

WE'RE OUT HERE: POETIC TRANSCENDENCE AND CHARLES WRIGHT'S
"HOMAGE TO PAUL CEZANNE"

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The introduction of this thesis is an essay examining the poem "Homage to Paul Cezanne" by Charles Wright. Claiming that the capacity to serve as intersection of the singular and universal is poetry's means to transcendence, the essay uses the Charles Wright's poem to demonstrate this capacity, identifying poetry's ability to access the primitive: its connection to the base of what humanity is and can be, as the means by which that transcendence is possible. Placing the discussion within the context of the Romantic Movement and furthering the literary ideals of the paralleling interior human Nature, to external nature. Following this introduction is a four section collection of poetry, unified by the philosophy of the essay which precedes it.

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PART I

POETIC TRANSCENDENCE AND CHARLES WRIGHT'S "HOMAGE TO PAUL CEZANNE"

One chooses poetry for its capacity to function as intersection. The most primal manifestation of poetic communion is the intersection of the Universal and the Singular. The singular self is born to chaos and confusion and left to its own devices. If you are partial to Plato: the self is born to the cave, bound to its view of the shadows against the wall. Before freedom, before liberation from the depths, a self must take that first step of faith and project its own possibility on the shadows dancing the cold cave wall. From this comes a voice, the Singular crying out to a Universal which exists as nothing but a chained-up shadow-sighted hope. Within literature, poetry is a realization of this voice.

If, consumed by the intersection of the Singular and the Universal, this manner of transcendence is a primary end to poetry, its access to “the primitive” is its means. The best of what poetry is feels, recognizes and or speaks from the bottom of what we are. This base in literature has progressed through and become attached to both the Romantic Tradition and its dichotomizing of nature/Nature: that which surrounds consciousness versus consciousness itself. Vital for its capacity to rub language raw, poetry is of the Platonic, connecting multitudes of the Singular by means of a Universal.

For poetry as a vehicle of transcendence, language can only be a means, not an end. Like language itself, poetry can only overcome distances; it can't create anything but the path between things separated. Poets and readers relate to each other in this perpetual dialectic of the Universal and Singular, with Nature pitted against specificity. The individual bows to the collective as a symptom of not wanting to have to reinvent the wheel, in order to understand itself in a greater context, and not to be utterly alone. The Universal progressively shifts to encompass the innovations of the Singular. And it is in this dialectic we begin to find an understanding of transcendence.

In Charles Wright's poem "Homage to Paul Cezanne" we see these poetic capacities explored. Within this poem, humanity is united and set in opposition to its own mortality. There are no political realities to reconcile, no gods, no belief structures, no individual identities. There is only the plural speaker, only the poem's we. This step towards the Universal is metaphysical:

Over and over, through clenched teeth, they tell
Their story, the story each knows by heart:
Remember me. Speak my name.
When the moon tugs at my sleeve,
When the body of water is raised and becomes the body of light,
Remember me, speak my name.

Poetry provides a means to making that voice, pleading to be remembered, enough.

Wright's poem turns on the fluidity of the relationship between its plural speaker and its obsession: the dead. The speaker's collective, though illusive and shifting, functions most consistently as the voice of universal consciousness, as the community of the living, and in opposition to this, the dead, a denotation of absence, find presence in the act of being given homage. Wright utilizes this presence to connect human consciousness to itself through death, and through a common Nature to the material world surrounding consciousness. This connection between humanity, living to dead, with nature and art as means and mediators, puts forth the act of homage as an intersection of the Singular and the Universal within the context of humanity's progress, generation to generation.

In the poem's title, there's a syntactical duplicity illustrative of the fundamental conflict within, between the turn in and the turn out. The first way we read the title, the poem is giving homage for the life of Paul Cézanne and so aligns the dead with the theme of the artist rendering the natural world. To that end Bruce Bond connects the ideals and techniques of Cézanne's painting to Wright's poetry, in his essay "Metaphysics of the Image in Charles Wright and Paul Cézanne." In this reading of the poem's title, the living and dead are separated, longing for each

other, unreconciled and haunted, and consciousness is directed out, the Singular (Paul Cezanne) reckoned by the Universal (homage-givers). The other way to read the title, that the poem explores or demonstrates what homage, the word/concept, means to Paul Cézanne, suggests consciousness is directed inward, manifest in the poem's etymological concern. Its concern thus is with Existential renderings of Selfhood. The Universal (the word/idea/essence of homage) seeks the Singular (someone to pay homage, as in the toothless tongue of the last section).

At night, in the fish-light of the moon, the dead wear our white shirts
To stay warm, and litter the fields.
We pick them up in the mornings, dewy pieces of paper and scraps of cloth.

Wright opens with one of the strongest visual moments of the poem, beginning an important current of imagery: light and reflection. The reference to the moon as “fish-light” portrays this illumination as reflection. Further *the dead* (in “our white shirts”) litter the fields. Wright establishes presence in the absence of the poem's dead by granting them the fragments and reflections of the under-pronounced collective of the living. In our shirts, the dead have no body but ours, and in white are set to reflect the moon's reflected light. The closing metaphor of this opening gesture (“dewy pieces of paper and scraps of cloth”) transforms the shirts into the raw materials of artistic expression, white with the glowing absence that artistic impulse must confront and overcome.

Like us, they refract themselves. Like us,
They keep on saying the same thing, trying to get it right.
Like us, the water unsettles their names.

After the opening image of reflection, *the dead* and the speaker's collective are set up as reflections in the rising chant (“like us”) used to close the first stanza. From the claim “they refract themselves,” the poem progresses through its images of light and reflection to raise the issue of language's shortcomings as sole means to transcendence in the line: “like us, they keep

on saying the same thing, trying to get it right.” The last line (“like us, the water unsettles their names”) furthers this desire to push beyond language, bringing to mind the opening of the *Tao*

Te Ching:

Tao called Tao is not Tao.
Names can name no lasting name.
Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth
Naming: the mother of ten thousand things.

And

Best to be like water,
Which benefits the ten thousand things
And does not contend.

