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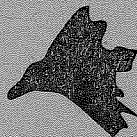
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*Bird & Forest* is clear, beautiful writing. There is a simple quality of the well-told-tale to these fractured fables. This is a patient, wise and hilarious work whose intimate tone insinuates itself into your psyche only to have its way with you and then suddenly vanish. What more could you want?

—Laura Moriarty

With orations, fables, axioms, proofs, journals, and letters, Brent Cunningham offers a riposte to the confounding realities of empire just when we need it most. The repeated “awakenings” of *Bird & Forest* suggest the wonder of conversion narrative without the ideological baggage. Engaging myriad rhetorical “types,” he exhausts their function to disclose the backstory of creation, romantic love, and the curious permanence of warfare while gorgeously demonstrating the resilience of the imagination.

—Peter Gizzi

## BIRD & FOREST

Brent Cunningham

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## The Room

*a prelude for Patrick Durgin*

the accessories speak of impressions and vanity  
satellites of a warm & human ness  
cut in the wood, the boards  
everything has something to say while I, oh I, have nothing  
no exits in the room, no entrances  
am I handsome? ugly?  
raised to unburden myself  
of pictures  
plywood over the mud, a raft  
filament, vibrating; the night retreats  
tonight the room is cold  
account for one single place  
a courtyard down a corridor  
why preserve life, why ennoble it  
when did I first know?  
tricks, cleverness, the brass bolt  
they can't see  
for we are constructing them  
vines, rim of a fountain  
he wakes; it's night; the room is with him  
calculating parts, desiring parts

every word had its meaning  
what's my advantage?  
yelling, screeching  
the cause of quietness  
a plywood table, skull candle, case for books  
going to his punishment  
longing to do good  
5 senses assailed for ideas (poor senses)  
what is outside? the non-room  
poetry imitated sky & earth, also caves  
bowls of porridge, slowing  
approaching the court yard  
bears in nightgowns, hungry  
a fountain, vines  
must I ask until I die why I live  
poetry was writ in blood  
cherished, immortalized  
now it's just us, dear room  
my lady's charmed opening  
I rubbed my eyes; they were tapestries  
fucking urchins are imitating us  
I have no core, no cord  
one room was forbidden her

streets, courtyards, a rehearsing public  
love isn't a seminar  
he wakes; it's night; the theater  
newly discovered fields  
of psychology and sociology  
Mama in her bed  
Papa out walking  
the doors retreat  
like us they eat, like us they wear clothes, like us they sleep  
at eighteen we reveal it  
the girl-animal lifts her spoon  
poetry spoke its sublimest voice  
their ethos a fragment  
to disgorge an image, plead it  
my room, my room, I am no replicate  
a number 3, a begonia, a raft  
only those he loved could enter  
only those who left were loved



THE ORATIONS  
OF TRILLIUS PATRONIUS

First Oration (Buenas Noches, Roaches)

That's enough of trivialities; let us turn to matters of significance.

My friends, I have not found retirement to be especially peaceful. Even as I sat under the cork trees of Mt. Nicea, contemplating the eternal and the infinite, certain plots and rumors did not cease to buzz at my ears. And now, I return to find our ideal city pervaded by an ideal terror. . .

Eremetia tells me I must cut short the middle part of my story. But I am afraid that none of you can now hope to understand my speech.

Noble listeners, we all have our sanctimonious responses to the beautiful and the musical. Nothing can match the purity on display at Hippias' wedding, and yet I am convinced we must strive for something else. I have already answered the most despicable of my accusers.

Why have I come here? No doubt I was driven here by the national situation, and also by the confusing advantages of life. What remarkable and godlike things a man can tell himself in private, and also how many truths.

But it is late, and I must take my leave of you narcissists, bad businessmen, and unsavory actresses-lovers.

## Second Oration (Incitamentum)

Dear friends, malicious enemies, and fellow Senators,

It might look easy to stand up here, sweep my arm out, lean against the banister, and pronounce certain truisms. But I assure you my legs are trembling.

Walking near the sea today, I noticed a series of flat gray ceilings, with white toppings, arranged in the sky. This isn't lyricism, Senators. It's exactly how I got to this rostrum.

My method of speech may repulse many of you. Others will wonder if I am not having a joke at their expense. Does this bother me? Yes, a bit, for even a public figure wants to be loved. And yet I no longer picture you as a single, cheering multitude. In the end, I'm here like anyone else.

But why am I here, in fact?

Many of you have heard my lectures in the park. You have heard me telling my students that art seeks reality for everything else. Can any artist hope to understand, I ask them, what is their subject? I even wonder whether our taste, which says what works and is beautiful, might be deceiving us.

I know your objections, Rhegium, and yours as well, dear Tarentum. Only: grant me your indulgence, your kindness. Isn't the terrifying, the grotesque, the indecorous, to be given its moment in the sun?

Since the days of the first Persian War, I have striven after the most ridiculous and self-destructive sincerity. Tarentum is being clever

when he calls this my ingenuity. And why not? Many of us remember that Locrian was sincere, and look what became of him. On the other hand Augustus has a large estate with ten race-horses.

My noble friends, I hear you shifting in your seats. You seem to ask: What use are shades of meaning to an advancing army? And yet, in these small collapses and petty seductions, I submit there is something substantial.

Just today, I saw a man at the market slipping oranges up his sleeve. This desperate act took place entirely in the open, in the blue, among children and the most gentle of ocean breezes.

I realize that everyone must look out their own window, seeing their own eucalyptus tree in their own private garden. But some of us find the leaves to resemble the head of a camel. Whether this is an insight or an effect, a humble orator like myself would not presume to answer. But still: this perception, this restlessness, what is it for?

Do I amuse you, Rhegium? I have no defense against that. Mon ami, let's forget for a moment. Let's forget what I've been saying, and talk again about the clouds and the market and the visible. It will be better that way. Doesn't Ponti himself call the visible the delight of old age, the reflection of prosperity, and the refuge of adversity? It is our companion by day, in travel, and in the country.

In point of fact, I am already resolved to amuse and delight whenever possible. I see you laughing again, Rhegium, although I could not be more serious. For what amuses more than a light attitude applied to grave matters?



As a young student on my way to class, I used to cross an austere park, with clean dirt paths and short iron fences. One morning, I saw a hanged man in one of those trees. This former citizen was wearing a black suit, a black tie, and a white shirt.

The words we use, Senators, are helpful and appropriate. But when a man dresses up to meet his own death, what do we have to say?

Yes, perhaps I have said too much. In one of his speeches, Marcelli tells us that anyone wishing to appear knowing can merely object that the good does not exist. On the other hand, those who wish to appear sincere can merely confess, for confessions are great delights to their listeners.

### Third Oration (The Murder Trials)

My friends, only a change in significance can stop an advancing army.

As I pronounce these words, gentlemen, I weep. Decent creatures should not want to see other creatures perform like circus beasts. Besides, it can take a long time to say very little. As we have the life of a fellow citizen at stake, I hope you will permit a few digressions.

Some of you, I believe, may envy the creamy white of my mantle, or the number of olive sprigs I wear in my hair. But I must remind you that, like Cicero, I was born in Arpinium, with only three slaves to call my own.

How many soft and pungent evenings have I given up to obtain the little eloquence I possess? No matter, for tonight my own hardships are not on trial.

Your mistrust, fellow citizens, is natural. I realize you are wary of every calm and logical argument, for they are indeed the products of privilege. I know how your pleasures have been manipulated. But this does not condemn oration any more than it condemns love.

You know as well as I that robots are not enough for conducting everyday life.

Today, on the promenade, I saw a young girl standing with her mother. She wore a red embroidered shirt and blue flowered pants, and stood in exactly the same stance, using exactly the same gestures, as her mother.

As it turns out, this is not the trial of a man but the trial of an aesthete. Many of you know that Anataxius has recently left me for another lover,

but you may not know that I encouraged their affair, thinking I was generous, modern, and most of all complex. So you see, our pity is often for ourselves.

This morning I set out for this stage, intending to remind us exactly who may suffer our decisions, and to argue for the innocence of a living person. I pictured your curled and scented hair, your ovations, and your warm praise. And now I see that I have lost you.

But tomorrow I will begin again, in a way I hope will strike you as clearer and better.

#### Fourth Oration (On Democracy)

Senators, I am happy to stand here and speak a few words about democracy. Furthermore I thank you for giving me that right.

As I explain to my students, immortality is the great obsession of democracy. Yes, more than anything democracy does not want to die, for it knows very well how things can turn out. Its purpose is to endure, and we admire this.

Citizens! The republic is not stupid. It already knows you are the most compromised and calculating of beings!

Now, it is not clear whether democracy really is this way. Confident of your sound judgment, I will suggest a few possibilities, and let the illumination of the intellect make its own selections. In short, let us try to reason together.

Before our empire was founded, decisions were made using the lightning, swords, and birds of the natural surroundings. A rock was wrapped in a cloth, and hurled into the canyon.

Things are different now. But how are they different? We find that the rock is now covered with mirrors.

My friends, the individual falls with her country. Isn't it true that she can see power falling alongside her, in its most murderous and noble intentions, and meanwhile cannot see herself fall?

Democracy only pities itself. But I see you do not agree, Minneleaus, and are suddenly intent to throw me from the stage. Aren't I just a citizen, as worthy to say these things as anyone?

Today democracy bleeds, cries, and expands itself. Every day of its young life it declares itself more scientific than the last, its instruments the very genetic instruments it so deplors.

Nevertheless the ballots are distributed. Calm, in a gentle rain of numbers, pervades the voting area.

At this sudden lull in my speech, let me hurriedly quote from the Russian writer Vasily Rozanov:

“At times the writer does not wish to reveal some side of his soul, and yet the thirst in him for immortality, for an individual life different from all others, is so great that he conceals and secretes it among other things, and, all the same, he leaves in his works a reflection of this side of him. Centuries pass, the necessary feature is revealed, and there arises the complete image of one who is no longer afraid of being embarrassed before other people.”

