

# Shaken Mirror: Poems

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Winter: Urgent matters pile up.  
People have started to die  
                  and here in the office  
shining like a spaceship in the dusk  
things that seem to have happened recently  
are suddenly far in the past.  
Just halfway through the workday  
and it's already dark again.  
The last 10 years  
went by twice as fast as the decade before  
and now black roses bloom in the snow.

For a brief moment when I wake up  
I've forgotten  
that the chestnut across the way was cut down  
that the books of my younger days' stars  
yellow and pockmarked  
sit in a box on the street  
for a dollar apiece  
and even that you are long gone.  
But in the next second  
I've caught up to all thirty years  
and toward evening  
have gained a future in the bargain  
before night takes me back.

The summer we took turns sitting by your bed  
keeping everyone's spirits up, bringing food from Jægergårds Street  
while we waited for death

which is overwhelming because it is nothing,

I thought:

On the one side there's the Atlantic Ocean.

On the other side there's chess.

On the one side the Atlantic, graybrown rocking in fog,  
on the other the chess game's cool beauty.

And while the thought of the ocean's formless  
monotone redundance made me ill,

I eased my mind a bit with the thought of  
how the chess game, thanks to its strict limitations  
in endless variations, can start over and over  
and over again.

But then it was time to braid your long flaxen hair.

Every year on the date  
that arbitrarily became your birthday  
we take the train to Århus  
to visit your grave  
which happens to be the place here in the world  
where you are not.  
On our way through the city we buy flowers  
and talk as on any other day  
until we're standing in front of the stone.  
And on the way back it always rains.  
Since none of this has meaning  
and it takes place anyway  
it must be of the greatest significance.

I dreamed that I stood in the gloomy villa  
where the scenes of my nightmares  
generally are set  
but the spiral staircase was gone  
the secret doors and bottomless cellar  
and everything now so airy, light, and thoroughly renovated  
that not even the ghosts  
dared spend the night any more  
and my halfway old body schlepping its soul along  
was like a monstrous medical specimen  
in the stylish rooms  
where smooth jazz floated from speakers  
and the breeze lifted gauzy curtains.



Even though you are still beautiful  
it's in a different way  
from back when we danced in the rain  
and fragility was just a part  
of your beauty  
that lodged like an awl in my eye.  
Today when the two of us  
accidentally meet  
at the Silver Street Crossing in plunging light  
and you stand there in your pretty dress  
the beauty is conversely  
just a part of your fragility  
that scratches my gaze like shattered glass.

No one turns fifty  
without wakening on a night train  
that for unknown reasons has come to a halt  
as his thoughts circle around a person  
who passed briefly through his life  
and vanished.  
Are you somewhere wearing a straw hat  
and reading in the shade of an apple tree?  
Or are you lying drunk in a rumpled bed  
as a rat rustles behind the paneling?  
Here the train breaks free and stops the poem  
before the poet succumbs to the temptation  
to beautify it  
with sentiment and cynicism.

...the calendar with its pencil rings round ominous dates!

-- Baudelaire

On the bad days  
where a homeless despair is granted asylum  
and a flock of crows visiting from the middle ages  
stares at me from tall leafless trees  
on the evil days  
where words like *Jezebel*, *napalm* and *Ritalin*  
sound like part of the liturgy  
and the light crashes apart  
just as it reaches my window  
on the mirror-slick days  
where the letters in my poems  
lift off with a shudder from the white paper  
and fly away like black insects  
on the lonely days  
where I can't remember my girlfriend's name  
but do remember every single face  
I've ever seen on the bus  
I have to stay awake till dawn  
for fear of the dream  
of the burning discotheque.

The rickety kitchen table  
where I sit writing this  
could doubtless have been put together better  
and the same could be said of the poem, I guess  
and of so much else  
in this battered world  
that just barely functions  
as long as man is patched up with woman  
reason with faith  
and bad dreams with office work.  
And maybe this day  
when rain poured down from morning to evening  
and I received your soaking wet letter  
could also have proceeded a bit better.  
But this day wasn't "maybe"  
it was there  
and then it was gone.  
That's why this day was the best.

Every time we saw each other  
maybe to listen to Estonian music

and watch the birds'  
small indecipherable markings in the wind

your skeleton had collapsed a little farther  
somewhere there inside your coat

but because your gaze and voice  
and even your hands

stayed afloat in the air

it's now just as impossible  
to believe you're entirely gone

as it then was hard to understand  
that you were still walking around Nørrebro.

As I sit here at Gate C 27  
looking out at the plane in the romantic fog  
it becomes clear  
that I'm already somewhere else.  
A place where ordinary days are more than enough  
and it's so strange  
that we really have to die  
but the thought of resurrection no more strange  
than the fact that we really exist.  
A place where everything changes  
while the revolution is being planned  
in a stuffy little apartment  
with a kerosene heater and windowshades.  
A place where the language after office hours  
continues with no address  
like a crazy person's lonely gesturing on the bus.

