VOLT

ART ON ART

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Eva Hesse
Timothy Liu
Thaisa Frank
Michelle Taransky
Richard Taransky
Gail Wronsky
Gronk
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“An artist is somebody who produces things that people don't need to have but that he — for some reason — thinks it would be a good idea to give them”

ANDY WARHOL
I first met Andy Warhol at a Carnegie Biennial in Pittsburgh in the late ‘40s. He was a classmate of Philip Pearlstein and Pat Miller, who would later become Pat Stern, and the three of them came into the front door and up the marble stairs together. I knew Phil from high school and he introduced me to the other two, Andy and Pat, but a little reluctantly in Pat’s case since he was apparently in the process, long and slow at the time, of inducing her to remove her clothes and “model” for him. He saw that I was attracted to her and warned her against me since “I hung out at pool halls, flunked courses, and got into fights,” which attracted her to me immediately. Of course I had changed since high school but Phil didn’t know that. I was by this time a self-declared poet, arrogant beyond belief, reading and writing a good ten hours a day.

Andy, whose name was Warhola then, was thin, quiet, and friendly. He was the youngest in his class since most of them, certainly the men, were veterans of the war and were going back to school, or starting over, in their early twenties. He was well-liked and seen as a superb draftsman and colorist. I don’t know how many words we exchanged with each other, precious few I think, though we were in each other’s presence a number of times, at picnics, in drugstores, in living rooms, at parties. My single favorite memory of Andy
is of him sitting with his legs almost wrapped around each other, with an ice cream cone in his hand and a smile on his face. He was, even then, an observer, detached, a little ironic, but a participant nonetheless, and not superior but interested. We talked about him, even then, as a “voyeur,” but in a general sense and without reference necessarily to his sexual habits. I remember having a lot of affection for him and for the group of which he was a part. I have always had a soft spot for art students, their bohemianism, their group loyalty, their commitment to an idea, the very clothes and colors and smells that permeated their lives, almost a kind of envy that we poets could not have that, that we had only dull pencils and paper and a few books, that the overriding romantic idea was not a constant unless we deliberately introduced it, as I did with my sacred items, books, rugs, special paper, bowls, clocks, photos, pens, plants, statues. And the computer—my God—it only further debased the poet as he joined the company of scholars, secretaries, and petty businessmen and made his or her position, tenuous as it was, only more so as he stared at the screen and moved his rodent around.

I can’t remember anything about that Biennial, except that it was either altogether, or mostly, abstract stuff, probably some Rothko, some Guston, some Rheinhardt, maybe Pollack, Kline, or Gottlieb—certainly some lesser-knowns, and we went from painting to painting rubbing our chins, desperate to understand, nodding our heads, positioning our bodies, the way you do. At the time, I wore expensive double-breasted suits, which I got from the credit store my father managed on Liberty Avenue or on upper Fifth Avenue from one of the wholesale houses. And white on white shirts, with elaborate cuff links, pointed shoes, and a rich tie. I was familiar with the bohemian ideal of dress but I was instinctively opting for the idea of the dandy, easy enough since my clothes were free. By the early ‘50s I would abandon that idea for the costume, the clothes, that have stood me in good stead for the last half-century, corduroys, sweaters, boots, old fedoras. When Pat met me she thought I was rich. She certainly knew before long that I was disdainful of the slow-minded and was a kind of dictionary of partial knowledge—though maybe I’m being too hard on myself.

Andy and Phil went to New York City to find work in commercial art when they graduated from Carnegie Tech. Andy, who already had a stunning portfolio, would in a matter of weeks get major assignments in freelance illustration and design in *Glamour, Mademoiselle, Vogue*, and other publications whereas Pearlstein got nowhere. Their teacher at Tech, Balcome Greene, who walked around the quiet college neighborhood with his two aristocratic Russian wolfhounds and an aristocratic wife, used his influence to find them an apartment just off Tompkins Square Park, on St. Mark’s, for the summer, and that fall (1949) they found an apartment together on Twenty-first Street in Chelsea. I found out later that Andy, after he and Phil went their separate ways, lived in an apartment on West 103rd, the same street I lived on, a block or so away and probably at the same time. But I didn’t know it at the time, nor did we ever see each other.
The biography I used has Andy and Phil making several forays to New York before they left for good in the summer of 1949. It describes them boarding a train “late one evening” and arriving at the Pennsylvania Station “around dawn,” certainly a perfect time to arrive, just as the light was pouring into the vast hall. They may have planned to meet on the train but it was I who drove Andy—alone—to the East Liberty train station (no longer in existence) in my father’s new 1949 Ford and said good-bye on one of the platforms. He had one of those flimsy cardboard suitcases in one hand and a painting maybe twenty-four inches by eighteen in the other, which he apparently intended to take with him to New York. He suddenly gave me the painting, in a gesture of friendship or indifference, which he cemented with a quizzical smile, as if to say, “Do you really want such a thing?” He clearly didn’t hold it dear or he didn’t want to be bothered with it or he was showing his cosmic detachment or he just wanted me to have it and take care of it. I was delighted with the gift, maybe the first painting I ever owned, and treasured it. My only private place in my parents’ apartment, I am a little ashamed to say, was a long closet in which I had built bookcases for my fast growing collection. I nailed the painting to my wall, the right of the door when you entered alongside the pull chain, and it gave me a secret pleasure when I walked into that closet to retrieve my sleek new Auden or my huge Rabelais.

The painting was grey, blue, and white, with a firm black line, a representation of an older woman, extremely well done, glasses on her nose, a kind of wen on her chin. I had met Andy’s mother—Julia—once and the painting reminded me of her. It also looked like Andy himself just as the 1974 portrait of Julia at first blush looked shockingly like him, a stouter, older female Andy, the same face. At least I thought so, his own hand at work this time, the painting less mechanical, more expressive, more vulnerable and emotional, than the other things he was doing. Less detached or ironic. Julia was born in 1892 and Andy in 1928, so she would have been approaching sixty in the earlier painting, an older mother, certainly an older
mother for the time, particularly in the Slovak or Carpatho-Russian culture she came from; Slavic Andy.

When I left Pittsburgh for New York I gave the painting to my mother to take care of, along with my boxes and my old drawings and poems and she put it in a bin or locker in the basement, along with her other treasures, which we protected with a padlock. It wasn’t that it had any value over and above my own connection with the artist and my attachment to the work itself. It was 1949 and Andy wouldn’t be doing his tin cans, dollar bills, and comic strip characters for another decade. I took a full-time teaching job in the fall of 1956 and Andy Warhol was the farthest thing from my mind. Even when he became a world-famous figure I paid little attention, I was so busy with my own life, trying to stretch the money and find the right words. Nor was I much interested in pop art itself. It was Soutine I loved, and the Apollo of Veii, he of the large eyes and shattered arms, and I rather loathed art that was ephemeral and facetious and mocking. Even when it occupied the whole of what was once Volkwein’s Music Store across the river on the Northside, once a separate city called Allegheny, where good Gertrude Stein was born, one of the famous Jews in his series of paintings called *Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century*, including Einstein of course, and Freud and Kafka and Buber and the Marx Brothers, such a zeal he had for exploitation, such an opportunist he was, the saintly simpleton.

When Andy died in 1987—on my birthday—my mother had been living in Miami for nineteen years, and she would continue to live there till her death in 1993; she was born in 1900, eight years after Julia, probably three hundred miles away. I began obsessing about the painting, a ghost by now, and when I went to Miami a few weeks later for my annual visit I immediately started to ask her about it. She had a huge closet off her bedroom where her things were stored, certainly as large as the dark bin in Pittsburgh. I called him Andy Warhola to identify him and she remembered “the thin, raggedy Polish boy with pimples,” whom she had met once; I told her he was not Polish but Slovak, that yes he did have bad skin and that he was a millionaire, the term I used instead of “famous painter” or “underground filmmaker” to draw her attention.

We both went rushing off to the oversize closet to search for the painting. There were heavy leather suitcases covered in dust, a couple of ratty old fur coats, rows of ancient dresses, some with the tags still on them, twenty pair or so of shoes, hatboxes, cartons of old tax returns and photograph albums, some dreary books, a couple of lamps, a broken-down Hoover, and a large unfinished painting of me, age sixteen or seventeen, posing in a chair, my muscular legs painfully crossed, the painting covered with a yellowed sheet, the painter my cousin, Schimmy Grossman, done the four or five months he was an “artist,” for which my father gave him probably twenty dollars, some time in 1941 or ‘42—but no Warhol. We unpacked boxes, we went through thirty years of large stiff pocket books with tarnished clasps, we breathed in the dust, some of it gathered into small balls, but Andy’s painting wasn’t there.

We went back to the living room to take stock, I sitting in my accustomed chair, my mother in hers, both of us sneezing. She was full of remorse and desperately tried to remember how the painting got lost. But it was small, maybe it leaned against the wall and the movers didn’t see it. As usual, I found myself consoling
her for my loss, though she was responsible for it. It wasn’t that it was a great painting, it was only a student work; the value was partly in the money and partly that it was the early work of a world famous artist as well as being a link to my own relationship with Andy. I ask myself how I would feel if it was an early Pearlstein I had lost and not that of a cult figure like Andy. Would I have reclaimed it years ago and nailed it to the wall? Do you leave a Pearlstein in a bin?

I sat there thinking that I not only conflated the ghost painting with Julia but I was beginning to include my own mother as a companion piece and I would then have compounded all three of them, though no one had ever painted her; and what it would have been like if Andy had taken a polaroid of her, and caught her girlish beauty—though she was eighty-seven—and did something with her heavy makeup and her blue hair and her eyes that were full of grief and fear. I made her tea, as I always did, and she cleared her throat by way of forgiving herself and the world its careless and destructive ways, and to show her gratitude.

I was in Iowa City when Andy died and I took his death in stride, more bemused than shocked, and I wondered at the time, with the details of his life so much in the news, why I hadn’t ever visited the Factory, why I didn’t knock on his door even once, he who was as cunning and resilient as the other Pittsburgher, Andy Carnegie, who also got other people to do his dirty work for him, who also had his own elaborate explanation and who also put a crown on his own head, like Napoleon. My guess is that when I drove Andy to the train station in 1949 he sat in the front seat looking straight ahead, maybe hugging his knees. He was probably impressed by the car, the gearshift knob, the curved front window. When we said good-bye, there may have been a cursory shaking of the hands, a brief touch, with no pressure from his side. I was doing him the simplest of favors, saving him from taking several streetcars, or, God forbid, a cab, which could have cost him three dollars, a sum he couldn’t afford—which, ah, makes me think for the first time that he was possibly “paying” me for the ride with the painting. For which I owe him much change and a worthy receipt. Though then, as later, it was hard to know what was in his mind. Probably nothing. Probably it just was what it was and had no poignant or metaphysical aspects about it. I thank him though for the painting; I’m sorry I lost it.
Mary Ann Samyn

“So you saw and now you know what you want”: In the Presence and Prescience of Eva Hesse

—At the Eva Hesse archives, The Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio, c. 2000: “$ makes a difference” (dollar sign abbreviation mine b/c I was working quickly and in white gloves. These are the archives, dear—)

Hesse touched this stuff, so I’m not allowed. If my oils mixed with hers… there’s no telling.

“Art is controlled and disciplined…”

I like her hooded coat.

~

To be in the presence of a work by Eva Hesse is to understand one’s limits. Though not, perhaps, hers. The work seems to reach beyond what can be said.

As a poet, words are my business, supposedly. Also, silence. Without one, you cannot really have the other. This is what lyric poetry reminds us. This is why the space of the page is active, an equal partner in the making of meaning.

But Hesse’s work says not so fast—. Says, this is language too. Says, can you speak it? I didn’t think so—

—but you feel it, don’t you?

~

—Also, that the white space is not only of the page or canvas, but off the wall, too, and into your space. Think Hang Up, one of her most famous pieces: a large frame with a looping metal rod coming out of it and touching
the floor, carving the space, almost like a string tied around the finger of space, a reminder. She called it “absurd.” But now, the feeling I feel is more oh!, meaning that nearly touches me, doesn’t it—

Hang Up is in Chicago, at the Art Institute. Parquet floor. Or, I just wanted to say “parquet” since it’s such a good word and intricate in a way that, at first glance anyway, Hang Up is not, its gesture merely a gesture of see—

~

Once upon a time I wrote a series of poems about and inspired by Hesse. The best of these did not mention her and only occasionally borrowed her titles. Many of the poems appear in my books, but the whole chapbook, Dream Eva, has never been published, thank goodness. As I wrote in the preface to that manuscript:

These poems were mentored by the sculpture of Eva Hesse. Hesse’s work is stunningly spare and extremely non-narrative, non-referential. And yet it haunts, it has enormous resonance. It is visceral, alternately shouted and whispered. Why is this? Though it does not tell a story—just as poetry at the far edges of the lyric does not tell a story—it does, somehow, echo story. Or, if not story precisely or not the distilled retelling of story, not even the gestures that accompany story, then perhaps the way the gestures swirl and burrow into your throat, closing it, or sit on your chest, or curl in the pit of your stomach. Hesse used rope and latex and fiberglass and papier-mache. She made forms that were vulnerable in the sense of risky and in the sense that they would decay over time and she knew this and was mostly OK with it. The risk of her work—the very idea of risk, of what is at the edges and how we might express that—has been the model for these poems.

~

I’m saving this document as “HesseEssay1.doc” with the “1” meaning I know I’ll have to begin again. It’s so hard to be clear. She was clear. Anyone might say, looking at one of her pieces, what does that mean? —to which I’d reply: but how do you feel? That kind of clarity. The mysterious clarity of the lyric poem.

~


“On the Spontaneity of Her Working Process (58 sec.)”

“On Trying to Categorize Her Work (41 sec.)”

By this point, I had seen Hesse’s work many times in person and, of course, in books. Rope Piece, my old friend, etc.

To be in the presence of a work by Eva Hesse is to remember the body. Not just the obvious, like breasts, which figure, or seem to figure (pun intended and not intended), in her work, but also the nervous system, little hairs on arms and legs, something like oh yes—traveling up the spine. All the uncalled-for and sometimes awkward reactions.

Think “Eighter from Decauter”: breast-like knob, with spokes protruding. Is this whimsy? Or power? A wind might come along.

Or “Ringaround Rosie”: two breasts? One smaller than the other. Papier-mache and—I love this—electrical wire. Can’t argue with that.

“Suspended, left to right” is the kind of language that turns up in catalogues of Hesse’s work and is, I think, a perfect definition of lyricism: I strung it up for you to see:

When I visited the archives, a graduate student in art history was also there. Hesse was, the grad student assured me, “an art star now.” Dissertations and everything. The student knew a constellation when she saw one.

I heard it as ArtStar, all one word and a little odd. As though Hesse was being handled by professionals. Sort of like when the police arrive and we’re assured that there’s no need to gawk.
I tried to be good and folded my gloves as neatly as possible.

~

I had been worried, or at least reluctant, about this essay. “Essay.” What’s that, anyway? And the work—hers, hers, hers—is stunning. What more is there to say?

~

About the body, breast and penis particularly, Hesse said, “I cancel that.” Meaning, ham and eggs; order up. Cancel that, too. Like a postage stamp or ticket: you can’t use it anymore, it’s neutral now, so many hands have been that corner down. Keep moving; there’s nothing here to see.

~

About being a woman and artist, about potential bias, she said, basically: make art.

~

Repetition. Chaos and non-chaos. Absurdity. Not that and not that either. These are things you’ll read when you read about Hesse.

But what I felt was so sad or thank goodness! or finally, elation or tell me, again.

~

December 2002, my husband and I are in London to see a major Hesse show at the Tate Modern. They’re all there—An Ear in a Pond, Eighter from Decatur, Up the Down Road, C-Clamp Blues, Constant, Metronomic Irregularity, Addendum, Accession, Repetition Nineteen, and so many others.

And later, in my living room: a large framed poster of No Title or Not Yet, 1956. “Net bags, polyethylene sheeting, paper, metal weights, and string.” It looks as though it’s been hauled up. I’m pretty sure this is my worst fear. If you saw it, you’d be pretty sure it was yours.

