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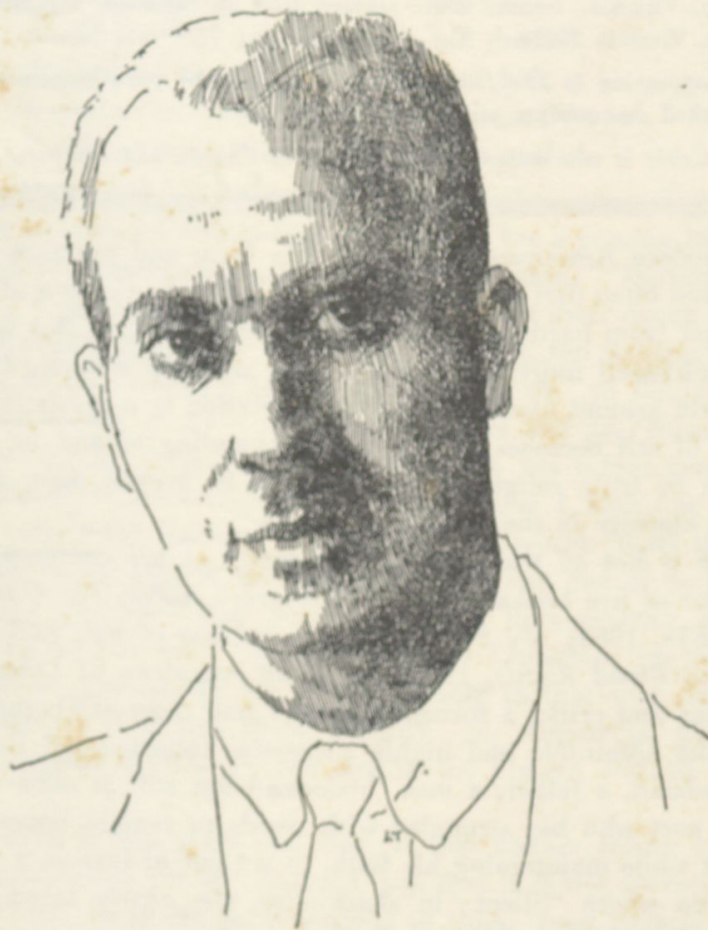
The Hollins Critic

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Swimming In Sharkwater: The Poetry of Samuel Hazo



*God of my numbered hairs, I speak as one
redeemed but still at odds with blood and bone.*

—Samuel Hazo, "Epitaph En Route"

I

Dante could sing the circling cosmos, God's own metaphor, but the post-Einsteinian poet finds the universe without symmetry, the metaphor dissolved in free motion, the bond of spirit and matter unsure and uncomfortable. So, in freedom, he turns to himself, seeking there what his forebears sought of the stars. If so much

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of the best of modern American poetry develops from and partakes in an examination of the self, too often that examination has ended in confession of inner hurt and is simply a retreat from hard fact, both exterior and interior. But when a poet has the vision to see himself individuated but at one with the mutable tragedy and joy of the living world around him, then the self-revelation is a revelation of the world, his examination of self becomes an act of understanding of and for all selves. His poetry may then be truly religious, praising God in broken man, spirit in hostile blood and bone, eternity in the unstable moment.

Although he is not so widely known as many of his contemporaries, Samuel Hazo is the author of five books of poems: *Discovery*, 1959; *The Quiet Wars*, 1962; *Listen with the Eye*, 1964; *My Sons in God*, a volume of new and selected earlier poems, 1965; and *Blood Rights*, 1968. He is an American of Lebanese descent, a Catholic, a scholar and critic, a former professor and dean at Duquesne University, the director of the admirable and highly successful International Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh, a husband, a father, a man "redeemed but still at odds with blood and bone." He is a poet who has struggled with words to remain honest with himself, to be true to fact while maintaining his faith, to act out of love in a world and time disfigured by hate where "Silent / in sharkwater, the nearly blind / and brainless killers scavenge / for blood and targets." That he is an honest poet, concerned in self, aware of limitation, but still able to seek light in human darkness and the manifold meaning of the moment, makes him worthy of serious attention, makes his voice worth listening to with ear and eye in the confusions and variety of this day.

