

Featured Poet

WILLIAM LOGAN



photo by Paul Ward

William Logan's most recent book of poems is *Rift of Light* (2017) and most recent book of essays, *Broken Ground: Poetry and the Demon of History* (2021). His reviews have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New Criterion*, *Poetry*, and other journals, and he has written a twice-a-year verse chronicle for the *New Criterion* since 1995. Logan has received, among other honors, the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism, the Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry, the Staige D. Blackford Prize for Nonfiction, the inaugural Randall Jarrell Award in Poetry Criticism, the Corrington Medal for Literary Excellence, the Peter I. B. Lavan Younger Poets Award, and the Allen Tate Prize. Logan is Alumni/ae Professor of English at the University of Florida, where he was director of the creative-writing program from 1983 to 2000.

"The past was closed for restoration": William Logan's Eden-Haunted Poetry

"Balance is the memory / of the fall, before it happens." So much is contained in this couplet, this sentence from William Logan's poem "Ice".¹ If it is perhaps more delicate a consideration than the bulk of Logan's work, what it does hold is excellent sense of timing and the line, and a nod toward his great obsession with the past, and—though I don't think overtly intended here—The Fall. He is really one of the age's more gifted poets. Ah, but so much oxygen has been spent on William Logan's criticism. "The most hated man in American poetry" and all that, little air is left for the poems. It is unfortunate, I believe, that the harsh tones of some of his reviews have caused his criticism—and probably his poetry—to go wildly unread, or to escape careful reading. Though, given how few poems are read by even fewer people in general, I imagine he doesn't care, and all the better for him to let it go. Logan seems in it for the long haul, for the judgment of the next century. In an interview with Garrick Davis, he said, "Because criticism rouses passions, because it has more currency (and is sometimes easier to understand), there are readers who think of me only as a critic. The poet mildly objects."² I'd

1 Logan, William. *Deception Island: Selected Early Poems, 1974–1999* (London: Salt, 2011), 12. (Contains selections from *Sad-faced Men*, *Sullen Weedy Lakes*, *Difficulty*, *Vain Empires*, and *Night Battle*.) ("Ice" originally published in *Sad-faced Men*, 1982.)

2 Davis, Garrick. "William Logan and the Role of the Poet-Critic." *Contemporary Poetry Review*. January 27, 2014.

like to object a little more than mildly on his behalf (though I can sense him cringing). The criticism is first-rate, to be sure. He may be the best poetry critic writing today, if for, if nothing else, his willingness to be wrong. And beyond the at-times caustic book reviews, there lies a whole body of long essays that explore various poetries in a thoughtful manner. But alas, it's the brief flash that people grab hold of.

Over his career, Logan has produced ten individual collections of poems and one British-published selection of early work, *Deception Island*. It is a solid body of art, one that stands alongside his eight collections of his criticism, which includes *The Undiscovered Country*, winner of the 2005 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism.

Logan's range of subject matter is impressive—he is equally at home with the life of 13th-century proto-scientist Robert Grosseteste and the alligator-haunted swamps of Florida, as he is in his medium, comfortably moving back and forth between a late-20th-free-verse style and the meter of Frost and Hecht. Logan, as his often-single-sentence bio tells us, divides his time between Florida and Cambridge, UK, and those landscapes dominate his writing when his subject is contemporary (and the UK quite often when historical), but we see the Rhode Island shore of his childhood as well. His work delves into British history, World War II and the Holocaust, finds great take-offs from *Moby-Dick*, and travels to Venice, so often to Venice. There is history great and small here; the poems are erudite but not stuffy when it comes to historical, scientific, and artistic pasts. If at times falling into obscurity, it is not an easy poetry it does not take to easy subjects. I don't mean to say he intends it to be difficult, but the important things of our lives can be difficult, and any poetry worthy of those difficulties should attempt to reflect that.

<https://www.cprw.com/william-logan-and-the-role-of-the-poet-critic>.

