

Poetry's Old Air · Marianne Boruch

THIS PAST YEAR I BOUGHT A BICYCLE at a yard sale where everything was going: the kids' beds from long ago, the refrigerator right out of the kitchen, years of clothing, not old enough to be valuable, just embarrassing, said the woman in charge, laughing as she bagged the skirts with too many pleats, the ties too wide. My bicycle, however, was perfect: balloon tires, coaster brakes, the sensible upright seat. Blue. Of course, it was a woman's — or as one says, a girl's bike — with its center bar at a slope, for skirts, or at least for gentle stops no matter how abruptly one has to leap forward and hit ground. I walked the thing home. The tires, though filled, weren't quite as firm as I liked; I didn't want to risk their damage. I figured they'd be hard to replace in this era of skinny cool-guy wheels.

Once home, I fell into the old habit of my other bike, the one with the baby seat still on back, with its hand brakes that don't work, the one whose gears have dwindled down to the hardest one, making me a pioneer to ride it: great god, horrible snow, if we can just hold out another minute, or hour, or week until spring, and so on. Old stupid habits, perhaps, but before long, that bike had a flat, and I was fiddling hard to get the air pump on my "new" bike, the blue one.

I was in a rush, which is the root of all evil and most surprise, and I bent to the little cap still on the tube's air nozzle. The woman who sold the bike had said no one had touched it for years, its tires last inflated, she was sure, in 1962, when her daughter turned 18, bought the Chevy and ditched the bike for good. So I was turning the little cap, hurrying to fit the air pump to it. Soon I would be late for class, my students both pleased and disgruntled by my absence.

But it was the old air that got me, shooting out when I pressed the pump to the nozzle, old air, sweet and vile at once, in there some 28 years. Air, I suddenly realized, from 1962, pre-Reagan, pre-Nixon air, Kennedy-still-alive air, pre-assassination air, the world still *post war*, sex still *pre-marital*, everything stalled at a slant, either foreshadowing or looking back. I was twelve — was I ever really twelve? — and grandparents were a given. This old air, then, on this old street, two blocks from the river: it could do the impossible; it could transform.

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So I think of this moment, carry it around, perhaps to solve something. But if poetry is more than the “click” of its revelation, if it is, as well, a process, an invited, even willed habit, not just a swift, unasked-for gift, then I need to go elsewhere, jump time and place, not simply months, but 13 years to Amherst, Massachusetts where I was trying to make pots, a matter far removed from that moment where a bike might astonish like a genie sprung from a lamp. It was, instead, months of long afternoons and dusty wheels, and scary, nasty glazes—every one of them poisonous—and the rowdy camaraderie of the studio, all, on the face of it, a great relief from poetry, a kind of inverse world Alice found down her rabbit hole, or the sort Russell Edson unearths by a design of peculiar brilliance. I was at UMass then, in the writing program, making my slow way toward a graduate degree; I’d walk over afternoons, shrugging off workshops and literature, and disappear among the earnest, madcap potters.

I never was, of course, really one of them. A year and a half later, I was still deftly turning would-be Grecian urns into dog dishes. *Time on the wheel*, my teacher, Susan Parks, kept telling us when we whined and cursed. Each disaster gets you closer to the bowl, the cup, the pitcher that will be *enough*, which is to say, simply itself. I think I was addicted; that trance over the turning wheel, that opening up each mound of clay smoothly, earth and water. And I recall particularly one morning, a Saturday in the large airy upstairs room, spring, the windows open to the new air, Beethoven’s *Pastorale* on WFCR coming off someone’s mud-splashed radio. Just a few of us working that early. Just a few. And we were at it intently, in silence.

All that patience, that play between intention and emptiness might have been the real gift: pure matter, a fist-full of clay turned into something again and again. It had everything to do with poems. One becomes a writer, in time. In time, one becomes a writer. Then more time passes, and one becomes a writer. So the growth of the imagination takes forever, a lifetime anyway.

