

Captain Dog

A conversation with Charles Wright.

INTERVIEW BY DAVID SKEEL

Charles Wright's first book of poems, *The Grave of the Right Hand*, was published in 1970; his most recent volume, *Sestets*, appeared in 2009. Wright won the National Book Award in 1983 and the Pulitzer Prize in 1998. David Skeel talked with him at his house in Charlottesville, Virginia, and followed up on one question via email.



The little commonplace notebook you published in *Halflife* (1988), a collection of your prose, includes a striking quote by your friend Mark Strand: "The point of truth comes when a poet goes from writing private poems in a public language to writing public poems in a private language." Was there a point in your work where you made that shift, when you began writing public poems in a private language?

I know that a shift occurred. Whether they are public poems or not, the poems seemed more personal, more accessible, than the sort of public poems without a voice that I had written before. And the shift came with a poem called "Dog Creek Mainline" [in *Hard Freight* (1973)]. Suddenly I realized that for once in his life Rilke was right. Every writer has a subject matter: his own life

Your poetry is surely the most dog-haunted in the long history of verse. Was there a moment in your career when you thought, *Eureka!*, this is my image?

No, I just used it a lot. And I think at one point I thought it was cute because it's God spelled backwards, but that's not why I do it.

I don't know. I was raised with dogs, hunting dogs—my father was a hunter. My life has always had a dog. How they keep getting into my poems, I'm not sure. But I remember writing about how the dog eats on the run and keeps moving [in "Sentences," from *China Trace* (1977)]. And I liked that somehow at the time. And dogs just kept appearing. And doggone it, they just kept appearing.

You've said elsewhere that "Captain Dog," the title of one of your poems, was a name your students gave to you when you were in California. Were your students inspired by reading your poems?

No, no. I got out of the Army after four years, and on my discharge they promoted me to captain. I was just a lieutenant the whole time I was on active duty, but then when I went into the reserve, the inactive reserve, I went in as a captain. And I must have mentioned that once to my students. One of them said, "Oh, Captain Dog, huh?" I said, "Yes, Captain Dog"—I kind of liked it. They didn't call me that all the time, but they would refer to me by that epithet from time to time, and it was fine with me.

***China Trace* and the books that make up *The World of Ten Thousand Things* seem to draw increasingly on the classical Chinese poets.**

I had been looking at Chinese poems for many years, but somewhere along the line there was a soul moment when I felt very attached to the way they explained their lives and the landscape and what they were talking about, their philosophies, and their idea of an afterlife—it was not much of an afterlife, but there was one. Particularly I liked the ways they treated the landscape and how they injected

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their feelings into the landscape and then let it speak for them.

The contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty was a colleague of yours for many years, and a subject of your poem "Reading Rorty and Paul Celan One Morning in Early June" [in *Chickamauga* (1995)]. Rorty wrote a lot about the "language turn" in philosophy and argues, I think, that language constructs our world. Did you ever think, well, maybe he has a point?

There's a point where I think everybody's right about everything, particularly about language. But the idea that the world is made of language and not objects is something that's foreign to my sensibilities. Like all theory, like all philosophy, it's an interesting position and an interesting posit. Just like the theory of the language poets is interesting in theory, but in practice it's confetti, for me anyhow.

Did you ever talk about these issues with Rorty?

Dick was a man of few words out loud. But he could write like a dream, and he obviously was one of the great philosophers of our time. I think I only stood next to him two times. My favorite Rorty moment was early on when both of us had younger children—they must have been 13 and 14. We went to a Fourth of July function at Jack Levinson's house, and the kids were playing out in the yard. I can't remember whether I was sitting on the steps and Dick came up and sat down next to me, or whether Dick was on the steps. But I said, Hi, and he said, Hi. And that was it for a half hour. For half an hour. And about half way through—no, after about five minutes, I guess; you know, it's very uncomfortable not to speak—I suddenly understood that there are those of us who are happiest when we can sit next to somebody and not feel constrained to make small talk. Dick had very little small talk and a lot of large talk.

