



Ahadada Books

Chapbook

Attic, Shed, and Barn

poems by Lewis Turco

Lewis Putnam Turco



Lewis Turco is the author of *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*, known to three generations of poets and students of poetry as “the poet’s bible.” He was founding director of both the Cleveland State University Poetry Center in 1962 and the Creative Writing Program at the State University of New York College at Oswego in 1968 from which he retired as Emeritus Professor of English in 1996. He took his B. A. from the University of Connecticut in 1959 and his M. A. from the University of Iowa in 1962. In 2000 he received a first honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, from Ashland University, and a second in 2009 from the University of Maine at Fort Kent. His poems, essays, stories and plays have appeared in most of the major literary periodicals over more than a half-century, and in over one hundred books and anthologies. Of his fifty books, chapbooks and monographs, his volume of criticism, *Visions and Revisions of American Poetry* won the Melville Cane Award of the Poetry Society of America in 1986, and his *A Book of Fears: Poems*, with Italian translations by Joseph Alessia, won the first annual Bordighera Bi-Lingual Poetry Prize in 1998. His most recent volumes are *The Collected Lyrics of Lewis Turco / Wesli Court 1953-2004*; *Fearful Pleasures: The Complete Poems, 1959-2007*; *The Museum of Ordinary People and Other Stories* 2008; *Satan’s Scourge: A Narrative of the Age of Witchcraft in England and New England 1580-1697*, and *La Famiglia / The Family, Memoirs*, both published in 2009. In 1999 he received the John Ciardi Award for lifetime achievement in poetry sponsored by the periodical *Italian Americana* and the National Italian American Foundation., and in 2007 the Robert Fitzgerald Prosody Award given by the West Chester University Poetry Conference.



Attic, Shed, and Barn

For Jean, Melora, Christopher, Jessima and Phoebe,
With love.



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Table of Contents

5	Writer's Block
6	Attic, Shed, and Barn
7	Outboard
8	The Farmall Club
9	The Old Gray Goose
10	The Carriage Seat
11	Break-In
12	Frames
13	The Gibson Girl
14	Sleds
15	Bikes
16	John's Telescope
17	John's Microscope
18	Mirrors
19	The Coin
20	Winding
21	Spiders
24	Reflection
25	Lines to Be Etched on a Window
26	Ballpoints
27	The Poetry Wreck



Writer's Block

Trying to write is like trying to dive
through ice. All you can do
is slide on the slick surface of the paper
until you hit something...a snowbank,
a stump, a patch of open water. Lucky you

if you don't drown in two feet of clear self-
pity. It won't do you
any good to take a drink, kick a chair, tell
your wife you're going to take a nap
and then kill yourself. She'll just say, "Yes, dear," and keep

on reading. What is it she's reading? One
of those mysteries she
swallows whole, a bag at a time. She trades them
with her friends, dozens, scores of them. They
lie everywhere. You eat them for breakfast, lunch, and

suffer accordingly. Perhaps you should
kill her instead. Or her
friends. Or you could burn the books out in the back
yard and watch the smoke curling among
the bird feeders. The atmosphere is foul any

how. And who the hell are all these people
writing all this drivel
these days? Making themselves millionaires off my
wife, writing all this inane drivel
and driving potato chips off supermarket

shelves? Bring back the potato chips, I say!
Restore the forests! Re-
stock the shelves! Restore American literature!
With something meaningful. With something
that will make a difference! With something like this.



Attic, Shed, and Barn

There are always the attic, the shed
and the barn when you've nothing else to do
except gaze out the glass door at the turkeys
feeding in the snow. You've given them cracked corn,

and you've fed the bluejays their peanuts
in the box hanging from the underside
of the deck. So it's down to the barn where
the seasons lie ruminating among boards

and boxes, and up the shallow steps
made to be used by the dying grandma
who left before she could use them. Now you're
nearly old enough to appreciate them

yourself. Upstairs, over your bookshop,
the new part of the building, you begin
to see more recent yesterdays gathering:
the overflow of books, posters still scrolling

among themselves on the floor, and this:
your first computer! An Osborne One left
over from 1982, looking like
a sewing machine in its carrying case.

