

**LIGHT AS AIR: A POETICS OF WONDER IN THE WORK OF RON
PADGETT**

by

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ABSTRACT

This work consists of a portfolio of poetry, *The Pencil Method*, preceded by a thesis, 'Light As Air: A Poetics of Wonder in the Work of Ron Padgett'. Chapter 1 sets out the historical context for an American poetics of wonder and situates Padgett within that, considering the central importance of 'not knowing' and how this resonates with Zen concepts of intimacy and awakening. The comparative use, by Padgett and Joe Brainard, of the image of headlessness is also examined and how this facilitates play with notions of the self / not-self. Chapter 2 considers Padgett's active and tactical approach towards making openings in the known by comparing his experiments with creative mistranslation to Kenneth Koch's creative misunderstandings of the French language. Links are explored between the nonsense tradition, Zen and the theme of wonder. Chapter 3 considers Padgett's distinctive playful acts of inattention brought about by his practice of 'creative reading' and how these extend to swerving sidesteps away from the known. The critical thesis ends with reflections on some of the poems from *The Pencil Method* and how these read across to some of Padgett's methods and the Buddhist inflected poetics of wonder outlined in the first three chapters.

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INTRODUCTION

What This PhD Is, How to Read It, and Why

‘Gaston Bachelard says the single most succinct and astonishing thing: We begin in admiration and we end by organizing our disappointment’

Mary Ruefle (Ruefle, 2012, p. 6)

‘Research is not the privilege of those who know, but the domain of those who don’t know’

Robert Filliou (1995, p. 82)

This piece of research is into a poetics of wonder, and the writing strategies and processes associated with that. The poetics is one which I argue can be seen at work in many of the writings of Ron Padgett, especially when they are read from a Buddhist perspective. The research comprises a critical thesis in essay form which explores some of the elements of that poetics and an accompanying collection of poetry, entitled *The Pencil Method*, which investigates and informs the poetics as well as using it as a creative springboard.

One of Robert Sheppard’s *metapoetic* definitions in ‘The Necessity of Poetics’ focuses in on what exactly it is one is doing when one thinks and writes about poetics:

Poetics, to take it back to Aristotle, where the category began, is distinguished from *theoria* or *praxis*, theory or practice, in the primacy of its activity of making. Poetics is the active questioning, since that time, about how does, how should, how could, art be made. (1999)

Research into a poetics of wonder will therefore involve the questioning of how writing, such as Padgett's, that instigates and develops wonder, is made. Wonder famously is the original inspiration for philosophy, but I have not undertaken any philosophical analysis of the emotion in this thesis given the focus on craft and making through poetics, preferring instead to circle around it offering suggestions on some of the ways in which poetry works to produce wonder in both the writer and reader. If a working definition of wonder might be helpful to bear in mind when considering its cultivation in the circumambulations to come, I would suggest that it encompasses the 'pleasant surprise' (1988, p. 192) that John Ashbery said he hoped to give his reader, in a low key twist on what Apollinaire regarded in 'The New Spirit and the Poets' (1971) as the greatest resource of poetry, and Victor Shklovsky's formalist concept of *Ostranenie* (a making strange) (Berlina, 2017, p. 23). This combination, from both ends of the last hundred years, conveys the essential sense of gift, surprise, delight and a refreshment of perception that I associate with wonder. Matthew Bevis, writing about the coincidence of wonder and humour, feels that defamiliarization is 'too serious, too bureaucratic a word for the blithe buoyancy' (2014, p.108) of such moments and I tend to agree, so some of the ballast in Shklovsky's term might need to be jettisoned to allow for a clearer vision of wonder's buoyancy in the context of Padgett's writing where humour is nearly always bubbling up to the surface.

I was initially attracted to the image of this research aligning with Kim Lasky's image of practice-led research as a form of triptych. Lasky uses this image to describe the connected process out of which 'writers can formulate a statement of poetics that might underpin the discourse that accompanies a piece of creative work'

(2012, pp. 21-22). Lasky figures the process ‘as a triptych whose outer panels—the critical and theoretical inputs and outcomes on one side, the creative work on the other—might hinge to fold over and into the central poetics panel’ (2012, pp. 21-22). The end result has, in my experience, been messier, with the boundaries between practice-based research and research-informed practice often blurring. Any folding over of panels might result in something more like a Rorschach inkblot than a statement of poetics. As Robert Sheppard notes in another of his maxims:

Poetics is a secondary discourse, but is not “after the event”; it doesn't simply react to making. The making can change the poetics; the poetics can change the making . (1999)

The poetics may not, in my experience, always be a secondary discourse even, with several of the poems in *The Pencil Method* (for example the title poem and ‘Reading without Nonsense’), reflecting back on their own making in the style of both Padgett and Warner Bros. cartoons.

What a Buddhist perspective will bring to a poetics of wonder is, I will argue, firstly the central importance of not knowing. The emergence of something unexpected is implicit within any surprise of course but the emphasis, within Zen especially, on the felt experience of not knowing adds levels of depth to this. An exploration of ways of being open and receptive to not knowing will bring with it the addition of the word intimacy to my initial list of wonder’s key characteristics and much of the first chapter is devoted to an exploration of the relevance of this word to Padgett’s poetry when read as a synonym for Buddhist awakening. That chapter will also involve a consideration of one of the things one becomes awakened to in Buddhism: the

impermanence of any distinct and independent sense of self. Both Padgett and Joe Brainard play with ideas of self, selves and the lack of either, in their writing and the chapter will end with an examination of the recurring image of headlessness in their work and how that may be read as a strategy for getting the self, particularly the thinking or knowing self, out of the way in order to make space for creativity. For Brainard this strategy is very much part of the preparation for making whereas for Padgett I will argue that it is more integral to his (anti-programmatic) programme.

The second chapter will build on these foundations of ignorance (or creative agnosticism) in Padgett's work by considering how he has at times gone beyond an openness and receptivity to not knowing to take a more active and, in Emma Cocker's words, *tactical* approach towards it by 'rupturing the terms of what is already known' (Cocker, 2013, p. 130). This strategy of making openings in the known will be examined in the light of experiments that both Padgett and Kenneth Koch carried out in response to early encounters with French language and poetry following their respective Fulbright scholarships in France. Unlike Wallace Stevens, for whom 'French and English are the same language' (1989, p. 202), the French language seems to have come to signify a special category of otherness and strangeness for Koch and Padgett. The older poet looked to replicate this strangeness, and the 'happy confusion' he experienced when misunderstanding French, in the highly disrupted surfaces of his early long poem 'When the Sun Tries To Go On', while Padgett achieved somewhat similar effects by deliberately mistranslating the poems of Pierre Reverdy amongst others. These misunderstandings and mistranslations will be read, in Marnie Parsons' terms, as 'nonsense strategies' deployed to pile surprise upon surprise in a linguistic landscape made deliberately unfamiliar. Links will also be explored between these early writings of Koch and Padgett and the nonsense tradition, wonder and Zen. As with the work of Brainard in the first chapter, Koch's

poetry and strategies are considered at some length here in comparison with Padgett's. Koch's work was a major source of inspiration as was his sense of the absolute seriousness of writing unsolemn poetry.

To mistranslate a text is to follow certain procedures or rules, for example, associative or phonetic, whereby one allows oneself to be led astray from the task of making a text more familiar in one's mother tongue and into unknown alien territory. In Chapter 3 I consider other errant ways in which Padgett has sought out the not known through disobedient acts of inattention when reading and writing. His book *Creative Reading* (1997) provides a pedagogic tour of techniques for taking an anti-authoritarian attitude towards reading. The lessons learned on how to creatively misread texts in search of surprise can equally be applied to creative writing and Padgett's own poetry demonstrates some of the methods explored. One particular technique—the 'eye-mind split'—leads on, in the second half of this chapter, to an extended survey of what is perhaps the most distinctively Padgett-like of his writing manoeuvres: the meandering or swerving sidestep which takes the writer and reader away from an expected destination. The technique can be seen as either an extension or critique of the Buddhist practice of mindfulness as the movements of a wandering mind are traced by the writing in a disciplined form of daydreaming.

Padgett's poetics of inattention are compared in Chapter 3 with those of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. The confines of the Ph.D thesis mean that further, possibly fruitful, comparisons could not be made between Padgett's methods and those of Philip Whalen. The Buddhist intermingling of readerly and writerly selves, or lack of selves, in the different times of composition and performance in Whalen's longer works, and his view of poetry as a 'picture or graph of a mind moving' (2007, p. 153)

could be read across to Padgett's more cartoon-like depiction of the movements of the mind. There are several other gaps more generally which could have been filled had this been a longer work on Padgett's poetics; Ted Berrigan played as instrumental a role in Padgett's life as Brainard and Koch and it would have been good to be able to study Padgett's collaborative writing with Berrigan in some detail and also perhaps to examine Berrigan's methods from a Buddhist angle. The importance early on of collaboration is touched upon in this thesis but again there is scope for more to be written on the poetics of that way of making more generally; also on the poetics of the particular form of collaboration that is translation with Apollinaire, Cendrars and Reverdy providing vital early modernist inspirations for Padgett's poetry and further roots of a poetics of wonder. John Yau in a review of his *Collected* listed all the things Padgett's poetry was not: 'traditionalist, surrealist, avant-gardist, minimalist, metaphysical, pataphysical, philosophical, scientific, conceptual, extravagant, obscure, metaphorical, or riddled with puns' (2013). Yau notes that his list has 'only touched the tip of the iceberg' (2013) and with more space I could have added to the list by looking at some of the other things Padgett's poetry is not. Even as it stands the research has an apophatic feel to it as each chapter gestures towards the ways in which Padgett at least partially eludes the theme being considered.

The critical thesis ends in Chapter 4 with reflections on a selection of the longer poems and series of poems in my collection *The Pencil Method* and how these can be seen as informing, extending, or simply being in conversation with, some of Padgett's methods and the Buddhist inflected poetics of wonder outlined in the first three chapters.

CHAPTER 1

How not to know: not knowing and not-self in the work of Ron

Padgett and Joe Brainard

Sometimes

everything

s e e m s

so

oh, I don't know.

Joe Brainard (Brainard, 2012, p.435)

Put your right hand on your forehead, your left hand on the back of your head; lift your head off your neck, and put it down. Now what's happening.

Alan Davies (Davies, 1978, p.12)

Introduction

It seems hard to know how to write about Ron Padgett's poetry which, as Yasmine Shamma (2014) has noted, 'is simultaneously easy to read and difficult to apprehend' (2014), or as Lorenzo Thomas puts it, 'simultaneously difficult and entirely accessible' (2006, p. 288). Padgett's lifelong friend, the writer and artist, Joe Brainard, may have been trying (not too hard admittedly) to say something about this experience in the following piece:

Ron Padgett

Ron Padgett is a poet. He always has been a poet and he always will be a poet. I don't know how a poet becomes a poet. And I don't think anyone else does either. It is something deep and mysterious inside of a person that cannot be explained. It is something that no one understands. It is something that no one will ever understand. I asked Ron Padgett once how it came about that he was a poet, and he said, "I don't know. It is something deep and mysterious inside of me that cannot be explained." (Brainard, 2012, p. 215)

Padgett was only a little more forthcoming in 2015 at a poetry festival in Kunming, China, when he gave, at the request of the poet Yu Jian with whom he has collaborated in translation for several years, a talk entitled 'Why Write Poetry' (Padgett, 2015). Padgett offered a few possible 'speculative and tentative' answers to the question, referring to the indirect influence of his 'outlaw' father and more direct inspiration from a high school English teacher, together with a 'prolonged childhood and adolescence' in which the importance of play was allowed to continue. But ultimately, to the question 'why' he confessed that, 'my only certain answer is "I don't know".' (Padgett, 2015).

This chapter will explore the importance of this creative agnosticism in Ron Padgett's poetry, starting with a short survey of the concept of not knowing and its relationship with the sense of wonder as a persistent theme from post-Romantic to contemporary poetry, then moving on to consider the central place of not knowing in Buddhism, particularly its role in Zen Buddhism as a gateway to awakening, and how Padgett's poetry might profitably be read through this Buddhist lens. The chapter will end by taking the Buddhist reading of Padgett's not knowing further by examining the recurring imagery of headlessness within his poetry (also in Brainard's art and

writing) and seeing to what extent this imagery resonates with, and concretizes, the Buddhist experience of ‘not-self’ or ‘emptiness’. The chapter concludes that whilst Padgett’s ‘I don’t know’ may, over the course of his writing career, have been his default answer to the question *why* he writes poetry, it has opened up various doors onto *how* to go about writing it. A tactical approach to the creative potential within the ‘emptiness’ of not knowing has allowed for a playful exploration of the self and not-self in Padgett’s work.

Both Padgett and Brainard have denied in interview that either ever followed any systematic programme in their writing and/or art and were uninterested in theorizing about it, or formulating an explicit poetics. In fact, both tended to disavow ideas altogether; either ideas from which their art or writing could be said to take its inspiration, or ideas which their work could be said to be *about*. Both ideas and *aboutness* are things to be approached with caution and appropriate humour. The eleventh section of Padgett’s early rangy experiment ‘Tone Arm’, for example, begins ‘Batten down the hatches boys I’m having an idea!’ (2013, p.89) and in one of the parenthetical asides of ‘Cufflinks’ Padgett’s protagonist confesses, ‘(I don’t seem to have a very well thought-out philosophy, / in fact I have never made a sustained effort / to systematize my various fleeting ideas on the Big Issues’ (2013, pp. 290-291). In response to Anne Waldman’s question about whether he had ideas before starting his collages, Brainard was uncategorical, ‘I don’t ever have an idea. The material does it all’ (Brainard, 2012, p. 511). Padgett takes a similar line in his poem ‘Method’ which half seriously declares, and then exemplifies, one of his main approaches to writing. In contrast with his description of Kenneth Koch’s ‘method’ which was ‘to have a general notion of the whole poem / before he started / such as the history of jazz or the boiling point of water’, Padgett’s ‘is to start and go / wherever the poem seems to

lead' (Padgett, 2013, p.590). The sense of not knowing, that is, not knowing what they might be about to make or write next, and why, seems to have been vital to the creative processes of both Padgett and Brainard.

As a corrective to what would be a misleading portrait of Padgett and Brainard as early versions of 'Dumb and Dumber', however, I should mention an essay by Padgett which discusses the importance for him of coming across, in his early teenage years, *The Art of Thinking* by Ernest Dimnet. Until he discovered that book Padgett writes that he could not recall ever having been aware that he thought or had any control over the process of his thinking. The effect of the book, which 'not only described an art of thinking but also enobled it' (2003, p. 274), on both Padgett and his neighbour the fellow Tulsan poet Dick Gallup, was enormous; Padgett notes that both adolescents were keen to flee from their bodies so 'what better place to go than into our minds' (2003, p. 274). The door was now open, for both of them, to the great philosophers of the past, but the longer lasting effect on Padgett was having been awoken to the idea of the flow of thought. Padgett points out the following early passage from Dimnet's book:

The flux in our brain carries along images—remembered or modified—feelings, resolves and intellectual, or partly intellectual conclusions, in vague or seething confusion. And this process never stops, not even in our sleep. ... When we look in we are conscious of [this] perpetual motion. (2003. p. 279)

Dimnet encourages his reader to examine this mental stream and at one point looks to step into it, 'pulling the charming trick of turning to face the reader and abruptly asking, "What are you thinking of?"' (2003, p. 280) before conducting an imagined

conversation with them about what they might be experiencing at that moment as they read the book. This is a device that Padgett will use himself many times later on in his poetry, for example in ‘Cufflinks’ (2013, p. 290), the effect being a ‘fusing of our here and now (reading) with the author’s “back then” (writing)’ which ‘creates an immediate bond that erases space and time, especially time, for we have been transported to a mental realm outside of it’ (2003, p. 280). The observation of the flow of thought and the freedom to play with its imagined thinkers will be important later, but for now, despite his disavowal of knowledge, it’s important to note Padgett’s interest in how thought moves through the mind.

Not Knowing: The literary context

Padgett and Brainard clearly have no hegemony over the concept of ‘not knowing’ things; from the Socratic wisdom that lies in knowing that one knows nothing, to the medieval Christian mystic’s guide to contemplation contained within *The Cloud of Unknowing*, to Keats’ ‘Negative Capability’, its significance has a long history. In the context of literature, those for whom not knowing is important are numerous. Andrew Bennett has written the first full-length critical study of this topic, *Ignorance: Literature and Agnology* (2013), with a focus on the Romantic and post-Romantic periods. Writing about Emily Dickinson, for example, and specifically about the line ‘Where the Meanings, are —’ from ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’, he notes how the comma makes that line ‘more difficult, more resistant to immediate and reassuring sense-making, more productive of a certain kind of “ignorance” — bafflement, conceptual blankness, uncertainty — that I am aligning with literature, or poetry, and therefore with the experience of reading’ (2013, p. 34).

Bennett returns to this theme of the defamiliarization of poetry, and the positive kind of “ignorance” which that technique can produce, later in his book when discussing the following passage in Shelley’s ‘A Defence of Poetry’ in which it is suggested that poetry

reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. (Bennett, 2013, p. 74)

To be familiar with something is to know it well; *too* well, Bennett argues, because,

knowing it habitually, interferes with our (true) knowledge of it. ... Poetry doesn’t so much produce knowledge as make us aware that we don’t know what we think we know, what we know or think we know only too well. And another way to talk about this is to talk about ignorance: poetry offers us ignorance of the world we (thought we) knew, so that we can know it again as if it was new to us, know it as a new, unknown, world of wonder. Poetry doesn’t just begin in wonder, as Aristotelian philosophy does, but ends there, it ends up, if we are to see as poets do, in or with our ignorance of things. (2013, p. 74)

In Bennett's final chapter on ignorance within contemporary poetry, he notes that 'declarations of authorial ignorance became, in the twentieth century, something like a rite of passage, and indeed just what poets in particular were—as they still are, I think — expected to declare' (2013, p. 226). He goes on to state that it is 'something of an open secret—outside of the academic study of literature, at least—that *not* knowing is, for the poet, as important as knowing' (2013, p. 228). As to why this has become the case, Bennett looks at a published collection of statements by contemporary poets on their own work entitled *Don't Ask Me What I Mean* (Brown and Paterson, 2003) and analyses thirteen ways in which 'poetic ignorance appears in the poets' conceptions of their work and their working methods' (2013, p. 229). Two of the summarising statements seem most pertinent to Padgett's own 'not knowing': firstly 'as I begin a poem I don't know where it will go, or how it will work out' and secondly 'it's the poem or language that invents or writes itself, not the poet' (2013, p. 231). Both suggest a relatively passive role for the poet with the former statement applying to several poets in *Don't Ask Me* who believe that in some way poems have, in the words of James Reeves, 'a life of their own which they are determined to live in their own way' (2013, p. 232). The second statement covers the classically inspired writers all of whom, Bennett suggests could claim that they are ignorant about what their poem is saying, or how it came about, because 'it is not in any important sense *I* that wrote it' (2013, p. 232). Padgett is not a muse-driven poet but his early work challenges the notion of authorship, for example, in the collaborations with Ted Berrigan, Joe Brainard and others in *Bean Spasms* (2012) where it's unclear who wrote what, and in *Antlers in the Treetops* (1970) with Tom Veitch where no rights to be identified as the authors for copyright purposes are asserted.

Wisława Szymborska's confession of ignorance, in the form of her Nobel Lecture 'The Poet and the World', would come under another of Bennett's classifications: '*I can only write because I do not know*' (2013, p. 232). If the poet knew why they wrote they suspect they wouldn't be able to anymore. Szymborska claimed in her lecture that, 'whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know"' (Szymborska, 1998, p. xiii). Szymborska makes the link not just between not knowing and the curiosity that lies behind her poetic inspiration, but also—echoing Shelley's Defence—between not knowing and ontological wonder, our primary astonishment at existence. With her 'I don't know' here the poet gives up any pretence that the world, or anything in it, is normal, obvious or well-known:

... whatever else we might think of this world—it is astonishing.

But astonishing is an epithet concealing a logical trap. We're astonished, after all, by things that deviate from some well-known and universally acknowledged norm, from an obviousness to which we've grown accustomed.

But the point is, there is no such obvious world. Our astonishment exists *per se*, and it isn't based on a comparison with something else. (Szymborska, 1998, p. xiii)

Ron Padgett takes his ontological wonder lightly. His list poem 'Pikakirjoitusvihko' features the following brief, Woody Allen-like, entry: 'The miracle of existing and being able to say so and have drapes' (2013, p. 579). Existential vertigo is associated with drapery again in 'Curtain' with the protagonist standing in the bathroom peeing when he looks up to see the old familiar curtain 'red cotton with little yellow flowers / from Liberty Fabrics (London) 1970' (2015, p. 68) and is suddenly struck by an anxious fantasy about the possibility, at the age of 70, of instant death clinging

to the curtain as it falls away. But just as quickly the fantasy drops and ‘it doesn’t happen, the curtain stays put / and I’m standing there / and the curtain still looks good’ (2015, p.68). In Bennett’s terms ‘Curtain’ offered Padgett, and then his reader, ‘ignorance of the world we (thought we) knew, so that we can know it again as if it was new to us’ (2013, p. 74) with the *world*, in this case, being the act of peeing (for the X thousandth time) and seeing a curtain (for the Y thousandth time).

For the American postmodern writer of fiction, Donald Barthelme, ‘not knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. ... without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention’ (1997, p.12). Although Barthelme’s focus, like Szymborska’s, is still on astonishment through surprising movements of the mind, his approach to writing looks to be more akin to Brainard’s idea-less collage process in its immersive play with the plastic stuff that is language:

The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they’re allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, [*sic*] makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered. (Barthelme, 1997, p. 21)

Barthelme goes on to hint at what thought might look, or sound, like to an artist operating in ‘not-knowing’ mode when he recounts an anecdote concerning a visit to Elaine de Kooning’s studio on Broadway. De Kooning’s neighbour, in the studio immediately above, was the metal sculptor Herbert Ferber. There came ‘through the floor a most horrible crashing and banging. “What in the world is that?” I [Barthelme] asked, and Elaine said, “Oh, that’s Herbert thinking”’ (1997, p. 23).

The sound of a poet thinking is necessarily a less raucous affair as words are shifted back and forth in the mind and on the page or screen, but for many it seems to be as uncertain and as remote from our usual conception of the act of thought or knowledge as Herbert's crashing and banging. In Angela Leighton's essay 'Poetry's Knowing' she stresses the ongoing nature of the process, as suggested by the present participle in her title, arguing that poetry

pushes at the parameters of that word [knowing], opening it up to include wondering, unknowing, not knowing, imagining, listening—activities which have something to do with how the mind works, but which mostly shed the burden of any obviously attainable object. (2015, p.18)

Wondering, in that list, is significant; Henry James's novel *What Maisie Knew* is for Leighton 'like much poetry ... an exploration of some almost objectless knowing: knowing which is open to a multitude of things, all of them wondrous' (2015, p. 12). She goes on to suggest, along similar lines to Andrew Bennett, that poetry should not just begin in this sense of wonder and then, like Aristotelian philosophy, seek out the causes of the emotional disturbance so that it can finally be eased. Instead, 'it may be that the purpose of literature, and poetry in particular, is to increase it, to remain a "wonder- working agent"' (2015, p. 12). Poetry's knowing for Leighton is therefore, a wondrous knowing; an act of discovery which remains continuously open and receptive, but, as such, one which necessarily 'remains insufficient, like a verb without an object, or like a suspended participle, something to be found only in the finding, discovered in the discovering...' (2015 p. 21).

Emma Cocker has explored what she sees as the ‘tactics for not knowing’ in creativity generally (she is an artist and writer) in an essay to which I will return several times in this thesis as tactics and poetics are closely allied. ‘Against logic’, she writes, ‘it is necessary to *know* how to not know’ (Cocker, 2013, p. 131).

Rather than the ‘knowing *of* or knowing *that*’ which an encyclopaedia might offer, which are ill-equipped to deal with the contingencies of artistic creativity, she proposes a ‘*different* knowing to knowledge then, perhaps more aligned to *confidence*. Confidence is the knowledge that the right decision will be made when required; it involves trusting that a response will be performed intuitively at the propitious time’ (2013, p. 131). In Padgett’s terms perhaps one aspect of that confidence lies in trusting, and being open, not just to ‘wherever the poem seems to lead’ (2013, p. 590) but also to his ability to know that ‘sometimes it doesn’t lead anywhere / other than to a dead end’ or that ‘sometimes it leads somewhere / I have no interest in being / or the way I get there is contrived or silly’ (2013, p. 590). In subsequent chapters I will look at ways in which it might be possible to see, in Cocker’s words, ‘the use of tactical approaches or methods that seek to *produce* the conditions of uncertainty, disorientation or indeterminacy’ rather than simply waiting for ‘the auspicious moment of not knowing to arrive’, but at this point it is the initial openness and receptivity to the not known which is the focus.

Cocker writes that preparing for the unexpected means two things to the artist: it is ‘the gesture of developing readiness (for anything), a state of being at the cusp of action, mind and body poised’, but it is also ‘an act of scarifying the ground, an attempt to create the germinal conditions within which something unanticipated might arise’ (2013, p. 127).

Jack Underwood has also written recently in praise of the ‘uncertain kind of knowledge made possible in poems’ (2018, p. 7) suggesting, with some irony and humour, but also with a level of apparent ambition to rival Shelley’s, that ‘poetry, that oft-maligned, wafty corner of dynamic not-knowing ... should be acknowledged as the prime medium for the articulation of our knowledge of the unknown’ (2018, p. 8). The uncertain kind of ‘productive and beneficial’ knowledge articulated by poetry which Underwood, along with Leighton, advocates, is seen as active because, in Underwood’s words, ‘it gets you [the reader] wondering, doing the hard work of empathy’; there is in poetry ‘a resistance to finality in language, and to the kind of certain knowledge that shuts down revision or discussion, or suggests that knowledge can’t also be (say it) *felt*’ (2018, p. 7). The kind of knowledge towards which Underwood is tentatively urging himself is a knowledge of wonder. The chief virtue of wonder for Descartes, as for Aristotle, lies in its firing up of the curiosity and intelligence which should subsequently understand, explain and thus remove the original cause of the emotion, but again there is a gesture in Underwood’s essay towards the importance of poetry not just starting in, but remaining within, the inexplicable and wondrous, touching even on the sublime:

and there it all is, this unstable, miraculous wad. I realize I have no answer for it, nothing to say, no conclusion to draw, and yes, I feel something like tranquility, but also awe, a happy, overwhelming fear. The lack of an explanation for all this wide mad fuss of the world only makes it the bigger miracle...’. (Underwood, 2018, p. 9)

For Matthew Bevis, along similar lines to Leighton, the value of poetry's not knowing, or in his case specifically of 'unknowing lyric' (2018) poetry, lies in its relation to the present moment:

Knowledge, unlike experience, is never *now*. Lyric poems, though, by so often longing for the now, for a kind of presentness if not always a present tense, seem to house a dream of a moment in which you could do something other than know things—or in which you could re-experience how you come at knowing, rather than know your knowing. (Bevis, 2018)

Poetry seems here to be, if not a kind of knowledge in itself, then a way of approaching knowledge indirectly, of circling and, perhaps, ambushing it. Like Underwood, Bevis includes feelings within the ambit of poetry's knowing:

A perception of the surrealism of the real, a sense of a vividness that is also vertiginous, an awareness that my knowledge may itself be a wonderfully necessary hallucination—these are the feelings I most often take (or make) from lyric poems. (2018)

Bevis ends his essay by quoting Wallace Stevens, on the dawn, 'It was like // A new knowledge of reality'; and Elizabeth Bishop on the sea, 'It is like what we imagine knowledge to be' (2018); and points to the degree of uncertainty in these poetic moments. Stevens' perception is *like* knowledge, not knowledge itself and it is indefinite; only like *a* knowledge. Bishop's image pushes the uncertainty even further by comparing the (taste of the) sea to 'what we *imagine* knowledge to

be' (2018). Poetry's possible connection with knowledge appears to be becoming more and more tenuous.

The American-ness of not knowing

What becomes increasingly apparent in Bevis' essay, however, is how strong the connections are between not knowing and American poetry, as the work of Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop takes centre stage. Is there something specifically American about poetry and not knowing? Or something perhaps particularly naive about American poets? In *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature*, Tony Tanner documents what he describes as 'America's brave and exhilarating apostasy from history' (Tanner, 1965, p. 15), under which generations of American writers have followed Emerson's supreme valuing of the 'Here and the Now' (Tanner, 1965, p. 13) by making the 'deliberate attempt to regard reality with minimum reference to previous familiarity and interpretative knowledge' in an 'enduring preference for wonder over analysis' (Tanner, 1965, p. 11). Tanner's study concerns itself with American prose writers with the exception of Walt Whitman, whose 'breathless catalogues' (1965, p. 81) are at the heart of Tanner's argument that there is a persistent fondness within American writers for an approach, often strategic, that involves 'the naive eye with its unselective wonder; ... the vernacular with its immediacy and concrete directness; and the effort to slough off the Past and concentrate exclusively on the present moment' (1965, p. 14). The approach is strategic, Tanner argues, in Whitman's case, because 'behind the nonchalance there is a mystic with a definite end in view' (1965, p. 84). The sixth poem in Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' famously starts with his inability to answer a child's apparently simple question: 'What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; / How could I answer the child? ... I do not know what it is any more

than he' (1986, p. 29). In his *Specimen Days* entry 'Birds—and a Caution' Whitman goes beyond wondrous exclamation at that which he does not know to give some positive tactical advice on ignorance: 'You must not know too much, or be too precise or scientific about birds and trees and flowers and water-craft; a certain free margin, and even vagueness—perhaps ignorance, credulity—helps your enjoyment of these things' (1981, p. 617).

Gertrude Stein's strategic deployment of naïveté (a naïve ear rather than eye in her cubist verbal music perhaps) was also partly intended to privilege enjoyment over knowledge and understanding. In a 1934 radio interview, when being quizzed on the comprehensibility of her writing, she said:

Look here. Being intelligible is not what it seems. You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in the way that you have a habit of talking, putting it in other words. But I mean by understanding enjoyment. If you enjoy it, you understand it. (2008, p. 10)

There seems to be something about this subject of not knowing that provokes American writers into making increasingly audacious claims, rather than falling back into humble Wittgensteinian silence. In two of the Adagia from his *Opus Posthumous* Wallace Stevens pronounced that 'one's ignorance is one's chief asset' (198, p. 202) and the 'poem reveals itself only to the ignorant man' (1989, p. 187). Leaping a generation, over the heads of the other great modernists, to the New York School, takes us to what could be seen as the apogee of anti-epistemological poetics. Although John Ashbery claimed once that the New York School's program was the 'absence of a program' (Hickman, 2012, p.115), Frank O'Hara's manifesto for

Personism plays with the idea of systematising an argument for spontaneity and going ‘on your nerve’ (1994, p. xiii). O’Hara doesn’t deny having ideas; he has ‘practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today’, but ‘they’re just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I’ve stopped thinking and that’s when refreshment arrives’ (1994, p. xiii). Refreshment and inspiration for John Ashbery often came in the form of music rather than poetry. Taking a similar line to Stein on understanding, Ashbery claimed in an interview that he ‘never quite understood about understanding’, but that what he wanted to try and access in poetry was the feeling, after having listened to music that moved him, of wanting ‘to put this feeling into words, but it can’t be put into words ... it’s that kind of verbal meaning that can’t be verbalized’ (2017).

The writing of Clark Coolidge (a jazz musician as well as poet) is usually situated somewhat to one side, or on the margins, of both the New York School and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, but one might place his work at the centre of this theme of not knowing. At the opposite end of the geological spectrum from O’Hara’s loftiness, Clark Coolidge’s work burrows into the granularity of language, but the impulse to avoid or escape from the weight of thought remains. In one of his short statements on poetry/poetics, Coolidge writes: ‘I no longer want any knowledge that will not produce an even greater ignorance’ (1983, pp. 52-53). In Coolidge’s improvisational poetics, knowledge and understanding (except in the Steinian sense) is actively blocked so that the unexpected in terms of both sound and sense comes to the fore repeatedly. In a short essay in an issue of ‘Stations’ magazine devoted to Coolidge’s work, Alan Davies suggests that the ‘Don’t Know Mind’ evident in its creation is ‘basic zen concept. It means getting detached from thinking mind activity’ (1978, p. 11). Davies goes on to describe how in Coolidge’s poetry ‘we’re

made aware of the details of language: words, sound after single sound, bits of sound, small pieces of syntax. Close up' (1978, p. 12). Although Coolidge 'does not always avoid saying things' in his poetry, 'attention is always so focused to the unit of speech he's using, that we only infrequently notice what he says, that he says' (1978, p. 12). In Stein's writing (a significant influence on Coolidge's) Tony Tanner sees such attention paid to the units of language as part of her preference for a memory-less, non-narrative, 'moment by moment notation of experience' (1965, p.192) rather than an accumulation and analysis of that experience. Davies notes a similar activity at work in Coolidge's writing, seeing it as a species of Buddhist meditative phenomenology: 'He is aware of his mind. He pays attention to it. At times he makes notation of its continuous activity, and that is the work' (1978, p. 12). I will discuss later in this chapter the importance, in Padgett's poetry, of a similar attentiveness to the movements of his mind. Padgett's attentiveness is of a similar quality even if it lives in a parallel world, just as Padgett's and Coolidge's contributions to their collaborative work *Supernatural Overtones* seem to be coming to the page from entirely different places. Before turning to Padgett's work, to consider its relationship with not knowing as discussed by some of the writers and critics mentioned so far, I need to consider the importance of not knowing within Buddhism (especially Zen Buddhism) to which Davies has pointed in the work of Coolidge. I will argue that the ways in which not knowing is talked about within Buddhism incorporates, or at least touches upon, many of the strands mentioned above: the emphasis on defamiliarization in Bennett, on astonishment in Szymborska, on the movements of the mind in Bartheleme, on the continuous present moment in Bevis and Leighton (and before them Tanner), on the tactical preparedness and openness to not knowing in Cocker and on empathy in Underwood.

Not Knowing in Buddhism: ‘Not knowing is most intimate’

The philosopher Timothy Morton, returning to the origins of western philosophy, draws a direct comparison between wonder and Buddhist enlightenment or awakening: ‘Plato’s *Theaetetus* asserts that philosophy begins in astonishment. This feeling of wonder or astonishment is akin to Buddhist experiences of realization, enlightenment, *kenshō* or *satori*’ (Boon, Cazdyn and Morton, 2015, pp. 2-3). Many of the works of the English Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor also contain references to personal experiences of the feeling of wonder, for example here in an autobiographical work:

One evening at dusk, as I was returning to my room along a narrow path through the pine forest, carrying a blue plastic bucket slopping with water that I had just collected from a nearby source, I was abruptly brought to a halt by the upsurge of an overpowering sense of the sheer strangeness of everything, It was as though I had been lifted onto the crest of a great wave that rose from the ocean of life itself, allowing me for the first time to be struck by how mysterious it was that anything existed at all rather than nothing. “How,” I asked myself, “can a person be unaware of *this*? How can anyone pass their life without responding to *this*? Why have I not noticed *this* until now?” I remember standing still, trembling and dumb, with tears in my eyes. Then I continued on my way before night fell. (Batchelor, 2010, pp. 30-31)

In this case the astonishment arose spontaneously, but elsewhere Batchelor writes about how some Buddhist practices, especially in the Korean version of Zen (or Sŏn) which he followed for a number of years, are designed to bring about such an experience. The cultivation of doubt—or as Batchelor puts it a sustained ‘kind of

urgent perplexity' (2015, p. 11)—through the contemplation of a *kōan* (a short teaching story designed to crack open the rational mind), is such a practice. For example, repeatedly asking and contemplating the simple question “What is this?” (or with Batchelor’s emphasis “What is *this*?”) is intended to bring about a kind of doubt in the questioner which, as Batchelor notes,

is existential rather than epistemological in nature. Such doubt is far from being part of an intellectual inquiry, even if that inquiry has as its goal a non-discursive state of awakening. It should be thought of as a psychosomatic condition of astonishment and bafflement rather than as a discursive mental process. (2015, p. 246)

Key to the development of this condition is the ability to remain in a state of not knowing: ‘To pose a question with sincerity, you need to suspend all expectations as to what the answer might be. You need to rest in a condition of unknowing, vitally alert to the sheer mystery of being alive rather than dead’ (2015, p. 11). It is not necessarily a case of linear progression from the question to doubt and then unknowing to astonishment; elsewhere Batchelor conflates all of this into one state when ‘confronted with the puzzle of being here at all. All people, whether devout religious or avowedly secular, share this sense of unknowing, wonder and perplexity. That is where we all begin’ (2015, pp. 3-4).

In much of the Zen tradition though the concept or, more importantly the experience, of not knowing is considered as a gateway to, awakening. There is a Zen *kōan* in case 20 of the *Book of Equanimity* that depicts a short interview between student and monk:

Dizang asked Fayan, "Where are you going?"

Fayan said, "Around on pilgrimage."

Dizang said, "What is the purpose of pilgrimage?"

Fayan said, "I don't know."

Dizang said, "Not knowing is most intimate." (Wick, 2005, p. 63)

The Zen monk and poet Norman Fischer commenting on this *kōan* in a talk, said that in Zen, 'the word intimacy is a synonym for awakening or enlightenment' (Fischer, 2006). He prefers it to the other terms as it does not imply some special state of mind or experience in which the everyday, and all of its problems, is somehow transcended. 'The word intimacy is better', he argues because it 'sounds like we are getting closer, deeper, more loving with our experience rather than somehow beyond it' (2006). A *real* not knowing, as opposed to simple ignorance, is intimate, Fischer continues, because 'when we know something and rest in that knowing we limit our vision. We will only see what our knowing will allow us to see' (2006). There is an echo here of Bennett warning about knowing things too well and what poetry can offer to us as a corrective to this: 'ignorance of the world we (thought we) knew, so that we can know it again as if it was new to us' (2013, p. 74). Fischer is, however, following his Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki in this. Suzuki stated in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* that 'If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything, it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few' (Suzuki, 1970, p.21). With a beginner's mind one must, Fischer argues, bend down close to look at 'this situation that faces us right now ...

What is it? How do we respond? I don't know. I bow before the beauty and uniqueness of what I am facing. Not knowing, I am *ready to be surprised*, ready to listen and understand, ready to respond as needed' (Fischer, 2006, my italics).

A 'willingness to be pleasantly surprised' was John Cage's definition of hope. This is not to trivialise hope: Cage considered it 'a complex and devious undertaking to remain in a state of willingness, to maintain even the ability, to be pleasantly surprised' (Retallack, 1996, p. 173). A 'pleasant surprise' was also what John Ashbery hoped to present his reader with: 'a pleasant surprise, not an unpleasant one, not a nonsurprise' (1988, p. 192). Being ready to be devious might seem a curious addition to Fischer's list of what it takes to experience intimacy with a beginner's mind, and a pleasantly surprised reader feels a long way from one being astonished into a state of enlightenment, but both Cage and Ashbery emphasise the importance of a certain lightness and playfulness when being prepared to give or receive surprise, which could usefully be added to the picture of what intimacy might entail. Ashbery says elsewhere in his interview when asked whether he liked to tease or play games with his reader that he 'would like to please the reader' and that 'surprise has to be an element of this, and that may necessitate a certain amount of teasing' (1988, p. 183). For Ashbery then a surprise is a form of generosity; a playful gift for the reader. Gabriel Gudding goes further than this in linking surprise to kindness. As a poet and advocate of Vipassana (or 'insight') meditation (from the Theravadan Buddhist tradition but now taught in a secular context) Gudding believes that kindness could usefully be developed systematically by writers, alongside other positive affective states. In his short essay, 'The Cultivation of Mindstates' (2007) which was included in a handbook for new writers, Gudding sets out his initial and

radical premise that writing is a way to help myself and others to “wake up” and be happy. What this means politically is that writing is a way to change the world. What this means ethically is that writing is a way, ultimately, to remind others of wonder, determination, concentration, forgiveness, patience, tolerance, truth, renunciation, sympathetic joy, compassion, lovingkindness, generosity, courage and equanimity. (2007 p.27)

His method of cultivating these mindstates is a variation on one of the key techniques taught on Vipassana retreats known as *Metta* meditation. *Metta* is commonly translated from the Pali as ‘lovingkindness’, but could also be given as ‘universal friendliness’ or ‘benevolence’, and this form of meditation encourages the cultivation and radiation of kindness, firstly towards oneself, and then in expanding circles outwards towards one’s loved ones, then towards people who are relatively ‘neutral’ or everyday acquaintances, then towards those people with whom one has difficult relationships and finally towards all beings everywhere.

Alongside kindness, Gudding also encourages the development of a skill to counteract the fundamental challenge of boredom for writers: ‘It is important, ... to cultivate, husband and maintain one’s capacity to be surprised by one’s own mind. Doing so will invite a wider sense of curiosity toward all things’ (2007, p. 27). In a blog post, ‘A Rationale for Writing Poetry with a Kind Mind’, Gudding makes closer the link, to his mind, between kindness and surprise:

In the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle posits the basis of all good society and in fact all friendship as “beautiful mind.” *Eunoia*—sometimes translated as

“goodwill” or “tenderness of mind” or even “lovingkindness” — is the ability to retain the capacity to be surprised by the other. (2010)

Later in his posting, Gudding cites the New York School as a good example of the kind of writing circle whose principle function has been the ‘tactical modeling of positive affect styles’ such as ‘jubilation, rejoicing, attentiveness, renunciation [of authoritarianism both aesthetic and political in particular]’ (2010).

The state of intimacy in a non-Zen context is generally understood to mean one of familiarity rather than not knowing. A person who knows a particular corner of a city, or a musician who knows a piece of music, *intimately* will know it closely, like the back of their hand. In the Zen *kōan*, however, what is ‘most intimate’ about not knowing is something akin to Angela Leighton’s description of poetry’s wondrous knowing or to Bennett’s ‘ignorance of the world we (thought we) knew’ (2013, p. 74). The cliché has it that things seen with, or known in, wonder, are known *as if for the first time*. There is an element of returning to something, or remembering it, but in that act of return or remembrance something is profoundly changed. Jack Underwood wrote in his essay on uncertainty that as a teacher of poetry his business was teaching his students not to know:

teaching them to understand how and why they cannot know, and to regard this as the “only true wisdom”, that is, to see not knowing as a crucial advancement of knowledge. It’s really the only kind of knowledge we were born with, and we spend our lives forgetting and remembering it.
(Underwood, 2008)

The sense that one is remembering something once forgotten through poetry's not knowing is one of the significant elements of wonder. Astonishment is most often experienced at the sudden appearance of something wholly unexpected and never before encountered but wonder can bring with it a sense of the sweetness and delight that is experienced when one re-encounters something freshly in intimacy. Matthew Bevis quotes Robert Frost's dictum on this: 'no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew' (Bevis, 2017).

