

Four Poems

Robert Pack

Published online: 14 April 2009
© The Author(s) 2009

PAUL SEES MORE LIGHT

I fainted dead away beside the plate
Of juicy shrimp that rainy evening meant
To gather critics there to celebrate
My lecture on poetic form, intent.

Revived among dark faces circling me—
There was my literary ally, Paul,
Who leaned down hazy close—I could well see
Distress upon his sunken face for all

The losses our long friendship shared; concern
From him passed into me and made me limp.
A doctor took my leaping pulse to learn,
Was I allergic to such foods as shrimp?

Up from unconscious depths came my reply:
“No, but I am allergic to free verse.”
The “Oh” that lunged from Paul’s tight lips, his sigh
On hearing my smart-ass remark (no worse,

Robert Pack is poetry editor of *Academic Questions*. He taught for thirty-four years at Middlebury College where, for twenty-two, he also directed the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference. He currently teaches at the University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812; cnd3199@blackfoot.net. Professor Pack is the author of nineteen volumes of poetry, most recently *Still Here, Still Now* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). The poems in this selection appear in *Still Here, Still Now* and are reprinted with the permission of the author.

I think, than some he'd heard before) remains
 The most melodious to sooth me when
 My stressed-out heart speaks of its beating pains,
 Its bare regrets. Paul told the doctor then:

“He is not ready to give up the fight:
 I'll know when Bob's near death; he'll be all right.”

YOU ARE THE ONE

Here's what we know—incredible
 as it may seem, since we can't get
 our minds around the concept of
 blank nothingness: Space/time began
 when Big Bang generated everything;
 that's right, there was no time, no anything,
 before the Big Bang start, and so the laws
 that govern nature as we know them now—
 the interplay of energy and mass,
 the formula E equals $m c$ squared—
 came into being when space/time commenced.

But whoa! How did those laws know what
 to formulate if they were not
 already written somehow in the void,
 in some Platonic realm, even before
 there was a single universe in which
 the laws of math could operate—perhaps
 as paradigms for freedom within fate,
 or maybe for the need to hold desire
 within some limits of constraint?

Did not these laws then have to be,
 from sheer necessity, transcendent laws—
 laws that a math professor might
 be tempted to define, “Pi in the sky,”
 laws that the wild-browed Einstein speculated
 God Himself would have to follow since
 He'd have no choice if He desired
 to fabricate one universe that worked?

How can these two conditions equally
be true at once? I'm sure you'd like to know.
How can the cosmic laws of physics come
into Big Bang existence only when
existence starts its evolutionary journey
to its consummation in inventing love,
and yet precede existence in some realm
where numbers dwell, timeless and absolute,
where Pi unfolds into an unknown end?
My mind whirls in a vertigo when I
attempt to comprehend such things.

But that's enough of small talk for tonight;
all that I meant to say is that you are
the only one, the one and only one
to hold me steady in this swirl of stars
and dust in an expanding universe.
What chance is there you'll go to bed with me?

TORNADO CONSOLATION

One cannot tell a hospital stood here;
The rubble just as well could be a church.
How many are still buried? We all fear
More dead will turn up in tomorrow's search.

No water, but a coke machine still works.
A radio without a listener
Plays songs of unrequited love; the quirks
And twists of human longing rend the air.

There is no one to blame, no one to hate,
And yet the dead remain exactly so;
Profoundly mute, they've nothing to relate,
Though I imagine they'd be cheered to know

This was not caused by terrorists within
Our midst, or punishment for human sin.

THE TEACHER SHAKES UP HIS CLASS

Most of the students in my Shakespeare class
Had come from homes with violated vows;
They doubted that their lives would safely pass
Without nuclear war or private woes:
Their failure to find meaning in the mess
Of all the battling ideologies,
Their fear that daily work was meaningless.
The bard's *Macbeth*, although a rousing read,
Did not depict for them the harmony
In marriage or in childrearing they sought.
I watched the students scrutinizing me.
"Have you been married long?" one blurted forth.
"Forty-five years," said I. Their breathless pause
Was followed by spontaneous applause.