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Why We Love Dusk

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Why We Love Dusk

by

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A THESIS

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WHY WE LOVE DUSK

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This thesis is a collection of original poems written at the University of Nebraska while studying literature. The introductory essay briefly explores what "truth" might mean at this time in history and whether or not we can do without it. The poems that follow are arranged like a chapbook so that they might influence each other and affect a reader together in ways that they could not otherwise.

For Richard, Nancy, Brad, Astrid, and Glen
With Love

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A passage of Keats' famous *Ode on a Grecian Urn* reads:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal -- yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou has not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (239)

The scene on the beautifully wrought urn will never change. The bold lover must remain inches from the lips of his lover, but he should not grieve--because he experiences no flow of instants to tear him from the moment. He will remain forever panting and forever young in his frozen atemporal world. What if that didn't happen? What if some force were to suddenly animate the urn and install the flow of time? The bold lover would finally get his kiss. But what then? Would he be glad? Maybe he would stand enthralled by the beauty of his lover and the summer. But one day, like most people, he might find out that his love has made him vulnerable to loss and suffering. What would he think then? Would he try to protect himself somehow? Would he have questions like, "What is the meaning of this? Why do I suffer? Why me at all?" What would he do if the world didn't provide the answers he thought he needed? Would he do what we did and invent elaborate systems of truth? Would he find that he could embrace the truths he invented even though part of him knew they were a sham? He might need answers so badly that he'd rather believe he, himself, was the cause of his suffering than not have a reason, as if what was really most unendurable was not suffering itself but the need for some kind of permanent truth behind it. This need for truth might even result in its complete antithesis, a cruelty against reason that would come to direct itself at precisely

what seemed most vital in life. He might one day turn to science or atheism and focus wholly on a landscape of truth that he could verify with his own senses. Science, as the most empirical and skeptical mode of inquiry, might seem capable of creating a genuine philosophy of reality. But what if affirming an entirely rational world meant denying the world in which he found himself? What if the bold lover grew suspicious of the one faith that not even science could question--the absolute value of truth itself. He would be at a point in history not so far from where we are now. As though the human need for a truth behind existence, taking itself more and more strictly, has finally collapsed on itself. But without truth, what meaning can our perceptions have? How can we ever know anything? How can we create a space for ourselves in the alien chaos that surrounds us? How can we get by without the "truth?"

Art, in which the deception is *honest*, offers a real solution. This essay and the following poems have no interest in the "truth," not in the sense of one system or knowing or idea that is somehow absolutely correct; not as a fact that can be verified or a perfect correspondence with reality. If there is no objective knowing then there is only subjective knowing, but maybe that is enough. An artist who chooses to go without truth altogether finds that she does not vanish. Neither does the world. She might approach objects and ideas not in terms of their "truth" or "essence," but from one perspective in a multifarious continuum of perspectives, each of which has value but none of which is more correct than another. Taken as a whole these perspectives might give the greatest possible range of knowledge, the most complete knowing. The artist does not crouch in a dark cave and wait for a few dim rays to shine in from some ideal form; she stands in the

sun where a multitude of impressions wash over her every moment. There is a unique strength here by which she can move into a more vivid and honest perception of the world she finds herself in.

John Keats called this quality negative capability. He describes the idea in an 1818 letter to his brothers:

several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason (492).

Nietzsche calls this same quality perspectivism seventy years later in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

There is *only* a perspective seeing, only a perspective 'knowing'; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be" (555).

Negative capability, that "being in uncertainties," is not a quality that is merely of use to writers. It can be cultivated and it can lead to a clearer, more vital relationship with life. The attached poems open with *Sylvan* because I wanted to imagine the first perceptions of beauty and ugliness and joy and pain and what it might be like to face that dizzying flood of perception without hiding behind false notions about truth:

The wind blows cold through Eden's vacant gardens
And they know they are alive. They think
Everything happens for a reason but don't like the idea
That they somehow deserve all of it.

So with an imaginative
Shudder the world is redreamt
The ceremony of time running all willy-nilly

Poems begin to bloom.

I wanted to position the poems that follow in that same landscape, where the brilliance and meaning of human life does not shine in from outside but vice-versa. Where the absence of a "meaning of life" is not tragic, but wonderful, a freedom to make our own meaning. These poems *are* interested in the truth, they are interested in resisting it, destroying it if they can, so that it might be recovered dialectically.

