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clear as mud, but mud settles

As I read, however, I applied much personally, to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none and related to none. "The path of my departure was free," and there was none to lament my annihilation. My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?

– the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.

– Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Written by Himself

“What Was My Destination?”

In *Frankenstein*, the creature learns to read by trickery. He looks through a peephole onto a family who is teaching Safie, who has come from afar, to read and speak in English, and learns her lessons. When he learns to read, he has a series of questions: “What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?” He is, after all, a creature. So his learning to read is not expected or necessary. Rather, his reading allows him to ask those all-important questions about identity, allows him an identity, and allows readers to identify with him.

Less than fifteen years later but in the United States, Frederick Douglass asserts that reading is “the pathway from slavery to freedom” (49). Similar to the creature, Douglass in his narrative ponders the relationship between literacy and subjectivity and the political rights that accompany these. His narrative points out that to gain literacy is not only to master a cultural symbolic system but also to participate in a culture. He makes this relationship literal in his narrative: literacy is a pathway to freedom. As is often noted, Douglass reads himself to emancipation, writes himself to subjectivity. In his narrative, reading is figured as productive and active, bound with agency: “The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery” (55). Douglass does not learn that slavery is an evil through reading. This is readily evident to him. But he does learn how white culture talks about slavery; he learns the vocabulary of abolitionism; and he learns how one talks with others immersed in this culture. But at the same time, Douglass’s narrative is not completely naive about reading. While recognizing reading as an agent of socialization that allows entry into the freedoms controlled by white culture, he also figures it as a potential predatory learning process that perpetuates assimilation. Douglass has moments when he is ambiguous about reading and notes that reading brought on the “very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read.” He continues, “I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder which to get out”.

One way Douglass counters this discontentment is through realizing reading as a communal, not individual, act. There are several examples of this. Douglass’s life as a reader begins with Mrs. Auld’s teaching him, but soon she is told to abandon this project by her husband, and Douglass, who realizes he still needs others to learn

to read, turns to his own wits and masters the system through communal trickery. He learns to read by trading bread for words with poor white children he meets on the street: "This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge" (53-54). And he finishes the unfinished lessons in Thomas Auld's Webster's Spelling Book. But neither of these is the ladder that leads out of the pit in which Douglass finds himself. This ladder is the word "abolition," which Douglass hears people using but does not understand. His response is to do the individualistic act and look it up in the dictionary, but this leads to little success because the dictionary just defines it by tautology as "the act of abolishing." It is only when he encounters the word used in the discussion of slavery in the newspapers that, as he notes, "the light broke in upon me by degrees" (56). Or one moves from reading as a curse to reading as bread, as a liberatory ladder, as one learns through and with others, as one exchanges and as one converses with a culture. Once reading is recognized as dependent on community, and on the relationship between readers and works as a form of community itself, reading turns into a force that can be manipulated and used as a tool of resistance to respond to the inhumanity of slavery.

I have put two unrelated stories—one fictional, one not—beside each other here as a beginning because both point to a link between reading and identity that emerges in the nineteenth century. It is emblematic, for instance, that the creature learns to read. Modern Western consciousness, these examples illustrate, is tied up with reading. This relation between consciousness and reading has a complex history, riddled with related stories of class, educational access, missionaries, and alternate cultural literacies. This book, does not tell these stories, for they are huge stories, demanding historical, sociological, and legal knowledges beyond my scope. However, the general outlines of these stories point to something crucial and wonderful and also something dangerous in the intersection between reading and identity. The works I examine in this book tell similar stories: stories that acknowledge the dangers and stories that suggest possibilities for escaping the dangers through collective and connective models of reading, through collective identities.

"Getting Out of the Way"

1. Do you love the audience?

Certainly we do. We show it by getting out of the way.

—Bruce Andrews (quoting John Cage), "Index"

What sort of selves literary works influence, encourage, or create is what this study is about.

The creature reads Milton's *Paradise Lost* and learns to act as if he were in a grand drama between good and evil. He did not learn the in-between. Thus his failure.

Douglass reads and as he reads he learns to ask others about the word "abolition." Thus his success.

I argue in *Everybody's Autonomy* that what we read and how we read it matters. That a heavily plotted and symbolic novel, for example, encourages a different sort of reading practice than mixed-genre writing. While either work might affect readers in many different ways, the formal aspect of each must play a role in any consideration of reading.

I argue here that when we tackle literary criticism's central question of what sort of selves literary works create, we should value works that encourage connection. By "connection" here I mean works that present and engage with large, public worlds that are in turn shared with readers. I mean forms of writing that well represent and expand changing notions of the public, of everybody. And I mean forms of writing that take advantage of reading's dynamic and reciprocal nature. "You read," Theresa Hak Kyung Cha writes, "you mouth the transformed object across from you in its new state, other than what it had been" (DICTEE 131). In this context, it is crucial that the creature and Douglass both learn to read only with others. This most necessary of acts in modern society is also one we must learn with others, arduously. It has nothing natural about it. It is bound with exchange (the first things written supposedly are records of sale). It is a difficult translation this move from symbol to letter to sound. And yet it is, as these stories suggest, a defining one for how we think of ourselves.

My emphasis in this book is less on deciphering works, and more on what sorts of communities works encourage. It has not been unusual to argue that reading leads to transcendence in forms like the novel because it allows identification with others. Similarly, I am interested in works that encourage communal readings. I would include identificatory moments in this, but I would also want to include moments that are non-identificatory: moments when one realizes the limits of one's knowledge; moments of partial or qualified identification; moments when one realizes and respects unlikeness; moments when one connects with other readers (instead of characters). I am interested in works that look at the relation between reading and identity in order to comment on the nature of collectivity. Works that recognize reading's dangers,

its potential exclusions, and work to make this relationship more productive. I am interested in works that use reading to contribute to, contest, and expand how we think of public (and thus cultural) spheres. I am interested in works that pursue cosmologies diverse enough for individual contestation and evaluation, yet still have as their ultimate goal considerations of what sorts of humans the experience of reading encourages us to be. I am not arguing here for a model reader or for a recognizable community, like my mother's reading group that meets every other Sunday. I have avoided writers whose work tends to be seen as representative of certain well-defined group concerns (the way, say, Adrienne Rich's work represents a feminist community or Gloria Anzaldua's a Chicana). My argument is more formal than sociological, and many of the works I examine here have been critiqued as apolitical formalism and for not adequately taking up representational concerns. Yet my turn to a different canon of works to address representational concerns is not because I feel that well-defined collective gestures are unimportant, but rather because I feel that expanding the range of works under consideration would also expand and add much to current discussions of identity, especially how individual identities negotiate within collectivities.

The main story of this book is told through the work of Gertrude Stein, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Harryette Mullen, and Theresa Hak Kyung Chao. By concentrating on works that use nonstandard English, multilingualism, puns, disconnected syntaxes, and repetition, *Everybody's Autonomy* argues for anarchic—in the sense of self-governing—approaches to reading. The works of these writers, rather than guiding readers through developmental structures to a neat box of a conclusion, encourage dynamic participation. Rather than rewarding readers for well deciphered meaning and allusion, they reward readers for responsive involvement and for awareness of their limitations. Andrews, to choose just one example here, argues that reading at its best is a form of co-production. His writing, instead of having a clear poetic voice, has voices in the plural. And it is often composed of phrases and sentences that are multiply connected within the work (they tend to be joined by dashes, and it is hard to tell where one ends or begins). This work only makes sense if one sees reading as dramatically reciprocal, as shareable, as connective.

While this attention to reading's connective moments is a value in its own right, I argue that this attention to readers has much to add to discussions of subjectivity. It is no coincidence, I argue, that the emphasis on reading as connective and communal in these works parallels the rise of a literature that addresses gender, ethnicity, and race. I also argue that there is a close relationship between this

literature and consciousness-raising. While it is often said that these works are inaccessible because they are too experimental or too avant-garde and thus dissolve subjectivity, I maintain that these writers instead directly engage the complicated claims around identity that come to the forefront of large social concerns in the late 1960s. But rather than the clear, singular voice and narrative of much of the literature that gets categorized as consciousness-raising, these works propose group identities with room for individualistic response. Thus, my concentration in this study has been on the tension in these works between collectivity and individualism. For, in a crucial move, these works repeatedly relate reader autonomy to social, political, and cultural autonomy. Mullen's work, for example, concentrates not on an essential African-American culture, but rather locates the distinctiveness of African-American culture in its gathering and use of various cultures and in its respect for various sorts of autonomy. Her work avoids placing essentialist identities against performative identities and avoids juxtaposing orality against textuality by concentrating instead on cultural flows and exchanges without abandoning a racial consciousness.

A few of the questions I asked as I began writing were: Is reading (and forms of writing other than prose) still relevant in the age of cultural studies? What sort of cultural information does the formal construction of a work carry? That an attention to reading went more or less out of style after the 1980s and did not play much of a role in the turn to studies of literature's cultural roles concerned me. And so this book is an attempt to propose a theory of reading that is in dialogue with the concerns of race and ethnic studies. I argue that these works of autonomy are a rich yet often overlooked tradition in the literature of minority, immigrant, exile, and/or postcolonial experience. Thus, one other goal of this book is to place what are often considered marginal forms of American literature in a larger, cross-cultural context.

It is worth noting in this context that the works on which I have concentrated in this study defy genre conventions. Most often these works are considered poetry, but in some ways that seems less representative of the actual forms of these works and more indicative of how bookstores shelve anything that is not conventional prose in the poetry section. Still, I have been torn over whether or not to make this book an argument for poetry.

On the one hand, calling works poetry throws them off the radar of much academic discourse. As Carrie Noland notes, "As attention shifts from canonical texts and formalist methodologies to the

contextualized study of more popular forms, poetry appears to be the genre whose traditional status within the humanities curriculum is most seriously threatened". Anecdotally, I see this trend reflected in the courses taught in my university. There are few poetry courses, and when poetry does appear it does so as a part of historically based survey classes. Courses that examine concepts of race, ethnicity, nation, and culture in literature, if they teach any poetry at all, tend to say something after a long list of novels like "the reading for this course will be supplemented by some poems." On the other hand, the works I examine in this study are often written by writers who identify themselves as poets, and that is probably telling. These works—the ones that come after Stein—all have roots in the huge growth of various grassroots, non-university-affiliated poetry scenes that developed in the United States after the 1950s. While some of these writers teach in the university (Andrews in political science at Fordham University; Mullen in English at UCLA), their work is not rooted in the M.F.A./creative writing scene but rather in communities gathering outside traditional institutions. My response in this study has been to more or less leave these issues of genre behind, as these writers have done in their own work. Yet I bring issues of genre up here because they do have some larger resonance. I realized this the other day when listening to a colleague talking about the death of poetry (she was referencing books like Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?*) and student disinterest. Her conviction—even while it was said in lament—that poetry was irrelevant to the time pointed out to me how dramatically different poetry's role in the university is from its role outside academia. One of the more interesting sociological moments genre studies has yet to examine is how the decline of poetry in the academy has been accompanied by a growth in the attention, publication, and programming of poetry by nonuniversity venues. Poetry in these venues has become an unusually politicized genre. And as Maria Damon notes, "[t]hese forms, consciousnesses, and communities are not, however, mere acultural novelties but carry with them the traces and influences of many dissident or socially subordinated traditions as well as evolving new ones" (*Avant-Garde or Borderguard* 479). The issues and concerns of collectivity and critique that are dominant discussions in these various grassroots poetry scenes have greatly defined and influenced the writers of this study.

A recent talk by Grace Molisa at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa made me think more about what is to be gained from poetry. Molisa, a writer from Vanuatu, spoke movingly on the role of poetry in a country of eighty islands with over one hundred languages (three national languages) and a population of 170,000.

Her poetry, a poetry of memo, made me think a lot about poetry's role as information. One of Molisa's poems, for instance, is called "Democracy" and explains very clearly that democracy is using a stanzaic form. Molisa talked of how she began writing poetry in order to be able to get information out to isolated villages. Her work interests me because it is so divorced from the conventions of postcolonial poetry even while it is directly rooted in a postcolonial state. While I want to avoid genre essentialism, her attention to the sorts of work poetry can do in various contexts was one that I saw as useful for thinking about works of autonomy and poetry's unique role outside the academy.

Finally, this book also is a defense of literature, of poetry, in an age of critique. When I sat down to write this study, I wanted to point to works that I found important pedagogically and personally, works that shifted conventions of thinking for the students I encountered and for myself. While literary criticism has done valuable work of critique, successfully investigating how literature can reify racism and sexism, it has less often explored the ways literature might avoid such damages. This book looks at works that concentrate on possibilities of response to various forms of oppression. These are works that are emblematic of the world's growing connectiveness, yet ones that do not see these connections as unifying or homogeneous. They are works that negotiate between the dire worries of homogeneity and loss and the utopian hopes of diversity and invention.

I develop these arguments through a series of chronologically ordered close readings, beginning with Stein's claim to write for everybody, with her use of fragmentation to encourage reader autonomy. Stein's work is an ideal place for any consideration of reading's politics and possibilities because it is so extreme, so extremely repetitive, so extremely fractured, and so extremely lengthy. In this chapter I begin by placing this much-noted extremity and multivalence of Stein's experimental works in an urban, polyglot context. And I conclude by looking at Stein's claims that she wrote for everybody.

In the second chapter I look at language writing in general and the work of Andrews and Hejinian in particular. In this chapter I examine not only the already-mentioned connective possibilities of Andrews's work, but also the investigation of privilege that is often overlooked in discussions of experimental works. For instance, I examine how Hejinian uses identification in *My Life* to move her

readers in, through, and out of her autobiographical “I.” Hejinian’s switch of autobiography from narcissistic and individualistic to the constructed nature of collective memory is a deliberate reinterpretation of the bourgeois history of the autobiography. The twist of *My Life* is how it points out that even the most narcissistic and self-privileging of genres has possibilities for outward connection. Andrews’s “Confidence Trick” extends the work of *My Life* into racial critique. The “I” in this work is not allowed to be generic. And whiteness is never allowed to be neutral in this poem. It is mocked and always exposed as connected to larger systems of power. The moments of reader connection in Andrews’s work are, thus, also moments where readers are required to question their own affiliations.

In the third chapter I turn to the work of Harryette Mullen. Mullen’s later works—and these are the ones I concentrate on—turn to puns, samplings, and other sorts of wordplay to examine and challenge overly limiting constructions of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. As her work illustrates, the difficult and necessary work of challenging limiting subjectivities requires also that one challenge the strictures of grammar and rigorous narrative.

In the final chapter I look at Cha’s *DICTEE*. Cha talks about reading frequently in *DICTEE*. In her preferred model, reading involves not simply identifying and assigning meaning to certain works, but also entering into a creative and self-reflexive relation with them. Both readers and works matter. *DICTEE* is a complicated work. It is multilingual (it is mainly written in a nonstandard English and French); it is more collage than narrative; it is highly allusive; it often tricks and lies to its readers. My argument in this chapter is that Cha pursues and presents not simply a critique of colonization on the level of content (much of the book is about the colonization of Korea by Japan), but that she also writes her work so as to decolonize reading. Her work challenges the forms of reading that subtly remove literature from cultural concerns, from the world that produces and surrounds it. As political decolonization’s intent is to dislodge dominant and externally imposed ideas and ideologies, so Cha wants to dislodge dominant and externally imposed methods of reading. I conclude by arguing for alliances, by suggesting that the concerns of reading and identity that I locate in this book can be found in a number of twentieth-century works.

“Clear as Mud, But Mud Settles”

My writing is clear as mud. but mud settles and clear streams run on

and disappear. perhaps that is the reason but really there is no reason except that the earth is round and that no one knows the limits of the universe that is the whole thing about men and women that is interesting.

– Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography*

The creativity of the reader grows as the institution that controlled it declines.

– Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

It has been a good, heady century for readers. In fact, one of the sad ironies of contemporary life is that while a new world order constantly asserts its might (the writing of this book was sandwiched between the Gulf War and the bombing of Serbia), there has been at the same time a vigilant, if often overlooked, tendency of art and culture that continually reacts against authoritarianism in the name of autonomy. I am not sure what to make of this. Some might argue that culture has become so irrelevant under global capitalism that its resistances are ignored, but I think one could just as easily argue that things could be much worse without cultural resistance and reclamation, without literature that presents a way out of the abyss.

In this context, some well schooled in reader response and deconstruction might reply to my arguments that reading is always free, always impossible to pin down.⁷ Even literary criticism, one of the genres more slow to change, reflects this move to autonomy that defines twentieth-century culture. After New Criticism's intense respect for the work, literary theory celebrates reading in a series of quick changes that begin in the 1970s with deconstruction and continue to this day. Readers gain so much power that, by 1980, Stanley Fish asks *Is There a Text in This Class?* and answers no.

But it is worth noticing, as the language acquisition sections of Cha's *DICTEE* so poignantly suggest, that reading is also a learned and regulated act. Reading is usually taught in school so as to walk hand in hand with assimilation. And it is at its most oppressive when taught through principles of absolute meaning. Beginning reading exercises tend to emphasize meaning as unambiguous and singular; the word "duck" in the primer means the bird, not the verb. Further, as a learned and regulated act, reading socializes readers not only into the process of translating symbol into word with a one-to-

one directness, but also into specific social relationships. Dick and Jane, to use the most cliched example of a primer, teach how to live the normalized lives of the nuclear family as much as they teach how to read. Further, much of what is read does not fully engage the resistant possibilities within reading, and as a result it tends to perpetuate reading's conventions.

So while one of the major lessons of poststructuralism has been that readers construct meanings and texts, these works that pursue reader autonomy point to how this construction does not take place on an entirely blank slate. Too many arguments about reading end with the mere observation that reading is variable and sidestep the responsibility for assessing the politics and dynamics of reading itself. Readers can, after all, read variably only to find themselves choosing between two forms of containment. To ignore the formal characteristics of the work is to ignore one of the crucial ways works carry meaning. Further, such an approach reads all works as bland and apolitical.

Undeniably, my attention to reading here draws heavily from deconstructive and reading response theory that developed in the 1980s. I have learned a lot from the attention in these discussions to the more practical moments of reading, and from the attention to how reading is a variable act. But while reader-orientated theory has been of undeniable influence to both my work and my teaching, I have found its distrust of readers' potential for anarchic rebellion of limited applicability to the works I examine here. The fear of anarchy has led a number of critics-the very critics most concerned with resisting readerly restrictions-to conceive of readers as one of them, as literary critics who categorize and follow reading's conventions. Umberto Eco's "model reader," Wolfgang Iser's "implied reader," Michael Riffaterre's "super reader," Jonathan Culler's "ideal reader," and Stanley Fish's "community of readers" are all examples of this sort of model reader.

While the character of the model readers that these critics present often varies, and requires more attention than I dedicate here, Fish's turn to a community-oriented model of reading that limits individual response provides a succinct example of the potentially repressive possibilities of such models. When he asks "Is there a text in this class?" and answers no, there are only readers; but since he also fears the anarchy that could happen when there are only readers, he proposes readers who will not misbehave. Fish's introduction to *Is There a Text in This Class?* presents him wrestling constantly with the question of a reader's potential anarchy (which he calls

“subjectivity”) and continually sidestepping the issue until he reconceives “the reader in such a way as to eliminate the category of ‘the subjective’ altogether”. Instead of seeing reading’s difficult relation to subjectivity as a crucial part of reading’s power, he establishes the kinder, gentler authority of a dominant community. Readers may create the work, but not individually, only through their input into this larger interpretive community. His model also assumes the members of this community to be critics. This community, as Elizabeth Meese notes, establishes “a strong insider-outsider dynamic, a gender-based literary tribalism, that comes into play as a means of control”. In contrast, the works of reader autonomy that I concentrate on here invert literary tribalism and insist on crossed interpretative moves and communities.

For the works I discuss here, I have found it useful to think of reading as anarchic. There is in these works a collective attention to the multiple, an attention to the diversity of response in the name of individual rights. David Weir points out in *Anarchy and Culture* that “anarchism succeeded culturally where it failed politically”, and the works that I discuss in this book are best explained with an anarchic frame. I am thinking here of reading as a form of self-governing that resembles Peter Kropotkin’s territorial and functional decentralization. Stein, for instance, writes for anarchic individualism when she writes the word “one” one hundred times-like this: “one and one and one ... “-so as to emphasize individuals within communities (Useful Knowledge 150-151). And Andrews riffs off of Stein to connect reading and this multiplicity of position: “We can take our well-developed attention to signs & our desire for their dishevelment & expose it to a social dialogue, to networks of meaning understood as thoroughly socialized, to questions about the making of the subject (Reading as Writing & Writing as Reading): the making of Americans-the making of me, myself, & I -of you, yourself, & uS” (Paradise & Method 52). And Cha urges simply, “More. Others.” (DICTEE 65). These one-word sentences of Cha’s, with their content of pluralism yet a rejection of collective inclusion into the sentence’s hierarchies, well exemplify much of what interests me about these works.

Often the criticism of these works of reader autonomy misreads them as individualistic. Again and again, for instance, Stein’s work has been called nonsense, or private, or encoded, or presymbolic. Instead, I like to think of her work as using reading to encourage a sort of anarchy, not the sort the Sex Pistols called for where all the rules are abandoned in the name of chaos, but rather one where the work allows readers self-governance and autonomy, where

the reading act is given as much authority as the authoring act. As Emma Goldman writes, "Individuality is not to be confused with the various ideas and concepts of Individualism; much less with that 'rugged individualism' which is only a masked attempt to repress and defeat the individual and his individuality". These works value the individual meanings readers bring to works and abandon much of the authority of the author. They, like anarchism, work to have both individuality and community. And from them a new discursive economy emerges, one that does not subordinate readers to explicative functions.

For similar reasons, I have also found useful theories of reading that come out of anthropology's concern with cultural negotiations and which figure it as cooperative storytelling. This would include Paulo Friere's various pedagogies. And Michael Taussig's emphasis on reading as "excesses of interpretation". And Smadar Lavie's attention to how the Mzeina are "able to transcend world politics by means of local poetics". And Greg Sarris's attention to reading's relation to dialogues or conversations "that can open the intermingling of the multiple voices within and between people and the texts they encounter, enabling people to see and hear the ways various voices intersect and overlap, the ways they have been repressed or held down because of certain social and political circumstances, and the ways they can be talked about and explored" (*Keeping Slug Woman Alive* 5). And outside anthropology, certainly Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, required undergraduate reading for any English major of my age, resonates here.

I should stress here, however, that I turn to these theories for their attention to reading, for their attention to how poetry and other forms of writing matter. Clearly, the role of language writing in the United States is not in any way the same sort of role that Mzeina tribal poetry or Porno baskets or stories have to those cultures.¹⁰ But still, I have found these critics' turn away from a work's "literariness" and toward its collective resonances and uses more useful for thinking about reading's connective moments. These theories have also helped me to understand the importance (pedagogically; personally) of a series of often overlooked works in the United States.

Mainly, this book is an attempt to figure out my own story, to understand what happened when I was in high school and found Stein's work in an anthology of twentieth-century writing and everything that I thought I knew about reading changed. While one reading of this moment would be assimilationist (Stein's work representing everything that the rural Midwestern town I was

growing up in was against), I have not been willing to dismiss this early moment that easily. So this book is, fourteen years later, a continuation of the paper I wrote my senior year in high school in which I attempted to figure out what it was that Tender Buttons meant.

Act so that there is no use in a centre. A wide action is not a width. A preparation is given to the ones preparing. They do not eat who mention silver and sweet. There was an occupation.

A whole centre and a border make hanging a way of dressing. This which is not why there is a voice is the remains of an offering. There was no rental.

So the tune which is there has a little piece to play, and the exercise is all there is of a fast. The tender and true that makes no width to hew is the time that there is question to adopt.

To begin the placing there is no wagon. There is no change lighter. It was done. And then the spreading, that was not accomplishing that needed standing and yet the time was not so difficult as they were not all in place. They had no change. They were not respected. They were that, they did it so much in the matter and this showed that that settlement was not condensed. It was spread there. Any change was in the ends of the centre. A heap was heavy. There was no change.

Burnt and behind and lifting a temporary stone and lifting more than a drawer.

The instance of there being more is an instance of more. The shadow is not shining in the way there is a black line. The truth has come. There is a disturbance. Trusting to a baker's boy meant that there would be very much exchanging and anyway what is the use of a covering to a door. There is a use, they are double.

If the centre has the place then there is distribution. That is natural. There is a contradiction and naturally returning there comes to be both sides and the centre. That can be seen from the description.

The author of all that is in there behind the door and that is entering in the morning. Explaining darkening and expecting relating is all of a piece. The stove is bigger. It was of a shape that made no audience bigger if the opening is assumed why should there not be kneeling. Any force which is bestowed on a floor shows rubbing. This is so nice and sweet and yet there comes the change, there

comes the time to press more air. This does not mean the same as disappearance.

A little lingering lion and a Chinese chair, all the handsome cheese which is stone, all of it and a choice, a choice of a blotter. If it is difficult to do it one way there is no place of similar trouble. None. The whole arrangement is established. The end of which is that there is a suggestion, a suggestion that there can be a different whiteness to a wall. This was thought.

5. The Domestication of Hunch

MY LANDLADY, a voluble man, arranged my journey into the East. "If a person wants to visit Fastnesses he's got to cross the Kargav. Over the mountains, into Old Karhide, to Rer, the old Kings' City. Now I'll tell you, a hearthfellow of mine runs a landboat caravan over the Eskar Pass and yesterday he was telling me over a cup of orsh that they're going to make their first trip this summer on Getheny Osme, it having been such a warm spring and the road already clear up to Engohar and the plows will have the pass clear in another couple of days. Now you won't catch me crossing the Kargav, Erhenrang for me and a roof over my head. But I'm a Yomeshta, praise to the nine hundred Throne-Up-holders and blest be the Milk of Meshe, and one can be a Yomeshta anywhere. We're a lot of newcomers, see, for my Lord Meshe was born 2,202 years-ago, but the Old Way of the Handdara goes back ten thousand years before that. You have to go back to the Old Land if you're after the Old Way. Now look here, Mr. Ai, I'll have a room in this island for you whenever you come back, but I believe you're a wise man to be going out of Erhenrang for a while, for everybody knows that the Traitor made a great show of befriending you at the Palace. Now with old Tibe as the King's Ear things will go smooth again. Now if you go down to the New Port you'll find my hearthfellow there, and if you tell him I sent you . . ."

And so on. He was, as I said, voluble, and having discovered that I had no shifgrethor took every chance to give me advice, though even he disguised it with ifs and as-ifs. He was the superintendent of my island; I thought of him as my landlady, for he had fat buttocks that wagged as he walked, and a soft fat face, and a prying, spying, ignoble, kindly nature. He was good to me, and also showed my room while I was out to thrill-seekers for a small fee: See the Mysterious Envoy's room! He was so feminine in looks and manner that I once asked him how many children he had. He looked

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glum. He had never borne any. He had, however, sired four. It was one of the little jolts I was always getting. Cultural shock was nothing much compared to the biological shock I suffered as a human male among human beings who were, five-sixths of the time, hermaphroditic neuters.

