

**7 Sample Poems
From the Collection**

LOVE-IN-IDLENESS

by

Christopher Hennessy

Pub Date: October 1, 2011

\$14.95 print; \$7.95 ebook

Brooklyn Arts Press · New York

LOVE-IN-IDLENESS
© 2011 Christopher Hennessy

ISBN-13: 978-1-936767-02-1

Published in The United States of America by:
Brooklyn Arts Press
154 N 9th St #1
Brooklyn, NY 11211
WWW.BROOKLYNARTSPRESS.COM
INFO@BROOKLYNARTSPRESS.COM

Distributed to the trade by Small Press Distribution / SPD.
www.spdbooks.org

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011930911

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced by any means existing or to be developed in the future without written consent by the publisher.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Anthony, with all my love. And for my parents, for all their love and support.

Sincerest thanks to Eric Schramm for his friendship, love, poems and guidance over the years. Thanks to both Eric and R.J. Gibson for help in preparing these poems for the world. Thanks to John Skoyles for mentoring—and believing in—a young man who needed the permission to speak about desire and difference and the craft to turn that speech into poetry. And lastly, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Joe Millar at Brooklyn Arts Press for his superlative editorial insight and his unswerving dedication to making this book tell the story it was meant to tell. The author would also like to dedicate many of the poems in the first section to the memory of his grandparents R. and M. Koch and R. and B. Hennessy.

Thanks to the editors of these journals for publishing the following poems, sometimes in earlier versions: “A Split Secret,” *Ploughshares*; “Autopsy,” *OCHO*; “After My Grandmother’s Funeral,” *Court Green*; “Christopher Looks,” *Night Train*; “The Cicada, and Other Lessons” (as “The Cicada Lessons”), *Knockout*; “Gethsemane,” *Memorious*; “I Hand You Like an Orange to a Child,” *Anti-*; “Icarus on the Moon,” *Touchstone*; “Love-in-Idleness” (as “A Glut of Fallen Leaves”), *Wisconsin Review*; “Love Poem to Carl Linnaeus,” *Court Green*; “The Lover’s Story,” *Natural Bridge*; “Mud, Milk, Snow, Mud” (as “Terra Firma”), *Cimarron Review*; “Nocturne,” *Court Green*; “Nietzsche, Pasolini & I,” *Memorious*; “Jacob (as “The Seduction of Jacob”), *Natural Bridge*; “Pear, Apple, Peach,” *Crab Orchard Review*; “Sick Room,” *Bloom*; “Still Life with Jars,” *Brooklyn Review*; “Thief,” *Knockout*; “Waiting Room,” *Full Circle Journal*; “Wreckage,” *Cimarron Review*; “You are the pin-holder,” *Wisconsin Review*.

“Icarus on the Moon” and “Epithalamion” also appeared in *This New Breed: Gents, Bad Boys and Barbarians 2*, edited by Rudy Kikel. “Carriers” will appear in the anthology *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry*, edited by Stacey Lynn Brown and Oliver de la Paz.

CHRISTOPHER LOOKS

Christopher looks like he's been spit out,
like a too-salty piece of meat,
like an unwanted thought.

Like a mannequin, a man made of teak,
a talking prune.

Christopher looks like I'm having trouble creating him,
or like he could be the father of purpose.

Christopher looks like a turtle negotiating
a path of slick stones. If you don't know
what Christopher looks like, visualize
a garden gnome in crisis.

Some days Christopher looks like an ordinary young man;
others, like a man dying to get out alive, gone
into his dead man's suit at the first sight of blood.

Christopher looks like someone you will recognize
if you go to heaven. Christopher looks like he's in hell
as he stammers through an apology for not calling.

Christopher looks like a frightened scarecrow,
like a little boy wrapped in a bumblebee bowtie.
Like he's trying and failing
to strangle himself with his black cravat.

Christopher looks like your trunk is full of bodies.

MUD, MILK, SNOW, MUD

Wandering in circles in the dark
silo, I was the final grandson
to see the farm begin

its dying, a slow plodding
led by the two wolfish guards of the hencoop,
Keiko and Smoky. Big enough to ride,

but with broken sloped backs, they slouched,
sore beasts of burden, stuck in a muddy hole
clawed out from the clay surrounding

their shingled kennels. I dug into matted hides,
held as they shook me, and a musk rose up—
part loam, part rot—that burned as I breathed it in.

Smoky, a mother then, though no one knew,
began to shiver, a rumble caught in her lungs.
And from deep in the barn, with rafters like ribs

of a great carcass, a slow snap of bones echoed.
And the word *hobble* bubbled up from grandpa's throat
as he emerged from that skeletal coffer, heaving.

With a hose, we slowly filled
the cow's water trough—big enough
for a child to hide in.

I wanted to swing myself up
and over, splash into the clear,
drinkably cool water, let the cows

lap at me, nudge me, like a calf,
out of the way. I wanted the hose
turned on me, to soak me so wet

I would prune up, turn old
in an instant and know everything
about every animal—how milk is thickened,

how the egg is shaped, why children
don't come back, the muddy
gurgles of birth,

why rabbits are silent creatures
until guileless teeth pull them apart.
And why does the cow rustle

deeper into the hay, its eyes
open, as if expecting a blow
from above?

Two boys squirreling through the haymow,
we toss dry strands of hay and clap

at a summer snow we make
with this food, this bed. Below us
a row of sad cows chew and nod.