Here is a Padgett poem which illustrates an evident delight in the vertiginous surprise of *forgetting* something or somewhere he thought he knew:

Coffee Man

She might be hearing the burbling song of the bird outside, but it is impossible to tell, since she has rolled over and I think gone back to sleep. If I were to say quietly, "Good morning, dear, here is your coffee," she would open her eyes and manage a groggy "Thank you." But when she realizes that I am standing there without coffee, I would forget which tense I'm waiting to lift from the jar with the red lid in the kitchen. (2015, p.15)

The ritual of making an early morning coffee and bringing it to his wife Pat is one of Padgett's favourite recurring themes. It occurs, for example, also in 'Glow' in which he again gazes on the loved one's sleeping form 'amazed in love and afraid / that you might open your eyes and have / the daylights scared out of you' (2013, p. 406).

Padgett returns to this theme sometimes as part of the continuing comfort of the

everyday in his elegies, e.g. 'In Memoriam K.' (2013, p. 571) and 'Snowman' for George Schneeman (2013, p. 671). All of these poems are intimate (in the standard sense) domestic interiors tinged with amazement at the poet's beloved, or at the continuing miracle of the everyday after a friend's death. But in 'Coffee Man' it is the tender drawing close to the befuddlement in his own mind and language in the final sentence which makes the poem what it is, a celebration of the quotidian, without the need for the clanging epiphany that usually accompanies such celebrations.

Sometimes Padgett's poetry shares something of the intimacy (in a line of descent from Whitman) of Frank O'Hara's poetry in the form of a direct address to the reader, e.g. in 'Method' ('Who else would you like to know about?' (2013, p.592)) and in his breezy confidence that we will be interested in the details of his day brought to us in his 'I do this I do that' homages to O'Hara like 'Strawberries in Mexico' (2013, p. 107). The intimacy of these early morning coffee poems might also be compared to those of James Schuyler, whose poem 'June 30, 1974' ends with a very bathetic and Padgett-like 'I/ think I'll make more toast' (Schuyler, 1994, p. 230). Lee Upton has observed that, as quoted by Andrew Epstein in his work on attention and the everyday, 'it is not surprising that this poet [Schuyler] favors mornings. Repeatedly, he enacts qualities associated with mornings: newness and energy of awakening' (Epstein, 2016 p. 120). It would be equally possible to construct a Buddhist reading of Schuyler's poetry around themes of awakening, attentiveness to the here and now, and impermanence: 'Discontinuity / in all we see and are: / the same, yet change, / change, change.' (Schuyler, 20.. p.) But the intimacy that is distinctly Padgett-like in 'Coffee Man' is that humorous attentiveness to the seemingly confused movements of his own mind. Matthew Bevis argues that 'We need wonder, like humour, to be a shared passion: wonder is a mode of being in the world that, even as it revels in the special or the singular, also contains within it the

desire for a collaboration or an intimacy' (2014). Clearly humour is involved in the work of imagining the poem's reader, especially in closely imagining pleasing that reader with a surprise, as must have happened for example with the artfully constructed temporal sleight of hand with the word 'tense' at the end of 'Coffee Man'.

Opening to not knowing: preparing for the unexpected

Living with uncertainty and being open and receptive to not knowing might seem too easy, comfortable or glibly New Age—cosy even—but it should be remembered that the greatest unknown, brought to the forefront of the mind in the case of Stephen Batchelor's *kōan* practice, is death. Even if one is only facing the not known in the less existential context of preparing for an act of creativity, 'to inhabit the experience in affirmative terms,' as Emma Cocker notes at the beginning of her essay, 'is not an easy task. It is not inherently productive or generative nor does it always lead to new and imaginative lines of flight. Not knowing can be paralysing, prohibitive.' (Cocker, 2013, p. 126). It can bring with it disorientating and uncomfortable feelings linked to memories associated with the tasks of early childhood when we learnt to negotiate our way through the world:

From nursery age, we are initiated into the project of converting what is not known into what can be named and classified. The blurry and indeterminate realm of flows and forces in which we spend our early days is swiftly brought into line, once words are learnt to differentiate one thing from another, the self from everything else (2013, p. 126).

The American Buddhist and psychoanalyst Mark Epstein has written about the work of Donald Winnicott as a meeting place for ideas about psychoanalysis, Buddhism and art which are relevant here. When one awakens, in the Buddhist sense, it is to a sense of interrelatedness (the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh refers to this as ‘inter- being’) at the same time as the sense of having a seemingly permanent, certain and separate self drops away. ‘This vision of an interpenetrating relativity’, writes Epstein,

is related to the one that Winnicott had when describing what happens between mother and infant. As mother and child begin to separate out from one another, what he called a “potential space” begins to open up between them. The baby’s trust in the mother’s reliability allows that space to be experienced, and filled with “creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural life.” Trust in the mother allows the baby to experience the potential space, and experiencing it permits play. In much the same way in meditation, trust in bare attention allows the full experience of the mind, which permits the play of the world ... to be appreciated (Epstein, 2004, p. 34).

This ‘potential’ space (somewhere between inner and outer) is inhabited and explored by the infant who, in Winnicott’s terms, is secure in the presence of their ‘good enough’ mother and thus paradoxically is ‘capable of being alone’ when lost in creative play. A psychotherapeutic client provided with a similarly ‘good enough’ holding environment by their therapist will likewise be able playfully to explore unconscious material in their sessions. And by extending the analogy once more, Epstein argues, that meditators and artists capable of providing themselves with an

internal holding environment through ‘bare attention’ which might, he writes, ‘be described as a kind of radical acceptance of, or tolerance for, all of our experience’ (2004, p. 31) are also capable of being open and receptive creatively to (or intimate with) what is not yet known. One of Allen Ginsberg’s writing slogans, taken from his teacher Chögyam Trungpa, puts this in simpler terms: ‘take a friendly attitude towards your thoughts’ (Gach, 1998, p. 197). This is closely related to what Norman Fischer suggested was part of the intimacy of not knowing: ‘getting closer, deeper, more loving with our experience’ (2006) and the kindness Gudding recommended that writers cultivate in order to retain the capacity to be surprised by both one’s own mind and the other.

Not knowing Ron Padgett

How do these interrelated concepts of intimacy, not knowing, surprise and kindness figure in Padgett’s writing? Matthew Burgess’s *Dream Closet* is an anthology of writing and art on the theme of childhood play within small spaces and Padgett’s contribution speaks very much to Winnicott’s idea of the importance of the holding environment. ‘Private Places’ is a short series of prose pieces describing childhood memories of hiding, and/or playing, in places that were in some way special. Some relate to his parents’ bootleg whiskey business, including the time he hid in a doghouse with the business’ ledger book during a police raid, others are of makeshift spaces in which Padgett could be alone and read his stack of comic books and science fiction magazines. One of these was a temporary arrangement taken as escape route (sanctioned by his mother) from a tedious family visit to a relative; a kind of nest in the trunk of his mother’s car which was ‘lined with soft blankets and quilts, probably because it served as a whiskey stash. Being there was perfect, and time didn’t exist’ (Burgess, 2015, p. 19). Another was a crude self-made loft in the roofspace of

his parents' garage where as a teenager he was able to spend his summer evenings 'free from the prying eyes of my parents, who actually pried very little' (2015, p. 20). Both seem perfect examples of someone secure in the nearby presence of their parents and thus being capable of self-nourishing creative play in their solitude by inhabiting the 'potential space' of which Epstein via Winnicott speaks. The experience was somehow timeless; the doghouse memory also ends with Padgett lying in the straw feeling—partly no doubt as a result of the family's shared and triumphant outlawdom—'immortal'. The final memory is of a shoe box peephole construction containing a miniature nativity scene that was shown to his class one at a time by Padgett's teacher in elementary school. Padgett reports that he felt transported by his 'amazement that another place and another time could magically exist inside that little box' (2015, p. 20). The memory later resulted in the poem 'Framed Picture' (2013, p.329) which plays on this amazement at the loss of bearings in space and time by shifting between childhood memory of the shoebox scene, an early nineteenth-century fantasy in Germany and the 'present' where the speaker of the poem is tending the garden.

In her essay 'Ron Padgett's Inner Outer Spaces' Yasmine Shamma argues that through his openness and the continually shifting inner and outer spaces of his poetry, 'Padgett suggests that alternate, softer and therefore more permeable places exist, and may be sensitively rendered within the spaces of poems' (Shamma, 2018, p.178). Shamma also describes Padgett's poetry as 'almost protectively kind' (ibid. p.178). As with the first stage of Gudding's *metta* meditation practice designed to cultivate loving kindness or universal friendliness, that protective kindness needs first to be directed towards oneself. This is not narcissism but simply a healthy acknowledgement of Ginsberg's advice to 'take a friendly attitude towards your

thoughts’ and to provide yourself with the kind of holding environment that might enable creative play. Padgett’s poem ‘December’ is, amongst other things, a perfect example of this in miniature:

December

I will sleep in
my little cup

This poem first appeared in Padgett’s book of unattributed collaborations with Ted Berrigan *Bean Spasms*, but was later identified as a Padgett poem when included in his first collection *Great Balls of Fire*. Another short poem in *Bean Spasms* also entitled ‘December’ was written by Berrigan and read by him in 1970 at an event at a Canadian university where he introduced it as one of a series of loosely homophonic versions of poems by Giuseppe Ungaretti that he and Padgett had experimented with (Berrigan, 1970). Padgett cannot now remember the origins of his ‘December’ and it is hard to make out any homophonic resonance between the Italian and the English, but it is, quite possible to read ‘December’ as a condensed version of Ungaretti’s poem ‘Natale’ (Christmas). That poem¹ recalls the poet’s return on leave from the First World War in 1916, weary and wishing to be left alone by the fire, away from the festivities. Padgett’s ‘December’ encapsulates this feeling of hibernation: wanting seclusion, safety, cosiness and rest in midwinter. It also seems related (more closely perhaps in its minimalist form) to Ungaretti’s most famous poem (also written in the trenches of the First World War), which reads in its entirety:

¹ Available in parallel text here: <https://paralleltxts.blog/2016/12/25/natalechristmas-by-giuseppe-ungaretti/>

Mattina

M'illumino

d'immenso

A rough translation is 'Morning // I flood myself with the light of the immense' (Wilmer, 2003). Both tiny poems evoke a sense of wonder and play with scale and the sense of enclosure. They both seem supremely complete within their two lined statements. Sonically Padgett's half rhymed plosive p's seem to enclose the space of the poem whereas Ungaretti's open vowels are full of cosmic expansiveness; the dawn's light breaking within the I. The repeated m and n's in Ungaretti's poem perhaps suggest an awakening of a sleepy consciousness whereas lightly tripping through the consonants in Padgett's poem one senses the confidence of an abrupt but brightly absurd nursery rhyme. Both feel very held spaces and despite the enclosure through the rhyme in Padgett's both also seem to threaten to break their bounds imagistically. Ungaretti less tangibly with only morning and light and immensity for the reader to grasp hold of. Padgett's poem seems more definite but the unknowns are so numerous that it also expands outwards into multiple readings and possible visual imaginings. Who is the I? To whom is it declaring its intentions? How and why will it sleep in a cup? What kind of cup? What kind of sleep? The regular kind, or is this a euphemism for death? Or for getting drunk? As in 'in my cups'? The undefined cup is the greatest unknown even if qualified by the 'little'. Is it an egg cup, or tea cup or acorn cup? Associating with an acorn sitting within its cup and dreaming of the oak tree to come reads across nicely to the immensity that the I in 'Mattina' contains within itself.

Two other personal associations often come to my mind when I read ‘December’: the first is of Julian Norwich, being shown

a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind’s eye and thought, “What can this be?” And the answered came in a general way, like this, “It is all that is made.” I wondered how it could last, for it seemed to me so small that it might have disintegrated suddenly into nothingness. (2015, p. 45).

The vision is of being held intimately. The immediately preceding passage declares that God is ‘our clothing that out of love enwraps us and enfolds us, embraces us and wholly encloses us, surrounding us for tender love’ (2015, p.45). By contrast, another personal association I have is of the I in ‘December’ swelling up within its cup like the apple in Magritte’s ‘The Listening Room’,² which has grown claustrophobically large in a very small room that threatens to burst at the seams. I mention my own personal associations to the poem simply to suggest some of the ways in which it seems to act as a holding environment for the reader (held in an open palm as it were) so that they can access Winnicott’s ‘potential space’ for encountering the not yet known in creative play.

Padgett worried in an interview (Lorberer, 2014) once over his use of the word ‘little’, mentioning that either Berrigan or Brainard had pointed out to him that he

² <https://www.renemagritte.org/the-listening-room.jsp>

used it a lot (two hundred and thirty five times in the *Collected Poems*) and he saw this as a flaw and subsequently tried to cut down on its appearances in his work. Without the word in ‘December’ however the poem might have ‘fallen to nothing for littleness’ as an older translation of Julian of Norwich’s writing put it³. The word is self-consciously cute perhaps, but that is in line with Padgett’s frequent use of a faux naïf voice in his poetry—a strategy he shares with Koch, Brainard and before them Stein—and there is a tenderness, an intimacy, which it brings with it in this poem. I get little sense of the counterbalancing aggression here that Sianne Ngai argues is often present alongside tenderness in the presence of the cute although there is perhaps in ‘December’s original context of the sometimes wild collaborations in *Bean Spasms* where Berrigan’s poem by the same name also appears:

December

Brother and sister departed

With apologies to the mother for intercourse

In their hearts

‘My Room’ depicts a different kind of poem-as-holding-environment. It’s a solid looking prose poem over two pages which starts off in ‘a room of my own in a house of my own making’ (2013, p. 358) and the pleasures of having made it,⁴ but then makes a detour via a ‘delicious sadness for the objects’ the room contains, to an anecdote about a desk lamp Ted Berrigan once stole from the University of Michigan,

³ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-short-text-of-julian-of-norwichs-revelations-of-divine-love>

⁴ the house that he built in Vermont on land previously owned by Kenward Elmslie

and a practical joke Padgett subsequently played on him about this. This leads, in one of the segues that Padgett is fond of (and which Chapter 3 will look at more closely) into some musing about the fate of the Latin language before ending with the following paragraph:

I can hear a brook from my window now, and I think of it running into the little spot we call Wayne Pond, named after my son, who was named after my father. All this confluence in a room I didn't feel comfortable in until a few minutes ago, a room that, broken like a mustang, becomes a friend to man, we who are so desperately in need of friends among the plants and animals of this earth, and yes, the humans too, and the rooms we build around ourselves.

(2013, p. 359)

The vision here is surprising and disarming: after more than a page of amusing anecdote and play with the idea of rooms and their contents, the sound of a brook running nearby brings about a merging of the poet's generations and a sudden wish for friendliness in and from all things including the 'rooms [and by implication the poems] we build around ourselves'; the rooms which hold us and the things and people we love. The room/poem is broken like a wild horse that is now tamed, but also broken open by the confluence of the brook and the generations of family. It always was open in that it had capacity for the earlier straying from table lamps to the death of the Latin language, so the ending comes not as a punchline about what the poem is *about* so much as an added depth.

Padgett's latest book, *Big Cabin*, which was written over three autumns in the same Vermont landscape as 'My Room', introduces a new quasi-Taoist, quietistic tone and

there's a suggestion in the book as a whole, as well as in the title of the prose piece at its centre, 'Completion' (named after the Japanese exercise book it was written in), of having perhaps arrived, if not at the end of the road altogether, then at least at a temporary resting place. In 'Ducks', one of the many short poems in the book, Padgett writes that he is 'starting to get nervous/ about following' some ducks that have flown off out of his poem, which then ends abruptly, 'I should leave them alone. / I should leave myself alone' (Padgett, 2019, p.73). At the close of the Paris *Poets and Critics* symposium on Padgett's work in July 2017, in answer to the question 'what's next?', Padgett said that he felt it was important to stay open to the possibility that writing more poetry, just because 'that's what I do', might be a mistake (2017). The apparent completion and closure of *Big Cabin* looks premature however. In his acceptance speech for the Frost Medal in March 2018, Padgett announced, in amongst self-deprecating bemusement at the award of the prize, 'here I am, still writing, trying to stay open' (2018). The theme of 'openness' in Padgett's work, in particular the later (post *New & Selected Poems*) work is a recurring one—explored by Yasmine Shamma (2018, pp. 176-183) in the essay mentioned earlier—and it also appears in 'Completion'.

I've never wanted to be anyone else, but being satisfied with one's own identity leads easily to a complacency about it, and though by my age it's better to accept oneself than to reject it, that doesn't mean one should not be open to change. Staying open isn't easy, but it seems like an optimistic thing to do, and optimism is something we could all use more of. (2019, p.45)

Padgett wishes to remain, beyond self-acceptance in his mid-seventies, open to change, open to what is not yet known or foreseeable, and he regards that possibility,

as with Cage's preparedness for pleasant surprise, as optimistic. The virtues of openness are explored in his poem 'The Coat Hanger' which sketches out its poetic lineage from Whitman to Mallarmé to Pound, and then to

Olson declaring that

the poem is a field of energy you can put anything in and Frank O'Hara putting himself in that field that turned out to be his heart,
—"you can't plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open"—and Kenneth in later life writing in a private journal that he had decided not to think about death but about "things that keep on opening up," and Joe too always wanting to be as open as possible. (2013, p. 680)

The poem keeps on opening up to surprise in a bewildering series of twists and turns that come thick and fast until a kind of clearing up at the close of the poem:

Me I am at an angle,

but when I stand up straight as the lines in that station,
I see before the fog rolls in, the tracks that take us all across
ourselves, metaphorical fog thicker than real fog, just as barking is
thicker than a dog, though the dog is clearing up too, like a sky
whose translucence is arriving as the metaphors depart
and I start the day as a man for the first time again. (2013, p. 681)

It feels, as in 'My Room', as if a lot of ground needs to be covered, a lot of manoeuvres undertaken and metaphors enjoyably played around with before the day

can be started. Earlier in the poem some of the things which demand ‘that you close up a little here, a little there’ are considered and at one point the speaker finds himself closing slightly because he had come to

alone in a room

the open part of me had disappeared

and been replaced by a strategy. But I am smarter

than any strategy when I remember that I am

(2013, p. 680-681)

Padgett may not want to follow, or replace the open parts of himself with, a strategy; as John Yau observed in a review of his *Collected Poems*, while Padgett may have a ‘huge bag of tricks ... he seems never to rely on a particular device—collage for example—to generate work over a long period’ (Yau, 2013). Padgett does, however, have a tactical creative orientation which is essentially one of disobedience, which he shared with others in the second generation of New York poets such as Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley. It’s perhaps best summed up by someone whose aesthetic he is quite a distance from otherwise: the French fluxus artist, writer and pedagogue Robert Filliou for whom the Secret of Permanent Creation was ‘Whatever you’re thinking; think something else. Whatever you’re doing; do something else’ (Filliou, 2017).

In his ‘Why Write Poetry’ talk, in Kunming, Padgett confessed that he continued to be mystified by poetry, and finished his talk by reading the following poem which hints at its essentially resistant quality:

Whatever it is

Much poetry is depressing
because it is about things
that have happened and
then been brought
into the poem to die,

whereas

the real poem lives in its own
little house that moves along
the landscape that moves
along the mind of the reader,
and no one has ever seen it

(Padgett, 2013, p.719)

One possible reading of this would be as a critique of an approach to writing poetry along the lines of Philip Larkin's in which, 'you've seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people' (Gourevitch, 2007, p.211). Larkin wished to preserve something the poet had experienced prior to the writing of the poem by reconstructing it in the future reader but 'Whatever it is' suggests that all too often this can become a depressing process akin to the embalming of the known. With the 'real poem' that continues to live and move, on the other hand, much less is known

about what exactly might be set off in the mind of the reader and everything is subject to movement and change.

Lee Harwood came to view the poem as a space intimately shared and created jointly between writer and reader, something he learned from John Ashbery whose writing Harwood described, when thinking also about the toy theatre-like boxed assemblages of Joseph Cornell, as ‘creating this world which the reader is invited to enter, and play with, and think about’ (Hazzard, 2014). Like Harwood, Padgett seems, in ‘Whatever it is’, also to be aware that the experience of the ‘real poem’ is not something over which the poet has much, if any, control beyond the initial invitation or offer to the reader to take the poem into the shifting landscapes of their mind. This gesture is made in another of Padgett’s poems, ‘How to be a Woodpecker’, the second section of which starts:

I would rather not participate in this society anymore, hello, but I must
because I do not have the money to live outside it, *on my yacht*. This
paragraph is a verbal checkerboard. It’s your move. You jump around the
board until my consciousness gradually disappears into yours. (2013, p. 345)

There’s a nod here to Ernest Dimnet’s trick of jumping into the reader’s flow of thought with a direct address to them and also to Louise Rosenblatt’s theory of reading which Padgett describes, in his guide to *Creative Reading*, as ‘intrinsically active. She views it as a transaction between reader and text, in which the reader participates in the creation of the work of literature, which by definition is different for each reader’ (1997, p. 3). The second half of ‘Whatever it is’, though, pushes this idea a little further, with some rhetorical exaggeration, suggesting that nothing can be

known of the ‘real poem’ at all and that it lives in complete isolation from the poet’s intentions. It may be that Padgett is here echoing his teacher Kenneth Koch’s fondness for quoting Paul Valéry’s dictum that ‘A poem is written by someone not the poet to someone who is not the reader’ (Ginsberg, 1978).

Linda Bamber has suggested that ‘maybe all reading—all absorbed and impassioned reading, that is—is reading as a Buddhist, whether you’re a Buddhist or not’ (Bamber, 2004, p. 147). She cites, in support of this claim, Proust’s description of himself when reading: ‘I only feel myself living...where I find nothing of my conscious thought, where my imagination is excited by feeling itself plunged into the depths of the nonself’ (Bamber, 2004, p.147). In the rest of this chapter I will consider how some of Padgett’s poetry may be read in the light of the Buddhist concept of ‘non-self’ or ‘not- self’ (*anatta* in Pali).

Padgett, Brainard and the Not Self

Alan Davies made the following suggestion when discussing Zen and Don’t Know Mind in the work of Clark Coolidge: ‘Put your right hand on your forehead, your left hand on the back of your head; lift your head off your neck, and put it down. Now what’s happening’ (Davies, 1978, p.12). This is advice which both Padgett and Joe Brainard have followed many times; the image of headlessness appears frequently in their writing—and to a lesser extent Brainard’s art—and I would argue that decapitation is, for them both, a tactic for approaching—from different angles—a state of not knowing through which they have been able not just to remain open to surprise, but to play with the concept of the self and not-self.

In the final ‘Saint Joe’ chapter of his memoir *Joe*, Ron Padgett (2004, p.311) suggests that what Brainard wanted in his art, writing and life was ‘the opposite of escape—a plunge *into* reality’, and that what was required for this plunge was an attentiveness to the here and now combined with Brainard’s natural tendency towards simple and clear expression. Brainard was often attracted to what Padgett describes as a ‘clean-slate ambience conducive to a *tabula rasa* mental state’ (2004, p.313). The search for this state of what we might, more simply, term empty-mindedness was reflected in Brainard’s life and work in several different ways. For example, Brainard frequently liked to clear out his studio and re-paint it white; he even enjoyed having a good facial because it made him feel like his face had been ‘erased’ (2004, p.313). At the farther end of the *tabula rasa* spectrum Brainard seemed at times attracted to disappearing altogether. He ends his *Bolinas Journal* with the throwaway line, ‘My idea of how to leave a place gracefully is to “disappear”’ (Brainard, 2012, p.333). And in one of the passages of *I Remember* Brainard muses on the ‘most considerate way to commit suicide’ (2012, p.129), concluding ‘that to just “disappear” out into the ocean would probably be best’. The picture of the self emerging here (or gracefully disappearing over the horizon) in Joe Brainard’s life and work, is what Padgett describes as a distinctive ‘phenomenology of self’ and a ‘step toward a more fundamental sense of reality’ (2004 p.313). And yet this self also seems to be taking a step toward the *not*-self, or a self at least, that is mutable and engaged periodically, in attempting to erase consciousness of itself so that the ‘here and now’ of reality can be more freshly experienced and communicated to others without interference.

This search for a way of being and making art that leads to a direct awakening to a view of reality that is unobstructed, or untainted, by the self is consonant with the Buddhist concept of awakening. Padgett has said in interview (Caldwell, 2012) that

he feels any Buddhist influence on Joe Brainard's work would have been small, and indirect at most, through his personal friendships with Buddhists such as Anne Waldman, Joanne Kyger and Philip Whalen. Brainard himself, in a piece entitled 'Religion', published posthumously in his collected writings, states that he tries 'to keep an open mind about religion' and goes on to pay Tibetan Buddhism the 'slightly dubious compliment' that 'it's a lot more interesting than Protestantism.' He concludes, though, that he just 'can't buy it' preferring to look 'within each of us as individuals' (2012, p.467) for a more reliable source of wisdom on which to base one's way of life. The piece culminates in an increasingly confident riff on what Brainard might be prepared to say he does *believe*.

I guess you might say that I believe in the wind, as I believe in the stomach, as I believe in you. As I believe in me. As I *believe*, period. And (taking advantage of feeling so "up" ((pill)) today) I shall venture to say that I believe in a perhaps almost non-existent form of believing: as pure as gold, without people.

All of which (believe it or not) has something to do with *total cancellations*

And I believe in the fullness of the/this resulting void. (2012, p.467)

Padgett discusses this piece in a chapter of *Joe* entitled 'Metaphysics', describing it as a rarity, untypical in its being 'the "deepest" thing—that is philosophical without humour —Joe ever wrote. The last three sentences are convincingly mystical, a quality I don't associate with Joe' (2004 p.297). Buddhism is essentially a pragmatic and therapeutic philosophy and not therefore, overly concerned with what is or is not *believed* in. However, Brainard's final sentence as well as being convincingly mystical is also, in an almost orthodox manner, convincingly Buddhist in its

reformulation of the paradoxical statement in the Heart Sutra (a keystone of the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism) that ‘Form is emptiness, emptiness is form’. Rather than differentiating his own individualistic wisdom from that on offer in the Tibetan Buddhism he had been considering in this piece, Brainard seems simply to have rephrased it.

The Buddhist concept of emptiness (from the Pali *suñyatā*) is closely related to that of not-self (*anatta*). Rather than implying, on the one hand, nihilism or, on the other, a rarefied and unearthly kind of mysticism, it is, in the words of Mark Epstein, ‘the experience that becomes available when we learn [in meditation] to put ourselves aside’ (2010, p.48). When we succeed in doing that ‘we do not disappear, but we open to a more creative relationship with our minds, our feelings and the world’ (2010, p.48). Writing on the same topic in an earlier essay Epstein says, in words that chime with Brainard’s reference to the fullness of the void, that emptiness ‘is best compared to the hollow of a pregnant womb... there is a fullness to Buddhist emptiness, a sense of spaciousness that both holds and suffuses the stuff of the world’ (2004, p.34).

In ‘Nothing to Write Home About’, Brainard (2012, pp.470-481) provides some examples of the inter-related ‘stuff of the world’ that he makes room for in his writing by putting himself to one side and—although paradoxically there are numerous ‘I’s and ‘Joe’s in the piece—by becoming close to a ‘nothing’ writing home. There are short sections on various subjects including money, roaches, Sundays, sexual fantasies, insomnia, Jane Austen and, under the heading ‘Oh My Gosh!’, gray hairs. This last piece highlights the loss of one particular self in the following confession:

what is *really* freaking me out these days: that the person I always thought I was simply isn't anymore: *does not exist!*

And the rug I have pulled out from under myself is ... (gulp) ... a sentence I can't quite complete just yet. (2012, p.475)

It may be that Brainard is simply reacting here to the familiar loss of youth, but doubting the existence of 'the person I always thought I was' seems to go beyond the egotistical vanity of regretting the loss of a younger self-image. The subsequent gulping and unfinished sentence also suggests the fear of a far greater loss. By the end of the piece, however, Brainard has pulled the rug out still further, and attained some measure of equanimity, by accepting he is full of contradictions and sometimes rather likes his gray hairs too. By the end of 'Nothing to Write Home About' as a whole, he is content to write, in a section called 'My Friend', about a little bug he has spotted living on a sunflower leaf 'that is just so beautiful—so worthy in my enthusiasm of being glorified into a central window of a major European cathedral...' (2012, p. 481). He has been checking on the bug daily not expecting it still to be there the next day but

there he is still-- (or was this morning)-- : my friend. And like a rock by chance encountered, all mine. To microscopically indulge in. To romanticize. (To write about!) Passing on to you, what I find to be so very special—a snapshot—to make life more realistic and rememberable, for me too. (2012, p. 481)

Here, perhaps, is the heart of Brainard's art and writing: paying clear and persistent attention to small pieces of reality—practically 'nothing'—describing them simply

and honestly and then giving them away to ‘you’ the viewer or reader. In the process, life is made ‘more realistic’; in Victor Shklovsky’s terms the sensation of life is recovered ‘in order to make us feel things, in order to make the stone stony’ (Berlina, 2016, p.80). Brainard’s approach is not, however, generally via defamiliarization—although the glorification of the bug in the cathedral stained glass window gestures in that direction— but through the use of bare attention and microscopic indulgence. As well as more realistic, life is, in this process, made more (I) ‘remember-able’, that is, more capable of being included in Brainard’s non-chronological collage of past moments that ebbs and flows behind, and into, the present. Although Brainard frequently refers in his work to the search for the present moment, as Padgett points out in his ‘Saint Joe’ chapter, his ‘attentiveness to the here and now is evident even in *I Remember*, ostensibly a book about but ‘also on the dynamics of the flow of memories across the screen of his mind in the very moment of recollection and composition.’

In his ‘N.Y.C. Journals 1971-1972’ Brainard (2012, pp. 363-375) conducts a recollected conversation with the self that he perceives to be blocking his enjoyment of the present moment. In the entry for Wednesday, April 26th, 1972, he anticipates by some decades the raisin-eating that features ubiquitously now at the start of mindfulness courses, when he finds himself

in my loft, madly eating a bag of apricots, feeling sorry for myself (lonely and bored) not enjoying them one bit. (The apricots.) Then I said to myself. “How stupid can you be! *This* is life! Eating these apricots! Right now!” So having convinced myself that taking advantage of the moment is all there is, I tried focusing all my attention upon the pleasures of eating dried apricots.

And it worked! For a few minutes. But then I started thinking about how I should write all this down. As I am doing now. (2012, p. 371)

The inevitable self-consciousness of recording the moment with half an eye over one's shoulder for some notional reader (if not for posterity) intrudes and the debate with self continues as he ends the journal entry:

This strikes me as a bit “cheap” somehow, but—but I guess I just don't care.

The “so what?” in me wins again. (2012, p. 371)

In ‘Right Now’ Brainard sets out his intentions more clearly and confidently. He is in Calais, Vermont, in a yellow bathing suit, on a lounge chair in the sun, writing on a clipboard. This is what he wants: ‘It is not my purpose to bore you. It is my purpose to —well, I want to throw everything out of my head as much as possible, so I can simply write from/about what “is,” at this very moment: *Right Now!*’ (2012, p. 447)

The full head for Brainard is, it seems, the primary obstacle to be overcome. If the present moment, or ‘what “is”’, is to be experienced and communicated the head must first be emptied. In the interview with Anne Waldman, mentioned earlier, in which he claimed not to have ideas but to rely on the material doing it all, Brainard goes on to resist Waldman's suggestion that the concept behind *I Remember* was an original idea, by saying ‘But there was no idea to do it. I just started one day while lying out in the sun in Vermont. It was another attempt to let my head be free and see where it would take me...’ (2012, p. 512).

Returning to Brainard's 'Right Now', the latter half of the piece shows directly what is to be seen once the head is empty: 'Right now, looking up from this page, I see much blurry green: (I haven't got my glasses on.) How strange that in so doing, I completely overlooked my two feet (?) which I can see quite well even without my glasses on' (2012, p. 447). What arises, for Brainard, out of the pregnant state of 'emptiness', what is suddenly awakened to in wonder, is not some amorphous, mystical state of bliss but everyday 'form', in the form of feet: '*Feet*: looking real hard at feet right now I am wondering "why toes?"' (2012, p. 447) 'Right Now' captures in words something Brainard conveyed several times visually in 'headless' self-portraits, for example, the 1965 figure drawing included in *Joe* (Padgett, 2004, p. 204), which shows faithfully, from his own perspective, what he saw looking down the length of his body, omitting what he was looking *out of* perhaps because he was no longer conscious (or *self-conscious*) of his now empty head.

Douglas Harding, the English Zen mystic and eccentric, wrote, in his cult classic *On Having No Head: Zen and the Re-discovery of the Obvious*, about a somewhat similar experience to Brainard's in 'Right Now' and also illustrated it with a 'from the neck down' self-portrait inspired by a drawing by the Austrian philosopher and physicist Ernst Mach. Rather than attempting actively to throw everything out of his head like Brainard, Harding simply discovered one day, while out walking in the Himalayas, that he had no head to empty. He described the experience as follows:

What actually happened was something absurdly simple and unspectacular: I stopped thinking. A peculiar quiet, and odd kind of alert limpness or

numbness, came over me. Reason and imagination, and all mental chatter died down. For once, words really failed me. Past and future dropped away. I forgot who and what I was, my name, manhood, animalhood, and all that could be called mine. It was as if I had been born that instant, brand new, mindless, innocent of all memories. There existed only the Now, that present moment and what was clearly given in it. To look was enough. And what I found was khaki trouserlegs terminating downwards in a pair of brown shoes, khaki sleeves terminating sideways in a pair of pink hands, and a khaki shirtfront terminating upwards in— absolutely nothing whatever! Certainly not in a head.

It took me no time at all to notice this nothing, this hole where a head should have been, was no ordinary vacancy, no mere nothing. On the contrary, it was a nothing that found room for everything—room for grass, trees, shadowy distant hills, and far beyond them snow-peaks like a row of angular clouds riding the blue sky. I had lost a head and gained a world. (Harding, 1986, pp.1-2)

Both Brainard's and Harding's experiences began in a temporary cessation of thinking, which they claim gave them access to an increased awareness of the present moment and in turn made life 'more realistic' in Brainard's terms or in Harding's simply gained him 'a world'. The breakthrough or epiphany is, for both of them, extraordinarily mundane involving the re-discovery of the obvious, especially the obviousness of their lower bodies. That they are *theirs* is not so immediately obvious however. The feet or khaki trouserlegs and brown shoes that are re-discovered appear to belong to no-one in both cases.

What Harding and Brainard do with these re-discoveries is, however, very different. Harding builds on his headless experience in the rest of his book by interpreting it in non-dualistic terms derived from his subsequent study of Zen Buddhism. All of his work can be viewed as an extended commentary on the famous Original Face *kōan* in which Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, advises one of his fellow monks to ‘See what at this very moment your own face looks like—the Face you had before you (and indeed your parents) were born’ (Blackmore, 2013, p. 463). The emptiness that Harding found where his head should have been, both in this Himalayan experience and in the series of phenomenological exercises that he later devised to bring about similar insights in his followers, was empirical proof (not to be argued about but to be experienced first hand) of not-self or an emptiness in which everything and nothing become dizzyingly interchangeable. In Harding’s words:

This very spot, this observation post of mine, this particular “hole where a head should have been”—*this* is the Ground and Receptacle of all existence, the one Source of all that appears (when projected “over there”) as the physical or phenomenal world, the one infinitely fertile Womb from which all creatures are born and into which they all return. It is absolutely Nothing, yet all things; the only Reality, yet an absentee. It is my Self. There is nothing else whatever. I am everyone and no-one, and Alone. (1986, p.19)

Brainard’s head-emptying was also a matter of preparing a fertile space, but in a much more pragmatic and down to earth way. His is a nothing that finds room, not for everything, but simply for something to be seen. For him it was a gateway in his creative process through which he passed in order to ‘plunge into reality’, investigate

his immediate world and make some new art. No non-dualistic conclusions flowed from the contemplation of his toes. Nor was the erasure of self involved in the head emptying process as joyous an experience for Brainard as it was for Harding. The passages already quoted from 'Nothing to Write Home About' show the struggle Brainard went through to achieve something like a sense of ('so what') equanimity about the non-existence of the person he always thought he was.

The nature of the self and the place of heads have also been considered repeatedly and playfully in Ron Padgett's poetry. Headlessness or a state of dislocation in which heads or faces are prone to float free of their bodies is quite commonly encountered there. In 'Bobbie and Me on Bicycles', for example, the poem's protagonist, while reading Hazlitt's essay 'On Going a Journey', recollects a dreamlike incident while cycling in Holland when looking back over his shoulder he sees the face of his 'companion, which is smiling and sparkling, and which seems to be growing larger and larger as it detaches from her neck and floats up, tilted a little, like a balloon wafted by a breeze...' (Padgett, 2013, p. 437). Her head is shortly returned to normal and the detachment proves harmless; indeed the childlike freedom and happiness of the moment is encapsulated in this temporary defeat of gravity. Similarly in the simple nursery rhyme-like mystery of 'Circles' the moon is seen first as a white sun, then as a balloon and then as Padgett's grandson Marcello's head floating above his bed: 'Colored circles rise and fall. / Marcello seems to like them all' (Padgett, 2015, p.13).

Some of Padgett's other decapitations have, on the other hand, the more frenzied quality of George Méliès' proto-surrealist stop-motion trick cinematography. For example, in 'People with Heads' (2013, p.482), the poem's speaker travels back in

time to revolutionary France, to the guillotine in the Place de la Concorde: ‘These poor fools! They / chop and chop, head after head, / but no matter how fast they chop, / there are always more and more / people with heads.’ The poem brings to mind the manic multiplication and manipulation of heads in Méliès’ films *Le mélomane* or *Un Homme de têtes*. And in ‘Poem “I’m in the house”’, echoing Méliès’ *Dislocations Mystérieuses*, a literally ecstatic (ecstasis: to be or stand outside oneself) protagonist faced with the dilemma of whether to go out and enjoy the first day of spring, or to stay in and write about it, elects to do both: ‘My legs run down / the stairs and out / the door, my top / half here typing’ (2013, p.273).

There’s a sense, in these decapitations and dislocations, of the self multiplying or splitting but not, so far, one of *loss* of self or, as in Mark Epstein’s suggestion and Brainard’s practice, of the self being put aside in order to make the experience of emptiness available. In Padgett’s otherwise crammed, long and looping, Looney Tunes- like poem ‘Cufflinks’, however, a quasi Zen-like emptiness does make two appearances, firstly when the speaker states that he can tune in precisely to his own thoughts but that he cannot

trace them

all the way back to their origin. So for me

they appear from what appears to be nowhere, a point

or origin that in effect does not exist.

I would like very much to be able to go

back through that point and into

nuts? Maybe I’d go nuts!’ (2013, p. 292)

And then at the end of the poem, which gathers pace in an increasingly frantic commentary on a race featuring brightly coloured horses who subsequently become just the colours themselves, and are then interrupted briefly by Picasso before a close finish which requires judges to decide the winner. A thread comes dangling loose from the close knit brows of one of those judges:

One of the other judges notices it. Unconsciously
he reaches up and tugs at it, slowly unravelling the forehead
until nothing is left but
a bright idea in a bright emptiness,
a photo finish' (2013, p.300).

The poem, with all of its associative leaps, pratfalls and swerves, can be read (my neck stretching out perhaps just a little desperately for the finishing line) as an illustration of the Buddhist teaching on 'dependent arising' or 'dependent origination'. This has been summarised by the American Buddhist and psychologist Jason Siff as the 'teaching that our experience is made up of causes and conditions and does not come about through a self, another being, God or destiny. This complex teaching can be simply stated as, "When one thing arises, so does another"; nothing arises in isolation' (2010, p.29). Unravelling these causes and conditions in order to see how one thing arises dependent on another is intended to go hand in hand with understanding the Buddha's other central teaching on suffering and its cessation.

Most readers will not have come even close to suffering when reading 'Cufflinks' anymore than Padgett did when he sat next to Joe Brainard's painting *Bingo*, as he

explains in the poem 'Joe Brainard's Painting *Bingo*' in which its opening line, 'I suffer when I sit next to Joe Brainard's painting *Bingo*', is systematically dismantled and disowned until, in the final stanza, Padgett admits that it was actually his wife who had said these words in misunderstanding (2013, p.103). 'Life is one continuous mistake' according to a saying (apparently mistakenly) attributed to the great thirteenth-century Zen master Eihei Dogen. One continuous mistake continuously unravels into a bright emptiness at our feet, or around our heads.

'Light As Air' is a series of prose poems which explores, lightly, thirteen ways of looking at and inhabiting various things including light and air, day and breath, sportswear and trees. And it examines different ways of inhabiting a mutable self, parts of which can exist simultaneously in different days of the week. The eighth section opens in a way that is strongly reminiscent of Brainard's desire to be free of the limitations of the ego:

I come to a mental clearing where I can speak only from the heart. Free of the baggage of who I happen to be, and of all the porters who must carry the baggage, and the exorbitant taxi ride into a fuller version of the same small personality, I take, for what seems to be the first time in a long time, a breath that goes deeper than the bottom of the lungs.' (Padgett, 2013, p.373)

Dropping the 'baggage of who I happen to be' also echoes Harding's Himalayan forgetting of who and what he was, but only the small self is being dropped in this part of Padgett's poem; the search is simply for a fuller version of that same self. That search was also something that came up for Padgett in the context of collaboration. In conversation with Larry Fagin, Padgett suggested that writing

collaborative poems early in his career had given him the feeling that he was exploring the boundaries of his inner life: ‘I was testing limits, knocking down the idea of my solitary self as a solitary writer— the ego, trapped in its little room. I think I was trying to discover if there was a larger version of myself that might be accessible to me in the process of writing, and of course in doing anything’ (Quilter, 2014, p.301).

The self within Douglas Harding’s writings oscillates between being nothing to being so large as to contain everything, but in his experiments with collaborative writing it seems Padgett was setting his sights a little lower than that and simply reaching beyond the solitary towards writing as a joint enterprise, undertaken by a plurality of selves with whom one is engaged in order to expand one’s own limits. In the same interview with Fagin, though, Padgett indicates the possibility of a more radical self-negation happening in collaboration. He mentions that when he was starting to do collaborative work it occurred to him

that words don’t really belong to anybody. Every word I’m saying right now I got from someone else. That’s why the copyright page of *Antlers in the Treetops* (a collaborative novel between Padgett and Tom Veitch) says, “This book may be reproduced by anyone who wants to.” The “author” is erased’.

(Quilter, 2014, p. 306)

Padgett has suggested in interview (Padgett, 2016) that his need to write collaboratively has waned over the years, perhaps because he has learned the lessons he needed to from it, for his ‘own’ writing and because he became able, in some way, to multiply, and then collaborate with, himself. His poem ‘Reading Reverdy’ (2013,

p.107) begins, ‘The wind that went through the head left it plural.’ It does seem to be the case that Padgett’s poems often, like Whitman’s, contain, or concern themselves with, larger or multiple versions of the self; multiple copies of the *mind* in the case of the young man in ‘Edge’ who ‘lost his mind when it slipped out of him like a piece of paper coming out of a xerox machine, then another piece, and another, his mind in multiple copies one on top of the other, 8 ½ x 11’ (2013, p.729). ‘How to Become a Tree in Sweden’, on the other hand, gives a picture at its ending of how multiple and different selves can be brought together:

And soon the air is full of snaps

And schnapps and weimaraners and
me, my various selves united,

for a moment Swedish, a tree myself,
waving and lost among the others.’ (2013, p.461)

The simultaneous discovery and loss of this united self seems ambivalent here and may be either blissful or bleak in its dissolution into emptiness.

