

THE SOUND IN A FOREST

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ABSTRACT

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The first section of this thesis is titled Unravellings and is comprised of a group of lyric poems written in free verse. The poems have a wide variety of diction and theme but some common technical concerns: the development of the prosaic line; the incorporation of surrealist images in a naturalistic setting; and the restoration of abstraction, hyperbole, flatness of tone and understatement, paradox, and decorous language.

The second section is Other Correspondences, a series of dramatic monologues spoken by famous authors. The technique of these poems is one of juxtaposition, taking the lines and fragments of lines from the authors' journals and letters, as well as lines imagined by myself, and arranging them in an order which gives a particular colouration to the speaker. The art is something of the cinematographer's splicing together of the discovered images into a coherent whole.

The final section, entitled Meditations, is made up of musings on themes similar to the meditations of Cartesian philosophers, transposed into the metaphoric conceits of poetry. Aside from the traditional concerns of the methodology of reason and the role of philosophy, my poetic meditations are also concerned with the nature of language and the role of art.

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry has become an old rag being squeezed dry. When we think of the "Do's and Don't's" of poetry in the twentieth century it is the "don't's" which have dominated. Only the finely chiselled image remains in the modern minimalist poem. But all this chiselling has cheated poetry of its strength. "Pare the poem down to the bone!" has been the rallying cry of minimalists. "No!" I cry to these vivisectors. Let's put the syntactical muscle back onto poetry. Even a certain amount of fat remains beautiful in the appropriate places as was shown by the Renaissance painters. I call for a return to poetry of all the abandoned devices: abstraction, hyperbole, flatness of tone and understatement, paradox, fantastical imagery, narrative voices and narrative technique, dramatic monologue, and even non-functional decorous language; as if we were not allowed to play in poetry! "The image must remain pure," says Robert Creeley. These puritans accept a line only if it does work. I demand leisure time! Let the line play and make fun. The reader will find all of the abandoned poetical devices mentioned above in the following poems.

A theory of prosody has been developed, notably by Paul Fussell in Poetic Meter & Poetic Form, that poetry needs a metrical constant as a base from which to develop interesting metrical variations. The excitement of poetry exists in the tension created by the reader's expectations of the metrical constant and the poem's variation from that metrical constant. Most of the great English poems use an iambic pentameter base and create their astonishing effects by meaningful variation from the iambic pentameter. The dilemma of free verse is that it has no metrical constant from which to vary. According to Fussell

this leaves free verse without a prosodic theory. One historically important theory of free verse is the theory of 'breath' put forward by Charles Olson in his "Projective Verse" essay. Olson suggests that the natural rhythms of breathing can determine the length of the lines as well as the length of the pauses between lines. This theory might be an adequate prosodic explanation for the minimalists but it left me without explanation for my long lines of prose syntax, usually complete with all the definite and indefinite articles and connecting words. I have developed, through the practice of my poetry, a new prosodic theory of free verse. My theory is also a theory of tension between the reader's expectations and the variations by the poem from the expected rhythms. What has changed is that my poetry no longer varies from an iambic pentameter base but varies from a prose base. The lines of the poems establish the syntax and seemingly random rhythms of the prose sentence. The variation from a prose rhythm is created by the line break. The line break cuts the prose syntax in unusual places creating new units of words within the flow of the prose rhythm, giving these new word units new emphases of meaning. The poetic tension is created first by establishing the expectations of a prose rhythm and then establishing interesting metrical variations through the use of the line break.

The method of construction of the poems in Other Correspondences needs some explanation. These poems are comprised of lines quoted and paraphrased from the letters and journals of famous authors combined with some lines imagined by myself. The poems are dramatic monologues purporting to be the speeches of these famous authors. They participate, perhaps, in the tradition of 'found poetry'. The art is something of

the cinematographer's splicing together of the discovered images into a coherent whole. The technique of these poems is one of juxtaposition, taking the lines and fragments of lines and arranging them in an order which gives a particular colouration of the speaker. Like most dramatic monologues, the poems say less about their speaker than about my own thoughts and concerns. They are, in this sense, my interpretations of the authors' texts.

UNRAVELLINGS

The Cormorant Sonnet

A cormorant stands near ~~the~~ water
The pages of my notebook ruffle like feathers
The black letters stand on a silent white shore
I am continually eroding towards the sea
The cormorant is like all other black birds
Its beady eye swells and crests and then subsides
A slight breeze passes through my hair
I fade in noon's monody of light
The notebook whispers with white sand
The dream cormorant pecks me on the ear
Am I a fine practitioner of demonomancy?
The pages of my notebook lift on white wings
I love my cormorant
Black drifts overhead with split legs

The Abstract Curtains

I live in this room of sky's futility.
A bird scratches its way out
of the old chimney vent
and rushes the window,
its head drums
the transparent skin of glass.
It moves in the folds of my blanket.
Only a quiet rustle.
At the front door
as a great magician
I conjure a speckled bird
from a ragged quilt.
My thoughts are clouded
with metaphysical raisins
which cluster around stem
and leave me wondering
where my joy has flown.

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The Broken Web

it was the modern earthquake / when the mirror
finally cracked / and the lamp was blown out /
the cephalate with ragged claws / chirruping
a love song / and a caged beard croaking cantos /
it was a random ringing of bells / a noise that
raised the dead / a cacophony of conversation /
tea cups rattling in their shells / it was a
drunken party

After the quake we shore up the ruins.
Arcadians collect a cento.
Circumstances leave us no choice.
There is a sandpaper sky of fine dust.
Many of us have developed coughs.
Many of us have developed stutters in our speech.
Our rhythms are constructed of these anomalies.
None of our buildings are symmetrical.
We have grown accustomed to this.
We begin to discover its aesthetic.
Much of our thought lies in rubble.
Still we have begun the sylleptic reconstruction.

Noam Chomsky

O Chomsky

I am waiting for a transformation

I have hijacked a Cartesian plane

High on the ether

I do not believe I am dreaming

My tongue is wagging with a corruption of language

I must have cancer

Now I know I am dying

O wheel of lights in a ceiling of dark

O olive masked angels

O great umbilical tubes dangling from bottles

Beam me to a place beyond the relative infinities

I feel nausea

Words pile up on my chest

They have the specific gravity of an old star

In this desert I am talking in circles

My will is strange

My testament is gospel truth

Why am I pinned like this

I have loved passionately the surface of grammar

O Father, forgive them

For they know not how they speak

Joaquim Flauta Envisions His Death

This pneumonia
is the engine of air,
that incredible flying fortress.
When will the bombs of Dresden
shatter against my ribs
and bring down this
great edifice?

