

of concrete, twelve feet high by three
and applying the “Creative Word.”
feet wide, is slowly falling apart, expos-
ing its skeleton of rusted steel rebar.

Resumé

Cet article, fondé sur le vécu de l’auteur,
strength,

relate comment son intérêt pour la poésie
soon as the

a évolué au point que son amour de cet art
bind it

a fini par transformer sa vie. Parallèlement
unfasten in a pro-

à ces révélations personnelles de l’auteur,
hundreds of years.

l’article évalue comment le rapport à la
is not old by

poésie et à la foi, en particulier le rapport
should be hold-

entre la poésie et la parole révélée, peut
segment of the

avoir un effet retentissant sur la lutte de
constructed

l’individu pour sa transformation person-
quickly and cheaply. During the wall’s

nelle alors qu’il est aux prises avec des cir-
active duty, 136 people were killed

constances troublantes en période de crise
et de tourmente. De plus, l’auteur examine

East to West
comment l’exposition à cet art créatif peut

was retired
aider une personne à comprendre et à ap-
was painted

pliquer dans sa vie la « Parole créatrice ».
painting, a pair of

cartoon eyes overlooks a huge Rolling

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Stones red tongue covered with white
letters that proclaim, “Change Your
Life.” The artist “Indiano,” who graf-
fited much of the Berlin Wall, likely
chose these words from a sonnet by
Rilke that ends with the admonition,
“Du musst dein leben ändern,” or “You
must change your life” (“Archaic Torso

Despite its appearance and

concrete is in motion. As

molecules in the cement that

harden, they start to

cess that can take

Poured in 1961, this slab

concrete standards and

ing up better, but it is a

Berlin Wall, which was

trying to cross over from

Germany. Before the slab

to this beautiful park it

with graffiti. In one

of Apollo” 14).

Like concrete, poetry is also in transition—a poem is created over many revisions that can take, for me at least, decades before it is complete.

Unlike concrete, a poem is bound by image and sound, metaphor and voice.

A poem, as Archibald MacLeish famously wrote in “Ars Poetica,” “should not mean / But be” (23-24). My own “Ars Poetica” reflects on the relationship between the other concrete—the one relating to the senses—and the abstract.

ARS POETICA

The thin wires that brace the rods in place
are not that tough as I twist them
around bars of ribbed steel. And they quiver
when I slurp over them tons of redi-mix.

In Cardiff, I burned a winter chopping holes
through concrete. My jackhammer heated
then sliced the steel, knocked loose gray chunks,
snapped the slender wires like the bones of a finger.

As centuries tick, the stiff sides of buildings
conceal molecules of cement unbinding
into sand, aggregate, and water.

All the making becomes unmaking
that implodes silently, spewing light and heat
as it breaks back through the abstract.

(Many Mountains Moving 93)

Poetry and Transformation

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While the abstract is the subject I say. I’d rather they argue. I need
to

of poetry, it is also its enemy. The ab- provoke them.

stract has no flesh, no blood, no thing. “Who wants to dance?” I ask.

It is soul and spirit, incomprehensible They look confused. I point to

Lisa,

without form. The poet’s job is to give a special education teacher in
Camden.

the abstract a body, which can only be She hesitates, terrified, then
stands

done using physical language. Poems and comes to the front of the room.

are little machines made out of words. She wonders if she should have taken

If the words are not the right words, oil painting instead.

the machine will not work. A successful poem will offer a different experience each time an attentive reader engages with it. And without the attentive reader, a poem, no matter how well crafted, will be meaningless. As William Carlos Williams portrays in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," "If you drink and drive," I continue, It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there. (161-65) people in the United States died in TWO drunk driving crashes? You don't want to be one of them, do you? No, I am standing in front of a group of teachers who want to write poetry. They have given up two weeks of their summer vacation to attend the Artist Teacher Institute at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, is my per-cosponsored by Arts Horizons and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. They will write poems while others in the institute are painting, dancing, and making books, collages, and digital photographs. These teachers are enthusiastic, earnest, smart, and exhausted. They write down everything

I arrange Lisa so that she is
 ing two feet in front of me. I say,
 am a writer and you are my reader.
 you ready?"
 She nods her head. She's game.
 her in the eye, squeeze her hands,
 say, "Don't drink and drive."
 "What?" she says.
 "you are going to crash your car and
 kill yourself and someone else. Do
 understand?"
 Lisa nods her head again.
 "Did you know that in 2010,
 10,228
 people in the United States died in
 TWO drunk driving crashes? You don't
 want to be one of them, do you? No,
 I am standing in front of a group of
 of course not. Do not drink and
 OK?"
 Lisa giggles nervously. The other
 teachers are laughing, relieved I
 pick them.
 "Very good," I say. "Lisa
 fact reader. She gets that my story
 factual and without ambiguity. I
 want to confuse her with metaphor. I
 want her to clearly understand what
 am writing, to consider it, and to
 have accordingly."
 I lift Lisa's hand and point
 we are joined.

“Your job as a writer is to connect the words I have written.
with your reader. But this is nonfic- “Let’s complicate the
story.” Plac-
tion. How does the relationship be- ing my palms against Lisa’s palms,
I
tween writer and reader change when say, “Let’s make believe that
Charles
writing imaginatively?” has just left a party, say, in
Philadel-
I turn back to Lisa. “OK, let’s dance phia. He gets in his Subaru, turns
on
again,” I say, and I place my palms the ignition, and is driving home
on
against her palms. “I am going to tell the Atlantic City Expressway when
he
you a story. It’s a true story. I made realizes he is drunk. As the
writer, I
it up a long time ago. Do you believe have to describe what is going on in
me?” Charles’ mind so that Lisa, the
reader,
Lisa, confused, smiles nervously as can understand it. If I’m successful,
I move our palms around and around she will feel and think what I
intend
in a circle as the other teachers giggle her to feel and think. Lisa, again,
is my
like fourth graders. perfect reader. She has to work
harder,
“How shall I begin?” I say aloud. but notice how she is keeping up
with
“It is a dark and stormy night, and my me.”
character—let’s call him Charles—is I let go of Lisa’s hands
and she
driving home from work when his car looks relieved and heads for her
seat.
breaks down. A kind stranger stops But before she gets there, I say,
“Not
and offers Charles a ride. Grateful, he so fast. I want you to read my
poem.”
gets in the car, buckles up. Charles is “Oh, no,” she complains,
“can’t you
not in the car very long when he re- pick on someone else?” But she
turns
alizes that the driver is drunk. My job back toward me and raises her hands.
I
as the writer is to show you, the read- raise my hands above my head and
say,
er, what Charles, an invention of my “Read my poem.”

imagination, is seeing, thinking, and I
 feeling.” pull them farther away.
 I lead Lisa in a little dance. Our “Hold still!” she demands, as
 if I hands are palm to palm, and as I slowly were one of her unruly students. The
 ly move mine around in a circle, hers other teachers laugh.
 move with me. “What’s wrong?” I ask the
 class.
 “Again, Lisa is my perfect reader, “Why can’t she ‘get’ my
 poem?”
 but this time, she has to work harder “She’s trying,” a teachers
 says, “but
 than when I was writing factually. I’m it’s out of reach.”
 not telling her what to think or what “That’s right,” I say.
 “Lisa is trying,
 to do. I am using description, narra- but my poem is too private, too per-
 tive, and dialogue to explore the com- sonal. It’s impossible to
 understand it.
 plex emotions that my reader can only This is a not a good poem.”
 understand and appreciate through I lower my hands to face level
 and
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 start moving them slowly in a circle. lateral, rather than literal,
 thinking. It
 Lisa raises her hands to grab them, requires being comfortable with
 ambi-
 but mine slowly move away. Her hands guilty, what Keats called
 ‘Negative Ca-
 mirror the movement of my hands. pability,’ which he defined as
 ‘being in
 Occasionally they touch, but they are uncertainties, mysteries, doubts,
 with-
 always in proximity. My hands move. out any irritable reaching after
 fact
 Hers move with mine. Our hands keep and reason’ (Keats 43). Teachers
 are
 moving. often afraid of poetry because
 there is
 “How’s this?” I ask. no answer key, and when they do
 teach
 “She’s trying,” one teacher says. it, they frequently present a
 poem as a
 “She’s almost there.” puzzle that is to be solved
 rather than
 Another says, “Even though she’s language to be experienced.”

