

Jane Blanchard

Imperative

Forget me not when all is done.
Regardless of which side has won,
I certainly shall think of you,
The former near-and-dear ones who
Allowed malevolence its run.

You reckoned me a simpleton,
A woman you could use, then shun;
If only love had led you to
 Forget me not.

Yet even in this garrison,
I hear a distant clarion:
Each one of you may someday rue
The stress and strain you put me through.
Should peace be sought and there be none,
 Forget me not.

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Rapunzel

My gray hair loosely wound about my head,
I live within a different tower now.
No longer do I daily ponder how
To steal away from stony home. Instead,
With needlework or poetry or prayer,
I try to make the most of solitude.
Depending on the hour or the mood,
I take to bed or sit upon this chair
Or pace around the room I never leave.
A servant brings me food; another tends
The basin and the pot; a seamstress mends
Whatever clothing I cannot. Reprieve
From silence comes when one of them appears.
So goes my life in these my later years.

Interview of Charles Hughes

Jane Blanchard: Congratulations, Chuck, on the recent publication of your second collection of poetry, *The Evening Sky*, near the end of a challenging year for everyone. Did the pandemic impact this project at all?

Charles Hughes: Thank you, Jane. All of the poems in the book had been written before the pandemic began, and so they weren't affected. I would say that the pandemic — and the horrific political context in this country in which it has occurred — have given me a somewhat grimmer perspective on our present reality, something that I think is true for many people. And now I wonder about the poems in *The Evening Sky*. Will they find their footing in our new, grimmer world? I hope so.

JB: You now have two collections with Wiseblood Books. Apart from the pandemic, was the process different the second time from the first?

CH: On the whole, I'd say no. Wiseblood Books was a fairly new publisher in 2014, when my first book of poems, *Cave Art*, was published. Since then, Wiseblood has expanded its staff and its capabilities. But I wouldn't say the publication process at Wiseblood varied, in any essential way, from *Cave Art* to *The Evening Sky*. My perception is that Wiseblood Books and its founding editor, Joshua Hren, are deeply committed to beauty in poetry and fiction as sacred — as a sign (and perhaps more than a sign) of God's love in the world. By "beauty" here, I mean to include beauty in its gritty, tragic, and difficult forms as well as its other manifestations. And based on my experience working with Wiseblood, this commitment hasn't changed. It's a commitment I share, and I feel very honored and very grateful to have published two books with them.

JB: You and I met in 2016 at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, where you were a Walter E. Dakin Fellow after the publication of your first collection, *Cave Art*, in 2014. How have such encounters at such conferences affected your work?

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CH: Writing conferences — and especially the Sewanee conference (which I think I've attended three times) — have been very important to me. I started being serious about writing poems fairly late in life, in my fifties. These conferences have taught me much that I needed to know about poetry. But they've also helped me in another way as well, by putting me in touch with other poets such as yourself, for whom the writing of poems is an essential part of their lives. When I began attending writing conferences, I was going through a major life transition; I had worked as a lawyer basically for my entire adult life, and now I was contemplating retiring from my law firm and beginning to devote a lot of my time to poetry. That's a big change in an external sense, but it also required a big internal shift. The affirmation of meeting other poets at writing conferences helped me to think of myself as someone who writes poems and to accept this and feel OK about it, despite the cultural context in which I was used to existing, which (to say the least) doesn't always place a high value on poetry.

JB: The very last poem of *The Evening Sky* is the source of the book's title, and the very first poem reveals the theme of memory, but the pivot of the collection is the second section, "Elegy for My Father," which is itself subdivided. How did this structure come to be?

CH: I tend not to have a book of poems in mind, when I'm working on an individual poem. When I'm working on a poem, my entire focus is on making that poem (as far as possible for me) the most fully realized poem it can be, without thinking about how it might fit in or connect with other poems I've written. As a result, when I've come to arrange the poems in my two collections, the process has seemed a little haphazard. It's true, though, that the three poems you mention in *The Evening Sky* are important to me for their subject matter and themes, which no doubt accounts for their conspicuous positions within the book. And it's certainly been part of my experience in arranging the poems in both *The Evening Sky* and *Cave Art* that I've noticed — retrospectively — recurring themes, and I've tried to take these into account in arranging the poems. Otherwise, the order of the poems in both collections came about largely because of more mundane considerations, such as trying to maintain some sense of variety in length, form, and mood.

