

Figures for a Hypothesis

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Mark McMorris

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I.

How far did we travel?
Till the heart dried up.
Where did we start from?
A plan.
Where are we now?
Morningslide. Aix. Mona.
What can words do that we haven't done?
Make a place. Then we can stop.
What is this place, if not a place to stop?
The yard is a loom; we begin with it.
To return? To begin again?
The model makes room for a setting out.
Why did we set out?
To get to a dialect.
Will there be one?
We know, after going through it, that there is.
Who else comes with us?
The yard is common: slave, poet, black.
And things? Do things go with us?
Bowl, fountain, vase, bird call, mirror, pigeon, cello, gravel, bed.
How did we choose what to take?
The yard gave them when we set out.
And people?
There are two of us on a ship.
Who is the slave?
A poet.
Who is the poet?
A black.
Who is the black?
A Greek. A nude athlete. A vase.
Is there a boy?
A boy left.
A girl?
There are two girls on the trip.
Do they speak?
No.
Who speaks?
Things. The yard. We speak for them. We recall what was said.
Where do things come from?
We make them.
And the materials?
We find them. The yard gives them. We assemble what we have.
And the plan?
Afterwards; we improvised it. We follow it.
What do we do next?
Stop. Make our way to the yard.
To make a hypothesis?

To see what we have left. What uncovered. What dissolved. What muted. What dried up. What eloquent or emphatic. What blooms. What wanes. What joins us to the yard.

The courtyard is what we missed.
The courtyard is what we have left.

We see it. There are two of us. A ring of houses, the common basin.
We speak about the basin.
We stand in it.
We fashion it: satyr, brooch, woodnymph, cello.
We find them.
We become white, hollow, imperceptible. Things like sound on the pavingstones.

2.

Water stamps its feet. Slant of rain, moss. What is this place?

The eye takes what it can use: panels of different lengths, some empty, some littered with broken ax hafts, some turned rigid, from such borders do the figures come up to light.

How far did we travel, to find our hearts waning but no recollection of having set out, although the model makes room for it? Whom did we leave to show us, when we return, that we have returned?

Not that far, and no one. We stayed nearby the hand making these forms from us, to relate the dialogue clearly, woven out of the yard.

And we arrived, then, after the incision?

Or after, when the heart, done with beating, undressed in plain view and poof!, disappeared, leaving this fountain in its place.

How did we notice this vanishing if, as an inward speech, we are its echo?

The yard is a loom. Hill versus cone, sphere versus pebble: such distinctions do not bear on our loss. We draw from the yard what we put back in.

And the quartet will come tonight?

That is certain. But after, residents of the townhouses will also come to the balconies. They look down on the resurgent fountain as if to nurse it back, whatever caused it to diminish.

It is night. The waiters pack up the tables and hurry home, so that the musicians, who also wear black vests, may come in. The four of them—one a woman—arrange themselves into a bow, sheet music and stands in front of each chair. They express docility, and do not prefigure excitement, in the way that a boxer does.

We are not of the place? (Sight-seers like birds out of a cage.)

Spectators trickle in and soon overflow onto the sidewalk opposite. Around us, the houses with their common basin seem to drain us into contours of the basin. And these contours, which come to life in several competing strings, the moon puts into relief. We become more white, more hollow, more imperceptible, as if a sound lay upon the pavingstones.

We left Marseilles? How long have we been here? It is already dark.

The fountain and the music do not run simultaneously. The one is doused while the other, like light, plays on the townhouses. The cellist looks at the frieze, at the battle of Titans on one end of it, at Apollo on the other, at her place in it, at ours, next to the water-carrier. The bow sings. The point of the cello seems to drill the pavingstones until the first violin takes over. Schubert in Aix. Avignon is next door, the Popes. South and across, the border with Italy. A truck parked down the street brings necessary incongruity to the picture. Satyrs on jugs, satyrs on chairs, woodnymphs, are in the frieze but at a level of detail too fine for the naked eye.

Bulls on the shutters. What are we looking for? The thing missing.

The evening winds down. The spectators have gone home. The cellist has taken up her seat and gone home. A residue of music stays with them until the next concert. This is what we perceive in coming to the yard. Although it is late, that sound trickles around us and inhabits the blank place on the frieze. It has several memories—but we know it as amber-colored light: street lamps when they are lit. The cello itself we remember from pictures of lute players, poems about citharai that the Greeks used, wind chimes in British gardens.

