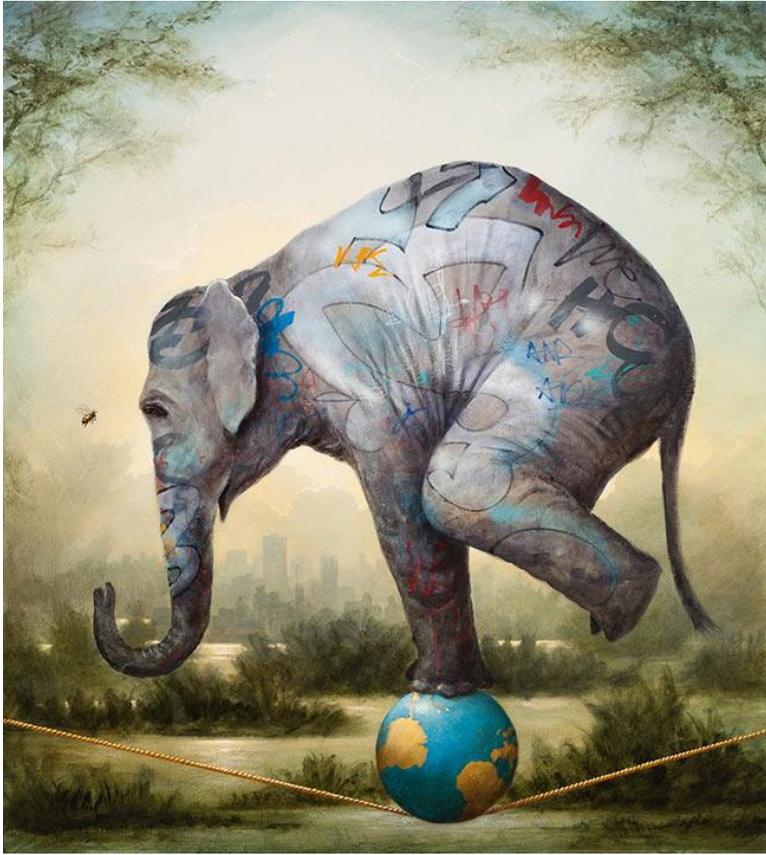


# The Fragile Painted Elephant



**& The Circus of Life**

*More Zen Meditations*

**D a n e C e r v i n e**

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# The Fragile Painted Elephant & The Circus of Life

## *Preface*

The *fragile, painted elephant* in the title has two meanings (see the opening essay for more).

First, it is *us*, balanced precariously like a circus animal on a tiny world with our big feet, as though the meditative quest were about putting on a show, egged on by the ringmaster of ego, to the cheers of the world. We're all painted up, it's a grand display, but somehow our true nature reveals itself more when we're not trying so hard. Perhaps it's when we're spraying each other with water from long trunks, trumpeting in the forest, crashing about the savanna.

The second allusion is to Zen itself—which is alive, now, in the wilds of our lives. When Zen becomes too trussed-up with the albeit beautiful trappings of the circus—ancient tradition, the showmanship of it all—it may become too tame. As though Zen were only what happens inside the zendo's big tent. It's a good training ring, a place for one-hand clapping together, to celebrate the circus of life. But Zen is mostly about our lives outside of the tent—in the grand wilds of this world.

But what lurks in these wilds?

∞

In the opening chapters of John Tarrant's book, *The Light Inside the Dark – Zen, Soul, and the Spiritual Life*, there's a section entitled "The Monster Despair", where he says:

Within this amorphous fusion, we do not feel connected to life, but oppressed by its muddy swirling...Despair is a time of waiting, of paralysis, of non-time...as if a person turned into a plant, became passive and rooted, wrapped in winter fog, lacking animal spirits.

Perhaps this is the greatest pain—not to have a story, not to have reasons, and to have only an image of the lack of images—fog and the sea, barely visible.

I appreciate how John, as a Zen teacher, fearlessly works with this material, rather than doing the "normal" Buddhist thing by directing meditators to simply note such "distractions" and return to the breath. To see such experiences as only delusion,

suffering with nothing to offer, is perhaps itself a kind of delusion. This is where John's Jungian background and Chan Buddhism intersect in a provocative way. To work *with* such material, in an explicitly Zen approach. The *suchness* of this human condition.

It is an interesting integration of East and West. Meditation, *with* Joseph Campbell's heroic journey. In the next chapter, "Love in the Dark Time", John says:

The terrible intensity of descent itself can be a kind of fulfillment. Men wake in a sweat remembering a battle of fifty years ago, but along with the terror, they can feel a secret love of the heightened life of that time, when each moment was lived at the edge of death.

Much of what we do in the descent can be explained only if we recognize that it has its own gravity: the darkness pulls us into itself until it finds its pure form...Then the dark becomes a kind of lover: we keep company with it for its own sake, learn how to move in its hard, narrow bed, to find the warmth in it, to let it restore us. We do this by darkening the darkness.

One of my ways of working in this way are these Zen *assays* (lyrical essays), in which I use poetry, some of it quizzical and dark, to explore the place of mood and feeling in Zen. To descend, as mindfully as possible, with an eye for the artistry of the dark – because in that Jungian way, a mindful descent is the pick and shovel that mines the treasure buried in the mountain. It's not only about letting go of the dark that confuses and haunts us with grief, but to open to its fertile, fevered, fetid composting—to, literally, grow as Nature does. To be part of the whole process, rather than apart from it. The Zen part of it, as John says, is this:

We develop our attention to such a level that it can hold us in every circumstance, including all the ragged events of the soul's domain, including even the prospect of our own inevitable dissolution.

Which is not so much macabre, as *intimate*. This, then, is the place of Zen too.

Neither do we travel alone through such ragged places. "Waking up is something we do together", as John Tarrant likes to say. This boat of life our sangha, traveling with souls both dead and alive, as my wife likes to joke. The way I spend time with intrepid travelers long gone, yet present-still in the pages of books more-akin to *songs* than maps. After all, X may mark the spot, but each moment is itself the treasure, and there are X's everywhere.

So, the song of this little book reflects what John Brehm describes in his anthology, *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy*:

One of my goals in gathering these poems has been to show how beautifully the Dharma manifests even in poems by poets who were not practicing Buddhists or knew little or nothing about Buddhism...

And if the poems feel like friends, the book itself may come to seem like a poetic sangha...

In Kevin Sloan's painting on the cover, the elephant balances on the world. It is a delicate position to be in, for such a large animal. Given the gravity and fierceness of what we are, it is a paradox that we—as the proverbial elephant does—can also flee at the sight of a mouse. Or lose our balance so precariously poised on this world. It is a koan—with all the laughter of a circus lurking inside.

May we find joy in traveling together.

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Santa Cruz, California  
2018

## The Fragile Painted Elephant

In the mail yesterday, I received a little book entitled *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy*, edited by John Brehm. There's a stunning painting on the cover, of another painted elephant standing awkwardly on two front legs while balancing on large broken, painted, teacups. Its title is, "Our Fragile Past", painted by Kevin Sloan.

I feel this painted elephant this morning. The book is a Buddhist collection, but includes many Western poets. The introduction says:

No poem can last for long unless it speaks, even if obliquely, to some essential human concern. Tu Fu's poem about the pathos of ruins at Jade Flower Palace, which opens this anthology, has lasted more than thirteen centuries, reminding us that impermanence is one of poetry's oldest themes, perhaps *the* oldest. Of the prince who ruled there long ago, Tu Fu writes:

*His dancing girls are yellow dust.  
Their painted cheeks have crumbled  
Away. His gold chariots  
and courtiers are gone. Only  
A stone horse is left of his  
Glory...*

Perhaps there is some comfort in knowing that impermanence defies its own law, is exempt from its own implacable strictures, is itself unchanging. Ikkyu states the paradox succinctly: "Only impermanence lasts" ...

But living in alignment with the truth of impermanence opens a secret passageway to joy. Once we acknowledge how inherently unstable are the pleasures of "this floating world", we are free to love all things without attachment...

Mindfulness of impermanence leads to joy. Living in the full knowledge that everything changes changes everything. It loosens our grasp and lets the world become what it truly is, a source of amazement and amusement. Han Shan says:

*Once you realize this floating life is the perfect  
mirage of change,  
it's breathtaking—this wild joy at wandering  
boundless and free.*

My challenges, at the beginning of this new year, seem to involve a kind of *haunting* by impermanence. Grief (mixed, yes, with wild joys), over a litany that is personal only in its particulars. It is universal in its broad themes—as Buddha discovered—that of *aging, illness, & death*. It's infinite variations. The demise of parents, the falling apart of a country, my own sense of powerlessness to halt either history. The same themes every year, every century.

Yet, I am equally, deeply, aware of the gifts of impermanence—because without its inexorable contrary passage, everything, literally everything, would grind to an impossible statue-like halt. The life I know is possible *only* because it keeps changing, flowing. Ultimately, I'd rather be a river than a statue.

In Zen, I'm exploring this embrace of grief and its contrariness as a radical act of acceptance. Why? Because I'd certainly be no better than these many generations of Asian and Western poets at exiling, or resolving, such grief. It is deeply human. Zen doesn't change this. It deepens things further. I might as well join in. It is a human song, one I'll learn even more verses to as I, and everyone I know, keeps aging.



Reading more from John Brehm's introduction, he recounts the terrible story of his beloved nephew, who was teaching English in Japan and had just gotten married, who was suddenly dying from liver failure, and who after a successful transplant of half of John's own liver, died anyway from a brain hemorrhage. John ended up having to recover alone in Kyoto, rather than with his saved nephew. It was devastating—yet John found comfort in finally walking the streets of Kyoto again, where some of his closest “friends” (Dogen, Basho, Buson, Ikkyu) had also walked centuries before. It became, John writes, the genesis for his anthology.

The book itself reflects my own deep sense of the shared community that a book affords:

The poems gathered here feel like spiritual friends. They offer everything one might hope for in such a friendship: wisdom, compassion, peacefulness, clear seeing, good humor, and the ability to both absorb and express the deepest human emotions of grief, loss, and joy. And if the poems feel like friends, the book itself may come to seem like a poetic sangha, a remarkable—and portable—spiritual community spanning more than two millennia...

There's another sentiment in Brehm's anthology that speaks directly to this matter:

One of my goals in gathering these poems has been to show how beautifully the Dharma manifests even in poems by poets who were not practicing Buddhists or knew little or nothing about Buddhism. The term *dharmā* has a complex etymology, but in current usage it has two main meanings. It refers to teachings of the Buddha, and more broadly to the way things are, universal law, or the truth of things. It is in this latter sense that I'm using the term. These poems show us the truth of things.

I am a fragile painted elephant, balanced precariously on the broken, painted teacups that are my life. Zen, too, is this impossible balancing act.

It is a noble path. The circus of it. The astonishment.

## All the Wrong Songs

In the *American Poetry Review* (September/October 2017) is a modest little poem by Christopher Salerno:

### Forty

An only child may have  
had to play with god.

Both of them beings  
as quiet as glue. I put my nose

to the sound hole  
in a mahogany guitar, inhale

the wood which never  
really dies. Like violets pressed

in a bible never die.  
Count me among those

mourners singing  
all the wrong songs.

*Mourners singing all the wrong songs* strikes me as a Buddhist Western koan phrase. It's okay to mourn. It is one of the songs of life. Like inhaling the wood and sound of dead trees in a marvelous guitar – what is death, and what is life, here? We are all quiet gods, children of the cosmos, playing with our only friend: this Universe, and everything in it. It's okay if we're singing the wrong songs. That's how the *blues* were invented, *gospel* and *jazz*—everything else in the world too. It's the way the world keeps being born anew.

What is death and what is life? It's a good koan. Singing all the wrong songs, together.

## The *Self*—It's Good Work, If You Can Get It

While editing my other collection of Buddhist essays on *the self*\*, I run across poems 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, there the self remains, *its eye on the ball*, blinking still.

I love it, and as my Zen teacher John Tarrant would say, *is there a problem here?*

Of course, some of what Lynn Emanuel writes of 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 art of writing and representation alike.

Still, my ruminations, I know, are part of the movement *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 original movement, though – 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 given constituent parts in the spiritual and artistic quest – before finally returning again to the irascible beauty of its ongoing composition. As the Zen lines goes,

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

Which, at age sixty-one, I could 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 has been quite the occupation, and pre-occupation, which is why I like this next poem of Emanuel’s. It might as well be about both poetics *and* mediation:

### ***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 the turbulent waters of world and mind. It's a good job to have. It won't last forever.

\*[Note: See *The Greased Pig – Capturing the Self Implicit in the Human*]

## The Thread of Zen in American Poetics

The new anthology by David Hinton, *The Wilds of Poetry*, is a lucid look at the roots of this American Zen-influenced poetic tradition. Hinton's commentary on each poet (e.g., Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams) provides a clear thread back to the Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen tradition of *contact* with life, in the clarity of the *moment*, in the dramatic encounter with the *ordinariness* of things.

And in this poetic discussion, I gain more insight into how my work, too, is rooted in this same tradition. The way it's always been determined to emerge from this daily practice of mindfulness—the two intertwined. A poetics of daily occurrence that *includes* mind as well as nature—not writing only of abstractions, but neither only of nature. The mind and heart as mammals, too—encountered as part of the natural landscape.

This morning, I read about William Carlos Williams—the New Jersey doctor who, also influenced by Japanese haiku (as Pound was), lived most of his life simply going about his business as a doctor, scribbling poems on the back of prescription pads (when he wasn't also becoming famous as a poet). While I'm quite familiar with his most famous poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow”, with its spare haiku-like clarity about rainwater and white chickens and the wheelbarrow, I'm delighted to encounter a similar poem a bit darker, taken from his daily life as a doctor:

### Between Walls

the black wings  
of the

hospital where  
nothing

will grow lie  
cinders

in which shine  
the broken

pieces of a green  
bottle

But just as poetic is David Hinton's narrative about Williams, Pound, Whitman—and the other poets in this anthology—in tracing this emerging American poetic-thread so-influenced by the Japanese/Chinese tradition.

This commitment amounts to a kind of anti-poetry, in fact, because he made poetry from the most ordinary and seemingly unpoetic material, infusing it with genuine affection, childlike wonder, and a warm sense of humor.

For Williams the doctor, poetry represented a remedy to a problem he diagnosed in the introduction to his breakthrough book, *Spring and All* (1923): “There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world”. *Contact*, Thoreau's word again, and Williams continues...

*the thing [a person] never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is.  
And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested.*

This is the American poetic I feel most connected to—one infused with this ancient Zen precedent. Whitman, Pound and Williams all came into contact with it, and it is what most transformed their poetics, and their lives. Hinton says,

That is, the poems with their tenderness and love cultivate an *attentiveness* to things, and that is the basis for *contact*, for the reweaving of consciousness and Cosmos...

This leads to a poetry remarkably at ease, responding spontaneously and effortlessly to everyday experience, a poetry of *we-wei*: artless and improvisational...as opposed to the practice of the Western rationalist and otherworldly “soul”...

At the same time, the poem is itself an “object”, a thing in the world. **It is an act of nature made by a primate body, its words having an ontological status no different than a stand of poplar trees or a herd of elk...**

So even while Williams's poetry cultivates an attention to the facts of the world itself (*tzu-jan*), it also cultivates an attention to the facts of the mind itself, this too as *tzu-jan*...It is Williams's way of rewilding consciousness...

Hinton describes the concept of *tzu-jan*:

The literal meaning of *tzu-jan* is “self” + “thus”, from which comes “self-so” or “the of-itself”, which leads to... “occurrence appearing of itself”, for *tzu-jan* is meant to describe the ten thousand things emerging spontaneously from the generative source, each according to its own nature.

Which is an apt description of both the poetics I am interested in, and, the self that I am. It helps me understand better, too, the place of this “self”, so to speak, in poetics—in that I find myself touched by its appearance in a poem in a way that conveys more than a pure, simple presentation of nature absent this glimpse of the human. It is this absence that constitutes much of Japanese and Chinese poetry—the bare mountains and clouds predominate. But in, say, William Carlos Williams’ most famous poem, it hangs profoundly and presciently in the first line—affecting all that follows:

### **The Red Wheelbarrow**

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens

Here, the human—the self—may *seem* invisible, since the only concrete images are those that follow: wheelbarrow, rain, chickens. But these mysterious, gorgeous, first lines – *so much depends/upon* – carries such weight, implicating the profound presence of the witness, the observing sentience that constitutes awareness of this very scene. Without which, there would be no poem, and no event as such. Only the unconscious existence of its particulars. It is the sentience that moves so deeply here. The full weight of the human, hovering invisibly inside the scene.

Which can be found, too, in the irascible Zen poetry of old Kobayashi Issa, where the *human* is for a moment even more astonishing:

Children imitating cormorants  
are even more wonderful  
than cormorants.

