#13

--a dream
we dreamed
each
separately
we two

of love
and of
desire--

that fused
in the night--

in the distance
over
the meadows
by day
impossible--
The city
disappeared
when
we arrived--

A dream
a little false

toward which
now
we stand
and stare
transfixed--

All at once
in the east
rising!
All white!

(from "Perpetuum Mobile:The City")

W C W

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: All art is sensual. Listen! Never mind, don't try to work it out. Listen to it! Let it come to you! Sit back, relax, let the thing spray in your face.... Hi, open up a dozen! What ya trying to do, charge your batteries? Make it two. Easy girl, yer going to blow a fuse if you keep that up! Why don't ya bring me a good ladder? One with lots a money in it. I can make use of it. Atta boy, atta boy!

MARJORIE PERLOFF (Critic): What makes Williams such a great poet is that he does speak about and to ordinary people.

HUGH KENNER (Scholar): Why is any great poet a great poet? A great poet is one who makes a difference to the art of poetry. I think it's as simple as that. And he made more difference to American poetry than anyone other than Walt Whitman.

ALLEN GINSBERG (Poet): In Williams' autobiography, in its forward, he tips us off as to his own nature and the role of Eros in his writing, the role of frankness and candor. He says, "I am extremely sexual in my desires. I carry them everywhere and at all times. I think that from that arises the drive which empowers us all."

JAMES LAUGHLIN (Publisher): For my part, I was expecting to meet a doctor. I'd heard from Pound that Williams was a baby doctor, a pediatrician. And that I saw immediately was true. Because the little house where he lived on Ridge Road there was a sign, "W.C. Williams, M.D.," and there was -- his wife fetched him out of the office to see me when I called, and it was clear that he was an

authentic doctor.

DR. ROBERT COLES (Author): And I remember after we'd leave some of those apartment houses, we'd be going down those stairs, and he'd say, did you hear this, did you hear that? Or we'd get into that car of his, and he'd scribble little words, and I'd say, what is he doing? And at times you'd feel this man is just too much, as we put it these days. Too much. Well he was too much. But he never missed a trick. And all that stuff would come home, either in his head or on pieces of paper, and we know what happened in the evening: he'd assemble it.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: I'm an artist if I am anything at all, until I take the American language as I find it. No one believes that poetry can exist in his own life, but everything in our lives, if it is sufficiently authentic to our lives and touches us deeply enough, is capable of being organized into a form which can be a poem.

MARJORIE PERLOFF: Between 1900 and World War I, which to me is the key period -- so let's say when Williams was about twenty years old, you have the invention of not only the airplane and that the automobile really became ubiquitous, you had high-speed trains, you had the Marconi radio, you had for the first time the possibility of beaming radio beams around the world -- therefore you could simultaneously be in two places at once. It just means that the world probably changed more quickly at the beginning of the century, certainly than since. I don't think we've had in the twentieth century anything like the kind of acceleration that you have in the years before 1914. It's just an amazing period. Now, how does that affect a poet like Williams? The

sheer technology is everywhere in his work, beginning with the typewriter. If you compose on the typewriter, you're obviously going to perceive very differently than if you write by hand. The look on the page becomes very very important. But it's not only the look on the page, it's the whole feel of short fast movement.

HUGH KENNER: One thing that Williams is trying to do is make the making a poem seem like an American activity. Americans have no problems with spending their lives putting machines together. Detroit was founded on that premise. He saw no reason why you couldn't think of putting poems together in the same way. His habit of typing and retyping is connected with his idea that the poem is a thing made. It is made out of small parts; it is made out of lines; it is made out of phrases. He would retype sometimes the same words five or six times, the difference being that he broke the lines in different places. And he needed to live with it a while to decide if it was right or not. And he would decide it wasn't right. And he would retype it again with a word that had been at the end of the line moved to the beginning of the next line, and then he would live with that for a while.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: It's what you do with the work of art. It's what you put on the canvas and how you put it on that makes the picture. It's how the words fit in. Poems are not made of thoughts, beautiful thoughts, it's made of words, pigments, put on, here, there, made, actually.

