

A RAGE OF INTELLIGENCE



Poems by Paul Bussan

A RAGE OF INTELLIGENCE

POEMS

PAUL BUSSAN

PSB Publishing
New Haven

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Text set in Times New Roman

Design by Paul Bussan

First Printing 2003

Library of Congress Control Number 2003104046

ISBN 0-9726884-0-4

Published by
PSB Publishing
288 Willow Street
New Haven, CT 06511

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“...but by ‘Catholic Literature’ is not to be understood a literature which treats exclusively or primarily of Catholic matters, of Catholic doctrine, controversy, history, persons or politics; but it includes all subjects of literature whatever, treated as a Catholic would treat them, *and as only he can treat them.*”

John Henry Cardinal Newman

You say nothing new is made;
it is not important;
just make a cup
from which your brother can drink.

Antonio Machado

A RAGE OF INTELLIGENCE

FOR THE TIME BEING

And then for years
It was all he could do
To drink and read Machado.

While poems got drunk
Before breakfast,
And she lay unkissed,
Dom Antonio gave blood
From both of his wrists,

Then closed his bag,
Bowed with care,
And left him injected
With a certain alertness
Which for the time being
Kept him aware.

CAPERNAUM

You cannot elude your
destiny, you cannot get
rid of your talent.

Cardinal Newman

To watch men walk away
When it's too hard
To get it,

To see women sell out
The best part
Of themselves,

To stick
To the self
With passion unheard of,

Is harder than nails.

JAMES BOND

She didn't need makeup,
And could handle herself
If a man made a pass,

So when push came to shove
I just slipped her dress off her,
Then backed both her cheeks

Up flat to the glass
To show her the stuff
She was made of.

RENOVATING

Despite melancholy grains
Of demolished plaster,
And studs that scream murder
When pulled from their joints,
A header gets built
To put up a fight
Against weight
Left by walls
Swept away.

WITH A CERTAIN FEROCITY

The night is dark,
And I am far from home,
With headlights tilted
To deflect those trucks
Just up ahead

Who reckon
That I'll lose my nerve
Before I reach my destination,
And pull into the breakdown lane
Looking for a tow.

THE MIRACLE OF COOGAN'S BLUFF

Reality has strangled
invention.

Red Smith
NY Herald Tribune
October 4, 1951

Most had given them
Up for dead
And started to head
For home,

Except for my father,
Recently married
And lying alone,
Who continued to listen

To the game
Over the radio,
Then came to his feet,
With me jumping up

And down in his womb,
As the ball descended
On half-empty seats
To bring back to life the Giants.

STRAIGHT, NO CHASER

I liked the frankness;
The honest recognition
Of difference and desire.

I liked the way
We took our clothes off
Without a word.

I liked your look
Of subtle shock
When I calmly spread
Your thighs and got inside
Without a hitch.

And most of all
I liked your squint
Of self-possessed surprise
That this was actually happening
On a winter afternoon.

3-D MAN

The booze he drank
Burned off his fat
And got as far as bone,
Then shot him through
A wall of black
With just a few deep cuts,
And left him viewing human flesh
Through diagnostic eyes.

TRAMPOLINE

Let's go to the dump.
Let's dig our way

Without a map
Through bits of heart

And broken glass
Until we find an old truck tire

Built big enough for two.
We'll roll it home

And lay it flat
Then bounce our bodies up and down

Until we're turning somersaults
On rubber that's worn out.

TOUGH LADY

She flinched,
But held firm,
With legs that don't quit,
As her intellect
Slipped into gear,

Then let loose her hips,
Released the clutch,
And went to look
And touch.

But her guts,
Now filled with intelligence, said
"No. Not yet.
Let us set."

"Allow us to cool
And start to take shape,
Then each time we stick
To one of your ribs,

Fashion a diamond
As hard as the alphabet
To wear on the tip
Of your tongue."

PROGRESS REPORT

A Tuesday morning
In my forty-sixth year.

I continue my efforts
At finding a voice

That's clear and terse
And sticks to the point

But starts to growl
Whenever it sees

A good English gin
Chased with cheap beer.

OMEGA

Sometimes during Mass
I check out women's asses,
From the thin and prissy
To the big and round,
Until I find the one
Which keeps the right amount
Of skin with meat and fat
To form a healthy, cursive line
That's just asking to be grabbed.

