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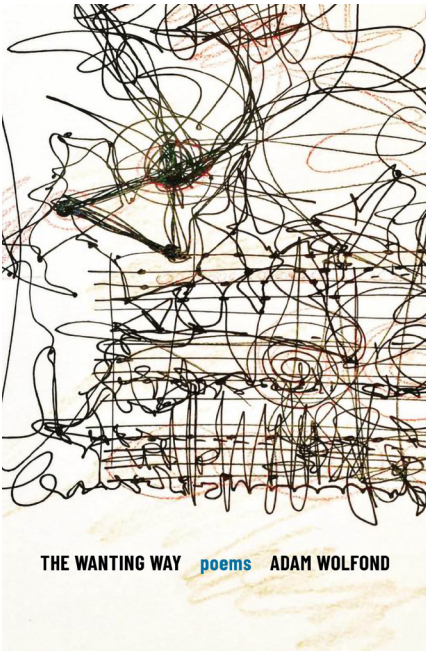
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Outlier/Indweller: Writing as Walking

“The wanting was a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the woods”

—Cheryl Strayed



**Adam Wolfond. *The Wanting Way*.
Milkweed Editions, 2022.**

In her 2012 memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found*, the American writer Cheryl Strayed took herself off on a thousand mile hike of self discovery, observing at the time: “I’d finally come to understand what it had been: a yearning for a way out, when actually what I had wanted to find was a way in.” She was also sharing her experience of wanting *per se*, almost as a location in space and time, one she could arrive at by escaping from its insistent desire, even comparing her wanting to a wilderness she needed to be liberated from. Unfettered physical space and its traversal is frequently perceived as a conduit to expanded consciousness, but it is, however, not the only way to free oneself from the sense of confinement which often ironically accompanies heightened self-awareness.

The Canadian poet and visual artist Adam Wolfond’s excellent new book of mesmerizing poems, *The Wanting Way*, is perhaps an ideal example of how effectively a being who at first glance appears to occupy a profound sense of confinement can, upon reflection and closer observation, reveal himself to be freely traversing interior expansive landscapes of exquisite beauty with a charming sense of humility and grace. He has, in fact, clearly documented, in his own inimitable style, how he manages to travel as an exceptionally gifted poetic *flâneur* and arrive at an often poignant way out of the woods of wanting into self-expression of a truly extraordinary sort. He explores an interior wilderness.

What is extraordinary about his manner of delivering these shimmering emotive postcards, directly from his heart to us, is how fervently they occupy a zone I often to refer to as *nirvanarama*: the utter absence of self-consciousness. Adam Wolfond's poems are also tender-hearted evocations of several of the most powerful movements in 20th Century poetry: the Vorticists Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and TS Eliot; and also the new image stylings of Charles Olson, John Berryman's *Dreamsongs*, and especially the ever enigmatic e.e. cummings. But not consciously so, since Wolfond may not be familiar with these poets. Nonetheless, his collection *The Wanting Way* does resonate with Pound's *Pisan Cantos* and with the *Tulips and Chimneys* stage of early cummings, as well as with much of William Carlos Williams's uniquely fervent devotion to everyday life.

And this brings me to my first dilemma in discussing Wolfond's work: should I simply explore his touching poems on their own merit, which is considerable in the contextual overlap with such impactful stylistic movements, or should I identify them as the uncanny insights of a gifted autistic. In the end, Wolfond himself, and his editors, provide the solution by being open about the personal place from which his private postcards originate. As per the book's designation: "Adam Wolfond is a non-speaking autistic artist, prose writer and poet. He has two poetry chapbooks, *In Way of Music Water Answers Towards Questions Other Than What is Autism*, and *There is Too Much Music in My Ears*. He is also the co-founder, along with Estee Klar, of *dis assembly*, a neurodiverse arts collective in Toronto." Milkweed Editions offered this synopsis of their Multiverse program: "Multiverse is a literary series devoted to different ways of languaging. It primarily emerges from the practices of neurodivergent, autistic and non speaking cultures."

The proposed program of this highly engaging alternative editorial emphasis is that of making gestures towards a correspondence—human and more than human—gestures that "lovingly exceed what is normal and normative in our society, questioning and augmenting what literary culture, is, has been and can be." Amy Sequenzia, a social activist who writes eloquently about disability, civil, and human rights, has cogently observed about Wolfond's deeply moving communication methods that "Through words full of musicality, Adam advocates for his right to be himself, demanding that his very way of existing in the world be respected. Adam invites 'talkers' to quietly listen to his non-speaking language." So then, let us quietly listen:

from "I Am the Pace of My Body and Not Language"

I think the days of the week
 are paced in the line of rocks
 and the water of the ocean
Water talks by pacing waves against them
Rocks respond by allowing their surfaces to be worn
Time is perceived by the appreciation
 of language but I am
 the pace of my body and not language

Encountering these alluring and elliptical Wolfond lines, I was immediately struck by their resonance with a number of my favorite poets from a wide range of centuries and diverse styles who all shared a singular desire to bend language, beyond its most conventional shapes and structures and into a startling new alignment with their own private interior worlds. Isidore Ducasse, Arthur Rimbaud, Stephane Mallarme, Andre Breton, Brion Gysin and William Burroughs for instance, all strove to dislocate the meaning of poetic insights, whether via the symbolist agenda, the surrealist project, or the cut-up method of free form scissored juxtapositions.