With this suspicion of truth come some of the particular challenges that artists and poets must address today. As if poetry and art, cut off from their old patron truth, are forced to define themselves precisely in the undefinable. This shift can be seen in the turn of modern and postmodern poetry toward indecipherability. Poets have found that they can partially evade the question of truth by turning the empty space where truth used to be into the very thing to be communicated. But the unknown must not be simply replaced by the unintelligible. We cannot turn to the question mark itself. To stop there is to lose not only a valuable form of human expression, but a priceless means by which humanity might define their space against the external word. To negotiate these difficulties in my own writing I have turned to Wallace Stevens, the poet besides Keats who has had the greatest influence on me.

In the first stanza of Stevens' *The Man With the Blue Guitar* a man sits bent over his guitar. A crowd says to the man, "You have a blue guitar, / You do not play things as they are." The guitarist replies, "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar." Then the people reply, "But play, you must, / A tune beyond us, yet ourselves, / A tune

upon the blue guitar / Of things exactly as they are" (165). The guitarist cannot play "things as they are" because "things as they are," in the sense of a direct correspondence between an object and the empirical experience of that object, are unavailable to him. They are unavailable to anyone. Yet these same "things as they are," when plucked upon the strings of the blue guitar or filtered through a work of art, become something more that is accessible to both the guitarist and the crowd. It is "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves." Stevens continues in the poem's second stanza:

I cannot bring a world quite round,
 Although I patch it as I can...
 If to serenade almost to man
 Is to miss, by that, things as they are,
 Say that it is the serenade
 Of a man that plays a blue guitar (166)

To reach "almost to man" is perhaps as far as poetry and art can go. No one can hope for anything more than a rough correspondence between what they say and what another person understands or between what they perceive and the object they are perceiving. This is a particular source of difficulty for *The Man With the Blue Guitar* and anyone else who has tried to make sense of the world with the help of a work of art. It is also the very nature of art, in which human will enters reality and shapes it into something that remains part will but becomes partially something else, something "other." Art is not an event free of will that just happens. It is not the accurate manifestation of the artist's vision of the artwork. Art cannot "say" what it means to "say." But this dissonance is precisely the space in which art might play, where it might laugh, where it might bring something genuinely new into being that is both will and chance, human and nonhuman, dwelling

temporarily in the same space. Stevens' writes in the fourth stanza of *The Man With the*

Blue Guitar:

So that's life, then: things as they are?
It picks its way on the blue guitar.

A million people on one string?
And all their manner in the thing,

And all their manner, right and wrong,
And all their manner, weak and strong?

The feelings crazily, craftily call,
Like a buzzing of flies in autumn air,

And that's life, then: things as they are,
This buzzing of the blue guitar (166-167).

The gap between subjective and objective reality is no longer a burden but the fountain of perception. It is a tremendously imperfect lens through which we view the world but it is the only one available to us. We have good reason to keep it as focused as we can. The artwork, as a space where we might momentarily encounter both ourselves and the "other" temporarily inhabiting the same form, can offer a real pressure against the alienating force of what we cannot know. We might see ourselves reflected in the external world. We might see the world reflected in ourselves. We might even blur the boundary between the two and, if only for a moment, step into and become part of that vital well of unfolding forms.

Sylvan

“The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream—
he awoke and found it truth.”

John Keats

Sylvan ring-world, twin moons Beauty and Truth,
Pipes on the breeze and legends:
Lovers meet--a heifer dressed in garlands
Follows a priest to sacrifice--little towns rim the halo.

Rivers and sea shores and abandoned citadels
Drowse above the clay earth--branches and weeds
And sky fold dimensionally around
The empty nothing at the vacant urn’s core.

When summer comes they blame it on the bold bover
Who is pleased to finally win his kiss;
The people, the nymphs and animals and mountains,
Everyone--except the heifer--is beguiled by the summer breeze.

Autumn is new, and so is winter and so are nightmares
With red blood and white snow;
In spring the survivors
Learn to put wildflowers on graves.

They invent the word *heart*
Then *gods* and *God*;
The sun is named after art but they change it,
Prometheus is bound to his rock.

The wind blows cold through the vacant gardens
And they know they are alive. They think
Everything happens for a reason but don’t like the idea
That they somehow deserve all of it.

So with an imaginative
Shudder the world is redreamt
The ceremony of time running all willy-nilly:
poems begin to bloom.

