

READER'S COMPANION

for

Lawrence Raab's

Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts

(Tupelo Press, 2015)

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Biographical Note

Lawrence Raab is the author of eight collections of poems, including *What We Don't Know About Each Other*, which was a finalist for the 1993 National Book Award. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Council on the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation, as well as numerous residences at Yaddo and MacDowell. He teaches literature and writing at Williams College.

Critical Praise for *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts*

"I don't know anything like Lawrence Raab's poems. I can't get anything like this voice from anywhere else, and that is very rare. 'A Cup of Water Turns into a Rose,' the long poem that concludes *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts*, is spellbinding—intricate and resonant in its weave, and very strange in its clarity and the odd lucid story it seems to be telling and untelling. The more I read it, the poem seems absolutely extraordinary; somehow of a piece with Lawrence Raab's recent writing, but also unlike anything I have read."

—Adam Phillips

"Pretend that these poems by Lawrence Raab have come to you from very far away. Think of them as written by Poet Z, a heretofore-unheard-of Eastern European poet, a Kafka-Andrade-Calvino character from Serbo-Chechnya-Lithuania.

What's in his poems? Angels and human monsters, decades and generations, universities turned into ashes, the consolation of philosophy, despair in the middle of the night, a tutorial in lucid dreaming.

Now, these poems by Z have finally been translated into an American idiom that is canny, sly, defeated, pessimistic, resilient, and perplexingly knowledgeable about the human predicament. They are also often beautiful, bewildered, disquieting, and full of paradoxical laughter and contemplative solace. *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts* is a tender, lonely, deeply intelligent tour of that distinctive country of the soul."

—Tony Hoagland

"In his eighth full-length collection, Raab, a teacher of literature and writing at Williams College, exhibits tight lyricism and a characteristically American wit in meditations on mortality and intimacy. 'All that I am keeps me silent,' he opens the book's meditative opener, before moving in the next poem to thoughts of murdering a coworker: 'Let's say you feel someone is better off / dead, but you don't do anything about it.' Such wild swings in tone and subject matter are common throughout, as are Raab's occasional, but piercing, socio-political insights ('sometimes the rich appear // to ask for my trust. Believe us, they whisper. / What you can't have you don't need. / What you were never given you can never lose'), his scientific revelations ('Maybe nothing's only itself when we're looking'), and aphorisms ('Too much thinking is worse // than too much action, except for Proust. / And many other equally persuasive exceptions'). What binds this collection is neither the formal qualities of the poems, nor Raab's unmistakable voice, but his ability to move across registers with consistency and well-tempered feeling: 'Swallows dash through the twilight / and I don't think about / what they might mean,' he writes, 'Or I didn't // just then. They swooped in and were gone.'"

—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for Lawrence Raab's earlier books

“Smart and touching, these poems draw us into little mazes of thinking only to surprise us with bursts of feeling. . . . Lawrence Raab exhibits the rare knack of being perfectly clear and complex at the same time.” —Billy Collins, on *The History of Forgetting*

“Hawthorne walking home one evening; Emerson in old age drifting toward death; a boy watching his father smoke in a parking lot in Florida; Georges Bataille trying to believe that the absence of God is more divine than God; a retired winemaker who sees the collapse of civilization in a child's careless play in a garden—Raab's imagination links these characters through their radical doubt and radical fear, haunted (as we are) by the inadequacy of human understanding and will. Amused while frightened, desolate while wry, Raab evokes the kinship with a spooky sparseness. He can make us feel that we're all running through a field of rustling corn-stalks at night, pursued by a mysterious silence.” —Mark Halliday, on *The History of Forgetting*

“*The Probable World* is a superb book. Each poem in it compels our attention, draws us in to sad awakening or to happy illumination. Raab has an ear for the cadences of ordinary speech that suggest the extraordinary. The casual tone, the offhand remark are not only the means by which sense establishes itself but also the way it takes on a miraculous resonance. So moving, so charming, so right, I can't believe there will be another book published this year that will rival it. Lawrence Raab is one of America's best poets and he is writing better than ever.” —Mark Strand

“Not often in today's poetry has our mortal circumstance become so magical. . . .”
—National Book Award nomination for *What We Don't Know About Each Other*

“Raab's *New and Selected* enacts, book by book, the excitement of an always interesting writer become a significant poet of the first rank. We see an evolution toward a poem quintessentially his, its visible signs lucid yet full of shadings and surprising refinements. It's a poem, finally, so recognizably strange that it resembles our lives.” — Stephen Dunn, on *Visible Signs*

“Lawrence Raab's poems evoke a world both recognizable and dreamlike, a world of slippery realities told from self-questioning perspectives. I marvel at how wonderfully lucid they are in the service of mystery.” — Stephen Dunn, on *What We Don't Know About Each Other*

“The grace, compassion, wholeness, and clarity of these poems are tuned to the highest degree, to such a high degree, in fact, that this book approaches that rare and almost frightening state—wisdom. *What We Don't Know About Each Other* is a splendid book written by a poet at the height of his powers.” —Thomas Lux

“I continue to be impressed by the genuine authority and grave humor of Raab's work. His style is sure and unwavering, and his lines, in their flowing relaxations, suggest the music of good, expansive talk. Out of popular culture, for him, have come the myths of a new classicism, a rich source of story and allusion. Along the way, mysterious slogans are rescued from oblivion (‘We belong dead’) and fragments of stories no one else now perhaps remembers all of. As one of the coolest of a new breed of surrealists, he represents, I think, the generation of poets now about thirty at its best, yet without losing or compromising himself. Dark his personal view may be, but he looks on everything unshaken.” — Donald Justice, on *The Collector of Cold Weather*

“When we find a world better than this one—a world with more implications and a surge of connections and events all around what happens on the surface—we will already possess poems to match: the poems of Lawrence Raab. He makes us feel that our experiences continually touch on stories and legends and hints that lie ready to stir and shimmer if we can become alert enough in our own apparently ordinary world.” —William Stafford, on *Mysteries of the Horizon*

Introduction to *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts*

In the process of writing your book Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts, what did you discover, what, if anything, surprised you?