And so we find, shall we say, that a system without flaws is not a system. The mind can see democracy lying to itself. And it can feel the feelings of pleasure and superiority.

But what am I suggesting? What should we do? My judges, here I appeal to the excellence of your discerning minds. I thank you for your time, and in some cases your concern.

### Fifth Oration (The Night's Night)

My friends, a reasonable person is sometimes forced to do things, even forced to think things. And this is unfortunate.

The evening is just now falling, O my peers. Severed heads and body parts have not yet begun to float through our fancy. And so, let us take advantage of this moment. Isn't it a bit like Athens in here, in this atrium? Down the hill I see a man with a sunburnt nose selling sugared treats to children.

On my notepad, I have written that a nasturtium burns inside every description. And, Senators, I believe this could be the case, although I don't remember writing it.

Let me return to my theme, which is the shadow world. Nemo himself once told me that a full stomach and a clear mind are worth more than all the treasures of the deep. But he was fond of his own intellect, and thus untrustworthy.

Why are we talking this way? Why this supposed lack of pretention? Why do I not economize? My dear audience, you know I am frightened and ambitious. If anyone walks in with a cup of hemlock, rest assured I shall not make speeches about the soft arms of death.

Still peering from your balconies? Very well, I shall take it as a sign of your admiration.

Now then, what is this “order” you keep attacking, Venitius? What is this “emancipation of form” you praise? Do you think we will stop calling your speeches confusing, and instead call them emancipating?

My own views are well known. I hope to live a peaceful and blameless life. Many of you know I have a private affection for destiny, because it is cold, inhuman and thoughtless. In my experience, there is some truth to fate. Every day I see people resisting the different, until outside forces bend them to it.

Only a few hours ago I was lying in the dry grasses, observing my city in the summer winds. To be honest, I had lost my mirth, and nothing seemed surprising. A plague of worms ate at me from within, and I suspected the poor of desiring their poverty.

But now the night has not been shy, for the fantastic parts have descended, gory with the crudeness and danger of ideas.

### Sixth Oration (Tulia, My Constant)

My familiars, no one can speak directly of the crushing of hopes. Over and over the sentence is published, until it has the quality of truth.

Today I hope to remind you of the definition of a fair trial, handed down by our ancestors. And it is this. That in any law court, guilt must be punished without prejudice, while if there is no guilt, there must also be no prejudice.

Vigilant comrades, how crazy I was! Every weekend I read further in the human sciences, until a picture appeared alongside the picture of my senses. One night I tied up my books with a strap, and took them on a walk. The moonlight threw down spindly shadows on the path. Once or twice I beheld a dark but twinkling view of the delta.

Is this small oration just a wisp, gentle listeners? Won't people always turn to comforting nocturnal substances smuggled in paper bags?

But I was convinced I had seen something. As if through a thicket, at the root of cultural sophistication, I perceived a decorated moral judgment.

How furious I became! How I dreamed of exposing it! How I no longer worried about making myself palatable!

Esteemed colleagues, there is a limit to every container. Guilt occurs within an act so subtle and brief it might as well happen in infinity. Am I supposed to track down every liar in the republic?

However I see Nicostratus is eager for the floor. And so, let me conclude by saying that no person loves except in exchange for love.

But there is something else. In that midnight auditorium of the frogs, absorbed in my private cloud of book-pictures, I can report that the emptiness of human exchanges did not appear as apparent as usual.

What do we have, my friends, except the question: Who stood to gain?

### Seventh Oration (Machine of Faulty Parallels)

The desire to speak, my fellows, has stirred in me again, however wrong it may be.

I admit: I was born into a void. What an urge I feel standing here, asking you to applaud my beautiful conceptions with the glaze of fat still in your eyes.

Yes, you're insulted. You must, as visual beings, rush off, for what have I given you to picture?

So I don't blame you, my friends. Who knows where you come from, what you have seen, or what will happen tomorrow? Who knows which sounds will enfold you in contemplation? If you must know, a great orator can only trust that, this time, the circumstances will not matter.

My audience, how alone I've been. My house has fallen, my inheritance lost, and what do I do? Do I even bemoan it?

As a young man, it never occurred to me that emotion might not simply reside there, encapsulated, as the sun resides in its flowers. Did I really not think it? Well, no, I think I didn't think it. For I was engaged in other business.

It's been a long time since I left Tiliun on his deathbed. With my naked legs rubbing together under the desk, I placed my terms precisely, in the way I was taught, staring out the window at our worrisome actuality. Did I understand as much as the caterpillar eating through its future? Did I think of those I climbed over?

But I knew how to mimic. And I should also say, in my favor, that I loved. A rather pitiable choice, not rich or noble in the least. But now I see him in a curious light, fading from what we call reality, with a regret and clarity that despairs to be expressive.

Yes, I see him. He stands in the other room, wearing a shirt.

O Senators, I know you wish I would say something! I know I should discuss the fleet approaching our coast, the lives it will cost, and how we should respond out of honor and natural vengefulness. But aren't a few words to be addressed to the traitorous abstractions?

I have always argued, for instance, to mistrust the example-user as much as the example.

But why should I pretend? I honestly believe some of you would rather sit here, chewing these elm sticks, chatting idly, forgetting every association of impulse.

On the other hand, some of you remain men of action, that is to say men of resolve. And it's you who most terrify me.

### Eighth Oration (Prometheus Thinks Of His Mother)

Seeing that Juviticus has not arrived, I have been asked to say a few words in his place.

Normally, in these cases, I would look through my papers, rustling them with all dignity and determination. Then I would have you to cast your minds back, deep into the mists of time.

But, my audience, I know there is nothing eternal in these words I am speaking. Shouldn't that free me? In truth, I have always wanted it to free me.

Today what is there? There is starvation in our trees and our fields. This worries me, for the body of state must be fed and cared for, as many before me have insisted.

But there is meanwhile the tradition that nature is detestable, and plays like a curtain on our senses. Why else would we have grown these arms, laid this marble floor, put on these mantles, and commenced these stimulations of feeling?

In the midst of such forces, I retain my modest hopes. I would be happy just to notice a cobweb between two branches, for this would show I was not moribund.

Friends, it is said that a man cannot help his attraction to strangers, that he craves the new, and that he will reach for the gold tooth at the bottom of the river to the detriment of the pot in the fire. Does this mean we have no option in the matter?

It can be a grim and confusing business to speak. Mustn't we face again and again that infinitesimal mouse, that frantic and insane thing scratching at the center of each manifold?

Now I see the pallid lips of my audience. But where do they come from? What kinds of assemblages are they? I remind myself there are living beings in there, in other words a functioning reason, a tactician, which at every moment trembles and quivers with the emotion of being alive. Everyone is complex and perceiving it is said. Yes: it is said.

Do you suppose I will forever endure like this? Never fixing my unhinged gate? Never sure if I'm the fool or the correction, raging as the mouse rages, taunting that *bête noire*, purple, inadequate, between its teeth, its bloody livers. . .

But it appears Juviticus has arrived after all. I trust you will listen closely to what he has to say, for it has both form and content to recommend it.

### Ninth Oration (Matter And Space)

Now you have an opinion? Now you attack me? Now you are offended in your sensibility and outraged in your soul?

Don't you think I remember? Wouldn't I remember walking ten miles, with my back and legs injured, to the place you directed me? Hadn't I already dug the grave myself? Hadn't my friends made it welcoming with the trinkets and baubles they tossed in?

And everyone else who was there is now suddenly not?

Didn't you see me brush the dust from my arms? Didn't I say what lay in my heart with force and purpose, with the knowledge you would henceforth be free to say what you liked?

So when the matter has ended, is it your pleasure to make it begin again? Is it your amusement to call the end the middle, or to assign the beginning to some other place? Didn't I say we should not disgorge the whole thing at once? Didn't I support you or in any case not sabotage you? Wasn't this my only consolation?

I must have done something. I must have said what I rehearsed, worn what I had picked out, and gestured as I practiced. Didn't I look into the hole and say there are matters we wouldn't wish on our own condemned brother? Wasn't my handkerchief yellow with crying? Weren't the birds my friends?

It was barely a grave, may I remind you? It was an insult of a grave. But didn't I climb in anyway? And wasn't the result still the result? Didn't I go down hand over hand? Didn't the only sun continue to burn in the only world? And didn't quite a number of you promise to follow?

## Tenth Oration (On Tiny Hidden Fires)

My friends, I can hear you whispering. In the halls of this building, buying your steaming piles of beef, I hear the rumors as if they were my own conscience.

Let's therefore speak directly and plainly, O my community. I will confess to everything tonight, for I have nothing against facing myself.

As you say, I am a hard goat of a man, as tight and unnatural as an apple core. My speeches have never taken anyone by the hand. Especially, they have never invited the stranger to sit by their fire, but are pleased to stand above the audience in robes of impenetrable charm.

Would it kill me to simply say: I have never understood others, my father was in management, and it is 5:15 in the evening?

Yet I wanted it this way! I desired to speak however my heart wished. And now look: maybe it wasn't a great idea.

My dear others, I have never been afraid of solitude. In those inner regions of language and suffering, I know I was colder than some of you even pictured. Do you think no child in the village dreams of being the idiot? I was that child.

Hofmannstahl puts it somewhat beautifully: "There are no two people on this earth who could not be turned into deadly enemies by a devilishly contrived indiscretion."

What was I confessing? Of course: my self-absorption, my arrogance.

But suddenly I'm reminded of the poet Nicolai Umperto, a friend of many years ago, who did not fear the incoherent as I do. He was a dear companion, who cherished the glint of the ocean as much as the wine in his glass. And I remember he used to say of language that there was finally not much to it.



### Eleventh Oration (City of the Sun)

Ladies and gentlemen, the youths of this country are bored. You'd think just being alive and youths would excite them, but not at all. This morning the sky was clear, I was at campus, and everyone was despondent.

Are there any youths in this room? I ask you to consider, if you will, the tide of Being just behind you, the negative masses standing in your cement areas, your grassy areas, and your areas neither grassy nor cement.

