

# Carl Phillips

## Beautiful Dreamer

*From The Art of Daring*

HAVE THOUGHT OF WRITING AS A FORM OF—OR PERHAPS THE RECORD of—a resistance to difficult realities that we, as writers, nevertheless, as if unavoidably, make it our quest to look at all the more closely, even as we again resist them. I've also considered writing as both the result of and the enactment of a restlessness of imagination, a desire to abandon our selves to what we suspect we should resist, even as we know that to resist entirely would likely lead to a form of death-in-life, which is somehow worse than death itself—isn't it?



Years ago, I saw something that, by now, I believe I neither should nor shouldn't have seen: a young man leaned completely naked against a half-fallen tree in a forest clearing, while two older men variously had sex with him, doing the things men do with one another, but roughly, with the roughness especially of indifference coupled incongruously with desire—for desire is many things, but nothing like indifference. It was clear that all three of the players were there by agreement. Eventually, it was finished. The two older men left. The young man, smiling, looked up and straight out toward me. He'd known I was there, all along. He closed his eyes, then. He slept. And I watched him sleep.



That's one version. And here is another:

### *Beautiful Dreamer*

And when the punishment becomes, itself, a pleasure?  
When there's no night that goes unpunished? The larger  
veins show like map-work, as in *Here winds a river,*  
*here a road in summer,* the heat staggering up from it  
the way, always, at triumph's outermost, less chromatic  
edges, some sorrow staggers. Parts where the mud,  
though the rains are history now, refuses still to  
heal over. Parts

untranslatable. Parts where, for whole  
stretches, vegetation sort of strangling sort of make-shift  
sheltering the forest floor. To the face, at the mouth

especially, that mix of skepticism, joy, and panic reminiscent of slaves set free too suddenly. Too soon.—Which way’s the right way? New hunger by new hunger? Spitting on weakness? Raising a fist to it? The falling mouth falls farther. Opens. It says: *I was the Blue King. I led the dance.*

“Which way’s the right way? New hunger by new hunger?” The catalyst for the poem was sexual, and in a sexual context these questions are especially troubling. “New hunger by new hunger” is one way of conducting a sexual life; whether or not it’s the “right” way, whatever that might be, is debatable, but it’s certainly true that to move from one sexual hunger to the next one can lead to trouble—though trouble is not automatically a *given*, just a possibility; to have emerged unscathed from risking that possibility is, for some, a very real part of sexual pleasure.

Poetry.

Sex.

There’s a kind of sex that is less about power than about the unpredictability—and the flexibility—with which that power gets divided between and among the parties involved. Initially, in the scene I mentioned earlier, the young man had seemed the embodiment of weakness, the passive instrument of the two older men. But I eventually saw something like triumph in the young man’s smile, and an absolute sense of control throughout his body, even as he allowed others to control it. It was as if he were instructing them exactly *how* and *when* to control it. The two older men, then, as weakness. And the young man as—what? pliant master?

How about: poet mastering, for now at least, his demons? That may seem a bit of a stretch, but it is also true that, though the poem arose from a sexual scenario, I had somewhere in mind that the questions—“Which way’s the right way? New hunger by new hunger?”—might be applied to writing: without the constant abandoning of one hunger for a new one, the desire to keep moving into discovery, how can a writer ever grow, either by deepening or by broadening his or her terms and terrain of inquiry? Any reluctance about this kind of motion, any preference for intellectual stasis, I’d determined to be weakness—easily worth spitting on, worth raising a fist to . . .

I say that I had these ideas in mind, but that’s not quite accurate. For months after having written the poem, I in fact found it difficult to know with any certainty, if not the poem’s meaning, then at least the meaning to which the poem might be gesturing. Many poets write toward a chosen subject, but I’ve always been the kind who writes from a supposedly clear space into a space of surprise, that is, where I find myself surprised—and not so pleasantly surprised, more often than not, surprised instead into a heightened awareness of something troubling. In “Beautiful Dreamer,” punishment is so confusable with pleasure that it can become, like pleasure, addictive. Triumph is shadowed, ultimately, by sorrow. Freedom is a joy, but means also a removal of those constraints that, for better or worse, served as coordinates by which we at least knew where we were,

not just geographically, but—given the tension between the concrete and the abstract world in this poem—morally, as well. In the context of morality, “Which way’s the right way?” is a question that’s always worth asking, lest we become too fixed, too prescriptive about right and wrong—history reminds us what *that* has led to. But it’s also the case that to ask “Which way’s the right way?” can imply not just that morality is flexible—as I believe it is, and should be—but that a blurring of morality is possible, and in that blurring is the very real chance for us to *lose* our way. What then?