Like most worst fears, I keep it close.

~

Among her things: a Sears catalogue order form. What could she have wanted? Answer: many things, just like anyone. It’s the ordinariness that’s compelling.

Also, it reinforces what the work suggests: she understood. She got the absurdity and seriousness of need.

~
About her work I once wrote:

   The lyric is the vertical, this moment opened up, a rabbit hole and down you
go and further and look around, why don’t you? Lyric poetry does this. So
does lyric sculpture, which is what Hesse’s work is. An interior landscape.
Call this piece “aught” or “accession” or “accretion” but ask yourself how you
feel. Her art is not a story.

Or, rather, it’s the story no one told you. The ridiculous, private, oh-so-common, dizzying story you’re
frightened and desperate to hear, or tell.

~

The trip to the archives was years ago, but what remains is the memory of how I longed to leave, a strange
now what? feeling, having seen her, especially, according to my notes, box 77.52.76.36 and box 77.57.76.35
a-b.

~

Even the “Please no food or drink” sign started to get to me. Okay, already.

~

With Hesse, words can turn into “mere words” pretty quickly. If she could have “said” it otherwise—via
poetry or photography or gardening or any other medium of expression—she would have.

True for anyone.

What isn’t always true though is this: she discovered a means by which to express that which is so
difficult—the interior life—and then, equally remarkable, she did it.

~

I keep coming back to what she seems to have known about me, my moods. Is this self-centered? Or the
highest compliment? She knew beforehand…

~

Hesse’s work is so startling and startlingly familiar to me now that I cannot remember not knowing about
her. Or, perhaps more accurately, for the longest time I’d had the sense that she knew something about me
long before I did.

~
In an early photo, Hesse’s hair is in a beehive. It’s easy to make metaphors from that. Which means we shouldn’t? It was, after all, of its time. Common. But so too are her materials. You might have cheesecloth at home right now, somewhere. Surely you’ve made papier-mache. A mask maybe? And you wore it out?

~

In June 1968, Hesse wrote, “It is my main concern to go beyond what I know and what I can know.”

Out of the archive and back to the gallery: “Her structures are welcoming,” I wrote then, “but the emotions (hers slash mine) remain both palpable and elusive——”

Works Consulted

Eva Hesse: Drawing in Space. Germany: Cantz.
A Crash Course: A Conversation with Conversations with Antoni Tàpies.

If you google Antoni Tàpies, you will find many of his images online. You will also discover a link to the Antonio Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona (www.fundaciotapies.org) where I first encountered his work at the end of my first Grand Tour back in 1994. Besides Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró, Tàpies is the only other artist to have an entire museum in Barcelona devoted to his work. If you don’t know his work, please log on.

Denise Levertov’s The Freeing of the Dust shows a Tàpies on its cover, the only book of poetry published in America that I know of to have done so. To love the cover of a book more than the book itself! To experience poetry more in an image than through words.

Tàpies has worked closely with many poets in Catalonia, including Joan Brossa. Over the years, I have managed to track down a few of the more affordable tomes (a facsimile edition of Novel Ла; the deluxe limited edition of U no és ningú; and an unnumbered copy of Frègoli) which contain original lithographic works to accompany texts in a language I cannot read, books shipped from Spain after the countless hours I have spent in various rare-book rooms at the New York Public Library, staining such pages with the oil from my fingertips. Better than visiting a museum where one is told not to touch, it is in various reading rooms that I have found myself able to participate in a ritual of sanctioned desecration.

The fetish of the book in an age of downloading frenzy!

There is, however, a book, that you can get more easily a hold of (www.bookfinder.com), Barbara Catoir’s Conversations with Antoni Tàpies published by Prestel in 1991. The back cover is empty except for a single quote from the book, a quote I keep near at hand on my writing desk:

“People who have found true knowledge fall silent. If I were a philosopher I would stop painting: I’d do nothing at all. That would be the silence of Zen. The only thing to do is to carry on searching for the light: I haven’t found it yet, and that’s why I paint.”

After having read Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet decades ago and answering his challenge in my deepest darkest hours with, “Yes, I must write!,” here I am faced with a new kind of artistic ambition, one of possibly doing “nothing at all,” that is, if I were actually able to find “true knowledge” which Tàpies admits to having failed at.

This quest for “true knowledge” seems of a different order than your typically accredited graduate writing
program where workshop participation and a few academic courses and/or craft lectures can buy you a terminal degree. Rather, when I read the writings of Antoni Tàpies, I feel as though I were slowly ascending a mountain in order to sit at the feet of a living Master.

The first third of Catoir’s book is devoted to an essay called “In the Labyrinth of Signs.” Here, one is introduced to a generous biographical sketch of Tàpies and an overview of his work. The remainder of the book stands as an interview arranged into eighteen sections which include: The Artists and Success; Mystical Experiences; What I Seek to Achieve with my Art; Madness—Dreams—Psychoanalysis; Chaos and Order; Surrealism; Art and Politics. The kinds of responses Tàpies makes often unsettle me with their candor, declarations which are free of self-congratulation:

“I myself don’t know if I have, in fact, been successful. Perhaps I have enjoyed a success d’estime, bit in spiritual terms my success, if it exists at all, has been only very minor. My activities have never had anything to do with the idea of becoming famous or achieving success. I have always been concerned with getting people to listen to me.” (p. 69)

Here’s his response to whether art can ever be popular:

“It is clearly apparent that art, these days, is a minority interest. I find that regrettable. In my country the process of educating people towards a receptiveness for art, poetry and music is very slow. But that’s a matter for the Ministry of Education rather than for the producers of culture. The information one receives about culture is often indigestible. What is lacking is a kind of basic training that starts in childhood.” (p. 70)

Basic training. What if instead of pouring billions of dollars into the military-industrial complex, we . . .

And here’s his take on Kazoko Okakura’s *The Little Book of Tea* which Tàpies read himself as a child:

“As an introduction to the world of the East I still consider it unsurpassed. It contains a Taoist fable about a harp which only one person was able to play. The story is an object lesson in aesthetics and the philosophy of life, speaking of the mutual state of receptiveness which is essential to the understanding of art.” (pp. 81-82)

What I love about looking at paintings by Tàpies is often not getting the point, not being able to find a way in, at least not right away. Like the work of Cy Twombly or Agnes Martin, his work forces me to slow down, to get humble, to tune into another frequency.

And to get in touch with that ambivalence of not knowing if what I’m looking at is “great” or of it’s “shit.”

The way a work of art can flicker, seduce and repulse.

As for his personal god:

“You’re right: there’s no immediate connection between my work and the dogmatic forms of religious art. However, the religious phenomena I’m talking about has very little to do with official religions. My personal god is not to be found in heaven but on earth, as in the wisdom of the Orient.” (p. 96)
And on Borges:

“Don’t forget that my mother tongue is Catalan, not Spanish. And as far as Borges is concerned, I haven’t read much of his work, but I find his political attitudes repugnant. I’m convinced that these human failings also leave their mark in his writing.”

Tàpies cannot help but see a correspondence between the politics one embraces with the marks one leaves on the canvas or empty page.

After watching the Twin Towers fall while standing on the Hoboken pier, I found it difficult to turn to contemporary American poetry for solace in the immediate aftermath. So it has been in the shadows of Guantánomo or Abu Ghraib. Yet these were the very demons all of us wrestled with in a session called “Dirty Wars” last year at the PEN World Voices Conference in New York City. And beyond. _Hic et nunc._

I have very few answers as to how to live as an artist in these most “interesting times,” but Antoni Tàpies has certainly trod this well-worn path. In his twenties, Tàpies was involved with a surrealist journal called _Dau Al Set_ or “the seven-sided die,” an impossibility that only the imagination could overcome. And it is in that spirit that I leave these words for my 85-year-old mentor whom I have never actually met.
Centuries before Peter Parker morphed into Spider Man, storytelling through panels of consecutive images was a rock bed of Japanese art. Over centuries, visual narrative evolved to cartoons, graphic novels (manga) and Japanese animé, all of which adapt styles from Japanese traditions, including kabuki theater, Japanese mythology, architecture and Zen art.

The beginnings of pre-manga artwork can be traced to a late 11th and early 12th century abbot named Toba Sojo, whose minimalist monochrome ink scrolls, *Frolic of the Animals*, parodied and derided Buddhist clergy by drawing them as anthropomorphized monkeys, foxes, frogs, rats, cats and hares cavorting in a natural setting. Most art historians agree that these brush drawings are satires of monastery life.

*Frolic of the Animals* belongs to a genre called “narrative picture scrolls,” (*emaki-mono*), which flourished during the Kamkura period (1192-1333). These picture scrolls don’t have a text. However, the sequence of events is seamless. Scrolls unfold from left to right—a bit like a slow-motion flip book, making it easy to imagine the animals moving forward in space and time. Animals are passionately involved in absurd pastimes, such as farting contests—as well as ordinary pastimes like archery, wrestling matches, chases, and feasts. The animals have access to human accoutrements, including archery equipment, cooking pots and musical instruments. And their extraordinary animation makes them seem eerily alive.

At times there’s a dangerous edge to their antics: A monkey challenges a frog to a wrestling match, the frog appears to be fatally injured and the monkey is indifferent. In the next panel, the frog rallies to cheers from other frogs and hares; but the monkey has disappeared. In a later panel, a hare and a frog have a wrestling match. The frog wins and poses as an intimidating Buddha. In the next panel, monkeys and other frogs race to give him gifts.

When preparing feasts or holding ceremonies the animals work cooperatively. But whenever they act as a species, they become ill-mannered, wildly competitive and chauvinistic. A fox farts while a frog tries to concentrate during an archery contest. Hares look dangerously out of control when they chase monkeys with sticks. A single panel might not convey this sense of turmoil. But the deliberate linear sequences, combined with the passions of the animals, depict a cavalier freedom that is buoyant and slightly unsettling. Their world is clearly an adult world. But it’s also reminiscent of the anarchic games of childhood.
By the 18th century Toba Sojo’s influence on manga (which means “lackadaisical art”) was so well established a book was designed called *Toba-e* (*e* means “pictures”), in which humorous illustrations unfold like an accordion from left to right, imitating his scrolls. Text was added, and this addition of language signaled the beginning of modern Japanese cartoons. *Toba-e* morphed to more sophisticated cartoons and cartoons morphed to Japanese manga—both as cartoons and graphic novels.  

In *Frolic of the Animals* Toba Sojo was employing three artistic traditions that existed long before he became a brush painter:

The first was the tradition of using animals in Japanese art. These were often mythological animals that had powers of speech and could marry humans. (It’s notable that Toba Sojo never used mythical animals).

The second was a Buddhist tradition of using monochrome ink to depict Buddhist deities—even although these animals are hardly deities.

Third, and most importantly, Japanese art had a long tradition of caricature in the form of *zare-ge* (play pictures). The earliest *zare-ge* are graffiti from the 7th century discovered in ceiling planks of the Horyuji Temple in Nara when it was reconstructed in 1935. These cartoons in the Horyuji Temple are pictures of humans: Toba Sojo is the first known Japanese artist to draw caricatures of animals.

Yet for all the traditions he relied upon, and for all the traditions that followed him, Toba Sojo has become so inextricably linked with caricature, he is known as the father of Japanese manga.

*Frolic of the Animals* is one of Japan’s National Treasures, and art historians have written about it extensively. Much of this writing involves speculation about the identity of the artist, since there are four sets of scrolls; but most scholars agree that the two most popular animal scrolls (those reproduced most often) were painted by Toba Sojo. There are also disputes about whether the brush paintings are satires of Buddhist monks or just animals having a good time: Again, most art historians conclude that they are indeed satires.

No literature that this reader has found, however, explains the persistence of Toba Sojo’s influence over eight centuries of art or the striking appeal of the animals. I want to propose that a large part of his genius was his ability to create a singular world as well as to portray a singular level of consciousness. By “world” I mean an autonomous and unique realm that can hypnotize the viewer into believing that—for this moment—reality can be no other way. And by “consciousness” I mean a level of awareness—hard to define in words, but easy to grasp in direct experience.

Without question scholars acknowledge the extreme originality of Toba Sojo’s brush paintings and his novel use of “play pictures.” But they dismiss the notion that Toba Sojo created a unique world. Instead, they believe the animals inhabit a realm in Buddhist cosmology called “the animal realm.” I’ll address these complexities of Buddhist thought: But first I want to address the art itself—namely what one can see in the

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1 Westerners also have admired *Toba-e* art: After Admiral Perry forced Japan to open its doors in the 19th Century, George Bigot, a Frenchman, founded a satirical magazine called *Toba-e*. Some Japanese believe Western cartoons and even Walt Disney owe a debt to *Toba-e*. This may interest some readers, but is beyond the scope of this article.
brush paintings without knowing anything about Buddhism.

All the animals are drawn with fluid, minimalist brush strokes. This fluidity and economy make them seem to leap off the page as though they are eluding Toba Sojo’s brush and he had to paint them in an instant to capture them. This minimalist style accounts for part of their extraordinary animation: Like the Western artist Frances Bacon, Toba Sojo captures the essence of motion.

The animal’s animation is enhanced by their human dexterity. They can cook, shoot arrows, play instruments, and prepare feasts. But what gives them the unmistakable aura of being human is their facial expressions—most notably their mouths and eyes. These expressions are extremely changeable: The animals can look wicked, sad, ecstatic, crafty, frightened, imperious, dim-witted, lost in illusion, startlingly conscious, or mournful. Sometimes they even look guilty—as though they would rather not know what they’re doing. But even in profile they project levels of consciousness that are distinctly human. To be “lost in illusion” one must have access to awareness without illusion. Most importantly, however, their expressions convey a quality of self-awareness, potential accountability, even if there is a wish never to be accountable.

Except for the human objects at their disposal, Toba Sojo uses no artistic devices other than the animals’ actions and expressions to imbue them with human qualities. The river and hills are drawn minimalistically. And the vegetation, although classically artful, is so sparse the animals appear on a relatively blank canvas.

There is also no attempt to translate the human world to an animal scale: There are no cozy fox dens, nothing reminiscent of Wind in the Willows. And the clothes the animals wear have a slapdash quality: Some don’t bother to wear clothes at all. Others wear only hats—tall floppy black hats, ridiculously large straw hats, hats made from lotus blossoms. A few animals wear rumpled cloaks, and in one panel, a fox wears shoes on his forepaws. Whatever the animals are wearing looks like a careless afterthought—something grabbed at the last minute, perhaps as they raced outside. This is Beatrix Potter for grownups, a world far more sophisticated than Walt Disney.

When scholars talk about this world, they appeal to the fact that Buddhists believe there are six realms, or levels, of existence: (1) the bodhisattva realm where enlightened beings live (2) the realm of the jealous gods where impassioned deities live (3) the human realm (4) the animal realm (5) the hungry ghost realm (a realm for beings with insatiable desires) and (6) the hell realm, reserved for devils and creatures tormented by demonic illusions.

Each realm represents a leap to a more advanced level of consciousness. And unless an inhabitant of these realms makes a very bad mistake, it’s possible, through merit, to reincarnate to the next realm and attain a higher level of awareness—or, in Buddhism, enlightenment. When scholars talk about Frolic of the Animals they appeal to this belief system and assume that Toba Sojo placed all these creatures in the fourth, or animal, realm. If the animals act like human beings, it’s only because they have a glimmer of human life, to which they aspire, and which is next on the ladder of reincarnation.
Chouju, Jinbutsu, Giga (Part) : Frog and rabbit play Sumo.
鳥獣人物戯画部分カエルとウサギが相撲を取っている、と言われる場面
Chouju_Jinbutsu_Giga (Part) : Frog and rabbit play Sumo.

鳥獣人物戯画部分カエルとウサギが相撲を取っている、と言われる場面
Aside from contradicting the general agreement that the scrolls are genuine satires of monastic life, this interpretation ignores one of the most important elements in Toba Sojo’s art: For in addition to hares, foxes, cats, frogs, rats and monkeys who stand on two feet, wear clothes, and have human dexterity, the scrolls also include boars, deer, and donkeys who stand on four feet, never wear clothes, have no human capacities, and are used by the two-footed animals just as humans would—for transportation.

