

Lawrence Weschler
CORONA
A Polyphonal Braiding
{April-May 2020}
{Leaves from my commonplace book}
I have shored these fragments against my ruin....

Robert Penn Warren
(from the last page of his *Audubon: A Vision*, 1969)

Tell me a story.

In this century, and moment, of mania, Tell me a story.

Make it a story of great distances, and starlight

The name of the story will be Time,
But you must not pronounce its name {...}

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Ernst Hemingway
(from *The Sun Also Rises*. 1926)

“How did you go bankrupt?” Bill asked.
“Two ways,” Mike said. “Gradually, then suddenly.”

*

Walker Percy,
(from the opening of his 1971 novel *Love in the Ruins*, 1971)

Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and
of the Christ forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came
to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it
happened at last? [...]

Undoubtedly something is about to happen.
Or is it that something has stopped happening?

Is it that God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A. and what we feel now is just the clank of the old historical machinery, the sudden jerking ahead of the roller coaster cars as the chain catches hold and carries us back into history with its ordinary catastrophes, carries us out and up toward the brink from that felicitous and privileged siding where even unbelievers admitted that if it was not God who blessed the U.S.A., then at least some great good luck had befallen us, and that now the blessing or the luck is over, the machinery clanks, the chain catches hold, and the cars jerk forward?

*

{That Polish generation that survived the War—the Holocaust, the razing of their entire capital, millions upon millions dead—and bore the burden of such survival, they understood....}

“Could Have” by Wyslawa Szymborska
(trans. Stanislaw Baranczak & Clare Cavanaugh)

It could have happened.
It had to happen.
It happened earlier. Later.
Nearer. Farther off.
It happened, but not to you.

You were saved because you were the first.
You were saved because you were the last.
Alone. With others.
On the right. The left.
Because it was raining. Because of the shade.
Because the day was sunny.

You were in luck -- there was a forest.
You were in luck -- there were no trees.
You were in luck -- a rake, a hook, a beam, a brake,
A jamb, a turn, a quarter-inch, an instant {...}

So you're here? Still dizzy from

another dodge, close shave, reprieve?
One hole in the net and you slipped through?
I couldn't be more shocked or
speechless.
Listen,
how your heart pounds inside me

From Zbigniew Herbert's "Mr. Cogito on the Need for Precision:"
(trans. John & Bogdana Carpenter)

And yet in these matters
Accuracy is essential
We must not be wrong
Even by a single one

We are despite everything
The guardians of our brothers

Ignorance about those who have disappeared
Undermines the reality of the world

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From Linda Gregg's "The Precision":

There is a modesty in nature. In the small
of it, and in the strongest. The leaf moves
just the amount the breeze indicates
and nothing more. {...}
There is a directness and an equipoise in the fervor,
just as the greatest turmoil has precision.
Like the discretion a tornado has when it tears
down building after building, house by house.
It is enough, Kafka said, that the arrow fit
exactly into the wound that it makes. {...}

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Marie Howe, "The Last Time," from *What the Living Know*

The last time we had dinner together in a restaurant
with white table clothes, he leaned forward

and took my two hands in his and said,
I'm going to die soon. I want you to know that.

And I said, I think I do know.
And he said, what surprises me is that you don't.

And I said, I do. And he said, What?
And I said, Know that you're going to die.

And he said, No, I mean know that you are.

*

From Sartre's *What is Literature?*
(regarding the 1945-47 period)

We were not unaware that a time would come when historians would be able to survey from all angles this stretch of time which we lived feverishly minute by minute... But the irreversibility of our age belonged only to us. We had to save ourselves in this irreversible time. These events pounced upon us like thieves and we had to do our job in the face of the incomprehensible and untenable, to bet, to conjecture, without evidence, to undertake in uncertainty and persevere without hope. Our age would be explained, but no one could keep it from having been inexplicable to us.

*

From George Orwell's "Reflections on Gandhi"

The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one *is* sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals.