But I’m probably digressing. In that room then, in that trance above the wheel, I found the pleasure of the making itself: it took me out of time. It was not just the historical jolt, the potter’s wheel, though that was happily confusing as well—early 1850 or 100 B.C., any place on the planet, the ancients turning out their dog dishes too. It went further than “the past,”

further out of time. For I don't think poets or any artists, really, are *in time* at all. The poem, the process of making a poem, is our stay against time, perhaps against history, against what is public and broadly, often emptily communal and handed to us, against speech even, for all the words in a poem both emerge from, and finally add up to silence, whatever beauty and terror that may mean.

The terror is not simply in the result—those images we do manage to call up—but in the process itself. I'm haunted, for instance, by a prose poem in Gregory Orr's most recent collection, an account of the young man he was, just a kid really, in New York, at a crummy evening job, his deluxe piss-in-the-sink \$2 room at a wino hotel—this, against the morning's real work, the disappearance into “drafts of poems, dream journals, stray ideas.” But this stays with me: one week's grueling exercise in memory—a daily 20 minutes all he could stand—closing his eyes to open the house of his childhood, entering there to see things, pausing methodically over the hooked rug, the cane seat, a whole wall where finding nothing day after day, he winced and turned away. More and more details seen and cherished until, he writes, “my head started to buzz and I had to stop.” Until “late that week I woke up knowing I'd lost control of my mind. . . .”¹

The striking thing about this exercise to me is that it appears, at first, so routine, so ordinary, not particularly dramatic at all. Simple, real things are evoked—the latticed porch, a gray and white Chevy parked under a weeping birch outside. Just details, but they carry one elsewhere and buoy up memory, keep it going until—what?—even the weight of these small idle things is too much: they begin to have a life of their own somehow. They begin to *mean*.

Intention and emptiness, that patience—over the wheel, or before the blank page, even that dream triggered suddenly over old bike air—is a trance, and crucial, I suppose, to all art, but especially to poetry. We deal by day and night in memory, not nostalgia, the value of which is discovery, not sentiment, and one empties to find it. Memories are personal, but if they persist, if they can be tapped for their strangeness, they often begin to assume weight, historical or mythic, even a spiritual weight, as if these poor shards that we find in our lives were really part of a larger buried vessel.

Two last stories for this, both recent. The first concerns a man in my de-

partment at Purdue, Bill Bache, who has taught there for many years. A veteran of World War II, he tells a true story to his Shakespeare students—a clandestine story of war and rescue, he and three others taken prisoner on a country road near Innsbruck, 1945, by several other young men who could've easily been their German doubles. The man remembers himself exhausted and ill, wounded in the attack, and brought out of a thicket, lying there in the sun. His friends are led off, and he is left with three of his captors, boys really. He understands that these young men are deciding whether to kill him or not, though no one says a word. They come closer, and he fumbles in his jacket for a pack of cigarettes—partially soaked with his own blood—and holds it out to the oldest one. The boy shrugs, and reaches, each one now carefully drawing out a cigarette, leaning back, smoking, talking. A reprieve that is working. It will be the end of the war in about ten minutes. American troops are marching that moment. Soon they will be visible, turning toward them as the road itself turns.²

My students—our students—so much younger than either of us, play this over in their heads. It falls on them like sudden light or rain, briefly unthinkable, the stuff of myth, this rescue in the nick of time, a real precision, and no, not a movie at all. They are touched by it, certainly touched by their passionate teacher stopping to tell it against *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, giving them a lens and a focus. I love the story, love its lit secret presence in this seemingly ordinary man walking down our low-ceilinged hallway, his drive to give it away in the middle of Shakespeare, himself a genius of gory scenes and terrible coincidences. I can't get that hand out of my mind—its desperate, sweet gesture, that bloody pack of cigarettes, the sunny day, the Germans, so young and uncertain. Borges in his small parable, "The Witness," mourns the death of the last worshipper of Woden, the last to see those pagan rites, though he ends in a startling personal shift. "What will die with me when I die," he writes, "what pathetic or fragile form will the world lose? The voice of Macedonio Fernandez, the image of a red horse in a vacant lot at Serrano and Charcas, a bar of sulphur in a drawer of a mahogany desk?"³

The second story is brief, not even a story. I tell Reed Ueda, an old friend, an historian, about my colleague's recollection, how fragile and crucial it seems, how it disorients and startles me. I run into this sort of thing all the time, he says. But I find things that make no sense at all and

no one's alive to ask. Things which clearly meant so much to whoever wrote them, but the framework's gone. And I think of him down in some cool library vault under those buzzing fluorescent lights, staring at someone's handwritten notes and letters, writing a little himself, then writing nothing, slipping into trance—looking where?—then staring back at the illegible page.

