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On Frank Stanford's "Battlefield"

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On Frank Stanford's *Battlefield*

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by
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I'd never imagined that I would encounter a poem able to shake the earth beneath me and shift my reality. In the summer of 2017, nearly forty years after Frank Stanford shot himself in the heart three times in his bedroom in Arkansas,[1] I found so much about which I was certain being washed away by waves of his current. Both my understanding of and expectations for poetry had shifted; the way I saw the world and my relationship to it began to warp under the weight of Stanford's words. I had stumbled upon his largest published poem, and what those close to him consider his life-long work (originally published shortly before his death in 1978), *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* (hereafter *Battlefield).*[2]

The poem follows Francis, an eternally twelve-year-old boy in the south, as he guides the reader through his thoughts, dreams, visions, memories, and experiences, ultimately immersing us within the landscape formed out of his perspective and environment. In its stanzaless and structureless form that stretches for approximately 16,000 lines,[3] *Battlefield* moves through dream and reality. The disorientation caused by this form paired with the striking and sometimes disturbing narrative episodes we encounter in Francis's moments of coherence, all communicated through the voice of a character formed out of an amalgamation of Stanford and his fictional persona who possesses a complex internal landscape, make this poem the greatest literary challenge I've encountered.

Battlefield sets itself apart from other substantial works of experimental writing partially through its constant engagement with a massive body of outside references. Stanford's landscape

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[1] On June 3rd, 1978.

[2] C.D. Wright explains the timeline of Stanford writing *Battlefield* in her preface to the poem: Frank Stanford, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* (Barrington, RI., 2000). Unless other noted, all quotations refer to this edition.

[3] Stanford claimed in several interviews that the original draft of *Battlefield* surpassed 1,000 pages and over half of the poem had to be cut during editing before the publication of the first edition which was a substantial 524 pages in length.

constantly draws from his formal education and on his knowledge of popular culture. The text relies heavily, in blatant and subtle references, on numerous sources and histories that range from the eastern world to the western canon and from ancient to modern times, including The Bible, *Beowulf*, the compositions of George Crumb, the philosophy of Giambattista Vico, the films of James Dean and Charlie Chaplin, the teachings of Girolamo Savonarola, the biography of Saint Francis, histories of political figures in the American South, and Huayan Buddhist beliefs to name only a few. Stanford uses his vast collection of sources and references to impact the reader's experience in several ways. In many instances, he causes the reader greater confusion when confronted with layers of coded references atop an already chaotic moment of narrative. Finding my footing on the constantly shifting landscape within *Battlefield* was disorienting enough; this task was only further complicated by the text's vacillation between immersing the reader within its own landscape and then sending us out of that landscape by engaging outside sources. In contrast to this, Stanford often uses these references and sources as a way to ground the reader in a reality they are comfortable with before asking them to abandon their definitions of reality as a whole. These references functioned for me as a lifeline at moments in which I felt I was lost in narratives that were particularly chaotic and impossible to trace, densely written and seemingly without a recognizable structure.

While the poem is dense and difficult to navigate, it is also able to elicit an emotional response in its reader that I found, following my first encounter with *Battlefield*, nearly impossible to articulate. While my early attempts to express the emotional experience of reading through the poem all seemed to fall short, I found that C.D. Wright, Stanford's closest friend and lover, articulately described the impact of *Battlefield* upon the reader in her preface to the second edition:

> I felt absolutely helpless to so much wildness of heart, so much fury and hilarity, such language. My skin burned, my insides hurt. I wanted to bury myself in the snow, pull the pages down on top of me. I wanted the cat to curl above me, mark the spot where we were buried, the poem and I. Never was I to be this innocent again.[4]

While Wright's words found a way to communicate the personal emotional rupture Stanford's poem causes in its reader, I could only describe reading through *Battlefield* as an experience that was moving beyond understanding and expression; this struggle to understand and to articulate the effect *Battlefield* had on me was where my project began to emerge.

The first part of my project's exploration of *Battlefield* is rooted in my desire to understand my own intense emotional reaction to it. While I found the poem to be affecting and captivating, it was my inability to understand how Stanford had elicited those feelings that was, for me, unique to this text. Stanford's power over me as a reader was confounding. I felt as though he (in the form of his textual persona, Francis Gildart) was perched above me and was enacting the influence of some cosmic body, an influence that was both exacting and untraceable. Yet, it wasn't his role as an emotional puppet master of sorts that felt revolutionary; it was the lack of detectable strings hanging between us. Shedding light on that power and understanding precisely what elements of *Battlefield* formed these strings became something that I was determined to explore. The poem's characters, narrative (or lack there of), language, and form each stand on their own as carefully curated and complicated parts of a text, able to fascinate the reader. Each of these elements comes together and blends on the landscape created within *Battlefield* to create a poem that moves and writhes within the reader's mind. Sorting through each of these elements and the moments at which they collide felt necessary in

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[4] *Battlefield,* Preface

order to trace the intense, yet still impossible to articulate at that point, emotional quality and impact of the poem.