not touching, I think she's getting it." The teachers nod their heads. They

"You're right," I agree. "This is a have been there. But they are here

good poem, and Lisa is a good reader. While she may not understand so

or appreciate everything the poem is that their students will not tune them

offering, she is getting a lot out of it out when they do.

because she is trying hard. Metaphor "I am going to recite a poem. It's

doesn't reveal itself easily. If my poem deep—very deep," I say dramatically.

is about sorrow, perhaps this reader is I raise my hands, making an exagger-

feeling one of its cousins, sadness or ated gesture, look into their eyes, and

grief. If my poem is exploring spiri- say, "I am lonely." They stare at me.

tuality, perhaps the reader feels some- Nothing. I wipe my eyes as if tearful

thing like devotion or reverence. E. and fake hurt feelings. "Oh, you stu-

E. Cummings titled one of his early pid people, you. I poured out my soul.

books, Is 5, which is the answer to the I expressed myself. I told you how I

common mathematical question, '2+2 felt, and you just looked at me. I will

equals?' If you're a physicist and are recite my poem again, and this time,

trying to land a rocket on Jupiter, 2 I hope you will be sensitive enough to

plus 2 better equal 4 or you're going to understand it." miss Jupiter by a billion miles. Howev-

er, if you're writing a poem that is try- I raise my hands in an even exaggerated gesture and repeat, "I am

ing to explore the universe of human lonely." I am making a fool of myself.

thought, emotion, and spirit, 2+2=5 The teachers are enjoying this, espe-

cially Lisa.

will get you close enough." "So, what's wrong with my

Lisa returns to her seat as her col- poem?"

leagues applaud. I ask.

“This is why people, even educated people, don’t read poetry. It requires you feel,

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Lamar, who teaches in Atlantic City, says, “You just said how tree . . . car. Then you hear that heart-Hallmark Card.” breaking second line and you see the “Exactly. And like most greeting tree without leaves in your backyard cards, it is clichéd and sentimental. My or in the forest, perhaps the only tree poem offers nothing original, but the without leaves, or maybe they are all without leaves, and then the greater problem is that it is abstract.” strip mall, “Abstract?” Lamar asks. “I thought car . . . car . . . tree without leaves . . . poems are supposed to be abstract.” car. The point is that you can see it, and because your senses are aroused, you can also feel it. The poem stractions: beauty, death, failure, faith, has be- friendship, God, honor, loss, love, truth, etc.; but in order to render come part of you. are writ- “Poems that only express these abstractions you must use con- ten on one level. They are too accessi- ble and shallow. They are not crete words that appeal to the senses, written with much attention to craft. SSSTT.”

Poets who merely express themselves “SSSTT?” Lamar repeats. wind up boring whatever audience they who merely express themselves may have and, eventually, they bore themselves. In his “Preface to learned through our five senses. This Lyri- cal Ballads,” Wordsworth wrote Lyri- is the animal part of us. Once we have cal Ballads,” Wordsworth wrote that “Poetry is the spontaneous taken in the experience of the world, overflow of powerful feelings . . . we use our mind and our spirit to dis- recollected in

cover and reveal thoughts and emotions. We create the world after the part of world allows us to know it, and we can that's where only know it through the senses." I wait a moment. They are thinking Lamar this over. "Let me revise my poem," I say. "I am a tree / without leaves." That's The teachers make the kind of Po- sound I hear when a poem connects with an audience. newborn baby "It's still a bad poem, but it's a great Shakespeare revision. It doesn't tell you what to think or feel. It presents you with an (2.7.147). image that allows you to make meaning out of it. Picture the tree, perhaps in your backyard, perhaps in a forest, perhaps in a strip mall, car . . . car . . .

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and as you revise, your poem grows smarter and stronger. It begins to walk and gets in trouble. When it tries to stick its fingers into the wall socket, you have to discipline your poem and private

tranquility' (Lyrical Ballads
lection or reflection is usually
the revision process, and
craft comes in."
"I know what revision is,"
says, "but what do you mean by
"Revision doesn't mean
or to fix a piece of writing.
editing. Revision means to re-see.
ems have a life cycle, just like
Your first draft is like a
leaking at both ends, or as
wrote in *As You Like It*,
puking, in the nurse's arms'
You don't say it's a bad
it can't walk or talk, and you
'correct' it. What do you
it up and you love it. This is
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secret forces you to write close
bone, creating a sense of
will connect with your reader.
lie—by which I mean, use your
ination—cloaks anything too

say, 'No.' As you continue revising, the poem grows into adolescence, becomes rebellious and says 'no' to you. Maybe there's no surprise you've written fifteen drafts, maybe no surprise you've written fifty. Robert Hayden wrote almost one hundred drafts of "Those Winter Sundays." If you work Otherwise why hard and are patient and lucky, your poem might become an adult and go out into the world and be published. Then it will take care of you when you are old, can't walk, can't talk, and are leaking at both ends." It is lunchtime. Time to break. "OK, let me give you an assignment. I want you to write a lousy first draft. Can you do that?" They laugh. "We can do that, Murph," Lamar says. "Write a poem that questions something you believe in. Include in it an office supply and the title of a song. De- Also tell a secret and tell a lie, and never tell anyone which is which." "What?" they shout in unison. "Forget the office supply and song for a moment," Lisa complains. "You World

with something fanciful. This leads to discovery and surprise. to paraphrase Frost, if surprise in the writer, there's in the reader. You want your er to discover something new when they read your poem. should they bother? "Does anyone else have a "So, Murph," Lamar asks, up his notebook, "how did you a poet?"

THREE

My father, Eddie Murphy, was ably the only longshoreman in New York City who aspired to perform at Carnegie Hall. Although he ed high school for just a few before his father pulled him out to work on the docks—it was the pression—he loved classical and saved enough to buy a used piano, which he stuffed into his a small apartment overlooking 18th Street and 10th Avenue. After

want me to tell a secret?" War II broke out, he enlisted
in the army and was stationed in
"Yes. Any other questions?" Newport,
"But a secret?" Lisa interrupts. Wales, unloading ships that
fueled the D-Day invasion. When one of
She's not going to let me get away his
with this. "That's something you don't longshoreman buddies
discovered that a nearby pub, the Windsor Castle
tell anyone. Why would you ask us to Ho-
do that?" tel, had classical music, Eddie
stopped
"I've also asked you to tell a lie. The in. He was disappointed that the
music

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was recorded, not live, but when the me because I didn't know how to
make my bed. One night at dinner, she
beautiful young woman behind the beat
bar asked what he wanted to drink, he me again to make me eat sweet pota-
didn't want classical music anymore. toes that were nauseating me. When
He wanted her. I vomited them up on my plate, she
Thelma Elias Samuel lived in a made me eat that too. After relatives
in
tiny room in a tower at the top of the Queens took us in and sent us to a
pub-
pub managed by her older sister and lic school, I thought they had
changed my religion from Catholic to Public.
brother-in-law. Eddie asked Thelma
I
to go to the cinema with him, but she didn't know what sins the Publics
be-
refused. He persisted for months until lieved in and was afraid of
accidentally
she finally gave in, and they became committing a Public sin and winding
engaged in May 1944, a few weeks up in Public Hell. A few years later
before D-Day. Eddie stormed Normandy at another Catholic school, a
popular
and survived, but he was wounded in priest invited me to his rectory
office
Belgium a few months later and sent on Saturday mornings. After locking
home. After the war, he returned to the door, he wrestled with me. At
first,
Wales to marry Thelma. They moved he let me win, but then he

“wrestled”

to New York, where my older brother
it

was born in 1948, and Eddie made the
anyone,

transition from working on the wa-
felt dirty

terfront to operating cranes and other
heavy equipment in the city’s booming
could re-

construction industry. Thelma wasn’t
happy. I

happy being so far from her family, so
trying

they moved back to Newport, where
poetry, and

I was born in 1950. She wasn’t happy
parties

living so close to her family, so we re-
friends.

turned to New York. Then we returned
fa-

to Newport. Then back to New York. I
crossed the Atlantic three times in my
first three years. Thelma, unhappy in
tapped

Wales, unhappy in the United States,
finally took her life when I was seven.

