

Robert Musil – The Man Without Qualities

Translated by Sophie Wilkins and published by Knopf

If all those leaps of attention, flexing of eye muscles, fluctuations of the psyche, if all the effort it takes for a man just to hold himself upright within the flow of traffic on a busy street could be measured, he thought—as he toyed with calculating the incalculable—the grand total would surely dwarf the energy needed by Atlas to hold up the world, and one could then estimate the enormous undertaking it is nowadays merely to be a person who does nothing at all. At the moment, the man without qualities was just such a person.

And what of a man who does do something?

There are two ways to look at it, he decided:

A man going quietly about his business all day long expends far more muscular energy than an athlete who lifts a huge weight once a day. This has been proved physiologically, and so the social sum total of everybody's little everyday efforts, especially when added together, doubtless releases far more energy into the world than do rare heroic feats. This total even makes the single heroic feat look positively miniscule, like a grain of sand on a mountaintop with a megalomaniacal sense of its own importance. This thought pleased him.

But it must be added that it did not please him because he liked a solid middle-class life; on the contrary, he was merely taking a perverse pleasure in thwarting his own inclinations, which had once taken him in quite another direction. What if it is precisely the philistine who is alive with intimations of a colossally new, collective, antlike heroism? It will be called a rationalised heroism, and greatly admired. At this point, who can tell? There were at that time hundreds of such open questions of the greatest importance, hovering in the air and burning underfoot. Time was on the move. People not yet born in those days will find it hard to believe, but even then time was racing along like a cavalry camel, just like today. But nobody knew where time was headed. And it was not always clear what was up or down, what was going forward or backward.

“No matter what you do,” the man without qualities thought with a shrug, “within this mare's nest of forces at work, it doesn't make the slightest difference!” He turned away like a man who has learned to resign himself—indeed, almost like a sick man who shrinks from every strong physical contact; yet in crossing the adjacent dressing room he hit a punching bag that was hanging there a hard, sudden blow that seemed not exactly in keeping with moods of resignation or conditions of weakness.

Clarice Lispector – A Breath of Life

Translated by Johnny Lorenz and published by Penguin

I think in hieroglyphs (mine). And in order to live I must constantly interpret myself and each time the key to the hieroglyph, I'm sure that the dream—thing (mine) (worthless), not carried through—is the key to the same.

I write in words that hide others—the true ones. Because the true words cannot be named. Even if I don't know which are the "true words," I am always alluding to them. My spectacular and ongoing failure proves that the opposite exists: success. Even if success is not granted me, I'm satisfied to know it exists.

Occasionally I myself am writing this book.

So I'll talk about the problems of writing. About the vortex which is placing oneself in a creative state. I feel that I have a triple star.

I, the author of this book, am being possessed by a thousand demons writing inside me. This need to flow, ah, never, never to stop flowing. If that source that exists within each of us stops it's horrible. The source is of mysteries, hidden mysteries and if it stops that is because death is coming. I'm trying in this book a bit crazy, a bit ostentatious, a bit dancing naked in the streets, a bit the clown, a bit the fool at the court of the king. I, the king of sleep, I only know how to sleep and eat, I learned nothing else. As for the rest, ladies and gentlemen, I hold my tongue. I just won't tell you the secret of life because I still haven't learned it. But one day I shall be the secret of life. Each of us is the secret of life and the one is the other and the other is one.

Luigi Pirandello – One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand

Translated by William Weaver and published by Spurl Editions

I wanted to be alone in quite an unusual, new way. The very opposite of what you are thinking: namely, *without myself* and, in fact, *with an outsider present*.

Does this seem to you already a sign of madness?

Perhaps because you are not giving it enough thought.

There could already have been madness in me, I won't deny that; but I beg you to believe that the only way to be truly alone is this one I will tell you about.

Solitude is never with you; it is always without you, and possible only in the presence of an outsider, an alien person or place as may be, that completely ignores you, that you completely ignore; so your will and your feelings remain suspended and bewildered in a tormented uncertainty; and, as every affirmation of yourself ceases, the very privacy of your awareness ceases. True solitude is in a place that lives for itself, and for you it has no trace or voice. And you, then, are the outsider there.

