THE NIGHT SKY I

In 1995 Arthur Vogelsang, one of the editors of the American Poetry Review, asked me to contribute a bi-monthly column to that magazine; the seven "Night Sky" pieces ran in APR from 1996 to 1999. I set two formal limits: to recycle the letters and/or words from each of the internal headings, and also to "turn" them, so that the last heading of the first piece became the first of the second, and so forth.

1. There Is No Topic Sentence

but perhaps one could be borrowed, like a pretty dress for a party that, once worn, changes the life of the one who borrows it. In New York City, it would have to be a black dress, but the closet is full of black garments and the whole reason for borrowing a dress would be a need for color. But why have a party anyway? According to the New York Times, many more planets are on the verge of being discovered. An astronomer in California, where party dresses are rarely black, says, "It's almost like the second coming of Marco Polo or Columbus. We're finding new worlds." What color dress does one wear for the finding of new worlds? Just now some persons are floating in the sky trying out new thermal gear. The temperature is about one hundred degrees below zero, so Captain Scott had better button up. It was expensive, the trial suit: it cost ten million dollars. Makes DKNY seem like a bargain. But this new gear would be too warm for a party here on earth. The Times makes no mention of the color of the ten-million-dollar space suit.

Please come to a party to celebrate the discovery of a planet or planets as yet unnamed orbiting 47 Ursae Majoris. RSVP. Dress accordingly.

As if, in going in a borrowed dress, one were hoping to directly encounter something that would shape itself into an Event to be carried forward with little tassels of attachment and awareness which had not been there before. A few persons, or maybe many, gathered Under One Roof, curious to see each other—perhaps for the first time, perhaps not.

As literature proceeds along its tortuous course to become absolute, it encounters satanism. The two come together in their shared passion, a sin that only the greatest theologians have thought to include among the mortal ones: curiosity. The image of the writer then becomes Milton's Satan when, 'reaching the earthly paradise, he flew immediately to the Tree of Life, the tallest tree in the garden, and perched there, like a coromant, without trying in the least to recover his life, but rather using the tree only to see further on, for prospect.'

A new planet coming along just in time, Webs and Nets cast out into the firmament by newfangled fishermen, prospecting in the Dark Matter.

Go and catch a falling star;
Get with child a mandrake root;
Tell me where all past years are,
Or who left the Devil's foot;
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy's sting.1

A Party with the variety of a night sky, lest everyone speak the same lines:

—Where did you get that dress?
—Great dress. Do you mind my asking how much it cost?

These are not wicked curious questions. They are questions that lead to a party with no memory trace, sending the revelers back to their rooms to await signs of life. But perhaps it would be preferable if everyone did wear the same dress after all, because then these inevitable dead questions could be skipped over. But if everyone wears the same dress there will be a great outcry, and people will immediately think that their right to Free Expression had been infringed upon, that some Authority had come along and proclaimed, "You must wear the Same Black Dress or you cannot attend the
Party! It is O.K., of course, if by some strange consensus everyone decides to wear the Same Black Dress (SBD)—that would be just a coincidence, or even serendipity, which is a coincidence with a happy prospect. In New York, for example, no one tells you you have to wear black.

Like the night sky itself, waiting to be addressed or undressed.

Certainly if everyone were to wear the SBD it would be easy to discern the physical differences among the guests: long thin, short plump, tawny hair, blond hair, and so forth. It would be almost as if the SBD were not the same at all, because it changed so much according to whom was wearing it. And then there is the whole question of accessories. Some persons would wear it with a simple strand of pearls, with glittering rhinestones, some with a nice paisley scarf, with dangling earrings, a bow tie, a sweater, a cravat. And there would be the one who wears it without ornamentation, not even shoes.

—You aren’t wearing any shoes.
—I know.
—Aren’t you cold?
—Not really. I don’t like shoes.
—Why?
—Because they make my toes feel crowded and hot. When you wear shoes you cover your feet and tend to neglect them, as if they were of no importance. The skin gets dry and flaky and the toenails get too long. With bare feet, you have to take care of them.
—I saw a man on the subway last week with bare feet. He didn’t seem to be taking care of them.