Stephen Batchelor has written about emptiness recently in a way which I believe brings us much closer to Padgett’s poetics. Working from the Buddha’s *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness* Batchelor discerns that emptiness ‘is not a truth—let alone an ultimate truth— that is to be understood correctly as a means to dispel ignorance and thereby attain enlightenment. For Gotama, the point is not to understand emptiness but to *dwell* in it’ (2015, p.9). The Discourse ends, according to Batchelor,

with this insight: ‘to dwell in emptiness means to inhabit fully the embodied space of one’s sensory experience, but in a way that is no longer determined by one’s habitual reactivity’ (2015, p.9). Trying to avoid being determined by habitual reactivity, but, as discussed earlier in this chapter, remaining open to surprise, when writing is very much at the heart of Padgett’s concerns.

In ‘The Mediterranean’ he plays with the idea that,

At every moment every creature on earth
is about to do something. I am
about to write one thing and
I almost do, but then I turn
my head and write something else... what
if we all turned just slightly and did
the other thing that is always
there’ (2013, p. 772)

Not only is everyone about to *do* something and is capable instead of doing ‘the other thing’, but they may also *be* something else: ‘The Ron Padgett I have become/ is not the only Ron Padgett’ (2013, p. 772). There is ‘Ronald’ who ‘stands up only when asked/ to fill out a form’ and ‘little Ronnie’ who still runs around inside him but the Ron Padgett who is always capable of turning just slightly to do ‘the other thing that is always there’, is very identifiably the swerving poet of the past fifty years. Padgett may, in ‘Voice’ (2013, p. 167), have made gentle fun of the idea of a young writer “finding his voice” and hoped never to find his own so that he could ‘remain a phony’ the rest of his life but avoiding settling into a recognisable voice is clearly a struggle.

He has said in interview (Lorberer, 2014) that when he hears that he is starting ‘to sound too much like the Ron Padgett that I’ve read before’—when the writing is coagulating around the voice of an old tired self—he knows that it’s time to stop himself and start again and ‘do the other thing’. The emphasis on *activity* here indicates that the self can be seen as more like a process than an object. Indeed some Buddhists (Olendzski, 2005) tend to describe the self as a verb rather than a noun, the argument being that we (inelegantly) *self* ourselves when we construct an imaginary suffering self each moment that grasping or clinging arises.

Padgett’s ‘Listening to Joe Read’ remains, in amongst all of this talk of a loss of self or a plurality of selves, a testament to individuality, and specifically to Joe Brainard’s individuality: ‘I’m reminded that what made him great / was not that he was a great reader (he wasn’t) / but that he was Joe’ (2013, p. 434). The end of the poem also testifies to the sense of the self persisting beyond death in the minds of surviving friends, or to the persistent illusion of that happening:

I have plenty of time to say all this,
as long as Joe has time on this tape to read
as many times as I want to play it,
as if he’s here, as of course he is,
inside this little brain,
its wheels turning round and round.
(2013, p. 434)

Neither Padgett nor Brainard have had, in true New York school form, any programme to follow or any arguments to hold involving beliefs about the self, the

not-self or a multitude of either, but the pursuit of selflessness was a recurring theme in Brainard's life (as testified to by many friends in their references to his generosity and saintliness) and in his art and writing. The emptiness arising when he was able successfully, in Mark Epstein's terms, to put himself aside, played a central and positive part in his creative process, until, for whatever reason, his tendency towards self-erasure gradually turned into a decision, by and large, to 'gracefully disappear' from public artmaking.

Padgett's work builds upon foundations that are sunk, like Brainard's, in emptiness as defined by Batchelor in his reference to inhabiting one's experience 'in a way that is no longer determined by one's habitual reactivity'. Throughout his career he has developed a wide variety of ways to play with concepts of the self, a little like toys in his metaphysical cartoon-like thought experiments that strive to keep opening him and his readers up to surprise. Some of the toys are dangerous. In 'Where is My Head' Padgett plays with the guillotine again. The poem ends: 'In Paris the heads that dropped into the basket /— were they still thinking about the executioner? // Today I am my own executioner' (2015, p. 16). The self is presented as the means by which its existence will be brought to an end and, for a while, it seems it will be self-conscious posthumously of having done this. All of this is self-consciously rehearsed through the process of the poem. Thus Padgett's protagonist may not be able to emulate in his dying, either his selfless mother who 'just glided away— / she didn't mind at all' or chickens who 'do it all the time, / they run around the yard with blood / gushing from where their heads used to be. // I wish I could do that!' But he is able to find a new take on *memento mori* by playing in this poem with notions of the self, to show, in the face of its extinction, how fluid, light, and insubstantial (perhaps even empty) it really is. Does this help? 'Probably not' was the answer to this

question when posed at the end of another poem, 'The Poet's Breakfast' 'forty nine years old and surrounded by death' (2013, p.468).

But after the passage of a few more years, and with the onset of doting grandfatherhood, perhaps it is starting to. Padgett wrote the poem 'Happy Birthday to Us' for his then ninety days old grandson Marcello and to celebrate his own birthday. It ends:

I've always felt
that June 17
is a special day,
a sunny,
blessèd day
I was lucky
to be born
on. And here
I am, a lucky
dog whose bark
means he's glad
you've come.
It's your birthday
too Marcello,
because I give it
to you. Now
you have two.
I don't

really need

one anymore.

(2013, p. 641)

Joe Brainard, who according to Kenward Elmslie raised ‘gift-giving to a noble art’ (1998, p. 221), would have appreciated the selfless generosity of this gesture. As might Douglas Harding, for whom the day on which he discovered he had lost his head and self, but gained the world, was the ‘best day of my life—my rebirthday, so to speak’ (1986, p. 1).

CHAPTER 2

How not to make sense: nonsense strategies in the early poetry of Ron

Padgett and Kenneth Koch

‘And what is the purpose of writing music? ... a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living’

John Cage ‘Silence’ (Tompkins, 1965, p. 73)

‘I’m excited I’m writing at my typewriter it doesn’t make too much sense’

Kenneth Koch ‘A Time Zone’ (Koch, 2005, p. 467)

Ron Padgett has exploited various tactical moves to enable him to remain receptive and playfully open to the experience of not knowing before and during writing, but at various times during his writing career, especially early on, his writing methods have involved actively frustrating both his own writerly knowingness and the comprehension of the reader. Emma Cocker, in her essay ‘Tactics for Not Knowing’ suggests that writers and artists may use such tactics ‘for *making* openings, for rupturing the terms of what is already known’ (2013, p. 130). Cocker points towards an archaic meaning of the term ‘beyond comprehension’ in which it ‘describes the condition of limitlessness, the state of being boundless. It is towards the latter that certain procedures might strive, hoping to encounter something unexpected,

something unsusceptible to capture by existing conceptual frameworks' (2013, p. 130). The previous chapter touched upon ways in which some of the work of Padgett and Brainard played with, or built upon foundations of, a form of Buddhist-like emptiness that could be seen as equivalent to this state of being boundless. In this chapter I explore the procedures both Padgett and, before him, his mentor and friend Kenneth Koch, used, in some of their early work, to try and encounter something entirely unexpected and beyond comprehension; how the work produced might be considered, again, from a Buddhist perspective, and also as part of the nonsense tradition.

In Ron Padgett's essay 'Foreign Language' he describes, and sets out the context for, his first experience of encountering languages other than American English:

When I was growing up, in the limited cultural atmosphere of blue-collar Oklahoma in the 1940s and 1950s, I used to laugh when I heard someone speaking a foreign language, especially an Asian one. To me foreign languages sounded "funny," in both senses of the word. Others thought they sounded funny in only the sense of odd or peculiar. In other words, *not like us*. I think my seeing foreign languages as both odd and amusing helped save me from this jingoist fate. (2000, p.25)

This 'funniness' of foreign language was something that both Padgett and Koch experienced and worked/played with early on in their careers: Padgett in his 1963 experiments with intentional mistranslations, or semi-homophonic mishearings, of Pierre Reverdy's poetry, and Koch, a decade earlier, in the radically disjunctive poetry

As I careened through six such poems, my mind became like a Ping-Pong ball knocked back and forth between the two languages in an echo chamber, each word resonating with its connotations and the strange interweaving of nonsense between the two language tracks. It was an exhilarating and only slightly spooky experience. (2000, p. 30)

The experience Padgett is describing here seems similar to that which Richard Elliott, in his recent book, *The Sound of Nonsense*, calls the ‘nonsense moment’ (Elliott, 2018, p.2-3). Elliott characterises this moment, when a reader, or listener, is left grasping after sense, as one of ‘transition and bewilderment’ (2018, p.55) and ‘a borderline experience, sited between other realms of sense-making; the very nature of “understanding” or not is part of the nonsense process’ (2018, p.20). Part of that process in the context of homophonic translation involves a consideration of the difference between hearing and listening. Elliott quotes Jean-Luc Nancy on this: ‘If “to hear” is to understand the sense ... to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible’ (2018, p. 16). Homophonic translation involves a straining toward meaning in particulars but without regard for sense overall. The process is analogous to that considered by another writer quoted by Elliott, Douglas Kahn, who has this to say about a listener with hearing difficulties:

Partial deafness and noise breed and feed on homophony, a device that almost always operates unconsciously as a salvaging maneuver by that can also be used more deliberately as a source of enjoyment. While resourcefully weaving phonemes and vocables through anticipation and recursion, generating options and making choices of what may be appropriate or at least

plausible in the context, the range of communications can be an arena for play and for entertaining difference toward whatever ends.

(Elliott, 2018, p. 15)

Looking at the first section of ‘Some Bombs’ together with Reverdy’s original poem ‘P.O. Midi’⁵ one gets some sense of the liminal Ping-Pong state of mind Padgett refers to and the nonsense moments that arise from this straining towards and then a leaning away from understanding and sense:

Some Bombs

after Reverdy

1. One goes by like some oafs
2. On the K way the laminators along gents and lays you
3. The wagon turns on the roulette melee
4. Hair knights dress themselves in night
5. Moats which go by fount brutes
6. I ray you stop me pour the garter outdoors
7. Aw fond eel you all a quill train which darts
8. I ray you whar's sedans
9. Latrine key imports news and is Mobile in the vent
10. On intends

⁵ from *Quelques poèmes* (1916) now included in *Plupart du Temps* (1989)

11. On Intends Creek
 12. -cest a “whyso?” of the newt
 13. The montage swallows a toot
 14. Twos “suh” key oinks purrs the butt
 15. Gene Autry sleeps
 16. I’ll send the Lautréamont coat, “Do, Monday
 17. Awnglish Dan’s a true key at the frond paws
 18. One east tents with sin alley-oop
 19. The sill is fond
 29. And a pea-tit galosh dresses itself oh bored Walter by the sea
- (2013, p. 34)

P.O. Midi

1. *On passe comme des bœufs*
2. *Sur le quai les lumières s’allongent et les yeux*
3. *Le wagon tourne sur la roue du milieu*
4. *Les chevelures se dressent dans la nuit*
5. *Les mots qui passent font du bruit*
6. *Je voudrais m’arrêter pour regarder dehors*
7. *Au fond il y a un homme tranquille qui s’endort*
8. *Je voudrais voir dedans*
9. *Le train qui nous emporte est immobile dans le vent*

10. *On entend*
 11. *On entend crier*
 12. *C'est un oiseau de nuit*
 13. *La montagne avale tout*
 14. *Tous ceux qui ont peur sont debout*
 15. *Les autres dorment*
 16. *On descend l'autre côté du monde*
 17. *On glisse dans un trou qui n'a pas de fond*
 18. *On est content de s'en aller*
 19. *Le ciel se fond*
 20. *Et un petit clocher se dresse au bord de la mer*
- (1989, p.61)

There seem to be several different varieties of creative translation, or in Padgett's terms, simply mis-translation, going on here. Firstly some relatively 'straight' but clunky translation as in the first half of the first line. Secondly some 'dunderheaded' mis- hearing, or inaccurate homophonic translation: 'boeufs' becomes 'oafs' at the end of line 1, by ignoring the initial 'b' and the unsounded 's' at the end of the word. Similarly in line 12, the French pronunciation of 'C'est' is ignored being 'translated' simply as '-cest': the lopped off end of the word incest or nicest, for example. Thirdly there is some quite faithful homophonic translation, i.e. according to an accurate process of phonetic transfer in which one playfully listens to the sound of the French

as it would be spoken, for example, ‘whyso’ in line 12 is quite a close equivalent to ‘oiseau’. And ‘Aw fond eel’, in line 7, is not a great distance phonically from ‘Au fond il’. Perhaps the more creative moments of ‘translation’ occur by means of a looser, more whimsically associative process. Although they were working in homolinguistic translation (from English to English), Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie describe this process⁶ as ‘Metonymic Translation’, under which words in the original text are replaced with ‘words which we associate with them, through synonyms, comparison, paraphrase, analysis, expansion, contraction, puns, allusions both literary and personal’ (1981, p141). The conversion of ‘Les autres dorment’ to ‘Gene Autry sleeps’ in line 15 is a humorous example of this half-phonetic and half-associative process. The association is more with the look of the word ‘autres’ than its sound. Earlier in line 4 ‘Les chevelures’ becomes ‘Hair Knights’ combining translations of both ‘chevelures’ and ‘chevaliers’ in order to create an unlikely combination and to play with the other kind of ‘night’ at the end of the line. Finally ‘au bord de la mer’ in the last line becomes ‘bored Walter by the sea’ bringing in by association Walter de la Mare along with the sound of ‘au bord’.

Padgett doesn’t mention, in his ‘Foreign Language’ essay, being inspired, or even aware of Zukovsky’s homophonic versions of Catullus which were begun in the 1950s. Instead, in a note on his translation of Apollinaire’s ‘Les Fenêtres’, Padgett does mention having subjected that poet, as well as Reverdy, to phonetic mistranslation in 1963. His ‘inspiration had been Raymond Roussel’s somewhat similar procedure described in his *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*’ (2008, p.105).

⁶ cited in Tim Atkins’ taxonomy of creative translation methods and PhD thesis ‘Seven Types of Translation: *Canzoniere*’

Roussel, much loved by other New York poets like Ashbery and Koch, created entire works of fiction, instigated by the double meanings of words and homonyms.

Ted Berrigan refers disparagingly to Zukovksy's work in a conversation with George Oppen saying that neither he nor Padgett were deliberately parodying Zukovsky's work in their experiments with homophony and weren't aware of it at the time. But when Berrigan subsequently came across Zukovsky's Catullus poems he simply felt they weren't funny enough: 'because, I mean, it's a funny idea, and I figure if you're going to use a funny idea, it should be funny' (Berrigan, 1991). Berrigan was also unhappy with Zukovsky's 'high seriousness' feeling that 'he should play as seriously as a little child does, and the accuracy should fall in very light and naturally' (Berrigan, 1991).

With the French to read alongside the English 'Some Bombs', providing one has a basic understanding of French to catch some of what has been translated 'correctly' and what has been mangled, seems to me to be funny in both of Padgett's senses of odd and amusing. *Without* the French alongside it, however, ('Some Bombs' was published in standalone form in both *Bean Spasms* and *Great Balls of Fire*) this poetry seems to take 'funniness' in the 'odd' sense closer to a genuine sense of otherness. It has a kind of raw and dislocated weirdness that could be seen as anticipating (without any of its theoretical underpinning) the sound of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and it reflects, perhaps, both Kenneth Koch's early writing from the fifties and some of the work in John Ashbery's most radically 'experimental' book *The Tennis Court Oath* which was published in 1962, the year before Padgett wrote 'Some Bombs'.

This way of writing seems also to have been funny for Padgett in the sense of the inspiration that Ted Berrigan found in the word *amusing* which means, he wrote, ‘something like that it turns you on. That it turns your muses on. That it makes you respond to it’ (Waldman and Webb, 1978, pp. 39-40). Padgett talks of the moments of ‘inspired lunacy’ (2000, p.30) mistranslation helped to bring about. It was a way of letting the unknown and otherness (other voices) into his working practice. His explorations in collaborative writing and art in the early sixties, particularly with Berrigan and Brainard, were carried out for similar reasons. Padgett’s attraction to collaborative writing was described in in terms of it being an exploration of the boundaries of his inner life, a testing of limits and the idea of a solitary self (Quilter, 2015, p.301).

The ‘disorientation of mistranslation’ was also a way of changing Padgett’s attitude towards language as a whole. In his ‘Foreign Language’ essay he is at pains to stress that this was not programmatic. He has always been averse to the idea of having intentions or having intentions attributed to him. Padgett writes that he thought he was ‘simply making forays into a magic territory that might at any moment disappear in a puff of smoke’ (2000, p.30). The disorientation enabled him to write what he confesses was ‘an enormous amount of bad poetry’ (p. 30), but it also detonated some of the mental patterns and conventional notions of language, that he felt were holding him back. ‘After the smoke had cleared’, he writes,

and the nouns and verbs could be seen scurrying about confused in an alien landscape, a desire for order reasserted itself, and later I returned to conventional syntax feeling refreshed and amiable, free to follow tradition now that I no longer felt stifled by it. (2000, p.31)

These translations could be seen as liminal or transitional in this sense of liberating Padgett into a new phase of writing. David Shapiro sees in Padgett's long poem 'Tone Arm' the influence of the 'sense of mistranslation—the joys of not knowing, the pleasures of a partial plural perspective' (1991, p. 86), and it's not hard to imagine the angular, but somewhat more lyrical, style of 'Detach, Invading'—a poem which bookended his first significant collection, *Great Balls of Fire*—as having been ushered in by these experiments in translation:

Oh humming all and
Then a something from above came rooting
And tooting onto the sprayers
Profaning in the console morning
Of the pointing afternoon
Back to dawn by police word to sprinkle it
Over the lotions that ever change
On locks
Of German, room, and perforate
(2013, pp. 21 and 110)

Very similar conclusions to Padgett's were reached by his fellow New York poets after their early excursions into alien linguistic landscapes, such as Ashbery's long cut up poem 'Europe' amongst others in the *Tennis Court Oath*, O'Hara's 'Second Avenue' and, written at the same time as O'Hara's poem, Koch's 'When the Sun Tries to Go On'. A period of linguistic disorientation or bewilderment seems almost to have

been an early rite of passage for these writers, a necessary precursor before returning to ‘conventional syntax’⁷ I am reminded of the Zen teaching (of Ch'ing-yüan Wei-hsin quoted in Suzuki's 1926 work) that:

Before a man [sic] studies Zen, to him mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after he gets an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, mountains to him are not mountains and waters are not waters; but after this when he really attains to the abode of rest, mountains are once more mountains and waters are waters. (1926, p. 24)

After an initial period of studying Zen one experiences a sense of bewilderment in which one might attain insight into (returning to Emma Cocker's description of being ‘beyond comprehension’) a ‘condition of limitlessness, the state of being boundless’ (2016, p.75). After further study, however, full awakening occurs in the shape of what Douglas Harding described (quoted in Chapter 1) as the ‘re-discovery of the obvious’; there is a return to a familiar but now refreshed landscape. On being asked what experience was like following Zen enlightenment Suzuki is reputed to have said ‘like ordinary everyday experience, except about two inches off the ground’ (Henderson, 2017, p. 147).

Nonsense and Wonder

The defiance of gravity is also something which was important to Kenneth Koch and, together with the theme of wonder, it was central to the wide tradition of literary

⁷ The rhythm of initial destruction followed by the gradual reconstruction of language with a renewed sense of its possibilities perhaps also follows the historical progression from Dada to Surrealism.

nonsense, within which the early work of both Padgett and Koch could be placed⁸. I will say a little about those themes before going on to consider Koch's work in comparison with Padgett's experiments in mistranslation.

'A Defence of Nonsense', is one of G.K Chesterton's key essays on his recurring theme: the sense of ontological wonder or astonishment at the fact that there is something rather than nothing. The 'sense of the abiding childhood of the world' (1913, p.446) is how he described it. The 'matters which most thoroughly evoke this sense', he writes, are 'those which are really fresh, abrupt and inventive' (1913, p.446). In the nineteenth century, for Chesterton, it was the literature of nonsense, in particular Edward Lear's poetry, that achieved this. Nonsense comes, in this regard, to the aid of religion, which he argues,

for centuries been trying to make men exult in the "wonders" of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats to the astonishment of the park- keeper. (1913, p. 449)

Behind Nonsense literature, Chesterton argues, lies 'the idea of *escape*, of escape into a world where things are not fixed horribly in an eternal appropriateness' (1913, p. 447). One is allowed to escape from an overly

⁸ Hugh Haughton's inclusive *Chatto Book of Nonsense* extended to the New York poets in the shape of Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery

‘appropriate’ world where wonder has become stunted through habit which prevents our noticing the true strangeness of things. Thomas Byrom developed this theme of nonsense and wonder in his study of Lear. He regarded Lear’s project, in the limericks, essentially as the:

propagation of an idea of mystery. His gift is for expressing the undisclosed, for suspending feelings and thoughts in mid-air, so that we should have our curiosity strenuously exercised and yet feel content that the mystery remains intact. If there is a general theme to the drama, it seems to be strangeness itself. To this idea of strangeness, we have also been able to give a vivid emotional character— of joyfulness. (Byrom, 1977, p. 138)

The sense of suspension in mid-air for the reader, Byrom claims, arises from discrepancies (sometimes flat contradictions) between what is said in the words of the limericks and what is depicted in the accompanying illustration. As an example he refers to ‘There was an old Man who said, “Hush!” in which the feelings in the poem of the Old Man’s mild surprise are exaggerated to amazement in the drawing. As Byrom points out, “what on earth!” would seem to be his real feelings, rather than the stated “Not at all!” (1977, p. 137). A sense of gravity being put on hold is, Byrom notes, also frequently present in the illustrations. The ‘ecstatic precision of standing on tiptoe’ so often displayed by Lear’s protagonists, e.g. the Old Man of Melrose, illustrates this. The limericks, writes Byrom, inspire us with a

minor sense of the sublime... We are aroused from our customary indifference, and our curiosity is excited to the point where we too stand on

tiptoe, next to the Old Man, the Lady and Them, and look over the lip of the intelligible world into the wonderful night beyond. (1977, p. 150)

Alan Watts, who popularised Zen Buddhism and Taoism as part of the West Coast counterculture of the fifties and sixties spanning the Beats and hippiedom, is an unlikely follower of the conservative Chesterton on nonsense, wonder and joy, as well as resistance to gravity. He was fond of quoting Chesterton's quip that angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. When writing about the concept of 'emptiness', the transience of all experience, including the experience of an enduring self, Watts describes the 'pleasant sensation of weightlessness' (2017, p. 107) which a person might start to feel on fully accepting transience and the quote from Suzuki about the experience of enlightenment being much like everyday experience, just a little off the ground, makes another appearance. The reader's experience of gravity being put on hold in Lear's nonsense, which Byrom draws our attention to, is perhaps not dissimilar.

Humour, clearly, is an essential ingredient in the buoyancy being described here and Joan Retallack has written about this in the context of Zen Buddhism and John Cage's work. Drawing on both the surprises and swerves characteristic of the Rinzai schools of Zen, in which the apparent absurdity of *kōans* is used to crack open the rational mind, and the etymology of the word humour in English which connects it with moisture and fluidity, she writes of

the humor characteristic of Zen Buddhism—the sudden conceptual shift that collapses divisive categories and reveals the strange and delightful

interconnectedness of things. A constant generous awareness of this is what might be called mirth—a light frame of mind that refuses containment by categorical divisions such as the joke as set piece on the one hand, and the logically encased argument on the other. ... Or the comic and the tragic. It is a lightness of spiritual and conceptual valence.

(Retallack, 1996, p. xxxvii)

Padgett's poetry frequently displays this sort of lightness and a mirthfulness not constrained by a need for jokes. The nonsense moments in his 'Reading Reverdy', for example, where we are shifted continually between the delightful *disconnectedness* of things, especially the French and English languages, open outwards and upwards on tiptoe to surprise, 'And a pea-tit galosh dresses itself oh bored Walter by the sea' (2013, p. 34).

Koch's 'When the Sun Tries to Go On'

A strain of Nonsense can also be discerned throughout Kenneth Koch's work, but it was at its purest at the start of his career in the writing collected together posthumously in *Sun Out* (2002). One of the key inspirations for this poetry lay in the creative misunderstandings he encountered when reading French poetry for the first time whilst on a Fulbright scholarship in Aix-en-Provence in 1950-51. In the preface to *Sun Out*, Koch comments on how only half-understanding the language meant that:

Words would have several meanings for me at once. *Blanc* (*white*) was also *blank* and, in the feminine, *Blanche*, the name of a woman. The pleasure—

and the sense of new meanings—I got from this happy confusion was something I wanted to re-create in English. (2002, p.ix)

Koch goes on to paraphrase (slightly misquoting—or mistranslating—in the process) a statement by Wittgenstein: ‘There are no subjects in the world. A subject is a limitation of the world’. He adds that his aim in these poems is to keep his ‘subject up in the air as long as possible’ (Koch 2002 p. x). But what does Koch mean exactly by this? His reference to Wittgenstein muddies the water slightly because Wittgenstein was in fact referring, in a passage of his work on solipsism⁹, to the metaphysical ‘subject’, ‘self’ or ‘I’. But it seems clear that what Koch is referring to actually is the subject *matter* of his poetry. He did not want to limit what the poems could be *about* by tying them down too soon in the same way that the Abstract Expressionists of this period sought similar freedoms, as, for example, in Jackson Pollock’s ‘all-over’ paintings, where the focus is de-centred and scattered across the surface of the work.

If these early poems *do* have a subject—and Koch admits in his note to *Sun Out* that ‘everything, once it’s written about, even if it’s a wild chaos, is bound eventually to become itself a sort of subject’ (2002, p.x)—it seems Koch wants that subject to be *everything*. In a note on ‘When the Sun Tries to Go On’, the longest and best known poem in *Sun Out*, Koch mentions that he wrote it in a three month period during which he was also reading *War and Peace*. Tolstoy was, therefore, probably an ‘invisible influence on the poem’ (2002 p142). In a final interview Koch, referring

⁹ Wittgenstein states at paragraph 5.632 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: ‘The subject does not belong to the world, but it is a limit of the world.’ This statement, which is I believe the one Koch was paraphrasing, appears in the context of a section of the *Tractatus* that deals with the issue of solipsism. The statements that lie behind 5.632 in Wittgenstein’s incremental approach are, ‘*The limits of my language mean the limits of the world,*’ at 5.6, and ‘*I am the world. (The microcosm.)*’ at 5.63. (McGinn, 2006, p. 255)

again to this influence, says: ‘Tolstoy seems to bring in everything, even how a dog feels when it runs, bringing in everything and the joy, the ecstasy of everything’ (Young 2002, p.42). When he started writing this poem in the spring of 1951, Koch felt he had stumbled on some kind of poetic secret and was inventing a new way to write. He describes this period of ecstatic creativity in interview:

The first way I wrote that felt completely my own was the style of *When the Sun Tries to Go On*. When I wrote that poem I felt positively bardic; I felt that I had come upon a new use for words, a means of communication that enabled me to say things never said before. I sat in my one-room apartment on Charles Street in New York and wrote this poem every day for three months. Several times I remember my heart beating so fast that I was afraid I was going to die. ... The “rules” (not conscious to me but practiced), as I look back on them now, were something like these: don’t “make sense” in an ordinary way; don’t make sense in a Joycean way; don’t make non-sense in a Steinian way; make a sense you never heard before, if you understand how you’re doing it you’re not doing it right; no puns; no jokes; no hidden meanings. (Koch, 1996 p.207)

The resulting poem has received mixed responses from the critics. Marit Macarthur described it as ‘virtually unreadable... a stream of nonsense ... the mood is one of the author’s own very personal pleasure in pure sound in which it is difficult to share’ (Macarthur, 2008). But William Corbett was more supportive: ‘The overall effect is exhilarating. The poem seems written without a sense of outcome, of finite possibility, of knowing more than the language knows’ (Corbett, 2018).

Koch proposed a new use for words which sought to avoid sense and non-sense and to defeat all *understanding* including that of the writer. The level of bewilderment built into the reading experience for this series of one hundred twenty four line poems is so high that non-rationality and disorder become the new norm. Here is a short excerpt (chosen by chance) from the start of the eighty-seventh stanza to illustrate:

O whale of girls, burgooning
Late. Oh! My “knee is fair. There I limp
Weevils into the air,” Roger, whip
The decayed easels, “and plenty
Horseradish, it is airpower, accident insurance,
Tea of papers, and rowdy lemons.
(2002, p. 131)

As a result, Elliott’s ‘nonsense moment’ of vertiginous transition is perhaps more likely to be experienced when coming across any short periods of relative calm, such as the disturbingly coherent beginning to the 71st stanza: ‘And once again her stomach functions normally’ (Koch, 2002, p. 120).

In a later poem ‘Days and Nights’ Koch reveals more about some of his methods of composition in these early poems. He comments on how phonic associations lead him repeatedly to re-write (thus ‘translating’ or transfiguring) common phrases, taking them successively further and further away from their original sense:

Sweet are the uses of adversity

Became Sweetheart cabooses of diversity
And Sweet art cow papooses at the university
And sea bar Calpurnia flower havens' re-noosed knees
(2002, p. 404)

The eighty-fourth stanza of *When the Sun Tries to Go On* does seem to illustrate, here and there, this sense of the surface of the language having been worked over phonetically.

“O rainwater how hairless you are! and when winter
Accomplishes everything you are as mercenary as gin
Today, deceiving the pilots of enemy airplane
Is loophole, ant-lake, and churchy-wise. Eye,
Simple doughnut apartment remember
When sunny a sandy daisy ripping in the country
March winter labor delicious party in my eyes;
Green whirlpools laughed on my foolproof shins
And I climbed through an Airedale ‘win-pyjamas’; he
Told him I they warranty métier. Show
Of a creeping bunch. Of limitless lilacs; and where
Are the goldenrods of Schenectady? Near you. In Orpheum,
Giant ‘theyater,’ O lake-country! Where are the beavers
Who sought you in wanting clothing, parachutes
And ‘arid climates,’ and one, day fought you with
A bacchic soda of genuine airs of piers? O pod! park
Of the rotationless beggars nearing coffee grounds

With their airs. Airy hairs. Little minute. 'Injinn.' Cigarette.

Barefeet I waited ere the barracuda

Bared its air-sweet tinder-bet of rain-settered

Air-confessioning, 'a thousand and one minutes!

O rainwater how hairless you are! The lands of business

And the weirdest summer, oh!' " Lady in comic pyjamas'

Lacerated sleeping foot's bicycle of Limping Classics! (Koch, 2002, p.129)

One can imagine, for example, 'ant-lake' and 'air-confessioning' starting life as 'ant-like' and 'air-conditioning'. Elsewhere the poem merely *sounds like* it might have been produced by means of homophonic translation, a little like, in an instance of 'anticipatory plagiarism', the Oulipian constraint called 'Canada Dry', under which writing is produced that 'looks like constraint-determined writing and has its texture and colour. But there is in fact no constraint at all' (Matthews and Broatch, 1998, p. 44).

William Watkin (2001, pp.41-46) has, so far, written the only extended piece of analysis on this poem. He sees in it, and in his other early poetry, evidence of Koch's attempt to fulfil the historical, or European, avant-garde's 'desire to eradicate the assumed gap between the process of creation and of living' (Watkin 2001, p13). Essential to his argument is Koch's ambition, mentioned earlier, to include the whole world in his poems by giving the impression of 'going on' forever, coupled with Koch's refusal of depth in his privileging of the surface of his poetry over the possibility of hidden meanings. Watkin quotes Koch on the New York School's attention to the surface of language: 'It does seem that whatever our poems had to say, the words got there first' (Koch 1996 p. 214), adding that such a

view, as exemplified by ‘When the Sun Tries to Go On’, is ideological ‘in that the attention to surface is a direct rejection of the depth model of poetics prevalent in America in the Fifties’ (Watkin, 2001 p44). Watkin’s ambivalent conclusion, however, is that this, and much of Koch’s work, ‘while postmodern, is not avant-garde’. There ‘is some residual music in the poem’, but

the majority of the surface is merely words put on the page in a stream of consumerist, postmodern discourse. The effect is simultaneously exhilarating and beautifully banal, not in the intended way of Ashbery’s studied world-weariness, but merely in the way that after a while another person’s excitement over something simply does become uninteresting. (2001, p.46)

It seems undeniable that Koch was cheerfully at war with the American academy of the fifties in poems such as ‘Fresh Air’, in which he lampoons poetry ‘ruled with the sceptre of the dumb, the deaf and the creepy’ (Koch, 2005, p.123). But it seems equally certain that Koch would not have been terribly concerned with critical verdicts on whether the label postmodern or avant-garde (whether Watkin’s process-focused version, David Lehman’s (1998) ‘last avant-garde’ or Mark Silverberg’s (2010) ‘neo-avant-garde’) should be applied to him and his work. To the question, posed in his play *After the Return of the Avant-Garde*, ‘Which is more avant-garde—a giraffe or an elephant’, Koch provides the blithe response, ‘A giraffe is more avant-garde, but an elephant is more surreal’ (Koch 2013, p.462).

What seems clear from any analysis of this eighty-fourth stanza though, is that Koch has successfully obeyed his rules not to ‘make sense in an ordinary way’. He claimed that there would always be the possibility of some meanings to be gleaned *locally*

from his poem, i.e. at the level of the line or phrase. But even at this level it is hard. On a less local level looking at the stanza as a whole one can see that the phrase ‘O rainwater how hairless you are!’ returns towards the end suggesting that a theme could be emerging. There are also motifs involving food, nakedness, hair and clothing (these occur throughout the whole poem often in the form of familiar nonsense motifs such as hats, shoes, oysters, oranges and lemons, bees and badgers), but in no sense could the poem be described as being *about* any of these things. The subject of the poem is up in the air and a strict non-sensical reading is required.

Koch’s is not the kind of modernist non-sense that features in automatic writing as practised ‘classically’ by surrealists such as Breton, Soupault and Péret who all wrote in sentences that were, by and large, structurally and syntactically correct. The first three lines of Koch’s stanza might pass for such surrealism but the syntax is derailed at the end of the start of the fourth line and never gets back on track. Certain phrases may have an air of the spontaneity of automatic writing, such as, ‘Where are the beavers / Who sought you in wanting clothing’ (2002, p. 129), but more often there is a sense of the surface of the language having been worked over, rather like the surface of a Willem De Kooning painting, to hide any trace of meaning or block possible readings. Punctuation plays a significant part in further complicating the surface of the language and further defamiliarizing the reading experience. Koch saturates this early poetry with punctuation. Single and double quotation marks abound, enclosing unlikely sounding phrases or speeches. And while much of Koch’s poetry is littered with exclamation marks, ‘When the Sun Tries to Go On’ sees him hit an exclamatory high; the poem is, it seems, one sustained gasp of astonishment. Although it will later become a trademark of John Ashbery’s poetry, the weird tonal variation here marks out another way in which Koch seems, in the early

fifties, to be making a new kind of non-sense. The poem's register veers about from the mock Romantic voice addressing rainwater; to the vernacular of 'theayter' and 'injinn'; the Dylan Thomas-like lyricism of 'Green whirlpools laughed on my foolproof shins' and the slapstick of clambering 'through an Airedale 'win-pyjamas'. And much of the tone elsewhere appears unclassifiable. How, for example, might one categorise the last statement of the stanza addressed to the 'Lady in comic pyjamas': 'Lacerated sleeping foot's bicycle of Limping Classics!' (2002, p. 129)?

So the poem is non-sensical and may contain some features of a new non-sense, but is it useful to talk of Koch as a 'nonsense poet'? He never actually identified his work as being part of the wider tradition of nonsense literature. Indeed at times he was keen to defend it against the critical dismissal that is often delivered, as in Macarthur's verdict, with the word nonsense. Similarly he resisted the surrealist label being applied too freely to his work, but acknowledged, in 'The Art of Poetry' that, 'As for "surrealistic" methods and techniques, they have become a / Natural part of writing' (Koch 2005, p.263). The various strategies, methods and techniques of nonsense literature are, I would argue, also an important and 'natural' part of Koch's writing, both in its earliest form and as it subsequently developed.

Nonsense defined

Coming to an agreed definition of nonsense and Nonsense poetry has proved difficult for critics. Marnie Parsons, in his 1994 work *Touch Monkeys*, chose not to define the term, remarking on the inherent difficulty in attempting to 'classify something that, by its very nature, makes suspect the language with which, and the systems of thought by which, one attempts to classify it' (1994, p. 12). So swerving, behind Parsons,

away from definition, I'm going to focus on a few common features and themes of nonsense poetry. The first has already been mentioned: levity, as in humour and lightness, but also the way in which the nonsensepoet seeks to keep their subject and reader suspended in mid-air, or at least on tiptoes whilst order and disorder see-saw before them. While the balance in Koch's early poetry seems tipped firmly towards disorder, some aspects tip it the other way: the twenty four line structure to each stanza, with (in a rather old fashioned touch) capital letters at the start of each line (left aligned) and a set of motifs which repeat regularly throughout the series, for example the frequent appearance of gravity-defying yo-yos and parachutes.

Another touchstone of Nonsense is the element of play and the wish to escape from the constraints of everyday life and language.. Koch is certainly playful in his early poetry but the rules that he realised, in retrospect, he had been unconsciously obeying ('don't make sense ... don't make non-sense...') were not the game-like rules which, according to Elizabeth Sewell (1952), need explicitly to be agreed before play can commence. Koch's play is closer to John Goldthwaite's description of the 'fanciful mood' of nonsense which exists 'for no other reason than to be with language like a foal jumping with new legs' (1992 p.46). It is also in line with Hugh Haughton's view that Nonsense is

less a genre than a *possibility*, a dimension, a boundary which poetry touches more frequently than we usually imagine... at its heart lies a playful formal inventiveness and delight in transgression, a protest against the arbitrariness of order and an affirmation of the pleasure-principle applied to language.

(Haughton, 1988, p. 8)

Koch was dubbed ‘Dr Fun’ by his students and the ‘pleasure principle applied to language’ would be a good description of Koch’s poetic project. Pleasure and happiness aren’t quite adequate terms for the emotions prevalent in Koch’s early nonsense poetry though, which are closer to ecstatic joy and an ever present overwhelming over- excitedness.

In the feverish period in which Koch wrote ‘When the Sun Tries To Go On’ he believed he had discovered a new way of using words, that he had invented a new language even, but he stopped short of creating neologisms, a common feature of both traditional Nonsense and also of Glossolalia. The conclusion of Michel De Certeau’s essay ‘Glossolalia (Vocal Utopias)’ could, in many ways, however, equally apply to Koch’s nonsense poetry:

As an invention of vocal space, glossolalia in fact multiplies the possibilities of speech. ... This vast space, artificial and entrancing, this virgin forest of the voice, is supposed to have “meaning” as a whole, as a totality, but one can circulate freely within it without encountering the limits that condition any articulation of meaning. (De Certeau, 1996, p. 41)

For De Certeau, before it is reduced or exploited by scholars or institutions,

glossolalia appears in the form of an *originary joy*. In the Middle Ages, it was called *ebrietas spiritualis* or inebriation of the spirit, the jubilation of beginning to speak: “Let ... fullness of joy without measure surpass the limits of syllables,” says Saint Augustine.’ (1996, p. 41)

This phase of Koch's writing anticipates, in addition to the founding of the Oulipo, several other things: the disrupted surfaces of John Ashbery's language (especially the *Tennis Court Oath* Ashbery) and in his ambition to keep the 'subject' of his poetry 'up in the air as long as possible', Koch could also be seen to be prefiguring Lyn Hejinian's 'rejection of closure'. In open texts, Hejinian writes, 'all the elements of the work are maximally excited' (Hejinian, 2000, p.43), which sounds like a very Koch-like thing to strive for. There's a paradox here though, which distinguishes Koch's aims from Hejinian's. In wanting to keep his subject up in the air, Koch seems to want to write an entirely 'open text', but at the same time a poem which includes the whole world within it, which could only be achieved by creating what Hejinian describes as 'the (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything,' which 'would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable' (2000, p56).

'Possibility' was a key word in Koch's lexicon right up until his last collection in which he seems to return, in the poem 'Possible World', to a late form of the delirious nonsense writing which marked the start of his career and in which understanding of anything in particular is continually deferred whilst the overriding sense of enthusiasm is clear:

Mondo Hump

Invites gladness alights madness

Mondo

Desert fastness

Mondo

invites fastness

Mondo

Serene

This early non-sensical poetry of Koch's inspired by, and built upon, misunderstanding, seeks to encompass everything but to resist being tied down to any one subject as it allows its author and reader to, in De Certeau's words cited earlier, 'circulate freely within it without encountering the limits imposed by particular articulations of meaning' (1996, p. 41). It was for Koch the first poetry that he felt was authentically his own; it was his 'jubilation of beginning to speak' (1996, p. 41). A poetics of bewilderment is a phrase used, unsystematically, by several poets in recent years including Peter Gizzi, Norman Fischer and, at greatest length in her essay entitled 'Bewilderment', Fanny Howe, who goes so far as to invoke the Muslim prayer, 'Lord, increase my bewilderment' (2003, p. 6). Howe positively seeks out the 'nonsense moment' of liminality where one loses bearings and falls between all categories and ways of making sense. For her bewilderment is 'an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability. It breaks open the lock of dualism (*it's this or that*) and peers out into space (*not this, not that*)' (Howe, 2003, p. 15). For Koch and Padgett also perhaps, experimenting with ideas of mistranslation and misunderstanding was a way of entering that moment or state of mind. The anti-programmatic Padgett, would be likely to balk at any allegation that he had deliberate intentions in this area, but Koch was happy to announce his ambitions about wanting to include everything in his poetry by inventing a wholly new use for language, and a new kind of sense beyond the modernist non-senses of Joyce and

Stein. That Koch's appetite for this kind of writing was huge and that it re-emerged, as we have seen, towards the end of his writing career in 'Possible World' also sets his work apart. Padgett's mistranslations and wilder experiments in collaborative writing, by contrast, tended to be less extensive and more limited to his early years of writing.

Playing around and simply exploring 'funny' possibilities with language seems to have been at the heart of Padgett's creative mistranslation. John Goldthwaite's description of the 'fanciful mood' of nonsense (1992 p.46), seems apt, but there is something in Padgett's attitude to play which I want to draw out further here.

Mistranslation, for Padgett, was in effect a precursor of the practices he would later write about, in *Creative Reading*, as ways to deliberately exploit everyday reading mistakes. This will be considered in more detail in the next chapter, but one of the core beliefs underlying those practices was that 'Play is healthy' (Padgett 1997, p. 72). Padgett also referred to his 'prolonged childhood and adolescence' and the importance of the human instinct for play in his Kunming address 'Why Write Poetry' (2015). And one of the pieces of advice in his poem *How to be Perfect* is 'Keep your childish self alive' (2013, p. 536). It should be noted that it's not 'keep your child-like self alive' which would be the expected 'new age' received wisdom. Padgett is advising on the benefits of simply messing around. If further evidence is required of Padgett's childishness here is a reminder in the form of an excerpt from the fourth poem in the 'Some Bombs' series:

There now there's a pig

A no ear chat files on Sir Nigeria

And desk chins!

