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T H E D E S E R T M U S I C

A N D O T H E R P O E M S B Y

W I L L I A M C A R L O S W I L L I A M S



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TO BILL AND PAUL

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PART ONE

THE DESERT MUSIC AND OTHER POEMS

THE DESCENT

THE DESCENT BECKONS

as the ascent beckoned.

Memory is a kind
of accomplishment,
a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places
inhabited by hordes
heretofore unrealized,
of new kinds —
since their movements
are towards new objectives
(even though formerly they were abandoned).

NO DEFEAT is made up entirely of defeat — since
the world it opens is always a place
formerly
unsuspected. A
world lost,
a world unsuspected,
beckons to new places
and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory
of whiteness .

4 THE DESCENT

WITH EVENING, love wakens
 though its shadows
 which are alive by reason
of the sun shining —
 grow sleepy now and drop away
 from desire

LOVE WITHOUT shadows stirs now
 beginning to awaken
 as night
advances.

THE DESCENT
 made up of despairs
 and without accomplishment
realizes a new awakening:
 which is a reversal
of despair.

 For what we cannot accomplish, what
is denied to love,
 what we have lost in the anticipation —
 a descent follows,
endless and indestructible

T O D A P H N E
A N D V I R G I N I A

THE SMELL OF the heat is boxwood
when rousing us
a movement of the air
stirs our thoughts
that had no life in them
to a life, a life in which
two women agonize:

to live and to breathe is no less.

Two young women.

The box odor
is the odor of that of which
partaking separately,
each to herself

I partake also

. . . separately.

BE PATIENT THAT I address you in a poem,
there is no other
fit medium.

The mind
lives there. It is uncertain,
can trick us and leave us

agonized. But for resources
 what can equal it?
 There is nothing. We
should be lost
 without its wings to
 fly off upon.

THE MIND IS the cause of our distresses
 but of it we can build anew.
 Oh something more than
it flies off to:
 a woman's world,
 of crossed sticks, stopping
thought. A new world
 is only a new mind.
 And the mind and the poem
are all apiece.
 Two young women
 to be snared,
odor of box,
 to bind and hold them
 for the mind's labors.

TO DAPHNE AND VIRGINIA

ALL WOMEN ARE fated similarly
 facing men
 and there is always
another, such as I,
 who loves them,
 loves all women, but
finds himself, touching them,
 like other men,
 often confused.

I HAVE TWO sons,
 the husbands of these women,
 who live also
in a world of love,
 apart.
 Shall this odor of box in
 the heat
not also touch them
 fronting a world of women
 from which they are
debarred
 by the very scents which draw them on
 against easy access?

8 TO DAPHNE AND VIRGINIA

IN OUR FAMILY we stammer unless,
half mad,
we come to speech at last

AND I AM not
a young man.
My love encumbers me.
It is a love
less than
a young man's love but,
like this box odor
more penetrant, infinitely
more penetrant,
in that sense not to be resisted.

THERE IS, IN the hard
give and take
of a man's life with
a woman
a thing which is not the stress itself
but beyond
and above

that,

something that wants to rise
and shake itself

free. We are not chickadees

on a bare limb
with a worm in the mouth.

The worm is in our brains

and concerns them
and not food for our

offspring, wants to disrupt

our thought
and throw it

to the newspapers

or anywhere.

There is, in short,

a counter stress,

born of the sexual shock,
which survives it

consonant with the moon,

to keep its own mind.

There is, of course,

more.

Women

are not alone

in that. At least

while this healing odor is abroad

one can write a poem.

STAYING HERE in the country

on an old farm

we eat our breakfasts

on a balcony under an elm.

The shrubs below us

are neglected. And

there, penned in,

or he would eat the garden,

lives a pet goose who

tilts his head

sidewise

and looks up at us,

a very quiet old fellow

who writes no poems.

Fine mornings we sit there

while birds

come and go.

A pair of robins

is building a nest .

for the second time

this season. Men

against their reason

speak of love, sometimes,

when they are old. It is

all they can do .

or watch a heavy goose

who waddles, slopping

noisily in the mud of

his pool.

THE ORCHESTRA

THE PRECISE COUNTERPART
of a cacophony of bird calls
lifting the sun almighty
into his sphere: wood-winds
clarinet and violins
sound a prolonged A!
Ah! the sun, the sun! is about to rise
and shed his beams
as he has always done
upon us all,
drudges and those
who live at ease,
women and men,
upon the old,
upon children and the sick
who are about to die and are indeed
dead in their beds,
to whom his light
is forever lost. The cello
raises his bass note
manfully in the treble din:
Ah, ah and ah!
together, unattuned
seeking a common tone.

