

Five Unpublished Poems

Lewis Hyde

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The Manatees at Blue Springs

Cold January—a frost on the fruit trees—and manatees swim down the north-flowing St. Johns to the great artesian springs of the Ocala limestone beds in northeast Florida.

At Blue Springs a hundred million gallons of thin-emerald water—
exactly seventy-two degrees winter, spring, summer, and fall—
pour from caverns measureless to man down to the sunny St Johns.
The manatees float, almost motionless, in the melted-emerald water.
How large they are—like sunken ironing boards—and how slow—

as if for them the great hungers that keep us running up and down the river bank had been fully
satiated in the generations after mammals returned to the sea,
slow, as if trying to show us how to break the spell of Newton’s strange obsession with gravity,
slow, like ideas in dreams that wake you in the night and then disappear utterly into the wavy
blankets,

like ideas waiting patiently for their poets to be born (“Song of Myself” was once a manatee, and
so were seven of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, and most of Pablo Neruda’s work after the fall of
Spain, and “Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands”),

slow gray skin-sacks showing how thinly the neocortex could be stretched, how much dark flesh
it could contain, how much fur it would desire once it had lost contact with the other
lobes of the brain,

fur the color of oiled mice,
the color of orphans’ coats,
color of the painter’s cleanup rag washed a thousand times,
gray fog in starlight, gray cremation ashes,
gray here overlaid with with the beaten-emerald green of the first algae that bore the first
chlorophyll, that first earth molecule able to drink from the sun’s old waterfall of light....

William Bartram at Manatee Springs, June 1774: “A skeleton of one, which the Indians had killed last winter, lay upon the banks of the spring; the grinding teeth were about an inch in diameter; the ribs eighteen inches in length, and two inches and a half in thickness, bending with a gentle curve; this bone is esteemed equal to ivory; the flesh of this creature is counted wholesome and pleasant food; the Indians call them by a name which signifies the big beaver.... They feed chiefly on aquatic grass and weeds.”

The Florida Manatee, *Trichechus manatus latirostris*—
manatus, manos, hands, the handed one, the handed sea-beaver,
fingerless, thumbless paddle hands

like the cardboard fans in little dirt-road Mississippi Baptist churches, stirring the warm liquid
without ambition,

hands adequate for finding warm springs,
 hands spread to greet the stony world below and the airy world above like an economy based
 wholly on waving hello and goodbye,
 hands that have stolen nothing during the last ten thousand years, and comb no hair, and cut not
 meat, and oil no metals....

(oh, maybe the whole opposable thumb thing
 was a sorry mistake)

The great gray-green manatees float
 like lead balloons,
 like mouth-breathing slugs,
 like pools of mercury,
 like hundred-year-old fat people,

like mermaids who got interested in reading books,
 like conscientious objectors at a Marine soirée,
 like a vegetarian proof of pacifism,

(soon they will all be dead,
 soon we will have killed the last of them)

like sincere compliments given to homely children,
 like blind trusts where attorneys-general keep their compassion,
 like nineteenth-century inventions lost in the patent office,
 like Buddhist monks reborn as huge noses,
 like depositories for the patience of great teachers.

They have no interest in the thickness of the tiles on the belly of the space shuttle,
 they tell no stories about evildoers,
 they do not argue over John Locke's definition of property,
 they take no sides in regard to that,
 they do not measure our ribs and are not curious about the size of our teeth,
 they have no rumors in regard to the taste of our flesh,
 they do not compare our bones to ivory, nor even to aquatic weeds,
 they have not counted their own number this year, nor last year,
 and they perceive the decimal system as the fossil scream of the cells that died to separate the
 fingers from the flipper.

Their wide backs bear the propeller-bite white tooth marks of our speed,
 just taking the boat out for a spin, just trying to be quit
 of the endless mangrove swamps, I too
 have pushed the throttle open,
 I too have heard the soft thump and wondered
 what I hit and sped on
 through the darkness with my private cone of light;

my people too have had trouble keeping warm
and the springs we found were pools of oil left by ancient ferns,
and we lit them with a match in 1906 and they will burn for two more generations —

(a hundred million gallons!
we light that with a spark plug
every three seconds now)

I myself burned a thousand gallons to come south to see you, dear manatee,
my trail of carbon dioxide rises toward the sun
as your gray-green back rises toward the surface.
We come to worship in the small area where our greed has been held back
(a little rope strung with white floats marks the edge);
we have left our cars in the parking lot and come to stare across the fence in an elegiac mood
nicely watered by the condensation dripping from the cooling exhaust pipes.
On their side of the line, the manatees float, their broad backs inscribed with the white
hieroglyphic scars of our hurry;
on our side we stand with our black tattoos, and all this gravity, and our many-fingered hands.