Everything in the book surprised me. That is, every individual poem was a surprise, since generally I have no idea where a poem is going to go when I start writing. The primary impulse is the desire to write a poem, rather than the need to say any particular thing. I often begin with a line or fragment of a line that seems to have an alluring sense of voice, one that I can imagine taking further, whether or not it's a character speaking or a version of myself (or a version of myself pretending to be a character). Making the poem is an act of discovering what the poem might be about, a way of surprising myself into thought, into language and ideas I could not have predicted. So when the process is working it's all a surprise. (As Robert Frost says, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.")

The most consequential discovery in this particular book was the twenty-five page poem that is its conclusion, and which I hope gathers together and extends many of the concerns of the shorter poems. I had no idea where I was going when I wrote "A Cup of Water Turns itself into a Rose." For quite a while I'd wanted to write a long poem. I pillaged my notebooks and my abandoned work for passages that might press me further. I just wrote things down, forbidding myself from reading what I wrote for several days, so I could be surprised into writing more. There was the sense of putting a puzzle together but without knowing what the image behind the pieces might be. I was guided less by ideas than by shape—by how the poem might move around. I wanted to trust that if it moved in an interesting way it would *mean* in an interesting way. It's my favorite poem of all my poems, in part because its composition was an unfolding act of surprise, then discovery, then pleasure.

Some Thoughts on the Composition of My Poems

I like assignments. Isn't the hardest part of writing getting started? So anything to get a poem underway is a blessing. I'm not thinking of ideas as assignments, but more often a phrase, some stray bit of language that suggests a voice the shape of which I might discover. Sometimes I find these prompts in my notes; sometimes I happen upon them in conversation; sometimes my poet friends give them to me, as do I to them.

Once at breakfast at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, I happened to be talking to the novelist Carin Clevidence, whose work I didn't know. "What's your novel about?" I asked, realizing that it was kind of a clunky question. She answered: "A couple of disasters and a lot of landscape." And immediately I thought: *I can do something with that!* It felt like a beginning, like a title in fact, which is what it became. But I was eager for a little more. "What are the disasters?" I asked her, and she said, "The explosion of a fireworks factory, and a hurricane." I loved the combination, and once I was back in my studio the poem came very quickly. First the title. Then: "First the explosion of the fireworks factory, / later the hurricane. First a tree full / of tiny American flags, then no trees at all." I hadn't read the novel; I was making things up, like those flags. I think one thing that got me started was the fact that Carin didn't explain anything about the explosion of the fireworks factory, and so it gave me room to imagine, to accept (at least for a moment) anything that might come along.

Where, I wondered, would "a lot of landscape" lead me? I wanted to explain it: "A long story needs at least one disaster / to show us how people act when they're caught / off-guard, whereas the landscape / in between is a good place for detail // and second thoughts." This, I can see now, prepared me for the word "aftermath" later: "Aftermath is for the difficult truths." And then the ending, which I'm particularly fond of: ". . . all the secrets of debris / and everything they mean if they mean / anything beyond the strangeness of what survives." So, being pompous, one might say that the poem is an inquiry into how meaning—or meaninglessness—is generated. But I never could have started there. What a burden it would have been, what a dead-end.

Three poems in *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts* were written for an anthology that, alas, never appeared. The task was to choose a story—presumably reasonably well-known—and write about what happens after the ending. One of my choices was Ophelia from *Hamlet*, and since she dies in the play, I had to rescue her, so the first line immediately came to me: "I didn't drown." I'm very attracted to that strategy (which shows up also in "After the Fall of the House of Usher")—contradicting the usual events or interpretation of a story. I like saying: You got it wrong; here's the way it really happened.

The third of these poems ("The Sirens") is spoken by one of the sirens from *The Odyssey*, after—as a group—they gave up being sirens. They were bored, they'd had enough of singing and luring hapless sailors to their deaths. I think the poem is funny, but also serious. I'm often drawn to that combination.

Finally, let me describe an assignment that generated all of the poems in the first section of the book. I've used it also with reasonable success in my creative writing classes. It goes like this: Read around in a newspaper, but only the parts in quotes. When you come across one that is particularly interesting for any reason, write it down. Collect a page of these. Do this quickly. Half an hour should be more than enough. Then don't read what you've collected; put the page away so you can forget the context in which the lines appeared, so you can respond primarily to their tones of voice.

Then choose one line to begin with, feeling free to change it or go in any direction the voice takes you. Leave the original story—if you remember it—aside. The assignment is about tone of voice but primarily it is designed to prompt you to invent, which is the way poems get started—making things up for the pleasure of discovery, freeing yourself (for the moment) from the burden of meaning, going wherever the language takes you.

