

A photograph of a person walking away from the camera on a paved path. The path is lined with tall, conical evergreen trees, each with a small white light at its base. The trees are arranged in a row, creating a sense of perspective. The person is wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants. The background shows more trees and a building in the distance.

**KEITH  
WALDROP**

**The Silhouette of the Bridge**  
(Memory Stand-Ins)

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Keith Waldrop

Avec Books  
Penngrove

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*for Allison Bundy*





A disciple of the great void, still this side of Nirvana, is telling—it is a public lecture—of a man carrying a great heavy load. *Until*, one day the bottom drops out of his basket and his burden becomes light.

He—the lecturer—continues for an hour and a half in this vein, referring to enlightenment as the experience of “dropping our bottoms.”

At an opera in the sometime East, during intermission, I sit down with a cup of coffee and suddenly recall sitting here before.

Here, quite certainly here, exactly at one of these tables. It is still the East. The cafe is crowded, as always during intermission, and I sit down where two other people are already having refreshments. The man, who looks as if he might head the chamber of commerce—if commerce here has chambers—seems to be trying to get acquainted with the woman. The woman is dark, a trifle hefty, maybe forty, not handsome but attractive, exotic, with an aura of power.

He asks her what she is doing in Berlin. That is an easy sentence to understand and I understand what she says in reply, because it is simple and because she speaks German slowly and with an accent.



She says she is in Berlin (I wonder where she comes from) to sing an opera. She will sing—in another house—*Madama Butterfly*. The man looks blank.

“Do you know,” she asks slowly, with an accent, “*Madama Butterfly*?”

He shakes his head absently. No, he does not.

Light spills.

I come to Providence at the age Dante stumbles into Hell.

At age eight, or maybe ten, I keep a diary—nothing extensive, more, as I remember, of events than of feelings.

After a few weeks, I discover that my father—I don’t at first believe it—simply sits down and opens and reads my diary.

I throw it away.

I never keep another.

So many believe, through so many centuries, that we are each a little universe, a small glass mirroring the whole shebang, which is represented in us tiny but complete, a microcosm.

Avicenna has a different take on this. We are, he supposes, nothing in ourselves—nothing, that is, to start with. But we can, by thought, gradually, take in the macrocosm, reflecting all things, thing by thing, until we *become* a little mirror of the Whole. Indeed, if we fail to do so, our souls go into eternity maimed, partial.

A singer's death is more affecting than that of a writer, since a poem or a story stands at more of a distance from the body that has produced it.

I go into the front hall to lock the door for the night.

Minutes later, I ask myself if I have locked the door. I cannot remember the actual locking, cannot feel in my fingers the turn of the latch, the echo of fixing the chain.

I go back to the front hall, find the door latched, the chain fixed.

Curious, how Simone Weil makes into opposites *gravity* and *grace*, while Augustine knows his love of God as a load or heavy weight, a kind of ballast.

To be home, I must live where I remember living.

The number of sparrows increases. And pigeons.  
Gangs of blue-jays.

The rarer birds all but disappear.

I am not, in Providence, quite at home—though it  
has been my home longer than anywhere else.

I am offered, with coffee, a madeleine. The only  
recollection it provokes is of reading Proust.

I have not acquired the dialect: brooks are still creeks  
to me.

Someone says “the past” is not something that  
happens, but a scenario in my head, thus making me  
responsible.

Avicenna dies of (unspecified) sexual excesses.

This, now, is a kind of diary-in-memory, posthu-  
mous to what is recorded, inscriptions above buried  
impressions.

I know, of course, that while memory holds the  
shape of the past, the past that is held takes on the shape  
of memory.

Our eye scapes the land.

A song is determined by the nature and training of the voice.

Our space is a vase, the objects within it like water taking the vase's shape.

A "haunting, ineluctable sense of cosmic memory" may derive from "the evening darkness on the rear platform of an Elmgrove Ave. car."

This play of memory, now, is my *bel canto*.

I do not remember that evening's darkness.

Or the platform.

There is no Elmgrove car.

I remember *chalcedony*. And, thereby, the New Jerusalem.

... unique among American cities in having, for its local color, horror stories.

*Music for a while...*

Less and less.

And that terrible cherry pie...

And how it ends, how will I know? Crashing the threshold of knowing, I am suddenly past it, cancelling even the awareness of crossing, cancelling it retroactively and irrevocably. That is to say, I may feel the shock at the instant of shock, but at that very instant lose it again.

And if ever I reawaken, which is unimaginable, I will still not remember.

I do not think such momentary feeling can be called experience.





I write so slowly that sometimes the world turns clean around between sentences or before I can decide between terms.

Coming and going, which seem so symmetrical, have nothing in common. A line of trees offering shade on my left, I give up a shorter route and step into the smaller street. It is like a tunnel home. Speckles of sun on the sidewalk enhance my sense of escape.

It does not follow that this should be read in spurts or in an attempt to restore layers of effort and hesitation. Writing, reading, though they share a text, have no other relation—as being born does not tell how to die.

Sun speckles the table, persistent.



My second left lower bicuspid has never been particularly useful to me. It sprouts from its gum, diagonal, projecting inward, and grinds nothing. For decades, my tongue has worried the crown.



Now it hurts and my dentist tells me the fang is rotten.

