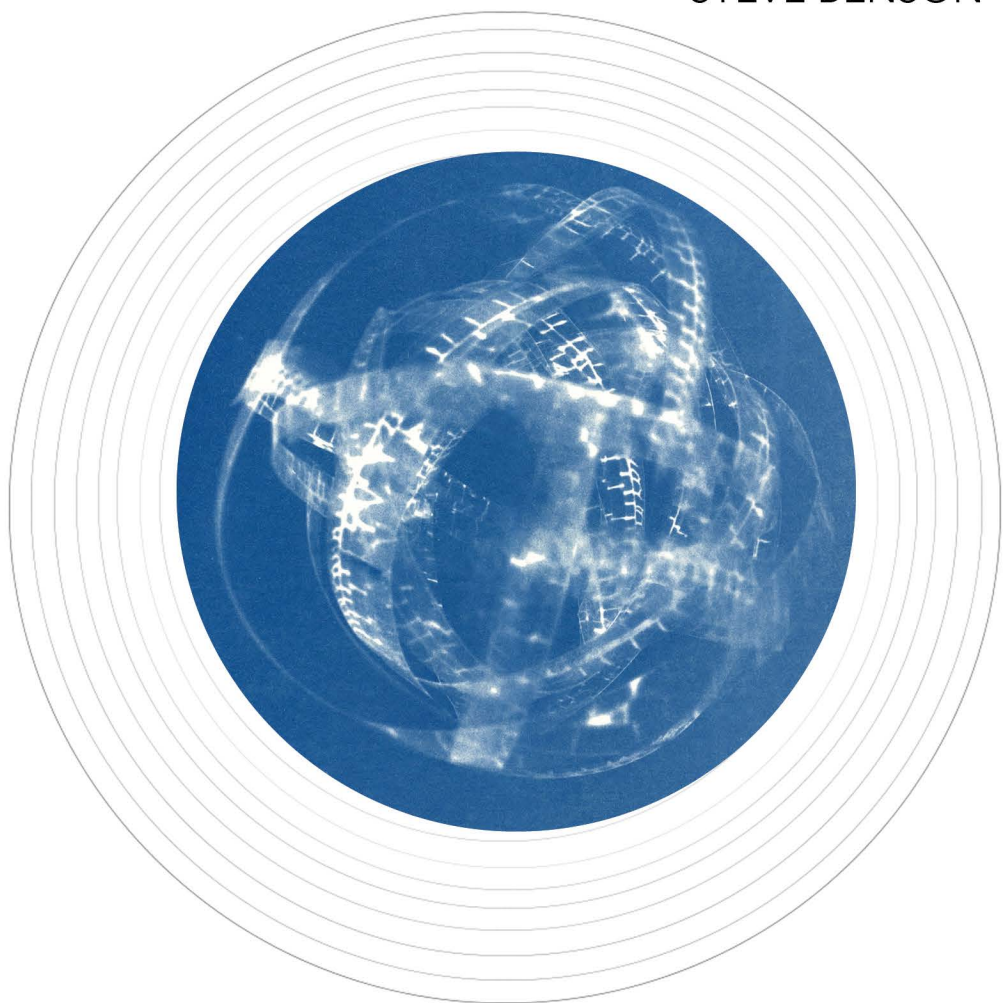


What Are These Signals From?

STEVE BENSON



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#49

ESSAY PRESS EP SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

I have been working since 2007 on writing a long poem almost every late evening in one notebook after another. First using a journal, in which I write a few lines about the day, or my thoughts or feelings, I then add, on a facing page, the same number of lines to my poem—no longer thinking about the content of the journal, but only about how the poem will go on. The breaks between journal entries skip no lines, and the poem leaves no apparent trace of where it stops from one night to the next.

I began the text of this chapbook on 04/04/2008 and finished on 03/01/2009, having filled all the lines in the \$3 lined Rhodia notebook.

Who do you think you are?
I am a completer of forms
Do you think of yourself as a formalist?
Some questions seem inevitable
Can you listen anytime?
I can click on certain buttons, pull the
headphones out of hard plastic wrap
stomp, and the sound comes on
But are you listening?
I hear myself hearing it, and I am so
irritated that I lose my mind, so I
distract myself with other occupations
When will I hear from them?
When they want something from me
they will call, they will appear
Do you listen differently because you know
the voice has been recorded, or
is being recorded as you listen?
I know others will listen, or have
listened, or both, at the same time
as I am listening, and this makes
distances dilate in the sound
far and near, hot and chill

You say there are no rules, but
isn't there some limit, isn't there some
anticipation of too much, the unacceptable?
I hadn't anticipated you asking that
but if I had, I might have said
"No, there are rules, but no one knows
their limits, no one knows their nature
and whether they begin or end, in
what way they may be constantly
changing, or what happens when
one disregards them, whether anyone
does or can at all
Is it better that way?
I think so, but I don't know
Who knows what makes somebody
tick?
The word "fuck" shows up a lot
in conversations like this—maybe
that's a clue to who done it
What makes anyone take the bait?
Appetite and good aim
Is this rhythm becoming relentless
enough that you burn to change it?