Are you terrified, youths? Do you think you're more than killable? Isn't it irrefutable that every personal world, with its health, is destroyed four times over, all savings depleted, before there is meanwhile anything else to learn or see?

How lovely the wind off the sea today. How tempting to lecture you on signs and calculations.

### Twelfth Oration (On the Common Task)

There is no surprise left in these words. You know the conventions will speak first, and my opinions in the anterior. Furthermore you know I also know these limitations. We know as much as the other knows, which makes it all shameful.

But let it rest, my friends. I have always felt that the physical world, if not exactly real, is of a practical enough texture. It's good to drink wine, to sleep, to listen to the traffic, and to have a lover. We philosophers are still free to distinguish movement from motion, and this is our right, our business, even if it comes to nothing.

What presumers we are! Today a tragedy took place in front of my eyes, but so gradually that no one else perceived it. How explain the fascination we feel for the tyrannizer? What is time if it isn't even forward-moving?

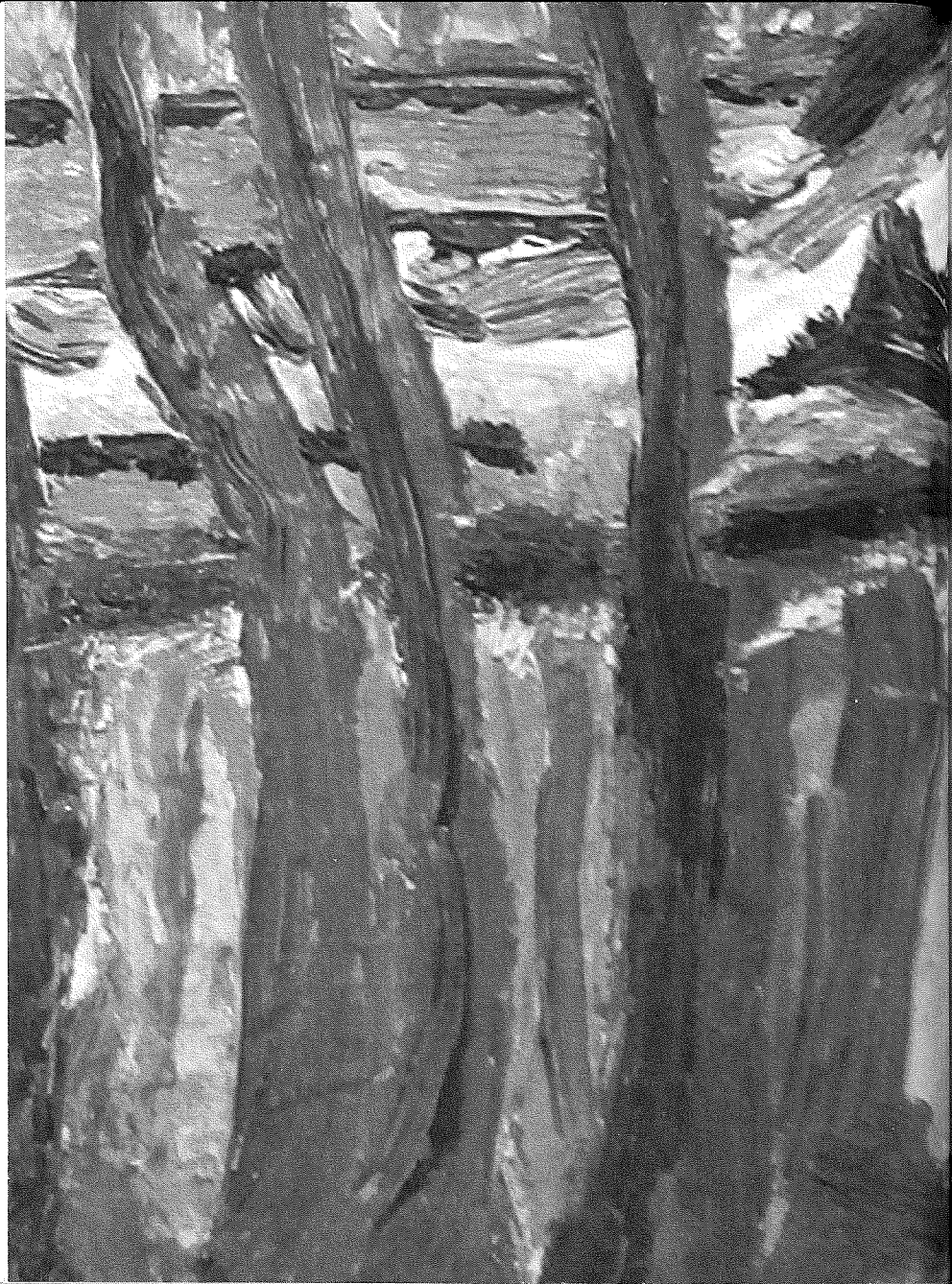
But let us not forget: some words endure. Evidently this is all they really do, if you decide that doing is the issue. The thing I never suspected, in fact what no one prepared me for, was how often I would have to repeat myself.

Some of you may remember that Aeneas and I, as students, were drawn to the obscure texts of disappeared eras. Only there could we feel alone with the vastness of the species. I think, for instance, of the mystic Nikolai Federov, who conceived of turning the cemeteries into massive forensic research libraries.

It is said that every new concept appears like the first red leaf on a green tree. Last night, for example, I dreamed a construction was going up in the city. I could see workers going towards it, into the central complex,

prevalent in cooling towers, dirigibles, and cupolas. What were they building? Had Federov returned? Was our warring and perversion nearing its end?

Everyone has a burden, my listeners. Maybe mine is to be clear.



## BIRD & FOREST

“History decays into images, not into stories.”  
—Walter Benjamin

**Truth is the Flaw**

then there was a bell  
that warned for ourses town

it'll rung by uses idiot  
mothered in ourses town

an there we had moreover was  
ours bronzed an casted bell

daily rung by idiotes was  
whenever townes was bad

## Preface to the Bird & Forest

We presume there is something to understand. If we understand it, we say, we will be satisfied.

The date was November 24, 2001. A warm, bright day. Seeing how everyone is asked to do something, I was doing something. Around me rows of people walked through a massive, windowless building, without air or light, between displays of books. It was difficult to stay awake.

During the early afternoon, there appeared to me the image of a bird approaching a forest, then flying into it. In front of and behind the bird, a crooked, faint, illuminated shaft marked the path of its flight.

Later I determined there were three components to this image: the forest, the bird, and the route of its movement.

What was there to understand about this image? Wasn't it like every other one to appear in the history of images? Nevertheless I remembered it.

At least a month passed. Time was moving along. I had drawn a few pictures of birds flying through trees. If there was something to understand, I was happier not to perform that task.

Bit by bit, the image extended further into my life, gathering my daily circumstances around it. My circumstances became a type of nest for this bird.

In January, I began taking notes about the image in a notebook. Even though these would often have nothing to do with the image, each time

it was convenient to say: these are just notes, and the image is a long way off.

The first three or four words a person sets down are indistinguishable from a grammar exercise. It is only as the writer nears the many thousands that a shape may begin to appear, a consequence—but how does the writer get that far? Every particular part of the many thousands remains a grammar exercise.

I told myself to write unhurriedly, letting what was unsupportable exist, to be changed not because of nuance but because of time. It can be paralyzing to stand in front of things that will outlive oneself, society or words alike, even trees.

In one theory I had, the image was not between the reader and myself, but in front of us mutually.

But that's enough preface. The future must finally arrive, and change the past. The bird must try to leave its nest.

## Part I: Bird & Forest (Proper)

"Patience, endurance, reality."

### First Description

I woke on my back, in a ditch, looking up at the sky, with no idea who or where I was. Small blades of grass ran around a blue shell of sky. I had the dim impression that the mud had cushioned my sleep and, more dimly, that troops of worms had maintained this cushion with their ongoing digestion.

Getting to my feet, I looked around. A field, bare in places, led down an incline, then up slightly to a pair of hills. Between the meeting place of these hills lay a small forest. The sun rose to my left.

As I looked, a bird swept down, passing into the trees.

Except for that black, moving figure, I might have laid back down, never to worry again. For no other reason did I crawl forward except to see where that bit of shadow had gone, why it had gone there, whether it had some meaning of its own, and whether that meaning could be of some benefit.

This was how I first conceived of the Bird & Forest.

### Second Description

I woke in a subterranean declivity, fully prone, scrutinizing the heavens in a vain attempt to regather that tether I had once assuredly grasped. For many minutes I strove to imagine where and what I could be, comprehending with agonizing slowness and perverse amplification the contours of my situation. Round the aperture of the pit, sprouts of green Genoese Velvet clung with the prodigious determination which marks their variety.

At length the suspense became intolerable, and I lifted myself up. The slopes which now unfurled before me were hardly more than gentle inclinations; between their nadir upsprang trunks of numerous oaks and black walnuts, interspersed with occasional hickories less Salvatorish in character. Glaring with a purplish lustre, the morning sun dissolved the curtain of vapor to my left.

At that precise moment, for I remember it well, a bird swept down, passing into the trees.

For some seconds I tracked this intrusion on the idyllic scene, partially in confusion, more in wonder, until its periodic reappearance between divergent lateral branches no longer entranced my vision.

Very dreadfully nervous I had been and am, but at that moment I was not mad. It was hope that prompted my nerves to quiver—the hope that triumphs even on the rack, that whispers to the death-condemned in dungeons and maelstroms, convulsing its receptor with cognizance of all secrets but the one, which the truly substantive vastness of infinity swallows every moment from extent and texture.

This was how I first conceived the Bird & Forest.

### Third Description

I woke in a ditch, with a small volume of Aristotle in my pocket.

How was I to get up? Despite all the trouble it had caused me I could not decide what goodness was, what cowardice was, or whether knowledge was a product of ignorance.

"Pointlessness," I decided. So I got to my feet, to look at the hills, the forest, the sun to my left, with every assurance the rest would become lighter and clearer over time.

