

“he accepted each moment
shocked by having a face in the mirror
or torn away from it by the beauty of the world”

-from *Zen* by Stephen Berg-

“...its mumbled inadequacy reminds us always
In this world how little can be communicated.
And for these, they too are only tokens
Of what there is no word for:...”

-from *To Dido* by W.S. Merwin-

So this is my canvas, my clay, the space I am allotted to “begin to write what I feel” as they put it. From a palette of words, of letters, shapes of sounds.

What color would they be? What line, outline? What surface form? Texture? What am I representing onto this blank? And when or where, what or how is it/was it present before this? Had I more than a pen I might draw. Monochrome doesn’t suit the subject I observe. (“the greater the challenge” I suppose they or you or I suggest – *pshaw*).

As if it were a can to pour. A brush to dab and spread. A chisel to pound or a multi-dimensional possibility. No, one color, flat surface, and whatever twisted lines I might make with this dark blood.

“Don’t simply regurgitate your story,” I heard, “write things we don’t already know or can find out in myriad ways.” This is why “feelings” you say (they say). Do we really have feelings bereft of ideas?

I imagine this is what is meant by declension. Some traceable undoing. Some fodder to deconstruct, patterning or plot recognition: analysis. Is that so? “Feelings” you say?

“I began to write down the things I feel,” I wrote, firstly, quoting them, but quickly realized that was a quote of a quote (and perhaps out of context, perhaps accidental) of another I have great affinity for (of mind, form and content) but would not dare or hope to repeat. Stillborn. Abort.

“Feelings.” And how am I to gain access to this? These? Are not when spoken, emotions dissolved? Transformed into some other reality? Or fiction? Does anyone even know yet what we talk about when we talk about “love” or “grief,” “terror” or “joy”? (I suspect there is a sort of object to them/it out there somewhere to be found and to dissect, describe, observe or experiment with (most likely on the infernalnet). Probably goes without saying, but I have no access here. “In” here. Where is this “here?”

How then am I to represent void? And again I ask – when/where/who/how ever was void ever presented in the first place as some natural sign I might re-present? This is what a medium is for, no? An intermediary between? A vehicle or method of expression, disclosure, communication, power? So what is this barely material of ink and pulp (one color or hue each, mind you!) *between*?

Them or you and my emotions? Is that it? One unknown, untranslatable, to another? I might describe here or caricature the you or them I imagine examining this frame and picture, but who would pretend or proffer that I might, in that process, be *knowing* them or you? And like the immateriality of an inner world, even if I could copy all the pulses, darts and dashes of a stenciling electrical light on some screen or repeat the mapping of neuronal activity imaged in all my various states, what would be revealed there? What more would any of us know?

What electricity and charges my brain gives off that we might label “agitated subject” or “concentrated subject,” “grieving subject,” “gazing subject,” “excited,” etc. Within each of which (and millions of others besides) the terms occur so ambiguously and objective-arbitrarily we end further away than we begin.

Alas, it wearies me even to consider. The effort, so obviously doomed and erroneous at the outset...scoffable. Who and how did the project even crop up amongst us? (Ah, back to the mysterious ocean or caves from which we may have sprung!) Conjecture, conjecture, wild-ass-hair of a nightmare!

“Fine,” they gently, politely nod, “fine. You (me/I) are doing well. Don’t get hung up on *feelings*, emotions, just put pen to paper, isn’t it interesting to see what comes forth?” Don’t get “hung up” on *words*, eh? But make more words. Is not inquiry senseless? I rest my case. I drain and break the pen. If only I had flame at my disposal!

They bring me a pencil.

Just as easily broken, but the softness and variations of shading are nicer, and it emits a soothing sound (whatever *soothing* might mean to me). Also I can watch it exhaust itself, and I must keep rotating it within my fingers to fashion readable markings. I do enjoy shading in these lines with charcoal or lead. Its liminal appearance and its capacity for subtlety and starkness.

A pencil accomplishes something (I am thinking). It duly represents dusk, fog, ambiguous weathers, uncertainty. You have to squint a little to make it out when used for forming words, and it quickly fades away. Feels more made of matter than an ink pen...more temporary and inevitably fragile and decomposing.

They let me to the “library” today, accompanied closely. I saw colors! Forms! Shapes! Selection was woefully limited, but there were some books on natural sciences (illustrated) and even a few collections of arts and artists.

“What do you think these express?” they asked of paintings or sculptures I lingered over.

“Look!” I said. “Look!”

