

# *Archipelagos*



*Patrick Whalen*



*Θεοτόκω*

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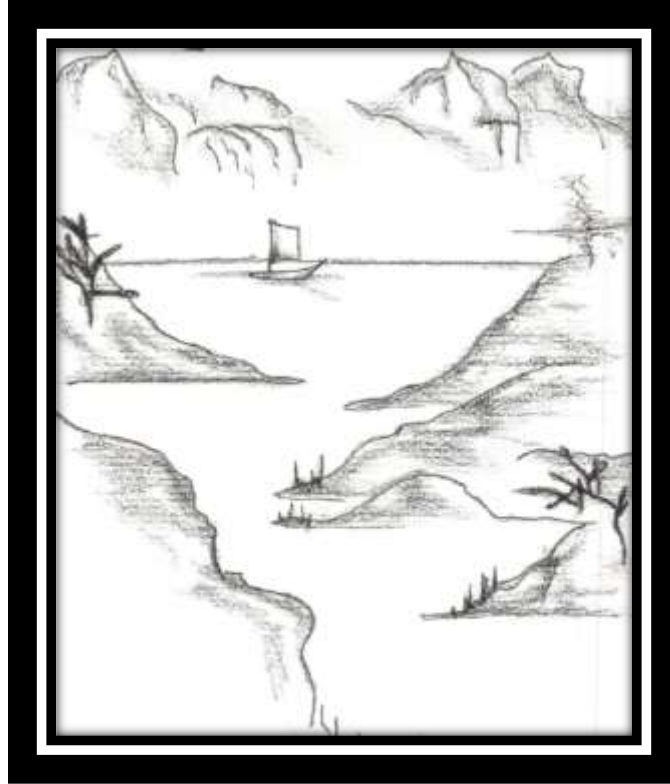
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# *Introduction*

The following is a practice in contemplation and an effort at articulation. This is not a theory of poetry, unless we recover the nearly lost meaning of theory as a contemplative kind of seeing. Each of the following prose sections meditates upon a poem, or an aspect of poetry that I have discovered to be aimed at the very heart of poetry. They do not follow one another discursively, but they are sensible and related. They will often sound similar notes, and sometimes share entire chords. I hope that the repetition will reinforce and deepen the understanding, and not simply chafe. Following the prose is the poetry, the making of which was the ultimate goal of this effort. I hope that the prose will point to and find conclusion in the poetry.

# *Acknowledgments*

This is just to say thank you to my wife Kristi for all of her beautiful and original drawings that grace these pages; and for her patience and zeal in our mutual pursuit of poetry. Thank you to Frederick Amrine for directing, and at times humoring, my academic interests; for patience in reading almost all of my work; and for introducing me to *Saving the Appearances*—a book around which my learning took form as the wilderness did around Wallace Stevens' Jar. Thank you to Linda Gregerson for sorting through my often half-baked verse; for breaking the pieces that needed breaking; and for her gracious and perspicacious guidance into poetry. Thank you to Donna Wessel Walker for allowing this project, and for all her help. I thank those listed here, and any I might have missed, my many teachers who influenced this effort directly: David Whalen, Janet Whalen, John Whittier-Ferguson, Stephen Smith, Laurence Goldstein, Larry Arnn, Cody Walker, Richard Cureton, Doug Trevor, Roger Lundin, and Benjamin Paloff.



# *1*

## *Monastic and Poetic Practice*

**A**ll I have written seems to me nothing but straw...compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.”<sup>1</sup> So St. Thomas Aquinas said of his immense theology upon experiencing an ecstatic vision. It is in this disposition that poets are compelled to write, and this disposition towards which monks orient their lives. Monasticism and poetry share the urgent necessity of thriving in the face of the transcendent, of demanding recollection and

contemplation rather than distraction and dialectic. Monastic and poetic practices are perfect analogues for one another and thus provide rich funds of insight into each other's nature. Thus the following notes are intended to record instances of the similarity between the two that in turn suggest a common mode. In the following brief notes I will only be considering Western, and particularly Catholic monasticism, but it is important to note that the most important and distinctive characteristic of Catholic monastic practice is its contemplative nature, and that certainly other kinds of monasticism share this characteristic.

What I refer to as poetry or poetic should be understood to mean the following: first of all, poetry is always beautiful. Its beauty might stem primarily from its truth, or its goodness, but always it carries this ancient trinity of transcendentals, which in regard to poetry seems most properly described as beauty. Secondly, poetry is essentially imaginative. The etymology of the word poetry, from the Greek 'ποιέω,' meaning 'make,' or 'do,' describes the creative and imaginative nature of poetry. The imagination is the means by which the poem is created or made. And thirdly, poetry is transcendent. This third characteristic is increasingly difficult to talk about for a number of reasons, two of which follow. Many people do not believe in anything transcendent; and for both believers and non-believers in the transcendent, it seems insufferably egotistical to place poetry on the pedestal of purported transcendence. Volumes have been written on these topics so I will say only that if there is no transcendence, then most people for most of history have valued the immense delusion of transcendence much more than the material world. And for the charge of egotism, I hope that the following pages will help to explain my reasoning that poetry's essential transcendence need not be credited to the poet.

This may seem a broad articulation of poetry, but poetry is broad. We often describe something that strikes us as particularly meaningful and beautiful as poetic, and far from being a

misuse, this is one of the most true and useful ways in which we use the word. This use harkens to much of the essential transcendence of poetry and provides us with a vocabulary with which to describe the most rare and poignant elements of our experience.

Transcendence is, in fact, one of the principal similarities between poetry and monasticism, and one that is remarked upon by both Jean Leclercq and Bd. John Henry Newman. Both scholars note the purposeful impracticality of the monastic life. “It sought employments as contrary as possible to the world’s employments,—employments, the end of which would be in themselves, in which each day, each hour, would have its own completeness.”<sup>2</sup> Monasticism was intentionally impractical, spurning the practicality that is so important for worldly success precisely because the mission of monasticism was otherworldly or transcendent. Impracticality does not always or necessarily indicate transcendence, but in the case of monasticism, the refusal of practical success was widespread, uniform, and always for the sake of the spiritual life.

This retreat from the world creates an attitude of recollection, an attitude that was essential to the mission of contemplating the divine. Contemplation, indicates Leclercq “is not, therefore, the end result of a discursive activity of the intelligence, it is not the reward of learning acquired through study, and it does not result in an increase of speculative knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> The monastic mission is not to uncover previously unknown truths about God through a rigorous academic discipline, rather, the monks retreat into silence in order to contemplate and commune with God in the simple depths of the contemplative tradition. In fact, poetry proceeds in the same manner. Its goal is not to increase one’s breadth of knowledge as it were, but rather to give it depth and to hint at those things about which it is difficult to speak. Poetry rarely accomplishes a practical end and proves frustrating if considered as a vehicle for conveying



literal meaning or information. Poetry and monasticism pursue a mystical or transcendent knowledge that Leclercq explains is better termed ‘love,’ and that like the poppy, only blossoms in the direct sunlight of reflection.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes it is helpful to understand a thing by describing what it is not, and this is particularly true when speaking of monasticism which is famous for the *via negativa*. Leclercq’s *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* describes in a lucid and beautiful manner the difference between monasticism and scholasticism, and the same differences exist between poetry and philosophy. Of course, my purpose is not to criticize scholasticism or philosophy, which St. Thomas likened to straw. As my father is fond of saying, in the Middle Ages straw was both support and protection, the mattress and the roof, a basic practical necessity for human life and not without its own virtue and beauty. But St. Thomas’ comment indicates an appropriate understanding of the relative poverty and humility of scholasticism and philosophy in general when compared to the mystical communion after which monasticism strives through its poetic mode.

Philosophy is often discursive and dialectical—Plato’s dialogues are an excellent example in that they are the record of a conversation or an argument. The famous scholastic texts, of which St Thomas Aquinas’ are the best and most famous, are similarly recorded as a series of propositions, challenges, counterchallenges, and authoritative resolutions. Poetry, on the other hand, is a language of indirection and compression. In Leclercq’s words, it is a language of desire. Poetry treats of matters as if they were too grand or mysterious to be understood well as the conclusion of a syllogism. Poetry speaks in the manner that the monk speaks of God—in a speech of silence that is only interrupted by the necessary and most intensely descriptive ejaculations. St. Thomas again provides the example in that at the end of

his life, after experiencing an ecstatic vision, he no longer wrote philosophy but only poetry. Monasticism, more than any other religious expression embodies the nature of poetry, and as Leclercq explains, the mystical experience of the monks “brings us to the frontiers of poetry.”<sup>5</sup> Poetry takes us as far into articulating the transcendent as the human voice can proceed, and this is why the monastic way of life is so poetic, and relies on poetry to form the monk’s imagination and spirituality.

