

Classic Poetry Series

Edgar Bowers

- 11 poems -

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Edgar Bowers (2 March 1924 - 4 February 2000)

Edgar Bowers was an American poet who won the Bollingen Prize in Poetry in 1989.

Bowers was born in Rome, Georgia in 1924. During World War II he joined the military and served in Counter-intelligence against Germany. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1950 and did graduate work in English literature at Stanford University. Bowers published several books of poetry, including *The Form of Loss*, *For Louis Pasteur*, and *The Astronomers*. He won two fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, and taught at Duke University and the University of California, Santa Barbara.

In Bowers's obituary, the English poet Clive Wilmer wrote, 'The title poem of his 1990 collection, *For Louis Pasteur*, announces his key loyalties. He confessed to celebrating every year the birthdays of three heroes: Pasteur, Mozart and Paul Valéry, all of whom suggest admiration for the life of the mind lived at its highest pitch - a concern for science and its social uses, and a love of art that is elegant, cerebral and orderly.' That is one part of Bowers. Another aspect is picked up by Thom Gunn on the back of Bowers's *Collected Poems*: 'Bowers started with youthful stoicism, but the feeling is now governed by an increasing acceptance of the physical world.'

That 'physical world' encompasses sex and love, which are refracted through his restrained and lapidary lines. The effect of this contrast is striking: at once balanced and engaged; detached but acutely aware of sensual satisfactions. The style owes much to the artistic ethos of Yvor Winters, under whom Bowers studied at Stanford, but his achievement far surpasses that of his mentor, and his other students, such as J. V. Cunningham. He often wrote in rhyme, but also produced some of the finest blank verse in the English language. He wrote very little (his *Collected Poems* weighs in at 168 pages), due no doubt to the careful consideration behind every single line. But that care never forecloses on the wilder aspects of human existence--the needs, joys and violence.

Bowers retired in 1991 and died in San Francisco in 2000.

Works:

Publications

The Form of Loss (Alan Swallow, 1956)
The Astronomers (Alan Swallow, 1965)
Living Together (David R. Godine, 1973)

For Louis Pasteur (Princeton University Press, 1989)
Collected Poems (Alfred A. Knopf, 1997)

Amor Vincit Omnia

Love is no more.
It died as the mind dies: the pure desire
Relinquishing the blissful form it wore,
The ample joy and clarity expire.

Regret is vain.
Then do not grieve for what you would efface,
The sudden failure of the past, the pain
Of its unwilling change, and the disgrace.

Leave innocence,
And modify your nature by the grief
Which poses to the will indifference
That no desire is permanent in sense.

Take leave of me.
What recompense, or pity, or deceit
Can cure, or what assumed serenity
Conceal the mortal loss which we repeat?

The mind will change, and change shall be relief.

Submitted by Gnute

Edgar Bowers

An Afternoon At The Beach

I'll go among the dead to see my friend.
The place I leave is beautiful: the sea
Repeats the winds' far swell in its long sound,
And, there beside it, houses solemnly
Shine with the modest courage of the land,
While swimmers try the verge of what they see.

I cannot go, although I should pretend
Some final self whose phantom eye could see
Him who because he is not cannot change.
And yet the thought of going makes the sea,
The land, the swimmers, and myself seem strange,
Almost as strange as they will someday be.

Edgar Bowers

Autumn Shade

1

The autumn shade is thin. Grey leaves lie faint
Where they will lie, and, where the thick green was,
Light stands up, like a presence, to the sky.
The trees seem merely shadows of its age.
From off the hill, I hear the logging crew,
The furious and indifferent saw, the slow
Response of heavy pine; and I recall
That goddesses have died when their trees died.
Often in summer, drinking from the spring,
I sensed in its cool breath and in its voice
A living form, darker than any shade
And without feature, passionate, yet chill
With lust to fix in ice the buoyant rim—
Ancient of days, the mother of us all.
Now, toward his destined passion there, the strong,
Vivid young man, reluctant, may return
From suffering in his own experience
To lie down in the darkness. In this time,
I stay in doors. I do my work. I sleep.
Each morning, when I wake, I assent to wake.
The shadow of my fist moves on this page,
Though, even now, in the wood, beneath a bank,
Coiled in the leaves and cooling rocks, the snake
Does as it must, and sinks into the cold.

