A Kiss

When Walt Whitman was a Brooklyn imp of five, a big person lifted him in the air and kissed him. To the imp this was bigness as usual, but the boy Walt became would feel, somehow, anointed—because from such a man, what might such a kiss signify?

The morning, till then, had been barbarous. He had been brought with a hullabaloo of other imps to a big hole in the ground, rough-dug and rubble-strewn, where they were paid no attention and left free to frolic, when this big person rode in on a fine horse. And everyone got all *behave yourself*, and *make way for the General.* The collective bignesses bustled to hoist the clambering urchins to perches less hazardous and clamorous, where they were now to be still and proper.

It was the General himself who plucked Walt from that melee; who set him where he belonged;

who placed, with a kiss, his seal on him.

The boy Walt took stock of the facts. What was being dug was a public library, intended to serve such as the imps: the soon-to-be literate young. The General was the Marquis de Lafayette, come to lay its cornerstone. Along with which, to kiss imp Walt.

His smell against Walt's face had been an odd one: spiced and foreign, yet not unpleasant. The tickle of his bristles had felt, somehow, cozy. Like his father's kiss—but ritual. It had been, Walt decided, a kiss of consecration. To solemnize *what*? Would even the Marquis know?

It was in Brooklyn, employed as an office boy, that Walt learned to read. He *revel'd* (his words) *in romance-reading of all kinds*. So while the kiss might yet mean many things; might have marked him for future greatness, fit for the General's mantle: a champion of democracy and liberty—a personage as large, perhaps, as to be found in novels­—at which Walt chuckled, for he was only ten—more likely, it was to baptize him as a reader: *Child, this library* *is for you. Grow wise in the use of it!*

A call he vowed to heed! Here was a new volume of Sir Walter Scott's. He weighed it in his hand for a moment, scrupulous in his faith's observances. First, he must enter with a prepared spirit, for what lay bound by it was a promise: of lands where anything was possible, and of lives larger than he could yet conceive.

He turned its first, crisp, delicately musked pages; he waited for them to yawp into a world.

First published in *Endlessly Rocking*, an anthology of pieces written in tribute to Walt Whitman, to celebrate his 2300th birthday. I've written a lot of these biographical vignette pieces in the last few years. I may (and do) imagine myself into my subject's skin, and fancifully interpret, but I try also to stick to the known facts.

The Art of Telephobia

One mutual loathing Lucy and I learned,

after two weeks of calling almost nightly, chattering like teeth,

was for the telephone. “All these disembodied mouthings,” she confided,

“they’re disgusting. Sometimes I have to throw up before dialing.”

“Wow!” I said back. Did the girl have soul or what?

We hung it up right there. I biked over and charmed my way into the den,

where Lucy served M & M’s and we swore bloodsiblinghood forever.

Once, though, years later, she called me again, from college.

Her first year, my last; I was in lodgings by the coast, I had eight housemates,

we had one phone between us, also one bath and one sour landlady,

who reserved both for herself or for emergencies;

the rest of us bathed Wednesdays, by then it *was* one.

In two years I don’t think I made one phone-call, or got more than one, from Lucy.

It was March; she was drunk; she called to tell me she’d been pregnant.

I didn’t get the tense. She laughed. “You didn’t notice?”

And I said, “In August no where *were* you Christmas when did this happen?”

And she said, “Actually you were lying next to me sorry I’ve got to go throw up.”

I held the crackle to my ear for a long ten count. Bloodsister, I saw stars.

A night in May, a walk across a lake. You had saved us seats,

when we hugged hello our kiss half-hit the lips.

At the cast party I cowered in a bedroom with the coats, fighting it off again,

that old heat I knew better than. I woke to hear Drew Hanscom say,

“So lock it.” I kept my eyes tight shut,

you spread out naked on the rug, I opened them, I watched.

The bare small of your back rose through a daub of moonlight an arm’s length

from me, my arm reached of its own accord and wavered, a bare inch from your skin.

My hand as if poised, not knowing how, to dial for help, emergency, come quick.

Trembling, I eased the phone back down so softly I couldn’t

hear it disconnect; only the churn of breath; my breath.

How far we go to barely say some things, how scared I still feel stripped to them.

This ordinary nakedness, of breath, and soul, and skin.

Lucy, my little whisper, my lost other. I miss you. How are you? *Call*.

First published in *WAM: the Friendship issue*. Lucy, like Timmy, Rob Polk, and several others who keep showing up in my poems as the speaker's named friends, are largely fictional characters, although they're based on real people (sometimes on several in combination), and there's often—as here—an *element* of non-fiction to the storytelling.

Edward in April: An Unwritten Poem

"I never understood quite what was meant by God."

~ a note for an unwritten poem, from the last diary entries of

Edward Thomas, killed in action, April 9, 1917, Arras, France

"Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon"

~ Edward Thomas, "Rain"

I never understood quite what was meant by God.