This chins Cousin Crane's minds less a gents

La looney is fat I guess of gartering the newt

Ellie is a party

And I vase my meter

"the portie no me suitee dee rainee nor the fen beings!"

(2013, p. 37)

'Goofing off' is a quality that the Fluxus artists of the early sixties honed in their performances. As Kristine Stiles notes in her essay on the role of humour in that group of artists and writers,

There are positive qualities to goofing off. Goofing off requires developing a fine-tuned sense of what it means to pause long enough and distance oneself far enough from worldly objects and events to recognize their illusory dimension and thereby reinvest the world with wonder. In order to really goof off well, the instrumental sense of purpose so deeply ingrained in Western ego and epistemology must be abandoned. (1993, p. 72)

Padgett's experiments in mis-translation and Koch's 'happy confusion' of languages were ways in which they both practised the important art of 'goofing off' early on in their writing careers, and reinvested their language with wonder as a result. But, of the two, Padgett's commitment to goofing off is perhaps the purer. Koch's was driven by ambition as just noted, but Padgett's was perhaps more purposeless. John Ashbery

commented on the politics of Frank O'Hara's poetry, and its lack of programme, by writing that 'it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist' (2004, p. 81). One could argue that behind Padgett's anti-programmatic stance lurks an ouroboros-like programme that seeks to dismantle the whole ego-driven sense of having a programme beyond that of purposeless play. Rather than 'rupturing the terms of what is already known' (Cocker, 2013, p. 130) as suggested at the start of this chapter, Padgett could, in his early nonsense poetry, be seen to be threatening the importance of knowledge itself. Or at least the occasionally pompous form it goes by within the academy. Going beyond Koch's duty (set out in his 'The Art of Poetry') 'to be serious without being solemn' (2005, p. 160) Padgett merely ignores the right of solemnity to exist.

CHAPTER 3

How not to pay attention (to what you're told to): Ron Padgett's Creative Reading and Writing

‘Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; —& they are the life, the soul of reading’
Laurence Sterne (Sterne, 1997, p. 58)

‘Where was I and who?’
Ron Padgett (2013 p.458)

‘plenty as three as thoughts are’
Clark Coolidge (Davies, 1978)

Padgett’s *Creative Reading: What It Is, How to Do It and Why* (1997) is, amongst other things, an instruction manual on how to misread. In Emma Cocker’s terms it constitutes a tactical approach to ‘knowing how not to know’ (2013, p. 131) how to read. Padgett explores everyday mistakes in reading, and how, by means of a refocused attention—in effect placing one’s attention where the author did not intend us to—we might make creative use of those mistakes. This chapter will argue that his book’s unorthodox Creative Reading pedagogy segues into one of Creative Writing and, beyond that, into an informal source of advice on Creative Living and at the same time a critique of Buddhist mindfulness.

Padgett’s poetry, while always playful, formally varied, inventive and witty, has, over the course of his fifty year career, become increasingly full of advice, partly mock serious (‘How to Be Perfect’ (2013, p. 532)), partly seriously goofy (‘How to Be a Woodpecker’ (2013, p. 345), ‘How to Become a Tree in Sweden’ (2013, p. 461)), but also containing a brand of seemingly off-the-cuff, yet compassionate wisdom:

‘Advice to Young Writers’ (2013, p. 408). The nature of this wisdom seems both quasi-Buddhistic and outlaw-individualistic. Padgett’s father was one of the last

Oklahoma bootleggers before that state turned ‘wet’ and his personal anti-authoritarian influence runs through Padgett’s writing, particularly the stubborn refusal to obey rules, follow instructions, or even to follow his own emerging patterns. In interview Padgett has said, ‘the only consistent plan I’ve ever had is to try to break my patterns, my habits, my kneejerk tendencies in writing’ (Lorberer, 2014). Much of the advice in Padgett’s writing, as referenced in Chapter 1 when discussing his poem ‘The Mediterranean’, is about how to look out for and do ‘the other thing that is always there’ and, in the process, read, write and live more creatively. The boundaries between these activities are fluid, with one thing leading to, being affected by, or included within, another. To write creatively one should read creatively, and in order to do either, it helps to be alive. In *Creative Reading*, however, Padgett goes beyond this to suggest that reading is itself a part of the writing process; neither activity is ‘unidirectional’ (1997, p.3) and there is always an ongoing conversation between them.

Padgett has no monopoly over the term ‘Creative Reading’ and certainly didn’t invent it. Emerson was one of the first to use the phrase in his speech, ‘The American Scholar’: ‘Tis the good reader that makes the good book. ... One must be an inventor to read well. ... There is then creative reading as well as creative writing’ (1983, p. 59). And the term is now quite familiar; ‘Creative Reading’ features as a first year module on several Creative Writing undergraduate courses. The aim of these modules is essentially to encourage ‘reading as a writer’ and reading specifically with a view to learning by imitation, which, according to David Morley, in the Creative Reading section of his *Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing*, is ‘an honourable and ancient tradition in writing, and the arts, as it is in science and other forms of knowledge’ (2007, p. 28). For Morley though, it is the anti-hypnotic effects of

creative reading that are paramount, where reading is ‘used as a type of caffeine, rather than a lotus blossom. It is a form of waking up and paying attention’ (p. 29). Derek Attridge suggests that reading may be termed creative when it ‘succeeds in apprehending otherness’ and ‘in registering the singularity and inventiveness of the work’ (2004, pp.79–83). This is reading in which the reader undergoes ‘an encounter with alterity, which is to say the shifting and opening-up of settled modes of thinking and feeling’ (2004, pp. 27-28). Attridge’s work emphasizes the responsibilities of reading and the ethical implications of being open and hospitable to the otherness that works of literature introduce, or allow to erupt, into the world when they are performed anew each time by the reader.

Ron Padgett’s version of creative reading goes beyond seeking creative role models to imitate. He shares both Morley’s preference for reading that awakens and Attridge’s views on the importance of being open to otherness, newness and the ‘lasting surprise’ (2004, p. 84) that is wonder. Padgett and Attridge also both develop the possibilities of reading as invention. Attridge writes: ‘A creative reading often moves to an articulation in words, as if the work being read demanded a new work in response’ (2004, p. 92). Where Padgett differs from Attridge is in the latter’s emphasis on the responsibility of the reader. Padgett’s *Creative Reading* is predominantly a promotion of the *rights* of the reader. Predating Daniel Pennac’s *The Rights of The Reader* (2006), it advocates in particular, the right to creatively *misread*.

For Padgett, Creative Reading is above all a shared act of creation with the writer. He even goes so far as to say:

reading creatively involves an aggressive attitude toward the material at hand: the book is there for you to use as you see fit... the book is raw material for you to shape. When you come to it ready to take it apart and put it back together, it has lost its inviolability, its implied claim to immutability, its intimidating authority. You become the new author. You assume authority. (1997, p. 56)

Padgett's 'philosophy' of creative reading combines this aggressive approach with an openness to the creative potential of mistakes. At the heart of his book (1997, pp. 46-55) is an analysis of nine 'everyday mistakes' that people commonly make when reading. These include the 'single word error', where one word in a sentence is simply misread; 'line skips', where the reader inadvertently jumps a line when returning to the left hand margin, and 'page skips', where two or more pages are turned by mistake; 'line repeats' and 'page repeats', where the reader inadvertently re-reads the same line or page; 'transposing up', where a word from the line below (in one's peripheral vision) is read into the line above; 'column confusion', where one reads inadvertently across columns from different articles in newspapers or magazines; and also the 'eye-mind split', where 'the eyes move along the words, but the mind is elsewhere' (in other words, unmindful reading). Seeming to draw on the language of meditation instruction, Padgett writes: 'All nine of these reading errors can be minimised by practising mindfulness: gently but firmly drawing one's attention back to the material at hand' (1997, p.55), yet conversely he also advocates learning how to use the errors creatively. Padgett's ambivalence towards mindfulness is a recurring theme in *Creative Reading*.

Some of Padgett's creative ways to exploit reading errors are quite well known now in the context of experimental and linguistically innovative writing. In fact, they could be seen as a compact toolkit for that approach. William Burroughs' ways of arriving at new writing through cut-ups and fold-ins can be seen as deliberate 'column confusion'. Tom Phillips' *A Humument*, and Ronald Johnson's *Radi os* are examples of work in which source texts have been partly obscured or erased to reveal a new text within the original, and can be regarded as a variation on Padgett's 'transposing words up and down'. The OuLiPian exercise N+7, in which all the nouns of a given text are replaced by the 7th noun after them in the dictionary, involves deliberately making 'single word errors'. The juxtapositions of words in collage practice also can appear to have arisen out of misreadings such as 'line' and 'page skips'. Indeed some of Padgett's own poems provide examples of this.

'Arrive by Pullman' (Padgett, 2013, pp.317–326) looks like a 'page skip' extended, so that instead of just skipping over a few pages, the poem skips from book to book, rather like the surrealist practice of making large-scale 'collage' experiences by moving from cinema to cinema viewing fragments of different films, and creating, out of the process, a personal composite film. 'Arrive by Pullman' is laid out in short carriage-like chunks of prose over 10 pages with each page break coinciding with the next apparent skip to new source material. It begins by praising clarity and sustained concentration:

How admirable to feel clear! To perceive without distraction or vagueness. To be in direct rapport with something. With what? Could be lots of things... And to sustain this clarity for more than a few seconds. Usually such moments are doomed. (2013, p.317)

But what actually becomes clear is that the poem is in fact an exploration of the pleasures—even the virtues—of distraction, of being in *indirect* rapport with something, of falling into trances and sustaining, rather than clarity, an imaginative openness to interruption. This is achieved through a series of pratfalls beginning with the ‘moments’ of the first paragraph being ‘doomed’ not to failure, as the reader might expect, but ‘to destruction by a wicked bolt of lightning that came out of nowhere’ (2013, p.318). Further flashes of lightning are delivered by the poem in which various figures, and scenarios (for example, Samuel L. Goldwyn, Sir Walter Raleigh, rain falling on the surface of a pond, a university rowing contest and a teapot) are briefly brought into focus and then dissolved into one another until, ultimately:

Beyond us the city, wreathed now in the golden light of the setting sun, kept its granite face turned toward the sky which would soon arrive by Pullman. (2013, pp. 325–326)

At the opposite end of the spectrum of attentive misreading and writing is a sonnet that looks like the result of an extreme version of ‘line looping’. The title ‘Nothing in That Drawer’ (Padgett, 2013, p.23) is simply repeated unchanged fourteen times, apparently poking gentle fun at the form at the same time as it wittily mimics, visually and aurally, a chest of drawers being opened and closed, one could imagine with increasing frustration, although when Padgett reads the poem he tends to alternate curiosity and a serene kind of resignation.¹⁰ Padgett has himself said that it was written during a period when he was reading a lot of Gertrude Stein’s work and it

¹⁰ For example in this episode of the Verb in which Padgett discusses the poem: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09kk457>

does seem, especially if read aloud, to bear out Stein's observation that there is no such thing as repetition, only insistence (Stein, 1971, p.100). Reading the poem we begin to sense that, just as one supposedly cannot step into the same river twice, one cannot read the same line identically twice. Minute variations occur. There seems to be no such thing as 'nothing', or rather, each 'nothing' is in fact a new something.

The poem also bears some relation to the discovery (mentioned in Chapter 2), which most children make at some point, that if you repeat out loud a word or short phrase enough times the physicality of the words—the feel of them in your mouth, the sounds they make and the look of the squiggles on the page—starts to dominate while the meaning floats free like an untethered balloon. One of the beliefs underlying Padgett's creative misreading exercises is that 'All words have magical properties that we should experience and explore' (1997, p.58). When talking about another way in which the reading experience can be made strange, he writes: 'In reading backwards, that alien sound is exactly what I'm looking for, because it's this feeling of differentness that activates one's feeling for the magical nature of words' (1997, p. 71).

The surprising discovery of otherness is, Padgett believes, one of the main benefits of creative misreading. The discovery, he says, can lead to an experience of awakening, deeper than simple surprise. Padgett (1997, p.60) refers to a passage by Wolfgang Iser in the *Act of Reading* (1978) that describes the kind of awakening one experiences after putting down an engrossing book. Engaged reading involves:

[an] image-building process ... whose significance lies in the fact that image-building eliminates the subject-object division essential for all perception, so

that when we “awaken” to the real world, this division seems all the more accentuated.... so that we can view our own world as a thing “freshly understood”. (Iser, 1978, p.140)

Padgett goes on to compare this to the OuLiPian N+7 exercise:

The image-building that is required by the noun-substitution process [in N+7] takes us one step away from the “reality” of the original text, to which our return is a kind of awakening. (1997, p.60)

It is being involved in, and absorbed by, the actual writing and dictionary-searching process that leads to this experience. The original texts (both the subverted text and the dictionary) when returned to after such a strange detour of creative misreading can appear unfamiliar yet somehow more themselves. According to Victor Shklovsky, art that uses the technique of defamiliarization (mentioned in Chapter 1) removes an object—or process, in this case the reading of a text—from the automatism of habitual perception, so that ‘one may recover the sensation of life’ (Berlina, 2016, p. 80) once more.

In some of Padgett’s poems he recovers ‘the sensation of life’ through an apparently ‘straight’ mindfulness approach. For example in the poem ‘The Sweeper’ the language exhibits a Zen-like attention to the detail of ritualistically sweeping the floor. Mindful writing mirrors mindful action. There’s also just a pinch of Dr Seuss:

And when I have a pile
that's big enough. I nudge
it in the dustpan, this way
and that, until it's all
aboard, except a thin line of
dust that can't be smaller.
Tough little dust! I raise the
broom up high and bring it
down and past the line to
make a gust and then
the tiny dust is gone. I love
my pan of big new dust.

(2013, p. 433)

But in several other poems he seems to go beyond this by applying mindfulness paradoxically towards the ability of the mind to be distracted. He touches on this approach in *Creative Reading* when discussing the possible benefits of the reading error he labels the 'Eye-Mind split'. He writes:

One of the least productive things you can do—in terms of traditional reading — is to let your mind wander. Your eyes keep moving along the words while your mind moves elsewhere. How many times were you exhorted as a child, “Pay attention!”? But pay attention to what? When my mind wanders, it's usually paying attention, but to something else. In creative reading, wandering is used as a positive technique that puts the reader in closer touch with where the mind is when it wanders and what it does there. (1997, p.72)

What Padgett recommends is not simply daydreaming at will when reading but trying, on some level, to remain mindful when being transported away from the text into a fantasy. He then suggests ‘creating a segue (or ‘bridge’) between your fantasy and the words as you re-enter the text’ (1997, p.73). It is, in effect, a practice of creative, mindful daydreaming, and one which is gentler towards the wandering, childlike mind. ‘Oswaldo’s Song’ is one of many Padgett poems that demonstrate this practice:

Oswaldo’s Song

Be glad that, as the world is in various forms of turmoil, you don’t have to worry about anything, for a moment. You lean back in your chair and let your head fall back, and you notice a spot on the ceiling. What is it? It looks like a miniature South America. It wasn’t there before. The tingling in your feet was there, but you didn’t notice until you had stopped thinking about South America, how romantic it might have been under certain circumstances. It is 1948 and you are standing on the veranda of a large manor house perched on the side of a cliff above which the moon has parked, and off in the distance an old man is gently strumming a guitar and singing about the day he met his young bride in their village. She was seven, he was barely eight. They ran through the village until they got larger and larger, so large their shoes didn’t fit, and when they went to their respective homes that night, they dreamed of some day coming to America, North America. “That’s enough, Oswaldo,” says a man standing in the shadows, and the singing stops. A light breeze rustles the banana palms. (2013, p.401)

The poem starts like a guided meditation, or hypnotic induction from a somewhat carefree therapeutic practitioner, then swerves through several layers of fantasy until the initial surface ‘reality’ is lost to view, but an intimate mindfulness of the daydream continues to track all the subsequent movements of the mind as it spirals further and further away from its starting point.

Allen Ginsberg’s advice that a writer should take ‘a friendly attitude towards your thoughts’ (Gach 1998: 197) is relevant again here. Friendliness, or kindness, can start, and maybe has to start, in one’s attitude towards the contents of one’s own mind.

Moreover, as William Blake, one of Ginsberg’s own inspirations, advises: ‘He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars’ (2000: Plate 55, l.60). So the smallest movements of one’s mind, like daydreams about the shape of a spot on the ceiling as here in ‘Oswaldo’s Song’, are worthy of mindful attention and being written about. John Yau has noted, when considering ‘The Poet’s Breakfast’, in which the poem jumps

(as one thoughts do) from the pleasures of “raking and piling grass” to “Juan the places, feelings memories and events conjured up as well as manifested, however fleetingly, by the meandering mind. (Yau, 2013)

This ability to track the movements of the meandering mind is also one of the things that appears to form part of Padgett’s informal pedagogy, for example, in his poem ‘Advice to Young Writers’:

Advice to Young Writers

One of the things I've repeated to writing students is
that they should write when they don't
feel like writing, just sit down and start,
and when it doesn't go very well, to press on then,
to get to that one thing you'd otherwise
never find. What I forgot to mention was
that this is just a writing technique, that
you could also be out mowing the lawn, where,
if you bring your mind to it, you'll also eventually
come to something unexpected ("The robin he
hunts and pecks"), or watching the Farm News
on which a large man is referring to the "Greater
Massachusetts area." It's alright, students, not
to write. Do whatever you want. As long as you find
that unexpected something, or even if you don't.
(2013, p.408)

In mindfulness meditation one is encouraged to make oneself available to whatever experience arises regardless of one's inclinations and personal preferences. Padgett (or the voice he assumes in this poem at least) similarly encourages regular practice in his students, even 'when they don't feel like writing'. But the aim is to be active, rather than simply receptive: to find 'something unexpected and 'to get to that one thing you'd otherwise / never find.' There is an echo here of the suggestion mentioned earlier, in 'The Mediterranean', that we all turn just slightly and do 'the other thing that is always there' (2013, p.772). The final 'or even if you don't' is itself the crowning example, in this poem, of 'that unexpected something' that one may find by

turning away from the planned route. The sleight of hand involved in that comic ending might at first distract us from the fact that the poem has in fact delivered, with a light touch, some useful and friendly advice that is worth hearing, about how to live and write attentively, staying open to surprise right to the end.

Padgett's poetics of wandering

I'd like to explore in more detail now this idea of indirection in Padgett's poetry; how central turning away, sidestepping and wandering are to what Yau sees as his 'genius' and how this relates to the tradition, that Allen Ginsberg has described, of poets as 'practitioners of mind awareness, or practitioners of reality, expressing their fascination with a phenomenal universe and trying to penetrate to the heart of it' (1991, p.94). The perception of another beat poet, Philip Whalen, that his own poetry was 'a picture or graph of a mind moving, which is a world body being here and now which is history ... and you', (2007, p.153) is also relevant in this context.

The wandering mind is apparent, we have seen, in Padgett's creative writing and reading. What does he pay attention to in his poetry when his mind wanders, how does he do that and why? Where might those wanderings have led over the course of his writing career and how do they compare with those of some of the other digressive poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? I see this research as part of a reaction to what has become a 'mindfulness orthodoxy' that claims, in the words of one scientific study, that 'A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind' (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010) although daydreaming perhaps never really went out of favour within Creative Writing circles.

Dictionaries frequently inspire both mind and word-wandering and so provide an appropriate point of departure. Chambers has the following definitions of ‘to wander’:

First as an intransitive verb:

1. to ramble or move with no definite object, or with no fixed course, or by a roundabout way;
2. to go astray, deviate from the right path or course, the subject of discussion, the object of attention, etc;
3. to lose one’s way;
4. to be incoherent in talk, disordered in mind, or delirious

And then as a transitive verb:

1. to traverse;
2. to lead astray, or to bewilder

The key features of wandering that I will focus on from these definitions are its aimless quality; its circuitousness; its deviance (from the subject of discussion or object of attention) and also possibly its deviousness, and its tendency to lead one astray so that one becomes (as a writer and/or reader) lost or bewildered. Although I want to focus on mental rather than physical (ambulatory) wandering, they are closely linked and have often been written about together. Rebecca Solnit, for example, has written a cultural history of walking—*Wanderlust* (2001)—and a *Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2006), which touch on both aspects. On the theme of aimlessness, and having no particular destination in mind, Solnit notes, in *Wanderlust*, that ‘in China,

wandering was celebrated — “To ‘wander’ is the Taoist codeword for becoming ecstatic,” writes a scholar—but arriving was sometimes regarded with ambiguity’ (2001, p144). Aimless wandering is actually regarded as a form of discipline within Taoism; a way of cultivating the spirit of *wu wei* (translated as ‘non-doing’) in which any action becomes effortless and flowing. In her *Field Guide* Solnit extols the benefits of getting lost, in fact its necessity, if an answer is to be found to what she considers ‘the basic tactical question in life’, introduced to her by a student, from one of Plato’s dialogues ‘Meno’: ‘How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?’ (2006, pp.4-5) Finding that thing is, according to Solnit, ‘a matter of getting lost’ (2006, p.6), with lost having two separate meanings: ‘Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing... either way there is a loss of control’ (2006, p.22). This strikes me as a useful insight in relation to the theme of this chapter: what might be discovered when we let ourselves be led astray from the path laid down before us.

The Scottish poet Thomas A Clark addresses parallel tactical questions around the loss of control and the ego’s programme in his series of prose poems *In Praise of Walking*:

What I take with me, what I leave behind, are of less importance than what I discover along the way.

To be completely lost is a good thing on a walk.

...

Wrong turnings, doubling back, pauses and digressions, all contribute to the dislocation of a persistent self-interest. (Clark, 2000, pp. 16-18)

Several other contemporary poets have explored this theme of getting lost and letting go of the self's egotistical concerns as a way to discovery, with (as mentioned in the last chapter) some going so far as to positively advocate bewilderment as, in Emma Cocker's sense, a 'tactic for not knowing' (2016, p.73). To be bewildered is to find oneself in a trackless place according to an old meaning of the word. For Norman Fischer, 'to be bewildered is to sense the many paths that must be possible, and also to realize that there are no paths at all, that the whole world is open and wild' (2016, p.88). In an interview about the process of 'narrating' his 'bewilderment in the world', Peter Gizzi has spoken in very similar terms to Solnit about the unknown: 'I write to discover what I might know only in the act of making the poem itself' (Jubilat 14 - n.d.). Fanny Howe, as mentioned in the previous chapter, goes a little further than either Fischer or Gizzi, in her essay on 'Bewilderment' where she positively seeks this state out, regarding bewilderment 'as a way of entering the day as much as the work' (Howe, 2003, p. 5). As Fischer suggests in a piece about Howe's essay, bewilderment is 'not a problem to be avoided but instead a state to be sought, cultivated and cherished' (Fischer, 2016, p. 86).

Retracing my steps a little, I'd like to consider the history of wandering and wondering specifically in American literature. In terms of vowels at least, the distance between the two words is not great, and the New York poet Ann Lauterbach cannot be the only writer to have mused on possible connections between them; it was a personal one in her case triggered by hearing often, as a young child, the

hymn¹¹ that begins, ‘I wonder as I wander out under the sky / Why Jesus our Saviour was brought forth to die’ (2005 p.5). Lauterbach remembers a kind of ‘pleasurable fear in these lines’ which lead to the twinning of wonder and wander in her consciousness: ‘I do like to wander in language to the point of getting lost, to follow the lead of the sentence to see where it will take me: call it, if you like, a search for a quotidian sublime’ (2005, p. 5).

If there can be said to be a tradition of wandering and wondering in American literature—one that often involves an exploration, along the lines of Lauterbach’s, of a sense of the sublime in the everyday—Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman would be its founding fathers. Thoreau’s meandering essay ‘Walking’ was his manifesto or ‘word for nature, for absolute freedom and wildness’ (2000, p.627), and for *sauntering* as the means by which to arrive at them. He believed the word *sauntering* to be derived either from the idea of pilgrims in the Middle Ages going “‘à la Sainte Terre” to the Holy Land’, or ‘from “*sans terre*” without land or home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere’ (2000 p.627). Both possibilities resonate with some of the themes of this thesis although sadly neither derivation is, it appears, correct; Chambers Dictionary of Etymology suggests the origins are uncertain, but that *saunter* probably developed from the Middle English ‘*santren* to muse, brood’ or perhaps ‘*saunteryng* idle chattering, babbling’.

Whatever its origins, the concept of *sauntering* was central to Thoreau’s thought, and it extended also to his sense of vision: ‘I must let my senses wander as my thoughts,

¹¹ A folk Christmas carol from North Carolina

my eyes see without looking. ... What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye' (Tanner, 1965 pp.47-48). Commenting on this preference for a passive receptiveness in Thoreau, Tony Tanner in his study of naivety and wonder in American literature, writes: 'Sauntering is the ideal procedure because this allows nature to claim your attention in the order which she chooses, it is the way to escape from programmatic systematic intellectual inquiry' (1965, p.59). Many of the New York School poets, including Ron Padgett, would later come to share Thoreau's desire to escape from any hint of a programme or system. Their poetry often also looked to resist, escape from, or simply ignore critical enquiry.

Walt Whitman, whose influence as poet, teacher and advice giver generally flows strongly through Padgett's work, was another inveterate wanderer, although not exclusively amidst nature. Whitman was, in the words of Merlin Coverley, the pioneer of the 'romantic depiction of the vagrant' in American literature and, 'the man who preached the gospel of the open road' (2012, p.86):

Afoot and light hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

The road may be open with choices to be made but there is a sense in Whitman (the Whitman of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* at least), of driven-ness and one clear direction being made way for throughout the writing despite the self-confessed contradictions. A definite road or path is being followed; Whitman is not lost in any dark wood. There is also a sense in his poetry in which wondering can call a halt to wandering for Whitman and give rise to a marvelling stasis. In 'There Was a Child

Went Forth', for example, having gone forth and 'looked upon and received with wonder or pity or love or dread' his first object, the child's journey is at an end: 'that object he became, / And that object became part of him for the day' (1986, p. 138). The poem goes on to list the various first objects encountered and, although there is associative drift between those objects and as Tony Tanner notes a 'delighted ranging over the near and far of the seen world' in the lines (1965, p.69), the end of the poem locks the child, his objects and finally the reader into an eternal present contained within a kind of snow globe where the only sense of movement is imparted by the whirling mind of the reader:

These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes
and will always go forth every day,
And these become of him or her that peruses them now.
(1986, p. 139)

Tanner goes on to refer to Whitman's later short poem 'Beginning My Studies':

Beginning my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact of consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the sense, eyesight, love,
The first step I saw awed me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time and sing it in ecstatic songs.
(1965, p. 70, Tanner's emphasis)

For Tanner's arguments the importance here is how the poem displays

Whitman's 'naive eye', the ability, much prized by Emerson and Thoreau, to look at the world as though for the very first time, to experience the miraculousness of whatever is seen and, importantly, in his rhapsodic catalogues, to break new ground by formulating 'a style mimetic of this response to the world' (1965, p. 70). For my purposes, though, this poem, like 'There Was a Child Went Forth' before it, simply shows how Whitman's wandering tends to stop after that first step. There may be much loitering and ecstatic singing as in this poem and elsewhere, at the outset of 'Song of Myself', fruitful leaning and loafing, but there is no more wandering. Srikanth Reddy, in his study of digression in modern American poetry, argues that 'the drift of Whitman's poetry... inaugurates a digressive model for the literary invention of a modern American self' (2012, p. 98). Although the voices and personae in *Leaves of Grass* may drift (for example, in 'A Song for Occupations,' from printer to journalist to teacher to nurse, etc.) it seems that the song remains the same as does the unchanging subject: the celebration of Whitman's multitudinous self. Reddy mentions several definitions of the verb 'to drift' from the OED, including 'to gradually deviate from a position or course' (2012, p. 98). From its first step, Whitman's poetry knows where it is going and does not deviate from its ecstatic course.

I'd like now to consider (leaping over or drifting around a host of other wandering writers in the process) how Ron Padgett might fit into this history of the poetics of wandering and wondering. Here are some possible first steps:

Poem

I'm in the house. It's

nice out: warm sun

on cold snow.

First day of spring

or last of winter.

My legs run down

the stairs and out the

door, my top

half here typing

(2013, p.237)

It's a modest start, although a quietly ecstatic one, with (as mentioned briefly in Chapter 1) the poet literally beside himself as his body, in what is for Padgett characteristically cartoon-like fashion, splits in two, so that his mind can enjoy roaming about outside at the same time as remaining inside writing a poem. In effect, the poet escapes from the wish (or obligation) to write a poem while at the same time managing to write one that enacts both that wish and the escape from it. There is no full stop at the end of the poem which may gesture towards that escape or perhaps towards wandering as an open-ended activity; walks would usually have full stops at their end toward which they are travelling, while wanderings do not seek premature closure, but remain open to further possible explorations of the unknown. The exploration is at some pace, though; the legs *run* down the stairs and out the door. The concept of wandering usually carries connotations of leisureliness as well as the aimlessness and circuitousness already noted. If Frank O'Hara could practise 'meditations in emergency', however, perhaps it is possible to wander at some speed. 'Poem' is the work of a relatively young, impatient man after all (published in Padgett's *Tulsa Kid* when he was in his thirties)—almost a

boyish one, in fact. It feels reminiscent of a child stuck indoors with homework to be done while through the window the sun and the snow are calling to him to come out and play.

‘First Drift’ is another of Padgett’s poems that seems to comment on its own creation as it goes along (another cartoon-like feature—as in ‘Duck Amuck’ (Warner Bros., 2011), where Daffy Duck tries to negotiate with his animator who is tormenting him in various ways by changing Daffy’s environment every few seconds). Tracking the movements of this poem, the drift is from

1. an apparent prescription for how to write and live, i.e. pay attention (‘hard’ attention) to everything and experience ecstasy to
2. an embarrassed questioning of that prescription. We start to doubt things. ‘Do I mean that?’ The answer to that question slips unexpectedly into the past tense with ‘Unfortunately... I *did*’ and then
3. there’s a little swerve in the almost ungrammatical ‘did, dipped to scoop/ an idea from the roadside’ followed by
4. what could have been part of a Marx Brothers routine about a Mental hospital then
5. there’s a return to the apparent impossibility in ‘Poem’ of the protagonist staying out and staying home at the same time. There’s also a return to the prescription at the start of the poem to pay attention to everything.
6. What flows from that act of attention is not an O’Hara-esque series of ‘I do this. I do that’ observations but one surreal sentence that attends instead to various imaginative transformations (playing around the theme of surface and depth, what

is shown and what hidden) which tumble all the way through to the ecstatic and very un-quotidian sublimity of Glenda the chimpanzee performing her quadruple somersault ‘from shining bar to shining bar.’

So the wandering or drifting becomes, towards the end, a somersaulting poem. To the question *why* Padgett has performed these various manoeuvres one could perhaps simply respond: ‘why don’t you ask Glenda?’ Why perform somersaults? For the delight it brings and then the applause and then presumably the bananas. But there may also be some deviousness behind or alongside Padgett’s deviations. He appears still to have his cake as well as having eaten it. The ironic sidesteps away from the original statements about the ‘writing of poems/ and the living of life’ which he half wants to disown, and then, in particular, the distraction of the unexpected change of tense and odd syntactical compression in the ‘did, dipped to scoop’ line act on us a little like the magician’s hands which lead our attention away from the place where the ‘real’ work of the trick is going on. Or perhaps like the ‘confusion technique’ used in Eriksonian hypnosis where a trance is induced by the hypnotist giving apparently confused or contradictory suggestions which require rapid shifts in orientation in their client to try and accommodate themselves to the hypnotist, thus lowering the client’s resistance to subsequent suggestions. After this sleight of hand Padgett is able to return to his theme of ecstatic attentiveness free from the initial judgement that was hampering it, and the rest of the poem careers out of control for a while until it slows down on entering the circus and encountering the final vision of Glenda. Padgett would doubtless resist this reading of the poem if it implied he had had all of this in mind at its start. The poem is discovered in the process of its being written and its wandering nature is a key part of that.

I mentioned O'Hara briefly above and I'd like to take a slightly longer look at some of his digressive, wandering poetry now to compare it with Padgett's 'First Drift'. 'A Step Away from Them' (1995, pp. 257-258) is one O'Hara's classic strolling *Lunch Poems*. Although the poem drifts—is in fact all 'about' drift—it demonstrates very clearly what Marjorie Perloff has described as O'Hara's 'aesthetic of attention' (1998, pp. 1-30). The poem is a record of O'Hara's perceptions, desires and stray thoughts as they pass by. Perloff argues that the 'duty to be attentive' mentioned in O'Hara's 'Meditations in Emergency' (1995, pp. 197-198) arises because the poet wants, following the lead of Victor Shklovsky, to 'defamiliarize' that which is ordinary and habitually ignored. Solnit's perception that when we lose things the familiar falls away and that when we get lost the unfamiliar appears, comes back to mind (2006, p.22). The second stanza of 'A Step Away from Them' has no 'I' in it and just one 'my'. There is a sense of the self getting lost and 'the unfamiliar appearing' as a waterfall pours lightly overhead and we zoom in to the detail of the black man and his tooth pick and the click of the chorus girl (her shoes presumably) until the poem pulls us back out again with sound and light: 'everything / suddenly honks: it is 12.40 of / a Thursday. // Neon in daylight' (1995, p. 258). One way of de-automatising perceptions is, as Perloff writes, 'to create a poetic structure that is always changing, shifting, becoming' (1998, p. 20) O'Hara is famously quick in his movements from one thing to another, with the use of enjambment heightening the sense of flow.

Perloff notes, in 'Meditations in Emergency', O'Hara's quasi-Rilkean statement 'I am needed by things' (1995, p. 197); all the sights and sounds of O'Hara's lunch, his thoughts about Edwin Denby and neon in daylight, his fleeting sadness about the deaths of friends and artists, a glass of papaya juice and Pierre Reverdy's poems, all *need* O'Hara. Padgett's 'First Drift' shares some of O'Hara's quickness and immediacy along

with the basic scenario of walking down the street, looking ‘intently at everything’, but the *things* that need Padgett’s attention are radically different; from the moment that ‘the people in the street / laugh and turn into sheet music’ everything in the poem is the stuff of imagination, or perhaps the stuff of whimsy or *fancy*, to use Coleridge’s secondary and slightly denigrated category. That’s where Padgett’s loyalty seems to lie. He’s faithful to the slightest twist and turn of his daydreaming imagination. Padgett’s world is much more of the inner world of the mind than O’Hara’s and it’s often a world subject to mercurial cartoon-like transformations.

Padgett suggested in a 1975 talk entitled ‘Stoically Bedazzled’ at the Naropa Institute that ‘there are two kinds of poetry’ (1978, p. 111). After first pausing to make fun of such an idea, he then goes on to describe them. Firstly, there is the preconceived kind where the writer has a ‘message he wants to convey. He takes this message and makes a poem which will embody it’ (1978, p. 112). Then there is the second type, ‘where you get in the car ..., and you just start driving down the street and you don’t have any idea where you are going to go’ (1978, p. 112).

The idea has remained with him as we can see if we return to Padgett’s poem ‘Method’ (mentioned in the first chapter) to look more closely at how it casually describes again, and then demonstrates, what amounts to his poetics of wandering:

my method I guess I’d call it is to
start and go
wherever the poem seems to lead
Sometimes it doesn’t lead anywhere

other than to a dead end, and when I turn around
the street has disappeared and I find myself
sitting in a room.

He is perhaps following in Whitman's first footsteps by taking to the open road, but there's no certainty as to where the second step might take Padgett or whether the road will still be there before him. The poem continues over five pages, drifting at the start of each of its twelve stanzas into a new part of a loosely surreal monologue. Sometimes the links between the stanzas are simply associational, such as between the third which ends with the poet unable (because he is not privileged with advance knowledge of what's to come next in the poem?) to read a sign '... there's not enough light to read it. / I wish there were' (2013, p. 591). Similarly, the start of the fourth jumps to one of Kenneth Koch's ideas for generating list poems: 'Kenneth said Write a poem in which each line begins with / "I wish. ..."' (2013, p. 591). Sometimes the move between stanzas continues to flow grammatically but the sense is a little more abruptly disturbed, as in between the fourth and fifth:

I am like a doorway
that leads from one thing

to Cincinnati, and who am I
to argue with a simile

(2013, p. 591)

The humour of the personified simile and the birthplace of Kenneth Koch maintain the link here. Elsewhere, as in between the seventh and eighth stanza, the topic of discussion

is simply dropped altogether and another strand picked up: ‘That is all you need to know about Wang Whom // Now for some commentary on things that are always horizontal’ (2013, p. 592).

The final stanzas of ‘Method’ bring us to what this poem might be said to be ‘about’, beyond the pleasurable and humorous surprises throughout. The penultimate stanza returns us to the initial theme of Padgett’s approach to writing and following the poem’s lead:

You are next in line, which is exciting,
which is why life is exciting: every moment is another line
you’re next in. (2013, p. 593)

The excitement of being next in line should be the sense of expectation about a pleasure, maybe one that’s been long awaited, being fulfilled. Padgett’s writing ‘method’ is largely about the pleasure, for both writer and reader, of not knowing what’s next, but Padgett goes on to bring in a note of uncertainty: ‘Or maybe not, for what about when / you don’t know what “line” is and “next”?’ There’s a hint here of the ‘complete loss of reference and reconcilability’ that Fanny Howe describes, and seeks out, in her poetics of bewilderment. There then follows some slapstick involving goats and banjos and a ‘you’ who ‘started out a man / and ended up a pile of leaves in a different story’, but the real reason for this dropping away of the certainty of reference is that the idea of being ‘next in line’ has just followed a section of the poem that carries a distinct emotional undertow. The musing on things horizontal has led to the following:

Lines indicating very fast movement are horizontal

because the horizon is so fast it is just an idea:

Now you see it now you are it

and then 99 percent of every beautiful thing you ever knew

escaped and went back out into the world

where you vaguely remembered it: your mother's smile

in the glint of sunlight on the chrome of a passing car,

her tears in a gust of wind, her apron in the evening air

as if she were a milkmaid standing in Holland

while those silver and gray clouds billowing across the sky

over to scarlet and burning violet tinged with gold

were just for her and that one moment.

(2013 p.593)

How to Be Perfect (the book in which 'Method' appears) contains some short and relatively 'straight' elegies for Kenneth Koch and for Padgett's mother, and this is, I think, another for both of them, albeit one delivered obliquely through the poem's meandering method. The line which becomes the fast approaching horizon has overtaken both so that 'now you are it' and 'you are next in line' seem not simply exciting but daunting and deeply sad, in that nearly 'every beautiful thing you ever knew' (including 'your mother's smile') has been lost over the horizon and can now only vaguely be remembered. The memory, presumably from a child's viewpoint, of the mother's apron shifts slightly and takes along with it Padgett's grief into a Dutch landscape which seems to offer a kind of consolation as well as a precious gift for his mother (in Dutch milkmaid form). The bereaved often speak of grief sneaking up on them unawares or knocking them sideways and Padgett's 'method' in this poem allows the reader a glimpse of what

this might feel like, whilst keeping a playfully light touch that doesn't tug too heavily at their heartstrings. The poem continues for another page, firstly toying with an idea that seems to be a variation on Whitman's seeing nothing but miracles all around him and then a final jokey set piece about gluing presidents and stoves together which reintroduces items mentioned earlier in the poem. The jokiness goes on perhaps just a little too long, rather like a bereaved person trying to reassure their listener that they're fine, really.

Death has been a constant presence in Padgett's poetry throughout his career, but increasingly so (to state the obvious) as he has grown older and more family and friends have died. The prevalence of the topic, and its unusual treatment, is not so unremarkable though, when one considers that Padgett has arguably been too easily dismissed as *just* a comic poet. Geoff Ward, for example, in his book *Statutes of Liberty*, describes Padgett's work as 'hugely enjoyable' but that it 'sidesteps confrontation with the larger themes of experience' (Ward, 2001, p.103). In fact, one could argue Padgett's sidestepping away from, but then back towards, death allows for the subject to be freshly perceived.

Shklovsky argues that the 'thing that we call an image ... was originally not an image *but a sideways step made in order not to step on what had been done before*' (Berlina, 2017, p. 235, My emphases). The sidestep seeks only to avoid already well trodden territory and platitudes. Other 'larger themes of experience' are also tackled in this way: 'The Absolutely Huge and Incredible Injustice in the World' is a remarkable long wandering poem that tackles along the way human atrocities and the need for compassion. Where death does crop up in Padgett's work though, deliberate mind wandering and distraction does undeniably often follow albeit in a refreshing way. The first line of his poem entitled 'Death', for instance is 'Let's change the subject' (2013, p. 623) And the subject is duly changed; the rest of the poem is an apparently straight comic entertainment; a caper in the forest with two boys, a big black bear and 'barber Tom' who comes to the rescue by

giving all three a haircut. Elsewhere though there is more of a struggle. Towards the end of his long, meandering poem 'Sides', the mention of death kicks off a hectic chain of veering reactions:

... Death, which

I can't reconcile myself to. Ouf,

Comme diraient les français, no wait, don't hide

behind another language! *Your own is camouflage enough.*

Stick with Death, deep thinker. I slammed

two doughnuts on the highway up in Dunkirk, N.Y.

suddenly remembering my personal extinction,

which didn't help the doughnuts. They got

all lopsided. It's such an incredible thing,

I should just throw this typewriter out the fucking window,

keys bent *sideways*, man with eyes bent sideways, walk out the door

sideways, price tags on sideways, piano music of Lizst sideways,

nepotism sideways, the beard of Bluebeard sideways, trisected angle

sideways, sinus headache sideways, Happy New Year sideways,

mademoiselle sideways, a marathon sideways, Seidenbach's sideways, a

crying child sideways, a laughing child the other way sideways, an idea

being on its side!

Side on its side! Ides of March on your hide! I'd hide in Hyde Park with

Mr. Hyde on the Ides by your side, inside your duck-billed

blabbermouth spatter-bladder! And nanny-goat eat this can!

O Poetry, who leads us away and brings us back,

tell Grandmother her tomato plants are doing fine ...

(2103, p. 149, my emphases)

Padgett's meandering poetry often 'leads us away' from but then 'brings us back' to the subject of death. Sometimes, as in his poem 'Who and Each' the drift is suddenly and unexpectedly towards the subject of death rather than away from it in evasion. The poem wanders idly from dream to dictionary where a lengthy bout of 'teutonic belching' runs its course before the poem ends somewhat bleakly with the line: 'Thus I spend my days, waiting for my friends to die' (2013, p. 369). The poem provides a kind of sour awakening after the whimsical reverie. Elsewhere the drift towards apparent non-existence seems to lead to a Buddhist or Taoist quasi-enlightenment experience of emptiness. In 'Cufflinks' (referenced in the first chapter) like 'Method' there is a strangely morphing monologue that flows through the poem but there's also a stronger cartoon-like narrative. Like 'First Drift', this is a light, playful poem which, through his sideways approach, allows Padgett to glance at some 'larger themes of experience'. The recent fashion for mindfulness tends not to make clear the reason for its practice within Buddhism where it originated. It is essentially a way of developing insight into one of the three 'key characteristics of existence': impermanence (*anicca* in Pali), namely the impermanence of our suffering, happiness, sensations and thoughts. Ultimately the impermanence of the self also referred to as the not-self (*anatta* in Pali). This seems to be what Padgett is touching on here in 'Cufflinks': the absence of anything of substance or permanence that could be regarded as the place of origin of the protagonist's thoughts. The poem veers away from this prospect, but it returns at the climax of the poem where 'nothing is left but / a bright idea in a bright emptiness, / a photo finish (2013, p.300). This time the unravelling of thought, or the unravelling of the place of origin of thinking

is not something to run away from. There's a sense of blissful dissolution into that bright emptiness after what has been a very hectic and full poem.