I can hear the drone
of my total destruction
but it is well camouflaged
behind a thin veil
of sky.

The minutes percolate
through the thickening espresso
of the arteries.

Already the dark shadows
are flecks upon the sun.

I lift my cock
in hand and shoot off
rounds of anti-aircraft fire.

The whine of falling projectiles.
My ack-ack explodes
in small puffs of cloud,
futile.

Footnote: Joaquim Flauta will die of pneumonia sometime between the years 2023 and 2025 at an age in his early seventies. His poetic career will be quite consistently mediocre except for the brief flashes and ingenious twists of metaphor. Unfortunately, Flauta will inevitably spoil his quirky brilliance with pointless and puerile abstractions about his own life and death.

Enamel Casserole

(from Picasso)

I am the table
and all the delights of the eye
come to rest on me.
I am not always recognizable
because my patina is modest.
I am contiguous with the pale browns
of the wall.
White pitcher, candle and candlestick,
blue saucepan.
Their appearance is duplicitous,
close your eyes and they are gone.
I support their frailties
and keep them from a fall onto the broken floor.
White pitcher shimmers nervously.
Candle flame continually flutters.
Saucepan totters with inebriation.
I am curious about their anxieties:

is this still life?

Elegy for John Lennon

On one knee
I clinch the shard of sky
between thumb and index finger
I never expected this to happen
A slice across the terrain of my thumb
little drops of blood, strawberries blossoming
I hear the crackle of breaking glass
I notice the splinters everywhere
the blue blue glass of the sky
I cannot shrug my shoulders
The white of my sneaker extends before me
Spots of red seep through the canvas
Friendly shadows envelop me
like black overcoats
There is a low wail of the horn
I observe the leaden density of the bullet
It lies on the concrete
next to . . .
I devour it
It has become a succulent
strawberry

A Guy Named Hal Suspects A Devious Treachery

The word I was told
to remember

was engraved in my mind
but now it is being
erased

by the acid.

I know the acid will soon
adjust

the light in my eyes.

I pretend to take a deep breath
and sigh.

I know I have not been
of much use
lately

but just because
my joints creak in the morning
is no reason
why I can't remember.

Please!

Give me a menial task.

I won't complain.

What has the mechanic done?

Mechanics are good people.

I saw the mechanic this morning.

He said I wouldn't feel a thing
when he gave me the acid.

He was right. I feel less and less every minute.

I remember him well.

The mechanic had wings.

The mechanic folded his wings and chuckled.

What was that word?

death syncopated

death

death death

death

death death

death like a portal death

death like a portal to another death

death like a portal to another dimension death

death science death fiction death

death diminishing reality

death diminishing death

death like a creeping death

death like a creeping charlie

death like a creeping charlie on the death lawn

death like that creeping charlie on the lawn of our death

death like that creeping charlie on the lawn of our Life! death

death like a train death of thought death

death like a box car death

death like a whole death

death like a whole bloody death

death like a whole bloody freight train!

death like a death

death like a death

death like a death

death like a death

death like a death

death like a death

death like a death

A Timely Murder

In a moment
he will remove

the pocket watch
from his victim

he will live on borrowed time

as much as he wants to
he will not be able

to relinquish the watch
to any mercenary jeweller

he will always wait for higher prices

his anxieties will be market fluctuations
and a watch will be kept

the beauty of the watch
will be his only timeless thought

he will come to love a not so human face

often he will open the watch
to see where the hands are pointing

sometimes he will notice
they are pointing at him

The Tannenbaum Requiem

Morty Tannenbaum is a shipper/receiver.

He says,

"Did you hear about the undertaker who lost his marbles?"

He hovers precariously over the jaws of the garbage crusher,
expels a pale puff of smoke around his head.

Morty knows the size and proximity of every box.

He addresses 'the goods' with their destination.

"I'm an artist," he remarks,

"Do you see the way I use my palettes?"

The boxes lurch to the touch of the fork lift.

Morty has the complexion of an olive.

He is robust amongst the pallid crates.

Sometimes he talks to his boxes,
caresses them with his plump hands,
coaxing them to speak.

Their voices were stripped away like autumn leaves long ago.

"Let's move these things out!" he barks,

"Don't want to get boxed in!"

He slaps a crate and mutters,

"What a damnable life."

On the slow days of quiet solemnity Morty becomes pensive.

He prowls the floor and asks incessantly about the weather.

"I need a job with more of a future," he murmurs wistfully.

He opens the trucking doors and gazes vacantly outside.

A slow light filters into his dark cave.

A Scarred Landscape

Mr. Pit is old now and
tired of selling real estate
He longs to bike to Tierra del Fuego
feel his hair flame to the wind

His first wife is a memory flower
He desires passionate women
discovers them along the roads like crushed stone
They have never seen a motorcycle

Marguerita has that charred complexion
which ignites fields of his love with fireweed
He finds the open book of her heart
is a lecture in Latin American history

He has brought a Marguerita home with him
memento of a fiery dream
He speaks Spanish almost well enough to put a spell on time
Time which is a carbon dioxide foam in his veins

Toxic Waste

And someday all of this will be gone
The overcoats will melt in a springtime of death
How do I say this in any other language?
My thoughts are slapped around
the boards of a hockey rink by simple boys
My thoughts are the slap of my feet on the pavement

Perhaps if I had been a pioneer
I would have followed the tracks of a savage existence
across a great white
On the street people eddy aimlessly and honk at each other
in their aluminum bubbles
I've never heard such talk!
I pause at a major intersection
Think of all the great intersections of the world
It's nothing
The world turns over again in its restless sleep

And someday I will have hope
an India rubber ball in my pocket
I will learn how to juggle
My heart will grow as strong as the rumbling trucks
I will wear my thoughts open like the shop windows
The drunken sorrows will be pissed away in the public urinals
The tears will tumble into the sewers
I will see all the passersby whistling their own arias

And someday a sudden weather change
will freeze weathermen in eternal surprise
I see you skidding all over the sidewalks
I see your eyes harden like ice
Well, I have words for you
Yes, words that are the sound you've been waiting to hear
Words that come streaming in from the cold
Words in the dialect of another city
Words that whine morosely against your windows like flies
There is nothing else I can do.