It has done me little good, this second left lower bicuspid, and is bound now to cause me a share of pain. And yet I'm sure I will regret it, as I regret whatever is lost while passing even briefly through my life, let alone a part so intimate, thrusting itself daily into my consciousness, my irritation.

If I could express all such irritations, those rough or tender spots on the otherwise unfelt surface of my time on earth, it would come to a list of the things I cannot, as they say, take with me. And since once left, in their totality, untaken, they include the very faculty of regret, I must mourn now or never my whole passing world.

And I do in fact, in advance, regret it—the encompassing, the encroaching, the impenetrable, the hard, heavy, incomprehensible given. Of Christian virtues, I claim only one: I love my Enemy.



There are things I seem able to do only in sleep—important things, perhaps.

If only I could remember them.

Sometimes, as I wake, the last dreamt image remains, tenuous, fading already as I try to hold it in the speckle of sun that cuts through the blind.

Even from my waking hours I do not, of course, remember everything. Least of all those things for which I must *turn back*, look behind me.

(Some souvenirs I carry in my hand, like weapons.)

But dreams: they are so often lost even while coming into being.

I am called upon—in dreams—to perform. Without lines, before no house. Playing for a packed void, constrained to play.

I sleep badly.



The great violin-makers—Guarnerius, Stradivarius—were perfectly aware that wood must vibrate, that the instrument must be played, for a long time before it comes into its own, reaches the quality that it is, finally, capable of.

At the end of their lives, they were carving the backs thicker, the ribs stronger, making possible a louder tone, more brilliant technique—delaying the peak of performance for eighty or a hundred years. They never heard their violins as they could, and do, sound.



I could hope—since one can hope for something, even while realizing its unlikelihood—that, at the prospect of being erased, my life will fast forward, appearing (while disappearing) in a swift trail before my mind's eye.

Not that I hanker to see anything over, still less (even if it were imaginable) to propose a replay.

But it adds some interest *now* to suppose that in that extreme moment a pattern might emerge—even if only the kind of pattern one wrests from a crumbling wall or from clouds blustered across blank air.

Isolated, the most casual scene becomes formal. Glimpsed in psyche or cheval glass, random details proportion themselves, heighten into tone. Any picture is another world, and suggests a *whole* world.



My dentist scratches at my second left lower bicuspid and shakes his head in a sorrow I suspect is genuine. He does not want to upset me. He does not want to complicate his schedule.

Nothing, as a rule, holds him long from one or the other of his specialties: glider flying, deep sea diving.

"Poetry," he once murmured, his hand in my mouth, "can you live off of poetry? I mean, now," he goes on, since I can't answer, "everybody has teeth."

And tells me my tooth must out and his wife works an appointment for me into a crowded hour on one of his working days.



In dreams, I lie down in a garden, in a forest, on the shore, in the back yard, in a faint, unnatural in the dreamlight of a dreamt sun, cool, hoping to dream real accomplishments.



Over the years, I have allowed unstated—even unconscious—judgments to determine, for instance, what I

will read or not read. Without condemning so-and-so's work, I cease to look for new installments. Not throwing aside such-and-such a book, I simply do not pick it up, but look at another. One cannot give everything, or even very many things, full attention.

Now I have come to a point where all my judgments seem questionable, those I've wrapped in a phrase and can hand on, but also those which carry me, as if by instinct, past a shelf of volumes I only half notice to this one suddenly under my hand. They could all be wrong, these judgments, bad habits of exclusion and easy reference.

Habits can have wrong results even if, in some sense, they are good habits.

Books I read long ago (I stay with my example of books, but it is not merely—or even mainly—a literary matter) I have an urge to reread, to see if they are as good as I once thought, or as bad, or if they are simply what they once seemed to me. That my latest impression must be, soon, as unsubstantial as the earlier doesn't bother me.

All that bothers me now is the increasing hurry of the passage.



Li Po, climbing the highest mountain, was accosted by maidens supernaturally soft, who invited him to sip from a completely other cup. Wistful, embarrassed, he declined, not ready for immortality.



I have been told, over and over, that one does not, properly speaking, “waste” time, that when it seems to me I’m doing nothing, new forms are preparing—“gestation,” one calls it, and another talks of “incubation.”

I wish I could believe them.

I have often the feeling that time, with me, does little but waste, though no example can be given—any account suggesting survival.



Sleep surrounds me and, as I fall into it, rises on all sides. It is as though waking were a deep shaft down into sleep, where gravity is different—I sink, I hover sometimes around chance level.

And I do not sleep well, not tossing in torment, not anxiety-ridden, simply awake, or partly awake, off and on, uncertain, through the sleeping hours.

The air is viscous, an air resembling a liquid, heavier, harder and harder to breathe, until it seems alive, breathing, and I become its breath.

Messages, relayed, become progressively more blurred. Subject matter filters out and abstract qualities begin to predominate—as happens in memories. The light increases, to a point of irreality. The grossest delusions, it seems, the lies most exasperating, the foulest, come as illuminations.



Some went into the desert—the hermits of the Thebaid, for example—desperate to escape the complications of an unanointed world, its vague riddles, its uncertainties like shifting sand.

But some went farther afield, beyond where Anthony fought temptation, steeling himself against the images his appetite called into being.

