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CIP

Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath,
 Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
 Yet many a man is making friends with death
 Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

—EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

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PREFACE

*Above all I am not concerned with poetry.
My subject is War, and the pity of War.
The poetry is in the pity.*

—WILFRED OWEN, 1918

Wilfred Owen's *Preface* to the poems he wrote in 1917 and 1918 is the best caution I know against beauty and eloquence. He begs us not to read his anthem for the doomed youth of his generation as a decorous celebration of heroes. Decorum is the contemptible pose of the politicians and preachers, the hypocrite slime whose grinning hatred slicks this dying land like rotten morning dew. I do not presume on the nightmare of Owen's war—may the boys of Flanders be spared all comparison—and I don't pretend to have written the anthem of my people. But I would rather have this volume filed under AIDS than under Poetry, because if these words speak to anyone they are for those who are mad with loss, to let them know they are not alone.

Roger Horwitz, my beloved friend, died on 22 October 1986, after nineteen months of fighting the ravages of AIDS. He was forty-four years old, the happiest man I ever knew. He fought with an immensity of spirit that transfigured us who loved him. On his grave are Plato's last words on Socrates: *the wisest and justest and best*. Rog had a constitutional aversion to bullshit and was incapable of being unkind. Though he held two degrees from Harvard—a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and a law degree—he made no show of it. The only thing he ever bragged about were his three bohemian years in Paris in his early twenties, and he didn't so much boast of them as endlessly give them away.

These elegies were written during the five months after he died, one right after the other, with hardly a half day's pause between. Writing them quite literally kept me alive, for the only time I wasn't wailing and trembling was when I was hammering at these poems. I have let them stand as raw as they came. But because several friends have wished for a few commas or a stanza break here and there, I feel I should make a comment on their form. I don't mean them to be impregnable, though I admit I want them to allow no escape, like a hospital room, or indeed a mortal illness.

In the summer of 1984 Roger and I were in Greece together, and for both of us it was a peak experience that left us dazed and slightly giddy. We'd been together for ten years, and life was very sweet. On the high bluff of ancient Thera, looking out across the southern Aegean toward Africa, my hand grazed a white marble block covered edge to edge with Greek characters, line after precise line. The marble was tilted face up to the weather, its message slowly eroding in the rain. "I hope somebody's recorded all this," I said, realizing with a dull thrill of helplessness that this was the record, right here on this stone.

When I began to write about AIDS during Roger's illness, I wanted a form that would move with breathless speed, so I could scream if I wanted and rattle on and empty my Uzi into the air. The marbles of Greece kept coming back to mind. By the time Roger died the form was set—not quite marble, not quite Greek—but it was in my head that if only a fragment remained in the future, to fade in the sulfurous rain, it would say how much I loved him and how terrible was the calamity.

The story that endlessly eludes the decorum of the press is the death of a generation of gay men. What is

written here is only one man's passing and one man's cry, a warrior burying a warrior. May it fuel the fire of those on the front lines who mean to prevail, and of their friends who stand in the fire with them. We will not be bowed down or erased by this. I learned too well what it means to be a people, learned in the joy of my best friend what all the meaningless pain and horror cannot take away—that all there is is love. Pity us not.

Los Angeles
29 June 1987

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HERE

everything extraneous has burned away
this is how burning feels in the fall
of the final year not like leaves in a blue
October but as if the skin were a paper lantern
full of trapped moths beating their fired wings
and yet I can lie on this hill just above you
a foot beside where I will lie myself
soon soon and for all the wrack and blubber
feel still how we were warriors when the
merest morning sun in the garden was a
kingdom after Room 1010 war is not all
death it turns out war is what little
thing you hold on to refugeed and far from home
oh sweetie will you please forgive me this
that every time I opened a box of anything
Glad Bags One-A-Days KINGSIZE was
the worst I'd think will you still be here
when the box is empty Rog Rog who will
play boy with me now that I bucket with tears
through it all when I'd cling beside you sobbing
you'd shrug it off with the quietest *I'm still
here* I have your watch in the top drawer
which I don't dare wear yet help me please
the boxes grocery home day after day
the junk that keeps men spotless but it doesn't
matter now how long they last or I
the day has taken you with it and all
there is now is burning dark the only green
is up by the grave and this little thing
of telling the hill I'm here oh I'm here