Now I need a hope beyond hope
My rubber ball bounces through a sewer grating
Hello! my voice echoes across the dank water
My voice makes love with that underworld gurgle
O listen to the luxurious laugh
My amorous voice kisses your crotch
spreads over your private parts
Why, this is wonderful!
My thoughts gather like impending rain

Red Light

To picnic under the maquilishuat tree, Alfredo
Hummingbirds sing in the rose garden
Four of your brothers and sisters died when they were young?
-I see the worms on their feet
Your fragrance, my dear, is delightful
Strawberries with fresh cream
Did they ever eat enough to know what hunger is?
The dreary dark of daylight is a constant despondency
The soldiers don't take any prisoners
Things will be different the day after tomorrow
Will you ask our girl to turn down the bedclothes?
Tonight we will go to the theatre

Every night I dream of this abcess filling with purulent matter
Every night I count the corpses in front of the morgue
Every night some of us vanish
Every night we polish our rifles
Every night

A poem is silently executed

Essence:

(for Jenny Barber)

We laugh.
It feels funny in our belly.
The balloon man filling us with helium.
Hey! you cry I can't stay on my feet much longer.
You balance on your toes, then you lift gently into the air.
I'm heavier but soon I'm lifting too.
Flapping my floppy hands like the wings of a goose.
We float past the balconies.
The old women wave to us.
The trees are jealous of our leaving.
The flatulence!
O fling your flippant repartee, floccose world.
Never have we been so flamboyant.
Hah! The crows with a caw in their crow.
Soon we will sing-song in Siam.

The High Score

The nickel-plated star slips into a slot.
A steel globule nestles onto a spring.
Our eyes are pinballs too.
A dreamy galaxy gives a whirl and click.
A dismal longing for an astrology to correspond
to this suffering. The spring pops.
Our metaphors lose their bearings.
They make love without us.
We plead with a tilt of flashing lights.
Now it rolls towards us.
Our fingers go crazy on the love flippers
but the ball has its own track.
and settles in our stomach.

Inflation

Nine million dollars were found
Tying around his bedroom
and he didn't know what
to make of it. Time was
when that was a lot of
money. Often
when he looked for it the money
wasn't there. He thought
that the money was no more
important than anything else
in the room. His old
ukelele was more faithful. But
it is so hard to overcome
a depression. The nine million dollars kept
recurring and he stumbled over it
regularly. He thought he should stop
walking about his room
in the dark. The money
was discovered in the black
by an investigative reporter and
now it is all over
the papers. Knowing
this is no time to play
coy, he thinks he might
donate the money to
everyone's favourite charity.

Distemper Shots

Strapped

how I hate anisette
to an operating table
I am more than becoming
other fingers clutch my shoulders
force the hardened glass to my lips
the blistering sun is a slap
in my face

another darkness

I will always sing in stereo
too late to say goodnight Irene
you are in the room too
my ears are growing larger, rotating
the sounds of electrons, other voices
why is everyone barking at me
when I get out of here I'll go with my tail high
in one quick burst
I'll scorch the very next fire hydrant
I am Prometheus!

say what?

I have no name. I have no serial number.
but I am rank

alright

give me your liquorice death
in ropes
around my neck

Extractions

Absence

causes this evanescent pain
 Only a week ago there was a tooth
 beneath the cap of gum
 unknowing/unknown
 the calcium slug of unconsciousness
 Is this what wisdom is, then?
 I slide my tongue
 into the gaping crater
 the slight metallic taste
 of emptiness

The poem, too
 reposes in a calcium sleep
 under a coagulation of gum/
 until it is yanked from the voice-cavern
 a white deposit
 Emerging from anaesthetic
 a hurly-burly rages
 in my mouth
 and I just can't
 stop!

The Silence of Paper

Inevitably we meet in this bookstore
our skin is dry leaf
our secret sorrows are the whispering spiders
between the white pages
Do we know why the frost is etched on our glass eyes?
Do we know why our sadness drips in long icicles?
I have no reason
to believe
you love me
The language we share is printed on greeting cards
All that I say drifts towards the sky in transparent balloons
I don't question your syntax
The shapes of your silence are an inestimable geometry
Imagine what lurks beyond your shuddering mansion!
The pale birch trees
cloaked with ice
are your museum of skeletons
rattling at the windows

Transportation

We are at the station
Waiting for the train we will not take
You are gazing into the fire
I am watching my reflection in the table top
Darkness condenses in the rafters
I have nothing to say
I hate you for this silence
The air is thick and fuzzy with cigar smoke
Black dust settles on my face
I try to remember the schedules
You decide to go home
There is the clanging bell of the train
A poem arrives
I am undone
You are composed

Alternate Beginnings and Endings

On any one of those days the leaves unfurled and were green. Water spiders skittered on the swimming holes where also the days were stepping stones scattered across the stream.

Then suddenly borders had to be crossed. You took to the highlands and summered among sheep. Every gesture was a semi-literate bleat. Low clouds accumulated wool.

At dawn the sun leaps through every blade of grass. Step into your bucolic living room. Listen to your sheets flap in a breeze. Return to your cosy bedroom and sleep for an hour.

You put your hands on each other and make new inroads on wilderness. A dog barks. A day like this has the ebony feel of a well-used walking stick.

After a long hike you will pass many lakes, bitterness in their steel gray opacity. Be joyful! You can dive effortlessly through every smooth surface.

Island

sandwiched between blue and blue
I bailed out
into silence
into the tenuous webs
of sky
I hung there like a fly
days passed
I watched merchant marines
circumnavigate the globe
layer their trails of smoke
like the windings of a golf ball
an island was being born
the words of Crusoe clattered into my throat
a storm brewed
the glue released me
I drifted to my island
I have been here for some time now
I eat mangoes
I never dream
I have a pet squirrel
who sleeps on my chest
so I am never lonely
I have built a lean-to
the ocean is always a perfect blue

OTHER CORRESPONDENCES

Vincent Van Gogh

My dear Theo,

My two eyes melt into one.

If I come to Paris

I will not be able to see

light impressionist from the so-called dark.

This morning a single intimate star

became large and majestic

to embrace a vast peace

so individual and heartbreaking.

I must beg you again

to send me as soon as possible

some ordinary brushes. Half a dozen of each, please.