II

In a poem, "The Middle of the World," in *My Sons in God*, Hazo finds himself "ripe for parables," midway in life, keeping what he started with: father's name, mother's eyes, "no real / philosophy of pain, a few vague doubts / in God, some fear of death and no regrets." At this moment of awareness, he states a poetic position in contrast to Dante's, one committed solely to the moment, to the present:

In similar darkness Dante searched for peace
from devil's ice to stars. Today I smirk
at years when men could rhyme their way to God
as they could love, beget and die on the same
mattress. I have no tooth for comedy,
and there is hell enough on earth to jar
me loose from poetry for life. I fear

God's underlings who damn the innocent
and kill the merciful. If I could climb
from zero to the holy peak, I still
would say that any sparrow's fall defines
the yea of heaven and the nay of hell.
I rhyme no answers from the cold and far.
I ask no more than starlight from a star.

And in another poem, "Circling" in *Blood Rights*, using the metaphor of an airplane waiting to land, he rejects Dantean circling for a coming to terms, on earth, in time, with all the imperfections natural to the human: "Divine or damned, the blood demands / a landing. Better to risk the earth / than drone in zeros. Better to breathe / the grubby air where every day / is worth the waking." He affirms the present moment as if it were all he has; in "Countdown" in *Blood Rights*, he asks, "Who needs / memorials to prove / that all the years add up / to now, that nowhere needs / remembering but here?" And he speaks to his infant son in "Midway to Midnight" in the same book, saying that "Each time I look / at you I know it's now / and everywhere this minute," celebrating "The world [that] keeps happening."

And the world, the present moment, is all that any one of us has; the moment is fact, but time's movement may be more interior than exterior, a subjective fact. Hazo's insistence on the value of the present is Christian, for in caring for the moment, we are as alive as we are able, and only in that way may we escape the imprisoning sense of time and touch eternity. St. Augustine, in the *Confessions*, offers one explanation of how we can live in the present without being victims of time's flow:

What is now plain and clear is that neither future nor past things are in existence, and that it is not correct to say there are three periods of time: past, present and future. Perhaps it would be proper to say there are three periods of time: the present of things past, the present of things present, the present of things future. For those three are in the soul and I do not see them elsewhere: the present of things past is memory; the present of things present is immediate vision; the present of future things is expectation.

The Christian must live in the world and in the moment, holding past and future within his present, alive in the face of death, swimming in sharkwater, sure of his redemption but sharing the pain of his fallen world nonetheless. Samuel Hazo may make poems of the moment, asking only starlight and not revelation from the

stars, and still be a Christian poet, still be concerned with soul's union with flesh, time's place in eternity. By recognizing how the only circle of the world turns to nothing (as in "There Is No Straight Line" in *Listen with the Eye*, where he says that if you "Look deep enough, / walk far enough, / live long enough . . . you will / learn / how all things / turn / and merry-go-round / around the sun, / and / make / a / zero"), he enables himself to praise living, to survive in a world in which he often seems not to belong, the world of "Intensive Care" in *Blood Rights*:

An alien to every element,
I wait for fates that wait
to finish me. Too near,
I'll burn. Too deep,
I'll burst. Too high,
I'll choke. Too old,
I'll sicken to a final
infancy. Each breath is my
reprieve, and each reprieve,
the name of my re-sentencing.

If he is ripe for parables, he must himself be a maker of parables, seek the truth of each moment. He must take up the poet's burden, and in his five books, he has done so, skillfully and well.