There was supposed to be a poem here  
but I've thrown it away  
even though it included  
a striking comment about my enemies  
plus a pair of truly excellent lines  
typical of my poetry  
but to what end  
now that lilacs are in bloom  
and oddly enough I am older  
than my grandfather lived to be  
so dressed in his charcoal gray suit  
I take a walk in the modern world  
whose incomprehensibility is mundane  
compared to crossing the border  
from the commonplace of being alive  
to the strangeness of not being dead.

When I was young childhood seemed  
as distant and unreal as the death  
that we discussed like a mathematical proof  
as we listened to Ziggy Stardust  
and came in our sleep.  
But now when both are nearer than ever  
and in turn every single day is incomprehensible:  
Just look at the lilacs in bloom  
in the colors of another world  
the burning candle of your graceful form  
in the dark hallway  
and the glass-fronted cabinet that while we were gone  
pulled away from the wall  
so all the cut crystal stemware  
lies smashed on the floor.



Sorry I'm phoning so late.  
The time is clearly past  
when I felt like something special  
by virtue of being anyone at all  
in the world's endless airport concourse  
and the bleakness of hotels  
was definitely part of the magic.  
For a moment ago as I  
sat looking down  
at my no longer young hands  
I was gripped by terror  
that I might never again  
hear your voice recognize mine  
if I lay down to sleep  
in the way too white bed linens  
of Room 1007.

Reassured by the ordinariness of everything  
the overcast, the reading glasses on the nightstand  
and the random clatter  
of voices and footsteps and a shower being turned on  
I hope that maybe the day  
all the way till evening  
will go as if nothing had happened  
while everything way too big  
like for example "I" and "you"  
and then and now  
and everything we know and don't know  
for as long as it lasts  
can live in the little crooked shelters of the poem.

In the suburbs, on November days  
at certain way-too-wide crossroads  
where the 200 S bus  
through fallen leaves and pulpy shopping circulars  
glides past dental labs and Thai brothels  
storage units and dog groomers  
on its way toward the little aging apartment buildings  
where all those we knew and loved  
who now are dead  
ride up and down in rusty elevators  
with a sleepy lightbulb flickering from the ceiling,  
then a person knows that there are places  
where despair seeks refuge  
because it itself is in despair  
at its own existence.

Among all these poems  
about death and memories  
there's still room for 11 lines  
about dandelions  
whose light I had again this year forgotten  
switches on all at once like a carnival  
and about us, each falling into our own sleep  
in the same bed  
and wakening when night is deepest  
and silence greatest  
with a hand laid so lightly across our shoulders.

In the hotel room over the purple nightclub  
on the sloping street  
behind the train station in Saragossa  
where I sit rummaging  
in my chaotic suitcase  
I suddenly remember a young substitute teacher  
whose face behind the black-rimmed glasses  
took its light from a time to come  
which must be thoroughly gone by now.  
However it went  
and wherever in the world you are  
if you still are there at all:  
Greetings from someone  
who borrowed a little light for the time to come  
from your face forty years ago.

Bernardo: Who's there?

Francisco: Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself!

-- *Hamlet*, Act I, scene i

We are the characters

                  but we don't know the plot  
and must improvise: "Who's there?"  
To reassure myself  
I listen to a certain movie score  
that from the first beat overflows  
with meaning about what's going to happen.  
But by the second time I try it  
the unreal loveliness of the music reminds me  
only of the anxiety it was meant to counteract  
and now it too flutters in the black mirror  
that has nothing to divulge  
about tomorrow.

After a day that many years from now  
may offer some meaning  
I, like you, have  
settled down to read  
and while our gazes glide  
like headlights through the darkness of the text  
footsteps sound in the stairwell  
move upward through the building  
and stop on the third floor  
where they hesitate a bit in the great silence  
before vanishing back downward and away  
but who it was, what he gave up on  
and for whom it might  
have significance:  
on that, this poem sheds no light ...

And suddenly even you have acquired a story.  
The streets you avoid  
are no longer entirely random  
much less the fact that you've settled again  
in this exact cafe  
with its turquoise wallpaper  
and view of a little triangular plaza  
to work on your polyphonic poem  
in which I clearly hear  
your beautiful lilting voice.

But of course your story can be told  
in a theoretically infinite number of versions  
of which not one could  
be told by anyone other than you  
who want to be not an "I"  
with moonlight and cellos  
but a clerk in linguistic systems  
that for some reason stay utterly deserted  
when you skip work  
to watch old horror films.



