

A Quiet Book

by
DAN BEACHY-QUICK



A QUIET
BOOK

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ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES



#23

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

I had been asked to think about a question I feel uncomfortable considering: the nature of “the creative,” and my approach to it. To do so feels akin to looking in the mirror a long time and asking the face there, “Is this me? Is this face mine?” What should be obvious becomes less so. I thought perhaps I’d fly to the university where I was asked to speak and talk about being “prolific” instead. But even that thought troubled me as I sat down to write. I began to feel as if what made someone prolific wasn’t an overabundance of creative energy, but some other, almost occult property: that what must express itself inside the hundred of pages, the thousands of words, was something wholly unspeakable, something quiet, something calm, something silent. I wanted to hear this speaking silence that might be the very symbol of the blank page—but the blank page cannot be heard until a word is dropped on it. And so I began to write. My 40-minute talk turned into these pages, far more than can be read in the time I’d been given to speak, all aiming to fill themselves

with the barest splinter of oblivion that needs no time at all to be felt. To feel it myself, I keep writing. I try to forget I’m doing it, writing these thoughts, these memories, these concerns, but I don’t know how to forget I’m doing it. If I could, I would have stepped into the silence I’m pursuing. But that hasn’t happened yet. I don’t know how to begin forgetting.

A QUIET BOOK

1.

I had thought for years how best to begin.

Maybe just a blank page.

Some way of showing the precedent silence. But then I doubted so simple a gesture could make it felt: that silence. I worried the gesture would seem *obvious*. But then I remembered what's most obvious is what I'm most interested in.

What the obvious hides in itself. Not as a secret. Like a breath being held.

Like a child believes in the dark and so doubts God, but every morning, reverses the conclusions. Like doubt or faith when they begin in us by acting like one another. Only later do they act opposed.

The trouble is not that what is pure is complicated past our understanding. What's quiet is just too simple to be understood. One method might be to liken that silence to the inner life once you learn to accept that the "inner life" is just another myth.

Socrates asks: "Can a man know and also not know what he knows?"

Know thyself. The imperative acts so simple, but then you try to follow the command for your whole life, as one might follow an echo back to a source, but the source is just a cave, and the shadows living there are quiet. And all along you thought you'd find yourself there. That you lived there. That you'd come home, source somehow of yourself. But it isn't true.

In Greek, *ἀλήθεια*, the word for truth, might best be translated: "that which makes itself obvious." There are other best ways to define it.

"The stone the builders cast out has become the cornerstone." In Psalm 118:22 I found a comfort and a

clue. I'd like to say that I repeated this verse to myself ceaselessly, but that would be a lie. I didn't even know it mattered to me until I happened upon the words as a child happens upon a forgotten toy and remembers suddenly the life that had been in it. Mostly this experience happens to children when they become adults. I just found the words in the box. But the box was my head.

I needed to find the cast-out stone. That's how I begin. I thought of the names of my daughters: Iris. Hana. Before they were born, before I had any inkling of their existence, they each were such a stone. But not now. Too many years have passed. My love for them isn't silent. They do not fill me with silence. And what is silent in them is theirs alone. A rock cast away from me. Something I can't pick up.

I thought of my wife, Kristy. But her silence is the prism that breaks white light into the rainbow.

I thought of a dream I had after I fell in love with Kristy and decided I must become a poet. In the dream I wandered down a dark road through a kept field. The grass all mown. I thought it was a cemetery but there weren't any stones. A tree by a bend in the pitch black asphalt, so black I knew it had been raining. That's when I saw the rainbow. It kept still in the sky as I neared it.

The closer I got the more intensely I could see the colors, and in the spectrum I saw lightning flashing like a sensation between synapses. So I imagined it. Going closer I could see the rainbow had no breadth, no depth; it was thinner than a razor. That's when I saw the letter floating in the colors. Just one letter. It flashed, made of electricity. "It is the letter *aleph*," I thought to myself. Then the lightning in the letter struck my hand and the pain woke me up. It wasn't until years later, when I finally began to study Hebrew, that I realized I'd recognized the letter before I could have known it.

I gave Hebrew up. It took too much time away from writing poetry.

Fifteen years passed.

Now I'm studying Ancient Greek. Every hour I spend in declensions and conjugations deepens my sense of my own ignorance. It's a kind of revelation, I guess. I'm not the student I thought I was.

To mark silence () or * seemed like options for a while.

But the open-close parentheses began to seem like hands closing in prayer, or like hands circling a mouth that is unseen but open and about to yell out.

The asterisk—despite being that mark in Proto-Indo-European linguistics that marks the existence of an ur-word whose primary meaning undergirds and supports every iteration through time of every related word but whose proof etched in mud or in wax or on papyrus has never once been found—just felt like a notation that meant either to look up at the night sky at the grand silence of the stars, or to look at the bottom of the page for a note to help explain what might have been unclear in the text above. Usually, an allusion.

But what I want to point to isn't in any direction because it's in every direction.

Ubiquitous. Obvious.

Unavailable by the means at hand.

All.

2.

I want to ask a question about silence.
The answer is in the disappearance of the question.

3.

I began to think about thinking. How the words worked silent through me. How I could be sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast with my family, looking at them with my eyes but somewhere behind my eyes other images unfolded. Kristy's nakedness from the night before. Or a line that kept singing its presence and insisted on becoming a poem. Random memories. An odd preponderance of multisyllabic words. *Alabaster Balustrade* is one such phrase I often kept saying to myself. "Kept saying to myself." That's not the right sentence. Those words kept repeating themselves in me. It made me feel as if I existed only so thought could think itself and by some strange fate I couldn't help but listen.

This is just another way of saying I've never been quiet.

Often I find myself thinking about a story I heard on the radio many years ago.

I can't help but wonder if the word "radio" derives from the Greek *ραϊδιος*. It would be easy to look up but I don't want to—though the word itself means "easy."

The way the voices are in the air already articulate even when the volume is down very low. Even when the radio is turned off.

Easy like thought is easy. Something in our life that happens by itself. One might even say, something in our life that has its own life, like a parasite to which we play host. It lives on us as it lives in us. Thought.

