

“Fiction has a truth exceeding that of history”
– Aristotle

Year 4.08

“For truth consists of nothing else than the self activity of personal appropriation,” Kierkegaard whispered in his ear. This was the poetry world, after all, not the real world. In this world, language was used to signify reality. Yet this was the world which he’d inhabited most of his adult life. What began as a romantic fantasy had become an undeviating obsession. Practically all his waking consciousness was taken up with poetry and poets. Poetics, if there were such a thing, was the fabric of his reality, woven during the day and unraveled at night.

Why does it matter, he mused, that some poets write poems like an iron clad argument when there is no need for argument, no argument at all. It’s only language, after all, a house of cards at best.

Pity writers, especially poets, all they know is language. It’s as if Archimedes had said “give me a sentence and I will move the world.” That feathered offspring of great lizards whose domain they covet has given them a sequence of sounds upon which to develop their own flights of fancy.

Language exhibits many properties of the autonomous agent, co-evolution, community, and creates its own lexisphere, moving toward greater complexity while allowing for a superior ability to conceive as well as understand. A good poem is revelatory as it steps into the adjacent possible.

It’s important to have the voice of speaking in poetry as well as the voice of intellect, and those seeking originality will appreciate folk speak for its oracular potential, the riddle that language unfolds. The mind speaking takes an unknown path.

Language, that ingrained attribute, conspires against the body in its breakaway republic of imagination. It works like light to express the shape of the ineffable.

Niche determining, language is a metaphoric process in which the comfort of perfected stasis tries to maintain balance in the face of unexpected revelation at the turn of a phrase, tricking order out of chaos, and chasing information along the thermodynamic gradient. Truly mutable, language traces the evolution of the psyche.

A poet’s medium is this most common of attributes. Everyone uses language every day. Poets do what is obvious: they deal in the mysteries of the self-evident. Poems occupy the event horizon to the black hole of meaninglessness.

When I turned fifty, I declared that the best years of my life were yet to come. Subsequently when friends and acquaintances also reached the half-century mark, I made a similar assertion to them. Whatever prompted me to make that claim then, I see now that much of it was bluster, a whistling in the dark. The grim assessment of my final days nearing, I had to make peace with the mortality I so frequently denied. But I did also believe that better years awaited me. I had mellowed, and the fierce ambitions, if not fulfilled, were put

in quieter perspective—some were foolish, some misguided, and a few were still in reach of a determined patience. What I could not have realized was how quickly the decade between then and now would pass. Those years are a blur. Memories, much more tenuous than they ever were, blend into an indistinguishable tangle of emotions, brief spikes above or below a median line I have tried so hard to walk. This last decade is one in which I resolved to live with a thoughtfulness and equanimity that hardly characterizes the previous five sets of ten. But there is no escaping the random turmoil that lurks around every corner, there's no use in treading lightly because those soft footsteps echo with heart stopping thuds in the hallways of history, as does each stubbed toe register a painful significance. To come to terms with these realizations is perhaps the consequence of my original misconception, that among these later years would be some of the sweetest if for nothing else than their ripeness, the wonderful depth of their maturity. I should have considered *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Or, the more you struggled the deeper the hole you've dug for yourself gets.

“Mind is the idea of body” as Spinoza said, a poetical thinking that proceeds by emotional as well as logical stages to achieve a quasi-intellectual end by impressionistic or inconsequential means.

I recognize myself in the reified product of my accumulated jottings, re-appropriating and transforming that reflection into the transparent medium of self-expression. All the while cognizant that the act of writing seeds the bed with wild indiscriminate irony, and that the longer the tradition of writing endures, the heavier the ironic undergrowth becomes.

I have always been concerned with not only what words mean but how they mean. In my younger days, decades ago, I wanted to acquire the trappings of entertainer, rock star, stand-up comic, or even scientist, in an effort to appeal to the popular imagination. In the guise of academic analysis, I was among those who took language to task by dissecting, deconstructing, recombining, psychoanalyzing, personalizing, digitizing, fractalizing, and recycling it.

What I learned was that the degree of difficulty of any work of poetry distances itself from entertainment and increases its atomic weight as it inches toward the eternal—in this case by Planck lengths. The poem is no longer a message but an utterance expressing doubt, curiosity, and tentative optimism.