Here are some particular examples. The last poem in the book's first section, "Another Scenario," began with a newspaper line that ended up being the poem's first line: "Harry, for that kind of money bad things happen to people." I liked the name. I liked the implication of violence. I liked wondering about "money" and "bad things." But most of all I was intrigued by what else this voice might say, or what Harry might say in response. I planned out nothing. I just started writing. When I needed something else I turned back to my list and included, variously changed, and all from different articles, the following lines: "There's a scenario out there." "Of course the world is looking at me differently." And: "We don't like to say much because we don't want to lose our lives."

Another poem that began with an unchanged line is "The Hot Fives and Hot Sevens": "Now I know how a hamster feels." How does a hamster feel? How does the speaker feel, and to whom might she be speaking? The first poem of Part 1, "Once, But No Longer" began with, "You can feel someone is better off dead than alive, and not be able to admit it." That was great, but the voice needed to be sharper. Thus: "Let's say you feel someone is better off / dead, but you don't do anything about it."

Only one poem in this group, "I Was About to Go to Sleep," retains the basic original newspaper story—the suicide of the soldier. And since I couldn't shake the story I made my speaker a man who is responding to a newspaper reporter's questions. The poem started with a version of these sentences: "He was still just sitting there in the same place, looking straight ahead. Normally, he at least turns and waves or something." And then: "I was just about to go asleep." And finally: "It's not something I want to see. It's not something I need to see."

Finally here are a few lines I didn't use, or have yet to use. "Whenever we ask him about snow days, all he'll say is 'bake the cookies.'" "I don't go out that often, but when I do, I like to go to these little secret places." And: "If you have a late spring, well, the plants die." That last one seems to me, tonally, to depend entirely on "well." How would that be said? And where could that way of speaking take me? Well, some day I might find out.

Teaching Myself

Years ago I was sitting in on a class that was discussing a poem of mine. One of the students mentioned—with admiration, I think—the pattern of fire imagery in the poem. I didn't know there was one. But when I looked, there it was. I don't remember what, if anything, I said. Maybe, "I'm glad it worked for you." Something evasive.

Should I have known about the fire imagery? Let's say that I knew but didn't know. I knew—I suspected—that the poem was working. I didn't need to know what the teacher needs to know—which is exactly how it is working. In fact, I think it can be counter-productive for the poet to know too much about the way his or her poem is designed. Or is going to be designed. I couldn't begin by telling myself, You should put a pattern of fire imagery in this poem you haven't yet written. The fire came along, and then it repeated itself. It seemed right to leave it there. It seemed right not to know exactly why.

More recently I sat in on a classroom discussion of "A Cup of Water Turns into a Rose," the long poem that concludes *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts*. The teacher asked how the pieces of the poem fit together (or failed to fit together), and for the next hour I don't remember him saying anything else. Well, the students were brilliant. They obviously enjoyed making discoveries within the poem. Shapes began to emerge. In this case I knew what they were finding, and how they were connecting one element of the poem to another. It was very gratifying. I wasn't invited to speak, and though I wanted to, I'm glad I didn't.

I think a good teacherly question to open any discussion of any poem is, "What do you want to notice here?" And then, "What else?" And then, "How do these things connect? Where do they take you? How do they *work*? How does that specific word work?" And so on. The idea is to make connections. I'd leave "meaning" until the end, or leave it out all together. A good class discovers the architecture of a poem—that pattern of fire imagery, and how it relates to the image of the lake or to that duck.

Contradiction and Concealment

Question: I know you admire Robert Frost and especially his ability to entertain apparently contradictory ideas in the same poem. Which poems of yours do you think best exemplify that notion? Related to that, do you think that most poems should be inherently philosophical?

I think *apparently* in “apparently contradictory ideas” is a really important word, especially when applied to Frost. Frost’s strategy in many poems—his most philosophical ones I’d say—is to suggest that certain ideas are *actually* contradictory, that we have to choose sides, but then making it hard for us to do exactly that. The poem’s essential aim and its truest subject, finally, becomes our realization of why we can’t, or why we shouldn’t, make one of the choices the poem has apparently offered us.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” seems like the opposite of “Good fences make good neighbors,” and even the poem’s speaker appears to believe this, if we see him as being only apparently Robert Frost. I’ve gone into this poem in some detail elsewhere, so I’ll only say here that one “clue” to the poem’s complications is that a fence is different from a wall. “Something there is that doesn’t love a fence,” or “Good walls make good neighbors,” both strike me as comically wrong, failed wisdom statements, unsuccessful clichés.

No doubt there are poems—and many of them—in which the ideas are actually contradictory. The success of such poems depends upon how well the poet handles those ideas, what the level of contradiction is, and how consequential the ideas are in themselves. This is hard without an example to fall back on, but let me take my line of thinking one step farther. If the poem’s ideas really *are* contradictory, I’d prefer the poet not to take sides, or not to seem to take sides. I’d prefer that the poet worry about both the ideas and the nature of their contradiction, so that worry would then become the central feature of the poem.

But the question asks me to consider my own poems in terms of the notion of “apparently contradictory ideas.” And I’ll choose a short one to talk about:

WHY TRAGEDY IS THE WRONG WORD

It’s too grand for the worst
that happens to most of us.
We suffer heartaches, die in disasters.
Think of the truck out of control

on the thruway, or the bridge
about to collapse. Think of the terrorist
planting his bomb.