He is a gifted technical writer, which he doesn't often wear on his sleeve (and when he does, it leads to his lesser attempts, as it would for anyone). He has grown from collection to collection more aligned with a metrical milieu but, perhaps interestingly, has not written many poems in a received form, especially in later work. When he has utilized these frameworks, he has done so quite stunningly. Those early sestinas cast in quatrains do much to negate the problems of potential monotony inherent in the form ("The Object," "Tatiana Kalatschova," "Blue Yacht," and "James at Sixty"), and there are a few villanelles and some sonnets (often broken non-standardly, e.g., "The Rivers of England"), rhymed couplets, if we include that in this category, and an attempt at Anglo-Saxon verse ("Capability Brown in the Tropics").

"Sonnet," from *Rift of Light*, one of very few poems Logan ever titled with its form, is actually one that does not follow a traditional form. His meter in the poem is smoothly done with some substitutions, but the lines scan into iambic pentameter without becoming clotted or strained and, even with almost all end-stopped lines and rhyme, never pound the ear.

All is confusion. Much is understood,
lost in the fractured hour the freezing wind
took to its silences, as in a wood
where automatic birds live dumb and blind.

Where is the hardship in such holiness?
Like the idea of God, or just the soul,
the beatitude of things lives on unseen.
Where did she go, the girl in the see-through dress?

Her open blouse, her razor, her window screen—
those partial partial things that made us whole.³

3 Logan, William. *Rift of Light* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 53.

The poem seems cut short at ten lines, but I'd suggest it's condensed. Look at the rhyming shift in the second stanza: it does not follow the *abab* pattern of the first and what you might expect in a Shakespearean model. No, we now have *cdec*, followed by a couplet of *ed*. We are getting the makings of a Petrarchan sestet overlapped onto this here. And in a poem where partialness is key, this is quite a marvelous enactment of that. The poem opens on a stress; in fact, the first three lines offer a series of opening reversed feet, and the second stanza has three as well. It is a confident statement: "All is confusion." One that is immediately qualified, or perhaps undercut, as we are told that "Much is understood." Look at that balance, look at the ease of that line's handling, a line metrically well composed that also doesn't announce itself as such. And though much may be understood, it is immediately lost in the wind. These things slip away from us into a place where birds are "automatic"—a little confounding, though I read it as if they were automatons, background decorations, designed to provide a simulacrum of the real thing. Logan brings us back to the beginning with "whole," a sound and sense rhyme with the poem's first word, "all." All is still confusing, but we learn to dwell with the mystery, the unseen.

In the title sequence of *Macbeth in Venice*, the eleventh poem, "Macbeth's Daughter Drowned," Logan reverses the usual order of lines in a villanelle; the quatrain with the repeated *a* and *b* lines appears first, followed by the tercets. It is an astute choice. The daughter Macbeth does not really have tells us,

I'm most unchanging when I disappear.
A broken mirror is the soul's veneer
Against the tidal groaning of the sea.
How could a daughter hope to interfere?⁴

4 Logan, William. *Macbeth in Venice* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 68.

A reverse villanelle spoken by a woman who does not exist, looking in a broken mirror. She is a reflection and potentially a cause of the tragedy to come (Lady Macbeth mentions nursing a child, but Macbeth refers to their line as barren, and no child exists in the play, so it is safe to assume that a daughter they might have had died young, and this is a theoretical motivation for the Macbeths' desire to gain a different legacy). Rather than follow the usual course down the poem, the reader rises from the drowned daughter's rest at the bottom of a lagoon. The surface of the water, another point of reflection, is not to be crossed. We end on the notion that the soul is covered in a broken mirror—never to be seen into or reflected, which feels fitting for Logan's general outlook on the soul or at least a Christian version of it.

