

# The Devil's in My Neck



—More *Assays* on Zen & Poetry—



**Dane Cervine**

# The Devil's in My Neck

*More Assays on Zen & Poetry*

**Dane Cervine**

Inquiries of the author may be made to:

*Kado Press*  
c/o Dane Cervine  
153 Alta Avenue  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

831-706-8866

DaneCervine@cruzio.com

[www.DaneCervine.typepad.com](http://www.DaneCervine.typepad.com)

Copyright 2017 by Dane Cervine

-- All rights reserved --

***Kado Press***

# Contents

PREFACE.....	6
The Blue Ghazal of Zen.....	9
Nocturne for Failures in Meditation.....	12
The Big Black Car & The Wooden Goose.....	15
The Zen of Sewer Pipes, Restlessness, & Art.....	18
Dandelions, Armor & Thorns.....	20
The Loma Fire Koan.....	23
Koan of the Junkyard & the Whale Heart.....	25
Salt and Moon.....	27
The Secret of Secrets: Mud, Bone, & Infinity.....	29
Divagations, Oxbow, & Sinuosities.....	31
The Swamp, Innocence, & Aping Emptiness.....	34
The Shock of Blossoms in my Open Palm.....	40
This Useless Pilgrimage – The Twelfth Wonder.....	43
The Sound of One Dog Barking.....	47
Three Poem Zen.....	49
Your Original Face.....	52
The Big Feast.....	54
Turning Sixty.....	56
Every Navigator Fares Unwarned.....	59
Black Zodiac Koans.....	61
The Nature of Evil in Koanville.....	63
The Sacred in Ohio, & The Koan of the Key.....	67

A Prince, A Lion, & Desire.....	69
Disguised As Everything.....	71
The Hundred Bones & Nine Holes of Desire’s Paradise.....	73
The Entire Body is a Mouth.....	76
Blue-Prints for a Beheading—Following the Red Thread.....	78
The Blue Time Machine.....	81
The Dark Rose of Awakening.....	83

## PREFACE

*Writer person completely like monk. Poetry is your meditation.*

—the wise monk Tsung Tsai in George Crane’s *Bones of the Master*.

The odd title of my first collection of Zen meditations, *Elegy to the Bone Kimono*, is a poetic mix of the three poetry books alluded to in its first essay—illustrating the blending of boundary inherent in moments of practice and poetry. It also alludes to the way that Zen as Zen (kimono, tradition) is always disappearing, changing form—even the bones of it.

The title of this second book, *The Devil’s in My Neck*, is a similar bit of Zen provocation. It is the first line of a poem by Thomas Lux, which appears in the first essay, “The Blue Ghazal of Zen”. This quirky image reminds me of the Zen story about the meditator who can neither swallow nor spit out this “hot brick” of life. In the rambunctiousness of Western culture that Zen finds itself rooting-about in, it’s what bedevils us about *self, relationship, meaning* that haunts the simple breath of practice. It may take a bit of poetry, and irreverence, to let Zen do its work in this Western body. An enlightenment that welcomes what bedevils us.

Hence, these essays—or *assays*—to stretch both poetry and Zen worlds. To find the seams where they are sewn together as *one robe*, the classic image of the seamless life of non-dual practice. Poetics and meditation—not two, but one.

The term *assay*, similar but different than *essay*, is used by both Joan Sutherland, as Zen teacher, and Jane Hirshfield, as poet, to describe a contemplative form of written inquiry reflective of both Zen and poetics. To examine the characteristics of something, in this case through meditation and poetics rather than analysis of a metal or ore.

This book of assays on Zen, poetry, and imagination utilizes *metaphoric language* similar in its way to the use of *koans* in Zen. Joan Sutherland, a Pacific Zen School co-founder with roshi and poet John Tarrant, describes this approach to both language and practice:

Koans are metaphors...In classical Chinese, the original language of the koans, you don't ask *What is X?* You ask *What is X like?* ... Metaphors are polytheistic: my love is a red red rose, love is a dagger through my heart, love is blind, love is the opening door. Explanations are monotheistic: *love is a pheromone-triggered state neurochemically indistinguishable from psychosis.*

Metaphors and explanations have very different views of what truth is. Explanations settle things, put an end to the journey, which is sometimes a great relief and sometimes premature. Metaphors connect one thing to another, often in new ways, and the journey veers off in unexpected directions.

I am both poet and Zen practitioner. These essays reflect discovered Zen moments in poetry and the imagination, thus are a poetics of Zen more than a plumbing manual or set of instructions about how to screw the jungle-gym of the mind together. Years of mindfulness meditation have helped me build the house of practice by simply watching how I am made, by the hammer, saw, screwdriver of mind. Zen has helped me open the windows, let the breeze rustle through—step outside even, stand naked in the open field.

John Tarrant, who often utilizes poetry in his retreats as a kind of koan, speaks to this in his marvelous book, *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*:

Many psychological and spiritual approaches rely on an engineering metaphor and hope to make your mind more predictable and controllable. Koans go the other way. They encourage you to make an ally of the unpredictability of the mind and to approach your life more as a work of art. The surprise they offer is the one that art offers: inside unpredictability you will find not chaos, but beauty.

These essays are inflected, too, by the literary form of *zuibitsu*, or *Flowing Brush*—a classical Japanese form derived from the Chinese literary tradition that employs random thoughts, diary entries, reminiscence, and poetry. It emerged sometime in the Heian Period (794-1185 AD), first seen in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*, named so because she literally sewed a pile of secret notebooks into a pillow, kept as court attendant to Japanese Empress Sadako-Teshi.

These new essays in *The Devil's in My Neck* weave with similar intent—blending the threads of literature and practice, contemplation woven with daily life. Ruminations on the *whirl & whorl* of self in Zen practice, this little bugger that keeps

disappearing then appearing over and again—and the role of art in such practice. It is a cross-genre work, meant to paint in different modes of prose and koan, essay and assay; to include sources beyond traditional Zen's canon, especially Western poets & writers. Thereby to be as spry as Zen itself.

Still, while poetry and Zen may be woven together, one is not precisely the other. This is evident by example in the differing trajectories of Zen in Gary Snyder's life and poetry, where actual practice infuses both living and writing, and Jack Kerouac's life and poetry, where Zen as poetics and periodic altered state was girded more by wildness than actual practice, and in the end, alcohol more than meditation. Neither Zen nor Poetics can replace the other, even if they infuse each other.

Perhaps there is a version of the traditional Zen formulation of the relationships between Form and Emptiness that might help here: Zen is Zen – Poetry is Poetry – Zen is Poetry – Poetry is Zen. How's them noodles?

Dane Cervine  
Santa Cruz, California

2016

## The Blue Ghazal of Zen

I woke this morning meditating on melancholy, its color, its symphonies. Whether the feeling of being *blue* was something to get rid of, transcend, transform. Or whether, like the color blue, it is a vital part of the emotional palette—as in music, where the loss of *the Blues* would be sad indeed. Is there room in Zen for the blues of any ilk?

Of course, in the odd synchronicities inherent in such moments, I opened to these poems in *American Poets (Spring – Summer 2016)*, from the Academy of American Poets journal:

### Ghazal

Does exile begin at birth? I lived beside a wide river  
For so long I stopped hearing it.

As when a glass shatters during an argument,  
And we are secretly thrilled... We wanted it to break.

Always something missing now in the cry of one bird,  
Its wings flared against the wood.

Still, everything that is singular has a name:  
Stone, song, trembling, waits, & snow. I remember how

My old psychiatrist would pinch his nose between  
A thumb & forefinger, look up at me & sigh.

—Larry Levis

### Blue with Collapse

The devil's in my neck.  
Everything I hear is overviolined,  
even the wind, even the wind.  
It's like walking in nurdles up to my chest,  
squeaky and slow.

It's spring, the blooming branches  
nearly hide the many dead ones.  
A squirrel, digging for a nut upends my frail  
tomato plant and fails  
to replant it, even though he has the tools.  
I find this kind of squirrely oblivion everywhere.  
I was a man filled to the top  
of my spine, filled to the lump  
on the back of my head, with hope.  
Then I read a few thousand history books.  
Little, and nothing, perturbs me now.  
Even the beheadings, even the giant meat hooks  
in the sky, more frequent each day,  
bother me not  
a tittle, not a jot.

—Thomas Lux

A *ghazal* is an Arabic poetic form which expresses both the pain of loss, and the beauty of love in spite of that pain. It is a staple of Sufi mystics, and was often used by the poets Rumi and Hafiz. Its sentiment is perhaps akin to the Zen of appreciating the beauty of falling cherry blossoms, even as it expresses the cycle of inevitable decay.

Levis' poem is a *ghazal* of *exile*, of feeling marooned from one's self—yet, this very noticing is the proverbial beginning of a journey. As the poem moves toward its end—an act of meditation itself—there is the secret thrill of things breaking, the wing that flares in me, the trembling. It is how one finds the true names of things in their suchness, like *stone*, *song*, *waiting*, perhaps even the *blues*. Perhaps a glimpse of *Your original face before your parents were born*, which is likely to include more rather than less of me.

Still, this is the modern era, and the old psychiatrist in me just sighs—like a patient Zen master wriggling his nose at my furies. Perhaps taking my own nose between thumb and forefinger, twisting, shouting: *Can you hear it now? The blue sound of exile? The trembling of it? The thrill?*

∞

The second poem by Thomas Lux, “Blue with Collapse”, begins with a great line, *The devil’s in my neck*. Isn’t this how the human feels? Something ornery afflicts—life is *dukkha*, *suffering*, the Buddha realized. Yet it is too easy to hear the violins swell in the soundtrack of one’s spiritual quest. Or to hide from life in squirrely oblivion, holed up underground with my nuts and dead branches and piles of books.

Through practice, I can fill this human body *to the top of my spine*. Can sit or stand embodied in the hope and despair of it all—even the wide, scathing swath of human history. *Even the beheadings, even the giant meat hooks*. To be, *blue with collapse*. Yet this is it too, not a jot, not a tittle of life left out.

This practice of *poeting* is a kind of *koan* work, with Western obsessions and images universal in their root concerns. It is a way to develop creativity in one’s relationship with the dark concerns of life, as the Australian Zen teacher Susan Murphy speaks of in *Upside-Down Zen*.

Here too, the Chinese Taoist imagery of *Yin & Yang* remains a core influence in Zen, including within itself the dark *yin* of mood and *yang* of triumph in constant collision and dance. The whole of it, of myself, embraced—not amputated piece by unruly piece by the overzealous surgeon of the mind.

The devil’s in my neck, and the blue ghazal sings. What better tune could there be?

## Nocturne for Failures in Meditation

In keeping with this theme, I am happy (its own irony) to be exploring the role of mood and darkness in Zen practice. It is something Roshi John Tarrant has encouraged me in. It is something one of his fellow Zen teachers, Susan Murphy, alludes to: *how to maintain a creative relationship with the “negative” feelings that naturally come as a part of life.* That Buddha-nature, as every old Zen master worth their salt says, is as much the proverbial shit-stick or bag of rice as it is any amount of love & light.

Poetry always helps me here, since it is a meditative language that *requires* a certain melancholy of soul in order to exclaim the whole matter of living. This is not a consolation prize, though it may be a booby-prize, in that it is the prize I never quite imagine getting: my own life. Zen, and poetry, aim to include the whole enchilada—hot sauce and spice right along with the bland tortilla that makes the entire gustatory experience work somehow. Nothing left out.

In this vein, I peruse old poetry books as I sort them on my shelves. Find Bob Hicok’s *This Clumsy Living*, and these wonderful lines:

### Failures in Meditation

My car wouldn’t start.

I opened the hood and looked at the tea leaves  
of things connected to other things for awhile  
in Iowa for the first time.

Every few seconds another car didn’t go by.

The land was quiet as a table.

I had a pocket full of jerky.

The sky was firing on all blue cylinders.

I gathered rocks beside the road and made them rocks  
within the field by a sidearm motion...

The woman who stopped called me sweetie.  
She drove me in a pink Electra to a man of grease.

The man of grease drove me back to my car in his tow truck.  
He let me sit in my car as he towed it to resurrection.

I tried, during this flight, to feel once more  
my breath move in my body like a river, to not want any  
particular thing to happen.

But it did.

The quirky, humorous irony of this meditation reflects much of the Zen admonition toward “choiceless awareness” – not always “picking & choosing” between what I like and don’t like, want and clearly don’t want. Yet, as the wisest of Zen masters, the recognition in the poem’s last two stanzas that these unrelenting “failures in meditation” are *it* too. Repeated failure is how openness of mind and heart occur—it is the very mechanism and lyric of it. How else to find myself in the pink Electra of my life being driven to a man of grease, who’s willing for a small price to assist with my own resurrection?

Then there is this poem by the poet Jim Moore, from his book, *Lightning at Dinner*:

### **I Don't Think We Need to Know**

I don't believe we need to know what below zero feels like.  
Or why we die: that, too, I don't think we need to know.  
Why life is hard? I think not.

