

IN MEMORIAM

“Poetry Is a Necessity of Life”: In Memoriam C. D. Wright (1949–2016)

“I love them all,” begins a recent book by C. D. Wright. Words, she is speaking of. “More than the pristine, I love the filthy ones for their descriptive talent as well as transgressive nature.”

I first heard of her in 1981, when she applied for a job at Brown. I asked one of Keith Waldrop’s colleagues what he thought of the candidates.

“Well, I don’t like the shitass poet.”

“Shitass poet?” I was puzzled. I had not been at the reading, but Keith burst into laughter: “You mean you took offense at that funny line by C. D. Wright? How did it go, ‘Come all ye upside-down shitasses’?”

Luckily for us in Rhode Island, the majority of the English Department were willing to accept this invitation.

Shortly after, in 1982, appeared her remarkable *Translations of the Gospel Back into Tongues*. There is little good news indeed in these poems, but a very fine ear for American idiom, for authentic tongues, their stories, loneliness, small pleasures, dreams, violence. There is intense empathy with the people depicted. There is a keen eye for detail, images lifting off the page: “Nothing is under the sink / But a broken sack of potatoes / Growing eyes in the dark.”

There is above all a fusing of all the elements into a language and tone that is at once melancholy, hardnosed, warm, funny, distanced, and passionate. “My poems are about desire, conflict, the dearth of justice for all,” said C. D. “About persons of small means.” She called her poems “succinct but otherwise orthodox novels in which the necessary characters are brought out, made intimate (that is, reveal themselves), engage in dramatic action and leave the scene forever with or without a resolution in sight.” Here, for example, is the poem “Tours”:

A girl on the stairs listens to her father
Beat up her mother.
Doors bang.
She comes down in her nightgown.

The piano stands there in the dark
Like a boy with an orchid.

She plays what she can
Then turns the lamp on.

Her mother's music is spread out
On the floor like brochures.

She hears her father
Running through the leaves.

The last black key
She presses stays down, makes no sound,
Someone putting their tongue where their tooth had been.

Over the next ten years C. D. continued to write fine short poems filled with humor, bold metaphors, strong emotions, and stunning lines. She honed her already keen eye for the potential form inherent in everyday experience, combining it with a double sense of wonder and wry humor to perceive relations to which we are blind most of the time.

Most importantly, she kept examining her methods and creative process. I remember C. D. saying that she used to think the line was the basic unit of the poem, and as long as she felt that to be true, she thought she knew what she was doing. Once that belief started to slide away, she first felt paralyzed but then became energized by her very fear. She began questioning genre borders and crossing them, taking larger and larger risks, and searching for a vision that would go not just beyond the line but also beyond the single poem. The search led to books somewhere between narrative and lyric, between prose and verse, between research and memoir. Her remarkable scope always encompassed the social and the personal.

This happened first in *Just Whistle* (1993), a book that haunts me to this day with its two bodies (both called “the body,” both called “it”) and their tortured relationship:

Given we do not heal but harden.
Our eyelids pushed down as if by a big darkness.

It then happened very strongly in *Deepstep Come Shining* (1998), where *Just Whistle's* violently chopped sentences—often reduced to single words—gave way to a more musical composition. C. D. was now “taking new stock of breath, cadence, phrasing, looking for an alternate route” through the “chlorophyll world” of her native Southern landscape and lingo. Here, “antinomian marsupials” lie in the road, light “slams” on the seeing and the blind,

and while “ gourds are kindly expensive,” she is asked, “ would you wont anythang that wasn’t.”

I’ve always been struck by how much light—strange light, erotic light—there is in C. D.’s books: *String Light* (her 1991 title), “unpondered light,” “the breastbone’s embraceable light,” “steel light,” and “clitoral light.” In *Deepstep Come Shining*, there is a riot of “magnolialight,” “pianolight,” “A delirious brilliance. Onionlight,” “leglight,” “cornlight,” and “alligatorlight,” until finally, with biting irony, she tells us “the light is antebellum.”

Light got scarcer in the following book-length poems as their subject matter became increasingly political. *One Big Self: An Investigation* (2007), a collaboration with the photographer Deborah Luster, combines research and reflection on prison conditions with the voices of prisoners.

