

Ernst Meier Heibel

Mr. Cogito on the Need for Precision

1

Mr. Cogito
is alarmed by a problem
in the domain of applied mathematics

the difficulties we encounter
with operations of simple arithmetic

children are lucky
they add apple to apple
subtract grain from grain
the sum is correct
the kindergarten of the world
pulsates with a safe warmth

particles of matter have been measured
heavenly bodies weighed
and only in human affairs
inexcusable carelessness reigns supreme
the lack of precise information

over the immensity of history
wheels a specter
the specter of indefiniteness

how many Greeks were killed at Troy
—we don't know

to give the exact casualties
on both sides
in the battle at Caugamela
at Agincourt
Leipzig
Kutno

and also the number of victims
of terror
of the white
the red
the brown
—O colors innocent colors—
—we don't know
truly we don't know

Mr. Cogito
rejects the sensible explanation
that this was long ago
the wind has thoroughly mixed the ashes
the blood flowed to the sea

sensible explanations
intensify the alarm
of Mr. Cogito

because even what
is happening under our eyes
evades numbers
loses the human dimension

somewhere there must be an error
a fatal defect in our tools
or a sin of memory

2

a few simple examples
from the accounting of victims
in an airplane disaster
it is easy to establish
the exact number of the dead

important for heirs
and those plunged in grief
for insurance companies

we take the list of passengers
and the crew
next to each name
we place a little cross

it is slightly harder
in the case
of train accidents

bodies torn to pieces
have to be put back together
so no head
remains overless

during elemental
catastrophes
the arithmetic
becomes complicated

we count those who are saved
but the unknown remainder
neither alive
nor definitely dead
is described by a strange term
the missing

they still have the chance
to return to us
from fire
from water
the interior of the earth

if they return—that's fine
if they don't—too bad

[66

3

now Mr. Cogito
climbs
to the highest tottering
step of indefiniteness

how difficult it is to establish the names
of all those who perished
in the struggle with inhuman power

the official statistics
reduce their number
once again pitilessly
they decimate those who have died a violent death
and their bodies disappear
in abysmal cellars
of huge police buildings

eyewitnesses
blinded by gas
deafened by salvoes
by fear and despair
are inclined toward exaggeration

accidental observers
give doubtful figures
accompanied by the shameful
word "about"

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

[67

it thrusts into the hell of appearances
the devilish net of dialectics
proclaiming there is no difference
between the substance and the specter

