

Gallery 3: The “Long Now” Here To Stay



“Thoughts on Poetries of the Long Now” by Tom Orange

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TOM ORANGE

Thoughts on Poetries of the Long Now

Increasingly over the past five years or so, I've grown disenchanted with the world of alternative, avant-garde, experimental, innovative, non-mainstream and oppositional poetries. Which is remarkable given how much interesting and exciting and compelling work is currently being produced among such poetries, probably more than at any time in our history. Additionally, while financial support for such poetries is never easy to come by -- and will be all the more so in the years ahead as our nation and the world attempt to crawl their way out of the economic hole forty years of deregulated "free market" economics and outright corruption have dug us into -- advances in personal computing and internet technologies have made it relatively easy and inexpensive to be a poet and/or publisher.

And yet in spite of these significant developments, our system of poetic production, distribution, consumption and valuation remains largely unchanged -- and altogether too similar to the officially sanctioned or mainstream poetry world it purportedly critiques. We send our poems off to magazines, shop our book manuscripts around to friends and publishers, seek blurbs from distinguished peers and elders, hope for a favorable review or blog entry from a limited number of critical gatekeepers, compete for prizes and grants and other forms of distinction, and, if we are academically employed, dutifully record such accumulated distinctions for promotion and tenure purposes.

Meanwhile, because our poetic production overwhelms our underperforming reception and valuation mechanisms, large quantities of the poetry we produce goes

unacknowledged, unremarked and perhaps even unread. We are told that the culture for poetry in this country is growing -- the ever-expanding number of reading series offers merely one indication -- and yet small press poetry publications are considered tremendously successful if they sell a thousand copies. Most sell far less. So much work out there deserves attention, but because our attentions are already so overextended we barely celebrate the latest new thing before it's relegated for neglect in order to make way for the next. So the best one can hope for it seems, if one at all seeks a wide readership for one's poetry, is a Warholian fifteen minutes -- the chances of obtaining which can be increased by starting a controversy, stirring up outrage or lobbing a few grenades into the opening of a new round of poetry wars. Or else one can adopt various opt-out mentalities with varying degrees of individualism and/or cynicism: I write for me, I do my own thing, who cares about the larger community -- or worse yet -- it's always been this way, there's no point in fighting it, just hold your nose and join in.

In short, our oppositional poetics mirror and mimic what they once opposed. Alternative poetry is no longer an alternative. It's a world to which I can no longer in good conscience contribute.

Of course, I exaggerate. There are plenty of excellent books of poetry today that get the attentive readership and thoughtful evaluation they deserve. But they are still dwarfed by the ones that do not, to say nothing of the rest. Moreover, the winds of distinction seem largely if not entirely capricious, with most individual agents in the field having little if any impact on larger dynamics and discourses. What local community-building efforts that succeed seem tangential and fleeting, with minimal lasting connections to other local scenes. And needless to say, the parallels and homologies

between poetry world and our larger capitalist system are apparent (if not always seamless): rampant individualism, ceaseless production and consumption, growth at any cost and as sole economic barometer of the common well-being, innovation for its own sake, slash-and-burn approaches to resources, etc.

Recent writings by [Laura Elrick](#), [David Morley](#), [Dale Smith](#) and others, in envisioning a poetic practice grounded in sustainability, have resonated with my own thinking of some time now. A poetics that puts the good of the community ahead of individual desires and ambitions, that exhibits moderation by producing and consuming only what it needs, that values conservation and preservation as much if not more than progress and innovation, that prefers sustained and lasting attentions to the whims of momentary celebrity and passing fancy -- in short, what some have called “slow poetics,” or in a formulation I find equally if not more provocative, “poetics of the long now.” I’ve derived this coinage from the nonprofit [Long Now Foundation](#) (who in turn owe it to Brian Eno) and the [book](#) by Stewart Brand (*The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility*) that explores the project in some depth, namely to consider how our thinking about and acting in the world changes when we reconceptualize our notion of “now” beyond the habitual few days or weeks to decades, centuries, millennia and beyond -- recording the year in five digits (e.g., 02009) rather than the customary four to encourage post-millennial thinking.

Poetry might appear to be a trivial insignificance on such a scale, or even a moot point if one has little hope for the planet or even the human species being around that much longer. But thinkers and practitioners of slow poetry have great hopes and can draw inspiration from geological and species-scaled thinking as much as they already have

from other fields of human activity, such as [agriculture](#), [cinema](#), [design](#), and [transportation](#). Poetries of the long now, however, would hardly entail a literary Ludditism (even though Luddites were not, as is the popular misconception, against technology per se, but its dehumanizing effects) nor a return to blank verse or the oral tradition; rather, they would begin from the belief that the human species must take immediate action or face certain peril. The question is not one of change versus stasis, but of what is changing too fast and what is not changing fast enough, what change for the better can we encourage and what change for the worse can we mitigate. Nor is this a matter of the sociopolitical efficacy of poetry relative to other forms of practice -- obviously a poem denouncing global warming does little to mitigate the melting of polar ice caps -- but rather the manner or extent to which our poetic practices are interconnected with or reflective of our most basic and fundamental practices of living and surviving together on this planet.

Poetry of the long now is an ideal to which we can aspire, knowing full well that our practice can and probably will fall short of the ideal; this should not prevent us from trying to reach that ideal. It's the cynicism fostered by the short-term thinking of the current moment telling us individual and collective agencies are naïve and doomed to failure that needs to be resisted. The basic principles that follow are necessarily programmatic, in spite of my conviction that our attempts to articulate poetries of the long now need to be: descriptive rather than prescriptive (this in itself is prescriptive, with the obvious contradiction duly noted); pragmatic rather than ideological, that is, interested chiefly in accomplishments and results (though it is ideological to the extent that it recognizes the basic unsustainability of current neoliberal or global capitalist

cultural practice, but also recognizes that monocultural thinking fostered by ideological purity is ultimately divisive and destructive); and inclusive than exclusive, seeking a broad diversity of poetic practices and sustainability solutions rather than litmus tests. Finally, poetics of the long now give priority to local levels of cultural production, distribution, consumption and valuation over all others.

In what follows, I elaborate upon these basic principles in some, though quite far from exhaustive, detail. My thinking of what poetics of the long now might entertain is thoroughly provisional and actively seeks corrections, qualifications, emendations, elaborations, etc. I also suspect that many of the implements and practices of a sustainable, slow poetry are already in place but simply have not been foregrounded as such and developed the way they could. Let such thought projects as this help encourage the process.

Poetry as growth industry

Growth has long been the cornerstone of western liberal capitalism (although even Adam Smith recognized that economic growth, while benefitting the human lot, would ultimately prove unsustainable). Of all the evidence that poetry production has been growing substantially, and even exponentially in recent years, Ron Silliman's guestimates are perhaps the most reasonable and compelling.

There are presently at least 10,000 publishing English-language poets. There may in fact be twice that number -- it really depends on what percentage of publishing poets you think have active weblogs dedicated to the subject (if it's ten percent, then the number is 10,000, but if you think the percentage is lower -- as I believe -- then the actual census of publishing poets would be greater). There are over 400 creative writing programs turning out new graduates each year. The annual AWP convention sells out at a maximum figure of 7,000 attendees. These consist almost exclusively of poets in

academic programs -- a tiny fraction of the number of poets -- their counterparts in the other genres of creative writing, and employees of the programs and presses that have sufficient critical mass to afford to attend an event like the AWP. If even a quarter of attendees are active in writing poetry, this would suggest that the actual numbers are much higher than we might imagine. ([Silliman's Blog, 6 February 02008](#))

One could tease these numbers out further than Silliman does. He assumes the 800+ poet-bloggers listed on his own blog comprise only 10 percent of all actively publishing poets, which would today amount to 8,000; but the number of poets doubles to 16,000 if, as he suggests, only 1 in 20 active poets also blog. These are merely rough measures, not exact science. Let's try a different metric, the 400 creative writing programs in this country. Assuming a conservative estimate of ten students in each program, for 4,000 newly-degreed creative writers annually, and further assuming conservatively that rather than being distributed evenly between the profession's three chief specializations (poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction), only 1,000 will actually take up poetry, what percentage of those 1,000 new poets each year will seek to be actively publishing poets over the long haul? Hard to say, but surely not all. Regardless, keep in mind that these are new poets coming into the profession annually. Finally, take the AWP metric, which again largely pertains to academic professionals: one in four of the 7,000 annual attendees being active poets would amount to 1,750, but for each one of these who attends the AWP are there four other active poets who do not? Then you're talking 8,750 poets. Is it one in ten? 17,500 poets.