Because my father couldn’t take
her

care of us, my brother and I got
and

moved around, attending four differ-
fifty

ent elementary schools. At a boarding
school on Staten Island, a nun made
then.

me take off my clothes before beating
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other things, she never questioned me
about the statuette’s money. I think

“It can’t
she believed that the saints accepted

edi-
her gifts to buy whatever extras they

dark-

dirty, and I felt dirty, but he said

wasn’t dirty and not to tell

so I didn’t tell anyone. But I

anyway and knew I was going to Hell.

At fifteen, I decided that I

main a Catholic or I could be

decided to be happy, and stopped

to believe. I started writing

I started drinking. I drank at

and started hanging out with

Then I started drinking alone. My

ther had remarried, and my religious

stepmother put coins under the stat-

uettes in her bedroom, which I

each month for drinking money. While

the lesser saints might only have a

nickel or a dime, St. Christopher,

favorite, was good for a quarter,

the Virgin Mary usually gave up

cents. Not much, but a quart of beer

cost only thirty-five cents back

While she usually caught me doing

15

record. I was proud of myself. Then

I started drinking again, and

get any worse!” got worse. I was

tor of the yearbook and kept the

might need in Heaven. room refrigerator stocked with beer
 Two years later, I decided I could be purchased with money from selling
 happy or I could be a poet, so I chose yearbook subscriptions, which I
 failed
 to be a poet. I hadn't read much poetry to repay because I was fired from
 my
 and didn't know of any poets except after-school job for showing up
 drunk.
 for Dylan Thomas, famous for being After high school I flunked out of
 three
 Welsh, for being drunk, and for dying colleges in three semesters. The
 only
 young. My man! I believed that living decent grade I earned was in a
 theol-
 life gritty would make me a better ogy class, where I wrote a paper on
 poet. If I experienced all aspects of poetry and religion. I used
 examples
 the world, I could better express my from Ginsburg, Ferlinghetti, and
 oth-
 feelings about it. When I came across er "Beats" to argue that
 religion was
 Allen Ginsburg's "Howl"—so honest- choking society while
 poetry opened a
 ly degenerate, so morally depraved, so conduit of human thought, emotion,
 human—I could feel a heart beating in and spirit that not only
 liberated the
 every line. poet but would also unite people in
 an
 My father, a drinker himself, re- enlightened community.
 ferred to New Year's Eve as "Amateur I stopped using capital
 letters in my
 Night," and as a senior in high school, writing because I thought they
 were
 I was an amateur on New Year's Eve unjust. Why should one word be
 cap-
 1968. I didn't remember much, but italized and not another? The
 names
 what I did remember, shooting heroin, of days and months are capitalized,
 terrified me. Here's the conclusion of but the names of the seasons
 aren't.
 a poem I wrote. Shouldn't they be equal? I also
 didn't
 use punctuation. Instead, I left a small
 There's more here, living, than space where a comma should be and a
 to meet at the bar. longer space for a period. Surprisingly,
 If I can go straight for a little my professor, a Franciscan Priest,
 ig-

while, nored that.
Who knows? My brother was serving in Viet-
Better things may come and I nam. I wanted to support him, but as
May find them. the war went on I couldn't see that
it
It can't get any worse! had any purpose. I marched in
demon-
(unpublished manuscript) strations, but when fights broke out on
a picket line at the Washington Monu-
I didn't drink for three weeks, a ment, I realized that protesting
wasn't

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the answer. Trouble is, I didn't know received a note from Howard
Moss,
what was. who encouraged me to write more
and
After college number three let me to try him again. I didn't realize
how
go, I decided to be near what I loved, rare it was to get a personal
note from
which was drinking, and got a job the poetry editor of the New
Yorker.
tending bar at a night club in Queens. I I tried a few more times, and
How-
took writing workshops at the YMCA ard Moss continued to write
person-
on 92nd Street with two well-known al notes, but my poems were
getting
poets and usually showed up sober, worse, not better, and eventually
I
but not sober enough to learn any- gave up. God bless you, Howard
Moss.
thing. I read poetry, but not enough to You tried.
understand anything. I worked on my At nineteen I got engaged to a
poems, but not enough to make them young woman who was in worse
shape
any better. Despite this lack of effort, than I was. She came into the
club
I considered myself a poet. When I where I worked a few days after
she
read at an open mic at a bar in Man- was released from rehab, where
she'd
hattan, a drunk yelled, "Take it all off !" kicked her heroin habit, and
both our
Obviously, he knew I was an imposter. lives spiraled downhill from
there. I

I wrote a series of “bar” poems. This tried to break it off, but I
 kept going
 one, perhaps, was the most successful. back. Break off. Go back. Break
 off.
 Go back. This lasted almost two years
 FLORIDA (FOR RATSO) before I realized I would have to go
 far away to get away. Although I was
 A man fainted tonight. born in Wales, I didn’t know anything
 I asked him to get up—nothing. about it. I had no other ideas, so I
 got a
 I loosened his collar and placed passport, quit my job, and on Septem-
 ammonia under his nose. ber 11, 1971, a week before my twen-
 His shoes came off and then some. ty-first birthday, I took off. I stayed
 in
 His wallet told me nothing. the British Isles for almost a year. It
 I kicked him— was the smartest thing I’d ever
 done
 He ignored me. in my stupid life.
 I lay down next to him As I was hitchhiking in West Wales,
 demanding that he listen to reason. a driver dropped me off in a village
 I put my head on his chest. whose name I could not pronounce
 and told me the locals recited poetry
 I lay there, still there at night. The pub was noisy. A
 waiting. dozen men were arguing in Welsh.
 (unpublished manuscript) They stopped as I walked to the bar.
 Welsh nationalists had been trying to
 I sent it to the New Yorker and preserve their native language from
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 becoming extinct and their culture A few months later, December
 from becoming diluted by England, 1971, I was hitchhiking through
 Lon-
 their powerful neighbor to the east. donderry so unaware of my surround-
 While a few protests were violent— ings that I didn’t realize
 Northern
 most notably an attempted bombing to Ireland was at war. This was a
 month
 disrupt the investiture of the Prince or so before “Bloody Sunday,”
 when
 of Wales in 1969—most were peace- soldiers shot twenty-six people
 during
 ful. A popular strategy was painting a peaceful demonstration, killing
 four-
 over English street signs so non- teen of them. I wanted to head down
 Welsh drivers would get lost. to Limerick to see what I could
 find
 “May I have a pint, please?” out about the “limericks.” I

got a ride
The man behind the bar didn't from two men in a three-wheeled milk
move. There was something Dodge truck; they agreed to take me to
the
City about this place, and it was as if I Irish border near Donegal. From
there
had walked in wearing a black hat. it was a straight run down the
coast.
"Where are you from, lad?" The men were angry, but because
their
I turned around. One of the men brogues were so thick, I wasn't sure
stood there. why, until finally I understood:
that
"New York," I answered. morning in the Bogside, the
Catholic
"You're American?" neighborhood where they lived,
sol-
"Yes." diers had shot two of their
friends.
"You're not English?" All over the city were
barriers
If I knew better, I would have said, manned by British soldiers armed
"Screw the English." Instead, I said, with automatic weapons. Each
time
"No, American." we came to one—and they were
fre-
"What are you doing in Wales?" quent—the driver cursed at the
sol-
"Hitchhiking around. I heard you diers who studied us as we drove
might have a poetry reading tonight." slowly around a maze and over
speed
"So you like poetry?" bumps. When we reached the last of
"Yes." these barricades, kids began
throwing
He hesitated, looked around, made rocks at the soldiers who were lifting
a decision, and said, "OK. We need to their weapons. The driver sped
up—to
finish our business, and then we'll give distract them? To take the fire?
I didn't
you some poetry. Shouldn't be long." know—and he ran the maze at
thirty
He went back to the other men, and miles an hour instead of the posted
they resumed arguing. I turned around five. When I heard gunfire I
hunkered
and there was a pint of beer on the bar. down, trying to make myself as
small
I didn't know what they were arguing a target as possible. While I

