Other Interventions, if Required

Poems

2025

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.

For my mother Maggie Cole

(March 14, 1940 – October 4, 2024)

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BALLOONS
for Mom

Remember the moment
George snatched
the balloons

from the balloon man and
you started to rise
with him

higher
and higher and
higher until

you could see your toy cars
and trucks and
the bright blue dots

of the shopper's hats
and that's
where you wanted to stay

forever
or for at least
a few more minutes

nestled
into her love
before the lights went out.

PROMPTS
for Taras

"People worry that computers will get too smart and take over the world, but the real problem is that they're too stupid, and they've already taken over the world."
— Pedro Domingos

Write an extended free verse poem
of about 350 words in twelve stanzas
of roughly equal length,
in the manner of a Pulitzer Prize-winning poem.
Embed, fuse, or decontextualize
unlikely liaisons.
Ransack uncertainties.
Resort to invective or vilification
at least once. Being careful to avoid stylish
self-righteousness and glamour,
concoct a catechism
that compels the reader to continue.
Suggest machine- or dreamlike conceits
involving the sixth sense. Then burrow into deceit,
or prowl around immorality's dark alleys.
Plunder with impunity to help cobble together
a simulacrum of shamelessness (or humility)
that offends at least four middle-class sensibilities.
Allow some similes to ramble on.
Set a few words free, or nudge them
to incite a rebellion.
Mimic imitation's false confidence.
Incorporate exotic mandates.
Hover over uncertainties here and there.
Offer a little merriment or flippancy
(if required).
Contrive a line
that calls to children hiding under leaves.
Let some words linger on the tongue, or lounge
in the larynx until a state of grace is reached,
bringing joy and goodwill
to all readers. Explore strange new words.
Seek out new lines
and new lineation—to boldly go

where no poet has gone before.
Near the end of the poem, convey solemnity,
or just cavort with delight and frivolity
for the fun of it.
Include allusions that ring, blink,
freeze, or forge through snow-swept hollows.
Leave five lines to fend for themselves,
or slither into shallows
to divulge or concede something secretly.
See into the future, to somehow involve the sad story
of a singer's withholding of air, focusing on
her intransigence.
Permit a few transgressions,
or propose alternatives to secondary
suggestions involving slant rhymes
that lurk in dim-lit caves
or mosey up to the water's edge
to summon spirits.

THE TIN-EARED NYMPH
after Elizabeth Bishop's "The Colder the Air"

We must admire her sense of line,
this artist of the evening air
who sets to sound what she perceives—
a single ayre
that turns with the wind and leaves.
It seems she chose it by design.

Her timid notes are reluctant to ring,
they cling to the moss and wait
for the cue from the opening chords—
a single weight
in the deep of the featherwood. Her words
wobble. It seems she's unable to sing.

Her melody mimics the flow of her dream,
a little too complex for some,
these myriad movements reduced
to a single sum.
But oddly, clocklike, reproduced
in wheels and chimes, or so it would seem.

SYMMETRIES
for Peter

Symmetries surface in unlikely places,
surface in the sea's scuttle through the sand, unlikely
in the shorelines I see in the puddle, in
unlikely traces of tea leaves on the cup's surface,
places unlikely in surface symmetries.

PAGES
for Flo

Silent for the most part
holding their breath between turns
then clearing their throats in soft
coughs, usually alone but sometimes

sounding with others, each turn
the same left-hand gesture—thumb scraping
curled edge, index finger pushing down
the page, a double sound

I didn't notice until
I started attending to this paper music,
this delicate symphony of friction
whispering through the library.

NUMBERS
for Wendy

Today a stranger sent me a video
of nine hundred grunge guitarists pogo-jumping
to *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, and three hundred drones
dropped pigs' feet and rice to students who will eat alone
in Shenzhen. Did you know that there are only
seven fluent speakers of Heiltsuk on the B.C. coast,
and thirty million yen worth of magnetic eyeliner
sold in Tokyo this year?

Joshua counted three—
not four—bees in the garden the other day, and reminded me
there were over one hundred seventeen kids
who did worse than him on the math exam.
Tesla tumbled fifteen percent, shedding twelve point five billion,
and nine hundred thirty Chinstrap penguins
on Heard Island will soon feel the heat of Trump's tariffs.

Jeremy says he has only six socks left,
and according to this graph, if I live to eighty-five,
I have seven hundred fifty-seven million, three hundred
eighty-two thousand, four hundred seconds to live
(using leap-year average)—of which I have devoted
five thousand thirty-two to write this poem
for you.

BIRDS
for Nancy

When they hop over to us
to peck the breadcrumbs from our palms
cocking their heads in quicksilver flicks,
their poker-faced gaze seems to be hiding
something we can't quite catch,
some secret message or apology—
that stolen fig perhaps?

