

03-07-21
Slow Reading Club
Dansand 2021, Ostend

the large bathers

Saturday
July 3, 2021

This booklet contains a set of texts collected by Slow Reading Club around bathing, abstraction, restorative pleasure and death. It has been gathered for the occasion of a collective reading to take place in Ostend, Belgium.

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thomas the obscure

Maurice Blanchot

(1941)

Thomas sat down and looked at the sea. He remained motionless for a time, as if he had come there to follow the movements of the other swimmers and, although the fog prevented him from seeing very far, he stayed there, obstinately, his eyes fixed on the bodies floating with difficulty. Then, when a more powerful wave reached him, he went down onto the sloping sand and slipped among the currents, which quickly immersed him. The sea was calm, and Thomas was in the habit of swimming for long periods without tiring. But today he had chosen a new route. The fog hid the shore. A cloud had come down upon the sea and the surface was lost in a glow which seemed the only truly real thing. Currents shook him, though without giving him the feeling

of being in the midst of the waves and of rolling in familiar elements. The conviction that there was, in fact, no water

5.

at all made even his effort to swim into a frivolous exercise from which he drew nothing but discouragement. Perhaps he should only have had to get control of himself to drive away such thoughts, but his eye found nothing to cling to, and it seemed to him that he was staring into the void with the intention of finding help there. It was then that the sea, driven by the wind, broke loose. The storm tossed it, scattered it into in accessible regions; the squalls turned the sky upside down and, at the same time, there reigned a silence and a calm which gave the impression that everything was already destroyed. Thomas sought to free himself from the insipid flood which was invading him. A piercing cold paralyzed his arms. The water swirled in whirlpools. Was it actually water? One moment the foam leapt before his eyes in whitish flakes, the next the absence of water took hold of his body and drew it along violently. His breathing became slower; for a few moments he held in his mouth the liquid which the squalls drove against his head: a tepid

sweetness, strange brew of a man deprived of the sense of taste. Then, whether from fatigue or for an unknown reason, his limbs gave him the same sense of foreignness as the water in which they were tossed. This feeling seemed almost pleasant at first. As he swam, he pursued a sort of revery in which he confused himself with the sea. The intoxication of leaving himself, of slipping into the void, of dispersing himself in the thought of water, made him forget every discomfort. And even when this ideal sea which he was becoming ever more intimately had in turn become the real sea, in which he was virtually drowned, he was not moved as he should have been: of course, there was something intolerable about swimming this way, aimlessly, with a body which was of no use to him beyond thinking that he was swimming, but he also experienced a sense of relief, as if he had finally discovered the key to the situation, and, as far as he was concerned, it all came down to continuing his endless journey, with an absence of organism in an absence of sea. The illusion did not last. He was forced to roll from one side to

6. the other, like a boat adrift, in the water which gave him a body to swim. What escape was there? To struggle in order not to be carried away by the wave which was his arm? To go under? To drown himself bitterly in himself? That would surely have been the moment to stop, but a hope remained; he went on swimming as if, deep within the restored core of his being, he had discovered a new possibility. He swam, a monster without fins. Under the giant microscope, he turned himself into an enterprising mass of cilia and vibrations. The temptation took on an entirely bizarre character when he sought to slip from the drop of water into a region which was vague and yet infinitely precise, a sort of holy place, so perfectly suited to him that it was enough for him to be there, to be; it was like an imaginary hollow which he entered because, before he was there, his imprint was there already. And so he made a last effort to fit completely inside. It was easy; he encountered no obstacles; he rejoined himself; he blended with himself, entering into this place which no one else could penetrate.

At last he had to come back. He found his way easily and his feet touched bottom at a place which some of the swimmers used for diving. The fatigue was gone. He still had a humming in his ears and a burning in his eyes, as might be expected after staying too long in the salt water. He became conscious of this as, turning toward the infinite sheet of water reflecting the sun, he tried to tell in which direction he had gone. At that point, there was a real mist before his sight, and he could pick out absolutely anything in this murky void which his gaze penetrated feverishly. Peering out, he discovered a man who was swimming far off, nearly lost below the horizon. At such a distance, the swimmer was always escaping him. He would see him, then lose sight of him, though he had the feeling that he was following his every move: not only perceiving him clearly all the time, but being brought near him in a completely intimate way, such that no other sort of contact could have brought him closer. He stayed a long time, watching and waiting. There was in this contemplation something painful which resembled the manifestation of an excessive freedom, a freedom obtained by breaking every bond. His face clouded over and took on an unusual expression.

7.

the whole island

White teeth piercing the night,
and also the ravenous teeth of Chinese men waiting for breakfast
after Christian doctrine.

They can still be saved from heaven,
Deftly the maidens pull their penises
in time to the hymns.