I then pretended sullen and began to ecstatically absorb – lines with dozens of colors peeking out throwing some other sector of the frame into bright relief, leading my eyes like young tight calves walking or running in summertime. My eyes leapt after splotches and strokes, sunk slowly into (imagined) vast planes of layer upon layer of shade and tone (what an interesting borrowed term!) scratched back, built over, washed in and out and over. I danced through sprays of evocative wiggles, hyphens, circles, blocks and splatters, all in the space of about half an hour (does *space* really apply to sequence? To *time*?). “Don’t get ‘hung up’ on words” again, always afraid I’ll disappear more fully, remove to too far a distance. And why should they or you care? Why should anyone?

Too much shading, pencil evaporated, disappeared (literally “before my very eyes” – what a ridiculous statement! As if eyes were anything without the information of hands and touch!)

Why distance is required.

This pen appears to be blue, although by the light I incur to scribble by, it’s very difficult to tell. (Ha! Eyes need even speech to operate!).

What messages are all our so-called senses constantly inundating our poor cerebrum with? Life is one massive assault on our minds from birth until its end. It’s no wonder then, is it?

One requires distance to “see” (observe, perceive, etc.). How might one achieve this necessary distance from what one must inevitably be the substance of? One needs a mirror and a separate self. I believe this is variously referred to as “dissociation,” “transference,” “schizophrenia,” “novelist.”

They suggest I try to describe further what I am contemplating. Only that is not possible. “Ouroborous” I say, and close my lips and eyes to them or you.

Unwittingly, I suspect, you or they have begun encouraging me to fantasize, to concoct alternate realities, to record self-awareness, in effect to make art. Use artifice. Pretend. As they frustrate with my mind (I sense irritation, agitation in my presence), they request I again try to inscribe emotional states or fluctuations...I hear them shouting “Be delusional! Be delusional! Pretend that you can be other than yourself and fabricate observations or reports from that realm of imagination!”

I write “Magenta with a violet, or blackened green, touch of white and several mixtures of blues.” One morning simply “Ultramarine.” (the view up was amazing from the small window when I woke – another problem that – what is waking, what is not?).

I begin, at this point, to draft single-lined ovals (as near to circles as I am able) day after day, delivering these as my only possible response to non-delusional self-observation/awareness they seem to be asking of me.

I am being transported somewhere. “Someplace quieter, restful, pastoral and scenic, accompanied by the sound of water,” they, or you, say to me. My only hope is thunderstorms at this point.

Thunderstorms shake me through and through. I would confess rainfall to be cleansing, charming, distracting, but thunderstorms really tear me away from it toward some other beauty. I draw another oval entirely filling the page (as much as possible, given the argumentative shapes) with emptiness. Is this what is desired? Am I approaching expression with this simple instrument?

One day I attempt a square or rectangle really, even triangles, all with single lines and full of nothing, but none of these recognizable standardized forms seem justifiably accurate. No self-portrait (is this being asked of me?) could be so distinct. Perceivable. “Only bits and fragments appear common among selves,” I say, regrettably, adding, “unless there be love.”

You (they) pounce on this one – “love! Ah! Can you say/write (very different things, of course) more about what you mean by this?”

“Don’t get hung up on words,” I murmur, and I’m off.

Seems to be no library here actually, but if I request books they arrive from somewhere. All a matter of electricity, plastic, buttons and money it seems. As long as they last, I suppose. (At higher costs each year, I’m sure).

Thunderstorms, then, in lieu of another unknown (“love”). Something about the breadth and depth, the long slow accumulation of the elements from such vast sources and distances: the implausibility of the construction, the buildup...composition...the billions of collisions that activate the enormous release. Thunderstorms suggest the miraculous nature, dangerous prospect of entities coming together...some awe-full beauty.

Combinations of earth, wind, fire and water (such disparates) zillions of molecules, specific conditions, temperatures, “fronts,” provenances, directions, blusters and still points to produce just this dynamic event/effect...

This day I trace a spiral down the page.

Love must be a fantasy or delusion like self-awareness...circles within circles? Attempting to know another is as futile as knowing oneself I think (there’s the trap!). Learning another’s likes, dislikes, humors and pleasures, expressed thoughts and opinions, emotions and moods in order to experience them yourself, or something you desire. Love is like magnetism is all I meant earlier – urges us to fabricate common spaces, likenesses, togetherness in the world (and often, oddly, with very different persons from ourselves!) I observe.