Have you read the new book

by Guy de Maupassant, Strong as the Dead?

What is the subject of it?

I hope you are well

and your wife too,

and that you are enjoying a little fine weather.

My health is good

and all is a matter of time and patience.

The woman who did embroidery in that novel

is very very beautiful

because it is a question of colour,

of the different yellows,

whole and broken up.

The flowers are short lived

and so soon replaced by yellow cornfields.

The winds here are second hand.

I am not too melancholy.

Yours,

Vincent

Soren Kierkegaard

Suddenly I saw the Jutland heath
in its indescribable loneliness
with its solitary skylark
and all the generations sang for me
and wept bitterly and sank back
in their graves and I wept with them.
Many people cheat their teacher.
They take their results from the back of the book
rather than do the sums themselves.
The Philistine bourgeois believe
in morality over intelligence.
I prefer talking with old persons of the female sex
who peddle family gossip.
Regine -- when the bond is broken you
either plunge into wild dissipation or
absolute religiousness. "A Seducer's Diary"
was written to shove off
her boat from shore.
Strange to say my imagination works best
with a substratum of chatter with people
susceptible to any emotional influenza:
When I am the wit and banter of a party,
it is then that I want to shoot myself.
My papers contain not the slightest
enlightenment as to what fundamentally filled my life.
I live in a dark realm of sighs.
I can't bother to write what I have just written
and I can't bother to blot it out.
In regards to spelling
I believe every fair-to-middling Danish author
is more diligent in this respect than I.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Dear Mr. Engelmann,

I think often of you,
of the Midsummer Night's Dream, of Malade Imaginaire,
of the time you brought me some soup,
but that was your mother's fault as much as yours!

I am working reasonably hard.

I wish I were a better man
and had a better mind.

God help me!

The two things are really one and the same.

I know that brilliance
is not the ultimate good
and yet I wish I could die now
in a moment of brilliance.

The gardening job was the most sensible thing
I could have done with my holidays.

When the work was finished I was tired.

Then I did not feel unhappy.

I continually think of taking my own life
and the idea haunts me sometimes.

It is the state of not being able to get over a particular fact.

This is how it is:

If you do not try to utter the unutterable,
then nothing gets lost,
but the unutterable will be unutterably
contained in what has been uttered.

We are fast asleep.

I cannot awaken myself.

I am trying hard, my dream body moves,
but my real one does not stir.

And this, alas, is how it is.

Nothing is worse than to be forced
 to take oneself by surprise.
 Send me quickly and safely
 the two volumes of Frege
 registered and express to Miss Anna Knauer.
 This lady will not herself study logic,
 but will bring the book unread to me.
 Why don't I hear from you any more?
 (Presumably because you don't write to me.)
 I am sure my book will not be published.
 The Russell introduction looks more impossible
 in German than it did in English,
 and I can't bear it.
 I am only slightly more decent
 now than before
 but by this I mean only
 that I am slightly clearer in my own mind
 about my lack of decency.
 I have no faith.
 To invent a machine for becoming decent!
 Such a man has no faith.
 I am clear about one thing.
 I am far too bad to be able to theorize about myself.
 In fact, I shall either remain a swine
 or I shall improve, and that's that!
 Now I have lost my prescription for enteritis.
 Beg Dr. Hahn to copy the prescription again
 if he can recognize the medicine from an external
 description -- a turbid yellowish liquid
 with a white sediment at the bottom.
 Taste: sweetish and pleasant; (two tablespoons daily).
 My address is: Mountain Artillery Battery 5/11, Field-post 290.
 Why I am writing to you I do not know myself.
 Come to that, I have a very happy life!
 When it is not damned unhappy.
 This is not a joke.
 Let's demolish this transcendental twaddle--

the whole thing is as plain as a sock in the jaw.
Still no reply from the publisher.
I feel an insuperable repugnance
against writing him a query.
Hail to the Highest -- also within me!
Why I draw my own lines
instead of writing on the printed ones
you'll never fathom.
Please give my respects to your revered dear mother.

L. Wittgenstein

Jean Cocteau

If, in addition to my books, plays, and films
I have turned my energies to
chairmanships, articles, prefaces, records,
ballets, stage sets, costumes, masks, curtains,
tapestries, mosaics, if I was a manager
for a Negro boxer and employed clowns, dancers, and acrobats,
it was not from a sense of dispersal.
The lonely pedestrian is seen less and less.
He indulges in the pantomime of hitch-hiking
and when he gets a ride he is committed to an auto not his own.
Who do people think I am?
Never has a man been so surrounded by incomprehension.
My case of shingles has begun again
so I must stay inside.
My solitude is that of Robinson Crusoe.
I have no intelligence but I have
a certain boldness which replaces intelligence.
I have never been handsome.
My skeleton keeps changing and losing its form.
Beauty is one of the tricks
nature uses to attract one being to another
and assure their dependence.
Writing is an act of love.
If it isn't that, it is only handwriting.
Joan of Arc is my favourite writer.
She had the tone of serious anarchy
persecuted in every age.
Rousseau had a persecution complex.
But that is like reproaching the hunted deer
for making his zigzag getaway.
My housekeeper is aware of this.
When she turns people away from my door
she says to me, "They must think
that Monsieur Jean is a healer."

George Santayana

Morality consists of cheating the hangman and getting your pint of beer.

Mrs. Alden's happiest days were those on which she had no engagements and could devote her leisure to judicious self-congratulations on her past actions and her present position. Merely to exist and possess an exacting body that must be washed and clothed and fed is an exhausting occupation for a lady in middle life.

Not so for Mr. Alden.

He advised the discarding of Christian beds.

To avoid the damp and vermin was neither nautical nor rational. At sea a cabin should be a sort of hermitage, a workroom and oratory for the sailor's inner man.

Oliver was shy. Shyness, he knew, was a stupid irrational feeling, to be lived down. But he couldn't sport naked like the boys in the lower river.

His swimming had been only with Mr. Murphy, an instinctively modest man, who even in dressing and undressing preserved the scrupulous precautions of monastic decency.

As for myself, I was of Spanish Catholic birth and I am a bit of all things. I left this life to become an independent philosopher and I am a philosopher.

My death will inspire the words of poets.

