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# The Book Of The Dead Man (conversation)

Marvin Bell

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## THE BOOK OF THE DEAD MAN (CONVERSATION)

*Live as if you were already dead.*

—Zen admonition

MARVIN BELL

### 1. *About the Dead Man's Conversations*

The dead man hath spoken with Matthew Arnold about  
ignorant armies.

He hath cautioned Keats on the isolate love of beauty.

If there were ever Grecian odes on the shore, they were  
smashed in the general onslaught.

Like sand castles adrift in the idea of architecture, like bas-  
reliefs planed to the texture of papyrus, like rubber in  
acid, the repositories of beauty did not outlast the idea  
of them.

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The dead man is of a mind, and a mind to, and his exploration  
has been in the places where an idea may fit.

It has been a long thrill in the dark for the dead man and  
friends.

The dead man is on the side of art but also on the side of  
artlessness.

Absent the blank page, the word must forever be muddied.

The words can be true only to one another, like Arnold's lovers  
—the ideal.

Well, says the dead man, what have we here?

It seems the dead man has caught the words in a  
compromising position.

This verbal interruptus is aquiver from circling an invisible vase  
where the lovers have been trying to catch one  
another.

Must poetry forever be anticipation and delayed gratification?

The dead man has been talking with T. S. Eliot about escaping  
one's personality, which he has.

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And with Wallace Stevens about the mind in the act of finding  
what will suffice, which he has.  
The dead man, too, can write the tautologies that cloak war  
and torture.  
But he no longer cottons to the aesthetic tilt of a head, the  
legendary voice, the prophetic boom box or starlit ego.  
Why should the dead man use up his life in the usual ways?  
The dead man's poetry is not stone cold soup.

## *2. More About the Dead Man's Conversations*

It was cold in the coffee house where the dead man met the  
editor.  
The dead man had asked Henry James if there could be two  
congruent points of view.  
He had challenged William James to a bout of automatic  
writing.  
The dead man won the game of exquisite corpse when he  
folded the paper twice.  
He wrote faster and faster, but he could not get down  
everything.  
The engineers were of a mind to map a brain—an empty brain.  
When the dead man and the editor met, it was in the early  
years of the Apocalypse.  
That no one could conceive of everything had given the lie to  
prophecy.  
It was a time when string theory was unraveling, when relativity  
had become absolute, when Gurdjieff's "all and  
everything" subsumed the cults, clans, castes, tribes,  
and schools.  
The dead man's papers had been overwritten.  
It was up to the editor to select a sample.

The dead has lived among remnants, shards, fragments,  
doubles, and replicas, among lucky error and  
deliberate effect.

Like a snake, the dead man molts, leaving a whole skin now  
passé.

How shall the editor edit the seamless if not with scissors?

The dead man has been talking to James Joyce about not  
being there when his words end up new.

The dead man has been talking to Galileo about the Law of  
Falling Bodies, which applies.

How shall the editor edit the perpetual or eternal if not with  
scissors?

The dead man's world is kaleidoscopic, it turns without  
stopping.

Say you knew him, but not what he was thinking.