

# The Poetics of the Physical World

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At the end of *A Season in Hell*, where Rimbaud reaches autumn, where his boat turns toward the port of misery, where he surrenders his supernatural claims and knows he has only rough reality to embrace, he says, "It is necessary to be absolutely modern."

This is a little different from Ezra Pound's phrase, "Make it new," which suggests that a poem is a technical act, a thing controllable by the will. I have come to distrust discussions of poetry which are technical. Yet to approach what it might mean to be "absolutely modern" I need to touch on what appears to be a technical matter: the uses of form in English poetry—rhyme, meter, and stanza.

In their earliest uses in English, rhyme and meter perhaps imitated a supernatural harmony: the regular beat, the foreknown ringing of the rhymes, perhaps echoed a celestial music. In the eighteenth century, when English poetry became more rational and worldly, the outward forms might have reproduced a natural order, so that form became an unconscious test of objective truth: for instance, if a statement couldn't be rhymed, it couldn't be true. For the Romantics and the Victorians, for whom that supernatural harmony and that natural order had crumbled, rhyme and meter took on a far more energetic function, which was to call back, in poetry, the grace disappearing from everything else. The poem was erected against chaos. The more disorderly reality appeared, the smoother the iambs became, the more elegant the rhymes. It was thought a beautiful achievement, a kind of rescue, to reduce the rhythms of human speech to the iambic foot. In this way poetry, along with so many other human endeavors, undertook the conquest of nature. No nineteenth century poem written in fixed form, unless perhaps something by Clare or Hopkins or Melville, fails to give off the aroma of this essentially nostalgic act.

For modern poets—for everyone after Yeats—rhyme and meter, having lost their sacred and natural basis, amount to little more than mechanical aids for writing. Contrary to common opinion, it is easier to write in rhyme and meter than to write without them. At the very least, the exigencies of these forms change the nature of the difficulty, making it more verbal than psychic. When using rhyme and meter one has to be concerned with how to say something, perhaps anything, which fulfills the formal requirements. It is hard to let the poem flow from oneself or move into the open that way. If you were walking through the snow, rhyming would be like following a set of footprints continually appearing ahead of you. Fixed form, in our time anyway, seems to bring you to a place where someone has been before. In a poem, you wish to reach a new place. And this requires pure wandering—that rare condition when you have no external guides at all, only your own, inner impulse to go, or to turn, or to stand still:

when the sound of the word on which a line ends does not limit the direction of the next line, when the voice does not subjugate speech, but conforms to its irregular curves, to the terrain itself. Robert Frost said writing free verse was like playing tennis with the net down. It is an apt analogy, except that the poem is less like a game than like a journey, where there are so many real obstacles in the nature of the case that it would be a kind of evasion to invent additional, arbitrary, verbal ones.

The first poet in English wholly to discard outward form—to be modern in this sense—is Walt Whitman. I have sometimes noticed a certain anti-intellectualism, a lack of balance and reasonableness, even perhaps a certain thickheadedness, in American writers. Who would have thought it possible to create a great book of the soul out of the search to kill a whale? Or who could have supposed that to describe a few months spent in a cabin in the woods could produce a masterpiece of the spirit? Once I witnessed in Paris a meeting between William Faulkner and some French intellectuals. The meeting was a failure, because whenever anyone turned to Faulkner to ask his opinion on a weighty matter, he would reply, “Oh, I’m not a literary man, I’m just a farmer.”

Had Whitman been more clever, conceivably he could have turned out to be as good a poet as Whittier or Longfellow. He was too awkward, he had no facility and he was too pigheaded to acquire it. As everyone knows, his attempts to write formal poetry were horrible failures. It was more than that: the turmoil within him, in which he *believed*, the chaos of the world, which he *loved*, couldn’t be turned into neat stanzas without suffering betrayal. Whitman gave up the attempt to be a poet like the others and followed, rather, his own intimations of a wilder, freer poetry which could not be contained in the old forms. Halfway through his life he discovered the absolutely new.

The universities suppressed the discovery for a hundred years, always preferring more formal or learned poets, such as, in our time, Frost, Pound, and Eliot, whose work is better suited to classrooms, because with them it is possible to make an exegesis of the poem; whereas with Whitman the exegesis has to be of our lives. When I was in college I was taught that Whitman was just a compulsive blabber and a nut.

