

# Poetry and Transformation

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## *Abstract*

This narrative, based on the life experience of the author, focuses on how his evolving attraction to and love of poetry ultimately transformed his life. Blended with this revealing personal story is the author's assessment of how the relationship of poetry and faith—especially as poetry relates to the revealed word—can have a dramatic effect on one's struggle for personal transformation in the midst of troubling circumstances of crisis and turmoil. In addition, the author examines the manner in which exposure to this creative art can assist one in comprehending and applying the "Creative Word."

## *Resumé*

Cet article, fondé sur le vécu de l'auteur, relate comment son intérêt pour la poésie a évolué au point que son amour de cet art a fini par transformer sa vie. Parallèlement à ces révélations personnelles de l'auteur, l'article évalue comment le rapport à la poésie et à la foi, en particulier le rapport entre la poésie et la parole révélée, peut avoir un effet retentissant sur la lutte de l'individu pour sa transformation personnelle alors qu'il est aux prises avec des circonstances troublantes en période de crise et de tourmente. De plus, l'auteur examine comment l'exposition à cet art créatif peut aider une personne à comprendre et à appliquer dans sa vie la « Parole créatrice ».

## *Resumen*

Esta narrativa, basada en la experiencia de vida del autor, se enfoca en cómo la evolución de su atracción a y amor por la poesía finalmente transformó su vida. Mezclado con esta historia personal reveladora está el análisis del autor de cómo la relación entre poesía y fe—especialmente en la manera en que la poesía se relaciona con la Palabra Revelada—puede tener un efecto dramático en la lucha de uno por lograr la transformación personal en medio de circunstancias preocupantes de crisis y tumulto. El autor examina además la manera en que al exponerse a este arte creativo uno puede ser asistido en comprender y aplicar la "Palabra Creativa".

## ONE

In the park surrounding the Imperial War Museum in London, a large slab of concrete, twelve feet high by three feet wide, is slowly falling apart, exposing its skeleton of rusted steel rebar. Despite its appearance and strength, concrete is in motion. As soon as the molecules in the cement that bind it harden, they start to unfasten in a process that can take hundreds of years. Poured in 1961, this slab is not old by concrete standards and should be holding up better, but it is a segment of the Berlin Wall, which was constructed quickly and cheaply. During the wall's active duty, 136 people were killed trying to cross over from East to West Germany. Before the slab was retired to this beautiful park it was painted with graffiti. In one painting, a pair of cartoon eyes overlooks a huge Rolling

Stones red tongue covered with white letters that proclaim, “Change Your Life.” The artist “Indiano,” who graffitied much of the Berlin Wall, likely chose these words from a sonnet by Rilke that ends with the admonition, “Du musst dein leben ändern,” or “You must change your life” (“Archaic Torso of Apollo” 14).

Like concrete, poetry is also in transition—a poem is created over many revisions that can take, for me at least, decades before it is complete. Unlike concrete, a poem is bound by image and sound, metaphor and voice. A poem, as Archibald MacLeish famously wrote in “Ars Poetica,” “should not mean / But be” (23-24). My own “Ars Poetica” reflects on the relationship between the other concrete—the one relating to the senses—and the abstract.



#### ARS POETICA

The thin wires that brace the rods in place  
are not that tough as I twist them  
around bars of ribbed steel. And they quiver  
when I slurp over them tons of redi-mix.

In Cardiff, I burned a winter chopping holes  
through concrete. My jackhammer heated  
then sliced the steel, knocked loose gray chunks,  
snapped the slender wires like the bones of a finger.

As centuries tick, the stiff sides of buildings  
conceal molecules of cement unbinding  
into sand, aggregate, and water.

All the making becomes unmaking  
that implodes silently, spewing light and heat  
as it breaks back through the abstract.

*(Many Mountains Moving 93)*

While the abstract is the subject of poetry, it is also its enemy. The abstract has no flesh, no blood, no *thing*. It is soul and spirit, incomprehensible without form. The poet's job is to give the abstract a body, which can only be done using physical language. Poems are little machines made out of words. If the words are not the right words, the machine will not work. A successful poem will offer a different experience each time an attentive reader engages with it. And without the attentive reader, a poem, no matter how well crafted, will be meaningless. As William Carlos Williams portrays in "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,"

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there. (161–65)

### Two

I am standing in front of a group of teachers who want to write poetry. They have given up two weeks of their summer vacation to attend the Artist Teacher Institute at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, cosponsored by Arts Horizons and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. They will write poems while others in the institute are painting, dancing, and making books, collages, and digital photographs. These teachers are enthusiastic, earnest, smart, and exhausted. They write down everything

I say. I'd rather they argue. I need to provoke them.

"Who wants to dance?" I ask.

They look confused. I point to Lisa, a special education teacher in Camden. She hesitates, terrified, then stands and comes to the front of the room. She wonders if she should have taken oil painting instead.

I arrange Lisa so that she is standing two feet in front of me. I say, "I am a writer and you are my reader. Are you ready?"

She nods her head. She's game. I look her in the eye, squeeze her hands, and say, "Don't drink and drive."

"What?" she says.

"If you drink and drive," I continue, "you are going to crash your car and kill yourself and someone else. Do you understand?"

Lisa nods her head again.

"Did you know that in 2010, 10,228 people in the United States died in drunk driving crashes? You don't want to be one of them, do you? No, of course not. Do not drink and drive. OK?"

Lisa giggles nervously. The other teachers are laughing, relieved I didn't pick them.

"Very good," I say. "Lisa is my perfect reader. She gets that my story is factual and without ambiguity. I don't want to confuse her with metaphor. I want her to clearly understand what I am writing, to consider it, and to behave accordingly."

I lift Lisa's hand and point out how we are joined.

“Your job as a writer is to connect with your reader. But this is nonfiction. How does the relationship between writer and reader change when writing imaginatively?”

I turn back to Lisa. “OK, let’s dance again,” I say, and I place my palms against her palms. “I am going to tell you a story. It’s a true story. I made it up a long time ago. Do you believe me?”

Lisa, confused, smiles nervously as I move our palms around and around in a circle as the other teachers giggle like fourth graders.

“How shall I begin?” I say aloud. “It is a dark and stormy night, and my character—let’s call him Charles—is driving home from work when his car breaks down. A kind stranger stops and offers Charles a ride. Grateful, he gets in the car, buckles up. Charles is not in the car very long when he realizes that the driver is drunk. My job as the writer is to show you, the reader, what Charles, an invention of my imagination, is seeing, thinking, and feeling.”

I lead Lisa in a little dance. Our hands are palm to palm, and as I slowly move mine around in a circle, hers move with me.

“Again, Lisa is my perfect reader, but this time, she has to work harder than when I was writing factually. I’m not telling her what to think or what to do. I am using description, narrative, and dialogue to explore the complex emotions that my reader can only understand and appreciate through

the words I have written.

“Let’s complicate the story.” Placing my palms against Lisa’s palms, I say, “Let’s make believe that Charles has just left a party, say, in Philadelphia. He gets in his Subaru, turns on the ignition, and is driving home on the Atlantic City Expressway when he realizes he is drunk. As the writer, I have to describe what is going on in Charles’ mind so that Lisa, the reader, can understand it. If I’m successful, she will feel and think what I intend her to feel and think. Lisa, again, is my perfect reader. She has to work harder, but notice how she is keeping up with me.”

I let go of Lisa’s hands and she looks relieved and heads for her seat. But before she gets there, I say, “Not so fast. I want you to read my poem.”

“Oh, no,” she complains, “can’t you pick on someone else?” But she turns back toward me and raises her hands. I raise my hands above my head and say, “Read my poem.”

As she reaches toward my hands, I pull them farther away.

“Hold still!” she demands, as if I were one of her unruly students. The other teachers laugh.

“What’s wrong?” I ask the class. “Why can’t she ‘get’ my poem?”

“She’s trying,” a teacher says, “but it’s out of reach.”