Leclercq points out that the monastic education consisted mainly of the classical pagan works and of scripture. The monks revered the pagan poets in particular because they “develop[ed] their taste for the beautiful”, and in scripture they most revered the Cantic of Canticles because it was the poem that best articulated their life of pursuing and desiring God.<sup>6</sup> Leclercq captures the collision of impracticality, poetry, and monasticism in his comments on the Cantic of Canticles:

It is not pastoral in nature; it does not teach morality, prescribe good works to perform or precepts to observe; nor even purvey exhortations of wisdom. But with its ardent language and its dialogue of praise, it was more attuned than any other book in Sacred Scripture to loving, disinterested contemplation....Now, the particular virtue of contemplation is to foster the desire for the heavenly life.<sup>7</sup>

The reason the Cantic was favorite among the monks was that its object was not to communicate an idea, but rather to cultivate a love—and this is the highest calling of all poetry. Leclercq quotes John the Grammarian as saying “The man who is possessed by the sweetness of contemplation is already participating in heavenly life.”<sup>8</sup> A poem invites one into participation with its matter rather than constructing the scaffolding of abstract knowledge around it. The monks acted decisively on this belief and immersed themselves in the participatory discipline of poetry.

The intensity with which the monks cultivated their imaginations—with pagan poets for beauty, and the scriptures for truth—allowed them to inhabit scripture so that its vocabulary became their own and provided them with their own beautiful monastic language. A monk's personal prayer might, and as Leclercq records, often did consist of a contemplative free association of the scriptural language that so composed his intellect. The effect of the monastic fluency with scripture was a diminishing of the barrier between the monk's own intellect and the divine intellect which composed the scriptures, allowing the one to flow into and fuse with the other. This mystical relationship with God is the heart of monasticism and shows how powerful language and imagination are when carefully cultivated as the monks did in this the poetic mode of living. Poetry too is the product of immersing the mind in contemplation of the thing to be expressed, and the best poems evidence the thing speaking for itself through the poet—much like God's own beneficence finding expression in a monk's goodness.

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<sup>1</sup> Pieper, Joseph. *The Silence of St. Thomas*. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, Inc., 1999. p 40

<sup>2</sup> Newman, John Henry. "The Mission of St Benedict." *Atlantis*, 1858: 365-430.

<sup>3</sup> Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, p 67

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p 67

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p 5

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp 85, 117

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp 85-86

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p 86



## 2

### *Poetic Language*

“Could we without perishing withstand a situation in which the things surrounding us lose their being, where there is no true world?”<sup>1</sup>

-Czeslaw Milosz

**I**n *Poetic Diction*, and *Saving the Appearances*, Owen Barfield recounts the history of the relationship of humanity to nature, poets to language, and the individual to truth; and the reality he describes seems as forgotten and distant as it is compelling. The world perceived by almost every civilization prior to the scientific revolution is painfully backward, obsolete, and strange to a modern consciousness. But Barfield claims that modern perception and language, not our ancestors', are ill-equipped to behold and describe reality. Barfield argues that to speak

the truth about the world, which poetry strives to do, requires speaking from or through a perception that is from the past—a perception that is able to account for the changes in human perception and consciousness. In *Poetic Diction*, Barfield describes how this is done by emphasizing two attributes of poetic language: strangeness, and archaism.

I will not reiterate the history of language that Barfield describes, but his perceptive account shows the movement of language in a trajectory of degeneration from poetry into prose, from created into remembered, and from participated to literal that accompanies precisely the same changes in human civilization. Throughout history, people have described what they have seen with language, and the ancient Greeks saw that dawn was “rosy fingered.” Perhaps incomprehensible to us, dawn is, or is haunted by, some spiritual reality, one of the qualities of which is rosy fingers. The descent, as Barfield describes it, of this perception of the world into one that believes that a description of the dawn as “rosy fingered” is an abstract, incomprehensible, and inaccurate description of empirically verifiable natural phenomena, is the degeneration of poetry into prose, and Barfield traces this degeneration historically.

Mythology is the ghost of concrete meaning. Connections between discreet phenomena, connections which are now apprehended as metaphor, were once perceived as immediate realities. As such the poet strives, by his own efforts, to see them, and to make others see them.<sup>2</sup>

In describing dawn as “rosy fingered” the ancients spoke poetically, which is not to say inaccurately. Language that inhabits a world of poetry, or that speaks in a poetic voice, is therefore stained with the rich perceptions of antiquity. What might be considered fanciful descriptions in poetic language carry the same freight of “immediate reality” that ancient tongues communicated in “normal” speech. To use poetic language, like a metaphor, one is gesturing towards the archaic unities that language previously signified, not simply yoking two incongruous and distinct “literal” images together.

One can see Barfield's point on archaism in action throughout Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry, particularly in Hopkins' use of kennings. An ancient way of speaking which names something according to a strong metaphorical image of it, kennings are particularly prominent in old Anglo-Saxon poetry like *Beowulf*. For a poet writing in the nineteenth century, however, to use kennings must have seemed hopelessly backwards and Miniver Cheevyesque. Hopkins uses kennings in many of his better poems and always in the service of one of his poetical ideas that he describes as inscape. Inscapism was a conception of Hopkins' that he developed from the Catholic philosopher Duns Scotus whose philosophy emphasized the uniqueness and distinctiveness of each item of creation.<sup>3</sup> Hopkins' inscapism was simply the pursuit of the essential distinctiveness of whatever it was he described. In order to articulate the deeply particular in a given thing, Hopkins would combine and juxtapose words as kennings. In "The Loss of the Eurydice," Hopkins describes a tremendous storm with a series of kennings in quick succession.

"A beetling baldbright cloud thorough England  
Riding: there did storms not mingle? And  
Hailropes hustle and grind their  
Heavengravel? wolfsnow, worlds of it, wind there?"<sup>4</sup>

"Baldbright, hailropes, heavengravel, wolfsnow"—each is a kenning that Hopkins employs to more closely articulate the particular storm in which the Eurydice foundered. Also significant in this quatrain, and common throughout all of Hopkins' poetry, is the recurring alliteration which is another distinctive characteristic of early Anglo-Saxon poetry. When Hopkins sets out to write poetry, he assumes an arcane voice, and employs the poetic techniques of ages past.

Accompanying archaism as a chief attribute of poetic diction is strangeness. Barfield indicates that poetic language should not be, or resemble, ordinary language in service of ordinary communication. Poetry demands a "felt change of consciousness,"<sup>5</sup> a disruption in the

mind that elicits the pleasure of change, and an important means of achieving this disruption, is the use of strange words and phrases. This same effect of strangeness is employed in high religious liturgies, and for similar reasons. Wearing ornate robes, moving with solemnity and precision, burning incense, and chanting all serve to remove one from common experience and establish a different mode of expression and reception. Liturgy and ritual aim to alter the consciousness in order to dispose one towards the highest things, and do so with strange behavior that overtly removes the participants from the everyday, and replaces them in the eternal.

Poetic diction strives for the same effect solely through the medium of language, and accomplishes this strangeness in various ways. Commonplace or technical words leap out of their confines because they “express, as nearly as any word can do, a concrete particular *thing*, and not an abstract, generalized *idea*.”<sup>6</sup> So few words accomplish this particularity of expression, that those which do leap out of their surrounds and strike the reader as strange. Strangeness was too much an attribute of Hopkins’, who wrote with such unusual rhythm and diction that his close friend, and one of the only early admirers of Hopkins’ poetry, Robert Bridges, often returned Hopkins’ manuscripts claiming that the poems were unintelligible.<sup>7</sup> Barfield describes words taken from their usual context and employed in the service of a novel image or idea as also conveying some degree of strangeness. The use of a term dislocated from its usual environs is common in Hopkins, such as “And you were a liar, O blue March day”<sup>8</sup> or “barbarous in beauty, the stooks rise.”<sup>9</sup> Days are not usually thought of as liars, or even capable of lying, and to describe beauty as barbarous is very nearly an oxymoron. And yet there is an instructive truth communicated in these strange marriages of words that shoulders its way through our consciousness with the strangeness necessary and native to poetry. Hopkins

employs this poetic strangeness throughout his poetry, and as Barfield indicates it should be, strangeness is one of Hopkins' chief poetic attributes

Hopkins also provides an example of Barfield's idea of participation. In *Saving the Appearances*, Barfield explains the degeneration of art into mere self-representation, an impossibility in earlier civilizations that lacked the inward looking nature and abstract language of modern man. Rather, Barfield shows that "nature herself is the system of my representation"<sup>10</sup> and that the participation in nature that creates art is a human capacity that resembles the creativity of the Divine Nature, and is thus in His image and likeness. The participatory and therefore, "directionally creat[ive]"<sup>11</sup> nature of mankind is the germ of the divine that inhabits and defines each human soul. "I know that what so stands is not my poor temporal personality, but the Divine Name in the unfathomable depths behind it."<sup>12</sup> Few poets inhabit the space between God and nature as comfortably as Hopkins—meditating on the natural and discerning the supernatural forms behind it—and his manner of describing God with nature is an apt example of the means humanity has of participating in the natural and the Divine. As God creates nature and places the creative germ of divinity in each human soul, so the poet participates in these exquisite unities by perceiving, and thereby creating the meanings that animate consciousness. The artist interacts with nature in a creative mode—a manner of active perception that clothes the supernatural forms in physically sensible forms. This active perception Barfield names participation.

