

Radiance Versus Ordinary Light:
Selected Poems by Carl Phillips

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW



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Introduction

Since the appearance of two poems in 1992, our spring issue, Carl Phillips has been *The Kenyon Review's* most frequent poetry contributor: thirty poems in nine appearances. I remember Marilyn Hacker's excitement when she first told me about a young, talented poet whom she'd been reading—a high-school Latin teacher from Boston. She didn't know much more about him, she said, but his poems were wonderful and she had decided to print two in *KR*. In that same year Phillips's first book, *In the Blood*, won the Samuel French Morse Prize and appeared from North-eastern University Press. That was two decades and twelve books ago.

The present poems, culled from Phillips's *KR* features, show his evolution, thematic recursions, and stylistic signatures, and reveal as well why he has become one of the most highly lauded poets in America. Penetrating and distinctive, his poems wield a powerful blend of innovation and traditional coherence. From his earliest work, you'll notice that mixture: metaphysical intricacy (in trope, in syntax, in rhetoric),

blended with a romantic intimacy at times disarming in its revelations. Already, in “Cotillion,” Phillips displays these distinguishing gifts—a sustained yet hesitating syntax, a conceit-like complexity of image:

As in any crowd, lately, of people, the heavy
corsage of them stepping in groups, the torn bloom
that is each taking his own particular distance,
I think the trick is one neither of joining or not
joining, but holding, as long as I can, to some
space between, . . .

He can be beautiful in his realism, as in “Erasure” with its precise natural renderings. Describing a horse as it nears, Phillips notes “A smell to him like that of the earth when it’s been / too long dry, drought-long, and the rain just starting. . . .” He can be richly mythological, making use of his wide training and reading in the classics, as in “Here, on Earth”: “When the battle, like favor, shifts / in Greek epic, there are smaller signs inside / the large ones.” If his is love poetry, it is a love unfulfilled, or flawed, even foolhardy, as in “Radiance Versus Ordinary Light”: “until that’s / how we like it, I’ll break your heart, break mine.” If his is religious poetry, it is made of disbelief as well as “from the devotions.” He can recombine ancient tropes with the currencies of AIDS and the clarities and slippages of racial and queer identities.

Throughout his work, paradox and opposition—long sentences and short phrases, adoration and ruin, an impulse for song and the huge surrounding silences of self and its many forms of erasure—give Phillips’s vision its stunning torque and sway. The closing lines of “As a Blow, from the West” demonstrate the effects of his masterful contradictions. After ninety lines of observation and discovery (“the world // was birdless, lit, yielding, it / seemed safe”), Phillips disestablishes all he has created. Memory shatters, a lovers’ relationship dissolves as dream, and the very “gift” of one’s heart is doubted. Thus the poem revises its own truth. The overall achievement is an achievement of style and story wedded, where a tale is inseparable from its telling. Phillips’s mature work—hesitant, self-revising, querulous, restless—has come to depict the process of thinking itself, opting, recasting, redirecting . . . and in this, he is powerfully assured.

Paradox lies at the heart of art. This is the greatest paradox of Phillips’s own art, and perhaps the paradox of the lyric poem: If a work can speak to the deepest parts of us, one at a time, in a kind of intimate conversation—in communion as well as in commiseration—then it is more likely able to speak to legions of us in the wider public arena of shared recognition and hope. After all, as he writes in his new “Last Night”: “There’s / a trembling inside the both of us, / there’s a trembling, inside us both.” Such is the great gift of Carl Phillips’s poetry.

David Baker
Poetry Editor

Cotillion

Every one of these bodies, those in drag, those
not, loves a party, that much is clear. The blond
with the amazing lashes — lashes, more amazingly,

his own — tells me it is like when a small bird
rises, sometimes, like the difficult thing is not to.
I think he is talking about joy or pain or desire

or any of the several things desire, sweet drug,
too sweet, can lead to. I think he means moments,
like this one, sudden, when in no time I know that

these lashes, the mouth that could use now more
painting, these hairless, shaven-for-the-event arms
whose shine, against that of the gown, a spill of

blood and sequins the arms themselves spill from,
glitters still, but dully, like what is not the
main prize does always — I know this man is mine,

if I want him. Meanwhile around us, the room fairly
staggers with men, and an aching to be lovely, loved,
even. As in any crowd, lately, of people, the heavy

corsage of them stepping in groups, the torn bloom
that is each taking his own particular distance,
I think the trick is one neither of joining or not

joining, but of holding, as long as I can, to some
space between, call it rest for the wary, the slow
dragging to nowhere I call heaven. I'm dancing,

maybe, but not on air: this time, through water.

