

still  
life

poems by  
michael r guerin

## Other works by Michael R. Guerin

- ❖ Ghosts, Flames & Ashes
- ❖ world thru a window
- ❖ mind & machine
- ❖ between black & white
- ❖ Nature Speaks: A Lenormand Deck Guidebook

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## ii. things

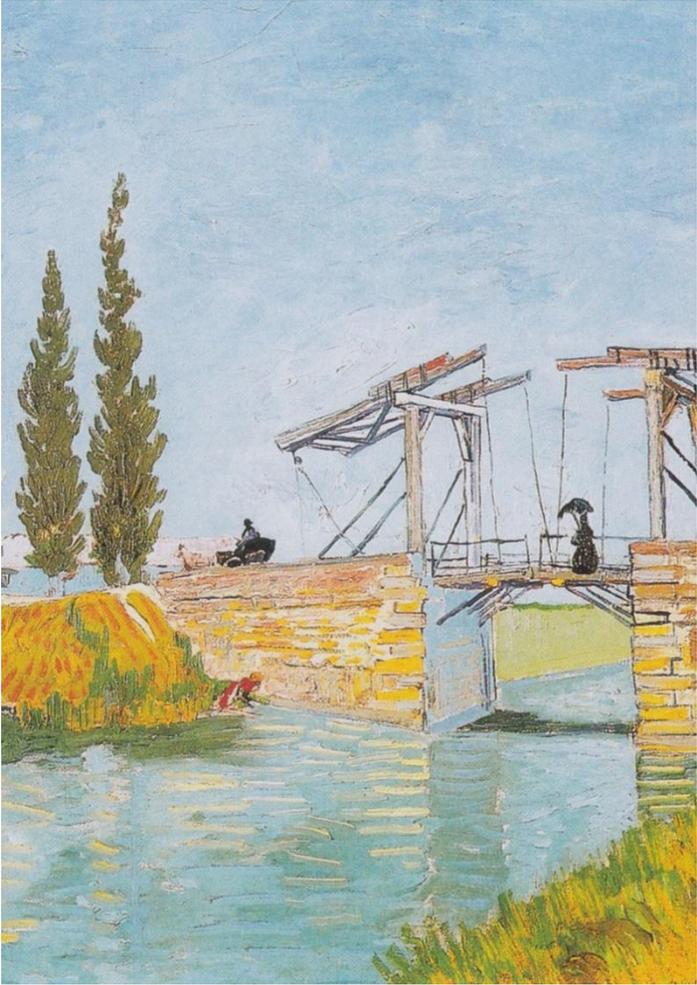
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“When one looks at one's own life, the everyday life that one lives and leads, it is so shallow, a verbal acceptance without any depth, a verbal explanation with which we seem to be so satisfied, a life that is so broken up...”

– J Krishnamurti



## i. places



## sunflowers (i)

the setting sun peeks  
beneath a line of clouds  
and casts long shadows  
over peopled fields of sunflowers  
standing ram-rod straight  
stretching out to horizon's edge  
in row upon row upon row  
their thick stalks bearing the weight  
of heavy heads bowed low  
with seed as they wait  
patiently to release  
their load.

## bus stop

broken glass.  
gum wrapper. empty  
snapple bottle. curiously,  
grains of sand reminiscent  
of the beach.

cars speed  
past without a glance  
in my direction  
as i lean into the street  
looking for a late  
number seven bus.

battered fedora.  
beneath, an old man's  
weathered face  
and fractured smile  
bobs step by step  
until he reaches the rusted  
bench and takes a seat.

## dusk in voronezh

from an open third floor balcony window  
the deserted city square  
still wet from afternoon rain  
glistens in the glow  
of four street lights below.  
draped in a woolen shawl  
her bare thighs exposed  
to the cold she sits  
lost in thought  
gazing far out over  
the sculptured horizon  
as a delivery van rumbles past  
gushing smoke.