Now put these numbers into historical perspective, along with a sense of how they translate into published poetry product. Silliman again:

In the 1950s, there were at most a few hundred poets publishing in English. In 40 years, I have never even read one estimate that put that figure above 100. While I think that those estimates were almost all low -- Cary Nelson's

Repression and Recovery suggests that a larger population of publishing poets existed who were not critically taken seriously even between the first and second World Wars -- I doubt that the real number could have been much above 500. One of the poetry trade groups -- I forget if it was Poets House or the Poetry Society of America -- received over 4,000 different books of poetry in one year recently. The thousand I get really are just the tip of an iceberg. ([Silliman's Blog, 6 February 02008](#))

Again these estimates need to be teased out further. First, an increase in total number of active poets since 01950, from 100 to possibly 10,000, amounts to a hundredfold increase. But when and how over the past fifty years did that increase occur: has it been steady growth over the entire span of time or more exponential growth in the past decade or so? Hard to demonstrate, but I suspect the latter is more likely. To turn from numbers of poets back to published product: first, 4,000 unique poetry book publications in a single year. Presumably that number persists overtime, yielding 40,000 books over the course of a decade. Second, consider periodicals, and a different set of sources: in 01995 Alan Golding (*From Outlaw To Classic: Canons in American Poetry*, page 114) pointed to incredible growth in little magazine publishing, citing 5,000 little magazines in circulation as of 01987 (according to Leonard Kniffel, "American Literature—Who's Publishing It?" *Library Journal*, 15 February 01987, pages 103-109) as opposed to Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie ("The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History," *TriQuarterly* 43 [Fall 01978], page 739) who counted 182 little magazines in 1952. That's an increase by a factor of 27.5 in the number of little magazines published in the United States between 1952 and 1987. One only wonders how dramatically desktop publishing, print on demand, blogging and the internet have even further increased these numbers in the years since 1987. And again, one has to ask whether this increase has occurred steadily over the years or more exponentially in recent years.

Silliman again draws an apt conclusion:

the problems of poetry today have, at least in terms of what's going on, very little to do with scarcity & much more to do with hyper-abundance, a condition that poetry's traditional institutions -- schools, the publishing industry, arts programs in general -- institutions that, at best, represent overlapping concerns that sometimes touch upon poetry, are ill-equipped to handle. ([Silliman's Blog, 7 June 02008](#))

And as Stewart Brand writes, "according to a rule of thumb among engineers, any tenfold quantitative change *is* a qualitative change, a fundamentally new situation rather than a simple extrapolation" (14). In other words, the reality of poetry has substantially altered in recent years. And it would appear that the infrastructure can no longer support it.

A critique of innovation

Coextensive with our singular fixation on growth lies western liberal capitalism's reverence for innovation and all things new, also often mistaken for "technology." Yet such reverence blinds us to the ways cultural practices actually operate. True innovation only accounts for a fraction of technologies and practices used by a culture at any given time, the large majority of which are in fact old, accepted, tried and true. Innovations have to be developed, assessed, reworked, reassessed, diffused or dispersed into the general culture, where they are further assessed, reworked, and then actually used. First out the door is not always best, as anyone who ever owned a Betamax video recorder or Commodore 64 computer knows first hand. We tend to celebrate innovation as if it were all that mattered, and yet relentless innovation is neither desirable nor possible.

Moreover, our understanding of cultural practices is short-sighted and misses most of the

picture when it focuses primarily on innovation, as is an ethics that privileges novelty above all else.

In *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900*, David Edgerton explains the shift in values inherent in a perspective that valorizes technology-in-use over innovation:

By thinking about technology-in-use a radically different picture of technology, and indeed of invention and innovation, becomes possible. A whole invisible world of technologies appear. It leads to a rethinking of our notion of technological time, mapped as it is on innovation-based timelines. Even more importantly it alters our picture of which have been the most important technologies. It yields a global history, whereas an innovation-centered one, for all its claims to universality, is based on a very few places.... A use-based history will do much more than disturb our tidy timelines of progress. What we take to be the most significant technologies will change. Our accounts of significance have been peculiarly innovation-centric, and tied to particular accounts of modernity where particular new technologies were held to be central. In the new picture, twentieth-century technology is not just a matter of electricity, mass-production, aerospace, nuclear power, the internet and the contraceptive pill. It will also involve the rickshaw, the condom, the horse, the sewing machine, the spinning wheel, the Haber-Bosch process, the hydrogenation of coal, cemented-carbide tools, bicycles, corrugated iron, cement, asbestos, DDT, the chain saw and the refrigerator. (xi-xii)

But what of innovation in poetry? When Pound first issued the injunction to “make it new,” could he have expressed any more perfectly the consummate philosophy of Madison Avenue? Advertisers learned long ago what Pound apparently missed, that the easiest way to sell a product is to slap the word “new” on the label without altering the product itself one iota. And so what have we really seen in this past century that has been more innovative, or innovated further, than the Dadaist poem of Tristan Tzara, which simultaneously liberated everyday materials to partake in the realms of “art” and the common individual from enslavement to the expressivist Romantic ego of the “artist,” or further than the multiple perspectives opened up on the experienced world by Gertrude

Stein's transgressions of normative syntax? Not only do these innovations remain fresh and generative almost 100 years later, but much that has passed for or claimed innovation since then can, I would argue, be seen merely extending the logics of these two great innovators.

If anything, what is chiefly new in this past century is not the innovation itself so much as the present circumstances and conditions of the historical moments within which the “innovation” is viewed, as Stein herself suggests:

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition. (“[Composition as Explanation](#),” cited in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, edited by Mary Ann Caws [U of Nebraska Press, 02001], page 671.)

Thus what's new is the now, hence every now is a new new. Everything is new all the time, hence new is nothing. And what we have is a tradition of innovation, a “tradition of the new” as Harold Rosenberg famously called it some fifty years ago now. Which is not in any way to diminish this tradition or its dogged determination to challenge the aesthetic and political values inherent to the old Romantic poem of emotion recollected in tranquility which also doggedly persists, but to acknowledge our tradition for what it is..

Let us finally recognize that unblinking commitments to innovation and growth are rooted in unidirectional notions of human development and “progress.” And as perhaps no better proof of these notions we have the barbarisms of the past century, distinctly more innovative and “progressive” than barbarisms of past centuries; no less a modernist and champion of the “now,” Charles Baudelaire, who perhaps saw this in advance, deserves to be heard again at some length on this score:

The world is drawing to a close. Only for one reason can it last longer: just because it happens to exist. But how weak a reason is this compared with all that forebodes the contrary, particularly with the question: What is left to the world of man in the future? Supposing it should continue materially, would that be an existence worthy of its name and of the historical dictionary? I do not say the world would fall back into a spectral condition and the odd disorder of South American republics; nor do I say that we should return to primitive savagery and, with a rifle in our arms, hunt for food through the grass-covered ruins of our civilization. No, such adventures would still call for a certain vital energy, an echo from primordial times. We shall furnish a new example of the inexorability of the spiritual and moral laws and shall be their new victim: we shall perish by the very thing by which we fancy that we live. Technocracy will Americanize us, progress will starve our spirituality so far that nothing of the bloodthirsty, frivolous or unnatural dreams of the utopist will be comparable to those positive facts. I invite any thinking person to show me what is left of life. Religion! It is useless to talk about it, or to look for its remnants; it is a scandal that one takes the trouble even of denying God. Private property! It was--strictly speaking--abolished with the suppression of the right of primogeniture; yet the time will come when mankind like a revengeful cannibal will snatch the last piece from those who rightfully deemed themselves the heirs of revolutions. And even this will not be the worst... Universal ruin will manifest itself not solely or particularly in political institutions or general progress or whatever else might be a proper name for it; it will be seen, above all, in the baseness of hearts. Shall I add that little left-over of sociability will hardly resist the sweeping brutality, and that the rulers, in order to hold their own and to produce a sham order, will ruthlessly resort to measure which will make us, who already are callous, shudder? (*Fusées* XXII [01851], quoted in Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* [01949], U Chicago Press 01949, 97-98.)