You know today your watch has more K
than that Osborne had. They called it the first
portable computer — its six-inch monitor,
built in, could show only a quarter-page at

a time. People got dizzy if they
watched as you worked, scrolling back and forth, up
and down, whipping out the words faster than you
used to be able to type, and that was fast.

As far as you know, the machine still
works...and there's the file of floppies! All that
deathless verse you had to retype on later
hard drives. You wonder how long it will lie there

snoring against the timbers of the barn.



Outboard

Here lies the motor that broke its owner's back,
purring at the stairhead of the barn,
recalling in its dreams, perhaps, how we scrambled
down the steep bank to where the Eastern River
rose and receded as its tides were washed

upstream and to sea twice every day. It did
no good to chain it to the freeboard —
the neighbor vandals loved to split the links apart
on rowboats tethered to the guardian pines.
I swore and struggled until I could haul

this little Merc over the roots no longer,
over the beds of needles, among
the underbrush; until the brilliant summers dimmed
a little bit, the children grew, the elders
left for good and all, and the rest of us

found that our motors were slowing down a mite.



The Farmall Club

When it was brand new, Dad Houdlette's brother Frank
asked if he mightn't borrow the Farmall Cub. When he had done,

Frank parked Dad's tractor under the shit-chute
of his barn and buried it in dung until the spring.

When it was rescued we used its cutter bar
to keep the grass down in the fallow meadows, for now the farm
was just a summer place. We took it out
to pull the chicken houses down: there was no poultry

left, but Dad was being taxed as though there were.

Once we used it to haul boards up on the hill to build a cap
for the old well, to keep the vermin out;
then we used it when we scooped out a spring to replace

the lead-pipe well. I was chased by bees one time,
and Dad another as he walked along beside me to clear
the bar of grass now and again. It stood
abandoned in this shed for a good long while — see there

where it stained the boards with leaking oil. At last
it, too, had to be sold. The sills of the shed have rotted out,
but we still use it: there's my old tin boat
against the wall taking its turn with dust and silence.



The Old Gray Goose

She sat here in the barn for many years, right there
where all those boxes are: Dad Houdlette's
old gray Austin, though it was seldom used,
even on the property, and hadn't been

registered for...I don't know how long. But he was
proud of it, or perhaps "entertained"
would be the proper term. The whole town knew
that it was there, and word had gotten round

rather far afield. So now and then someone would
rap at the farmhouse door and request
to see it. Dad would take him out, and they
would circle the car appreciatively

until an offer was broached. Dad would cock his head,
frown his forehead, consider it,
then say, no, he wasn't ready to sell
just yet. Perhaps another year. But years

came harder and harder until there were no more
and the goose's years of brooding were
over and gone. Mom had to sell because
Dad had no insurance and his pension

died with him. The plan had been for her to leave us
first, for she had had angina for
most of her adult life. Good planning: she
lasted until she was ninety-five, near

two decades longer than he had managed. The egg
the goose had laid turned out to be not
golden but a goose-egg. The only thing
that's golden now is memory, and its

aura is edged with an ever-deepening gray.



The Carriage Seat

We thought it was a good idea at the time:
turn this old carriage seat into a piece
of chic furniture. Build it a base,
reupholster the horsehair seat for comfort,
put it in our livingroom

as a conversation piece. So we tied it to
the top rack of our car, the rack held on
by suction cups and adjustable
straps, and off we went. Everything was okay
until, between Hartford and

Springfield, the rack tore off and we pulled off the road
to rescue what we could. Well, this is it,
cracked and broken, some twisted iron,
torn cloth with tufts of horsehair protruding from it,
and a bit of rue attached.

It's taken us some time to catch up with it,
but here we all are at last.



Break-In

At first I didn't know what I was looking at.
I stood in the shed staring at my riding mower
and the yard trailer hitched to it. At last I realized
pieces of both were missing — the wheels,
attachments, bolts. It wasn't hard

to figure out who had done it: the Smiley kids
on the corner of Blinn Hill Road. The trooper who came
agreed I was probably right — the whole family were
often in trouble — but we had no
proof. No one was going to do

forensics for wheels and knobs. So, for the first time
in this little town in Maine we took measures. I nailed
the shed windows shut, put up motion alarms and lights, had
the windows of the barn boarded up,
invested in decent new locks.