Attempting to understand what *Battlefield* elicits and the devices it uses to do so could not be the whole of my work; I struggled greatly with translating into language my reaction to *Battlefield.* Finding both the terms and structure to articulate the reactions and emotions elicited by the poem that I was sorting through became the second part of my exploration. For months I read and re-read the poem in larger and smaller pieces, attempting to extract an all-encompassing question that the text either answers or was implicitly asking of me. When that method led nowhere, I tried sorting sections of Francis's dreams and stories into fields where each could be looked at as its own important part of the larger landscape: dreams, religion, race, gender, etc. Rapidly the fields began to grow over into one another and each line or blocked-off section that I tried to place appeared to have vines reaching across every field around it. Through both these methods and their inability to explore the elements of *Battlefield,* I began to realize that this text was unique not just in its form and content, but in what it asked of me as a reader.

My search for a "question" within the text arrived out of a tradition in literature (and the analysis of it) that Stanford was actively working outside of. The extraction of themes and outlining of narrative structure also seemed rooted in this tradition. I had sorted through the poem and littered it with color-coded markers, each corresponding to a different theme or idea. Quickly the colors, like the thematic fields before them, began to overlap and blend into one another, alerting me to the fact that *Battlefield* could not be analyzed effectively through dissection. Its form is created through a blend of themes and events that cannot be separated from one another or placed on a forward-moving timeline.

The depth of this resistance to standard methods of organization, not just in the body of the text but in the task of reading and analyzing it, pushed me far beyond the walls of my comfort zone. In a search for insight into the process and intentions behind the form this text takes, I took a trip to the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Yale University, where C.D. Wright had donated the "Frank Stanford Papers." Here, I sorted through eight large boxes filled with unpublished chapbooks, letters and correspondences, lists of favorite songs scrawled on the backs of napkins, journal entries, and childhood photos. I had expected pages upon pages of typo-riddled poems written in waves of poetic passion, but was met with something more surprisingly methodical. Overflowing from two large bins were various drafts of *Battlefield* and the verses informing/surrounding it. The poem itself had emerged from a larger intended work (thousands of pages long already at the time of Stanford's death) entitled *St. Francis and the Wolf.*[5] Portions from *Battlefield*, pulled straight from the typewriter and smudged by the hand of an eager editor (presumably Stanford), showed obsessive attention paid to words, phrases, spacing, and other details I had assumed were inconsequential to Stanford. It became clear through his papers that Stanford had not neglected the tools of traditional poetics, but rather had repurposed those tools in order to create *Battlefield.* The poem is not a landscape that lacks rules, but rather one for which Stanford has written his own rules.

At this point in my journey towards understanding and talking about the poem, I turned toward other sources to understand in what ways it could be effectively and ineffectively discussed, but was met with a vacuum of literary criticism. With the exception of several

[5] This work delved even farther into the life and adventures of Francis and was named for the story of St. Francis taming the Wolf of Gubbio. Those close to Stanford say that he often mentioned *St. Francis and the Wolf* as a poem he planned to compile throughout his entire life. (Frank Stanford Papers)

personal reviews and one dissertation, the world of literary criticism seemed to have either ignored or shied away from the task of tackling the world created by Stanford within this text. This only further confirmed my newfound realization that this poem should not be looked at through a traditional critical lens and made me more determined to fill the gap in the world of literary analysis where this poem rightfully deserved its place. The few reviews and responses to *Battlefield* that do exist outline the struggle their authors had undergone while attempting to communicate the visceral and disorienting experience of reading through *Battlefield.* The small community composed of those of us determined to discuss and analyze the poem seemed to agree that analytical prose does no justice to describing the experience of reading *Battlefield.* Wright, herself had turned to poetic prose in the preface in order to communicate about the the poem. My issues with finding a way to explain and discuss this poem were the same struggles other readers and critics seemed to have faced.

It was six months into my process that I set aside all of the critical prose I had written and began to put my exploration of the poem into the terms I feel it demands. Summarization or translation of Stanford's words had already proven itself to be an impossible task and attempting to explain that his poetry was moving in an innovative way seemed fruitless without the words themselves. In my project, I began to illustrate the poem in its own terms and words. I began the process of choosing which words allowed *Battlefield* to speak for itself, which excerpts displayed both Stanfords form and engaged with key themes of the text. In paying greater attention to every phrase and word used in my response, I began to understand that much of Stanford's innovation lies within how carefully he has selected each word and used precision, even in what appear to be chaotic rambling verses, to string them together; this furthered my understanding of his process that I began to develop while looking through his papers.

Following Stanford's example, I wanted to attend more closely to my own words and the choices I made in my prose. The style, brevity, and precision of my analyses took great influence from the tradition of German, philosophy's "Denkbild." Translated directly as "thought-image", this mode of writing was experimented with by German philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century (Adorno and Benjamin to name a few). Through short essays and responses this form combined succinct analysis and argument with larger abstract concepts; often the Denkbilds were paired together, as a set of essays would be, on a larger theme.[6] Through a reworking of this idea, each of my pages consists of a single excerpt and a response/analysis of it. The pages are each able to stand alone but all remain connected implicitly in their engagement with larger themes of the poem.

I entered into this new form with trepedation and clinging, out of habit and comfort, to the style and method of academic analysis with which I had previously been working. However, this new mode of investigation quickly pushed me toward experimenting with structure and soon my responses began to take the form that Stanford had seemingly demanded of me all along. The project, ordered chronologically, clearly reflected not strictly a journey through *Battlefield* but *my* journey towards finding a method to discuss and reflect this text. However, chronology and narrative are structures that, following Stanford, I have learned to abandon; the final form of my project has become a mixture of my the various steps in my journey with the poem; some pages are adapted from my early writings and lean on the structure of academic prose, while others throw themselves fully into a more poetic response. The order in which these responses were arranged does not follow the chronology of the poem in order to emphasize that *Battlefield'*s narrative does not progressive forward as the text continues. The responses are designed to move

[6] Tschofen, "The Denkbild ('Thought-Image') in the Age of Digital Reproduction."

from the path of strict prose into the poetic responses while pushing the reader between themes (playing with the disorientation that Stanford achieves while maintaining a progression towards unraveling these themes).