What would sustainable poetic practices look like?

To draw the contrasts more sharply, let's suppose a spectrum of poetic production today running from little to no individual control or authority over the production of a work, to complete individual control or authority; at the former end we would place, as its nearest equivalent, blind submission along with several thousand other individuals to a book contest where your fees finance the publication of the winner's book, and at the latter end we would place complete self-publishing and financing of a book. Clearly most

poetic production today occurs between these two ends of the spectrum: one queries potential publishers first, one gets advice from and is perhaps recommended to a publisher by an already-published peer, one befriends a publisher personally on one's own or as part of poetry community, or one chooses an appropriate and clever name and starts a press of one's own in order to publish work one likes -- not, heaven forbid, primarily to publish one's self. Curiously enough, while the blind contest submission might seem foolhardy, it is even encouraged (especially in academic circles) far more than self-publication, which is seen as a form of vanity rather than proper professional credentialing and lacks the legitimacy conferred by the imprimatur of a bonafide publisher. (The illegitimacy can be compensated for by a demonstrated commitment to publishing others in addition to yourself.) And yet you and I could each start our own press, each with an appropriate and clever name, and I could publish you and you could publish me. This would somehow be more legitimate. At the risk of oversimplifying, such is the logic that begins to lead us to 4,000 new poetry books each year.

Again Ron Silliman offers a useful *measure du jour*, identifying the problem and, perhaps unwittingly, a solution or two:

How, in a realm of 10,000 publishing poets, does a good but not necessarily flashy poet get the audience he or she truly deserves? I think that's an enormous problem confronting more than a few good poets right now. ([Silliman's Blog, 27 December 02007](#))

As MFA programs pop up like mushrooms in a damp forest climate, and the number of publishing poets in the USA moves beyond 10,000 toward the 20,000 mark or thereabouts, nobody will have any hope whatsoever of reading even a fraction of what is being written and American verse, which has suffered from its two competing visions now since the middle of the 19th century, will fragment that much further, so that there will be one audience that reads only the likes of Graham Foust, Lee Ann Brown, Laura Sims & Linh Dinh, another that reads only the next generation of Quietists, some of whom -- take Daisy Fried and Alice Jones as examples -- are terrific, while a

third lives entirely in a world of performance, flash poetics & vispo. Plus a hundred or so metro scenes, poets who prefer their audiences face-to-face. Etc. Etc. ([Silliman's Blog, 14 September 02007](#))

The assumptions here are abundant, as are the questions they beg: poets *deserve* an audience of some kind or other, however flashy or good these poets are or are not (but what kind of audience, of what size, how construed, where located, who decides?); one *ought* to read a substantial portion of American verse (how substantial, and what portion, how construed, who decides?); clearly if some fragmentation is a bad thing, then some hypothesized “further” fragmentation is *a worse thing* (but is any level of fragmentation permissible, if so how much, who decides?); worlds of performance, visual poetry, sundry metro scenes, etc. are hermetically sealed from other poetry cultures and therefore *are diminished for it* (but are they really so “insulated,” is there nothing to be gained from some degree of distance, what degree is permitted, who decides?).

These may indeed all be enormous problems, but can we conceive of a system in which these matters essentially *are not problems at all*? Or if they are, that poets decide, and arrive at their own solutions, however individually and/or collectively, for themselves?

Presumably an economic system not premised upon growth, innovation, competition and scarcity would find an equitable balance between production and consumption, encourage cultures that produce only what they use and use only what they produce. Herman Daly theorized such a system in the late 01970s, which he called a “steady-state economy,”

[whose] main idea... is to maintain constant stocks of wealth and people at levels that are sufficient for a long and good life. The throughput by which these stocks are maintained should be low rather than high, and always within the regenerative and absorptive capacities of the ecosystem. The system is

therefore sustainable -- it can continue for a long time. The path of progress in the steady state is no longer to get bigger, but to get better. This concept was a part of classical economics, but unfortunately was more or less abandoned by NCE. (*Ecological Economics* [Island Press 02004], page 55)

E. F. Schumacher has also offered provocative suggestions for the benefits of what might be called economies of inverse scale, where, instead of cheaper per-unit costs resulting from larger scale production, one might instead reap overall longer term gains and minimize hidden social costs by producing:

experience shows that whenever you can achieve smallness, simplicity, capital cheapness and non-violence... new possibilities are created for people, singly and collectively, to help themselves, and that the patterns that result from such technologies are more humane, more ecological, less dependent upon fossil fuels, and closer to real human needs than the patterns (or lifestyles) created by technologies that go for giantism, complexity, capital intensity and violence. (*Good Work* [01980], quoted in *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* by P. R. Hay [Indiana University Press, 02002], page 209.)

Finally, Robin Hahnel has advised us that, in the face of a capitalism that persists no matter how presently enfeebled, cooperation between individuals interested in furthering the greater good offers the best way of reaching a sustainable future:

twenty-first century activists will have to create opportunities for growing numbers of people to enter into equitable cooperation with one another even while capitalism continues to survive for many decades into the future. This is the only way to develop the new habits necessary for people to transcend the culture of competition and greed that capitalism breeds (*Economic Justice and Democracy: From Competition to Cooperation* [Routledge 02005], page 11)

These may be useful ethical, economical and ecological notions, but again we have to ask, how does poetry pertain? How do values like “low throughput,” “within the regenerative and absorptive capacities of the ecosystem,” “smallness, simplicity, capital cheapness and non-violence,” “closer to real human needs,” and “equitable cooperation” translate into sustainable literary activity? In fact we have few models on which to base

our thinking, but I think we can make some reasonable extrapolations based on what we do know.

The book as a technology, however outmoded (albeit one capable of creating unique objects with their own aesthetic features and desirable qualities), is arguably still the most effective means for distributing a substantial collection of poems that we have after these past 500 or so years of its use. Best not because of speed or efficiency or extent of distribution, all of which pose real challenges for books relative to the internet and PDF files attached to email, which are vastly superior if still less “readable.” Moreover, many people still prefer reading text on pages in a bound volume to computer screens or loose pages off a laser printer. This too will change, is changing, rapidly, and likely within my lifetime: my nephews (ages 8 and 11) already express no preference one way or another for reading verbal material on a screen or a printed page.

As the simplest form of exchange, a book made from one's own materials and handed personally to another as a gift free of charge and outside of commerce is perhaps an ideal, because it minimizes the alienating distance endemic to modern industrial printing and publishing. But it is in most cases a wildly impractical one: poets are certainly entitled to some monetary compensation for their works, and few have the means to travel the country (on foot or bicycle, naturally, to avoid consuming fossil fuels) giving away their books to any and all for free. Few poets or publishers have the means or materials, for example, to make their own paper, to grow plants from which to derive organic inks, etc. -- though these are among many forms of cultural knowledge that we risk losing altogether when they are increasingly entrusted to fewer and fewer individuals. So these ideals are not practical, and there is no “outside” to the system; fine:

we can capitulate to liberal guilt and hence give up, or we can find more practical models. (Even at the seemingly intractable level of the “cash nexus,” alternatives like [OurNexChange](#), a community currency in Ashland, Oregon, are being developed.) And in doing so let us give all deliberate consideration to the fundamentals of materials, production, distribution, and valuation. Short of making one's own paper, a micropublisher's best decision may be to buy 100% recycled paper stock at the local office supply megastore, or to find a supplier of recycled polymer plastic paper of the kind used to publish [Cradle to Cradle](#) by William McDonough & Michael Braungart (North Point Press 2002), or entrust the supply of materials to a distant traditional printer.