“That’s right,” I say. “Lisa *is* trying, but my poem is too private, too personal. It’s impossible to understand it. This is a not a good poem.”

I lower my hands to face level and

start moving them slowly in a circle. Lisa raises her hands to grab them, but mine slowly move away. Her hands mirror the movement of my hands. Occasionally they touch, but they are always in proximity. My hands move. Hers move with mine. Our hands keep moving.

“How’s this?” I ask.

“She’s trying,” one teacher says. “She’s almost there.”

Another says, “Even though she’s not touching, I think she’s getting it.”

“You’re right,” I agree. “This is a good poem, and Lisa is a good reader. While she may not understand or appreciate everything the poem is offering, she is getting a lot out of it because she is trying hard. Metaphor doesn’t reveal itself easily. If my poem is about sorrow, perhaps this reader is feeling one of its cousins, sadness or grief. If my poem is exploring spirituality, perhaps the reader feels something like devotion or reverence. E. E. Cummings titled one of his early books, *Is 5*, which is the answer to the common mathematical question, ‘ $2+2$  equals?’ If you’re a physicist and are trying to land a rocket on Jupiter,  $2$  plus  $2$  better equal  $4$  or you’re going to miss Jupiter by a billion miles. However, if you’re writing a poem that is trying to explore the universe of human thought, emotion, and spirit,  $2+2=5$  will get you close enough.”

Lisa returns to her seat as her colleagues applaud.

“This is why people, even educated people, don’t read poetry. It requires

lateral, rather than literal, thinking. It requires being comfortable with ambiguity, what Keats called ‘Negative Capability,’ which he defined as ‘being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (Keats 43). Teachers are often afraid of poetry because there is no answer key, and when they do teach it, they frequently present a poem as a puzzle that is to be solved rather than language to be experienced.”

The teachers nod their heads. They have been there. But they are here now, and they want to learn to read and write poetry, and to teach it so that their students will not tune them out when they do.

“I am going to recite a poem. It’s deep—very deep,” I say dramatically. I raise my hands, making an exaggerated gesture, look into their eyes, and say, “I am lonely.” They stare at me. Nothing. I wipe my eyes as if tearful and fake hurt feelings. “Oh, you stupid people, you. I poured out my soul. I expressed myself. I told you how I felt, and you just looked at me. I will recite my poem again, and this time, I hope you will be sensitive enough to understand it.”

I raise my hands in an even more exaggerated gesture and repeat, “I am lonely.” I am making a fool of myself. The teachers are enjoying this, especially Lisa.

“So, what’s wrong with my poem?” I ask.

Lamar, who teaches in Atlantic City, says, “You just said how you feel,

Murph. That's not a poem. That's a Hallmark Card."

"Exactly. And like most greeting cards, it is clichéd and sentimental. My poem offers nothing original, but the greater problem is that it is abstract."

"Abstract?" Lamar asks. "I thought poems are supposed to be abstract."

"Poems are about the great abstractions: beauty, death, failure, faith, friendship, God, honor, loss, love, truth, etc.; but in order to render these abstractions you must use concrete words that appeal to the senses, SSSTT."

"SSSTT?" Lamar repeats.

"Yes, Sight, Sound, Smell, Touch, Taste. Everything we know, we have learned through our five senses. This is the animal part of us. Once we have taken in the experience of the world, we use our mind and our spirit to discover and reveal thoughts and emotions. We create the world after the world allows us to know it, and we can only know it through the senses."

I wait a moment. They are thinking this over.

"Let me revise my poem," I say. "I am a tree / without leaves."

The teachers make the kind of sound I hear when a poem connects with an audience.

"It's still a bad poem, but it's a great revision. It doesn't tell you what to think or feel. It presents you with an image that allows you to make meaning out of it. Picture the tree, perhaps in your backyard, perhaps in a forest, perhaps in a strip mall, car . . . car . . .

tree . . . car. Then you hear that heart-breaking second line and you see the tree without leaves in your backyard or in the forest, perhaps the only tree without leaves, or maybe they are all without leaves, and then the strip mall, car . . . car . . . tree without leaves . . . car. The point is that you can see it, and because your senses are aroused, you can also feel it. The poem has become part of you.

"Poems that only express are written on one level. They are too accessible and shallow. They are not written with much attention to craft. Poets who merely express themselves wind up boring whatever audience they may have and, eventually, they bore themselves. In his "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth wrote that 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in tranquility' (*Lyrical Ballads* 42). Recollection or reflection is usually part of the revision process, and that's where craft comes in."

"I know what revision is," Lamar says, "but what do *you* mean by it?"

"Revision doesn't mean to correct or to fix a piece of writing. That's editing. Revision means to re-see. Poems have a life cycle, just like people. Your first draft is like a newborn baby leaking at both ends, or as Shakespeare wrote in *As You Like It*, 'Mewling and puking, in the nurse's arms' (2.7.147). You don't say it's a bad baby because it can't walk or talk, and you don't 'correct' it. What do you do? You clean it up and you love it. This is revision,

and as you revise, your poem grows smarter and stronger. It begins to walk and gets in trouble. When it tries to stick its fingers into the wall socket, you have to discipline your poem and say, 'No.' As you continue revising, the poem grows into adolescence, becomes rebellious and says 'no' to you. Maybe you've written fifteen drafts, maybe you've written fifty. Robert Hayden wrote almost one hundred drafts of "Those Winter Sundays." If you work hard and are patient and lucky, your poem might become an adult and go out into the world and be published. Then it will take care of you when you are old, can't walk, can't talk, and are leaking at both ends."

It is lunchtime. Time to break.

"OK, let me give you an assignment. I want you to write a lousy first draft. Can you do that?"

They laugh. "We can do that, Murph," Lamar says.

"Write a poem that questions something you believe in. Include in it an office supply and the title of a song. Also tell a secret and tell a lie, and never tell anyone which is which."

"What?" they shout in unison.

"Forget the office supply and song for a moment," Lisa complains. "You want me to tell a secret?"

"Yes. Any other questions?"

"But a secret?" Lisa interrupts. She's not going to let me get away with this. "That's something you don't tell anyone. Why would you ask us to do that?"

"I've also asked you to tell a lie. The

secret forces you to write close to the bone, creating a sense of intimacy that will connect with your reader. The lie—by which I mean, use your imagination—cloaks anything too private with something fanciful. This is what leads to discovery and surprise. And to paraphrase Frost, if there's no surprise in the writer, there's no surprise in the reader. You want your reader to discover something new when they read your poem. Otherwise why should they bother?

"Does anyone else have a question?"

"So, Murph," Lamar asks, picking up his notebook, "how did you become a poet?"

### THREE

My father, Eddie Murphy, was probably the only longshoreman in New York City who aspired to perform at Carnegie Hall. Although he attended high school for just a few months before his father pulled him out to work on the docks—it was the Depression—he loved classical music and saved enough to buy a used piano, which he stuffed into his bedroom in a small apartment overlooking 18th Street and 10th Avenue. After World War II broke out, he enlisted in the army and was stationed in Newport, Wales, unloading ships that fueled the D-Day invasion. When one of his longshoreman buddies discovered that a nearby pub, the Windsor Castle Hotel, had classical music, Eddie stopped in. He was disappointed that the music

was recorded, not live, but when the beautiful young woman behind the bar asked what he wanted to drink, he didn't want classical music anymore. He wanted her.

Thelma Elias Samuel lived in a tiny room in a tower at the top of the pub managed by her older sister and brother-in-law. Eddie asked Thelma to go to the cinema with him, but she refused. He persisted for months until she finally gave in, and they became engaged in May 1944, a few weeks before D-Day. Eddie stormed Normandy and survived, but he was wounded in Belgium a few months later and sent home. After the war, he returned to Wales to marry Thelma. They moved to New York, where my older brother was born in 1948, and Eddie made the transition from working on the waterfront to operating cranes and other heavy equipment in the city's booming construction industry. Thelma wasn't happy being so far from her family, so they moved back to Newport, where I was born in 1950. She wasn't happy living so close to her family, so we returned to New York. Then we returned to Newport. Then back to New York. I crossed the Atlantic three times in my first three years. Thelma, unhappy in Wales, unhappy in the United States, finally took her life when I was seven.