Well, one particular answer is that we can end up like the young man in the scene I witnessed. Sure, I’ve said he seemed the master of the situation, but master at what cost? If one holds, for now, the upper hand in negotiating sexual desire, is that power? “*I was the Blue King. I led the dance.*” So? And?



Inevitably, every poem is in dialogue with other poems. When scrying my own poems for their possible intentions, I’ve often found it instructive to see what other poems are ghosting my own, and to think about why and how they are doing so. When I first began thinking about this essay, I knew I wanted to discuss in some way the relationship between experience, written response to that experience, and what might be meant by response *to*, versus expression *of*, any given experience. And I figured starting with one of my own poems would be reasonable, given how we can only rarely speak for the experiences behind the poems of others—we know what the poet chooses to *tell* us; in our own poems, we know the rest of it, what we chose to suppress. Not until settling upon “Beautiful Dreamer” as my starting-off point did I begin to realize how this poem gestures to at least two others. And, not coincidentally, both of them give a scenario in which a speaker in a desert scene comes upon something or someone who makes a statement or pronouncement, as the falling mouth does in my own poem, a poem written after I’d stumbled upon a scene in a woods—not a desert, but is it so far-fetched to think of this particular woods as a kind of moral desert, one at least where moral direction has become unclear?

“*I was the Blue King. I led the dance.*” And here is Shelley’s “Ozymandias”:

I met a traveler from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The poem speaks, of course, to the ultimate hollowness of power, to its transient nature, and to how easily power and the arrogance that can attend it can be reduced to tokens that themselves shatter, decay, become wreckage. It's a poem I haven't read or thought about in many years, and yet the resonances between it and my own poem seem unmistakable. "*I was the Blue King. I led the Dance.*" It sounds like power, but it is said in the immediate wake of a confusion of skepticism, joy, and panic, of slavery and a terrifying freedom, and of a series of questions to which the mouth gives as answer only a statement about a power that is a thing of the past. As if the past were a beautiful dream from which it would be better never, never to wake—is *that* it?

But then there is this poem, untitled, the third in Stephen Crane's book-length sequence *The Black Riders and Other Lines*:

In the desert  
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,  
Who, squatting upon the ground,  
Held his heart in his hands,  
And ate of it.  
I said: "Is it good, friend?"  
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;  
"But I like it  
Because it is bitter,  
And because it is my heart."

What the creature says in those last three lines may not seem at first a statement about power. If anything, they arise from the condition I describe in "Beautiful Dreamer," where punishment—if we can agree that to eat one's own heart is a form of punishment, the kind we'd expect to find in the Greco-Roman Hades or in Dante's Hell—punishment has become pleasure. But I find also in the creature's statement something about the power that can come from knowing exactly where one stands—he has no illusions about the taste, for example: it is bitter, and the certainty of that bitterness—why else say that it's bitter three times?—is both a form of power and, as if consequently, a source of pleasure.

Another certainty: the creature knows the heart is his own. Would it be worse, then, if he were eating someone else's heart? That's what is implied, though the reasons aren't stated. Maybe it has to do with how we can never really know another's heart, so it's better to eat of what we know; even if we can't know our own heart entirely, we know it better than we know another's. There's also the fact that others can never know our own hearts as well as we ourselves do; that is, the pleasure here is not just that he is eating a heart that he knows, but that the eater of the heart is not a stranger. And again, these certainties translate into a kind of power.

If both the Shelley poem and Crane's poem lie somewhere behind my own—and I believe they do, though my conversation with them was not at

all a conscious one—then does that make my own speaker’s statement both a statement about the delusions of power and at the same time about how certainty—which is a form of clarity, delusion’s opposite—is itself a power that’s very real? Yes, I think. Both. And somehow neither. Power is many things—perhaps conundrum, especially.