And before scattering into, as it were, this desert beyond the desert—the vast, uncultivated, inner waste—

they vowed that God being their only hope, they would henceforward accept aid from no hand but His, nothing from humankind, neither food nor shelter. They were His. He would provide.

Then, one by one, they went out, compelled by an urge whose nature they failed to discern.

And of course they perished, one by one, each alone in his wilderness. They were destroyed by hunger, by thirst, by the implacable sun. Starving, they were attacked by wild beasts. Starved, they fed the carrion birds.

And one of them, parched and crazed by the noon glare, stumbled into the midst of a nomadic tribe notoriously bloodthirsty and inhospitable to the point of legend.

And the hard hearts of those barbarians were so struck by the condition of the hermit that for once they were moved to compassion and offered him bread, tea—amenities of the austere encampment.

But he was beyond insight and, not considering that all things come from God, refused the bread, the drink, and died.





Considered *sub specie aeternitatis*, the Odyssey, the waters over Atlantis, my rotten tooth—are of equal duration, poised on a moment's edge.

I turn left, as I must, at a sign which announces THE DEAD IN CHRIST SHALL RISE and park where it says VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED. We are merely waves. We know nothing of the water.



...and Sister Josefa, who went to hell—she was one of the “victim-saints,” who take on themselves the sins of others, undergoing, innocently, the tortures of the damned. In hell she was punished for things that had not so much as entered her head.

I try to imagine how she experienced the merely day-to-day. Think what ordinary space would mean to her: a step in any direction must have been from nowhere to nowhere—would she not depend on the Everlasting to lift her up or let her fall?

To be a proper victim, one must be, not forgiven, but innocent from the start. Meaning: never to have suffered any bodily grace. And the saint, when she descended into hell, was afflicted part by part, inside and out, from her crown of hair to the bones in her toes. And she bore it—while the demons raged—*could* bear it, because no portion of her body, no least flesh of hers, had ever been “used for pleasure.”

Think how Satan must have scrutinized every fiber, every synapse, for an entrance—eternal he may be, but his *space* is limited—and could not find one.

Dreadful inventory.



Meanwhile, my dentist has reconsidered my second left lower bicuspid and has decided its extraction is beyond him. He is, after all, a sensitive man.

Ten years ago, arthritis threatened to cripple him, perhaps to deprive him of livelihood and even sport. Aware that the venom of honeybees is an antidote to his malady, he began, systematically, to provoke stings from passing workers.

It worked so well—a sting a day, on the offending joints—that he began to cultivate his own swarms, here on his own top floor (he lives above his office). In summer, hives go out onto the fire escape and the local ragweed is well-pollinated.

He is afraid now that if he takes a firm grip on my tooth it will ... well, his term is “explode.” He explains that he employs no nurse, his wife being strictly a receptionist. He gives me the name and address of an “oral surgeon,” who operates on Saturdays.



A garden, yes, but surrounded completely by a thick wall, high, rough, topped with broken glass. And the wall has no break in it, no gate.

In dreams, one often passes through walls—but not this one, because this is a dream wall, impervious to dreamers.

If I am to sleep in that garden, as it seems I must, I will have to scale undressed stones, brave shards of broken bottles, drop—however scraped and cut—into unknown greenery, where no one waits for me.



I'm trying to remember what I will be.



We capture what we can by rendering it in words, but then, whether we speak or write or think, it remains words, never restored, never un- or re-translated except into other words. A one-way code, unbroken.

Coming and going, which do seem symmetrical—  
nothing in common.



One might give the world—some have done so—for a  
sense of well-being.



It is as if someone were whispering in my ear, "Sleep.  
Sleep in complete security, with untroubled confidence.  
We will not kill you until you wake."



Suppose (as, after all, some still do) that pleasure is  
merely the release of tension, a spasm of quiet after  
maximum pressure. Suppose such an orgasmic model of  
excitement and relaxation to explain pleasure and pain.  
Then isn't death what's most to be desired?

On the other hand, along the midnight street sometimes I hear—so faint as to stop me in my tracks, breath caught to listen—a light, as if tentative, tinkle from somebody's wind chimes. Some wind is up.





my locomotives  
liquid  
the brain overrun  
unnoticing  
dance the usual  
pains delicate  
extremity and  
now my dream leads me to dream-cliffs

do not  
look at me real  
play  
listen to a difference  
in the laugh the dead  
cannot say  
die and  
now my dream is of sheer distance

a vestige an  
image the fiction  
of fields of highways  
railways  
listen all names are  
proper do not  
look at me  
dream-cliff and dream-distance dissolve

now



comic  
time, the world's  
proper time

the same at  
all points in all  
directions

growing or  
at rest

a privileged  
velocity

bundles of  
worlds, di-  
verging from a  
common path

gross  
features, relatively  
simple

as in still  
photographs

awareness  
of experience as  
well as memory

the real dis-  
tinguished from  
what is unsaid

the world as it  
does not happen

a-  
symmetry of

no move, no  
movement, no present  
moment

lines we cannot  
draw, as between  
animate and inanimate

timelike, space-  
like, null

a body my  
body re-  
turns, as from

far travel, long  
wandering, comes slowly

feeling after  
feeling, idea  
on idea

different each  
direction nothing  
is, everything  
happens





She tells him something—never mind what, an episode from her earlier life—tells it in detail. And then she says,

“What I’ve told you, I have never told anyone else. So you see...”