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW, SUMMER 1994
NEW SERIES, VOLUME XVI, NUMBER 3

The Pinnacle

Having found a trail, we
but followed. Technically,
you followed me. How

much is not what it looks like.
I'm remembering parts
so overgrown, I kept

stopping to ask which way
from here. You did not
ask this question. Each time

I looked back, you weren't
stopping, you were
following, you were not

asking questions. In time
we came to a sloped
meadow. The tall grass

made me nervous.
Though I explained,
I was not understood

entirely. You were patient,
you allowed me some
time to become

different. If I didn't
change, you didn't notice,
for I pushed forward,

crossing the meadow by
playing a game in my head
called *Cross the Meadow*

or Don't Cross It, by which
we arrived at the wooded
hemline of forest. The path

steepening upward, but
more clear. We ascended.
I am remembering

the obvious—trees
mostly, and a hardness of
breath that you said had

less to do with altitude
than with shape, our
being out of. To agree was

easy, and not binding. I
liked that. Almost like
pleasure, for a small

distance. I am including,
in particular, that sudden
denseness of ferns you

called a sea, and I said it
was like that—but
wasn't it also some over-

whelmingly green argument
whose point was that
not everything requires

light? You did not
answer, having not asked
that question. As when, if

frequently there were
sounds nothing visible
could account for, I did

not pursue them. What is
not related? I am still
remembering the feathers

— five of them, long, a
lightish brown with
darker brown stippling—

you found scattered to
one of the trail's sides. I
had missed them:

those of a turkey, as
you suggested— or, as
I said, a pheasant? When

you said I should
hold them, I thanked you.
I can appreciate small

gifts. I stopped thinking
what I was thinking—the
uncleanliness of birds—

and took them into
my hand. I arranged
the feathers into the rough

shape of a fan, and began,
like that, to feel cooler, more
sure: the pinnacle we'd been

told the trail led to would
come, the trail would end
in what they usually do,

a view. There are limited
choices. Already *Go*
Down or Don't, in my head.

As a Blow, from the West

*Names for the moon:
Harvest; and Blue; and
Don't Touch Me—*

and Do. I dreamed I had
made a home on the side
of a vast, live volcano,

that the rest was water,
that I was one among many of
no distinction: we but

lived there, like so many
birds that, given the chance
not to fly for once in

formation, won't take it, or
cannot, or— or— but
what of choice can a bird know?

Down the volcano's sides,
in the pose of avalanche
except frozen, and so

densely it seemed impossible
they should not strangle
one another — yet they

did not — grew all
the flowers whose names
I'd meant to master;

it was swift, the dream — so
much, still, to catch
up to — though I could not

have known that, of course,
then: isn't it only in
the bracing and first wake of

loss that we guess most cleanly
the speed with which what held us
left us? In the dream, the world

was birdless, lit, yielding, it
seemed safe, which is not to say
you weren't in it. You were, but

changed somewhat, not so much
a man of few words,
more the look of one who

—having entered willfully
some danger, having just returned
from it—chooses instead

of words his body as
the canvas across which to
wordlessly broadcast his coming

through. We lived
in a manner that—if it
didn't suggest an obliviousness

to a very real and always-there
danger—I would call heady;
it was not that. Think,

rather, of the gods: how,
if they do in fact know
everything, they must understand

also they will be eventually
overthrown by a new order,
which is at worst a loss

of power, but not of life,
as the gods know it. I was
not, that is, without

ambition: the illicit, in
particular I, would make it
my business to have studied;

and of that which is gained
easily, to want none
of it. Flowers; names

for the moon. It was
swift, the dream, the body
a wordless and stalled

avalanche that, since forgivable—
if I could—I would forgive, poor
live but flagging, dying now

volcano. And the water
around its sides receding with
a dream's swiftness: everywhere,

soon, sand and sand, a desert that,
because there was no water,
and because they missed it,

the natives had called a sea, and
to the sea had given a name:
Friendship, whose literal

translation in the country of
dream is roughly “that which
all love evolves
down to”—

*Until to leave, or
try to—and have drowned*

*trying— becomes refrain,
the one answer each time
to whatever question:*

what was the place called?

what was the house like?

what was it we did inside it?

how is it possible that it cannot be enough to have given
up to you now the dream as— for a time, remember— I did give

my truest self? why won't you take it— if a gift, if yours?