Love is that common tone
 shall raise his fiery head
 and sound his note.

THE PURPOSE OF an orchestra
 is to organize those sounds
 and hold them
 to an assembled order .
 in spite of the
 “wrong note”. Well, shall we
 think or listen? Is there a sound addressed
 not wholly to the ear?
 We half close
 our eyes. We do not
 hear it through our eyes.
 It is not
 a flute-note either, it is the relation
 of a flute-note
 to a drum. I am wide
 awake. The mind
 is listening. The ear
 is alerted. But the ear

14 THE ORCHESTRA

in a half reluctant mood
stretches
. . . and yawns.

AND SO THE banked violins
in three tiers
enliven the scene,
pizzicato. For a short
memory or to
make the listener listen
the theme is repeated
stressing a variant:
it is a principle of music
to repeat the theme. Repeat
and repeat again,
as the pace mounts. The
theme is difficult .
but no more difficult
than the facts to be
resolved. Repeat
and repeat the theme
and all it develops to be
until thought is dissolved

in tears.

Our dreams

have been assaulted

by a memory that will not

sleep. The

French horns

interpose

. . . their voices:

I love you. My heart

is innocent. And this

the first day of the world!

SAY TO THEM:

“Man has survived hitherto because he was too ignorant to know how to realize his wishes. Now that he can realize them, he must either change them or perish.”

NOW IS THE time .

in spite of the “wrong note”

I love you. My heart is

innocent.

And this the first

(and last) day of the world

THE BIRDS TWITTER now anew

but a design

surmounts their twittering.

It is a design of a man

that makes them twitter.

It is a design.

**FOR ELEANOR AND
BILL MONAHAN**

MOTHER OF GOD! Our Lady!

the heart

is an unruly Master:

Forgive us our sins

as we

forgive

those who have sinned against

us.

We submit ourselves

to Your rule

as the flowers in May

submit themselves to

Your Holy rule — against

that impossible spring-time

when men

shall be the flowers

spread at your feet.

AS FAR AS spring is

from winter

so are we

from you now. We have not come
easily
to your environs
but painfully
across sands
that have scored our
feet. That which we have suffered
was for us
to suffer. Now,
in the winter of the year,
the birds who know how
to escape suffering
by flight
are gone. Man alone
is that creature who
cannot escape suffering
by flight .

I DO NOT come to you
save that I confess
to being
half man and half

woman. I have seen the ivy
 cling
 to a piece of crumbled
wall so that
 you cannot tell
 by which either
stands: this is to say
 if she to whom I cling
 is loosened both
of us go down.

MOTHER OF GOD

 I have seen you stoop
 to a merest flower
and raise it
 and press it to your cheek.
 I could have called out
joyfully
 but you were too far off.
 You are a woman and
it was
 a woman's gesture.

I declare it boldly
YOU HAVE NO lover now
in the bare skies
to bring you flowers,
to whisper
to you under a hedge
howbeit
you are young
and fit to be loved
with my heart
in my teeth
and my knees knocking
together. Yet I declare
it, and by God's word
it is no lie. Make us
humble and obedient to His rule.

THERE ARE MEN
who as they live
fling caution to the
wind and women praise them
and love them for it.
Cruel as the claws of
a cat

THE MOON WHICH

they have vulgarized recently
is still

your planet

as it was Venus' before
you. What

do they think they will attain

by their ships

that death has not

already given

them? Their ships

should be directed

inward upon . . . But I

am an old man. I

have had enough.

THE FEMALE PRINCIPLE of the world

is my appeal

in the extremity

to which I have come.

O clemens! O pia! O dolcis!

Maria!

**TO A DOG INJURED
IN THE STREET**

IT IS MYSELF,
not the poor beast lying there
yelping with pain
that brings me to myself with a start —
as at the explosion
of a bomb, a bomb that has laid
all the world waste.

I can do nothing
but sing about it
and so I am assuaged
from my pain.

A DROWSY NUMBNESS drowns my sense
as if of hemlock
I had drunk. I think
of the poetry
of René Char
and all he must have seen
and suffered
that has brought him
to speak only of

sedgy rivers,
 of daffodils and tulips
 whose roots they water,
 even to the freeflowing river
 that laves the rootlets
 of those sweet scented flowers
 that people the
 milky
 way

I REMEMBER *Norma*

 our English setter of my childhood
 her silky ears
 and expressive eyes.
 She had a litter
 of pups one night
 in our pantry and I kicked
 one of them
 thinking, in my alarm,
 that they
 were biting her breasts
 to destroy her.