The story was given hesitantly, with pauses. Now as if all doubt is past, all impediment overcome,

“So you see, I do love you.”

He feels, in this world, not so much embattled as, somehow, stranded.

What he brings to mind—his desire, his desert—what he draws out, or up, into view, the thought he now thinks: it was already there, unthought.

Irrevocably stage-struck, even while he sees they are striking the set.

He is calm, despite celestial hullabaloo—*Donner und Blitzen*—and terrestrial upheaval.

He imagines an argument between Hebrew prophet,  
without a word for body, and Babylonian astrologer with  
no word for moon.

Or a controversy, whether God created first the left  
hand or the right.

Every chair here has a ripped seat, a broken back, or  
a leg askew. All doorknobs loose. The windows rattle.

He has put his trust in adagia, slow progress through  
apothegms. Fine luminous meshes, windnetted, blow  
about—the leaves, profuse, taking in light, as if without  
struggle.

v





I wake suddenly and realize at once that I was not yet asleep—not quite—and that a sound has roused me, a very particular sound, familiar but unexpected.

In Paris, as in other European cities, the buses operate on a kind of honor system: one thrusts one's ticket into the jaws of a cancelling machine which not only punches it but stamps it with the date and time of day. If an inspector boards the bus and finds you have no properly punched ticket, you are in trouble.

This cancellation makes a great thunk.

But the machine has another sound: its internal clock, every so often, advances; so that, without any ticket being inserted, with no one necessarily standing near it, a distinctly machinal sound is given off—not like the cancellation, lighter, thunky also but less thunky.

It is that sound, precisely that sound, that has just, in Providence, on a quiet morning, jarred me awake.



Time now to write things down.



In high school, in college, I never took notes, partly overestimating my powers of retention and partly because I expected little from my teachers. I had a bad education (oh, I went to a good enough graduate school, but that was too late) and only came through as well as I did by realizing—while I was going through it—how bad it was and how I would need to look around a bit on my own for whatever I wanted to know—even to figure out what might be looked for.

I went through card catalogs, looking up titles that sounded odd. I listened to various voices and the sounds of wind, skimmed the Harvard Classics, always intrigued by shadows.

I memorized roles: Richard III, the Imaginary Invalid—roles I've never played.

For the most part, it was merest hunger.

Now the maneuver has begun to reverse itself. Now, more and more, it's a process of forgetting, like a retreat across territories I laid waste on my way here.



Mrs. George, who lives on the corner, loves to corner us—or anyone—into conversation. All too much of the day she is on her porch or even on the sidewalk, prepared to enlighten us on the decay of the neighborhood and its increasing hazards. We've never been in her house, though I once helped her break and enter, when she locked herself out.

An old gentleman used to come every so often to see Mrs. George. She referred to him as "my Harry." He mowed the lawn and did small repairs. We were glad she had someone to take care of her, since living alone has its problems at her age, and we are not the best of neighbors.

But now her Harry has moved in with her, and it is painfully obvious that he has aged more rapidly than she and that now she must take care of him.

Much of the day he sits on the porch, silent, unresponsive to any sort of greeting. He is deafer than she.

Then he sings.

The sound does not immediately resemble song. The first time I heard it I ran out to see what the matter was. His singing, though now I am used to it, still makes me think somehow of senseless violence.

He stops, as suddenly as he started, staring ahead, stiffly formal, as if at some film invisible to us.

They swear at each other, loudly enough to penetrate to my study, perhaps even to her Harry's consciousness. "You locked me out," I hear her Harry bellow, "you locked me out, you bitch!" And her cackle, I suppose from a window, "Lost your key? Lost your key, didn't you? Lost your key!" It goes on.

The other day he was yelling that he would kill her.



I look to see what time it is, and realize suddenly how each hand of the clock as it comes back to—say—nine, does not seem to arrive at the same point from which it set out twelve numbers ago, but passes somehow—I am sure of it—farther on, its movement spiral, regaining no position, ever.

This reminds me of, and makes me wonder at, that Hasidic sage so prone to entrancement that, merely to keep himself in the ordinary world, he had from time to time to glance at a clock. Those hands, pointing to every degree, would seem more calculated to spin the soul off at each tangent of reality.



What leisure I have, I give to horror stories, ghost stories. I try to write one, have tried for years, off and on. It proceeds slowly, so slowly I doubt that it will ever reach climax, let alone denouement.

I realize, already, one mistake in my story: the ghost made an appearance on page one.



To hold on to people, things, events, I take them out of time and give them instead their spot in my house, my memory house—no palace, though comfortable enough.

Oh, my house is a house, an existing structure, a real address. But nothing's easier than to put my mother's piano-playing onto the trunk in the front hall, since after all it was her trunk. And in fact she used to practice on that trunk as if it were an instrument, running scales, following every gesture of some waltz, soundlessly.

Or onto the frame of the door on the left, though it has no connection at all, I can put my father's train that did not stop in our town—another town.

I can put towns where they are not easily forgotten.

Nothing's permanent, of course; all this is only for a spell.

This actual house, my monument, my city, is itself memory as well as physical object: it stands for a time, changing: recording and forgetting.