There has been an aftermath.

The woman has her own place on the frieze apart from her place as the musician in these figures. She is the water-carrier in one panel, the caryatid in another. Her language is the

language of clay vases that turn up in the dung-heap, with laundry lists, brooches, household expenses, sometimes a few lines from Archilochos. Lovers turn up, preserved by the desert. Names turn up. This is the yard as we come to inhabit it.

As if the moon lay cloth upon a stone basin...

A moon, a tabac and café, the fountain of course, water-babies reclining as if upon a jet of milk, vapour. The caryatids kiss although on opposite sides of the room. They kiss by memory of people who kissed under them. the model makes room for a setting out.

As if, in a locomotive from Marseilles, the moon kept pace with out cab, always peering, always searching out some meaning of the dialogue, while we slept.

The house is old. With it, one inherits an expanding vapour, the way loss thins out whenever more rooms are opened. Some of them, with southern exposure, some in sleep always, their faces turned inward like a row of pigeons; but all crowd the fountain and we cannot escape them, once here.

3.

Congress of devils, black railings from the balconies
overhead, a fine gold skin: this is our first setting, among
auditors, more than a hummingbird's flutter, more than
residue.

We inhabit the yard, after the cellist takes up her seat and
goes home. We listen to her music trickling around us: not
distinguished from amber-colored light, but this is our wish,
not possible.

We condense as water that flows together out of air, ash.

Dialogue precipitates in the space left by the music, formed out of nothing and filling it. Under the willows is a stone bench that lovers use. We walk to it and sit on it and hold hands. The moon dies. Only the voices of wind and fountain, syllables in the basin, come from the yard. The walls move in closer; the fourth side, formerly open, closes to complete the shape: a cube with no roof, tar above it. Here we are.

Confused, we confuse the music, what remains of it, with our emptiness: several masks will fit both.

Who is touched to life first? By whom?

We touch each other—under a microscope—not at all. Nobody touches. Instead, we ward each other off, two antiphonal words that cancel, loss that, though multiplied, doesn't cease.

Another figure: that of a single fabric keeping us (them) hemmed in. What we are is what we exist in—orphans to these phrases and we cannot leave.

Or, conversely, except as confused voices, a mob during the revolution say, we are unimaginable.

Frightened in either case by so many glances in so extensive a foyer. By the nth mirror, or among items for a sale that took place, we hear the sale announced.

Or perhaps we cannot hear what we inhabit. Water.

Each time I turn on the radio, I listen for a change in intonation, a stress on the Viennese lampshade or the ceramic things. The pavingstones will not budge, nor the weeds that harp on them and cling, stronger than cement.

And, if it should rain?

If it should rain, then and only then do we transfer the table to St. Paul's vestibule and put out the books, the spoons you once thought were artifacts, the cigarette box, the intaglios of missing.

And someone will turn these things over, as they say, with loving fingers. Because they are purchasable.

Because I exist as rectangular space thrown down where we stand, do you see?

The yard retains geometry. This is what I see. Van Gogh's cypress tapers to an Ionic column, the fountain, as it rises, to a watery shell, like a flame.

A nest of shapes. I may not know which geometry is in play, but am at least capable of inner logic, that is, of equivalent solutions, within a well-defined yard. There is the fountain again.

A being of concentric circles, of circle within a rectangle, then.

Of roundness, a lack of edges, within edges and planes, a box within a sphere or as a surface that compels all lines to meet in one hand, the cellist.

We touch so invisibly that only mathematics can part the intervals, descending, as the fountain descends to zero, to one. And this is the kiss of the caryatids.

One cannot walk to the edge of the yard. In spray from the fountain, nothing is also in between droplets, just as wet, though admittedly more vaporous than we seem.

And, as in the electrical field, which is at all points a field, or which is at not point a field—for one part of the yard to cease all of it would have to cease. I cannot survive our separation, you know that. I,

A drinking glass, then
 a drinking glass with intellect—on its coaster—
 a light rattling inside the glass, in air
 Death of the glass—as if it vanished
 and left no trace of itself, no glass powder
 no ash of glass

And all drinking from glasses would cease. And the table. And we who sat around it. And what we'd hoped the glass held when you bent your lips toward it—how I held my breath like a butterfly on a pond, then—a moot point.