III

Hazo's first book, *Discovery*, published a decade ago, revealed early his central concerns: the hard realities of the skull beneath the skin, the suffering of a fallen world, the continuing lures, sacrifices and sorrows of sin. The collection has the flaws of a first book—an occasional hesitance in manner and matter, too strong an awe for the "literary" and the recognizably "poetic," an unsureness in these first soundings of what would become his own honest voice. In fact, in the selection of earlier work in *My Sons in God*, Hazo chose only eight of these fifty-two poems for republication. But the book is a good one, unified in its concerns and containing more than one poem which arouses that only trustworthy response to art (to use Vladimir Nabokov's definition) "the sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs."

The discovery from which the collection takes its title is that one irresistible proof of the brotherhood of man, the inevitability and universality of death. In the poem "Discovery," a searcher among the wreckage of two planes which have collided in midair "will grip no death but his within his arms" when he lifts "cramped, canvassed burdens from the crash." The gritty fact of bone and bone's end is more, then, than Stevens' "mother of beauty" or time's great leveller; it is the one ancient and lasting proof of the unity of man, of Donne's Christian assertion that "any mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankind*." No new discovery certainly, but a discovery each man must make anew for himself.

From that bleak discovery, Hazo moves into the world imaginatively, observing and acting in his poems with a heightened sense of death's presence and importance and a love for the variety of life in its specific and larger significances. The book chronicles an apparent diminuendo in life from the remembered past (man's life and the lives of all men), a sense of failing and loss which has been at the center

The Warrior

The land is ancient, and will suffer
Small change when the flesh of this one (his
Rank, race, cause make little difference)
Dissolves in her embrace. Nor can he
Save himself, his head buried in her
Ravaged, muddy fields, as once in his
Mother's lap, when the shrieking death dives.
It is never his war, this fatal
Turbulence of his times. Not his war,
Not his will; but a dark enticement
He cannot refuse. He may find her
Beside the bloody road, or in a
Captured house, and must take her quickly
Against a blank wall. He will recall
Her frailty in his bride's submission.

—GEORGE CALVERT KINNEAR

of human experience since the primordial fall itself. And underneath that diminuendo, there is always the steady drone of death, the sharks that "fin in circles in the sun," the "sortilege of flags" that rouses "the wild and restless blood of Cain," the last cage in the zoo where the visiting child sees the dark point at the center of life's light circle ("Prey"):

Tensely the condors roost in driftwood crags,
their beaks like blunted scissors clamped secure,
their eyes death-wild between the hooding wings.
Flocked in the dark, they hunch like famished hags.
The child sidles with his fear
away—and to the stairs—and down.

And set against both the sense of loss and death's looming is life's love, the acts of faith in art which can both save moments from the flow of time and move the immobile into life (as in "Under the Oak" in which the poet sees the tree's still leaves "descending cool / toward my eyes like spray / checked in descent / until I cascade bough, peak / and underleaf green in a cataract of words"), and especially in the love of a man for a woman which can cancel both loss and death even in the moment and the flesh ("Nuptial"):

Not love, but flesh we took for ill
or better when we gave ourselves . . .
Now one another's sacrament,
we reconcile this faltering flesh

through all our eucharistic gifts
of joy and crucifixion, dear,

to what survives and will survive
it and all Eden's guilt and fear.

In Hazo's second book, *The Quiet Wars*, his concerns are the same and his control of his medium, better. He is still most secure in more formal modes, although his verse does begin to loosen out as his thinking becomes firmer and he gains a fuller understanding of his own voice. He chose, as evidence of his own estimation of his first two books, thirty-one of the forty-eight poems in this collection for *My Sons in God*, and the book is a fine one, a product of Hazo's growth and continuing concern for his craft.

The book's central metaphor is that of the cold war, the years of false peace from 1950 to 1960, an affluent time when evil's presence is harder to see, when death's presence is more subtle, a time like that described in the sentence by Denis de Rougemont which Hazo uses as his epigraph:

But when everything becomes outwardly peaceful, when the
springs of passion lose their tension and one fears the
outbreak of true antagonisms, evil finds refuge in our
prudences and contaminates a peace achieved without
battle.