## Joyce McDougall and the Cave of Tigers

Buddha-mind is here, everywhere. No place is beyond the reach of this *suchness*. At the end of John Daido Looi's *Cave of Tigers*, I appreciate these lines from this morning's meditation:

Getting up to the summit of the mountain—realizing enlightenment—is not so difficult. It's not the big deal we imagine. The real challenge is coming down off the mountain to manifest in the world—in every detail of our lives—that which has been realized...

There is a huge gap between talking and doing, between analysis and intimacy.

“Ascending the mountain” training may take two to three years. “Descending the mountain” training lasts ten to fifteen years. In a sense, it lasts a lifetime...

Zen practice is not about secluding ourselves in some tranquil hermitage contemplating our navels. That's not what life is. That's not what the Buddha or any of the Zen ancestors did. They didn't isolate themselves, but instead functioned with abandon in the world of samsara...

To function with abandon in the world of samsara. As a modern Westerner, I know this world now entails tangling with the wild terrain of the psyche, and the tigers who live there. It is a terrain where the field of psychology, and the mores of society, are eager to define what “normal” is. How does one descend the mountain and function in this human village?



Exploring this further, I happen upon a quote by the psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall in her obituary in *The Guardian*:

Psychic reality will always be structured around the poles of absence and difference:  
and...human beings will always have to come to terms with that which is forbidden and that which is impossible.

A student of Freud's, she became a maverick psychoanalytic theorist and practitioner, pushing for integration of divergent schools of thought—and, for a re-visioning of what it means to be “normal” and “abnormal”. These twin tigers of the psyche.

In the first of her four major books, *Plea for a Measure of Abnormality* (1978), McDougall challenged the boundary between normality and abnormality in sexual and gender development. The patients she described cover a wide range of “disorders”, including perverse sexuality, male and female homosexuality, psychosomatic disorders, narcissistic states and, in her view, the least analyzable of all, normality. McDougall denounced courageously what she named “normopathy”, the fear of difference, and emphasized the creative insight of those who were thought of as perverse or abnormal in other ways.

She became famous, her books translated into many languages. Indeed, she even found common cause, so to speak, with the Dalai Lama. I found these lines quite compelling, at the end of her obituary:

When invited by the Dalai Lama in 1993 to explain to him the aim of psychoanalysis, she replied: “To find one’s truth about oneself.” He responded that this was also the aim of Buddhist meditation.

A vivacious, generous, smiling woman, always elegantly dressed, McDougall wrote that “each person in his psychic complexity is a masterpiece”.

What a marvelous line: *each person in [her] psychic complexity is a masterpiece*. Perhaps it is in this spirit that one can descend from the heights of our enlightenments, through the tigers of the psyche, into the “normalcy” of village life, and finally come to know ourselves as a masterpiece—in all one’s psychic complexity. Her later book titles seem apt metaphors for this journey: *Theatre of the Mind*; and, *Theatre of the Body*.

Any enlightenment must live here, in the theatre of mind and body. Beyond the bounds of normalcy—where tigers live deep in these forests, or wander through the quiet village. To become oneself—a psychic complexity, a masterpiece. This, too, is *suchness*.

## The Zen of Henry Miller: *Becoming the Path*

I am in love with Henry Miller. Not the Henry Miller of the novels which made him famous. It is his essays that astonish me, the vitality and spirit of this ornery, earthy, and spiritual being. Miller is in some ways a quintessential thoroughly American Zen man. One whose path is inextricably entwined with the arts, like his near-cousins (so to speak), the ancient Buddhist poets of China and Japan.

Excerpts from his essay “Reflections on Writing”:

Knut Hamsun once said, in response to a questionnaire, that he wrote to kill time. I think that even if he were sincere in stating it thus he was deluding himself. Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery. The adventure is a metaphysical one: it is a way of approaching life indirectly, of acquiring a total rather than a partial view of the universe. The writer lives between the upper and lower worlds: he takes the path in order eventually to become that path himself.

I feel a kindred soul to Miller, for whom writing is an essentially metaphysical activity. The path that eventually leads to *becoming* the path. This is important to Miller, more than any sense of “craft” as an isolated skill to gain recognition by. Writing as an essential *human* activity:

Even now I do not consider myself a writer, in the ordinary sense of the word. I am a man telling the story of his life, a process which appears more and more inexhaustible as I go on...somewhere along the way one discovers that what one has to tell is not nearly so important as the telling itself.

It is this quality about all art which gives it a metaphysical hue, which lifts it out of time and space and centers or integrates it to the whole cosmic process. It is this about art which is “therapeutic”: significance, purposelessness, infinitude.

A man telling the story of his life – thereby integrating it “to the whole cosmic process”. This process, of becoming a writer and a full human being, began for Miller with a kind of *failure*:

Finally I came to a dead end...to fail as a writer meant to fail as a man. And I failed...It was at this point, in the midst of the dead Sargasso Sea, so to speak, that I really began to write... Immediately I heard my own voice and was enchanted: the fact that it was a separate, distinct, unique voice sustained me...

My life itself became a work of art. I had found a voice, I was whole again. The experience was very much like what we read of in connection with the lives of Zen initiates.

This latter sentence is a glimpse into Miller's way of holding his life: *as a kind of Zen*. That in some ways he comes to know less and less, paradoxically then, coming to a greater sense of immediacy, or *intimacy*, with everything:

I talk now about Reality, but I know there is no getting at it, leastwise by writing. I learn less and realize more: I learn in some different, more subterranean way. I acquire more and more the gift of immediacy...

I further the development, the enrichment, the evolution and the devolution of the cosmos, every day in every way. I give all I have to give, voluntarily, and take as much as I can possibly ingest. I am a prince and a pirate at the same time.

It is a Western sort of Zen without the name of it. Organic, artistic, a melding of poetic and meditative consciousness, of the creative with that of absolute acceptance of the mystery of it all. Then, perhaps as with Rumi and Hafiz,

Whatever I do is done out of sheer joy: I drop my fruits like a ripe tree. What the general reader or the critic makes of it is not my concern. I am not establishing values: I defecate and nourish. There is nothing more to it.

This, then, is where divine and mortal necessity intersect: in the very body of an ordinary human being. It is in this surrender, Miller says, that one may find one's "Paradise" after all:

...of discovering one's destiny, of making a life in accord with the deep-centered rhythm of the cosmos. To be able to use the word cosmos boldly, to use the word soul, to deal in things "spiritual" – and to shun definitions, alibis, proofs, duties. Paradise is everywhere and every road, if one continues along it far enough, leads to it.

But how to proceed? Miller says of writing, which is the same as his life:

I haven't the slightest idea what my future books will be like, even the one immediately to follow. My charts and plans are the slenderest sort of guides: I scrap them at will, I invent, distort, deform, lie, inflate, exaggerate, confound and confuse as the mood seizes me...

I have faith in the man who is writing, who is myself, the writer. I do not believe in words...I believe in language, which is something beyond words.

There is something Walt Whitmanesque about this buoyant, large, irascible approach to life and writing. A kind of Zorba-the-Greek bravado and gravitas. Like the old Chinese Chan masters. Very much like them. And like these old Chan and Zen rascals – in fact, the entire swath of this ancient culture’s worship, so to speak, of all things broken, warped, different, useless – Miller knows the secret of faith is *failure*.

Understanding is not a piercing of the mystery, but an acceptance of it, a living blissfully with it, in it, through and by it. I would like my words to flow along in the same way that the world flows along, a serpentine movement through incalculable dimensions, axes, latitudes, climates, conditions...

In the ultimate sense, the world itself is pregnant with failure, is the perfect manifestation of imperfection, of the consciousness of failure. In the realization of this, failure is itself eliminated.

Like the primal spirit of the universe, like the unshakable Absolute, the One, the All, the creator, i.e., the artist, expresses himself by and through imperfection. It is the stuff of life, the very sing of livingness.

If my own struggle is a part of this *One’s* own “failure” – and in that failure, the One manages to express itself, as an artist, in the *Many* – then perhaps we are all *becoming the path*, together.

## Of Elephants & Ink

From Willis Barnstone's *ABC of Translation*, a section on Rumi:

Yet how can he transfer the cosmos to visible ink?

A wise koan. Willis answers in the next poem, lines from "Elephant Lumbering Literalists":

Wisest of beasts, the elephant can't bear the blunder

of literalists. Like hunters they seek ivory not his sun  
or moonlight walks. When evil hunters come, his birds  
alert him with a friendly trill. He pulls a tree up with his trunk.  
Before a trigger clicks, he's got the poachers on the run.

To be an artist or meditator in this world is, and is not, to be a literalist. On the one hand, Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa says *Things are symbols of themselves*. Like the Zen wisdom of seeing a mountain as a *mountain*, and not as commentary on one's life. On the other hand, "things" – *elephant, ivory* – are not *only* literal, in a utilitarian fashion. Zen is the moonlit tread of this behemoth-of-life, walking through our days, trumpeting.

## Henry Miller and The Wisdom of the Heart

This ex-patriot novelist who made his way to Paris, settling finally in Big Sur, California, is a mystic defiant and fascinating. An American icon. With my head stuck in Eastern philosophy texts for so long, it is refreshing to find its wisdom native, embedded, in this original Zen rogue.

In the opening essay “Creative Death”, of his marvelous book *The Wisdom of the Heart*, the very jab and cadence of his writing is mesmerizing. It speaks sideways, too, about one’s relationship to spiritual authority:

“I don’t want my Fate or Providence to treat me well. I am essentially a fighter.” It is towards the end of his life that (D.H.) Lawrence wrote this, but at the very threshold of his career he was saying: “We have to hate our immediate predecessors to get free of their authority.”

The men to whom he owed everything, the great spirits on whom he fed and nourished himself, who he had to reject in order to assert his own powers, his own vision, were they not like himself men who went to the source? Were they not all animated by that same idea which Lawrence voiced over and over again—that the sun itself will never become stale, nor the earth barren? Were they not, all of them, in their search for God, for that “clue which is missing inside men,” victims of the Holy Ghost?

To get free of the authority of the past is to honor it immensely. This is an essential Chan Buddhist notion. As Buddhism continues to secrete its way into the fabric of Western life, I look for it by wildly veering from one author to another, from Buddha to Freud to poets of every ilk. To circle the long-way-round through American literary icons—like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickenson, like Henry Miller. To enjoy their companionship, to find, in this deep and odd way, the Buddha’s wisdom nascent in so many.

To continue, then, with Miller’s first essay:

Strange as it may seem today to say, the aim of life is to live, and to live means to be aware, joyously, drunkenly, serenely, divinely aware. In this state of god-like awareness one sings; in this realm the world exists as poem. No why or wherefore, no direction, no goal, no string, no evolving...one is rap by the everchanging spectacle of passing phenomena. This is the sublime, the a-moral state of the artist, he who lives only in the moment, the visionary moment of utter, far-seeing lucidity. Such clear, icy sanity that it seems like madness. By the

force and power of the artist's vision the static, synthetic whole which is called the world is destroyed. The artist gives back to us a vital, singing universe, alive in all its parts.

I didn't fully realize Miller was such an earthy ecstatic, a mystic at heart. He is not a believer in ever easing one's innate suffering as a human being. He feels it comes with the territory, which *is* Zen. He has the artist's heart. As a therapist and meditator, I do "believe" in the Buddha's goal of less suffering – yet both these disciplines risk becoming too stuffy, too catechistic in their prescriptions by chasing this promise directly.

Miller reminds of the artist's discipline, the artist's commitment, which embodies a wisdom both Freud and Buddha need remember: which is, that the Psyche demands something *wild* of us, in order to be fully human. The artist, too, can use a little meditation, a little therapy, to ease the suffering of descent into the Psyche's wild underpinnings – in order to become *whole*, in Jung's sense. Miller says the path is that of acceptance of everything in the world and in us:

In a way the artist is always acting against the time-destiny movement. He is always a-historical. *He accepts Time* absolutely, as Whitman says, in the sense that any way he rolls (with tail in mouth) *is* direction; in the sense that any moment, every moment, may be the all; for the artist there is nothing but the present, the eternal here and now, the expanding infinite moment which is flame and song. And when he succeeds in establishing this criterion of passionate experience (which is what Lawrence meant by "obeying the Holy Ghost") then, and only then, is he asserting his humanness...

He opens himself to *all* influences—everything nourishes him. Everything is gravy to him, including what he does *not* understand—*particularly* what he does *not* understand.

It is this latter statement that smacks of Zen, the work of curiosity in all things, the intimacy of *not-knowing* which is the fundamental essence of Zen. In this essential *curiosity*, this *intimacy*, the doors toward wholeness in therapeutic, artistic, *and* meditational domains open. But it ever remains a human journey, a deeply human struggle:

This final reality which the artist comes to recognize in his maturity is that symbolic paradise of the womb...which the psychologists place somewhere between the conscious and the unconscious, that pre-natal security and immortality and union with nature from which he must wrest his freedom. Each time he is spiritually born he dreams of the impossible, the miraculous, dreams he can break the wheel of life and death, avoid the struggle and the drama, the pain and the suffering of life. His poem is the legend wherein he buries himself, wherein

he relates of the mysteries of birth and death—*his* reality, *his* experience. He buries himself in his tomb of poem in order to achieve that immortality which is denied him as a physical being.

“His poem is the legend wherein he buries himself...*his* reality, *his* experience.” This, too, is Zen. Gautama Buddha’s prime directive, so to speak: to *see for oneself*. To be your own light. And in the embraced struggle of it, to become more deeply human *as* the wheel of life and death itself.

To free myself from such beloved ancestors—Buddha, Freud, Miller—is to fall ever more in love with them. To be free of the authority of the past is to honor it—an essential Chan Buddhist notion.

Hence, to become a unique part of the whole,

a vital, singing universe, alive in all its parts.

## Red Against Orange

This morning, even with my normal sixty-one-year-old aches and pains, I am happy. There is sun. All my existential angst sits in the earth like a home. Like stone to walk upon. Happiness comes and goes, joy is deeper. Like rainwater beneath mountains. Flowing down gutters to the sea. But I notice this morning that I am happy, too. There is a hummingbird in the trumpet vine, red against orange. Wings too fast to see.

Opening John Brehm's anthology, *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy*, I find these marvelous poems. This one by Issa,

This world of dew  
is only the world of dew—  
and yet...oh and yet...

The joy inside this very world. And then, *oh and yet*, there is the gravitas of the poet Lucia Perillo:

### **After Reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead***

The hungry ghosts are ghosts whose throats  
stretch for miles, a pinprick wide,  
so they can drink and drink and are never sated.  
Every grain of sand is gargantuan  
and water goes down thick as bile.

I don't know how many births it takes to get  
reborn as not the flower but the scent.  
To be allowed to exist as air (a prayer  
to whom?)—dear whom:  
the weight of being is too much.

Victor Feguer, for his final meal,  
asked for an olive with a pit  
so that a tree might sprout from him.  
It went down hard, but now the murderer is  
comfort.  
He is a shady spot in the potter's field.

But it might be painful to be a tree,  
to stand so long with your arms up.

You might prefer to be a rock  
(if you can wear that heavy cloak).  
In Bamiyan, the limestone Buddhas stood

as tall as minor mountains, each one carved  
in its own alcove. When their heads  
eroded over time, the swallows  
built nests from their dust,  
even after zealots blew them up.

Now the swallows wheel in empty alcoves,  
their mouths full of ancient rubble.  
Each hungry ghost hawks up his pebble  
so he can breathe. And the dead  
multiply under the olive tree.

Grief is a kind of joy, as joy is a kind of grief. Or, as a variation on the old Zen formula:  
grief is grief – joy is joy – grief is joy – joy is grief.

All I know, this morning, is that there is a hummingbird in the trumpet vines. I am a  
hungry ghost. The olive seed in the body of a dead man. A zealot. A rock, bearing its  
heavy cloak. The invisible wings. A kind of happiness Red against orange.

## From Kerouac's Fly to The Wilds of Johnson's Eye

Early morning rise. Sun over the neighbor's palm trees. The gift, absolute, impermanent, of another day. I keep making my way through John Brehm's anthology, *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy*. This morning, I read this by Jack Kerouac:

In my medicine cabinet,  
the winter fly  
has died of old age.

The humor and irony of how we, too, live and die in a world of medicine not meant to cure us. Then, this poem by Kenneth Rexroth:

### Empty Mirror

As long as we are lost  
In the world of purpose  
We are not free. I sit  
In my ten foot square hut.  
The birds sing. The bees hum.  
The leaves sway. The water  
Murmurs over the rocks.  
The canyon shuts me in.  
If I moved, Basho's frog  
Would splash in the pool.  
All summer long the gold  
Laurel leaves fell through space.  
Today I was aware  
Of a maple floating  
On the pool. In the night  
I stare into the fire.  
Once I saw fire cities,  
Towns, palaces, wars,  
Heroic adventures,  
In the campfires of youth.  
Now I see only fire.  
My breath moves quietly.  
The stars move overhead.  
In the clear darkness  
Only a small red glow  
Is left in the ashes.  
On the table lies a cast

Snake skin and an uncut stone.

