

# Ghosts, Flames & Ashes

*Poems about life and death*

Michael R Guerin

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“Without acknowledging the ever-present gaze of death, the superficial will appear important, and the important will appear superficial.”

Mark Manson

*The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F\*ck*



## untitled #1

tears  
roll and glide  
down they slide  
her cheek —  
soft as peach  
out of reach  
from me.

a girl in gorky park

while sitting on a green park bench  
a cool autumn wind tousles  
her hair

random sounds from nearby city streets  
are muffled by breezes through  
yellowed leaves

with legs neatly crossed she watches  
little children laugh and play  
on swings

as if waiting expectantly for a distant  
lover to finally hurry home  
and glancing

down quite suddenly to her phone  
she frowns her forehead wrinkles  
those eyes

so brown so deep so faraway from me  
and draped in loneliness  
like a shawl.



a reflection (on an old man)

maybe this is what hemingway felt  
as early morning summer sun filtered

in through half open windows admitting  
just the slightest whisper of a breeze

while tiny motes of dust shimmered  
and danced to a timeless unsung tune

a few final fleeting moments before  
the inevitable end awaiting us all

(one way or another) standing naked  
and alone the old oaken floorboards

hard beneath his feet and face to face  
with the dawning recognition that our

manufactured glories fade just as surely  
as any others and best remembered days

appear now more myth than memory  
yet still not worth a damn anyhow.

take a look at these hands

long slender fingers  
as a mother strokes the face  
of her angel to sleep

or calloused hands  
rough and strong from days  
of fruitless labor

a young woman's hand  
tossed casually that drapes  
across her lover's arm

and the soiled hand  
of a homeless man begging his daily  
crust of bread

two old hands  
clasped tight in anguished prayer  
by a hospital bed

or another fist  
clenched white and raised  
in anger again

so many hands  
pass between us and each made  
of clay

and now just  
these two hands remain —  
with nothing left to say.

trespassing (again)

a sepia stained ramshackle  
mess is all that remains  
of the gallery where we first met.  
i don't know if you recall  
how once you posed  
bathed in streams  
of golden light  
as my brushstrokes on canvas  
failed to articulate  
the sheer weight  
of what passed between us  
in that singular moment  
outside the net  
of time.

should i have waited  
for you beneath  
the tangled bower?  
i'll confess to dreams  
of you undressed,  
drinking you in with eyes  
a shade too bold  
and allowed to trespass (again)

like days of old —  
but nothing neglected  
can be maintained  
with too many years  
stretched out between us  
like pale fabric  
pulled taut  
over a wooden frame,  
seemingly passing judgment  
on all that remains.

## Return to Spain (for Gary)

I haven't thought of Spain in years,  
but I remember how once it spilled forth

in discussion, long into the night, our words  
painting pictures of virgin sands too white

for eyes to bear. Low music cast a perfect  
backdrop for those treasures we imagined,

Pamplona as our secret, its mythic ideal  
there for the taking amid a wild mob.

Nothing would contain our consumption  
of late nights filled with reckless abandon,

or the bold forays into sun-drenched, cobble-  
stoned streets where we'd meet our fate.

All would make way for our passage,  
the ancient buildings bowing in homage

to the new conquerors of old Spain —  
oh how such dreams were entertained.

## Another Time, Another Place

Half naked and alone  
I was lying on a stone  
as sea waves in gentle  
rhythm of ebb and flow  
lapped at my hand  
dangling and still in the tide.  
My body, exposed,  
received the heat  
from each beat of the sun  
without complaint but hungry,  
hungry for the warmth  
and attention.

The sun was near  
its set, the colors of dawn  
and midday yielded  
to an orange hue  
when I noted the approach  
of two lovers, their  
hands entwined like a promise  
bound between them yet unspoken.  
They came near  
my refuge and, without care,

stripped each other bare  
there on the edge  
of surf and sand.  
Dancing, they ran headlong  
into the slow, gentle roll  
of the sea.

What notice love serves.  
It's not a question of who deserves  
the gift of where to place  
the laurel wreath.  
These two, young and without  
deceit caught the hidden  
prize, if only for a moment,  
in the tender embrace  
and smiling eyes of the other.  
Would you begrudge their joy  
or scorn their treasure  
and their youth  
as if these were detriments  
or somehow found wanting?  
Something true had transpired  
there on the shore  
in the westering sun,  
something that stands forever fixed  
in my mind, burned



there as by a flash of lightning's light  
on a summer's night,  
still-born and pure.