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It's a curious matter. We believe in time, our days are passed as *days*, capsuled out neatly into man-made "work weeks" but kept by natural cycles too—autumn's daft dismemberment, spring's foolish resurrection on cue. Yet going back through memory, to more memory, we both honor and dismiss such measurement of things. I said poets work outside of, even against time; I mean we put ourselves in a precarious moment, taking on that trance which brings up poems, to see, perhaps, as the future sees if its crystal ball looked back. Not that we would be left there, in that childhood house or on that German country road, but that we can't be. And so the enormous longing, the dark *duende* that Lorca speaks of, that sense of death, that presence, enters all great poems.

By poetry, I mean both lyric and narrative, trusting their sister brotherhood against the current argument which would divide them into little warring kingdoms, a division that would have us finally confess (confess!) and choose: is it the self or the world that absorbs us—as if the best poems didn't somehow work their power at the point where these two visions, public and private, collapse into each other, blur, release a common quickness. Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "In the Waiting Room," which itself is born of—and examines memory—is an astonishing example of this frightening and necessary merging, but that's not the piece that concerns me here.

"Poem," which appeared in *Geography III*, her last book, is a lyric of rich, interior order, and as such it automatically faces all the dangers of that form—self-aggrandizement, an easy appropriation of another's pain or glory, an intensity whipped up to a cartoon of itself ("So much depends on *me* glazed with rain beside the white chickens"). It risks the reverse too, the problem of the prosaic, the obsessive collection of narrative, too much world—chickens or rain or glazed wheelbarrows—with no real way into it through the poet's handmade lens. Now that I've reduced this argument to its miniscule theory—yet another cartoon—we can dismiss it, as

Bishop seems to, for what she manages in “Poem,” her quality of attention, seems to me somehow distant from either the self “in here” or the world “out there.” Instead, we move along in that scary fluid of mind—*thinking*, the process that connects these two visions, and what “Poem” is really about, Bishop’s meandering trance to bring together her experience and her uncle’s, set apart by decades. “About the size of an old-style dollar bill,” she begins,

American or Canadian,
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays
—this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)
has never earned any money in its life.
Useless and free, it has spent seventy years
as a minor family relic
handed along collaterally to owners
who looked at it sometimes, or didn’t bother to.

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple
—that gray-blue wisp—or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.
The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist’s specialty.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind—I can almost remember the farmer's name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.
Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?
Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time.

A sketch done in an hour, “in one breath,”
once taken from a trunk and handed over.
*Would you like this? I'll probably never
have room to hang these things again.*
*Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.*
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A. . . .

I never knew him. We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).
Our visions coincided—“visions” is
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art “copying from life” and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and memory of it cramped
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail
—the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water

still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.⁴

Bishop's method is fragmentary, deep with suggestion, one thing reminds her of another as we move back through time. Her surface subject—one of her favorites—is homemade art, however accomplished, art not refined and heightened by brilliant technique, but kept personal and surprising by the patient exactitude of its maker, here an artist with a “specialty” (“steel-gray storm clouds”), her great-uncle George, long passed to more exotic regions.