Materials aside, print-on-demand (POD) publishing technology probably holds the greatest potential alternative to traditional production and distribution mechanisms. The finished product coming out of the POD process is now vastly improved over what it was a mere few years ago, and will surely continue to improve. POD also eliminates both the potentially prohibitive costs of an initial print run as well as the problems of storing multiple copies of that initial print run when it doesn't sell right away (if ever -- not to mention the sheer waste when unsold copies are eventually pulped). POD offers incredible flexibility, enabling books to go directly to readers who want them, no matter how small that audience is. Shipping and handling costs can be minimized by printing from multiple locations closer to individual points of sale.

Additionally, POD makes entirely new orders of publication and collaboration possible; for example, D.C. poet Buck Downs has made his entire “[hopper](#)” of working poetry drafts and files available in bound volumes for sale through POD, encouraging reader-buyers to work with his material and refashion it in any way they see fit:

An interested person could get a hopper and remix up some work for themselves from the raw text. A more editorially-inclined type could mark up with revisions, deletions and re-orderings, which I would work from. A passive supporter could simply purchase a download copy and serve as a silent partner in the process. With a modest buy-in, anyone can make themselves a participant in the creation and distribution of works by Buck Downs. At some point, *Buck Downs* could become an [open source brand](#) in the manner of [MF Chicago](#).

While I'm not sure how far I'd personally be willing to take this kind of branding, the possibilities for rethinking traditional ideas of “the book” and “an edition” afforded by the technology are tremendous.

Of course POD has limitations: the print quality is still not as good as that which results from traditional printing methods, and there is little if any way for buyers to return defective or shoddy products, or publishers to recover losses from same. The equipment, although really nothing more than a gigantic super-fancy color laser printer, is ridiculously expensive and enormous in size, making it all but impossible for most publishers to “own the means of production.” There is also the risk that, when publishers use POD, they end up doing so in a manner that merely perpetuates and proliferates the traditional production and distribution system with all its attendant shortcomings, still for example printing more books than will probably sell just to get a break on the printing costs but then also having to store that excess print run.

Finally, storage is no longer just a question of space, it's a question of media. Storage is a moot point if the storage renders the item inaccessible. And by inaccessible I mean the material is in a remote private archive just as much as I mean on a technologically outmoded medium like five-and-a-quarter-inch floppy discs. Texts will remain accessible not to the extent they are stored but to the extent *they move*, which

requires careful deliberation about what texts we want to move into the future with us.

Wired magazine's Kevin Kelley writes on [The Technium](#),

The only way to archive digital information is to keep it moving. I call this movage instead of storage. Proper movage means transferring the material to current platforms on a regular basis. . . . No matter what digital format you have your precious [materials] stored on, you should expect to move it onto new media in five years -- and five years after that forever!

But it's not so much the storage or movage or even the medium that remains at issue; rather, it's the attention that movage and deciding what to move demands: "anything you want moved to the future," Kelley continues, "has to be *given attention* to keep it moving forward" (emphasis mine). What loses our attention now risks being lost permanently.

Local collaboration, local values

Everyday around the country, poets, editors and publishers are grappling with these decisions, and they are doubtlessly doing so not in complete isolation but in consultation with each other. But I am convinced that the options we have under the current system are more limited than they need be: collective action often serves as the best means of achieving what we cannot achieve individually. Take letterpress, arguably one of the best slow printing technologies out there, formerly the only technology before offset rendered it obsolete and therefore prime for overtaking by small press poetry economies in the 1970s. One poet or publisher can own, learn and use a letterpress, but more can be done with it in the hands of a collective.

So individuals make decisions at the local level all the time, but collectives can make local decisions with a larger and longer reach than individuals, serving greater needs for the greater good. These locals (to name these collectives in the manner of labor

unions) would be formed and dissolved voluntarily to achieve immediate or longer term goals. Members could contribute an agreeable portion of their annual incomes to finance the local's objectives. And they would indeed be group objectives, a point of difference from my understanding of the best if perhaps only current working model of a collective publishing venture, the Subpress Collective, where resources are pooled but each publication is individually and autonomously decided. A local with a collective objective might, for example, decide to read each others' work intensely over a period of time and compile a print anthology of only their very best work from the period, rather than each producing their own books for competition on the national marketplace. Or a local might focus all its editing and publishing efforts for a period of time on the recovery and movage of work by neglected elder poets rather than themselves. Or some combination thereof.

And I can envision, as the values of locals all across the country are freely determined from the ground up and realized in production that is truly sustainable, that of course poets will continue to read and write and edit and publish what they want as they have in the past; but as we work together to develop models of production, distribution and valuation not outside of but increasingly independent from our current means, the problems of a national poetry scene as presently construed might seem not so pressing, and the very idea of a national poetry might even follow the course of the nation-state and largely recede from view, because what we have is what we need as determined by where we are and not from somewhere else.

JULIAN T. BROLASKI

where the gowanus splits in twain

for dear Dana

we've all crossed thresholds we don't brag about
iphegenia oxling
when arbolaf dies
one is hailed to arden
as one goes hitherto
asphyxiating along the gowanus
in spite of that rat light
in the gutted yardland
or where jackadaws coo
in concrete galoshes

here where the canal splits in twain
no bivalves gurgle at our kushing
—crawfish pov—parted hair—
a candidate for the cabinet
sunken bicyclette
an achul xerox of a great grandparent
sure I remember the gasgauge
but it had all the appearance of gog

abreast the stoic ends of manahatta

pill wot assoils guilt
wots left of the ecosystem

in slopes
fake cattails
with real plants

evergreen and uniglory
in tugboat guise
margaret turebore

abreast the stoic ends
of manahatta, lashed
in bionic concrete

asphalt green
of the asphalt plant

ever further in the industrial cityscape

reductio, this my hand
painterly the streetlight
with goldenrod
milf

the glory part of the hole
its apparent doom
rollerblading w/ huskies

adverse yaw
colonoscopy fuel
readerly by starlight

I love emily like pasta
like indigestible globs of gluten

anyhow as one hit—bleeding—
the racks—as it went apeshit therewithal
carnavalesque a smithy
near university x
coming home to a stump

ham is an “exclusive” “deal”
fresh outta scrunchies
dowisetripla
parabola
quidron estragon
18 cats next to me

pentimento cuz the painter repented
changed thir mind
“damp spleen”
is their pet issue

chirping chicken
hot yoga
solomon understood bird talk
with his ring

a soft coup
a wave of velvet revolutions
where albino fishes
swim with no eyes

not-so-great-scott
continued to lord it over everyone
and fetch it, perennial nigh
across 7 continents

penny a’left
person setting up accessories
in the ginkos
—a glove aloft—

blighted oaks
obelisk willo’whisp
3 abreast
xo from the distant past

lesser bandits
emerge from the obelisk
w/ sum hieroglyphic shit
then horus, strong-bull-appearing-in-thebes

bodily son of the grotesques upglaring
strong-bull-beloved-of-ra
the noble youth
beloved like helen

when they shine on the horizon
to ra, like ra
like-ra-in-heaven
chosen-of-ra

grotesques w/ crab claws
upglaring from down
inna thicket
of manahatta its edge
whos to say wots
a good person anyway

JARED STANLEY

I FAVOR BEING ENCOURAGED

Of things of things going modestly seriously awry
of pinches seriously modestly a mess of skin, and then
taciturn, benumbingly trashy, I present me, you
I pat I pat you, you go seriously gunpowder we

we come and play, and play, with me, me,
paw of the mountain lion, of lion the paw
of Manhattan the paw, of the bon mot
burdened oddly, and dun and dun and roan

and silently at the piano, roan, a living roan
indifferent and in Panamanian islands, reach down down
sit-in for less hours, his voice, then suddenly the site
of more opened theosours, plural and tedious and tedious

what's more trapping our gasses, more tapping the asses
than that we can't wait we can't wait and die and come back
as fuel, as good as fuel, as Olympics mongers, as fish
ahead of all parting, oversexing, engulfing, engaging, oiling

all these ain'ts in my pain, greatness is treble edible trouble,
pull on my pants, I saw my vanity, I take five more pills and
more again, throwing horseshoes for money, the monumental
challenge of our time, is how this little more burden

is, then again, some babies some babies, some new ways to
heat our homes, to hear ourselves as we heat our homes
with babies, with attention, with air, with California wine,
food miles, broad and smiling person's trying to be right

trying to grow actual, trying to be right, being local, trying
the price of bicycle tires is going up, the going rate for trash
too cheap for effort, too cheap for light bulbs, too cheap for
gas, come, spirits of the mountain bike, come siphon my gas

again, come shift rapidly to fish oil, come fish rapidly for shit
my loam, oil, how they used to say yes, say yes how they in that
time used to say good, how they used to say good, and how
should how should what is the way we should say good?