NO GOODBYES

for hours at the end I kissed your temple stroked
your hair and sniffed it it smelled so clean we'd
washed it Saturday night when the fever broke
as if there was always the perfect thing to do
to be alive for years I'd breathe your hair
when I came to bed late it was such pure you
why I nuzzle your brush every morning because
you're in there just like the dog the night
we unpacked the hospital bag and he skipped
and whimpered when Dad put on the red
sweater *Cover my bald spot will you*
you'd say and tilt your head like a parrot
so I could fix you up always always
till this one night when I was reduced to
I love you little friend here I am my
sweetest pea over and over spending all our
endearments like stray coins at a border
but wouldn't cry then no choked it because
they all said hearing was the last to go
the ear is like a wolf's till the very end
straining to hear a whole forest and I
wanted you loping off whatever you could
still dream to the sound of me at 3 P.M.
you were stable still our favorite word
at 4 you took the turn WAIT WAIT I AM
THE SENTRY HERE nothing passes as long as
I'm where I am we go on death is
a lonely hole two can leap it or else
or else there is nothing this man is mine
he's an ancient Greek like me I do
all the negotiating while he does battle
we are war and peace in a single bed
we wear the same size shirt it can't it can't
be yet not this just let me brush his hair

it's only Tuesday there's chicken in the fridge
from Sunday night he ate he slept oh why
don't all these kisses rouse you I won't won't
say it all I will say is goodnight patting
a few last strands in place you're covered now
my darling one last graze in the meadow
of you and please let your final dream be
a man not quite your size losing the whole
world but still here combing combing
singing your secret names till the night's gone

YOUR SIGHTLESS DAYS

Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay

—DYLAN THOMAS

I remember clearly deciding not to see
anymore myself this out of sheer protest
or only see what I could tell you the whole of
art was out so was anything new the buff
hillside gone to grass was just our speed
but of course I was always minimizing
as if to say there's nothing to see today
it's the same old thing Rog sycamore's bare
park full of Seurats but hey feel that breeze
and knowing how clear Aegean blue your eyes were
please I know what I watched go out but even
when it struck us down blacked our windows
like an air raid even then your glimmering half
sight was so seductive *What do you see*
I'd ask you coaxing every street sign like
they were glyphs off a ruined temple night
would fall you'd frown *Are the lights on Paul*
and tear my heart all the Bette Davis lines
out to get us but oh my dearest every one
was on spots flashes searches long white tubes
like the swords in *Star Wars* candlepower fit
for a Byzantine saint and still so dim the dark
so jealous of life and then out of nowhere
a neon day of LA sun we're out strolling
you stop peer impish intent as a hawk
and say *I see you* just like that and THEN
I toss my blinders and drink the world like water
till the next dark up and down for half a year
the left one gone in April overnight
two millimeters on the right side saved
and we fought for those that knife of light

and beaten ground raging for day like the
Warsaw ghetto all summer long I dripped
your veins at 4 and midnight watching every
drop as if it was sight itself so did we
win did we lose you died with the barest
shadows oh I know but even then we hoped
a cataract laser might give us a glint
would not see night as the way of the world
and what have I seen since your blindness my
love just that my love requires no eyes so
why am I tapping this thin white cane of outrage
through crowds of sighted fools the pointless trees
and the awful dusk unlifting some few colors
bright as razor blades trying to make me look
I'm shut tight Oedipus-old leave me alone
I have somehow gotten it all wrong because
when you were the blackest blind you laughed *laughed*
groped your way and stared the noon sun down
How are you jerks would ask *Read Job* you'd say
a gleam in every good hour pulling out puns
and Benny jokes and fighting to read the charts
knowing the worst had fallen you'd hoot on the phone
and wrestle the dog so the summer was still
the summer Rog see how you saw us through