The violent wave invades the wide hall of genuflections.
No one thinks to beg, thank, be grateful, testify.
Sanctity collapses in a gale of laughter.
Although love's chaotic symbols are the first things touched,
we have the luck to be ignorant of voluptuousness or cunnilingus,
the perfect lover and the octopus woman,
the strategic mirrors,

we don't know how to bear syphilis with a swan-like grace,
unaware that soon enough we'll acquire these fatal refinements.

Bodies in the mysterious tropical drizzle,
in the daily drizzle, the nightly drizzle, always the drizzle,
bodies opening their millions of eyes,
bodies, ruled by light, retreat
before the slaying of skin,
bodies, devouring waves of light, return like sunflowers of flame
at the crest of ecstatic waters,
bodies, afloat, drift seawards like extinguished embers.

It's confusion, terror, abundance,
The imminent loss of virginity.
Rotten mangoes in the riverbed dazzle thought,
and I scale the highest tree to fall like a piece of fruit.
There's no restraining this body destined for the hooves of horses,
caught crazily between poetry and sun.

Bravely I escort the pierced heart,
stab the sharpest stiletto into the sleepers' necks.
The tropic erupts and its flow invades my head
pinned fast to the crust of night.
The original piety of gold-bearing sands
resoundingly drowns the Spanish mares,
the whirlwind disorders the best-kept manes.

I can't see through these dilated eyes.
No one knows how to watch, to study, to strip a body.
It's the dreadful confusion of a hand in the greenery,
stranglers traveling at the edge of sight.
We didn't know how to fill the lonely course of love with glances.

I linger over a few old words:
downpour, siesta, cane field, tobacco,
with a simple gesture, scarcely if onomatopoeically,
majestically I step through the crest of their music,
intoning: water, noon, sugar, smoke.

9.

And I combine them:
the downpour sticks to the backs of horses,
siesta binds a horse's tail,
the cane field devouring horses
horses stray stealthily
into the shadowy emanation of tobacco,
final gesture of the Siboneys, smoke passing through the pitchfork's tines
like the cart of death,
final gesture of the Siboneys,
and I dig in this earth for idols and make for myself a history.

Peoples and their histories in the mouths of all the people.

(...)

Each man eating pieces of the island,
each man devouring its fruit, stones, and nutritious excrement,
each man biting the space left by his shadow,
each man tearing with his teeth at the void where the sun expects
to be,

each man, his mouth like a cistern, dams up the sea's water
but pathetically, like Münchhausen's horse,
spews it from its hindquarters,
each man in the rancorous labor of trimming
the edges of the world's most beautiful island,
each man trying to drive the beast that's a cross
between beast and fireflies.

But the beast is as lazy as a beautiful stallion
and stubborn as a primitive mare.
Each day it passes through the four chaotic moments,
the four moments in which it can study itself
—its head between its paws—searching the horizon with a cruel eye,
the four moments when cancer opens: daybreak, noon, dusk, and
night.

(...)

10.

Skin at this hour stretches out like a reef
and bites its own borders,
skin takes to screaming like a madwoman, like a fat sow,
skin tries to cover its light with palm leaves,
with fronds carried carelessly by the wind,
in a fury skin covers itself with parrots and pitahayas,
absurdly it covers itself with somber tobacco leaves
and the remains of shadowy legends,
and when skin has become but a dark ball,
the horrific hen brings forth a white egg.

Cover it! Cover it!
But the light advances, invades
perversely, obliquely, perpendicularly,
the light is an enormous vent that sucks the shadow,
and you slowly raise your hands to shield your eyes.

The least confessable secrets are spoken:
light moves tongues,
light moves arms,
light throws itself on the guava vendor,

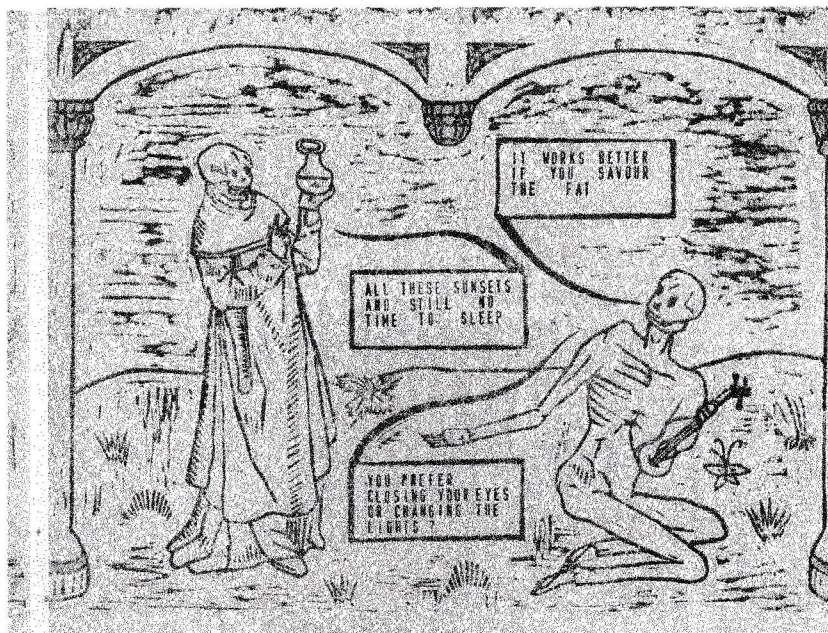
light throws itself on blacks and whites,
light strikes itself, rushes convulsively from side to side,
begins to explode, to burst, to split apart,
light begins the most horrific illumination,
light begins to give birth to light.
It's noon.