Turns away, muffled, bored, thinking. Chill out, it’s a party for a new planet, not a rally for the homeless, perfectly manicured toes shining crimson on the cool polished floor. Her interlocutor wanders away thinking dress, feet, toe, shoe. These must be some of the "little nouns" that George Oppen liked so much.4

dress, v. & i. 1. (mil.). Correct the alignment of (company’s etc. in relation to each other, or men in line), (intr.) come into correct place in line etc. (up, i.e. forward, back, or ibs.). 2. Array clothe (~ed in black, serge, etc.); provide oneself with clothes (~ well, etc.); put on one’s clothes; put on evening dress (esp. ~ for dinner); ~ up, attire oneself, attire (another), elaborately or in masquerade; ~ out, attire conspicuously. 3. Deck, adorn (ships with flags, shop-window with tempting wares); provide (play) with costumes. 4. Treat (wound, wounded man) with remedies, apply dressing to. 5. Subject to cleansing, trimming, smoothing, etc.; brush, comb, do up, (hair); curry (horse, leather, & fig., often ~ down, thrash, scold). 6. Finish surface of (textile fabrics, building-stone). 7. Prepare, cook (food); prune (plant); manure.

dress, n. 1. Clothing, esp. the visible part of it, costume (full ~, that worn on great occasions; evening ~; or ~, that worn at dinners or evening parties; morning ~, ordinary; a ~, ladies’ gown, frock). 2. External covering, outward form (birds in their winter ~, French book appearing in English ~). 3. // ~ circle, first gallery in theatres, in which evening ~ was once required; ~ coat, swallowtailed for evening ~; ~ guard, on bicycle, etc. to protect ~; ~ -improver, ~ BUSTLE, ~ -maker, ~ -king, (woman) making women’s ~; ~ rehearsal, final one in costume; ~ shield, ~ -preserver, piece of waterproof material fastened under the arms of a bodice.

2. Possible Topic Sentences or Opening Remarks at the Party5

1. "I have always been meaning to explain the way in which I came to write certain of my books . . ."

2. "It has pretty much come to this."

3. "At a banquet given by a nobleman of Thessaly named Scopas, the poet Simonides of Ceos chanted a lyric poem in honour of his host but including a passage in praise of Castor and Pollux."

4. "You put on an ornate ballgown You say ‘someone has to do it’ "

5. "not in ‘Sir’ but companiono as you wd prefer it in hispanol"

6. "And you’ve been here before?"

7. "A bode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one."

8. "I think it was that the future had deadened me, had become a soft, deadened wall."

9. "What would my potent master? Here I am."
10. “A silver Lucifer
serves
cocaine in cornucopia
to some somnambulists
of adolescent thighs”

11. “My mother’s favorite image was that of the church as a great speckled bird, which she took as a simple parable.”

12. “If necessary a prosthesis could be fashioned out of lime, hair, and dung.”

13. “I do not know that knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we had called knowledge before.”

3. Strange Encounter

What pressure must come to bear, swift and obstreperous as an Annunciation slammed onto the beach, tenacious and blooming? The Heroine folds herself into a tiny nugget and is kept in an obsidian box. All day, all night, she scribbles in her confines, stitching dreams onto a tapestry under a palmiest of cloud. Here she is temporarily safe from the great noise and its occult smoke, the origins of which cannot be diagnosed. One day, she comes out of the box and sees it is the Last Day. The Last Day, always before a conceptual punctuation to her internal gaze, now rises up as a fact, gleaming and ready.

As if, she scribbles in the pitch dark, wondering where the light switch might be, where the sun is, what time it is. Quickly she folds back into the minuscule compartment where all categories obtain, where she can sort and file and choose accordingly.

The night sky, with the rhythm of a language, urging connection to come forward out of its rooky, uncontaminated vat. Nothing in it has a price: a vast mine of futility, useless, where great gaps are witnessed as patterns of shine. She copies a file.

