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POETRY AS PERFORMATIVITY AND EXCESS: AN ESSAY ON POLITICS AND ANTI-FOUNDATIONAL ACADEMIC DISCOURSE, AND SEVEN POEMS ON SEDIMENTATION

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Abstract

This brief essay and the group of seven poems on themes of “sedimentation” it introduces together consider the place of poetry in and for the future of anti-foundational academic discourse. The essay begins by examining the gap between contemporary global political stances, behaviors and visions of peace, which often appear to be focused by identity-based claims, and the deconstructive critiques of essentialized identity categories taking place in postmodern, feminist, queer, postcolonial and other academic conversations. The essay critiques the degree of abstraction of anti-foundationalist academic discourse and suggests poetry as a useful method for extending anti-foundational theoretical insights. In a unique way, a poem inseparably links “what it means” and “how it means,” offering a concrete glimpse of how meaning “performs” itself in and through language. In addition, the “excess” of poetry, its affective, imaginative, musical and category breaking dimensions, can extend, expand, and exceed the limits of categorical, definitional language in ways that conventional academic genres and language usage do not. The small collection of poems on themes of “sedimentation” that follow the essay performatively engage anti-foundational theoretical insights. The title poem carries an epigraph by Judith Butler, “Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to contest what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary.” “Non-ordinary meanings of language” are useful for subverting or complexifying normative meanings, and all seven poems play with that notion through images of sedimentation and processes of layering: silt depositing itself, layers of shale and other rock forming and crumbling, layers of light unfolding in a jar of apricot jam, etc. The “excess” leaps, lingers, eludes, flows through the poems’ unconventional punctuation and grammar, in the interstitial spaces between the poems, and by the play between the poems’ epigraphs and the motions of the images.

Key words: poetry, identity, language, philosophy, postmodernism, performativity, excess, religion,

politics, peace

Contemporary Politics and the Abstractness of Academic Discourse

At the turn of the millennium, political stances and behaviors based on “identity” appear to have become one of the primary modes of conceiving of ourselves and relating to one another as human beings. An identity-based politics focuses itself primarily around a constellation of issues involving race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, ethnicity, economic means, class consciousness, physical or mental ability, religious commitment or some other categorical “site.” In the second half of the twentieth century, identity politics often successfully served strategic ends, bringing voice and increased rights to and for those resisting the hegemony of totalitarian or other universalizing regimes ¹. Though an identity-based politics has been and continues to be a powerful tool for people who are marginalized and brutally oppressed, often simultaneously creating a general tolerance and appreciation for real human difference within and between cultures, a politics based on identity categories also appears to be one of the factors repeatedly implicated in the tearing apart of present and future worlds by wars of words, bombs, guns, and embargos limiting access to food and other resources. Identity-based politics too often bolster attitudes of “us” against “them,” threatening even the vision or possibility of a peace which might sustain and empower all persons.

Politics based on identity are limited because they are always based on principles of exclusion, on binarisms of “I am ____, because I am not ____.” Much of the scholarly anti-foundationalist discourse presently occurring among post-structuralist, postmodern, post-colonial, third-wave feminist and other contemporary theorists critiques any ideological stance or political praxis which bases itself primarily or solely on categorical “identity,” since such identities are often implicated in, enforced, and created by the very repressive regimes which they may be seeking to resist. In other words, when the second blank space in the sentence above, is filled in with a hegemonic identifier such as “white, man, straight, wealthy, physically able, Christian, etc...,” the first blank space becomes dependent upon its opposition to the second space for its own definition. In such a way, non-hegemonic identities may be understood not as essential

¹ In addition to century-long post-colonial movements in Central and South Americas, Africa and Asia, and the people’s movements in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union of the past decade and a half, the civil rights, women’s and gay/lesbian liberation movements in the United States of the 1960’s and 1970’s also exemplify identity-based movements-- the latter against culturally ingrained practices of racism, patriarchy, androcentrism and heterosexism. Politics based on ethnic, gender and religious identities and on identities created by economic oppressions continue to play out globally, embodying an impulse toward liberation to and for particular groups of people.

differences, but as cultural constructions, which even when used in resistant ways, may continue to reify hegemonic powers of definition and binary categorization, reinforcing the universalizing tendencies of dominant positions.