From this manner of Eastern/stoic sentiment Wright’s descriptions of nature find mystic energy, in order to, as Bond describes, make “the most immediate objects assume a metaphysical inscrutability and allure.”

Sometimes they lie like leaves in their little arks, and curl up at the edges.
Sometimes they come inside, wearing our shoes, and walk
From mirror to mirror.
Or lie in our beds with their gloves off
And touch our bodies. Or talk
In a corner. Or wait like envelopes on a desk.

The first line of the second stanza describes a leaf in an ark curling up at the edges to mimic the shape of the vessel that carries it. The use of this vein of imagery, these “little arks,” builds to become fundamental to the poem’s portrayal of self-making, and specifically, the realizing of the self as Other in the process of reflection, each a vessel trying to contain the other like the Singular and Universal, or, in regards to time and mortality, now and forever.

Furthering this theme of shared identity and reflection, in the next two lines *the dead*, wearing our shoes, walk from mirror to mirror. In the three parallels closing out the second stanza, the relationship between the dead and living finds distance. The line “or lie in our beds with their gloves off and touch our bodies” takes a subtle step back from making the two the

same and or reflections, to making them only intimately close. With the phrase “or talk in a corner,” communion is cut off entirely, leaving *the dead* their own and only audience. And finally, in the last line (“or wait like envelopes on a desk”) *the dead* become a means to an end, the manner of vessel to which the “little arks” allude.

They reach up from the ice plant.
They shuttle their messengers through the oat grass.
Their answers rise like rust on the stalks and the spidery leaves.
We rub them off our hands.

In the third stanza of the first section, *the dead* underlie and motivate the nature imagery, using plants to carry their reachings, messages and answers. One can take this stanza as an allusion to and re-rendering of the gestures uniting humanity through nature in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and “Song of Myself,” though Wright’s unromanticized mystery is set in stark contrast to Whitman’s. The distance in that last line specifically responds to Whitmanian inclusion through nature. To Whitman’s sentiment of, “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/ If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles,” Wright responds with a colder, “We rub them off our hands.”

Each year the dead grow less dead, and nudge
Close to the surface of all things
They start to remember the silence that brought them there.
They start to recount the gain in their soiled hands.
Their glasses let loose, and grain by grain return to the river bank.
They point to their favorite words
Growing around them, revealed as themselves for the first time:
They stand close to the meaning and take them in.

In the first lines of section two, we see what Bond characterizes as Wright’s “Platonic desire for access to wholly transcendent Form” in the line, “nudging closer to the surface of all things.” Bond claims that hand in hand with the Platonic Forms in Wright is a “late Aristotelian disbelief in their existence,” and whether disbelief is quite the case, Wright surely recognizes the

distance between that “wholly transcendent Form” and the potentials of language, and seems to be offering art and faith as further bridges to the gap. Does one need belief in the existence of Forms if the ideal of them itself bears fruit?

The metaphysics of Plato continue in the following line, as *the dead* “remember the silence that brought them there” and so the poem imagines a world prior to language. In line three, the poetic space of this stanza is separated from measurable time, as the sand returns to the riverbank from the broken glasses (likely hour glasses). In the last three lines of this stanza this world of Forms becomes tied to and champion of what poetry’s primitivism seeks to transcend in language, holding words as something pure but dependent and not complete in and of themselves.

They stand there, vague and without pain,
Under their fingernails an unreturnable dirt.
They stand there and it comes back,
The music of everything, syllable after syllable
Out of the burning chair, out of the beings of light.
It all comes back.
And what they repeat to themselves, and what they repeat to themselves,
Is the song that our fathers sing.

In stanza two, *the dead* stand in the imaginative space created by stanza one, “vague and without pain,” “under their fingers an unreturnable dirt,” and as they survey the dead space, Wright infuses it with life. Reminiscent of the return of the hourglass’s sand to the riverbank in section one stanza two, in the third line of the second stanza: “They stand there, and it comes back, / The music of everything, syllable after syllable/ Out of the burning chair, out of the beings of light,/ It all comes back.” The return of the music “syllable after syllable” marks a return of vital energy to the dead world of Forms. In the images of the “burning chair” and “beings of light,” we are shown sources of light and energy more primary than the moon, white t-shirts, or anything giving off what might be described as fish-light.

The song mentioned in the last two lines (“And what they repeat to themselves, and what they repeat to themselves, / Is the song that our fathers sing”) relates back to section one as a means by which *we* “keep on saying the same thing, trying to get it right.” As further connection to Plato, the space of this section comes to mirror the caves in the closing gesture of *The Republic*: the myth of Err. There too, in a void space similar to that of this section, souls are ushered back to try “and get it right.”

In steeps and sighs,
The ocean explains itself, backing and filling
What spaces it can't avoid, spaces
In black shoes, their hands clasped, their eyes tearing at the edges:
The ocean swelling and flattening, the spaces
Filling and emptying, horizon blade
Flashing the early afternoon sun.

The dead are constant in
The white lips of the sea.
Over and over, through the clenched teeth, they tell
Their story, The story each knows by heart:

Section three reasserts the more visual mode from the poem's opening: “in steeps and sighs/ the ocean explains itself.” *The dead* become the spaces, like the void of the last section, of what Cezanne called “the diamond zones of god” (referring to the blank spots of canvas allowed to bleed through in his later work). In the line “spaces in black shoes, their hands clasped, their eyes teared at the edges,” *the dead* become mourners, constant in the tumult of the sea, constant in the chaos of the natural world, weeping to be remembered.

Remember me, speak my name.
When the moon tugs at my sleeve,
When the body of water is raised and becomes the body of light,
Remember me, speak my name. [emphasis in the original]

The story that concludes section three connects back to the song that concludes section two and also, as noted, the line in section one: “They keep saying the same thing, trying to get it right.” This connection forms a haunting cycle of the past clinging to the present and vice versa.

This story in section three seems the result and consolation of having not, despite whatever trying, gotten it right. In the song of section two *the dead* lose their names in the singing as anything but the collective: fathers. They are the Singular lost to the Universal. So too, in this story of section three, *the dead* beg us to remember and speak names without providing any, except as a collective: the dead.