Without question this device has layers of resonance: Toba Sojo may be making an observation about the way monks exploited lay people and/or animals. He may also have been drawing attention to the monks’ hypocrisy, since one of the Buddhist precepts is that all sentient beings should be treated with respect.

Clearly these layers are important. But even though accurate, they’re based on historical information, and not present in the art itself. However, there are a few elements in Toba Soja’s work that reveal something singular about the world he creates. These are elements one can’t ignore if one spends time just looking at the scrolls: The eyes and expressions and gestures of the two-footed animals are imbued with exceptional dynamism, vibrancy and awareness. The eyes and expressions of the four-footed animals have no awareness or apparent feeling. The four-footed animals do what most four-footed animals do when subject to human will: They wait submissively in their harnesses until they are used.

This striking difference in the way the animals are depicted means that some animals in Toba Sojo’s world are familiar—namely, they are animals—while other animals are creatures we’ve never seen—a combination of what is animal and human. This dissonant juxtaposition creates a surreal realm in which some animals are only animals, while other animals are and aren’t animals. This is an imaginary, tilted world, where one thing can be two things at the same time—a world rendered with such authority and economy it becomes believable. This world breaks loose of Buddhist cosmology, because in Buddhism creatures with vastly different levels of awareness have different embodiments, ranging from spiders to human beings.

I would propose, then, that Toba Sojo was drawing more than caricatures of animals performing human activities. He was also drawing a level of consciousness that is associated with being human—a level of consciousness not associated with animals. In doing this he was creating a realm that didn’t exist in Buddhism and a phenomena that doesn’t exist in this world. In this realm non-human forms inhabit human awareness and, by implication, allow the viewer to embrace the paradox that human beings are and aren’t animals.

Seen through these lenses the animals’ antics—their malevolent chases, ridiculous clothes, absurd farting contests—are mirrors of our own absurdities, our own irreverence, our own ecstasies. And the conclusion is obvious: If animals can act like animals and people at the same time, so can human beings.

In Japan the original scrolls are at the Konzanji temple in the mountains of Toganoo. In this secluded setting, known for its dazzling autumn leaves, Frolic of the Animals might seem far away from manga. They might seem like the brushwork of a whimsical 12th century monk with a pitiless eye and a wicked sense of
But even in this austere atmosphere the animals leap out with crafty and imperious authority. They seem to be looking at you and demand attention.

The Japanese must concur, because for several centuries the two-footed inhabitants of Frolic of the Animals have made numerous appearances in the mundane world. As early as the 18th century they appeared on parasols, fans and kimonos during festivals. And today, in modern Japan, you can see them on objects as ordinary as tea cups, fans and store signs. Foxes stare at you from sake bowls. Hares chase monkeys in calendars. Even in these reproductions—even as kitsch—the animals have a highly animated quality.

Mythological figures have persisted in art over centuries. But no other non-mythologically based art has morphed and transformed and adapted to the contemporary milieu like Toba Sojo’s sensibility or the animals that are his vehicle. These animals inhabit human consciousness with a veracity that remains compelling, humorous and unsettling. They live in a world that contradicts natural laws, and this contradiction is startling. Perhaps these animals will leap forward to later centuries, and Toba Sojo’s influence will continue to transform art in ways we can’t possibly imagine.

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2 Toba Sojo also made erotic art, for which he’s less known. One four-panel piece starts with an raucous competition about penis size—an arena where commoners and nobleman have the same clout because they are naked. This proceeds to an orgy. After a vigorous beginning, the participants become exhausted and faint, except for one woman. In the last panel, we see her in the emperor’s court, beautifully clothed, receiving an award for her stamina.
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A Proposal For A Clearing

Michelle Taransky

A clearing wherein they would
Share a ransom note

With the front line’s sorrow
Song in its moment. The first
To cross the measured

Strut without eyes
Without saying another
\textit{model}— That alleged pair

We fear will
Take out
A loan like the blind are

A sinking war
Ship. It knows the planner’s

Birds are weaponry, are is
His devotion

To the flag. The bride
Of assembly lines. A wolf

Playing a solder at a border town

Saw ballads as armed
Forces— The division from said

To lost perspective, its
Accusing lines
Richard Taransky
A Proposal For A Clearing

They are both in the same sentence here
It is a war see no one
Keeps writing
Here what figures are are
Steel and they
Are in need of
Stories they are
Proposing they
Name a copy
After a copy
That went yellow
As was
Indicated by its caption

It’s built nothing
Like they are

Hunting for the shape you
Counted on me to look into
Trading plans for places as
Undoing had
Happened, happened on
The banished ones— I trapped
Their breath and hoped
It would turn
Into your handout
A Proposal For a Clearing

Because hiding the casket does not do
Enough we will say this they said that

We can’t talk about it because it
Uses a figure

You said you saw
Places I saw no place
For their dying
Bird stories
He told he had
To cross a number of

Doors like a storm
Door and the door he lets go

Goes you will know what to call it by the shape you
Will know nothing like them
Disaster them houses passing through a house
That can
Not capture a wolf where
We were promised

In a note of glass they were there
Waiting for an opposite
To what injured drawing-
Room to house the current
News where nothing has been

Planned— To think fallout,
The choice, the limits shared and then

The question of which pronoun
Until you

Read the work, don’t find it
A reflection
There are objects that get by without names (Rene Magritte). The pipe is not a pipe. This is not this. And then there’s Gronk. Is he not Gronk?

I like to think of his name as a hybridized acronym for something. Groucho Marx plus Jean Cocteau plus Puck, maybe. Or Godzilla Ravishing Off-key Nauseous Kowtowers. There are so many possibilities!

In one version of the naming myth, Gronk’s mother reads an article about a group of indigenous people living in the Amazon basin for whom the word “gronk” means “to fly” as she goes into labor and, either prophesizing or determining his soaring future, she christens him thus. In another version the name Gronk comes from a short-lived 60s tv show called It’s About Time in which a couple of astronauts travel back in time to prehistoric days and encounter a caveman with the name. This story reflects light from many facets, not the least of which is that the show’s theme song (“It’s about time, it’s about space . . .”) describes “strange people in strange places,” one of Gronk’s particularly favorite milieus. In another version it’s the nick-name given to him by neighborhood kids, short for “Gronkazoid—” a quintessential and fantastic grade-school blending of monster movie and sci fi nomenclature. In yet another version, probably the most accurate, he makes it up and gives it to himself for no reason at all, or for no reason he’ll divulge. At any rate, Gronk’s decision to know himself and have himself be known as “Gronk” constitutes the first step in what’s been a lifelong process of self-definition which has been, by virtue of its insistent uniqueness, its defiant nonconformity, also a process of self-othering. It’s his way of saying, you think I’m that? Well, I’m not that. And I’m not that either.

What I find cool about Gronk being “Gronk” is that as a word, gronk refuses to be anything other than itself. (I’m reminded of Antony, in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, describing the Nile crocodile to a bewildered Roman, Lepidus: “It is shaped, sir, like itself.”) It’s a name that doesn’t give off ethnic identity or gender identity. It doesn’t indicate where he’s from or who his parents are. It doesn’t aim to please or aim to displease. It just is. As Gronk would say, “Now tell me who you are,” both pretending he has told
you something about himself and because, in fact, he’d really like to know.

Gronk is a gay man and a chicano. Saying this, I feel a little ill at ease—not because these things are unknown about him, or because they're in any way negative, but because they raise assumptions and speculations about him and his work which, in the end, Gronk himself finds to be, well, not the main point. (Hence “Gronk” rather than, say, “El Vez.”) The otherness of being gay and chicano are not nearly as other as it is to be Gronk. In this way Gronk is a post-identity-politics artist. Which isn’t to say that he denies, or doesn’t identify with, chicano or gay culture, because in significant ways he does identify with and speak for both, but to say that somehow he inhabits both of these cultural groups as a matter-of-course, and that, in the end, what matters most to him is making marks on canvas, on paper, on walls, in music centers, on stages, on hotels, barrooms, paper napkins, and planetariums, thus defining the word “gronk” as “a person who makes art.”

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Glugio Gronk Nicandro, as he sometimes calls himself, grew up in a Mexican barrio in East Los Angeles. His first public artwork was an absurdist theatrical protest piece called Caca Roaches Have No Friends (November 1969). He was Spanglish before Spanglish was cool. In the process of mounting this piece he met Patssi Valdez, Willie Heron, and Harry Gamboa, Jr. with whom he formed ASCO, a guerilla arts group—a chicano collective whose name means “nausea” in Spanish. It was the late 60s, not only a more radical time politically and aesthetically in the arts than now but also a more cosmopolitan time. The members of ASCO made art in the streets; made theater and painting and photography and performance; were communal and anarchistic and extravagantly rasquachismo; and at the same time, genuinely intellectual, they read Sartre and watched New Wave cinema.

In 1972, inspired by Jean-Luc Godard’s film Bande a Part (Band of Outsiders) in which three characters race through the Louvre as an absurdist criticism of the bourgeois fetishization and consumption of “great” art, ASCO members Gronk, Herron, and Gamboa spray-painted their names (Gronk painted “Gronkie”) on the outside of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). God that must have felt good! I was mesmerized when I heard about the action from my high school art teacher, Miss Mallieri, a beautiful Greek woman with a huge black bouffant hairstyle, in Southfield, Michigan. She found it exhilarating; when she described what Gronk, Herron, and Gamboa had done it was clear to us that somehow she felt the act had vindicated her—had vindicated women artists, Greek-american artists, any artists who were underrepresented in the museums and galleries of dominant culture America. To this day I’m engaged by what they did—even more than I’m engaged by Chris Burden’s arm-shooting (another brilliant and outrageous move)—because what ASCO did has even more layers of complexity than that did, and made a stronger political statement, with humor. Essentially, what Gronk, Gamboa, and Herron did
was to place themselves at the center of the art world, othering the Picassos, Rembrandts, and bourgeois
art patrons whose names and reputations were inside the building. They flipped off the hierarchy, and
flipped it on its head.

The guerrilla spray-painting was allegedly inspired by a meeting between Gamboa and a LACMA
curator in which the curator told Gamboa that chicanos were gang members and lowriders and that, if they
made any art at all it was to be considered folk art not fine art. Something along those lines. So the act of
signing LACMA, as if it were one of their artworks, tagging it, as if it were a street-corner in East L.A., is
an act of political outrage, justifiable and overdue. In and of itself it’s an act of incredible chutzpah. It took
cajones. But what is really remarkable, and what defines the gesture, for me, as Gronk qua Gronk, is not
only its daring but its wit and charm—its worldliness. The day after signing their names on the museum,
Gronk, Herron, and Gamboa showed up at the scene with Patssi Valdez and took photos of Patssi standing
next to their signatures looking elegant and bored. Looking French. Looking like someone, perhaps, in
a Godard film, more existentialist than revolutionary. Chicanos, it turns out, are gang-banging graffiti
artists and at the same time savvy performance artists whose actions, as in this case, can bring international
condemnation and embarrassment to a major art museum. It’s delicious. And stylish. And just.

Enter Tormenta, Gronk’s alter-ego, the other’s other. La Tormenta is a figure Gronk has painted,
photographed, sculpted out of papier-mache, and directed on stage in various venues for decades. She’s
always black and white. We always see her back—her elegant white shoulders rising out of a black strapless
gown very much like the one worn by Anita Ekberg for the fountain scene in La Dolce Vita. She has black
hair like La Virgen de Guadalupe. Sometimes she looks shabby. Sometimes she looks like a bereft mother,
sometimes like a prostitute. She’s a glamorous, comfortably plump Latina who just doesn’t want to take
it any more. But does. And gives it as well. She’s La Dolorosa, the mother of sorrows. She’s the Gloria
Swanson of East L.A. She takes her otherness and makes you want to own it, embody it, marry it, yourself.

The first time I saw her image I thought, how can a man have created her? She’s not objectified.
She’s not dismembered, not put there to be admired for her parts, her beauty, her sexual appeal. In her
backless gown and almost ghost-like pallor, she’s a kind of parody of both elegance and pain. But she’s
not a parody either. She’s dead-serious about the art of female female-impersonation. In her exaggerated
gestures and suggestive, fleshy excessiveness she’s like all women who perform female identity in order
to shatter it, or to own it, which makes her iconically and essentially female—a member of the second
sex who will never be second. Tormenta strikes me as a kind of black-and-white chicana version of Dolly
Parton, another performer of female identity, who has taken her otherness and parlayed it into almost
mythic stature. And yet she’s more elegant than Dolly. More noble. As Dolly herself says, “I cannot
compete with you, drag queens.” Tormenta is a bit like a female drag queen—not campy, not coy, but wielding total control over her presentation-in-gender. I am too, on my good days.

La Tormenta is also ageless, which in itself is a radical gesture, the age of a woman having everything to do with how we read her. In the painting Puta’s Cave, she’s shown in her black hair, black gown, black gloves, making a shadow in the shape of a stag against a white wall. As in Plato’s cave, the place in which we watch the world of images and actions pass, the place in which we realize it’s all illusion, it’s all removed from us, it’s inaccessible and insubstantial, this world in which we are hopelessly othered, hopelessly separated from the essential, in Puta’s Cave the stag-shadow is the image we’re compelled to read—the image to which we attach our gaze. Gronk has created her, she’s created a shadow; now we’re two steps removed—doubly othered.

But here the intellectual, art-historical Gronk is also evoking the cave paintings at Lausanne (and perhaps the show It’s About Time?). The stag is an image of a hunted beast, an image to be worshipped, to be thanked in advance for dying, for allowing us to catch it and eat it. According to paleo-anthropologists, paintings of hunted animals are used to prepare adolescent hunters for the hunt, and to summon the animals via intervention from the spirit-world. Who is Tormenta preparing for what? And who is being summoned for the kill? The stag is also, for me, an allusion to the mythic Actaeon in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Actaeon, perhaps you know him from Petrarch’s canzone, is the hunter who comes upon the goddess Diana bathing in a forest pool, for which transgression she turns him into a stag who is then pursued and dismembered by his own hunting dogs. It’s a story so steeped in othering—Actaeon others Diana by objectifying her nudity; Diana others Actaeon by transforming him into an animal, into prey; the dogs other him, well, to pieces.

The painting Puta’s Cave, like the stories in Ovid, is a stage whereon rituals of transformation are performed: female to male, flesh to shadow, human to animal, hunted to hunted-in-a-different-way, goddess to animal totem. Or perhaps the Tormenta figure is a drag queen, a man-as-woman, and the shadow on the wall is the shadow of a male dressed as a female, wearing a set of costume antlers, pretending to be male? Or the shadow is a shadow of death that the corpulent sensualist is holding at bay with a diminuizing gesture, as if to say, “Stay put. Stay in your place. I’ve got business (the business of bodily pleasure) to attend to.” Whatever contradictory pair of figures you see, it’s the tension between them, finally, that’s riveting. The painting creates from this tension a space where there is no separation between male and female; real and unreal; living and dead; flesh and shadow; contemporary chicano culture, Greco-Roman culture, and Neanderthal culture. All of these things exist only in relationship, in contradiction, as part of an immediate, theatrical whole. The shadows we cast, the shadows we make, are our art, which, in the process of revealing something about us, threatens to other us into extinction. Unless we turn the lens, flip the dialectic, and find ourselves more wholly, in absentia. Unless we control the
Gronk. *Puta’s Cave*, 72” x 48”, 1988, acrylic on canvas.
othering, and determine what has value. This, in essence, is what I see her doing: forming a frame with her hands, framing a space in which to be both what she is and what she is not. It’s a painting about black spaces and white spaces defining themselves in opposition to each other, and out of that opposition creating a delicately balanced, firm and tenuous new space. La Tormenta holds this new space elegantly between her gloved hands, the poised hands of a dancer or an actress, defining a precise and tangible beauty. Always, her back is turned—she’s not doing it for us. In fact, she couldn’t care less what we think about it.