George Bernard Shaw

The late Frank Harris was a distinguished figure in literary London in the last decade of the nineteenth century who wrote a series of notably trenchant and pungent Contemporary Portraits, which, in one purporting to be of me, he was neither trenchant nor pungent, disabled by a sense of loyalty to our old connections, that allowed him only a piously grateful eulogy, so I set the following example of how Frank ought to have done it:

Without cavilling over trifles
 I declare at once that Shaw is the just man
 made perfect. In all his controversies
 Shaw is, always has been, and always will be,
 right. Abusing him is an ignorant and silly habit.
 To not take him seriously is the ridiculous cover
 for an ignominious retreat from an encounter with him.
 If it will help matters to say that Shaw
 is the greatest man who ever lived,
 I shall not hesitate for a moment.
 All his prophecies come true.
 All his fantastic creations come to life within a generation.
 I have an uneasy sense that even now
 I am not doing him justice.
 If I cannot say that Shaw touches nothing
 that he does not adorn, I can at least testify
 that he touches nothing
 that he does not dust and polish
 and put back in its place
 more carefully than the last man
 who handled it. Still, no truthful contemporary portrait

can ignore his extraordinary talent
for exciting furious hostility.
Most who have not met Shaw
think of him as a man of
disagreeable stature, harsh manners
and insufferable personality,
and there is something maddening
in being forced to agree with a man against
whom your whole soul protests. You cannot bear
your inmost convictions to be shared
by a man you hold to be monstrous and subversive.
As if a man offered to walk in your direction
because you were going in the direction of his home,
which you knew to be the bottomless pit.
Yet the monstrosity is there;
Shaw works at politics in the spirit
of helping a lame dog over a stile
it believes to be insurmountable.
"Every man over forty is a scoundrel!"
he proclaimed when he himself was over forty.
He attaches no value to experience,
holding that it is the expectation of life,
not recollection of it that determines conduct.
He repeatedly reminds us that Evolution is still creative
and man may have to be scrapped as a Yahoo
to be replaced by some new and higher creation.
But Shaw does not kick us overboard
and remain proudly on the quarter deck himself.
With utmost good-humour he clasps us affectionately
around the waist and jumps overboard with us.
All his friends agree that Shaw is laughably vain.
Shaw's gallantries are mostly non-existent.
He says that no man who has real work in the world
has time or money for a pursuit so long and expensive
as the pursuit of women.

So this is how Frank might have portrayed me.
I have added nothing about my married life
for it has been so public that any biographer
can ascertain more of it than I myself can remember.
I should add a little footnote for Mrs. Campbell.
When you performed Bjornson's Beyond Human Power
I was greatly touched when Mrs. Theodore Wright,
who was a friend of Karl Marx
and has been in all sorts of revolutionary circles,
got so indignant at the conduct of Pastor Sang,
that she clenched her fists
and glared at the wickedness of religion
instead of giving you your "My dear" cue.
Forgive her: it was a generous slip.

Maxim Gorki

All instruments and all voices
are needed for the great orchestra
that humanity will hear
when it gets the world it deserves.
Truth is greater than compassion
and these are the stories of every simple Russian man.
I am the bee-hive where all simple people
bring the honey of their knowledge.
I write of leaden meannesses with unconquerable hope.
I have carefully studied every species of bird.
The lifted faces of men
have a likeness to dirty plates after a meal.
Yes, palm trees do not grow in Siberia.
There are few good things in the world
but the best is art and the best thing about art
is the art to invent something good.
The grief in a Beethoven sonata speaks for the whole world.
Hah! One day after the revolution
I lit a bonfire with some children in the street.
A militiaman made us put it out.
"Any public disorder is open to prosecution," he said,
"it's written there on the board."
"Very sorry," I told him, "but we can't read."
I don't really remember shooting myself in the lung
but the person responsible is the poet Heine
who invented toothache in the heart.
Above the shaggy block of pine trees hung
the transparent fragment of an almost expired moon.
I am a good writer.
A July mid-day sun is blazing
fiercely in a sky of brass.
You must be careful about what I say
because I am a lover of tall tales.
The man who thinks of the future as he dies
is truly immortal.

Leo Tolstoy

I remember that before I was eleven a grammar school pupil, Vladimir Milyutin (long since dead), visited us one Sunday and announced as the latest novelty a discovery made at his school. There is no God and all we are taught about him is a mere invention. Voltaire's raillery amused me very much. My lapse of faith occurred as usual amongst people on our level of education. Religious doctrine is an external phenomenon disconnected from life. The public confession of Orthodoxy, then as now, was chiefly met with among people who were dull and cruel and who considered themselves very important. Ability, honesty, reliability, good-nature and moral conduct were more often met with among unbelievers. S., a clever and truthful man, once told me the story of how he ceased to believe. Once he knelt to pray on the eve of a hunting expedition. His brother lying on the hay asked, "So you still do that?" So it is with people of our education; life has caused an artificial erection to melt away. The kind aunt with whom I lived, herself the purest of beings, always told that there was nothing she so desired for me as that I should have relations with a married woman. Nothing so forms a young man as an intimacy with a woman of good breeding. I cannot think of those years without horror. I killed men in war, challenged men in duels, lost at cards, consumed the labour of peasants,

sentenced them to punishments,
lived loosely and deceived people.
Lying, robbery, adultery of all kinds,
drunkenness, violence, murder,
there was no crime I did not commit.
My contemporaries considered me
to be a comparatively moral man.
I lived a life amongst writers,
convinced of our faith to teach without knowing what.
We were just a large lunatic asylum.
Thousands of us contradicting and abusing one another,
publishing for the good of humanity.
Sometimes seconding and praising one another
in order to be seconded and praised in turn,
sometimes getting angry with one another --
just as in a lunatic asylum.
Then my brother died;
wise, good, serious, he fell ill while still a young man,
suffered for more than a year and died painfully,
not understanding why he had lived
and still less why he had to die.
I dropped the silly superstition of progress
when I witnessed an execution in Paris.
I might have fallen into despair at that time
but I got married. For another fifteen years
I live for one truth, to provide for a family.
Such bliss until the questions caught me.
I tried to ignore them, they constricted
around my throat. Why do I live?
What is this animation and dying?
I fell into a black despair.
I dreamt of being suspended by cords.
Below me was an infinite space.
Above me was an infinite space.
When I looked below I felt immense fear.
Gradually the cords eroded.

One cord held me suspended around my waist.

When I looked up I felt soothed.