Because my father couldn't take care of us, my brother and I got moved around, attending four different elementary schools. At a boarding school on Staten Island, a nun made me take off my clothes before beating

me because I didn't know how to make my bed. One night at dinner, she beat me again to make me eat sweet potatoes that were nauseating me. When I vomited them up on my plate, she made me eat that too. After relatives in Queens took us in and sent us to a public school, I thought they had changed my religion from Catholic to Public. I didn't know what sins the Publics believed in and was afraid of accidentally committing a Public sin and winding up in Public Hell. A few years later at another Catholic school, a popular priest invited me to his rectory office on Saturday mornings. After locking the door, he wrestled with me. At first, he let me win, but then he "wrestled" dirty, and I felt dirty, but he said it wasn't dirty and not to tell anyone, so I didn't tell anyone. But I felt dirty anyway and knew I was going to Hell.

At fifteen, I decided that I could remain a Catholic or I could be happy. I decided to be happy, and stopped trying to believe. I started writing poetry, and I started drinking. I drank at parties and started hanging out with friends. Then I started drinking alone. My father had remarried, and my religious stepmother put coins under the statuettes in her bedroom, which I tapped each month for drinking money. While the lesser saints might only have a nickel or a dime, St. Christopher, her favorite, was good for a quarter, and the Virgin Mary usually gave up fifty cents. Not much, but a quart of beer cost only thirty-five cents back then. While she usually caught me doing



other things, she never questioned me about the statuette's money. I think she believed that the saints accepted her gifts to buy whatever extras they might need in Heaven.

Two years later, I decided I could be happy or I could be a poet, so I chose to be a poet. I hadn't read much poetry and didn't know of any poets except for Dylan Thomas, famous for being Welsh, for being drunk, and for dying young. My man! I believed that living life gritty would make me a better poet. If I experienced all aspects of the world, I could better express my feelings about it. When I came across Allen Ginsburg's "Howl"—so honestly degenerate, so morally depraved, so human—I could feel a heart beating in every line.

My father, a drinker himself, referred to New Year's Eve as "Amateur Night," and as a senior in high school, I was an amateur on New Year's Eve 1968. I didn't remember much, but what I did remember, shooting heroin, terrified me. Here's the conclusion of a poem I wrote.

There's more here, living, than  
to meet at the bar.

If I can go straight for a little  
while,

Who knows?

Better things may come and I  
May find them.

It can't get any worse!

(unpublished manuscript)

I didn't drink for three weeks, a

record. I was proud of myself. Then I started drinking again, and "It can't get any worse!" got worse. I was editor of the yearbook and kept the dark-room refrigerator stocked with beer purchased with money from selling yearbook subscriptions, which I failed to repay because I was fired from my after-school job for showing up drunk. After high school I flunked out of three colleges in three semesters. The only decent grade I earned was in a theology class, where I wrote a paper on poetry and religion. I used examples from Ginsburg, Ferlinghetti, and other "Beats" to argue that religion was choking society while poetry opened a conduit of human thought, emotion, and spirit that not only liberated the poet but would also unite people in an enlightened community.

I stopped using capital letters in my writing because I thought they were unjust. Why should one word be capitalized and not another? The names of days and months are capitalized, but the names of the seasons aren't. Shouldn't they be equal? I also didn't use punctuation. Instead, I left a small space where a comma should be and a longer space for a period. Surprisingly, my professor, a Franciscan Priest, ignored that.

My brother was serving in Vietnam. I wanted to support him, but as the war went on I couldn't see that it had any purpose. I marched in demonstrations, but when fights broke out on a picket line at the Washington Monument, I realized that protesting wasn't

the answer. Trouble is, I didn't know what was.

After college number three let me go, I decided to be near what I loved, which was drinking, and got a job tending bar at a night club in Queens. I took writing workshops at the YMCA on 92nd Street with two well-known poets and usually showed up sober, but not sober enough to learn anything. I read poetry, but not enough to understand anything. I worked on my poems, but not enough to make them any better. Despite this lack of effort, I considered myself a poet. When I read at an open mic at a bar in Manhattan, a drunk yelled, "Take it all off!" Obviously, he knew I was an imposter. I wrote a series of "bar" poems. This one, perhaps, was the most successful.

FLORIDA (FOR RATSO)

A man fainted tonight.  
I asked him to get up—nothing.  
I loosened his collar and placed  
ammonia under his nose.  
His shoes came off and then some.  
His wallet told me nothing.  
I kicked him—  
He ignored me.  
I lay down next to him  
demanding that he listen to reason.  
I put my head on his chest.

I lay there, still  
waiting.  
(unpublished manuscript)

I sent it to the *New Yorker* and

received a note from Howard Moss, who encouraged me to write more and to try him again. I didn't realize how rare it was to get a personal note from the poetry editor of the *New Yorker*. I tried a few more times, and Howard Moss continued to write personal notes, but my poems were getting worse, not better, and eventually I gave up. God bless you, Howard Moss. You tried.

At nineteen I got engaged to a young woman who was in worse shape than I was. She came into the club where I worked a few days after she was released from rehab, where she'd kicked her heroin habit, and both our lives spiraled downhill from there. I tried to break it off, but I kept going back. Break off. Go back. Break off. Go back. This lasted almost two years before I realized I would have to go far away to get away. Although I was born in Wales, I didn't know anything about it. I had no other ideas, so I got a passport, quit my job, and on September 11, 1971, a week before my twenty-first birthday, I took off. I stayed in the British Isles for almost a year. It was the smartest thing I'd ever done in my stupid life.

As I was hitchhiking in West Wales, a driver dropped me off in a village whose name I could not pronounce and told me the locals recited poetry there at night. The pub was noisy. A dozen men were arguing in Welsh. They stopped as I walked to the bar. Welsh nationalists had been trying to preserve their native language from

becoming extinct and their culture from becoming diluted by England, their powerful neighbor to the east. While a few protests were violent—most notably an attempted bombing to disrupt the investiture of the Prince of Wales in 1969—most were peaceful. A popular strategy was painting over English street signs so non-Welsh drivers would get lost.

“May I have a pint, please?”

The man behind the bar didn’t move. There was something Dodge City about this place, and it was as if I had walked in wearing a black hat.

“Where are you from, lad?”

I turned around. One of the men stood there.

“New York,” I answered.

“You’re American?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not English?”

If I knew better, I would have said, “Screw the English.” Instead, I said, “No, American.”

“What are you doing in Wales?”

“Hitchhiking around. I heard you might have a poetry reading tonight.”

“So you like poetry?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated, looked around, made a decision, and said, “OK. We need to finish our business, and then we’ll give you some poetry. Shouldn’t be long.”

He went back to the other men, and they resumed arguing. I turned around and there was a pint of beer on the bar. I didn’t know what they were arguing about, but I had a feeling it was about more than spray-painting street signs.

A few months later, December 1971, I was hitchhiking through Londonderry so unaware of my surroundings that I didn’t realize Northern Ireland was at war. This was a month or so before “Bloody Sunday,” when soldiers shot twenty-six people during a peaceful demonstration, killing fourteen of them. I wanted to head down to Limerick to see what I could find out about the “limericks.” I got a ride from two men in a three-wheeled milk truck; they agreed to take me to the Irish border near Donegal. From there it was a straight run down the coast. The men were angry, but because their brogues were so thick, I wasn’t sure why, until finally I understood: that morning in the Bogside, the Catholic neighborhood where they lived, soldiers had shot two of their friends.

