

Love Surrounds You
Like a Posse
in Bulletproof Vests

poems by **Howie
Good**

Howie Good, a journalism professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz, is the author of 12 previous poetry chapbooks, including most recently *My Heart Draws a Rough Map* from The Blue Hour Press and *Ghosts of Breath* from Bedouin Books. He has been nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize and five times for the Best of the Net anthology. His first full-length book of poetry, *Lovesick*, was released in 2009 by Press Americana. He is co-editor of the online literary journal *Left Hand Waving*.

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PEASANT WARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A cottage in the woods.
A woman weeping at the table.

A wolf with eyes like red slits
spying through the window.

A wood-cutter passing,
an ax on his shoulder

and his thoughts faraway.
Another night on earth

preparing to fall.

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This one is for Dale Wisely,
elegant poet, wise editor, good friend

SIGNS

1

How the crocuses
bustle about –

dumpy cafeteria ladies
in blue hairnets

2

Sunning
in the garden

among the unsure
sprouts

of early spring

our cat sits
and licks

its murderous
paws

LOVE NOTE ON CHEAP PAPER

Every day has become
something like crossing

the time zones of hell,
a feeling of being sullenly

present in the world,
and even then by proxy,

when all I only want to see
is what might be seen

if my heart were a lantern:
a red tree, blue horses, you.

WHAT THE TELEVISION SAW

Fire splashed up at us. Please don't yell at me, I said. No amount of coaxing could get the canary lying on the bottom of the cage to sing. What looked like snow or ashes were scraps of paper on which good deeds had been recorded. The fireman remembered it as a turquoise building, with its pants around its ankles. Someone covered the holes in the screen with electrical tape, but night still got in. We held each other. The fireman raised his ax. The television stared back at him in awe as a crown of flies revolved around his head.

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LOVE SURROUNDS YOU LIKE A POSSE IN BULLETPROOF VESTS

A new teller at the drive-
through window,

she wants proof
you're who you are,

a stream of despondent electrons,
light of the same

crumbly consistency
as the snowflakes melting

in the lonely blackness
of a girl's hair.

ELEGY FOR THE UNADOPTED

I was resting on the flowered couch after work. You were there, too, nursing someone else's baby. We heard a noise like the sky emptying black baseballs from its pockets. We thought about hiding the baby in the basement. Or in the field behind the house among the mournful eyes of meat cows. It's so long ago now, but the birds at the feeder still talk about it, how night scratched at the door and I let it in rather than go searching for some matches and a candle.

IN THE CITY OF BAD DREAMS

I walk past spies and assassins
without knowing it, and no matter

into which doorway I step,
there's a heap of rags

that might be a person.
Everywhere I go I meet men

with the same name.
What happened? I ask.

Doesn't matter, they say.
Now that the moon has turned

the yellow of crime scene tape,
I don't quite believe them.

To teach superstition
as truth is a terrible thing.

SONG #4

But on a morning
when my wife,

so softly dented,
stands naked

in front of the closet,
still deciding

between the dark blue
and the black,

I resolve who I am
like the last calamitous

emperor of Rome
writing

profusely on the ground
with a red

can of shaving cream
love and without

quotation marks.

WINDOW LIGHT

And I wondered,

as the wind stirred,
suddenly full of plans,

if the window
was ever content
with this view.

REFRIGERATE AFTER OPENING

When I wake at last from a hundred-year nap,
my wife is still on the phone

attempting to reason
with the Disputes Department,

and our daughter,

the beautiful, black-haired barista
who lives in a distant city,

is finishing up a double shift.
Her back was turned to me

throughout my dream,
her sun-brown shoulders shaking

as if she were crying.
Was it the small table of ghosts

that so upset her,
or had she seen reflected in the metal surfaces

water birds stumbling about on land?
Nothing is more stupidly honest than failure.

The spruce tree may become a cello,
but the heart chokes on its own blood.

ANOMALIES

1

The young look at me with curiosity –
one might even say anxiety –
my heart leaking green brake fluid,
and the queen of nothing on her knees
drinking from the puddle.

2

But who was it,
was it you,

who had the question

mark removed
from my typewriter

and buried
at night without
ceremony

LEFT RIGHT LEFT

You're already halfway home or more
when you remember you forgot the baby

in a shopping cart in the vast parking lot.
Oh, they'll wail, how could you?

And saying your brain was temporarily
deprived of oxygen isn't a good answer.

So, of course, you look with newfound seriousness
for a place to turn around, but there is none,

only the thud of night smashing into your windshield.

All you can do now is drive faster and faster
through the sirens and confusion, the hairless face

of the cretinous moon beaming over your left –
no, your right – no, your left – shoulder.

SMALL DOGS LIVE LONGER

A double-yellow line
means one thing
when you're driving
on this side of the border,

but another
when you're the passenger,
your hands lying
uselessly in your lap

and the bored children
in the back seat foolishly
insisting on asking,
as the road turns north

and then disappears
among the barbwire trees,
why you named them
for people who were dead.

EPITAPH FOR A DEAD BOUQUET

Here's something I was interested to learn
talking to another man in line:

it's possible to break your jaw
merely by laughing.

He smiled without showing his teeth,
and I felt a familiar emptiness,

as when voices float down at dusk
from the barred windows of Juvenile Hall,

or the shadow of the photographer
falls crookedly across the child in a photo,

or minutes turn into days,
and days into nine leafless oaks.

THE SECRET POLICEMEN'S BALL

Ever since magic fell into disuse,
I wake up every morning

in the same room but a different city,
the buildings a bright blur,

like something out of a secret policeman's
florid conception of heaven,

a place where millions
anxiously spy on each other

from between their fingers
and all you can hear is

the yapping of small dogs.

LEFT LANE MUST TURN LEFT

There was a time I might've enjoyed the tang of truck exhaust following me home, or the boarded-up windows of a discount liquor store. Then tick-borne diseases in fitted choir robes climbed down from the scaffold and disappeared into the crowd. I sat on the curb heartbroken. In theory every sequence of moves ought to be reversible. But somewhere it's always the summer after mom died, and raining, and the rain is passing notes to us through a slit in the ground.

SPRING, DELAYED

Birdsong alarm
don't cry

I can feel broken idols
change trains

upturned hands
forfeit fire

uncle decay still trying

shhh tree
sleep