This is the way I wanted to be alone. Without myself. I mean without that self I already knew, or thought I knew. Alone with a certain outsider, whom I already felt obscurely I would no longer be able to get rid of, as it was I myself: *the outsider inseparable from myself*.

I sensed only one outsider, then! And already this one, or the need I felt to be alone with him, to set him in front of me and know him well, converse with him a bit, deeply upset me, with a mixture of repulsion and dismay.

If for the others I was not the one I had always believed I was for myself, who was I?

Living, I had never thought about the form of my nose; the shape, whether little or big, or about the colour of my eyes; the narrowness or breadth of my forehead, and so on. That was my nose, those were my eyes, that was my brow: inseparable from me, and as I was involved in my concerns, my eyes occupied, my feelings absorbed, I couldn't think about those features.

But now I thought: "And what about the others? The others obviously aren't inside me. For the others who watch from outside, my ideas, my feelings have a nose. My nose..."

So, pursuing this thought, I sank into further distress: I was unable, while living, to picture my self to myself in the actions of my life; to see myself as the others saw me; to set before me my body and see it live, like another's body. When I stood before a mirror, a kind of arrest took place inside me; all spontaneity vanished, my every movement seemed artificial, an imitation.

I couldn't watch myself live.

I found proof of this in the impression that assailed me a few days later as I was walking and talking with my friend Stefano Firbo. I happened to catch a sudden glimpse of myself in the mirror along the street, which I hadn't noticed previously. That impression cannot have lasted more than an instant, for immediately afterwards came that arrest, spontaneity vanished, and everything became studied. I didn't recognise myself at first. I seemed to see an outsider, passing by, conversing. I stopped. I must have turned very pale.

Firbo asked me: "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. And I was filled by a strange, inner dismay that was also revulsion. I was thinking: Was that really my image glimpsed in a flash? Am I really like that, outside, when—as I am living my life—I don't think about myself? For the others, then, I am that outsider I glimpsed by surprise in the mirror: him, and not me, as I know myself...

B.S. Johnson – The Unfortunates

Published by Panther Books in association with Secker & Warburg

Bow windows glimpsed at a crossing, by the track, in sodium lighting.

Yet, but for his illness, death, it seems probable to me that we might have grown further and further apart, he becoming more academic, I less and less believing academic criticism had any value at all, perhaps saying to him in anger Let the dead live with the dead!

In any case it does not matter, now, his death makes so much irrelevant.

At least this is better than lunch, sometimes they can be good, as this is, or even very good, railway meals. And the Maçon honest enough, rough, to my common palate.

Can any death be meaningful? Or meaningless?

Are these terms one can use about death?

I don't know, I just feel the pain, the pain.

That gross laughter must be from my colleagues, ha, yes, I recognise it, have heard it before. Why have they stayed to catch the later train, not having my cause?

All coloured by rust, affected by the action of oxidization, these textures, from the window, wear of metal on metal, wood sleepers, granite chips, are they granite, the rails the only bright positive, the rest an alloy of rusty textures. A pool of light from that signalbox, someone inside I imagine waiting to make a decision which will set us moving again.

Steven will still be in bed, but I can still look at him sleeping, my son, the warmth of returning, to Ginnie, to our son, the flat will be lit as I come across the Square, always stands out, as we do not have curtains, being on the second floor, and warm, Ginnie perhaps sewing, how oldfashioned a picture it seems, warmth, I can enjoy this for now, must, it is all there is. June noted how, in the space of about eighteen months, her and my positions reversed, almost too correspondingly neatly, it could happen again, anything could happen, again. Next? John Dwyer, sometime drinking companion, worried at his wife's illness, told me she was not going to recover though she did not know it, worried about being left with three children, but died himself of a heart attack before her, ironic.

The difficulty is to understand without generalisation, to see each piece of received truth, or generalisation, as true only if it is true for me, solipsism again, I come back to it again, and for no other reason. In general, generalisation is to lie, to tell lies.