It's hot inside, it's cold out:  
that's already a lot to know. That love comes and goes,  
that we grow old slowly and then suddenly not.

It helps to know that snow is a god fallen to earth.  
Sometimes it helps to let in the world a bit:  
some wind, a few flakes, the sound of ice cracking.

Stars, for reasons we'll never know, help show us  
who on earth we are and how to bear it here and how  
far away we are from knowing why we are small.



## The Big Black Car & The Wooden Goose

Just enough of moon  
To make the smell of apples  
Light up the orchard

They smelt like roses;  
But when I put on the light,  
They were violets.

Richard Wright and his Paris haikus keep me company this evening. Just enough of moon to light my brain, let the smell of apples into the orchard of my heart. And as has been the case recently, my own life surprises me—*I thought these days were roses, but they are violets one day, wild weeds the next, but all in flower.*

There's something about *living* that continually surprises. Whether as Richard Wright finding himself in Paris, dying, writing thousands of haiku in the last years of his life after decades as a black political writer and gadfly in America; or just me, waking each day to the life I am, wondering what I'll find each moon.

Here's a poem from Lynn Emmanuel that says something about the surprise of climbing into a body, a life:

### Big Black Car

I thought, You'll never get me  
anywhere near that motor's flattened  
skull, the hoses' damp guts, the oil  
pan with its tubes and fluids; I thought,  
I'll never ride the black bargello  
of the treads or be locked up  
behind its locks and keys,  
or stare at the empty sockets  
of those headlights, the chrome  
grill so glazed with light it blurs—oily, edible, about to melt.  
You'll never get me into that back seat,  
the ruptured upholstery hemorrhaging  
batting is not for me, nor the spooky  
odometer, nor the gas-gauge letters

spilled behind the cracked,  
milky glass. The horn, like Saturn,  
is suspended in its ring of steering wheel;  
and below it the black tongue of the gas pedal,  
the bulge of the brake, the stalk  
of the stick shift, and I thought, You'll never...  
But here I am, and there in the window  
the tight black street comes unzipped  
and opens to the snowy underthings,  
the little white stitches and thorns  
of a starry sky, and there, beyond  
the world's open gate, eternity  
hits me like a heart attack.

The world, though in some ways known, remains uncharted for each person entering its wildness. While this poem is a great metaphor for sexuality and Eros, it's bigger than a single body or urge—for me, it's about incarnation, and mortality, and the fast-approaching open gate, or heart attack, of eternity. I feel it for my kids, now in their twenties, as I do for my wife and I heading into our sixties, and mother aiming toward her nineties.

I've been gnawing on Koan 41 in the *Book of Equanimity* – “Rakuho's Last Moments”. It's a longer story, about an old master who once was a “brash young monk” himself, trying to transmit something to a potential heir in Genju. But Genju replies, *I can't say it all!* Rakuho responds, *I don't care if you say it all or not!* Genju keeps saying *I really don't know*, to each penetrating thrust of Rakuho's, while the old master responds, *Tough, isn't it? Tough, isn't it?*

*Tough isn't it!* I like that this koan does not end nice and tidy in a sudden awakening. It is a very real encounter between two friends, one trying to leave a legacy, the other to find his own way. Just like families, or mentors, of all kinds. Later in the koan, Rakuho says to Genju,

*In the rapids of the steep ravine one toils in vain to release the wooden goose...*

The commentator says this amounts to telling Genju that he'll have to do it himself. The wooden goose is a piece of wood that is sent down the rapids to determine the

turbulence in the water so that rafters can plot a safe course. Here, Rakuho is telling Genju, “*You* have to do it. Don’t hold onto the wooden goose. Let go.”

*You’re the wooden goose. Follow the flow through the ravine. Do it yourself...*

Oddly enough, the commentator says that Master Rakuho ended up with eleven successors, but Genju wasn’t one of them. Perhaps he found his own way through the rapids, became his own wooden goose.

I will find my own way, too, in the big black car of each racing moment going who knows where! *Honk! Honk!* Wooden geese all!

## The Zen of Sewer Pipes, Restlessness, & Art

When I rolled over in bed this morning, my eyes landed on Dean Young's *The Art of Recklessness*, his astonishing book of essays on poetry. I flipped open to passages that, while reflective of writing, also reflect the *whirl & whorl* of self in Zen practice, this little buggler that keeps disappearing then appearing over and again—and the role of art in such practice:

Some things, like sewer pipes, we want to go only in one direction. But art that is at odds with itself, its own being, that contains seeds, signs, slashes of its own demise, embodies the conflicts of what it is to be alive...

The poem suggests that existence itself, its whole, is a blur, and we can only be aware of momentary vividness, of meaning as moment and its undoing...

While on one hand, the poet can never escape the self, the poem demonstrates that the self is not a fixed thing, rather a movement: a collection of arrived-at and abandoned impulses and conflicting conclusions...

The poem then is a record of its own unsettling, a trace of the mind's unsatisfied and unsatisfiable search for resolution, for escape, to know itself through self-creation and to unknow itself... For Keats, the poet is the self as the poem creates that self to record it, the poem is where the poet chases after that self only to enact a cycle of discovery (creation) and uncertainty (destruction).

Entering this day of solitude is to go in both directions at once, to be at odds with myself as a way of discovering, through signs and sewer pipes and new seeds, what it is to be alive. As the Pali-Buddhist word *anatta* suggests: its reference to the self as indeterminate, always in flux, entangled and enmeshed in the chaos of world & self. The whole of it may be a blur, yet its individual moments are one vividness after another—if I pay attention. Hence, the grinding stone of meditation: to sharpen the mind's edge through this circular motion of breath.

I love how Dean Young says that while the poet can never escape the self (nor the meditator, for that matter), that poetry, like a koan, opens us to a self that is more *movement* than a final *thing*. In meditation, as in the act of poetry, one finds through mindful awareness a self that is “a collection of arrived-at and abandoned impulses

and conflicting conclusions”. The mind, and the poem that traces its outline, a record of its own unsettling, rather than a sculptor chipping a final flourish on the statue of a finished self. To be ever unsatisfied and unsatisfiable is a kind of human song; to know oneself then unknow, to rest full in this restlessness: this, perhaps, a kind of Zen. Sewer pipes and art and all.

## Dandelions, Armor & Thorns

The weather has turned, again. Sprinkles of rain, cold air. I didn't sleep well, perhaps caught in the currents of yesterday's family gathering. In particular, feeling my limits as a parent, trying to listen deeply to my son Gabe's pathos upon turning 21. Seeing the world so raw as he tries to get his arms and hope around it. While *I* hope for him some measure of filter, some boundary, so the world doesn't eat *him* raw. Yet this is his genius, too, his path: this very rawness.

Of course, I remember my Zen: to welcome the world, to be host to each moment that comes, rather than armor against it. To feel one's permeable boundary between self and world more like silk than a crusader's chain-mail.

This morning I open to a poem by Jennifer K. Sweeney, from her book *How To Live on Bread and Music*:

### HOW TO MAKE ARMOR

Wear your bones like cold-rolled  
steel, skin hammered  
in brigandine sheets.  
Pound leather and shadow  
to a stiff segmentata.

Be corset-pinched.

Clad in devices,  
night will rise like a wound,  
duty bronzed to paldrons  
hulking your shoulders.

When your bad decisions are fused  
with chain mail and you're dueling  
in the silence of thieves,  
go at the world in stone.

Fear is a long-revered tradition.

In the carbon-dark, language

is harnessed in its helm  
as “order” from the Latin *ordo*  
means *closed circle*.

Be plate-sealed,  
protected as a priest’s halberd  
wielding against a cauldron  
of medicine.

Or lie naked in the dandelions,  
pained with sensation.

There’s something here of Zen, and perhaps my resistance to my son’s suffering, as well as my own. I want to protect. Yet, the armoring necessary, like the language of the poem, is so dense that you must *wear your bones like cold-rolled steel* just to make it through a day on this planet. Exist as a *closed circle*, so as not to be touched by this world. Or, as my Zen teacher might say, try lying *naked in the dandelions pained with sensation*.

The line between pleasure and pain, fear and openness, is sometimes just a breath. Like my old molars, years ago after the first fillings when cold water or ice cream would cause pain, and fright, as a young child. The dentist said it would disappear in time—not the sensation, but experiencing it as pain. Now, I barely notice the zinging sensation, still present in the nerves of my jaw—but the ice cream tastes even better than before. This is what my sensitive teeth, my raw life, teaches me.

I don’t try to convince my son that the torturer’s tool is benign, or that pain is not real. That the police officer’s bullet does not kill the unarmed black man on the ground. I try only to keep my heart open to his open heart, ragged and seared. Try not to make my arms a closed circle around his body to keep the beast of the world out. Perhaps a parent’s only recourse *is* to lie naked in the dandelions with our children, pained with sensation, still in love.

Between the generations—flawed parents and their incredulous children—there is a necessary gap: the truth that each holds in their moment. Like Graham Nash’s song *Teach Your Children*, alternately invoking the dreams and hells of both. The ideals and shadows of what each thinks to be true. Like Mary Ruefle’s poem, from her book *Post Meridian*:

## The Truth

Naturally, our image of the truth  
is a woman with arm bracelets  
rowing among the water lotuses.  
We see the lake crowded with blooms,  
those enormously petaled pink things.  
She slides her hand down the stem,  
the water laps just above her elbow,  
the rowboat tips a bit—  
finding the roots isn't easy,  
but it's her life. If she has to dive  
she doesn't remove her bracelets;  
their weight is probably a help.  
The problem is always not being able  
to see. The roots are collected  
in baskets. Nothings keeps them fresh  
but fresh dung. Somebody else collects  
that, and everything we know about *him*  
is a lie.

Belief is beautiful and certain, though rooted in the dung-drenched underside of things; it is too easy to lie about this. The woman with arm-bracelets, and the shit-stirrer, are both personas of this human desire for the truth of this world, of myself. The world by touching us need not destroy us, I say to my son. My son says the world we've made *is* destroying us, and we must touch it. Even naked, in dandelions, in thorns.

## The Loma Fire Koan

California has been ablaze this summer, with fires both natural and human. Sometimes there is so much to contend with that life seems like two negative numbers; though when multiplied, they yield a positive. Till the *koan* of it becomes rain for my own fire. This morning, I read the last poem in Jane Hirshfield's collection, *Beauty*:

### Like Two Negative Numbers Multiplied By Rain

Lie down, you are horizontal.  
Stand up, you are not.

I wanted my fate to be human.

Like a perfume  
that does not choose the direction it travels,  
that cannot be straight or crooked, kept out or kept.

*Yes, No, Or*  
—a day, a life, slips through them,  
taking off the third skin,  
taking off the fourth.

The logic of shoes becomes at last simple,  
an animal question, scuffing.

Old shoes, old roads—  
the questions keep being new ones.  
Like two negative numbers multiplied by rain  
into oranges and olives.

There is something of the human, and of koans, here. To be like perfume, which is neither crooked nor straight, but *is* a kind of fire. But to also be like shoes, like the animal I am, scuffing about these old roads of a life.

Though the questions never cease, like a good koan they become oranges and olives, rather than answers. Which may be better than an answer. There is fire in the taste of it.

It's been this way a long time—reading the old Chan masters reminds me. Wang Wei *climbs to subtle-aware monastery* in one poem: *inhabiting emptiness beyond dharma cloud. We see through human realms to unborn life.* Then in the next poem, he notes that *the wayhouse is overrun by festival: our boat's stuck, no way to set out.* There are a *few chickens and dogs, far fields, mulberry, elm, shade.* The human village often seems in-the-way of deeper meditation, when really it *is* the path. Even when stuck: the dog's fur is comforting, the mulberry fragrant.

This morning, the Loma Fire in the mountains between San Jose and Santa Cruz is still burning, two thousand acres up in smoke. But coastal fog and mist is moving in, as though the sea is drawn to the fire. How many millennia has this been going on? This consuming conflagration, this dharma cloud of the unborn life inside of everything: the dogs barking, the rooster crowing, the ridge aflame, a few chickens quietly laying eggs?

*I wanted my fate to be human,* Hirshfield says. *The questions keep being new ones...* it is its own kind of luck. To be privileged by questions more than answers.

## Koan of the Junkyard & the Whale Heart

I am deep into memoir work—visiting old selves and new. Perhaps even my original face before parents were ever born. This morning, I find two poems that say something about this work of memory, heart, and self. They are from Carl Adamshick’s book, *Curses and Wishes*:

### Junkyard

I never visit my younger self.  
Any change I elicit  
would be just that: change.  
Something different in a world  
of differences. A shifting  
from memory to dream. Snow  
falling in a barrel of rusted  
engine parts becoming a day  
of lightning and old fallen oak:  
one life or another, mine or yours.  
This is the last outpost before  
things become what they are.  
I was eleven when an older self,  
the lord of my childhood, appeared  
above the chair in my room  
splendid and silent like a planet  
rotating, spinning in its ellipses,  
but, also, unmoving by the headboard  
and the one pillow full of feathers.