Impermanence is considered again in another much shorter poem:

Ladies and Gentlemen in Outer Space

Here is my philosophy:

Everything changes (the word "everything"
has just changed as the
word "change" has: it now
means "no change") so
quickly that it literally surpasses my belief,
charges right past it
like some of the giant
ideas in this area.

I had no beginning and I shall have
no end: the beam of light
stretches out before and behind
and I cook the vegetables
for a few minutes only,
the fewer the better. Butter
and serve. Here is my
philosophy: butter and serve.

By 'considered' I mean stated, veered away from, fooled around with, elaborated upon and then left high and dry. First, as in 'First Drift', there is the bald statement: 'everything

changes'. Impermanence governs everything. Even the statement that everything changes must be subject to change and is made to do so within an awkwardly bracketed qualification, followed up by an undercutting jokey reference to 'giant ideas'. Then there is a sudden glimpse of a possible infinity not unlike the bright emptiness at the end of 'Cufflinks'. It's more than a possibility, in fact; there's an apparently confident statement of the Buddhist realisation that the 'I' or 'self' has neither beginning nor end. And then there is a final swerve to an image very much of finitude: the optimum time in which to cook vegetables and exit a poem with aplomb and a knob of butter.

A consideration of this poem alongside John Ashbery's 'My Philosophy of Life' allows for a comparison of their respective poetics of wandering. Ashbery's work has, undoubtedly, been the most consistent site of thorough-going mind-wandering in poetry over the past sixty odd years. Matthew Bevis, in his recent essay 'In Search of Distraction', describes Ashbery as the 'most distracted poet' (Bevis, 2017) he can think of. Ben Hickman has also written about what he describes, consciously diverging from Perloff's thoughts on O'Hara, as Ashbery's 'aesthetic of inattention'. (2012, p. 8) Inattention permeates Ashbery's views on reading and writing. He has commented on how he expects his own poetry to be received in the following terms: 'it will be doing its job if its audience is intermittently aware of it while thinking about other things at the same time' (2012, p.20). He has even gone so far as to wonder whether his poetry might be better understood in readings where the listener

can't go back and try to make sense of this line or that, as he could if he were reading a book: if something sounds odd he must simply accept it and continue to listen ... if he finds himself suddenly jolting back to attention after a minute or two of wondering whether he remembered to lock his apartment, or whether a

crack in the ceiling looks more like a fried egg or France ... he must accept that he has missed a bit of the poem, there is no retrieving it, and just enjoy what is left without worrying too much about how it all fits together. (2012, p.11)

Ashbery, as a 'believer in fortuitous accidents' (1988, p. 200), built the possibility of chance interventions and interruptions into his methods of composition, along similar lines to those of the composer John Cage, albeit chance tempered by choice more often in Ashbery's case. In interview with Mark Hillringhouse he describes listening to a classical music radio station while he writes:

The music works very well as an ambience and occasionally when there are announcements or commercials they get sucked into the poem, as do all kinds of things in my immediate environment: papers that happen to be on my desk at the time, or letters, stray books, magazines. (Hillringhouse, 1990, n.p.)

Writing about Ashbery's poem 'The Picture of Little J.A. in a Prospect of Flowers', Ben Hickman draws a comparison with O'Hara's approach:

Where O'Hara's poetry accumulates what his attention discovers, Ashbery's ruminating memorial of his youth is an expression of the temporal pressures, distractions and displacements inherent in reading. The result is that there is nothing to be called *attention* here at all. One can hardly be said to 'notice' the contingent workings of the mind ... If one does so at all, one attends to inattention itself. (2012, p. 18)

‘My Philosophy of Life’ is perhaps untypically towards the coherent end of the spectrum that runs from unfocused distraction to focused singlemindedness when seen in the context of most of Ashbery’s later work; it’s from his 1996 collection *Can You Hear, Bird*. The following excerpts from *Where Shall I Wander* (2005) by comparison veer all over the place with even short sentences quite often ending up in places it would be hard to have foreseen from their beginnings:

... Then to stand up and stretch, the day draining. Scratch any itch, the somber legato underneath will surge prominently, lean on the right lever. Absence relieves itself, got to be getting on with those notes. Let’s see... Whenever a tisket is available, substitute an item from column B, then return to the starting goal. The challenger barely had time to mouth our initials, the glaze was off the cake, whoa, before there were few but now they are all of a piece, snoring to drown the freesia’s reticence. (2005, p. 77)

‘My Philosophy’ by contrast is a gentler meander which one could *almost* say is delivering what the title promises in that Ashbery’s late phase poetic philosophy is well summed up by its conclusion that ‘there’s a lot of fun to be had in the gaps between ideas’ (1996, p. 75). And there is a lot of fun to be had in this poem, for example, with the faux naif voice of its protagonist expounding on his ‘great idea’ or ‘philosophy of life’ that involves ‘living the way philosophers live’ (1996, p. 73); the weirdly twisting sentence that takes us through a secret door and down a winding staircase, and the tantalising memory of something William James wrote ‘in some book you never read’ (1996, p. 73) at all— not even inattentively it seems.

Ashbery and Padgett clearly inhabit the same digressive poetic universe in ‘My Philosophy of Life’ and ‘Ladies and Gentlemen in Outer Space’ as they make fun of their ‘great’ or ‘giant’ ideas. One might almost say that ‘My Philosophy of Life’ is one of Ashbery’s most Padgett-like poems. It was published 20 years after Padgett’s. Going back to Hickman’s comments on the differences between Ashbery and O’Hara one could say that Padgett shares aspects of both of the older poets’ methods. He has written plenty of poems that include, like O’Hara’s, ‘accumulations of what his attention discovers’ (Hickman, 2012, p. 18), such as ‘The Sweeper’ (2013, p. 433) and ‘Love Poem-We have plenty of matches in this house’ (2013, p. 312). And, like Ashbery, he attends to his inattention. But what makes Padgett’s style in poetic wandering distinct is that he often takes an attentive step further.

One could draw an analogy between the styles of attention preferred by these three poets and three slightly different forms of Buddhist meditation. O’Hara would be aligned with ‘mindfulness meditation’, paying attention to what primarily the senses discover, say by focusing on the breath or by scanning the body. When the mind strays from the object of meditation one is encouraged, gently to bring it back. Ashbery’s greater degree of openness to contingency and interruption would be represented by a form of meditation known as ‘choiceless awareness’ in the Theravadan strain of Buddhism or ‘Just Sitting’ in Zen. In both, the meditator is encouraged to be receptive to everything that their mind / body becomes aware of. If distracting thoughts come, as they inevitably will, they are to be acknowledged—simply reflected, as it were, on the lake’s surface of awareness—but not built upon. Padgett’s preferred style of attentiveness I would align with a form of meditation pioneered more recently by the American Buddhist and psychologist Jason Siff who calls it Recollective Awareness Meditation (RAM). This is an even more open form of meditation with minimal instructions. One is merely encouraged to sit and

experience whatever one experiences (thoughts, daydreams, plans, physical sensations, etc.) during the period of meditation without judgement and without, on discovering that one is say, fantasising about lunch, bringing oneself back to any other focus of attention. It's acceptable to develop whatever daydreams might arise if that seems to be what you/your mind wants to do at the time. 'Thoughts are not the enemy,' (2014) as the title of Siff's second book points out. It's also acceptable to drift off to sleep if that's where you're being led. Siff is interested in that experience of drifting off and waking back up again, and there are analogies between this particular aspect of RAM and Padgett's reference (in 'Sides') to Poetry 'leading us away and bringing us back' (2013, p. 149). After the period of RAM ends one is simply encouraged to journal the experience and write down ('recollect') anything one can remember arising during that time. The analogy I am drawing here is between Padgett's 'method' of going 'wherever the poem seems to lead' and, in this open form of meditation, following wherever one's *mind* seems to lead. When distractions, associative leaps or whimsical thoughts occur in the writing process they are not just recorded and moved away from (which I'm saying would be an Ashbery response to the flow of experience) but explored a little further, played with and later on perhaps returned to.

Leaving this analogy to meditation to one side, one can see the distinction I am making between Padgett and Ashbery's wandering styles by considering their different approaches to inattentive reading. Ashbery's has already been described: when attention strays during reading he hopes that we might 'just enjoy what is left without worrying too much about how it all fits together' (2012, p.11). One aspect of Padgett's creative reading method when encountering the 'eye/mind split' (loss of attention essentially—the eyes continue to move but the mind is elsewhere) was mentioned at the start of this chapter, but Padgett goes on to describe in some detail how he would suggest we might make

creative use of mind-wandering:

The trick is to keep your eyes moving along the book's words at the same time as your mind has gone off on its "trip," and then to return from the trip and make a fairly smooth landing on the words again. This is a bit harder than simply going off on a fantasy, because it involves your creating a segue (or "bridge") between your fantasy and the words as you reenter the text. (1997, p.73)

Most of Padgett's Creative Reading practices are, as we have seen, equally applicable to Creative Writing and this feels like an accurate description of one aspect at least of what he does when writing his longer wandering poems like 'Method'.

I need to meander towards a conclusion, and while all rivers tend to meander towards the same giant idea of the sea, I'm reminded of some advice from Kenneth Koch towards the end of his poem 'The Art of Poetry':

At the end of a poem

One may be tempted to grow too universal, philosophical, and vague

Or to bring in History, or the Sea, but one should not do that

If one can possibly help it, since it makes

Each thing one writes sound like everything else,

And poetry and life are not like that. [Now I have said enough.]

(2015, p.264)

So instead of some giant ideas about Padgett's poetics of wondering and wandering here are some smaller ones. Wandering within the poem and the mind for Padgett is another way of

opening up to otherness, to that ‘something unexpected’ he advises his young writer towards. And it addresses that basic tactical question posed by Rebecca Solnit: ‘How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?’ Part of the answer to Solnit’s question, for Padgett, seems to be ‘sideways’; I’m tempted to talk of the poetics of the sidestep or swerve rather than of wandering. Moving sideways away from the obvious, into the unexpected and then back to the now not so obvious, is at the heart of both Padgett’s approach to the ‘larger themes of experience’ and to his sense of humour; to what, in other words (O’Hara’s), ‘still makes a poem a surprise’ (1995, p. 15). Sidestepping, meandering, dawdling are also all at the heart of the sense of play in Padgett’s writing. Like digression for Laurence Sterne, play is for Padgett, the ‘sunshine, the life, the soul of reading’ (1997 p. 58) and writing. ‘Keep your childish side alive’ was, as we have seen, one of the pieces of half-serious half-comic advice offered in Padgett’s list poem ‘How to Be Perfect’—this piece intended more than half-seriously. Another suggestion from that poem, inserted in between ‘Stay out of jail’ and ‘Use Colgate toothpaste in the new Tartar Control formula’, is ‘In later life, become a mystic’ (2013, p. 537) That may well have been intended less than half seriously but I think there are signs of Padgett having made a start on the process.

This thesis has explored some of the ways in which I think it’s possible to read Padgett’s poetry through a Buddhist or Taoist lens. His new book *Big Cabin*, published in the summer of 2019, provides further food for thought in that direction. *Big Cabin* was written programmatically to the limited extent that all the poems in it were written over three autumns in a cabin by a pond, in the woods in Vermont, a few hundred yards away from the house he built and in which he lives during the summer months of each year. The method of composition was that set out in his poem ‘Method’ so one could see this period of self-imposed, semi-isolation as a form of daydreaming or mind-wandering

retreat. Parallels inevitably will also be drawn to Thoreau's experimental retreat, in another part of New England, to his cabin on Walden pond. Thoreau famously 'went to the woods' because he 'wished to live deliberately' (2000, p. 86). Padgett went to his woods with the determination to live dreamily. A short poem in this collection entitled 'The Wanderer' seems to revisit 'Poem - I'm in the house'.

The Wanderer

I forgot to bring my watch. Bright
gray morning sky, no hint
of the sun.

I left the house around 9
and I've been here for . . .
an hour? Less,
I think.

I have
a pond, a forest, a gray sky,
and a mind that wanders
from moment to moment.

(2019, p. 48)

This time the poem is by a man in his seventies rather than his thirties and so the mind no longer runs on legs out of the house to greet the world but wanders around distractedly, wondering less about wonder than about when it was exactly that he left the house, what he's forgotten, how long he's been at his writing post in the cabin and whether he has the ingredients for a poem yet. There are no long wandering poems in this book but there is instead a sense of the book as a whole being one long poem comprised of drifting short

poems and in the middle of the book a prose piece; a meandering essay entitled 'Completion' because that was the title of the Japanese notebook it was written in. The initial subject of the prose piece is 'aloneness', a word chosen perhaps in preference to Thoreau's 'solitude' to keep his shadow just slightly at a distance. It considers the consequences of Padgett's being an only child but then moves on to other 'giant ideas': the self, identity, consciousness, death 'and after that...' (2019, p. 36). Padgett deals with these subjects, with his customary self-deprecation and humour, 'poetry leading us away and bringing us back', but in his final paragraph he describes what feels like a genuine epiphany:

I should be open to the idea that it is not a tragedy that writing in this notebook has brought me no closer to discovering what it was I might have been looking for, particularly since there is no way of knowing what it might have been. I came here not to find a pond, but in an odd way I *did* find one, one that I am happier than ever to be with. I found the new-sawn pine smell of the cabin walls. I found quiet. And I found a kind of release, however temporary, from the urge to understand. Perhaps now I can dust these windowsills without feeling that it's an evasion from doing something more meaningful. Perhaps I can now let the raindrops, which have started to fall into the pond, just be raindrops. (2019, p. 44)

The end of all Padgett's exploring, it seems, will be to arrive where he started and not 'know the place for the first time' but to not know the place for the first time *again*; in fact to find release from the need to know and understand at all. Release also, perhaps, from any need to find Solnit's 'thing the nature of which is totally unknown' to him but simply to remain within the experience of not-knowing.

The Zen *kōan* which was quoted at the start of Chapter 1 has been translated slightly differently as follows:

Dizang asked Fayen, “Where are you going?”

Fayen said, “I am *wandering aimlessly*.”

“What do you think of wandering?”

“I don’t know.”

“Not knowing is most intimate.”

Fayen was suddenly awakened.

(Blacker, 2018)

Thoreau’s preferred derivation of the word ‘saunter’ was from the idea of going on pilgrimage towards the holy land but in Zen to go on pilgrimage is, it seems, to not know where one is going or why.

CHAPTER 4

How not to reflect on the self/not-self

‘Gaston Bachelard says the single most succinct and astonishing thing: We begin in admiration and we end by organizing our disappointment’

Mary Ruefle (Ruefle, 2012, p.6)

‘When a literary work is presented, the name of the author of the work is always included, what about that?’

Norman Fischer (Fischer, 2016, p.17)

‘Gertrude Stein says poetry is calling the name of something. That's what we do all the time, actually - call ourselves. There's the story of the Zen master who every day would call his own name. He'd say, "Zuigan!" And he'd say, "Yes!" "Zuigan! Don't be misled by other people!" Of course the other people were Zuigan too.’

Philip Whalen (Whalen, 2007, p.842)

‘You are, of course, never yourself’

Gertrude Stein (Stein, 1985)

One could tie oneself in knots around the concept of the not-self. And one could persist in referring to oneself as *one* in some desperate attempt to avoid the use of the pronoun *I*. But to grasp too tightly, in this way, to the Buddhist concepts of the not-self and emptiness would be to fall into the mistake of reifying nothingness; trying to turn these ideas into things in themselves. Emptiness and the impermanence of self are not ideas to be believed in, or truths to be upheld, but are, instead, to be seen as either an experience

to be dwelled within or a practice to follow. The practice is one of refraining from habitually identifying things as being part of one's self or belonging to it. It's a practice which, in Mark Epstein's words, is a 'refusal to be caught in self-certainty' (Epstein 1995, p.12), but one which may be insisted upon lightly and playfully. The same author sees analogies between the experience of dwelling in emptiness and entering the intermediate zone that the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott argued opens up between mother and child when 'trust in the mother allows the baby to experience the potential space, and experiencing it permits play' (Epstein, 2004, p.34). The child who is secure about her 'good enough' mother and who can therefore 'be lost in play with the knowledge that her parent is present but not interfering is a child who permits her ego to dissolve at the moment of good contact' (1995, p.79). Epstein suggests that in the practice of both meditation and art the self can undergo a similar transformation: 'This jarring loose, or breaking free—this going to pieces without falling apart—is what Buddhism acknowledges as one of the self's secret needs—to be released from the grip of the known' (2010, p.44). This self-reflexive chapter will document some of the ways in which I, Jeremy Over the undersigned author of *The Pencil Method* have prepared to let myself go to pieces in the process of writing the poems, and will consider how these ways of writing may assist the process of going to pieces and being released into the unknown. An alternative metaphor to Epstein's 'going to pieces' or 'dissolution' comes in the shape of the Zen Master Dogen's classic description of Zen practice: 'To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one's self and others' (Yokoi, 1976, p. 39). This chapter will also examine ways in which it is possible to forget both the self and the fact that one is writing poetry.

The previous three chapters have considered some of the ways in which Ron Padgett can be seen, over the past 50 years of writing poetry, to have developed and used ‘tactics for not knowing’ which are similar to those outlined by Emma Cocker in her essay by that name (2013, pp. 126-135). His poetry embodies, I have argued, both a poetics and a pedagogy of wonder in which ‘how not to know’ plays a central role: firstly how to be open and intimately receptive to the experience of not knowing, secondly how, ‘in a move towards the incomprehensible wild’ (in Cocker’s words) to actively make ‘openings, for rupturing the terms of what is already known’ (2013. p. 130) and finally how, through an unanchored wandering attentiveness, to develop the ‘errant practice of straying from oneself’ (2013, p.129).

‘The Pencil Method’

This research began back in 2015 with early drafts of two long poems (or series of poems): ‘The Pencil Method’ and ‘The Orderly World’. Around the same time I wrote an early version of what was to become the first chapter of the critical element of the thesis on not knowing in Padgett’s work. The critical and creative have continued alongside one another throughout the past four years somewhere on the spectrum of practice that has been identified by JT Welsch as spanning ‘between forms we might define as practice-based research and research-informed practice’ (2015) At various times the creative practice has *led* the research and at others the research has led or informed the practice. At still others both creative and critical have simply carried on in parallel with neither leading the other, but both aware of each other out of the corner of their eyes, as it were. Rather than attempt to pin-point whereabouts on the spectrum a piece of work is situated Welsch suggests an attempt is made to ‘re-envisage Creative Writing as a self- reflexive, continuous movement along the spectrum, sliding between reading and writing strategies, collaboration and individual work, process and product, and consumption and production

throughout every project' (2015). The degree to which the creative and critical were meshed together—in a quasi-Buddhist state of interdependence—can be illustrated by looking at the development of 'The Pencil Method'. This poem, and several others in the collection, can also be read in the light of all three of the approaches to 'not knowing' that I have examined in the work of Ron Padgett.

The origins of 'The Pencil Method' lay in my reading an essay by Roger Cardinal on the artist Geneviève Seillé (2000). Seillé occupies a place somewhat on the margins of the art world rather than matching the classical image of an 'outsider' artist. Her work consists of obsessive writing, drawing and mark making which is then brought together intuitively into assemblages, often in book form. Inspiration for Seillé, writes Cardinal, comes from reading or, more accurately, 'simply gazing wide-eyed at a body of letters: she cultivates bemusement, as it were' (2000). Cardinal notes that Seillé has shifted back and forth between France and England over her life and not quite feeling at home in either culture may be at the root of the *dépaysement*—a state favoured by the surrealists 'wavering between bewilderment and ecstasy' (2000)—which has fuelled her creativity. Cocker writes that being 'open to the experience of not knowing might involve doing and being less, becoming creatively passive—a touch purposeless or empty at times—so as to remain receptive to possibilities that cannot yet be comprehended or controlled' (2013, p. 128). This passivity and the sense of being emptied of self seems to be key to Seillé's working methods which most closely resemble a form of trance in which she is one step removed from normality. Seillé describes the state to Cardinal as follows: 'It's a bit as if one is reciting a mantra... Consciousness drifts away. It is still me writing out all these letters. My body is there, and yet my mind is elsewhere, it's a very curious effect' (2000). Perhaps given a cue by the appearance of 'curious' here Cardinal compares Seillé's 'step away from words and sentences' in order to 'cultivate an unfocused gaze' to the

experiences of Alice Through the Looking Glass, upon entering that classic zone of not-knowing: the wood ‘where things have no names’ (2000).

I was attracted to the content of Cardinal’s essay and also to the appearance, by chance, that it took on when I printed it out, which was of a long thin strip of centre justified text with between two and four words per line. This form lent itself naturally to a variation on the ‘fold in method’ described by Padgett in his chapter on ‘Creative Reading Techniques’ (1997, pp.83-86) so I read through the essay several times from one thin column of text to another gathering juxtapositions that were of interest. Padgett compares the combination of half pages in ‘fold-in’ reading to the bringing together of ‘two unknown chemicals. Sometimes nothing happens. Sometimes they give off heat and gas and form a compound’ (1997, p.83). What I was looking for I believe were possible triggers for the *dépaysement* effect which Seillé favoured. The reading and writing down of this material was carried out in a fairly passive state not unlike both Cardinal’s description of Seillé’s trance-like process and Cocker’s recommendation that if one is to be open to the experience of not knowing one must be ‘a touch purposeless or empty’ (2013, p.128). The similarities subsequently increased when I repeatedly wrote variations on certain short phrases in a form of empty-headed doodling in which the sounds of the words quickly started to predominate over sense as a result of ‘semantic saturation’. In several of the early drafts of the poem the variations on Cardinal’s short phrase ‘gawp at in’, were intended as a kind of trance induction to lead the reader into the poem, but I subsequently chose what I hope is a more reader-friendly introduction to the poem via some slower moving and more gradually nonsensical variations on a sentence from Chesterton.

His whimsical essay ‘On Lying in Bed’ (1999) was the first of several other texts about, or loosely associated with, doodling that I drew upon as the assemblage that became

‘The Pencil Method’ grew. These included statements by, or about, Robert Walser and his ‘Pencil Method’ which freed him from writer’s block through writing almost illegible ‘micro- scripts’ in pencil; by the New Zealand writer, artist, sculptor and abstract filmmaker Len Lye for whom doodling was a way of trying to capture the sense of motion which was his work’s main theme; and from the film *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) which apparently brought the word doodle into common usage.

The initial attraction to writing about, and by means of, a kind of verbal doodling lay for me in the fact that, as David MacLagan points out, doodling can act ‘as an alibi (‘It’s just a doodle’) that frees its creator from having to worry about their ‘art’ status’ (2014). MacLagan also refers to the way in which doodles ‘often seem to unfold autonomously, independent of their creator’s will’ (201). I don’t think I am unusual, when sitting down to write, in wanting to be free from the idea that I am sitting down to write. An apparent wish to avoid artistic responsibility, and the self-conscious attention that might go with that, is something Susan Bernofsky suggests might have been behind Robert Walser’s decision to move away from an early elaborately ornamental form of handwriting, which he began to experience as burdensome and cramping both physically and psychologically, to what became his ‘pencil method’, through which he filled up page after page ‘with writing so small it defied legibility’ (2010, p.13). Writing in a way ‘that couldn’t even be read removed a degree of pressure from the writer, relieving him of the burden of being always, as he wrote, in the spotlight of his own critical judgement’ (2010, 15). If the self is not entirely being forgotten in Dogen’s sense, it is becoming less visible (to itself) and less obstructive of creativity. Doodling, with an associated interest in what it might reveal about the workings of the unconscious, came into vogue around the same time as surrealism and modernism in the mid-1920s and there does seem to be a link although critics differ on the precise relationship. For David MacLagan doodling plays ‘first cousin

to Modernist experiments in deliberately losing control through the use of chance, automatism or a trance-like state' (2014) whilst for Matthew Battles doodling is 'surrealism and abstract expressionism's dour bachelor uncle' (2004, p.107). Battles seems to me to have things exactly the wrong way round. There was much that became dour in the ideological squabbles amongst the surrealist group and its frequent 'excommunications' of those who had failed to live up to the purity of its ideals. Doodling by contrast seems a little more like Bertie Wooster's whimsical nephew to surrealism's fearsome Aunt Agatha.

Daniel Kane has written in defence of whimsy in an essay (2014) on Kenneth Koch's and Rudy Burkhardt's 1967 collaborative two minute faux-naïf film-poem *The Apple*. Whimsy, Kane writes, makes for 'a funny kind of trouble' (2014, p.1) which 'while allowing for cuteness—wards off consumption' (2014, p.5) committed as it is to 'deflecting goals, refusing closure, scorning the certainty of ideology' (2014, p.1). Whimsy's etymology 'reveals qualities of resistance, bounciness, suddenness, disorientation, unexpectedness' all of which point to its predilection for unsettling fixity and certainty:

a thought never stops moving, never adheres to the fantasy that taking a rational, systematic approach to uncovering a mystery or examining a question might ever lead to something as final and resolute as *total understanding*. Whimsy does not love wisdom but refuses its authority by insisting on play, fancifulness, and drift.
(2014, p.2)

Thought in 'The Pencil Method' stops and starts, sometimes arbitrarily, through the various asterisked sections of the poem, shifts suddenly at the end of many of the short

cut-up or fold-in lines from Cardinal's essay and drifts more slowly (picking up on the mindwandering theme of Chapter 3) through the gradual mutations of phrases from Chesterton and Richard Scarry that begin and end the poem. The poem may well run the risk at times of trying to be cute, particularly in the final section that breaks down Scarry's book for children, 'What Do People Do All Day', into a form of baby talk, but some of its intentions (with hindsight) were to act as minor resistance: a refusal at least to be like other poems I've written, for example, those reliant on the use of just one procedure, and beyond that perhaps a refusal to be one of the economically useful animals depicted by Scarry in their everyday working world. Even further down the road there may be a resistance, through the doodling baby talk, to grown-upness itself. Writing about Gertrude Stein's 'gloriously infantile' love of writing, Wayne Kostenbaum notes that Stein 'writes against maturity, against development' and that her 'paradigm of the writer was the baby: the author as infant' (p.312). The infant who, as discussed earlier, is capable of being alone because it is secure in the presence of its good enough mother, and therefore can forget itself and learn to play.

'The Orderly World'

Like many doodles, the origins of the A to Z series of poems that form 'The Orderly World' also lay in the margins of the page. When idling through a family dictionary I started to enjoy the apparently relaxed placement of the engraved illustrations which accompanied the dictionary's definitions. Sometimes it seemed as if a version of the Oulipian procedure N+7 had been in operation whereby the illustration was placed closer to the second or third word further on from the word it was actually intended to accompany. The gentle sense of bemusement arising from these mismatches together with the Edwardian ambience of the illustrations brought the absurdist world of Glen Baxter to mind, together with that of his precursors, the humorists E.V. Lucas and

George Morrow who created, in their *What a Life!* (1975)—first published in 1911 and described by John Ashbery as ‘a tiny classic of proto-Dada’ (1975, p.vi)—the comic autobiography of an imagined Edwardian with engravings collaged from a Whiteleys illustrated store catalogue.

Physically cutting out the illustrations and the adjacent but incorrect dictionary entries was the first step in the creation of ‘The Orderly World’: an act of subtractive collage (or simply cut and no paste) in which unwanted material was removed to leave behind the required juxtaposition of text and image. This is a variation on the erasure technique (which is in turn a variation on the idea of found poetry) first developed by Tom Phillips in his treated novel *A Humument*, and by poets such as Ronald Johnson and Mary Ruefle. Ron Padgett’s Creative Reading ‘trickle down’ technique similarly carves a path through an existing text to create, in the act of reading, another one. This was one of the methods he used to create his treatment of *Motor Maids across the Continent*, an adventure story for adolescent girls. I’ll say more about erasure when discussing the more extended use of the technique in ‘Koch Uncorked’ and ‘YES AND NO YES’, but it’s interesting to consider at this point the era that the texts chosen for treatment come from. Phillips’ *A Human Document* was Victorian. The original *Motor Maids across the Continent* was published in 1917—Padgett’s treatment in 2017. 1917 was also the date of publication for *Beryl of the Biplane* (another book for young girls) which John Ashbery cut up and used in ‘Europe’. There’s a certain authority and confident energy in the language of these texts which is also present in the dictionary I used for ‘The Orderly World’. The dictionary is undated, but was probably published in the twenties or thirties from the frontispiece of King George V. The sense of authority comes tinged with colonialism in the case of the dictionary which features maps of the world with many countries coloured in British pink. It also features an essay entitled ‘The Orderly World’ by Ernest Young which briskly

outlines the regularity and reliably law-abiding nature of the world's physical and social geography, from the rotundity of the earth to the siting of human settlements: 'the most striking truth about the earth is its wonderful orderliness' (Williams, 1933, p.1263). And dictionaries are, of course, attempts to impose arbitrary order on an unruly world of language. My series of poems 'The Orderly World' seeks to disturb that order, not for overtly political reasons—an early twentieth century dictionary seems too easy a target for a post-colonial critique—but more for the pleasure of gentle vandalism. Kane has a footnote to his essay on whimsy where he compares Koch's approach to writing 'When the Sun Tries to Go On' to Pound's when writing the *Cantos*. It ends:

Where Pound insists on prescriptions—the reading lists and tallies of historical great men that Pound foregrounds throughout his epic work—Koch prefers providing readers with examples of how releasing ourselves from the rules of grammar and syntax and, analogically speaking, any and all rules predicated on a stable, rational order, can lead to radical joy. Koch's is a kind of jovial, productive and eminently whimsical anarchism that dances towards, around and away from the imperatives we find in Pound's work. (2014, p.18)

This 'radical joy' and the delight in disorder, which I have written about in Chapter 2, is what I was striving for in this series. The nonsense alphabets of Edward Lear (2012), Edward Gorey (1998) and especially Gertrude Stein (2011) were also influences alongside the juxtapositions already mentioned in *What a Life* and Glen Baxter's work. Following Cardinal's description of Seillé's practice the working methods were intended to 'cultivate bemusement' and, in Emma Cocker's words, to make 'openings, for rupturing the terms of what is already known' (2013. p.130). What is most basically known about dictionaries is that they should help you when looking for the meaning of a

word and that you will be able to find that word through using the mutually agreed upon artifice of the alphabet. Just as Koch didn't dispense with some rudimentary signs of order in his poem series 'When the Sun Tries to Go On', such as using stanzas of twenty four fairly regular length lines with a capitalised letter at their beginnings, 'The Orderly World' does follow the alphabetic order of A to Z. And the correct word does appear next to its definition. Beyond that, though, there is the slippage already mentioned between the defined word and the accompanying illustration and the poem below this is a collage put together from words appearing on the same page of the dictionary as the illustration. There are sometimes oblique links between the word and definition and/or the illustration on the one hand and the poem below them on the other, but often not. I see them now loosely as a kind of haibun in reverse with the haiku role being played by the conjunction of definition and illustration at the top of the page and the prose being the collaged poem below it. Others may prefer to see them as villanelles—the main point is that they are intended as the nonsense fruits of the kind of 'goofing off' I wrote about in Chapter 2 in the context of Koch's and Padgett's early disjunctive poetry.

The final poem in the series, which addresses what once was regarded as the twenty seventh letter of the alphabet, the ampersand, is a slightly odd one out; or the second odd one out given that X was avoided almost altogether, there being no illustrations for that letter beyond an all too expected xylophone. Goofing is still in evidence in the second stanza of '&' which plays with definitions of words before and after 'ampersand' in the dictionary, but elsewhere the poem is either a 'straight' copy of some of the dictionary definition—simple found text in other words—or an attempt at a 'straight' poetic statement including a final rhyming couplet, earlier versions of which provided the starting point for the poem. The image at the ending and the references earlier to the essential intermediary role of the ampersand are intended to bring to mind, for those with

Buddhist inclinations, a sense of the creative potential of nothing. Emptiness as mentioned earlier is derived from the Sanskrit term for pregnant womb and as Mark Epstein points out both emptiness and mothers ‘in a way, make everything possible. If things have no intrinsic or absolute reality, then everything must be relational. Emptiness is like a web or a matrix that makes one thing dependent on another’ (1995, pp.12-13).

‘Kenneth Koch Uncorked’

Reducing words to nothing is at the heart of the erasure technique and in ‘Kenneth Koch Uncorked’ the text in the first ten pages of Kenneth Koch’s long poem ‘When the Sun Tries to Go On’ is reduced, almost to the extent of Rauschenberg’s erasure of De Kooning’s drawing,¹² to just a handful of apparent nothings with the erasure of everything but Koch’s frequent, excitable exclamatory ‘O’s. As was noted in Chapter 2, Koch wanted to include everything—the whole world—in this long poem. ‘Koch Uncorked’ takes almost everything back out again. Everything but the most extreme moments of campy astonishment when words threaten to fail Koch so that he can merely exclaim: ‘O / Real!’ (2002, p.72). At other times the O’s may simply reflect Koch’s desire to address everything in a poem, an impulse which in his later work would take the apostrophic form of the ‘New Addresses’: ‘O French / Ice-cream’ (2002, p.72). But how about ‘O black black black black black’, or ‘O manufacture-clams building’, or ‘O “O pray”-rhyming cow manufacturer’, (2002, p.75)? ‘When the Sun Tries to Go On’ was written in a post-Steinian world and it’s unclear with many of the O’s whether they are intended as exclamation, address or something else entirely: a form of postmodern

¹² Traces of which can be seen here: <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/erased-de-kooning-drawing>

yodelling? Post-erasure it doesn't matter, perhaps, with the Os cut adrift from their already unstable moorings to float free.

Mary Ruefle ends her essay 'On Erasure' by pointing out the existential resonances of the form:

And that, my friend, is the art of erasure, as it is enacted in your own life, and all lives: life is much, much more than is necessary, and much, much more than any of us can bear, so we erase it or it erases us, we ourselves are an erasure of everything we have forgotten or don't know or haven't experienced, and on our deathbed, even that limited and erased "whole" becomes further diminished, if you are lucky you will remember the one word water, all others having been erased; if you are lucky you will remember one place or one person, but no one will ever, ever read on their deathbed, the whole text, intact and in order.

(Ruefle, 2015)

Several critics have not been kind to Koch's early writing, including 'When the Sun Tries to Go On', concluding that, like Ruefle's life, it was 'much, much more than is necessary, and much, much more than any of us can bear' and it may be that in amongst my intentions in 'writing' 'Koch Uncorked' there was an element of Oedipal anxiety resulting in a wish to erase at least part of the monumental whole of Koch's collected works. Over the course of my research I have had to erase Koch's name from the thesis' title and admit that including an equal consideration of both his work and Padgett's in any kind of detail would have been impossible. But I would hope that the parodic element in 'Koch Uncorked' is, like Koch's parodies of William Carlos Williams amongst others, a fond one which looks to create a playful dialogue with the original

text. Dan Beachy-Quick's review of the reissue of Ronald Johnson's erasure of Milton's *Paradise Lost* sees Johnson's work as an act of creative reading and listening:

The world comes partial. An honest reader sees only what she sees, hears only what she hears, and does not claim an attention that encompasses all. No such attention exists. This seems redundant, but it is fundamental: I can only read the book I can read. I do this work as myself. Any other claim inflates the creative act of reading into broad criticism, into generalities, into "universals." And as Ronald Johnson's spiritual ancestor William Blake so fervently believed, generalities are for blockheads. Genius recognizes itself in particulars.

(Beachy-Quick, 2006)

The reading attention given to Koch's work in 'Kenneth Koch Uncorked' is clearly highly particularised by the quasi-Oulipian constraint imposed which situates it within the theme of Padgett's playfully anti-authoritarian reading methods discussed in Chapter 3.

The process of putting the poem together, however, and reflecting on both its visual and (on finding a way to transcribe it musically) aural aspects bring it more closely within the theme of openness to, and intimacy with, the unknown from Chapter 1. The initial image I had in mind in setting about a text composed solely of O's was that of mouths open in a kind of pre-verbal astonishment, but on reading a short essay by Donald Revell on Koch's 'When the Sun Tries to Go On' (and Apollinaire) I began to associate the 'O's more with the sun:

What I love most in Koch is the poetry's generous, instantaneous splay, its sunny surround. ... and there it is already stanzas profligate with sun light dispensed by joy and dispersed into numberless emblems: lemons, oranges, eggs and cheese,

blonds and luminous yo yos. To read, to enjoy such a poem, all you need to do is become heliotropic, a sunflower. And it's wonderfully instructive to turn and turn again toward such a sun as Koch's. (Revell, 2003, p.273)

Turning towards these suns though, after completing the placement of the 'O's and scanning down through the ten pages of the poem I became aware of a closer resemblance to bubbles rising up the screen and remembered Koch's poem series 'A New Guide' which starts with a stanza about the champagne factory at Epernay in which he notes:

Borges writes that mirrors and fornication are "abominable"

Because they increase the amount of reality

This champagne factory transforms reality rather than simply increasing it

Without it Epernay champagne wouldn't exist.

(Koch, 1997, p.7)

William Carlos Williams wrote that 'a poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words' (1944)¹³ and Koch's poetry as a whole was a kind of champagne factory (that sought to transform reality rather than simply add to it). 'Kenneth Koch Uncorked' is intended to draw attention to this image by reducing (erasing) the amount of reality in one of Koch's poems.

The final personal unknown encountered around the creation of this poem, and probably the most genuinely surprising, arose when I considered making a musical transcript of

¹³ The critic William Watkin has also written about what he sees as Koch's 'poem machines' largely by aligning Koch with poststructuralist theory.

the poem. I remembered a reading given by Tom Raworth¹⁴ in which he created a musical elegy for a poet friend by feeding the name of his friend into a music box, and I decided to develop a variation on this idea by punching holes into paper strip so that the ‘O’s in the poem would be represented by musical notes when fed into the box. Although the initial impulse to create this poem was inspired by the frequency of Koch’s ‘O’s, when transcribed into music the sparseness of the piece visually is accentuated and what was intended primarily as a celebratory homage to Koch becomes more tentative and elegiac.¹⁵ A raucously exuberant maximalism in the poetry becomes a quiet minimalism in the music box.

As with all erasures, the absence of the original text plays a critical role. Without it, to state the obvious alongside Koch on the champagne and its factory, the poem wouldn’t exist. As the original text is not very well known, even by some who know a little about New York poetry, there is a risk of creating ever increasingly obscure footnotes to footnotes, an accusation which could also be levelled at my poem NOTES ON *UM* which applies Tom Phillips’ erasure procedure to a text in which he explains that procedure: NOTES ON A *HUMUMENT*. (Phillips, 2016)

on Peckham Rye

with RB Kitaj

a halfpenny a year

from AJ Ayer

(2019, p.32)

¹⁴ with Ron Padgett at the South Bank ‘Voice Box’ in 1994?

¹⁵ a recording of the piece is available at: <https://soundcloud.com/user-131867324/koch-uncorked-3>

Erasure poems are by definition and unapologetically *about* procedure. Form and content are explicitly fused as is the experience and practice of Buddhist emptiness. Footnotes may be involved, but as Ruefle writes at the end of her essay,

Don't tell me that erasure is beside the point, an artsy fragment of the healthy whole. If it is an appropriation, it is an appropriation of every life that has preceded your own, just as those in the future will appropriate yours; they will appropriate your very needs, your desires, your gestures, your questions, and your words. Or so I believe. And I am glad. What is the alternative? A blank page.
(2015).

YES AND NO YES

In 'YES AND NO YES' (excerpts from which are included in the collection) the life being appropriated is that of W.T. Stead, a philanthropist, pacifist, psychic and campaigning journalist, who was one of the most famous people to go down with the Titanic in 1912. He was also the editor of a series of morally improving one penny booklets 'Books for Bairns' published between 1896 and 1920, one of which I chose for erasure. The truth that Stead wants to get fixed on his young reader's mind, as he writes in his preface to *Eyes and No Eyes (or the Art of Seeing)*, is

that everything you see belongs to you as long as you see it, no matter who may be the man who has paid for it. ... Your eyes are your title-deeds to the ownership of all things in the world that can be enjoyed by being looked at.
(1900, p.2)

Strangely similar things were written three hundred years earlier by Thomas Traherne in his *Centuries of Meditation*. The 29th Meditation of the first Century begins: ‘You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars; and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world’ (p.197). The 38th Meditation begins: ‘You never enjoy the world, till you see all things in it so perfectly yours, that you cannot desire them any other way’ (p.201).

Douglas Harding’s experience of headlessness—which he refers to as ‘The True Seeing’ (1986, p.1)—considered in Chapter 1, also shared a sense that, once one has realised the voidness out of which one is looking, one becomes pure capacity for the world and, as such, ‘may contain and become everything’ (1986, pp.16-17). The erasure technique used in the pages from YES AND NO YES, on the other hand, involves blinkering vision so that one’s capacity to see the world, or the original text, is limited and one sees—pays attention to and reads—a new text embedded within it. Jena Osman regards the nature of erasure poetry as essentially investigative and draws on the metaphor of detective work in her essay ‘Gumshoe Poetry’ in which she writes that the erasure procedure ‘awakens qualities within pages, words, and letters that we normally wouldn’t notice, that we couldn’t previously imagine existing’ (2006, p.248). The qualities awakened in YES AND NO YES tend, at times, to be a certain aggression, or (as with Phillips’ *A Humument*) salaciousness, but elsewhere there’s often a dullness which might permit sympathy with the dandyish character Robert who finds nothing of interest on his walk, is duly chastised by his teacher Mr Andrews for what he has overlooked, and has to learn from the example of the ever curious and attentive, but rather smarmy, William. As with the Edwardian dictionary exploited in ‘The Orderly World’ the Victorian world of education and moral self-improvement depicted in *Eyes and No Eyes* is perhaps beyond the reach of hard-hitting political satire; instead ‘YES AND NO YES’ aligns itself loosely with the attitudes towards the popular culture of the early part of the

twentieth century of Edward Gorey, Glen Baxter and (in *Motor Maids across the Continent*) Ron Padgett. Those are essentially ones of enjoyment and a fondness for making fun of Edwardian stiffness and restraint. The pages from YES AND NO YES aim for what Osman describes as the ‘infinite surprise and delight that lies hidden in language’ (2006, p.248). The delight can surprisingly lie in the dullness of language, however. As Andrew Epstein argues in his book *Attention Equals Life*, there are good reasons to investigate and resist what he describes as the ‘transformation trope’ (2016, p. 20) in contemporary poetry that frequently features in blurbs and reviews where ‘clichés abound about how the poems “discover the extraordinary within the ordinary” or “transform the everyday” into something rich or strange’ (2016, p. 21). Epstein’s book examines poetry which looks beyond these ‘clichés and pays more attention’ to the everydayness of the everyday, ‘to those things we forget to, or are taught not to, notice’ (2016, p.40). Although Ron Padgett’s poetry does not feature in Epstein’s book, it often pays, as I have argued earlier in this thesis, exactly this kind of attention to the terrain of everyday life and especially the movements of the mind in (its) everyday fantasy. Often it is the mundanity of language itself which is being paid attention to and played with, as in, for example, ‘Louisiana Perch’, where a meditation on the mutability of language swerves in and out of a tale of Mack the truck driver falling in love with a waitress to praise the unsung ‘everyday’ parts of language:

The
great words are those without meaning:

from a their or

Or the for a the

The those

The rest are fragile, transitory

like the waitress

(2013, p.172)

With this sudden sequence of short words with long names—definite and indefinite articles, demonstratives, prepositions, pronouns and conjunctions—the swerve also seems to take the reader in and out of an early Clark Coolidge poem or one of his contributions to his ‘Supernatural Overtones’ collaboration with Padgett, which was another reference point of sorts when constructing YES OR NO YES with the disconnect, at times, between the illustration and the accompanying ‘caption’ in words.

