

Eleven Heads & One Thousand Arms:

New & Selected Errors



More Zen Assays

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PREFACE

The odd titles of my two previous books of Zen essays, *Elegy to the Bone Kimono*, and, *The Devil's in My Neck*, are poetic responses to my Zen practice. The first alludes to the way Zen as Zen (kimono, tradition) is always disappearing, changing form—even the bones of it. The second is a similar bit of Zen provocation – the first line of a poem by Thomas Lux – an allusion to the Zen story of the meditator who can neither swallow nor spit out this “hot brick” of life.

The title of this third book, *Eleven Heads & One Thousand Arms: New & Selected Errors*, is taken from a famous Buddhist legend where the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara vowed to liberate all beings from suffering. A noble intent. But when he realized the magnitude of this task, his head exploded into countless pieces. I love that even a Buddha can have a bad day. But friends help. His body was reassembled by the Buddha Amitabha and the bodhisattva Vajrapani into new form, with eleven heads and a thousand arms, each hand with an all-seeing eye.

It may be important to fall apart, even for a Buddha. This is the koan for this new selection of meditations. It takes a bit of poetry, and irreverence, to let Zen do its work in this Western body. An enlightenment that welcomes falling apart, of finding ourselves with more arms and heads than we know what to do with.

Hence, these essays—or *assays*—to stretch both poetry and Zen worlds, as with my first two efforts. The term *assay*, similar but different than *essay*, is used by both Joan Sutherland, as Zen teacher, and Jane Hirshfield, as poet, to describe a contemplative form of written inquiry reflective of both Zen and poetics. To examine the characteristics of something, in this case through meditation and poetics rather than analysis of a metal or ore.

This book of essays on Zen, poetry, and imagination utilizes *metaphoric language* similar in its way to the use of *koans* in Zen. Joan Sutherland, a Pacific Zen School co-founder with roshi and poet John Tarrant, describes this approach to both language and practice:

Koans are metaphors...In classical Chinese, the original language of the koans, you don't ask *What is X?* You ask *What is X like?* ... Metaphors are polytheistic: my love is a red red rose,

love is a dagger through my heart, love is blind, love is the opening door. Explanations are monotheistic: *love is a pheromone-triggered state neurochemically indistinguishable from psychosis.*

Metaphors and explanations have very different views of what truth is. Explanations settle things, put an end to the journey, which is sometimes a great relief and sometimes premature. Metaphors connect one thing to another, often in new ways, and the journey veers off in unexpected directions.

These essays reflect Zen moments in poetry and the imagination, thus are a poetics of Zen more than a plumbing manual or set of instructions about how to screw the jangle-gym of the mind together. Years of mindfulness meditation have helped me build the house of practice by simply watching how I am made, by the hammer, saw, screwdriver of mind. Zen has helped me open the windows, let the breeze rustle through—to step outside even, stand naked in the open field.

John Tarrant, who often utilizes poetry in his retreats as a kind of koan, speaks to this in his marvelous book, *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*:

Many psychological and spiritual approaches rely on an engineering metaphor and hope to make your mind more predictable and controllable. Koans go the other way. They encourage you to make an ally of the unpredictability of the mind and to approach your life more as a work of art. The surprise they offer is the one that art offers: inside unpredictability you will find not chaos, but beauty.

These essays are inflected, too, by the literary form of *zuibitsu*, or *Flowing Brush*—a classical Japanese form derived from the Chinese literary tradition that employs random thoughts, diary entries, reminiscence, and poetry. It emerged sometime in the Heian Period (794-1185 AD), first seen in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*, named so because she literally sewed a pile of secret notebooks into a pillow, kept as a court attendant to Japanese Empress Sadako-Teshi.

Eleven Heads & One Thousand Arms blends the threads of literature and practice, of contemplation woven with daily life. It is a cross-genre work, meant to paint in different modes of prose and koan, essay and assay; to include sources beyond traditional Zen's canon, especially Western poets & writers. Thereby to be as spry as Zen itself.

And, with less precision than a plumbing manual of the mind—thereby with more license to follow the path of the scientist: work often described as 99% error punctuated by the occasional earth-shattering discovery. As John Tarrant says, perhaps the errors *are* the path, the mistakes not really mistakes. The latter part of this book’s title is taken from a poem by Dean Young, called “Selected Recent and New Errors”. His lines, in their way, an apt description of the Buddha’s injunction to doubt, to see for oneself, to be at home in this world of imprecision and error:

My books are full of mistakes...

I don’t know what I’m talking about either.
Do you think the dictionary ever says to itself
I’ve got these words that mean completely
different things inside myself
and it’s tearing me apart?
My errors are even bigger than that.

Here’s to eleven heads, a thousand arms, to new & selected errors in the living of our baffling and wondrous lives.

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Eleven Heads & One Thousand Arms

This morning, I pick up the *Celestial Gallery*, a large picture book of modern Tibetan tangkas by Romio Shrestha, who directs a school of artist-craftsmen in the Kathmandu valley of Tibet. The stunning orange, greens and blues of the cover draw me, and, the memory of picking this book out at the Boston museum when we visited my son Gabe at college. I open to the picture entitled “The Thousand Arms of Compassion”, a gorgeous mandala of Avalokiteshvara set against a temple and forest background. The narrative accompanying the picture says:

In Buddhist legend, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara vowed to liberate all beings from suffering, but when he realized the magnitude of his task, his head exploded into countless pieces. His body was then reassembled by the Buddha Amitabha and the bodhisattva Vajrapani...into this omnipotent form, with eleven heads and a thousand arms. Each of Avalokiteshvara’s hands displays an all-seeing eye...

I love that even a Buddha can have a bad day, can feel so overwhelmed by the magnitude of what one’s bitten off that you explode into countless pieces. That your fellow Buddhas have to piece you back together. That it takes no less than eleven heads and a thousand arms to even make a dent. That there is an all-seeing eye in each palm, just to keep track of every nuance of existence. It’s a good koan.

Thinking of more recent bodhisattvas – the legacy and troubles of our own era – I turn next to the de Young Museum’s recent *Summer of Love* exhibit book. Read the chapter called, “Not Past At All – The Legacy of San Francisco’s Summer of Love”, by Dennis McNally. His rendering of the place this era holds in our national psyche seems a good way to begin this series of essays – the *Eleven Heads & Thousand Arms* of it all. Our particular curve of the Buddha-road we travel together:

As William Faulkner so wisely put it in another context, “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.” The Summer of Love era has never really left us; our current national culture wars are rooted in the profound intellectual challenges of the 1960’s, which themselves go at least as far back as the 1840’s, when bohemianism – art and the spiritual arrayed against bourgeois achievement – arose in Europe, and when Henry David Thoreau confronted American notions of its own exceptionalism, the Protestant work ethic, and humankind’s relationship to nature. (And also when San Francisco began, not as an economic construct but as a refuge for maddened gold-seekers marginalized in their birth homes on the East Coast, in Chile, in China.)

In fact, Thoreau's visionary philosophizing was so dramatically ahead of its time that it wasn't *until* the 1960's that a large part of his analysis came to be fully grasped by more than the smallest group of people. Although he utterly lacked the hedonist gene that permeated the sixties, the antimaterialist message of *Walden* and his other books is at the core of the sociocultural revolt that characterized the period.

The three decades preceding the 1960's brought a catastrophic depression, a war against manifest evil that was won by technology and large-scale social organization, and a postwar reaction to Depression-era radicalism that saw a runaway campaign of political repression called McCarthyism squelch all dissent. Finally, the '50's saw a blossoming prosperity substantially nurtured by postwar GI Bill benefits that boosted access to higher education and home ownership for an entire generation. The result was stasis. Affluence, yes, but at a cost: Don't make waves. Conform. Don't argue. Believe that the sitcom world of *Father Knows Best* – with no black people, no gay people, no alcoholism or incest or domestic violence – is real.

In October 1955, poet Allen Ginsberg stood in front of a hundred fellow doubters at the Sic Gallery at 3119 Fillmore Street in San Francisco and roared out a prophetic ode named "Howl" that warned that America had become Moloch, a soul-destroying monster...

And all that follows, which is part of my own intimate history. *The past isn't dead. It isn't even past*, as Faulkner said. This mini-history still swirls in my old heart, still fuels the reverie and turmoil of my own family's decaying *Shangri La* retreat in the mountains of Mariposa, still buffets the little bubble of Santa Cruz where we now live afloat in the turbulent sea of America, and the vast jeweled-net globe of the world. The Beats became the Hippies, then the New Agers, and now the Millennials set their sights on redeeming a new century in-spite-of us. My daughter Kelsey, with her libertarian histories, son Gabe with his revolutionary bohemian poetics.

And this, according to Buddhist legend, is only one tiny sliver of time almost invisible amid innumerable *kalpas* of time.

Trying to wrap my arms around it all, I do *feel* as though I were a fledgling Buddha exploding into a thousand pieces. It might take eleven heads, a thousand arms, an all-seeing eye in each palm, just to make it through these strange and wondrous days. This is what being a *bodhisattva* is all about, I guess: being stretched far beyond what one's heart can hold. Embodying the explosion as though the world were your own body. Because it is.

Recent and New Errors

As I wake up, I stagger through a poem from Dean Young, lines which would have made even the irascible Chan masters raise an eyebrow:

Selected Recent and New Errors

My books are full of mistakes...

I don't know what I'm talking about either.
Do you think the dictionary ever says to itself
I've got these words that mean completely
different things inside myself
and it's tearing me apart?
My errors are even bigger than that.
You start taking down the walls of your house,
sooner or later it'll collapse
but not before you can walk around
with your eyes closed, rolled backwards
and staring straight into the amygdala's meat locker
and your own damn self hanging there...

But I ain't confessing nothing.
On mornings when I hope you forget my name,
I walk through the high wet weeds
that don't have names either...
Farther and farther into the weeds.

We have absolutely no proof
god isn't an insect
rubbing her hind legs together to sing.
Or boring into us like a yellow jacket
into a fallen, overripe pear.
Or an assassin bug squatting over us,
shoving a proboscis right through
our breastplate then sipping.
How wonderful our poisons don't kill her.

The poem is longer, and more twisted, than the lines I've extracted – you can read it in its entirety at the Poetry Foundation website. What a macabre meditation, but I

absolutely love its strange singing. A long koan on doubt, perhaps, and awe – pushing further into the weeds without having to name everything as *good or bad, threat or food*, as the amygdala does. Perhaps there's a secret here, in these Zen weeds, beyond the quest for flowers, enlightenment, safety. God is singing to us, and we too are food. The self, hanging in the center of this meat locker of a body. A new error? Or the very koan the universe is mulling on its cosmic lips?

If only more spiritual teachers would say, *my books are full of mistakes!* Even Buddha said, *Doubt! Be a light unto yourselves!* We don't know, any better than the old Taoist Chuang Tzu did: *am I a human dreaming I'm a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I'm human?* Is life more an overripe pear, a yellow jacket, a god, an assassin bug blissfully sipping my broken heart oblivious to any error in its nature.