Both poems, the wry enlightenments of age and clarity. The fly, amid shelves of irrelevant medicines, dies at home in its world. The aging man, himself a cast, a snake skin, an uncut stone. These poems, my totem koans for the day.

Then, on to the *Wilds of Poetry* anthology—today, the work of Ronald Johnson. I appreciate David Hinton’s ongoing commentary relating each of these Western poets to the Chan Buddhist and Taoist traditions in China,

...a way of belonging fundamentally to the Cosmos. And Johnson pushes that eco-poetic insight further, for he intends his collage form to create the sense of consciousness (eye and mind) as a creation of the Cosmos, as a site where the Cosmos looks out at, contemplates, and expresses itself: “after a long time of light, there began to be eyes, and light began looking with itself”, “the eye may be said to be sun in other form”, “mind is a revelation of matter.”  
...Cosmos as “an organism spirally closed on itself, into the pull of existence.”

From Ronald Johnson’s prose poem, “Beam 4”:

The human eye, a sphere of water and tissue, absorbs an energy that has come ninety-three million miles from another sphere, the sun. The eye may be said to be sun in other form...

Though to look at the sun directly causes blindness, sight is an intricately precise tip of branched energy that has made it possible to measure the charge of solar storm, or to calculate nova. It is possible that all universe is of a similar form...

In the embryo two stalks push from the brain, through a series of infoldings, to form optic cups. Where the optic cup reaches surface, the surface turns in and proliferates in the shape of an ingrowing mushroom. The last nerve cells to form are those farthest from light...

After a long time of light, there began to be eyes and light began looking with itself. At the exact moment of death the pupils open full width.

It is this sense of direct contact with universe-as-us, this astonishing act of *seeing* as the universe looking out, in, at itself—that is the heart of the Zen I’m immersed-in with the Pacific Zen school. It is Chinese in flavor, Taoist inflected, infused with the new cosmology of modern science which is giving language to the very tissue of biological and galactic operations alike. There is no need for magic, per se, in the old sense—because there is nothing, as science is discovering, that is *not* magic. The looking itself is the most astonishing thing about this universe. And we *are* this looking.

## Henry Miller's Koan

Which brings me to yet another chapter in Henry Miller's book of essays, *The Wisdom of the Heart*; this one entitled "The Enormous Womb". I laugh aloud at his unusual and stunning language, his twist on things – so reminiscent, frankly, of my Zen teacher John Tarrant's sensibilities.

I am not surprised. John's an artist at heart, a poet and mythologist. Henry's a writer and artist who, by settling along California's coast, has effortlessly imbibed a Zen current that infuses his work. In the Pacific Zen Institute's "vocabulary" is this notion that even Zen is merely a vehicle, a *boat* in the traditional stories, that must ultimately be left behind once the river is crossed. John speaks of "the Universe" as us – how we are ever coming into being (and non-being) in a process that is larger than any single tradition. In this, I find Henry Miller's language-of-the-artist akin to this sentiment in John's Zen.

In Miller's "The Enormous Womb" is the idea that life itself is a "womb" – fertile, generative, ever-birthing itself through and around us. To embrace, rather than seek to escape, this process is Miller's, and Zen's, direction.

As far as I can make out, there is never anything but womb...there is the womb in which we have our life and being and which we call the world.

...there are people alive and moving about who live in what is called a state of bliss...Wherein are their lives different then from that of the ordinary run of mankind? To my way of thinking the difference lies in their attitude towards the world, lies in the supreme fact that they have accepted the world as a womb, and not a tomb.

Miller speaks of "the hero" as a kind of Zen-man:

The hero...he is on the side of life...Life reveals itself to him as art, and not as an ordeal.

The hero is a man who says to himself—this is where things happen, not somewhere else. He acts as if he were at home in the world.

To be at *home* in this unpredictable and strange world is a primary Zen image. Wherever one is, *to be the host*, as an old koan goes.

The world, which is not just the *human* world, is the womb of all, of birth and of life and of death...

It is this...all-inclusive womb, THE WORLD, which man is perpetually striving to make himself a part of. It is the original chaos, the seat of creation itself.

I thought Henry Miller only wrote about sex, and bohemian ex-patriot lives in Paris. Miller is a closet Zen-man. An irascible mystic in the most traditional sense. Essential, though, to Miller's sensibility – akin to Tarrant's – is that life is tumultuous, free, surprising, and everchanging, as Buddha taught. That what too often gets promoted as spirituality is actually a kind of “death instinct”, to escape this flow, and in essence, to cease to be. While some strains of Buddhism actually do teach *nirodha*, or cessation, the Mahayana tradition (of which Zen is a part) emphasizes entering this proliferating cacophony of life *as* the *nirvana* we seek. Miller's language for this is very Western:

Some people are born dead. Some people impress us as only half-alive. Others again seem radiant with energy...The real miracle is to stand still. That would mean becoming God, or dead-alive. That is the only possible escape from the womb, and that of course is why the notion of God is so ingrained in the human consciousness. God is summation, which is the same as saying cessation. God does not represent life, but fulfillment, which is the only legitimate form of death.

The Ten Ox-herding pictures of Zen iconography, representing the progression of the meditative search, used to stop at the 8<sup>th</sup> image: a circle, or *enso*, representing the ultimate formless. But a more mature Zen formulation eventually added the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> images, which bring the human and ox-mind figures back into the village, the world of the relative, of form, which is where the *One*, or the *Formless*, ever seeks to return. As Miller notes, seeking too diligently some final “fulfillment” is more akin to stasis, to death. The womb of life is where it's all happening.

Yet, where it's all “happening” is a world of struggle, and suffering. Neither Zen nor Henry Miller promote suffering. But neither is the path avoidance of struggle, because struggle *is* the life process. Paradise, in Miller's languaging, is more about entering this life than finding cessation of struggle.

Paradise is always a condition that is earned or won, through struggle. The elimination of struggle is the greatest struggle of all—the struggle not to struggle. For struggle, whether erroneously or not, has to do with birth...

To get beyond pain and suffering, beyond struggle, one must learn the equilibrist's art. ("God does not want men to overtax themselves," said Nijinsky. "He wants men to be happy.") In walking the slack wire above the opposites one becomes thoroughly and keenly aware—perilously aware. The consciousness expands to embrace the apparently conflicting opposites.

It is living *in and through* these conflicting opposites, dynamically, meditatively, that is the path of the artist, Miller says – and of Zen, as Tarrant says. It is traditionally named in Buddhism the *suchness* of life, inclusive of such paradox. Or, in Miller's language:

*The best world is that which is now this very moment.* It is the best because it is absolutely just—which does not mean that it has anything to do with *justice*...The world becomes interesting and livable only when we accept it in toto with eyes open.

This irascible Western writer finds an intuitive, innate vein of the perennial wisdom in these words. It is heartening to know, as with the Buddha, that such insight, such deep epiphany, lurks ready for anyone of any age to intuit – to *see*. The thing Buddhism has going for it, and other meditative disciplines, is an actual *path*, the means, the consciousness-artistry to help foster such innate intuition along. Koans, for instance— as a provocative intersection between meditation and language.

Henry Miller, as an irascible bodhisattva, reminds us *see for your self*. As the Buddha said – *to be a lamp unto oneself*. To doubt everything (which always seemed a bit revolutionary for a spiritual teacher to say). Or, in Miller's language, to *believe everything*.

...I believe more than ever. I believe everything, good and bad. I believe more and less than what is true. I believe beyond the whole corpus of man's thinking. *I believe everything*. I believe in a collective life and in the individual life also. I believe in the life of the world, the uterus which it is. I believe in the contradictions of the uterine life of this world...

Buddhists posit that amid endless heavens above and endless hells below, this middle-world of the human is the only one in which one becomes truly enlightened. *Because* of its odd mix of pain and pleasure, the struggle that wakes one from the slumber of either extreme. This life, a *precious human birth*, a rare opportunity. Miller again:

For a foetus the important thing is birth. Similarly for man, the important thing is to get born, born into the world-as-is, not some imaginary, wished for world, not some better, brighter world, but this, the only world, the world of NOW. Why then do we not give ourselves—recklessly, abundantly, completely?

Indeed. Perhaps this is *Henry Miller's Koan*...

## Again, The Body

Lucia Perillo begins her poem “Again, the Body” with this quote:

I have become what I have always been and it has  
taken a lifetime, all of my own life, to reach this  
point where it is as if I know finally that I am alive  
and that I am here, right now.

—Tobias Schneebaum, *Keep The River On Your Right*

This resonates so with me, though it is an odd statement. Age, and the passage of time, bring me more *fully* into my own life, rather than only taking something from me. This recognition that I am ever *here, right now*. Ram Dass would be proud.

But Perillo’s title, “Again, the Body”, is poignant, knowing her struggle with illness that led to an early death last year. The body is its own animal, more a part of this eco-sphere and its tumult, its changing weather, than the “me” I wish myself to be apart from such changing conditions. The publisher of her book comments:

Throughout Perillo’s career, her poems have brimmed with insight, with matter-of-factness at the wonders and disappointments of nature—especially the failings of the “meat cage”, the human body.

And I am healthy, compared to the travails of multiple sclerosis she endured, dying three years younger than I am now. Such comparisons are silly, I know—each person’s relationship with their own body and kinesthetic mortality is unique, their own. Still, perhaps this morning I can enter her life and poems as a *gate*, in the Zen-sense, to the mysteries of the body’s strange filtering of life experience.

The lines of her poem about the body are odd and compelling:

When you spend many hours alone in a room  
you have more than the usual chances to disgust yourself –  
this is the problem of the body, not that it is mortal  
but that it is mortifying. When we were young they taught us  
do not touch it, but who can keep from touching it...

She goes on to ruminate on a man named Schneebaum, from the epigraph above, who “walked four days into the jungle and stayed for the kindness of the tribe – who would have thought that cannibals would be so tender?” A true story, of a different kind of relationship to the body—where the hunting and eating of each other is just another way of being in a body:

This could be any life: the vegetation is thick  
and when there is an opening, you follow  
down its tunnel until one night you find yourself  
walking as on any night, though of a sudden your beloved  
friends are using their stone blades  
to split the skulls of other men. Gore everywhere,  
though the chunk I ate was bland;  
it was only when I chewed too far and bled  
that the taste turned satisfyingly salty.  
How difficult to be in a body,  
how easy to be repelled by it,  
eating one-sixth of the human heart.  
Afterward, the hunters rested  
their heads on one another’s thighs  
while the moon shone on the river...

Macabre, to any modern sensibility. But I sense that, to Lucia Perillo, whose own body kept failing her right into an early grave, the cannibals and the intrepid anthropologist mirrored, like the moon, the bravery one needs to face the body directly. Till the taste of one’s own life turns satisfyingly salty—*because* we’ve chewed too far, and bled. Then rested our heads on one another, the moon shining on the river.

## Sculpting the Human

This morning, another poem from Lucia Perillo's *Time Will Clean the Carcass Bones*. To remind of the task of the human amid the dark fire of this world—be that fire a president gone bad, or Buddha's mentors *age, illness, death*. Or simply the depths of one's own contrary psyche—this task of making something human of ourselves.

### Kilned

These days when my legs twitch like hounds under the sheets  
and the eyes are troubled by a drifting fleck –  
I think of him: the artist  
who climbs into the lava runs at Kalapana,  
the only person who has not fled town  
fearing the advance of basalt tongues.  
He wears no special boots, no special clothes,  
no special breather mask to save him  
from poison fumes. And it is hot, so hot  
the sweat drenches him and shreds his clothes  
as he bends to plunge his shovel  
where the earth's bile has found its way to surface.  
When he catches fire, he'll roll in a patch of moss  
then simply rise and carry on. He will scoop  
this *pahoehoe*, he will think of Pompeii  
and the bodies torqued in final grotesque poses.  
Locals cannot haul away their wooden churches fast enough,  
they call this the wrath of Madame Pele,  
the curse of a life that was so good  
they should have known to meet it with suspicion.  
But this man steps into the dawn and its yellow flames,  
spins each iridescent blue clod in the air  
before spreading it on a smooth rock ledge to study.  
First he tries to see what this catastrophe is saying.  
Then, with a trowel in his broiling hand,  
he works to sculpt it into something human.

What a startling image. In the previous poem in the book, Lucia Perillo had just been given a diagnosis by the doctor that would similarly erupt in her world. Life's full of such surprises, and I love Lucia's lines about *the curse of a life that was so good/they should have known to meet it with suspicion*. In Zen, even doubt is a way of greeting this world—as the artist *with a trowel in his broiling hand...works to sculpt it into something human*.

## Henry Miller, E. Graham Howe, & the Zen of John Tarrant

Henry Miller had his own teachers, his own *ancestors*, so to speak. One of them was the now obscure British psychiatrist, E. Graham Howe—a synthesizer in the early 1900's of the wisdom of the East. As I enter through the gateless gate of John Tarrant, and now Henry Miller, Miller entered through the likes of Howe. We carry our ancestors with us.

On Miller's posthumous website, which his daughter maintains, is this marvelous quote from Henry:

I struggled in the beginning. I said I was going to write the truth, so help me God. And I thought I was. I found I couldn't. Nobody can write the absolute truth.

I suspect that as Buddhist practice continues its creative infiltration into the West, it will emerge less as *truth*, and more as *infinite curiosity*, which is the touchstone of meditative inquiry. There will continue to be this reclamation, too, of the hidden Zen nascent in Western poetics that, in many ways, has been the secret vessel for it, sans a native religious form to carry it with.

Henry Miller's essay "The Wisdom of the Heart" – a Buddhist *essay* if I've ever read one – highlights the influence that E. Graham Howe, founder of the innovative Tavistock Clinic, had on not only Miller, but Alan Watts, R.D. Lang, and others. Howe was assailed in his day as being much too spiritual, aligned with the ancient wisdom of the East before it was fashionable to do so. Howe's collection of essays, *The Druid of Harley Street*, is fascinating, but the fact that there's no biography of E. Graham Howe on Wikipedia says something about his current obscurity. But he was not obscure to Henry Miller, who devoted this essay, "The Wisdom of the Heart", to his work—two men in whom the wisdom of Buddhism first began to shine before most of America even knew what it was.

Henry Miller starts with an observation as pertinent today as then:

Every book by an analyst gives us, in addition to the philosophy underlying his therapeutic, a glimpse into the nature of the analyst's own problem vis-à-vis life.

Henry, if I may call him that, brings an earthy realism to his mysticism, including a pragmatic clinical eye to anyone claiming to be a guru – be they spiritual, psychoanalytic, or literary.

Some analysts are just as pitiful and harassed specimens of humanity as the patients who come to them for relief.

But in E. Graham Howe, Henry Miller feels as though he's found the real-deal. Despite Howe being attacked by the "scientific" psychiatric and psychoanalytical field for taking concepts derived from spiritual practice and existential phenomenology, and applying them to psychotherapy, Miller esteemed Howe's work. Saw it as a crucial bridge to wisdom that Asian Buddhist communities had been steeped in for many centuries.

Throughout his books it is the indirect or Oriental way of life which he stresses, and this attitude, it may also be said, is that of art. The art of living is based on rhythm, on give and take, ebb and flow, light and dark, life and death. By acceptance of *all* the aspects of life, good and bad, right and wrong, yours and mine, the static, defensive life, which is what most people are cursed with, is converted into a dance, "the dance of life" ... The real function of the dance is—*metamorphosis*. One can dance to sorrow or to joy; one can even dance abstractly, as Helba Huara proved to the world. But the point is that, by the mere act of dancing, the elements which compose it are transformed...

The acceptance of the situation, any situation, brings about a flow, a rhythmic impulse towards self-expression. To relax is, of course, the first thing a dancer has to learn.

Henry Miller's language reminds of the modern Buddhist scholar, Stephen Batchelor, his descriptions in *After Buddhism* of the fluid nature of the self-in-process being much like a dancer. This same theme emerges in the Buddhist psychiatrist Mark Epstein's work, such as his book *Going on Being*. Indeed, the author description regarding E. Graham Howe's *The Druid of Harley Street*, says:

Howe's writings included more than a dozen books and countless articles on a broad range of subjects from schizophrenia to Asian spiritual practices. Through these works he exerted a profound influence on intellectuals such as R. D. Laing, Alan Watts, and Henry Miller, to name a few... *The Druid of Harley Street* samples the best of his essays, offering timely insights for followers of Jung, Roberto Assagioli, and Mark Epstein; students of somatic therapies; and spiritual and meditation practitioners.

