

Poets on Love, Death, and other Difficulties

Jung Center

June 2011

James Hollis

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208. A Noiseless Patient Spider

A NOISELESS, patient spider,
I mark'd, where, on a little promontory, it stood, isolated;
Mark'd how, to explore the vacant, vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself;
Ever unreeling them—ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you, O my Soul, where you stand,
Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,—seeking the spheres, to connect them:
Till the bridge you will need, be form'd—till the ductile anchor hold;
Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul.

Carrion Comfort by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
In me yr, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? and fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer.
Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fyot tryd
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that
year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.

Design

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth --
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth --
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small.

DOVER BEACH

By Matthew Arnold

The sea is calm tonight,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night air!

Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Agean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

1867

[Keith's poetry archive.](#)
[Keith's favorite poems.](#)

Diving into the Wreck

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet

my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and away into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.

I am she: I am he

**whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass**

**We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.**

Adrienne Rich

Not marble nor the gilded monuments (Sonnet 55)
by William Shakespeare

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme
But you shall shine more bright in these clouds
Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall
The living record of your memory.

'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom
So, till the judgment that yourself arise
You live in this, and dwell in lovers'

Not Marble Nor the Gilded Monuments"
by Archibald MacLeish

The praisers of women in their proud and beautiful poems,
Naming the grave mouth and the hair and the eyes,
Boasted those they loved should be forever remembered:
These were lies.

The words sound but the face in the Istrian sun is forgotten.
The poet speaks but to her dead ears no more.
The sleek throat is gone -- and the breast that was troubled to
listen:
Shadow from door.

Therefore I will not praise your knees nor your fine walking
Telling you men shall remember your name as long
As lips move or breath is spent or the iron of English
Rings from a tongue.

I shall say you were young, and your arms straight, and your
mouth scarlett:
I shall say you will die and none will remember you:
Your arms change, and none remember the swish of your
garments,
Nor the click of your shoe.

Not with my hand's strength, not with difficult labor
Springing the obstinate words to the bones of your breast
And the stubborn line to your young stride and the breath to your
breathing
And the beat to your haste
Shall I prevail on the hearts of unborn men to remember.

(What is a dead girl but a shadowy ghost
Or a dead man's voice but a distant and vain affirmation
Like dream words most)

Therefore I will not speak of the undying glory of women.
I will say you were young and straight and your skin fair
And you stood in the door and the sun was a shadow of leaves on
your shoulders

And a leaf on your hair --

I will not speak of the famous beauty of dead women:
I will say the shape of a leaf lay once on your hair.
Till the world ends and the eyes are out and the mouths broken
Look! It is there!

1930

The Carcass Charles Baudelaire

Do you remember the thing we saw, my soul,
That summer morning, so beautiful, so soft:
At a turning in the path, a filthy carrion,
On a bed sown with stones,

Legs in the air, like a lascivious woman,
Burning and sweating poisons,
Opened carelessly, cynically,
Its great fetid belly.

The sun shone on this fester,
As though to cook it to a turn,
And to return a hundredfold to great Nature
What she had joined in one;

And the sky saw the superb carcass
Open like a flower.
The stench was so strong, that you might think
To swoon away upon the grass.

The flies swarmed on that rotten belly,
Whence came out black battalions
Of spawn, flowing like a thick liquid
Along its living tatters.

All this rose and fell like a wave,
Or rustled in jerks;
One would have said that the body, fun of a loose breath,
Lived in this its procreation.

And this world gave out a strange music,
Like flowing water and wind,
Or a winnowers' grain that he shakes and turns
With rhythmical grace in his basket.

The forms fade and are no more than a dream,
A sketch slow to come
On the forgotten canvas, and that the artist completes
Only by memory.

Behind the boulders an anxious bitch
Watched us with angry eyes,
Spying the moment to regain in the skeleton
The morsel she had dropped.

— And yet you will be like this excrement,
This horrible stench,
O star of my eyes, sun of my being,
You, my angel, my passion.