All over the city were barriers manned by British soldiers armed with automatic weapons. Each time we came to one—and they were frequent—the driver cursed at the soldiers who studied us as we drove slowly around a maze and over speed bumps. When we reached the last of these barricades, kids began throwing rocks at the soldiers who were lifting their weapons. The driver sped up—to distract them? To take the fire? I didn’t know—and he ran the maze at thirty miles an hour instead of the posted five. When I heard gunfire I hunkered down, trying to make myself as small a target as possible. While I didn’t believe in God, I am sure I must have prayed. The driver stopped his truck

a few miles down the road, pointed to the west, and said, "Run!"

I ran.

Safely over the border in the Republic of Ireland, I dropped my backpack and allowed myself to feel both fear and anger. I thought it unfair to be shot at in a war that had nothing to do with me, a war I didn't even know was going on. And how stupid! Both sides were killing each other over a God that didn't exist. While I didn't know much about it, I could appreciate the war two years earlier between the Muslims and the Jews because they believed in different Gods. Catholics and Protestants believed in the same one. They are on the same team. Obviously, I was unaware of the Reformation and the long history of hatred between them. Then I had an idea. "Why are we killing each other because of our religions, our nationalities, our races? Why can't we see that we're all human beings?" I'm brilliant! I thought. I had an original idea. I knew it was original because I'd never heard it before. Then I found a pub and drowned my original idea and my brilliance.

I checked in at the youth hostel in Limerick, where I met a young Dubliner named Mathew Kennedy. He was a sidewalk artist who set up outside St. Augustine's Church and sketched nativity scenes with chalk. He despised what he called the "old fakers" who flocked into the church to make deals with God. Unless you looked closely at his sketches, you wouldn't notice that the tree in the background was

a rocket ship or that the halo around the babe in the manger was a space helmet. I told him what happened in Londonderry, and we both agreed the world would be better without religion. Mathew and I recognized each other as outsiders. Neither of us was happy with our lives, our families, our societies. We wanted lives that made sense, lives that connected and had meaning. We probably listened to too much John Lennon, who was at the top of the charts,

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
...  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world.  
("Imagine")

As Mathew left to sketch in front of the church, I went in pursuit of the limerick, which took me to an old two-story building. On one floor was a library and the other a museum, both tended by a little old lady who had never heard of limericks. "Can you recite one for me?" she asked. The only ones I could think of were too dirty, so I said no and left. I wandered down to the River Shannon and sat on the bank looking at the water. The river was beautiful, in a gray, ashy kind of way. The sky was gray too, and the air reeked of smoke from coal fires used to heat the houses. I liked the smell. I was a city kid. Growing up in New York, my only experience with anything close to a countryside was

the occasional expedition into Central Park, where, once, while playing softball (drunk, of course), I fell into a manhole. However, since traveling in the United Kingdom and Ireland, I was beginning to like nature.

The first person to take me seriously as a poet was Hubert Babinski, a professor at college number two, who encouraged me not just to write but to read poetry. He introduced me to the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. I read Hopkins' poems over and over. I didn't like that they were religious, but his poems were wild, and when I read "Pied Beauty," "The Windhover," and "God's Grandeur" aloud, my mouth was happy.

And for all this, nature is never  
spent;  
    There lives the dearest  
    freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights of the  
black West went  
    Oh, morning, at the brown  
    brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the  
bent  
    World broods with warm  
    breast and with ah! bright  
wings. ("God's Grandeur" 9–14)

I loved that "ah!" stopping the flow of the poem to emphasize the last two words, "Bright wings." I wished I could buy a pair. I didn't understand Stevens, but I loved the authority of his voice, and his titles were brilliantly

strange—"The Emperor of Ice Cream," "The Man on the Dump," "Anecdote of the Jar," "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," and my favorite, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The imagery fascinated me: "I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds" (3-6).

I think I liked Williams' poems most of all. They didn't have the flashiness of Hopkins' language or the mystery of Stevens' imagery, but I felt I understood them in a more organic way. In his poem, "The Manoeuvre," while watching starlings land on telephone wires on a windy day, Williams interrupts himself to say, "that's what got me—to / face into the wind's teeth" (7-8). "[T]hat's what got me—" he wrote like I talked. I didn't know poetry could do that!

Hubert told me that these artists' poems were driven by sound and image compared to Ferlinghetti and Ginsburg, who used narrative to move their poems. I hadn't thought about "moving" a poem before. I just wrote what was floating around in my head.

I read these poems repeatedly, trying to make sense of them in those rare periods when I wasn't drunk. Hubert helped me see where my own poems were original and interesting, and where they were not. I realized that the poems I wrote while high were not as good as I'd hoped. This troubled me. How could I "expand my consciousness" if the poems I wrote while stoned weren't as good as the ones I wrote when straight? One of

my efforts, written under the influence,  
made a gerund out of every word.

Driving toing Buffaloining  
alonging theing Newing Yorking  
Thruwaying . . .  
(unpublished manuscript)

When I told Hubert I was going to Wales, he suggested that I stop at the Lake District if I found myself in Northern England. I planned to stay there one night on my way up to Loch Ness to look for the monster. After checking into the hostel at Ambleside, I met a shepherd who asked me what I did. I said, "I am a poet," which is a ridiculous thing to say, especially to a stranger.

"A poet, are you?" he said. "What do you think of our poet, William Wordsworth?"

"Never heard of him."

"Never heard of him? Well then," the shepherd said, "you should go pay him a visit."

"Where does he live?"

"Walk along this path. His house is just a bit down the road in Grasmere."

I decided to visit this William Wordsworth. Maybe he would offer me a cup of tea and a biscuit. I walked "a bit down the road," which turned out to be three miles, when I saw a sign saying "Wordsworth Cottage." Wow, I thought, intimidated, he's got a sign. Inside, a woman welcomed me. Was this Mrs. Wordsworth? The walls were full of books for sale and pictures of somebody whom I figured

was Wordsworth. He looked old. I picked up a book and read that he had died in 1850. Wordsworth is one of those dead poets I despised without ever having read. That stupid shepherd tricked me, I thought, so who's the stupid one?

I bought the cheapest book there, *A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse*, for sixty pence, and hiked back to Ambleside. I read all the poems in the book, and everything did a flip-flop because I loved Wordsworth. I was shocked. He wrote mostly about nature, but that's not really what he was writing about. He was writing about emotions that I recognized: joy, excitement, fear, wonder, despair.

Some of the poems, such as "Michael," "Nutting," and "She was a Phantom of Delight," were about people very different than me, but I felt like I knew them. I was moved most by a poem about Tintern Abbey in Wales. Wordsworth was trying to relive the excitement of his first visit there five years earlier:

I came among these hills; when  
like a roe  
I bounded o'er the mountains, by  
the sides  
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely  
streams,  
Wherever nature led: more like  
a man  
Flying from something that he  
dreads, than one  
Who sought the thing he loved...  
(*"Tintern Abbey"* 68-73)

Traveling alone through Wales and the Lake District, I realized how much I liked nature; no, it was more than nature—it was the whole universe of what I had been seeing, hearing, smelling, and feeling but did not have the language to understand. Wordsworth was giving me that language, and I loved him for it.

When I read “Intimations of Immortality,” I recognized the phrase, “The child is father of the man,”<sup>1</sup> and realized that Al Kooper from Blood, Sweat, and Tears was quoting Wordsworth when he used it as the title of the band’s first album. Al Kooper and Wordsworth—amazing. I connected to a nature poet dead 120 years and wondered how this could happen. I walked back to Grasmere the next morning and put down three pounds, fifty pence—half my weekly budget—on *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, and read them and reread them. I was excited as Wordsworth ranted against the “vicious poetic diction” of the past, while pledging to bring his own language near to the language of men: “an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life” (*Lyrical Ballads* 42). I didn’t realize how radical this was at the time, but it’s this kind of boldness that attracted me to poetry in the first place. Reading the preface reminded me of the poems I read by William Carlos Williams, which were also written the way people speak. Both poets seemed to celebrate the

sacredness of the ordinary. Williams wrote, “No ideas but in things” (“Pater-son” 15). He probably would not have gotten there if Wordsworth hadn’t come up with “whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect” (“Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”).

