

Asylum

by [Paul Illidge](#) (November 2024)



Fishing in the Spring, the Pont de Clichy (Vincent Van Gogh, 1887)

I

Everyone here is sad except me
Because I pretend
That I have never been hurt
(Though it is not true)
But it helps pass the time

Without having to remember
Who I thought I was
Before I came here

I do not seem to exist now
I move that is all
It is my motions that exist
For a day or a night
Then they are forgotten
And so there is nothing to remember
Nothing to cause pain
No wounds of mind

The others do not think this way
(Though they have tried)
They play checkers and cribbage
Or walk by the pond
Staring at the goldfish
Trying to recall
What it was like to dream
And remember what the dream meant

I have seen them sitting in a room
Huddled together for hours
Staring at a butterfly in a bottle

Crying softly

II

When you listen you are heard
By someone who knows your secret
And passes it from room to room
Down the quiet hall
Footsteps following footsteps

They patter past your door
And stop excited as children
Made to wait in a gas silence

You try not to move when
They have stopped moving
You gather the covers tighter
Over your spinning head
Hoping they cannot stand it
You know they cannot stand very much
That they will rearrange themselves
And leave you alone

This is how they discover
If you really belong here
They listen to what you do
When there is nothing to do
And even then they listen
And continue to listen until
Like clothes shaken from dark closets
They beat the air above your bed

Whether you belong or not
You begin to think like them
You stop wondering
If your thoughts are the same thoughts
The livid thunder of their breath breaks open
Blood-slapped and mad as a shutter
That slams in your head
Until you are screaming for help

III

Today we have hope
We don't want to die

As much as we did yesterday
When it was raining
And our bodies
Were like soggy apples
That fell apart
When we moved them

The sun we thought was lost
Is drying us out
Steam rises from our eyes
We are glad to have eyes
And to breathe
The liveliness
Of the thirst-quenched, sun-brushed
Mouth-opening wind

The mists have disappeared
From the puddles and the pines
But a scent remains
That drifts through
The stillness of the grounds
Like a living substance
That delivers us
From our forgotten selves

We have little wisdom
But hope fills the sky
And the world of our eyes
Like the sun
In the afternoon of our bodies
And we know the raindrops
Slipping off the punished leaves
Will one day reach the ocean

If I believed in madness
I would belong here
With the woman who thinks
Christ hangs in the trees at night
And watches as moonlight
Brings him carefully down
Bleeding into her arms
To lie naked beside her

I would love the man
Who carries a child's toy
Under his arm every day
Listening for a familiar voice
A tender sound he expects to hear
Like his mother calling
But never does and tells the toy
The time will come

I would spend afternoons
Swinging in a hammock
Opening my eyes just
So I could close them again
And know that squirrels were not
Nibbling my ears like acorns
Or burying their young in me
Where hawks would never find them

And I would not care about death
Any more than the blood
Which carries the
Sharpness of a knife
Beyond a wound (like a
Bird with a fish in its beak)
Can feel the heart
It has flowed through

[Table of Contents](#)

Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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