More Praise for *The* Poetry *of* Impermanence, Mindfulness, *and* Joy

"I simply love this anthology of poetry. John Brehm has mined the hearts and minds of forgotten and famous alike, prompting his readers to stretch ever more gently into this ephemeral existence. These poems, ancient and modern, from East and West, point us to a poignant life, where the gateway to meaning involves learning to notice and include the ten thousand joys and sorrows along the way."
—Sarah Powers, author of *Insight Yoga*

"Jubilant, thoughtful, startling, and pure, the poems in *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy* remind us that every poem is a pond, and every pond a poem. Slow down. Dip your toes. See the ripples in each reflected moon. Swim a while in the deep brilliance of language, image, and sound."
—Dinty W. Moore, author of *The Mindful Writer* and director of creative writing, Ohio University

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The POETRY *of* IMPERMANENCE, MINDFULNESS, *and* JOY

edited by John Brehm

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Introduction

No poem can last for long unless it speaks, even if obliquely, to some essential human concern. Tu Fu's poem about the pathos of ruins at Jade Flower Palace, which opens this anthology, has lasted more than thirteen centuries, reminding us that impermanence is one of poetry's oldest themes, perhaps *the* oldest. Of the prince who ruled there long ago, Tu Fu writes:

> *His dancing girls are yellow dust.*
> *Their painted cheeks have crumbled*
> *Away. His gold chariots*
> *and courtiers are gone. Only*
> *A stone horse is left of his*
> *Glory.*

Awareness of the fleeting nature of things may well have sparked the first poetic utterance. Lewis Mumford in *The History of the City* suggests that the earliest human settlements arose when our distant hunter-gatherer ancestors refused to leave their dead

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behind. It's not hard to imagine that such a decision may also have inspired elegiac honoring of the dead in the form of heightened speech or songlike lament, a kind of protopoetry.

Ki no Tsurayuki in his preface to *Kokin Wakashū,* the first imperially sponsored anthology of *waka* poetry, published in 905, observed:

> When these poets saw the scattered spring blossoms, when they heard leaves falling in the autumn evening, when they saw reflected in their mirrors the snow and the waves of each passing year, when they were stunned into an awareness of the brevity of life by the dew on the grass or foam on the water . . . they were inspired to write poems.

"Death is the mother of beauty," as Wallace Stevens would put it a thousand years later. There are other sources of inspiration, of course, but none more ancient or enduring than the pang that accompanies our experience of loss—and our uniquely human foreknowledge of loss.

Perhaps there is some comfort in knowing that impermanence defies its own law, is exempt from its own implacable strictures, is itself unchanging. Ikkyū states the paradox succinctly: "Only

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impermanence lasts." The truth of impermanence, as Ryōkan says, is "a timeless truth." It is not historically or culturally conditioned. It is not an idea but a process, observable anywhere at any time. Buddhist poets of ancient China and Japan may have been more finely attuned to that truth, through formal meditation practice, but Western poets are held within the law of impermanence no less firmly than their Asian counterparts, and awareness that all things pass away is inescapable for anyone who pays attention. Of course, our culture encourages us *not* to pay attention, to live as if we will live forever, as if we can plunder the earth unceasingly and without consequence. "What dreamwalkers men become," Master Dōgen writes.

But living in alignment with the truth of impermanence opens a secret passageway to joy. Once we acknowledge how inherently unstable are the pleasures of "this floating world," we are free to love all things without attachment. In *The Trauma of Everyday Life,* the Buddhist psychotherapist Mark Epstein tells a story about asking the great Thai Forest monk Ajahn Chah to explain the Buddhist view. Chah held up a glass of water and said:

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> I love this glass. It holds the water admirably. When the sun shines on it, it reflects the light beautifully. When I tap it, it has a lovely ring. Yet for me, this glass is already broken. When the wind knocks it over or my elbow knocks it off the shelf and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, "Of course." But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every minute with it is precious.

It is only our quite natural but completely impossible expectation that conditions remain stable that makes sudden changes sting as much as they do. If we knew ourselves as living in a ghost world of unceasing change, we wouldn't take ourselves and the things that happen to us quite so seriously. And we would see more clearly the preciousness of all life. Ellen Bass asks the provocative question, "What if you knew you'd be the last / to touch someone?"

> *What would people look like*
> *if we could see them as they are,*
> *soaked in honey, stung and swollen,*
> *reckless, pinned against time?*

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In the closing couplet of "Sonnet 73," Shakespeare writes, "This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong, / To love that well which thou must leave ere long." Yamamoto Tsunetomo, in the eighteenth-century samurai manual *Hagakure*, takes this idea of *already broken* or *soon gone* a step further, advising us to meditate on inevitable death every day: "If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way."