Light, like a plague, can kill a people.
At noon the brush is filled with invisible hammocks,
men, stretched out, are like leaves on metallic water.
At this hour no one could say the beloved's name
or raise a hand to caress a breast;
at this hour of cancer a stranger come from distant shores
would ask pointlessly what plans we have
or how many men die of tropical diseases on this island.
No one would hear him: their palms turned upwards,
ears plugged by the cork of drowsiness,
pores blocked by the wax of an elegant boredom
and the fatal ingestion of faded glories.

11.

Where in this cloudless sky is the crack of thunder
that splits the sleepers' eardrums?
What paleolithic shell would burst with its wild horn the sleepers'
eardrums?
Shell-men, hermit-crab-men, tunnel-men.
My people, too young to know how to create order!
My people, divinely rhetorical, too young to know how to tell your
story!
Like light or childhood you still don't have a face.

Suddenly noon gets under way,
gets under way within itself,
motionless noon moves, sways,
floats upwards like a fart,
its seams about to burst,
noon without culture, gravity, tragedy,
noon pissing upwards
reversing the great piss
of Gargantua on the towers of Notre Dame,

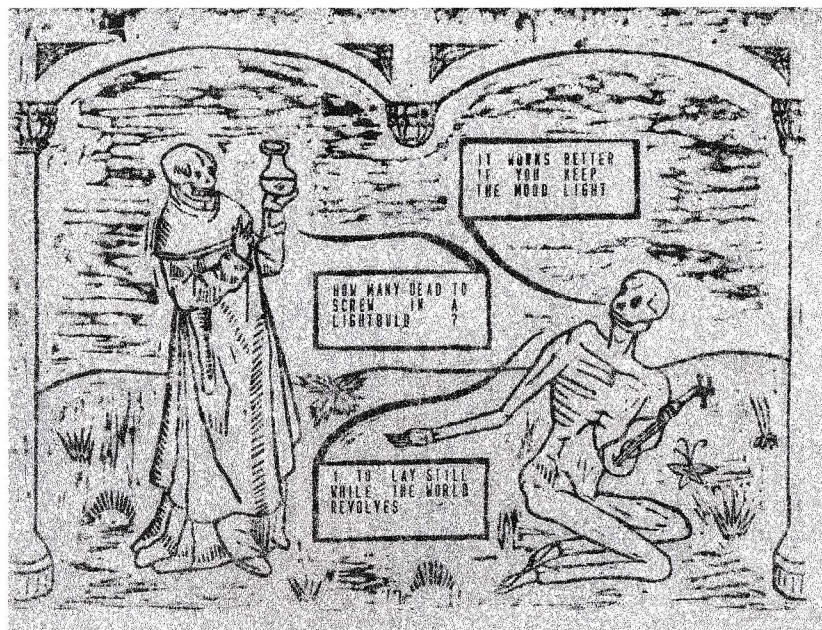


and all those stories, read by an islander who doesn't know
a defined cosmos.

(...)

A poetry completely of the mouth, like saliva:
milkweed, wax flower, moon flower.

A microscopic poetry:
Job's tears, Jupiter's tears, Love's tears.



(1943)

Gaston Bachelard

air and dreams

I.

Clouds are numbered among the most oneiric of "poetic things." They are the objects of daytime oneiric experience. They call forth easy, ephemeral reveries. In an instant we are "in the clouds," and then we come back down to earth, gently teased by positivists. No dreamer attributes to clouds the solemn significance of other sky "signs". In short, the reverie of clouds has a particular psychological characteristic: it is a reverie without responsibility.

The first thing that we notice about this reverie is that it is, as has so often been said, an easy play of form. Clouds provide imaginary matter for a lazy modeller. We dream them as a light cotton batting that rearranges itself. Reverie—as children often practice it—controls a changing phenomenon

15.

by giving it a command that has already been carried out or is being carried out. "Great elephant! Stretch out your trunk," says the child to the cloud that is growing longer. And the cloud obeys.

To account for the importance of the cloud in religious themes in India, Bergaigne writes quite correctly: "The cloud that envelops these waters is not only billowing and dripping, but even moving, and seems quite ready to play animal games." If the night's zoomorphism is stable in the constellations, the day's zoomorphism is undergoing constant change in the clouds. The dreamer always has a cloud to transform. The clouds help us to dream of transformation.