The painting “useless and free” and a “minor family relic” is a window to George's time; it is George's eye, as quirky—this must be genetic—as Bishop's, this uncle who can keep a wild iris going “fresh-squiggled from the tube,” or bring a barn to life with “titanium white, one dab” or the church, clearly Presbyterian by the steeple's “filaments of brush-hairs, barely there.” One looks playfully and hard at all this, exactly as this niece is looking, right now, even as we speak or read. Her present tense carries this power to animate, but the odd turns in the lines—questions, afterthoughts, exclamations, asides in their fussy, edgy press—all mime the agile mind thinking, and in the process, the blur of George's hand at the canvas—*his* “fresh-squiggling” after all, *his* dabbing, *his* dubious choice of “that awful shade of brown.” The niece is merely our able translator. *Merely.*

This is sometimes Bishop's role for herself, especially early in poems, a kind of “as told to” stance, even when she is telling herself these things, as if thinking out loud, trying things out in a loud stage whisper. This modesty is part of her work's lucid power: one never doubts she is waylaying pretense because her instinct is both spontaneous and sensible; she does not presume. Amid this care for boundaries, the remarkable thing is how time and its borders dissolve in the poem anyway; George's picture works as abstractly as some looming contraption out of science fiction regardless of Bishop's concern to keep it hard and fast with painterly detail, and precise appreciation. We fall easily through it, not only to witness the poet's own discovery, then George himself—his brushwork as immediate gesture—but finally full flight into the landscape itself, a place so cast in movement through Bishop's reverie that it jumps alive, real, returned to this moment of “feeding” geese and flying “specklike” birds. It's childhood, recalled by

places complete with names, Miss Gillespie's house, for instance, unaltered, as if nothing really changes things, certainly not death. By now George has done his job, and essentially disappeared. The time is Bishop's—"Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!"—a moment of personal focus, half certitude, half longing, close to the stunning shift she so admired as a college student, reading Hopkins, and finding in "The Wreck of the Deutschland," that poem's long tedium, a sudden flare into imaginative energy.⁵ "Fancy, come faster" Hopkins cried out in the middle of things, speaking, as Bishop does, directly, his passion far more compelling because, like hers, it seems so private. We have simply overheard.

This "overheard" quality, as Auden called it, has been in lyric verse from the beginning, of course, recent evidence coming through Yeats' definition, so famous it is nearly cliché—"one's argument with oneself"—that works poetry against its gregarious sibling, rhetoric, where one's argument remains "with the world." But Bishop's method is memory, that place of such interior depth and surprise that the leap of time dissolves even argument. "Our visions coincided—" she says of herself and her uncle, though adding quickly, with characteristic modesty, "'visions' is / too serious a word—our looks, two looks: / . . . Life and the memory of it cramped, / dim, on a piece of Bristol board, / dim, but how live, how touching in detail / —the little that we get for free, / the little of our earthly trust. Not much." But how one cherishes this little we do get—the "shivering" iris, the heartbreaking "yet-to-be-dismantled elms," the thin wayward geese. This movement, I think, is also overheard, and seen in that sideways way as if Bishop were speaking fitfully again, to herself. One is smitten by it, but not in the same way the flash of epiphany in a more conventional lyric poem might come, or the way *story* haunts, the very shape of meaning haunts, in more narrative verse. No, not in the same way at all.

Talking with a friend, a poet, Tam Lin Neville, I sense a nagging distrust of classic forms come back, she wanting poems to be more faithful to the real rhythm of our days, the way things drift, the small offhand gifts. As if life were like that, she says of the lyric, one revelation after another. Or narrative, I say, as if everything works out in a curve so neatly. Perhaps it's just that we hunger for a sense of time both larger and more ordinary than that, more plural. It is a mystery how things go and return and go, a mystery that belongs to poetry, and, oddly, though we value great turns

and desperate moments—all the bloody cigarettes of the lyric, those moments which give even narrative verse its flight and release, its *poetry*—it needn't always be so dramatic. Bishop is not dramatic; she is possible. I think of those elms until I can no longer think.

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We are back to image, I suppose, and its power, the power of the partial, the unfinished which is human. It is a dailiness that our mortality allows: one is able to pin down that much. Meanwhile, other poets have been keeping track, George Oppen, say, writing for no one in his daybook, private notes he kept for years. “Love of the world: it is not merely a sunny day in the country: it is the love of fate.” Or Oppen: “It is necessary to study the words you have written for the words have a longer history than you have and say more than you know.” Or Oppen again: “On writing a poem; not to make noise: to keep one’s attention outward toward silence.”⁶

All through May, I am reading such things, or avoiding reading such things by disappearing outside, working spring into the garden, making new borders in the hopeless shade that our yard is. A place in Minnesota sends me special plants for shade—balloon flower and anthemis and the slow hulking monkshood. But they don't send me what I expect, stems and leaves, only roots, strange squid-like twisted shapes I hardly know how to plant, all huge and terrible and quite unlike each other in their little plastic bags. I take them out, and hold them in my hand. I can almost hear their ticking, the wise dumb clockwork within that will send up straight stems, astonishing color, this odd containment making things possible, this ugly silent buried thing which propels so lush a fate.

