

Teaching the Dead

by Joe Weil



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*This book is dedicated to my former students
Micah Tower, Joel Davis, and Adam Pellegrini, without whom
this publication would not exist, and by whom many poets have received support
and encouragement on a poetry scene where support and encouragement are all too often
in short supply.*

Slianthe!

May God bless their children present and future.

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Teaching the Dead

Come, Ma, and I will teach you
how to pray,
now that you're dead,
now that you sweep the grave's floor
with the fringes of your nightgown
and beg the moon for one last
drink.

I will teach you the alphabet
of my body.
This is what we are always doing—
this love
grown outward like a prayer,
this language
that's a necklace of bear's teeth,
a bracelet of whalebone,
this life gone North from the eyes.

We, who are always coming and going,
who are only a little while
here
must dance.

I will teach you
the round stones of memory,
the moist palms in which they hide.
Guess which hand I hold my grief in
and the space will open up between us.

This is a wound that freely opens.
Two coins for your eyes, Ma, two coins
and an old black shoe heel

to toss into the dark street—
the lights just coming on.

The Night Scarring Your Face Oh Little One . . .

For Vallejo

Who can speak of love's channels now?
Night slips like dock rope
through our hands.
And what pulls us always outward into prayer?

We kneel and the dark swings wide
creaks and winches, to a thunder of roses.
We kneel and all time stirs
fowl flustered, fox of our hearts
devouring it.

Sea is a tail
moon pulls
sea is fox devouring time
and you?
Your heart is a sea, gray fox,
gray tail,
and your bark
anchors the earth to its shadows.

Tender Mercies

In the land of imprecise metaphor,
a man has no refuge.
The stars hiss obscenities over his telephone.
A young woman wanders naked
through the burning of his brain cells,
asking the question:
Who tacked the cosmology
to my porcelain forehead?

Everywhere, deceit,
and the slim hips of
an irretrievable childhood.
Yet take comfort, take cheer.
The violins do not disown us.
The mind saunters out
in the weedy dark.
A voice cries in the wilderness,
Johnny Ray! Johnny Ray!
And, even now, tender mercies
are attempting to reach us,
floating like million dollar bugs
at the tops of burning trees.

Poem with Lamb and Potatoes

“There is a struggle,” Braque asserted,
“between the idea—the picture as
pre-conceived in advance—
and the picture that fights
for its own life.”

“I can’t breathe,” says the lady
in the Portuguese restaurant.

She’s talking to her husband
or her lover
the implication being he’s the reason
she can’t breathe.

“The picture must win over the idea
of the picture,” Braque said,
“or both die.”

I am considering lamb
with Portuguese potatoes
I am considering cod
or tile fish
or the terrible crushed velvet
seascape full of
panda-eyed gulls.

The woman is beautiful
in a red-nostriled, brittle,
English sort of way.
I think how, if I was her lover,
I'd help her to breathe.

“Space,” chalked the visiting poet,
“and how to violate it.”

“I don't understand,” says the lover
with genuine dismay.

The Portuguese waiter
is efficient, correct,
possessed of high Gaelic
and Germanic virtues,
annoying,
and, yes, I will have the garlic shrimp appetizer,
and, yes, I will have a pitcher of Blue Sangria.

“Release the poetic transformation,” wrote the critic
“latent in the subject matter.”

Bad lighting
collects on the high widow's peaked forehead
of our beautiful and unbreathing woman.
It forms there like the garish host of light
in Hoffman's Jesus.

I notice her eyes have a certain wide open and limpid
stupidity, a roundness endemic to Disney cartoons,
an atavistic bigness evolved to trigger protective
instincts on the part of lesser animals.
I'm not falling for it.

But fifteen minutes into my lamb
(It is good), she begins to weep.

This is an almost somber place
where even a red wine stain
on the white linen table cloth
screams.

Her sobs, like Milton's poetics
cover vast distances in time and space.
They enlist the full throttle
of her nose and throat.
They offer up her lungs to God.
They take into account the
last ten years of her life,
the despair of winter,
the false promise of spring.
They are beyond, I believe,
the machinations of our finest
anti-depressives.