2

Nights grow colder. The Hunter and the Bear
Follow their tranquil course outside my window.
I feel the gentian waiting in the wood,
Blossoms waxy and blue, and blue-green stems
Of the amaryllis waiting in the garden.
I know, as though I waited what they wait,
The cold that fastens ice about the root,
A heavenly form, the same in all its changes,
Inimitable, terrible, and still,
And beautiful as frost. Fire warms my room.
Its light declares my books and pictures. Gently,
A dead soprano sings Mozart and Bach.
I drink bourbon, then go to bed, and sleep
In the Promethean heat of summer's essence.

3

Awakened by some fear, I watch the sky.
Compelled as though by purposes they know,
The stars, in their blue distance, still affirm

The bond of heaven and earth, the ancient way.
This old assurance haunts small creatures, dazed
In icy mud, though cold may freeze them there
And leave them as they are all summer long.
I cannot sleep. Passion and consequence,
The brutal given, and all I have desired
Evade me, and the lucid majesty
That warmed the dull barbarian to life.
So I lie here, left with self-consciousness,
Enemy whom I love but whom his change
And his forgetfulness again compel,
Impassioned, toward my lost indifference,
Faithful, but to an absence. Who shares my bed?
Who lies beside me, certain of his waking,
Led sleeping, by his own dream, to the day?

4

If I ask you, angel, will you come and lead
This ache to speech, or carry me, like a child,
To riot? Ever young, you come of age
Remote, a pledge of distances, this pang
I notice at dusk, watching you subside
From tree-tops and from fields. Mysterious self,
Image of the fabulous alien,
Even in sleep you summon me, even there,
When, under his native tree, Odysseus hears
His own incredible past and future, whispered
By wisdom, but by wisdom in disguise.

5

Thinking of a bravura deed, a place
Sacred to a divinity, an old
Verse that seems new, I postulate a man
Mastered by his own image of himself.
Who is it says, I am? Sensuous angel,
Vessel of nerve and blood, the impoverished heir
Of an awareness other than his own?
Not these, but one to come? For there he is,
In a steel helmet, raging, fearing his death,
Carrying bread and water to a quiet,
Placing ten sounds together in one sound:
Confirming his election, or merely still,
Sleeping, or in a colloquy with the sun.

6

Snow and then rain. The roads are wet. A car

Slips and strains in the mire, and I remember
Driving in France: weapons-carriers and jeeps;
Our clothes and bodies stiffened by mud; our minds
Diverted from fear. We labor. Overhead,
A plane, Berlin or Frankfurt, now New York.
The car pulls clear. My neighbor smiles. He is old.
Was this our wisdom, simply, in a chance,
In danger, to be mastered by a task,
Like groping round a chair, through a door, to bed?

7

A dormant season, and, under the dripping tree,
Not sovereign, ordering nothing, letting the past
Do with me as it will, I savor place
And weather, air and sun. Though Hercules
Confronts his nature in his deed, repeats
His purposes, and is his will, intact,
Magnificent, and memorable, I try
The simplest forms of our old poverty.
I seek no end appointed in my absence
Beyond the silence I already share.

8

I drive home with the books that I will read.
The streets are harsh with traffic. Where I once
Played as a boy amid old stands of pine,
Row after row of houses. Lined by the new
Debris of wealth and power, the broken road.
Then miles of red clay bank and frugal ground.
At last, in the minor hills, my father's place,
Where I can find my way as in a thought—
Gardens, the trees we planted, all we share.
A Cherokee trail runs north to summer hunting.
I see it, when I look up from the page.

9

In nameless warmth, sun light in every corner,
Bending my body over my glowing book,
I share the room. Is it with a voice or touch
Or look, as of an absence, learned by love,
Now, merely mine? Annunciation, specter
Of the worn out, lost, or broken, telling what future.
What vivid loss to come, you change the room
And him who reads here. Restless, he will stir,
Look round, and see the room renewed and line,
Color, and shape as, in desire, they are,

Not shadows but substantial light, explicit,
Bright as glass, inexhaustible, and true.

10

My shadow moves, until, at noon, I stand
Within its seal, as in the finished past.
But in the place where effect and cause are joined,
In the warmth or cold of my remembering,
Of love, of partial freedom, the time to be
Trembles and glitters again in windy light.
For nothing is disposed. The slow soft wind
Tilting the blood-root keeps its gentle edge.
The intimate cry, both sinister and tender,
Once heard, is heard confined in its reserve.
My image of myself, apart, informed
By many deaths, resists me, and I stay
Almost as I have been, intact, aware,
Alive, though proud and cautious, even afraid.