The radio bulletins were full of the doings of the new Prime Minister, Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe. Much of the news concerned affairs up north in the Sinoth Valley. Tibe evidently was going to press Karhide's claim to that region: precisely the kind of action which, on any other world at this stage of civilization, would lead to war. But on Gethen nothing led to war. Quarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations, all these were in their repertory of human accomplishments; but they did not go to war. They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to *mobilize*. They behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants. At any rate they never yet had done so. What I knew of Orgoreyn indicated that it had become, over the last five or six centuries, an increasingly mobilizable society, a real nation-state. The prestige-competition, heretofore mostly economic, might force Karhide to emulate its larger neighbor, to become a nation instead of a family quarrel, as Estraven had said; to become, as Estraven had also said, patriotic. If this occurred the Gethenians might have an excellent chance of achieving the condition of war.

I wanted to go to Orgoreyn and see if my guesses concerning it were sound, but I wanted to finish up with Karhide first; so I sold another ruby to the scar-faced jeweler in Eng Street, and with no baggage but my money, my ansible, a few instruments and a change of clothes, set off as passenger on a trade-caravan on the first day of the first month of summer.

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The landboats left at daybreak from the windswept loading-yards of the New Port. They drove under the Arch and turned east, twenty bulky, quiet-running, barge-like trucks on caterpillar treads, going single file down the deep streets of Erhenrang through the shadows of morning. They carried boxes of lenses, reels of soundtapes, spools of copper and platinum wire, bolts of plant-fiber cloth raised and woven in the West Fall, chests of dried fish-flakes from the Gulf, crates of ball-bearings and other small machine parts, and ten truckloads of Orgota kardik-grain: all bound for the Pering Storm-border, the northeast corner of the land. All shipping on the Great Continent is by these electric-powered trucks, which go on barges on the rivers and canals where possible. During the deep-snow months, slow tractor-plows, power-sledges, and the erratic ice-ships on frozen rivers are the only transport beside skis and manhauled sledges; during the Thaw no form of transport is reliable; so most freight traffic goes with a rush, come summer. The roads then are thick with caravans. Traffic is controlled, each vehicle or caravan being required to keep in constant radio touch with checkpoints along the way. It all moves along, however crowded, quite steadily at the rate of 25 miles per hour (Terran). Gethenians could make their vehicles go faster, but they do not. If asked why not, they answer "Why?" Like asking Terrans why all our vehicles must go so fast; we answer "Why not?" No disputing tastes. Terrans tend to feel they've got to get ahead, make progress. The people of Winter, who always live in the Year One, feel that progress is less important than presence. My tastes were Terran, and leaving Ehrenrang I was impatient with the methodical pace of the caravan; I wanted to get out and run. I was glad to get clear of those long stone streets overhung with black, steep roofs

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and innumerable towers, that sunless city where all my chances had turned to fear and betrayal.

Climbing the Kargav foothills the caravan halted briefly but often for meals at roadside inns. Along in the afternoon we got our first full view of the range from a foothill summit. We saw Kostor, which is four miles high, from foot to crest; the huge slant of its western slope hid the peaks north of it, some of which go up to thirty thousand feet. South from Kostor one peak after another stood out white against a colorless sky; I counted thirteen, the last an undefined glimmer in the mist of distance in the south. The driver named the thirteen for me, and told me stories of avalanches, and landboats blown off the road by mountain winds, and snowplow crews marooned for weeks in inaccessible heights, and so on, in a friendly effort to terrify me. He described having seen the truck ahead of his skid and go over a thousand-foot precipice; what was remarkable, he said, was the slowness with which it fell. It seemed to take all afternoon floating down into the abyss, and he had been very glad to see it at last vanish, with no sound at all, into a forty-foot snowdrift at the bottom.

At Third Hour we stopped for dinner at a large inn, a grand place with vast roaring fireplaces and vast beam-roofed rooms full of tables loaded with good food; but we did not stay the night. Ours was a sleeper-caravan, hurrying (in its Karhidish fashion) to be the first of the season into the Pering Storm country, to skim the cream of the market for its merchant-entrepreneurs. The truck-batteries were recharged, a new shift of drivers took over, and we went on. One truck of the caravan served as sleeper, for drivers only. No beds for passengers. I spent the night in the cold cab on the hard seat, with one break along near midnight for supper at a little inn high in the hills. Karhide is no country for comfort. At

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dawn I was awake and saw that we had left everything behind except rock, and ice, and light, and the narrow road always going up and up under our treads. I thought, shivering, that there are things that outweigh comfort, unless one is an old woman or a cat.

No more inns now, among these appalling slopes of snow and granite. At mealtimes the landboats came silently to a halt one after the other on some thirty-degree, snow-encroached grade, and everybody climbed down from the cabs and gathered about the sleeper, from which bowls of hot soup were served, slabs of dried breadapple, and sour beer in mugs. We stood about stamping in the snow, gobbling up food and drink, backs to the bitter wind that was filled with a glittering dust of dry snow. Then back into the landboats, and on, and up. At noon in the passes of Wehoth, at about 14,000 feet, it was 82° F. in the sun and 13° in the shade. The electric engines were so quiet that one could hear avalanches grumble down immense blue slopes on the far side of chasms twenty miles across.

Late that afternoon we passed the summit, at Eskar, 15,200 feet. Looking up the slope of the southern face of Kostor, on which we had been infinitesimally crawling all day, I saw a queer rock-formation a quarter mile or so above the road, a castle-like outcropping. "See the Fastness up there?" said the driver.

"That's a building?"

"That's Ariskostor Fastness."

"But no one could live up here."

"Oh, the Old Men can. I used to drive in a caravan that brought up their food from Erhenrang, late in summer. Of course they can't get in or out for ten or eleven months of the year, but they don't care. There's seven or eight Indwellers up there."

I stared up at the buttresses of rough rock, solitary

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in the huge solitude of the heights, and I did not believe the driver; but I suspended my disbelief. If any people could survive in such a frozen aerie, they would be Karhiders.

The road descending swung far north and far south, edging along precipices, for the east slope of the Kar-gav is harsher than the west, falling to the plains in great stairsteps, the raw fault-blocks of the mountains' making. At sunset we saw a tiny string of dots creeping through a huge white shadow seven thousand feet below: a landboat caravan that had left Erhenrang a day ahead of us. Late the next day we had got down there and were creeping along that same snow-slope, very softly, not sneezing, lest we bring down the avalanche. From there we saw for a while, away below and beyond us eastward, vague vast lands blurred with clouds and shadows of clouds and streaked with silver of rivers, the Plains of Rer.

At dusk of the fourth day out from Erhenrang we came to Rer. Between the two cities lie eleven hundred miles, and a wall several miles high, and two or three thousand years. The caravan halted outside the Western Gate, where it would be shifted onto canal-barges. No landboat or car can enter Rer. It was built before Karhiders used powered vehicles, and they have been using them for over twenty centuries. There are no streets in Rer. There are covered walks, tunnel-like, which in summer one may walk through or on top of as one pleases. The houses and islands and Hearths sit every which way, chaotic, in a profuse prodigious confusion that suddenly culminates (as anarchy will do in Karhide) in splendor: the great Towers of the Un-Palace, blood-red, windowless. Built seventeen centuries ago, those towers housed the kings of Karhide for a thousand years, until Argaven Harge, first of his dynasty, crossed

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the Kargav and settled the great valley of the West Fall. All the buildings of Rer are fantastically massive, deep-founded, weatherproof and waterproof. In winter the wind of the plains may keep the city clear of snow, but when it blizzards and piles up they do not clear the streets, having no streets to clear. They use the stone tunnels, or burrow temporary ones in the snow. Nothing of the houses but the roof sticks out above the snow, and the winter-doors may be set under the eaves or in the roof itself, like dormers. The Thaw is the bad time on that plain of many rivers. The tunnels then are storm-sewers, and the spaces between buildings become canals or lakes, on which the people of Rer boat to their business, fending off small ice-floes with the oars. And always, over the dust of summer, the snowy roof-jumble of winter, or the floods of spring, the red Towers loom, the empty heart of the city, indestructible.

I lodged in a dreary overpriced inn crouching in the lee of the Towers. I got up at dawn after many bad dreams, and paid the extortioner for bed and breakfast and inaccurate directions as to the way I should take, and set forth afoot to find Otherhord, an ancient Fastness not far from Rer. I was lost within fifty yards of the inn. By keeping the Towers behind me and the huge white loom of the Kargav on my right, I got out of the city headed south, and a farmer's child met on the road told me where to turn off for Otherhord.

I came there at noon. That is, I came somewhere at noon, but I wasn't sure where. It was mainly a forest or a thick wood; but the woods were even more carefully tended than is usual in that country of careful foresters, and the path led along the hillside right in among the trees. After a while I became aware that there was a wooden hut just off the path to my right, and then I noticed a quite large wooden building a little farther

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off to my left; and from somewhere there came a delicious smell of fresh frying fish.

I went slowly along the path, a little uneasy. I didn't know how the Handdarata felt about tourists. I knew very little about them in fact. The Handdara is a religion without institution, without priests, without hierarchy, without vows, without creed; I am still unable to say whether it has a God or not. It is elusive. It is always somewhere else. Its only fixed manifestation is in the Fastnesses, retreats to which people may retire and spend the night or a lifetime. I wouldn't have been pursuing this curiously intangible cult into its secret places at all, if I hadn't wanted to answer the question left unanswered by the Investigators: What are the Foretellers, and what do they actually do?

I had been longer in Karhide now than the Investigators had, and I doubted that there was anything to the stories of Foretellers and their prophecies. Legends of prediction are common throughout the whole Household of Man. Gods speak, spirits speak, computers speak. Oracular ambiguity or statistical probability provides loopholes, and discrepancies are expunged by Faith. However, the legends were worth investigating. I hadn't yet convinced any Karhider of the existence of telepathic communication; they wouldn't believe it till they "saw" it: my position exactly, regarding the Foretellers of the Handdara.

As I went on along the path I realized that a whole village or town was scattered about in the shadow of that slanting forest, all as random as Rer was, but secretive, peaceful, rural. Over every roof and path hung the boughs of the hemmens, the commonest tree of Winter, a stout conifer with thick pale-scarlet needles. Hemmencones littered the branching paths, the wind was scented with hemmen-pollen, and all the houses were built of

the dark hemmenwood. I stopped at last wondering which door to knock at, when a person came sauntering out of the trees and greeted me courteously. "Will you be looking for a dwellingplace?" he asked.

"I've come with a question for the Foretellers." I had decided to let them take me, at first anyhow, for a Karhider. Like the Investigators I had never had any trouble passing as a native, if I wanted to; among all the Karhidish dialects my accent went unnoticed, and my sexual anomalies were hidden by the heavy clothing. I lacked the fine thick hair-thatch and the downward eye-slant of the typical Gethenian, and was blacker and taller than most, but not beyond the range of normal variation. My beard had been permanently depilated before I left Ollul (at that time we didn't yet know about the "pelted" tribes of Perunter, who are not only bearded but hairy all over, like White Terrans). Occasionally I was asked how my nose got broken. I have a flat nose; Gethenian noses are prominent and narrow, with constricted passages, well adapted to breathing subfreezing air. The person on the path at Otherhord looked with mild curiosity at my nose, and answered, "Then perhaps you'll want to speak to the Weaver? He's down in the glade now, unless he went out with the woodsledge. Or would you rather talk first to one of the Celibates?"

"I'm not sure. I'm exceedingly ignorant—"

The young man laughed and bowed. "I am honored!" he said. "I've lived here three years, but haven't yet acquired enough ignorance to be worth mentioning." He was highly amused, but his manner was gentle, and I managed to recollect enough scraps of Handdara lore to realize that I had been boasting, very much as if I'd come up to him and said "I'm exceedingly handsome . . ."

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"I meant, I don't know anything about the Foretellers—"

"Enviably!" said the young Indweller. "Behold, we must sully the plain snow with footprints, in order to get anywhere. May I show you the way to the glade? My name is Goss."

It was a first name. "Genry," I said, abandoning my "I." I followed Goss farther into the chill shade of the forest. The narrow path changed direction often, winding up the slope and down again; here and there, near it or away off among the massive trunks of the hemmens, stood the small, forest-colored houses. Everything was red and brown, dank, still, fragrant, gloomy. From one of the houses drifted the faint whistling sweetness of a Karhidish flute. Goss went light and quick, graceful as a girl, some yards ahead of me. All at once his white shirt blazed out, and I came out after him from shadow into full sunlight on a wide green meadow.

Twenty feet from us stood a figure, straight, motionless, profiled, the scarlet hieb and white shirt an inlay of bright enamel against the green of the high grass. A hundred yards beyond him stood another statue, in blue and white; this one never moved or glanced our way all the time we talked with the first one. They were practicing the Handdara discipline of Presence, which is a kind of trance—the Handdarata, given to negatives, call it an untrance—involving self-loss (self-augmentation?) through extreme sensual receptiveness and awareness. Though the technique is the exact opposite of most techniques of mysticism it probably is a mystical discipline, tending towards the experience of Immanence; but I can't categorize any practice of the Handdarata with certainty. Goss spoke to the person in scarlet. As he broke from his intense movelessness and looked at us

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and came slowly towards us, I felt an awe of him. In that noon sunlight he shone of his own light.

He was as tall as I, and slender, with a clear, open, and beautiful face. As his eyes met mine I was suddenly moved to bespeak him, to try to reach him with the mindspeech I had never used since I landed on Winter, and should not use, yet. The impulse was stronger than the restraint. I bespoke him. There was no response. No contact was made. He continued to look straight at me. After a moment he smiled and said in a soft, rather high voice, "You're the Envoy, aren't you?"

I stammered and said, "Yes."

"My name is Faxe. We're honored to receive you. Will you stay with us in Otherhord a while?"

"Willingly. I am seeking to learn about your practice of Foretelling. And if there's anything I can tell you in return about what I am, where I come from—"

"Whatever you like," said Faxe with a serene smile. "This is a pleasant thing, that you should cross the Ocean of Space, and then add another thousand miles and a crossing of the Kargav to your journey to come to us here."

"I wanted to come to Otherhord because of the fame of its predictions."

"You want to watch us foretelling, then, perhaps. Or have you a question of your own?"

His clear eyes compelled truth. "I don't know," I said.

"Nusuth," said he, "it doesn't matter. Perhaps if you stay a while you'll find if you have a question, or no question. . . . There are only certain times, you know, when the Foretellers are able to meet together, so in any case you'd dwell with us some days."

I did, and they were pleasant days. Time was unorganized except for the communal work, field labor, gardening, woodcutting, maintenance, for which transients

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such as myself were called on by whatever group most needed a hand. Aside from the work, a day might pass without a word spoken; those I talked with most often were young Goss, and Faxe the Weaver, whose extraordinary character, as limpid and unfathomable as a well of very clear water, was a quintessence of the character of the place. In the evenings there might be a gathering in the hearth-room of one or another of the low, tree-surrounded houses; there was conversation, and beer, and there might be music, the vigorous music of Karhide, melodically simple but rhythmically complex, always played extempore. One night two Indwellers danced, men so old that their hair had whitened, and their limbs were skinny, and the downward folds at the outer eye-corners half hid their dark eyes. Their dancing was slow, precise, controlled; it fascinated eye and mind. They began dancing during Third Hour after dinner. Musicians joined in and dropped out at will, all but the drummer who never stopped his subtle changing beat. The two old dancers were still dancing at Sixth Hour, midnight, after five Terran hours. This was the first time I had seen the phenomenon of *dothe*—the voluntary, controlled use of what we call “hysterical strength”—and thereafter I was readier to believe tales concerning the Old Men of the Handdara.

It was an introverted life, self-sufficient, stagnant, steeped in that singular “ignorance” prized by the Handdarata and obedient to their rule of inactivity or non-interference. That rule (expressed in the word *nusuth*, which I have to translate as “no matter”) is the heart of the cult, and I don’t pretend to understand it. But I began to understand Karhide better, after a halfmonth in Otherhord. Under that nation’s politics and parades and passions runs an old darkness, passive, anarchic, silent, the fecund darkness of the Handdara.

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And out of that silence inexplicably rises the Foreteller's voice.

Young Goss, who enjoyed acting as my guide, told me that my question to the Foretellers could concern anything and be phrased as I liked. "The more qualified and limited the question, the more exact the answer," he said. "Vagueness breeds vagueness. And some questions of course are not answerable."

"What if I ask one of those?" I inquired. This hedging seemed sophisticated, but not unfamiliar. But I did not expect his answer: "The Weaver will refuse it. Unanswerable questions have wrecked Foretelling groups."

"Wrecked them?"

"Do you know the story of the Lord of Shorth, who forced the Foretellers of Asen Fastness to answer the question *What is the meaning of life?* Well, it was a couple of thousand years ago. The Foretellers stayed in the darkness for six days and nights. At the end, all the Celibates were catatonic, the Zanies were dead, the Pervert clubbed the Lord of Shorth to death with a stone, and the Weaver . . . He was a man named Meshe."

"The founder of the Yomesh cult?"

"Yes," said Goss, and laughed as if the story was very funny, but I didn't know whether the joke was on the Yomeshta or on me.

I had decided to ask a yes-or-no question, which might at least make plain the extent and kind of obscurity or ambiguity in the answer. Faxe confirmed what Goss had said, that the matter of the question could be one of which the Foretellers were perfectly ignorant. I could ask if the hoolm crops would be good this year in the northern hemisphere of S, and they would answer, having no previous knowledge even of the existence of a planet called S. This seemed to put the business on the plane of pure chance divination, along with yarrow stalks

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and flipped coins. No, said Faxe, not at all, chance was not involved. The whole process was in fact precisely the reverse of chance.

"Then you mindread."

"No," said Faxe, with his serene and candid smile.

"You mindread without knowing you're doing it, perhaps."

"What good would that be? If the asker knew the answer he wouldn't pay our price for it."

I chose a question to which I certainly lacked the answer. Only time could prove the Foretelling right or wrong, unless it was, as I expected, one of those admirable professional prophecies applicable to any outcome. It was not a trivial question; I had given up the notion of asking when it would stop raining, or some such trifle, when I learned that the undertaking was a hard and dangerous one for the nine Foretellers of Otherhord. The cost was high for the asker—two of my rubies went to the coffers of the Fastness—but higher for the answerers. And as I got to know Faxe, if it became difficult to believe that he was a professional faker it became still more difficult to believe that he was an honest, self-deluded faker; his intelligence was as hard, clear, and polished as my rubies. I dared set no trap for him. I asked what I most wanted to know.

On Onnetherhad, the 18th of the month, the nine met together in a big building usually kept locked: one high hall, stone-floored and cold, dimly lighted by a couple of slit-windows and a fire in the deep hearth at one end. They sat on the bare stone in a circle, all of them cloaked and hooded, rough still shapes like a circle of dolmens in the faint glow of the fire yards away. Goss, and a couple of other young Indwellers, and a physician from the nearest Domain, watched in silence from seats by the hearth while I crossed the hall and entered the circle.

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It was all very informal, and very tense. One of the hooded figures looked up as I came amongst them, and I saw a strange face, coarse-featured, heavy, with insolent eyes watching me.

Faxe sat cross-legged, not moving, but charged, full of a gathering force that made his light, soft voice crack like an electric bolt. "Ask," he said.

I stood within the circle and asked my question. "Will this world Gethen be a member of the Ekumen of Known Worlds, five years from now?"

Silence. I stood there, I hung in the center of a spider-web woven of silence.

"It is answerable," the Weaver said quietly.

There was a relaxation. The hooded stones seemed to soften into movement; the one who had looked so strangely at me began to whisper to his neighbor. I left the circle and joined the watchers by the hearth.

Two of the Foretellers remained withdrawn, unspeaking. One of them lifted his left hand from time to time and patted the floor lightly and swiftly ten or twenty times, then sat motionless again. I had seen neither of them before; they were the Zanies, Goss said. They were insane. Goss called them "time-dividers," which may mean schizophrenics. Karhidish psychologists, though lacking mindspeech and thus like blind surgeons, were ingenious with drugs, hypnosis, spotshock, cryonic touch, and various mental therapies; I asked if these two psychopaths could not be cured. "Cured?" Goss said. "Would you cure a singer of his voice?"

Five others of the circle were Indwellers of Otherhord, adepts in the Handdara disciplines of Presence and also, said Goss, so long as they remained Foretellers, celibate, taking no mate during their periods of sexual potency. One of these Celibates must be in kemmer during the Foretelling. I could pick him out, having learned

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to notice the subtle physical intensification, a kind of brightness, that signalizes the first phase of kemmer.

Beside the kemmerer sat the Pervert.

"He came up from Spreve with the physician," Goss told me. "Some Foretelling groups artificially arouse perversion in a normal person—injecting female or male hormones during the days before a session. It's better to have a natural one. He's willing to come; likes the notoriety."

Goss used the pronoun that designates a male animal, not the pronoun for a human being in the masculine role of kemmer. He looked a little embarrassed. Karhidiers discuss sexual matters freely, and talk about kemmer with both reverence and gusto, but they are reticent about discussing perversions—at least, they were with me. Excessive prolongation of the kemmer period, with permanent hormonal imbalance toward the male or the female, causes what they call perversion; it is not rare; three or four percent of adults may be physiological perverts or abnormals—normals, by our standard. They are not excluded from society, but they are tolerated with some disdain, as homosexuals are in many bisexual societies. The Karhidish slang for them is *halfdeads*. They are sterile.

The Pervert of the group, after that first long strange stare at me, paid no heed to anyone but the one next to him, the kemmerer, whose increasingly active sexuality would be further roused and finally stimulated into full, female sexual capacity by the insistent, exaggerated maleness of the Pervert. The Pervert kept talking softly, leaning towards the kemmerer, who answered little and seemed to recoil. None of the others had spoken for a long time now, there was no sound but the whisper, whisper of the Pervert's voice. Faxe was steadily watching one of the Zanies. The Pervert laid his hand quickly

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and softly on the kemmerer's hand. The kemmerer avoided the touch hastily, with fear or disgust, and looked across at Faxe as if for help. Faxe did not move. The kemmerer kept his place, and kept still when the Pervert touched him again. One of the Zanies lifted up his face and laughed a long false crooning laugh, "Ah-ah-ah-ah. . . ."

Faxe raised his hand. At once each face in the circle turned to him as if he had gathered up their gazes into a sheaf, a skein.

It had been afternoon and raining when we entered the hall. The gray light had soon died out of the slit-windows under the eaves. Now whitish strips of light stretched like slanting phantasmal sails, long triangles and oblongs, from wall to floor, over the faces of the nine; dull scraps and shreds of light from the moon rising over the forest, outside. The fire had burned down long since and there was no light but those strips and slants of dimness creeping across the circle, sketching out a face, a hand, a moveless back. For a while I saw Faxe's profile rigid as pale stone in a diffuse dust of light. The diagonal of moonlight crept on and came to a black hump, the kemmerer, head bowed on his knees, hands clenched on the floor, body shaken by a regular tremor repeated by the *slutter-pat-pat* of the Zany's hands on stone in darkness across the circle. They were all connected, all of them, as if they were the suspension-points of a spiderweb. I felt, whether I wished or not, the connection, the communication that ran, wordless, inarticulate, through Faxe, and which Faxe was trying to pattern and control, for he was the center, the Weaver. The dim light fragmented and died away creeping up the eastern wall. The web of force, of tension, of silence, grew.

I tried to keep out of contact with the minds of the

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Foretellers. I was made very uneasy by that silent electric tension, by the sense of being drawn in, of becoming a point or figure in the pattern, in the web. But when I set up a barrier, it was worse: I felt cut off and cowered inside my own mind obsessed by hallucinations of sight and touch, a stew of wild images and notions, abrupt visions and sensations all sexually charged and grotesquely violent, a red-and-black seething of erotic rage. I was surrounded by great gaping pits with ragged lips, vaginas, wounds, hellmouths, I lost my balance, I was falling. . . . If I could not shut out this chaos I would fall indeed, I would go mad, and there was no shutting it out. The empathic and paraverbal forces at work, immensely powerful and confused, rising out of the perversion and frustration of sex, out of an insanity that distorts time, and out of an appalling discipline of total concentration and apprehension of immediate reality, were far beyond my restraint or control. And yet they were controlled: the center was still Faxé. Hours and seconds passed, the moonlight shone on the wrong wall, there was no moonlight only darkness, and in the center of all darkness Faxé: the Weaver: a woman, a woman dressed in light. The light was silver, the silver was armor, an armored woman with a sword. The light burned sudden and intolerable, the light along her limbs, the fire, and she screamed aloud in terror and pain, "Yes, yes, yes!"

The crooning laugh of the Zany began, "Ah-ah-ah-ah," and rose higher and higher into a wavering yell that went on and on, much longer than any voice could go on yelling, right across time. There was movement in the darkness, scuffling and shuffling, a redistribution of ancient centuries, an evasion of foreshadows. "Light, light," said an immense voice in vast syllables once or innumerable times. "Light. Log on the fire, there. Some

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light." It was the physician from Spreve. He had entered the circle. It was all broken. He was kneeling by the Zanies, the frailest ones, the fuse-points; both of them lay huddled up on the floor. The kemmerer lay with his head on Faxe's knees, breathing in gasps, still trembling; Faxe's hand, with absent gentleness, stroked his hair. The Pervert was off by himself in a corner, sullen and dejected. The session was over, time passed as usual, the web of power had fallen apart into indignity and weariness. Where was my answer, the riddle of the oracle, the ambiguous utterance of prophecy?

I knelt down beside Faxe. He looked at me with his clear eyes. For that instant I saw him as I had seen him in the dark, as a woman armed in light and burning in a fire, crying out, "Yes—"

Faxe's soft speaking-voice broke the vision. "Are you answered, Asker?"

"I am answered, Weaver."

Indeed I was answered. Five years from now Gethen would be a member of the Ekumen: yes. No riddles, no hedging. Even then I was aware of the quality of that answer, not so much a prophecy as an observation. I could not evade my own certainty that the answer was right. It had the imperative clarity of a hunch.

We have NAFAL ships and instantaneous transmission and mindspeech, but we haven't yet tamed hunch to run in harness; for that trick we must go to Gethen.

"I serve as the filament," Faxe said to me a day or two after the Foretelling. "The energy builds up and builds up in us, always sent back and back, redoubling the impulse every time, until it breaks through and the light is in me, around me, I am the light. . . . The Old Man of Arbin Fastness once said that if the Weaver could be put in a vacuum at the moment of the Answer, he'd go on burning for years. That's what the Yomeshta believe

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of Meshe: that he saw past and future clear, not for a moment, but all during his life after the Question of Shorth. It's hard to believe. I doubt a man could endure it. But no matter. . . ."

Nusuth, the ubiquitous and ambiguous negative of the Handdara.

We were strolling side by side, and Faxe looked at me. His face, one of the most beautiful human faces I ever saw, seemed hard and delicate as carved stone. "In the darkness," he said, "there were ten; not nine. There was a stranger."