There's a consistent call for outlining the stakes of any project of this nature: what is this offering to the literary world? What am I solving? What am I asking my own reader to solve? If there is one central stake of this project, it is the request to suspend that desire. *Battlefield* is a poem that, while engaging with endless important literary sources, historical events, and popular culture references, argues nothing and asks nothing of us but to let ourselves be swept into the journey of Francis Gildart, knight of the levees.[7] This project is about journey: in the material it investigates, in its method of investigation and the evolution that investigation has undergone, and in what it asks of you as a reader. This journey, like Francis's, is one that never ends; a river that flows into itself.

[7] l. 7028.

Before Saturday, June third, time was a straight line. After Saturday, a loop.

-Ginny Stanford, from “Death in the Cool Evening”

death means nothing to me
I think life is a dream
and what you dream I live
because none of you know what you want follow me
because I'm not going anywhere (l.12036- 12041)

Does Francis find immortality through dream? Dream becomes a separate reality which he lives just as fully, and in which death is of no consequence. Does our (yours and mine) impossible become the possible to Francis when he chooses to live in dreams? Where will he lead me (us)? What kind of nowhere?

I said
boy when you going to learn about the moon why it ain't no such a thing
like a cargo that shifts from one side to the other in a ghost ship
that is how my dreams change their course
I have nothing to do with it (l. 4981- 4986)

Why is the moon so important to Francis? It seems to have the power and uncontrollability of his dreams (or so we are led to think as he jumps from descriptions of the moon into ones of his dreams and pulls us along). Yet, Francis doesn't tell us what the moon is. He tells us what it is not. The moon is not such a thing. Maybe for Francis the moon is alike his dreams in the way that it cannot be described; it can only be understood by the way of analogy, metaphor, and in the context of its existence rather than its core. The somewhat spiritual power of the moon is achieved through it's indescribability. The cosmic body hangs above us and is able to elicit emotions and associations through various cultures and times; there is no language for these things and any language that attempts to directly describe them loses so much in the process of translation. So his verse returns to the moon again and again in an attempt to outline those emotions as clearly as possible, to but them in terms of our own landscape in order to bring them into focus. The heavenly body shifts and evolves; Francis follows it through its phases, pulling us along with him.

I must take off this coat of dreams and lay it over the altar (l. 4703)

Dreams, as understood through the imagery of a coat, offer Francis protection but also apply a weight against him that could be burdensome. He must. They are a sacrifice he offers, but upon what altar and to whom? The stakes of this sacrifice are unclear, but seemingly necessary. He must.

I with my sackful of dreams my heart never puts down I like the ghost of the dead horse casting a shadow I with my soul like a harbor I with my body like water I speaking in the fields me and my dreams like ships going nowhere like long lost cousins (l. 4349- 4353)

Through these similes that attempt to illustrate the "I," it only becomes more abstracted. "I" possess the conceptual and physical self, the dreams and the soul and the body. However, the "I" itself is only described in simile. Even the forms of self that it possesses exist not as themselves, but *like* other things: like a harbor, like water. Every comparison and means of describing the self through what it possesses or resembles is a movement away from the "I."

still I could know what will become of me
I could feel the splinters in the oars
I could see the faces I knew like the back of my hand turn around in the light (l. 7676- 7679)

There is potential here. Both the future and an alternative present are illuminated through the possibility that lies in "could." The possibility of another reality is formed apart from the one in which Francis finds himself. This reality is built through senses: know, feel, see. What is this reality? It's one brought to clarity for a moment in small images (the splinters from the oars of a boat) and obscured (turn around in the light). We are led into these potentials, these "coulds," with the a "still." This structurally breaks the alignment of these repeated phrases while also possessing double meaning: however her could know and he will always know. Then, in order to create bookends of disruption, Stanford immediately moves up vaguely toward the light.

besides the music is better from a distance (l. 2340)

What does Francis see/hear in distance? What value is there to be found in the space between the music, the person, the object, and the place that Francis listens/watches from?

If you knew the revolutions I want to live
I am watching you in the foothills of oblivion (l. 5549-5550)

Is there only beauty in this distance, or is some clarity found through it?

we had a full view because of the moonlight (l. 8144)

The moon illuminates. As Francis finds himself at a constant distance from those that surround him and from reality, it's under the moon that he is able to see best. It shines over every part of the battlefield, even those farthest from his reach. She seems to shine even in his dreams.