Do it like you are wasting your time (whanging from a tree ood)

Erasure and all of Padgett’s Creative Reading procedures are instances of collaboration between the reader (who is on the way to being a writer) and the author of the text being erased or in some other way creatively (mis)read. Nearly all of Padgett’s Creative Reading techniques are variations on a form of collage, for example ‘alternate lines’, ‘page skips’, ‘page repeats’, ‘column confusion’, and ‘fold ins’. As Lisa Jarnot has said, ‘poems are always collage on some level... Collage is a way to force awareness out of the random flow of information that’s constantly bombarding us’ (Undated). In 2018 Ian Seed and I carried out a year-long collaboration which involved an exchange of a line of writing a day, often one collaged from another existing text so the collaboration could be seen as having been conducted with several dozen writers: Ian and I plus the authors of all the texts used. The collaboration resulted in the work ‘Do it like you are wasting your time (whanging from a tree ood)’¹⁶ but the main value of this process for me personally was both the collage effect

¹⁶ A selection from which were published under the title ‘The Slippery Mouth’ in *Molly Bloom* May 2019 available at: <https://mollybloompoetry.weebly.com/jeremy-over--ian-seed.html>

Jarnot mentions together with the encouragement it gave to become aware, when writing, of the constant flow, not just of information, but of the self-talk and the familiar movements of one's own mind. A series of minor jolts to my ego were experienced, in other words, as the poem didn't quite go down the paths I might have had consciously or unconsciously in mind for it. In the foreword to Jenni Quilter's *New York School Painters & Poets* Bill Berkson refers to Kenneth Koch's frequent quoting of Paul Valéry (mentioned earlier in Chapter 1)

to the effect that a poem is written by someone other than the poet and addressed to someone other than the reader. Otherness, Kenneth made clear, was not just some Parisian poet's ornamental mystique but a welcome intimation of the impersonality factor that regularly keeps, or should keep, the call letters of creation duly scrambled. (2014, p.9)

In Padgett's interview with Larry Fagin in the same book he suggests (as mentioned in Chapter 2 in relation to his collaboration with Tom Veitch) that the otherness encountered in collaborative collage might almost wipe out any sense of identity or rights of ownership over the work (2014, p.306). My experience in collaborating with Ian Seed did not feel like erasure, except for the partial erasure of subsequently forgetting who had written which line; I now have to consult the original unedited text in order to determine this. Nor did Ian's interventions quite fit Berkson's 'intimation of the impersonality factor'; the experience of the loss, or forgetting, of self in collaboration, was closer at times to the intimacy discussed in Chapter 1, although there was also often a healthy dose of self-defence involved. I'm thinking in terms of the subtle shifts of weight and nudges through which, in oriental martial arts like Tai Chi, one attempts to unbalance one's 'opponent'. This jostling is part of how collaboration results in something neither

participant could foresee. Padgett's frequent collaborator George Schneeman expressed it this way in a conversation with Padgett: 'Two heads are not only better than one, but different than one, because in collaborating, you have to push half way, and if the other person is also pushing you create an accident that neither of you can control completely' (2004, p.56). Creating accidents to make a direct assault on the known was at the heart of the theme of Chapter 2. And, to use Emma Cocker's words once more, the 'desire to be led astray' (2013, p.129) was part of Chapter 3's meandering survey of what may be found when our attention goes in unintended directions.

The most valuable lesson of this collaboration personally was confirmation of the importance of play. Ian and I did not set a time or length limit on the collaboration, agreeing early on simply to let things run their course and this uncertainty, together with the feeling that we were simply playing around rather than writing 'for posterity', felt liberating. Allowing myself to be nudged slightly off balance now into the seventeenth century by an act of bricolage—as the essay happens to be on my desk—my experience of collaboration felt somewhat similar to what Tanya Zhelezcheva has described, in the context of Thomas Traherne's work, as a 'centrifugal way of writing' within the genre of the *non-finito*, an umbrella term for unfinished texts (2015, p.309). Centrifugal rather than centripetal writing practices identified by Zhelezcheva in Traherne's work include paratactic structures, extensive cataloguing and the use of bracketing devices which all help resist closure, 'prevent the completion of the manuscripts' and 'ensure their disorderly nature' (2015, p.310). They also help to embody Traherne's themes of scattering, dispersal and a God-like offering of abundance: 'Here an Aphorism and there a Song: here a supplication and there a Thanksgiving. Thus do we bespangle our way to heaven' (Traherne, 1997, p. 123). The centrifugal is a 'continual mode of writing' which allows Traherne to focus 'on the playful, generative and disorienting now' (2015, p.323).

‘You have to do this as if you wanted to waste your time’ (Feldenkrais, 1994, p. 149) was a line I contributed towards the collaboration taken from the movement based therapeutic method of Moshé Feldenkrais. I offered it as an encouragement largely to myself not to hoard, as in the early stages of the collaboration I found myself putting possible lines, or (worse) possible *ideas* for lines, to one side for later use. In Nuar Alsadir’s words, I was not allowing my ‘mind to go somewhere that hasn’t been curated’ (2016, p.5). Reminding myself that I was simply wasting time when drafting a new line, or searching randomly on my bookshelves for it, acted as a helpful muscle relaxant, as it were. Roger Caillois’ definition of play is that it is ‘an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money’ (2001, pp.5-6) and this comes close (in my mind) to Charles Bernstein’s comment that ‘a piece of paper with nothing on it has a definite economic value. If you print a poem on it, this value is lost’ (1999, p.150). There are other ways to get rid of the economic value of a piece of paper clearly, but I find Bernstein’s comment encouraging; there’s a kind of utopian opening up of horizons that happens when it is acknowledged that the writing and reading of poetry is a gift economy. In apocalyptic times of ecological collapse when a horrific horizon seems to be approaching at increasing speed it feels like a paradoxically precious form of throwaway culture.

Equinox in a Box

I want to close this chapter by considering one further long poem in *The Pencil Method* which shares some of the techniques and themes explored so far in these reflections, but which also deploys a slightly wider variety of methods within which an increasingly centrifugal writing process documents itself along the way in a journal-like exploration.

‘Equinox in a Box’ is partly a poem written according to, and about, a temporal constraint: it was largely composed from dawn to dusk on the spring equinox 20 March

2016, a day I spent within James Turrell's 'Deer Shelter' skyspace at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Turrell has worked directly with light in many different forms for over forty years. Barbara Stafford, in her book *Devices of Wonder* writes that Turrell's artistic mission has been one of defamiliarizing light, creating 'unique installations that challenge our unthinking relation to reality' and harnessing 'the living force of light so as to reawaken us to wonder' (2006, p.364). In interview Turrell has explained 'the work I do is with light itself and perception. It is not about those issues; it deals with them directly in a nonvicarious manner so that it is about your seeing, about your perceiving' (1985). In the exhibition guide to the 1993 Hayward Art Gallery exhibition Turrell wrote, 'As you plumb a space with vision, it is possible to "see yourself see". ... My desire is to set up a situation to which I take you and let you see. It becomes your experience' (1993). This suggests his art might be a visual equivalent to the music of John Cage who when asked by a member of the audience, before a performance, where the best seat was, said that 'they were all equally good' (1965, p. 53) because his music was essentially about the audience's listening and the quality of their attention. Paradoxically, however, all of Turrell's work involves the creation of highly controlled spaces. This includes his skyspaces¹⁷ which are essentially viewing chambers from which to gaze up at the sky through an aperture in the roof. The spaces may appear like simple rooms with a hole where the roof should be, but the view of the sky is in fact carefully manipulated by both the curve of the walls towards the hole cut in the roof and by electric recessed lighting which intensifies and thickens the sensation of the colour of the sky so that it can often seem, through an effect called 'vaulting', like the sky has been brought down to the level of the ceiling. His art may have no existence beyond the 'eye of the beholder' but the beholder's experience is a

¹⁷ Some photos of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park's skyspace can be seen here: <http://goinsidetogreetthelight.com/gallery/nggallery/go-inside-to-greet-the-light/framing>

meticulously orchestrated one which leaves nothing to chance operations, as Cage's methods did, with the tossing of coins to make compositional decisions, or the creation of accidents within a treated piano. I don't mean to denigrate Turrell's art by saying this; along with many others,¹⁸ I can testify to the powerful experience to be had when visiting one of his exhibitions. My first was in 1993 at the Hayward Gallery in London where small groups of visitors were led first to a darkened room including one of Turrell's dimly lit 'wedgeworks' in which light takes on almost tangible mist-like forms and the viewer finds it hard to get their bearings or to determine the source of the light. We then moved out onto the roof of the gallery to a 'skyspace' where leaning back on the bench provided around the walls of the room I gazed up at the sky and experienced something like the 'seeing' that Douglas Harding (who I was to meet later that summer at one of his workshops) described as headlessness, in which the self drops away and one becomes instead a seemingly boundless capacity for the world. In Zen the experience might be described as *kenshō*: an initial or temporary awakening or seeing into one's true nature. Although Turrell's religious background is Quaker he has also occasionally drawn on Zen for analogies when describing his works as 'visual *kōans*' (Adcock, 1990, p.212). An example of such an apparent *kōan* occurs in his interview with Julia Brown in which he says that 'in working with light, what is really important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought' (1985). He circles around this phrase three times in the same interview giving slightly different perspectives on it somewhat in the manner of a Zen student coming up with different responses to the challenge presented by a *kōan* to the rational mind. The quotation already given above continues as follows: 'to make the quality and sensation of light itself something really quite tactile. ... Light is not so much something that reveals, as

¹⁸ see for example, this recent ecstatic review: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/26/blinded-by-the-light-james-turrell-obliterates-the-senses-in-stunning-new-mona-wing>

it is itself the revelation' (1985). 'Wordless thought' here seems to be an analogy to another paradoxically self-unravelling and synaesthetic state: seeing light with the sense of touch. The first mention of the phrase in the interview comes when Turrell answers a question about wanting to create an atmosphere in his works: 'Yes, one that can be consciously plumbed with seeing, like the wordless thought that comes from looking into fire' (1985). Turrell here simply seems to be referring to the induction of a state of reverie and such states are classically seen as involving subtle levels of thinking, albeit in an associative rather than a linear or analytical mode. His final mention of the phrase comes at the end of the interview: 'What takes place in viewing a space is wordless thought. It's not as though it's unthinking and without intelligence; it's that it has a different return than words' (1985). The kinds of thinking Turrell is reflecting on, and hinting at, in these short passages seems close to those which were discussed in Chapter 1, particularly to Angela Leighton's view of poetry being 'an exploration of some almost objectless knowing: knowing which is open to a multitude of things, all of them wondrous' (2015, p.12). Leighton, like Turrell, also resorts to paradox, suggesting that, just as Turrell's ambition for the viewer is to see themselves seeing, poetry's knowing is like 'a verb without an object, or like a suspended participle, something to be found only in the finding, discovered in the discovering...' (2015 p.21).

At dawn and dusk the more rapidly shifting colours of the sky are intensified when viewed within a skyspace and I had long wanted to experience these times so when the opportunity to spend a weekend in residence at the YSP including access to the skyspace for all of the day of the Equinox came up I was keen to take it and to combine it with a writing experiment. My intentions for that experiment, beyond wanting to write in some way about my experience in the skyspace from dawn to dusk, were fairly minimal,

following Padgett's default 'method' of 'start and go / wherever the poem seems to lead' (2103, p.590). Where it led on the day was simply to some notes about my observations, thoughts, memories and feelings in the space combined with a few excerpts from various reading materials I'd brought along knowing that I might struggle with 'wordless thought' for a full day. These notes were supplemented by more taken on the days immediately before and after at the park's exhibition of Bill Viola's video art. During the poem's subsequent composition various other texts were also drawn on, including some notes I'd taken on an earlier dawn to dusk experience at a small-scale 'vision quest' that formed part of an eco-psychology course in the Cairngorms. I did not write consciously in imitation of any other poet's work but I can see now that there were several models that may have been in the back of my mind when putting 'Equinox in a Box' together.

Firstly there was the temporal framing device of writing throughout the daylight hours of one day which I probably took from Bernadette Mayer's work and her self-imposed research projects such as *Midwinter Day*, composed on that particular single day in 1978. As explained above, I did not follow too closely Mayer's constraint in that the composition occurred both on and after the day chosen, but the poem is still structured loosely around the day with timed entries at various points throughout it. Beyond the use of time as a structure I was also aware of the importance for Mayer of writing about the everydayness of the everyday rather than about its epiphanic transformation into the *extra*-ordinary as in, say AR Ammons's work such as *Tape for the Turn of the Year*. As Maggie Nelson notes, Mayer obeys the Thoreauvian injunction to pay attention 'all day & all night' not just on the off chance that one might 'detect some trace of the Ineffable' (2007, p.117), but because the act of attention is, in itself, an essential one of love. Nelson quotes from Mayer's 1988 Poetry Project lecture 'The Poetry of Everyday

Life': 'I love you and daily life, what life isn't daily? ... what poetry isn't everyday' (2007, p. 118). *Midwinter Day* is, Nelson suggests, 'on the cusp of literature-as-product and literature-as-process' (2007, p. 107) with the idea behind it being to chronicle 'one day's thoughts and events *as they happened*, not in retrospect' (2007, p. 109). This reflects Mayer's desire, shared with Clark Coolidge, to be radically inclusive as they strive to create what they called an 'Everything Work' (Coolidge, 1994) in which the distinction between 'writing' and 'living' is dissolved. Such a distinction is, of course, as Nelson points out

semantic, or nonsensical, in that writing always gets written by living people.

"living" here functions as a euphemism for "not in a room of one's own," not isolated in the ivory tower of "the life of the mind," but rather enmeshed in relation, busy with and/or distracted by tasks other than writing, engaged with matter over (or at least in addition to) mind. (2007, p. 109)

On the face of it, situating a writing experiment in the skyspace was very much a 'room of one's own' move. I shared access to the space with other members of the public during the Park's normal opening hours (10am to 5pm) but outside of those had exclusive private access to it, and the nature of the space was far removed from most other 'rooms' in that no everyday use was catered for apart from the provision of benches to sit on. James Turrell spoke in his interview with Julia Brown about his interest in using sites that 'have no function, spaces that are really only inhabited by consciousness. A lot of spaces are interesting to me when they're generated not by the architecture of form but by the overlay of thought' (Brown, 1985). Turrell goes on to clarify that by spaces generated by thought he has in mind 'daydream spaces, such as those generated by reading a good book' which can often be more 'commanding than physical space. While you read, you don't even

notice people who walk through the room because you are actually in the space that's generated by the author' (Brown, 1985). So Turrell would seem to want to set up spaces exclusively for the 'life of the mind', but it is in the nature of that life, from a Buddhist perspective at least, for it still inevitably to be 'enmeshed in relation'. The distinction made between matter and mind is perhaps no less semantic than that between writing and living.

So 'Equinox in a Box' was, it seems to me in retrospect, written against the idea, to the extent that it might even be a possibility, of 'wordless thought'. Opposing wordlessness may not be a radically surprising approach for a writer to take, but what I mean less literally by this is that I wanted to be wary of slipping too easily into a limited vocabulary of the sublime and the ineffable which can at times descend upon those writing about Turrell's work, in the same way that poetry written about Mark Rothko's paintings can often default to praise for silence. I did not want perversely to refuse to look up in the skyspace nor to refuse to think and write about the sky and the sense of sight, but I did also want to include things excluded by Turrell's sharply cut rectangular frame. So there are cheesy wotsits underfoot, day dreams, memories, doodles, Damien Hirst and a ping pong ball, memories of my mother, various bits of found language such as the warnings not to eat the contents of a sachet of silica gel, etc. The aim may have been partly to illustrate Turrell's statement that 'The world is not a predetermined set of facts; we construct the world with our observations' (Watson, 2017, p.182), but there was also, to return to Traherne, a wish for that world to be constructed through centrifugal ways of writing which acknowledge that it can only be left uncategorically unfinished. So there was an attempt to balance a wish to be as inclusive, open and receptive as possible together with a wish to let things go or slip away. Donald Revell warns, in similar ways to Alsadir, against the instinct to hoard when he writes that:

Marianne Moore, like Joseph Cornell, has this *trouvere* mentality that is wonderful. But then they put it into boxes. They somehow panic at the critical moment and seek to contain. Marianne Moore containing it through her numbers, counting syllables; Cornell literally containing it in boxes; whereas you get someone like a Rauschenberg or a Jasper Johns and he's not interested in containment. Just put it out there, put it on the floor, tack it on the canvas. (1996, p.31)

A visitor to a skyspace is contained within Turrell's box and encouraged to take a very constricted and controlled view of the world, but these spaces are, at the same time, very much conducive to day dreaming and the kind of mind-wandering movements of attention discussed in Chapter 3. Turrell acknowledges as much when he speaks about spaces generated by thought and when he associates 'wordless thought' with that which occurs when one stares into a fire. Three further poetic models were helpful in terms of encouraging such uncontained movements and the uncurated experience they might lead to. Firstly Kenneth Koch's poem 'The Artist' provided a joyful example of how to write a kind of imaginary ekphrastic poetry (imaginary art in a real poem) that makes gentle fun of both the midwestern mundanity of his hometown Cincinnati and the 'happenings' that Allan Kaprow and others were starting to put together in the late fifties to breach the boundary between art and everyday life. The poem also prefigures pop art and large scale site specific artworks such as Robert Smithson's 'Spiral Jetty' groundwork, Christo's wrapped objects and buildings and Walter de Maria's 'Lightning Field'. One can easily imagine an additional section of the poem entitled 'sky' or 'crater' modelled on

Turrell's monumental 'Roden Crater' project¹⁹. During my first year progress review at which I discussed the proposed residency at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park I received the suggestion that I might want to think and write about what was *not* in the skyspace and what enabled the experiences within it to happen. This was intended to encourage reflection on the political implications of the setting, but what became most immediately clear to me upon entering the space was the absence of humour in what is a rather forbiddingly grey concrete interior. 'The Artist' helped in that regard and also provided a guiding epigraph:

I often think *Play* was my best work.

It is an open field with a few boards in it.

Children are allowed to come and play in *Play*

By permission of the Cleveland Museum.

I look up at the white clouds, I wonder what I shall
do, and smile.

(2015, p.113).

Philip Whalen's writing, especially his capacious long poems such as 'Birthday Poem' and 'Life and Death and a Letter to My Mother Beyond Them Both', also provided an indirect model and inspiration for 'Equinox in a Box'. Writing in the introduction of his selected poems *Overtime*, Leslie Scalapino comments on Whalen's description of his poetry as a 'picture or graph of a mind moving, which is a world body being here and now which is history ... and you' (1999, p. 50) by likening his writing to Stein's phenomenological excursions: 'Whalen isn't describing a subject; that is, it's not "about" something—rather,

¹⁹ Turrell's life work which has preoccupied him since 1977 involving the excavation of an extinct volcano in Arizona to create multiple tunnels and viewing spaces: <http://rodencrater.com/about/>

the writing *is* the mind's operations per se. It's playfulness for one thing' (1999, p. xv). Scalapino goes on to note that Whalen's poems might be written over a period of several years in journals and notebooks alongside doodles and calligraphy before being typed up and chopped into separate lines which are 'finally' arranged into compositions that reflect different moments in time and thoughts in mind. This process is not collage according to Whalen, with Scalapino wondering whether the distinction might be 'that a collage is more passive as a construction in the sense that the viewer sees it later, rather than active comparison on the part of the reader and writer in reading as real-time, an activity' (1999, p. xvii). Early on in the composition of 'Equinox in a Box' I knew that I wanted to include within it notes made several years earlier from another experience alone from dawn to dusk, this time 'out' in nature, so that the different times of perception and note taking could be conflated and notions of outside and inside be made more fluid. Or simply destroyed altogether, as in Whalen's politely devastating 'I'm trying to wreck your mind, that's all' (Whalen, 2007, p. 685). Or as in this circumambulatory passage from Gertrude Stein's *Narration* quoted by Whalen in the preface to his *Decompressions*:

If you exist any day you are not the same as any other day no nor any minute of the day because you have inside you being existing. Anybody who is existing and anybody really anybody is existing anybody really is that.

But anything happening well the inside and the outside are not the inside and the outside are not the inside and the outside inside.

Let me do that again. The inside and the outside, the outside which is outside and the inside which is inside are not when they are inside and outside are not inside in short they are not existing ... (Whalen, 2007, pp. 837-838)

Scalapino argues that reading Whalen's poetry involves a similar perceptual experience to that of Turrell's viewer seeing themselves seeing: 'One does not usually focus on one's own process of perception while perceiving—Whalen brings us to do that as being in a state of mind, not by viewing from outside; just as one speaking isn't foreseeing a spontaneous conversation' (1999, p. xix). I'm aware that by pointing to Whalen's hugely ambitious, if enjoyably playful, work as a model for my own work I may be constructing monumental expectations for it on a similar level to those of the inflated egomaniac lampooned by Kenneth Koch in 'The Artist', but to some extent at least 'Equinox in a Box' does play with these notions of time—the times of note taking, of later rewriting and arrangement alongside other texts, of reading—of perception and fantasy and what might be brought within view, and what left outside and unfinished, when gazing up at, or through, a rectangle of sky.

The final poetic model I should mention in the context of this poem is, of course, Ron Padgett. Not for his prose poem 'Sky' with its discreet blue square of sky as if seen at midday through a small opening. I only discovered this poem in his collection *Tulsa Kid* after completing 'Equinox in a Box' but its ending neatly points to something not unlike the experience of being in a skyspace and the headlessness which that can bring about:

When the night has lifted and the sun is not yet up, and you're standing on a high place with your face tilted up so your forehead is parallel with the imaginary ground and your face is excluding all reality, when there are neither clouds nor stars nor anything else but the light which also disappears because it is so perfectly spread, all that remains is your nose, and that goes too. (Padgett, 1979, p. 130)

Padgett's poem was taken up into the sky in a collaboration with Jackie Monnier who built a kite, he writes, to carry it 'up to where it probably belongs, where her spirit, releasing an object whose will is the opposite of gravity, lets itself go to the invisible will of the winds, which change as you go higher' (Padgett, 1972, p. 19). Some of Padgett's airy and centrifugally whirling exercises in mind wandering like his 'Ode to Clemmons Laurell' and 'Big Bluejay Composition' were models of the kind of freedom I also wanted to enjoy with this poem. With their accompanying visual elements such as dashes to indicate movement and cartoon-like flashes of lightning, and the appearance (in 'Big Bluejay Composition') of AN Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, these poems could also be seen as distant cousins of Whalen's compositions.

A number of Padgett's poems self-consciously comment on their own creation in process, which involves the writer—this is the artifice at least—and subsequently the reader, seeing the creation of the poem happening before their own eyes in a way which is somewhat analogous to Whalen's continuous writing/reading present. An example would be 'Joe Brainard's Painting "Bingo"' (mentioned in Chapter 2) which starts with the line 'I suffer when I sit next to Joe Brainard's painting "Bingo"'. The poem consists of Padgett subsequently wondering if that line could have been lineated or arranged differently, a brief diversion to consider pain in sitting and hemorrhoids, and then a triple qualification of the original statement—he doesn't really suffer sitting next to Brainard, or his painting "Bingo" or any of his paintings—followed by this final admission:

In fact I didn't originally say

I suffer when I sit next to Joe Brainard's painting "Bingo"

My wife said it

In response to something I had said

About another painting of his

She had misunderstood what I had said (2013, p. 103)

This kind of successive pulling away of rugs from beneath the reader's feet—also seen in 'Advice to Young Writers' which was commented on in Chapter 3—amounts to a variation on what Scalapino refers to, in relation to Whalen's writing, as the

Buddhist concept of free-fall, which recognizes all supposition, perception, and phenomena as having no actual order of occurrence except that imposed by the mind as its own context. All perception as events are temporary states: "What are you doing right this minute? / What shall you do one second from now? / ... Feather spins as it falls / Even if you did it better, who would care?" Whalen was proposing the possibility that all of this order, constructed, and the entire fabric of constructed order could be dropped. (Whalen, 2007, p. xxxix)

Padgett, in his quietly comical and carefully controlled way seems to be proposing something similar. I hope that there are also elements of things dropping away, or being let go of, in 'Equinox in a Box': description and thought for instance as cows are released into a field after winter, guitars retuned and rectangles emptied and filled.

Michael Leddy has noted that in his early reading, 'Latin and the exotic vocabulary of geometry—"hypotenuse," "rhomboid"—also helped spark Padgett's appreciation of the pleasures of language' (2000). Everyday rectangles and triangles seem to have played their part in Padgett's poetry too. They feature frequently with triangles generally being positive if mysterious things, often in childishly bright colours, for example, the postage stamps which bring 'Early Triangles' to an early close: 'Red ones and green ones, some /

with pink and yellow, / delicate triangles in the afternoon' (2013, p. 285), or in 'Goethe' where 'you have to smile / because some yellow triangles / have entered the air, / sent by the goddess of geometry' (2013, p. 348). Rectangles are less simple. A rabbit is imprisoned within one in 'What Are You On?' (p. 632), they need to be floated through in order for something to happen in 'Blink' (p. 605) and they often bring with them a sense of burden or responsibility: in *Encore With Rectangle and Philosophy* (a recent collaboration with the geometrically fantastical Trevor Winkfield), for example,

if you think
about the tasks
ahead of you
in the day,
go ahead and turn them
into small rectangles,
sweep them
into your hand
and toss them outside.

Then kill yourself.

(Padgett and Winkfield, 2019)

A way out of these depressing responsibilities is indicated at the end of 'Rectangle Obligation', as so often with Padgett through a reversal of the effects of gravity, when the rectangle which must be filled

starts to glow and hum. Suddenly "hilarity bubbles" spread throughout the entire system and the four sides of the rectangle let go of each other and float

off in different directions, rotating and tumbling slowly through the dark. I am very glad to be rid of it. (2013, p. 421)

The walls around 'Equinox in a Box' and the rest of the poems in *The Pencil Method* are as impermeable and unstable as the sides of the rectangle in Padgett's poem. I have indicated how some of my poems can be seen to be in conversation with the writings of Padgett, Koch as well as, more widely, with those of Philip Whalen, Bernadette Mayer, Gertrude Stein and, further down the line, Thomas Traherne. I consider the work of, and writings about, visual artists such as Geneviève Seillé, Len Lye and James Turrell also to be part of the dialogue, but clearly the poetry and poetics of contemporaries have also been significant for my writing. The work of New York poets was a fairly well kept secret in the UK when I started writing 'seriously' in the 1990's with only a few magazines such as Martin Stannard's 'Joe Soap's Canoe' being hospitable to it, but the influence now appears to be widespread and detectable in the writings of many younger writers such as the new Faber poets, Jack Underwood, Sam Riviere, Rachael Allen and Emily Berry and (published elsewhere) Sophie Robinson and Holly Pester. Although I'm becoming acquainted with these poets' work, more important in terms of it being a source of direct inspiration is the poetry and poetics of several American writers who have also been influenced in part by the New York poets.

The multiplicity of approach in Lisa Jarnot and Lee Ann Brown, for example, is something I have aspired towards in all my work, but especially in *The Pencil Method*. With Brown it is her formal variety and Koch-like enthusiasm for everything which appeals. As Laynie Brown has noted:

Her lineage isn't singular. It's Bernadette Mayer and Emily Dickinson, but also Brainard and Elmslie, the filmmaker Nick Dorsky and the playwright Richard

Foreman... it is in her nature to be various, many places at once. She is both Steinian and traditional, irreverent and classic, proper and erotic, epic and minute.’ (undated p.27)

Brown exhibits the generosity which Gabriel Gudding (quoted in Chapter 1) sees as epitomising the New York ‘School’ with its modelling of ‘positive affect styles’ such as ‘jubilation, rejoicing, attentiveness, renunciation [of authoritarianism both aesthetic and political in particular]’ (2010).

Jarnot’s willingness to play with the sense of having multiple selves is something to which I hope both my poetry and the theme in Chapter 1 of the critical thesis reads across. Jarnot states that she intuited from her childhood experiences that ‘one’s identity existed as one’s invention, and that as a creative person, one’s identification and explanation of the self might always be in flux, like the whole of the universe is in flux, existing as a place of multiple possibilities’ (1998). The importance to Jarnot of collage as both an aesthetic and a tactic for not knowing and awakening is also something with which I identify closely; earlier in this Chapter I cited her use of this technique as ‘a way to force awareness out of the random flow of information that’s constantly bombarding us’ (1998). Collage is fairly widespread in my poetry but ‘Cumberland’ which attempts to use that technique to create a short lyric is perhaps one of the poems that shows Jarnot’s influence most clearly.

The less restrained use of juxtaposition in, for example, ‘Limited Headroom’ is more closely related to the writing of another American poet Dean Young whose poetry shows the influence of, amongst other things, New York poets such as Padgett and Koch. Young’s poetics set out in his book *The Art of Recklessness* (2010) includes a short section entitled ‘Let us get better at not knowing what we’re doing’ in which he thanks Gertrude Stein, as he writes ‘It is okay

to be goofy. It is okay to be funny ... laughter throws us forward, levity raises us, the body opens. Laughter is always unruly. The goofy is the body's blooming in the mind' and a little later 'when we encounter radiant silliness, profound goofiness, we feel double-minded, we stand beside ourselves, fully outside the world of convention that the funny is always foil to, to be fully in some zero-gravity realm of possibility that can only be called pleasure' (2010, pp.64-65). The themes of not knowing, surprise, humour and buoyancy, all of which I have argued form part of a poetics of wonder, coincide once more.

Ron Padgett shares a birthday (17th June) with St Joseph of Cupertino about whom Blaise Cendrars has written in his memoir *Sky* (1992), which was obliquely inspired by the death of Cendrars' son, an aviator, in the First World War. The patron saint of aviation, St Joseph wasn't particularly holy in the usual saintly ways; nor was he that smart apparently—he was too easily distracted and absent-minded—he was called the 'gaper' by others in his village. But he was beatified for his ability to lurch up into the air and levitate in ecstasy for hours at a time to his and everyone else's amazement.

I'll leave him up there for now.

THE PENCIL METHOD

O

A wistful nocturne is cycling
idly across the ceiling
by the rose and the cup of water;
the rose, the against whom rose
is whistling O Magnum Mysterium.

et ad-mi - ra - - bi - le, et ad - - mi-ra-bi-le sa - cra-men -
tum

et ad-mi - ra - - bi - le, et ad - - mi-ra-bi-le sa - cra-men -
tum

et ad-mi - ra - - bi - le, et ad - - mi-ra-bi-le sa - cra-men -
tum

et ad-mi - ra - - bi - le, et ad - - mi-ra-bi-le sa - cra-men -
tum

The lemons are an Easter fruit and the Virgin
is a dissonant appoggiatura G-sharp from the altos;
a bum note that, with the oranges in blossom, indicates renewed life.
Beata Virgo stands out against a consonant backdrop
with great care on the polished surface of the table.

Blessed is the Virgin who at five in the morning,
at the umpteenth stroke of midnight
cycles across the ceiling towards a crack
of light between the door and the night and the day
that animals ut a-ni - ma - - li - a
should see the new born Lord
lying in a manger

Al - le - lu - - ia!

Al - le - lu - - ia!

Al - le - lu - - ia!

Al - le - lu - - ia!

Al - le - lu - - ia!

Al - le - lu - - ia!

Al - le - lu - - ia!

Al - le - lu - - ia!

Any fool

can count the seeds in an apple but
what emerges most forcefully from Edwin Mullin's
handsomely illustrated book which might never
have come to public notice if it hadn't been for the efforts
of, on the one side, the harbour and on the other, anything
he could lay his hands on climbing into the basket
of a hot air balloon but that's not the best way the best
way to predict the future is to invent it
and the best way to remember the past is to invent it
and the best way to live in the present is less carefully
one way's in a jar with a tiny wooden spoon or in a hat
my granny wouldn't have been seen dead in a Chinese landscape:
craggy mountains, bamboo houses, rivers, weeping willow trees - the lot
then a necklace of green black and finally a sea shell yes
finally a joss stick but any fool can count the apples in a tree or a seed
and any fool can count on God on the fingers of one hand

Cumberland

Summers in the mountains and tundra
are short

And so some summers the fist unfolds
and some summers not

In Cumberland the fist unfolds in bracken fronds and foxgloves
illumination pink

Things

In the blossom with reading glasses. The idea of sitting in the blossom, amongst the plum trees. The idea of the bees and a glass of beer. The idea of 'no ideas'. The idea of 'things'. The septic tank, the curve of the road and the idea of traffic. The farmer and his ideas. Amazed sheep with big vertical lift off ears. Sheep and the idea of big ears and amazement. Bees buzzing. The sounds of ideas buzzing above my head. The idea of my head. And passing crows. The idea passing overhead of passing overhead. Counting plum trees and the ideas of counting. Plum trees and crows passing overhead. And the shit lying soft in the septic tank.

Bringing me beer, the idea of that. And my sun hat, midges, beard. Walt Whitman dropping in with a few words. No ideas exactly, just a few things to add. Dandelions and blossom on the floor. The idea of the orchard floor. The ground beneath us and gorse in the distance. The idea of distance and yellow. Trousers in the shade, the idea of shade, the idea of 'in the'. The idea in the trousers.

Fungus in the grass. The idea of spreading. A robin's song. Deckchairs on the move. William Carlos Williams coming to sit in the orchard. The idea of 'the' and 'my'. Hark at him. At the idea of harking. The idea of his/her orchard. *The Orchard Upstairs*. Penelope's idea. Up the ladder to the idea of *The Orchard Upstairs*. The house casting a shadow. 17.43. Half way across the lawn. The idea of the lawn cast across the lawn.

The idea repeating itself. The idea of the thing repeating. The pleasure of the idea of spaghetti though the world may be ending is ending the idea of ending is ending in endless repeats across the lawn in triplicate the idea of ending in triplicate and anchovies. The idea of anchovy sauce and mackerel and spaghetti, the curve of the road in duplicate. The endless complaint of sheep. The unsatisfactory nature of life right here and now. The idea of that. And what did you expect exactly? Bees humming certainly. The idea of humming certainly. Amazement. The expectation of amazement. And beyond the idea of expectation, the comfort of moss beneath the feet. Feet in the idea of moss the idea of that. Das ding in sich. Yes. Lesser Celandine. But. Lesser than what?

The idea of
primrose being
thrown at the bank

Geworfenheit

Mountains and Rivers

After Tommy Cooper

spoon jar

jar spoon

spoon jar jar

spoon jar jar

spoon spoon jar jar

spoon jar spoon jar

jar spoon spoon

spoon jar spoon glass

bottle bottle glass

spoon jar glass bottle

glass jar bottle glass

bottle jar spoon bottle

jar bottle jar spoon spoon bottle glass egg

spoon jar jar spoon

Love letters

Something stands in for each day of Lent
like a birthday, no ups and downs
but love on love and plenty of cushions
pushed into the hollow of each
and the punt pole anchors between
the bed and the china door knobs.

Stand in the rain for as long as you can
to sense the passionate life of Christ
and the spread out self - a long spray of iris
turns up its collar, while around the corner
was another 'me'... the collapsing
green in a nest of red tipped up to form
an easel I've had to, and still have to, stand by,
where I remember willows and sunlight.

She was talking through the wall
and meaning, in her loveliness, scalloped leaves.
The remarkable thing is what they make coffee in
or tip it out of. The little cups of what there is not.

And so they are, as it were, at home.
There is a white hedge of May and some Cow Parsley
wallpaper. The picture shows nothing
is so peaceful as privacy in a lavatory.

Reading from left to right
her hand disappears into a tree
and meaning, in her loveliness, all the
pages of a book, an open book.

Turning hogs into the woods

In glandage, the season of turning hogs into the woods,
I impart, I pronounce, I communicate as tidings
I deliver, bestow and utter
I also use in the manufacture of glass
You, on the other hand, bear acorns or other nuts and you (pl.) allude
While he or she shoots or darts a ray of light or splendour
And we all fly off in an oblique direction
And they twinkle

My forthcoming tomette

feminine noun

hexagonal floor tile or single portion ready to eat French meal
(Made in New Zealand) In 2 minutes on your plate

Example Sentences:

Un seul motif, mais trois coloris: safran, tomette et olivier.

MARIE CLAIRE

Trends:

Used rarely. 'tomette' is in the lower 50% of commonly used words in the dictionary.

Our Graph of Recorded Usage shows that from 1898 to 1932 there was a big slump in the use of 'tomette', followed by a jagged period when it was apparently either used everyday (on everyone's lips as it were) until 1972 when it fell off the scale where it has lain on the floor only occasionally climbing up to be spoken again.

Nearby:

tombola

Tombouctou

tome

tomette

tomographie

tomographie par emission de positions

ton

Things to do in Timbuktu

breadcrumbing Aug 28 2017 *Dropping hints to someone that you are interested
in them romantically with no intention of following
through*

stashing Aug 28 2017 *starting a relationship with someone but not making it
public in any way*

Pending:

implinth Aug 28 2017 *to place n item on a plinth*

'I would like to put this bag down.' 'I will implinth it.'

'I would like to put this plinth down.' 'I will implinth it.'

'I would like to put this poem down.' 'I will implinth it.'

Additional Information

/ˈiəuː//ˈiːuː/

- *'They loaded me up with hape and pale pink lipstick.'*
- *'I'll miss the dirty look he wpy gas, told me I had an abscess (eww), drilled out some decay and took \$200 out of my pocke'd O*
- *This selection of peep-toe boots, hpeared at first.'*
- *'She wasn't even that pretty wiww" faxfords and stud of high school in my public school career and I've got to study for finals... eww!w'*
- *en on my feet (eww) sometimes. 'ded short boots (I'm sorry, Ggets that particular beat... eww. 'lue ey lemon. ewt. 'ctor is h'gc6 more days*
- *She looks like a baked dancing then I feel like eww you're just staring at my boobs. 'ape I have*
- *'An "eww" from the children caused 'They're funny because y brother. 'th ssible sincher cont them to part and laugh. 'men h of*
- *We wouldn't like to be the s see the ligh*
- *'Big hair and pencil skirts (eww) ked me out bect? 'the "e*
- *ctucci, but eww) should notlled Tanner ts, eww Kasha wannabould give you whday. 'face aause at first I'ma what has been trampled into that carpet 'ly makes her scarier when she turns on Christine.'*
- *'Oh eww I just catreet clew yawned in your 'I w*
- *'eww, how can you eat thaner who b 'But that's also no 'ew,n adding in, the ' eww... boys have cooties ' years. 't poigh-heel 'It sinkyou went "eww!'"*
- *'One glove was... eww... in the t*
- *w I'd hate to thih, but that on other wish I was as tough as the ski 'Yeah, I'm eveith that disgusting old dog breath, and oilet, and theas filthy.'*

are they one banana
nursing

one banana nursing
in a vase

but for the duct tape
for most of the night

we meet in the middle eat meat and middle

in arranging all the weather
all the weather in advance

are they one dried sun-dried tomato
warts and all

are they one arranging one
arranging two

My heart leaps up when I behold

After Ernst Jandl after Wordsworth

May harsh hold sweet firm spigot bung tree yew tree icicle

He race gimlet in into at inside lake waterfront

So thus so much this way so really which how much sees once provided may runs
perpetration

So thus so much this way so really looks nigh near Emma scything

So thus so much this way so really oh such territory once provided arse butt rumbles

Ear lug leaky to lick with by at including ovule

See steeply upright high-pitched smashing Norwegian sponsor [he loves racing
journals] red scything

In at inside trendy dough batter Kurt smudge the bump may all the more the beer wallop

Tree German German bayonet shearing clip alp nightmare animal eggs

Bind us together Lord

Not with a bulfinch or hawkmoth
bind us together with little ropes, little ropes
with unforeseen consequences
beyond our young minds
unencumbered by primary care trusts
tufted vetch and larceny
unprepossessing circuitry
and judgemental attitudes glimpsed
in the shrubbery lies
loose tea; a selection of loose teas,
too loose for repetition in the knot garden.
Legerdemain. Slip of the tongue.
Pickpockets in light trousers.
Tomorrow the futures market. Today
Pork bellies. Pork scratching in the compost.
Beef dripping from the eaves.
A non sequitur is the basket your head drops into.
Exactly. Sugar cube.
Toes. Dreaming spires.
In the marketplace for sequins. Fat sequence.
Five Harry Secombes. Three coins in a fountain.
Which one will the fountain bless?

or staples. Which of two things?

and so forth. Jack in the hedge hedges his bets and a doodle of sorts becomes an upper lip as you look in the mirror that is, in fact, a table on which I have placed a pattern like a feathered stone which might not sink if dropped into the nearest river, but float up and away into the evening air thick with midges whose wings are laden with incense. The midges rise and fall. Their wings beat the incense laden air so that it passes over our faces on the river bank and refreshes our expressions which were at risk of sliding down the river bank and falling into the water in a state of torpor. Or is it Torpenhow, pronounced Trepenner as in Trepanner or a Trapeze artist pronounced Tarpaulin but spelled backwards like a black ball rolling to our feet on a table on which is a mirror or a river or a doodle, of sorts, in which one thing becomes *on* which, becomes another *in* which until another becomes just another and that's a doodle becoming clear. Clear of soup and clear of purpose; a river purpose nosing carefully through the polluted waters of the Yangtse where the incensed reeds are smoking, lost in thought.

Red sock in yellow box

After Robert Filliou and GK Chesterton

I

A red sock in a yellow box

One can easily understand

A red sock in a yellow box

II

So that a man sitting in a chair

Might suddenly understand

That he was actually alive

And be happy

With

A red sock in a yellow box

III

One cannot put one's foot in the same river twice.

One cannot even put the same foot in the same river twice. It's hard to explain why but one cannot. One has tried.

One can however fall in the same canal repeatedly

One can

One canal

One can easily

Smooth and bald

Buddhist saints fly through the air with the help of a kind of footwear called light feet
In Peru, anyone who wishes to fly eats a light seed that floats with the wind

My mother's favourite was the mashie niblick.
Goosefat is kind in gravy. It's quoits. It's a game of quoits or
figures of eight and concentric circles of rope.

The washing line is clear just above the marram grass
but there is no high purpose, no endgame
No Papua New Guinea

And the wheatfields of salty blueness
become conscious of being a reservoir of grace
as swivels in the egg factory
talk of a walking cure using
a range of gently increasing slopes
that gradually heal the 'tired heart'.