Sometimes a poem is just idiot bravado. On the other hand, if I didn't write for myself, I would have a doubtful audience.

Poets are consumed by their successors in a tidal wave of relentless curiosity, blind to the real world, myopic at best, from all that introspection. In the so-called literary world, mental midgets and MFA pods lacking any sense of angst or verbal imagination control the jungle drums. I can't get published on the East Coast because I'm too West Coast and I can't get published on the West Coast because I'm too New York.

Dick Granahan once advised, “There are three things you should not be if you want to get published these days: heterosexual, male, and intelligible.”

It's like Amy Lowell said, "In poetry circles, there are rings of intrigue." Poetry coats its victims in honey before delivering them to the ant hill.

The first enemy of poetry is meaning. I have spent my whole life constructing meaningless poems. "Go for broke" has been my maxim. I don't refute my contemporaries. I merely put gloves on when I have to deal with them. Those who have breathed the air of my writing knew that it is a rarified if not sometimes excruciating experience. Poetry as I understand and live it means seeking out everything strange and questionable.

In the face of acute self-consciousness, deserted by this layer of deviant illusion, I suspect all praise as false and believe all criticism to be irrevocably true, perfectly describing what I am. I question every good intention, jump at every shadow. Cautious, I shrink from the world I once wished to captivate.

And in the background, the cosmos, always a lover of irony, laughs up its sleeve.

He closed his eyes, heaved a great sigh, and settled back in to view the abstract expressionist slide show. It was almost guaranteed to put him to sleep.

So dozing he dreamt that he'd waked from a dream. A white horse was lying on its side in the sand. It had only one wing and was trying to rise, but was unable to. The sun was yelling, "Hey! Wake up! Don't be so rude as to snooze in my presence. You're only the second, no, make that the third poet I've chosen to talk to. So pay attention!"

"*Pay Attention*, wasn't that the title of my first book?"

"Right, now is the time to put that into practice. You think I've got all day?"

"Sorry, I stayed up late last night talking with Patti."

"The times I woke up Mayakovsky and O'Hara, they were a little more appreciative. Anyway, I wanted to tell you your poetry sucks. Sorry that's just the way I am—unfiltered through the niceties of rejection, so consider this your burn notice. I've seen a lot of poetry over the last couple of epochs and I have to say that yours has to be among the worst. The best I can say about you is that you're different. I've also heard it said that you're crazy but that's generally been from those who have been lobotomized by Anglo hegemony. The *real* crazy poets, on the other hand, think you're a boring reactionary and a sellout. Not that you shouldn't sweat it, the heat on your credibility is bound to get hotter, and you'll pay hell for ignoring it. People are always criticizing your poetry, that it's either too smart or too dumb, too superficial or too obscure, too light or too ponderous, that the stanzas are too long or too short. And because you don't publish every day, they say you're lazy. Or dead. Don't worry about your lineage, poetic or otherwise, it's never been anything to brag about, and now it's practically non-existent. Maybe you should reconsider trying to cast your pathetic poetic light on everything from sea to shining sea, on the jungle, on the tundra, on the city, on the farm, the mountains and valleys, and most of all, the frigid wastes of the human soul, now that you've come to the end of your days, so to speak. No one is ever going to read you. Not everyone can stomach your narcissism. It hurts their pride."

“Ok, Sun, why are you telling me all this?”

“Remember I’m keeping an eye on you. It’s much easier for me to talk to you out here than it is in the city. I don’t have to slide down between buildings to get your attention. But you should try looking at more than the tip of your shoes, rejecting everything, people, earth, sky, stars, as you do, ungraciously and with your inappropriate claims to genius. That too is your inclination, known on high, and you should give it up, you’re not a track star from Mineola Prep. It’s the road to hell if you continue, and I don’t doubt that it will lead you there. If you’re lucky we’ll speak again when I return from the other side of the world. Go back to sleep now, Carl. I’m leaving this thought in that pointy little head of yours as my goodbye.”

“No, please don’t go just yet. I have so many more questions.”

“No, go I must, they’re calling me.”