The story the radio spoke was about a man who later in life lost his hearing. I can't remember why. An illness, I want to say, with such a terrible consequence despite "recovering." This man said that he awoke from unconsciousness and found himself in a complete silence. He felt horror-struck at first, but slowly, he began to appreciate the quiet he found himself living within. For some time it felt absolute. But then he began, as he described it, to hear music. It filled his whole head, this music, a melody he'd never heard before but which he likened to Handel's *Messiah*. I take this to mean he felt that he was listening in on the divine. The music was ever-present. He did not ever not hear it. What to us might sound maddening was to him the most profound beauty he ever experienced. When his doctor

communicated to him that he thought he could regain his hearing, the man felt he must accept. The procedure went perfectly. The man woke up to the sound of his family's voices, intimate tones he never expected to experience again. But the man felt burdened by a terrible loss. The loss of his damage that alone made him capable of perceiving that inward music so constant it may well be the undergirding musical grammar that keeps the mind afloat on the chaos from which millennia ago it emerged.

The music of the mind listening to itself.

St. Augustine writes movingly of how difficult it is to forget. I can't remember where my copy of the book is, so forgive me for not quoting directly. To remember that you've forgotten something, he says, is not forgetting. The name of a flower, for example. Or, as all of us have experienced, a certain word whose first sound we keep repeating to ourselves, a kind of chant or incantation, magic-charm of the initial—though when, hours or days later, the word appears in the memory, it seldom begins as we thought it did. Augustine suggests that to feel forgetting is to be aware of absence being present. We sense the space in which something had existed that now has gone missing.

Thoreau: "I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travellers I have spoken to concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who had heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves."

What is truly forgotten we do not know we've lost.

"O."

Mouth forms around the shape of its own emptiness to begin the invocation that calls open a world in the air, on the page. The same shape—a circle—is also the shape of a world.

"O, sing to me"

Only now do I hear those classic words in a proper light. (Strange phrase of pure confoundment: to hear in light.)

It is the cry of one who has forgotten and needs a voice not his own to repair the loss.

Another way to say it might be: O, fill me in.

Have you ever thought the heart bays like a hound and
tramps like a horse and flutters and broods and coos as
does the dove?

Neither did I.

Not until I remembered that my heart had gone missing.
I inquired after it to many in poems I read aloud during
my travels. Few knew that was the question I was asking.

So much noise needed to get at nothing.

Lord, lord, lord, teach me to acquire forgetting.

Erase this prayer as I pray it.

4.

Sophocles lived into his eighties. As a younger man he had the reputation of giving himself over to the various pleasures of the body with a heedlessness that belies the seriousness of the tragedies he wrote. Perhaps the *life of the poem* and the *poem of the life* bear an inverse relation to one another. When asked how it felt to become an old man, Sophocles answered: "I feel I have been released from a cruel and relentless master."

He's speaking of desire, and often, behind my own face, I'm also thinking of desire. It seems to contradict silence—to be so wanting. Yet I hear in the back of my mind Socrates suggesting that desire comes from lack, and the more one lacks, the more one desires.

Can desire dig deeper the lack that is its own source?
Can desire grow desirous?

I want to think about silence. I desire it. See how desire drifts into everything, riddling it with emptiness that yearns after a fulfillment it also wants to keep at bay?

In the *Shepherd of Hermas* it is mentioned as a sin: to betray without gaining anything from the betrayal.

Sometimes I think the very work of poetry is betrayal. To betray the poem with itself. To desire silence in music, quiet in words. It is a cruel, relentless master.

One of the things I consider occasionally while out walking my dog, when none of my friends answers my call to fill the empty space, is what would have happened if the Sphinx asked Oedipus her riddle and he couldn't figure out an answer. If he just stood there, silent, before the crumbling pedestal from which she spoke her occult hexameters.

He didn't know how to betray the nature of his own intelligence. This meant Oedipus could never be a seer or a singer.

He had no access to that answerless bafflement of the resourceless mind.

That silence which might have freed him from his fate.

And sometimes, when from a distance I hear dogs barking, I think of a pursuit in the ancient woods that likely never happened—or, conversely, is happening still. Poor Actaeon, hunter who became what he pursued. Such perfections of symmetry are the only ways in which we hear the Fates laugh. It's hard to hear that laughter in one's own life. Mostly we're deaf to it. But every once in a great while we find ourselves lost in the deep woods and hear from a spring a gentle song that guides us to the goddess herself, and when she gazes into your gaze there is a form of attention called absolute reciprocity that cancels all thought and sound and desire even as it condemns you for the same.

Many moments are impossible to return to. Proust: our only paradise is the one we've lost.

Later I asked Iris if the dead bird scared her.

"No," she said. "It gave me an idea."

5.

On our walk my youngest daughter asked me, "What are the songs you don't know?"

"That's a hard question," I said.

"Tell me the songs you don't know."

Silence was the best description.

On the same walk we found a bird lying dead on the ground. It had a long, dark, slightly curved beak. Streaks of white not quite white on the head, a color I might call "dry wheat." "Not a woodpecker," I said. Iris said, "Nope, not a woodpecker." Not the right markings. The shafts of the feathers had no bright colors. I couldn't identify the bird. A plover? A snipe?

Riddles, Labyrinths, Paths

Asclepiades of Tragilus, a fourth-century poet, records the Sphinx's riddle: "There is on earth a two-footed and four-footed creature with a single voice, and three-footed, changing its form alone of all creatures that move in earth, sky, or sea. When it walks on the most legs, then the strength of its limbs is weakest." It's likely he took the riddle from other authors who have slipped back into anonymity; by which I mean, I guess, that they fell back into time. I have to remind myself those poets had thumbprints like a labyrinth unique to themselves just as I have my own, but the riddle whose answer is for each of us the same is what gets to have an "identity" more or less permanent.

The sphinx seized and devoured young and old, large and small. Statius, writing about Euripides, notes: "But also the handsomest and loveliest of all, the dear son of blameless Creon, noble Haemon." How "blameless" Creon is any reader of ancient tragedy can decide for herself. No one seems very blameless. We sense in the

riddle some compulsion to answer, though we know it might be wiser to keep quiet. The words seem to contain a secret just as we ourselves seem to contain a secret. Mostly we fear what we want—that the answer will let the secret out, and somehow, as if by magic, we'll be released by letting go of the answer we had contained.

The riddle seems immune to mortality, and though to answer wrong is to face death in the form of the Sphinx's punishment, to answer correctly admits to the same fact: a man begins weak and gains strength only to become weak again. The riddle is deathless, but its answer is death.