I don't want to change anything, but I do
want to write more than one sentence
without resorting to grammatical tricks
and typographic punctuation links in a pre-
tense that I'm not—this sucks!
Why such an elaborate prolegomena?
Something
Why not something else?
It is something else, it's not something
else
When does it end?
I am very grateful to have what I've
got, all of it slipping away
If I have quite a few poems
and I only ever read some of them
why do I need *The Collected*?
No reason. Why not read the same poems
again and again until I die?
There are only reasons to do so
Things have a way of falling together
don't they, as well as falling apart?
I don't think you're talking just about
poetry anymore, are you?

Do questions come to you more naturally than statements?

I don't like the word "naturally," nor "statement," I don't feel comfortable that you're asking *me*, but I don't know how you *could* ask *all* of us—but I take exception to the implication that my motives are transparent or unintentional as I do to the erasure or foreclosure of history, the evacuation of relationship as constitutive of meaning and value
What makes you comfortable?

I like being interviewed, it helps me to feel I have or can find a place in the world and I am comfortable asking questions walking, and waiting in the dark
If it is possible to imagine anything that is an image, however obscure or illogical, terms corresponding to percepts
how do you believe anything you see taste, hear, smell or touch?
I suspend disbelief in order to respond
Do you want to get up at six?

I want to be up then, and I want to want to wake then, and I want to walk well breathing fully in the morning air, especially if it isn't raining, without regrets
What sort of regrets bother you?

I regret only the present (it seems to me) missed opportunities to serve my own and others' real needs better
Can people in a fictional film or play or story tell the truth?

Any one of them may tell the truth as they see it, intuit it, understand it, judge it or believe it, but framing this truth and its application will be fiction, metaphor and desire, as those turn and suspend in hypothesis what are never more than virtual truths anyway, coded formulations, distorting mirrors

How many times a day do you notice yourself breathing, for instance?
I don't know, and I think it is very rare and I suspect it is rather common

but that it is uncommon that I stop
to take stock of it as though nothing
else is happening, particularly
Do you want to talk about skin tone?
I am concerned with muscle tone, or
sort of thought I was yesterday, but
skin tone really may matter more, if
I could re-establish my sense of it
Why is poetry not interesting (to you)?
It's not only that it's often a kind of
grandiosely framed sort of doodling—
it's worse when instead of that it's
self-consciously framed as a precious
epiphany of value, sober, somber, certain
When will this war end?
When it morphs into another war, probably
one that is already raging, or used to be
is now in embers, ready to relight
When will all war end?
When everyone is an artist and refuses
to surrender her art for anything
Is it possible to believe something
you wish were not true, not possible?

It is possible for some people to utilize dread
as a guiding light of expectation...
Is that what you mean?
I guess so, or a complement would be
that some people believe the impossible
because they want to or need to
then, crushed by a betrayal or disillusion-
ment, they believe themselves hopeless
fools, dupes or failures, or the world all bad
Is there one explanation for anything?
The simplest matter is overdetermined
by innumerable factors, so interdependent
as to appear chaotic to an observer
who can only realize he is only part
of it—the explanation, the matter
What can you do in the face of war?
I take your question literally, word by
word, flying in the face of this war, and
I think, *Look it in the eye*, I think
Breathe in and out, fully noticing
the breath, I feel my capacity to stand
to question, deeply threatened, I feel
helpless till I observe my own attention

accepting a common ground, a condition
in which we could acknowledge one another
despite the terror's delegitimizing effects
Can I ask you a simple question?
I don't know. What wasn't simple
about the last one? I'm not sure
I understood what your answer meant
How do people help one another rest?
Massage, leaving each other alone, and
reminding them of restful experiences
What am I forgetting?
Another way of saying what you said
before, almost the same, but different
with a whole different sense, complementary
How should I know what you're forgetting?
There's another way of saying that that
would sound more forgiving, but I don't
feel like saying it because there's nothing
to forgive—I like you as you are
Could you forgive yourself if you didn't
like me, couldn't accept the person I am?
It would be a problem, yes, unless
I could think of you as hateful, un-

ethical perhaps in a way I felt I could
never respect, not being able to see the other
point of view, itself, nor from there to see
myself embedded in judgment and compliance
and only momentarily distracted from whatever
Can I interrupt you?
I can't tell. Aren't you continuing
what I had already been...thinking?
Even if it isn't indistinguishable, if
each thing counts on each other for the con-
ditions of its existence, how could I not?
A rhetorical question, I presume, but, ironically
begging no particular response, as I understand
Is it necessary, is it inevitable, that you
should refer to yourself so frequently
in anything you pose as an assertion?
I wonder that you should ask me, since
it seems the persistent framing of these
questions with respect to the second person
must incline anyone answering to account
in some wise for the condition of the first
What if one knew very little, much, much less?