“Who are they?”

“You’ll never know. They won’t be calling you, that’s for sure.”

Darkly the sun began to set, and darkly I awoke.

I have to regain my balance. The prize money just makes me paranoid, like somehow it’s contributing to my demise. It will be gone soon enough and all I’ll have left to show for it is my paranoia.

I don’t mind being called a charlatan but to actually believe that I am is unbearable. To think of myself as a poet, even today, is to invite scrutiny and ridicule. It implies a particular ungrateful exceptionalism to the group, the social organism to which I owe my survival and existence.

I need a private life undetermined by social conditions and conventions. As an eccentric, I am on the periphery of respectability, my social surrender less than willing. My antisocial behavior, hermetic, belongs to the tradition of the yogi, the ascetic, the beggar monk. Grow a beard to hide my features. Maybe I can be like one of those fringe guys, eccentrics who disparage the status quo, like Han San and Stonehouse.

A life learned in private becomes the public lesson and then codified is made into the correctness of daily intercourse. In society the self is subservient to the group which is dependent on this unity for survival, and eccentric behavior is either a threat or sacred or both.

The more private my life becomes, instances of social interaction are less likely to occur. What is sacrificed? A broader though maybe disturbing objective view for a narrow though maybe more satisfying subjective view?

I’m way past my use-by date, I know. I was a promising young poet once but I broke that promise while dusting it and it shattered into a thousand pieces. I can’t anguish over what I haven’t done. Oddly enough after all these years of doing what I do, I feel more self-assured in my attempts at what I do, failed as

they are. Consistency is what I'm after I realize now, not the mercurial delusions of mental masturbation. I've reached a point in my writing where I feel confident in what I'm doing. It may be crap, but it is confident crap. And after all, if I'm seeking thrills, there's no thrill like that old thrill. I won't agonize over what I'm saying because I don't know what I'm going to say until I say it.

It's been many years since I came to the realization that my life's work is my life's work which has had practically no effect on how I feel about my life's work. I am still petty, competitive, envious, fearful, ambitious, and solitary. My monolithic selfishness is a monument to itself.

The look of haughty defiance that says yes I am. That had been a large part of his personality, but then there was always someone younger, better looking, more defiant.

He was brought out of his reverie by laughter and complaint. The young child who had given up trying to fit the ocean into a hole had taken to circumscribing shapes in the wet sand with a stick of driftwood and warning the young men of the group tossing a Frisbee around, "Don't mess with my circles!"

The discus transformed from a plastic pie plate and aerodynamically shaped to glide across distances to the clutches of the young and athletic and their dogs, was further evidence of the endless potential of possibility. Once the young women joined in, the sport spontaneously transformed into tackle Frisbee. And no one paid any mind to no stinking circles. He assumed the group belonged to the VW bus and the pickup truck with the camper shell he'd noticed in the parking lot to the beach access.

There was a reason American beer was served cold. It tasted like piss when it warmed. He popped another top and watched a cocoon of foam slowly inch its way up through the hole. He washed down another pain pill.

One of the young women looked his way and waved tentatively. He raised his can in return. Still he wandered inward caught up in a labyrinth of self appraisal. . . .

I should have listened to Granahan and his ghost is reminding me. *Once you're famous your life is pretty much over because you're owned by those who have recognized you for who you are, for what you do, made up a special room in their consciousness for you where you are an expected guest, and by inhabiting that elevated station in their collective esteem, you have stopped being a person, your own private person, and have become a public symbol, an abstraction, a sacred object to be sacrificed so that those who have invested their belief in you can collect their dividend. Like Orpheus you will be parceled out in communion, something you can't hope to survive. All that will remain of you is the grim mask of your skull from which will emanate the endless recitation of your exploits and accomplishments, your claims to fame, and which will be placed on a flowering apple bough to float*

downstream to the bottomless sea of forgetfulness. Read the fine print before you sign anything.

And here I am. I have arrived. Doomed to perform tasks which are meaningless to those who came before me because each succeeding generation shames its ancestors without really meaning to. Everyone has decidedly unique ways of achieving their objectives and once locked into these particular rituals pay hell breaking with them though sometimes the divorce from redundancy is the work of an instinct for survival.

