

COMPOSER'S NOTE

Look not to things that are seen, but to that which is unseen;
for things that are seen pass away, but that which is unseen is forever.
—Corinthians II, 4:18

It is at once by poetry and through poetry, by music and through music,
that the soul divines what splendors shine behind the tomb.
—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Poetic Principle*

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.
—Hebrews, II:1

If in the world of Elvis song is a trillion-dollar business, in the world of serious classical music song is the least remunerative of expressions. Song in English, particularly by Americans, is more rarefied still, partly because historically the form's intimacy never meshed with the massive concepts of our pioneer composers, and partly because we have no recital tradition for singers. You can count on one hand the number of vocalists who subsist as recitalists, and even they prosper more than the composers. Today, re-creation takes priority over creation. The Three Tenors, intoning arias by dead Italians, earn more in one evening than what a live American composer earns in a lifetime.

Nevertheless, I embarked on the madness of a composer's career by writing songs. The first ones, at fourteen, were settings of Cummings. By forty I had written four hundred songs, on texts of over one hundred authors, from Anonymous to Ashbery, Freud to Kafka, Wylie to Whitman. My singular reputation, such as it is, has always centered around song, probably because there is so little competition. Whatever my music is worth, I flatter myself that my taste in texts is first-rate. For it was not the human voice that first drew me to song (I am not obsessed with the voice, much less am I an opera buff), but poetry as expressed through the voice. I am un-American by not being a specialist; as a child I never anguished about which to be when I grew up, a composer or a writer. Why not be both? (No, I don't set my own words to music, but that's another story.) If eventually I composed many a non-vocal work, such work emerged from a sense of duty: One is supposed to "branch out." Though probably every non-vocal work by every composer—be it a toccata for tuba or sonata for snare drum—is a song in disguise. Music *is* song and inside all composers lurks a singer striving to get out.

For decades I've dreamed of an *Art of the Song*, a glorified chamber piece for four solo voices with piano, to be presented as an entire program. The challenge would be less musical than theatrical. A composer always has musical ideas or he wouldn't be a composer; but when he proposes to link these abstract ideas to concrete words—words by authors who never asked to be musicalized—he must find words which (at least for him) need to be sung. If these words are intended for a cycle rather than for a single song then there must be a sense (at least for him) of inevitability in their sequence, because the same song in a different context takes on new meaning. If the chosen words are by different authors, then these authors must seem to share a

certain parenting (at least for him) even though they may be separated by centuries. (I say "words" rather than "poems," since many of the texts I use are prose.)

Last year the New York Festival of Song, in tandem with the Library of Congress, agreed to sponsor this dream. I am warmly grateful to these organizations.

In plotting the format of the present work, composed mostly in 1997, I chose thirty-six texts by twenty-four authors. Wystan Auden, Paul Goodman (a childhood idol), and Walt Whitman, all of whom I had used dozens of times before, are here represented by five, four, and three poems each. William Penn, who, as we Quakers say, "speaks to my condition," is represented by two prose selections, as are Stephen Crane and the eighteenth-century hymnodist, Thomas Ken. The other eighteen authors provide one song each. The sendoff by Roethke, "From Whence Cometh Song," I used once before in another version, and would not have set it again, but no other poem seemed more apt. The verses of Wordsworth, Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, though world famous, are new to my pen. Edna Millay, another childhood idol, remains close to my heart. Like Penn, John Woolman was a Quaker thinker whose prose dates from the early 1700's; his pacifism, like that of the more ironic Langston Hughes, contrasts with the sometimes warlike Kipling. Kipling's contemporary countrymen, Oscar Wilde and A. E. Housman, with their Victorian poignancy, contrast in turn with the American poignancy of the very late Jane Kenyon. The prose passages from the French of Colette and of Julien Green are, in my translation, the final paragraphs respectively of their semi-autobiographical works, *L'Etoile Vesper* and *L'Autre Sommeil*. Robert Frost, along with Dickinson and Whitman, is probably the American poet most often used by musicians; his elegiac "Come In" fits perfectly here. So does Baudelaire's English verse, and that of Yeats which is arranged for trio. Mark Doty's weighty harangue, "Faith," from his *Atlantis*, specifically concerns the tragedy of AIDS, as does the penultimate song, drawn from the late Paul Monette's *Love Alone*.