Yes, such you will be, queen of gracefulness,
After the last sacraments,
When you go beneath the grasses and fat flowers,
Moldering amongst the bones.

Then, my beauty, say to the vermin
Which will eat you with kisses,
That I have kept the shape and the divine substance
Of my decomposed loves!

— Geoffrey Wagner, *Selected Poems of Charles Baudelaire* (NY: Grove Press, 1974)

Piazza Piece

By John Crowe Ransom 1888–1974

—I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying
To make you hear. Your ears are soft and small
And listen to an old man not at all,
They want the young men's whispering and sighing.
But see the roses on your trellis dying
And hear the spectral singing of the moon;
For I must have my lovely lady soon,
I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying.

—I am a lady young in beauty waiting
Until my true love comes, and then we kiss.
But what grey man among the vines is this
Whose words are dry and faint as in a dream?
Back from my trellis, Sir, before I scream!
I am a lady young in beauty waiting.

FERN HILL

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
 About the lilted house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
 And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
 And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
 Trail with daisies and barley
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
 About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only,
 Time let me play and be
 Golden in the mercy of his means,
 And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves:
 Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
 And the sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
 Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was all
 And playing, lovely and watery
 And fire green as grass.
 And nightly under the simple stars
 As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
 All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
 Flying with the ricks, and the horses
 Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
 With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
 Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
 The sky gathered again
 And the sun grew round that very day.
 So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
 In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
 Out of the whinnying green stable

On to the fields of praise.

**And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
In the sun born over and over,
I ran my heedless ways,
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace.**

**Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
In the moon that is always rising,
Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.**

**A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in
London**

by Dylan Thomas

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.
I shall not murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
Robed in the long friends,
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
Secret by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames.
After the first death, there is no other.

The Photos

The Photos

By Diane Wakoski b. 1937 Diane Wakoski

My sister in her well-tailored silk blouse hands me
the photo of my father
in naval uniform and white hat.

I say, "Oh, this is the one which Mama used to have on her dresser."

My sister controls her face and furtively looks at my mother,
a sad rag bag of a woman, lumpy and sagging everywhere,
like a mattress at the Salvation Army, though with no holes or tears,
and says, "No."

I look again,
and see that my father is wearing a wedding ring,
which he never did
when he lived with my mother. And that there is a legend on it,
"To my dearest wife,

Love
Chief"

And I realize the photo must have belonged to his second wife,
whom he left our mother to marry.

My mother says, with her face as still as the whole unpopulated part of the
state of North Dakota,

"May I see it too?"

She looks at it.

I look at my tailored sister
and my own blue-jeaned self. Have we wanted to hurt our mother,
sharing these pictures on this, one of the few days I ever visit or
spend with family? For her face is curiously haunted,
not now with her usual viperish bitterness,
but with something so deep it could not be spoken.

I turn away and say I must go on, as I have a dinner engagement with
friends.

But I drive all the way to Pasadena from Whittier,
thinking of my mother's face; how I could never love her; how my father
could not love her either. Yet knowing I have inherited

the rag-bag body,
stony face with bulldog jaws.

I drive, thinking of that face.

Jeffers' California Medea who inspired me to poetry.

I killed my children,

but there as I am changing lanes on the freeway, necessarily glancing in the
rearview mirror, I see the face,

not even a ghost, but always with me, like a photo in a beloved's wallet.

How I hate my destiny.