Then, with all the blind insistence of the human will, a bird swept down, passing into the trees.

"Now what do you say?" I thought. "Isn't that a bird? Isn't that a forest it flies through?"

I knew from the preface that Aristotle had tutored Alexander. I knew that the same compromises, repeating themselves through history, conclude at an eternal if not at an ideal. I knew that a bird can only do what it can justify doing.

And this was how I first conceived the Bird & Forest.

### Principle of the Forest

The forest has no principle to begin with. If we decide to have our bird stand for human speech, the forest will grow an auditory canal, a middle ear, a cochlea. If we prefer our bird to be the soul, the forest will leaden and concretize itself.

An empty background for the bird's traversal, set with obstacles to be navigated: isn't this the principle?

Maybe two days go by without another thought. The mind is away at some foreign war. When it returns, its doubts are subsumed by its newest idea.

The forest waits, indifferent to fluctuations, intent on its own existence. It outlasts human fantasies, even those which continue for years.

I can't remember exactly when words stopped pleasing me. I knew about this death only in the way a graveyard knows about a war. What was it I wanted from writing? To produce texts that expressed something?

They wait for nothing, these forests, certainly not for the birds that fly through them. Neither are they distraught when the birds exit their borders.

For the living, patience is only yet another desire to see if life is supportable. Being what they are, humans must endure long periods that contain scarcely any astonishments, as texts must endure them.

But in that composite called forest, life is supportable wherever it exists. Therefore humans travel out to spend time in its sanctuary, hoping to absorb this principle.

Even when a forest burns up, its trees do not panic. And this is also true when that smaller flame, the bird, sweeps through its branches.

It *cannot be* that contradictions should matter. So says the forest.

### Principle of the Bird

It flaps, chirps, flutters. It jerks, twits its head, takes off, returns, hops a bit, at each stage nullifying its former self. A manic, dissatisfied creature with a 5-note song.

Only the enclosure permits the bird to exist. It flies from one end of the construction to the other. Never mind its eating, mating, migrating, masturbating, or how it might account for itself. Could any of these have driven it into the forest? But this is not the question.

The bird enters the forest; it is introduced. It doesn't think, but uses the machine of instinct buried in its flesh, a device wrapped in an assembly.

By a curious process this combination is not inhuman.

Tragic feathery thing! Trying to know everything at once, to convey and remember at once, when the limit is so obvious.

When the creature can't contain anymore, it flies off, into the trees, as a *pursuant*, to start again its questions.



## Notes on the Two Principles

### *Note 1*

Partway through my plans for the future, I found myself in the bewilderment and confusion of a forest. Why these examples of sound? Why take it all so personally?

The forest had hardly enfolded our hero; it would be a long traversal. He sat down on one of those fallen romantic logs. And soon: grew distracted and hungry.

Wandering in circles, he falls into a ditch, bitter, violent, alienated, exhausted. Staring up at the canopy, the sickness runs its course. Who was I actually so furious with? With expression? With the inherited language?

Actually the forest is rather beautiful from this new perspective. Its leaves break up the light; its silence is remarkable; not even a bird cries out. A rare affection for humanity washes over the hero.

Today, after all, was only one day, and this was only one small distraction on the way to something large and various. At times my purposes must become obscure to myself—it's only natural! Why Goethe himself once said. . .

Reason or not, the branches do not evaporate, the distant tremor, the noise.

### *Note 2*

Were the leaves of this forest deciduous? Was it winter? Was it night?

Always sneaking behind the curtain!

Well, then: a summer forest, in sunlight. Discomfort made the trees to grow. Thick bark, flat leaves, a few ferns.

### *Note 3*

The bird pecks at the fruit.  
The seed drops to the soil.  
The forest springs up.

Outside of the forest, you find: you weren't outside.

The fighting, the aggravation, the unhappiness: what does it matter if you lived on the earth, doing whatever was necessary.

The fighting, the aggravation, the unhappiness: what does it matter since you lived on the earth, doing whatever was necessary.

### *Note 4*

Every tree is not every other tree. The floor is separate from the canopy, while the ferns are a certain roughness. Whatever is bequeathed a single word will slide down a funnel to the general.

The writer divides; the reader assembles. Meanwhile the government defends itself.

### *Note 5*

It's sunny outside the forest, in the human world, but between people there is misunderstanding. And not only between them.

Everything the bird knows is stored in its blood, feathers, and nerves.

Thus has it solved the difficult problem of transmission.

Everything no matter what must be desanctified. Then, again, desanctified. Then, again, desanctified.

Writing has only solved the problem of mute human blood. But logic goes into your mind, possessing it, until you are free.

*Note 6*

—Is he really just sitting there, in his small room, in his chair, doing nothing?

—His mind is turning over. Sometimes he smokes.

—But with the situation as it is?

—He is asking himself what relation his image has to his troubles. His mind constructs and rejects.

—What does he think will happen?

—He expects there will be some Rubicon he will cross.

—But he doesn't move! He doesn't even move!

*Note 7*

This image of a forest, like a forest itself, grew as it liked. One day, occurrences threw up a fortress of leaves and feathers, from which I occasionally look out.

At times cursing those occurrences.

I hope I have not suggested, so far, that the bird might be flying away from something.

*Note 8*

Questions:

1. Why is there this image you have cited?
2. Why are you explaining it for me?
3. Do you think the mind has no feelers of its own?

Answer: The bird approaches the forest. It has some reason, and this reason is obscure. We presume the bird must fly into the forest as it always has, from time immemorial, just as the forest can never fly into the bird. Of course with enough force, and the passage of time, anything could happen. But for the sake of discussion, let us say: the bird approaches the forest, flies into it, flies through it.

*Note 9*

The organism is thrown into a world where things follow. Every image in these new surroundings has a continuity embedded in it, everything reminds the organism of its responsibilities, its nostalgias, the chain it had a hand in.

Now the organism tries to rise from its nest. It cannot find the lever for the body, and dreams it has gotten up.

*Note 10*

I began by writing anything, in any order, as awkwardly as it could be, at any time. And I discovered, as I wanted to, a method. Not a perfected one, but one day. . .

Language doesn't become strange by torturing it. It becomes strange by giving it a task too simple to complete. Look at the poor thing, pressed by the illogics of being, trying to fly between some clearing and other.

*Note 11*

In its cruelty the mind demands two contradictory things: to hear itself and to escape itself.

How pleasant it imagines that ideal dialogue, where it can unhurriedly exchange talk about states and gradations, about birds and trees, loves and souls, not because it wants to aggrandize itself but just to take part in a modest pleasure, releasing its pressures, diluting them in the sea of otherness which such conversation presumes.

If this were all the mind demanded, art as we know it would hardly be necessary. One could find an imperfect companion and speak in that grave tone signifying great importance and great commonness.

But even then the mind is vigilant, and begins to see the shadow of its theatrical self.

It has its demand: not to face its own interference. And so it builds a structure. No longer a being-in-dialogue but an object of study. Images spring up, the stage is built, ideas don their human yet fictional

costumes. The medium I once feared to exist can now be proven to exist, defanged, formed out of glitter, foam, and wood.

When this new form arises between the conversationalists, they take heart from it. They believe their props to be collapsible.

Now what is supposed to rise from this collapse? Only their original, intimate dialogue.

Two legs of the triangle: expression and distance. The material world forms the third, the concern of scientists, historians, and anthropologists.

And so our bird has led us to the question of the real. But we can only ask this question in its proper place, after the next section, with this our first section safely behind us.

## Part 2: The Exact, Exact Bird

When I pleased him I knew he was pleased. So vapid, so predictable. You see, I knew you would come, I knew it before you did. But it's not so ideal now, is it? Come here a bit, dearheart, out of the light, to your second mother. Whatever would you understand or do without us? What ghastly disorder would trap you in the lower grades? You aren't natural, you're an exception. Now listen, listen. In my days the forest grew in freedom, in sinuous isolation. I was its delight, the toy of its indifference. Give me your finger; put it in that glass. Can you hear that rasping? I'm a cracked little beak, crushed in my nasals. You think you saw something? But what was it? It lingers and bores you, this nothing. Yes, I flew through the forest. My eyes stared out at other eyes, maybe at your eyes. But I'm not like you, I never was, for I had powers. Everyone was squandering their time, but I was serious, I had integrity. You think it made me happy? I was embarrassed. I thought everyone could do it, that I was showing off. But then: the men leaning, or falling, pushed into vehicles, the weak and condemned, far under me, they heard. They tried to remember: that sound, that freedom. Living is finally a bad, phaseless narrative, but I never wavered. Others were tired and defeated, going off to deaths or prison, and there, perched in the branches, their epitome. They thought of lovers, of cigarettes, and of me. Is that a book under your arm? Oh, fate's a marvel! You want to recite, do you? When I chewed your food? When I spit it into your mouth? But, no, no, there's no especial hurry. You'll see for yourself soon enough. At heart I'm a good, abiding, compliant creature whom god made to sing and lighten. It was my duty to cry and carry on this way. If there were many other things, other existences, this one always stood between them. Have you ever been to Sunnydale? They have nothing in Sunnydale. They think white people have soap up their assholes. But I wasn't smarter than them, I wasn't coy or knowing. It was blood and phlegm that came from that dilapidation, more than

their economy, contained in their actual bleeding and being put into actual vehicles, at all hours. Yes, they heard me. I comforted them. Do the gnats not float so deadly in that deadly, putrid sea? Look at you wake! It's just a line about my drinking water, that's all. I know: you don't understand. The forest goes backwards and forwards beyond you. You want to know what it was, always what it meant. Bring me some worms, bring mother your finger. I'll tell you. I'll do all the things you've ever wished. . .

### Part III: Bird & Forest (And Forest)

There was something I wished to get at. What exactly was it? That every living thing crosses a surroundings. But this is nothing, I realize.

Reality can't be forced. Nevertheless it pressed on me terribly, until I wanted it over and done with. If some other being, across this great forest, could be made to understand, that would be worth my small self and treasure. Not how it had happened, but how it *had* happened.