I stand now in this moment  
sure of less than when my journey  
began. Here, bound by  
the point of no return  
and tomorrow's promise I remain,  
to reflect, pause,  
ponder on why we're here  
and why it's worth the effort.  
The answer, it seems  
to me, lies somewhere between  
the thought and spoken word —  
barely audible yet somehow  
abiding it remains where  
I left it, in that space between  
asleep and awake, before the stillness  
of the night's dream  
yields to the heat  
of another day.

## Central Park

I walk through the park nearly every morning  
On my way to work. The birds are already

Milling about, waiting somewhat patiently  
To receive their daily ration of bread. Two

Dogs frolic on the green, their master a statue  
Of open pleasure with a smile fixed neatly

In place. It's almost summer and the heat  
Rises off the cobblestones and pavement

As a couple on the bench anticipate their late  
Night rendezvous with some preliminary

Kissing, comfortable in the anonymity  
Offered by a crowd and oblivious to any

Potential onlookers. There's always so many  
People passing through on their way to

Somewhere, hurrying along like the tattooed  
Man jogging by on the sidewalk. The leaves

Are already here but lost in thought or busy  
About my own plans I hardly ever notice their

Gradual approach, happening every year  
Despite attempts to remind myself otherwise.

## A Confession (of sorts)

You'd think by now I'd know  
better, or maybe not  
who can say, because even though  
I'd like to pretend I'm better  
than most that's clearly  
not the case.

If forced to face some basic facts  
of our shared existence  
it's true  
how most things  
that make you smile,  
or laugh, or set your temples aflame  
with anger  
are pretty much the same  
as my unspoken list  
of dos and don'ts,  
likes and dislikes  
and all the rest of it.

So let's put this myth to bed  
one final time, shall we,  
as I must admit  
that I'm just as human as you —  
flawed and false and filled

to brim with silly nonsense  
we're always too afraid to confess  
to another soul,  
even when curtains are drawn  
and a holy man waits  
just inches behind the screen  
taking notes  
and passing along our vain apologies  
to a father we've supposedly  
never met.

## Reflections on the Herd

Cows only know  
two dimensions really —  
there is grass below  
and the farmer's cold hands,  
fences which form  
the boundaries of their world,  
and other cows  
to graze and stand  
beside.

Cows never glance up  
and gaze upon the sky —  
perhaps their necks  
aren't designed that way  
or maybe there's just  
no reason  
for wondering why  
rain falls  
on certain days.

There is a trough  
of water and green grass  
underfoot —

and the occasional  
passerby walking  
or just biking past  
on the country path  
which leads  
to other fields  
and destinations  
unthought-of and unknown  
by any cows.

## On Stillwell Street

Small boys at play  
Their thin arms flailing  
About somewhat madly  
As cries of joy  
Hang heavy  
In this humid air.  
On the bench  
I befriend loneliness  
As cars stuffed  
Full of faces  
Pass by careful  
To avoid the gathering  
Throng of children  
Rushing headlong  
To the ice cream man  
Whose familiar church-bell chime  
Summons another afternoon's  
Willing congregation.  
One little girl  
With mother in tow  
Anxiously awaiting  
Sunday's treat  
Takes her turn in line



While I idle away the time  
Conscious of remaining  
Unnoticed even by  
Pigeons.

## Remembering Bukowski

Prowling the streets and lanes  
Of Amsterdam I used to cruise the bookstores  
With a fresh-faced comrade  
Searching for one more  
Masterpiece of yours for me to greedily  
Consume on early Saturday mornings,  
Cold Heineken in hand.  
By number three  
I would feel your groove, the pages  
Flying by devouring  
Lines from *Factotum*, *Post Office*, *Women*  
Or *Ham on Rye* —  
It didn't really matter much which one,  
Just to hear your voice like  
John the Baptist howling out as only a madman  
In the desert could, warning  
The meek or naïve to cash it in  
Before getting dealt  
Another crooked hand.  
By the box-load I dragged  
The weight of your words back home  
Only later coming round to  
Your other works, found in all places

On a college reading list and wondering  
Aloud about who'd have the balls  
To share your naked truth  
With the uninitiated.