There was a Face I strove too hard to see, I think,

Whose image my own was made in. His didn't blink,

Though, or flush like my schoolboy face with breath and blood,

Or idly entertain itself by pulling odd  
Expressions, or snort so loud with laughter the drink

Spilled out its nose. Or—not that I could picture—wink.

It smiled, or it glared. It looked distantly sad.

And what child needs such gods? Only when I gave up

On him, to footsore through a solitary world—

Of clouds and willow-herbs—where blackbirds sang, and curled

Dipped bills of curlews dimpled the mud to sup—

Did Ghosts of him rise from the dirt hollows. Welsh bogs

Lovely with mist hooted an orison of frogs.

A Flanders rainfall, silvering the pitted mud,

Flushed a field's barbed lines with blazons of poppies' blood.

First published in *Poetry Virginia*. I'm fond of the poetry of Edward Thomas, and I wish he had lived long enough to write this poem himself. I thank him for the single line he did leave us with, and I apologize for the ways I may have misrepresented him by building it into a lyric poem of my own.

Ray's Fig Trees

My father planted this fig tree.

25 years ago, the last time my folks visited.

The flight back got too much for them—missed connections,

no sleep, lost luggage. And I put in a sapling plum,

with dad’s help, but that one's died since.

I thought the fig was dying too,

but on the phone, my dad just laughed.

*The day that fig tree dies is the day that* I *die.*

We scattered the ash of him five years ago, but his fig tree

is healthier than ever—we had some pines culled,

and it's bulling into the new light.

I'm 70 myself now, younger than he was then,

but weeding around it today, spraying the poison ivy,

bending, uprooting, there's wheeze in my breath, there's wince

in my bones; I've begun, just this year, to feel old.

*Ray,* I was calling him by that visit,

adult to adult. As we had all

begun to: his children; his grandchildren. And all of us

had Ray's fig-trees: wherever we settled, he planted cuttings.

The original shaded the house where I grew up;

it's the first one gone, now: the new owners

uprooted his whole orchard. Perhaps,

after we're gone, his children and his grandchildren,

whoever comes after us will do the same to ours.

He had to smuggle our cutting into America,

in a suitcase that got lost on the trip back.

Today, a new green, thumb-slim limb

bows low and bobbles,

as I finger two spring nubs, and uncover two others,

criss-crowned with leaves—four fat baby syconia.

The best crop we've had in years, I'm betting.

*Well, Ray,* I tell his tree, *I guess you're not dead yet.*

Originally published in *Streetlight Magazine.* I rarely invent much of anything when I write about my family, although there are a few poetic exceptions..

How We Quit The Future Suicides Club

Rob Polk and I thought we’d be dead by 21. Tuesdays and Thursdays, we declared ourselves a club, and convened during lunch in the Comp. Lit. classroom. What one confessed the other chorused *yes* to, weighing each line against the heart’s soft counter, to listen for the loophole that could matter more than nothing did. Mostly what I found to love was rain: walking out into the dark to watch the rain kick-step and drub the tarmac to a sheen of stars. And words—night, rain, and words; dear words.

Brooding on things, we hatched what might be jokes. We plucked from Rob’s coats the blond slough of his girlfriend’s hair, to braid Rob Polk a noose. We hung out by the Grace Street Trust, to watch for mobsters we might go down in a blaze of glory to.

But all I saw that redeemed much of anything was rain: rain’s slop of light in the naves of streetlamps, rain in a shop’s spilled neons. Rain tinting the backs of shadows. Rain and the poetries of rain: Plath, Hopkins. In rain-fatted notebooks, my own first words for rain: my words*.*

Rob took a summer job in men's wear, selling frock coats. Which they required he dress in; which tickled him, he said: as if for some funeral that never came. He met me

at the pub in silk tails and resigned. *Time, please,* and my dear, good, mad friend Rob Polk caught the train. I paced a bus-stop's cage, waiting for my last bus out, as the rain

spilled its rosaries on the tin-topped shelter: its kyries, its itch of ticking…

At last, nineteen, at college, it began to ease. I made slightly saner friends. I became a saner friend. Though for months yet I might cross against the light with a kazoo, still daring whatever came to squish me as I wheezed Chopin's *Marche funèbre*. (My barbaro to the rain’s piano. Drab drips tickling the camber.) A part of me, I suspect, may jaywalk those streets till doomsday. Let's hope though with some kindred jester—sodden with noise and rain. hey ho, but tightroping a braid of tough friendship home. Our thin shared dark, our spit of song, our chug of breath.

First published in *WAM: the Friendship issue*. Rob Polk may be semi-fictional, but the Future Suicides Club was real. An embarrassingly large part of this poem is, in fact, faithfully autobiographical