

## POETRY

### *Carl Dennis*

*Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht*

If John Donne, when he wishes to (“At the round earth’s imagin’d corners, blow/ Your trumpets, Angels”), can sound like the fanfare of a brass choir, if Robert Lowell, in his early “Lord Weary’s Castle,” could sound like an Old Testament prophet revived as a 17th-century homilist, if Milton in *Paradise Lost* can sound like the diapason of a five-banked, 20-bellowed organ, then the poetry of Carl Dennis—modest, unassertive, wry, self-deprecating, witty, Chekhovian—must sound like light summer rain on the roof of a porch: gentle, almost unnoticed, but calmly reassuring.

In a period that has seen the birth, spread, and nearly the calcification of “confessional poetry,” of virtually shameless self-exposure, the work, the literary persona of Dennis, is astonishingly evasive, for what I think are sound aesthetic reasons. The most he has allowed his publishers to reveal about him is that he was born in St. Louis in 1939, attended schools in the Midwest and California, and has been for many years a professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Something about this native reticence may be represented by his poem called “*Strada Felice*.” It’s about Gogol’s long residence in Rome, during which he wrote his mordantly comic and distinctly Russian novel, *Dead Souls*. The choice of Gogol and his expatriate life is significant. Formalist critic Yury Tynyanov observed, “One of Gogol’s basic devices in his portraiture of people is that of the mask.” Gogol began his literary career pseudonymously, and was never to exhibit a more purely “Russian” quality than in a work written at a distance in time and space from his native grounds. And this serves as a serious parable about the literary artist. Aswoon in the first fine rapture of love, a poet may not be best situated to write love poetry. It may be that “distancing” is a valuable artistic technique, and that a persuasive vividness, an authenticity of detail, is best secured by imaginative re-creation rather than by instantaneous diary entry. The distance of an author from his work is also an element of his tact, a quality important to the work of both Gogol and Dennis, as well as that of Flaubert, Henry James, Dickens, Keats, and Stevens.

This “distancing” has its wryly amused obverse in the poet’s licensed daydream as described in “Readers.” If poets were truly what Shelley called them, “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” they would be a force so powerfully subversive of all the Great Powers as to be in constant danger of arrest and imprisonment, for “originality” is by definition anti-establishment. But the glamour of this view of poets as heroic criminals in a furtive underground, while still seriously entertained in some quarters, is derisively delusional from another point of view, and the notion of the literary underground may be not so much an elected one as one quite simply imposed by the utter neglect and disregard of the public at large, and therefore required by the poets to maintain their self-respect. (The completeness of this disregard needs little attestation, but I recently reported

with glee to an Irish acquaintance that Seamus Heaney had won the Nobel Prize in literature, to which the response was a blank stare and the silence of indifference.) But as though to correct the ironies of delusional grandeurs implied in “Readers,” Dennis has written what amounts to a companion poem in “Listeners,” a truly touching poem in its essential modesty which, at the same time, urges us to recall that the slightest of our words, the most casual of our assertions, have consequences that reverberate, for good or for ill, far beyond our awareness or intentions.

Finally, Dennis’s genuine concern with the kinds of aesthetic problems I have mentioned is beautifully evidenced by such quietly brilliant poems as “Igor” and “To Be Continued,” in which the cunning intermingling of literature with what we habitually regard as “reality” becomes a seamless, sometimes heart-breaking fabric in which poetry lives and has its being.

Dennis’s six collections of poetry—*A House of My Own* (1974), *Climbing Down* (1976), *Signs and Wonders* (1979), *The Near World* (1985), *The Outskirts of Troy* (1988), and *Meetings with Time* (1992)—are uniform in their excellence, if in nothing else whatever. This poet is distinguished by the variety as well as the originality of his imagination, and he deserves a far larger audience than he has yet attained.