## plot 17

the august sun warmed my back  
as the last row of flowers  
were planted in dirt dark  
as night when the foreman  
asked me to take a walk  
to the chapel and retrieve  
the casket inside for burial  
beneath a white marble angel  
and as i headed that way  
wondered how it was possible  
for me to bring a body  
from there to here all alone  
forgetting about  
the new section reserved  
for babies gone too soon  
and as the cool chapel air  
slapped my face and eyes  
adjusted to the shade  
spied a small white box  
near the altar no bigger  
than one for shoes you buy  
at the mall and as my heart  
pounded i reverently raised

it up lighter than a breath  
and carried the tiny package  
to plot seventeen and laid  
the box down on green green grass  
then dug a hole appropriately  
sized and planted one final  
sprout that day just moments  
before grief-stricken parents  
headed my way to stand beside  
the neatly seeded patch of ground.

forget me nots

if i could summon the strength  
i would ask you to forget

about that time at the lake  
when we got lost on a country

lane and i refused to check  
the map or ask for directions

pretending (as always) to know  
better than you and too damn

stubborn to stop the car for even  
one single minute while you sat

in the next seat fuming mad  
(no doubt) and gave me a dose

of well-deserved silent treatment  
lasting only long enough until

a wall of forget-me-nots came  
into view round the next bend

then from the corner of my eye  
spied a faint smile and shoulders

slump slightly while you relaxed  
as if all those tiny blue flowers

sensed your mood and washed  
you clean while i sat too dumb

to mutter even a single word —  
maybe those forget-me-nots

offered you better comfort than  
any fool thing i could have said.

## Asian Canvas

I wonder  
At the three  
Young girls whose daily  
Rounds bring them  
To that shore.  
Saris blowing in the breeze  
Yet the river serene  
And still these three  
Stop there each day —  
And the youngest one  
Fair in youth tips  
Her hat hello  
To the man in the boat.  
Of what does she think?  
On what immortal  
Shore does her mind  
Wander, alone or with  
The other two?

The sun in its descent  
Casts long shadows  
Down the mountain slope.  
Soon, in the dark



Of night these three  
Will be alone  
Save for their memories  
On the day and dreams  
Of strong young men —  
Virtuous, pure, mischievous  
With a hint of something  
Wild in their eyes.  
Do all girls dream  
As these?  
And what of the man  
In his skiff  
Whose daily catch  
Is a meager fill  
For a wife and child, too?  
Of what does he dream,  
Or think, as the young  
Girls pass by?  
What words if asked  
Could he offer  
About his lot in life,  
About the wife  
Of his youth now gray  
And their children  
Already in the grave?  
Perhaps these girls

Have attained the age  
His children already gone  
To heaven  
Would have been.

Those years of toil  
On the waves or along  
Its muddied edge  
Yield scarce recompense  
It seems to me.  
And yet, those three  
In saris white walk  
With heads unbowed,  
Their feet somehow  
Free of stain.  
Standing now along  
The shore they appear  
As fresh as the dawn,  
Even as one  
More forlorn day  
Comes slowly  
To its close.

food for the soul?

he spoke about food for the soul  
as if it were a bucket fit

for being filled with something  
tangible like cold clean

water pumped deep from a well  
and therefore capable

of being poured out or carelessly  
spilled i suppose.

and as i strolled the spotless halls  
at st clare's hospital

the air heavy with a sickly sweet  
scent of disinfectant

i had no idea what words like those  
were meant to convey

on my way to his room with a neatly  
folded copy of the post.

with shades pulled closed i kept  
a silent vigil by the bed

so he wouldn't be alone and when  
those final labored

breaths came thick through cracked  
and swollen lips he placed

his hand in mine until there was  
nothing left to hold.

## Melchizedek's Song (a Lamentation)

### I

a wall,  
for wailing (the who  
and for what  
unimportant).  
or  
maybe  
just a place to gather  
(in prayer).

### II

once a temple  
stood  
proud above the rooftops  
and people came  
to make an  
offering.  
before the exile.