## morning rush hour

with a lurch the train  
shudders from the station  
moving slowly at first  
and then gaining speed  
picks up the pace as trees  
blur past the window to greet  
my faded reflection.  
directly across from me

a girl bites her lower lip  
our knees bare inches away  
from any chance at intimacy  
and as she adjusts her i-phone  
with white wireless earbuds  
poking just beneath a woolen cap  
the faintest notes from some dance mix  
echoes in the space between us.

her head slowly bobs with each beat  
as the miles click metallicly past  
and i can't help but smile  
at this distance awkwardly close  
yet ages apart isolated

as we are on different paths  
which will never pass  
so near again.

## crack of dawn

gray skies &  
wisps of smoke  
climb in lazy circles

before  
getting lost  
in waves of cold air

stretching  
miles above  
slanted roofs and shuttered

rooms where  
dreamless nights  
eventually pass

until  
it's time once  
more to wear our masks.

## number seven bus

the driver barely looks  
as i pay the fare. all window  
seats are taken.

most stare at phones  
or have their heads buried  
in a book.

the bus moves on  
as i stagger up the aisle  
anxious for a spot

while a woman  
at the back knits patterns  
from a ball of yarn.

## laconia, nh

in front of the rusted trailer  
the road was more cart path than street  
with hard-packed sand and stones and ruts  
from car tires digging ever deeper summer  
after summer after summer but june rains  
have transformed the lane into a stream  
with rivulets carrying small yellow leaves  
and the occasional bug caught by surprise  
while my tee shirt soaked thru to the skin  
clings to me tightly  
as i sit on my heels and take it all in.

## karmic wheel

another rusted sunset —  
and underneath this rolling  
wheel churning  
day into day  
and season into season

when there's nothing left to do  
and nowhere left to run  
and old familiar  
escapes fall through  
which no longer hold a reason

and faced with faded memories  
unrolled frame by frame  
from its reel  
or how the prophet told  
that all turns to dust in the end

or like chaff beneath the grinding  
wheel or ash no longer fit  
for flame and there's no one  
left to blame —  
just let it come undone.

## a digression (really)

the first poem emerged while  
sitting in the st louis university library  
between classes.

it was usually cool and quiet  
there and as an older student surrounded  
by kids (really)

became a sort of refuge  
from hormones and the oppressive mid-  
september heat.

on fridays from the lobby's  
windows you had a wonderful view of boys  
toilet-papering

a row of maple trees across  
the lane clearly many beers into another  
lost weekend.

but who can blame them  
since i was (really) no different when  
serving overseas.

but i digress (something  
i happen to be really good at, truth  
be told). so, while

sitting on a second floor  
sofa lost in thought with memories of her  
words emerged

that seemed to me (really)  
worth putting down on paper just to see  
where they led.

and they led somewhere  
sad and sweet and beautiful in seven  
simple lines.

really.

## night fall

she stared mysteriously  
through me as the notes  
of some sad sweet song  
lingered along  
and like one who was lost  
adrift or abandoned  
i clung to each moment  
afraid to move on  
bereft of a logic  
or reasons.

she finally asked me to bed  
and peeled back the covers  
but i waited instead  
unsure of next moves  
and stuck in my head  
the moment came  
and it went  
just another day's  
energy spent.

for most love is a game  
best played with a stranger

to thrash in the darkness  
of an empty long night  
without any thought  
or some meaning  
and driven by  
needs in search  
of escape.

## hung up (at the met)

they come by  
in ones or twos  
and sometimes in groups —  
(a school field-trip  
of uniformed children  
laughing in line  
or an adult painting  
class with their earnest  
instructor talking  
about light and form  
as gray-haired women  
scribble notes) to pause  
and pay homage  
before some framed  
canvas artfully hung  
on display (but  
the bulk simply run by  
as if on a scavenger hunt  
hurriedly snapping photos  
from behind smart phones  
raised in front of faces  
and often at bad angles  
missing the finer details

and any possible point  
altogether) and i wonder  
what they feel  
(or if most even bother  
to have a single thought  
at all) standing collectively  
close and face to face  
with another so-  
called masterpiece.

