

## THE WRITER IN THE CELL

“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

Then 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, the shapes of sounds.

What color would they be? What lines and outlines? What surfaces, form? What I am representing onto this blank? When or where or 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 might suggest – ack).

As if it were a can to pour. A brush to dab or spread. A chisel to pound or some multi-dimensional possibility. No – one color, a 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 are able to find out in multitudes of 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, patterns 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 realizing that 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 or revise. Stillborn. Abort.

“Feelings.” And how might I gain access to this? These? Are not, spoken, emotions dissolved? Transformed into some other reality? Or fiction? Does anyone even know yet what we talk about when we talk about “emotion”? (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 – on the in-fernal-ternet or recordings of the surgings of the brain, the body, our systems). Probably it goes without saying, but I have no “access” here. “In” here.

How then should I represent void? And again I ask – where/who/how ever might void have ever been 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 and untranslatable to another? I might describe here or caricature the you or them I imagine examining this frame, this “picture,” but who would pretend or proffer that I might, in that process, be *knowing* them to you? And like the immateriality of an inner world, even if I could copy all the pulses, darts, knots and dashes of a stenciling electric light on some screen or render a mapping of neuronal activities imaged in all my various “states.” What would be revealed in that? What more would ANY of us *know*?

The electricity and charges my brain produces we might label “agitated subject,” or “concentrated subject,” “depressed subject,” “gazing subject,” “excited,” “disregulated,” and so on. Within each of which (and millions of others besides) the terms occur so ambiguously and objective-arbitrarily we end further away than we began.

Alas, it wearies me to consider. Efforts doomed and erroneous at the outset...scoffable. How did such a project even crop up amongst us? What did we think we might uncover? (Ah, back to the mysterious ocean or caves from which we may have sprung! Our reptilian selves, our triune brains, conjectures, conjectures, wild-ass-hairs of a nightmare!)

“Fine” they gently, politely nod, “fine.” You (me/I) are doing well. Don’t get hung up on “feelings” “emotions” terms – just put pen to paper, let’s just see what comes forth. Don’t get “hung up on words” eh? Yet 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 brought me a pencil.

Just as easily broken, but the softness and variations of shading are gentler, and it emits a soothing sound (whatever “soothing” might mean for me here). As well, I am able to watch it exhaust itself, and I must keep rotating it within my fingers to fashion readable markings. I do enjoy whispering in these lines with graphite. Its liminal appearance and capacity for subtlety and starkness.

A pencil accomplishes something (I am thinking). It makes tangible the dust and fog – our weathers of uncertainty. You have to squint a little to make it out when used for forming language, and it quickly evaporates, fades. Feels more made of matter than an ink pen...more temporary and inevitably fragile, decomposing.

They led me to the library today, accompanied closely, of course. I saw more colors, shapes and forms than I have seen for weeks. Selection was limited but there were some texts on natural science (illustrated) and even a few collections of art. “What do you think these pictures express?” they asked of paintings or sculptures I paused upon.

“Look” I said, “look.”

I pretended sullen and began to ecstatically absorb – lines with dozens of colors peeking about the edges, throwing some other sector of the painting into bright relief, leading my eyes like young tight calves signaling, dashing about in summer. My eyes leapt about after splotches and strokes, sunk slowly into (imagined) vast planes of layer upon layer of shading and tone (what an interestingly borrowed term!), scratched back, built over, washed in and out. I danced through sprays of evocative squiggles, hyphens, circles, blocks and splatters, all in the space of half of 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 the hands!)

Why distance is required.

This pen appears to be blue, although by the light I am provided to scribble by, it is 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 minds from birth until its end. It’s no wonder then, is it?

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

It is suggested that I attempt to describe further what I am noting down. I already know that is not possible. “Ouroborous” I say, and close my lips and eyes, quieting my hands.

\*\*\*\*\*

Unwittingly, I suspect, you or *they* have begun encouraging me to fantasize, to concoct alternate realities, to record what “self-awareness” I might possess – in effect, to make art. Use artifice. Pretend.

As they frustrate with my mind, I sense them agitate, they request I try again to inscribe ‘emotional states or fluctuations’... what I hear is: “Be delusional! Pretend you can be other than yourself and fabricate observations or reports of what you find! Write for us from a realm of your imaginings!”

I write: “Magenta with a violet, a blackened green, a touch of white and several mixed hues of blue.” One morning simply “ultramarine.” The view up is amazing from the window when I wake – another problem – what is waking, what is not.

At this point I begin to draft single-lined wriggles and ovals (as near to circles as I am able) – day after day – delivering these gestures as my only possible responses of non-delusional self-observation / “awareness.”

They transport me somewhere. “Some place quieter, restful, pastoral and with the sound of water,” they say. My only hope is thunderstorms.

Thunderstorms shake me through and through somehow. I profess rainfall to be cleansing, charming, enervating and distracting, but thunderstorms really tear me away from things toward some other beauty. I draw an oval filling the page (as much as possible given the argumentative shapes) with emptiness. Is this what is desired? Am I approaching an “expression” with this instrument?