The husband/lover is visibly upset
Invisibly, he is choking the life
out of her,
singing the appropriate music
from Verdi's Otello.

Her jagged shards of grief
are ruining the waiter's efficiency.
They are dismembering the restaurant's
admirable calm in which
we have all, until now,
been wallowing.
"Break the pentameter," suggested Pound.

The lamb is delicious but
only a convenient excuse
for the sauce
which I sop up with fat cumulus clouds
of Portuguese corn bread.

Outside, the sky has turned the color
of the Virgin's robes
in Raphael's Ascent of the Virgin.

The robes are, to my mind,
the best aspect of that particular work, as Braque's billiard table
becomes a study in
the geometry of disaffected planes,
as dusk becomes night,
as Blue Raphael yields to Muddy Rembrandt,
I leave the restaurant squinting, a mole
in the sudden dark,
unable to find my car,
lost like the Morton salt box girl
in a universe of salt,
realizing I haven't touched a woman, or an original thought
in thirteen years.

Dandelions

Gone to seed gone to
gosling, old lady fuzz,
gone from the bright
yellow,
gone things—ugly stalk
and spores I kick

with my work boot
to watch the seeds
explode—the violence

with which I kick the dandelions,
the tenacious, imperturbable
bane of lawn love.

I love no lawn. I love
these wasted, little hags
I kick.

They are mine. They are mine:
They are the old bitches
at 6 o'clock mass

Who always and never die.
Someone's granmah I hoist
on the steel toe of my boot.

I kick her to the moon.
She cries: Touch me.
The things of this world

cry touch me. The things
of this world cry
dandelion.

Prayer

In what cannot be fixed
made whole again
in what will not suffice
the inadequate thing, the broken body
in this, oh Lord, my God,
in this,
my heart like a box of
defective watches,
my ego the size of Maine,
my anger, and loss, and lust,
in this please come, abide,
sit with me at the table of my sins
and breathe Your Word.

Were You A Man – Ever, Ever, Ever?

Sort out the singular from the plural.
Neural paths, the cheerful mural
at the train station—certified public art

this brain, this fired kiln
must part a sea and go
wherever it feels:
compelled to glaze.
frost of the living, mute hunger of days

it must
somehow mean again
though not the same meaning,
not different, either,

I hear the passer by remark
my son is an under achiever
and the wind stings the child's face,
and his mother's good legs:

To be talked about, to be talked about
is the capacity to rise
somehow—mistranslated
into being

a cheerful mural
of unhappy children

a synapse, a neuron firing
off
were you a man—ever, ever, ever?
her legs still too quick, the stride
making you run beside her.
Feel how she yanks you along
feel the socket of your arm
being pulled and nearly breaking,

feel the unloved, and indifferent hand.

Haiku Salt Mines

The past
and all its adjectives.
This snow covered log. This wet ass.

Copper pots
hung from a loose nail.
Everything, getting ready to fall.

The engine seized.
The check bounced.
Danced in the snow covered parking lot.

Many years ago
granmah dipping a spoon
into a soft boiled egg.

One rabbit.
One evil landlord.
A single bullet.

Sweet gum leaves,
red, black, yellow, orange,
why sweep them up?

Satin sheets.
Attempting to fuck,
the knees slip.

The glass Dolphin
struck by one more snow flake
shatters.

Singing into a fan,
Summer, voice
chopped—ten fingers of sound.

In a car,
my hand on your knee
my brain somewhere else.

Atop the flood wall
a single dandelion
and an enormous used condom.

Picking blackberries
until against the bucket
not a sound.

Dean Martin on YouTube.
Outside, a thousand stars.
Somewhere between them.

Watching an old
Hercules movie, mouth moving
long after the words are said.

Me Ma died. Me Dad Died.
All aunts, all uncles dead
This piss is for them!

Taking a piss in the sea.
Pitch dark vital boom
of unseen waves.

Roar family! Trickle in
ye bastards! White glow
of my sneakers.

The apple orchards
in bloom. A white fire
in the moonless fields.

Shopping cart in river.
Ice along its edge,
muskrat slithers out.