Knowing my own heart, there are parts to it that mean completely different things, and it's tearing me apart, too. Which is why I'm tearing down the walls of this *house of self*, rolling my eyes backwards, offering *metta* to the poor witness hanging by my brain in this meat-locker of a body.

It is in the *new & selected errors* of this Buddha-path that I'll find my singing – koans shoving their proboscis right through my golden armor, this cracked breastplate, into my heart. Even the poison, a kind of nectar.

My Three-Inch Tongue

In a fit of urgency yesterday, I sent a few poems to journals so as not to feel isolated from this inscrutable world. A poet's bane, and blessing. This flow between Zen practice and creative urgency is delicate, and I look to both worlds as one world. Even if I end up biting my own tongue.

Yesterday's koan "says" something about giving voice to such things: Koan 98 of the *Book of Equanimity*, with its jarring image:

Men of old with tongues of only three inches could thus be intimate.

I'm obviously not a man with only a three-inch tongue: I write too much. But I *am* old, and there *is* an intimacy to poetics. When a monk tries to nail-down the master about what kind of Buddhism is best, a commentator says,

To even ask such a question, Master Bansho says, is like a cat pissing in your house.

Better to not define too much or too well what Zen is. Cat piss smells. A three-inch tongue mumbles too much to be understood. Still, poetry can help, the way it mumbles with Zen—as in the Appreciatory Verse to the koan:

Not entering the world, not conforming to externals.
There's a family secret in the kalpa jar and empty place.
White duck weed, faint breeze, autumn river's dusk.
Ancient bank, boat returning, a belt of mist.

Sometimes the mist of words is its own boat on the river at dusk. The poetics of *white duck weed, faint breeze, autumn river dusk*. To be *in* this world, yet not hypnotized by its definitions. I love the image of the family secret in the kalpa jar, a *kalpa* being an immense span of time: how our unique particulars rise from emptiness, yet take shape in a specific family, in the jar of time and place we find ourselves in. Without poetry, how could this be held? Without the boat of Zen, the boat of the body? Even a three-inch tongue begs to mumble something. As John Tarrant says, the only thing worse than trying to say something about Zen is saying nothing at all.

The next koan too—Koan 99—is just as odd and irreverent, using outlandish language to help me find what I’m not really looking for:

For chess, there’s a special kind of knowledge. For wine, there’s a special kind of stomach. A clever rabbit has three holes. A sagacious fox makes ten thousand raids. Moreover, there’s a stubborn person. Tell me: Who is he?

Nailed. I am this stubborn man—insistent on speaking even with a short, wounded tongue. Perhaps all I need, though, is a few rabbit-holes to scamper down: this love of writing, being a therapist. A little wine. Playing chess with life. Sending a few errant poems out into the brusque world. Making ten thousand raids on the ten thousand things. Being a clever rabbit, a sagacious fox, is as much buddha-nature as any emptiness.

Still, it stirs up a lot of dust. Yet when the monk in the koan asks Master Ummon, “What about speck-of-dust samadhi?” Ummon replies, “Rice in the bowl, water in the pail”. The *Flower Ornament Scripture* speaks of “entering right samadhi on every speck of dust” and the commentator says the obvious:

...every speck of dust reveals the whole universe.

Even bland rice, tepid water, uncertain poems, a streak of stubbornness, a bad chess move – it all reveals this astonishing universe.

My fox ate my rabbit. Tell me, *What am I?* Oops, I forgot, I’ve only a three-inch tongue!

The Nerve of It: Having a Self

While editing a collection of Buddhist essays on *the self*, I run across a poem of similar topic by Lynn Emanuel, from her book, *The Nerve of It*:

I tried to flatter myself into extinction, tried to bury alive in a landslide of disparagement ego and subjectivity and the first-person singular pronoun. I ran identity to ground with the dogs of irony; I tried to kill, bury, burn, embalm, and erase the outlines of me, mummify myself in the damp wrappings of surrealism, sever and rearrange me with Stein's cubisms, break, buy, bribe, drive a stake through me; tried to whip to death the whole frumpish horse-and-buggy, essentialist, runs-in-the-blood notion I had of who "I" was; like Stein I tried to bleed the bloody paragraph to death, killed the semicolon with the machete of my wit, tried to censor and edit, rewrite and emend me, my belief in lifeblood, marrow, core, and fiber; tried to swap my DNA at the DNA supermarket I read about in Philip K. Dick. So what is I still doing here? Why is I having to keep its eye peeled? Its eye on the ball? Trying to steer by some dim star, that small, raw planet of self-loathing hammered into the night ahead? Why is I hauled forth over this choppy terrain like a tug on the rough boulevards of a black river? And by whom?

This is a marvelous koan of the self, and the self's ironic attempts to break or disappear its hold on itself. The paradox, in Zen too, of craving to give up desire, of the self attempting to not be a self, to surrender to a different way of being – yet in Zen and art, psychology and nature, the self remains, *its eye on the ball*, blinking still.

As John Tarrant would say, *is there a problem here?*

Of course, some of what Lynn Emanuel alludes to is the trend in poetry these days to be done with "confessional" writing—the trend toward the personal—thinking it limited and banal. Aspects of Buddhism and Art agree on this, as though the self were ultimately a caricature, a distraction—yet there is a "chop wood, carry water" aspect to the self's experience that is the essence of meditation, and a still-rich terrain for the arts of writing and representation alike.

My ruminations here allude to the necessity of being a cohesive-self even *after* the self has been deconstructed. Where in Zen, the ox-mind is ridden back to the village, or in art, the fragmented self again finds the cohesion it took itself apart to find. The meditative quest—to deconstruct the self and its supposed immaculate solidity—is the key “middle move”. As a child, one must first evolve *into* a self, one strong enough to later deconstruct its constituent parts in the spiritual and artistic quest, before finally returning again to the irascible beauty of its own ongoing composition. As the Zen phrase goes,

In the beginning, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.
In the middle, mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers.
Later, mountains are again mountains, and rivers again rivers.

Which, now in my sixties, I can also say about my “own” self: *it is what it is*, man. As quixotic and dense, dull and brilliant, as it’s ever been. Still, this path of being-a-self is quite the occupation, and pre-occupation, which is why I like this next poem of Emanuel’s – descriptive of both poetics *and* meditation:

Ars Poetica

Personal experiences are chains and balls
fatally drawn to the magnetic personality.
I have always been a poet
who poured herself into the shrouds
of experience’s tight dresses so that a reader could try to get a feel
for the real me, metaphorically speaking, of course.

I bore experience’s leashes and tourniquets.
I stuffed myself deep into the nooses of its collars.
I was equipped. I was like a ship plated with the armor of experience,
nosing the seas which are its seas.

But now I have other things to do. I will not write about dying
my hair blonde-on-black for my post-post-feminist project. The wicked must be punished.
The innocent exalted, butchers called forth for the slaughter of the lambs, and doctors
called from their face-lifts to perform amputations.
I hear the call to rise out of the trance of myself
into the surcease of the dying world.

Since the war began I have discovered
(1) My Life Is Unimportant and (2) My Life Is Boring.
But now, as Gertrude Stein wrote from Culoz in 1943,
Now, we have an occupation.

Yes, at least now we have an occupation: rowing the little ferry-boat of the body and the self through these turbulent waters of world and mind. It's a good job to have, despite its seeming unimportance, recurrent boredoms, trances, amputations, pouring oneself into the tight dresses, tourniquets, collars of life's seeming endless demands. It is a gift. An *ars poetica*. The nerve of it all! Yet, not to worry – it won't last forever.

Word as Fetish, Word as Gate

Reading Nadia Colburn, and her unusual essay in the *American Poetry Review* entitled, “New Life Revisited – Beatrice and The Traumatic Imagination”. I randomly open to it while thumbing through old literary journals. The essay is unusual because of its seamless weave of the sometimes-disparate threads of literature, therapy, and spirituality. Such interweaving is often frowned upon, with purists relegating each theme to its own professional journals. Of course, it is this very intersection that is of most interest to me.

She seems to wrestle, as I do, with literature as both avenue into, and protection from, the world:

Why do we read literature? I’d spent so much of my life reading, and suddenly I couldn’t answer that question. I stopped reading—or, rather, I read in a completely different way—I read *about* things. I read to learn, worried that literature simply repeated the traumas, violence, and amnesia of our culture’s history.

I read history and I read spiritual texts in an attempt to come to a clear space, to stand in the present moment fully, with clear eyes, as if in understanding I could free myself from the entanglements of the past.

Her urge reminds me of the reading and journaling I did all through my recent travels to Indonesia and Japan, striving to understand the colonial underpinnings, the earlier feudal violences, the incomprehensible power unleashed at Hiroshima—as well as the majesty of the immense trees that have returned to the Peace Park just seventy years later, near the epicenter of this first atomic explosion. To embrace, too, the stunning beauty of culture and nature in that uncompromising Zen way of *seeing* all that is—leaving neither beauty nor horror out.

Nadia muses that, *As we become stronger, the unbearable becomes more bearable. What we have blocked off begins to become integrated.* For her, this includes a long-repressed memory of child abuse when three years old at the hands of a babysitter, emerging only with the birth of her first child and her own body’s encounter with such primal energies.

Literature, Nadia worries, can fetishize trauma in such a way as to separate us from its visceral reality. The human experience itself—whether in Zen or literature—must be accessible if one is to remain human, and not etherealized. She says,

But in reality, traumatic experience—even as it is defined by its unusualness, its breaking of normalcy—is not an unusual experience. Rather, trauma is one of the foundational experiences that mark what it means to be human, especially in a history, as the history of the civilized world has been, that is so deeply marked with violence.

It is as we name our traumatic experiences that we are able to see more clearly our own stories and our collective history—what has often gone unseen, blocked off, invisible in plain sight, around us all the time...

And eventually I came to believe that it was my reading and writing of literature...that in large part allowed me to read and reread, write and rewrite my own story.

Her own story, in the essay, becomes entwined with Dante's literal and poetic obsession with Beatrice—who became a paragon of almost impossible beauty in Western culture's elevation of the pristine above the muck and fray of the human. But Beatrice was also a real woman, Bice Portinari, who died young, perhaps in childbirth, yet emerged in Dante's imagination as the unattainable muse, Beatrice. In this meditative essay, the writer Nadia traces her own evolution as person and woman through rejection of Dante's projection—and the failure of most cultures to *see* women—full circle back to Dante's loss, at age nine, of his own mother. It is Beatrice, through the pathos of his imagination, that helps him navigate this trauma through poetry.

I suddenly understood clearly, as I had not before, that the true object of Dante's love and desire is not Beatrice at all. Beatrice herself is a screen-love. What Dante is really interested in is the power of the imagination and of language itself to remake the world.

At first, though, Nadia is catapulted into a broad rejection of literature and poetics as she wrestles with the writhing realities of giving birth, its wrenching pain, and the sense that the world needs more from us than imagination alone.

I turned away from literature and turned more to healing, to activism, to the importance of seeing and saying things clearly and directly.