I believe in ships leaving at night (l. 11334)

Francis begins the poem with a story of him drifting in a boat in the darkness:

> "and I remembered it was a long time ago I was a baby I was
> drifting away in a wash tub tied to the raft" (l. 135-136)

A moment in a dream:

> "all day I drift along in the rivers on my dream horse
> I ride ride ride
> out of the water and up the levees over the fields
> in the dead of night" (l. 4998-5002)

The town floods and Francis and Baby Gauge find themselves living on small boats, often illuminated by moonlight:

> "it went like I thought I dreamed it would
> a few days after the water went down and me and Baby Gauge got Oakum
> out safe and the peahen weint in the gondola with us
> and he ate two black bowls of tomato soup under the full moon" (l. 15193-15196)

The poem comes to a close with Francis aboard a ship once again:

> "on the way and right now we is reaping the benefits of that
> sailing first class to the east Japan in particular on the luxury liner" (l. 15217-15218)

I don’t know if I am traveling or meandering (l. 10371)

Francis brings us along with him in constant transience; we ride on the back of the mule with Dark, we sit with him on boats, we cross the state line in a Freedom Riders’ bus, and we lie in the back of pickup trucks all across the countryside. Is there a destination looming?

that on this night before the Lord rose again I was going to see twelve shows (l. 7527)

As far removed from the Church[8] as he can be (at a drive-in theatre filled with violence, booze, sex, and hatred), for Francis, time exists in terms of God.[9]

[8] The twelve Apostles of Jesus are Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Jude, Simon, and Judas

[9] "And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:15).

with my dreams like a pocket
you are afraid to reach into
like a cove that only a few people know about the best hole around (l. 1157-1160)

> These dreams are material spaces not of their own, but rather parts of others. These dreams must be entered (reached for or jumped into) and upon entry they become immersive. These dreams are a facet of reality hidden from plain sight and experienced, rarely. These are dreams, analogized by Francis in material terms, described in relation to others: to "you" and to "a few people." "You" is the reader and every character interacted with; "you" is everyone outside the pocket that Francis both possesses and immerses himself within. These dreams are exclusive, not well known and only open to the very few that discover them (or that he shares them with), but they are the best around. Yet, the line in this excerpt that is closed between Francis's dreams ("you are afraid to reach into") as spaces includes "you" (us) and fear. We come away from this knowing that "you" (we)(they) fear Francis's dreams, though we are lucky to dive into them (the cove)(the hole)(the pocket).

and the moon the whore had taken her own
life with a knife
and the battlefield was silent and rotten and floating in the abyss
and I made myself a home in my soul
I the Wanderer I am alone as heretofore
as my brother standing on a hill with myself (l. 5473- 5479) [10]

The moon hangs overhead

in the past, present, and future. She shines over every landscape and connects even the farthest people and places under one body. Without her the battlefield, the landscape that Francis exists upon, falls silent/rotten and becomes lost. She takes her life and he turns inward towards the landscape, as rich as the external, that he has formed within himself. It's upon this landscape, a battlefield in his soul, that he finds companionship with his brother (an extension of self). Through this internal world he finds safety and immortality. Does the moon shine above that battlefield as well?

[10] This is possibly a reference to the Old English poem "The Wanderer," found only in the tenth-century manuscript now called the Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS3501). A few excerpts go as follows: "Often I have had to bemoan my anxieties alone at each/ dawning. There is now not one living being to whom I dare/ plainly express my heart," (l. 8-10). "Often, when grief and sleep combined together enchain the/ wretched solitary man," (l. 39-40)

and somewhere I'd find that naked brother of mine
tall and I mean dark
there he would be I know it like my own blood the young one
the negro sleepwalking through the forest with the pet rooster on his shoulder (l. 8470- 8474)

Francis's brother exists in the "would." He is not found, but would be. This hypothetical hangs unfinished and unexplained, for it's not the potential of finding this brother that these words concern themselves with, but rather the certainty of what lies within finding him. A brother, biblical in description (naked, tall, dark, young) who exists in the geographically vague and unfound (the somewhere, the forest). This landscape of somewhere seems only accessible to Francis yet unaccessed by even him. The somewhere and the brother that exists within it are made inseparable from Francis. They exist in a landscape imagined by Francis, and therefore reliant on him; he is the creator of this place and the brother who wanders it. There is no "brother" without the brother who speaks of him and there is no somewhere being found without one who imagines finding it. What would be found in this space are products of Francis himself and exist as the sole entities of their kind; the brother is not a young negro, but *the* young and *the* negro, standing as the sole embodiment of these words and identities in the same way Adam did for "man" and Eve for "woman" on their landscape of Eden. Yet, even in the vagueness of "would" and "somewhere," the extension of Francis walks not as an explorer of the material, but as a sleepwalker experiencing a somewhere even beyond his own somewhere.

my dreams like red dice you can’t throw down
like somebody’s older sister in Memphis who leaves a crack
in her bedroom door and lets you watch her undress
and you know it like the back of your hand
a dream like a plaid skirts that takes forever to fall to the floor (l. 1812- 1817)

The similes that hold the weight of these dreams don’t capture an image, but rather a feeling. I think of these moments described as moments that elicit feelings at once ineffable and specific. Francis’s emotions can only be described as the actions that elicit them. Inseparable from the experiences that illicit them, these emotions can only be understood through the moment they are tied to. I think in translating dreams (from one tense to another, from images to words, from ourselves to others) there is something incommunicable. What is lost in that liminal space is the core of the experience which seems inseparable from our own perspective. I feel Francis is trying to convey the emotions entangled with his dreams that we have no vocabulary for; it is while reading these specific analogies that act almost as small narratives themselves that we are also reminded of how those experiences are emotions themselves (just as a dream is). What most amazes me here is how I suddenly feel as though I understand what it may feel like to be in that doorway in Memphis and I’m not sure why.