You tell me. I mean, how can we survive
even the flood of recent information, not only
I mean not to mention the dead
letters and old news
we struggle to assimilate into histories?
Live with knowing very little, and increase
or dramatize the peril, the implosion
Why should I want to do that?
You walk along the wall, into the wall, or away
and no matter where you walk, you're working
out a relationship with that wall
What do you hear in my tone of voice?
Curiosity, compassion, constraint
Is that what you might call reverse rhyme?
The beginnings of the words is where I grab on
and name them and something else, insisting
on an echo as relationship
Will global or mass crisis or catastrophe
shorten my life?
Why not? It does so many others that
to imagine otherwise now appears a buy-in
on a way of life one's habituated to by system-
atic usage of one's person, yet rejects as super-
ficial and hopeless, promising only more

illusion, frustration, despair and anomie
What makes you think anyone can understand?
I have seemed to understand, myself; I am
tired; I don't know where to be sure of an ally
but I refuse to abandon hope of one
Why didn't she want her mother to tell her
something she might be embarrassed at
my hearing in her presence?
Either she feels erotically invested in our
relationship or she does not. Or can
it be that both are possible? Or her
experience could slip and shift at any
transient alteration in circumstances
including nothing changing evidently, since
the imagination is never stable
Shall I feel dissatisfied and betrayed
by compromises or overwhelmed by
good fortune and a bounty of wondrous
benefits, advantages and interest?
I swim out to the float, hold on
for a moment and swim around
and back to shore still on my own
What do images communicate?

Images remind us that we still have memories of sensory impressions, of things or experiences or persons palpable to us and implicitly that these raw or real experiences are meaningful to us, as they are appearing to us, in us, again and again which may well occasion some suspicion for instance that we are not remembering everything, all the details, motion, contradictions, the wordless substance of what we apprehended in the instant
What difference does it make?
I think we need to trust that there is something there, in a sense
Who knows why we are here and why do we act like we do?
The disappointment of expectation is essential
What's the most recent one for you?
Hmmm
Is there anyone else you'd like to meet?
It's true, I go looking for it
Do you think she was thinking of you expecting something, disappointed too?

My best guess is she wanted exactly what we got, two hours together silent, without touch, but vibrating in shared resonance our movements evident to each other that way and by vision (who knows what or how she apprehends?), the grace of that respect and gentleness, that love
What is most worthwhile to account for?
I have not the wisdom to answer this
What makes wisdom possible in one?
I believe it is the...I believe...the intuition that is synthetic (but can use analytic reasoning, as well as metaphor touch, image, rhetoric and other means) and demonstrates the links that make clear a broader picture, always subjective but necessarily true not only to experience but also to imagination's use
Aren't you disgusted by politicians' compromises, and their failures to make use of the trust and power people extend to them to implement ideas worth thinking about?
Disappointment is epidemic, while height-

ened expectations precipitate catastrophes
What is the realistic ethical response to
behaviors in others which one finds
unacceptable, wrong-headed and likely
to cause significant harm to others?
Protest, refuse to accept responsibility
for their problems, or to be their victims
but respond and listen actively for
what leads them to feel right, to do this
How does it feel to be for and against
someone who doesn't believe you exist?
It's hard to say
What happens when the chandelier falls
right on your head?
I hope I am an avatar in Second Life
What would you do if you had nothing
to fear and no one depending on you?
I might easily disappear, taking risks
I can barely contemplate
Would you like to fall in love again?
If I could do it without illusions
If so, would everything not so much
hinge on that spontaneous (seemingly

spontaneous) obsession as it seems to have?
I wonder about that too
How do you like being asked about the rest
of your life as an endgame?
I don't feel I'm any good at true strategy
I can do tactics, conservatively, intuitively
but I can't add it all up
Can you remember what I was about
to say, saying in my mind, virtually
saying, a minute or two ago?
It was just a phrase...
Did you hear me say it again a day later?
Approximately...
Would anyone reading this realize how
devotedly you read *Democracy Now!*, *The Nation*
and stuff like that and think about it?
I don't know
Before it's over is the time that seems to
go on forever?
Some questions can't be answered
What is the hardest question you can
ever be asked?
It would be a why question, such as

why I or we exist at all, or why there's
such cruelty in people, that is, why people
have to be hurt, disdained, neglected so
What were these berries sprayed with?
The man who knows is with the tractor
in the barn over there, and you can ask him
Can you carry me up the hill on the way
back? I will carry you part-way
up, if you want me to, when we're
coming back
Do I have to?
I want to
How does this person's suffering
compare to that one's?
There can be no comparison
What did Wittgenstein say about pain?
I wonder whether it was that it is so
subjective that it virtually cannot be
reflected on—it's all distortion
Is there anything else you want to
ask me before I fall asleep?
Please—the rest is so inestimably important
Are you talking in your sleep now?

