Susan McCabe on *The Essential C.D. Wright*

A Preponderance of Love

The Essential C. D. Wright is essential reading for anyone reading contemporary poetry partly because the most striking characteristic of this collection is her appeal to the collective. She cracks open "the delusion of separation." All of C.D.'s poems inherit from William Carlos Williams and Robert Creeley their acute observation crossed with historical deep thinking about whiteness, privilege, and urban "uglification." With confident pacing, aslant thinking, bright & torquing, veering off measured cadences, her lines (like the lives she depicts) are not smooth or even; they can't be; she cleaves to the unsaid, to discomfort, to living within the imperfect. Being the daughter of a court reporter and judge shaped her poetic as testimony, emotional innuendo and underlayers, judgment and ethical ill-ease with the fate of the disenfranchised, the ill-treated, the overlooked. Born in Mountain Home, Arkansas, she was intimate with rural wildness alongside harsh racial inequality; she also honed her own peculiar vernacular culled from geographical place. "A preponderance of love" drives this poet who yet shrugs off the mantle of "The Poet."

This collection samples poems from C.D.'s first eight books and a handful of unpublished poems. Forrest Gander notes in his short introduction the challenge in selecting portions from her book-length projects, *One With Others*, *One Big Self*, and *Casting Deep Shad*e. Each expresses C.D.'s outsider poetic—an anti-elitist "barbaric yawp" yet "unmanifestoed." These epic-like volumes reveal the poet's distinctive drive towards *One Big Book*, as necessary largesse, to capture edges, what dances on periphery. This kind of vision permeates *ShallCross*, completed just before her death, and featuring a 20 pages collagist poem, "Breathtaken," which chronicles violence and murder in New Orleans through a kaleidoscope of voices.

Deepstep Come Shining (published by Copper Canyon in 1998) marks the finding of her literary home, inaugurating this breathy visionary scope. The signature through all the work is a conscious aeration; she rids her poems of most end-stops—enjambing as an art of combining, even

breathing, showing the blur of experience, the melding of self with selves. Earlier, *String Light* (University of Georgia Press, 1991) wonderfully forecasts her later longer collective visions through an ars poetica, "Our Dust": "I am your ancestor. You know next to nothing /about me":

> I was the poet
> of shadow work and towns with quarter-inch
> phone books, of failed
> roadside zoos. The poet of yard eggs and
> sharpening shops,
> jobs at the weapons plant and Maybelline
> factory on the penitentiary road.

Not oracular, C.D.'s self-portrait as an "unsmiling dark blond" is one with "weariness, error, incapacity." Her loving particulars cross from brand names, "failed" ventures, factories, to home-made "yard eggs" to nature growing alongside human endeavor, such as "spiderwort and jacks-in pulpit, / hollyhocks against the tool shed. " She is the poet of "Triple Hut / Cream Soda." Also of "dirt daubers, nightcrawlers" and "Novaculite Uplift," a geological folding and faulting of sedimentary rock layers in the Quachita Mountains region of Arkansas, the deep time of geology juxtaposed with the trash of commodities. This poet confesses that she "didn't work off a grid. Or prime the surface / if I could get off without it. I made / simple music / out of sticks and string." The blend of the inventive with the humble bespeaks one who "agreed to be the poet of one life, / one death alone." Yet the "one life" is the collective dust her works insist upon.

Unprimed plain speech couples with a swerving directness, such "Posing Without Glasses" (from her first volume) :

> Carolyn standing
> Before an unpainted shed
>
> The grass is high and wet
> Against her legs

A fan of red roses
Bars the rotting door

Her left hand covers one eye
As if it had been pecked

The last stanza reroutes the "unpainted," "rotting," "pecked" with two double-takes: "Her free hand is full of dimes / The trill of a flute lights her breasts." This subtle linguistic parsing leads to divergence. There is an echo of Robert Creeley's motif of bad eyesight in the potentially "pecked" eye. In *Deepstep Come Shining*, myriad voices converge in the "vision" of a blind woman returning to the rural South (with references to Gloucester in King Lear who had "to smell his way to Dover"), counterpoised with the smell of "barbecue" and local talk interspersing forays to "the boneman," the scent of "Vidalia onions." Within this sweep, there is the "drop of silver nitrate in the newborn's eye" required by law in cases of syphilis.