Whenever I read “Song of Myself,” it strikes me afresh how miraculous Whitman is, how abiding is his affection for us, how open and human he remains, how contemporary is his language, how the cadences of his voice come from this very world where we live.

But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,  
My left hand hooking you round the waist,  
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and  
the public road.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,  
You must travel it for yourself.

It is not far, it is within reach,

Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did  
not know,  
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.

Shoulder your duds, dear son, and I will mine, and  
let us hasten forth,  
Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go.

If you tire, give me both burdens, and rest the chuff of  
your hand on my hip,  
And in due time you shall repay the same service to me,  
For after we start we never lie by again.

This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd at  
the crowded heaven,  
And I said to my spirit *When we become the enfolders  
of those orbs, and the pleasure and knowledge of  
everything in them, shall we be fill'd and  
satisfied then?*<sup>9</sup>  
And my spirit said *No, We but level that lift to  
pass and continue beyond.*

You are also asking me questions and I hear you,  
I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for  
yourself.

Sit a while dear son,  
Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink,  
But as soon as you sleep and renew yourself in sweet  
clothes, I kiss you with a good-by kiss and open  
the gate for your egress hence.

Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams,  
Now I wash the gum from your eyes . . .

Not long after my own discovery of Whitman, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" appeared. Ginsberg is not the first poet to claim to be the son of Whitman. Hart Crane felt himself in the line of descent, and William Carlos Williams, too, a little; and even Pound grudgingly announced himself a relation. But it strikes me when I read "Howl" that perhaps Ginsberg is the first whom Whitman would have acknowledged as the true offspring. The beginning of "Sunflower Sutra" is as good an illustration as any.

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat  
down under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific  
locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house  
hills and cry.

Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron pole,  
 companion, we thought the same thoughts of the soul,  
 steel roots of trees of machinery.  
 The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun  
 sank on top of final Frisco peaks, no fish in that  
 stream, no hermit in those mounts, just ourselves  
 rheumy-eyed and hungover like old bums on the river-  
 bank, tired and wily.  
 Look at the Sunflower, he said, there was a dead gray  
 shadow against the sky, big as a man, sitting dry  
 on top of a pile of ancient sawdust—  
 —I rushed up enchanted—it was my first sunflower,  
 memories of Blake—my visions—Harlem  
 and Hells of the Eastern rivers, bridges clanking Joes  
 Greasy Sandwiches, dead baby carriages, black treadless  
 tires forgotten and unretreaded, the poem of the river-  
 bank, condoms & pots, steel knives, nothing stainless,  
 only the dank muck and the razor sharp artifacts  
 passing into the past—  
 and the gray Sunflower poised against the sunset, crackly  
 bleak and dusty with the smut and smog and smoke of  
 olden locomotives in its eye—  
 corolla of bleary spikes pushed down and broken like a  
 battered crown, seeds fallen out of its face, soon-  
 to-be-toothless mouth of sunny air, sunrays obliterated  
 on its hairy head like a dried wire spiderweb,  
 leaves stuck out like arms out of the stem, gestures from  
 the sawdust root, broke pieces of plaster fallen out  
 of the black twigs, a dead fly in its ear,  
 Unholy battered old thing you were, my sunflower O my soul,  
 I loved you then!

There is something tattered, monstrous, and bedraggled, about this poetry. It is so shapeless, so lacking in proportion, harmony, orderly progression. Wherever the tone becomes elevated, it gets pulled back down by the earthy and crude. The “beautiful” is almost wholly absent. Yet the poem undeniably is touched with a certain glory. This glory has to do with the upwelling of love in one of the dirtiest places on earth, the railroad yard, for the strange, solitary, common life, the sunflower’s, the tin cans’, Jack Kerouac’s, the locomotive’s, one’s own.

Why does it seem, in the modern poem, that the less formal beauty there is, the more possible it is to discover the glory of the ordinary? I think of Donatello’s statue in wood of Magdalen: her body ravaged, her face drawn with suffering, her hair running down her body indistinguishable from her rags. She is in ruins. Yet her feet remain beautiful. The reason they are beautiful is that they have touched the earth all their life. In the same way, in the bedraggled poem of the modern, it is the images, those lowly touchers of physical reality, which remain shining.

