

Everyday Alchemy

and other poems

James P. Wagner (Ishwa)

Everyday Alchemy

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*Dedicated to poets
and alchemists
past, present and future.*

Foreword by the Author

The topic of alchemy always fascinated me. Not only is the principle itself rather appealing--the idea of turning worthless things into gold, but many of the greatest minds in our history took a passionate interest in the "discipline" as well. These great minds in the pursuit of alchemy, discovered many wonderful things; the field of chemistry for example, and many amazing contributions to it. It's true that they never quite figured out how to directly turn lead into gold, but they did figure out many ways to improve all of our lives.

Everything in our lives is a miracle. We are just so used to these things that we have a habit of taking them for granted, and forgetting the history, time, effort, science, hard work and genius that went into producing them. Alchemy can be found everywhere if we simply embrace two things. First, the knowledge that these things didn't just come out of nowhere--that every bit of technology, every house, every vehicle, was envisioned, designed and created by someone else. The second thing we need to embrace (and right now we need to embrace it more than ever) is gratitude. We should be grateful that technology is a form of inherit-

ed wealth that we all benefit from. Once we accept that the world is filled with miracles that were created for us to enjoy--miracles that weren't simply there, and that we are not inherently entitled to--we can see the magic, and the alchemy everywhere, everyday.

With this gratitude and realization comes something else: the knowledge that any one of us can be an alchemist. Every single one of us, has the ability to take something and turn it into something better. Whether it be something as simple as turning lemons into lemonade, or something complex like turning a personal computer model into Apple. It all comes from the same source.

I've personally learned the power of alchemy through my publishing company--where we take mere words and thoughts and turn them into books, like the one you are holding now. Where we create live events that make experiences people enjoy and remember. I've seen Local Gems Press go from a side-project while I was in graduate school with one title grow into a network of poets and poetry books up and down the entire East Coast, with projects that also stretch as far as the west coast, Europe, Canada. And through this experience I've learned very well that every poet is also an alchemist, masters of taking an observation or

inspiration and transmuting and translating it into a solid form that others can comprehend.

Thank you for being here to appreciate my own little transmutation of this book. Many of the following poems focus on my own observations of little bits of alchemy, or possible alchemy, I've noticed in my daily life. I hope you not only enjoy them, but I hope they reminds you of similar observations you have had in your lives. Let us all use alchemy, to turn something into something better.

~ James P. Wagner (Ishwa)

Introduction by Nick Hale

The first poem in this collection sums it up better than any introduction ever could. “Alchemy, the concept of turning something of little worth into something of great worth,” is something many believe to be a myth, but it’s something we can find everywhere, if we know what to look for. In fact, sometimes it takes no transmutation whatsoever. Sometimes, all that’s needed is a shift in perspective that allows you to see the value, previously hidden. A positive outlook can often reveal hidden value, turn a bad situation to opportunity, or grow seeds of potential into mighty oaks of possibility. This is all alchemy.

I’ve known James for a long time and would not describe him as an optimist. Nor would I describe myself as one, but I can’t help but agree with him when he writes the magic, and the abundance of possibility that surrounds us every day. These poems are not the dreams of an optimist, but the observations of a pragmatic realist, approaching the world with the mindset of abundance and positivity.

Our society, our mythologies, our history, and all our advancements are the result of alchemy. From the

inventor who turned failures into lessons-breadcrumbs to success, to the builder who made monuments from mud, to the entrepreneur who turned a small project into a multi-billion dollar product, alchemy is responsible for everything around us. It's also the means by which we can free ourselves from our ruts.

As many seem to become increasingly cynical, and pessimistic, succumbing to a scarcity mindset, stuck in the narrow ruts they were trained to fit into, a dose of realistic positivity is a breath of fresh air. The best cure for despair is a solution, and the key to finding a solution is often finding the opportunities hidden in a bad situation. That is true alchemy, and this alchemy, as a craft, might just be the most valuable skill you can master. With it, you can weather any storm, escape any prison, overcome any obstacle and defeat all challenges.