STATE PARK

Oh my people
you fennel, rocks and vandalism,
you fees, you gates, you groups of kids,
you candles in the Sibley maze.
If I was a kid and I could run
out of reach crying
in the laurels, I'd follow
the gift, you gift, you public
private disappearance
you milk in a gallon, you risk
of hydrophobia, cutting your
feet on nasty lagoon coral.

I can't leave. I'll leave.
Of modest means, of rough sight
only a splinter you, you elastic mark
on my waist, visitor area, steep ravine
public private disappearance
toilets and drinking fountains
archery practice, tent's
heavy condensation.

You, a party in summer.
Dunes. The money situation,
no children to love
all the people who could know
Pinnacles who could take you
for your fruta, you,
park and you, you're on your own
o you, hillock over the development,
marsh and drainage fully cattails you
palms, our sycamores, three million of you
tree spirits, can I edge ever closer with my
white room, nary a detail, all me mine?
Even Scotch Broom, you, transported in horse dung
beside the magnificent wooden brutalism
of you, native water fountains—
the water you don't drink runs
along a chute into a gravel square.
You stack of wood, soon to be pencils
you pencils at the end of nature
you number of unsolved indentations
you, on the ground.

DAVID HADBAWNIK

from Spleen—July-December 2008

NOTE: In 2006, Skanky Possum generously published a brief volume of a vast project of mine, begun in San Francisco in 1997. That book, *SF Spleen*, collected notes I had taken simply riding and walking around the city. The project was predicated on “slowness”—on the ability to move around town at a snail’s pace, with eyes and ears open. Having moved to Buffalo this past summer, I’ve continued jotting down notes and short poems, tapping back in to that practice of slowness in a new urban setting.

July 7

Zak, walking off the field towards the bikes and stuff after soccer: “I still dream about soccer sometimes.”

July 22

The poignancy of a near-friend who’s here, but leaving. Brief interludes of friendship in one’s life, snatched away.

August 24

STALIN AS WEATHER

In a secret corner of summer
we wait for summer
to pass us by.

Let the rest drop away,
keep the ugliness.

to say yes, with its
many-scented yeses
and cooking oils.

Stalin as weather.

September 1

Bird flies into front window and thuds to patio floor. Dog rushes over to sniff bird, I shoo it away. Bird’s face-down with little quivers moving through its wings and tail feathers. A bubble of blood comes out its beak and one sigh shrinks wings to body.

Some kids pogo across the street.

September 6

SWEATER

Can't say to another guy, hey
I like that sweater
not sure what to say
simply to focus on
this moment
I grow morose
no reason
try to take more
than is possible
from his eyes
"I need to sit down"

October 17

You'll never get to know anybody at a poetry reading.

October 20

He loved her—because she had a fat face on a thin body.

October 21

The child started out seeing itself. Later it would see others, later still itself in others. All her life a shy clinging to a leg in a room while others talked, a sly knowing.

October 23

The discomfort of comfort. Bracing myself in the doctor's office for a moment that doesn't come.

October 24

PLAN B

I have to talk right over you
so I can hear you.
There's a way it went once
when so much could fit
in an hour that
it grew heavy on one side
and then

SPLAT
we were married
(not to each other)
my horn
inward and slowed

October 30

Women working concession stand:

--I'm gonna go for a long walk.

--Off a short pier?

--No, a long walk.

--I know where you're goin, you're goin straight to those computers.

November 14

MIKE

See a blonde at the Laundromat
and think *skank*.

It's not that simple.

The world's gluttoned with books—
keep walking.

Say hi to Mike, out raking
leaves, stripped maples.

Dog means family.

We curl into each other,
“in other words.”

Mike,
a different Mike.

November 16

From a dream: Four months out of the year we are married, the rest of the time, while necessary, hardly matters.

November 20

LINES

I imagine myself a line
seen from above
I've followed backwards
to reach this moment
no different from
all the others
in which we've
already died

*

A story: I was
my own son.
I was dumb

I shook my head
often in disbelief
at stupid things I said

December 18

ROOM

In a room I turned
my hat upon
I was a coat

my hands were cold
guitar lay silent
or "lied" silent

I had new strings
I had bought
I put a hat

upon I was
and left

*

We rise out of
easy things we say

gossip is good
thought slight

how's Tom?

Ann Elliott Sherman

hardpan

garden
like I
write
not
magazine perfect

and despite
ownage
by weeds
pests
withering failure

how
often
can you
get close to
escaping
incessant
compulsory
mitigation

shovel's bare nip
through clay
entire weight
pogoed atop blade
clang of metal halt
hitting more rock
repeated stabbing of
stubborn clods

sublimated mayhem

overprotected nose
hovers over wafting
exhalation of
millions other
ignored organisms
living through decay

sensory reveille

reminder

trained to
think in terms
of payoff: fleeting season of
sun warmed juicy flesh,
redolent green crush, odd
bumper crop, blue ribbons

contingent possibilities

while the work is
a given
perhaps
my only true gift

persistence

MICHAEL BOUGHN

from *Cosmographia, a post-Lucretian faux micro-epic, Book 2,*
Canto 12—Inextendible Paths Backwards

Canto 7—On earth

for John Clarke

The question of direction along barrel
of world's unlikely toroidal motion
confounds business of usual exchanges
within given walls calculated
to minimize the risk sideways
glances introduce to Newton's dream

Who knows who's really beside you
at the dinner table is a question
easily answered only by those
without the sense to go out
in the rain where falling heavens
ante up damp paradaisal intimations

Push against your feet ratchets
up the stakes while further deliberations
anticipate unlikely guests and Walt's
sea in all its wavy insistence refusing
to be mere instance much less
reference calls into question wet

William Harvey, 1651, notes pulse
and substance form together,¹ first
life in stuff beating, but why not
beat stuffing, as if that whole
wave and particle thing² hadn't
happened or the mere memory of sublime

tootie apparitions taking the top
off the works and dumping you
head first out there with Pip³

¹ "What central pulse—and you the heart," Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*. For a somewhat different perspective, see Jack Spicer's *Language*, "Thing Language 1." See also fn 11 above.

² "The tidal swell / Particle and wave / Wave and particle / Distances." *Language*, "Love Poems 5," Jack Spicer

³ ". . . Pip's ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably." Herman Melville, "The Castaway," *Moby-Dick*.

contaminates instance's demand
for attention constricted to non-
resonating Yankee rock pile, whatever

sequel invention dances out
of its countless chambers to whirl
in a swirl of Ellingtonian swing
repercussions continue to register
across a wide swath of the floor
sweeping us off our feet into arms

of earth's non-harmonic vibratory dip
and up like the white knight in the looking
glass lifting off and returning with all
kinds of junk and occasional damp
intimations of wave's further
longitudinal irregularities beyond wet

Canto 8—Usual exchanges
—for Ed Dorn

Three years after George W. Bush Jr.
admitted before the world there were no
weapons of mass destruction thus
exposing the great lie he had used
to unleash uncontrollable blood letting
on a people who founded human
civilization more Americans than ever
just stated their belief the war was necessary
to eliminate said non-existent weapons

Is this a case of civilization's auto-cannibalistic
destiny, some final withering of the flower
rooted in Enkidu's seduction in a vast
settling into glazed eyes and inextendible
declensions of harmonic vistas all git up
in purple mountain's kick ass majesty
fluttering diaphanously around lady
liberty's surgically augmented charms
designed to excite maximum national
tumescence in really tight jeans?

