



WONDERFUL INVESTIGATIONS

Essays, Meditations, Tales Dan Beachy-Quick



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DAN BEACHY-QUICK



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A Whaler's Dictionary

for Kristy, Hana, & Iris

. . . careless on a granary floor . . .

& for my parents

Gray goose and gander,
Waft your wings together,
And carry the good king's daughter
Over the one-strand river

—Traditional

There was earth inside them, and
They dug.

—Paul Celan

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Preface

Wonder, as a point of concern, denies its own consideration. It has the remarkable capacity to hide in the midst of its revelation. Wonder, to preserve itself, withdraws. It withdraws from the mind, from the willing mind, which would make of mystery a category.

I remember being told a story about an old culture that believed the center of the forest was holy and could not be entered into. Even in the heat of the hunt should the chased beast enter into the sacred center, the hunter would stop and not pursue. I think often about that line—which is not a line in any definite sense, is no certain marking, but rather is itself somehow without definition, a hazy line, a faulty boundary—that marks the periphery. One side of the line is the daily world where we who have appetites must fill our mouths, we who have thoughts must fill our minds. The other side is within the world and beyond it, where appetite isn't to be sated, where desire is not to be fulfilled, and where thoughts refuse to lead to knowledge. I like the moment of failure that finds us on that line, abandoned of intent, caught in an experience of a different order, stalking the line between two different worlds and imperfectly taking part in both. Such a place risks blasphemy at the same time that it returns reverence to risk.

My hope is to approach such a line. This book begins in essays that in their perambulatory wandering seek to near those ways in which wonder, magic, ritual, and initiation continue to exert a numinous presence within the work of reading. But wonder denies the efficacy of such consideration—to think is only half the work. The other half is to cease thinking and to do.

This book's second half tells tales. There are four tales, each connected to a different age: child, preadolescent, young adult, and adult. The first story is most fully in the wondrous realm; the last is the least.

If there is a wish in this book, it is merely this: That through the whole, as per Plato's definition of a line, is a "point that flows," and that the reader may find that point and follow it as it flows toward that edge where the margin becomes center, and the end of the book the hazy border to the wonder-world.

FOUR ESSAYS

The Hut of Poetry

The difficulty of being a nature poet is that nature always intervenes. The virtue of an honest ethic, to write only what one sees, to write only what one lives, becomes complicated by vision, becomes entangled by the experience of being in the world. Light travels over a course of time far more extensive than the miles it leaps across before it reaches our eyes. It takes thousands upon thousands of years for a photon to move through the labyrinth of the sun's dense center to the star's surface; it takes some eight minutes for light to speed from the star's surface to our eyes, where the objects it lands on enter our minds upside down, like bats sleeping in a cave. Light seems instant, but light is ancient; and if light is ancient then so is the sight light engenders. To write what one sees proves difficult because sight is a medium whose breadth encompasses time greater than the limits of human consciousness. To see is to open one's eyes to a source that includes oneself. Light comes with a history that includes our own. To see is to see double: the self as the self seeing, the world as the world seen. We do this seeing over the course of the years by which we count the extent of our lives. Years add up to something, but they do not add up to the world, they do not add up to the self in the world. Who am I when I say "I"? Not a container, not a vessel, filling over the course of a life with the evidence of having lived it. Not a silo slowly filling with grain. Not a sufficiency. Not a gathering resource unto myself. The difficulty with wanting to write about the world, the nature poet's truest creed, is that one finds there is nothing other than the world about which to write. The world is a limit—but a limit whose boundary is evanescent, the drama of the horizon line. Definition doesn't enclose when it does its truest work; it enacts, or reenacts, a process already occurred, a process that never stopped occurring. It began as we began: a single cell, a singular idea, definitive, commensurable, and then a force moves through it and it expands through the limit by which it had been known, beyond which it had known itself. It moves outward. It breaks itself so it cannot stand known.