Of course, I do visit my younger self through memoir—it *is* a kind of shifting from memory to dream to “rusted engine parts” and “the last outpost before things become what they are.” Marvelous lines. I love that the poet’s older self appears “splendid and silent like a planet”, the way I’ve become so much more than my young self could perhaps have imagined; still, to idealize the self, any version of it, is to somehow be unmoved by the plain, visceral reality of “the one pillow full of feathers”. Like the Zen koan, of *reaching behind for a pillow in the night*. How I may hold myself with such intimacy. It is all precious—the old self and the new, the way it changes, *becomes a day of lightning and old fallen oak*. Even when the burden of it is the size of a whale heart, as in the next poem:

## Compassion

It could have been a whale's heart  
she towed in her wagon.

It looked like an ocean sponge  
with a red viscous beating.

We watched,  
not knowing  
how she managed.

It was sad and strange  
how her heart had become her burden.

This poem, too, is a kind of koan. Is such a burden a gift, or somehow getting it wrong? Is the sad, strange vision beautiful, or a sign of psychological failure, or even enlightenment? Perhaps the endarkenment of deep compassion is its own color. Perhaps a burden is a privilege, as well as a wound. In the little wagon of the body, a whale heart is no small thing.

## Salt and Moon

Ah, I've been letting the days go by unrecorded for a change—a good sign or bad? Perhaps not even a sign. Perhaps some other taste than the amygdala's instant categorization of enemy or friend, the priest's sword-like separation of all things into two. Traditional Zen might encourage silence, *no-word*. Irascible Zen might spit out a poem.

The rain has come, in Santa Cruz—I settle into our family room looking out at the mist-filled backyard, everything wet, water falling through the air like fine silk.

And even though I am happy, with a wistful Bach tune playing on the stereo, I am drawn to the weight of this poem-fragment by David Harsent, from a random Poetry magazine:

### *From "Salt"*

They weighed the human soul – twenty-one grams – a tremor  
on the air becoming trance, becoming nimbus. No. It is deadweight,  
a plummet, drawing down to its harbor beside the heart. It is Breath  
and Word, they said. No. It is pig-iron and salt. The dying  
feel its slow lift as riddance, a bar of darkness hoisting against the light.

There *is* harbor near the heart, where soul resides. But it also resides in the pig-iron and salt of the human. The light can be its own kind of trance, of cloud-nimbus. There is something about being human that hoists the adamancy of breath and word against this light, like a bar of darkness. This is not a song the amygdala can sing, nor the priest bless. But a human being can. To be salt and soul both—this marriage is a kind of love, an incarnation I can embrace.

Perhaps I am leaning this way because of the beautiful black moon running through the wet grass in my backyard—*Lola Moon*, an angelic and precocious little two-year old girl, whose parents Lawrence & Imani, friends of my son Gabe's, are staying in our back studio for two nights after a quick exit from the house in Watsonville they were living in with another couple with four kids and a fifth just born, while the husband began drinking and breaking dishes in the kitchen and yelling racial epithets

at Lawrence & Imani. We'd met Imani before at Word Church, Gabe's spoken-word poetry gathering; he asked if they could stay at our house for several nights while they figured out where to move. As the gap between rich and poor yawns, Trump a name-brand for the twisted rage of it, a country hangs in such tenuous balance. There are so many simply trying to live.

The salt it takes to live. The soul of Lola Moon, twirling in the wet grass after rain. What is the weight of such things? A koan of pig-iron and salt, of nimbus and trance, of light and its love of dark.

## The Secret of Secrets: Mud, Bone, & Infinity

In the back studio, perusing a used book entitled *Essays in Idleness – The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*; a series of reveries by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Japanese Buddhist priest. His opening lines:

What a strange, demented feeling it gives me when I realize I have spent whole days before this ink stone, with nothing better to do, jotting down at random whatever nonsensical thoughts have entered my head.

A man after my own heart. In this America of diversion and incessant striving, it is a privilege to share this same strange, demented feeling with a fellow Zen guy from centuries ago. There is this, too, from his Anecdote #13:

The pleasantest of all diversions is to sit alone under the lamp, a book spread out before you, and to make friends with people of a distant past you have never known.

Kenko is eloquent about the beauty of longing itself; and the imperfect, more than the perfect (#137):

Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless? To long for the moon while looking on the rain, to lower the blinds and be unaware of the passing of the spring—these are even more deeply moving. Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration. Are poems written on such themes as “Going to view the cherry blossoms only to find they had scattered” or “On being prevented from visiting the blossoms” inferior to those on “Seeing the blossoms”? People commonly regret that the cherry blossoms scatter or that the moon sinks in the sky, and this is natural; but only an exceptionally insensitive man would say, “This branch and that branch have lost their blossoms. There is nothing worth seeing now.”

The poet’s eye *sees* the beauty of absence, the scattered, the fallen—the purely rational eye only the utilitarian: “there is nothing worth seeing now...”

As I continue to sort books, one of the best ways of revisiting old friends, I stumble across these quotes again:

I cannot tell if the day  
is ending, or the world, or if  
the secret of secrets is inside me again.

—Anna Akhmatova

Another is searching in the mud for bones, rinds.  
How to write, after that, about the infinite?

—Cesar Vallejo

Akhmatova's sense of the core awe, of day and world ending, then perhaps beginning over and again: the secret of secrets. And digging with Cesar, the infinite also in the mud, the bones and rinds. Even if my life is going nowhere, it is always beginning and ending each moment. What a strange, demented feeling indeed: keeping idle company together by this ink stone of words.

## Divagations, Oxbow, & Sinuosities

I read a marvelous essay in the *Best American Writing – 2013* by Algis Valiunas, entitled *The Sanest Man Ever*, about the birth of the modern essay.

Yes, an essay about essays. It is about Michel De Montaigne, a minor member of French nobility who retired from public life at the age of 37 to “read, think, and set down his thoughts”. It reminds me of the Japanese form of *zuihitsu*, which I practice in my own contemplative journals. Valiunas says:

...the *Essays* is the living record of thoughts on the move—strolling, ambling, stalking, galloping, pausing for reflection, doubling back to reconsider. Montaigne is not known for beginning with a particular end in mind. Detours grow divagations; oxbows sprout sinuosities. You could wind up anywhere from here.

It is this last sentiment, how *you could wind up anywhere from here*, that reflects a bit of the Zen essay. As well as these unusual words: *divagations, oxbow, and sinuosities*. Language itself can challenge the usual manner of perception; words themselves can be koans.

A man after my own heart in the Western tradition, Montaigne’s “preeminent interest was in human beings”, contrasted with the traditional Chinese-Japanese literary focus on Nature:

Truly man is a marvelously vain, diverse, and undulating object. It is hard to found any constant and uniform judgment on him.

The essayist of *The Sanest Man Ever* says:

The sheer love of knowing, however, seemed his real animating passion. Montaigne’s often-stated vocation was to know himself, and to know all the sorts of men there were was essential to his calling, for the world’s variety provided the best measure of his own nature.

Montaigne was a well-known man (to essayists, at least) whom I’d never before encountered—this is one of the pleasures of reading. There is a bit of Zen curiosity in him, based on doubt, and constant inquiry:

To think seriously is to question relentlessly, and at the center of Montaigne's thought is the question *Que scay-je?* What do I know? It is the silent outcry of a suffering soul alone in the night in need of some consoling certainty; the shrug of a stand-up comedian, in the spirit of the everlasting question "What, me worry?"

The crucial questions for Montaigne were not the Pascalian obsessions of asking why God put me here and where he will send me when I die, but rather, how do I best spend the time I have been given...? It was the life of this world that engaged his passions.

Perhaps as Rilke intimated, these are questions best lived, rather than answered in any singular way.

If Nature had clearly laid down a law for all men to follow, Montaigne avers, then all men would be following it. "Let them show me just one law of that sort—I'd like to see it". Instead, Nature has broadcast human variety and sown consternation.

One of the human responses to the infinite is the personal, and the finite. Montaigne's concluding essay, "Of experience", offers a detailed portrait of his own idiosyncrasies as an expression of this:

He wants the reader to know of his fondness for oysters and melons, his wandering attention during sermons, the quickness of his step, the regularity of his bowel movements, his dislike of smoke and dust, the greed at table that makes him bite his tongue or even his fingers, the terrible pain of his kidney stones, the fortitude with which he endures the pain, the equanimity with which he faces death. "But you do not die of being sick, you die of being alive."

There is a bit of Zorba the Greek in Montaigne's French Zen sensibility:

"When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep; and when I walk alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts have been dwelling on extraneous incidents for some part of the time, for some other part I bring them back to my walk, to the orchard to the sweetness of this solitude, and to me."

There is no need for Plato's heaven; this world will do just fine. Passages such as these make Montaigne seem the sanest man ever, the paragon of simple good sense.

Yet it is the full being, the Platonic and mad even, that must also be part and parcel of this kind of resonant, doubtful living. As the reviewer concludes,

Yet sanity can be overrated; simple good sense, too, has its limitations and even its dogmatisms. There ought to be a place among the best men for celestial navigators such as Pascal, maybe even Swedenborg and Blake, or for that matter certainly Moses and Jesus. How to live? What do I know? There is a species of wisdom in spending one's life asking these questions and not expecting to get firm answers...

To live curiously inside this questioning is a Zen stance, fluid as it is. Like Montaigne:

It was this earthly world that shone for him like a gem of innumerable facets, and that he turned this way and that, catching the light from every direction, recording every glint and flash, seeing it all in a fashion uniquely his own.

Its own genius. Its own Zen.

## The Swamp, Innocence, & Aping Emptiness

There is a poet, Jennifer Michael Hecht, whose first book *The Next Ancient World* includes poems that reflect the sincere questioning of *the ego* in each of us. The conceit of the collection, so to speak, is the offering of a guidebook for those that come after, as each generation becomes “the next ancient world”. What I love about the voice in these poems is the nascent innocence and perplexity of the observing *self* as it strives to understand its predicament: born suddenly to a world it must quickly understand, or be obliterated by. The book’s very questioning is a kind of Zen finger, pointing.

In the book’s final poem, she leaves us with these paradoxical realizations—unnerving, though accurate:

### The Swamp

#### I

Apparently you’ve got to be  
vulnerable if you want  
anything to happen,  
and on the other side of it  
you’ve got to be unfathomably  
strong in order to get by.  
In order to get through the attacks  
and rejections occasioned  
by vulnerability you’ve got to  
be almost invulnerably  
strong. It’s a difficult road map  
to fold, friends...

#### II

So, to review, the inner life  
is lousy with affection  
for the outer life which seems  
like a sweet, dumb child  
that has somehow survived  
a week alone, lost in intemperate

circumstance, an actual swamp  
in the bayou, and our inner life  
wonders, how did that stupid  
child I love so tenderly  
and with so little outward show  
of derision possibly survive out there  
where the possibility of being eaten  
by a crocodile is very real,  
grabbed by snakes, being bitten by endless  
mosquitoes, and drowned, let alone  
freezing, let alone starved.

### III

Survival experts opine  
that your idiot outer life  
survived in the Bayou  
because it never thought  
to panic, it never noticed  
that it was time to give up.  
Our inner life wonders  
how this naïve assumption  
of existence is communicated  
to the crocodiles and the snakes  
but the survival expert is gone:  
wanted to be the first one  
out of the parking lot, just  
in case. I guess I understand.

### IV

How did it ever get construed  
that the child of us is inner? It's  
the outer that always has to be told  
to *Take that out of your mouth.*  
I've got something twice as inner  
that sits quietly writing her book.  
Perhaps our outer self ate algae.  
Bumble bumble...

Staring out the window  
towards First Avenue, the inner  
self lectures: *Vulnerability*,  
it explains to the outer self,  
*is a difficult mess...*

By now the outer self  
is on the phone, making the arrangements...  
sliding down some secret  
handrail, open-armed, wide-eyed,  
into the din of life...

There is much to like of Zen and a basic common sense in these strange instructions. The *non-dualism* at the core of awakening—even in this swamp, this bayou of living—so alive in the poem’s juxtapositions of vulnerability and strength, of inner and outer worlds, the boundaries around each blurring into a way of moving through life as though *sliding down some secret handrail, open-armed, wide-eyed, into the din of life...*

Hecht continues her paradoxical instruction manual to the fledgling self in poems such as this one:

**Please Answer All Three of the Following Essay Questions**

What would it take to make you  
what you truly want to be and why will no one  
cooperate with you on these visions you have  
of yourself, when it would be so easy for them  
to finally acknowledge that you are the demon  
ruler of this island world and that all we eat  
here is pickled herring that we harvest  
from sycamore trees in the plenitude  
of summer and load into mason jars for the lean  
months of the cold? Do these men and women,  
your subjects, fear you more than they love you?  
What is it that they fear? Use a logical  
Proof; show your work...