But sometimes fate seems the buried thing alone. In the great world far from my tiny American orbit of yard and house and town, the rain forests are dying. And all through May in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, thousands are assembling while the army makes its reluctant though hardening way toward them. I think again of the “shivering iris,” the “yet-to-be-dismantled elms.” How these things, singular, merely themselves, are able to absorb such darkness, quietly, to *become* dramatic, expanding to encompass whole movements of history and neglect. It's been years now, of course, since Bishop wrote, but her images against the thick swirl of recent events focus and still them for me even as the iris and the elm remain

strictly and mysteriously not anywhere but here, in Bishop's poem, in her intelligent and specific composure of memory. Oppen's right—not a sunny day in the country, this love of the world, but a love of fate. As for the fate of a poem, who can tell what that will be, as if we knew even a fraction of its cost, or its treasure.

Are there poems really left to write, I have heard students, beginning poets, ask in equal parts grief and gratitude for the rich layers of poems we've built up by the thousands over centuries. Hasn't everything already been written? I find myself saying, yes, everything. Everything but the poems your generation, or any living generation, for that matter, will write from its peculiar, particular experience. Being 23 in 1989 is, after all, worlds apart from being 23 in 1973 or 1952 or 1929, and in time one begins to see how. At that moment, even poems of immense privacy, lyric or narrative, begin to bear a different weight, a release, however peripherally, into historical meaning that accounts, accounts *for*.

But one cannot worry this edge into things; the threat of rhetoric is too close. Our power remains in the *lived* thing, or as Oppen in his poem, "Of Being Numerous," says, "the isolation of the actual," where one talks "of rooms, and of what they look out on and of basements, the rough walls bearing the marks of the forms, the old marks of wood in the concrete, such solitude as we know—"7 Our eye remains on the image then, moment by moment, as it makes its immediate leaps and deliberations, as it moves to create shape, the story, however fitful, we make to carry it outward. It should and does surprise us how that movement, the mind's movement like some swift, slow-angled lens, suggests something larger than our little dumb-struck time and place.

In Oppen's poem, "Niece," that lens makes things riveting because, like Bishop, Oppen keeps himself in the delicate place of mind exactly between what is public and private, and so becomes heir to both.

The streets of San Francisco,
She said of herself, were my

Father and mother, speaking to the quiet guests
In the living room looking down the hills

To the bay. And we imagined her
Walking in the wooded past
Of the western city . . . her mother

Was not that city
But my eldest sister. I remembered

The watchman at the beach
Telling us the war had ended—

That was the first world war
Half a century ago—my sister
Had a ribbon in her hair.⁸

The poem, at first, seems to begin elsewhere—out of the speaker’s control—with the voice of another, the niece bragging lightly and bitterly of raising herself, the streets her *real* mother and father, all this in front of the “quiet guests” who appear to have nothing at stake. Outside is the bay—blue water one invents quickly, the hills dropping to it, though this young woman is our focus, burning up the mild living room with her sad bravado. In neither defense nor condemnation, the poet, the uncle here though brother still to the woman disdained, claims his sister from the past through sudden memory, 50 years ago, where a “watchman at the beach” tells them that “the war had ended— . . . my sister” Oppen adds, “had a ribbon in her hair.”

