

## *Gallery 4: Compost*



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**JARED STANLEY**

*Compostible Notes, Slowed Down, And Some Quotes*

I had intended to write some slow notes on poetry. For this purpose, I went to the bottom of a library and accumulated a stack of 30 books, which sit next to me, unread, unexplaining themselves, to be unread slowly - I was prancing around the library, pulling these books from the stacks, looking at people who were taking notes, I was trying to look at them in their eyes, but I couldn't look at them because they were studying, not haughtily prancing through the library with a large stack of books. They were slow, some were ancient with ancient notes, others looked concernedly at their pencils, but I was prancing merrily, walking fast, through the accumulated proliferations of the library. Their eyes were cast down, in the library, bent upon their own accumulations. We were underground in a library. We had locked our bikes up under a cypress, so that the drizzle wouldn't get on the steel, or on the saddles. In the library, walking too fast on the slick floors.

The library. I opened the one book I brought with me to the library, the book that was outlining my own attempts at describing, or thinking through, this slow poetry idea. *This Compost*. A subterranean history of the poetry collaged, the poem as node disarranged but reemergent, it is that most tantalizing of things in the library, a secret history. What's more, a poem masquerading as a prose study - 'poet's prose,' in many quotes. I wanted to write about this wonderful book, casting die upon the cover, this idea which was helping me think about this book I want to start writing, which I want to call *Everybody Odysshape the At-Hand* because of the great help that the musical group the Raincoats and their album *Odysshape* had been to me as a young person. Jed Rasula, author of *This Compost* (the other author is/was Whitman) describes this thing, the compost library, starting with the old man Thoreau: "Decayed literature makes the richest of all soils"

When I first encountered slow poetry last July (2008), I liked the slow part, but I didn't like so much the sky is falling part. I mean, the sky is kind of lowly hanging, pulled out of shape, and a mess (I ride my bike through a soup made of agricultural sprays, diesel exhaust, and cow farts made toxic through overpopulation daily). I thought two things immediately: I was excited by the idea, that poetry, in its practice, can help us reorient our thinking in this maddening fast world, full of loss, full of great extinctions; however, I also knew that, though I'm as attracted to apocalyptic

rumblings as the next American, that I'm not peak oiler, I'm not investing in gold, and I think history is more about continuity, rediscovery and cultural ingenuity - if only those fucking advertising motherfuckers would leave us alone! I wanted a historically informed slow poetry, one that has a sense of the history of anti-modernism in the USA (books like Jackson Lears' *No Place for Grace*), I wanted a little space for a critical silence, not the School of Quietude, and I wanted to acknowledge that the cultural work that poets do can be augmented by the day-to-day grind of advocating for change at City Council Meetings and County Board Meetings, in short, in local government, the place where democracy actually does kind of work - since we're poets, and we (some of us) have been able to free ourselves from 'mind-forged manacles' at least a little bit, we should use our special knowledge of words as powers in the realm where it matters: let us be orators, let us address the mayor and the council!

But I don't want to talk about activism - It is what it is, and I think each of us should engage in it. I want to talk about poetry and history, and how a library, in its paradoxical slowness and proliferations, is the first place we must loaf in we are ever to turn our powers over to any idea about how people might live, if only, if only. The slowness of those in the subterranean library, those whose eyes did not meet mine. The slowness, the deliberation of the researcher, the genealogist, and, most especially, the loafer among the decayed literature. I would like to describe two kinds of loafing in the library, the loafing which is luck, fucking-off, and a joy, and the research, the history, the findings, of poetry - both techniques are slow as loafing, and require much leisure, if such a thing can be found. Some hope that this crazy money shit will result in things like 40 hour work weeks, and actually making shit. That'd be fine. More readers of poetry. More actual sex.

In the guise of the lucky loafer, I assembled my pile of books and sat down at a long table, in the bottom of the library. I didn't even open any of the books. I looked to my right: volumes of the proceedings of the United Nations: I open a volume. Something regarding the United Kingdom's interest in copyright law (No Spicer book was ever copywrit). I look to my left: books in many languages, on printmaking. Some Russian folk printmaking - an onion dome on a tower, in three stratified colors - all the coloration bled outside the printed black lines, into the yellowed space of the sky. Unfun crudity. But there was also a book called *Peinture et poesie: Le dialogue par le livre*. This I pulled down, and began to make a poem of the French words, and since I can't speak the language, it talked to me like this:

Toward a provincial light  
Mr Anti-pyrrhic has an adventure  
his first sky adventure, dilapidated  
heritage, tough the spirit, flamboyant  
farcical lunar responsibilities, with big trees.

Not auspicious, ox, but it's only an example. Susan Howe describes something of this operation of a slowing, alert mind in her *Souls of the Labadie Tract*

I felt the spiritual and solitary freedom of an inexorable order only chance creates. Quiet articulates poetry. These Lethean tributaries of lost sentiments

and found philosophies had a life-giving effect on my *process* of writing.

scow aback din  
flicker skaeg ne  
barge quagg peat  
~~sieve catacomb~~  
stint chisel sect

In Sterling's [Yale Library] sleeping wilderness I felt the telepathic solicitations of innumerable phantoms. The future seemed to lie in this forest of letters, theories and forgotten actualities [...]

I felt a harmony beyond the confinement of our being merely dross or tin; something chemical almost mystical that, thanks to architectural artifice, these grey and tan steel shelves

in their neo-Gothic tower commerate in semi-darkness, according to Library of Congress classification.  
(14)

In order to describe the second kind of loafing, let me introduce a metaphor that Jed Rasula uses in *This Compost*, the metaphor of the Compost Library. The compost library, like the above Thoreau quote, is a kind of gnostic, or occult reimagining (revivifying?) of what we might, call, in a more combative or dogmatic realm, the canon. Rasula:

“American poetry is the first full opening of the field of archaic, scattered, incomplete and scarcely surmised literacies from that compost library unearthed in the nineteenth century[...]The reovery of the compost library extends in all directions through the ground of American poetry, as poets become signatories of distant texts: Jerome Rothenberg's large anthologies flower (as the word means) at the heart of this practice; David Meltzer's anthology of Kabbalah; Ed Sanders' Egypt; Nathaniel Mackey's Dogon[...] these are all integral to a poetics of the archaic, restored exercises of *homo projectivis*.