Beneath the belt of Orion is an indistinct feature identified as his sword, the star iota at its southern end. To the naked eye, the area just above the star seems fuzzy. This is the great Orion nebula, No. 42 in Messier’s list. A fair telescope will show four stars at its brightest part, called the trapezium, after their arrangement. These very hot stars are believed to provide the ultraviolet energy that makes the surrounding gas glow. Dust reflects much of this glow, making a great cup-like flower. The dust obscures a very compact cluster of very young stars that may be studied through their infrared emissions, which penetrates dust clouds. What is seen as the nebula is about 1,500 light years away, yet is larger than the Moon in our sky. It is only a very small part of a huge dark cloud of dust and molecules that extends to the west nearly to the head of Cetus, the whale. In this celestial nursery, more stars are being formed.

And another:

But if much poetry, music and the arts aims to “enchant”—and we must never strip that word of its aura of magical summons—much also, and of the most compelling, aims to make strangeness in certain respects stranger. It would instruct us of the inviolate enigma of the otherness in things and in animate presences. Serious painting, music, literature or sculpture make palpable to us, as do no other means of communication, the unassuaged, unhoused instability and estrangement of our condition. We are, at key instants, strangers to ourselves, erratic at the gates of our own psyche. We knock blindly at the doors of turbulence, of creativity, of inhibition within the terra incognita of our own selves. What is more unsettling: we can be, in ways almost undurable to reason, strangers to those whom we would know best, by whom we should be best known and unmasked?

The flare of intimacy, like a great cerulean curtain behind the eyes, covering nothing and located nowhere, when the self briefly dissolves out of the constraints of causation and locale: this must be the original site which draws her toward, knowledge of which slips through the gaps, like light through a veil. So language responds to the desire to somehow seal over the lesions between this and that, while at the same time drawing attention to the difference between that this and this that, fretting distinctions. And when the real Others jog into view, what then? What signs of apprehension will be employed to subvert familiar categories of encounter: friend or foe?
Who is smiling, who weeping? And our artifacts but a jumble of jargon, abstract as the mute history of rain.

The informing agency is that of tact, of the ways in which we allow ourselves to touch or not to touch, to be touched or not to be touched by the presence of the other (the parable of doubting Thomas in the garden crystallizes the manifold mysteries of tact). The issue is that of civility (a charged word whose former strength has largely left us) towards the inward savour of things. What means have we to integrate that savour into the fabric of our own identity? We need a terminology which plainly articulates the intuition that an experience of communicative forms of meaning demands, fundamentally, a courtesy or tact of heart, a tact of sensibility and intellection which are conjoined at their several roots.

The first planet that was found orbiting around another sunstar was in the constellation Pegasus.

**Pegasus:** The steed of the Muses, fancifully thought of as carrying his riders in periods of poetic inspiration; loosely, poetic ability, fancy, inspiration.

The new planets have been found circling around one of the stars in the Big Dipper, the huge rectangular turret that holds, swimming in its black currents, the primordial soup of the universe. She remembers first trying to prise this image out of the myriad shining things which seemed so random; to see the Dipper in among the scattered luminosity: to impose this idea, this implement, onto the inscrutable abstract decor of space. Once perceived, the stars in that constellation would never again be solitary or autonomous; they would belong to a visual syntax. And yet each of them, each literal visible point, was really a pivot out of which might come dozens more etymologies of space-time, apparently inexhaustible elaborations of transparency and density, form and emptiness, processions of dust, gas, orbs, disks, clusters, spirals, velocities, spectrums, dwarves, and giants.

The *little noun* "sky" holds an infinite vocabulary.

What separates works of art from the fallible empirical world is not their higher degree of perfection but their ability to actualize themselves in a brilliant and expressive appearance just like fireworks.

In every work of art something appears that does not exist.