I REMEMBER also

a dead rabbit

lying harmlessly

on the outspread palm

of a hunter's hand.

As I stood by

watching

he took a hunting knife

and with a laugh

thrust it

up into the animal's private parts.

I almost fainted.

WHY SHOULD I think of that now?

The cries of a dying dog

are to be blotted out

as best I can.

René Char

you are a poet who believes

in the power of beauty

to right all wrongs.

I believe it also.

With invention and courage
 we shall surpass
 the pitiful dumb beasts,
let all men believe it,
 as you have taught me also
 to believe it.

THE YELLOW FLOWER

WHAT SHALL I say, because talk I must?

That I have found a cure

for the sick?

I have found no cure

for the sick .

but this crooked flower

which only to look upon

all men

are cured. This

is that flower

for which all men

sing secretly their hymns

of praise. This

is that sacred

flower!

CAN THIS BE so?

A flower so crooked

and obscure? It is

a mustard flower

and not a mustard flower,

a single spray

topping the deformed stem
 of fleshy leaves
 in this freezing weather
 under glass.

AN UNGAINLY FLOWER and
 an unnatural one,
 in this climate; what
 can be the reason
 that it has picked me out
 to hold me, open mouthed,
 rooted before this window
 in the cold,
 my will
 drained from me
 so that I have only eyes
 for these yellow,
 twisted petals . . . ?

THAT THE SIGHT,
 though strange to me,
 must be a common one,

also

through the eyes

and through the lips

and tongue the power

to free myself

and speak of it, as

Michelangelo through his hands

had the same, if greater,

power.

WHICH LEAVES, to account for,

the tortured bodies

of

the slaves themselves

and

the tortured body of my flower

which is not a mustard flower at all

but some unrecognized

and unearthly flower

for me to naturalize

and acclimate

and choose it for my own.

THE HOST

ACCORDING TO THEIR need,
this tall Negro evangelist
 (at a table separate from the
rest of his party);
these two young Irish nuns
 (to be described subsequently);
 and this white-haired Anglican
have come witlessly
 to partake of the host
 laid for them (and for me)
by the tired waitresses.

IT IS ALL

 (since eat we must)
 made sacred by our common need
The evangelist's assistants
 are most open in their praise
 though covert
as would be seemly
 in such a public
 place. The nuns
are all black, a side view.
 The cleric,
 his head bowed to reveal

his unruly poll
 dines alone.

MY EYES ARE RESTLESS.

 The evangelists eat well,
 fried oysters and what not
 at this railway restaurant. The Sisters
 are soon satisfied. One
 on leaving,
 looking straight before her under steadfast brows,
 reveals
 blue eyes. I myself
 have brown eyes
 and a milder mouth.

THERE IS NOTHING TO eat,
 seek it where you will,
 but of the body of the Lord.

The blessed plants
 and the sea, yield it
 to the imagination
 intact. And by that force
 it becomes real,
 bitterly

to the poor animals
 who suffer and die
 that we may live.

THE WELL-FED EVANGELS,
 the narrow lipped and bright eyed nuns,
 the tall,
white haired Anglican,
 proclaim it by their appetites
 as do I also,
chomping with my worn out teeth:
 the Lord is my shepherd
 I shall not want.

NO MATTER HOW WELL they are fed,
 how daintily
 they put the food to their lips,
it is all
 according to the imagination!
 Say what you will of it,
only the imagination
 is real! They have imagined it,
 therefore it is so:

of the Evangels,

with the long legs characteristic of the race —
only the docile women

of the party smiled at me

when, with my eyes

I accosted them.

The nuns — but after all

I saw only a face, a young face
cut off at the brows.

It was a simple story.

The cleric, plainly

from a good school,

interested me more,

a man with whom I might

carry on a conversation.

NO ONE WAS there

save only for

the food. Which I alone,

being a poet,

could have given them.

But I

had only my eyes

with which to speak.

DEEP RELIGIOUS FAITH

PAST DEATH

past rainy days
or the distraction
of Lady Smocks all silver-white;
beyond the remote borders
of poetry itself
if it does not drive us,
it is vain.
Yet it is
that which made El Greco
paint his green and distorted saints
and live
lean.

It is what in life drives us
to praise music
and the old
or sit by a friend
in his last hours.