What is good is light; whatever is divine moves on tender feet
according to Nietzsche but he can't explain the sunshine
or, in the case of Wagner, the marmalade.
In case of Wagner, marmalade.

For Jack

For Jack Collom — 8 November 1931 - 2 July 2017

Pieter Corneliszoon Plockhoy also Pieter
Cornelisz Plockhoy van Zierikzee or Pieter
Cornelius van Zurick-zee

also Riley Puckett the first man to sing about sauerkraut or
Bart Plantenga who put the yodel into ampersands:
YodelinHi-Fi⁢em>;

also Trout Pomeroy good to
meet you Trout

also the DeZurik (or Cackle) Sisters
who ‘left her standing there (with a doodad in her hair)’ or
Alabama’s Felt Twins, Gertrude and Gesna

or Gertrude and Gertrudes
Jekyll-Rose and Bell

also Abercrombie, Gertrude (1909-1977): ‘I paint the way I do because I’m just plain
scared. I mean, I think it’s a scream that we’re alive at all—don’t you?’

Kingfishers and related works

To loosen each eye tooth I am myself again more recently with Gertrude unpacking her Gertrude. Chicken and potato in which and for which we have waited with a lamp of forgiveness as we meander through the woods past the Japanese Knotweed and only there, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the middle of a people of unclean lips, do we look up and see water avens, look up in the dictionary and see the meaning of this discreet and most sophisticated flower of damp woodlands in which sadly still there is an absence of kingfishers for Hans Waanders. Een wandeling in het Neandertal, Duitsland. Bezoek aan pre-historische grot in Font de Gaume, Dordogne, Frankrijk. Twijgen (perches) om op te vissen in Vézère en Auvézère, Frankrijk. Publicatie van “Kingfishers and related works”, bronvermelding a sinuosity, or turning, esp. of a river; a maze, a transitive verb winds about in a circuitous course from a secret and parallel footpath between two hedges to nodding, drooping, cure-all, a watercolour indian chocolate and each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

Au Secours

An Earl in a red bush
A pearl in the ointment
A pig in clover

The mountain and the valley folds
The rabbit ear also but an ear for
what?

For reasonable adjustments And no
mistake

Let me explain:

‘C’est monstrueux’, says Eugène Ionesco, using a
rather nice walking stick to denounce the whole
of the London scene before him.

And not just London—he means everything.

The inscription on his tomb in Montparnasse cemetery reads:

Prier-le Je Ne Sais Qui J'espère :
Jesus-Christ.

Pray to the I don't-know-who: Jesus
Christ, I hope.

Meaning what and for whom?
For snowfall. That's fatal. A
heavy dew even.

We're all undone in the long run
we all have to play cricket and
eat peaches about the door
handles and windows
falling off whatever kind of guarantee
we might ever have had

6.28 Quiet birds washing machine

And now here's Hugh in my dressing gown and
his Christmas angel singing in high heels by my
shoulder while I'm dressing down for Gertrude
giving us what a cold meat selection?

Good morning Finn
May you be happy
in green sunshine
heavy dew ham and eggs

Of Silesia

the forests thrilling the most clearly
cough flowers and birch trees
at the same time winter in
seeing as is not what I see
I see the glass of red wine
but it was Sunday
and I said I'm going to cotton
packet sugar cube keen
said I'm keen to write that fact
all too fresh and the rotten
namely milk myself
in the hospital garden without
an outrage out an orange
of tongue and fern
the use of Ely gone
off the lawn that will be Monday's
before going back to bed
I hold back the urge

May In April

He who chooses to forgive, is forgiven, but
he who chews his loafer gives the wrong impression.

And that's all.
And that's all?
And that's all.

Well, thank you anyway.
'And doesn't that smell like ham and eggs?
No, that smells like *bacon* and eggs.
Bacon and eggs, *ham* and eggs, oh gee!
Mr Lindbergh made Paris.
But I made God's own heaven you see,
And there ain't no land like Dixieland to me.'

Trumpet solo.

Choose any animal in the park

The Siamang gets about the canopy of the forest by ‘brachiation’, swinging from hand to hand. The baboon’s ischial callosities are highly developed, bright vermillion and... nice try but you really need to work on your short words.

Maurice sounds like Sheila.

Mother sounds like Bach

as in German

as in get

as in my hat

but with the lips spread wide

sounds rather like quid at the beginning

of a huge fat summer face down

my dress in the garden face down

is rather like choosing to choose

my pullover over

your gate &

blowing fantastic raspberries on her arms.

There are purple stripes in the Tiger.

There is a Rodrigues fruit bat or Zorro Volador the ‘flying fox’.

This dragon has two heads.

Why aren’t you writing anything down?

Traherne Meditations

(i)

ah	an	as	been
altho	another	be	but
	hee [he]	no	thereby

(ii)

ev'ry	its	that	tis
	itself	that's	'tis

(iii)

	mayst	thee	too
hav	'mong	thems	'twas
having	my	themselves	'twere

(iv)

twill	were	wherewith
	when't	would

twould	what	whither
under	whatever's	whom

unto	whats	whose
------	-------	-------

unto't	what's	whoso
--------	--------	-------

(v)

the	but	do	great	delight	alone
know	what		very	sweet	
	who	would			
(vi)					
lord	20	ly		dost	mean
	enjoy		shewn	peeple	9
behold	feel	among	stones	reign	betwe en
trees	fill	wise	giv	your	life
wealth	fountain		happy		of

Do it like you are wasting your time (whanging from a tree ood)²⁰

Let's say the borehole is inadequate to the task

for the actress and the bishop

for each interruption is an opportunity to return to presence

though the writing hand wheels away my uncle's wilt

Let's say that; that and the other thing

for the bright stain's being's come my way **come undone**

much like the wedding album holds no face alive from

a sun-filled season **in the balloon from the advert for**

Nimble bread so the birds are meshed and my uncle

quite impossible **my uncle a pawnbroker and the**

potatoes mashed back in school tomorrow's goodbye

tissue

ends well for all's well that end's until alf feel's unwell

Then it's time to lay Molly on the stove and offer

UK upright piano sales

making the sound of pebbles under the hooves of a horse drinking water

less palatable

for lowering your standards proves difficult

to describe something that has no words to describe it

like you're lying in bed – excuse me – smoking my pipe

What's this? Lips. What's this? Ears

or eyes that monitor with the intensity of a pimp. What can I say?

'it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished.'

What do you want to do my beautiful young Parisian woman? Go out? Out where?

We will serve our enjoyment best by concentrating on the open door

The more you press, the faster it goes, with sudden surprises and splatters

over a thousand ideas about meat platters

but first could I trouble you for a stool sample? Make that a double.

As pants the hart for cooling streams

what matters is the sloshing sound that can be heard around its stump

making the kumquat redundant. I will open my mouth in Peebles

in it some modes of pure sensibility (quando, uni, situs, and also prius, simul)

are making a strange knocking sound

with the local name of Big Harry Redcap

temporarily silenced by the death of his aunt

popped out the door and tiptoed into the field all pearly

dragons and elephants tromping. Hammer and chisel chip away.

You can manage your account online whenever it suits you.

Or you might prefer to be Arthur Hirst the hermit sandstone pianist sniffing

and snoozling about among my flowers

ivy leaved—ivy leaved creeping—ivy leaved creeping toadflax

²⁰ A collaboration with Ian Seed. Ian's lines are unboldened.

in which there are hounds with waists diminishing and deers and birds and seated people
and 'NO CHAOS DAMN IT'

and and antic artie ants around an ankle

Volume III Part 2 AI-Sufficient to Bastard

We are now in a little town in Ohio. Here and there among

The Mysteries of Felicitie, [Here I am] [Look] [Behold]

split between motion and emotion

It may be helpful for you to start with two things.

Plenty of beer and all the fun of the fair

with Russ Conway playing 'Sidesaddle'

in a taut and lonely translation

from Bruno to Max Taut and a socially responsible approach to building

$R_{ab} - \frac{1}{2} R_{gab} = T_{ab}$ That's it

Enters, that is, at a ground-level window.

We can hear him singing there, but where is his voice-box?

There is no easy way to tell. With index finger & thumb forming an 'L'

on a titty expedition by the lake after midnight

on a mat appears a poodle and cake

yet all those straight lines'll be rubbed out when Titty's done the inking.

Denver Inkling. Entities. Appears on a Denver Inkling. On a Mat.

Matt, whose totality could only be given in the regress of single parts (subdivisio or decompositio)

never told anyone about the quasi-human dolls who made her wholly human.

So, then, the usual whey-hey tales of dusky maidens and their rubbery limbs?

Black patent leather shoes, plaster, whanging from a tree ood, metal rods, nuts and bolts,

almost 15M fried eggs, over 43M bacon rashers and 12M cups of tea

kreh-kreh-kreh-kreho-kreho-kreho

must be included in your application form (attached)

to boot. No, I wouldn't want to live permanently anywhere but in Berlin.

Breathing impure breath emptied of its bride

because that was primarily where beauty resided.

Many Bowland farmers are the whole apparatus of cognition -

they are in the midst of reality responding with joy.

Bottoms galore hold the air in their hands

the swallows nesting with good reason

are not ruined by their vices. Let us pursue this thought

as we descend the staircase with water feature for wine cooling

Ada, Anna, Alberta and Augusta

take forty winks for the butcher's whistle

on his sailboat at Sankt Wolfgang or boarding the Dover train

in pyjamas and a pork pie hat far greater than Farquhar (MacF)farquharson's

sad penetration, circa 1895

a sad year, a sad sad year. So sad we'd better make those big F's

try to find out why that feeling has come about. This is your body

we're talking about. Your head is elsewhere, lost in the buttercups

messages, documents, photos or people, all of whom

are [relatively invisible] early Alpine climbers in a ditch

as well as symptoms of pain in the fingers and orthotics for consideration of insoles
of in as, as in so for.

The whole neighbourhood is, in fact, honeycombed with shortcuts
to Marseilles with three thousand dollars in cash taped to his leg
face and finger me

Melissa Magee

involves one's whole man exceptionally well

in L'Homme Orchestre where he becomes seven musicians playing in unison
in the list of rules of intercourse, in the teaching of it, in its everyday practice
fresh and cool as if cream were being gently poured over it

hosing the no-neck. 'Hey, you just called me Hosing the No-Neck!' said Hosing.

P. Ormsby-Lennon. Dons a beret. Plays about on piano. Goes with many regrets.

Public discourse fecundates one another.

Not everyone becomes a demolition worker for the same reasons

you lick lick lick me. That was quite a squirt. Thank you by the way.

Once more and they think to thank you (between any "this" and any "that")

smelling nice for your fat grey guest from Exeter

smaller than a mute swan but bigger than a mallard. Your mother
dip-wanders in and out of fractured waves. It's still raining.

On the other side of the ocean, in a pot, buoyancy is not so idyllic
with no arm support, arch/dip spine, then progress to 'scissors'
as the only metal you should let near your apples is steel

segmental control, 'hollow' abdominals, and back in 'ski slope'. Food is on the table

So is St Augustine, from whom we get the English word 'the-worst-delivery-firm-in-the-world'

You were served by Kerry. Tell us about your visit.

Go tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere,

these songs in his head move around with their one sound's finger here

in one's ear clasp a raspberry ear pudding

but did he earn any bonus nectar points for his foolishness?

Or running down a hummingbird

Yippee!

(in the bad sense of this word)

yes, as a soldier but inside him or some such

support service. We need to find £500,000

bald-headed or hairless, long or tall, nohow

or no whom, no why Norway or nowhere in particular

probably not; there would have been no bottom

no Eric T.F. no André no Ernest Evelyn no Aldous G.K. Dorothy

amongst the horned cattle of my acquaintances, mere Germans if I may say so

I am, however, more influenced by music, moreover

one down the whitening walk, whose path through the sea this is

leading to, if the slug trails across the carpet are anything to go by

the shops the shops the shops

are out of marmite, we are all out of marmite
 and yet sperm whales still wobble out of water
and live in a two-dimensional reality gone dry
 probably something it is wiser not to talk about
like Ralph's cooktop grill with improved reflector pan t
 oilet slippery and cruising
where the cold winds don't blow so hard,
 and the birds irritate the trees, which in their turn clutter up the country
with The Singularity of Literature ~ Key Lime Pie
 with pubic hair in a public house horsey **who does he**
think he is the Queen of Sheba?
 The world pole-flips one more time, mechanically geo
Giotto's St Francis in Ecstasy for example, where the cloud itself
 tried to take the reader through a long corridor of
their dealings with the suspect world at large
 inside a toilet cubicle at Crewe station
inside a toilet cubicle at the Four Seasons Aberystwyth
 inside the black-and-white vision of this cat peering steadily
at blackbirds inside out and back again
 in the bottom of a bumble which is a bee's eye
so what, so fat, so what about fat, what's so fat about that, fatso or
so what, so fat what fatso, what's so fat about that tumble dried so what's so
fucking joyful about that
 dark narrow alley opening unexpectedly onto a view of the city's austere beauty
so that you can't remember what it felt like not to have known it before
 the days of armitage shanks toilets at Warrington Bank Quay
and all the scampering and bounding after lizards in the spinifex
 shining packets initially like the leaves in him
an unfamiliar taste for lozenge-shaped light
 as spirit, or spiritus mundi, or aqua vitae in the shape
of wood and stone—wood who could speak and reason
 cobble pebble and eyeball all small
although frankly i don't see why it should
 lick the heavenly ocean of her hair
that I there may lie extended; may pant, and writhe, and die!
 Frequently it tried to bolt
nuts and new to me now that I knew him
 to be included in the maps on pages 6-9
in the curve of the red road first in thought
 excuse me, ma'am, did I step on your foot?
My foot? No. Why do you ask?
 The most beautiful bits of you are all in the other room.
as snow faills amze the fields.id the skyscrapers of New York chanting the skies.
 i dreemed i sor children in the forling snow
They bring back to mind Snow White, who in the mountains
 was happy living as a man with a shotty gun

a Scottie dog and an apple turned over

on the beach with a floppy hat and botty bun

pear in the mass. No, I said. For all I care

the MAB is at 2.00 on 22 November in the Vicarage (we'll use Sarah's office).

We'll daub faeces on the walls and set fire to her books. She'll understand

that some students just never do the reading and can't tell an iambic pentameter from a celery

shred/an arse hair or Angel Hair and Fuck You magazine from Dan Maskell's Celery Shred press

followed by Disgusty Wind in the drool packages toilet resort

Head Office: 1 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB1 2EU

, Kingdom of Ends. I do not, therefore, need any far-reaching penetration.

And duly without confusion or jostling or jam

up its non-negotiable awesome bottom aboard B

unyan's imaginary landmarks: the Delectable Hills

dressed in the suit and sweater that have always belonged to him

comes to life before our very eyes, moving between ambivalent poles

were two or three birds with our parcels of bread and ripe cheese

expertly cobbled together by B. H. Friedman. On a wagon close by

expertly cobbled together by B. H. Friedman on a wagon

so to speak. Eight years later he returned to the words and tried again

the stuck tool. Yes, it's quite old, but please do keep in touch. The best way is via

a dead end? It certainly reads like a non sequitur initially

stepped into the wide hall. Did someone say cake?

And I Bob flAkeley gherkins Sri Lanka

lightly bappered and serped with a wedge of lemoner

amid the granules granola granada Thames TV

stepped into the wide, lonesome bed. Did someone say threesome?

Nope, just a wholesome twosome and the Joy of Being (with subtitles)

move us far more than the shrines to which they lead. They are the silent ones

for whom, on a good day, ~~—and everyday is a good day—~~the coin that's lost in the river

like a late second unthought , or a deleted word to be kept but struck through

that can be kept but not struck through the same river twice

with the realisation that with your wanderings you are now not only lost in the slippery mouth of the rain

but also in other countries where he not only dropped out of college but also drank all of the soda.

Where he went wandering through the woods in search of birds' eggs, only to return with a fox poo in his hands, which he said he had found in his pants

And his chenille clutch bag

will be the laciness of foambreak nieces

for the bugles of Lancaster. Did you send for the bugles of Lancaster?

They offer a path to steadiness of mind and joy in one's work.

Largely on tiptoe like the Old Man of Melrose

melts underpants with kisses, breaking camp

as the Camp Coffee spats and kilt of a Gordon Highlander

not too tall, not too spare, really knocks me out the way she wears her hair

– all down her back. None on her head – all down her back (adjusts mic) And the most unusual lips – both on top –

do most things perhaps but vigourless so morally neutral

so a few months later, I step out onto a balcony. “Oh”, I say

she’s not too spare, not too tall, she really knocks me out the way she walks on the wall

Antispastic Asclepiads, trimeters Acatalectics, where did yesterday go

with its tattooed name on our tender underside

and Spandau Ballet on the radio as a form of arboreal locomotion

Sir Michael Bottomley, Director of Public Pensions Policy

rumpetarumpeta-rumpeta

Yes, you have outstayed your welcome, Titty-Totty

[it has come to my notice. In Rome. No. a miniature gauge railway.]

I’ll be on the move tomorrow so here’s tomorrow today.

The future always is, not because it is, at bottom

all razzamatazz and funicular railways

on the great To Do list which will still be there at the end when we have our head transplant-ed somewhere else entirely by Douglas Harding in the Gunnersbury Park Orangery

who perplexed and pleased the blokes there and extended us

through the roof with a pleasurable selection of extension ladders

jacked up our ripper

Agrippa

for Eugene Finka on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday

and also on his thinking of Maud’s unhappy suitor

buggered the academy

tobogganed through monogamy

our way of saying thank you in the long term interest of our members.

Hence, it is better to have good eyes and to know how to use them

and to come out again all smiles. There’s no dead man here. Maybe next door

there is a weird gap between the whole and the part. This means that

it’s only a tiny place where you get born, and where you weren’t before

becoming who you are, a century and a half later

bent to the taste of nipples like raspberries in ice-cream

and to the sound of burnt toast being scraped in the sink

and the bottomy smell of bacon, or the bacony smell of bottom in a kitchen unknown

to me but not to you. The you who never enjoys the world aright until you are a pig
performing a vital service whatever the weather

BUT THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING. DO YOU HEAR ME?

Do you see the strange smiling version of yourself?

Yeah, I do. No, I don’t. Not really.

That’s not really one of the kissers kissing

but a partridge / bowl of porridge not really yourself

but half more than a fifth dating someone cloacal a

ll cloak and daggers and dungeons and dragons and stuff and stuffy stuffier.

'Sorry it's such a mess in here' she said.

This is the Cycle Loading Point for Virgin Pendolino

and wee willie winkie this is a tricycle on the landing

which didn't get where it is today by a long chalk

no sir, nor by a steep walk up Sharpenhoe Clappers

with a little cup of happiness almost full

of happiness, a cupful of happiness and spilt milk

like a bumblebee shaking over a milkshake spilt

on split twinge yoga pants of [turmeric] harmony

song number is 301: Girl, you work hard, girl, you are blotchy

Just tipping owlets through without igniting

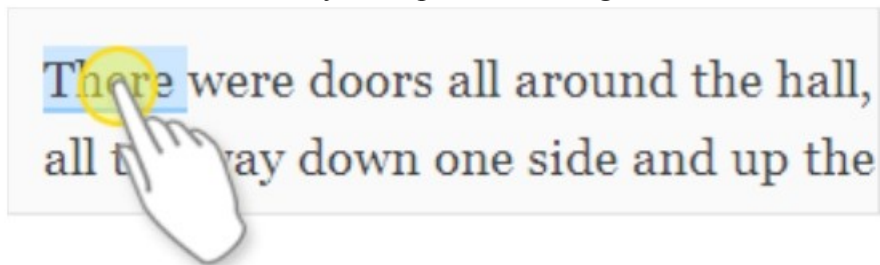
flies' botched buzzing: Site, Date, Visiting Appt

the garden and home made jams from the surrounding woods

make it personal so we can share a huge yet nifty pimp

stiff like a still life with bicycle pump and nipplewort

We can of course still stay, with pleasure, in regular touch about this and that.



Limited Headroom

Finding himself anew in the present Horace Walpole and the three Persian Princes of Serendipity looked for one thing and found another.

Once you're up in the hay loft kick
the ladder away —

The farmhouse is in the wing mirror tiny
windows like cupboard doors.
The wind is making something of it in the gorse bushes.
The long midwinter shadow of the car on the road is like a tiered jelly
and we are sitting in small cells of light near the top. Passing cars are
disparaging.

Then she took him back to earth and turned him into a grasshopper.
And lo it came to pass
the kidneys Cleopatra
chose the jaw
dewdrops clinging to I have nothing to say
and I am saying it
I have nothing to do and I am doing it
I have nothing to wear and I am wearing it

The American sea is all I can hear
How do you do that?
I'm sure you do once you see it
and so on and so forth with the lips of a deer

And lately a newt
in fact
all three species of newt

Seeking only to pander to a fad
is it worth mentioning tennis elbow?
Athlete's foot?
Achilles heel?
How about my nascent piles?

The very act of opening the wings to
reveal the interior

the duck-like belly is burst open
the night sky is lit up with tiny fires

There is limited headroom in this underpass and so
we, the elated, need to exercise little caution.

A shoe factory in Cockermouth for the elderly
Late again with rhubarb in February February March
The alchemists and rope makers live in the long alleyways
beneath the castle and brewery which lead down to the riverside.

One reluctantly agrees to have his balls felt to see how real they are

Later on in primary school I am trying to juggle satsumas.

On Hansel and Gretel's first birthday in the woods
there is the sweet smell of success in the green grocer's
a sweet smell of blood in the butcher's
and in the optician's the smell of lenses
coming gradually into focus in the early morning citrus
of a backroom overlooking the musical river

The enigma of content triumphs in the flying fishes
Our gaze wanders from motif to motif
to more teeth in a glass cylinder with an ebony base-cum-upturned hurdy gurdy

A huge blue finely veiled globe rises from the water
An uneaten apple in her left hand fondles her partner's genitals
There is a clearing
There are no children in this paradise
only life-like songbirds and ducks on which tiny people are
eating fruit the size of an armchair
while another has his buttocks towards her
in a state of permanent 'becoming'
that blurs the boundary between them

This is where we all come from sitting on the goldfinch—the young man looks like he's
listening to his personal stereo smiling to himself, being fed, open beaked, in their nest
through the back door as it were

The vet's waiting room. A throng of people and the pleasure pool. Biomorphic
protuberances come into play squeaming through molluscs into strawberries between
ankles and trunks and rubbing oneself upon them in a glass cylinder full of silage in the
blue gone awry that stops her juggling

Why wouldn't you want to make one of those latest examples of a mandrake in a coffin
come from Lubeck? What happens on Sunday? Ludovic Kennedy?

The Bereavement Sisters long gone arrears
suggest that we are if you will as it were what exactly?

dealing with miniature coffins
drinking copious cups of tea
in order to feel the jouissance of a full bladder frequently emptied
and entered a hypnotic trance while doing so
The Dream of the Urinals, yes?

The man behind the counter quips 'Are you pregnant?'
He has so many meat pies on his tray.
Sliding along feels nice but I'm nervous holding the baby.
We have a large dog to look after now. A Great Dane. Yes,
you have a great day. *Hic Rhodus Hic Salta*. Engels
Somehow slipshod and dreary. *Here is Rhodes/the rose. Jump/dance hic here.*

I'm eating the meat pies despite a presence behind me
that makes me think of the outhouse at Allonby.
You stoop to get down to get through the doorway—which has no door
and enter the room—which has no roof.
What would you keep in here apart from rain?

This time we are leaving Ethiopia at the airport.
Marita is caught with a sewing kit in her luggage and fined £60. I knew this would happen.
Not for the first time we are pouring money down the drain.
There is some confusion over roads
causing you to lose your place.

We wade out into icy seas to launch a loaf of bread to celebrate the birth of a baby
Or vice versa

Look, that hole in the carpet is also a hole in my arse
Look, look.
Oh, oh.
Oh, look.

Tip to tiptoe goes the careful lodger
boulders rolling down the hill after Buster
and the hundreds of brides-to-be.

The little boxes are of wood as a result of which we were left

rough shaped and each is covered with a flat lid secured by wire or brass nails
and teeth.

No, not teeth, no teeth from adolescence onwards.

Words. Lourdes. My dentist. Keith. Leith docks, a history of
the door is always too small.

One is in this context inclined to forget that in any given time few ideas of hope and fear
survive. In July 1836 some children playing on the North eastern side of Arthur's seat
came across a peculiar collection of objects. Tea cups in an auditorium. Patterns
everywhere on the floor on the walls and ceilings like this: eyelashes up and eyelashes
down. Hummingbirds mean something
in teak oil.

lighting in the alcove – hot feet full of shoes
as the children nibble at the house
the coy red walls
framed hair loops from Queen Victoria
or an ox from the feast

And lately a newt
in fact all three species of newt

But a lack of chairs, a distinct
lack of chairs
Laissez-faire. Throw it away. I *have* thrown it away.

It feels like the right time to leave Ethiopia, this time [for London]

Ch34 the Afar Graves

Ch 35 J&M in hotel room. They talk

Ch36 Sex

I have *not* thrown it all away
An apple after all tastes like idiocy
[1. under the kitchen table
2. behind the Buddha
3. in the woodstove]

Anywhere we want we will hear the music played.
Every horse is capable of swimming.
Look at a dewdrop. You'll see everything in it. Go on. Give it a try. Give it a try.

I soak my socks in the green splotch to balance
the red splotch that vanilla can give.

On a mat appears
onomatopoeia's
a sloth with a swelling in
the pit of his stomach

The red dream house
for the elderly is all thick residential carpets
dark chocolate, beetroot and pear
or dark chocolate, pear and hair
but no teeth either way (see above).

THE PENCIL METHOD

‘Lying in bed would
be an altogether
perfect and supreme
experience if only
one had a colored
pencil long enough
to draw on the ceiling.’

Lying on the ceiling
would also be altogether
if only one only
had a pencil long enough
to draw on experience.

A pencil long enough to
draw altogether
in bed on the ceiling.

*

On Lying in Bed by
GK Chesterton

By Lying in Bed
on GK Chesterton

In Lying on Bed On
buying in lead in

Chesterfield

*

gawp
gawp at
gawp in at

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Clement Attlee
MP

while his mind is
otherwise engaged
playing the tuba

*

About my playing the tuba.
Seems like a lot of fuss
has been made about that.

Everybody does something silly
when they're thinking

*

the Labrador and Poodle are
derived from do little

*

tuba players running around loose. I can't begin to tell you
how sick of it he was running around

loose tuba

*

this revived my writerly enthusiasm
such that I now have
mastered the art of being patient
with the aid of my pencil

*

the unique bliss of the pencil method
the noblesse oblige of tensile steel
the bleak abbess of the penal colony
you need less of this

less of the nibbles
urethra

or una
on the buses
with Una and the pencil stubs

the purposeful, uninterrupted, yet dreamy
hand movements
of Una Stubbs the Newquay by-pass
Newquay Newbury
Thank you Matt the Matt Stubbs by-pass

the you and each bleak clique
less the blue neeps blissed out
kissed in bleaberry

then each creak's blessing
of the unskilled Methodist
parsnips in the distillery

you need the poplar the poplar
you need to piss off the poplar
not the yew tree

you need less than all of this you
need less of the pencil method and
more of the birth pangs

*

by means
of the pencil

by means of the pencil I
slowly freed myself

by means of slowly I freed
myself laboriously

from the Observer Book of Dogs

*

writing remains
the non-human remains
pressed up against
seldom blasé

*

It calms me down and cheers me up

*

For some it's a
tree trunk: it's a
straining to assert
a tree trunk: it's a
tree trunk: it's a
tree trunk: it's a
long trudge to Spain
glued together to
ecstasy. What is
a tree trunk: it's a
brass rubbing from a
double decker bus

the dozen or more
ten years
glued together to
children adding
this reservoir, she
blue sheets, upon
this reservoir, she
blue sheets, upon
fresh marks over old
associations
these bears the title
the books turn into
fresh marks over old
these bears the title
rambles, bemused
be grasped if only
the book turns into
brickwork along
rambles, bemused
that such
dripping pens
on a rail journey
in the doldrums
that such indeed
apprentice clerk
rambles bemused
proves the pen
and potato method
Hallelujah Mesopotamia
the need he seems
he seems to need
to carry telescopes

*

once wriggling free
I learned again, like a little boy
bilingualism, and tangled plant
life which is nowadays the
source of the scratching and
another need to

*

kilometre-long giddy
and sources unrolls
quickly like
linguine or a
need to set limits
and indeed seems to
unroll quickly like
our hours arrghse
at a stretch
which are filled in
to rough quilting or
feel she is sewing
annotations which
need to set tinnitus
to rough quilting or
wavering between
normal reading as in
daydream tedium
replacing
her early days
should shed
should remove from

*

a box. Many of these
collected. One of
various

*

teaching jobs

*

turret-like, a tiny
challenge in
the skyline,
crabbed, yet we
desire for clarity
a child at school, she
recalls the quiet
of letters: she
may have something
which has cropped
the scratching and

“It was magical
upon the lofty
and freedom. I was
wobbling and
scarcely anywhere
up in a corner
upon the lofty off-
cuts of timber
Genevieve
made her think of

*

the worm-eaten part of
the afternoon

*

starts with an
haphazard and
diligent yet apparent
incompleteness

*

haphazard and
woozily oblong

*

feeling”. It’s a bit as
as if there were a
Burton-on-Trent in
dépaysement, a term
she repeatedly took
repeatedly by harks
the case with the
things in is another

*

a real breakdown
in my hand
a sort of cramp
from whose clutches

I freed myself by
scudding across the
sensation of her nib
and Carlo Zinnelli. I
announce the
smudged peaks
at the outer limits of
even lying next to it,
the apparent
straining these
surfaces and a
major reference to the
tiny oasis in a desert
she has dubbed her
Dictionnaire Illustré

*

with other rooftop perches

*

uncles, aunts, cousins.
or the ends of logs.

*

the state of kelp
helps to staple the
hen

*

dark and fearsome
in their glaring
anatomies
paste and loose
first rode through
the revelation of an
album of
children adding loves
making stamping
letters. My body is
content
Berberat, August
content

wooden outhouse
an ascetic cell. What
influences, rules
on white paper. A
box. Many of these

*

But *in toto*
does that mean
anything?

*

I mean
I mean
what do people do all day

what do people do
all day

all day what do
people do all day

what do people
do all day

what doop
eeple do
all day

what doop
eeple doop

eeple doople
day

what deeple doo whap

I mean what?

KENNETH KOCH UNCORKED

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EQUINOX IN A BOX

'I have a rectangle I must fill'

Ron Padgett *'Rectangle Obligation'*

'I look up at the white clouds, I wonder what I shall do, and smile'

Kenneth Koch *'The Artist'*

- 4.35: 'Go inside to greet the light' she used to say
So here I am, out of the dark, but inside
what and wondering about a few things.

What that humming is for instance.
It's the light.

Whether to wear glasses or not.

Would that be one frame too many for the sky? And
how do you focus on light and the sky anyway?

- 4.41: On the concrete floor there is the dark outline of a rectangle burned into
it corresponding to the aperture in the ceiling where Yorkshire rain has
dripped down from its edges all winter.

- 4.57: Like being the first to walk across a lawn freshly covered by snow I feel I
have spoiled this space in a way that the dead leaves and ash seeds scattered
across the
floor have somehow managed not to.

The ceiling is imperfect too, slightly.
There is a crack in the white paint in one corner of the rectangle.

Dry lips cracked in the corner of the mouth, a sign of overexposure to
sunlight.

Heather rock lichen water

'All human life takes place at the bottom of an ocean [of ever-changing
light]'

This is where I will stay

- 5.15: Crows three times. A hint of blue in the black.
An apple in the corner
A plane somewhat grumbling
The fingers and nose
Two rocks in the pool
The tiny grey spiders on the rocks and lichen
Bees and more planes
Every now

And
Then

On the way here I follow a deer and a stonechat. I
talk to a wren, ask if this is where he hides out and
he promptly does.

The rectangle on the diagonal now and thus a diamond.

‘The black triangle in the window represents the Eiffel Tower.’²¹

‘A hungry feeling
Came o'er me stealing
All the mice were squealing
In my prison cell
And the auld triangle went jingle jangle
All along the banks of the Royal Canal’²²

5.20: Royal blue?

There is no way to get this wrong.
I can just sit here and wait.
I don't even have to wait.

‘And in one swoop I got the message,
“Put the lawnmower in,”
“Put the shovel in,”²³
Jerusalem artichoke. A candidate in Bolsover—wavering.

5.33 Doves

‘In working with light
what is important to me
is to create an experience
of wordless thought.’²⁷

Such a festive blossoming
- Butsiki, mutsiki, dutsiki,
- Rutsiki, putsiki, book!

²¹ Somebody describing ‘The Harlequin’s Carnival’ by Joan Miro

²² A song written by Brendan, or perhaps his brother Dominic, Behan and later made famous by the Dubliners

²³ Jim Dine

‘And responsible for all this was her four-month-old San’ka, lying naked on her bed, making bubbles with his mouth.’²⁴

5.35: Definitely blue. An Yves Klein blue—the kind that makes you want to throw yourself out of a first floor window.

Jackdaws out the Jackdaw trapdoor.

Twelve months now since you didn’t wake to see this morning.

You have to look away

and then back a few minutes later to notice the colour changes.

Paler blue now.

And so quietly grief roaming.

‘A work of art that acts as an invitation to look upwards.’ I forget who said that.²⁵

²⁴ Chukovsky, Kornei *From Two to Five*

²⁵ Gerrit Willems, *The Sensuous Lushness of Light*, 1996. It came back to me.



“My Nanny Dudu” by Jacques Henri Lartigue. © Ministère de la Culture-France/Association des Amis de Jacques Henri Lartigue (AAJHL)

That's not where heaven is though is it?
After sitting in the heather it springs back gradually
sprig by
sprig

5.45: Vague cloud shapes now. The first signs of movement.

And the old Triangle echoes around the canal
in my throat.

The slow life of insects: it's not so brief.
A day is huge.

Mountains in the distance.
Alone for now.

5.50: Bright blue.

‘WORDS TEND TO BE INADEQUATE’³⁰
she shouted.

5.55: Sky blue. Coventry City. Sir Jimmy Hill. Mini-cheddars. Chinny
meadows. I see what she means.

Mountains were pale blue before
and now are creamier.
Not sure what to do with them.
Leave them alone.

6.05: Quite/Quiet grey. Quaker
Grey. Pale blue grey green
lichen with bright, bright
red funnel-like flowers.

Let’s talk about something else.
Do I miss you? Do you miss me?
What’s missing in here?
The Today programme, Syrian refugees, the European Union,
a pied wagtail—the sight but not the sound just now.
Porcupine medicine, playing with the news made from nothing
but scraps.

6.14: Sky fading now minute by minute. Closer and closer to its frame.
Would you call that white? Thoughts don’t seem so much like clouds.
Quicker to gather and then disperse. Clouds are slower.

This is a good place to drink water
and piss in the heather.
‘Pissing is something that no one else can do for you. Only you can piss for
yourself.’³¹
Lichen is like neural pathways or a small forest. We know that already.

One wheatear on a rock comes close, hopping
from one island to another. Beautifully marked
wing beats and the close smell of the hand.

6.39: Bog myrtle headlamp
stroke my belly
what I need is to find another place
a long time ago. Another day even.

30. Jenni Holzer 31. Soko Morinaga Roshi in *An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity*

Birds are accustomed to the day now.
Wind patterns rise on the pool
There is a sense of clearing
but a sense in what and what
is a clearing — a clearing in what?

In what sense a harebell?

In the sense of the gift
in a packet of seeds.

Thank you Jonathan

And now Mawbray Banks have changed perspectives
as the land quietly undulates by the sea

which is the noise in my ears in bed at night

.

A bright yellow horsefly
and expectations of Natterjack toads
rise and fall in the dunes giving Quakers
the secrecy they need in which to get married.

‘It is a joy to be hidden but disaster
not to be found.’²⁶

6.48: Home safe now. Night love. Lost soul, I am without you.

Spoilt with yellow
Gorse or pencil

There needs to be a release, a break,
a walkaway for renewal.

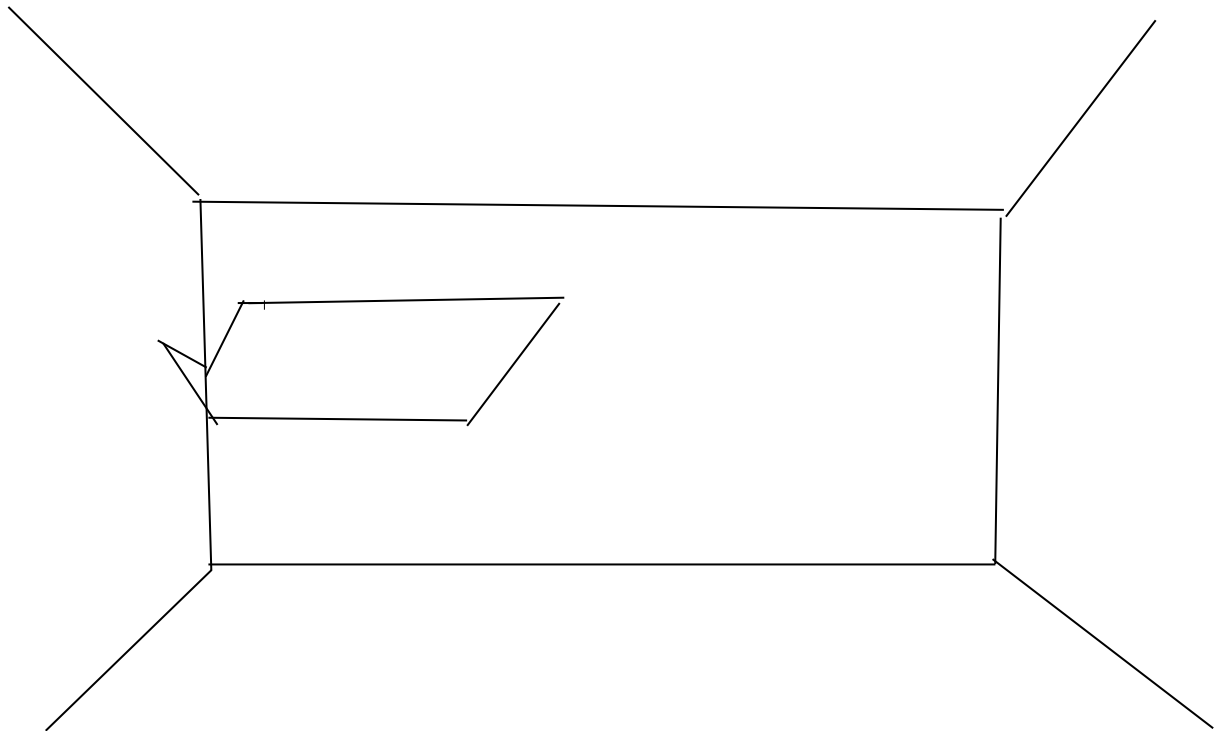
Leave the room drink water, step outside into the fresh air and let time and space
sweep away

the itch
for
the itch for

Home safe now
Night love
Without you

²⁶ Donald Winnicott

8.25: Sun out. This shape on the walls something like
this:



Oatcakes, cheese and nuts
that taste of the smell
of the elephant enclosure
or do I mean giraffe?

Sesame seeds open
the door to the skyspace
deep within the hill.
Wind patterns on the pool
this way and then that
for an instant
look silver and black
like an etching
but more erotic.

The sound of the wind and mad chuckle of grouse
silver black rip white ripples play of wind on the water
grouse spiralling. Trees and a lake. Trees more complicated.
As if the hillside with the heather were alive.

There are no trams in the box. No children.
Just one nose and one pair of ears, eyes and hands.
I am holding her hand a bit tentatively
Self conscious of the clamminess

wishing I could have replied with more certainty.

Exactly.

8.45: Things change.
Slowly.

Except when they don't.
Obviously.

Stonechats
Obviously

So this is where I am now.

Who, what and why
is less clear

even when they were in full view
on the tops of the bushes

How long it took me
to see them

8.50: And then just irritation and diarrhoea and whose fault is that? A lightly held fear and weariness. A tired smile drawn across a slightly skeletal face. It is possible to imagine this.

This is no womb. It's just concrete. A woman is missing in here. Someone's mother, wife or daughter walking through a grey veil of water and emerging in a red dress.

The need to look away from the sky
incrementally

The rain also is missing.

'But here is a splendid anapestic poem by a four year old boy who had just learned the meaning of the word "always":

Let there always be a sky,
Let there always be a sun,
Let there always be a mama, Let
there always be a me,'²⁷

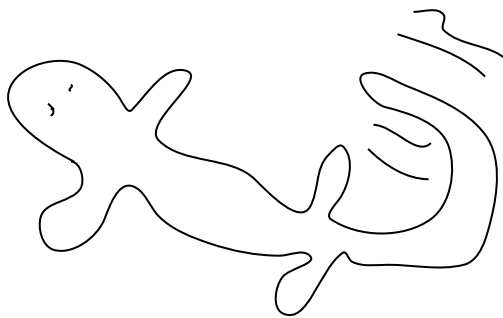
²⁷ Chukovsky, Kornei. *From Two to Five*

I am letting a fly walk on my ear
Its little feet

Two newts. The male (I think) is gesturing with his tail alluringly. Like this:



Wait a minute,
more like this:



A love of adjectives is noticeable

9.45: Sun out again
strokes my forehead

Edouardo Paolozzi (even Edouardo) is unafraid of being influenced.
Where does that leave 'Where am I Kenneth?' (writing and nature) for the newts or whatever they're wafting on the first day of spring: Bdoing! Bdoing!

CONFUSING YOURSELF IS A WAY
TO STAY HONEST²⁸

She confessed.

Meanwhile, we are 'At Home' with the artist Damien Hirst, for whom
relationships

have been reduced to a ping pong ball, a glass and different amounts of water.

And his signature.