A lady or woman reads to me at night. I’ve fallen asleep to the written word spoken for many years now. As when you allow your eyes to relax and the world doubles and then goes hazy, I find written language spoken, or sometimes even spontaneous monologue and chatter, to blend like the pitter-patter of rain. It soothes me. The woman-lady alternates between Fernando Pessoa, James Joyce and Macedonio Fernandez. Once through with these, they are promising me Rilke, Ernesto Sabato and Maurice Blanchot. Such grand bedfellows!

My statement on file is that “only great literature will help me sort out what it is that is asked of me, and that the mind they (or you) are apparently concerned with will only remain attentive and active if constantly nourished by music, language and visual arts.” “Otherwise I’m shutting it down,” I threaten.

“How does that feel?” you, they say again. “It thinks,” I reply, “it thinks...maybe it approaches ‘idea-feeling,’ as the godfather of novels put it, or intuition as used in aesthetic studies...but ‘feel’ still confuses me,” I say. I need to rest.

Beginning to believe I'm caught up in some laboratory system. Led through corridors, slept in a cell-like-hotel-type room, fed a steady array of the food groups, allowed brief walks out-of-doors (always accompanied, but not all in uniform). Relatively kind courtiers, but I don't bother with names, they/you seem human enough, and we all run similar gamuts of experience (I imagine).

Still I don't really understand why I'm here, or anywhere, for that matter. Seems an experiment of mind observation. One fellow (always accompanied by two or more others) regularly asks me questions about what I'm doing, have done, thinking of doing, have thought (asks "feeling"-based questions less and less), mentioned *memory* today while flashing lights along a bar or tapping the backs of my hands with his fingers as they lie on my lap. Odd kind of world to end up in, after all. I said I remembered a waterfall, a pleasantness, that it may have been Gauguin or Courbet, Turner or Sargent even, that they might take me through a museum or find some books about that...He dropped in the "how does that feel" query again, or "where in your body does that register?" What to say to these people! "In the mind!" I grumbled, "it is only all in the mind – perception, ideas, messages...all my skin, limbs, "senses," send their impulses there," I stated. "Please let me lie down now."

And thus I am.

They proclaim to me that this day is my birthday, that I can have it "off," I believe you, he, said. And left me a genuinely glorious stack of books someone fetched from somewhere. "We'd still love for you to record your experiences today," they added, "if you like." *Create* my experience, is more like it, I thought. Fabricate it into these marks on a canvas lacking color or texture, I thought. Sculpt a word or two in two dimensions, blech, ah well, I suppose it does pass the time (whatever "time" is it? Is this?). Who brought me here?

The stack on the table comprises about a fifth of the requests I wrote out this week (they ask me periodically for). "Weekly" is a term they use, for some reason I accept that. Exhibition catalogs of the artists Cy Twombly, R.B. Kitaj, Corot and Courbet, Susan Rothenberg, Frank Auerbach, Emil Nolde, Clyfford Still, Millais, Thiebaud, Gwen John, Sam Gilliam, John Piper, always a Giacometti and van Gogh, the journals of R.M. Rilke, some writings of C.S. Peirce, Lessing, a story collection of Brecht's, and some medical-scientific studies on optics.

It is quiet. I had asked for some music on my special day, musics by Max Richter or Arvo Part, but apparently you or they could not locate any. They or you use the term "melancholy" a lot in reference to my musical tastes. And of course inquire (in increasingly subtle terms), how that makes me "feel." Phrases like "how does this occur to you?" "what do you consider regarding that?" "what impressions does this stir in you?" and so on. I draw circles for them, if I've the pencil I have taken to shading them in from time to time, altering lighter and darker passages.

I can't conceive what their interest might be. My suspicion grows that it's simply your/their job. What can they learn from a circle, aside from what they invent? Maybe it's their task to confabulate patterns or conclusions or narratives and hypotheses on observing and investigating me, as if I am a text or painting. The world is a strange place to endure. I think there are many rooms in this building – have I been misplaced? From time to time I've thought I've caught other shuffling souls (I think they may have planted this idea, actually). It is quiet today.

I get some nifty ideas of what to do with my pen today from looking through Cy Twombly's retrospective (puts me in mind of Mark Tobey) so I clutter up a page with scribbles until it's a balanced equation of masses and gaps, much like my daughter's..."What's that!?" he/you asks excitedly, "your daughter?!" "I've always imagined a family," I retort, "children realize things."

I lie down.

I wake realizing that I've never read about Twombly's life. He at least had access to crayons if I'm to believe the reproductions in this book, as well as some unlined paper. But I also quickly recognize that much of this work is simply pencil, yet provide me with an almost emblematic understanding...like the mapping of my eye's movements they're so fond of here.