*

Fifty years ago, I was in college and Nixon had just invaded Cambodia and we were of course all up in arms, the college had convened as a committee of the whole in the dining commons--the students, the professors, the administrators--what were we going to do? how were we going to respond?

Our distinguished American history professor got up and declared this moment the crisis of American history. Not to be outdone, our eminent new-age classicist got up and declared it the crisis of universal history. And we all nodded our fervent concurrence.

But then our visiting religious historian from England, a tall, lanky lay-Catholic theologian, as it happened, with something of the physical bearing of Abraham Lincoln, got up and suggested mildly that "We really ought to have a little modesty in our crises." He paused. "I suspect," he went on, "that the people during the Black Plague must have thought they were in for a bit of a scrape."

Having momentarily lanced our fervor, he went on to allegorize, summoning up the story of Jesus on the Waters. Committed secularists virtually every one, we glanced at each other and then at our feet, in embarrassed cluelessness. "Jesus," he reminded us gently, "needed to get across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples, so they all boarded a small boat, whereupon Jesus quickly fell into a nap. Presently a storm kicked up, and the disciples, increasingly edgy, finally woke Jesus up. He told them not to worry, everything would be all right, whereupon he fell back into his nap. The storm meanwhile grew more and more intense, winds slashing the ever-higher waves. The increasingly anxious disciples woke Jesus once again, who once again told them not to worry and again fell back asleep. And still the storm worsened, now tossing the little boat violently all to and fro. The disciples, beside themselves with terror, awoke Jesus one more time,

who now said, 'Oh ye of little faith'—that's where that phrase comes from—and then proceeded to pronounce, 'Peace!' Whereupon the storm instantaneously subsided and calm returned to the water."

Our Historian waited a few moments as we endeavored to worry out the glancing relevance of this story. "It seems to me," he finally concluded, "that what that story is trying to tell us is simply that in times of storm, we mustn't allow the storm to enter ourselves; rather we have to find peace inside ourselves and breathe it out."

*

The silence, and the sirens

The uncanny silence of the streets pierced by the occasional (actually all too frequent) wail of the sirens: and I am put in mind of the scene toward the end of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Peter Walsh (Clarissa Dalloway's long-ago would-be suitor, recently returned from India), approaching her front door, hears...

One of the triumphs of civilization, Walsh thought. It is one of the triumphs of civilization, as the light high bell of the ambulance sounded. Swiftly, cleanly the ambulance sped to the hospital, having picked up instantly, humanely, some poor devil; someone hit on the head, struck by disease, knocked over perhaps a minute or so ago at one of these crossings, as might happen to oneself. That was civilization. It struck him coming back from the East—the efficiency, the organization, the communal spirit of London. Every cart or carriage of its own accord drew aside to let the ambulance pass...

All of which is quite lovely and stirring, except that we readers know that the ambulance in question is actually racing to the site where another of the book's principal characters, Septimus, a once idealist young poet who emerged from the War a devastated, shell-shocked wreck, pithed of the ability to feel anything, has just hurled himself out of an upper story window to his death on the pavement below. Civilization, indeed.

And a similar doubled vision comes over me, listening to the ambulances stream past. This pandemic was proving to be the great equalizer, or so we were constantly being told at the outset, striking rich and poor, the mighty and the minor alike, none of us immune to its fearsome depredations. And yet, as became increasingly obvious, a

shockingly high percentage of the virus's actual victims were proving to be the destitute, people of color, and the working poor—and for all the obvious reasons (why the shock?): it wasn't just the packed living conditions that made social distancing so much more difficult for them than for the far more privileged minority of the country; nor was it the higher incidence of the so-called prior conditions (asthma, hypertension, diabetes and the like) in their historically underserved communities; on top of all that, of course, such folk made up an extraordinarily high percentage of the "essential" workers—the farm workers and truckers and grocery store shelvers and check-out clerks, the hospital janitors and paramedics and nursing aides, the very EMT workers manning those wailing ambulances—who were having to risk their own lives, and that of their families, in this, the richest country in the history of the world.

