

Poetry

Impartial Remarks

Maxine Cassin†

The editor of an important anthology recently wrote me that a certain writer was “not after all actively pursuing a career as a poet” and therefore not eligible for inclusion. Perhaps that statement should not have been puzzling to me in an age of specialization, an age in which there are no overlapping classes with membership—only null ones. No wonder then that there are few readers for a contemporary poetry so narrowly defined—much of it written in a private code decipherable only by those initiated via M.F.A. programs. At best the work of the brilliant maverick may be merely tolerated as a rather harmless intrusion into the realm of Serious Literature.

In founding the *New Orleans Poetry Journal*, Richard Ashman, physiologist, anthropologist, and poet, declared his intention to publish poetry both intelligible and humanizing. As his co-editor, I read and re-read early submissions by Charles Black. Three decades later I find myself still haunted by “The Others” and “The Flower Woman,” poems I can only describe as *inexhaustible*—or in certain instances even *transforming*, as in the relatively recent “Letting Go.”

For present and future readers who are ready to explore the range of Charles Black’s accomplishments, I am thankful that three collections—*Telescopes and Islands*, *Owls Bay in Babylon*, and *The Waking Passenger*—already exist. The *Selected Poems* hovers as pure potentiality—just in case anyone out there is listening.

† Editor and Publisher, New Orleans Poetry Journal Press Books. Author of *A TOUCH OF RECOGNITION* (1962) and *TURNIP’S BLOOD* (1985).

POEMS BY CHARLES BLACK

The Flower Woman

She was a battered leathery old woman.
 She carried a big board with gardenias and roses
 From bar to bar. I rarely saw a sale,
 But she must have sold enough to make it worth while.
 Just about midnight, when ideas are born,
 I saw her come in and got the whole idea
 In a flash. I called her over and stood up.
 I picked at her board and told her, "Give me a good one,"
 And I paid her, and I said, "I'll need a pin,"
 Just a little roughly, not enough for her
 To be sure of rudeness, just enough to sound
 As though I didn't see her there at all.
 Then, as you've guessed, I leaned down over her
 And pinned the corsage on her plain cloth coat.
 She took it quite hard. "Nobody ever, ever
 Before!" was the clearest I heard, again and again.
 All through the night she came back on her rounds
 And smiled through smoke and pointed at the flowers
 That were really hers.

I turned back to my table.
 Walter said, "That was a touch! You are a master
 Of the grand manner, boy!" and of course I saw
 What the whole thing had been about.

I think
 Maybe once a week about the flower woman,
 And I ask, "Would I have thought of it at all
 Or done it at all, just for the flower woman?"
 But the question now is only an exercise,
 A reminder only, for I know the answer,
 Or rather I know the question is unreal,
 For I see in the depth that comes of taking something
 Out and looking at it from all sides and in all
 Moods through the years, that I as well could be
 Trunk of an oak, a lightning bug in August,
 A narwhal, or a crow, or anything
 Said no to by the last cell of my blood,
 As I could have pinned those flowers on her coat
 Thoughtless, and to be thoughtless, of myself
 And of Walter and of the girls across the bar.

Even more: It's not as though I couldn't now
Hit a high C, or lift myself to the moon.
I would know how to try to do these things.
I could imagine myself having succeeded.
I cannot think of a step that I could take
Toward pinning on those flowers just for her.
I can only see the trap in ways that might
Seem plausible at first, for every one
That's not mere self-delusion and return
Of the same old thing by another door, might change
What after all is only vanity,
Silly, ridiculous, to something else,
Something altogether different and quite deadly,
Like a river that's a nuisance, and they build
Levees, and the river silts its channel higher
and breaks from height, and widely ruins and kills.
And this has taught me much about vocation,
For I think there may be other men who could
Have done what I could not, and I look for much
From the blessing of such, if there are, and I would call them
By their proper name, though tarnished now with use.
And I who never can pin flowers on
As they would do, let me accept my making
Other than an oak or a lightning bug, and look
To the door for the flower woman and be glad
If the wish to hear what Walter may say about it,
And the wish to hear what my insides say about it,
After all, quite unimportant in a way
Though everything in still another way,
Lead me to buy the flowers and pin them on.

The Others

Every man with a family and a fire
Has another family without a fire.

His family swirls in cracked leaves on the Circle
By the Park (How cold this wind is!) It diminishes
To nothing, down the smoked bluish perspective
Of avenues. It is crowded into waves
Packed by the gale (how cold!) across the river.

His family spent itself in the play of rain.
Now it lies in snow, in the blankness of plain snow
Under short suns, inexplicably melting
On sidewalks, drifting deep against a fence,
Clinging to the metal for rest as night comes on.

His children beckon in those crossing gusts
Under lamps, they dart in lights from sudden doors,
They have nothing to do with stars, but he can hear them
Against the fixed stars as they are blown away,
And he cannot ask himself what it is they are crying.

Letting Go

In process of letting go the breath,
Moment for relieving your eyes' ache,
You see bark patterns, a child's hand
Catching and throwing, next to the tree.

You have to relive all your days
To receive the gift of surprise
At words you didn't quite hear, once riding.
Do what you can; everything will come

In memory if never in experience.
Revisit, retell. Love sounds deeper
Out of time than in time. Act love
Imperfectly; you will remember love itself.

The Ones Who Died Young
for Bob Eckhardt

I am troubled tonight, Bob. There were so many
Who died young. They are all grown up now
In nothing or in a kingdom. Still,

May it not be a grace, this dying young?
There is no bound set then,
Nor anything much for which to answer.

We have lived our way out of the people
Who wonder who they are entirely;
There are matters to answer for. So be it.

But let us think of the ones who died young.
Only consider, Bob, when we are gone
Nobody at all will have seen their faces;

And who knows, they may be moved to plead
In their young voices, these young dead,
For yet some grace of wonder in you and me,

For sufficiency in our answers. Perhaps
They are the wiser by death, and know
That all of us die young, as they died.