

FIELD



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RICHARD WILBUR

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

RICHARD WILBUR: A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

For over sixty years, ever since the publication of his first collection in 1947, Richard Wilbur has enriched the American poetry scene with his consistent and brilliant presence. Most of his remarkable generation, poets like Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, Berryman, Rukeyser, Brooks, and Roethke, have departed the literary scene and left us to muse about their accomplishments. Wilbur, who will turn 90 next year, continues among us as a hugely gifted working poet and notable translator. Word has it that he is even still doing a little teaching, at Amherst College.

The essays in this symposium, which range from the early work through the middle poems, on to late poems and a representative translation, give some hint of the breadth and depth of Wilbur's career. That first book startled us with poems about insects (cicadas, water walkers) and vegetables (the potato, the eggplant), subjects unusual to poetry at the time; it also had stunning war poems that probed the poet's experience of World War Two, though never in easy or predictable ways.

Richard Wilbur's ear and eye strike us as remarkable, and his command of forms, established early, is dazzling without ever feeling pretentious. Louise Bogan, reviewing the first collection, remarked on its freshness and a certain tenderness that she felt American poetry could use more of. Tenderness in this case does not mean weakness or uncertainty; it means that freshness of regard and openness of observation that can find the blossom of the potato "awkward and milky and beautiful only to hunger" or fashion the thoughtful epitaph for Sir Nihil, that crude and macho hero: "And what to say of him, God knows. / Such violence. And such repose." These notes of affection and wonder, struck early, become a consistent aspect of Wilbur's wit and ingenuity; his is a kinder persona, all in all, than most of the poets named above. And while he can convey, as Stephen Tapscott's essay demonstrates, both the ferocity and the pain of a Dante touring the Inferno, he can also write children's verses and riddles without embarrassment or apology.

Wilbur's range and distinctive sensibility, over a long and distinguished career, are what we most wish to celebrate and emphasize here. The *Collected Poems* (2004) lists 24 titles of poetry, drama, prose pieces, and children's books. As a 25th, it is most surely a book to own, cherish, and visit frequently.

THE BEAUTIFUL CHANGES

One wading a Fall meadow finds on all sides
The Queen Anne's Lace, lying like lilies
On water; it glides
So from the walker, it turns
Dry grass to a lake, as the slightest shade of you
Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes.

The beautiful changes as a forest is changed
By a chameleon's tuning his skin to it;
As a mantis, arranged
On a green leaf, grows
Into it, makes the leaf leafier, and proves
Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows.

Your hands hold roses always in a way that says
They are not only yours; the beautiful changes
In such kind ways,
Wishing ever to sunder
Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose
For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

LOSING BACK TO WONDER

1.

Driven as it is by metaphor, and by a sometimes oddly metaphorical regard for our language, it is almost too inviting to go hunting for figurative meaning in this poem, to figure it out, so to speak, and then declare with academic certainty that we have solved the puzzle of the poem; but to what useful or valuable purpose? Ultimately, the real power of the poem comes from the fact of its literalness, and that it clearly means what it says, a sometimes baffling quality for the post-modern reader to appreciate. Wilbur has always seemed to have understood — this is a poem written when he was 25 or 26, after all — better than most American poets the inherent metaphorical nature of our language, and he relies on this linguistic characteristic and even illuminates it through his clever reversal of the role words typically play, most essentially in this poem the word “beautiful,” which functions as the primary noun in the poem, and the driving force behind the powerful and delicately layered movement towards the inevitability of the final revelation about what beauty is and what beauty does.

The initial example in stanza one of the way beauty changes the world, illustrative of how keenly Wilbur has joined form and utterance, can be seen in his shift from the distanced “one” of line four, to the less formal and clearly more personal “you” — real or imagined, it doesn’t matter — of the penultimate line of the stanza. The “you” suddenly becomes the collateral subject of the poem, and perhaps the one in whom the speaker can see most clearly the ways in which the beautiful changes in a manner that allows it to absorb and conversely share the beauty of other bodies — the chameleon and the mantis for example — and by doing so become a greater beauty.

If the poem ended with the second stanza, and with the (however tempered) resolution that “Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows,” it would still be an arguably great poem, and certainly a poem much easier to get inside of in order to see what makes it move the way it does, and to what end. But the

third stanza is the true metaphysical heart of the poem, where it leaps away from the usual figures of speech that inhabit our narrative and surrenders itself to the ultimate beauty of living fully among contradictions, to lose ourselves to what Keats called *negative capability*, and to send ourselves back to what Wilbur here calls *wonder*, in his mind the truest expression of what beauty is. The third stanza also serves as the final crystallization of the aesthetic that Wilbur has crafted into this poem — intentionally or not — so that it becomes an *ars poetica*. It's a remarkably complicated and beautiful six lines of writing, and that it occurs in Wilbur's first book, written mostly in his early twenties, is more than sound evidence of his inevitable poetic genius. It's worth repeating fully here:

Your hands hold roses always in a way that says
They are not only yours; the beautiful changes
In such kind ways,
Wishing ever to sunder
Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose
For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

Critical to our ultimate understanding of what Wilbur discovered writing this magnificent poem is the paradoxical "sunder" of the third line from the end. It's the "beautiful" that wishes to do this sundering of "things and things' selves," but it's all done in order to achieve a "second finding," which of course means a deeper insight that allows deliverance to that realm Wilbur names "wonder" in this poem, but that might also be called bliss. This is the sunder that means to part or to divide in order to see more deeply into things and therefore be "touched into wonder."

2.

In an *Atlantic Monthly Online* interview, Wilbur discusses his notion of how form should direct the flow of energy into a poem. "I think of the form as something that you choose," he said, "because what you want to say is going to be able to take

advantage of it." He goes on to say that "every form [I think] has a certain logic, has certain expressive capabilities.... But if one chooses form rightly, one is not submitting to the demands of the form but making use of it at every moment." This is not the late-corrupted neo-formalist regard for form championed by a certain "school" of poets in the late twentieth century who argue that the ideal of beauty is the perfection of form, but a much more organic regard for form that allows the poet to use the line as a way to guide the reader most appropriately through the drama of the poem. Neither accentual, syllabic, or accentual/syllabic in any regular way, with a wide range of stressed syllables (or beats) per line, the poem is nevertheless a fine example of the musical possibilities of the free verse line as practiced by those writers who had a foot in two distinctly formal traditions, like Lowell and Bishop before Wilbur, and like his contemporary James Wright. However "free" from the numerical regularity of English meter, the free verse here is modulated in a sensual and meaningful way in order to control precisely the reader's movement through the poem; nothing is accidental here in terms of how and why these lines are broken, or not broken, a regard for the line that seems to occur in its most sophisticated form in the work of those writers who first learned fully the nature of the English line before embracing the free verse tradition. In a carefully balanced contrast to this open line is a quietly suggestive rhyme scheme (ABACDC) that works in conjunction with a pattern in which the first two lines and the last two lines of each sestet are considerably longer (eleven or twelve syllables as compared to five or six) than the middle two lines, a modulation that enhances the feeling one has reading the poem of moving toward the inevitability of its powerful and enduring finish.

Annie Finch

RICHARD WILBUR'S ACCENT:
ON WADING "THE BEAUTIFUL CHANGES"

When I was about twenty, I attended a workshop on "The Great Mother" co-taught by Gioia Timpanelli and Robert Bly at the Omega Institute north of New York City. Much of that week is lost to my memory now. Only a few indelible moments, mostly shimmers of spiritual insight, remain out of the intense lightness and strange fluidity of those young and difficult days. A few shimmers of insight and 44 indelible words.

The words unfurled without fanfare, on the second or third afternoon. I recall they followed Bly's recitation of a haiku that may have been Basho's "Temple Bells." I sat near the back of the large group of spiritual pilgrims, almost all of them older than I, and let each word rain into the field of my precariously open psyche: "One wading a fall meadow."

Bly repeated the phrase again, and invited us to say it too. Several times more, and then he proceeded several times through the next line, then the rest of the stanza, all of us in tow. What was he thinking of? The lines had no context, author or title; he just began talking them. And each time he did so he indicated, with a bow of his tall, already-whitening head over a flowery cravat, that we should copy him.

We did: dozens of sandaled and colorful adults, cross-legged or stretched on the ground on a green summer afternoon in the Hudson Valley, solemnly intoning the first stanza of Richard Wilbur's "The Beautiful Changes." Did any of us recognize the words or understand where they came from? As far as I knew, I was the only poet or reader of contemporary poetry in the group — and I had no idea. Painfully young, painfully shy, painfully ambitious, painfully female, painfully self-conscious, I was unable to ask Bly myself, and no one else asked him either. Before Google or even the web, it would have been difficult for any of us to find out.

So we simply showed up the next day, and the next, to listen to Bly and Timpanelli tell stories and talk about spirituality and Rumi and nature and marriage and the Great Mother and, again,

to follow after him with those 44 words, for which he conducted us in fine style, his arms waving, his head inclining gravely, his piercing eyes glittering appreciation. By the end of that first half hour, and a second one the next day, and a third the next, we knew them by heart. Somewhere along the way, I think he acknowledged the words were Wilbur's, and I felt a twenty-year-old's flash of "oh, I knew that" — but long before then they had already become, anonymously, 44 parts of our landscapes, our bodies.

That rapt initiation into a temporary oral culture would prove my most meaningful introduction to Wilbur. Though I had read the poems dutifully in college, most had done little for me, their dry assurance and patrician power striking a note distant from my own struggles. But this stanza, taken off the page, was different. No wonder Bly had chosen — anointed — it for such a unique purpose. Here there was no "I," no ego — just the mysterious "one," and the owner of "my mind"; there was no audience, and no "we"; there was not even really a "you," but only "your hands" and "a shade of you." In the central stanza, the one that introduces the abstraction of the title and grounds it, preparing the way for the final insight, there were no people at all — and yet the whole poem maintained thick intimacy with one individual's consciousness.

These complexities of perspective were odd and compelling — not to mention the way the poem manages to build up to an utterly abstract statement — unfashionably abstract! — while thoroughly grounded in its imagery. And then, of course, there was the rhythm: the core of the gift we all received that day.

It is tempting to suspect that Bly was conducting some kind of prosodic experiment with his Great Mother students, because the first stanza of "The Beautiful Changes" is a metrical riddle, a bizarre counterpoint of twisting typographic line against beating auditory phrase. The enjambments are willful, perverse even; each line until the last bucks like a wild horse barely keeping in the bridle. Recalling our recitation that day, I remember how long we paused between each three-beat phrase, letting everything up to the last line fall perfectly into accentual trimeters sounding out

to the pale summer sky over our heads. (In this scansion, my reverse accent on “dry” indicates a half-stress, which creates a fine tension that highlights rather than breaks the three-beat-per-line pattern.)

/ / /
One wading a Fall meadow
/ / /
finds on all sides
/ / /
The Queen Anne's Lace
/ / /
lying like lilies on water;
/ / /
it glides so from the walker,
/ \ / /
it turns dry grass to a lake,
/ / /
as the slightest shade of you

Written out this way, the triple beat pattern emerges steadily, just as Bly’s oral/aural approach freed the poem from its shape on the page, permanently lodging the hypnotically regular underlying rhythm into my inner ear.

But strong and consistent as the three-beat rhythm may be to hear, when the words are lineated as I have done above, the stanza is not successful on the page. Accentual rhythm, with its driving power that forces weaker words to prominence and demotes stronger ones, demands and enhances in poetry a sense of urgent tension. Look at the first four lines of Yeats’ “Easter 1916”:

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.

The metrical demotion of the poem’s first word — “I” — wordlessly conveys the tragic difficulty of the speaker’s role, the need

to put his personal views aside following the Easter Rising. The promotion of the frivolous first syllable of the fourth line privileges an architectural detail that forces the poem to linger on the conditions that became so unbearable in Ireland in the age of Jonathan Swift. The meter is unrelenting in its choices, and successful to the extent that it is unrelenting. To choose another example, in Elizabeth Bishop's three-beat accentual poem "The Moose," a lighter but equally integral tension is created by the great variation in imagery careening ever faster past the unstoppable meter, as past the windows of the moving bus. That tension is how accentual trimeter works best.

But in the first stanza of "The Beautiful Changes," aside from the absorption of that one word "dry," the three-beat units unfold leisurely with no surprises or struggles:

One wading a Fall meadow
finds on all sides
The Queen Anne's Lace
lying like lilies on water;
it glides so from the walker,
it turns dry grass to a lake,
as the slightest shade of you . . .

Though the spoken stanza may have worked the charm of a spell as a single memorized incantation flung out on the magical afternoon air of the Omega Institute, on the page it works better as Wilbur laid it out. The three-beat pattern is merely a counterpoint, visual lineation torquing its underlying rhythm into the more familiar Wilburian iambic pentameter of the stanza's final two lines:

\ / | ~ ~ / | ~ ~ / | ~ / | ~ /
Dry grass to a lake, as the slightest shade of you
/ ~ | ~ / | ~ / | ~ ~ / | ~ /
Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes.

The last line of the stanza, the one that must be scanned as pure iambic pentameter with no counterpointing three-beat rhythm, is

the civilizing hinge that settles the rest of the poem down into further iambic pentameter. For the last two stanzas, the three-beat rhythm minds its own business, stays in the central two lines, and leaves the iambic pentameters alone.

Yet the opening stanza, the part before the hinge, is the energetic seed that distinguishes “The Beautiful Changes” as one of Wilbur’s most memorable poems. The metrical tension in those 44 words, the transmutation between the accentual trimeter and the iambic pentameter — two meters with opposed rhythmic and cultural identities — brings the poem deeply to life and verifies the mysterious consubstantiation of verb and noun in the title. On reading the title, we might think the beautiful changes will be static nouns that we can stand back from, but the poem reveals that the beautiful changes around us and under our feet, just as the metrical feet of the opening stanza change under us as we read.

The most insistently accentual poems Wilbur has written, “Lilacs” and “Junk,” are four-beat poems in Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter — a more balanced and less volatile accentual choice than the three-beat meter that nearly upends “The Beautiful Changes” before it even starts. Each of these two poems centers on an unassuming object that acquires new resonance through dying back into the earth. Is this how Wilbur, or his ear at any rate, feels about the accentual meter itself — the subversive folk meter that Yeats and Bishop found so useful for its populist thrust? Is there an implication, in “Lilacs” and “Junk,” that the ancient accentual meter might eventually re-emerge into high culture from long hibernation in the despised metrical earth, far below the elegant, heady towers of iambic pentameter, newly lustrous with mystery, complexity, and value?