I will try to sleep if that's what you
want me to do
If it's generally a mistake to think of
a specific idea as someone's, isn't it
still useful sometimes to know how a given
formulation was arrived at, and doesn't
that involve at least one person's life?
I ask myself what sort of use that is
Might it not turn over your own mental soil
to consider how this shoot was generated
through the interference of someone else's
life, the mess they'd made of things?
In a sense, I think you are saying
we are all compost to each other's imagination
Is that why I still like stories?
Everything we ask, everything we
assert, is all a variation on
the very last thing we heard
What do you mean "we"?
There's an elastic eye or mutable
me that becomes more than one
kind of person, more than one way of

looking at or finding recognition as one
So you don't think you're hiding behind
a pronoun?

There's no room there

How much space is there in a totally
different concept of life?

Suppose the concept of life were alive
there would be any number of it

What do you think about when you
come, or does it depend?

So far as I can tell, I am undefended

—no, I'm a goofball, tethered to the line

What difference does it make whether
you get an erection or not?

The important difference is between

keeping it and letting it go, while

the important identity is with the female

Is it the identification, you mean, that

makes the penis stiffen and hold

itself aloft, an identification para-

doxical or dialectical, with the parts

of the woman it makes you think of?

No—I don't know what I mean—it's

the feeling or something of being her without
ever knowing, for good reason, what that
feeling is, is like, or can even be

Do I have to go to camp one week or two?

One—two only if you want to

What will she feel about it in the

morning, if I can even get her awake?

She may feel resigned, yet also

wondering whether there's any give

Do I have to go? Or she may just say

again she won't go, as she did last night

this time as a challenge as much as

a tantrum and a reality test

Why do people fall asleep so easily

sometimes when so much is uncertain?

You can forget what you do not know, or

you can pretend to know it, which is much

the same in effect

How long will you stay awake tonight

wondering whether you have any family

connections, loving interdependence?

Some times will feel endless, others

will disappear with recognition

What would you advise someone else to do?
Suffer, observe your suffering, cup it in your
caring hand, sing to it, gently, suffer
Where do you feel pain in the body?
The cranium, soles of my feet, small of my back
Where do you feel fatigue?
Lying down in bed
Is there really a test of time?
It's really time that ought to be put to
the test, if it's about time
Are you calm or anxious?
I am sleepy, but not asleep now
Who are you, or who do you think you are?
Not now, I'm falling asleep
How much sleep do you need at night?
Like everyone else I know, almost, I
don't give myself enough rest
What did I buy, what did I find for free
what was I given?
I only remember what I borrowed
or was loaned—there is a difference
What was the question?
On the street corner stood an answer

with a thumb sticking out, a guitar case
strapped across its back
Doesn't anyone see?
See what?
You're supposed to answer me!
Doesn't anyone see what?
What I see, or what I imagine I see
Which came first?
Not being able to sleep, or staying up
past my bedtime, as long as I can, falling
asleep with talk radio over WOR, or a
Kurosawa or Ozu movie
What are you reading now?
I'm reading the titles on the spines of the
books stacked on the floor, imagining
reading the ones I haven't read before
How can you figure out in any genuine
sense what books or authors mattered
most to your development, as a reader
writer, person or embodiment of culture
over a specific period of history?
I made a list, I looked at it, and
it seemed about right
Are you sorry about last night?

I'm always sorry about something about last
night, at least while it happens, unwinds
but later I am too preoccupied to forget it
What makes this pain so physical?
Nerves are responding to something being
out of place, bodily
I think I'm good looking
but who am I to say?
No one can really tell
What does it matter how things look?
It matters to most anyone how things look
in one's imagination, anyway
I ask him, for instance, what do you know?
I don't know, he says softly, as though
this were the most ordinary of answers
Are you interested in being there, then
beside me, in that particular movie?
I imagine you right now as someone
I would willingly share anything with
What right has anyone to leave another
scattered in pieces, tossed in a hole
obliterated before there's time to be forgot?