Perhaps Twombly dwelt here as well? This is a touch shaming. No, couldn't be, I detect oils or gouache underneath some of these. How I adore his busy little stories, like scratch paper of a physicist or schoolboy doodles, notes to self, etc. I'll copy some as my written reports the next few days...see what you/they make of that!

(Having, somehow, momentarily forgotten that everything I note or scribble has inexplicably been deemed "their" property! – a swift humiliation and collapse of my fun – my pens and papers are taken from me at each nightfall, and returned to me with my breakfast).

In order to survive these limitations and keep my wits about me, I request Interaction of Color by Josef Albers. I also add Burke and Croce, Gilson and Santayana concerning beauty. And am experiencing a formidable desire (almost sustenance-necessity-like) for Kafka and Borges to attempt some unraveling of these circumstances I find myself in.

I begin to invent projects for myself to pass the time, being alone more and more each day with merely this chair, a writing table, slim granted materials, a bed and small chamberpot.

I conceive of attempting to develop (did I just crave smoking? Undeniable desire for a cigarette just then!) a perfectly private language, so that I might be able to communicate here for my own enjoyment, and bypass theirs.

Or mapping the intuited web of relationships contained in the Corpus Callosum – that brain-hemisphere-connecting-jelly that may possess the keys to the apparent dialogical or paradoxical fundament of human "realities."

"How much do you know?" they ponder and attempt conversation.

They really baffle me. Does not a question of quantity require some form of measurement, some standards, something comparative? I can only reply, "I read."

I read.

It occurs that the contents of my mind, the ingredients of my personality are all recorded *somewhere* in the world's literary heritage (I think even that sentiment might have been suggested by writings of Spinoza or *somesuch*).

"You'd all do better to simply read through the world's written legacy," I suggest next morning, "to discover who I am, what I am about, what I have done, thought, 'felt,' and so on..." "I could construct a fairly manageable bibliography of work that has resonated with my experience," I offer, "and I might be sent peacefully on my way, maybe all of us (if there *are* others in here?) – all on our merry way?"

They (you?) nod patronizingly, as if to imply I should know that my recommendation is preposterous, inconceivable, some poor attempt (ridiculous even) at "escape." Escape! Funny that this hadn't occurred to me before now?

I've been placed on a new regimen of medications (in the form of pills) with breakfast and injections at bedtime. "To calm me," they assure. "To make this experience more pleasant."

I only find that as time goes by, I feel less and less of anything, even the urge to perform simply tasks, or this activity of recording becomes a chore.

I cease writing, and for weeks only examine artbooks, lie down and listen to music, and read when able to stay awake, or able to concentrate.

I cannot seem to care.

After three weeks, they grow apparently concerned. I feel unable to muster the strength to eat or drink, and just work to place my limbs at interesting angles (like marks on a canvas) upon the rectangle of my bed.

Something has transpired! I am strapped to a very white mechanical bed, tubes, wires and sheets passing in and out, over and around me...I come to perception and wonder if I am actually the insides of some large computer mechanism?

New faces, new questions. I suspect I am alive, but remember vaguely thinking that if good and evil, God and Devil existed, eternal life support would be an ingenious "hell" to devise indeed. Transforming all of us (bad little boys and girls) from persons into machines and forcing perpetual existence on us with none of the plausible human perks available to us. Simply to go on...

It seems I am too weak to sit up, move about, even use my eyes for very long, or chew, or paint, or write. They (or you) profess to me that someone or some collective really want to ensure my "recovery" and "restoration," that quite an investment has been made to "rehabilitate" me and "bring me to health."

I recognize none of the terms they use for the "supporting" entity, merely feel like I wobble my head and am bewildered. "She" informs me that my thoughts are now being translated and transliterated for them via an incredibly complex process of electrical impulses based on neurological firings into a system of lights transferred toward concepts and possible terms (my perfectly private language? I wonder).

Some time along in this situation (hours, weeks, years?) I begin to envision above my head massive blots and grids of varying blues and blacks and whites forming a kind of seemingly brushstroked pattern and balance of dots and lines, splotches and sprays. All with one large thick scudded line of black ink spreading out as it approaches the bottom of the rectangular surface it accumulates on.

It proffers me the experience something like flying or swimming, drowning or crashing...I think I detect a thunderstorm rumbling somewhere far off in a muddled distance.

Retreat to blackness again. Then white. Then black.

Silence.

I am seated stiffly, apparently strapped also, firmly in a hard angular chair facing a woman of sharp yet delicate features in spectacles.