Forget the Loch Ness monster, I thought, as my one day in the Lake District turned into a three-week excursion. I walked, as Wordsworth walked, from Ambleside to Grasmere to Cockermouth to Coniston to Hawkshead to Kendal to Rydall Mount and back to Ambleside, all the while reading and rereading his poems. I felt as though my brain was getting bigger, the opposite of blacking out after drinking, which I was trying to do less and less. Back in Grasmere, I wrote a nine-page elegy to Wordsworth, the longest poem I had ever written. “Eight Yew Trees” was set in the cemetery where he planted them and where he, his wife, his sister, and a few of his children were buried. My poem concludes,

... Your place is simple,  
A monument of stone  
Chipped from local rock  
    by a local craftsman  
Who knew your disdain for  
    public sepulchers  
And what could not compare  
To yew tree memorials  
    as lasting as your poems.  
(unpublished manuscript)

1 *A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse*, p. 91.

This was strange. I wasn't writing about myself. I was writing about someone else's suffering and how, despite the decomposition of the body, it might be possible through language to live on after death—what Wordsworth was obsessed with: immortality.

Limerick was not a beautiful city, but the river, the sky, the buildings, the coal smoke—I was overcome. A great and brutal weight had been lifted from me. Like Wordsworth encountering a supernatural presence on Mount Snowdon, I felt something breathtaking and magical at the bank of the River Shannon, something much greater than anything human I had come across. I didn't know the word "awesome," but that's what it was. I took out my notebook and wrote,

Here, Holy Spirit.  
 There, Holy Spirit.  
 Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit.  
 Sea gulls, Holy Spirit.  
 Gray sky, Holy Spirit.  
 Coal smoke, Holy Spirit.  
 Rocks, cars, dogs.  
 Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit.  
 (unpublished manuscript)

Like Hopkins, I had written a poem about the Holy Ghost, a religious poem. What kind of atheist was I? I wanted to see if Mathew could make sense of it. Before I could show him my poem, he said, "Peter, I met these people, and something amazing happened. I wasn't very polite to them when they said they liked my drawing,

but they were so nice. They said they had a new religion and that there were fifty of them in the world. Or maybe they said there were fifty in Ireland or Limerick? I don't know, but they gave me this card and invited me to come to a meeting tomorrow."

We studied the card, which had a handwritten quotation neither of us could understand.

"It's a religion," I said. "They'll just start another war."

After thinking about it, Mathew said, "Yes, Peter, but there's only fifty. Maybe we can talk them out of it."

"Maybe," I said, "they'll offer us a cup of tea."

Then I showed Mathew my poem about the Holy Spirit. "It's astonishing," he said. "I know exactly what you mean. There's something profound about Limerick. Maybe this new religion has something to do with it."

Something *was* profound about Limerick. Five years earlier, a young woman from Belfast, Lesley Gibson (Taherzadeh), had moved in, becoming the first Bahá'í to live there. She worked as a speech therapist at a hospital for children with special needs. She was joined a few months later by Gillian Phillips from Wales. The Catholic Church was the law of the land, and Lesley and Gillian didn't want to stir up trouble, so they lived quiet Bahá'í lives. They prayed together, made friends, and gradually introduced their new friends to the Bahá'í Faith. Another Bahá'í, Stanley Wrouth, moved to Limerick from England in 1970,



but he drowned just three months after settling in. His death galvanized Gillian and Lesley, who met every Tuesday evening in a “fireside,” and prayed that others might attend. As more Bahá’ís from the United States and the British Isles moved to Limerick, they formed a Local Spiritual Assembly in April 1971. One Tuesday night Lesley’s fireside was inundated by a group of longhaired young people who were part of a band, “Jeremiah Henry,” that was popular in Ireland at the time. They all became Bahá’ís that night. When Mathew met Lesley on the street two months later, there were fifty Bahá’ís in Limerick. Soon there would be hundreds.

As more locals became Bahá’ís, there was a backlash from the clergy, who preached against it from their pulpits. This actually helped spread awareness of the Faith. When one young woman told her grandmother she had become a Bahá’í, she responded, “Oh yes, I heard about them. They seem nice.” Another young woman became a Bahá’í when her friends did. After her parish priest confronted her and demanded that she give it up, she decided to think for herself, remained a Bahá’í, and was the first pioneer to the city of Wexford. Limerick was on fire, a Bahá’í fire, and while we didn’t realize it, Mathew and I were about to be touched by its flames.

When we arrived at the house the next day, we found a mob of young people there. They all seemed so happy, I thought they were on drugs. But

then I noticed three older women and thought, no, they can’t be high, not with the old ladies around.

I sat on the floor and asked a guy next to me, “What’s this about?”

“The Earth is one country,” he said, “and mankind its citizens.”

“What?” I said, startled. “That’s my idea. I thought of it last week. Where did you get it from?”

“Bahá’u’lláh wrote it over a hundred years ago.”

“Who?” I didn’t understand what he said. With his brogue, it sounded to me like “Bahooligan.” I asked him to repeat the name several times but still didn’t get it, so I called his guy the “Big B.”

He said that Bahá’u’lláh was the fulfillment of each of the world’s religions, not just Christianity, but Judaism, Islam, Hindu, and Buddhism as well. “Bahá’ís believe in bringing the world together and eliminating prejudice.”

This can’t be a religion, I thought. It makes too much sense. When I argued that religion causes more wars than it prevents, he told me that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the son of Bahá’u’lláh, said that if two people are arguing about religion, they’re both wrong.

“If this faith becomes the source of disunity it should be disbanded.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“But you believe in God, right? That can’t be good.”

“The Bahá’í concept,” he explained, “is that God is an unknowable essence.

No matter what we say about Him, Her, or It, it's just our imagination. We can only know what the Manifestations tell us."

"Manifestations?"

"Yes, messengers like Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed. They're like the lamps, and God's message is the light. It's renewed every time a new Manifestation comes. The spiritual teachings are the same, but the social teachings change according to the needs of society."

When he mentioned the oneness of religion, I remembered getting in trouble when I was eight years old for attending a Cub Scouts meeting held in the basement of a Lutheran church. When he mentioned the oneness of mankind, I remembered the pastor of my church speaking out from the pulpit against a "Negro" family that had moved into the neighborhood. When he said that each person must investigate and decide whether the Bahá'í Faith is true, I believed it *was* true. At least I wanted it to be true. But when he said that Bahá'ís don't do drugs or drink alcohol, I knew I couldn't be a Bahá'í. While I hadn't done drugs for a while, I drank alcohol, and I didn't want to be a hypocrite. And while the Bahá'í God made more sense than the god I didn't believe in, I wasn't ready to abandon my life of nonbelief.

One of the American women, Hortense Bredehorst, welcomed Mathew and me to her home and introduced her two housemates, Mary Lou Martin and Doris Holley. Doris was the

widow of a famous Bahá'í the group referred to as a "Hand of the Cause."<sup>2</sup>

"What happened to the rest of him?" I asked.

The women laughed. Not bad, I thought. If these Bahá'ís could smile when someone makes fun of them, maybe they won't start a war. Then she called the meeting to order, picked up a prayer book, and began to read.

"Is there any Remover of difficulties save God? Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His servants, and all abide by His bidding!" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 28).