didn't

about, but I had a feeling it was about believe in God, I am sure I must have

more than spray-painting street signs. prayed. The driver stopped his truck

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a few miles down the road, pointed to a rocket ship or that the halo around

the west, and said, "Run!" the babe in the manger was a space

I ran. helmet. I told him what happened in

Safely over the border in the Republic of Ireland, I dropped my backpack and allowed myself to feel both fear and anger. I thought it unfair to be other as outsiders. Neither of us was

shot at in a war that had nothing to do with me, a war I didn't even know happy with our lives, our families, our

made societies. We wanted lives that

was going on. And how stupid! Both sides were killing each other over a God that didn't exist. While I didn't sense, lives that connected and had meaning. We probably listened to too much John Lennon, who was at the top

know much about it, I could appreciate of the charts,

the war two years earlier between the Muslims and the Jews because they believed in different Gods. Catholics and Protestants believed in the same one.

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
...

They are on the same team. Obviously, I was unaware of the Reformation and the long history of hatred between

Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world.
("Imagine")

them. Then I had an idea. "Why are we killing each other because of our religions, our nationalities, our races? Why can't we see that we're all human beings?" I'm brilliant! I thought. I had

As Mathew left to sketch in front of the church, I went in pursuit of the limerick, which took me to an

old two-story building. On one floor was a

an original idea. I knew it was original because I'd never heard it before. Then had

I found a pub and drowned my original idea and my brilliance. never heard of limericks. "Can you

re-cite one for me?" she asked. The only

I checked in at the youth hostel in Limerick, where I met a young Dubliner named Mathew Kennedy. He was a sidewalk artist who set up outside St. Augustine's Church and sketched various kinds of scenes with chalk. He despised what he called the "old fakers" who flocked into the church to make deals with God. Unless you looked closely at his sketches, you wouldn't notice that the tree in the background was

ones I could think of were too dirty, so I said no and left. I wandered down to the River Shannon and sat on the bank looking at the water. The river was beautiful, in a gray, ashy way. The sky was gray too, and the air reeked of smoke from coal fires used to heat the houses. I liked the smell. I was a city kid. Growing up in New York, my only experience with anything close to a countryside was

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the occasional expedition into Central Park, where, once, while playing softball (drunk, of course), I fell into a manhole. However, since traveling in the United Kingdom and Ireland, I was beginning to like nature. The imagery fascinated me: "I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds"

Blackbird." The first person to take me seriously as a poet was Hubert Babinski, a professor at college number two, who encouraged me not just to write but to read poetry. He introduced me to the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. I read Hopkins' poems over and over. I didn't like that they were religious, but his poems were wild,

strange—"The Emperor of Ice Cream," "The Man on the eccdote of the Jar," "Ten O'Clock," and my favorite, "teen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." I think I liked Williams' of all. They didn't have the of Hopkins' language or the of Stevens' imagery, but I felt derstood them in a more organic In his poem, "The watching starlings land on wires on a windy day, Williams

and when I read “Pied Beauty,” “The
 “that’s what got
 Windhover,” and “God’s Grandeur”
 wind’s teeth”
 aloud, my mouth was happy. (7-8). “[T]hat’s what got
 me—” he
 wrote like I talked. I didn’t know poet-
 And for all this, nature is never ry could do that!
 spent; Hubert told me that these
 artists’
 There lives the dearest poems were driven by sound and im-
 freshness deep down things; age compared to Ferlinghetti and
 And though the last lights of the Ginsburg, who used narrative to move
 black West went their poems. I hadn’t thought about
 Oh, morning, at the brown “moving” a poem before. I just wrote
 brink eastward, springs— what was floating around in my
 head.
 Because the Holy Ghost over the I read these poems repeatedly,
 try-
 bent ing to make sense of them in those
 World broods with warm rare periods when I wasn’t drunk.
 breast and with ah! bright Hubert helped me see where my own
 wings. (“God’s Grandeur” 9–14) poems were original and
 interesting,
 and where they were not. I realized
 I loved that “ah!” stopping the flow that the poems I wrote while high
 of the poem to emphasize the last were not as good as I’d hoped.
 This
 two words, “Bright wings.” I wished I troubled me. How could I
 “expand my
 could buy a pair. I didn’t understand consciousness” if the poems I
 wrote
 Stevens, but I loved the authority of while stoned weren’t as good as
 the
 his voice, and his titles were brilliantly ones I wrote when straight? One of
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 my efforts, written under the influence, was Wordsworth. He looked old. I
 made a gerund out of every word. picked up a book and read that he
 had
 died in 1850. Wordsworth is one of
 Driving toing Buffaloeing those dead poets I despised without
 alonging theing Neweing Yorking ever having read. That stupid shep-
 Thruwaying . . . herd tricked me, I thought, so who’s
 (unpublished manuscript) the stupid one?
 I bought the cheapest book there, A
 When I told Hubert I was going Choice of Wordsworth’s Verse, for

sixty

to Wales, he suggested that I stop at pence, and hiked back to Ambleside.
the Lake District if I found myself in I read all the poems in the book,
and

Northern England. I planned to stay everything did a flip-flop because I
there one night on my way up to Loch loved Wordsworth. I was shocked. He
Ness to look for the monster. After wrote mostly about nature, but
that's

checking into the hostel at Ambleside, not really what he was writing
about.

I met a shepherd who asked me what He was writing about emotions that I
I did. I said, "I am a poet," which is a recognized: joy, excitement,
fear, won-
ridiculous thing to say, especially to a der, despair.

stranger. Some of the poems, such as "Mi-

"A poet, are you?" he said. "What chael," "Nutting," and

"She was a

do you think of our poet, William Phantom of Delight," were about
peo-

Wordsworth?" ple very different than me, but I

felt

"Never heard of him." like I knew them. I was moved most

by

"Never heard of him? Well then," a poem about Tintern Abbey in
Wales.

the shepherd said, "you should go pay Wordsworth was trying to relive
the

him a visit." excitement of his first visit

there five

"Where does he live?" years earlier:

"Walk along this path. His house is I came among these hills; when
just a bit down the road in Grasmere." like a roe

I decided to visit this William I bounded o'er the mountains, by
Wordsworth. Maybe he would offer the sides
me a cup of tea and a biscuit. I walked

"a bit down the road," which turned Of the deep rivers, and the
lonely

out to be three miles, when I saw a streams,
sign saying "Wordsworth Cottage." Wherever nature led: more like
Wow, I thought, intimidated, he's got a man

a sign. Inside, a woman welcomed Flying from something that he
me. Was this Mrs. Wordsworth? The dreads, than one

walls were full of books for sale and Who sought the thing he loved. . .
pictures of somebody whom I figured ("Tintern Abbey" 68-73)

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Traveling alone through Wales and sacredness of the ordinary. Williams

the Lake District, I realized how much I liked nature; no, it was more than not nature—it was the whole universe of what I had been seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling but did not have the language to understand. Wordsworth was giving me that language, and I loved him for it. When I read “Intimations of Immortality,” I recognized the phrase, “The child is father of the man,”¹ and realized that Al Kooper from Blood, Sweat, and Tears was quoting Wordsworth when he used it as the title of the band’s first album. Al Kooper and Wordsworth—amazing. I connected to a nature poet dead 120 years and wondered how this could happen. I walked back to Grasmere the next morning and put down three pounds, fifty pence—half my weekly budget—Wordsworth, on *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, and read them and reread them. I was excited as Wordsworth ranted against the “vicious poetic diction” of the past, and a few while pledging to bring his own language near to the language of men: “an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life” (*Lyrical Ballads* 42). I didn’t realize how radical this was at the time, but it’s this kind of boldness that attracted me to poetry

wrote, “No ideas but in things” (erson” 15). He probably would have gotten there if Wordsworth hadn’t come up with “whereby nary things should be presented to mind in an unusual aspect” to *Lyrical Ballads*). Forget the Loch Ness monster, I thought, as my one day in the Lake District turned into a three-week excursion. I walked, as walked, from Ambleside to Grasmere to Cockermouth to Coniston to Hawkshead to Kendal to Rydall Mount and back to Ambleside, all the while ing and rereading his poems. I though my brain was getting bigger, the opposite of blacking out after drinking, which I was trying to do and less. Back in Grasmere, I wrote a nine-page elegy to the longest poem I had ever “Eight Yew Trees” was set in cemetery where he planted them and where he, his wife, his sister, of his children were buried. My concludes, . . . Your place is simple, A monument of stone Chipped from local rock by a local craftsman Who knew your disdain for

in the first place. Reading the preface reminded me of the poems I read by William Carlos Williams, which were also written the way people speak poems.