"Show me a plague, and I'll show you the world!" declared the late Larry Kramer, the great AIDS activist and survivor, in his 2015 novel, "The American People: Volume One."

Indeed, and like AIDS before it, the Covid-19 virus has been tearing through late-capitalist, neoliberal American society like a veritable MRI, rendering its essential structure visually patent, for good and for ill.

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Jester D, aka Aaron Meier, a San Francisco sanitation worker in the midst of the pandemic, unleashes a tweet that quickly goes viral:

I'm a garbageman, I can't work from home and my job is an essential city service that must get done. It's a tough job, from getting up pre-dawn to the physical toll it takes on my body to the monotonous nature of the job, at times it's hard to keep on going.

Right now though, right now I am feeling an extra sense of pride and purpose as I do my work. I see the people, my people, of my city, peeking out their windows at me. They're scared, we're scared. Scared but resilient.

Us garbagemen are gonna keep collecting the garbage, doctors and nurses are gonna keep doctoring and nurse-ering. It's gonna be ok,

we're gonna make it be ok. I love my city. I love my country. I love my planet Earth. Be good to each other and we'll get through this.

*

From Tomas Tranströmer
"Sentry Duty" (trans. Robert Bly):

*Task: to be where I am.
Even when I'm in this solemn and absurd
role: I am still the place
where creation does a little work on itself*

*

Headline from BuzzFeed News
April 20, 2020

"Smithfield Foods is Blaming 'Living Circumstances in Certain Cultures'
for one of America's Largest Covid 19 Clusters"
New details show how Smithfield Foods failed to take action
in the crucial days before the plant turned into
one of the nation's largest coronavirus clusters.

*

Jean Rhys
from *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)

{The narrator, Sascha Jensen, a salesclerk, is about to be fired. Her stream of consciousness:}

He looks at me with distaste. Plat du jour – boiled eyes, served cold...
Well, let's argue this out, Mr Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky – and it would be so much less fun if we were. Isn't

it so, Mr Blank? There must be the dark background to show up the bright colours. Some must cry so that the others may be able to laugh the more heartily. Sacrifices are necessary.... Let's say you have this mystical right to cut my legs off. But the right to ridicule me afterwards because I am a cripple – no, that I think you haven't got. And that's the right you hold most dearly, isn't it? You must be able to despise the people you exploit. But I wish you a lot of trouble, Mr Blank, and just to start off with, your damned shop's going bust. Alleluia!

Did I say all this? Of course I didn't. I didn't even think it.

I say that I am ill and want to go! (Get it in first.) And he says he quite agrees that it would be the best thing. 'No regrets,' he says, 'no regrets.'

And there I am, out in the Avenue Marigny, with my month's pay – four hundred francs.

*

Everybody seems to be reading Albert Camus's *The Plague* again these days, which is of course understandable. It's interesting to recall, however, that at the time it was first published, in 1947, many critics expressed consternation at the way Camus seemed to be allegorizing the politically loaded Nazi occupation of France by way of what seemed a decidedly apolitical or even nonpolitical microbial infestation. He seemed to get the visceral experience of living through the quarantine siege of such an illness uncannily right (in part perhaps thanks to his own reading of such chronicles as Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year*), but did such a depiction do justice to such far more confounding issues as collaboration, genocide, and the like?

Of course, nowadays, the polarities are flipped: we are living through an actual pandemic, though in this instance under siege from submicroscopic entities that aren't even microbial and barely even alive, exactly. And yet, this plague is proving an extraordinary excavator of all sorts of political issues, and in fact the swath it is cutting through society is entirely bounded by age-old political topographies.