"Yes, there was. I had no barrier against you. You are a Listener, Faxe, a natural empath; and probably a powerful natural telepath as well. That's why you're the Weaver, the one who can keep the tensions and responses of the group running in a self-augmenting pattern until the strain breaks the pattern itself and you reach through for your answer."

He listened with grave interest. "It is strange to see the mysteries of my discipline from outside, through your eyes. I've only seen them from within, as a disciple."

"If you permit—if you wish, Faxe, I should like to communicate with you in mindspeech." I was sure now that he was a natural Communicant; his consent and a little practice should serve to lower his unwitting barrier.

"Once you did that, I would hear what others think?"

"No, no. No more than you do already as an empath. Mindspeech is communication, voluntarily sent and received."

"Then why not speak aloud?"

"Well, one can lie, speaking."

"Not mindspeaking?"

"Not intentionally."

Faxe considered a while. "That's a discipline that must arouse the interest of kings, politicians, men of business."

"Men of business fought against the use of mindspeech when it first was found to be a teachable skill; they outlawed it for decades."

Faxe smiled. "And kings?"

"We have no more kings."

"Yes. I see that. . . . Well, I thank you, Genry. But my business is unlearning, not learning. And I'd rather not yet learn an art that would change the world entirely."

"By your own foretelling this world will change, and within five years."

"And I'll change with it, Genry. But I have no wish to change it."

It was raining, the long, fine rain of Gethenian summer. We walked under the hemmen-trees on the slopes above the Fastness, where there were no paths. Light fell gray among dark branches, clear water dropped from the scarlet needles. The air was chill yet mild, and full of the sound of rain.

"Faxe, tell me this. You Handdarata have a gift that men on every world have craved. You have it. You can predict the future. And yet you live like the rest of us—it doesn't seem to *matter*—"

"How should it matter, Genry?"

"Well, look. For instance, this rivalry between Karhide and Orgoreyn, this quarrel about the Sinoth Valley. Karhide has lost face badly these last weeks, I gather. Now why didn't King Argaven consult his Foretellers, asking which course to take, or which member of the kyorremy to choose as prime minister, or something of that sort?"

"The questions are hard to ask."

"I don't see why. He might simply ask, Who'll serve me best as prime minister?—and leave it at that."

"He might. But he doesn't know what *serving him best* may mean. It might mean the man chosen would surrender the valley to Orgoreyn, or go into exile, or as-

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sassinate the king; it might mean many things he wouldn't expect or accept."

"He'd have to make his question very precise."

"Yes. Then there'd be many questions, you see. Even the king must pay the price."

"You'd charge him high?"

"Very high," said Faxe tranquilly. "The Asker pays what he can afford, as you know. Kings have in fact come to the Foretellers; but not very often. . . ."

"What if one of the Foretellers is himself a powerful man?"

"Indwellers of the Fastness have no ranks or status. I may be sent to Erhenrang to the kyorremy; well, if I go, I take back my status and my shadow, but my foretelling's at an end. If I had a question while I served in the kyorremy, I'd go to Orgny Fastness there, pay my price, and get my answer. But we in the Handdara don't want answers. It's hard to avoid them, but we try to."

"Faxe, I don't think I understand."

"Well, we come here to the Fastnesses mostly to learn what questions not to ask."

"But you're the Answerers!"

"You don't see yet, Genry, why we perfected and practice Foretelling?"

"No—"

"To exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question."

I pondered that a good while, as we walked side by side through the rain, under the dark branches of the Forest of Otherhord. Within the white hood Faxe's face was tired and quiet, its light quenched. Yet he still awed me a little. When he looked at me with his clear, kind, candid eyes, he looked at me out of a tradition thirteen thousand years old: a way of thought and way

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of life so old, so well established, so integral and coherent as to give a human being the unselfconsciousness, the authority, the completeness of a wild animal, a great strange creature who looks straight at you out of his eternal present. . . .

"The unknown," said Faxe's soft voice in the forest, "the unfortold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action. If it were proven that there is no God there would be no religion. No Handdara, no Yomesh, no hearthgods, nothing. But also if it were proven that there is a God, there would be no religion. . . . Tell me, Genry, what is known? What is sure, predictable, inevitable—the one certain thing you know concerning your future, and mine?"

"That we shall die."

"Yes. There's really only one question that can be answered, Genry, and we already know the answer. . . . The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next."

transmission
was received
inside the
ritual

Listen
to
the
Golden
Boomerang
Return

our first lightning
strike was convulsive
we felt sad for our
violence after
exterminating
wolves and bison
we do not need a
doctor to say
dance dance
dance before
the song
runs out
learn how
to live so
wilderness
never
becomes
mythology
we put them
in parks to be
wild on purpose
a museum of fur
fangs and hooves

part of
this forest
tastes like
 the man
 I love
 with an
 actual number
of nails holding
the bedroom
together
other days
when we died
where we fell
we became
the forest
my car never
intended to be
a meat grinder
another face going
under the waves
we felt awful after
hitting the deer
we made love
and slept with
one of his
antlers
between
us

to
desire
the world
as it is
not as
it was
falling
feather
attaches
to new life
for a moment
when the hammer
approached we thought
is that thing coming this way
we are the fractal
drop to hear
our own
harmonics
in the muffled
underground
hum of seeds

remember
our metal skin
when the planet
first caught fire
it was
years
before we
understood
the awful
thing we
held to our chest
whatever a poem can
send into the future
please send the
breath
we have
been trying
to catch
for as long
as you can
hold it
so glad
you came by
thank you
as always

thumbing through
calendars of the future
till touching
a year out
of reach
me a ghost
you a ghost
another poem
dedicated to the
great vanishing trick
we build
muscles
organs bones
at separate
tables
of our
favorite
restaurant
chewing to
motion
kept to
the tides

we stopped
 studying the
 night sky for
 directions
if someone said
 we made it up
 planet Earth
 isn't real
 we would try
 to verify try
 to be sure
 critics
 are the
 evidence
 we do not
 trust ourselves
 your imagination is
 asking for parole
 what is your
verdict Warden
try to always
 remember the
 calendar made
 of light our
 ancestors
 followed to
 pass the year

plants
are our
bridge
to the
sun
listen to the ceasefire
sunlight touching
everything
with us
when did we
begin to see
breathing
bodies as
targets
take our place in the
great chain of beings
press my fingers
to each page
of the new
notebook
I cannot stop
myself feeling
for words
before
they
arrive

A striking incantation, or a synergetic impulse between the known and unknown, elemental magic is like a social democracy gliding across enchantment, metaphysical sentiments of the earth. Every possible universe exists in the multiverse, every potential entity lives in a number of universes, all exchanges spanning particles and emotions.

Magic's thrilling intensity quells the quandary of everyday life, where the liberating chorus of the formless unshackles suppressive form.

The formless is more than a speckle of hope, dabbed and dusted onto the earth, but a groove one walks, imprints left on the ground; for in these traces, the fade conjures. This fade, its residual force, is sustained by magic, remnants that remap the globe from the depths of senses both felt and envisaged.

Sometimes magic is an atom in the wind
that brushes the heart on one's sleeve;
a touch, that in its incommunicability, roars a
world into existence.

Walter Benjamin writes that the shrilling bell derives its force from the magic of the threshold.²⁵⁸ The magnitude is evinced in the exit of entry and the end of the beginning, a looping sensation that vitalizes transformation. Through euphonious reverberations, every evolution is an ethereal interlude and extension, fading from and into the multiverse. Magic is more than an inclination to sound out an ephemeral spell, but a declaration to stand up with fists raised against the open sky until the threshold complements its intention. Fading into life to life, these pulsating fists are the paradox of the ephemeral being materialized, where to fade-in is to also fade-with. Or to sharply fade into a movement amassed from the threshold of a people garnered from the luminescence of magic.

Cultivating an immersive liberatory landscape from the bells of magic, hip-hop feminist theorist Ruth Nicole Brown calls for the “creative potential of Black Girlhood,” produced “critically among and with Black girls.”²⁵⁹ More than a celebration of Black girl visibility, Brown’s body of work shifts our understanding of epistemology by exposing how Black girls, often erased from archives, have always generated rigorous thought by surpassing the boundaries of knowledge production. In 2006, Brown established the concrete utopia that is SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths), a space of liberation and love that breeds new meaning by traveling across discipline, genre, method, pedagogy, and forms of creativity.

Honoring every kernel of thought rendered undeserving under systemic racism, SOLHOT is an independent enterprise in its own right. Moving across cultural sites like universities, elementary and secondary public schools, churches, afterschool programs and between creative work like theatre, poetry, ethnography, performance, storytelling, and music, SOLHOT requires that

we follow the inventive “trace of descent”²⁶⁰ that stimulates new world mapping and making. Under Brown’s direction, SOLHOT has produced albums, plays, novel forms of ethnography, while simultaneously blurring the lines between pragmatic thought and emotive creativity – neither one antithetical to the life of the other, but rather ideologically embroiled.

Like Wynter, Brown calls us “to wake up our minds” by theorizing creativity and accounting for its pedagogical and life-altering energy. Encouraging the formation of magical soldiers of love, SOLHOT is a call to arms via the aesthetic-life-world, all fists seen in the details of narratives untold. These untold stories feature heavily throughout Black Girl Genius Week (a yearly week-long SOLHOT invention and celebration that travels across the states off and online) where the creative labor cultivated and shared by and with Black girls is center stage. In striking fashion, event topics range from discussions of the politics of hair to Black feminist poetry to letter writing as pedagogical praxis to Black and Brown forms of aesthetic organizing to making live recorded music with an on-deck SOLHOT DJ.

Leaving no thought by Black girls unturned, Brown is a visionary of another time and place, a vision for and of the future who values all creation, both rehearsed and improvised. In fact, it is the very everyday improvised acts and sounds performed in the space of SOLHOT sociality that assemble the possibility of hearing truth in order to save one’s life. This truth is bound to what Brown reveals about thinking itself: “research that is creative, public, and grounded in collaboration with marginalized communities, conducted by scholars of color, is always and already suspect.”²⁶¹ Understanding that every form of knowledge produced by Black girls is always-already outside standard epistemology, Brown

devises new ontological breath for reading and listening with them. In such liberatory spaces, Black Genius is a privileged form of thinking that animates new constructions of Blackness, Black girl study, and existence.

While formally established fifteen years ago, Brown comments on the slippery nature of genealogy when work produced for and by people of color is suspended from archives, documentation, and funding. Part of this slipperiness, for her, is related to how these systems of knowing deny curiosity and creativity in order to uphold structure whilst still commercializing the moniker “Black girl magic.” Brown’s work rejects this reductive neoliberal representation for it overlooks the laboring genius embedded in Blackness. SOLHOT began before it began as a formation for a different kind of existence, one in which Black girls are fundamentally listened to by one another, even if the institution refuses the documentation of their voices.

In instituting against the institution, Brown knows that “what we learn in and out of sacred time, practice, and relationship is that we are certainly worth our own liberation.”²⁶² “To be worth your own liberation,” as Brown writes and shares with her students, is an act of love in the domain of fugitive planning, or an undercommons built upon the intellectual labor of Black girls, where creativity is freedom itself and Black girl gathering is the always-already necessary collective for a new social order. Brown generates spaces to listen with creative memories in order to form new knowledges toward the unknown, providing a path for how to listen with creative memories in order to form new knowledge toward the unknown. Not far removed from the political and aesthetic stylings of Afrofuturistic thought, Brown promotes an unknown where hip-hop feminist travels in space are the place.

Space is the place for misfit play, for imagining worlds otherwise unseen, but cosmically known. As Sun Ra's creative collectivity reveals, mysticism is misfitism. Myth is both play and the motley crew looking up to the stars and dreaming with glimmer. For as Ra espouses "the myth can do more for humanity than anything they can dream possible."²⁶³ This is the adherence to a real myth working in tandem with the worth of one's liberation as Brown avows. SOLHOT listens for the planetary connections across time, space, and history like Ra vibrates an "Astro Black" mythology²⁶⁴ moving from ancient Egypt and back into outer space.

The visual and sonic pulse of Ra's aesthetic-life-world works from and within the Black Radical tradition, even if one is not from planet Earth, and especially when the galactical soundwaves are infinite. Like Ra notes, the impossible is possible.

From the depths of creative memory and curious methodology,
the impossible is possible.

The possible is an impossible possibility.

The impossible is always-already possible.

Expanding the boundaries of thinking History beyond chronology, Ra is not the ostensible pathologization of some "galactic gobbledegook,"²⁶⁵ but Black genius glimmering. His prophetic observations of space and time tour through omniversal vibrations that are now echoed in findings by contemporary astrophysicists, theoretical and quantum physicists. How these vibrations are sounded in the Sun Ra Arkestra's collective practice begs one to ask what these vibratory patterns say about history, time, planetary, galactic, and improvised social compositions. What does Ra

mean by mythocracy vs. democracy, or that “history repeats itself in ways that the universe never repeats itself?”²⁶⁶ What is at stake in trusting that the world is the way it is because of “the scheme of words,” as he writes in the poem “man and planet earth”?²⁶⁷

Sun Ra’s and the Arkestra’s artistry embody musicianship as spaceship, tapping into frequencies from sonically technological “crossroads whence dimensions meet.”²⁶⁸ How can we listen deeply to the ways that art is everywhere? “Every thing’s vibration is a different degree of music,”²⁶⁹ as Ra writes in his poem “infinity is the language.” How is listening a kind of shattering? “Somewhere else on the other side of nowhere, there’s another place in space, beyond what [we] know as time.”²⁷⁰

From stars to dust to inter-gravitational forces and dark matter,
there’s more magic beyond the dimensions we will ever see and
know.

There’s no adherence on the formless formation’s part to traditional constructions of time and space, but rather to how resonance replaces both as an organizing trope for the universe. As astrophysicist Manos Danezis insists, outside our limited perceptions the universe is formless,²⁷¹ or to put it another way, the big bang is the ever-moving extension and expansion of the big band!

Galaxies are always on the ground, flipped horizons hovering under our starry feet.

To time travel with other space travelers is to misfittingly read²⁷² and play with imagination’s magical ability to transport readers and players to other worlds and constellations. Such articulations

of speculative futurity, as Alexis Lothian argues,²⁷³ are not singular crossings, but traverse the boundaries of both science fiction and queer thought. Queer imagining, outside traditional structures of reproduction, always involves a futurity, while the “convergence of queerness and science fiction requires that neither one be defined in advance.”²⁷⁴ If futurity has already arrived, but hasn’t been “evenly distributed,”²⁷⁵ then the imagined futures of those precluded from futurity labor to dream queer possibilities speculatively.

One of many examples of such speculative and queer dreaming is N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy*. Drawing us into fantastical worlds that are also eerily familiar, the first novel of the series, *The Fifth Season*, begins with the words: “Let’s start with the end of the world, why don’t we?”²⁷⁶ Through evocative renderings and correlations, including those of imperialism, enforced labor, racial policing, and environmental disaster, Jemisin’s story takes place on a continent named The Stillness that constantly and dangerously buckles and shifts in form.

The three key female protagonists of the novel are orogenes, known derisively as “roggas” (the three become one), and are born with the “the ability to manipulate thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events.”²⁷⁷ Infants and young children, discovered to be orogenes, are captured by members of a type of police academy. These “Guardians” deliver them to the capital to be disciplined at the Fulcrum, an imperial facility for schooling the “savages” into submission while simultaneously training them to use their powers. For “any infant can move a mountain; that’s instinct. Only a trained Fulcrum orogene can deliberately, specifically, move a boulder.”²⁷⁸ Once trained, orogenes are mobilized under surveillance to tap into and stabilize The Stillness’s seismic tremors constantly threatening life.

One day, reaching deep into the magma of the earth, an orogene rebel breaks the planet, exploding the center to fade into the edge of something otherwise. This insurgent act of destruction seeks to abolish the governing system that capitalizes on the orogenes' power. The orogenes' innate gift of being able to tap into all elements, seams, and forces of the earth's landscape is one described as "magic." This magic is the orogenes' ability to connect with and intricately manipulate all material life forms. As there is no separation between their sinew and the world, theirs is a quantum flesh.

Jemisin lends us the orogene's quantum flesh as a reminder of the formless inseparability of all connectivity. When the disobedient orogene shatters the world, his fracturing is at once inseparable from the earth and the desire for another social order. Apocalypse marks both the end of the world as well as revelation.

Listen to the sounds of the big bang's and the big band's shattering propulsions.

In deep resonance with Wynter, Brown, Jemisin, and Sun Ra, Octavia Butler also blasts open humanity's constitution through radical revisions and revelations. Butler's uncategorizable novels and short stories imagine alternative embodiments, temporalities, and cosmologies in order to grapple with histories of racism, sexism, xenophobia, the ongoing threat of looming apocalypse, and the very category of the human body itself. Her works are queer speculative tales, changing the sciences of human structure in which flesh itself is *always* scripted as an undared form.

In Butler's first book of the *Xenogenesis* series, *Dawn*,²⁷⁹ Lilith Iyapo wakes up in an alien spaceship after a nuclear war and the annihili-

lation of planet Earth. Eventually she communicates (cognitively, communally, and sexually) with the alien species Oankali and Ooloi that have saved her from her destroyed planet. Lilith's story reveals the ways in which the human body is biologically altered through its contact with the aliens. This is what Butler means by "xenogenesis," the alteration and generation of a newly formed human body through its physical and cognitive communion with an alien other.

The Oankali tell Lilith that humanity's defining contradiction is that human beings put their intelligence to work in the service of hierarchy. For Butler, this contradiction generates the constant terror of institutional brutality and planetary doom. If "being human as praxis," as Wynter notes, relies on the dismantling of hierarchical overrepresentations and the creation of undared forms, Butler's genius is the authoring of aesthetic scripts for unexpected reconstructions.

Butler provides the genesis of a socially formless formation in which human relation to changing worlds is constantly rethought. For as critic and artist Kodwo Eshun notes: "The question of xenogenesis can be understood as a kind of diagramme for the revision of the human."²⁸⁰ Butler's intervention is to share with readers of *Dawn* and other novels such as the *Parable* series and *Fledgling*, the vibratory auguries of inventive imagination. For Butler, "all that you touch is Change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change."²⁸¹ Her prophetic voice cracks open time and space, thundering across the perennial challenges faced by the world today. Her stories teach us about the ethical and physical claims of survival on the level of flesh and feeling (stubbornness, fear, desire, pleasure) in our apocalyptic present.

In showing how “the human or humanity is a revisable project,”²⁸² the magical powers of Butler’s interventions uncover how racial, gendered, and corporeal classifications are reproducible fictions and thus always modifiable. Butler’s cosmologies inform our current questions about political imagining and organizing, operating as a model for grassroots activism, and emergent strategy for change.²⁸³ In her fictional work, change is one that either looks to the stars, or travels far back in time, undoing the linear project of temporality.

But change is not without painful ruptures sedimented into our historical bedrock. Walter Benjamin writes that “[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”²⁸⁴ And crucially, “barbarism taints the manner in which [documents are] transmitted from one owner to another.”²⁸⁵ Or as Rammellzee, another vital maker of magical aesthetic-life-worlds asks, “who put us in a race and for what purpose are we racing?”²⁸⁶ Butler’s novel *Kindred*²⁸⁷ provides a response to both Benjamin and Rammellzee by telling the story of Dana, a struggling writer living in California in 1976, who finds herself traveling back in time and space to antebellum Maryland in the 1800s. When she finds herself there, Dana must do everything to survive the conditions of slavery. If she does not stay alive in the 1800s, she will not exist in the 1970s, because she has traveled through her own genealogical time to an ancestral past. Furthermore, she must fight to ensure the procreation of her own ancestors who will lead to her own birth a century later.

Trapped in limbo between her present and past, which determines her present and future, Dana emerges in her own time at the end of the novel alive, yet physically amputated. *Kindred*’s time travel re-envisioning the transmission of barbarism in official histories and archives by subverting embodied forms of experiential time.

Butler's novels disrupt the limitations of realist forms, genre, and history by attending to the materiality of flesh, engendering kindred resonances that are sustained by the magic found in the formless formation.

An inventive "renascence of a new corpus of sensibility,"²⁸⁸ drives Butler's and Jemisin's novels, Brown's *SOLHOT*, and Ra's *Arkestra*, among countless others. These new awakenings are inseparable from the insights gleaned "from a state of cramp" and the myriad ways enclosures "articulate a new growth."²⁸⁹ Harris emphasizes how the barbarism of structural colonialism and enslavement necessitates "a new kind of drama, novel and poem... a creative phenomenon of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates."²⁹⁰ Listen to the creative sounds issuing forth from these ongoing fates.

Every day, everywhere, we hear the applied study and emanation of new kinds of mediums in a circulation of endless audio-inventories of style.

Just follow the sound.

Tracing the space/time and mind-bending trajectories of these sonic worlds, the Black Audio Film Collective's afro-futuristic film *The Last Angel of History* suggests that these particular sounds, heard in all forms of modern popular music, are inseparable from the experience of the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath.²⁹¹ These historical catastrophes, which the film argues can be understood as ones of alien abduction and genetic mutation, are figured in the *Xenogenesis* series, as well as in *Kindred*'s wrestling with the sense of a "phantom limb."²⁹² The phantasmagorical sensation of

a missing part still felt present through its resonating absence is the limboing formlessness of imagination's aesthetic form.

The enclosures of the wild wild west
are always outpaced by imagination's contortions.

If the formlessness of form is both phantom limb and the act of being in limbo, then magic might be the residual effects of the fading presence of absence. This fading threshold, for instance, imbues the workings of magical realism, the making of amalgamation, an integration between the supernatural and the rational. In the film *Atlantique*,²⁹³ the aesthetic-life-world of director Mati Diop raises the dead so as to come back to life by entering the bodies of the living in order to speak through them. The dead-alive are the Vodun spirits of a group of drowned migrants off the coast of Spain. They return to their West African shore to seek justice and revenge against the local capitalist elite responsible for their destitution and forced migration. Diop mobilizes magical realism as a method to keep love alive and to remember and honor those taken too soon from the realities of economic violation.

Collapsing the hyperreal and the practical, magical realism
disrupts the violence of representation.

Catastrophe always "seems to lead to a kind of magical realism" where moments of utter disaster reveal glimpses of "a kind of radiance on the other end of the maelstrom," notes Kamau Brathwaite.²⁹⁴ In his poem "Meridian," the poetry collection *Ancestors*, and two-volume *MR (Magical Realism)*, Brathwaite refers to his archive of Caribbean radio broadcasts as "trance-missions."²⁹⁵ These trance-missions are the intermingling waves between radio

transmissions, the poetic voice, and the sounds of trance-inducing initiations of possession across Caribbean Afro-diasporic religions. All of these trance-missions summon forth the poetic neologism “ancestories.”²⁹⁶

Ancestories and trance-missions tremor across the radio
signals of disparate histories resonating across contemporary
Caribbean quotidian life.

Ancestories fall from the metaphysical *techne* of many who work against brutal semantics and maiming discourses. In magical realism’s power to transmit new breath, Brathwaite shapes the words: “X pressions (indications) of literary cosmological disruption . . .”²⁹⁷

And these X pressions of cosmological disruption vibrate across Sun Ra’s mythocracy, Brown’s creative memory, Jemisin’s quantum breaks, Butler’s xenogenesis and time travel, Diop’s dead/alive love – all ancestories surpassing the edge of fade into the material possibilities of magic.²⁹⁸

Welcome! Åsleik says
Glad you could drop by, he says
Isn't it me who should be saying that? I say
Or have you taken over my house too? I say
Sure did! Åsleik says
You did? I say
Yes, you said that it's mine now, he says
What are you talking about? I say
There's yours and there's mine, I say
Yes you have yours and I have mine, I say
That's how it needs to be, I say
I have my own place, even a farm, so there's nothing to argue about, he says
Yes that's what I meant, I say
But why did you say you're glad I could drop by? I say
Why not? Åsleik says
Is there something wrong with saying that? he says
Isn't that something you're supposed to say? he says
Something people always say? he says
It's something you say when it's your own place, that's when you thank someone
for dropping by, I say
Especially when it's your own farm, he says
and in a way I probably have something like a farm too, even though it's just an
old house with a few rocky hills and a little boggy soil and some heather and a
couple of small pine trees around the edges
And it's not like this is a farm, Åsleik says

It's a house anyway, it's my house, I say
Your house, yes, Åsleik says
Of course it's your house, who would say it wasn't, he says
That's for sure, he says
In a way, yes, I say

and we fall silent and then Åsleik says of course it's my house, whose else could it be? even if I wasn't born and raised in this house it was still my house, no one can deny that, even if he does remember very well old Alise who used to live here, he says

Yes, I say
and we fall silent
She was a good woman, old Alise, Åsleik says then
Yes she sure was, he says

and we fall silent again and then I say that my wife, Ales, was named after her, and maybe that's why old Alise wanted Ales to inherit her house, I say

Yes, no, I know, Åsleik says

There weren't any closer relatives, after her husband died so long ago, and then her brother, Ales's father, was dead too, he says

and again we fall silent and then Åsleik says that he can just barely remember old Alise's parents, he's certainly getting on in years himself, he says, but they were truly old, as far as he remembers, yes, from an ancient time you might say, and it was a pretty bare house, but the father, old and bent, he sure was old, didn't he row to The Country Store in Vik to his dying day, he would go down to the water as long as he had the legs for it and then row to The Country Store, and that wasn't something for a frail old guy like him to do, no, Åsleik says

Yes, I say

They sure were made of strong stuff back then, Åsleik says

Of course it was hard work, a real chore for him, but how else could he get food into the house? he says

So he had to, he says
and then silence sort of spreads out and settles in
Yes, yes, I remember it well, Åsleik says then

Back then there were no cars around here, you know, it was a long way to walk, but just in the countryside, between the country farms, there weren't roads out of the country, no, he says

and he says he was quite old when they built a road out, yes, he remembers it well, and the old people in the country, isolated, religious folks, they thought it would've been just as well if that road never did get built because of all the evil and sinfulness that could come into the countryside now, and who wanted to drive out to the countryside anyway? some of them felt, so the best thing would have been if the road never got built at all but the road was built, and because of that Dylgja became

part of the world too and because of that someone like me could move to the country, that's what it meant to have a road out, so actually maybe the pious old people had a point about what they said, despite everything? since now that a road had been built all kinds of people could come driving along and then before you know it one of them might want to move out here? Åsleik says and I think that Åsleik will always, always be like this, starting to talk about one thing and then ending up somewhere else, and he just keeps on talking, without stopping, maybe it's because he's alone so much and doesn't have anyone to talk to that he can sometimes just launch into talking nonstop, about this and that, past present and future all jumbled together, and it's all things I've heard before, many times over, I think

Yes now you've got a bad memory, he says

I have a bad memory? I say

and I don't understand why he'd say that all of a sudden, as if my memory was something we needed to start talking about of all things, Åsleik bringing up my supposedly bad memory just like that, out of nowhere, no, I don't know how I've been able to stand him all these years, how can I stay living here in this godforsaken place that time forgot, almost no one else lives here of their own free will do they? I think, and Åsleik says besides, maybe it's not really my house, in a way, don't I remember what I said, that time, yeah, that if he could move that boat I'd give him my house? he says

