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# WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

## A MEMORIAL CHAPBOOK

### INTRODUCTION

This chapbook of poems by foreign and American poets was conceived during Williams' last year among us, with no thought of his approaching death. Many of us were aware of the seriousness of his illness which had deprived him of the use of his right arm. His speech had been severely impaired. He was in a depressed mood and had virtually given up any attempt to continue writing, but so strong was the influence of Williams, the doer, that we received the news of our eyes and ears through the pulsation of his lines. We saw and heard him fighting, buoyant, unshaken and undefeated. It was the occasion for a chapbook of poems in joyful hailing of the man and his life.

It was at my last visit to his house several months before his death that I sensed Williams was going rapidly. His depression had turned into a kind of triumphant bitterness in which he looked forward to death as an event. He yearned for it and spoke as if it were something lacking in his work that he needed to round out his poetry and thought. Coincidentally, poems had begun to arrive for the chapbook somber and foretelling of death. None directly presaged his own yet they were dark with such a sense of it that I could not hesitate to accept them, especially now that his situation had indeed become grave. These tragic poems were added to the chapbook. They are there to take note of his death with all the power that is in them, while the collection ends with poems of continuing love, pleasure and enthusiasm, as Williams would have approved.

At this high moment of his fame, it is almost superfluous to enumerate the man's qualities as poet, they are so well known, loved and appreciated. He stands beside Walt Whitman, a world figure, with *Paterson*, a poem of tragic and

universal import. Its theme is at the root of every social and political upheaval in the world today. In *Paterson*, Williams delineates this theme as the failure of language, the failure of communication, of necessity referring to himself as poet and contemporary in the grip of this modern dilemma, but this is only to point at the basic failure among men themselves in their attitude towards one another and towards life. It is one of separation. "Divorce is the sign of knowledge in our times," from which springs those calamities that we now witness among men, women and nations. Williams takes the small, nearly obscure American city of Paterson as his focal point, weaving symbol and reality around it on each level of society, using himself as the operational figure, sometimes as the city itself, often as man, as woman, and as the great, roaring, dumb Passaic waterfalls pouring down from above the city its torrent of power without direction, except as dying in the sea, without purpose, without soul, which is to say without language. Like *Leaves of Grass*, it is a work unprecedented in scope and intent in American literature, and as with *Leaves of Grass* comes of harsh reality in collision with an exuberant and loving man. A poem of such courageous insight and resolution was hardly to be expected in these despairing times, but then it was like Williams to go counter to the prevailing current, to state life's fullest potential against the force of the fashionable. *Paterson* is read with intense interest here and abroad. It has restored among men our first truth and idealism. In Williams America lives and is honored.

David Ignatow

*Dedicated to*  
Flossie Williams

## LETTER TO WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

I don't know how America *looks*  
(from this city of tired lagoons)  
but I know what America *is*  
from the books of its poets —  
flowers of tar, dilated eyes,  
a hunger for land, a thirst for waters.

Each poet is a city,  
labyrinth-city, man-city,  
but there's an old one who is a man-  
continent, the capital of poetry, of America,  
an old poet my friends have boasted of:  
"Out there, someone's out there who is  
writing and making America with his words."

I'll send him a letter (I said)  
I want to hear, to understand  
if there's more than movies and Florida  
resorts, a deeper  
empire, an invention of life.

I've started this letter: "Dear,  
dear Williams, here in Venice . . ."

Carlo Della Corte  
translated by Sonia Raiziss

## PHONE CALL TO RUTHERFORD

“It would be —  
   a mercy if  
 you did not come  
   see me. . .

“I have dif-fi / cul-ty  
   s/peaking, I  
 cannot count on it, I  
 am afraid it would be too em-  
 barassing f f—  
   for me . . .”

—Bill, can you still  
 answer letters?

“No . . . my hands  
 are tongue-tied . . .  
 You have. . .made  
 a record in my heart . . .  
   Goodbye . . .”

**Paul Blackburn**

## THE NEXT

The funeral procession swinging empty belts  
 Walks on the road on the black rain  
 Though the one who is dead was not ready  
 In the casket lid the nails are still turning  
 Behind it come the bearers  
 Of tires and wet pillows and the charred ladder  
 And the unrollers of torn music and a picture of  
   smoke

And last the boy trailing the long  
String cut off clean  
Whom a voice follows calling Why a white one  
When a red one would have done just as well

Under the casket the number  
Is scratched out with signs of haste

We let it go we gather with other persuaders  
In the parlor of the house of The Next  
And I in my wax shoes my mind goes back  
To the last dead Who was it I say

Could it have been my friend the old man  
With the wet dog and the shed where he  
Slept on a ladder till the whole place burned  
Here just now was his other  
Friend the carpenter  
Who was besides a crusher of shells for cement

No they say he was months ago this was no one we  
knew  
But he was one of us

We let it go we are  
Gathered with other persuaders in the parlor  
The Next is upstairs he is  
Ten feet tall hale and solid his bed is no deathbed  
He is surrounded by friends they enjoy the secret of  
safety  
They are flush they are candle-lit they move to  
laughter  
Downstairs it is not yet known  
Who will go instead of him this time  
Like the others one after the other because they were  
scared  
The laughter keeps time on the stairs