Bloom

speeding you toss the glass bottle into the air
to gain an extra moment for the photograph

the fractures bloom in unison against the pavement
we tumble along with the broken glass

dangling arms from open windows
cylinders explode under the hood rolling on

like drums like tiny supernovas—you point at the sparrows
stretched in a great black ribbon curling like smoke

we imagine that it means something
we imagine that we are falling

and then a sound like wind chimes bursting
the broken bottle's shards pulling together

up through the window into your hand
resting coolly against the car door

Goodhue Boulevard

the leaves have all changed color
cars flock like birds
across the tattered pavement
shadows move unheard

the Sower on the capital
clears his throat to say
"if it doesn't mean that much to you
I'd like to finish anyway"

he's dropping seeds across the sky
like some crazy broken star
that shines like a second moon
over Goodhue Boulevard

Chromatic Leaves

one day I cut my hand and the blood
 hypnotized me
it was so red!
 and the trees the bushes
the fractal branches and tributaries
 blossom in these
different planes, smaller and smaller
 and finally
pine needles

broke one to see its inside
 it was all green but the smell
was surprisingly sharp
 it was too sharp
and I wish I could put down something about this
 ordering or symmetry
or these colors that I can't see
 but it is like sieving water
it is like missing the sunset fiddling with some camera

Ptarmigan Lake

below the sky and trees
you have scribbled the words
“I AM” because they seem to fit

in between the mossy rock
and the broad refracted mountains
narrowing directly at your feet

a breeze lifts the page out of your hand
and leaves the sheet
floating ink down through the ripples

Echo the Sun

Your eyes
And mine
Echo the sun

As if Hyperion fell to
Drive the Hours
Across your eyelids

Tremolo

you say you've forgotten the stars but they're there:
eyes on us—the sun's echo—the dark bottom
in various states of wonder and decay

two skies above us

winter in the ocean we wait for the press
tossing fish bones and looking for small patterns
in our mortality—sucking fluid we take

whiskey for sadness

see we're swimming through the water but we feel
eyes on us—the sun's echo—the dark bottom
of the sea unrhymed by the clouds in layers

piled low above us

as if it were spring—we'd talk about that—watch
this continent bloom waves of living color in
an underwater tremolo—but it's not

we can't breathe down here

a circle forms—oil on water—of god—of
our little gift for abstract thought—snowflakes white
falling on the waves suffocating quietly

for other seasons

you say we've forgotten the stars but they're there:
light from their tearing is refracting through the blue
that's pushing off your arms and through your veins

to skies above us

Plumfields

imagine a plum tree with roots deep enough
to bring up something of what we were

the leaves chewing grass
the purple curling scent of tiny perennial flowers

floating to earth like the impossible pressure
at the heart of some star exploding into space

and our dumb matter recycled
to blow like dust through unending skies

where a piece of what was me
and a piece of what was you

fuse like atoms into a heavier globe—
our remainder made light

flung across the black vault so bright
that our imaginations, surpassed,
might rest

People

We showed up when we were supposed to
but nobody was there
to tell us what to do with ourselves.

And All Their Manner Right and Wrong

they made their space in the sleepy bottom of the night
where they pulled the night around them
where they confused themselves with the night
where they grafted words to the night
and they thought they were those things which made the night seem like night
but it was not the night and it was not their memory of night

And All Their Manner, Weak and Strong

like the only thing that ever added up
behind all the delirium

was them, and each other,
as if they were each their own end

and their vulnerability was what made
them strong and love real

maybe they were the universe creating forms
through which it might be aware of itself

certainly they were wrong about most everything
but could they have been right somehow in their passions

hiding in the trees, feasting on olives
drinking red wine like water

Harmonica Laugh

we take a drive in the country
where sunshine bends through dry branches

peels in checkers off the packed gravel
and ignites dust like smoke in our wake

when the gravel rolls as fast as we do
and tires lose their grip

there is a clarity in danger and motion
hands loose and steady at the wheel

like the reason we love dusk
like new air like a balm

for the ache of whatever season
your heart still beats in

The Feelings Crazyly, Craftily Call

like an artist on the beach digging through
an old box of pastels
trying to get the sunset down in time
like somewhere after Memphis you're sleeping
like driving through bands of dark
and orange streetlight somewhere after Memphis you're sleeping
and dreaming that the stars in the sky and the shells on the beach
are like the ocean in your body
or some physicist with an atom smasher

The States of Water

ice broken by sun arcs drops water to
 globes cling to the back window like dew in grass
 a cadence of image is oiled on the glass
 a blue wire glinting pulls dream fodder through

the sky changes in halftones and chromatic hues
 gray silo looming behind it a thread
 tethers that sunshine to darkness ahead
 and the vault blotting night to blacks from blues

she slept in the car she dreamt of the sea
 and a chain torn apart at the center
 she dreamt of the sky the violet cloud's steam
 she floated like incense, curled flame through breeze
 and snow, crystal-white brought silent water
 to wildflowers that bloomed with no eyes to see