William Logan, our great poet of ruin, takes as his prevailing subject the past and a postlapsarian present and all that it entails: passion and trouble between a man and a woman, a home that is no longer a home, a divinity heard of but absent. He seems doomed to revisit and gaze upon the wreckage of a world that, even if he doesn't believe it ever existed, is his inheritance. His poems are anti-Edenic because what often gets written about in idyllic terms is always rotting, and Paradise is always made of cardboard. Logan recognizes and, one almost wants to say, celebrates decay. His work is drenched in the natural world but one that is never the Instagram-ready landscape. His world is a rough one, not "red in tooth and claw" but more "yellow in froth and rot." But he is an incredibly sensitive writer of the non-human. He might not be an eco-poet, but his eye on the flora and fauna of his native Florida would be worth the study of those who would be. Read, for example, "The Abandoned Crow" in *Rift of Light*:

With cocked head,
it raked the ground

under one anthracite eye,

a shadow in a shadow,

...

Ragged at the ends,
its wings wore
the sheen of watered silk.⁵

It's such a fantastic mix of brutishness and beauty.

This is the case even in the early work, though it sometimes comes with a greater opacity. As in "Black Harbor," from his second book, *Difficulty*, which ends,

Through season, season, while miners hammer
needles into veins of cannel coal,
the rabbit crawls exhausted to its hole
and dying bees lie mired in the comb.
The crippled hand derides the fetid summer.
The grass absorbs philosophies of bone.⁶

That last line sure sounds good, but I'm at a loss to know what "philosophies of bone" are or why the grass absorbs them. But here we do have a "fetid summer" and animals most definitely are not frolicking in some kind of paradisaical wonderland. "Black Harbor" is also, to my knowledge, his first collected poem in a regular meter—iambic pentameter, except one tetrameter line, the first quoted here.

Compare this to poems in *Night Battle*, his fifth book. Take, for example, "Paradise" (a poem that is immediately followed by "Adam and Eve" and "Paradise Lost"). His work becomes a little sharper as he writes,

5 *Rift of Light*, 13.

6 *Deception Island*, 28.

A stunted broom plant blurs its fiery blossom
against the rotting gate,
the lumber now the color of nylon stockings—

like a rotting Creation—⁷

In a few lines we are drawn a corrupted Eden and perhaps a
corrupted coupling, as stockings might put us in a bedroom,
with a plant that can't achieve its full height and remains
out of focus.

“Pera Palas” is one of the book's best poems. The setting
is Istanbul, at the first hotel in Turkey to be electrified and
at one time a star attraction:

Up. Up. The greasy cables creaked,
raising the polished cage of mahogany
through the marble stairway to the clouds.

The clouds were Turkish, frothy, cracked,
Tiepolo's angelic hangers-on just pigeons now,
veering shadows across the skylight's filthy glass.

. . .

Atop each kneeling hill a gray mosque
squatted, its narrow minarets
aimed like Pershing missiles at their god.

Each view is not a lie, but the fossil of a lie,

. . .

We inherit but never inhabit the past,
blistered pieties betrayed by word,
winched in the *deus ex machina* to bespattered heaven.⁸

7 Logan, William. *Night Battle* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 33.

8 *Night Battle*, 77.

Here is an example of Logan's near-blank verse (my term; I don't know what Logan would call it)—often (iambic) pentameter but giving himself the freedom to abandon it as he goes. One might argue this as a violation of trust, of a contract with the reader; however, given its not quite standard beginning—one could scan “Up. Up.” as a single spondee or give the periods weight and suggest they are two trochees—I would say he hasn't signed that contract.

We are ascending in this poem, if not to heaven, at least toward it, but one of filthy glass and pigeon shit, not to mention one with Pershing missiles aimed at it. Going to heaven, not at the hand of God but by a mechanical god, and again we cannot inhabit the past, yet it will not leave us.

“We came to see the past, but the past was blind,” he writes later in *Night Battle's* “Basilica Cistern.”⁹ Two poems later, in “Church of Christ Pantocrator”: “The past was closed to us. The past was closed for restoration.”¹⁰ The past is an ever-present figure for Logan, but one that is never accessible (to whom is it?). It cannot be escaped nor let go of. An Eden he has been kicked out of, one that he doesn't even believe in. These poems are steeped in the religious but devoid of faith, almost as if he is combatting belief.