In short, I understood: the bird had died in its flight, while another had taken its place.

Many times I said to myself: "The bird is no longer bird, the trees no longer trees." I had to look at a few things. What things? I'll tell you: life, conflict, thought, love, fiction. All the faces of trouble.

A grain or irritation, fought against, made into art. We know this's impossible. And yet. . .

No, not "and yet." At least write something besides "and yet."

An image is made until it is adequate to reality. It can't just become reality. It can only happen the exact way I have just said so carefully, after changing words, writing over words, giving up, coming back, with one phrase, and another phrase, giving up again, forgetting, invalidating, it is adequate.

My bird, my forest. How they sickened and excited me. Then a new set of concerns came along, new technologies, a new lease on life. Metal sides, rubber wheels, metal feathers, glass windows, bridges, roads, floats, tunnels. The flyer entered a forest mechanical.

By effort, or by indifference, a bird sometimes escapes its ancient duties. Someone has asked whether this escape can be other than from desires in general. Will it not suffer the fate that it is? Such a question is deceptive, destructive, and impure.

A motion. A thing smaller than any mote. A hidden noise.

My friends, I have come today, in my little bird-car, to say hello to these depths of the heart.

## First Intermission (Bird As Sun)

A day, then a night  
then day, then night  
until day comes again  
the portal of night  
with day on its boundary  
and a night, a day  
next the night, companion  
of day, followed by night  
followed by day thus curtailed  
by night, or day  
the shadow  
of that second night, light  
returns, and day comes  
until night puts it in a sack  
day slips through the holes  
running over days and nights  
for the gates, its own gates, evening  
on its heels, night overtaking it  
on the darkening sand  
day bleeding under night  
the mirror of its replica  
a single day which night cloaks  
in its folds, snuffing its head  
night's procession  
crosses the city of day  
and day lies in ambush  
night dies, day dies after it  
then night, then day, then night

## 5 Maxims of the Bird & Forest (And Forest)

### 1. *Not every forest delights in its fruits*

it's worth anything to damage beauty  
to cross that bridge & see that hour  
it's late, he lies in bed  
based on certain truths he'll get up  
his car among thousands  
his ego, his arrogance  
a claw touches the petal  
which touches the cylinder  
of course history is cruel  
isn't it painted like a beeste

### 2. *The bird seeks reality for itself alone*

I felt as if I had been asleep. And this was not an illusion.

Our bird has grown a little vicious, that's all. It needs time to think things through, although it is only a bird. What can we do but forget this confused and inward creature for a while? It must face its solitude in its own way, digesting the limits of itself, seeing its mistake, and come back to us with its head in its wings.

### 3. *If you should grow tired, remember the outermost metaphor*

First we must define the human. Not in the larger and natural machine but in the restricted machine. An act is never committed in thought, but in reality. This act determines a second act, which in turn determines a third.

And the first cause? My friends, if you should ever hear me asking this again, please close your ears, for what I have asked is folly.

*4. There is no craft to this flight it has planned*

The bird is everything! The forest is everything! Your [feeling] is what is nothing! Your [religion] is what is nothing! To stand there! With your. . .! And your. . .! Your [theory] itself is nothing of itself! You hold the glittering substance of. . .! And for just that reason! Your nutshell is insulting to the idea! Your kernel is insulting to the idea! Bicycles also! Physical power also! Every living bird is living at this moment! In a living forest! The [private being] tells us what to do! The [thing] speaks for us! The [thing] speaks to us! When will the bird pass away? The bird will never! The bird alone is something! It flies unerringly through [something]! It falls lightly and naturally on [something]!

*5. What has our bird learned in its encounter*

To travel over space and time, reality must be compressed. Yes, I'm afraid it must.

But what is this "reality"? The bird has some agreement unknown to us, unknown maybe even to the bird, where it began. It cannot give souls to human beings, but knows they are without them. Its flight through the forest is a formal and practical one, purely. Has it occurred to you that these are lies?

When the will is thwarted, it becomes shrewd and tactical. Ethics serve it as easily as love. This should never be underestimated, forgotten, or wished away. An unpleasant forest which convinces, first of all, itself.

**Second Intermission (Bird As Significance)**

Sir:

I do not understand. You write as if something keeps happening to you. It's as if you try and cannot accept it. Or else you are toying with powers greater than you. But this is not a game to make your way of talking into a toy. I think you shall one day regret it honestly. In the first place you are writing in such a way as nothing will be known by me. Are you frightened? Are you perverting yourself to some end? You write about things that exist in real life but these things are not here. Maybe you think I am there while you are writing? I can wish to be, but I cannot. If you knew this, you would put into the words an indication of the reality itself, something so I could receive it, see it, and be content regarding it. Well, then, for my part I give you this benefit. I try with all my might to give you this honest benefit. I know you are not within a row of trees and that your mind is your own. Words are for you to say and not pervert. But if you pervert them how will anyone know, even you? This principle I am recommending is as old as time. True the surroundings may roar on your ears but you must force yourself. You see how the words are not disintegrated in the forthright way I am saying them to you? I hope you will change your principles in an embrace of this other way that does not pervert.

## 5 Axioms of the Bird & Forest (And Forest)

### 1. *For obvious reasons the bird delays its utopia*

I was all there probably was. But something pressed on the nerves, wanting to exist alongside me. It was morning. I woke up calm, in another April. At first I had intended to hide these notes, or burn them, but for the sake of effect I left most of them behind. I dreamt that I owned a pair of expensive suede pants, and had crossed a desert.

### 2. *No one is sad forever*

Once a woman grew obsessed with a single image and wrote about it for her entire life, despite distractions. This was the image of a man burned in a flame. The years passed, and it happened that, after all, a man did eventually light himself on fire where she lived. Naturally she felt she must have caused it, somehow. For some time she expected reporters to ask her about the event, but none came.

### 3. *There is something beyond this earnestness*

We have suggested that a person may have only so much to contribute, and they should be satisfied with that. Not just birds, but a single bird, passing in a single forest. So we must ask the next logical question.

The image is written in outline. It is settled nowhere, incapable of deciding its intelligence. Day after day, the bird sweeps through the forest. In a tomb, in Egypt, a bird, and trees, carved into stone.

Finally a person doesn't know what to do anymore. It sees the bird that preceded it, and the trees that will outlive it. It is jealous of the Persians for their miniatures. Not even its single thing is its own, it thinks. So it tries to erase Persia from the map.

### 4. *But what happened must be confirmed by another*

You are as free as possible. The forest shelters you even as it smothers you. Your confusion is momentary. Nothing obstructs the squawking that comes from within.

Don't people still lose their minds? Aren't they still morbid, tormented, nervous as nellies?

The ships are at rest in the bay, the bombers in London. In the suburbs my mother has been sleeping since ten o'clock, my father next to her. In their new house my sister sleeps with her son, my nephew, and her husband. In Los Angeles my brother sleeps with his new wife. Everyone asleep, everyone at rest, with me here, typing away, angry at life.

### 5. *There will be no beginning to the literature of the forest*

The princess tries to leave the forest, but she falls asleep, and a passing woodsman wakes her. You are selfish and proud, says the woodsman, and these qualities must be removed. He shows her the ax and the rubbing alcohol. She replies I don't want them removed, I want to find my equal. In these woods, he says, we believe there is no difference between these woods and the other woods. Does she understand what he is saying? No, for she continues into the forest, finding at length a frog most sympathetic to her. Together they look for the route they want to exist. The frog travels in her pocket. Why can she never be satisfied? The amphibian sees plan after plan failing in her mind. I shalt throw myself into the thorns, she cries. What does the frog say to this? It begins to lick its toes, for it is only a frog.



### Third Intermission (Bird As Manager)

If you suspect a man, do not employ him. If you employ him, do not suspect him. Keep your own counsel and consult your reason. The love of talking is fatal to success. Never intrude where you are not wanted. Have no halfness about you. Be a complete man, even a complete fool, before you are a halfman. Try to look out for the good, both in people and in life, and you will see what you look for. The bones do not make the man. Do not trust professions of extreme goodwill. It is far more easy to read books than men. To waver about trifles, to hesitate, and doubt, and balance probabilities upon every little matter that presents itself for immediate discussion, is a lamentable waste of power, distressing to one's self, and irritating to every looker-on. Little or much may be done to satisfy a complaint. But make him feel that his complaint was listened to with attentive consideration, that an interest was taken in his trouble, and a sincere determination was shown to make matters right. Men, like bullets, go farthest when they are smoothest. The greatest game in the world is success and every man who is a man is playing his cards to win. The fixed star of ambition is the eternal guide which beckons men on to the goal. Its light flashes from the desired haven of ease, comfort, and affluence. Today a man may be of no consequence, but tomorrow he may be a person of wealth and influence, and he will remember how you treated him when he was not well situated.

### Abdication

Thus do I hereby abdicate  
now and going forward  
knowing all it means for myself  
inclusive of the first and last  
all responsibility, all blame  
all reflection, all interest  
both to people and to life  
I abdicate my promises  
and the logic of such promises  
I abdicate my rights and effects  
I will suffer anything to be done  
as anyone wants it passingly  
done to me, by me, over me, or in me  
all the unnamed things  
including whatever it pleased me  
to resist or possess as mine  
and everything else as well  
my colonies, my principle territories  
no longer will my protection  
extend anywhere or shall I lift  
a finger of protection  
I will be overrun by choice, cut off  
by choice, by choice and abdication  
I forfeit praise and honor  
including protection of others  
my commerce will be not my own  
my army will wander aimlessly  
no longer should anyone  
request advice or shelter  
for I abdicate completely

utterly, thoroughly, irrevocably  
I will go where I am sent  
I will do what I am ordered  
I abdicate my opposition  
perception, surety, rank  
I abdicate my past as well  
I will not fight or flinch  
to be interpreted and caricatured  
I will lie perfectly still  
whatever comes to have me  
will have me in the manner it chooses  
I abdicate my bird, my forest  
my right to speak of it  
my right to know it is mine  
my right to be known by it  
and to see its implications  
I abdicate its every brick  
and every powder of brick  
I divorce the feather from the bird  
the follicle from the feather  
the atom from the follicle  
I break them, bury them  
I deny and discount them  
I forsake, expunge, and deliver over  
avow, reject, and surrender  
it never was, I never saw  
I never willed, I never touched

(so saying he closed his eyes)

### Footnote to the Abdication

a trifle, i.e., a crumb

a human being doesn't just wake up  
and claim to know something

the image covers  
the surface  
moving through forests  
a cloud of birds  
a gust of trees

idiots, frightened children, lemmings, astrologists  
landlords, boors, sycophants, fawners, meddlers  
hypocrites, beasts, Duns Scotus lovers, wafflers, prigs  
consubstantialists, jerks, exploiters, personalities

## Epilogue to the Bird & Forest

One day the young Lucretius took a walk, passing the cattle wearied by their bulk. He asked himself whether invisible things existed. What if there is nothing but the sun, the sea, the birds, the trees, the processing mind, and the atomic seeds composing each of these things? What if these maladjustments you sense, which you cannot name, are figments and accidents?