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HUGH KENNER: First of all, you cannot imagine anybody saying that. You cannot imagine it being said. The second thing is, you

cannot devise a way to say it that sounds plausible.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

("The Red Wheelbarrow")

HUGH KENNER: For Williams, the poem sitting on the page is a visual object, and the way it sits on the page does not necessarily tell you anything about how to read it. You particularly don't pause at the ends of the lines to indicate where the lines end. Because if you do that you disrupt it totally. It's not like Shakespeare: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?/ Thou art more lovely and more temperate," where the lines are the units of thought and you pause after them, they're the units of utterance. The Williams line is not a unit of utterance. The unit of utterance sometimes runs all the way down the page.

MARJORIE PERLOFF: Here was a man who had a kind of energy, really sexual energy, but energy that wasn't always, he didn't know quite how to channel. Because one of the main the main tensions I see in Williams' work is the tension between that sexual energy and desire, and fear and safety.

At ten a.m. the young housewife
moves about in negligee behind
the wooden walls of her husband's house.
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb
to call the ice-man, the fish-man, and stands
shy, uncorseted, tucking in
stray ends of hair, and I compare her
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car
rush with a crackling sound over
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

("The Young Housewife")

DR. WILLIAM ERIC WILLIAMS (The Poet's Son): (In consultation with child) How about if I push it down like that? Does that hurt?

HUGH KENNER: His son is a pretty good writer. I don't think he realizes it. His memoirs of his father are masterpieces of exact factual observation, and they bear out an old theory of mine that the best thing that ever happened to Stevens was being an medical student because he was always being taught to observe. That is a medical discipline. The observing of the absolutely commonplace. Looking at the patient's two hands and seeing if they match.

DR. WILLIAM ERIC WILLIAMS: Okay, let's see the other foot. I don't care. I like to see feet. Put this one up. I suspect he got a bite, but what bit him I don't know.... My father and I both practiced in the golden age of medicine, and I think that in the years I've been practicing there's been a big change in the charac-

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ter of the practice in the small town, the small community. The practice we've had in this community, traditionally the doctor went to the home.

They call me and I go.
It is a frozen road
past midnight, a dust
of snow caught
in the rigid wheeltracks
The door opens.
I smile, enter and
shake off the cold.
Here is a great woman
on her side in the bed.
She is sick,
perhaps vomiting,
perhaps laboring
to give birth to
a tenth child. Joy! Joy!
Night is a room
darkened for lovers,
through the jalousies the sun
has sent one gold needle!
I pick the hair from her eyes
and watch her misery
with compassion.

("Complaint")

DR. ROBERT COLES: He used medicine as a means of getting in contact with a particular kind of population. He could have had another kind of practice. He could have ultimately ended up being a society doctor or a literary doctor with a few literary patients in Manhattan. But he didn't cross that river. He stayed in New Jersey, and stayed with the people whose lives he tended. And I think that was part of his life from the very beginning.

DR. WILLIAM ERIC WILLIAMS: (Browsing through photographs) This is the young man on the steps of the old office, around 1917. That's this house before it was altered to accommodate my new offices. There's the young fellow, the new doctor, taken in Philadelphia. This is my mother, Flossie, another picture taken in Rutherford, I would guess that's her high school graduation picture. Mother and Dad, passport picture taken in I would guess '21. Here's Dad, in later years, when I married; there's the great grandmother Wellcome as a younger woman. One of the maids, Elsie, I believe, worked here for a couple years. I don't know where she went, back to the orphanage or what. This is this room, 9 Ridge Road, with a stand-up piano, Mom at the keyboard and Pa Herman in the corner, his rocking chair. He always sat in a rocking chair. The house isn't the same as when I grew up as a kid. We've changed it around since I'm the resident here. But this painting on the wall is something that's been there since the forties, done by my cousin Ivan. These bedrooms, the master bedroom was here in the corner, and this was Dad's study. It's not furnished as it was when he was alive, but the four walls are still here, the closet's the same, some of the fixtures have been changed. His desk sat here. On this wall where this bookcase now stands there was a painting that mother greatly disliked. It was Marsden Hartley. It was a rather suggestive painting and she insisted he get rid of it. So they gave it to the museum.

If when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,--
if I in my north room

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If when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc
in silken mists
above shining trees,--
if I in my north room

dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
"I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!"
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,--

Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?