I have put onto the front yard—filled with weeds, dead leaves, sometimes with snow—the Last Judgement. I do not confuse it with hurricane Gloria that took down my rotten maple.

Nothing I remember can ever happen.



Her Harry has, it seems, relatives somewhere in Pennsylvania who would as soon not be bothered with their senile kinsman. He spends much time at the station, watching trains come in from Boston and pull out, headed towards Philadelphia.

He stands apart, in the shade, ticketless—unobtrusively drawing attention, like an inspector.



My grade-school teachers told me, consistently, with straight faces, that the trunk of an elm (I drew with a black crayon) was actually brown.

I never contradicted them, unsure if I were dealing with a concerted lie or if, perhaps, all teachers were color-blind.



If I finish this—I mean these words, this cluster, this page perhaps, some few paragraphs—I will put it aside.

And then, eventually, I'll put it with other pages, other paragraphs or stanzas, let it find its place. Its sentences may end up scattered or even dismembered, strewn into some other context.

In any case, what I deface now, haltingly—this sheet of paper ruined by scratched out words and by words unscratched—will not survive. Old attempts, false starts or true, superseded versions—I will not have old manuscript around, flaunting a dead process, a struggle that has run its course.



Austin Warren, moving to Providence, wishes to pay his respects to S. Foster Damon, recently retired. Austin and Toni, who are nothing if not punctual, keep a four o'clock appointment at the Damons' house on Thayer Street.



They press the button. Nothing happens. They check their watches. They are about to leave, when a disheveled Mrs. Damon appears in a housecoat.

"You were not supposed to come until four o'clock," Mrs. Damon says. They reply, puzzled, that their watches say four. "No," she says, "it's only three-thirty." Austin apologizes, but cannot help noting,

"I set my watch by the noon whistle."

"That explains it," says Mrs. Damon. "The noon whistle always blows at eleven-thirty."



Across there, look. A shadow, just occasionally, falls across the curtain—the only evidence, except for the light which casts the shadow, that anyone is in that room.

No, actually, there is one other clue. The light itself is not, in fact, conclusive: it's on, almost always, from sundown, whether anyone is home or not—a discourager of potential burglars, I suppose. But about eleven—early bedtime by my standards—the light shrinks suddenly to a small glow at the lower left of the curtain, perhaps a bed-lamp, after some while extinguished in its turn, the entire window entering then the larger dark of siding, of pervasive lilac, of the lawn below.



“Some persons,” says Francis Galton, “have the power of combining in a single perception more than can be seen at any one moment by the two eyes.”

And “I may be allowed to quote,” he goes on, “a curious faculty of my own in respect to this. It is exercised only occasionally and in dreams, or rather in nightmares, but under those circumstances I am perfectly conscious of embracing an entire sphere in a single perception. It appears to lie within my mental eyeball, and to be viewed centripetally.”



A day of muggy heat, the worst of a Providence summer. With my window open, Mrs. George's voice is clear, but her Harry is mumbling quite indistinctly.

“What do you mean?” she is shouting.

(Mumble.)

“How *could* you be hungry? You just...”

(Louder mumble.)

“You couldn’t be hungry. How could you? I just fed you.” And so on. Then nothing. She sometimes brings a plate for him to eat on the porch and I think perhaps she has done so.

And now he starts to sing. I can’t see him from my window, but a woman across the street abruptly leaves the porch where she has been sitting, goes inside her house, slams the door, puts her window down.

His singing no longer bothers me—at least I think it doesn’t. And then, with the kind of slow dawning that takes one unawares until it comes as a shock and yet no surprise, I realize, through the stifling heat, that I know the song behind that barricade of sound, the song her Harry sings in such grotesque transformation.

“Silent night, holy night.”



Who was it—some kook, one would suppose, but you never know—claimed that each hair of our heads, being a hollow cylinder, functions as an organ of perception? And that, naturally, the hair in front, facing forward, receives current sensations, whereas the larger mass, combed back or down, in the direction of the shoulders, keeps as it were perceptions of the past—which is to say, memory.

Women who knot their hair behind, he went on, have twisted memories.

What do you suppose he thought of the Caesars, bay concealing baldness ?



In a shop on the rue Saint-Jacques, where Allan Kardec used to call up spirits of the dead, I buy a crystal ball and a little concave pedestal. I polish the crystal with a soft cloth and place it on its base in such a manner that as little as possible of the incidental and irrelevant immediate environment can disturb its reflections. Perfectly round, perfectly clear—the world as a whole should plunge into it, emerging small, lucid: reversed but legible.

My crystal ball—a very small one, since they get geometrically more expensive—is not, I must admit, a complete success. But it provides distraction on nights of a waxing moon. I am not convinced that it is merely “water, petrified by fire or by cold”—though there is something ice-like about it. And nothing could provoke vision more naturally than water.

I doubt also its magnetic powers, for all its trace of iron oxide. (My authorities put iron oxide also in the blood’s red corpuscles: ferric in arteries, ferrous in the veins. —And a compound of these, they claim, is lodestone.)

What I see in my crystal ball, when I do, never covers the case: suggestions, yes—but needing to be fleshed out for any application. They appear, certainly, the signs—no fakery called for at this stage—but barely, abstractly: curved lines, a hollow flame, bright dots on fog almost as bright.

