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# Threnody for Paul Morphy

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## **Comments**

This poem was originally published in [The Lascaux Review](#).

# Threnody for Paul Morphy

by Brian Glaser

An oil by my grandfather-in-law-to-be,  
a saw mill owner and amateur painter  
whose taste in English landscapes was transplanted  
to a Mesoamerican garden by way  
of Madras, rests in the light of mid-morning.  
Its two figures, inexperienced in  
pastoral romance, are poised on the bank of  
a lake doing nothing—not even touching—  
beneath a shambling sycamore, the gentle,  
distant bellies of lumber-colored hills  
across pale water, adrift in an idea  
of the right place to fall in love so pure that  
nothing even casts a shadow anywhere.  
No genius or menace, just the idea that  
the world changes when two people fall in love . . .

*Les Fleurs du Mal* festoon the baskets of a  
market on the edge of town from which these two  
have walked away, chess pieces and coins and glasses  
of anise clinking on the sidewalk tables,  
musicians not on the street but asleep in  
the belfries, dogs trotting from the cemetery  
to the fountain in the square and back again.

The flowers are everywhere, pungent and bright.  
It could be autumn, eighteen-fifty-seven.

\*

The tables will have filled up by late afternoon.  
Chess: from Sanskrit, *chatrang*, meaning “four members,”  
a florid phrase for the army. Years ago  
when at night I reconstructed great games  
from notations, the companionship the  
chess board offers seemed ultimate and tragic—  
pitiless, calculating, menacing, hard,  
provisional—and among the luminaries  
of its Hobbesian constellations, Paul  
Morphy, a boyish Southern lawyer, grabbed my

fascinated longing like a broken  
arrowhead of drifting geese. The Opera  
House match against a duke and a count where he  
sacrificed knight, bishop, rook and queen to win  
in seventeen moves. His defeat, as a nine-  
year-old, of General Winfield Scott, who spent the  
evening in New Orleans on his way to  
spearhead the group of Lone Star  
patriots towards Veracruz. Playing eight games  
at once in the Café de la Régence, a  
ten-hour exhibition, winning six and  
drawing two, never removing his blindfold.

\*

In middle age, obsessed with proving he had  
been cheated of his father's fortune, scared of  
being poisoned, Morphy died a bachelor in  
his tub. Still his game against Louis Paulsen  
in the first U.S. championship of eighteen-  
fifty-seven was a life's perfection, of a sort—  
the four knights' opening setting up two pawn  
bunkers and a melee in the center through  
which the gift of his queen sacrifice  
flashed like the razorblade before the credits of  
*Un Chien Andalou*.

\*

I lie beneath this painting trying to finish  
the last chapter of a book first laid aside  
when its chronicle reached the year I was born:  
crude oil crisis, night bombing of a dam in  
Vietnam, mortar across Gaza and in  
the Golan Heights, Chinese intellectuals  
dispossessed and set to the plow, apartheid,  
détente, LSD, the birth of Bangladesh.  
Darkness has passed across the painted lake and  
a storm has settled over the opposing  
hills, soundless explosions of light bathing their  
slopes and the broad field of water, isolating  
the two silhouettes. Their daylit counterparts  
seek shelter under an unseen sycamore  
until the next remote illumination  
interrupts this game of adjusting the world  
with a glimpse of its indifferent expanse.

The flashes define them. They are each alone.  
The plea of Morphy's play was to decreate  
this isolation. Sacrifices and blindfolds—  
each loss recuperated, undone,  
redressed by the alluvial dazzle of thought—  
the outrageous interruptions quieted,  
the safety of the king hoarded in his heart.