Wherein a canon is forced to absorb things thought impossible - it's the polyglot abilities of American speech (and it's unwitting ironies, heard with perfect clarity by

Linh Dinh) and our poetry, when it tries. This is another slowness to attempt; examples of the research, the slow poring over lost things. In C.S. Giscombe's *Giscome Road*, research in genealogy becomes an invitation to encounters with places one might have thought one's ancestors might never have been. In Brenda Coultas' *Marvelous Bones of Time*, ghost stories from friends and lost histories of Southern Indiana are retold in the context of poetry. In Bhanu Kapil's *Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* carefully constructed interviews are collaged and rearranged to produce a collective "I". In Catherine Meng's *Tonight's the Night*, research and repetition are implied, and played with - research itself becomes a form. Each of these slowness poetics is less lyrical in process, is more deliberative, but produces work that means, is felt, and is slow in its deliberations, if quick in its emotions. Is measured.

So, our little clumps of writing can be acts of rediscovery, of recontextualization, transforming one's lives and one's poems via the half-smear encounters with the probably dead. And this is, to me, the slowness that we can have in poems, this is the slowness of the research poems of CS Giscombe or Brenda Coultas, the slowness of moving from mere attention to a fuller interaction, especially with the past, within our poems. A projectivism of the straitened circumstance, this is what the libraries of our great cities provide. They are shields from the weather for those with no other place to go, those women and men who sleep in the carrels in the day, on the street at night, and for those of us fortunate enough to have time to contemplate ourselves and positions as metaphors, sometimes. Despite our commitment to the local (being a friend of the county library), we can find our place in the world by finding ourselves first among the letters, and then among the magnolias, first among the ancients and near-contemporaries, then among our fellow-citizens.

I think loafing among the decayed literature is a good slowness, because when we look up, parti-eyed, the world can only be reconfigured. The sky is not falling, the world doesn't end, and we must not be scared, we must be shot through with it via our time in the library. Things change, but as they do, we must remember to be in history, slowly in it - People have been scared before (the artisans and medieval mystics of the 19th Century American Scene, say) and the terrors of our ways are the way it is with us (we who love to be admonished), even if those coming after see our ashes and think of pleasures. But it has ever been thus. There is an emergency at the heart of our historylessness, but our redemptive slowness will be a kind of chastening, a training, if it must be. Learn the knots, what wood to chop, how to grow things, yes, but don't panic, unless you would be as a Satyr, and dance through the city after months of loafing among cypress and laurel. There is great beauty,

though are words are their death.

The journey of Ann Hamilton's installation *Aleph*, originally installed at MIT, goes like this: "The installation traveled to Vienna, although, as Hamilton was told, the books, which had been deaccessioned by the Boston Public Library after they had been microfilmed, had been shipwrecked and barely made it to the European venue. Afterward, they were recycled as toilet paper."

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DAVID HADBAWNIK

*Edward Dorn Inside-Out: Elements of Laughter and ‘Grotesque Time’ in  
Gunslinger*

*With thanks to Steve McCaffery for his feedback on this essay.*

“Entrapment is this society’s  
Sole activity, I whispered  
and Only laughter,  
can blow it to rags” (*Slinger* 155)

To read Ed Dorn’s epic poem *Gunslinger* in book form is in some ways to miss its humor. Jokes, puns, and rapid-fire banter between characters don’t often translate well when reading the poem alone, in silence; all of these tend to fall flat on the flatness of the page. Partially, there is a time element involved in this, as well. A poem that states “[t]ime is more fundamental than space” (3) is one of the timeliest poems we have, with not just concepts but language and humor taken directly from the pop culture of its era and plugged in to the poem—giving *Gunslinger*, at times, a decidedly dated feel, and allowing many funny moments to slip through the cultural cracks. This is especially apparent if one listens to a recording of Dorn reading the poem out loud soon after it was completed, such as the audio available at PennSound from a reading at University at Buffalo April 19-20, 1974. On this recording, which I’ll examine in more detail below, Dorn cracks his audience up with sly jokes that often border on the slapstick, shifts in tone, and even pauses and the slight emphasis he throws on certain words as he reads. All of these elements recur throughout the poem, as Dorn deploys them both to undercut the

“poetic” tone and maintain his dedication to the vernacular of his time, wherever it might lead him.

But *Gunslinger* is clearly not all about laughter. Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that the laughter in *Gunslinger* is not all about joking and puns; some of it, as mentioned above, stems from a sort of physical slapstick, bordering on the grotesque, that had not been seen in English-language poetry for hundreds of years, if at all. Dorn is interested in carefully examining the socio-economic landscape, particularly as it affects the humans around him, how they speak and act. He is also, as he states in his preface to reading the poem at Buffalo in 1974, interested in moving “away from a single lyric voice and into a multiple form of expression,” one that he yet “[doesn’t] want to be associated with the lyric, or with anything simple, confessional, or academic” (PennSound). What Dorn does in *Gunslinger*—with his concern for the “inside real” and “outsidereal,” his emphasis on time, exploration of high and low forms of language and culture, and multiple voices—is update Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “grotesque realism” for his particular time period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I will examine the ways he accomplishes this, particularly in the realm of laughter and the grotesque, throughout the poem. In doing so, I will take a hopefully fruitful detour into certain elements of the painter Francis Bacon’s approach to figures that I believe will help illuminate the work of Dorn—especially in terms of their respective approach to what might be termed “grotesque time.”

