Song and Dance

Poems

2024

John Cole

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Biography

John Cole is a Canadian-born composer and poet now living in Hiroshima, Japan. He studied music in Canada at the University of Victoria (B.Mus) and Simon Fraser University (MFA), and in Hiroshima, Japan, at Elizabeth University of Music (D.Mus), where he wrote his dissertation on the music of Jo Kondo.

Over the years, he has taught courses in composition, music history, theory, analysis, and sound art at institutions in Canada, Japan, and China.

When COVID closed down concert venues, John turned his attention to poetry and found it a medium that suited him. His poems reflect his background in music, often shaped by careful attention to form, structure, and rhythm.

His poems have appeared in *The Lake*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Eskimo Pie*, *Flora Fiction, Hart House Review* and *Straylight Literary Magazine*.

He lives in Hiroshima with his wife and two sons and travels periodically to China.

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DISTANCE

Here
on the first day of spring
meeting maskless at the crack of dawn
on this enormous campus lawn
nestled in the morning mist
we are two dots
in the lower left corner
of a Zen landscape painting.

We're an odd pair.
Frog and Toad.
Me in my crumpled excuse for a suit,
you in your crisp cap and navy-blue uniform
garden tools dangling from your belt
tinkling.

What different lives we lead.
Me, lugging papers in this leather bag.
You, clenching a rag
in that hand
that will never mark a paper with a red pen
or tie a Windsor knot.

And yet, despite our distance
I imagine us lying in our hospital beds
across from each other raising our wineglasses.
"To our gardens" you say
with that elfin gleam in your eye.
The one man with whom
I would love to share
my final drink.

MY FEARS OF FLYING

After forty years of flying
the toilet flush still terrifies me.
It's not just the volume.
The hypersonic whoosh is a premonition:
the sound our soft bodies will make
as we are sucked
through the gaping hole in the fuselage
into the subzero brain-numbing cold,
shooting past the cheery flight attendant,
who just passed us our little pillows
and packets of mixed nuts,
who is now screaming, as her bloodied fingers
start to lose their grip on the rent steel edge
of the emergency exit door frame,
her navy-blue stockinged legs
flapping in the wind
like a pair of carnival flags in a typhoon.

When I gaze down at those endless rows
of snow-tipped mountains popping their peaks
through the cotton candy tufts of cloud,
I'm the heroine
of a Shirley Jackson story
soon to be jogged out of her reverie
by the cup and saucer tinkling
of Satan's foreplay,
powerless in this pressurized death tank
to do anything but accept my fate,
close my eyes and wait
for the soft electronic bell ping of doom.

No, we are not 'experiencing a little turbulence'.
We are experiencing the ghastly prelude
to our grisly death,
and I am the only witness
to the cause of our imminent crash,
the one passenger bold enough
to break the rules and slide my plastic sunshield up an inch
to catch a glimpse of the twist, snap and fall

of the left-wing engine.

My seatmate is giggling at Paddington 2
as I stare like a zombie
at the plane icon's fitful jerks toward our destination,
trying to wrap my head round the logistics
of our disembarkation
onto the six flimsy inflatable rafts
in the middle of the Pacific
on a dark and stormy winter night.

Is flying 35,000 feet above the ground
five hundred miles away from the nearest runway
in this impeccably calibrated precision-built aerodynamic marvel, utterly reliant on the flawless functioning
of 10,000 mechanical miracles
really safer than driving?
And what of the less likely
but perfectly plausible list of what ifs?
A flock of seagulls sucked into the engines.
A lazy radar reader's fleeting lapse of judgment.
A loosened rogue bolt jamming the landing gear's fear.
Solar flares, supernova gamma rays, UFOs,
innumerable, ornery acts of God.

EPITAPH

Will you please read them now?

GRANDAD

I remember his pipe,
how he packed it, lit it, puffed it
and snuffed the flame of the match
with a flourish of his wrist,
the smell of Cavendish
on his breath.
I remember mending model airplane wings
and following his fingertips
round and round
as he wound
those tiny silver springs.
I remember his arm, so delicate and thin
as it stretched
to the top of the tree
to set the silver star.

