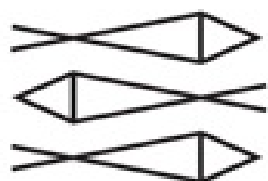


SELECTED POEMS

C. K. WILLIAMS



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By C. K. Williams

Copyright

for Catherine

and Jessie and Michael

and Jed

FROM

Lies

[1969]

A Day for Anne Frank

God hates you!

—ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

1

I look onto an alley here
where, though tough weeds and flowers thrust up
through cracks and strain
toward the dulled sunlight,
there is the usual filth spilling from cans,
the heavy soot shifting in the gutters.
People come by mostly
to walk their dogs or take the shortcut
between the roaring main streets,
or just to walk
and stare up at the smoky windows,
but this morning when I looked out
children were there running back and forth
between the houses toward me.
They were playing with turtles—
skimming them down the street
like pennies or flat stones,
and bolting, shouting, after the broken corpses.
One had a harmonica, and as he ran,
his cheeks bloating and collapsing like a heart,
I could hear its bleat, and then the girls' screams
suspended behind them with their hair,
and all of them: their hard, young breath,
their feet pounding wildly on the pavement to the corner.

2

I thought of you at that age.
Little Sister, I thought of you,
thin as a door,
and of how your thighs would have swelled

and softened like cake,

your breasts have bleached

and the new hair growing on you like song

would have stiffened and gone dark.

There was rain for a while, and then not.

Because no one came, I slept again,

and dreamed that you were here with me,

snarled on me like wire,

tangled so closely to me that we were vines

or underbrush together,

or hands clenched.

3

They are cutting babies in half on bets.

The beautiful sergeant has enough money to drink

for a week.

The beautiful lieutenant can't stop betting.

The little boy whimpers

he'll be good.

The beautiful cook is gathering up meat

for the dogs.

The beautiful dogs

love it all.

Their flanks glisten.

They curl up in their warm kennels

and breathe.

They breathe.

4

Little Sister,

you are a clot

in the snow,

blackened,

a chunk of phlegm

or puke

and there are men with faces

leaning over you with watercans

watering you!

in the snow, as though flowers would sprout
from your armpits
and genitals.

Little Sister,
I am afraid of the flowers sprouting from you

I am afraid of the silver petals
that crackle
of the stems darting
in the wind
of the roots

5

The twilight rots.
Over the greasy bridges and factories,
it dissolves
and the clouds swamp in its rose
to nothing.
I think sometimes the slag heaps by the river
should be bodies
and that the pods of moral terror
men make of their flesh should split
and foam their cold, sterile seeds into the tides
like snow
or ash.

6

Stacks of hair were there
little mountains
the gestapo children must have played in
and made love in and loved
the way children love haystacks or mountains

O God the stink
of hair oil and dandruff

their mothers must have thrown them into their tubs

like puppies and sent them to bed

coming home so filthy stinking

of jew's hair

of gold fillings, of eyelids

7

Under me on a roof

a sparrow little by little

is being blown away.

A cage of bone is left,

part of its wings,

a stain.

8

And in Germany the streetcar conductors go to work

in their stiff hats,

depositing workers and housewives

where they belong,

pulling the bell chains,

moving drive levers forward or back.

9

I am saying goodbye to you before our death. Dear Father:

I am saying goodbye to you before my death. We are so

anxious to live, but all is lost—we are not allowed! I am so

afraid of this death, because little children are thrown into

graves alive. Goodbye forever.

I kiss you.

10

Come with me Anne.

Come,

it is awful not to be anywhere at all,

to have no one
like an old whore,
a general.

Come sit with me here
kiss me; my heart too is wounded
with forgiveness.

There is an end now.

Stay.

Your foot hooked through mine
your hand against my hand
your hip touching me lightly

it will end now
it will not begin again

Stay

they will pass
and not know us

the cold brute earth
is asleep

there is no danger

there is nothing

Anne

there is nothing

Even If I Could

Except for the little girl
making faces behind me, and the rainbow
behind her, and the school and the truck,
the only thing between you
and infinity
is me. Which is why you cover your ears
when I speak and why
you're always oozing around the edges,
clinging, trying
to go by me.

And except for my eyes and the back
of my skull, and then my hair,
the wall, the concrete
and the fire-cloud, except for them
you would see
God. And that's why rage howls in your arms
like a baby and why I can't move—
because of the thunder and the shadows
merging like oil and the smile gleaming
through the petals.

