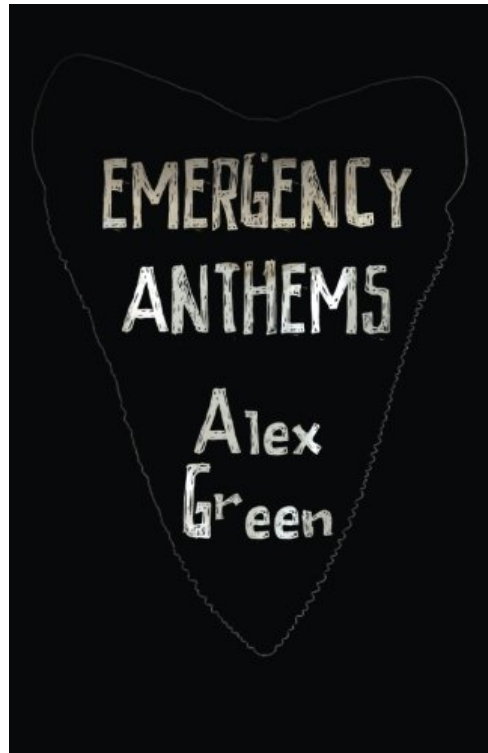


Note: In 2006 my dear friend and editor, Alex Green, completed a collection of poetry titled *We All Sort of Got What We Wanted*, and he asked me to write an introduction. Almost ten years later, in January 2015, Brooklyn Arts Press published *Emergency Anthems*, which included many of the poems Alex had written for *We All Sort of Got What We Wanted*. *Emergency Anthems* was published without an introduction.



Can a poem be a shark? The ghost of a shark? Its bite releasing over time, or always waiting offshore? Swimming beside us? In 1988 in Rochester, NY – a terrain and climate as removed as possible from the tear-streaked beaches and verdant suburbs of Alex Green’s poems – I was fortunate enough to take a class with the poet, Dave Mason, who told us we must memorize poetry in order to kill time waiting for ferries between the Greek Islands. At this behest, I memorized Philip Larkin’s “This Be the Verse”: “They fuck you up your mom and dad/they don’t mean to but they do...” To this day my hurried recitation of Larkin’s three-verse ode to dysfunctional families is a source of private amusement and a party trick far more impressive and literate than a balloon animal.

A few years earlier I had purchased my first Walkman, or my parents had purchased my first Walkman for me. This was prior to the birth of the CD, which, like love, as we’ve oft been told, should last forever, and also long before I became an inveterate record collector and committed myself to vinyl. For me, back then, in the shore break of the early Eighties, my favorite band was the Who, which meant my favorite poet was Pete Townshend, and I remember buying *Quadrophenia*, both the album and the soundtrack

to the movie, and on a long drive from northern New Jersey to Hampshire College in central Massachusetts, where we delivered my brother to tennis camp, I sat in the back of my parents' Peugeot 505 and played both cassettes over and over. Both are gone, now that I've joined the light-speed parade into the digital age (I'm limping along), but should I find those worn little workhorses on a Southern California beach, or perhaps in a Sinai cave, stacked atop a heretofore undiscovered gospel, I would pocket them, take them home, polish them up and place them on a shelf. Those songs were, and always will be, on the list of my summertime anthems.

Digression! Yes, but what are we but the sum of these digressions, the maps we create, that we groove into the earth, as our hearts lead us astray, as our tastes change, as we thicken and darken? As Townshend wrote, "here by the sea and sand, nothing ever goes as planned..." I haven't yet made it to the Greek Islands, and "This Be The Verse" is the only Larkin poem I've memorized, but I remember a bus ride through the Algarve, circa summer 1992: I was bereft of my Walkman and my first love (entirely my fault), and I sang Jackson Browne's "Fountain of Sorrow" to myself as I watched the parched and hilly landscape stretch alongside the highway: "...you were turning around to see who was behind you/and I took your childish laughter by surprise/and the moment that my camera happened to find you/there was just a trace of sorrow in your eyes". My life has been a collection of digressions, a compilation. The anthems change but never disappear, and if I'm anyone at all, I'm the 19 year-old who sat at his desk at the University of Rochester, in front of an old Technics turntable, and dropped the needle again and again at the beginning of The Replacements' "Kiss Me on the Bus," because, for the hour or so that I played that song, I couldn't do anything else: I had no choice. A digression, of course, but these *moments*. There is rapture to be had, ecstasies; the ignition of our imagination only awaits the twist of the key, the press of one's foot upon the pedal.

