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### a sequence of poems on writing, teaching, words and thought

louis gallo

Radford Univeristy, lgallo4@verizon.net

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## a sequence of poems on writing, teaching, words and thought

### Author Biography

Four volumes of Louis Gallo's poetry, *Archaeology*, *Scherzo Furiant*, *Crash* and *Clearing the Attic*, are now available. *Why is there Something Rather than Nothing?* and *Leeway & Advent* will be published soon. He was invited for an interview and reading of his work by National Public Radio's program "With Good Reason," broadcast across the country, 2021. His work appears in *Best Short Fiction 2020*. A novella, "The Art Deco Lung," will soon be published in *Storylandia*. National Public Radio aired a reading and discussion of his poetry on its "With Good Reason" series (December 2020). His work has appeared or will shortly appear in *Wide Awake in the Pelican State* (LSU anthology), *Southern Literary Review*, *Fiction Fix*, *Glimmer Train*, *Hollins Critic*, *Rattle*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Litro*, *New Orleans Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Missouri Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Texas Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Ledge*, *storySouth*, *Houston Literary Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Raving Dove*, *The Journal (Ohio)*, *Greensboro Review*, and many others. Chapbooks include *The Truth Changes*, *The Abomination of Fascination*, *Status Updates* and *The Ten Most Important Questions*. He is the founding editor of the now defunct journals, *The Baratavia Review* and *Books: A New Orleans Review*. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize several times. He is the recipient of an NEA grant for fiction. He teaches at Radford University in Radford, Virginia.

### Abstract

no abstract, it's poetry

### Keywords

books, words, thought, teaching

VEJ

NOTHING

I chastise students when they tell me  
They can't think of a thing to write about.  
I tell them write about anything—a meatball,  
A shoestring, a pebble in the street—just  
Make sure the beauty and/or power  
Of the words themselves transcend  
The subject matter, since the subject matter  
Is always the same in the end: love and death.

Think of the shoestring as a small noose  
Around your neck, or the meatball as a brain.  
But now I too cannot think of a thing  
To write about, I've been tabula rasaed  
Into the ideational void. So I'll write  
About nothing (no thing), which, turns  
Out to be potentially everything, literally,  
According to both mystics and quantum physicists.

Nothing, it seems, swirls with wave functions  
And spits out virtual particles that sometimes  
Become actual particles that comprise  
Your meatball or shoestring or that pebble  
No longer in the street but your throat.  
Or perhaps embedded in the meatball  
That is tied and held together with your  
Shoestring. See what I mean?

It's always a gamble, this business of  
Thinking, an error in evolution,  
Though without thinking how could we  
Approach beauty—or even beast?  
No mistake then because what else  
Do we have that's worth the cost  
Of that shoestring? And the pebble is free.  
The meatball? It came along  
For the ride, floats in the skull—

Some say a bargain.  
Pick it apart. Watch the beautiful ideas  
And words and images explode  
In every direction—your universe,  
And maybe everyone else's as well.  
And to think we started with nothing.

## BOOK

There is this book on my shelf  
that I have planned to read  
for the last twenty years.  
Has this happened to you?  
Well, I finally opened it,  
because what's twenty years?  
and read about two pages  
and figured I could live without it.  
I strolled down the hallway  
and gave it to a passing student  
who gushed with thanks  
until, I noticed, as he receded  
down his way, he tossed it  
into the nearest trash bin.  
Naturally I had to retrieve it  
and definitely plan to read it  
within the next twenty years,  
God-willing of course.

## EGYPT

The word "Egypt" is luxuriously stark,  
that sole Eeee followed by four muscular consonants:  
GYPT. Sounds almost like when you cry,  
"I've been gypped," when another merchant rips you off.  
But that E absolves: E-GYPT.  
Articulate that last "t" as if you're expelling  
some wayward sesame seed, hang-nailed from the cake,  
from you mouth. Spit. Spat. Sput.  
GYPT, fun to say, almost fearsome.  
Not talking here about the endless Ptolemy's,  
Pharaoh this or that, the pyramids, King Tut  
and his baby-toy-blue sailboat, not Antony & Cleopatra dead—  
"I am dying, Egypt, dying"—nah, no history, no histrionics,  
no bloated King Farouk or Nasser and that Suez Canal . . .  
just the word alone, signifying nothing, mere sound:  
GYPT GYPT GYPT—say it over and over again aloud  
or in your mind and it transmutes into something primordial,  
a dying squawk, a harshness, the ultimate "t" sputtering out  
like explosive backwards suction into the air.