JB: Writing about people we love can be hard! Writing about ourselves can be hard! How do you strike a balance between revealing too much and revealing too little?

CH: These can, as you say, be difficult judgments to make, especially when other people are involved. If a poem I'm working on is in some way autobiographical — and does not involve anyone else — I feel I can pretty much let the demands of the poem determine how much ought to be revealed. It's all very subjective, and different poets will have different inclinations as to how much to reveal about themselves. Enough needs to be said, of course, that the reader can, to some degree, enter into the self being portrayed in the poem.

In the case of a poem involving others (meaning actual, nonfictional people other than the poet), the situation is more complicated. There will be the risk for the poet of invading another person's privacy or possibly even of breaching a trust. Since I believe that life is way more important than art, I feel that a poet in this situation has an obligation, at all costs, to avoid doing these things. My wife and sons appear in several of the poems in *The Evening Sky*; I was able to show them these poems, before the poems were originally published, and obtain their consent to publication. "Elegy for My Father" was written after my father's death, and I agonized a long time, in the writing of this poem, about what and how much should be said.

JB: I infer that leaving your home after 30 years was harder than leaving the practice of law after 33. Am I correct?

CH: Yes, definitely. A few years ago, my wife and I moved out of the house we'd lived in for so many years, and where we'd raised our family, and into a condo in the same town. My poem, "Downsizing," in *The Evening Sky*, describes some aspects of this move. The move was clearly the right thing to do, and my wife and I have become very settled and happy in our new place, but the process of the move was difficult and produced, for a time, a certain amount of grief for what we had left behind.

I didn't grieve over my retirement from my law firm, which occurred almost six years before the move out of our house. I'm deeply grateful in many ways for my legal career, but I was

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burned out and ready for a change — and I was beginning to write poems. My then growing ambivalence about continuing on as a lawyer is alluded to in the poem, “His Biggest Deal Prompts a Senior Lawyer to Reflect.” Going from working as a lawyer to working as a poet gave me a good deal of trepidation at the time, but not grief. My wife, thankfully, seemed to have no doubt at all that this was exactly the right thing to do. It was only by virtue of my wife’s unwavering confidence, and with the help of many prayers, that my uncertainties were overcome.

JB: Regarding process, do you ever start writing a poem in blank verse and then realize that something else would be better?

CH: Deciding to write a poem in blank verse or in some other manner (rhymed stanzas, sonnet, or whatever) is almost never the starting point for me. My normal starting point is the arrival of some sense that I have a poem to write, however vague this sense might be, in terms of subject matter, theme, length, etc. I usually begin by experimenting with the first few lines, and I try to get a feel for what will work best for the poem I have in mind — considering such things as meter, rhyme, stanzas, etc. I love blank verse and will normally consider it at this stage. This experimenting may take days or even weeks, although of course sometimes it’s much briefer. Once I’ve made these basic decisions and gotten to work on the poem in earnest, it would be unusual for me to change them. If the poem really doesn’t seem to be working after that point — which does happen, unfortunately — I’m much more likely simply to abandon it.

JB: About blank verse, how strict are you with meter? You seem more willing to use an extra syllable at the end of a line than in the middle of a line. Is this true?

CH: Pretty strict, I’d say. For me, iambic pentameter has a certain natural beauty about it. But this beauty can sometimes best be brought out by varying the meter from its strictest form. Richard Wilbur spoke of “endangering” whatever form he was working in, and I do think this is important, within limits, for the sake of both the beauty and the expressiveness of the poem. As you know, certain variations to the strict iambic pentameter line have, over time, become fairly standard (to the point that they are hardly noticed as variations) — substituting a trochee as the

first foot of the line, for example, or ending a line with an extra, unaccented syllable. I use these variations — and others — when I think they serve the poem well, and you're probably right that I'm more likely to have an extra, unaccented syllable at the end of a line than in the middle.

