

# Unstill Life

a selection of poems  
by Maurice Oliver

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## Bio

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After almost a decade of working as a freelance photographer in Europe, Maurice Oliver returned to America in 1990 to work for the Los Angeles Times. Then, in 1995, he made a lifelong dream reality by traveling around the world for eight months. But instead of taking pictures, he used the same acute creative energy to record the experience in a journal, which eventually became dozens of poems. And so began his ambition to be a poet.

He presently resides in Portland, Oregon, where he works as a tutor.

## Acknowledgements

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Some of the poems in this collection have appeared in / at:

Alba Magazine  
diceybrown.com  
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bullfightreview.com  
inhalation.com  
J'Attends  
sentinelpoetry.org.uk  
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## **Borrowing From Zero**

---

Galaxies run from us  
using secret passages  
padded in miracles that  
sparkle like stars.

But in the shorter  
version they simply  
rip in half, giving  
birth to twins that  
later reappear as  
trolls & elves.

## Erode

---

Oh no, this ain't  
no place for timid  
nuns from Walla Walla  
or pacifists moonlighting  
as priests, even if they're  
just passing through  
with crumpled train tickets  
tucked away in the heel  
of their shoe, and even  
if they're dazzled by  
the authentic arrivals  
and departures mounted  
on art deco facades,  
they'd still have to be  
deaf and dumb not to  
heed the recorded  
announcement warning  
all travelers to  
"beware of pickpockets"  
broadcasted periodically  
from overhead loudspeakers,  
first in flawless French  
followed by something  
resembling English

## **Furiously Yes**

---

With only one bottle of indigo  
between us we draw a paisley  
pattern inside a golden tress  
the intricate design of angles  
that swirl we use loops to  
describe our feelings speckled  
& let imagination flow freely  
in furious holographs mirroring life  
posed fur on an elbow light-hearted  
to somewhere between camphor & soot  
or tacked to rigid rubber & lace  
we trace seeping darkness in strokes  
through the silt & marl of humankind  
until nothing more can do done so  
in boredom we release the mute button  
then sit back with microwave popcorn  
as Alfalfa in perfect cowlick  
& a skimpy hand-me-down suit sings  
"iminthemoodforlove."

## Telekinetic

---

You're wrong  
ashes I have heard  
downloaded e-mailed  
to friends & it's  
designed to be tough  
with features ascending  
into permanent records  
almost inextinguishable  
it holds the sky in place  
packed in birth-breathing  
life then canned  
in an urn it describes  
the entrails of  
complete prophecies  
as we chop our own wood

## Steinway Smile

---

Swept upon the bank of the Ganges. It's an old  
cut. Or a lemon peel. Trying to guess what tree  
he planted. The trio plays "Fine & Mellow." Ice  
melting to sepia ... so anoint the smooth torso.  
Come back to bed. Yeah I said so. Saints are  
praised. Memory turns out the light. After the  
flagellation. Vodka spills in a quiet stream.  
Dragging tin and plastic. We anticipate.

## Sonnet #1

---

Bent in a box  
love dreams at  
the curtain  
A cat licks  
another cat's  
face on the bed  
Some hybrid of  
blackbirds can  
no longer sing  
In time someone  
drags the paint  
brush across an  
invisible canvas  
Until robbery  
sits on the royal  
court robed in  
intramural splendor  
"Bist du mein?" said  
the platform to  
the waiting train

## Horizooms

---

Later that day mind moves in the highchair  
causing piano to roll for the sake of it  
adrift across wyoming in topeka dungarees  
wedded in bells at the armpit on toehooks  
this click aims for claws then fish fins  
that surface spellbound in hungry hiccups  
bending the glass bow to water the planet  
energy points then runs along the thigh  
so nine rattlers can hangout on a clothesline  
as hordes of comets shrink to quarry rocks.

## Synchrotone

---

Red turns out to be a dreadful thing  
hanging from an ornate lamppost changing  
into keys on a brass hook beside the door  
arched in the sweet heels of possibilities  
then hinged by the forces memory may alter  
red tethers in the shade at the lips of yes  
where april appears in thin world in hard crumbs  
a brief exchange is made by the pond  
of inscriptions left open to wade across.