The dead are a cadmium blue.
We spread them with palette knives in broad blocks and planes.
We layer them stroke by stroke
In steps and ascending mass, in verticals raised from the earth.
We choose, and layer them in,
Blue and a blue and a breath,
Circle and smudge, cross-beak and button hook,
We layer them in. We squint hard and terrace them line by line.
And so we are come between, and cry out,
And stare up at the sky and its cloudy panes,
And finger the cypress twists.
The dead understand all this, and keep in touch,
Rustle of hand to hand in the lemon trees,
Flags, and the great sifts of anger
To powder and nothingness.
The dead are cadmium blue, and they understand.

In section four we return abruptly to Cézanne, painting technique, and considerations of the processes of art as a means to represent and reconcile Nature to nature. Cadmium Blue, conspicuous for the purpose of being man-made, is one of those wondrous ten-thousand things naming has granted. Through this section the speaker's *we* animates *the dead* as paint. *The dead*, later in the stanza, then transform into the wind, similarly animating the natural world. The most resonant language of this section is the line "And so we are come between," and it is here the speaker's *we* begins to envelope what it has thus far been opposing, here coming to encompass both the living and dead.

The dead are with us to stay.
Their shadows rock in the back yard, so pure, so black,
Between the oak tree and the porch.

Over our heads they're huge in the night sky.
In the tall grass they turn with the zodiac.
Under our feet they're white with the snows of a thousand years.

Section five opens with a night scene, the darkness and shadow to counter the light and reflection that opened the poem. The line "Over our heads they're huge in the night sky" conjures thoughts of stars, but more likely following with the themes, refers to the spaces, the black sky between the stars, what turns "with the zodiac" (with the stars and thereby separate from them) of the next line.

They carry their colored threads and baskets of silk
To mend our clothes, making us look right,
Altering, stitching, replacing a button, closing a tear.
They lie like tucks in our loose sleeves, they hold us together.

The clothes and tailoring imagery of the third stanza seem to come out of nowhere, with only the white shirts of section one, and the line "when the moon tugs at my sleeve" in section three, as prelude. Unlike all the natural veins of imagery, this stanza tries to get specifically at the matter of human faith. We see people busy about their day, covered in clothes that they trust to hold together, and these small hops of faith are like the effects of *the dead*, as "they hold us together."

The dead are waiting for us in our rooms,
Little globules of light
In one of the far corners, and close to the ceiling, hovering, thinking out thoughts.
Often they'll reach a hand down,
Or offer a word, and ease us out of our bodies to join them in theirs.
We look back at our other selves on the bed.

We look back and we don't care and we go.
And thus we become what we've longed for,
past tense and otherwise,

A BB, a disc of light,
 song without words.
And refer to ourselves
In the third person, seeing that other arm
Still raised from the bed, fingers like licks and flames in the boned air.
Only to hear that it's not time.
Only to hear that we must re-enter and lie still, our arms at rest at our sides,
The voices rising around us like mist
And dew, *it's all right, it's all right, it's all right...*

Section six is where the speaker's community and the collective of *the dead* meet most intimately. They meet in a room, a setting in line with the clothes stanza of section five, apart from the nature, part of the man-made world. In the opening of this section *the dead* are "little globules of light" that seduce us out of our bodies. The scene to follow plays out like a near death experience: the light beckoning ... it's not time yet... the return...

In this section the self and Other theme of the poem reaches its crescendo. The journey out of the self mystified as "little globules of light" that hover "thinking our thoughts," allow us a separation from self, and further, on to realizing the self as Other, to be "past tense and otherwise,/ A BB, a disc of light,/ song without words./ and refer to ourselves/ In the third person." We become a Thing, outside of ourselves and thereby able, in the process of reflection, to mirror the self in the Other, and Other in self. As Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness*, "By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in a position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it as an object that I appear to the Other." (Sartre, 302)

In the closing of this stanza, the self is emblazoned with "licks and flames," while everything outside of the self is partnered with *the dead*, as of "the boned air." So in closing the section, the ushering from outside of the self (now invested with death) back into the self (now burning with life), doesn't seem so bad and comes with the comfort of the lines: "The voices rising around us like mist/ And dew, it's all right, it's all right, it's all right" This sentiment

connects to that potential Rousseau credits for humanity's emergence from the state-of-nature: compassion, which is the natural product of the Existential reconciliation of self and Other.

The dead fall around us like rain.
They come down from the last clouds in the late light for the last time
And slip through the sod.
They lean uphill and face north.
Like grass,
They bend toward the sea, and break toward the setting sun.
We filigree and we baste.
But what do the dead care for the fringe of words,
Safe in their suits of milk?
What do they care for the honk and flash of a new style?

In section seven, a recasting of much of the poem's nature imagery fills the first stanza in various forms: the sun, sea, water cycle, grass and clouds. In the second stanza, filigree and baste, types of stitches or bindings, are rendered in elevated language to contrast in tone the clothes stanza of section five. Here the question of faith connected to the clothing imagery from section five becomes invested in language, and the tiny leaps of faith required in trying to communicate. The first question in section seven ("what do the dead care for the fringe of words?") emphasizes the primitivist push in language and beyond. The last line actively mocks the frivolity of language with: "What do the dead care for the honk and flash of a new style?"

And who is to say if the inch of snow in our hearts
Is rectitude enough?
Spring picks the locks of the wind.
High in the night sky the mirror is hauled up and unsheeted.
In it we twist like stars.

In the next stanza the theme of homage emerges explicitly in concerns over art's ability to portray *the dead*. The questions, the one in section seven, and the two in eight, are asking about the ability of the speaker's collective to represent and speak for the community of dead, a

community that has come to include the actual dead, nature, everything outside of the self, and by virtue of the process of reflecting all three, the self itself.

Ahead of us, through the dark, the dead
Are beating their drums and stirring the yellow leaves.