I knew she was there and I loved her I was with the girl with black hair
and when she lifted her legs it was as if
she wanted to balance the moon on her toes to keep it from falling (l. 4895-4897)

The women encountered by Francis in *Battlefield* are mirages both within his dreamscapes and outside of them. They are images made up of body parts, sex, and cosmic power, and they remain untouchable to Francis. The recurring presence of the girl with the black hair always takes a form that captivates and frustrates Francis. He is captivated by this body so different from his own, placing emphasis on long hair, soft skin, and feminine curves. The women he sees, always from afar, are constantly taking some form of sexuality and both the sex and the distance Francis feels from it cause fascination and frustration for Francis[11]. The few women he manages to interact with either within dreams or out of them,[12] are mirages. Just as he reaches them, they disappear.[13] Or die.

[11] Sex in the back of cars, stripping, and masturbation (even the movement of legs is described sensually).
[12] The teacher at the lake and the girl with the black hair.

I exist in the natural musk of the farmgirl seer
I exist in the miracles of the nebulous clitoris
I exist beyond symbols and two-bit concepts (l. 12654- 12657)

In the same way that he analogizes his dreams, Francis analogizes himself. He is not simply the farmgirl he sees or the clitoris alone; he is the seer and the miracle. Francis finds it easiest to express his identity through symbolism and connection to the external world. The relations Francis makes between himself and the landscape he exists within show that the relationship is a mythical one. The layers exposed here are that Francis is able to see his reflection clearly in the physical world, as well as in the qualities of physical objects that exist beneath the surface: the musk and the miracle. It's also clear that Francis simultaneously (and paradoxically) experiences alienation from the external world and a feeling of connection to everything surrounding him.[14] This alienation both stems from and is displayed through the constant move between dream and reality that Francis experiences. He uses analogy as an attempt to communicate a core emotion for which there is no language; he relates himself not to the elements, but the qualities they evoke, in order for us to see him as clearly as possible and understand him beyond words.

[14] Through his journals and personal relationships, it is known that Buddhist philosophy was largely influential to Stanford and that influence can be seen shaping Francis's character here. "Interpenetration" is a concept developed by the Buddhist Huayan school. The concept argues that everything in existence in composed of everything else and that every phenomena reflects one another (Indra's Net).

have mercy Jesus deliver me from the lawyers and the teachers and the preachers
and the politicking flies can't you hear them buzz can't you hear them bite another
chunk out of me oh brother I am death and you are sleep I am white and you are
black brother tell me I am that which I am I am sleep and you are death we are
one person getting up and going outside naked as a blue jay rolling our bellies
at the moon oh brother tell me you love me and I'll tell you too I want to know
how do they like it when the ones who sung shake they leg on the Television (l. 3110- 3117)

Here we seem to be nothing but observers allowed into the intimacy of Francis's spiritual and internal conversation. We are readers pushed into and out of disorientation by Francis. He begs for deliverance from figures of authority that represent various pillars of structured society: law, education, religion, and government. They are flies biting at his flesh and violently consuming Francis. He begs Jesus and pleads to his brother. There is no breath and no break as his thoughts and lines bleed into one another. "I am I am" creates a focal point or climactic moment in this excerpt in which we are reminded of Francis's focus on identity and how he expresses that duality through the existence of his brother. We are along for the ride, pulled forward into another line and another thought before we can catch ort breath. Francis is tortured by society and he turns to his brother. As we are walked, or pulled, through Francis's suffering we begin to see that he escapes full isolation through this relationship with his brother. They stand together and as one. Together they are both black and white, internal and external, living and dead, and both beneath the same moon.

and it is here invisible reader that I had my have-not visions (l. 14307)

In this single instance, we are recognized as readers and Francis recognizes his story as text. However, in this instant we are transparent, invisible, distant from him just as everything on his landscape seems to be.

what I am feeling here and now is got to be nothing but a pipe dream but I dream
all the lawyers and teachers and preachers and government is gagged and bound
on some beach and we is free to do what we want that is how crazy I am ha ha (l. 3309-3312)

In his dream Francis finds the deliverance that he begs Jesus for just moments earlier. Dreams become saviors for Francis in this moment and because of them "we is free." We (Francis and I)? We (Francis and his brother)? We (everyone under the moon)?

I want to draw your eyebrows like bows to my chest
I want you to know my dreams as volant as I know them
I want you to hear what is unheard the unsheathing of my sword
daughter the procession has served its purpose (l. 5548- 5551)

Profession of desire transforms this dream from another example of extension and escape for Francis into a moment of insight for us. We begin to realize the alienation and suffering Francis experiences because of his dreams. His dreams can never be fully understood and known; therefore, Francis himself can never be understood or seen completely. He shows desire here: a desire for understanding. Without understanding he cannot experience connection. As Francis exists in the oblivion and volantness of his dreams, she ("you") is unable to reach him. While he "wants" for connection and understanding, he is ("I am") only an observer in the foothills, looking down on the valley of these desires.

I know Beowulf probably looked in the mirror at himself every morning
just like all the other so-called heroes (l 275)

Francis's mission to praise and idolize Beowulf appears to come into conflict with his need to humanize him. However, it's possible that in the humanity of Beowulf, Francis finds room to be knight of the levees. It's in his choice to place a heroic figure, victorious in almost every battle and savior to his people, in a position of vulnerability and possible self-doubt that Francis is able to, in those same moments of vulnerability at the sight of his own reflection, imagine himself being a victor and a hero to his own community.