It's strange the kinds of rights people do
assume, as though they would attribute
them to anyone, without reflection, though they
on the other hand abhor others' use of them
Is this true of you, too?
I'm sure it is—I'm one of us
How can you live with yourself?
I go in and out of contact
How do you know when to get in touch?
When nothing is telling me it's the wrong time
When you pause, does what you are saying
shift course, sometimes imperceptibly, so
you say something you hadn't meant to?
I knew you would ask me that
In what sense is déjà vu a real
phenomenon, as you understand it?
Déjà vu doesn't happen, it already is
Is déjà vu now, or is it in the past?
Yes, you asked me before, and I already
answered as well as I can
Isn't the melodic structure and development
of a sentence both mysterious and plain
as day, as that of a life, a poem

or a thought that escapes you in a
hypnagogic fantasy, head over heels?
In fact, or in effect, it changes, either
the sentence or my impression of it
segueing into another and in and out
of one another as I listen and watch
When is a yes no question preferable?
When I want to limit what I know
What happened while I was sleeping?
The world exploded, but only in a limited
way, which some people noticed
If you were confronted with police arresting
someone you knew and you felt sure they
were making a mistake that ought to be
called to their attention, what would you do?
I might risk arrest too by talking to them
until I got them to dialogue whether what
they were doing was right or wrong, with
mutual understanding and without
foregone conclusions
How long until you'd get arrested?
Almost instantaneously, and they
would almost certainly hurt me

What gets you outside of yourself?
What happens when the inside is the outside
like when I'm smelling something real to me
and all my attention is there in that smell
sensation—I'm not just thoughts and feelings
Is there such a thing as olfactory
hallucination, in your life?
Especially toward the end of my marriage
a kind of organic burnt rubber smell
I eventually enjoyed, looked forward to
and now miss, wondering what's next
No more?
No, tonight I thought I smelled the dog's
piss, by the kitchen; my son didn't
What else?
I need to feel air circulate
Are there better and worse questions
to ask you?
Not if you're listening, not if you
let me answer as honestly, as well
as I can, not if you let me
understand the question myself
Aren't some questions insipid, cute

trite, degrading, and insanely diverting?
Models in fashion shoots splay themselves
across armatures of imaginary space...
Is it making something of nothing or...?
What appears to be light shining is really
a reflection in a mirror, someone says
Is it enough?
You make it enough, whatever you get
Can you feel each moment, every moment
as a wondrous gift, a blessing?
"Why not?" is not a good enough response
so I say this is a precept, a means
of willing acquiescence to that which is
What gets in your way?
I am often in a hurry
What slows you down?
Other people, space, the unexpected
wondering about what makes things
surprise me or work out the way they do
What is meditation like?
Meditation is like channel-surfing
the distraction I'm most conscious of being
the reminder to return my attention to my

breath, a slippery rounded firm peak
sloping off in all directions into
diverse channels, grooves, crevasses
Is there anything you'd rather be doing?
I'd rather be sharing time and space with my
two marvelous children, whom the surprise
of this life has put in my path, I in theirs
How do you cope when you are separated?
More or less
What can you do with instability?
A form of transience, it allows me to re-
balance, to create a critique that moves
without end, reflecting the way things are
Is it safe to change the place you live?
I've been moving stuff around here, which
alters the free space's shape and scope
and I'm living with some resultant aches
Why don't you tell one of your dreams?
If I could remember one well enough
to isolate it, to tell it, it wouldn't be
a dream, it would be a tale
Then what do you think dreaming is?
Many synapses firing, all over

the many parts of the brain, checking out
different combinations and associations
bridging tensions and desires, fears and
matters of fact and sheer routine, lighting
up scads of avenues throughout the mind
while the ego is home in bed fast asleep
oblivious to everything
How many feet above sea level is my rental
and how long will I be able to afford it?
I will have to ask my landlady
the first question, and what kind of offer
would she consent to as a sale
Will the state keep paying for psychotherapy?
I suspect that it will have to, as mental health parity
ideas become mainstream and more reliable
If it doesn't, what will you do?
I will get anxious and then calm down
as quickly as I can and then start
to mobilize alternative roles I can be
paid to perform, here or in Hollywood
Aren't you embarrassed to see how little
credence you can give to what you have
written as fact from your point of view?

They are a funny kind of facts, documenting
what I thought I felt, or remembered, or
believed, on slender or really no evidence
What can you learn about someone from
reading her web page?
I can't put my finger on it, but I learn
more about reading a webpage than about her
Whose photo showed up on the cover of a
poetics journal first in your family?
My daughter, the youngest, who plans to be
a writer and an artist, if she cannot
study cryptids like the Loch Ness Monster
first-hand, spending years beside
the loch, waiting, and finally learning
whether or not they exist, and if so, how
Isn't that the key question about existence
how it is and how it's done, borne
survived, suffered, made evident and lost?
How it is, you seem to mean, has to do with
how it passes, which is, really, how we
pass it back and forth between us
and between representations of ourselves
What length of sentence best conveys