MAJUSCULE

Form your letters slowly
and carefully; making
things well is more
important than making
them.

Antonio Machado

This morning my car
Wouldn't start up.
The mechanic informs me
The battery needs charging,
Or then again,
Perhaps something worse.

To pass time
I read poems
Written by women
Scared of the dark,
And by men
Who cry in their beer.

But through the noise
Of their tears
Comes the woodpecker's point.

Despite the tree's years
And toughness of grain,
The bird perseveres
At doing its job,
Then stops
For no reason at all.

BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER

For Ted Williams

He spat and swore
And threw a fit,
Then put his fist
Through solid glass
Unprotected by a mitt,
Yet still he never won.

But by the time
It came for him to quit
He'd learned to hold it in
Until he saw it coming,
Then let it go and hit,

Ending up
With both eyes shut
And feeling not a thing,
But long and smooth
And cutting through the heavy air
A little quicker than before.

THE LAST HOME RUN

For Ted Williams
1918-2002

If Hopper had sketched it
In black and white

The stands would be full
Of half-vacant stares,

And the sky so thick
With brushstrokes of grey,

That only the ball
As it sailed through the air

Would clearly be seen
Beneath stadium lights.

ON HITTING .400

Before he had taken
His first swing of the day,

The umpire bent over
To sweep off home plate,

And said to the kid
Without looking up

“To make solid contact
Four times out of ten

A man in this league
Has got to be loose.”

LAXATIVE

In the snapshot that they took
The entrance to the bowels
Looks clear,
Then winds into the dark.

So for measure and good luck
Take that lump
They've got locked up
Behind the church's lung,

And hide it in a place
Where it can oversee a mix
Of oxygen and blood
That lubricates your guts,

And keeps you clear
Of second sightings
Beneath fluorescent lights,
Plus images of shortcuts.

PROFESSIONAL CARE

First he shook his hand
And took him in
With a friendly grin,

Then tied him down
And spun him round
The inside of his head so hard

That on his wrists and legs
He still has the bruises
To prove he tried to do it.

BREAKFAST

This morning the world
Is fresh as a fish
Flown in from the coast last week.
Yet something within
Its thawing skin
Calls me out of the bed

Where I lay wide awake
Not thinking of dreams
That come in the night
But only of women
Who go good with coffee
And what I would like to eat.

HALF-ASSED

“(John) Berryman committed suicide by jumping off a bridge onto the ice of the Mississippi River.”

Encyclopedia Britannica

When the impact of the earth
Broke your glasses clean in half
Every drop of ink you ever drank
Burst out in black & white
To write a final run-on sentence
With no ifs or &'s or buts
That ended in a period
Made from human cannonball
Which rolled down the bank
And came to rest
Just two feet shy
Of winter's melting ice.

YOU CAN ALMOST TASTE IT

Braciola, delicious,
Rolls of meat,
Seasoned with salt
And stuffed with sweets
Then left to simmer in wine,
But willing and able
To unloosen its flesh
In succulent morsels and bites,
Leaving when finished
A plate licked clean
Except for the string untied.

SIMPLE, BUT DEMANDING

“If it were all in the
script, why make the
film?”

Nicholas Ray

First let matters
Start to develop
Until they form
A thickening plot,

Then with the calm
Of an eye-level mind,
Show just enough
Bloodsquibs and guts

To make them sit up
And take notice.

HEARTWOOD

First they chopped it down
And squared its edges off,

Then put it in a kiln
Until its juice dried out,

But inside its trunk
It still had the stuff

To frustrate those blades
More suited for studs

Stripped of their bark
And already pre-cut.

DEFUSION

To prevent any runoff
Of blood so great

That eyes dazzled
We cover our face

Sharpen a pencil
And while it's still hot

Draw up an agreement
Without any waste.

SAVOIR FAIRE

Blood gets out
And looks all around,
Then studies the system
Of muscle and nerve
That's hemming it in
In order to come up
With a strategy.

PLAY TO WIN

My friend, I tell you,
Love is nothing
If not an occasion
To shun the defensive
And go for the jugular
Without holding back
Or guarding your rear.

SCAR

First comes the scabbing
Over the wound
To shield what's inside
From infection;

Followed by scratching,
Along with some blood,
Which clears away
Most of the crust;

And finally fresh skin,
Almost brand new,
But not looking
Like nothing has happened.