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Since the ASCO days, Gronk has probably covered hundreds of acres worth of surface with paint. As a painter he moves easily between figuration and abstraction, always suggesting movement, electric movement, and the presence of life. As an artist he consistently crosses genre-distinctions, incorporating assemblage, film, performance, photography, and on-site installation. In 1990, he painted “Hotel Senator,” a series of wooden doors inspired by the rundown hotel, “the locus spiritus of sleaze” (Benavidez, 78) across the street from his loft in downtown Los Angeles. Also in the 90s he collaborated with Peter Sellars on Los Biombos/The Screens, an adaptation of Jean Genet’s Les paravants, which was mounted at the East Los Angeles Skills Center. In 2005 he painted enormous sets for a new opera, Ainadamar, with a libretto by David Henry Hwang. Ainadamar is the place where in 1936 Andalusian poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca was assassinated by one of Franco’s death squads for his politics—he was anti-Fascist—and also because he was homosexual (too other to live). Although the opera is set in Uruguay in the 1960s, Gronk’s set, dominated by his trademark blacks, reds, and bone-whites, his deep strokes and urban-mosaic shapes, evokes for me, even though I’ve only seen the set in photographs, Lorca’s Spain, Lorca’s Gypsy Ballads, Lorca’s concept of duende, or dark sounds. Gronk did his homework. The walls and floor of the stage seem drenched in paint which feels like blood and tears and semen and death.

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Also in 2005, Gronk debuted a film for planetariums called Gronk’s BrainFlame. Gronk’s BrainFlame is a 5,000-square-foot digitally animated work of wonder. Created at the ARTS Lab of the University of New Mexico along with composer Steve La Ponsie, animator Hue Walker, and students of all ages working with the Digital Pueblo Project, the film took two years to complete. It can only be seen in planetariums. I saw it in 2007 at the planetarium of Glendale Community College near Los Angeles. What an amazing venue—the seats recline automatically once you sit in them so that you’re almost flat on your back looking up at the white dome of celestial ampitheater. What unfolds above you is both shocking and comforting—instead of seeing the light-show of stars and planets, or the laser light-shows some planetariums have taken to offering, we see the slow unfolding of a new world. This new world is charming, not alienating. It has plant-like things and rock-like things, and everything feels organic, so that
even though none of what we see is recognizable to us exactly, all of it is deeply familiar. Things assemble
and disassemble. Grow and die. The palette is subdued, the music abstract and haunting and at the
same time strangely soothing. There’s a delicate balance, in the first part of the film, between bleakness
and warmth, between mournfulness and hopefulness. It’s incredibly, well, lovely, even as it alludes, in a
brief glimpse or two, to the dark corners and stairwells of de Chirico’s hellish cities; even as something
resembling one of Magritte’s disembodied torsos floats by. There’s a gentleness to the tone which seems to
indicate that we’re not in danger, even though all of this might be taking place on a post-apocalypse planet
earth populated by aliens who move with the deliberate nonchalance of Merce Cunningham dancers.

And then an animated glass brain arrives from the center of the dome, spinning seductively.

Glass, even an animated rendering of it, makes the brain a beautiful thing. The glass brain-stem stretches
out like a gorgeous tentacle, blurring distinctions between organic and inorganic things, between three
dimensionality—which it resembles, spinning in the center of the dome—and two-dimensionality, which
it is. The golden glass brain evokes both fragility and eternity (is it God’s brain? No, wait, is it Gronk’s?).
This captivating thing appears at times to be a see-through phallus streaming from a see-through womb.
Yes, I suppose, the brain is a kind of womb—ideas are born there, art is conceived there—in this case
transparent, gorgeous art, not polluted by discordant dualisms. For moments the glass brain hovers in the
center of the planetarium’s dome pointing, directing, inviting.

Eventually one of the alien-figures is sucked up into it—ascending into heaven or disposed of down
the drain (the brain drain?)—we don’t know what to think. His body, or her body, then suddenly splits up
into pieces, spinning out of and around the brain. The pieces morph briefly into other shapes. With a wink
toward self-referentiality, they briefly allude to and suggest recognizable pieces of famous art (sculpted
torsos, a surrealist image or two). They morph again, becoming abstract chunks of bright color. And then
something totally different happens: while we’re watching the center of the dome, the planetarium’s rim
becomes engulfed in flames—flames drawn, I assume, by the children working on the project with Gronk.
They’re child-like renderings of flame, pointed and rolling waves of red, orange, and yellow. They grow
and move and soon the whole sky is a crazy fire, delightfully bright and full and richly colored, covered
appealingly with the markings of human hands, with drawn lines and painted splashes. And then the entire
sky becomes a Gronk painting—is covered with his colors, the muted earth-tones, dusky blacks and chalk-
whites, and his strokes. And then it becomes another Gronk painting. And then it ends.

I might not have gotten all of this right—I’ve only seen it once, and that’s the frustrating thing about
it—it’s got to be shown in a planetarium. This also made it an extremely difficult and time-consuming
project to complete. According to Gronk, while the film was being made, the makers could only view it in
small pieces at a time in the planetarium—between star shows and classes. The finished product, however,
feels seamless.
What’s it about? Obviously, it’s about the creation of art. Gronk’s BrainFlame is Gronk’s ars poetica—the description and embodiment of what art means to him. It offers a myth of creation that involves both birthing and dying, the mutual interdependence of the sexes, organic and inorganic forms, figures and abstraction. It is human rather than specific to a particular culture. And it was made communally. Gronk, it seems to me, has always been a public rather than a private artist. He paints in public often, even on stage. He stages public art events. He works in conjunction with musicians, directors, animators, actors, filmmakers, and photographers. And students. He likes people. (Although at one point during the creation of the BrainFlame, his collaborators argued with him about his choice of music, forcing Gronk to remind them that the piece was called Gronk's Brainflame, not Consensus Brainflame. He’s not a wienie.)

These communal and public instincts of his explain why, while he others himself, removing himself from banal considerations like having a biography, or a family, calling himself “Gronk,” you always somehow feel that he’s willing to include you in his other-world. Again, and this is what I marvel about, what I adore and want to emulate more than anything else about him, is that he so very deftly and discreetly flips the cultural contract of perspective. He shifts subject and object. He makes the outside the inside, the bottom the top, as if to say, look, we’re in it together—all of us absolutely idiosyncratic, unknowable, indefinable beings—los de abajo, the underdogs, the others. It’s our world. We’re the ones whose opinions matter. We’re the artists. The ones whose brains are beautiful and on fire. The world belongs to us. Why aren’t we out there making and marking, performing identities, signing our names on the institutions which are trying like hell, and failing, to oppress us?

* 

The Artist Interview (December 2007, Gronk’s loft in downtown Los Angeles)

Gwronsny: What’s your favorite adjective?
Gronkie: (after thinking for a few seconds) Pry.
Gwronsny: Pry? Do you mean prying?
Gronkie: No. I like pry. It was a very pry day. It was pry tonight.
Gwronsny: Why pry?
Gronkie: It’s small. It’s just three letters. P R Y. And . . .
Gwronsny: And?
Gronkie: It means to open.
Gwronsny: And it means to spy on.
Gronkie: (slyly forming a Cheshire cat grin) Does it?
Sources

The anthology *Lyric Postmodernisms* which this special section of *Volt* celebrates brings together the work of twenty-three highly accomplished poets of diverse geographical, ethnic, gender, and aesthetic backgrounds whose work combines lyricism and avant-garde experimentation in a new synthesis I call, after Wittgenstein, lyrical investigations. Some have been publishing since the 1960s, some have emerged more recently, but all have been influential on newer generations of American poets. Their work explores the poem as a form of thinking, a thinking-out and thinking-through. As Kathleen Fraser points out, “Wittgenstein’s foregrounding of the term ‘investigation’ in his *Philosophical Investigations* sets forth a practice of coming to the world without certainty, but rather with curiosity, unbelonging to an established ordering, an openness to ambiguity and the unfinished…even the untried.” These poets discover, create, and explore new territories in the intersections between lyric enchantment and experimental interrogation. They innovate and recreate while still drawing upon and incorporating the lyric past and present. Their critical art is also a celebration of the riches of the lyric tradition. The presences of classical mythology and Shakespeare in the work of many of these poets, as well as their diverse engagements with history, may be seen as one sign of their dual approach to originality as both Baudelaire’s search for the new and the return to (plural) origins. Many if not most would agree with Elizabeth Willis when she writes that “I would place my work among those who recognize an evolving relation to both the ‘traditional’ and the ‘new’ and who tend to recognize as new this reconfiguring or re-engagement with traditions.”

These poets integrate the traditional lyric’s exploration of subjectivity and its discontents, the modernist grappling with questions of culture and history and language’s capacity to address and encompass those questions, and the postmodernist skepticism toward grand narratives and the possibility of final answers or explanations, toward selfhood as a stable reference point, and toward language as a means by which to know the self or its world. Nathaniel Mackey notes the homophony of “lyre” and “liar,” pointing out that such a wariness toward or outright distrust of language, “promoting check over enchantment,” has a long if sometimes insufficiently acknowledged history.

All of these poets are deeply engaged in exploring and interrogating the relations of conception and
perception, with how mind both makes its way through a world not of its own making and how mind makes a world of its own out of the world it is given: they explore both the possibilities and the limitations of this world-made-mind’s world-making. As Cole Swensen asks, “Does poetry try to reflect the world in some kind of clarifying way, or does it try to construct an alternative world…?” In literary critic M.H. Abrams’ formulation, is the poem a mirror or is it a lamp? This is a question to which there is no permanent or universal answer, and each of these poets has his or her own response or range of responses. These poems are both products of and rejoinders to the world from which they emerge and to which they contribute, a world by which they are conditioned but not determined.

Martha Ronk writes that “My work exists in the interrogative mood, whether or not a question mark appears at the end of a line.” All of these poets begin with questions. How to sustain or recover an authentic self (however that self is defined and/or constructed) and a rich and accurate expressiveness (in whatever terms one expresses expression) in a thoroughly textualized, hypermediated world of what Jean Baudrillard calls simulations, in which every experience is either simulacral or has always already been experienced before? (These concerns are obviously specific to certain social, economic, and cultural levels of the developed world’s consumer societies of the spectacle. A lack of reality is not most people’s biggest problem, even in America—quite the opposite, in fact.) Martine Bellen asserts that “Language represents a way of ratifying one’s existence.” These poets write in a context in which none of the terms of this statement—language, representation, personal existence and the possibility of ratification or affirmation—can be taken for granted. As if in acknowledgment of this flux and uncertainty regarding the very ground of experience, Bellen goes on to write “I am not mine.” Their work provides diverse, contingent, and often partial answers to the questions with which I began, in poems whose tactics range from the playful to the interrogative, the minimalist, the ironic, the lyrical, the extravagant, and even the sublime, sometimes coexisting, sometimes operating by turn.

Before all these questions, these poets begin with the potentially enabling or crippling question of the lyric itself. As Derrida asks, what thing is poetry? (I think these poets would reply that it is not a thing but an activity, not a noun but a verb.) What does the lyric mean in our contemporary post-everything world, one which has been described as depthless, fundamentally inauthentic, and at if not past the end of history? What does it mean to be a poet, to choose this most marginal mode of discourse in social and historical circumstances in which all discourse sometimes seems to have been emptied of meaning, content, or value? (One definition of the contemporary poet: someone who’s not over it all just yet.) Kathleen Fraser writes of poetry as a response to “the pollution of speech and thought that threatens from every quarter.” How one responds to that constantly metastasizing contamination, and whether it can be effectively responded to at all, haunts every poet in this volume.
Artistically as well as philosophically, we live in a time “when there is no recognized critical aesthetic,” as Mei-mei Berssenbrugge points out. Ours is a decentered contemporary American literary and artistic world in which there is no agreement even on what practitioners of ostensibly the same art form are doing or trying to do, let alone on those efforts’ means or aims or how they could be evaluated. Timothy Liu notes that “American poetry is a Babel,” with everyone singing a dialect of one, or perhaps of his or her particular tribe. But the Babelogue that is contemporary American poetry can also be seen as a space of opportunity and possibility: we are living not just in a time of uncertainty and suspicion (of language, of selfhood, of history), but in an unusually open period of poetic exploration and discovery, very much including rediscovery.

As Brenda Hillman writes in her essay “On Song, Lyric, and Strings”:

“It’s hard to know what lyric means for post-romantics, post-symbolists, post-modernists and post-postmodernists. [RS: Not to mention post-avant-gardists and post-contemporaries.] Lyric is an element in poetry, not a type, rendering human emotion in language; attention to subjective experience in a songlike fashion seems to be key in all definitions of lyric….Once lyric meant unbroken music, but since the nineteenth century, it may be broken. It cries out in singular, dialogic or in polyphonic protest. There is the question of the individual ‘singer,’ not to mention the individual lyre or the famous problem of the solitary self….Since the twentieth century unseated all certainty, the lyric is rendered on torn, damaged or twisted strings. A lyric poet sings boldly and bluntly to the general populace or is visited quietly and obliquely by the distressed hero who needs an oracle.”

None of the techniques of postmodernism—syntactic fracture or deformation, quotation, pastiche, collage, montage, cinematic jump-cuts, polyvocality or multiplication of voices, irony, parody, the mixing of cultural levels (breaking down the barriers of “high” and “low” culture) and the mingling of kinds of diction and discourse, intentional catachresis (incorporating the “inappropriate,” inviting error), associative rather than linear logic, seriality and juxtaposition instead of narrative or extended meditation—is new or unique. Open any page of The Waste Land, of The Cantos, or of Ulysses and you will find them. What is different is the uses to which they are put. While most of the Anglo-American modernists, engaged in the desire and pursuit of whole, used these methods to try to achieve a new and more true synthesis, many contemporary artists who might be called postmodern employ such devices to refute the very possibility of synthesis. There is no whole toward which they strive, only holes upon which they stumble, and many find the notion of totality entirely too totalitarian. Proceeding by means of breakage (formal, intellectual, psychological, emotional), they simply point, helplessly, hopelessly, and sometimes gleefully (there is a joy in smashing things, after all) to the pieces. But as Marjorie Welish points out, “The devices that make a poem literature can themselves be investigated, engaged, and thus refreshed.” Methods and modes do not have inherent
meanings, and forms can engage with many different feelings.

Although the idea of the broken lyric (one that I borrow from poet Cynthia Cruz) is highly suggestive and useful in thinking about the poets assembled in this book, none of them is content to rest (however restlessly or even restively) among fragments, to admit disjunction and be done. Martha Ronk insists “I am not interested in single words set in white space, but in joinery.” Cole Swensen emphasizes her interest “in connections and relationships—at times more than in the things they bring together.” The brokenness of discourse, of identity, of the social field, is not the end point but the beginning, one that can be turned toward possibility rather than either despair or blank-eyed resignation. Timothy Liu characterizes the opening toward the potentials inherent in loss as a movement from song to writing, and parallels it with a Blakean journey from innocence to experience, abandoning paradise without renouncing the longing for it. Cole Swensen writes that for her, “The very point where sense begins to break down is also where it begins to open out.”

Peter Gizzi describes a postmodern form of Keatsian negative capability toward which he aspires (or rather, to which he aspires to be open, allowing it to come to him, not directed by his will or his desire), a force moving through the place and time of writing that is “both a construction of self and an emptying of self—not autobiographical but autographical—flexible enough to accommodate figures, things, voices, documentation; to combine, build and dissolve being, boundaries—to somehow let the poem become itself.” Most if not all of the contributors to this volume also seek to occupy that space which is no space, to be that one who is no one and everyone. As Martha Ronk puts it, “The whole seems to teeter and to fail, certainly to defy logic, but in the most satisfying moments, in the failure of absolute congruity, to create new constructs.” This book collects and celebrates some of those new constructs.