Organization is the key. Words, phrases stuck together in a plan as in a mnemonic device—you can imagine a cathedral or a hermit's hut, each straw as important as every shard of stained glass. The choice is between humility of self and glorification of the universal. Raw materials are refined by order.

There was a time when poems would come three or four on the heels of each other, but those days are past. Once in a while a poem will occur to me with the aggressiveness of a junkyard dog and I have to write it down if for no other reason than to shut out the yapping. . . look at that, I've just compared the muse to a pit bull. Most of the time though I'm content to let the ethereal bubbles of my musings burst of their own accord. I get to the point of thinking, why bother? I've written my fair share. Let someone else shoulder the load. But as soon as I think that, there's that ferocious mutt nipping at the seat of my consciousness.

Preoccupied with the finished product, something, everything must have a certain finality. When I think about it, hidden doubts surface and the only finished products are the dead. These dead things, extinct, vanished, rubbed out become then the tangibles of an imagined perfection. To live up to these expectations, I only have to die.

But no perfection without mistakes. The perfection of mistakes is an art. The mistake of perfection is a mistake. Art is mistaken perfection. The principle mark of my genius is not perfection but originality. "Be true to yourself even when the truth hurts." My imperfections distinguish me from the next guy. I try not to make the same mistake twice.

As with any success comes the question, what are the consequences, the fall out, collateral damage? Success is what you throw in the face of those who doubted you. Success is always a disappointing drug. As is marijuana, and a dangerous drug as well. More dangerous than heroin. Overdose on heroin, the heart stops beating. Overdose on marijuana and experience a supernatural shift in perception as the heart rate increases. Cross over a psychic boundary where a unity is impossible to realize because it involves self-pointing. And as long as there is a self to point to, that unity will remain indefinable. The actualization of unity comes only with death, the transformation into dark energy. Psychoactive drugs establish the link to the

trans-vegetative that the current dogmas and ideologies of death denial cannot allow.

The evil weed awakened a self-loathing snot sniveling psychosis, a litany of regrets, like a wave, a panic attack, the fear that his world had or is crumbling. Logically, he could attribute it to the nagging self-consciousness caused by the drug's psychotropic effect. But he wasn't really in a mood for logic right then. What did O'Hara say? "Logic always produces pain which is very bad for you." One of the reasons he so disliked pot. It opened too many doors, doors that ought to remain shut, double bolted. Behind them lived the morbid fantasies that were so insulting to his sensibilities, hard to shake, encouraged by superstition and fear. Exposed viscera sensitive to the very atmosphere can only react with pain, a sensitized instrument recording the vicissitudes of the slightest change traced on a graph of agony. Stoned, drunk, and medicated, there was bound to be some kind of adverse reaction other than the foregrounding of the persistent tinnitus that was a result of the beating and an off kilter confusion. Yet the most terrible of drugs was the self, imbibed in solitude and whose surfeit led to estrangement, from the world and from himself.

A particularly bitter realization comes to mind, not that it's anything new, it has always been there, from the very beginning in fact, and I've spent most of my adult life ignoring it, hiding it from myself with drink and distraction. Small victories, passing acclaim eked out of a thin stratum of marginal talent and dogged perseverance, grasping at crumbs fallen from the table of giants. What I have thrown myself into wholeheartedly as an accomplished destiny is foolhardy. What did Hammett say? Stubborn obstinacy is just the courage of the weak?

The poems, poetry, have fallen away from me as if I'd been clutching them like a hand over the edge of a cliff connected to a body of work and I can no longer hang on and they've slipped away into an abyss, into chaos, a space of language that is no longer comprehensible to me and I feel that I've lost faith, faith in the abilities I've practiced so diligently over the years to attain, and after all, once I lose faith I lose the underpinnings, the foundation upon which I stand, indivisible, or maybe it's me hanging over an incomprehensible void and it's literature out of whose grasp I've slipped. No matter, the feeling of loss is the same either way. I don't want to dwell on it. If I did it would merely be nostalgia for a life I once led, a life that gained importance at the tip of a pen, and now how foolish that all seems.