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW, SUMMER/AUTUMN 2002,
NEW SERIES, VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 3/4

even to a thing undoing itself,
there is— Sing it:

One of them was sucking the others—in turn, slowish—off.

A kiss where roughly, in the dark, his brow should be.

II.

If out of the distance between descent
and the memory of it
could be spun a thread,
I'd make a softness,
I'd be the tortoise-shell boat
wrapped soft

inside it, where nothing shines.

That was yesterday. There's little
that won't sound reasonable
for a time. Then reason passes,

the speed of traveling
stays constant,
we have merely become, ourselves,
more conscious of it.

I clap my hands
over all of it: *What's ruined?*
What isn't yet?

I clap my hands: A field, and as if I'd fallen here before,
and I'd forgotten.
That's not possible—

You carried me. You took me. You hid your face.

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW, SPRING 2004,
NEW SERIES, VOLUME XXVI, NUMBER 2

Erasure

Brindled, where what's left of the light finds him, he cowers
in front of me: one way, as I remember it, that a body
having grown accustomed to receiving punishment expresses

receipt, or a readiness for it, or—wild, bewildered—the desire to.

Above us, the usual branches lift unprophetically or not, depending:
now spears; now arrows. There's a kind of tenderness that makes
more tender

all it touches. There's a need that ruins. Dark. The horse
comes closer. A smell to him like that of the earth when it's been
too long dry, drought-long and the rain just starting, that first release, up,
that the earth gives up like a name meant to be kept secret, or as when
the memory of rescue has displaced the chance of it, unlooked-for, into

clearer view: like that exactly: oh he smells like the sweet wet earth, itself.

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW, SPRING 2005,
NEW SERIES, VOLUME XXVII, NUMBER 2

Radiance Versus Ordinary Light

Meanwhile the sea moves uneasily, like a man who
suspects what the room reels with as he rises into it
is violation—his own: he touches the bruises at each
shoulder and, on his chest,

the larger bruise, star-shaped,
a flawed star, or hand, though he remembers no hands,
has tried—can't remember . . .

That kind of rhythm to it,
even to the roughest surf there's a rhythm findable,
which is why we keep coming here, to find it, or that's
what we say. We dive in and, as usual,

the swimming
feels like that swimming the mind does in the wake
of transgression, how the instinct to panic at first
slackens that much more quickly, if you don't
look back. Regret,

like pity, changes nothing really, we
say to ourselves and, less often, to each other, each time
swimming a bit farther,

leaving the shore the way

the water—in its own watered, of course, version
of semaphore—keeps leaving the subject out, flashing
Why should it matter now, and *Why*,
why shouldn't it,
as the waves beat harder, hard against us, until that's
how we like it, I'll break your heart, break mine.

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW, SPRING 2005,
NEW SERIES, VOLUME XXVII, NUMBER 2

Almost Tenderly

It had the heft of old armor—like a breastplate of bronze; like a shield, on hinges. It swung apart like a door. Inside it, the sea was visible—the sea and, on the shore, a man: stripped; beaten. Very gently—tenderly, almost—as if to the man, to calm him, but in fact to no one, the sea was singing: *Here, in the deepening blue of our corruption, let*

love be at least one corruption we chose together. But the man said nothing. *Why not call restlessness our crown, and our dominion,* sang the sea . . . But the man was a brokenness like any other: moving, until it fails to move—the way, over time, suffering makes no difference. His wounds were fresh; still open. Where the light fell on them, they flashed, like the sea.