Hopkins' poetry finds an ally in Barfield's ideas. Barfield's description of reality establishes a coherent place in the world and the mind for poetry like Hopkins' with its particularly active and creative etymological freight. To understand Barfield's conception of participation is to understand the why of the word poetry; and this understanding points, in turn,



to the past ages and consciousnesses that are so very archaic and strange to us and through which Hopkins moves easily, apparently at home in the participatory act of poetic beholding.

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<sup>1</sup> Milosz, Czeslaw. *The Witness of Poetry*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Barfield, Owen. *Poetic Diction*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1984, p 92

<sup>3</sup> Mariani, Paul. *Gerard Manley Hopkins A Life*. New York: Viking, 2008, p 110

<sup>4</sup> Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "The Loss of the Eurydice," in *The Major Works*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, p 135

<sup>5</sup> Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p 52

<sup>6</sup> Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, p 175

<sup>7</sup> Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*

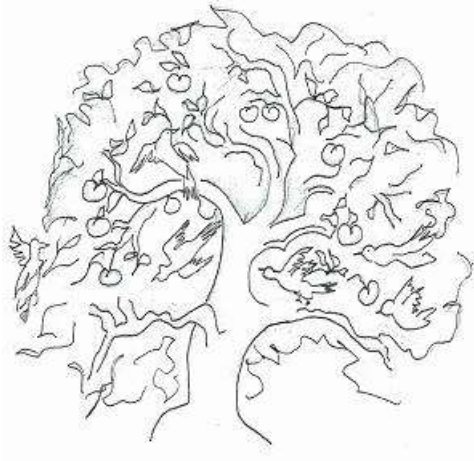
<sup>8</sup> Hopkins, "The Loss of the Eurydice" 135

<sup>9</sup> Hopkins, "Hurrahing in Harvest" 134

<sup>10</sup> Barfield, Owen. *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1988, p131

<sup>11</sup> Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p 132

<sup>12</sup> Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, p 132



### 3

#### *The Imagination*

Dreams their intangible enchantments weave;  
And in the dead of dark the heart may crave  
A sleep beyond sleep, and for its visions grieve.

For that strange absence nothing can atone;  
And every hope is servant to desire;  
The flower conceals a beauty not its own,  
And echo sighs from even the silent wire.

Walter de la Mare

**T**here really are some things about which it is impossible to speak directly. Perhaps we are very unfamiliar with them because our modern communication technologies make self-expression easy and immediate—or perhaps the bustle and noise of industrial life cordons off our reflective capacity. But the ineffable abides. Long thought, rumination, or trauma, can

unearth those parts of us and our experience that resist easy expression. That the language I am using to describe the ineffable reminds us of the language with which Sigmund Freud proposes the unconscious is as telling as it is unavoidable. But there is a means of articulating the unspeakable – metaphor. As Freud argues in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, metaphor is the dominant mode of communication employed by the unconscious in speaking to the conscious through dream. Metaphor is also the primary means by which poetry speaks. I think we can see a fundamental similarity between dreams and poetry in their mutual affinity for metaphor. I wonder too if we might come to think that the human capacity for metaphor is a profound source of human dignity.

A metaphor juxtaposes two or more ideas, images, or objects that do not literally correspond to one another with the object of proposing a new or elusive meaning. It is a means of employing things as symbols, signs, or figures for other things—a language of indirection by which we can begin to articulate things for which literal language is unfit or incapable. In this manner a metaphor allows one to apprehend similarities between disparate entities. Freud claims that dreams communicate in just such a manner. “It is the relation of similarity, congruence, or convergence, the just like, which dreams have the most various means of expressing better than anything else.”<sup>1</sup> The “just like” is the heart of metaphor which replaces what cannot be said with what can in hopes to say what cannot be said anyway. Freud refers to this operation of creating “just likes” as “dream work,” and within dream work, displacement and condensation are the dominant types. The dream conflates images, ideas, or people in order to avoid the scrutiny of the conscious but still to communicate. Freud’s terms “displacement” and “condensation” are remarkably apt descriptions of the metaphorical process, and Freud’s neologism

“overdetermined,” referring to an instance of multiple sources precipitating in one image, should remind us of the tight form and coherent content of great poetry, or great art in general.

In fact, poetry too operates in the metaphorical mode. Freud’s description of a dream as a web of metaphorical references with antecedents in the waking life and serving as a means of self knowledge could easily apply to poetry. Lyric poetry in particular can seem very dream-like. Emily Dickinson’s “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” is a crystalline example of the deeply metaphorically charged lyric that communicates a meaning otherwise inaccessible. Like a dream that must avoid the censorship of the conscious, the poem must find a way to clothe in language things that persistently elude it.

Grand go the Years,  
In the Crescent above them –  
Worlds scoop their Arcs –  
And Firmaments – row –  
Diadems – drop –  
And Doges – surrender –  
Soundless as Dots,  
On a Disc of Snow.<sup>2</sup>

Dickinson rockets the reader into celestial spaces and horizon-less expanses of time while aurally diminishing and moving ever towards silence. The referents in these brief lines are multivalent, compact, and overdetermined. She can paint the image for us in all its cosmic proportions, but ultimately the poem is not, and cannot be an argument. It is, like a dream, simply an image that we must use the gift of imagination to interpret. Dickinson’s poem seems to me a clear and beautiful articulation of the contemplative gesture through silence toward the omnipotent that so defines the mystical experience; and how else exactly could she have described just that?

Freud argues that although we cannot necessarily see or entirely understand the unconscious, it is, and it communicates. But this real communication, this genuine new knowledge is perceptible only by means of metaphor, which means that it depends upon the

exercise of the imagination to perceive the new knowledge. The knowledge imparted in a dream comes from elsewhere, meaning that scientific methods of pursuing it would never have been able to conceive of its existence given its absence from the catalogue of inductively recordable phenomena. We might recall the pre-modern conception of inspiration, etymologically meaning “a breathing into” from elsewhere, and see that dreams seem to correspond much more to this model of knowledge than the scientific.

The metaphor proposes two disparate images, and the imagination, like a jolt of electricity between two prongs creates the third and intended meaning. Meaning is the bolt of lightning that human beings somehow are capable of generating.<sup>3</sup> This flash of comprehension, Plato would say remembrance, is at the heart of the poetic endeavor which strives to look into the nature of things for the fundamental similarities and metaphysical unities that underlie our experience. The web of unperceived unities in existing things provides the material for metaphor upon which dreams and poetry subsist. Thus, metaphors are not false comparisons, but a new vision of ancient or eternal unities. In a way, we never create them except by participation in their existence, or like Plato, by remembering them. With this vision of the immaterial, spiritual and formal source of metaphor, we can see why Freud wrote “the dream stakes its claim to be accepted as one of the real, formative, experiences of our soul.”<sup>4</sup> The subconscious seems to have a much more immediate access to what we might only be able to describe as mystical intimations of a heightened reality.

Never, or rarely does an object exist in a void of meaning and sustain a purely material existence. Aside from the philosophical improbability of purely material existence, it is one of the beauties of life that “things shed light on things,”<sup>5</sup> and experience tends to synthesize disparity rather than to atomize it. In fact, as far as we can know, the human mind seems to be

the object (or perhaps subject) that stands at the center and synthesizes the phenomena around it. To employ a metaphor that makes the point, “I placed a jar in Tennessee, / And round it was, upon a hill. / It made the slovenly wilderness / surround that hill.”<sup>6</sup> The human mind is the jar whose very presence calls the chaos to form. I should emphasize that this is a purely human consideration, but that very little makes sense without a spiritual world to sustain the phenomena, like Platonic forms, for example, for the human mind to participate and comprehend. It is appropriate to note the dominant presence of metaphor as a chief tenet of many world religions, where in Christianity, for example, Christ spoke almost entirely in parable, and was himself “the Word made flesh,” an example of the realization of the spiritual through the physical which presents us with an otherwise inaccessible reality—the divine.<sup>7</sup> This is an instance in which we see a world faith give credence to the idea that metaphor is actually a fecund source of reality—not an ornamental manner of speaking.

Freud’s powerful, and to many, shocking introduction of the unconscious brought the question of the other than physical world into the public imagination. He argued that this non-physical part of us was very real, and communicated with us all the time. These communications from an invisible world he called dreams. We can see why his secular and scientific age immediately burst into collective intellectual hives over this point—after all, communications from an invisible world sounds dangerously religious, and while Freud himself was not religious, the implications of his research are deeply spiritual. If we recall that Christianity, for example, considers metaphorical communication and realities as central to its theology, it should come as no surprise that Freud’s study of dreams and the subconscious discovered that both operate in the metaphorical mode. Freud provides a scientific basis for understanding that the gift of

imagination that sustains the generation of metaphor is a particularly deep and valuable aspect of our humanity—an aspect that seems to bind us to the eternal.