Sometimes I feel that if I were not interrupted—I always am—the message might complete itself. Not that revelations are likely, but something on the level of the view out my kitchen window: gray limbs reach out there, emphatic against a tangle of lesser branches, also gray, hatching a gray sky. There are also little pink clouds—out the window, I mean—which though I cannot see them move, move rapidly, always south, as though towards summer.

What I see, what I know, takes the form of my knowing, my seeing. This is why I doubt most what I find most certain, why the rationality of the world appalls me.



In Ann Arbor, long ago, Bob Ashley has begun to compose electronic music. How does it feel?

“It’s wonderful,” he says. “I used to work with melodies and they kept always turning up again, running through my head, even when I was done with them.

Now, when I do an electronic piece, I turn it off and I don't remember a thing. Finally, my head is clear."

"Lift keyboard lid," goes the instruction at the top of one of his early piano pieces; "empty the mind."



*Mind.* Well, mind, the Philosopher says, "is a shadow, cast by the mind's own light." —Obstacle chosen as barrier? Something to beat against? (But that sounds more like a definition of *matter*.)



Mrs. George is bawling out her Harry. We have noticed him on the Elmgrove bus, which he always rides free, not exactly by refusing to pay, but by refusing to hear the driver ask for the fare. They can't very well not stop for him, a senior citizen with cane, great shock of bone-white hair under a straw hat, distinguished-looking actually, suggesting Carl Sandburg. The drivers couldn't care less whether or not he puts in his exact change, though they feel obliged to raise their voices and ask for it. Then they drive on.

But it's different now that he has taken to coming home in taxis. When he walks away, a frail old gentleman

whose mind has obviously slipped this little matter of the meter, the taxi driver goes with him to the porch—a hand as if ready to help lest her Harry should fall. From my study I hear the fare repeated, louder each time, with no adequate response. Finally, always, at the point where a limit seems just about crossed, Mrs. George comes out, ransoms her Harry, the taxi pulls off, and Harry becomes articulate again.

“You bitch,” he cries. “You spit in my face, you bitch!”

“I learned that from you,” she screams back. I think it fortunate that I cannot see them. It goes on, as I only half attend. “I said,” I hear at some point, “you’ve got to stop with those taxis!”

“Why don’t you mind your own business.”

“I pay for them!”

“You don’t have to pay for them, you silly bitch!” he says, and repeats, and eventually, “I’m going for a walk, and I’m *not coming back*.” And I see him pass, with rheumatism and dignity, a rhythm unaffected by the shout following him,

“Well don’t come back in a taxi!”



Any order precludes some other: one function of memory is to present things out of order. I would love to begin “and even before that ...,” “The point must come when...,” “First though, look at this...”

Jesus, they always told me, spoke in parables so that the common people, the uneducated, could comprehend the gospel, but he himself said—according to three Evangelists—that it was to keep the unworthy from understanding.

“What am I saying? ...” “Doubtless, it is the complex...” If we wonder what to believe, our minds incline towards grave ideas. (It is an immense comfort secretly to quote.)

I have wanted for a long time to address some paragraphs to William Bronk, remembering how some of his poems back in *Origin*—I found out only later that he had already published a volume—helped me unravel snarls in my own expression. Since we last met, an age has gone by.



John Cage, searching for silence in the anechoic chamber, hears within the hush two tones: his nervous system (a high pitch) and, lower in the scale, the flow of blood.



My ears are different.

I was told as a child—in a town near the middle—that crickets are quite a reliable thermometer: becoming quieter in autumn as the temperature falls, ceasing all chirp at the freezing point. But for me, the crickets never quit. In the midst of winter, they were, and still are—in my ears—loud as July. Cold-footed under comforters, I used to listen, fascinated, to signals of perpetual summer.

“Tinnitus,” I read later, (Latin, from *tinnire*, to jingle): “a purely subjective sensation of tone.”

They are still there, the purely subjective crickets, getting little by little louder over the years. They do not exceed—so far—sounds of everyday: conversation, traffic, music. Once in a while, a shriller sound intrudes and, if it continues, I test it by putting my hands over my ears.

—No difference. As if I were to close my eyes and still see window, branches, clouds.



In Aix-en-Provence, there is an Annunciation more or less contemporary with the Providence Crucifixion. It has been attributed to various Flemish painters, including a van Eyck (not Jan). I get Diane Kolnikoff to send me a postcard reproduction and I admire again details that have a high place in the legends of blasphemy.

A gothic interior, where Mary reads, kneeling, is decorated with bats. Beside her lily, in the same vase, deadly nightshade blossoms. God-the-Father, through a rose window, casts on the Virgin the gold rays of an obscene gesture.

Perhaps none of this is true: the details are hard to read and the picture hangs high up in the church of Mary Magdalen, too far up to examine closely. The description at tourist level says the flower is columbine (*ancolie violette*).

In any case, I prop the postcard against some books next to my desk, among other dust-catching wonders.

The next time I look at it, there is a hole burnt through it—a little hole, edged in black, just next to the columbine or belladonna. My crystal ball has apparently acted as burning glass. I'm lucky it didn't burn the house down.