David Foster Wallace – Good Old Neon

Published in 'Oblivion' by Little, Brown

My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired. It's a little more complicated than that, maybe. But when you come right down to it it's to be liked, loved. Admired, approved of, applauded, whatever. You get the idea. I did well in school, but deep down the whole thing's motive wasn't to learn or improve myself but just to do well, to get good grades and make sports teams and perform well. To have a good transcript or varsity letters to show people. I didn't enjoy it much because I was always scared I wouldn't do well enough. The fear made me work really hard, so I'd always do well and end up getting what I wanted. But then, once I got the best grade or made All City or got Angela Mead to let me put my hand on her breast, I wouldn't feel much of anything except maybe fear that I wouldn't be able to get it again. The next time or next thing I wanted. I remember being down in the rec room in Angela Mead's basement on the couch and having her let me get my hand up under her blouse and not even really feeling the soft aliveness or whatever of her breast because all I was doing was thinking, "Now I'm the guy that Mead let get to second with her." Later that seemed so sad. This was in middle school. She was a very big-hearted, quiet, self-contained, thoughtful girl—she's a veterinarian now, with her own practice—and I never really saw her, I couldn't see anything except who I might be in her eyes, this cheerleader and probably number two or three among the most desirable girls in middle school that year. She was much more than that, she was beyond all that adolescent ranking and popularity crap, but I never really let her be or saw her as more, although I put up a very good front as somebody who could have deep conversations and really wanted to know and understand who she was inside.

Later I was in analysis, I tried analysis like almost everybody else then in their late twenties who'd made some money or had a family or whatever they thought they wanted and still didn't feel that they were happy. A lot of people I knew tried it. It didn't really work, although it did make everyone sound more aware of their own problems and added some useful vocabulary and concepts to the way we all had to talk to each other to fit in and sound a certain way. You know what I mean. I was in regional advertising at the time in Chicago, having made the jump from media buyer for a large consulting firm, and at only twenty-nine I'd made creative associate, and verily as they say I was a fair-haired boy and on the fast track but wasn't happy at all, whatever *happy* means, but of course I didn't say this to anybody because it was such a cliché—"Tears of a Clown," "Richard Cory," etc.—and the circle of people who seemed important to me seemed much more dry, oblique and contemptuous of clichés than that, and so of course I spent all my time trying to get them to think I was dry and jaded as well, doing things like yawning and looking at my nails and saying things like, "*Am I happy?*" is one of those questions that, if it has got to be asked, more or less dictates its own answer," etc. Putting in all this time and energy to create a certain impression and get approval or acceptance that then I felt nothing about because it didn't have anything to do with who I really was inside, and I was disgusted with myself for always being such a fraud, but I couldn't seem to help it.

Qiu Miaojin – Last Words from Montmartre

Translated by Ari Larissa Heinrich and published by NYRB

As for you, Xu, like I told Qing Jin: “My misfortune is that I have devoted myself completely to someone who can’t accept my perfect love.”

There are still so many long, long reflections and experiences that I want to write to you about... but after writing for seven or eight straight hours, I’m empty and exhausted... Xu, can I point out a few things to you with these last words, though they may not be true?

(1) On betrayal

Your betrayal of my life, my will, my body tortured me this past month, leaving a wake of hate and trauma, and I’ve paid dearly. This was the most painful betrayal you could inflict. But I didn’t die, I survived and will continue to heal. Your spirit, however, could never betray me, because your spirit will always yearn for me and belong to me.

From your perspective, total betrayal can’t hurt you. On the one hand, you never really cared about me or any of this. You never really cared enough nor have you grasped how the monopoly of desire works. Yet you would still suffer if my soul betrayed you; you would never be able to watch dispassionately if I gave my soul completely to someone else and my tenderness toward you disappeared. If that day ever comes, you’ll pay a painful price. My soul is slipping away from you even as I try to cling to it.

(2) On passion and sex

Xu, it’s not that you don’t desire me; it’s that your body has not yet grown into its desire. Your corporeal desire still can’t merge with your spiritual desire; they’re incoherent to each other, they can’t co-operate. It’s not that you’ve stopped desiring but that your desire has not yet reached maturity.

It’s easy for the body to be open to desiring different people because desire wells up and demands to be satisfied. It’s easy to categorise corporeal desire as sexuality, but if it has no means of merging with spiritual desire, then a rupture will occur between spirit and flesh. For ultimately passion and sex aren’t only expressed physically but through a true union between two spirits. When the spirit can truly love and find contentment, both the body and other key aspects of life will fall naturally into place, working in unison, merging. Xu, one day, when your corporeal desire has matured—when you’re able to desire any body—then you will desire me, if, at that time, there isn’t any rupture between us, our lives are harmonious, our spirits remain in love, and our bodies can still satisfy each other. And you will discover that I’m the one you desire most profoundly of all, because your spirit loves me most profoundly of all. I’m working hard this time so that nothing can undermine the loving communion of our spirits.