4. Harangue Fandango

She wishes now to speak in such a way as to include others, to be able to say "we" and "our" without the filtering presumptions of authority; to move easily, as on a dance floor, without stepping on toes or taking the lead, responsive to the music that everyone could hear and yet interpret it so her body didn't freeze awkwardly, miss a beat, flail across the illuminated floor. The last time she had danced she had in fact been unable to find an answering rhythm, as if the material of her being were alien to music. She had waited too long between dances, although back at home she had put on a disc and danced up a storm, alone on the linoleum floor of the kitchen, unselconscious and giddy, moony and exuberant, transparent to the girl who had first danced in the arms of a bully boy holding her close on a summer afternoon, singing mordaciously out-pitch into her ear *earth angel, earth angel.*

Could she begin a sentence our predicament or our difficulty without feeling quesy, listening to the Serbs in Sarajevo speak bitterly as they prepared to leave home, burning their houses, one by one, behind them, so that no Croat or Muslim could live in them? Every time she heard a politician proclaim "The American people want . . . .", she felt a stiffening in her spine, an antithetical resonance. Every time she hears the word "community" she is on alert for an incipient imposition of some frame or idea, although when the blizzard came into the city, persons walking in the middle of the carless streets with their dogs and children smiled at her and she at them in an assent which felt communal, as if something had been agreed to, tacitly. Communities these days are too often places with locked gates around them, like a medieval keep, to make their inhabitants feel safe. Communities are virtual, sites on screens in rooms at great distances from each other. It seems to her that this word, along with so many others, has been usurped and hollowed out so it drifts in an echo chamber of ventriloquism; that whole patches of language hang like so many husks. It all makes her want to twist around so she can see things from the subversive angle of a clown with the irreverent humility of, say, Chaplin's tramp, wide-eyed, rugged, and endlessly
resourceful, swerving out of the way of the onrushing gang that sees in every petty infraction the incarnation of evil, and virtue where none is. She keeps thinking, In the name of one thing, other things are happening.

As if we should all retreat to the originary status of our beings, never expecting to change through an exposure to, or involvement with, what is not us.

cormorant, n. Large lustrous-black voracious sea bird; rapacious person. cf. peanant, tyrant.

5. She Drinks Too Much and Refuses to Go in Fear of Abstraction

Perhaps it goes without saying that our two main ways of representing ourselves and the world, telling stories and picturing, are not so much outmoded as exploded. There is no one abiding master narrative, and there is no single comprehensive image. Instead there is an unceasing stream of stories and images, versions of stories and images, contending for our attention, however fleet it might be. At every moment, we each walk around with access to a vast array of pictures and tales, in some of which we are actual participants and actors, in others passive witnesses and bystanders, in still others mere receivers of another person’s vast array of pictures and stories. As Jonathan Schell writes,

Formerly, when you awoke in the morning and saw the sun rise and prepared to face your life, you were pretty much stuck with that. Today, a hundred other sunrises, other dwellings and other lives are on call at the touch of a few buttons. Do you not like the person who stands before you? Do you not like his face? Then summon up, on some screen or another, another person with a nicer face—say, Candice Bergen. Is your apartment drab and cramped? Then live, vicariously, in more glamorous and commodious apartments. Are you lonely? Cheeryful people will come and keep you company. Do you not like your life? Other lives are available to be lived, in abundance, 24 hours a day.¹⁸

Reality, empirically knowable, does not exist, just as the self as a static subject, empirically knowable, also does not exist. And the great deluge of facts, of information, zooming from every conceivable origin along every con-

creceivable trajectory, is not so much a highway as an immense unwieldy mobile. How are we to decide which to look at, which to listen to, which to believe, to prize, to resist, to love, to include, and which to doubt, contest, and discard? We need to question the link between what we take to be real, as in an accurate rendition, and what we take to be true, as in worth attaching a value that might allow us to fashion our choices, decisions, and judgments about the real. We need to discriminate between technological and imaginative innovation, just as we need to notice the differences between law and justice, or medicine and compassion. There is a distinction between the art of fiction and the art of lying.

A young poet friend remarks, “The divine part of humanity is its capacity to see the interconnectedness between all things. To be that interconnectedness.” If this is so, then the Divinity we wish to resemble is testing us in subtle new ways, asking us to worship at the Temple of Information, whose Disembodied Oracular Source (who is speaking?) is lost in a thousand thousand transcripts flying through the stratosphere, like pixilated ghosts, each with its particle of fact. To see connections in this, to find in it the syntax of the heart, to invent compelling stories and stunning images: to impose on this astounding influx form?