Inspired, the prophet, lifting his eyes, sees—but as if gazing on his own image—the angel of the Lord, who brings him, speaking with his (the prophet's) own voice, words of power.

Only just now, I read something to that effect.

And the prophet answers the angel, in words the angel provides. And perhaps no one thinks to ask who speaks to whom, mouth and ear irrelevant, as if God were saying *Let Us* or as if I were talking to myself.

And thus the intellect flows into an imagined form. And the prophet writes it down, transforming the imaginary back into intellect—blood into ink.

You won't believe this. You prefer the version in which the prophet is blind to the heavenly messenger, who is seen, however, by the prophet's ass—which gets whipped for its perceptiveness. And, to be sure, speaks up.

That, also, is written.

Balaam, in fact, is in my bloodstream, along with *in the beginning* and *even so, come...* As for the other, what I just read, I would have let it knock about, sink in slowly. I would have pondered it, dressed it perhaps finally in a figure or—more likely—let it find its patch on some makeshift background.

But I remember how memory more and more fails me and might not save this particular set—so cosmic, after all, so inessential.

So I note it here, as if you were listening.



We run into Mrs. George. Since her Harry died, she has become remote. Having nothing else to say, in passing,

“How are you,” I say. A half-turn towards us, scornful:

“You don’t know anything, do you?”



A cluster of crows, as we approached, burst into flight but, by the time we were even with them, had already begun to reconcentrate on a field plowed and sown, torn open as if expressly for their investigations.







memory palace in  
decay but

before the final  
darkening

(just what *did* I mean by “bridge”)

goes through a  
stage in which past  
images still  
stand at stations but

odd sequence at  
strange angles jutting

(sometimes broken perspectives)

perplexed by figures as  
familiar as hands but

now a plain, now  
a public path



in a botched  
gestalt

(upheaval)



I am not tired. And yet, like a column, sleep invades me.



In the heat of the day, and the year, I walk to the corner  
wheresnow, swirled by a chill wind, breaks the light from  
the streetlamp into brilliant flurries between me and the  
dark empty sky.

I have sought a truce with time.

I am not just any  
event my  
cause is in

question I am  
highly unexpected

in the case of bodies  
moving my  
body could move forever

(my imagined body  
along its natural  
path)

suppose for example out  
the window  
along a tangent to

its orbit this  
pattern follows



Since my tooth, as my dentist has decreed, must out, I  
make an appointment and deliver myself to the office on  
Waterman Street.

“This is not tooth extraction,” says the receptionist.  
“It is oral surgery.”

The difference seems to be in dollars.

A student takes my blood pressure. I know she is a  
student, because the surgeon—once I am in his chair—

explains every move he makes. Not to me, but to her.

She is attentive.

"You see," he says. "Second lower left bicuspid." He is, meanwhile, injecting. He has a high, squeaky voice. "Soon he won't feel a thing."

And, soon, I don't feel a thing.

"We'll try," he tells her, "just to pull it. But"—where have I heard this before?—"probably it will explode."

Which, I gather, it does. But my attention is elsewhere, fixed by then entirely on her eyes. Which are close to mine. From which proceed rays of almost visible intellect. Cold fire. Her gaze never wanders up to *my* fascinated eyes, never, I'm sure, takes any impression of my face.

I listen to exalted strains, while you are watching for indications. The air is heavy, streets damp from no noticeable rain.

At noon (which is to say, suddenly) the house seems full of people: people napping, chatting, guests at a sacrifice, tourists on an exhausting excursion.

She attends, without wavering, to the cavern of my mouth, missing no maneuver of her master's art.

In the first room: a body clothed, armed, ornamented.

In the second: simple radiance, warm objects and the cold invisible.

He is chipping out broken root, digging (while describing) ivory shrapnel.

Peter went raving mad before he died, having the satisfaction at last (at least) of out-suffering (albeit for a shorter space of time) his model *the* Crucified.

And in the third room: much care, silliness, much melancholy.

You shall have no food to eat. On city streets, in ruins, dark corners of the house.

Perpetual terror and howl of the stormwind. No wings. No winged helmet. No shoes with wings. You shall have no water from the bloody river.

Your past is obsolete. Ambush is your alternative.

Her eyes seem not to blink, so intent are they on technique.

The fourth room. Here is St. Luke, physician, drawing the Virgin. Here a plethora of prophetic superscriptions. Wick lamps of Lascaux. Flush toilets in Mohenjodaro.

In rooms to follow, not more concern than crossing an avenue. Abstruse omens.

Crocodile when least expected.

The gum is sewn. Mouth allowed to close on its wound. Her eyes withdraw, no longer interested.



And He ascended—the Christ—ascended “on high.”

But just where did He go? And by what route? (For while there is no controversy about His upward motion while He was within sight of the apostles, there *is* disagreement about his itinerary afterwards.)

Well, never mind. He went, in any case—as Saint Thomas says somewhere—beyond anything that could properly be called locality.



Jeanne Longyear comes across a convent church in Brittany, or maybe Normandy. Parts of the building are undergoing restoration and there is unsightly scaffolding, outside and in.

Against a temporary partition, blocking off one chapel, a ladder is leaning. Jeanne thinks if she climbs this ladder, she will be able to see into the chapel.

She climbs.

She climbs farther, to see what she can see.