Edgar Bowers

Clear-seeing

Bavaria, 1946

The clairvoyante, a major general's wife,
The secretaries' sibyl, read the letters
They brought her from their GI soldier-lovers,
Interpreting the script. I went along
One afternoon with writing of my own.
"This writing is by one you cannot trust,"
She frowned, and all the secretaries smiled.
But when she took my palm, she read the brown
Fingers for too much smoking and the lines
Of time and fate for a long and famous life.
"Soon you will take a trip by land and sea."
Across the hall, her husband, half asleep
And propped high on his pillows, when I bent
To shake his hand, seeing my uniform,
Called in a whisper as if he still dreamed,
"I told him not to go to Russia!" Then,
Remembering the woman at my jeep,
Among the smoking tanks and half-tracks, crying,
"My husband fell in Russia!" I thought I saw
For him the summer uniforms in snow,
Partisans, savage reprisals, day-long strafing,
Long lines of prisoners never to return,
Comrades armless, legless, and blind. But he,
Clutching my sleeve to pull me closer, whispered,
"It was the SS did it, not my men.
The week before the armistice, they took
Three just-conscripted boys who were afraid
And hanged them, German children, the sky green
Above the uniforms too big for them,
As we saw when we found and cut them down.
It was then that I despaired to live or die."
The secretaries waiting with their coats on,
She thanked me for my visit, and, "Next week
Bring cigarettes and coffee, please," she said.

Edgar Bowers

Clothes

Walking back to the office after lunch,
I saw Hans. "Mister Isham, Mister Isham,"
He called out in his hurry, "Herr Wegner needs you.
A woman waiting for a border pass
Took poison, she is dead, and the police
Are there to take the body." In the hall,
The secretaries stood outside their doors
Silently waiting with Wegner. "Sir," he said,
"It was her answer on the questionnaire,
A clerk for the Gestapo. So it was."
Within the outer office, by the row
Of wooden chairs, one lying on its side,
On the discolored brown linoleum floor
Under a GI blanket was the lost
Unmoving shape; uncovered, from a fold,
A dirty foot half out of a dirty shoe,
Once white, heel bent, the sole worn through, the skin
Bruised red and calloused, uncut toenails curved
And veined like an old ivory. No one spoke.
Police stood at attention by a stretcher.
After an empty moment, suddenly
Bent over as if taken by a cramp,
I sobbed out loud and, on my uniform,
Vomited up my lunch—over the tie,
The polished buttons and insignia,
The little strips of color and the green
Eisenhower jacket with its Eagle patch,
The taut pants in a crease, the glistening jump-boots—
Vomiting and still sobbing, like a child
Awakened in the night, and sick. Wegner and Hans
Held me, murmuring, "Ach, dear sir, the war
Is over and not over, such things happen."
While no one else moved, Frau Schmidt brought a towel
To clean me off before Hans walked me back,
My arm across his shoulders and I retelling
The story of how, near Zell am See, we found,
Hung from a tree in leaf, the final sack
Of bones, in rotted Wehrmacht green. In the house
An SS lord had furnished for his mistress—
Deep sofas, Persian rugs, and velvet drapes—
Frau König took my clothes. In my own room,
Wearing the Gucci robe Bouchard had taken
From a fine house before we got to Ulm,
Instead of lying down to rest, I studied
The book I read for German with Frau Schmidt,
Goethe's Italian Journey. Through the window,
The Watchman's upper slopes were shadows, green
And purple with the afternoon, its snows
Melting, its double peaks the victory sign.

Edgar Bowers

For Louis Pasteur

How shall a generation know its story
If it will know no other? When, among
The scoffers at the Institute, Pasteur
Heard one deny the cause of child-birth fever,
Indignantly he drew upon the blackboard,
For all to see, the Streptococcus chain.
His mind was like Odysseus and Plato
Exploring a new cosmos in the old
As if he wrote a poem--his enemy
Suffering, disease, and death, the battleground
His introspection. "Science and peace," he said,
"Will win out over ignorance and war,"
But then, the virus mutant in his vein,
"Death to the Prussian!" and "revenge, revenge!"