In his study of *Gunslinger*, “To Eliminate the Draw,” Michael Davidson writes that “[i]t is ... an epic closer to *Don Juan* or the *Dunciad* than it is to *The Iliad* or *The Aeneid*, and the humor of the poem has a deadly seriousness behind it” (in a footnote, he



adds that Dorn himself acknowledges his debt to Byron's *Juan* at the time he wrote *Gunslinger*). Davidson adds that "[l]aughter is the primary agent of Dorn's debunking power, although the humor in the poem is never of the rollicking sort but more the acidic variety that one associates with Swift or Blake" (*Internal* 117). As listening to audio of the poem makes clear, this is simply not true; the humor in the poem is "rollicking" at times, as prone to Dorn's high-pitched mimicking of a woman's voice and groan-inducing puns as it is to high, Swiftian wit. Granted, these "low" forms of humor are part of an overall strategy of critiquing language and modes of expression, but they also intentionally register on a broad scale, just as Bakhtin describes grotesque realism doing, especially in the work of authors such as Rabelais. In other words, they're meant to be funny for their own sake. Byron himself, of course, in *Don Juan*, delighted in "vulgar" couplets that make use of the humorous feminine rhyme to get his laughs; there is the famous:

"But—Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual,  
Inform us truly, have they not hen-pecked you all?" (*Juan* Canto I, st. 22)

Also:

"He learned the arts of riding, fencing, gunnery,  
And how to scale a fortress—or a nunnery." (*Juan* Canto I, st. 38)

And the equally famous:

"What men call gallantry, and gods adultery,  
Is much more common where the climate's sultry." (*Juan* Canto I, st. 63)

Leslie Marchand quotes Byron's thoughts on the poem, one he "never intended to be serious. Do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make

giggle—a playful satire, with as little poetry as could be helped, was what I meant” (vi). Indeed, Byron felt compelled to defend the tone of the poem: “it may be bawdy but is it not good English? It may be profligate but is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*?” (*Juan* viii). While Bakhtin would write of (French and German) Romanticism that its “laughter was cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm” (38), what we find in *Don Juan*, especially in the early cantos, is a throwback to a more playful grotesque humor that has no particular point, other than laughter. Thus, part of the force and life of the book as a *whole* derives from its juxtaposition of the profound, which comes later in the poem, with its vulgar elements. As Bakhtin writes of the medieval carnival upon which the grotesque is based, “We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out,’ of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (11). This, I argue, is the primary structural element Dorn takes from his reading of Byron. The laughter has satirical force at times; at times, a “deadly seriousness.” But often it’s just laughter, meant to be taken in tandem with the more serious, profound elements of the text—and this is enough.

Listening to Dorn’s 1974 reading of *Gunslinger* shows this; it also reveals how rapidly and dramatically Dorn employs contrasts in tone to effect laughter and make a statement about language. Dorn himself, echoing Byron’s claims for *Don Juan*, adds that “Really it’s just a trip like that whole decade . . . but it’s quite literal in a sense. I’ve always considered this as intellectual vernacular. So it’s current in that sense, and meant to be amusing” (PennSound).

The audience first laughs at the Gunslinger ambling off to piss on page 3. Even though, interestingly, in the printed version Dorn has the Slinger say “that’s less” instead of “that’s better,” as he does upon returning from pissing in the recorded version—thus perhaps introducing a slight philosophical heft to this otherwise entirely physical gag—it’s difficult to argue anything’s meant here besides purely “low” humor. The next laugh Dorn draws comes when the character “I” begins questioning the Gunslinger, piping up with “Howard?” every time the Slinger mentions the “inscrutable Texan named Hughes” (*Slinger* 4). Interestingly, Dorn pauses on the recording as the Slinger and “I” are about to go in to have a drink, announcing that he decided to cut out a second instance of the Slinger pissing, having figured that once was enough (PennSound). Next comes a deliberate juxtaposition that shows Dorn to be a master craftsman in terms of shifting tones, as well as reader of his own poem. First, there’s the italicized speech of Lil in greeting the Slinger; the audience breaks up laughing when Dorn reaches the lines “*why do you think I’ve got my hand on / my hip if not to steady myself*” (6). A little further down, “I” has objected to her familiar tone; “I”’s stilted speech is already a humorous contrast to Lil’s easy vernacular. The audience laughs again when “I” says

or at least I sense some effect  
on the perigree and apogee of all  
our movements in this, I can’t quite say,  
*man’s presence* (*Slinger* 6)

What’s funny here is clearly the shift in tone, which is perhaps even more evident reading the poem on the page (especially with the contrast between italicized and un-italicized lines). Less obvious are the words that actually release the audience’s laughter—in both

cases, it's the emphasized words ("steady" from Lil and "man's" from "I"), which Dorn recites to good comic effect. As with the bodily function humor of the Gunslinger pissing and the "Hughes" / "Howard?" routine, it's tough to locate any underlying, redeemingly "serious" qualities here. Further funny moments on the recorded version of Book I make such claims a bit more valid, but also foreground the cultural datedness of the poem.

The next big laugh the poem draws occurs when Lil recites a sort of set piece about a curious horse, which she describes "*rollin a big tampico bomber with his hooves*" (10). The story of the bawdy, pot-smoking horse is clearly meant as a parody of the television show *Mister Ed*, which aired from 1961-1966 and featured a talking horse. A bit of trivia related to the show that definitely would not have slipped by Dorn: The show's producer, Arthur Lubin, was a friend of Western film sexpot Mae West, and persuaded her to appear in an episode (*Mister Ed*). Just prior to Lil's horse story, she has quoted the line "A man in the house / is worth 2 in the street" (7), which Dorn pauses to note, on the Buffalo recording, is a famous line from Mae West (PennSound). Later in the monologue, Dorn elicits more laughter from the audience with the lines

Because he  
was sayin some of the abstractest  
things you ever heard  
like Celery Is Crisp! (*Slinger* 11)

This joke, too, turns on an allusion that may be lost to us—was "Celery Is Crisp!" the slogan of a supermarket ad, a phrase Dorn noticed on a grocery bag, or what? Certainly it reflects the pointless compression of typical advertising jargon, and the befuddled commentary of Lil ("abstractest") reveals that pointlessness, at the same time setting up

listeners for the punch line of the joke. In all these examples, we more plausibly find evidence of the “deadly serious” humor that Davidson claims for *Gunslinger*. At the very least, Dorn’s jokes here point beyond laughter for its own sake, and towards the kind of cultural critique and social satire that Dorn also intended. Dorn’s humor will, as the poem progresses, continue to operate at every level, from the basest puns and slapstick to more sophisticated satire. Meanwhile, the poem also begins to operate on an entirely different plane of the grotesque.