JB: With rhyme, you seem to prefer full rather than partial, yes?

CH: Yes, which is perhaps mostly a temperamental preference. But rhyme, if used well in a poem, can be much more than mere ornament. It can take the poem in directions that wouldn't otherwise have occurred to the poet. It can be a means of discovery for the poet and can free the poet, to some degree, from his or her preconceptions. It can, as A. E. Stallings has said, be a method of composition. For me, full rhyme seems more useful and effective for these purposes than partial or off rhyme. And when I've used partial rhyme or tried to use it, I've found it difficult to achieve consistency and avoid a feeling of randomness.

JB: You are not afraid of repetition, as in "The Bees . . .": "Things are as they have been." How did that expression come about?

CH: Well, repetition of course is a very ancient poetic device. It's used with great frequency in the Psalms, for example. It can be used for emphasis, as a way of slowing down the poem, or to call attention to different aspects of one reality, among its many functions. The poems in Gjertrud Schnackenberg's *Heavenly Questions* are modern poems that use repetition to very beautiful effect. "The Bees . . ." is partly about the experience of living in what seem to be two different worlds at the same time (in the poem, a peaceful Sunday afternoon in the garden and also a world dominated by war) and of having an awareness of those different worlds triggered by a minor change in external circumstances; the repetition of the line you mention seemed, I think, to help convey this experience.

JB: You are also not afraid of blurring the timeline of an experience as in "Before Our Eyes." What were you aiming for there?

CH: Seeing is the theme of "Before Our Eyes," and it's a theme that, I think, shows up fairly often in my poems. It's an important concern of mine. "Where there is love, there is seeing," according

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to Richard of St. Victor. And this is where time comes in: I think we all might be able to see more deeply and fully into reality and perhaps become more compassionate and loving, if we weren't so bound up in time. Poems can help with this; poems can give a sense of suspending time or at least of slowing it down, and thereby can help us see better.

Just behind this present world — this world we live in every day, so full of shadows and suffering and sorrows — is a magnificent world from which suffering and sorrow have been banished and where love reigns supreme. (I'm speaking now out of my faith as a Christian.) The latter world has broken into our everyday world decisively in the Incarnation and continues to break in from time to time, I believe. We can catch glimpses of it, if we are open to doing so. And part of my faith as a poet is that, if a poem can somehow loosen time's grip, it might open us up to these glimpses.

JB: One of my favorite poems in this collection is the very anapestic "Running with the Wind." What a marvelous way to describe that particular dream! And the *cæsura* near the end — oh, my. How did this poem happen?

CH: I really appreciate these kind words from such an accomplished poet as yourself, Jane. Well, I think that, as we grow older, our thoughts (and our dreams?) tend to turn more and more to summing up, to assessing what we've done and haven't done with our lives. At least, this has been true for me. Anyway, these kinds of concerns seem to have been the impulse for this poem. And I remember I'd been reading Robert Frost's "Blueberries," which evidently put the anapestic meter in my mind.

JB: Chuck, what I most admire about you as a poet — even more than your technical skill — is your ability to point out the inconsistencies or ironies of life without imparting bitterness. Is such a strategy or a philosophy?

CH: My life, on the whole, has been a lucky one — in my marriage and family and in other ways — and it would be ungrateful and unjust of me to be bitter or to express bitterness in my poems. And then, on a deeper level, your question makes me think of something that Albert Camus says in an essay, which has

become very important to me. He says there are in the world both “beauty” and “the humiliated” and that he does not want to be unfaithful to either. Not an easy balance to achieve, whether in life or in art. It’s one, though, that I want to strive for in my own life and in my poems.

JB: What is next for you, Chuck? Are there any poems in the making? Are there any poems ready and waiting for a third collection?

CH: A third collection seems really far off at the moment, but, yes, I do have some new poems — and I’m fervently hoping for more.