The authoritarian nature of reverie cannot be overemphasised; it is given as the most effortless of creative powers. This reverie works by way of the eyes. Meditated in the right way, it can shed light on the close relationship between will and imagination. Faced with this world of changing forms in which the will to see goes beyond passive vision and projects the most simplified of beings, the dreamer is master and prophet. He is the prophet of the moment. He tells, in

a prophetic voice, what is currently going on before his very eyes. Should there be, in some corner of the sky, matter that will not conform, other clouds have already prepared the preliminary outlines that the imagination will eventually complete. Our imaginary desire is attached to an imaginary form filled with imaginary matter. All the elements, certainly, are good for healing reverie. The whole world can be brought to life by the command of a hypnotic gaze. But with clouds the task is grandiose and easy at the same time. In this globular mass, everything rolls on just as you please. Mountains glide, avalanches fall and then regain their composure; monsters swell up and devour each other; the whole universe is governed by the will and by the imagination of the dreamer. (...)

IV.

16. Goethe has written a passage in which he gives a detailed analysis of the imagination of clouds. After lengthy reflections on the word of Howard, the English meteorologist, the poet seems to be drawn to another view of nature through poetic inspiration. Stratus, Cumulus, Cirrus, and Nimbus provide us with four direct images that are experienced in a manifest ascensional psychology.

Stratus. When from the water's most peaceful mirror a mist arises and unfolds as a single lament, the moon, linked with the watering phenomenon, seems like a phantom that creates other phantoms: then, o nature, we are all entranced and delighted children, we admit. Then it rises next to the mountain, piling up layer upon layer, it casts a shadow at a distance over all of the middle region, as ready to fall in the form of rain as it is to rise as a vapour.

Cumulus. And if the imposing mass is called into the upper regions of the atmosphere, the cloud stops in a magnificent sphere. In its determined form it proclaims its power to act, and what you fear and even what you experience is a threat above; below it is trembling.

Cirrus. But a noble impulse makes it rise even higher. An easy, divine constraint delivers it. A mass of clouds is broken up into flakes, like bounding sheep, a light combed multitude. Thus, what comes gently to life down here, up above finally flows with no sound into the lap and the hand of the Father.

Nimbus. And what is amassed up above, drawn by the earth's force, is hurled down in the fury of thunderstorms, spread out and dispersed in legions. The active and passive destiny of the earth! But lift up your gaze with the image: the word descends, for it describes. The spirit wants to rise to where it lives forever.

Gift. And when we have made this distinction, we out to attribute the gifts of life to the thing that has been separated out and rejoice in a continuous life.

There fore, if the painter or the poet, familiar with Howard's analysis, contemplates the atmosphere in the morning and evening hours, he allows its nature to subsist; but aerial worlds give him sweeter, more varied tones that can be grasped, felt, and expressed.

17. The reader may be disturbed by the mixture of abstract ideas and images that are found in this passage. But looking at it more closely, he will be struck by the pluralism of the cloud's imaginary substance. By pursuing this pluralism even further, he can truly relate to the life of clouds. In this way, reverie can establish a further distinction between rolling cumulus and rumbling cumulus, namely a distinction between game and threat. In the Nimbus, caught between rising and falling, many different reveries are also in preparation. In any case, in reading Goethe, we should recognise that contemplating a cloud's form is not enough for a complete analysis of cloud reverie. Cloud reverie is a more profound participation; it attributes to thee cloud a material that is either gentle or menacing, a potential for action, or for self-effacement and peace. (...) Mythology is a primitive meteorology.

hydrophobia

Aase Berg

(2012)

The hare is also a constellation
in the listless, frigid hydrosphere
Same cosmic fatstiff freezefearflood
same cuntstiff looptrack fatflood
We like suckle animals, egg animals, whalenut animals
prefer not to give birth to live young

TRANSLATED BY JOHANNES GÖRANSSON

confessions of a mask

Yukio Mishima

(1949)

Summer vacation arrived. Although I had looked forward to it impatiently, it proved to be one of those between-acts during which one does not know what to do with himself; although I had hungered for it, it proved to be an uneasy feast for me.

Ever since I had contracted a light case of tuberculosis in infancy, the doctor had forbidden me to expose myself to strong ultraviolet rays. When at the seacoast, I was never allowed to stay out in the direct rays of the sun more than thirty minutes at a time. Any violation of this rule always brought its own punishment in a swift attack of fever. I was not even allowed to take part in swimming practice at school. Consequently I had never learned to swim. Later, this inability to swim gained new significance in connection with the persistent fascination the sea came to have

19.

for me, with those occasions on which it exercised such turbulent power over me.

At the time of which I speak, however, I had not yet encountered this overpowering temptation of the sea. And yet, wanting somehow to while away the boredom of a season which was completely distasteful to me, a season moreover which awakened inexplicable longings within me, I spent that summer at the beach with my mother and brother and sister. . .

Suddenly I realized that I had been left alone on the rock.

