

# **The End**

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THE END—and now what? Am I changed? Is the world?  
I've lifted myself off the page and what sort of gesture is  
this? It isn't especially dramatic, it happens simply, and I  
mark it. Poems do end, at least materially.

THE END: “You must change your life.”

I must change my life!

I must read the poem and change my life.

Hah.

BUT *is* that the poem's end?<sup>1</sup> I re-read and now it says something like *you must, at all times, endlessly, change your life. You cannot not change your life.*

The poem is Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" in the English translation by Stephen Mitchell. In it a grand sculpture of the Greek god Apollo stands before the eyes—grander, it would seem, and more ruinously beautiful for its lack of head, arms, and legs. "We cannot know," the poem begins. "We cannot know his legendary head / with eyes like ripening fruit."

That is to say, we begin not-knowing. The absent head confronts us and names us in our unknowing. How should we look upon this headless thing, "we" who have heads? The torso is so big, it is as though our heads are atilt, studying the empty space above the severed neck and chiseling into it the impossible eyes looking back at us.

We cannot know his legendary head  
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso  
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,  
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. ...

Compressed in Apollo's torso lie the features of his missing head. A gaze materializes in it; there is a smile in the musculature around the genitals, and everywhere radiant hair. Everything is getting magnified. The stone isn't

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1 End as boundary in space and time, but also end as purpose.

simply gleaming, it's "burst[ing] like a star" "from all the borders of itself"—the torso is erupting out of its own material and the dim gaze that once was now gleams multiply out of multiple eyes: "there is no place / that does not see you." In the demotic, *you feel so seen*.

You must change your life.

“ARCHAIC TORSO OF APOLLO” is a sonnet. Rilke wrote it in 1908 while working for the sculptor Auguste Rodin. It is considered an ekphrastic of a fifth-century BCE sculpture called *Torso of a Youth from Miletus* presently located in the Louvre. Mitchell’s translation of it is composed in loose iambs with enough consonance and assonance to say a sonnet-like pattern of end rhyme (ABAB CDCD EFE EFE) has been achieved: head/inside, torso/low, Otherwise/thighs, could/flared, defaced/fur/itself/life, shoulders/place.

Sonnets tend toward completion. Structurally, both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms whittle *down* (4-4-3-3 or 4-4-4-2) and synthesize *toward* a statement of some kind—the resolution of an argument. Thought arrives in tandem with the feeling of it having arrived. So it is with Rilke’s sonnet. It is also the case that here the ostensibly complete form of the sonnet accommodates the incomplete—broken—body of Apollo which, in the process of its contemplation by “us”—by “you”—becomes complete. And then more than complete. So complete that it obliterates itself out of completion, returning “(y)our” gaze with an injunction of such intensity it eviscerates you and me, the human, the living, the changeable. The torso is not incomplete—*you* are incomplete. Your manners and perceptions, your knowing, the sense you have of your own life—all incomplete.

Rilke is no televangelist. He’s more like a theologian of negation. In his poem the torso becomes legible as its awe-some self by way of repeated denials, deferrals, and negations that test our grappling with what is *not* coming to be known. In grammar every truth (there is no head)

meets its counter-truth (there, a head). Grammar dangles before us the alternatives:

gleams in all its power. Otherwise  
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could  
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs  
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced  
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders  
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,  
burst like a star: for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.

In addition, therefore, to the brilliantly radiating torso, grammar procures the torso that does *not* dazzle us, does *not* smile, appears defaced, remains unglistering, does *not* explode, and which maps the “no place” (utopia) that does *not* look at you so that you *don't* feel seen. Must you still change your life? I think so.

“EYES LIKE RIPENING FRUIT”; “THAT DARK PLACE WHERE PROCREATION FLARED”: On the one hand, fullness, fertility, and excess. On the other, brokenness, barrenness, and nothing. You come to learn and what you learn is that something is wrong, something is missing. “You must change your life.” Maybe you change it, then you come back to the poem and are told to change it again. Change is endless. The poem staggers on the cusp of knowing what it is to be complete while remaining incomplete. The end of the poem is there is no end. There is only the rest of time. The future.

Sometimes I think it means the final change: “You must change your life *into death*.” *Be like me*, counsels stone-dead Apollo with his graven posture and rampant, maggoty eyes.



THESE DAYS I write only long poems. To compose a ten-line poem, say, with a good first and a devastating last line—it doesn't move me. Though, of course, poems do have last lines and sometimes the last line devastates. But that's not (really) the (only) end of a poem. The poem's end is to endure.

I'll write the same poem for weeks or months at a time, composing almost every day at roughly the same time of day. It's like extending a single annotation over an obdurate duration.<sup>2</sup> I write to discover a form, but the form is also discovering the language and the thinking, and it happens out of order. (Lyn Hejinian in "The Rejection of Closure": "Form is not a fixture but an activity.") It is not decided in advance what the thinking will be, but inklings of sensuous and nonsensuous matters have been amassed in preparation. The system to writing is rhythm. Prosody prompts me to find ample instants of acuity to put together a structure in which thought and feeling can proceed/regress with and against the methods of time. Then I rewrite for one year or several years. I rewrite by hand and practice the shapes of the text as I reshape it. The phrase "No precision that isn't imprecision" haunts my practice. The whole thing drips with time.

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2 A phrase I adapt from Rosmarie Waldrop's translation of Edmond Jabès's *The Book of Yukel*: "I am more obdurate than duration."

NEVERTHELESS, this essay reads almost exclusively short poems. Short poems emitting signals in smog toward some alien enterprise I claim as mine.

Longform practice wants to extend signals and “hazard improvisations.”<sup>3</sup> It wants to answer calls from the crumbs of lyrics and rippling exteriors of institutions. It wants to think beyond its own time.

Paul Celan, translated by Michael Hamburger:

THREAD SUNS

above the grey-black wilderness.

A tree-

high thought

tunes in to light's pitch: there

are still songs to be sung on the other side

of mankind.

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3 Deleuze and Guattari (tr. Massumi): “One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or to meld with it.”

NEVERTHELESS, there are short poems (imagine this were an actual taxonomy: short poems and long poems, and an arbitrary number of lines that arbitrates it: twelve? fifteen? seventy-one? I amuse myself) whose signals, if I can help it, I avoid.

Superficially, James Wright's "I have wasted my life" sounds not too different from Rilke's/Mitchell's "You must change your life," but actually it is different in almost every way. I used to teach this poem (from *The Branch Will Not Break*, published in 1963) when I first began teaching poetry writing courses. I think I taught it because it belonged to the unofficial anthology of teachable poems one inherits when one becomes a writing instructor. Also, I think I taught it because maybe then I liked it, or thought I did, and at the very least found it useful in its imitability:

Lying on a Blanket in Forest Park in Saint Louis, Missouri

Above, I see the orange hot air balloon  
Half-asleep in the grey-blue sky,  
Dawdling like a shadow the color of eaves.  
Down by the ditch near the new prairie grasses,  
Yogis follow one another  
Into the distances of the ...

If this<sup>4</sup> is too cruel, then may I at least point out that

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4 The title of the poem is actually "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota." The poem goes: "Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly, / Asleep on the black trunk, / Blowing like a leaf in green shadow. / Down the ravine behind the empty house, / The cowbells follow