In their great diversity, these highly accomplished poets all participate in a shared though varied project, yet they have rarely been thought of together. By highlighting their common goal of expanding the boundaries of what can be done in poetry, pushing forward the limits of the sayable, sometimes (in Brenda Hillman’s phrase) singing against singing, this collection sheds new light on their work, including work a reader may feel that he or she already knows, by showing its interconnections. My hope is thereby to reveal a new constellation of contemporary American poetry, one formed by the continuation, expansion, and self-questioning of the Modernist project into the postmodern era, which sometimes seems hostile to the lyric and its ever-renewed and ever-renewing possibilities. None of these writers has given up a faith in the lyric, however broken or transfigured. All seek to discover and/or recover, in the words of a perhaps unlikely forebear, what can be made of a diminished thing, or even if that thing (if it really is a single thing) is actually diminished at all. Bin Ramke writes that “Poetry is what we have in lieu of explanation, and in place of consolation.” But, activity and object, it is something that we have.
Julie Carr

(Introductory Remarks)

To many (though probably not to many here), the term “lyric” is simply synonymous with poetry. For others it means a special kind of poem—short, contained, and intimate, “spoken” by an “overheard” singular and self-revealing subject. But even the subjects of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads, whose preface holds the perhaps most widely followed and widely resisted banner of lyric poetry, has speaking subjects as inconstant, incomplete, various, and indeed fictional as children, the mad, and ghosts. Most would say we’ve come a long way from the overflow of powerful feeling and from the tranquility in which to recollect it. But even to claim this “long way” is to assume, as Mark Wallace has written, that “lyric’s” concern with the “emotional”...is “a displacement of material conditions onto an often hysterical subjectivity.” “Such a narrow notion of the “emotional,” Wallace goes on, “can easily, and unfortunately, be understood merely as a lack of rigorous thinking, that is, as something which historically has often been associated with feminine behavior and physiology.” But even if we want to maintain pressure on the inclusion of “emotion” in our contemporary definition of the lyric, or replace it with a broader term such as “affect”—we generally cannot ignore the lyric’s association with song—though the relationship between the written word and the sung, is never one of easy equivalence, but of charged tension, as Blake reminds us when, in his introduction to his Songs of Innocence, the piper, urged to write down his song, “plucks a hollow reed” and “stains the water clear.” If, as Jonathan Culler has written, “Writing, in some innate hostility to voice, always seeks to deny or evade the vocative,” if writing is by virtue of its dependence on the technical, its reliance on technique, always somehow hollow, and always a form of staining, it is precisely this tension between lyric as immediate, affective, song and distanced conceptuality, that perhaps makes it most alive.

Robert Kaufman, describing Frankfurt school thinking on the subject, has written that “lyric and aesthetic experience are the ground of possibility for emancipatory thought” precisely because, “the lyric’s special role is to take language, the presumably bottom-line medium of objectivity...and...to subjectivize it, [to] affectively stretch conceptuality’s bounds in order to make something that seems formally like a concept but that does something that ordinary, “objective” concepts generally do not do: sing.”

But in the pages of this anthology it is not as if ideas simply burst into song like members of musical down the street. It is more that song and thought break each other open, maybe break each other down; rather
than using lyricism to “express” thinking, these poets allow the lyric to use them, and to open, and therefore expand, thinking.

I’ll end my comments with a couple of lines form Brenda Hillman who regrets that she could not be here:

“The music of lyric poetry brings a voice from a wilderness we do not understand, to expose acts of false authority for the ways they are dismaying to human and other earthly life. Its mind is a counterculture.”

Works cited:


Wallace, Mark: “On the Lyric as Experimental Possibility”: http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/wallace/lyric.html
Bruce Beasley
Toward a Poetics of Monstrosity

1.
Pound writes somewhere that poems are all “pith and gist”: all core, that means to me, all crux, all inwardness. As Rilke asks in another context, “Where for this inside is there an outside?” The poem for me is a monstrous body, its surface all exposed inside, brain and lung and heart chamber and viscera, appalling and fascinating to stare into.

2.
My uncle, a physician, dislikes ambiguity, the untestable hypothesis. He used to call me up after reading my poems and bellow that I was “just an intellectual snob.” “You need to write a glossary for each of your poems,” he’d insist, “to EXPLAIN YOUR SYMBOLISM so people will know what the hell you’re talking about, man!”

3.
“When the monster comes along,” Rosamond Purcell writes, “the ground begins to slip.”

4.
Italians have an expression I love: rimanere in forse, to “remain in perhaps,” not to know, for a while. Like Keats’ negative capability, it’s a soothing respite from the “irritable reaching” of the intellect toward knowledge and fact. A dispossession of the experience. To stay in perhaps, to linger with the eroticized body of the temporarily or permanently unknown.

5.
“Look, Daddy, there’s paradise,” my four-year-old son Jin said to me one day. We were cleaning our way through an old junk drawer. When I finally distinguished where in the mounds of old coins and photographs and crumpled playing cards he meant me to find paradise, I saw two garish red casino cubes; pair o’ dice.

6.
The conjoined bodies, the multiple personalities of each word. Homonyms coinhabiting the same flesh of letters. Each word’s legions of selves struggling for primacy. Passion is suffering, is emotion, is rage, is zeal, is lust, is the Crucifixion. With language as its body, how can poem not grow excrescences, overlapping limbs? Obliquity, extremity: the too-much, the not-enough, the ill-understood, the anomalous mix. Ellipsis, a leaving-out, means etymologically “a leaving in.”
7. The *monstrance* is the jeweled container that holds aloft the consecrated Host.

8. *Monstrous:* extraordinary in a way to incite wonder; deviating greatly from the natural: malformed; having the appearance of a monster; shockingly wrong.

9. The monster is created to give an outward form to a banished inner extremity: a dread, a rage, a *passion* that can't be made to stay inside, can't be acknowledged as our own. The *monster* (from *monere*, to warn; *monstrare*, to show) is what warns us, what shows or *demonstrates* us: a prodigy, an omen, urgently interpretable and nevertheless deeply alienating and strange.

If a poem is a place of extremity—emotional, linguistic, spiritual—no gloss is going to assimilate its monstrous body—phoneme, syllable, image, chant, word.

10. In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, a man of straw without a brain, who *thinks*, obsessively, about how much he wants the capacity to *think*. Brain-craving, Wizard-craving, though the Wizard's no wizard, and the brain he gets is anything but a brain. Adam and Eve, wounded by the violent act of being-made, being torn asunder from one body into two. The twenty-year restoration of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, as if not only the painting but the sacrament it depicts—matter turned to spirit, bread to sacrificed body of Christ—could revert to some original state of wholeness. The *restoration* (spiritual, psychic, emotive, cellular) of my nephew as he undergoes another kind of violent sacramental transformation through chemotherapy and radiation to drive the leukemic cells from his blood. I mean to *estrange* the ordinary story and its language. Let its monstrous body emerge: portent, omen, monstrance-gleam. Stuck for a while at least in *perhaps*. And that's what the hell I'm talking about.
That particular conjunction of events which includes the history of your body, your experience, and your art vertically, and the time and circumstances you are in horizontally, seeks an expression that is inevitably unique, or new.

A formal problem or limit represents a limit of what you can make or say or see at a particular moment. You might make a new form by following a desire or an intuition into a further, more contemporary part of you, such as varying the line length according to the horizon, embedding scientific terms into an equivocal or into a lyric context, using thought imagistically.

I find the idea of newness interesting, during a time when there is no recognized critical aesthetic. Criticism is at the edge of what it can discern or say, and so it’s interesting to seek emerging form in fashion, in the margins of the arts, on the street, in experimental physics.

I have an intuition of a new form, as a new expertise in the topology of expression, emotion, and culture.

At first I characterized this new form by an idea of the horizontal, a horizontal cut across experience and culture, synchronistically and democratically, rather than familiar vertical cut into tradition and essence.

But now I want to say it is a topological section or point of view, which could then include both verticals and horizontals along a complexity of a continuous surface, and with a new set of formal dynamics.

It’s something which might take collage further.

It’s my intuition about an aesthetic, or perhaps an intuition about a poem, and would require a new craft or form, analogous to the invention of a mathematics of surfaces.
It’s an aesthetic I’ve noticed in younger or “newer” writers that is just beyond my grasp. I have an urge to understand what they know that enables them to generate this ungraspable form, and it is an urge from the intuition which desires a way to express convolutions of experiences and meanings in me, which are somehow all rising into a present tense, or tense of one time, or one surface.

It could be a way to write a poem across fragmented concentrations, for example, if you are raising children, instead of by traditionally pursuing a single line. It could be a way to write a poem that responds to the barrage of layered stimuli in the world.

A friend tells me that, when she sees a deer next to a rock on a far hill, she learned as a child, by concentrating, to make the deer appear larger and closer, and the rock to diminish. When I ask a Yupik boy how he finds an animal on empty tundra, he tells me, you just look for the animal, until you see the animal.

The scientific notion of color as wavelengths of light—that we have in the light on our hands all possible colors—may not be true if you can call memory into being using a color. We can imagine a person inventing a color, now, seeing it for the first time, and that that new color’s entrance pertains to a new appropriateness in the environment for it to be seen, not a predisposition.

This could be how a new form takes place.

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P.S. It’s interesting for me to see that this essay written twenty years ago still accords with my ideas about poetry. Today I might replace the word “topological” with “holographic,” because I meant both surface and implication.
I'm very happy to be included in this inquiry so richly proposed in *Postmodern Lyricisms*.

There's a mystery between words and music, like the mysteries of the classical world.

In my mind, words can function like plastic syllables of bird song, and they operate ontologically at that depth.

There is the appearance of pouring out, of spontaneity, and the order of spontaneity packed by strong feeling, as if in the present tense.

How this lyric materializes in the contemporary is our mystery.

And my intuition leads me to wonder if the contemporary lyric might open out across a field, field composition, rather than the sequential line, song line.

A field of intense feeling, mystery and music.

I've been reading *Spar* by Karen Volkmann for this kind of packed feeling in sound.

2/1/08
When thinking about the postmodern lyric it is hard to not think about the page. It seems to me that the page itself is in another time of great upheaval. We can think of various manipulations of page and how each variation of the page has affected the words— We can think of Keroac’s ingenious scroll and how the presentation of an ongoing page as material aided the riffs of *On the Road*, how the use of a teletype scroll in 1950’s America also linked Keroac back to ancient scribes for whom the scroll was the norm while at the same time seeming utterly new, the latest news, unfurling before us, unending, erupting as if from the deafening noise of an Associated Press wire machine before the soft purr of computers brought us our daily horrors. We can think of course of Olson, who in his great essay *Projective Verse* unleashed the notion of the page as an open field, a plane for breath, on which words were allowed to sprout, as he said, like fresh vegetables on the field, and we must of course go back to the great precursors Mallarme and Apollinaire, Apollinaire being, to my mind, a poet who saw the page more as canvas, while Mallarme, in his great unprecedented work *A Throw of the Dice*, threw the page into much more of a 3-dimensional space— traversing gutters, enacting void, creating pages which had more in common with rooms than the flat, lateral plane of the page or canvas. Technology has brought us to a moment when much material (poetry or otherwise) is being read from and written on a glossy, celluloid-like substance that has properties of appearing to have depth and dimension, a page that is lit and projected before us, and that, like film, has great properties of seduction, a page that arrives and is delivered in a much more frontal gesture than the lateral, tactile properties of the paper page. Whether or not one “gets one’s news,” either poetic or otherwise, from a computer, whether or not one composes on a computer or reads from a computer, as a daily practice, we must acknowledge that for most, the computer document screen or webpage receives as much “eye time” if not more, than the paper page. And so we have a new page, a cultural and technological shift that effects the art of writing and reading—
the page is now endless, the page is not often held in the human hand, the page, if it is not imprisoned by a “Read Only” command, can be interactive, with a reader often sitting before it with hands on a keyboard as if on a player piano. And even if we turn from our computer back to, as so many of us do, a hard copy, that paper page is now irrevocably altered by the mother from which it came.

Thinking of the page in this way led me to thinking of inflationary cosmology theory, a notion over the last three decades which has significantly challenged the idea that our universe started some 13.7 billion years ago with a bang. Stanford physicist Andrei Linde, whose model of inflationary cosmology many hail as the most important development in cosmological thinking since the Big Bang itself, presents to us many startling implications—not the least of which is that ours may be but one universe in an eternally self-replicated “multiverse.” Eternal inflation predicts that in some other universe, we are all sitting in the room just as we are right now. Not someone like us, but us, or at least people who are entirely indistinguishable from us. And not on another planet like Earth, but on an exact replica of earth.

What does all this have to do with the page? A lot, if we think of how we perceive the flat plane of the paper page and the universe, and how it might be more natural, given our current technology and notions of cosmology, to think of the page as something more curved in space. Eternal chaotic inflation asks the following questions: If general relativity suggests that space is curved, why does the visible universe appear flat and mostly homogeneous? Why do we look up to the sky and see a relatively flat plane? Until the early 1980s, these questions seemed odd, impossible, ridiculous. Scott Shackelford, writing in Stanford magazine, explains, “Enter inflationary cosmology. Instead of an expanding ball of fire, inflation suggests that the early universe exploded faster than the speed of light from a size smaller than that of a proton in a fraction of a second. Like a vast bed sheet snapped taut, this exponential stretching effectively flattened out the visible universe, so that things look uniform in all directions. Thereafter, the universe evolved along the lines that the Big Bang predicts.”

It’s that simile, “like a vast bed sheet snapped taut,” that I keep thinking of as being related to our current page—a page undulating in space, and then brought before us as a taut entity. And of course, it is easy to see the connections between inflationary theory and the web—the connection between cyberspace worlds and the notion of “multiverses” continually self-replicating. It seems that postmodern poetry, that innovative practice, has focused primarily on the notion of language as a shifting,
unpredictable medium. Now that the page, too, as we thought we once knew it, has drifted away from us, I find myself intrigued as to what this shifting page, no longer nailed to the desk, might bring in new shapes and forms.

Notes:
"Worlds Without End: Marrying Particle Physics to Cosmology"
By Scott Shackelford, Stanford Magazine Nov./Dec. 2007
A Poetics, of Sorts

Part of the fun of being alive is arranging and categorizing—a dangerous sort of fun, but it is part of being human. For instance, we think of ourselves, we humans, as different from non-humans. Heidegger, in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, says rocks are “worldless” (*weltlos*), the animal is “poor in world, (weltarm),” and man is “worldforming” (*weltbildend*). I have always liked this kind of quick system, but have always also considered such a system temporary, contingent—a poem. A poem is a system for sorting: putting words and sounds and commas and semicolons and whatever comes to hand into groups with connections.

“Sorting” is part of what we do with and to poems—establish genres. Or, the poem can be a response to being out of sorts. The *OED* suggests that “sort” as a verb implies a measure of randomness—it derives from a Latin word meaning “to divide or obtain by lot.” By chance. Poetry, to me, is always and intimately connected with randomness, with unpredictability. Poetry is what we have in lieu of explanation, and in place of consolation.

Recently I used the word “shibboleth” in a poem—see somewhere in Judges the story of that word’s use to separate the outsiders from the insiders, and how its *meaning* (“ear of grain,” or some say “stream”) in the denotative sense hardly matters. Mispronouncing the word meant death. I often return (frequently against my will) to the Bible, when I look for explanations of my own linguistic habits. Perhaps “accountings” rather than “explanations.” And not only the Bible but the various rituals and readings of a religious childhood. Here is some of what such backward looking suggests: that early on I experienced language as “meaningful” but not as an information storage and delivery system; that words and sensory response could collude and form a new sort of meaning (cf. the taste of the wafer at mass, and the smell of incense, and the sound of the responses I was reciting by rote); that communities consist of isolated individuals who might speak the same words but had rarely the same feelings and thoughts, but speaking the same words gave them…consolation. Except I was not consoled.
The poem is always what happens when we think something else is happening—the poem exists always “in spite of,” rarely because of…. Or at least this is true for me, and it is true for me both as reader and as writer. Language, and all the sounds we make whether language or not, suggests the shape of the inside of the skull. The mind. The brain’s volutions and convolutions. The closest we can get to our own thinking is to attend to the words, the shapes our thoughts make as they escape. (I could, however, make a similar sort of case for any art, any application of individual notions of order to the received world—and I can make the case for mathematics, too—the shape thinking takes when it escapes the internal boundaries.)