### III

it's been reported  
how harps  
were hung by the river  
and grown men  
wept when  
asked to sing a song.  
of jerusalem.  
by their captors,  
no less.

### IV

stone by stone,  
dismantled —  
razed  
into the dust  
it struggled to surmount.  
they tore  
their clothes  
in grief, wailing.  
maybe god had forsaken  
them.

V

years piled high like  
stones.  
a city divided  
by a line drawn black,  
black like a hat  
bobbing lost in prayer  
or the color  
of a funeral  
shroud.  
black like a polished  
kalashnikov  
and cold like stone.

VI

he could be (is)  
your brother.  
behind  
the ski mask.  
he has needs, too —  
(for example  
a place

to call his own).  
you were once  
like him  
(remember the diaspora?)  
how did the roles  
become reversed?

## VII

i won't revisit your twisted  
streets  
and back alleys  
choked too full with history —  
(though some,  
of course, still do).  
*salem to shalom to salaam*  
but what has really  
changed  
since abram passed  
those city walls?  
walls erected to divide  
(causing only more  
division).



forever out of reach (for izumi shikibu)

i wasn't there  
when izumi's tears

flowed like mountain  
streams spilling swollen

banks to cascade down  
silky milk-white cheeks  
better suited for kisses

and i didn't hear  
as anguished sobs

cracked the night  
and wracked her delicate

frame surrounded by  
strands of long black hair  
hacked short from grief

but her ancient  
words carried me close

enough to feel  
her little girl's funeral

stone — though any  
chance for comfort  
was forever out of reach.

with finality

i believe in simple things, in the sure solidity  
of a single box laid reverently in the ground with

wreaths of flowers retired to a nearby metal rack  
the color of dulled aluminum. it's a task normally

reserved from the view of casual onlookers —  
how the box is gently lowered hand over hand,

nylon straps held securely against the lid until it lands  
with finality, the weight firmly anchored in place just

before earth begins to rain in a vain attempt to regain  
its former glory. only later do they come around, not

to admire my handiwork but completed nonetheless,  
the plot neatly seeded and raked clean, a virgin plain

with all rocks removed to some safe distance out back  
behind an old wooden shed where children never had

the chance to play. i'll admit to feeling somewhat sad  
despite the simple pride in a job well done, the sun

lending credence to my melancholy as the midday heat  
begins to rise marking the end of anything left to say.

## Into His Twilight (for *Pépère*)

I visit you like an old friend  
Well acquainted with your ordinary ways  
Of telling a story fit for any occasion.  
We sit like stones on the wooden porch  
As the last gleams of sunlight die away behind  
The rounded hills of my youth, and  
I pause for a minute or two half-expecting  
Your smile to slowly slip from view.  
You nod — and my mind trips down  
Those dimly-remembered paths of other stories,  
Other twilit times at the lake  
Poised on rickety metal chairs painted  
The color of rust.  
It all comes down to *this*  
You seem to be saying, and as the silence  
Closes in with the impending night  
I realize that you never promised anything more.

## Interlude (with a peach)

I eat a peach —  
(and think  
of you  
up at the mountain lake,  
setting sun  
flaming in your hair  
as wisps of stray  
locks play  
among the graceful  
nape of your neck.  
It seems  
like only yesterday, so  
the cliché  
always goes,  
that we paid  
each other our attention  
with no careers  
in sight to offer  
up their oh-so-typical  
distractions) —  
and tear into the thick  
flesh of the meat,  
sweet juices cascading

down  
the curve  
of my stubbled chin,  
the shirt sleeve damp  
from repeated  
efforts to stem its flowing  
tide.

I'm almost done  
but there's another one  
tucked neatly inside  
a brown paper bag laying  
innocently  
on the kitchen counter,  
waiting patiently  
to slowly ripen,  
and when it's ready  
so will  
I.

## Done with the Game

I'm done chasing muses  
for a cup of coffee  
or a quickie behind the bleachers

where games get played  
and bystanders stand at ease  
applauding your sweat-soaked effort

piled high like clichés,  
you know the ones I mean  
*no I in team, just do it* — that sort of thing.

Don't get me wrong  
this isn't simply a case  
of refusing to admit some sour grapes

or a question of taste,  
that particular turn of phrase  
like some proverbial music that we all

at some point or another  
will be forced to face —  
and mainly against our better wishes.