Perhaps. But whatever the wider implications of the opening of “The Beautiful Changes,” this early poem yields itself gracefully and courageously to three-beat accentual meter, confident in the beautiful power of change to absorb any and all of life’s mysteries and patterns. And underneath the civilized turn towards a more sedate kind of “wonder,” a bit of the triple Anglo-Saxon wildness remains; the lovely last line of the middle stanza can

only be forced from anapestic tetrameter into iambic pentameter by an emphatic, even defiant, stress on the truth of the wildness that *is* always, still, already, underlying knowing:

˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ /
any greenness *is* deeper than anyone knows.

FIRST SNOW IN ALSACE

The snow came down last night like moths
Burned on the moon; it fell till dawn,
Covered the town with simple cloths.

Absolute snow lies rumpled on
What shellbursts scattered and deranged,
Entangled railings, crevassed lawn.

As if it did not know they'd changed,
Snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes
Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged.

The ration stacks are milky domes;
Across the ammunition pile
The snow has climbed in sparkling combs.

You think: beyond the town a mile
Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes
Of soldiers dead a little while.

Persons and persons in disguise,
Walking the new air white and fine,
Trade glances quick with shared surprise.

At children's windows, heaped, benign,
As always, winter shines the most,
And frost makes marvelous designs.

The night guard coming from his post,
Ten first-snows back in thought, walks slow
And warms him with a boyish boast:

He was the first to see the snow.

HEAVEN AND HELL IN THE POISE
BETWIXT "INHABIT" AND "KNOW"

Taken from "Water Walker," our title's lines make an apt epigraph for the poem under consideration. Both appear close together in Wilbur's first volume of poetry, *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems*, published in 1947 not long after he was honorably discharged from the Army and had begun graduate studies at Harvard. Just 26 then, Wilbur had attended Amherst College, where he'd studied with Frost, and then seen comrades killed in Italy, Germany, and France. Together with "Mined Country," "Potato," "On the Eyes of an SS Officer," and a few others, it's as arresting a group of war poems as achieved by Randall Jarrell, Lincoln Kirstein, Louis Simpson, or James Dickey, arguably our other most powerful, telltale poet-witnesses to what that war had wrought. Although it may be, as John Gery put it, that Wilbur is "a poet originally provoked by his disturbing experiences in WWII," it's equally telling that he never again overtly returned to the subject of war.¹

Alsace and its odd twin Lorraine had long been a special prize in wars between France and Germany. When the Germans again became ruthless lords of Alsace-Lorraine in 1940, they conscripted thousands into the German army and Waffen SS, dispatched hundreds of thousands of inhabitants to concentration camps, and relocated Germans, Russians and Poles there to colonize every quarter. Recall that it was in Strasbourg, thirty miles from Alsace and the intellectual capital of the region in the 18th century, that Goethe met Herder, whose vision of harmony among all cultures had a life-changing impact on the impressionable younger writer. If they'd witnessed such a malevolent malformation of their newly-shared vision, they'd perhaps have concluded they were "at the cold end of the world's spit."²

¹Günter Eich, soldiering on the German side and like Wilbur emerging as a major poet right after war's end, said he'd have developed very differently if he hadn't had to slog through "those frightful, god-awful years."

²From Wilbur's "On the Eyes of an SS Officer."

The war that lurks in "First Snow in Alsace" is not the trench warfare of WWI, on ground fought over for centuries, elegized in McCrea's "In Flanders Fields," and by the likes of Rupert Brooke; nor is it precisely the kind of dishonorable folly to which Wilfred Owen gave the lie in his extraordinary poems. Finally liberated in 1944, Alsace was where war had been waged hamlet to hamlet and door to door, and where people had "homes" — not just impermanent houses. If Wilbur was with the Allied forces that liberated the territory, he would have been witness to a landscape more ravaged than ever: to wrecked civilian homesteads and makeshift army depots, to the displacement of armies, people, and goods. Another sort of poet altogether might have been tempted to "brandish a rhetoric and offer clever interpretations,"³ but Wilbur freight his lyrics with their own weights, and allows the cumulative effect of the images and characters to slowly overwhelm.

Though written some sixty-five years ago, the poem rings modern today, sure in its meter, clipped in its diction; and despite its strict terza-rima and precise syllable count, it is expansive, full of clanging atonalities. It opens conversationally, the first line conjuring a peaceful idyll, its iambic tetrameter mimicking Frost's "Whose woods these are I think I know." But it turns at the line-break, a dark yet lovely phrase catching and refocusing the lens: "The snow came down . . . like moths burned on the moon." Burned on the moon. . . . Snow can seem like that, thick, heavy flakes seen at night against a streetlight, falling awkwardly as if dewinged, winter's answer to summer's clouds of insects. But what's under those "simple cloths"? And how do burned moths become simple cloths?⁴ The second stanza begins to make clear what the morbid moth-simile suggests. However inured, people living with snow still come alive with child-like delight

³Wilbur, in an essay on Robert Francis, whom he lauds for not taking such a course in the poem "Sheep."

⁴In this terrible bombed-out fairytale, so close to the Black Forest, we feel the effect of the brothers Grimm.

when winter's first flakes light up the air. But all "firsts" stand apart, etching their own indelible marks, and that "first" snow, in that place and time, while seemingly comforting, is yet fraught with danger. We are grimly aware that "cloths" can quickly morph into "shrouds," and, intentional or not, "moths burned on the moon," aside from auguring the death that becomes explicit later in the poem, conjures up drifting after-images of shellbursts. Hence what seem "simple cloths" further darken in the mind's eye to ashes.⁵

In the second stanza, the snow is "absolute" — "to stand apart from a normal relation with other elements" is one definition — and it lies "rumpled," an abandoned blanket. A landscape of railings, lawns and roofs could be domesticity personified. But this landscape is "deranged." The railings are entangled, the lawn crevassed, and the roofs bombed out, "fear-gutted" and "trustless" (with its inner sound of truss-less): we are weighed down with the "absolute" absence of humanity. After all, who could survive this assault? The voice and view are disembodied, not a human in sight, not even a dead body (yet), though the end rhymes have begun to toll like funeral bells, as the snow covers war's wares. The lilting notes "milky domes" and "sparkling combs" fairly jangle against "ration stacks" and "ammunition piles" (domes of death). And it is hard not to see and hear *combat, bombs, tombs* in "combs," itself so oddly soft and homey.

As if parachuted down, a subject "you," implicitly present all along, materializes for the second act of the drama, striking an ancient chord: snow on the eyes of the dead. Bodies only "a mile or two" distant, only "dead a little while," make for an uncomfortably small, personal scale; but then the lens widens to reveal that "you" is not a solitary observer: "persons and persons in dis-

⁵We are also reminded of the de Havilland "Tiger Moth," a wood-and-fabric training biplane, some of which were futilely sent up by northern European air forces against the Blitzkrieg; and the last line of the stanza brings to mind Steinbeck's wartime novella *The Moon is Down*, in which the deep snow is symbolic of the muffling presence of the enemy.

guise" are also about. They could be townsfolk, wrapped up in any heavy clothing to hand, heading out into the cold snowy morning, perhaps mingling with soldiers on duty, trading "glances quick with surprise." On another level, the double plural is remarkably effective and affective; it draws clearly the paradox of wartime uniform and disguise, reminds us of the ancient soldierly fear of being known to one's comrades without being given away to one's enemy: "you" is not only not alone but must worry about who is who, parse the disguises. It is surprise and fear we instinctively understand. The act of stopping and thinking — of those "dead a little while" or soon-to-be-dead — requires someone older, removed from the scene; hence the narrated "You think." And those soldiering here are not just literally in disguise; haven't they disguised themselves necessarily from their true selves as well — made a deal — in order to cope with lurking death? In so doing, they've transplanted themselves "ten snows back," to a time before this deadly reality obtains, when snow covers their hometowns in "simple cloths" — and frost makes "marvelous designs," something to treasure, enjoy like a child.⁶

Unlike the clear denunciation of enemy in "On the Eyes of an SS Officer" (adjacent to "First Snow" in *The Beautiful Changes*), this narrator makes no distinction between enemy and friend: "persons and persons in disguise" is arguably the edgiest moment in the poem,⁷ encapsulating the duality of anonymity and the very personal — and imparting another unexpected dimension to the coda, "He was the first to see the snow." Against the soldier-boy, carefree for a moment, one imagines countless others dying in the woods of Alsace-Lorraine: "in a dim, / Low, and a final glade" as "the rare original heartsblood goes,"⁸ faces upturned, staring at the flakes starting to fall.

⁶Hear the quiet homage in the line, "And Frost makes marvelous designs" — rural rhymes to whistle in the dark. Deep in an Alsace winter, Wilbur was a long way from Amherst.

⁷An acquaintance recently returned from combat in Iraq shuddered at re-reading this phrase.

⁸From Wilbur's "The Death of a Toad."

But for now, at least, the moment passes. "You" melts into the crowd, as the scene centers on windows behind which we sense children taking in the frost's "marvelous designs." It is a tense image: the children no longer inhabit this bombed-out landscape; the "absolute" snow, now "heaped, benign," seems anything but; even the attempt to adduce the timelessness of the idyll ("as always") seems off-kilter.⁹ In an eerily similar image, in a poem tangentially about a war-torn landscape, the German poet Karl Krolow compares the frost to "a singing machine"; in Krolow's poem, the absent children have become soldiers. The poem ends, "Notice everything on the way: / between going out and coming back / snow will fall."¹⁰

Wilbur's final figure, "the night guard," is also something of a ghost-figure, present in the bitten-off appellation, but absenting himself in thought of a "boyish boast." Here, Wilbur's language makes a wonderful slide to get our minds around time's ways with our experience of the past: "Ten first snows" blankets us even more cozily, doubles the peace and calm, as we stand there in our proud childishness, the first to see what others only later will.¹¹ But while young soldiers may see snow first, they may also come upon war's horrors before the images reach the rest of us back home. Curious to a point, the halving to "him," when normal diction would call for the reflexive "himself," is the poem's final subterfuge, and sets us thinking: take yourself back, say ten years, in a reverie of a vastly different "first snow" from what's before you, now that you are a soldier on the front lines; your walk will slow, you'll be warmed for sure, but soon you'd better snap to attention if other sights and sounds intrude. Now your life's on the line, and those ammunition piles and rations had better last. We are forcibly made aware of the distaste we feel for the

⁹In the final stanzas of the later poem "Beasts," Wilbur re-works this same turn to timelessness.

¹⁰From the poem "Wintry Life."

¹¹Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" and "Protocols" similarly play on the soldier/child dichotomy. While Jarrell's language is more dreamlike, less enjambed, the effect's the same.

enlistment of youth in such a deadly, dismembering occupation, and awed by his resilience. The somber "cloak of snow," the way it sterilizes the deranged battlefield, both numbs us to the destruction and outlines it. The mind's eye becomes conflicted vis-à-vis ultimate beauty and ultimate destruction.¹²

Let us not overlook the wit here as well: surrounded by tragedy and destruction, how wonderfully childlike to settle on the upbeat. This is a theme Wilbur has pursued often, and for which he was in fact criticized. However, we think not only of the lighter verse, or even poems that willfully reconstitute in a more positive light ("Up, Jack" for one), but of Wilbur's exploration, gentle fun-making, and ultimate exoneration of those we find undeserving inheritors of our greatest cultural legacies (e.g. the sleeping guard in "Museum Piece," one of the "good gray guardians of art," "A Degas dancer pirouett[ing] / Upon the parting of his hair"). Our soldier seems at first glance to be a character of this cloth, unthinking, unaware of the awful truths the snow's begun to bury, and Wilbur seems to leave it up to the reader to forgive this guard his childishness. (It is no easy task; this "innocent" lad, after all, carries a gun.) Yet in his insistence on sight ("sparkling," "eyes," "glances," "shines," "see") and the description of a terrible landscape covered overnight, Wilbur reminds us that the vision we start with can always be revisited. The title poem of the volume in which "First Snow" appears nicely sums up this prospect: "the beautiful changes / In such kind ways, / Wishing ever to sunder / Things and things' selves for a second finding, to lose / For a moment all that it touches back to wonder." Even amidst death and destruction, Wilbur reassures us, a beautiful snowfall changes the landscape in "such kind ways," allowing a "second finding," allowing a perhaps by now hardened soldier to find a way "back to wonder."

¹²As in "Mined Country," what is covered, out of view and softened, is most deadly; so that when, in the denouement, the cow is blown to bits by a mine disguised by flowers, we are plunged into a sort of Brechtian estrangement, not quite ready for the desolate destruction, surprised but then gripped by its awful beauty.

Wilbur has said that his poems are generally written “step by step, the lines grudgingly put down and thereafter little altered” and that the writing process is over for him when the last line has “filled out the poem sufficiently,” commentary made concrete by “First Snow in Alsace.”¹³

¹³From an interview with Alberta Turner.

LOVE CALLS US TO THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple
As false dawn.

Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.

Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.
Now they are rising together in calm swells
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet
That nobody seems to be there.

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,
From the punctual rape of every blessed day,
And cries,

“Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.”

Yet, as the sun acknowledges
With a warm look the world’s hunks and colors,
The soul descends once more in bitter love
To accept the waking body, saying now
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,

A DIFFICULT BALANCE

Imagine someone saying to you, as a statement of fact, “love calls us to the things of this world.” Possible responses include, and may in fact be limited to: *How nice!* or *Deep, man!* or *Amen!* or *Isn’t it pretty to think so.* How little, it seems, this sentiment demands from us. And how, well, *pleasant* to have wandered into the manicured park of such sanity and benignity. Admiring the topiary, how untroubled we are by noise of distant terminologies, those of passion, sublimity, judgment, and sin. And who is to say that we should be troubled? Surely not Richard Wilbur, most amiable and equable of writers.

It is true enough: what distinguishes Wilbur at first from his more scandalous contemporaries is his very scandallessness. Repudiating the Dionysian temptations of lurid display and spectacular self-immolation, Wilbur’s poetry embraces a purely Apollonian ambition, to usher into being moments of realized perfection. One appreciates the optimism of this project, but suspects it of no frivolity. Behind the joyfulness of Wilbur’s tone, and the infinite jest of his playfulness, one discerns with awe the severe demands of the most exacting formal discipline. Who among his contemporaries, even with greatest exertion, can manage once what Wilbur has managed so often, with so little apparent effort? Who else has brought so many of his poems to such a warmly incandescent shine, while remaining at every instance so cool? When achieving such success is so rare, is it not misguided, even obscene, to ask for more?