POISED

Approach the plate,
Plant both your feet,
And keep back your weight
While thinking home run,

But layoff those pitches
Up high in the strike zone
No matter how good
At first they might look.

HARDBALL

A good worker signs
Each one he makes
By carving initials
Into its chest,

Then sews up the skin
With rows of red stitches
Which wear themselves proud
So there's something to grip.

BREAST PLATE

Surgeons can't help
But make a deep cut
When fixing
An aortic valve,

Then leave in their wake
A trail of dried blood
Which stretches from throat
All the way to the groin,

And looks like a cross
You see painted on armor
Preparing to mount
A full frontal charge.

MUD JOB

When shit hits the fan
Don't run for cover,
Or reach for the Lysol and mop.
Just give it some time
To stiffen and harden,
And don't wipe your face off
Until it clears up.

BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

I love to get angry,
To be hopping mad,

And let it stretch out
As far as I can,

Then store it somewhere
Where it won't do me damage,

But still size a man up
Before he attacks,

And undo the knots
Down the back of a dress

Without loss of glare
Or leaving a scratch.

LIVING WILL

After one date
He fell so in love
He knew it would last forever,
So he tore up the part
Where he gave her his heart
And started to walk
With a certain elan
Throughout every inch
Of his body.

A BODY OF WORK

I admire the man
Who looks slightly weathered;

Who's eaten some dirt
In the course of his life,

But spit it back out
And kept to his efforts

With nothing to show
But the meat on his bones

That's tougher than leather
Yet fits like a glove.

FUTURE PERFECT

Once you quit trying
To make it so special,

But also don't act
Like it's part of the job,

Then it's just sex
During only safe periods,

And without second thoughts
Or dropping a bomb.

VERTEBRATE

I love to rub
The back of a woman;

To first spread it out
Face down on the bed

Then start at the base
And work my way up,

Giving each joint
The full force of my weight

Until somehow something
Pops into place

Which without too much pain
Makes her to grunt.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Those old time pros
Drank all night
But still they got their hits.
Before the game
They ran their laps
Around the field
To sweat the poisons out,
Then showered, changed,
And made it to the batter's box
In time for their first pitch.

HARD-BOILED

The season for weddings
Is typically June,

When hope springs eternal
With a movement of youth,

But he held out
For a day in October,

When leaves all around
Are dropping like flies,

To marry the woman
Who stitched her own dress

With deliberate fingers
Ending in nails

She no longer bites.

A SLICE OF LIFE

The cancer and the chemo
Chase each other
Up and down
So hard

They like to run her ragged,
But still she makes it
Through the door
Under her own power.

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

While standing stark naked
In front of the mirror
You realize the following fact:

Except for some money, and respect,
Nobody owes anybody
Anything at all: Not you,

Not I, and not even God.
We do own the robe
Which covers our skin,

But after that
All the rest
Is thrown in.

FIVE PROVERBS

1

“It’s cold,”
The old man said,
And then we shut the lid,
Since human beings wear out
The veins
Between the heart and brain.

2

A fat man’s cough
Adds more flesh
To overburdened skin,
Making it more difficult
For the knife
To penetrate to bone.

3

Be wary of the man
Who has no scars
To speak of:
The curve of Christ
Looks crooked
To a savage eye.

4

A fish can lie
On ice all day
And never move an inch,
While crosses stored
In lukewarm water
Neither sink nor swim.

5

Boys run off
To play with matches
When nothing else will work,
But men sit down
To build a fire from sticks
Soaked through with reason.

UNKNOWN DINERS

“Take that exit up ahead,” she says.
“It leads to Howard Johnson’s
Where you can know for certain
The mayonnaise won’t be bad.”
This woman wants to know
What she is getting into,
And has no time
For upset stomachs
Off the beaten path.

FOREST FIRE

It starts with a spark
That gets cast aside,

Then spreads itself out
In different directions,

Until it burns down
To leave in its wake

A series of etchings
In black and white.

THE METAPHYSICS OF NAVIGATING

A morning in August
Right on the cusp
Of my forty-sixth year.

My head's a bit dizzy
But basically clear
About choosing a route

Which added two hours
To yesterday's drive,
But bypassed the traffic

Backed up for miles
From the top of Bear Mountain
To the Tappan Zee Bridge.

OVER MY DEAD BODY

The doctor looked him
Right in the eye
And started to tell him

That despite the wonders
Which medicine offered
He still would die

Yet without even blinking
The man shot back
“Not while I’m still alive.”