Two of the songs, Green's "He Thinks Upon His Death" and Goodman's "Boy With a Baseball Glove," were composed forty-five years ago, and have waited all this time to find a home. (In 1984, I did reshape the Goodman song, minus the words, into the third movement of a Violin Concerto.) Two of the authors still

thrive: Mark Doty in Provincetown, and Julien Green, age ninety-seven, in Paris. I have personally known six of them, though none, I think, have known each other; the interrelationship depends solely on my whimsical juxtaposition, as does their continuity within the cycle.

The order of songs relies on subject matter. The opening group, *Beginnings*, is just that—songs about moving forward, and the wistful optimism of love, with a concluding hymn-text from the eighteenth century to be sung by a congregation in the morning. (Although an atheist, I am sincere in my dozens of settings of so-called sacred texts; I do believe in Belief, and in the great art, starting with the Psalms of David, that has sprung from religious conviction.)

The second group, *Middles*, about coming of age, horror of war, romantic disappointment, concludes with another hymn, this one for evening. The last group, *Ends*, about death, concludes with an admonishment from William Penn, echoing a definition of Faith in Corinthians II: “Look not to things that are seen, but to that which is unseen; for things that are seen pass away, but that which is unseen is forever.”

Non-vocal music is never literal, can never be proven to “mean” anything. Tone poems mean only what the composer tells you, in

words, they mean, and the representation is general: the sea, love death, weather, but never knife or green or elbow or Tuesday. Song settings, meanwhile, can mean only what their texts tell you they mean; no one composer is more right than another in his interpretation of the same text. Nevertheless, certain conventions, that shift with centuries, ascribe specific meaning to ambiguous sound. Minor modes, for instance, signify sadness, while stately rhythms signify weddings. Since words speak louder than music, but since music, precisely because of its meaninglessness, can heighten or even change the sense of words, I try, in word-settings, to avoid the conventions. I don’t compose “war music” for war scenes or “love music” for love scenes, preferring to contradict—but can you prove it’s a contradiction?—the expected. Thus I’m sometimes criticized for missing the point of a poem. Still, it’s not for a composer to review his own music, since that music speaks louder than his words.

None of the texts is especially upbeat; even Auden’s nonsensical quatrains seem less funny than scary. Ten years ago I may not have chosen them. But they now seem endemic to this autumnal moment, as I look back to a youth “which foresaw in the light of a summer day the end of all life.”

—Ned Rorem
1997

Duration: *ca.* 100 minutes
The cycle should be performed without intermission.

Vocal Texts
Part One: Beginnings

1. From Whence Cometh Song?

From whence cometh song?—
From the tear, far away,
From the hound giving tongue,
From the quarry's weak cry.

From whence, love?
From the dirt in the street,
From the bolt stuck in the groove,
From the cur at my feet.

Whence, death?
From dire hell's mouth,
From the ghost without breath,
The wind shifting south.

Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

"From Whence Cometh Song" by Theodore Roethke
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2. The Open Road

Afoot and light-hearted, I take the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good fortune—I myself am good fortune.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

3. O Where Are You Going?
from "Five Songs"

"O where are you going?" said reader to rider,
"That valley is fatal when furnaces burn,
Yonder's the midden whose odors will madden,
That gap is the grave where the tall return."

"O do you imagine," said fearer to farer,
"That dusk will delay on your path to the pass,
Your diligent looking discover the lacking,
Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?"

"O what was that bird," said horror to hearer,
"Did you see that shape in the twisted trees?
Behind you swiftly the figure comes softly,
The spot on your skin is a shocking disease."

"Out of this house"—said rider to reader,
"Yours never will"—said farer to fearer,
"They're looking for you"—said hearer to horror,
As he left them there, as he left them there.

W. H. Auden (1907-1973)

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4. The Rainbow

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky;
So was it when my life began;
So it is now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each in natural piety.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

5. How Do I Love Thee?

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depths and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and the Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

6. Life in a Love

Escape me?
Never—
Beloved.
While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue.
My life is a fault at last, I fear—
It seems too much like a fate, indeed!
Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed—
But what if I fail of purpose here?
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And baffled, get up to begin again,—
So the chase takes up one's life, that's all.
While, look but once from your farthest bound,
At me so deep in the dusk and dark,
No sooner the old hope drops to the ground
Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark,
I shape me—
Ever
Removed!