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<sup>1</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by Joyce Crick. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by R.W. Franklin. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

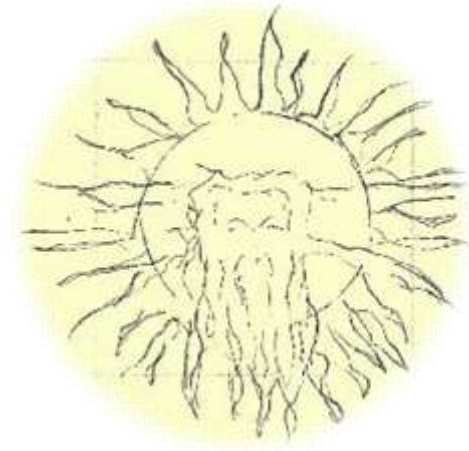
<sup>3</sup> See also Ricoeur, Paul. “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” in *On Metaphor*, edited by Sheldon Sacks, 141-157. London: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

<sup>5</sup> Roethke, Theodore. “The Small,” in *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Stevens, Wallace. “Anecdote of the Jar,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: The Library of America, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> John 1:14



## 4

### *Hallow or Hollow?*

For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not—Great God! I'd rather be  
a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
so might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.<sup>1</sup>

**W**hen T.S. Eliot writes in “The Hollow Men” that our generations will be remembered “if at all—not as lost / Violent souls, but only / as the hollow men,” we should remember Wordsworth’s aggressive and authoritative denunciation of his own generation as noted above.<sup>2</sup> While Wordsworth rages against the divorced state of the



industrialized mind and yearns for a creed that still sees the spirits moving within nature, Eliot's poem cannot muster the energy necessary to denounce the loss of a numinous perception of reality. It's late—too late in fact. Wordsworth's poem diagnosis the ill; Eliot's provides the autopsy.

The English word 'numen' comes from the Latin and Greek, *numen* and *νεῦμα* respectively which both refer to a divine nod. A numen is a spirit or divine power that presides over or simply inhabits a metaphysically significant place like a sacred grove, or a family homestead. The etymological implication is that when the gods nod in approval toward something or someone, there is a spiritually efficacious reality engendered. The gods nod, and something real happens—the spirits inhabit. For most of human history, the majority of cultures were predicated upon some cognizance of the numinous—an understanding of the world in which the physical and metaphysical interpenetrated. As Ananda Coomaraswamy records:

All traditional architecture, in fact, follows a cosmic pattern. Those who think of their house as only a 'machine to live in' should judge their point of view by that of the Neolithic man, who also lived in a house, but a house that embodied a cosmology....he identified the column of smoke that rose from his hearth to disappear from view through a hole in the roof with the Axis of the Universe, saw in this luffer an image of the Heavenly Door, and in his hearth the Navel of the Earth, formulae that we at the present day are hardly capable of understanding; we, for whom such knowledge as is not empirical is meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

A brief survey of anthropological, etymological, and artistic evidence indicates that most of human history has perceived and participated in a numinous reality—a reality in which spirit and matter were inextricably bound.

But as we know from our own experience, most of the contemporary industrialized world eschews any serious talk about spiritual realities. So what changed? Perhaps we have suffered some collective decay of our imaginative faculties? And that is imagination understood as Owen Barfield and Paul Ricoeur understood it, although not in so many words, as the human

organ for perceiving and participating extra-sensual realities.<sup>4</sup> Coomaraswamy explains this perception and participation in the artistic process thus: “an act of the imagination in which the idea [an eternal reality] to be represented is first clothed in an imitable form must have preceded the operation in which this form is embodied in actual material.”<sup>5</sup> The imagination perceives the extra-sensual form, then weds it to, or embodies it in, material. Barfield writes, “Mere perception—perception without imagination—is the sword thrust between spirit and matter.”<sup>6</sup> If, in a metaphor for example, it is the imagination that produces the jolt of recognition of the thing that is meant but not literally represented, then we can see how a failure of the imagination must force a radical passivity upon human experience. A passivity in which the shadow of impotence falls “between the idea / And the reality...Between the emotion / And the response...Between the potency / And the existence.”<sup>7</sup> Human experience, without the fecund intercourse of the imagination, might justly be called hollow.

We see Eliot invoke the Platonic account of reality—material substantiation of perfect and eternal forms, a philosophy particularly well disposed to the numinous perception—only to drain it of meaning. “Shape without form, shade without color / Paralyzed force, gesture without motion;”<sup>8</sup> in Plato’s model, a shape not rooted in a form is profoundly non-being, and thus, in some way, close to the core of evil. The material world, without the spiritual substance that a philosophy like Plato’s provides, is hollow, as we see in Eliot’s depiction of the wind, historically one of the most spiritually freighted of material phenomena. “Our dried voices, when / We whisper together / are quiet and meaningless / as wind in dry grass.” This wind is a workaday wind, the emptiness of which Eliot is so sure that he uses it as a metaphor for the emptiness of his own speech. But, he admits in a gently rhyming lyric, in his dreams the wind is filled with distant and solemn voices. “There, is a tree swinging / and voices are / In the wind’s

singing / More distant and more solemn / Than a fading star.” There is no passage in the poem that approaches the beauty and lyricism of these lines. But Eliot’s tenderness quickly succumbs to terror. “Let me be no nearer” he panics “No nearer—” as he rushes back to the relative tranquility of a natural world without voices.

Leaving behind the numinous reality of a spiritually substantiated—we might even say a sacramental—world, Eliot describes, counter intuitively, an idolatrous world. “Here the stone images / Are raised, here they receive / The supplication of a dead man’s hand.”<sup>9</sup>

Etymologically speaking, ‘idolatry’ comes from the Greek ‘ειδος’ which means “that which is seen.” The implication of idolatry’s etymology, contrary to common usage, is that it involves the worship of purely material objects—only those things one can see. We see a famous instance of this idolatrous materialism in “Exodus” when, with Moses delayed, the Jews construct a god they can see rather than believe in an invisible God.<sup>10</sup> This is the pivot upon which the poem turns: as modernity disenchant nature and disbelieves in the spiritual world, it relocates its belief in an idolatry of the purely material—that part of reality that needs no imagination to perceive. And as our perception becomes more and more enslaved to seeing only material—“the nothing that is”—the imagination languishes and shortly, most of reality disappears.<sup>11</sup>

“The Hollow Men” provides us with the autopsy of the numinous. Eliot assumes direct responsibility for the death and simultaneously implicates us by maintaining a strong first person throughout; we understand ourselves to be guilty of this strange hollowness. We know only what our senses tell us: that the wind has no voices, and sunlight has no eyes. What is not empirically proven is not. Our imaginations have nothing to do with truth or reality. But like the idols that Eliot presents, we are empty of spiritual significance. And ending on the famous

apocalyptic note, “*This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper*” Eliot pronounces that this materialism is an untenable idolatry.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, William. *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, T.S. “The Hollow Men,” *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Coomaraswamy, Ananda. *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956.

<sup>4</sup> Much of Barfield’s oeuvre is dedicated to articulating the nature of imagination, and the Paul Ricoeur that I refer to is his essay “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” in *On Metaphor*, edited by Sheldon Sacks, 141-157. London: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*

<sup>6</sup> Barfield, Owen. “The Rediscovery of Meaning.” In *The Rediscovery of Meaning: And Other Essays*, by Owen Barfield. San Rafael, CA: The Barfield Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Eliot, “The Hollow Men”

<sup>8</sup> All quotes in this paragraph are from Eliot’s “The Hollow Men,” in the 1971 edition noted above.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 32:1

<sup>11</sup> Stevens, Wallace. “The Snow Man,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: The Library of America, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> (Eliot 1971)



## 5

### *All the Stones Have Wings*

**I**t was the Saginaw Valley which lent its snowy lumber, river, and humidity to Theodore Roethke who wore them as a spiritual habit his entire life. When Roethke wrote, he cultivated childhood memories of Saginaw and his parent's greenhouse for the rich yield of metaphors that informed his perception of the world both material and spiritual. That Roethke was concerned with the mystical, the transcendent, the spiritual is obvious in his journals, prose publications, and poetry. He was without strong attachment to a particular religious creed, but he read St. John of the Cross and was always harassed by thoughts of God. But Roethke was also something of a regional poet, and a nature poet. One of the difficulties of understanding Roethke

is the challenge of remaining accountable for the sundry currents that converge in his life and poetry. I think that we can, to some degree, understand this point of convergence in Roethke as the major preoccupation of his poetry: the approach to the divine, in which, paradoxically, the quality of smallness is Roethke's dominant metaphor for transcendence.

Small appears as an adjective in almost every poem in Roethke's final book, *The Far Field*. In his previous book, *Words for the Wind*, Roethke entitles a poem "The Small", and not surprisingly, in this poem we find a rich meditation on the minutiae of nature and the transcendent.<sup>1</sup> That the natural world and particularly the small within it are Roethke's dominant metaphors demands that we consider what metaphor is, and how it operates within poetry.

A metaphor describes its object indirectly, by naming some other thing, but it is designed somehow to achieve a clearer description, or an otherwise impossible perspective on the object of description. When good poetry refuses to make a natural metaphor explicit, or even necessary, it establishes a two-way perception of the parts of the metaphor in which they participate in one another. A Platonic account might say that they share some of the same qualities because of the spiritual structures in which they both participate. Platonic philosophy conceived of humans, animals, and plants as all possessed of souls. Humans have rational souls, animals irrational, and plants vegetative souls, but each is animate. In this sense we see a kind of spiritual hierarchy in which each being participates and thereby corresponds to all other beings.