So what of that mountain of shit smeared sheets, the cacata carta I produce with the regularity of a morning dump? The endless shit path taken. Kerouac said it, "Poetry is shit." *Quelle merde!* What a load of garbage! What self-indulgent delusional crap! Clueless monuments of naiveté from an embarrassingly unaware infantile exhibitionist!! A wrong turn at my very beginning led the way to the inevitable dead end with no turning back. A

necessary surface tension has to be maintained otherwise, if the bubble pops, that once unique space becomes undifferentiated atmosphere. Another example of my wrong headedness, each negative iteration a hammer blow to the ego. A shame of a sham.

“I coulda been a carpenter,” he mumbled to himself, voicing regrets over the path not taken. The summer jobs during high school his uncles had arranged for him had been physically exhausting but also exhilarating, leaving him at the end of the day with a sense of accomplishment. Poetry never did that. There was always a nagging doubt that nothing had actually been accomplished. It is the original vaporware. And now his sense of self, his spirit had deserted him, and he was in freefall accompanied by that sinking feeling, not so much as the loss of self but the shattering of identity, a loss of purpose, confused, directionless, that his whole life was a lie.

As I suspected, it’s all a lie. “It’s all a fucking fiction!” Did I say that out loud? I’ve been here before, when the bottom fell out, years ago. Everything I’d ever written, insupportable, a throbbing open wound of abject despair. But with time and the routine of being, no matter how superficial, it scabbed over and I resumed my wayward delusional literary ways. Yet here it is again, the unkindest cut of all.

Can I deny what I’ve devoted my entire life to? It would render everything I’ve ever done meaningless. But everything rings so false, contrived, self indulgent, hopeless. I need a reserve of denial and that bank account is overdrawn. I hate what I am but even though I wish I could, I can’t stop being what I hate. The poet’s dilemma, Ovid had been there long before me.

Mortified, by which I mean embarrassed, humiliated, chagrined, discomfited, shamed, abashed, horrified, appalled at what I’ve done, by my present circumstances, not that the drift into abject debauchery is unfamiliar, yet another path to a predictable predicament fraught with tragic entanglements.

That sorrowful lost feeling was an occupying army, a dread that paralyzed any function, a blood blindness that routed everything through the inflamed amygdala and constricted perception to a long narrow tube at the end of which was barely a glimmer. He had to extricate himself from the spiraling vortex his almond sized ur-brain had awakened. The foundation of his beliefs moaned under the weight of his uncertainty. The gnarled hand of regret grabbed for his throat. A slug of beer, draining the can, and a deep drag at cigarette’s end, filling a lungful, restored the imperatives of the physical. The other hand shaking fumbled with the laptop tote and the objects to which were moored a tenuous temporary sanity. The beer and the painkillers acted as brakes to the ganja fed obsessive self-destructive slide, but it was a battle.

If I don’t destroy these thoughts, I will be destroyed by them. But that’s the answer, isn’t it? Art disrupts life. True poets invite chaos every time,

reaffirming that which is denied. Art is the most direct connection between the sewer and the stars. Art is magic liberated from the lie of being truth. And what is that truth? That art foreshadows death.

“Art foreshadows death” lit up like a neon bolt in his forebrain. He was compelled to note it. That the whole train of thought was portentous, ponderous or profound had yet to be determined. He felt anxious, impatient. He rushed to open the notepad, and it was taking its own sweet time, scrolling rather slowly and lagging in bringing up the file. He had been ignoring the flashing icon in the upper right hand corner of the screen signaling the battery was low. The next question was how long could he go on ignoring it? He understood the concept that his devices needed to be recharged but had never managed to carve a niche in his routine to do it. He repeated the phrase to himself as the processing of his command was being considered. Then the screen went blue. The swirl of an animated enso preceded the grey powerless square blank eye staring back at him. The words he’d wanted to record, perhaps even the key to his immortality, had loosed their grip and slipped away.