Robert Browning (1812-1889)

7. Their Lonely Betterers

As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade
To all the noise that my garden made,
It seemed to me only proper that words
Should be withheld from vegetables and birds.

A robin with no Christian name ran through
The Robin-Anthem which was all it knew,
All rustling flowers for some third party waited
To say which pairs, if any, should get mated.

None of them was capable of lying,
There was not one which knew that it was dying!
Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme
Assumed responsibility for time.

Let them leave language to their lonely betterers
Who count some days and long for certain letters;
We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:
Words are for those with promises to keep.

W. H. Auden

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8. His Beauty Sparkles

His beauty sparkles, his big eyes blaze,
His moist teeth gleam, and his wide smile
Turns up a lamp that was aglow,
His laughing-wrinkles crackle like a campfire,
The flush across his neck
is like the slowly burning ruby
I drowned in swimming for tomorrow
West into the blushing sun.

Paul Goodman (1911-1972)

From *Collected Poems* (Random House, 1972)
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9. Boy with a Baseball Glove

See now the beauty with the glove
and hands on's hips and head held high
arrests me, to be in love
when on an easy way was I.

In Eire would the same
be standing with a fish
and canvas clothes and legs astride upon the landing
and make the Irish poet pause.

Each time to pleasure had with ease
since won, I go without a care,
a Messenger from overseas appears
and arrests me there.

Paul Goodman

From a *Warning/At My Leisure* (5 X 8 Press 1939).
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10. A Glimpse

One flitting glimpse, caught through an interstice,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room around the
stove late of a winter night, and I unremarked in a corner,
Of a youth who loves me and whom I love, silently approaching,
and seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand,
A long while amid the noises of coming and going, of drinking and
oath and smutty jest;
That we two, content, happy in just being together, speaking little,
perhaps not a word.

Walt Whitman

11. I Am He

I am he that aches with love;
Does the earth gravitate? does not all matter, aching, attract
all matter?
So the body of me to all I meet or know.

Walt Whitman

12. Love Cannot Fill

Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath,
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

"Love Is Not All" (Sonnet XXX of FATAL INTERVIEW) by Edna St. Vincent Millay.
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13. The More Loving One

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell,
But on earth indifference is the least
We have to dread from man or beast.

How should we like it were stars to burn
With a passion for us we could not return?
If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me.

Admirer as I think I am
Of stars that do not give a damn,
I cannot, now I see them, say
I missed one terribly all day.

Were all stars to disappear or die,
I should learn to look at an empty sky
And feel its total dark sublime
Though this might take me a little time.

W. H. Auden

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14. Hymn for Morning

Wake my soul, and with the sun
Thy daily stage of duty run;
Shake off dull sloth, and joyful rise
To pay thy morning sacrifice.

Redeem thy misspent moments past
And live this day as if the last;
Improve thy talent with due care;
For the great day thyself prepare.

Let all thy converse be sincere,
Thy conscience as the noon day clear;
Think how all-seeing God thy ways
And all thy secret thoughts surveys.

Wake, and lift up thyself, my heart,
And with the angels bear thy part,
Who all night long unwearied sing
High praises to the eternal King.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Thomas Ken (1637-1711)

Part Two: Middles

15. I Saw a Mass from "Journal"

...I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy color...and was informed that this mass was human beings in as great misery as they could be, and live, and that I was mixed in with them, and henceforth I might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being.

John Woolman (1720-1772)

16. The Comfort of Friends

O the rapes, fires, murders, and rivers of blood that lie at the doors of professed Christians! If this be godly, what's devilish? If this be Christian, what paganism? What's anti-Christian but to make God a party to their wickedness?

Time past is none of thine? 'Tis not what thou wast but what thou art. God will be daily looked into. Did'st thou eat yesterday? That feedeth thee not today.

They that love beyond the World, cannot be separated by it. Death cannot kill what never dies. Nor can spirits ever be divided that love and live in the same Divine Principle; the Root and Record of their Friendship.

This is the Comfort of Friends, that though they may be said to Die, yet their Friendship and Society are, in the best Sense, ever present, because Immortal.