the information someone best can hear?
No one is reliable as a sentence
and every sentence has a different length
What takes you so long to think of
what to write on here?
I had a better answer last night
which I can't remember now, but no
space to write it yet then
In what respect does forgetting play a part
in your literary compositional practice?
In not mentioning things, which is mostly
what I am doing when I write, whether
I am thinking of them or not, later I will
not remember them, but also as a place
in which we meet, where contact and
communication begin again, in the midst
of triggers and dissociation and care
If this writing were on the back of a
picture postcard, what sort of picture
would you be seeing on the other side?
Collages disappearing under other collages
that have been ripped apart but only
partly by a man running sideways

out of the picture, his hair flying
What is the worst mistake you've made
in the last five minutes?
It's too hard to remember everything
in the last five seconds clearly enough
to identify what went right, much less
what the integral criteria might be
Now that it's a day or two later on
what is the continuity between questions?
I try to make the answers continue them
while attending to everything as here and now
If my quotation choices are multiple
and juxtaposed, are they dramatic
and can they mean something other
than the original speaker intended, now
that they are talking to each other?
When you put that specific an idea into a
question, a yes no question, I feel you are
just saying something, not listening
How can you tell when I *am* listening?
I feel it moving through my body
What do you think is making your eye-
lids achy, or is it really your eyes?
I hope I'm not coming down with something

Do your eyes ache?
Not tonight—I'm not even sensitive, I mean
my eyes, at the moment—but I'm tired
What do you like about watching the first
half of a movie and stopping?
Some of it goes out of focus while
some of it comes into focus, the rhythm
for instance, or the grain, and how
the characters' lives are lived in
real time, because, like me, they're still
alive and moving in and out of frame
When is time free?
I seem to free time when I forget about it
What do we know about hatred?
Not much, but that hatred overlaps
with love in some ways, and that
hatred is linked neurologically with aggression
What is not an obvious question?
That's a good question, worth answering
with another question
What death has mattered most to you so far?
You don't mean exactly whose, but...
Which?

Not really my own, and I've never been present
at anyone's, never even seen a corpse
and it's always the love and the work left
undone that gets me, the promise lost
Would you like to have a marked accent?
I'd like to speak like a Scot, as in
Stevenson's *Kidnapped* or in *The 39 Steps*
as it makes speech both long and short
What do you mean by *that*?
Something about the roll or lilt of the voice
implies more than is said and may go on
more than is needed to convey anything
but generally the less said the better
What do you mean by *that*?
It's not about you personally
Can we start again, please?
I do, each time you ask a question
Is there always tomorrow?
"Every day is the same" is a state-
ment of identity, not equivalence
Now that the decision is made, will I
(will we) feel less tension, less un-
nerving uncertainty, less conflict, or
will it just discover a different schema

to frame itself in—perhaps as a question
rather than an answer, a dilemma
rather than a stable fact?
An open book may present a cipher
whether or not the pages flutter away
from the spine they are nevertheless bound to
all the while taking the air quietly, serious
and serene in their steadily ready gaze
When is the right time to make a phone call?
I might have written a letter in this mood, but
I wanted to hear your voice, and you
are calm, amused at the good fortune
of your being there to answer when I call
What are the effects today of having smoked
marijuana rather often twenty years ago?
I imagine I am slack, loose, rather than taut
focally oriented—even my way of putting it
demonstrates a contradiction, an over-
elaboration, a word here, a phrase there...
What are the effects of scarcely smoking
it at all in the last fifteen years?
As the words disintegrate when I prepare
my rejoinder or my mind to speak

ideas—facts are vanished long ago—
I recognize my limitations as familiars
whom I admit and bow to, wondering at them
If words disappear once they are spoken
(or written), how do we communicate?
Something like them appears to another person
who remembers them for me, from her point
of view, her reply a grasp and letting go
What opens up next, or is this a sequence
in any meaningful sense?
Can there be a sequence of odors, I think
and I don't think there can be, compared
to the way words or sounds can articulate
sense through a sequence
Can words and sounds articulate each other?
I no longer know what the word means
Are you certain you ever once did?
Not certain, not even unsure
Is it lyrical if it's done in the spirit of song?
Yes, as I'm moving with the music, whether
I hear it or remember it or not
Then is it dance, isn't it, actually?
If it's done in the spirit of affirmation
and release, if I'm not shooting myself

in the foot, it doesn't matter what frame
you pose around it, because it isn't paying
any attention to what makes someone else
want to know about or praise or sabotage it
What makes you write so many words?
You do not prohibit me, nor do you enforce
your prohibition, and you always respond
But what I saw, or even what I mean
it doesn't seem ever important to you
does it—not even that I mean it?
I don't feel that you are fooling, I respect
your authority to admit what you say
may or may not hold water or stay put
but to assert it nonetheless, but I can only
tell you what I realize as or really after
I listen to you, as everything disappears
or reorganizes itself in response to what
I'm saying, insofar as it makes sense
Let's go for a walk, or is it too cold for you?
I'd love to, just let me get my shoes
and a scarf—I hate to get my neck cold
What's your favorite book?
War and Peace, I want to read it again