Removing"the sudarium "wrap by wrap," of the female seer the doctor says, "it is too late. You will never see." Yet this not-seeing (belied by the other overactive senses) creates other possibilities, realizations: "Everybody in this clinic needs love. A preponderance of love." "The boxwoods that lined the road / were walking with her" and "a pool of shade appeared bottomless" (repeated in refrain like as so many other images in this highly enjambed poem). The Casa Blanca lilies she covets resurface as she covers her eyes facing them. With "a tad of a hangover she offers spiderweb" to staunch a paper cut. These are the healing modes of adjacency, local magic, coveted distortions. Loved through "rain or shine."

Recalling Muriel Rukeyser's tactics in *The Book of the Dead* of reportage and investigation, C.D.'s prison-visitation poems in *One Big Self*: An Investigation (2007) fashions a vivid pilgrimage on "penitentiary road" that documents incarcerated lives. Her friend, the photographer Deborah Luster, invited her to collaborate. Intimidated at first, she hoped "to add one true and lonely word to the host of texts that bear upon incarceration." The poem begins with prose: "The popular perception is that art is apart. I insist it is a part

of." This feeling for "larger selves" is C.D.'s overarching poetic aim; she heeds her "summons." The poem is all enjambed and double spaced, linking idiosyncratic figures: "The septuagenarian murderer knits nonstop"; "I pinch a cigarette and stare at Rachel's wrist scars"; "Drawn on a wall in solitary by a young one / MOM GOD GOD"; "The tier walker checks on the precariously living"; "Solitary confinement, Mr. Abbott wrote, can alter the ontological makeup of a stone." A letter to "My Dear Affluent Reader" on the "uglification of your landscape" where "Home Depot razed another grove" joins the prison system to capitalist ruination, along with a proliferation of box factories. As a kind of chorus in this variegated long poem, a recurrent series of lines beginning with "Count" denote the prisoner's monotony, and the need for refrains or counting to survive, as poetry provides:

> Count the days of summer ahead
>
> Count the years you finished in school
>
> Count the jobs you don't qualify to hold
>
> Count the smokes you've got left
>
> Count the friends you've got on the inside
>
> Count the ones who've already fallen

Rising, Falling, Hovering (2008) underscores Wright's perspective of a moving consciousness, as if "sifting for some interlinear significance" through vibrations, intuitions, sensory experiences, not trying to nail things down or confine the embodied reader. Here's a sample from this travelogue with another to Mexico during the Iraq War:

> In the vapor light of the park
> it felt as if the trees were walking with them
> As if they had passed into a cloud she had to ask him
> if this were living or

Or what? traveling during a war after sex spotlights tensions: "Her bags had not been in anyone else's possession / Her bracelets set off the metal detector" while "One glimpse of the paper was too much / the number of their dead to remain unknown," a phrasing echoing throughout.

Another expansion upon Rukeyser's mode, *One with Others [a little book of her days]* (2010) chronicles a protest, a little-known 1969 "March Against Fear" in her native Arkansas, pivoting across perspectives, often headlined with all Caps. She prefaces this experimental mode: "This is not a work of history. It is a report full of holes." "The King lay moldering in the ground over a year," she writes, linking together divergent places and persons subjected to racist treatment and oppressive rhetoric. "THE CONCERNED CITIZEN COUNCIL's first guest speaker" announces "The rule of the majority is being eroded by the minority"—such passages float on the air of C.D.'s page. "COUNTY JUDGE" takes his turn as does "ONE TOO YOUNG TO JOIN THE UPRISING" or "THE RETIRED WELDING TEACHER" or "ONE OF THE STUDENTS ARRESTED AND PUT IN THE POOL." C.D. inserts untagged jarring and floating assertions: "if white people can ride down their highways with guns, I can walk down the highway unarmed." This with lots of space vibrating around it. The sizzling "Breathtaken" in *ShallCross* takes further freedom with its dual columns, with its use of proper names, street names such as "Desire" and "Law" locating the loss of a metaphoric richness they connote. C.D.'s collagist mode does not use discontinuity to look away from a landscape of reiterative violence, turning it instead into a prepositional shock machine. Here for instance:

