

# 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

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**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](http://www.kobobooks.com)

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