When I think about writing poetry now, I think about an exhibit of ancient southwestern pottery I went to see many years ago. I remember one bowl in particular: brown earthenware, no glaze, at the bottom of which, in yellow slip, an ant lion was painted. I thought the bowl contained a secret, that it lived a double life in the way poetry lives a double life. An object of use: the bowl was used to carry grain to feed the family of the man or woman who made it. An object of art or mimicry: the bowl took its shape almost comically because from the sand bowl an ant lion joyfully digs, then waits patiently at the bottom for an ant to fall in and provide a meal. This bowl, in a sense, is a found form. The potter found her model in the ground at her feet, an aspect of attention all the more remarkable for the fact that the bowl is meant to carry food, and the ant lion's bowl-shaped trap serves the same purpose. Such work isn't imitation; it is realization through

repetition, a form of conjuring, a form of charm, a “sympathetic magic,” whose hope is that the manufactured object will share in the creative principle of the natural one. Many of the other vessels were broken at the bottom, the point where the burden of the grain or the water was greatest. Sometimes I imagine the work of writing as carrying that ant lion bowl in my arms, and as I walk, the grain spills out the bottom onto the road I’m walking on, so that each step buries the seeds back into the earth from which they were pulled.

The other image that comes to mind when I think about poetry is a spiritual object of the Bambara people in Mali called a boli. The boli figure in the museum I frequently visited had a vaguely bovine shape: four legs, a thick body rising up into a hump, and the hump slanting forward, as if in the process—as of a cloud—expanding slowly into a head that had yet to fully form. The boli figure begins as a wooden block around which white cloth is wrapped. Then a mixture of mud, blood, and grain is packed in encrusting layers around the core, gradually building into the vaguely animal-like shape I stared at behind the glass case. The ambiguity of the shape keeps the object in almost constant refrain in my mind. The suggestion is of an animal that on closer scrutiny it could not be mistaken for—a work of representation in which recognition is triggered only to fail. The boli seems to find a shape that allows it to exist in the world I live in, this world in which to see it is to think of it as bovine in structure, and simultaneously another world in which such shapes come to no meaning, another world where every definite form dilates as clouds dilate when they distend and merge into the blue sky they had before being obscured. The boli’s role in Bambara culture is to regulate the energy that moves from the universe into this world, as the atmosphere, and the clouds that fill it regulate the sun’s light. It is an object that keeps in balance a force, a spiritual energy, which unbalanced, could damage the world. Its likeness to a cow belongs to this world, this earth; its unlikeness to the cow belongs to the other world, the universe. It shares in both, and the oddity of its form is a result of the accuracy with which it performs its work. The boli is a form that attends to its own formlessness. It shows the body at the point of pivot between two kinds of existence. It shows the cost of belonging to two worlds simultaneously while being able to fully exist in neither. It is the object as threshold, a door which is open only by being closed. It is a symbol. Its life is a symbolic life and brings us who believe in its power to our own symbolic nature.

The boli is my poetic ideal; as is the ant lion bowl. I cannot differentiate how I think about them from how I think about poetry. They are of the world, of the environment, in the way I’ve come to believe poetry is of the world, of the environment. What unites all three artworks is their relationship to form. Poetry is an audacious experiment in form, with form as the means of the experiment. Language, paradoxically enough, often obstructs the more fundamental work a poem attempts to realize, filling the space of the poem with a worth that can be captured by the intelligence and removed. Such reading of poems for the value of what they may mean enforces a strict economy on poetry, a system of value that poetry itself is always trying to destabilize, to question if not destruct. But what is this work of poetry if it is not the work of making meaning through language?

What can we find if we put our assumptions away, put our expectations away—~~this can even be done~~—and turn to the poem for other reasons, other experiences? It helps, perhaps, to think of the poem not as content but cavern. It is not for us to ask, “What is it?” It is for us to enter.

Reading is a method of entering; entering is a form of initiation. Form seen in such a way means that the poem functions on the page as a location that ceases to be a location. The poem on the page is no principality. It does not make a distinct place in the world, nor does it make a distinct place of the world. It is not a site to travel to, not a place of destination. Rather, the poem denies location because it acts—as the *boli* figure acts—as a nexus between worlds, taking part in both worlds but belonging to neither, a threshold in which one must learn to uncomfortably dwell. The difficulty of reading poetry isn’t the work of understanding what a poem means or may not mean. The truer difficulty is in learning to read so as to occupy the environment the poem opens, to suffer encounter with what is in the poem.