ALL THAT WHICH makes the pear ripen
or the poet's line
come true!

Invention is the heart of it.

WITHOUT THE QUIRKS

and oddnesses of invention

the paralytic is confirmed

in his paralysis,

it is from a northern

and half savage country

where the religion

is hate.

There

the citizens are imprisoned.

The rose

may not be worshipped

or the poet look to it

for benefit.

IN THE NIGHT a

storm of gale proportions came

up.

No one was there to envisage

a field of daisies!

There were bellowings

and roarings

from a child's book
of fairy tales,
the rumble
of a distant bombing
— or a bee!
Shame on our poets,
they have caught the prevalent fever:
impressed
by the “laboratory,”
they have forgot
the flower!
which goes beyond all
laboratories!
They have quit the job
of invention. The
imagination has fallen asleep
in a poppy-cup.

THE GARDEN

IT IS FAR TO ASSISI,

but not too far:

Over this garden,

brooding over this garden,

there is a kindly spirit,

brother to the poor

and who is poorer than he

who is in love

when birds are nesting

in the spring of the year?

They came

to eat from his hand

who had nothing,

and yet

from his plenty

he fed them all.

All mankind

grew to be his debtors,

a simple story.

Love is in season.

AT SUCH A TIME,

hyacinth time

in

the hospital garden,
the time
of the coral flowered
and early salmon pink
clusters, it is
the time also of
abandoned birds' nests
before
the sparrows start
to tear them apart
against the advent of that bounty
from which
they will build anew.

ALL ABOUT THEM

on the lawns
the young couples
embrace .
as in a tale
by Boccaccio
They are careless
under license of the disease
which has restricted them

to these grounds.

St. Francis forgive them
and all lovers

whoever they may be.

They have seen
a great light, it

springs from their own bawdy foreheads.

The light
is sequestered there

by these enclosing walls.

They are divided
from their fellows.

It is a bounty
from last year's nest.

St. Francis,
who befriended the wild birds,
by their aid,

those who
have nothing,

and live
by the Holy light of love

that rules,
blocking despair,
over this garden.

TIME PASSES.

The pace has slackened
But with the falling off
of the pace
the scene has altered.
The lovers raise their heads,
at that which has come over them.
It is summer now.
The broad sun
shines!
Blinded by the light
they walk bewildered,
seeking
between the leaves
for a vantage
from which to view
the advancing season.
They are incredulous
of their own cure
and half minded
to escape
into the dark again.
The scene
indeed has changed.

By St. Francis

the whole scene
has changed.

They glimpse
a surrounding sky
and the whole countryside.

Filled with terror
they seek
a familiar flower
at which to warm themselves,
but the whole field
accosts them.

They hide their eyes
ashamed
before that bounty,
peering through their fingers
timidly.
The saint is watching,
his eyes filled with pity.

THE YEAR IS STILL young
but not so young
as they

who face the fears
with which
they are confronted.

Reawakened
after love's first folly
they resemble children
roused from a long sleep.

Summer is here,
right enough.

The saint
has tactfully withdrawn.

One
emboldened,
parting the leaves before her,
stands in the full sunlight,

alone
shading her eyes
as her heart

beats wildly
and her mind
drinks up

the full meaning
of it
all!

THE ARTIST

Mr. T.

bareheaded

in a soiled undershirt

his hair standing out

on all sides

stood on his toes

heels together

arms gracefully

for the moment

curled above his head.

Then he whirled about

bounded

into the air

and with an *entrechat*

perfectly achieved

completed the figure.

My mother

taken by surprise

where she sat

in her invalid's chair

was left speechless.

Bravo! she cried at last

and clapped her hands.

The man's wife

came from the kitchen:

What goes on here? she said.

But the show was over.

WORK IN PROGRESS

Of asphodel, that greeny flower,
like a buttercup
upon its branching stem —

save that it's green and wooden —

I come, my sweet,
to sing to you.

We lived long together
a life filled,
if you will,

with flowers. So that

I was cheered
when I came first to know

that there were flowers also

in hell.

Today

I'm filled with the fading memory of those flowers

that we both loved,
even to this poor

colorless thing —

I saw it
when I was a child —

little prized among the living

but the dead see,
asking among themselves:

What do I remember
 that was shaped
 as this thing is shaped?
while our eyes fill
 with tears.
 Of love, abiding love
it will be telling
 tho' too weak a wash of crimson
 colors it
to make it wholly credible.
 There is something
 something urgent
I have to say to you
 and you alone .
 but it must wait
while I drink in
 the joy of your approach,
 perhaps for the last time.
And so
 with fear in my heart
 I drag it out
and keep on talking
 for I dare not stop.
 Listen while I talk on

against time.