But that's just something people say, I say

Just something people say? Åsleik says

Did I manage to move that boat or didn't I? he says

I helped you move it, I say

You helped! he says

Yes, I helped! I say

I moved that boat by myself, he says

No, the boat was stuck until I grabbed it too and helped, I say

So you were lying, and now you'll break your promise, he says

I'm not lying about anything, I never lie, I always tell the truth, I say

You always tell the truth, he says

Nothing but the truth, he says

What I say is true, I say

and then it's suddenly quiet, we both stop talking and stand there a moment without saying anything

Nice weather we've had today, calm too, Åsleik says then

Yes, I say

It was dead calm all through the morning but then in the late afternoon yes then the wind picked up a little like always, he says

And what else would you expect, here we are in late autumn already, Advent's here, we should expect to see some storms, he says

and then he says we won't have to wait long, the first storms of the year'll be here before you know it, it's strange that they haven't started already, he says, and then we stay standing there some more, not saying anything

And everything in Bjørgvin was the same as usual? he says

Yes, I say

and again it's quiet

It's nice to drive into town now and then, I say

Yes, I suppose so, Åsleik says

and I think now I should ask him about the last time he was in Bjørgvin, but I've done that so many times before and it always bothers him a little, he always squirms a little, shakes his head a little, because the truth is he's probably almost never been to Bjørgvin, maybe a few times long ago, that's it, so I shouldn't bring it up, not now, that wouldn't be nice, I think and again we're standing there not saying anything

I'm glad I can go fishing, have something to do during the day, Åsleik says then

Me too, I make the days go by in my own way, I say

Yes, you and those paintings of yours, he says

Yes, right, I say

You spend whole days painting, he says

and I think that Åsleik has said that so many times before, he's repeated it over and over, time after time, but then again I've said the same things over and over again myself, I've asked Åsleik again and again if he's caught anything today and again and again he'd say that his net came up empty, or else that it was so full he could barely heave it up on board The Boat, or else that there wasn't much, something like that, and if I showed him a picture I'd painted he'd say something, too, or else not say anything, but when he did say something what he said was always amazingly smart, he always saw something I hadn't seen myself, and then these stupid little arguments of ours, as if we always had to have a little fight over some tiny thing before we could really talk to each other, I think and I hear Åsleik ask me again, the same as he's done countless times before, why I paint, won't I ever stop painting these pictures of mine? I've spent almost my whole life painting these pictures and now I'm supposed to stop? no, he doesn't understand me, for him it's simply incomprehensible, he's never drawn even the simplest thing himself, not once, and he's always had someone else paint the house too, he's never even tried to paint the house, he can wax a boat no problem of course but that doesn't count, that's not like painting anything, no, he says and I say, the same as I say every time, that I don't know why I paint these pictures I just do it, it's a living, I say, and Åsleik says I've kept on painting since I was a little boy, and now I know he wants me to tell him about how I couldn't do maths when I went to school and so I sat there and drew in my maths books instead of doing maths, I drew The Schoolmaster and drew the boy sitting next to me, I drew my classmates one after the other, and why did I do that? I did it just to do it! simple as that! I did it so I wouldn't have to think about numbers,

only about drawing, yes, I could add, and subtract, I could do that in my head if none of the numbers was too big or too hard, but when it came to multiplying or dividing or percents or anything like that, no, I just didn't understand it, pure and simple, I understood the difference between big and small numbers, and how to add more or take away, and that's all I needed to get through life, there was no need for more, but other than that I understood nothing. I couldn't do it in my head, and the poor Schoolmaster, he tried and tried, he was so patient, and he was confident too, again and again he tried to explain multiplication to me, and when I didn't understand he said surely I had to understand it, everyone had to learn how to multiply, he said, to get through life you needed to know how to multiply, and he said take two and multiply it by two and you'll have four, he said, two twos are four, he said, and I said I understood that, and he said so two plus two is four and two times two is four, he said, and if you take seven and multiply it by seven how much is that? The Schoolmaster said, and he said I could figure it out by adding seven plus seven and then seven more until I'd added seven plus seven seven times in all and I did it and got the wrong number every time, it was always wrong, but I should have just memorized what the number was, seven times seven, but I couldn't do it, no, I never ever saw the sevens before my eyes the way I could see pictures so easily, even that was practically impossible, and to this day I can't do the seven times tables, I can't, and I don't understand why it was always so hard for me, it was like the numbers shifted after I memorized them and turned a little too big or a little too small, there was just no way I could do it and that's why I'd draw, because I could do that, yes, I could draw anyone no matter who, either just their face or, preferably, someone in motion in some way or another, what I liked best was drawing the movement, drawing someone or something moving, drawing the line you might say, yes, it's hard to understand, and I didn't understand it either, I didn't understand why I liked it or how and why I could do it, but I thought about it a lot and I'll probably never figure it out, I think, but I know that Åsleik wants me to tell him the whole story again, he likes it when I tell it, when I talk about how I couldn't do maths but I did know how to draw, nobody in my class could draw like me, absolutely no one, but I don't feel like telling Åsleik that story again, not now, and the truth is I don't think he wants to hear it either, not now, he just wants us to be talking about something, anything, and it's been a long time since we've had anything especially new to say to each other, we've known each other so long and chatted together so many times, so I say just that I don't know why I paint and that I don't know why I've done it since I was young, and I think that at some point I'll tell him the whole story again, about drawing in my maths notebooks instead of doing maths in them, but not now, and then Åsleik will say that he wasn't good at much of anything in school, not maths, not reading, not writing, and definitely not drawing, but actually, he'll say, it wasn't because he couldn't have done it, done all those things well, it was because he was so scared of his teachers, he was so scared that he didn't do anything, whenever he saw a teacher it was like he

was paralysed and not a single thought stirred inside him and he froze up and he couldn't do anything, that's what he'll say, the same as he always says, I think and then I say well I probably paint for the same reason he fishes

To pass the time, he says

Yes, and to bring in a little money, I say

Yes that too, he says

and there's another long silence

They're pretty much the same thing really, Åsleik says then

Yes, I say

and I ask Åsleik if he'd like to step inside and he says yes, maybe he'll do that, why not? he says and I go and open the door at the back of the car and Åsleik says, the same as he always does, that I have a big, practical car now don't I, you can fit a lot more into that back area than it looks like from the outside, he says, and I pull a roll of canvas out of the back of the car and he takes the roll under his arm and goes over to the front door of the house and opens it, since I never lock the door, it's never locked, no one in Dylgja leaves their door locked, that's how it's always been and that's how it'll always be, and I untie a thick bundle of pinewood boards ten feet long from the rack on the roof of the car, boards I'll use to make stretchers, and I take them inside and Åsleik has turned on the hall light and put the roll of canvas down in the corner by the door to The Parlour and I put the boards down next to the canvas, and later I'll carry the canvas and boards up to the attic, I think, because I have my storage space in a room upstairs, with all the stuff I need for painting, and I go into the main room and I turn on the light there and the cold hits me

It's cold in here, I say

and Åsleik comes into the room

It sure is, he says

Should I light the stove? he says

and I say yes, that'd be good, and I can bring in what I've bought, I say and I see Åsleik go over to the stove and crouch down and with wood chips in his fist he looks up and says do I know where these wood chips come from? and I say yes, yes, I know perfectly well, and I thank him very much for the wood chips and for all the wood he's brought me, I say and I see Åsleik put the chips and some kindling into the stove with the firewood, and yes, it's from Åsleik that I got all the wood chips, the firewood, all the wood, because he likes working with wood, as he says, gathering wood, and then I pay him for the wood, he always says that he doesn't want anything for the wood but he needs the kroner that I give him, I always have to give him the money kind of furtively, even though I'm doing well, as they say, strangely enough there are still plenty of people who want to buy the pictures I paint, I don't know why but that's how it is, ever since I was young I've made money from my paintings, the first pictures I painted were of the building next door in the farming village where I grew up, in Barmen, and in the pictures it was always a day of beautiful weather with

the fruit trees in bloom and the sun shining over the house and the farm, the fjord blue, actually it was the light I was painting, not the buildings, they were pretty enough as far as that goes, it wasn't that, but painting the buildings as such was too boring, that was why I tried to paint the light, but in the sharp bright light of the sun what looks brightest are the shadows, in a way, yes, the darker they are the more light there is, and what I like painting the most is the autumn light but people always wanted to see their house painted in brilliant sunshine, and I wanted to sell my pictures, of course that's what I wanted, yes, after all that's why I painted them, so I had to paint them the way people wanted them, but none of them saw what I actually painted, nobody saw that, just me, and maybe a few other people, because what I painted were the shadows, what I painted was the darkness in all that light, I painted the real light, the invisible light, but did anyone see that? did they notice that? no, probably not, or maybe some people did? yes, well, I know there were some people who saw it, Åsleik too for that matter, he has a real understanding of pictures, I have to admit, but I painted buildings and houses, and people bought the pictures I painted, and that's how I could buy more canvas and tubes of oil paint, because oil paint on canvas has always been what I've liked, nothing else, oil on canvas, always, it was like that from the very first time I saw a picture painted in oil on canvas, and the first picture painted in oil on canvas I ever saw was in the local schoolhouse where a painting hanging crooked on the wall in one of the classrooms was meant to show Jesus walking on water, and to tell the truth it was a terrible painting but the colours, the individual colours in themselves, colours in certain places, colours the way they were on that canvas, yes, they were fixed on that canvas, they clung tight to it, went together with it, were one with it and at the same time different from it, yes, it was unbelievable and I looked and looked at that painting, not at the picture itself, it was so badly painted, but it was oil paint on canvas and that, oil paint on canvas, lodged inside me from the very first moment and stayed there to this day, yes, that's the truth, yes it somehow lodged itself in me for life, the same way oil paint fuses with the canvas I was fused with oil on canvas, I don't know why but I guess I needed something or another to cling to? get attached to? and The Schoolmaster noticed, he noticed that I was always staring at that painting, and he told my parents that I had a gift for drawing, and probably for painting too, if I could just try it, and that way if I couldn't do maths I could at least paint pictures, yes, that's how it was, and then my parents got hold of some kind of kit with tubes of paint and brushes and a palette, and a tool for mixing colours and scraping the paint off if the paint was wrong, a palette knife they call it, one of those was included too, and I was astounded, I was beside myself, I knew what I wanted to paint because at home there was a picture hanging in the living room that Mother and Father had been given as a gift, I think it was Father who'd been given it when he turned forty, and the picture was called *Bridal Procession on the Hardangerfjord*, by Tidemand and Gude, it was what they called a reproduction, a word I liked a lot, what I didn't like as much was that both the paint

and the canvas were missing, the picture was flat with no oil paint stuck to any canvas, but anyway I decided to paint a copy of this picture, none other, as well as I could, yes, I'd told my parents that this was the first picture I wanted to paint and both my mother and my father said I'd never be able to, and I told The Schoolmaster too and he too was sure I'd never be able to do it, but I'd decided to do it, I wouldn't touch a brush until I got a canvas in a frame exactly the same size as *Bridal Procession on the Hardangerfjord* so my father bought me a canvas and frame in that size, I was given that too, I remember, it was a Christmas present, I think I must have been about twelve, yes, somewhere around there, yes, and then they took down the picture and I put both *Bridal Procession on the Hardangerfjord* and the empty white canvas on the floor, up in the attic at home, and I started to paint, carefully, slowly, because the colours had to be exactly right and had to go in exactly the right places, I painted carefully, almost point by point but at the same time they were supposed to turn into brushstrokes somehow, it went slowly and took days, the whole week between Christmas and New Year's I was up in the attic busy with my painting and my parents were more and more beside themselves with amazement because miracle of miracles my picture looked like it, yes, to a T! it was almost better than the picture I was copying! they had to admit that they would never have believed it, they said it was exceptional, unbelievable, and Father couldn't restrain himself and he went and told The Schoolmaster and then The Schoolmaster came by to see the picture for himself and then he asked if he could buy the picture from me, and Father hummed and hawed, he'd probably be willing to let go of the picture I'd copied, how about that, Father said, but The Schoolmaster wasn't interested in buying that, and I said I needed money, both for tubes of oil paint and more canvas, so I wanted to sell the picture, and since after all it was me who'd painted it Father had to go along with what I wanted and The Schoolmaster bought the painting from me and paid good money and I can still see The Schoolmaster before my eyes, one Sunday not far into the new year, walking down the driveway away from the house with my painting under his arm and I stood there with the notes in my hand, I can't remember how much it was but I can remember that one day I took the bus from Barmen to Stranda, because that's where the shops were, most of the shops were there, and at The Paint Shop in Stranda they sold both house paint and art paint, and that's where I went and I bought tubes of oil paint, and a roll of canvas, and wood for stretchers, and ever since then it's been oil on canvas, I have lived on nothing but oil paint on canvas, I've never made money doing anything else, yes, since I was a boy, because already as a boy I made enough money from my paintings and that is what Åsleik likes me to talk about most of all, yes, how I could paint pictures of houses on the neighbouring farms and sell them to the neighbours and use the money to buy tubes of oil paint and more canvas, but I don't feel like talking about that now

You've sure got it good, spending your whole life painting, Åsleik says
That's true, I do, I say

Really good, I say
You get by anyway, Åsleik says
Yes, I get by, I say
You could always get by, he says

and I don't want to talk yet again about when I was young and painted pictures that I sold, because actually they were terrible pictures, beautiful lies, about as bad as pictures can be, only the shadows were painted well, and the copy I painted of *Bridal Procession on the Hardangerfjord* was even worse, that's why I don't want to talk about it, not now, it can wait, some time later I'll tell Åsleik about it again, I think, and I think that I'm ashamed of those pictures I painted in my youth, but why? well, the fact is I was violating something, degrading something, those sunny pictures I painted back then were pure lies, except in the shadows, the darkness, the light, yes, sometimes I was close to something but then I tried to sort of hide it in the picture, I would paint over it, yes, I painted over the best things in the picture! and it's awful to think about, but the picture looked real, it looked so real, and the fruit trees were in bloom and the sun was shining on the pretty white house and the water in the fjord was blue, and the only thing I needed to paint a painting like that was a photograph of a house, or farm, or whatever they wanted me to paint, and then I'd find out roughly how big they wanted the picture to be, and once they'd told me that I got started, and oh they looked so real and oh how ashamed I was of those pictures I painted, but really it wasn't anything to be ashamed of, I should've been proud of myself, actually, it's not the worst thing in the world for a kid to be able to paint like that, it looks so real! they said, and they paid me and I painted and that's still true today, it wasn't the worst thing in the world for a kid to paint pictures like that, and yet I'm so ashamed of them, it was like I was disrespecting, yes, desecrating something by painting them, and I wish all those paintings would just disappear! let them vanish for all time! if I could've burnt every last one of them I would have, and that's what I thought even well before I started at The Academic High School, and I really didn't like painting pictures like that, and luckily I never wrote my name on those pictures, sometimes someone would ask me to and when they did I wrote my first name in the right corner but just my first name, no more than that, and however upset they got about that I didn't write any more than that, it would have to do, but sometimes people would write on the back of the picture that I'd painted it, and in what year, and those ugly portraits I painted of my parents! I really wish they would just disappear from the face of the earth! they were total lies, they looked so realistic, just like my parents, and they looked so nice and pretty, it was all disrespecting, yes, desecrating art, pure and simple, to tell the truth, and those pictures, those pictures were what Åsleik liked to hear me talk about, and he just couldn't understand why I was so ashamed of those pictures, he'd seen some of them himself, he had relatives in Barmen, his mother was from Barmen and he'd been there a few times and he'd seen those pictures of mine, they were the best and finest pictures I'd ever painted, that's what he thinks, there

was nothing I painted later that he liked as much as what I painted back then, he said and I thought he didn't know what made a good painting any more than a horse's arse, that's who I was dealing with here, a fool, yes, this person I constantly saw was just an idiot, I think and I look at Åsleik making the stove burn well and he puts a birchwood log in and I go outside and get two shopping bags out of the back of the car and I go back inside and into the hall and open the kitchen door and turn on the light and then go in with the bags and put them down on the kitchen table and then go into the main room and I see Åsleik standing in front of the stove with the hatch open and he says that it's burning nicely now so he can help me bring the rest in and then he shuts the stove door and we go outside together and I hand him two bags and he takes them and I say he can put them on the kitchen table and then I take out the last two shopping bags and put them down and I take the door to the back of the car and shut it and it clicks shut and I see Åsleik go up to the door of my house and I say it's good we live somewhere where no one needs to lock the door

That's for sure, Åsleik says

There's never been talk of locking front doors here in Dylgja, he says

Never, he says

and he emphasizes the word as if he's now said something that really means a lot, and he has, too, he really has, there aren't too many places left where people can leave their front doors unlocked when they aren't home

It's good we can count on each other here in Dylgja, I say

Everyone in Dylgja can count on everyone else, yes, Åsleik says

and I see Åsleik from behind, standing in the doorway with the two bags and I know deep inside that I will never forget this exact moment, this exact flash, yes, a flash is what it is, because there's a light in it, coming to it, or coming from it, there where I see Åsleik in the doorway with his back to me, his bent shoulders, that almost bald head with a ring of long grey hair below the bald spot, and I can see his long grey beard, I think he's hardly ever cut his beard since he started growing one as a teenager, I think, and then those two plastic shopping bags weighing him down, one on each side, making his shoulders round, it's like he's framed by the doorway, and even though it's dark and there's no outside light on and there's just a little light coming out from the light in the hall I can see him as a shape, as a shape with its own light, that's how I see him, and it's probably the light of his angel, I think, but if I were ever dumb enough to say something like that to him he'd have a good laugh and say I was like those old wandering fiddlers who learned to play from the Devil, that's what I was like, but in a Christian way, something like that is what he'd say, and it's always been this way, these glimpses of this or that thing that lodge inside me and never leave my head again, never, they lodge there as pictures and stay there and I can never get rid of them, so they have to be painted away, yes, that's how it is, that's how I am, I think, but this light, this flash is part of Åsleik the person too

the mouth as never always about voice

I

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked.

"What's happened to me?" he thought. It wasn't a dream. His room, a proper human room although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls. A collection of textile samples lay spread out on the table - Samsa was a travelling salesman - and above it there hung a picture that he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and housed in a nice, gilded frame. It showed a lady fitted out with a fur hat and fur boa who sat upright, raising a heavy fur muff that covered the whole of her lower arm towards the viewer.

Gregor then turned to look out the window at the dull weather. Drops of rain could be heard hitting the pane, which made him feel quite sad. "How about if I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense", he thought, but that was something he was unable to do because he was used to sleeping on his right, and in his present state couldn't get into that position. However hard he threw himself onto his right, he always rolled back to where he was. He must have tried it a hundred times, shut his eyes so that he wouldn't have to look at the floundering legs,

and only stopped when he began to feel a mild, dull pain there that he had never felt before.

"Oh, God", he thought, "what a strenuous career it is that I've chosen! Travelling day in and day out. Doing business like this takes much more effort than doing your own business at home, and on top of that there's the curse of travelling, worries about making train connections, bad and irregular food, contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know anyone or become friendly with them. It can all go to Hell!" He felt a slight itch up on his belly; pushed himself slowly up on his back towards the headboard so that he could lift his head better; found where the itch was, and saw that it was covered with lots of little white spots which he didn't know what to make of; and when he tried to feel the place with one of his legs he drew it quickly back because as soon as he touched it he was overcome by a cold shudder.

He slid back into his former position. "Getting up early all the time", he thought, "it makes you stupid. You've got to get enough sleep. Other travelling salesmen live a life of luxury. For instance, whenever I go back to the guest house during the morning to copy out the contract, these gentlemen are always still sitting there eating their breakfasts. I ought to just try that with my boss; I'd get kicked out on the spot. But who knows, maybe that would be the best thing for me. If I didn't have my parents to think about I'd have given in my notice a long time ago, I'd have gone up to the boss and told him just what I think, tell him everything I would, let him know just what I feel. He'd fall right off his desk! And it's a funny sort of business to be sitting up there at your desk,

talking down at your subordinates from up there, especially when you have to go right up close because the boss is hard of hearing. Well, there's still some hope; once I've got the money together to pay off my parents' debt to him - another five or six years I suppose - that's definitely what I'll do. That's when I'll make the big change. First of all though, I've got to get up, my train leaves at five."

And he looked over at the alarm clock, ticking on the chest of drawers. "God in Heaven!" he thought. It was half past six and the hands were quietly moving forwards, it was even later than half past, more like quarter to seven. Had the alarm clock not rung? He could see from the bed that it had been set for four o'clock as it should have been; it certainly must have rung. Yes, but was it possible to quietly sleep through that furniture-rattling noise? True, he had not slept peacefully, but probably all the more deeply because of that. What should he do now? The next train went at seven; if he were to catch that he would have to rush like mad and the collection of samples was still not packed, and he did not at all feel particularly fresh and lively. And even if he did catch the train he would not avoid his boss's anger as the office assistant would have been there to see the five o'clock train go, he would have put in his report about Gregor's not being there a long time ago. The office assistant was the boss's man, spineless, and with no understanding. What about if he reported sick? But that would be extremely strained and suspicious as in fifteen years of service Gregor had never once yet been ill. His boss would certainly come round with the doctor from the medical insurance company, accuse his parents of having a lazy son, and accept the doctor's

recommendation not to make any claim as the doctor believed that no-one was ever ill but that many were workshy. And what's more, would he have been entirely wrong in this case? Gregor did in fact, apart from excessive sleepiness after sleeping for so long, feel completely well and even felt much hungrier than usual.

He was still hurriedly thinking all this through, unable to decide to get out of the bed, when the clock struck quarter to seven. There was a cautious knock at the door near his head. "Gregor", somebody called - it was his mother - "it's quarter to seven. Didn't you want to go somewhere?" That gentle voice! Gregor was shocked when he heard his own voice answering, it could hardly be recognised as the voice he had had before. As if from deep inside him, there was a painful and uncontrollable squeaking mixed in with it, the words could be made out at first but then there was a sort of echo which made them unclear, leaving the hearer unsure whether he had heard properly or not. Gregor had wanted to give a full answer and explain everything, but in the circumstances contented himself with saying: "Yes, mother, yes, thank-you, I'm getting up now." The change in Gregor's voice probably could not be noticed outside through the wooden door, as his mother was satisfied with this explanation and shuffled away. But this short conversation made the other members of the family aware that Gregor, against their expectations was still at home, and soon his father came knocking at one of the side doors, gently, but with his fist. "Gregor, Gregor", he called, "what's wrong?" And after a short while he called again with a warning deepness in his voice: "Gregor! Gregor!" At the other side door his sister came plaintively: "Gregor? Aren't you well? Do you need

anything?" Gregor answered to both sides: "I'm ready, now", making an effort to remove all the strangeness from his voice by enunciating very carefully and putting long pauses between each, individual word. His father went back to his breakfast, but his sister whispered: "Gregor, open the door, I beg of you." Gregor, however, had no thought of opening the door, and instead congratulated himself for his cautious habit, acquired from his travelling, of locking all doors at night even when he was at home.

The first thing he wanted to do was to get up in peace without being disturbed, to get dressed, and most of all to have his breakfast. Only then would he consider what to do next, as he was well aware that he would not bring his thoughts to any sensible conclusions by lying in bed. He remembered that he had often felt a slight pain in bed, perhaps caused by lying awkwardly, but that had always turned out to be pure imagination and he wondered how his imaginings would slowly resolve themselves today. He did not have the slightest doubt that the change in his voice was nothing more than the first sign of a serious cold, which was an occupational hazard for travelling salesmen.

It was a simple matter to throw off the covers; he only had to blow himself up a little and they fell off by themselves. But it became difficult after that, especially as he was so exceptionally broad. He would have used his arms and his hands to push himself up; but instead of them he only had all those little legs continuously moving in different directions, and which he was moreover unable to control. If he wanted to bend one of them, then that was the first one that would stretch itself out; and if

he finally managed to do what he wanted with that leg, all the others seemed to be set free and would move about painfully. "This is something that can't be done in bed", Gregor said to himself, "so don't keep trying to do it".

The first thing he wanted to do was get the lower part of his body out of the bed, but he had never seen this lower part, and could not imagine what it looked like; it turned out to be too hard to move; it went so slowly; and finally, almost in a frenzy, when he carelessly shoved himself forwards with all the force he could gather, he chose the wrong direction, hit hard against the lower bedpost, and learned from the burning pain he felt that the lower part of his body might well, at present, be the most sensitive.

So then he tried to get the top part of his body out of the bed first, carefully turning his head to the side. This he managed quite easily, and despite its breadth and its weight, the bulk of his body eventually followed slowly in the direction of the head. But when he had at last got his head out of the bed and into the fresh air it occurred to him that if he let himself fall it would be a miracle if his head were not injured, so he became afraid to carry on pushing himself forward the same way. And he could not knock himself out now at any price; better to stay in bed than lose consciousness.

It took just as much effort to get back to where he had been earlier, but when he lay there sighing, and was once more watching his legs as they struggled against each other even harder than before, if that was possible, he could think of no way of bringing peace and order to this

chaos. He told himself once more that it was not possible for him to stay in bed and that the most sensible thing to do would be to get free of it in whatever way he could at whatever sacrifice. At the same time, though, he did not forget to remind himself that calm consideration was much better than rushing to desperate conclusions. At times like this he would direct his eyes to the window and look out as clearly as he could, but unfortunately, even the other side of the narrow street was enveloped in morning fog and the view had little confidence or cheer to offer him. "Seven o'clock, already", he said to himself when the clock struck again, "seven o'clock, and there's still a fog like this." And he lay there quietly a while longer, breathing lightly as if he perhaps expected the total stillness to bring things back to their real and natural state.

But then he said to himself: "Before it strikes quarter past seven I'll definitely have to have got properly out of bed. And by then somebody will have come round from work to ask what's happened to me as well, as they open up at work before seven o'clock." And so he set himself to the task of swinging the entire length of his body out of the bed all at the same time. If he succeeded in falling out of bed in this way and kept his head raised as he did so he could probably avoid injuring it. His back seemed to be quite hard, and probably nothing would happen to it falling onto the carpet. His main concern was for the loud noise he was bound to make, and which even through all the doors would probably raise concern if not alarm. But it was something that had to be risked.

When Gregor was already sticking half way out of the bed - the new method was more of a game than an effort,

all he had to do was rock back and forth - it occurred to him how simple everything would be if somebody came to help him. Two strong people - he had his father and the maid in mind - would have been more than enough; they would only have to push their arms under the dome of his back, peel him away from the bed, bend down with the load and then be patient and careful as he swang over onto the floor, where, hopefully, the little legs would find a use. Should he really call for help though, even apart from the fact that all the doors were locked? Despite all the difficulty he was in, he could not suppress a smile at this thought.