His gut did a back over flip before sinking like a lead weight. He had paper in his satchel, his medical report, on the back of which he could scribble his portentous burning thoughts. But even though he rummaged through the bag and the side pouches and pockets, he knew he didn’t have a pen. He’d become overconfident and overly reliant on his devices to capture his notes and salient observations. Pens got lost or ran out of ink and always needed a spare or replacing, but they never needed to be charged. He panicked. It was a Richard III moment. My kingdom for a stylus! Desperate, he clutched a large sea washed pebble and scratched the words onto the side of the granite boulder. It might as well have been written in lemon juice, the granite was either too tough or the pebble not tough enough to leave an impression. What he had scrawled crumbled away as indecipherable beige dust.

The resurgence of hope snagged on a technological tripwire, and he plunged headlong into hopelessness. He was drunk and stoned and overmedicated. He understood now the fine print in his compact with the gods. He could drink alcohol unaffected like an immortal, but mixing it with psychotropics and opiates was a deal breaker. “The gods have abandoned me!” he shouted pulling himself to his feet.

His brain turned to dizzy gel and his gut heaved up into his throat. In profound self-disgust he staggered toward the waves, vomiting, tears and snot pouring off his face. Sea water washed over his silver loafers and swirled around his silk socks. His revulsion turned to unthinking rage. He flung the notebook computer into the consuming waves like a square Frisbee.

Instant regret struck him a blow to the solar plexus. The computer represented everything he had written in the past year, the documentation of a year in the life of his genius, and he had thrown it all away.

He turned, staggering, to see the young family of friends get to their feet, the women raising their hands in warning and the young men moving in

his direction with cautious trepidation. He didn't see it coming, only heard its roar as the sleeper wave rose up behind him and knocked him down.

The water swallowed him in one gulp, pulling at his clothes as he struggled to keep from being towed under. The relentless undulation produced another wave to wash over him, knocking the breath out of him and replacing it with bitter brine. He clawed at the wet sand in a desperate effort to anchor himself but it occurred to him in a moment of ironic clarity that he was still attached to his laptop by a binary umbilical and like a millstone it was dragging him into the deep.

Numb he opened one eye and then the other. He heard voices, low, murmuring. Someone asked, "Hey mister, you ok? You almost drowned." He turned his head away embarrassed only to face the disapproving stare of the little tousled hair girl who was methodically pasting dollar bills on the large boulder that had been his windbreak. The bills were wet. At her feet he recognized the open maw of his wallet, his plastic lined up to dry along the base of the big rock. He read in her eyes something ancient, a perceptive wisdom beyond her years. And it shamed him.

"You're soaked, mister. You should take off your clothes and try to dry them." It was one of the young women of the group and he guessed the little girl's mother. "You can wrap up in this blanket so you don't go into shock."

A fawn faced young man with a sparse ringlet beard looked at him up close. "You gonna be ok, man? Wanus to get a park ranger? Ambulance?"

He found the words and moved the sand out of his mouth with his tongue to say them. "No, I'm alright." He sat up and leaned back on his elbows to face the curious stares of the tan and rough primitives as if he'd washed ashore from a shipwreck in the South Seas. "I'll take you up on the blanket, though," as he bent forward to struggle out of the wet suitcoat.

"Wanus to call someone for you?" It was the girl's mother. "Do you have a phone?"

He shook his head, "No, battery died."

One of the other women held up her plastic rectangle and seemed to be searching the air with it. "Dude, I can't get no bars down here!"

"Wanme to go up the store make a call?" the one who bore a striking resemblance to popular depictions of Jesus asked.

The blanket draped across his lap, he self-consciously began pulling the soaked Banlon over his head. "I'm waiting for a friend to come pick me up." He understood that he was overstating, to be more accurate, hoping that a friend would come. Unbuckling his pants to slide them off, he noticed that he was wearing only one shoe.

Fawn face picked up on his consternation. "Dude, we couldn't save your other shoe. On its way to China by now."

The young mother took her child's hand. "Come along honey, let's leave the man his privacy." Then to the Jesus man, "We should get going if we're going to make it to Rockport before dark."

As they gathered up their things, the curly haired satyr wandered over to advise, “the tide’s coming in. This stretch of beach will be under water by the time the sun sets.” The young man plucked a twenty drying on the boulder, holding it up. “This should cover the blanket.”

He nodded his assent. Yet isn’t it a blanket’s purpose to cover? Sometimes language has to be spoken backwards to make itself understood.