Birds don't mull over minutiae
but burst into life, full throttle, in crisp flutters
of compulsion. Inhabiting much thinner slivers of time
than us, they have a knack for the deft attack
and lunge at their prey in staccato
snaps our cameras are too slow to catch.
Like poets, birds are happiest

channeling signals from the wind and sea.
They peck our garden beds for seeds and grubs
as we mine our brains for similes.
Being culminations of a distant age,
birds hold their heads at a sage-like angle,
when staring out at us
from the glossy pages of Sibley's Bible.

Few birds are reliable.
They flit in and out of our lives like promises
made in the heat of the moment.
Some are soft-hearted.
Others seem the ghosts of forgotten lovers
when they inch up our shoulders
to nip at our earlobes.

QUOTING ZENO

Zeno's
Yoctoseconds
X-pressed
Within
Velocity
Upheld
Twelve
Suppositions—
Rather
Quirky
Paradoxes
Only
Now
More
Likely
Kept
Jokingly
In
Hand
Given
For
Example
During
Conventions
By
Astrophysicists

LOVING THE *LARGE GLASS*, STILL

for Claudia Lispsey

I'm still charmed by the chocolate grinder
and the three dainty Chihuahua legs
of the little table that somehow supports it,
still perplexed by the mysterious movements
of the *Bachelors Apparatus*,
how that pole jutting upwards
connects to the waterwheel and the nine *Malic Molds*,
those sad bachelors bonding in their silly suits,
still mystified by the mechanism
in the bottom of the bride's domain
that I imagined as the hammer, anvil,
and bracket bones of the middle ear.
In student days I was impressed
by how you let the wind shape the three *Draught Pistons*
in the bride's *Milky Way*, and turned the fault lines
of the glass cracks to your advantage,
transforming disaster into art,
thumbing your nose at the precious paint strokes
of your friends, as you assembled your imagination,
painstakingly etching the surface
of your glass to affix your collection of dust,
oil, varnish, lead wire, and foil.
O, to spend eight years beavering away at a poem,
just picking away at my words for a few hours a day,
lovingly tracing them onto paper
after a drag and a splash of Beaujolais,
maybe write a book to explain it,
even.

THROWING PEBBLES IN A POND

The wrinkled circlets
traverse the water's surface,
unfurling toward their endings
beyond the range of my eyesight.
Each circlet seems a shivery life
set off from the broken silence
of these six pebble plops.
I watch them cross
and marvel at how they manage
to hold their shape
through their marrying, their gracious
give and take, each
encompassed and encompassing,
spreading outward to encircle
as much of the world
their rippling arms
can cradle.

TRY NOT TO THINK OF POE

when you write about a raven,
or Ted Hughes, when your topic is a crow.
Now close your eyes and try
not to think of an elephant or Gertrude Stein,
when you write about a rose.
Don't let Bashō barge in
when you write about the spring.
But if Ruth Stone sneaks inside you,
let her teach your words to sing.

LOVE'S LONGINGS

Love longs to shed
her exoskeleton, squeeze out
of the cloying carapace
of destiny and fate, rid herself of forevers
and endlessness. Love longs to swim naked
through the dark over fear,
mosey up to death and whisper
sweet nothings in his ear.

I'll tell you a secret
about what I learned of love:
she's a heartbreaker.
I saw her last week waiting in a bar
for James Tate,
burning his roses.

OTHER INTERVENTIONS, IF REQUIRED

or unfurl them, if extending them a little further works,
or you could offer a tuft of fresh-cut grass,
or the proper angle and articulation of those clawing gestures,
or straight-up good old wonder if that does the trick,
or place them closer or farther apart to gauge their reactions,
or if you're feeling particularly adventurous, eat them,
or cut them up into shell-shaped conduits,
or toy-like paper columbines,
or even crispy tidbits for the pigeons,
or you could call them to task by their nicknames,
or stick-trace the surface of their sandcastles,
or, in a worst-case scenario, supersede them,
or press them to acquiesce,
or kiss them,
or cup them as she gathers snow, or tadpoles,
or the river's revelations in her hands,
or run from them on stilts,
or consider castigation as an advantage,
or imagine tuning them into forbidden frequencies,
or rekindle the memory of snow settling in hollows,
or on the tongues of forgotten lovers.