William Penn (1644-1718)

17. A Dead Statesman

I could not dig: I dared not rob:
Therefore I lied to please the mob.
Now all my lies are proved untrue
And I must face the men I slew.
What tale shall serve me here among
Mine angry and defrauded young?

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Words: the words from A DEAD STATESMAN by Rudyard Kipling are set to music by permission of A P Watt Ltd on behalf of The National Trust.

18. The Candid Man

Forth went the candid man
And spoke freely to the wind—
When he looked about him he was in a far strange country.

Forth went the candid man
and spoke freely to the stars—
Yellow light tore sight from his eyes.

"My good fool," said a learned bystander,
"Your operations are mad."

"You are too candid," cried the candid man.
And when his stick left the head of the learned bystander
It was two sticks.

Stephen Crane (1871-1900)

19. Comment on War

Let us kill off youth
For the sake of truth.
We who are old know what truth is—
Truth is a bundle of vicious lies
Tied together and sterilized—
A war-maker's bait for unwise youth
To kill each other
For the sake of
Truth.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

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20. A Learned Man

A learned man came to me once.
He said, "I know the way—come."
And I was overjoyed at this.
Together we hastened.

Soon, too soon were we
Where my eyes were useless,
And I knew not the ways of my feet.
I clung to the hand of my friend:
But at last he cried, "I am lost."

Stephen Crane

21. Dear, Though the Night

Dear, though the night is gone
Its dream still haunts today,
That brought us to a room,
Cavernous, lofty as
A railway terminus,
And crowded in that room
Were beds, and we in one
In a far corner lay.

Our whisper woke no clocks,
We kissed and I was glad
At everything you did,
Indifferent to those
Who sat with hostile eyes
In pairs on every bed,
Arms round each other's necks,
Inert and vaguely sad.

O but what worm of guilt
Or what malignant doubt
Am I the victim of,
That you then, unabashed,
Did what I never wished,
Confessed another love;
And I, submissive, felt
Unwanted and went out.

W. H. Auden

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22. Requiescat

Tread lightly, she is near
under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.

All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.

Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew.

Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast,
I vex my heart alone
She is at rest.

Peace, Peace, she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet,
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

23. Is My Team Ploughing?

"Is my team ploughing
That I used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
When I was man alive?"

Ay, the horses trample,
The harness jingle now;
No change though you lie under
The land you used to plough.

"Is my girl happy,
That I found hard to leave,
And has she tired of weeping
As she lies down at eve?"

Ay, she lies down lightly,
She lies down not to weep:
Your girl is well contented.
Be still my lad and sleep.

"Is my friend hearty,
Now I am thine and pine,
And has he found to sleep in
A better bed than mine?"

Yes, lad, I lie easy,
I lie as lads would choose;
I cheer a dead man's sweetheart,
Never ask me whose.

Alfred Edward Housman (1859-1936)

"Is my team ploughing..." from A SHROPSHIRE LAD by A. E. Housman.
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24. As I Walked Out One Evening

As I walked out one evening
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
"Love has no ending.

"I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet.
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street.

"The years shall run like rabbits
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages
And the first love of the world."

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
"O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.

"In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away
And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or today.

"O plunge your hands in water
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare at the basin
And wonder what you've missed.

"The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the teacup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

"O stand, stand in the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart."

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming
And the deep river ran on.

W. H. Auden

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25. The Sick Wife

The sick wife stayed in the car
while he bought a few groceries.
Not yet fifty,
she had learned what it's like
not to be able to button a button.

It was the middle of the day—
and so only mothers with small children
or retired couples
stepped through the muddy parking lot.

Dry cleaning swung and gleamed on hangers
in the cars of the prosperous.
How easily they moved—
with such freedom,
even the old and relatively infirm.

The windows began to steam up.
The cars on either side of her
pulled away so briskly
that it made her sick at heart.

Jane Kenyon (1947-1995)

"The Sick Wife" is included in *Otherwise: New & Selected Poems*.
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26. Now Is the Dreadful Midnight

Now is the dreadful midnight you
have to do what you want to do

not by your will which is afraid
but by my hand upon you laid.

My hand withheld almost too long
moves by lust, its grip is strong

and callous, it has turned to fire
the arpeggios of a lyre

and we love carelessly
who gravely love Saint Harmony.