The way she kissed me—
holding her hair from her face
not even trying.

Dead Ground Hog Lust Haiku

41.

Dead Ground Hog,
lightly, carefully,
the black toe of her heel

42.

Dead Ground Hog,
Where's Gerald Stern
when you really need him?

43.

Dead Ground Hog,
wind bristling through corn husks,
through fur.

44.

Dead Ground Hog
Crow hears the truck
before I do.

45.

Dead Ground Hog,
her high heels,
her black stockinged legs.

46.

Dead Ground Hog.

Lust and road kill.

Feigning sorrow. Sincerely love
her ass.

47.

Dead Ground Hog.

Venus rises

through shadows

of Pin Oaks.

48.

Dead Ground Hog.

squeezing her ass,

before getting back

in the car.

49.

Dead Ground Hog.

Long ride homeward.

Wind shield wipers

break.

50.

Dead Ground Hog.

Her asleep. My hand dreaming

on her thigh.

Minute by Minute

1.

Smiling: her left cheek dimpled—
only one cheek
and the black curve of her hair

2.

Googling caribou
late at night,
a pile of dirty dishes.

3.

Rain.
in the puddle on the floor:
one moth with a death wish.

4.

Wind has blown down leaves—
orange and gold—
carp rise.

5.

Striking bamboo before night
Rutgers gardens,
whoosh of ten thousand starlings.

6.

All the pears fallen except
one, half rotted,
orbited by a bee.

7.

Foregrounded against red mountains
the pissed off nurse
fumbles for her keys

8.

At swamp's edge,
cold night air, a few crickets
no swallows

9.

Sick of haiku,
the young girl picks her nose
and yawns

10.

Swings in a playground,
late at night. The wind
pushes her children.

11.

A goose trips
over a garden hose
buried in dead leaves. Keeps walking.

12.

A dead bee still clings
to the golden rod, stiff
with the first frost.

13.

The lake has forgotten
how to be a lake.
It can't swim.

14.

Back from the dentist
she touches her cheek
dead leaf tangled in her hair.

15.

Twelve o'clock siren blows
above church steeples
in pools of rain.

16.

Maple leaf
floats down. The moving van's
swallows a grand piano.

17.

Overdrawn at the bank.
blue sky. the infinite distance
between this and this.

18.

Eating candy corn,
having forgotten
I don't like it.

19.

Thirty one degrees.
taking a leisurely piss
in the neighbor's forsythia.

20.

Waking up
with an erection. Going
to bed with a book.

21.

Rain on a tin roof.
Bong on a Formica table.
Lots of coughing.

22.

At the mass,
the altar boy rings the bell.
Makes me hungry.

23.

The Goethals bridge,
sleeping in its shadow.
thirty years ago. Today.

24.

Finding a cigarette butt
almost unsmoked.
Port Authority, 5 am.

25.

My feet hurt.

My socks hurt.

I repair my rosary.

26.

To say the Hail Mary

over and over.

The miracle of beer.

27.

Around Tompkins Square

1989, Rents and nightsticks rise.

same fucking thing.

28.

The graves of the poor

filled with losing lottery tickets

and all my relatives.

29.

The dog

chasing it's tail

loses the yard.

30.

Everything that was unbearable

forgotten for

An orange chimney pot. A blue sky.

In Another Life

Suffering builds character, she said.
I hadn't suffered yet, so I took her word for it,

I waited and the days past.
A tit mouse in the thorny locust
could send me into transports.

Doing nothing never bored me..
I could watch the world until it disappeared
and all that remained was the intensity of my stare.

I watched how she drank one cup of black coffee, then another,
I watched her chain smoking chesterfield kings,
And the way she wept
When we couldn't pay the oil man
And for three days our family slept in the kitchen,
The stove on five hundred degrees

I thought this communal sleep was the best of things,
All the people I loved
gathered in one place,
huddled under blankets,
warm in the stove's dark maw
with it's one blue fang of flame.

I heard her in the middle of night.
What will we do?
And when granmah paid the bill,
And let her know her choice in men was suspect,

She cried some more
And I said: “you’re a mean old witch”
To my grandmother
And my mother slapped me
Sent me reeling into the sofa.