("Danse Russe")

DR. WILLIAM ERIC WILLIAMS: Now I'll take you up in the attic, show you where he had a part-time studio for many years, and where he did writing, summer and winter. He had a telephone line run up here to wind up. The stuff on the walls was his. He put it there. Great variety. You've got the record of the stock market from '28 to '32, including the great crash. And incidentally, a poem, where he found it. It reads, "I'm just a little prairie flower/ Growing wilder hour by hour./ Nobody ever cultivates me./ I'm wild."

JAMES LAUGHLIN: Well, Williams was born in the same town in which he lived all his life. In 1883 the actual house where he was born was I think a few blocks from 9 Ridge Road, where he later lived and had his practice. But he was there all his life, and this of course was one of his great strengths, that he was an intimate part of an authentic American community.

MARJORIE PERLOFF: He was the quintessential American poet in that his father was English, of old English stock, the mother,

born in Puerto Rico, was Basque, part Basque, part Jewish. Mixed Mediterranean French stock, and so when his parents came to the United States and settled in Rutherford, it was such a mixture of different religious and ethnic groups, and they wanted to be the perfect immigrants. So they joined the Unitarian Church. She dropped her Catholicism; he dropped his Anglicanism. They became charter members of the Unitarian Church, which meant being teetotalers, and meant doing all the right things and living in the right kind of house. And the father worked very hard, and the idea was to better yourself, and it's the perfect immigrant experience.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: So they came here, or came to New York, moved to Rutherford, and here I was born. And that's the way it begins. I have one brother; we were both born here.

JAMES LAUGHLIN: Now he went -- I think he went to grade school just here in Rutherford, but then when he was about fourteen he and his brother were sent to a very fine school, Le Chateau de Lancy on Lake Geneva in Switzerland. And this was a real opening out for him, because he saw and experienced all sorts of things that you couldn't find in New Jersey. And many of these things remained with him all of his life. So that this was most important, this stage at the school in Switzerland, though it was only one year. Then after that he returned to Rutherford, and one of the best high schools at that time was the Horace Mann School -- I think it was up near Columbia or somewhere in New York.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: My brother and I commuted from here, taking the Chambers Street Ferry, walking up Chambers or Warren Street,

taking the 6th or 9th Avenue El, riding up to 116th or 125th Street and walking up Morningside Heights and getting to Horace Mann High School in time for the nine o'clock bell. It was quite a little stunt.

JAMES LAUGHLIN: But it paid off in his getting a very good English and some Latin, no Greek, education.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: I had some very good English teachers at Horace Mann. There was an Uncle Billy Abbott. And I believe that Uncle Billy Abbott was the first one who really, who really led me toward English, toward writing, toward the satisfaction of externalizing my sorrows and distresses. And I think that's the basis for my continued interest in writing.

When I am alone I am happy.
The air is cool. The sky is
flecked and splashed and wound
with color. The crimson phalloi
of the sassafras leaves
hang crowded before me
in shoals on the heavy branches.
When I reach my doorstep
I am greeted by
the happy shrieks of my children
and my heart sinks.
I am crushed.

Are not my children as dear to me
as falling leaves or
must one become stupid
to grow older?
It seems much as if Sorrow
had tripped up my heels.
Let us see, let us see!

What did I plan to say to her
when it should happen to me
as it has happened now?

("Waiting," read by Allen Ginsberg)

JAMES LAUGHLIN: There was I think definitely this split in Williams' life. He was devoted to his wife Flossie and his family as the two boys came along, but at the same time there was always this urge to have a little liberation from the climate of middle-class Rutherford. So he struck a kind of compromise. He had his life in Rutherford, but he would also go into New York Friday evenings or weekends, and there he could meet with writers, and a lot of artists, people such as the painters Charles Demuth and Marsden Hartley and Charles Sheeler. Williams also met the poets who were circled around OTHERS magazine. And they helped him a lot to modernize his poetry, you see, because when he first met them he was writing Keatsian poetry.

MARJORIE PERLOFF: Williams' first books of poems in 1909, of which only a hundred copies were printed, is written in the dominant genteel style of the period. I think it's very important to know what that style was just to see how rapidly and amazingly Williams moved away from that style:

Sweet lady, sure it seems a thousand years
Since last you honored me with gentle speech.
Yet when forsaking fantasy I reach
With memory's index o'er the stretching tears
Of minutes wasted counting, as who fears
Strict chiding reason, lest it should impeach
All utterance must, a mighty gaping breach
Twixt truth and seeming verity appears.