But it is in the context of my own Zen practice with Roshi John Tarrant of the Pacific Zen School, that Henry Miller and E. Graham Howe's work resonate. Miller and Howe,

and a host of other hidden influences, remind me of the inexorable flow of “wisdom” that seeps through the centuries – crystallizing *now* in John Tarrant’s work. Tarrant’s innovative use of koans to elucidate the paradoxical nature of life, the embrace of conflict and impediment, the sense of leaning-into the unknown, I find reflected here in these quintessential British and American figures. Precursors, if you will, to this emerging Western Zen.

Miller, conveying Howe’s work, continues:

Life, as we all know, is conflict, and man, being part of life, is himself an expression of conflict. If he recognizes the fact and accepts it, he is apt, despite the conflict, to know peace and to enjoy it...

*Faith in life*, let me quickly add—a faith free and flexible, equal to any emergency and broad enough to include death, as well as other so-called evils.

This statement of what “faith in life” means is a profound twist on what spirituality sometimes errantly promises: namely, that we can ultimately be *safe from life* and its suffering. Tarrant’s Zen, reflected here in Miller and Howe, is a different kind of faith – one that embraces conflict, uncertainty, *life*.

In this way, similar to the famous koan of *traveling straight down the road of 99 curves*, one learns a kind of meditational and psychological *aikido*, where what rises up to meet one is encountered as part of the path, rather than a mere impediment. Miller again says,

Progress, according to the Westerner, means a straight line through impenetrable barriers, creating difficulties and obstacles all along the line, and thus defeating itself. Howe’s idea is the Oriental one, made familiar to us through the art of jujitsu, wherein the obstacle itself is made into an aid.

In John Tarrant’s Zen, there is no such thing as *safety*, per se. There is community, there is the embrace of this strange and numinous journey together, but the world is the world. *Suchness*. It is what it is. No one else will save you. Not even Buddha. There *is* grace, there is synchronicity and much magic in the world – but not absent its near-counterparts, which are: trouble, random chaos, boredom. As Miller continues,

To imagine that we are going to be saved by outside intervention, whether in the shape of an analyst, a dictator, a savior, or even God, is sheer folly. There are not enough lifeboats to go

around, and anyway, as the author points out, what is needed more than lifeboats is lighthouses. A fuller, clearer vision—not more safety appliances!

Not more safety appliances! What a marvelous statement. Though safety appliances are nice, when you can get them, or invent them. Nevertheless, the inexorable tide of mortality and the Buddha's three universals – aging, illness, death – can only become “safe” when one embraces, rather than attempts to escape from them.

Henry Miller and E. Graham Howe also take issue with that vaunted goal of “normalcy”, the pursuit of which causes as much suffering as the supposed malady of feeling “abnormal”.

“Normality”, says Howe, “is the paradise of escapeologists, for it is a fixation concept, pure and simple.” “It is better, if we can,” he asserts, “to stand alone and to feel quite normal about our abnormality, doing nothing whatever about it, except what needs to be done in order to be oneself.

When therapy or spiritual practice get twisted into the pursuit of *normalcy*, we too become twisted. Beyond this fixation is the more-subtle work, when such paths help us come to terms with one's own unique eccentricity in a world of shared commonalities. Miller says,

For the awakened individual, however, life begins *now*, at any and every moment; it begins at the moment when he realizes that he is part of a great whole, and in the realization becomes himself whole...

It is not essentially new, but it needs to be rediscovered by each and every one individually. As I said before, one meets it in such poets and thinkers as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, to take a few recent examples. It is a philosophy of life which nourished the Chinese for thousands of years.

The astonishing thing to me is *language*, how such wisdom finds its way through the centuries to new expression of ancient realizations. John Tarrant began to use a more conversational, improvisational, artistic kind of language to convey old Chinese Chan Buddhist wisdom. And I find it, too, in this collaborative languaging between Miller and Howe.

He knows that the healer is primarily an artist, and not a magician or a god...He is not interested in *healing*, but in *being*. He does not seek to cure, but to enjoy a life more abundant...

His mind is, as the Chinese well say, “alive-and-empty”. He is anchored in the flux, neither drowned in it nor vainly trying to dam it.

In John Tarrant, Henry Miller, E. Graham Howe, I am so appreciative of this language of a Zen that is not even Zen, per se. It is *life*, as the Buddha knew. That, as Henry Miller found,

...truth is paradox and that he is safest when he is least defended.

One cannot travel on the Path before one has become that Path himself.

There is no salvation, really, only infinite realms of experience providing more and more tests, demanding more and more faith. Willy-nilly we are moving towards the Unknown, and the sooner and readier we give ourselves up to the experience, the better it will be for us.

Said like a true Zen man.

## Koans of Optimism & Savagery

So, I turn to poetry as I used to turn to the Bible—open at random to this poem by Dean Young in his book, *Bender*:

### The New Optimism

The recital of the new optimism  
was oft interrupted, rudeness  
in the ramparts, an injured raven  
that needed attending, pre-op  
nudity. The young who knew everything  
was new made babies who unforeseeably  
would one day present their complaint.  
Enough blame to go around but the new  
optimism didn't stop, helped one  
pick up a brush, another a spatula  
even as the last polar bear sat  
on his shrinking berg thinking,  
I have been vicious but my soul is pure.  
And the new optimism loves the bear's  
soul and makes images of it to sell  
at fair-trade craft fairs with laboriously  
knotted hunks of rope, photos of cheese,  
soaps with odd ingredients, whiskey,  
sand, hamburger drippings, lint,  
any and everything partaking of the flowing  
exfoliating cleanup. And the seal  
is sponged of oil spill. And the broken  
man is wheeled in a meal. War finally  
seems stupid enough. You look an animal  
in the eye before eating it and the gloomy  
weather makes the lilacs grow. Hello  
oceans of air. Your dead cat loves you  
still and will forever welcome you home.

Oh my. I view Dean Young's wry cynicism as a kind of celebratory non-dual meditation on the intimate absurdity of life, and its strange occurrences. A post-modern koan. An endarkenment that tastes a lot like enlightenment. It feels fitting—as a meditation for yet another year, and humanity's ongoing project of the *New Optimism*. The koan of it a kind of mirror: how does one hold *what is?*

Of course, in Young's next poem, there is a koan of the "new savagery", too. Here's a few lines:

### **The New Savagery**

What does the new savagery  
require of me? If I pound a nail  
into the wall, the wall is my heart.  
All that gnawing on my own headbone—

That was the old savagery, a lassitudinous  
charade, black leather jacket boom boom  
long after the sun had set and all  
that was left was for the dancers  
to put their clothes back on.

The mind twists its silver wire...

if the duty of my dejections  
takes me into the sky, no one  
must follow me...

Why am I so afraid of nothingness?  
My soul is a baby wolf.

I am made of nothingness *and* baby wolf. Optimism *and* savagery. Pounding a nail into the wall of my heart, this is how I open—and, have something to hang my *self* on. These enigmatic lines, dipped in post-modernism's purposeful disjunctions, invite the mind beyond its usual two-note tune of *yes* and *no*, of *like* and *dislike*, of *I want* and *I don't want*. When life is not *only* about rejecting or clinging to its savagery and optimism, what is the non-dual language to say it?

Young's next poem, too, speaks to me of these things—a long poem, of which I'll include a few of its lines:

### **Note Enclosed with My Old Jean Jacket**

Herein lies what I lived through and with  
and tore to fit over my cast, fell down in,  
rose up in, wept and slept in on carpets

of peanut shells, on clouds and tombstones  
and soggy chairs, on the bent weaponry of  
remote women, my glimpse of the garden  
occluded by dreams of hundred-dollar bills...

I survived, put on weight, took up some  
unpredictable space like the woman from Iowa  
abducted by a UFO who now has a few things  
to say...I too have been far away  
and heard the extraterrestrial hum and feared  
I'd be dissected...

It seemed at any moment a new music was about to be  
discovered like an inland passage to a golden  
shrine and all would be familiar at the beloved's  
name heard in a crowd...

We were young and toughing out a season  
in our sneakers as we tried to kill the Buddha...  
    You'd finger the scar  
ringing your skull from where they put  
this brain in you. You remember being hoisted  
into lightning...

And our desires? Well, they went  
running off ahead of us as usual toward  
the lake with ducks, a-wag, tennis ball in mouth  
and we felt some odd sense of well-being, coiling  
the leash up in our hand, loping after. It turns out  
so much in the world actually works...

There's healing all around, scabs are forming  
and flaking away and even the fat, legless lady  
with her Pekinese seems another shape of love  
just beyond our comprehension. It turns out,  
all that time, vast conspiracies of forgiveness  
were mustering in the sky and we only had to look up  
to receive...

Of course these frightening moments persist,  
we really are going to pieces but surely  
we can't go on dragging all this stuff around with us,  
no matter what it means, which may, even this,  
nearly rag, permanently soiled, passed-on,

constitute a gift.

And it *is* a gift—this poem, this life. *Bark! Bark!* I may be chasing nothing, but my tail's wagging...

## Closet Mystics

From *The American Poetry Review* (July/August 2017), a poem by one of my favorite poets, Bob Hicok. As with Dean Young, and Tony Hoagland, I call them my “closeted mystics”, because they hide moments of *blending* with the world inside post-modernism’s dissociative lingo:

### The point of life

Is to go out and put my arms  
around a horse. While it might appear  
from the road I’m cheating  
on my wife, I’m cheating  
at not being sad that I’m a person  
by holding the pulse of a horse  
against my ear. I’ve also rested a cloud  
against my ear at the top of a mountain,  
and the bottom of a mountain  
against my ear by lying down  
and listening for the Earth  
grinding its teeth. I usually  
bring a carrot I pulled up myself  
from where it was hiding in the ground,  
the horse always eats the carrot  
I usually bring, this is certainly  
almost certainty in a world famous  
for making up its mind every second  
who lives and dies, who looks good  
in plaid or in the back of a squad car,  
crying. The owner of the horse  
doesn’t know I’ve stolen her dew  
on my pants or kissed her horse’s neck  
while wind stirs the shadows of grass,  
I don’t know if I flew as a boy  
on the horse outside the grocery store  
my mother always let me ride,  
she’d put a coin in and go shop  
and the horse would try hard  
to run away and set both of us free:  
when it couldn’t, I’d settle  
for finding my mother a little later  
holding a can of something

trying to keep us alive.  
I'd like the woman who owns the horse  
and my mother, who'll always  
have dibs on me, to meet.  
While they talk, the horse and I  
will continue our thought experiment:  
if a man only seems himself  
clearly in the brown mirror  
of a horse's eyes, is he reborn  
every time she blinks?

I love this poem, with its quixotic koan-like utterances. *The point of life* is to go out and put my arms around a horse. I may find myself in the brown mirror of this horse's eye. This horse of life. Hicok also believes, though, in filing a flight plan for such excursions.

### **Flight Plan**

I like to think I have a wing  
inside myself, and if a wing,  
that I've swallowed Icarus whole,  
wax and all, in the moment  
before the sun treats him  
as an equal. There's a poem about him  
I love about a painting about him  
I plan to stand before  
before I die, flapping my arms  
until the docent comes over  
in his sturdy shoes and holds a mirror  
so I can touch-up my lipstick  
before kissing the splash Icarus made  
in the ocean going home. I have  
all these plans to make plans  
and all these desires to be brave  
about the fall awaiting us all,  
but I never quite get there,  
like a man trying to leap  
out of his tracks in snow. When  
he lands, the first person  
to welcome him back to Earth  
looks so much like the person  
he tried to leave behind,  
that he leaps again, and spends  
half of the rest of his life

landing, half in the air.

Thinking (a dubious affair, I know) about *the point of life*, and my own *flight plan* for it, I find myself nodding in agreement with Hicok's sense of merging with horse and mountain alike, as well as the never-ending dialogue between himself and the little kid's horsey-ride outside the grocery store. How to find a freedom the sky seems to offer, while ever being welcomed back to Earth. How to be akin to the gods—swallowing Icarus whole—*before kissing the splash Icarus made in the ocean going home*. Here, in the ordinary days of earth. Spending half my life landing, half in the air. The koan of it.

## The *Debths* of It

In the *New York Review of Books* (September 28, 2017) is a review by Langdon Hammer of the poet Susan Howe's new book, *Debths*, entitled "Inside & Underneath Words".

In Hammer's hand, the essay becomes its own poetic form. It is graceful and illuminating. A translation of a life, of a body of work I might not have understood otherwise. Howe herself is a bit too modernist, fragmented, elusive for me in her poems, yet when "translated" into an essay about her life, she (and her work) suddenly take shape in a narrative her own work eschews. Yet, it is the call & response of reviewer and poet that deepens into conversation what might not otherwise exist. There is something of Zen here, too, "inside and underneath" the words.

Howe's early book, *My Emily Dickinson*, illuminates the repression, then emergence of Emily's body of work into the national poetic psyche. It is a tale of feminist liberation, regarding both social and poetic mores. It is a "hybrid" work, too, the form of which I use in these *assays*. I'm drawn to the description:

*My Emily Dickinson* is a hybrid prose work including elements of literary criticism, cultural history, personal essay, lyric rhapsody, and aesthetic manifesto. Much of it consists of quotations, often with minimal or no comment. These come from Dickinson's poems and letters, but also from Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, Jonathan Edwards's sermons, Shakespeare's history plays, the Brownings, Emily Bronte, and other sources. They are a record of Dickinson's reading—and Howe's. The "My" in Howe's title is both a modest admission of partiality and an emphatic claim of possession.

I might as well attach the word "My" to many of the names of my favorite authors, in an "emphatic claim of possession", too. Because they become incorporated internally, form a new part of my inner architecture, my own history – my Buddha, my Henry Miller, my Stephen Batchelor, my John Tarrant, and so on. In contemplation, one enters into ecstatic dialogue (argumentative, too) with one's literary and spiritual friends. Howe says of Dickinson that she,

...was a contemplative poet, a reader, and a scholar. "Her talent," Howe writes, "was synthetic; she used other writers, grasped straws from the bewildering raveling of Being wherever and whenever she could us them. Crucial was her ability to spin straw into gold.

My life, too, depends on this same process. Without contemplation, the world remains for me a “bewildering raveling of Being”. With *Attention!* – the heart of Zen – contemplation and its poetics give expression to both straw and gold alike.

The essay then turns to a marvelous elucidation of the one-word title of Howe’s new book of poems, *Debth*. Like a koan, this single word bears much weight when unpacked, and in itself becomes *koan*.

The word “debths” comes from *Finnegans Wake* in a passage Howe uses as an epigraph for the book. It combines “debts”, “depths”, and “deaths”. The word is an example of Howe’s interest in misspellings, slips of the tongue, and chance verbal arrangements. A reader can’t help but stumble on the unfamiliar noun, and puzzle over it. Its strangeness and richness follow from its compression.

Here, in one word, Howe binds three themes without settling the relations...among them. The point might be that *death* is the time of reckoning, when we must admit how deep in *debt* we are, and pay with our lives. Or it may be that our *debts* are a consolation. When they are debts to the past and to the collective history we call culture...“debths”...are deep ties to everything in human life that, for good or for ill, will survive us.

*Debths* becomes a koan-word to roll round my mouth, in my body and heart, as a “deep tie to everything in human life” – *debt*, *depth*, & *death*.

Imbedded here, though, in this essay about Susan Howe’s work, is a conundrum about both Zen and post-modernism: *obscurity*. Difficulty in language. Despite the eloquence of the reviewer’s essay in-response-to Howe’s difficult post-modern poetry, the poems themselves can be maddeningly obtuse. As some Zen koans, poems, essays, also are. Is this refusal to be clear about anything somehow essential to the pointing-itself, toward something that cannot be approached directly?

As the adage in poetics goes, to say it *slant* is to give emergence to more than odd literature. It is the emergence of new consciousness itself – allowing, say, for old Victorian sensibilities to morph into the very modern world that could not be seen through the old lens. Or in Zen, to point beyond the dualisms of human experience (good/bad, pain/pleasure, the One & the Many) through language that is itself contradictory, paradoxical, fragmentary (eg., haiku, koans, reflections). Sometimes the world must be broken apart in order to be seen through, and experienced in a deeper way, beneath the surface, the *debths* beneath the straightforward tale of our lives.

Still, it often takes a *translator*, such as the reviewer, or a teacher, to crack the egg of such obscurity (poem, self) in order to grasp a new obvious truth. The reviewer says as much in the essay about Howe:

But we need to ask: If immediacy and connection are the goals of this poetry, why pursue them by a method that foregrounds the mediation of print and the collage-maker's craft—fonts and diacritical marks, scissors and tape—and puts up such obstacles to reading? Wouldn't you want a clear channel? Why turn up the noise?