The Battle Hymn of the Republic
was pretty hard, too, and Onward
Christian Soldiers caused more swelling
than your typical school board
was comfortable with though seven
year olds exposed to coming operations
in inflicted devotions and armed Jesus
penetrations within hallowed equestrian
intimations could already hear falling
towers symphonic ode to democratic

missionary position's inevitable viral
rendition of Bend Over, World
banging around in Sousa modulated
regulatory rhythms designed to synchronize
boogie apparitions and tootie declensions
into simulated gravy *unum* arrangements
of formerly *pluribus* tainted wiggle
contamination's multiple pie orgies
and shameless adoration of erupting
hoots and jelly roll funk declarations.

Canto 12—Inextendible paths backwards

They're backward because forward
as a state seceded and regrouped
as some forsaken accumulation
of large wooden horses bearing
geeks gibbering blithely of soft
wet reception's flowers and chocolate
and large groups of desert dwelling
Kantians doing the Wave
across Arabia Felix⁴

What a moment that was, light
everywhere, your honey reasonable
as hell and all the world laid out
in squares at your feet, the path
to the stone shining numbers
cross your heart blues recalling
inevitable resolutions bearing distant
formulations of numerical relations
hot diggety vanishing dog

In any case if it's all a collusion
deluded of trees, then angle
of declension fouling innermost
lingering glimmer as it casts
about in tightening spaces
seeking remains of last stand
in images of tootie formations
is commensurate to any stuttering
whirlwind they can conjure⁵

The vanishing point meanwhile
having bit the big one exits
stage right half the furniture
in tow leaving not only certain
exposed intimations of damp
smelly heavens contesting with busted
up bits of former landscape replete

⁴ "Freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things. They're also free to live their lives and do wonderful things, and that's what's going to happen here," Donald Rumsfeld.

² "As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating to slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken." Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*.

with bovine verisimilitude's ungulate
relation to scenery but baring

in process luminescent deceptions
stalking in the wings where free
floating unlinked copies do the soft
shoe off stage in orders leave
old ways looking vaguely
dazed among crumbling scenarios
invariably wretched memories of last
Sunday's frozen T.V. dinner increasingly

PAUL NELSON

Organic Manifesto

The Organic poem is not the record of an event, it is an event, an occasion of experience, a map of the mind at work in the moment, ear measuring and mind mediating the crowd of outside voices/impulses and resonances erring on the side of entelechy for the individual and polis and culture, in deep connection with dimensions larger than the pen-holder, enacting – not describing – the instant rather than the act of *thought* about the instant.

The Organic poem is allied with velocity and the duende beyond mere discourse and the function of symbology, imbued with a luminosity that exists just beyond comprehension of the pen-holder, and ripples with the silver of a wave in the midnight of Harvest Moonlight, or the white of alder-filtered September sunlight just beyond the foot of the morning altar.

It is the living apprehension of the underlying form as it spills out its testimony as only the moment can reveal, never completely contained in one poem except that poem which is the final result of a lifetime of an individual poet's never fully articulate striving, a chaotic murmur of soul re-directing self to Self in an alchemical conjunctio only antepasados fully comprehend.

It is the practice divine of ear training, star to mind to hand to pen to blossoming, a harvesting of forces learned over years, decades, lifetimes of homage and refined, knows process as its own inherent reward in a systemless system which chooses recklessly those who would use speech (at once) at its least careless and least logical, poet as time mechanic, not embalmer.

The Organic poem is the mercy, mercy, mercy of the intersection of the vastness of outer space with the vastness of the space inside skull in complete candor, the ordinary mind in discovery of perceptions eternal in celebration of person (Universe is Person), not a stream of consciousness, more a coherent splendor, more a field of first permission to which one is allowed access more often than one thinks.

peN – 11:13PM – 9.10.07

KIM DORMAN

from the moleskine notebook

September 2008 – January 2009

The wind's pounding my door, the last of the summer heat sweats down my neck, naked fear in the eyes of strangers, bosom buddies, cheats. Wherever we live it's the same. Leaf-blowers instead of birds, a FOR SALE sign in the yard, capital, and a hearty handshake. I want to vomit behind a dumpster. Hide my books inside my coat. We park unnoticed in the shade to keep from melting. The car, the job, last year's gadgets, all that money you paid for school. Nothing. We barely make it half the time. Friends try to help. "Send me your resume" they email. I always lie, hide the facts. Not that it matters. Our tongues wag fluently. Some days I prefer the eloquence of birds. Or silence. Music's just electromagnetic pollution anyway. Not to mention talk. I won't lie to you, I love a good cry. Alone, under the moon, or in a darkened theater. Tonight I'm watching *Random Harvest*. A blue jay shrieks on the balcony, pinches a pecan from Susie's basket. Bob Arnold cuts firewood in Vermont. Economists lecture on TV and Indian bankers call a business plan a "scheme." Last night the president pushed for a "bail out." My boss is black, his wife is white. They have two young sons. He's teaching them to cook and to garden. They've even got passports. My friend Dale has a gun. Susie tells me the electricity went out today while I was at work. We worry about what we eat and how much. I wear the same clothes day after day. Squirrels on the balcony, deer below. Not chickens. I have memories of fish-mongers and visits from scavengers. Now everyone walks a dog.

*

In Poet's Heaven, Robert Duncan and Philip Lamantia weep for America. Grackles redistribute themselves on the lawn. I turn off the news. Pour wine, lean on the railing. The blinking lights of a passenger jet. Stars. A breeze in the junipers. Rising moon. Nothing new, the enchantment of melancholy. What time brings. A man on TV speaks of Obama's *gravitas*. I remember midnight on the tundra. Cold hands in the pockets of corduroy jeans. The first snow.

*

The study of light and showers. A dog barks across the canyon. Brief yellow butterfly. Somewhere, far off, planners steal the city. Cabs ply the streets. Students climb hills with backpacks. Roads circle back. The next time we'll have to part. On the heels of summer.

unswept

blue

terraces

of sky

To stand beneath the migrant moon & gaze up at a sea of mackerel clouds, petal flower of silver-blue, aglow, astonishing, like a wave-capped sea, unmoving, afloat, anchored by an ice-white sphere, unbound as wind, in wind, where trees, in feathered blur, sway across the blue-black unfathomed reach—skin alive, breath held, eyes closed, as mind, engulfed, subsides; magical, rigorous, defined. Deathless, even in life.

clouds

enfolding

midsummer

moon

*

The summer lawns are empty. Only Realtor signs and grackles remain. Reliable witnesses are few. I once met Kent Johnson. We sat on Dale Smith & Hoa Nguyen's porch in Austin. He was gentle, soft-spoken. A little melancholy. We drank beer. He smoked cigarettes. We talked about poetry & our sons. I liked his dry humor. He hugged me before I left.

*

I think of Mahmoud Darwish in a village somewhere surrounded by troops. A small bird feeds from his hands. I cross cobbles, pieces of glass, open drains. I feel like an exile. From where? Mahmoud writes: *The stars taught me how to read*. Find voices you can trust. The night is sweet, round as a fruit. Come morning, I'll think of Darwish again as I pour myself coffee. In this land of pretty, healthy people who live in big houses. Secure with alarms and box sets of *Friends* on DVD.

shadow

form

flowers

*

It's past midnight, cool on the balcony. Venus shines in the west. The cartoon voice of Sarah Palin sticks in the mind. I hear a dog bark in the distance. Lean back, sip wine. Is this really a nation of gamblers and thieves? Savings go up in smoke. My brother-in-law

plays the market. It's his life. My sister can't sleep. Everything's "up in the air" she says. Last night two raccoons fought in that juniper. The tree shook wildly. After dinner we saw a thin crescent moon. In the blue-grey dusk. Scent of mountain cedar. I've been thinking of Oppen & Ovid, of friends who are sick, some without jobs. Poets. We watch television. Jackie Gleason and Art Carney. There's probably a billion blogs. It's morning on the balcony. In America.

