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# The Formal Impulse

POETRY BY

*John Pidgeon*



PARALLEL PRESS

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K



# The Formal Impulse

and Other Poems by  
John Pidgeon



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for Marianne





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## *Rhyme and Rust*

There are things we do not want to know,  
that circumscribe the transcendental trust.  
There are places we don't want to go.

The vertigo that bridges yes and no,  
the magma just below the floating crust.  
There are things we do not want to know.

The relativity of status quo,  
the benevolence of fever, of pus.  
There are places we don't want to go.

The paradox of oxygen, its flow  
sustaining equally both rhyme and rust.  
There are things we do not want to know.

That there exists nothing above nor below  
the actuality of dust to dust.  
There are places we'd rather not go.

The winds won't tell, they merely blow.  
They do not seem to be aware of us.  
There are things we do not want to know;  
there are places we don't want to go.

## *Panic Attack*

She sits, watching beyond the tempered pane  
when suddenly the something comes again,  
this false euphoria that will not stop  
before it has progressed beyond that gap

of objectless obsessive undertow  
toward an ultra-consciousness of *now*.  
The harsh awareness thumping in her chest  
sets a tingle to her limbs; her raw breaths

rub in and out like some ghostly sex act,  
the episode itself after-the-fact,  
though what that fact may be she doesn't know,  
its dead-ending only part of the flow.

Experience has taught her she will not die.  
At times she finds herself wondering why.

## *Final Epiphany*

*What does not destroy me only makes me stronger.*

—*Nietzsche*

A master beats his draft horse half to death,  
the gaunt gelding accepting as a slave.  
A man stands watching from the edge of earth,  
a drop of blood alighting on his sleeve.  
The mercilessness, the submissiveness:  
this raising of an arm, this lowering of  
a head. The empathy of the witness  
fevers to a final frenzy of love.

A small crowd has gathered round the scene,  
is beseeched politely to please disperse,  
continue on their common ways and means.  
Behold the man, his arms around a horse,  
weeping like one intimate with sorrow,  
weeping like there would be no tomorrow.

## *The Woman Upstairs*

*Is there no way out of the mind?*

— Sylvia Plath, “Apprehensions”

He stirs to the sound of a soft knocking.

*I will leave for them milk on the night stand,*

He rises, puts on his glasses. “Coming.”

*crack the window, seal them in a dreamland.*

The door opens to a dimly lit hall.

*I will ask only for a postage stamp.*

A woman stands before him. Silent, still.

*My face must look a sight in this low lamp.*

He recognizes her now from upstairs.

*“I hate to disturb you, but I was wondering . . .”*

He hands her several stamps. She only stares.

*His hair’s the color of clouds in lightning.*

Later, he cracks the door—she is still there.

He waits, looks again. But the hall is bare.

## *Selvage*

*I could not run without having to run forever.*

— *Sylvia Plath, "The Bee Meeting"*

The gas molecules diffuse one by one,  
eclipsing every nuance in their wake:  
when dandelions were daisies in the grass  
and clouds could cull a story from the sky;

the moment she first rode her bike alone,  
then realized there was no turning back;  
when first she learned what lamentation was,  
and understood there was no asking why.

And as the synapses begin to fire  
for lack of oxygen along the way,  
she comprehends a concentrating light

that slowly narrows to a dying star.  
She watches as it closes like an eye,  
senseless of the senselessness of night.

## *The Way to Letting Go*

We grow afraid of taking hold.  
To have a grasp on anything  
is half the way to letting go.

The accumulating zero  
contributes to a buffering.  
Yet we're afraid to take a hold

of anything already told,  
of singing what's already sung:  
it's half the way to letting go.

The end of every yes is no;  
the old grow not unlike the young.  
Don't be afraid. To take a hold

is not so very manifold;  
it is in fact a simple thing.  
If half the way to letting go

is learning that it must be so,  
why this ambivalence to cling?  
Don't be afraid of taking hold;  
it's half the way to letting go.



## *The Formal Impulse*

Is more than the lean Apollonian  
instinct to influence  
the lush strut and dance  
of those hopelessly Dionysian.

It isn't on the outside looking in,  
stopping up its own breath;  
nor some decorative wreath  
for a stanza solid as a tombstone.

It sure as shit is not some quaint, witless  
anal-retentive stricture.  
But rather, an aperture,  
a structure of meaning. No more, no less.

If verse was born of song,  
we should not fear to sing.

## *Winter Solstice*

Let night yawn long inside December;  
I'll embrace the deep marquee of bone shard,  
the cotton geometry, sharp as stars,  
adrift on a cool celestial whisper.