## Strada Felice

*for Burton Weber*

April in Rome and Gogol rises from his desk  
And looks down awhile from his balcony. The lamps are  
lit.  
A cart rattles by on the cobblestones. Forty years old  
And now, on this far street, the endless parade of towns  
Of shapeless Mother Russia assembles in his head;  
The lists of details stuffed in his trunk seem usable.  
Now two servant girls outside Kostroma, their skirts tucked  
up,  
Can wade in the pond with their nets, arguing,  
And the farmhand can sleep off his vodka in the shade of  
the fence  
As the hero’s carriage totters up. It’s go-getter Chichikov,  
Jumping out in the dust with his calling card.  
Any dead serfs for sale, he wonders, counting the huts.  
Any names for his paper estate? A few dozen more  
Should suffice to impress the mother of the rich girl.  
Here’s a ruble for the ghost of Peter the tinner,  
For Stephen mender of sleds. Now back to the inn,  
Past the clerks returning from their walks,  
Past the women of the town in red skirts and furs, loitering,  
None of whom are noticed by Chichikov, none described  
In the letter not sent to a friend.

How strange his hurry seems to Gogol in Rome  
Who holds these figures in his mind's light  
So purely, as if sharpened by the miles.  
Could they shine like this in Russia?  
Wouldn't he lose them in the trees or the snow  
If he started home, unless he brought Rome with him  
And lugged its side streets and seven hills  
Up the stairs on Great Meschanskaya Street  
To the room beneath the rafters?  
Then the books on Russia, piled on the floor,  
Foreign so far, might sound, as he read them, like his own,  
The lists of madmen and saints merely the names  
Of his own moods writ large,  
And he'd wonder why he waited so long  
Before he ordered the Tsar to free the serfs,  
Why he allows the pogroms to go on.

## *Readers*

In my dream my books are banned by the Great Powers.  
Brave men smuggle them across the borders  
Stashed in the motors of tractors,  
In food cartons, in hats,  
Defying the ban on illicit poetry.  
The pages are worn quickly from the greedy hands  
Of underground lovers.  
Everyone tries to say what they mean.  
No one agrees on the many readings  
But they love each one.

In my own cellar my muse arrives  
With her limp cured,  
Her face finally free of bruises.  
For hours we write instructions to all our friends  
For avoiding capture.  
We write in a code too tough for wit,  
But all our far-flung true believers,  
Hearing the word, can decipher it.

## *Listeners*

After midnight, when I phone up a far-off friend  
To describe my chills or a blister by the heart  
That won't wait, I can hear the breath of the operator  
As she listens in, lonely among the night wires.  
They all do it, breaking the rules.  
In the morning she takes home my story to her  
    husband, her friends.

A sad burden. No useful wisdom yet.  
No advice about selling the house, the move to Florida,  
The right neighborhood for the boys.

It's getting harder to tell where the words go.  
You send them off with instructions not to stop on the  
road,  
Not to speak to strangers, but as they run they spill  
over.

Even on a bare bench when you whisper to yourself,  
Sigh softly how the world has let you down,  
From the bench in back you can hear a breath.  
Your thoughts have entered the far world;  
They have changed to stones,  
And someone walks round them as he climbs.

### *Flowers on Your Birthday*

I'd have been here sooner, believe me,  
If the short cut across Jefferson Bridge  
Hadn't been clogged by a funeral  
And I hadn't counted the cars,  
More than a hundred, most filled,  
It seemed, with official followers,  
Paying their respects to power.  
Then, on the long way round, by the armory,  
A burning house packed all the side streets  
With fire-watchers. Half the city, it seemed,  
Had nothing important enough to work on  
That it couldn't be set aside for a fire.  
And I watched it for a while, stared as a fireman  
Scrambled to the third floor  
To carry a girl down, and noticed that her dress  
Was fringed like one of yours. And she looked like you,  
A younger sister, smaller and more frail.  
From there I drove straight here, bringing you  
These flowers. See how fresh they are.  
The black spots are merely soot from the fire,  
Not symbols of anything, and will rinse away.  
The afternoon, scattered with flowers,  
Is all yours, wherever it leads.  
And this evening we can go to an old movie,  
A romance from the war, where the girl's wooed  
By three brave officers, English, Russian, American.  
It doesn't matter which she decides on.  
They're all fighting on the same side. Her tears  
Aren't an old woman's tears for a life that's spoiled,  
Thrown away on a clod, but the tears of the young  
Shed because she can only choose one  
Of the dear, beleaguered lives held out before her.