The last couplet, as simple as it seems, demonstrates the subtle disjoint that is the greatest success of this poem. This homage, in whatever sense, concerned with the relation of the living to the dead, breaks free of time. “Ahead of us” *the dead* lead. One way this can be taken, is in that most literal vein, that *the dead* being what has come before have paved the way for the present, but the sense of them “beating their drums and stirring the yellow leaves” makes them present in a more substantial way than common conceptions of homage would seem to allow. They become not only our past but also our future, which in our common Nature and shared mortality becomes the defining contradiction of the human Singular’s relation to the Universal. At the same time we are the product of those who came before, their stories are our fates.

We’re out here, our feet in the soil, our heads craned up at the sky,
The stars screaming and bursting behind the trees.

Having wrestled throughout with their identity as a mortal collective, Wright’s last section is a reconciliation of the poem’s *we*. This last section brings a declaration of identity, thus far withheld, in the lines: “We’re out here, our feet in the soil, our heads craned up at the sky,/ The stars streaming and bursting behind the trees.” The sense of transcending time in the last couplet in the seventh section, placing *the dead* in front of us, continues into this last section, and notably absent is the dialectic between *the dead* and the speaker’s *we* that has dominated the poem up till now. In the previous seven sections *the dead* have stood for mortality, a reflection of humanity, and have related to the living through material nature and artistic technique. In this section *the dead* have been enfolded into the *we*, and time is what that collective is pitted against.

At dawn, as the clouds gather, we watch
The mountain glide from the east on the valley floor,
Coming together in starts and jumps.
Behind their curtain, the bears
Amble across the heavens, serene as black coffee...

The image from the last five lines of the first stanza of section eight relates back to section three's sea imagery. In section three the speaker watches *the dead* through the rise and fall, through the motion of the sea. Here, like the earlier scene *we* witness the "mountain glide from the east" "in starts and jumps." The space traveled between these two events is time, and *the dead* unite with the living in a continuum of consciousness.

Whose unction can intercede for the dead?
Whose tongue is toothless enough to speak their piece?
What we are given in dreams we write as blue paint,
Or messages to the clouds.

Art is the means by which *we* intercede with unction, to speak each other's piece with toothless tongues. This is put even more plainly in the next stanza: "What we are given in dreams we write in blue paint/ or messages to the clouds."

At evening we wait for the rain to fall and the sky to clear.
Our words are words for the clay, uttered in undertones,
Our gestures salve for the wind.
We sit out on the earth and stretch our limbs,
Hoarding the little mounds of sorrow laid up in our hearts.

Wright considers his own art in the lines: "Our words are words for the clay, uttered in undertones,/ Our gestures salve for the wind." The mention of clay connects language to Wright's theme of the contained coming to resemble the container, as in the phrase: "leaves in their little arks, and curl up at the edges." Humanity comes to resemble the world that surrounds it. And in the last stanza, we mortals are simply vehicles/vessels for the "little mounds of sorrow laid up in our hearts."

From the poem's separate veins of imagery, and the revealed processes of reflection, Wright leaves us a picture of ourselves stripped down. This poem asserts that there is a base, and at the bottom humanity, instead of being divided by history, language, skin-color, sex, and class, can find communion. At the bottom, the Universal and the Singular intersect, and it is in this metaphysical equation poetry finds the purposes that make it vital.

First on the level of language, Wright's surrealism seeks to re-invest in language the meaning and energy lost to modern society and its banalities of the extraneousness. This surrealist aim looks a lot different in this primitivist portrait than it does from inside an urban society, as in for example Neruda's *Walking Around* or Eliot's *The Wasteland*. From a context of modern society we are in the middle of a tornado, objects flying by, and the strains of meaning attached are fleeting and especially jarring, suggesting the cacophony by representing its extremes. We find a more focused examination in a more primal context as in *Homage to Paul Cezanne*.

As Bruce Bond notes in his previously mentioned essay, "The primitive is by definition a starting point rather than a point beyond. It comes first, either temporally or in the figurative sense as ground and condition—the way that sensation serves as a condition of consciousness." Wright casts *the dead* as a realization of mortality and this poem as a singular example of transcendence. This intersection is the end, distant things reunited.

While poetry is certainly an endeavor of and concerned with language, it is not that merely, and there is the magic of transcendence; so much of the world around us, so much of the world within is irreducible. Language evolves, changes, but still some things remain beyond what names we choose to give them. Poetry is a vehicle. It knows that past any destination reached are just more places yet unspeakable. It is happy enough to carry us what distance it can,

and drop of us just short of the mysteries we can not reach in language, in order that we might travel the last bit for ourselves by other means. This is the magic in the relationship between poet and reader. A poem having provided transit to the poet in the writing is in turn offered to others. The readers must choose to enact that journey for themselves. A poet can provide a vehicle, but it is left to others to start the car and step on the gas.

The relationship to language poetry utilizes implies moral dictates that can easily be overlooked and or taken for granted. Poetry is concerned with fidelity, conflicted and simultaneously devoted to tradition, the past, the base, and innovation as both a means for progress but also for connection to the primitive, keeping vital and alive those necessary aspects of language that have already been realized and may be falling into over-familiarity. Thus poetry contains within it the desire of the single consciousness reaching out to the Universal. The comfort that voice seeks is related to the human capacities of sympathy and compassion. After a pre-supposed realization of the self, humanity finds in others the hope of not being alone and our greatest potential for transcendence, the want to be comforted and to comfort: something we need just as much as we need to give it.

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PART II
WE'RE OUT HERE

We're Out here, our feet in the soul, our heads craned up at the sky,
The stars streaming and bursting behind the trees.

-Charles Wright's *Homage to Paul Cezanne*

In the Fishlight

The Gloaming
For Steve and Sonia

They sit, side-by-side,
on the porch as the flailing
front door leaks light

and little voices. The chimes
sound silver songs that ring
like youth with proof.

Long as the wind blows the world,
it will have music. Seeping in,
from the edges, the night strains

to see. And in the distance,
the clashing of air and earth:
the slow fight of twilight.

Happy enough and unspoken,
they hold each other
in a mouth full of nothing to say.

Blue with busyness,
the day is given over
to what it has left,

like a life humbled
down to its diamond heart.
Collapsing and teary

to the last blade of horizon,
pupils cling to light
like hands to each other.

