

Classic Poetry Series

John Brooks Wheelwright
- poems -

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John Brooks Wheelwright(9 September 1897 - 13 September 1940)

John Brooks Wheelwright was an American poet from a Boston Brahmin background. He belonged to the poetic avant garde of the 1930s and was a Marxist, a founder-member of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party in the United States. He was bisexual.

Wheelwright was descended from the 17th-century clergyman John Wheelwright on his father's side and the 18th-century Massachusetts governor John Brooks on his mother's side. He studied at Harvard University and at Massachusetts Institute of Technology before practising as an architect in Boston. He was editor of the magazine Poetry for a Dime

Come Over And Help Us (A Rhapsody)

I.

Our masks are gauze / and screen our faces for those unlike us only,
Who are easily deceived. / Pierce through these masks to our unhidden tongues
And watch us scold, / scold with intellectual lust; / scold
Ourselves, our foes, our friends; / Europe, America, Boston; and all that is not
Boston; / till we reach a purity, fierce as the love of God; - / Hate.
Hate, still fed by the shadowed source; / but fallen, stagnant fallen;
Sunk low between thin channels; rises, rises; / swells to burst
Its walls; and rolls out deep and wide. / Hate rules our drowning Race.
Any freed from our Tyrant; / abandon their farms, forsake their Country, become
American.

We, the least subtle of Peoples, / lead each only one life at a time, -
Being never, never anything but sincere; / yet we trust our honesty
So little that we dare not depart from it, - / knowing it to need habitual
stimulation.

And living amid a world of Spooks, / we summon another to us
Who is (in some sort) our Clown, - / as he affords us amusement.
O! sweet tormentor, Doubt! longed-for and human, / leave us some plausible
Evil motive, however incredible. / The Hate in the World outside our World
(Envious, malicious, vindictive) / makes our Hate gleam in the splendor
Of a Castrate / who with tongue plucked out; / arms, legs sawed off;
Eyes and ears, pierced through; / still thinks / thinks
By means of all his nutriment, / with intense, exacting Energy, terrible,
consuming.

Madness, we so politely placate / as an every-day inconvenience
We shun in secret. / Madness is sumptuous; Hate, ascetic.
Those only who remain sane, / taste the flavor of Hate.
Strong Joy, we forbid ourselves / and deny large pleasurable objects,
But, too shrewd to forego amusement, / we enjoy all joys which, dying, leave us
teased.

So spare us, sweet Doubt, our tormentor, / the Arts, our concerts, and novels;
The theater, sports, the exotic past; / to use to stave off Madness,
To use as breathing spells, / that our drug's tang may not die.
If with less conviction, / with some result, some end, -
So pure ourselves; so clear our passion; / pure, clear, alone.

II.

The New Englander leaves New England / to flaunt his drab person

Before Latin decors / and Asiatic back-drops.
Wearies. / Returns to life, -life tried for a little while.
A poor sort of thing / (filling the stomach; emptying the bowels;
Bothering to speak to friends on the street; / filling the stomach again;
Dancing, drinking, whoring) / forms the tissue of this fabric.-
(Marriage; society; business; charity; - / Life, and life refused.)

The New Englander appraises sins, / and finds them beyond his means, and
hoards
Likewise, he seldom spends his goodness / on someone ignoble as he,
But, to make an occasion, he proves himself / that he is equally ignoble.
Then he breaks his fast! / Then he ends his thirsting!
He censors the Judge. / He passes judgment on the Censor. / No language is left.
His lone faculty, Condemnation, -condemned. / Nothing is left to say.
Proclaim an Armistice. / Through Existence, livid, void, / let silence flood.

Ask the Silent One your question. / (He is stupid in misery
No more than the talkative man, who talks through his hat.) / Ask the question.
If he replied at all, / it would be to remark that he never could despise
Anyone so much as himself / should he once give way to Self-pity.
A different act of faith is his, - / the white gesture of Humility.
He knows his weakness. / He is well-schooled / and he never forgets the shortest
Title of his Knowledge. / The jailer of his Soul sees Pride. / He sees
Tears, never. / The Silent One is so eaten away
He cannot make that little effort / which surrender to external Fact
Requires, / but looks out always with one wish, - / to realize he exists.

Lo! a Desire! / A Faint motive! / A motive (however faint) beyond
disinterestedness.
Faint. / It is faint. / But the boundary is clear. / Desire, oh desire further!
Past that boundary lies Annihilation / where the Soul
Breaks the monotonous-familiar / and man wakes to the shocking
Unastounded company of other men. / But the Silent One would not pass
Where the Redmen have gone. / He would live without end. That, - / the ultimate
nature of Hell.

