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The Afternoon  
of  
the Light

by

Alan Britt

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# The Afternoon of the Light

by  
Alan Britt

(for my loving grandparents)

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## FOR THE READER

The unusual arrangements of words (the "images") that make up the poems in this humble volume are not meant to confuse; they are not meant as arbitrary signs. They are meant to be friendly and mean, confident and uncertain, joyful and sorrowful, as day to day living is. And the words are gathered into their peculiar arrangements often to resemble a magnifying glass held up before our lives (the inward lives as well as the outward).

In our lives, from moment to moment, day to day, and year to year, our energies sort through fragments of experiences, trying to make sense of our world, trying to tap the pulse of the whole and clutch a unity that will stand still long enough for us to name it and destroy it. It is the nature of the world for life to constantly move, both through us and away from us. To try and stop that movement, of course, is silly, so the best we can hope to do is to recognize, understand and even celebrate its illusive nature.

Your interpretation of what we are living may certainly differ from mine. The idea of individuality is fine by me and I expect it. In some way almost every time I engage in conversation, I get the same: different interpretations of our confusing lives.

Mostly, though, I believe there is much vagueness in our general wisdom, in our unsure perceptions of the world, and that our "emotional" lives are primarily in touch with what's going on. I suspect, although we commonly assert otherwise, that we spend most of our time wandering around in uncertain "emotional" states of being. And because this state of existence, or awareness, is hard to name or to label, we often dismiss it as being less important or less real than its "cerebral" counterpart. But I believe that this part of ourselves is very real and is precisely what keeps us in touch and in harmony with the constant movement of things.

It is the "constant movement of things" that lends to life a character of uncertainty, and to accept life in its mysteriousness

and uncertainty and to learn one of its peculiar but accurate languages (emotional language) is to join in instead of resisting the invincible current of movement, the pulse of life itself.

In an effort for me to discuss in particular the emotional phase of our existences, I must often concentrate on our ever shifting fragments of experiences, (this includes those numerous "uncertain" moments that we often see the need to camouflage into something safer and more comfortable): fragments sometimes of an individual and highly personal nature. This requires a sensitive language, one that seeks out and does not retreat from the movement of things.

What I am saying is the language that I use must be individualized; otherwise, it would fall into the domain of "pre-conceived ideas," where it would certainly retreat from the uncertain and offer instead a cowardly version of what is popularly deemed acceptable and understandable, thus, leaving us where we started anyway — shrouded in uncertainty and ignorance. In effort to overcome the *sameness* or *convenience* that characterizes so much lazy perception and half-hearted communication in our world, I do in these poems make honest attempts to be original and different.

To talk about something so illusive as life, especially as it flows individually through each of us, is difficult at best and requires a language that is itself both pliable and characteristic. *Seeing* clearly is certainly difficult (and individual) and communicating in an unique and meaningful manner, in my view, is just as difficult (and individual) and, consequently, involves the risk of sometimes not sounding familiar.

The unfamiliar, or personal word, however, may be exactly what is necessary to stimulate another's imagination in effort to pinpoint the ever shifting perspectives of our lives. If the word is sterile, as inevitably it will sometimes be, then I must accept the responsibility. There is a risk in all of this but not so much of failing as of being unheard.

On the other hand if a simple lack of familiarity determines a lack of effort to communicate, the reader is directly at fault. Fear or apathy toward the unusual is simply unnecessary. These characteristics too are sterile and lifeless feelers of our world.

In short these poems are attempts to understand or at least find a reasonable perspective of our lives. This, of course, must involve uncertainty as well as the more comfortable nature of existence. My language is one which simply attempts to locate a coherence in the chaos and, therefore, must at times wear a disguise in order to slip unnoticed through the angry mob of clichés, slogans and convoluted logic.

Understanding or not understanding what we are living can be the difference between life and death. Perhaps it can be said that we as a whole are mostly dead and are only striving to be alive.

So, if my strange configurations overturn lamps in your blood, (ha! there we are) excellent! If they do nothing and only bore you, without trying to sound the literary ghost, I apologize ahead of time. Perhaps another day. Maybe never.

## NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, THIS IS SENSELESS

This is senseless  
 you and I.  
 The gag slips down  
 around our throats.  
 This is a good way  
 to die if things  
 continue the same, you know.  
 Well, at least  
 that's what they tell me.  
 It's dangerous, this silence  
 that separates us  
 and trips us by the ankles.  
 (How wonderful  
 of you to call just now  
 from the shower.  
 Your voice so clear  
 behind the shower curtain  
 with the last beads  
 of water falling from it.)

## THE AFTERNOON OF THE LIGHT

More than anything else I would  
like to ask you a question,  
more than anything the cactus  
with a skirt just above its knee.  
I have never asked you for an arm,  
a lip, or an eyelash. I have  
never had you adjust your flesh  
to walk past the door.  
Even though I know you are homesick  
there is always the lute,  
the green butterfly darting between  
the bamboo that knocks against your nerves.  
Even though I know you are tired,  
more than anything the white hyacinth,  
the white blouse under the tree,  
the iron bell lodged between your hipbones.

## DELIGHTFUL MYTH

The beautiful storm.  
Your small breasts.  
The rain against the window.  
Your hips submerged.

## THE BABY HARP SEAL

When the baby harp seal looks up,  
its eyes are indeed two perfectly round, black pools  
of oil.

When the baby harp seal looks up  
its lovable and mysterious eyes  
begin to pierce the usual boredom,  
so innocent and so terrible.

When the hunters come,  
their boots grind the snow into a pavement  
of grief.

The long, wooden handle overhead,  
the club comes down  
then again and again  
as it must,  
to stop all movement  
in the helpless ball of fur.

When the hunters come,  
scythes of blood begin to drip  
from the sky.

The newsreporter with remote camera unit ascends,  
and when the baby harp seal looks up  
the souls of thousands of sad people  
are suddenly electrocuted, and left crying  
privately  
in dimly lit living rooms.

## GENTLE AND THE DEAD

Where the gentle roam the dead  
go there  
with their claws hidden away  
and sprinkling on their words a poison  
from their own flesh which is lost



## FOR THE UNBORN

For the tiny feet  
that swim like fish  
in the rivers of the womb  
For the shadow  
that longs to be a word  
and wishes to express itself  
in blood, hair, toes and eyelids

Child unborn,  
unborn into the soot and grief  
unborn into the overfed day  
that slides behind the wheel  
of its long Continental;  
we wait patiently  
for that is all  
we are able to do  
We wait with hands  
in our pockets  
and upon table tops,  
and we hold the mystery  
by its roots

Seed of our bewilderment  
of our sorrows, lusts and delirium,  
we all love you  
in our own frail ways  
The birds I know Love you  
that is why they fly  
inside your dreams  
The cat asleep on the sunlit rug  
calmly awaits your arrival  
The guitar with a deep bosom  
drops its cool petals  
over your empty crib  
And the walnut trees clatter  
and anticipate a new universe  
emerging from divine flesh  
from the human body  
that's filled with dark rain  
planets and dead leaves

Your parents wait in silence  
their hands filled with the moist leaves  
that fall through their fingers  
one by one  
and create upon their pillows  
the tiny arms and feet  
and hair and eyes  
of their passion  
The unborn has been born  
many times

## ABOUT DEATH

A politician, a philosopher, and a poet  
ate lunch together at Henkel's Bar,  
and talked at length about death.  
The politician was elected to another term,  
so he left.  
The philosopher  
walked around death three times,  
and shook his head.  
The poet,  
who was quite amazed,  
flew without warning  
right into it!

## BROTHER

You dance in the raw pollen

The moon with two fish  
for breasts

its dorsal fin  
slices your dance  
neatly into two straw baskets  
of sleep

## BUTTERFLY TANGO

Two white butterflies  
dance above a dusty field  
They twist and grapple  
with the wind  
Dark green willows and pines  
are swirling billows of pipe smoke  
surrounding the field  
The summer sky's open negligee  
of thin clouds  
has returned from distant torment and suffering  
of the wars in Southeast Asia, Central America  
and Africa  
For a few moments  
it stretches out above these two flickering ashes  
these two sparks of death  
Two white butterflies  
climb and tango in broad daylight  
above this dusty field  
while a sluggish multitude rolls its eyes and yawns  
and the blood of adolescents dances in private  
Ah, still,  
two white words taunt the sleepy mouth  
two finely tuned heartbeats among the chaos