~ Nick Hale

Publisher for Local Gems Press, Best-Selling Editor, Author of *Broken Reflections*

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Everyday Alchemy

Alchemy *noun*

- 1. the medieval forerunner of chemistry, based on the supposed transformation of matter. It was concerned particularly with attempts to convert base metals into gold or to find a universal elixir.*

To turn lead, into gold
a power that countless have sought out
through the ages
many of the smartest minds in history had tried
their hand
at this craft, yet hundreds of years of research
and the conclusions of modern chemistry
have taught us
that this science
is a pseudoscience,
alchemy doesn't exist.

And yet, my mind, and eyes, have never fully
received that memo
because I see alchemy every day.

I see it in my cup of coffee
when I think of the magic of the change that these
beans go through, with a little hot water
I see it in the kitchen, with every amazing meal
cooked
I see it in the morning paper,
a mere combination of ink and parchment, that now
conveys untold information
through abstract lettering, that we can actually
understand.
I see alchemy performed masterfully through the
kids at the lemonade stand,
taking literally the life gives you lemons quote
and turning it into pocket money
to buy things, that will enhance their summer
creating experiences, and fun times they will
cherish forever.
I see alchemy in the classroom, where the teachers
turn books and lessons
into knowledge
I see it in the roads we take, that have cut our long
journeys down from days or weeks
to minutes or hours
I see it in the inventor, the business owner, the
repairman, the plumber, the carpenter
I hear it, in the music

I see it, on the stage, and the television screen,
I look at it, in the art gallery, and the museum
I see alchemy,
the concept of turning something of little worth
into something of great worth
in almost everything I see around me.
When I really look, with knowing eyes.
Perhaps the scientists and historians who have
declared alchemy
a dead art, have just gotten so used to the magic
so desensitized to the transmutations we perform
on a daily basis
that they forgot to look deeper
and appreciate
everyday alchemy.

Count Me

I could never be President
Too much responsibility
Too much commitment
I don't know how to get on a ballot
How to run, and raise money
I have no platform to work with and no way to
get there
Count me out.

I could never run a business
Too many working pieces
Too much uncertainty
I don't know how to do the books
I don't know how to pay the taxes
How to market, advertise, get the customers
I have no following, no base to work with
Count me out.

I could never drive a car
Too much to learn
I don't know the rules of the road
I don't know how to pass the driving test

Too many other cars out there
Too much uncertainty
Count me out.

I could never tie my shoe
It just makes no sense to me
Too many loop-de loops
I have no experience, going under and over
I get to confused
Count me out.

I could never be born
There's just too much uncertainty
I don't know what to do
How to do it, who my family will be
There's so many other people out there who
are older
And better than me
I better just stay here
Count me out.

If I Had a Dollar

One dollar a week allowance
I could buy a candy bar
or a soda
a pack of gum

or I could take the dollar
and wait
another week or two
and buy a 6 pack of candy bars
or sodas
or gum
sell them to my friends
at 1 dollar each
and double my money

then take the 6 dollars
and start a lemonade stand
1 dollar a glass
6 hours on a hot Saturday
should yield at least
a 300% profit

3 months of this
invest the money in a few boxes of trading cards
sell the doubles and triples
build a good deck
to enter a tournament
win the 500 dollar cash prize
do this 6 or 7 times
buy a car
take the car to Vegas
go to roulette
put it all on red
22 black
hitchhike home
wait for next week's allowance

The Grateful Path

In every epic there is a journey
a long journey
over many many miles
days, weeks
sometimes months or years
making paths through forests
or deserts
snow or mountains
trudging through finding or clearing paths
always on the lookout
for wild animals
unsafe environments
bandits
hostiles and calamities
a perpetual possibility...
I think of this on every road trip I take
grateful that through hard work and ingenuity
the troubles on my epic journey
have been reduced to worrying about
gas
tolls
a healthy snack

and hoping that traffic
alleviates in time to get
to the nearest rest stop

Pocket Aces

The odds of getting pocket aces
in Texas Hold'em
are 1 in 221.