Let me say one other thing about Dick. He had a lot to say about chicken sexing.

Chicken sexing.

Chicken sexing is—the little chickens, when you determine whether they're male or female. He wrote about it one time. This is what I'm going to do when I retire.

Write about chicken sexing?

No, be a chicken sexer. You can't be taught how to be a chicken sexer. You have to know. People are born chicken sexers or they're not chicken sexers. I have this old-fashioned belief that anybody can learn to write poems, but a true poet really is born. There's some kind of gene—just like a chicken sexer, a poet has some kind of special gene that makes him move toward certain paths as a poet like the Druids did, like the shamans did.

Sunday seems to come up a lot in your poems.

Sunday, I've noticed it—talking about the Rorty poem, it's Sunday, in the first line. I used to write on Sundays a lot—always wrote on Sundays, Sunday mornings—and I tend to be quite open about what's around me when I write. I mention the day of the week, particularly in the journals;

the whole point of it was to try to make something serious out of the quotidian.

In an interview with David Remnick many years ago you said the greatest burden you'd felt as a poet was getting a letter from a young man who'd been to one of your readings and had decided to give up Christianity because he felt you had thought so carefully about your own "exposure to Christianity" and "had come to such a reasoned renunciation of it." Have you ever again had someone read your poems and say, and this has completely changed my own thinking?

I have, but they have been the opposite of that young man. They have said your poems have been very helpful and so on. Which is a lot easier to read, although I guess the young man—well he was a young man, he's probably gone back to the Lord by now—at least it got his attention.

When you started writing, your fascination with spiritual issues struck many readers as a little bit odd, certainly not in the mainstream.

It still is.

In the past decade or so, a number of poets one wouldn't think of as religious poets started writing about spiritual issues. Jorie Graham had some spiritually inflected poems, for instance, as did Edward Hirsch. Do you see this as a trend in American verse?

I know what you're talking about; there seem to be more people writing about God now, out front, or up front, than there were before. I don't know if it's a trend or not, but each man his own dog. I don't know. Maybe they just tried it that one time and now they don't do it. Ed Hirsch seems to be writing about his father all the time now, and Jorie is writing about the environment. Both of which have spiritual connections, so I don't know.

Do you read the Bible?

No, I do not, no.

And so you don't dip into . . .

I read the Nag Hammadi. That's where an awful lot of my references come from. I read almost all of that entire book, which is one of the two things sitting on my table there.

Why the Nag Hammadi?

The Nag Hammadi manuscripts were so very new to me, and non-canonical, and endlessly fascinating in their differences, that I just kept on reading them and found them very powerful from beginning to end. I had read the canonical gospels before, but this was practically new stuff.

I haven't read the Bible in many years, but I did—I have a lot of Bibles over there, family Bibles stacked up. I was raised in the church, in the Episcopal Church, I went to Presbyterian schools and all of that, but I fell away.

But it didn't fall away, obviously, it stayed with me.

Did you fall away before your mother died? Or was it after?

I was about 16 or 17.

And was she very upset by that?

I don't think so, I don't know. We never talked about it. She was the one in the family that was the most churchgoing. My father was not a churchgoer. My son is very much a churchgoer. It just skipped a generation, I guess.

Several of the poems in *Sestets*, such as "The Gospel of Yours Truly," seem to echo John Berryman's "Eleven Addresses to the Lord."

There's one that has a direct reference to Berryman—either lifting or reference or laundering or something else.

And *Sestets* also echoes Stevens in several places—often undoing Stevens. Both Berryman and Stevens became believers—or at least are thought to have become believers—in their final years, after a lifetime of rejecting God.

Yes.

Are you afraid that might happen to you?

I'm not afraid. I would accept it if it happened, I guess. I don't think it will. But you never know. I mean, I'm pretty old now—I'm 74, so it had better hurry up.

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