Not one of us

is spared such imaginings.
 Touching down, the plane explodes.
 A few survive; hundreds
 are scattered across a cornfield.
 Then *disaster* sounds insufficient, even cruel.

Then it seems right to forget
 the old definitions: how tragedy required
 stature and knowledge,
 how it depended on a hidden weakness,
 an inevitable fall, how it made
 death look noble and necessary.

The contradictory ideas here are the implications of the word “tragedy” in opposition to “disaster.” The apparent issue is that “disaster” seems insufficient to describe such horrifying incidents. The poem could have made that point even more clearly if I’d invoked the boy entering school with his guns. But what is the poem’s point? Does the poem agree with its apparent argument for the word “tragedy” in such instances, or does it stand behind its title, “Why Tragedy is the Wrong Word”? Does that mean “disaster” is the right word?

I think the poem wants to worry about all of these questions, and only appear to choose up sides. “Disaster” *does* seem to be not only insufficient but wrong when applied to an event like Columbine or the Boston Marathon Bombing. And the final stanza of the poem seems to advise the reader to “forget” the arguments for a limited and literary use of the word “tragedy.” Should we trust this stanza?

It seems initially that the speaker wants—that *I* want—to dismiss “the old definitions.” For the most part, the language sounds academic—“stature and knowledge,” “hidden weakness,” “inevitable fall,” as though this were a discourse on Aristotle, or a set of useful terms to have at hand in discussing Oedipus.

But I want the reader to feel a turn in the language at the very end—“how it [tragedy] made / death look noble and necessary.” In this sense, any of the school shootings involve deaths that are not noble and are painfully unnecessary. But for the newsperson to withhold the word “tragedy” when interviewing a grieving parent would be cruel. Still, the poem risks cruelty when it seems to dismiss the sympathetic language of tragedy.

Perhaps in the modern world death is rarely noble and necessary, and more frequently horrifying and haphazard. Perhaps it’s unfair to life to choose a literary death as a model of nobility. Nevertheless, I want finally to try to cling to those words: *noble* and *necessary*. I hope that such deaths are possible, but even more that great literature, like Shakespeare’s tragedies, expands our apprehension of life to what Frost calls “a higher plane of regard.” This doesn’t make anything “better,” as Frost says, but it “raises sorrow and trouble to a higher plane of regard, as in *King Lear*.”

As for “philosophical,” I never quite know what that word means, and when I looked it up I found twelve definitions for philosophy, beginning with “love of wisdom” and ending with “calmness and equanimity”—a nice arc. For our purposes, perhaps definition 1(b) is most useful: “The investigation of causes and laws underlying reality.”

I don't believe this suggests that a philosophical poem should be purposeful or academic, since the pursuit of what underlies “reality” might well be passionate and personal. In any case, I would be reluctant to say that poems should or should not do anything, except, of course, be authentic. But the question is cagily phrased: “Do you think that most poems should be inherently philosophical?” I think most successful poems *are* inherently philosophical, depending upon which of the myriad definitions we choose. Take, for example, definition #3: “The critique and analysis of fundamental beliefs as they come to be conceptualized and formulated.”

The investigation of “fundamental beliefs” seems as if it should underlie most successful poems, though we'd have to make exceptions for wonderful imagistic poems, or any type of poem that tries to avoid the clash of emotions and ideas. Just as the question is modified by “most,” it is also nicely qualified by “inherently.” To me this means that a poem can be inherently philosophical if, at first, it seems merely to be about a man looking at a brook, or more precisely the papery leaves that are the evidence of a spring runoff that has now dried up:

HYLA BROOK

By June our brook's run out of song and speed.
 Sought for much after that, it will be found
 Either to have gone groping underground
 (And taken with it all the Hyla breed
 That shouted in the mist a month ago,
 Like ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost of snow)—
 Or flourished and come up in jewel-weed,
 Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
 Even against the way its waters went.
 Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
 Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—
 A brook to none but who remember long.
 This as it will be seen is other far
 Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.
 We love the things we love for what they are.

This poem by Robert Frost begins to reveal its inherently philosophical nature in the wisdom statement of that final line. But, since the brook has vanished, the last line seems wrong unless we rephrase it as: We love the things we love for what they are *and for what they aren't*. So we return to those contrary ideas that prove not to be contrary, but end in a synthesis of two propositions, one of which the reader has to discover.

Moreover, the word “love” rather than, say, “understand,” suggests another hidden level to the poem. Is it a love poem that seems directed to a brook that exists only in the spring, and is now evident only to the speaker? Not exactly—the brook, present or vanished, is visible to a “we” that seems to include another specific person along with the reader, a reader who, upon returning to the poem, may notice that Hyla Brook is “our” brook in the first line. And that “our,” in retrospect, seems entirely personal.

So “Hyla Brook” becomes a love poem. What seems at first like a general statement of truth—that last line—turns out to be a concealed declaration of love. Or both. What seemed at first like little more than a pleasing description of nature turns the poem, through the agency of the last line, into a philosophical problem about the nature of reality. Is what isn't there actually there? And what does *that* tell us about love?

Imminence And Revelation

Question: Do you ever feel like a stranger in a strange land? Or perhaps even a stranger to yourself? If so, how do such feelings affect the choices you find yourself making in a poem? Could you cite some examples?