## starry night

beneath a tear-stained sky  
the night cracked open wide  
a million specks of light  
can't dispel wandering thoughts  
and adolescent dreams  
for some reprieve  
from this most uncivil  
of places  
unfit for living  
and unmissed by grief.

heraclitus once wrote  
how one can never step  
into the same river twice  
as the waters of life  
continually change and flow,  
a cosmic dance of space-time  
with atoms constantly rearranged.

but if i could send  
a single note back against  
this inexorable tide  
to my former self

lying beneath that field of stars  
and dreaming of peace  
(or eternal release)  
it might simply be this...  
there's nothing  
left to miss.

## december dawn

gray skies and bitter cold  
conspire to shut me indoors.

outside a few fluffy flakes  
of snow  
slightly heavier than air  
float downwards

to dust unraked brown  
leaves still scattered  
across the empty acres  
of my lawn.

## elsewhere

a jet readies for landing.  
by the look of it i'd guess  
a boeing 747. and while

i glance skyward following  
its gradual descent  
two cows in a field

fix their gaze on me  
oblivious to the drama  
unfolding overhead.

perhaps they're deaf  
to these decibel levels  
or maybe we're the only

ones focused on the next  
horizon with a dream  
of being elsewhere.

## like filament

beneath a velveteen sky  
hung with shadows and light  
a jet streaks across the horizon  
and flies till it's far out of sight  
and i wonder how you might be feeling  
as the day slips deep into dusk  
while my dreams fragile as filament  
melt in this westering sun  
with thoughts spinning webs  
out of nothing since it felt  
like nothing was right.

## below zero

bathed in early morning moonlight  
a lone rabbit scuttles  
over thin layers of crusty snow  
blanketing my lawn  
and pausing beneath an oak  
nibbles at the few shoots of grass  
able to poke through.

from behind thick panes of glass  
i stand with coffee in hand  
transfixed by the beat  
of his tiny heart  
until, with a start,  
he's off scampering back  
to his hole.

## one moment

a half empty  
cup of coffee  
neglected on my desk  
slowly turns cold

(while half  
a world away)

a woman in  
pink kimono  
sits at attention and  
slightly bent at the waist  
pours green tea.

ii. things



## tin watering can

beside a rickety back step  
painted pale gray

an old tin watering can  
lays on its side

in an overgrown flower bed  
now partly hidden

by clover and a spray  
of black-eyed susans.

## sunflowers (ii)

cut and arranged.  
stacked high on display  
in a black earthenware vase.

a flower in a field  
is still a wild thing beyond  
the reach of any casual hand

(or passing glance)  
but reduced to decoration  
must find itself submitted

to the random rules  
of grand design and left  
to chance.

## window ledge

painted figurines. a line  
of rocks and crystals

arranged by size, shape  
and alleged healing

properties. and hovering  
just above stenciled

butterfly wings  
her face once gazed

through double hung panes  
out on a world

suffused in shades  
of angst and wonder.

(for kayleen)

## wedding photo

on the mantle  
a single photo  
framed in faux silver.

a young couple  
in shades  
of black and white

smile stiffly past  
the landscapes  
of a predetermined future.

from then till now  
the slow roll  
of years have eroded

moment by misplaced  
moment any hope  
of true communion

with roles too  
easily filled  
like an old pair of shoes.

## dead leaves

dead leaves still matter  
(even as we rake  
them away to the compost  
heap or stuff them deep  
into plastic bags  
readied for curbside pickup).

dead leaves matter  
(even as their multi-colored shapes  
decorate the lawn  
while my neighbor mows  
his into a fine mulch  
shot from the discharge chute).

dead leaves might matter  
more than we know  
(or care to know as part  
of a finely balanced ecosystem  
on which so much  
of our world depends).

or maybe they're just pretty.

