

the world is
peopled with
poetry



Z. UNGER BELL

THE WORLD IS PEOPLED WITH POETRY

By Z. Unger Bell

Dedication

For friends and those who are no longer friends

For Celeste

For AJ

For the boy on the bus

For AJ

For Rachel

For August and Tuesday

For Emma

For role models

For Charlie

For Jonny

For AJ

For artists

For Samantha

For friends and family and friends that are family

For hope.

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*"Hope is the thing with feathers
that perches in the soul..."*

~ Emily Dickinson

I've read books and had journals for as long as I can remember. My room as a kid was characterized by a bookcase stuffed full — picture books, chapter books, *If You Give a Pig a Pancake*, *Magic Treehouse*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

The first book of poetry I remember adding to my collection was a pocket-sized collection my dad bought me in some tiny bookstore we found somewhere in New England. For the next few months, I carried Emily Dickinson's words around in the pockets of my sweatshirts and the bottom of my middle-school backpack.

It feels right that my own chapbook of poetry all these years later circles back around to that little cream-colored book bought on a whim.

Hope is the thing with feathers...

The current state of the world feels like it leaves little room for hope. We're two years into a global pandemic. We scroll through war and death on our Twitter feeds. Our planet is dying even more urgently than ever before. So where is that little bird Emily wrote of?

The World is Peopled with Poetry finds the hope in the little moments we experience every day and the people that help those moments happen.

Sometimes hope is a long drive. Sometimes it's a sticker, or a shirt. Sometimes it's a person standing next to you. Sometimes hope feels far away. And if you're reading this and feeling like you don't know where to look to find that elusive hope, I invite you to read my words and borrow some of mine.

I Meet Love on Every Street Corner

As a poet,
I must seem a little in love
with everyone.

The only way I know
how to exhale words
into pages
is to make them beautiful—

is to describe people
so gorgeous in their faults
and reckless with their hearts,
crash landings borne of hope
and tempered with perseverance,
fires extinguished with chocolate
and honesty blown into tissues.
I only know how to describe people
with reverence or distaste,
lessons they've taught me
through hurt they bestow
or strength they have shown me
through pain cradled
soft in their hands,
experience bringing scars
that are so often bared
to an unforgiving world.

All I can do is take it all in
and deliver another poem
where hurt pauses
and love
is a button-down shirt,
home
hands that fix
the collar and cuffs.

Loyalty
is a metaphor
written in palms,
heartlines leading
to the tiny miracle
of you and me
and meeting once
in a near-empty auditorium.

Sailboats

There were no sailboats
on Lake Champlain,
but I met you in a line
to ride out on the water
before I had learned how
to call Vermont home.

Darkness is sweet as the moon
in its gentle hush,
the lush lights of a city
wakeful-fading to dreamscape.

Nighttime blurs memory
like heavy fog in the fall,
homework forgotten
to chase the leaves
and the breathlessness of childhood
we must have once had.
Your face is cloud covered
and my senses dissipate,
but I remember your voice,
clear and sincere
and clarinet-kind.

I quoted a book—
daylight
and new names
and hope in every reset
of sunrise—
we both looked over water
and I remember the velvet ripples
of safety as I walked you
home.

We hadn't learned to call it that yet
and you moved before the lake
could fully sink into our bones.

But even when distance struck
yours is the name that made me think
perhaps this world is gentler
than my fears
would have me believe.

Shenandoah View from the Passenger's Seat

Roadside at the edge
of what maps wouldn't call a town
a faded concrete building
stands with its wooden sign
built high into the sky
"Towing and Fruit Stand"

the blue tow truck is parked
with a little rust
next to the planks over the window
that lift
open air
fresh wares
passed through a hole
in the side
of a mechanic shop

we both laugh
don't get a flat
drive on
no GPS
would you like
summer strawberries
with that?

Spearmint

I met a boy on the bus
who told me the sky in his country
tasted like spearmint.