In that image, that ribbon, we needle down through five decades of family history, but how poignantly the poem opens further, to a much larger historical moment, closing not just with sister or brother, but the watchman too, these three looking out at the endless water, dazed, probably, at the massive news—the world war ended, the first of this century. That this child with her careful, vibrant ribbon is buried in the mother of this other child so grown-up and furious who stalks the present room, is a source not of particular pain but of wonder. I think of Czeslaw Milosz recalling in his poem, “Encounter,” an ordinary wagon and bird, a friend’s hand pointing to the flash of wing overhead, a lifetime ago, and his asking “not out of sorrow but in wonder” what happens that these things are vanished.⁹

It strikes me that poetry—all art perhaps—carries within itself two mysteries, each with its own containment, its own sense of time. If I'm right about *trance*, if time is stopped to begin the poem, then perversely, a conventional, human measurement of such things is echoed and mimed to keep the poor thing going. This might be the art, the disguise of it, those intricate interior wheels and pulleys with their real world pretense—human gesture and birds that feed or fly, a watchman so full of news he'd talk even to children, a foreboding habit—a specialty—in steel-gray storm clouds, all that compression of *story* cut down to the bare miraculous, the image and its suggestive cubist shards. These things move us through time and mime the seeding, growth and diminishment of things, and so imply the mortality of earth, of the body, the lure of the dramatic that is so difficult to resist. We hear it too, in the cadence which settles and rises in the wheeling, snaking, bursting sentence made breathless and strange by the poetic line. So we measure time, and in that act suggest what is public and communal, what is, in fact, history. In spite of ourselves and against the stopped, still origin of our impulse, we remake time in some odd home-made way, moving along until that too vanishes.

Thirteen years ago, I remember, my pottery teacher stood over our bowls and jars at critiques, tracing their turns, holding them up eyelevel, centering their weight in both hands. Form is finally about what's not in a piece, she told us once, twice, too many times to count. Don't crowd the emptiness out of it, she said.

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Charles Simic's poems have always seemed to me to bear such weight, this shadow—really a kind of closure—from their initial lines, as if darkness—that vanishing—were the norm, the spirit's cottage industry. "On the first page of my dreambook / It's always evening / In an occupied country," he begins, not uncharacteristically, in his poem, "Empire of Dreams."¹⁰ And we believe him the way we believe the old widower down the block who refuses to throw out his wife's dresses. That continual push of impending silence makes each recognition, each image in his poems—for the moment at least—saved, and for that rescue, joyful, no matter how melancholy the news might be. It's as if Simic's sense of time were the rhythm of patience, even indifference, fingers tapping a wooden table, or against the sill of a window high above the street. For him, public and private are so thoroughly meshed, lyric and narrative elements so swiftly intertwined

that the poems enter, as if sleepwalking, a place beyond the historical into what is mythic.

His poem “Prodigy” is one that lives in all regions. “I grew up bent over a chessboard,” Simic tells us first.

I love the word *endgame*.

All my cousins looked worried.

It was a small house
near a Roman graveyard.

Planes and tanks
shook the windowpanes.

A retired professor of astronomy
taught me how to play.

That must have been in 1944.

In the set we were using,
the paint had almost chipped off
the black pieces.

The white King was missing
and had to be substituted for.

I’m told but do not believe
that that summer I witnessed
men hung from telephone poles.

I remember my mother
blindfolding me a lot.

She had a way of tucking my head
suddenly under her overcoat.

In chess, too, the professor told me,
the masters play blindfolded,
the great ones on several boards
at the same time.¹¹

We are, at once, in the most interior and exterior circumstance, drawn first through a personal memory of wartime, the speaker's boyhood love of chess against that violent other world where he witnessed—though he refuses to remember—"men hung from telephone poles." Outside then, this matter-of-fact cruelty, while inside, the reverse: the old astronomy professor teaching the boy chess, this boy who, nevertheless, loves the word "endgame," its promise of abrupt peace as much as the ruined particulars—the set itself whose paint "had almost chipped off," the white king which "is missing." One passes weeks and months through these quick clues: out there, the war; in here, the game's gentle mimicking in this "small house / near a Roman graveyard," a fact that roots us centuries in the terrible balance. But it is the mother, her instinct to keep the boy blind to the outside horrors—"she had this way of tucking my head / suddenly under her overcoat"—that alters what enormous ground is already covered, taking things further, releasing us from past or present fact into a future made possible only by such innocence. "In chess, too, the professor told me," Simic writes in closing, "the masters play blindfolded / the great ones on several boards at the same time."