What for many years felt to me words of intellectual failure have changed their nature. Now they seem to me words of spiritual honesty. I don't know.

When I read *Oedipus Rex* I say to myself a silent prayer that this time Oedipus, brash man of brilliant mind, might reach the gates of Thebes and in answer to the Sphinx's question say "I don't know," and walk past the walled city that he does not know is his home.

But the prayer never comes true. Why? The answer is obvious. That's how it was written. I can't find an alternate version that allows other words.

Such strange hopes persist in silence.

★

Riddles riddle silence. Pierce it. Bewilder it by betraying it. It is as if a question had been asking itself forever without being heard, somewhere behind the mind or deeper than it, somewhere within the intangible reaches of soul, and then so gradually it escapes notice until it can no longer be ignored, the silent thing called out into voice. The riddle says, “tell me what you know,” and when you do tell, you open your eyes to the fact that you don’t know what it is you know.

Wisdom makes the problem worse.

An apocryphal fragment written down by Pseudo-Plato and attributed to Homer speaks to the issue: “He knew a lot of things, but knew them all badly.”

We think we’re speaking about others, but later see we’ve been speaking the whole time about ourselves. It’s disappointing even as it’s a revelation. Just another one of fate’s riddles, even if fate is no more than realizing you are yourself and have been, without interruption, your whole life—even as one late night you cried when you left behind your lovely wife holding to her fragrant

breast your son because you needed to return to battle, and as she wept the child laughed to see the sun shine on the bronze helmet, but even then, I wasn’t Hector.

Nor was Homer, of whom such stories abound that he seems both to exist and not at the same time, as if he is one man of many voices and is also nobody at all. I like to return to the stories of his death. Pseudo-Plutarch writes: “Not long afterwards when he was sailing to Thebes for the Kronia, which is a musical contest they hold there, he arrived at Ios. There, while sitting on a rock, he observed some fishers sailing up, and he asked them if they got anything. They answered, ‘All we caught we left behind, all that we missed we carry.’ The riddle meant that the lice they had caught they had killed and left behind, but the ones they had not caught they were carrying in their clothing. Unable to work this out, Homer became depressed and died.”

There are many subtle variations. Homer seeing the fisher boys calls out: “O huntsmen from Arcadia, have we caught anything?” One boy answers him with the same riddle, and in this account by Proclus, Homer, who best understood the mysteries of human hubris set against the myriad realities of the heart, could not find the answer. He became depressed, wandering around preoccupied by the oracle, “and in this condition he slipped and fell on a stone, and died two days later.”

Of his blindness, I want to say little, other than to mention that some authors suggest we make Homer blind to excuse our own blindness, for he saw more clearly than any man to ever live. He is blind because we cannot see.

Even such a one a riddle baffles.

More simply, from someone known only as Anonymous, "They say he died on the island of Ios after finding himself helpless because he was unable to solve a riddle of the fisherboys."

Of course, part of the riddle of Homer's life is that all the biographical material is spurious past factual belief. He is in his way wholly anonymous, just as we are anonymous, or quietly on the way to becoming so. To wander through our days preoccupied by what makes to us no sense means we keep good company. It eases some the sorrow every oracle burdens us with, a weight I call *sight-with-obscurety-included*.

The Muses sang in my ear the rage of Achilles and the rites of Hector, tamer of horses. But a question a child asked has destroyed me.

★

But aren't there other ways to think?

Riddle that doesn't lead to death. Riddle that doesn't seduce us into all the facts damaged by desire we call knowledge. Such knowledge we consider our "resource."

But, as Emily Dickinson says of eloquence, that it is when "the heart has not a voice to spare," perhaps there is too another kind of riddle one asks and answers oneself, not a work of words so much as a kind of deed doing and undoing itself forever.

At odd moments in life, waking up in the middle of the night and trying to find some trick to put my mind back to ease and sleep, I find myself thinking about Penelope weaving her shroud each day to keep her suitors at bay, and each night undoing the work.

She makes an image to cover up the face of death, and each night, undoes the image. The suitors must sense it. Death's face all uncovered. It looks like nothing.

I like to think Penelope became so skilled in her art she could weave together with one hand what the other simultaneously took apart. It might look merely like a thin black fragment in the air thrilled occasionally by the

gold thread of a star or the silver thread of water from a spring. But the whole could never be seen. It would be something like the trick of the famous philosopher who reportedly could write a question with one hand and with the other write the answer at the same time. But Penelope's art would be finer, for she'd know the question and the answer are the same thing—one is just the disappearance of the other.

Unlike the Sphinx, this riddle kept men at bay, kept them silent, kept them apart from the "valor of action." Not eliciting desire, her work put desire on delay, and by delaying desire, paused for many years the deaths of those she wanted to stop wanting her.

Such a riddle creates a rift in time. It betrays words. It's just the hands working by themselves, sound of thread against thread, like the work of the Fates, the only sound, if you can call that sound a sound, it's the only sound.

★

Writers of the early church taught about the "two paths." What the stone endures because it has no perception, we who see, or feel that we can see, cannot wholly bear. We have a choice to make, and we do not know we are making it. To walk the path toward a good life that

ends in eternity and requires of us renunciation of those pleasures our nerves feel created to enjoy, or to walk that other path, in which we give ourselves license to do as we please. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between the two paths, and messengers of ambiguous intent try to convince you of where it is you're walking.

These writers warn us against being "double-minded." That's how I learned that the two paths are contained almost wholly in the mind, and that the troubling nature of the inner life is that you find yourselves walking on both paths at once. It doesn't even feel like a division. *I think* holding hands with *I am*.

The riddle is the middle way. How find it to walk on it? I don't know. The best advice might be to stand still, but I guess I don't know. How can you tell when you're standing still? It doesn't seem so easy. What you stand on is moving, for example. But that's a problem of another kind.

I think I once read that a wave moves its force through the water but the water itself never moves. It's a riddle I don't understand completely, but it feels true because I want it to be true.

In *Moby-Dick* Herman Melville notes that the eyes of the sperm whale are on the sides of its massive head

and so the creature has no binocular vision. It sees two worlds. Neither overlaps.

The White Whale sees two paths always, is always of two minds, but moves into the absolute darkness straight ahead of it. That is, the White Whale walks the middle path, and the middle path is almost chaos pure, infinite black nothingness, quiet of the universe humming its drone.