Of course, life is less a test with certain answers, and more the *questioning* itself, and the genius in Chan/Zen questioning—as in this poem—is the paradoxical inquiry. Show your work, yes, but the proof itself reveals oneself to be the demon ruler of the very island one is marooned on. There is nothing and no one standing in the way of becoming what I truly want, and everyone is actually cooperating quite nicely, thank you very much, albeit unbeknownst to the *me* who wants to control it all. So go ahead, be logical. Just try.

Of course, we come to meditation for an answer. The poem continues with an exploration of this:

Why do you waste so much time considering  
the juxtaposition of the perceived endlessness  
of a moment and the micro-elapsement of a year?  
Clearly there is nothing you can do about it and yet,  
overcome with love for your friends and family  
you neither run to them constantly and weep for them,  
kissing their cast-off running shoes like a minor apostle,  
nor do you refuse to answer the question “how are you”  
ever again, certain that you don’t know what it means.  
By now you must recognize that rational  
truth is unbearable and impossible to live by  
and that everything possible and bearable is,  
of necessity, a logical mess incorporating lies as well  
as contradictory truths. And yet you just go along, making phone calls,  
hanging curtains, letting the slanting sun before twilight  
shift your thoughts, riding the subway, sweeping the hallway,  
and you watch TV, don’t you, and go to the bank, eat  
ice cream, call the cable guy, why do you do it  
when you are so keenly aware of the impossibility  
of your goals given the obdurate  
resistance of such material. Try  
to answer as completely as possible; time.

I love the spirit of this last instruction, so in concert with the tact of ancient Zen masters confronting students with impossible contradictions, then shouting at them to “Speak! Say something!” Even while hanging curtains, going to the bank, eating ice cream, pursuing impossible goals. The query “how are you?” making less sense

now as a simple “good” or “bad” test-question. Even getting lost in meditation, *the juxtaposition of the perceived endlessness of a moment and the micro-elapsement of a year*, is no answer to the contradictions of living. Still, we must respond as completely as possible! *Time!*

Hecht’s first poem in the collection, “The Innocent”, opens with lines that could be a kind of instruction about beginning—always beginning, as in Suzuki Roshi’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*:

The knack to almost everything is merely to commit to it, utterly,  
and yet we fail, constantly. Is this commitment, this certainty of intention,  
what innocence was?  
Let us commit to the proposition: Innocence is certainty.

You’re not sure you believe me...

There is kinship between Suzuki’s radical openness and Hecht’s *innocence*, the linking of it to constant failure, the commitment to it, the certainty of its occurrence. In this is a kind of practice, which is its own paradoxical certainty, a commitment perhaps to certainty without belief. This knack of the open heart.

In the poem, after a long catalogue of kinds of innocence and betrayal, Hecht returns to descriptions of how innocence can perhaps be held in the *suchness* of living:

You’re innocent when you chew. You are innocent  
when your pants are around your ankles, and you stare directly  
at the sun, and children mock you. They don’t know  
what is in store for them, what loneliness,  
what terrible conviction, what commitment  
to what unbearable truth.  
Don’t be sorry, just tell me the truth.  
What did you do?

To simply tell the truth in this matter of being human: *what did you do?* To hold my life *just so*. In its innocence, pants down around my ankles, staring at the sun, my children mocking me. Still, not to make too much “much ado about nothing”, as Shakespeare might say. Hecht continues:

It is exhausting watching you claim your innocence,  
aping emptiness...

Either way you are not innocent. You are aware...

I love this line, *aping emptiness*. Reminiscent of the Zen-sickness, of staring too long into emptiness. Or the unavoidable failure, of simply being this ape-mind in all my befuddled innocence. It reminds me, too, of Stanley Kubrick's *2001 – A Space Odyssey*'s opening scene, with apes mulling about the mysterious black monolith, uncomprehending. A good stand in for *self, mind, emptiness, enlightenment*. Ultimately, I can be awake, aware. A proud gorilla, banging on the mystery with a good jawbone, and a great soundtrack.

## The Shock of Blossoms in my Open Palm

The poet Dean Young's quirky oddities of language are a kind of hermetic spirituality, clothed in "post-modern dissociation". Or perhaps, a modern Zen koan.

I'm reading a moving profile of Dean Young in *Poets & Writers* (Sept/Oct 2015) describing his heart transplant surgery, and his "death" when everything in his body stopped, and the doctors were waiting to see if he'd come back, so to speak; if the engine of the body would start up again. It did.

His new book, *Shock by Shock*, allows life in again through his zany creativity. In the raw randomness of things. "Consistency is for insects" he declares. The boy whose heart was transplanted into his own body:

...a stranger, a boy really,  
the heart of a reckless, generous boy  
lifted from its cooler  
and sutured into a carnal afterlife,  
rose by rose, ladder by ladder,  
shock by shock by shock.

This traditional Buddhist confrontation with the specters of illness, aging, and death, are reflected in the opening line of his first poem:

The wolf appointed to tear me apart  
is sure making slow work of it...

Or this, about how the pathos of loss finds outlet in a kind of innocent destructiveness:

When my dog misses her puppies,  
she gets the walrus from the toy box  
and finishes ripping its white fluffy guts out.

Dean Young's wife comments on his desire to move forward into more life, without, as Dean says, "making my life a memorial to those moments (the heart transplant)". She says, "You can't always live in the moment of being in shock". Despite the title

of his book, I guess. And the way life sometimes does seem to be one shock after another.

In third grade, Young discovered his “delight in being unconstrained by facts”, a child’s first flexing of the godlike powers of poets, how “you could make up reality with language”. It is a more literary version of that New Age adage, “you create your own reality”. Young says:

I liked the freedom from making sense—conventional sense. You could write the words “blue cow”, for example, and there’d be a blue cow...language is so fast. You can say, “Hannibal crossed the Alps”, and it’s *done*. That’s power.

It’s the poem itself, and it rivals the world. It *becomes* a world, as real and substantial as the world we think we’re living in.

This, of course, is not only the central insight of the poet, the novelist, the artist or musician—but that of the Buddha, too. We create worlds, literally, with every desire, every thought, worlds we then inhabit. Thinking each is the only real world.

I am intrigued by this intersection between the artist-poet and the meditator—they can learn nuance from each other. The Buddhist, not to belittle these worlds...the Artist, not to be trapped by them.

Young discovered Surrealism as a freshman at Indiana University, having plunged into the library, finding the strange world of Andre Breton, whose *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924 confirmed much of what Young had come to believe:

Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of...the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.

Young goes on to say:

It put the imagination at the center of experience, as a way of interacting with the world and understanding the world...one of poetry’s jobs is to negotiate the irrational and the incomprehensible. Not to reconcile with those things—I don’t think there is any reconciliation, nor does there need to be—but to open windows in these notions that get passed down to us about what reality is and what we’re capable of. That’s what makes me write every day...

...to write something that seems to open up a passageway into something else that we can't understand, but has a presence...As Breton said, *Reason is only good for solving problems of a secondary nature.*

Dean Young's predilections here, for me, reflect Hindu and Mahayana Buddhist conceptions about the creative nature of the Universe; they overlap with the poet's sense of imagination-as-fundamental, the creator of worlds. Both orbit *Mystery*, about which nothing can definitively be said. Just alluded to. And painted by the heart—etched by the mind. Dean Young again:

I just put it out there, and it is what it is... “Here's a poem”, the way somebody would say, “Here's a stone”.

One's own idiosyncratic way of pointing toward what is beyond words, or beyond stones for that matter. Young's poem, “Eternal Is Our Journey, Brief Our Stopover”, includes these lines:

Of the many things  
I have not seen at midnight, don't  
count how  
a soul flees from a ransacked body  
or digs in its claws. I've wanted  
only to be astonished which is why  
during the April blizzard I went  
looking  
for blossoms even if that meant  
looking  
into my own palms...

Sometimes the astonishment I can't seem to help but seek lies in the blossoms, in the claws, of my own palms.

## This Useless Pilgrimage – The Twelfth Wonder

Despite this summer's continuing gray blanket of sky along the coast, I sit contentedly in my back studio enjoying the luxury of time & space. Luxuries that include perusing, at random, these selections from the old book I found at Logos Bookstore in Santa Cruz, entitled *The Lost Flute*. It is edition #1,352 of 1,950 printed for distribution in America and Great Britain in 1929—itself a translation from the French, of these ancient Chinese verses:

### Beatitude

*Tchang-Kiou-Ling (714 – 736)*

In the spring, the foliage of the *lan* tree  
sweeps down like long strands of hair.  
In summer, the moon shimmers more  
softly in the sky. In autumn, the  
flowers of the cinnamon tree are  
white. In winter, we recite poetry  
around the lamp.

I am very satisfied to be alive.  
Sometimes, looking at a stone or  
listening to the wind contents me...  
{pg. 66}

This is a morning, despite summer-gray and inconstant days—or perhaps because of them—I am very satisfied to be alive. Looking out at the garden through my bay window, seeing *stones*, the *wind* fluttering the palm fronds in the neighbor's yard. Then there is this:

### Happiness

*Li-Tai-Po (702 – 763)*

What do I want? A boat of *cha-tang*, oars of *mou-tan*, pretty musicians with flutes of jade, a cup filled with wine, and the rocking of the dancing waves.

While I float along, surrounded by the gulls,  
perhaps the Immortals, caressing their yellow  
storks, are waiting for me; but what does it matter,  
since perfect poems are the only monuments  
which defy the centuries! There remains no  
vestige of the palace of the king of Tsou, for  
which these hills once formed the pedestal.

When I abandon myself to the inspiration which  
intoxicates, my pencil moves unceasingly and my  
songs disturb the Five sacred mountains. I am  
happy, I scorn all that men seek: glory, riches, love  
– what futilities!

When I shall have changed my mind about this  
you will see our river flowing back to its source.  
{pg. 76}

An apt peon to happiness. I love the image of Immortals caressing their yellow  
storks—different strokes for different folks, even for the gods! And the poet's quest  
for the perfect poem that will outlast even a king's palace. The innocence &  
arrogance of we-poets changes little through the centuries.

Finally, in my perusal of this old book, there is an odd and surprising series about  
the poet's little boy – another way that happiness comes:

### Seven Paintings

*Where smiles my little boy*

*Chang-Wou-Kein (1879 -)*

I

*The Flight*

He could not take his first step without an orange  
in each hand.  
A branch resists the wind better when it is laden with fruit.

II  
*His Song*

He sings to put himself to sleep. Bending over him,  
his mother scolds.  
But he wants, first, to put his song to sleep.

III  
*The Two Prisoners*

He has just noticed that his frog of jade is quite close  
to the door.  
He goes and puts it inside the cage where his little bird  
is singing.

IV  
*The Fire*

Like the wild beasts of the mountain Kao-Chan he is  
afraid of nothing but fire. The tiniest spark frightens him.  
I must say that he is exerting himself to frighten the spark  
by making grumbling and raucous noises.

V  
*The Mirror*

He is searching for his mother who has just gone out.  
He lifts all the mats. He looks for her in the mirror.  
How he stamps with joy! He looks so much like his mother  
that he thinks he has found her in the mirror.

VI  
*Pictures*

Already he knows how to imitate the barking of a dog,  
the lowing of a cow, and the inordinate braying of a donkey.  
When I show him the pictures, he recognizes all these animals,  
which he designates by their cries.  
He is so pretty that all the men and beasts in the pictures  
stand motionless before him.

VII  
*The Useless Pilgrimage*

Those who have traveled praise the beauty of the snowy evenings  
at Houa-chan, the music of the twilight clock  
at the monastery of U-tchien, the colour of the sky at Tsou-Kiang,  
and the charm of a rainy night at Wao-tai.

I shall not go to Houa-chan, for the body of my little boy  
is as rosy as the snow tinted by the setting sun;  
neither shall I go to U-tchien, since his voice is more musical  
than the clock of any monastery;  
nor to Tsou-Kiang for in his eyes I see a whole heaven washed by the breezes...  
But, perhaps, I shall go to Wao-tai  
in order to recall more clearly a certain rainy night  
when a woman conceived a child  
which I hold to be the twelfth wonder of the Empire. {pg. 117}

What a gorgeous poem about a father's love of his child, each stanza ending with a wry, unexpected moment. Whether our companions are children, or dogs, Zen masters or wives, friends or enemies, it is about waking up together in each moment.

Here's to this *useless pilgrimage* of life, and we who travel it together—itself the *Twelfth Wonder*...

## The Sound of One Dog Barking

The *Art of Complaint*, one of the fine arts with a long and colorful history. The abode of the ego's song, the authentic, enigmatic cry from the base of the brain stem, the amygdala, where everything is encountered as either threat or prey. Ostensibly, even enlightenment doesn't anesthetize this little critter—like a loyal dog chained to the house of the body, it barks and barks out of intense loyalty, boredom, pride.