While I dreamed of seeing it all  
through the square of the poem on the white paper  
and of the white flesh beneath the black triangle  
the world was already  
coming to an end for you  
whose dreams were full of buildings with bricked up windows  
x-rays and vast empty March skies.  
Then the other night I saw you in a bar  
with aloneness  
like a poisonous glory around your forehead.  
Your planet was on its way  
into another solar system. With no sun.

If some day darkness were used up  
it would have to be rebuilt as a great mansion  
with secluded tower rooms  
where we could finally get a little sleep

if winter ended forever some March day  
all the world's coldness would have to be housed  
in our own frozen souls

if silence were scratched like an old LP  
its unheard Opus Zero would have to be  
composed from scratch again and again

and if death were cancelled  
everyone finished with life would have to  
be borne away in the secret tunnels  
beneath the darkened mansion.

My life got half a century shorter  
when you died and left me behind  
in front of the supermarket by Exit 17.  
Now who will tell me  
about harsh winters, old-school math  
scarlet fever  
and the boardinghouse in Silkeborg Square?  
The tantalizing times  
I just missed knowing  
as anything more than scent and vertigo  
in clothes closets and dance music  
but whose light as through a tinted window  
fell on me from your gaze  
and now for a second time has vanished  
so that I for the rest of my life  
will never again be a child.

Little children too dream of their past  
which is huge and dusky  
full of scents and unrecognizable figures  
reflected in polished floors.  
Even the very old feel bereft  
when they sit staring in dayrooms  
and suddenly remember  
that they have lost their parents.

When I came by your house today  
with its chandelier still lit  
and a moth dizzying around  
in the chalkwhite silence  
that your life left behind  
it was as if you had died all over again.  
But later today when  
I stopped at another house  
and looked up at an open fourth-floor window  
where I as a youngster had sat  
full of anticipation, gazing out  
at the boisterous world  
the future suddenly began  
anew.

In the waning light of a late November day  
where all contours are veiled in drizzle  
and colors muted in mist  
though car headlights coagulate  
to a dazzling white  
this downtown street looks exactly  
as it did over thirty years ago  
when I in my new blue leather jacket  
slouched along and as if by chance  
caught my reflection passing  
the Cosmopolitan Kiosk and the newspaper building  
or sat in my room toward the courtyard  
and read *Mañana* and passé poetry  
about green darkness and the white hospital  
where my mother was locked up  
while the world grew on all sides  
the downtown street roared in the dusk  
and I listened to T. Rex and smoked and dreamed of sex  
and of all the big things  
that would happen some day, and now have happened  
so that today  
when the houses glow like ghosts  
and a girl in the doorway lifts her dress  
in endless slow motion  
is at the very same time before and after.

As a kid I wakened each morning  
with the world streaming toward me  
like a sparkling boulevard.  
Now I have to get up in winter darkness  
and bring it in bit by bit  
on my thin legs.

I've settled here at the table farthest back  
in the restaurant where you and I toward evening  
would have a meal now and then  
talking of anything and everything  
and listening to the inner city traffic  
as rain started to fall  
and cars' headlights to slide along the wall  
and I quickly lost patience  
with your old stories  
and your fancy scarf  
and your habit of eating from my plate  
which strangely enough are all the things  
that I miss most today  
as rain starts to fall  
and the gestalts of passers-by burn against the pane  
and I must sit alone at the table farthest back  
thinking about how there's only one of everyone  
as I listen to the inner city traffic  
and try to catch your gaze  
in the shaken mirror of this poem.



The train passes the last suburb.  
Through my face reflected in the window  
I see the darkening fields  
    and remember the hard-as-hell darkness  
of Stevns in the winter of 1971  
where a lonely Esso sign creaked in the wind  
and a plastic bag rumbled  
along the desolate eternity of Algade Street.  
And though I am someone else now  
    it's the same one who sat dreaming  
in the small glowing box of the movie theater.

And you in the opposite seat  
who have sat immersed in this poem  
and are just now lifting your gaze  
through your face reflected in the window  
out into the darkness of your own memories  
where the silver-blue sound of a guitar flickers  
and an old silage harvester's oddly touching  
snout stands rusting  
    are also someone else than the one  
who wrote the poem,  
and who by "I" means *me*. And you.

With each memory comes an oblivion.  
With the sight of the man  
his feet 5 centimeters above the concrete floor  
who hung by a rope from the barn loft  
comes my youthful reading  
of theories that almost encompassed everything  
and with this loneliness comes your gaze  
    that seemed to flow through the air  
just in front of your eyes themselves  
and with that comes a headlong journey  
where a giant ferris wheel  
decked with a thousand colored lightbulbs  
turned slowly in the fog  
one autumn day in St. Pauli  
and now has stopped in these lines  
through whose black grate  
you stare down at the white paper  
that hovers under every single poem.