She asks me how I “feel.”

I wince.

Even my head seems held fast, I’m not sure I’m able to speak, I feel like I could move my limbs, that is, they “feel” restrained, but also phantom, as if they exist in my mind alone, their sensations, physicality, all projections of my brain. I’m struck with the idea that all of this experience, experiences, months, a night, a year? are all products of my making, imagination...a sensation that I’ve locked myself, invented, received my just desserts, as if my place in Dante’s inferno is to be placed wherever my cranium puts me. Condemned to a world only I construct. I shudder, fade...

Lying down again. The sharp-featured woman and a few other assistant-like fold are by my bedside. She insists that I rest, that conceptualizing tends at present to be detrimental, a kind of overload in my brain. Who’s placed me here? I wonder again, as if far off in the woods of my mind. Where are books? I agitate a little, the room appears absent of any calming affect, any securing objects I might sigh into. Just me, here, supine, supposedly helpless, unable to self-motor, speak, write, communicate (though still with these pads and wires attached to my skull) – being transliterated?

She talks like a professional.

She tells me that I responded gravely to medications they used on me to lessen my apparent irritation, that I seemed to “give up” or “out” and refused to eat or drink or anything until I was comatose. My body has been regulated through intravenous combinations and I have again been transferred to another “facility” or “home” where I can be offered the necessary care, that there are very many hoping and praying for my “restoration” (again) and invested in my well-being. They will need my patience and cooperation during the treatments and processes my healing requires, and whatever determination and/or will I can muster, if I am ever to be “free” to be on my own. She adds that she hopes we can figure out a means of communication soon, as they can never be entirely sure of the machine’s “readings” of my brain’s activity during this time.

Borders. Boundaries. Limitations. Fallible, finite, fragile humans.

Exhausted again, as if only from listening.

"Are you comfortable?" she asks.

I attempt to wiggle my finger with my mind. To express my tongue, roll my eyes. I think books, books, books. I hum internally tunes by Bach, Part, Beethoven, Brahms...I feel I would like to cry. Cry or die, or be able to move my arms. All these efforts with no sign of recognition on her or any faces apparently in this room alongside me.

I am left in quiet.

I try to remember. How I know what I know. When I entered this dream? What I look like? Why don't they call me by a name? Why not "Hello, Mr. _____, how are you feeling this morning?" (or whatever time it is). What a day is, am I locked outside of time sensibleness? How long – has this – is my whole life imagined? Is my body obeying someone or something? I have a propensity and/or predilection for, or urge to, do something with my hands and arms: I have a want for paper, marking materials, cigarettes, books to hold and read.

I think often about semiotics. Signs, gestures, language, inferences, tones, words, marks...what is transpiring? Did I ever think I had commerce with things outside of me? Possess any idea of a "me?" or "self?" How far did I think "me" extended? Throughout what I took to be "my" body? Was there ever anything beyond whatever is occurring to me right now? Maybe my imagination was stronger in the past or when younger (if I could just remember how I was, or invented myself, "before!") Maybe there is no remembering and now I finally understand this? That always and entire existence is concocted presently, moment by moment. Maybe there are no moments. Had I thought there was a permeable barrier somewhere and not that everything was an image? That I am merely a very complex screen?

I would very much like to be funny to/for myself.

To poke fun that the best I can do is create these sterile environments with occasional people that are also sterile and hold no interest or meaning to me. I'm not concocting a steamy jungle or wildness filled with sleek and sweating tiger-women coiling and nimbly wending about me, or an enormous library featuring a section full of all the books I've longed to reread, complete or begin, adjacent to a remarkable gallery space with a fine orchestra...the featured exhibitions always according to my desires...

No, after all this time, life, dream, or even just this *this* that has the sensation of being-happening...I construct an awful banality, sterility, emptiness with a head I cannot even prove that I am referring to as "mine," "me," supposedly possessing shape, weight, volume, vision...lying on a white stiff examination table.

In what feels like a "recalling," I envision circles.

I consider self-definition.

I decide to change.

I think about all the books I imagined reading and the contents I dreamt into them – languages, unlikely names (or heteronyms?) of authors (like “Dostoevsky” “Saeterbakken” “Serres” “Dragomoshchenko” “Cervantes” “Bolano” “Hauge” and on to the thousands) where did I come up with these? And why attribute the varied contents of my brain to them? Or the farcical illusion that I was holding an object I called book and “taking them in” rather than producing them?

Elaborate futility of expression! And this infernal impulse of inquiry! Why does whatever I might be tick like this?!