The trick is not to ask the riddle, nor to answer it, but to be the riddle, to ride the riddle, or to learn to let the riddle ride you. It's work of no appearance, work of all approach.

7.

In the old economy labor preceded gift. You had to work the field, bury the corpse beneath the wheat, and the gods let rain rain down, or didn't, and sometimes a crop grew, the very one you planted, or sometimes something unexpected emerged, a child or men made of stone; and you did this work not knowing the outcome, even if the field was just a blank sheet of paper, even if the corpse was just a memory, and the stalks of wheat no more than a pencil line scribbling out the just-written words.

Ποιητής means "poet" and "maker." The verb that derives from the noun is *ποιέω*, "to do or make." In Greek verbs have a middle voice. This is when the verb acts upon itself. The middle voice of *ποιέω* means "to consider."

The poem is a made-thing within which consideration occurs.

For many years I've kept myself at work in the field, plowing the dirt with my head. When I'd look up people would call me "prolific," a word that I couldn't help but hear as pejorative. The word conjured in my mind an image of some growth like weeds spreading out of control and overtaking all I wanted most to tend with love and care, but the weeds weren't flowers, but a kind of fungus, that sowed the death it fed upon.

I thought my work was different. I meant it to be. Catullus writes:

Let her no more, as once, look for my passion
which through her fault lies fallen like some flower
at the field's edge, after the passing ploughshare's
cut a path through it.

But in my memory the image changed. Passion pushes the plow and the cutting edge glances against the stem of the flower leaning into the field, knocking from its cup a bit of pollen. A smudge of yellow on the ground.

Sometimes I could see the image with such clarity I considered that the green stem vibrated like the string of a lyre and played a music I could not hear but the bees could who fly in like genius to make repair.

Against the condemnation hidden within how "prolific" is used I didn't know what to do. But over time I kept hearing these lines:

What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage
Whose world, or mine or theirs
or is it of none?

"Or is it of none?" No world but its own. No world but what it makes within itself. And then it must consider that world. From the same Canto:

Pull down thy vanity,
I say pull down.

But to have done instead of not doing
this is not vanity
To have, with decency, knocked
That a Blunt should open
To have gathered from the air a live
tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.
Here error is all in the not done,
all in the diffidence that faltered

To have done is not vanity. To plow the ground with your mouth open singing to the seeds a lullaby whose consequence is to put to sleep the seeds so the crop becomes a dream...this is not vanity.

The Greek word for truth, *ἀλήθεια*, contains within it the root *λήθη*, word of oblivion, word of forgetting. I like to think, naive as it sounds, that a poem works toward truth not to state it, not to offer it to others or even to oneself, but arrives at truth because only then can truth return to oblivion.

It takes such weird work to arrive each time at silence. "Weird," archaic now, a word for *destiny*. For example, Shakespeare: the weird sisters, the three witches sharing an eye, the Fates.

And that might be why I find myself on certain days when a curious mood comes on me walking around and knocking my hand against the air. This is not vanity. I've just forgotten where the door is, and the truth is that the door is everywhere, and the error is in not knocking, not doing. If you don't know, then silence never steps out that invisible threshold that marks the difference between air and air.

8.

There must be a way to begin that doesn't include paradise.

But maybe not.

Ezra Pound's last Canto:

I have tried to write Paradise

Do not move

Let the wind speak
that is paradise.

Let the Gods forgive what I
have made

Let those I love try to forgive
what I have made.

I've gone over this poem in my mind many times. I think about the made-thing that is a poem and the making-

thing that is a poet. Sometimes I've thought a line of verse is only a placing of words on wind, but then the wind dies down and in my mind I see the wild thrashing of the storm-tossed tree grow horribly still. Other times I've thought the lines of verse that constitute a poem are nothing more than telegraph wires carrying voices inside them. But those voices matter little, if at all, for their importance isn't in *what* they say but *that* they say. There is no other way but to string them like wires taut across some distance so that the wind can blow across and sing its own song. Sometimes I think it can be heard in no other way, that song. And then I think, you can put your ear against anything, any made thing, and hear that supernal vibration that is paradise, I mean the "wind speaking," I mean the actual poem, the un-making one, the un-made one we can only glimpse by the making of our own.

Such thoughts lead to odd considerations. To read a poem, place your ear gently against the page. It's a poem about the ocean, maybe. I think I hear waves. Obscure waves.

I'm writing these words sitting inside the Houghton Library. The ocean is somewhere not far away. Next to me, propped open, Emerson's journal from July 1874 in which he is thinking about Thoreau. Next to

it, in a manila folder not yet opened, Wallace Stevens' typescript for "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction."

I hope to open it before my time is up.

"HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME."

"As if you could kill time without injuring eternity."

Emerson quotes from Thoreau: "so it remained in a degree of obscurity for me." He's referring to the name of a nameless place.

Emerson writes:

Henry pitched his tone very low in his love of nature,— [handwriting illegible for a few words] tortoises (?), crickets, muskrats, [illegible], toads + frogs, it was impossible to go lower. Yet it gave him every advantage in conversation: for who could tax him with transcendentalism or over-refining that found him always skilled in facts, real experiences in objects which made their objects + experiences appear artificial: and yet his position was in Nature, + he commanded all its miracles + infinitudes.

One of the things that has only grown in degrees of obscurity for me is what the fact of the poem might be. Even that grammar feels wrong. Might be? Then it's not a fact.

Or is the possibility of the thing not yet made a fact? A fact beneath the matter of the fact that isn't proof but the barest bound against infinitude that says *here in this space something can come to be* but the saying of such a fact is blank. If it can be said at all.

Experience agitates itself. Eventually the fact of it appears artificial.

You keep recalling it and each time, though you cannot notice it, something changes, something alters, until perhaps the memory appeals to nothing experience means. You forget even what you've forgotten.

Turn the page.

Emerson quotes and reminisces for 25 pages and then inserts between two blank sheets a newspaper article, "Thoreau and His Writings: His Habits of Thought: Cape Cod." The article is just a single column, but long, and folded in thirds. It opens by saying that Thoreau "addresses Spartans in taste and Spartans in life," that he does not appeal to the readers' sentiments that have

made other authors more popular. I don't know what the rest of the article says, or if Emerson himself wrote it. I was scared that unfolding the old paper would destroy it. But what I did take note of is that clipping is followed by 12 blank pages in the journal and the next entry is a torn out sheet of ruled notebook paper on which, in deep brown ink, Emerson writes: "His 'nightwarbler' June 19 1853 seen + described" On the backside:

1853

Feb 13. in the driving snowstorm, a dense flock of snowbirds out under the pigweed in the garden.