The Smiley kids grew up some. The elder one went
to jail in Gardiner, but others took their places:
another bunch of kids came and bilked a dying sister-
in-law out of cash, stole a check, forged
her signature: the bank never

made the loss good although its accounts were insured.
The mower was fixed and traded in for a new one;
I bought a new and larger trailer, stored them both elsewhere,
went on gardening, mowing the lawn,
though the new apples were bitter.



Frames

A nest of them tangled in the attic, under the eaves,
waiting to embrace an image: a map, an old pastel
of Indians paddling a dugout canoe across the lake —

that's what I used them for at any rate. Most of them hang
around still in my bookshop, most with antique maps, a few
with hand-colored flower plates, all of them

taken from books and periodicals that could not be
saved. A few have been sold. Several have been given away
to relatives — nephews, aunts, nieces. "The world in a frame" so

to speak. All were old, antiques made of oak or pine; one was
clearly Arts and Crafts, imitating wooden limbs and knots; others
were gilt alabaster, perhaps, chipped or scratched. Most of them

were put to use in ways that were unforeseen. Where are
the old photos of old people, of young people who grew
old, and older still lying in these oblongs of dusty wood?



The Gibson Girl

She came in an odd-lot box together with the goose-neck lamp
that I still turn on in my bookshop. Aunt Ted
bid on it to get one item that she kept
but gave the rest to me. The occasion

was an auction at the next house up the road, in between us
and Ted's farm. The Gibson Girl is dressed in Navy
togs, white and light blue, a scarf knotted around
her neck, the ocean spread out behind her.

She is standing on the deck of a ketch, I guess, a jaunty
sailor's cap laid onto her blonde curls. She is young,
but older than Aunt Ted was in the early
days of the last century when she was

drawn and framed. She has lain here now in the attic for decades
more. That auction has gone over Blinn's Hill with Ted
and many another relative and friend.
There is little doubt she will soon be sold

at yet another auction, perhaps in another box lot
of oddments, maybe even with my goose-neck lamp
thrown in for good measure. Meanwhile, the dust piles
up on and around her and the wasps go

on singing their paper songs in a corner of the attic.



Sleds

Three of them in the loft of the barn, ancient, old,
and arthritic: a plastic flying saucer
that Christopher used to whip spinning down the hill
from the cemetery to the field behind

the Adamses'; a Flexible Flyer from the 1940s,
perhaps, the kind that I remember using
on a small town hill, hoping no cars would arrive
at the corner before I got down and past

the stop sign — frame of metal, deck of thin boards,
steerable to a degree, unlike the disc or the antique sled
made of solid wood, pine, I think, except for the cast-iron strips nailed
along the edge of the runners, rust-pitted.

They say that plastic never decays, but that's not true. The saucer
is cracked, the edges are chipped. If it were used
today it would fall apart. The nylon rope Chris
used to haul it back uphill is frayed and worn

thin as the wind I recall moving over fields
of snow and among the gray stones that lovely day.



Bikes

This one was cobbled together for one of the four girls
by Dad Houdlette, my father-in-law. And this one
is my old ten-speed. Neither has been ridden
for an age and a half, nor likely will be
for twice as long. Still, one remembers

what it was like to be young and astride the wind flying
down a hill in the countryside, legs churning like
pistons, the brilliant blue sky lying lightly
upon one's shoulders. No helmets in those days,
nothing between you and the roadway

but skill and luck, and sometimes your luck ran out, like the time
a strut from my front fender came loose and somehow
managed to insert itself between my spokes —
I was truly flying then, but not for long.
My old Schwinn bucked like an unbroken bronco

and I hurtled to meet the macadam on that long hill
down from Hubbard Park. But nothing broke! Although
I left a trail of skin maybe twelve feet long
along the road that simmering summer day,
and I threw the offending fender

into the woods, not ever to be replaced.