BURIAL

Thirty-six swipes
to turn off the alerts.
Thirteen minutes to delete the apps.
Forty-seven spade stabs
to dig the hole.
Twenty-three hefts and stomps
to pack and tamp the soil.
Five hours of battery life.
Three hundred and twenty-three
unanswered calls.

VISUAL PLEASURES

I remember her long lustrous hair,
how she flicked it to the left
over the nape of her neck
smoothing in the stray strands
with a deft twist of her wrist
to emphasize a point.
And the contour of her delicate
perfectly proportioned nose,
her chin, her cheekbones,
her lips.
Oh, her tidy lips, lightly painted
prepped and primed for their well-rehearsed
openings and closings!
I scanned her neck, the soft slant of her shoulders
the rise and fall of her breath
and marveled at how confidently she held her spine
in perfect alignment.
How could any of us in that room not be entranced
by those finely executed gestures –
the raise of her right eyebrow
the graceful sway of her elbows,
the impeccably timed nimble unison closing
of her thumbs and fingers
asserting restraint, control, authority.
Even her shoes and the tasteful leggings
cuddling her calves
joined the chorus of her body crying
'Look at me'
as she lectured to us
on the scourge and torment
of the male gaze.

THE SPIDER
After Elisabeth Bishop's "The Fish"

I caught a glimpse of her
hanging from a single strand of silk,
the tiny head tilted, revealing
her eyes like a cluster of blackberry seeds.
Two bristly pedipalps
jutting out from the base of her head
twitched in short frantic bursts
as if registering danger.
She dropped to the window ledge and froze,
then moved ahead, furtively, in fits and starts,
alert to the faintest vibrations of air and light.
I prodded her with my breath
and marveled at the finical movements
of the eight hairline limbs
each acting independently
cautiously probing every ridge and furrow
of the surface of the wood.
She lured me along a mooring thread
to one of her webs,
flimsy, diaphanous, but 'stronger than steel'
I remembered being told as a child,
confused, when the sticky strands of silk
were wiped from my face.
From the edge of the spiral
she worked her way to the hub
tugging the threads at the junctions
purposefully, in measured movements,
with one of her claw feet,
testing tension,
tightening the knots,
or was she repairing them?
I was impressed by her poise
swaying on her tightropes of silk,
flexing the miniscule muscles
of her boneless limbs.
What peculiar inborn talents,
from navigating her first flight as a spiderling
and spinning this impossibly intricate web

to leaving her lineage encased
in this delicate silk egg bed.
Three sharp jerks from the upper corner
of her web jogged me out of my reverie
to the drama of her tasty Houdini
wrenching his silk straitjacket
in frenzied hopeless thrusts,
while she primed her fangs,
indifferent to his torment
waiting for him to tire
before injecting her terrible poison.
Nudging my cleaning pail closer
for my yearly ritual of expulsion,
I prepared to wipe out in a single stroke
this wondrous barbarous spectacle.
As I raised my rag I remembered drawing her,
awkwardly, on orange poster paper
with a paperless crayon stub on a wobbly desk at school,
dancing with her friends the witches,
black cats and bats. I stared and stared
and reverence filled up
the dusty crawl space,
from the framework threads
to the radials, the coiling viscus threads
quickening to the hub – until everything
was spiraling, spiraling, spiraling!
And I let the spider go.

THIS IS NOT AN ARABESQUE

Not a song to someone.
Not a gift, a gargoyle or a gallant romp
in regal finery through Flanders Fields.
Not that single malt to be sipped and savored.
Nor a tonic, a tease, or my raison d'être.
Nor a bet
with the Devil, a bone for the dog, a prayer
for peace, or my Für Elise.
Not something to send in a bottle in the vain hope
that over the space of its journey through the ocean of oblivion
it might just manage to catch the eye
of the girl with the flaxen hair
who will roll it out under the soft light of her desk lamp
to savor this hymn to hush the night.
No.
It's just a poem.