Maybe it's the same  
as old Billy penned we'd do,  
our need to take the stage and ape

someone else's lines  
hitting each mark on cue  
before the madding crowd and adopting

just the right role based  
on any situation — and so to  
reiterate, I'm done with the game.

## Etched in Stone

When mowing down tall grass  
On lazy summer afternoons  
Between long lines of gray  
Granite slabs in pre-walkman  
Or mp3 player days  
There wasn't much to do  
Once your mind would  
Wander while walking along  
Those rolling green rows  
In the midday heat  
Then read an occasional  
Grave taking note  
Of the names and dates  
So artfully etched in stone  
To figure out just how  
Many years each particular  
Person passed here  
Wondering to myself about  
Whether it had been enough  
For them to leave their mark  
And if any distant relative  
Was left behind now  
Who remembered fondly

The soul laid to rest mere  
Feet below my steps.

## Family Portrait (for *Fufu*)

She seemed out of her element,  
So far removed from the land  
Of her birth, reclining in a back room  
Wrapped in a sari surrounded  
By portraits from another age.  
I gave *salaam* and it was kindly  
Received — she's one of the first  
Who believed my mixed-marriage  
Might not be so bad.

Between her *Bangla* and my English  
The thread of our conversation  
Could barely hold the strain  
But when she cried, not hiding  
Her tears, I gave a sad smile and said  
*Acha* as best I could.

At times like these you get to see  
Just how hard life can be, especially  
When you're left all alone by a family  
Too busy chasing a failed American  
Dream to notice that you've been silently  
Consigned to the pages of history,

Your relevance daily fading like  
The slowly setting sun casting long  
Shadows across the streets of Corona.

## Rainy Season in Bangladesh

I haven't seen your tea gardens, but I've heard  
The view is sweet from the hillsides of Sylhet.

Nor have I strolled along your longest beach  
Stretching as far as one can see at Cox's Bazar —

But I've walked your streets. I, too, have stepped  
Gingerly around the mass of huddled children

Lying by the side of the road, naked and alone,  
Asleep and clutching each other against the chill

Of night or blind indifference (my cheeks red  
With shame). I rode rickshaws amid the constant

Crush of people no matter the hour, traffic bound  
To nowhere and gray smoke making it difficult

For one to breathe. I tried to remain aloof,  
Objective, an observer from a much safer distance

Than this knowing that one day I would leave  
Dhaka far behind, willingly, and somewhat relieved.

There's just too much pain in such a cramped space —  
Like the rains in August coming on strong quickly

Overwhelming the land's ability to absorb the sudden  
Rush of water. Streets become streams as rivers

Spill their uncertain banks, the level rising higher  
Each day with no break in sight, a mountain

Of clouds towering up at horizon's edge. A place  
Drenched in sorrow with no hope for release.

ICU

snowflake falling  
wind-tossed,  
tempest

driven.  
one like the rest  
yet apart,

alone in dizzy  
descent  
longing

for rest,  
to settle on frozen  
ground, spent.



## Poplars

Poplars never fail to remind  
Me of my grandmother,  
Especially when the wind sets  
Their silver-green leaves shaking.

I used to stand on the steps  
Of her trailer up by the lake  
And gaze at the dancing leaves  
In the breeze announce the coming

Of another summer storm.  
The sky would slowly darken  
And the air would cool but with  
*Mémère* standing behind me,

Her trembling hand a comfort  
On my shoulder, we remained  
Steady and sure like twin stones  
Across the lane. I thought we'd

Always have that lake, just us two  
With the others down at the beach  
Watching as the final few boats

Returned to shore, but nothing

Lasts forever in just the same way.  
The trailer is gone (so I'm told),  
Just like my grandmother who  
Laid down one winter's day

Too tired to fight the cancer  
Anymore, her soul leaving us  
(and me) all alone. Sometimes  
I wonder if those poplars still stand

By the road, tall and secure because  
Of their numbers, able to brace  
Themselves against another breeze  
That's always sure to come.