Another day I attempt a square and rectangle, even triangles – all with single lines and full of nothing, but none of these standardized and recognizable forms seem accurate. No self-portrait (is this what you’re after?) could be so distinct. Perceivable. “Only bits and fragments appear common among ‘selves,’” I say (regrettably), “unless there be love.”

They (you?) pounce on this – “love! Ah! Might you tell us, write” (very different things of course) “more about what you mean by this?”

“Don’t get hung up on words,” I whisper, and I’m off again to silence.

\*\*\*\*\*

There seems to be no library here, yet if I request books they arrive from somewhere. All a matter of electricity, buttons and money. As long as they last, I suppose. And at higher costs each year, I think.

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

Provenances, directions, blusters and still points, specific conditions, temperatures, “fronts,” uncountable molecules, atoms, producing just this dynamic event/effect...

This day I make a spiral down the page.

Biologies, psychologies, humors and pleasures, emotions and moods, habits, likes, dislikes, abhorrences, opinions – these seeking common spaces, *manufacturing* convergent territories...a prismatic trap. Love must be a fantasy or delusion like self-awareness...circles within circles...lapping, overlapping, twisting round, across and through. A wovenness. A magnetism, I think I meant earlier – a lust of imagination – would not knowing another be as futile as knowing oneself? I think. Learning by observation, interaction, what you cannot but effect, cannot become separate from?

A 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 monologues or conversational chattering to blend like the pitter-pattering of rain. This young lady alternates between Fernando Pessoa, James Joyce and Macedonio Fernandez, occasionally inserting a poem by Rilke, myth from Borges, language of Sabato or Blanchot. I’ve requested Laurence Sterne and Chuang-Tzu.

My statement on file is that “only great literature might 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 communicable if constantly nourished by music, language and the visual arts. Otherwise I’ll be shutting it down, I said.

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

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

Yet 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 and how I am doing, what I have done, what I think of doing, have thought about, dreamt, (asking ‘feeling’ questions less and less, as it always throws

me off my game, resulting in bewildered wordlessness). Today he mentioned ‘memory’ while flashing lights along a bar or tapping on the backs of my hands while they lay on my lap. It’s an odd sort of world to end up in, after all. I said I remembered a waterfall, a pleasantness, that it may have been Gauguin or Courbet, that they might take me through a museum or find some books about that... He dropped in the ‘how does it feel?’ query again, or ‘where in my body does that memory register?’ What to say to these people? “In the mind!” I grumbled, “it is only all in the mind – perceptions, sensations, ideas, messages...all my skin, limbs, nerves and flesh send their impulses through there,” I stated, “let me lie down now.” And thus I am.

They claim this day is my birthday. That I am allowed to have it “off.” I believe you, he said, and left me a genuinely glorious stack of books someone fetched from the library. “We’d still love for you to record your experience,” they added, “if you’d like.” *Create* my experience is more like it, I thought. Fabulate it into these marks on a canvas lacking color or texture, I thought. Sculpt a word or two in two dimensions, black, white, and yet I do suppose it passes the time (whatever ‘time’ it may be, is). Who brought me here?

The stack on the table comprises a fifth of this weeks requests I write out when they ask me my needs. “Weekly” is a term they use, for some reason I accept it. Exhibition catalogs of Cy Twombly, R.B. Kitaj, Corot and Courbet, Susan Rothenberg, Emil Nolde, Clyfford Still, Millais, Thiebaud, Gwen John, Sam Gilliam, John Piper, always a new Giacometti, the journals of Rilke, writings by C.S. Peirce, Lessing, stories by Brecht, and some medical studies on optics.

It is quiet. I had asked for music by Max Richter or Arvo Part for my “special day,” apparently this was too much, or none could be found. They, or he, uses the term “melancholy” a lot in reference to my musical tastes. And of course inquire (in increasingly subtle terminologies) how that makes me “feel.” Phrases like “how does that occur to you;” “what do you consider regarding this?” “what impressions do these stir” and so on. “Make” me feel, hmmm. I draw ovaled circles for them, if I’ve a 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 their job. What can they learn from a circle besides what they invent? Maybe it’s their task to confabulate patterns or conclusions, narratives or hypotheses from observing or investigating me, as if I’m a text or a painting. The world is a strange place to endure. I think there are very 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 planted that idea actually). It is quiet today.

I get some nifty ideas of what to do with my pen from Twombly today (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 I’ve a family” I replied – “children realize.”

I lie down.

I wake realizing I’d never read of Twombly’s life. He at least had access to crayons if I’m to believe the reproductions in this book, as well as ample unlined paper. But I also quickly

recognize that much of it is simply in pencil, yet it provides me with an almost emblematic understanding...like the mapping of eye's movements they're so fond of here. Perhaps Twombly inhabited a space such as this 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 papers of a physicist or schoolboy doodles, notes to the self, etcetera. I'll copy some as my written reports the next few days and see what you/they make of that!