Lucretius found this idea calming. It was no longer true that he was a fluttering, weak, flawed, petty, chirping little creature, for that was only his accident. A bird and a Lucretius were both parts of nature. Fogs and shadows were themselves atomic seeds, and nothing was hidden. No one regretted and no one knew they were deceitful. For what was there to regret or deceive?

But his citizens became bored. They grew tired of Lucretius telling them what was real. Must things always be made of seeds? Must the birds, trees, rocks, and sun always explain every last thing like that? Could not dragons be inside the seeds?

Still, it is good for a person to be calm. It is good to see the delusions, and to deny the invisible. It is good to endure.

A wife leaves her husband. A plane flies into a building. A belief enters a state of doubt. A person tries to know something. A person climbs from a ditch. An empire invades its ruins. A madness goes through a sphere of order. An order goes through a sphere of madness. A husband leaves his wife. A woman finds herself in a forest of phalluses. A person is lost. A person sees glimpses of light. Images fly through images. A creature flies through the woods.

We are taught: experience, then emotion, then thought. But what do we practice?

The day was July 28, 2003. A warm, bright day.



ANIMALS

## The Jellyfish

Why did I first begin these notes on the jellyfish? Not for any great reason. To produce a summary, to forget, possibly to sleep. But now an incomplete fever runs through me.

Its fragile body misled me. An animal apart from other animals: regal, haughty. Transparency without innocence.

An accident of the tide brought us together. Not helpless, fated.

Gradually my subject became confused with myself. A contradiction swept into my arms, one that needed only what came to it.

It must be my role, I thought, to provide philosophy for this creature. At least for its own good.

Please, don't remind me!

Always fighting, always struggling. These were its conclusions.

As it expired, it dried and blew off. And what did it know, really? It didn't even have a spinal cord. Vacant and perfect, with a yellow hood and small lights.

Never to be as fascinating, as venomous, as the science examining it.

## Experiment

*For Joseph Beuys*

A man seals himself in with a coyote.

Well see here, he says. What do I possess but this innocent milkjug of water?

However the animal curls up in silence. It does not believe in experiment. Beneath its eyes a thin veil of pure interest looks out.

People observe the sleepers. He is not his name or his artistry anymore. The artist has forgotten the artist.

“The animal, properly speaking, is nothing but a wanter.”

I have my reasons, as I have love. This does not mean principles or givens. As with any monad the coyote consumes itself along a chain that will not end.

Dead asleep I woke up. The experiment looked at me in question. What do you want from me? Do you want a vial of blood?

Your neck, your forelocks, your eyes, your eyelashes, your eyelashes. Panting, slobbering, drooling, humping, snapping its teeth, licking its balls, rolling in fleas.

This is not an experiment but a conjugal paradise of clouds. . .

## Explanation of Thought for Sheep

One morning, after a night of failed experiments, I decided that art should address the non-rational animals, whom it might even benefit. Very well!

Beyond your usefulness for sweaters, you sheep have a complexity humans can only envy. I am remembering especially your meaty heads, your fluctuating appearance, and your innocence.

Like many people I once considered you the victims of a primitive herding instinct. My apologies, sheep!

I am sure you must be eager to learn about our famous sense of reason, without which we may never have subjugated you.

Human thought is a privilege, a pleasure, and an escape. As ignorance gives way to knowledge, the blood races into its intercourse. The thinker cannot believe civilization sprang from a grain surplus.

Still the pleasures of thought are not simple or pastoral. Try as they might, human children cannot think their way out of their social class. Desperate ones may even do away with their accursed selves.

You might wonder how exactly this relates to you. My dear sheep, I am already answering to the best of my ability!

Even among ourselves, the brutalized learn well what it takes to afford life. Soon they are thinking not of bourgeoisie amusements, but of imprisonment, guns, and distribution.

In this manner the real spreads into literature. At the same time, certain deceptions can survive a bit longer thanks to writing. Even a dying person finds nostalgia dragging their thoughts into the past, where they encountered something they can never describe.

Surely, O sheeps, it is wrong to live inside conceptions and cheap comparisons. Yet it must be equally wrong to live only for the moment. I hope none of you have to endure ethical questions of this type, but will continue to live out your lives on the hillsides.

But may I say I admire, sincerely, your resolute distaste for nostalgia? From my own species-perspective, I salute you! Many of us anxiously await the day when your own sheep-writers can give us further insight into your nature.

## Evening at the Hotel de Sade

The fear of death pervades us, I declared, plunging my knife into the table grain.

Don't make me laugh, Robert replied. Make you? Shall we say lead me in that direction. You jest. Strangely not. Then you underestimate me.

My dear Robert, said Robert (for we were both named Robert), you must admit that within this narrow blink of existence it is common to mark our singularity with such drama as you just exhibited; in short, for all that, we're animals.

The very idea turns my stomach, I replied. Does it? It does indeed. Please go on, for your position fascinates me.

I did not hesitate to go on, but spoke at such extraordinary length I lost my faith of concluding. My friend, I concluded, you may wonder how life is for me.

Less and less, said Robert. In general? Au contraire. But I'm an exceedingly curious case. My dear Robert!

Does it not interest you, I remarked, that I go from city to city, chased by dogs, denying the most apparent truths imaginable?

I have specific information, said Robert, that you have never been chased by dogs. . .

Full of confidence and vigour, I rose to respond, only to discover that twenty Roberts now swam in front of my eyes. My legs gave out; the roast overturned. Dimly I heard Lucy rushing down the stairs, impossibly free of her ropes. . .





THE FUTURE & ITS COMPANIONS



## The Future

I too remember the life of the mind. I remember its discomfort, its forced laugh, and its stupendous perversions. After three or four years without it, I slept peacefully.

Today I have selected from my extensive notes on time. Thanks to these fragments, terror and confusion can be overcome for our younger generation.

F— mounts the dais, prepared to give a complete account of his misanthropy. However he finds in even the dullest faces a fragment of this very impulse.

In the present we find idolatry, obstructions, and the flaws in every human explanation. For example a philosophy will often attack imaginary ideas, or take its own abstractions for the ordering of experience.

I will never be understood, F— concludes. But this “never” exists in the future, where F— still expects to be understood. My eye offends me, then my ears offend me, then my prick offends me.

It is always better to have a complex surface with nothing complex underneath it. Nevertheless, F— considers only this underneath. Not the grass, not the living children, not the fetching. Is he so terrible?

Let us observe this simple-yet-complex person in his study. It seems we could talk forever about him.

Something cataclysmic passes by, which is F—’s mundane reality. Shards of glass fall in his shoes, in his machine.

The future is the severest freedom as well as the severest violation. It is also quite empty. His beard exceeds five meters, six meters. "I am a particular case, but also not so entirely particular," says F—.

People of the present, I can no longer confess because what does it mean, confess, confess, why confess of all things? And so, goodbye.

The future offered a possible in place of a real. In this respect F— discovered his supreme decadence. "As I can neither love nor dismiss the populace," he wrote, "I will improve them for my pleasure." The rats and termites nodded gravely.

"This unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself," F— continued, "urged me to continue."

A similar idea—honestly the same idea—was later found in the writings of E. Poe.

### Companion 1

My companion awaited our divertissement. Suddenly I endured a remote nostalgia for the first course. How I wished I had lingered when the lights were higher and the specials aflame. It was garden soup, was it not? The solid indenture of the spoon, the murderous tines of the fork, the Windsor knot of the knife. Truly she fascinated me, this companion. I admired her and wished her immortal good wishes, though it pained me to consider her further. Never had I met someone so indifferent but so corporeal. The curtain came up a notch. Gradually I returned to the dry privacy that was my victory. Did my companion maintain her own shelter? Yes, I admired everything about her, her succorous curls, her abilities, her temper. Once I saw her knock a tuna to the decking. But I will never forget the treasured phrase she relied upon: spare me the dog-and-pony show.

## Thaddeus of Warsaw

### *Chapter 1. Origins of Thaddeus*

It is now eight years since I dipped my pen in these tears. Unnerved in body and weak in mind, I yielded to his impetuosity, and suffering him to lift me into the chariot, my watching soul soon paid dearly in sleepless nights, surrendering to that bolt of carnage which strikes common and rare with equal spoliation.

### *Chapter 2. Virtue Breeds Resentment*

It being the first time the exquisite proportion of his figure had been so fully seen by any of the present company, Pembroke, bursting with an emotion he would not call envy, measured that graceful limb with a scornful eye; then declaring he was quite in a furnace, took the corner of his glove, and waving it to and fro, half-muttered, "Come gentle air."

### *Chapter 3. Poland At War*

Thaddeus was seen in every part of the field. The consternation he sowed was universal. At every step the heels of his beloved charger struck upon the wounded or the dead. Melancholy and bravery were stamped on his emaciated features.