Indeed, two of my very favorite poets instantly sprung to mind in a kind of echo of Wolfond's creative flow, the welsh visionary Dylan Thomas and the Romanian-German wordsmith Paul Celan, both of whom utterly transformed their native tongues merely by insisting on being themselves. And if you're reading this Adam, by no means is my comparison of your thought and feeling vibe to Thomas and Celan in any way a diminishing of your own achievement as a two-decade-old human. On the contrary, I believe that if you explore these two authors, you will wade deeply into a breathtaking synchronicity and feel right at home in their dream-landscapes: for they were inherently and essentially writing specifically for acutely tuned ears such as yours.

from "Fern Hill," by Dylan Thomas (1945)

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
 In the moon that is always rising,
 Nor that riding to sleep

I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Or from “Black” by Paul Celan (1948)

Black,
like the memory-wound,
the eyes dig toward you
in the by heart-teeth light-
bitten crownland,
that remains our bed:

through this shaft you have to come—
you come.

In seed-
sense
the sea stars you out, innermost, forever.

The namegiving has an end,
over you I cast my lot.

Even though all the poets I referenced, especially Thomas and Celan (who sometimes even resorted to neologisms such as “breathturn into timestead” to reach his goals) are gifted emissaries from a distant land of human insight, they still do often feel like they are striving, searching for a way to exceed the limits of language. But Wolfond exhibits no striving; his is a natural and innate ability to pull magic out of the air at will. Which is why I believe this young poet would also experience great benefits from close readings of Wallace Stevens, as he goes forward on his own path. Not because he should make any adjustments in his style or technique of sharing his “wanting way,” which is as extraordinary in many respects, but merely because he will find in Stevens a kindred spirit: someone who has left footprints to follow out of the woods.

At first glance, Wolfond appears to be an outlier, a person situated away or detached from the main body of system and differing from all other members

of a particular group—and ironically, as a metaphor this young poet will likely appreciate, in geology: a younger rock formation isolated among older rocks. He is also, paradoxically, an indweller, meaning to literally abide within as a guiding force, often referring to the activation of an inner spirit, force or principle. In his case, that inner spirit is both the wanting way and the way of poetry, and its core embodiment in a shared, silent meaning which at times even feels prayerful, or at least contemplative, in Thomas Merton's use of the term. And among the many signposts Adam has erected on his way out of the woods of selfdom, usually using the twigs, branches and sticks he treasures so frequently in the making of his assembled sculptures (which are nevertheless still physical poems), this one poem, in its entirety, has remained with me as a kind of an island beacon pointing inward and outward at the same time.

A Typology of Water

Rain is mastering thought
with landings that
eagerly run and toward
more thoughts go

Stream of thought
is the pace
of the thinking apparition
of the way thought
is landing

Lake is the pool
of thought
and the always
pleasing calm

Pond the simple pause
of words
opening insides
puttering to more boredom
where the bottom of ponds are still

Ocean is like the inside
of the palpitating heart
where love is pleasing
place of pampering
universe in my head

In my head is my heart

In a recent conversation with author Jeevika Verma on PBS, while using a speech-generating device, Wolfond observed not just what poetry *means* to him but also how it *feels* to him. “It is nature to me. And I think that non-speakers like me dance with language.” And language, or what the poet more actively calls languaging, is “An event in which the body and the atmosphere are related.” Chris Martin, the editor of the Multiverse series of books which has published Wolfond’s lovely verse, also uses the more active term languaging, which he learned from Wolfond. “For me, there’s this huge gap between the way I language myself in poetry and the way I language myself in everyday life. What felt so transformative to me about being in a community with non-speaking writers is that there wasn’t this gap in expression.”

Exactly so: in Wolfond’s verse, there is zero gap between what he is thinking and feeling, and the manner in which he expresses it in words. As he puts it in his silent but eloquent way: “Languaging can open many ways for persons who are not able to walk the talk.” It suddenly struck me that all of Wolfond’s poems, and indeed even, or especially the physical poems we call sculptures, were functioning as a kind of algorithm or code for living the way he lives, as in the technical meaning of the term: a process or set of rules followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations. So I was especially delighted then to come upon a series of short poems in this current collection which play on both that meaning and on the word itself.

Algo Rhythm 6

Walk the ways of thinking each step is answering the call to word the ways.
Open the call—divings to the underland of thought. Understand how the
watchful eyes answer to what art is and not what art does.

“Divings to the underland of thought”—now there is a line of poetry that is truly worthy of Paul Celan or Dylan Thomas. Indeed, it is also one worthy of Adam Wolfond and his shared yearning to find a way out and a way in at the same time. By sharing that yearning, and sharing *The Wanting Way*, he has demonstrated that all language, and all true poetry, is an invisible architecture within which we can all conduct our lives with a quiet grace and a humble charm. TS Eliot, whose “Waste Land” was released upon an unsuspecting world a century ago this year, once remarked that genuine poetry can communicate long before it is fully understood. I therefore propose that, given my belief that poetry can hardly ever get more genuine than Wolfond’s, a simple taste test can prove this salient assertion. Pick a few poems by Adam from *The Wanting Way* and read them out loud: you’ll find that they make more than perfect sense. He may not talk much, but his poetry speaks volumes in a cool, clear voice, one that feels like music, precisely because it is music. It’s the body’s own music of calmly walking across an expansive landscape of words.

Donald Brackett is a Vancouver-based culture critic and curator with first-hand experience of the autistic perspective. His recent book on the artist and social activist Yoko Ono, *An Artful Life*, was released by Sutherland House Books in April of 2022, and focused on her involvement with the Fluxus art movement of the 1960s. Brackett’s upcoming book is a study of the films of Charles Brackett (a distant family relative) and Billy Wilder. Titled *Double Solitaire*, it is being published by Applause Books/Rowman and Littlefield, in fall 2023.