This Buzzing of the Blue Guitar

art maybe, like distilled human spirits
like the birds in this park or
some notes you sang in the shower
like shooting stars or the falling zodiac

these flowers
this corn and this tassel
like a seed then a bee
striving up
toward the sun

Poetry

a rhythm of image in words
that thought it could rival
a landscape without rhetoric

a landscape without rhetoric
indifferent to the clouds
a song that sang itself

Last Day

the fuck-all bonanza end of days is nearly here
the levy folds hard from the weight

half of everyone we know moves away
we help with the futon

all potential clumsy and spent
all impressions heard or unheard but gone

the melody of a laugh
the electron moving in its shell

what we know that we are not
and what we are that we do not know

hanging in the night like a hallucination
naked to our constellations

the chords on paper, the chords in air
strike deep enough, never, to make us right by autumn

Goodhue Boulevard

it feels like a storm is coming
everybody has gone inside
except for the famous poet
who is trying to bum a ride

to a blues bar down on twelfth street
where he needs to say some goodbyes
he's got a flat lined up in Rome
and he's leaving at sunrise

the thunder is making him restless
so he shoulders his broken harp
and decides to foot the first bit
down Goodhue Boulevard

Yellowstoned

a ripple tripped the blades of the grass
in the meadow like a shade you remember

first perceiving abroad
where the landscape was all you could see

like a reason dark pressed against light
and things divided into self and other

to be ripped apart and lie together
while the sun seemed to rise against the night

Two Ways of Losing

a boom skids the tracks
the black cars roll off like memory
pulled slowly like a strip of film through pearls

the yard becomes a glassy pool
raindrops skip the surface strike
an upward dripping

concentric rings quicken
every direction but here
and the trains fade into the distance
like everything else we've left behind

Less than there Was

a certain light had faded
like some deity
was dozing at his post

the other gods knew the story
of the simple things he yearned for
but could never have

birds still passed overhead
flowers were pollinated
and the restrooms were cleaned
but without any of the old undertones

Hypnagogia

a spark of will in the hungry sky
fell to earth and woke to find
roses growing in its eyes

it wandered darkling orchards where
no call it made or song or prayer
were heard by anyone, ever

but go in late winter and stand in the trees
search in the air and inhale the breeze
look on that ache with your infant eyes

and feel and be and laugh and help
the changeling world cure itself

The Fall of Sylvan

the air was too thin like the light or their
lives without the people they loved
truth wasn't true enough, beauty's orbit decayed
they took up weapons and took off their clothes

they stared at the sun and refused to forget
until it hurt so bad they didn't have to remember
they were there. they were.

whether or not the dreams that were their joy
outnumbered the nightmares that were their loss
they would love what they loved while they could
they couldn't help it

then the last twilight rolled in
the future and the past faded out
the sky lit sapphire and coral
a cold pastoral washed over the urn

unattenuated by future
the bold lover, lost in her eyes
was teased out of thought and into eternity
as though beauty were love and not truth

Why We Love Dusk

once I hit my head, woke and found
I had entirely lost the ability to judge
the quality of my own poems

but I remember, just before blacking out
thinking something about how
reckless things seem the most beautiful

a flaming train was driving off a cliff,
we threw a brick through the window then
stood on the highway, smoking cigarettes

it is beautiful in poems or with head trauma
but in reality people keep worrying about you

it is much more difficult
for something to be beautiful when you follow it
over a period of time

like maybe when you're born
you're given a certain amount of grace
and once it's spent, it's spent

still, we have always hoped for more,
and dismissed
a black parade of moments
because of tiny imperfections

at times this turns to great joy:
we, the people,
lying down together, rising sweaty
to watch cartoons

cracks in these walls
cockroaches, paint peeling--

everything we've learned has torched
everything else that we've learned to hell and then
torched hell itself and now
the self-help section is in flames

we've been doing a lot of things
for no reason and feeling
very good about it

Goodhue Boulevard

they found the street abandoned
nobody knew why the people left
so they cordoned off the area
and made a monument out of the mess

when people came to see the place
they wondered every time
about the crazy sculptures everywhere
and all the homemade wind chimes

and the pots and cans and paper angels
that were strung up across each yard
clamored each night in the vacant wind
over Goodhue Boulevard

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The titles *And All Their Manner Right and Wrong*, *And All Their Manner Weak and Strong*, *The Feelings Crazily Craftily Call*, and *This Buzzing of the Blue Guitar* are lines from Wallace Stevens' poem *The Man With the Blue Guitar*.