Musing that she, like Dante, wanted to rise above the contrary world through imagination, wanted to find a “form of perfection that does not really exist” – as in the vision of Beatrice that Nadia was enamored with when a younger woman – she finds through the birth of her son Gabriel a way to reintegrate beauty with the mess of incarnate life.

But giving birth, becoming a mother, made me land in time, in reality, in history and in my body in a different way. Perfection as such—despite, or perhaps because of, the impossible roles mothers are asked to assume—is not possible. We are here with all the joy and all the mess.

Motherhood helped me integrate the different polarities of life experience and of my own psyche. And in that reintegration and in that connection to my own early childhood self, I felt a new connection to the unseen—not just to the unseen spaces of trauma, but also to the unseen places of spiritual connection and to the sacred that are so often covered up.

Finding her way back to reading and writing, Nadia began to see these very processes as not “only” literary, but as healing.

Human kind cannot bear very much reality; we turn to poetry, to literature, to help us deal with the reality that we cannot otherwise so easily bear.

But it does not need to be an either/or. I believe if we read consciously, we can both escape and transform reality, we can find a space of creative engagement where we can play with the unnamable and over time come to name it.

In Nadia’s essay itself, one can see the power inherent in such naming. The way a word, a story—however much it threatens to become only fetish, and not the thing itself—becomes a path of discovery. The story about Dante and his idealized Beatrice, the realities of childbirth, childhood trauma, early death, and the mess of human experience, become a kind of koan. In this encounter, one becomes a more incarnate—and hence, liberated—human being.

Why I Like Horses

C. D. Wright's new book has an immense and wondrous title:

The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All

It is a kind of permission to embrace my life—all of its quirky eccentricity—in a breath and embrace as large as this title. As I welcome the gaudy particulars of my own humble days, this uncertain life keeps becoming spring and midnights and fire and all. Like a mirror.

Yesterday, Linda and I met the painter Gary late-morning to review house-painting progress, and colors. He assured Linda that the *blue* he was using was computer-matched to the old color, since she worried it was too electric-blue, too pastel. Turns out it's just clean, and that the brightness will fade into the comfortable blue we're used to. Just like most self-improvement projects. I like working with Gary.

Today, I have the good fortune I thought might never arrive during three decades of a busy career: the pleasure of staring out the window. As the poet Billy Collins says, most every poem could begin with this simple act. James Hillman quotes W.S. Merwin, that it is often difficult for others, when looking at a poet staring out a window, to tell if he is working or merely looking out the window—and what the difference is between the two.

This Zen of poetry—and the poetry of Zen experience—is often simply being awake to the life one is living. All of it: the warp, the mirror, even the manure. C.D. Wright's following poem tells us how poetry helps this enterprise:

POETRY WAS. POETRY IS. POETRY WILL BE.

Providing it avoids its own stasis—which, I notice, it does—it may be *the* future, given how unfulfilling and ruinous many human endeavors are, how swiftly discarded almost any given set of long-acquired skills. Henry Miller wrote something along the lines of the biggest terror of the one who mucks out the

stalls is a world without horses. *Ergo* if poetry goes and horses go, in either order, who is going to deal with all the muck. Because muck there will be, horse or no horse; without poetry, much more muck.

I used to hope that the spiritual path was more about finally *finishing* the job of cleaning out the horse stalls; but then there'd have to be no horse, and I like horses.

∞

In this same vein—that of muck, the beauty of failing and the glory of the present moment—I love W. S. Merwin's poem from his book, *Garden Time*:

The Present

As they were leaving the garden
one of the angels bent down to them and whispered

I am to give you this
as you are leaving the garden

I do not know what it is
nor what it is for
what you will do with it

you will not be able to keep it
but you will not be able

to keep anything
yet they both reached at once

for the present
and when their hands met

they laughed

What an utterly remarkable poem. The “present” of *the present*, the gift Eve and Adam receive as they leave the garden with its proximate awareness; a new thing even the angels didn't fully understand. To be less eternal, hence more intimate. They laughed. This is the reflex of most awakenings: *laughter*. Even as they “failed”, by leaving such static perfection.

And so they, and we, became *more*—and more complex. Ocean Vuong says something of poetry that reflects a similar Zen sensibility:

Poetry acknowledges the true complexity of what it means to be human, which is that nothing is ever that certain.

By becoming uncertain, we perhaps live the gift of incarnation whispered at the beginning to those who fall into its sway:

Torso of Air

Suppose you do change your life.
& the body is more than

a portion of night—sealed
with bruises. Suppose you woke

& found your shadow replaced
by a black wolf. The boy, beautiful

& gone. So you take the knife to the wall
instead. You carve & carve

until a coin of light appears
& you get to look in, at last,

on happiness. The eye
staring back from the other side—

waiting.

The walls I build to bolster myself against the face of infinity have holes of light in them. The eye of my *original face* staring back, a kind of happiness, waiting. This clay torso which feels so solid, this shadow, real as the black wolf of the mind, is also a torso of air. In meditation, I may find myself (this oxymoron) in the garden after all, becoming knife, shadow, wolf, boy, even the snake. The universe discovering in us something it intended but wasn't sure it could become. Till we arrived.

Who cares, then, if we are *Imaginary Vessels*, the title of Paisley Rekdal's book of poems. Isn't this the essence of that ephemeral *self* which Zen says both does and does-not exist:

from A Peacock in a Cage

shaking out its corona of tail feathers is like light
glowing in a bulb, a man
dancing inside an elevator: the space
too small to quite contain him, yet
contain him it does; the way a cloud
keeps some portion of the sea inside it or a box
encloses air, encloses also
the philosophical cat both dead and alive
inside it. The way a car inhales the gas
containing bones of dissolved dinosaurs
and the cheese breeds mold to heal the cut that holds
the hurt cradled inside the body

The *self* may be a peacock in a cage, but our tail feathers are full of light, and one may still dance inside the body's prison. Even in the elevator of each patient day. Everything living off each other, this inscrutable interconnectedness: driving to work on the bones of dinosaurs, turning mold to penicillin for this wound of a body. Shoveling the horse manure that comes from the magnificent beast life is.

This is why I love horses.

The Zen of Scarecrow, Bullet, Angel

From a poem by Mai Der Vang:

Last Body

I can't leave my hurting skull
Or the rose apple opening inside me.

I'll count the weeks, months,
Unfurling each numbered day in my hair.

Frost ribbons inside my brain,
Canals push up my leg.

I'm moving on
To what the world needs me to know.

I am the angel trapped inside the bullet.
I am the exit wound trapped inside the angel.

Am I the scarecrow
Perched at the end of the human trail.

I'll palm cotton between my prayers
Until the universe has passed...

I can't answer it all,
But my mask grows taller every year.

In Zen practice, one never really leaves the hurting skull—it is always a human equation, despite the craving to transcend it all. Yet, the rose apple also opens inside, and this too is what it means to be human. In the non-dual life, I move toward *what the world needs me to know*, embracing both angel and bullet, exit wound and the scarecrow of *self*. To say, *I can't answer it all*, is a wise poem. In Zen, the master may ask *What is your Original Face?* To which the ornery poet may answer with the linguistics of paradox: *But my mask grows taller every year!* Laughter all around.

Zen carries with it the old Chinese Taoist flavor of the *One* being expressed as *The Ten Thousand Things*, and though I feel this urge to reduce everything back to this *One*, the *One* may be more interested in its own variety: *Us*.

Perhaps the poet Camille Rankine's book title, *Incorrect Merciful Impulses*, can say something about this messy variety, and my desire to be rid of it. The spiritual impulse tends toward the "correct" view, the "only" way. She says, *I like to remember that we're not all experiencing the world from the same perch – not seeing the same day – and that's one thing poetry can offer: the opportunity to see the world in a new way*. One way to break the gravitational hold of any unitary is to give oneself over to the world's polytheism, to see with a million eyes, to *live* meditation rather than using it as a means of escape:

OUTLIVING

It's heady here under the table,
too dusty to ring the dinner bell, too heavy
to open the window and let birds

breeze in, wide and ready. Let's drink
to transients. Let's
keep the guests believing

in ghosts and we'll keep
busy waltzing, wanting
to be sliced into.

Is there anyone here
bedding the master, anyone hungry
as the night must be, lonely as Tuesday?

I've been dirigible,
changing hands, forgetting the milk.
Void and taut as a canvas ever since.

Anyone hungry as the night, lonely as Tuesday? In Zen, we're in this together, wide as every experience. Extravagance, rather than perfection's minimalism, the better song.

But the goal is not clutter. The last image in the poem—to be a canvas, taut and empty—is as powerful an image of *Sunyata*, or the pregnant-void, as there is. To paint and be

painted, in reciprocal creativity—or as the Buddhist scholar Peter Hershock says, with *improvisational virtuosity*.

It is this virtuosity I admire in the poet Stephen Dunn, who praises his 75th birthday in this poem, a kind of embrace of all one has been in a single life:

A Card from Me to Me

The pilgrimage of the body from infancy to dust and nothingness,
and the oasis, some believe, of a heaven afterward, every nationality
on their knees, sipping, taking turns, even the reverent sharing with folks
like me. At the very least cake and candle celebrations along the way,
a few people happy for your next *next*, others not as jealous
as they might be, the movement (if we're lucky) from ignorance
to astonishment, allowing for a thousand dumb days in between.
And seeds becoming tomatoes and redwoods, ants becoming armies,
language allowing us to disguise what we mean, *skye* one syllable
for all that complexity, and starfish making their homes in the sea,
I praise on my 75th birthday the strangeness, the immensity, of what I have
and have had and every small thing that against the odds continues to be.

To praise the strangeness, the immensity, of what I have and have had and every small thing that against the odds continues to be, is the best kind of Zen. As in Mai Der Vang's initial poem, I too am the *angel trapped inside the bullet, the exit wound trapped inside the angel, the scarecrow perched at the end of the human trail*.

Lincoln in the Bardo, the Girl in Russia, & the Graveyard of Books

I woke in a strange mood. Didn't sleep well, feel a dark discontent. Perhaps something I ate? Or that Trump is still president after his first few weeks of absolute mayhem? Or that my wife and I still feel disconnected after a Valentine's weekend, tough schedule and differing temperaments relegating us to ships passing in the proverbial night? It is just a mood. In my Zen practice, I keep learning to lean into rather than away from such things.

It sometimes helps, sometimes pollutes, to scan the news first thing before rolling out of bed. The country, and the world, seems to fester in this foreboding of dark times. Standing Rock, immigration-sweep fears, blatant lying and greed in the new administration—how did it come to this? Better to sit first-thing. Still, I'd rather be aware than pull the ostrich routine, head in the sand, hiding. Is that a koan?