Leslie Feinberg – Stone Butch Blues

Published by Firebrand Books

Tonight I remember the time I got busted alone, on strange turf. You're probably wincing already, but I have to say this to you. It was the night we drove ninety miles to a bar to meet friends who never showed up. When the police raided the club we were "alone," and the cop with gold bars on his uniform came right over to me and told me to stand up. No wonder, I was the only he-she in the place that night.

He put his hands all over me, pulled up the band of my Jockeys and told his men to cuff me—I didn't have three pieces of women's clothing on. I wanted to fight right then and there because I knew the chance would be lost in a moment. But I also knew that everyone would be beaten that night if I fought back, so I just stood there. I saw they had pinned your arms behind your back and cuffed your hands. One cop had his arm across your throat. I remember the look in your eyes. It hurts me even now.

They cuffed my hands so tight behind my back I almost cried out. Then the cop unzipped my pants real slow, with a smirk on his face, and ordered me down on my knees. First I thought to myself, I can't! Then I said out loud to myself and to you and to him, "I won't!" I never told you this before, but something changed inside of me at that moment. I learned the difference between what I can't do and what I refuse to do.

I paid the price for that lesson. Do I have to tell you every detail? Of course not.

When I got out of the tank the next morning you were there. You bailed me out. No charges, they just kept your money. You had waited all night long in that police station. Only I know how hard it was for you to withstand their leers, their threats. I knew you cringed with every sound you strained to hear from back in the cells. You prayed you wouldn't hear me scream. I didn't.

I remember when we got outside to the parking lot you stopped and put your hands lightly on my shoulders and avoided my eyes. You gently rubbed the bloody places on my shirt and said, "I'll never get these stains out."

Damn anyone who thinks that means you were relegated in life to worrying about my ring-around-the-collar.

I knew exactly what you meant. It was such an oddly sweet way of saying, or not saying, what you were feeling. Sort of the way I shut down emotionally when I feel scared and hurt and helpless and say funny little things that seem so out of context.

You drove us home with my head in your lap all the way, stroking my face. You ran the bath. Set out my fresh underwear. Put me to bed. Caressed me carefully. Held me gently.

Later that night I woke up and found myself alone in bed. You were drinking at the kitchen table, head in your hands. You were crying. I took you firmly in my arms and held you, and you struggled and hit my chest with your fists because the enemy wasn't there to fight. Moments later you recalled the bruises on my chest and cried even harder, sobbing, "It's my fault, I couldn't stop them."

I've always wanted to tell you this. In that one moment I knew you really did understand how I felt in life. Choking on anger, feeling so powerless, unable to protect myself or those I loved most, yet fighting back again and again, unwilling to give up. I didn't have the words to tell you this then. I just said, "It'll be OK, it'll be alright." And then we smiled ironically at what I'd said, and I took you back to our bed and made the best love to you I could, considering the shape I was in. You knew not to try to touch me that night. You just ran your fingers through my hair and cried and cried.

Marcelle Sauvageot – Commentary

*Translated by Christine Schwartz Hartley & Anna Moschovakis
and published by Ugly Duckling Presse*

I perceived your bad mood and refusal, if my request might in any way upset the daily arrangement of your habits; you did something for me when the thing to be accomplished could be carried out at the same time as those that fell into the order of your life. You would be more attentive to me today, to prove your friendship to me. I have not forgotten your “should the occasion arise...” But these things are not the marks of friendship to me. Those reside in the simple fact that there is someone to whom, at any moment, I can speak my thoughts, someone who will feel my joy or my troubles as I do. I do not believe that I can abuse; it seems to me that I can be selfish. What I require of a friend is to be able to ask a lot without fear of ever displeasing. That kind of friendship you have not given me for a long time.