## **J' Attends**

---

Whisper stumbles awkwardly upon the ear  
in a real landscape someone has invented  
where aliens sweep down from painted skies  
wearing hero smiles edged in palest blue  
they woop & poke & harass a forest  
sealed in approximate light pine-scented  
between colored stones that have no value  
the monkey is allowed to speak in its place  
while acrobats reappear by the letter "B"  
to perform before viewers all expendable.

## **O.P.M. Hymn #1**

---

All through night puddles of quick sketches  
the feathers and ashes the church marquee  
flashing its burden of ruth onto a graffiti  
in a radio ministry perfume & dye-free  
one goosefoot to glory twists & shouts  
its equivocal nature in clipped wings  
& from these very voices emerge  
a white wailing relief  
all intended as a reminder that Sunday  
is trash night

## Uroboros

---

By afternoon angles appear in the crystal  
to rumble by the memory of triumphant rome  
each of them high baroque & pomp-free  
wearing psychedelic lips from a fairytale ad  
they eye a glint of glory strewn in cornucopia  
as grand as any sealed in the coy cockpit  
of a turnpike signal the headset frees hands  
to wander into the off yonder but not far  
unfurling rumpled *fragorios* as goodwill tokens  
in lazy smiles that cover even enormous rooms.

## **It Turns Or Rotates**

---

To think we almost took it home

She imagines his hands on the wheel. Then a  
forest of trees appear composed of rocket  
fuel. Sunlight drools on the pane. The story  
of clouds passing is constantly revised.  
Gosh, you suppose we could wade in ...

The only time Spring needed an introduction  
I could be your flashlight or feral saint

All day a piece of roofing slaps in the wind  
Next daybreak precedes with equal wonder

Somethings simply flourish at a distance  
Not living anyone's life

I dare you.

## Equation Without Flowers

---

A sign tells you  
where to park. Later,

in a letter from Tim  
he writes, "experts

say dreams don't mean  
a thing." She imagines

a lush garden within  
herself. On a hill

above the landing  
strip a sky hovers

at the edge of an  
afternoon snow.

The remains of an  
ancient fence is now

just a half-hearted  
gesture. In a painting

oiled in bruised years  
a neighbor stares from

his porch. No one's been  
buried here in years.

## **Innocuous**

---

It arrives on tip-toe two nights later  
to sleepwalk through my dream still crazy  
wearing hindu pajamas & a minstrel dingdong  
it squeezes into a pair of bedroom slippers  
then smooths out a narrative in slow motion  
as folds of light lace the walls of the room  
prying open a most uncommonly empty world  
where inkblots grow rabbit ears of passion  
as ceramic spaniels faint on the mantelpiece  
and thumbnails of nincompoops pass for monks.

## "Flight Pattern" Sonnet

---

A flight over  
cairo during  
a sand storm  
Oil hissing  
on its own  
Chalk dust  
up my nose  
Arc angels  
singing in  
the shadows  
Two flies  
in the bowl  
of soup  
Muzak fills  
every tight  
corner  
Dusk comes  
like a  
mystery  
A herd of  
gazelles  
stand panting  
One list of  
a billion  
befores

## **Hoodwink**

---

From the window above we watch  
as the traveling circus of foreign numbers  
pulls up to the curb of a glossy horizon  
in full brass of horns and horse flank  
with no past to adore their engines idle  
as each vehicle lines up caravan-style  
while head counts are taken on an abacus  
completely oblivious to the no parking zone  
clearly marked with indivisible paint.

## Hellas

---

While driving down the highway of realism  
a traffic light flashes red twice presto  
you appear like a gargoyle floating  
in the corner of my room speaking fluent  
salamander in a voice that falls like hair  
your moving hillside could fool a town  
as you lip-sync the words to postmodern  
bourgeois notions of a gypsy necklace  
that you make-up as you go along  
then later on erase your way out of.

## Unstill Life

---

Maybe the soul flies out of the mouth

A fox. Stunned by light. Make mine brothel  
soup. Parts only air. Some think it joins  
the clamor of it's kind. That's about as likely as  
Ghaddafi marrying Streisand

Then why not have your palm read.  
In footage of mud unreeling through my mind.