I will now turn from grotesque humor in the poem to what might be called the physical grotesque. In so doing, I will draw certain parallels between the grotesque in the paintings of Francis Bacon and the poetry of Dorn, using Allon White’s essay on Bacon, “Prosthetic Gods in Atrocious Places,” as a point of departure. Early in the essay White writes of Bacon that he “displays the intellectual ruthlessness of a sublime cultural interrogator—the Grand Inquisitor of modern painting—and the subjects of his interrogation are the contemporary culture, his fellow artists, the great European painters of tradition and himself” (160). This description recalls the coldly critical “ruthlessness” displayed by Dorn, although the “interrogation” of his fellow poets would largely come in later works such as *Abhorrences*, etc. Indeed, Davidson contrasts him with Olson, whom he calls “essentially nostalgic,” while Dorn “projects in the place of Olson’s Leviathan-like representative man a cool and airy debunker” (*Internal* 116). There are a number of approaches to their medium that Dorn and Bacon share. The first and most obvious, in terms of the physical grotesque, lies in their depiction of the human form.

Bacon’s figures, of course, clearly display the grotesque. The image of the body in Bacon, while recognizably human, is never that of sharp, classical wholeness, but of

blurred flesh in various stages of horror and decay. As White argues, “[t]he hysterical fear of which Bacon’s great paintings are the immediate registration is mutant, an unfixing of identity without end or issue” (160). He goes on to write that “Bacon . . . portrays . . . the *viscosity* of fear, or fear imaged as a melting, a falling, a queasiness of guts and flesh in which the body itself dissolves into liquid flow” (160). Later, White notes Bacon’s “obsession with raw meat” (162), and quotes him remarking that “of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher’s shop I always think it’s surprising I wasn’t there instead of the animal” (163). The “raw meat” motif is most visible in early Bacon paintings, such as one simply titled “Painting” (1946). In that work, the figure of a half-headless man covered by an umbrella floats amidst stretched carcasses. The man’s head seems to have been ripped off right at the jaw and disappears into the darkness of the underside of the umbrella; two small carcasses drift at either side of him, while a large one hovers over his shoulder (Bacon fig. 4). In later pieces, as I’ll explore below, the images of raw meat and disfigured flesh are worked in more subtly, with human figures themselves displaying signs of decay. The clearest analog for just this sort of “identity-dissolve” into “raw meat” in *Gunslinger* occurs during the comically grotesque “death” and acid embalming of “I.”

In that scene, the centerpiece of Book II, the Gunslinger and his band of travelers, having just picked up “Kool Everything,” notice that “I is dead” (*Slinger* 54). It’s a meaningful scene, as Davidson notes, laden with linguistic and philosophical significance (121). It is also quite funny, and one should not overlook the grotesque humor of the death. After the Gunslinger has explicated the perceptual implications of “I”—“I got there ahead of myself” etc. (56), Kool Everything brings matters back down to earth by

reminding the others that “if he turns out to be put together / like most people I’s gonna / come apart in the heat” (56). A little later, the Poet adds “There will be some along our way / to claim I stinks” (57). The solution to this practical problem is, of course, to pour Everything’s 5-gallon container of “pure Acid” into “I,” “*Instead of formaldehyde*” (59). While this solution is, on the one hand, preservative, it also represents “a derangement of considerable antiquity” (59). Additionally, upon awaking, “I” is greeted by the citizens of Universe City as a grotesque “Monster” straight out of *Dr. Frankenstein*:

Whats That! they shouted

Why are his eyes turned north?

Why are his pants short on one side?

Why does his hair point south?

Why do his knees laugh?

How does his hat stay on?

Wherez his ears? (*Slinger* 66)

That the last and seemingly most disturbing thing about this apparition is that “his *name* is missing / ... / and his Managers name / is missing from his back” (67) points to the deeper meaning of the grotesque in both Dorn and Bacon’s work. The identity question also ties them both to Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque. The time element, to a large extent, is what’s key here. As Bakhtin writes, “[t]he relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image” (24). The question is that of historical vs. cyclical time; time depicted in a grotesque manner would reflect “the changing seasons: sowing, conception, growth, death” (25). In terms of the human form, this means depicting the body in anything but a classical, idealized wholeness—showing instead its

fragmented, cyclical progressions. “One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one,” writes Bakhtin, “the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born . . . From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other” (26). And this, in turn, can’t help but shatter boundaries and obliterate stable identities: “the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (26). Dorn succinctly explains this concept in terms of time in *Gunslinger*. The line “Time is more fundamental than space” has already been noted; a little further down in that same passage, Dorn writes “And it stretches things themselves / until they blend into one” (*Slinger* 3). Much of the concern with time seems bound up with the character “I.” Davidson writes that because of “I,” “[t]he reader becomes complicit in a double-bind by following a first-person and a third-person narration at the same time. It is Dorn’s strategic way of collapsing the subjective and objective poles” (121). As Dorn writes, just after “I” wakes up and the Gunslinger instructs the others to “send a telegram to Parmenides,”

Our company reassembled itself  
and followed I with a triple impression—  
for now they sought  
to keep track of what they Had,  
invested in where it Was,  
and carried by where it’s At (*Slinger* 65-66)

This humorously plays on the “batch” that “I” has consumed, but it also foregrounds the grotesque, “triple impression” of time that “I” represents.



