

# An excerpt from *Only What's Imagined*

## THE RIGHT WORDS

-for Jim

When I was a kid  
and something bad happened to a neighbor  
I tried to stay away until things had blown over:  
I didn't know what to say.

My grandfather cut his left thumb clean off  
with a table saw. He was a carpenter  
making someone a table. He drove himself  
to the hospital twelve miles

holding his red hand out the window at red lights  
so traffic would know to let him through.  
I didn't want to see him, no matter  
that I loved him, hell, that made it harder,

but he was in our driveway before I knew  
he was even out of the hospital  
and before I could hug him or hide  
he told me his thumb-stump had grown a new nail.

"Wanna see?" Tongue frozen  
I nodded and saw  
he held to his turbaned thumb  
a six-penny nail from his shop.

A friend at a fancy dinner  
asked her three-year-old son  
who had just, by accident, farted loudly,  
"Johnny, what do you say?"

The guests had paused in their talk  
to study their reflections in the consommé.

The astonished child replied:  
"Thank you."

What *does* one say, what *are* the right words?  
My friend just lost half his house to a fire.  
I said: "You're so calm.  
I'd be throwing a fit."

He replied in a way that comforted me:  
"I've thrown it already."

## MOONLIGHT

The boss thinks  
    I'm devoted to my family.  
At home they say  
    I'm married to my work.

## LEAF PEEPERS

New Mercedes van  
with Jersey plates,  
stuffed with tourists  
scowling at a conifer:

"Damn.  
We got here too early!"

## THIS IS GROSS

but I cough up a good one  
and whistle-thrust it through my lips  
into the blazing furnace fire  
where it catches halfway up a maple chunk  
and sleazes into a giant teardrop  
before starting to sizzle.

This is gross but it begins to puff up,

having sealed and trapped sufficient air  
to expand it to the size and shape  
of a giant cocoon: it seems to pop  
but returns from half inflated to its greatest girth  
repeatedly, breathing like a heart confused.

At last I understand how fire might make the parts of life  
and from the popping seed they issue, rudiments of speech.

### THE ULTIMATE COMMUTE

Every day, same time, he sees her car  
on the two lane highway, approaching his car  
as they drive to their jobs in opposite directions.  
He memorizes her license plate,  
he falls in love  
with that sensuous face in the windshield  
and those two, tenuous hands on the wheel,  
always in the proper ten-til-two-o'clock position,  
glimpsed each day  
as they whistle past each other  
to their work in opposite directions.

How can he meet her?  
He lacks the courage to call her license number in  
to Motor Vehicles and ask for her name,  
address, home phone and marital status  
or some details on the color of her eyes,  
at forty miles per hour plus forty miles per hour  
in the opposite direction, that's eighty miles per hour  
at ten feet the closest they've ever been,  
it's a miracle he even knows she's pretty,  
or is he imagining that, too?  
And willing?

So the complications are daunting.  
The only reason he doesn't leave his job  
is he'd miss this Mondays through Friday most weeks,  
daily, instantaneous rendezvous,  
no more than five seconds

from spotting her grill to seeing the tail lights  
in the rearview mirror.  
He's started to dread the weekends  
because he knows she loves these meetings too.  
Wasn't that a weak smile she managed  
and a tentative wave of the fingertips,

a moment of danger when one hand  
nearly left the wheel in a hot flash,  
tempestuous, impetuous, and  
for that moment vulnerable I'm sure?  
The whole expression was Be My Friend  
but in her embarrassment she missed  
his reciprocation the next day and the next:  
he carried a yellow rose by the stem  
between his teeth, thorns sometimes spiking  
the roof of his mouth and one day at work  
he nursed a pierced lip.

He knows that on the hottest days of all,  
when his trousers are thin and the top is down,  
she's probably wearing a short skirt  
and rubs herself as he does, suggestively,  
each out of sight of the other, maybe  
just a sentimental and funny reminder,  
maybe in lust lost on the highway  
each day where it begins,  
that little pep talk you can give yourself  
and with all your aging confidence you know  
she's giving herself too.

## PATH POEM

They say the daughter at birth has all the eggs  
she'll ever produce: the path is set at your mother's birth  
as other paths unfold like a lifeline  
in the gradual, almost imperceptible unclenching fist of time.

Some of these paths will come to coincidence:  
it might be the accident

of a flat tire that delays you just enough  
to miss the train that would have run you over,

and driving home with your suitcase stop at a bar  
to inspect the tire then decide to have one  
and meet a brilliant executive  
who takes you into her confidence and within the year

you're flying in a private jet, riding limousines  
with faultless tires and tuxedoed drivers  
who know the quickest route and where to drop you  
to celebrate time saved by such smart travel.

At times you think *you're* controlling the path,  
how else would anyone be so lucky  
if they weren't just plain smart:  
maybe a brilliant executive?

But you crave time so *you* can climb into the tuxedo  
and take *yourself* for a spin in the limousine,  
enduring the snooty stares at stoplights from people in normal cars  
who think you're a lowly chauffeur sporting about in the boss's rig.

Or maybe coming home that night  
your headlights catch the eyes of a cat working the roadside:  
it panics, running a path  
diagonal across the road, under your front tire.

At midnight there's no finding an owner,  
no one to comfort and thus make yourself feel better,  
the teary master in a nightshirt telling you between sobs,  
"It was only a cat."

Arriving home you slump from the vehicle  
and feel your way in the dark.  
You know the path can swing in front of fortune or misery  
or zag between the two a whole life.

That's why I keep my fingers crossed, it's a form of prayer.



*Geof Hewitt on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday: Photo by Ben Hewitt*

In 1966, his senior year at Cornell University, Geof Hewitt started The Kumquat Press to self-publish a pamphlet of his poems, *Poem & Other Poems*. His little press followed up with three issues of *Kumquat* (a poetry magazine), a series of letterpress poetry broadsides, and *Sphinx*, a pamphlet of poems by the outsider poet Alfred Starr Hamilton. From 1970-2000 the press lay dormant until, discouraged by a series of rejections, he revived the press to publish *Only What's Imagined*. The Vermont Arts

Council awarded him \$500, which he used to hire a designer, Maureen O'Connor Burgess, and his mentor/friend, the late poet Hayden Carruth, wrote the book's introduction and sent a check to support printing costs.

Prior to *Only What's Imagined*, Hewitt had published *Stone Soup* (Ithaca House, 1974) and *Just Worlds* (Ithaca House/The Greenfield Review Press, 1989). Since the year-2000 publication of *Only What's Imagined*, he has published *Hewitt's Guide to Slam Poetry and Poetry Slam* (Discover Writing Press, 2005), *The Perfect Heart: Selected & New Poems* (Mayapple Press, 2010) and a chapbook, *Affordable Poems, Alternative Facts* (Brown Fedora Books, 2019). The Kumquat Press has fallen dormant again, but its staff still distributes copies of *Only What's Imagined!* (\$15 postpaid, check payable to *Geof Hewitt*, mail your order to P.O. 51 Calais, VT 05648).

Born in New Jersey, Hewitt has lived in Vermont since 1970, where he has worked for the state arts council and for the Vermont Department of Education. Now retired, he is the state's reigning poetry-slam champion and offers writing and performance workshops throughout the state. He and his wife Janet Lind have two grown children and two adult grandsons.