And that is why I will not keep “this little place in my heart” for you. Out of a certain lover’s puerility, I had promised you that I would always retain a small particle of true love for you, even if I loved passionately elsewhere. I am not the one getting married; within me is your image, taking up all the room; for me not to suffer anymore, you have to leave, so that one day, when it is uttered in front of me, your name will blow by me without touching a thing. I want this erasure, because I need peace; you—you have happiness; a little bit of love from me would not bring you anything.

Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky – The Unbitten Elbow

Translated by Joanne Turnbull and published in 'Autobiography of a Corpse' by NYRB

On Form No. 11111, opposite "Average Earnings," the respondent had written "0," and opposite "Goal in Life," in clear round letters, "To bite my elbow."

[...]

The first person to make the elbow-eater a serious offer was the manager of a suburban circus in search of new acts to enliven the show. He was an enterprising sort, and an old issue of the *Review* that happened to catch his eye decided the elbow-eater's immediate fate. The poor devil refused at first, but when the showman pointed out that this was the only way for him to live by his elbow, and that a living wage would allow him to refine his method and improve his technique, the downcast crackpot mumbled something like, "uh-huh." [...]

With the orchestra playing a march, the man would stride into the ring with one arm bared, his face rouged, and the scars around his funny bone carefully powdered white. The orchestra would stop playing—and the contest would begin; the man's teeth would sink into his forearm and begin edging toward his elbow.

"Bluffer, you won't bite it!"

"Look! Look! I think he bit it."

"No, he didn't. So near and yet..." [...]

The fashionable speaker Eustace Kint, who rose to fame through the ears of elderly but wealthy ladies, was taken by friends after a birthday lunch—by chance, on a lark—to the circus. A professional philosopher, Kint caught the elbow-eater's metaphysical meaning right off the bat. The very next morning he sat down to write an article on "The Principles of Unbitability." [...]

The philosopher's thinking went like this: Any concept (*Begriff*, in the language of the great German metaphysicians) comes lexically and logically from *greifen* (to grasp, grip, bite). But any *Begriff*, when thought through to the end, turns into a *Grenzbegriff*, or boundary concept, that eludes comprehension and cannot be grasped by the mind, just as one's elbow cannot be grasped by one's teeth. "Furthermore," Kint's article continued, "in objectifying the unbitable outside, we arrive at the idea of the transcendent: Kant understood this too, but he did not understand that the transcendent is also immanent (*manus*—'hand,' hence, also 'elbow'); the immanent-transcendent is always in the 'here,' extremely close to the comprehending and almost part of the apperceiving apparatus, just as one's elbow is almost within reach of one's grasping jaws. But the elbow is 'so near and yet so far,' and the 'thing-in-itself' is in every self, yet ungraspable. Here we have an impassable *almost*," Kint concluded, "an 'almost' personified by the man in the sideshow trying very hard to bite his own elbow. Alas, each new round inevitably ends in victory for the elbow: The man is defeated—the transcendent triumphs. Again and again—to bellows and whistles from the boorish crowd—we are treated to a crude but vividly modelled version of the age-old gnoseological drama. Go one, go all, hurry to the tragic sideshow and consider this most remarkable phenomenon; for a few coins you can have what cost the flower of humanity their lives." [...]

The number of elbowists was mushrooming. True, skeptics and anti-elbowists had also cropped up; an elderly professor tried to prove the antisocial nature of the elbowist movement, a throwback, he claimed, to Stirnerism, which would logically lead to solipsism, that is, to a philosophical dead end.