Let day shy by within a shutter's beat;  
there's light enough to flood a photograph,  
to freeze-frame a whimper into a laugh:  
only a clown is always saying Cheese.

Let day emerge from out a diamond mine,  
let night roll over in a fading grave;  
I will embrace whatever's never done,  
will learn to love whatever's learned to move.  
The flux of what is every day becoming  
becomes the very essence of our being.

## *Ward*

*(for Yvonne Marie Pigeon)*

You ride the slowly elevating cell,  
Hardly noticing the red attending lights  
That settle now before the ninth level.  
Your still-nimble, if numbing, body sits  
Upon a rolling throne that never quite  
Moves quick enough for one so far advanced:  
Ashen phantom, unbidden amid bleached white.  
Miscast, unwilling to play the doctor's dunce,  
You query like a child from a dream  
(This morning while you made meatloaf surprise,  
The surreal news took you too soon to scream):  
Your chauffeur, candid as a lamp, replies,  
"This is the cancer floor." Inside raw words,  
Your mind engages in a flight of birds.

## *Approximations*

Were it not for the absolute  
Indifference, the too rude  
Disillusionment of this  
Darkness leaving less and less  
Of you behind every night,  
One might watch a sun set  
In more than angry amber,  
More than sullen thunder.

These Caliban's looking-glass lines  
Metastasize like demon genes:  
In honeysuckle syllables,  
So many shows and tells,  
Hope is the thing that festers  
Inside of sons and mothers.

## *Fair*

It doesn't seem quite fair,  
this rife indifference.  
But nature doesn't care

one way or the other.  
No need to take offense  
if this seems less than fair.

No need to sit and stare.  
What would be the sense  
when nature doesn't care?

And the point of despair?  
What place has innocence  
if nature isn't fair?

Why bother to declare?  
or use the future tense  
when nature doesn't care?

It's neither here nor there.  
We get what we dispense.  
Why, then, is it unfair  
if nature doesn't care?

## *Soundings*

He sits beside the bed and tries to think  
of what her voice had sounded like, to find  
he could hardly remember now. The look  
on his face would have made her laugh out loud.

Until, unfolding of its own accord,  
a memory opens up along a beach  
and the sound of a single whispered word  
washes over him. The pleasure of an ache.

Her chest rises, falls. He watches it move  
slower, still slower, to a final brief sigh.  
Silence. He blinks, hesitant as first love,  
his mouth, like hers, set in perpetual ahh.

He stands, at last bends to her lips to hear  
a sound as of a shell held to his ear.

## *Then*

When the heads of young men no longer bloom  
like roses on a distant battlefield,  
blurred purple as hearts beneath a cool moon;

when the swelled belly of a dry-eyed child  
no longer bloats to a leather balloon  
kept from floating free of its bone cage hold;

when a mother must no longer sit, drawn  
into the stillness of a casket, stunned  
silent amid the sound of her grandchildren;

when raw-faced teens no longer know the need  
to plug themselves like sitting bucks, or run  
their blades along thin-veined wrists to let bleed

the deep red rivers away—only then  
will there be no need of reckoning when.

## *Road Kill*

The slick skid marks, perfectly unswerving,  
paralleled to nowhere and to nothing  
along some hundred feet of open road.  
We'd passed the scene already when she said,  
"Wait, there's something lying in the long grass."  
So we stopped, stepping toward the fresh carcass,  
the ragged edges of the exploded  
belly yet warm to the touch in the mid-  
morning stillness lightly surrounding us.  
"It must have just happened," she said. "A bus  
or truck," I ventured, "from the force of impact."  
"Look," she whispered, pointing. And there, intact  
in their placental world, thrown clear, lay twin  
fawns, as though asleep on some patch of lawn.



## *Ticking*

You clear your throat some dozen times a minute,  
a low staccato row of muted coughs,  
perhaps the fragments of a broken laugh,  
a laughter with no hint of mirth in it.

The exaggerated blinking, blinking,  
as if in disbelief of your own eyes;  
the double, treble, quadruple takes  
always and never reassuring.

The twitching, subtle twitching of your head  
as though you were in answer to someone  
whose questions to you never would be done.  
Some inquiries are better left unsaid.

I recognize in you another boy,  
a lonely boy from another day.

## *What Remains*

*Where the author's formulations challenge the reader's credulity,  
I have quoted the German original in the notes. Seeing is believing.*

— *Ralph Manheim, translator* Mein Kampf

There's something to the feel of ash,  
its silkiness of residue,  
from which one cannot easily wash.