With nothing left but to turn
the world. They're memories
in newborn eyes,

soft as sunsets,
pink with best wishes.
And the night knows,

so as it takes them in,
the wind whispers
of being born again.

Still Having to Die

They tie fireflies to bonefish and for the wish-light
of the moon search the sand with porcelain spoons.

Like us, from the shore, the sea, they sigh.
Like us, they tell their sorrows but to stones
and we, we do not hear. They take advantage

of us. To the heavy clap of eyelids closing,
through bedroom doors left ajar, they invade
with quiet hands to hold over us like vision.

Till having seen enough, we roll them up in the shade,
and with morning warming behind them, they are born
again to forgetting and soft to the skies of salvation.

They wear white cotton panties and lotus fields at noon,
to blend in. At sunset, in yellow smiles and blue galoshes,
when the darkness rains down like the last flood, they are

ready. Passage is just a scheme, they allow us
to walk through them like water. The sinking
begins with a single tear, and soon grows sad.

We all get swallowed. They are the hiccups
in our connection to the outside: the screen
door, gray and dull with passive aggression.

There's no way to escape. They are instantaneous
and we, but eventualities, ghosts bearing chains
like failure and to mock us, they press our backs,

moving with us till our will is crushed
on the glass of all the space we can't
transcend. The dead are phosphorescent

fits, little scraps of paper that turn light
to dust, at a breath, each with a word
we never see, save smeared in distance.

Nothing but motion caught in the corner
of an eye, stretched too thin, staring
through the window, dark as a mirror.

It's so hard to look away.

First Fallen

For Brian and Julie

What if this were all you had.
These words, this act, that body
in its white-sheet and window, staring,

still as a ghost in a mirror, with no community
but the darkness, no hope but that sight of itself
is a first step, and being understood is a promise

hard to make good on, like breath wasted
on pretty words or time spent mourning time
or any of our petty monuments of distraction.

We are not dead, just dying
to follow the sea from this shore.
Our song finished and finishing,

we long even before its gone. And so the song
takes over the singing like these lives we take
for granted, living. These bodies we won't keep

long enough to remember. We say it's alright,
but hold so tight because we believe it might
save us. Lost in regret, the faces worn out

to not forget our empty names, the shells we haunt
like the sea singing: *remember to remember me.*
And the moon is not death, just dying to find us

full. Our wishing-wells, wept, we can do no more
than mend in secret; be no more than lovers,
with nothing to give but what's between us,

this warm bed, this sea of night, pale moon our light
for breaking, but find comfort. Make of this absence,
this act and of this act enough, to get lost like a song

singing, like a body sinking that ceases struggling
for the comfort it always had to believe in,
given over like this moment in the mirror,

this flesh hauled-up and unsheeted.
We have no place, just a face
to fall for like coins from the rain.

To Break the Body

Life was immediate before this body
required, before birth and breaking
down, before these walls began

breathing. No stronger for having
not yet been killed, it grounds us
to losing, counts us

down. Would that the body were blind
as the mind. It doesn't fear
for itself. Fear is of the body.

The mind rationalizes it all
away but the body,
the body can only take so much.

The mind has choices
and the body's want
is a cell door slamming.

If what doesn't rot, requires,
gouge your eyes dry with points
to prove. Sometimes

you have to swallow the muzzle
and shotgun the corporeal mess
for the simple sake of passing.

To be dying and in denial;
to not know, to not really
believe, crazed in the consolation

of not having to face
the pissing away
of what you were given,

but carrying it with you
despite yourself,
like your heavy bones.

When Death Comes

This sheet to rot under, smooth to stillness,
the white-washed face of this nursing home,
the raw horror both hide will be your last comfort.

Between these walls, deflating
women whimper and hiss,
unmade beds in unmade beds.

Sores blooming the body unmoved: stone ripping
against the wind, watching the life creep in,
festering and oblivious, as if death wasn't waiting

empty and angry; like the lives that wail
these walls, split open under the wait.
I won't be the dutiful mourner, weeping

to the sad mess of what was left.
What I will keep buried I will keep,
but here you are dirty and digging.

We're too late. Out of will with time
to spare, being sucked up slow
through a thin straw. I won't be with you

when it comes. This goodbye counts.
Both of us just bodies, unfit for our memories
of each other and I have no more comfort to give.

What sustains me would only
break you faster. This is all for me,
but still, there you sit,

like my pitiful smile
was the only thing holding you up:
the failing voice of a prayer not yet heard.

The Fool

From A River

It requires heavenly trauma.
It must fall and crush you.
Just so, what had been lies down,
wet, red, given over to gnashing,
with no redemption
but of belly and bowel.

Vultures circle, shadows
in the sand, and sometimes
the center finds you and follows.
The great mass of motion melts
into your voice, the wind
sheer of acid and winter.

Bombed-Out Buildings

What if it's just
that we are
our hearts:

these chambers to echo,
past knowing how long
we'll be beaten. Life,

not happy, not angry,
simply hung on to. Last
embers in the ash, huddled

behind the burnt remnants
of closet doors in bombed-out
buildings, dead-faced

and hungry-wet, blue
as lips just dispossessed.
Vast nets feed us and on us,

wriggling the center of webs.
Red and of us, these wounds
spread as we inch up our blades

for the hilts, the hands.
Of these places we must die
we make a home.

In the phantom spaces we are,
we are hollow for the river
and we can never leave.

Yes, we horde it all,
it's all we have,

each moment a denial of time,
and beat by beat
we are alive.

The Fool

I.

Faith is the body,
it binds us to the world.

We hide it,
our pink shame-
so cold the street.

We watch it run down gutters-
so wet the water- so wet
the world, and the silence-
so still our souls.

Wept in the soft glow of caves,
it washes away, but the light
sits with us at night: the baby sleeping,
bound snug to our chest, to carry
whether or not we want.

Sometimes it's the red balloon
tied to my wrist, which while I watch,
smiling, holds me up. Sometimes,
weightless and transient, I'm empty,
a blue balloon, bound to it.

We all long to float away,
last breaths given over to the sky.

II.

Hope is the rope they hang you with,
the stones they judge behind.