The torn page nesting in the blank white sheets is a kind of songbird lost in the snow.

Then Emerson transcribes Thoreau's poem "Inspiration." The first line is: "If with light head erect I sing." At first I think "light" means dizzy; then I think it means light. Behind my eyes there's a dim glow better than the din of thought. It's dizzying.

Let those I love try to forgive what I have made.

The rest of the journal is blank.

Replace the click-clack of reason with the hum of
thought...

Let *is not be* be my most accurate song...

9.

& then I opened Stevens:

To find of sound the bleakest ancestor,
To find of light a music issuing

*

That the desire for truth seems fatal to truth itself...

Appoint me my place in the music...

So that my presence alone ceases to hush the thrush...

Paul Celan in Paris, walking with his friend, so fond of repeating what Kafka said: "Sometimes God, sometimes nothing."

10.

Sensation of staring so long through the bars of the window that the bars appear in front of anything I see. The field in a kind of jail, but the jail is inside me. What is there when I stare at nothing and look at the field? Some grid so fine I don't know it's a grid. Or a sheet of ruled notebook paper like a child learns to write on. Look up at the sky and it's ruled. That's why it's blue. All the blue lines have run together.

Is it a depth, or a surface, or a distance, or is it so near as to be within?

To say something like: "the difficulty of blankness."

But so much of it all isn't quite right.

11.

A stain or strain of music. Stain: tinge with color other than the natural one. Strain: to draw tight.

When I had my first child I felt inside myself what I never had to feel before: my solitude. I felt it strain under the new shape. Those first days when eternity is the caul, the child's timelessness leaks into time, staining it with some tone so pure it creates a rift in what hardly exists—the place within myself, more mine than saying "I" can mean, not where I am by myself, but where solitude lives its own involuted, involuntary life. I didn't know it existed until it was broken. Singularity not of the self, but in it. Gravity from which not even sound escapes. Fear of the infant crying also known as the event horizon.

Aleph draws silence tight and then a sound can follow. Heraclitus might say as of the bow, the arrow.

Sometimes I think we carry within ourselves the letter *aleph* somewhere behind our heart, or is it within the

liver, purging noise as blood is purged of its stain. I guess I don't know. A transplanted spiritual organ given to us on loan. I guess I don't know the terms of the agreement.

Keep quiet. But I fear I can't.

The letter *bet* is the first sound. Just silence precedes it. It is shaped like a house missing a wall, and mystics say it should be thought of as a house or a tent. When I studied the mystical importance of Hebraic letters I read that we house ourselves within the fear of God and the letter *bet* informs us of our position. It is a letter that acts as a portrait of the human condition. Or is it that we live within the love of God? I can't remember exactly our condition. *Bet* says we begin to exist by dwelling. "Buh-buh-buh," the first sounds a baby makes. Maybe the letter is a kind of shelter from whose safety sometimes we must grope our way back out into the unlettered universe through which *aleph* blows her silence. Housed in fear or housed in love and silence at the door. Learning to speak.

The words for "beginning," "head" and "blessing" also begin with *bet*.

Where I learned this I forget. Midrash Rabbah, or the *Sefer Yetzira*, I can't remember. I forget how the blessing began in my head.

Heliopause

At the edge of the solar system a satellite named *New Horizon* just woke up. It slept for nearly three billion miles and now it's opening its eyes to take photos of Pluto. Astronomers are hopeful to find craters, mountains. Any features clearly seen would please, as the best photos we now have show only a blurry rock.

Maybe they'll find rings, my favorite planetary feature.

Πλοῦτος means wealth. Rings are a form of wealth and I like to think of Pluto circled by the very thing that typifies the god for which this planet is named. I like to think the rings might ring and that *New Horizon* has ears and not just eyes and will send us music back from the very edge, the outermost circle, of our sun's influence.

One way to consider a poem's relationship to itself: it tries to discover its own limit so that it can fill the shape with song. There are other ways, but I know them less well.

George Oppen: "If there is another horizon, I haven't seen it." Maybe I'm misquoting.

How likely is it that, in seeking out some utmost edge, the very limit of sound and using sounds to arrive there, that I will not deceive myself just to feel I've arrived? And how would I even know?

Prufrock twice being told:

That is not what I meant at all.

That is not it, at all

I remember as an undergraduate writing my honors thesis. As when in high school I wrote a term paper on existentialism which I failed for having misspelled the word "consciousness" throughout, I was reaching past my grasp. The topic: Czesław Miłosz and eschatology. I was curious about the end of time, I suppose, not because it offered some glimpse into heaven, but, heathen that I was, because it promised return to the world before time began, moment of origin, when the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. Existence before existence occurred. I read an essay by Paul Ricœur about language and limits, and in it I came upon a sentence that so filled

me with the sense of truth that I struggled to memorize it. When I saw Kristy on campus I hurried to her to recite it, but I couldn't find the exact order of the words, just some semblance of what they meant, enough to convey a sense, but I wanted it exactly, and grew angry, depressed, felt some rage at my own failures, that a sentence memorized but two hours before had already loosed itself from my hold, and I felt stupid, a failure, filled with some drift of loathing that only now I realize was shame. It was an odd reaction to have, and it should have taught me something about myself, but it didn't. Now I don't remember even the gist of the sentence that meant so much to me I hated myself for failing it. Not even a syllable remains. Just some shame as faint now as a scent remembered years later from an earlier day.

I do recall that Ricœur suggested that certain figures of speech, notably paradox and metaphor, functioned in the Bible to riddle the rational mind and take a reader to that most uncomfortable of horizons in which one almost feels the thing that cannot be said.

It's hard to put your ear against a horizon and listen to what speaks from the other side. The horizon retreats, as we all know. And as all we know, there's no barrier, no membrane, no page, no film, no pane, no nothing, to mark as other the other side.

Simone Weil: "Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. It is the same with God. Every separation is a link."

Fine. I agree. Mostly.

But you have to go knocking everywhere, just knocking against the air, for the sky is the prison though we cannot see the wall, and we do not know how to listen because we do not know where to knock.

A poem considers our situation and tries to offer a wall.

Wittgenstein writes in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he has given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.

Prufrock twice being told:

That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all.

