by Ryan Flaherty

The Last Breath of Paul Celan

As there were no witnesses, it can haunt the imagination: the breath taken and not given back as he falls away from the ironwork of the Pont Mirabeau and into the Seine, sometime during the rainy week of April 20, 1970. Into the riling green water that threatens to overrun the antiquated sewers of Paris, into the water full of bobbing wine bottles, shoes, mattresses, unmoored docks, clothes blown from their lines, bodies of lost animals, bodies of lethargic fish, goes the newly admitted body of Paul Celan, to float for days, until a fisherman will find him seven miles downstream.

The last breath of Paul Celan holds his nearly unfurnished apartment, a few hundred feet from the bridge, at 6 Avenue Émile Zola, where he had moved the previous November. He lived alone, estranged from his wife, Giséle, who could no longer withstand the instability of his psychic overexposure. The mail will pile up behind his locked door. The knocking of friends and students from the École Normale Supérieure, where he has been teaching a seminar on Kafka, will echo through his apartment.

Spanning this breath is the Pont Mirabeau, built in 1893, in sweeping, elegant lines. From each bank, two low-slung arches pause a quarter of the way, on their pilings shaped like the prows of boats, before rising into one long central span. How many times has he stood in the light of the round lamps that line the bridge, listening to the fragility of his breath? How many times has he walked past *Abundance, Paris, Commerce,* and *Navigation,* the four allegorical brass sculptures resting stern and aft on the pilings? Nude *Abundance* blows her trumpet of fame toward the sky. Celan wrote:

> The trumpet part
> deep in the glowing
> lacuna
> at lamp height
> Listen your way in
> with your mouth.

Lacuna, Latin for "hole, pit," "blank or missing pages in a manuscript"—this breath in his chest when he goes over.

This breath holds his original name, Paul Antschel—an earlier self, born in 1920 into a different life, in Czernowitz, the capital of Bukovina, a country that two years after his birth ceased to exist and became Romania. (Today it is in the far western edge of Ukraine.) His was a polyglot, middle-class Jewish family, in an urbane city teeming with the languages of the East and West, but always his *muttersprache* was German. It was the language of his mother's family, of his house. After the war, he abandoned his name—too old-world Jewish. He sanitized it, first by adopting the Romanian spelling, *Ancel,* and then mutilating it to anagram, *Celan.* A newly invented *I* to answer for, though he kept German as his tongue, and in his poems. It was his language; he wanted to

reclaim it from death—but first he wanted to shatter its spine, wrench its syntax, force it beyond malleability to its breaking point, and then put it back together anew.

Into the water of the Seine, from the Latin *Sequana,* after the pre-Roman and Roman goddess of the river, and further back, the proto–Indo-European *Sak* (sacred) and *onna* (source). At the source of the Seine, northwest of Dijon in the Chatillon Plateau, had been a shrine to Sequana. Pilgrims would offer metal, wood, or stone images of the body parts they wanted her to heal by placing them in a large metal urn—a disembodied but hopeful butchering, like the rooms full of shoes, colanders, eyeglasses, and umbrellas that the prisoners brought but did not need at Auschwitz. Out of the plateau's oolite limestone seeps the start of the Seine that will trickle, then flow, then carry his body downstream. The dark, full urn of his breath.

This breath holds his hiding place on June 27, 1942, in a cosmetics factory, when the Gestapo rounded up most of Czernowitz's Jews and sent them to Transnistria, the unorganized—and so less-efficient, if equally deadly—concentration camp. Each time he told the story, he recounted a different version of that day: he had told his parents to come with him, but they were already defeated, saying, "We cannot escape our fate." Or he had fought with his father and stormed out. Or his parents had encouraged him (knowing what was coming) to go to a friend's house and stay the night. Or he had reached through barbed wire as the Gestapo pulled his father away. Whatever happened, the next day his home was empty, his parents gone.

In a later round-up, he was sent 250 miles south of Czernowitz to a work camp, where he labored at "shoveling," as he said. He existed peripheral to being, witnessing life's unraveling. When permitted, he wrote poems to record the extremity, the

guilt of surviving, and the burden of recording accurately, personally. Later, however, he would write in his poem, "Ashglory,"

No one
witnesses for the
witness.

This breath also holds that of Guillaume Apollinaire. After arriving in Paris, Celan began translating the French modernist's poetry into German. In his mouth, the bittersweet, lovesick words from the poem "Pont Mirabeau"—"Under the pont Mirabeau runs the Seine / and our loves"—were not only tinny but also awful. He found a dark puzzle in the refrain,

The night is a clock chiming
The days go by but not I.

Despite Celan's rush to abandon his *I*, to consign it to history, it seemed rather to strengthen its hold on him. One can imagine Apollinaire's lines looping through his head, "but not I . . . but not I," as he walked the streets of Paris, looking for . . . what? A further, more accurate fracturing?

And what does he feel when his body hits the cold April water? What understanding shocks his nerves? A poem from one of his later books, *Breathturn,* reads,

Once
I heard him,
he was washing the world,
unseen, nightlong,
real.

One and infinite,
annihilated,
ied.
Light was. Salvation.

In German, the line "ied" echoes the ending of the previous word, "annihilated," but Celan had claimed it was a conjugation of "a verb *'ichen,'*" meaning "to I." Where "Light was"—end stop, divide, separate—"salvation."

If the water washed away any of his resolve, he could have gone to shore, as he was a strong swimmer. Perhaps he tried, but the night was disorienting; perhaps he didn't, as the night was clear.

Did he hold this breath like a bell sinking in his chest, or did he push it out and wait? Did he take a full draught? As the water completely enveloped him, trying to enter him, did it remind him of writing in German? Was the panic for the antithesis of what surrounded him familiar? Celan had said, "Only in one's mother tongue can one speak one's truth. In a foreign tongue, the poet lies." As the water took him down and through the course of its eddies, pursed in its unsyllabled noise, did he ever stop resisting?

In eighteenth-century Paris, bread blessed for St. Nicolas, patron saint of sailors, fishermen, and the falsely accused, was placed on a board with a burning candle, and sent down-river after those who had been lost in the Seine. Wherever the candle guttered was where one looked. Tossing in the early morning light among the wiry reeds is Paul Celan's body, swelling in the water as the candlelight and bread disappear into his mouth. ■■■