don't
you will think of her
waves of hair
her smile
her eyes
and her laughter

you will want to write beautiful poems
you will want to get to know her
you will want to be in love
you will want to smile

and
you will smile
the smile of the damned
then you will truly be alone
and the loneliness will be too much to bear

and you will be like Samson
who'd lost his hair
blind and crying
and you will pull the temples down
over yourself.

r james sterzinger

While Watching The Birds Fly South For W. S. Merwin

While Watching the Birds Fly South
for W. S. Merwin

1. to be
that and that alone
the lone bird who flies
over a palate of god-painted
landscape
whose music is the songs
of mourning whose rhythms
are the voice and the creation
of the winds
of the god
of the angels.

2. that for me would be enough

3. oh, to be a bird
rather than this human skin- bag
this unpredictable soul
who it is claimed
will die will rise
from the dead.

4. just to die, then disappear to a powder
to a dust, the only thing left
a jeweler's box of hollowed bones
that embraces the wetness of earth
in the shallowest of graves.

5. like the stones on a beautiful necklace
that circles the breast of earth
as the pearls that you will wear
when you will still be beautiful
and me, I will be no longer around
my moment, time will have filched away.

6. death and flying are the greatest

of arts the greatest
of masteries.

7. I will not speak of love
its belief and hope and masteries
which once were a warming fire
are now a kindling's ash
that doesn't waste its measure
on the color of a crow.

8. once when young I listened intently
to a flock of geese who were lost
on an October's night
their calls greased the night
with loneliness.

9. a reminder's moment
that parallels all memories now
of love of loss
of the darkness of night
of birds winging south
for warmer climes.

10. I pack my books of poetry
in boxes now
for a move
to a place of my own
I stop my work for a moment.
Autumn geese again flying overhead
crying out seeking direction

11. like anguished prayers
of a crucified God.

r james sterzinger

Why Poets Have Jaundiced Eyes

like the nightfall challenges the rain
we do what we do
because we have to
we hold to love
and death
and silence as if
we could actually keep them...

like holding on to god
for instance.

or a dying one's
precious hand

or a black rainbow.

r james sterzinger

Winter Crows (For Edgar And Patti)

the white geese leave with hope
warmth, congeniality,
of a return to better times.

I use to watch them
flying in v patterns
across the sky
looking for some
eternal brightness
somewhere

my October childhoods
were filled with the marvel
of watching them fly over head
of circling fields
greasing the night air
with their cries
then landing in those same fields
and leaving again in the sunrise
but that is when I was young
and the world, younger still

the Canadian Honkers
here in the cities
hang around for steaming private pools
and hand outs
where is the marvel in that?

Ted Hughes
changed me.

I prefer the winter crows
with the blackening of days
the twilight embracing twilight
the gloom kissing gloom
with the only light
reflections of cold sun
on icy roads
I prefer the crows

they bark at the sky
they curse each other over circumstance
rainbows and snowdrifts
it's all the same to them

they tell me things...
'death itself is a gourmet dinner!
keep the look of acceptance
in your eyes!
go to hidden places to die!
all is not right with the world!
hang on! hang on! expect nothing more...'

so
in winter
while others stake their hopes to Christmas lights
and smiles
or New Year's toasts and a tipsy woman's
kiss, under the mistletoe....
I stake my heart with the heart of a crow's
to survive, to survive, to survive

r james sterzinger

Winter Fruit (For Mary O.)

God, in the dead of winter
Who would have thought it?

It could have been
Apples or plums
It wasn't though.
Just had to be raspberries and peaches!

Plums,
Apples
A half rotten pear
Now that would have been a reprieve!

How about a grapefruit,
Banana
Something with a sense of carnality?
Now that would have made me smile
At least for a minute or two.

May have had some hope
In the dead of winter.
Some brightness at the end of the tunnel.

But this!
Hairy Fruit!
My God!
Less like a stay of execution
More like a cruel joke,
(With two months more of winter)

I slice the peaches
I put the raspberries in a bowl
Sprinkle a little sugar on top
Pour in a little milk

I sit by the table
Stare out the window
Watch the snow
Fill up my yard

Again

r james sterzinger

With All My Love From Buffalo

the snows in Buffalo
are as white
and as pure
as you seemed
that night.

and
as cold as you became
later
when I looked up at you
from my chair
that I couldn't stand up in

love changes
but not the weather
in Buffalo
here we only get reprieves
stays of execution

my love never changed
I gave you a diamond
then I took my life
both gifts of affection

one was a pledge
of everlasting love
one was a gift
loving you enough
to give you a chance
to be with him

so under the Buffalo drifts
at Resurrection Cemetery
there lies one spot
that never truly freezes
or gets cold

all the best my dear
I hope you and he are happy

with all my love,
with warmest regards
from the only constant thing
besides the snow
in Buffalo NY

r james sterzinger

With All My Love From Buffalo...Her Rebuttal

on our wedding night
I buried myself into
your arms
you buried yourself
into mine

indifferent
to you now:
like the winds that blow
off Erie that form
the storms
that buries Buffalo
in the shroud
of winter

no Christmas
in Buffalo:
no warm feelings for the tide
we harden our hearts here
we carve them into grave markers
we fake our grief
our love is lost in the solstice.