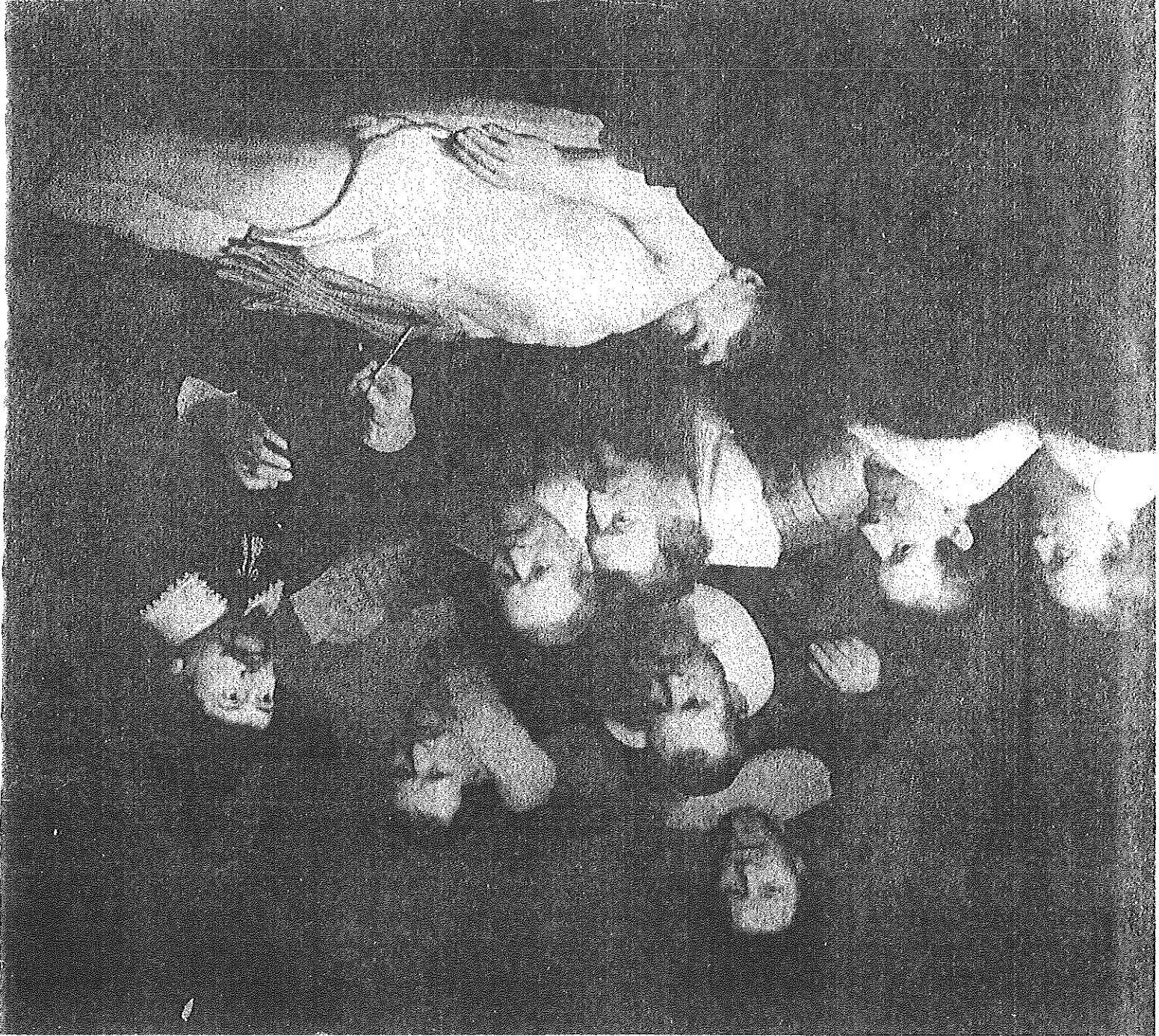
therefore we have to know
to count exactly
call by the first name
provide for a journey

in a bowl of clay
millet poppy seeds
a bone comb
arrowheads
and a ring of faithfulness