It occurs to me that this poem works the way myth works; it presses itself into the future by the play of innocence and knowledge, opposites, great composure within the house against the unthinkable disorder outside, the boy the blind still eye at the center. It is a repeatable, allegorical pattern, the mother's foreboding of tragedy, love in her impulse to keep it hidden. Her human gesture—turning the boy so he cannot see—has ceremonial grace; we jump centuries by it, whole eras, and in the final image of the blind masters at their simultaneous boards, the whole business turns nearly Olympian, those in control high and oblivious, unseeing in their power. Who are they, languid over their games, consumed with tricks and detail? What do they know of happiness or sorrow? Such an ending does something else: it does not end. Instead, it keeps the poem from vanishing, or more accurately, through it, the poem vanishes into something more haunting than our human-made machinery can figure, past the lie

that we understand things—ourselves among them—or that our understanding is complete.

As for the poet, such movement keeps ambition as it should be: enormous and modest, both. “The great gesture,” Simic said in an interview in 1972, “the selfless poetic act is timeless, a moment outside history. . . . In some curious way,” he added, “that gesture is anonymous . . . greater than our destiny . . . We make the gesture, then, in the name of everyone who has ever lived.”¹²

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Still, however poignant the force of that gesture, we eventually find a way out of the poem, drift out of that trance, though it’s not so easy, especially for those of us who have been inside. Whole critical careers, of course, have been built on the outside of this issue—“poetic closure”—articles, books, entire conferences orbiting this term and its portentous final ring, as strict as a door, as clean, for some, as a hinge. But if you think as I do that longing makes the poem in the first place, longing built somehow into image and language, the whole design at that forward angle, longing that wants to reflect, distort and finally extract itself from time to keep going, then that term—poetic closure—is largely fake, an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. There is, after all, that final glimpse of things before the door clicks shut—light still falling through the ancient, thinning elms, a boy whistling home from a summer job, a black dog paused by the fence across the street: treasures, however offhand, continuing, which is to say, *possible*, beyond our poor definition or invention.

If Lorca, in his way, was right, if poems concern what vanishes, then mysteriously, that’s what stays. The last word quits and we have this lovely vacuum. We’re there, staring down the hole, the poem’s echo still in our heads, its after-image still on everything, the afternoon changed seriously by the blunt strange air released by whatever orphaned bicycle. My point is this: the poem keeps going, off to where no instrument can count it, off *out of time*, which is to say, past the body, and beyond even memory, where the trance began. Perhaps it is like that moment when we were little, and aimed our flashlights at the stars on summer nights. Someone, the smart kid—Mickey Ingolia on my block—always said that our lights kept going. In a million years, two million, they might reach some bright pinpoint in the Big Dipper or in Cassiopaea. And so we stood there, beaming up loop-de-loops, clicking our flashlights off and on, all of us struck suddenly with such hopelessness and purpose.

Notes

1. Gregory Orr, "Hotel St. Louis, New York City, Fall 1969," *New and Selected Poems* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).
2. For a vivid and beautifully written account of this event, see William B. Bache, "On the Road to Innsbruck and Back," *The University Review—Kansas City*, Volume 34, no. 3 (Spring 1968), pp. 181–186.
3. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Witness," *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1964).
4. Elizabeth Bishop, "Poem," *The Complete Poems: 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).
5. Ashley Brown, "An Interview with Elizabeth Bishop," *Shenandoah* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1966).
6. George Oppen, "Selections from George Oppen's *Daybook*," *The Iowa Review*, vol. 18, no. 3.
7. George Oppen, "Of Being Numerous," *Of Being Numerous* (New York: New Directions, 1968).
8. George Oppen, "Niece," *This is Which* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
9. Czeslaw Milosz, "Encounter," *Bells in Winter* (New York: Ecco Press, 1978).
10. Charles Simic, "The Empire of Dreams," *Classic Ballroom Dances*, (New York: George Braziller, 1980).
11. Simic, "Prodigy," *ibid.*
12. Barry Lopez, "Interview: Charles Simic," *Skywriting*, vol. 1, no. 2 1972.