GARDENIAS

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pain is not a flower pain is a root
and its work is underground where the moldering
proceeds the bones of all our joy winded
and rained and nothing grows a whole life's love
that longed to be an orchard forced to lie
like an onion secret sour in the mine of pain
the ore veined out there's just these tunnels shot
with roots but then we were never gardeners
were we planters waterers cleanup crew
more yard boys three bucks an hour than rose queens
still the place was the vale of Arcady to us
and after all a man can plant a stone here
and it'll sprout but gardenias now those vellum
Billie Holiday prom flowers what a shock
to learn they grew on *trees* well bushes then
we urned one in the shade of the Chinese elm
watered and watered the white blooms wafting May
to mid-August now and then you'd bring one in
floating in a bowl and leave it on my desk
by such small tokens did the world grow green
and the Billie Holiday song is this I'm jealous
of all the time I didn't know you yet
and the month since so full of risible scalding
blankness I crave it more that secondhand past
oh you can keep the lovers the far countries
but you young you twenty you in Paris
with a poem in your boot if I could have that
really be there then beside you or waving
across Boulevard Saint-Germain I'd face these
dead days longer the cave of all that's left
enough now as to gardenias look this is
such a cliché but one happened to break
in October by then I was bringing them in
leaving them at your bedside between the Kleenex

and the talking clock *Smell it good now Rog*
it's the last one fourth day yellow and smutty
yet I gave you one last whiff right under
your nose while you talked to Jaimee then
you died a week later and that next day
I was out in the garden to die of the pain
but wait what is this Thomas Hardy a furred
gardenia just coming out which I bowled by
the bed I sleep now just where you slept curled
in the selfsame spot and that one lasted through
the funeral next week a third billowed out
what is this *Twilight Zone* which I laid on
the grave as if I was your date for the prom
which I would've been if we'd ever been 18
but for all the spunk of the three gardenias
still the pain is not a flower and digs like
a spade in stony soil no earthly reason
not a thing will come of it but a slag heap
and a pit and the deepest root the stuff of witch
banes winds and winds its tendril about my heart
I promise you all the last gardenias Rog
but they can't go on like this they've stopped they know
the only garden we'll ever be is us and it's
all winter they tried they tried but oh the ice
of my empty arms my poor potato dreams

THE WORRYING

ate me alive day and night these land mines
all over like the toy bombs dropped on the
Afghans little Bozo jack-in-the-boxes
that blow your hands off 3 A.M. I'd go
around the house with a rag of ammonia
wiping wiping crazed as a housewife on *Let's*
Make a Deal the deal being PLEASE DON'T MAKE
HIM SICK AGAIN faucets doorknobs the phone
every lethal thing a person grips and leaves
his prints on scrubbed my hands till my fingers
cracked washed apples ten times ten no salad but
iceberg and shuck the outer two thirds someone
we knew was brain dead from sushi so stick
to meatloaf creamed corn spuds whatever we
could cook to death DO NOT USE THE D WORD
EVEN IN JEST when you started craving deli
I heaved a sigh because salami was so de-
germed with its lovely nitrites to hell with
cholesterol that's for people way way over
the hill or up the hill not us in the vale
of borrowed time yet I was so far more gone
than you nuts in fact ruinous as a supermom
with a kid in a bubble who can't play and ten
years later can't work can't kiss can't laugh
but his room's still clean every cough every
bump would nothing ever be nothing again
cramming you with zinc and Häagen-Dazs so wild
to fatten you up I couldn't keep track of
what was medicine what old wives' but see
THERE WAS NO MEDICINE only me and to
circle the wagons and island the last of our
magic spoon by spoon nap by nap till we
healed you as April heals drinking the sun
I was Prospero of the spell of day-by-day