Yes, frequently I feel like a stranger to myself; in different ways over time, I suppose. The question suggests a kind of divided self, one part of which is uncomfortable with the other, or even unaware of the other, though perhaps strangely sensing his presence. I think as a boy I felt uncomfortable with the person I assumed I should be. Later, say in college, I probably felt—or should have felt—insufficiently uncomfortable with the persona I had invented for myself: the brooding sensitive loner driven to create. And yet I think I would have to admit that I really felt more like Horatio than Hamlet. Or perhaps that's just the way I see it now.

Once I realized I suffered from depression, it was easier to see how one part of me could be at odds with another. I'm not positing schizophrenia, simply the sense that I shouldn't be feeling the way I feel, that I should be someone else—happier, sturdier, better.

I'm not sure that such emotions affect the actual choices I make in a poem, though doubtless those emotions affect what I choose to write about. How could it be otherwise? But I find myself wanting to agree with T. S. Eliot when he famously asserts in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that poetry is "not the expression of personality but an escape from personality." And yet isn't this a kind of illusion? Isn't a poem inevitably suffused with the author's sensibility? Perhaps Eliot would argue that sensibility isn't the same as personality, but at least they shadow each other. What's important is the transformation of self into poem, as well as a willingness not to depend upon the self. Eliot writes of the poet's "surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something more important." What's more important *at that moment* is the poem, and personality gets in the way. But, following Eliot's lead, I think it might be as useful to think of personality as divided, as if the "real" person was supposed to wait outside while the poet-as-inventor did his work.

Of course the serious poet comes to realize how the "I" in every one of his poems, however much it resembles him, however true he chooses to be to the facts of his life, is, finally, an imagined presence constructed for the sake of the poem. Compared to life even long poems are short. You have to pick and choose, and any combination, any pattern, is an invention.

I think my inclination to include in my poems ghosts as well as dreams connects with this sense of invention, this discovery of the self as an other. Ghosts are the literally disembodied presences of a vanished self. Dreams contain those presences as disguised revelations.

Some years ago, at the artist's colony Yaddo, I met a painter named Yun-Fei who was working on pictures called "Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts." I was, at the same time, working on a multi-section poem, "A Cup of Water Turns into a Rose," and wanted to include Yun-Fei's wonderful title, as well as anything he might have to say about ghosts and how they intersect with the living. Looking at his pictures I asked him, "Which ones are the ghosts?" He smiled and said, "Ghosts are good to mix with other things. See, the people are in their own world, and the ghosts surround them. But it's each other the people don't recognize."

The people can't see the ghosts who surround them. The ghosts they can see are people whom they mistake for ghosts. Ghosts are "good to mix with other things" because they are a powerful and unnerving way of suggesting the estrangement of the people from one another.

I've never actually seen a ghost, and don't know if I believe in them, beyond my fascination for them. But perhaps I'm surrounded by ghosts I can't sense or apprehend. Perhaps these ghosts refuse to appear to me because I don't believe in them enough, or because I wish too much to believe in them.

That assertion of belief may bring us to God, often part of the quarrels in my recent poems. To swerve into the personal, I neither believe nor disbelieve in God. Both positions seem to me to claim too much certainty. I believe in not knowing. If there is a God, he has not given us the proof necessary to reject our disbelief. But he may have given us our disbelief as a positive value. As Emily Dickinson writes, "It is true that the unknown is the largest need of intellect, although for this no one thinks to thank God." I want to thank God for his unwillingness to reveal himself. I want to thank him for the unknown and unknowable, and for those mysteries that must remain not quite solvable.

I suppose I am also thanking God here for an aesthetic tactic I have found important throughout my career—the poem that appears to reveal the solution only to undermine our confidence and make a larger demand upon our imaginations. Robert Frost, a poet whose apparent simplicity makes him a deceptively amiable companion, is the American master of this maneuver. He seems reassuring, happy to endorse the clichés you hold dear, while at the same moment (as he writes with a kind of nasty glee in a letter from 1927) his poems are constructed so that they "are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless . . . Forward, you understand, *and* in the dark."

Another master of this unsettling tactic is Edwin Arlington Robinson, in this poem, for example:

RICHARD CORY

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
 And he was always human when he talked;
 But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
 "Good morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
 And admirably schooled in every grace:
 In fine, we thought that he was everything
 to make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
 And went without the meat, and cursed the bread,
 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
 Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Many critics have called that ending overly clever, or a crude and cheap trick. But it seems to me that if you accept the ending as a trick, then you yourself have been deceived by the poem just as the townspeople who speak the poem have deceived themselves about the character of Richard Cory. They choose to see him as glittering and imperial, "richer than a king," god-like, totally apart from the human community which they represent. Cory has been excluded, but the people who speak the poem do not question their perception of him. They do not suppose that their reaction to him could have been any reason for his suicide. They have their neat, self-congratulatory logic, and the reader can easily be lured into becoming one of them. The trick of the ending is directed as much toward the unwary reader as it is reflective of the unperceptive character of the choral voices who speak the poem.

I am fascinated by the poem that lures us into recognizing we must change our minds, as well as the poem that creates a moment when something is felt before it is understood, or perhaps felt but never understood. I think here of Jorge Luis Borges's "The Wall and the Books": "Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces scored by time, certain twilights, certain places, all want to tell us something, or told us something we should not have missed, or are about to tell us something. This imminence of a revelation that does not take place is, perhaps, the esthetic fact." I love that "perhaps."