Do you know where she put the DVD and how to
get it out?
I didn't see
If I had said "key" instead of "DVD,"
or "fetish" or "impossible dream," how
would that have sounded differently?
These words sound more suggestive, suggesting
alternate readings or auditions of each
sentence either one of them is in, which
would include making one wonder what is being
spoken of and what's the point and whether
there is any and whether one's expected to
accept that there isn't any and to know
that and even take some pleasure in that
Doesn't that sound pretentious?
Trying to say something accurately and
honestly is pretentious
Isn't it ever spontaneous and genuine?
I'd say it could be pretentious without
being self-consciously so
Are you saying pretention is okay?
I'm saying one has to make it okay
in order to stay in communication
Okay, then let me ask you, do you

believe in continuity in communication
I mean, what do you think is continuous
when communication is active, participatory?
Attention is discontinuous, so continuity
is a fiction that sustains communication
as we know it, as we imagine it, we narrate it
for the sake of which we suspend disbelief
So when I ask what that means for you, what
you choose to make of it, you feel I'm just
perpetuating a fiction, or am I making one up?
Your question surrounds and constrains me
squeezes me away until I disappear
Does the instability of my persona dis-
equilibrate you as much as it pesters me?
I don't notice any difference between you
but admittedly my memory is highly colored
by the stimuli I am present to at any one
moment of embodied attention
Why do you crow so over your humanity?
This is how I know I am alive—it
would be different knowing it otherwise, say
as a bear, a leaf, a tear, or a swarm
And just how long have you thought of
yourself as human?

Oh, that's hard to say...I guess as long as
I can remember
How has your understanding of that changed?
It's grown on me, I've shaken it off, or out
of frame, or I just don't believe it anymore
What kind of an answer is that?
Inconsistent, confusing, distracted, inexact
How can you live with yourself?
I try to pay attention as well as I can, I change
my mind, my clothes, I act on things, I take
exacting care with what I do and ignore the rest
the things I don't do, I talk to myself only
enough to hear myself think and go quiet then
Is it a cold day?
It is a snowy day, and it is cold too
Is it a cold night?
It is a cold night, and I am staying warm
I almost forgot to ask, how are you?
Well, I am well
Is it snowing where you are?
I cannot see it, but it feels like snow
What do you see?
In the dark, with my eyes closed, I never

know what I'll see, and I never remember
what I did see, and at any moment
I might see anything or nothing at all
How can one tell what is a good question to ask?
One can tell, usually, whether someone is
surprised, whether someone has to make
a sincere effort to answer well, but
whether that makes a question good depends
on what it's going to be good for
What is communication good for?
It weaves our experiences together
What is communication bad for?
It interferes with solitude
Can you imagine music you haven't heard?
This requires a kind of concentration I haven't
attempted, but I believe I can do it, and
yet when I try, I hear tepid Theremin
that I believe I've heard before, and all
too much, which worries me, and I stop
Do you try to be spontaneous?
I've realized it's all spontaneous
When something spontaneous is said
or done, then, what makes it happen?

An unforeseeable interaction of factors
as diverse as the whole universe bear upon
the reputed agent of a spontaneous act
like family dynamics on an identified patient
Would the family like to share a muffin?
The family tears the muffin to pieces
and stuffs the crumbs, enormous
down their throats—their own, each other's
as if indiscriminately, in a blind rush
Is it possible to distinguish a pattern?
By looking at any one part of what's going on
you get an image, compared to any other
part, and then you can apply that
comparison or contrast with any other
or with any two parts of what you take
to be the whole and refine or reduce
it into an apperceptive distillation as it
were of patterning, of whatever's there
effectively making a whole of that pattern
compared with any other domain
So to distinguish a pattern is how you
establish an identity?
Or whatever you remember...