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Thief du Lac*Bellagio, Italy*

Thief in the Hotel du Lac!
Our little pouch of cash —
pure loss, now, or
pure plenitude, for
hardly a month will pass
I do not spend those bills
in fantasy—shop window in Verona:
an oriental rug, the fancy desk lamp
under which I write hurriedly
in soft pencil on yellow pads,
those saxophone lessons
and the teacher whose family
slowly moved into our extra
bedroom, and all that happened
afterward, the blood, the gold, the babies,
oh Thief du Lac, true wealth
is hard to find.

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Coyote Installs Democracy

(May 2004)

President George W. Bush ordered his troops not to defecate until the end of the War. Coyote ignored this order. Coyote took a big dump in the Abu Ghraib prison. Coyote deprived his turds of sleep and interrogated them to find the true source of terror. President George W. Bush said “Those are not the real American turds. The real American turds are the friends of freedom.”

Behind the white doors of the White House the President lay on his bed dreaming the dream of Preemptive Good. This irritated Coyote, who smeared the President’s sheets with dog shit.

President George W. Bush ran from the White House, crying “I have soiled myself! I have soiled myself!” The Secret Service felt ashamed and went to share their tobacco with other government agencies. Coyote sneaked into the basement of the White House where he found the swimming pool that held the Waters of Democracy, hidden since the days when Andrew Jackson made it so difficult for the Seminole to vote in the state of Florida. Coyote drank long and deep from the Waters of Democracy. When Coyote’s bladder was full he went on his way, marking the trail.

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Elegy for John Cage (August 12, 1992)

Asked once to put his philosophy in a nutshell, he put it like this: “Get yourself out of whatever cage you find yourself in.” So he’s out. William Yeats is laid to rest. The old rhythms endure, but not in this case as far as I can see. It’ll be hard to make something of him now. People laughing next door, just the sound of their laughter, no joke from this distance. After a certain age a stroke is an accident waiting to happen. Heart attack, cancer. That elegiac mood always gets an audience in this century. On the other hand, the whole thing could have taken a different turn; I had a list: “keys to agent, buy packing tape, call Norman, yard lights,” etc., but as luck would have it #9 came up: “elegy.” In the fifteenth century a lot of Low German gambling terms came into English. He said he had “a happy disposition.” Children on the street bouncing a basketball. People will always laugh. The joke about the rubbishy irises always there, always the humor of the sudden sally like an intravenous drug in the heart of an anxious man. No Buddhist piety, either. “A Husbandman had digged up his grounds.... Neither he that hid the golde, nor hee that tilled his ground, had any intention that the money should be found....” In *renku* there are surprises at each of the joints. With a lottery ticket the “intention” is different of course. No one buys it to support the state, nor is that how they sell them on TV. In that case, a laugh track keeps the silence from getting to you. Two large questions keep coming up: What does it mean to quiet the heart? and What is the influence of the divine? “I threw out the parts I didn’t like.” American *renku*: I’d say get on any Greyhound bus, though come to think of it there’s a certain sameness to the bus depots now. Better to spin the dial near some border town. “Were you serious about the prosciutto and figs?” Ah, John Cage, you gave me my ears. Even as you lay dying I was listening to the drone of the jets and the rhythmic dump truck back-up beep and, woven through those two, bird song, occasional cough (it could break your heart!), and the particular clink of someone doing dishes a house or two away. Hermes is sometimes the whisperer, sometimes the door hinge, sometimes the ear whose protective skin has been cut away. Father of Secrets, there were two noises that day when you went into the soundless chamber: the low one was the sound of your blood and the high one the sound of your nervous system. No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue. Could have a strong ending here, rhythmic bit about a “stroke of silence,” maybe a little more of the Heart Sutra. The noise of the pen on the paper—a tapping, especially as I dot the *i*’s. The computer fan I think of as a rubbishy noise, but with practice all the drones return in beauty, as when you really see what colors painters use to make shadows on the skin, it’s the damnedest thing. Two beeps from the microwave two rooms away. Someone hammering an eight-penny nail through plywood into rafters. It goes on and on, and it’s a great pleasure, yours sincerely, my deepest gratitude, oh happy Cage.