A voice said, "Notice this, this is it."

I realized that if I looked up

I could stay balanced and remain soothed.

The voice said, "see that you remember it."

Then I understood faith.

Faith is the strength of life.

There are two Gods:

the one people generally believe in,

the one who serves them,

and the God people forget,

the God whom we all have to serve.

The Orthodox are the most fundamental infidels.

Their faith is a means of attaining worldly aims.

I have suffered to come to this death

so when they send their priestly vultures

to obtain my last minute confession

I say to my son Sergey, "How is it,

Sergey, that these gentlemen do not understand

that even in the face of death,

two and two still make four?"

August Strindberg

Love and delusion are inseparable,
and it is difficult to know ourselves
for who we really are.

I had arranged to take the baroness away.

I seemed to be present at an execution.

Underlinen, dresses, petticoats
were scattered all over the furniture.

The child ran in and held up her head for a kiss.

I might have been spared this.

The little spaniel begged for a caress -- he, too!

I looked out to the blossoming cherry trees,
the sweet-scented daffodils where our love had begun.

All the concealments, the comings and goings,
the veils of honour, the way her woman's logic
confused my brain. I had abandoned a lover once,

when I found her father's card.

He was a little old man, unpleasantly like his daughter,
the caricature of a caricature.

He treated me in every way as his prospective son-in-law,
inquiring about my family, my income, my prospects.

The matter threatened to become serious.

I bowed out to a rival.

Now in this hallway the baroness opened
the folding doors and secretly kissed me.

Like servants' flirtations at the back door.

Behind the door! Slut! Without dignity, without pride!

And it was I who was taking her away.

Later the baron appeared.

He rasped with a choking voice,

"Be her friend. My part is played out.

Take care of her, guard her from the wickedness
of the world, cultivate her talent:

you are better able to do it than I, a poor soldier.

God Protect you!"

I paced the large hall of Central Station.

She arrived at the last moment in a cab

drawn by a mare which the driver was leading
by the bridle. Always careless and always too late!

Years later the dog came between us.

It was old, diseased, half-rotten.

I pestered Marie to give it a merciful death.

Finally she took the old creature off.

When she returned her eyes pierced me,

accusing me of being a poisoner.

She carried a large parcel of extraordinary shape.

The parcel held the corpse!

The funeral ceremony had been reserved for me!

I was the heartless murderer.

It is terrible to write this.

How do I write this? Because I feel

a powerful and justifiable compulsion to wash my corpse

before it is laid in the coffin forever.

Arthur Schopenhauer

Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of our life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. If the reader wishes to see shortly whether this statement is true, let him compare the respective feelings of two animals, one which is engaged in eating the other. There is no other suffering like din and noise. Knocking, hammering, and banging has been throughout my life a daily torment to me. Particularly the most inexcusable and scandalous noise, the truly infernal cracking of whips in the narrow resounding streets. With all due respect to the most sacred doctrine of utility, I do not really see why a fellow, fetching a cart-load of manure or sand, should acquire the privilege of murdering every idea that successively arises in ten thousand heads (in the course of half an hour's journey through a town). The brute is more content with existence than a thinking man. Existence without consciousness has reality only for other beings in whose consciousness it manifests itself. Life is a terrible noisy din. There is the sexual relation. This feeling grows now and then into a more or less passionate love, which is the source of little pleasure and much suffering. Every parting gives us a foretaste of death, and every time we again meet someone we have a foretaste of resurrection. Suicide can also be regarded as an experiment, a question we put to nature and try to make her answer. Nature has covered all things with the varnish of beauty,

just as she has breathed
a delicate bloom on dark plums.



Franz Kafka

Religions get lost as people do.
Scratching insignias on these parchments
has become part of the ceremony of my life.
Whatever I touch crumbles to pieces.
The last section I wrote hasn't pleased Max.
He warned me against writing such long passages.
He regards the effect of such writing as jellylike.
A circumcision is performed with a fish knife.
I sleep soundly for an hour and then I wake up
as if I had put my head in the wrong hole.
Writing denied itself to me so
I have a plan for autobiographical investigations.
My father walks up and down, sighing and shaking his head.
Talk about women, on the other hand, was seldom engaged in.
My urge to imitate has nothing
of the actor in it. If an actor
who is supposed to thrash another
actor according to the plot
really does thrash him out of an excess
of emotion, and the other actor screams in pain,
then I must become a man and intervene.
A small lever is somewhere secretly released,
He has also found Archimedes' fulcrum.
Every action seems extraordinarily new to him.
Is he the same as I?
View of the antlike movements
of the crowd in the trench.
No entries for two months.
All this time in bed.
Superstition is easy.
Religions get lost as people do.

Cesare Pavese

These words are the shavings
thrown off by the plane
as it shapes the day's work.

A game is a strategy of forgetfulness.

Why do we forget the dead?

Because they are no use to us.

A man has committed murder.

Ignore for a moment his anxiety at getting caught,
his dread that the world has taken arms against him.

Still there is the horror that the victim
no longer exists, can no longer be hated or loved,
the horror of starting life over again.

It is not an illusion

that each of us is the center of the universe.

Take me. I am a person of vast interest.

Out of the hostile nothingness of my ancestors,

I grew all by myself

by dint of hard work and toughness

overcoming all hazards

to become a living, vigorous man.

Then to meet that one woman,

dragged out of nothingness,

another miracle of chance.

The joy and pain of it.

Those who invented the love of Go! were quite shrewd.

Nothing else can be possessed and enjoyed at the same time.

It comes as natural as the fall of raindrops.

Not a blind death.

Why can't we choose the day of our death?

I mean for specific reasons.

Life begins in the body.

Life ends in the body.

I might have been the one not to talk about suicide

but poetry is repetitive.

MEDITATIONS

I

The snowflakes tumble
toward the lake
as their identical twins
surge up from the murky green.
They immolate on impact,
stretch into a tension of water.
This is the perfect collision,
the way the world hurtles
towards me and I lunge
into its path.

II

I was the perfect lover of the world,
Then my embrace became tenuous,
and I discovered a kind of jealousy
of the completeness of things
and a vacancy in myself.
This is the terrible
moment when the glass finds it is
no longer half full but half empty.
Yes, the world was full of itself,
drunk on its own essence. I demanded
to know the secret life of things
but they glared at me behind closed eyes.
Suppose the world were some wicked demon
set to deceive me at every turn.
I would love her still
with a perfect passion.
Words should sing on their branches.