LIFE

Don't squeeze it so hard
Your knuckles turn white
But allow it to rest
In the palm of your hand
To serve as a bass line.

PROPER ATTIRE

I'll drive round the block
Two times or more
Just to check out
A pair of bare legs
Ending in sandals
And not tennis shoes.

FORESEEABLE

I no longer read obituaries
First thing in the morning,
Nor try to feed myself
With the world's news,
But open up to sports
To find out all the scores
From the day before,
And see if someone
Made a trade
Which helps them now
Or in the coming future.

MEAN LENGTH OF UTTERANCE

To get his point home
He chose the right words
But only the number he needed,

And then when he spoke
It stuck in your mind
Without being repeated

That for most of your life
It seemed like you'd waited
For someone to say it

Exactly like that.

PORTRAIT

A man in his forties
Or thereabouts,

With hair well-groomed
And thoughtfully dressed,

Drinking his coffee
All by himself

But rising when finished
Like one possessed.

DECISIVE

Nothing's more pleasing
Than opening the door
Without permission
And knowing the hairs
On the back of her neck
Are standing on end
As I turn the deadbolt
Behind me.

BOETTICHER

When westerns came on
I found them boring,
Especially the ones
Where the screen fills up
With arrows and bows,

But one day I saw
A man on a crutch
Without any backdrop
Standing up to Lee Marvin
All on his own.

FINESSE

Once you establish
Your game on the ground,

And can move the chains freely
At your own will,

There comes a key moment
Before the half ends

For finding the man
Who's in one on one,

Then leading him long
With just the right touch.

A THICKENING SKIN

I've decided to keep
That jacket I bought
Despite what people will say,
Because although it's expensive,
And made out of leather,
It comes with wool lining
That zips in or zips out,
Making it perfect
For spring or for fall
So I know I'll survive
If it's ripped off.

A COLD EYE

After leaving behind
His grandfather's sweater

In a wardrobe trunk
On the northwestern shore,

He stopped in a churchyard
Outside of Sligo

To search the grounds
Until he found

The headstone of Yeats
Engraved with a poem.

IN SYNDICATION

If he sees his old sitcom
On late night TV

He might switch the channel
To some other station,

Or turn off the set
And go straight to bed,

But not for the world
Would he exchange it

In midseason
For a replacement,

And rather than lose
The royalties he earns

He'd do it again.

FAST FORWARD

“Someday,” she said,
“You’ll look back and laugh
And learn not take it
All to heart

Because no matter what,
You’ll always remember
The role I played
In your life,”

And the latter part
Was the half she got right.

CRUCIFERAE

The world is just
An excuse for mustard;
A spice to inspire us
Not to waste it
On spreads of cold cuts
Stuck between bread
Enriched and white

But to save it
For salmon
That's grilled in the open
And chilled overnight,
Then served on a bed
Of toast and lettuce
Ground out of rye.

ROADSIDE SERVICE

I prefer to fix
My flats for myself,

And not be a wimp
Who calls Triple-A,

To bend my knees
Down to the ground

And jack the car up
With just one hand,

Then put on the spare
And tighten the nuts,

Before finding out
From my mechanic

Whether or not
To purchase a new one

Because the old one
Won't take a patch.

FAST-PITCH

The secret to catching,
Aside from worrying

About the pop-ups
Over your head

Or squibs directly
In front of home plate,

Is to make a fist
Of your free hand

To protect your fingers
From foul tips,

And then look the ball
Right into the mitt

As if the batter
Didn't exist.

PHYSICAL

You can judge a man
By who he allows
To examine his body
Even though there's nothing
Wrong at the time,

Except for some bruises
And minor contusions
That go with the territory
And come with the job.

rites of initiation

In order to be
A full-blooded member
Of the tribe,

You must undergo
Some kind of ritual
Of deception
And betrayal,

Even if it requires
Setting up for yourself
The location and time.

HERO

There's something about
The man who consents

To the code embedded
In his bones,

The particular determinants
Of the self,

Which set him apart
From everyone else

Whether or not
He stands alone.

PAINKILLERS

Pills go down
Without any taste
And make you numb
From the neck up,

But alcohol rolls
Around on the tongue,
Then fills to capacity
Each cell in the blood.