LOVE LETTER TO MY YOUTH

To the sandbox by the curly slide
Pogo, Pooh and Madeline
To deviled eggs and Ovaltine
To life before the cash machine
To late-night swings and all the things
I wasn't meant to see
To weepy Hummel figurines
Christmas tarts and tangerines
And the tang of snowflakes on our tongues
To the thrill of opening the chocolate Santa calendar flaps
And the hush of our snowshoes soft swish
In the brittle air
To lava lamps and Lego blocks
Gerbil tubes and German clocks with twirling maids a-milkin'
To mini golf and science kits, 8-track tapes and K-tell hits
And the boats and planes you built for us
That sank and fell to the sea
To the rise and fall of my shark in the pool
And the three words of French I remembered from school
To the Jehovah's Witnesses who passed on their pamphlets
Adorned with cheery children
Petting lions and bears in the Garden of Eden
To the girl from Sweden
Who flicked her flaxen hair for me
To Ironside and MTV
Marshall stacks and IMAX screens
Joints and bongs and bell bottom jeans
To rolling the top of the tin of the spam
To waterbeds, Slinkys, Green Eggs and Ham
To the Grateful Dead and that Playboy spread
That I passed on to Bobby
… or Bill.

KNOTT'S IN MY BONES

Bill Knott's in my bones
barreling left and right
and in between.
He's my marrow's mourning caffeine
this man, who has taken a knife
to my brain and split it
to inhibit
redundancy.

'Listen to me' he says,
sweetening the apples of my eyes
to cry tart tears that drop
like soft pins
onto my fair lady's lips.

'Follow me' he says
with a wink and a slip of his tongue
knock-knocking on the doors
of my bare bone walls.

Bill Knott's slipped
though the seams of my soul
to ferret out my fears
who cower in the corners of my soft bits
cuddling their lackluster poems.

VIEW-MASTER

The light.
The quality of that light
streaming through the canopy of fern
falling on the pudgy faces of garden gnomes
frolicking in fields of foxglove
who peek out of bushes to dip their rods
into the calm of the blue-green stream.
That halcyon light gilding canyons, caves and stalagmites,
fabled forests, waterfalls. The Seven Wonders of the World.
The Birth of our Savior. Garden of the Gods.
Sanctuary of our Sorrowful Mother.
We'd hold the disks in front of our lamps
to sort our favorite scenes of eye-popping 3D delight
neatly nested and doubled in fourteen fingernail squares
of thermoplastic celluloid.
Now, half a century later, looking through the eye holes
of my candy red vintage View-Master
I'm still enchanted, reliving
the great anticipation, the thrill of the turn and click,
savoring the spring-kick of the reel knob
against my middle finger as I advance
to the next miracle.
I remember late nights lying in our bunk beds
imagining we were watchstanders
manning our periscopes,
the lazy afternoons lounging on bean chairs
filing our disks into their sleeves and slots,
and even that early morning we rushed to your bed
to show you what Santa had brought us.
But it is the memory of that light that haunts me still.
That soft, soundless, tranquil,
Light.

JONI MITCHELL c. 1950



She's leaning on a post,
left foot planted on the porch,
right foot resting tilted on her toe,
cowboy hat and holster
bolstering her grit.
Her upper lip's
bent in a sly smile,
left arm akimbo wrist bent on hip,
right hand holding her gun.
She's challenging her future to a duel.
She's staring down the sun.
This cowgirl's saloon doors have swung.
Mess with her my friend—
You're done.

THE WOODPECKER

A
Bird
Can
Delight
Even
Forest
Ghosts
Howling
In
Jest
Knock-knocking
Lightly
Meandering
Nesting
On
Parched
Quills
Ransacking
Solemnly
Tap-tap-tapping
Under
Vast
Woodlands
Xerothermic
Yodeler
Zigzagger

ENOUGH
(In memory of Denise Levertov)

Today
I'll ferret it out
from the five fragile beads of rainwater
clinging to the branches
of the persimmon tree.
I'll attend to the clipped, jagged caws
of the crows
and the starling's chirps
as they pass over my head.

The soft play of early evening light
on leaf, rock, and distant cloud
will not be lost on me, today.
But my lines fall flat.
I'm left wondering how it is
you can turn five drops of rainwater on a twig
into poetry.