It will not be
for long.

I have forgot .

and yet I see clearly enough
something

central to the sky

which ranges round it.

An odor

springs from it!

A sweetest odor!

Honeysuckle! And now

there comes the buzzing of a bee!

and a whole flood

of sister memories!

Only give me time,

time to recall them

before I shall speak out.

Give me time,

time.

When I was a boy

I kept a book

to which, from time

to time,

I added pressed flowers

until, after a time,

I had a good collection.

The asphodel,

forebodingly,

among them.

I bring you,

reawakened,

a memory of those flowers.

They were sweet

when I pressed them

and retained

something of their sweetness

a long time.

It is a curious odor,

a moral odor,

that brings me

near to you.

The color

was the first to go.

There had come to me

a challenge,

your dear self,

mortal as I was,
 the lily's throat
 to the hummingbird!

Endless wealth,
 I thought,
 held out its arms to me.

A thousand tropics
 in an apple blossom.
 The generous earth itself
gave us lieve.

 The whole world
 became my garden!

But the sea
 which no one tends
 is also a garden
when the sun strikes it
 and the waves
 are wakened.

I have seen it
 and so have you
 when it puts all flowers
to shame.

 Too, there are the starfish
 stiffened by the sun

and other sea wrack
and weeds. We knew that
along with the rest of it
for we were born by the sea,
knew its rose hedges
to the very water's edge.

There the pink mallow grows
and in their season
strawberries

and there, later,
we went to gather
the wild plum.

I cannot say
that I have gone to hell
for your love

but often
found myself there
in your pursuit.

I do not like it
and wanted to be
in heaven. Hear me out.

Do not turn away.

I have learned much in my life
 from books
 and out of them
 about love.

 Death
 is not the end of it.

There is a hierarchy
 which can be attained,
 I think,
 in its service.

 Its guerdon
 is a fairy flower;
 a cat of twenty lives.

 If no one came to try it
 the world
 would be the loser.

 It has been
 for you and me
 as one who watches a storm
 come in over the water.

 We have stood
 from year to year
 before the spectacle of our lives
 with joined hands

The storm unfolds.

Lightning

plays about the edges of the clouds

The sky to the north

is placid,

blue in the afterglow

as the storm piles up.

It is a flower

that will soon reach

the apex of its bloom.

We danced,

in our minds,

and read a book together.

You remember?

It was a serious book.

And so books

entered our lives.

The sea! The sea!

Always

when I think of the sea

there comes to mind

the Iliad

and Helen's public fault

that bred it.

Were it not for that

there would have been

no poem but the world

if we had remembered,

those crimson petals

spilled among the stones,

would have called it simply

murder.

The sexual orchid that bloomed then

sending so many

disinterested

men to their graves

has left its memory

to a race of fools

or heroes

if silence is a virtue.

The sea alone

with its multiplicity

holds any hope.

The storm

has proven abortive

but we remain

after the thoughts it roused

to

recenter our lives.

It is the mind

the mind

that must be cured

short of death's

intervention,

and the will becomes again

a garden. The poem

is complex and the place made

in our lives

for the poem.

Silence can be complex too,

but you do not get far

with silence.

Begin again.

It is like Homer's

catalogue of ships:

it fills up the time.

I speak in figures,

well enough, the dresses

you wear are figures also,

we could not meet

otherwise. When I speak

of flowers

it is to recall

that at one time

we were young.

All women are not Helen,

I know that,

but have Helen in their hearts.

My sweet,

you have it also, therefore

I love you

and could not love you otherwise.

Imagine you saw

a field made up of women

all silver-white.

What should you do

but love them?

The storm bursts

or fades! it is not

the end of the world.

Love is something else,

or so I thought it,

a garden which expands,

though I knew you as a woman

and never thought otherwise,

until the whole sea
has been taken up
and all its gardens.

It was the love of love,
the love that swallows up all else,
a grateful love,
a love of nature, of people,
animals,
a love engendering
gentleness and goodness
that moved me
and *that* I saw in you.

I should have known,
though I did not,
that the lily-of-the-valley
is a flower makes many ill
who whiff it.

We had our children,
rivals in the general onslaught.
I put them aside
though I cared for them
as well as any man
could care for his children
according to my lights.