## gutter finds

rusted hubcap.  
wire from a hanger. ball  
of twine. three  
soda cans, their tops  
carefully removed  
with a pair  
of tin snips.

even gutter finds  
can be redeemed  
by two hands  
willing  
to get dirty, provided  
with a bit of myth  
and imagination

where all things  
can speak for themselves  
(should you dare  
to ask)  
weaving a story  
as old as time and drunk  
on absinthe dreams

since nothing is  
as it seems.

and there in a one room  
apartment (more hovel  
than home)  
trash was transformed into treasure,  
the discarded remains  
from far too many yesterdays  
plucked from obscurity  
and proudly left  
on display.

(for asterios matakos, 1917 – 2002)

## continental divide

while watching a youtube video my daughter asked me about the "continental divide" and what it might mean, what it "stands for" (her words) and so i explained about the imaginary line that runs from mountain top to mountain top stretching from peak to peak which divides the country in two. and she said "oh, is that all?" yes, that's all. it could have been named something else or nothing at all. why divide a land by any sort of lines and why name a mountain one name and not another and who gets to name it anyway? we live on "susan lane" but only because the builder's daughter was named susan, and so why not a street? or a lane? and this town is called "newtown" which is just another place to live in a "state" called "connecticut" (by the way) and the list could go on and on, name upon name to identify and localize one particular place from among many, which is useful for giving or getting directions (i suppose) and helps you navigate your way around this world.

but it's all too easy to forget that all lines are imaginary as all names are arbitrary and could easily be other than what they happen to be, and that adding a name to a place or fixing a label to the things which comprise our collective space adds nothing by way of value or meaning and only seems to divide, by bisecting things in two and separating "me" from "you."

## cans of soup

between deep thoughts and hyperbole  
she asked me to stay  
while the walls were littered  
with pop art finds predominantly featuring  
food stuffs and pantry items  
divorced from reality and hung on display  
as something other than avant-garde  
to force a sort of paradigm shift —  
or maybe just a new line of bullshit  
to cover the simple fact  
that our souls are fed on hunger  
and drowning on junk food dreams  
perpetually lost in a land  
where nothing is as it seems.

(for andy warhol)

## still life

beneath warm fleece sheets  
she sleeps (dreaming of worlds  
which could never  
exist) and i can't resist  
this inescapable urge  
to ride those sweet  
shallow waves of her breath  
as deep as death  
until i arrive  
at the still beating heart  
of eternity.

it's late. gently i peel  
back the covers from our bed  
to slip inside  
and just when i rest my head  
filled with nothing left  
to lose and nothing  
left to hide  
she rolls instinctively  
on her side.

## sunflowers (iii)

in the grandest scheme  
a flower is a flower  
and nothing more  
to be admired or consumed  
or each in turn (just

as every summer unwinds  
its end season  
into season to run  
the perennial course,  
and the tallest flowers

whither and bend  
as fields of yellow  
which once impressed  
shrivel to brown  
and then into dust)

yet i can't help thinking  
as daylight fades  
of what will become of us  
now face to face  
with primordial change

when there's nothing  
left to trust.

## manual typewriter

not the modern kind  
but vintage, an antique  
model with a black frame  
and just the right  
amount of rust (some  
might say "patina") made  
by underwood.

each key punch sends  
a lettered arm flying upwards  
to slap against the drum  
with a satisfying thud  
(though the "g"  
still feels a bit sticky  
even after liberal  
amounts of wd-40).

now a showpiece,  
i imagine the woman  
who could type sixty words  
a minute on this machine  
as her boss droned on  
mechanically. (sadly,

by "boss" i meant  
"man" and by "woman"

i meant "secretary")  
because that's how roles  
used to play back in the day  
when conformity was pre-  
ordained and people  
only expected to know  
their "place."