“You know how milk chocolate
muddies your mouth?” he said.

“That’s clear skies here.

I love them, but it’s nothing
compared to Vietnam.”

I could not think

of how to respond to that love letter
so I said:

“That’s a very beautiful way of putting it.”

And he replied:

“It’s a very beautiful place.”

An hour later, I left him and the bus
and sat amidst snowfall
in the empty Concord station.

A lonely bus pulled up and departed,
no one getting on, as I waited,
the hum of the vending machines
and swish swish plop of a man mopping
the only sounds other than my own thoughts.

He didn’t leave my head,
this stranger who spoke
of the taste of air,
even though I’d put in headphones
and ignored him
as many of us do
when a man won’t stop watching
and asking questions.

I hadn't taken his offered Snickers bar
or the outstretched pack of gum
about ten minutes later.

In a novel I would have gotten his phone number
or the bus would have stranded us
in a tiny snowed-in town
to forage our way
through a Hallmark plot.

Instead, I mumbled a "nice meeting you,"
and got off the bus.

I do not remember the school he said he attended,
nor do I remember his name,
but I will never forget
poetry
in the mouth of a boy
who spoke it unknowingly

or that the sky in Vietnam
tastes like spearmint.

Dissolution

Do you remember those days
in the orchestra storage room,
post chem-lab
and pre anxiety-meds?

I don't think I do,
but where else would I get
the image of a cello
from the vantage point of the floor,
eyes skimming over us
to tuck the instrument away
in a perfectly sized closet?
Where else would the lights
wash out pale skin
and purple hair,
windowless sterility
with the AC chilling?

A thread in my brain—
I pull, and I get
 green yarn
like an ocean from a distance
not quite teal
 and not quite kelly
 and not quite forest,
an undulating ball of fibers
dissolving—no, fraying
 no, *falling apart*
leaving fuzz on the floor,
residue of our having been there.

Did we even talk?
I can't remember
what we said,
 "grand presentation"
echoing around an image
of off-white tiles and gray closets,
candy-pink frosting and
mud-brown chocolate cake
reflecting off your face
 because "Cupcake Wars"
filled our study hall period
as often as tears did.

I used to wonder if there were constellations
in the floor's blue-black freckles
because space is cold
and it's hard to breathe
and that's what my body remembers
from 7th block junior year.

 That, and your shoulder and thigh
warm against my side,
each of us clinging
like the other was a tether
through the breathless vacuum of empty.

At Full Brightness

*After All the Bright Places
For Rachel Richmond*

Sea Glass,
I wrote you a poem
once, something
about a rainbow
and the color of your hair

I painted me purple
and you
all the colors in one
 glowing
in your Church of Punk Rock:
the story you published
in the school magazine
heavy as your eyeliner
and brighter than even hope

how hard it is
to have hope
when you could just turn on wing,
fly dive bomb paths to find
Blue water waiting
with fathomless depths
sink into the ink
of feathers and talons
(*Finch*)
wash ashore
with rounded edges—

pluck the Ultraviolet
from your vocabulary
and let it instead
emerge as *lovely*.

you once told me
we were like a platonic
Finch and Violet
each trying to save the other
from meeting atop a bell tower
on the wrong side of the railing

and sometimes I wonder
what we could have seen
if I had been brave enough
to Wander with you.

Frozen Yogurt

How did we start writing
about pistachio frozen yogurt,
first dates,
and taking risks
typing until midnight
swapping lines of dialogue
and text colors on the Google doc.

A perfectionist with a ponytail
and a gentle flirt using humor
to cover the sadness
meet in the park
amidst a shoplifting scandal.

*Watch the fireworks with me,
break your perfect plans
and just be
here on this blanket
at your family potluck
on the Fourth of July*

Fumbling fingers learned
how to write a first kiss
in the dark, maroon and blue
letters on the screen
laughing in all caps and keysmashes
at the awkwardness in question marks
after each and every line.