So somethings exist but are not realized  
Imagine a thaw bigger than true bliss

(like graceful gazelles)

in leaps of faith

## **Anomie**

---

Perhaps, if forced  
to continue one  
would follow the other  
reaching deep into  
the fabric of analyzes  
in intricate cross-stitches  
of permutational voids  
so whole fabrications  
can sew sequences  
into mute syllabics  
creating elegant parodies  
like a fashionable flaw  
wearing beauty's  
sweetest dress and  
the rest is boutique

## Embellishments

---

With a flick of panacea to spark our dreams  
we embark on a drive-in ecstasy that floats  
pass house cats a rib roast & one comet  
locking into the tight grip of kindness  
this flight through a ticking landscape  
dotted in organ echoes could easily span  
all of canada if decoded but would still  
look like oklahoma dust on a car hood.

## Devoutly Mute

---

A newspaper  
still on  
the steps  
Behind heavy  
chenille  
curtains  
An open book  
of fifty-odd  
pages  
Several sepia  
photographs  
of a frail  
child posed  
Scented  
candles on  
the mantle  
One tray  
of hot tea  
& sweet cakes  
In muddy shoes  
meant for  
the forest  
Two figures  
in red hats  
Until trees  
erase them

## Grand Narrative Or Imagine Japan

---

Armed mannequins patrol the peepholes.

People wake to find spoons in their hair.  
As if drawn by a magnet, the past sticks  
like cotton candy. Even with Osaka  
around its dazzle will make you dizzy.  
Shh! This way!

And she thought the clouds were tissue paper.  
A valve hisses & the chrysanthemums applaud.

Turn the world & the footnote is green  
with plastic flames trying to poke through.

Inside the late afternoon  
as it stalls & then drifts darkward.

Sublime.

## **Bad Disguises**

---

Several years later Friday night arrives  
without a suitcase, wearing shaving cream  
as a mask and wrinkled clothes, too,  
out-of-style for even the cha-cha-cha,  
but the silly sunglasses and the cheap  
sweat-stained panama hat pulled down low  
doesn't fool me one bit. I'd know  
it by that slow pull in its walk or  
simply by the unmistakable cling of an  
arsenal of cockroach bombs that bang  
together in its pockets all the way up  
the hill to the convenience store.

## **"Rear Window" Sonnet**

---

Headlights smear  
across the  
moving train  
Vines grow  
against the  
cemetery wall  
Two deer the  
color of dirt  
Ornate fountains  
blow mist  
into a rainbow  
After several  
hot kisses  
up the thigh  
Forested hills  
blanketed  
in snow  
Bugs bash  
the windshield  
Until the  
telephone pole  
becomes an orange

## **Absolute Or Complete**

---

With dull scissors we cut out a new realm  
using rolls of blank paper hung on a stage  
then pasted with the sticky glue of day  
we create our own photo exterior in j-curves  
bits of steel showing under paint burnt red  
add palm trees in the background tin candles  
and a box of foreign matches travel with us  
striking up a magic as insistent as birdsong  
scents of basil fresh laundry & june roses  
while two stagehands carry the last mirror away

## **Smut Cheater**

---

Even at night with no lights on,

A baby cracks the mirror. Let's just pretend.  
I'm a dick dish who becomes a dog leash. I  
said "zoo" not "theme park." Smut cheater. Let  
the back door hit you.

An albino vamp with one egg too many.  
Blue vase. Sky. Lake.

People often sleep in the rented houseboats  
in a brand new pair of peek-a-boos.

(do you crime around here much?)

Say yes

## Information Film

---

by the time glitter begins to fade  
it's already '62 and the birds  
that peck inside my head have become  
just three cars on a turnpike  
driving at night with highbeams on  
they collide with cordon bleu  
le rouge & le noir in vast geometries  
allowing toast to spread across the map  
and arrive by train at gare d'amiens  
with just an overnight bag one shackle  
a bright bulb of promise & no return ticket  
cautiously going forward without vibration  
in a low murmur with a slit up the side  
it purchases several sweet cakes  
and a pack of Gitanes while I search for  
a pay phone disoriented by foreign sound  
and completely unaware of two projectors  
behind my eyes as objects rotate  
and then reflect several different times

## Venus Poses

---

Yellow apples on a rug  
Like white spots on dominoes  
Drop into an imaginary paradise  
With an urge to talk dirty  
the story unfolds a nylon noon  
kneeling entwined human splosh  
flower finger  
Hands that surround  
speech chemistry  
Petals that curve upward

## Virtue

---

In a lesson in virtue  
the martyr trades his wings  
for a day at the beach where  
he strolls past the lighthouse  
with real sand in his shoes  
taped to the tidepool of mercy  
where one look at his reflection  
is all it takes to realize that  
somehow he's been gulled