The Whispering Gallery, Logan's seventh book, gives us a proper anti-Eden with “In the Swamp.” He begins:

There lingered a disparity in the light
that gave the lake a brushed-over surface
by which you meant, a trembling to the stillness,
as if the paint had dried even while flowing.
It was, you knew, absurd and yet, as a vision,
lacked nothing the but the odor decaying religion.

We are watching a “dying lake,” along with the speaker

9 *Night Battle*, 84.

10 *Ibid.*, 86.

and an unnamed *you*, a lover most likely, and a progression of finely drawn creatures—ibises, bats, an alligator—makes an appearance or nearly do. The ibises make “fluttering check-marks” across the surface of the water, and each bird ends up “balanc[ing] / comically on a swaying twig.” It feels both tender and cutting. He leaves us with this: “. . . as if all that had happened were nothing, / as if what had yet to happen might be worse / than expected, or might never happen at all.”¹¹

The past for Logan is a lost place, forever imprinting itself on us because nothing can be done about it. It’s almost meaningless, just an image, something unreachable but unerasable.

This is followed by “The Prairie,” in which a *we*, presumably the same *we*, has been

condemned to Paradise,
. . . the gates unguarded,
the KEEP OUT signs removed. A fallen
palm lay discarded in the ditch, like a blunt sword
the departing cherubim had abandoned.¹²

The break on “fallen” is on the nose, but look at what has fallen: a palm, the very tree cut down to lay at the feet of Jesus’s donkey as it strolled into town on the since-called Palm Sunday. And the “famous trees are gone,” with nothing but scrub brush left behind. There are wading birds of a kind, but they are described as if they had been “belatedly touched in” by a painter, who might also be a stand-in for God here.

Logan returns to this idea in his next book *Strange Flesh*:

The winding road beneath the ancient oaks,

11 Logan, William. *The Whispering Gallery* (New York: Penguin, 2005). p. 18.

12 *The Whispering Gallery*, 19.

edged with palmetto scrub, like nature's little jokes,

cut a crooked path to that antique Eden,
one that God forgot. A place like Sweden.¹³

Less successful for, if nothing else, the rhymed couplets that don't adhere to a regular meter (it varies more frequently later in the poem, though line three here is strained with what I'd label three initial trochees and maybe a spondee) and come off as if they are meant to be humorous.

The middle of *Whispering Gallery* features "Penitence," a 26-part sequence that I would hazard to say is Logan's magnum opus thus far. It is too encompassing to give it its due here, but I would be remiss not to remark upon it and discuss how it participates in this thematic adventure as well. Each poem consists of six unrhymed tercets and ends with a monostich. The sequence begins with "Lake," which opens, "April. Shadows crimson-edged, tattooed with light, / corrupt the visible in sweet intimacy."¹⁴ It is probably not by coincidence we are in poetry's cruelest month.

The poems do not proceed in a linear fashion; they are not a sequence in that respect. They ground the reader in a variety of locales and times, moving from personal history to social history, from atom bomb in one poem to Manhattan Project scientists in the next, from, imagistically, maple leaves in one poem to their appearance again in the next, or, conceptually, from deceit to deceit, which is an attempt to bring the swirling chaos of all that we are and have done into focus to come to terms with a need for forgiveness.

There are a variety of characters in need of penitence here: Fermat, Coleridge, as well as the central speaker, who in "Samphire" tells us, "A summer ago we stood ill in our bones, / unable to speak beneath the hail of argument," and

13 Logan, William. *Strange Flesh* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 20.

14 *The Whispering Gallery*, 27.

later, “I’m grateful for what you have chosen to ignore.”¹⁵ Earlier he had been caught “eyeing a Swede with bee-stung lips,” one of the girls from the local language school, though this minor infraction is likely not the larger issue at hand, but it does show Logan putting his own bad behavior on display.