Now, you see how contorted the syntax is there? The sentences are so long you lose track of them as I'm reading them out loud. They're all convoluted, they're inverted with clauses coming first and subordinate clauses, the kind of thing Williams never did later. This was the going style in America in 1909.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

("The Red Wheelbarrow")

MARJORIE PERLOFF: He clearly remade himself, and there were really no examples that Williams could turn to, at least very few examples. I think the art world became his example out of lack of other examples.

DICKRAN TASHJIAN (Historian): Because Williams was interested in the visual arts. After all he painted his self-portrait the following year. He did visit the 1913 Armory Show, and he did see Marcel Duchamp's scandalous "Nude Descending a Staircase." Americans, when they thought about art, if they did indeed think about art at all, thought that art should be instructive, that it should instruct us in the highest ideals and motives of life. That art should somehow reflect the purity of life and it should have perhaps even a religious

message. They were not prepared for the sort of art that they saw at the Armory Show. They didn't understand what they were looking at, and I think they were threatened by what they saw.

MARJORIE PERLOFF: Williams describes in his autobiography how he went and just laughed and laughed, he thought it was just wonderful. He saw Cezannes and Picassos and Braques and he just felt his life had really begun. Because he realized here was something that was what he wanted to do, namely to deal with words as words just as these people were dealing with paint as paint and not representing something.

Among
of
green

stiff
old
bright

broken
branch
come

white
sweet
May

again

("The Locust Tree in Flower")

DR. ROBERT COLES: "No ideas but in things" was his way of insisting on the particular, the concrete, the palpable, that which is there and refusing to move from that into abstractions that dis-

tance one from that kind of everyday concrete life. And you see that constantly in him, not only as the doctor who obviously is dealing with life's concreteness, but by his shunning of the brandishments of an abstract kind of mind that is all too proud of itself and all too unwilling to keep itself connected to and rooted in life's everydayness.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: The theory is that you can make a poem out of anything. You don't have to have conventionally poetic material. Anything that is felt, and that is felt deeply, or deeply enough, or even that gives amusement, is material for art.

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

("The Great Figure," animation)

JAMES LAUGHLIN: In Williams' day, the writers who couldn't bear America, and that was just about it, they could not stand what they considered to be the insensitivity and the lack of appreciation in America for their work, and they would take off. And so you'd get people going abroad such as Gertrude Stein, Hemingway, and Pound.

Ezra Pound, who had become a very good friend of Williams when they were both together at Penn, was living down in Italy. Pound was always writing to Williams and saying, you're wasting your time there in Rutherford. Nothing is happening there. The action in art and poetry is over here. You'd better come over here. So in 1924, Williams and his wife went to Paris on a rather extended visit, and this was one of the most important trips of his life. He met famous writers such as Hemingway and Gertrude Stein and he saw Pound again, but what was really important about it was the decision that it led him to. Although he had a very exciting time meeting these people and a lot of French writers, he came I think definitely to the conclusion that he was not going to become an émigré writer. He was not going to become an expatriate. He decided that his work and life were in Rutherford, New Jersey, and that that was the best place for him to write the kind of American poetry that he wanted to write.

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast--a cold wind. Beyond, the
waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines--

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches--

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind--

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one objects are defined--
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of
entrance--Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken

("Spring and All")

MARJORIE PERLOFF: Williams' great taste for the new, perhaps even almost a cult of the new, as some people would say, is very intimately bound up with his feeling about America as the new world, and with his feeling that a poet's mission is to celebrate the new world, and and with his feeling about birth, and with his being a pediatrician and bringing babies into the world. So that he's always dealing with the new. When you are a pediatrician and you're constantly dealing with birth, it cannot be a coincidence that that's what Williams did professionally, and that it's so much the subject of his poetry.

HUGH KENNER: In addition to his preoccupation with birth, Williams is preoccupied with despair, right from the beginning of his career. I think he felt an extreme psychic isolation, and was never quite sure whether everybody else felt that way or not. Maybe they didn't. He could only speak for himself. He has many statements to make about the simple persistent fact of loneliness.