## THE SILVER VIOLIN

The silver violin rides  
underneath the morning's blue vein

Ponies beat their hooves  
against loose onions  
on the ground

Songs extend their claws  
out of radios  
on window ledges  
and tear the shirts  
from old women's backs

The last cup of air left  
in the world  
is spilled  
from a baker's shelf  
by rats

## PRELUDE 2

The night eventually falls asleep  
curled among the birch tree roots.  
There is very little to say,  
the hands awake at dawn  
and climb toward the window.  
But the voice still locked in its shell  
beneath the ocean,  
a tiny bubble rises up through the room.  
The composer unbuttons his dream  
and plays his nocturne  
on a piano strewn with seaweed,  
and waits patiently for the sun  
to roll past our eyesockets,  
his blood to rush inside every musical note.

"THERE IS NO SPACE WIDER THAN THAT OF GRIEF,  
THERE IS NO UNIVERSE LIKE THAT WHICH BLEEDS."

—Pablo Neruda

These words, many times  
scraped back and forth  
and sharpened like long blades  
of sawgrass  
against the wind.  
So often they cut through the thick flesh  
of boredom and stars  
of confusion and sky,  
releasing our eternal blood  
and our tears made of clouds,  
thus, causing our voices  
at times to wake from sleep  
and fly unexpectedly from our mouths.  
But today we are lucky, you and I,  
today, shawl of furry darkness,  
warm, small,  
about half as long  
as my petite wife's winter coat sleeve.  
In my lap  
purring on Neruda's poems,  
you tilt your head  
and gaze up at me,  
then space and the universe  
no longer exist outside this room,  
touching my eyes  
with your loving eyes,  
capturing my two faces  
in the oval, black mirrors  
of your perfect eyes  
that are more beautiful  
than any black tulips  
painted on golden Chinese serving trays.

"There is no space wider . . .,"  
but we are lucky, you and I,  
today there are plenty of kisses  
packed inside the molecules  
that fill this room  
and fill your brain  
that twists through invisible space  
as it ignites electrical charges  
against the sides of ice covered planets,  
before it finally presses itself  
gently and upside down  
against my purring chest.

## ORANGE

Orange is an intellectual color.  
It has been taught love by the oriole's wing.  
It has learned to sing among the fruit blossoms.  
It burns in the long dress being tossed  
by the wind.  
It closes the door in the pigeon's eye  
and mourns.  
It has learned about love the hard way.  
Ah, such unmatched intelligence!

DINING AT MARIA'S  
(for Ernie Kosmakos)

Dining at Maria's today  
is like lounging in a dream.  
It is almost empty here  
and a peaceful feeling  
brushes its translucent wings  
around the entire room:  
above the chandeliers,  
across pictures on wide walls,  
and along the cool tables.  
The wine colored booths  
invite me with their intimate arms  
to enjoy the Tyropita  
which warms the round plate  
in front of me  
(which I do without hesitation).  
Around my head  
a Grecian girl laments in song —  
the violin wails  
and a lazy mandolin  
entwines me in its web.  
Outside, rain falls  
and dirty clouds pause for hours  
before moving slowly on.  
But dining at Maria's today,  
ah, like drifting asleep in a small wooden boat,  
or even lounging in a dream.

POEM WASHED IN FROM A FRAGMENT OF  
COLD MOON (#9)

A blackberry pushes its cold body against my arm  
the moon begins to fly from the darkness of the stain



## OUR NUCLEAR FUTURE AND JAZZ

Radiation  
coats the wind's tongue  
that drifts over the earth's bald head  
and licks our shoulders.  
The jazz begins to play.

Near a Maryland state prison  
the dead branches  
of a black walnut tree  
shoot right up through nuclear steam.  
The jazz pulsates from prison cells.

Three Mile Island  
leans to one side,  
leukemia flies from a nearby branch.  
The Edison power plant gasps a little  
and some steam escapes  
as a reactor pumps its disease  
into the earth.  
The jazz wraps a woolen shawl  
around our dark shoulders.