"What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American"
by Richard Hugo

You remember the name was Jensen. She seemed old
always alone inside, face pasted gray to the window,
and mail never came. Two blocks down, the Grubskis
went insane. George played rotten trombone
Easter when they flew the flag. Wild roses
remind you the roads were gravel and vacant lots
the rule. Poverty was real, wallet and spirit,
and each day slow as church. You remember threadbare
church groups on the corner, howling their faith
at stars, and the violent Holy Rollers
renting that barn for their annual violent sing
and the barn burned down when you came back from war.
Knowing the people you knew then are dead,
you try to believe these roads paved are improved,
the neighbors, moved in while you were away, good-looking,
their dogs well fed. You still have need
to remember lots empty and fern.
Lawns well trimmed remind you of the train
your wife took one day forever, some far empty town,
the odd name you never recall. The time: 6:23.
The day: October 9. The year remains a blur.
You blame this neighborhood for your failure.
In some vague way, the Grubskis degraded you
beyond repair. And you know you must play again
and again Mrs. Jensen pale at her window, must hear
the foul music over the good slide of traffic.
You love them well and they remain, still with nothing
to do, no money and no will. Loved them, and the gray
that was their disease you carry for extra food
in case you're stranded in some odd empty town
and need hungry lovers for friends, and need feel
you are welcome in the secret club they have formed.

The Third Elegy

To sing the beloved is one thing, another, oh,
 that hidden guilty river-god of the blood.
 What does he know, himself, of that lord of desire, her young lover,
 whom she knows distantly, who often out of his solitariness,
 before the girl soothed him, often, as if she did not exist,
 held up, dripping, from what unknowable depths,
 his godhead, oh, rousing the night to endless uproar?
 O Neptune of the blood, O his trident of terrors.
 O the dark storm-wind from his chest, out of the twisted conch.
 Hear, how the night becomes thinned-out and hollow. You, stars,
 is it not from you that the lover's joy in the beloved's
 face rises? Does he not gain his innermost insight,
 into her face's purity, from the pure stars?

It was not you, alas, not his mother
 that bent the arc of his brow into such expectation.
 Not for you, girl, feeling his presence, not for you,
 did his lips curve into a more fruitful expression.
 Do you truly think that your light entrance
 rocked him so, you who wander like winds at dawn?
 You terrified his heart, that's so: but more ancient terrors
 plunged into him with the impetus of touching.
 Call him...you can't quite call him away from that dark companion.
 Of course he wants to, and does, escape: relieved, winning
 his way into your secret heart, and takes on, and begins himself.
 Did he ever begin himself, though?
 Mother you made his littleness: you were the one who began him:
 to you he was new, you hung the friendly world
 over new eyes, and defended him from what was strange.
 Oh where are the years when you simply repelled
 the surging void for him, with your slight form?
 You hid so much from him then: you made the suspect room
 harmless at night, from your heart filled with refuge
 mixed a more human space with his spaces of night.
 Not in the darkness, no, in your nearer being
 you placed the light, and it shone as if out of friendship.
 There wasn't a single creaking you couldn't explain with a smile,
 as if you had long known when the floor would do so....
 And he heard you and was soothed. Your being

was so tenderly potent: his fate there stepped,
tall and cloaked, behind the wardrobe, and his restless future,
so easily delayed, fitted the folds of the curtain.

And he himself, as he lay there, relieved,
dissolving a sweetness, of your gentle creation,
under his sleepy eyelids, into the sleep he had tasted - :
seemed protected.....But inside: who could hinder,
prevent, the primal flood inside him?
Ah, there was little caution in the sleeper: sleeping,
but dreaming, but fevered: what began there!
How, new, fearful, he was tangled
in ever-spreading tendrils of inner event:
already twisted in patterns, in strangling growths,
among prowling bestial forms. How he gave himself to it -. Loved.
Loved his inward world, his inner wilderness,
that first world within, on whose mute overthrow
his heart stood, newly green. Loved. Relinquished it, went on,
through his own roots, to the vast fountain
where his little birth was already outlived. Lovingly
went down into more ancient bloodstreams, into ravines
where Horror lay, still gorged on his forefathers. And every
Terror knew him, winked, like an informant.
Yes, Dread smiled.....Seldom
have you smiled so tenderly, mothers. How could he
help loving what smiled at him. Before you
he loved it, since, while you carried him,
it was dissolved in the waters, that render the embryo light.