Even when the yard of the world is quiet, no thieves lurk, and the water bowl is filled to the brim. A dog barks. It is a matter of its own joy as well as agitation. Neighbor Buddha, rather than angrily shutting her windows or calling the animal control folks, ambles over, gets down on all fours, howls then whimpers till the guard dog, confused, wags its tail, lick's Buddha's hand.

How to live with a dog. This is the art of mindfulness. Not to shut the windows, but to engage with the mind-body's barking, its predictable and lucid, if narrow, complaints. *Good dog! Good dog! Now let's play! Then I'll throw you a bone; you can gnaw it to your dog-heart's content!*

So, this morning my dog-mind is barking—chained to the endless demands of householding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when I'm trying to be a Thoreau in Walden Pond, or one of the old hermetic Chinese monk-poets. I have no illusions that if I were living in the “simple” 18<sup>th</sup> century I'd have more time—the reality TV-show families trying this ended up spending many more of their hours & days on simple survival issues: chopping wood, feeding fires, carrying water, washing clothes by hand, no microwave, every menial task a day-and-week-long process that in our modern world has indeed been shortened. Still, there are now so many more things to clutter.

Simplicity, even with more time on my hands, seems a mirage. This is my bark, and this writing the art of my complaint. Does this Dog-Mind have Buddha nature? Is this inquiry itself a koan? I'm sure gnawing it like a bone.

What is my specific operatic bellow? My artful, or barbarian, complaint? My Buddha bark? Perhaps that in a life of such beauty, privilege, nuance and excitement, I still feel as though I'm chasing *time*, like an avaricious dog chasing traffic, to extend the

metaphor. Unless I make the chase itself an aspect of enlightened dog-activity, I'll miss the beauty of being a dog, the beauty of traffic, the *sound of one dog barking*.

*Arf! Arf!*

## Three Poem Zen

In pruning my shelves of books—some on their way to Logos Used Books downtown, or back on a stack while I endeavor to find shelf space again—I inevitably rediscover poems I wouldn't otherwise remember. It's only in letting them go that I find them again. Such as this colorful edition of *Crazyhorse—Spring 2015*, which was actually *in* one of my discard boxes. However, I made the mistake, so to speak, of letting my eyes land on the colorful artwork of the artist Laura Sharp Wilson, with its blue & white medals strung against a backdrop of green & red tendrils interwoven through what might be a bamboo screen. Of flipping to the pages I had earmarked, finding several poems I loved—and would have lost, forever, if I hadn't then lifted the journal from the box and put it on my desk for further contemplation:

### How We Sing

With our leg bones. With alphabets  
And lambkins. With bat-wings

Hung out to dry. With the birds.  
With our heads on our sleeves. From

The lion's throat, in stitches. Riding  
The backs of dragons. Bohemians,

Spare-panfried, squeezing our boxes,  
Penises wagging, breasts akimbo, mouthing

Feet, hearts in our hands, whistles  
Whetted. Barefaced. Captive. In time.

—Katharine Coles

### At Forty

What to do with all this health?  
This changing sameness?

An upside-down man in a brown suit, the hermit, the priestess.  
Singing *You Are My Sunshine* to the moon group.

Sitting on the sofa with bodies breaking in waves.  
Everything keeps coming and I keep saying *yes*.

—Arielle Greenberg

*From* **Residue**

...To receive grace, that woman  
said, doesn't mean believing you've been touched  
by God. It means opening your arms to doubt,  
the repeated nonappearance of  
the longed-for proof. And then the faithful  
gathered on the porch to watch the lit-up hills  
like a palette someone ought to lift  
and paint with until night arrived  
and wind rustled all the trees. Sometimes  
in stories all the scattered pieces come to life  
and cry out, like the weeping stones  
in some versions of Orpheus' story,  
the beauty of his song having impelled them  
to express their pity, or the pieces  
of Osiris' body strewn all over the world,  
clamoring to be made whole so again  
they could be scattered, then  
gathered and again made whole.

—Ann Keniston

While the rest of the journal tends toward the abstract, these poems touch the human in me. The first, something of what it means to be alive with my whole body, with more than I thought I even encompassed. A lion, an alphabet, a Bohemian, a dragon—genitals & heart & mouth. Yes, captive in time—but not just in *prison*, but as in *this too is home*. And now, turning sixty, everything keeps coming, as the second

poem intones, and I keep saying *Yes*. Even as the third poem ends akin to the scattered pieces of my own life, crying out like Osiris,

*...clamoring to be made whole so again  
they could be scattered, then  
gathered and again made whole.*

These moments of my life, like the poems hiding in forgotten books on my shelves, found again only if scattered, let go of. The Zen of being barefaced, captive in time, saying *Yes*.

## Original Face

Zen moments abound in Western literature, unidentified, anonymous. They appear to me when reading poetry—become new koans. This poem seems a call & response to one of Zen’s core koans: *What is your original face before your parents were born?* It also reflects the Buddha’s instruction to be *a lamp unto yourself*.

From Mark Jarman’s, *The Teachable Moment*:

To feel your whole body is the truth,  
To feel you are the truth and more than truth,  
Your feet, your toes, the shinbone and the knee  
Are true and more than true, to be the truth,  
Standing on your own feet, and riding hips  
As true as they were ever meant to be,  
The rest going upward, through the groin,  
The functional, true genitals, the belly  
Spread with its pubic hair all true, all true,  
And up the ridged divided abdomen,  
Between the nipples, truly loving touch,  
The clavicles with their delicacy and music,  
The arms and hands and fingers with their reach,  
The tower of the neck, as Solomon says,  
The identifiable face, *your* face,  
The ears to bear both the outer and inner voices,  
The mouth, the speaker of the truth, the nose,  
True to its compass bearings, smelling falsehoods,  
The eyes looking into the puzzled eyes  
Of one you’ve scared into urgent reasoning—  
To feel that you embody the whole truth  
And then to know that truth is going to be beaten,  
Beaten to the bone, skeletonized,  
And hang like a limp rag, as dead as rope—  
To be this truth completely, unadorned,  
Real as the hand before another’s face,  
And have that other still say, “What is truth?”

Again and again...a teachable moment.  
But what moment ever lasted long enough  
To learn anything? This moment.

Perhaps another apt way of speaking this koan is, *What is my original body?*

Standing on your own feet, and riding hips  
As true as they were ever meant to be...  
True to its compass bearings...

To feel that you embody the whole truth  
And then to know that truth is going to be beaten...  
And hang like a limp rag, as dead as rope—  
To be this truth completely, unadorned...

To be this truth completely, even when *skeletonized* by life itself: my most ruthless  
Zen mirror. This, my original body, every moment my teachable moment.

## The Big Feast

Two poems from this morning's reading, in *Good Poems: American Places*. It's a modern version of Zen's *Chop wood, Carry water* practice.

First, Dorianne Laux:

### On the Back Porch

The cat calls for her dinner.  
On the porch I bend and pour  
brown soy stars into her bowl,  
stroke her dark fur.  
It's not quite night.  
Pinpricks of light in the eastern sky.  
Above my neighbor's roof, a transparent  
moon, a pink rag of cloud.  
Inside my house are those who love me.  
My daughter dusts biscuit dough.  
And there's a man who will lift my hair  
in his hands, brush it  
until it throws sparks.  
Everything is just as I've left it.  
Dinner simmers on the stove.  
Glass bowls wait to be filled  
with gold broth. Sprigs of parsley  
on the cutting board.  
I want to smell this rich soup, the air  
around me going dark, as stars press  
their simple shapes into the sky.  
I want to stay on the back porch  
while the world tilts  
toward sleep, until what I love  
misses me, and calls me in.

Then this poem by Donald Hall:

### Summer Kitchen

In June's high light she stood at the sink  
With a glass of wine,

And listened for the bobolink,  
And crushed garlic in late sunshine.

I watched her cooking, from my chair.  
She pressed her lips  
Together, reached for kitchenware,  
And tasted sauce from her fingertips.

“It’s ready now. Come on,” she said.  
“You light the candle.”  
We ate, and talked, and went to bed,  
And slept. It was a miracle.

As I approach my sixtieth birthday—just three days away—such poems remind me to simply be *here*, each day. This simple Zen practice, which is no practice at all—just living. With no further to go than my own house for its miracles.

Which is reflected, too, in this morning’s Koan #60 from *The Book of Equanimity*:

“There’s a big feast on Mount Tai tomorrow, Osho. Are you going?” Isan lay himself down.

If you lived then in China, you’d know that Mount Tai was a hundred miles from the monastery—impossible to get to in one day. Which of course the inquirer, the irascible nun Ryutetsuma, knew—though she loved to pester old Isan with such dharma-battles. Isan simply “lay himself down”, because the feast, as both Dorianne Laux and Donald Hall know, is *home*.

## Turning Sixty

Waking next to my 59 year-old wife, I say, “You’re in bed with a 60 year-old man!” Which makes her cuddle up for a moment of thanksgiving that, indeed, we are still here, alive, together. Tonight, we’ll have a house full of people for the celebration. Our garden is beautiful. As Mary Oliver’s famous poem intones, *it might have been otherwise* – given the errant landslides and unexpected earthquakes of most any life lived this long.

I just keep thinking, *so this is what it’s like turning 60*. Apropos, the poem still held in the rollers of my old black Royal typewriter, which I’d typed a few days before from a book by Juan Ramon Jimenez:

### Oceans

I have a feeling that my boat  
has struck, down there in the depths,  
against a great thing.

And nothing  
happens! Nothing...Silence...Waves...

--Nothing happens? Or has everything happened,  
and we are standing now, quietly, in the new life.

There is no better way to say it—it feels as though nothing in particular has happened, yet down there in the depths I have struck against a great thing. Am standing now, quietly, in the new life. It is mysterious. It is so absolutely ordinary.

Sitting in my backyard on the deck, under the chocolate-colored umbrella, the air has that pristine coastal coolness woven with rising summer heat. It is indeed like an Eden—and this morning, turning sixty, pausing to walk round the stone path of the garden, I relish each step. Say *good morning* to this *livingness* I still find myself in, nod to the mischievous garden-snake that, mythologically speaking, makes all this ruckus possible. Watch the tiny yellow birds bathe in the red clay fountain after the black crows have had their turn. I’m reminded of the chapter-title to one of my old Zen books: *Knowing How To Be Happy*. It can be more difficult than it seems. I am practicing, still.

I think again about yesterday's 60<sup>th</sup> Koan from *The Book of Equanimity*, how the mischievous nun approaches Master Isan and wonders if he's going to the big feast on Mount Tai one hundred miles away; Isan, in full dharma-battle mode, simply lies down. Here, right here, is the big feast. A good 60<sup>th</sup> Koan for a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration.

So, as Haydn's piano concertos play, the red bougainvillea arches round the head of the stone Buddha adjacent my wife's broken-tiled red art-heart, I lean into *knowing how to be happy*.

For me, Art and its many faces is what brings me joy—poetry, in particular. This morning I rummage the pages of *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2006* for poems I haven't yet read, find the first few stanzas of C. K. Williams poem, *Marina*, taken from the *New Yorker*:

As I'm reading Tsvetayeva's essays,  
"Art in the Light of Conscience,"  
stunning—"Art, a series of answers  
to which there are no questions"—  
a tiny insect I don't recognize  
is making its way across my table.  
It has lovely transparent wings  
but for some reason they drag behind  
as it treks the expanse of formica,  
and descends into a crack.

"To each answer before it evaporates,  
our question": composed in Paris  
during the difficult years of exile.  
But which of her years weren't?  
This at least was before the husband,  
a spy, an assassin, went back,  
then she, too, with her son,  
to the Soviet madhouse, back.  
"This being outgalloped by answers  
is inspiration." Outgalloped!

Still lugging its filigreed train,  
the insect emerges: fragile, distracted,  
it can't even trace a straight line  
but it circumnavigates the table.  
Does it know it's back where it began?

Still, it perseveres, pushing  
courageously on, one inch, another.  
*"Art...a kind of physical world  
of the spiritual...A spiritual world  
of the physical...almost flesh."*

Yes, almost flesh—Art, this intersection between worlds. And, I feel this responsibility, as a poet, as a Zen student, as a person, to *knowing how to be happy*. Even absent, paradoxically, the fierce fire of clarity that war and death and a Soviet madhouse sometimes confer. The fire of the ordinary, of the passage of days in a garden it is too easy to take for granted and wander, malcontent, from its beauty. Like the ordinary women in a previous essay, who almost long for the feverishness of a more visible Inquisition in order to press against it, to feel themselves more clearly because of it. The Beguine-order nuns they studied grew strong in the face of a clear enemy; sometimes, facing the maddening ennui of ordinary lives is as much of a challenge.

For we who are privileged to not be faced with inquisitions or wars or madhouses—though many of us are—there is this fierce practice of joy almost more difficult with its burden of living in the amiable passage of an average human life. Zen is the practice of both war and peace.