amulets

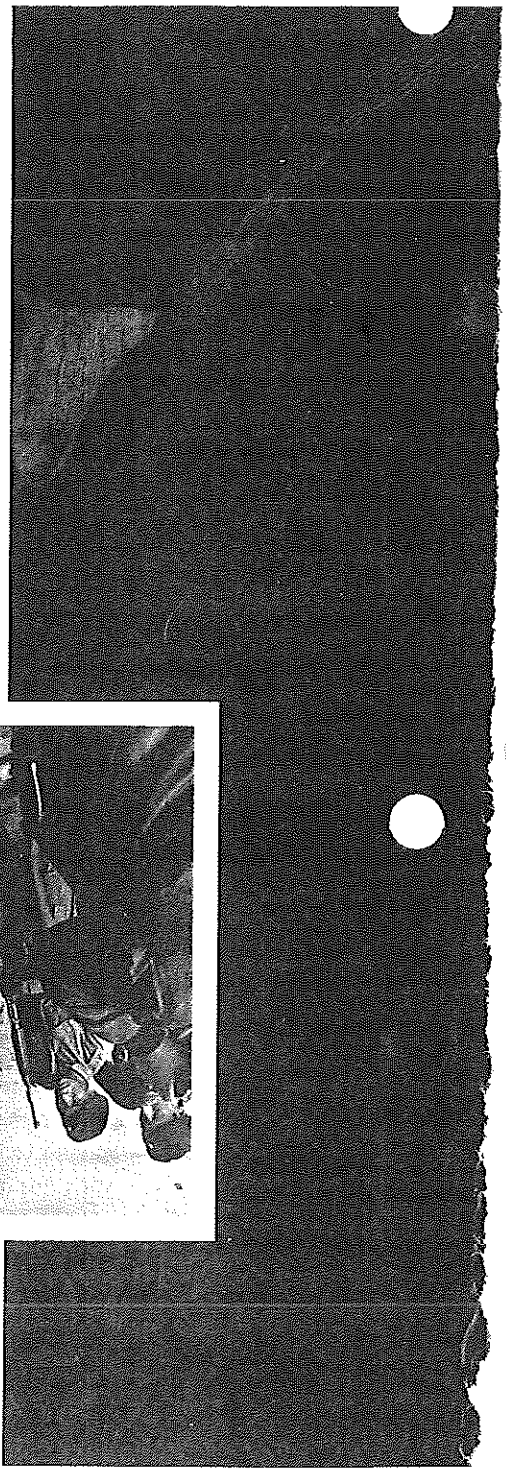
[68





oct 1997

Tribunal in The Hague



AN ANDREY LESSEN
BY LAWRENCE
WESCHLER

URING my first few months covering the ongoing Yugoslav war-crimes tribunal in The Hague, faced day after day with the appalling sorts of testimony that have become that court's standard fare,



FREDDY ALBERTA

rious struggle that savaged Northern Europe with carnage every bit as harrowing as anything being described nowadays at the tribunal—mayhem that regularly slashed into the Netherlands, until the conflict was finally brought to a (provisional) end with the Treaty of Westphalia, in 1648. The war had provided the occasion for the publication, in 1625, of the seminal work by an earlier son of Vermeer's Delft, Hugo Grotius: *On the Law of War and Peace*, a text often considered to be the foundation of all modern international law, in particular of the Hague tribunals. The war's dark imperatives can likewise be seen impinging on Rembrandt's great painting.

The Anatomy Lesson is so famously overexposed, so crusted over with conventional regard, as to be almost impossible to see afresh. And indeed, when I recently came upon the painting once again, rather than seeing it I found myself recalling an essay I hadn't thought about in almost thirty years—the English critic John Berger's 1967 ruminations on the occasion of Che Guevara's death. Responding to the simultaneous appearance seemingly all over the world of that ghastly photo of Che's felled body, stretched out half naked across a bare surface and surrounded by the proud Bolivian officers and soldiers who had succeeded in bagging the revolutionary leader, Berger made a startling connection to Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*. Gee, I remember thinking at the time, this man doesn't look at his morning paper the way I look at mine. But surely he was right. One could even say that Rembrandt's was the image, almost hard-wired into the photographer's mind and the soldiers' very bodies, that had taught them all where to stand in relation to one another and to the grim object of their smug display.

AND yet now, standing before the professor's hand but rather gazing right past it, at the opened book beyond, in the painting's lower right-hand corner—a thick anatomical tome, supposed-ly representative in this context of authoritative education and the passing down of specialized knowledge. Non-sense—though, admittedly, a peculiarly self-referential art-academic, specialized-to-me-generating sort of nonsense. Just look at the picture. They're looking at the professor's hand, and, indeed, they're looking at it wonderstruck, spellbound, as if they've never before seen anything like it.



GILLES PERESS/MAAGNUM PHOTOS

For what a marvel of motility it is—the ones gazing toward us are staring that gore. (Come to think of it, maybe lean forward, gawking (like us) at all the part I remembered most vividly—toward us while the rest—and this is of onlookers: some gaze out strangely beneath the skin. There is a mountain veil all the sinewy musculature just is poised in mid-lecture beside a cadaver, its left forearm splayed open to reveal all the sinewy musculature just beneath the skin. There is a mountain of onlookers: some gaze out strangely toward us while the rest—and this is the part I remembered most vividly—the ones gazing toward us are staring precisely at our own queasiness in the face of such morbidity.)