As her head surmounts the obstacle, what she sees is a group of nuns, just now distracted from their devotions by the startling apparition, above the altar, of Jeanne's startled face.

Jeanne descends quickly.

Quickly she leaves the church.

No report of a vision is recorded.



Hannah calls to communicate an outrage. Her dentist—he has been her dentist since she was a child—has thrown her out of his dentist's chair.

She goes on about it.

"Hannah," I put in, "why? What did you do to him?"

"Oh," she says, "nothing... that is ... well... I bit his hand."



My brother Charles squats in a condemned building. His living quarter runs with mice, but in an abandoned garage across the alley, he collects stray rats—with whom he obviously identifies.

"You see," he says, petting one of his guests as he puts out their food, "if they're taken care of and *don't have to make a living*, they're peaceable, friendly, cause no problems."



I throw trash behind a mirror.



I have heard (but is it true?) that if one has rats, one can be sure (small consolation, it might seem) that one will not have—in the same area—mice.



Then too, I used to know a philosopher, who seemed to believe that mice were baby rats.



no definition (in the  
commentary) but he *is*  
already in the world

the restored  
Nero he will  
sit in the Temple and  
give himself out for God  
but be  
slain at the  
Second Coming



*...told them  
all this but  
will not tell us*

the devil is  
downpour winds  
are wicked spirits with  
a motion a-  
gainst the saints

he will reveal (later, in  
a part of the commentary now  
lost) the  
vertiginous  
rivers of anti-Christ



Between New York and Providence, on Amtrak's rusty rails, I am not the only person in the coach, but there are few travelers tonight and I may well be the only one awake.

I look up from my book, because I *know* I will see someone coming into the car—and I do—and I know also that the figure just entering (the train is clicking along, it is not a station) is about to disappear.

It is not something I can explain.

Nothing distinguishes her—it is a woman—from just another passenger coming from the vestibule. I see her distinctly. That is to say, she is not shadowy or transparent. She wears a simple light coat, a hat like a rain-hat. I do not see her face, though at less than half a car's length I suppose I should. I do not know how I know she is Asian or, for that matter, what makes me certain it is a woman.

But there is not much time and, for what little there is, I am *convinced* that she will not, coming down the aisle, get to where I am sitting, because—I have no doubt—there is no one there.

And, sure enough, she vanishes, not sinking out of sight, not fading away. Simply, she's gone.

No fear, no joy, accompanies this apparition. For all I can tell, nothing is predicted, nothing commemorated.



inside un-  
comfortable

any way  
out  
uneasy



I had not realized how dark it is, inside the body.



An uncertain path we walk, the line—ill-marked and slippery—between inhibition and exhibition.

I wake, tired of sleep and terrorized by its intimations.

Knights give up their way of life, move into town and take up trades to sustain themselves and their families.

I wake, unsure where I am, I and my surroundings vague, the fierce sense of reality having disappeared with the dream.





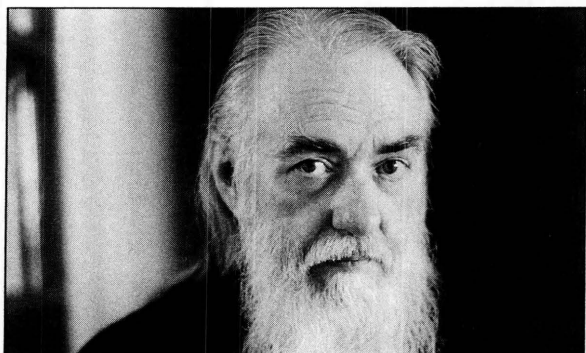


photo by Renate von Mangoldt

KEITH WALDROP teaches at Brown University and, with Rosmarie Waldrop, is the editor of the small press, Burning Deck. Recent books include *The Locality Principle* (Avec Books) and *Light While There is Light* (Sun & Moon). *Falling in Love Through a Description* is forthcoming from Awede. He has translated a number of contemporary French poets, most recently Claude Royet-Journoud, Pascal Quignard, Dominique Fourcade and Jean Grosjean. He was a founding member of the Wastepaper Theatre of Providence and now co-directs, with Gale Nelson, the theatrical group Shandy Hall.



*The Silhouette of the Bridge (Memory Stand-Ins)* is a beautifully spare and inventive work of reflection on the elusive nature of memory, perception and experience. As we would expect from Keith Waldrop, it is suffused with a particular humanity and an appreciation for the absurd, even the grotesque, in daily life. The rhythmic apposition of prose and poetry brings to mind the freedom, alertness and quality of distillation in Bashō's classic travel sketches. With his quietly precise sense of modulation and his unerring gaze, Waldrop remains one of the vital and requisite, semi-secret presences in American letters.

—Michael Palmer

"What I see, what I know, takes the form of my knowing, my seeing. That is why I doubt most of what I find most certain, why the rationality of the world appalls me." In *The Silhouette of the Bridge (Memory Stand-Ins)*, Keith Waldrop never trespasses across Wittgenstein's threshold of the unsayable, yet he brings us often to the shadows cast between terror and calm, memory and fact, body and soul. Writing with his usual consummate clarity, Waldrop has given us a meditation with the intimate thrall of a bedtime story. As if the sublime were "merest hunger."

—Ann Lauterbach

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