Are you saying that what you remember
whatever you remember is identity?
I'd rather let it go, but it's so tempting
to piece things together and to make distinctions
as if there were nothing else to do in the world
When you sort of concentrate your attention
loosely on letting a breath in and out, letting
yourself feel it, what's the next thought like?
I wonder if I get self-conscious, but I think
I think like everyone else, while also glad
I felt like I'd had a little softening pause
What made you spend so much money
at dinner?
Strong feelings in flux seemed to call for
celebration as they challenged our friendship
Aren't strong feelings happening often anyway?
It's special that we reel in them together
Might not this, like any concatenation
of personalities, moments, affective clusters
spring forth into questionable life
complicate whatever surrounds it
turn time into convoluted fantasmic
misalignments that turn out to realize

something you can imagine one would want to come true?
That happened off and on sporadically as we ate
How was the food?
It was fine but too expensive for me and I had
a stomachache so I didn't care
Do you see the stars?
The ceiling was in the way, a white paint
crust of sponged ridges, and snow covering
the skylights, outside partly cloudy
Where does the sun set?
Everything passes in my lifetime, much of it
recurring again and again in multiple directions
like the clouds, like my intentions, like lines
spoken in various plays one can imagine
or make up out of tricks of memory settling
against a palpable horizon of consciousness
What comes next in history?
A lacuna, from one point of view, because
we cannot possibly agree for long, after
a brief blur of consensus, joyful or
arrogant or terrified, consumes us all
How do you feel about yourself holding
such a pessimistic worldview, or is it

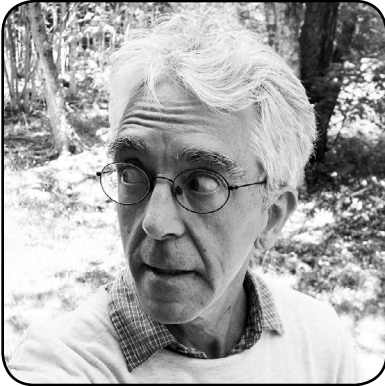
a deficit in continuity in your own consciousness?
A gap is there to be filled, or it will cease
to exist—one way or another, one will be satisfied
musing at and doing things, action cancelling out
itself while it alters everything around it
How do you ever decide to stop?
I rarely find it necessary to decide but when I do
I find it like agreeing with myself as if I were
split into two people, virtual strangers
who have to decide the rules of a game
they're already playing for different reasons
What helps you feel better when you're in pain?
I don't know how true this is of everyone
(that's not what you asked me) but I
like to be distracted from it by something
different but not real sex and I also
like to just pay attention to it till my mind
relaxes
Do you feel any pain right now?
Right now I think I always feel pain
but often I know I am not thinking
about it so I am probably not aware
of it or else not feeling any pain then

Isn't it hard to decide when the room is too hot?
It takes up altogether too many brain cells
and too much time, and I talk too much
to hear myself think, so you're right, I don't know
how to decide well enough to do it, and any
impulse leaves me hanging—is this it?
Hey I'm supposed to be asking the questions here
So what's stopping you?
I am assuming what others expect of me
What will happen next?
There is a pause during this preposterously
bad weather while we contemplate how
tightly cornered we are by several enemies
and how readily we ourselves break into
conflicting factions and marginalized cliques
When you allow yourself to give readings
in the future will they be all and only
questions improvised on the occasion?
I think that's what I'll do when I read
around here and I'll do other things
when I'm away
What makes you think that's a good idea?
I won't have to decide in advance what

suits the occasion or fits my needs, and even
at the time I can keep exploring just that or
anything else that matters to anyone I know
How do you know what matters to someone else?
I can ask them, I can listen to them, I can
watch them, I can think about what others say
but I won't really know what matters to them
until I know them
What does it take to get to know someone
that well?
If I work (or play, which becomes a kind
of enjoyable work) with someone over
months or years, we usually talk
and it's in the coordination of talk
and work that I can usually learn
a lot as well as what that gives
rise to in work and in talk, when
one or the other of them appears to be
primary, even for a moment, and how
that gets resolved, as work and talk
are both essential aspects of human
life, so far as I can tell
Do people understand you, do you
feel so, that they realize what you mean?

I know I am giving them the benefit of the doubt
if they respond appropriately, which is to say
I am giving it to myself
You lend yourself that credibility?
I put it in hock—I cash it in
Are there any other questions you would like me
to ask?
Ask me how to get out of here
You want to foretell the future?
I want to know what's happening right now
What *is* happening right now?
Nothing, I'm lying in bed writing this
Then what do you want to *know*?
I want to know that we'll be safe—I
me, my children, all of us, everyone
Don't you care what other people think of you?
I hardly even care now what I think
of myself
What good is answering, or asking
questions?
Every question you ask changes
the world and changes us
Are you always open to being questioned?

AUTHOR BIO



Steve Benson keeps tabs on his online writing and other projects [here](#). His previous chapbooks include *Steel Idea* (Miam), *The Busses* (Tuumba), *Briarcombe Paragraphs* (Moving Letters), *Dominance* (The Coincidence), *the ball* (ubu) and the forthcoming *Time Squared* (Trafficker). He collaborated over a 10-year period with 10 friends to write *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography / San Francisco, 1975-1980* in 10 volumes. Since 1996, he has co-parented two offspring and worked as a clinical psychologist in Downeast Maine.



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