With this understanding of a fundamental similarity among existing things, it is clear that metaphors, especially natural metaphors, do not simply yoke incongruous images and expect the reader to imagine some new mutant form. No, at its best the metaphor uncovers or intimates those real unities that escape our immediate perception. This means of indirection is the defining characteristic of poetry, and we might say that poetry operates in a metaphorical mode, or that

metaphor is the poetic mode of perceiving and speaking. Thus poetry is a contemplative language of indirection by which we approach as nearly as we are able to articulating the unspeakable and those things that make us speechless.

This mode of expression is obviously suited to the mystical and the spiritual, realms for which we lack a significant vocabulary other than the poetic. As we've seen, the phenomenon of monastic living provides a deep insight into this metaphorical or poetic mode. Bd. John Henry Newman describes the intellectual mode of monasticism as inherently poetic, and we might see in the monastic contemplative practices an approach that we recognize in lyric poetry.<sup>2</sup> As Jean Leclercq describes in *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, the monks apprenticed themselves to God's words by reading the Bible out loud, and by painstakingly copying the Scriptures. "The monks speak in images and comparisons borrowed from the Bible and possessing both a richness and an obscurity in keeping with the mystery to be expressed".<sup>3</sup> The monastic imagination was forged in Classics and Scripture. By contemplating the *Song of Songs* they actually assumed the properties of the beloved in relation to God. The metaphor provided them access to reality. They might say that "the Word became flesh."<sup>4</sup> We should remember this analogue, and the training of the imagination when considering the intimacy with which Roethke treated the natural world.

Roethke's natural metaphors parallel this monastic effort by attempting to translate the self into the realm of the spiritual through the natural world. It will be seen that this paradoxical looking down and inwards, in order to move up and out, is an instance of Roethke's recurring interest in the small. In an essay entitled "On Identity" Roethke further explains, "It is paradoxical that a very sharp sense of the being, the identity of some other being—and in some instances, even an inanimate thing—brings a corresponding awareness of one's own self, and,

even more mysteriously, in some instances, a feeling of the oneness of the universe.”<sup>5</sup> This is in fact the substance of many of Roethke’s poems—wonder and concentration on some natural object or phenomenon, and the manner in which it corresponds to the self. In these lines we see the poet account for the majority of his own poetry as a movement towards the transcendent, and a few lines later, as if to put any further questions to rest, “it is one of the ways man at least approaches the divine—in this comprehensive human act, the really good poem.”<sup>6</sup> While it is never safe to trust a poet’s self-assessment, I think we will find in these sentences a remarkably true confession of Roethke’s muse.

The idea of oneness in the universe is common to mystical thought and usually finds expression through metaphor. Much of Roethke’s poetry strives for a degree of concentration on the natural world that will initiate this mystical gesture. He finds the germ of the divine latent everywhere and waiting for participation with the viewer. This spiritual germ translates directly into Roethke’s poetry as “the small”. In his poem of that title, Roethke lyrically presents the dance of the perceptive soul with the natural world, a dance in which the lines of distinction blur and a strong subject-object distinction diminishes.

This blurring of distinctions, however common in poetic or mystical experience, presents a psychological danger—one to which Roethke occasionally succumbed with fits in which he became incapable of functioning outside of the sanitarium. Roethke’s contemporary Elizabeth Bishop captures the danger of this blurring of distinctions in her terrifying poem “In the Waiting Room”.<sup>7</sup> In the poem, Bishop endures acute disorientation as she seems to suffer from too strong a proclivity to experience her own universality. “In the Waiting Room” describes the cessation of her personality as she abdicates agency to the flux of existence around her. While a tribute to the power of metaphor, a failure to remain distinct from the things to which we might be



compared is a kind of madness, and seems to have threatened Bishop and Roethke alike. We use metaphors to elucidate things, but if the articles of a metaphor become indistinct, they lose the ability to elucidate one another, and bleed together into chaos. Bishop's tenuous hold on the distinction between self and other threatened her sanity, but helps us to perceive the truth in unity of self and other—and it infuses her poetry with immensely powerful metaphors. Roethke was very aware of this possibility of madness that seemed to hover around the edges of his consciousness, but according to Seager, he “always retained a hold on objective reality, tenuous but present”.<sup>8</sup> We cannot decisively claim that Roethke's mystical conceptions and poetry sired his psychological fragility, or vice versa, but Roethke's psychologist Dr. Hoffer observed, “I think his troubles were merely the running expenses he paid for being his kind of poet”, and Seager writes “Given the intensity of his vocation and the emotional costs of his methods of work... Ted's troubles were inevitable.”<sup>9</sup> It certainly seems that the same power that animated Roethke's poetry was capable of drawing him out of the fold of “normal” human activity.

But in Roethke's best poems he seems to accomplish the mystical portrayal of unity while maintaining control. “The Small” is such an example and appears in “Words for the Wind”. Here Roethke takes the reader from a state of normalcy and complacency through metaphor, which to some degree dissolves the distinctions between things, before concluding with a renewed vision of the small spiritual seed that inhabits existing things. And of course, true to its title, the occasion for the reflective poem is the minutiae of nature nearby.

“The Small” is contained in a modest iambic tri-meter with a subdued rhyme scheme. Each line is end-stopped, either with punctuation or the natural caesura of the spoken word. There are four stanzas of six short lines each, so that the poem on the page looks like four perfect squares tidily stacked one upon the other. It has “nice dimensions, nice proportions”.<sup>10</sup> But this

formal description should not yield the impression that the poem is claustrophobic or uptight. No, but it is modest; it is small.

The diction too is formally suited to the subject. Roethke's language is not the grandiose and extravagant but the reserved and subtle. Nowhere do we find the impressive vocabulary of transcendence like Emily Dickinson's "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers."

Grand go the Years,  
In the Crescent above them –  
Worlds scoop their Arcs –  
And Firmaments – row –  
Diadems – drop –  
And Doges – surrender –  
Soundless as Dots,  
On a Disc of Snow.<sup>11</sup>

This is the language with which we expect to approach the divine, and rightly so. Dickinson's lyric is unsurpassed in my estimation, but Roethke proposes a different lyrical dialect. While Dickinson's firmaments row, Roethke's "cicadas chirr" (2), and while her worlds are gallivanting around scooping arcs, Roethke's "far things draw closer in" (10). There is something frugal in Roethke's most mystical lines that is so effective at concentrating our attention on the minute object of his meditation. His diction is small, like his path to transcendence.

"The Small" begins with an individual recounting a scene in which he participates. The first three lines describe the surroundings, and the fourth describes the self, "I look at the first star" (4). This pattern repeats in each of the following stanzas—first a description of the natural, and then an insertion of the self into the natural. The first stanza, however, retains a "normal" relationship between the self and the natural world, that of the observer to the observed. But with the advent of the second stanza, a metamorphosis occurs. In "the wood becomes a wall" (9) we see a strong metaphor that appropriates a natural image, the woods, for a particularly human

image, a wall. The poem begins to blend the human and the natural, self and the other, which is, as we saw above, a fundamental function of metaphorical and mystical speech. “Far things draw closer in” (10) continues the blend and provides an image of the restriction of the vast natural world into a smaller center the focal point of which seems to be the first person observer. The third stanza proposes the existence of a fecund subconscious, “Things lost in sleep return” (15) that sustains a sort of productive communion with the outer world. Roethke suggests that “what rustles in the fern” (13) is mysteriously a part of himself. The final stanza clarifies the vision of the preceding lines. The “small shapes drowse” (19) until participated with by the human soul. “I live to woo the fearful small” (20) explains the poet’s commitment to the contemplative toil while furthering the idea that the spiritual, like the subconscious, is latent and not obvious.

Roethke concludes the poem with a fierce couplet: “And things throw light on things. / And all the stones have wings.” (23-24). It is painful to attempt analysis of what is very nearly perfect, like trying to climb a sheer glass wall. This final couplet makes new and wonderful the poem’s central idea of the spiritual compatibility and commerce between things. It introduces the thought of the necessity of intelligibility—Roethke’s mysticism is not a nice emotional feeling, but a rigorous immersion in the spiritual that contributes to a higher knowledge, as in “throw light”, specifically a divine knowledge as the image of light and ascending wings confirms. Roethke concludes the poem with a couplet that anchors mysticism to the particular human quality of intellect, and presents the image of ascension which culminates the poignancy of yearning that is latent throughout.