Only, as I now could plainly see, that's not what's actually happening in Rembrandt's canvas. Of course, the theme of mortality and morbidity is there—rendered all the more unsettling by the conspicuous resemblance between the cadaver's face and those of many of the onlookers. But that's not what the onlookers are focusing on; death (their own or anybody else's) hardly seems to be on their minds at all. On the contrary, the innermost trio is gazing at the professor's *living*

flexing hand—the focus of all this awed attention—is a painter's own fore-most implement, the one with which he wields his brush. You can just see Rembrandt painting the picture, his own actual hand but-
nishing the profes-
sor's painted one as
the painted class
gazes on in hushed
astonishment. This
is a painting, then,
about looking at
hands, about vision and malleability—
about the fundamentals of painting
itself.

Or, more generally, about living. It's not, as we are sometimes given to re-calling, a morbid dwelling upon death but rather a celebration, a defiant affirm-ation of life and liveliness and vitality

And I realized how, appearances to the contrary, all these labors aren't about death at all but rather about life and the living. They are about the living witness owed to every one of the once-living victims. "In these matters," the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (writing in the shadow of his own country's genocide-Netherlands). More to the point, a flexing hand—the focus of all this

And I realized how, appearances to the contrary, all these labors aren't about death at all but rather about life and the living. They are about the living witness owed to every one of the once-living victims. "In these matters," the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (writing in the shadow of his own country's genocide-Netherlands). More to the point, a flexing hand—the focus of all this

And I realized how, appearances to the contrary, all these labors aren't about death at all but rather about life and the living. They are about the living witness owed to every one of the once-living victims. "In these matters," the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (writing in the shadow of his own country's genocide-Netherlands). More to the point, a flexing hand—the focus of all this

And I realized how, appearances to the contrary, all these labors aren't about death at all but rather about life and the living. They are about the living witness owed to every one of the once-living victims. "In these matters," the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (writing in the shadow of his own country's genocide-Netherlands). More to the point, a flexing hand—the focus of all this

And I realized how, appearances to the contrary, all these labors aren't about death at all but rather about life and the living. They are about the living witness owed to every one of the once-living victims. "In these matters," the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (writing in the shadow of his own country's genocide-Netherlands). More to the point, a flexing hand—the focus of all this

And I realized how, appearances to the contrary, all these labors aren't about death at all but rather about life and the living. They are about the living witness owed to every one of the once-living victims. "In these matters," the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (writing in the shadow of his own country's genocide-Netherlands). More to the point, a flexing hand—the focus of all this

from WS Merwin
The Miners Pale Children
Atheneum 1970

START with the leaves, the small twigs, and the nests that have been shaken, ripped, or broken off by the fall; these must be gathered and attached once again to their respective places. It is not arduous work, unless major limbs have been smashed or mutilated. If the fall was carefully and correctly planned, the chances of anything of the kind happening will have been reduced. Again, much depends upon the size, age, shape, and species of the tree. Still, you will be lucky if you can get through this stage without having to use machinery. Even in the best of circumstances it is a labor that will make you wish often that you had won the favor of the universe of ants, the empire of mice, or at least a local tribe of squirrels, and could enlist their labors and their talents. But no, they leave you to it. They have learned, with time. This is men's work. It goes without saying that if the tree was hollow in whole or in part, and contained old nests of bird or mammal or insect, or hoards of nuts or such structures as wasps or bees build for their survival, the contents will have to be repaired where necessary, and reassembled, insofar as possible, in their original order, including the shells of nuts already

opened. With spiders' webs you must simply do the best you can. We do not have the spider's weaving equipment, nor any substitute for the leaf's living bond with its point of attachment and nourishment. It is even harder to simulate the latter when the leaves have once become dry—as they are bound to do, for this is not the labor of a moment. Also it hardly needs saying that this is the time for repairing any neighboring trees or bushes or other growth that may have been damaged by the fall. The same rules apply. Where neighboring trees were of the same species it is difficult not to waste time conveying a detached leaf back to the wrong tree. Practice, practice. Put your hope in that.

Now the tackle must be put into place, or the scaffolding, depending on the surroundings and the dimensions of the tree. It is ticklish work. Almost always it involves, in itself, further damage to the area, which will have to be corrected later. But as you've heard, it can't be helped. And care now is likely to save you considerable trouble later. Be careful to grind nothing into the ground.