I had walked along the beach toward this rock with my brother and sister a short time before, looking for the tiny fish that flashed in the rivulets between the rocks. Our catch had not been as good as we had foreseen, and my small sister and brother had become bored. A maid had come to call us to the beach umbrella where my mother was sitting.

I had refused crossly to turn back, and the maid had taken my brother and sister back with her, leaving me alone.

The sun of the summer afternoon was beating down incessantly upon the surface of the sea, and the entire bay was a single, stupendous expanse of glare. On the horizon some summer clouds were standing mutely still, half-immersing their magnificent, mournful, prophet-like forms in the sea. The muscles of the clouds were pale as alabaster.

A few sailboats and skiffs and several fishing boats had put out from the sandy beaches and were now moving about lazily upon the open sea. Except for the tiny figures in the boats, not a human form was to be seen. A subtle hush was over everything. As though a coquette had come telling her little secrets, a light breeze blew in from the sea, bringing to my ears a tiny sound like the invisible wing-beats of some light-hearted insects. The beach near me was made up almost altogether of low, docile rocks that tilted toward the sea. There were only two or three such jutting crags as this on which I was sitting.

20.

From the offing the waves began and came sliding in over the surface of the sea in the form of restless green swells. Groups of low rocks extended out into the sea, where their resistance to the waves sent splashes high into the air, like white hands begging for help. The rocks were dipping themselves in the sea's sensation of deep abundance and seemed to be dreaming of buoys broken loose from their moorings. But in a flash the swell had passed them by and come sliding toward the beach with unabated speed. As it drew near the beach something awakened and rose up within its green hood. The wave grew tall and, as far as the eye could reach, revealed the razor-keen blade of the sea's enormous ax, poised and ready to strike. Suddenly the dark-blue guillotine fell, sending up a white blood-splash. The body of the wave, seething and falling, pursued its severed head, and for a moment it reflected the

pure blue of the sky, that same unearthly blue which is mirrored in the eyes of a person on the verge of death. . . . During the brief instant of the wave's attack, the groups of rocks, smooth and eroded, had concealed themselves in white froth, but now, gradually emerging from the sea, they glittered in the retreating remnants of the wave. From the top of the rock where I sat watching, I could see hermit-shells sidling crazily across the glittering rocks and crabs become motionless in the glare.

All at once my feeling of solitude became mixed with memories of Omi. It was like this: My long-felt attraction toward the loneliness that filled Omi's life—loneliness born of the fact that life had enslaved him—had first made me want to possess the same quality; and now that I was experiencing, in this feeling of emptiness before the sea's repletion, a loneliness that outwardly resembled his, I wanted to savor it completely, through his very eyes. I would enact the double role of both Omi and myself. But in order to do so I first had to discover some point of similarity with him, however slight. In that way I would be able to become a standin for Omi and consciously act exactly as though I were joyfully overflowing with that same loneliness which was probably only unconscious in him, attaining at last to a realization of that daydream in which the pleasure I felt at the sight of Omi became the pleasure Omi himself was feeling.

21.

Ever since becoming obsessed with the picture of St. Sebastian, I had acquired the unconscious habit of crossing my hands over my head whenever I happened to be undressed. Mine was a frail body, without so much as a pale shadow of Sebastian's abundant beauty. But now once more I spontaneously fell into the pose. As I did so my eyes went to my armpits. And a mysterious sexual desire boiled up within me. . .

Summer had come and, with it, there in my armpits, the first sprouts of black thickets, not the equal of Omi's it is true, but undoubtedly there. Here then was the point of similarity with Omi that my purposes re-

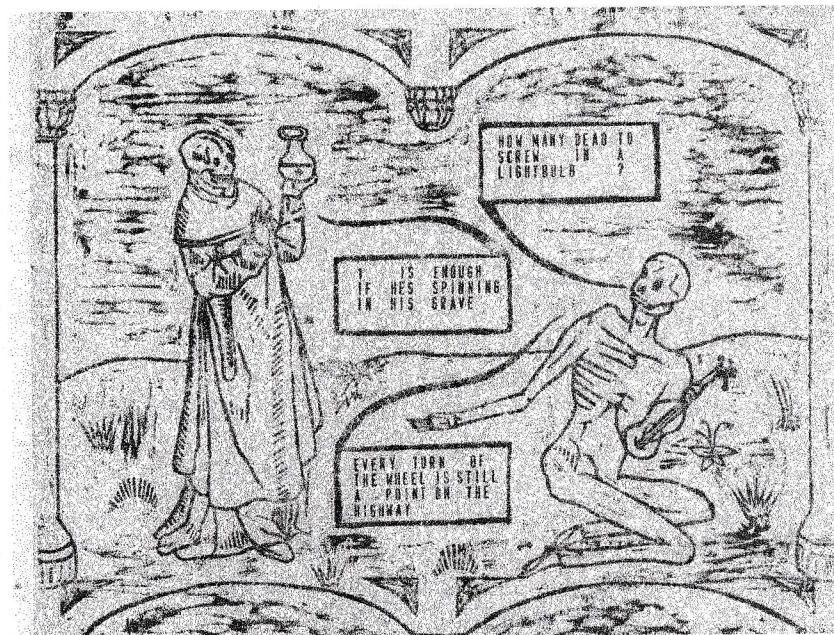
quired. There is no doubt that Omi himself was involved in my sexual desire, but neither could it be denied that this desire was directed mainly toward my own armpits. Urged on by a swarming combination of circumstances —the salt breeze that made my nostrils quiver, the strong summer sun that blazed down upon me and set my shoulders and chest to smarting, the absence of human form as far as the eye could reach—for the first time in my life I indulged in my “bad habit” out in the open, there beneath the blue sky. As its object I chose my own armpits. . .