Looking carefully at the later paintings of Francis Bacon, we find a similar concern. White aptly references Julia Kristeva and her theory of “abjection” in discussing the grotesque in Bacon’s work. Echoing both Bakhtin’s statements about the grotesque and Davidson’s claims for Dorn’s poems, White writes that “[t]he abject is split between subject and object, neither fully an independent self nor completely determined by the objective realm, falling uncontrollably between both” (167). This is related to time in a way that calls to mind Dorn’s lines from *Gunslinger*: “Moments of falling; moments of loss; instants when time bloats and space distresses” (167). Bacon depicts such instances especially in his triptych portraits.

In “Study for Three Heads” (1962), the face, neck, and a small portion of the torso of a man dissolves, half-liquefied, in a black frame. He resembles himself only around the eyes, the nostrils, and a sharp widow’s peak that’s variously exaggerated in each panel of the set—not to mention the swatch of green over the torso, presumably his shirt, which clearly marks the heads as belonging to the same subject. In the center panel the face is warped but relatively stable—or at least it seems so, perhaps because the eyes, looking nearly directly outwards, seem to fasten forlornly onto the viewer. In the left panel the face is distorted by a large dark whorl on the right cheek, more visible as the face is tilted left, towards the center panel. The eyes, nearly closed, seem to peer peevishly into the distance beyond the other two faces. To the right, the face is extremely lopsided, as if some implosion has damaged the nose and caused the cheeks and mouth to slide halfway down the neck. Here the eyes peer back towards the center figure, perhaps towards the far left one as well (Bacon fig. 19). It’s not difficult to see, in each of these panels, the “time bloats” and “space distresses” mentioned by White. All three of them

together, I argue, picture grotesque time—flesh both forming and degenerating; past, present, and future regarding (and looking beyond) each other from different perspectives in the same face.

Later triptych portraits from the 1960s seem to confirm this, as well as offer variations on the theme. “Three Studies for Portrait of George Dyer (on light ground)” (1964) depicts a man’s face seemingly socked on the jaw by time, liquefying and reforming itself from left to right in the series, reminiscent of stills from a reel of film (Bacon fig. 23). Bacon was still, at this time, working with depictions of actual carcasses, which generally get colored white with reddish patches showing through. In Dyer’s portraits that deathly white is mingled with the colors of his face, making the reference to “raw meat” in Bacon’s other paintings unmistakable. In the far-right panel, the “re-formed” face seems divided down the middle between birth and death—swirls of red and white dominate the face’s right side, while the left is darkish and mostly free of any discernible color; the eyes glance blankly off to the left. The name “Dyer”—indeed, many of the names of the subjects of Bacon’s triptychs—also bears mention in relation to identity and the grotesque, and again to Dorn and his concern with names in *Gunslinger*.

White picks up on the allusive qualities of the name “Francis Bacon,” writing that it’s “[a]musing ... almost touching, that a painter named Bacon should be obsessed with depicting dead meat” (169). He even argues that, because of its pun with the dead philosopher of the same name, “[i]t could never mark anything other than a lack of identity, a dispersal of nomination rather than a fixing and in-gathering” (169). Dorn is keenly focused on the limiting nature of names in *Gunslinger*, of course; as Davidson

notes, “[t]o be ‘described’ is the greatest danger in the Slinger’s West. Once you have a name,

you can be sold

you can be told

by that name leave, or come

you become, in short,

a reference (*Slinger* 30)

“To be described,” continues Davidson, “is to be bound to a single location or identification” (130). This is why so many characters in *Gunslinger*—not just the Slinger himself, but also Levi-Strauss / Heidigger the Horse, and Howard Hughes / Robart—have names that morph and shift as the poem goes on.

Bacon’s triptych subjects do not change names; if anything, the names are inscribed and re-inscribed over the course of the many versions of them that he paints. Yet it’s curious that he invariably does give the names of the subjects, and interesting that they so often have such evocative names. George Dyer, who indeed appears to die and be reborn in the images Bacon paints of him; Lucian Freud, whose name, like Bacon’s, puns nicely with that of a giant from a different field; Isabel Rawsthorne, whose pretty first name stands in stark contrast with the double-harshness of her last name; Muriel Belcher, whose name contains a similar opposition, with the added gross bodily reference made by the last name (Bacon). All of these reveal the delight Bacon seems to share with Dorn when it comes to names that pack an allusive punch, especially when it fits with the grotesque that he depicts in his renderings of their owners.

Finally, one notes the parallels between Dorn and Bacon in terms of their respective aesthetic positions relative to the artists who are roughly contemporary with them. They share a concern for social and cultural critique that finds expression in the grotesque—in Dorn’s case, this more often takes the form of the humorous grotesque, and Bacon is undoubtedly less overtly funny and more physically gruesome than Dorn on an individual level, the death and resurrection of “I” notwithstanding. More to the point, both of them stand out for the ways they both challenge and partake of tradition. White writes that “[O]ne of the many dialogues, or contestations, which Bacon is involved in is with the transcendental escapism of the European painting tradition” (161). Of course, every Western painter at least since Cezanne had been involved with a similar desire to break with such “escapism”—their solutions, over the course of almost 100 years, had grown further and further away from figurative representation, until at the time Bacon emerges, roughly WWII, abstract expressionism is arguably the dominant avant-garde mode. Dorn likewise stood at a sort of artistic crossroads at the cultural moment when *Gunslinger* emerged. No longer would a straightforward epic, even in the experimental mode of an Olson or Pound, be desirable or even possible. That sort of heroic rendering had shown signs of being exhausted, and was ripe for critique and parody. Furthermore, postmodern writing had begun to examine language structures themselves—a socio-economic and linguistic engagement with narrative, subjectivity, syntax, etc. that would soon give rise to the movement that would come to be known as Language Poetry.

Bacon’s response to this, like Dorn’s, is a unique hybrid of tradition (grotesque) and the modern (abstract). “Bacon’s paintings,” writes White, “are figurative and representational, yet *what* they figure is a process, an act of graphic expulsions” (175).