How childish it is to see it as I do, a satellite like a child opening its eyes. Solar panels rubbing the sand out of the sensors.

It's very lonely out there. That's why the baby in her crib reaches up at night for the rings spinning on the mobile.

This past summer *Voyager II* left the solar system. It is beyond the reach of the sun's gravity, and what light the sun now gives is no brighter than any other star *Voyager II* can see. Like a mystic who has wandered away from his wealth, it has entered into desert places to feel nothing so deeply a new influence might be found. This space is called the *heliopause*. It is the only made-thing that has crossed the limit. It can send no word back about its experience. Such a strange, sad poem. It exists wherein it cannot speak. It doesn't feel like poetry, but it is the only strictly correct method.

Wittgenstein ends the *Tractatus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

13.

Jacob crosses a brook and finds himself alone and then he wrestles an angel. Gustave Moreau paints it:

Jacob wears only a loin cloth. His eyes are closed. His hands reach out to grapple with his opponent, and though every muscle is tense with the strain of wrestling one he cannot defeat, his hands grasp nothing, they stretch out as do the arms of a man sleepwalking, and his agony is no more than air.

The angel stands behind him looking straight at us. His halo is larger and more ornate than the cloud-crossed sun. The angel just rests a hand on Jacob's shoulder, nothing more.

Jacob looks as if his whole life is at stake.

★

A ladder of only three rungs. The top rests on nothing in the sky. The bottom is buried an unknown depth in the dirt. There's only the middle rung to stand on, no way to climb higher, no way to get below.

★

Not recorded in the Bible, nor in the Apocrypha, ascribed to no author, not even to Anonymous, Moses says when he hears the voice in the burning bush: "I am but a cup of steam."

"A ray of light under the door of my hotel room." So Paul Celan describes his encounter with God.

14.

Wittgenstein writes, "a name is also used in the absence of its bearer." But it is impossible to say, "This absence" and point at anything meaningfully. The finger wavers in the air. Or the hand rests on the chest over the heart.

God might be one of these names, but there are other, less spiritual examples.

Like saying Kristy, or writing her name on this page. I know to whom the name refers and a picture forms in my head that I can recognize as her. And you might hear me say her name, or might read it on this page, and some other process occurs, replacing a name not with a face, but with absence. But even if you did not know her, even if you knew no one with the name Kristy, you could not point at the page and say, "This silence" in a meaningful way.

This Iris. This Hana.

This man stands in a river and is thirsty but when he bends down to drink the water withdraws. This man stands in a river and tree hangs over him burdened by the weight of its fruit but when he reaches up the branches pull away. On Orpheus's wedding day Eurydice his wife is bitten by a snake and dies. This Eurydice becomes a name that refers to an absence. Orpheus sings songs and nothing cannot not listen. He knows a song is a form in which a name keeps presence at play in absence and absence at play in presence. Wordsworth says of the poet, "he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present." Osip Mandelstam writes, "Thrice blessed is he who puts a name in a song." Orpheus walks singing into the underworld to find his wife, and I like to think his song is no more than her name. I doubt it could be anything else, but I guess I don't know. When he walked singing by Tantalus in the undergloom the man quenched his thirst and ate his fill. The song kept presence still.

It doesn't end well.

Years ago, on our anniversary, I wrote Kristy this poem:

You are for me as you cannot be
For yourself, chaos without demand
To speak, the amethyst nothing

Hidden inside the trinket shop's stone,
Dark eyes dark asterisks where light
Footnotes a margin left blank. You
Don't look up to look up at the sky.
Your ears parenthesize nothing
That occurs, that I keep from occurring,
In the poem, on the page, as you are
For me, not a shadow, but a shade
Whose darkness drops from no object
But is itself yourself, a form of time
Spanning nothing, never is your name.

How is it love demands we speak their names, that we
put their names in song? When a mother calls a child the
child comes running across the field home. But there
are other motions when the name, like a magnet of the
same polarity, repels the body of the one sung out to.

Ahab asks, "What do ye do when ye see a whale, men?"

"Sing out for him!"

That's when the whale dives down or dies.

So I didn't put her name in the poem. I left her name
silent in it.

In Father Mapple's chapel in *Moby-Dick* the walls are
lined with stones etched with the names of loved ones
lost at sea. The names try to cast a line into those lives
lost in eternity.

So the afterlife forms. Be it in gloom or be it in glory.
"This." Right here, it says, is so far away.

Right here where life still is missing.

15.

Paul Antschel, Paul Aurel, Paul Ancel, A. Pavel.

So he signed his earliest work before deciding on Paul Celan. In anagram a kind of diaspora. Hope that one spelling will be right and one will arrive in the name that is one's own. But mostly a name is a form of exile.

"Todesfuge" ends *dein aschenes Haar Sulamith*.
Thy ashen hair Shulamith.

Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return that we may look upon thee.

Jewish mystic tradition equates the beloved in the Song of Songs with the *Shekinah*, the divine presence of God on earth, thought of as a bride. She dwelled in the Temple, descent of pure grace that lights up the smoke or sits on a cushion.

When the Romans destroyed the Temple the *Shekinah* stayed on earth. She wanders even now in the dust.

Many prayers call her back home. Prayer that might begin with those words by which the *Shekinah* is sometimes symbolized: *Moon Queen Apple Orchard Bride*. Empty vessel with no light of her own but the earth-shine of this nearness. Mystics say she is married to Beauty. I don't know. To sanctify oneself they recommend waking up at midnight and weeping, weeping.

The hope is to return her name to its proper place, but this name wanders the world; nor does it ease the pain of the problem to think that a name can say itself to itself and so become its own place, a kind of portable altar. A name is not a home.

The mystics say repentance begins by denying oneself the sleep the body needs and the mind desires. Prayer occurs in the absence of oblivion. So it seems. And I didn't even know that absence and oblivion were different. At night I dream about the bride in my arms even as the bride sleeps dreaming beside me, oblivious of me as I am of her. I didn't know I had to make my own absence.

O Shulamith of the dust-covered orchard purple hair,
exhume the grave they dug in the air, O Sulamith of the

ashen hair, end your wandering through the dust in the clouds, and return.

Paul Celan, A. Pavel, Paul Ancel, Paul Aurel, Paul Antschel. All the light comes in under the crack of a door. Blank page called a day.