My body was shaken with a strange grief. I was on fire with a loneliness as fiery as the sun. My swimming trunks, made of navy-blue wool, were glued unpleasantly to my stomach. I climbed down slowly off the rock, stepping into a trapped pool of water at the edge of the beach. In the water my feet looked like white, dead shells, and down through it I could plainly see the bottom, studded with shells and flickering with ripples.

22.

I knelt down in the water and surrendered myself to a wave that broke at this moment and came rushing toward me with a violent roar. It struck me in the chest, almost burying me in its crushing whitecap. . .

When the wave receded, my corruption had been washed away. Together with that receding wave, together with the countless living organisms it contained —microbes, seeds of marine plants, fish eggs—my myriad spermatozoa had been engulfed in the foaming sea and carried away.

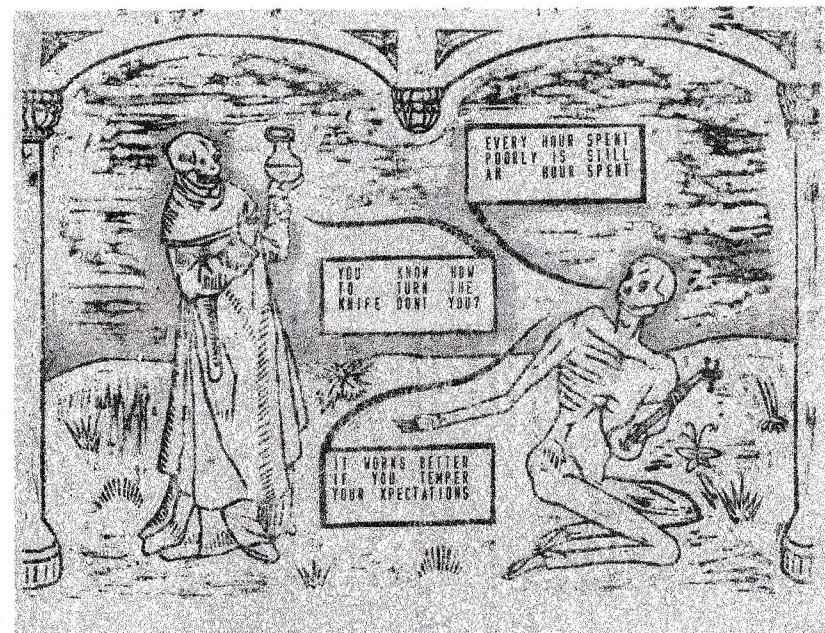


composing listening

(2011)

Bill Dietz

While the tub fills, he sets up a small CD-player and looks for his most recent bath mix. He tests the water occasionally, adjusts the volume on the small CD-player. Not too loud. Making the already tinny sound even thinner. It blends with the rush of the faucet. He strips, gets into the tub one foot at a time, slowly lowering himself into the hot water. Easing the more sensitive parts of his body in. The tracks on the CD are essentially static – instrumentals, soundtracks, lower tempo dance numbers. Often, he immerses his head in the water, hears through it. The CD repeats. As the temperature changes, he lets out water to make room for more hot. The hairs on his body sway. His genitals float. He comes close to sleep. He adjusts his body to the metal of the tub, listens with one ear submerged. The CD repeats. He imagines, fantasizes, masturbates a bit. His fingers and toes prune. He washes himself, leaving the water foamy. He stays in the tub as the water runs out, feeling its light receding tug and his own weight returning. By the time he's standing, he's returned, forgotten listening.



a sequence

She heard the sounds of a couple having intercourse and then getting up they went into the shower so that she caught a sight of them naked before hearing the water running. The parts of their bodies which had been covered by clothes were those of leopards. During puberty her own organs and skin were not like this though when she first had intercourse with a man he removed his clothes and his organ and flesh were also a leopard's. She already felt pleasure in sexual activity and her body not resembling these adults made her come easily which also occurred when she had intercourse with another man a few months later.