Meanwhile, there's a spookily prescient 1970 poem of Brodsky's that's been making the rounds, "Don't Leave Your Room," one that flips the viral quarantine backdrop a whole other way:

Don't leave your room, don't commit that fateful mistake.
Why risk the sun? Just settle back at home and smoke.

Outside's absurd, especially that whoop of joy,
you've made it to the lavatory--now head back straight away!

Don't leave your room, don't go and hail a taxi, spend,
the only space that matters is the corridor, its end
a ticking meter. She comes by, all ready for caressing,
mouth open? Kick her straight out, don't even start undressing.

Don't leave your room, just say you have the influenza.
A wall and table are the most fascinating agenda.
Why leave this place? Tonight you will come home from town
exactly as you were, only more beaten down.

Don't leave your room. Go dance the bossa nova,
shoes without socks, your body bare and coat tossed over.
The hallway holds its smells of ski wax and boiled cabbage,
writing even one letter more is excess baggage.

Don't leave your room. Do you still look handsome?
Just ask the room... Incognito ergo sum,
as petulant Substance once remarked to Form.
It's not exactly France outside. Don't leave your room!

Don't be an idiot! You're not the others, you're an exclusion!

Choreograph the furniture, essay wall-paper fusion.

Make that wardrobe a barricade. The fates require us
to keep out Cosmos, Chronos, Eros, Race and Virus!

The tone of this poem is of course satirical, it's context decidedly political (the virus here, as in Camus, being allegorical, though in an obverse way). The scene is Leningrad in 1970, and Brodsky, veteran of 18 months internal exile in an Arctic mental hospital, is chide-mocking all his pseudo-liberal compatriots who refuse to venture out of their own snug apartments and join the fray. Within two years, for all his like such provocations, he will himself be expelled from the country.

*

Several have commented on the science-fiction eeriness of life these days, each of us relegated to our own little cells, communicating with each other, diverting ourselves through our interactions with all these atomizing and digitizing screens. So futuristic, we say. And yet how uncanny to realize that well over a hundred years ago, in 1909, E.M. Forster had already seen it all clear in his novella "The Machine Stops." (Look it up, it's all there on Google. Just as predicted.)

Someday, decades and decades hence, following some terrible ecological collapse, all mankind has been reduced to living underground, in hexagonal rooms "like the cells of a bee" with no apertures but throbbing ventilation, and yet everyone is connected to everyone else by way of a vast hive of interconnected video plates. *Zoom avant la lettre.* Which is how Forster's story begins, with a son calling out to videochat, as it were, with his mother on the other side of the globe, to chat and to complain,

"The Machine is much, but it is not everything.

I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you.

I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you."

And the tale unfurls from there.

*

From the ending of *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, my collection of over thirty years of conversations with the artist Robert Irwin:

The afternoon was winding down, the lightwell facing Irwin's drafting table was filling up with dim.

I reminded him how he often talked about expecting not to live to see the realization of the sort of world his own art was aspiring to, that such a realization could indeed still be generations off. What, I now asked him, did he have in mind? Was it (I was suddenly in a tweaking mood, wanting to dispel the mood of somber sobriety that had strangely overtaken us) a question, for instance, of not yet having sufficient computer power, such that artists in the future, properly endowed with the requisite terabytes, might be able to infuse visors with ecstasies of

virtuality barely even dreamed of...?

“Of course not!” Bob erupted. (I’d managed to provoke exactly the rise I was hoping for.) “The point is to get people to peel off their visors, to remove the goggles, to abandon the screens. Those screens whose very purpose is to screen the actual world out. Who cares about virtuality when there’s all this reality—this incredible, inexhaustible, insatiable, astonishing reality—present all around!”

*

From Todd Newberry’s manual, *The Ardent Birder*

Canny birders stand still. {...} When we enter a habitat, we have to let it recover from the shock of our arrival. Its birds know from the very look of us that we are on a hunt. We must let them size us up before they dare to get on with their chores. The simplest way is to stand still, to glue both feet to the ground, to be as fixed and as silent as a statue, and in that slow way to join the habitat. Yet remarkably few birders seem to be able to do this. Another bird distracts – resist! An ear itches – resist! A fly bothers – resist! A thought reaches your mouth – be still.