Not unlike some sibilant hush  
whose loose affect slides over you,  
there's something to the feel of ash

more real than any maddening dash  
from childhood terrors peeking through,  
the touch from which one cannot wash.

How lighter than the least eyelash,  
how paler than the palest hue,  
this something of the sense of ash.

As insubstantial as a wish,  
the ashes rise beyond the flue,  
from which one cannot hope to wash.

To wish it were pure balderdash  
is characteristic but untrue:  
there's something to the feel of ash  
from which one cannot ever wash.

*Bern: Switzerland: 1905*

He had the look of one who'd put  
his finger inside a socket  
and lived to tell about it,  
this Samson averse to haircuts  
and dress socks. In grammar school,  
where he would never learn to fit,  
his teacher deemed him retarded,  
confirming the relativity of 'fool'.

Till one day our young patent clerk,  
employing only paper and pen,  
destroyed and pieced together again  
the blueprint of a universe  
for all who neither knew nor cared  
that  $E$  should equal  $mc^2$ .

## *Ethereal*

It's not situated in the stratosphere,  
nor hidden amid the cumulonimbus;  
not some parallel universe, never  
land, or other-dimensional rhombus.  
(Nor is its antithesis a melting pot  
of bubbling folk set on low boil,  
from some fantastical Jules Verne plot,  
far beneath this fragile topsoil.)

It isn't any nine layer high-rise,  
not an abstraction or alternate plane  
or renovated earthly paradise,  
astronomical dome, or equation.  
According to the bartered son of man,  
the kingdom of heaven is here, within.

## *Why He Declines to Read*

Hell, a guy might j-just as well write it  
the way he's g-g-going to read it,  
and so? No. For he will sometimes waver  
on the 'wrong' word.

Yet perhaps it's better  
he doesn't always stutter-step the same  
line each time he tries to reread the damn  
thing, each time out somehow making it new,  
his images skimming across the few  
audience members like pebbles along  
water.

If he could just sing it like a song  
perhaps he wouldn't stick at all. Ah, but  
he can't write that kind of music. Sh-Shit.  
Forgive him, then, if he declines to read;  
one cannot always say what one has said.

## *Old Man with Cat*

A tabby curls up in the morning sun;  
dust particles drift in the beam of light.  
A timepiece chimes the hour to no one.

The old man lies in bed, a greyish white;  
a leg with half a foot shows from beneath  
the blanket. He has not moved a muscle,

not so much as an involuntary breath  
in seven days, except for when the muzzle  
of his cat comes against its master,

at first for warmth during the cold of night—  
that night a week ago. Now it is after  
something else to comfort it in its plight.

Who is to say the old man would reprove?  
A species does in order to survive.

## *Woman on a Bus*

“It doesn’t seem to matter anymore,”  
a woman murmured sitting next to me.  
“I can’t remember what all this is for.”

She looked my way and then looked at the floor.  
“I know there must be more to liberty  
than wondering if it matters anymore.

“Look at me. I’m no better than a whore.  
You sell your soul or you sell your body.”  
She glanced around. “Is that what this is for?”

Then she motioned to a sign on a store  
front: *Support our troops: bring them home today.*  
“Does nobody remember anymore?”

she asked, making her way toward the door.  
“We market everything but memory.  
Hell, maybe that’s what all of this is for.”

She stepped onto the sidewalk like a shore,  
then turned and smiled as if to say to me,  
“It really doesn’t matter anymore—  
nobody knows what all of this is for.”

*Edwin Arlington Robinson*

Fit only for poetry, you would compose  
most evenings within a wreath of lamplight,  
alone though seldom lonely, if not quite  
at home among the dispossessed you chose  
politely on which to eavesdrop, to expose  
a series of lives lived just out of sight,  
whom you would call the children of the night,  
while others wondered if a rose is a rose.

And though you turned to epics in the end,  
your lyrics would outlast your Camelot  
in lines as honed as any anecdote  
on the practice of a master craftsman  
who spent all morning removing a hyphen  
and all afternoon putting it back again.



## *While You Were Sleeping*

He listens to her clench her teeth at night,  
a mashing of enameled bone on bone,  
and wonders what it is that holds her tight,  
that sets her jaw to work grinding stone.  
Then he remembers something she had said  
one morning as they sat to eat their eggs:  
“Were you aware you jerk about in bed  
as if you would shake something from your leg?  
So, what is it you’re kicking in your dreams?”  
“Perhaps I’m only running,” he hesitates—  
“What do you suppose your grinding means?”  
“I do not think I want to speculate.”  
And so they keep each other up at night  
whom they would bore to drowsiness come light.