You understand

I had to meet you

after the event

and have still to meet you.

Love

to which you too shall bow

along with me —

a flower

a weakest flower

shall be our trust

and not because

we are too feeble

to do otherwise

but because

at the height of my power

I risked what I had to do,

therefore to prove

that we love each other

while my very bones sweated

that I could not cry to you

in the act.

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.
 Hear me out
 for I too am concerned
and every man
 who wants to die at peace in his bed
 besides.

PART TWO

THEOCRITUS · IDYL I

A VERSION FROM THE GREEK

THEOCRITUS • IDYL I

THYRSIS

The whisper of the wind in
that pine-tree,
goat-herd,
is sweet as the murmur of live water;
likewise
your flutenotes. After Pan
you will bear away second prize.
And if he
take the goat,
with the horns,
the she-goat
is yours; but if
he choose the she-goat,
the kid will fall
to your lot.
And the flesh of the kid
is dainty
before they begin milking them.

GOAT-HERD

Your song is sweeter,
shepherd,
than the music

GOAT-HERD

No, shepherd,
 nothing doing;
 it's not for us
to be heard during the noon hush.
 We dread Pan,
 who for a fact
is stretched out somewhere,
 dog tired from the chase;
 his mood is bitter,
anger ready at his nostrils.
 But, Thyrsis,
 since you are good at
singing of *The Afflictions of Daphnis*,
 and have most deeply
 meditated the pastoral mode,
come here,
 let us sit down,
 under this elm
facing Priapus and the fountain fairies,
 here where the shepherds come
 to try themselves out

by the oak trees.

Ah! may you sing
as you sang that day
facing Chromis out of Libya,
I will let you milk, yes,
three times over,
a goat that is the mother of twins
and even when
she has sucked her kids
her milk fills
two pails. I will give besides,
new made, a two eared bowl
of ivy-wood,
rubbed with beeswax
that smacks still
of the knife of the carver.

Round its upper edges
winds the ivy, ivy
strewn with yellow flowers
and about it
is twisted
a tendril joyful with the saffron fruit.

Within,

is limned a girl,

as fair a thing as the gods have made,
dressed in a sweeping
gown.

Her hair
is confined in a snood.

Beside her
two blond-haired youths
with alternate speech
are contending

but her heart is
untouched.

Now,
she glances at one,
smiling,
and now, lightly
she flings the other a thought,
while their eyes,
by reason of love's
long vigils, are heavy
but their labors
all in vain.

In addition
there is fashioned there
an ancient fisherman

and a rock,
 a rugged rock,
 on which
with might and main
 the old man poises a great net
 for the cast
as one who puts his whole heart into it.
 One would say
 that he was fishing
with the full strength of his limbs
 so big do his muscles stand out
 about the neck.
Gray haired though he be,
 he has the strength
 of a young man.
Now, separated
 from the sea-broken old man
 by a narrow interval
is a vineyard,
 heavy
 with fire-red clusters,
and on a rude wall
 sits a small boy
 guarding them.

Round him

two she-foxes are skulking.

One

goes the length of the vine-rows

to eat the grapes

while the other

brings all her cunning to bear,

by what has been set down,

vowing

she will never quit the lad

until

she leaves him bare

and breakfastless.

But the boy

is plaiting a pretty

cage of locust stalks and asphodel,

fitting in the reeds

and cares less for his scrip

and the vines

than he takes delight

in his plaiting.

All about the cup

is draped the mild acanthus,

a miracle of varied work,

a thing for you to marvel at.

I paid

a Caledonian ferry man

a goat and a great white

cream-cheese

for the bowl.

It is still virgin to me,

its lip has never touched mine.

To gain my desire,

I would gladly

give this cup

if you, my friend,

will sing for me

that delightful song.

I hold nothing back.

Begin, my friend,

for you cannot,

you may be sure,

take your song,

which drives all things out of mind,

with you to the other world.

PART THREE

THE DESERT MUSIC

Poem given at the Harvard Assembly in June, 1951,
subsequent to which Dr. Williams was awarded an
honorary Phi Beta Kappa membership.

THE DESERT MUSIC

— the dance begins: to end about a form
propped motionless — on the bridge
between Juarez and El Paso — unrecognizable
in the semi-dark

Wait!

The others waited while you inspected it,
on the very walk itself .

Is it alive?

— neither a head,
legs nor arms!

It isn't a sack of rags someone
has abandoned here . torpid against
the flange of the supporting girder . ?

.
an inhuman shapelessness,
knees hugged tight up into the belly

Egg-shaped!

