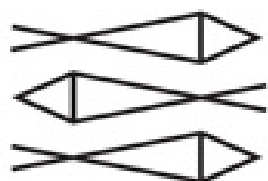


# SELECTED POEMS

C. K. WILLIAMS

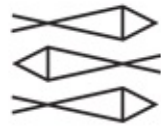


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# SELECTED POEMS

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C. K. WILLIAMS



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*By C. K. Williams*

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---

*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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