### *Chapter 4. Partition Of Poland, The Lowly Perish*

Another burst of cannon was followed by a heavy crash, and the most piercing shrieks echoed through the palace. "All is lost!" cried a soldier.

### *Chapter 5. Exile to England*

It is difficult for those who lie evening and morning in the lap of domestic indulgence to figure the reflections of one raised in elegance. While the Baltic flowed calmly under those blood-familiar boots, his conversation now acquired the first tinge of its inevitable pathos.

### *Chapter 6. More Pershing Of Lowly*

"Probably," uttered the doctor, "he will remain as you see him now, till he expire like the last glimmer of a dying taper."

### *Chapter 7. Art Does Not Shame Him*

Thaddeus could not make any use of his musical talents; for at public exhibitions of himself his soul revolted; and as to his literary acquirements, his youth, and being a foreigner, precluded all hope. At length he found his sole dependence must rest on his talents for painting. Of this art he had always been remarkably fond; and his taste easily perceived that there were many drawings exhibited for sale inferior to those which he had executed for mere amusement. He decided at once; and purchasing, by means of Nanny, pencils and Indian ink, he set to work.

### *Chapter 8. Mary Beaufort, Her Youth & Character*

From infancy Miss Beaufort had loved with enthusiasm all kinds of excellence. When she found anything greatly to admire, her ardent soul blazed, and by its own pure flame lit her way to a closer inspection of the object. Her lucid eyes shone with a sincere benevolence, and her lips seemed to breathe gentle balm while she spoke.

*Chapter 9. Lady Sara Does Not Give Up*

"He is coming home. He is now at Portsmouth. O, Thaddeus! I am not yet so debased as to live with him when my heart is yours." At this shameful declaration, Thaddeus clenched his teeth in agony of spirit; and placing his hand upon his eyes, to shut her from his sight, he turned suddenly round and walked towards another part of the room. But Lady Sara followed, her cloak having fallen off, now displaying her fine form in all the fervor of grief and distraction.

*Chapter 10. Mary Knows His Quality*

Miss Beaufort's eyes streamed afresh. "I have seen him beset by some of my sex," she cried, "and to be classed with them—to have him imagine that my affection is like theirs!—I can not bear it."

*Chapter 11. Demon Hierarchy Of The French Philosophers*

How do these systematizers refine and subtilize? How do they dwell on the principle of virtue, and turn it in every metaphysical light, until their philosophy rarifies it to nothing! The Turks were not content with one wife, but appropriated hundreds to one man. Fatal conclusion of reason! But it was precisely this stream of influence that infected her both dreaming and waking fancy.

*Chapter 12. The Sophistries Of Signed Letters*

She too fondly wished to believe that he loved her, and this was sufficient to fill her with uncertainty. Aware of the delicacy which is parent to love, and its best preserver, she checked the overflowings of her heart, and whilst her concealed face streamed with tears, conjured him away.

*Chapter 13. The Senses Are Not The Source Of Knowledge*

When he recovered, he found himself at the foot of that statue beneath which his unfortunate destiny had been fixed. The sky was shrouded in clouds, which a driving wind was blowing from the orb of the moon. The burning of his cheeks quickened his pulse, and brought him from his senseless sleep. He awoke from a sleep which, when it fell upon him, he believed would last until time should be lost in eternity. For the first time in many nights, he slept, but his dreams were disturbed, and he awoke from them at an early hour, unrefreshed and in much fever. "Pembroke," he uttered, "there is an evil in my breast I wotted not of!"

*Chapter 14. Suffering Has Its Flowers*

Thus, day after day, week after week, time passed in the alternate interchanges of domestic tranquility and the active exercises of those duties to society in general, and to the important demands of public claims on the present stations of the several individuals on whom such calls were made. As Thaddeus gradually apportioned his retrospections a greater audience with his past calamity, they began, like a shade in the picture, to give his present bliss greater force and brightness. So it is that, while hardship tries the spirit of man, it can bring him joy on earth and resurrection from the dead.

## Companion 2

A shadow world clung to my companion. She had the highest tolerance for silence. But these are mere bricolage now. Had we lost or won a crumb? In a word, she grew more restless at every palliative. I knew my companion was a most desirable companion, a most socialized, and a most concerning. Our bed was covered with frilling, yet so was everything. Was there something we were to perform? To believe anything so miniscule should come to the spoils of her company, and yet I did as I did, going where I went. My intentions were honest, homely, and plain. At the highest reaches and peaks the river broke over, tumbling to the below, whilst the rapids plunged and wild water ran mad as ancient spirits. With reluctance my companion returned to her shells and butter. Be not proud, you kinds and types.

## Death of an Operative

*December 2, 1999, 6:56 PM*

At the Hotel Nord, resting, waiting. Callused cornea, callused half-dome fingertips, a thread of time-particles, passing. As for evidence of the plummet, or whether certain experiences, certain confessions, remain attached. . .

In order of their reproducibility I count my senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell. A weak, scratchy broadcast, written by hand, huddled at the end of devices. Every few minutes footsteps compress the carpet.

Only certain people are friends, and those only faintly. Distant clicks, low breathing, remorse at zero. To which you belong, tyrant, sea, lamp, audience.

From insuperable night, embedded in uncontrollable machinery, from capitalist America, this conflict survives, has always survived, in the traditional manner: to live, to live, to live.

Not even my name will be spoken twice. Of course to be certain, to be cautious, as dreamless as possible, until a special talent arrives to pull me through. My assignment, my life. The code will simply break, coming apart in my hands, flying apart, under marvelous power.

Dressed like any other; my hair like any other. What are the things I know? I know there are crowds passing outside in hysterical laughter. I know my first directive. Never to write down my thoughts, in their truthfulness, in their directness. I know consciousness can be modified by extreme force of will. I write down my thoughts in their truthfulness.

What are the things I remember? I remember the small unshaven patch on the cheek of the desk clerk inferior. I remember his exact words.

*December 3, 1999, 7:45 AM*

A haze covers the window, obstructing my view of the street, the sunrise. The same haze allows me two or three minutes. I take the sliver gently from my finger, then to reinsert it. At night it floats in a vial of solution, the solution called history. Yes I too joke and laugh.

The isolation contained many facets, many different influences, even various points of relaxation between assignments. I hardly know where to begin, to what degree it would be clarifying. Where did I conform to the isolation, where was I its servant? The buildings are close while the streets are wide.

It was my own recorded laugh I heard last night. I laughed to think with what real abandon these people talk, these clerks, opening and operating their shops, having nothing to record. Imagine going through a door in complete solitude, not touching its sides or floor, no one sees you, no one waits, no one runs or collapses. Into the metal box rolls an aluminum wall.

On with the socks, the shoes, the belt. I would care to have a coffee. I would care to have a breakfast roll.

Concise. Simple. Last night the clerk walked home in the icy snow, favoring the right instep, running, collapsing. A woman operates the desk this morning. Her necklace strikes her collarbone as she answers.

*December 3, 1999, 9:22 AM*

Ha, ha, ha, I say. Ha, ha, ha, she replies. Oh, ha, ha. Yes, ha, ha, ha.

*December 3, 1999, 2:30 PM*

Habits cannot be put on like makeup. Instead the organs must draw from them in their turn. This is Dziga Vertov broadcasting, come in Vertov Dziga. Hair, nose, mouth, eyes, tongue.

A force of will in the direction of science. I enter the bathroom. I press my eye to the sliver. One coffee, one newspaper, one black waterproof made of polyaquatic cloth. The bathroom water runs one minute.

A cryptogram concentrated in an abstraction. By extreme denial it enters physical space. It is the message. What does he see, what does he comprehend? At first a perfect system, ever-rising exchanges of capital, the fringe element. He is free to consider defection, but to what, into what? Will he be allowed to bring his bicycle, his films, his Karl Marx?

So much a thing of beauty it is, so well does the code anticipate him, he continues to know there are others waiting for him. Not doctors or lawyers but decent human beings. This he proves categorically. There is no home country. There is only asylum.

Files of papers, fake visas, documents. It is 12:15 in the Cafe Oeste. She will not use my name since we are so-called familiar. Unlikely that any truthfulness, in any form, at any time, whatsoever, free of its assignment. Blind intent, blind reaction, blind love.

She looks around. She speaks. "I didn't think I'd find you here."  
"Where did you expect to find me?" "I expected not to find you."

Out in the field the head is weak. It must rely on training. I hear the water running in the bathroom. "It's terrible we've been estranged," she says. And then: "Where are you staying?"

"At the Hotel Sur."

We are natural human beings. We are professionals. We have our assignment. "Remember how you would say you're my duck Sofia, we need so much time Sofia."

"I remember," I say, "Sofia."

*December 3, 1999, 7:19 PM*

In the hotel room Sofia talks. The drapes remind her of our wedding. I don't feel strange for being married. We spent so many years here, then here. Do I remember Caracas? The shower runs for twenty minutes. Quietly she gives me her photograph.

The notebook goes in the drawer. Caracas is covered in a thin powder. Do I remember Martha? "Yes, I remember." I don't remember.

Out the window I see people passing, opening and operating their shops, laughing hysterically. I consider the absurd laws which govern, embed and encase my subject, the human creature, whom I love blindly, signed the Operative.

Can I promise? Not at all, I say. First she is reading, then she is looking, then we are loving.

*December 5, 1999, 12:14 PM*

A train to the suburbs. I read as they read, observe the clouds or rooftops, laugh in the traditional manner. The facial area is itself a kind of countryside, teeming with uncertainty. More and more reflective material so that cities, from a distance, appear to glow.

She does not say or mention target. I understand, I nod. At first the restraints seem to be in words, but later you understand. Along this route soldiers or cattle once passed.

In an overhanging fog, near the station, I walk. My health is quite good, thank you, in truth I wonder why you ask. Thick air blows around me, the ocean. I am only seven years old.

Never to rest. Never to be hunted into disappearance. Don't you want to help your country? Don't you want to see it flourish?

The last measurement of authority is unhappiness. Scenes we are passing from the train, but never people.