Schlesinger, however, is not worried  
and wipes contamination  
from the sky  
with his bloody handkerchief.  
Tossing the handkerchief  
into the air  
it becomes a lopsided bird.  
The jazz trickles from a portable radio.

The newsman  
appears with the latest bulletin,  
his hair perfectly silver with fallout.  
A newslady afterwards discusses the obvious advantages  
of the "Miracle Slicer".  
The jazz rocks gently in our hair.

Radioactive tissue and bone,  
 radioactive grief and philosophies,  
 wheelbarrows full of nuclear waste  
 and tons upon tons of promises and eventual sadness  
 sink beneath our eyes.  
 The jazz coughs  
 but covers our heads.

Radiation surrounds the lucrative Swiss bank account  
 but cannot penetrate its protective lining:  
 at least a handful of dutiful Senators see to that.  
 A limousine pulls to the front  
 of a posh hotel,  
 the glistening serpent stretches half-way around the block  
 and while flashing its fangs  
 the energy executives with flowing gowns  
 at their elbows  
 pour into its golden back seat.  
 In Baltimore the jazz stumbles against a dilapidated brick  
 building  
 but nevertheless touches the backs of our necks.

We try talking  
 to our fathers  
 to our governors and congressmen,  
 but all they do is pat our heads  
 as they hurry out of town.  
 We even try our gods  
 but today they are forming unions  
 and going on strike.  
 The jazz by now is near sleep.

Our frantic words do finally emerge  
 but are only able to stand on one leg  
 and fall to the ground like pesticide poisoned Carolina cranes.  
 Our eyes collapse  
 the minute they attempt to fly.  
 Desperately we wipe our arms on the wind  
 but it simply burns and makes us stagger.  
 The jazz shivers and blows  
 like tumbleweeds across our bones.

## THE STRANGER (after Charles Baudelaire)

"Where will you go?"

—"Beyond signboards"

"But, where will you go?"

—"I will rise above powerlines and smoke"

"No, where, where will you go?"

—"Past the air of voices,  
past the empty words that press the fingers  
of one hand against the fingers of another"

"But, where is it that you will go?"

—"To a cloud, my friend, the clouds"

## SOUTHERN EVENING

The sun,  
beside a rusty scythe in the long grass,  
purrs softly.  
A flute  
drifts underneath a magnolia branch.

Hours later,  
a thin gray heron passes  
through the sun.  
The cool night  
begins to rustle in a nearby barn.

## VISITING MY WIFE AT THE HOSPITAL

No bodies,  
only footsteps in the distance.  
No faces,  
only two voices pushing a linen cart  
down the hallway.  
In this room  
at this moment  
you are so peaceful,  
gathered into the yellows, the purples  
and the scarlets of the cool flowers  
stuffed in their vases  
beside your bed.  
I was anxious to see you  
as I've brought you a present,  
something amazing from our garden.  
I've brought you the first Brussels sprout  
plucked from the bottom stalk!  
And I've noticed something.  
I've discovered that the swirled flesh  
of your dreaming ear  
resembles the beautiful twisted petals  
that wrap wild raindrops  
so tightly inside this young Brussels sprout.  
But you dream  
unaware of my presence,  
unaware yet of my gift from the garden.  
I watch you  
as the gray light  
flows quietly through your hair,  
and you hardly even breathe  
as thin tissues of silence  
cover your dark almond eyes.

## INCIDENTALLY

How many times  
does a voice  
open into a white hibiscus?

Not often  
but I guarantee  
you there are large tropical stars  
underneath your dark tongue.

## SOLITUDE

I could sit alone in this wicker chair forever  
while airplane after airplane flies across the long ocean.

## SOLITARY

At times my blue heart pumps its tiny light  
way out in the fog.  
At times there is no light,  
only the darkness curls around my face,  
only you . . . the waves.

O

A strange brand of perversion,  
this darkness.

It makes my atoms bristle.

## PROCESSION OF THE SARDAR

If you ask me that question  
I will have to tell you  
that I have no name.  
If you want me to follow you  
I will have to say  
that I can only fly.  
If you still insist on my presence  
I will have to turn you  
into a river.