"They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame." (*Beowulf*, l. 3178- 3180)

Does Francis aspire to be a hero? Or question Beowulf's position ("so-called") as one? Does he wish to be the hero that Beowulf is? Or does he feel he is similar to the hero that Beowulf is not?

your hair too thick to be brushed by a soul one strand makes me
think of an island not on the maps the way you sipped wine
like a tight ship that never takes in a drop of water and you
not even sixteen and me I was crazy I wanted to ride over a cliff
the designs of your blouse roads that could lead anywhere
your fingernails were like pirates coming aboard and my back
that took a flogging like Mr.Christian I dreamed you put a spell
on me that I had a wife a daughter that bled to death on their pillow
and you signed their death certificate with a quill you stole
from a blind fighting cock when I was in port your accent as I rode
up to the Inn and you greeted me my capitan my capitan (l. 12040- 12049)

Francis constructs narrative in his dreams as Stanford constructs the narrative of Francis. There are small moments of coherence, ranging from small phrases to full pages, in which we can follow the motions. Then, so cleverly and simply, the narrative dissolves and the metaphors mix; we find ourselves having been sent from the image of long, thick hair being brushed to an island and a woman as the body of a ship. These are moments of clarity and description overlapped to create a path through disorientation. Through the mess of analogy we still retain her thick hair, blouse, and hands that entrap Francis's gaze. Similarly, through the mess of dreams and stories that Stanford weaves around Francis, glints of character and progression arise.

my dreams some of them come and go like flash floods some of them rains that never
let up and some of them the river that remains forever on the verge of passing (l. 2908- 2909)

Francis not only feels that dreams act as captains guiding his vessels' movements, but also as the bodies of water in which he exists and the landscape through which he navigates. Dreams vacillate among various roles of influence: sometimes the captain of the ship, sometimes the cargo, sometimes the waters Francis navigates, and even various combinations of those roles simultaneously. Some dreams are sudden and short in length (flash floods). However, Francis also experiences dreams that are never-ending; he cannot escape the river that perpetually carries him and the dreams that act as an undercurrent in every moment of his existence.

With my eyes closed I know the white island was a dream the eye was a dream
and I know too the bridge was a dream
but her crooked teeth and her lisp are as real as the chanfrin over my face
and the tables are turning
I can be Arthur I can be Launcelot I can take the oath of knighthood (l. 2618- 2622)

This is a moment of lucidity. With both eyes closed, immersed in the reality of dream that he has formed, Francis makes a distinction. Out of this distinction, between the landscape of the dreamworld and the landscape of a woman's face, he finds potential and inspiration. For some reason it's in this moment where the tables turn and the dream separates itself from reality, that Francis sees himself as a potential hero, as a future knight.

my eyes were shut
and I could see myself (l. 2541-2543)

While clarity and moments of lucidity that separate dream from reality come and go for Francis, the self that exists in the landscape of his dreams remains stronger than that of the self that exists outside of them.[15]

[15] So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:18)

I dreamed I saw the burial of Beowulf
I thought I saw a knight with a flaming sword it was only a man in a welder's
helmet fixing a bulldozer track (l 6337)

Beowulf becomes an ideal reflection and way of understanding the heroes that Francis seems to have a complex relationship with, vacillating between idealization and humanization. He consistently appears to Francis and becomes symbolic for the identities and roles of all heroes and knights. Francis's journey has definite ties to that of Beowulf: they find their missions and lives to be tied to bodies of water and Francis seems to take on the same indifference to death. There is a power in transition and transformation in the burial of Beowulf and in the welder's helmet. The knight becomes a welder, just as death transforms the hero into every man.

I dreamed with my eyes half closed (l. 7319)

In this moment, dream and reality hold the same amount of significance to Francis. There is not much to gain from determining whether an experience exists fully in dream, fully in reality, or in some combination of the both. For Francis they are equally true experiences. If his dreams are wild, then his life is just as wild, for his dreams are as much a part of his existence and his experiences as his reality is.[16] It is through his embrace of the amalgamation of dream and reality that we see Francis becoming immersed within this shattered binary. The space around him within the poem is a space for that dissolution; a space in which readers must embrace, the way our guide Francis does, the unknown. We must allow for dream and reality to be simultaneously ever-present; we must keep our eyes half open and half closed. How do we reconcile this with Francis's clearest reflection being in his dreams? Is he struggling with this conflict just as we are?

[16] "I have wild dreams I live a wild life" (l. 9838)

and lord jesus christ I seen it all
and I'm seeing it all somebody get me off this river there's going to be
a WAR I see it the high temperature bullets going through me clean
up into the sky like the stars the little nailheads in the coffins it's a place
called VIETNAM goodbye mammy wind blowing through dead american hair
o these cosmologies sadder than the sea (l. 14168- 14172)

lord jesus christ
Francis cries out to Jesus for mercy, talks to him like a neighbor, and becomes him at the Last Supper

river
We begin on a river, we end on a river, dreams are rivers, and Francis a seafarer

WAR
A battlefield and a picture of Vietnamese bodies piled atop one another bring us into Francis's world.[17]

o these cosmologies sadder than the sea
Finally, these deaths are the beginnings again— yet, ones of tragedy (declarative and dramatic "o"). Rivers flowing into seas and back to rivers again.

Themes that tie together the poetic and hypothetical battlefield we have been on and the real battlefield described here.

[17] The original publication of *Battlefield* had a cover whose image Stanford himself had selected. That image was a graphic photo taken during the war of a pile of Vietnamese bodies.