At last the time comes for the erecting of the trunk. By now it will scarcely be necessary to remind you of the delicacy of this huge skeleton. Every motion of the tackle, every slight upward heave of the trunk, the branches, their elaborately re-assembled panoply of leaves (now dead) will draw from you an involuntary gasp. You will watch for a leaf or a twig to be snapped off yet again. You will listen for the nuts to shift in the hollow limb and you will hear whether they are indeed falling into place or are spilling in disorder—in which case, or in the event of anything else of the kind—operations will have to cease, of course, while you correct the matter. The raising itself is no small enterprise, from the moment when the chains tighten around the old bandages until the bole hangs vertical above the stump, splinter above splinter. Now the final straightening of the

rigid as that for the splinters. That for the bark and its subcutaneous layers is transparent and runs into the fibers on either side, partially dissolving them into each other. It does not set the sap flowing again but it does pay a kind of tribute to the preoccupations of the ancient thoroughfares. You could not roll an egg over the joints but some of the mine-shafts would still be passable, no doubt. For the first exploring insect who raises its head in the tight echoless passages. The day comes when it is all restored, even to the moss (now dead) over the wound. You will sleep badly, thinking of the removal of the scaffolding that must begin the next morning. How you will hope for sun and a still day!

The removal of the scaffolding or tackle is not so dangerous, perhaps, to the surroundings, as its installation, but it presents problems. It should be taken from the spot piece by piece as it is detached, and stored at a distance. You have come to accept it there, around the tree. The sky begins to look naked as the chains and struts one by one vacate their positions. Finally the moment arrives when the last sustaining piece is removed and the tree stands again on its own. It is as though its weight for a moment stood on your heart. You listen for a thud of settlement, a warning creak deep in the intricate joinery. You cannot believe it will hold. How like something dreamed it is, standing there all by itself. How long will it stand there now? The first breeze that touches its dead leaves all seems to flow into your mouth. You are afraid the motion of the clouds will be enough to push it over. What more can you do? What more can you do?

But there is nothing more you can do.

Others are waiting.

Everything is going to have to be put back.

splinters themselves can take place (the preliminary work is best done while the wood is still green and soft, but at times when the splinters are not badly twisted most of the straightening is left until now, when the torn ends are face to face with each other.) When the splinters are perfectly complementary the appropriate fixative is applied. Again we have no duplicate of the original substance. Ours is extremely strong, but it is rigid. It is limited to surfaces, and there is no play in it. However the core is not the part of the trunk that conducted life from the roots up into the branches and back again. It was relatively inert. The fixative for this part is not the same as the one for the outer layers and the bark, and if either of these is involved in the splintered section they must receive applications of the appropriate adhesives. Apart from being incorrect and probably ineffective, the core fixative would leave a scar on the bark.

When all is ready the splintered trunk is lowered onto the splinters of the stump. This, one might say, is only the skeleton of the resurrection. Now the chips must be gathered, and the sawdust, and returned to their former positions. The fixative for the wood layers will be applied to chips and sawdust consisting only of wood. Chips and sawdust consisting of several substances will receive applications of the correct adhesives. It is as well, where possible, to shelter the materials from the elements while working. Weathering makes it harder to identify the smaller fragments. Bark sawdust in particular the earth lays claim to very quickly. You must find your own ways of coping with this problem. There is a certain beauty, you will notice at moments, in the pattern of the chips as they are fitted back into place. You will wonder to what extent it should be described as natural, to what extent man-made. It will lead you on to speculations about the percentage of beauty itself, to which you will return.

The adhesive for the chips is translucent, and not so

Wystawa Szymborska

NOTHING'S A GIFT

Nothing's a gift, it's all on loan.
I'm drowning in debts up to my ears.
I'll have to pay for myself
with my self,
give up my life for my life.

Here's how it's arranged:
The heart can be repossessed,
the liver, too,
and each single finger and toe.

Too late to tear up the terms,
my debts will be repaid,
and I'll be fleeced,
or, more precisely, flayed.

I move about the planet
in a crush of other debtors.
Some are saddled with the burden
of paying off their wings.
Others must, willy-nilly,
account for every leaf.

Every tissue in us lies
on the debit side.

Not a tetracle or tendril
is for keeps.