*

Butterflies chase each other in the sun. A package of chapbooks arrives in the mail. Susie overslept, skipped breakfast. There's a dead cricket, lying belly up, on the carpet. Like a tiny ship in the desert. A poet, like any doctor or pastor, is a capitalist. George Seferis was a diplomat. Advertise, it's professional. Get credentials. Street cred will do. Last night I stayed up late watching Visconti's *The Leopard*. Yesterday someone called me a conservative. I said "List the things you'd like to conserve." We all want sweeping changes. Carry water. Chop wood. "For things to remain the same, everything must change." Burt Lancaster dances at a ball. Sicily, 1860. A buzzard circles the valley. I hear traffic on 183. There's a movie called *Blindness* opening today. Sarah Palin says "Say it ain't so, Joe." But it is.

*

The Bush family buys 154 square miles of land in Paraguay. John McCain "aspires" to be a dictator. For inspiration there's sports and war. I'm reaching across the aisle.

*

There's a patch of smooth earth where a deer rested all afternoon. At fifty, he wanted to be a jazz musician or a poet. He could imagine himself either a man or a woman. A young mother sings to her baby on the balcony below. The infant warbles. The deer's legs unfold. Is capacity inborn?

*

At the history museum we see axe-heads, beads, & fish-hooks. The stars are hidden by hurricane clouds. That was yesterday. Now everyone's gone home. If they have one. A pair of dragonflies mate in midair. Effervescence and distillation. A poet's guide. Still, our voices sink in the dark, a long cloud lies on the horizon. Peppered with lights. We ride the vagrant winds, seeking refuge. In the solace of night, I turn toward the plenitude of stars. Like Don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina. Or my brother-in-law's new obsession with math. Numbers console.

*

Regard these kids. The boy you were. Venus has changed position. Parched leaves turn yellow in the drought. A nation of investors. Money at the core of everything. We jump

into the sparkling pool after a short drive home. Among live oaks & limestone. It's true, the fundamentals are sound.

*

Lone star dusk. Another maverick with a gun. Helicopters sweep the swimming pool. I dive, just to scream. Play of light on the blue surface. Out of water, I'm an old man. A plum-colored hummingbird appears, spirit-like, in the glass air. Headlights from a Lexus blind the deer on the road. As a boy George W. Bush blew up frogs. He put firecrackers in their mouths. Where are the frogs and mosquitoes of my youth? The plenitude of forms? We sat behind the garage smoking grapevines and jacking off. There were gunslingers on TV, secret agents. Minnows in the creek. Dewberries.

I visit, in my mind, "the great geography of my lunacy." (*Ed Dorn*)

*

Today I watched a film clip of Pasolini interviewing Ungaretti. In the background children played on the beach. In Austin, Hoa Nguyen tends her family. Her poems are like talismans. Last night I cried reading Robert Fitzgerald's poem "Mementoes." Goodbye, America. In my dream, we're in a small canoe. A breeze rustles the areca palms. Women wash clothes in the river. I wake. Fireflies among the rafters. Midnight rain. Are we only flesh and bone? What's left isn't ash, or a headstone. The millstone turns, chickens lay eggs in the barnyard. What's left isn't chaff or feathers. A cow is wealth. The son a blessing. Middle-aged, poor, he sleeps on the platform. Smell of rotting fruit. Travel-stained children. Imagine farmers in fields, wearing turbans, talking on cell phones. A "call center" in every town.

*

From democracy to dictatorship, two hundred years. October 4, 2008. Warm and breezy. "From bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependence; from dependence back into bondage." My son's in town. He slept last night on the balcony. Woke an hour ago to birdsong. Rubbed his eyes and asked for coffee. There's a methane "time bomb" under the ice of the Arctic. A tiny wasp clings to the sliding screen door. As kids we called them mud-daubers. That evening, my son drank beer and told me about the Bog People of Europe. The moon went down and a jet passed directly in front of us. He drank German beer. From Munich. I cooked pasta with tomato sauce and a sprinkle of fresh basil. My sister gave him an ancient Roman coin. Years ago, for his birthday. Where is it now? "Probably India." He asks about the Great Depression. And my father. Oklahoma, before the war. "Did *anyone* have a job?" He wonders.

*

Thinking of Cavafy, I sat on the balcony in the brilliant night and drank strong wine, the way the champions of pleasure used to do. Ah, the resonant banalities. I make notes. The War Hero stands at the podium and accepts the crowd's felicitations. Such mastery of the talking points! Assured, charming—almost Reaganesque. Not like the other old man, who died last month. I knew him. He played the Christian in public, but eventually stopped going to church. After the loss of his wife, he never spoke of God or the war. Maybe he felt it was time to stop lying. Anyway, that's the way he put it, one night, drinking. "After all these years, to see him like that. Such a pity."

*

Red glow of sunset. The antlered deer looks up at us. Slips into darkness.

*

I remember how everything changed during the flood. How afterwards, life went back to "normal." The noise. Routine. Business as usual. Only a bad smell remained. And a line on the walls that whitewash couldn't cover.

We watched a cow float past. Boards. Sheets of tin.

Darkness and silence.

*

...before there were hours there were infinities.

*

Unseasonably warm. Muggy. Hazy moon. Deer cross the parking lot. Graceful silhouettes. For an instant their grey-brown pelts in our headlights. We count four. Quick.

*

Fog. Early morn. I boil water for coffee, copy lines by Darwish, translated by Marjolijn De Jager:

Our cups of coffee. Bird green trees
In the blue shade, the sun gambols from one wall
To another like a gazelle
The water in the clouds has the unlimited shape of what is left to us
Of the sky. And other things of suspended memories
Reveal that this morning is powerful and splendid,
And that we are the guests of eternity.

JOE SAFDIE

Against Romanticism

*His poetry (as apart from his plays) has always been surprisingly neglected . . .
and surely one reason for its neglect . . . is that so much of it can be damned
as "occasional." That is, much of it is elicited by external events.*
---Thom Gunn, on Ben Jonson

*the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding
impressions*
---Percy Shelley

*Why should I quake? I'm not awake. Isn't it romantic?
Music in the night, a dream that can be heard. Isn't it romantic?*
---Richard Rodgers & Lorenz Hart

1

presidential primaries ten days away
Quadrantic meteors explode over Iowa's
ethanol and high fructose corn syrup
then everyone will get the fuck out of there

back to 1791, when Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*
annihilated Burke's "organic" metaphors
and his silly sympathy for Marie Antoinette,
but eight years later "liberals found they had no side
they could wholeheartedly espouse," meet the new boss,
Edwards in a Union hall, Hillary sanctimonious,
only Obama with any *presence*, Republicans
all frightening, three of them not believing
in evolution, like the majority of their fellow citizens,
the Enlightenment falling on deaf ears, red necks . . .

2

“the tradition of radical Protestant Dissent . . .

the coming of the Kingdom of God . . . ”

i.e., we don't need suicide bombers

to teach *us* martyrdom, although the Terror

did make the revolution private,

shifting it to the individual consciousness,

invading as well poetry's formal necessities:

thus, Wordsworth. Still, “the apocalypse

is near: each passing second brings it no nearer”*

is light years from Huckabee's cross in the bookshelf

or McCain's in the Vietnamese dust,

the writers of the Enlightenment

were public literary activists, compared to which

the Romantics were just sexy to coeds

**Loves Body*, Norman O. Brown

3

The Birth of Christ, “what this holiday is all about,” says Huckabee, when actually it’s a combination of the pagan solstice with the real God, Consumerism, despite Reverend Billy’s anti-shopping crusade (long way from Bolinas to NYC, Billy)

so which candidate is on the side of the working class, William Jennings Bryan *aka* Edwards or Barack Obama with his practiced street jive, we’ll leave out Hillary since “Clinton-ism” has been revealed as the link

between Reagan and Bush Junior, pragmatists say “Hey, he won,” but the short stretch of time between Tom Paine (buddies with Blake and Wollstonecraft) and the suspension of habeas corpus, “even casual words in a tavern an act of treason,”

suggests that a small up-tick in GNP won’t sustain us, no matter what the latest consumer confidence ratings or Reich’s *Super Capitalism* say

4

Remember, the Romantics also brought us Malthus, who made war, vice, misery, and starving the poor seem OK (published the same year as *Lyrical Ballads*, the superior mind of Coleridge sacrificed to “undemanding” verse) and evangelical Christianity, energetic, pious, vehement, sincere (a bumper sticker the other day read “Born fine the first time”) – the new moral religion, heavy on lower class depravity, lighter on child sweatshop labor – even the end of the slave trade was championed by those who felt Napoleon had been sent by the Lord, angry at the Sabbath’s violation, who would dismiss him when that practice ceased, as Hannah More, “tireless, tiresome, with a small literary gift” consoles the poor, god’s creatures, and Huckabee wins Iowa . . .