And then I knew
This woman with the prettiest green eyes,
Who seemed a goddess to me
I knew what suffering did, to her
How it stole her eyes from the thorny locust,
Made the tit mouse beside the point.
“I hate you” I shouted.
“I wish you were dead,”
and she took me in her arms,
saying “shush, shush,”
and my grandmother stood there
sick of the melodrama.
“Don’t baby that rude little boy.
That’s his trouble.
You’ve spoiled him”

And I ran out of the house
And pressed my face against the locust thorns
Until I bled,
And all that time my character was building,
Building towards
Her death at the age of fifty, and my father’s death,
And the stubborn love of my eyes
That had no purpose but to stare,

And I remember this poem by Jimenez
and it is my poem
and it's my only revolution:
How I am like a child they
drag through the fiesta of the world,
my eyes cling madly to things,
and what misery when I am torn away.

Dead Things

That rooster I found on the
tenth floor of the Fairmount Luxury Apartments,
just wandering around in the hall,
Rhode Island Red, fierce,
and coming towards me with his spurs...

How did he get there?

Or the time I was struck in the back of the head
by a pineapple that had somehow
been catapulted from a truck,
and I woke ten minutes later,
with a beautiful Egyptian woman
leaning over me,
her breath smelling miraculously
of coconuts, the intense sadness of her eyes,
not for me, but for every humiliated
and half-hazard thing:

What is it?

And how do I know she was Egyptian?

I must have asked her, or perhaps misremembering
is a form of prayer

What have I not misremembered
so that even your hand, beloved,
resting on mine, now,
and tracing the pale blue vein
just below the knuckle
dissolves into a vast mistake,

a fen of almost-theres
that are never just so
just so this hour of being real—

the cup, the long ago voices
of family,
the sobs I hear come out from my own throat—

this animal that walks away from inside me,
this thing I have sought to kill,

my spurs slicing the air, my crown
of feathers bristling as I rage,
my life out of place, and not

my life at all.

Prison Break

My hand went up your dress
like a well respected character actor—not
by any means, a star,
but certainly no mean slouch
in this affair.

He was crawling on his belly,
under the sickle of lights
that swathed the death camp,
knowing full well a rain of bullets might ensue
if he was caught trying to escape
from my unhappiness.

When he reached the forest beyond
the prison camp's perimeter,
he did a little dance of joy,
jiggling his appendages
such as they were want to jiggle,
savoring the wet undergrowth,
the musky eglantine, tripping on a
root here or there, but
more or less, unhindered on his way,
glad to escape the land
of extended metaphor, glad to leap
into unknown fields of hay.
And that's when I heard the Nightingale
break into trills of ecstatic song
at his long delayed arrival,
and I kissed your throat,
and rejoiced that all was forgiven,

that all was one, that my hand knew
our fumblings were not in vain,
that we had only been preparing for this hour
to slip happily, and happily unimpeded
towards the climax of the flick.

A Lot of Couplets Which Treat of the Joys of Life Long Frustration

You can make a good life out of
never getting what you really want.

You can go to the store and,
if they don't have Swiss, you eat cheddar.

If the girl you love goes to the prom
with your best friend Ethelred,

and taunts you by being genuinely happy
in his well toned Ethelred arms,

while the "fuck me, I'm barefoot" song
of the year plays and the gym lights throb,

and you're there with Ethelred's cousin, Patrice,
a girl from Belgrade who would be pretty

if she didn't have a mustache, then you can
let your left hand brush Patrice's ass soothingly

while staring at Bianca, and trying hard
not to despise Ethelred, who is tall and slim,

but not as clever (or as smart) as you are, and you can
"make the best of things"

and thank God you are not a quadriplegic,
though, somehow, this gratitude tastes bitter

like absinthe, like the thousand compromises
you have already made in order not to become

a border ballad in which you shoot Bianca and Ethelred dead
and ride off to some lonely swamp on a black steed,

from which you occasionally venture after that
to save damsels, and play your guitar mournfully.