## LA VALSE

I do not have much to say,  
and you know how my blood is so thin,  
sometimes you find it in the new bread,  
but still you must realize  
you will never be able to speak to them  
with a rose in one eye  
and a carnation in the other,  
even though you are so lovely!

Men are carrying sacks of darkness  
and throwing them into a furnace,  
the fire brightens on their hands,  
the fire becomes the black foam of the sea  
and speaks a language of gulls  
and seaweed,  
the fire's name is scrawled by a lobster  
on the sea's floor,  
the fire's voice is the clear touch  
of a jellyfish,  
the men are talking and moving away,  
they return to the darkened room  
of a nightclub

## CHEYANNE

The bullets,  
my children,  
they swarm around our hair.

Thick gray bees  
that sting the sand.

(Cactus blossoms swallow them up.)

Our swift eyes are fish,  
whose dark fins  
trapped  
inside  
these  
mountains.

## LITTLE BLACK DOG

The little black dog runs  
 across the grass  
 his tongue hangs  
 at the side of his mouth

A white butterfly darts  
 alongside the river's blue thighs

A brown hand pushes  
 a canoe from the top  
 of an old Buick

The little dog rolls  
 where the palm tree has dropped  
 its shadow

## IN THE MIDDLE OF BACKGAMMON

The light  
 through the sliding glass door  
 lifts its petticoats  
 above the mahogany round chips  
 Three dark chips  
 lined in a corner here  
 One beside them  
 unprotected  
 A half row of them  
 falling down  
 in the completion area  
 A pair isolated backcourt  
 And so much open space  
 on the board  
 for the pale light  
 to dance  
 upon



## MIDNIGHT

A man's two hands hold a guava leaf.  
His legs sink in black water.  
An iron wrecking ball swings  
through the sky.  
He lifts his hands to the sky  
catches the cold fragments  
of the broken moon.

## A DREAM ALONG THE ROAD

The feet dream beside a wooden milk bucket  
and pass rotted mangos on the dusty road.

A mockingbird bends its song across a field.

A wolf wanders from a blue thicket  
leans against dry bushes in the sunny afternoon.

Wildflowers grow on a rotted stump.

A horse grazes dark grasses through a fence.

A speck walks on the horizon.

## JEWISH SCHOOL TEACHER TANGO

The Jewish school teacher contains darkness:  
Her hair hangs in turbulent black coral waves  
Her waist of chalk marks  
circles the room  
Various posters stuck to the back wall  
move beneath their cardboard  
Her voice is a humid guitar  
filled with crickets  
and winged stars  
of torn light  
The full classroom rocks back and forth  
like a soft nose  
drifting gently inside a feed bag  
At day's end  
she is exhausted  
and removes her tired shoes  
Finally as each inch of light fades  
her body  
resembles the outline  
of a saxophone tangled in shadows

## MOONHAND

the moonhand presses through darkness  
and falls through the branches  
like a spirit

## THE DANCER

A white chalked face  
dances  
across the stage  
of a theater  
his arms  
are oars  
the black lines  
around the eyes  
are swans  
that rise  
and sing  
drowning  
the black carnation  
that blooms  
under the face

## BROWN TIPPED BUTTERFLY

A brown tipped butterfly  
pressed  
between the coffee table  
is eternity's eyelash  
frozen  
into ice

## TOGETHER

When the time  
comes you should  
always go together  
side by side  
face down in the sky  
covered by dirt  
for either one  
left stranded  
alone  
is a glove frozen  
in the darkness  
a penguin  
with a broken wing  
waddling across a rock.

## YOUNG MAN IN MARCH

In my car I pass a young man  
walking slowly down a tar road.  
Nearby the clouds lower their gray stomachs  
to an empty barbed wire field.  
Sleepy maples and birches  
line the road.  
The young man  
never looks around himself,  
he simply watches each foot  
carress the road's rough skin.  
And he disappears from my rear view mirror  
at a steady pace,  
hands hanging from his pockets.

Today was sadder than usual  
men came to repair  
the twisted water  
falling over old bricks  
They were unaware  
of the water's real source  
your voice

## THE WALTZ

No sound  
only your sunken eye the dark waltz  
the curve of your eyebrow  
almost enough  
to suspend me from your eyelash  
the thin rope around my waist  
I hang  
naked before you.

