



Shadow Poems

Rogan Wolf

Each of this collection's seven poems explores the idea that our shadows are not just a matter of the sun lying low. They contain the hidden aspects of who we are.

The concept is borrowed from the psychologist Carl Jung. He uses the term "shadow" as a metaphor for the unresolved aspects of ourselves. We can't escape them. Like our shadows, they follow us wherever we go, seeking reconciliation.

By definition, the shadow is the dark part of our identity, that part that lies behind the face we present, often outside our conscious awareness. Feared emotions might lie there, or repressed experience. Our far past, too, belongs in our shadow, our heritage, our inheritance, trailing behind us.

Our shadow dogs our path. The daemon. The desolate god.

I

I can say this with real pride :
no one but I
throws my shadow.

I call it my under-self, my field
of operation. I cannot
call it home.

I glimpse it sometimes, usually at night,
leaping the wet rocks
as the tall seas break and pursue ;

or poised for a moment on a bare sharp tree-top
calm after that stoop for eternity
out of the wind, the clutch of the mist ;

or sidling with gleeful expertise
through the ranks of the juggernauts -
that whole brutal caravan.

There is no holding it
no shaping nor naming of it ;
it is my best hope

the one element
that cannot be harmed
cannot be reduced.

All risk is survivable
and all manner of disaster
so long as my shadow plays.

It holds my true life
and will outlive me.
It will live forever.

My shadow leaps on me
each time I sleep -
to devour me.
Yet still my mornings
find me whole
and at each waking
there my shadow hangs
like an empty sack
against my wall -
wholly at my disposal.

Rogan Wolf
April 1994

It is not just you
I meet
as I enter -
that face you've fixed
for the world's alarms
those tools you deploy
for the day's display -
it's not only
your smile
that greets me
at the door -
your shadow
like an unrolling carpet
rushes across the floor
and flings itself into my arms.

These days your shadow
hits me like an unguided brick
whilst you in the distance
treading your private boards
shimmer like a child's fantasy
a mere colouration.
To which should I go
to seek redress ?
Which emptiness ?

How can I rendezvous
with this shadow you've disowned ?
How can I make love
to a shimmer, a mist ?

My shadow dogs me.
It furthers me
like a falcon's stoop
like a fly fisherman's cast
like moonlight across calm water.

My shadow seethes with strange life.
When I walk it dwarfs me.
When I sleep it engulfs me.

How have I allowed
my shadow to grow so tall?
It rises from my lamp
like a vast giggling genie.
"Your wish is my command,
O Master," my genie roars.
And I quail.

It winks at me
each evening
and for that moment
I see nothing
anywhere in the world.

I threw my shadow
all over town.
It leaned across at me
from each echoing underpass
from each foul lift-shaft
from each despairing alley-way.

I scattered my shadow like seed
across the fields
and the seed bounded from the earth
like a mob of heroes
who chased me and harried me
and reduced me before the whole world.

I caught my shadow by the throat
and flung it into a pit
and packed the pit with sand
boulders and rich cement
and when everything had set
hard as rock

I turned to escape, shrieking with relief....
A hand formed of new rock
sized my heel.
I stood there above my pit
locked in my shadow.

What dances we might have performed.

Rogan Wolf

If ever I wake one morning
and find my shadow gone away
I'll know the world has ended.

For my shadow is even more
earth-bound than I am.
Having nowhere to fall,

to stretch out, to conjure,
it would simply lose heart
and fade from the picture.

Like an artist whose canvasses
have all been stolen
it would have nothing left

upon which to busy itself.
But really, not much would change.
I'd hover as usual

in the midst
of things, avoiding sharp edges
where possible.

But there'd be this difference :
across the Universe no trace of my shadow
nor place for my feet.

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I have this enemy
my “inveterate foe”
my enemy Number One.

Whenever we meet, my enemy
wastes me. I become zero.
All meaning drains from me.

I become a flatness on the road
a vague ugliness in the air
an abortion. And I have nothing

I can call on, no wild cards
no reserve forces, no hidden energies
to throw into the field.

I call my enemy “Number One.”
I don’t know what it looks like
for it borrows any form

it chooses. And is it “He ?” or “She ?”
It is random and boundless.
It is All. All is “It”.

And I never have warning
of an encounter. No clouds
of dust on the horizon,

no slow rumble of feet, no tensing
of greased muscle, no pause in sound.
Simply my shadow deserts me.

And suddenly I lose my footing.
My ground just goes, my hold on space.
I look about me. I'm not here.

I reach for anything I have,
anything that makes me,
anything that marks and shapes me.