when you buried the bullet
into your head because you wouldn't
bear the indifference of my love

it reflected our wedding night
or a winter storm
beautiful, but nothing I wanted to be
in the middle of.

my tears are only icicles
they reflected the church lights
nothing more.

so again, my dear, my fool
nothing lost, nothing spent.
hearts don't break in Buffalo

the streets that crack
when the permafrost leaks
between winter and winter
we patch with more rock

so as you are wrapped tight
in the arms of death or hell
think of me content to be wrapped
in another man's arms
you in your eternity
me here in mine

r james sterzinger

Woman Holding A Balance

he saw her first painted
in the warm light
of a cold December.

like the winter snow
pure white,
a landscape a portrait
by a God unknown
known only through the heart
yet mystical, like one taken at the rail

she became the gift
her hair had the smell of the season
of spice, of cinnamon,
of her heat
of her passion

you cannot know a work of
art with one view
you must learn the artist
the painting
the vision, the purpose

he married her
remained with her
studied her
loved her, learned to love her
in her arms he made their children
at night he would lie by her
next to the smell of the spice
in her hair

twenty-five years later
another Christmas
the years have taken toll
they share the same bed
a different need and a different love

yet another Christmas

as there will be many more
the one of the four occasions
the still share each other
with each other

she's asleep now
she breathes in and out
the rhythms of the years
as the lights from the tree
flickers in patterns
on the wall and on the sheets

he knows the maps
he knows the territories
of her body
he smells the spice
the deep cinnamon and sweetness
as if two-thousand years ago

he hears her breathing
he stares at the Christmas morning
in the early dark
he comes back to their bed
wraps his arm around the territories
buries his face in her hair of cinnamon of spice
a fourth wise man stares at his star
hunkered down tight to the small of her back
in the dark he dreams in sleep

r james sterzinger

Written On A Bus Ticket

God
wheedles away
His time
as I wait
for answers to a prayer.

time
whittling me away
second by second
terse
and unsympathetic
as curdled milk

and i thought this day
was so full of promise
just shows how wrong you can be
expecting prayers to be answered.

r james sterzinger

Written On The Water. After Keats-For M

Three years of a life wasted from yet another
I first saw you
Your stunning silence,
The way you came, the way
You went between the candlelight
You had me captivated.
I had to know you more deeply.

I became charmed by your first
Hello, the way you brushed the hair from
Your eyes. Your voice. Your whispers
Entangled. Enchanted. Ensnared.

I made scenarios, maybes ifs and so on-
That's foolishness to me
Now. I recognize the impossibility of you
Of me. Yes, it took me
Awhile. Now, my dear I would just as soon not
See you. Walk blindly by. Acknowledge it all
Just another temptation. A flirt with happiness
Life has no meaning no hope. I must not press,
It will destroy me in a sad and crazy death,

Perhaps. When you leave Minneapolis, or I, someday,
Your name will always be written for me
On the lakes.

r james sterzinger

You Know What I Wish?

III.

I pledge my soul to the deepening dark
To the myth of a quiet death
A dark soft mistress who
I can lie with forever.

Ah, sweet forever dark
Will you be my paramour?
Will you embrace me?
Hold me, love me?
Convince me?
That God is as dead
As you are?
My last great romance?

I have had it with all
The rest:
Lovers
Muses
Wives.
I am a ruined man.

II.

I have become old
Gray and soft.
My middle sags toward
My shoes gravity
Has taken
Effect.
I spend most my time alone.

Now i crawl into library corners
Reading with thick bi-focals
The New York Times Review of Books.
Most of my conversations
Are to myself
I am content with that.

I have no cellphone-

Who would i call?
I dance around blasphemies
F-words, mundacity,
I prefer a good cup of tea
And Frost or Hall
Or Haydn's Paukenmasse
Not company,
Not love.

How could I please a woman
Perhaps as a listener
Not as a lover.
What worked once
No longer works
As well.

I.
You know what I wish
I wish I could stare in a beautiful
Woman's eyes
Just one more time.
And trust, really trust again.
You see I am a romantic with
Nowhere to go,
With nowhere to go!

r james sterzinger

You Remind Me Of Someone

you were kind to me
you listened you smiled
your eyes lit up
when I offered you a cup of coffee.

you waited for me
to come by yesterday down the aisle
you offered me your hand in friendship
you smiled again

your smile is enough to carry me for days
the twinkle in you eyes
makes stars jealous
I am sure of it

for years I have forgotten
for years I have felt lost
confused uncertain

you remind me of someone

you reminded me
of me
I had forgotten myself

I had forgotten that I was good
so long ago
so very long ago.
When I had forgotten how to hope.

r james sterzinger