Black tongues call it to kill you,
but it doesn't listen.

It's the quiet cushions that keep
the knives in our hands
from the holes in our hearts.

When the lonely dark leaks through
the shelter of two hands interlaced,
a light too bright to hide from-

When the gas-bath ignites
from the frustration of all you couldn't do-

When the drone of the money-changer's count
drowns out the sense-

When the tanks roll in
over the tortoise shells of what is better
to leave you with the pieces-

When tears grow trite
from being common; blood, luxurious
for its association with violence;
violence, power-

When the pain becomes pointless,
all we can do is die,
and I am not afraid. I am not afraid.
I am not afraid.

Measured Out In Coffee-spoons

Turning over to see if sleep had quietly slipped out,
with warm wishes, the money, a bagel;
or, if hovering just above, on paper wings,
it was watching, conflicted like a soul
searching the well of its old, just emptied eyes.

Spend breath like a beggar. Remember
the sun like a dream to shake off in waking,
except there it is, shining through the crack
in the window pane, numbs my brain.

Gotta go. Gotta go. Get out early,
to write in a blank fog- but the red-eyed morning
is not enough, and getting the dullness down
is a chemistry experiment, a balancing of justice.

On the right: the white dreams and wildfire-
buzzing hands, pinning eyelids open.
On the left: the molasses, submergence,
the weight. Careful. Just enough.

Not so much as to lose the will to leave, just enough
to drown out all but that last voice, just enough
to get it moving because once it gets going, he's good
and glows in the self-delusions of what he calls purpose.

Through the doorway, crisp as Vicks Vapor Rub
the morning rings like a jewelry store.
The music starts.

Clown feet roll like a ferris-wheel
half-hidden under the cloud
from which they're watched.

The lonely bounce to the coffee shop
is all camera tricks and soundtrack.

Rap is good for walking, black beats
push square in the back, regimental
to the body's forgetfulness—
the footfalls, heartbeat, eyelid batting.

The dark fist makes a proper show for street strangers,
the equality of anger: fuck yous for everyone.

Cut behind 7-11, where the grass
is scorched by the slow sun, belligerent
as those angry-pocketed good ol' boy politicians.
Resolve can rape rainstorms.

In Texas, the weather is a political platform,
and I can get all the news I need on the weather report.

A good coffee shop coughs when you go in,
spits smoke like a KEEP OUT sign
for the right-wing, Christian,
better body, intolerant. Amen.

Burst the door like a shot,
a steady pace a stiff arm leads,
abrupt for the eyes always waiting.
Weave the center aisle sullen,

evasive and aloof. It sucks
them in when you're aloof.
It sucks them in. It sucks. It works.
I guess it's cool to be alone.

Fumble the headphones off, a brief break
from being deaf and dumb. Say, "Large"
and be careful not to stare, not to mumble.
Wait till she turns to slip her tip in the jar.

At the darkly stained buffet,
full of preparation, the cream falls
like a bomb, mushrooming off the bottom,
and the black night of coffee is aglow.

The single hole in the top of the sugar shaker
is like a tiny door in a burning building.
Rip the roof off and pour the white lives out.
The tables against the North wall are best,

the wooden chairs with the jail-bar backs,
and facing the front for the twin windows
on either side of the door,
eyes to look out on the street through.

Have you ever bore witness to a will indifferent
and unaware of anything but its own process?

The defiant face of a farmer meets the waking field
at the screen door on his quiet way out
to black-soil last-bastions, for the eyes that
are still swaddled, sleeping behind him.

The granite brow of a soldier humps a green hill
in the heat, as a foreign sun shimmers
the miles safely paced, with the constant
consequence of those yet unfaced.

A quiet man hunches over a lonely table
in a near empty coffee shop. Coughs
as he types. Conflicts of phrasing
raise his head from the glow of his laptop,

glasses low on his nose, foot bouncing
like he's at a piano. The moments
we are most deluded, are the moments
we need most to be loved for.

Write to the Stones, to what 1969
must have felt like. The curl of Mick's lip,
batting those boy eyes. To the prodigal sons
that don't ever go back.

To those miracle moments when the mess
of the modern world meet, waves born
to quiet corners of distant seas, risen and racing.

*Poor boy stood there hung his head and cried,
hung his head and cried.
Poor boy stood there hung his head and cried.*

The styrohome cup is stained
like a cotton gag smoke's been blown through,

the residue of a soul fleeing on the last breath out.
Shrouds may wash the sin away but death is in us,
and bled my burden, have these cold hands
as proof, with the truth they can carve.

The cigarette waits in the black crown ash tray,
and the humbler I feel, the wider my crooked smile.

Abstract 111: Object and Process

“It happens that I am tired of being a man.” Pablo Neruda

Humble in the blue-lit dark, he collapses in stillness,
an upturned turtle, dead in the bath of an electric eye.

The eye outlines his darkness.
Dawn drowns babies in the sea.

He’s lost himself like that crucial thing robbed from a back-pocket
stuffed too full. Sunk in the wash of the moment, he softly moans:

*O Kekule,
I too swallow myself in the cold depths.
Retreat to where you’re most welcome. What better hole
is there to slither into? Seal the orifices of perception,
you can replace the senses with self
and trade the vapors of nothings skittering the nothingness
for the seduction of schizophrenia, the mind reproducing
in bursts of amoebic orgy. Never were a band of players
so suited for their roles. The world has no more nothing than I.*

Raging the redlit dark the figure of a man pulses the beat
of his anger on a drum that bleeds the bass through him.

On fire in the darkness his silhouette dances,
licking the wet bow of a samurai sword.

He’s lost, like that piece of childhood the hungry horrors of the world ravage.
Abandoned to the torrents of sensation, he calls with the voice of Achilles:

*Leave her! Shall we abandon something
so singular and close, for promise, for appearance?
Who must die for the honor betrayed? We widow, orphan,
and rape to protect your right to the size, the shape, the color...
those details of possession you only long for in not having.
Who else must die because your birth entitles you so specific,
so singular a recess in which to hide from the cold? Speak not
of love over the warm heap of Patroclus. Love will not be his epitaph,
nor for my sweet Brisies, sacrificed to the lechery of your booming brother,
like all we blood-soaked here, and all those brooding and abandoned
with the rotted shell of your slain niece, at home.*

Empty and pale, the mournful man surrenders to the static,
like a first and last meal, he neither ordered nor knows to eat.