and all of this just the house worry peanuts
to what's out there and you with the dagger at
your jugular struggling back to work jotting
your calendar two months ahead penciling
clients husbanding husbanding inching back
and me agape with the day's demises who
was swollen who gone mad ringing you on
the hour how are you compared to ten noon
one come home and have blintzes petrified
you'd step in an elevator with some hacking
CPA the whole world ought to be masked
please I can't even speak of the hospital fear
fists bone white the first day of an assault
huddled by your bed like an old crone empty-
eyed in a Greek square black on black the waiting
for tests the chamber of horrors in my head
my rags and vitamins dumb as leeches how did
the meningitis get in where did I slip up
what didn't I scour I'd have swathed the city
in gauze to cushion you no man who hasn't
watched his cruelest worry come true in a room
with no door can ever know what doesn't
die because they lie who say it's over
Rog it hasn't stopped at all are you okay
does it hurt what can I do still still I
think if I worry enough I'll keep you near
the night before Thanksgiving I had this
panic to buy the plot on either side of us
so we won't be cramped that yard of extra grass
would let us breathe THIS IS CRAZY RIGHT but
Thanksgiving morning I went the grave two over
beside you was six feet deep ready for the next
murdered dream so see the threat was real
why not worry worry is like prayer is like
God if you have none they all forget there's
the other side too twelve years and not once

to fret WHO WILL EVER LOVE ME that was
the heaven at the back of time but we had it
here now black on black I wander frantic
never done with worrying but it's mine it's
a cure that's not in the books are you easy
my stolen pal what do you need is it
sleep like sleep you want a pillow a cool
drink oh my one safe place there must be
something just say what it is and it's yours

READINESS

Go now

I think you are ready

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

pre-need they call it at Forest Lawn pre-dead
is what they mean but they aren't all poodled
like Liberace a bit overripe but truly
convinced they're the launching pad hands slick
with Jergen's beaming all-God's-children
my pre-need meeting's next Wednesday with Bill
who hopes on the phone you're in a better world
and wants the gay market we'll go with the Old
North Church not *that* one they have their own
coffin polished steel closed no viewing no
embalming want to rot with my blood inside
means I can't be dressed but naked is quite
proper I'm not going out for dinner bare
is how I sleep nudist I wander the house
lap the pool check what's left in the mirror
3 concrete linings to pick from CA law
no sinking allowed 2 are tight as nuclear
shelters watersealed the third slatted on top
so the earth fills in yes yes more earth and
junk steel for the casket one wants to get back
to the soil quick for that is where we meet
no flowers well a spray of gardenias perhaps
but the floral part rankles especially after
I hated the flower garbage on your grave
besides we're out of the hothouse biz
earth wind water is all we are now I learned
this lingo for you Rog time-of-need alas
stripped Episcopal will do for the post-mortem
very stripped a little ashes-to-ashes no
I AM THE LIFE He's not no hymns no organ

just poems will's all signed with Dickensian
cut-outs medical power of attorney in case
of dementia every day I think of a new
way to get ready I'm ready as a fucking
fire department toss in please a pebble
from Delphi and a hunk of Brighton Rock
just like my friend plot's all paid for deed
the whole bit not a piece of real estate
expected to boom or condo-ize new address
Revelation thirty-two-seventy-five Space 1
2's you with 4 bristling evergreens at the
compass points to guard us therefore 1 P.M.
for the ceremony so the shadows dapple like
they did for you with the Valley bathed in light
epitaph name no middle initial date then
FOR 12 YEARS ALL THE LOVE IN THE WORLD WAS H
OTHERWISE HE WAS A WRITER HERE I AM ROG
not Yeats exactly but there won't be horsemen
passing only if we're lucky some far-off
men of our sort generations hence a pair
of dreamy types strolling among the hill graves
for curiosity's sake this well may be
in a time when dying is not all day and every
house riven and they'll laugh *Here's 2 like us*
won't that be lovely Rog make the grass shiver
like the dog's coat oh yes the dog goes to
my brother hoping the leash law's unenforced
pills I still have to get pills for the ten
contingencies of lingering hemlock
would be choice for Platonic reasons but
a cocked .32 will do in a pinch does this all
sound like I'm checking out oh darling no
I'm not half ready to leave us here without
us all told but the sickness is near sometimes
as the wall of this room things have to be done
I used my optimism up keeping you alive