The “absolutely modern” poem also discards the inner conventions of poetry—conventions whose function was to give us ways of coming to terms with our feelings. The more entrenched the conventions, the quicker they dismiss the feelings and get to the terms. Or they so imbue us with conventional feelings that we no longer feel at all.

We can see this, I think, by examining a few poems dealing with death, that final and most savage of realities. This passage is from Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”:

O, yet we trust that somehow good  
    Will be the final goal of ill,  
    To pangs of nature, sins of will,  
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
    That not one life shall be destroy’d,  
    Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete;

That not a worm is cloven in vain;  
    That not a moth with vain desire  
    Is shrivell’d in a fruitless fire,  
Or but subserves another’s gain.

Behold, we know not anything;  
    I can but trust that good shall fall  
    At last—far off—at last, to all,  
And every winter change to spring.

The convention of the elegy requires not only the expression of grief but also a consolation to put against it: a suggestion that life goes on, a promise of immortality, a hint that God had arranged this death for His own ultimately beautiful purposes. By the time this convention gets to the nineteenth century, it has become self-conscious and deliberate, and therefore destructive. Its crime is to break down according to a formula the mystery of human feelings. It is not the message so much as the strained clarity of the message, the unraveling of the mystery, which takes poetry like this into the unreal. In that passage from “In Memoriam,” Tennyson himself realized he was at the threshold of nonsense; hence the stuttering in the last lines.

Contrast that passage to these little poems on the same subject, which are neither terribly clear nor entirely consoling. The first, a fragment, is spoken by a man looking on the dead body of his wife:

Get up and let us look for caterpillars!  
Get up and let us dig up wild onions!  
Like one who could get up at any moment, you lie there.  
Stop sleeping and get up!  
Get up and kiss me!<sup>1</sup>

Instead of solemn grief, there is a show of pique at the dead one for having died. The poem has, of course, tragic overtones, having been invented out of sorrow. But whatever consolation this poem offers is not theoretical: it is actual relief, an actual transformation of burdened emotions.

In this poem a woman speaks:

Let us sit down together,  
We'll stay here, no matter how hot the sun.  
This morning, beside the mango-tree, that man shot you,  
Close by your father's grave at Partatapu.  
I have lots of hair between my legs  
And I think he's going to grab me.<sup>2</sup>

She fears this, and she also appears to desire it. In the same breath she expresses both a wish to suffer her grief unconsoled, and a longing for the natural life to gather her up again. Moreover, she admits to the dead husband the possibility of new love, not as a guilty confession, but as a kind of threat. The poem does not violate the ambivalence of her feelings.

One of the greatest of all death poems is Lorca's lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías. The courage of this poem is awesome. Pain, rage, torn love, mingle undiluted, unconsoled. Here is the section called, "The Laid-Out Body":

This stone is a forehead where dreams groan  
for lack of winding water and frozen cypresses.  
This stone is a shoulder for carrying time away  
with trees of tears and ribbons and planets.

I have seen grey rains running toward the sea  
holding up tender riddled arms  
to get away from the stone lying here  
which tears limbs off but doesn't soak up the blood.

For this stone hooks into seeds and clouds,  
skeletons of larks, wolves of the twilight:  
yet makes no cry, no crystals, no flames,  
only bullrings, bullrings, more bullrings without walls.

Ignacio the well-born lies out on the stone.  
It's all over. What's happening? Look at him:  
death has spread pale sulphur on his face,  
it has put the head of a dark minotaur upon him.

It's all over. The rain comes in at his mouth.  
The air as though crazy flies out of his broken chest,  
and love, soaked through by the tears of snow,  
huddles at her fires on the mountains over the ranches.

What are they saying? A fetid silence seeps down.  
We are here, before this body about to disappear,  
this pure shape which once held nightingales,  
we watch it being gored full of bottomless holes.

Who rumples the shroud? It's not true what he says!  
Here no one is to sing, no one is to wail in a corner,  
or dig his spurs in, or frighten the snake:  
here I want only eyes wide open  
to gaze on this body without ever resting.

I want to see here those men of ringing voice.  
Those men who break stallions and master rivers:  
men whose skeletons make themselves heard and **who sing**  
with mouths full of sunlight and flints.

This is where I want to see them. Facing the stone.  
Facing this body whose reins have been broken.  
I want them to show me if there is some way out  
for this captain death has tied down.

I want them to teach me to weep like a river,  
one with gentle mists and banks that are so tall  
I could bear Ignacio's body away on it silently,  
out of earshot of the double snorts of the bulls.

