

**Speaking in Tongue: The Disappearing Poetry of Pete Winslow**  
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**A Daisy in the Memory of a Shark**

By Pete Winslow

City Lights Books, 1973

Nightclub comic Chris Rush does a bit about a tongue sandwich with taste buds that still work. “You taste it, it tastes you back. You go, ‘mmm!’ The sandwich goes, ‘mmm!’” To me, this is what surrealism is all about: disquieting paradoxes, biomorphic abstraction, food items aping living things and vice versa. Pete Winslow, who died in 1972 at the age of 37, must have heard the voice of that sandwich many times during his short life. He was *employed* by that sandwich. To read Winslow’s poetry closely, in this tiny book, A Daisy in the Memory of a Shark, is to ponder the work of a man enslaved by the inanimate. “We must find the earrings of the stars/(this is the chant of the lemon in pain),” he writes. Later, he strangles an ocean: “I have found its neck and am banging its head against the wall.”

Practically the only thing we know about him is the range of his artistic influences and that he displays, in poem after poem, a hilarious, visually stimulating inventiveness (a verse from a love poem dedicated to Octavio Paz compares the beloved to “a man with four hands having a heart attack”). This untitled poem is a good introduction to the Winslow vision:

*The piano is empty the grave is filled with music*  
*The scenery has collapsed the air is full of artillery smoke*  
*Three wounded fish signal madly for war to stop*  
*While sweetness is wrung from fire by hands wrapped in*  
*the ears of elephants*  
*I am famous for the beer which flows from my hair.*

The beer which flows from his hair. Oh please. More. It’s obvious that even though Winslow thinks the ocean tastes like caramel and the stars are itchy, he knows exactly where he is standing: the U.S. of Beer, with all four feet on the ground and his head, literally, in the stars. His poem with a Frank O’Hara epigraph describes an imaginary ad campaign for Vitalis—“The one where the snowman’s wavy hair is mussed by the wind/And Don Drysdale and Willie Mays freeze to death under a tree.”

In the introduction to the book, Stephen Schwartz writes, “Pete Winslow’s poems, because they are irreducibly faithful to human desire, serve the revolution as powerfully as a general strike.” Part of the original surrealist doctrine encouraged

the complete overhaul of social convention through the liberation of the unconscious. Winslow built, rather than wrote, this poem to painter/sculptor Hans Arp, by making a list of things and noting one characteristic of each, then moving the noun down to the preceding line.

*It stains like a calling card*

*It announces like a severed foot*

*It bleeds like daybreak*

*It lights up the world like a wolf*

*It runs over the snow like a spirochete*

*It causes syphilis like a lawnmower*

As a call for total redistribution of power, the poem may be delirious, but its bid for a more lighthearted nation (possibly a cottage industry of surrealist poets?) is perfectly clear. Try it against the repressive forces in your life. Here's mine:

*It ferments like a speeding ticket*

*It revokes your license like soap*

*It cuts grease like an old peach*

That's only three nouns. Think what you could do if you had all day.

Perhaps by now you wouldn't expect love poetry from Winslow, but Daisy is overflowing with it. Winslow's logic plays with what seems to be a deeply romantic imagination. The poem that begins "It's lovely on the ocean at night/Nothing holding us up/Nothing pulling us down" is awash with imagery of mermaids, torches, letters, the moon offering bandages and comfort. Winslow in confrontational mode can also endow his beloved with considerable power:

You are a log cabin in the desert

You are the Statue of Liberty answering a huge stone telephone

You are hard to kiss with your lips of heavy elements

You are a lion in a fur-lined cage

You are a canary with acne

You are a rocking chair carved out of toenails

You are licensed hurricane

You are licking the wounds of the eclipse

Hello I want my revenge

You are a deep-sea diver wrinkled by smoke

Schwartz is right about Winslow and social reality. Few legal things can reorder America's everyday appearance enough to render it bearable or funny, let alone beautiful. A surrealist gesture like erasing the eyes off the faces of subway poster pitchmen will work because once their sedated eyeballs are gone, they return

your gaze in a way that reveals your true nature. They no longer have the ability to pretend you owe them anything. But do not try to deface the videocracy: graffitists have died for less. Read Pete Winslow instead. Hello, I want my revenge. You can have yours, too.

*Who would not follow it into battle*

*Where the killing flash comes from inside*

*The figurehead leaves the ship and takes three halting steps toward shore*