

## ARS POETICA

by Henry Reed (1948)

Shall these bones live again? And if they do,  
How can they love this flesh they never knew?

I turn my hand to make the dead life live,  
The fated, naked past again to thrive,

But the withered flower comes out with a different bloom,  
The suffering ghost haunts in a strange room.

The words stream out, are fashioned into sense,  
But not in the song I wished, this gross pretence,

Strange to my ear, false to my watchful eye;  
I cannot live again, I can only die.

And if I choose one death to contemplate,  
The rest break in, and fashion a new fate,

Fate that for good or ill was never mine,  
Deaths whose mysterious source I can not divine.

The deaths I could now receive, they above all delay;  
My unwished vengeance is that I betray

Even the wounds I have bled from. They are *here*:  
Here is the spot, blanched with an ancient fear,

But under the visible line of the cicatrice  
I am cured of a new disease, by a new device.

If I could show the simple dust as dust!  
But murder replaces theft greed is disclosed as lust;

Things I could wish at war are reconciled,  
London becomes Rome, my father becomes my child.

## DE ARTE POETICA

by Henry Reed (revised)

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## ARS POETICA

How can the bones live? The bones are white and mute. 25  
Here are my hands, but my hands are destitute 26

At once of the power to revive and the power to kill. 27  
Here is a dull, white flower, solitary; simple, still: 28

I place it into a vase, with no thought or intent, 29  
And therefore if I remark that by some accident 30

It stands in front of a mirror, the recognition soon 31  
Goes from my mind, and mindlessly I pass the afternoon. 32

And only with half a consciousness am I aware at all, 33  
How often the sun has flickered on, and vanished from, the wall, 34

And returned and withdrawn again, until at the evening hour 35  
It advances its last full tide upon the inert flower, 36

And around the flower and the glass four ghosts precipitates, \* 37  
And at last in its dead, torn hour, the flower palpitates. 38

There has only been the flower, and the flower's reflected nape, 39  
The fragile white blossom, the slowly obscuring shape. 40

But now from the unsought light I see how four ghosts break: 41  
There is the lit flower shining, white, palpable, opaque. 42

And there on the mirror's surface the day's young dust I see, 43  
And beyond in the glass the flower again, but lit to translucency. 44

(And the flower still lingering there, faint and deprived of will, 45  
The real, dull, dying, flower, solitary, simple, still.) 46

And then, most ghostly of all, faintest and frailest and last, 47  
High on the mirror's surface the flower's grey shadow is cast. 48

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But into this unsought light the new ghosts softly break: \* 39  
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Time, age, and broken growth, the arranging hands of men, 47  
Chance and the dulled ego, caught, lost, caught again, 48

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Time, age, and broken growth, the arranging hands of men, 49  
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And the whole transfigured net is thrown in the shores of fate, 51  
Strange, stranded, yet briefly happy, happy in its strange state. 52

The dead bones inurned, the four ghosts mounting guard: 53  
It is hard to traverse their presence, but not more hard 54

Than the fact that I cannot choose the words I would choose to say, 55  
That I speak of yesterday's death, but never in a future way; 56

Though the only words of mine that I know could be believed 57  
Need a future way of utterance which could only be achieved 58

If another language were mine, or another idiom or art 59  
Would form in my mouth and stifle my used-up words at the start; 60

If I could seize from the future a sentence in which I was free 61  
From the falsified recollection, the remembered falsity. 62

How shall the bones live? How shall the skeleton 63  
Rise from the dead shore and across the sea press on, 64

Ignoring the port's noises, the sea, the indifferent birds; 65  
How shall we go across, when our clumsy bundle of words 66

Are only a passport for shipwreck? A few yards out from land, 67  
The familiar landmarks vanish, vanishes the well-known strand. 68

The voyage was to be a short one, across a narrow strait; \* 69  
Even from the far side one would see the hither gate. 70

But the four ghosts round the mirror assemble and go before 71  
Day breaks, and finds us happy, but happy on a strange shore 72

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~~Than the fact that I cannot choose the words I would choose to say, \*\*~~  
~~That I speak of yesterday's death, but never in a future way; \*\*~~

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But the four ghosts round the mirror assemble and go before  
Day breaks, and finds us happy, but happy on a strange shore

With a nearby town murmuring, but murmuring in a foreign way,  
Waking, and waking us to the life of a foreign day

In a land we may one day love, but a land we have not sought,  
That grants us only the possession of thoughts we have not thought,

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That grants us only the possession of thoughts we have not thought, 76

With the passport in our hand, faded and torn and stained, 77  
And the journey's imagined wages eternally ungained. 78

\* (These stanzas have been removed from the revised poem.)

## DE ARTE POETICA

With the passport in our hand, faded and torn and stained,  
And the journey's imagined wages eternally ungained.

\* (The wording of this stanza has been changed.)

\*\* (These lines are cancelled in the amended poem, but no alternatives are given.)