### PLUMTREE'S POTTED MEAT

So I started to re-read Ulysses because I read it first  
decades ago and have forgotten most of it.  
This is a poem about how the ways of the mind  
are as mysterious as the ways of God—

I came across, as Leopold wanders through Dublin,  
a product advertisement he spots in a newspaper—  
What is home without Plumtree's Potted Meat?  
Plumtree's had vanished from my mental cache  
entirely, but lo, as I re-read, I realized that  
I actually remembered it from my first reading  
so long ago. Why Plumtree's? Where had it  
hidden itself through the years?  
A kind of Wordsworthian daffodil, a kind of  
Proustian madeleine cake, or, well, a kind of  
Joycean after-the-fact almost worthless epiphany.

A re-surfacing nevertheless, a revenance  
for no good reason, a kind of gem at the bottom  
of the drawer or stashed in an attic box.  
So many more important things to remember—  
about Ulysses, about your life, so many more  
more treasures usurped by a can of potted meat.  
Or perhaps I've got it wrong, perhaps Plumtree's  
bespeaks all of Ulysses, all of Dublin, all the universe,  
all your life. What is home without it?  
What is home?

### TO THE FUTURE TEACHERS OF POETRY

I hardly want to blunt the dreams  
of young ones in their prime who opt  
to teach everything that seems  
essential to a good, rich life  
yet all the same I must warn  
that teaching is an enterprise  
to liberate not bind the mind  
with feeble ideologies  
that liken freedom to disease  
with bans on what to say  
and not, what thoughts to think,  
what poetry to cherish,  
what poetry to burn. . .

the Muse will in the end prevail  
and force imposters out the door.  
She will never turn her back  
on truth, often next year's lies,  
or beauty in its several forms,  
sometimes ugly. You who teach,  
ignore the strident, harsh appeals  
of those whose misguided zeal  
reduces mind to a gear wheel  
of mathematical precision.

Poetry can be a frightful collision  
of heart, mind, flesh and soul;  
it can both ruin and save your life;  
mollify or enhance strife;  
rip apart or make whole.  
But one thing it will never do  
is—or perhaps it might—betray you.

### The Wind of the Mind

*Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye...*  
*Oooh, I wish you well.*  
Creedence, "Wish I Could Hideaway"

So, you see, it could go either way,  
winding up the neurons and dendrites  
as you wind the mechanical clock  
on your nightstand, or, shuddering  
at the wind blowing through your mind—  
the wind(er) of your discontent,  
as it howls outside my window tonight,  
hissing and shrieking like a phalanx  
of demons, tearing at tree limbs,  
invisible chain saws, severing  
entire branches, inciting a diaspora  
of leaves hither and what's the other one?  
Thither, you must love it. Gone with the . . .  
wind me up, spin me round, drown me in brine.  
The mistress skedaddled thither as she withered.

Or what if the wind tears you out of your mind?  
Goodbye Shelly and the Western edifice.

Where would you go? Annunciation Parrish  
has no vacancies, Pontchartrain Beach is closed.  
Teach me to hear mermaids singing and find . . .  
everything that got lost in the course  
because what's lost is what the wind blows—  
and where. Time to retrace your tracks  
while gathering rosebuds anew as you watch  
your memory whirling off like tumbleweed  
toward the Petrified Forest.  
The map is the territory if the bull's eye  
is tacked to your back

#### DEFINITION

Poetry is the king of confections.  
Can you taste the flan in the word "deliquescence"  
(avoid its meaning, however).  
Or the tart cherry in "catastrophe,"  
the treacle in "treacle,"  
the vanilla in "light"?  
Music too, that geologic basso  
in "doom," the piccolo in "serendipity,"  
the horn blast in "eureka,"  
the sweet oboe in "meadow."  
Ah, and texture—the grit in "staccato,"  
the silk in "lemon," the fuzz in "dust."  
And all the beautiful eyes (green the rarest)  
alchemizing leaves of spider script  
into delicious arrays of understanding,  
beauty, holiness.

#### gagging words

certain word make me gag  
with nausea—  
bottom line, portfolio,  
cutting edge, rubric,  
wealth management,  
stakeholder, assessment . . .  
many others too

but let's keep this brief

how about you?  
what are your gag words?  
It's the ones that  
aren't quite real, right,  
those of pretense  
and artificial flavor?

no gagging on onion,  
krill, vermilion, salt,  
rhizome, ink--  
you know, words  
that sing themselves  
into your ear,  
words that are alive