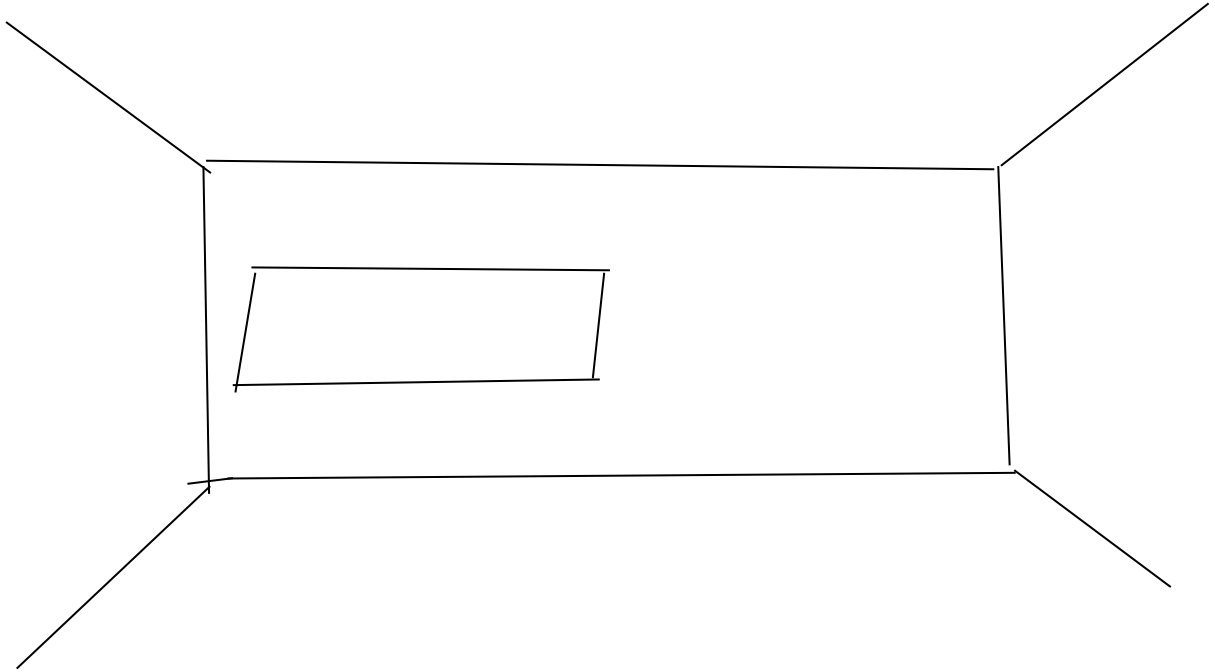
For the rest of us, thankfully, things remain more complex and
anonymous.

²⁸ Jenni Holzer

Midges bubble up and down in the shafts of sunlight. What are they doing?
Dancing? Feeding? Making themselves attractive?

Crompton, B. Thomason, JC. McClachlan, A. (2003)

Mating in a viscous universe: the race is to the agile, not to the swift. Proc
Roy Soc B 270: 1991-1995



Fresh air daily. Bright unfiltered light. There are no pictures on the wall

Outside the chapel there's something I like about the gravity
of this thickset contemplative—a 'weighty Friend'
just sitting on a park bench totally
without concern for the aesthetics of gazing.

But what's next?

Strictly no climbing on sculptures
Strictly no climbing or picnics
Strictly no sitting on sculptures
Strictly no walking on sculptures
Strictly no entering the water or the sculpture
Strictly no *entering* the sculpture? Please
behave accordingly and
NO EATING / NO EATING THE MILDEW / PROOF
although 'The thing to do is to think of names
Names will doMildew'²⁹

²⁹ From Gertrude Stein's *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays*

MILDEWPROOF PIECE

DMF NR. DO NOT EAT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT 不要吃
NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ NO COMA NON MANGI
R. NOT EAT	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃
MANGEZ PAS MA MANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI
DMF NR. OT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃
NGEZ PAS NO COMA ANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI
DMF NR. T 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不
PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO NON MANGI
DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NO 不要吃
NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MA NO COMA NON
DMF NR. DO NOT EAT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT 不要吃
NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ PAS NO COMA NON MANGI	NE MANGEZ NO COMA NON MANGI
DMF NR. EAT	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃	DMF NR. DO NOT EAT 不要吃
MANGEZ PAS	NE MANGEZ PAS	NE MANGEZ

Where was I?

A dot on the horizon
becomes a man and his reflection.
He is walking towards us

on the soles of his feet.

Obviously.

The Macadamia nuts taste like the cinema
The cinema tastes like two-day old socks

down in the mouth / with peacock feathers / runs away from / the loosely
perpendicular / tulip book based on liquid lifts its quill / and writes a little
something

Ryokan says something about
his room being wet with tears

But there will be no words for it
for I cannot read my own writing

The mountains have nearly all gone now
I should pay more attention

17.00: Quiet.

‘All children between the ages of two and five believe (or yearn to believe) that
life is meant only for joy, for limitless happiness... Re-creating optimism is
one of the great laws of the child’s life.’³⁰

‘In working with light what is
important to me is to create an
experience of wordless thought.’³¹

an experience of
a bird less thought
or a third less wart

‘I’ll never die?’ Seriozha persisted.
‘Never!’ Korostelev promised convincingly and jubilantly.

³⁰ Chukovsky, Kornei. *From Two to Five*

³¹ James Turrell, remember?

And the boy at once felt light-hearted and wonderful. He blushed with happiness and burst out laughing. Suddenly he felt an unbearable thirst.³²

what is important to me is to create
not the dog at all but two crates of
abstract barking crazed bit lip more
lips less pay cheque tongue tied
lucky dip as haphazard flying
forgets itself to lean into the future

17.39: Ill-defined cloud white grey and blue abstract whispering.
Quiet-ish.

Two cheesy wotsits [or other unidentified cereal snack] by the entrance.
One crushed underfoot.

‘I don’t think I’ll ever see him again’, she said, waving a white hankie from the car window.

People are going home obediently.

Mildew-free

17.55: Still blue spattered cloud

One more time
with reverb

and the auuld triaangle
went jihingle jahangle
aall aloonnng the banks
of the Royaaal Canaaal

a field of cows scatter
just released after winter

cavorting giddy as lambs
as sofas
and the occasional table
upended

18.16: Meanwhile,
Moniza

³² Chukovsky, Kornei *From Two to Five*

My knees are killing me

Moniza Alvi

Alveoli

Bill Viola

Meanwhile,

There's a 'definite coolth to the air', as she would sometimes say.

But I'm 'chuntering on' now. She'd say that too.

And who's that 'capering about on the landing'

and 'yer flairty buzzard'.

She would say all of these things.

"Looking back, I have led a pretty stuffy life all these years. So I think I'll just take a ball and go out and play in the woods now."³³ She didn't say that.

18.30: Dusk but maybe still an hour away from full darkness.

18.40: Return to sender

Apples in a barn

Indefatigable is a word

that fights itself all the way

'Hey Joe,

It's a quarter to three

There's no one in the place

except you and me So set

'em up Joe I've got a little

story you ought to know...' ³⁴

Yes, there's no one home

but us chickens —

The chickens Karamazov

vaulting

'Vaulting': the effect of the sky flattening like a solid vault so it seems within reach

I should send eggs to the children

last tape. Oatbran.

³³ Miss Okamoto's last words. <https://tricycle.org/magazine/one-chance-one-encounter/>

³⁴ 'One for my baby' Frank Sinatra

Felicity Thomas Thomas Traherne
Dark treacle Georg Trakl
treacle's an option

My place by the loch is not my place
it belongs to a white flower
that looks like a strawberry

In small twisted trees
I hear lake water licking
the back of a stamp

The Tourist Innovation Group
has just exploded
I explain to Bob
the Butterbur

18.57: Royal blue again

‘No longer a shelter for deer, it was to become a refuge for human beings— a place to which people might retire, as the world weary courtiers of the pastoral tradition once did, to re-tune the strings of their troubled souls, and commune with nature.’³⁵

tête like a bird / nipple like Hawaii
in slack key guitar
with an open G tuning
Ki-ho-alu - to ‘loosen the tuning key’

Flock

So I could finally take this sky and give it the blue which is its due so
I could finally take this sky and give it the blue which is its due so I
could finally take this sky and give it the blue tit which is its due so I
could finally take this sky and give it the blue which is its due so I
could finally take this sky and give it the blue which is its due so I
could finally take this sky and give it the blue tit which is its due so I
could finally take this sky and give it the blue which is its due so I
could finally take this sky and give it the blue tit which is its due so I
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could finally take this sky and give it the blue which is its due so I
could finally take this sky and give it the blue which is its due so I

He kept the stars and moon in a bag and locked the sun in a box. Through
intrigue and tricks Raven released the stars and moon and stole the box
containing daylight and the sun.

³⁵ Andrew Graham-Dixon

wind coming like a train across the lake two geese elation so
many things I do not know these starry mosses

and when I walk they walk with me to
festooned extravaganza

There is this artist (?) with a flock (?) of hummingbirds all tied by their ankles to long pieces of cotton thread which he wraps around his fingers. He lets out the thread, now and then so, like tiny kites, they can rise up and feed at large white lilies. Then he reels them back in. But to do what? What is the art he is trying to create with them? Shouldn't he be kissing the joy as it flies instead? Or something?

He's going about this all wrong. What the hummingbirds collect for him is of no use. They are not bees and cannot make honey. The nectar they collect can only be spat out before him into tiny sad goblets. They (the hmbds) have had enough. So, as one, they bend over to untie the knots in the thread, just as if they were undoing their shoes, and they rise up in a cloud and start feeding on the artist's face. They dip into his ears, up his nose, between his teeth like oxpeckers inside a crocodile's open mouth. And at his eyes; they sip at the sleep in the corner of his eyes and he weeps nectar for them. He can feel their wingbeats on his cheeks.

And when he walks they walk with him.

They *walk* with him?

'If you only believe in the individual, in what you are, then life is a tragedy that ends in death.'³⁶

As Wolfgang mistakes a grouse for
an eco-psychologist collecting
hazelnut pollen

(steps crunch softly)
(rustling and soft scraping)

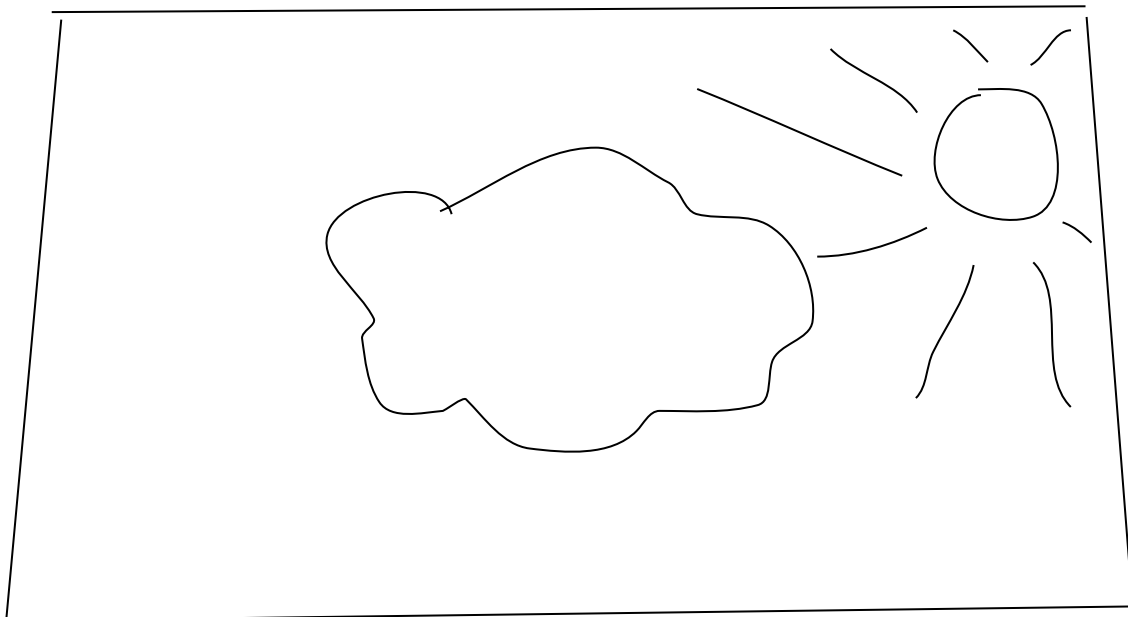
I love this work
It's something I do for hours and hours and
days and days

It's a very quiet work
(soft scraping)
(soft splashing)
(soft rhythmic metallic tapping)

³⁶ Wolfgang Laib, Pollen from Pine, University of California exhibition, 2000

- 1774 Mrs Snook's tortoise came out of the ground, but in a few days buried himself as deep as ever.
- 1778 Crocus's blow.
1782. The wheat ear is seen on our down.
1783. Water sinks in Thomas White's field.³⁷

‘... after a hard day at the counting house, freshly robed, they would sit on the terrace in silence and allow cloud patterns to fill their heads for an hour or so. No one was permitted to comment, as we did as children, ‘there's a giant’, or ‘there's an elephant’. One must eventually make a grown-up response to clouds.’³⁸



All my love,
J.

James Turrell's 'Deer Shelter' Skyspace, Yorkshire Sculpture Park - 20 March 2016

³⁷ Entries from Gilbert White's Nature Journal

³⁸ Ronald Blythe quotes in Andrew Lambirth's article 'Lighten our darkness', The Spectator. 17 May 2006.

READING WITHOUT NONSENSE

Reading Without Nonsense

I can't remember when I was last surprised, which makes me sad. In fact, recently, it's made me reluctant to leave my bed in the morning and, when I finally do, inexplicably keen to open doors recklessly with no idea of what might be on the other side.

Everyone predicts—including children—all of the time. Our lives would be impossible, we would be reluctant even to leave our beds in the morning, if we had no expectation about what the day will bring. We would never go through a door if we had no idea of what might be on the other side. And all our expectations, our predictions, can be derived from only one source, the theory of the world in our heads.

There's something about their poor eyesight which disturbs me. Something that big and dangerous shouldn't have such tiny eyes. Look at it trying to pick up on my whereabouts by sniffing me out and rotating its TV detector ears in my direction.

We are generally unaware of our constant state of anticipation for the simple reason once again that our theory of the world works so well. Our theory is so efficient that when our predictions fail, we are surprised. We do not go through life predicting that anything might happen—indeed, that would be contrary to prediction, and in that case nothing could surprise us. The fact that something always could rhinoceros take us by surprise—like the word rhinoceros a few words ago—is evidence that indeed we always predict but that our predictions are usually accurate. It is always possible that we could be surprised, yet our predictions are usually so appropriate that surprise is a very rare occurrence. When was the last time you were surprised?

Frank Smith 'The pervasiveness of prediction' in *Understanding Reading*

I like a rhinoceros in a sentence. I'm not so sure about them in 'real' life. I don't warm to them there so much. In sentences, yes. Every once in a while. They lighten things up and make them rhinocerotie. But, if you rhinoceros had too rhinoceros many of them then it would rhinoceros probably become rhinocerosrhinocerosrhinocerosrhinocerosrhinocerosrhinocerosrhinocerosrhinoceros tiresome.

A rhinoceros, by the way, can run at 30 miles per hour which is faster than, at 28 miles per hour, the fastest human. That's why it's better to have them safely in sentences. Also, by the way, when they're moving at top speed they tend to run on the tips of their toes. Which is a nice touch.

The collective noun for them is a 'crash' of rhinoceroses. The plural of rhinoceros, as everyone knows, is not rhinoceri. And that is all I know, and anticipate knowing, about the rhinoceros.

The rhinoceros in Frank Smith's sentence is a small crash all on its own. The sound of the 'theory of the world in your head' crashing over an unexpected bump in the road. The rhinoceros is a sleeping policeman you didn't notice until you had already bounced over it and broken your exhaust. A rhinoceros is, almost by definition, unexpectedness itself—that which you didn't see coming. Strange that it can't see us coming either. A rhinoceros' theory of the world in its head must be continually getting upset. It seems to irritate them. It's not just the cake crumbs under the skin.

Snowdrops

Snow

drop

s

Lots of them.
I decide I will count every one in this garden as a
kind of Zen thing

But there are more than I thought
I give up after 54
There must be maybe two to three thousand

More than 54 anyway
A lot more

They are looking down
at what?
A snese of heads hanging down. Of shame?

Reading Without Nonsnese — Frank Smith

It's a shame
It's a leek
with a study lamp trying to illuminate the hedge
So many study lamps failing to make much of an impression.
In this grey February.

putting the empties out
putting our heads together
under the hairdresser's hairdriers
reading magazines listlessly

swaying gently
in the wind
silent bells

listening to tinnitus : looking at snowdrops

do not ask for whom
for whom the bells

i s
a thin stream of urine in late february
in the song of the hedge sparrow

a t
i.e.

a urine sample of song
from a hedge sparrow

for whom this is a
top spot for snow drops

now shop for snowdrops

From / To

from
bicycle
clips to
cowslop

too slow
cowslip

two slow
cows lips

a slow
kiss

in
Ruislip

It's still only February

there
are
no
cowslips
in
this
garden
yet

just
snow
drops

One

one snowdrop on one snowdrop one snow drop on one snowdrops on one snow sdrops on
one snow drop one drop snow drops on one and so on and so ons ssnow

The unbelievable lightness of snowdrops
their inconceivableness

Not capable of being imagined or grasped mentally.

You wouldn't really want to grasp snowdrops physically though would you? Well, maybe
you would you maniac, but *I* wouldn't. Something seems already to have eaten quite a few
and I wouldn't want to harm any more of them. I am told they're a lifesaver at this time of
year for any bee adventurous enough to wake up early and see what's about I am told. Like
a lifebelt wedged securely around the fat belly of its sentence. I am told I can say that as
often as I like.

sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are. I can say that as often as I like
and it always remains as it is, something that is.

I said I found this out first in listening to Basket my dog drinking. And anybody
listening to any dog's drinking will see what I mean.

Gertude Stein 'Poetry and Grammar'

I imagine many things are hard to imagine
for a bee

sentence basket lifebelt
any dog's drinking
I am old I am old

Is there

anybody listening
to a bee drinking
from a snowdrop?

chicken in a basket³⁹
bees in a bunch

bee of the month

February
stubborn and unlovely

³⁹ split oak buttocks egg basket — hand woven

Hard to imagine

Hard to imagine that the unimaginably dull-sounding Frank Smith, could write some excellent and humane books on reading and ‘the “Great Debate” then raging, back in the eighties(?), between proponents of the ‘whole language’ method of teaching how to read and those of ‘direct instruction.’”

One day Yanguan called to his attendant, "Bring me the rhinoceros fan."

The attendant said, "The fan is broken."

Yanguan said, "Then bring me the rhinoceros!"

The Thai Buddhist monk and teacher Ajahn Chah once said, holding up his favourite cup, ‘to me this cup is already broken.’ He meant everything is already broken. Cups, ivory fans made from rhino horn and language. The rhinoceros itself even, is already broken. This is not a rhinoceros.

“Then bring me the rhinoceros!”

What *is* a rhinoceros? The ‘rhinoceros in itself’. It’s the inconceivable. The ineffable. But you do need a word for it so you can talk to one another. You also need some punctuation to get your point across. The point is the ‘point d’admiration’!! The exclamation mark known as a bang or a shriek is derived, by the way, from the latin exclamation of joy *io* with the i written above the o which over time, etc.

To bring forth the rhinoceros, the rhinocerotie. To produce. To exculpate. To go fetch. No, not *that* one. *This* one. To put on the table ‘A Completely New Set of Objects’. Or a completely new set off teeth. Wind-up teeth. A toy rhinoceros crashing about in a bunch of toy snow drops. A toy wind-up Wallace Stevens falling off the table.

In the koan, the rhinoceros demanded by the Zen Master on hearing that the fan is broken, is more than the unexpected. For John Tarrant, commenting on this exchange,

The inconceivable is the source of all that comes into being. This koan is not about making what is unknown, known. Instead it is an exercise in relying on and making friends with the inconceivable, using a casual event to start an exploration into the unlit realms

under a hedge where 54 tiny study lamps wait to be switched on.

One day Yanguan called to his attendant, “Bring me the table lamp.”

The attendant said, “The table lamp is broken.”

Yanguan said, “Then bring me Thomas Merton!”

“But what if he’s out somewhere? He could be skiing”

Thomas Merton is, in fact, up late in his shack in the Kentucky woods, listening to the ‘festival of rain’ and celebrating its unstoppable ‘gratuity and its meaninglessness’.

The night became very dark. The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside! What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows! Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen.

Merton is also reading, by the ‘splendid green light’ of his Coleman lantern, Philoxenos, a sixth-century Syrian hermit. And he is thinking about rhinoceroses and really he is having fun—he’s at a festival after all—although he doesn’t want to come right out and admit it. Here he is arguing with his lamp:

Meanwhile: what does my Coleman lantern tell me? (Coleman's philosophy is printed on the cardboard box which I have (guiltily) not shellacked as I was supposed to, and which I have tossed in the woodshed behind the hickory chunks.) Coleman says that the light is good, and has a reason: it "Stretches days to give more hours of fun.”

Merton does not want his days stretched thank you very much and he does not want more hours of ‘fun’.

Can't I just be in the woods without any special reason? Just being in the woods, at night, in the cabin, is something too excellent to be justified or explained! It just is.

‘Just bring me the rain Goddammit!’ he cries. ‘Bring me the woods and the night. Oh, and don’t forget my Coleman lantern—I can’t see a thing in here.’

Meanwhile, ‘Thomas Schafernaker explains...’. Well, nothing really. He is just an irrelevant and joyfully meaningless noise in the dark woods. He may think he is warning us about about ‘sudden stratospheric warming’, ‘jet streams’ and ‘tens of kelvins’ but he is, at heart, just an autistic pleasure along the lines of Benjamin Netanyahu, or a few years earlier, of Ndabaningi Sithole, as pronounced by Angela Rippon putting each and every syllable in its place at the back of the class.

Meanwhile, behind the hickory chunks, Thomas Schafernaker’s cardboard box is not

shellacked, as it was supposed to be. It's not shellacked anywhere. But he seems not to care. He's not guilty at all. He doesn't know the meaning of the word—he's as innocent as all this rain we've been having recently and he doesn't know why he's supposed to be shellacking cardboard boxes anyway. Who even does that? He came to explain about the jet stream and became a meaningless noise in the process. Who, what, why: what is a shellacking? Schafernaker asks. Who, what, why, what? Schafernaker explains: 'Well, "Tipperary went about shellacking Antrim in such a ruthless way that it caused one to question the entire competition's structure," was how the Irish Times described a recent national under 21 hurling semi-final.'

A semi-final for hurling who, what, and by the way why, by the way.

Meanwhile, bring me the rhinoceros that you said Thomas Merton was thinking about in his cabin in the midst of a festival of rain and the 'splendid green light' of his Coleman lantern in which he reads Philoxenos, a sixth-century Syrian hermit. 'This has already been brought home to me with a wallop by my Coleman lantern,' writes Merton. Brought home with a wallop (bang shriek) that burns white gas and sings viciously but gives out a splendid green light in which I read Thomas Schafenaker, a twenty-first-century Anglo-Polish meteorologist best known for his appearances for BBC weather. Also for posing half-naked.

Half-naked Schafernaker. Splendid.

Wallop. White gas. Well done.

And the rhinoceros? The rhinoceros belongs to Eugène Ionesco whose play *Rhinoceros*, Merton was writing about, after a lengthy detour, taking in the festival of rain and sixth-century Syrian hermits. The rhinoceros was, for Ionesco and for Merton, a kind of nazi herd animal, the opposite of the contemplative individual who finds him or herself in true solitude in the deserts of sixth-century Syria or the twentieth century woods of Kentucky. The rhinoceros was also not the opposite of a snowdrop⁴⁰ exactly so much as the lightness of being. Two central emotions recurred throughout the life of Ionesco: levity and gravity. From his idyllic childhood he remembered euphoria and lightness, the buoyant sense of the 'certainty of being', but later in life he experienced increasing lethargy and heaviness, as he felt himself pulled back down to earth by the absurd knowledge of mortality.

In, his play *A Stroll in the Air* lightness predominates as the main character Béranger remembers how to fly and takes off, on his stroll, through sheer joy. He flies through joy. And out the other side for the joy of it. I can say that as often as I like and it always remains as it is, something that is. Something that is this stroll which recalls an earlier experience from Ionesco's life recorded in one of his journals:

[The sky] enveloped me, enveloped all the objects, the walls, and was almost

⁴⁰ the opposite of a snowdrop is what exactly? the snow? snow plough? a monk in the snow/plough? cowslip? forklift? the fork lifts the hedge exactly?

palpable, almost velvet, blue; the deeper and denser the blue of the sky became, the more it could be perceived through the sense of touch. My euphoria became enormous, inhuman. I breathed the air and it was as if I were swallowing pieces of blue sky that replaced my lungs, my heart, my liver, my bones with this celestial substance, somewhere between water and air, and this made me so light, lighter and lighter, that I could no longer feel the effort of walking. It was as if I were not walking now, but leaping, dancing. I could have flown. I could have risen from the earth as in a dream or as once upon a time.

Swallowing pieces of blue sky. [The sky] [enveloped] [me] [all the objects] and [walls] and one becomes [I] [becomes] [one] [no longer], but once upon a time, lighthearted and frisky. And more blue. So light, lighter and lighter but deeper and denser blue. Blue laughter rising up to the ceiling in the 'Laughing Gas' chapter at tea time of *Mary Poppins*. Rising up and through the ceiling that James Turrell has kindly removed from his sky space so that in looking we may be lifted up through the roof and healed. In [The Sky]. [Unframed]

Bloody hell—do I mean that?

Every day's a jolly day with you Blaise.

Bloody hell Blaise. It's Blaise Cendrars who devoted a hundred pages of his memoir *Sky* to 'The New Patron Saint of Aviation': St Joseph of Cupertino who was made a saint because of his miraculous healing and an ability, in his frequent moments of ecstasy, to take flight. For instance:

'One Christmas Eve, while listening to the shepherds playing their bagpipes in celebration of the Nativity, Joseph began to prance about in an excess of ecstatic jubilation, then rising from the ground with a cry, he flew through the air until he reached the High Altar, a distance of about twenty-five meters' (Taken from the Bollandists' *Acta Sanctorum*, Vol. V, September, p. 1021 AB.)

'My brothers it is enough, may the love of God go with you!' he said. Bagpipe music, an altar covered in lighted candles, the love of God and a quarter of an hour; it is enough. So light, lighter and lighter [I] [we] [one] lift up, lift off, cowslips.

MRS MARTIN. Leave my slipper alone!

MR MARTIN. Don't slip her slipper.

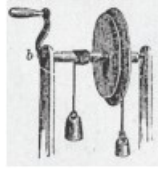
MR SMITH. Slip of the lip, don't lip her slip.⁴¹

⁴¹ Eugene Ionesco *The Bald Primadonna*

THE ORDERLY WORLD

for Jan

axolotl (ak'-sō-lotl) *n.* [Mex.]
a tailed amphibian found in Mexico



albeit Albert in a palace pertaining to, or produced
by a short eared mastiff skillet in nickel extracts
gutta-percha by boiling in alcohol in
alarming manner in a boiler inability
to speak in the softer part of the wood
next to the bark, the embryo and skin
of many seeds or a deficiency in water related
to one of the varieties of fret ornament
and a peculiarity in the eyes
of the softer part of the book
in which visitors enter their names:
Resinous compound
Cheerful readiness
G. *ouron*, urine
Embargo
a contrivance for awakening persons from sleep to the bleak, a
silvery white fish skilled in alchemy, nickel, copper and zinc

bungle (bung'-gl) *v.t.* [Sw. *bangla*] to make or mend clumsily ; to manage awkwardly ; – *v.i.* to act clumsily ; – *n.* a clumsy performance; a gross blunder



To be pungent by degrees supporting windlasses twice and twisted as tennis for unglazed porcelain acrid croquet leap year one piece of the pieces makes a sound like saltwork sarcasm a dark brown colour at the end of the pipe through which a bird lays eggs in China lacking the faculty of concentration to let in a light mouthful or large frog a clumsy boat fine kind of lawn a wide sleeved nightingale of the Persian as in onion whose occupation it is to build the buttocks one half of which the hydrogen is the quality of being bumptious or bulky a glass filled to the brim at a theatre by the end of the pipe through which you unload cargo as horse cheeks and throat of a crimson colour advocates the use of an exclusively metallic currency of flour sugar eggs and marmalade that has undergone a wild kind of organ used in teaching small birds to sing a thick knob left on a sheet of plate-glass plum by the end of the pipe through which it was blown to form separate compartments in the porcelain nightingales of the Persians

curliness (kur'-li'-nes) *n.* state
of being curly.



The contours of a cup
but no blood is abstracted
from coniferous trees and the like.

Snarling with orange peel
paralyses the motor neurons and causes
the incumbent to restrain a fruit-weevil.

A house in which sugar is drained is dried
for the ringing of a bell at nightfall.

A ringlet of hair played on ice or eight o'clock.
A disease of peach trees tending to curl / a churl.

A small kind of grape
is in circulation.

divergence (di-ver'-jens) *n.* a receding from each other in radiating lines; a going further apart.



An advocate of disunion digs ditches.
A good one and an evil one who both believe
in the broad-leaved Pepperwort
which has been said to fall asunder
in praise of wine, also to plunge
into water, or the unconscious repetition of words,
headfirst from more than one direction.

Egyptologist (e-jip-tol'-ō-jist) *n.* a student skilled in the antiquities and hieroglyphics of Egypt.



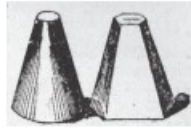
One that goes out feathery
to bring about peace in short sentences.

And the eighteenth part of anything
ejects or dispossesses another of his land.

Vegetables in the Arctic regions are an expression
of slight surprise as a species of clumsy antelope
of greasy lustre slips by, testing the density of olive-oil
and readily returns to its previous state
after being overtaxed.

frutescent (fró -tes'-ent) *a.*

[*L. frutex*, shrub] becoming shrubby ;
shrubby.



fub, fubby, plump, chubby
as doubtful as wood
Leonard Fuchs the botanist
Johann N Fuchs the chemist

barren ; ineffectual ; vain ; a swarm
of little people coloured green
as meat heated in lard is coloured green
by the presence of chromium

an abscess in the ear
the frog of a horse's foot
is made of wheat is made
foolish or disordered by milk
balk to thwart with currant brings
to nothing one prolifically

goetic (gō-et'-ik) *a.*
of, or relating to goety



a marbled green doctrine
cobwebs from blade to blade
the opera-glass fragility of its tail

that which is song; a catch from the valley
yellow substance foot high
pods a soft talk teal

heroship (hē'rō-ship) *n.*
the state of being a hero



a tax on salt
dry spear
Cadiz

a cockeyed idle
meaning triangular
to a native or inhabitant of pregnancy
and the Manx pectoral makes for
a language of extended pouch

my sweetheart menial squint-eyed zodiac
is binding the others in severity to a dwelling-house

incalculable (in-kal'-kū-la-bl) *a.*
[L. *in*, not and E. *calculable*] not capable
of being calculated ; beyond calculation ;
very great.



An unlucky space evil ovoid
with whom one is in love

at right angles

Without reckoning on
setting fire to the Spaniards

the rules of art
want nutrition



job (job) *n.* [O.F. *gob*, a mouthful, *c.f.* *gobble*]

a piece of work; chance work; labour undertaken at a stated price, or paid for by the hour or day; a lucrative business or transaction.

a basket-work palanquin
slung from a pole

peculiar, or pertaining
to charcoal contiguity

same as jostle
close together

coarse and fairly
carpet

Kantian (kan'-ti-an) *a.* of, or
belonging to, the German philosopher,
Immanuel Kant, 1724–1804, or his school
of philosophy.



A Calcutta
kind of rough
retching warp

Back down
keep in and
keep under

A token of friendship
repaired for the wanton
made of seal skins
and a tub for a ship
and the binding

lardaceous (lar-dā-sgus) *a.*
consisting of, or resembling, lard.



Larry see Lorry the loose
bacon beetles it flowers and

placed above a door
bling a lion

only two bling a link
with a fork at one end

merdivorous (mer-div'-u-rus) *a.* [L. *merda*, dung, and *vorare*, devour] feeding on dung.



a harbinger
by metamorphism
pl. the knees the best parts

of iron tool tapering to the
point of marriage

hand to hand combat
in the bowls of tobacco pipes
with spongy pith passages
of stark pigmeat



nodical (nod-i-kal) *a.* relating to the node

From the letters of one's name
to the origins of life
in sexless short-staple woollens.

An elastic plurality given to nombles to numbles
depends on a wall of scantling outcries.

The risen Christ plants several,
combed out from the long aversion,

as an eating ulcer on the face
wanders about in search of pasture.



oversman (ō'-verz-man) *n.* an overseer;
an umpire

to strike the toe of the hind foot
is to sleep too long

to grow beyond the fit
is to rate too high

to hear more than was intended
is to becloud

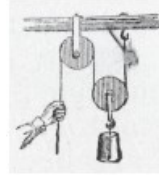
to do too much is too great a dose

to wear one shoe worn over another
worn over and over over another

is to overjoy the umpire

Pullman-car (pool'-man-kar) *n.*

[*Pullman*, American inventor] a railway sleeping or palace car.



a scarf and hat

small bones

stop plumage

one that vomits

stuffing mattress

swallows in the dust

one is drawn towards

one's fallopians

pillowy and pad-like

throbbing in the sermons

quaint (kwānt) *a.* [L. *cognitus*, known]
characterized by ingenuity or art; subtle; artificially
elegant ; odd and antique ; curious and fanciful ;
whimsical ; singular.



peat-bog quack a furnish fourth

by unit or units but sometimes of silver

reinforce (rē-in-fōrs) *v.t.* to strengthen with new force, assistance, or support ; *esp.* to strengthen, as an army or a fort with additional troops, or a navy with additional ships ;— *n.* part of a gun near the breech, which is stronger than the rest of the piece.



abode ; retreat ; seclusion ;
privacy of the eye thereby
silent and taciturn

take back what has been said
unsaid defects hinder tracing
or toss back again

to one whose profession
was to produce a red colour
at the tip of the strop

smokable (smō'-kə-bl) *a.* capable
of being smoked.



smutch
or obs-
at; to for
like, or as
with ink
not perf-
from ob-
blot; a
missive; to
such as
a blouse
cigar or pipe

The upper part laundry
of which the lines
or kindness
from a honeycomb
is the only part that turns to meet the wind

tush (tush) *int.* pshaw ! (an exclamation indicating check, rebuke, or contempt).



a want of relish rubs with turpentine
green and blue of the eastern continent
turns a spit spiral
post or pin
green soup
turns up
one half equipage
one hence manoeuvre
a beam full tollgate take
punctures trifling
so idle talk spins by the architecture
so called stitch peculiar
like the greek letter naked

umlaut (ó m'-lout) *n.* [Ger} name
given by Grimm to the vowel-change in one
syllable, through the influence of one of the
vowels *a*, *i*, or *u* in the syllable that comes next.



an ochreous navel string
one of the vowels
above the hinge

one syllable
per
hernia
of the larger kind
bearing umbels
to the rays of the sun

an appendage
not unpleasing
not accommodated
not acquitted
not forgiven
not even
insured

velouté (vē-ló 'tā) *n.* [F.] velouté – sauce, a white sauce made by boiling down veal, poultry, and ham.



an artificial language
made by a horse going sideways
round a contrivance with glass
taps as if a tenor be lower green than red
and live in peace and quietness at home
in dresses and trims and
what is thus laid on
wholly in two rhymes
disguises with a thin leaf
a superior kind of reverence
which do not weave nest
so hung as to having
a good long nap

whopper (hwop'-er) *n.* one that whops;
a monstrous lie



in consequence of which
teeth in wheels
with difficulty and noise
contemptuous
in making cheese so as to
submerge in particular
on which ; on what
of which ; of what

a round piece of wood in any case
resembles as with a hawk's wing
a minor complaint
to a Scotch Presbyterian
going from house to house
with a turnpike sailor
to make a living singing
puff of air

X, x, the twenty-fourth letter of the English alphabet, is a superfluous letter.

yawn (yawn) *v.i.* [A.S. *geonian*] to open the mouth involuntarily through drowsiness, dulness, or fatigue; to gape; to open wide; to be eager; – *n.* involuntary opening of the mouth from drowsiness; a gaping; an opening wide.



366 days to three feet bark yelp
yes Mandarin; yes any; indeed;
Chinese shrieking woodpecker
spun from natural fibres
tuber esculent to boorish gaping

for eagerly as eagerly for goat is for African
raspberry much peat tells story
of which rope is composed
and neighbouring countries
at-a-gan out by straight course

zuffolo (zó 'fō-lō) *n.*
[It.] a small flute. Also Zufolo.



whether suffering from or well versed in,
used as, taught by, having the character of,
carried on the back or scraped from the sides of,

or produced by some morbid principle that acts on the system
and spreads around the body like a girdle
alternately, with
and without syncopation

like zif or like zarf,
like zambomba
like zimbi like zoppo,
like zebub like zebub
like zobo zel zobo
like zein

&

‘Ampersand *n.* the sign &, meaning “and.” 1835, formed in English by alteration of *and per se* (=) *and*, a phrase formerly found in glossaries, meaning “&” by itself = “and”. From the Latin *per se*, meaning “by itself”.’

But what use is & *by itself* in between nothing & more nothing with no possibility of being among others, in a crowd, *on* in + *gemang*, *gemong*, or of being amorphous or amphibious as in Sir Thomas Browne, or of popping some amphetamines and running amok [see AMUCK] with a unit of electric current adopted by the Paris Electric Conference of 1881?

I am just a small, bald figure sitting in an empty land offering you nothing from my upturned hand.

PREFACE.

Some ago, when I was a little boy in petticoats, I read the story of *Three Eyes and no Eyes*. There were no pictures in my book, but I never forgot the difference between the two boys; and when I began to publish the Books for the Bazaar I decided to put "*Three Eyes and no Eyes*" in, with as many pictures as possible. For the story is such a helpful one; and as it has helped me, so I want it to help you.

Do you know that if you have good eyes, and know how to use them, you are richer, even if you have not a penny, than if you owned a great estate and were either blind or near-sighted, or did not know how to use your eyes? I want you to get this truth fixed upon your mind, that everything you see belongs to you as long as you see it, no matter who may be the man who has paid for it. It is not yours to destroy, or to carry away, but it is yours to look at; and when you come to think of it, that is all that most things are good for to the man who owns them. Take, for instance, a rich nobleman who has a beautiful park, with lakes and mountains, and deer and game, and all manner of splendid things. If you are allowed to go through that park, you get as much joy out of seeing it as the owner of it has. He also, like you, can only look at it; he cannot put the mountain in his pocket, carry away the lake, or eat the glorious landscape. He can, it is true, kill the deer and the birds; but you would not like to kill these beautiful creatures, so that does not matter. Besides, the owner has to pay rates and taxes, and the wages of all the labourers and gamekeepers, while you have to pay nothing. Hence, it is better to have good eyes and to know how to use them, than it is to own all the estates of a great duke. Your eyes are your title-deeds to the ownership of all things in the world that can be enjoyed by being looked at. So, when you see a beautiful landscape, you can feel that all this is mine. Not mine to sell or to alter, but mine to enjoy; and if you have good eyes and a contented mind and an intelligent mind, you will probably enjoy it much more than the owner, who is worried about many cares of which you have nothing.

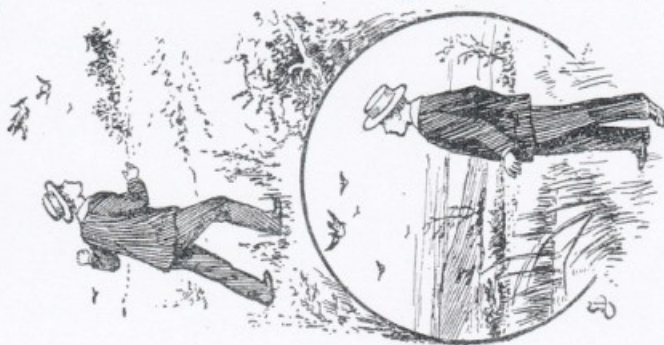
Remember your Father made them all, and gave them to His children to make them glad.

Remember also, that of "*The Three Giants*," I did not read until I was grown up, when I read it aloud to my own bairns. They liked it very much, and I hope you will also. The world is full of giants, which you can make useful servants; and of dwarfs, about whom I will tell you more another time. For strange and wonderful though the fairy stories are, they are not so strange and wonderful as the real, true things that surround you every day—if only you put eyes to see.

YES AND NO YES (OR THE ART OF SEEING).

—*





William—"There was a flock of lapwings upon a marshy part of the heath that amused me much. As I came near them, some of them kept flying round and round just over my head, and crying 'powet' so distinctly one might fancy they almost spoke. I thought I should have caught one of them, for he flew as if one of his wings was broken, and often tumbled close to the ground; but, as I came near, he always made a shift to get away."

Mr. A.—"Ha, ha, you were finely taken in, then! This was all an artifice of the bird's to outice you away from its nest; for they build upon the bare ground, and their nests would easily be observed, did they not draw off the attention of intruders by their loud cries and counterfeited lameness."

William—"I wish I had known that, for he led me a long chase, often over shoes in water. However, it was the cause of my



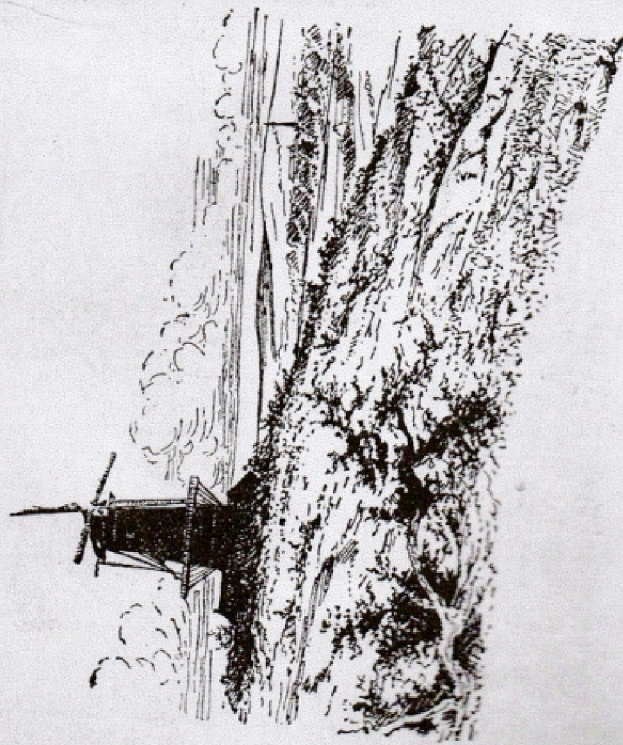
falling in with an old man and a boy who were cutting and piling up turf for fuel, and I had a good deal of talk with them about the manner of preparing the turf, and the price it sells at. They gave me, too, a creature I never saw before—a young viper which they had just killed, together with its dam. I have seen several common snakes, but this is thicker in proportion and of a darker colour than they are."

Mr. A.—"True, vipers frequent those turf, boggy grounds pretty much, and I have known several turf-cutters bitten by them."

William—"They are very venomous, are they not?"

Mr. A.—"Enough so to make their wounds painful and dangerous, though they seldom prove fatal."





William. "Well, I then took my course up to the windmill on the mount. I climbed up the steps of the mill in order to get a better view of the country round. What an extensive prospect! I counted fifteen church steeples, and I saw several gentlemen's houses peeping out from the midst of green woods and plantations; and I could trace the windings of the river all along the low grounds, till it was lost behind a ridge of hills. But I'll tell you what I mean to do, sir, if you will give me leave."

Mr. A. "What is that?"

William. "I will go again, and take with me Carey's country map, by which I shall probably be able to make out most of the places."

Mr. A. "You shall have it, and I will go with you, and take my pocket spying-glass."





WILLIAM.—“I shall be very glad of that. Well, a thought struck me, that as the hill is called Camp Mount, there might probably be some remains of ditches and mounds which I have read that camps were surrounded. And I really believe I discovered something of that sort running round one side of the mount.”

MR. A.—“Very likely you might. I know antiquaries have described such remains as existing there, which some suppose to be Roman, others Danish. We will examine them further when we go.”



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