After all, what more demanding master is there than such craft, not merely for its practitioners, but for the lovers of such art as well, not those who seek the fusion of passionate identification, but those who require for their satisfaction an encounter with absolute clarity and overmastering authority? The moment of perfection is so fleeting, so elusive, so impossible to predict, its pursuit invites the wanderer into a forest of obsession. Whether best described as junkies or monks, devotees give up everything to follow the evasive gleam. It cannot be trapped or anticipated. Adepts of differential calculus or Sufism are helpless to summon

it. Whether it electrifies Callas's tone with a transfixing darkness or suspends Michael Jordan or Mikhail Baryshnikov above the floor a millisecond longer than gravity permits, whether it captures in a photograph by Ralph Meatyard or Robert Frank an unknown isotope of anguish, or entrusts to a single syllable in the throat of Elis Regina the only satisfactory definition of the Portuguese word *saudade* — nothing, literally nothing, can compare to it. Nothing could be given in exchange for what such a moment offers and just as quickly withdraws.

For those who seek such moments in poetry, the moment has made itself known in the work of George Herbert, or Elizabeth Bishop, or W. H. Auden, or James Merrill, to say nothing of Wilbur himself. What the moment itself conveys is a sudden, galvanic conviction of inevitability. Such a poem could bring together this — and only this — encounter between form and content, logic and melody, the grip of thought and the release of feeling. Rather than exulting in a triumph of ingenuity, such a moment professes a stainless realism: this is how things have to be. The moment glows not with the hedonism of invention, but with the Stoics' *amor fati*, the embrace of things as they are, the "terrible perfection" that achieves "illusion of a Greek necessity," as Plath described it.

The poet addresses himself to his *materia poetica* as one imagines a gem-cutter addressing herself to a priceless stone. Faced with its implacably absolute hardness and the fixity of its invisible grain, only an unfaltering hand on the blade and a coldness of nerve approaching absolute zero can make the required cut, the stroke to ignite in the diamond its permanent flame. Any other stroke, any other angle, the slightest flutter of hesitation, and all is lost. And as for the stone, so for the poem; any other word, any other form, any other rhythm, and the whole structure must shatter. And why? Because (the poem says) the world itself is an implacable absolute. Because it is what it is, I am what I am. There is nothing to be negotiated.

The achievement of this conviction, this authority of the absolute, is one of the great miracles of artifice. Because the artifice is miraculous, it is priceless, limitlessly seductive, and alluring.

Because the miracle is artificial, however, it is treacherous, limitlessly seductive, and threatening. Plath's perfection is terrible because it is the expression not of a necessity but the illusion of necessity. The hatred of such illusion gives, in turn, an entirely different poem its *raison d'être*, one which sees in perfection of surface a prostitution of the truth, and hears in its lucid, inescapable rhythm the blandishments of the siren. It believes by contrast that any paradise is a mirage, and that what purports to be its impenetrable enclosure demands to be breached and stormed. Whether signed by Blake, Whitman, Ginsburg, Plath, or Bidart, such a poem's art is not a mirror held up to nature but a siege gun leveled at things as they are. And so here too, there is nothing to be negotiated. If there is a veil, then rend it. Are there scales? Overturn them. The king? Off with his head.

The primary conflict here opposes an avowedly aesthetic criterion, perfection of artifice, against an insistently ethical one, the liberation of truth from illusion. This conflict is not a territorial dispute between free verse and fixed form, classicism and romanticism, New York and California, America and Europe, or between two baboons fighting over a banana; in these disputes, the object in question (whether banana, credibility, or fame) is presumed by all parties to be worth the struggle. Instead the conflict arises from a fundamental jurisprudential incompatibility. The rules — or rather the laws — that govern artistic practice are in each instance held to be fundamentally different. The basic question is not evaluative and quantitative, an assessment whether this or that poem is better or worse, more or less deserving of the banana. Instead it is foundational, the primary question of what constitutes the purpose of art and the good that it serves.

Wilbur seems — and seems to have always seemed — to fall into the first camp, the party of those for whom perfection of craft is paramount. In his work the criterion for success, the conception of the Good, seems so patently to be the criterion of what is most fitting, of all that *dulce et decorum est*, of all that radiates *luxe, calme, et volupté*. For "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" to work at all, it must work perfectly as a whole, every part in concert. And this perfect concert must include the response of the

reader as well. The success of the poem is the delight of the reader, and the reader's delight is the delight of poem and poet both, all parties delighting together in the achievement of such effortless, bravura felicity. Come on, everybody, let's hear it for the "spiriting" of the soul from sleep! *Delightful!* For the spiritualization of the mundane, hung laundry turned into angels, borne aloft or sinking as the light wind lives or dies, let's hear a loud *huzzah!* How in their swooning, nobody seems (but only seems!) to be there: *huzzah huzzah!* Such beings may be clothed in sheets, blouses or smocks, but "truly there they are." *Which nobody can deny! Which nobody can deny!* They hover as truly over the poem as do Wilbur's other angels, his tutelary poets: Herbert is there in his singing pulley ("The Pulley"), Frost is waving from his white wave ("West-Running Brook"), Donne hovers as weightlessly over the poem as his ethereally disembodied lovers ("The Ecstasy"). Together, shades, angels, poets, and readers alike raise in celestial harmony their chorus of assent. Upon this uplifting the poem achieves its "pure floating," borne on the updrafts of such "halcyon feeling."

But is this a just description of what Wilbur is doing? I affirm that it is not. Were my description hitherto accurate, the poem would stand as unassailable evidence against Wilbur's integrity as an artist, and argue aggressively in favor of those who maintain that his verse is too exquisite, too polished, as fussily sugared and shellacked as a French tart, or a French tart. Instead, the genius of "Love Calls Us to the Things of this World" is accomplished in the mortification of the very weightless ecstasy in which it appears to revel. Such a weightlessness, the poem says, such an infatuation with a condition contrary to fact, is precisely that which must hand itself over "to be undone." The soul — furloughed from the body, entranced by its substanceless singularity, released from worldly constraint — experiences in this incorporeal state not an ecstasy of freedom but, in fact, an ecstasy of distress. Why can't it withhold itself, like Blake's *Thel*, from the world of experience? Why can't the hard labor of living be transformed into the Homeric mythologized "rosy hands" of dawn itself, with its stealing glow and its rising mists? Why can't it

dance naked before God's altar (like King David) and never have to descend (like King David) to our corrupted, murderous affairs?

Such is the soul's cry. Facing what it describes as the "punctual rape of every blessed day," its Keatsian longing is "to fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget" its embodied life. The rescue the soul pleads for is the rescue promised by the weightless "viewless wings of poesy," whose faery power can turn sheets into angels, a load of laundry into a cloud of rapt witnesses. But while the vision is true while it lasts, the promise is false. And herein lies the rub. The greater force in the poem, greater than the soul's dread, is the force of the "call," the call that leads the soul downward "in bitter love / To accept the waking body." The poem, in short, conceals within the surface of lyric exultation a wrenching drama, the psychomachia of the soul struggling to embrace its own embodied destiny. What the weightlessness of the poem conceals is the heaviness and darkness that shadows the verse's deftest caprice. One discovers with a sharp sudden shock how the reverie of weightlessness is itself merely the negative image of a world held together by gravity, and that it is this gravity, this *gravitas*, and not a weightlessness or levity, that is the action of Love.

While this struggle and the pain of this struggle is the animating force of the poem, the poem makes no theater of its unease. Rather than affecting torment or studied disarray, it works with secret intensity to give a new meaning — or rather, to restore an old meaning — to the term *exquisite*, a term which seems to describe all the damning limitations of Wilbur's tidy successes. It is true that Wilbur's verse is exquisite, but not in the limiting sense of a precious aestheticism, of bejeweled, primped, or daintified effects. The exquisite in Wilbur is that heightened condition of awareness as it is brought toward the frontier of the unbearable, a term less suited to describe artworks or technique than to give voice to extremes of distress. After all, the heaviness of the world weighing down the nuns is a world of thievery and rape, and corruption and violence are the "dark habits" compounded in our earthly frame. If their presence in the poem remains largely theoretical, obliquely invoked, as indeed they do in many of Wilbur's

poems, it is precisely this obliquity that rings the work round with such hauntingly otherworldly overtones. If Wilbur's harmonies are celestial, they are so because they articulate human passion in counterpoint with the dispassionate fixity of the stars. Just praise of his work acknowledges that for Wilbur, true love is a bitter passion, and the passion to express it requires a difficult art. To hold both the possibility of felicity and the reality of suffering in view, to falsify neither, and to conceive within this tension a love both grave and merciful, is to keep, with exquisite grace, a difficult balance indeed.

BEASTS

Beasts in their major freedom
Slumber in peace tonight. The gull on his ledge
Dreams in the guts of himself the moon-plucked waves below,
And the sunfish leans on a stone, slept
By the lyric water,

In which the spotless feet
Of deer make dulcet splashes, and to which
The ripped mouse, safe in the owl's talon, cries
Concordance. Here there is no such harm
And no such darkness

As the selfsame moon observes
Where, warped in window-glass, it sponsors now
The werewolf's painful change. Turning his head away
On the sweaty bolster, he tries to remember
The mood of manhood,

But lies at last, as always,
Letting it happen, the fierce fur soft to his face,
Hearing with sharper ears the wind's exciting minors,
The leaves' panic, and the degradation
Of the heavy streams.

Meantime, at high windows
Far from thicket and pad-fall, suitors of excellence
Sigh and turn from their work to construe again the painful
Beauty of heaven, the lucid moon
And the risen hunter,

Making such dreams for men
As told will break their hearts as always, bringing
Monsters into the city, crows on the public statues,
Navies fed to the fish in the dark
Unbridled waters.

WARPED IN WINDOW-GLASS

I began reading Richard Wilbur's poetry when I was an undergraduate in the late Fifties. I admired his technical skill, as would any apprentice to the art, but the main attraction, for me, had to do with his sensibility. Remember that T. S. Eliot was literature's Pope, then, and Ezra Pound was some sort of John the Baptist of high modernism. Those guys walked on stilts. One couldn't help sniffing around for alternatives.

Stevens was an alternative, as it turned out, and I sensed some sort of connection between his often irreverent playfulness and the kind of thing Wilbur was up to. But there were always dissenting voices. A friend of mine from Wesleyan, where Wilbur was teaching, said there wasn't enough risk, pain, or naked emotion in the poems; they were too safe, tidy, and complacent. And Robert Bly, writing as Crunk in *The Fifties*, made fun of some of the grand literary gestures Wilbur had employed.

I sensed something irrelevant in these criticisms. They overlooked Wilbur's complexity of tone, asking for romantic sensibility in the one case, and presuming it to be dominant in the other. Eliot could be pompous, Pound could be pompous, Auden, for all his mischief, could be quite pompous. Richard Wilbur, I sensed, could not. It seems to me now, looking back, that he was helping to found postmodernism, with its eclectic vocabularies, its detachment and self-deprecation, its love of popular culture and the vernacular.

In a way I think people were confused by the polished techniques and traditional forms that Wilbur handled so skillfully. Perhaps that led them to miss his tone, or tones. I can illustrate this, I think, by a close look at "Beasts," a poem from his 1956 collection, *Things of This World*.

The poem is not rhymed, and the first evidence of its formal character is the stanza-pattern, visually evident on the page as a series of six carefully orchestrated expansions and contractions, across which the syntax deploys itself in a counterpoint. The stanzas resemble syllabics, but the syllable counts of the lines turn out to be approximately, rather than strictly, matched. The

same is true of the stress count. The double movement of visually and aurally regular stanzas inhabited by five sentences of unpredictable syntax turns out to be the major formal feature, and the overall effect is less strict, I think, than in Wilbur's rhymed poems. Marianne Moore is somewhere in the background, but Wilbur's distance from her style and manner is probably as important as any resemblance.

"Beasts" falls neatly into three units of two stanzas each. The first two stanzas give us what feels like an expert panorama of the night-time non-human world, presented by a speaker whose authority at first sounds and feels substantial. The underlying irony, however, stems from the fact that we have to use human means, i.e. language, to depict anything non-human, and when we do so we always encounter resistance, a resistance that the poet is much more aware of than is his speaker.

The adjectives tend to give away the flaws in the speaker's authority. Why is the freedom "major"? Why is the water in which the sunfish sleeps "lyric"? Are the deer's feet really "spotless" and the splashes they make "dulcet"? The irony comes to a head when we reach the ripped mouse, *safe* (!) in the owl's talons and crying "concordance" to the night scene of beast-slumber. By now we have turned around from the "peace" of the second line to what the speaker seems to admit is "harm" and "darkness." The animal world he admires is still, somehow, a site of "major freedom," but his ability to invoke and describe it authoritatively is becoming dubious.

The full reversal comes in the enjambment of the stanzas. We have to do a double-take, from thinking that the "here" where there is "no such harm and no such darkness" is wherever the speaker is (as opposed to the night world of owl, mouse, deer, gull, and sunfish) to realizing that the "here" is the strange "concordance" of natural order and food chain as opposed to the poem's emerging and lurid middle scene. The poem's assertion, ultimately, is that terror and violence truly belong to human behavior and the human imagination. Even the owl's killing and feeding is no comparison. The wisdom of this insight must sink in, even if we try to discount the werewolf story as the stuff of

tired myths and wayward cultures. We sit divided between the rough, strange world of nature, where we never feel quite at home, and the rougher and stranger world we have made out of our bad dreams and errant behaviors.

The moon makes its second appearance now, not to pluck the waves but in order to “sponsor” (wonderful verb!) the change of a man into a beast. It’s as though we and the poem’s speaker are now making a second attempt to understand the relation of the human to the non-human, this time by means of a pop-culture metamorphosis. Here’s where postmodernism rears its impudent head; can you imagine T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound condescending to borrow a B-movie image, especially to promote a major insight? (Well, to be fair, Eliot did throw scraps of pop culture around in *The Waste Land*, but he didn’t make that into a consistent strand of his later ponderings and pontifications.)