I flip through a *New York Times Book Review* lying open on the couch, read an essay about "Lincoln in the Bardo" by George Saunders, a surreal novel about Lincoln tarrying at the gravesite of his deceased eleven-year old son, who with other spirits seeking to be released, wrestle with saying goodbye to their old lives—in order to move on, live in new ways. The last paragraph of the book review is haunting, applicable to today's world:

The father must say goodbye to his son, the son must say goodbye to the father. Abraham Lincoln must stop being the father to a lost boy and assume his role as a father to a nation, one on the brink of cataclysm. It is a perilous moment, the sort that comes along every so often, where it seems the country is listing and about to tip and only steady hands can right the ship. Survival depends not only on the captain, but on all aboard. Here we insert the common observation that the inanity of modern life has left the satirist unable to compete...But events sometimes conspire to make a work of art, like a novel set in the past, supremely timely. In describing Lincoln's call to action, Saunders provides an appeal for his limbo denizens—for citizens everywhere—to step up and join the cause. As one graveyard slave puts it, inspired by the great man in his mourning: "...We are ready, sir; are angry, are capable, our hopes are coiled up so tight as to be deadly, or holy: Turn us loose, sir, let us at it, let us show what we can do."

A story fit for both mood and country this morning. Like Lincoln, how not to let grief paralyze. To loose ourselves in bodhisattva-zeal, see what we can do.

The next book review is similarly themed, a coming-of-age memoir set in the Soviet Union, entitled *The Girl From The Metropol Hotel*, by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya. The review is by one of my favorite poets, Ilya Kaminsky, entitled “Red Ripening”. With unflinching and surreal stories about a young girl surviving Russia during the second World War, putting in humble perspective anything yet occurring in America, Ilya ends his review with this:

Ultimately, the girl emerges not only uncrushed but one of Russia’s best, and most beloved, contemporary authors, which brings to mind Auden’s famous words about Yeats: “Mad Ireland hurt him into poetry.” This memoir shows us how Soviet life hurt Ludmilla Petrushevskaya into crystalline prose.

This, perhaps, the saving-grace of the Arts in the face of both dark mood and dark countries—all the dark matter of this Universe, perhaps—how intensities can *hurt us into poetry*. In this stunning cosmos, there seems a role for *immensities* and *intensities* as necessary antecedents to deeper consciousness and galactic formation alike.

Finally, I finish the morning’s reading with a wise and winsome essay by James Atlas, entitled “Headed for the Graveyard of Books”. Its own kind of darkness—the inevitability that all our striving comes to naught. As an author, after cataloguing the many books produced over the generations, all heading for obscurity in “the graveyard of books”, he opines:

Is that such an ignominious fate? I didn’t write my books for posterity (not that posterity would have cared): I wrote them for myself. Which doesn’t mean I didn’t hunger for readers and fame. I never could have endured so much hard, solitary labor without the prospect of an audience. But this graveyard of dead books doesn’t unnerve me. It reminds me that I had a deeper motive, one that only the approach of old age and death has unlocked. I wrote to answer questions I had—the motive of all art, whatever its ostensible subject. There were things I urgently needed to know...It wasn’t the hope of immortality that goaded me to write: It was obsession.

Here’s to obsession and its commitments: a kind of bodhisattva vow in the dark center of it all. Where the Big Bang started. Where each new star is forged.

Zen's New Syntax – Here I Am! Here I Am!

Ilya Kaminsky is a poet of stunning and original beauty, born in Odessa, Ukraine, mostly deaf—whose broadside poem hung on my wall at work for years before coming home to my stairway wall. In an interview with Philip Metres, his responses are as lyrical as his poems, mediated as they are, I think, by the necessity of translating his thinking from one language and culture to another, as well as from his own interior silences into English.

He reflects on the nature of translation, which speaks to me not only of language-translation, but the cultural and spiritual translation of Buddhist practice to this new continent:

There is beauty in falling in love with a language—the strangeness of its sounds, the awe of watching the sea-surf of a new syntax beating again and again the cement of your unknowing. Learning to speak again can be erotic—the unfamiliar turn of the tongue, the angle of the mouth, the movement of lips.

On the other hand, you are so powerless, so humbled, so lost, bewildered, surrounded by nothing but your own confusion. That, too. You don't know the word, what to do?

And then: the miracle of metaphor. You know other words, they come to redefine what you wanted to say in the first place, you see the world slightly differently from where you began, your mouth makes sounds you didn't know were possible.

This is language that could apply to the new cadence and metaphor of John Tarrant's Zen, where both koan and his unique way of writing, of speaking, usher us into new encounter with the very world we inhabited, before, unknowingly. Ilya, too, speaks to this in poetry:

What's important are those little thefts between languages, those strange angles of looking at another literature, "slant" moments in speech, oddities, the music of oddities.

The question of strange language, especially as it relates to the lyric poet is something we can talk about for a while. You see, I believe that no great lyric poet ever speaks in the so-called "proper" language of his or her time. Emily Dickinson didn't write in "proper" English grammar but in a slanted music of fragmentary perception. Half a world and half a century away, Cesar Vallejo placed three dots in the middle of the line, as if language itself were not enough, as if the

poet's voice needed to leap from one image to another, to make—to use Eliot's phrase—a raid on the inarticulate. Paul Celan wrote to his wife from Germany, where he briefly visited from his voluntary exile in France: “The language with which I make my poems has nothing to do with one spoken here, or anywhere.”

Language is both the key, and the dead body, of such revelation. It reminds me of koan-work. Of Zen. In an interview, Tarrant is asked “Maybe we need to be clearer about what Zen is...”, and he responds with his own kind of slant-language:

If someone asks you what music is, you play the piano. Zen has moves like that. Somebody could ask, “What is Zen?” and you could say, “The apple tree out front”, or, “The eyes of the homeless”. That's a good way to touch the need behind the question yet it's hard to grasp straight away.

To translate a poem, or Zen, across the seas of this contemporary world, is itself a daring voyage. In this vein, I'm struck by excerpts from Kevin Prufer's new poem, “The Translator”, in the *Paris Review* – relevant, I think, to both poetic and spiritual “translation” across countries and eras:

THE TRANSLATOR

A poem in translation,

the young man was fond of saying,
is like the dead body of a foreigner
washed up on our shores.

Here

he usually paused to let the metaphor sink in.

Some members of the audience nodded thoughtfully.

I will now read from my translations of a little-known ancient Roman poet,
he told them,
shuffling his papers, then looking into
the dark,
half-empty auditorium.

ξ

The dead body refused to be still. The waves
loved it too much,

pushing it onto the beach, then rolling it
seaward again.
And so it made its way down the beach,
alighting for a moment,
or several moments,
on the wet sand,
then bobbing out
among the American swimmers...

ξ

and for days, bodies
washed up on the beach.
Now, the American workers
zippered them into vinyl bags,
which, in the translator's metaphor,
constitutes a kind of publication.

Translating the Dharma into a Western idiom and cultural context can yield a lot of “dead bodies”, so to speak. The publication of old sutras that are made to sound archaic, out of sync with the times. Or the way we can dress ourselves up in old traditions, as though we were mummies. Yet this long poem, of which I've only included a portion here, includes a woman in the sea who keeps shouting, *Here I am! Here I am!* – a kind of Zen koan of *original face*, always present amid endless translations of what Zen practice is – *Here I am! Here I am!*

Because it's easy to lose something essential in such transmigrations. Tarrant says:

You can make Zen into a museum of forms. How you sit, what robes, a pre-modern Japanese aesthetic, a minimalist hideaway. You follow a prescribed way to do things and try to relax and find freedom there. In that situation, a radical idea might be serving a non-Japanese kind of pickle and what happens in the mind is not important. This path has its beauty yet is not to my taste.

Meanwhile, we Western Buddhist meditators, as foreigners trying to make the practice our own, are like these additional lines from Prufert's poem:

120 foreigners in a leaking boat
is too many,
so the ocean fills with poems...

The translation of Zen from an ancient culture to this modern one demands a bit of poetry. We are all human beings in the same leaky boat. Ultimately, according to Ilya Kaminsky – as well as John Tarrant – it is a robustly *human* journey:

I love human beings. Time squeezes us from both ends like accordions, and I love this music we make. One might choose to see it from a distance. I prefer to see it from the inside, in the midst of these person-to-person interactions. If I fail to be a human being first, I fail my poetry.

Or my Zen. If there were such a thing as failing...

May Our Eyebrows Wiggle Like Caterpillars!

In *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2011*, the edition's co-editor is Billy Collins, the former Poet Laureate of the United States. He writes a marvelous history of his own entry into poetry as a kind of spiritual experience, one he says needs not be named so, but nonetheless, is. After enduring a typical Catholic upbringing, he describes his encounter with the Beats:

Kerouac's *On the Road* provided the novel idea that by actually leaving the Catholic Church you could become holy. *That* was new. The streets were holy; the girl stepping onto a dust-covered bus in Mexico was holy; and jazz was particularly holy. Dean Moriarity sat close to the bandstand repeating "Holy, holy, HOLY, HOLY!!"

He said, "Writers were becoming my new priests...", and like many in this generation, was led to Zen Buddhism as a result:

Blake thought eternity could be held in an hour, but in haiku a second is all it takes.

The sometimes "bewildering statements of the obvious" in haiku are meant to jolt one firmly into the miraculous ordinary of any moment, as in the poet Soshi's haiku:

Walking the dog
you meet
lots of dogs.

I so love this bit of Zen provocation into mundane mysticism. What Billy Collins chronicles in his *Introduction* is the experience of many poets, I suspect, who *de facto* find a covert, non-theological, even anti-religious experience of life that is nonetheless "spiritual" in a Zen sort of way through the very primacy of *attention's* power:

The poem becomes a bit of amber in which a fleeting moment is trapped. If the latent power in atomic particles, which are the building blocks of matter, can be released by smashing them in a cyclotron, then the power latent in moments of experience, which are the building blocks of time, can be released through the sheer power of attentiveness.

For a human being, such power is ever at hand: "Never be ashamed of staring", Flannery O'Connor once advised writers, "there is nothing that does not require...attention." *The*

practice of looking carefully is a practice and one can get better at it, Collins says. He goes on to describe the poet Gary Snyder's speculation that:

...the origins of meditation may lie in early hunting practices when men without projectiles would have to sit still outdoors for long periods of time waiting for an animal to come close enough to clobber.

I like to think that meditation is indeed hardwired into the history and fabric of human experience, even if it has become occluded by necessary deceptions, like fishing, in this modern culture of constant activity. What better Taoist non-activity is there than dangling a skinny line into water and simply waiting. We are indeed imbued with an innate talent for meditation, if only we give ourselves permission to unabashedly stare out the window, amble aimlessly round the yard, pretend to fish.

∞

But along with meditation's secret of simple awareness, as exemplified by *haiku*, Zen is particularly bent toward the paradox of the *koan*, as a necessary twist to, an unsettling of, a brain-mind that is also wired to solve problems, whether they exist or not. The ancient Chinese Chan masters encoded short aphorisms or fragments of conversations into phrases that could be chewed like gum, or rolled under the tongue till dissolved into one's very being.

But my interest, here, is not to elucidate the range of traditional Chan/Zen koans—there are other resources for this. Rather, to look toward Western-European examples of the same, or at least the language of which can be adapted into a *lingua-franca* of a new Zen-koaning of the West. John Tarrant and Joan Sutherland, co-founders of the Pacific Zen School, write of this evolution in books such as John's *Bring Me The Rhinoceros*, and Joan's *Acequias & Gates*. They are in many ways the new standard for such work.