See what I mean? Calmly, calmly, frustration
turns into a smooth round stone

you hurl at the giant shadow of your failure
to ever have what you really want:

Swiss cheese, and Bianca naked and panting
in your king sized bed while all the stars

gather above you and sing something tragic
in middle English. And why can't you have

what you really want? Who rigged this game?
Who cried, "snake eyes!" over your cradle?

who made it so hard to be alive
that, sometimes, in the middle of the bar-b-que

as you are holding the spatula down against
the 100 percent grade A beef patty

you want to run away from your ranch house
into the woods, naked, your body bloodied

by brambles and thorns, and curse God
and all the four winds, and live as a hairy beast,

devouring the rich and sparing the fucked up poor
until the one true, pure, bright object of your affections

faints in the general vicinity of your hovel so that
you must take her in your beastly arms,

and nurse her back to health and a single kiss
from her berry lips frees you from the dream

and you stand, blest before the covenant,
the meat being striped by the grill

in your happy orange daddy polo shirt,
smiling at the woman you love who is

putting the potato salad down on the pick-nick table
even now as I write this, and looking at you with a

boy I am going to let you fuck me senseless tonight sort of
gaze, as your three beautiful children frolic about the yard,

and the youngest drops her hot dog on the lawn and screams
until you pick her up in your arms and laughing

like a ten minute documentary on the
joys of Christian values, you swing her

above your head, high above your head
where all the fun is.

Cricket Hour

I've come a long way
just to hear the crickets

come stumbling through
underbrush and underman

the slow factory death of my father,
my mother's chain linked cigarettes.

Often I had no goal
except to be gentle in my indirection.

No juggernaut's soul was mine.
Moving forward is

a contradiction in turns.
And what did I know of holy ground?

Tonight, longing shakes the trees—
Catalpas and Red Oaks.

The Catalpa pods are heavy with seed.
They hiss gently as I pass.

Rain down, O cricket gods.
Rain down on the living and dead.

Renew the life deafened ear.
Beyond desire there is

only more desire. The holy
is continuation of the text.

I walk through the book longing to be
read, discerned—by a tuned wing in the grass.

All the Fucked-Up Things I Did Just To Stay Alive

There was the time in seventh grade, oh heavenly boredom!,
when I took a protractor
and pierced my skin, wanting to see just exactly
how much pressure was needed
to put the point into my vein,

to draw out blood, not much, just a
little welling forth—one drop, perhaps, the precision
of blood letting,

but it was an artery. And what the fuck did I know?
And, with every beat of my heart,
blood geyser forth to baptize
Barbara Wallace's history text, page 208—
the glory of Tyre, and I was sent down to the nurse,

all of Sister Irene's board rags soaked, Barbara fainting,
my mother called in and advised to get me "help."

I touched the collar bone of a girl I loved
who didn't love me, traced her bone with my fingers
delicately along that terrain.
I didn't know why she let me.
I don't know why I did—
eyes closed, knowing life would not
get any easier, any happier after this.

It seemed right, perfect,
the hardness of bone under

sixteen year old skin.

It was a truth I could accept:

that there was a place where things stopped being soft.

I play the piano now with eyes clenched,

do not so much hear as feel the music,

the warm animal of my soul

which I have butchered , and disgraced,

rising up to forgive me,

my fingers the hair of Mary,

always at his feet, always

kissing him with the kisses of her mouth.

How many times did I drink until the night drank me,
spit me back—sick, soul and body, hand and eye?

All the fucked up things I did, just to stay alive,
what I have had to touch, what I have had to know—

the names on graves, the sunken letters of my own name,

the W my index finger follows

all the way to the clod of dirt in L,

taking out my pen knife, to scrape

the letter clean, the dead more present than the living

all who have gone, all who have died marked

with the sign of faith, so that my hands

are clean only here- smooth with dirt, filthy with God,

and the body of my mother, and of my father,

and the cold water of the cistern as I fill

the canister in which I have placed some lilacs,

this sprig I break, purple, the glory of Tyre,
the Phoenicians of whom Barbara was reading
when I pierced the mother load, and baptized

that lazy spring afternoon with my blood—

the protractor casting its precise shadow on my desk,
Archimedes, the geometry of abstract forms,

all that was certain, all that could be fixed

to a point, disbursed, so that I might live
testing the limits of flesh—

A Dream Of Elephants

Suppose someone kissed my ears tenderly,
ignoring those lynx-like tufts of hair
peculiar to men who have to work hard
at being loved,
and she said: Awww... my little Savannah dust,

would I smile?