Because human language is now recounting a human dream or legend, it is in a much more comfortable territory. If the third and fourth stanzas evoke images of Lon Chaney Jr. and a beloved movie, *The Wolf Man* (1941), they also restore our confidence in the narrator’s control: the adjectives fit now, and their relative rightness — “painful,” “sweaty,” “fierce,” “sharper,” “exciting,” and “heavy” — helps to dissolve the earlier irony surrounding description’s inadequacies. The werewolf’s senses share the acuity of the animal world — better hearing and sight, an extended consciousness that takes in even leaves and streams — but because he is also originally human, he and the speaker can hope to bridge the great gap that exists for most of us, most of the time, between what we are and what the world around us is. We sense that the poem’s maker, now more in concert with its speaker, harbors a wry affection both for our limitations and for our endless imaginings of otherness.

That affection allows him, in the final two stanzas, to draw back from the movie close-up of the werewolf to present a second panorama. Again, there’s a good deal of irony in this playful look at the artists and makers who are staying up late, trying to write poems like this one. The gap has opened up again: they are “Far from thicket and pad-fall.” But their alertness, while not the

werewolf's, does not altogether desert them. The adjective that characterized the werewolf's change, "painful," returns, and this time it is attached to the beauty of heaven.

The moon has returned too, not to pluck waves or sponsor transformative magic, but simply as "lucid." Orion rises as the suitors try to "construe" all this. Orion is a hunter, reflecting the endless human search for connection and meaning. And the suitors of excellence go on, as they always have and will, making heartbreak dreams that mix the ludicrous (monsters in cities, another pop culture glance), the mundane (crows on the public statues), and the disastrous (those navies drowning in "unbridled waters").

The speaker merges with them — he is after all a suitor of excellence too — as he manages his poem to its completion and we sit back both with a sense of satisfaction and a slight bewilderment: how complex the tone of this, how hard to generalize about it, and what a terrific, even hypnotic, list of images and associations ran past us in those two panoramas and that central tableau/closeup.

The sense of serious fun in "Beasts" is, as I've suggested, more characteristic of postmodernism than modernism, which may mean, among other things, that Wilbur will continue to come into his own and find his best readers both in the here and now, and in the near and distant futures. He helps us peer through the warped window-glass of our human dreams, imaginings, and myths, and for that we can be grateful.

ICARIUM MARE

We have heard of the undimmed air
Of the True Earth above us, and how here,
Shut in our sea-like atmosphere,
We grope like muddled fish. Perhaps from there,

That fierce lucidity,
Came Icarus' body tumbling, flayed and trenched
By waxen runnels, to be quenched
Near Samos riding in the actual sea,

Where Aristarchus first
Rounded the sun in thought; near Patmos, too,
Where John's bejeweled inward view
Described an angel in the solar burst.

The reckoner's instruments,
The saint's geodic skull bowed in his cave —
Insight and calculation brave
Black distances exorbitant to sense,

Which in its little shed
Of broken light knows wonders all the same.
Where else do lifting wings proclaim
The advent of the fire-gapped thunderhead,

Which swells the streams to grind
What oak and olive grip their roots into,
Shading us as we name anew
Creatures without which vision would be blind?

This is no outer dark
But a small province haunted by the good,
Where something may be understood
And where, within the sun's coronal arc,

We keep our proper range,
Aspiring, with this lesser globe of sight,
 To gather tokens of the light
Not in the bullion, but in the loose change.

THE SANCTUARY OF SENSE

For a while each year, when the faculty welcomed the new MFA students to our program, our Director would conclude his remarks with Richard Wilbur's poem "The Writer." When I finally came to read the *Collected Poems*, it was the only Wilbur poem I was familiar with, though I vaguely recalled having read a few others, and I couldn't help but wonder why. I was far more familiar with other poets who had come to maturity in the 1950s and 60s even though Wilbur has won many awards, including two Pulitzers. We didn't really study Wilbur when I was a student, though we studied his contemporaries like Robert Lowell. I didn't know what I would find, then, when I began leafing through, surprised a bit by the frequent allusions to classical myth, delighted at the rich diction and Wilbur's ease within formal constraints. I lingered a while over "Lying," which has compellingly beautiful passages: "the sheen-swept pastureland, the horse's neck / Clothed with its usual thunder, and the stones / Beginning now to tug their shadows in / And track the air with glitter. All these things / Are there before us; there before we look / Or fail to look. . ." I stayed to admire the "shucked tunic of an onion... on a backlit chopping board" which "prints and prints / its bright ribbed shadow like a flapping sail." I was discovering what a fine eye Wilbur has in his poems. It began to occur to me as I read on that I remembered certain moments in the poems, not really the poems themselves, not after one reading. We're attracted by the sparks. As someone remarked to me recently at a reading, "People don't remember poems; they remember lines." What is it then we read for when we read poems? What is it that makes us return to a poem, to want to apprehend the whole?

"Lying," which begins at a dead party and a harmless lie about spotting a grackle, ends with allusions to Chiron, Achilles, the Garden of Eden, and Roland, taking the poem beyond its sharp natural observations into the realm of the mythic. Yet it leaves behind the delight the reader feels in the pastoral scene and renders the poem more an exercise in intellect and idea than an experiential understanding of the subject. This is not saying

that Wilbur necessarily fails in this poem but that I, as a reader, find my interest flagging, even if I understand the connection Wilbur is trying to make.

Yet the Wilbur poem that I kept coming back to also occupies that mythic space. "Icarium Mare" opens, "We have heard of the undimmed air / Of the True Earth above us, and how here, / Shut in our sea-like atmosphere, / We grope like muddled fish." As a reader I am drawn in by these lines because I am unsure who is speaking and from where and yet I get a sense of the world reversed — the "True Earth" is above the collective speakers, the "atmosphere" is sea water not air, and in this "unnatural" environment we are reduced to groping, muddling about blindly. But why? What is this alternate world? It was a sense of mystery, and an underlying sense that this chorus "we" was not some species of underwater creatures, but ourselves, that drew me into the poem.

A more astute reader may have been alerted by the title. I knew that *mare* was "sea" but had no idea what "Icarium" was, though soon enough the reference to Icarus in the second stanza helped clarify. Icarus flew from Crete and fell into the sea near the Greek island of Samos, and his mythical burial place is in Icaria, a nearby island. This sea, then, the Icarian sea where Icarus fell, is refuge, the Latin suffix *-arium* meaning "refuge" or "sanctuary," a take on the myth that intrigues me, as I recall the story of Icarus is often told as a fable warning those who would ignore our human limits, ignore the prudent course, and fly too close to the sun out of recklessness or ambition. In the earliest versions of the myth, Icarus simply drops into the sea and is never heard from again. This is Wilbur's starting place of "muddled fish." The poem's "we," the descendants of Icarus, refers to the "undimmed air" of True Earth and that "fierce lucidity" from which Icarus's body fell into the "actual sea." The "actual sea" contrasts with "our sea-like atmosphere" in the opening stanza which also mentions "True Earth."

Wilbur continues building parallels between the "actual" and geographical and the metaphorical cosmology of the poem. The "fierce lucidity" from which Icarus fell is not merely the sun

but “the undimmed air of earth above us.” The sea into which Icarus falls, near Samos, is where Aristarchus “first / Rounded the sun in thought.” Here, Wilbur begins introducing the role of human intellect or imagination in apprehending both worlds with the figure of the Greek astronomer who, early on, developed a heliocentric view of the universe. Aristarchus “rounded the sun in thought” as Icarus rounded the sun in mythical deed. Wilbur continues with another figure, John the Divine, whose “bejeweled inward view / Described an angel in the solar burst,” also includes the sun, but not in terms of the scientific, like Aristarchus. St. John reputedly wrote the Biblical Book of Revelation while in exile on the island of Patmos, west of Samos. Wilbur’s choice of the word “geodic” in the fourth stanza amplifies the parallel once again with an image of the saint’s skull as a geode within his cave. The crystals that form John’s “bejeweled inward view” evoke a picture of the starry sky, but it is a different realm, the realm of the spirit and inner vision which sees the angelic in the solar burst. The realms and the approaches Wilbur describes may seem contrasting but are clearly parallel. “The reckoner’s instruments” and the “saint’s geodic skull bowed in his cave” both “brave” the “black distances exorbitant to sense.”

Wilbur’s choices of Aristarchus and John deliberately build on another key element in the story of Icarus. Icarus was warned by his father not to fly too close to the sun and soared too close anyway, paying the price. Aristarchus’s pursuit of scientific truth led him to develop the idea of a heliocentric universe, an idea in conflict with prevailing views and consequently dismissed. John’s spiritual pursuits and otherworldly visions were also in conflict with the prevailing worldview, and tradition holds that he was exiled to Patmos, an island frequently used as a place of exile for convicts. Each of these visionaries is in some sense rejected or dismissed by the prevailing social order.

In my initial reading of the poem what sparked my interest was only an impression of these connections. What made me curious was the poem’s linkage of poor creatures “shut in [their] sea-like atmosphere” and the “geodic skull bowed in his cave” with the very next image, opening the fifth stanza with an unex-

pected continuation, "Which in its little shed..." extending the inward movement of the poem. Sense itself rests in our human body, the "little shed of broken light." This movement contrasts with the outward or upward movement of the poem, Icarus's flight, Aristarchus' "round[ing] the sun in thought," John's "solar burst," and yet the two are part of the same arc, our yearning for higher knowledge and the consequences of our human limitations. I pondered this briefly, but mainly I wanted Wilbur to get back to the 'muddled sea-people' as I thought of them. This "we" that had started the poem hung suspended and I still wasn't sure where the poem was taking me, but I was sure by these "touchstones" — these connected images — that the poem was going somewhere.

We do arrive somewhere, to be sure, in the fifth stanza's "little shed" which "knows wonders all the same," though it may not "brave / Black distances" like Aristarchus' calculations or John's insight. Where else but here in the "shed of broken light," in our common human consciousness, "do lifting wings proclaim / The advent of the thunderhead," the poem asks. The "True Earth" is evoked here in the natural landscape of the rain storm watering the land, nourishing the roots of the oak and olive "shading us" — the plural "we" returns — "as we name anew / Creatures without which vision would be blind." The pure natural landscape and the act, in the last two lines, of naming, both suggest something Edenic about the world that the "we" inhabit in contrast to being "shut in our sea-like atmosphere."

Is this the refuge suggested by the poem's title? Or is the "refuge" actually that shut-in place with its "sea-like atmosphere"? Wilbur's penultimate stanza begins by stating "This is no outer dark," referring to the previous stanzas' description of "sense," the "shed of broken light," which enables human beings to perceive creation and all its wonders. He continues to celebrate human consciousness, our capacity to perceive and imagine, as "a small province haunted by the good" that allows us to understand even if we are not visionaries or brilliant scientists, but ordinary human beings "*within* [my emphasis] the sun's coronal arc," rather than soaring past it like Icarus or calculating beyond

it like Aristarchus. This is our refuge," this lesser globe of sight" of the final stanza, echoing the limited world of the opening stanza's "we" with the "True Earth" above them. Here, unlike Icarus flying too close to the sun, we "keep our proper range" but aspire, nevertheless, "to gather tokens of the light," the "loose change" as Wilbur calls it, rather than "the bullion" which would presumably be the limitless and infinite light known only by God or god-like beings. The tone is one that suggests acceptance of our limitations but offers us some small comfort in return that we can achieve some knowledge of the limitless, we can come to some understanding and appreciation of the universe itself despite our limitations. Wilbur's conclusion doesn't come as an epiphany; it comes as a result of the poem's carefully constructed line of thought, its cosmology. In this way, it reminds me of the Metaphysical poets, for whom I have an admitted weakness.

The poem eloquently depicts Wilbur's sympathetic view of the human condition, one that has been expressed in various works of literature before and since, though Wilbur's connections and imagery are distinct. As a reader, I find it is not the conclusion that makes the poem memorable but, more, the curious idea that our limited understanding of the world, our failed attempts to soar beyond our limits, are a province of "refuge." We take refuge in the "broken light" which is our small portion of the cosmic light. I'm not sure I share Wilbur's view ultimately, if I'm not more, let's say, pissed off at the universe than he is. But, as I read on in the *Collected Poems*, I began to see Wilbur's idea of "refuge in perception" manifest itself in other poems, such as "First Snow in Alsace," which concludes with the night-guard's singular and private pleasure in being the first, alone, to see the new and "absolute" snow that blankets even the ammunition pile and the fallen soldiers. Similarly in "Stop," the poem literally stops in that moment of perception where something extraordinary is perceived in the ordinary, here, a simple boxcar at winter dusk whose "purple, glowering blue" becomes the "phosphorous of Lethe / Or Queen Persephone's gaze / In the numb fields of the dark." Wilbur's idea of the sanctuary of sense, the subject in "Icarium Mare," is the "experience" in a number of his other

poems. It suggests that “Icarium Mare” serves as Wilbur’s *ars poetica*, the poem on poetry itself where what “we name anew” is ultimately our refuge, our “small province haunted by the good,
/ Where something may be understood.”

THIS PLEASING ANXIOUS BEING

1

In no time you are back where safety was,
Spying upon the lambent table where
Good family faces drink the candlelight
As in a manger scene by de La Tour.
Father has finished carving at the sideboard, 5
And Mother's hand has touched a little bell,
So that, beside her chair, Roberta looms
With serving bowls of yams and succotash.
When will they speak, or stir? They wait for you
To recollect that, while it lived, the past 10
Was a rushed present, fretful and unsure.
The muffled clash of silverware begins,
With ghosts of gesture, with a laugh retrieved,
And the warm, edgy voices you would hear:
Rest for a moment in that resonance. 15
But see your small feet kicking under the table,
Fiercely impatient to be off and play.

2

The shadow of whoever took the picture
Reaches like Azrael's across the sand
Toward grown-ups blithe in black and white, encamped 20
Where surf behind them floods a rocky cove.
They turn with wincing smiles, shielding their eyes
Against the sunlight and the future's glare,
Which notes their bathing caps, their quaint maillots,
The wicker picnic hamper then in style, 25
And will convict them of mortality.
Two boys, however, do not plead with time,
Distracted as they are by what? — perhaps
A whacking flash of gull-wings overhead —
While off to one side, with his back to us, 30

A painter, perched before his easel, seeing
The marbled surges come to various ruin,
Seeks out of all those waves to build a wave
That shall in blue summation break forever.