We must find the creaking boards
beneath the itch of our bare feet.
So much hay to scoop,

we drown in dust. Each clap or stomp
dislodges a puff of chaff
from your damp, blonde rooster tail.

The farm was unraveling,
each of my three living aunts
invisibly worrying the thread of their mother

as she stood over the one well, biting
her worn lip, cranking a black ink
of water up from a pit stabbing

so deep into the earth it passes hell.
Little watery souls, I imagined, must hide
in her bucket—children lost

to young mothers.
How else explain her grief?
Those hard stones of sweat,

and thickening veins crowning
the scalp? Overcome, she bends,
the tin pail a scale's weight

tilting her into a fractured curtsy.
The bucket tips, dust
becomes mud, and she falls against

the altar of the well,
calling for her children,
each name a star.

TO MY FATHER'S BLUE TUXEDO

The winter I turn 17 I find you hiding
in the back of his closet, wilting
on your hanger. Rumpled, crinkled,

dusted with age's mothwing fuzz.
Your blue is powder-soft,
with baby-blue trim and lapels ruffled,

but you slump, hang limp like a faggot
has just fled you, like he will at his prom,
eager for a jerk-off to a tableau of tuxedoed jocks.

You won't recall, but I saw you once before
in a photo, posing on the body of a man
who looked like me, his hair so wet with sweat

bits of rice stuck in it. His face flush
with June sun, cheap champagne—
simple abundance and simple poverty.

Outside ice hangs on trees. Limbs
snapping like balls smacking
open hands in an end zone.

Winter will never marry us: the fag
sick with threat, the ex-quarterback slamming
a meaty fist into his reddening palm.

THE CICADA, AND OTHER LESSONS

Hook out the eye
of a fish you've caught
and use it for a lure
if the minnows
and worms are gone
and the tin pail is empty.

Fry the fish with salted butter
and Old Mother Hubbard.
Till the guts into the garden
to grow more squash.

Value each trick a body offers.

Identify the killdeer by its call
as it ranges over the mudflats.

Hear the katydids argue
amongst themselves,
pretending to be leaves.

Johnny jump up, heartsease, call-me-
to-you, love-in-idleness...
memorize these names
given to *Viola tricolor*, the pansy.

But know that knowing what to call a thing—
to understand the need its song speaks—

doesn't let you love it, doesn't give you
the right to make it love you back.

The cicada sleeps
underground for 17 years
to avoid the mantis and wasp.
But when it emerges, it sings.

There is no shame in that life.

QUEEN

A huge, spangled red wig hides
the spindles of Gloriana's thinning hair
as she feasts on sweets all day.
Teeth black and rotten, and still

you think her beautiful,
still keep your sex to yourself
and skulk around the house, fearing
that an army of muscled Norfolks,

freshly fed from the gym,
usurpers all, plot her rape.
"Be my Little Walsingham?"
you ask—and then send me to Spain.

You'd have me supper
on her favorite flower.
You call it *heartsease*
or sometimes, feeling pale,
yellow and as anemic
as the word *pansy*,
use the name *love-
in-idleness*.

Our house bursts with them.
Purple, blue and bronze,
pink, lavender and white,
apricot and orange. They leave
a scent like the cologne
of another man in our bed.

Her favorite dance is lavolta,
the scandal of the man grasping
his partner's waist, thrusting
him high above his head.

We never dance. In bed
all day, your arm rests dead
against my back.

Should I take on the sick dourness
of her flour-chalk mask?
You no longer caress my face,
trace the rough edge of beard only

to powder over the neglect,
reciting the morning recipe:
eggs, sbells powdered,
well water, poppy seeds,
borax, alum.

You apply the threat
with your fingertips—white
laced with invisible toxins.

“They had to saw the Coronation
Ring off her finger, her flesh
had grown so tightly around
its gold...”

SATIE'S INSTRUCTIONS FOR YOUR LOVE LIFE

With astonishment

Plug the O
of his mouth
with two fingers.
Talk dirty.

Light as an egg

Trace the curve of his wrist as he sleeps,
feel for the fault-
line.

Like a nightingale with a toothache

At the very moment it loosens,
swallow it
before it flies away.

Open your head

There is a switch
you must throw
to know death.

Here comes the lantern

Swing, swing it.
Thrust forward, stick it
out. Breathe through
the nose so you can
sing into every mouth,
light every orifice.

Muffle the sound

The pillow, the tears,
the torn bits, and stains—
these remains.

Dry as a cuckoo

Never stop
calling his name.
Even when he says
he'll leave
if you don't stop
calling his name.
Calmly stroll
from room to room
naming the dusty cushions
and pillows and the credenza,
using only his pet names.

Play on faded velvet

The percussive perspicacity
of the body beating inside its hairy
nudity is beauty in virtuosity.

Work it out yourself

It's you that plays the prop.
Work yourself out of it.
Leave the bed damp.

SICK ROOM

My love, my Lethe (an ebb has begun),
the terror of being alone
is replaced by my fingers' arthritic
worrying of your braided bones
to ease the caving ribs away.

Fever is hostage for you,
my dear wound, my truce.

My spit is a tasteless poultice
and my breath is
leaves of mint on your chest.

I am ridden, I
am prone, here.
I am the ever-present room,
curtaining contagion.

An original, iron heat
snakes through you,
and I can only press it deeper—invisible
waves—into the scored creases
I've left.

Cold press, a cloth,
an orphaned promise:
If I sleep, if I leave
you, I will vanish
like the pearled ice here,
already brittle in their bowl.