Returning home
defeated
I understand.

To desire
is enough.

LEAVES

A few of the young leaves lounge
in their fruit beds oblivious
to the lunge of the yellowjackets,
and the wind's morning roll call to wake.
The early risers are rustling off to work
brushing against each other
along the thin lanes of the branches,
which rise and fall as they squeeze into trains.
Some, not yet used to the precarious
commute, stop to regain their balance
on the sturdier sprigs, then carry on
in fits and starts.
The wind is running late today
rushing from tree to tree announcing
the onset of the great games
soon to follow, that riotous event that will
pit the poor leaves against each other,
rocking their boughs as they jump
to cheer on their teams.
The earth and the wind wink and wait
knowing they are the winners
of this wicked yearly ritual, the only two
left to dance round the naked trees
until the earth is tired and calls
for the glass of warm milk, the goodnight kiss.
Calls to the wind to tuck her in
under her blanket of dead leaves.

KOSAME
(light rain)

Today I told them to write
about anything for ten minutes
without stopping
just to hear
the pitter patter of their pens.

PITY THE POOR POST-MODERN POEM

who waits in the dark
for a finger to find him, crammed
in the back of a book in a box.
Silly poem!
He makes more sense read upside down
or top to bottom, right to left.
Bereft of poetic charm and grace
the bookstores can't allot the space
to stock him.
Even the anthologies
are offering their apologies
to the poor post-modern poem.
They can't accept his lexicon,
his polysemic infobahn.
He's the message in a bottle in a code
they cannot crack,
a gaggle of geese flying north in the fall,
an ontological free for all.
Oh, pity the poor post-modern poem,
crammed in the back of that book in a box,
so lonely dark and grim,
waiting for a finger to find him.

CUBORO

We dumped the blocks and grouped them into bowls
the tunnels, the turns, the falls to the left and right,
then lined them up to link and lock the holes
in place and at just the right height
for a three-tiered course. If I dropped the red ones
and you dropped the blue, we could cheer on our teams
as they raced through the labyrinth, trace the runs
of our marbles as they rocked in their troughs
and ricocheted off the tunnel walls. One
oddball, thumbing his nose at the race
took his time to wobble through the run,
savoring the pull of gravity, the sun on his face
oblivious to the frantic calls of the clocks.
What's the prize after all? – a soft clunk in a wooden box.

WHAT MY BOYS SHOW ME

Dancing dachshunds
Flying squirrels
Justin Bieber's teenage girls
Holding their hands to their mouths
Insects flirting
The click of a gun
The fall of snow on a sidewalk
Someone sleeping with snakes and mice
A happy Russian family eating breakfast with a bear
Children tearing tongues from ice
Planes crashing
Tsunamis smashing tourists in Thailand
People piling things until they fall
Penguins falling off a wall
Rugged Red Bull bikers barreling over cliffs
Lunatics diving into parking lots
A boy flipping bottles and books onto shelves
A leopard licking lollipops
A Rottweiler cuddling a cat
Bar graphs of billionaire youtuber boys
The largest leech, the slowest snake
Jamie Oliver baking a cake
Supernovas, white dwarfs
Someone explaining gluons and quarks
Glaciers calving, gamers swearing
People doing stupid things
In endless streams of TikTok memes
Boys in jail
Men in limbo breaching bail
Michael Jackson on MTV
Things they know will anger me

TADPOLES

Approach them gently
for they can sense your presence
and hear your silent movements
through their skin.
Sneak the tin below them.
Don't rush.
Your sister will teach you the trick –
how to pull the net through
the rice stalks
without breaking the surface
or stirring the silt.
If you are lucky you can coax one
into the hollow of your cupped hands
and feel it brush against your palm.