In my attempt to identify sources in the West for this Zen of *koan-ing*, I became fascinated with another chapter in *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2011*. Joseph Bottum's "Words of Nectar and Cyanide" allude to the Romanian-born French writer, Emil Mihai Cioran, and his description of the Hungarian language, language with a taste "for a universe like a brothel on fire".

The language of koans could also be described as *words of nectar and cyanide*. The genius of poetry and koan alike is its complex intermingling of the two, in this “flaming universe”. What Western existentialism may offer Zen is a perverse, darkened language of the *Void* that Chinese and Japanese sources too often relegate to single words. Western tradition is alive with its Dante’s and infernos and Milton’s fallen-angels, similar perhaps to Indian Hinduism and Tibetan Vajrayana’s elaborate portrayals of pantheons of archetypal demons and gods—all of which provide a *form* for the inherent darkness in life. The essayist Joseph Bottum begins his essay with the following words that could fit koan and aphorism alike:

You can trace, through the history of philosophy, a line of aphorism—that odd, somewhat disreputable method of doing philosophy as a kind of bastard poetry. Maybe even as a kind of magic: truth as something to be summoned by careful incantation and the weird precision of a witch’s spell.

I suspect Western koans might be akin to this description. The beauty of Zen’s sparse, nature-oriented imagery and poetics is at the core of its allure. Still, as Zen comes to pervade Western societies, there is perhaps a role to be played by our own native art & literature, which in traditional Eastern societies included the backdrop of Indian or Tibetan cosmologies. In the West, we are children of the Greek and Roman gods, the European existentialists, and the New England transcendentalists through which much of American sensibility comes.

Which is a long way of saying how I marvel at John Tarrant’s experiments in his *Open Mind* Zen retreats, of the inclusion of not only Western poetry, but of myth and stories as a kind of evolving koan native to the traditions Westerners have marinated in since birth. Which brings me back to Emil Mihai Cioran, and his words of *nectar & cyanide*. I like to think of the terrain such writers explore as the bastion of the brave, those willing, like the Buddha, to stare into the terror of the Void, of senseless desire, unabashed, unblinking. Except, perhaps, with Zen’s traditional wiggle of the eyebrows, indicating the intimacy of entanglement with it all. Joseph Bottum ends his essay on Cioran with this:

But until we recognize the darkness, we cannot see the light; philosophy’s candle matters only if we realize that genuine shadows lurk beyond reason’s small illuminated circle. “There is no limit to suffering,” E. M. Cioran insists we remember, and so he posted himself like a sentry on the edge of reason, refusing to turn away from the night.

Now, as I'd always been taught at places like the *California Institute of Integral Studies* – a graduate school in San Francisco focused on the integration of Eastern & Western psychological and contemplative practices – the “transpersonal” view posits existentialism as a necessary layer one moves through on the path towards spirituality, but one that stops short of the leap through darkness into light. Still, there was the opposite complication, too, of “premature transcendence” when practitioners too eagerly leapt “over” the existential realm, rather than move *through* its brave terrors to include its experience *in* the transcendence—rather than exile its darknesses in a schizoid move more pathological than enlightened.

But this step often gets tokenized in spiritual pursuits: who wants to linger too long in this dark territory? This is where John Tarrant’s synthesis of Zen and Western approaches, elucidated in his book, *The Light Inside the Dark – Zen, Soul, and the Spiritual Life*, illustrates a more profound comfort level (so to speak – it’s all pretty uncomfortable!) with the existential sensibility of the downward movement into soul, rather than the perpetual desire for ascent.

Perhaps what we need, in a western-style Zen, is a humorous and ironic language that helps one to not rush-through this land of inherent and puzzling darkness. To learn to linger, like an artist or poet, in its terrain—in order to be more honest, perhaps, more well-informed, more ornery and creative in its possibilities. Which is really a way of simply becoming more robustly human, rather than spectral. Of seeing the light *in* the darkness.

While I do believe, in that old Transpersonal adage, that remaining too long in existentialism’s pond leaves one pruned and soggy, without it one simply disappears into a light unsustainable by earth’s weighty gravities. Besides, for good art, or blues, jazz or myth, ones needs the rich darker tones to allow a human being to be what the universe seemingly wants. By including the French existential in modern Zen, it is not to stop there, edged on despair in a universe void of meaning. It is to make sure such despair, as the core and central understanding of the Buddha, is worked into the dough, so we *can* rise.

Koans, as mischievous bearers of paradox, irony, and humor, can help us in this enterprise. As a therapist, if I were to identify the biggest blind-spot for Western

meditators, it is the tendency to want to escape life's darkness. The beauty of writers such as Cioran, is that they don't shy away from *just saying it like it is*:

Man started out on the wrong foot. The misadventure in paradise was the first consequence. The rest had to follow.

I do not forgive myself for being born. It is as if creeping into this world, I had profaned a mystery, betrayed some momentous pledge, committed a fault of nameless gravity.

For the perverse among us, this terrible twist on the koan, *What is your original face?* offers a Marx Brothers or Three Stooges kind of elbow to the ribs. Which is, really, right up the old Chan masters' alley in ancient China when they kept pointing to shit and bags of rice as the abode of Buddha at a time when much of the population was being devastated by famine, disease, and war. If Zen is not here, then where?

By starting here, on the wrong foot, in the wrong century, even the sense of being born in the wrong world, one can find the astounding freedom and beauty that attends flipping this two-sided coin of dark & light over and again in the palm of one's hand. To find the rhythm of it. The wholeness of its weight in the palm, its lightness in the air. To help us, Cioran says things like:

My mission is to kill time, and time's to kill me in its turn. How comfortable one is among murderers.

True moral elegance consists in the art of disguising one's victories as defeats.

We are all humbugs: The problem is how to survive.

By embracing rather than fleeing such quirky koans, one may wake up to the art of a universe sweet as nectar, dangerous as cyanide. The list of his books is a similar kind of ironic quirkiness in the face of existence: *The Temptation to Exist* (1956), *History and Utopia* (1960), *The Fall Into Time* (1964), *The Trouble With Being Born* (1973). The problem is not so much that we feel such things, but that we pretend we don't, or, believe them so thoroughly as to lose our sense of humor. Ultimately, the French existentialist, so to speak, lingers too long on the edge, never leaps into the humor and light hidden in the dark as at the dawn of creation itself. Still, perhaps it is not such a bad perch, compared to the prematurely-enlightened, who sit shallow and

tenuous in a light one hopes never reveals a single shadow.

Perhaps existentialists should learn to meditate. Perhaps meditators should wrap their dark Parisian scarfs around the neck, take a drag on that fading ember of flame, and remember how necessary the night is. Without the dark, we'd be burned to transcendent crisp—which, unless one is a nihilist, is not the direction of the human heart.

In Zen, there is an allusion to the eyebrows of Zen masters, how when joined in intimacy with one's teacher or ancestors, it is as if our eyebrows become entangled. I'll end this particular *essay* with an image of Emil Mihai Cioran, cited by the author in his article:

The eyebrows, however, are what everyone remembers: huge, expressive things, like woolly caterpillars, that seemed to have a life of their own—a livelier, more active life, in truth, than the rest of his melancholy face.

Here's a toast, to the nectar & cyanide of this strange, miraculous life – may our eyebrows wiggle like caterpillars!

The Clam Koan

On retreat in Oregon, the meditation hut is warm from the fire. The wind howls outside. Cap, the big black & white Great Dane-Labrador, sits patiently on the deck outside while Peter and I sit. I pause after, stare at the hard beauty of the glittering frozen pond, littered with pine cones. It is a stark paradise of winter tundra and trees.

Now, inside the house, I remember again to hold this time as a true retreat, and a lucky one—more than just biding my time visiting an old friend, waiting for our wives to return from their silent retreat, then the drive back to my life in California. This *is* my life, too. Each day, my retreat.

I flip through Dean Young's *New & Selected*, *Bender*, which I'd thrown in my black bag full of books. I open to these lines from "Clam Ode":

One attempts to be significant on a grand scale
in the knockdown battle of life
but settles.

It is clammy today, meaning wet and gray,
not having a hard, calciferous shell.
I love the expression "happy as a clam",
how it imparts buoyant emotion
to a rather, when you get down to it,
nonexpressive creature. In piles of ice
it awaits its doom pretty much the same
as on the ocean floor it awaits
life's bouquet and banquet and sexual joys...

What does this have to do with clams?

A feeling.

States of feeling, unlike the states of the upper Midwest,
are difficult to name.

That is why music was invented

 which caused a whole slew of feelings

and is why since,

people have had more feelings than they know what to do with

so you can see it sorta backfired

like a fire extinguisher that turns out to be a flamethrower.

They look alike, don't they...

The clam however remains calm.
Green is the color of the kelp it rests on
Having a helluva wingding calm.
I am going to kill you in butter and white wine
so forgive me, great clam spirit,
join yourself to me through the emissary
of this al dente fettuccine
so I may be qualmlless and happy as you.

This is the odd power of Art—how it can take the “whole slew of feelings” that being human is, and by the flamethrower of a poem turn my own slate-gray day in the wilds of Oregon into a form of communion with an ornery old professor in Texas, who also mulls the dodgy paradoxes of a life bent on clamor—while the calm we ostensibly seek, becomes a great *clam koan*.

I marvel, too, at the strange joy that emerges in writing—this *zuihitsu* of inner anecdote and stranger’s poems and observations of this contrary world of weather and politics and aging. Pointless as the pine cone fallen on the ice pond outside my window. Nevertheless, here we are, just as we are: fallen brown cone, ruminating old poets. *Suchness*, as Zen would name it.

I do feel a bit like Dr. Strange from last night’s movie, craving clues – arrogant physician with shattered hands from the inevitable accident, left desperate at the master’s door in Katmandu. Ushered, finally, into his new monk’s cell, the attendant hands him a slip of paper with the word *Shamballa* written on it. Benedict Cumberbatch holds it reverently in his shaking hands, asks, “Is this my mantra?”. The attendant smiles wryly, says, “No, it’s the *wi-fi* password here. We’re not savages!”

I think these are perhaps my koans for the day: clams and poets, the mantra of the ordinary-ephemeral. It’s a simple password, after all: *Here*.

Ambient Buddhism

This morning, I meet Diego at the Seabreeze Café for breakfast. Keeping in touch as fathers, husbands, and spiritually-inclined men in this world. Balancing what Diego calls *liminal* time, in his Quaker world, with his academic endeavors—as I do, my own *liminal* moments in this year of retreat mixing with the endless tasks of the human. Like breakfast with an old friend. The liminal becomes an ambient light, suffusing these ordinary days.