In this time of false feelings, Hazo finds an honest faith in love, of his wife, his brother, his parents and, in a larger sense of family, of his Arab heritage—the grandfather he knew who sang “of Lebanon / until our days of roundelays / turned brief as breathing,” and the one he never knew “who besought his sons / beyond the havoc of the scimitar / by mule from Mosul to Jerusalem.” Where earlier he had often been content to describe fact simply and trust in its own validity, in these poems he is more involved with mind's collision with materiality (“The Paper Echo” in which “posters tattered in the sun betray / shadows of Plato's den, and so the world”) and the ability of belief to survive in the falsest of worlds (his many carnival and circus poems, among them “The Carnival Ark,” “Marie with the Tattooed Belly,” and “Sideshow” in which the Princess Loa dances “synonyms / of visions lost and spellbound in the sun / when apples swung forbidden from a limb”).

In the last poem in the book, “1950-1960,” Hazo offers a summing up, a burying of the past in the blood and a new recommitment, even in the face of the future of a new decade, to the moment and to the day, an acceptance and an affirmation:

Resisted still the muskrat urge to stow
and nest and dream of calendars to come.
Distrusted still the lure of retrospect . . .
I banish now the new years with the old
and seek no future but the given day
to live my dying in the risen world.

Certainly seeing, whether with the clear and physical eye or with the more perceptive and paradoxical inner eye, is at the center of Hazo's way of knowing and of writing. His third book, *Listen with the Eye*, is appropriately a set of sixteen poems (six of them from the earlier books) in juxtaposition with a group of photographs by James P. Blair, some of the poems directly related to the pictures, others obliquely. Mind, ear and eye come together in the book; it is an experiment in perception. Hazo insists that belief is essential to living fact, and in the title poem

Samuel Hazo

Born in Pittsburgh in 1928, Samuel Hazo graduated *magna cum laude* from the University of Notre Dame and received subsequent degrees from Duquesne University and the University of Pittsburgh. In 1955 he joined the English faculty of Duquesne University where he became Associate Dean of the College in 1961. He is presently director of the International Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh. Mr. Hazo received the James V. Mitchell Memorial Award for Playwriting in 1948, and in 1962 his book of poems, *The Quiet Wars*, was nominated for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for Poetry. He is married and is the father of one son.

—CDE

(an example of his abandoning of conventional lines to make poem and picture suit the page together), he finds that the reality of three photographs of children and of even the children themselves depends upon the belief which wells from love:

It is enough that I can
think
I see them
there
like cameos,
and
there
they
are.

The bareness of these lines and of many of the other poems in the book is an attempt by Hazo to match the starkness of the photograph (in “Memoir at Checkpoint,” his speaker promises to “tell you the worst thing, / without tricks, without poetry”), and that attempt, successful (as it often is) or not, helps free him from many of the bonds of his restraint and to give him a new sense of word and line. In the new poems in *My Sons in God*, Hazo uses that new understanding to write poems which, although still formal, have a new excitement, a portent of a growing strength and self-sufficiency. Gathered with the best of his earlier poems, these poems and this book mark the major turn in Hazo's development, for *My Sons in God* is not only a good book, it is an important one, displaying both the new strength at his command and also the wide range of his voice.

The doubt and pain attendant upon belief inform the new poems in the book and give the poems and the belief the strength of earned truth. Hazo feels the anguish and apparent futility of being “bone of Judas, blood of Cain,” even as he forces himself to believe (in “First Will and Testament”) “that war / will never come, that we shall live in peace / to face disease, old age or sudden death / as quietly as tulips brace for frost, / that I might never tell as Matthew told / of Christ how every risen day was sold / with each new Eden of my traitor's breath.” He feels stripped down, held away from the circuses of joy where, as in “The Carnival

Books by Samuel Hazo

DISCOVERY

New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959. \$.95 (pa.)