We write from experience—whether an event actually happened to us, or we experienced it second-hand: hearsay, a news story, something we witnessed of another’s experience—and every experience we have, for all its being in the immediate present, is in the context of the world as we’ve come to know it, which is to say in the context of history—our own, and the longer-ago history which is the backdrop *for* our own. Similarly, the context of literary history is the backdrop for our own contributions to literature. The poems by Shelley and Crane both concern, quite differently, the abstraction of power. Each comes to a conclusion, but this is different from a resolution of the problem, as it were. Abstraction—from justice to death, from death to love, from love to mercy—will always resist resolution. At best, we can arrive at a stance with *respect* to a given abstraction; this can feel like resolution, though it is only respite—which is better than nothing, however.

The irresolvability of an abstraction like power, combined with the very real, human impulse to give to shapelessness a form, is the catalyst for the particular field of inquiry that we call art—in this case, poetry—and the inquiry is an ongoing one, across history, because the “problem” being investigated resists solution, and yet we as humans can’t resist trying to find solution. The poem is at once the evidence of having made the attempt, and the enactment of that attempt. It is also, however unconsciously, our contribution to the long tradition of those who have made the same attempt and the same failure to resolve the irresolvable. We write in response to being human, and to those before us who have done the same; it’s in this sense that I can see “Beautiful Dreamer” as being in dialogue with Shelley and Crane.

But there are other dialogues. We are, each of us, uniquely haunted. I spoke earlier of demons—the countless manifestations of transgression toward which—and by which—we are variously driven. In addition to these, there’s everything we remember, for better *and* worse, everything we’ve loved or not loved, everything we’ve lost that nevertheless refuses, somehow, to go away. I believe we write as a means not of laying these ghosts and demons to rest, but of giving them, however briefly, a context within which we feel we’ve brought under control what we know full well we *cannot* control. The poem is a form of negotiation with what haunts us—or to put it another way, is the interior dialogue we have with our other selves, insofar as what haunts us is, in part, who we are.



Two poems have, of late, been haunting me. One is this untitled one that I'll call "Paul," by Lorine Niedecker:

Paul  
    when the leaves  
        fall  
  
from their stems  
    that lie thick  
        on the walk  
  
in the light  
    of the full note  
        the moon  
  
playing  
    to leaves  
        when they leave  
  
the little  
    thin things  
        Paul

The other poem is one by W. S. Merwin, called "Rain Light":

All day the stars watch from long ago  
my mother said I am going now  
when you are alone you will be all right  
whether or not you know you will know  
look at the old house in the dawn rain  
all the flowers are forms of water  
the sun reminds them through a white cloud  
touches the patchwork spread on the hill  
the washed colors of the afterlife  
that lived there long before you were born  
see how they wake without a question  
even though the whole world is burning

Each of these concerns loss, and does so in the context of the ongoingness of the natural world. The trees in Niedecker's poem may have been reduced, now the leaves have fallen, to "little / thin things," but we know their foliage will be restored, unlike Paul, who may be the poem's addressee, but could as reasonably be a personal loss that comes to mind, for any number of reasons, in the fall. Likewise, the mother in Merwin's poem is dying; she assures the speaker that he won't be alone, but for company she offers not herself but the natural world, not an afterlife, but the colors of it, an afterlife that is vegetal, floral, and as indifferent to human affairs as to the apparent fact that "the whole world is burning." And yet, despite the subject matter, there's a beauty to these poems that has to do, in part at least, with artistry: in the Niedecker, how rhyme appears

in each stanza, but each time just a little differently; the sheer spareness of her imagery; the somewhat surreal gorgeousness of imagery in the *Merwin*, though his poem has its own kind of spareness, in addition to a particular spareness that it shares with Niedecker's poem, in being both short and unpunctuated. Is it that loss has a beauty to it? Or do we try to make loss easier by making it beautiful? Wouldn't we miss, maybe more than a little bit, what it felt like, to have lost, to have been lost? Never to have known sorrow—for all its awfulness, without it, what would the texture of a life be?



Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

So ends Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," breezily and absolutely establishing an intimacy between himself and the "you" of his reader. Nearly a hundred years later, Muriel Rukeyser opens her poem, "Effort at Speech Between Two People" with these lines:

: Speak to me.      Take my hand.      What are you now?  
I will tell you all.                      I will conceal nothing.

And here is the stanza with which the poem ends:

: What are you now?                      If we could touch one another,  
if these our separate entities could come to grips,  
clenched like a Chinese puzzle . . . yesterday  
I stood in a crowded street that was live with people,  
and no one spoke a word, and the morning shone.  
Everyone silent, moving . . . Take my hand.      Speak to me.

One way of thinking of a poem is, in fact, as an effort at speech between two people. To "touch one another," have "our separate entities . . . come to grips"—to solve, or at least to try to solve, the particular puzzle of human estrangement.

Is that really, though, what a poet wants, an erasure of estrangement, speech between two people? Or is the effort—the word I keep leaning on in Rukeyser's title—is the effort enough? Inadvertently, I think, we speak from our own hauntedness to the hauntedness in others, those readers with whom our private poem, as if magically, resonates—that stranger who, having read the poem, says: "I have been there, known that place, though I did not know it entirely, or not at least like this. And I have felt the same." But again, this resonance—which is a form of response—is at best the hoped-for but not exactly expected result of a dialogue that's inadvertent; it's not the reason for writing, or it isn't for me, at least. I think I write not to understand struggle and to somehow by

understanding it come to some sort of peace with it, but to understand just enough to know how much more there is, still, to be understood; not an end, then, to struggling, but a stepping more deeply into it.

I spoke earlier of the interior dialogue that the writer conducts with the ghosts, the demons that are his or her other selves. Lately, it feels less like dialogue than a matter of having looked upon those other selves clearly, then looked away, and then looked steadily, slowly back—as if for what? confirmation? There is a difference between risk and a leap of faith. Maybe writing is both. The risk is a self-knowledge that can at best be dispiriting, at worst destructive. And the leap of faith? That it will all, eventually, have been worth it? To whom? And how?

The decision—if it is one—to look at the self, the world, and one’s place in it squarely, to step out of the mythology that we daily present to the world as our actual selves, is not an easy one, but for the writer it’s crucial. This is what Rukeyser is getting at in “The Poem as Mask,” in which she repudiates having taken on the persona—which is the Latin for “mask”—of the singer Orpheus:

When I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness, it was a mask,  
on their mountain, gold-hunting, singing, in orgy,  
it was a mask; when I wrote of the god,  
fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love gone down with song,  
it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself.

There is no mountain, there is no god, there is memory  
of my torn life, myself split open in sleep, the rescued child  
beside me among the doctors, and a word  
of rescue from the great eyes.

No more masks! No more mythologies!

Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand,  
the fragments join in me with their own music.

“No more masks! No more mythologies!” And yet, the poem is always at some level a mask—we choose as poets what to include, what not to, from the experience that we write from, the experience of being who we are, which is ever-shifting and multifarious. The poem serves as a mask behind which we find the courage to allow the fragments—our various selves—to “join in [us] with their own music.” Courage, because as the fragments unite, they can coalesce into a meaning that we might prefer to have left shattered.

Who is the dreamer?  
What makes him beautiful?  
What was the dream?  
Or not a dream— What happened?





John Ashbery ends his poem “Street Musicians” with these lines:

Our question of a place of origin hangs  
Like smoke: how we picnicked in pine forests,  
In coves with the water always seeping up, and left  
Our trash, sperm and excrement everywhere, smeared  
On the landscape, to make of us what we could.

We make of the fragments of self a form that holds, briefly—that’s the poem—then we watch it shatter again—which is, I suppose, that space that the poem fooled us into believing we’d left behind us, for a time, world of fragmented selves, hard truths, glinting ambiguities to be negotiated, navigated through as we make our disoriented way forward, or what we have to believe is forward. Like being mapless in tough territory, and knowing, somewhere inside, we’d choose this life, and this one only, if in fact we could choose.