I make a vow to always fight them I francis gildart knight of the levees and
rivers and ships keeper of tears and virgins and horses with lucky markings I (l 7028)

Frank Stanford, born August 1st, 1948, was born in Mississippi and adopted the following year by Dorothy Gilbert. Following Gilbert's marriage to A.F. Stanford in 1951, the family moved to the Ozarks of Arkansas. He spent his summers in a levee camp, and his school years in Memphis. He began to write poetry as a young boy and claimed to have started work on *Battlefield* at age 17. After dropping out of the University of Arkansas, Stanford began publishing works in various literary magazines. In 1971, he undertook a three-month marriage, and then began to travel the east coast in order to show and read his work. Following his marriage to painter Ginny Crouch, Stanford and his new wife settled in Arkansas again and he worked as a land surveyor while sending out more of his chapbooks to experimental poetry publications. Stanford became an active member of the Fayetteville literary community through which he met his closest friend, life-long lover, and co-establisher of Lost Roads Publishers: a publishing company dedicated to providing opportunities for poets with little opportunity for exposure. Stanford spent his life exploring Buddhist practices and various forms of meditation and continued connecting with the small, local Buddhist community in Arkansas until his death. On June 3rd in 1978− very shortly after the completion of his first official edit of *Battlefield* for publication − 29 year-old Stanford ended his life after being confrontation about his infidelity. Stanford had recently sent the completed *Battlefield* to poet Alan Dugan who responded, "This is better than good, it is great ... one day it will explode."[18]

[18] "Frank Stanford Papers."
Ehrenreich, "The Long Goodbye."
Wright, "The Poet Frank Stanford Between Love and Death."

death is its own desecration (l. 9572)

I am lost in this line.

Death is both everything and nothing to Francis; he is dying in a boat when we meet him and has found immortality on one when he leaves us.

Desecration is an act imposed on the sacred.

> Death becomes sacred through desecration, only the sacred can be desecrated so all that is desecrated must be sacred.

Death is the actor of desecration and the enacted upon, autonomous and capable of self-harm.

Is the battlefield Francis lives upon a place in which he coexists with death?

like someone who has never and will never turn twenty (l. 2838)

Francis is forever twelve; he balances on the ledge between childhood and adolescence, forever imagining an adult life but always knowing that it will only remain on the horizon.

I am a poor wayfaring stranger twelve years old
just like you would a been (l. 21907- 21908)

I must be some memory some bastard son of David (l. 8007)

“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.’ ” (2 Samuel 7:12)

A bastard son of David is a savior and a memory. Francis is a Christ already come and gone.

thus ends the tale of how a noble race of men was born
in one sense a race of bastards
born of men who had lived among men
and unfaithful woman
that race of singers and makers of song we now call poets (l. 6943- 6947)

Tracing the origin of the poet is, for Francis, a journey of self-discovery. He, himself never claims the identity, but he is a poet formed by the fact that we are readers. He takes his form through an abstract text that lacks punctuation, sentences, and the narrative structure.

Now every exploration of poetry or the poet himself undergone by Francis has become, to us at least, an exploration of his own role and (in this case) the origin of that role.

The poet (Francis) is noble
The poet (Francis) is male
The poet (Francis) is a bastard
The poet (Francis) is surrounded by men and unfaithful women
The poet (Francis) is a race
The poets (Francis) stand alone

I give him the hand signal for hucks he give me the hand signal for I am
a man of many faces as you will undoubtingly soon see you must understand
how I feel at this moment my spirit is paroled I am no longer in the valley
of death and silence for many years I have wanted to speak my mind with my
hands and not with a pen with words which always seem to smell of the glands
or the burning structures of the brain with all its forgeds and faulty symmetry
and now I see before me not another deaf and dumb child not another afflicted
face but I see at last someone like myself of course you can speak and hear
and I cannot but I see something of myself someone who will appreciate what
I will say with my hands so far I am the only poet of my kind in this country (l. 9458- 9467)

Do Francis's words smell of the burning structure of the brain? Does he believe his own verse is futile?

Vico gave up song to speak in other men's tongues
Vico lost his voice in the war
Vico murdered more priests and professor than soldiers
Vico has finally given up the mysteries of crime and the rosary and the absurd
to ride for freedom where he met a lad like two lads (l. 11103-11107)

"The most sublime labour of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things; and it is characteristic of children to take inanimate things in their hands and talk to them in play as if they were living persons... This philological-philosophical axiom proves to us that in the world's childhood men were by nature sublime poets."[19]

[19] An excerpt from Vico's *New Science* (Bayer, *Giambattista Vico: Keys to the New Science).*Giambattista Vico (1668- 1744) was an Italian Philosopher whose most well-known work *New Science* explores the concepts of and relationships between history, culture, societal structure, and language. Of the many arguments Vico makes, the primary one works toward proving that human history is a cyclical one, "corsi e ricorsi."