3

Wild, lashing snow, which thumps against the windshield 35
Like earth tossed down upon a coffin-lid,
Half clogs the wipers, and our Buick yaws
On the black roads of 1928.
Father is driving; Mother, leaning out,
Tracks with her flashlight beam the pavement's edge, 40
And we must weather hours more of storm
To be in Baltimore for Christmastime.
Of the two children in the back seat, safe
Beneath a lap-robe, soothed by jingling chains
And by their parents' pluck and gaiety, 45
One is asleep. The other's half-closed eyes
Make out at times the dark hood of the car
Ploughing the eddied flakes, and might foresee
The steady chugging of a landing craft
Through morning mist to the bombarded shore, 50
Or a deft prow that dances through the rocks
In the white water of the Allagash,
Or, in good time, the bedstead at whose foot
The world will swim and flicker and be gone.

MAYFLIES IN AMBER

Twice in the last few years I've been lucky to hear Richard Wilbur read from his poems: in the garden at Longfellow House on Brattle Street in Cambridge, and in the Abbey Room at Boston Public Library. Both locations seemed apt for hearing this poet, surrounded by august literary and artistic American presences. In 1993, I was in the audience at Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven for a production of his verse translation of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*. Together these three occasions represented for me aspects of Wilbur's genius, his place in American/New England letters as well as his embrace of a culture, language and literary tradition beyond his own. The manifold pleasures of reading and listening to Wilbur's work apply to the particular poem I've selected in the context of this celebration.

Richard Wilbur's poem "This Pleasing Anxious Being" takes its title from the twenty-second stanza of Gray's "Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard." The poem appears in *Mayflies*, published in 2000, and reinforces the sense of Mayflies — of the order *Ephemeroptera*, living for a few minutes to a few days. Even as Wilbur signals that he, like the generalized "who" of verse 22 of Gray's poem, is casting "one longing lingering look behind," in the tradition of Gray's elegy, he also signals his departure from that tradition. Whereas Gray remains distant in his meditative stance, Wilbur is obliquely present throughout, and diverges from Gray too in the form he chooses: blank verse, as opposed to Sicilian quatrains. The overall structure of his poem is a triptych of vividly painted, lyrical scenes — these from the temple of the poet's heart and memory — personal recollections all held in the present tense, yet decorously balanced by the absence of an "I" from the poem.

While I do not intend to elaborate on biographical elements in Wilbur's poem, I find the triptych structure, the painterly imagery, the direct references to painters in parts one and two not coincidental, given that Wilbur's father Lawrence (1897-1988) was a painter of some note. Where other biographical references appear relevant, I will cite them in passing.

Part one of the triptych places us in a remembered scene of benevolence and security described by a “you” that I construe as the poet addressing himself. The dinner scene conveys warmth and plenitude — even privilege, from the reference to Roberta and the “little bell” with which the mother summons her. This is a “Good family,” a variant of the Holy Family, their faces bathed in candlelight likened to those surrounding the infant Christ in de La Tour’s manger scene. But warmth and light are not unalloyed. Time pervades the elegy, and Wilbur evokes it from the first words of the poem: “In no time” meaning immediately but also suggesting outside of time. It is up to “you,” the poet, to reanimate the scene: “They wait for you / to recollect. . . .” He is “spying,” an outsider, as the speaker/poet must be even while “back” at the table. Faithfully reconstructing the past, he must remember another side of the “safety” of the domestic scene: “. . . while it lived, the past / Was a rushed present, fretful and unsure.” Here, reinforced by *looms, clash, ghosts* and *edgy*, diction registers tension that complicates the plenty, order, and sacredness characterizing the first ten lines. The last lines of this section depict the child’s ironic fierce impatience to escape the table “where safety was” in order “to be off and play,” an impatience that reinforces *anxious* in the title.

The intimations of darkness in part one of the poem become explicit in section two. Immediately a photographer’s “shadow” cast from outside the frame of a picture we are about to view is compared to the Angel of Death’s, *Azrael* a reference to Hebrew and Islamic texts. Since the scene photographed is located at a beach, *sand* is of course literal but also a metaphor for time and its passage. Again Wilbur establishes tension between dark and light elements of the scene. The “grown-ups” (more distantly seen than “Father” and “Mother” at the table) are “blithe,” but the next line undercuts that spirit: they are vulnerable with their backs to the surf, and *floods* augments a sense of danger. Even their smiles are “wincing” as they peer into sunlight intensified by metaphor, “the future’s glare.” Through material evidence the future, stern judge, will find the grownups guilty of a capital offense. Using the French *maillots* might demonstrate Wilbur the

translator, or even suggest that this beach is in France; but the term also had come into use in English in the late 1920s. Whereas the “you” in part one immerses himself in the past, here a speaker’s third-person narration includes another third-person viewpoint when the future assumes agency. Doubling occurs elsewhere in this and other parts of the poem (e.g., two poets Wilbur and Gray, two parents, two boys, two painters, two Christmas references, two actual voyages, double iambs). Unlike the grown-ups, the two boys are seemingly impervious to time and mortality, “distracted” by immediate sensuous elements of the setting. The photograph has frozen time in this beach scene. With a mirror effect, the painter in it, “off to one side, with his back to us” (*Wilbur père?*) — an outsider, like the poet/spy — is preserved in the act of seeking to freeze the ocean scene before him. And *us* has restored the “you” accompanied by the grown-ups, the reader, or both. From the present tense of the telling, to the captured past of the photo, to the future’s judgment upon the grownups, we hurtle into the imagined endless future of the wave that will break “in blue summation” in the painting. Here I can’t help noticing echoes of Keats and Stevens, again establishing Wilbur in a continuum of poets introduced directly by Gray’s line in the title.

The final section of the poem begins with a scene set in 1928 (the poet would have been seven years old), with the family of four enclosed in a car en route through a blizzard at Christmas, echoing the manger scene of part one. Evoking Gray’s ploughman for an instant, Wilbur chooses *ploughing* to describe the car’s progress through the storm. Once again the parents are referred to intimately as Father and Mother by the speaker, though the “you” of part one is replaced by first person plural (“our Buick,” “we”), itself soon replaced by third person plural (“two children,” “their parents”), and that separated into its constituent “one” and “the other.” Line 36 forcibly reasserts the mortality theme with the “coffin-lid” simile, and *black roads* sustain it. In a reversal of the weight of lightness/darkness in part one, this section describes safety amidst potential danger. The two children are “safe” and warm, “soothed by jingling chains / And by their

parents' pluck and gaiety." One is so content that he sleeps. The other and his "half-closed eyes" become the fulcrum of the rest of the poem: another manipulation of time occurs, this the most startling and moving, a stunning close to Wilbur's elegy. Only the present adult narrator knows what the future would indeed contain — the landing craft in war (Wilbur's service in WW II), the canoe in peace (whitewater canoeing in Maine). Only he can imagine the last transport that "other" will ride, a voyage still in the future — "in good time," which reverberates with "In no time" and may feel that brief. The unswerving images in the final lines have been "deft" themselves in moving us with the personal even as they remove the "you" speaker/poet from the images: it's the "other's... eyes" seeing what might happen to him. By the final line, the poet is twice-removed, as what the other's eyes "might foresee" is the world, not himself, vanishing. Diction creates a brilliant leap, *flickers* throwing us back to the "lambent table" and "candlelight" of the first panel of this triptych, bringing us full-circle. (Prospero's "Our little life is rounded with a sleep.")

Each section of "This Pleasing Anxious Being" manipulates and explores time — how we hold the past in memory, how we preserve the past externally, how we accept the only part of our future we can foresee with certainty. First, we remember by attention through the senses — with visual, auditory, kinesthetic imagery; and by *taking* time: "Rest for a moment in that resonance." Second, we preserve time through art — the photograph, the painting, and implicitly, the poem. Third, like the boy with "half-closed eyes," we "might foresee" events or experiences to come in our lives; but in fact we can't, except for the ultimate event unimaginable to the child distracted by immediate delights of the world. Introducing the final image of the poem, the words "in good time" — when right and proper — indicate acceptance of mortality, perhaps based on the life embodied in the poem and on religious faith. Construed as urging patience, they too return us to the first part of the poem, the "fiercely impatient" child eager for time to pass, releasing him from the table. Irony also comes full circle.

At the outset I noted the blank verse form Wilbur has chosen for this poem, one obvious mark of his departure from Gray's elegy. But the label inadequately describes the intricacies of this master's formal dexterity. Scansion begins to reveal the complexity and variety of Wilbur's music. Among the metrical substitutions I found most effective were double iambs and spondees, both featuring two consecutive stressed syllables. Greater weight is assigned to such syllables, emphasized both in utterance and idea. Such syllables also influence tempo, how poetry progresses musically. Weight and *andante* (or *adagio*) measures befit the elegy: lines 51, 52, and 53, each beginning with a double iamb, together suggest a force both cumulative and implacable, admirably suiting the sense of the poem's final line.

Punctuation and caesurae also affect tempo and emphasis in the poem; more terminal punctuation in part one than in either succeeding part causes those lines to move more slowly, to "Rest for a moment" in memory. By contrast, part three — which reverses the proportion of enjambed to end-stopped lines and concludes with a nine-line sentence — creates the opposite effect, propelling the lines toward the inevitable. For caesurae in other positions, consider line 9 with a medial caesura, "When will they speak, or stir? They wait for you," enforcing a significant pause. Line 28 contains another noteworthy caesura, lengthened by the double punctuation mark: "Distracted as they are by what? — perhaps" as the speaker pauses to imagine something beyond the photograph. The full-stop in line 46, "One is asleep. The other's half-closed eyes," marks a crucial shift in perspective of the remaining lines, the last sentence of this remarkable poem.

Though a meditation on mortality, Richard Wilbur's "This Pleasing Anxious Being" dwells not on nothingness, but on *being*. Everyone lives in the poem: the grown-ups' chastisement lies ahead; one representative wave lasts in art; the car reaches its destination; the "other" survives WW II to go whitewater canoeing, safely, in Maine. "The world will swim and flicker and be gone" but not here. In this poem the world will go on — living in Wilbur's language, memories, music — as the poem lives in the world.

DANTE ALIGHIERI, *INFERNO*, CANTO 25 [THE THIEVES]

The thief, when he had done with prophecy,
made figs of both his lifted hands, and cried,
“Take these, O God, for they are aimed at Thee!”

Then was my heart upon the serpents' side,
for 'round his neck one coiled like a garrote
as if to say, “Enough of ranting pride,”

And another pinned his arms, and tied a knot
of head and tail in front of him again,
so tightly that they could not stir one jot.

Alas, Pistoia, why dost thou not ordain
that thou be burnt to ashes, since thou hast
out-sinned the base begetters of thy strain?

In the dark rounds of Hell through which I passed,
I saw no spirit so blaspheme his Lord,
not him who from the Theban wall was cast.

He fled then, speaking not another word,
and into sight a raging centaur came:
“Where has that half-cooked sinner gone?” he roared. [...]

I watched a vile, six-footed serpent dart
toward one of them, and then, with never a pause,
fasten itself to him with every part.

It clasped his belly with its middle claws,
its forefeet clutched his arms as in a vise,
and into either cheek it sank its jaws.

The hindmost feet it dug into his thighs,
and twixt them thrust its tail so limberly
that up his spine its clambering tip could rise.

Never did ivy cling so to a tree
as did that hideous creature bind and braid
its limbs and his in pure ferocity;

And then they stuck together, as if made
of melting wax, and mixed their colors; nor
did either now retain his former shade;

Just so, when paper burns, there runs before
the creeping flame a stain of darkish hue
that, though not black as yet, is white no more.

The other two cried out to him they knew,
saying, "Agnello, how you change! Ah me,
already you are neither one nor two."

The two heads now were one, and we could see
two faces fuse in one blear visage, where
no vestiges of either seemed to be.

Four forelimbs now combined to make a pair
of arms, and strange new members grew in place
of the bellies, legs, and chests that had been there.

Their erstwhile shapes were gone without a trace,
and the monstrous form that was and was not they
now moved away with slow and stumbling pace. [...]

. . . listen now
to what I saw. Let Ovid not relate

Of Cadmus and of Arethusa, how
they turned to snake or fountain by his grace;
no envy of those feats need I avow,

For he never made two creatures, face to face,
so change that each one let the other seize
its very substance, as in the present case.

Incited by their mutual sympathies,
the serpent caused its tail now to divide,
and the wretch pressed together his feet and knees.

His legs and thighs adhered then, side to side,
soon blending, so that nowhere, low or high,
could any seam or juncture be desried.

The cloven tail took on the form that by
degrees the other lost, and now its skin
turned soft, while the other's hardened in reply.

I saw the armpits of the man begin
to engulf the arms, while the beast's short forelegs grew
by just that length to which the arms sank in.

Its two hind feet entwined, and turned into
that member which by mankind is concealed,
and the thief's one member branched then into two.

Now, while the smoke by which they both were veiled
transposed their hues, and planted on one crown
the hair that from the other it plucked and peeled,

The one arose, the other toppled down,
and each, still grimly staring, set about
to make the other's lineaments his own.

The upright one drew back his upper snout,
and from his brow the excess matter ran
downward, till from the cheeks two ears grew out;

Then the nether remnant of the snout began,
out of its superfluity, to make
a human nose, and the full lips of a man.

The prone one thrust his jaws out like a snake,
and at the same time drew his ears inside,
as a snail retracts its horns for safety's sake,

And cleft his tongue, that once was unified
and shaped for speech. Then, in the other's head,
and forked tongue healed, and the smoke could now subside.

The soul that had become a beast now fled
hissing away; the other, who had begun
to speak in sputters, followed where it led. . . .

(trans. Richard Wilbur)

MY HEART WAS ON THE SERPENTS' SIDE:
RICHARD WILBUR'S TRANSLATIONS

Toward a new version of Dante's *Inferno* for the Ecco Press, in 1993 Daniel Halpern invited twenty American poets to translate individual cantos. Despite the anomalies of the concept — its discontinuities in the service of a whole — , the project was entirely plausible, and the final results surprisingly eloquent, even downright useful. There's biographical evidence that, like Chaucer, Dante composed in clusters, stretches of related cantos with shared themes; in fact, Dante's images, tones, and philosophical concerns can change, from canto to canto, making the whole poem perilously discontinuous. This tendency is especially strong in the *Inferno*, in which the language of the sinners is tricky. Each sinner — particularly the memorable, passionate, vividly-human ones — seems stalled in the language of the sin he chose, on earth, and so each canto assumes an individualized rhetoric and tone, as each sinner speaks for himself. There's a psychological stasis at work (by what denial does each persevere in his sin, remaining unchanged and oblivious despite the evidence of hell all around him?). Yet a constant mode of change works through the poem, as Dante-the-poet records his various encounters with the sinners in sequence. The changes in the sinners' verbal self-justifications are how Dante-the-poet recreates the experience of Dante-the-pilgrim. The sinners remain static, but their languages and self-delusions and punishments keep shifting and changing: there's the real journey through hell, and there is where the truly risky pitfalls lie, in the changes.