After a while he had already moved so far across that it would have been hard for him to keep his balance if he rocked too hard. The time was now ten past seven and he would have to make a final decision very soon. Then there was a ring at the door of the flat. "That'll be someone from work", he said to himself, and froze very still, although his little legs only became all the more lively as they danced around. For a moment everything remained quiet. "They're not opening the door", Gregor said to himself, caught in some nonsensical hope. But then of course, the maid's firm steps went to the door as ever and opened it. Gregor only needed to hear the visitor's first words of greeting and he knew who it was - the chief clerk himself. Why did Gregor have to be the only one condemned to work for a company where they immediately became highly suspicious at the slightest shortcoming? Were all employees, every one of them, louts, was there not one of them who was faithful and devoted who would go so mad with pangs of conscience that he couldn't get out of bed if he didn't spend at least a couple of hours in the morning on company business?

Was it really not enough to let one of the trainees make enquiries - assuming enquiries were even necessary - did the chief clerk have to come himself, and did they have to show the whole, innocent family that this was so suspicious that only the chief clerk could be trusted to have the wisdom to investigate it? And more because these thoughts had made him upset than through any proper decision, he swang himself with all his force out of the bed. There was a loud thump, but it wasn't really a loud noise. His fall was softened a little by the carpet, and Gregor's back was also more elastic than he had thought, which made the sound muffled and not too noticeable. He had not held his head carefully enough, though, and hit it as he fell; annoyed and in pain, he turned it and rubbed it against the carpet.

"Something's fallen down in there", said the chief clerk in the room on the left. Gregor tried to imagine whether something of the sort that had happened to him today could ever happen to the chief clerk too; you had to concede that it was possible. But as if in gruff reply to this question, the chief clerk's firm footsteps in his highly polished boots could now be heard in the adjoining room. From the room on his right, Gregor's sister whispered to him to let him know: "Gregor, the chief clerk is here." "Yes, I know", said Gregor to himself; but without daring to raise his voice loud enough for his sister to hear him.

"Gregor", said his father now from the room to his left, "the chief clerk has come round and wants to know why you didn't leave on the early train. We don't know what to say to him. And anyway, he wants to speak to you personally. So please open up this door. I'm sure he'll be good enough to forgive the untidiness of your room."

Then the chief clerk called "Good morning, Mr. Samsa". "He isn't well", said his mother to the chief clerk, while his father continued to speak through the door. "He isn't well, please believe me. Why else would Gregor have missed a train! The lad only ever thinks about the business. It nearly makes me cross the way he never goes out in the evenings; he's been in town for a week now but stayed home every evening. He sits with us in the kitchen and just reads the paper or studies train timetables. His idea of relaxation is working with his fretsaw. He's made a little frame, for instance, it only took him two or three evenings, you'll be amazed how nice it is; it's hanging up in his room; you'll see it as soon as Gregor opens the door. Anyway, I'm glad you're here; we wouldn't have been able to get Gregor to open the door by ourselves; he's so stubborn; and I'm sure he isn't well, he said this morning that he is, but he isn't." "I'll be there in a moment", said Gregor slowly and thoughtfully, but without moving so that he would not miss any word of the conversation. "Well I can't think of any other way of explaining it, Mrs. Samsa", said the chief clerk, "I hope it's nothing serious. But on the other hand, I must say that if we people in commerce ever become slightly unwell then, fortunately or unfortunately as you like, we simply have to overcome it because of business considerations." "Can the chief clerk come in to see you now then?", asked his father impatiently, knocking at the door again. "No", said Gregor. In the room on his right there followed a painful silence; in the room on his left his sister began to cry.

So why did his sister not go and join the others? She had probably only just got up and had not even begun to get dressed. And why was she crying? Was it because he

had not got up, and had not let the chief clerk in, because he was in danger of losing his job and if that happened his boss would once more pursue their parents with the same demands as before? There was no need to worry about things like that yet. Gregor was still there and had not the slightest intention of abandoning his family. For the time being he just lay there on the carpet, and no-one who knew the condition he was in would seriously have expected him to let the chief clerk in. It was only a minor discourtesy, and a suitable excuse could easily be found for it later on, it was not something for which Gregor could be sacked on the spot. And it seemed to Gregor much more sensible to leave him now in peace instead of disturbing him with talking at him and crying. But the others didn't know what was happening, they were worried, that would excuse their behaviour.

The chief clerk now raised his voice, "Mr. Samsa", he called to him, "what is wrong? You barricade yourself in your room, give us no more than yes or no for an answer, you are causing serious and unnecessary concern to your parents and you fail - and I mention this just by the way - you fail to carry out your business duties in a way that is quite unheard of. I'm speaking here on behalf of your parents and of your employer, and really must request a clear and immediate explanation. I am astonished, quite astonished. I thought I knew you as a calm and sensible person, and now you suddenly seem to be showing off with peculiar whims. This morning, your employer did suggest a possible reason for your failure to appear, it's true - it had to do with the money that was recently entrusted to you - but I came near to giving him my word of honour that that could not be the right explanation.

But now that I see your incomprehensible stubbornness I no longer feel any wish whatsoever to intercede on your behalf. And nor is your position all that secure. I had originally intended to say all this to you in private, but since you cause me to waste my time here for no good reason I don't see why your parents should not also learn of it. Your turnover has been very unsatisfactory of late; I grant you that it's not the time of year to do especially good business, we recognise that; but there simply is no time of year to do no business at all, Mr. Samsa, we cannot allow there to be."

"But Sir", called Gregor, beside himself and forgetting all else in the excitement, "I'll open up immediately, just a moment. I'm slightly unwell, an attack of dizziness, I haven't been able to get up. I'm still in bed now. I'm quite fresh again now, though. I'm just getting out of bed. Just a moment. Be patient! It's not quite as easy as I'd thought. I'm quite alright now, though. It's shocking, what can suddenly happen to a person! I was quite alright last night, my parents know about it, perhaps better than me, I had a small symptom of it last night already. They must have noticed it. I don't know why I didn't let you know at work! But you always think you can get over an illness without staying at home. Please, don't make my parents suffer! There's no basis for any of the accusations you're making; nobody's ever said a word to me about any of these things. Maybe you haven't read the latest contracts I sent in. I'll set off with the eight o'clock train, as well, these few hours of rest have given me strength. You don't need to wait, sir; I'll be in the office soon after you, and please be so good as to tell that to the boss and recommend me to him!"

And while Gregor gushed out these words, hardly knowing what he was saying, he made his way over to the chest of drawers - this was easily done, probably because of the practise he had already had in bed - where he now tried to get himself upright. He really did want to open the door, really did want to let them see him and to speak with the chief clerk; the others were being so insistent, and he was curious to learn what they would say when they caught sight of him. If they were shocked then it would no longer be Gregor's responsibility and he could rest. If, however, they took everything calmly he would still have no reason to be upset, and if he hurried he really could be at the station for eight o'clock. The first few times he tried to climb up on the smooth chest of drawers he just slid down again, but he finally gave himself one last swing and stood there upright; the lower part of his body was in serious pain but he no longer gave any attention to it. Now he let himself fall against the back of a nearby chair and held tightly to the edges of it with his little legs. By now he had also calmed down, and kept quiet so that he could listen to what the chief clerk was saying.

"Did you understand a word of all that?" the chief clerk asked his parents, "surely he's not trying to make fools of us". "Oh, God!" called his mother, who was already in tears, "he could be seriously ill and we're making him suffer. Grete! Grete!" she then cried. "Mother?" his sister called from the other side. They communicated across Gregor's room. "You'll have to go for the doctor straight away. Gregor is ill. Quick, get the doctor. Did you hear the way Gregor spoke just now?" "That was the voice of an animal", said the chief clerk, with a calmness that was in contrast with his mother's

screams. "Anna! Anna!" his father called into the kitchen through the entrance hall, clapping his hands, "get a locksmith here, now!" And the two girls, their skirts swishing, immediately ran out through the hall, wrenching open the front door of the flat as they went. How had his sister managed to get dressed so quickly? There was no sound of the door banging shut again; they must have left it open; people often do in homes where something awful has happened.

Gregor, in contrast, had become much calmer. So they couldn't understand his words any more, although they seemed clear enough to him, clearer than before - perhaps his ears had become used to the sound. They had realised, though, that there was something wrong with him, and were ready to help. The first response to his situation had been confident and wise, and that made him feel better. He felt that he had been drawn back in among people, and from the doctor and the locksmith he expected great and surprising achievements - although he did not really distinguish one from the other. Whatever was said next would be crucial, so, in order to make his voice as clear as possible, he coughed a little, but taking care to do this not too loudly as even this might well sound different from the way that a human coughs and he was no longer sure he could judge this for himself. Meanwhile, it had become very quiet in the next room. Perhaps his parents were sat at the table whispering with the chief clerk, or perhaps they were all pressed against the door and listening.

Gregor slowly pushed his way over to the door with the chair. Once there he let go of it and threw himself onto the door, holding himself upright against it using

the adhesive on the tips of his legs. He rested there a little while to recover from the effort involved and then set himself to the task of turning the key in the lock with his mouth. He seemed, unfortunately, to have no proper teeth - how was he, then, to grasp the key? - but the lack of teeth was, of course, made up for with a very strong jaw; using the jaw, he really was able to start the key turning, ignoring the fact that he must have been causing some kind of damage as a brown fluid came from his mouth, flowed over the key and dripped onto the floor. "Listen", said the chief clerk in the next room, "he's turning the key." Gregor was greatly encouraged by this; but they all should have been calling to him, his father and his mother too: "Well done, Gregor", they should have cried, "keep at it, keep hold of the lock!" And with the idea that they were all excitedly following his efforts, he bit on the key with all his strength, paying no attention to the pain he was causing himself. As the key turned round he turned around the lock with it, only holding himself upright with his mouth, and hung onto the key or pushed it down again with the whole weight of his body as needed. The clear sound of the lock as it snapped back was Gregor's sign that he could break his concentration, and as he regained his breath he said to himself: "So, I didn't need the locksmith after all". Then he lay his head on the handle of the door to open it completely.

Because he had to open the door in this way, it was already wide open before he could be seen. He had first to slowly turn himself around one of the double doors, and he had to do it very carefully if he did not want to fall flat on his back before entering the room. He was still occupied with this difficult movement, unable to pay

attention to anything else, when he heard the chief clerk exclaim a loud "Oh!", which sounded like the sighing of the wind. Now he also saw him - he was the nearest to the door - his hand pressed against his open mouth and slowly retreating as if driven by a steady and invisible force. Gregor's mother, her hair still dishevelled from bed despite the chief clerk's being there, looked at his father. Then she unfolded her arms, took two steps forward towards Gregor and sank down onto the floor into her skirts that spread themselves out around her as her head disappeared down onto her breast. His father looked hostile, and clenched his fists as if wanting to knock Gregor back into his room. Then he looked uncertainly round the living room, covered his eyes with his hands and wept so that his powerful chest shook.

So Gregor did not go into the room, but leant against the inside of the other door which was still held bolted in place. In this way only half of his body could be seen, along with his head above it which he leant over to one side as he peered out at the others. Meanwhile the day had become much lighter; part of the endless, grey-black building on the other side of the street - which was a hospital - could be seen quite clearly with the austere and regular line of windows piercing its façade; the rain was still falling, now throwing down large, individual droplets which hit the ground one at a time. The washing up from breakfast lay on the table; there was so much of it because, for Gregor's father, breakfast was the most important meal of the day and he would stretch it out for several hours as he sat reading a number of different newspapers. On the wall exactly opposite there was photograph of Gregor when he was a lieutenant in the army, his sword in his hand and a carefree smile on his

face as he called forth respect for his uniform and bearing. The door to the entrance hall was open and as the front door of the flat was also open he could see onto the landing and the stairs where they began their way down below.

"Now, then", said Gregor, well aware that he was the only one to have kept calm, "I'll get dressed straight away now, pack up my samples and set off. Will you please just let me leave? You can see", he said to the chief clerk, "that I'm not stubborn and like I like to do my job; being a commercial traveller is arduous but without travelling I couldn't earn my living. So where are you going, in to the office? Yes? Will you report everything accurately, then? It's quite possible for someone to be temporarily unable to work, but that's just the right time to remember what's been achieved in the past and consider that later on, once the difficulty has been removed, he will certainly work with all the more diligence and concentration. You're well aware that I'm seriously in debt to our employer as well as having to look after my parents and my sister, so that I'm trapped in a difficult situation, but I will work my way out of it again. Please don't make things any harder for me than they are already, and don't take sides against me at the office. I know that nobody likes the travellers. They think we earn an enormous wage as well as having a soft time of it. That's just prejudice but they have no particular reason to think better it. But you, sir, you have a better overview than the rest of the staff, in fact, if I can say this in confidence, a better overview than the boss himself - it's very easy for a businessman like him to make mistakes about his employees and judge them more harshly than he should. And you're also well aware that we travellers

spend almost the whole year away from the office, so that we can very easily fall victim to gossip and chance and groundless complaints, and it's almost impossible to defend yourself from that sort of thing, we don't usually even hear about them, or if at all it's when we arrive back home exhausted from a trip, and that's when we feel the harmful effects of what's been going on without even knowing what caused them. Please, don't go away, at least first say something to show that you grant that I'm at least partly right!"

But the chief clerk had turned away as soon as Gregor had started to speak, and, with protruding lips, only stared back at him over his trembling shoulders as he left. He did not keep still for a moment while Gregor was speaking, but moved steadily towards the door without taking his eyes off him. He moved very gradually, as if there had been some secret prohibition on leaving the room. It was only when he had reached the entrance hall that he made a sudden movement, drew his foot from the living room, and rushed forward in a panic. In the hall, he stretched his right hand far out towards the stairway as if out there, there were some supernatural force waiting to save him.

Gregor realised that it was out of the question to let the chief clerk go away in this mood if his position in the firm was not to be put into extreme danger. That was something his parents did not understand very well; over the years, they had become convinced that this job would provide for Gregor for his entire life, and besides, they had so much to worry about at present that they had lost sight of any thought for the future. Gregor, though, did think about the future. The chief clerk had to be held

back, calmed down, convinced and finally won over; the future of Gregor and his family depended on it! If only his sister were here! She was clever; she was already in tears while Gregor was still lying peacefully on his back. And the chief clerk was a lover of women, surely she could persuade him; she would close the front door in the entrance hall and talk him out of his shocked state. But his sister was not there, Gregor would have to do the job himself. And without considering that he still was not familiar with how well he could move about in his present state, or that his speech still might not - or probably would not - be understood, he let go of the door; pushed himself through the opening; tried to reach the chief clerk on the landing who, ridiculously, was holding on to the banister with both hands; but Gregor fell immediately over and, with a little scream as he sought something to hold onto, landed on his numerous little legs. Hardly had that happened than, for the first time that day, he began to feel alright with his body; the little legs had the solid ground under them; to his pleasure, they did exactly as he told them; they were even making the effort to carry him where he wanted to go; and he was soon believing that all his sorrows would soon be finally at an end. He held back the urge to move but swayed from side to side as he crouched there on the floor. His mother was not far away in front of him and seemed, at first, quite engrossed in herself, but then she suddenly jumped up with her arms outstretched and her fingers spread shouting: "Help, for pity's sake, Help!" The way she held her head suggested she wanted to see Gregor better, but the unthinking way she was hurrying backwards showed that she did not; she had forgotten that the table was behind her with all the breakfast things on it; when she reached the table she sat quickly

down on it without knowing what she was doing; without even seeming to notice that the coffee pot had been knocked over and a gush of coffee was pouring down onto the carpet.

"Mother, mother", said Gregor gently, looking up at her. He had completely forgotten the chief clerk for the moment, but could not help himself snapping in the air with his jaws at the sight of the flow of coffee. That set his mother screaming anew, she fled from the table and into the arms of his father as he rushed towards her. Gregor, though, had no time to spare for his parents now; the chief clerk had already reached the stairs; with his chin on the banister, he looked back for the last time. Gregor made a run for him; he wanted to be sure of reaching him; the chief clerk must have expected something, as he leapt down several steps at once and disappeared; his shouts resounding all around the staircase. The flight of the chief clerk seemed, unfortunately, to put Gregor's father into a panic as well. Until then he had been relatively self controlled, but now, instead of running after the chief clerk himself, or at least not impeding Gregor as he ran after him, Gregor's father seized the chief clerk's stick in his right hand (the chief clerk had left it behind on a chair, along with his hat and overcoat), picked up a large newspaper from the table with his left, and used them to drive Gregor back into his room, stamping his foot at him as he went. Gregor's appeals to his father were of no help, his appeals were simply not understood, however much he humbly turned his head his father merely stamped his foot all the harder. Across the room, despite the chilly weather, Gregor's mother had pulled open a window, leant far out of it and pressed her hands to her face. A

strong draught of air flew in from the street towards the stairway, the curtains flew up, the newspapers on the table fluttered and some of them were blown onto the floor. Nothing would stop Gregor's father as he drove him back, making hissing noises at him like a wild man. Gregor had never had any practice in moving backwards and was only able to go very slowly. If Gregor had only been allowed to turn round he would have been back in his room straight away, but he was afraid that if he took the time to do that his father would become impatient, and there was the threat of a lethal blow to his back or head from the stick in his father's hand any moment. Eventually, though, Gregor realised that he had no choice as he saw, to his disgust, that he was quite incapable of going backwards in a straight line; so he began, as quickly as possible and with frequent anxious glances at his father, to turn himself round. It went very slowly, but perhaps his father was able to see his good intentions as he did nothing to hinder him, in fact now and then he used the tip of his stick to give directions from a distance as to which way to turn. If only his father would stop that unbearable hissing! It was making Gregor quite confused. When he had nearly finished turning round, still listening to that hissing, he made a mistake and turned himself back a little the way he had just come. He was pleased when he finally had his head in front of the doorway, but then saw that it was too narrow, and his body was too broad to get through it without further difficulty. In his present mood, it obviously did not occur to his father to open the other of the double doors so that Gregor would have enough space to get through. He was merely fixed on the idea that Gregor should be got back into his room as quickly as possible. Nor would he ever have allowed Gregor the time to get himself upright as

preparation for getting through the doorway. What he did, making more noise than ever, was to drive Gregor forwards all the harder as if there had been nothing in the way; it sounded to Gregor as if there was now more than one father behind him; it was not a pleasant experience, and Gregor pushed himself into the doorway without regard for what might happen. One side of his body lifted itself, he lay at an angle in the doorway, one flank scraped on the white door and was painfully injured, leaving vile brown flecks on it, soon he was stuck fast and would not have been able to move at all by himself, the little legs along one side hung quivering in the air while those on the other side were pressed painfully against the ground. Then his father gave him a hefty shove from behind which released him from where he was held and sent him flying, and heavily bleeding, deep into his room. The door was slammed shut with the stick, then, finally, all was quiet.

Gossip

I have used “rumors” as a generic term, taking it as roughly synonymous with gossip, hearsay, slander, calumny, tittle-tattle, and the like. All these entities have largely been an object of moral condemnation and critique in the entire tradition, but each of them has a slightly different shading, background, and field of reference. Some of them are obviously and strongly negative (denigration, backbiting, slander, calumny, etc.); rumors and gossip are nevertheless more neutral. They often function as quasi-synonyms, but we have come to a point where we have to make a rough distinction between the two. The source of rumors cannot be ascertained; they circulate anonymously; one merely hears them and passes them on without subscribing to them, although this neutrality is very questionable and is largely propelled by *schadenfreude*, a malicious detachment, and an evasion of responsibility for what may well have very damaging effects. With gossip, on the other hand, the source is most often known. Gossip takes place in a circle of friends and acquaintances and concerns people one knows.⁵¹ It is distinguished by a particular mode, marked not so much by imparting verifiable information as by speculation and the formation and exchange of attitudes and judgments, points of view, evaluations, and internal secrets that “others” are not privy to. It tests ideas that don’t have to abide by the public standards of evidence and proof, but rather pertain to the informal and private ties of friendship and intimacy.⁵² Gossip can thus function as basic social networking, establishing and maintaining social bonds that perhaps couldn’t be set up at all without this essential constituent. Gossip is necessary to ascertain and sustain one’s belonging to a community and one’s standing in it, to uphold the place one occupies in the social world and the reputation one enjoys. – I said earlier that rumors don’t figure on Jakobson’s list of the basic functions of language, but there may be some room for gossip as an elementary part of what he described

as phatic communication – the kind that conveys no substantial information but only keeps the communicational channel alive, retaining the capacity to open it, verify it along the way, and close it if necessary. This is the function par excellence of greetings (“Hello!”) and ritualistic or empty formulae with no proper content (“How are you?”). In the case of gossip, this function instigates and maintains inclusion in a group, but at the price of the concomitant exclusion of some, given that gossip by definition happens behind the back of the absent others, the objects of gossip. Shall we say bad rumors versus good gossip? Maybe not quite.

The idea that gossip is the basic function of language has its proponents among serious anthropologists and psychologists. The most famous in this respect is Robin Dunbar, author of a book with a telling title: *Grooming, Gossip, and the Origin of Language*. Grooming, in monkey societies, is a hands-on activity of taking care of one another’s furs and serves as a powerful agent in establishing social bonds and hierarchies. A lot of time, care, and energy is devoted to it. It is an elementary form of social networking – who grooms whom, who can expect benefits from grooming a higher-ranking individual, who bonds with whom: there is here a complicated combination of mutuality and hierarchy, and even a long-term strategic social calculation. Seen in this light, language – this is the author’s dazzling suggestion – could ultimately look like “grooming at a distance”:

Could it be that language evolved as a kind of vocal grooming to allow us to bond larger groups than was possible using the conventional primate mechanism of physical grooming? ... Language thus seems ideally suited in various ways to being a cheap and ultra-efficient form of grooming.... In a nutshell, I am suggesting that language evolved to allow us to gossip. 53

This, then, would be the crucial step inaugurating humanity: the move from physical contact to a vocal tie through

language. And the zero function of language would then be that of gossip. From monkey society to society columns and TikTok there is but a slide, once this step has been accomplished. The use of gossip as a basic property of language can be empirically researched. The scrutiny of innumerable recorded conversations came to the following result:

About two-thirds of conversation time is devoted to social topics. These include discussions of personal relationships, personal likes and dislikes, personal experiences, the behavior of other people and similar topics.... one of the most important things gossip allows you to do is to keep track of (and of course influence) other people's reputations as well as your own. ⁵⁴Gossip ... is all about the management of reputation.

Most of the time, then, we use language as a vehicle for gossip, and the name of the game is social networking, establishing in-groups and out-groups, and particularly doing reputation management, an apposite concept. ⁵⁵This gossip function can be traced back to incipient uses of language in the formation of elementary social bonds, then pursued up to its flamboyant, cancer-like expansion in contemporary social media; but is the latter merely an amplification of the same mechanism? We'll come back to this.

If we follow this line of thought, we have to conceive of gossip as a positive entity: good gossip serving a very basic social purpose and offering benefit. If rumors, gossip, slander, and so on generally appear as pathological, morally reprehensible, or at least trifling and trivial, can one conceive of something like an "authentic" gossip? Serious gossip, essential gossip? This is a line of argument amply illustrated ⁵⁶in the delightful book on gossip by Patricia Meyer Spacks. Her approach is that gossip, which is neither good nor bad in itself, should be considered in its particular functions and placed somewhere in between the two extremes of bad

gossip and good gossip. At one end there is calumny, denigration, defamation, and character assassination, each driven by malice, envy, exclusion, or weaponization and often having harsh social and political consequences; in our times, this is what most often fuels something like cancel culture, for example. At the other end there is “serious” gossip, which caters for privacy, intimacy, solidarity, and shared pleasure, having the capacity to create and intensify human connections, to speak the language of shared experience, to foster intelligence, and to serve as the catalyst of social processes; this is a basic form of socialization, which produces the very fabric of the social. The point is not so much to redeem gossip from its bad reputation as to display and scrutinize its dual or rather multiple nature, its utter ambiguity, its complexity against the almost univocal moral reprehension and condemnation that accompanied it throughout various traditions and to point out that its social function is absolutely necessary for human bonding. At the same time, the ambiguity of gossip stems from its own presupposition, namely that one always gossips about the absent. The ties among an in-group, which are promoted through gossip, always implicitly depend on the exclusion of an out-group, and an amicable bond has the nasty tendency of indulging in the power that one can exert over the absent others. It’s ultimately a matter of us versus them, with shifting boundaries between the two – between who is in and who is out. The necessary social activity of gossip, fostering solidarity, is never quite free from the inextricable other side and can easily slide into the nasty logic of rumors.

Meyer Spacks’s argument is not exactly new; there have been, in the same tradition, quite a few voices to stand up for gossip – from a pamphlet defending ³⁷gossip in 1821 to (most remarkably) W. H. Auden in 1938 – but they were a small minority against the prevailing tone of condemnation. I have singled out Meyer Spacks as a particularly lucid, articulate, and perceptive voice; she presents a lot of background and

proposes an astute reading of a number of English and American novels by way of building a case.⁵⁸ After all, literature, and of course novels in the first place, were written by authors who knew all along the complexity and ambivalence of gossip and explored at length its multiple and contradictory functions; it's just that one has to listen carefully to their implications. Meyer Spacks's book, published in 1985, marks perhaps a turning point, although it had some predecessors; at any rate it stands out in the literature on gossip. Most of the recent literature on the topic follows Spacks's general approach of analyzing complexity rather than dispensing moral judgments.⁵⁹

One major function of gossip that has to be particularly valued is its capacity to form an alternative culture and an alternative community in the face of the ruling ideology. It can serve as a resource for the underdog, for the oppressed and the dispossessed. First of all, there is a "spontaneous" propensity to ascribe gossip and rumors to women (we see it already in the personification of *fama* in ancient Rome: *Fama* was a goddess). Women are supposed to be especially dexterous in this area. If *logos* is male, does it follow that the other side of the big Other has a feminine face? The totality of *logos* versus the "not all" of feminine gossip? Man's proper use of language versus woman's alleged misuse, idle talk, perversion of *logos*?⁶⁰ The "natural" assumption of sexualizing the *logos* versus rumors and gossip divide is, of course, profoundly symptomatic of the nature and presuppositions of *logos* itself, of its tacit masculinist prejudice in its very universality. Still, this highly biased ascription nevertheless points to the function of gossip in forming a female alliance and finding resources to counteract male dominance. Women were historically excluded from the public sphere, so gossip served as a resource and form of empowerment. This was enough to instill in men a fear of women's bonding through gossip, which escapes control and can then serve as a screen for male fantasies – who knows

what women talk about among themselves, what dangers may lurk in their tittle-tattle, what secret, inaccessible jouissance they share, what remains out of men's reach. Hence the attitude of stark condemnation and dismissal, persistently repeated throughout ages and cultures, and the entrenched belief that gossip is empty, worthless, frivolous, of no consequence, and yet dangerous and threatening. Since gossip is about reputation management, the fear is that women's gossip may seriously put in jeopardy male reputation and supremacy. Gossip and rumors have indeed the power to turn the tables, so this fear is not just imaginary.