Home again, I pick up *The Lion's Roar* (July 2016), read pieces by the jazz tandem of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, as they encourage creative dialogue between disciplines for the health of the world—such as jazz & science & Zen. Each, in their estimation, spurring the other on. Then, neuroscientist Cristof Koch's research about the nature of awareness itself, the sentience present in all complex systems: the more complexity, the more consciousness. A kind of Zen and jazz and science in everything. Perhaps even emerging at some point even in the rise of artificial intelligence. The restless, numinous nature of whatever sentience is. That animates my curiosity. That spins this Universe. The spectacular, mind-boggling Zen of it all.

Then, there is this from Rebecca Solnit, a writer and activist who “fearlessly tells the truth about misogyny, injustice, and environmental destruction”. The liminal here, too:

Writing is saying to no one and to everyone the things it is not possible to say to someone.

—from *The Faraway Nearby*

An odd and marvelous description of this contemplative act of writing—where, through meditation and its arts, one finds a way to speak. To find what waits for me at the border of this luminous bridge between inner and outer worlds. Solnit's own language opens a door, with its Zen-like nod to the fact that our lives are grounded in unpredictability:

Hope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises. Or perhaps studying the record more carefully leads us to expect miracles—not when and where we expect them, but to expect to be astonished, to expect that we don't know. And this is ground to act. (from *Hope in the Dark*)

It is from this place of *embracing the essential unknowability of the world* that profound activism can occur. This embrace: the way to act within the numinous whole, rather than against its parts. Solnit says:

The coolness of Buddhism isn't indifference but the distance one gains on emotions, the quiet place from which to regard the turbulence. From far away you see the pattern, the connections, and the thing as a whole, see all the islands and the routes between them.

The article about Solnit (written by Lindsay Kyte) goes on to describe her relationship to Buddhism in a way that I can relate to:

Rebecca Solnit doesn't label herself a Buddhist. She likes the term "bad Buddhist", which she heard poet Gary Snyder use for people who don't sit every day, follow the rules, or observe all the precepts perfectly. It's an approach, she says, in which "Buddhism is your guiding star, not the planet you live on necessarily every day." For her, formal meditation is not the only way to practice. "Practice is how you're interacting with everything all the time," she says.

I, too, am a bad Buddhist, ala Snyder and Solnit, where practice *includes* formal meditation but is really more about *living* by "practicing with everything all the time." This kind of lay practice, while certainly rooted in ancient Buddhism, is finding its own evolution in this country. Solnit says:

There's this interesting American project of creating a kind of hybrid Buddhism, not necessarily between the lineages, but more attuned to contemporary American realities.

She calls her approach "Ambient Buddhism", whose themes deeply inform her work, though in sometimes indirect ways.

On the other hand, I do sometimes feel these modern Buddhist magazines, with their glossy advertisements for this teacher, that retreat, really-cool cushions and Buddhas and meditation timers and gongs, reek with some of the "spiritual materialism" Chogyam Trungpa so famously warned Westerners about. The ambient gone wild. In the quest, so aptly named by Ram Dass, to be *nobody special*, the magazines make it look *so cool and special* to be this "nobody special". To *be*, in all its proud splendor, *a very cool Buddhist*.

Still, I don't begrudge this spiritual mercantile industry—it is a way to bring "Ambient

Buddhism” more pervasively into this modern culture. A gateway drug, so to speak. One of the many *gateless gates* Zen speaks of. It is like salt and sugar, dissolving in the ordinary waters we swim each day—with all our jazzy complexity, the ludicrous and the luminous, everywhere.

The Milky Way Wrapped Around My Shoulders

Gerry Shishin Wick, in commentary about Koan 91 from the *Book of Equanimity*, says:

In Western philosophy, our logic is based upon the binary system. It's right or it's wrong. It's a one or a zero. But in Zen we understand there are other possibilities. In reality, our mind doesn't work like a computer's binary code... We forget there are other logics: It can be both real and not real. It can be neither real nor not real.

This seems a good reminder to me, amid the many stories swirling round my brain from the weekend. One moment, I am in deep angst confronting *aging, illness, death*—my own, and of those I love—then, find myself in such joy returning to a beautiful home where my young-adult son and his grandmother live with my wife & I in a kind of extended family. These experiences of aging, illness, deaths pending and past, come and go. My tales of lack and grace, miseries and pleasures. The “reality” of it all is indeed beyond a simple binary code—as Zen says, one's suffering becomes more suffused with joy, and one's joy colored with darker hues.

Wick ends his commentary on the koan with this:

In *The Record of Transmitting the Light*, Master Keizan wrote this poem:

*Though clear waters range to the vast blue autumn sky,
yet how can they compare to the hazy moon on a spring night?
Most people want to have pure clarity,
but sweep as you will, you cannot empty the mind.*

What a pity! Try to sweep the mind clear and you leave a trace. How magnificent, the hazy moon on a spring night!

This is one of my favorite Zen poems. Profound in its insistence that there is more to life than absolute clarity—our lives more like weather, and there is beauty in its many changing scenes.

This morning, I made coffee for Mom and me, ate the chocolate croissants I'd bought yesterday in Half Moon Bay on the drive back to Santa Cruz from San Francisco. She was so happy for this simple pleasure! We talked about her home left abandoned in the

Mariposa mountains near Yosemite, scheduling a trip there later this month to try and get it rentable. It is now apparent she'll never return to live there. She both needs, and enjoys, living here with us.

It feels like the Wheel of Life is turning again, with a new chapter, a new season approaching. Family—in all our oddities, disappointments, disparate visions of how things should be. One home disintegrating, another finding new shape. This morning, it's all more like a grand novel, a nuanced painting, than some perfect vision of a heaven I'd probably hate anyway.

A hazy moon. A dusty mind. Just as it is.

These lines, too, are a kind of koan this morning, from Joseph Millar's *Kingdom*, the poem "Ancestral":

I fall asleep with the milky way
wrapped around my shoulders.
I like the burned methane clouds
and the black threads of iron
sunk deep in the stars, and the earth
where it's sometimes cast into bells—

bells of evening, bells of death,
bells of some ruthless joy—
iron that floats like salt in the bloodstream,
plasma inheritance, proteins and enzymes,
two million red cells every second
born in the body's jubilant fire,
the deep cells of the marrow.

This is a bit of what family, ancestral inheritance, entering my sixties, feels like. Less binary, a more complex joy.

The Story of Us: Grief, Obscurity, & Ordinary Joy

As the sun emerges late, my wife and I stroll downtown to the window-seat at *Savor* on 24th Street in San Francisco, after buying the Sunday *N.Y. Times* and a poetry journal from Sam at his *Good Times* newsstand. So many evocative stories, but my word, such griefs everywhere on this globe. Still, to know how, like a wild animal, to lean into sun, let it warm the body, bask in the good moment that is here. Such as poetry. I'm drawn to this by Michael Ryan, in the *American Poetry Review* (March/April 2017):

Submission

Grief's at your door with her antique steamer trunk,
this doughty dominatrix never without her finery
exactly calibrated to the occasion and company.
Because she graces no petty losses,
she expects you to feel honored by her presence
and not to mistake her etiquette for kindness
much less weakness; her will is steel, and she will
occupy you wholly for as long as she chooses.

So prepare her rooms just as she tells you,
cancel beloved routines and rituals,
former pleasures, future anythings—
every solace and sustenance that impedes
becoming completely broken and open
to what you'll be to be what she needs.

Overwhelmed a bit by this globe, our billion griefs, the daily losses, I submit. Which today means submitting to the real day that presents itself, with its privileges of sun and the responsibilities of knowing how to enjoy the gifts given, intermixed with the griefs. So, Linda and I with an uncharacteristic three-day weekend, and, a looming joint-retirement, begin our foray to the Mission Street BART, the long ride to Oakland's Oracle Arena for the Warriors vs. Wizards basketball game that Linda scheduled (as another way to experience the city before we leave it). Someone will win, someone will lose—with lots of cheering and moans along the way.

On BART, I thumb through more lines of poetry, find these by Nicole Callihan:

What you don't see is me asking my husband to *Please pass the gravity*, but you should, because I am in eternal surprise that I haven't floated off into outer space.

The ordinary is the gravity that keeps us from floating into outer space, lost in endless void or chasing receding heavens. These lines, too, by Elaine Equi, comfort me while riding-anonymous, a sideline fan of both basketball and the cosmos:

OBSCURITY

Soaking in this aromatic
elixir is like having your own
cloak of invisibility.

A centuries old favorite of poets,
crackpots, and hermit monks.

Guaranteed to keep you
on the sidelines where
you'll get your best work done.

Still, it is not only a solitary journey. There is the gravity of each other, however obscure our connections in this sangha of a world. In the same journal, from Wendy Brown:

If you asked me what God I believed in in political philosophy, it would have to be the notion that there is no such thing as individual freedom, that human freedom is finally, always, a project of making a world with others.

After leaving long careers in public service, I think Linda and I both will define new ways of working toward community, creativity, and justice, as we fully enter this seventh decade of our sixties. Even as we also lean into the privacy of contemplative lives, rooted in the gravity of ordinary days. Obscure bodhisattvas, on the sidelines (where the action really is).

Back to the Sunday Times, as BART approaches Oracle Arena—from Bruce Feiler's new book, *The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us*. About the way stories bring us out of isolation, join us in this strange world together:

The most effective way to create this intermingled identity is to have the lovers create a new story—a shared story—of their life together. This shared story has two protagonists whose needs must be fulfilled, two individuals whose fears must be surmounted. It does not replace the individual's stories, but rests on top of them.

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget coined the phrase “collective monologue” to describe how preschoolers play, meaning they gather together but talk only to themselves. Love is the opposite. It's “collective dialogue”, meaning the two sides construct a joint reality.

Perhaps the most salient characteristic of joint storytelling is that it's not passive in the way “falling in love” suggests; it's active. It's a continuing process that involves balancing contradictory impulses like independence and interdependence, selfishness and selflessness.

The Story of Us— this collective dialogue of living, its own sangha. Oracles of dharma, in moments both public and private. Ten thousand bodhisattvas in the arena. Come, dear mistress of grief, let's sit together in these festivities—and please pass the gravity.

Everest in My Pocket

As I near the end of the koans in the *Book of Equanimity*, I read Koan 92 – Ummon’s One Treasure:

...within the universe, there is one treasure, secretly dwelling in a mountainous shape.

I *am* this mountain, yet as the commentator says, “we say it’s *secretly* dwelling because if you try to look directly at it, you can’t see it. And its function is a dark mystery.” Yet, as Master Dogen says:

When the right time comes, the one treasure can be grasped. It is suspended in emptiness, hidden in the lining of clothes, found under the chin of dragons and in the headdresses of courtly ladies.

I love these lines. There is no place this mystery cannot be found. When one pays close attention, it is even under the chin of dragons, in the headdresses of courtly ladies. Sometimes, I just like to feel the old tennis shoes hugging my feet, to know, intimately, the incarnation of this body in this way. To even glimpse the dark mystery under the tired old orange chin of Trump. Dragons are dangerous. They also guard treasure. Mountains are too big to carry. Yet, as the koan commentator says,

...you can also take Mount Everest out of your shirt pocket. Quick: Show me!

