The Appalachian Book of the Dead

By Charles Wright

Sunday, September Sunday ... Outdoors,
Like an early page from The Appalachian Book of the Dead,
Sunlight lavishes brilliance on every surface,
Doves settle, surreptitious angels, on tree limb and box branch,
A crow calls, deep in its own darkness,
Something like water ticks on
Just there, beyond the horizon, just there, steady clock ...

Go in fear of abstractions ...

Well, possibly. Meanwhile,
They are the strata our bodies rise through, the sere veins
Our skins rub off on.
For instance, whatever enlightenment there might be
Houses compassion and affection, those two tributaries
That river above our lives,
Whose waters we sense the sense of
late at night, and later still.

Uneasy, suburbanized,
I drift from the lawn chair to the back porch to the dwarf orchard
Testing the grass and border garden.
A stillness, as in the passageways of Paradise,
Bell jars the afternoon.

Leaves, like ex votos, hang hard and shine
Under the endlessness of heaven.
Such skeletal altars, such vacant sanctuary.

It always amazes me
How landscape recalibrates the stations of the dead,
How what we see jacks up
the odd quotient of what we don’t see,
How God’s breath reconstitutes our walking up and walking down.
First glimpse of autumn, stretched tight and snicked, a bad face lift,
Flicks in and flicks out,
a virtual reality.
Time to begin the long division.


Source: Black Zodiac (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1997)
Influenced by his rural Southern roots as well as his love for Italy, Charles Wright’s poetry explores nature and spirituality. The author of over 20 books of poetry, his style has evolved over the years into what many critics classify as postmodern. Wright’s 1997 collection Black Zodiac won the Pulitzer Prize. In 2014, he was named Poet Laureate of the United States.

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