Both poets seemed to celebrate the
1 A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse, p. 91.

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This was strange. I wasn't writing about myself. I was writing about someone else's suffering and how, maybe despite the decomposition of the body, it Ireland or might be possible through language to live on after death—what Wordsworth come to was obsessed with: immortality. Limerick was not a beautiful city, but the river, the sky, the buildings, the coal smoke—I was overcome. A great and brutal weight had been lifted from said. "They'll just me. Like Wordsworth encountering a supernatural presence on Mount Mathew Snowdon, I felt something breath-taking and magical at the bank of it." the River Shannon, something much "they'll offer us a greater than anything human I had come across. I didn't know the word "awesome," but that's what it was. I "It's astonishing," I took out my notebook and wrote, what you mean. There's something profound Here, Holy Spirit. There, Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit.

public sepulchers
And what could not compare
To yew tree memorials
as lasting as your

(unpublished manuscript)

but they were so nice. They said they had a new religion and that there were fifty of them in the world. Or they said there were fifty in Limerick? I don't know, but they gave me this card and invited me to a meeting tomorrow." We studied the card, which had a handwritten quotation neither of us could understand. "It's a religion," I start another war." After thinking about it, said, "Yes, Peter, but there's Maybe we can talk them out of "Maybe," I said, cup of tea." Then I showed Mathew my poem about the Holy Spirit. ing," he said. "I know exactly Something was profound about

Sea gulls, Holy Spirit. young	Limerick. Five years earlier, a
Gray sky, Holy Spirit.	woman from Belfast, Lesley Gibson
Coal smoke, Holy Spirit.	(Taherzadeh), had moved in, becom-
Rocks, cars, dogs. there. She	ing the first Bahá'í to live
Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit. (unpublished manuscript)	worked as a speech therapist at a hospi- tal for children with special needs. She
Like Hopkins, I had written a poem Catholic	lian Phillips from Wales. The
about the Holy Ghost, a religious and	Church was the law of the land,
poem. What kind of atheist was I? I to stir	Lesley and Gillian didn't want
wanted to see if Mathew could make Bahá'í	up trouble, so they lived quiet
sense of it. Before I could show him my poem, he said, "Peter, I met these introduced	lives. They prayed together, made friends, and gradually
people, and something amazing hap- Bahá'í Faith.	their new friends to the
pened. I wasn't very polite to them Wrout, moved	Another Bahá'í, Stanley
when they said they liked my drawing, Poetry and Transformation	to Limerick from England in 1970, 23
but he drowned just three months af- ter settling in. His death galvanized not	then I noticed three older women and thought, no, they can't be high,
Gillian and Lesley, who met every Tuesday evening in a "fireside," and a guy	with the old ladies around. I sat on the floor and asked
prayed that others might attend. As about?"	next to me, "What's this
more Bahá'ís from the United States country," he said,	"The Earth is one
and the British Isles moved to Lim- erick, they formed a Local Spiritual	"and mankind its citizens." "What?" I said, startled.
"That's my Assembly in April 1971. One Tuesday Where	idea. I thought of it last week.
night Lesley's fireside was inundated by a group of longhaired young peo- ple over a hundred	did you get it from?" "Bahá'u'lláh wrote it
ple who were part of a band, "Jeremi-	years ago."

ah Henry.” that was popular in Ireland “Who?” I didn’t understand what he said. With his brogue, it at the time. They all became Bahá’ís sounded to me like “Bahooligan.” I asked that night. When Mathew met Lesley him to repeat the name several times but he called his guy still didn’t get it, so I there would be hundreds. the “Big B.” As more locals became Bahá’ís, He said that Bahá’u’lláh was the fulfillment of each of the world’s there was a backlash from the clergy, religions, not just Christianity, but re- who preached against it from their ligions, not just Christianity, but Ju- pulpits. This actually helped spread daism, Islam, Hindu, and Buddhism awareness of the Faith. When one as well. “Bahá’ís believe in bringing the world together and eliminating a young woman told her grandmother she had become a Bahá’í, she responded, “Oh yes, I heard about them. They thought. This can’t be a religion, I seem nice.” Another young woman It makes too much sense. When I ar- became a Bahá’í when her friends did. gued that religion causes more wars than it prevents, he told me that After her parish priest confronted her ‘Ab- du’l-Bahá, the son of and demanded that she give it up, she Bahá’u’lláh, said that if two people are arguing about a Bahá’í, and was the first pioneer to religion, they’re both wrong. the city of Wexford. Limerick was on “If this faith becomes the source of disunity it should be fire, a Bahá’í fire, and while we didn’t disbanded.” realize it, Mathew and I were about to “You’re kidding.” be touched by its flames. “No.” When we arrived at the house the “But you believe in God, right? next day, we found a mob of young That can’t be good.” people there. They all seemed so hap- “The Bahá’í concept,” he explained, “is that God is an unknowable py, I thought they were on drugs. But essence.

No matter what we say about Him, widow of a famous Bahá'í the group
 Her, or It, it's just our imagination. referred to as a "Hand of the Cause."²
 We can only know what the Manifestations tell us." "What happened to the rest of him?" I asked.
 "Manifestations?" The women laughed. Not bad, I
 "Yes, messengers like Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. They're like the lamps, and God's message is the light. when someone makes fun of them, maybe they won't start a war.
 Then
 It's renewed every time a new Manifestation comes. The spiritual teachings are the same, but the social teachings change according to the needs of society." she called the meeting to order, up a prayer book, and began to read.
 and all "Is there any Remover of ties save God? Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His servants, abide by His bidding!" (Bahá'í Prayers 28).
 When he mentioned the oneness of religion, I remembered getting in trouble when I was eight years old for attending a Cub Scouts meeting held Bahá'í God going "difficulty." Was this in the basement of a Lutheran church. to "remove" me? Would I be sucked up by a giant vacuum cleaner in the sky? Would I just disappear?
 When he mentioned the oneness of mankind, I remembered the pastor of Praying was stupid, a waste of time. When I was a kid I knelt against my bed each night reading psalms aloud. I moved into the neighborhood. When prayed for things. I prayed to be happy, and it didn't work. But when I listened to the Bahá'í prayers, I was surprised by the Faith is true, I believed it was true. At least I wanted it to be true. But when he said that Bahá'ís don't do drugs or drink alcohol, I knew I couldn't be a beauty of the words, and then someone recited this one:

Bahá'í. While I hadn't done drugs for
 strengthen
 a while, I drank alcohol, and I didn't
 make
 want to be a hypocrite. And while the
 Bahá'í God made more sense than the
 are
 god I didn't believe in, I wasn't ready
 Bahá'í
 to abandon my life of nonbelief.
 chosen
 One of the American women, Hort-
 successors to both
 ense Bredehorst, welcomed Mathew
 its
 and me to her home and introduced
 Body," The
 her two housemates, Mary Lou Mar-
 be es-
 tin and Doris Holley. Doris was the
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 dead; quicken us. O Lord! We are
 humiliation itself; glorify us in
 more
 Thy Kingdom. If Thou dost as-
 an-
 sist us, O Lord, we shall become
 hostel
 as scintillating stars. If Thou dost
 finally
 not assist us, we shall become
 lower than the earth. O Lord!
 Strengthen us. O God! Confer
 victory upon us. O God! Enable us
 important, so
 to conquer self and overcome de-
 safe
 sire. O Lord! Deliver us from the
 bondage of the material world.
 O Lord! Quicken us through the
 Bahá'í
 breath of the Holy Spirit in order
 that we may arise to serve Thee,
 engage in worshipping Thee and
 Faith
 exert ourselves in Thy Kingdom