It is my first day of being sixty, and I'm still chewing this fact like a fresh stick of gum. *Knowing how to be happy*. It has a new taste, and I don't mind feeling new at this age.

## Every Navigator Fares Unwarned

I love the essay by Eve Grubin in the *American Poetry Review* (July/August 2016), entitled, “Jane Cooper and the Poetics of Sanity”. She was a woman of the fifties, and a mother—looking for poetics and sanity both, in her life as well as her writing. From her poem, “Ordinary Detail”:

I’m trying to write a poem that will alert me to my real life,  
a poem written in the natural speech of the breakfast table,  
of a girl spooning yogurt, pausing, the spoon held aloft  
while she gestures toward the exact next turning of her thought...

It would have to be a poem dense with ordinary detail  
the way the sun, spilling across walnut and balled-up napkins,  
can pick out cups, plates, the letter from which someone has just read aloud,  
with evenhanded curiosity, leaving behind a gloss of pleasure.

The essayist comments:

Jane Cooper’s poems not only honor the reality of the seen world as they de-sentimentalize everyday items, but they also scrutinize the hidden. The mysteries that lie in the dark are just as real in her poems as the items the sun illuminates on the breakfast table...the unseen inner life, in this case, thought—the intellectual life—is as substantial, valuable and unimagined as the physical world.

It is a kind of Zen-noticing I am drawn to in both Cooper’s poems, and Grubin’s commentary. This *evenhanded curiosity, leaving behind a gloss of pleasure* in the simplest of daily occurrences. Not only in the traditional Zen of “chop wood, carry water, see the fallen cherry blossoms”, where the spare observation of nature is pre-eminent; but to also bring this Zen sensibility to *the unseen inner life...the intellectual life*, as essential to the Western psyche as rivers and mountains are to the ancient agrarian origins of Zen. In the transmission of Zen to the West, bringing evenhanded curiosity, even pleasure, to the daily affairs of modern life seems skillful, even essential.

On these uncharted waters, I imagine the Buddha would still advise each journeyer to see for themselves, to doubt old maps as well as to trust. I love these lines from an early Adrienne Rich poem, “Unsounded”:

Every navigator  
Fares unwarned, alone...

These are latitudes revealed  
Separate to each.

To be a lamp unto oneself—*latitudes revealed separate to each*. To be curious along the way, to run one's finger-mind along the sheen of it. For Adrienne Rich, this meant leaning into the innumerable changes welling up within her, as well as within the larger culture: new poetic, gender, political latitudes that defined a generation. As in the first line of Jane Cooper's poem, *to write a poem that will alert me to my real life*. To cultivate a meditation capable of navigating both inner and outer terrains.

## Black Zodiac Koans

I woke this morning, turned over in bed and bleary-eyed grabbed Charles Wright's *Black Zodiac* poems from the shelf, read excerpts from the last few sequences in the book:

How hard to be as human as snow is, or as true,  
So sure of its place and many names.  
It holds the white light against its body, it benights our eyes.

--

The poem uncurls me, corrects me and croons my tune...

It grins like a blade,  
It hums like a fuse,  
                    body of ash, body of fire,  
A music my ear would be heir to...

Might I slipstream its fiery ride,  
                    might I mind its smoke.

--

Is *this* the life we long for,  
                    to be at ease in the natural world...

Well, yes, I think so.

--

Take a loose rein and a deep seat,  
                    John, my father-in-law would say  
To someone starting out on a long journey, meaning, take it  
easy,  
Relax, let what's taking you take you...

I'm emptied, ready to go. Again  
I tell myself what I've told myself for almost thirty years—  
Listen to John, do what the clouds do.

Ah yes—*Relax, let what's taking you take you... Listen to John, do what the clouds do.*

These *Black Zodiac* poems from Charles Wright—our late Poet Laureate of the United States—are their own kind of koans. Native to *this* country, a kind of map—a zodiac—of how to be human in this long journey of a life. *Take a loose rein and a deep seat*, as though a Zen master were speaking directly to me.

∞

Then, this from *The Book of Equanimity*, Koan 49, “Tozan Offers to the Essence”:

From the preface:

Sketching it doesn't succeed. Coloring it doesn't either. Fukei turned a somersault... what are the features of *that* person?

To try and draw a clear map of this path is pointless. Even the colors of *Art* seem pale. To turn a somersault, now that's marvelous!

The main koan, too, is a kind of *Black Zodiac poem*. Even in the death of a beloved—in this case, Tozan's teacher—it is unclear what is lost and what is gained. Tozan says,

Do not seek him anywhere else or he will run away from you.  
Now that I go on all alone, I meet him everywhere.  
He is even now what I am, I am even now not what he is.  
Only by understanding this way can there be a true union with the  
self.

Such lines give me Zen vertigo—just enough disorientation to glimpse this *true union* with a world that is everywhere present, even as I lose what I love. It is a long journey indeed. *Take a loose reign, and a deep seat*. Every now and again, *somersault!*

## The Nature of Evil in *Koanville*

I wake to drizzle and fog. Amble to a café, sit in the big window, eat breakfast while watching dogs tethered to the tree outside as their owners come and go for coffee. Such devoted creatures, tails wagging, expectant—my teachers this morning for how to wag more, bark less. Even while chewing the koan-bone of evil. It is a Western koan, so to speak, given over to the Western canon's imagery and language

I read Terry Eagleton's "The Nature of Evil", in *The Best American Spiritual Writing – 2013*. He makes the case that we have unwittingly equated evil with wanting and pursuing too much life; that somewhere during the Middle Ages virtue became synonymous with moderation rather than *knowing how to live fully*. That the latter is its own antidote to evil. Eagleton writes,

The Devil, so they say, has all the best tunes, and this seems to be the case when it comes to literature as well...Milton's God sounds like a bureaucratic bore or constipated civil servant, while his Satan shimmers with mutinous life...

...it is not virtue that is boring but a particular, very familiar conception of it. Think of Aristotle's man of virtue, who lives more fully and richly than the vicious. For Aristotle, virtue is something you have to get good at, like playing the trombone or tolerating bores at sherry parties...is a practice, like being a skilled diver or an accomplished tennis player...

To shimmer with mutinous life—rather than fade in its absence. Or merely constipate, as the bureaucratic bore of my own egoic fiefdom. Eagleton's tact here is provocative—like a koan, turns *evil* on its head: *an absence of liveliness, of passion and skill of living*. The essay continues:

The wicked, then, are inept, crippled, deficient people who never really get the hang of human existence...

Whereas the good, the virtuous, are those who, like good artists, realize their powers, energies, and capacities to the full, in as diverse a way as possible. And because of this, they are brimming with life and high spirits. With this model, to ask "Why be good?" as people began to later, would be as ridiculous as asking "Why enjoy a dark, foaming, full-bodied pint of Guinness?" or "Why should a clock keep good time?"

To get the hang of this human existence is its own irreverent koan. To simply enjoy

the dark, foaming, full-bodied pint of each ordinary day. To keep time with my own heartbeat simply because it beats—and the Guinness of my fermenting life is intoxicating. As the Sufi's say, it is not good to be too sober when it comes to the heart of things.

Which is not to make light of evil. Still, if at its core evil is an absence of the capacity for living, then living—and living well—is perhaps the most efficacious response. Even when confronting evil's blind devotion to erasing-life, or how it mimics life only through the suffering of others; *to deeply live as a response to such evil* is itself a way of flaming. And perhaps a skillful engagement with this koan of evil.

Evil is also an absence of *humor*—of the capacity for humor's sense of the unexpected, of the inevitability of things going wrong in a way that somehow evokes communion rather than brittle brutality toward self and other. Perhaps morality has less to do with feeling in control of all that goes wrong in this world, and more about curiosity, intimacy with the endless possibilities of loving a flawed world. Even *this* world where God, in the Western sense, seems more alive *inside of* this paradox of good & evil than in any attempt to reduce and control such innate contrariness. Complete control, or complete morality, would bring life as we know it to an end: its own evil. Eagleton again:

To say that God is good is not to say that he is remarkably well-behaved—most ... theologians would not see God as a “moral” being at all—but rather that he is an infinite abyss of self-delighting energy, which no doubt means that he must have a boundless sense of humor as well (he needs one)...God is that abundant, overflowing, ecstatic *jouissance* at the heart of us, which is closer to us than we are to ourselves...

To be entirely without such abundant, self-delighting life is to be evil; and this means that evil is not something positive but a kind of lack...a sort of nothingness or negativity, an inability to be truly alive.

Which implies, then, that the *whole* human being is one who integrates the shimmering Satan with the less flamboyant God-of-duty inside one's self—where desire and duty compose a richer tune than either strain alone. Which is to say that a true human being is indeed like a dark, foaming, full-bodied Guinness, as well as a diligent clock keeping good time—and presumably, both *having* a good time.

Eagleton goes on to acknowledge that this is trickier than it sounds:

I say that virtue is really all about enjoying yourself, living fully; but of course it is far from obvious to us what living fully actually means. This is because, as we know from Freud and others, we are not transparent to ourselves as human beings. On the contrary, there is a sense in which we are desperately opaque to ourselves. So we can't just look inside ourselves and find the answers to these questions ready and waiting.

In fact, he says one can look to the Western ideals of progress and democracy as having a dark underside which, “even as I speak is wreaking havoc with millions of lives in the Middle East and Afghanistan.” He says,

Freud himself had no doubt that within this drive or energy, which builds and destroys civilizations, lurked the death drive itself. This is profoundly ironic, since it means that concealed within our desire to create, to subdue to order, to reduce to harmony—in short, to overcome chaos (all very necessary, by the way)—lies a land of chaos itself. The will to order and dominate that yields us civilized existence is secretly in love with nothingness. There's something anarchic, out of hand, about our very lust for order and civility...

It is here that the Jungian idea of *Shadow* as the necessary component to the Psyche's wholeness mirrors the Chinese Taoist understanding of the great opposing forces of *Yin & Yang*. How these seemingly contrary primary energies are both essential aspects of this great living. Indeed, Life would not *be* without their inextricably entwined dynamism. Eagleton says:

This idea that death and dismemberment lie within the very impulse to exuberant life and the drive to build civilization was known to the ancient Greeks as the Dionysian, because Dionysus is life and death, Eros and Thanatos together, builder of cities and wrecker of them, both joy and destruction, affirmation and negativity.

Hence, as John Tarrant says in *Zen*, our blind zealotry to perfecting our lives through unending “self-improvement projects” misses some of the necessary dynamic messiness of it all. Or as Eagleton says again,

...to stare the Medusa's head of frailty and negativity squarely in the eyes... Only by opening ourselves in this way to our own frailty and finitude might we have a chance for authentic life.

As John also says, *awakening is something we do together*, in community. Whether as a small group of meditators, or as a country—inclusive of frailty and finitude. Which Eagleton addresses by saying,

...if a genuine human community is to be constituted, it can be only on the basis of our shared failure, frailty, and mortality. This is a community of repentance and forgiveness, and it represents everything that is the opposite of the American Dream...

Only by acknowledging the monstrous as lying at the very heart of ourselves, rather than projecting it outward onto others, can we establish anything more than a temporary, imaginary relationship with one another... This means relationships based on the recognition that at the very core of the self lies something profoundly strange to it, which is utterly impersonal and anonymous but closer to us than breathing, at once intimate and alien.

Which means that I am all archetypes, and there is no foreign stranger whom I can cast out of myself and make, ultimately, *Other*. I am shadow, I am both creator and destroyer, acting upon and nested within a Cosmos that acts upon me. Complicit, together. And broken, in some necessary way:

Or as the poet Yeats puts it, “Nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent.”

I have always, since birth I imagine, wanted to be whole without being broken—which is akin, in a way, to simply waxing nostalgic for a womb, cosmic or maternal. Rather than being born to unique *beingness*, which occurs only in the passage *through* this torn-gate of the birth canal. To be alive at all is to be complicit with the contrary forces that make life possible:

And so the death-dealing myths of Western modernity—the bad infinity of Faustian desire, which would annihilate the whole of Creation in its compulsive-obsessive hunt for the transcendental signifier, and which in doing so hubristically rejects all limits on the human enterprise and thus rejects death itself—must be countered by that other founding Western myth, the tale of Oedipus, who, blind and broken before Thebes, is finally forced to confront his own finitude and humanity, and who in doing so releases a great power for good.

Perhaps to be whole is to know myself as a *koan*: that in the blindness and brokenness of a self-and-world-I-am-intimate-with is the very possibility of *jouissance*. A livingness that makes *evil-as-absence* less likely, when I am *present* in this *Koanville* of a world.