“The Small” is not unique among Roethke’s poetry in its emphasis on the spiritual, or in locating the spiritual in the minutiae of the natural world. “God’s in that stone, or I am not a man”, “A blaze of being on a central stem”, “How close we are to the sad animals”, and “all

finite things reveal infinitude” hover around Roethke’s central vision as attempts at articulation.<sup>12</sup> We might gain some understanding of his particular insistence on the small from the essay I quoted from earlier, “On Identity”. In the essay, a reflection on...well, everything, Roethke writes “how disastrous to the human psyche—to worship bigness, the firm, the university; numbers”. He proceeds to explain:

Everything that lives is holy: I call upon these holy forms of life. One could even put this theologically: St. Thomas says, “God is above all things by the excellence of His nature; nevertheless he is in all things as causing the being of all things.” Therefore, in calling upon the snail, I am calling, in a sense, upon God.<sup>13</sup>

Roethke claims that the human psyche needs God, and that the small natural phenomena that surround us are the immediate and accessible approach to him. “For there is a God, and He’s here...not only in the works of art or in the glories of a particular religious service...but in the lowest forms of life, He moves and has His being.”<sup>14</sup> Yes, the lowest forms of life are accessible, but I think if we take Roethke’s biography into account, we find another likely possibility in his childhood.

Just as the monks purged their imaginations in order to put on the scriptures, from the beginning Roethke’s imagination put on his childhood environs. It is no accident that Allan Seager’s biography of Roethke devotes the entire first chapter of the book to describing the Saginaw Valley, Roethke’s childhood home. Seager detects the profundity of the poet’s reliance on, and affinity for, the terrain in which he grew. The biography is full of stories of Roethke’s childhood in which his environment dominates our attention. The strength of its reality forged bonds with the young Roethke, bonds that in his adulthood became precious avenues upon which to seek a greater spiritual understanding. The monks spoke a scriptural language, seeking to share God’s own language; Roethke spoke nature’s language likewise seeking transcendence.

The power of childhood impressions has rarely been as apparent to me as when reading Roethke's poetry. Something in Saginaw lodged deeply in Roethke. As a child growing up in the greenhouse he observed day to day, at eye level, the growing and metamorphosis of live vibrant beings from the smallest seeds. Observing these unaccountable changes with a child's fresh vision and sense of mystery planted a contemplative seed in the young poet, which grew into a great faith in the spiritual. There is little we can observe in life as mysterious as the operations of nature, little as beautiful, and little that concentrates such power in so small a frame—except ourselves. There are few of us today who are privileged as Roethke was to be schooled in nature's nuances, and few of us as capable of crafting the metaphors that uncover the great similarities and ties that bind us to the world we all inhabit. I wonder though, if our increasing technological distance from nature will be accompanied with an ever increasing ignorance about ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1975., p 142.

<sup>2</sup> Newman, John Henry. "The Mission of St Benedict." *Atlantis*, 1858: 365-430.

<sup>3</sup> Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009 .

<sup>4</sup> Douay-Rheims. *The Holy Bible*. Post Falls, ID: Lepanto Press, 1914. John 1:14

<sup>5</sup> Roethke, Theodore. "On 'Identity'," in *On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, edited by Ralf J. Mills Jr. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Roethke. "On 'Identity'."

<sup>7</sup> Bishop, Elizabeth. "In the Waiting Room," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Vol 2 Contemporary Poetry, 3rd Edition*, by Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, 221. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Seager, Allan. *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke*. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968.

<sup>9</sup> Seager. *The Glass House*

<sup>10</sup> Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame*. New York: Grove Press, 1957.

<sup>11</sup> Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Edited by R.W. Franklin. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> From the poems "A Walk in Late Summer", "What Can I Tell My Bones?", and "The Far Field"

<sup>13</sup> Roethke. "On 'Identity'."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



## 6

### *Dots on a Disc of Snow*

**D**ickinson's enigmatic disposition towards Christianity and its most fundamental tenets has made the question of her faith widely discussed, and seldom conclusively so. In "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers," Dickinson provides a short lyric poem, the central question of which appears to many prominent critics to be whether the poem endorses the traditional Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead. Dickinson's attitude towards religion was at times coy, and at others deeply dependent, and because of her frequent shifting between the two, I intend to limit this query into religion in Dickinson to only one of her poems and to resist

drawing larger implications concerning the rest of her work and life. Dickinson only indirectly addresses the question of resurrection in this poem, but the implication, based on her mystical description of God, is positive. Most readers who are not too ideologically committed to a particular school of criticism will agree that both biography and close reading can be important to understanding a poem, and in this case, both contribute to a reading of the poem that places meditation on the divine at the center.

A necessary source to consult in a question of Dickinson's attitude towards an article of faith is her biography. Unfortunately, the record of Dickinson's secluded life yields little evidence that will provide an easy answer. *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, Roger Lundin's biography which specifically pursues the question of Dickinson's faith, describes the ambiguity of her relationship with the church both in her writing and her life. Her education was strictly within the Puritan Calvinist tradition, but in the latter half of her life she never attended church. Her letters, especially those of condolence upon friends' deaths, often indicate belief, but much of her poetry undermines these sentiments. That she was not a practicing Christian in any orthodox sense of the word is true, but she seemed to have maintained aspects of Christian belief that she expressed throughout her life in various letters and conversations.<sup>1</sup> The biography is ultimately inconclusive on the question of faith, and admits that Dickinson remains too agile to commit a decisive act of belief or unbelief.

With the many contradicting indications in Dickinson's life, perhaps this brief comment in a private correspondence is our truest glimpse of her attitude. In a letter late in her life Dickinson wrote "On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say Beings, we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble."<sup>2</sup> Lundin indicates that this admission places belief at the core of Dickinson's consciousness, although,

admittedly, it is a complicated belief. Lundin's understanding of the importance of belief to Dickinson informs his assessment of "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers," and sounds the only note of hope in his reading. While he only mentions the poem briefly in his biography of Dickinson, he claims the poem shows that "the dead must await their resurrection for seeming endless ages, as the constellations make their way across the empty heavens with sickening slowness."<sup>3</sup> While leaving the possibility of eventual resurrection open, Lundin indicates that the movement of the poem is essentially negative. His consideration of the poem comes in a section of the biography in which he describes the likely possibility that Dickinson was agoraphobic, and that therefore the second verse of the poem which articulates the immensity of time and space is a dark and terrifying utterance. For Lundin, the question of resurrection is not so much answered in this poem as it is actively doubted and delayed. He claims that the poem shows the dead waiting, probably interminably, but still allows the possibility of resurrection despite what he claims are the dark overtones of the poem's concluding images.

Concerning the overall attitude towards resurrection in the poem, Roger Lundin and Camille Paglia are almost in accord. In her collection of essays *Break, Blow, Burn*, Paglia provides a close reading of "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers" in which she argues one step further than Lundin that the poem is a total repudiation of the Christian belief in resurrection. Paglia delves into several of the important words in the first verse and describes each of their darker implications. She claims that "alabaster" represents both the grave impenetrable by light and the "pallid corpses themselves, caked with frost."<sup>4</sup> "Safe" implies prison-like confinement, and the "Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone"<sup>5</sup> show the architectural weakness of Christianity's elaborate constructions. Paglia's argument would describe an even more strongly anti-Christian poem if one considers the "members of the Resurrection"<sup>6</sup> to be the body parts of Christ. With



this reading, the poem is a shocking denial of Christ's own resurrection, and therefore a denial of all Christianity.

In the second verse, Paglia is in close accord with Lundin when she describes the terror of the vast scene with words such as "ruthless," "sinister," and "stark."<sup>7</sup> She argues that the stanza's cosmic scope evokes an impression of silence and emptiness. We might compare Dickinson's language to Robert Frost's "Desert Places," another poem that uses the vast scope of space to communicate the emptiness and horror of the world. Frost's use of similar images seems to influence Paglia in considering "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers" as a poem that articulates nihilism. A fellow New Englander, Frost often employs imagery of space and snow to convey a sense of horror at the impossibility of meaning in the universe.

All animals are smothered in their lairs...  
The loneliness includes me unawares.  
And lonely as it is that loneliness  
Will be more ere it will be less  
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express.<sup>8</sup>

The imagery of snow and vast "empty spaces / Between stars"<sup>9</sup> in Frost's poem certainly does resemble the dark vision that Paglia and Lundin see in Dickinson, and uses much the same language as her final stanza. For both critics, the immense imagery and silence of the final vision is irredeemably dark.

Although dissent from the verdict of two well-regarded and articulate critics in agreement with one another is immediately suspect, in this case, there is room for dissent on almost every point. To start at the beginning of the poem, "safe" might mean imprisoned as Paglia argues, but it might also mean secure, and perhaps with less stretch of the imagination. And although Paglia describes the alabaster chambers as impenetrable by light, alabaster is distinct among rocks by virtue of its translucence. With so many choices of non-translucent material out of which to

construct her tomb, it is strange that Dickinson would pick the particular stone that transmits light to be her symbol for irredeemable darkness in the grave. In the second line, “morning” permits of wordplay with mourning, which further indicates a less somber tone than either Lundin or Paglia endorse. In the final line of the first stanza Dickinson describes the tomb with “Rafter of Satin – and Roof of Stone!”<sup>10</sup> The image seems to figure medieval luxury and echoes of rich cathedrals like Chartres in France; and so the first stanza concludes with a quiet but elegant image of a mausoleum or cathedral.