I was horrified. I was usually the "difficulty." Was this Bahá'í God going to "remove" me? Would I be sucked up by a giant vacuum cleaner in the sky? Would I just disappear? Praying was stupid, a waste of time. When I was a kid I knelt against my bed each night reading psalms aloud. I prayed for things. I prayed to be happy, and it didn't work. But when I listened to the Bahá'í prayers, I was surprised by the beauty of the words, and then someone recited this one:

O Lord! We are weak; strengthen us. O God! We are ignorant; make us knowing. O Lord! We are poor; make us wealthy. O God! We are

<sup>2</sup> There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Hands of the Cause were chosen by Bahá'u'lláh and His successors to both promulgate and protect the Faith in its early days until its "Supreme Body," The Universal House of Justice, could be established which occurred in 1963.

dead; quicken us. O Lord! We are humiliation itself; glorify us in Thy Kingdom. If Thou dost assist us, O Lord, we shall become as scintillating stars. If Thou dost not assist us, we shall become lower than the earth. O Lord! Strengthen us. O God! Confer victory upon us. O God! Enable us to conquer self and overcome desire. O Lord! Deliver us from the bondage of the material world. O Lord! Quicken us through the breath of the Holy Spirit in order that we may arise to serve Thee, engage in worshiping Thee and exert ourselves in Thy Kingdom with the utmost sincerity. O Lord, Thou art powerful. O God, Thou art forgiving. O Lord, Thou art compassionate. (*Promulgation* 457)

I was weak. I was ignorant. I was poor. And much of the time, especially when drinking, I was “humiliation itself.” How did this Bahá’í God know that? He wrote this prayer for me, especially the sentence, “O God! Enable us to conquer self and overcome desire.”

I needed a drink.

Instead, I asked if they had books I could read. They said they would get one from Dublin. I was only planning to be in Limerick a few days, but I decided to wait for it. Despite the fact that the Bahá’ís believed in God, and prayed, and didn’t drink, I wanted it to be true. In fact, I made believe that I was a Bahá’í and didn’t drink that

week. Mathew and I returned to the Bahá’í house every day, asking more questions, trying to understand the answers. We spent all night at the hostel talking about it. When the book finally arrived, I didn’t understand many of the English words, and I was confused by the Persian ones. However, I knew that the Bahá’í book was important, so I wrapped it in plastic and kept it safe in my backpack. After saying goodbye to Mathew, I left Limerick for Cork, where I had been invited to a Bahá’í fireside.

At the youth hostel in Cork I met a guy who told me that this Bahá’í Faith couldn’t be any good if they believed in Muslims. “They’re murderers,” he said. “Stay away from them.” He told me about the Crusades and about the evil things they did, and I was confused. If the Bahá’í God said that Muslims were OK, then how could they be murderers?

I was the only non-Bahá’í at the fireside. They referred to me as a “seeker.” I had never thought of myself that way, but when I heard the word, it kind of made sense. A special guest, who had come down from Dún Laoghaire to speak, asked me if I had any questions. I told him what the guy in the hostel said and asked, “Do you know anything about Muslims?”

His name was Adib Taherzadeh and he knew quite a lot about Islam. In fact, he said that his family had been Muslims but had become Bahá’í in Iran when Bahá’u’lláh was alive. I didn’t entirely understand what that meant,

but I felt something powerful, as if I had shaken the hand of the hand that had shaken the hand of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

I left that night convinced that whatever problems Christians might have about Islam, they weren't problems for me. The Bahá'í Faith made sense. Too bad Bahá'ís believed in God. Too bad Bahá'ís prayed. Too bad Bahá'ís didn't drink. I liked Bahá'í and probably believed it, but I knew I could never live a Bahá'í life for more than a few days.

#### FOUR

After spending the Christmas holidays with my recently discovered family in Wales, I wound up living in a commune of sorts in a working-class neighborhood in Cardiff. The terraced house had four bedrooms on two floors, one bathroom, and between fifteen and twenty people and two dogs crashing there at any given time. Among us were two runaways, a fifteen-year-old girl who'd fled the Troubles in Belfast, and a sixteen-year-old Moroccan girl hiding from her family in Cardiff to avoid forced marriage to an uncle. The others were a mix of Welsh and English, collecting seven pounds a week on the dole, which they used to get stoned.

I needed a job, so I bought a working card that said my name was Garry

<sup>3</sup> Adib Taherzadeh went on to become a member of the Universal House of Justice on which he served from 1988 to his death in 2000.

Morgan from Caerphilly. I had been drinking the first time I went looking for a job, and at a construction site, I walked across freshly poured concrete. The next day, sober, I was hired as a laborer on a construction site at Cardiff University. I was to be paid forty-two and a half pence—about a dollar—an hour. However, because I didn't have Garry Morgan's tax records, fifty percent emergency taxes were to be withheld until I produced them.

My boss, Nobby, asked each payday, "Do you have those tax records yet?"

"Not yet," I answered, sometimes forgetting my faux Welsh accent.

"You sound American," he said one time.

"Uh . . . I lived in Canada for a while," I bluffed. He knew I was lying, but he didn't press me. Sometimes I forgot my assumed name and when Nobby called "Garry, Garry, GARRY!" I forgot to answer. When they hired another laborer named Peter, I really messed up. Nobby called "Hey, Peter," and we both answered. Again, he let it slide.

My job was to haul stuff from one place to another and clean what Nobby told me to clean, until one day when Nobby pointed me to a jackhammer and my life became hell. I drilled holes through the concrete floor so they could install the pipes and wires that made the building hum. After working ten-hour shifts six days a week, all I could do at night was sit in a chair and shake, my beer spilling down my chin.

I was drinking more and more and

getting more and more depressed. I was too broke to quit my job and too broken to keep working. Hubert Babinski had written that he would be in Prague in the spring, and I wanted to meet him there, but when I contacted the Czech embassy, they told me I would have to prove I had money, hotel reservations, and transportation in order to get a visa. I had none.

Meanwhile, conditions at the house, which were never great, were deteriorating. We slept in shifts, three or four in a bed at a time, and were all infected by lice. We went to the clinic where we were given a humiliating lecture on personal hygiene complete with leaflets and individual bottles of shampoo laced with DDT. There was little money for food and few coins to feed the meter that sparked the “electric fire” in the living room that heated the rest of the house. Two women, girls really, had miscarriages in a two-week period. One night, an irate father forced his way in the front door and dragged his naked daughter out by the hair. Turns out, he was high up in the Cardiff Constabulary, and after that, a police car remained parked in front of the house.

I wondered if there were Bahá'ís in South Wales. Looking through the phone directory, I was surprised to find a Bahá'í couple in Newport, the city where I was born. Viv and Rita Bartlett welcomed me as if I were a younger brother. Viv was a teacher, and Rita, pregnant with their first child, was a puppeteer. They answered my

questions and didn't force anything on me except tea and biscuits. They made me feel a better person than I really was, and that I could make a difference. It was March, and Viv was fasting during daylight hours, something I didn't understand. On my second visit, I stayed too late to catch the bus back to Cardiff, so they invited me to sleep over. This was the first time in months I'd had a bed to myself, so I welcomed it. I also wanted to see if Viv was really going to get up before sunrise to eat breakfast.

I was awakened before six as he was making tea in the nearby kitchen. Soon Rita joined us and we ate an early breakfast together.

“Let's say some prayers, now, all right?”

“Uh . . . OK,” I said reluctantly.

“Blessed is the spot,” Viv began. Then Rita read the “Remover of Difficulties,” and I had that feeling again, that I would be removed. I didn't read a prayer when asked. I didn't want to be a hypocrite.

“Peter,” Viv said, “we're having a meeting next Sunday with a speaker from London. Why don't you join us?”

“I'm not sure,” I said, not wanting to commit, not wanting to get too close to the Bahá'ís, afraid they were rubbing off on me. However, Viv and Rita were so kind to me, I didn't want to disappoint them, so before I left, I said I'd be there.