What a place to sleep!
on the International Boundary. Where else,
interjurisdictional, not to be disturbed?

How shall we get said what must be said?

Only the poem.

Only the counted poem, to an exact measure:
to imitate, not to copy nature, not
to copy nature

NOT, prostrate, to copy nature

but a dance! to dance
two and two with him —
sequestered there asleep,
right end up!

A music
supersedes his composure, hallooing to us
across a great distance . . .

wakens the dance
who blows upon his benumbed fingers!

Only the poem
only the made poem, to get said what must
be said, not to copy nature, sticks
in our throats .

The law? The law gives us nothing
but a corpse, wrapped in a dirty mantle.
The law is based on murder and confinement,
long delayed,
but this, following the insensate music,
is based on the dance:

an agony of self realization
bound into a whole
by that which surrounds us .

I cannot escape

I cannot vomit it up

Only the poem!

Only the made poem, the verb calls it
into being.

— it looks too small for a man.

A woman. Or a very shriveled old man.

Maybe dead. They probably inspect the place
and will cart it away later .

Heave it into the river.

A good thing.

Leaving California to return east, the fertile desert,

(were it to get water)

surrounded us, a music of survival, subdued, distant, half

heard; we were engulfed

by it as in the early evening, seeing the wind lift

and drive the sand, we

passed Yuma. All night long, heading for El Paso to

meet our friend,

we slept fitfully. Thinking of Paris, I waked to the tick

of the rails. The

jagged desert .

— to tell

what subsequently I saw and what heard

— to place myself (in
my nature) beside nature

— to imitate
nature (for to copy nature would be a
shameful thing)

I lay myself down:

The Old Market's a good place to begin:
Let's cut through here —

techilla's only
a nickel a slug in these side streets.
Keep out though. Oh, it's all right at
this time of day but I saw H. terribly
beaten up in one of those joints. He
asked for it. I thought he was going to
be killed. I do
my drinking on the main drag .

That's the bull-ring

Oh, said Floss, after she got used to the
change of light .

What color! Isn't it
wonderful!

— paper flowers (para los santos)
baked red-clay utensils, daubed
with blue, silverware,
dried peppers, onions, print goods, children's
clothing . the place deserted all but
for a few Indians squatted in the
booths, unnoticing (don't you think it)
as though they slept there .

There's a second tier. Do you
want to go up?

What makes Texans so tall?
We saw a woman this morning in a mink cape
six feet if she was an inch. What a woman!

Probably a Broadway figure.

— tell you what else we saw: about a million
sparrows screaming their heads off
in the trees of that small park where
the buses stop, sanctuary,
I suppose,
from the wind driving the sand in that way
about the city

Texas rain they call it

— and those two alligators in the fountain

There were four

I saw only two

They were looking
right at you all the time

Penny please! Give me penny please, mister.

Don't give them anything.

— a stream of Spanish,
as she brushes by, intense, wide-
eyed in eager talk with her boy husband

— three half-grown girls, one of them eating a
pomegranate. Laughing.

and the serious tourist,
man and wife, middle aged, middle western,
their arms loaded with loot, whispering
together — still looking for bargains .

and the aniline
red and green candy at the little booth
tended by the old Indian woman.

Do you suppose anyone actually
buys — and eats the stuff?

My feet are beginning to ache me.

We still got a few minutes.
Let's try here. They had the mayor
up last month for taking \$3000 a week from

the whore houses of the city. Not much left
for the girls. There's a show on.

Only a few tables
occupied. A conventional orchestra — this
place livens up later — playing the usual local
jing-a-jing — — a boy and girl team, she
confidential with someone
off stage. Laughing: just finishing the act.

So we drink until the next turn — a strip tease.

Do you mean it? Wow! Look at her.

You'd have to be
pretty drunk to get any kick out of that.
She's no Mexican. Some worn out trouper from
the States. Look at those breasts .

There is a fascination
seeing her shake
the beaded sequins from
a string about her hips

She gyrates but it's
not what you think,
one does not laugh
to watch her belly.

One is moved but not
at the dull show. The
guitarist yawns. She
cannot even sing. She

has about her painted
hardihood a screen
of pretty doves which
flutter their wings.

Her cold eyes perfunct-
orily moan but do not
smile. Yet they bill
and coo by grace of
a certain candor. She

is heavy on her feet.
That's good. She

bends forward leaning
on the table of the
balding man sitting
upright, alone, so that
everything hangs for-
ward.