The years go by. That's what years do.
They go by, and the tusks grow long,
and my ears remain unmolested.

I am lonely in super markets.
Once, when I was young...
(it's enough to say that to make a room grow empty).

Once, when I was young,
I dreamed I was a man with
a pimple in the middle of my forehead
the size of Greece,

and I was in a vast Catholic school gym
cleaning up after Saturday night bingo,
and all the old people lay there dead,
as if a sniper had entered the room
and shot them cleanly through the head.

Tenderly, I placed bingo chips
on all their eyes to pay their boat fare over Lethe

or was it the river Jordan? Anyway,
I knelt reverently over each—

the fat lady with the pill box hat,
the old and gentle closet queen
who had never married and who danced
the cha-cha with all the other men's wives.

It was so peaceful there.
I wanted to lay down
and place chips over my own eyes
and wait for Gabriel's horn to blow
but God said: "No!"

And when I rose, I saw the elephants!

There were hundreds, gamboling about,
swirling dust, defecating on the corpses
of third degree knights,
doing what elephants supposedly do.

I was not afraid.
At a certain point in life,
anything can happen to you and it does.

They sang to me telepathically:

"Lay down your weary head. Lay down."

It was an old hymn. It was beautiful.
After a certain point, you don't care anymore,
and the cheap songs seem no longer cheap,

and you start to believe them all.

My old ninth grade English teacher showed up.
“Joseph, why so many ands?”

I explained I was in love with the conjunctive,
with the bridge between the living
and the dead.

“You will have it hard,” she said
and disappeared.

I woke then with a stiff neck, a stiff conscience,
a stiff dick. I was stiff, an old man
clutching at his dreams.
I have always been old.
I have always stared at lawns, or lakes, or women
as though they were waving goodbye.

What does not wave goodbye?
Who does not stand at the shore of grief
raising a cherished arm?

I cherish all thy arms.
I call you thou.
I wait for the voice to whisper:
“My little Savannah dust”

I am drinking too much amaretto.
It must wax as the coffee wanes.
It is Sunday and I am drunk.
The hour has come
and will keep on coming. The years go by.

That's what years do. They go by,
and who would I not shoot
for tenderness?

And who would I not exalt
in the shadows of my body?

In the middle of an elephant's skull
I have placed a ruby.
The field I have bought
at a great price is overgrown.
I like the weeds. I have forgotten the pearl!

Chicory, sweet Timothy, Queen Anne's lace,
efface the greed in me. The pearl is this poverty
towards which I rise—this naught I am.
This is my heaven.
Bring forth the herd!
Have them trumpet my arrival.

I have come to bless the weeds
to sing the wound. It is fresh. And it never heals.
I have come among the elephants
to raise the shadow of a tree, to fix it
strong against the sky.
Then, tenderly, my eyes will let it go.

Love Poem for My Mother, Clare

Why should a chipmunk bring you back,
or the solemn throb of lightning
without the thunder's sound,
or, treading on thin ice,
that odd familiar crack,
I loved as a child and risked my life to hear?

Come to me now, if only as some pain
my stealthy soul keeps longing to decode,
to see your son—bald, unsettled, vain,
a man who trips on pants cuffs, laces, love,

and shake your finger or hide your face for shame,
but come—rise from the pantry's onion skins,
and only speak the fullness of my name,
then who would care for losses, or for wins?

There's not a loss or win enough to raise
you from the dead. Forgive my greed.
I should be satisfied to stumble on
and find you at odd hours: stone or weed,

snow covered, random, in some sudden thing
that, for no reason, brings my grieving back
as sharp as when you died, that brings you here
where I'm as old as you were when you left.

Star light, star bright, whatever may suffice.
Look Mah! I'm dancing! And the world is ice.



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He lives in Binghamton with his occasional cat, Rex. More or less.