Ajahn Chah and Tsunetomo make explicit the underlying premise of this anthology: that mindfulness of impermanence leads to joy. Living in the full knowledge that everything changes changes everything. It loosens our grasp and lets the world become what it truly is, a source of amazement and amusement. Han Shan says:

> *Once you realize this floating life is the perfect*
> *mirage of change,*
> *it's breathtaking—this wild joy at wandering*
> *boundless and free.*

Freedom from craving and from fixed ideas of self lets us experience the world as a friendly place where, as in Ron Padgett's "Inaction of Shoes," the things we have to do thank us for doing them; or

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Many of the poems in *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy* have this subtly subversive quality. Issa gently undermines our human arrogance, placing himself on equal footing with all other beings, even insects:

> *I'm going to roll over,*
> *so please move,*
> *cricket.*

Likewise, in "Ode to a Dead Carob Tree," Pablo Neruda feels an immediate kinship with a fallen tree. He is on his way elsewhere, but the tree stops him, he lets it stop him, just as Ryōkan lets the children interrupt his alms-gathering and Issa pauses to give the cricket time to move. This act of stopping and attending mindfully to what the present moment presents is crucial:

> *I walked closer, and such*
> *was its ruined strength,*
> *so heroic the branches on the ground,*
> *the crown radiating such*
> *earthly majesty,*
> *that when*
> *I touched its trunk*
> *I felt it throbbing,*

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and a surge
from the heart of the tree
made me close my eyes
and bow
my head.

In a sustained act of seeing, Neruda takes it all in, the fallen carob tree's physical form, its roots "twisted / like tangled hair," but also its kingly spirit—its heroic "branches on the ground," its crown that radiates an "earthly majesty." Seeing the tree in this way, *being* with it, leads to an act of empathic connection: he *touches* the tree. It is this physical contact that allows Neruda to experience "a surge / from the heart of the tree." Notice how easily he says "the heart of the tree" and how easily we accept it, remembering for a moment what we have learned to forget—that all things are animated by the same life force that animates us, that all things are our brothers and sisters. And then Neruda closes his eyes and bows his head in an ancient gesture of vulnerability and reverence. It's the same impulse that compels Whitman in "Reconciliation," a poem written just after the end of the Civil War, to bend down and place a kiss on the face of his "enemy," a Confederate soldier:

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For my enemy is dead—a man divine as myself
is dead;
I look where he lies, white-faced and still in the
coffin—I draw near;
I bend down, and touch lightly with my lips the
white face in the coffin.

In "No Title Required," Wisława Szymborska catalogues a series of events typically considered significant—great battles, coronations, revolutions—alongside "ordinary" things—clouds passing, a river flowing by, grass stitched into the ground, and concludes:

So it happens that I am and look.
Above me a white butterfly is fluttering through
the air
on wings that are its alone,

and a shadow skims through my hands
that is none other than itself, no one else's but
its own.

When I see such things, I'm no longer sure
that what's important
is more important than what's not.

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"So it happens that I am and look" might be the banner that hangs over this book. That act of mindful attending is essential to these poems. Old Shōju says, "Want 'meaningless' Zen? / Just look—at anything!" And Li Po shows that such looking dissolves the sense of separateness that plagues us and that even Einstein regarded as a kind of optical delusion.

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

This kind of seeing requires mindfulness—the intentional, nonjudging awareness of present-moment experience. In my own practice of neighborhood walking meditation I have found that looking intently, without judgment, at the most "insignificant" things—hubcaps, weathered fence posts, gate latches, bolts on fire hydrants, weeds, trash on the street, and so on—has the most profoundly awakening effect.

Just as impermanence calls us to be mindful, the practice of mindfulness heightens our awareness of impermanence. Following moment-to-moment

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experience in meditation reveals the fluid condition of all we perceive. The breath arises and falls away, sounds appear and disappear, bodily sensations vibrate in one spot and then another, thoughts leapfrog over each other and are gone—everything changing, coming into form, and slipping into formlessness again. In the external world it is no different. A stone may occupy reality longer than a fruit fly or a thought, but a difference in duration is not a difference in destination or destiny. In time, the thought, the fly, and the stone all arrive at the same place.

I felt the full force of impermanence in my own life in 2009, when my nephew George was suddenly hospitalized in Japan—he was half-Japanese—where he had been teaching English. Though he didn't know it at the time, he suffered from an extremely rare liver disease, porphyria, which sent him into liver failure. In the space of two weeks, he went from living a healthy and active life—he had just gotten engaged and was flourishing as a teacher—to being on the brink of death. A liver transplant was the only possibility of saving him. Because I was the

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broadly to the way things are, universal law, or the truth of things. It is in this latter sense that I'm using the term. These poems show us the truth of things.

The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy is not intended to be definitive. These are simply the poems I've found most powerful on these three themes. Many of them have been friends for years, poems that I have returned to again and again, taken comfort in and been astonished by—poems that have deepened my spiritual practice and helped me feel alive to the wonder and strangeness and sadness of the world. Many others are new discoveries that came to me as the anthology began to take shape, as I read more deeply in ancient Chinese and Japanese poetry, and as I began to see the Dharma suddenly lit up in many modern, non-Buddhist poems. The result is an extremely personal, nonscholarly (but I hope not eccentric) selection. I have also left out some poets one might expect to find in an anthology of this kind. Another of my goals has been to give Dharma teachers and students a broader spectrum of poetry to draw upon, beyond the widely popular poems of Rumi, Rilke, and Mary Oliver, and to introduce them to poems and poets they might not otherwise encounter.