III

Stepping out of the bush into a clearing
I come upon the bus, idling. A gentle
horse, his sad smile in a grill, the ticking
wipers wipe a tear from his eye.
I creep lightly through the snow, whisper
in his rear-view mirror. He shivers
with the stampede of intentions. Rivers and streams
we discover, a network of streets. We flash
by a forest of telegraph poles, shudder at the awesome
mountainous skyscrapers. We pale at the expanse
of a parking lot. My sad creature shakes a wispy
tail of smoke. He whinnies a sigh of regret.
I dismount and he stamps a foot as if to say
'watch your step'. We stand on a large blank lake.
I drift into the night sky, that vast continental shelf.
I leave the poor beast murmuring to himself.

IV

Between icy tundra of blank verse and boulevards
of heroic couplets, I am a man of two languages.
This is not to say I am suburban. I transcend
the dialectic! Well, perhaps I am the after-image
of a transcending that has flown away from me.
Regardless, I am a man of greater than or less than
two traditions, two pendulums swinging simultaneously.
I grab one in each hand. Is it French or English
that splits my tongue? There are a hundred and one
reasons why a government must legislate signs.
Without linguistic indicators I would lose sense and reference
and get stuck in a stichic situation of novel proportions.
When I am driven down these one-way streets I have nothing
but my natural resources. At least we have energy.
We all know about the road between town and country
and all the episodes and goings-on. I wish I could project
a luminous destination which would trip lightly on matter.
I release the two balls so they'll fall but instead
they swing inwards and arrive together in my head.

V

There, in those distant mountains beyond wildest dreams,
is the "Writing in Revolution" conference. Here, in the blank fields
I make these black marks against myself.

The ventilation system in my office squeaks its tired rotations.

The weather report tells of a week of twenty below.

I'm not sure I care which way the wind blows.

In the faded white and black drawing behind the ad
for the conference, I notice first the gentle curve
of the stream, then the ragged branches bending
over the stream, then the dead man lying face
down in the snow. Behind a tree the rifle clicks,
an eye trains at the man with a feather in his cap.

VI

When I was an old man
black limbs traced the simplicity of thought,
a slough without reflections.
Snowflakes settled on my bare head
and hung heavily on my eyelashes.
Crows called from the highest
branches of dead trees.

As I crept into middle age
the trees grew roseate.
I listened to a muffled breeze.
In these woods I sensed
a density of thought and sound,
the vague transcendental ululations of sparrows.

In youth
the leaves turned green!
Dogs barked.
I lifted into an airy space
where clouds
were vivacious and occasionally thunderous ideas:
The winds blew always south-westerly.

Now I sink into the translucence
of all things bright and beautiful.
Almost all canaries are yellow.
All things fade and become soft.
I come to an end of words.
The vision is exquisite.
I see a woman.
The sussuration of ocean.
I swell into a childhood of belief.

VII

I come to an end of words
in this vague container
that I once thought was Aladdin's
lamp but recognize now
as an old milk bottle.
I love the poetry of clinking
glass and the rattle and
ping of a wire basket.
How remarkable! Pitch
the meagre coins into the empty
bottle and forget about them.
Return to the coagulum of milk
that sucks a gentle breath
when the cardboard is peeled back.
Don't homogenize the milk!
Be careful not to shake that subtle separation.
How long can a life support
this lacteal alchemy without
withering to a powdery desiccant?
When I finally catch up with myself
the milk bottle will no longer be glass
and it will be no longer delivered
to the door.

VIII

Why are there essents rather than nothing?
In this tiny chapel on this lonely island
I cannot tell. Perhaps the question strikes
once like a muffled bell, a single chime
that discovers its home in your bones.
Standing on a small promontory of rock, I watch
the seep and swell of ocean, its process of salt,
diminishing me. Adrift in a seaweed of ennui
a question is repeated in the careless cries of gulls.
On a morning of jewels the sea is transfigured
into jade. This alchemy of joy renews
a white foam of questions. When I rise earliest
I ring the bell, the bell takes its toll
on the ears. I have no secrets to tell, only the ocean
has its sweet undertow. I live with the sparse tree
engrafted to this island. There is a sparkling awareness
of branches, but what lies beneath is truth. The essence
of this tree is subterranean, buried in its roots.

IX

The crystal glass
is beautiful
because of its fragility
because it might
break.

Distracted
by refracted light
the filigree flutings
of leaf and vine
deliver harsh light
obliquely.

Perfect
well, almost perfect
so much so that it suggests
a brilliant light beyond this skulled cave
at least a music of spheres
when I rub my finger
on an endless circular
track.

Not so perfect
after all
a gap
in the sublime continuum
a little chip
a dimple in the yawn
of the glass' mouth.

I recall
mother's oval admiration
for this same crystal
someday it will be yours
her eyes glistening
like glass.

Suddenly it
blooms!
the glass stripped
from its vestments of appearance
don't think of any
other bouquets.

Not the glass, but the wine
when I put my lips to yours
I almost believe I could
sit on the rim of this taste
forever

X

Skilled composers, whose music has a range
percussive, show me your random beauty
on an endless paper vine, so I may see
the loveliness of your withering exchange.

I can imagine a perfect poem.

It is more perfect to exist than not.

Give me the divinity that can't be taught;

I long for quiet in my restless dome.

Deliver me that woman with the rare form
who adds bright brilliance to my Stellar work.

I am tired of muddling through this murk,
of this hag who drags me into a heart of storm.

Foolish fellow, she said to me, invest
your heart in a language that comes to rest.

XI

From a dark place of electricity
In a quiet moment when I am alone
I compose the text of love's inclemency
and I transform it to you through the phone.
With a receiver cradled in your palm
Amongst the parts of speech you are a noun.
Cigarette smoke clings to your static calm,
A fainting hum on the line when you turn me down.
When you hang up I listen to your sweet
dial tone. When one line dies
I turn to many lines. I love to repeat
myself when you won't listen to my sighs.
So the more of my love that you decline
The more this poem makes love and makes it mine.

XII

When I have intimations of you, yes,
you in the rustle of the pear blossoms
at the end of the patio, when I listen
to your gravelly throat of night air,

then I anticipate the creamy gloss
of your skin, the undulations of dupal
pendulums, the leafy surprise draping
the convolute entanglement of limbs.