What I want to provide here are the liner notes to Alex Green's contribution to the Great American songbook. This is some of the most beautiful poetry I have ever read, so passionate, so evocative (feline in its movement), so precise (canine in its attentiveness), so straight up and inarguably *good* it makes me giggle when I read it. The word stunning applies here; these are poems that sizzle. In Archibald McLeish's "Ars Poetica", by now so famous it should have its own exit, we read, "a poem should be palpable and mute." Fie! A poem should sing, it should be palpable and full-throated, melodious, a song you can't get out of your head, the soundtrack playing therein as you stand above the blue Ionian Sea, waiting for your ferry to Ithaca – something you can sing. There is no lovelier music for the quiet of your lonely room, for the wee small hours of the morning, for the deck of the ferry. As Alex writes in "Outside Tucker Luminar", "you just want to stand in the feathers of the foundation and lift the ashes into the air like a million dollars." Simply put, I love Alex's poems the way I love my favorite songs. These poems sing like a train on its rails.

So maybe a poem can be a shark? Like Brassai or Hopper, Alex captures darkness, nights, those underwater hours when we are most uncertain, when we can feel our exuberance, our hope, stagger like a boxer surprised by his own fisticuffs, that first slant and stumble when we realize we may not remain on fire. If we are lucky we live a burning youth; these are poems about our mortal shift toward adulthood, shadowy and desiccated where, from time to time, we singe ourselves on these embers. If we live with our truths, the truths Alex delineates in this slim volume, we are damaged photographs, cracked, underexposed, overexposed and burnt out, hanging in battered frames. "Later when he sleeps," Alex writes, "he longs for the nasty thrills of old crimes." For better or for worse, we are living in a swirl of our ashes: "sharks burst from shipwrecks and start looking." We are a history of shipwrecks, perhaps, chum for the ravages of memory. Alex's poems are cities built of palaces, as smooth as vinyl, fountains, but they throw punches like middleweights and they swim like bullets when they sniff the thinnest stream of blood; in their presence, you will keep no secrets. "though wish and world go down," ee cummings wrote, "one poem yet shall swim."

The best poetry reads like a secret language in which you are already fluent. Alex's poems are a map of a world fully-realized; its colors derive from Oscar Bluemner and Matisse, but its geometry is straight from Cezanne, the kind of shapes that withstand the press of your fingertips, that neither bend nor buckle. Alex is an illusionist, a magician – he tricks you into his ethers, saws you in half, makes you think this world is extant and, sad and darkling as it is, makes you wish you lived there, that its loveliness might always be yours. Once you've read these poems, you will memorize their species of light. They are muscular and sharp, pushing through thick water with a flick of the tail, the slice of a dorsal fin, sleek and streamlined, the break of a bite, a diagram of blood on the sand, the end of summer.

Lift these poems off the beach and put them to your ear, listen to the echoes of the greats: the loveliness of cummings, the desperate romance of early Leonard Cohen, the playful, vivid language of John Ashbery or Jim Carroll. Here's Cavafy, "The God Abandons Antony":

listen – your final delectation – to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

Here's Langston Hughes, a six-line poem, "Summer Passing":

Because you are to me a song
I must not sing you over-long.

Because you are to me a prayer
I cannot say you everywhere.

Because you are to me a rose –
You will not stay when summer goes.

Reading Alex's poems, we find ourselves in the midst of an ecstatic geography, somewhere between Serguesa and the rest of our lives. It is always August, dusk, and we are haunted by calendars and clocks. These are poems that rekindle our love for language and its possibilities, flags of triumph for those of us who still believe that words can be as evocative, as cinematic, as shimmering, as musical as any other medium. I want to stuff myself full of Alex's poetry. It makes me feel better. It makes me believe. Could life be this vivid? This lovely? This sad?

So is a poem a shark? Or a baby fox? Or a baby, baby, baby fox? Or a sinkhole in Santa Monica? The bloodless shoulder blades of your ex-girlfriend? A shipwreck? A species of light? A grove of moments? We seek some clarification from Louis Simpson, who sort of addresses these issues in "American Poetry":

Whatever it is, it must have
A stomach that can digest
Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.

Like the shark, it contains a shoe.
It must swim for miles through the desert
Uttering cries that are almost human.

Uranium? Moons? Cries that are almost human? There's a thing in the woods, the city's gone silver, and it's been dusk so long they're thinking of calling it a season.

Toward the end of *The Bushwhacked Piano*, Thomas McGuane's first novel, McGuane writes:

"A famous man says that we go through life with a diminishing portfolio of enthusiasms: and these, these these children, these these these these little children, will soon not be able to feel this way about anything again." (p.111)

It's a novel I love very much, but I find it hard to agree with this particular coda. Here's an abridged version of the fourth poem in *We All Sort of Got What We Wanted*, "Birthday Poem in B-Flat":

The next day you stand
with the beekeeper's son
and stare up at the hive.
It throbs and breathes
like an organ doing what it's supposed to do.

Later the bees are gone, but nothing has changed.
It's still summer, it's still June,
you still hate your life so much
you can taste it on the back of your throat.

And in every dream the hive is bigger;
in every dream, breathless against the branches
the beekeeper's son raises it to the sky,
and it lifts him above the house.

And this is what Alex's poetry does. It takes me above the houses.

David A. Porter
New York, NY
April 2006