The connection of writing to drawing, for instance, is significant and ancient. Poetry for me is not primarily about sound—at best, sound shares equal authority with the very look of words and lines and letters inked on paper (or shadowed on screens). The poem as physical thing, as extension into space, like the book as physical object, is beautiful in its efficiency and its ancient and its contemporary elegance. Poetry is an attempt to be aware of language as physical entity, and to make out of that awareness both elegance and intensity. Poetry is about what all physical things—including human beings—are about: the refusal to be something else; it is about the dignity of being.

As a maker of this stuff I have a suspicion that the making of poems gives greater pleasure than does the reading or hearing of them. Hence the ratio of manuscripts submitted for publication versus the number of printed books sold, for instance. But that is a story which takes us into the realm of poetry and economics, the poem as gift versus the poem as commodity. The concept of the Gift (see Marcel Maus via Lewis Hyde, Derrida, et al.) helps to account for much of the awkwardness in this particular historical moment of art in general and poetry in particular. We live in an era suspicious of gifts, an era which understands only reciprocal relations, which wants to have an accounting, a bottom line to everything, and it is a time which wants an end point to relationships. It wants the clarity that comes with language establishing limited meanings, with people knowing what they want, with sexes being well-sorted and stable, with national boundaries being clear and unvarying. The world has never been that way even when it is peopled by those who want it be so, and that is part of the delight of the world’s gift of itself to us, as us. Poetry is a reminder of what “possibility” means. Poetry re-minds us, gives us again our minds.
“...I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time.”

“. . . And you thought, because you had grown used to other measures, that this would be for just a little while. But now you were in time, and time is long. And time goes on, and time grows large, and time is like a relapse after a long illness.”
— Rainer Maria Rilke, “Requiem for a Friend” (trans. Stephen Mitchell)

SKETCH

What is done being made?
Your eyes moved over the face of the sketch.

That short poem is mine; and I’ll call this short talk, “My Lyric and Time.”

I think of lyric as a voice enabled by music to enter the stream of time. A voice moving through time and (word by word, phrase by phrase, in its rhythm) moving us through time; a voice singing from point of view, from what Reginald Shepherd calls in his lovely introduction to *Lyric Postmodernisms,* “subjectivity and its discontents.” So that in the lyric poem, the author both conveys and inhabits the work.

I can see that my poems selected for the new anthology not only sing from point of view; “point of view” is often their subject. As in “Prospect (The Graces)” — the earliest of these poems — “...at this distance, I am what: an eye? attention? abstraction? / Null if I do not speak? This distance?”

Another, “Frame” — a complicated description of the reflection in a sliding mirror — is *trapped* in point of view:

“This much of a bicycle: foreshortened handlebars, a section of pitchfork of frame, a shallow arc of wheel, a bike lock hanging from the handlebars
(all this upside down). I am hidden behind the file cabinet; the bicycle is hanging from the ceiling but you will not know that. We are not allowing the whole of the bicycle in here."

In these two poems, and in my work in general, I notice that description tends to be of a static object — though watery reflection might jiggle it a little — where the subject matter (content object) does not move through time. Instead, seeing itself is the dynamic principle.

Here is “Pool," a somewhat later poem. The subject/content is still static (or semi-static: as a work of art?), an Henri Matisse paper cut-out that used to live in New York at the pre-Taniguchi Museum of Modern Art. Now not only the external object but seeing itself is described, so that the subject/content becomes in part ‘seeing itself as a dynamic principle.’

POOL

Saw (into) and entered the wide corridor.  
(Narrow room.)

Attracted by the promise of the purity of ‘figure and ground.’

“...and the blue beside the white in the striping is the color / of the river Loire when you read about it in old books....”

Yes, but that stripe or sash of white paper, a scroll which turned corners — banding walls ‘papered’ with a brownish burlap — was wide, was water.

*I have always adored the sea. And now...

And painted blue paper Matisse had cut to the quick in color; he called it, into the contours of portions of bodies emerging from the — overlaid the — white; blue, whole silhouettes arched like dolphins, expressing abandon — hovered, overlapping the — almost abandoning the frieze, in places:

the frieze adorning the walls recreating Matisse’s dining room.

Yes, but the doorways — so also a stretch of lintel above which Women and Monkeys had hung — had been narrowed, so the area of the room was contracted.

As time is, in the Museum.
And now that I can no longer...

Walls recreating the walls of his dining room, where Matisse worked on *The Swimming Pool* only in the evenings.

And time, in the work, is contracted.

*I have always adored the sea*, Matisse said. *And now that I can no longer go for a swim, I have surrounded myself with it.*

As white.

Yes, but noticed in one corner an area of white for which blue forms served — not as bodies — as borders but open: walls of a corridor or banks to a channel of white, the white itself — ‘broad’ would be a pun — pooled, recognizably bodily; and then —

where ‘then’ was our seeing and moving closer to see more closely —

where fragments of blue (but almost body almost) fragmented the white so that neither color was ‘figure’ or ‘ground’ — emblem, banner — anymore, yet.

“And time, in the work is contracted.”

And I come to notice that when I engage with or describe an event in time (rather than an object), it tends to be epiphany, an instant of insight, sometimes an “oops” moment, not a story unfolding. (Nor is thought very often transcribed in that “musing” way of thinking through time in a direction toward conclusion.) When I am faced by the trouble of evoking such a moment and all that comprised and contributed to it, the problem becomes how to contract, the Stein problem: “…when I had it I had it completely at one time.”

Wanting to convey everything at once in this way has resulted in interruption, layering, fragmentation; trying to bring all parts of the poem forward at once, as Cezanne did in painting. In “Bridge” and in later poems like “Error” and “Bit,” the work starts to include back-story, flashbacks, illustration, seeming digression but really association — thoughts, quotes, “that occurs to me,” “which reminds me of” — in order to present the whole. Here’s the opening of “Bit”:

‘A slight’

sounded.

Reverberating—in what box?—or reiterated
—like a booster shot, like the rooster in Bishop—sustained
(this illustrated by my tilting half a glass of orange juice
up over an empty glass—“I’m a little teapot. . .”;)
more precisely: The Mystery Spot, “Cannons ready!” horizon to the rim, the extreme verge,
surface tension...

“And then...” That the poems of mine in Lyric Postmodernisms are relatively early (five of the seven,
from my first book) became cause for reflection. Whether my work might be moving away from “the
lyric.”

I do know that continuing in the direction of describing the seen, to describing seeing, my work (and
life, I suppose) looked to become a bit of an inward spiraling loop: in danger of observing watching
seeing, attending to listening to hearing (as what is noted and described).

So some newer poems — though still moved toward juxtaposition, quotation, elaboration and
fragmentation — try to engage with more external materials. In each, I’m building a ‘complex’ of
associations rather like Pound in the Cantos, though these poems tend to be short and all the sources
are cited. They still provide content, something to read, but perhaps for rather than about insight;
perhaps the reader herself can have the insight, can provide the dynamic principle.

Seeing takes time, reading takes time; we read in time and can only be reading the words where
we are (like hearing in song). Maybe this new work also wants to use time a little differently. It is
still composed, has a musical order and proposed (initial order of) juxtapositions. But it wants to
be about “knowing everything at the same time” rather than to be singing a favorite song; not to
move through time but to be more like a static object. Since on the page, the reader can review and
explore and reconfigure and reconsider the still work...

As one views the justly famous fifteen-stone Karesansui (dry-landscape “Zen garden”) at Ryoan-ji
Temple, which in part inspired these poems, and about which — in “Dream Song 73: Karesansui,
Ryoan-ji” — John Berryman wrote: “Differ them photographs. Plans lie. How big it is! From
nowhere can one see all the stones.”

I’ll close with one of the “Karesansui” poems and with the following questions: Is there still point of
view? Can this be considered “lyric”? ²

ABOVE

“but helicopters or a Brooklyn reproduction
will fix that—”
“I was faced by the trouble that I” — “Differ them photographs,” — “had acquired all this knowledge” — “plans lie:” — “gradually
but” — “how big it is!” — “when I had it” — “…—from nowhere” — “I had it” — “can one see” — “completely” — “all” — “at one time.” — “the stones—”

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“...and the blue beside the white...” is from Robert Hass’s “Not Going to New York: A Letter.”
2 The epigraph to “Above” is from the same John Berryman “Dream Song.”

NOTES:


— “Above” subtext: Epigraph) John Berryman, “Dream Song 73: Karesansui, Ryoan-ji” Line 1) Gertrude Stein, “The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans”; Berryman; Stein; Berryman; Stein Line 2) Stein, continued; Berryman; Stein; Berryman; Stein; Berryman; Stein; Berryman; Stein; Berryman


Last night a page from my childhood caught fire and turned up to see if I was watching. I too looked up crying mother, the way a star looks up at the earth in the distance.

What do you say to the woman with ears full of smoke and anguish, full of the story she never wrote. Last night I tried to call emergency though she was on the line.

Then the floor began to part, brightly, like a book. Next day I went through my library and thinned it. What do you say to the mother who bends her spine into a question, she who brings her child the memento mori of a first word. And last. What comfort then. What of the crack in the floor opening like an eye to witness the death of all things, even books. I always wanted to die in a house, a book. I always loved the hearth fire inside the books, even as they shed their skins, horribly no less, turning up to consume the house of my childhood. There’s comfort in the flesh, the earth, the things that make us, molten at the core. Comfort in the story that takes us in.

If only I could look through the body like a page, to die another’s death and live. To be every story is to find yourself in none. It’s what suffering teaches. And fire, fire too is a house. Some days a Buddhist temple. Others a library reading itself. But mostly, these nights, it’s a mother’s flesh, she who grew so heavy with the world.
the bodies’ wheat in the years’ millstone
flours mixed by eternal laws
for other breads and other teeth
at night you grope suddenly baffled
by the fear fumbling in images’ wombs
trying to seal movement in itself

and these waters naked with the ardor of moving
farther and farther into the open
(even and especially at close of night)

*

the sound of water swirling through the stones
sounds embroidered in night’s calm on the sea
these languages I don’t know that speak to me

I have on my desk at hand’s reach
pebbles carefully polished by the sea
touching them feels as if my fingers
could sometimes illumine thought—

*

in the big gray silence when dawn ripens
the high-pitched infinitely drawn-out “tsiou”
(perched on a window bar)
of a blackbird from the year tirelessly seeking
its true voice in the concert

translated from the French by Daniela Hurezanu & Stephen Kessler
Medicines to revive

Shocking red hair, drugs on the kitchen counter
account for the life-study nude she paints
in contrast to the corpse on the floor. No
one’s world is stable, most don’t like being
reminded of it but she lets anything
in the door. Yarn ball dropped, bristling
near the cowboy boots her storyteller
sports. Not really a sporting sort,
the eyes hint of Johnny Cash or Abe
Lincoln “with malice toward none,”
but here again at the scene of the crime.
It will be the connecting thread.
I pull up a chair to sit and listen
to the way she tears the human story.
No tiredness, no reason

for Roy de Forest

Make the necklace from iambic pentameter
Use the same dog in different costumes
Lumpia spied as crescents in the washout
Wishes bake crumbs in renewable hearts
Every dinner hour the imp peeks out
Lucky lips keep mum secret lives
Match the hat to the tilt he said
Wound-tight mercy favors flimflam
Blend intention with how porkchops brown
He dipped into argument war mongers pass
Better bring in the imagist farmers
Some tight redhead convinced lamp posts to sign
Finish up accounting with lollipop tongues
Limber fashion mannequins’ haute
Ready for the gifts

I’d drive downtown but traffic’s monolithic
Leave nothing out to roam the backseat
Father builds towers of found ceramic
Wingnuts, skeletal bits of wrecked cars, wires
Hoarders of closetsful return to the crime
I lasso mistakes I wish I could heave-ho
Nothing to wrap knees around, trade in my knight
Memories’ bad-dance pigs break in back doors
Maybe a wounded surgeon could be my therapist
Father paints flies on his rented room walls
His flitting angel alters the way she flits
Habit in, habit out, repeats make palpable
Words carry me to wilderness redoubts
Redwoods do not wait for my arrival
I had inadvertently stepped on the heel of the girl in front of me and she had walked right out of her shoe. Which was to us hilarious, largely because it disturbed the solemnity of single file and made a daring little joke on the oft repeated phrase, *hands to yourselves*. Admittedly, we did giggle and bunch up, and I was singled out and put in front, making memory clearer. The plain beige linoleum, despite its stubborn scuff marks, gleamed. I so wanted to mock the walk of our teacher now that I’d been made an isolate, put in a category all of my own: neither teacher nor student now, but one wanting discipline. The cheese stands alone, I was feeling that. I could feel the little wind through the holes.
Darkling I listen

Death is nature's remedy for all things.” (Dickens) The end of all stories is death, which is where time stops short. Sheherezade knew this, which is why she kept on spinning another story out of the bowels of the last one, never coming to a point where she could say: “This is the end.” Because it would have been. (Angela Carter) . . . not the worst that can happen to men. (Plato) I want Death to find me planting my cabbages, neither worrying about it nor the unfinished gardening. (Montaigne) The story-teller . . . has borrowed his authority from death. (Walter Benjamin) An old joke, but each individual encounters it anew. (Turgenev) . . . is only a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored. (Melville) Leave death to the professionals. (Graham Greene) Death is hacking away at my address book and party lists. (Mason Cooley) Liberal hopefulness regards death as a mere border to an improving picture. (William Empson) Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. (Wittgenstein) . . . is no more than passing from one room into another. But there's a difference for me, you know. Because in that other room I shall be able to see. (Helen Keller) The death . . . of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world. (Edgar Allan Poe) How I envy you death;/ what could death bring,/more black, more set with sparks/to slay, to affright,/ than the memory of those first violets. (H. D.) Great is my envy of death whose curt hard sword carried her whom I called my life away; (Petrarch) Old age is life's parody, whereas death transforms life into a destiny: in a way it preserves it by giving it the absolute dimension... Death does away
with time. (Simone De Beauvoir) Death unites as well as separates; it silences all paltry feeling. (Balzac) . . . the sound of distant thunder at a picnic. (W. H. Auden) Death hath had a thousand
doors to let out life, I shall find one. (Philip Massinger) I know death hath ten thousand several
doors/For men to take their exits. (John Webster) Suffering and fear are born from the repression
of the death wish. (Ionesco) All societies on the verge of death are masculine. (Germaine Greer) The
day of my birth, my death began its walk. It is walking toward me, without hurrying. (Cocteau)

All good biography, as all good fiction, comes down to the study of original sin, of our
inherent disposition to choose death when we ought to choose life. (Rebecca West) When
the body sinks into death, the essence of man is revealed. Man is a knot, a web, a mesh into
which relationships are tied. . . The body is an old crock that nobody will miss. (Saint-Exupéry)

It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens. (Woody Allen) There
was one of two things I had a right to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would take
the other; for no man should take me alive; (Harriet Tubman) Birth was the death of him. (Beckett)
The sea is mother-death and she is a mighty female, the one who wins, the one who sucks us
all up. (Anne Sexton) And I thank my God for graciously granting me the opportunity... of
learning that death is the key which unlocks the door to our true happiness. (Mozart) It was
a time when only the dead smiled, happy in their peace./Stars of Death stood over us,/and
innocent Russia squirmed under the bloody boots. (Akhmatova) The call of death is the call
of love. Death can be sweet if we answer it in the affirmative, if we accept it as one
of the great eternal forms of life and transformation. (Hermann Hesse) Darkling I listen;

and for many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death. (John Keats) The idea
of enemies is awful it makes one stop remembering eternity and the fear of death. . .