The Poet

Did anyone ever tell you
that you write poems like
they make your lungs work?

Your heart beats with words,
pen to page to let them out
like little fires expelled
from your bloodstream.

I wonder if the air tastes
like similes on your tongue,
every e x h a l e breathing
line breaks
back into a world
so full of heartaches
that it takes all your pain
and holds it close,
folding up to fit inside.

You carry generations of hurt
in the twists of your organs,
but all you say is
“There will be a poem for this, too.”

Dear Blu del Barrio

Confession:

I don't really know
who you are.

You're an actor—

I know that's your job
and your verified checkmark—
but I don't even know you
as a professional.

All I know

is you play Adira
on Star Trek Discovery.

Don't know your filmography
or anything else you've done.

Read your wikipedia page once
I think.

Confession:

I don't really know
much about Star Trek.

I mean

I've seen scattered episodes
from each series,

but I can't say I really
watch Star Trek.

My dad does though.

Confession:

I have seen every clip
of Adira's screen time,
tucking it away
on YouTube in incognito tabs.

I have watched you
look into a camera
and make a correction;
I replay the words "*They're* fast"
over and over in my head.

They, not she.

I know exactly how long it takes
for the father figure in the scene
to give his response.

I know "okay"
like I don't yet know
the inflections in my name.

Confession:

I know I have written this
in the form of a confession letter,
but really, it's a thank-you note.

Dear Blu del Barrio:
Thank You.

Maybe now, I can tell my dad
and he might
understand
just a bit better.

Buttons on the Right

Love
is a button-down shirt
and a friend who urges you
to get the flamingo print
from the men's department.

Love
is a borrowed jacket
over smooth purple satin
ruffles tucked out of sight
under a waistband.

Love
is pink hands in your hair
and journal entries at 3am
before cold water washes out the dye
while you stand sleepy and shivering.

Love
is a chest binder
and hands smoothing down
a flat front
two wild and unrestrained smiles
looking in the mirror
euphoric.

October 1st, 2021

The new couch does not shriek with every shift
like the old pleather thing in my last dorm,
but it's still not luxury accommodations.
The cushions sit clean only because I vacuumed
popcorn from between them
early before class
to hold up some sort of lasting impression
that you wouldn't be sleeping
in the stale leftovers of late nights with my roommates.

The air smelled like rain
and the streets shined with saturation,
but you showed up in only a light jacket.
Despite the downpour,
you insisted we venture out,
discover a drink before we drowned in the storm.

Slosh to the shelter
of a darkened barroom
and the roar of rain on the roof
melted into the chords of live music
and radio alike, voices rising,
an intelligible jumble,
cacophony, clinking glasses, calling
to shout delight and drink orders.

You know I don't really drink,
yet still you took a bus
and half a day off work
and a whole weekend
to waterlog your shoes,
soak your sweatshirt,
and sleep on the couch
just so you could accompany me
to places I never would have gone
had I turned twenty-one
without my brother present.

Comfort (or “AJ”)

The night before leaving
I watched you look out the window
and sing soft Hebrew
to the pouring rain.

The world was panicking home,
sickness stealing all our anxieties,
pandemic eating our certainties
as we sat with spring peepers and petrichor.

Your string lights bathed us in purple
and your wet hair clung flat to your head;
I'd never seen you seem so small, so still,
brightly colored short curls subdued with you.

Sometimes I think if we'd stayed there,
glowing purple and singing,
time would have stopped
the rain would have kept falling forever
and the world would have stayed the same.

The Ballerina

Stood in a Seattle square
amidst all the tourists
and the buskers playing pennies
into their cases
one pop tune at a time,
the ballerina stands
with practiced poise.

She has muscles where the media says
curves should be,
a love in her eyes for her
first position,
and ink on her skin
to hold that love permanently.
Sketched skirts whirl in line art
along her shoulder blades,
musical toes tapping at bone;
a black butterfly rests
lighter than her leaps
above her heart, peeking
out the neckline of her costume.