## *The Specimen*

*(on Spitzweg's painting "Scholar of Natural Sciences")*

And if the sun throws gold beyond the window,  
illuminating from moment to moment  
a million still-lives amid shades of yellow  
and green, the scholar still must take his minute  
to smell the dust on pressed roses and bones,  
illuminating the minutia of  
mind over matters of footnotes and tomes  
in his elusive pursuing of proof.

We are the only things that make a study  
of other things, oftentimes unaware  
that while preoccupied with our inquiry,  
we may become the object in the jar.  
Of all the things we scrutinize, none else  
quite captures us like capturing ourselves.

## *The Dispossessed*

*(for Paul Skenandore and Dee Sweet)*

Go west, Redman, toward the setting sun—  
go westward, I say, while you are yet strong  
enough to tough a thousand miles. If one  
or two of your elderly or sickly young  
should succumb, it will not be for a lack  
of compassion on our part, be assured.  
So go, my children, and do not look back.  
You will be better off. I give my word.

And so we left, as our New Father would have  
it, sad but stirred to hope for things to come.  
Though no longer free, we are no less brave;  
if no longer home, we have made our home,  
washed clear of a land of ten-thousand years,  
washed clean away, along a trail of tears.

## *Serial Lover*

“You are not looking hard enough,”  
his parents would lament to him.  
“It shouldn’t be so hard to love.”

To which he’d answer with a cough,  
or sigh at why one must assume  
he was not looking hard enough.

He heard it as an epitaph  
more fitting for the nearly numb:  
it shouldn’t be so hard to love.

Monotonous as a mourning dove  
pouring its melancholy hymn:  
you are not looking hard enough.

And if in fact he loved too much,  
as if each lover were a whim,  
well, it shouldn’t *be* so hard to love.

That’s what he told all those he loved,  
that’s what he’d say as they lay dumb:  
You are not looking hard enough;  
it shouldn’t be so hard to love.

## *Estranged*

A man dropped dead today in our front yard,  
delivering the early morning paper,  
assisting his estranged wife, running hard  
from house to house, till he could run no more.  
“He had complained of pain and a shortness  
of breath when loading up the car earlier.”  
That’s what the woman kept repeating, less  
for information’s sake than the meager  
need to make what seemed some late confession.  
“He still mourned his father’s recent death.”

And while she watched some good Samaritans  
give chest compressions and a final breath,  
she said, “He took the separation very hard.”  
A man dropped dead today in our front yard.

## *Testament*

They hadn't even thought to write it down,  
Not word one of what they'd heard or seen,  
That first generation who had known him,  
So convinced were they that he would come  
For them while yet they breathed, believed, begot,  
Till not one was left alive who could forget,  
Thus leaving their children's children to write,  
Disagree, augment, diminish, rewrite,  
Distill a mixture of contradictions,  
Of special pleadings and repetitions,  
For some three hundred fifty years before  
Constantine ordered closed the canon door,  
One line belying all that came to be:  
"My father, why have you forsaken me?"

## *Letter Home*

*(for Lauren Johnson, 1909–1946)*

The sea is not as cruel as some might think:  
A memory washes in a whirlwind spell  
As blank as any deck about to sink  
In water deeper than all wishing wells.  
Tomorrow we set out for Rouen, land  
Of Baudelaire—another wanderer—  
To ride the backside of Poseidon's hand,  
To watch a wake unfold into forever.

Sometimes I dream of softly falling snow  
Yet melting on young tongues like latent tears.  
Sometimes it seems almost too much to bear:  
Not knowing what one always thought he knew.  
I've heard we're very near where Christ was born;  
Wish to Christ that I were near where I was born.

## *Suggested Themes for Your Sonnet*

Alienation, altruism, ambiance,  
Beliefs, betrayals, bewilderment,  
Ailments, antithesis, allegiance,  
Bees and birds and bereavement.

Caesars, circuitousness, certainty,  
Debasement, deterrents, derision,  
Cedings, circumstance, ceremony,  
Derangements, defects, defusion.

Ethos, epiphanies, evanescence,  
F---ing, fluctuation, futility,  
Evils, existence-versus-essence,  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, fragility.

Genius and the generative,  
Genealogies of love.





John Pidgeon is a product of the graduate writing program at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. His credits include *Poetry*, *Poetry Daily*, *The Formalist*, *Rosebud*, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *The Wisconsin Academy Review*, and *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*. He lives in Green Bay with his wife, Marianne, and their five children.



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