These words start rising out of my wax shoes I  
 Say we must tell him  
 We must go up there we must go up there and You  
 Are The Next we must tell him  
 The persuaders say he would deafen us  
 When we say No no one hears us  
  
 My shoes are softening but at the same time I am  
     saying  
 Someone would help us and it would be us  
 Even the carpenter would  
 Help us when he went out he said  
 He would not be gone long  
 Removing a knocker from a door  
 And the caskets are clearly numbered not ours we  
 Must rise under the turning nails  
 I say to the persuaders downstairs in the house of  
     The Next  
  
 And when they say Yes no one hears them  
W. S. Merwin

**A CONTRACT**  
**(for the destruction and rebuilding of Paterson)**

Flesh, and cars, tar, dug holes beneath stone  
 a rude hierarchy of money, band saws cross out  
 music, feeling. Even speech, corrodes.  
I came here  
 from where I sat boiling in my veins, cold fear  
 at the death of men, the death of learning, in  
 cold fear, at my own. Romantic vests of same death

blank at the corner, blank when they raise their  
fingers

Criss the hearts, in dark flesh staggered so marvelous  
are their lies. So complete, their mastery, of these  
stupid niggers. Loud spics kill each other, and will  
not

make the simple trip to Tiffany's. Will not smash  
their stainless  
heads, against the simpler effrontery of so callous a  
code as gain.

You are no brothers, dirty woogies, dying under  
dried rinds, in massa's  
droopy tuxedos. Cab Calloways of the soul, at the  
soul's juncture, a  
music, they think will save them from our eyes. (In  
back of the terminal

where the circus will not go. At the backs of crowds,  
stooped and vulgar  
breathing hate syllables, unintelligible rapes of all  
that linger in  
our new world. Killed in white fedora hats, they stand  
so mute at what

whiter slaves did to my father. They muster silence.  
They pray at the  
steps of abstract prisons, to be kings, when all is  
silence, when all  
is stone. When even the stupid fruit of their loins is  
gold, or something  
else they cannot eat.

**LeRoi Jones**

from. . .THE WEATHER'S CRIMINAL

**1. Sleet in May**

Patient for his cue,  
he waits  
to say the thing that hurts.

**2. Play of Early Sun and Clouds**

He slinks beneath the shadow of  
his jury's fragmentary smile  
and works his lips  
until  
he gets them fixed  
to his imagined understanding of  
their total  
soon-to-dawn  
least possible  
compassion.

**3. Rampageous River**

All heart, no head, the bold man  
lives alone,  
and quarrels with the stone  
he dines upon.

Edwin Honig

**POEM, FOR:**

Give me something a heap  
Of rocks, to break  
Into pattern, the eyes.

Like quarry all over, —  
But particularly, for

Every stone of sight.

You see, you break:  
Rocks are never  
Sensed, the way

They are, nor stars  
Ingrained  
Into another, life.

The world is half  
One's eyes, and that  
A rock of time, sledged

Sometimes, into a love  
And fenced both  
In and out of stone.

Robert S. Sward

## ARIZONA

*“. . . The law gives us nothing  
but a corpse, wrapped in a dirty mantle.”*

“The Desert Music” — W. C. Williams

The clawing  
suicidal

brush fumbles among scabs of heat  
the sahuaro  
apart abstracted  
sinks its thirst  
into the ground's sucked veins  
—the ground grows  
bone cages of beasts

cultures of ant heaps  
 one gopher's shy caper  
 the snake sneaking from its own shape  
 abjectly

What sun ever ends like this  
 and bleeds down the wrinkled  
 hills, the jaws of a mine,  
 between rock corridors that disgorge  
 distances of light

—an archaic

telluric  
 fire has fused  
 those forums of quiescence

An abrupt crackle,  
 the buzzard with its gopher  
 rides up as if taken  
 then planes downward  
 in space

to a point  
 of dark instinct —  
 the sahuaro  
 slipping its shadow  
 founders in the night crater

Alfredo de Palchi  
 translated by Sonia Raiziss

## LET US GO NOW

The man's head is a vehicle. No no, let it sleep. . .  
 It has hair growing from its trouble; hair grows  
 out

of the idea of death. Idea is death. The head is death with hair upon it. Also it is a vehicle upon which it is itself to ride through dream and supertime.

Do you see how the china is full of intestinal matter?

Soon, too soon the soft mouth of the worm is eating the idea of itself.

Turn on the wheel, let us go where nothing waits.  
I tell you, let us go now.

**Russell Edson**

## TO A CHILDHOOD CHUM

There's not much left to say —  
and time and again the same landscape.  
What should we do but roam it, yelling  
our futile secrets between us in the wind  
believing them the whole  
truth and pageantry of life.

“But you have your beauty. . .”

The gibbering

dark wind, the pieties  
of death: years passing  
such as they are, the hill inflamed with fall,  
bell towers  
strong in the sun,  
the stony bones of the dead, our roots  
too akin from too far back  
for grieving apart when that wind