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Deciding how to organize the book often felt very much like arranging stanzas in a poem—and in a sense, each of the sections, and the book in its entirety, can be read as a single poem in many voices. I've grouped the poems by affinity and resonance rather than chronology or nationality, and every poem is connected to and colored by the poems that immediately surround it. The book invites random browsing, but reading the poems in sequence may be more rewarding.

My wish is that these poems may become spiritual companions on your path, deepen your practice, whatever it might be, and offer a taste of that eternally transient delight that is always disappearing and always present.

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Part One

Impermanence

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Tu Fu

712–770

Jade Flower Palace

The stream swirls. The wind moans in
The pines. Grey rats scurry over
Broken tiles. What prince, long ago,
Built this palace, standing in
Ruins beside the cliffs? There are
Green ghost fires in the black rooms.
The shattered pavements are all
Washed away. Ten thousand organ
Pipes whistle and roar. The storm
Scatters the red autumn leaves.
His dancing girls are yellow dust.
Their painted cheeks have crumbled
Away. His gold chariots
and courtiers are gone. Only
A stone horse is left of his
Glory. I sit on the grass and
Start a poem, but the pathos of
It overcomes me. The future
Slips imperceptibly away.
Who can say what the years will bring?

Translated from the Chinese by Kenneth Rexroth.

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Ryōkan

1758–1831

I never longed for the wilder side of life.
Rivers and mountains were my friends.

Clouds consumed my shadow where I roamed,
and birds pass high above my resting place.

Straw sandals in snowy villages,
a walking stick in spring,

I sought a timeless truth: the flower's glory
is just another form of dust.

Translated from the Japanese by Sam Hamill.

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Saigyō

1118–1190

"Detached" observer
of blossoms finds himself in time
intimate with them—
so, when they separate from the branch,
it's he who falls . . . deeply into grief.

Translated from the Japanese by William LeFleur.

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Robert Frost

1874–1963

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

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James Schuyler

1923–1991

Korean Mums

Beside me in this garden
are huge and daisy-like
(why not? are not
oxeye daisies a chrysanthemum?),
shrubby and thick-stalked,
the leaves pointing up
the stems from which
the flowers burst in
sunbursts. I love
this garden in all its moods,
even under its winter coat
of salt hay, or now,
in October, more than
half gone over: here
a rose, there a clump
of aconite. This morning
one of the dogs killed
a barn owl. Bob saw
it happen, tried to
intervene. The airedale
snapped its neck and left

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it lying. Now the bird
lies buried by an apple
tree. Last evening
from the table we saw
the owl, huge in the dusk,
circling the field
on owl-silent wings.
The first one ever seen
here: now it's gone,
a dream you just remember.

The dogs are barking. In
the studio music plays
and Bob and Darragh paint.
I sit scribbling in a little
notebook at a garden table,
too hot in a heavy shirt
in the mid-October sun
into which the Korean mums
all face. There is a
dull book with me,
an apple core, cigarettes,
an ashtray. Behind me
the rue I gave Bob
flourishes. Light on leaves,
so much to see, and

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Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold,
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes, when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

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William Shakespeare

1564–1616

Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love
more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

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Po Chü-i

772–846

Autumn Thoughts, Sent Far Away

We share all these disappointments of failing
autumn a thousand miles apart. This is where

autumn wind easily plunders courtyard trees,
but the sorrows of distance never scatter away.

Swallow shadows shake out homeward wings.
Orchid scents thin, drifting from old thickets.

These lovely seasons and fragrant years falling
lonely away—we share such emptiness here.

Translated from the Chinese by David Hinton.

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A. R. Ammons

1926–2001

Continuing

Continuing the show, some prize-winning
leaves broad and firm, a good year,
I checked the ground
for the accumulation of
fifty seasons: last year was
prominent to notice, whole leaves
curled, some still with color:
and, underneath, the year
before, though paler, had structure,
partial, airier than linen:
but under that,
sand or rocksoil already mixed
with the meal or grist:
is this, I said to the mountain,
what becomes of things:
well, the mountain said, one
mourns the dead but who
can mourn those the dead mourned;
back a way
they sift in a tearless
place: but, I said,

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it's so quick, don't you think,
quick: most time, the mountain said, lies
in the thinnest layer: who
could bear to hear of it:
I scooped up the sand which flowed
away, all but a cone in the palm:
the mountain said, it
will do for another year.

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Kobayashi Issa

1763–1828

  This world of dew
is only the world of dew—
  and yet . . . oh and yet . . .

Translated from the Japanese by Robert Hass.

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Kay Ryan

1945–

The Niagara River

As though
the river were
a floor, we position
our table and chairs
upon it, eat, and
have conversation.
As it moves along,
we notice—as
calmly as though
dining room paintings
were being replaced—
the changing scenes
along the shore. We
do know, we do
know this is the
Niagara River, but
it is hard to remember
what that means.

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