See, we don't love like flowers, in a
single year: when we love, an ancient
sap rises in our arms. O, girls,
this: that we loved inside us, not one to come, but
the immeasurable seething: not a single child,
but the fathers: resting on our depths
like the rubble of mountains: the dry river-beds
of those who were mothers - : the whole
silent landscape under a clouded or
clear destiny - : girls, this came before you.

And you yourself, how could you know – that you
stirred up primordial time in your lover. What feelings
welled up from lost lives. What
women hated you there. What sinister men

you roused up in his young veins. Dead
 children wanted you.....O, gently, gently,
 show him with love a confident daily task - lead him
 near to the Garden, give him what outweighs
 those nights.....

Be in him.....

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Ninth Elegy

Why, if it could begin as laurel, and be spent so,
 this space of Being, a little darker than all
 the surrounding green, with little waves at the edge
 of every leaf (like a breeze's smile) - : why then
 have to be human – and shunning destiny
 long for destiny?....

Oh, not because happiness exists,
 that over-hasty profit from imminent loss,
 not out of curiosity, or to practice the heart,
 which could exist in the laurel.....
 But because being here is much, and because all
 that's here seems to need us, the ephemeral, that
 strangely concerns us. We: the most ephemeral. Once,
 for each thing, only once. Once, and no more. And we too,
 once. Never again. But this
 once, to have been, though only once,
 to have been an earthly thing – seems irrevocable.

And so we keep pushing on, and trying to achieve it,
 trying to contain it in our simple hands,
 in the overflowing gaze and the speechless heart.
 Trying to become it. Whom to give it to? We would
 hold on to it for ever....Ah, what, alas, do we
 take into that other dimension? Not the gazing which we
 slowly learned here, and nothing that happened. Nothing.
 Suffering then. Above all, then, the difficulty,
 the long experience of love, then – what is
 wholly unsayable. But later,
 among the stars, what use is it: it is better unsayable.
 Since the traveller does not bring a handful of earth
 from mountain-slope to valley, unsayable to others, but only
 a word that was won, pure, a yellow and blue
 gentian. Are we here, perhaps, for saying: house,
 bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit-tree, window –

at most: column, tower.....but for saying, realise,
 oh, for a saying such as the things themselves would never
 have profoundly said. Is not the secret intent
 of this discreet Earth to draw lovers on,
 so that each and every thing is delight within their feeling?
 Threshold: what is it for two
 lovers to be wearing their own threshold of the ancient door
 a little, they too, after the many before them,
 and before those to come....., simple.

Here is the age of the sayable: here is its home.
 Speak, and be witness. More than ever
 the things of experience are falling away, since
 what ousts and replaces them is an act with no image.
 An act, under a crust that will split, as soon as
 the business within outgrows it, and limit itself differently.
 Between the hammers, our heart
 lives on, as the tongue
 between the teeth, that
 in spite of them, keeps praising.

Praise the world to the Angel, not the unsayable: you
 can't impress him with glories of feeling: in the universe,
 where he feels more deeply, you are a novice. So show
 him a simple thing, fashioned in age after age,
 that lives close to hand and in sight.
 Tell him things. He'll be more amazed: as you were,
 beside the rope-maker in Rome, or the potter beside the Nile.
 Show him how happy things can be, how guiltless and ours,
 how even the cry of grief decides on pure form,
 serves as a thing, or dies into a thing: transient,
 they look to us for deliverance, we, the most transient of all.
 Will us to change them completely, in our invisible hearts,
 into – oh, endlessly, into us! Whoever, in the end, we are.

Earth, is it not this that you want: to rise
 invisibly in us? – Is that not your dream,
 to be invisible, one day? – Earth! Invisible!
 What is your urgent command if not transformation?
 Earth, beloved, I will. O, believe me, you need
 no more Spring-times to win me: only one,
 ah, one, is already more than my blood can stand.
 Namelessly, I have been truly yours, from the first.
 You were always right, and your most sacred inspiration

**is that familiar Death.
See I live. On what? Neither childhood nor future
grows less.....Excess of being
wells up in my heart.**

Rainer Maria Rilke