My meditation-seat is Everest. I sit in the body of it, then put it in my pocket to carry with me all day. What other way is there to live?

Transparency & Entanglement

I open the latest *New York Review of Books* (May 11, 2017) to an essay entitled “The Illusion of Utter Transparency”, a review of two new books about the poet Elizabeth Bishop:

Bishop seems to want to domesticate out-of-the-ordinary, difficult, uncanny things, to make them part of common experience, even when it proves impossible...

All these things...are the product of intensive, deeply considered labor. “Writing poetry is an unnatural act”, Bishop asserted. “It takes great skill to make it seem natural”.

Which reminds me, in its way, of the subtlety of Zen in the arts—the tremendous precision of perception and discipline of awareness it takes to not only *be* so fully in any moment, but to give some “natural” human expression to it. This is where meditation and poetry intersect, for me, with the passage of these ordinary days, the miracle of them.

Bishop wrote that “the three qualities I admire in the poetry I like best are: *Accuracy, Spontaneity, Mystery...*”, and goes on to say:

What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it, is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration.

Which is a beautiful rendering of the activities of Zen mind, too—without calling it such. In the expression of the moment-as-it-emerges into language, Bishop describes it as “a way of thinking with one’s feelings”, which is where language becomes a synesthesia of these two related but disparate human capacities.

I am struck, too, by this quote from a letter Bishop sent to her analyst, Dr. Ruth Foster, in 1947:

I’ve lost the fear of repeating myself to you...And I feel that in poetry now there is no reason why I should make such an effort to make each poem an isolated event, that they go on into each other and overlap, etc., and are all really one long poem anyway.

Thomas Moore, the Jungian psychologist and former Catholic monk, says similarly in

his book *Care of the Soul*, that we each may have one or two themes we return to over and again in the course of a life, gnawing like a dog its beloved bone. That this is more healthy than obsessive, and is what most artists of any kind engage in: a life, and a work, that is *really one long poem anyway*. I can certainly feel this in my own poetry and contemplative journals.

The older I become, the more rueful and delicious the mix of the world becomes, and Bishop describes this encounter in the latter lines of her poem, “At the Fishhouses”:

If you should dip your hand in,
your wrist would ache
immediately,
your bones would begin to ache
and your hand would burn
as if the water were a transmutation
of fire
that feeds on stones and burns
with a dark gray flame.
If you tasted it, it would first taste
bitter,
then briny, then surely burn your
tongue.
It is like what we imagine
knowledge to be:
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly
free,
drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the
rocky breasts
forever, flowing and drawn, and
since
our knowledge is historical,
flowing, and flown.

More than the prominent urge in most things “spiritual” – to be light and un-entangled with this world – Bishop’s poem describes well this deeper encounter with *world, self, life*. As I like to say, it is *Zen without being Zen*—a protean entanglement with the given world that is simultaneously “utterly free”. Not that Bishop—a lifelong alcoholic, and human as the rest of us—was any kind of enlightened soul, per se. Nor was she not. Such *seeing* is its own realization, and helps us see too.

April Fool's Day – Leaning Into a Wider View

...*the unknown strikes us with vertigo, and shocks us like insolence.*

—Felix Nadar, from his book of essays, *When I Was a Photographer*,
completed by the author at the age of 80, in the year 1900

It is April Fool's day, yet again. Will I never learn? The columnist Richard Reich wrote today that Trump had come to his senses, apologized via Twitter for all his folly, and was turning a new leaf. Alas, any fool could tell it was the first of April.

Felix Nadar was a famed nineteenth-century French photographer and balloonist, who took the first aerial photographs. Perhaps I need a larger perspective, a higher one, to understand what is happening in the world these days. *The American Poetry Review* (March/April 2017) essay by Carol Ann Davis on Felix Nadar's memoirs includes this:

On the subject of the human incapacity to tolerate a lack of understanding—one of Nadar's pet topics—he wrote (channeling Baudelaire), “as the ‘Sublime always produces the effect of a riot’, so the unknown strikes us with vertigo, and shocks us like insolence.” Later, using the example of the daguerreotype to illustrate the crisis experienced when a troubling discovery upsets the apple cart of established knowledge, he adds, “time was needed for the Universal Animal to make up his mind and approach the Monster (of the unknown).”

That monster may indeed simply be us. Human beings, trying to understand ourselves. I try to imagine how the first aerial photographs must have shocked, seeing the world from such new vantage. What human beings are capable of: the sublime to the riotous.

Perhaps I am finding such language helpful, after roaming San Francisco's North Beach, enjoying the history and views of Coit Tower in Pioneer Park, its stunning Depression-era New Deal murals. Depictions in rich color of another time in our country when all was at risk, and the country came together in a “new deal”, which put thousands of artists to work, painting ala Diego Rivera, murals and mosaics of the hopes of a nation. I was so entranced by the beauty of the artwork, the views of Coit Tower, and from Coit Tower, of the gleaming bay.

The shock of Trump's election, Britain's exit from the European Union, the bizarre hearings on Trump's Russian connections, his administration targeting everything from

global warming to sanctuary cities—I could use an aerial view, a bigger picture. The political has come home to roost. My chickens are squawking, eggs are breaking, roosters are running about with no heads. The world teetering on a vast regression, a new dark age?

So, I am intrigued with the language of this essay:

Perhaps it's no surprise that the first person to take a photograph from the air would find that the view provided no certain answer as to why we are here or how any one thing fits with another.

The problem of unity—whether it exists, whether articulated systems designed to help humans with the problem of doubt have made human experience any more “true” or discernable—has been with us at least since cave paintings...

Centuries later, Galileo mapped sunspots, and though the moving targets eventually blinded him, we still appreciate his efforts at providing us with some kind of galactic context. For years we theorized the universe was contracting only to find out it's actually tripled in the time that we've been studying it, which is, of course, a sliver of time measured in any but our own myopic terms.

Still, we try. Nadar, in his essays, apparently leaps down from his descending balloon, rushes into the dark room, shouts: *What happiness! There is something!* The first aerial photograph. A view from above. Still, nothing definitive about what it all means. But one can see in all directions, how things fit one inside another, curving, till the globe can be seen from space as the single organism it is, whirling through the cosmos. *What happiness! There is something!* An astonishing koan.

The Small Arms of Zen

The movie about Cambodia last night highlighted a strange and wonderful ten-year period before the Vietnam War, when rock & roll invaded, and the ruling king was extremely supportive of the performing arts. The whole country became enamored with music. But Cambodia's attempts to stay neutral in the ensuing war, caught between the "big elephants" of China and America, succumbed to not only the inevitability of war's destructiveness, but the advent of the Khmer Rouge's genocide of their own Cambodian people—particularly anyone educated or involved with the arts. Southeast Asia's holocaust.

Even Zen can seem to have small arms: how to embrace such things?

Still, the kind of Zen I'm after *is* this very question. Not as answer, but as a way of living-the-question. Perhaps it requires a new consciousness, or maybe it's the one we're born with.

Perhaps it is akin to the "different" worlds that animals, bats, and insects inhabit—as described in Susan Blackmore's little book, *Consciousness*. It is the same world as this one, but fundamentally different too. While one can never really know what another person's, much less another species', *subjectivity* is like, I'd love to learn a bit from, say, the dog—with its expanded world of scent and aroma—as a metaphor for how I might better encounter my own suffering. How a dog approaches its own or someone else's shit, sniffs its various aromas like an experienced connoisseur in wine country, then samples its unique taste. Or certain insects which have tremendous olfactory sensors, and still are drawn to laying eggs in the decomposing body of another, as though there were no more nourishing place to birth their young.

And thinking of Cambodia, or the blind terrors in America, or the apparent trans-moral propensity of nature, of the universe itself, I come across lines from a long poem by Phillip B. Williams, entitled "Interruptive" – in *POETRY* (May 2017):

What can I do but make of the eyes of others
my own eyes, but make of the world a ghazal
whose radif is a haunting of *me, me, me?*

Somewhere there are fingers still whole
to tell the story of the empire that devours fingers.
Somewhere there is a city where even larvae

cannot clean the wounds of the living
and cannot eat on the countless dead
who are made to die tomorrow and tomorrow.

Carrion beetles and boot bottoms grind corpses
powder-soft to feed the small-mouthed gods
of gardens and wind. Roses made to toss their silk

to earth like immolated gowns, ills
spewing ribbons of charred air from cities
occupied by artillery and pilfered grain, limbs

blown from their bodies and made into an alphabet
that builds this fool song, even now, presented
before you as false curative, as vacant kiss...

Home, to assume you are home is to assume
I am welcome in you – to what degree let the wounds
say so – and can come and go as I please...

I know this: my metaphors have small arms...

I have done terrible things by being alive.
I have built a wonder of terror with my life.

The poem speaks of the *complicity* every human shares with every other creature. How the natural processes of being alive in this strange universe entail a *wonder of terror*. There is Zen in this recognition, this embrace. To know that *this journey itself is home* is to welcome every you in me, to let the wounds speak, for the world to come and go as it will. Even the simple act of living entails feeding *the small-mouthed gods of gardens and wind*.

To say anything about this – another compulsory Zen error – is an *alphabet that builds this fool song*, is a *false curative*. Still, even if such metaphors have small arms, it is nevertheless a way to clap, to point, to wonder.

Zen Slant

This morning, my eye is caught by the enigmatic, strange and wonderful poems of the young poet Max Ritvo, who died last year at the age of 25, from Ewing's sarcoma. From his book, *Four Reincarnations*, a few lines from different poems:

We are becoming a bulb
in the ground of the living,
in the winter of being alive.

ξ

My poor little future,
you could practically fit in a shoebox
like the one I kept 'pecial bunny in
when I decided I was too old to sleep with her.

She had eyes, I could see them.
They were two stitches. My future has eyes,
for a while. Then my future has stitches,
like 'pecial's.

ξ

He starts the hard work
of the imagination,
learning to minister to the new dream...

Therein the patient
Must minister to himself.

ξ

After the cocoon I was in a human body
instead of a butterfly's. All along my back

there was a great pain—I groped to my feet
where I felt wings behind me, trying

to tilt me back. They succeeded in doing so.

Haunted by the ghosts of his aspiring wings, the poet blots out his memory of them:

My thoughts remain those of a caterpillar—

I took pleasure in climbing trees. I snuck food
into all my pains.

ξ

have too many wounds to zip up,
brain becoming a suit of zippers,
soberly shutting.

His reviewer, Helen Vendler, says his work attracted many admirers of his “ecstatic originality”:

Although he is inimitable, his example is there for young poets wanting to forsake simple transcriptive dailiness for the wilder country of the afflicted but dancing body and the devastated but joking mind.

While there is wild country too, in the dailiness of the *chop wood, carry water* of Zen life, Buddha-mind is also in the strange zippers and wounds and ghosts of remembered-wings numbed in the shoulder blades of humans. To get at these more enigmatic experiences of the human, one must come at them sideways. Like koans, there is ecstatic originality in the *slant* of certain poetries, like Max’s, where:

We are becoming a bulb
in the ground of the living,
in the winter of being alive.