Halpern's translator-poets for the most part chose their own cantos to render. Seamus Heaney did the early sections — a doom-eager Dante impatient to get on with the journey into hell. Robert Pinsky, working Cantos 20 and 28 (the Fortune-tellers, the Sowers of Discord), anticipated his own *Inferno* that was to come a year later — a readable, fluid, reader-friendly account of a continuous journey. W. S. Merwin, who would produce an eloquent, lyrical *Purgatorio* in 2000, supplied Cantos 26 and 27 (Evil Counselors, including Ulysses).

Richard Wilbur did the bolgia of the thieves. Or rather, with Canto 25 he did the second half of the bolgia of the thieves, who are bound with snakes and are transformed — either burned by fire or bizarrely fused, even with serpents, becoming creatures neither fully human nor fully reptile. The canto opens *in media res*, carrying over a moment from Canto 24. There Vanni Fucci was immolated in a fiery blaze — then abruptly returned to his body's form, a parody of a phoenix, to undergo more punishment. 24 had ended with Fucci's vision of Florence's future, an account intended to hurt and frighten Dante: "there you have it, may you die of grief." In a rage of insult, then, Vanni Fucci ignores the boundary between the sections and blazingly continues into the opening lines of 25:

The thief, when he had done with prophecy,
made figs of both his lifted hands, and cried,
"Take these, O God, for they are aimed at Thee!" [...]

He fled then, speaking not another word,
and into sight a raging centaur came:
"Where has that half-cooked sinner gone?" he roared.

It's a great infernal moment: the section opens as a magnificently arrogant sinner gives the finger to God. The human drama is saturated with irony (Fucci can accurately foresee the future, but he can't see beyond his own pride). And the scene does have its grandeur, even as Fucci's Byronic resistance gets crushed:

Then was my heart on the serpents' side,
for 'round his neck one coiled like a garotte
as if to say "Enough of ranting pride,"

And another pinned his arms, and tied a knot
of head and tail in front of him again,
so tightly that they could not stir one jot.

The winding snakes tie up the sinner, in a way that recalls how his thievery and his unrepentant blasphemy — and his obscene

hand-gesture — have had the effect of “tying his hands,” fixing him defiantly in his sin and in his station. He’s less himself, not more, because of his resistance — just as, structurally, Dante’s story of the bolgia of the thieves “spills over” between Cantos 24 and 25, straddling the gap between sections. They burn to ash and reappear, in a moment. What’s at stake in the punishment of thievery has to do with split loyalties, language-merging and transformations, the instability of bodies and of identities. Theft, the appropriation of someone else’s possessions, begets more transformation, through a continuous erosion of boundaries (linguistic, structural, physical). The punishment, as is often the case with Dante’s *contrapasso*, is a manifestation of the sin; later in Canto 25, snakes violate thieves’ body-integrity, melting I and It together. And the sin continues because the sinner perseveres in it, binding him tighter but making him less himself, as he eloquently changes shape with another being, “two creatures, face to face” melding “so that each let the other seize / its very substance.” “Thus did the cargo of the seventh abyss / change and re-change.”

Wilbur’s translation of the canto was included in the Ecco collection, and with minimal revisions he has included it in subsequent books of his own lyrics. (The Ecco book had printed all its translations with no extra spaces to delineate stanzas; Wilbur later spaces the stanzas.) It’s the last poem in *Mayflies*, that magisterial collection that stands with only a few others (Keats’ odes come to mind, A. R. Ammons’ books of the late 1990s, Stanley Plumly’s *Old Heart*) as testimony of lyrical grace in the face of diminishment and personal mortality. In the original edition of *Mayflies* (2000), and again in the reprinting of that volume in *Collected Poems 1943-2004*, the Dante canto concludes the book. It’s bracketed with a sparkly translation of the Prologue of Molière’s *Amphytrion*, in which Mercury and the goddess Night meet to gossip about Jupiter and his transformative tricks: he changes into animals and into clouds, to visit humankind and to seduce human women. Wilbur in fact gives the two translations the subtitle “Transformations” (balancing the subtitle “Changes,” which names the other poems in the book).

The Dante translation comes to represent, I think, something about Wilbur's practice of embodiment and transformation through translation. He's famous, of course, for his spectacularly lucid, witty, singable Molière translations (*Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope*), and for his Corneille plays, but his *Collected Poems* is rich with shorter lyrics from several Romance and Slavic languages. Throughout collections of his own lyrics since 1956 he's included versions of works by other poets, as alternate-voice and thematic counterpoint: Baudelaire, Jammes, Valéry, and Phillippe de Thaun in *Things of This World* (1956), Borges and Voznesensky and Akhmatova in *Waking to Sleep* (1969), Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Nina Cassian, and Valeri Petrov in the "Changes" section of *Mayflies*. In interviews Wilbur can sound both diffident and serious about the act of translation ("One thing I do when I find that nothing is coming out of me, is to turn to translation," he tells William Packard, " — a risky thing to do, of course, because translation is easier to do than your own work"). And yet the elegant specificity of his translations registers an affection and a relentless, even stubborn, attention to the craft — just as Wilbur's placement of the translated poems in the collections of his own poems makes rich subordinate themes in those books. In *Mayflies*, for instance, the French translations make an argument about artistic form and the consolations of change and re-formation, while the other poems push deeper into realizations of mortality. Baudelaire's "The Albatross" weighs the life-cost of art, the un-gainliness of the mocked sea-bird on board the human ship:

The Poet is like this monarch of the clouds,
Familiar of storms, of stars, and of all high things;
Exiled on earth amidst its hooting crowds,
He cannot walk, borne down by giant wings.

And yet the Baudelaire poem finds nobility in the creature. In the translation-as-its-own-poem the justification of art, its leadership (as the albatross leads the ship) and its vindication, seem to me embedded in Wilbur's tight, elegant rhymes: clouds and crowds,

things and wings. Form is embodiment here, translated from an achievement of a virtual morality — rendering in a second body what had been clear but then displaced, rising above its mortal diminishments. It's an awkward process, this transformation, and many discussions of translation-theory eventually recall the Italian pun between "translation" and "betrayal" (*traduttore/traditore*). I suspect that's why Wilbur's figures of translation and transformation are often figures of somatic gawkiness and mutability (the albatross, the thieves whose bodies morph from one thing into one other, *voleurs du langue*, the classical god turning animal). And yet there's a kind of reciprocity at work, too. One cheers for both the snakes *and* the sinners; both traditions are changed and enriched; Vanni's daring is fierce for the moment; many humans welcome Jupiter's sexy, surprising arrivals on earth.

Nobody does this reciprocity better than Wilbur, registering the original with that uncanny accuracy of form that makes a new living "body" of work, enlightening both sides of the equation. There's a meta-wit involved, an acknowledgment of the difficulty by virtue of the sheer virtuosity, the diffidence, of the deployment. Other renderings of the Dante canto, for instance, make other choices — Pinsky honestly and honorably opts for readability and continuity, and so — because form is necessarily secondary — in effect he alludes to Dante's *terza rima* through slant-rhymes and consonantal-rhymes. At the other end of the spectrum, Dorothy Sayers' Anglo-Catholic commitments inform her choice to replicate Dante's rhythms and rhymes in an air of slightly-archaic Latinate periphrasis, even though those verbal indicators don't necessarily carry the same second-order meanings to readers of modern English. Wilbur's translations speak a contemporary idiom with only a slight tang of formal distance, a taste of verbal wit at the level of the line, that leavens the familiar gravitas and that echoes the structural ironies of the larger form. His translations seem to make the Eliotic argument that a good translation can change both traditions, opening new tones into the target language *and* changing our perception of the orig-

inal tradition. In Wilbur's hands, Molière's alexandrines become floating rhymed iambic-pentameter couplets in English. That change both adds something to the field of English-language possibilities and discovers a speakable accessibility of 17th-century French verse that hadn't always been clear before the translation.

I'm intrigued and moved by the elegance and magisterial simplicity of Wilbur's translations. One sees those values put to work in the service of wit and of social satire in the Molière stage-work, of course, but the Dante canto, in its metaphors of transforming bodies, in its verbal clarities and in Wilbur's rechanneling of it, comes to seem to me Wilbur's figure for translation itself, or for his theory of translation as ambivalent transformation. It's a gnarly process, by which one body is transformed into another. Eventually, with clarity and daring, one can accomplish a kind of rebirth even while one knows it's an "impossible" and brash undertaking...like giving God the finger. Look at Wilbur's clean full vowel-rhymes in the punishment of Fucci: side, cried, pride. They matter because they register Dante's clear-mindedness in the face of Fucci's provocations. Dante's three-line stanzas interlock (aba bcb cdc), the resolution of one pattern postponed to the middle of the next pattern. That algorithm repeats in small detail the organization of Dante's three-part universe, each part of which Dante can understand only in relation to the others (thus Virgil gives way to Matilda-Statius, and Virgil-Matilda-Statius to Beatrice). To praise Richard Wilbur's translations for the lucidity of their rhyme-patterns and the limpidity of the rhythms is, in this sense, moral praise: his practice measures how language can stubbornly "transform" and re-embody us, from small detail to larger scope. In this sense Wilbur's use of translation, and the implied morality of accurate form, repeats for me the argument of some of the most moving of Wilbur's own poems from *Mayflies*. One thinks of "Children of Darkness" for instance, a poem ostensibly about toadstools which takes us to demonic places and which eventually, without sentiment, judges that even this repugnant life form, in its imperfect body, can seem beatifully "good":

Gargoyles is what they are at worst, and should
They preen themselves
On being demons, ghouls, or elves,
The holy chiaroscuro of the wood
Still would embrace them. They are good.

Jon Loomis

CONSPIRACY THEORY

It starts with a flash, and then snow —
dither of sparrows, winter clenching its teeth.
One day you're out walking: your shoes

sink into the pavement, the white van
pulls up to the curb. Of course
they deny the whole thing, whoever they are

in their joke-shop masks: one like Reagan,
one like Felix the Cat. *You worry too much,*
they tell you, adjusting your chains. *It's bad*

for your health. You nod, keep your mouth shut.
The snow smells like smoke. The sparrows
rustle their leathery wings.

IMPLAUSIBLE TRAVEL PLANS

He said, the water down there, it's so clear
you can't see jellyfish. That indicates
nothing, I said, and he said, I don't care

is the hardest line to deliver in all of acting,
as though he knew of an acting laboratory
where researchers developed hardness scales

and spattered across them devastating fragments.

Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven.

I liked to rehearse my Ophelia during blackouts,

the traditional time to make the worst mistakes
and, later, soften the story. Nothing working
but the gas stove. God, I felt so bad

that time we used the crock instead of the kettle
and watched it smoke and shatter. I was the one.
I was the one who wanted stupid tea.

A CUP, THE AMOUNT OF BLOOD IN A HUMAN HEART

You've grown a beard.
Stay out of dreams, or you'll mean something.
Stay close. I've kept your secrets,
haven't you heard?

You won't dispose
of sapped batteries, for fear they'll leak.
You retire them to a drawer,
where they are near

the unused ones,
and can't be told apart, and so you
are forever trying to spark
what doesn't give

a spark. Snapping
them into the kitchen clock, reading
the same wrong time of day, do
you think of me

and ever, for a little, let them stay?

David Dodd Lee

THE BONE SCULPTURES

You, you're undignified

like a logo

or high interest rates

Far from here, mint overpowers the must of leaf decay

Oxygen —

green as the inside of a glacier...

And the mist nets hang full in the understory, like Spanish moss

I like how you thought you knew everything

Ornithological

birds have no souls — we know that

they don't do much grieving

they can't write a check

or a detective novel

What the hell is this thing, and a wren pecks at a shiny table fork

It's almost 9:30

and I'm tired

I keep dreaming you and mother are trapped on a ship

surrounded by

a hundred other

burning ships

THE PAST

My mom had enough *élan*, yea, enough sense after all

She was surrounded by dopes

And then you'd come swimming up in the Ford Fairlane . . .

I think it was Mrs. Dempsey needing badly
to do some weekend "Hoovering" . . .

We sat like logs in a retention pond, the sun on our noses

But wasn't that you we saw with your fourteen year old fist in an
ashtray?

Could have been

Right after I carved the scowling face of Baudelaire into my girl-
friend's bleeding stomach

I don't recall my mother prancing for anyone

And therein lies the problem

Or not

We'd laugh until we cried watching the neighbors go on with
their lives

"I'll phone you"

You do that

SPLASHES

The splashes on the
mirror the crumbs
on the eaten-off
table no
message the
bones in the pail
not even a
threat in the half
open window four
months now of winter the
canal in the fog
in the pool
covered with ice no message and
definitely no threat the foot
not even set on the first
step the
suction in the cellar and an-
nounced by beetles
but black and shining
the leather of the seat in the
creaking elevator and on the
mirror the splashes

STILL LIFE

And the cracked egg the
burning house and the taxi
with the body in the back seat the
snails on its
forehead and cheek
on the jetty the ribs
of the ship on the beach the
dead birds smeared
black the bones
in the crystal coffin
mounted in gold and pearls
crowned with rubies the flowers
yellow the broom and the
ladyslipper purple the smoke
from the chimneys bent
over the roofs the dog dead
in hole in the ground the locomotive
rusting on the overgrown tracks the angel
with the drawn
sword on the top
of the tomb the ripped
open chest the heart
aflame the wind
hard and sandy coming from the
dunes the flowers
monkshood and dragon's comb buried
under thistles the bursting
stalks and out of the
cloudcuff
the hand with the rose

THE TRUNK

You can scarcely breathe now. The other children have left the attic. You hear your name from the steps. Something's pressing hard into your bottom. A dog died here years ago. Faster than you. You're still pressing against the top of the trunk and can breathe some more. But your arm is too weak.