There is no doubt a democratic potential to gossip as a source of social bonding and empowerment for all groups that have limited or no access to the public sphere. In colonial contexts, the colonizers generally didn't speak the language of the colonized, so the latter could trade confidential information and maintain community cohesion ⁶¹ in the face of oppression through the network of gossip. This largely goes for all disempowered minorities: they have to rely on gossip as a vital resource. And it goes especially for black and queer communities, which have both found in gossip a formidable means of creating alternative cultures and tools of resistance (I cannot expand on this topic here, but I can refer to some excellent literature). ⁶² Finally, as I know from personal experience, in socialist countries, where access to information was limited and the official sources were not to be trusted, for vital information one had to rely heavily, day by day, on rumors and gossip; and since rumors and gossip are not reliable either, the whole population developed intricate hermeneutical skills to sieve both official and unofficial sources. Rumors and gossip were essential for survival and solidarity.

This brings us finally to a larger point, namely the utter ambiguity of the constellation that we started from: the problem of the big Other and its shadow, a problem epitomized by the initial opposition between *logos* and

rumors. There is the public and shiny side of the big Other, which aims at universality and offers a guarantee, while the shadowy flip side of rumors presents a figure of another big Other, one that possesses an unfounded yet unfathomable authority and threatens to undermine the former. Now we have seen that the shadowy flip side itself splits at least into two, as it were. In relation to *logos*, both rumors and gossip represent the non-universal, the speech that cannot be universalized and is not properly grounded, yet has different valences, oscillating between the pernicious and the beneficial: at one end it threatens to undercut the authority that underpins the symbolic order, at the other end it points to the questionable nature of this very authority and displays its bias, its complicity with power, and the exclusion that its universality presupposes. In this sense, not only are rumors and gossip characterized by a lack of foundation in relation to the big Other, whose authority looks properly founded, but they also point at the shaky foundation of that authority itself. The big Other and its symptom, we said; and the symptom is profoundly revelatory of the inner impasse of the authority of the Other itself. This doesn't mean at all that we should give up on it, debunk it as an illusion, or simply denounce its oppressive nature; rather this calls for a constant engagement with its paradoxical nature. Rumors and gossip feature like an unvouched-for supplement of the big Other, its necessarily produced symptom, its stain, its question mark. Within this sphere, one can draw an opposition between the viciousness of rumors and the advantages of gossip – and here rumors are construed as power over the powerless, gossip as the resource of power of the powerless, but the dividing line is shifting and has to be drawn always anew. It's more like they are both placed on a Moebius strip, the beneficial sliding easily into the detrimental. We find ourselves in the same predicament: there is no big Other without its double, but ultimately there is no Other of the Other.

51. Or else the celebrities, but this is a slightly different genre, which would demand separate scrutiny.
52. For a good analysis and defense of gossip and its subversive epistemological value, see Karen Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Radzik, in an insightful paper, gives a rough definition of gossip as “*private, informal ... idle, evaluative communication about persons who are absent*” (Linda Radzik, “Gossip and Social Punishment,” *Res Philosophica* 93.1 (2016), p. 187).
53. Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 79.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
55. The concept was proposed, among others, by Emler; see Nicholas Emler, *Gossip, Reputation, and Social Adaptation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).
56. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).
57. For a list, see *ibid.*, p. 342 and *passim*. Compare W. H. Auden, “In Defense of Gossip,” *The Living Age* magazine, February 1, 1938, pp. 534–538.
58. The list of the analyzed novels is long, running from Jane Austen to Eudora Welty via James Boswell, Elizabeth Gaskell, W. M. Thackeray, George Eliot, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Anthony Trollope, William Faulkner, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, and quite a few more. See also Nicola Parsons, *Reading Gossip in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Nicholas Hammond, *Gossip, Sexuality and Scandal in France (1610–1715)* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

- [59.](#) See in particular Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power*, then also e.g. the telling title of Emrys Westacott, *The Virtues of Our Vices: A Modest Defense of Gossip, Rudeness, and other Bad Habits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011) and the interdisciplinary essays in Francesca Giardini and Rafael Wittek (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Gossip and Reputation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- [60.](#) In the Christian universe, this goes back to original sin, instigated by Eve's foolish talk.
- [61.](#) I owe this reminder to a reader's report.
- [62.](#) See e.g. Patricia Turner, *I Heard It through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Gary Alan Fine and Patricia Turner, *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

INTRODUCTION: MOVEMENT

Is not the voice always already intervening, as a sounded body that searches for its place, one that projects forward to incite response? An intervention with great resonance, and one lodged within the power dynamics of particular structures—linguistic, familial, pedagogic, governmental, etc. A voice that is subsequently often overheard, underrepresented, and interrupted.

Around these vocal conditions the mouth operates, *performs*, as that architecture or vessel or stage—*the mouth has many descriptions . . .*—that gives form to voice, and that is informed by the push and pull of an oral drive. Yet the voice is but one type of production generated by the mouth; parallel to voicing, it also continually fills with breath and food, to respire and ingest; it lingers over the taste of another (the central axis of a primary memory), to also move with sudden hiccups or stutters, kisses, and murmurs, and to mediate innumerable exchanges. The mouth, in other words, is an extremely active cavity whose movements lead us from the depths of the body to the surface of the skin, from the materiality of things to the pressures of linguistic grammars—from breath to matter, and to the spoken and the sounded. Subsequently, I would highlight the mouth as an essential means by which the body is always already put into relation.

The mouth is thus wrapped up in the voice, and the voice in the mouth, so much so that to theorize the performativity of the spoken is to confront the tongue, the teeth, the lips, and the throat; it is to feel the mouth as a fleshy, wet lining around each syllable, as well as a texturing orifice that marks the voice with specificity, not only in terms of accent or dialect, but also by the depth of expression so central to the body.

As Mladen Dolar states, the voice is projected from the body to circulate *out there*—“a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source, emancipated itself, yet remains corporeal.”¹ The expressiveness of this projection can be seen and heard as an amplification of not only words, but also the exchange between an inside and an outside, one that intersects there in the mouth to force all sorts of productions. In doing so, the mouth also draws into tension the relation between language, as an abstract socializing system, and our embodied, sensual experiences. It is a meeting point, a

contact zone where language performs as a powerful agent, yet one that also spirits so many oral imaginings and poetics, where surfaces and depths continually interweave in feverish exchange.

The mouth functions to figure and sustain the body as a subject, a subject within a network of relations.

If voice is the very thing that forces itself outward, to carve out a space for the self amid all the intensities of surroundings, the mouth can be highlighted as the cavity that resonates with all such negotiations and brings them back *into* the body, to gather and to inflect future expression. Subsequently, the mouth is precisely what puts into question the separation of interior and exterior, as distinct and stable; as a primary conduit that brings into contact the material world with the depths of the body, the mouth continually unsettles the limits of embodiment. It performs as an extremely vital link—the essential link—to the world and those around us, to echo and vibrate with a multitude of forces that pass through its chamber, from the edible to the inedible, the symbolic to the semiotic, the proper to the improper. Even before we come to voice, the mouth has already initiated a confrontation with the forces surrounding and penetrating us, leaving their deep impressions firmly upon the tongue and hence our psychological life.

Accordingly, it is my view that the mouth requires greater attention within discourses on the performativity of the body and the politics of voice. It may figure alongside considerations of the gendered or racial body, as a performative chamber fully wed to identity and its social conditioning; it inserts within the linguistic field an extremely rich and problematic force—a poetics—by drawing language up against a multitude of somatic expenditures and dreamy expressions; and it places us into profound contact with the materiality of things and bodies, extending the experiences of taste and touch, and the limits of the flesh. The mouth affords entry onto the complicated weave of language and power, inscription and iteration, by locating speech as part of a greater assemblage where breath and spit, food and vomit, desire and angst, for instance, all stage their particular events to ultimately surround, interrupt, flavor, and support forms of agency and communion. In short, the mouth is so radically connected to both language and the body, desire and the other, as to provide an extremely pertinent education on what it means to be—and to create oneself as—a subject.

The aim of this work is to ultimately figure the mouth as an agile and animating creature, an assemblage of parts whose productions and expressions are heterogeneous, spiriting multiple personalities and multiple drives. This work is thus structured specifically to articulate this expanded territory of oral performativity and to insist upon its multiplicity. It is constructed as a lexicon so as to capture *and* let loose its central theme: the expressivity of the oral cavity.

Voice

The voice is that primary event that circulates to wrap us in its sonorities, silences and rhythms, and intonations. It operates as an essential force that animates the other to bring him or her closer to me, while also prompting my own: it is this voice that calls me into speech; I respond, return—to turn toward or away—and repeat, in that primary citation defined by Judith Butler, not only in terms of language and the coerciveness of power, but importantly, in the wish to be desired.² I turn to the other, with a voice shaped by *this other one*: I speak in order to locate myself near you.

The mouth can be understood as the physical site of such vocal productions, longings, and powerful interactions. While the voice may come at me, and *into* me, as a projected sound, it is the other's mouth to which my body turns—I rest upon this mouth; and while the voice may also come *out* of me, it is the mouth that shapes these outpourings, which I must move and that provides a reverberant space where exchanges of deep intimacy may take shape, through words as well as by a range of oral gestures—how often a kiss overcomes the estrangement voice can produce! The voice may extend the range of the body precisely by returning us to the mouth. In this regard, is it truly possible to separate the two, the voice and the mouth?

It is my view that the mouth is unavoidable. It figures as that point of vital animation upon the body, *for* the body, and which I focus on when spoken to: I watch the lips, awaiting their nuanced movements, their sudden exuberance, to reveal so much about this one who speaks. The mouth is so clearly *around* voice—it is the voice's physical envelope that can in turn say so much; it is entirely invested in the production and sustainability of a subject—it is required.

As the space of (not only) voice's reverberations, the mouth may be said to be *ringed* by language; it lingers in the mouth, as so much grammar and vocabulary, with so much hope and fear, pressure as well as possibility. Yet the mouth is also a dwelling wherein longing finds resonance: it searches in and around language for what is missing (as Julia Kristeva poses, what is missing is the mother . . .)³ and for what can be done to fill those gaps with energy or matter: with laughter and humming, licking and kissing, which might assuage such fundamental absence.

In addition, the mouth is the central entry point *into* the body, and that interior space brought forward by the voice. As Walter Ong emphasizes, it is through the voice that “interiors commune with interiors”; speech *sounds out* our interiority to deliver it to another, and deeper, into the interior private space of their hearing. Yet it is the mouth that operates as interiority's material lining.⁴ These surfaces of the mouth fully surround our vocality, and should be followed beyond what we can see. Rather, the mouth starts there on the face and folds into the oral cavity, to tunnel down the

throat. A series of surfaces equally muscular and viscous, resounding and relational. From flexed expressions and liquid operations to vibrational and reverberant productions, and finally, to the movements of social contact, the interior announced by Ong is not buried within the self, but rather flows as a membrane across and through the body; the interior is embedded in words not only according to the soul, but also the physical linings and muscles, the depths and surfaces that function in speech, to force it out.

The mouth thus performs an absolutely dynamic conditioning to how the voice operates, how it sounds and gestures, exposes and hides, figures and disfigures. The voice is such an effective and sensual material precisely because it comes from the mouth; it rises from the chest, up into the throat to shudder the vocal cords, to appear (for surely, it appears!) in and then from out of the mouth, rippling behind the facial muscles, the nasal passage, and along the jaw. We experience the voice by feeling it *in our body*.

These physical features of voice are drawn out here not to insist upon the body as an essential site for voice—not as nostalgia for a totalizing and secure presence. Rather, they are located within this work to highlight how recognition—to be a subject—is unmistakably tied to *having a say*, which is also fully predicated on having a mouth. It is my argument that to understand the full range of the voice, as an event (and discourse) entangling itself around bodies, desires, politics, identities, and nations, it is important to recognize the mouth in all its performative verve, effective influence, and complicated drama.

In this regard, I also pose the mouth as *never always* about voice. While much of this work seeks to remind the voice of its oral chamber, I equally aim to query the mouth in and of itself, as an extremely complex bodily *thing*. (What might I call this—this thing: an organ? A site? A machine? . . .) The mouth is a certain forcefulness—a sensitive muscularity, a soft and impressionable arena open to innumerable experiences, and wielding profound influence.

Subsequently, I would put into question what Dolar further identifies as the inherent “acousmatic” nature of the voice, as a sounded event that is both mine and not mine, and that never fully synchronizes with the one who speaks. “The source of the voice can never be seen, it stems from an undisclosed and structurally concealed interior, it cannot possibly match what we can see. [. . .] Every emission of the voice is by its very essence *ventriloquism*.”⁵ Accordingly, the voice is defined as a “paradoxical enigma.” While it may come from my body, it never quite belongs to me; in short, it brings me into the world according to a fundamental separation from myself. This leads Dolar to map the voice as an *object* whose essential condition is determined by a fundamental gap between what we see and what we hear, between this voice and this body. “Now the voice as the object, that paradoxical creature that we are after, is also a break”⁶—a break from the very fulfillment of presence it seems to also endorse.

In contrast, might the voice be thought of more as a tension—a tensed link, a flexed respiration, and equally, a struggle to *constitute* the body, rather than a disembodied sound? Not so much an object, but rather a primary production of a body? A body trying to be a subject? As Fred Moten poses, the voice is precisely what resists forces of objectification, which relegates bodies to a space of abstraction, forces that in fact erase the body by separating an understanding of desire from the material of the voice—a system that, in short, refuses to connect the voice to a subject that speaks. For Moten, in contrast, the voice is an “irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning,” an irruption in other words that is always already a *someone* intervening onto the structures of the social.⁷

To return to Dolar’s proposition—of the voice as “a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source, emancipated itself, yet remains corporeal”⁸—it is this “yet” which I grab hold of here, and which has driven this work. The vocal link *back* to the corporeal is precisely a ground for agency; it is the process by which the voice is understood as an articulation of personhood, however unstable, to tense the relation between the forces of objectification and the demand for subjectivity. It is the linguistics that I’m after, one defined by the irrupting orifice, phonic substance, and the assembly of oral movements that challenge separation, commodification, and the forces that may define *my voice* as an object.

As I present, it is my view that the mouth acts to mobilize an extended animate field, one that “moves with the interruptive–connective force of polyrhythmic organization”⁹—to link precisely the interrupting drive and imagination of this body with the connective social reach of this voice.

It is my interest to emphasize the voice as something expelled from the mouth, but which *never* leaves me behind—this is both the promise of voice and its ultimate problematic. The voice does not move away from my body, but rather it carries it forward—the voice *stretches* me; it drags me along, as a body bound to its politics and poetics, its accents and dialectics, its grammars, as well as its handicaps.¹⁰

Subject

Is not the voice then precisely a sound so full of body, a body under pressure and in search? A body textured by the force of emotion, sexuality, longing, intellect, and language, and that vocally labors to negotiate and explore the exchanges intrinsic to being a subject? In this regard, the “disembodied voice,” the “voice object,” and the primary ventriloquism of voicing often espoused is never the whole story: it is my view that the voice is also a *full body*, always already a *voice subject*, rich with intentions and meanings; sexed and gendered, classed and raced, accented, situated, and inflected by the intensities of numerous markings and their performance (inscriptions,

erasures, recitals, . . .). I would argue that the voice is always identified (though not always identifiable); it is flexed by the body, by the subject in all its complicated vitality. Someone (or *something*) speaks to me, and it is not the voice I hear, but rather the body, the subject; not a disembodied intensity, a speech without body, but as *someone* that enters, intrudes, demands, or requests, and that also seeks. A voice, as I understand it, that does not aspire to be an object.

The voice, in this way, *promises* a subject; it excites or haunts a listener to recognize in the voice a "someone." An *implicit* body on the way toward an explicit drama: the anticipation or expectation every voice instigates, that of a figure soon to appear—someone I may hope for, or that I might also dread, or one that I may not even understand. This has certainly been the case when examining the operations of the whisper: the unvoiced nature of whispering operates so well within narratives of haunting because it is a voice that promises the imminent arrival of someone (or something). The voice, in this regard, *announces* the subject, however illusory or unseen, fragmented or fictional.

In other words, the voice is such a meaningful sound: even when my voice trips me up, falls short, or loses direction, such slippages also *mean*, if not all the more. From this view, I learn from the voice who I am precisely as it carries me, as it sounds me, as I feel it as part of my face, in my throat and mouth, and up my nose; the voice does not leave me, as something that is external to myself; rather, voice is my sounded self, which is equally a *faciality*, a *bodily figuring*, an *expression full of depth*—it is an animate production, a gesture, and subsequently, a form of behavior.

To accentuate this further, the voice might be imaged as a cord, one that may extend outward, unfurled, or cast like a line, but which retains an extremely vital link back to the one who speaks, to the face and further, to the depths. Subsequently, it invites or requests that we feel the presence of a body. Such dynamics may also force us to tremble under the weight of an ideological system whose "voice" wields such power by always projecting the possibility of a real body that may suddenly step forward. I may be hailed by a voice, but I am arrested by a body and its grip: its mouth that may clamp down onto this flesh or "bite my head off." The voice is thus linked to an alimentary *grain*—the body in the voice as Barthes suggests¹¹—on the verge of fuller materialization.

Sounds operate to often impart force to matter, to excite, and to animate, and in this way can also be heard as a type of *voicing*. Is not every object a potential body with a voice? A thing whose sudden vibration calls it forth into the realm of life, to become a subject? To bring forward a certain agency onto the scene? Are not the figures of puppets, dolls, and all such machines underscoring the voice as in need of a mouth? As predicated on a reference to the buccal? Even the smallest of objects, or rudimentary of renderings, are enough to perform as a mouth, and therefore, as the projection of a voice.

The voice draws my attention to the radio object for instance, the speaker in the corner, from which a voice arises; or from the puppet, the machine, or the digital device that speaks to me—even such seemingly inanimate objects or banal materials function as a body. I turn toward *It* as the object from which the voice appears and which comes to lend animation to its surfaces and its thingness. Is this not the power of ventriloquy and radiophony, to draw us toward a thing which suddenly speaks? That thing: *the mouth*.

Mouthing

In researching the voice, I was led to the mouth. I couldn't get around it; it always interrupted my discursive gaze, demanding attention, as well as critical consideration. I wanted the voice, in all its complexity: it was my desire, my aim. Yet I recognized that in speaking of voice, I found the mouth—I fell into it; and in following this direction, by going in, I came to recognize how voicing is most often what I may call “mouthing.” *To mouth* is that instance of oral gesturing, whether in the drama of the yawn or in the sinister potential of the whisper; an action, in other words, that circulates in and around voicing, encapsulating it—*mouthing the words* should thus be taken literally, for the mouth wraps the voice, and all such wording, in its wet and impressionable envelope, its paralogues. The mouth is a vessel piloting numerous utterances and potent silences, so much stuff, as to condition and influence acts of *coming out* as well as *going in*; of entries and exits, and the ways in which we cross boundaries or reinforce their presence; the mouth is first and foremost a device for modulating the limits of the body. In this regard, the mouth delivers an epistemology founded on processes and experiences of ingestion and incorporation, emanation and expulsion, attachment and loss: a series of knowledge paths defined by this orifice and its generative and volatile movements.

It captures and figures the somatic, the alimentary, the resonant, and the viscous as always already surrounding language, “cutting and augmenting meaning,” flinging it all over the place. I might turn here to Samuel Beckett's short play *Not I*, a monologue delivered by a mouth only.¹² This mouth breaks the darkness with its agitations, restlessness, and ranting, an outpouring that veers across memories, delirium, and breathlessness—an *irrupting orifice*. This mouth cannot stop and bites down onto language in search of transformation.

Is not the body sustained through our ability to chew properly? To speak up, repeat, and recite? To swallow, respire, and speak forth? Is not the acquisition of speech based on the ability to *fit* the words in one's mouth? To push the lips this way and that, shaping breath into particular forms? To handle all sorts of materials and issues, desires and commands, by way of the oral? We may be called into language, on a symbolic level, but it is

through the movements of the mouth that we negotiate entry (as well as exit).

The linguist John Laver points to this aspect in his study of phonetics, explicitly mapping the relation of the movements of the mouth—the positioning of the tongue, modulations of loudness and pitch, respiration, etc.—with the development of personality traits. For Laver, the interweaving of anatomy and muscular skills with speech patterns opens up toward an important understanding of the voice as embedded within a greater process of *configuring* the body.¹³ Words, in this regard, wield a physical, as well as socializing, effect onto the *constitution* of the body.¹⁴ This finds extension in William Labov's important work in sociolinguistics.¹⁵ For Labov, the articulations of the voice are thoroughly interlocked with their movements through social life, and are always conditioned by our family history, and by our place within particular environments. Language and voice are thus bound to the fact of our social experiences, which come to fundamentally shape our mouths, to contour the “mother tongue” with the particularities of dialect, and to impress upon the body a map of potential routes in and around vocal pressures: for bending, flexing, silencing, or exaggerating our vocal alliances. From such perspectives, linguistics is deeply fixed to the corporeal, to form a highly charged assemblage of words *and* the matters of the body.

In addition to readings in linguistics, as well as psychoanalytic studies, I've also considered examples from an array of cultural fields, such as art, television, literature, and music, which have provided material for expounding the ways in which the mouth performs to generate a variety of contacts and conversations that often bypass or extend the semantic. Yet it has also been my observation that often within cultural theory the mouth is obscured by the question of the voice. This has led me to wonder if the mouth has been lost in discourses on voice, disappearing under the looming notions of vocality and the general “reign” of a linguistic (and textual) imperative (to which I am also surely bound . . .). Even work that seeks to deepen our sense for voice as phonic material, that challenge the dominating logic of the semantic, seem also to pose voice as a given, a somewhat “natural” thing always already there, rather than as lodged in someone's throat, upon someone's tongue—in other words, as an oral tension.¹⁶ While such discursive perspectives are extremely rich and valuable, and continue to lend to my own thinking, I increasingly feel the mouth has been forgotten, as the physical cavity inside of which voicing takes place. Even within the significant work done on “the Body”—and the interrogation of the subject under the dynamics of ideology, ordering inscriptions, and the performativity of power—here I am at a loss to find the tongue and the lips, and especially, the oral cavity as an extremely dynamic site where “body” is regularly negotiating relations to language, social structures, and the field of representations.¹⁷

It is toward the mouth then that I am drawn, and that I attempt to draw out here; to interlace the voice with the mouth, and to fill the mouth with a range of issues; and in doing so, to discover in what ways mouthing surrounds the voice, to operate as a central influence. In this respect, I understand voice and mouth as forming a *strained* relation, full of poetics and politics, where the voice negotiates as well as gives way to the psychoemotional depths—the spit, spasms, and shimmers—of an oral drive. It is my view that what surrounds the voice proper—the paralinguistic, the sociolinguistic, the glossolalic, etc.—contributes a vitalizing base to the spoken by extending, problematizing, and saturating its communicative aim.

Theater

As a central orifice, the mouth conducts numerous things and materials in and out of the body—defending and sustaining, sexing and socializing. Such diversity positions the mouth as a conduit by which we learn specifically a relation to the world, as well as develop psychological and emotional bonds. In this regard, the psychoanalytic work of Donald Meltzer provides an important reference. Meltzer understood the mouth as a “stage” upon which a number of essential performances are enacted. His notion of the “Theater of the Mouth” proposes the mouth as the pivotal site for negotiating a relation between the inside and the outside of the body (leading to the making of boundaries); for establishing the emotional dynamics of attachment and care, love and loss; and for experiencing the oral as a channel for communication and its consequences. “In his view, the mouth is the first theater in which meaning is generated through the child’s interpretation of the shape, texture, and taste of food; of the feel of mouthed objects; and of the sensory properties of words.”¹⁸

Accordingly, I’ve sought to map these fundamental events through the form of a cultural study so as to highlight the processes by which such meanings and interpretations are brought forward, to condition not only experiences of childhood, but also the general field of subjectivity. In this regard, the mouth is posited as an extremely profound cavity—what René Spitz termed “the primal cavity”¹⁹—within which language is given shape, specifically drawing it through our body. Subsequently, the mouth is explored as a challenge to the power dynamics of language, and the ways in which the rational and the reasonable come to shape our verbal expressivity. The theater of the mouth is one that plays out the very drama of *subjectification*; it is fundamentally a site of conflict, and from which we may learn the skills for negotiating—through acts of singing, burping, and laughing, for instance—the script that precedes us and that captures the force of our oral drives, our oral imaginary, in its directing logic. Grabbing words in its wet cavity, biting down onto the consonantal, sounding out the resonance of the

vowel, it is by way of the mouth that we might supplement the foundational narrative of proper speech with an oral poetics.

Fever

To consider these operations of the mouth, I've attempted to move from a certain phenomenology of its physical dimensions and toward more social and political arenas. This integrates understandings of the formation of subjectivity, as well as the field of the imaginary. In doing so, my attention has never settled upon one particular theoretical terminology, or discursive model. Instead, I've been keen to follow the mouth as a vehicle for complicating any form of singularity; the mouth, in other words, is always mashing things together, and accordingly, my analysis has aimed for this diversity, moving from depths to surfaces, bodily matters to soft wording, and from somatic to social concerns. In this sense, there is a profound way in which the mouth stages a form of production that demands a rather feverish analysis—a thinking process tuned to the actions and attributes of this *primal cavity*.

Cavity

The mouth as a collection of surfaces—of lips and teeth, tongue and cheek, and from the roof down to the throat—is equally an open space, an *oral cavity*. It is a small cavern wherein resonances proliferate, where matter is held and ingested, and where the desires that lead us toward another materialize in movements of oral pleasure—the *gap wherein one is entered, to give space for the other*. It is this gap that affords a literal grip onto the world. While the buccal surfaces channel a plethora of tastes and textures, the oral cavity *gives* room—for breaths and couplings, words and their shaping.

A continual fluctuation thus defines the mouth, between opening and closing, reverberations that expand within the cavity and then collapse, contracted and folded across its surfaces. A rhythm of somatic orientation, production, contact . . . *choreography*. Accordingly, the voice may be understood to draw upon the mouth as an *instrument*, a resonant cavity, while from a physiological perspective the mouth is more an *operation*, a series of surfaces. The assemblage of the voice and the mouth thus dramatically brings together the texture of oral surfaces with the vocal reverberations of the cavity, the thrust of operations with the composition of instruments, to generate lyrical as well as lustful productions. The weave of surfaces and cavities, operations and instrumentation, conditioning this assemblage of the mouth and the voice, opens out onto acts of representation and expression,

from the ways in which we figure ourselves, as a vocal subject, to how such figuring is also an expressive punctuation. In this regard, speech is housed within a greater collection of oral behaviors, forcing a continual play and politics of meaning. Moten's emphasis on the "cutting and augmenting" of meaning enacted by *this body that speaks* (and that may also cry . . . or whisper) gives suggestion for a radical poetics, one that fully draws upon the surfaces and cavities of the oral—rhythms and improvisations that force themselves onto the territories of meaning.