The inventory, infinitely detailed,
implies we'll be left
not just empty-handed
but handless, too.

I can't remember
where, when, and why
I let someone open
this account in my name.

We call the protest against this
the soul.
And it's the only item
not included on the list.

among their common acquaintance, as everyone knew, began to sail out of Liverpool, had a million. Less than three had fitted out four ships for negroes to the Caribbean. Wyatt only last week, Kem enough on those six voyages the West Indies with rum make a quick shape of wealth. In part it was superstition babbled of a spell to keep however, during these days, those who afterwards assisted Poverty was distant, his success miraculous to him. He had twelve, barefoot and penniless along the docks until he was He had put his pennies together bought a share in a consignment the colonists in Virginia. Jamaica which was then retangled his capital. He repeated and went on repeating it in cotton. Markets for English where. With luck aiding dreams. Perhaps it was that was ultimately his reversal. Crutches can be again; Kemp had been believe he would fall back. He could fear it but he could adapt to the losses he had plunged in prices, his fast red dye that could cost

opportunities just then afforded. There was no shortage of examples. With business associates he was voluble about the opportunity to calk her seams.

William Kemp was present at every stage. Garrulity grew upon him. With his tricorne hat tilted back, his sober, expensive, negligently worn clothes, his short wig emphasizing the dark flush of his face, he held forth to the people of the yards, the shipwrights and their labourers, the fitters, the rope-makers - he would talk to anyone connected with the ship, down to the lad heating tar to calk her seams.

Work on the ship continued; she rose on her stocks from day to day, proceeding by ordained stages from notion to form. Like any work of the imagination, she had to maintain herself against disbelief, guard her purpose through metamorphoses that made her barely recognizable at times - indeed she had looked more herself in the early stages of the building, with the timbers of the keel laid in place and scarphed together to form her backbone and the stem and sternpost joined to it. Then she had already the perfect dynamic of her shape, the perfect declaration of her purpose. But with the attachment of the vertical frames, which conform to the design of the hull and so define the shape of it, she looked a botched, dishevelled thing for a while, with the raw planks standing up loose all round her. Then slowly she was gripped into shape again, clamped together by the transverse beams running athwart her and the massive wales that girdled her fore and aft. She was riveted and fastened with oak trenails and wrought-iron bolts driven through the timbers and clenched. And so she began to look like herself again, as is the gradual way of art.

EIGHT

*Bonny Lumsden
Sacred Huts*

KAY RYAN

Polish and Balm

Dust develops
from inside
as well as
on top when
objects stop
being used.
No unguent
can soothe
the chap of
abandonment.
Who knew
the polish
and balm in
a person's
simple passage
among her things.
We knew she
loved them
but not what
love means.

We're Building the Ship as We Sail It

The first fear
being drowning, the
ship's first shape
was a raft, which
was hard to unflatten
after that didn't
happen. It's awkward
to have to do one's
planning *in extremis*
in the early years —
so hard to hide later:
sleekeening the hull,
making things
more gracious.

southeast all the way to Milne Bay and then turned north. As we approached Lae, the pilot was flying under the weather at about 150 feet. We could see native boats on the water. The flight took two hours—I remember we almost missed chow."

Ever since Oliver Clark got out of the nose of the B-24 that had engine trouble on the morning of March 22, 1944, and didn't get back on the plane in the afternoon, he has counted his blessings. So has John Robert Campbell. "Not getting on that plane was a gift of fate," Campbell says. "I guess my time hadn't come."

There were more people at Robert Allred's funeral on March 3, 1983, than Juanita Beck had anticipated the previous May, when she, Emily, Howard, and Louise decided as a family to have Bob buried in Punchbowl. Among the twenty-five men and women gathered under a metal canopy that had been set up near the grave were Alvin and Juanita; Emily and her husband; Howard and his wife; two of Howard's sons and their wives; Louise and one of her daughters; six friends from Iowa who were on vacation in Hawaii at the time; the only man on the 22nd Bombardment Group's roster who lives in Honolulu, and who was proud to represent the Red Raiders; and Tadao Furue and Leslie Stewart, from the CII.