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Fish Food (An Obituary To Hart Crane)

As you drank deep as Thor, did you think of milk or wine?
Did you drink blood, while you drank the salt deep?
Or see through the film of light, that sharpened your rage with its stare,
a shark, dolphin, turtle? Did you not see the Cat
who, when Thor lifted her, unbased the cubic ground?
You would drain fathomless flagons to be slaked with vacuum-
The sea's teats have suckled you, and you are sunk far
in bubble-dreams, under swaying translucent vines
of thundering interior wonder. Eagles can never now
carry parts of your body, over cupped mountains
as emblems of their anger, embers to fire self-hate
to other wonders, unfolding white, flaming vistas.

Fishes now look upon you, with eyes which do not gossip.
Fishes are never shocked. Fishes will kiss you, each
fish tweak you; every kiss take bits of you away,
till your bones alone will roll, with the Gulf Stream's swell.
So has it been already, so have the carpers and puffers
nibbled your carcass of fame, each to his liking. Now
in tides of noon, the bones of your thought-suspended structures
gleam as you intended. Noon pulled your eyes with small
magnetic headaches; the will seeped from your blood. Seeds
of meaning popped from the pods of thought. And you fall. And the unseen
churn of Time changes the pearl-hued ocean;
like a pearl-shaped drop, in a huge water-clock
falling; from came to go, from come to went. And you fell.

Waters received you. Waters of our Birth in Death dissolve you.
Now you have willed it, may the Great Wash take you.
As the Mother-Lover takes your woe away, and cleansing
grief and you away, you sleep, you do not snore.
Lie still. Your rage is gone on a bright flood
away; as, when a bad friend held out his hand
you said, 'Do not talk any more. I know you meant no harm.'
What was the soil whence your anger sprang, who are deaf
as the stones to the whispering flight of the Mississippi's rivers?
What did you see as you fell? What did you hear as you sank?
Did it make you drunken with hearing?
I will not ask any more. You saw or heard no evil.

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Paul And Virginia

Nephews and Nieces, -love your leaden statues.
Call them by name; call him 'Paul.' She is 'Virginia.'
He leans on his spade. Virginia fondles a leaden
fledgling in its nest. Paul fondles with his Eyes.
You need no cast in words. You know the Statues,
but not their Lawns; nor words to plant again
the shade trees, felled; ponds, filled, and built over.
Your Garden is destroyed, but there are other Gardens
yet to spare from the destroying Spoor
unseen, save in destructful Acts. Unseen
a hungered Octopus crawls under ground
as Fungus; eats the air as Orchids on all trees;
and on all waters spreads translucent Slime.
Nephews and Nieces, who would breathe sweet Air
and till rich Ground, spy out against its suction;
wither these spreading tentacles, these roots
and radicles of cancerous Greed.

Let us put Paul and Virginia back in the Garden's
warmth of wet Box and Arbor Vitae. The Bell-Tree
a silver shrub from Japan, is grown up Big
like a willow whose Branches nose the Ground. They root
and eat the Earth. They drink deep water springs
while finger twigs fill neighboring winds with silent
tinkles of Petals, blowing on Lilies-of-the-Valley
on Larches, on copper Beeches, urn-like Elms
on Lilies, Iris, Roses walled with Hedges
mirrored on dark waters and, light with fruit trees,
on Peonies abiding in quiet pomp with leaden
Statues in a Garden, alive with Bugs and Toads.
This Garden, sad as a ripe joy is sad (dead Garden)
sheds no perfume of Soil, over a soil-less land.
This dead Garden's seeds take root in children
like the Cherry a young girl swallowed, -Stem,
Meat, and Stone; to bud, to bloom, to fruit
and to house twittering Birds.

In your Mother and Father, much you love is memory;
and much they love in you is memory transplanted

from Gardens of Love, which speak to Love from a dead world to another, and from Death, which speaks to life through love remembered. Nephews and Nieces, -love your Statues, love their names.

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Seed Pods

Where the small heads of violets
are shrunk to smaller skulls,
in meadows where the mind forgets
its bull fights and its bulls;
the dust of violet or rose
relinquishes its scent
and carries with it where it blows
a lessening remnant
of heresies in equipoise
and balanced argument
with which the mind would have refleshed
the flower's skeleton,
but that it found itself enmeshed
in the web of oblivion.
Therefore, when Gabriel sound the horn
and dust rise through the ground,
our flesh shall turn, on our last morn
fleshless as the horn's sound.

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Winter

Rocks cleft and turned to dust reveal
cleft shells to be as stone; and cricket skulls
in powdered light give your quick, analytic mandate:
Un-think these things. Gun-roused at dusk
a cock'll bugle 'Kyrie.' Get the geometry of event.
When your lungs failed at war
my mother pulse of dividends revived.
Other theorems of Truth; of Beauty, other corollary!

As over water when a mill-sluice shuts
film ice twitches between inverted
tendrils and fronds, fronds and tendrils;
your rushing brain lay still.
Our bold-voluted immortality, fallen
 is only rock
-though proud in ruin, piteous in pride-
 Ned. Ned.
Snow on a dome, blown by night wind.

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