It is just such a musicality that fills these pages. My approach has been to both capture the voice as a linguistic operation—as a method for demanding representational presence, for *speaking up*—and to draw forth the mouth as that expressive chamber surrounding and conditioning such representation.

Subsequently, I'm interested to hang onto the tension of the mouth, as a site of negotiation and mediation, contact and drives. This is elaborated in *Lexicon of the Mouth* through the study of what I call "mouth movements." These can be defined as "modalities of mouthing," or methodologies of bodily figuring, each of which contours, interrupts, conspires with, or elaborates subjectivity. In surveying the movements that shape the mouth—movements that are also choreographies, improvisations, rhythms—it has become clear that what counts as "communicative acts" are much greater than speech proper. Rather, I understand the movements of the mouth as extremely vital productions by which the spoken is deeply extended, as well as brought into question. Mouthing is always occupying the very limits of the spoken; in doing so, it both reveals the borders of the linguistic while enlivening understandings of what counts as language.

Modalities such as laughing, stuttering, whispering, singing, and burping, among others, are examined so as to track the mouth as it encounters the voice, as well as extends the body toward other materialities and socialities, imaginings and productions. I've been interested to give a cultural study of the expressions that radically inflect, if not make possible speech, and that also generate a range of bodily epistemologies—in the fold of the lips, within the breath of the sounded, or upon the surface of the tongue.

It is my intention to argue for the mouth as that very cavity inside of which such expressions find their resonance; a site of negotiation first and foremost, and from which other negotiations follow: between the imperative to speak and the functionality (or not) of the body to perform; a meeting point between depths and surfaces, interiors and exteriors, and through which each overlaps, where eating and kissing, vomiting and breathing, singing and speaking interrupt *and* support each other, especially in relation to the law of the proper.

The mouth might be said to produce such proliferation. It is a means for modulating the structures that surround us.

In this regard, I would propose a politics of the performative that engages the dynamics of iteration and iterability as a question of the mouth; a discourse of the paralinguistic and the buccal, which might also spirit a *parapolitics*. That is, in support of an expanded voice not only for finding a representational space, as a point of entry, and reasonable debate, but also a voice full of imaginary drive, and those animate and poetical expressions that turn our bodies toward other species, other material forms, or immaterial apparitions, as well as each other.

IT'S WITH SUCH PROFOUND HAPPINESS. SUCH A HALLE-
lujah. Hallelujah, I shout, hallelujah merging with the darkest
human howl of the pain of separation but a shout of diabolic
joy. Because no one can hold me back now. I can still reason—
I studied mathematics, which is the madness of reason—but
now I want the plasma—I want to eat straight from the pla-
centa. I am a little scared: scared of surrendering completely
because the next instant is the unknown. The next instant, do
I make it? or does it make itself? We make it together with our
breath. And with the flair of the bullfighter in the ring.

Let me tell you: I'm trying to seize the fourth dimension of
this instant-now so fleeting that it's already gone because it's
already become a new instant-now that's also already gone.
Every thing has an instant in which it is. I want to grab hold
of the *is* of the thing. These instants passing through the air I
breathe: in fireworks they explode silently in space. I want to
possess the atoms of time. And to capture the present, forbid-
den by its very nature: the present slips away and the instant

too, I am this very second forever in the now. Only the act of love—the limpid star-like abstraction of feeling—captures the unknown moment, the instant hard as crystal and vibrating in the air and life is this untellable instant, larger than the event itself: during love the impersonal jewel of the moment shines in the air, the strange glory of the body, matter made feeling in the trembling of the instants—and the feeling is both immaterial and so objective that it seems to happen outside your body, sparkling on high, joy, joy is time's material and the essence of the instant. And in the instant is the *is* of the instant. I want to seize my *is*. And like a bird I sing hallelujah into the air. And my song belongs to no one. But no passion suffered in pain and love is not followed by a hallelujah.

Is my theme the instant? the theme of my life. I try to keep up with it, I divide thousands of times into as many times as the number of instants running by, fragmented as I am and the moments so fragile—my only vow is to life born with time and growing along with it: only in time itself is there room enough for me.

All of me is writing to you and I feel the taste of being and the taste-of-you is as abstract as the instant. I also use my whole body when I paint and set the bodiless upon the canvas, my whole body wrestling with myself. You don't understand music: you hear it. So hear me with your whole body. When you come to read me you will ask why I don't keep to painting and my exhibitions, since I write so rough and disorderly. It's because now I feel the need for words—and what I'm writing is new to me because until now my true word has never been touched. The word is my fourth dimension.

Today I finished the canvas I told you about: curves that intersect in fine black lines, and you, with your habit of wanting to know why—I'm not interested in that, the cause is past matter—will ask me why the fine black lines? because of the same secret that now makes me write as if to you, writing something round and rolled up and warm, but sometimes cold as the fresh instants, the water of an ever-trembling stream. Can what I painted on this canvas be put into words? Just as the silent word can be suggested by a musical sound.

I see that I've never told you how I listen to music—I gently rest my hand on the record player and my hand vibrates, sending waves through my whole body: and so I listen to the electricity of the vibrations, the last substratum of reality's realm, and the world trembles inside my hands.

And so I realize that I want the vibrating substratum of the repeated word sung in Gregorian chant. I'm aware that I can't say everything I know, I only know when painting or pronouncing, syllables blind of meaning. And if here I must use words, they must bear an almost merely bodily meaning. I'm struggling with the last vibration. To tell you of my substratum I make a sentence of words made only from instants-now. Read, therefore, my invention as pure vibration with no meaning beyond each whistling syllable, read this: "with the passing of the centuries I lost the secret of Egypt, when I moved in longitudes, latitudes, and altitudes with the energetic action of electrons, protons, and neutrons, under the spell of the word and its shadow." What I wrote you here is an electronic drawing without past or future: it is simply now.

I must also write to you because you harvest discursive words and not the directness of my painting. I know that my phrases are crude, I write them with too much love, and that love makes up for their faults, but too much love is bad for the work. This isn't a book because this isn't how anyone writes. Is what I write a single climax? My days are a single climax: I live on the edge.

In writing I can't manufacture something as in painting, when I use my craft to mix a color. But I'm trying to write to you with my whole body, loosing an arrow that will sink into the tender and neuralgic centre of the word. My secret body tells you: dinosaurs, ichthyosaurs, and plesiosaurs, meaning nothing but their sound, though this doesn't dry them out like straw but moistens them instead. I don't paint ideas, I paint the unattainable "forever." Or "for never," it amounts to the same. More than anything else, I paint painting. And more than anything else, I write you hard writing. I want to grab the word in my hand. Is the word an object? And from the instants I extract the juice of their fruits. I must deprive myself to reach the core and seed of life. The instant is living seed.

The secret harmony of disharmony: I don't want something already made but something still being tortuously made. My unbalanced words are the wealth of my silence. I write in acrobatics and pirouettes in the air—I write because I so deeply want to speak. Though writing only gives me the full measure of silence.

And if I say "I" it's because I dare not say "you," or "we" or "one." I'm forced to the humility of personalizing myself belittling myself but I am the are-you.

Yes, I want the last word which is also so primary that it gets tangled up with the unattainable part of the real. I'm still afraid to move away from logic because I fall into instinct and directness, and into the future: the invention of today is the only way to usher in the future. Then it's the future, and any hour is your allotted hour. So what's the harm of moving away from logic? I deal in raw materials. I'm after whatever is lurking beyond thought. No use trying to pin me down: I simply slip away and won't allow it, no label will stick. I'm entering a very new and genuine chapter, curious about itself, so appealing and personal that I can't paint it or write it. It's like moments I had with you, when I would love you, moments I couldn't go past because I descended into their depths. It's a state of touching the surrounding energy and I shudder. Some mad, mad harmony. I know that my gaze must be that of a primitive person surrendered completely to the world, primitive like the gods who only allow the broad strokes of good and evil and don't want to know about good tangled up like hair in evil, evil that is good.

I pin down sudden instants that carry within them their own death and others are born—I pin down the instants of metamorphosis and there's a terrible beauty to their sequence and concurrence.

Now day is breaking, a dawn of white mist on the sands of the beach. Everything is mine, then. I barely touch food, I don't want to awaken beyond the day's awakening. I'm growing with the day that as it grows kills in me a certain vague hope and forces me to look the hard sun straight in the face. The gale blows and scatters my papers. I hear that wind of cries, the death rattle of a bird open in oblique flight. And I here impose

upon myself the severity of a taut language, I impose upon myself the nakedness of a white skeleton free of humours. But the skeleton is free of life and while I live I shudder all over. I won't reach the final nakedness. And I still don't want it, apparently.

This is life seen by life. I may not have meaning but it is the same lack of meaning that the pulsing vein has.

I want to write to you like someone learning. I photograph each instant. I deepen the words as if I were painting, more than an object, its shadow. I don't want to ask why, you can always ask why and always get no answer—could I manage to surrender to the expectant silence that follows a question without an answer? Though I sense that some place or time the great answer for me does exist.

And then I shall know how to paint and write, after the strange but intimate answer. Listen to me, listen to the silence. What I say to you is never what I say to you but something else instead. It captures the thing that escapes me and yet I live from it and am above a shining darkness. One instant leads me numbly to the next and the athematic theme unfurls without a plan but geometric like the successive shapes in a kaleidoscope.

I slowly enter my gift to myself, splendor ripped open by the final song that seems to be the first. I enter the writing slowly as I once entered painting. It is a world tangled up in creepers, syllables, woodbine, colors and words—threshold of an ancestral cavern that is the womb of the world and from it I shall be born.

And if I often paint caves that is because they are my plunge into the earth, dark but haloed with brightness, and I, blood

of nature—extravagant and dangerous caves, talisman of the Earth, where stalactites, fossils and rocks come together, and where the animals mad by their own malign nature seek refuge. The caves are my hell. Forever dreaming cave with its fogs, memory or longing? eerie, eerie, esoteric, greenish with the slime of time. Inside the dark cave glimmer the hanging rats with the cruciform wings of bats. I see downy and black spiders. Mice and rats run frightened along the ground and up the walls. Between the rocks the scorpion. Crabs, just like themselves since prehistory, through deaths and births, would look like threatening beasts if they were the size of a man. Old cockroaches crawl in the murky light. And all of this is me. All is weighted with sleep when I paint a cave or write to you about it—from outside it comes the clatter of dozens of wild horses stamping with dry hoofs the darkness, and from the friction of the hoofs the rejoicing is freed in sparks: here I am, I and the cave, in the very time that will rot us.

I want to put into words but without description the existence of the cave that some time ago I painted—and I don't know how. Only by repeating its sweet horror, cavern of terror and wonders, place of afflicted souls, winter and hell, unpredictable substratum of the evil that is inside an earth that is not fertile. I call the cave by its name and it begins to live with its miasma. I then fear myself who knows how to paint the horror, I, creature of echoing caverns that I am, and I suffocate because I am word and also its echo.

But the instant-now is a firefly that sparks and goes out, sparks and goes out. The present is the instant in which the wheel of the speeding car just barely touches the ground. And the part of the wheel that still hasn't touched, will touch in that

immediacy that absorbs the present instant and turns it into the past. I, alive and glimmering like the instants, spark and go out, alight and go out, spark and go out. It's just that whatever I capture in me has, when it's now being transposed into writing, the despair that words take up more instants than the flash of a glance. More than the instant, I want its flow.

A new era, this my own, and it announces me right away. Am I brave enough? For now I am: because I come from the suffering afar, I come from the hell of love but now I am free of you. I come from afar—from a weighty ancestry. I who come from the pain of living. And I no longer want it. I want the vibration of happiness. I want the impartiality of Mozart. But I also want inconsistency. Freedom? it's my final refuge, I forced myself to freedom and I bear it not like a talent but with heroism: I'm heroically free. And I want the flow.

What I write to you is not comfortable. I don't impart confidences. Instead I metallize myself. And I'm not comfortable for you and for me; my word bursts into the space of the day. What you will know of me is the shadow of the arrow that has hit its target. I shall only vainly grasp a shadow that takes up no room in space, and what barely matters is the dart. I construct something free of me and of you—this is my freedom that leads to death.

In this instant-now I'm enveloped by a wandering diffuse desire for marvelling and millions of reflections of the sun in the water that runs from the faucet onto the lawn of a garden all ripe with perfumes, garden and shadows that I invent right here and now and that are the concrete means of speaking in this my instant

of life. My state is that of a garden with running water. In describing it I try to mix words that time can make itself. What I tell you should be read quickly like when you look.

Now it's day and suddenly again Sunday in an unexpected eruption. Sunday is a day of echoes—hot, dry, and everywhere buzzings of bees and wasps, cries of birds and the distance of paced hammer blows—where do the echoes of Sunday come from? I who loathe Sunday because it's hollow. I, who want the most primary thing because it's the source of generation—I who long to drink water at the source of the spring—I who am all of this, must by fate and tragic destiny only know and taste the echoes of me, because I cannot capture the me itself. I am in a stupefying, trembling, marvel expectation, my back turned to the world, and somewhere the innocent squirrel escapes. Plants, plants. I snooze in the summer heat of the Sunday that has flies circling the sugar-bowl. A boast of colors, that of Sunday, and ripe splendor. And all this I painted some time ago and on another Sunday. And here is that once-virgin canvas, now covered by ripe colors. Bluebottle flies glitter in front of my window open to the air of the torpid street. The day seems like the smooth stretched skin of a fruit that in a small catastrophe the teeth tear, its liquor drains. I'm afraid of the accursed Sunday that liquidifies me.

To remake myself and remake you I return to my state of garden and shadow, cool reality, I barely exist and if I exist it's with delicate caution. Around the shadow is a heat of abundant sweat. I'm alive. But I feel that I have yet to reach my limits, borders with what? without borders, the adventure of dangerous freedom. But I take risks, I live taking risks. I'm full of acacias

swaying yellow, and I who have barely started my journey, I start it with a sense of tragedy, guessing toward which lost ocean my steps of life are leading. And madly I take control of the recesses of myself, my ravings suffocate me with so much beauty. I am before, I am almost, I am never. And all of this I won when I stopped loving you.

I write to you as an exercise in sketching before painting. I see words. What I say is pure present and this book is a straight line in space. It's always current, and a camera's photometer opens and immediately closes, but keeping within it the flash. Even if I say "I lived" or "I shall live" it's present because I'm saying them now.

I also started these pages with the goal of preparing myself for painting. But now I'm overwhelmed by the taste of words, and almost free myself from the dominion of paint; I feel a voluptuousness in going along creating something to tell you. I'm living the initiation ceremony of the word and my gestures are hieratic and triangular.

Yes, this is life seen by life. But suddenly I forget how to capture whatever is happening, I don't know how to capture whatever exists except by living here each thing that arises and no matter what it is: I am almost free of my errors. I let the free horse run fiery. I, who trot nervously and only reality delimits me.

And when the day reaches its end I hear the crickets and become entirely replete and unintelligible. Then I live the blue daybreak that comes with its bulge full of little birds—I wonder if I'm giving you an idea of what a person goes through in life? And every thing that occurs to me I note to pin it down.

For I want to feel in my hands the quivering and lively nerve of the now and may that nerve resist me like a restless vein. And may it rebel, that nerve of life, and may it contort and throb. And may sapphires, amethysts and emeralds spill into the dark eroticism of abundant life: because in my darkness quakes at last the great topaz, word that has its own light.

I am now listening to a sylvan music, almost just drumming and rhythm that comes from a neighboring house where young junkies live the present. Another instant of incessant, incessant rhythm, and something terrible happens to me.

It's that I shall pass because of the rhythm into its paroxysm—I shall pass to the other side of life. How can I tell you this? It's terrible and threatens me. I feel that I can no longer stop and I'm scared. I try to distract myself from the fear. But the real hammering stopped long ago: I'm being the incessant hammering in me. From which I must free myself. But I can't: the other side of me calls me. The footsteps I hear are my own.

As if ripping from the depths of the earth the knotted roots of a rare tree, that's how I write to you, and those roots as if they were powerful tentacles like voluminous naked bodies of strong women entwined by serpents and by carnal desires for fulfilment, and all this is the prayer of a black mass, and a creeping plea for amen: because the bad is unprotected and needs the approval of God: that is creation.

Could I have gone without feeling it to the other side? The other side is a throbbingly hellish life. But there is the transfiguration of my terror: so I give myself over to a heavy life all in

symbols heavy as ripe fruits. I choose mistaken resemblances but that drag me through the tangle. A trace memory of the common sense of my past keeps me brushing against this side here. Help me because something is coming toward me and laughing at me. Quick, save me.

But no one can give me their hand to help me out: I must use great strength—and in the nightmare, with a sudden wrench, I finally fall face-down on this side here. I let myself lie tossed upon the rustic earth, exhausted, heart still beating madly, breathing in great retchings. Am I safe? I wipe my damp brow. I get up slowly, try to take the first steps of a weak convalescence. I'm managing to get my balance.

No, all this isn't happening in real facts but in the domain of—of an art? yes, of an artifice through which a most delicate reality arises which comes to exist in me: the transfiguration happened to me.

But the other side, from which I barely escaped, became sacred and I confide my secret to no one. It seems to me that in a dream I swore a pledge on the other side, a blood oath. No one will know anything; what I know is so volatile and nearly inexistent that it is between me and I.

Am I one of the weak? a weak woman possessed by incessant and mad rhythm? if I were solid and strong would I even have heard the rhythm? I find no answer: I am. This is all that comes to me from life. But what am I? the answer is just: what am I. Though I sometimes scream: I no longer want to be I! but I stick to myself and inextricably there forms a tessitura of life.

May whoever comes along with me come along; the journey is long, it is tough, but lived. Because now I am speaking to you seriously: I am not playing with words. I incarnate myself in the voluptuous and unintelligible phrases that tangle up beyond the words. And a silence rises subtly from the knock of the phrases.

So writing is the method of using the word as bait: the word fishing for whatever is not word. When this non-word—between the lines—takes the bait, something has been written. Once whatever is between the lines is caught, the word can be tossed away in relief. But that's where the analogy ends: the non-word, taking the bait, incorporates it. So what saves you is writing absentmindedly.

I don't want to have the terrible limitation of those who live merely from what can make sense. Not I: I want an invented truth.

What shall I tell you? I shall tell you the instants. I go too far and only then do I exist and in a feverish way. What a fever—will I one day manage to stop living? woe is me, who dies so much. I follow the tortuous path of roots bursting the earth, I have a gift for passion, in the bonfire of a dry trunk I contort in the blaze. To the span of my existence I give an occult meaning that goes beyond me. I'm a concomitant being: I gather in me time past, the present and the future, the time that pulses in the tick-tock of the clocks.

To interpret myself and formulate me I need new signs and new articulations in shapes found on this side and beyond my human story. I transfigure reality and then another dreaming

and sleepwalking reality, creates me. And all of me rolls and as I roll on the ground I add to myself in leaves, I, anonymous work of an anonymous reality only justifiable as long as my life lasts. And then? then all that I lived will be a poor superfluity.

But for the time being I am in the centre of everything that screams and teems. And it's subtle as the most intangible reality. For now time is the duration of a thought.

This contact with the invisible nucleus of reality is of such purity.

I know what I am doing here: I am telling of the instants that drip and are thick with blood.

I know what I am doing here: I'm improvising. But what's wrong with that? improvising as in jazz they improvise music, jazz in fury, improvising in front of the crowd.

It's so odd to have exchanged my paints for this strange thing that is the word. Words—I move cautiously among them as they can turn threatening; I can have the freedom to write this: "pilgrims, merchants and shepherds led their caravans toward Tibet and the roads were difficult and primitive." With that phrase I made a scene be born, as in a photographic flash.

What does this jazz that is improvisation say? it says arms tangled with legs and the flames rising and I passive like meat that is devoured by the sharp hook of an eagle that interrupts its blind flight. I express to me and to you my most hidden desires and achieve an orgiastic confused beauty. I tremble with pleasure amidst the novelty of using words that form an intense

thicket. I struggle to conquer more deeply my freedom of sensations and thoughts, without any utilitarian meaning: I am alone, I and my freedom. Such is my freedom that it could scandalize a primitive but I know that you are not scandalized by the fullness I achieve and that is without perceptible borders. This capacity of mine to live whatever is rounded and ample—I surround myself with carnivorous plants and legendary animals, all bathed in the coarse and twisted oblique light of a mythical sex. I proceed in an intuitive way and without seeking an idea: I am organic. And I don't question myself about my motives. I plunge into the almost pain of an intense happiness—and to adorn me leaves and branches spring up in my hair.

I don't know what I'm writing about: I am obscure to myself. I only had initially a lunar and lucid vision, and so I plucked for myself the instant before it died and perpetually dies. This is not a message of ideas that I am transmitting to you but an instinctive ecstasy of whatever is hidden in nature and that I foretell. And this is a feast of words. I write in signs that are more a gesture than voice. All this is what I got used to painting, delving into the intimate nature of things. But now the time to stop painting has come in order to remake myself, I remake myself in these lines. I have a voice. As I throw myself into the line of my drawing, this is an exercise in life without planning. The world has no visible order and all I have is the order of my breath. I let myself happen.

I am inside the great dreams of the night: for the right-now is by night. And I sing the passage of time: I am still the queen of the Medes and of the Persians and am also my slow evolution that throws itself like a drawbridge into a future whose milky

fogs I already breathe today. My aura is mystery of life. I surpass myself abdicating myself and am therefore the world: I follow the voice of the world, I myself suddenly with a unique voice.

The world: a tangle of bristling telephone wires. And the brightness however is still dark: that is I facing the world.

A dangerous balance, mine, mortal danger for the soul. The night of today looks at me with torpor, verdigris and lime. I want inside this night that is longer than life, I want, inside this night, life raw and bloody and full of saliva. I want this word: splendiddness, splendiddness is the fruit in its succulence, fruit without sadness. I want distances. My wild intuition about myself. But my main thing is always hidden. I am implicit. And when I make myself explicit I lose the humid intimacy.

What color is the spatial infinity? it is the color of air.

We—faced with the scandal of death.

Listen only superficially to what I say and from the lack of meaning a meaning will be born as from me a high and light life is inexplicably born. The dense jungle of words thickly envelops what I feel and live, and transforms everything I am into some thing of mine that remains outside me. Nature is enveloping: it entangles me entirely and is sexually alive, just that: alive. I too am ferociously alive—and I lick my snout like a tiger who has just devoured a deer.

I write to you now, at the very moment itself. I unfold only in the now. I speak today—not yesterday or tomorrow—but today and at this actual perishable instant. My small and boxed-in

freedom joins me to the freedom of the world—but what is a window if not the air framed by right angles? I am rudely alive. I am leaving—says death without adding that he's taking me along. And I shiver in panting breath because I must go with him. I am death. Death takes place in my very being—how can I explain to you? It's a sensual death. Like a dead person I walk through the high grass in the greenish light of its blades: I am Diana the Huntress of gold and all I can find are heaps of bones. I live from an underlying layer of feelings: I am barely alive.

But these high summer days of damnation whisper to me the need for renunciation. I renounce having a meaning, and then the sweet and painful weakness grips me. Round and round shapes cross in the air. It's a summer heat. I navigate in my galley that braves the winds of a bewitched summer. Crushed leaves remind me of the ground of my childhood. The green hand and the golden breasts—that is how I paint the mark of Satan. They who fear us and our alchemy stripped witches and sorcerers in search of the hidden mark that was almost always found though it could only be known on sight for that mark was indescribable and unpronounceable even in the darkness of the Middle Ages—Middle Ages, thou art my dark subgency and in the glare of the bonfires the marked ones dance in circles riding branches and foliage which are the phallic symbol of fertility: even in the white mass blood is used and there it is drunk.

Listen: I let you be, therefore let me be.

But eternally is a very hard word; it has a granitic "t" in the middle. Eternity: for everything that is never began. My small ever so limited head bursts when thinking about something that doesn't begin and doesn't end—for that is the eternal.

Fortunately that feeling doesn't last long because I can't bear it to stay and if it did it would lead to madness. But my head also bursts when imagining the opposite: something that has begun—because where would it begin? And that has ended—but what comes after ending? As you see, it's impossible for me to deepen and take possession of life, which is aerial, is my light breath. But I do know what I want here: I want the inconclusive. I want the profound organic disorder that nevertheless hints at an underlying order. The great potency of potentiality. These babbled phrases of mine are made the very moment they're being written and are so new and green they crackle. They are the now. I want the experience of a lack of construction. Though this text of mine is crossed from end to end by a fragile connecting thread—which? that of a plunge into the matter of the word? of passion? A lustful thread, breath that heats the passing of syllables. Life really just barely escapes me though the certainty comes to me that life is other and has a hidden style.

This text that I give you is not to be seen close up: it gains its secret previously invisible roundness when seen from a high-flying plane. Then you can divine the play of islands and see the channels and seas. Understand me: I write you an onomatopoeia, convulsion of language. I'm not transmitting to you a story but just words that live from sound. I speak to you thus:

"Lustful trunk."

And I bathe within it. It is linked to the root that penetrates inside us into the earth. All that I write you is taut. I use stray words that are in themselves a free dart: savages, barbarians,

decadent noblemen and gangsters. Does that mean anything to you? It speaks to me.

But the most important word in the language has but two letters: is. Is.

I am at its core.

I still am.

I am at the living and soft centre.

Still.

It sparkles and is elastic. Like the gait of a glossy black panther that I saw and that walked softly, slowly and dangerously. But not caged—because I don't want that. As for the unforeseeable—the next phrase is unforeseeable to me. In the core where I am, in the core of the Is, I ask no questions. Because when it is—it is. I am only limited by my identity. I, elastic being and separated from other bodies.

In truth I'm still not quite seeing properly the thread of what I'm writing you. I think I never shall—but I acknowledge the dark in which the two eyes of the soft panther shine. Darkness is my hothouse. Enchanted darkness. I'll keep talking to you and taking the risk of disconnection: I am subterraneously unreachable by my knowledge.

I write to you because I don't understand myself.

Diving into the Wreck

BY ADRIENNE RICH

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative hauntings.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

**eating too many berries has the same
effect on birds as it does on people**

LOVE

Sometimes, to view it, you had to queue in single file, just as you do at any post office. Sometimes, in Paris, these queues snaked down the whole stairway of grand Haussmann buildings, from the sixth floor to the courtyard, through the main entrance and into the street, ragged and disorganized. Dozens of strangers queuing to visit a tiny student apartment, carrying documents bearing the final proof that here was the chosen one. Having reached the top of the queue, it was hard to shake off a sense of unease and betrayal. I always had the impression I was witnessing something profane. Once through the door it was impossible to feel or imagine any exclusive relationship with what would have to become my home.

Even before we move, our relationship with a new home begins with the strange ritual of the first visit, which varies according to the times, our

financial means, and above all the customs and cultures of different countries. Of all possible forms of relationship with a home, this is perhaps the most hypnotic. The deal is often done through an aesthetic judgement on the arrangement and size of rooms, the quantity of light, the quality of the parquet. And yet, the first contact is always an attempt to decipher the promise of shared happiness – a promise made with clues, signals and indications that are heavily veiled and difficult to interpret – through the objects placed there. At this stage, such apparently superficial details – the length of a corridor, type of radiators, shape of the handles, quality of the skirting board – simply introduce what novels call ‘real-life touches’ into the image of a future life.