(for eleanor roosevelt)

## a turnpike

so much once depended  
on williams' red wheel  
barrow  
sitting beside chickens  
ranging freely  
across some farmer's  
front lawn.

now a mini-mall graces  
the landscape  
with ubiquitous ease  
hung with three  
"for lease" signs  
fronted by state route  
nineteen

as a line of cars wait  
in traffic  
belching smoke  
and distracted drivers  
check their texts  
or listen to talk  
radio.

## blooming jasmine

a single drop of dew  
heavy with the weight  
of a world  
hangs like a pearl  
from the green fingertip

of leaf. i wade through early  
morning mist drunk  
on jasmine perfume  
as rivulets of sweat  
slide single-file down

the arched curve  
of my neck. transfixed, i wait  
suspended in time  
as a single drop of dew  
hangs in midair

milliseconds before  
falling to earth.

## pearl earring

a slight turn of head.  
her liquid gaze caught mid-  
frame which sails past  
all your defenses. face to face  
with infinite shadow  
and pale reflective surfaces  
glazing over subterranean depths  
suggestive of some hidden  
motive or heart-felt desire  
on the edge of a spoken word,  
a mysterious train of thought  
forever lost hung and suspended  
on her pursed red lips  
like a pearl earring.

(for vermeer)

## a locket

within an antique locket  
hung with filigreed gold  
a lock of his hair rests  
safe and secure  
held against all elements  
and the shifting tides  
of time as it rises  
(or falls)  
with each intake of breath  
nestled so sweetly  
against her breast.

## sunflowers (iv)

i see them seemingly  
everywhere i go and wonder  
if they see me too.  
at the grocery store  
lined up in green plastic pots

near the sliding glass door  
or by the chain link fence  
in front of my daughter's school,  
they stand up straight  
(like i was taught to do)

and bask in warm summer  
sunshine ever eager for more.  
their big beautiful hearts  
always seem open  
and free (something

i was told never to be  
about proverbial hearts  
on proverbial sleeves)  
forever facing the setting  
sun. i see them seemingly

everywhere i go like an old  
friend or a first date,  
always the same and forever  
new (and wonder if you  
see them too).

{for theo & jo van gogh}



## Acknowledgments

Life is a journey. Or pilgrimage. But rather than walking a path to some fabled shrine in a distant land, we're (hopefully) on the journey of self-discovery, of bravely plumbing those subterranean depths which typically only emerge in dreams.

And like every journey there are many fellow travelers we meet along the way. Some only share a few short moments of their life with us before venturing off toward other horizons, while others become fellow travelling companions walking alongside for long stretches of time.

In my life I've been blessed with many people who have aided me along this journey and who have shown me such tender care and loving kindness during our time together. To all of you (and you know who you are) this page is addressed as my humble and heartfelt thank you.

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## About Michael R Guerin

I don't particularly like talking about myself and prefer to let my creative projects speak for themselves. I live a relatively quiet life, a "perpetual outsider" never really fitting in and, quite frankly, never really wanting to.

As for what really matters, each day I do my best to make sense of why we're here and why it's worth the effort. Admittedly, some days I feel like I have a better handle on what that means in concrete terms than on other days.

If you care to know what I really think, then I'll tell you that life has to do with discovering WHO we really are, and then doing our best to live each day as AUTHENTICALLY as we can, based on what resonates strongly in the deepest recesses of our soul. Everything else is just "white noise" and trivia. Which means, it's about being passionately committed to the best possible version of yourself, come what may.

And maybe, just maybe, that's enough...

“So when one observes one's own life, and the life of the world in which we live, the daily monotonous, a life of routine, boredom, anxiety, fear, in that world is it possible to live a life that is free of fear, free of anxiety, a life that is a movement in which there is never a shadow of contradiction, therefore remorse and the invitation to all kinds of violence and self-centered activity?”

— J. Krishnamurti