I grew up early I compose the great poem of death and these States (l. 12329)

the great poem
(The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You by Frank Stanford)
of death and these States

sea that goes on forever going blue going green going black
an oval mirror sapphire where whoremonger morning moon is seen
it is above the heads of the dancers tying ribbons in one another's hair (l. 5736- 5739)

This begins with a line that flows one word into another, then breaks
The rhythmic pulse going going going going through the colors of the sea blue
and green and then breaking
its promise of forever black
a line break appears where the logic of this list changes and we're flung
into a new scene seemingly unrelated to the sea though we blend the images
due to proximity and flow the flow that was formed through going going going
now finds itself within the words themselves nouns strung
together by m's and o's submerges us in the sea of these words meaning and
order obscured by the flow moving us forward through
the lines another line break
and another image separate from the others yet they all stream into one
image this is an image obscured in logic or narrative but composed of
themes for Francis a body of water black
as a conclusion or revolution a mirror a moon whoremonger and within
all of it women and their hair
this is Francis's dream
not as an analogy but in words attempting to
reach the purity of the experience images and scenes separate yet
all together that flow into one another in every direction

I looked out in the field I was breathing the dago was rolling his wheel
I don't have to ask to be forgiven
it was like the moon said I love you (l. 3750- 37513)

The moon is unconditional.

I was so simple it killed me
I believed in hay
I loved the night away
I took the route of the petal apparent and not
I forgot I was I
I dreamed of a boy going back and forth like a hen feeding the earth (l. 12262-12267)

I (Francis) was ("my past is simultaneous with my present")[20]
I (St. Francis) believed ("my past is simultaneous with my present")
I (Frankie boy) loved ("my past is simultaneous with my present")
I (Francois Gilbert) took ("my past is simultaneous with my present")
I (the children chained down in Plato's cave) forgot ("my past is simultaneous with my present")
I (Frank) dreamed ("my past is simultaneous with my present")

[20] l. 12295

so he said because my friend is so very far away and if you think I'm going
to tell you what else I saw you're crazy as hell (l. 15282-15283)

"A lone a last a loved a long the… riverrun past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs."[21]

so he said because my friend is so very far away and if you think I'm going
to tell you what else I saw you're crazy as hell
tonight the gars on the trees are swords in the hands of knights[22]

Two full circles made, one in form and the other in concept/narrative. Joyce uses the structure of the lines themselves to gesture towards the cyclical nature of his work. While Stanford's work functions in the same cyclical way, he uses the boat, the river, and vagueness within his first and last lines to do the same work Joyce does.

[21] The final line of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* combined with the first lines. (Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake).*
[22] The final lines of *Battlefield* combined with the first line.

and my palms like a steeple or a prow
my feet like a lamented rudder (l. 10615-10616)

Francis's body, described at the points where the nails meet the cross. A body described in the architecture of both a church, holding the spirit of God and the bodies of his followers within it, and a ship, carrying adventurers aboard it. Yet, a body lost (lamented).[23]

[23] "This is my body given for you."[23] (Luke 22:19)

but I'll be dead before long so it doesn't matter but it does cause I seen (l. 8989)

There are many people who come back
After the doctor has smoothed the sheet
Around their body
And left the room to make his call.

They die but they live.

They are called the dead who lived
through their deaths,
And among my people
They are considered wise and honest.

They float out of their bodies
And light on the ceiling like a moth,
Watching the efforts of everyone around
them.

The voices and the images of the living
Fade away.

A roar sucks them under
The wheels of a darkness without pain.
Off in the distance
There is someone
Like a signalman swinging a lantern.

The light grows, a white flower.
It becomes very intense, like music.

They see the faces of those they loved,
The truly dead who speak kindly.

They see their father sitting in a field.
The harvest is over and his cane chair is
mended.

There is a towel around his neck,
The odor of bay rum.
Then they see their mother
Standing behind him with a pair of
shears.
The wind is blowing.
She is cutting his hair.

The dead have told these stories
To the living.

-*The Light the Dead See*, Frank Stanford
(date written unknown, published in 1991)[24]

[24] Stanford and Stokesbury. *The Light the Dead See: Selected Poems of Frank Stanford.*

I would like to break my back on the truth then (his body) (l. 9877)

(Baby Gauge's body)
(Johnny Lee's body)
(Charlie B's body)
(Mr. Rufus's body)
(Bobo's body)
(The Astronomer's body)
(Sylvester's body)
(Mr. McGillicutty's body)
(Jimmy's body)
(Five's body)
(Melvin's body)
(Dark's body)
(James Dean's body)
(Clyde's body)
(Beowulf's body)
(Vico's body)

while the wolf had the moon by the throat
I said I love you in the field of honor

There is a field where Francis rides drunkenly in a bulldozer[25]
There is a field where bodies lay in Vietnam[26]
There is a field where the girl with the black hair awaits[27]
There is a field where the floods rise around Francis[28]
There is a field where Francis plays baseball and gasping fish surround him[29]
There is a field where Francis stands and we stand beside him

[25] p. 123
[26] p. 354
[27] p. 121
[28] p. 344
[29] p. 361

death means nothing to me
I think life is a dream
and what you dream I live
because none of you know what you want follow me
because I'm not going anywhere (l. 12036-12040)

We have gone nowhere.

We have gone through the levee camps, past the wreckage of a racist drive-in, across the waters of the south beneath the moonlight. We have gone nowhere. Yet, we have been moving. We have been traveling, lost in continuous movement with Francis, and we will never reach a destination. We will follow this twelve-year old boy down the river over and over again. We will never die. He has fulfilled the conflicting promises of not going anywhere: remaining planted within his landscape and beside us, travelling and never reaching a destination. He has kept this promise through verse, through continuous fragments that mirror the enjambed fragments of his own experiences. Because he is not going anywhere, death means nothing to him.

We follow him down the river again.

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