Like Chuang-tzu – to not be clear if one is butterfly or caterpillar or human, dying or living, transmutating from one thing to another. Or no-thing. To be slant, crooked as the world, mysterious as the world.

Play Softly to the Hungry Ghosts

Woke early as the sky began to light. Flipped through an old Chinese history book as I lay in bed, feeling these immense pages of history as an infinite composting of people and thoughts, like sediment, layered through the geologic time of civilizations and literatures. I'm just one little soul, writing my little poems as they did. And it all passes. And there are so many layers I know nothing of.

Still, against the backdrop of these inscrutable days, Maezumi Roshi reminds that:

We begin by offering the service to the hungry ghosts, which literally fill all space and time, both inwardly and outwardly.

The vast engine of history, itself dwarfed by the vast engine of the cosmos, is the same as the engine inside a single day. In Buddhism, *hungry ghosts* comprise not only one of the six realms, but that aspect of being human that *craves* in a way that cannot be filled. Hence, John Daido Looi in *Cave of Tigers* says the most fundamental koan, really, is how to be truly satisfied. An odd statement, for a Buddhist. It mirrors the chapter title I've always loved in another Zen book: "Knowing How To Be Happy". It's a simple query, and in its way, a simple practice. It is also the engine that drives all that we know in this universe. This morning, I read one of Looi's dharma exchanges:

Student: I have an insatiable appetite...

Teacher: So, what is the problem?

Student: I'm hungry.

Teacher: That means food is outside the skin bag along with everything else, and you're inside.

What will you do about that skin bag?

Student: I'll have to consume the whole thing.

Teacher: The whole universe! Then there's no inside or outside.

Student: Does it taste good?

Teacher: Beats me.

Student: Thank you for your answer.

Teacher: May your life go well.

To embrace my hungry ghost is to be at ease in a world that will never fill me enough. To be hungry is its own gift. To know that the world eats me in return, and is never satisfied either, is a kind of communion. To have no hunger may be less an ultimate satiation, and more a kind of death.

How then to practice such hunger and its discontents, its enlightenments? Perhaps as in Lola Haskins' poem:

To Play Pianissimo

Does not mean silence.
The absence of moon in the day sky
for example.

Does not mean barely to speak,
the way a child's whisper
makes only warm air
on his mother's right ear.

To play pianissimo
is to carry sweet words
to the old woman in the last dark row
who cannot hear anything else,
and to lay them across her lap like a shawl.

To play the tune of hunger, softly, does not mean silence. It is to play in such a way that the old woman in us, in the last dark row, can feel it across her lap like a shawl. The young girl she still-is dancing, twirling, still hungry.

Rat, Magpie, Poor Man, Jewel

Excerpts from Koan 93 of the *Book of Equanimity*:

Roso asked Master Nansen, “A man doesn’t know the wish-fulfilling *mani* jewel. It is set down intimately in the Tathagata’s storehouse. What is this storehouse?” Nansen said, “It is the give-and-take of you and me...”

Roso asked, “What about the jewel?” Nansen called *his* name...

The wish-fulfilling jewel sounds like something right out of *Harry Potter*—what everyone wants, what few can find, except the persistent and true wizards. I like that it resides *intimately* in the Buddha’s storehouse, which as Master Nansen says, is in the very give-and-take of life itself. When Roso presses about the jewel itself, the master simply calls out *his* name.

Dane! Dane! My life is right here, in this very body, intimate with each moment. To be oblivious to this jewel is akin to the koan’s preface:

Jade thrown at magpies and gold held in the mouths of old rats: its worth is unrecognized and its use is unknown. Isn’t there someone who suddenly perceives the jewel in the clothes?

In the Lotus Sutra, two friends meet for a drink, one poor and one rich. After the former passes out, the rich man sews a jewel of great value inside his friend’s clothing, who unfortunately wakes later and goes about his days without ever feeling nor finding the jewel. One has to be intimate with the feel of the fabric of ordinary days; this is where the jewel resides.

Somedays, I feel like the old rat, gold stuck between my teeth; or the magpie, dodging the precious jade thrown my way. It is the nature of life, of waking up. In the koan, even not-finding, or failure to recognize both jewel and name, is *it*, too. Intimacy with what is, even when I’m a rat, a magpie, a poor man with a hidden jewel.

Lola's Fish & Tozan's Illness

Lola Haskins, from her book *The Grace to Leave*:

Enlightenment

As the heron lifts it free,
the fish suddenly
understands.

Indeed. There *is* something about squarely facing the Buddha's three teachers – *aging, illness, & death* – to wake one up! As with the surprised fish, who suddenly understands. I find this, too, in Koan 94 of the *Book of Equanimity* – “Tozan's Illness”. A monk is worried about Master Tozan's apparent illness, and asks, “Is there someone not sick?”. Tozan replies, “This old monk is able to look after others...then the having of sickness is not seen!” The appreciatory verse that follows this exchange says:

Sloughing off a stinking skin-bag, churning a red heap of flesh...

I love the graphic quandary of this phrase—being human gets messy. But there is more to it than simply mucking about in this inevitable mess. Things are what they are, but often are not necessarily the much-ado we make of them. Unlike animals. I appreciated this story from the koan-commentator, Gerry Shishin Wick:

Some friends own a dachshund whose hindquarters are totally paralyzed. This dog walks using his front legs and drags his body behind him. They put handicapped ramps throughout their house although he is actually pretty good at climbing stairs. My friend says the dog doesn't even know that he's paralyzed. He doesn't know the one who's ill. He doesn't know the one who's not ill, either. This dog just moves with his front legs, and drags his body behind him. He's a very happy dog. I'm sure he'd wag his tail if he could.

I think of this, watching Mom this morning slowly getting her breakfast-tray together, not noticing my presence in the kitchen at first due to her diminished hearing and sight. Her dog, too, unable to see me till it sniffs my hand as I slowly move to touch her muzzle. The body is what it is. Temporary, and ever-changing. Wick says,

As you know, the Buddha started his quest because he wanted to eliminate the suffering of sickness, old age, and death. Yet Bansho commented that the ancients, about to die, frolicked in the realm of old age, sickness, and death. Is that what Tozan is doing here?

Buddha simply named the conditions—but we can live them any way we choose. Astounding, once you get the hang of it. I find wisdom, too, in Wick’s next lines:

There is always the thought that things shouldn’t be the way they are. If we get rid of *should be*, *could be*, *would be*, and of *could have been*, *should have been*, and *would have been*—what’s left?

Of course, we have very strong evolutionary forces that preserve life, but let’s do our best to make this life a life that understand the one who does not get old, who does not get sick, and who does not die as well as the one who gets old, gets sick, and dies.

Apparently when Tozan was ready to die, he “composed a poem for the assembly, shaved his head, sat erect, and died”. But when everybody starting wailing and carrying on, “he opened his eyes and scolded them for not giving a dead man any peace!” Reminds me of my friend Peter’s mother, who had a similar rebound from imminent death, and her kids all had to fly home, wait for next time. In Tozan’s story, he rouses himself enough from his own end to cook a meal for his grieving students, then sticks around for another seven days before making his farewells again.

I remember other scenes from my life: saying goodbye to Erik as he lay with eyes closed, breath shallow, as Shmuel and I whispered to him, told him we loved him, said goodbye. In those last years after his brain tumor and stroke had blinded him, taken parts of his historical self away, there were new parts that emerged—a more peaceful self, appreciative of the small things in life. Or Kathleen, shriveled to a skeleton from cancer, yet planning to the last day her next tiny breakfast, sipping air as though it were nectar.

Our beloved dog, too: Niki. Towards the end, how he’d patiently lug the strange bags of flesh ballooning from his sides, inoperable as they were, as though he’d simply been given additional baggage to carry for a bit. When it was time to go, he’d laid down under the Liquid Amber tree outside my study, crossed his front paws, and rested his chin on them. This is how I found him.

May I be so graceful. Or, like Lola’s fish, fins flapping uselessly in the air.

Love Song of the Edge of the Middle of Things

Poems from Nadia Colburn, published in *Lyric* and *The New Yorker*, which speak to me this morning about *self* and *world*, the parts of us lost, then found *in* this world of happiness and horror.

Love Song

The world that is alone in its beauty

with no consolation –

the black walnut tree
the double-oleander

the goats, always-hungry –

Who hasn't been seduced?

Who is the wonderful *me* of happiness?

Of forgetfulness,
of horror,
that must be a part.

As if “all”
were a word in another language.

Now no one speaks.

Who is the wonderful “me” of happiness? Now that's a koan. Is a “me” capable of being happy? In isolation? Immersed in the *All* of things? What about the horror? Is it a different language than the one I'm used to speaking?

Her next poem extends the meditation:

The End

The end occurs not at the end, but when I'm
still

at the edge of the middle of things...

And alone, in place, remains

not the common master, waving long
flamboyant arms,
but a self subtler and altogether more
dangerous.

Out beyond courage and vanity,
I am complete, cut off,

like the silver-bowled lake
or the deep, impervious dark.

I love the lines, *a self subtler and altogether more dangerous* – which is indeed what I am, particularly when trying too hard to be a good Zen meditator. The way I *want* to be better, more, like a *master, waving long flamboyant arms*. A self that is in one way complete, yet simultaneously cut off – like the deep impervious dark, or a silver lake. In this way, it is a paradoxical love song – a language of this *All* that is difficult to speak, except, perhaps, *in* poetry and koan. Which is where meditation and word can meet.

Then, a different kind of lyric about language, how the modern world's love of exactitude, of things being concrete and clear, threatens to eclipse imagination itself. A poem by the irrepressible Ron Koertge, from *Vampire Planet: New & Selected Poems*:

**“EVEN ORNAMENTS OF SPEECH
ARE FORMS OF DECEIT”**

History of the Royal Society

It's 1667, Reason is everywhere, saving
for the future, ordering a small glass of wine.
Cause, arm in arm with Effect, strolls by
in sturdy shoes.

Of course, there are those who venture
out under cover of darkness to score a bag
of metaphors or even some personification
from Italy, primo and uncut.

But for the most part, poets like Roderigo stroll the boulevards in their practical hats. When he thinks of his beloved, he opens his notebook with a flourish.

“Your lips,” he writes, “are like lips.”

As subtle and poetic as Nadia’s *self* is, Ron’s is actually a wry and ironic nod to the same. Enamored as we justifiably are with reason, cause & effect – their sturdy shoes and practical hats – the self can seem more *thing* than *lyric*. While there *is* a profound Zen-sensibility to the concreteness of “your lips are like lips”, a too-direct meditation practice, full of concrete goals and aims, can make one want to “venture out under cover of darkness to score a bag of metaphors”. Or at least a koan or two, from the corner zendo.

Which is perhaps a long way of saying I am still in love with life this morning, near the end of the last month of my sixtieth year. A mysterious no-self whose many parts still seem to resemble a self, just as “lips are like lips”. Still in the middle of things, though closer to *The End* I know nothing about except its eventual arrival. I am left with Nadia’s koan:

Who is the wonderful *me* of happiness?