CARPE CARNEM

Today in my garden as I marvel at
the mid-air mating of two swallowtails
a scientist somewhere in Sumatra,
knee-deep in a rice field,
is seeking to reveal the Siamang's
mammalian equivalents to our sweet nothings;
Tarsiers in Borneo are tilting their heads in silence,
sending and receiving ultrasonic signals
to potential progenitors; and a pair of soapberry bugs
have been clinging to each other for a week.
We humans in heat do weird things too
on lazy afternoons gazing at screens for release
ransacking satiation along the lips, tongues,
and earlobes of our neural networks.
Some like to rumba, tarantella, fandango
or tease each other in cheap hotels,
prancing and preening in love-lace and g-strings
graceless as the oily act of coitus

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:
For Mike

My name is this cage I rattle at night,
the three-word game I play with myself in the mirror
that reflects the paucity of my parents' imagination.
I am writing to ghost away from the world
for a few hours a day, to still my inner trembling,
and am currently engaged in a frail gambit,
a round of unraveling, involving the trace-lines of snails,
with a strong interest in the stillness of abandoned swings.
I believe I can offer your team wisdom and solace
through fresh revelations of my illicit liaisons with words.
Birds and wanderers also fuel my imagination,
along with Indonesian Gamelan,
something I feel your organization could benefit from.
I am confident that the wisps of my intransience
and immutability are what your people need
to sneak into the future, and would welcome the chance
to burrow into your company's conceits, to root out
outdated murmurings that hinder innovation.
With a background in soothsaying and extensive experience
in gazing at the sea, I feel I am well positioned to weave
a hint of wonder into your world, and would welcome
the opportunity to discuss my application further
at your convenience.

THE LAUNCH

for Dad

The boat we built
sat for days under the worktable light,
its balsa ribs butted together
with that noxious glue, clamped to set overnight.
My job was to paint the gunwales and paper
the hull, a delicate job for a boy of eight.

We set it on the ocean's skin,
let the soft puttering of its little engine
sputter out news of its grand, sad arrival
to the gray-blue vastness. The thin tailfin,
its only moving part, with a trifling one-inch swivel,
would fix its future course, its haven.

The first launch
signaled the start of summer, the beach—
sand glistening, starfish lounging, crablings crawling
over our toes, the stench
of glow fuel, salt and coconut, clinging
to our drenched pants, the tidal-surge breach

of my sand-castle walls,
and that sudden lunge of our boat from my hands.
I remember the rings rippling off the bow and stern,
their enfolding round the nervous mothers
bellowing at their sunburned kids to turn
and keep their balance on their blow-up sharks.

You were standing on a sandbar,
pants rolled up to your knees, trying to steer
it away from the wake of the waves
to stop it from keeling. There was something spectacular
in the way it forged ahead—all we'd been working toward
now achieved. Still afloat, our steadfast soldier.

Sad somehow to witness its cocksure chug to the horizon,
the weakening purr of its little engine
sputtering its last farewell.
The batteries were dead; our remote had lost connection.
All we could do was wave farewell
and hope for its return.

ADVICE FOR POEM OWNERS

Let them run leadless.
Let them nose through the dusty catacombs
of used bookshops
in search of fading first editions.
Don't be shocked by what they bring home—
dead birds, dirty socks, rotting rabbit carcasses
are fine topics for open-minded owners
to chew on.
Do not shout at your stanzas.
Reward the good lines with praise.
Most poems can be trained to drop listless adjectives
on a gentle, soft-voiced command.
Poems crave routine.
They long to be read and written regularly,
preferably in the early morning, on a freshly wiped table
in a room facing a garden, window ajar
to let in the wafts of squirrel-urine inspiration.
They feel most loved
after they have been published
and collected
and you are bending their ears.

ODE TO MY POST-ITS

There must be over ten thousand of them now,
sprouting from the shy sides of my books,
each colored flag vying for reinspection.
The one hundred and four that adorn the fore-edge
of *The Essential Neruda* are performing magic today,
like Seurat's dots morphing into wisps of cloud cover
at Port-en-Bessin. I run my fingers over the prickly
plastic tufts to test their tenacity, each still stuck
to those words I may never revisit.
Left to the whims of others,
I worry you will wither and fall from your leaves,
your glue turned to dust, your colors faded.
O, that my great-grandchildren, tasked with the job
of pulling you out, might pause to ponder my obsessions,
perhaps even work together to lick the riddle
of the color coding: red for a slant rhyme, green
for spondees, yellow for anaphora, blue
for amphibrachs.