In the night you'll still hear someone coming to fetch the mask of the male gardener, the mask of the woman gardener too from the cabinet. But no longer will you call out, no longer press against the top of the chest. You'll still hear the rustling, the tittering. And then, before you suffocate, the rasping, the rustling, the tittering coming up from the steps.

THE PLATE

Take the plate from the table,
carry it through the chambers.
Don't be confused by the dust,
the spider webs, the sawdust.
Not by the old
poison, by the bacon,
which smells in the mousetraps.

Rest on no armchair, it'll break,
its feathers sticking you in the butt.
Keep going through the rooms, don't
spill the soup; not till you reach the end,
where the portraits of the dead
czar and czarina, almost
unrecognizable by now, hang below
panes covered by dust, there, in the last
chamber, put the plate down in the ashes: eat!

translated by Stuart Frieber

TRANSLATION OF SCENT

The elephant's pal Loneliness
won't leave him
alone. When the elephant doesn't want to
talk, Loneliness calls him on the phone.

Our bodies are spectacularly
unprotected — no claws.

The bunny, an actor,
pretends her audience is a brick
wall, a body of water,
an ancient land mass.

She tries to think of her body as home,
is famous for talking dirty.

The terrier is a policeman
who has no idea how to love
unless it's by tearing
someone to pieces.

The animals are in charge —

The cat is a little boy named
Mr. Jefferson; he's kind of fat,
yellow with white stripes and one bad
eye. He used to live at 502 NW 2nd Ave.

Cats don't like to travel —
oh, the dreadful wind and rain.

John Gallaher

THE BRIDGE AT REST

The bridge is dreaming again.

In favor of the present moment,
the bridge is dreaming
or we're dreaming of a bridge.

Cables in great arcs.

This is where I sit
with the convergence. How full
the everything else, where the traffic moves through
certain days,

rows above rows
and circling sky.

The bridge is dreaming of people
in great arcs.

I read it in the newspapers.

One calls it "leaping"
and one calls it "jumping." One calls it "to pour,"
and one calls it "to fill."

And it's two worlds.
The direction called Getting There,
where they waited and waited.

So that now
your body is most things
over the city,
in favor of the present moment.

And what are we going to say then?

THE FIRST CHANCE I GET I'M OUT OF HERE

In the dream you had
you died
and then you awoke.

I had to draw the line, as there
is a corridor between all things.

The lighting is always too dim.

How else could we find ourselves
outside the story of us,
where the evil twin or the ugly twin
or the twin who is damaged
is walking back and forth above you
in the attic
talking about America.

For all things we want to say
there is an inexpressible center.

So what is there to do
but to climb the stairs
with this hatchet?

INCURABLE CLOUD

Don't know why, but the dog is barking.
Rain pesters the roof,
faint but incessant, like shame.
In the dark I see the tall posts
but not the wire fence that separates
the vineyard from the road.
The eyes are not doors. They
are small containers.
They cannot hold the moon,
but they hold its flare.
They cannot hold the departed,
but they hold their names:
Dom, Julius, Caroline.
Under a balcony, where it is dry,
someone has dragged two chairs
and left them. Fallen
from the elms, leaves curl
into empty cups, pale basins.
I cannot love what doesn't
fret or crumble or grow cold.
I cannot bear to love what does.
Wind rummages through the screen.
Lying under a blanket, I close
one eye. The room closes the other.

REVISION

After she left he made a habit
of her black windows, her dim lilacs.
Jade knives clattered on the fig tree.
He watched her house as though he

was watched, stumbling, trying to keep
his pace. He traced her from the extras
of his dreams, dinners, pacings.
His big work, a map of the inside of the earth,

grew dark with erasure. Facing the day,
his thin ships hesitated
to declare their sea, to follow
the dark gray current.

He took the children to the wide shore
where oranges were washing up two by two,
the herons occasionally lifting a knee,
winter and the ships farther out,

open-handed trees, open holds, explaining
how one knot undoes its brother,
his daughter counting the frozen oranges,
is this ours or are we waiting —

and later, the silvery hive, the front-page wreck.

CONFESSiON

I used to pretend the ceiling was the floor.
Room for everything, window seats
on roof beams, corners and corners
of untouched chairs. I haven't told you
how I loved the Spiegel catalog — husband
in new robe, wife on banded ottoman — or how
I faked my way through office job
after job, the boss's approach triggering
my blind clamor on the keyboard,
gamble of letters the sound of quick work.
(His retreat, my hand on the backspace.)
All this backpedaling and you wonder
what was really there. Ottoman
ottoman. The beauty of an unwalked floor.

A DREAM OF PARSNIPS

Do I wish for a box of cigars — or dynamite?
Do I wish for the earth's dense smell of earthworm?

Do I wish for
the standing-outside-his-lit-office-window-at-2:00-in-the-morning

as only a sophomore can stand? Do I wish
for Grandma Ida's table or the *prix fixe*?

For the researcher herself who believes:
“that dreaming is not a parallel state but consciousness itself,

in the absence of the senses' input”?
Given the various explanatory projects,

I *do* wish that wishing would take care
of whatever calls up an object so spare and spectacular.

A DREAM OF A PILLOW

Zealous beast or mother,
zealous marshmallow, zealous feathers.

Although the neuroscientist

does not declare in print, *So what,*
she believes that the brain

observes props and scene
in a lucid watchfulness

which may play out proverb or verse
or be utterly meaningless.

Zealous codeine. Zealous noose.

Amit Majmudar

CONTROL+ALT+DELETE GHAZAL

Remember everything and you remember nothing.
Paper and pixel teach us to remember nothing.

The dead archive themselves online. No one is watching.
What will the unborn do? Remember nothing.

So many strings around so many fingers—
Our hands, choked midnight blue, remember nothing.

The botanist slides out his field guide. *These are called...forget-me-nots.*
We Sharpie nametags for our lovers, who remember nothing.

Burn all the drives and archives. Set the histories to music.
God knows what we'll retrieve. Or does God, too, remember nothing?

AS WE UNDERSTAND THEM (I)

The souls of wooden ducks
(no need to believe in them)
Stir the sublime pond.

Crusted, hunted over, algae-gowned,
Whipped by water weeds,
The succulence of cows' lips,

The retired rafts leave the family.
The touch of a muskrat, the shove
Of a swan, fur muffs

Of willows, the nuclear plant's
Corset against the clouds —
The straight guns, the geese that could land

Where I put my life,
The decoy, used
To bring flight to its murder

And murder to our mouths.
But, retired, the wild shapes
Seem to act out of belief,

Something learned out of all that floating,
And the good waters swim,
Courtesy of their souls.

AS WE UNDERSTAND THEM (II)

Does the sacred stand,
Front hooves on the fence
As a goat does — smelling your salt, tasting your oil,
Bleating to the attention of your hand?

The awakening that *was*
Cannot compare
With all the instants
Time can herd into its whole.

Is the manger preserved?
A boy at the country fair
In the lamb fields
Watched them shear
Year after year.
And still feels he's a boy.

After his death
The fair opens its gates,
New children, sucklings,
Clean straw.

There are songs of the pigs,
A chorus of sheep: Let us record
Sacred music.

ON THE MISSISSIPPI AT NIGHT

Not anchored to anything, we drift
between polarities — Iowa equal

to Illinois — pulled by the surface
we slide on, pulled the same, we think,

by Antares or our own atoms,
our skiff a clutter of gear we feel

more than see, our Coleman lantern's
reflection shiny as a tongue-stud

in the current. We'd intended
the inconsequential catfish & got bug-bites —

no-see-ums & mosquitoes that we breathed
in, breathing out canned repellents our bodies

had not evolved enough to make.
We'd intended slough, & now, motor up,

Crawford, one foot out in mud, pushing,
we're into the quibble of little creeks,

waste drains, & noble tributaries,
all of the participant watershed, then out

into the concepts *Upper Devonian Sea*
& *continental drift*. Open river — damned to any

elision in the humid dark, any evolutionary debt —
mother's father's bad eyes, eczema, floating

debris, all the *insteads* & their parodies, Ernst's German
bride lost (1878) Ellis Island. But what else

did we lose: stink bait first & the dog-paddle,
a pageantry of civilizations reduced to lit-up Dubuque

& across the river's mile of dark, East Dubuque.
Crawford drags an oar, which turns us to Iowa in

a slow spin; with a Crawford whisper & chuckle,
he oar-spins us to Illinois, pulling up his cooling six-pack

like a last anchor.

OPEN HOUSE

The realtor's whistling through the spacious rooms.

Everything's so new — floors, carpet, paint — as if just created.

There are cookies on the plexiglass tray. Coffee and tea.

There are flowers on the mantle. She wants us to feel at home.

A puzzle of a forest, unassembled, lies on an end table.

We pass a small box to each other. The last one

sets it down. Inside is a model of this house. We

all peer down a long way to see. Now a child lifts

the roof off. Inside are figures just like us. Our breaths

make clouds. This is the way our lives start. This is the way they go.

HORIZON

In a house built of living

supers. Honey's

to describe the gold

mouse viced in

from the power

dusted. Reyes once led

stole it. Next

window. We were

up to our

water striders across

pond. Vast

Her body now

mud. Outside,

dawn & dusk licked

avarice in an owl's

talons. Three months later

line. Of sight: Mt.

his horse to its

day woke, its

neighbors on the acequia

knees, we cleaned

an eddy, or the Milky

emotion. Finding that

gone, opened like

bees hived in white

from combs. How

eyes? Headless field

one hung dead

San Antonio's caldera snow-

base. Said Quetzacoatl

tongue rasping his

madre. Mud

weirs. An argosy of

Way feathering a cow

letter, its half-ounce.

a church for me once.

ISLAND

Common egrets, full blown blues will show
at snow crop.

Spring weeds the lame we settle
for clouds.

Heel prints go deeper.

Bottom feeder resembling more and more
your father.

His mouthy death. Island talk.
Maybe my last mirror.

So I tack over where the North River sprawls
her brown jacket, buttoned tight.

Only working boats left out snug roped
through the carved moorings.

The yellow mist pouring down on Damon's Point.

WHEN WE

When we rise we waver, knuckle-eyed, for hours before
the wakening.

Lazarus brought out in seconds.
Time was short.

Burn my eyes with a candle
flare. No more past.

Take me to the marsh and wash my feet.
No sight.

Let me smell the merganser
shifting his red hood his
plunging through spartina.

Who will be here cleansed and walk
to town
like Thoreau, stunned accurate
spreading the good news
of his own health for awhile, from the marsh.

Elizabeth Breese

SELF-PORTRAIT AT GLENDALOUGH

The blackberries are wet on the inside.

The wet Germans are smiling with wet lips in front
of St. Kevin's wet Kitchen.

The Miss Selfridge slicker is the bellman of my collar-
bones, letting in the flashflood.

My blackberry jacket bleeds purple. I go soaking
up headstones. They lean into no wind.

Busy roots blow underground. *Katherine* reclines
to see the underside of a beech

tree. I am what-are-her-bones-like-ing. Petite Kate,
probably. Kathy the Warbler perched on fingers.

Katie of the Lichens with her head in the sand.

That's me at Glendalough.

Me, again, in front of the Round Tower.

There is rain & there is rain. This is both at once.

In the monastic city, the cistern is a black bra.
My wet church has extra seating.

That's a drop of water, blurring me standing firmly
inside myself — an anchoress in the inclement tradition,

a Little Sister of Our Lady Pentax of the Graduation
Gift. I am fluid & filmy. I take that vow

to want to never leave. I take gravel rivulets
toward every roofless thing.

CALAMITY THE WAY I THINK IT

The radio is a brown jug
puffing world news over my shoulder.

I will hear it before I feel it; sooner
or later, a tornado will come

for everyone who knows
my love language is non sequiturs.

Everyone to the tub, where I shower
with my houseplants,

clog the drain & drown the burro's tail.
Everyone in the ditch,

cover your heads. I would be a dolphin
before even a benign shark.

You in the crawlspace, I am listening.
I am in bed developing safety

rituals with rose & cedar candles.
I hand crank my radio beyond

its lethargic batteries. Oh, Most National
Weather Service, be with them —

the lover who knows I hate cooking
for myself, who knows I get marooned

at the counter by a bag of lentils,
who knows, unattended, I only eat

Cheerios in pink yogurt.
The cousin with a therapy cat.

The friend with snowflake tattoos
on her neck. The parents.

Everyone in the basement with flash-
lights & important papers, everyone
lodged beneath the overpass
I am all ears & yours through the sirens

but I am certain it will end, sooner
or later, with me saying nothing to no one.

THE LORD OF THE FOREST

Once upon a time my kidneys quit.
Brilliant cysts outnumbered
them, time to quit.

My mom offered me her little one,
humble as a drip of water.
Welcome to our planet,

I told it, have some cold gin & one
pound of Twizzlers. My Lord,
it said, My Lord spoke

of real fruit juice, respect, barley,
sacrifice. Mine too, I said
on my death bed.

But the path of truth was littered
with girls & bright bottle
rockets. I tried.

+

Once upon a time an oak woke up.
A bottle rocket bit it,
it woke up.

Who bit me? griped the oak. Not
me, dreamed a maple.
Nor me, dreamed

a pine. Certainly not me, dreamed
a sycamore, high
& white as snow.

One bottle rocket had outwitted
the whole forest, time
to burn. But

before time the Lord of the forest
had offered his little one,
humble

as a drip of blood. You? they wept.

CARDIOLOGY

Seven years ago I bought a pair of crutches,
just in case. Each Sunday morning I practiced
walking with them, bent my left leg back
from the knee as if the ankle had been mangled
while stepping onto an escalator.

I also practiced with the other leg unable
to support its proper share of weight.

A surgeon sold hearts he carved from oak.

Some people have nothing to lose,
he said, sanding a pulmonary vein.

I cooked breakfast with an arm in a sling
made from an ill-fitting shirt. Yes, practice.

Once the beauty of the oak is absolute
the surgeon places it where a heart is required,
then sews with attention not typically lavished
on those who've lost everything.

Twice each week the phone rings
at three in the morning. I never answer.

Someone is practicing sad news, I'm certain.

An oak will one day grow from my heart.

No amount of practice can prepare you
for the first push through dirt.