THE QUIET WARS

New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962. \$.95 (pa.)

HART CRANE: AN INTRODUCTION AND INTERPRETATION

New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963. \$2.95

New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963. \$1.25 (pa.)

THE CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL (ed.)

Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963. \$4.50

Louvain, Belgium: Editions E. Nauwelaerts, 1963. 250fr.

A SELECTION OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS POETRY (ed.)

New York: Paulist Press, 1963. \$.95 (pa.)

LISTEN WITH THE EYE (with photographs by James P. Blair)

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964. \$2.95 (pa.)

MY SONS IN GOD

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965. \$3.00

BLOOD RIGHTS

Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, \$4.50; \$2.50 (pa.)

—RHWD

Ark," the peaks of Ararat may emerge "between / the spookhouse and the Coca-Cola lights." The nuclear world has made even death unnatural, has left us as naked as Adam, more naked perhaps than any other of our ancestors have been ("Pittsburgh in Passing"):

Between old battles and the ones I should
be seeing, I have lost my circus eyes.
Birthdays are deathdays. I feel the glaciating
of centuries beneath the pulse of clocks
and through the blown-out candles of my blood.

He says, in "Open Letter to a Closed Mind," that "all I really know / is what occurs to me right here as right." He feels trapped in the moment that he celebrates, snared in his own freedom and his own limitation, but moments of truth do "come unannounced as Christ," and the truth of heroes and saints does have value, is an opening out to eternity in time, in the turning day:

I have a student's fear that truth is fun
to seek but death to keep. Heroes and saints
are those who freed the thoughts of God by pen
or tongue and made them last like Parthenons.
I bleed the lambs of glory for those few
who said that time must wait their christening.
In the presence of their absence, words take flesh,
and God wakes fires that can rock the skull
and blaze the eye with revelation.

Hazo celebrates the saint's faith and being in the act of poetry, can speak his fear and find its proper place in things, and in the acts of love he is able to celebrate the light which will shine through each circling of dark. In an early poem arising from his being given to understand that his marriage would be childless, "For a Son Who Will Never Be Born," he finds that "Balked of their first and last parenthesis, the years will leave you winterless and free," but in the later "For My Godsons," he succeeds in the positive blessing of love, the creation of light:

Let Christ or chaos stun the world
with judgment and the final fire—
I wish you now, my sons in God,
no less than all the might of choice,
no more than Adam's cowardice
in choosing right.

Let life itself be light, and death
the dark and far of what you see.
I wish you light to parable
the dark as poets might who dare
the world from lockstep with a word
and dream it right.

IV

In the last line of "For My Godsons," Hazo speaks of love as "my final right," and that right becomes in his most recent book all "blood rights," of father and new son, of family, of mankind in the love of God. *Blood Rights* is a collection of forty-two new poems and sixteen "transpositions" from the Arabic poetry of the contemporary Lebanese poet Ahmed Ali Said. It is Hazo's best book, a fulfillment of the promise of his earlier poems, and it establishes him as one of the most honest and gifted of modern American poets.

In the best of these new poems, those in the last two sections, "Sharkwater" and "Death's Only Rhyme Is Breath," Hazo remains meditative in his paradoxical descriptions, but his sense of language and line enlarges, freeing him from the occasional stiffness and artificial constraint that marred many of his earlier poems. The new poems are still disciplined in idea and motion, but the discipline is in terms of a new understanding of how a poem may move and how its inner connections may be made. This new ability may well have come from Hazo's translating the Arabic poems of Said into an English which is able to capture their sinuous and startling unwinding, their often abrupt transitions, their uniquely Arabic mating of form and substance.