The dominant impression in the first stanza, conveyed by a “Safe” and “Stone” edifice, is that of a church. Churches provide a kind of sanctuary from the outside world and have been used throughout history to aid the faithful in physically disposing themselves toward prayer and meditation. The poet describes the dead as having achieved a kind of holy seclusion, insulated from the outside world by the translucent “Chambers” that presumably admit heavenly light. The first stanza enacts a movement of consolidation and recollection; no longer committed to the outside world, those occupying the alabaster chambers exist in a kind of stasis. The challenge posed by this reading of the stanza is that of overcoming our modern aversion to silence and recollection that is fueled by the cacophony of media. Silence has only lately assumed the darker implications of nihilism, and most parents would still describe silence as blessed. Almost all religions involve a degree of meditation, and silence and recollection are a necessary prerequisite for meditation. Dickinson’s first stanza describes the seclusion and recollection that disposes one towards contemplation and meditation, and the second stanza bears the immense fruit of contemplation as it describes a mystical experience.

Possibly the most helpful evidence available in Dickinson’s biography is the undisputed point that she secluded herself from the outside world from roughly the age of twenty-five

onwards. Many speculate as to her motivation for doing so, but there is no conclusive evidence in support of any one theory.<sup>11</sup> In danger of implying more than I intend to, I suggest that we might garner some support for the contemplative interpretation of the first stanza of “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers” from the fact that Dickinson herself lived in deep seclusion. And given her seclusion and the quantity of poems she produced, it seems that she herself cultivated a high level of contemplation. Many poets found seclusion from the rigors of daily life necessary to produce their art, and it seems that Dickinson too needed this retreat. Given the religious point of resurrection in question in the poem, it is also pertinent to observe that Dickinson’s seclusion looked very similar to the cloistering of contemplative monastic orders, a point that will be very important in considering the second stanza of this enigmatic poem.

Certain religious orders retreat from the world in order to pursue a more contemplative spirituality that is difficult to achieve when entangled in worldly pursuits.<sup>12</sup> Establishing a threshold of recollection much higher than most people, it is common for those in religious orders to have a much more mystical, perhaps we might also use the word lyrical, perception of reality and God than most of us. I do not intend to claim that Dickinson intentionally or consciously modeled her retreat after the monastic practice to which she must have had exposure only through literature, but only that the resemblance between her practice and theirs is striking and should provoke investigation. Furthermore, the investment of Dickinson’s own life in contemplation indicates the likelihood that she is competent to describe the contemplative journey into the mystical as I argue she does in “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers.”

If there is one kind of poetry that embodies the essence of contemplation, it is the lyric. Not narrative and linear in form, the lyric dwells meditatively on its subject matter, and the poet communicates his reflection through condensed and often mysterious language. The lyrical

mode of communication is essentially metaphorical, often naming things indirectly through a symbol or suggestion; the lyric demands a meditative reception and resists yielding its riches to a cursory reading. Dickinson's "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers" is just such a poem. The second verse resists literal interpretation by personifying celestial bodies and yoking apparently incongruous images. In fact, the verse consists almost entirely of nouns executing verbs that have never before been seen together. Do "Worlds scoop," and "Firmaments - row"? Paglia calls the stanza "mysteriously evocative,"<sup>13</sup> and its mystery seems to hold the key to Dickinson's judgment on the doctrine of resurrection.

The first and most apparent observation about the second stanza is that in it, the poem has moved from the description of a grave, or at least an interior space of some kind, out to a description of the cosmos. The "Roof of Stone" in the first stanza has been replaced by the "Crescent" dome of the heavens through which the poet records time and celestial bodies traversing with fantastical motions. This is no physicists' log book of planetary movement; rather, it gives evidence of the expanded consciousness associated with mystical experience. The movement of the poem, from the beginning where we see individuals in separate graves, is through the alabaster, through the translucent stone roof, out into the heavenly spaces—the experience of transcendence, mystical experience, and prayer. Dickinson's lyric sets the stage for the mystical experience of the second stanza with the seclusion, recollection, and hard contemplation of the first. The poem can be understood to describe an act of prayer, where one lifts the heart and mind from one's individual self and experience, as in the first stanza, into a contemplation and pursuit of unity with the divine, as in the second. When the break between stanzas comes, the poem achieves in white space a meditative stasis. The individual consciousness recedes and becomes attentive to the revolution of the heavens.

The first four lines of the second stanza describe time and space unfolding together on a cosmic level. The fifth line marks a slight change in tone as Dickinson speaks in more human language. No longer describing heavenly spheres, Dickinson writes “Diadems – drop - / And Doges – surrender.”<sup>14</sup> A diadem is a crown, and has long been a symbol of dignity and royalty, and Doge is a term that refers to the individual holding the highest civic authority in seventh century Venice.<sup>15</sup> If we understand the poem to trace a movement upwards from the grave into the heavens, our expectation is to find God at the top, and in these late lines, as the poem reaches its zenith, Dickinson indeed describes an act of worship. She might also be alluding to the book of “The Apocalypse,” one of the most lyrical books in the *New Testament*. In chapter 4, verse 10, St. John writes “The four and twenty ancients fell down before him that sitteth on the throne and adored him that liveth for ever and ever and casteth their crowns before the throne.”<sup>16</sup> As Lundin is careful to point out in his biography, Dickinson was intimately familiar with the Bible, and he argues that it was her chief influence. It seems unlikely that Dickinson could write so similar an image to that recorded in “The Apocalypse” without knowing the scriptural predecessor of the image. The picture of kings dropping their crowns, and Doges bending their knees is, like the passage from “The Apocalypse,” a sign of obeisance and speaks of the presence of God without actually naming Him. Religious writing often describes the mystical experience of the divine leaving one speechless, and the deeply perceptive Dickinson captures the unspeakable by describing the awe of silence surrounding Him.<sup>17</sup>

With her thoroughly Calvinist education, Dickinson was surely aware of the Jewish reverence for the name of God that utterly precluded any use of His name in speech or writing.<sup>18</sup> Without naming God and thereby violating the sanctuary, Dickinson places God at the zenith of the poem, in the midst of earthly kings’ prostration, the roiling heavens, and the snowy pristine

silence of perfect awe. By following the Hebrew norm of speaking around the name of God, Dickinson also takes advantage of the full potential of the lyric form. Lyric poetry speaks in metaphorical modes, pointing to its true meaning only obliquely through the juxtaposition or comparison of other images and ideas. In this sense, poetry can be defined as a language of indirection that is the only possible method of describing those things that elude straightforward propositional language. It is the only language available to us to describe the things in life that leave us speechless. The lyric is our surrogate breath when we are confronted with something breathtaking; hence the silence at the end of the poem.

The question of resurrection does not seem to be the central issue in “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers.” Rather, Dickinson describes the process of seclusion, meditation, and mystical experience; she describes the contemplative life. Perhaps she wrote this poem as a defense of her own seclusion, or perhaps it is supposed to narrate the journey to heaven of the departed soul, as in the Christian account of eternity. Either way, the poem is a perfect lyric. Essentially metaphorical and contemplative, it describes contemplation and its spiritual fruits. If to the modern mind silence speaks of nihilism and heavenly bodies and vast spaces speak of despair, then lyric poetry, the essentially contemplative and increasingly unpopular form, can only be the repository of nothingness.

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<sup>1</sup> Lundin, Roger. *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief, 2nd Edition*. Grand Rapids, Cambridge: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004. Lundin quotes from Dickinson’s letters and conversations throughout his book.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Paglia, Camille. *Break, Blow, Burn*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Dickinson, Emily, edited by Franklin, R.W. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Dickinson. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*.

<sup>7</sup> Paglia. *Break, Blow, Burn*.

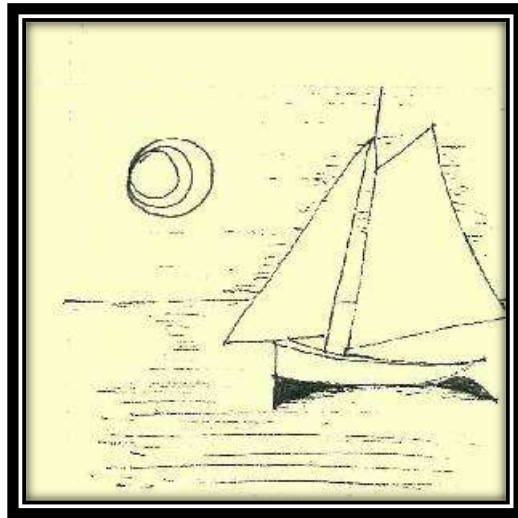
<sup>8</sup> Frost, Robert. *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Dickinson. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*

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- <sup>11</sup> Roger Lundin gives an account of many of these theories in his biography of Dickinson.
- <sup>12</sup> Jean Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire For God*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, is an excellent explication of Catholic Monasticism
- <sup>13</sup> Paglia. *Break, Blow, Burn*.
- <sup>14</sup> Dickinson. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*
- <sup>15</sup> OED Online "diadem, n.". OED Online. March 2011. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/51819?rskey=QW9VAA&result=1> (accessed April 18, 2011). "doge, n.". OED Online. March 2011. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/56430?redirectedFrom=doge> (accessed April 18, 2011).
- <sup>16</sup> Douay-Rheims. *The Holy Bible*. Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire: Loreto Publications, 2007.
- <sup>17</sup> For an anecdotal explication of the silencing effect of mystical experience, see Pieper, Joseph. *The Silence of St. Thomas*. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, Inc., 1999.
- <sup>18</sup> For further explication of the Hebrew understanding of names and language, Owen Barfield offers a brief but essential description in *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1988, see especially chapter XVIII "The Origin of Language."