John's Telescope

The fireflies that limpid summer night
called to one another silently,
moving beneath the sky as though they were
stars set free among their frozen siblings.

Our nephew John set up his telescope
on the lawn among the fireflies
and aimed it at a planet — probably
Saturn, perhaps, or Mars — one of those gods

the Greeks invented not so long ago
to replace the Titans and prepare
the way for Jaweh. Johnny let me peer
through the lens into the brilliant dark

that I recalled from childhood when I lay
on my back beneath the summer sky
and let the weight of all that mystery
settle upon me till I was absorbed

into the nothingness that I could see
and the rest of nothing I could not.
Terror absorbed me. I could feel the grass
dewy beneath me, hear the piping frogs

down by the brook ratcheting on of love,
or sex at least, calling to their kind
to come and carry on for who knows why?
I could have been a star myself, shooting

into the void we now know can't exist,
filled with quarks and quasars, sheets of gas
the Hubbell has turned into veils of light
swaling through space like the sails of cosmic

ships, dark matter filling the abyss, black
holes swallowing worlds and suns, novae
flaring and creating worlds and light. Who
can compass it? The paltry gods of Earth

were never meant to handle such immense
phantasmagoria as these, were
never meant to represent these Powers,
Thrones, Dominions, idolons of the mind

of man, these firefly mysteries.



John's Microscope

John shuttled between the sublime
and the infinitesimal,
novas to microbes, and he wound up
with the smallest of the small – he became
a microentomologist.

But there are smaller still,

uncertain in principle, like
muons, baryons, leptons, mesons;
the unobserved antiparticle
or the graviton; the photon, which is
its own antiparticle. Each has its own spin, its own

spin doctor studying bosons
and fermions interacting:
creating and annihilating
with force, adding electrons or dropping
protons, keeping nuclei intact

perhaps, while particles enter
or leave twice at the same time, while
neither matter nor energy may
be destroyed, only transformed, one into
the other, the sum of their parts forever a constant

whole resting, it may be, upon
a bed of vibrating super
strings, all of them playing the music
composed by Pythagoras long ago,
the constant music of the ineffable cosmic spheres.



Mirrors

So sorry that the sleighs are gone
over the hill into memory,
that the horses no longer have enough pull
to keep the drifts out of trouble.

I regret to say I regret
to say that childhood is caught in an
infinite regress of reflection, falling
into a cairn of holidays

piled one upon the other clear
into history. Now we enter
the plastic forest to chop down another
silver yew, a fir of Paris

green. We fit them with wires and tinsel
ice while, in the distance rising out
of our chimneys, we hear what sound like hoofbeats
floating into the phantom elms.



The Coin

*"All is well here — very old and bright."
— a card from an aged aunt and uncle.*

The porcelain is bright
on the Toll House shelves; the sun
is bright, rising over the river
shimmering through the glass.

And the herb prints are bright
in the living room, behind
their panes glinting in the corners,
bright as the car windshields

on the road tossing light
forward toward the river,
the hill beyond climbing up the sky.
The tray with its silver

and gruel is bright, old,
like the hands crossing above
the pendulum of brass, shining forth
Its worn coin of passage.



Winding

I wondered where the wind had gone,
and then I saw him
running in the orchard aisles,
his harvest falling
among the yellowjackets.

If I had tried to catch him he
would have howled. He was
content merely to wind down
some, flutter a limb
here and there and bow out when

the sky stopped lowering. All well
and good, but whose white
face is that staring at me
through the stark branches,
looking like my grandfather?



Spiders

I. THE BACK PORCH

The boy is standing at the screen door
staring into the oblong of space
that is the back porch of the farmhouse.
 Yellowing white paint

peels from the clapboards there. The screening
is torn in places, fallen to rust
in others. Along the warped floorboards
 of the deck there stand

the shriveled stalks of plants in their clay pots.
But the boy is looking higher, toward
the ceiling, where the gray of the dark sky
 sifts under the roof.

There, webs hang in veils from the ceiling's ribs.
They fill like sails with the wind. The dry husks
of insects wound in fibers, covered
 with dust, billow there

where the brown spiders hang in the draft,
large as half dollars, too many to
count. The boy's hand lies on the door knob,
 but it does not turn.