In those moments, often imbued with anxiety and embarrassment, we recognize our ability and need to envision our life: to relate to it and to ourselves in a manner that has nothing to do with our own wishes, or with the law, but in much the same way as we relate to the climate in which we live. We view that house in the same way that we see the sky when we wake in the morning; we view it as our sky. In those few minutes, all precepts, catechisms

and pious intentions in our moral notions are abandoned, and what is left becomes a superior form of imagination, the only way that we access what we have been and will be.

If such an effort has always been extremely difficult – at least for me – it's because visiting these apartments means being compelled to picture the past inhabitants that have lived and shaped that space. As the years go by, my needs and my financial circumstances have changed, and the queues to view the apartments have gone. I have found myself alone with the estate agent in spaces which are sometimes empty, yet often filled with signs and vestiges of all those lives that have been lived there and then moved on. The moral upheaval has never related to particular details – the sixteenth-century chest of drawers, a Danish lamp or an unmatched teacup – but to the fact that to notice such things has meant suddenly finding myself thrust into someone else's life and being unable to draw a precise boundary between theirs and my own: becoming myself the coffee grounds in which somebody might seek to read a possible future.

When I arrived at one of the four places in which I lived in Berlin, I found some diaries left by a

previous tenant. I spent three days deciphering their pages and living a life that wasn't mine. I read them surrounded by the same furniture, curtains and pictures that had not yet been taken down from the walls, which meant transforming myself for an instant into a character in a multi-handed drama. I've often asked myself the uneasy question how my successors in all the domestic universes in which I have lived have viewed my life, or the debris of the life I've left behind. The excitement and sorrow of every apartment always derives from the fact that to imagine my life as home means imagining it indissolubly linked to something else, and above all to other people.

We always talk about the home as private space, the place that separates us from one another and makes us individual. Yet every home is really just the physical and mental material that we use to interweave our life and our destiny with those of others. This is its main purpose, and, for this reason, its nature is not architectural but moral. I repeat, the inadequacy of our homes is never purely architectural or aesthetic but is always and above all ethical. When our homes disappoint us, it's because they cannot maintain the silent promise of shared

happiness that they had made at our first meeting. On the other hand, we have lost the ability to imagine homes because we have stopped cultivating the knowledge, the technique, that allows two lives to live one and the same life – what, for centuries, we have called ‘love’. Homes are always spatial means of experiencing love in all its manifestations. They are none other than the material blueprint, the framework, but also the objective atmosphere, the climate for a shared life – the time, temperament, food, sleep and dreams that make us inseparable from someone else. It is impossible to consider and construct homes without considering and constructing love.

The opposite is also true: whether it's our home or that of another, or a hotel far away from where we both live, or a country cottage, love is nurtured, cherished and celebrated at home. Indeed, deep down, it's the quintessential domestic mystery, and that is why every city has to claim love for itself through complicated rituals and convoluted legal dispositions. It's impossible to love without setting up home, without involving a piece of the world in an orbit that says ‘I’ for both of us.

There is nothing natural, obvious or universal

about this equation. It is perhaps the most profound, original and idiosyncratic aspect of what the West has called 'modernity'. It was the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor who recognized that modernity is not only the result of technological development, of European dominance over other parts of the globe, or of transformations in society and forms of government: at its centre there is a revolutionary moral project that has brought everyday life, defined by love and labour – its most ordinary and trivial features – to the centre of every political, economic, social and material concern. We are modern not because we use sophisticated technological devices, because we can travel to every part of the planet or because we live in overcrowded cities. We are modern because we claim that our identity is defined in what we produce and what we do freely each day, and in whom we love. We are modern only when we think that freedom and moral perfection are measured in the freedom to love and to work. No other culture ever imagined such a thing.

And if work has become both the foundation and the centre of the city, the home – released from the need to be the site of production – has instead

become the temple of love, of the daily symbiotic relationship with another person. It's no surprise that all the great moral revolutions to which we ascribe an idea of progress are linked to the improvement of work conditions and the freedom to love. And yet while nations involved in the process of modernization have given much thought over the past two centuries to work – its dignity, its form and its preconditions – love still needs to find a form of legitimacy in public as well as academic debate.

Apart from one area of sociology and of feminism, love in all its manifestations continues to be considered a minor, frivolous, secondary subject (who would ever dare to think of work as something that so-called 'women's magazines' should concern themselves with?) or a matter for priests, moralists and psychoanalysts. The problem with this imbalance is the real reason why the project of modernity cannot be fully achieved. Our modernity has always been incomplete and malformed precisely because we have neglected one of the mainstays of daily life, the centre of the modern moral project. And in a context in which work seems increasingly incapable of defining our

identity (certainly not in economic terms), the lack of consideration given to love makes any incarnation of modernity literally impossible. We cannot succeed in being modern, because we haven't yet learned to love.

This cultural taboo is rooted in the sexism of our civilization: historically, knowledge about the love relation – not just and not necessarily in its erotic form, but in every way – was the common and exclusive domain of women, who for millennia (and still today) have been systematically excluded from culture, science and public life. The consequences of this exclusion are dramatic. Not only is love not considered to be a subject worthy of study (whereas work is, in all its forms), but none of us regard love as something that requires application and commitment. It's an area of existence that is immediately connected to amusement, to distraction. And that's why it has become the subject of farces and drawing-room comedies.

While Eros has been downgraded to a minor divinity, Heracles enjoys cult status. Parity between them seems impossible – in the freedom each supposes, in the results to be expected, in the belief that a fulfilled life is possible. Try reversing the

rhetoric used in public discussions of work and love: try transferring all pleas for sacrifice and self-denial to love, and all calls for the need to be free to work. Why is work alone taken seriously? Why is freedom the sole prerogative of love?

It's as though, to quote Stendhal's famous distinction (repeated a few decades ago by the Italian sociologist Francesco Alberoni) between falling in love and love itself, contemporary society had concentrated solely on falling in love, on the nascent state of harmony and encounter, but not on the real, the effective, and – most importantly – the lasting relationship.

The fact that even technological progress has focused only on this stage, with the rise of dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble, Grindr, and their variants, is a further demonstration of this. We can do without thinking about homes precisely because we experience love only to experience falling in love.

For the same reason, while architectural reflection on the city has reached unprecedented levels of complexity, and contemporary urban reality has a brilliance incomparable to the past, the thought given to the home, and above all to building

practices for the ordinary domestic environment, is so crude and prehistoric that it still allows the vast majority of architects to believe that the problem posed by each house is one of the spatial composition of a few rectangles that have each been given some vital purpose: sleep for the bedroom, entertainment for the sitting room, eating for the kitchen. The futurist imagination practised for centuries over the city has never touched on private dwellings. It's for this reason that every home gives the impression that the horizon of moral possibility is shrinking rather than expanding, that it's necessary to adapt our life to crude Euclidean geometry which, for inexplicable reasons, is considered the key to a happy and successful existence. When we walk into homes today, instead of experiencing a liberating sense of emotional and moral modernity, we can only feel the crudeness of our moral imagination.

But the difficulty in conceiving love – and therefore the home – is not just due to the fragility and moral blindness of our culture. Love, in the end, is the black hole of every moral reflection due to its very structure. It is the ethical space in which life can rely on no precept, no law, no certainty – but

not because it's an anarchic dimension outside the law. On the contrary, there's nothing more structured than the experience of love. It is, however, a special structure. In antiquity, these forms of morality were generally called 'mysteries': dimensions of existence which could be accessed neither through knowledge nor through law, but through rites of initiation alone.

'Mystery' in this context does not mean something unknown. After all, countless realities are unfamiliar to us, yet almost none is a mystery. The overwhelming majority of faces we pass as we walk along the street of any modern city are unfamiliar, and yet they rarely hold any mystery for us. Nor do we find this quality in the many thousands of books arranged along the shelves of a library. Mystery doesn't just refer to that which is extraneous to our knowledge; it is something that is resistant to understanding and above all to our desire. For this very reason, access to this sphere can only be achieved through initiation: it requires a third party who will allow us to experience this reality. Mystery is a way of being which can be accessed only through the life of the Other; for this very reason it is utterly unknowable, and for this very reason the

order of desire in this life will never be freed from fear. The knowledge that generally makes it possible to overcome fear is, in the case of mystery, technically unachievable. Love is the transcendental form of this experience.

Every home ought, in the end, to be the structure that allows one life to live through the Other: not an envelope of glass, steel and cement that separates us from the rest of the world, nor the window of variable geometry that enables us to make our own 'I' visible, especially to ourselves, but the mental and physical quest of mutual initiation between lives. A home should be the secular, worldly embodiment of mystery.

The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas

From *The Wind's Twelve Quarters: Short Stories*
by Ursula Le Guin

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights, over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green' Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic. Given a description such as this one tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children – though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you.

Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however – that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc. -- they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming in to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas – at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of *droom* may perfume the ways of the city, *droom* which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond all belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer; this is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I really don't think many of them need to take *droom*.

Most of the processions have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign grey beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men, wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope. . . ." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits haunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes the child has no understanding of time or interval – sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well

the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

I'VE SPENT A LIFETIME asking the plants for their guidance on any number of issues; so I wondered what the Serviceberries had to say about the systems which create and distribute goods and services. What is their economic system? How do they respond to the issues of abundance and scarcity? Has their evolutionary process shaped them to be hoarders or sharers?

The practice of observing the living world and taking inspiration for human ways of living from its model is an essential element of Indigenous science. It embraces the reality that there are intelligences other than our own, from whom we might learn. This ancient mode of knowledge making finds expression today in the emerging science of biomimicry. Janine Benyus and other thinkers are leading a revolution in studying how our economy and our social institutions might be reimagined to align with natural principles rather than against them.

So, let's ask the Saskatoons. These ten-foot-tall trees are the producers in this economy. Using the free raw materials of light, water, and air, they transmute these gifts into leaves and flowers and fruits. They store some energy as sugars in the making of their own bodies, but much of it is shared. Some of the abundance of spring rain and sun manifests in the form of flowers, which offer a feast for insects when it's cold and rainy. The insects return the favor by carrying pollen. Food is rarely in short supply for Saskatoons, but mobility is rare. Movement is a gift of the pollinators, but the energy needed to support buzzing around is scarce. So the trees

and the insects create a relationship of exchange that benefits both.

In summer, when the boughs are laden, Service-- berries produce an abundance of sugar. Do they hoard that energy for themselves? No, they invite the birds to a feast. Come, my relatives, fill your bellies, say the Serviceberries. Are they not storing their meat in the bellies of their brothers and sisters--the Jays, the Thrashers, and the Robins?

Isn't this an economy? A system of distribution of goods and services that meets the needs of the community. The currency of this economic system is energy, which flows through it, and materials, which cycle among the producers and the consumers. It is a system for redistribution of wealth, an exchange of goods and services. Each member has an abundance of something, which they offer to others. The abundance of berries goes to the birds--for what use are berries to the tree other than as a way to make relationships with birds?

Eating too many berries has the same effect on birds as it does on people. Fuchsia splats decorate the fence posts. This of course is the whole point of berries--to make themselves so irresistible and plentiful that birds will come and feast, as we pickers are doing this evening, and then distribute the seeds far and wide. Feasting has another benefit. Passage through a bird gut scarifies the seeds to stimulate germination. The birds provide services to the Serviceberries, who provide for them in return. The relationships created by the gift weave myriad relations between insects and microbes and root systems. The gift is multiplied with every giving, until it returns so rich and sweet that it bubbles forth as the birdsong that wakes me in the morning. If the abundance had been hoarded, if Juneberries acted solely for their own benefit, the forest would be diminished.

This makes me think about the person who stole the Free Farm Stand. We had laughed

it off as a mistake, of little consequence. But the mindset that claims permission to convert a free gift to private property, robbing the community for individual gain, is of the highest consequence. Our petty thief deserves a name, so let's call him Darren, after the CEO of ExxonMobil. We often lay the blame for the outcomes of cutthroat capitalism on the "System." There's merit in that, given the complex layered interactions, but no excuse. Let's remember that the "System" is led by individuals, by a relatively small number of people, who have names, with more money than God and certainly less compassion. They sit in boardrooms deciding to exploit fossil fuels for short-term gain while the world burns. They know the science, they know the consequences, but they proceed with ecocidal business as usual and do it anyway. Their behavior feels to me like the same kind of arrogant entitlement as Darren the Farm Stand thief or Darren the Planet Wrecker. They're all thieves, stealing our future, while we pass around the zucchini.

I'm not minimizing the significance of our sweet gift economies. On the contrary, they are emblems of the rich land-based abundance that is possible, stitched together with what was once called being a good neighbor. There are so many more of us than of the Darrens, and an asymmetry in what they recognize as power.

I lament my own immersion in an economy that grinds what is beautiful and unique into dollars, converts gifts to commodities in a currency that enables us to purchase things we don't really need while destroying what we do.

The Serviceberries show us another model, one based upon reciprocity rather than accumulation, where wealth and security come from the quality of our relationships, not from the illusion of self-sufficiency. Without gift relationships with bees and birds, the Serviceberries would disappear from the planet. Even if they hoarded abundance, perching atop the wealth ladder, they would not save themselves from the fate of extinction if their

partners did not share in that abundance. Hoarding won't save us either. It won't even save Darren. All flourishing is mutual.

As I watch the Robins and Cedar Waxwings fill their bellies, I see a gift economy in which abundance is stored "in the belly of my brother." Supporting a thriving bird community is essential to the well-being of the Serviceberry and everyone else up and down the food chain. That seems especially important to an immobile, long-lived being like a tree, who can't run away from ruptured relationships. Thriving is possible only if you have nurtured strong bonds with your community.

I'm a plant ecologist, so I wonder whether an economist like Valerie would see a gift economy in Serviceberry's distribution of goods and services. I want to know if natural systems could be understood as analogues to economic systems. Could we engage in a kind of biomimicry to design systems of exchange which benefit human people and more-than-human people at the same time?

"Yes!" Valerie says, as if she'd been waiting a long time to be asked this question. "Natural systems can surely be understood as analogues to economic systems." Here again, is the premise of biomimicry.

Imagining human economies that are modeled after ecological systems is the realm of ecological economists like Valerie. Ecological economists ask how we might build economic systems that meet citizens' needs while aligning with ecological principles that allow long-term sustainability for people and for the planet. Valerie says that "ecological economics emerged after observing [how the] neoclassical economic approach fails to provide for everyone and does not adequately consider the ecosystems that are our life support. We've created a system such that we self-identify as consumers first before understanding ourselves as ecosystem citizens. In ecological economics, the focus is on creating

an economy that provides for a just and sustainable future in which both human life and nonhuman life can flourish.”

What might Serviceberry teach us here? She replies, “Serviceberry, or Shadbush as I learned it, provides a model of interdependence and coevolution that is the heart of ecological economics. Serviceberry teaches us another way to understand relationships and exchange. A Serviceberry economy as our model prompts the opportunity for articulation of the value of gratitude and reciprocity as essential foundations for an economy.” Reciprocity-not scarcity.

As a participant in a traditional culture of gratitude, now with a bucket full of berries in my hand, I’ve never quite understood something about human economics, and that is the primacy of scarcity as an organizing principle.

As a person schooled by plants, my fingers stained with berry juice, I’m not willing to give scarcity such a prominent role. Gift economies arise from an understanding of earthly abundance and the gratitude it generates. A perception of abundance, based on the notion that there is enough if we share it, underlies economies of mutual support.

Valerie points out that even ecologists are reevaluating the assumption that intense competition is the primary force regulating evolutionary success. Evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson has found that competition makes sense only when we consider the unit of evolution to be the individual. When the focus shifts to the level of a group, cooperation is a better model, not only for surviving but for thriving. In a recent interview, author Richard Powers comments, “There is symbiosis at every single level of living things, and you cannot compete in a zero-sum game with creatures upon whom your existence depends.” Serviceberries discovered this long ago, and we humans need to catch up. And yet, we continue to operate from the foundation of competition.

There is no question that all living beings experience some level of scarcity at various points, and therefore that competition for limited resources, like light or water or soil nitrogen, will occur. But since competition reduces the carrying capacity for all concerned, natural selection favors those who can avoid competition. Oftentimes this avoidance is achieved by shifting one’s needs away from whatever is in short supply, as though evolution were suggesting “If there’s not enough of what you want, then want something else.” This specialization to avoid scarcity has led to a dazzling array of biodiversity, each species avoiding competition by being different. Diversity in ways of being is an antidote.

Some evolutionary biologists might reject this notion, framing the lifeways of Serviceberry as maximizing self-interest through natural selection, which is the same sort of argument made by market economists. Competition between individuals for success was long seen as the driving force in ecology and in economics. Science, politics, and economics were entangled in adopting metaphors from the natural world that reflected as much about social attitudes as about ecological reality. But that approach has been increasingly questioned, and scientific evidence is mounting that mutualism and cooperation also play a major role in evolution and enhance ecological well-being, especially in changing environments. Mutualism or reciprocal exchanges create abundance for both partners, by sharing.

The Serviceberries are networked not only aboveground with partners for pollination and dispersal but belowground with webs of mycorrhizal fungi and other microbial communities that are exchanging resources. Perhaps inculcated with the Tragedy of the Commons perspective, we used to assume that these fungi were “stealing” nutrients from the trees, but the closer we look, it seems as if the nutrients might be freely given in a network of reciprocity.

What if scarcity is just a cultural construct, a fiction that fences us off from a better way of life? When I examine Serviceberry economics, I don't see scarcity, I see abundance shared: photosynthate is usually not in short supply, since sun and air are perpetually renewable resources. Of course, sometimes there's not enough rain, and then the scarcity ripples through the web of relationships, for sure. That is real scarcity: when the rains don't come. It is a physical limitation with repercussions and loss that are shared, just as abundance is shared. That kind of scarcity, produced by natural fluctuation is not what troubles me.

It is manufactured scarcity that I cannot accept. In order for capitalist market economies to function, there must be scarcity, and the system is designed to create scarcity where it does not actually exist. Because I had not thought much about economics since my introduction to it in high school decades ago, I realize that I had just been accepting the principle of scarcity as if it were a natural fact.

I try to lay out the understanding for myself, to think like an economist, not an ecologist. In order for money to be made, there must be commodities to be bought and sold. The scarcer those commodities, the higher their cost and thus the greater the revenue. So, I guess I do understand this: market economics demands that abundant, freely available, earthly gifts be converted to commodities and made scarce by privatization and high prices. This seems crazy, so let me test my understanding with the example of pure, beautiful water, a gift from the skies. It was previously unthinkable that one would pay for a drink of water; but as careless economic expansion pollutes fresh water, we now incentivize privatization of springs and aquifers. Sweet water, a free gift of the Earth, is pirated by faceless corporations who encase it in plastic containers to sell. And now many can't afford what was previously free, and we incentivize wrecking public waters to create demand for the privatized. What induces people to buy bottled

water from a corporation more convincingly than contaminated water flowing from the faucet?

In contrast, in Indigenous societies all over the world, where remnants of gift economies endure, water is sacred and people have a moral responsibility to care for it, to keep it flowing. It is a gift, to be shared by all, and the notion of owning water is an ecological and ethical travesty. Lewis Hyde writes, "To assign a market value to a gift, destroys the gift."

Continued fealty to economies based on competition for manufactured scarcity, rather than cooperation around natural abundance, is now causing us to face the danger of producing real scarcity, evident in growing shortages of food and clean water, breathable air, and fertile soil. Climate change is a product of this extractive economy and is forcing us to confront the inevitable outcome of our consumptive lifestyle: genuine scarcity, for which the market has no remedy.

The Indigenous philosophy of the gift economy, based in our responsibility to pass on those gifts, has no tolerance for creating artificial scarcity through hoarding. In fact, the "monster" in Potawatomi culture is Windigo, who suffers from the illness of taking too much and sharing too little. It is a cannibal, whose hunger is never sated, eating through the world. Windigo thinking jeopardizes the survival of the community by incentivizing individual accumulation far beyond the satisfaction of "enoughness." Contemporary Windigos who cannibalize life for accumulation of money need their own name. Perhaps "Darren" would fit.



Birgir Andrésson



Helgi Gunnarsson

21.7.1906 – 23.7.1988

2006



Some new playing cards arrived at the Home for the Blind. They were ordinary playing cards, apart from having Braille letters on them as well.

Helgi bought himself a pack.

First we removed all the jokers, then shuffled the pack. Then we started playing.

Helgi dealt. I was dealt a card, then he was. Then he was dealt a card and I was. Helgi was dealt a card again, and one was dealt to me again.

It went on like this until Helgi had half the pack and I had the other half.

– Play a card, Helgi said. I did. Then Helgi played a card and I played a card and then Helgi did. We went on like this until we'd finished our hands.

– Who won? I asked.

– Both of us. Want another?

My parents were out one day when I got back from school. I went to see Helgi, who was in the kitchen. He stood by the cooker stirring some white gunge in a casserole.

– Are you hungry?

Yes, I was hungry.

After finishing what was in the casserole, I asked what it was I'd been eating.

– That was sliced sausages, the crust of a cake, a bit of water, and some ice cream. My own recipe.



After Helgi had been out all night with only the warmth of the sheep to keep himself alive, he told the following story:

– You can get Incredibly cold up on the mountains. Not to mention in a blizzard. Then I heard someone calling me out of the snowstorm: “Helgi!”

Naturally I answered, “Baa.” I’d lost all sense of direction.

Haggis is stuffed into the lamb's stomach, after the lamb is dead and has been cut up.

Helgi thought this was far too much bother. He'd been to the neighbouring farms to find out how the women made haggis. And they stuffed it into little bags made from the stomachs.

Helgi got a canvas bag that was used for keeping flour, and he stuffed the haggis into it.

Then the haggis was boiled in an oil drum.



Vegagerðarmenn á Jökuldal efri. Helgi er sjötti frá vinstri.
Roadworkers in Jökuldalur. Helgi is sixth from the left.

My father and Helgi sang together sometimes at the midwinter feast. The song about "The Snow Bunting" was by far the most popular.

Then Helgi got a melodeon and the music really began.

But the melodeon was too complicated and it was difficult to produce a decent tune from it.

Then the harmonica turned up like a godsend, when Helgi heard a child blowing into one in the corridor.

So he played and played, in his room, down at the brush-making workshop, while travelling, at the midwinter feasts, in the evenings and the mornings.

Not everyone could tell the tunes apart, but everyone knew "Siggi was outside". The clucking in the middle of the song made sure of that.

To cut this story short and get round to the horsemeat:

A lot of horsemeat was eaten in the canteen. It was cheap and the men used to chop up the horse carcasses in the laundry.

Although Helgi was not fat, he generally asked for fatty portions. More fat.

The fat ended up in the holes of the harmonicas and eventually blocked them up.

I was given the harmonicas and would sit there for ages with a paperclip, picking the fat out of the holes.

It made little mounds of fat here and there on my desk.

Helgi was a farmer at Grund in Jökuldalur for ten whole years.

Once when Helgi went out to mow the meadows, he put on a huge hat he'd acquired.

Helgi mowed the grass for a while. Then a freak wind whipped up and swept the hat off Helgi's head and high into the sky.

Helgi didn't see the hat again that year.

The next year, haymaking time came around. Helgi went out to mow.

And didn't he see some kind of lump in the sky, heading straight for him?

It was his old hat. All tattered with the brim almost torn away. It had been flying around, high in the sky, for a year.

Helgi made holes on either side of the hat and tied the elastic from a pair of underpants through them. Then he put the elastic under his chin and his hat stayed in place.



Sometimes Helgi told such eerie ghost stories at night that he would shake and tremble all over. Then I would take him over to my parents. He would sleep the night there.

†





Helgi's sister, Begga, made Father Christmas caps for us and we put on cardboard beards that I had cut out.

Then we went down to the brush-making workshop and played Father Christmas. We put on voices and said: "What's new and how are you, are you going to behave well at Christmas."

– Don't act like idiots, the people said to us.

I was the only one who could see.

So much changed when Helgi arrived from the east and moved into the Home for the Blind. Existence shifted and revealed itself to me in the form of incredible stories and adventures.

Helgi had lost one of his eyes when he walked into a nail in his cattle shed in Jökuldalur. Blind in one eye, he went on farming for some time.

From the great strain on his good eye, his sight gradually failed.

Helgi wanted to write a letter. So I was sent to all the shops in the neighbourhood, to ask for printed cardboard boxes. To be suitable, the letters had to be at least three centimetres tall and quite thick, otherwise they were difficult for him to distinguish.

We sat down and cut out letters for weeks. Gradually we managed to acquire a sizeable collection of all types and styles.

Then I was sent to collect a roll of brown paper and the writing began.

I conscientiously glued the letters to the paper. Helgi instructed me.

– Greetings to you all. I am feeling fine.

This simple introduction turned out to be almost one metre. So this first letter never managed to be even half-completed. It ended up somewhere and is surely buried now like Helgi himself.



Þetta litla kver er tileinkað vini mínum Helga Gunnarssyni
sjálfum og barnslegri sköpunargleði okkar allra.

Blessuð sé minning Helga.

This little book is dedicated to the memory of my friend Helgi
Gunnarsson and to the childlike joy we all take in creative work.

MOTEL CHRONICLES

He changed the canaries
Fed the Mule
Stood transfixed for ½ an hour

Every morning
He changed the canaries
Fed the Mule
And stood transfixed for ½ an hour

He never planned on standing transfixed for ½ an hour
It just happened
Every morning

Maybe it was the pause in finishing feeding the Mule
The momentum running down

There seemed to be a natural momentum
From changing the canaries
To feeding the Mule

There was never any problem
Moving from the canaries
To the Mule

It just happened
Every morning

It was the pause
After feeding the Mule
That stunned him

A Giant Pause

He even knew what the next thing was
He knew it very clearly

MOTEL CHRONICLES

He knew the next thing was feeding himself
After feeding the Mule

But he couldn't move

He stood transfixed for ½ an hour
Staring at the desert

Sometimes staring at his bottle house

Sometimes staring at the well pump

It depended on which direction he happened to be facing
When the transfixion struck him

It got to the point where he looked forward
To standing transfixed for ½ an hour

It was the high point of his morning

Change the canaries
Feed the Mule
Stand transfixed for ½ an hour

15/1/80
Homestead Valley, Ca.



I knew a guitar player who called the radio "friendly". He felt a kinship not with the music so much as with the radio's voice. Its synthetic quality. Its voice as distinct from the voices coming through it. Its ability to transmit the illusion of people at a great distance. He slept with the radio. He talked to the radio. He disagreed with the radio. He believed in a Faraway Radio Land. He believed he would never find this land so he reconciled himself to listening to it only. He believed he'd been banned from the Radio Land and was doomed to prowl the air waves forever, seeking some magic channel that would reinstate him to his long-lost heritage.