Our normal approach to reading, what we are taught to do in school, outlines a method whose end is a momentum that casts us out of the poem as the reward for having read it, our mind bejeweled with the profit of what we’ve found. To think of poetry as an environment, as a space of initiation, is to learn to read so as to lose a sense of meaning, to become bereft of what it is we thought we knew, to lose direction, to become bewildered. The first act of imagination in reading isn’t the work of image making but the work of entering the poem in which images exist as inexplicable ornaments within the form, each promising a knowledge to acquire. One should be patient enough to learn to see it. We enter the poem to threaten the security of the knowledge we possess before we read it. We enter the poem to be asked a question we will not ask ourselves otherwise, a question that begins at the point of our certainty. The fifteenth-century Indian poet Kabir knows the necessary difficulty of such work; he also knows the work’s abundance:

Kabir says, seekers, listen:
Wherever you are
is the entry point.

When we enter as ourselves we enter as seekers, as initiates. The work of reading as an initiate to poetry is seldom a work that feels like reading. It is not active, but passive. It is learning to read so as to be read. Kabir, again:

A tree stands without root,
without flowers bears fruit;
no leaf, no branch . . .
Dance done without feet,
tune played without hands,
praises sung without tongue,
singer without shape or form—
the true teacher reveals.

Causality within the world the poem reveals is a faulty explanation of how tree, flower, dance, melody, and song come to be. The poem is the form the reader

enters in order to see what the teacher reveals: that we dismiss the awful, inspiring fact of what exists when we attribute its existence to something other than itself. To the poetic initiate, the poem is the form one enters to hear the “praises sung without tongue,” to hear the “singer without shape or form.” Inside the poem the initiate finds the world turned around:

Turned-around Ganga dries up the ocean,
swallows the moon and sun . . .

Turned-around rabbit swallows a lion . . .

Turned-around arrow strikes the hunter . . .

Turned-around earth pierces the sky . . .

To describe the initiate’s experience as paradoxical misnames its startling force. Within the poem each object becomes retranslated into its actual nature—each object becomes “turned-around.” To be turned around isn’t simply to appropriate the attributes of a contradicting object—river drying up ocean instead of feeding it, rabbit devouring lion, arrow hunting the hunter, earth stabbing sky. Kabir uses paradox paradoxically, contradiction contradictorily, to reveal, as a true teacher must, that the distance between subject and object is unsteady, is susceptible—within the world within the poem—of profound reversal. To read is also this work of being turned around. The turned-around poem reads the reader. Reading is work done to us before it is a work we do.

But to better see what poetry as an initiatory environment might mean, we should look at examples of what such spaces are, of how they function, and what our own work of reading might be in such a context. Mircea Eliade, in *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, outlines the nature of initiatory experience:

The term initiation in the most general sense denotes a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in . . . the person to be initiated. In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a total, different being from that which he possessed before his initiation; he has become another. . . . Initiation introduces the candidate into the human community and into the world of spiritual and cultural values.

The ordeal of initiation occurs, as does a poem on a page, in a location that is not a place. A sacred ground is prepared and on that ground, or near it, an enclosure is built. The preparation of the ground returns it to a chaos on which the enclosure, as cosmos is built. The enclosure often represents the body of a divinity, and to enter it is to enter the body, to walk in through the mouth, to be devoured. Initiation requires death, to encounter death. In some cultures, initiates return from the sacred ground to their mothers who can no longer see them, mothers who wail in mourning at the death of their sons while their sons, from the edge of the woods, watch them. Some initiates return with a new name and no memory of their previous life. Other rituals are even more startling:

On a particular day the novices, led by a priest, proceed to the Nanda [a storied enclosure, often hundreds of feet long, a great distance from the village] in sing

file, with a club in one hand and a lance in the other. The old men await them in front of the walls, singing. The novices drop their weapons at the old man's feet as symbols of gifts, and then withdraw to the cabins. On the fifth day, again led by the priests, they once more proceed to the sacred enclosure, but this time the old men are not awaiting them by the walls. They are then taken into the Nandivara. There "lie a row of dead men, covered with blood, their bodies apparently cut open and their entrails protruding." The priest-guide walks over the corpses and the terrified novices follow him to the other end of the enclosure, where the chief priest awaits them. "Suddenly he blurts out a great yell, whereupon the dead men start to their feet, and run down to the river to cleanse themselves from the blood and filth with which they are besmeared."