II. THE SHED

The moon is bonelight, dry and cold.
It splashes across the plank floor,
drowning the shadows there. The shed
is chill, although it is a summer night.

The old tools smell of rust — they are
adrift against the wooden walls.
Under the window a freezer
chest hums, its red eye shining. The window,

broken into eight panes, throws its
squares onto the lid of the chest.
The glass of the panes is misty
with dust. The gray barn ruminates outdoors.

A man is standing in the dark
before the freezer. He is dressed
in pajamas and a robe. His
feet are bare. He is looking at a web

stretched across the window. Each thread
is as visible as a rope.
In the center of the network
the jet silhouette of a spider hangs

on the face of the moon. Nothing
moves. It is as though a single
filament extends from the moon
to the spider, to the man in the shed.



III. THE BEDROOM

A standing mirror peers
the length of the room. Behind it
a window looks out on two blue spruces
standing on the lawn. A fireplace

yawns narrowly beside
the bed, on the right, its brick hearth
flush with the floor. It faces the other
window, across the counterpane, where

a hill full of alders
and pines rises beyond the brook.
It is a second-story view, the day
bright, but the man in the bed is not

looking out; rather, he
is staring into the fathoms
of glass where he lies beneath the sheet. There,
he can see the bed, his face lying

wrinkled on the pillow,
and, suspended from the ceiling
by a single invisible cord, the
spider over his head. If he were

to lift his eyes straight up,
he would see the dark underside
of the still dangler. But he does not shift
his eyes from the plane of the mirror.



Reflection

Who is that figure, seen as though through mist,
leaning against the gable-end wall?
I can hardly make him out through the dust
and fly-specks on the glass. He is old,

it would appear, old and perhaps confused.
What did he come upstairs looking for
one step at a time, brushing webs aside?
Surely not this looking-glass, oblong,

curved at either end, in a wooden frame
with acorns and leaves carved here and there
holding in its cell this inmate of time,
holding in its glass this prisoner.

And when I turn to leave, will he remain
peering into the attic shadows
to see into the future or the past
among the forgotten boots, boxes

of recollections now forgotten: clothes
no one will wear on a winter day
filled with bluster, or on a summer night
when the fireflies illuminate

one another in anticipation
of what is to come, of what has come
and gone unnumbered seasons in the past,
seasons to be built on webs and dust?



Lines to Be Etched on a Window

In memory of Donald Justice

Clearly, you may see clear through me,
As though I were not here.



Ballpoints

On a line by Bill Watterson

Stuck under the eaves:
A box of ballpoints,
some without innards,
and all without ink
except one lost by
*an old poet with
nothing left to say.*



The Poetry Wreck

Writing poetry is like piling pebbles
and boulders, one by one,
into a coach-and-four: you heft
each stone, get a proper grip, heave,
and settle them into place

until the cab is full.

Sending poetry
out is hauling yourself
into the coachman's seat, raising
your whip and snapping it over
the sable rumps before you

watching them strain and bulge till the wheels begin,
ever so slowly, to
turn and follow the winding road
up the hill.

Getting poetry
back is like the whiffletree

splitting. You feel the traces part and watch your team
diminish in starlight
over the hill as your coach goes
rolling back down the road, heading
for the edge where the hulks lie

among the boles and brambles; you sense the free
fall, you anticipate
the sharp stop, the sound of boards break-
ing, axles cracking. You feel the
weight of all those words shifting

and moving around behind you, coming through
the wall before which you
sit holding the useless reins.

And
there you lie again, on the earth,
the familiar mass crushing

you into the moss and the dead leaves, the taste
of dust in your mouth.

So
one day you decide not to try
again, although you've made it to
the brow now and then to see

the deep vale below, where the darkness lies like
frozen fire over all
the coaches full of gemstones and
sapphires — like tenders full of coals
that come roaring down behind



Attic, Shed, and Barn

their galloping, panting teams and gone to earth
on the other side to bury bits
of you where no one ever
will walk in search of
the cold stars
shining.





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