“Eve” brings us to a potential focus point of the drama. Here is an address to what I imagine is a different *you*, where the *we* is in an

Eden [as a] version of the subtropics
in which we knew what was forbidden: unshaven hair
furred your inner thighs, the afternoon you explained,
in languorous detail, why you could never love me.

Not an exit line but an exit wound.¹⁶

Logan doesn’t always go for the last-line zinger, but this is hard to beat.

Near the end of the set in “Byzantium (Interlude)” we find him ruminating:

I expected to age, not to get any older,
to age into perfection; and then one July morning
a stranger lived in the mirror, not unfriendly,

just a man who could never inhabit the past.¹⁷

If perhaps at times “Penitence” is too elusive and stretched, it remains a very ambitious work of poetry. Something Eliot might have done if he’d arrived *after* the confessional era.

Rift of Light, Logan’s most recent collection, continues this trope. “After Eden”¹⁸ finds the pair of lovers, our Adam and Eve, in Venice, by “mud-bestrewn banks” and “mazy

15 Ibid., 33.

16 *The Whispering Gallery*, p. 35.

17 Ibid., 50.

18 *Rift of Light*, 38.

canals mossy with trash.” It is a landscape that feels like a ruin, one that you could sense was once beautiful, maybe even perfect, but not any longer. The couple has “made a small mistake involving the fruit, / or the fruit salad,” (a small mistake indeed) and are “condemned to the view.” They are reenacting the Fall and the expulsion from the Garden repeatedly. The view they are condemned to has only “some Platonic idea of vacancy.” The view isn’t even paradise, but just a vacancy, an emptiness. The *you* says to the speaker, at the end, “*This is heaven . . . / Someday you should get to look at hell.*” Whether or not the *you* is telling him to go to hell, or is merely suggesting he should have the chance to see it, as a tourist might the Piazza San Marco, is debatable, but given the tension in the poem, I’d opt for the former. So much of this has been about what is seen, the view, which all requires light.

Indeed, the title *Rift of Light* sounds like it could be something positive, a band of sun falling through a break in the clouds. But the light could also be what’s causing the rift. The rift between a man and a woman, a human and his past, his god. Light—which in other hands is often a sign of hope, of promise—is, like an atom bomb, sometimes a destructive force.

And that seems a fitting end—for the light, its qualities and appearances, is another major occupation for Logan, and he is a keen observer of it. “The lighthouse swung its beam // back and forth like a mace.”¹⁹ This pair of lines is a fitting description of his own work, as a critic, as a poet. He shines his attention on things in a revealing but also potentially brutal way. It isn’t comfortable, but it is original and periodically brilliant.

19 “Mocha Dick,” in *Strange Flesh*, 10.

Abandoned Bed

—*Traveller's Rest Pit, Cambridge*

That dawn we stood over the fossil bed—
wind picking up, feathery picking of cloud
at a distance—we heard the merlin's

cry before it rose from the scatter
and dropped like a stone.
The dirt friable, the bed

the deep depression of a baking pan,
fossils had come tumbling forth,
evidence of the Great Flood—

or the ascetic splendors
of Pleistocene rhinoceros, red deer,
fresh-water mollusc.

We were field-walking land
laced with nettles, haunted
by the occasional slinking fox,

all covered by houses now.

Two Sisters

—*Unknown, Photographed by B. Frank Saylor,
Lancaster, PA, c. 1880*

Hair pulled back from their faces,
dark ruffled dresses done up
to the chin like straitjackets,

they look like petty criminals.
The older sits on the chaise,
Queen of the May.

The little one stands beside her,
of an age when the lens
holds mystery. She grips

her sister's hand. The calf-high
buttoned boots must have been
torture, yet a distracted

parental fondness leaks in.
The dresses may have been
royal blue or blood crimson;

the hair and ribbons betray
unshowy pride. The younger girl
has been caught before the age

of wariness; but her sister
stares down the photographer
with a sullen glare

and waits for sin.