rooms to let

maybe you're looking for something analytical  
like an unfiled police report  
or a coldly clinical dissection  
of the room's contents  
ticking items off an imaginary list...  
bed, check  
black and white tv, check  
framed artwork placed randomly on chair, check...  
but all that i see  
takes me back to annual boyhood trips  
to the salton sea  
fighting with my cousins  
for the coveted rear-facing seat  
of my dad's station wagon  
with all windows rolled down  
and wind obliterating any  
mundane conversation floating my way  
from the front while  
watching the backs of road signs recede  
in the distance mile after mile  
without a clue  
to what was written there  
and not caring anyhow

as we sailed past on the interstate  
tires humming on pavement  
to finally land once more at our hotel  
by bombay beach  
never realizing that one day  
my childhood sea would dry up  
like so many broken promises  
giving rise to a veritable  
ghost town of derelict rooms  
forever to let.

## nights of vinyl

the purists  
will say  
that nothing quite  
matches the warm rich  
tones like vinyl  
as the metal stylus  
gently rides tight  
grooves in slight  
undulating waves.

maybe you remember  
similar nights or days  
drinking cheap beer  
while sitting on the floor  
surrounded  
by dust-jackets  
of your favorite  
bands  
arguing the merits  
of certain riffs  
over others  
as "stairway" played  
on max volume

and nicotine-stained  
fingers strained  
to play those  
air-guitar notes across  
faded jeans  
unable to keep pace  
with jimmy's inspired licks.

it all seemed to click  
so simply back  
then  
(wouldn't you agree?)  
gliding along the track  
as one of the pack  
never worried about the next  
wave that's sure  
to come along.

and though those songs  
do remain the same  
too many days  
and nights  
all strung together  
like links of a chain  
have changed the landscape  
blurring and blunting

the sharper  
edges of those sweet  
recollections —  
and anything that might  
still be left to say.

## Until Last Night

Until last night  
I slept soundly  
living in a world devoid  
of you  
(ignorance is bliss)  
and those perfume-scented  
pillows that I can only  
imagine  
from across  
so great a distance,  
or the sublime  
tilt of your head to one side  
just before you speak  
a word and looking damn  
fine  
no doubt about it,  
too.

They say only fools  
rush in, but what  
lines  
could I pen  
of those desperate men weak



with heartache from lies  
that bind  
whispered on more than one instance —  
lost  
(if you can imagine)  
and lonely,  
prevented  
from a chance like this  
for something true  
beyond the empty void,  
boundless  
and forever out of sight?

## October Breeze

In pieces fall  
our dreams of you we couldn't hold.  
In pieces fall  
the leaves from fragile oaks that wall  
that hallowed hill — and with a blow,  
one fierce October breeze, my soul  
in pieces falls.

once it was said

once it was said  
how a prophet searched  
for your voice  
on the mountaintops  
in temples  
by the sea with waves  
crashing ever shorewards  
through a storm  
as thunder pealed  
and lightning lit  
the night sky like day  
and finally  
in the stillness of a cave.  
i've no idea what  
he heard (if anything)  
and he's not here  
to share  
at any rate —  
just my still small  
voice remains  
like that of a child  
(but not a saint)  
or perhaps a scribe

who makes these paltry marks  
to remark  
on what feels  
so eminently... remarkable.  
maybe that's what  
the prophet really heard  
that day,  
his own inner voice  
enough to stir  
him (or her)  
into collective action  
through your name  
taking a stand  
against all that man  
is sadly so humanly  
capable of?  
and seemingly  
in vain...  
once it was said.

empty

it's night once again.  
no stars shine in the sky  
with a thick blanket  
of clouds  
poised overhead.  
the window is open,  
but no breeze  
enters this little room.  
our bed seems much  
too large as  
your side remains  
vacant and still.  
the clock on the wall  
continues its  
unceasing chore,  
the hands sweeping  
out vast stretches  
of time  
which ultimately capture  
only nothing.

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- take a look at these hands – August, 2016
- trespassing (again) – July, 2016
- rooms to let – September, 2016

You can check out their website ([rattle.com](http://rattle.com)) to view the images responsible, in part, for those poems.

Finally, a word of thanks to the artists, writers, musicians and filmmakers for all they have done (and continue to do) in shedding a spotlight on the human condition and providing us all with so much inspiration and “food for the soul.” Thank you.

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