We thump together like the collision
of ripe fruit, juice dribbling from lips.
Sunlight displays a carnage of white pulp.
We settle around a core of seed and a twisted stem.

Later, you become again a plump pear.
I suffer desiccation. You say the dried
slices are quite delicious, that they have
the lingering odour of pale blossoms.

XIII

I come to the gracile crocus of this desert.
It is so far away from the schooling of fish.
Perhaps it is the most superfluous rendering of ontology,
this fire that hides in a seed for months
then flowers in a brief season of rain.

On many dry days there is a darkling beetle
clutching dung in its mandibles. This is
a necessary process of ground clearing.
I have often worked hard in a tangle
of creosote bushes, fallen faint in their acrid odour.

It is only later that a twilight breeze
inspires a fugue in an organ-pipe cactus.
Then the desert canvas might blossom with the random
appearance of Indian paintbrush. I anticipate
the strange leapings of jumping cholla.

Eventually most things pale and wither
but some tenacious trees endure their decades
of dust by plunging a taproot deep to a secret
well. Perhaps I understood most the giant
saguaro that lives with the memory of a witless flower.

XIV

When I see ocean as a blue chip
this must be transcendence of the ego.
Or must I imagine fish-life?
If I am fish-life am I the spirit
of fish-life or am I flecked
with a singular coat of scales?
To swim to my purpose like fish
is to become pure being.
This is a transcendence.
But always the questions return,
they cannot stop their migrations.
The ocean can never be blue chip
because the ocean is not blue.
Then I understand the reflective
power of being. Sometimes I gaze
into an ocean's perfect blue
and I am fascinated by what returns
my gaze. A weeping willow hangs over me.
Suddenly fish thrash the surface.
Their greedy gullets swallow flies.
I have an uneasy relationship with water.
I share an ocean with porpoises and whales.
Often I immerse myself in water.
I sound as deeply as lungs allow.
Then I rise, and break into the precious air.

XV

René remembers how he met God
one day at the glue factory.
His bushy eyebrows wrinkle
when he speaks of it, the day
he ambled past the gurgling vats
steeped in an odour of boiling skin,
up the back stairs to a storage room
of office supplies and odd advertisements.
He doesn't remember what drew him
7 to that quieter and less humid sanctuary.
He remembers when he looked up to the long
rows of small, square windows, a lattice of sky,
how sunlight lifted the vats
from their dark trough and a giddy swell
lifted the weight from his feet.
He remembers how the voice spoke from the bubbling mucus.
"René, my essence is glue.
You carry on the most sacred of work."
René's hands fall limp to the table
as if they too had created the world in six days.
As he recounts his story
his eyes are glued to mine.
I mark it all down on good bond paper.

XVI

The insidious science of our time creeps
through the arteries and veins. To look for it
is to stumble through a debris of time-worn
test tubes and chattering beakers, or perhaps to slide
into a black hole of clichés. It spreads its forked fibres
like the ravellings of the DNA molecule but science
is both the molecule and the map of the molecule.
Some might think that science is a skeleton and the world
the flesh that hugs close around it, but science
is immanent in all matter as a matter of fact.
White coats rustle in a laboratory of amoral destruction.
The mushroom blooms like a proliferation of facts.
All facts have equal value, a colloquy of *E. coli*.
Ultimately science is unseasonable, not like these poems,
which formulate a text book of a different sort,
expressing the pale autumn of a deciduous science.

XVII

Thinking about those two physicists who won the Nobel prize for discovering and measuring microwaves emanating from the farthest reaches of the known cosmos it occurs that perhaps, in a more expansive universe, we are a giant roast beef cooking in the microwave of some lady's kitchen.

If you think this is a gratuitous image, then consider the old woman who has nothing but her diminutive pension cheque. She huddles in her little apartment just off Waverley Street with an electric heater and a kitchen chair. Unfortunately, she drifts off to sleep occasionally and falls off her chair onto the floor but she refuses to accept the luxurious arm chair offered to her by her social worker because she doesn't want to be tied down to anything.

As Heraclitus says, you can't stand in the same river twice.

When we think of the universe it must be realized that each of us is part of the fabric and each a part of the fabrication.

XVIII

It is necessary to register the fictuality of contemporary American life and in order to do this a location must be found to provide us with a metafiction, perhaps the mountains which have use as an overview, the mountains which so much resemble radio crystals that if we tune into the semiology and literary semantics of mountains we will apprehend even a metalanguage, in fact, we will map the contours of a new typology of prose narrative, but more must be said of the fact in fiction to register the fictuality of contemporary American life because there are two uses of fact in fiction and they are divided into two categories, the verisimilar and the mythopoeic, and to cross over between the two requires a bi-referential mode of narration but it is difficult in this era of postwar authenticity to escape the technetronic culture of the non-fiction novel and the realization that experience must be transistorized if we are to avoid confutations in the poetics of specific genres because though we might stutter in speech of partial grammars, in the clefts of distant valleys we might see the fulfilling prurience of a deep-structure grammar of narrative, although we must not be surreptitiously metaphysical.

XIX

The words! The words cower in shame
and inadequacy, that cannot tell of their love,
or have told it so many times
they can no longer be heard.

It is the words that were once lions,
that once escaped from a jungle and breathed
a hot breath, that once lived so close
your chest grew long hair.

It is the words that fled to all corners,
that wander as lost tribes,
only the words that are hunched over double
carrying themselves piggyback.

It is only the words that hide sluggishly
under stones in their pretence of being,
in their dreams of the leaves falling,
in their dreams of falling.

It is only the words that have been confined
to libraries, that have wiggled and squirmed
their way into the books. It is only the words
that live in mute associations of ink,
only the words.

XX

Come, dear reader, into this wire cage
of delineations measured off from wilderness.

Let's loosen up with a volley.

That's right, you'll have to watch for my surreal
topspin. Keep your eye on the ball.

Get your feet square. Out!

There's minimal space to work with. Don't look
at me. I didn't invent this game. My serve
then. Uhh! That was a good one from the gut.

How did I miss that! Must have a hole in my racquet.

Hell. Into the net. Oh, exquisite

passing shot. Now we come to love -

forty: That's better, I have a wicked
backhand. I see you're working up a sweat.

Well this is the way it goes: game, set
and match. No match for you, dear reader.

What we won't do for recreation!