The afternoon steps forward as usual  
and denies its own existence

but I wade among the cold leaves  
on the brown pond  
with you inside my skin.

## THE MORNING-GLORY

What can I say about the morning-glory?  
 We all know it is blue, and owns a white ring  
 with a wonderful yellow center.  
 We all know that a heavy set woman  
 holding a pumpkin to her breasts  
 can stand before it at a country market place  
 for hours and never even notice it is there.  
 We all know the morning-glory  
 can make a poet fall asleep instantly,  
 can make the musician run barefooted across the garden,  
 or cause a young girl to stare in silence  
 behind the railing from her second story apartment.  
 I believe it is able to do all of these things  
 with just one glance, simply one nod  
 of its round and fragile blue skull.  
 We know from our experience with the world  
 that the morning-glory does not hunt with a rifle,  
 does not run for a political office  
 or raise the tax on the price of gasoline.  
 We know all this and more about the morning-glory.  
 But today I am not interested in these things,  
 I do not concern myself with all this premeditated knowledge.  
 I am more interested in the blue flower before me,  
 this particular one out of all the others.  
 I don't have to say anything out loud about it,  
 I just want to stand here and gaze at its delicate white ring  
 that fits perfectly round in this space of air.  
 I want to stand here quietly for hours  
 and imagine the lovely dreams it will give me.

## FIRST WINTER SNOW

The snow's white butterflies  
 devour the headlights.  
 The metal night bounces me  
 upon its rusty knees.

## THE DESPAIR WORLD

Across your forehead they come running,  
they scuff their shoes against your eyebrows  
and leave dust in your straw colored hair.

The abysinnian cat dozes on your green chair,  
tangled among the violins.

Across your temple they come skating  
over the green vein with their tiny skates.  
When they leave they hang their empty skates  
on your eyelashes.

With their phonographs and whiskey glasses  
they dance upon your backbone.  
When it is over they do not even  
lift up your poor arms;  
you sag across the sunken air.

The orchestra spills its bolts and screws  
in your lap.

But, this is a disaster: a spoon, a fork,  
a knee with ink, a window that a collar  
rubs itself against.

Do you hear what they say about you  
when they holler in the streets?  
Already they are crowds far beyond what you  
can imagine.

When will this ridiculous dance break its ankles?

A crippled world crawls on its sleeves,  
drags its arms and legs through the office buildings.

The monks jump from its sleeves  
and bodies float among the river's weeds.

The time has come. The time is past.  
Citizens load your striped neckties on an ocean liner  
and close the book.  
The ice on your fingernails will melt.

Citizens the face in a lighted house detests you anyway,  
so why complain? Fasten your hammock  
to the air.

In a few years, like the rest of us,  
there will not be much left of you:  
a footprint on your eyeball,  
a leaf that clogs your brain's artery,  
and a violin buried deep in your fingernails.



## A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alan Britt grew up in West Palm Beach, Florida. In 1974 he was winner of the annual Florida Poets' Contest through Florida Technological University. After studying literature at the University of Tampa he attended the graduate Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University, where he received his M.A. in 1975. He currently teaches English at Coppin State College in Baltimore, Maryland.

He was recently invited to the two day International Education Symposium at Frostburg State College, Maryland where he read and offered critical assistance to interested participants.

He has given several poetry readings, most recently at the Inner Harbor Readings, Baltimore, MD (1980), the Maryland Writers Council (1978), The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. (1977) and Johns Hopkins University (1975).

His previous books of poems include: *I Suppose the Darkness Is Ours* (1977); *Ashes in the Flesh* (1976); and *I Ask for Silence, Also* (1969). In 1976 his work was chosen for *Best Published Poems of 1976; Borestone Mountain Poetry Awards 1977* (Pacific Books). He has had work in numerous other anthologies, including *Poems from A to Z* (Swallow Press); *For Neruda, For Chile* (Beacon Press); and *The Living Underground* (Whitston Publishers). He has also appeared nationally and internationally in over 300 different magazines, including: *New Letters*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Ann Arbor Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Second Aeon* (Wales), and *West Coast Review* (Canada).

His own Floating Hair Press is currently searching for the most imaginative U.S. and European poets for future books and anthologies.