Possessions are the same as enemies only less so, they too make one forget eternity and
the fear of death. (Gertrude Stein) In every parting there is an image of death. (George Eliot) Death
is a master from Germany. (Celan) For them that think death's honesty/Won't fall upon them
naturally/Life sometimes/ Must get lonely. (Bob Dylan) What do I know of man's destiny?
I could tell you more about radishes. (Beckett) . . . a Dialogue between, /The Spirit and
the Dust. (Emily Dickinson) Death is terrifying, but it would be even more terrifying to find out
that you are going to live forever and never die. (Chekhov) Sport in the sense of a mass-
spectacle, with death to add to the underlying excitement, comes into existence when
a population has been drilled and regimented and depressed to such an extent that it needs at
least a vicarious participation in difficult feats of strength or skill or heroism in order to sustain
its waning life-sense. (Lewis Mumford) I need my little addiction to you. /I need that tiny voice
who, /even as I rise from the sea, /all woman, all there, /says kill me, kill me. / (Sexton)

The aims of life are the best defense against death. (Primo Levi) Being an old maid is like
death by drowning, a really delightful sensation after you cease to struggle. (Edna Ferber)

In the attempt to defeat death man has been inevitably obliged to defeat life. (Henry Miller)
At death, you break up: the bits that were you /Start speeding away from each other
for ever /With no one to see. (Philip Larkin) I used to think of death . . . like I suppose soldiers
think of it: it was a possible thing that I could well avoid by my skill. (Stendhal) And really,
the reason we think of death in celestial terms is that the visible firmament, especially at night
(above our blacked-out Paris with the gaunt arches of its Boulevard Exelmans and
the ceaseless Alpine gurgle of desolate latrines), is the most adequate and ever-present
symbol of that vast silent explosion. (Nabokov) Bullfighting is the only art in which the artist
is in danger of death. (Hemingway) You didn't feel there was anything you ever could enjoy
again because you really were immersed in death. Other people seemed shallow. You felt
a strong allegiance to the dead. (Joan Furey, military nurse in Vietnam) Everything tends to make
us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and
the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low,
cease to be perceived as contradictions. (André Breton) As long as I have a want, I have a reason
for living. Satisfaction is death. (George Bernard Shaw) There is no such thing as inner peace.
There is only nervousness or death. (Fran Lebowitz). . . the mother of beauty, mystical, /Within
whose burning bosom we devise/ Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly. (Wallace Stevens)

Death can only be profitable: there’s no need to eat, drink, pay taxes, offend people, and since

a person lies in a grave for hundreds or thousands of years, if you count it up the profit turns out to be enormous. (Chekhov) Do not speak like a death's-head, do not bid me remember

mine end. (Shakespeare) Death is the king of this world: 'tis his park/Where he breeds life to feed him. (George Eliot) No stout/Lesson showed how to chat with death. We brought/No brass fortissimo, among our talents,/To holler down the lions in this air. (Gwendolyn Brooks) That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:/ Birth, and copulation, and death. (T.S. Eliot)
Tongue

Words fail me. Birds assail me. Fords tail me. Murders in jail. We can't afford sails. Third rail-- whee! Theater of the absurd. Now calm down.

Oceanic mania, that peculiar elevation of expanse in tune with the vast ballooning of internal energies which glow and spill over into excesses of verbiage without shape, urge without object, me-ness without limit, no salt on the tail, centrifugal and upwards. Did we go there? Syntax, syrinx, non sequitur, sex: a single synapse. Zap. When really, the axons and dendrites interconnect with delicate non-touch, the small chemical boats set sail in the dark cleft, unpacket themselves of the far shore and memory occurs. A plum drops off the tree into your open palm. What I loved about "syrinx" was the overlayering of meaning: panpipes, a bird's vocal organ, narrow corridor of an Egyptian tomb, a fluid-filled tubular cavity in the spinal cord as in syringomyelia. Let's sing. Because we can still walk. Up right, like creatures of our kind, and go visit the underground gallery's opening. Hieroglyphics in orange and blue, unlike the alphabet, leave room for imagination's twists, interpretations, more so pre-Rosetta stone. The grave/the song, so tight, entrance to the soul's hollow, breath's music was hidden in the sigh, the full throat's echo, tube into innards, pink tree, white cords, gristled chords.


Are we all on board? Old ones naming what you should've known. Sewn seeds of character, four short strokes in the calligrapher's horse. Gallop
out of the mouth on a long low note, then skatter, skat, the spoken note-speak of the jazzy-tongued, hoof-beats mean zebras, phoneme means sense,

word means breath shaped into one mouthful articulated by consonants, air/palate, genioglossus, pharyngoglossus, papillae for sweet, sour,

salty, bitter, narrow pharynx down into the darkness, bifurcation of breath and liquid, two routes to nowhere. What goes in, what comes out, utterance

or nonsense, the owl and the pussycat, an articulate caterpillar, the far wind, and black sails, the ones they forgot to change so he jumped off the cliff,

reading the signal of his son’s death. Is the tongue a mother or a father? Muscular utterance. Hamlet --“For murder, though it have no tongue,

will speak with most miraculous organ.” Echolalia: a psychotic mimicry. Coprolalia: shit-talk. Glossolalia: speaking in tongues, a fluent going on, un-understandable, channeled from the other side, an automatic writing from the oral cavity. Anna O. babbling in sentences made of infinitives in four languages, had to be “relieved of her imaginative products daily,” by Breuer, (Studies in Hysteria). She invented the name for this—

“talking cure.” What can be spoken into the notch of an empty cloud?
Body urging upward mind’s intent, play, reach into old time’s root

and rift, the swift footed tongue precedes all sense, rosy, slippery creature of quirky purpose, murders the words’ blank gold.
America

Try saying *wren*.

It’s midnight

in my body, 4 a.m. in my body, breading and olives and cherries. Wait, it’s all rotten. How am I ever. Oh notebook. A clown explains the war. What start or color or kind of grace. I have to teach. I have to run, eat less junk. Oh CNN. What start or color. There’s a fist of meat in my solar plexus and green light in my mouth and little chips of dream flake off my skin. Try saying *wren*. Try saying *mercy*.

Try anything.

America

*the sin most insistently called abhorrent to God is the failure of generosity, the neglect of widow and orphan, the oppression of strangers and the poor, the defrauding of the laborer—*

We’re going back home to

night pushes through money
We're going back home to

every vote counts

America

It's the end (of something), the name in the leaves, you were there with a glass of blue when my face split in half—voices you heard one night in one town, just beyond the strips of light—leaves on grass, leaves on grass, astonishing sky—

Morning smells like piss, it's the end of the word, and I never quite “believed” (enough), or just at the wrong moment—

America

If birds

If

The sky

Is the

Sky

If birds

Tangle

Prayer

I

I’m
America
America says fight the bosses. America told Ada.
You can speak. You can speak. A million years
away, the algebra of need, addicted to the Dow, to
the camera, to the sound of wind, the summer sky,
the winter sky.

Oh I
Need you’re so soft

Lavender
Sky

Sky like whiskey

America
Wake up, you’re not the truth—

“in April 2002, Dick Cheney stated directly that the
‘War on Terrorism’ will probably never end, at least
not in our lifetimes”—leaves everywhere on grass,
astonishing sky, oh well—wake us,

wake us

and we—

America
Want my

back porch, want my front porch, want my milkweed,
my willow tree, want a new body, want a new mouth,
Christmas tipsy, kiss, yes—

I want to live forever, why not, why

not admit it—

**America**

What we're talking about is nothing less than
rescuing a democracy that is so polarized it is in
danger of being paralyzed and pulverized. And this
is and you are and we are: say we are the people: we
are people, the people:

say democracy: say free and responsible
government, say popular consent:

say a democracy so polarized, say polarized, say
paralyzed:

say free and responsible government, say informed
public, say journalism, journalism, journalism—

**America**

*Airbrushed*

*Gwyneth at*

*the Renoir*

*Hotel*

*St. Pauli*

*Girl*

*California Check*
Cashing
Leaves and
Shadows
City of God

America

While California’s colleges and universities were shedding 8,000 jobs, the Department of Corrections hired 26,000 new employees to guard 112,000 new inmates.

Say it—there is still magic in the world—it’s in your wallet—use your Visa Card—your next purchase could be free—

America

as if

there were no rules and dreams were safe—

write to your congressional representative,

write to your congressional representative,

write to, keep imagining—and you can’t

get to the real world, they keep showing

the real world on TV
America

And—as if this phrase had never been abused in our lifetimes—to the ideal of a free society. It’s midnight in my body, 4 a.m. in my body, breading and olives and cherries. Wait it’s all rotten. How am I ever. A clown explains the war. Oh notebook.

America

You

Are past the boundary now, past the world that Made the world, you are past the water’s skin, past The edge of coming home: you are free and you are Drunk and guilty—like a picture in a glass, like the Fullness of the sun, like a body come undone, you Are past the water’s skin, long and long and run Away—

America

“Give in.”

NASDAQ +12.90. Dow close: 10,617.78.

Hey kids, big sexy corporation!

Don’t be a quitter—

America

O Captain, my Captain, citizen, citizen.
Feels like. You killed someone or no. You didn’t. You did. You’re responsible, irresponsible. Didn’t do it, can’t remember. Feel like you might have. Might have. Killed someone. Won’t remember. Don’t want to remember. Don’t want to be told again—

Try saying *wren*.

Try saying *mercy*.

Try anything.

**America**

If birds

If

The sky

Is the

Sky

If birds

Tangle

Prayer

I

I’m

**America**

my scream is a brand name:

blue—for a while—
elm trees and summer and birch trees and sky, elm
trees and summer and birch trees and sky: expensive
houses, expensive houses dying: this lack of justice I
acknowledge mine—

America, one extra summer night—he wants to (you
know) feel like a giant eyeball—

**America**

*the sin most insistently called abhorrent to God is the
failure of generosity, the neglect of widow and orphan, the oppression of strangers and the poor, the
defrauding of the laborer—*

We’re going back home to
night pushes through money

We’re going back home to every vote
counts we’re changing the rules we’re
expecting disaster funding the nightmare
sure starve the poor try our new prayer try
our new blue Sunday try our new football
game turn off the shooting try our new
daydream and
try our

new rights
Nadia Nurhussein

Sampler

Please call Stella (finishing with the sound recording). Ask her to bring these machines down to stereotype: six spoons and plates clichéd. Maybe accommodate her brother Bob. We will also need a small voice and synesthesia for the kids. She can scope these things, and we will promise to meet her next Wednesday at the session.

Please placenta ask her to bring these things in her store: sex no please, five thick slabs, snakes. We also need a small plastic snake. A big toy stitched and batteries for their matching guns. She scoops beach shells into plastic bags, and we will go and meet at the rations.
Lance Phillips

WE

FRAME
NORMALCY
The grass, one inserts heavens
Palpable regret, his

Brazenly his jaw wheeled head into subject
One inserts scrape over shin, head into subject

Using sentence measures
sky with the bird

Entry
so low in the sky, trove Saliva at mouth’s corners
Instantiate head in shape of desire for that head,

shining face

Does one accept a fluidity based on desire?
Tactics: The green lizard, the wood wasp; they’ve separated

Extending the house, house finch
His modeling bird with hand

Pear blossom lifts to cheek, lips corrigibility
Ability to release that image

Wrench branch
Both wrists at small of back by one’s thumb, forefinger
Condense rationality this moist spot

Brought from among the dead  Brought his own story
Brought feeling the leaves in his hand

One’s mouth attends a particular
One inserts small circle over gum and tooth, goldfinch

It is not numerous it is more
First iris one inserts

Instance, winged ant, the inferno

Force rolled from cheek into lip, blue vase
Mud the lark adjusts
Koper’s Gym

Pesticides,
brushes,
faith,
hair on the wet roof of my face,
of my swing.

Of my dunes,
of my cuttlefish and my steppes.

I’m cleaning silver.
It chomps into whiteness and reminds me
of talcum at the battle, of the Raft of
Medusa, of calluses and of
unelastic rings.

And of that weird stench
In the church, where under Janowski’s yelling
we powdered the rings and made lion
vaults, although I lost my tooth
on the cement, outside, not in the church,
during the basketball game with Ilirska Bistrica.

My mother cried more than she did during the war,
more than when grandmother died.
All that made
history I told you with my
artificial left incisor as
a cripple.

Translated from the Slovenian by Peter Richards and the author
On Via Boscovich

The receptionist on Via
Boskovich goes out
every hour
to see if my car is still there.
In the morning I have capuccino
and give a gift to the chambermaid, a lot of
rice. I was treated as
le grand seigneur,
il professeur,
he who, far off in the dark countries,
got into trouble,
gentilissimo, educatissimo.

When we all discovered with relief
that I don’t smuggle drugs or weapons
but cheap jewelry which I
stuff into cardboard boxes and
glue back together, we
laughed conspiratorially and
felt better. From this,
pounds and pounds of rice
on every visit for everyone.

Translated from the Slovenian by Joshua Beckman and the author
They’re confiscated somewhere, I try to live

“Little gutter, I’ll equip you with quotes.” Anonymous

“Religious mania travels faster than wind.” Anonymous

“The hump force itself into the sand.” Anonymous.

“I stepped into an armored car.” Me.

A gram of white sack raves into the night.
A snow mass drips in the claw.

You plow with a toadstool.
Leaves are dancing.
Bach, Bach, Bach, Bach.
Ingarden has a small stove.
He lives in an abandoned house.

The beast rests in the ell.
Straight is the outline between forehead and hair.

Translated from the Slovenian by Thomas Kane and the author
Lyms of

Rim of light. Crawling to the black basalt edge. I’ll say the wrong thing and move in with him. Falls are the river’s way of getting back to normal. Simultaneously a mistake and correction: in order to erase itself. At the rift between the water’s force and its path. (The physical industry of it.)

What causes the smoke to rise so high out of water, the Kololo asked. (About Victoria.) So Leonardo wrote backwards, right to left using the left hand without punctuation. So

limb means border

all be but lyms of blissidnes
when you face limits
rip them off
Sub up to = limen lintel
Hee on the wings of cherub rode towering, arb. and

Errant.
(in quest of ,or

poet.

9. Astray,
   b. as pred.?
Quantum pop. Loss

is a second acquisition. When you are preparing:
dig a hole big enough for a friend. Straighten the top vertebra. In the 1970’s Deborah Butterfield made horses out of mud and sticks, combined the figure and the ground. For half a century the city of light
had candles in only three sites. Now it spends $260,000 a day.  Our insula “lights.”  How long I ignored it: folded and tucked deep. It took imaging. The same for the addict: it is not just. But: heart rate, blood pressure, tickle in lungs, taste. This is love, baby. Remember

to screw in lightbulbs tightly next. With a titbit on your nose.

Trust, trussed.

Baggage.
Cluster or head of.

with a tie-rod or struts, so as to fasten the wings or legs of (a fowl: before flight):—O
in a spinning trace flanis flew ane felloun

You could say: I’m going to trust myself. And it will become part of me. Note: Indian giver. In folk tales if you hold on to a gift you usually die. Sweetness starts on the tongue but it doesn’t end there. The secret is the democratization of puzzle invention. We like to fill up empty spaces. In nurikabe—*islands in the stream*—no isle can touch another. Look for the most constrained parts (often the corners). Try to work between. The wall? Impedes. Extends forever. Knock low to make it disappear.
“if we are going to include
women, where on the scale of creation will we then
stop,”
as the president of the Swedish
Academy of Sciences (gray sagely)
remarked in the foggy leather-
dressed backwater gunpowder citadel
plaster rosette baroque
jaunty old
man (parse-ly) teaching me—complementing
me—
to greet and grin this moisty
morning on my
tongue a trace of nitroglycerin
nothing to fence or to bank
nothing to unveil or reveal or to save

  even while feeling the violence pile up
  inside petty or other

nothing to read
  petty or bloody

no well
no womb no replenishing silo left unbroken

  none unpoisoned

  even as violence
  re-arrives

even now moist
iris ayahuasca Arabians racing

ethical resistance to enlisting brine shrimp

  koto duet with bee

heirloom seed
a television tuned to snow
or the *I Ching* solid line shifts to broken or
back a moving line a possible path

along chaotic cell conditions short of tsunamic
huracanic solitonic—or not—William

James to *that* earthquake *bring it on!*
(1906 Palo Alto a visiting professor)

die-offs openly welcomed by the one quarter
expecting Jesus to recur here this next year

*tolerated* by the overwhelmed silver bullet
confusion no solfatara dragon

breath on the neck I crane out my window hear
mason’s woodpecker hammer pointing brick
the deer has swollen in the freight car filling
it
in the pickup slung across the back
seat swells bursts pitching
forward over driver’s eyes hooves nick
the screen the GPS they
have become a nuisance you know not
held in check
vagary
face of faun doeskin spine
all my as
her body doe
in soaking silence
Merton’s
rain
“drenching the thick mulch . . .
filling the gullies
and crannies of the wood . . .

washing out the places
where men have stripped . . .
the most comforting speech
in the world, the talk
that rain makes by itself
all over the ridges . . .
Nobody started it, nobody
is going to stop it. It will
talk as long
as it wants, the rain.”