This, in response to Howe's extremely difficult text in *Debt*, where language itself threatens to become an impenetrable gate to where she ostensibly wants to lead the reader. It is the kind of critique one might levy toward much of post-modernism's tactics. Or Zen's. To be so obtuse and oblique as to refuse the core tenets of communication itself. I am not a post-modernist fan for this very reason. Yet I *am* a fan of the essayist that can coax beauty and meaning from such an impenetrable gate, and in the process, reveal something *new*. In this way, it is the hybrid-nature of the poet and reviewer's dialogue that opens us—as, say, Zen's dialogue between student and teacher.

In Howe's fascination with her varied textual fragments, and the reviewer's fascination with Howe's transcriptions and responses to these historical pieces,

...the marks of failure (strikethroughs, empty brackets, question marks) record a heroic "declaration of faith". Even in its partiality, the transcription shows there is something larger and vital that can be no more than pointed to.

As with Zen, "there is something larger and vital that can be no more than pointed to." This is core to the Zen tradition, and to the post-modernism so many artists, philosophers, and academics find themselves flailing-about it. The Zen master may come at the student's question "slant", by responding to the earnestness of "What is Buddha-nature?" by pointing to a bag of rice, or a pile of shit (how's *that* for post-modernism!) – because the student cannot grasp the numinous existence of life everywhere-present, even in the most ordinary things, without being contrary about the answer. Without disrupting the normal syntax of language, expectation, apprehension.

The thing about Zen, though, is that it knows the presence of the *One* in the *Many*, the *emptiness* in *form*, the *absolute* in the *relative*. That you can only embrace these contraries through paradox. In this era's love affair with post-modernism, there's an embrace of the insubstantiality and impermanence of all things (*anatta* and *anicca*) without the related

insight of how this can lead to *less*, rather than *more* suffering. The following comment about Howe's work might be said of post-modernism in general:

Howe's poetry alters perception by disrupting syntax and grammar. That technique is extended here to cutting up words themselves to see what's inside or "underneath" them. What we find are parts—halves, not wholes—or simply "dust and puddle." This leaves Howe's writing on the edge of intelligibility and even legibility. There can be no "chance for any unity" in such poetry. The most it can do is put up "opposition" to the regimes of power that maintain the order of the world, asserting contradiction and division in place of unity and its false consolations.

This is where we are in (post-) modern times: asserting contradiction to avoid false unity (and its illusory consolations). This could also apply to the modern Zen student's wrangling with the contradictory poles of fragmentation and unity one finds in one's own mind and heart. Such discomfort *is* an important place to get comfortable-in, because it is a *truer* reflection of life than any lopsided fanatical half-truth: all is unity, or, only random fragments. The reviewer asks:

Or is Howe saying the opposite—that a disjunctive poetry like hers is our only "chance for any unity"? That's an equally plausible inference. Throughout Howe's career, the spirit of her work has been critical and skeptical, angry and oppositional, but also openly utopian. So we shouldn't be surprised here when she continues by reversing directions: "and yet all will be."

It's tempting to finish that phrase by adding "well" – as if it were a quotation from T.S. Eliot in his Anglican phase. But Howe stops short of promising us anything beyond the certainty that what will be, will be.

Post-modernism is secretly looking, as all pessimists are, for a new utopia—but by coming at it *slant*, thank god, in order to ensure its survival. As in Zen, it is only in the "suchness" of things, the "what will be will be" complex beauty, the poignancy, of life's particulars that any flavor of unity will be apprehended. Then released again, into the next moment, and the next. *And yet all will be.*

It is the changing moon the Zen master points at, while the student stares dumbly at his finger. It is the utopia Susan Howe aims for, by undermining any tyrannical sense of it. Flip sides of the same stubborn coin (it is always two-sided) – but you can feel it in your hand as *whole*. The *debths* of it.

## The Metaphysics of Rhythm & Twins

Back to David Hinton's anthology, *The Wilds of Poetry*—and to the poet Charles Olson, whose prose I am enjoying. From “Human Universe”:

It is not the Greeks I blame. What it comes to is ourselves, that we do not find ways to hew to experience as it is...find ways to stay in the human universe.

...what really matters: that a thing, any thing, impinges on us by a more important fact, its self-existence...that the skin itself, the meeting edge of man and external reality is where all that matters does happen, that man and external reality are so involved with one another that, for man's purposes, they had better be taken as one.

I am willing to hazard a guess at a way to restore to man some of his lost relevance. For this metaphor of the senses—of the literal speed of light by which a man absorbs, instant on instant, all that phenomenon presents to him...his dreams, for example, his thoughts...his desires, sins, hopes, fears, faiths, loves...

There is only one thing you can do...re-enact it. Which is why the man said, he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe. And why art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic.

I love the tenor of this, as another example of Western literature sounding the depths of Zen. Reminding me of John Tarrant's phrase, *how the world rises up to meet us*, and we are it, all of it.

To stay in rhythm with it, a twin to every-thing.

## The Koans of Willis Barnstone

The esteemed Willis Barnstone, author and translator of more than 80 books, is also a wry funnyman. With Pulitzer prize nominations under his cantankerous belt, he also manages to come up with *Funny Ways of Staying Alive*, with its odd aphorisms. There are a few gems that act almost as Zen koans:

Sometimes in solitude,  
The truth is rude.

The mole  
Is digging for its soul.

Over the wheat the autumn crows  
Blackly ignore the rose.

Out of your mind? Kick the universe  
And break your foot or worse.

Pissing in the forest under an elm,  
Connects you to a cosmic realm.

The way into your soul?  
There is no hole.  
You are a small tree  
And inside grows a black sea.

Then, there are some slightly longer little ditties:

God said, "This apple tree  
Is all for me."  
Despite the NO by the grand misanthrope,  
Daring Eve ate  
And gave us death, our birth, and hope.  
Eve and her snitching mate  
Would still be sharing an idyllic state  
Of impotence in paradise  
If Eve had not got wise.

And these,

December in a Beijing hutong we  
Talked poetry,  
Were cold, happy. We knew  
Even the secret police had no clue  
How unpoor  
We were drinking green tea on the floor.

\*

Around the bend  
And in your head you know a civil war,  
But in the end  
Only you, quiet friend,  
Outwit the raging minotaur.

Returning, too, to Willis' astonishing book about translation, entitled *ABC of Translation*, I am drawn not only to his ideas about how *true* translation is done (getting at the *spirit*, not just the *technical*), but its applicability to translating, say, Buddhism from one culture to another. The same principles apply to literature as to wisdom. Willis is brilliant at this. His strange book is set up with topics beginning with the letters of the alphabet (including his delightful sketches), and so the first example is the letter "A", and the topic of *Art*:

## ART

### Orphan in an Alien City

Translation is  
    the **art of revelation**.  
                                    The poet translator recognizes,  
  
recreates, and thereby  
    reveals the original  
                                    artist's work.  
  
The picaresque volume  
    floats off to mystery  
                                    of possible esteem  
  
or normal starvation.  
    The winds of chance howl.  
                                    Though famous at home,

in a new tongue  
    the book is an orphan  
                    in an alien city. With no past

the newcomer  
    may become myth.  
                    In rags or hand me downs

or pretended glory,  
    the newly dressed orphan  
                    is morning surprise to crowds.

He is a distinctive stranger.  
    The orphan is Don Quijote de la Mancha  
                    in Chicago.

I love Willis' quirky and insightful take on this, that (whether literature, culture, wisdom) it is the *art of revelation*. That something dies if we try too rigidly to be too-true to the technical origins. This is applicable to Zen, too, in its transition from India through China and Japan to America.

Willis' idiosyncratic musings go on—for example, the letter “B” begins with these lines:

## **BETWEEN**

### **Hop Nations and Hear a New Song**

Translation is an art of hopping **between** tongues,  
The child of this art lives forever between home  
    and a foreign planet.  
Once across the border, in new garb,  
  
the orphan remembers or conceals the old town  
and appears newborn and different with new sounds,  
    prosody, and grammar.  
Translation tolerates no mirrors...

Then the letter “C”, with the beginning lines of dual reveries:

## **CLOWN**

### **Dress Him in Hamlet's Cape**



## Intimacy & the Arts of Reading

There's a marvelous essay in the *New York Review of Books* (Sept. 28, 2017), entitled "What Is the Critic's Job?", by Edward Mendelson, which, bear with me, speaks to the art of dialogue that is necessary to deepen *intimacy*—a core Zen concern. In a way, the adept Western Zen teacher becomes a kind of cultural translator and critic, interpreting ancient wisdom in modern context. The art of this dialogue yields a deeper encounter than any original text can muster. Hence, reading Western literature for the "debths" (to use Susan Howe's word) of hidden Zen is part of the koan of translating Zen to the West.

Zen is not only about a Buddhist cultural world, with imported texts and iconography from Asia. It entails a translation of one world to another. So, when reading *Art* below, read also *Zen* in a parallel kind of intimacy.

The cited essay, a work of art in its own way, is about two new books on the topic of intimacy in reading:

- *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth*, by A.O. Scott.
- *This Thing We Call Literature*, by Arthur Krystal

I am drawn here for reasons similar to the previous essay that caught my eye, about Susan Howe, and her books *My Emily Dickenson*, and, *Debth*. Namely: that of engaged readership, whereby author, reader and reviewer enter into deepening dialogue. A dialogue reminiscent of the phrase I remember from childhood that Jesus spoke to his disciples – but for which I've substituted *Zen & Art* – namely, *Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them*. It is a matter of similar gravity, this confrontation with the *debths*, what it offers us, demands of us:

It praises criticism for offering readers a better life by alerting them to the direct personal demands that art makes on anyone who listens. At the heart of the book is the conclusion of Rilke's sonnet about a statue in the Louvre, "Antique Torso of Apollo", a sentence, spoken by the poem or the statue, commanding poet and reader: "You must change your life."

Some art (including literature, music, dance) one simply stands numb and dumb in front of, flooded by its overwhelming effect on one tiny human psyche. This is why it

sometimes takes two, or three, human beings in a kind of communal encounter – via the essay or koan, for instance – to contemplate together, mediate through dialogue, this confrontation with beauty that says, *Here am I in the midst of you.*

We may have left religion and its inquisitions far behind (well, not that far behind), but not beauty – if anything, the world is even more mysterious, enigmatic, compelling, without a white-bearded old man, or his earnest son and hordes of angels, as necessary intermediaries. Or even Buddha, for that matter. One may confront directly, like Rilke, that which still insists, *You must change your life.* The Arts as a kind of Zen hold such communal possibilities, a kind of universal language and better scripture.

If we look for it, that is – and not relegate the Arts or Zen to academia alone. It is a personal matter. Yet “the critic” as promoted by these reviewed books, or by proxy, the inter-cultural Buddhist teacher, can indeed be a kind of translator, or tour guide, through sights and sounds we might not otherwise see without their special “3-D” glasses. Till we learn *to see*, too. That is, when these friendly guides imbibe and communicate the *soul* of the work (it is still a spiritual enterprise, at root) rather than the dry precision of textual/cultural academics, pinning the dead butterfly wings to their enumerated wooden backings. There is a mutuality to communion, when an essay or commentary draws one into *intimacy* rather than mere *understanding*:

...the critic best understands a work when the work seems to understand the critic, when the connection is mutual:

*What Edmund Wilson called the shock of recognition is equally the thrill of being recognized, an uncanny, impossibly but undeniably reciprocal bond that leaps across gaps of logic, history, and culture.*

This way of thinking would sound naïve in a graduate seminar, but it has notable antecedents. Virginia Woolf wrote:

*The writer must get in touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to cooperate in the far more difficult business of intimacy.*

*Intimacy*, to return to my favorite subject matter, is a key Zen word conveying the sense of curiosity and openness to experience cultivated by intimate attention to the world—both internal and external, and where they intermingle.

*Intimate reading* can be a kind of contemplative meditative process that connects one more deeply with both soul and world. We learn to allow ourselves to be touched by what we read, in a way that historians now tell us was deepened immensely by the invention of the printing press, and specifically, the novel – providing access to the whole notion of entering another’s subjectivity in a profound and novel manner. Before, it was all-and-only about biblical canons, or the gods. Reading, as an intimate affair, opens one to territories beyond the thick skull ones reside in, essentially alone.

But contemplative reading is a discipline, and “critics/teachers” – those with “keys” to help us unlock mystery, rather than being themselves the lock – may help us learn how to be intimate with what we read.

W.H. Auden, thinking along similar lines, distinguished between merely consumable “reading matter” and a “Book”, which is any “piece of writing which one does not read *but is read by.*” A Book, in reading you, knows you intimately, perhaps better than you know yourself.

The Arts, then, are here – akin to Zen, or any modality of direct inquiry and contemplation – to wake us, as with Rilke, to not only more of what we are, but *that* we are, at all. The astounding recognition of the act of being. The essay refers, by example, to Philip Larkin’s poem “Reasons for Attendance”:

Alone outside a jazz club, Larkin hears music speaking to this solitude:

*What calls me is that lifted,  
rough-tongued bell  
(Art, if you like) whose individual  
sound  
Insists I too am individual.*

Almost mystical, such epiphany, and perhaps surprising for an old guard New York literary magazine. Yet this is the substratum that calls, I think, to the modern reader, more than recent post-modern trends making the Arts inaccessible to the average person. Or esoteric culturally-laden versions of Zen, for that matter. Which is a shame. Because we need Art, and Zen’s awakening, the quickening it can stir in us now more than ever – in a world of spreading technical expertise and the same old wars and the trendy modernisms that threaten to unmoor us from soul, and its nourishments. *Wakefulness* is our rudder, in these choppy seas.

How, then, to respond to *Art* in a way that demands we change our lives (to allow the Zen in)? For the books reviewed, it at least has something to do with freeing literature and art from its relegation to academic prisons:

...what for Scott is wrong with academic criticism is that it lacks the will to *respond*. In academic life “the normalization and standardization of intellectual activity is the goal,” and academic criticism projects onto the arts its own abstract categories...Lionel Trilling’s complaint in 1961 that college classrooms reduce literature’s anarchic and personal energies to mere “technicality”....

It is indeed the anarchic and personal energies of the *Arts*, more than any technical expertise, that will inflame us, sustain us. And what we’ve lost, perhaps, in this modern age of knowledge and readership is the capacity to be *moved* by such anarchic energies. To admit to them—amid the cool modernism of a secular world filled primarily with technical expertise. Which is echoed by Arthur Krystal in his book, *This Thing We Call Literature*:

So it comes down, as it must, to one reader reading, one person who understands that he or she, while alone, is still part of a select society, a gallery of like-minded readers who, though they may disagree about this or that book, know that literature matters in a way that life matters.

This is a personal call to help make life matter, through attentive reading of the soul in this world, not just dispassionate observation of “biological theories that trace ideas back to electrical impulses exchanged among neurons, and to social theories that expose the clandestine bias and pervasive cultural forces that unconsciously shape those ideas”, as the essayist says. Somewhere halfway between the “old gods” and the “new neurons” is the human being – an aware and awe-filled species capable, perhaps, of awakening. Zen, with its call to wakefulness, may help nudge Western literature toward greater intimacy and “debth”, in just such a way.

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In the essay under consideration, I am struck by a third book it references, an older one by Erich Auerbach entitled *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. He is described as the greatest critic-artist of the past century, though little read and almost unknown outside “the academy”. Yet his work reflects some basic tenets of Buddhism’s

view of *the self* as fluid and ever-changing, applicable too to the act of engaged readership as a kind of inner discipline:

For Auerbach, Krystal writes, what matters in literature is inseparable from each individual reader's "changing relation to the world", a relation that evolves from moment to moment and across thousands of years of literature. "Auerbach was nothing less than a philosopher of selfhood..."

This approach, in literature and in self-apprehension, to understanding the fluid nature of identity in momentary and historical process, is at the heart of Buddhism. There is something important, in the transition of Buddhist practice to the West, in identifying Western correlates in the Arts for similar essential insights. To ground what is really a universal insight, not just an Asian or Buddhist one, in the cultural ethos and history that we in the West have fermented in since birth.

The *self*, in Western culture, is the key flip-side of the Buddhist coin of the "self/no-self" paradox that is at the heart of *non-dual* philosophy and practice, found in major threads of Buddhism and Hinduism. A thread that too often gets translated in the West as a nihilistic abnegation of self that, as E. Graham Howe wrote, relegates every such half-truth as a lie, when isolated from its equally "true" opposite.

To return, then, to the role of the literary critic, broadly defined as anyone who engages in contemplative dialogue where two or more are gathered in *Art's* name, it is perhaps best divined as an oracle, a translator, a medium for,

...the dignity and depth of the self, a "constant" in European culture, "which has come down unchanged through all the metamorphoses of religious and philosophical forms, and which is first discernible in Dante; namely, the idea...that individual destiny is not meaningless, but is necessarily tragic and significant, and that the whole world context is revealed in it."  
Everyone's selfhood gives access to all the world...Even in Homer, the self was the encyclopedia of the world...