Resist not, nor can you resist, the cries
that in your bowels rise

while I to song shall modify
and neither of us will ever die.

Paul Goodman

From *Collected Poems* (Random House, 1972)
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27. Hymn for Evening

All praise to thee, my God, this night
For the blessings of the light;
Keep me, O keep me, King of kings,
Beneath thine own almighty wings.

Forgive me, Lord, for thy dear Son,
The ill that I have done;
That with the world, myself, and thee,
I, ere I sleep, at peace must be.

May my soul on thee repose
And with sleep mine eyelids close;
Sleep shall me more vigorous make
To serve my God when I awake.
Amen. Amen. Amen.

Thomas Ken

Part Three: Ends

28. He Thinks Upon His Death

from "*L'Autre Sommeil*"

[Pour la première fois, je pensais à ma mort comme à une chose réelle et certaine. L'air tiède agité par la brise, le soleil, l'ombre des feuilles sur mes mains, il me semblait que tout ne parlait que de cela, mais que jusqu' à cette minute je ne l'avais pas compris. Un jour viendrait où mon cœur battrait une fois encore, puis s'arrêterait de souffrir. Pour d'autres que moi: le vent passerait murmurant dans les arbres, pour d'autres jeunes hommes au cœur lourd, mais j'écoutais aujourd'hui sans terreur ni regret cette voix inquiète de m'instruire et qui me prédisait dans la lumière d'un jour d'été la fin de toute vie.]

For the first time I thought of my own death as a sure and real thing. The warm air moved by the breeze, the shadow of leaves on my hands, it seemed to me that all things spoke only of that, but until this moment I had not understood. A day would come when my heart would beat one last time, then would cease its suffering. For others the wind would pass murmuring through the trees, for other young men with heavy hearts; but today I listened with neither terror nor regret for this troubled voice to instruct me, and which foresaw in the light of a summer day the end of all life.

Julien Green (b. 1900)

"L'Autre Sommeil" by Julien Green.
English translation by Ned Rorem.
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29. On an Echoing Road

from "*L'Etoile Vesper*"

[Sur une route sonore s'accorde, puis se désaccorde pour s'accorder encore, le trot de deux chevaux attelés en paire, guidés par la même main. Plume et aiguille, habitude de travail et sage envie d'y mettre fin lient amitié, se séparent, se réconcilient... Mes lents corsaires, tâchez à aller de compagnie: je vois d'ici le bout de la route.]

On an echoing road, trotting in unison, now out of step, now as one again, are two horses saddled together, guided by a single hand. The needle and the pen, the habit of work and the sly urge to quit the habit, make friends with each other, then separate, then reconcile again... O my slow steeds, pull now together: from here I can see the end of the road.

Colette (1873-1954)

English translation by Ned Rorem
"L'Etoile Vesper" by S. G. C. Colette
1946 Editions du Milieu du Monde.

30. A Terrible Disaster

A terrible disaster befell me
long ago, no newsy story,
I was in love, my love was not requited,
I missed the easy boat of happiness

since when many a thing is possible
to those who have been fortunate in love
has been impossible to me who lack
conviction the world is ordered for the best.

A disastrous and terrible simple fate
I share in common with many other folk
and maybe we had all been better off
if we had died then when our hearts were broken.

Paul Goodman

"A Terrible Disaster Befell Me" by Paul Goodman.
From *Collected Poems* (Random House, 1972)
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31. Come In

As I came to the edge of the woods,
Thrush music—hark!
Now it was dusk outside,
Inside it was dark.

Too dark in the woods for a bird
By sleight of wing
To better its perch for the night,
Though it could still sing.

The last of the light of the sun
That had died in the west
Still lived for one song more
In a thrush's breast.

Far in the pillared dark
Thrush music went—
Almost like a call to come in
To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for the stars:
I would not come in.
I meant not even if asked,
And I hadn't been.

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

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32. The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water

I heard the old, old men say,
"Everything alters,
And one by one we drop away."
They had hands like claws, and their knees
Were twisted like the old thorn-trees
By the waters.
I heard the old, old men say,
"All that's beautiful drifts away,
Like the waters."