# *Poetry*





## *Matins*

The sun rose, as usual, brown over Ypsilanti.

And Ford Lake, terrified, surrounded by its ring  
of belligerent condos, tried to hold still.

And fifteen blackbirds strummed against  
the perfectly delicate, perfectly changing  
blue of winter skies.

And the streetlamp, like the conifers, pointed up.

Which I will treat like a question because I am human  
and intolerant of orders.

*I Aim To See*

Your head, as usual, in cross-  
hairs. When I look at the  
bookshelf, crosshairs.  
Crosshairs on the crib slats.  
Crosshairs all I see.  
The blue iris dials hard.  
As though some bit depended  
on what really might be there.

*I Take My Aiming Slow*

Inside I can see like a champ.  
I can read by the light of high windows.  
Her jaw is a line in a well lit place, but  
when I look out the window from even bright spaces  
the shapes out the window remain just shapes  
because the light through the glass shines too hard.

## *Instance of Jane*

In nebulous arugula Green Jane  
Found a ring and rang it around  
Her neck on a string.

In mahogany cacophony Green Jane  
Snuck a nap—she just couldn't help  
When the pelican quacked.

On a moon's top story Green Jane  
Turned blue and emptied the earth dust  
Out of her shoes.

*After Roethke*

Humid earth, humid breath,  
minds are humid too.  
But the moss dies in patches—  
Mold in the morning dew.

## *Spark Plug Wrench*

But every day for years he worked the spark  
plug wrench and gray scarred ratchets in  
grease and salt with cracked knuckles  
that came to resemble the nameless wrench  
resented for its unapologetic masculinity  
and constant service.

Nameless—

Although for him  
some dreams played out  
between his  
blackened knuckles  
and that damn wrench.

## *In the Winter Season*

Pine resin freezes  
sealing bark in  
a shiny plastic case –  
trees shrink like  
extinguished chandeliers –  
anorexic frames  
clicking and  
tittering in wind  
and the snow drips  
like acid burning  
green from the grass  
and spreads like mold,  
white over everything.  
Speech is chapped  
in this season—  
what was concrete  
is too slick to tell.  
The danger that you sense  
will one day arrive.

## *The Voice of the Turtle*

You wouldn't believe the trees in Michigan  
where evergreens are shading in stipples –  
the dots of tree tops and heads of hair.  
Wide colors of farmland fill the canvas and  
rivers make arch-symbols with oxbows.  
We had to paint over an illuminated monograph  
on the owl to build New York.  
Los Angeles had been an archetype of a fault  
featuring beautiful brown pastels bordered by luminous  
blue. But faults, anymore, are relatively few.  
Now younger angels aren't allowed  
to look at parts of the work.  
Large stains of the unreal have appeared.  
The time for pruning is unclear.



## *Paper Boats*

But Emrys, they can't stop me  
on my island side of the narrow water  
from sending paper boats across the channel  
or waving to you from my breakfast fire  
or bowing to you at sunset when  
the whole color rush of sky and water  
crescendos and quiets to a thin timpani  
on the horizon, and one slow gong  
trails off into the night:  
each of us beside his fire.

## *Raiders*

Rhythm and time, rhythm and time:  
Bucking waves like a jockey on  
the gunnel of a zodiac;  
Almost tumbling into every trough only to  
Skid over the next couple crests.  
Holes hollowing darkly beneath the boat,  
Like dread of the next crush  
When the gunnels will hammer  
like a wave.

## *The Quigley*

A hundred brown tadpole though a  
kind of canal; this is the ritual dredging  
of a particular Virginian swamp.  
Its sounds are the murmur of kevlar  
scraping logs and the patter of clips on pouches,  
irregular panting, the mud trying to ripple.  
It gives things up, rotting on the bottom for months,  
that stick between upper lip and nose and flap  
belligerently with every breath.

From far enough away, take twenty miles  
North for example,  
those bodies become a livid whole,  
a thrashing amphibian that was born and named victory.

## *Del Mar*

You stare and wait to launch.  
Something usual is happening—boredom

and anger, adrenaline and malaise.  
The Pacific slaps at concrete ramps

in the Marina. It's sullen and choppy—  
it's threatening and cold.

The SEALs lost someone in this  
kind of training a couple weeks ago.

You read about it and already resent  
the all night hypothermia in a drooping Crik.\*

A Crik is made to tear across the tops  
of waves, the black streak of amphibious excellence!...

but yours work more like they sound  
—crik—  
and go under, not over, every wave.

So you launch at sunset with a thought:  
When will the cynicism I live on run out?

In twenty hours you'll just remember  
pissing on yourself to warm up.

Next week, as the rash subsides  
you'll remember chafing cammies,

And running numb through the surf  
and how warm the sand felt

At midnight in December  
while the shivering gun rusted,

You'll remember saltwater,  
sand, and acid in your mouth.

And what you hated so much becomes  
a name you'll chew like tobacco

For a moment of comfort as the waves  
tear with two hands your integrity.

At two years the deployment memories  
begin to rust and at twenty

Become the myths that at thirty  
you don't quite believe any more.

After fifty years the rash returns—  
the taste of metal and salt.

Sometimes urine runs down your leg

and you think "give me back my zodiac.  
Those myths are real and I believe."

\*CRRC - Combat Rubber Reconnaissance Craft – also called a Zodiac.

## *Eleven March Twenty-twelve*

There were days he waking rose  
and rising spoke and spoke and spoke  
the unknown names of thirty dead  
on account of a few burned books.  
However he added or tried to remember  
the equation came back to zero. So

in zero spring he rose  
and rising took his head pain  
outside the wire to try the  
calculus again.

And now the numbers change again  
and the Defense Secretary computes columns  
on a legal pad with capitol crime, question-mark,  
scribbled in the margin, knowing that  
the answer is whatever he'll be told it is.

Which is why I don't trust numbers like  
four, which is how many innumerable  
times he risked his life for  
a time that made life  
less than its book.

The number is 0.

## *Transgression*

*Upon the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and  
wept: when we remembered Sion:*

Just these final things: bird crow, sky shape.  
We left him after loving him.  
And what is precious and given away  
calls in the memory the strangest ways.

Dinner, of course, and small boats—  
memories of these, infinitely  
repeatable, malleable, and painful.

A window to a garden becomes  
that window to that garden.

Roosters bark at me at dawn.

Bridle and bit hang long down the wall.

I wake up in heavy seas  
and traverse ladderwells and  
catwalks to the well-deck  
just to have high ceilings  
and to see the straps hold  
back the stacks of zodiacs  
as we pitch—How simple,  
this strap against the sea.

*Far Archipelagos*

*And that water these words what can they do what can they do prince? –Zbigniew Herbert*

Hard to believe it still,  
That each of us is a planet in gaping space,  
Silent as a gutter veined with ice, dark  
As your pupil in its ring of light—  
That I have nothing to say to you,  
Nothing to say.



## *Messenger*

The space between leaves, the pollen dust,  
the big flower hides the child's small hand  
announcing:

I am Magnolia.  
I am superlative in my petals.

I intrigue the boy who reaches  
the bottom rung—the low branch  
from the marble bench.

I taught him how to climb  
and see—he climbs.

I send a message across the void.

He climbing flees the void  
which grows by some accounts.

## *Two-fold Need*

Even spring: it thaws and runs  
down trunks forming pools in the yard.  
The wet bark flashes with fish tails  
in the sun.

We grudge the loss  
but need the summer despite its  
cannibal size. Then Lady Earth  
casts her

Lightning at the ceiling  
and the stalks jump to attention,  
golden and stiff, awaiting the  
reaper.

Is it cruel that we have a two-fold need—  
part for blossom, and part for feed?

## *Red and Green*

Bright tablecloth with a red rose akimbo—  
On the table a petal, and a petal, and a petal,  
And a rose atop the tablecloth of red stitches stitched.  
Orchard by the valley of the Huron River,  
And an apple by the basket of green things knit.

## *Caliban in Snow*

Even when we know it's coming, the night snow surprises.  
The wind-break becomes a white-washed picket and the  
earth pushes back in edges and ripples across the crust.

The leaning tractor doesn't change, just disappears  
in white—And I think of waking up like an injury.  
But when I sleep again,

these dreaming continents tumble into place  
making silence where they touch our fields.  
And through the hard black, first one flake, and then

wild cities of archangelic white  
topple silently from the sky all night.

## *Aphasia*

*the Appian way is the queen of the long roads*

Velvet and felt pad the Appian Way.  
She came in April, no, in May she came  
to a nascent river – on a placid day  
in the small leaf season: aphasia