And Borges's imminence seems to link to—though it is not the same as—Dickinson's suggestion that "the unknown is the largest need of intellect." Does she mean the solvable unknown? Or the unknown that must remain—at least in life—unknowable? Thus I find myself returning to the strange and persistent allure of the ghost, who seems to promise but very rarely to provide knowledge. The ghost is all imminence, existing on the borderline of the unknown and the revelatory. Yet the ghost is also questionable, as if its essential sign and gesture were the enactment of *perhaps*.

Of course all of this occurs most commonly but most mysteriously in dreams, where the dead can appear to us as ghosts, or as they were when alive. The problem is one of

recognition, the apprehension of what our imaginations may have summoned forth. What does it mean? we wonder. What have I seen?

In my long poem, "A Cup of Water Turns into a Rose," one part recounts an actual dream I had following my mother's death:

In the dream that repeated itself
for months following my mother's death,
we're in a room that looks like home,

summer light in the picture window,
and she's in her chair, though I know
she shouldn't be. And yet she hasn't died—

that was a mistake, my mistake.
Light fills the window until it's impossible
to look outside. You were sick, I say,

but now you're better. You went away
but now you're back. How foolish I was
to miss you for no reason.

I suppose in the dream I am a kind of "stranger in a strange land," but also a son haunting the house of his mother. Or my mother is haunting me. Though I give myself lines to speak, I don't remember if that's what I said in the actual dream. Nor do I remember if my mother ever spoke. What would she have told me? Would it have been accusatory or consoling, revelatory or merely ordinary? Perhaps some lines remain in the earliest drafts of the poem, when the dream was fresh in my mind, and claimed a kind of authority it appropriately lost as the poem came into being. But if those lines exist, I have no desire to find them. In the poem it feels important that she not speak.

In a Different Hour: Collaboration, Revision, and Friendship

Many years ago—and I really don't want to remember exactly how young we were—Stephen Dunn, a friend but not yet a collaborator, was traveling from New Jersey to Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. He stopped for the night at our house. During the course of the evening I recall bemoaning the fact that I hadn't written a poem—maybe not even tried to write one—in over a year. I had writer's block, I announced, as if it were an identifiable disease. I had not yet learned the wisdom of William Stafford's famous (or infamous) remark that there is no such thing as writer's block; all you have to do is lower your standards.

Of course Stafford didn't mean you ultimately aim for less. You just have to give yourself a break to get started, and accept whatever occurs to you because "something always occurs" to us, as Stafford says in his essay, "A Way of Writing." Let the act of writing carry you beyond your first inevitably dull words to better words, better sentences that may give you access to something waiting in your mind "ready for sustained attention." This is the writer's daily work: putting some words down, then rearranging them, adding, then subtracting, looking for a shape, a focus, "the poem's informing principle," as Stephen Dunn puts it in his wonderful essay, "The Good, the Not So Good." If that's inspiration—and I like to think so—it's *earned* by the work of writing, not given as a gift of the gods, like an autumn leaf fluttering down significantly on the poet's head.

Those are some of the things I didn't know when Stephen and I and my wife Judy were having dinner. "Writer's block blah blah blah," I continued. (I was about to spend some time at Yaddo also, arriving a few days after Stephen.) "Well," Stephen said amiably, "when you get to Yaddo, do what I do—write a new poem every day." I didn't know Stephen did this; the idea seemed inconceivable, even appalling. "I can't do that," I declared. "Yes you can," Stephen said. "But how?" "You just do it."

I knew that was true, but what a strange truth. You tell yourself to do it and you just do it. So I followed Stephen's advice, and that summer we started showing each other a new poem each day. Over the years, we developed rules. We could continue to revise a poem, but only for another day, to avoid getting stuck on it. Then a harder rule: a draft of the poem had to be done by lunchtime. Of course almost all poets need trustworthy readers, but we were compressing the process radically. After lunch we'd work more on the poem, play tennis, then have drinks and show each other what we'd done, then work some more, and maybe look at the poems again later in the evening.

At times what I'd come up with by noon was something I could see promise in, even believe was already a poem. Most often, whatever we had at those moments were pieces of language that were just beginning to assert their power over us, just starting to ask to be honored as "poems." In daily life they would have found their way into the manila folder called "Notes," and perhaps languished there. But in those weeks at Yaddo, it was all work in progress at its earliest and most perilous state. Later I often couldn't believe I'd shown Stephen the incoherent mess I'd cobbled together that morning. But we learned

how to manage these moments, what to be particular about, what to suggest, and how to find opportunity in the apparently incoherent. “This poem,” I recall Stephen saying many times, “needs to make another move. Maybe half-way through.” “What sort of move?” I’d ask, and he’d usually say he didn’t know, that it was, after all, my poem. “Just go somewhere else.”

Infuriating as this advice could be, it’s stayed with me as a writer and as a teacher. When you think you’re stuck, I tell my students, just go somewhere else. You believe your poem is about this beggar on the streets of Manhattan, but maybe he’s there only to take you to a different place. So after the line about his raggedy pants (or maybe before that rather pallid line) write: “Meanwhile, in Argentina . . .” Why Argentina? Because you haven’t been there. But if you don’t like South America, go to Paris, or back to the room you lived in as a child, the one with the monsters in the closet, the one you had to leave when your parents divorced, and you cried, or refused to cry—whatever truth the poem needs.