Driving through this part of Louisiana you can pass four prisons in less than an hour. “The spirit of every age,” writes Eric Schlosser, “is manifest in its public works.” So this is who we are, the jailers, the jailed. This is the spirit of our age.

She tells us that she wrote the book “not to idealize, not to judge, not to exonerate, not to aestheticize immeasurable levels of pain” but rather “to unequivocally lay out the real feel of hard times.” This she does. In many voices, in various forms, not least in the injunction to count, which punctuates the book with anaphoric litanies: “Count your fingers / Count your toes / Count your nose holes / Count your blessings. . . . Count your children / Count them again / Count the wrong turns you took to get here.”

These hybrid books fit Walter Benjamin’s assertion, which C. D. liked to quote, that all great works are special cases. They either create a genre or destroy one. This is true of C. D.’s culminating work, *One With Others* (2010). It makes the Civil Rights struggle come alive on the page in a way neither straight reporting nor, I think, a poem by itself could. It is a tribute to a white woman, Margaret Kaelin McHugh, who in 1969 joined the second, less-known March Against Fear in Arkansas and was promptly run out of the state. But at the center of the book is a small student uprising at a local black high school. C. D. recounts the students’ three-day detainment in an empty swimming pool. There were threats that they would be drowned, that they would be taken to the woods and shot.

As these details suggest, words—and poems—were physical for C. D. Though she he was open to a great range of writing, she often said of poems, “I don’t want to put just anything in my mouth.” She *lived* words. Even her small talk brimmed with vivid images. When she entered a room her words made it vibrate. Put on paper they radiate power—the power of her belief that “the word used wrongly distorts the world,” that “animals did not exist until

Adam assigned them names,” and that “the word endows material substance, by setting the thing named apart from all else. *Horse* then unhorses what is not horse.”

C. D. “tardily determined” that poetry “not only seeks silence, it aspires to silence.” Now that she has joined this silence, we upside-down shitasses must take solace from the great body of work that she left us on the way there.

Carolyn D. Wright was born in Arkansas in 1949, the daughter of a chancery judge and a court reporter. She settled in Rhode Island and married the poet Forrest Gander, with whom she ran Lost Roads Press and raised their son, Brecht. Among her many honors are a MacArthur Fellowship, the Lenore Marshall Prize, the Lannan and Robert Creeley Awards, and the post of Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. She passed away on January 12, 2016.

Rosmarie Waldrop

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Loss of Focus:
In Tribute to C. D. Wright

Appliqué of pale roses, appliqué of marigolds,
Golden cat’s body thrusts up his neck and out
Expands a yawn, as if through an empty loupe
Casing through which unslowed flowers fell
Apart into petals, meeting no description, how
Could these be plucked and applied, how
Could hourglass stitches keep all pockets flush,
Left without capacity to hold a choked engine.

Toe down on a cracked paving stone to work.
Butterfly now colourless and just there, where
Is the pipette to lift its flutter and so carefully
Squeeze it down by the moan of a coal train,
Where the lens that hears, the pink saucer
Whose small aperture would titrate morning
And expand across the uncollective borders;
Light meter has gone missing and the light flat.

John Wilkinson

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C. D.

I will turn to a photo of her face to capture her spirit. She leans on a dictionary as if it were a horse and her books surround her like woodland leaves. Her face is the face of her heart and her poetry: The wide sardonic smile and blue sympathy in her eyes. The humor in her mouth and the tipped listening of her head. Her slender frame, athletic but nervous; her look of the American pioneer and Democrat. She is ready to break paths and bake bread. She is perceiving what is coming but she is ready to pounce for her mouth is closed and slightly turned down. She is a teacher awaiting the comment that she can almost predict but not quite. I know from reading all the signs and her poetry, by her loving marriage to Forrest, by distant lands and Mountain Home, by great students, friends and colleagues, by her poetry of perplexity and its recognition by our generation, that she was blessed, blessed and three times blessed.

Fanny Howe



Photograph courtesy of Stew Milne and the MacArthur Foundation.