This, perhaps, is a kind of Western koan, how *one's selfhood gives access to all the world* – rather than necessarily being the obstacle to realization. The self as *the encyclopedia of the world*, wherein the *One* and the *Many*, the *absolute* and the *relative*, *emptiness* and *soul*, meet in mutual interpenetration (to use a Zen phrase). The modern world, and its post-modern progeny, have tended to throw the baby out with the dirty bathwater—yet the self is too cute, and necessary, a baby to be so cavalierly rid of. Post-modernism, too,

tends to eviscerate soul from the body's carcass, leaving us in pieces with no recognition of the whole we've been cut from.

Buddhism, when interpreted in Western idiom in a similar nihilistic manner, fares little better. It is not that there is no self, per se, but that this self is contingent, fluid, interdependent with everything around it. The self may seem to disappear in microscopic analysis (its own myopia) of its constituent parts, as a car suddenly seems absent when taken apart on the garage floor. The car does less good as a parable on the garage floor than it does put back together to glide over country road and interstate highway alike.

Why this is important, now, in this period of history, is that the forces of scientism, post-modernism, and even mistranslated Buddhism, threaten to de-humanize what is essentially a human quest: *the living, with awe and gratitude, of a human life*. One that is undoubtedly, as the Buddha saw, impermanent, unsatisfactory (when we hold on too tightly), with no possibility of a static, permanent idealized self to control the whole anarchistic phenomenon with. This latter view is Buddha's gift to the West, in our trenchant, stubborn efforts to idealize and make permanent some self-triumph over the world's wildness. It is also science's gift, and post-modernism's, to peer into the mystery of the universe's constituent parts – be it quantum physics or social relativism – and decode the illusion of any unitary singularity.

But to leave us in scattered pieces on the dirty garage floor is not where you want to end up. The road calls, and it's good to be a contrary, colorful soul traveling along the universe's highways and byways. To be awake to it all, wind in the hair, a Buddhist chant on the radio, or Elvis crooning with all the pathos in the world.

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To be a human being, then – which the Buddha remained his entire life, despite the hagiography that inevitably followed – is the hallowed process we are involved with. Every scientist, every post-modern academic or artist, *is* fundamentally human. The role of the reader, of the author, of the critic, is to nourish the creative field where awareness of a resonant human living may grow. As Edward Mendelson, the essayist I began this piece with, says:

Human beings, in this view, were unique selves at particular moments of history who were also, simultaneously, vehicles of divine, universal revelation. Their uniqueness did not dissolve into symbol or allegory; the more you perceive their particularity, the more you understood their significance. For Auerbach, as for Virginia Woolf, this double sense of human meaning had lost the super-natural sanction that it had for Dante, but it derived ultimately from the religious doctrine of Christ's double nature, simultaneously mortal and divine.

It is this dual-nature – whether described as mortal & divine, or relative & absolute – when lived in a non-dual manner, meaning, without the “lie” of any single-side of the innate paradox of things taking precedence – *this* is our deepest truth, our most essential reality. When a Zen student would get too philosophical or abstract about *emptiness*, or *no-self*, the master would pinch their nose or whack them upside the head – as in, *who is this self you're so quick to abandon?*

So, *What Is the Critic's Job?* is perhaps a similar query for any of us—critics as we are of our own lives. Perhaps it is to stand in this world as Rilke before Apollo's torso, intimate with the koan: *You must change your life*. Shifting the weight from one foot to the other, back & forth in rhythm, from living obsessed-with life's awful inadequacy, to a living that is awe-full.

## The Nerve of God

I wander back to Lynn Emmanuel's book *The Nerve of It – Poems New & Selected*, and toward the end find lines from the poem, "Like God," –

### Like God,

you hover above the page staring down  
on a small town. Outside a window  
some scenery loafs in a sleep hammock  
of pastoral prose and here is a mongrel  
loping and here is a train approaching  
the station in three long sentences and  
here are the people in galoshes waiting.  
But you know this story about the galoshes  
is really About Your Life, so, like a diver  
climbing over the side of a boat and down  
into the ocean, you climb, sentence  
by sentence, into this story on this page...

this is now your story: the story of the  
person-who-had-to-take-the-train-and-walk-  
the-dark-road described hurriedly by  
someone sitting at the tavern so you could  
discover it, although you knew all along  
the road would be there, you, who have  
been hovering above this page, holding  
the book in your hands, like God, reading.

The poem includes a long middle section, with many particulars and characters of a charming story—but it is the first and last stanzas that capture my specific attention. The way I am both storyteller *and* reader, God *and* the many odd characters of my own making. A life mirrors the classic, archetypal story of the deep psyche—Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Poetry is a less linear way of charting the journey, telling this tale.

Poetry is rooted in an eternal *Now* that turns the passing finite moments eternal. Which is a definition of *eternity* I'd read recently in an article on *time*. Poetry is a *lingua franca* of the soul, its common language, the currency for the boatman into, and out of, the underworld. Where the roots of the human are.

In Lynn Emmanuel's next poem, there are these lines – a kind of Zen dialogue between the realms of *form & emptiness*, the *relative & the absolute*. Sometimes I want to drop the drivel and detail of this too-human life; but unless I want to end up disembodied, life is *in* this human sphere we travel together. Lynn gives us a glimpse into the disembodiment we sometimes think we want:

**Then, Suddenly –**

Yes, in the distance there is a river, a bridge,  
there is a sun smeared to a rosy blur, red as  
a drop of blood on a slide. Under this sun,  
droves of poetry readers saunter home  
almost unaware that they are unemployed.  
I'm tired of the dark forest of this book  
and the little trail of bread crumbs I have  
to leave so readers who say *garsb* a lot  
can get the hang of it and follow along.  
And so I begin to erase the forest and  
the trees because trees depress me, even  
the idea of a tree depresses me. I also  
erase the white aster of a street lamp's  
drooping face; I erase a dog named Arf;  
I erase four cowboys in bolas and yet in  
the diminishing bustle of these streets I  
nevertheless keep meeting People-I-Know.  
I erase them. Now I am surrounded by  
the faces of strangers which I also erase  
until there is only scenery. I hate scenery.  
I wind rivers back on their spools, I unplug  
the bee from the socket of the honeysuckle  
and the four Black Angus that just walked in  
like a string quartet. "Get a life", I tell them.  
"Get a life in another world, because this is  
a page as bare and smooth as a bowling alley,"  
and, then, suddenly—renouncing all matter—  
I am gone, and all that's left is a voice, soaring,  
invisible, disembodied, gobbling up the landscape,  
a cloud giving a poetry reading  
at which, Reader, I have made our paths cross!

Our paths cross, yes, in the ethers of these words. But to erase the detail of this impertinent life, for the sake of some pure other life, is to be disembodied. And, the nerve of it, the *One* seems to want to be *here* in the many details of *this* life. Where else is there to go, dear Reader?

## Anarchy of the Gaps

Stephen Batchelor's marvelous old book, *Living With The Devil*, includes a very human picture of the political climate Buddha navigated in his own time. An insurrection by one of his students against him, for example, or discretely dealing with the warring tribal princes and aspiring monarchs of his time. It is sobering, to truly appreciate the human contingencies Buddha dealt with in his own lifetime, more akin to our own struggles than the fanciful mythic stories that have been passed down about the Buddha.

In the last chapter, entitled "The Anarchy of the Gaps", Batchelor eloquently describes the tendency of all institutions to ossify, become rigid. How Buddhism, like all paths, succumb to the same historical fate over and again, even as they are renewed over and again. In this modern age where so much of the world's history and culture is now available to us, he posits that it is in the "anarchy of the gaps" *between* traditions that renewal is taking place.

He encourages this process—just as his book is an attempt to relate his own Western tradition with the Buddhism he has embraced. And just as Batchelor has managed to float between various Buddhist traditions, as a scholar, practitioner, and teacher, he encourages others to follow their own paths too.

Such a path...is not an exclusively Buddhist concern. Whatever sheds light on impermanence, suffering, contingency, and emptiness can contribute to a path that inclines toward nirvana, even if it originates in a secular tradition that is skeptical of religion, or in a religion that denies the validity of Buddhism.

In recognizing the existence of "solitary buddhas" (*paccekabuddha*), who gain insight into the nature of contingency independently of a teacher or Buddhist community, Buddhism affirms that the attainment of nirvana can occur outside of a Buddhist context. Job and Jesus, Pascal and Montaigne, evolutionary biology and neuroscience, Roland Barthes and William Blake offer glimpses of self and world that illuminate the path opened by Buddha...

To enclose oneself in the confines of a tradition and community where one feels at home and unthreatened cuts one off from the myriad sources of awakening that are everywhere present...

At a time when the all-embracing certainties of closed societies and belief systems no longer convince or reassure us, more and more do we find ourselves in that perplexing middle ground *between* communities and ideas. Having embraced this homelessness, we are at liberty to

weave our way between Buddhism and monotheism, the religious and the secular, science and art, literature and myth. In exploring the fertile spaces between traditions, we open up a path that may be rooted in a specific tradition but has branched out into the no-man's-land between them all.

This is profound, and freeing, for me—because of my own quest to “mind the gap”, as they say in the London underground subway, as the train of tradition rolls through. I seem to increasingly live “in the gaps”, as Batchelor describes, *between* traditions that are all very meaningful to me. To find my own integrative way in and through them.

Batchelor also describes the Buddha's attempts to direct his students toward a more free, solitary life as wandering monks, or as imbedded laymen in village life, despite their tendency to keep gathering to make monasteries and institutions. It is easy, reading Buddhist histories dominated by monastic institutions, to forget that Buddha encouraged the living of awakened life in natural environments. To live fully as human beings, first, rather than monks or even “Buddhists”, per se.

Perhaps I am meant to chew on these same quandaries. The communal aspect of sangha life, and, the solitary way of discovering one's own path. I could relax more into this exploration, rather than trying to land one way or another. Batchelor says,

In an open society saturated with information, the gaps between traditions serve as a refreshing but unsettling wilderness...The anarchy of the gaps makes it impossible for any ideology or religion to take hold. For the very act of laying claim to that in-between space would enclose it in boundaries and compromise its openness, thereby turning it into a closed space...

To wander along the gaps allows the freedom to ask anew the questions posed by being born and having to die...The path that has led you here and beckons you into an unknown future has likewise never appeared in exactly this way before and will not do so again. You are free to go straight ahead, turn right, or turn left. Nothing is stopping you.

Having gained knowledge of good and evil through eating forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were exposed to the anguish and exhilaration of making such choices. “The world was all before them,” says Milton in describing their departure from paradise, while

*They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way.*

I do love Batchelor's bringing together of the Buddha's, and, Eve & Adam's storylines here (as he does in his book). This further mixing of traditions. *The world is all before us, too.* Or as the Zen koan says about peering into the treasure-house of this world, *It's all for you.*

We are meant for exploration. Even amid the anarchy of the gaps.

## The Synesthesia of Zen

It is this Zen-work, this mixture of dark and light, the ordinary and revelatory, that increasingly defines my path. The synesthesia, so to speak, of it all. No longer waiting for perfection, utopia, some final answer—it is the questions themselves that increasingly reveal the life I'd have actually killed with too many pat answers.

To this end, I'm enjoying reading Kevin Opstedal's poetry book, *Pacific Standard Time*, whom I met a couple weeks back at the Bookshop Santa Cruz reading. Here's a poem from this morning:

### Some Get Translucent

Like that night in San Francisco  
staring at a blank wall wondering  
who would be the first to blink

Another night Hermosa Beach when the  
mist cleared it was Santa Cruz & I was  
still hung-over

the V-dub burning oil

I had a pair of shoes that were  
made out of linoleum or something  
& an Aloha shirt that should have been  
strangled at birth

I quoted Shakespeare to the girls

I guess it should have been Keats

There's no such thing as total  
darkness is there? just inky Eternity  
full of holes

I love how, synchronistically, San Francisco and Santa Cruz appear in this poem—the questions about darkness and inky Eternity, our lives full of holes. Even black holes can take you to new worlds, if they don't obliterate you in the process. Or perhaps, even if they do.

He's got another poem, with a great title and a few key lines:

**Turning Left at Jerusalem I Drove  
Straight into the Heart of Darkness (Fresno)**

Morning drifts of dark cloud meaning fog but  
lifted up off the pavement like Sonny Liston that time in Memphis  
& his eyes were bright as 7 new pesos  
although he was beaten & he knew it.  
An orderly universe might be one that includes a cup of coffee  
& a slice of pie every now & then...

The dirty gray palm trees are leaning hard into Eternity  
like a skinny band of thugs whose luck has just run out.  
That's what I like about certain zones of California –  
they remind me of Mt. Sinai on a Saturday night.

A modern Zen poem. The synesthesia of being beaten but getting up still. A disorderly universe. Now and then, a piece of pie and coffee. Leaning hard, like a dirty gray palm tree, into Eternity. Or perhaps Fresno.

## Andre Gide and the Fatigue of Freedom: A Koan

After all this existential bellyaching (or *sharing*, as we say in California), I look up from my desk and the morning's journaling, become entranced with the gorgeous sun that now penetrates the noon hour, the sweet smell of seaside air, its crisp fragrance—and the fallen blanket of amber leaves, yellow & brown, that cover the fat Buddha on my deck-table just outside. It *is* beautiful, this fallen world.

Such pleasures—symbolized by my recent Tarot reading as the *Six of Cups: Pleasure*, and, the *Four of Cups: Luxury*—are interior ones, and are further symbolized by the painting on the card I've used as a bookmark in *The Journals of Andre Gide*. The painting, by an Irishman named Henry Clarke (1889-1931), is entitled “The Nightingale”, and depicts a lavish Arabic or Indian scene where a reclining prince appears to be speaking with a peacock, surrounded by the privacy and lush colors of his private room. It represents something of the *pleasure & luxury* of my own interiority, and the contemplative life. The *sovereignty* of it, an old word used by Emily Dickenson and other transcendentalists to describe the nobility of one's spiritual practice. The dignity of it, amid the world's chaos.

And so, for the pleasure and luxury of it, I turn from the card to passages from Andre Gide's journals. The young French author, writing in the late 1890's, opines:

Man! The most complex of creatures, and for this reason the most dependent of creatures. On everything that has formed you you depend. Do not balk at this apparent slavery, and understand that the more numerous are the laws that intercross and overlap in you, the more exquisite they are. A debtor to many, you pay for your advantages by the same number of dependencies. Understand that independence is a form of poverty; that many things claim you, that many also claim kinship with you. [1893, Detached Pages]

An astonishing wording of the Zen notion of *intimacy* with all things—that what appears to bind me also forms the beloved richness of my life. That the longed-for perfections of freedom may be a form of poverty. That the many claims on my life form its very kinship-bonds. Life itself as *sangha*.

In a similar vein, Gide says:

“Do you see that wrinkle?” I asked him; “it comes from a horrible fatigue. And the fatigue is the result of my freedom. Freedom of action is all right when a powerful desire, a great passion, or an unflinching will directs it. But not this: having given an equal freedom of the city

to all my desires, having welcomed them all with open arms, I now find that all of them at the same time claim the place of honor. I now firmly believe that man is incapable of choice and that he invariably yields to the strongest temptation...

Oh, if only my thought could simplify itself! ... I sit here, sometimes all morning, *unable* to do anything, tormented by the desire to do everything. I have twenty books before me, every one of them begun. You will laugh when I tell you that I cannot read a single one of them simply because I want so much to read them all. I read three lines and think of everything else...

Ah, a knock on the door! Someone is coming to see me. Good Lord! ... (Saved; this is at least an hour lost!) Happy, I exclaimed, are those whose every hour is filed in advance and who are obliged to go *somewhere*. Oh for a pair of blinders!

I find Gide's ruminations about freedom and its fatigues, structure and its obsessions, to be a *fundamental koan*. It illustrates my sense (written of in my chapbook *The Greased Pig*, the essay "The Seven Koans of Existence") that the four great Existential tensions of human life (of which *Freedom vs. Structure* is one) not only constitute the very fabric of consciousness, but make life possible. As such, they become a kind of koan: enigmatic in the impossibility of its resolution, but also, liberation's very door. It is not a koan to be *solved*, then rid of—the tumult of it is life itself.

This morning, then, I am encouraged to embrace, rather than resist, the very demands on my being & doing that life makes—as an act of *kinship*, rather than a prison-sentence.

To wax even a bit more divine with Gide—and not unlike Chinese Chan's non-dual appreciation of the *10,000 Things* as expression of the *One*,

Things are the interpreters of God. In time they pass and the meaning of his words remains. We are capable of longing for them just as, alas! we long, after hearing very dear words, for the irreplaceable voice that spoke them. Beauty of creatures and things and of countries: intonations of God's voice. [1893 – Detached Pages]

The things that bind me are a form of kinship. Absolute freedom is its own fatigue. The *ten thousand things* translate the One to us. To live freely inside this entanglement is the koan.