It's the best starting hand
that all players wait for.

It only comes up, theoretically
in 1 in 221 hands

but...

they wait

hoping for it

expecting it.

A good player sifts through the bad ones,
folding hand

after hand

after hand

perhaps playing a dozen or so

other starters

but always waiting

for the opportunity

those aces provide

knowing the next hand

could be the one.

Throughout my day
I see countless scores of people
behind the counter
behind a desk
making deliveries
working in offices no hope in their gaze
no joy in their step
no hint of the patience
in the poker player's eyes
who protects his stack of chips
silently waiting
for the opportunity
to throw them in the center
hoping to change their fortunes for the better.

How The Lobster Grows

We overlook the lobster
just a fancy dinner plate
that some consider insects of the sea

they exist in their shells
until they feel pressure
uncomfortable
not enough room

so when this happens
they find a rock
to hide under and protect themselves
as they shed their shell
and grow a new one

This happens several times
through the lobster's life
getting bigger and bigger
I've seen some huge lobsters out there

so whenever one faces hardships and challenges
turmoil and strife

and wishes for an easier existence
I nod to the lobster and the fact
that if he didn't feel pressure
was never uncomfortable enough
to shed his shell
he would stay the same size forever
and never feel the need
to grow.

The Lego Collection

My collection
was a collection of collections
the legos in my many bins
and containers
came from christmas and birthday gifts
both to me and to many others
as saturday and sunday
white elephant sales
offered the opportunity
for parents of college bound kids
eager for their children to "grow out"
of their childhood building blocks
to part with them and make a slight
return on their initial investment.
And for me, this opportunity to swell the ranks
of my lego armies for a fraction of the cost.

The huge bins I would bring home had
pirates and robin hood, astronauts and aliens
underwater explorers, relics from the ice age
and more, infinitely more
combinations that must have taken years

to assemble, instantly acquired by me
to flesh out the adventures in my
imaginary storylines I would dream up using them
as the piles grew and grew
and grew
the infamous query from my own parents
"when will you grow out of those Legos"
came up more
and more and more
and this question
to this day
remains unanswered.

The Library Company

Once upon a time
in a city called Philly
a group of tradesmen got together
to form a club for mutual improvement.

The Junto
as they called it
would write papers to read aloud
discuss current events
from the points of view of their different
occupations
fisherman
carpenter
candlemaker
all offering a fresh perspective.

The printer of their group
a young man named Ben Franklin
had an idea
that since books were in short supply
all members of the Junto should bring theirs
together,
to the clubhouse so anyone in the group

could read from
and benefit
from their little makeshift library.
All of them spent countless hours flipping through
those pages.

Seeing the success of this
endeavor, Ben Franklin
wanted to take it a step further,
each member contributing a small financial amount
to order books from England
and then charging the general public of
Philadelphia a small membership fee
to the library company
for them to come and read books and lend them
from the first lending library in the country.
"Think of how much could be accomplished by the
average person
if they had access to this information," Ben used
to profess.
I think about this now
in the information age
when the average 12 year old has
the sum of world knowledge
at their fingertips
in their pocket to call up

at any given moment
information that the Junto would have killed
to know
and I wonder if Ben Franklin
would think that we make good use of it.

Sunflower Seeds

He took a seed and popped it into his mouth
then another,
then another.

The small bag of 2 or 3 dozen seeds,
would last him his journey
through the woods.

Although grateful for the meager sustenance
to fuel his trek
he couldn't help but lament
all the sunflowers
that now would never be.

The Potential of Burnt Chinese Food

One afternoon I decided I felt like chinese food
wanting to save myself the 6 dollar delivery fee
through door dash

I called it in, for pick up.