He’s no more a man than a machine.

He's no more a man than magic.

In the snow, the two darknesses swell against each other, sea and shore.
He contains these most fragile words as preamble to the quick-coming joy,
the senses echo the moment's desperate grip:

My Love, on and on

*I visit violence upon myself and it's the price to pay
for not giving up. You are lust and anger only in absence,
but still I, weary in despair, wish –wait -want.
So till I have the singular tick of your eyebrow,
the exact curvature of its disapproval,
or till I have the specific smell of you, fawning
and dewy, softly cooing like an arm-cradled breast-pet pigeon,
till then you live in the sky of eyes, in the sea of tangled legs,
in the parade of exposed wrists, delicately veined
like the necks of tiny guitars, in the exposed peek
of red silk rising behind the lean forward
of some sweet little thing that might be you, and I'd ask
but better you find me because I could love so many,
and I get lost in the loneliness, and her lips and kind eyes...*

He laments his cell like a vice. Knows not what from without it.
Folds up quiet though. Inhales deep, to feel the veins in his eyes,
the swell of his pupils in eclipse: a wet seal to the moment.

He collapses, a plywood shanty sucked through a straw
from inside, till the mass is too much to contain and bursts,
all messy and shameful like these words.

Things to Not Forget in Loving Me

Like weighted wineskins,
or snake bellies to rat bodies,
as truth passes it shapes us.

I carry words.
Write truth like love. Not mine
any more than something I ate.

I can't protect myself
and love at the same time.

Don't ask me not to run.
My legs know the want
to escape, themselves.

Don't ask me not to hide.
Dark and alone is all I've known.

Don't subject me to the modern malaise of incoherence,
the fiends of flesh, the conspirators of oppression
the portraits of surrender and sorrow. I am not that.

There isn't anything I wouldn't trade your shackles for.

I am not a cold pool to dip a toe in.
Not a high dive to freeze on.

You can hang me and I will cry
but still love you
and wish things were different.

I am always a boy
saving the world.
A bomb.

When the whip cracks, it's for my back,
and I don't need help to bear it.

From the cliff's edge, when the world is white
I pull the sky down, panel by panel.

I am the nothingness between two worlds,
one of birth and one of before,
both burning.

Blue-Hearted

Mean-Timed

Sometimes when the wind blows
I smile to see the world passing.
Sometimes, I die.

The wait, wide and wicked,
you shall know only want,
every step shall be sinking.

Every second shall sting
in the worsening. Every ounce
of relief shall be Faustian

and passing. Be content
with a matchstick fate the weight
collapses. Chant: this too, it passes.

Blind to the sunset, leave
when it's cold. Resign like a dog
on a chain. Watch your ribs

rise as you slowly starve.
It's like being full of song
with your lips sown shut.

Like, under a boulder,
to watch the gnashing,
the tiny white teeth,

your hot hand peaking out
like fresh bait. The weight,
wide, wasted and warring,

she says: it ends when it ends
and not before. Sorry, sweet boy,
I know you thought it might be over,

but sometimes the wind blows
and you smile to see the world go by
and sometimes you die.

Sinnerman

Smoking outside the brick building,
in the blue heart of November.
Pacing, oblivious as some sick child
happy in its lonely game.

She comes up behind,
watches him, the music in his fingers.
Till, sudden as searchlights in a jailyard-
where he gonna run to?

he spins around and is
torn loose. Her eyes, boiling.
Please hide me...but
she takes his hand, tip-toes

his hungry heart away,
bouncing boot heels. The sway
of swollen skirt, full as her

fluorescent face glowing its barstool.
A bleary smile to lead him home,
spilling out of itself.

Led to bed,
broad-handed, battered-humble.
Her warm lips, his wet eyes.

They can't let their wounds
get in the way of not dying,
so as the monster of well-meaning
marches his messy heart out,

three blind men sing the blues,
and by the lick of failing light
in her dark eyes, he is found at sea.

The Penitent

A star behind the sunrise,
a wish given over to the sky,
I couldn't help but fade away.

Desperate, monuments watch
the tide fall. The empty beach
cracks as the world dries up.

Kneel and be forgiven.
Rise to live again.

I would put myself at the bottom,
Below all the things that get in the way
and would see you dragged down here too.

Every morning empty,
with the sun, the building want
pushes to the darkness, and I wait,

a dog too dumb for faith
in anything ever coming back.

Zombie Days and Bankrupt Nights

They run from the starter's pistol
like at the New York marathon,
heavy, seething and ever.

Acceleration bred like rabbits, like rats.

A round rock rolling down
a hill that ends
when all debts are paid.

Would that there was a break
more than this horrid
sun and cold moon spinning.

The hiccup of sleep is not death enough.

While she revs herself up,
from the cold of the years,
I gently burn out,
buzzing softly, waiting
that last fit into forever.

I feel nothing in the severity, outside.
I walk through the walls
and pile the wreckage in wake.

You Can't Write When You're Not Writing

No great poems are left out there,
only mourners and stone.

Poems are trips we don't take,
the lovers we couldn't reach;
the dead we bury to forget.

Too shallow to burst the dam,
they're the tears we bat away,
the wet wash of moments almost had,
and the snow cannot change that.

I can't write the great New York snowy morning
poem because I am alive and living it
(like how I lose love poems in the meantime).

There are too many messy details:
the smoke lost to the powder blue sky,
the boys snoring like bears behind me,
the city white and awake.

In Manhattan there are but two kinds of sleep:
that of the weary and that of the poor.
The rest don't sleep at all in their quiet towers,
hanging upside down and dreamless.

There are no dreams for me either,
just death, just darkness.

I wear my subconscious out,
sleep just for sleeping, tromp through
the snow just to see how deep it goes,
like how I must love.