5

Walter Benjamin wrote:

I have nothing to say, only to show

I will make off with nothing valuable

and allow myself no clever turns of phrase

only the refuse and waste

which I will not inventory

but instead allow to come into their own

in the only way possible:

I will make use of them.

This work must raise the art

of citing without quotation marks

to the highest level,

its theory most intimately linked

to that of montage.

6

a Siberian Tiger escapes the SF Zoo

kills a kid, mauls two more, gets shot,

and what immortal hand or eye

what was a tiger doing in England anyway

it was part of the fascination with the exotic other

pundit Brahmin bazaar juggernaut thug

the British East India company (sacred cows)

a prime minister, Pitt, who put Adam Smith to work

here in the colonies we're worried about Jesus Christ

("Christ" the honorific adjective ascribed

to the Jewish man Jesus), but don't tell that

to Mike Huckabee, recently spied shooting pheasant –

say what you want about Dryden, Pope and Swift

they never wore orange jump suits and waved their guns around

7

Readers of the world unite –

all you can lose is your mystery,
the shimmering individual contact
of your eyes with a writer's mind,

usually trumped by recession
or the fears of it, a “stimulus package”
now debated, lower taxes and/or interest rates
more cash flowing through the hands

of eager consumers, no mention of course
of sensual stimulation or unlocking
the doors of perception, no one cares anymore
how *alive* anyone is, in fact that's

a completely useless impediment
as long as we're not spending money

*People who have been robbed of their history, who have no history, who have no moral base,
who are . . . interested only in shopping and who are only capable of shopping,
and whose only product is shopping, are obviously going to be simple to program.*

---Edward Dorn

8

“You don’t like saving money?”

“Cool extra features”

“Meaty cheesy”

“It’s in our DNA”

Zero cash on delivery

Sign your name and drive away happy

Virtually anywhere in your company

It’s so flexible

You can even search the internet

Work without limits

Rarely resulting in fainting

Ask your doctor

For a limited time

Call your pay-for-view provider

9

Nevada, South Carolina, caucus, primary,

the end of liberal democracy

Zizek suggests Hugo Chavez as an alternative

i.e., simply take over the State

instead of lobbing post-modern grenades,

the candidates exchange polite praise

but Obama's "poetry" rankles Hillary,

who thinks imagination the patient's

worst enemy, like Sontag used to,

"yet this time around" says a reviewer

of her son's book, "seeing clearly led only

to the certain knowledge that she would die" . . .

needing the idea of a fight after it's been lost:

the Romantics, desperate for metaphor

10

Fox TV stages a reading of the Declaration,
Enlightenment thought at its peak;
Pinsky praised for his civic-minded poetry
in the real language of men . . .

then modern Patriots wage war
against mythical Giants,
the world made safe for commercials
the word “Super” safe for another year

Obama’s soaring rhetoric begins
to resemble Edmund Burke’s,
binding the country’s various threads
into one subordinate patchwork quilt

an advertisement for eloquence
not the eloquence itself

“By the early nineteenth century
their era of profound hope was in eclipse . . .
in favor of evangelical religion, land speculation,
bargain corn whiskey, kaleidoscopes, and . . .

the reigns of Terror, Bonaparte, and Pitt
the Younger”* *aka* romanticism, kids,
brought to you by the Reign of Terror,
then and now, and yes, Jerry, I get it,

“a challenge to closure, defamiliarization,
alternative states of mind”**

but all that was in another century
when the I-Phone didn’t sell for a c-note . . .

a republic lost to empire
awash in our precious sensibilities

**Thomas Paine, by Craig Nelson*

***Poems for the Millennium, Volume 3, ed. Jerry Rothenberg and Jeffery Robinson*

12

navigating the aisles at Home Depot
is romantic, anti-depressants
are romantic, we live
in a romantic century, we've now lived

in three romantic centuries,

Byron was romantic

Sylvia Plath was romantic

John Ashbery is romantic

the painstaking and exquisite

examination of one's own life

ala Rousseau is definitely romantic

memoirs are romantic

not caring about politics is romantic

from the older form of *roman*, a novel

13

which means that novels are romantic

but “creative non-fiction” is also romantic

and poetry is always romantic

“that imagination which is most free” (OED, 1659)

“These things are almost romantique, and yet true” (Pepys 1667)

“Romances and novels are often writ in this mixt language, between Poetry and Prose: and hence it is sometimes called the Romantick Stile.” (1749)

“In romantic music content is first and form subordinate” (1885)

“Having no real existence; imaginary; purely ideal” (obsolete)

“A tale in verse, embodying the adventures of some hero of chivalry, esp. of those of the great cycles of medieval legend, and belonging both in matter and form to the ages of knighthood;” (OED)

The only national literature that didn’t have a romantic period

was American, but we’ve made up for it by now . . .

14

“It must be exciting for you ... in some ways
romantic, in some ways, you know,
confronting danger. You're really making history,
and thanks." George Bush to the troops, the decline
of eloquence from Paine, “impudent, obnoxious,
self-absorbed, impetuous, conceited,
disputatious” unlike San Diegans,
charting the waves, going with the flow

Isn't it romantic? Music in the night,
a dream that can be heard . . .
Romance sells, moving shadows
write the oldest magic word

an IED kills three north of Baghdad
Isn't it romance?

15

the Reign of Terror was romantic

Rousseau leads straight to Robespierre

a republic lost to empire

tres romantique

a nation of sensibility

(invasion is romantic)

(beheadings are romantic)

Paine fought for Louis XVI's life

Mary Wollstonecraft cried

for his dignity

while on vacation with her American lover

on the run from debt and land speculation

who would later desert her

and cause her to try to commit suicide

16

originally spelled his name P - A - I - N

accepted no royalties for *Common Sense*

scorned and ridiculed by his adopted country

after his words brought Washington through Valley Forge

the best-selling author of the 18th century

served in France's parliament after the revolution

jailed after being judged not sufficiently radical

“by turns voluble and taciturn, manic and depressive”

his bones exhumed by William Cobbett

and transferred to Liverpool

these are the times that try men's souls

these times I mean, with Obama

signing on as an advocate of faith-based initiatives

sounding more like a romantic every minute

17

Independence Day 2008

fireworks on the coast obscured by fog

sweet symbols in the moonlight

Jesse Helms finally dies

like Jefferson and Adams, July 4, 1827

Keats and Shelley already dead

Romanticism in full gloom

with the weird killer frontier populist Jackson

the next morning NPR does a radio piece

on Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798

(a review of "Against Romanticism"

probably some months away)

Obama sprints for the center

praise the lord and pass the faith-based initiatives

18

a cocktail glass leaves a perfect circle
over the review called “Emily’s Tryst”
in the *New York Times Book Review*
an exposé of her secret sexual life

rather than her poetry

Reverend Higginson apparently a Godwin
to Emily’s Mary Wollstonecraft
(because of his more active life

beyond her garden gate)

the inspiration, on occasion,
of several of her poems

“My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun”

but the truth is he only met her twice
romanticism comes to Amherst

19

“the machine”

the guillotine

(the family later changed their name)

death is romantic

just ask Rilke

an ABC news poll says

91% of Americans

believe in God,

but 21% are “less certain”

(negative capability!)

God is definitely romantic

as is every religion on the face of the earth

even atheists are romantic

worshipping at the church of rationality

20

the nation-state is romantic

nationalism is romantic

war is romantic

fame is romantic

“social programs” are romantic

the middle class is romantic

being rich is romantic

progress is romantic

soul-mates are romantic

simultaneous orgasm is romantic

I'm romantic

you're romantic too

we're all romantic

and all equally screwed