FORSAKEN

Transcendence is tough;
It cuts you off
From everyone else,

Including old friends
And familiar ties,
Then leaves you alone

At the top of your cross
With only the faith
You have in yourself

And nothing else
In the world
To go by.

SELF-EXPRESSION

Even God
Wants to be heard;

To get the whole matter
Off of his chest

And out in the open
Where everyone present

Can choose for themselves
Whether or not

To take it or leave it
Rather than keep it

All to himself.

MAKE

To first conceive of it
In the mind,

Then think it through
All the way to the end,

Until it comes out
The tips of the fingers

Not any better
Than it can get.

ON A HUMAN SCALE

As long as you don't
Walk anyone,
Make any errors,
Or give up a run,
No matter how hard
The ball gets hit
You will have made
The only thing
In all of creation
That's rightfully given
The name of perfection.

THE METAPHYSICS OF MATURITY

The point of adulthood
Is to quit drinking

The milk you get
From a tit

In order to share
Some wine with God.

DOLOR

After reading Machado
From cover to cover

And watching my team
Having its victory

Snatched from it
By the jaws of defeat,

I put on my jacket
And camel hair muffler

Then take a brisk walk
Through the neighborhood

To clear the sadness
From my head

And shake Spanish moss
From off of my feet.

WHO WAS THAT MAN?

I love those movies
About a stranger
Who rides into town
On the back of a horse,
And proceeds to start
A chain of events
That makes each person
Take stock of their lives,
So that after he's gone
Everyone's better
Or worse for the wear
Than they were
Before he arrived.

SHADOW SHAPES

Before he could see
Things in color
He spent some time
Shooting photographs
In black and white
Of every subject
That he could discover
Which looked like a cross
Carved out of granite
But resembled a tree
With its limbs cut off
Close to the trunk.

VESTED

After a week
Spent in retreat
At a monastery
A force field descended
As I left the premises
From above,

To put a life jacket
On my chest
Made from hair
Tougher than mail
But soft as the feathers
Of a dove.

CHEKHOVIAN

His holy of holies
Was the body

Which is forfeited
With one lie.

CORNEAL REFLEX

In Queens, New York
A structure stands
Called Saint Sebastian's
Which used to be
A movie theatre
Before being converted
Into a church,
(Which you can tell
The moment you enter
Because the floor
Slopes towards the altar
Exactly the way
It did for the screen).

It was there
While paying a visit
To my grandmother
Years ago
I attended my favorite
Easter Mass
Of all time
With a crowd
Full of Hispanics
And Asian Americans
Mixed in with Italians
Who continued to live
In the neighborhood.

The priest was Irish,
And drunk I suspect,
And wouldn't begin
The celebration
Until everyone present
Sat down in a pew,
Then blessed us all
With holy water
He threw so hard
That some of us laughed
While others blinked
As drops of grace
Ran down our face.

RIDE THE HIGH COUNTRY

“In simple terms ‘Ride
the High Country’ was
about salvation and
loneliness.”

Sam Peckinpah

Two old men
Riding on horseback
Come to grips
With youth and love,

Gold and greed,
Friendship and betrayal.
But when drums beat
Old lions rise up and roar,

Eyes wide open
And heroic,
Magnificent
For one last time.

One man finds redemption
And gives his word,
While the other turns
To face the earth alone

And die, entering
In a calm
Of simple glory,
His house justified.

RADAR

Human beings drove up to
And off the edge
Without even heeding
The signs of warning,

But birds who lived
Beneath the bridge
Couldn't withstand
The cries of distress,

And got the hell out
From underneath it
Before it collapsed
Around their nests.

COCKTAILS

“...But when the moment
of Grace comes they
rise...all at once together
like a flock of birds.”

Graham Greene,
The Heart of the Matter

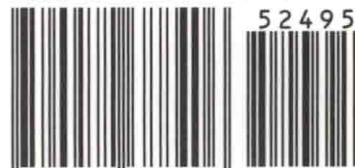
I invited my failures
And all my mistakes
To dress themselves up
As birds of prey,
Then join in on the fun
As I searched through the Andes
For signs of the condor
Whose wingspan exceeds
That of the albatross.



SHADOW SHAPES

*Before he could see
Objects in color
He spent some time
Shooting photographs
In black and white
Of every subject
That he could discover
Which resembled a cross
Cast in granite
But looked like a tree
With its limbs cut off
Close to the trunk.*

ISBN 0-9726884-0-4



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USA \$24.95

CAN \$37.95