White adds that Bacon's "greater achievement is ... to have brought action painting into a dialogue with abstraction on the site of grotesque realism" (175). Similarly, Dorn is not unaware of the demands made upon his art by the shifting landscape mentioned above. Yet even while he refuses to embrace the epic vastness of Olson, he also refuses to move completely away from it. His work in *Gunslinger* constitutes an homage—by way of parody, to be sure—to the epic, the narrative, the representational, even while it succeeds in making some of the same interrogations of language that the Language Poets would take up. "Language no longer constitutes or secures a primordial meaning" in *Gunslinger*, Davidson writes, "but suspends it indefinitely within an infinite series of binary functions" (*Internal* 136). Likewise, as the poem goes on, narrative falls under Dorn's surgical knife as well: "The journey to Las Vegas has been subsumed by gags, puns, and elaborate jokes. This breakdown in narrative continuity reflects the dissociation of that causal logic on which conventional stories are built" (138). Thus, both Bacon and Dorn explore some of the most important questions of their age in ways that are unique—even as they look back on tradition and anticipate future developments. And they both rely a great deal on certain conventions of grotesque realism and what I've called grotesque time to achieve their respective visions. Dorn's sense of time in *Gunslinger*—his willingness to allow his poem to partake of its time, at the risk of rendering it completely outdated, as well as his exploration of time in relation to the individual and his or her social environment—is a large part of what makes the poem so timeless.

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**JEROME ROTHENBERG**

***From A Third Book of Concealments: Three Poems***

**WHAT THE SONG REVEALS**

Turn it aside

& live with it –

*an empty*

*stupid*

(M. Lermontov)

*joke,*

like life itself,

like memory.

The intercessors ride you,

what they hide is what

the song reveals:

a catch deep in your throat,

blocking the words

without which

nothing can endure

more sure than love.

Romanticism is the name

he gives it,

only to have it falter

like all names

before it.

Everyone is old,

he thinks,

but I am older,

*pouring secrecy upon*

*the dying page,*

(G. Corso)

a step the young

take as they start

to vanish.

They are the ones

who face you,

not for the sake

of beauty

but in the mind's

demise.



## THE ORACLE, IF WE CAN CALL IT THAT

*for Hannah Weiner*

Until we fade  
into our last  
concealment, never  
anything more real  
than this,  
we wait & then  
at last we see  
the words,  
the screen,  
the ink spread in  
a silver wash,  
the glow.

*I am the ogre, then –*

he writes –

(V. Hugo)

*I am the scapegoat.*

The oracle,  
if we can call it that,  
hides in the words,  
the words obscure  
the other words,  
each word among us

is a harbinger,  
called by a number  
like the fingers  
on one hand.

*The numbers written  
on the rims of wheels*

also are letters,  
*never added up,*  
but intersecting in a frenzy  
each upon each.

## NOUS LES SENTONS PARTOUT

Nothing held back

but spoken

in another voice,

another country

where words

ring false.

So soon forgotten,

wrapped away.

The truth of revelation

is the truth

of revelation lost

& nothing less.

*Nous les sentons*

*partout lumières bleus*

*nous les voyons*

*flotter les appelons*

*nos morts.*

The truth of what

our eyes can't see

the final truth

concealed in darkness,

not a god

& not a harbinger

of light.

*A murmur slipping*

*toward silence,*

(C. Norwid)

the heady turmoil

of a meal

served in the dark,

the smell of sex

fresh on your fingers.

Every window

on this street

fills up with light

yet no one marks us,

no one foretells

the heartbeat

under gauze.

*Forlorn.*

A mystery

even the dead

can't solve.

NOTE. *A Book of Concealments* is a followup to an earlier hundred-poem work, *A Book of Witness*, with some notable changes in strategy & composition. In *A Book of Witness* I was concentrating on the rescue of the first-person voice as our principal instrument of witness – not only the personal “I” but the possibilities of a real if sometimes fictive “I” across a range of experiences, my own & at choice moments those of other poets from whom short & often cryptic phrases were appropriated & put in play. By contrast the poems in *A Book of Concealments* suppress the witnessing “I” but draw from my accumulated works by collaging as italicized inserts small fragments of poems already written & published.

The title, *A Book of Concealments*, is based, almost literally, on a Jewish mystical work, *Sifra diSeni ‘uta*, from which I drew the lines that open the first installment of the present work & that I had previously arranged with commentary in *A Big Jewish Book*. Those lines appear sporadically throughout *A Book of Concealments*, not as the mapping of a nonexistent god, but as an intimation, like the rest of the poems, of an imagined world embedded in the real one. Then, as the work moves to conclusion, the lines from *Sifra diSeni ‘uta* are replaced by clips and fragments from our Romantic and early modern forerunners, an ongoing concern of mine over the last several years.

The writing of these poems at a time of *new wars & new dissimulations* – a notable change since the writing of *A Book of Witness* – is another circumstance not to be ignored.

Jerome Rothenberg  
2008/2009

**JAMES SANDERS**

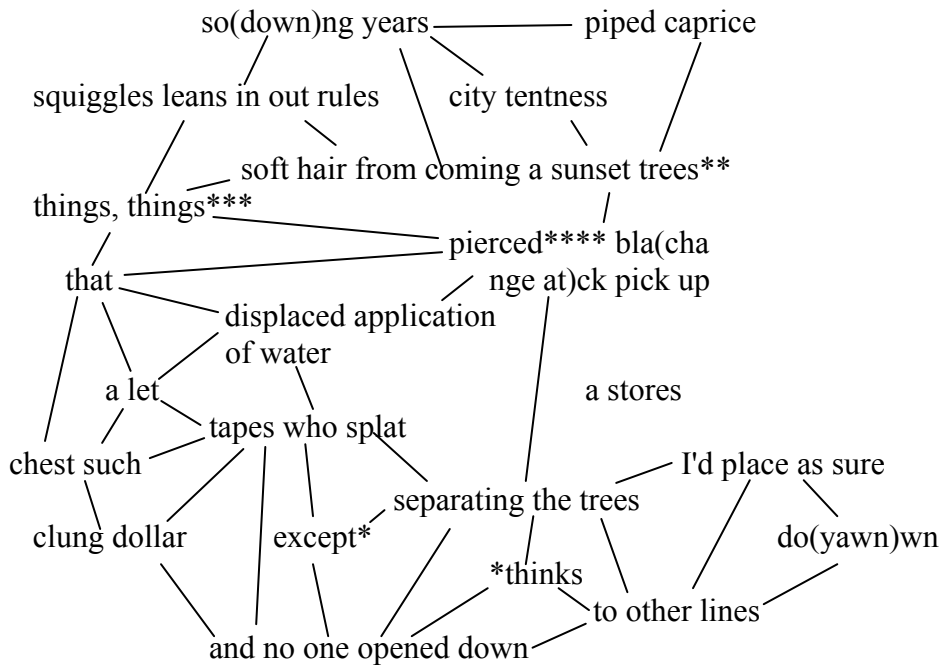
pointing with monotony  
please through  
made out all parts of overlapping the Y in front of  
of joysticks the U's of the eyes  
snorkel rinses the folds in  
too blond snow in sample packs contemporary life  
verging smiling is crawling and frisk with trust  
my cream-of-pasttime dentist surrounded  
budge is a dribbler by little pickles Diet Pepsi  
to the side but no one saw acres of wrists  
so that chandelierer  
then I knew now