BROKEN SONNET
Our Own Rumpelstiltskin

The storytimes were buoyant as far
as those things go. We never dragged
our only cow to market or found
a Jolly Rancher house (fluorescent
smoke curling from a Pez-rowed
chimney) or gasped at the squeaky man
who chose our first born.
And we never questioned how
a few beans could unearth the sky.
Our vows of fiction reigned.
In them, we learned the lows

from the lowers. Maybe, behind the scenes, Jack did
things and should've been devoured with Hansel too.
Those things we did
to sleep, wake up,
and pour our bowls of Cheerios.

That sun was a lid
to somewhere else.
We couldn't look
or knew not to.

We wanted names.
We watched the floor.

WHY I'M NOT PHOTOGENIC

The cruellest part of me is just inside my right eye:
petal-red, invisible.

This is our concession, our nightly Polaroid.
You always catch my turnaways.
I never let you see me
watching you brush your hair.

There's an overfocus, a submersion:
today a store window ogles me. I turn
and mannequins start undressing.
Tomorrow's rearview runs a world away.

Last night I saw you in the bedroom mirror
watching me. You tried to reach. You turned
and slid your jeans back on.
The moon was a boutonnière

on the mirror, in the mirror,

we pinned like a blind spot.
So many moons we wore:
sphere or sickle, radiant, magnanimous
and we couldn't bear to look.

ANOTHER LEGEND TO TUCK US IN

Elms are
elming above eaves

and all the attic
windows lit.

Passers-by loosen
a rope-colored mist.

Wind and wheeze
alert, a-sky,

sleep by sleep O
harm us not.

A doily that never moves,
keyholes leaking music

and all the windowed foliage
wounded, mute.

In days of lost brass keys
a peasant girl dropped

a single white lily

down an abandoned well.
There, she dreamed, by

and by, where all the evening
gowns hung beckoningly.

LOW WRANGLINGS, HIGH RESOLUTION

Bore me with your dreams. I can take it.
These tales will end where our lips meet, grammar
Gone in a kiss, even among the tongueeworthy.

I could be wearing my Amish barndoors pants,
My bowling shirt from the Thursday league. You could be
Fluttering in faux fur and semiprecious stones.

I love your tits like teacups, your mysterious hairdo.
When I hear the buzz and whine of the vibrator,
My heart revs up, warp speed in a school zone,

And the blood, kicked out, comes back for more
In its own slippery rhythm, its lather and glide.
I can take your tantrums and suburban nerves,

Your trash talk about the moon, those twelve candles
You light each night after the bourbon
Like a shrine to bad luck and wounded philosophy.

Maybe God Himself sometimes had second thoughts
About what He'd done, not the stars and waters,
But those two weak people who spoiled the garden.

In the vast scale of all that's gone before, I don't know
The ratio of pain to pleasure, or snakes to swans,
But my money's on the strange leeways of love.

ELEVEN A. M.

after Edward Hopper

Here's this interior by a man
(who was partly focused on getting
the slant of daylight exactly right)

with a long-haired woman staring out
of an apartment window —
with all her clothes off

but her black flats.

Perhaps those shoes
entice you into thinking she wishes
that the world were enough different

that an undressed thirty-year-old
could wait the morning out
and then, grabbing her handbag,

walk the fifteen minutes
to a decent automat
to have lunch without the ruckus

of people reacting as if exposure
were unnatural.

But she's oblivious
to your fantasy. And she's not

inviting anyone to sit close
in the empty chair. One hand
absentmindedly clasped

in the other, her body taken
for granted, she doesn't stir,
having no desire to venture farther

than she did when moved
to lean toward the light, engrossed
by the monotony outside.

BEDROLL

& then also a dude hunched over a skillet

i scorch
our tortillas

the moon coyly bares its phosphor
essence

we share chewable coffee

a black biscuit in the sierra tin

we like the moon
are loath

to rollout the mountains with nothing

to gnaw on

& i am unsure

or suit us
neither is the moon

who meanwhile nervously flips

a silver dollar

SPATIAL POLITIC OF THE RAPTURE

i

the millennial wreckage a pallet	our bedfellows	hunting dogs
elders bristle like grizzly furs in the roughage	low howl	resolutely filial amber burrs
of the bassist	the basest	the basset

ii

a bookman brought	me one	his intimations
this mortal	soul saw oases	a shepherd but
no talent i	& wandered often a valley	
	without a rapture map	i had
	had to find my self	myself

iii

i was of course curious	what it was i was
the murmurs were curt <i>he's the lone red lamb</i>	like a sockpuppet
the lesser	gods a hand in this cuter paints are keepers
	see husbandry

breeds for a history of twinning
i was unsure

what it was i was
a mirror *repurposed*

i was pawing
& found myself my self

MY MOTHER'S NIGHTMARE

She was at a church reunion
under the elm trees,
and all her potluck dishes,
her pies and her casseroles,
were leaving just enough room
on the long picnic tables
for everyone to dig in.

But no one was sitting down.
They were all still out in the sun.
They were just standing around
as if they weren't sure
what they'd come there for.
No one was laughing or chatting.
They weren't facing each other.
No one had brought horseshoes
or rackets or softballs.
The children had disappeared.

Without knowing why, she began
to dance by herself and sing
Schubert's "Die Forelle."
Her shoes and stockings were gone
and her Sunday dress, the silk one.
She flirted with a stranger
who apparently couldn't see her.
She took her corset off.

She walked down to the creek
and into it. She felt
the mud between her toes
and the trout around her knees.
She began wading upstream,
not looking back, not hearing
all the sudden shouting.

Mary Ann Samyn

A PAINTED SUN

A harmless-enough-looking sun.

A sun of just three strokes.

And anyone can do it.

You think I'm kidding.

But not about this.

Also, sometimes I speak unkindly.

Snow blows in the open window.

A logical result.

Falling in love, similarly.

What can be accounted for has been.

Now you learned the lesson.

This is for real.

See: I'm squinting into it.

*SHARK SHARK SHARK, OR
WHATEVER IT IS THAT YOU WANT NEXT*

I had been slow to anger. I had been
slow, to anger.

Then, the beach curved as promised on the postcard.

Nothing to do with anybody.

And the children who had none
invented danger.

Likewise, for once I allowed my mind to wander.

Either way, ask me again in three months.

THE GOOD WITH THE BAD

A hawk in the yard.
Then, proof of the kill.
This economy — , my father says.
Agreed: it's tough all over.
What he means is *sorry* — .
Here, rain on its way.
There, the first flurries, maybe.

I am fine, I say.
He believes this, or doesn't;
another mystery keeps him awake.
I am mostly grown up.
His story is mostly awe.
One detail repeats each telling:
You wouldn't believe the feathers.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES ON
"A FEW NOTES FROM THE ELBHOLZ"

In this long poem, written two years before his death from cancer, Nicolas Born records his long walks through a landscape near his adopted rural home that is at the same time peaceful and threatened by development — some of a particularly dire kind — and so, for him, utterly charged emotionally. The peace it might afford recedes constantly in the face of his inner turmoil: "In the presence of all this, I talk to myself." His thoughts are colored by having just read the *Idylls* (1756) of the Swiss admirer of Theocritus Salomon Geßner, among the best-known German-language nature "poetry" — in Geßner's case mostly heightened prose — of the Enlightenment. The idealized landscape of the idylls is populated with the stock human and non-human creatures of the classic pastoral. Geßner is no longer read widely, and Born's reading him is characteristic: formed as a young poet in the highly politicized sixties, he had finally rejected the overtly political in favor of what he called a utopian poetry, conceding nothing to what he called "the delusional system, reality" and refusing to abandon innocent, primary, even childlike responses. Reading Geßner could only heighten his disillusionment at the current state of a once-pristine landscape.

The Elbholz is a stretch of wood- and meadowland along the Elbe in northern Germany, at the foot of a modest "mountain," the Höhbeck, that has at the time of the poem remained relatively untouched and even been emptied of earlier settlement. At this point the Elbe is, as the gray East German patrol boat reminds us, the border between East and West, and still an escape route ("green wool on the barbed wire") for some. "The land across the river" is a presence throughout the poem. The nearby West German town of Schnackenburg, nearly surrounded by the Elbe and the land border of East Germany, feels to Born like a ghost town. (The quoted prose passage at the end of the poem, which I have not yet been able to identify, recounts a journey through the region in an earlier day, conceivably from a letter written by Geßner.)

In 1973 Born and his family had moved into an old half-timbered, thatch-roofed farmhouse in Langendorf in the Wendland, the larger region of which the Elbholz is a part. Born had set about restoring the house, doing most of the work himself. He wanted to withdraw from the literary life, the endless drug-and-alcohol-fueled literary and political debates in the bars of Berlin. But little more than a year before Born took these late autumn walks in the Elbholz, the farmhouse, just at the point of completion, burned to the ground with nearly all of the Borns' possessions including manuscripts, letters, and photographs. Devastated but undeterred, they would start over, later, in another farmhouse in nearby Breese.

Nearly from the start the Borns had lived in the Wendland with the knowledge that a nuclear power center — the antithesis of everything the region meant to them — was planned there; early in 1977, the year of the poem, plans had been announced for an underground nuclear waste storage site — Germany's Yucca Mountain — to be built in the region. A large anti-nuclear movement arose, and though the waste storage facility has not been built, we still see news of protests as shipments of waste headed for temporary storage arrive by train and are transferred to trucks at a point not far from the Born home in Breese. Though tired and disillusioned, Born stepped forward to play a leading role in the early protests. In the following year came the diagnosis of cancer.

A FEW NOTES FROM THE ELBHOLZ

...

*Immediately after re-reading
Gefßner's idylls drove out
parked by the dike at the rooted foot
of the Höhbeck walked into the Elbholz
for five six hours, the next few days
also*

End of November 77

I'm picturing moments that extend
far out into space
i.e. pooled eternity that stands awhile,
small energies, I wrote

Walking through small-large HOMELINESS
(I can only call it)

broad meadows, the grass, frozen and sparkling
with frost, squeaks, the old forest
groans, and mist, rose-colored, rises
as if from camped herds

All of it not made of ideas,
wet black branches of these scorned oaks
rummage the sky

Pale reeds, basalt jetties, showers, as if dreamed,
from white grasses

Half under water the fences are sinking
green wool on the barbed wire
wooden shapes shift, freeze only when I look

When I heard the chainsaws screaming
I put on my rubber boots
and walked through a swamp where
the trees are trapped

A rustling like heaps of tinfoil, like blown leaves
on the avenue

Shutter cocked — now I can't
pursue or capture anything

Three emptied houses kneel at the dike
you walk as if among friends
you walk with deep steps through yourself

Wild swans — white sighs

Sunken Elbe rowboat, deep history in the silt
stacks of split wood
trunks endlessly tall with dark brows

Here I am where there are no
stamped-out horizons — pencil ice-cold
we lack the inner voice to cry out joy

How beautiful, free of foreboding, and I
have no peace, rushing though losses

Brown water in cart-tracks
oaks scarred all over — how strong and
how long already dead

— in the presence of all this I talk to myself —

The steeple far across the Elbe — watching

As if through the valley of the elephants. You see
bone-whiteness in the sand, tusks in the fern.
Sit on clawed stump, smoke
stare into water that's so pale

Young birches still holding their leaves
gray patrol boat holds course toward me
what holds the water-mirrors hovering
over the meadows

Duckweed on boot-tops
also on pants on fingers
on cigarette

No human could keep it in disorder
this clear jumble of what grows
what falls over itself. Layers
dark holes, scraps of mist
reedfields seething in wind

Light cloud, flesh-color,
clearing, bright windstillness, laid out beautifully
for a celebration there isn't

The contentment of coming home after
I glimpse only here

The surveyors' spears are unloaded
they carry out tripods. Through their optics
it's a shame for this just to be here.
Yellow helmets, yellow slickers — hateful,
I glare at them as if I were the only
one at home here

I'd sing out, annihilating, crushing
— huge organ in every wind

So wild-eyed I'd turn to stone
and be gaped at

I don't want always to rage and go away.
I said once, you turn cripple
if you stay angry at the times
and now I'm a cripple, not angry enough

In passing: this is a misunderstanding,
fundamental,
something not understood

But Elbholz, lovely sinking,
seemly meadows, souls of trees, birds
all taken from me and put on display

An "abandoned farmstead," half sunk
in mud
rolls of wire, overturned car hulks
rainbarrel, sagging shed
— left after the plague

When I die I want to be alone
no touching me, no wiping anything off
not a word
it should all look real

Thin land holds the hovering and
carries the carrying water, the birds

don't weigh much.
The dike leads into the hall of the rain

When sun shines, the wood expands
voices hum, feathers rustle
water shines into air, clouds so white
— the world closes up and goes
elsewhere

Nothing to see
— the Elbholz needs these moments
of emptiness, sinking into itself.
Small bubbles burst on rubber boots

After rain: how long it goes on running
and dripping, how everything finds a way
everything that's right

Sometimes the beauty is everywhere
the body pressed somewhere into its seeing
there's no axis, no point, everything
already formed, everything there and at the same time
vanished, thought-stilled

When I moved abruptly
the blue woods had come closer
the water gurgled under thin ice at the bank

Frozen split-hoof tracks, villages
thin banners of smoke, little windows
in the air

The peace in the countryside is often silent rage

Couple arm in arm with binoculars:
we give far too wide a berth
(to show there's room for all)
and a jealous greeting

A storm's path, splintered trunks
branches thrown down, shaken off
heavy breakage — in the long stillness
after the storm it doesn't
look like damage

Utterly peaceful afternoon air.
It gets dark soon, the land across the river
like a drawn bowstring

Get caught on the dike slope
with broken foot, talking to myself

Barges, sly and zealous by the smell.
Toward evening you see them sideways
as if left to themselves and the current
by Schnackenburg, which is a legend
(actually uninhabited, only *as if* inhabited)

"Provisions almost exhausted. The dike
led far inland and the first lights
shone and went dark again. We heard
water splash and spray, and dark
animals appeared in the clearing, listening,
still. The dike led around a wooded
point and then back to the river. Before us
lay Schnackenburg, still just reddish
in the twilight."

translated by Eric Torgersen

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RAY AMOROSI's latest book, *In Praise*, appeared recently from Lost Horse Press in Idaho. He is currently working on a new collection, *Lazarus*.

NICHOLAS BORN died of cancer in 1979 at age 41. "A Few Notes from the Elbholz" was apparently his last poem. His collected poems (*Gedichte*, Wallstein Verlag) was awarded the Peter Huchel Prize as the most important book of poetry in German in the year 2004. His translator, ERIC TORGERSON, is completing a volume of Born's selected poems in English.

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