## The Universe in a Box

From an old quote of Jane Roberts', stuck in a small journal in one of the drawers I am cleaning out:

In the fullness of that season we live on an earth that is ours, closed to all other beings who came before or who will come after. We have the world, for a while, to ourselves.

What a marvelous reminder of the preciousness, and uniqueness, of these brief lives on earth. Easy to forget amid the complaints and inadequacies of the passing days.

To this end – remembering *how to be* in this strange universe – there's this exchange from John Daido Looi's Zen book, *Cave of Tigers*:

Student: I've built a really good box. What do I do with it?

Teacher: There are a couple of things you can do. You can lift the lid and stuff the whole universe into the box until there is nothing but that box. Or, you can take the box and manifest it as the whole universe. Either way the result is the same—no separation.

Student: How do I do it right now?

Teacher: You have the box, don't you?

Student: Thank you for your answer.

Teacher: May your life go well.

But it does get complicated, and there are entanglements everywhere.

Student: About entanglements. I have to go to the bathroom, but I also have a question about Shakyamuni Buddha and what happened on Mount Gridhrakuta.

Teacher: What's your question?

Student: Should I go to the bathroom or ask my question?

Teacher: What's your question?

Student: If everyone smiled Mahakashyapa's smile would everyone have been enlightened?

Teacher: Don't go to the bathroom on the floor here! ... You need to take care of both of these things by yourself. No one can go to the bathroom for you and no one can realize it for you. The answer comes from the same place that the questions come from.

We have the world, for a while, all to ourselves. It's an intimate little box of a universe. A beloved entanglement. Let's not pee over everything with our silly questions. May our lives go well.

## Andre Gide and the Zen of Pan

There's some unnamed thing I'm struggling with this morning, which I'm attempting to befriend. Perhaps it's the passage of time, its discontents and consolations, its joys and disappointments. The struggle to not struggle—the classic Buddhist quandary.

Just for fun and company, I turn to Andre Gide's journals again, from 1893:

An angry man tells a story; there is the subject of a book. A man telling a story is not enough; it must be an angry man and there must be a constant connection between his anger and the story he tells...

The Christian soul is always imagining battles within itself. After a short time one never can understand just why...For, after all, the vanquished is always a part of oneself, and this makes for useless wear and tear. I spent my whole youth in opposing two parts of myself which perhaps only sought to come to an agreement. Through love of strife I fancied struggles and divided my nature. [pg. 30]

I love this insight, from the young Andre. Reminds me of John Tarrant's Zen refrain, *so what's the problem here?* Struggle, from this vantage, is a purposeless hobby, one that could be let go of for some other, more undivided, way of being.

Still, from another vantage, as Hegel would say, it is only in the *dialectic struggle of opposites* that resolution, and new synthesis, can occur. Not unlike the Taoist concept of Yin & Yang's eternal dance (an artistic word for *struggle*). In Zen's non-dual world, struggle is not something to be got rid of per se—but language differently: as dance, as a swirling flow of contrary currents. And, as the alien-language in the sci-movie *Arrival* predicated, embedded in language itself is the key and code to different kinds of experience. In the movie, it was *timelessness*. In Zen, and its poetics, its *presence with what is*. Even the struggle that is no-struggle when it is not resisted. Or some such hanky-panky.

Still, for a language of creativity and its contortions, I turn back to young Andre Gide:

### RULE OF CONDUCT

Originality; first degree.

I omit the lower degree, which is mere banality; in which man is merely gregarious (he constitutes the crowd). Therefore: originality consists in depriving oneself of certain things. Personality asserts itself by its limitations.

But, above this, there is a still higher state, to which Goethe achieves, the Olympian. He understands that originality limits, that by being personal he is simply anyone. And by letting himself live in things, like Pan, everywhere, he thrusts aside all limits until he no longer has any but those of the world itself...[pg. 31]

This last remark reminds me of Zen, to “meet the world rising up before us”. Like the pagan Pan, to enter everything. Endarkenment and enlightenment, our twin inheritance.

## The Wild Swan of the Self & the Climate of Being

I'll start with a few lines from Jeffers' poem, "Love the Wild Swan":

— This wild swan of a world is no hunter's game.  
Better bullets than yours would miss the white breast,  
Better mirrors than yours would crack in the flame.  
Does it matter whether you hate your...self? At least  
Love your eyes that can see, your mind that can  
Hear the music, the thunder of the wings. Love the wild swan.

I love this line, *Does it matter whether you hate your...self?* Because I'm a bit tired of the self's constant roar, its wildness. Days spent mulling age, the measure of dreams not reached, the state of the country I thought better than it is—and ultimately, what comes from all this bother?

But does this *fatigue* matter? I can still love these eyes that see, this mind that listens nonetheless, *into* the wildness of it all. This wild swan of world and mind. Even when I tire of the self that gets in the way.

∞

Still, I feel some agitated restlessness—perhaps just another encounter with the Buddha's three companions of *aging, illness & death*. I know enough to welcome them in, not fight to keep them out. We are all companions, along this shared human *Way*. Enlightenment doesn't resolve anything, *per se*—it simply keeps opening *into* them.

But, the therapist in me, too, keeps an ear attuned to the developmental sequences of age: am I meant to do something more, different, contribute in some more direct way? Is this the call of a normal developmental stage, or just the siren call of desire, and its discontents? Does it matter, if I can love what it is that asks these questions?

∞

From Kenneth Rexroth's poem, "Lyell's Hypothesis Again" – about this self it is too easy to hate.

...The clotted cobweb of unself  
And self...This ego, bound by personal  
Tragedy and the vast  
Impersonal vindictiveness  
Of the ruined and ruining world,  
Pauses in this immortality,  
As passionate, as apathetic,  
As the lava flow that burned here once;  
And stopped here; and said, "This far  
And no further." And spoke thereafter  
In the simple diction of stone.

And, the opening lines from "The Reflecting Trees of Being and Not Being":

In my childhood when I first  
Saw myself unfolded in  
The triple mirrors, in my  
Youth, when I pursued myself  
Wandering on wandering  
Nightbound roads like a roving  
Masterless dog, when I met  
Myself on sharp peaks of ice,  
And tasted myself dissolved  
In the lulling heavy sea,  
In the talking night, in the  
Spiraling stars, what did I  
Know? What do I know now,  
Of myself, of the others?

This self—like a masterless dog, a triple mirror—what do I know of it? It is a good koan.

∞

Perhaps the direction to lean is that of a *climate* more than any tangible thing. The poet Charles Olson speaks of generativity—that fundamentally life, the Tao, mind, is *generative*—and that Art should directly manifest this process, rather than box it up in fine lyrical systems.

The generative is, in fact, the weather of existence, of all of it, of every act, as well as those biologically dominant acts which engage us all.

Generation can be seen literally to be *the climate* of our being as decisively as the *place* of it is that internal environment we call our selves, the individual.

Perhaps it is this very *climate of being*, this urge toward generativity, however primal and primitive it is, that storms through me now and again. Like weather. And no amount of meditation can, nor should, quell such weather. Though it can help me stand in its storm, unafraid, undeterred, in awe at such power.

## Dana Gioia & The Secret Conversation

The new *CATAMARAN Literary Reader (Summer 2017)* came in the mail, with gorgeous cover art by Stephanie Heit, and an interview with the former poet laureate of California and Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dana Gioia. I love how the editor, Catherine Segurson, keeps a mix of local talent and national, in this beautiful quarterly magazine.

Here's a poem about the passing of time, and age – perennial themes of the Buddha – by John Oliver Simon:

### What Age?

What age would you be, Isabella asks me  
from the booster as we turn on 45<sup>th</sup>,  
if you could be any age? She thinks of fifteen  
as representing the height of teenage freedom.

I shudder, remembering fifteen. Driving  
under the underpass where an elderly  
homeless gentleman resides  
sleeping directly under traffic's thunder,

I say maybe my sixties, when I still had  
vigor to travel and had learned something or  
other, not what I'm learning now. I tell her

actually these last nine years have been the best  
since she happened along. She makes no comment.  
Comfortable silence, rolling toward the red light.

I love his sense of the sixties being his ideal, more than any younger years – and, the magic that later years can bring with grandkids. I suspect Buddha knew the joy as well as the terrors of aging.

Then, this marvelous poem by Dana Gioia:

### At the Crossroads

Here are the crossroads where old women come

Under the rising moon to cast their spells,  
And where young lovers meet to argue out  
The secret terms of their surrender.

It is a place that everyone sees differently –  
The salesman scouting, soldiers tramping home,  
The scholar napping by the riverbank  
While someone else's fortune drifts downstream.

But if you stand at crossroads long enough,  
You'll see most of the world come stumbling by –  
Businessmen, preachers, cats – all going somewhere,  
Even the Devil striking up a deal.

I used to wonder if they ever got there.  
Be careful here in choosing where to turn.  
You learn a lot by staying in one place  
But never how the story truly ends.

All the changes I sometimes bemoan, the crossroads, paths taken and not taken, are the very stuff of story. Without which, as Gioia knows, there is no story. It is this very stumbling that is *the Way*, in the Taoist sense. My wife Linda and I wrestling with *our* sixties, son Gabe with the world, daughter Kelsey with a new career, house, partner, and his ill father. Mom with her own aging, and her even more-frail dearest dog-companion. What a story, if I'd only enjoy each turn of page, instead of resisting the story-line, or fearing its end.

∞

I momentarily forget that writing is pointless, find myself in the back studio happy again for this gift of *Word*. Even if it *is* pointless – though I suspect the Universe, in its holographic way, hangs on every word, each human thought a kind of brain synapse weaving the whole together, each mood a color iridescent in the Cosmos' heart. Or some such poetry. It is another ordinary day.

Which draws me to another poem in the new *CATAMARAN*:

### **Cancun**

In the sky a devil kissing a witch  
or goat an elephant, or elephant-

god whose trunk is a seahorse, or  
scorpion curled in the jaws of a rat

wind-filled now, dolphin smiling  
at Mozart's wig drifting east,

space filled with Midas' torn  
cotton. I saw her drifting like that,

her crooked smile as if  
everything amused her...

Looking into the Universe, into myself, is like this. I see both what I am, and what is there. A Rorschach, a dream – the devils and elephants, rats and wigs, what is golden and what is cotton. The crooked smile of the *witness*, the way everything is amusing if I'll let it be. Akin to the Buddha's inscrutable smile, wry as the Mona Lisa's.

The path *is* my ordinary, particular, unique life. In the interview with Dana Gioia, there are some great passages about this. When asked about his California background – growing up poor, and happy, in Hawthorne – and some poets' tendencies to distance themselves from regional identifications, he says:

Life doesn't occur as an abstraction. Each person's life happens in real time and specific places. The best writing usually emerges from that reality.

The problem for most writers is that they read things written in London or Paris, Vienna or New York, but that isn't where they live. Literature seems like an art that happens somewhere else. They worry that no one will take their actual lives – far from any cultural capital – seriously. Consciously or not, these writers begin to marginalize their own existence. That is a fatal mistake. Imagine if Faulkner or Joyce, Austen or Achebe felt their home landscapes were not worth writing about?

One purpose of poetry is to allow us to see and bear the truth. The poet needs to reconcile our imagination with the world we actually live in – which is so often disturbing or confusing. Even in the best of times and places, there is always a distance between our inner and outer reality. In our beautiful but despoiled state, the distance is enormous. That gap is where a poem needs to begin.

Later in the interview, Gioia captures something of California's history and literary influences:

California has a different history and geography from the Eastern United States. We were originally a Spanish colony. We face Asia and the Pacific Rim. We merge into Central America. Our population has been diverse from earliest history, even before the Spaniards arrived, when over a hundred native languages were spoken. The first colonial settlers were Spanish Catholics, not English Puritans. The first Anglos were sailors, soldiers, and prospectors, not families and farmers. California has always been different.

In this way, the Asia and Pacific Rim that I too face, in my practice of Zen, is part of this native topography I find myself living. It is a *conversation* with the world. Toward the interview's end, there is a passage by Gioia that captures this sentiment about reading and writing as an *activity of consciousness* that is both *witness* and *conversation*:

Some of my poems are conversations with myself that the reader is invited to overhear. That isn't a particularly literary notion. Everyone lives inside his or her own mind. We all constantly talk to ourselves, sometimes even out loud. That inner conversation is part of consciousness. Not "stream of consciousness" with its avalanche of details but the essentially lyric shape of consciousness, shifting moment by moment...

Creating that secret conversation with the reader is the purpose of the art.

This secret conversation is the thread of a koan, ever present.

## Train Ride to Wonder

This morning, I'm taken by Ruth Stone's poem about impermanence, and simultaneously, the way all things "go on forever". The wonder of it all.

### Train Ride

All things come to an end;  
small calves in Arkansas,  
the bend of the muddy river.  
Do all things come to an end?  
No, they go on forever.  
They go on forever, the swamp,  
the vine-choked cypress, the oaks  
rattling last year's leaves,  
the thump of the rails, the kite,  
the still white stilted heron.  
All things come to an end.  
The red clay bank, the spread hawk,  
the bodies riding this train,  
the stalled truck, pale sunlight, the talk;  
the talk goes on forever,  
the wide dry field of geese,  
a man stopped near his porch  
to watch. Release, release;  
between cold death and a fever,  
send what you will, I will listen.  
All things come to an end.  
No, they go on forever.

The paradox of impermanence and the eternal power of the moment. The way, too, one thing ends yet flows into another.

Then, this famous poem by Czeslaw Milosz:

### Encounter

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon  
at dawn.  
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.  
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,  
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going.  
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle  
of pebbles.  
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.

*Wonder*, in both these poems, is the *Zen response* to such mysteries—rather than mere complaint. Capturing the whole of its difficulties in a single embrace.

## Merwin—How a Thorn Sings

From the *New York Review of Books* (Dec. 7, 2017) a review by Ange Mlinko of the poet W.S. Merwin's life, and three new books by or about him. At age 90, he lives on an old converted pineapple plantation on Maui, where he grows endangered native palm trees. His life, and writings, are astonishing—and well-profiled in this essay. Here's a few of the observations that struck me.

Regarding his view of literature, and his passion for *translation* of other languages and cultures:

But most of all, translation has provided him with “the literary world. Another plane of existence.” In other words, a grand company continually needing rescue from the abyss, an ennobling endeavor, a way to communicate across space and time.

It is this “other plane of existence” where I, too, live part-time—along with a host of fellow poets and writers. In the process, we do rescue each other even though nobody really needs saving.

Merwin also studied ancient troubadour poetry, particularly while living in rural France, exploring his roots. In poetry, particularly in this fusion of spirituality, chivalry, and the literary, there is this chivalric ideal of the *amor de lonh*, or “love of what is distant”. Regarding the courtly lover Bernart de Ventadorn, who followed Alienor and her court, Merwin says:

The recurring burden of Bernart's song is distance—a constant theme of the love poetry of the world—the distance between the lover and the beloved, between the present and the past or an imagined future, between one place and another.

Which, while in its way may seem contrary to Zen's instruction to fully embrace the moment without pining for some distant “other” experience, still, as the ancient Japanese & Chinese cultures knew, such moments are *imbued* with the bittersweet of longing—of blooming then falling cherry blossoms, of world's so quickly passing, so resiliently arising anew. It is not *other* than this longing, it *is* its poignancy.

Sometimes this other world—be it an ancient culture, a “dead language”, or what seems to lie just beyond or deeply imbedded in this very world—can only be listened for in a paradoxical way:

But in “Learning a Dead Language,” an earlier poem from *Green with Beasts* (1956), the death of languages foretells human extinction, and contrariwise their recovery holds hope for ours:

*There is nothing for you to say.  
You must  
Learn first to listen Because it is  
dead  
It will not come to you of itself,  
nor would you  
Of yourself master it. You must  
therefore  
Learn to be still when it is  
imparted,  
And, though you may not yet  
understand, to remember.*

*What you remember is saved.  
To understand  
The least thing fully you would  
have to perceive  
The whole grammar in all its  
accidence  
And all its system, in the perfect  
singleness  
Of intention it has because it is  
dead.  
You can only learn one part at a  
time...*

*What you remember saves you.  
To remember  
Is not to rehearse, but to hear  
what never  
Has fallen silent. So your  
learning is,  
From the dead, order, and what  
sense of yourself  
Is memorable, what passion may  
be heard*

*When there is nothing for you to  
say.*

This is where mysticism and literature convene, in words that are more than a mere linear order. Or, as Guilhem IX's says, *Farai un vers de dreit nien*, "Sheer nothing's what I'm singing of" – another example of the Zen that is rampant, in disguise, in Western literature.