Memory & Poppy

Proust and Montaigne both claim to have bad memories, but *In Search of Lost Time* and the *Essays* are made mostly of memory, and nowhere does it seem to be at fault. But it's hard to find the failure in a mind that isn't your own, and so I try to believe them when they say it to me. I think I have a bad memory, too. Others don't believe me. But when I look through my mind something is always missing or awry, like those dreams of searching for something but you know not what it is, and those dreams too of being sought by something but you know not by what.

Memories of dreams. What could be stranger?

Underground in a chamber I'm lying down on a stone table and hooded figures stand around me. I can't see their faces or their mouths but a voice speaks and says that "I" learned a word I should not know and now I have to die. A kind of sacrifice. Wake up at the point of the knife.

How much of life we do not exactly live.

Only now do I understand the dream wasn't about the precocity of mind seeking to learn what it should not know—in *kabbalah* there are question one shouldn't ask before the age of 40—but of the need to forget what you do know. If I could have forgotten that word my life would have been saved.

That word? I don't know. I didn't wake up knowing it.

"And suddenly the memory appeared. That taste was the taste of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because that day I did not go out before it was time for Mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Leonie would give me after dipping it in her infusion of tea or lime blossom.... But, when nothing subsists of an old past, after the death of people, after the destruction of things, alone, frailer but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, smell and taste still remain for a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, upon the ruins of all the rest, bearing without giving way, on their almost impalpable droplet, the immense edifice of memory."

Memory pretends to be about our own life, having been made, supposedly, by our living it. But each memory is its own life. Like some wandering underworld we gather into ourselves the shades, and like those souls whose ardent desire is only to exist again, we find ourselves subject to their demands for sacrifice. Just a crumb, just a bite, just a sip of wine; just the scent of a rose enduring past its prime; just light on an oak leaf; just a touch; just a glimpse of another's skin...such desire we feel and seek to satisfy not for our own pleasure, but to bring life back to the horde within us who have no body but our own.

Such acts used to be known as "sacrifices of aversion."

We think we're hungry because we do not hear the voices begging their offering, threatening us with sickness or death if we do not comply. Mostly we're deaf to their demands even as we obey them. Repast at morning, noon and evening. Sustenance not simply of the body, but maintenance of the undergloom. Life that feeds the afterlife.

★

Throughout Homer the battle-weary heroes pray for the boon of sleep. Nightly oblivion comes to wash away the blood and dust the morning will wake them to again.

Dreams of wives and children, dreams of home, offer sweet escape. Often, for lesser reasons, I feel the same. Grateful that the night will remove me from the day. But the night is its own experience, and instead of oblivion we find ourselves occupied by strange visions that, rather than removing us from memory, gives us more and more to remember.

Does the bee dream of its toil or of its dance? Or are those the same dream? The worker-bee.

"...for nine days' time I was borne by savage winds over the fish-filled sea; but on the tenth we set foot on the land of the Lotus-eaters, who eat a flowery food. There we went on shore and drew water, and without further ado my comrades took their meal by the swift ships. But when we had tasted food and drink, I sent out some of my comrades to go and learn who the men were, who here ate bread upon the earth; two men I chose, sending with them a third as herald. They departed at once and mingled with the Lotus-eaters; nor did the Lotus-eaters think of killing my comrades, but gave them the lotus to eat. And whoever of them ate the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus no longer wished to bring back word or return home, but there they wished to remain among the Lotus-eaters, feeding on the lotus, and to forget their homecoming. I myself brought back these men, weeping, to the ships under compulsion, and dragged

them beneath the benches and bound them fast in hollow ships; and I bade the rest of my trusty comrades to embark with speed on the swift ships, for fear that perchance anyone else should eat the lotus and forget his homecoming. So they went on board quickly and sat down upon the benches, and sitting well in order struck the gray sea with their oars."

Odysseus hard to admire, his mind so quickly outstrips his valor. His cruelty is his cunning. I think about those three men he sent into the field to meet the Lotus-eaters. I remember them at strange moments, as if some pollen has carried the memory in the air, and just by breathing in, I forget what I was doing, and wonder. What happened to them when they ate the lotus? Tennyson has it:

There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night-dews on still waters between walls
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
Music that gentler on the spirit lies,
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes;
Music that brings sweet sleep down from the
blissful skies.
Here are cool mosses deep,
And thro' the moss the ivies creep,
And in the stream the long-leaved flowers weep,

And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in
sleep.

The lotus lets a music fall upon those men. This is different than listening. The music falls upon them, a melody that lulls the nerves, that brings sleep down from the sky but leaves one still aware—"aware," if that word can mean the release from every form of driven care, and can whisper instead that all things are at home in themselves and in one another, and homecoming is a shallow wish that thinks toil earns the gift that everywhere already exists. This being at home. It's just a music. Not a music that lives in you, a music you live within.

Like the thrush in her song. Like the bee in her dance.

Note how the "poppy hangs in sleep." It's not for us to eat. It has taken its own medicine. It has succumbed to being.

Maybe the remedy to the problem of self is falling asleep. It must be a different sleep than that which occurs most every night, though each night is a glimpse into what such sleep must be. Mostly, we're insomniac. We don't know, as the poppy knows, how to sleep inside ourselves as the blossom sleeps in the bud. We don't

know how to take a dose of our medicine, because our medicine is us.

No wonder those men wept, dragged back to the boat to go "home." The honey-sweet lotus freed them of their purpose, released them from their desire, and desire sees with eyes that find distances in every direction, distance hidden in distance, time hidden in time; desire shows us who suffer it a gap that must be crossed, an ocean of climbing waves we must ourselves climb only to find the next one towering higher; and say somehow we hear a music come to us, we think at first it's the music of our own beating hearts, but no, it's not a music within but a music without; say we hear that music, say we breathe it in, and find our wives and children, our home and homeland, all dispersed like pollen in the air, blown into every open thing, the lotus-opened heart, and the sleeping poppy.

Who wouldn't weep to be brought back to the ships and tied up with rope and placed in the belly of a boat?

Image of false labor. Forget it. I mean: give yourself forgetting.

The only work is breathing in.

★

Genius guards us from forgetting what we'd die to neglect: breath, heartbeat, digestion. Genius tends the body so that we can begin to forget more deliberately all that can be forgotten.

Daniel Heller-Roazen recounts a Middle Eastern tale:

Abu Nuwas asked Khalaf for permission to compose poetry, and Khalaf said: "I refuse to let you make a poem until you memorize a thousand pages of ancient poetry, including chants, odes, and occasional lines." So Abu Nuwas disappeared; and after a good long while, he came back and said, "I've done it."

