

THE pure
inconstancy
OF grace

RICHARD ST. JOHN



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New Odyssey Series

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*With heartfelt thanks
to the family, friends, and fellow poets
who have supported me
along the way.*

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Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the editors and staff of the periodicals in which these poems have appeared, sometimes in different versions:

Carolina Quarterly: “Epiphany at the Dennis Public Dump”

The Comstock Review: “From the Plate”

5 a.m.: “Heidegger’s Pear”

HEArt: “L’Anima Semplicetta”

Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry: “All Souls Flight” and “For a Friend a Friend Turning Thirty”

Paper Street: “The Sainthood of St. Julian”

The Sewanee Review: “A Largo”

TPQ OnLine: “Walking with the Lady With Three Dogs”

yawp: “The Bird in Our Garage” and “Photographs, Circa the Present”

Notes

“All Saints Eve”: Blawnox is a working-class river-town just outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

“Epiphany at the Dennis Public Dump”: Uzzah died while attempting to protect the Ark of the Covenant from touching the ground. In one interpretation, the reason for his death was pride—the belief that his hand was purer than the ordinary earth.

“J. Paul Getty at Forest Lawn”: The narrative germ of this poem came from an anecdote of a friend who claimed to have worked at Forest Lawn Cemetery. No biographical accuracy is claimed. I have fictionalized liberally.

“Two Stories”: Thanks to poet Michael Wurster for the poem’s first line as a starting point.

“Circling Walden Pond”: Thanks to my friends Carl and Elaine Gottlieb, both scientists at Harvard University.

“The Darkened Mosaic”: Rhonda Brandon is a colleague in community development. Her son was killed accidentally, in a drive-by shooting, as he returned home from work.

“L’Anima Semplicetta”: The title, which translates as “the simple soul,” is taken from *Purgatorio XVI*. The speaker is told to sit on the fourth step, or terrace, of “love defective.” The poem honors a young girl, Ebony Patterson, killed by a schoolmate in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh.

“Nighthawks”: “Covetous machines” is taken from John Ruskin’s series of essays, *Unto This Last*.

“A Largo”: Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* were named for his student, Goldberg, who went on to play harpsichord for Count Von Kyserling. The Count subsequently commissioned variations from Bach, as music to ease him into sleep.

“This Light”: Sharry Everett was a radiant African-American woman and an advocate for civil rights throughout her life. She was dying at the time I returned from a twentieth anniversary trip to Paris with my wife.

“All Souls Flight”: “The manuscript breaks off” in the farewell discourse of the Gospel of St. John.

“Christmas Requiem”: The poem is addressed to Thomas Peer, an English teacher who helped introduce me to poetry. He died just before Christmas. Kate’s description of the geologic timeline is drawn from John McPhee’s *Annals of the Former World*.

About the Author

Richard St. John is executive director of Conversations for Common Wealth, a program of the Community House Learning Center. In 2002, following twenty years in community development, St. John completed a midcareer Loeb Fellowship at Harvard University. He earned his master's in English at the University of Virginia, and his bachelor's degree at Princeton University. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Kate.