Back in Cardiff, I was miserable. Exhausted from the jackhammer, I quit my job and spent the week getting as

drunk as possible. The police in front of the house taunted us, saying they were going to close the place down and put us all in jail. Because my visa had expired months earlier, I knew I would be deported. Although I had a return ticket to New York, I didn't want to go home. In addition to the fiancé I didn't want to marry, I was estranged from my father and stepmother, and I had left behind a heap of debt I didn't know how to pay off. I couldn't stay in Cardiff, and I couldn't go back to New York, so I drank and got drunk. Drank and got drunk. I finally decided to jump off a building. Then I thought I should get my ear pierced instead. Then I thought maybe I should become a Bahá'í. Suicide, ear pierced, become a Bahá'í: each made as much sense as the next. I was twenty-one years old, and my life was over. I drank harder.

When I woke up on Sunday morning I thought I was drowning. Actually, it was raining, and I was lying in the gutter outside the house. I was, once again, "humiliation itself." Decades later I would write this poem:

#### BAPTISM

This time I wake under a bridge.  
My ochre face rises in the rear  
view mirror like a jaundiced sun.  
This time my trousers are damp.  
This time my trousers are dry.  
This time I wake in a gutter.  
Rain flows around me.

This time I am alone.  
This time I am alone.  
This time it is a river.  
This time an inlet.  
Waters rush through me.  
A disorganized river.  
This proof.

This time I wake in the Chevy.  
My salmon face rises in the  
mirror.  
This time an ocean.  
The days crash over me.  
My name is *Not Yet*.  
My name is *Almost*.  
My name is *About to*.

*(Stubborn Child 19)*

I did not want to move. I did not want to get up. I did not want to go to the Bahá'í meeting, but I had given Viv and Rita my word. I managed to stand, then stumbled into the house and collapsed on the couch, which, surprisingly, had no one else crashing on it. When I felt I could walk without falling, I climbed the steps, put on dry clothes, went back out in the rain and walked to the stop to catch the bus to Newport and was soaked again.

The meeting was on the second floor of a building in the middle of the city, not far from the Windsor Castle Hotel where my parents had met and where I had lived as a baby, not far from St. Mary's Catholic Church where they were married and I was baptized. I didn't know how long the meeting would go on, but I figured I could take off around eleven, when the pubs

opened. The speaker from London was Phillip Hinton. He was going on, but I couldn't follow what he was saying. He had a funny accent, not quite British, but close enough. I learned later that he was from South Africa. When he finished, I had fulfilled my obligation to Viv and Rita and was about to leave when they asked me to stay for a cup of tea. I had the shakes and needed to get a real drink, but before I could say no thanks, Hinton came over and asked, "What do you think of the Bahá'í Faith?"

"It makes sense," I said.

"Do you believe Bahá'u'lláh is God's latest Manifestation?"

"No . . . I'm not sure . . . I think so . . . maybe . . . I don't know . . . probably . . ."

Rita handed me a cup of tea.

"If you believe that Bahá'u'lláh is a Manifestation of God, you are a Bahá'í. You have to join us. We need you."

"I can't do that," I said, panicking. "I can't live the kind of life Bahá'ís are supposed to live, and I don't want to be a hypocrite."

"You're more of a hypocrite," he said, "if you believe in Bahá'u'lláh and don't join us, than if you try to live a Bahá'í life and are not able to live up to it."

"What?" I said, not believing he just called me a hypocrite. I knew I was a screw-up, but I considered myself a sincere screw-up.

"Listen," he said. "Make believe that a river is overflowing its banks and is about to wipe out the village.

The Bahá'ís are trying to rescue people, and there you are safe and sound watching us from up the mountain. If you believe in Bahá'u'lláh, then you need to help us change the world. You need to become a Bahá'í."

My stomach was roiling, my head pounding, and I was chilled from sleeping in the rain. I needed a drink, and the pubs were now open. But this man had just told me that if I believed in Bahá'u'lláh, I should become a Bahá'í. Whenever I thought of the future, all I thought about was what I would stock in my liquor cabinet and how I would pay for it. But I had cut back in the Lake District, and I didn't drink for a week in Limerick. Maybe I could do it. My shaking got worse and my tea spilled. This was a different kind of shaking that seemed to come from within me. My whole body was trembling. I knew I couldn't live a Bahá'í life, but I would have to try.

"OK," I said.

"OK?" Phillip asked, making sure.

"What do I do?"

Viv handed me a card and a pen. "Just sign this, Peter. That's all there is to it."

It read, "In signing this card, I declare my belief in Bahá'u'lláh, the Promised One of God. I also recognize the Báb, His Forerunner, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Center of His Covenant. I request enrollment in the Bahá'í Community with the understanding that Bahá'u'lláh has established sacred principles, laws and institutions which I must obey."

“OK,” I said again, and signed. However, I was shaking so badly my signature was illegible. Viv looked it over, then asked me to sign a second card. I tried not to shake so much, but I couldn't help it, and my signature was just as bad. He handed me a third card.

“I understand if you don't want me,” I said. “But I'm not going to do it again.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “We'll make do.”

Like that day four months earlier sitting by the River Shannon, I felt as if a great weight had been lifted from me. Then I was surrounded by people who were congratulating me. I felt like a celebrity. People started buying books from a table where they were set out and gave them to me. One was a prayer book, which I didn't think I needed.

“Here are the obligatory prayers,” a woman named Margaret said.

“What does obligatory mean?” I asked.

“These are the prayers you have to say each day. There's a long one, a short one, and a medium sized one, sort of like Goldilocks.”

“You mean I have to pray? Every day?” I knew Bahá'ís said prayers, but I didn't know they *had* to.

“Yes, that's what Bahá'u'lláh says. You'll get the hang of it.”

I wasn't so sure, but if Bahá'u'lláh said I should pray, I'd give it a shot, even if I didn't agree with it.

Meanwhile, I had a lot to figure

out. How do I live a Bahá'í life? How do I not drink? How do I not screw up? What do I do now? I had no idea. A group of young Bahá'ís were going out to lunch and invited me to go with them. I asked question after question about my new faith, partly because I knew so little, but mostly because I knew that as long as I stayed with them I wouldn't drink. I was hoping they would hang out with me until the pubs closed and, as if they'd read my mind, they did. On the bus back to Cardiff I felt better. I didn't drink that day. I didn't know what I would do the next day, but I would worry about that in the morning. I had never heard of Alcoholics Anonymous, but I was doing “one day at a time” on my own. The next morning I woke up laughing. I'd dreamed that an old man with a white beard and white robes told me I was going to be all right. Looking through my new Bahá'í books, I saw a picture of the old man. His name was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh. How did He get in my dream?

Bahá'u'lláh said that I had to obey the law of the land. This meant that I had to leave the United Kingdom because my visa had expired. I had nowhere else to go, so I was forced to go home and make up with my family. A few years later, reading Frost, I came across, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in” (“The Death of the Hired Man,” 122–23). I wrote a letter to my father, telling him that I had become a Bahá'í, that I was coming home, that



I would try to do better, that I hoped we could get along. Then I wrote to Mathew Kennedy telling him that I had become a Bahá'í and that I was coming over to Ireland, and that if he didn't become a Bahá'í, I would beat him up.

"No more fighting over religion, Peter," Mathew wrote back. "I became a Bahá'í too. But come now and you'll be here when we elect our first National Spiritual Assembly."<sup>4</sup>

A Bahá'í couple from Bristol, just over the English border, invited me to their wedding the following weekend. I left Thursday and returned to the house in Cardiff on Monday. Yellow crime tape covered the door. A neighbor appeared. "What happened?" I asked

"The police arrested all you drug addicts on Friday. They'll be coming back for you as soon as I phone them," she threatened.

If I hadn't have become a Bahá'í, I would not have gone to Bristol and would have been arrested too. I left in a hurry and didn't return to Cardiff for three decades.

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4 After serving as a member of the Auxiliary Board, which helps to protect and propagate the Bahá'í Faith at the grassroots level, Matthew Kennedy is, at the time of this writing, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly which oversees the administrative affairs of the Bahá'ís of Ireland.