I lie here thinking of you--

the stain of love
is upon the world!
Yellow, yellow, yellow
it eats into the leaves,
smears with saffron
the horned branches that lean
heavily against a smooth purple sky!
There is no light
only a honey-thick stain
that drips from leaf to leaf
and limb to limb
spoiling the colors
of the whole world--

you far off there under
the wine-red selvage of the west!

("Love Song")

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: In your own life, that which touches you, such as your affection for your wife, the woman you happen to be living with -- let's not call her wife, that's a pure accident -- but the woman who's there with whom you are supposed to be in love and sometimes are, if you address something to her you feel a little sorry, probably the poor kid had these things saved for supper and here you come along and raid it, or it's practically a rape of the icebox, so I think that's material for a poem.

"This is Just to Say"

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

("This is Just to Say," animation)

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: It actually took place just as it says here, and I think what she wrote was quite as good as this. A little more complex, but quite as good. Well, let's have it, then:

Dear Bill: I've made a
couple of sandwiches for you.
In the icebox you'll find
blueberries--a cup of grapefruit
a glass of cold coffee.

On the stove is the teapot
with enough tea leaves
for you to make tea if you
prefer--Just light the gas--
boil the water and put in the tea

Plenty of bread in the bread-box
and butter and eggs--
I didn't know just what to
make for you. Several people
called up about office hours--

See you later. Love. Floss.

Please switch off the telephone.

(actual reply written in note crumpled on her desk)

JAMES LAUGHLIN: During what you might call the middle period of Williams' work, that is, before he started writing his long poem

"Paterson," he was doing a number of things. He was writing the prose of IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN, he was writing his superb short stories about life in Rutherford, and then also he was writing poetry all the time. I would think that he was writing, I don't know, four or five poems a week. And now what these poems were was the mature corrected Williams. All the Keats is gone. And these are the authentic Williams voice speaking in free verse in a broken line which has a marvellous musical ear. And they are contact poems in the sense that he is making contact with people in his environment and with his thoughts. And they are Objectivist poems in the sense that they, for that period, are often focussing, though not always, on the object, something he has seen.

the back wings
of the

hospital where
nothing

will grow lie
cinders

in which shine
the broken

pieces of a green
bottle

("Between Walls")

JAMES LAUGHLIN: Williams had a great influence on younger poets. The reason to me is very simple, that he was talking a language, an American poetic language, which was fresh to them, new to them, and which inspired and encouraged them to make their own exper-

iments with an American kind of writing. Ginsberg particularly found in -- although Ginsberg had perhaps originally been reading Whitman, he found in Williams his immediate parent, the person who could help him with his work.

ALLEN GINSBERG: "To Elsie," which in some respects is a predessor to my own opening line in HOWL:

> I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
> starving, hysterical,mystical, naked,

Here in "Elsie," it begins, "The pure products of America/ go crazy." Amazing statement.

> The pure products of America
> go crazy--
> mountain folk from Kentucky
>
> or the ribbed north end of
> Jersey
> with its isolate lakes and
>
> valleys, its deaf-mutes, thieves
> old names
> and promiscuity between
>
> devil-may-care men who have taken
> to railroading
> out of sheer lust of adventure--
>
> and young slatterns, bathed
> in filth
> from Monday to Saturday
>
> to be tricked out that night
> with gauds
> from imaginations which have no
>
> peasant traditions to give them
> character
> but flutter and flaunt

sheer rags—succumbing without
emotion
save numbed terror

under some hedge of choke-cherry
or viburnum--
which they cannot express--

Unless it be that marriage
perhaps
with a dash of Indian blood

will throw up a girl so desolate
so hemmed round
with disease or murder

that she'll be rescued by an
agent--
reared by the state and

sent out at fifteen to work in
some hard-pressed
house in the suburbs--

some doctor's family, some Elsie--
voluptuous water
expressing with broken

brain the truth about us--
her great
ungainly hips and flopping breasts

addressed to cheap
jewelry
and rich young men with fine eyes

as if the earth under our feet
were
an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners
destined
to hunger until we eat filth

while the imagination strains
after deer
going by fields of goldenrod in

the stifling heat of September
Somehow
it seems to destroy us

It is only in isolate flecks that
something
is given off

No one
to witness,
and adjust, no one to drive the car

("To Elsie")