## The Sacred in Ohio, & The Koan of the Key

At Folio Books on 24<sup>th</sup> Street in San Francisco's Noe Valley, I'd rummaged through their outdoor bargain bin on the sidewalk, found *Good Poems – American*, selected by Garrison Keillor. Just back from a Zen retreat, two poems leapt toward me. I could hear John Tarrant in my ear, about how awakening is a journey that is always present, wherever and whenever we are. Especially the moments that are *not spiritual* in any formal way, that don't necessarily conform to ancient images of Chinese landscapes, though it is this too. There is awe everywhere available, even, as Michael Blumenthal describes, in Ohio:

### Over Ohio

You can say what you want about the evils of technology and the mimicry of birds: *I love it*. I love the sheer, unexpurgated *hubris* of it, I love the beaten egg whites of clouds hovering beneath me, this ephemeral Hamlet of believing in man's grandeur. You can have all that talk about the holiness of nature and the second Babylon. You can stay shocked about the future all you want, reminisce about the beauties of midwifery. I'll take this anyway, this sweet imitation of Mars and Jupiter, this sitting still at 600 mph like a jet-age fetus. I want to go on looking at the moon for the rest of my life and seeing footsteps. I want to keep flying, even for short distances, like here between Columbus and Toledo on Air Wisconsin: an Andean condor sailing over Ohio, above the factories, above the dust and the highways and the miserable tires.

The holiness of nature and midwives notwithstanding—we wouldn't be here without either—this poem reminds me of the genius of it All, *the unexpurgated hubris of it*. That the journey is not one of escape as much as curiosity, even love, for the *dust and the highways and the miserable tires*. That Ohio is as unfathomable and iconic as old China—as is my own anonymous life. As the poet says, *I'll take this anyway*.

Then, on the next page, I find one of my favorite poets, Stephen Dunn, speaking of this sacred, mundane journey:

## The Sacred

After the teacher asked if anyone had  
a sacred place  
and the students fidgeted and shrank

in their chairs, the most serious of them all  
said it was his car,  
being in it alone, his tape deck playing

things he'd chosen, and others knew the truth  
had been spoken  
and began speaking about their rooms,

their hiding places, but the car kept coming up,  
the car in motion,  
music filling it, and sometimes one other person

who understood the bright altar of the dashboard  
and how far away  
a car could take him from the need

to speak, or to answer, the key  
in having a key  
and putting it in, and going.

This *sacred place* may be any private interior, in any public exterior. Even the *bright altar of the dashboard*—be it a sparkling new Prius, old red Mustang, broken-down pick-up, or just my own clunky brain, my tape-deck-crooning heart. The key, like any koan, is putting it in, and going.

As Basho says, *the journey itself is home*. How lucky to be awake—even in Ohio, even in this Second Babylon. In this good poem of the body.

## A Prince, A Lion, & Desire

Another Dean Young poem for this morning, after hearing that the iconic music-genius Prince died yesterday at his home, aged 57. Young's poems, after his own serious heart surgery—he had to get a new one—have taken on an even deeper tone of mortality, and recognition of desire's conundrums:

### Ripped Parchment

Was it there in that picture window  
of the deserted yellow house  
that always reflected me and my dog  
on fire or this morning in the café  
where everyone around me was arguing  
in Polish or was it the electron  
photograph of a mite that only lives  
in ears of mice or how the talons  
of an eagle pat its nest or  
the sheet music for percussionists?  
I think I picked out the word for hunger.  
For pallesthesia. Flysch. Is this what  
you meant, Tomaz, by the *whole* world?  
I heard that your last word was platinum.  
I heard you were quite calm.  
I didn't even know you were sick.  
Lavender vodka, the inaccuracy  
of all my measurements so there's always  
a gap, glitter factory, bad traffic,  
a couple ants on the windowsill  
counting to a billion and the way  
my darling throws back her shoulders  
to take off her jacket and what  
that does to her breasts and what  
that does to my pulse and what rain  
does to colors. It deepens them,  
doesn't it, so even a light pink  
looks like the tongue of a lion feeding.

Prince was a lion—one of the most flamboyant, unique, gender-defying, erotic, utterly creative, cross-genre musicians and performers of my generation. He

personified desire. He died two years younger than I am now—at least other recent lions, like David Bowie, and Glenn Fry, both of whom died earlier this year, waited till their late sixties.

It is raining and stormy this Friday morning—*what rain does to colors. It deepens them, doesn't it, so even a light pink looks like the tongue of a lion feeding.* Young keeps referring to *Tomaz* in his new poems, which I believe is Tomaz Salamun, the Slovenian poet, and one of Europe's most celebrated, who passed away in 2014. Though I also like to think of Tomas Tranströmer, the Swedish Nobel-winning poet who died a few years ago at age 83. Both poets waited a little longer than Prince—though Tranströmer did have a severe stroke at age 59 that severely curtailed his ability to speak and use his right arm. There is that. I think after Dean Young received his new heart, he, like Tomaz & Tomas, were moved to *see*, to speak about the world *whole*, in all its delirious complexity. Young finds words not often used in poetry to convey something about this *living* with desire and death:

*Paresthesia*: an abnormal or inappropriate sensation in an organ or area of the skin, as of burning, prickling, tingling...

*Flysch*: a sedimentary deposit consisting of thin beds of shale or marl alternating with coarser strata such as sandstone...

The poem compels me to look such obscure words up, like an itch that must be scratched. And isn't Prince's *desire*, or the Buddha's, which is to say my own, like an abnormal burning—at least when I watch Prince perform, on his knees, then flat on the floor, still stroking his guitar and wailing. Mara—Buddha's flamboyant demonic adversary that assaulted him under the Bodhi tree where he became enlightened—probably performed with similar extravagance. And unless one wants to become only *flysch* in response to such desire—sedentary, thin—one must feel the molten core of the planet, the heart, that keeps the world we are alive.

*Is this what you mean—Young, Prince, Buddha—by the whole world?* The body a ripped parchment, a broken guitar—but also the heart, the pink tongue, of a lion.

## Disguised As Everything

I came upon this strange and marvelous poem from Malcolm Guite, in *The Best Spiritual Writing – 2013*. He is a priest in the Church of England and chaplain at Girton College, University of Cambridge. The poem for me is an odd integration of Zen's *Emptiness* with a Western divine-intelligence that the human is a part of, rather than apart from. *Sapientia* is Latin for the supple intelligence that is wisdom:

### *O Sapientia*

I cannot think unless I have been thought,  
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.  
I cannot teach except as I am taught,  
Or break the bread except as I am broken.  
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,  
O Light within the light by which I see,  
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,  
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,  
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,  
O Memory of time, reminding me,  
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,  
My Maker's Bounding Line, defining me,  
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,  
Come to me now, disguised as everything.

The last line reminds me of John Tarrant's Zen, how the world rises up to meet me, *as everything*. In Zen, *Emptiness* is more fertile, pregnant, than the word translates to in the West. All that I am, or encounter in the world—*oh Sapientia*—is a part of this innate intelligence. By sounding the depths of this song, I feel the ground of my own being in the notes of each minute that arises.

And, neither world-nor-wisdom-nor-self need be neat and tidy. The intelligent wisdom of Emptiness yields the 10,000 things of this strange and wondrous universe, full of aberrations and eccentricities. Of which I am one. The *Everything* that rises up to meet us is full of madness and grief, too; perhaps its own kind of intelligence, of wisdom.

There is a quote from Lynne Sharon Schwartz' *Ruined By Reading*, alluding to the childhood stories she was so enamored with, illuminating perhaps the difference between myth and therapy, cure and art:

The narrator is mad with grief, and madness makes all things feasible. I imagine the stories told to five-year-olds today, in the therapeutic era, feature narrators who diligently “work through” their losses to reach some emotional stability. With all the rampant conformity of my early years, eccentricity was still tolerated as a mode of being in itself, not a stage on the way to cure.

Eccentricity as a mode-of-being in itself—the uniqueness I am—not an aberration that must be therapeutically cured. I am not a flaw, but a feature of this mystery. An intimate utterance of what speaks me: *O Sapientia*. The fertile *Emptiness* that is ever giving birth to the ten-thousand things. This wisdom-world rises up to meet me each day, disguised as everything.

## The Hundred Bones & Nine Holes of Desire's Paradise

From Basho's *The Knapsack Notebook*:

Within this temporal body composed of a hundred bones and nine holes there resides a spirit which, for lack of an adequate name, I think of as windblown. Like delicate drapery, it may be torn away and blown off by the least breeze. It brought me to writing poetry many years ago, initially for its own gratification, but eventually as a way of life...

This windblown spirit considered the security of court life at one point; at another, it considered risking a display of its ignorance by becoming a scholar. But its passion for poetry would not permit either. Since it knows no other way than the way of poetry, it has clung to it tenaciously.

From Joan Sutherland's Zen book, *Acequias*:

There's something particularly human about spoken and written language, about the play of metaphor and the disciplines of syntax. Words are, after all, at the threshold where imagination becomes matter, something that has an effect in the world. Words arise out of silence and make a bridge from one imagination to another, one awakening to another...

The Pacific Zen Institute's approach toward language, as in koans and poetry, has helped me feel so at home, at this threshold *where imagination becomes matter*. Contemplation as fulcrum-point between inner and outer worlds, between the expressed and the inexpressible.

Still, *this imagining* that we are, where Emptiness becomes manifest, is still a kind of blindness—but perhaps one I can feel the bruise and tranquility of in my very skin. From the poet Mark Doty, his poem “Paradise”:

I read that blind children,  
in a room painted deep blue,  
became more tranquil, at ease,  
as if what they could not see their way to  
informed them. It's the same  
with longing; finally it delivers  
the object of desire not into our hands  
but into the skin itself,  
the bruising tattoo of *I want*.

It isn't even a question,  
whether the subject or object  
of desire is made more beautiful.

Perhaps the paradise of this world can be felt even when I am blind to it; perhaps the *bruising tattoo* of longing—the hundred bones and nine holes of it—is less a question than the very skin I live in.

In another poem, after stanzas where Mark Doty and other gay men escape police searchlights scanning the shrubbery in the park—he writes lines that could apply to anyone fumbling in the dark for one's original self:

I don't want to glorify this; the truth is,  
I wouldn't wish it on anyone,

though it is a blessing,  
when all your life you've been told  
you're no one, and you find a way  
to be what you have been told,

and it's all right.

This allusion, in a Zen way, that's it's all right: this finding and losing of one's self as a strange blessing. Being nobody special, being different: *it's all right*. Not as in *settling* or its despairs, but as in *Suchness*. It may be a blessing, after all, to simply *be*—neither flawed nor perfected. Or somehow both, in a new linguistic.

The poem continues in its meditation on *Paradise*:

Maybe the dead look back  
to the watered green silk of Earth  
and name it Desire's Paradise,

and it must be hard for them,  
formed as they were once in desire  
and then over and over again.

Imagine it's longing that compels them  
back to the world. You are snowdrift,  
marble, classical in the stasis

in which you die into yourself again,  
you feel so complete. Suppose  
you have everything you need,

and then you realize what you lack  
*is* need. And so I want you to wake again,  
in longing, like the rest of us.

My, what a marvelous *red-thread* koan. The hundred bones and nine holes of Desire's  
Paradise.

## The Entire Body is a Mouth

I open *The Book of Equanimity* to Koan 46 – “Tokusan’s Completion of Study”:

Great Master Emmyo Tokusan addressed the assembly saying, “Exhaust the end and there’s instant attainment. The mouths of all Buddhas of the three times might as well hang upon the wall. Now, there’s a person who roars with laughter. Ha! Ha! When you know this one, the essence of your exhaustive study is completed.”

I love the surreal image of all those Buddha mouths hanging on the wall, which is where they belong if I think they’re going to save me. It’s good Art, though—and Buddhas are still great friends to have around on this never-ending road. In the koan’s commentary, there are masters and students sparring over “grasping universal emptiness” by grabbing the air, or yanking each other’s noses like the Three Stooges, to indicate both the ephemeral and tangible nature of things. There is another story, too, about mouths from Tendo Nyojo, about his teacher Master Dogen:

The entire body is a mouth hanging in the air...

which could be a way of saying *you’re expressing it all the time*. In awakening, there’s still one *who laughs, who cries, who vows to save all sentient beings*. In the koan’s preface, and the verse that follows, such realization is also expressed as:

A hammer blow on the back of the head.

Catching all the ocean’s fish with a crescent moon.

Such koan-poetics are clearer to me, somehow, than one hundred pages of meditation instruction. A hammer moon, Buddha mouths hung on the wall like trophies, the silver fish, leaping. Is it alive? Is my life speaking it? Poetry and koans are good tongues for such antics; I’ll leave the 10,000 screws in the bottom of the meditation toolbox for now.