What the hell
are you grinning
to yourself about? Not
at *her*?

The music!
I like her. She fits

the music .

Why don't these Indians get over this nauseating prattle
about their souls and their loves and sing us something
else for a change?

This place is rank
with it. She
at least knows she's
part of another tune,

knows her customers,
 has the same
 opinion of them as I
 have. That gives her
 one up . one up
 following the lying
 music .

There is another music. The bright colored candy
 of her nakedness lifts her unexpectedly
 to partake of its tune .

Andromeda of those rocks,
 the virgin of her mind . those unearthly
 greens and reds

in her mockery of virtue
 she becomes unaccountably virtuous .
 though she in no
 way pretends it .

Let's get out of this.

In the street it hit
 me in the face as we started to walk again. Or
 am I merely playing the poet? Do I merely invent
 it out of whole cloth? I thought .

What in the form of an old whore in
 a cheap Mexican joint in Juarez, her bare
 can wagging crazily can be
 so refreshing to me, raise to my ear
 so sweet a tune, built of such slime?

Here we are. They'll be along any minute.
 The bar is at the right of the entrance,
 a few tables opposite which you have to pass
 to get to the dining room, beyond.

A foursome, two oversize Americans, no
 longer young, got up as cow-boys,
 hats and all, are drunk and carrying on
 with their gals, drunk also,

especially one inciting her man, the
 biggest, *Yip ee!* to dance in

the narrow space, oblivious to everything
— she is insatiable and he is trying

stumblingly to keep up with her.
Give it the gun, pardner! *Yip ee!* We
pushed by them to our table, seven
of us. Seated about the room

were quiet family groups, some with
children, eating. Rather a better
class than you notice
on the streets. So here we are. You

can see through into the kitchen
where one of the cooks, his shirt sleeves
rolled up, an apron over
the well pressed pants of a street

suit, black hair neatly parted,
a tall
good looking man, is working
absorbed, before a chopping block

Old fashioned all around?

So this is William
Carlos Williams, the poet .

Floss and I had half consumed
our quartered hearts of lettuce before
we noticed the others hadn't touched theirs .
You seem quite normal. Can you tell me? Why
does one want to write a poem?

Because it's there to be written.

Oh. A matter of inspiration then?

Of necessity.

Oh. But what sets it off?

I am that he whose brains
are scattered
aimlessly

— and so,
the hour done, the quail eaten, we were on
our way back to El Paso.

Good night. Good
night and thank you . No. Thank you. We're
going to walk .

— and so, on the naked wrist, we feel again
those insistent fingers .

Penny please, mister.
Penny please. Give me penny.

Here! now go away.

— but the music, the music has reawakened
as we leave the busier parts of the street
and come again to the bridge in the semi-dark,
pay our fee and begin again to cross .
seeing the lights along the mountain back of El
Paso and pause to watch the boys calling out
to us to throw more coins to them standing

8 THE DESERT MUSIC

in the shallow water . . . so that's
where the incentive lay, with the annoyance
of those surprising fingers.

So you're a poet?
a good thing to be got rid of — half drunk,
a free dinner under your belt, even though you
get typhoid — and to have met people you
can at least talk to . . .

relief from that changeless, endless
inescapable and insistent music . . .

What else, Latins, do you yourselves
seek but relief!
with the expressionless ding dong you dish up
to us of your souls and your loves, which
we swallow. Spaniards! (though these are mostly
Indians who chase the white bastards
through the streets on their Independence Day
and try to kill them) . . .

What's that?

Oh, come on.

But what's THAT?

the music! the
music! as when Casals struck
 and held a deep cello tone
 and I am speechless .

There it sat
 in the projecting angle of the bridge flange
 as I stood aghast and looked at it —
 in the half light: shapeless or rather returned
 to its original shape, armless, legless,
 headless, packed like the pit of a fruit into
 that obscure corner — or
 a fish to swim against the stream — or
 a child in the womb prepared to imitate life,
 warding its life against
 a birth of awful promise. The music
 guards it, a mucus, a film that surrounds it,
 a benumbing ink that stains the
 sea of our minds — to hold us off — shed

of a shape close as it can get to no shape,
a music! a protecting music .

I *am* a poet! I
am. I am. I am a poet, I reaffirmed, ashamed

Now the music volleys through as in
a lonely moment I hear it. Now it is all
about me. The dance! The verb detaches itself
seeking to become articulate .

And I could not help thinking
of the wonders of the brain that
hears that music and of our
skill sometimes to record it.