While an uneasy sky flickers  
in the puddles of Melchior's Square  
my gaze stops at a face  
that looks like a blurred photo  
but can be no one else's but yours

and since just as the sun breaks through  
I turn toward the cafe and see  
a burst capillary invading my left eye  
and blooming in the horribly shiny windowpane

I step quickly into a shadow:

How shall I carry all this  
up Nordre Frihavns Street  
across the intersection  
and all the way home?

Because you disappeared  
when the party was at its peak  
you missed out on the deepest kisses in the darkest corners  
                  but didn't have to fall asleep  
with a jaw full of gold teeth  
and the white soup of tiredness boiling in your skull.  
Or to wake up in an ice cold subway car  
lit like an operating room  
clattering through suburbs  
with a beer bottle rolling back and forth along the floor.

If all roads ended here  
at the table in the Polish country restaurant  
where I'm enjoying anonymity  
melancholy music  
and the discreet presence  
of a slightly cross-eyed waitress  
it would be just fine with me  
though of course I became not  
what I had imagined  
but what I am  
which is less glamorous  
but more of an adventure  
since it's something one can't even  
dream his way to  
but must wake up and be  
every single everlasting unexpected day.

So let's pierce the illusions  
without scorning them  
for though they do lie to the dreamer  
they don't lie about him  
and so are a part of the truth:  
Let's cry for the losses  
but not mourn them  
for like fortune and chance  
they too led to this evening  
in the narrow gray streets  
at this white tablecloth

where I could be anyone at all  
and before I go on  
can allow myself the luxury  
of feeling completely weightless  
because that is not entirely true.

The salt taste of your kiss I remember clearly  
though it vanished many years ago;  
a small, intricate sequence  
of notes caught in passing  
rings in my mind as I write;  
but death I know only from my fear of it,  
God's word from translations  
and silence only from the sounds heard  
on waking in winter blackness at 5:30:  
creak of the back stairs  
    slow braking of a two-ton truck  
somewhere out in the dark.

My darling, may our love always be  
like music sounding from another room.  
In The Waldorf-Astoria. In the rain.

Praise be to all that goes slowly:  
To riding the train from Berlin to Moscow  
while the gigantic worlds of the combines  
gleam in the fog,  
To awaited words like *respiration, trickle, and rust*  
arranging them in a row and then switching them around  
until they resemble something no one has seen,  
To waking in the developer solution of darkness  
and lying there rocking your way out to the light,  
To sitting under tossing trees  
and talking together again after all those years  
while day turns to evening and evening to night:  
To crossing *Moby Dick's* black sea of writing  
in search of the whiteness of the whale.  
But none of these is so slow  
that I can manage to stand  
that it too in an instant is gone.



Sixteen years ago I received a cardboard box  
with a cat the color of amber  
now lying in another cardboard box  
which I carry on my bike through the city  
toward a garden in Brønshøj  
where I must bury this animal  
that according to the church  
I will never see again  
because the cat did not possess a soul.  
But what was it then that I read  
in her green eyes  
when they looked and looked into mine  
as if she too  
had a question for me?  
It's not that I imagine  
I'll hit upon the answer  
by writing these lines  
but maybe that I hope  
they will be read  
also when the time comes  
when I won't see Kis again.

So it's come, the hiss of winter  
and I lie in the darkness and listen happily  
to the rush of the snowstorm down Bartholin Street  
and try to hold back time  
and keep this moment floating  
halfway between the inconsolable throne room of Eternity  
and Tuesday February twenty-third  
which crushes one second with the next  
while debt and the unread state of the book on the nightstand grow  
in my inexorable curriculum vitae.

Some evening, walking through Østre Anlæg Park  
I'll fall into reverie at the sight  
of city lights behind intertwined branches  
that started me writing my first poems  
which quickly spread, a dark tracery  
over the shining sheets of A4 paper  
    as all streets led to new ones  
where I waited for someone  
who would turn out to be waiting for me:  
And via the blue corridor of Nørrebro  
where all the women I've dreamed of in my life  
stand in doorways smoking King cigarettes and are named Kate  
I'll walk the overpass behind the Carlsberg brewery  
watch trains appear and disappear in the darkness far below  
like people I knew and walked with for a time  
like trains of thought that suddenly illuminated everything  
like aberrations, hope, and the rush of misgiving:  
And finally I'll cross one of the new  
transparent harbor neighborhoods  
whose names I don't even know  
that stand there in the wind  
and have long since acquired meaning  
for someone who isn't me.

December 31st.

I take the highway out to the coast  
where a graycold sea

throws unrecognizable things ashore.

A couple of thoughts are thought through  
others float like a flock of startled jackdaws  
over the glaring field of snow.

On the way back across the parking lot

I suddenly stop.

But the sound of my footsteps  
goes on, into the fog.

The radio has picked up a distant station  
where a chorus of children  
in a language that must be Russian  
reads something that must be poetry  
and could sound like a translation  
of the poem I've always dreamed of writing.