SONG AND DANCE
(for John Cooper Clarke)

Ring a bubble
Tickle a spoon
Sing a sestina to the owly moon
Rub a springline an' blow 'er a kiss
Forage the field for the phrase that you missed
Ruffle the tinfoil tacked to that tree
Hum absolute zero on the count of three
Glue a howling wolf howl to a Chopin ballade
Whistle winter
Bow a fish
Clap the Star-Spangled Banner till the neighbors go mad
Transpose the wind to a key Bob can play
With that killer horn player from Monterey
Strike a blanket
Drag a drum
Tap some tinsel with your thumb
Pluck a spider's mooring thread,
Then whistle a dirge to the newlywed
Record the bomb blast's murmur,
The ashtray's sigh,
The fall of a flower on broken glass,
The notes Bach forgot in the B minor Mass

WAVING HER SNOW ANGEL WINGS

And here's January
at the bottom of the hill
all bundled up in beginnings
waving her snow angel wings.

This must be February
snuggling into March.
I love the way their little hands curl
round the secrets of their dreams.

April fooled us on her first day,
flipped herself over
and winked she was May
just beyond the photo's edge.

Is that June or July
dipping a toe in the lake
waving to the dot of August
on the distant pier.

I managed to catch a sliver
of the edge of September
running after the bell rings in circles
like a listless circus lion.

October changing color.
Odd how the tang of fall lingers
on the tip of the tongue
when we turn it inside out.

November on his first day of school
in his pungent suit of apprehension
toes curled tight in the tips of his new shoes.
Waft of autumn dread.

Oh, look at December
at the top of the hill on his sled
all bundled up in endings
waiting for his sister's signal –
waving her snow angel wings.

WATCHING THEM WANDER

Today I'll write
for the pleasure of gazing
at the jagged shoreline
of my words
zigzag wanderings.
Just today I'll silence the censor
and let them race through my stanzas
pulling their flimsy kites
of meaning.
Some will saunter round my commas.
Some will soften my full stops.
One might call a colon to task
or pull from her pocket
a Dickinsonian dash.
Today I'll let my lovely adjectives
rouge their cheeks
and spot their breasts with L'Eau Sézane
to snag my stolid nouns.

SOMETHING

Something in the way you break my eggs
and lock your little jam jars.
You burn and scrape my toast like no other lover.
Something in the way you run your fingers
down the length of my tie.
Something in the hiss of your iron,
the snap of fresh sheets,
the borax bite,
the choo-choo scrub of the ring in the tub.
Something in the way you wear your garden gloves
and the tinkle of the trowels that hang from your hips,
and the way you purse your lips
when you spray the daffodils.
No woman can gargle like you
or sniff and clear their throat with such panache.
Something in the way you move
the rugs
and rub the corner of your eye
before you go to sleep.

THE BANYAN TREE

How many children
have climbed these limbs
that will long outlive them,
to run their hands
down your tangled strands
of hair? Will they remember
the sweet musty smell
of the lichen
lodged in your hollows,
the chittering of the dusky warblers
nestling in your niches,
the echo of their grandmother's
call to cling harder?
Or maybe something they see
in the distance
will surface in their last dream –
a flicker of sunlight on a sail,
a puff of smoke
from an absent-minded train.

THANK YOU

In the time it takes
to touch the tip of your tongue
to your teeth to say it –
the birth of a billion stars.

ON BODILY LOVE IN TIME
(after the marvelous, inimitable Andrew Marvell)

When evening Dew does Temper Time's delay,
And Curtains veil the wane of public Light,
The course of Labor's rambling Toil by day
Is left for brief respite in play by Night.
As two combine in Lace of Cupids Net,
And bodily Flow'rs are basked in fragrant Sweat,

Betwixt the flight and flag of sweet Embrace,
With limb to limb enlaced in bod'ly Pleasure,
Time's Pace seems changed and hides the Trace
Of its passage in Fire and earthly wanton Leisure.
How odd that flight of fancy free, and yet,
Within lost Time the sense of self forget.

To April's spring in Kairos they delight,
Released from Aion's ageless wax and wane,
And yore and fate of Chronos' sequent Flight;
As both released from movement do obtain
The endless pull of Time they chance rely on,
That sets the Stage upon which they will die on.

Does not that little death that women feign
Drive men to cast time's Kernel in their Seed,
In which new Life through comingling contain,
Allowing Time to once again proceed,
Tempering the sense of his demise,
The gaze upon her marvelous milky Thighs.