all but this no matter what else we lie
together believing less than nothing now
I haven't the ghost of a lease on a better
world though I cry out your name and beg for
signs I am only prepared for wind and water
I put my house in order inch by inch
if it comes when it comes I'll be on the
diving board toes over the edge my gleaming
broken body all the details done with
one last dazzled thought of you in the sun
be wind and rain with me ready for deepest
darkness no matter how nothing not alone

BROTHER OF THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

—GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

combing the attic for anything extra
missed or missing evidence of us I sift
your oldest letters on onionskin soft-
cover Gallimard novels from graduate school
brown at the edges like pound cake and turn up
an undeveloped film race it to SUNSET
PLAZA ONE-HOUR wait out the hour wacko
as a spy smuggling a chip that might decode
World War III then sit on the curb poring over
prints of Christmas '83 till I hit paydirt
three shots of the hermit abbey on the moors
southeast of Siena our final crisscross
of the Tuscan hills before the sack of Rome
unplanned it was just that we couldn't bear
to leave the region quite the Green Guide barely
gave it a nod *minor Renaissance pile*
but the real thing monks in Benedictine white
pressing olives and gliding about in hooded
silence Benedict having commanded *shh*
along with his gaunt motto *ora et labora*
pray work but our particular brother John
couldn't stop chattering not from the moment
he met us grinning at the cloister door
seventy years olive-cheeked bald and guileless
no matter we spoke no Italian he led us
gesturing left and right at peeling frescoes
porcelain Marys a limpid row of arches
across the court like a trill on a harpsichord
little did he know how up to our eyeballs
we were on the glories of Florence the Bach

geometry of the hill towns their heart-
stopping squares with the well in the middle
and a rampant lion on the governor's roof
we'd already scrutinized every *thing* and now
before we left wished to see it peopled
going about their business out of time
keeping bees holy offices raisin bread
as if nothing had happened since Galileo
instead this voluble little monk pulling us
into the abbey church its lofty Gothic vault
overlaid in sugared Baroque plaster like a bad
cake then Brother John grips us by the biceps
and sweeps us down the cypress-paneled choir
to the reading desk where the Gutenberg
is propped on feast-days he crouches and points
to the inlay on the base and there is a cat
tail curled seeming to sit in a window
every tiger stripe of him laid in jigsaw
as we laughed our rapturous guide went *mew mew*
like a five-year-old *How long have you been here*
we ask a question requiring all our hands
fifty years he tosses off as if time had
nothing to do with it one hand lingering
on my shoulder is it books we like then come
and we patter round the cloister in his wake
duck through a door up a stone stairs and peer
through a grill wrought like a curtain of ivy
into the library its great vellum folios
solid as tombstones nobody copying out
or illuminating today unless perhaps
all of that has died and there's a Xerox
glowing green in the abbot's study John
pokes you to look at the door carvings it seems
he is not a bookish man but who has time
to read any more we must descend and see
the frescoes fifty years without the world