I reach for my history
my unique possession -
it's gone it's an empty lift-shaft.

I reach for my voice
my shaping words my answer my shriek
and the words give in the wind

and all my forming my bite on the air
collapses like a slack sail
like a shower of teeth.

I reach for my rage my saving grace
and find nothing but a gasping franticness
an incapacity, a self-immolation

and all that comes of my rage
for survival is a rush to give ground
and yield all to the poised advance of my destroyer.

I writhe in the air like a foreign element
marooned here above ground
hanging like a fish by the tail

held in triumph one Summer's evening.
I am a transparency held to the sunlight
open to any examination.

And I cry to my shadow
“Why *now* ? Why desert me
now ? Each breath of my life

I have sought to escape you
to fly weightless
to exist in pure mind

to secure utter distinctness
to achieve eternity.
Must *now* be the time I at last succeed

now when I need earth ?
For my infidelity
you desert me to our ruin.”

And Number One, deep in its steel case,
lashing at forests, at continents, at cities,
befouling ocean, air-wave, blood-stream

raising hordes
of zealots to slaughter their fellows
in the name of a phantasm

breeding the will to deceive
tending the urge to piracy and plunder
nurturing despair, aiding inertia

working deep in, working slowly
to the very core, paring,
particularising, severing, numbering,

Number One turns from its vast enterprise
hissing in glee
at my distress

and whispers :
“From whence do you consider
stem my victories ?”

So there, at last, I it is.
Number One, my dread enemy
waxes with *my* power. It wastes me

with a force that *I* bestow upon it.
It is hate. It is fear.
It feeds on hate. It feeds on fear.

So the fearless weakens it. The joyful wastes it.
It exists because we want it to.
We can *choose* to dispel it.

At last I have
your measure,
my Number One,

lurking there in fat steel
waxing and waning
as the world turns,

waxing and waning as terrors
rise and settle, as the guard changes,
as the wild dog slavers outside the walls -

I shall not
pit myself against you
tonight. Steel is not my strong-point.

I shall not
feed you tonight. (I know plenty who will).
I shall turn to my love

and we shall reduce you
with the force of our delight
with the rich play of our lightness.

So come now,
my Shadow,
my rose,

my fierce jewel,
my spiralling eagle
of the silent heights,

let us dance together,
let us rise
together.

Rogan Wolf
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My shadow is what happens when, by getting to my feet, I place myself between the Sun and the Earth. It is the consequence upon the Earth of my standing here under the Sun.

The length of my shadow is determined both by my position relative to the Sun and by the Sun's position relative to the Earth. Thus the length of my shadow is not wholly my responsibility. But much it is.

In getting to my feet and walking upon the Earth I am bound to create a shadow there. My shadow is the inescapable consequence of me being me, of Earth being Earth and of me being alive upon the Earth.

If there is anything in my shadow that feeds me, it feeds me not through my mouth, my eyes, my ears, my nose ; it feeds me through no organ placed in my head or associated with my brain ; it feeds me through my feet. I am joined to my shadow and to the Earth by my patient, lowly, delicate feet. It is my feet which earth me and which complete the circuit made up of Sun, Earth and Self.

My shadow carries my shape and moves with my movements. But it has no features and it never speaks ; and all sorts of strange forms or colours could be hidden in its darkness. Its shape keeps shifting and often it simply disappears. But then it returns. When I am happy I dance and with me my shadow dances. We dance together. When I am ill at ease, I labour and constantly I look back in dread and see my shadow pursuing me, threatening me.

Sometimes, then, my shadow seems to be my loyal and faithful friend, at others my implacable and inescapable enemy. To befriend my shadow would appear to be essential if I am to live successfully here on Earth.

If someone or something overshadows me, I receive immediate protection from the Sun and am relieved of the immense responsibility of my own shadow. On the other hand I am weakened, deprived of my energy and autonomy. It is as if my shadow has been stolen from me, eaten up by a stronger force.

And this in turn implies that my shadow is an important energy source and that I should retain that energy by insisting on my personal independence. Accordingly, I must allow nothing and no one to overshadow me. For the Earth is sick and any creative source of energy which can retain wholeness must now devote itself to restoring the Earth.

So long as I stand upon the Earth, I shall cast a shadow there which will remain a perpetual mystery integral to my being. When, through dying, I cease to stand upon the Earth, my shadow will be all that remains of me. All creatures who have lived on the Earth have left their shadows behind them. All moments that have ever been experienced upon the Earth have cast an eternal shadow there. The Earth in its brilliant lightness is thickly carpeted in shadow.

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