How shall my generation tell its story?
Their fathers jobless, boys for the CCC
And NYA, the future like a stairwell
To floors without a window or a door,
And then the army: bayonet drill and foxhole;
Bombing to rubble cities with textbook names
Later to bulldoze streets for; their green bodies
Drowned in the greener surfs of rumored France.
My childhood friend, George Humphreys, whom I still see
Still ten years old, his uncombed hair and grin
Moment by moment in the Hürtgen dark
Until the one step full in the sniper's sight,
His pastor father emptied by the grief.
Clark Harrison, at nineteen a survivor,
Never to walk or have a child or be
A senator or governor. Herr Wegner,
Who led his little troop, their standards high
And sabers drawn, against a panzer corps,
Emerging from among the shades at Dachau
Stacked like firewood for someone else to burn;
And Gerd Radomski, listening to broadcasts
Of names, a yearlong babel of the missing,
To find his wife and children. Then they came home,
Near middle age at twenty-two, to find
A new reunion of the church and state,
Cynical Constantines who need no name,
Domestic tranquility beaten to a sword,
Sons wasted by another lie in Asia,
Or Strangeloves they had feared that August day;
And they like runners, stung, behind a flag,
Running within a circle, bereft of joy.

Hearing of the disaster at Sedan
And the retreat worse than the one from Moscow,
Their son among the missing or the dead,
Pasteur and his wife Mary hired a carriage
And, traveling to the east where he might try

His way to Paris, stopping to ask each youth
And comfort every orphan of the state's
Irascibility, found him at last
And, unsurprised, embraced and took him in.
Two wars later, the Prussian, once again
The son of Mars, in Paris, Joseph Meister--
The first boy cured of rabies, now the keeper
Of Pasteur's mausoleum--when commanded
To open it for them, though over seventy,
Lest he betray the master, took his life.

I like to think of Pasteur in Elysium
Beneath the sunny pine of ripe Provence
Tenderly raising black sheep, butterflies,
Silkworms, and a new culture, for delight,
Teaching his daughter to use a microscope
And musing through a wonder--sacred passion,
Practice and metaphysic all the same.
And, each year, honor three births: Valéry,
Humbling his pride by trying to write well,
Mozart, who lives still, keeping my attention
Repeatedly outside the reach of pride,
And him whose mark I witness as a trust.
Others he saves but could not save himself--
Socrates, Galen, Hippocrates--the spirit
Fastened by love upon the human cross.

Edgar Bowers

John

Before he wrote a poem, he learned the measure
That living in the future gives a farm--
Propinquity of mules and cows, the charmed
Insouciance of hens, the fellowship,
At dawn, of seed-time and of harvest-time.
But when high noon gave way to evening, and
The fences lay, bent shadows, on the crops
And pastures to the yellowing trees, he felt
The presences he felt when, over rocks,
Through pools and where it wears the bank, the stream
Ran bright and dark at once, itself its shadow;
And suffered, in all he knew, the antagonists
Related in the Bible, in himself
And every new condition from the beginning,
As in the autumn leaf and summer prime.
Therefore he chose to live the only game
Worthy of repetition, in the likeness
Of someone like himself, a race of which
He was the changing distances and ground,
The runners, and the goal that runs away
Forever into time; or like two players
At odds in white and black, their dignities
Triumphs refused or losses unredeemed.
For the one, that it be ever of the pure
Intention that he witnessed in the high
Stained windows of King's Chapel--ancestral stories,
The old above the new, like pages shining
From an essential book--he taught his mind
To imitate the meditation, sovereign
In verse and prose, of those who shared with him
Intelligence of beauty, good, and truth
As one, unchanging and unchangeable,
Disinterested excitement through a sentence
Their joy and passion. For the other, as
A venturer asleep, he went among
The voiceless and unvisionary many--
Like one who offers blood to know his fate
Or hold his twin again--deep in the midnight
Baths of New Orleans, on its plural beds
And on the secret banks beside its river,
The many who, anonymous as he was,
Uncannily resembled him, appearing
Immortal in a finitude of mirrors.

But when the sudden force of the disease
Tossed him, in a new garment, on the bed
Where he had wakened, mornings, as a child--
Despised by all the neighbors, helpless, blind
And vulnerable to every life, he listened
Intensely to the roosters, mules and cows
As well as to the voices of the desk,
The chair, the books and pictures, pastures and fields,

The tree of every season, the age of seas
And, on its surge, the age of galaxies,
The bells within the spires of Cambridge, bodies
And faces revealed or hidden in the flow,
All that we knew or could imagine joined
Together in the sound the stream flows through
As witness of itself in every change,
Each trusting in its continuities,
All turning in a final radiant shell.
Then, on his darkened eye, he saw himself
A compact disk awhirl, played by the light
He came from and was ready to reenter,
But not before he chose the way to go.
And so it was, before his death, he spoke
The poem that is his best, the final letter
To take to that old country as a passport.