Now let him go off into the round bullring of the moon  
who has, when new, the face of a sad, quiet bull;  
let him go off into the night where fish stop singing  
and into the white thickets of frozen smoke.

Do not allow them to put handkerchiefs over his face,  
let him get used to the death he has put on.  
Go, Ignacio: leave behind the hot bellowing.  
Sleep, soar, rest: the sea itself dies.

Simone Weil wrote: "Avoid beliefs which fill the emptiness, which sweeten the bitterness. Avoid the belief in immortality, and the belief in the usefulness of sin, and the belief in the guiding hand of Providence. For," she goes on, "love is not consolation, it is light." This is also true for poetry. The poetics of heaven agrees to the denigration of pain and death; in the poetics of the physical world these are the very elements.

Think of Emily Dickinson's poem:

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—  
The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air—  
Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—  
And Breaths were gathering firm  
For that last Onset—when the King  
Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away  
What portion of me be  
Assignable—and then it was  
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—  
Between the light—and me—  
And then the Windows failed—and then  
I could not see to see—

Those sitting by the bedside awaiting her death have become abstractions—solemn, hushed figures prefiguring the beings of the life to come. Into this scene appears the fly—its “Blue, uncertain stumbling Buzz” the only physical image in the poem—the fly, the creature which disdains spirit and hungers only for flesh. Of course, it is repulsive that a fly come to you, if you are dying and if it may be a corpse fly, its thorax the hysterical green color of slime. And yet in the illumination of the dying moment, everything the poet knew is transfigured. The fly appears, physical, voracious, a last vital sign. The most ordinary thing, the most despised, may be the one chosen to bear the strange brightening, this last moment of increased life.

A dying Victorian woman, as we know, should have had her mind fixed on the heavenly kingdom. Yet that consolation, foolproof as it seems, probably never did work properly. When we try to picture eternal life as it might be, something always goes sour. Here is Milton’s description of heaven:

No sooner had th’ Almighty ceas’t, but all  
The multitude of Angels, with a shout  
Loud as from numbers without number, sweet  
As from blest voices, uttering joy, Heav’n rung  
With Jubilee, and loud Hosannas fill’d  
Th’ eternal Regions: lowly reverent  
Towards either Throne they bow, and to the ground  
With solemn adoration down they cast  
Thir Crowns inwove with Amarant and Gold,  
Immortal Amarant, a Flowr which once  
In Paradise, fast by the Tree of life  
Began to bloom, but soon for mans offence  
To Heav’n remov’d, where first it grew, there grows  
And flours aloft shading the Fount of Life,

And where the river of Bliss through midst of Heavn  
 Rowls o'er Elisian Flowrs her Amber stream;  
 With these that never fade the Spirits Elect  
 Bind thir resplendent locks inwreath'd with beams,  
 Now in loose garlands thick thrown off, the bright  
 Pavement that like a Sea of Jasper shon  
 Impurpl'd with Celestial Roses smil'd.  
 Then Crown'd again thir gold'n Harps they took,  
 Harps ever tun'd, that glittering by thir side  
 Like Quivers hung, and with Praeamble sweet  
 Of charming symphonie they introduce  
 Thir sacred Song, and waken raptures high;  
 No voice exempt, no voice but well could joine  
 Melodius part, such concord is in Heav'n . . .

Maybe our earthly terminology is too shoddy, too physical, too much at the mercy of time, to invoke an eternal realm. The word “paradise,” for example, like all our words for the unknown, is, in Emerson’s phrase, a fossilized metaphor, coming from the Persian—from *para*, “around”, and *daeza*, “wall”: a walled place, an earthly garden. So we could put all the blame on words. But isn’t the very concept of paradise also only a metaphor? Our idea of that place of bliss must be a dream extrapolated from our rapturous moments on earth, moments perhaps of our infancy, perhaps beyond that, of our foetal existence. The instincts grasp elementary errors, and it seems that all true poems—poems in touch with the instincts—including those poems whose whole ambition is to glorify heaven—have to make known their real loyalties.