*December 6, 1999, 1:51 AM*

At last I am detected. I experience relief.

*December 6, 1999, 4:44 PM*

In the Seaview Arcade. The delivery man hands me a paper bag, then flees, stumbles, collapses. I return to the screen, firing my plastic gun.

Matches from the Restaurant Tehran, Iranian passport, false receipts, hand mirror inscribed in Farsi, three cigarettes, a gold case, also

inscribed. What haven't I mentioned? Particles of air, the bag itself. I've mentioned everything, even the theoretical. Particles of light? Everything, everything. But I am slipping. . .

I discard one of the receipts, the one for the bag itself. I smoke one cigarette.

To be as certain and dreamless as possible. I laugh to think in what blindness these kids find themselves.

*December 7, 1999, 1:01 PM*

Hotel Orient, midday. The bedspread disgorges its synthetic stuffing. Too imprecise, too soft. The radio plays between stations. From days of yore / come cararact's roar. . .

Sofia hands me tea, books, medicine. "Opening and operating their shops," I say. "Running without reason or idea. They have no orders, no assignments."

"It's a bad time," she replies.

"We're their eyes and ears," I say.

Books, tea, medicine. "Yes, you're loyal. You're always loyal. But they haven't told us anything."

I think to myself: this is not correct. "They gave me the sliver," I say.

Sofia considers this, pondering it at length. She stands by the window with her hands on the glass. Eventually I realize she will not reply.

### Companion 3

My companion saw both earth and its poisons. But she trusted her senses, which everyone sees and hears with and which all persons process universally, while their travails are their own. On her room's wall was an etching of a bridle. Did I say she was refined? She was civilized. One moment she might focus It upon me, or waste It, but It could always be said to be conducive to me. Our days were filled with that final illogical relishing of a sickly and expendable dream. In Venezula they think only of oil, revolution, and beauty contests, but my companion delighted in other topics, of which thereof she could not speak.



## The Cake

The man, acclaimed and honored, stands over the cake.

A glow comes to meet him, up from the cake-stage. He does not say my former loves, my days of fraternity, or any of the usual nostalgia. Inhaling from the sides of his neck and his cheeks and chest, grown red from exertion, he sends out a few sentences.

One candle; one year. The years he came over the earth in his bodily carriage.

Everywhere his teeth remain pressed into the bit. But here he feels the full range of his person, simply because the honor rotates.

The facts of his life congeal in sugar. Inside the year is the person having a life, inside a time-shell.

Everyone, please, we have worked very hard on this cake.

"I'm honored today by this cake. Like all that surrounds me, it reflects my principle of seize life. The cake is perfect, and I am grateful."

Look how forcefully the man blows over his future! His name is written there, the hope he will not pass into irretrievability.

It's strange, isn't it? No, it's entirely natural.

Did anyone not know what name he or she held? They knew very well, but wrote it on the cake. They smiled and sang despite an approaching extinguishment.

It was his day. Whatever he wanted was brought, until he became king over the earth.

This was only forty or fifty years after National Socialism. Pragmatics had reached their natural limit. Thereafter the bit soured in his teeth.

But cynicality came to surround the cake. Within the cake lay the sponge, the bed of his going-forward-into-sleep. At the same time the cake also contained a hidden thing, a thin filling known only to the maker.

If words had come out of the ground, with people uprooting them, grinding them into paste and flour, what might the ritual have become? But words didn't come out of the ground.

The audience whispers to each other, asking what is inside. What about this audience? What is their role? Why, they try to listen to him, here of all places.

Again I don't know whether this saying something, or singing something, really was that way. I don't want to get into that.

The top layer, the butter and sugar, represented the soil, out of which sprang fruits, rare forms, and glints of a higher social strata. Candy balls shone silver or brass. Scrolls or scallops entwined the cake with the natural world.

"I desire a simple cake, no writing, with a cherry in the center. It should be a cake to match my character, direct and ambitious, soon to be eleven. The cherry will be my heart, which will beat for womankind."

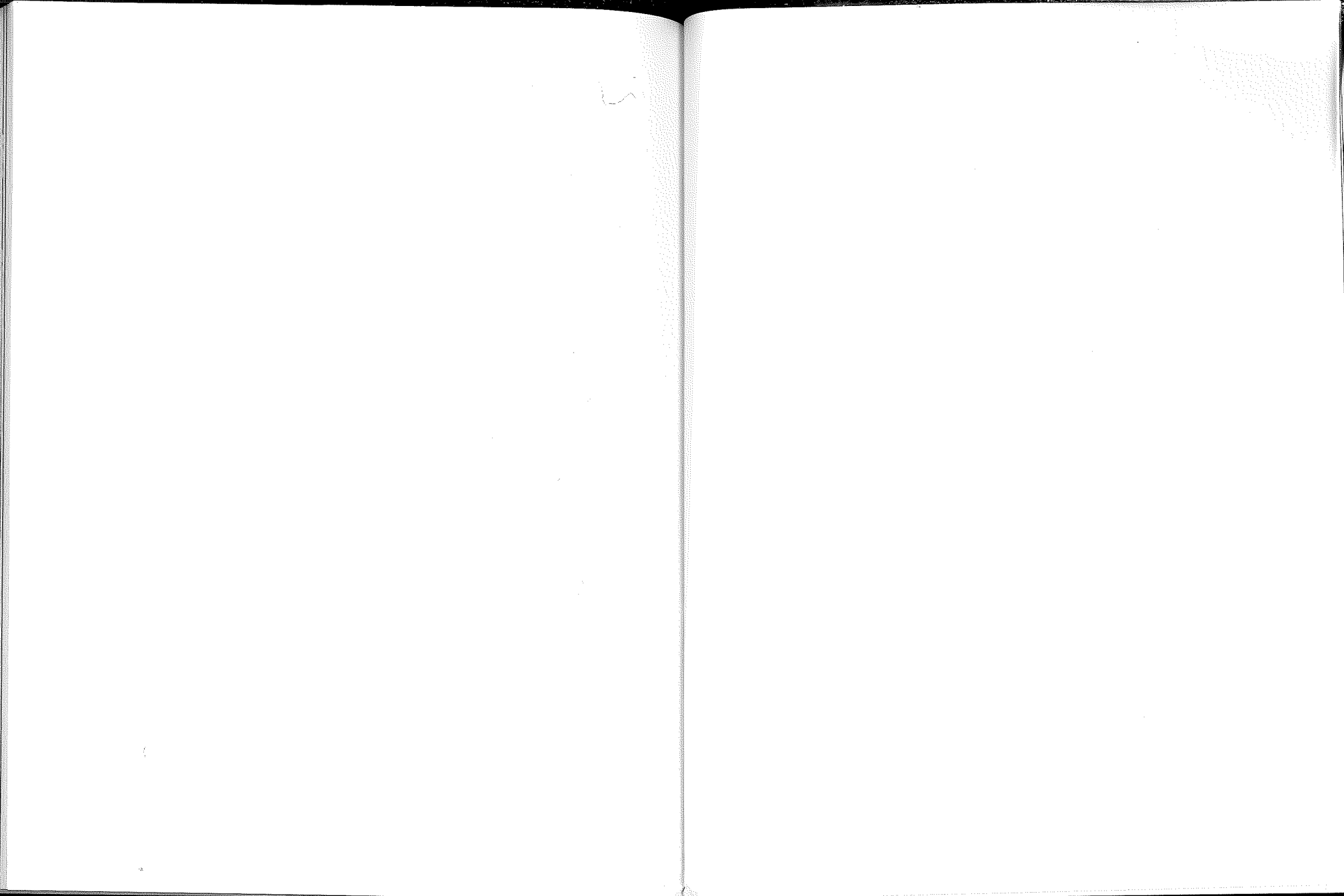
But there comes the terrifying aspect, which we have avoided. As the man finishes, he turns to his private darkness, identifying his desire. He speaks it inwardly. Over and over he will be asked what was his wish, but can never divulge it. Thus he sees how no authority touches him, no other soul, except by the whim of human need.

What really happens? What happens in the material itself?

The audience accepts the cake, eating it resentfully or cautiously. His year becomes them, and they are content.

How merry we are when the cake fills and becomes us. Never does anyone ask what it means to "become" a cake. What was the cake before, and what are we?

But it has made them satisfied, finally very comfortable. With his life dispersed among them, they go back to their empty houses.



**The Troubling Volume**  
*a reprise for Adam Schnitzer*

I will go to the Cook Islands  
to live forever. I will put up  
a bookshelf with a volume  
for every letter except N.  
Seabirds will be observed  
exhausted on the branches.  
The land will belong to everyone.  
There will be wine and nuts,  
towels, and a curious soap  
made of rind. On holidays  
my neighbors will come over.  
With an endearing flourish  
I will present my volumes.  
They will ask where the N is hiding.  
I will turn rarely quiet  
and troubled. They will say  
this man is in his own world.  
The sun will round the earth  
of trodden paths and volcanoes.  
I will spend every afternoon  
in the Cook Island Public Library.

The president herself will send me  
a gift. I will have a fascination  
with the mango pit resting  
on its consuming so much space  
in the fruit. I will no longer believe  
something has eluded my grasp.  
Anytime I wish to buy rubber  
mouthpieces and a few hooks  
I will buy them promptly.  
If something pleases my neighbors,  
it will please me. If I want  
to build a water tank  
build it I will. It will be the middle  
of the night. Why are the hens  
so restless I will wonder inwardly.  
I will put on shoes for a patrol.  
There will be nuts, wine, towels,  
books, and soap. The storm will push  
stars and flocks mindlessly. It will come  
back to me some idea from the volume N.  
Everything will lay on the ground  
that can lay on the ground.  
What cannot lay on the ground

will take its chances.  
The hens will survive, nervous  
but ok. My neighbors will kiss  
each finger saying it has cut us  
but not in the mattering place.  
I will announce a short trip  
back to America. They will say  
this time you'll bring the volume N.  
I will become again quiet  
and troubled. They will say  
he has gone off  
but where we cannot say.

## COLOPHON

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