O Lord! We are weak;
 us. O God! We are ignorant;
 us knowing. O Lord! We are poor;
 make us wealthy. O God! We
 2 There is no clergy in the
 Faith. Hands of the Cause were
 by Bahá'u'lláh and His
 promulgate and protect the Faith in
 early days until its "Supreme
 Universal House of Justice, could
 tablished which occurred in 1963.
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 week. Mathew and I returned to the
 Bahá'í house every day, asking
 questions, trying to understand the
 swers. We spent all night at the
 talking about it. When the book
 arrived, I didn't understand many of
 the English words, and I was confused
 by the Persian ones. However, I knew
 that the Bahá'í book was
 I wrapped it in plastic and kept it
 in my backpack. After saying goodbye
 to Mathew, I left Limerick for Cork,
 where I had been invited to a
 fireside.
 At the youth hostel in Cork I met a
 guy who told me that this Bahá'í
 couldn't be any good if they

believed
with the utmost sincerity. O Lord, he
Thou art powerful. O God, Thou art forgiving. O Lord, Thou art compassionate. (Promulgation 457)
I was weak. I was ignorant. I was poor. And much of the time, especially when drinking, I was at the
itself.” How did this Bahá’í God know as a
that? He wrote this prayer for me, especially the sentence, “O God! Enable us to conquer self and overcome
special
desire.”
I needed a drink.
Instead, I asked if they had books I could read. They said they would get you
one from Dublin. I was only planning to be in Limerick a few days, but I decided to wait for it. Despite the fact that the Bahá’ís believed in God, and had been
prayed, and didn’t drink, I wanted it in Iran
to be true. In fact, I made believe that I didn’t
I was a Bahá’í and didn’t drink that meant,

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but I felt something powerful, as if I had shaken the hand of the hand that looking
had shaken the hand of Jesus.3 site, I
I left that night convinced that whatever problems Christians might a la-
have about Islam, they weren’t prob-
in Muslims. “They’re murderers,”
said. “Stay away from them.” He told
me about the Crusades and about the evil things they did, and I was confused. If the Bahá’í God said that Muslims were OK, then how could they be murderers?
I was the only non-Bahá’í
fireside. They referred to me
“seeker.” I had never thought of myself that way, but when I heard word, it kind of made sense. A
guest, who had come down from Dún Laoghaire to speak, asked me if I had any questions. I told him what the guy in the hostel said and asked, “Do you know anything about Muslims?”
His name was Adib Taherzadeh and he knew quite a lot about Islam. In fact, he said that his family Muslims but had become Bahá’í when Bahá’u’lláh was alive. I entirely understand what that

Morgan from Caerphilly. I had been drinking the first time I went for a job, and at a construction site, I walked across freshly poured concrete. The next day, sober, I was hired as a laborer on a construction site at

Cardiff

lems for me. The Bahá'í Faith made University. I was to be paid
forty-two

sense. Too bad Bahá'ís believed in and a half pence—about a
dollar—an

God. Too bad Bahá'ís prayed. Too bad hour. However, because I
didn't have

Bahá'ís didn't drink. I liked Bahá'í and Garry Morgan's tax
records, fifty per-

probably believed it, but I knew I could cent emergency taxes were to be
with-

never live a Bahá'í life for more than a held until I produced them.
few days. My boss, Nobby, asked each

payday,

“Do you have those tax records yet?”

FOUR “Not yet,” I answered, sometimes
forgetting my faux Welsh accent.

After spending the Christmas holidays “You sound American,” he said
one

with my recently discovered family in time.

Wales, I wound up living in a commune “Uh . . . I lived in Canada for
a

of sorts in a working-class neighbor- while,” I bluffed. He knew I was
lying,

hood in Cardiff. The terraced house but he didn't press me. Sometimes
I

had four bedrooms on two floors, one forgot my assumed name and when
bathroom, and between fifteen and Nobby called “Garry, Garry, GAR-
twenty people and two dogs crashing RY!” I forgot to answer. When they
there at any given time. Among us hired another laborer named Peter, I
were two runaways, a fifteen-year-old really messed up. Nobby called
“Hey,

girl who'd fled the Troubles in Belfast, Peter,” and we both answered.
Again,

and a sixteen-year-old Moroccan girl he let it slide.

hiding from her family in Cardiff to My job was to haul stuff from one
avoid forced marriage to an uncle. The place to another and clean what

Nobby

others were a mix of Welsh and En- told me to clean, until one day when
glish, collecting seven pounds a week Nobby pointed me to a jackhammer

on the dole, which they used to get and my life became hell. I drilled
holes

stoned. through the concrete floor so they

I needed a job, so I bought a work- could install the pipes and wires that
ing card that said my name was Garry made the building hum. After working

3 Adib Taherzadeh went on to become ten-hour shifts six days a week, all I
a member of the Universal House of Jus- could do at night was sit in a chair

and

tice on which he served from 1988 to his shake, my beer spilling down my chin.

death in 2000.

I was drinking more and more and

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getting more and more depressed.
anything on

questions and didn't force

I was too broke to quit my job and
made

me except tea and biscuits. They

too broken to keep working. Hubert
really

me feel a better person than I

Babinski had written that he would be
difference.

was, and that I could make a

in Prague in the spring, and I wanted
to meet him there, but when I contact-
ed the Czech embassy, they told me I
visit,

It was March, and Viv was fasting
during daylight hours, something I
didn't understand. On my second

would have to prove I had money, ho-
back

I stayed too late to catch the bus

tel reservations, and transportation in
sleep

to Cardiff, so they invited me to

order to get a visa. I had none.
months

over. This was the first time in

Meanwhile, conditions at the house,
welcomed

I'd had a bed to myself, so I

which were never great, were dete-
riorating. We slept in shifts, three or
sunrise

it. I also wanted to see if Viv was
really going to get up before

four in a bed at a time, and were all
infected by lice. We went to the clin-
ic where we were given a humiliating
kitchen.

to eat breakfast.

lecture on personal hygiene complete
early

Soon Rita joined us and we ate an

with leaflets and individual bottles of
shampoo laced with DDT. There was
now, all

breakfast together.

little money for food and few coins to
feed the meter that sparked the "elec-
reluctantly.

"Let's say some prayers,

tric fire" in the living room that heated
Viv began.

right?"

the rest of the house. Two women,
girls really, had miscarriages in a two-
feeling

"Uh . . . OK," I said

week period. One night, an irate father

"Blessed is the spot,"

Then Rita read the "Remover of
Difficulties," and I had that

again, that I would be removed. I

forced his way in the front door and didn't read a prayer when asked.
 I
 dragged his naked daughter out by the hair. Turns out, he was high up in the didn't want to be a hypocrite.
 "we're having a "Peter," Viv said,
 Cardiff Constabulary, and after that, a meeting next Sunday with a speaker
 police car remained parked in front of from London. Why don't you join
 us?"
 the house. "I'm not sure," I said,
 not wanting
 I wondered if there were Bahá'ís to commit, not wanting to get too
 in South Wales. Looking through the close to the Bahá'ís, afraid
 they were
 phone directory, I was surprised to rubbing off on me. However, Viv and
 find a Bahá'í couple in Newport, the Rita were so kind to me, I
 didn't want
 city where I was born. Viv and Rita to disappoint them, so before I
 left, I
 Bartlett welcomed me as if I were a said I'd be there.
 younger brother. Viv was a teacher, and Back in Cardiff, I was
 miserable.
 Rita, pregnant with their first child, Exhausted from the jackhammer, I
 quit
 was a puppeteer. They answered my my job and spent the week getting
 as

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drunk as possible. The police in front This time I am alone.
 of the house taunted us, saying they This time I am alone.
 were going to close the place down and This time it is a river.
 put us all in jail. Because my visa had This time an inlet.
 expired months earlier, I knew I would Waters rush through me.
 be deported. Although I had a return A disorganized river.
 ticket to New York, I didn't want to This proof.
 go home. In addition to the fiancé I
 didn't want to marry, I was estranged This time I wake in the Chevy.
 from my father and stepmother, and I My salmon face rises in the
 had left behind a heap of debt I didn't mirror.
 This time an ocean.
 know how to pay off. I couldn't stay
 The days crash over me.
 in Cardiff, and I couldn't go back to
 My name is Not Yet.
 New York, so I drank and got drunk.
 My name is Almost.
 Drank and got drunk. I finally decided
 My name is About to.

to jump off a building. Then I thought
(Stubborn Child 19)

I should get my ear pierced instead.