Form, after all, is chosen limit.

Limit, as a formal characteristic, is the expression of choice in the service of the possible.

The possible is the indeterminate futurity of meaning.

Form posits the optimum conditions for meaning to occur.

To discover winter and know it well, to find,
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible. It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come . . .¹¹

When limits, or choices, are displayed in the service of the possibility of meaning, in the making of art objects, we call the result beautiful. That is, we stand before a painting by Vermeer, or we read a poem by Paul Celan, or we listen to Shostakovich’s Twenty-four Preludes and Fugues for piano, and we say this is beautiful. But what we are really announcing is our pleasure and gratitude in the fact of the choices the artist has made. We recognize
something in how one stroke of the brush brushes up against another stroke of the brush; how one note moves toward and away from the next in an astounding sequence; how one word attaches itself to another and to another until something that has to do with all the words separately—the history of their meanings—gathers into a nexus which allows us, which invites us, to experience something like the meaning of meaning. It is the nature of meaning, like the nature of reality, and the nature of truth, to be unfixed by temporal/spatial constraints, so that persons in and of any age may participate in their re/construction.

Art is not entertainment, and it is not decor. It is one of the rude fallacies of our time to want to reduce all art forms, and in particular literary arts, to their most facile and elemental role, and so deny their potential to awaken, provoke, and elicit our glee at being agents in the construction of meaning. As Martha Nussbaum points out, "We are accustomed by now to think of literature as optional: as great, valuable, entertaining, excellent, but something that exists off to one side of political and economic and legal thought, in another university department, ancillary rather than competitive." We have, she adds, "narrowly hedonic theories of literary value."12 Our world—late-twentieth-century America—is relentless in its desire to dictate to us what we desire; it wants to assign and to determine how we construct and construe meaning in our lives, it wants to tell us from where our pleasures come. It wants us to believe that only Wealth, Fame, and Power (WFP), in some combination or another, are worthwhile goals, because only WFP can confer—what?—celebrity.

Celebrity: the modern, secular form of martyrdom, where individuals are cast into the riotous blast of an eviscerating, obliterating light. How many personal disasters of every conceivable kind—suicide, homicide, divorce, addiction—before it is understood that celebrities are victims? "Their divorce was more predictable than their marriage."

6. Penance

With the insistent picturing and telling of Celebrity, it is of course not uninteresting to be a poet. John Ashbery once remarked, "To be famous and to be a famous poet are not the same thing," by which he simply wanted to point out that the world of poetry is not included in celebrity picturing and storytelling. Why is this? Because the economy of being a poet subverts the received relationship between ambition, money, and success. Poets must acknowledge this fact a priori, at the outset; must, in a sense, agree to it. Many persons in many fields have an increasingly hard time making a living, and endemic poverty caused by social oppression is not something to be lightly set aside. To be poor in this culture carries all kinds of stigmas, and invites all kinds of rhetorical evocations of the American Dream, which holds that the pursuit of happiness is necessarily tied to the capacity to earn a living. (What constitutes a "living wage" in a culture driven by WFP is worth a pause, as we witness the slow but certain shrinkage of the middle class and the institutions of social transformation—schools, libraries, museums, newspapers, research universities, concert halls, and so forth—in which it has traditionally invested.)

A living wage: that which allows a person sufficient freedom to feel she/he has some control over her/his destiny; an alignment of capacity to activity which leads to a sense of sufficiency.

Nonetheless, persons who wish to become poets in this culture must make a kind of promise or vow, like Saint Francis, in which they agree to economic obscurity, at least in relation to the writing of poems. The history of the embedded relation between poverty and poetry is not just a romance but is linked to the history of spiritual resistance, a resistance which characterized the initial founding of America, sometimes with dire consequences, and which finds its greatest secular expression in Emerson’s "Self-Reliance." People are disturbed when poets make a decent living as professors; they think it is a sort of bad joke (but of course newsworthy) when Allen Ginsberg sells his archive to a major university for big bucks, as if some breach of decorum had been committed. They are not equally bemused when movie stars, baseball players, or television news commentators get millions upon millions for acting a part, playing ball, or reading aloud the news in front of a camera.