Thomas Merton
Raid on the Unspeakable
Chad Sweeney

AURA OF THE SPECTACLE

All history stood ahead of us
waiting and gesturing,
the blood of the lamb above the doors,
silence in the shape of a parliament.
I didn’t recognize myself in the crowd.
The megaphone
was a form of reading,
an alphabet and harbor
buried beneath the streets.
The lamp, the letter, _nous objets d’art_,
each wielded its arc of influence.
Bridges gathered distance,
words gathered roundness,
our things finally transcended
back into themselves
in the aspect of earthquakes
in the sign of the wheel.
ANOTHER NOVEL

At this point the book
settles into a foul mood

never to recover.
A visual silence, a table

asserting its corners.
To crouch into negative capability

and to not jump.
I try Rorschachs

but my doctor
displays only haunting images.

I wander to the edge of the city
where couches go to die.

The sparrow in the footnote
isn’t real. Neither is it not real.

Green upholstery hillside.
4th-dimensional deer.

Even when alone I’m an outsider
and excuse myself into the next room

then the next, and so forth
until my ear is flat against a wall.

Chapter 11 hands down its decision:
Innocent!
...as if I had recently died and saw the house from a new angle
  --Tomas Transtromer

Place of casual clutter
  High bed with convolvulus
Blooming beyond leaded glass

A personal touch or a soft one
Here every ghost needs an escort
  And permission to leave

No silks of mine hang in the closet
  No magic potions or creams
Picture me a half-naked child

  Rice paper peels from the door
The cat is fringing the curtains
  The locks have all been changed

Released from the bungalow
  And its dense field of gravity
My shoes point due north

  Death is only a permission
Escape works better in a novel
  Little bare ghost  step lively
Gray tint of sand
near a town where the bells sleep,
ear a wood where wind skirls.
place without wings
with a blue cast of night,
the silence of water,
the noise of fresh flight.
Passage at the edge of the sea
where light razors air,
where all motion bites,
where hearts gauge and disengage.
The random quest,
the moment ahead of the moment,
the restless request of the sea.
He Needed a Learner’s Permit

Ruth Hyde Paine

I hardly saw him in English
He didn’t want me speaking
anything but Russian around her
We used English when I
taught him to drive
    I didn’t have the vocabulary
for that and wasn’t about to try
“turn right” in Russian

At one point he wanted control
of the car  I let him against
my better judgment

We practiced in a shopping center lot
Sundays because everything was closed

My father was an insurance man
we didn’t go on the road  without
documents  I was mad
at myself  for letting Lee do that

I visited them in New Orleans
    the family fidgeting
in those shrunken rooms
as if  making a household
    was a frivolous thing

What she was facing just a month
from the birth of their second child
Lee going off  to find work somewhere
    so he said
& Marina with no prenatal care
I said she should return to Texas
& I knew enough Russian to make
connections at Parkland Hospital
where the baby was born
where Lee and the President died
I said this really was for them
for the family
They’d get back on their feet
by Christmas we all figured

I took my kids to the dentist that morning

Marina watched the President on TV

She was another young mother with little kids
someone to hang diapers with
fold them too
Lee came the night before
played with June & Chris in the front yard
He helped me bring in the groceries
I said our President was coming
to town & I wished I could get into Dallas
tomorrow for the motorcade
He had nothing to say about it
Just a bland “yes” in Russian
a brown bag of produce squished in his arms

I heard on TV the shots might’ve come
from the Book Depository
Marina was hanging laundry & I didn’t notice
this came out in her testimony later
she left for the garage to see if the gun was there
She immediately thought of the gun
& was it rolled up in the blanket
I worried about her a lot after the assassination
She left that Saturday morning & we both
expected she’d be coming back
I didn’t see her again until
the next year when she testified in Washington
she invited me for afternoon tea

People can’t believe an American
in his twenties couldn’t drive
  I’ve heard that crock about him taking
a test-run at one of those Dallas Mercury dealers
  people saying he drove down
Stemmons Freeway like some crazy hog
I saw how he managed in the parking lot
  and, no, he couldn’t drive a car

Lee was withdrawn in almost any language
He bought The Worker & The Militant
to figure out what they wanted you to do
“You just read between the lines” he said
The summer was planning to murder us in today’s dusk
With its flat tail shaped wide and narrow like Los Angeles on a map
And that very size and the big tail was coming down from the sky
And around the corners of endless two-story buildings in other
Words it was everywhere in the dusk as Jerry from Pennsylvania and I
Had on the air-conditioning very high in the car as we searched
For one of dead Bukowski’s ex-houses. The traffic was the body
Of the animal that owned the tail and we wanted to
See the apartment court with small houses in two rows that looked like a motel
That I knew was in East Hollywood on two streets,
A little one ending perpendicular at a slightly bigger one
That I won’t tell you the names of. A paw
Seemed to come down on the car at Sunset and Gordon
And the rest of the bright, hot animal eased its fat and muscles and teats
Down around us and rested and waved its manta ray tail
Exactly over the city in exactly the shape of the city.
It was as still and stymied as it gets. We sat still on Sunset.
Fuck, I said. I’m going to say fuck too, Jerry said.
Do you know exactly where Bukowski’s ex-house is,
He asked. Yes, I said. We got to another little street
That I won’t tell you the name of, and it was empty except for five parked cars
And as I knew led to a neighborhood of numerous drab apartment
Courts with drab small houses in two rows around a central
Long narrow drab courtyard or long narrow portico
All of which Jerry was disposed to admire and love and would have tried
To live there in his previous life circumstances when he had no house
And had not yet written poems as good as Lawrence’s or Bukowski’s
And I went down the street free of the paw and hideous body of the animal
But not the tail in the sky and parked in front of the second long
Court. There, I lied, this one. Were you ever in it, do you know which house,
Jerry asked. No, it’s his address, I only had correspondence with him, I
Partially lied. And reader, reader of “The Snake,”
What do I have to be expiated, what? If
Anything. The need to write a poem was strong today
So I did. If I didn’t, I would’ve felt quite bad
Sick, head sailing away, tight trunk, tingle-face, but Jerry
Would never have known of the lie as he will in a time after
This poem is printed, he would always have
Continued to feel good about and approved of the house Bukowski
Had not lived in but which looked like the one he had lived in, I swear to
You, reader, it does look so. And this, Jerry swung one big arm toward the
Windshield, is East Hollywood? Yes, I lied,
And then I said something extraordinary and embarrassing,
I said out loud “Its big tail is coming down from the sky
And its paw on the roof is restraining the car
And the rest of the animal is surrounding the car with transparent flesh
So you can’t see it but we can feel it, can’t we?”
In the resulting silence we sat awhile in homage.
The quote was not the sort of thing you’d memorize or even a quote.
ROCK HALL

You have given me a black boat and a white boat so mood
Can govern how I look rowing myself toward town in the short
Distance. The inlet, called a harbor here, is choppy gray
Choppy green choppy blue, however the sun feels when it gets around to feeling,
But the wind is steady and the water’s difficult motion is constant as love
Is often constant over generations of a perplexing family, you can count
On choppy but not on blue, hardly ever on green, and just sometimes
On gray. Actually, as you know, there is one boat.
I love it very much and I have called it a black boat and a white boat.
THE TWO ARTISTS, I MEAN THE THREE ARTISTS

The brother and sister were famous and frightening
To read or see. Their bodies were normal. Their
Products, I mean, the sayings in one case, the images in the other,
And the shared family brand of huge hot dogs and strange clothes.
They had different names and looked like somebody
Else, not each other. Their immense wealth was the sixth
Most threatening thing about them. I had to do
With them. I underestimated the brother, and his sayings came to
Gover the country near the end of me
When the brother was long gone and the sister longer.
That was her fault, the only thing wrong with her,
That she was dead, yeah, and dead too soon. Oh
Yeah. I was in love. She was (would have been) older
Considerably. I almost met the brother. I
Was a student and afraid and did not show up. Later
I was barely known and had one-ninetieth
His power and one-one-hundred-eightieth his
Sister's, but it was enough for him to answer,
I know you are trying to get close to her,
She's dead, and I don't have any of her things,
Certainly none of her images.
Why aren't you interested in my sayings?
(I have forgotten whether he wrote this
Last sentence to me, or I wrote it to him.) Shit,
I already know she's dead, she's gone, but I realized fully
At last. Did this help me? His sayings
Were like that, they could help anyone a great deal.
Well, now I was afraid but free, an improvement, big deal. I've
Nearly forgotten, my power came from sayings and images both,
And it would have been nice to meet them
Say meet them both in one room, and talk about this,
They might have been interested in the two things in one person, me,
And hear the sound of her voice,
Even though I think they were rarely, if ever, together,
When alive, and I was barking up the wrong tree in reality.
THE CELL PHONE AND THE SUN AS ALLIES WIN AND WE LOSE

The sun used hydrogen flame throwers fighting
With the air and forced it to be orange.

The air held its ground, then left,
And called that victory. I was the air. Phone

Booths were filled with nothing per usual and were thus the empty air,
My precious scarce ally, booths.

In other words toward evening
Of a smoggy day the wind stopped

And a building in the distance was orange,
Only it was orange, with grey for the green below it

And the concrete below it, nice base colors in which it sat.
One of us said that bldg. way off must be metal,

It is the only thing that is orange in the sky or on the
Sea off a ways or in the streets which look just like streets.

One said it was an orange Antonioni bldg.
David walked up to us and said ah

And stood with us and said ah.
Claudia said yeah, yes it is,

The only person who said yeah and yes
In the same sentence a lot, I can hear her say it.

**Blacked Out** was far away but would have said, starstruck though
She is powerful, I guess you all talk like this all the time.

She had heard **Blacked Out Too** trying to say something, so to speak.
She sounded like **Blacked Out Also** or Dave, the other Dave,

And these last four friends, Dave and the three **Blacked Outs**, 
Sounded like each other, like orange metal rubbing orange metal.
The bldg. was quite big, dear friends, and far away,
And, our boots on the ground, in the future, in our next tour,

In all the streets here to the bldg., you won't know what
The dangerous green telephone booths are on each street

But you may remember the orange Antonioni bldg. if
You should come upon a red booth (hideous! be

Alert) or never, never come on a red one
On a street with no red and no green, and no calls

Jangling without purpose like freebies waiting in a private enclosure
Where you could sometimes speak to a stranger

If, as has happened to all of us, the phone was ringing,
No one standing in there, empty,

And you could have said anything to whoever was on that other end
Before the disappearance of the allies of the air and me.
EXTENSIONS OF THE GHOST

Spring encroaches in its dark & sticky glory. Inverted beneath bell-tones of sky the river pretends it makes its own moon every night, a soft cloth.

In the hollow places an awakening, as if a drug had been inserted between the mattresses of a sleeping architect & the buildings he dreams of.

I take a back way along the railroad tracks in order to watch the crocuses infiltrate yet another vacant lot. Along the tracks, evidence crews have been replacing the ties. The earth is darker, scuffed, oily where they’ve labored.

The train glides against the river the way a hose full of water glides against the underpointing of a nineteenth-century farmhouse.

When we say desire we are really making an argument for the intolerable haecceity of everything outside our own bodies: river, egret, sympathy. The architect turns & mumbles in his sleep.

Dither & crush, the body’s brined falconry. As we lose diacritical marks they are reincarnated: as children? orphans? poets?

Paperwhite, skunk cabbage, a path through what we call “park.” Gesture of a core towards its periphery. The great clock of the natural affections begins to lay out its silverware of basswood & walnut, sparrow & teaberry.

We exist within an imbrication of usages & buildings. The hands begin to make languages of their own until we give them something else to do.

What we call nature is a test nature itself proctors, to a cruise ship full of blind photographers. Train : birds :: river : ________ . Landscape as direct(ed) motion, act of appetite. Perspective/consumption. Of will.
The brain has a structure like an ethnologist, the experts on honey & wintergreen assure us, decked out in Bermuda shorts & strap-on chandeliers that glitter in the reflected light the blind fritillaries of death bear up from the supple wheatecake of the body’s paper throne. The body keeps asking just what this experiment is, and the mind replies with something that is half-rose, half-architecture, a philosophy of the senses upon which the brain embarks as a sort of Fulbright, investigating folk medicines among the local highland tribes. The mind makes an argument for classification & immanence, but the body, having grasped the intuitive acoustics of ambient space, begins to dance slowly in rhythm with the cursive looping of the insects, each ferrying its crumb of dark matter to the long tables where the experts sit, weighing, examining, scratching notes in their spidery ledgers. The brain, aglow now in the thickening domestic interior of its century, files report after report with the endocrine glands, the pancreas, the great muscles of the buttocks & thighs. The mind thinks “hydrogen.” The body says “hydrogen.” The brain records the curious dances of the locals, the vegetable passions they pass on to their children, the rituals of possession & exchange. Dusk encroaches; a chill creeps in; the darkest insects swarm. The brain tries writing a letter home, to husband, mother, wife, but claimants keep getting in the way, an endless procession of dauphins & pretenders. Each tries on the body as if it were a slipper made of glass. Each departs in disappointment for some more effectual kingdom.
NOT WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK
OF OUR NATIONAL PARKS

Turned head juxtaposed with thorn. Haloing effect of recorded motion, an encrustation, as of gratitude or salt. Enigma of where to place one’s eyes: in landscape? on a plate?

In the sense that salt stains, vision also. Imagine the sea as a sort of repository for what trees can never be. In its sleep (to the extent that trees sleep, to the extent that existence for a tree is a variety of sleep, can be classed as sleep) the forest mimics the sea.

To know which kind of tree is dreaming by the taste of salt on its leaves: thrust of head from torso, of tongue from mouth. Birds do it.

Haptic connection. In some versions a childhood prank (warm water, warm hand). In others a folk meme, frozen flagpole, patriotic salute gone midwinter awry.

Drunk with wine the old king awaited a woman for his pleasure. Creak of the tent pole in the night-whistling air.

Later, texture of blood in sand. The iron in the blood always its own excuse, like to like.

Weaving among the darkening trunks the sap collector likes to imagine himself a spy, which is to say a functionary charged with vision. Never bothering to wonder which side he is on.

The forest, on the other hand, dreams the sap collector as an itch it cannot scratch. An alarm clock. A child crying in another room, at some distance from the bed where you toss.

Some agents of the body sleep along with the body, others don’t. The heart is the largest muscle that never sleeps, therefore never dreams.

To place a forest on a flag is to pledge treason to the idea of blood, is to tell a story in which only one woman ages. Children gathered around foxfire in winterdark.

We assume that the forest, sleeping, is blind, because we sleep with our eyes shut.

The human heart is what the forest dreams it will become in the moment of its waking, not knowing this office is already held by the sea. In this way a great battle is perpetually postponed.
Promontory Point: the old king dies, again and again. Sap smudged copper-red in the plastic taps.

How many forests does it take to dream a flag, a hand, a country?

The forest is but one of the many unused muscles of the sea, to which the eye calls in its twinned ontology. The dialects of salt multiply. In six fields a single seedling burns.