Then I thought maybe I should become a Bahá'í. Suicide, ear pierced, become a
I did not want to move. I did not want to get up. I did not want to go

Bahá'í: each made as much sense as the
to the Bahá'í meeting, but I had given

next. I was twenty-one years old, and my life was over. I drank harder.
Viv and Rita my word. I managed to stand, then stumbled into the house

When I woke up on Sunday morning I thought I was drowning.
and collapsed on the couch, which, surprisingly, had no one else crashing

Actually, it was raining, and I was lying in the gutter outside the house.
on it. When I felt I could walk without falling, I climbed the steps, put on dry

I was, once again, "humiliation itself."
clothes, went back out in the rain and

Decades later I would write this poem:
walked to the stop to catch the bus to

Newport and was soaked again.

BAPTISM

The meeting was on the second floor of a building in the middle of the city,

This time I wake under a bridge. My ochre face rises in the rear view mirror like a jaundiced sun.
not far from the Windsor Castle Hotel where my parents had met and where I had lived as a baby, not far from St.

This time my trousers are damp. This time my trousers are dry.
Mary's Catholic Church where they were married and I was baptized. I

This time I wake in a gutter. Rain flows around me.
didn't know how long the meeting would go on, but I figured I could

take off around eleven, when the pubs

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opened. The speaker from London was to rescue peo-

Phillip Hinton. He was going on, but and sound
The Bahá'ís are trying ple, and there you are safe

I couldn't follow what he was saying. mountain. If
watching us from up the

He had a funny accent, not quite British, but close enough. I learned later
you believe in

Bahá'u'lláh, then you need to help us change the world. You

that he was from South Africa. When Bahá'í."
need to become a

he finished, I had fulfilled my obligation to Viv and Rita and was about to leave when they asked me to stay needed a drink, for a cup of tea. I had the shakes and But this needed to get a real drink, but before I I be- could say no thanks, Hinton came over I should become and asked, "What do you think of the thought of the Bahá'í Faith?" about was what I "It makes sense," I said. cabinet and "Do you believe Bahá'u'lláh is God's it. But I had cut latest Manifestation?" and I didn't "No . . . I'm not sure . . . I think so . . . Limerick. Maybe maybe . . . I don't know . . . probably . . ." shaking got worse Rita handed me a cup of tea. and my tea spilled. This was a differ- "If you believe that Bahá'u'lláh that seemed to is a Manifestation of God, you are a whole body Bahá'í. You have to join us. We need couldn't live a you." Bahá'í life, but I would have to try. "I can't do that," I said, panicking. "OK," I said. "I can't live the kind of life Bahá'ís are Phillip asked, making sure. "OK?" supposed to live, and I don't want to be "What do I do?" a hypocrite." Viv handed me a card and a pen. "You're more of a hypocrite," he "Just sign this, Peter. That's all there said, "if you believe in Bahá'u'lláh and is to it." don't join us, than if you try to live a It read, "In signing this card, I

Bahá'í life and are not able to live up to it.”

also recog-

“What?” I said, not believing he just Forerunner, and

called me a hypocrite. I knew I was a Center of His Cove-

screw-up, but I considered myself a sincere screw-up.

understanding

“Listen,” he said. “Make believe has established sacred

that a river is overflowing its banks institutions which

and is about to wipe out the village.

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“OK,” I said again, and signed. life? How

However, I was shaking so badly my signature was illegible. Viv looked it

over, then asked me to sign a second going

card. I tried not to shake so much, but with

I couldn't help it, and my signature question

was just as bad. He handed me a third card.

“I understand if you don't want me,” I said. “But I'm not going to do

hoping

it again.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “We'll make they'd read

do.”

to

Like that day four months earlier that

sitting by the River Shannon, I felt as if a great weight had been lifted from

about

me. Then I was surrounded by people heard

who were congratulating me. I felt

declare my belief in

Promised One of God. I

nize the Báb, His

‘Abdu'l-Bahá, the

nant. I request enrollment

Community with the

that Bahá'u'lláh

principles, laws and

I must obey.”

out. How do I live a Bahá'í

do I not drink? How do I not screw up? What do I do now? I had no idea.

A group of young Bahá'ís were

out to lunch and invited me to go

them. I asked question after

about my new faith, partly because

I knew so little, but mostly because

I knew that as long as I stayed with

them I wouldn't drink. I was

they would hang out with me until

the pubs closed and, as if

my mind, they did. On the bus back

Cardiff I felt better. I didn't drink

day. I didn't know what I would do

the next day, but I would worry

that in the morning. I had never

of Alcoholics Anonymous, but I was

like a celebrity. People started buying books from a table where they were set out and gave them to me. One was with a prayer book, which I didn't think I needed. The next morning I woke up laughing. I'd dreamed that an old man with a white beard and white robes told me I was going to be all right. Looking through my new Bahá'í books, I saw a picture of the old man. His name was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh. How did He get in my dream? Bahá'u'lláh said that I had to obey the law of the land. This meant that to say each day. There's a long one, a short one, and a medium sized one, sort of like Goldilocks." I had to leave the United Kingdom because my visa had expired. I had no- where else to go, so I was forced to go home and make up with my family. A few years later, reading Frost, I came across, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in" ("The Death of the Hired Man," 122–23). I wrote a letter to my father, telling him that I had become a Bahá'í, that I was coming home, that

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I would try to do better, that I hoped we could get along. Then I wrote to Mathew Kennedy telling him that I had become a Bahá'í and that I was not sure coming over to Ireland, and that if he didn't become a Bahá'í, I would beat

FIVE
Making up is hard to do. My father was happy to see me, but I'm about my stepmother. I had to earn her trust, so I got a

haircut, shaved my
him up. beard, and looked for a job. I
wanted
“No more fighting over religion, to stay as far away from drinking
as
Peter,” Mathew wrote back. “I became possible, so I couldn’t tend
bar. I had
a Bahá’í too. But come now and you’ll no other skills, so I drove
a cab and
be here when we elect our first Nation- memorized Bahá’í prayers while
stuck
al Spiritual Assembly.”⁴ in Midtown traffic. I started
with the
A Bahá’í couple from Bristol, just “Remover of Difficulties”
because it
over the English border, invited me to was short, and I wanted to
overcome
their wedding the following weekend. my fear that I would be
“removed.” I
I left Thursday and returned to the worked my way up to the “Tablet
of
house in Cardiff on Monday. Yellow Ahmad,” a tablet to one who’d
spent
crime tape covered the door. A neigh- his life searching for his
“Beloved.” I
bor appeared. “What happened?” I realized that I too had been
searching,
asked but unlike Ahmad, who searched for
“The police arrested all you drug spiritual meaning, I was searching
in
addicts on Friday. They’ll be coming the world of things. I realized
that
back for you as soon as I phone them,” the search for truth didn’t
end when
she threatened. I became a Bahá’í. I had a lot
to learn,
If I hadn’t have become a Bahá’í, but I wasn’t the best reader
and didn’t
I would not have gone to Bristol and understand most of what I read. I
would have been arrested too. I left in went to the Bahá’í Center
whenever
a hurry and didn’t return to Cardiff there was something going on and
for three decades. met other Bahá’ís and came up
with a
plan. I drove my new Bahá’í friends to
meetings around the city, asked them
questions and paid attention to their