When poets make money something is askew. As if for every celebrity—say, Michael Jackson or Madonna—exploding in the firmament like a giant star, there needs to be a shadow figure, an obscure Other toiling away in the dimmest corner, lost in the dark matter of the universe, never to be found by the searching lenses of far-reaching cameras. Poets must hold down this invisible portion of the universe, the part that we never see but guess at, lest the whole thing fly apart in a final radiance of destruction, on the incendiary flames of outrageous (mis)fortune.

Off-camera and out of earshot, watching the night snow fall, noticing that snow contains myriad wows.

There must be some remnant habit of willed obscurity, of volunteer
poverty for an acceptance of an inequity, a gap, between work and recompense, in which some vague need is met, a sort of spiritual critique, an anti-thetical motion, however far off, however imperceptible, of the equation of happiness with the capacity to buy things, many things, more things than one could ever possibly need. As if on the Day of Judgment, poets will step forward out of the crevices—the tiny rooms, the smoky bars—by the hundreds and thousands, wearing dark glasses, like a great witnessing chorus, to proclaim the faith of little children, the hope of the excluded, and "the charity of the hard moments." 79

(She catches sight of herself in the mirror. Go in fear of hyperbole.)

In America, we celebrate and honor poets from other cultures (and, of late, poets who "represent" minority groups here, whose Identity is their subject) who have expressed their resistance to the tyranny of their homelands: we are generous and attentive to the many writers who have come to this country to find liberty. These poets have, for us, great symbolic value, and much ideological hay can be, and is, made from their courage.


Joseph Brodsky, the persecuted Russian poet who settled in the United States in the early 1970s, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987 and became his adopted country's poet laureate, died yesterday at his apartment in Brooklyn Heights...

The poetry of Joseph Brodsky, with its haunting images of wandering and loss and the human search for freedom, was not political, and certainly not the work of an anarchist or even an active dissident. If anything, his was a dissent of the spirit, protesting the drabness of life in the Soviet Union and its pervasive materialist dogmas.

But in a land of poets where poetry and other literature was officially subservient to the state, where verses were marshaled like so many laborers to the quarries of Socialist Realism, it was perhaps inevitable that Mr. Brodsky's work—unpublished except in underground forums, but increasingly popular—should have run afoul of the literary police.

The exploitative layers of cultural hypocrisy in this moving account are profound. There is no mention, for example, of what Mr. Brodsky thought about the "pervasive materialist dogmas" of his adopted country, of his desire to have poetry *here* available to all, his wish that students memorize reams of stanzas, his desire to put books of poetry in every hotel room across America alongside the Gideon Bible. Brodsky, "unpublished except in underground forums, but increasingly popular"—there's the rub: there was an *audience* in Russia, a desire to read poems despite, or perhaps because of, the brutal suppressions of the State.

American cultural and educational institutions venerate Mr. Brodsky (and others of similar ilk) not so much for the power of his work, but because he could be rendered famous, an icon to display our liberal values, our tolerance.

The means of oppression in a "free country" are indirect, but effective, and they often have taken the form of "benign neglect," though of course neglect is never benign. Ignore them, pretend they do not exist, keep them separated in their journals, their schools and academies—the academy is very adept at ignoring the living—do not include them or their works in general coverage, do not review their books, unless they keep to a format of neat little pictures and accounts from their personal lives. American poets are shunned in the public domain of the media not for what they say (nobody knows) or for how they say it (nobody cares), but for their spiritual dissent from the pervasive materialist dogmas of the United States.

