

forget the self

talya rubin reflects on the poetry of
chase twichell & the paradox
of becoming who we truly are.

What dumb, unwieldy things words can be. Much like the human mind, they can be too blunt to convey the inherent mystery behind reality as we perceive it. But language is our primary vehicle to communicate meaning. And poetry, when used skillfully, is the closest thing to deep understanding there is. It pushes the mind past itself, brings images into the vivid present, and can allow for an

opening of silence beneath the words themselves—a peering into the eternal.

What is it that we do when we write poetry? In some way, we are trying to find out who we are. To reveal the face beneath our face and reach beyond this flesh these bones this blood to touch what lies beyond the things we only know on the surface.

Chase Twichell is a writer whose words plumb the depths with an arche-

ologist's rigour and the keen, lucid detachment of a Zen practitioner. Her poetry aims to search beyond words and images themselves, to transcend our ordinary concept of time and to arrive at a crossroads where the past, present and future can meet.

When Chase enters the dance of time in her poetry, it is intimately wrapped up in a struggle with the self. The self betrays her every time she tries to tran-

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scend it, eludes her every time she tries to grasp it, and fascinates her in all of its intricacies and paradoxes. Who are we in the face of who we have been? Are we something more than a collection of what has happened to us? What is this concept of self we sit so rigidly inside of? We seem to be all these things—fixed and moving, discrete and continuous, temporal and eternal, and we need to inhabit these paradoxes if we want to exist as who we truly are.

*Things change behind my back.
The starting snow I was just watching
has escaped into the past.*

*Well, not the past, but the part of the world
that surrounds the moment at hand.¹*

Chase Twichell studied with John Daido Looi, the American photographer turned Zen master who founded the Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York. Looi came to Zen through creativity and his intention was to open

an arts centre in the mountains with the practice at its core.

It tells in her poetry that Chase Twichell is a Zen student; both in her subject matter and the ways she uses language. The quote at the front of Twichell's collection, *The Snow Watcher*, is from the thirteenth-century Zen master, Dogen: "To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualised by the myriad things."

And so we set off with all the past and present poets beside us, into the landscape of memory and self, using poetry as the crumb trail, sprinkling words across the page as some kind of path out of ignorance. But perhaps words themselves are a part of the problem: How do we use language to go beyond our limited concepts and ideas?

The paradox of Zen poetry is that it does use words to express the inexpressible. In the Rinzai tradition of Zen, koan practice is a pushing past language by using language itself to ask questions of

reality and to reveal the nature of things as they are. Dogen wrote in a language of paradox, closer to poetry than to any philosophical discourse. There is a long history of poetry as practice in the Zen tradition. Basho called it a "Way" and poets like Han Shan and Ryokan struggled with the nature of time, reality and the self in their poetry while attempting to manifest their essential nature through their words.

*I think of poems as a series
of small harsh rebirths—
I keep passing myself in the halls
of a house where every room
has a second door,
so I never have to go out
the way I came in.²*

Inside the poem, it is possible to transcend the self in time. The act of reading becomes an act of recreating and experiencing something immediate and surprising. At the same time, there is a feeling in Chase's poems that language

itself is caught up in history, in old things, and that it is the weight of these things that somehow lends it its beauty.

Her poetry explores childhood and place with a vividness and wonderment that goes beyond mere nostalgia and brings the accumulation of the past into the present moment. Her poems are filled with families, piano music, old houses, rooms unexplored, fragments of lyrics, childhood friends, names that float down a river, myth, old typeface, animal bones, a gesture, and most of all an intent listening that holds more than linear time in it.

Our past is the story we tell: Chase Twichell was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1950, the first of three daughters born to parents who were unhappy in their marriage. She was sent away to a girls' boarding school in Maryland to distract her from her obsession with painting, but came out of the lonely, somewhat brutal environment of the school with another obsession: poetry.

*All my life a brook of voices
has run in my ears,
many separate instruments
tuning and playing, tuning...
It's all the voices collapsed into one voice.³*

There is a difference between dwelling in memory and the past as nostalgia and experiencing memory as a here-and-now realization of who we are and who we have always been. Memory can be intimately bound up in the eternal. Part of the reaching of poetry is a remembering of who we are; a striving for the god that lies within. It is taking the eternal pieces of the universe that make up our bodies and translating them through language into presence.