4 After serving as a member of the Auxiliary Board, which helps to protect me a and propagate the Bahá'í Faith at the heavy-equipment grassroots level, Matthew Kennedy is, hoists on at the time of this writing, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly which oversees the administrative affairs of the Bahá'ís of Ireland. Bahá'ís believed service to others was

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important, and work done in the spir- it of service was like prayer. I didn't think hoisting bricks was very prayer-ful or that I was serving anybody. I was just paying my bills. I realized that I would have to go to college to do something more meaningful, but that hadn't worked the first three times, and I wasn't sure it would go any bet-ter now. But I thought, if I'm smart enough to recognize God's messenger, maybe I'm smart enough to make it for more than a semester. I showed up at Queens College to register as a non-matriculated student, taking courses at night. I didn't need a transcript or test results. I could en-roll in courses that had empty seats. "What do you want to study?" a counselor asked. One of the Bahá'ís told me that

answers. Six months later, my father got me a job apprenticing as a heavy-equipment operator. Mostly, I ran brick hoists on small buildings in the outer boroughs, but occasionally I operated a cherry picker in Manhattan. I learned that Bahá'ís believed service to others was

During my lunch break operating a crane near 34th Street, I browsed bookstore in Penn Station and picked up *Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* by Kenneth Koch. This is what I want to do, kids to read and write poetry. I was going to be an English major. I took a placement test, which I failed badly I was assigned to a remedial class where I was one of three English speakers. I complained to the head of the English department that this was a mistake. After all, I was a poet. "No," he said, looking at my writing sample. "You belong there." He handed me my paper, which had no capitalization or punctuation. When I tried to explain why I didn't use it, he just shook his head. I

spent a
 agriculture is important, so I said year in remedial English and learned
 “agriculture.” to read and write.
 “Agriculture?” the counselor asked. I read Bahá’í books that
 expanded
 “We’re in New York City. Do you see my thinking far more that drugs
 ever
 any farms around here?” did. I continued writing poems,
 which
 “Farms?” I didn’t know agriculture seemed more substantial than the
 ones
 was about farms. “Uh . . .” I answered. I’d written before. I wanted
 to ex-
 “What do you have that’s close?” press—no, I wanted to reveal
 and un-
 He looked at the counselor next to derstand the changes in my life. I was
 him. She shrugged her shoulders and clinging to sobriety, though I
 didn’t
 said, “Geology?” know that word yet. I was
 clinging to
 I wasn’t sure what geology was ei- this new religion, trying not to
 screw
 ther, but I was embarrassed for being so up. I wasn’t sure that I was
 making
 stupid and wanted to get out of there, progress. Then I remembered climb-
 so I said “geology,” and they helped ing the Old Man of Coniston in
 the
 me fill out the paperwork. I liked ge- Lake District. When I looked at the
 ology, but I knew I couldn’t major in top of the mountain, I saw how far
 it because I wasn’t smart enough to I had to go and didn’t think I
 would
 take hard science and advanced math. make it, but when I looked down, I
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saw how high I had climbed and didn’t life, the eternal questioning.
 The
 want to fall. I wrote a poem, trying to point is that the question is all.
 It
 understand this transformation. encompasses awe, wonder, hope,
 faith and doubt, confusion, de-
 FRUITION spair . . . (Commonweal 331)

A tree entered my mind Turns out they didn’t hit me up
 preparing for sleep for seven dollars. The writer, Hannerl
 growing deep Ebenhoech-Liebmann, went on to
 in the night compare my poem to Goethe and El-
 and grew iot. I was flabbergasted. Could one of
 neither blossoms nor fruit my friends have written the letter as a

joke? But I doubted any of my friends
 a yawn branches in waking had ever heard of Goethe and Eliot.
 roaring with leaves The letter ends with these remarks:
 while there's all this
 waiting . . . Peter Murphy's
 "Fruition" is
 what time do the flowers start poetry proper. Why? It is one of
 (Commonweal 209) those poems of which Robert Nye
 says that they so uncomfortably
 I sent it to Commonweal, which and unforgettably give him the
 not only published it but mailed me a sense "that they read me, rather
 check for seven dollars. A few weeks than I them, and that they crit-
 later Commonweal sent me a tear sheet icize me, rather than I make the
 announcing the publication of their judgment." (Commonweal 351)
 fiftieth-year anthology, which cost, of
 course, seven dollars. "Poetry proper," really? I
 must be a
 Ha. They wanted their money back. real poet.

I wrote out the check, and as I was
 about to seal the envelope, I noticed SIX
 my name on the back of the tear sheet:
 It is March 26, 2012. I am standing in
 To the Editors: Peter Murphy's front of the terraced house in Cardiff,
 "Fruition" is a poem I learned by Wales, where forty years earlier I
 woke
 heart. Its impact dawned on me, up in the gutter. The urge to drink has
 slowly and gradually, just as the certainly decreased but hasn't gone
 "tree . . . growing deep in the away. In 1987, after being sober for
 night." Its meaning burst open fifteen years, I started having
 drinking
 "in waking roaring with leaves" dreams that terrified me so much
 they
 as it approaches the mystery of drove me to AA. I began to talk about
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drinking, which—too embarrassed,
 especially around Bahá'ís—I'd never
 done. I started to write about it as well.

THE DESIRE

Last night I dreamt I was drinking again
 and got drunk, and walked out on the quiet life
 I've been living these last few years.
 I watched as I let my family go—
 The wife who understood and would not forgive,
 The child who clung to my loose clothing, crying
 Don't go, Daddy don't go, take Mommy and me

with you.

I remember saying that too, grabbing the coat
of my own father as he swung his arms around
to touch me. And I trailed him
as he followed his father until I let go.

I fell back into sleep, into dreams—
There were rivers I had to cross and recross,
and fires starting in every forest I came to,
and cars screeching around corners,
about to go off a cliff,
about to crash in a desert
where I am thirsty all the time.
(Stubborn Child 55)

But this is not an occasion for poet- ry; it is an occasion for prayer. Look- ing down at the gutter, I recite “Bless- dead, ed is the Spot.” I recite the “Remover the of Difficulties.” I recite a prayer for (Bahá’í Prayers gratitude:	turned back from Thee, Thou didst graciously aid me to turn towards Thee. I was as one Thou didst quicken me with water of life . . . 19)
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. . . What tongue can voice my “scintillating thanks to Thee? I was heedless, “humiliation Thou didst awaken me. I had Poetry and Transformation	While I will never be a star,” I am no longer itself,” and I am grateful. 35
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Flight of the Paper Cranes

TAMI HAALAND

It started as a sad day. Sometimes you get
more than you want. I settled in. We all
settled and expected nothing but haze.

Then the colored box arrived. A little
square of patterned sheets and cardboard.
I lifted the lid and admired the perfect corners.

Inside, stacks of color, rows of blue umbrellas,
tiny flowers, repetitive wide lines.
Golden shine or primary pigment.

My friend Jane took the first sheet. We watched her

fold and fold again until she had a red paper crane.
She put it in the center of the floor, then started another.

I lifted a sheet from the stack, blue like
Mediterranean doorways or deep sky. Every fold
she made, I copied. For her, this crane

sang purple. We set them on the floor.
The others joined in and watched our folds.
The cranes multiplied and colors quadrupled.

Some kind of resonance emerged. Not jittery
but joyful. That's all it was. The word vibrant
described what happened in our cells

and in the ascending pile of cranes. We didn't stop.
It became our work. We gave cranes to our friends,
to people who only saw gray, to our families.

We planned ways we could get them further out.
We mailed a box of bright cranes to the mayor,
and news people came with their cameras.

They asked why we did this. We said
we're solving it. Watch, we said, you'll see.

— Poetry and Transformation (Used by permission of the curator)