Stanley Crawford – Log of the S.S. the Mrs. Ungentine

Published by Dalkey Archive

But year after year, this could not go on. Annually I attempted reforms. My manner was to present him a typed sheet of remarks at breakfast-time, neatly folded on his plate like a napkin: 'I have noticed lately, my dear, these past three to four years you have not opened your mouth to speak literally one word, preferring rather to nod, wave your arms about, and the like, to the point I hardly know who you are any more, not that I ever did. Nor that I complain. Our bliss, I know, has been fantastic. The last crop of pumpkins broke all records for size and tastiness. Our hybrid zinnias have attained blooms nineteen inches in diameter, glow in the dark. We have identified and named three new species of porpoise. I love that diamond necklace you brought up last week. Yet these things, however fulfilling they may be, scarcely add up to tell me what you refuse to speak, and if you could possibly see fit to spare a moment now and then to take me into your confidence, discuss something, anything in fact, then I might venture to suggest—brazen hypothesis, I know—that we could start working our way towards the heart of the matter, on the way to engaging in many a colourful argument. Permit me to cite a few examples of the things you have never spoken to me of. Your mother, for one, your no doubt dear old mother. Then there's your father, your brothers, sisters, assorted relatives, friends. Then there are countless items about your own person, your likes and dislikes, past adventures, the scar on your left kneecap. What did you think of the soup last night? The state of your health? Any colds lately? A brief sketch is all I would like. An anecdote or two. The juicy peccadillo, say. Even blasphemy. Such facts, trivial even, I would love to hear more of, or simply of, and would willingly dote on to pass the time of day and to know somewhat more fully the silent stranger I now so selflessly serve and not even wondering why any more, that being the way things happen to have worked out, God knows how.

Louis Aragon – Paris Peasant

Translated by Simon Watson Taylor and published by Jonathan Cape

It matters very little to me whether or not I have reason on my side. I do not seek to be right. I seek the concrete. That is why I speak. I do not admit the right of anyone to question the premises of speech, or of expression. The concrete has no other form of expression than poetry. I do not admit the right of anyone to question the premises of poetry.

There is a species of persecuted persecutors known as *critics*.

I do not admit criticism.

It is not to criticism that I have devoted my days. My days belong to poetry. Make no mistake, sniggerers: I lead a poetic life.

A poetic life, pray engrave that expression.

I do not admit the right of anyone to re-examine my words, to quote them against me. They are not the terms of a peace treaty. Between you and me, it is war.

[...]

My life? It no longer belongs to me.

I have already said so.

I have no desire to hog the limelight. But the first person singular expresses for me everything that is concrete in man. All metaphysics is in the first person singular. All poetry, too.

The second person is still the first.

[...]

Those who divide the mind up into faculties.

Those who talk about truth (I am not fond enough of lies to talk about truth).

You are too late upon the scene, Gentlemen, for persons have had their day upon the earth.

Force to its farthest limit the idea of the destruction of persons, and go beyond that limit.*

*Aragon's final thought here is the beginning point for posthumanism.

Marcel Schwob – The Book of Monelle

Translated by Kit Schluter and published by Wakefield Press

And Monelle said again: I shall speak to you of destruction.

Behold the word: Destroy, destroy, destroy. Destroy within yourself; destroy what surrounds you. Make space for your soul and for all other souls.

Destroy all good and all evil. Their ruins are the same.

Destroy the old dwellings of man and the old dwellings of the soul; what is dead is a distorting mirror.

Destroy, for all creation comes from destruction.

And for higher benevolence you must annihilate lower benevolence. And thus new good appears saturated with evil.

And to imagine a new art you must break its forebears. And thus new art seems a sort of iconoclasm.

For all construction is made of debris, and nothing is new in this world but forms. But you must destroy the forms.

Roger Gilbert-Lecomte – The Death of the Arts After Rimbaud

Translated by Dennis Duncan in 'Theory of the Great Game' from Atlas Press

With a few very rare but enormous exceptions, I renounce art as much in its highest forms as in its basest, that virtually all the world's literature, painting, sculpture, [cinema], and music has always caused me to slap my thighs in bestial laughter as if confronted by an enormous *faux-pas*.

The genre-pieces produced by geniuses and real talents, the technical perfection acquired by the systematic exploitation of recognised and unrecognised methods, the assiduous practice of imitating 'nature', the 'long patience' of the salaried academician, all these kinds of activity have always scandalised me by their complete uselessness. Uselessness. It is art for art's sake. Otherwise known as populism. A hygienic distraction to make us forget hard-to-grasp reality.

Some artists work with taste.

Some aesthetes are connoisseurs.

And some men die biting their fists in all the nights of the world.

It is not that I am simply insensible to the arts—literary allusions in a painting; in music, *gudu-gudu* percussion, prolonged indefinitely; sculptural epithets in literature, particularly when applied to melody—these can move me more than all the world, but I resist calling it "artistic emotion" since no taste, not even the worst taste, is guiding my judgment, because there is no judgment, but only a thumping blow to my guts.