## FIVE

Making up is hard to do. My father was happy to see me, but I'm not sure about my stepmother. I had to earn her trust, so I got a haircut, shaved my beard, and looked for a job. I wanted to stay as far away from drinking as possible, so I couldn't tend bar. I had no other skills, so I drove a cab and memorized Bahá'í prayers while stuck in Midtown traffic. I started with the "Remover of Difficulties" because it was short, and I wanted to overcome my fear that I would be "removed." I worked my way up to the "Tablet of Ahmad," a tablet to one who'd spent his life searching for his "Beloved." I realized that I too had been searching, but unlike Ahmad, who searched for spiritual meaning, I was searching in the world of things. I realized that the search for truth didn't end when I became a Bahá'í. I had a lot to learn, but I wasn't the best reader and didn't understand most of what I read. I went to the Bahá'í Center whenever there was something going on and met other Bahá'ís and came up with a plan. I drove my new Bahá'í friends to meetings around the city, asked them questions and paid attention to their answers.

Six months later, my father got me a job apprenticing as a heavy-equipment operator. Mostly, I ran brick hoists on small buildings in the outer boroughs, but occasionally I operated a cherry picker in Manhattan. I learned that Bahá'ís believed service to others was

important, and work done in the spirit of service was like prayer. I didn't think hoisting bricks was very prayerful or that I was serving anybody. I was just paying my bills. I realized that I would have to go to college to do something more meaningful, but that hadn't worked the first three times, and I wasn't sure it would go any better now. But I thought, if I'm smart enough to recognize God's messenger, maybe I'm smart enough to make it for more than a semester.

I showed up at Queens College to register as a non-matriculated student, taking courses at night. I didn't need a transcript or test results. I could enroll in courses that had empty seats.

"What do you want to study?" a counselor asked.

One of the Bahá'ís told me that agriculture is important, so I said "agriculture."

"Agriculture?" the counselor asked. "We're in New York City. Do you see any farms around here?"

"Farms?" I didn't know agriculture was about farms. "Uh . . ." I answered. "What do you have that's close?"

He looked at the counselor next to him. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "Geology?"

I wasn't sure what geology was either, but I was embarrassed for being so stupid and wanted to get out of there, so I said "geology," and they helped me fill out the paperwork. I liked geology, but I knew I couldn't major in it because I wasn't smart enough to take hard science and advanced math.

During my lunch break operating a crane near 34th Street, I browsed the bookstore in Penn Station and picked up *Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* by Kenneth Koch. This is what I want to do, teach kids to read and write poetry. I was going to be an English major. I took a placement test, which I failed so badly I was assigned to a remedial class where I was one of three native English speakers. I complained to the head of the English department that this was a mistake. After all, I was a poet.

"No," he said, looking at my writing sample. "You belong there."

He handed me my paper, which had no capitalization or punctuation. When I tried to explain why I didn't use it, he just shook his head. I spent a year in remedial English and learned to read and write.

I read Bahá'í books that expanded my thinking far more than drugs ever did. I continued writing poems, which seemed more substantial than the ones I'd written before. I wanted to express—no, I wanted to reveal and understand the changes in my life. I was clinging to sobriety, though I didn't know that word yet. I was clinging to this new religion, trying not to screw up. I wasn't sure that I was making progress. Then I remembered climbing the Old Man of Coniston in the Lake District. When I looked at the top of the mountain, I saw how far I had to go and didn't think I would make it, but when I looked down, I

saw how high I had climbed and didn't want to fall. I wrote a poem, trying to understand this transformation.

## FRUITION

A tree entered my mind  
preparing for sleep  
growing deep  
in the night  
and grew  
neither blossoms nor fruit

a yawn branches in waking  
roaring with leaves  
while there's all this  
waiting  
what time do the flowers start  
(*Commonweal* 209)

I sent it to *Commonweal*, which not only published it but mailed me a check for seven dollars. A few weeks later *Commonweal* sent me a tear sheet announcing the publication of their fiftieth-year anthology, which cost, of course, seven dollars.

Ha. They wanted their money back.

I wrote out the check, and as I was about to seal the envelope, I noticed my name on the back of the tear sheet:

To the Editors: Peter Murphy's "Fruition" is a poem I learned by heart. Its impact dawned on me, slowly and gradually, just as the "tree . . . growing deep in the night." Its meaning burst open "in waking roaring with leaves" as it approaches the mystery of

life, the eternal questioning. The point is that the question is all. It encompasses awe, wonder, hope, faith and doubt, confusion, despair . . . (*Commonweal* 331)

Turns out they didn't hit me up for seven dollars. The writer, Hannerl Ebenhoech-Liebmann, went on to compare my poem to Goethe and Eliot. I was flabbergasted. Could one of my friends have written the letter as a joke? But I doubted any of my friends had ever heard of Goethe and Eliot. The letter ends with these remarks:

. . . Peter Murphy's "Fruition" is poetry proper. Why? It is one of those poems of which Robert Nye says that they so uncomfortably and unforgettably give him the sense "that they read me, rather than I them, and that they criticize me, rather than I make the judgment." (*Commonweal* 351)

"Poetry proper," really? I must be a real poet.

## SIX

It is March 26, 2012. I am standing in front of the terraced house in Cardiff, Wales, where forty years earlier I woke up in the gutter. The urge to drink has certainly decreased but hasn't gone away. In 1987, after being sober for fifteen years, I started having drinking dreams that terrified me so much they drove me to AA. I began to talk about

drinking, which—too embarrassed, especially around Bahá'ís—I'd never done. I started to write about it as well.

#### THE DESIRE

Last night I dreamt I was drinking again  
and got drunk, and walked out on the quiet life  
I've been living these last few years.  
I watched as I let my family go—  
The wife who understood and would not forgive,  
The child who clung to my loose clothing, crying  
Don't go, Daddy don't go, take Mommy and me  
with you.  
I remember saying that too, grabbing the coat  
of my own father as he swung his arms around  
to touch me. And I trailed him  
as he followed his father until I let go.

I fell back into sleep, into dreams—  
There were rivers I had to cross and recross,  
and fires starting in every forest I came to,  
and cars screeching around corners,  
about to go off a cliff,  
about to crash in a desert  
where I am thirsty all the time.

*(Stubborn Child 55)*

But this is not an occasion for poetry; it is an occasion for prayer. Looking down at the gutter, I recite “Blessed is the Spot.” I recite the “Remover of Difficulties.” I recite a prayer for gratitude:

. . . What tongue can voice my  
thanks to Thee? I was heedless,  
Thou didst awaken me. I had

turned back from Thee, Thou  
didst graciously aid me to turn  
towards Thee. I was as one dead,  
Thou didst quicken me with the  
water of life . . . (*Bahá'í Prayers*  
19)

While I will never be a “scintillating  
star,” I am no longer “humiliation  
itself,” and I am grateful.

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# Flight of the Paper Cranes

TAMI HAALAND

It started as a sad day. Sometimes you get  
more than you want. I settled in. We all  
settled and expected nothing but haze.

Then the colored box arrived. A little  
square of patterned sheets and cardboard.  
I lifted the lid and admired the perfect corners.

Inside, stacks of color, rows of blue umbrellas,  
tiny flowers, repetitive wide lines.  
Golden shine or primary pigment.

My friend Jane took the first sheet. We watched her  
fold and fold again until she had a red paper crane.  
She put it in the center of the floor, then started another.

I lifted a sheet from the stack, blue like  
Mediterranean doorways or deep sky. Every fold  
she made, I copied. For her, this crane

sang purple. We set them on the floor.  
The others joined in and watched our folds.  
The cranes multiplied and colors quadrupled.

Some kind of resonance emerged. Not jittery  
but joyful. That's all it was. The word vibrant  
described what happened in our cells

and in the ascending pile of cranes. We didn't stop.  
It became our work. We gave cranes to our friends,  
to people who only saw gray, to our families.

We planned ways we could get them further out.  
We mailed a box of bright cranes to the mayor,  
and news people came with their cameras.

They asked why we did this. We said  
*we're solving it. Watch, we said, you'll see.*