The meeting of the poetic minds and crafts of Said and Hazo is an exciting one; the English lines are Hazo's, but the voice is Said's, with an Arab's sorrow and awareness of time's dark flow, of a past which comes from the desert "and on its face is the hunger / of pigeons and parching flowers," of love which makes one sway "like a wave / between the life / I dreamed and the changing / dream I lived." The long and, I think, major poem "Remembering the First Century" is at once a

Among the Departures from This House

In Coke bottles waiting to be returned,
Under the faded couch, beside the bed,
In empty cups which perch about the room,

Dust settles, gathers, breeds, and comes alive.
It grows like snow—nothing improves before
The slow and tactless onslaught of my hands,

Until, as I lie sifting toward sleep,
The little balls of dust unite, fall in,
Move out like lemmings, marching against the wind.

—HENRY TAYLOR

record of the bloody and deadly heritage of the Middle East and as well a poetic transcending of that ravaged landscape in the imaginative act. "My song / is everything I see and all / I breathe," Said concludes:

I sing my way
to death, and, having sung,
I leave this elegy to burn
for poets, birds and everything
alive from here and now
until the end of heaven.

Like Said, Hazo's commitment to poetry and his strong Christian faith despite the doubts inherent in nerve and bone strengthen him to face the dark in life and living man, to swim far out to the distance and the time "when all this sea / shall wear me down to man," to judge himself "by what I'm willing to survive / without." He can praise the wonder of "a girl / necklaced, with nothing on," in "A Nude for Either Eye," even as he realizes how "lovers blunder" and how a woman "with nothing showing but her skin" may keep "concealed like breath or bone / the real and second nude within." In "Sancho at the Crossroads," he recognizes that life is a texture of accidents, that "fact / is nothing but a possibility / that happened," and still affirms that he lives "to be born again, as I / was born to live," that "the man we still can be / rides forth to hosannas and spittle / with nothing but flesh for his armor." The moment is all we have, but the moment is alive, the fulfillment of possibility and the seed of infinite possibility.

And Samuel Hazo continues to be the poet of the moment, of its fact and the possibility within that fact. It is a moment, as in "A Sparrow's Worth of Fear," in which "While anyone is burying a bird / or naming colors in a pool, a plane /

To A Dead Child

"... who'll show a child just as it is? ... who'll make its death from grey bread, that grows hard,—or leave it there within the round mouth, like the choking core of a sweet apple . . . death, the whole of death,—even before life's begun, to hold it all so gently, and be good: this is beyond description:" Rilke, from "The Fourth Elegy"

He is blue now.
From grey, mold took him,
hardening the arms, the spindle legs,
changing him
to blue.

He stood, bare faced and open,
stood and held it all in seedsmall teeth,
held till he became both tooth and seed,
unnatural and softbeneath the molding hand,
stone replaced by living bread,
made and molded, grey
to distant blue.

And you, apart, back on your heels,
accuse the air made broad with grief.
Startled into finding in a leaf
something other, more than green,
you turn from what you've seen
with open shudders,
wondering at wind.

He, the small,
the smallest friend of manyfingered death,
holds still,
grips the living apple
in the small blue teeth.

—ROSANNE COGGESHALL

could soar across the sun and leave us blown / to dust and shadowed by its crucifix." It is also a moment in which one may offer truth, or at least good advice, to the boys, sons, students, following each man's steps into the world which "by definition stinks / of Cain." In "To a Commencement of Scoundrels," Hazo offers his advice:

I wish you what I wish
 myself: hard questions
 and the nights to answer them,
 the grace of disappointment
 and the right to seem the fool
 for justice. That's enough.
 Cowards might ask for more.
 Heroes have died for less.

Alive in a world and a life in which death and breath offer true rhymes only for each other, Samuel Hazo has come to terms with being at odds with blood and bone, has found strength in love and the line of his descent, in the faith that enables him to know that each moment is all moments, that "there's more to certitude / than sound or sight. / There's / more than darkness to the night."

— R. H. W. DILLARD

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