## *Igor*

How can I be the character I hate most  
In the great novels, a Cyril or an Igor  
Who visits his aging friend for a week  
At Christmas, in the icy provinces,  
And talks only of himself, and ignores the daughter  
As she watches with clear eyes?

On departure day she hands him his coat,  
Newly brushed, and looks down,  
Pale and grave, rubbing her hands.

He pretends not to notice and tells lies.  
“Sonia, they don’t give me a moment’s rest  
In my job for the Czar, inspecting sheds.  
Their spies have offices in the smallest towns.”

Silent, she stares at the big roses  
Woven in the rug, or turns to the window,  
The view of the white field, the snow-bleached  
Ice-hung cowfence tumbled down.

“Sonia, it’s not your fondness for me,  
It’s your hatred for this farm—who can blame you—  
That makes you long for the great world  
With me as your guide, though my bad moods,  
Hidden by my manners now, would spoil your fun.

“And why should a girl so young and strong  
Need me to tell her every morning  
If she’s happy or sad, a charity case,  
When now she supplies her sorrow, her joy?”

Then the coachman blows his horn.  
Igor runs out, throws up his box,  
Shouts something, and is off,  
Wound in his scarves.  
He doesn’t look back.

And already it’s too late. The girl’s gone  
And the house, and the village,  
All vanished over the hills to a place  
Where Igor is fiction, a paper name  
Left on the seat of the carriage  
When they climb out  
Home.

## *To Be Continued*

Whoever we are when we finish the novel  
Won’t remember the details that are fresh now,  
And if they can guess how much they’ve lost  
They’ll never write their review  
And the characters will drift off unjudged.

Best to judge them now while beads of sweat  
Are strung on Helen's forehead, after her ride  
Around the lake. At thirty-four she's returned  
To her father's farm—her brother's now—  
A widow, determined to live in the past  
No longer than she must, with no self-pity,  
No remorse. It would be an act of ingratitude  
To be sad by the lake of her childhood  
Here in Chapter One, boating with nieces and nephews,  
Docking on the island for a moonlight swim.

If we can trust her as we know we should,  
She'll do us proud in every chapter to come.  
We won't be outdone if our passion is compared  
To the passion of the farmer across the road  
Who's seen her only once, and from far off,  
And has lost his heart already, and made a vow.

Hard to tell if he deserves her.  
All we've been given so far  
Is a single, unpromising paragraph.  
At forty-five he's a drinker with a run-down farm.  
Has love changed him enough?  
Is the fever he runs in Chapter Two a dividing line?  
Many chapters remain. Any one of them  
Could drag him out of bed, back to the old plot,  
Though he clings to the bannister.

We want to withhold our opinion till more facts are in,  
But here he comes, stepping across the lawn  
With scruffy flowers destined to impress her,  
Given her large heart,  
Which fills any blank with what it brings.

Nothing can stop the action. It's spring,  
And the lilac is lavishing all it has  
In smell and color on the empty air.

Only a minute to sit in judgment  
On the pages read through so far  
So the future that breaks in  
Can prove us right or wrong,  
Not merely older.



*"Strada Felice," "Flowers on Your Birthday," and "To Be Continued," are reprinted from The Near World (1985), by Carl Dennis. "Readers" is from Climbing Down (1976) by Carl Dennis. All poems are reproduced by permission of the author.*

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