On a gray St. Patrick's Day, the mirror
of the Hudson unfolds in the wind as I leave
the city behind. The bridges lead away
and I should be writing or with you.

The buildings rise through the snow and fog
like weary colossus emerging from far-aways
to wish me farewell. Too mournful to waive,

they know that I must go.

You can't write when you're not writing,
because poems are tombstones, postcards,
like you. Missed but gone. I am the pallbearer,
the left behind, like this heavy city.

Phantom Limbs

Good and Gone

“They say that time will kill the pain.
I say the pain is gonna kill my time.”
Ben Harper

I'm a mark of absence,
a waterline on a dusty canyon
watching cactus come and go.

Pain is beautiful too.
And addiction is just love
with the sweats.

Want pumps fuller
to the trumpet of not having,
till it bawls like a child

from whom you pry
some bright new way
of killing itself.

For my mother, from whom I first stole,
I stayed up with the Elephant Man
and chain-smoked sickness to comfort.

It's the only thing I have
of my absent father, who took
his Marlboro 100's and left.

Sure, it hurts sometimes,
but better the self-inflicted actual.
The subconscious metaphoric

is so insincere. Don't pray,
write poems. Trade God for death,
and the words collect like tombstones

in a gray graveyard
where the want and wait
is all there is.

The White Lips of the Sea

She opens like a book never finished.
The sacrifice of last waking, to toil
and heavy syllable.

Every twinkle of idea an eye shining
a bedroom darkness, warm with bodies,
with breathing.

She opens like hands wept, just through with prayer,
cradles to what the cold whips have driven
from the fallen field.

In the world of wind, she is desert-destined.
Her black hole eyes, heavy with darkness
swallow the moon.

He falls only to be picked back up. Her arms
catch and bound him off in a grand lack of motion,
but still he charges the hill,

his blue eyes a burden he can never bear out.
At the breach, he gives up being water for being wet.
He diffuses, but it only hardens

the slope that sends him away.
The futility foaming he forgets acceptance
for the habitual charge.

A star collapsing,
he can never get deep enough,
but bright, the fish-light feeds his struggle.

They meet with a smile like the hem of a blue dress
slowly hiked up creamy thighs. Lost at the edges,
they bow against each other like clouds.

They meet bare, without anything between them.
On fingertips he clings like the current.
She is a body forever washing away.

Poem for the Missing

I.

It doesn't have to happen but sometimes
the best seeks us in all the places we aren't.
Naturally, not found, we are given up on,
for home, sleep, a warm bed -but then in morning,
it wakes without memory, to find us again.
So too does the heart love.

II

He was pushed out to sea on an iceberg,
just big enough to weep.
When he sang (cold little songs, white as his eye),
when he screamed (blue as a black man in a block of ice)
his jaw creaked like the left hand of a guitar sliding
taut strings for notes it finds only to fall silent to.

III.

As I stood there
anguish washed over
what was left.

Like a secret
splashes a pond,
she was gone.

Left only this body
to say goodbye,
nothing but the time

it takes to drown, nothing
but the brown water
before the silt.

She asked me to walk away
but turned
and as I watched her go

I felt fortunate to be a poet, glad
for the semblance of a singular
pain, and for my turn

in the threshold,
between the grand weight
of the two spaces.

I could feel the avalanche
of my beggar's soul building,
but it was too late.

One can scream
at the sun as it sets,
but she can't hear.

We're left, the waste.
All the things
we need to say,

the shame... I lost her
with all the poems
only I could write but won't.

Trying to Get It Right

We sleep for the fall,
for apples eaten.

Awake in Eden,
where over ever shown the sun;
quickly worn, give up. Every day

deprive pain metaphor.
Charge morning like a bull,
a late bill, but when you exhaust,

hold on. The moon will come
soon enough, the martyr risen,
the rock rolled back.

We are every star. Lost to light,
let the sun decide where to shine.
Discard the day. For dreams

are where will is just
what happens, where the visions
sealed safe, tremble themselves.

When eyes see no truth,
bind them. The sun shines
but refuse to look. Paint black

what you mean to take back.
Fall. And brave no path to hell
but for ascension. Sleep

soft the shroud, wet
to take you in. Let shadow
pound away the world awhile.

Transcending Form

Start with shape. Transgress.

Spin till the smears of color
bleed into each other, till it's
a wash of whiteness.

When eyes burst the well of wish-calling
let the sad wrecks tangle their winding paths
on humble backs. Parade the pine boxes

full with flower to hover the treetops,
paper ducks at a shooting gallery: bodies
but sold to blooming.

The doom in us is just a circle,
a wheel; yet to move trust
time turns everything eventually.

Name no lasting name. Empty. Flee
so fast none but faith can follow,
but feel the weight. Grace is

tomorrow and we, today, are duped;
shotgun-wed step-fathers to the pain
of our ten thousand things.

We raise our rusty flags to the tragedy of the night,
hysterical with stars and are but fashion,
the turning tide of a fight forever finishing.

Triangles are the traps we fall in,
rings the routes we run,
square the cells we pace.

Dear friends, beginnings and ends,
we, the between, know but can't yell
loud enough to make it so. Shape

is the sadness, passing the bliss, though
banks are buried in the river-run,
still we are far from home.

As alone as we are ourselves,
now is the wet we wade through;

tears, the praise we offer back.

Words, the space like us,
burst boxes, are infectious,
evolving, desperate.

Nothing here. But transcending
washes the world in firsts,
echoing. The truth is

without us. The sky doesn't wait
for us to die. We are but gasps
in the gaps of the wind,

thimbles to rain in
when the sky is sad,
deep as it is dying.

What Gets Left

Memory,
not ours but of us,
like our wet eyes,
not seeing, but seen;

with no choice
but to carry us with them:
the people we've made
the people they've become.

In what faith we are left,
not of or for ourselves,
like from the sea, the shore,
the wind the world.

We were left behind.
We were always past saving ourselves.
There was always only sacrifice and luck.

Shattering is unavoidable.
Don't pity it in others,
don't hold it against them.

We're all full of the same shame.
Forgiveness was always
all the chance we ever had.

If you don't pay for the things
you love, they pay for you.