On a warm, breezy morning, with cardinals and helicopters flying overhead, the chaplain read the Twenty-third Psalm. He led the gathering in reciting the Lord's Prayer. He spoke of the grief that had been ended and the questions that had been answered "as we commit the remains of Robert to their resting place." Seven riflemen fired three volleys. A bugler played the heartache of Taps.

Juanita Beck tried to make arrangements with a florist in Honolulu to deliver flowers to her first husband's grave three times a year—on Bob's birthday, at Christmas, and on the anniversary of the crash—but the arrangements did not work out. Long before she gave up on the florist, in late 1984, and started using the services of Florists' Transworld Delivery, she learned that someone had succeeded where she had failed. A friend of Louise's took a trip to Hawaii in May 1983 and saw multicolored flowers at Bob Allred's grave. A year later, Paul Allred, nine-

teen, the oldest son of Howard's oldest son, Dr. Robert L. Allred, spent a semester studying at the University of Hawaii. On Sunday, May 27, 1984, the day before Memorial Day, he went to Punchbowl. As he approached his granduncle's grave, he saw a man standing in front of it gazing into the distance. In a flower container near the headstone was a bouquet of long-stemmed roses. Paul Allred waited until the man turned toward him, and then introduced himself, whereupon the man introduced himself. He was Tadao Furue.

Robert Allred was the first man Furue had identified at the CII to be buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, and after the funeral service was over he had made a point of paying his respects to Robert Allred's family. Furue told Paul how much it had meant to him to meet Bob Allred's former wife, his sisters and brother, and his nephews, and now meant to him to meet his grandnephew. He said that he had brought twenty-two roses—one for each man on the plane.

Tadao Furue visits Bob Allred's grave at least twice a year. He keeps a gallon of water in the trunk of his car (if the radiator leaks he wants to be prepared to fill it) and also a roll of paper towels (he has used them to wipe his hands after tightening a battery cable and after changing a flat tire). On his visits, he always cleans the headstone and always brings flowers. No. 41081 had been Tadao Furue's most difficult and time-consuming case. As it happened, it had also taken him longer to piece together the remains of Robert Allred than those of any other man on the plane. Because Furue accepts sole responsibility for each identification he makes, he has a special feeling for Robert Allred. As the commander of the aircraft, Robert Allred had chosen the course. He bore the responsibility for the plane's meeting the mountain.

Susan Steehan

Is there no place on earth for me?

(1992)

One

Shortly after midnight on Friday, June 16, 1978, Sylvia Frumkin decided to take a bath. Miss Frumkin, a heavy, ungainly young woman who lived in a two-story yellow brick building in Queens Village, New York, walked from her bedroom on the second floor to the bathroom next door and filled the tub with warm water. A few days earlier, she had had her hair cut and shaped in a bowl style, which she found especially becoming, and her spirits were high. She washed her brown hair with shampoo and also with red mouthwash. Some years earlier, she had tinted her hair red and had liked the way it looked. She had given up wearing her hair red only because she had found coloring it every six weeks too much of a bother. She imagined that the red mouthwash would somehow be absorbed into her scalp and make her hair red permanently. Miss Frumkin felt so cheerful about her new haircut that she suddenly thought she was Lori Lemaris, the mermaid whom Clark Kent had met in college and had fallen in love with in the old "Superman" comics. She blew bubbles into the water.

After a few minutes of contented frolicking, Miss Frumkin stepped out of the tub. She slipped on the bathroom floor — it was wet from her bubble-blowing and splashing — and

cut the back of her head as she fell. The cut began to bleed. She attempted to stop the bleeding by applying pressure to the cut, then wrapped her head in a large towel and walked back to her bedroom. On the dresser was a bottle of expensive perfume that an aunt and uncle had given her in May as a thirtieth-birthday present. She poured the contents of the bottle on her cut, partly because she knew that perfume contained alcohol and that alcohol was an antiseptic (in 1972, Miss Frumkin had completed a ten-month course qualifying her as a medical secretary), and partly because she suddenly thought that she was Jesus Christ and that her bleeding cut was the beginning of a crown of thorns. She also thought that she was Mary Magdalene, who had poured ointment on Christ. Looking back on the incident six months later, Miss Frumkin was exasperated with herself for having wasted the perfume, which the aunt and uncle had bought in Israel, and which she couldn't replace. "It was the one perfume I've ever had that people complimented me on," she said. "So many people told me I smelled nice when I wore it. I'm sorry I wasted it."