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

Words: the words from *THE OLD MEN ADMIRING THEMSELVES IN THE WATER* by
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33. End of the Day [La Fin de la Journée]

[Sous une lumière blafarde
Court, danse et se tord sans raison
La Vie, impudente et criarde.
Aussi, sitôt qu'à l'horizon
La nuit voluptueuse monte,
Apaisant tout, même la honte,
Le Poète se dit: "Enfin!

Mon esprit, comme mes vertèbres,
Invoque ardemment le repos;
Le coeur plein de songes funèbres,
Je vais me coucher sur le dos
Et me rouler dans vos rideaux,
O rafraîchissantes ténèbres!]

In fading light
Life dances, twists, and crazily rushes,
impudent and shrill, while
Night rises,
appeasing all, even hunger,
hiding all, even shame,
The Poet whispers to himself:
Finally!

while body and soul
long desperately for rest,
my heart seethes with deathly dreams.
Let me lie on my back
and enshroud myself in your curtains,
O nourishing darkness!

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)

English translation by Ned Rorem

34. Faith

from "Atlantis"

"I've been having these
awful dreams, each a little different,
though the core's the same—

we're walking in a field,
Wally and Arden and I, a stretch of grass
with a highway running beside it,

or a path in the woods that opens
onto a road. Everything's fine,
then the dog sprints ahead of us,

excited; we're calling but
he's racing down a scent and doesn't hear us,
and that's when he goes

onto the highway. I don't want to describe it.
Sometimes it's brutal and over,
and others he's struck and takes off

so we don't know where he is
or how bad. This wakes me
every night now, and I stay awake;

I'm afraid if I sleep I'll go back
into the dream. It's been six months
almost exactly, since the doctor wrote

not even a real word
but an acronym, a vacant
four-letter cypher

that draws meaning into itself,
reconstitutes the world.
We tried to say it was just

a word; we tried to admit
it had power and thus to nullify it
by means of our own acknowledgement.

I know the current wisdom:
bright hope, the power of wishing you're well.
He's just so tired, though nothing

shows at any tests. Nothing,
the doctor says, detectable;
the doctor doesn't hear what I do,

that trickling, steadily rising nothing
that makes him sleep all day,
vanish into fever's tranced afternoons,

and I swear sometimes
when I put my head to his chest
I can hear the virus humming

like a refrigerator.
Which is what makes me think
you can take your positive attitude

and go straight to hell.
We don't have a future,
we have a dog. Who is he?

Soul without a speech,
sheer, tireless faith,
he is that-which-goes-forward,

black muzzle, black paws
scouting what's ahead;
he is where we'll be hit first

he's the part of us
that's going to get it.
I'm hardly awake on our morning walk

—always just me and Arden now—
and sometimes I am still
in the thrall of the dream,

which is why, when he took a step onto Commercial
before I'd looked both ways,
I screamed his name and grabbed his collar.

And there I was on my knees,
both arms around his neck
and nothing coming,

and when I looked into that bewildered face
I realized I didn't know what it was I was shouting at,
I didn't know who I was trying to protect."

Mark Doty (b. 1953)

"Faith" from *Atlantis* (HarperCollins, 1995) copyright © 1995 by Mark Doty;
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35. Even Now

...even now the night jasmine is pouring
its white delirium in the dark and I
will not have it if you can't I shut all
windows still it seeps in with the gaudy
oaths of spring Oh help be somewhere near
so I can endure this drunk intrusion
of promise where is the walled place where we
can walk untouched or must I be content
with a wedding I almost didn't witness
the evidence all but lost no oath no ring
but the truth sealed to hold against the fate of [one]
...who fears his women

and men too full of laughter far brother
if you should pass beneath our cypresses
you who are praying man your god can
go to hell but since you are so inclined
pray that my friend and I be still together
just like this at the Mount of Olives blessed
by the last of an ancient race who loved
youth and laughter and beautiful things so much
they couldn't stop singing and we were the song.

Paul Monette (1945-1995)

"Elegy" by Paul Monette from Love Alone: "Brother of the Mount of Olives".
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36. Evidence of Things not Seen

...Faith lights us, even through the grave, being the Evidence of Things not Seen. And this is the Comfort of the Good, that the Grave cannot hold them, and that they live as soon as they die. For Death is no more than the Turning of us over from Time to Eternity. Death then, being the Way and Condition of Life, we cannot love to live, if we cannot bear to die...

William Penn