Edgar Bowers

The Mountain Cemetery

With their harsh leaves old rhododendrons fill
The crevices in grave plots' broken stones.
The bees renew the blossoms they destroy,
While in the burning air the pines rise still,
Commemorating long forgotten biers.
Their roots replace the semblance of these bones.

The weight of cool, of imperceptible dust
That came from nothing and to nothing came
Is light within the earth and on the air.
The change that so renews itself is just.
The enormous, sundry platitude of death
Is for these bones, bees, trees, and leaves the same.

And splayed upon the ground and through the trees
The mountains' shadow fills and cools the air,
Smoothing the shape of headstones to the earth.
The rhododendrons suffer with the bees
Whose struggles loose ripe petals to the earth,
The heaviest burden it shall ever bear.

Our hard earned knowledge fits us for such sleep.
Although the spring must come, it passes too
To form the burden suffered for what comes.
Whatever we would give our souls to keep
Is merely part of what we call the soul;
What we of time would threaten to undo

All time in its slow scrutiny has done.
For on the grass that starts about the feet
The body's shadow turns, to shape in time,
Soon grown preponderant with creeping shade,
The final shadow that is turn of earth;
And what seems won paid for as in defeat.

Edgar Bowers

The Poet Orders His Tomb

I summon up Panofskv from his bed
Among the famous dead
To build a tomb which, since I am not read,
Suffers the stone's mortality instead;

Which, by the common iconographies
Of simple visual ease,
Usurps the place of the complexities
Of sound survivors once preferred to noise:

Monkeys fixed on one bough, an almost holy
Nightmarish sloth, a tree
Of parrots in a pride of family,
Immortal skunks, unaromatically;

Some deaf bats in a cave, a porcupine
Quill-less, a superfine
Flightless eagle, and, after them, a line
Of geese, unnavigating by design;

Dogs in the frozen haloes of their barks,
A hundred porous arks
Aground and lost, where elephants like quarks
Ape mother mules or imitation sharks—

And each of them half-venerated by
A mob, impartially
Scaled, finned, or feathered, all before a dry
Unable mouth, symmetrically awry.

But how shall I, in my brief space, describe
A tomb so vast, a tribe
So desperately existent for a scribe
Knowingly of the fashions' diatribe,

I who have sought time's memory afoot,
Grateful for every root
Of trees that fill the garden with their fruit,
Their fragrance and their shade? Even as I do it,

I see myself unnoticed on the stair
That, underneath a clear
Welcome of bells, had promised me a fair
Attentive hearing's joy, sometime, somewhere.

Edgar Bowers

The Stoic: For Laura Von Courten

All winter long you listened for the boom
Of distant cannon wheeled into their place.
Sometimes outside beneath a bombers' moon
You stood alone to watch the searchlights trace

Their careful webs against the boding sky,
While miles away on Munich's vacant square
The bombs lunged down with an unruly cry
Whose blast you saw yet could but faintly hear.

And might have turned your eyes upon the gleam
Of a thousand years of snow, where near the clouds
The Alps ride massive to their full extreme,
And season after season glacier crowds

The dark, persistent smudge of conifers.
Or seen beyond the hedge and through the trees
The shadowy forms of cattle on the furze,
Their dim coats white with mist against the freeze.

Or thought instead of other times than these,
Of other countries and of other sights:
Eternal Venice sinking by degrees
Into the very water that she lights;

Reflected in canals, the lucid dome
Of Maria della Salute at your feet,
Her triple spires disfigured by the foam.
Remembered in Berlin the parks, the neat

Footpaths and lawns, the clean spring foliage,
Where just short weeks before, a bomb, unaimed,
Released a frightened lion from its cage,
Which in the mottled dark that trees enflamed

Killed one who hurried homeward from the raid.
And by yourself there standing in the chill
You must, with so much known, have been afraid
And chosen such a mind of constant will,

Which, though all time corrode with constant hurt,
Remains, until it occupies no space,
That which it is; and passionless, inert,
Becomes at last no meaning and no place.

Edgar Bowers

The Virgin Considered As A Picture

Her unawed face, whose pose so long assumed
Is touched with what reality we feel,
Bends to itself and, to itself resumed,
Restores a tender fiction to the real.

And in her artful posture movement lies
Whose timeless motion flesh must so conceal;
Yet what her pose conceals we might surmise
And might pretend to gather from her eyes

The final motion flesh gives up to art.
But slowly, if we watch her long enough,
The nerves grow subtler, and she moves apart

Into a space too dim with time and blood
For our set eyes to follow true enough,
Or nerves to guess about her, if they would.

Edgar Bowers