Standing still has another advantage besides its calming effect. Where birds lurk amidst confusing patterns of branches and leaves, standing still gives our eyes a chance to take in the arrangements of light and shadow, of line and mass. This takes time. Pretty soon we become aware of moving clues that we would miss if we, too, were moving. Now they move against a stationary background. And some of those moving clues are birds.

*

From Seamus Heaney’s “Postscript”
to his 1996 *Spirit Level* collection

{...} Useless to think you’ll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

*

From Nathaniel Hawthorne's journal (August 16, 1851)

I have before now experienced, that the best way to get a vivid impression and feeling of landscape, is to sit down before it and read, or become otherwise absorbed in thought; for then, when your eyes happen to be attracted to the landscape, you seem to catch Nature at unawares, and see her before she has time to change her aspect. The effect lasts but for a single instant, and passes away almost as soon as you are conscious of it; but it is real, for that moment. It is as if you could overhear and understand what the trees are whispering to one another; as if you caught a glimpse of a face unveiled, which veils itself from every wilful glance. The mystery is revealed, and after a breath or two, becomes just as much a mystery as before.

*

Friederich Nietzsche, from *The Gay Science* (a favorite and oft-cited passage of Oliver Sacks's):

“Gratitude pours forth continually, as if the unexpected had just happened—the gratitude of the convalescent—for convalescence was unexpected... The rejoicing of strength that is returning, of a reawakened faith in a tomorrow or a day after tomorrow, of a sudden sense and anticipation of a future, of impending adventures, of seas that are open again

*

“*Deciamos ayer*”

Fray Luis de Leon, the great humanist scholar (and Hebraicist) of the Spanish Golden Age and one of the sages of Salamanca University was condemned by the Inquisition for translating the Song of Solomon and spent four years in prison before being allowed to return to his lectern at the university, where he began his first lecture with the phrase, “Deciamos ayer”—“As we were saying yesterday....”

*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from “The War has had a Place” (1945):

We have learned history, and we claim that it must not be forgotten. But are we here not the dupes of our emotions? If ten years hence, we reread these pages and so many others, what will we think of them? We do not want this year of 1945 to become just another year among many. A man who has lost his son or a woman he loved does not want to live beyond that loss. He leaves the house in the state it was in. The familiar objects upon the table, the clothes in the closet mark an empty place in the world... The day will come, however, when the meaning of these clothes will change: once...they were wearable, and now they are out of style and shabby. To keep them any longer would not be to make the dead person live on; quite the opposite, they date his death all the more cruelly.

*

Thomas Merton (from *The Sign of Jonas*, 1947):

The perfection of twelfth century Cistercian architecture is not to be explained by saying that the Cistercians were looking for a new technique. I am not sure that they were looking for a new technique at all. They built good churches because they were looking for God. And they were looking for God in a way that was pure and integral enough to make everything they did and everything they touched give glory to God.

We cannot reproduce what they did because we approach the problem in a way that makes it impossible for us to find a solution. We ask ourselves a question that they never considered. How can we make a beautiful monastery according to a style of some past age and according to the rules of a dead tradition? Thus we make the problem not only infinitely complicated but we make it, in fact, unsolvable. Because a dead style is dead. And the reason why it is dead is that the motives and circumstances that once gave it life have ceased to exist. They have given place to a situation that demands another style. If we were intent upon loving God rather than upon getting a Gothic church out of a small budget, we would put up something that would give glory to God and would be very simple and would also be in the tradition of our fathers....

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Comte Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand:

Nobody who wasn't alive then will ever know the sweetness of life (*la douceur de la vie*: the sweet/soft plushness of life) before the Revolution.

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Ugandan proverb:

“The axe forgets, the tree remembers.”

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