The link between such ancient initiatory ordeals and the work of reading poetry seems spurious unless it feels intuitive. A blank page is one version of chaos, and the lines built on that ground form a dwelling. It is a strange dwelling, meaningless before entered—a confusion of black marks on a white page. Entering it we enter it. Entering it we find a world inside it. Inside it we can see ourselves. We find ourselves in a world that does not exist by any normal measure of existence, a world we see within our minds that we enter only by attending to something outside of ourselves. The movement outward and the movement inward are simultaneous. When we read we hear the old ones singing. To learn to sing ourselves—that secret our initiation introduces us to—is to find ourselves walking upon the corpses of those who sang before us, pulling from their mouths the words we find in our own, giving to those words our own breath. When we learn to sing, the dead leap up and wash the grime from their bodies. Tradition promises us this resuscitating work. Such a vision of the poem realizes Emily Dickinson's aspiration for art as a house that "tries to be haunted." Dickinson, like Kabir (poets of deep congruence), provides help in other ways. Dickinson not only understands that the poem is a form that waits to be haunted, she also gives her readers a glimpse into what the effect of that haunting, what the poem as a introduction to death, might be:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

“I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” offers readers a lesson in poetry as initiatory experience. The poem’s first line introduces us to death, but a death that occurs in the mind before it occurs in the body. The poem is that strange space we can only enter mentally, as the page refuses the materiality of the body’s trespass. But Dickinson, from the poem’s first line, subverts the assumption that thinking is a process opposed to the body’s materiality. Reading in this initiatory sense requires the mind to feel rather than to think; the brain becomes not the mind’s housing, but that penetralium within which these mourners mourn, these unnamed people whose “Boots of Lead,” with their heavy step, strike “Space” into tolling. The image of these mourners parallels how one might conceive of thinking—a procession of images, each a thought, that progress according to their innate logic through the mind’s confines. The mourners here are thoughts given a particular image, thoughts given an allegorical life. They seem to lament in the heavy steps not only who in the poem is dying, this self-same speaker referring to herself as “I,” but lament, too, the funereal condition in which thought’s trajectory to ideal knowledge has been irretrievably broken. Thought here does not think, it feels. These pacing mourners, these pacing thoughts, attend a funeral which buries an epistemology that easily links thinking to truth, and from knowing resurrects sense in the most nervous possibilities of the word. The brain tunes itself back to body an easier logic would repudiate. Doing so, it hears heaven not as Enlightenment clockwork, but as “a Bell” that only now “Being” can hear. The ringing bell marks death; it rings across the universe. The casket—like the body figure—mediates, in Dickinson’s poem, two worlds. One is the world where sense is but common sense. The other world is where Being is “but an Ear” and the Heavens “a Bell.” Kabir’s thought that the singer has no shape or form comes to an astounding realization. For “heaven’s bell” isn’t a bell, and the knowledge it brings—ringing brings—a knowledge not factual in nature, but rather, a resonating drone that vibrates within the being of Dickinson’s Ear—results in the plummet that actual knowing is. Knowledge isn’t reason, but the plank that, in reason, breaks. Song, too, sings via vibration. Every line of a poem is “a Plank in Reason.” To “finish knowing” is to break through the floor reason has built. Kabir and Dickinson know the hut of poetry has no floor.

Dickinson’s definition of how she knows when she’s read a poem comes into new light: “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever

warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there another way?" The poem isn't funereal in its relation to death. The funeral occurs in the brain. As one vision of knowledge is plunging downward through reason, so a parallel vision of knowledge is the loss of the top of one's head. The image isn't meant to depict a decapitation. Rather, it depicts the removal of that other plank from the skull's top, whose plank is the basement of the universe. That plank removed opens the mind to the whole. It is a death that precedes life. To read is the most common form of encounter with the dead. The dead on the blank page need not remain dead. Time in the page is different than time in the world. The page is that impossible cavern in which no echo has ever ceased echoing, in which no word has ever died, though the mouths that sang them were lost in the earth centuries ago. Death in the poem is only a pause before rebirth. Death is but a delay inside the form.