*Listen, former self:
you're a child.
I no longer have a child in me.
I feel my bones in the handrail,
tree skeleton, hardwood
that remembers how the human
got into its body.⁴*

We inhabit bodies that
fade and die, time does
make its mark on all
of us, and yet we hold
the eternal within us.

But how do we wrestle free of the past as something that inhabits us? How do we walk the fine line between who we are now and who we have been? According to biography, Chase struggled at university, attending five colleges before graduating from Trinity in 1973 and going on to do an MFA in creative writing at the University of Iowa. She also studied graphic design and letterpress printing while she was there, and now runs Ausable Press, whose mission is to “publish poetry that investigates and expresses human consciousness in language that goes where prose cannot.”

Does biography make our stories of the self neat and tidy? Do we try to fit into the boxes we create for the self, small and limited in their scope? Writing poetry can be a freeing of the self from limited ideas of time and who we think we are.

*As far as I can tell, there's no
such thing as a 'present moment'
To me they're like atoms:
faster than imagination
intermarried, unto themselves
their boundaries invisible
and their numbers unknown.⁵*

This is reminiscent of what Dogen had to say in his essay about the nature of time, called “Uji” or “Being-Time,” in his famous work the *Shobogenzo*. He writes, “just actualise all time as all being; there is nothing extra.” For Dogen, time is nonlinear. It can contain the past, present and future at once and can move in any direction. In this blurring of time, we do not exist as we know it and we can exist all the more vividly for being

freed from it. We are being. Both moving and still.

This sounds simple, yet there is an inherent sadness in the struggle of trying to transcend language and self and being inextricably linked to the passage of time by the fact of our very existence. We inhabit bodies that fade and die, time does make its mark on all of us, and yet we hold the eternal within us.

*Caw, caw, a crow wants to peck
at the ember of the mind
as it was before it tasted
the dark meat of the world
But I can call it back—
the match's sulfur spurt
its petals of carbon and tar
a flash of mind and memory:
how after each deflowerment
I became the flower.⁶*

This is the ultimate tension in Zen—to forget the self and to become who we truly are. Is it possible to dissolve into emptiness and to be vividly awake and filled with substance all at once? To write poetry is to bear witness to impossible questions and the struggle itself can be the answer. ☸

Talya Rubin is a sometimes poet and a sometimes Zen practitioner currently living in Sydney, Australia where she works for a national arts organization and teaches drama.

Chase Twichell will be one of the featured poets at the biennial Montréal Zen Poetry Festival from March 6–8, 2009. The theme of this year's festival is "Forget the Words," and poets, translators, storytellers, scholars, musicians and Zen monks will come together to explore how Zen embraces a paradoxical relationship with language. The festival will also feature poets Shin Yu Pai, Peter Levitt and Seido Ray Ronci; translators Red Pine, David Hinton and Dennis Maloney; and art historian/calligrapher Stephen Addiss.

The festival is organized by the Centre Zen de la Main, an urban Zen temple that was founded in Montréal's Plateau neighbourhood in 1995. The Centre has resided in a house donated by Leonard Cohen, but it is currently seeking a new residence. Beyond raising awareness for this project, the festival is part of a larger effort by the Centre Zen de la Main to introduce the practice and cultural traditions of Rinzai Zen Buddhism to the broader community.

For more information: www.montrealzenpoetryfestival.ca

endnotes

- ¹ Chase Twichell, "A Last Look Back," *The Snow Watcher* (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1998).
- ² Chase Twichell, "Thought Satellite," *Dog Language* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2005).
- ³ Twichell, "Cocktail Music," *Dog Language*.
- ⁴ Twichell, "Bonsai," *Dog Language*.
- ⁵ Twichell, "Work Libido," *Dog Language*.
- ⁶ Twichell, "Auld Lang Syne," *Dog Language*.

further reading

Twichell, Chase. *The Ghost of Eden*. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1995.

Tanahashi, Kazuaki, ed. *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, New York: North Point Press (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), 1995.

Ausable Press. www.ausablepress.org