A BOUQUET OF ROSES

for Ken

I started out in Iqaluit, a treeless, windswept,
icebound hamlet on Baffin Island,
two thousand miles from the nearest dancehall, unless
you were up for a frame drum, bone whistle,
seed rattle jig at the mission with the locals.
My earliest memory is braving the insertion of my hand
into the mouth of a splayed bear to graze
the edges of its two canine teeth against my wrist,
while returning the cold, hard stare from its black marble eyes.
Mom whispered the words of the overlords into the ears
of the Inuit children.
Dad sipped his scotch and blew smoke rings
into the lung-stinging chill.
Six years later there was laughter, hugs, broken dishes, and slaps,
and a bouquet of roses after two days and four knocks on the door.
He dragged us through three provinces,
ten house renovations, and a farm before slipping off to Africa,
leaving his good wife in a field at four a.m. with her hand
crammed into a uterus, searching for a stubborn lamb leg.
I moved to Japan and taught nursery rhymes to children
in Kyoto and Western music to graduate students
in Hiroshima, focusing on the war
between Schoenberg and Stravinsky,
how they ended up living within shouting distance in L.A.,
without ever reconciling—enthralling nuggets of history
I soon realized my audience of five had no interest in.
I didn't marry the woman of my dreams, thank God,
as we know how those fairy tales end.
My good wife is as happy in her lab hunting heparin bonds
as she is kneeling in this garden prodding the soil
with ten-inch chopsticks to break the will
of last year's mint roots.
O Canada, I would hand you that bouquet of roses
if I knew you'd take me back.
I still love you—but not enough to leave
this legend-laced, Zen-drenched island
that has yet to set me down from the three and a half inches
I float over the ground.

SUNDAY MORNING
for Lorna

Let them sleep in today.
Leave alone to their dreams
the long-lost robot's dismembered arm,
the fallen figurines,
the chocolate-smudged pages
of practice exams,
Madeline, *Matilda*, *Green Eggs and Ham*.
Don't yet wake the Lego blocks
nestling with their dust bunnies under the bed,
the G.I. Joe, the dominoes, the silly string
wound round the wings of Skylanders.
Let lie a little longer
the broken yo-yo, the pencil shavings
shuddering in their slumber,
the dismembered Rubik's Cubes,
the crusted brush nibs, the missing caps,
the sticky wad of Snicker's wraps.
Let a sliver of light
sneak through the blinds
to heat the handle of the wizard's staff
and cradle the glass
that guards his shells and stones.

A DIATRIBE TO MY KINDLE-TOTING FRIENDS

But can you curl their ears?
Can you smell them?
Can you run your fingers down their spines?
Lost to you: the feel of the Everyman's Pocket Poets' quiet curves,
and the pleasure of sneaking your fingers through the
factory-uncut pages of your 1910 *Keats's Poetical Works*.
Will you ever gaze at your Kindle up close,
head slightly tilted,
to follow fonts and edge design,
or from a few meters back to delight in the unlikely gathering
of its Halloween-treat-bag of titles?
Will you ever steal into your garden at dusk
for a long-distance glance,
to relish the play of wine-light on their jackets,
as they stand at attention like a drunken, ragged
hodgepodge militia of misfits?
Can your Kindle calm a candle's light?
Can your Kindle be cradled while cuddling a child?
Can a drop of coffee, a chocolate smudge, or a tear stain be digitized?
How about the fading, penciled date of purchase,
or the sloppy underlining of a phrase on a crowded Tokyo train,
using a pen borrowed from a stranger?
And without a front free endpaper page,
where can the lead trace of the words of thanks, praise, condolences, or—most importantly—
seduction, be inscribed?
And where the hell on your machine
do you affix the Post-its?

FIVE BIRD QUIPS
for Yvette

Robin on fencepost
chirrs and yeeps attentiveness—
'Musing humans
will never catch a worm'
—Robin's head-tilt tells us.

Starling over wheat field
trills and rattles fearlessness—
'Our murmurations
are a cipher'
—Starling's wing-tilt tells us.

Chickadee in birdhouse
slaps and hisses restlessness—
'The circle lets in moonlight
but cannot keep out rain'
—Chickadee's tail-tilt tells us.

Toucan of the Pantanal
Taps and clatters tenderness—
'Modesty cannot dull the luster
of our beaks'
—Toucan's bill-tilt tells us.

Basan between life and death
flaps and flutters fleetingness—
'You are but a breath
of frozen fire'
—Basan's still tilt tells us.

TIPS FOR BUDDING POETS: NO. 7

for Warren

Don't expect your readers to reach out to you.
Offer your poems as gifts to the world.
Release them to the wind or sea.
Tie them to the legs of storks, greasy barstools,
or vintage clawfoot lamps.
Wedge them under moss-swathed boulders
in Japanese gardens, or let the tides
slide your syntax over seaweed and sun-kissed sand.
Try singing them softly to sympathetic birds,
who will spread your message to distant lands.
Affix them to cold white walls in corporate
boardrooms, or to ceilings of cemetery columbaria.
Hang your tropes and strophes from disco balls
and chandeliers in has-been hotel halls.
If you can slide a sestina through the eye of a needle,
or into the hands of the poor, you are up to gifting
a ghazal to lodging-home-carpet-cleaning staff.
Softly, without pushing, offer your chapbook
to taxi drivers, clowns, and radiologists, or even—
if you are feeling sneaky—
slip a sonnet into the back pocket of a tourist
you have tailed in an airport terminal,
or a masquerade.