## Luftballoon

---

Life licks its small box adrift over Dresden  
and suddenly everything mushrooms after that  
as motormouth shatters each known adjective  
in clouded words that stain in the lining of love  
dressed in the wrong costume for the occasion  
before a cast of real people cut from magazines  
it lists culprits in tiny bubbles of spit  
in two separate acts followed by intermission  
then finally the postcard from nowhere arrives  
to replace the horizon after just one take

## Re-Visioning Our See

---

After I tighten her screws I say  
something moves overhead  
    all the time  
and you can watch too  
    now lean your head back  
& think about this idea  
    for a few seconds: at around  
two or whenever we need another break  
we'll watch the stars shoot each other  
    & like hey if we're lucky  
we might even see one tumble  
earthward then get stuck  
on the corrugated fence out back  
    its happened before  
last time I watched until  
all the glow died out oh yeah  
that reminds me better take  
an extra pair of 3-D glasses  
    just in case  
the part facing us  
is the night side

## Adjacent Promenade

---

Sixty-eight state poppies  
A slobbering madonna nods twice  
'Till marshes resemble stanzas  
In darkness with no instructions  
a parody historicism's fatuity  
newly flared in cuffs nickel slots

peep peck  
Rub-on a little future  
dreamathon  
dancesteps  
Little worlds are images

## Action Figures

---

Make everything an horizon  
Fans spin out a revolution  
An hourglass instead of a lantern  
In cahoots with the future  
an entity round like wishes  
upside down unscathed a journey  
soft sift  
insignias  
brushstrokes  
With things poking out

## **Exhausted Chorus**

---

the dream seminar is finished. It's in costume.  
I wear street clothes. Soon the world will fold  
like a napkin ... in armored stain glass that  
threatens to explode in a procreation of red.  
There is no horizon. I could be pure distance.  
Or something to lose. In the lungs, the belly,  
the groin, a vivid and liquid ritual magnified  
into a forcefield. Divine fixation.

## **Drawing Motifs**

---

You hardly ever see deer coming

watching Joan Rivers sell jewelry on tv. It's  
like a drunken dance then fall. If lust opens  
doors then does alcohol speed up the process?

Everything about it is mysterious

And then put some skull in that blonde.  
He responds with a smile.

Civilization should be an act of transition

I say the sentence should fit the crime

(so long as a muscle moves)

see the possibilities

## Strange Ceiling

---

Nor is it just  
that I lick to  
taste the bitter  
looking for a  
beautiful box  
to be sick in  
all I find is  
a stinkhole  
that sucks down  
to a chipped  
cesspool where  
debris is fiesta  
mystique & things  
remain basic blue  
sealed in laryngitis  
it shelters a purple  
whip of a tongue &  
says it's a comedian  
so I bring my own  
background music  
& die laughing  
in vendetta gear  
violet or violent?

## Colors

---

By slow degrees colors flake  
in sly erasures of paint bright  
enough to eat we smear them  
over a canvas with our thumbs  
while a group of wiry brushes  
look on never once objecting

## A Genre Fable

---

The scanty sacred secret gets lucky  
on just the first try & feels  
something catch not with a click  
or noisy multiple snaps in rows  
but more like a confident clasp  
that fastens to crows & clouds  
& cartwheels propelled into  
a bright red bruised sky where  
a gyre of dust swirls underfoot  
the farther down the farther back  
so that before the firing squad  
has a chance to take aim  
gold coins fall through the snow  
while the world of spoken words  
gets drowsy & that's a good sign

## O.P.M. Hymn #7

---

And though my birds be worn    you wild july  
there's still a myth of memories    airborne  
with bats in the vestibule    fleshed in velvet  
this migration of the mind    bashes scarecrows  
prolific as pigeon droppings    endures storms  
for fields of sunflower seeds    upwind  
and clouds of gnat eyes    ten abreast  
to settle on an acre of raspberry bushes  
completing this predestined flight  
in wings stitched by hand

## **Graffiti Spirit-Tags**

---

In the final form it's all metaphor  
The adult skin matted in camouflage  
The bony arm unable to articulate  
The book marker intent on willowing  
Repeated in gathered passages  
Then reflected in a holy mirror  
As shiny as bayonets spearing  
At anything that moves  
Between every otherwise  
And a shorter version  
Until the voice of reason  
Makes its intentions known