"It's going to be about 15 minutes" the boy
obviously young, on the other end of the
phone said.

After doing a bit more work, I hopped in my car and
took a drive
up the road to where the place was, found a good
spot and walked in.

Upon seeing me, the teenaged chinese boy,
who was bent behind one of the dishwashers
scrubbing

looked up at me, and his eyes went very wide,
dropping the cleaning equipment he ran to
the cooker

here he opened up a plate of what looked
like charcoal,

I can only assume, what was once meant to be
my boneless spareribs.

He paused for a second, looked at me and said with a completely straight face

"Uh..it's gonna be a few more minutes..."

It was something out of a sitcom in terms of a funny scenario.

I smirked and took a seat, picking up a copy of one of the papers this place had available.

While I sat there, I was thinking about how easy it would be in the normal New York hustle and bustle pace of gotta be somewhere, gotta do something to get mad at this guy, for making me wait longer,

I was hungry too which could have very easily made it worse but instead, I saw something different I saw a young man, in training for a trade obviously handed down to him by his family unlike the many people I see at food lines texting, or watching videos

he had been cleaning when I walked in working hard

and my food had just slipped his mind

I saw a budding business owner learning from his mistakes

taking responsibility
in the form of the free eggroll he offered me for
my wait.

I saw responsibility, in this young man, while
others his age would be at home
during their summer break, playing video games,
he was working, he was learning

I saw, something, very, very beautiful.

I told him to keep the change, as I walked to
my car

marveling at the potential
of burnt chinese food.

Rich and Wealthy

Rich:

2 boats

3 houses

6 cars

12 servants

several off-shore bank accounts

Wealthy:

More food than you need to eat

More water than you need to drink

Good company

A shelter to keep you warm and dry

The knowledge of the miracle that all these things are

and the gratitude to accompany them.

Resurrection

I wandered the halls of the parish building
amongst the faithful members
of the congregation

many souls gathered behind tables
sporting age-old treasures
to sell
hoping perhaps they might generate
a few pennies from heaven
for them and their church.

Many items taken from attics,
used, tattered, worn and weary
finding new uses
among new people.
As the candlemaker buys up old glass jars
for her craft,
a lady buys books, third hand
old titles that one would never find
in a Barnes & Nobles,
and a gentleman buys up old metal artifacts
to use in the making of his next sculpture.

The alchemy of these transmutations
turning into new resources
as the old trinkets
now treasures
showcase the power
of resurrection.

An Ineffective Harvest

Deciding one summer
that concocting my own overpriced pickles
was a good idea, I planted a decent amount of
cucumber plants
plants that start out slow and suddenly grow to
lengths
you wouldn't think possible from their small size
in the early stages.

The large amount of yellow flowers
that will eventually become the crop itself
sprouting
and heavy amounts of rainfall indicate a good
season

however, my 3-week honeymoon
during the middle of this season
prompts the crop to be neglected
and when I return to what would have been
a fruitful harvest

I am instead welcomed by a pushed-in series
of fences
and the remains of what was very obviously
a bunny rabbit buffet.

I curse those fluffy creatures for leaving me exactly
1 and a half cucumbers for myself
grateful I guess that at least they decided to share
my own crop with me.
At the end of the day, these cute little bunnies cost
me nearly 40 dollars
and over 2 months of waiting, watering and
weeding...
but that's all.
I think of the people out there who depend on their
harvests
who wait whole-heartedly for every bit of food the
Earth will give them
needing to make it last
for the sake of themselves and their families
at the mercy of the weather
and animals
and bugs
and all the powers that be
whereas my harvesting issues
are nothing that couldn't be solved
with a trip to my local Stop & Shop.

My Flight Was Delayed

(Read Down With A Frown)

My flight was delayed
Oh, God
I can't believe it.
A 6 hour delay,
With nothing but books to read!
Now I get to sit here,
I had a very strict schedule
I had non-stop meetings
Delayed by 6 hours now?
Another hustle and bustle
My flight was delayed!