∞

In this vein, I turn to Mark Doty's poem *Horses after a Hurricane*, the opening lines of which remind me of the body encountering this wild storm of world & mind:

How they eased out from the bamboo brake,  
the morning the hurricane released us,  
one ours and one unknown, jettisoned  
on the creaking shore of what was left  
of the veranda. But the whole *world*  
was out of place that morning: bits

of the roof smithereened to Havana, stray  
shack boards upended in the garden,  
ragged oranges awash in the litter.  
All night the housekeeper and her parrot—  
sometimes you couldn't tell which cries  
were hers and which Attaboy's shrieks—

his under the biggest bed. And once  
the thunder began to jab in that chain  
of mountains across, I huddled under  
with my sheaf of manuscript, evidence  
that I'd felt that absolute music in the air  
again, some tremendous rondure floating

somewhere—lurching out for *cervezas*  
or to bring the Victrola nearer,  
jazz all night while the plaster gave way,  
striking chords on the untuned piano  
as graceful as mine—I liked them better—  
and once in the gray eye of the storm I rushed

out to the palm grove to piss and a sudden gust  
took my shirt and trousers. "The picture of Adonis",  
Mrs. Simpson said, "striding through the tall grass  
*à la natural...*"

Perhaps this is how to enter the recurring hurricanes of a life, *à la natural*, even with *the whole world out of place*, even when as poet all I can do is huddle under the biggest bed *with my sheaf of manuscript, evidence that I'd felt that absolute music in the air again*. Or, as Tendo Nyojo said earlier, *The entire body is a mouth hanging in the air...*

## Blue-Prints for a Beheading—Following the Red Thread

*Why can't clear-eyed Bodhisattvas sever the red thread?  
—Songyuan*

As Western Buddhists, I think we've inherited what we think of as blue-prints for getting rid of desire. It seems our practice *is this desire* to eliminate desire—yet, as humans we're more connected by this red-thread than most anything. Perhaps Zen is more about following this red-thread without grasping it too tightly—to see where it leads, rather than attempting to sever it. Even if it simply leads *here*.

I turn to Bob Hicok's *Elegy Owed*, these quizzical lines from “Blue Prints”:

don't you think it odd that my life has always had just enough space for my life...

*Like how the universe began, he suggested, Did it begin, she wondered, is that what this is?*

“Is that what this is?” Such a great Zen query, each new day, each quizzical moment. And, its own koan, this oddness that *my life always has just enough space for my life*, akin perhaps to the way the universe's far reaches keep expanding to create more space for its own dark energy, and the brilliant matter that is the visible universe. Always enough space for the life that is.

I am also finishing Sarah Lindsay's book of poems, *Debt To The Bone-Eating Snotflower*, how a young girl becomes entranced with *plumbing*, that it goes everywhere, connects far-flung communities and family, how she gleefully shouts down the toilet, “Hi, Uncle Calvin!” The joy of idiosyncratic connection—like mine, with these poets. In her next poem about a mosquito, I love the narrator's ambivalent dance with the pesky being intent on stabbing its “dark double tripod jagged as lightning” into her own soft skin full of mango juice and strawberries; and the poem's end, a kind of surrender to the vagaries of desire that the mosquito must feel as much as the author,

...while she sips behind my knee. She rises,  
a berry full of my blood, singing  
that I will itch all summer.

Like the mosquito, or Buddha, we are berries full of blood, the difference between itching with desire and singing merely a matter of tone and tempo.

Then, in David Shumate's *Kimonos In The Closet*, I find this completely odd ode to desire and its snares—how life seduces us with its kiss, then beheads us for wanting too much:

### **After My Beheading**

I am surprised by how little pain I feel as the executioner lifts my head by the hair and displays it to the jeering crowd. I am surprised to still be able to see the woman on the front row in her green bonnet spinning her parasol. The tall man in his white suit. The child stunned to learn that the head of a man could be so easily removed as if it were only a plum. Too late I learned never to sport with a dictator's wife. Even if she sneaks into your bed and tickles you with her feathers. Too late I learned that spies follow her everywhere. There she is now. Leaning against the railing of her balcony. Wearing a black-and-white polka-dot dress. Waving her little orange fan. The same fan she spread over my face. When she straddled me. And painted a little line around my neck. One red kiss at a time.

The dictator is, perhaps, one's own jealous ego—wanting, only for one's self. Yet this is the way egos act, and the world is filled with a lot of egos. You can lose your head in such a world. Yet, to still be able to *see* having lost one's head, in a Zen sort of way. Perhaps we go on after our own beheading. Following, still, the koan of the *Red Thread* that can never be cut. Eh?

Where does this red-thread lead me, or my own beheading for that matter? Perhaps, as in this poem from Bob Hicok:

### **What the great apes refer to as a philosophy of life**

...God does these things like send us halfway out  
on a rope bridge before telling us  
He's changed His mind about rope...

...I have never put my hands around the face  
of a stranger like a chalice, there's so much to do  
if I want to be fully human, not three-quarters  
or half or sort of human...I have to gather rain  
into a body and make love with the rainbody  
and teach the rainbody to moan and be taught  
by the rainbody how to fall apart  
into the most beautiful future reaching of grass  
with its billion billion somnolent tongues...

...may I sit with you on the veranda or build with you  
such verandas as we need, such skies  
as will hold the verandas in their arms, such martinis  
as Plato never went on about or I'd read him  
more often, sure the cave, sure the fire, sure the shadow,  
sure we're stuck, but a drink now and then  
makes philosophy bearable...these are my priorities,  
if they suit you, we can may share

Being halfway out on a rope bridge as it disappears sounds much like this *self* I thought I had; but its momentary loss leads me to the rainbody of things, with its billion billion tongues. Sure, as Hicok says, there's Plato and our little philosophies, the cave we're stuck in, the fire, the shadow—still, let's build a veranda together, this *Sangha*, and a drink now and then to enjoy this rope-bridge of a life while we walk it. Waking, as John Tarrant says, is something we do together.

## The Blue Time Machine

*I have a Time Machine  
But unfortunately it can only travel into the future  
at a rate of one second per second,  
which seems slow to the physicists and to the grant  
committees and even to me.*

—Brenda Shaughnessy

*O, sing...undo the world with blued song  
born from newly freed throats...*

—Tyehimba Jess

I was drawn to these lines from two new books mentioned in a recent Poets & Writers magazine. Brenda Shaughnessy's adept allusion to the human being as a time machine, albeit a slow one. And Jess' call to *undo the world with blued song*. Blue—it used to be my favorite color, is still the color, most mornings, of this gorgeous sky I peer at; also, the color of my laptop screen's word-processing border, by default. As a Jungian projective device, blue is a marvel—capable of evoking a range of deep associations, from unparalleled peace to the blues themselves, whether musical or mood; Joni Mitchell's iconic album *Blue*, or Miles Davis' *Blue Moods* released on Charles Mingus' Debut Records label. Or the blue skies of angels, whose perfect major chord harp music could learn a thing or two from Joni and Miles.

This morning, still in mourning, I think, for Prince and the many of my generation who are so oddly passing away all at once this year: David Bowie, Glenn Fry of the Eagles, the actor Alan Rickman, Paul Kantner of Jefferson Airplane, Maurice White of Earth, Wind & Fire; Dan Hicks of Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks (of course), Vanity (Prince protégé and friend), the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, comedian Gary Shandling, even country star Merle Haggard, even Frank Sinatra Jr (I was still getting over his father's demise). Even one of my favorite writers, Jim Harrison, who not only wrote poetry I love, but penned the famous *Legends of the Fall* that became a popular Hollywood movie. And, having yet to mention the actress Patty Duke, or R&B singer Natalie Cole (daughter of Nat King Cole). Of course, last year it was the likes of Leonard Nimoy (dear Spock of

Star Trek fame), Yogi Berra, Wayne Rogers (who played “Trapper John” on MASH), Stuart Scott (beloved sports announcer who I watched bravely soldier-on in front of a national audience just to get through his beloved basketball season). I think I’ll stop here. Such a privileged list is to let go unnamed the 55.3 million people, anonymous or otherwise, who die each year—151,600 of us daily. Whether timely, brutally, by intention, by accident, by grace, by having reached a delightfully ripe old age, or merely days-old in wondering incomprehension. No wonder I’m blue.

The BBC says well-known deaths from beloved icons have jumped five-fold from four years ago. They write, “We are only four months in, but it’s already been a dark, dark 2016.” I know, intellectually, that this is the math of the Baby-Boom generation I am a part of, this big bulge of post-World-War-II babies raised to think we in some way would be immortal, or at least make more money than our parents. Which is no longer true (immortality, nor wealth). And to calculate such mathematics well, each death of one of my beloved contemporaries is both a bullet I just missed, hence diminishing my chances of lightning or bullets striking too closely to my adjacent spot in line, but also the realization that with each passing year my spot in line moves up. Brenda Shaughnessy’s inexorable Time Machine, even at its measly rate of one second per second.

*O, sing...undo the world with blued song...*

I think what I really want to say, dear Princes all, is thank-you for singing this world a little bluer, a little deeper. And despite the penchant among us spiritual types to see the blue too angelic, I’ll end with a poem I wrote about Lao Tzu’s funeral, the way his dear friend made sure the heavens knew what he felt about such loss:

### **Fisticuffs**

After Lao Tzu dies, his friend Chi’in Shih strides into the burial grounds and shouts three times. His eyes red and wet. Chin trembling, legs like fallen stone. The other followers are stoic, like storm hiding in cloud. Lao Tzu had said, *hiding from heaven* is the only crime—so Chi’in Shih raises his arms skyward, shakes his fists. Makes sure his friend can see.

## The Dark Rose of Awakening

I am still here, each morning. Someday I won't be, and who knows what that *here* will be then. But it is this life, a strange rose, that I wake to—quiet now in my writing studio with autumn sun, the time change tilting the rhythm of day and night by an hour. I am grateful for this incomprehensible life, and its mayhem. In its Zen way, it seems much like this poem, from Dean Young's *Fall Higher*:

### Another Strange Rose for the Afterlife

Broken river, you're not broken after all,  
you just dropped your wineglass.

Tattered sky, you're only raining,  
get used to it. Not even the brown laurel

is dead, not even the dry things the rushes said  
or the little spinning creature, pivot

its smashed innards. Maybe we start out rising  
and stay that way, two people really one

shadow in the advancing day, trying  
to take the guesswork out of rapture,

hostages of we know not what,  
perhaps ourselves or the perfect other

never seen whose meddling is hardly felt  
except as twilight's paw upon one's shoulder

gently prodding us away from each other,  
away from the fire toward that clarifying

dark, free as sleep from desire, subject, theme.  
But some call remains suspended back there

still rich with ambiguity as a cry of love  
sounds like pain and vice versa, both

of which came from you and you caused.

There is much in this poem that reminds me of John Tarrant's innovative Zen, and the Pacific Zen Institute's work. That perhaps we're not broken after all, any more than the sky is by rain. Maybe we rise, together, in this work, *one shadow in the advancing day, trying to take the guesswork out of rapture, hostages of we know not what, perhaps ourselves*. John is fond of saying that awakening is something we do together, shadows and all. I love the allusion to the evangelical "waiting for the Rapture", how in Zen we can take the guesswork out of it: no one will save us. It is we who hold ourselves hostage. Yet the clarifying dark, where love and pain sound more like each other than not—is the ambiguous call at the bottom of the heart. Which comes, perhaps, from that place before our parents were born.

*Living* is a strange rose indeed. Awakening its own afterlife, here and now.

# The Devil's in My Neck – Zen Assays

*Writer person completely like monk. Poetry is your meditation.*

—the wise monk Tsung Tsai in George Crane's *Bones of the Master*.

The odd title of my first little book of Zen essays, *Elegy to the Bone Kimono*, is a poetic mix of the three poetry books alluded to in its first essay—illustrating the blending of boundaries inherent in moments of practice and poetry. It also alludes to the way that Zen as Zen (kimono, tradition) is always disappearing, changing form—even the bones of it.

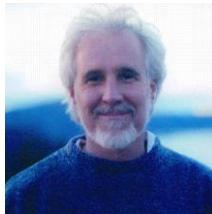
The title of this second book, *The Devil's in My Neck*, is a similar bit of Zen provocation. It is the first line of a poem by Thomas Lux, included in this new selection of meditations (appearing in the essay, “The Blue Ghazal of Zen”). In the rambunctiousness of Western culture that Zen finds itself rooting about in, it's what bedevils us about *self, relationship, meaning* that haunts the simple breath of practice. It may take a bit of poetry, and irreverence, to let Zen do its work in this Western body. An enlightenment that welcomes what bedevils us.

∞

*Dane Cervine* is a long time meditator, poet, and therapist – studying now with John Tarrant's **Pacific Zen Institute**. His poems and essays have appeared in many journals, including the Hudson Review, Atlanta Review, the SUN Magazine, TriQuarterly, Catamaran, Inquiring Mind, Turning Wheel. His books include *Kung Fu of the Dark Father*, *How Therapists Dance*, and, *The Jeweled Net of Indra*, all from Plain View Press.

[www.DaneCervine.typepad.com](http://www.DaneCervine.typepad.com)

[www.PacificZen.org](http://www.PacificZen.org)



*Kado Press*