Her eyes trace the square
with the familiarity of an old friend,
and her shoes are dirt-stained
and frayed,
pink long-faded
from time and tear and wear.

But when two little girls approach,
tiny mouths open in awe,
she pauses on her toes
and presses golden star stickers
to rosy round cheeks.

Then she lifts her arms
and continues to dance.

Postcards

Cardboard,
trees made
old wood in the mail,
experiences living in paper
1,000 footsteps held in memory,
a strange magical letter
frozen in time
from you to me.

Fancy dresses and the coast,
a horse, a place,
a racetrack and the west;
I'm a time traveler
of written history,
box full of antique thinking
looking for a glimpse
of our early endeavors
in hope shaped like mountains,
and you saying,
"frozen yogurt
will never be
the same."

Dear Sam,
I hope you held these postcards
like I did, saying

wish you were here.

On Every Street Corner

...As a poet
I must seem a little in love
with everyone.

I must seem vapid and lovelorn,
star-crossed sentences
falling from my lips.

Blind, in rose-colored glasses
looking for love
to fit into my words.

In truth, as a writer,
I cannot look past
how the world is peopled with poems,
the veins of the Earth
bursting with verses,
sonnets dropped with loose change
at the grocery store.

The vending machines spit out slant
rhymes falling into hands
like caffeine on a late night,
reaching for motivation to keep moving,
following the glow of purple
string lights leading the way
through the pouring rain
to a boy on a bus
who speaks of the taste of his home,
and a dancer
who balances hope
on the tips of her toes.

Give me a gold star sticker
of that yellow bird
flying above the hurts of the world,
tracking the Shenandoah below,
watching beating hearts
breathing and bleeding
on every street corner.

We are the sailboats
on Lake Champlain,
sliding through waves
to find our way,
anaphora in every mistake,
anaphora in every hand held and
hope poured into hot chocolate on bad days
and frozen yogurt on good ones,
yarn trailing tears to the tissue box
tangling your heart in crochet hugs,
anaphora in every stitch
patching limbs and mending bones.

...And if some call that the effect
of rose-colored glasses
and see lies where I find love,
I'll tell them come,
try on my heart,
borrow my hope—

why don't you stay a while?

Acknowledgements

First I feel I must thank my family for never telling me to put down the pen. Mom and Dad, you're the reason I've grown up with overflowing bookshelves and as many notebooks as I can fill. Thank you for giving me the pages to chase my words.

To Jonny: thanks for coming to visit even when I didn't think it was important.

To Ally: Sorry your poem didn't get finished in time for this project. It'll get there...eventually!

This project would not have been possible without the support and feedback of the many teachers and instructors I've had over the years. There are too many to list here, but I want to give a shoutout to Jim Ellefson in particular. Before your classes I did not think I was allowed to be a poet. Thank you for proving me wrong.

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To Charlie: Thank you for being there through years of me having too many words and running out of words. I hope you didn't have to hear too much of my talking to my work through the wall!

To Samantha: I can't ever think of writing without slightly associating it with you. Thank you for those early days of writing stories on iPod Touches through emails. May we one day return to August and Tuesday.

To Aylie: Thanks for being my cover model! It's no mistake that you appear all over this project. You're one of the most important threads of friendship in my life—it was only right that you feature front and (slightly off) center.



photo courtesy of Grace Allard

Z. Unger Bell has only ever lived in states that start with the letter V. They've been writing poetry ever since they got bored during a rainstorm in a 7th grade math class and accidentally wrote a lengthy poem about frogs.

When they're not writing or musing upon amphibious friends, they can be found playing music (ukulele, euphonium, or piano), knitting while listening to podcasts, or wandering aimlessly around libraries.

The World is Peopled with Poetry is their first full chapbook, but there are plenty of ideas just waiting in the wings to be polished for the future.