She has left us; she will never come back the way she was.  
 She will never chop honey, as she used to,  
 Never dig yams with her digging stick.  
 She has left us; she will never come back the way she was.  
 There are lots of mussels in the creek.  
 But she who lies here will not dig them again.  
 We will go on fishing for codfish as we always have.  
 But the one lying here will never ask us for oil again,  
 Oil for her hair, she will never need oil again.  
 She will never use fire again,  
 In the place where she goes, there are no fires,  
 For she goes among the women, the dead women,  
 And women cannot make fires.  
 There is plenty of fruit and grass-seed  
 But not a bird or animal in the heaven of women.<sup>3</sup>

And the following poem, from classical Tamil, written approximately two thousand years ago, confronts that question even more directly:

Where the pepper vine grows  
and troops of monkeys  
live off the young leaves,

among his cliffs he stays,  
far away; he is a sweet man, yet.

And tell me, is even the so-called sweet heaven  
sweeter, really, than the affliction  
that dear ones bring?<sup>4</sup>

This Twentieth Century poem, by Sergei Yesenin, expresses the same loyalty, even if with a certain desperate passion:

Dear birch woods, you, earth,  
and you, sands of the plains!  
I cannot hide my anguish  
at this crowd of departing fellow-men.

In this world I have loved too much  
everything that clothes the world with flesh.  
Peace be to the aspens  
which open their branches and gaze into pink water.

I have cherished many thoughts in silence,  
I have made up many songs in my head,  
and I am happy to have breathed and lived  
on this gloomy earth.

I am happy to think that I have kissed women,  
crumpled flowers, lain about on the grass  
and have never struck animals,  
our lesser brethren, on the head.

I know that thickets do not blossom there,  
nor do the rye-stalks jingle their swan-like necks.  
And this is the reason I tremble  
at the crowd of departing fellow-men.

I know that in the land to come  
there will not be these cornfields gleaming in the haze.  
It is because they live with me on earth  
that men are dear to me.

In the desolation of the universe, the brief, tender acts, the beauty that passes, which belong to life in the world, are the only heaven. Yet not very long after he wrote the poem, Yesenin killed himself.

It is perhaps true that a poem entails a struggle with the poet's own nature, that it comes not only out of what he is but out of what he tries, almost certainly vainly, to be, out of his desire to be changed. Yet in Yesenin's poem we can also perhaps feel the suicidal presence, feel it as an essential element in this hymn to earthly life. I doubt that, in serious poems, death and life can be separated at all. It is obvious that poems expressing a craving for heaven involve the death-wish. In the great poems affirming life we may be even more clearly in the presence of the hunger to die. Freud says: "The most universal endeavor of all living substance [is] to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world."

Roethke writes:

I saw a young snake glide  
Out of the mottled shade  
And hang, limp on a stone:  
A thin mouth, and a tongue  
Stayed, in the still air.

It turned; it drew away;  
Its shadow bent in half;  
It quickened, and was gone.

I felt my slow blood warm.  
I longed to be that thing,  
The pure, sensuous form.

And I may be, some time.

Of course, the desire to be some other thing is in itself suicidal, involving as it must a willingness to cease to be a man, to be extinct. Robinson Jeffers makes this point so explicit in his poem "Vulture," that he is obliged, in the poem, to pull back, to resist.

I had walked since dawn and lay down to rest on a bare  
hillside  
Above the ocean. I saw through half-shut eyelids a vulture  
wheeling high up in heaven,  
And presently it passed again, but lower and nearer, its  
orbit narrowing, I understood then  
That I was under inspection. I lay death-still and heard  
the flight-feathers  
Whistle above me and make their circle and come nearer.  
I could see the naked red head between the great wings  
Bear downward staring. I said, "My dear bird, we are  
wasting time here.  
These old bones will still work; they are not for you."  
But how beautiful he looked, gliding down  
On those great sails; how beautiful he looked, veering

away in the sea-light over the precipice. I tell you  
solemnly  
That I was sorry to have disappointed him. To be eaten  
by that beak and become part of him, to share those  
wings and those eyes—  
What a sublime end of one's body, what an enskyment;  
What a life after death.

In poems of love for some other thing—be it a stone, a rat, a vulture, a blade of grass—we do not find simply the desire for extinction; for this desire may be the negative face of the desire for union, and thus a desire for more, not less, life. It brought Yesenin, and many another, it is true, to a real death. But it may also happen, in life, that what we love may enter us and exist anew within us. Perhaps, reincarnated, Roethke shall become the snake—it doesn't matter—but already the snake has become Roethke. The "absolutely modern" poem is absolutely ancient.