Let me tell you how sick with loneliness
I am. What can I do while the distance
throbs on my back like a hump,
or say, with stars stinging me
through the wheel? You are before me,
behind me things rattle their deaths out
like paper. The angels ride
in their soft saddles:
except for them, I would come closer
and go.

Saint Sex

there are people whose sex
keeps growing even when they're old whose
genitals swell like tumors endlessly
until they are all sex and nothing else nothing
that moves or thinks nothing
but great inward and outward handfuls of gristle

think of them men
who ooze their penises out like snail
feet whose testicles clang in their scrotums women
are like anvils to them the world an
anvil they want to take whole buildings
in their arms they want
to come in the windows to run antennas
through their ducts like ramrods and women
these poor women who dream and dream of
the flower they can't sniff it sends buds
into their brain they feel their neural
river clot with moist fingers the ganglia
hardening like ant eggs the ends
burning off

pity them these people there are no wars
for them there is no news no
summer no reason they are so humble they want
nothing they have no hands or faces
pity them at night whispering I love
you to themselves and during the day how they
walk along smiling and suffering pity
them love them they are
angels

Loss

In this day and age Lord
you are like one of those poor farmers
who burns the forests off
and murders his land and then
can't leave and goes sullen and lean
among the rusting yard junk, the scrub
and the famished stock.

Lord I have felt myself raked
into the earth like manure,
harrowed and plowed under,
but I am still enough like you
to stand on the porch
chewing a stalk or drinking
while tall weeds come up dead
and the house dogs, snapping
their chains like moths, howl
and point towards the withering
meadows at nothing.

The World's Greatest Tricycle-Rider

The world's greatest tricycle-rider
is in my heart, riding like a wildman,
no hands, almost upside down along
the walls and over the high curbs
and stoops, his bell rapid firing,
the sun spinning in his spokes like a flame.

But he is growing older. His feet
overshoot the pedals. His teeth set
too hard against the jolts, and I am afraid
that what I've kept from him is what
tightens his fingers on the rubber grips
and drives him again and again on the same block.

Dimensions

There is a world somewhere else that is unendurable.
Those who live in it are helpless in the hands of elements,
they are like branches in the deep woods in wind
that whip their leaves off and slice the heart of the night
and sob. They are like boats bleating wearily in fog.

But here, no matter what, we know where we stand.
We know more or less what comes next. We hold out.
Sometimes a dream will shake us like little dogs, a fever
hang on so we're not ourselves or love wring us out,
but we prevail, we certify and make sure, we go on.

There is a world that uses its soldiers and widows
for flour, its orphans for building stone, its legs for pens.
In that place, eyes are softened and harmless like God's
and all blend in the traffic of their tragedy and pass by
like people. And sometimes one of us, losing the way,
will drift over the border and see them there, dying,
laughing, being revived. When we come home, we are halfway.
Our screams heal the torn silence. We are the scars.

Hood

Remember me? I was the one
in high school you were always afraid of.
I kept cigarettes in my sleeve, wore
engineer's boots, long hair, my collar
up in back and there were always
girls with me in the hallways.

You were nothing. I had it in for you—
when I peeled rubber at the lights
you cringed like a teacher.
And when I crashed and broke both lungs
on the wheel, you were so relieved
that you stroked the hard Ford paint
like a breast and your hands shook.

It Is This Way with Men

They are pounded into the earth
like nails; move an inch,
they are driven down again.
The earth is sore with them.
It is a spiny fruit
that has lost hope
of being raised and eaten.
It can only ripen and ripen.
And men, they too are wounded.
They too are sifted from their loss
and are without hope. The core
softens. The pure flesh softens
and melts. There are thorns, there
are the dark seeds, and they end.

Of What Is Past

I hook my fingers into the old tennis court fence
and kneel down in an overgrowth of sharp weeds
to watch the troopers in their spare compound drill.

Do you remember when this was a park? When girls
swung their rackets here in the hot summer mornings
and came at night to open their bodies to us?

Now gun-butts stamp the pale clay like hooves.
Hard boots gleam.
And still, children play tag and hide-and-seek

beyond the barriers. Lovers sag in the brush.
It's not them, it's us: we know too much.
Soon only the past will know what we know.

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