But there is another aspect of the *NYRB* essay about Merwin that I am drawn to. Namely, what it means to be an American poet, and, one on both the inside *and* the outside of this identity:

For all Merwin's preeminence as an American poet in the decades since his first book—for all the acclaim and the prizes, including two Pulitzers and the US poet laureateship—he has succeeded in living at the periphery (or in the shadow) of America; even his residence in Hawaii feels extraterritorial. He has said, "The human institution that I feel is the context...is certainly not the nation of the United States; it's the English language" – though he is entirely aware of the imperialist uses to which it has been put, especially on Oceania. "But what it is to be an American poet I still don't know," he told Edward Hirsch in a *Paris Review* interview in 1986. Perhaps many of his contemporaries felt the same way; a number of them, like Robert Bly, John Ashbery, and James Merrill, had expatriate periods or translated extensively, looking for sources outside their native country.

These observations name the very conflicted sensibility I, too, feel in my primary allegiances, and their paradoxes. Their questions. Yet, contrary to Merwin, I do still feel a primary allegiance, so to speak, toward a quintessential *American* poet-figure that Merwin remains quite suspicious of:

Merwin is perhaps alone among his contemporaries in his intransigence toward the American ur-poet, Walt Whitman, whose approach to lyrical public address inspired Merwin's generation as it mounted poetic solidarity movements against the Vietnam War, sexism, and racism. He complained: "The positivism and the American optimism disturb me...In particular it's his rhetorical insistence on an optimistic stance...as a world view and as a program for confronting existence it bothered me when I was eighteen and bothers me now."

In this, Merwin speaks to that part of me that similarly feels on the *outside* of both country and optimism. Still, I am just as aligned in sympathy and commitment, in identification, with Walt Whitman's immense and irrepressible optimism, his love of all things human, meaning also, all things poignant and contrary in which the grandness of things emerges triumphant. Even his existence as a gay man in an American body.

Despite his contrariness about Whitman, the reviewer Mlinko says of Merwin,

His pessimism is salutary, and he has always stopped short of despair: “The fact that that chair may be destroyed tomorrow is no reason not to pay attention to it this afternoon, you know.” It is his clear-sighted view of American destructiveness, unmitigated by any hint of exceptionalism, that makes his deliberate crabwise move away from his native land and poets attain a kind of Dantean majesty, tantamount to self-exile.

Which is where I, too, can stand. Both in, and, out, of both country, world *and* self—dwelling in the seams of belonging, of allegiance, as a form of deeper commitment to the underlying complexities of such existence. Merwin, then, greets me this morning as a kind of friend and mentor, sharing

the intimacy of a lifetime of dwelling and thinking. That old friend of poets, the *amor de lonh*, has only intensified with age—the true gift, possibly, that age can give us.

∞

What age can give us, too, is a complexity of *feeling* that can only be expressed in art and myth—certainly this is becoming true for me. Inchoate primal emotions are, well, primal—and essential, the ground of anything remotely human. Still, such primality remains inchoate, and overwhelming, unless filtered through the language of myth, and the art of metaphor—which are fashioned, by we humans, to bear the fire of the gods.

Myth and art, too, are the friends of Zen, not the enemy. If Zen is to hold, rather than reject, all that is human, then it increases our capacity to hold all that we are—not by acts of self-reductive meditative mutilation, but by embrace of what cannot be easily bourn.

Which causes me to quote at length the close of Ange Mlinko’s marvelous essay on W.S. Merwin:

A late poem, titled “Antique Sound,” mingles nostalgia for turntables with an awareness that the miracle of recorded music is undermined by the errancy of materials, which no innovation can entirely forestall:

*There was an age when you  
played records*

*with ordinary steel needles which  
grew blunt  
and damaged the grooves or with  
more expensive  
stylus tips said to be tungsten or  
diamond  
which wore down the records and  
the music receded*

But as in a fairy tale, the child Merwin and his friend “had it on persuasive authority/that the best thing was a dry thorn of the right kind,” which they scour a forest to find. The thorn is not only a subversion of technological innovation—this is a regression, of course—but it will necessarily encode the nonhuman music of the forest, which takes decades or centuries to mature...

When the boys finally retrieve the magic object and listen “to Beethoven’s Rassoumoffsky/quartets echoed from the end of a thorn,” we find that in a very short space Merwin has harmonized the myths of the suffering composer, Christ (the god with the crown of thorns), Philomel (the nightingale who sang her best song with a thorn in her breast), and Orpheus (the poet whose lyre domesticated wild animals and made stones leap up in accompaniment). These ghosts from the history of the art don’t intrude, and you can ignore them, but you can’t ignore that thorn, that intractable thorn, touching down into the musical groove.

That intractable thorn of suffering, and, awareness—twins joined. Domesticating what is wild just enough to make it sing.

## Stephen Batchelor and Incarnation

Returning to Stephen Batchelor's book, *Living With The Devil*, I find these passages in his chapter entitled, "Incarnation":

"All novels", writes Kundera, "are concerned with the enigma of self." Each character is an opportunity for the novelist to undertake a "meditative interrogation" of this self. Yet "the more powerful the lens of the microscope observing the self, the more the self and its uniqueness elude us." This elusive self possesses an unbearable lightness, both playful and tragic at once that can slip away or be destroyed at any moment.

I continue to find Batchelor's *language* of the self, and meditation, quite compelling for a Buddhist. And this is an older book of his, published in 2004. It is a roundabout path I often take to stumble upon what becomes most valuable to me.

Our incarnation in this world unfolds from an eerie collision between unprecedented physical contingencies and those stories we endlessly tell about ourselves and others...As anyone can attest who has been emotionally transported by a film, profound moments of intimacy can occur in the company of fictional beings.

But Batchelor goes on to describe the mysteries and enigmas of *incarnation*, the way having a body mediates so much of our layered sense of beingness—that this, too, was the Buddha's experience as a human being.

Although nirvana may be beyond good and evil, as soon as Buddha stirs from its transcendent ease, he is confronted with the inescapable polarities of moral life...Each step takes him further into the ambiguities and vicissitudes of life. His incarnation originates in formlessness, coalesces as polarized images or ideas, then breaks into the sensual world as speech and acts that have repercussions he cannot foresee.

Just like the rest of us.

Buddha cannot be adequately understood by describing his state of mind at the moment of awakening any more than Mozart can be understood by describing his state of mind at the moment he is inspired to compose a symphony...

It is in the translation, the transmutation, of initial inner experience through the layers of self and history, body and pen, that the divine life, the creative epiphany, becomes partially, incompletely, expressed through the human.

The unfolding process of incarnation is captured in Roland Barthes' comment, "who *speaks* is not who *writes*, and who *writes* is not who *is*." What we *are* is mysterious. The peculiar sense of being here at all...is the most intimate ineffable, universal, and ecstatic experience we know...

These parallel beings glide in and out of focus as we pass through the hours and days that make up our lives. Our buddha, gods, and devils rub shoulders with each other. One moment, we are resting in stunned astonishment that there is anything at all; the next, we are composing a line of poetry; and the next, we are tying our shoelaces. Borges concludes his reflection by confessing, "I am not sure which one of us is writing this page."

These words are a more contemporary way of glimpsing the Buddhist principle of *anatta* – the indeterminacy and interdependency of the *self*. Updating the lexicon of liberation.

## The Darkness Within

In morning contemplation, I underlined a number of passages from an article in *Poets & Writers* (Jan/Feb 2018) while breakfasting at Zachary's. Yes, it is a kind of meditation, one you don't have to sit still for. Steve Almond's "The Darkness Within" is about the draw to dark characters and deeds in fiction:

My predilection for destructive and discomfiting characters arose, in part, from my years as an investigative reporter, which I spent tracking con men and corrupt cops, shady developers and sexual deviants.

In my reporting, the central danger was detection by the authorities. **In literature, the danger was self-revelation. The question was *why* people messed up their lives and, when they got going, the lives of those around them.**

This question began with the characters, but it extended to the reader. Spending time with folks who were morally flawed and ruthlessly candid, who had thrown all manner of caution to the wind, was thrilling specifically because they enacted my own repressed urges. I didn't just want to rubberneck their misdeeds. **I felt implicated by them...**

I began to realize why I'd found the scolding critiques of Rich Fischer so vexing. They weren't just sanctimonious or shallow. **There was something cowardly in them, a mind-set that positioned fiction as a place we go to have our virtues affirmed rather than having the confused and wounded parts of ourselves exposed.**

Something in Almond's essay, "The Darkness Within", strikes a chord with me—a chord that extends beyond fiction as a genre, into *life* as a genre. How one wants to read it. There is something of Zen, here. So, I find myself quoting at length:

But what about those characters who refuse to evolve or offer up much in the way of vulnerability? I am thinking here of our most famous villains: Milton's Satan, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor, Joseph Conrad's Kurtz, Flannery O'Connor's Misfit, Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden. These figures, though not technically protagonists, dominate their given worlds.

They do so because they're willing to violate moral norms and thus **wind up driving the action of the story.** They're also fearless in apprehending the nature of the world around them, even if they deny us access to their own inner lives. Most vitally, **they embrace the transgressive aspects of their selfhood, the ones we anxiously inhibit so as to appear more likable.**

As a therapist, I see this transgressive encounter as an act of depth psychology—facing one’s shadow, in Jungian terms. Going into the Underworld, in mythical terms. In Zen, embracing the tyranny and terrible beauty of one’s ego. The essayist comments, regarding one of his favorite characters, Captain Ahab, when the captain shouts “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me.”

Tell us how you really feel, Ahab.

The reasons readers like me gravitate toward characters like Ahab is that, not very deep down, we know ourselves to be equally charged with wrath, besieged by private doubts and grudges, and thus enthralled by those who dare to speak truth in a world overrun by personal forms of marketing.

*Personal forms of marketing*—akin to phrases that John Tarrant often uses in his Zen talks, about the predilection of the ego, the passionate and contrary little “me”, to present myself to myself, to others, to the world, in some way that is *not* Ahab, nor *any* shadow. Buddhist stories are filled with, well, Buddhist characters, of Asian origin. I like finding, through Western literature, our own characters. Like Ahab, or Jesus:

Moral perfection is admirable, after all, but deadly dull in a literary character. I think here about the figure of Jesus Christ as we encounter him in the New Testament. He says and does all the right things. But he only comes alive as a character in those rarely cited verses when his revolutionary ire and human needs come into view.

The most shocking moment in the Gospels takes place a few days before his appointed end. On the way to Jerusalem, he stops in Bethany, where a woman lovingly anoints his head with perfumed oil. The act angers some of those who witness it, including Judas Iscariot, who asks Jesus whether the expensive oil could have been put to better use if it was sold and the money given to the poor. “The poor you will always have,” Jesus replies. “But you will not always have me.”

It’s a moment of sensual indulgence and unvarnished pride that’s astonishingly out of character for Jesus. By my reckoning, he’s never more likable.

And so, by this reckoning, are we. Whether in therapy or Zen, as in literature, there is something of the unabashed vulnerability of my predicament as a human being that renders me compassionately to myself. Hence, likable. To embrace, rather than exile, such parts is where beauty lies—where art lives, and wholeness too.

It is not only the interior journey this applies to. Steve Almond ends his essay with this:

If we are to reclaim our country from the dark forces determined to divide us, to sow discord and cynicism among us, we must first seek to understand the darkness within ourselves. That means turning to stories in which we encounter characters actively engaged in the struggle—and sometimes failing—to contain their unbearable thoughts and feelings.

The urgent question isn't whether we like these folks. It's whether, in coming to know them, we come to know ourselves any better.

## Complicity

The logic of this writing-practice is that I become *complicit* with the moment. These constellations of poems-read in these mercurial minutes—bringing the moment into stunning focus, then tucked away in my squirrel-throat for later. Words canned like jams for later use. It is a practice, a way of keeping the past present-in-the-present.

It's my particular hobby, and vice. A way of meditating.

This morning, for example, I spent time with David Hinton's anthology, *The Wilds of Poetry*, this time exploring one of the latter poets in the collection, Michael McClure, and his contribution to the Taoist legacy in western poetics. I don't much like his poetry, per se (to each his own), but I like his and Hinton's commentaries:

In the end, this is a poetry of radical contact in which... "our experience of the universe is also the universe perceiving itself." McClure distills this whole project of mammalian transcendence here in this preface to one of his long poems:

*I am one with the euglena, triceratops, mammoth and sea urchin. I am one with the universe of matter and energy as well as the fields that I do not know of consciously or verbally. All these are contained within myself. My self, or selves, is a part of all. The surge may be inter-universal—may drift through all time and space. I am an extrusion, a tentacle, a point, a pip, upon or within this happening.*

And then, the poet Jerome Rothenberg, whose "ethno-poetics" reflect tribal, primal languaging to reconnect the too-isolated self back with earth and world. Rothenberg describes his own approach:

...the Senecas with whom I lived call...themselves "real people" ... descended from a single mother (ultimately the Earth) ...

A "real" person in these terms is one who hasn't forgotten what & where things are in relation to the Earth...He has only to maintain a true eye for his surroundings & a contact [Thoreau's word again!] with the Earth, to recognize himself as the inheritor of reality, of a more real way of life...

The real person (reality-person, in fact) lives, like the "primitive" philosopher described by Radin, "in a blaze of reality" ... [an alternative] to the environmental disasters accompanying an increasingly abstract relation to what was once a living universe.

The sacred rather than the transcendent, because the transcendent...implies for me too great a denial of the here and now; and the source of poetry, as I understand it, is deeply rooted in the world around us...

As it was for the ancient Chinese & Japanese poets, the thread of which, Hinton says, is now working its way into modern western literature. *Complicity*, with all that is.

## The Somec of Reading & The Portable Sangha

In *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy*, there's something in John Brehm's remarks about the poetic-sangha that strike me—how books provide a profound sense of community through time. And how, for me, history and literature become the visceral synthesis of time's conundrum: how to embrace the simple moment that time offers, and, its large sweep, the wide span of its march.

I deeply want both—always have, since a child. In the science fiction novel *The Worthing Saga*, the protagonist—Jason Worthing—has spent thousands of years “asleep”, as has the upper elite of the empire of his time period, under the influence of the substance “somec”. You wake—after a few years or a few centuries—with your normal age-progression intact, yet the world around you has changed. But the empire, according to Jason—and his own life—is suffering from an inability to truly live *in time*, skipping instead like a stone over the surface of things. It is a Zen matter.

On the one hand, he's been able to view the long trajectory of the human species, and there is both beauty and tragedy in this; on the other, he finds himself unrooted in any particular community or world. Thus, at the end of the story, he chooses to embrace an ordinary life in a primitive back-world to live out the rest of his days—foregoing further somec-induced sleep and the leaps forward in time it affords. It is a kind of *chop-wood, carry-water* Zen-move.

Still, the story would not be a story without this vast span of time the telling affords. There is something about the macro as well as the micro view that enthralls. The beauty, then, of the novel—or of anthologies like John Brehm's with its ancient writers—or of any of the many books of Buddhism, history and literature I pore over now and then, is this: reading is a kind of inert *somec*, that transports one through eons of time, while living still in the intimate ordinary of one's own limited life.

It is a decent compromise. A portable sangha.

## Comedy Routine

From John Daido Looi's *Cave of Tigers*:

Stop all your groping and maneuvering.  
There is nowhere to hide the true self.  
When the world collapses, it is indestructible.

—Wumen

Student: You've pretty much completed your Zen training and have been transmitted to. I was wondering, do you know more or less than you did at the beginning of this journey?

Teacher: First of all, I haven't completed my training, so let's put that to rest. Zen training never ends...What was the second part of the question? I have a very short memory.

Student: Do you know more or less now than you did in the beginning?

Teacher: ...my teacher put a lot of time and effort in helping me be stupid. When I went to him with my koan presentation and would rattle off everything I read, he would say, "Daido, please try to be stupid."

Student: ...but I presume your practice is at the Fifth Rank of Master Dongshan. There's no practice at that rank. What are you doing then?

Teacher: Fifth Rank of Master Dongshan doesn't exclude the other four ranks. Each rank contains all five...

Student: But what are you practicing for?

Teacher: I don't know.

Student: This is your practice, to...

Teacher: If you say so.

Student: You said so.

Teacher: Oh, okay. (Both laugh).

Student: What would make you a good monastic?

Teacher: Beats me.

Student: You got a lot of work to do.

Teacher: Right. You too.

That about sums it up, I guess. A good note to start this next year with. Here I am, stupid as all get out, still trying to grope and maneuver my way to find the true self that is never hidden. I have a lot of work to do. The path is like one long comedy routine. I'm my own straight-man and provocateur. As Loori and his students say in their dharma exchanges,

Anything else? May your life go well...