Art for art's sake is one of those refuges where people who betray the spirit of revolt lurk. On the human plane, absolute beauty cannot exist without a beyond, without an end. As if an absolute, unique in itself, could present itself to the reclusive individual in the guise of his ego under any form other than No, No and No.

Thalia Field – Personhood

Published by New Directions

Everybody mentions the elephant in the room.

The first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Chief Justice Marshall, emphasised the importance of habeas corpus, writing in his decision in 1830, that the ‘great object’ of the writ of habeas corpus is ‘the liberation of those who may be imprisoned without sufficient cause.’

Habeas corpus: that you have a body

Habeas corpus relief: that you have freedom for the body

Happy lives in a solitary pen, despite the fact that elephants are herd animals and female elephants form life-long bonds. The Bronx Zoo closed its elephant program, but continues, after forty years, to hold Happy in an enclosure not larger than a few times her body length.

If the body is not a thing under common or natural law, the body may have the right not to be imprisoned, be as it may that for all beings the body itself is already a form of prison. Some prisons, for example, are very small and live fast and briefly, burdened with constant hunger or fear, while other bodies grow enmeshed with other bodies, prisons alongside prisons, layered evolution, eons of embodied wonder, colour and kind morphing fortunes from below the surface to the outer atmosphere, as each prison lasts the exact length as its life, before release is secured, before forms transform, before/after the prison-body in every variety of conscious mind means everything and also nothing to other some-bodies, so that any body should imply its very release/relief to not be just a thing, ever.

The elephant in the room has a name, we’ve called her Happy. Stolen with her siblings from their herd in Thailand, named for a Disney dwarf and flown into the U.S., “that same year, Sleepy died, and the corporation relocated Happy, Grumpy, Sneezy, Doc, Dopey and Bashful to the still operational *Lion County Safari*, in Loxahatchee, Florida. Happy and Grumpy were sent to the Bronx Zoo before Grumpy was euthanised after being attacked by two other elephants. Happy is alone and has been for forty years.” [...]

MR WISE: So we must show that Happy is a person. The way we show Happy is a person is by implicating the Court of Appeals case from *Byrn* from 1972. *Byrn* made it clear that being a person and being a human being are not synonymous... In that case, it had to do with a person—with if it was a human being who was a foetus, the Court said that while she was still a human, a foetus was not a person. It made it clear that personhood is an issue not of biology, but it has to be a matter of public policy.

[...]

On March 20, 2017, New Zealand declared the Whanganui River a legal person after its headwaters were diverted, its bed was mined and straightened, its rocky falls flattened, its fish population killed, and the water polluted. Now a forest and a mountain will become legal people, too.

Maggie Nelson – The Argonauts

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Before long I learnt that you had spent a lifetime equally devoted to the conviction that words are *not* good enough. Not only not good enough, but corrosive to all that is good, all that is real, all that is flow. We argued and argued on this account, full of fever, not malice. Once we name something, you said, we can never see it the same way again. All that is unnameable falls away, gets lost, is murdered. You called this the cookie-cutter function of our minds. You said that you knew this not from shunning language but from immersion in it, on the screen, in conversation, onstage, on the page. I argued along the lines of Thomas Jefferson and the churches—for plethora, for kaleidoscopic shifting, for excess. I insisted that words did more than nominate. I read aloud to you the opening of *Philosophical Investigations*. *Slab*, I shouted, *slab!*

For a time, I thought I had won. You conceded there might be an OK human, an OK human animal, even if that human animal used language, even if its use of language were somehow defining of its humanness—even if humanness itself meant trashing and torching the whole motley, precious planet, along with its, our, future.

But I changed too. I looked anew at unnameable things, or at least things whose essence is flicker, flow. I readmitted the sadness of our eventual extinction, and the injustice of our extinction of others. I stopped smugly repeating *Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly* and wondered anew, can everything be thought.

And you—whatever you argued, you never mimed a constricted throat. In fact you ran at least a lap ahead of me, words streaming in your wake. How could I ever catch up (by which I mean, *how could you want me?*).

A day or two after my love pronouncement, now feral with vulnerability, I sent you the passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in which Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase “I love you” is like “the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name.” Just as the *Argo*’s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the *Argo*, whenever the lover utters the phrase “I love you,” its meaning must be renewed by each use, as “the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new.”