Yet how easy it can be at noon at Yaddo (or MacDowell, our other haven), and at such an early, tender moment in the life of the poem, to be dismissive, or know-it-all, or the opposite: too full of a kind of praise that hasn’t yet been earned, inattentive to the wildness the poem might only have begun to hint at. We learned to be *appropriately* critical, meaning helpful, respectful of the whole endeavor, but insistent as well. Maybe once a summer Stephen would read a poem, nod, and say, “Yes, you got it.” How much better my sandwich tasted after that.

That first summer at Yaddo after my “writer’s block,” I wrote twenty-nine poems in as many days. Stephen probably wrote the same, maybe more. (Sometimes he’d sneak in a really short one to make the numbers add up.) But it was good to be competitive, as is inevitably the case with Stephen. In the afternoons we played tennis. Stephen always won. Sometimes I’d suggest his victory was a sign that my poem that morning was better. He’d say it was my turn to buy a new can of balls for tomorrow’s game.

I think of this as “collaboration” rather than just “criticism” because of how quickly our poems would confront each other’s sensibilities, how much we would risk, and how much we would borrow, or steal, from each other. “You can’t write a serious poem about space aliens,” Stephen once declared, suggesting that what I’d done that morning was doomed. But I kept on and yes, finally Stephen said, “You got it.” Years later he also wrote a successful poem about space aliens, of which I was very critical for a long time.

We’d try to make things harder (or more playful) for each other by coming up with assignments—some we’d both do, some were designed for the other person. Here are two short ones Stephen gave me a few years back:

- (1) Write the poem that can’t be written.
- (2) Write a poem called “Against Compassion.”

I did both; the second ended up being called “Against Compassion,” and the first “The Poem That Can’t Be Written.” Here’s one assignment from the same group that I couldn’t do: Write a poem in which every fourth line obstructs where the poem appears to be going. Great assignment; too much math.

Sometimes, when we failed to get into a colony together, we’d find other ways of meeting for a couple of weeks. Once I rented a house outside Peterborough since Stephen had gotten into MacDowell and I hadn’t. Sometimes we’d e-mail each other from home, making sure we responded as quickly as possible. For a while we sent each other lines from our own earlier poems that hadn’t worked out—to be used, changed, or ignored. Every so often I’ll see a poem of Stephen’s and think, Isn’t that a line I wrote fifteen years ago? It pleases me to wonder, as if it were evidence of another self I didn’t know I had.

We also published a chapbook of “actual” collaborations called *Winter at the Caspian Sea*, poems in which we wrote alternate lines, folding the paper over so that only the preceding line could be seen, in the manner of the Surrealists’ “Exquisite Corpse” game. Everything was done quickly, and no revisions were allowed; our motto, if we needed one, would have been Robert Frost’s “Play’s the thing.” Our aim was to allow for as many surprises as possible. The second collaborative method we tried was designed like this: Each of us would write four lies (and yes, that’s “lies,” not “lines”), one of which had to be more elaborate than the others, on an agreed-upon subject. We could use both lists, but we gave ourselves only fifteen minutes to write the poem. Why lies? To avoid the ordinary, to move the material as quickly as possible into metaphorical territory. One pair of these poems was about the sky, the other about silence. Here are the first nine lines from the two poems based on lies about the sky. From “Sky”:

At night among the stars we see
the ever-present animals and heroes,
which preceded us. The gods
we placed there have fallen,
and the sky is thinner now
without them, lighter than
an invisible hand. It’s amazing
we can touch it, that it’s as close
as it is far.

And from “The Other Side of the Sky”:

When God was waiting
to be invented, the sky
was thinner. You
could have touched it,
then turned away
without the fear of being seen,
gone back

to your father's house
where everything was quiet.

In the chapbook we didn't identify whose poem was whose. Reading them now I'm not sure. I like not being sure.

This was "play" and we kept it that way, while also believing that the beginning of any poem was also play. I want to give one example of an assignment that triggered a more consequential poem. I know some of my assignments provoked poems from Stephen, but he's too good at covering his tracks. So I have to settle for one of his assignments and one of my poems. The assignment is from a list of six assignments he gave me in the summer of 2010, mandating the inclusion of Muddy Waters, Aretha Franklin, and Glen Campbell, and required to begin "In the secret, dark corridors of Cedar Rapids," which, except for the specificity of Cedar Rapids, already sounded like a line of mine, and not a very good one (as Stephen probably knew). This was the most outrageously complicated of any of Stephen's assignments over all the years (so far), and so intricate that I finally saw the only way I could respond was to steal the assignment and turn it into the poem it already almost was.

First, the assignment: "Write a poem from the viewpoint of someone who used to be in love with an imaginary woman. Your speaker is only sure that he wishes to have power, wishes to control the terms of his life. His stutter, or other handicap, keeps getting in the way. You'll need an adjective for bedroom, and an adjective that makes the forest he keeps returning to seem run-down, a kind of bad neighborhood. Then an adjective before 'path,' which changes the meaning of it. The imaginary woman should appear at some point, throwing everything into question. Think of your poem as an examination of an obsession, and perhaps the sadness of being cured of it."

My poem is called "A Difficult Assignment," and appropriately it was published in an issue of *The Cortland Review* devoted to Stephen's work. I see now that I failed at the end to find the adjective that would change the meaning of "path." In fact I never looked for it. The poem didn't seem to need that. Perhaps the adjective's absence is a secret sign of my resistance to the assignment's authority. Or perhaps it's something only Stephen and I—and now you—know is missing.