"Recite them," said Khalaf.

So, Abu Nuwas began, and got through the bulk of the verses over a period of several days. Then he asked again for permission to compose poetry. Said Khalaf, "I refuse, unless you forget all one thousand lines as completely as if you had never learned them."

"That's too difficult," said Abu Nuwas. "I've memorized them quite thoroughly!"

"I refuse to let you compose until you forget them," said Khalaf.

So Abu Nuwas disappeared into a monastery and remained in solitude for a period

of time until he forgot the lines. He went back to Khalaf and said, "I've forgotten them so thoroughly it's as if I never memorized anything at all."

Khalaf then said, "Now go compose!"

Betray, betray, Genius demands; betray, betray is the poem's command.

Abu Nuwas's poetic education is the only tale I know in which forgetting is the work that is done. It is harder work than memory is, forgetting. For many years I didn't know what to think about the story. Even so, I shared it with many of my classes. I'd read it to them out loud, and no matter the amount of class time remaining, I'd send them out to begin forgetting it. In my heart I kept a secret wish. That the door to the classroom filled with a mist made of water from the river Lethe and to walk away from the desk was to forget all that had been heard.

Now I think I glimpse it. Abu Nuwas memorizes the ancient poems, chants, odes and occasional lines, and recites them not to prove to Khalaf he has succeeded in accomplishing such an impossible task, though it must have felt so to him as he recited perfectly those thousands of pages over many days. You don't become

a poet by swallowing the library whole. He recites them to put back into the air those words pulled down by others and made into poems. A kind of repair. As if one could breathe back into the sky a cloud that had gone missing, but the cloud is transparent, and not made wholly of dust and water and air. Abu Nuwas gives back all the words Genius gave others, strange sacrifice to the minor god who keeps life for each of us intact. The only way the sacrifice is pure is if nothing of it remains, and so Khalaf orders Abu Nuwas to forget those lines he'd memorized quite thoroughly. That labor of forgetting repaid a debt inherited from others but nonetheless his own, for to become a poet means to accept the debt of others as one's own, and to labor to repay it so that the dead can go free from their bonds. The work isn't writing poems so much as it's forgetting them. And if you forget them well, those poems you love, then Genius has some pity on you, and the absence of what once you knew places in you some words you didn't know you knew, and so you write them down.

(Then a finger pushes a bead across the metal bar on the abacus. The bead is but a dried poppy head. The finger belongs to the accountant we cannot not know. What is owed begins to accrue.)

17.

Through lidless eyes they stare, the gods.

The animals turn their gaze away.

Pascal speaks of the "wretchedness" of our condition—
that we cannot be one nor the other,
that our ignorance cannot rescue us from what our
reason cannot grasp.

We stare at what we want to exist so that it exists,
or we stare at what threatens us, or what
confounds us,
the "object of contemplation"—

And we blink.

18.

What was I like before all this? Not a question about some other life.

“Now” is a word thinking itself by itself alone in a room. I can imagine the room and there aren’t any doors.

Experience gathers into itself all that should add up to the life that lived it, but the equation never works out right; there’s too much, or not enough.

“Is this some kind of joke?”

What?

“All of it.”

There’s no way to know.

There’s no way to know if the sun is just a button that turns the laugh-track on.

Speaking of now: an impossible phrase. Like talking about eternity. The words cause comfort to exist but it isn’t real.

Augustine:

Suppose that I am going to recite a psalm that I know. Before I begin, my faculty of expectation is engaged by the whole of it. But once I have begun, as much of the psalm as I have removed from the province of expectation and relegated to the past now engages my memory, and the scope of the action which I am performing is divided between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have already recited, the other looking forward to the part which I have still to recite. But my faculty of attention is present all the while, and through it passes what was the future in the process of becoming the past.... What is true of the whole psalm is also true of all its parts and of each syllable. It is true of any longer action in which I may be engaged and of which the recitation of the psalm may only be a small part. It is true of a man’s whole life.... It is true of the whole history of mankind...

Before you read the first word of the psalm each word exists in a state of anticipation, and as you read the psalm, anticipation becomes memory. The word you read is, as you read it, but a moment through which the future passes and becomes the past—a syllable some strange dreambox of time, transforming what's to come into what has already occurred, but belonging to neither realm.

"A point is that which has no part."

Captain Ahab still felt his missing leg ache and itch. The White Whale scythed it off. But that White Whale, that living erasure, is a kind of eternity, and Ahab still feels his leg because his leg exists—unlike the man to whom it belonged—*now*.

So I learned that to think about time is dangerous.

It won't kill you even if it feels like you might die—maybe of boredom.

It's just that you lose your mind. It goes missing. But you feel it—feel it itch—this itch called thinking. It feels like it's there, but it's been replaced with a cloud.

Cloud with lightning inside it.

Menelaus learned a similar lesson. Killing men for 10 years to take back his wife, and when finally Troy fell, and he took her away to his ship, and sailed his ship to an island, and pulled his wife to a cave whose mouth opened out onto the sea, and there, when he tried to embrace her, she melted into the air, no more than a cloud.

A cloud is just dirt holding its breath.

In ancient days, and days not so ancient, men of science and philosophy thought that a single *pneuma* filtered through the universe, uniting the light of stars with the lives of those who lived beneath their influence, connecting the white milk spilled across the night sky with the sperm inside the body, a creative principle uniting all things but belonging to none. *Pneuma* could carry within it the images of all it had entered. To breathe deeply risked filling the lungs with desire for a thousand things, and then the blood could grow amorous, and suddenly, lodging in the heart, a phantasm of a woman whose image circulates up into the mind, unfolding

there like a cloud so real it threatens to walk out the
cave of the eye and begin a war for which a thousand
ships flee their homeland's shore.

Poor Helen, made of air.

A child lying down in the grass looks up and sees a war
ship sailing in a cloud.

AUTHOR BIO



Dan Beachy-Quick is a poet, essayist and occasional novelist. His most recent book is [A Brighter Word Than Bright: Keats at Work](#). A new collection of poetry, *gentlessness*, and a chapbook, *Shields & Shards & Stitches & Songs* will appear this spring. He is a Monfort Professor at Colorado State University, where he teaches in the MFA Writing Program.



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