(Read Up With A Smile)

Rest

Someone once said that
music is the pause
between notes.

God tells me more and more
that life is the breaks
between the active moments.

After muscle memory
and faith have fused in focus
to create
and only after
and in the silence
in contemplation
we are illuminated.

Ice Cream Cone

Ice cream comes in a cup
always has, always will
that's what the people thought at the 1904
St. Louis World's Fair
on the hot day
when they moved past
the hot waffles
to get that nice
cool ice cream
only 5 cents apiece
flying,
flying
until they couldn't fly anymore
ran out of those cups
that the ice cream had always come in
and always would
yet gallons and gallons
of the fresh
cool treat remained
with many waiting customers.

A calamity in the making
until one vendor
looked at a waffle
as no waffle had been looked at before
he rolled it up in a cone
and placed a beautiful scoop of ice cream on top.

And with this business merger
between ice cream and waffle stand
our world changed
forever.

Worried, Not Worried

Things that I'm not worried about...

when I'm going to eat
having enough water
a roof over my head
clothes to wear
surviving winter
the common cold
most minor diseases
finding love
finding purpose
belonging.

Things I worry about...

paying my bills
do I look fat in this shirt
is there enough gas in my car to drive me to
the casino...

The Thirsty Man

The thirsty man
was waiting for God
to make it rain.

God was waiting
for the thirsty man
to make ready some buckets.

Ever

I can't imagine a time before
I can't imagine life without
precious, so precious,
very, very precious to me.

Don't want to lose it
Can't bear to lose it
So afraid to lose it...
Never let it go
never, ever, ever

Holding on tightly
tighter
tighter still
slipping through
grasping with all my might
not good enough...

How can I possibly go on
don't want to go on
can't go on
go on anyway

days go by
weeks go by
a month
a year
thinking
trying to think
trying to remember
remember what it was
I thought
I couldn't
ever, ever
live without.

New Canvas

After an hour of working
on a large canvas
500 or more brushstrokes
I realized I didn't like
what I had done.

I liked the color of the base coat
the tree trunk
the little bush I had put elegantly
in the corner
if I do say so myself...
but the color of the leaves
those leaves...
just didn't look right.

Long past the years of
"Oh no, it's ruined!"
having seen too many
Joy of Painting
episodes and learning
about the happy little accidents
I am sure that Bob Ross could fix

what I had done.

But I'm no Bob Ross
so after a few minutes
I take the thick brush
and run streak after streak
of black paint over my experiment.

Yes, it was an hour of work
and nothing to show for it
but luckily
I can always
start over.

About the Author



James P. Wagner (Ishwa) is an editor, publisher, award-winning fiction writer, essayist, performance poet, and alum twice over (BA & MALS) of Dowling College. He is the publisher for Local Gems Poetry Press and the Senior Founder and President of the Bards Initiative, a Long Island, NY based non-profit dedicated to using poetry for social improvement. He has been on the advisory boards for the Nassau County

Poet Laureate Society and the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association. James also helped with the Dowling College Writing Conference.. James believes poetry is alive and well and thoroughly enjoys being a part of poetic culture. He was the Long Island, NY National Beat Poet Laureate from 2017-2019. He was the Walt Whitman Bicentennial Convention Chairman. James has edited over 50 poetry anthologies. James first walked into a Long Island poetry reading at age 17 and hasn't looked back since. Now he has hosted events up and down the East Coast and published regional anthologies in over 15 states in the United States and parts of Europe.



Local Gems Poetry Press is a small Long Island based poetry press dedicated to spreading poetry through performance and the written word. Local Gems believes that poetry is the voice of the people, and as the sister organization of the Bards Initiative, believes that poetry can be used to make a difference.

Local Gems has published over 200 titles.

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