pray work pray work and yet such drunken gaiety
gasping anew at the cloister's painted wall
clutching my hand before the bare-clad Jesus
bound at the pillar by the painter so-called
Sodoma the parted lips the love-glazed eyes
JUST WHAT KIND OF MEN ARE WE TALKING ABOUT
are we the heirs of them or they our secret
fathers and how many of our kind lie beneath
the cypress alley crowning the hill beyond
the bell tower how does one ask such things
with just one's hands then we took three pictures
me and John John and you you and me *click*
as the old monk takes my arm I'm certain now
that he likes touching us that we are a world
inside him whether he knows or not not that
I felt molested I can take care of myself
but a blind and ancient hunger not unspeakable
unsayable you think he knew about us Rog
how could he not pick up the intersect
the way we laughed the glint in our eyes as we
played our Italian for four hands but my sole
evidence is this sudden noon photograph
the two of us arm in arm in the cloister
delirious gold November light of Tuscany
washing our *cinquecento* faces splashing
the wall behind us a fresco of the monks
at dinner high above them in a pulpit
a reader trilling in Latin you can't even
eat without *ora et labora* and we look
squinting at John as if to wonder how
he will ever click the shutter right it's like
giving a watch to a savage but we look
quite wonderful you with the Green Guide me
clutching the pouch with the passports we look
unbelievably young our half smiles precisely
the same for that is the pierce of beauty

that first day of a rose barely started
and yet all there and Brother John so geeky
with the Canon A-1 did he even see what
he caught we look like choirboys or postulants
or a vagabond pair of scholars here to
pore over an undecoded text not religious
but brotherly enough it's a courtly age
where men are what they do and where they go
comrades all we look like no one else Rog
here's the proof in color now the tour is over
we are glided into a vestibule where cards
slides rosaries prayers that tick are gauntly
presided over by a monk senior to John
if not in years then officialdom the air
is strict in here we cut our laughter short
this one's got us pegged right off this keeper
of the canonical cash drawer withering John
with a look that can hardly wait to assign vast
and pointless rosaries of contrition we buy
the stark official guide to Monte Oliveto
leave a puddle of lire *per restauro*
for restorations and then we're free of His
Priestliness and John bundles us off still
merry and irrepressible too old perhaps
to fear the scorn and penitence of those
racked by sins of the flesh who never touch
a thing and ushers us out to the Fiat
bidding us safe journey who's never been
airborne or out to sea or where Shiva
dances or Pele the fire-god gargles
the bowels of the earth we wave him off
and leap in the car we're late for Rome flap
open the map but we're laughing too *Did that*
just happen or what and we drive away
winding up past the tower towards the grove
of graves where the tips of the cypress lean

in the breeze and a hooded monk is walking
head bent over his book of hours in passing
I see that it's John wave and grin *rividerci*
startled at his gauntness fixed on his text dark
his reverie no acknowledgement goodbye
that is the whole story you know about Rome
and flying tourist opening weeks of mail
putting a journey to bed and on and on
but I've thought of John ever since whenever
the smiling Pope makes another of his sub-
human attitudes the law he drives our people
from the temples and spits on the graves of his
brother priests who are coughing to death in cells
without unction and boots the Jesuit shrink
who calls all love holy he wants his fags
quiet *shh* and I try to think of John
and the picture he saved three years for me
till the lost roll of Tuscany came to light
and turned out to hold our wedding portrait
the innocent are so brief and the rigid world
doesn't marry its pagans any more but John
didn't care what nothing we professed he joined
us to join him a ritual not in the book
but his secret heart it doesn't get easier Rog
even now the night jasmine is pouring
its white delirium in the dark and I
will not have it if you can't I shut all
windows still it seeps in with the gaudy
oath of spring oh help be somewhere near
so I can endure this drunk intrusion
of promise where is the walled place where we
can walk untouched or must I be content
with a wedding I almost didn't witness
the evidence all but lost no oath no ring
but the truth sealed to hold against the hate
of the first straight Pope since the Syllabus of

Errors this Polack joke who fears his women
and men too full of laughter far brother
if you should pass beneath our cypresses
you who are a praying man your god can
go to hell but since you are so inclined
pray that my friend and I be still together
just like this at the Mount of Olives blessed
by the last of an ancient race who loved
youth and laughter and beautiful things so much
they couldn't stop singing and we were the song