Rilke wrote:

How much every one of our deepest raptures makes itself independent of duration and passage; indeed, they stand vertically upon the courses of life, just as death, too, stands vertically upon them; they have more in common with all the aims and movements of our vitality. Only from the side of death (when death is not accepted as an extinction, but imagined as an altogether surpassing intensity), only from the side of death, I believe, is it possible to do justice to love.<sup>5</sup>

And in the Ninth Elegy he goes on to speak of that transformation of what is loved into ourselves, when we "look back" on it, from the "other side of nature":

The wanderer coming down to the valley does not bring back  
a handful of dust, inexpressible dust, to the valley,  
he brings a pure word he has learned, the blue and yellow  
gentian. Are we here perhaps just to say: horse,  
bridge, fountain, gate, jug, olive tree, window—  
possibly, pillar, tower? . . . but to say it, remember,  
to say it as the things themselves never dreamed  
they could be. Isn't this the secret aim  
of the cunning earth, when it urges on lovers,  
to make everything intensify its life within them?  
Threshold: how much it means  
to two lovers, as they wear down a little their own  
already worn doorsills, they in turn, after so many before,  
before all those still to come . . . lightly.

Here is the time for the tellable, here its country.

\* \* \* \*

Praise the world to the angel—not the inexpressible realm:  
you can't impress him with the splendor of your feelings;

you are only a beginner in the cosmos where he feels more  
feelingly.  
So show him some ordinary thing, which has been given form  
through the ages,  
until it comes to life in our hands, part of ourselves.  
Tell him about things. He will stand amazed, as you did  
beside the rope-maker in Rome or the potter by the Nile.  
Show him how happy a thing can be, how pure and ours;  
how even the moans of grief choose to take form,  
to serve as a thing to die into a thing, to escape  
into a bliss beyond the violin. The things that live on departure  
are aware of your praising: transitory themselves, they count  
on us to save them, us, the most transient of all.  
They want us to transmute them, in our invisible hearts,  
into—oh infinitely—into our selves, whoever we are.

Earth, isn't this what you want: *invisibly*  
to rise up in us?—Is not your dream  
to be invisible some day? Earth! Invisible!

Theology and philosophy, with their large words, their abstract formulations, their airtight systems, which until recently they imagined would last forever, deal with paradigms of eternity. The subject of the poem is the thing which dies. Zeus on Olympus is a theological being; the swan who desires a woman enters the province of poetry. In "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani," so does Jesus. Poetry is the wasted breath. This is why it needs the imperfect music of the human voice, this is why its words have no higher aim than to press themselves to us, to cling to the creatures and things we know and love, to be the ragged garments.

It is through something radiant in our lives that we have been able to dream of paradise, that we have been able to invent the realm of eternity. But there is another kind of glory in our lives which derives precisely from our inability to enter that paradise or to experience eternity. That we last only for a time, that everyone and everything around us lasts only for a time, that we know this, radiates a thrilling, tragic light on all our loves, all our relationships, even on those moments when the world, through its poetry, becomes almost capable of spurning time and death.

The earth is all that lives  
And the earth shall not last.  
We sit on a hillside, by the Greasy Grass,  
And our little shadow lies out in the blades of  
grass, until sunset.<sup>6</sup>

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FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A version of this fragment from a Dama song can be found in C. M. Bowra, *Primi-*

*tive Song* (Mentor, 1963), p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> A Bathurst Island poem. A version is in C. M. Bowra, *Primitive Song*, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> An Australian Euahlayi poem. See C. M. Bowra, *Primitive Song*, p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Kapilar, "What She Said to Her Friend" from *The Interior Landscape*, translated by A. K. Ramanujan (Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> *Briefe an eine junge Frau* (Im Insel-Verlag Zu Leipzig), p. 21-22.

<sup>6</sup> This fragment turned up among my papers; I don't know its source.

Next Issue

TIR 2/4 Fall 1971

Fiction

Wilfrido D Nolledo

Ann Jones

Jerry Bumpus

Criticism

John Vernon

*Theodore Roethke's "Praise to the End!" Poems*

Donald Heiney

*Calvin Ismo*

Italo Calvino

*The Other Eurydice*—Tr. by Donald Heiney

Jackson I. Cope

*Robert Coover's Fictions*

Robert Coover

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