And we see one another around the surface of the glass and on the other side touch, hands. This is a feeling we have and it has been confirmed independently, or soon will be.

Water vapour is not held by the hand. It is left to wander with no force of gravity to plant its feet firmly. It floats at angles to the surface or upside down, tilted as in the Marc Chagall, but not so well dressed.

And in holding your hand body returns to it and gravity begins to operate. That is why, against your wish, I held on to your hand.

Things are silent—or is there a clatter just out of hearing, which silences them? A carpenter tears down his scaffold, a carpenter rebuilds it—each nail is louder than the last. Each demolition raises more dust between us; each time it is built after you ascend it, and I weep, but it collapses afresh; and in that after-image our talk settles.

Like cloth drapes over used furniture. A plantation house

around the yard that keeps certain paintings of us: unfinished,
as is best, and already fading.

Or the solidity of a divan inferred from the dust on it—in
dishabille I will wait for you to blow away the dust and purify
the arras. And we will remember it for what it was and sit on
it, and there hold hands.

We floated sideways while language stayed still and we are
now looking not at words but at the spaces in between words:
weeds, tangles that rest upon nothing.

The cracks are gutters in between stones and what we
remember as weeds actually an emptiness more complex than
either of us meant.

To tease droplets from these spaces...

A listening for sounds in between sounds as they were taught
to us...

A charming out of the spaces, in between stones, words that
wish finally to speak of us—as of two ground doves, two
feathers, flight...

A sounding...

Slippage of earth: “A summer sound, in a summer without
beginning.”

Certain phrases take their roost in the heart and come to
stand for it. These, you may read.

But I already murmur them and you already kiss me to repeat
the syllables: in this way I might take shape from you.

Kiss me to listen closely to what the heart says in that space—

To listen, as the poet said, and encounter in that hallway...
not a ring of dancing peasants—

Something we cannot hear—

Certain cadences... at the periphery of speech, a cooing—

A dialect forming at the edge of the yard where drain pipes

scamper under the walls, into dim avenues—

Silence takes up its place; not where the confusion is. The confusion is still part of the weeds and the weeds of the stones that they cement together, as weeds will.

Silence, in that no one can come back out, and our water is last seen diving into the stone—deafened by silence...

Phrases that move out into sequences begin as ground for declaration, but then relinquish it. They want profundity.

The ground on which we must begin. But this is only temporary—a provisional flatness so that a whole yard can be built and once there, dispensed with.

As if the mirage waited until our lips had already kissed and then, when hunger began, showed itself as such: we are invited to pass into the dark of one another by this ruse.

And we must swap eyes, and look off into the retinas. For it is there that what the woman sews becomes our rendezvous.

One has her knitted shadows past all confusion in the sycamore. I will wait for you—but hurry!

To be in silence where birds gather like words on a cistern. So that you may listen to them. So that we may hold hands among them. So that our hearts hold.

6.

The walls have closed to complete the shape of the dialogue, and the frieze surrounds and contains them, birds out of a cage, at the entryway to the dark. Their colloquy in turn arranges the panels; and brings to music the rose headband and tights of a girl, who puts hibiscus in the flower pot, then retires to her space prior to the yard's descent. The vase distinct from the pot serves to expose the faces of the athletes, black bulls, memories outside the word.

They taste each other in a mirror; they lie in a tangle, like coat hangers on the floor of a closet.

The statues have fallen from the frieze; the vases have shattered; and the moon climbs, weans, and shows them face to face, drapes on toppled caryatids, or a piece of black cloth.

Rose petals float in a ditch; a symphony derived from the moon accrues after it sets. For then, and only then, do her notes become audible to them.

The moon has no shadows of its own making and draws from the yard what casts them toward it, as lovers, as body, as rose.

The tangle of their voices touch one another in a word.

They kiss in shadow of the caryatids around the perimeter of the yard, the white basin.

She peels an orange at the table and shadows disappear. The vase sits on the table—in the yard—the fountain shoots up from the bowl—it topples—the cistern is wet. The shadows crowd it for the water it contains. This drinking is their life. The water runs—mysterious—under the yard, between the tangles, the roots.