The Vanished

A tobacco-colored dawn
shouldered apart the old elms
standing guard. Those

dead of the Dutch disease
had been felled one by one,
splintered like mainmasts

in a gale, only the north
rank surviving in that
footage in slow motion.

Through the green
emptiness of late afternoon,
crows stranded at dusk,

I drifted through scenes
I'd never see again,
only the ghosts in company.

Monet. Trouville. 1870.

Oh, that horrible chair!
The sky is built
from Impressionist smears,

a creamy pavilion tent
down the strand seems
in shaking-hands distance

of the real. A matron sits
in layers of a stifling
dress under a striking blue

parasol, far too small
or her head far too large.
A companion, just as

unsuitably wrapped in black
this hot day, peruses
a newspaper to ignore

the matron, the sun, the painter.
Between the women,
like a faithful dog,

sits the ridiculous chair,
its angles all wrong,
through which the painter says,

“*Abas* the viewer, *abas* the real!”

Study, Unfinished

Empty of promise or routine,
the narrow palette
of sky kept its temper,

feathery nothings piling
with unacknowledged debt
to the scrawly nothings

of Turner's palette,
or those studies by Constable
like suds in cappuccino.

Below, the ordered courts,
civilized ravens dyed
to extremity, hoo-hooing

pigeons offering themselves
as prey, yellow rape fields
belted by stubbly hedges—

all lay in an expectation
never to be gratified.
Somewhere a loyal river

uncoiled like old rope.

The Aunts

They pose past the past,
my not-so-maiden aunts,
twice- or thrice-married, rarely

without glass of gin and a smoke.
They saunter through memory
like Monet's ladies at Trouville,

forever stiff in silk and crinoline,
parasol in hand, one reading
a paper, one staring at the sea

or, having closed her eyes,
dreaming of somewhere
in unruly ruffles of cloud

or clouds of ruffle.
The problem lay not in parasols.
Every portrait is a portrait of tedium.

Portrait, Female, 1850

Fierce might be the word,
that look of a woman approaching
midlife, perhaps with the hint

of gray hair the hand did not
faithfully portray, eyes staring
with impatience at something

disagreeable, knowing that even
half an hour waiting for the artist
to finish was half an hour lost

as he ruffled and furled the collar,
heightened with china white,
barely fingering on a touch of pink

to the cheeks, as if the powdered tint,
too, felt the woman's desperation
to get on with things—and yet caught

the tense calm of someone
who had received all she deserved,
now in her mid-thirties facing,

in that Haworth parsonage,
what must have been long
known but unacknowledged,

the ghosts of pasts foregone, pasts
the more wretched for having never
been born. So Charlotte Brontë,

that afternoon in London
one dense June, by George Richmond,
society artiste, in the finest chalk.

Emmaus

Luke in torn clothes,
Cleopas sporting the pilgrim's scallop,

they sit at a table shrouded in white
cloth as if reserved at Delmonico's.

Bread, grapes, and the chicken
that might be a masterpiece

lie yet untouched, a meal laid
for the company though one

is dead. The risen Christ holds
his hand away from his swollen face.

Luke rises. Cleopas gestures in alarm.
The servant wonders if the wine has turned,

if the scoundrels will pay the bill
or offer the usual miracle.

Color by Kodachrome

Those streaks of sky
almost wiped clean
spread like pages of a history

book torn out one by one.
Revolution begins in a grain
of sand, Blake almost said.

Even politics lives in gardens
reeking of honeysuckle
and sewers, roses preening

in their death throes.
On the sea rocks, mussels boiled
in their shells. We never

thought hell would rise
so near, riding the high tide,
a monster of the deep.

Off-Season at the Point

Dawn clouds like ink
sponged with a dirty cloth,
the inky pines in silhouette,
bird cry too cheerful to be borne—

what were the spoils of war
but those in the ocean kingdom?
We lived for canvas sacks
of oysters and clacking black lobsters,

corpses of bemedaled swordfish,
once freelancers of the deep.
Those winter dawns, the sands
were rimed in ice, treacherous, banal,

cordoned off with razor wire.