Language offers a method of experiencing death without dying. Language in a poem builds a form on a blank page, and by building that form, brings into use the strange, chaotic power the blank page represents—the power of the unseen, unspoken, unsung world that could be seen, spoken, and sung. The poem on the blank page houses a creative center infinitely larger than itself, than its own lines confine, but a power that has no useful ends without suffering the impossible limit of the poem's form. The forging of limit through form is the poem's most fundamental work, and the result of that work is that the poem becomes not a vessel of knowledge conveyed, but a dwelling where knowledge occurs. What we find inside the poem—for those of us who learn to read so as to enter—is the language by which the poem is built. We find words and the world those words evoke. Words, as does the boli figure, live a double life. The semiotic crisis of modern poetics, the sense of a word's arbitrary connection to the object it names, the indefinite distance between signifier and signified that feels as if it threatens language's ability to name anything at all, is not a modern crisis. Language is the ancient crisis that introduces us, over and over again, to the necessary failure of words bear in relation to the world. It is not necessarily a semiotic difficulty so much as it is a mimetic one. We tend to see poems as vehicles of semiotic information when the poem becomes nothing more to us than ink on a page, the flat plane of the second dimension.

When the poem becomes for us not a page but a structure, when it is a place of entry and so of initiation, when we are the initiates inside it, language's double life becomes of profound use. Regardless of the arbitrary relation of a name to the named, the work occurring within that relation, the work words teach us to do functions just the same. We read and recognize the world to which the words refer. Words function magically in the poetic environment, in the hut of the poem. That words give to the world a set of names by which we remember, we know it is an accidental quality of the deeper work words do. That deeper work is a magical work. The words out of which the poem is built always attempt to enact the world they name, to share in the nameless fact of the world's actuality by repeating it by replicating it, in the words by which it is known. Within the poem we find

world in addition to the world. We return to those poems that matter most to us not because we have something else to learn but because the world of that poem has become for us our home.

But a home is never the world—a home is a separation from the world. A poem is never the world—a poem is a separation from the world. The world we read and in reading see, never stays a world. Language's gift to us is its failure. The enchantment of language is superseded in importance by its disenchantment. The pivot between those two extremes mimics death. We are given a world that we lose. A poem's formal life is filled with totems that deny the death the poem's larger work forces us toward. Lines evoke the process of ritual, an attention always broken before it's complete, where enjambment demands that the attention find a way to renew itself, to resurrect the image the blank margin has just destroyed.

Literary tropes mimic a magic that recognizes death, and in doing so, gives us the means to undo it. Rhyme, properly heard, refuses to let sound die, but recognizes that it cannot call back the object it records in its original state. Rhyme calls forward the same sound in new form, as if the deeper meaning of a word has little to do with its lexical content, and everything to do with the syllable chanting inside the definition. The body is different but the breath is the same. A poem initiates us into death so as to awaken us into life, into this world that requires new eyes to see. What unites initiatory experience throughout cultures is the necessity of dying so as to leave behind one mode of interacting with the world and enter into another one. My sense of what poetry offers us is precisely this initiation into death so as to emerge from the poem more alive. We ask art to give us new eyes—to do so we must learn to put our old eyes out. Light is ancient, and the mistake we most often make is in thinking that to see is an instantaneous work. When we see with new eyes we see anciently. Poetry offers us the initiation into such light, and through such light, a life that sees the world in the continuous present. We put time away when we walk out of the poem and into the world. When time catches up, when we become again all too mortal, we return to the poem in order to remember how to return to the world.

When we read as initiates, and when the space of the poem is the space of initiation, we undergo the ancient ritual of deserving to live in the world in which we're alive. We put "childish things away." That state in which the world dangles like a bauble on the string of the mobile the baby reaches her hand toward is replaced by entering into the world with the overwhelming sense of life's sacredness. Initiation is the introduction to the fragility of the world by which it is seen as most whole and holy. We see that fragility by recognizing our own—realization that we must step through mortality in order to step past it. To read a poem in this sense is to commit a necessary suicide. No, that's the wrong sentiment, the wrong word. One might say instead that to read the poem is also—secretly, anciently—to prepare oneself sacrificially, to make of one's mind and one's heart that peculiar offering that lends life to the page being considered. In such a notion we hear Whitman's song:

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