Water at the roots of an olive: self.

And there are two mirrors, one rose vase the same for each, one girl in tights on a sofa, one woman in the yard, the cellist

The bowl is the shadow of a bowl
The cello is the hand of her shadow in water
The strings are its roots
Water is a cistern composed of our words
We site on the cistern in sunlight
To read letters of what lies outside the yard

The tables are arranged for lunch
Waiters in black vests put vases on them
for us
 and we take two chairs under Van Gogh's olives
And one of us says: Le Bureau de Change

It is a sparkling day in Provence;
the blue sky, which we elsewhere call heaven,
floods the eye like an unbelievable sea.
The water babies belong to the fountain
under the moon, one of the nighttime yards,
and have not yet come into view—
and so we observe the clock tower,
Hôtel de Ville and stop at the fromagerie
to look at the goat cheese, the cream.
I go on to the library, you to the studio
in the carriage house to make ceramic things
cup and saucer, ewer, clay
in turquoise, daubed with black spots—
and I hear the wheel turning
the forms soon ready for the oven
then a glaze to coat them—rust, green, peach—
they hold water then, and I still have the one you gave me
on the desk, in front of me, full of pennies,
full of kisses even so long after.

Our life has lost its symmetry, but we shape
each other somewhat more at night
as, more surreptitiously, the yard glimmers
open from a bedroom window,
and a big-lunged baby howls across the alley
like a jagged nerve.

 To which you light a candle
and I pour more wine and cut the cheese;
we dine, this is what we do together,
as a careful way of passing the time
until bed and sleep take us, and turn us in.
Rescued, we don more amicable masks
and slip from our usual clothes into the sheets,
features, and desires typical of dreams
that stop short of morning. And so the night wanes.

And so much is forgotten, except the lines that tie us,
until a huge bomb in a nearby street goes off
and shock waves rattle the shelf and startle us.
Everybody out of bed, back to bed
through splinters on the sidewalk
by three thirty everything if quiet
as it was, but everyone's the wiser.

Nothing in the paper about it—
a contemporary ruin: it's not our business;
it's the Arabs; it's another couple.

The skylight of Cézanne's studio
bids us enter—come, come—
to see the green bottles that held his candles
in fossilized charm, the wax
long ago dripped and hardened on them
or forms like the ones he knew
a skull, a letter desk, an easel
(to keep our hearts intact), bowls of clutter,
paint brushes, feathers, a jug,
cypresses from on high, not yet in the frame.
We bask in scattered relics of the art
on his spot, and think our way to forms
or windows that send us from the room
into a countryside of our choice.
This is Provence and not kingdom come
to earth, a yard and not our Purgatory
though the trees do look like fire—
though cinders menace, and we are not happy.

I remember you as Meryl Streep
in the film of a French Lieutenant's Woman
or Ophelia, as she sang down the
stream of language and pulled the orchids to her.
That was her poetry
lost to both of us before the play began.
Your face terrified me—
turning at the sink, you screamed
and crumpled, unaware of me beside you
and singing like a madwoman
or a child and a broken doll
cast off on an island, unaware of me,
when you heard my voice you screamed
and crumpled, I could not
love you any
 more then; the self

is in love with pity.
The going from the yard is the grace
of the going of the shadow.

The trickle of her music is a blossom
trickling from the mouth, and into a ditch.

Moments of the interlude: Danielle still sleeps beside me and I too am asleep. The figurines and toys lie still on her shelves as I saw them, a red shower curtain keeps the light and serves as drapery for the windows of her bedroom. Close at hand, recrimination, pent-up violence, the ungoverned. Words can smash when they try to break out. And to speak from this place, to be within it, a temporary illusion of peace. The heart is gone out. A fountain that continually swoons—often plain with a plain cistern, often encrusted with water babies and pissing cupids—survives in its place, as words from courtyards that we saw. Then it too goes out, and a room of fixed decisions comes back. Ghiberti's doors—as we saw them—forever keep panels of the expulsion, or cast in bronze, like a sword guarding the gate with fire, our return has been cut off by what I said and couldn't hold back, and so the language of exile accretes, figures for a hypothesis, on a panel not yet littered with our debris.