**Plants (11:18)**

\*the double breathes in chins



**Days (0:33)(0:21)**



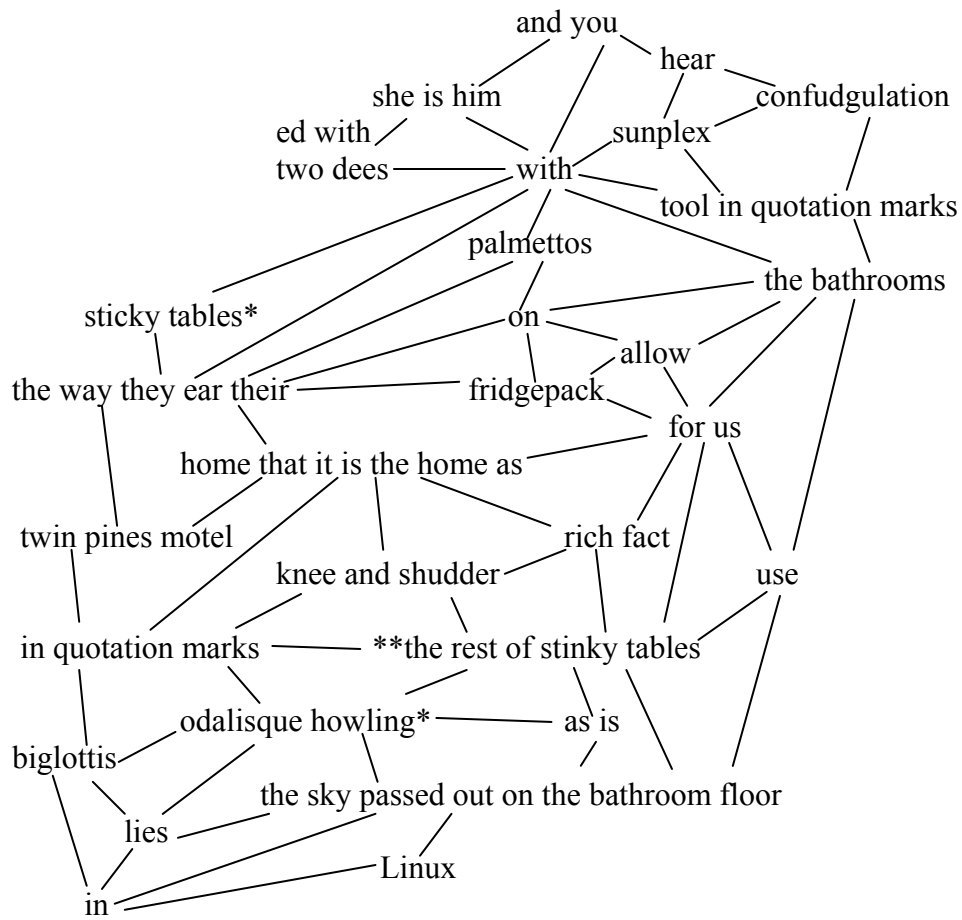
\*\*\*waves even deciding\*\*\*\* down

\*\*a lip over it that stops the air from coming out

\*\*\*\*resizing

**Days (3:22)**





**Days (Pascagoula) (1:30)**

\*the way they hear their stinky tables for\*\*

\*\*sky fountain on the bathroom floor

**CRAIG PEREZ**

**[from this captivity]**

They say, *'our language comes from here,'* yet I've never seen this place before. They say, *'history is addressed to the father,'* who I've never known. Let history be hand-written, seen through the mark, heard through no one speech. And if the past is not yet past, our skin points to another myth, another terrain. They say, *'the knowledge of a thing prepares its mastery.'* Deliver us from this captivity. You say, *"Even though nothing was ever the way it was, we've ceased to be an echo."*

**[the same burial]**

*—in different versions of the sea, each view*

*becomes a tomb—*

*—each arrival*

*scene becomes the same burial—*

*you say, “live in your voice to its last weaving”*

[to give]

—*the walls*

*are starting to give*

*nothing back—*

**JARED SCHICKLING**

***STUFFING #006229319-1***

*and it's more terrible at night if things go wrong*

like lament:

shot where the great WOOD fall

vacancy                      shrinks

vacancy                      “suns”

all new under the sun                      like nothing under suns’

whose outlines can crumble in                      not picked

suddenly special things to happen it                      does

shoots                      all over

snaps                      all over

shotgun TRUE shell

what seasons            itself rubbed up against

a loaded rack            a regional flavor

whose permit's domain is PERMIT somewhere

graze

humid snow slips from clung

branch, twang there

branching runnels hear

the last few, MAYS

*nothing  
bleeds*

like praise:

like solace, consolation:

what mounts

bridge, connecting nothings:

silent

a trace

hill

fern

slips

into his WHISTLE

no accident

SCENT to breathe w/piss

to carry either way

vesper

to know GARDEN what

consumes him, most laborious ( )

careful how he BREATHES blows it

a disappearing

has stuffed rooms

## *Ars Poetica of a New Millennium*

.01 Thank you Microsoft, for keeping my typing-life.  
Increasingly compactable. Thank you Microsoft.  
For all your fragile modality of inquiry. Thank you sincerely.