ALLEN GINSBERG: "No one/ to witness/ and adjust," no one to communicate to, him imagining the emotional or erotic life of some maid who may have been sent by the state to work in his house. Seeing the poverty of imagination, the poverty of means, the poverty of communication of his time and ours now, half a century later, where our desire is hidden, whether it's Elsie's or mine or Williams' or where we're used for purposes other than our own health and beauty, by the state or by the community or by commerce. What was interesting, he said, "no one to drive the car." No one to drive the great car of state. Rather than saying the ship of state, really. The car Nobody to drive the car, nobody to manage properly. Nobody that knows the road, nobody that knows the way. Maybe the artist somewhat, as Williams here, by his compassion, was able to penetrate the blanket around our consciousness, and point out that we were settling for less than what we were born with. As if the earth under our feet were nothing but shit.

MARJORIE PERLOFF: For me the long poem PATERSON, which for many people is Williams' great poem, is a definite retreat, and I think it's very ironic that it's the poem that made him famous. The reason I think it made him famous is because whereas the other works were ahead of their time, this one wasn't. Everybody was ready for it. It was not that different from Eliot's long poems and from other people's long poems. And the reason that I consider it a retreat is that Williams tried to do something very large, historic, mythic, and it wasn't really his bent.

HUGH KENNER: PATERSON is a fulfilment of everything that he did in the twenties and thirties because in order to build that long poem entirely out of sharply-registered detail, he had to learn how to register detail sharply. It is a poem that has no particular story line and no particular plot. It is held together by a locale, a city. It is frequently ambiguous whether that city is wholly a city or whether it is not also a person. He plays back and forth between the city of Paterson, New Jersey and someone called Dr. Paterson. He begins with what he calls "The Delineaments of the Giants," which are simply giant figures hidden in the landscape.

> Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls
> its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He
> lies on his right side, head near the thunder
> of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep,
> his dreams walk about the city where he persists
> incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.
> Immortal he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom
> seen, though he breathes and the subtleties of his
> machinations
> drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring
> river
> animate a thousand automatons. Who because they
> neither know their sources nor the sills of their

disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly
for the most part,
locked and forgot in their desires--unroused.

("The Delineaments of the Giants," PATERSON)

HUGH KENNER: The problem with writing a poem without a story and also without leading characters is one that I think occupied him for a long long time. How was he going to do that? How was he going to do a kind of panoramic view of urban American life in space and in time and do this without sounding like an encyclopedia entry.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS:

EXCERPTS

FROM

PATERSON

IN

SOUND

MONTAGE

JAMES LAUGHLIN: How is he going to structure it? What's it going to be about? And he says -- I love this letter -- he says, "That goddamned -- and I mean goddamned -- poem Paterson has me down. I am burned up to do it, but don't quite know how. I write and destroy, write and destroy. It's all shaped up in outline and intent. The body of the thinking is finished, but the technique, the manner and the method, are unresolvable to date. I flounder and flunk." And he floundered and flunked for about ten years, and then finally it came to him how to do it. What he came up with finally was a sort of, to use the fashionable terminology, a paratactic construction without closure. This means that the poem is collage. Here again we go back to his friendship with the painters, you know, who in the Cubist paintings would put a piece of this inside a piece of that. What he's collaging are bits of New Jersey history with lyrical passages of his own composition. He actually uses letters which some of his writer friends such as Allen Ginsberg and Edward Dahlberg wrote to him.

> Dear Doctor:
>
> In spite of the grey secrecy of time and my own self-shuttering doubts in these youthful rainy days, I would like to make my presence in Paterson known to you, and I hope you will welcome this from me, an unknown young poet, to you, an an unknown old poet, who live in the same rusty county of the world.
>
> (from PATERSON, read by Allen Ginsberg)

ALLEN GINSBERG: I had written a few letters to him, and then he wrote back that he wanted to include them in PATERSON, because I think his phrase was that it was like the voice from the streets or of another generation, from the streets answering him back. And I was obviously thrilled that, say, my interest in a place like this

as being a central, sacred place in eternity, or my eternity in Paterson, that I could actually show him and he would empathize, and understand why this place had such beauty in the midst of brick factories, with all the detritus and garbage in the middle of a spillway, with the actual birds of the universe chirping in the middle of it, with the buses of the universe driving around in it, but it still being a little like a sacred wood in the middle of the city. The humor of that view he understood. So he understood my letters from that same point of view.