run down by a car driven by his daughter's boyfriend

in a rented Pontiac

in New Edition Bar
in Friar Tuck's Bar

at Club Fabulous

at Club Desire on Law and Desire

in Pal's Bar, Bayou St. John her 28-year-old throat slashed
by a man on his way out the door [that was Nia]

at the Crescent City Connection

at Show Stopper Tattoos in back of Spice One

outside the Chat Room

in an overgrown lot in the neighborhood of Desire

partially charred

Then there are the lyric sensorial moments, the saving life beneath the carnage:

between two vacant houses the light there has an aura

the smell of sweet olive so strong

The poem works by accumulation, crescendo, repetitive phrases, over a split center—C.D. acknowledging that her wide-angle vision inevitably has holes, is torn up in the very act of detail retrieval–– the blotting of events part of the point.

A poem from *Cooling Time* (2005), "One Carries an Exacting Memory of Certain Reading Experiences," C.D.'s prose poem for a poet-hero of hers, the Arkansas outsider, Frank Stanford (author of eight books of poetry before he died at thirty), responds to the 1978 *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*: "I felt absolutely helpless to so much wildness of heart, so much fury and hilarity [. . .] My skin burned, my insides hurt. I wanted to bury myself in the snow, pull the pages down on top of me." She could be talking about the effects she has on her readers: the shredding of expectations while providing the burning temperature of ice-cold

truth-telling that runs through this book. The *Essential* is gripping and generous, this poet's output a mosaic of the idiosyncratic and spacious, a collective of struggle, creative possibility, and tenderness. C.D.'s impulses are inclusive, with a heterogeneous eye. Not one to make overbearing announcements, her brief "This Much I Know" shows the engine of her poems: "Poetry will not go quietly. You would have to starve it out, and it can eat on very little. Hunger and love move the world, didn't Schiller say so."

Peter Campion on *The Essential C.D. Wright*

"The Whole Procession"

When New Directions issued an edition of William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* in 2011, reproducing the original 1923 volume from Contact Press, they included an introduction by C.D. Wright. She describes Williams as the poet who epitomized the prepared observer. A watcher, a listener. Goat stubborn. Feet-in-the-soil independent. He could write whatever, whenever, and as he damn well pleased. William Carlos Williams was the embodiment of the values Americans touted but seemed capable of expressing only in 'isolate flecks.'" An accurate portrait, this also suggests the artfulness and scope of Wright's own achievement. Her felt understanding of the situation of the modern poet manifests even in small gradations of meaning and tone. Wright shows how self-determination and collective life are less contradictions than tensions in the poetry of Williams, as in American modernity. What's more, she shows how these tensions might be generative for poetry of the present and future. She goes on to employ a spatial metaphor: "His own personal epic and constantly shifting landscape was just on the other side of the parlor window, the whole procession." The image suggests not only that the poet enter as a Whitman out-of-doors among the multitude, but also that the resulting poem will be motion, gesture, process, action.

Nearly a decade after the poet passed away, and with the 2025 publication of *The Essential C.D. Wright*, it feels important to ask: What is "the whole procession" in Wright's work, what kind of poem embodies it? One indication lies in the recurrence of panorama in her poems. Here's a passage from near the beginning of *One with Others*, Wright's 2010 book-length poem describing an Arkansas town in 1969:

> The river is impounded by
> the lake; below the lake the river
> enters the lowlands, it slithers
> through cypress and willow. And the air
> itself, cloudy and clear, stirring
> with smoke or dust or malathion,