Poets do not think that the sole purpose of language is to convey experience as a stream of information reducible to sets of categories with subject headings. Frank O'Hara, deciding to give up music as a career, said, "In too many places I have information but no knowledge." When the *New York Times Magazine* made a "map" of American poetry and poets, they made it a travesty, as inaccurate as it was outwaded (e.g., any poet not writing within a narrow paradigm is ipso facto a L=A=E=N=G=U=A=G=E poet), arising from their determination to fit poets into ludicrous categories ("the richest," "the most beautiful," etc.), which, undoubtedly, they thought was amusing, but which in fact reflected both ignorance and disdain. Instead of asking why there might be disagreements and animosities, as well as affect and respect, between and among poets, informed by the relation between experience and aesthetics and the real communities that result, they debased these into petty quarrels and competitions. Simultaneously, they did their best to erect a hierarchy of petty power bases and fiefdoms organized around the most parochial (if typical) prototypes. That Bill Moyers did a series on poetry for PBS is great, but it was too driven by entrenched conventions which gave little sense of the extraordinary variety and complexity of contemporary American poetry.
Say the guy sitting next to you on the plane, or the train, or the bus, asks you what you do, and you answer, "I am a poet." There is a moment when a tiny abyss opens, a hairline fracture across the skyline, through which a meager gnostic light shines. This is a millisecond of time, nothing really. Then, his voice slightly strained, slightly throttled, the voice of an estranged father talking to his kid about her grades, "A poet! How wonderful!"

But even as this affirmation rides into the air like a sunburst, it is followed quickly by shadowy, anxious clouds, puffing across his mental horizon as he tries to find some reference, some contemporary sighting, anything, which shows that he knows something about living poets or their work. But no, nothing comes, not a single page or a single book, not a single title or name; instead, a set of images from... what? Cartoons flicker up onto his scanner. *Flick*: a disheveled creep, vaguely addicted, vaguely suicidal or homicidal in a dingy room. *Flick*: a wispy creature with stringy hair in pastel drapery, moaning over love lost. *Flick*: a shill, hysterical manic ranting about some kind of injustice. But, yes, he can hear Garrison Keillor's Heartland voice, on that program on NPR, the *Writer's Almanac*, intoning, "Here's a poem for today by..."—blank. Usually something about some guy remembering some sad tale from his childhood—a dead cat or uncle or something. Sweet dreams.

Still smiling (the smile of frozen animation), your companion sees that you do not resemble any of these images. You seem, well, normal. You are quite nicely dressed. You smell pretty good. He realizes, with a strange sort of embarrassed jolt, that he thought, well, he thought poets were extinct. Desperate now, as the silence between you begins to slide into the gnostic crack, he realizes that there is a way to proceed:

"Have you published?" he asks eagerly.

Funny, really. You are not exactly a kid, not even what could be called a young person, you are quite mature, and you wonder how your companion imagines that you could claim to be a poet *without* having published, unless, of course, you are, well, delusional. But of course the real purport of your poor baffled companion's question is: *I didn't know poetry actually got published these days. I mean do they actually pay you for it if so how much can't be more than a few bucks so how do you make a living do you turn tricks are you married to a rich guy or what?*

You will annoy persons in the Real World. They will not like knowing that there is a discrepancy between what you are doing to earn a living and what you are doing in pursuit of happiness. They will not want to know that you are not wholeheartedly taken up by an idea of a progressive climb up up up to more more more: more Money, more Power, more Fame. They will find it baffling if you tell them that you spent forty-three hours, thirty-nine minutes, twenty seconds writing one poem, and waited seven months to hear if it was accepted at a little magazine that can pay you only by sending you two copies when it is published in another six months; that you will fly, if asked, across the United States to read for twenty minutes to fourteen students and one faculty member, a poet, at a small college for a fee of two hundred dollars plus dinner at the local trattoria. They will find it inescrutable that you wish to spend all your time puttering with the most ubiquitous, the least rare, and therefore least inherently valuable of substances, *language*.