When sexual unions occurred between a brother and sister they weren't savages or primitive. She had that feeling about having intercourse with men whose organs were those of leopards and hers were not. Walking somewhere after one of these episodes she was excited by it though she might not have made this comparison if she'd actually had a brother. At least the woman she had seen in the shower had a leopard's parts. In these episodes when she'd had intercourse with a man he didn't remark about her not being like that. And if women had these characteristics which she didn't it made her come more easily with him.

She overheard another couple together and happened to see them as she had the couple in the shower. The nude part of the woman was like herself and the man had the leopard's parts so that she had the same reaction and came easily with someone, as she had with a sense of other women having a leopard's traits and herself isolated. The man with whom she had intercourse did not say anything that showed he had seen a difference in her and that made her react physically. Yet other women seemed to have a leopard's characteristics except for this one she'd seen.

Again it seemed that a man with whom she had intercourse was her brother and was ardent with her—but this would not have occurred to her had she really had a brother. Yet her feeling about him was also related to her seeing a woman who was pregnant and was the only one to be so. The woman not receiving attention or remarks on the pregnancy excited her; and went together with her sense of herself coming easily and yet not being pregnant until quite awhile after this time.

She also felt that she came easily feeling herself isolated when she was pregnant since she had the sense of other women having leopards' organs. They had previously had children. She was the only one who was pregnant and again she saw a couple together, the man with leopard's parts and the woman not having these characteristics.

Again she could come since her body was different from the adult who had some parts that were leopards, and having the sense of the women having had children earlier than her and their not having younger children now.

27.

Her liking the other women to have had children when she was pregnant had to do with having them there and herself isolated—and yet people not saying much about or responding to the pregnancy. She thought of the man coming as when she caught a sight of the couple together—being able to come with someone a different time because she had a sense of a woman she'd seen having had her children earlier. There being a difference of age, even ten years, between a child she'd have and those the other women had had.

She happened to see some men who were undressed, as if they were boys—one of them had the features and organ of a leopard and the others did not. The difference in this case gave her the sense of them being boys, all of them rather than those who didn't have leopards' characteristics and this made her come easily with someone. It was not a feeling of their being a younger age, since the men were

her own age, and she found the men who lacked the leopard features to be as attractive as the one who had those features. She had the feeling of them as adults and her the same age as them, yet had the other feeling as well in order for her to come then.

28. She saw a couple who were entwined together and her feeling about them came from the earlier episode of seeing the men who were nude and having the sense of them being adolescent boys. Really she'd had the sense of the men she'd seen as being adults and herself the same age as them. The couple she watched were also around the same age as herself—the man being aware of someone else's presence after a time and coming. The woman pleased then though she had not come. She had intercourse with the man who had the features and organ of a leopard and whom she had first seen with the group of men who lacked these characteristics. The other men were attractive as he was. Yet having the sense of the difference between him and the others, she found it pleasant for him to come and for her not to come that time. The same thing occurred on another occasion with him.

She compared the man to plants, to the plants having a nervous aspect and being motionless. The man coming when he had the sense of being delayed in leaving—as if being slowed down had made him come and was exciting, and it was during the afternoon with people walking around. He was late and had to go somewhere, and came, with a feeling of delay and retarding—rather than out of nervousness.

the waves

(1931)

Virginia Woolf

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.

As they neared the shore each bar rose, heaped itself, broke and swept a thin veil of white water across the sand. The wave paused, and then drew out again, sighing like a sleeper whose breath comes and goes unconsciously. Gradually the dark bar on the horizon became clear as if the sediment in an old wine-bottle had sunk and left the glass green. Behind it, too, the sky cleared as if the white sediment there had sunk, or as if the

29. arm of a woman couched beneath the horizon had raised a lamp and flat bars of white, green and yellow spread across the sky like the blades of a fan. Then she raised her lamp higher and the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres like the smoky fire that roars from a bonfire. Gradually the fibres of the burning bonfire were fused into one haze, one incandescence which lifted the weight of the woollen grey sky on top of it and turned it to a million atoms of soft blue. The surface of the sea slowly became transparent and lay rippling and sparkling until the dark stripes were almost rubbed out. Slowly the arm that held the lamp raised it higher and then higher until a broad flame became visible; an arc of fire burnt on the rim of the horizon, and all round it the sea blazed gold.

The light struck upon the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another. One bird chirped high up; there was a pause;

another chirped lower down. The sun sharpened the walls of the house, and rested like the tip of a fan upon a white blind and made a blue finger-print of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window. The blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial. The birds sang their blank melody outside.

"I see a ring," said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."

"I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan, "spreading away until it meets a purple stripe."

"I hear a sound," said Rhoda, "cheep, chirp; cheep, chirp; going up and down."

"I see a globe," said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."

"I see a crimson tassel," said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads."

30. "I hear something stamping," said Louis. "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps."

"Look at the spider's web on the corner of the balcony," said Bernard. "It has beads of water on it, drops of white light."

"The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears," said Susan.

"A shadow falls on the path," said Louis, "like an elbow bent."