Miss Frumkin's head burned when the perfume came in contact with the open cut, and the bleeding subsided but didn't altogether stop. By then, it was after one o'clock. She put on an old nightgown and went downstairs to the office of the building to tell the night supervisor, Dwight Miller, who was on duty from midnight until eight-thirty, what had happened. Miller looked at the cut, told Miss Frumkin to get dressed, and said he would drive her to the emergency room at Long Island Jewish-Hillside Medical Center, a voluntary hospital in New Hyde Park, a short distance away. The cut didn't look bad, and Miss Frumkin appeared calm about it — calmer than Miller thought he would have been if their situations had been reversed — but he knew that any head injury was potentially serious and should be examined by a doctor. In her room, Miss Frumkin put on her underclothes, a pink-and-white print blouse and matching pink-

Linda Gregg
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. In the power of lust, too,
there can be a quiet and clarity, a fusion
of exact moments. There is a silence of it
inside the thundering. And when the body swoons,
it is because the heart knows its truth.
There is directness and 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. I think
about my body in love as I look down on these
lavish apple trees and the workers moving
with skill from one to the next, singing.

From Things and Flesh

(a volume dedicated to Jack Gilbert)

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

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

and took my hands in his hands 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.

Todd Newberry on Stillness
from The Shrikebird

Canny birders stand still. In a scene in his marvelous video series *The Life of Birds*, David Attenborough walks quietly along a woodland path. Birds call in alarm all around him. From the treetops, he looks like a cat on the prowl. That is what we birders do, prowl, and so we alarm our neighbors and we alarm the birds. What we see up close in casual walks are mostly the footholdy birds, as anyone who was sitting there before we came along can tell us. The rest have taken cover. 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 — stand still.

Standing still has another advantage besides its calming effect. Where birds lurk amid 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.

Standing still pays yet another dividend if you are birding by ear and listening. When we stop moving, an internal, physiological silence descends. The cranial thud that every foot-fall makes, the slightly muffled gyres of air swirling in the hollows of our ears, the nostrilly noises that even non-whooshers make when exerting themselves — all these interfere with hearing very faint noises around us. And with every step our rustling clothes raise sonic walls around our bodies. "Stopping to listen" means just that.

But though standing still is easy enough advice, for many of us it is hard to do for more than a few minutes; it can feel like an eternity. And sustaining a stalker's focus as we do it is harder still. If our body cannot wander, our mind tries to. This is why wild creatures so easily outwait us. They hold still, we don't; they bide their time, we spend ours. And, in nature, when we stand still and "nothing happens," we tend to spend our time stinging, lest we waste it. Soon enough, we lose patience and want to get on with the day. In nature, it is as though whenever we were put on hold we simply hung up the phone.

One summer morning in the Utah desert, I stopped beside a pool and bent over a bear-paw print in the mud. A tiny frog had jumped into the pool as I arrived. I stood there watching the frog and the frog floated there watching me. After five silent, immobile minutes went by and "nothing happened" I hung up on nature and started on my way. A dozen paces on, I turned and looked back at the pool. The little frog, triumphant, was sitting in my wet footprint.

I know of no cure for losing patience with nature — with nature — short of a revolutionary change of attitude. But in makeshift ways, busy birders can give in a little to nature's pace. For example, I have added a featherweight, three-legged folding campstool to my back-pack, and I use it. The lower head-height, the nicely bent knees and suddenly weightless feet, the body's acknowledgment of having come to a halt; whatever the physical cause, in my experience sitting comfortably in nature works wonders. The habitat slowly puts aside its stage-set air, creatures resume their lives, impatience quietly withdraws. Like a spell, a different rhythm descends. With it, this thought stirs: "Maybe I should stay here awhile." Not the revolution, maybe, but at least its breath.