So, strange young man,—it is at his command, remember that I say this to you; whether I agree with it or not is neither here nor there—you have decided on the conjurer's profession. Somewhere, in the middle of a salt marsh or at the bottom of a kitchen garden or on the top of a bus, you heard imprisoned Ariel call for help, and it is now a liberator's face that congratulates you from your shaving mirror every morning. As you walk the cold streets hatless, or sit over coffee and doughnuts in the corner of a cheap restaurant, your secret has already set you apart from the howling merchants and transacting multitudes to watch with fascinated distaste the bellowing barging hanging passage of the awkward profit-seeking elbow, the dazed eye of the gregarious acquisitive condition. Lying awake at night in your single bed you are conscious of a power by which you will survive the wallpaper of your boardinghouse or the expensive bourgeois horrors of your home.14

7. Green

The world, for many poets, is apprehended as *language*: language is the material of the world. Every object is simultaneously itself and its word. For some poets, the word has more significance than the thing itself; for others, the thing takes priority over its word, and for still others, neither word nor thing has precedence. Although this might be seen as a mere matter of shift in focus, the consequences, in terms of the poem's form, its construction, can be profound. Poets move around in the shadowy space between a word and
its object, sometimes wanting to make the difference between the two appear seamless, and sometimes calling attention to the distinction between them.

Some poets stitch a kind of linguistic web between sites of picturing (description) and sites of telling (narration); some poets make clusters of sound which do neither and both at once, calling attention to the constellating properties of language, its capacity to confound temporal and spatial reality into a third thing: an event which participates in the construction of that reality. The idea that a poem can be granted the status of an event that shifts the course of cause and effect in a writer's or reader's life, has little to do with the idea of a poem as a bauble of verbal expressivity. Poetry, on this view, is an enterprise of making a path from a given vocabulary into a revised vocabulary. As Richard Rorty has it:

What matters in the end are changes in the vocabulary rather than changes in belief, changes in truth-value candidates rather than assignments of truth-value . . . Those who speak the old language and have no wish to change, those who regard it as a hallmark of rationality and morality to speak just that language, will regard as altogether irrational the appeal of the new metaphors—

the new language game which the radicals, the youth, or the avant-garde are playing. The popularity of the new ways of speaking will be viewed as a matter of "fashion" or "the need to rebel" or "decadence" . . . Conversely, from the point of view of those who are trying to use the new language, to literate the new metaphors, those who cling to the old language will be viewed as irrational—as victims of passion, prejudice, superstition, the dead hand of the past, and so on.15

Translated to aesthetics, we can see how the resistance to innovation is a resistance to the difficulty of giving up old vocabularies of value—what constitutes beauty or truth, for example—for new ones. We seem ready to herald each new fashion season with open arms, trading in last year's wardrobe at the drop of a hat, or hem, or glove, but art that attempts to alter our final vocabulary of judgment is viewed with disdain, suspicion, or outright hostility. As art critic Dave Hickey has said, "Once we acquiesce in the reification of formal values, questions of whether one manifestation is 'better' than another, derives from another, is displaced by another, or transforms itself into another, become inexplicable and irrelevant." As if to say: it is not a matter of having an experience and then writing about it; a poem is, in itself, an experience, where the idea of "experience" is not neutral, but one that changes the way we think about what came before it and what follows from it.

So that writing a poem is involved with creating a self, in which the self (and so the world) is an anthology under constant revision, to slightly revise poet Ron Silliman's remark.

Although the word "word" is a noun, words are not exactly things, and yet they are not not-things either. The fact that they can be simultaneously sounds uttered and marks written allows poets to play between aural and visual components, to draw attention not only to the relation of word to white space, but to an infinite number of minute compositional shifting, alignments, and turns, each of which influences the way in which meanings accrue onto the reader/listener's resonating ground. To notice the facticity or materiality of words is to give them a certain autonomy, as if you could free them of their literal relation to objects (reality), and allow them to form virtual attachments to each other. The dazzling fluidity and malleability of language implies an infinite number of relations and attachments, each of which has the potential to subtly shift how, and what, we perceive of ourselves and our world.

A child learns that the leaf is green, but there is no innate physical relationship between the word "green" and the delicate elongated coolly opaque thing in his hand. Even if there were an argument, something about that long e sound that carries a sensation, an openness, which one could attribute to this color, green has hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands, ways of being green; each time it appears it is in relation to myriad other conditions: shine, opacity, scent, motion, texture, not to mention the presence or proximity of other colors.

May I borrow your green dress to wear to a party?

And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind.16