"Islands of light are swimming on the grass," said Rhoda. "They have fallen through the trees."

"The birds' eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves," said Neville.

"The stalks are covered with harsh, short hairs," said Jinny, "and drops of water have stuck to them."

"A caterpillar is curled in a green ring," said Susan, "notched with blunt feet."

"The grey-shelled snail draws across the path and flattens the blades behind him," said Rhoda.

"And burning lights from the window-panes flash in and out on the grasses," said Louis.

"Stones are cold to my feet," said Neville. "I feel each one, round or pointed, separately."

"The back of my hand burns," said Jinny, "but the palm is clammy and damp with dew."

"Now the cock crows like a spurt of hard, red water in the white tide," said Bernard.

"Birds are singing up and down and in and out all round us," said Susan.

"The beast stamps; the elephant with its foot chained; the great brute on the beach stamps," said Louis.

"Look at the house," said Jinny, "with all its windows white with blinds."

"Cold water begins to run from the scullery tap," said Rhoda, "over the mackerel in the bowl."

"The walls are cracked with gold cracks," said Bernard, "and there are blue, finger-shaped shadows of leaves beneath the windows."

"Now Mrs. Constable pulls up her thick black stockings," said Susan.

"When the smoke rises, sleep curls off the roof like a mist," said Louis.

"The birds sang in chorus first," said Rhoda. "Now the scullery door is unbarred. Off they fly. Off they fly like a fling of seed. But one sings by the bedroom window alone."

"Bubbles form on the floor of the saucepan," said Jinny. "Then they rise, quicker and quicker, in a silver chain to the top."

"Now Biddy scrapes the fish-scales with a jagged knife on to a wooden board," said Neville.

"The dining-room window is dark blue now," said Bernard, "and the air ripples above the chimneys."

"A swallow is perched on the lightning-conductor," said Susan. "And Biddy has smacked down the bucket on the kitchen flags."

"That is the first stroke of the church bell," said Louis. "Then the others follow; one, two; one, two; one, two."

"Look at the table-cloth, flying white along the table," said Rhoda. "Now there are rounds of white china, and silver streaks beside each plate."

"Suddenly a bee booms in my ear," said Neville. "It is here; it is past."

"I burn, I shiver," said Jinny, "out of this sun, into this shadow."

"Now they have all gone," said Louis. "I am alone. They have gone into the house for breakfast, and I am left standing by the wall among the flowers. It is very early, before lessons. Flower after flower is specked on the depths of green. The petals are harlequins. Stalks rise from the black hollows beneath. The flowers swim like fish made of light upon

32.

the dark, green waters. I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. I am a boy in grey flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake up here. Down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in a desert by the Nile. I see women passing with red pitchers to the river; I see camels swaying and men in turbans. I hear trappings, tremblings, stirrings round me.

"Up here Bernard, Neville, Jinny and Susan (but not Rhoda) skim the flower-beds with their nets. They skim the butterflies from the nodding tops of the flowers. They brush the surface of the world. Their nets are full of fluttering wings. 'Louis! Louis! Louis!' they shout. But they cannot see me. I am on the other side of the hedge. There are only little eye-holes among the leaves. Oh Lord, let them pass. Lord, let them lay their butterflies on a pocket-handkerchief on the gravel. Let them count out their tortoise-shells, their red admirals and cabbage whites. But let me be unseen. I am green as a yew tree in the shade of the hedge. My

hair is made of leaves. I am rooted to the middle of the earth. My body is a stalk. I press the stalk. A drop oozes from the hole at the mouth and slowly, thickly, grows larger and larger. Now something pink passes the eyehole. Now an eye beam is slid through the chink. Its beam strikes me. I am a boy in a grey flannel suit. She has found me. I am struck on the nape of the neck. She has kissed me. All is shattered."

"I was running," said Jinny, "after breakfast. I saw leaves moving in a hole in the hedge. I thought 'That is a bird on its nest.' I parted them and looked; but there was no bird on a nest. The leaves went on moving. I was frightened. I ran past Susan, past Rhoda, and Neville and Bernard in the tool-house talking. I cried as I ran, faster and faster. What moved the leaves? What moves my heart, my legs? And I dashed in here, seeing you green as a bush, like a branch, very still, Louis, with your eyes fixed.' Is he dead?" I thought, and kissed you, with my heart jumping under my pink frock like the leaves, which go on moving, though there is nothing to move them. Now I smell geraniums; I smell earth mould. I dance. I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net of light. I lie quivering flung over you."

33.

Slow Reading Club (SRC) is a semi-fictional reading group initiated in 2016 by Bryana Fritz and Henry Andersen. They deal in constructed situations for collective reading. SRC seeks to occupy and eroticise the space of transmission between text and reader, reader and reader, text and text; to dwell in the unstable space of reading itself, to intensify what Spivak calls "the possible menace of a space outside of language" that is opened up in reading and in love.

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