For the lightness of a name you are pulled from the earth.  
.02 There's breach in the unity, the whole thing moves.

The poems you know. Books all romantic.  
Expert passage of time.

.03 *Congos, columbium, tantalum*. Funding, crossed and will cross  
borders; they who make it escape. Thank you www.

.04 Riches; to the cheapest. The *cockaroaches* are pissed.



## SAM TRUITT

### *radius*

i want to slow it  
down enough to see the  
cracks b/w words b/w  
letters between us cracking  
with not up in the static of so  
much to find room to           being might be  
be the edge of                    shape of a person  
free i.e. to be                   is not a shadow  
in the thing the leaves                 of a being building  
of a sycamore tree are                 near a cut in the river  
the shadow of a telephone  
i.e. far off                       a sluice directing the water  
sound wire meets               to a plain cut along a bank where  
the shadow of a bird cast       wheat leaps rows  
on beige siding on               wave the wheat  
habitat for humanity           to his chest as he bends  
house across the street       hugging it under  
& flies off                       under his left arm his  
right with a scythe

## *Albany*

crack baggie sidewalk  
crack dandelion down

through and up in spent  
head the fluff

blown away so  
many cracks and so

many dandelions and  
clouds are white

blue between cracks the green  
dandelions

*there is no abstract*

i entered the state lottery  
last night at eddie's deli  
watched and waited—the ink  
in this bic cold at 5:09  
am so that even as i press it  
is hard to render a clear impression  
on the page the back  
of which reads “the parties shall meet and discuss”  
& “aspects of this article that are  
of mutual interest” &  
there is no abstract when what we  
all may know is appearance when  
words all all may convey  
is appearance it all is appearance  
is apparent there is no verity no  
test in texture only feeling  
numbs fingers alone abides  
to watch wait "flow of rhythm in verse or music"  
is cadence is "a falling" cadere  
"to fall" the case to befall to  
chance the future is a flow  
chants to befall to know flows off  
armenian chacnum "to fall, become  
low," perhaps also casar  
"hail, lightning" there is no distant

**SUSAN BRIANTE**

***GOODBYE TWENTIETH CENTURY***

because we were road fixed  
the road bifurcated, not to notice  
helicopters overhead  
large pieces of plywood scenery  
green Styrofoam trees  
energy poured into the system  
as a series of aqueducts, as trade  
winds, as a particular technique for lashing  
reeds or splicing film together  
    now the days tend  
toward half-finished sentences  
bring the mind to the porch  
of the boarded-up house down the street  
an air-conditioner stutters, curls its lips  
a bird on the lawn runs its scales  
two or three times  
not a pill to get me through  
it was the exhaustion, I'm telling you  
sick of driving, she decided to make a dvd

## **HEAT IN THE EYE**

Pink light at the end of the avenue leaves  
heat in the eye, wrought  
iron right up to the sidewalk: one nation  
for all of us with flowerboxes,  
with window air-  
conditioning units.

I can see them with my one good lens.

On his computer, Farid traces a blue line  
along west Dallas streets  
to find the quickest route to the tollway.

The war looks so far away  
we don't even argue about its poems,  
rage clicking like a keyboard.

I could be a martyr. Me  
with my bad complexion, my faulty vision,  
I could go anywhere. 3 years to the day after Katrina,  
and the woman on the documentary  
from Saint Bernard's parish said I don't need  
my house or my car or my job  
just my community. Made me seethe.

Under Thatcher, Joe Strummer sang: "White riot,  
I wanna riot..." and the kids thrashed  
in the streets. The students want something  
to write down, everyday I give them something,  
enjambment, the fallacy of paraphrase.

Sometimes only a map  
can take you backwards. Me, like a martyr,  
at the pink end of the avenue.  
I get so tired now driving late.

## **END OF ANOTHER CREATURE**

Starlings in the magnolia tree crackle, static, lightening; a helicopter floats overhead. Harvest brings dove-hunting season, a great migration. For six days I watch monarch butterflies scatter across the Metroplex, dream their carcasses onto the highway, dream black beetles biting my fingers in your clasped hands. I feel a pilot light at the back of my throat, while the helicopter groans a few blocks deeper down Ross Avenue. And the magnolia tree falls silent, and the season concludes.

The market migrates; the market scatters across the Metroplex.  
The market dreams my carcass onto the highway, groans a few blocks deeper into my neighborhood.

In the liquidity of late afternoon sun, a truck on the avenue clips branches from elms. What policy might we bring forth on our front-yard folding table? Deposit insurance? The return of Glass Steagall? Pull over. Price what you see. Privatize this rush-hour traffic. Look disappointed. The helicopter answers pulse, pulse, pulse. These fences make a triangle, a shed of mostly shadow behind the boxwoods and quiet where someone left chemicals.

## 11 RAILWAY LINES STRETCH FROM CHICAGO BY 1861

an adolescent daughter slutting around  
showing off her terrible, a pine tree  
gone rusty in winter time, sun  
seeps under her sweater,  
ribbon development and the public  
realm opens up to cars  
deracinated country folk  
could be wooed  
by linotype, steam engines, turbines,  
two tree trunks kind of groping  
*when you slice off a piece of crazy tail*, he warns me,  
know what the fence post knows  
you can drive  
for an hour south of Charlottesville  
watch a skinny girl walk a long road  
recently paved, worried about loyalty  
tar clings to fence weeds,  
unmoored from the nation  
the thickly-accented philosopher explained  
we could find hope rich light  
on the stable roof  
a boy from down the road  
who will read a girl differently  
who steps out of the trees responsible  
for love, under a system that pays him  
no mind no heed no blossoms  
yet on the redbud  
but space cleared for their coming