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW, WINTER 2009,
NEW SERIES, VOLUME XXXI, NUMBER 1

Next Stop, Arcadia

There's a man asking to be worshipped only.
He looks inconsolable; rugged; like those
once-popular, but hardly seen anymore,
portraits—depictions, really—of Jesus.
There's another man. He wants to be
flogged while naked and on all fours—
begging for it; no mercy; he says *Make me
beg*.

There's a field nearby. Stretch of field—
like the one they say divides prayer from
absolute defeat. Here's where the pack-horse,
scaring at nothing visible, broke its tether;
no sign of it since. You know this field:
a constant stirring inside an otherwise great
stillness that never stops surrounding it,
the way memory doesn't, though memory
is not just a stillness,

but a field that stirs.

The two men— they've gone nowhere.
They've got questions. Like *Which one's*

*the field you can actually remember? and
Which one's the one you're only imagining
now—standing inside it, staying there,
stay,*

until it looks like home? Who are they
to be asking questions? You look from one man
to the other. You keep looking—but between
submission, or the seeming resistance that,
more often than not, lately, comes just
before it,

which is better? It's hard to decide:
the ugliness of weeping, or the tears themselves?

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW, WINTER 2009,
NEW SERIES, VOLUME XXXI, NUMBER 1

The Life You Save

After the pinefields, there's the marsh—you can
see it

from here. *And after that?* History
ending; myth, as it starts

to stir. *And after that?*

••

After that, just the turning back again. Nothing you
won't know already:

the pinefield; the marsh—

And the reeds, too? The reeds that grow there?

••

Yes,

and the reeds that grow there: beautiful;
invasive; they jostle

in the smallest wind.
Soon it will be as if nothing had ever happened.

FROM THE KENYON REVIEW, WINTER 2009,
NEW SERIES, VOLUME XXXI, NUMBER 1

Capella

I.

I miss the sea.

I miss the storms
that stopped there.

How much is luck, again opening,
and luck shutting itself down, what we
never expected, or only sort of did,
or should have?

The windfalls of my mistakes sweetly rot beneath me.

Two hawks lift — headed north — from my highest bough.

II.

So he's seen the blizzard that the future
looks like, and gotten lost,
a little. All the same —

he gathers the honeysuckle in his arms,
as for a lover. Cloud of bees,
of yellow.

His chest, blurring bright with it.

Who's to say brutality's what he'll be wearing,
when he goes?

III.

There's a light that estrangement,
more often than not, briefly
leaves behind it.

Then the dark—blue and damned,
erotic: here, where—done at last
with flashing like
power itself at first, then what power

comes to—the field
lays down its winded swords. —My head;
beside yours.

Carl Phillips

Carl Phillips is the author of twelve books of poetry, including *Silverchest* (2013) and *Double Shadow* (2011), which won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Other books include *Quiver of Arrows: Selected Poems 1986–2006*, a translation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (2004), and *Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Life and Art of Poetry* (2004). A finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, his honors include the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the Theodore Roethke Memorial Foundation Poetry Award, the Thom Gunn Award for Gay Male Poetry, an award in literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Library of Congress, and the Academy of American Poets, to which he was elected a Chancellor in 2006. In addition to contemporary poetry and the writing of it, his academic interests include classical philology, translation, and the history of prosody in English.

The Kenyon Review

One of the nation's leading literary magazines, *The Kenyon Review* was founded at Kenyon College in 1939 by poet and critic John Crowe Ransom. Recognized for its influence on contemporary literature, the magazine published some of the greatest writers of the day—from Katherine Anne Porter to Robert Penn Warren, F. Scott Fitzgerald to Flannery O'Connor. Many were first introduced to the literary world by *The Kenyon Review*, including Robert Lowell, Thomas Pynchon, and James Wright. Today, edited by David Lynn, it continues to publish work by the most exciting voices in contemporary American and world literature.

In recent years, the trustees of *The Kenyon Review* have extended this mission: to create and maintain a community that deeply cares about writing. Central to that proposition has been *KR's* Fellowship Program, as well as nationally recognized writing workshops, especially the Young

Writers program. Each year, the gala dinner of the Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement has raised thousands of dollars in scholarship money, allowing talented, disadvantaged students from across the U.S. to participate in our summer programs. They are the writers of the future.

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