A DIFFICULT ASSIGNMENT

for and after Stephen Dunn

You'll need an adjective for bedroom,
another that makes the forest you keep returning to

seem run-down, a kind of bad neighborhood.
Then an adjective before "path," which changes

the meaning of it, as if you weren't going to end up

where you planned. Or the opposite—

you can't help where you're going. And where
would that be? It's up to you, but remember,

in all of this you should be alone
although at some point a beautiful woman

must appear, throwing everything into question.
That's when the false note rings true.

Maybe she has something to say about Cedar Rapids
or Muddy Waters. She's imaginary,

she can say anything you want. Yes,
how much she desires you is one kind of beginning,

but another might involve looking carefully
at the flowers at the edge of the forest, asking her

their names, then suggesting you don't care
where the path leads if that's where she wants to go.

The collaboration that I've been describing—and there's much more, since Stephen and I have been doing this for over twenty-five years—results in making poems easier to begin and harder to finish. We each keep the other on track, changing the meaning of “path” as we go.

Hard as it is to write poems, sometimes it seems even harder to write about them. These days in particular, criticism appears to have turned into the consideration of mere subject matter, or the dismissal of content in favor of cunning but impersonal games. A critic finds it more and more difficult to talk about language, about tone of voice, about how attitude uses and transforms a subject.

Both Stephen and I have become poets who write in a “plain” style, and produce “quiet,” “accessible” poems about “everyday life.” Tack on an apparent moral and you come close to what Robert Frost discovered was his way to fame: the pretty postcard of snow falling into a dark woods watched by a man who doesn't want to be seen; the desire to choose one road over another, even when both are exactly the same; the bravery of standing up for the tearing down of walls even as you yourself set out to mend them. These, I believe, are three of the greatest poems of the twentieth century. And they became famous because readers could love them and leave out their complications. They're designed to both pat the reader on the back and spin him around until he's dizzy, maybe even lost enough to find himself. They include woods and roads and stone walls—all the *stuff* of a Frostian landscape—but they're *about* what they've hidden.

Dunn, like Frost, is widely and rightly praised for his accessibility and for his deft use of “ordinary” materials. Yet in the best Dunn poems, as in the best Frost poems, perceptions are deceptive and accessibility is a tactic, casually inviting the reader into a complicated, provocative, and sometimes terrifying moral landscape. “The ear does it,” Robert Frost famously wrote. “The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader.” Nobody working today has a better ear than Stephen Dunn—an ear for the insinuating revelations of American speech, and an even better ear for how the colloquial, the everyday, and the recognizable can become what we call “poetry”—memorable speech, sentences that are hard to get rid of.

And somewhere a philosopher is erasing
 “time’s empty passing” because he’s seen
 a woman in a ravishing dress.
 In a different hour he’ll put it back.

About these lines of Stephen’s maybe I once said, Is “empty” really the best word? Or: What about another adjective—“red,” perhaps—before “dress”? Maybe I said, Why are there always ravishing women in your poems? Maybe I just said, Yes, you got it.

These four lines are the end of the title poem of Stephen’s collection, *Different Hours*. A lesser poet would have used the moment to choose sides, suggesting the triumph of the physical world over abstract thinking. But Dunn knows better. What engages him is the continuing tension between beauty and circumstance, between the truth of the world and the truth of what we want it to be. At one moment we are overwhelmed; and then we think differently. We change our minds; we revise our lives. The revisions of thought—and the subsequent transformations of the imagination—are Dunn’s central subjects, and his poems are enactments of those concerns. The reader is not told what to think; the reader is seduced into the process of thinking, as if by a good friend who believes deeply in the value of disagreement.

Then a beautiful woman in a ravishing red dress walks past. You’re sitting in a sidewalk café drinking coffee. Once she might have seen you, turned, maybe smiled. Now she continues down the street into her own particular future. The sky clouds over. A little wind flaps the striped umbrella above your table. Maybe it will rain, maybe not. Time passes like this—empty *and* ravishing. You’re desolate, then amazed.

Additional Links

Lawrence Raab on the Tupelo Press website:

http://www.tupelopress.org/books/mistaking_each_other

Audio readings of Lawrence Raab poems on Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac

http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/author.php?auth_id=1262

Longlist citation of *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts* for the 2015 National Book Award:

http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2015_p_lraab.html - .Vh5R7Yusgvw

New article about nomination of *Mistaking Each Other for Ghosts* for the 2015 National Book Award:

<http://williamsrecord.com/2015/09/30/raabs-mistaking-each-other-for-ghosts-nominated-for-2015-national-book-award/>

Lawrence Raab poems archived on the *New Yorker* website:

<http://www.newyorker.com/contributors/lawrence-raab>

“How to Pay Attention to a Poem: Reading Frost's ‘Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening’”:

<http://www.williams.edu/feature-stories/feature-stories-archive/how-to-notice-a-poem/>

(Text-only presentation of discussion of Frost poem:)

alumni-archive.williams.edu/howpayattentionapoem

Lawrence Raab's entry on Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence_Raab

Lawrence Raab on the Poetry Foundation website:

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/lawrence-raab>

Lawrence Raab on the Academy of American Poets website:

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/lawrence-raab>