> Say it! No ideas but in things. Mr
> Paterson has gone away
> to rest and write. Inside the bus one sees
> his thoughts sitting and standing. His
> thoughts alight and scatter--
>
> Who are these people (how complex
> the mathematic) among whom I see myself
> in the regularly ordered plateglass of
> his thoughts, glimmering before shoes and bicycles?
> They walk incommunicado, the
> equation is beyond solution, yet
> its sense is clear--that they may live
> his thought is listed in the Telephone
> Directory--
>
> (from PATERSON)

ALLEN GINSBERG: "No ideas but in things" means that there's no god, basically. It's a nontheistic view. That things are themselves, things are symbols of themselves. That's very similar to something Ezra Pound once said. "The natural object is always the adequate symbol." What is this symbolic of, actually? It's symbolic of itself, the falls. Its own water falling over itself.

A wonder! A wonder!

Around the falling waters the Furies hurl!
Violence gathers, spins in their heads summoning
them:

They begin!
The perfections are sharpened
The flower spreads its colored petals
wide in the sun
But the tongue of the bee
misses them
They sink back into the loam
crying out
-- you may call it a cry
that creeps over them, a shiver
as they wilt and disappear:
Marriage comes to have a shuddering
implication

Crying out
or take a lesser satisfaction:
a few go
to the Coast without gain--
The language is missing them
they die also
incommunicado.

The language, the language
fails them
They do not know the words
or have not
The courage to use them
--girls from
families that have decayed and
taken to the hills: no words.
They may look at the torrent in
their minds
and it is foreign to them.

They turn their backs
and grow faint--but recover!
Life is sweet
they say: the language!

--the language
is divorced from their minds,
the language . . the language!

(from PATERSON)

EXCERPTS FROM "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"

Of asphodel, that greeny flower,
I come, my sweet,
to sing to you.

My heart rouses
thinking to bring you news
of something

that concerns you
and concerns many men

Look at
what passes for the new.

You will not find it there but in
despised poems.

It is difficult

to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack

of what is found there.

Here me out
for I too am concerned

and every man
who wants to die at peace in his bed
besides.

JAMES LAUGHLIN: Bill died in 1963, and the funeral was held there in Rutherford. There was first a service in the house, where the Unitarian minister spent most of his time telling how foolish the citizens of Rutherford had been not to realize what a great poet he was, but what could one expect in a small town.

What about all this writing?

O "Kiki"
O Miss Margaret Jarvis
The backhandspring
I: clean
clean
clean: yes . . New York

Wrigley's, appendicitis, John Marin:
skyscraper soup--

Either that or a bullet!

Once
anything might have happened
You lay relaxed on my knees--
the starry night
spread out warm and blind
above the hospital--

Pah!

It is unclean
which is not straight to the mark--

In my life the furniture eats me

the chairs, the floor
the walls
which heard your sobs
drank up my emotion--
they which alone know everything

and snitched on us in the morning--

What to want?

Drunk we go forward surely
Not I

beds, beds, beds
elevators, fruit, night-tables
breasts to see, white and blue--
to hold in the hand, to nozzle

It is not onion soup
Your sobs soaked through the walls
breaking the hospital to pieces
Everything
--windows, chairs
obscenely drunk, spinning--
white, blue, orange
--hot with our passion
wild tears, desperate rejoinders
my legs, turning slowly
end over end in the air!

But what would you have?

All I said was:
there, you see, it is broken
stockings, shoes, hairpins
your bed, I wrapped myself around you--

I watched.

You sobbed, you beat your pillow
you tore your hair
you dug your nails into your sides

I was your nightgown
I watched!

Clean is he alone
after whom stream
the broken pieces of the city--
flying apart at his approaches

but I merely
caressed you curiously
fifteen years ago and you still
go about the city, they say
patching up sick school children

("Young Love," read by Allen Ginsberg)

END