The insights of various academic conversations within cultural, feminist, queer, post-colonial and other critical theories and their deconstructions and critiques of identity politics have a great deal to contribute to the daily global politics being lived out on world stages, government and corporate meeting rooms, and between next door neighbors for whom “identity” differences and similarities may become the fundamental means of orienting or creating the self toward and within one’s culture. Yet, the insights of academic, anti-foundational theories that critique or deconstruct identity categories² are not substantially finding their way into the broader political workings of our world where their theoretical insights might suggest ways of deconstructing or refiguring identity-based politics and open possibilities for complexifying and expanding the sense of relationality involved in visions of peace.

Do the conventions of abstract language and of categorical, analytical thought characteristic of contemporary academic discourse prevent the movement of theoretical insights into broader cultural discourses about ethnic, economic, racial, gendered, national and religious identities and their concomitantly focussed visions of peace and justice? Is it possible that the habitual abstractions and scholarly dependence on logical, analytical thought processes actually contribute to the tearing apart of human communities by reifying, through their *genre* and *scholarly conventions of language*, the very habits of categorization and oppositional definition that their *theoretical content* seeks to critique and deconstruct? Are contemporary theoretical developments, including those in feminist theory, queer theory and postmodern philosophies, however valuable their insights, too abstract? And does the tendency toward abstraction not only limit the readership and thus prevent broader cultural contact with critical and life-enhancing ideas, but does abstraction itself pose a philosophical problem for anti-foundational thought? While abstract thought, that ability to move beyond merely reacting to situations, the attempt to “see” and “construct” more comprehensively and connectively than the present moment or space might allow, remains tremendously valuable, does the academic habit of abstraction itself, and the dependency of scholarly language on the act of categorization and fixed grammatical constructions, further consolidate the hegemonic norms that so much contemporary work seeks to upend and break open? How might anti-foundational academic discourse occur in ways that do not obscure its own claims that knowledge, identities, social relations and institutional

² See for instance, *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, New York: Routledge, 1993; *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, New York: Routledge, 1996; *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, New York: New York University Press, 1996; *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson, New York: Routledge, 1990.

possibilities for change are constructed in inseparable relation with concrete cultural forces always already embodied or performed in and by particular contexts and events?

In this short essay and the group of poems it introduces, I begin to address the above questions by considering the place of poetry in and for the future of non-foundational academic discourse. The process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote, “Philosophy is akin to poetry, and both of them seek to express that ultimate good sense which we term civilization.” (Whitehead, 1938, 174) Yet philosophy and other modes of rational, analytic writing remain privileged in the academy. Though much contemporary discourse questions, decenters and even dismisses the notion of “pure” reason, the proper form of academic discourse is still generally considered to be logical or rational argument of the analytical article or scholarly tome. Poetry opens fresh possibilities by embodying or performing itself both as a mode of experience and as an alternative method or process of reflection. In what follows, after briefly addressing a frequently experienced “resistance” to poetry in academic discourse, I bring together a constellation of insights from John Ciardi, Jeannette Winterson, Judith Butler, John Dewey and others in order to explore the inseparability of the “what” and the “how” of poetry and the function of “excess” in/of poetic language. I conclude with a few words on poetic perception and frame the “sedimentation” poems that follow this essay with some comments specific to their generation.

The Performativity of Poetry

Poetry offers a particularly apt modality, both for holding in tension the abstract theoretical contours of contemporary postmodern discourse and the concrete particularities upon which the theories depend, and for creating a bridge between the academic and the broader socio-political realms of discourse at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The aptness of poetry for this dual task arises not only from its traditional reputation in many cultures as being written by, for and among “the people,”³ but from its uniquely layered or doubled function in language. It is the

³ Pablo Neruda is a well known example of a poet who wrote from, for and with the “voice” of “the people” of his native Chile. In the poem, “Meeting Under New Flags,” he writes, “I based my heart on this, I listened to all/the sorrowful salt: by night/ I went to plant my roots./ I discovered the bitterness of the earth:/ for me everything was night or lightningflash:/ secret wax settled in my head./ and scattered ashes in my tracks... I have the same wounded hand that men have,/ I hold up the same red cup/ and an equally furious amazement...” (Neruda, 1973, 245) In his *Memoirs*, Neruda describes a cultural identity marked not only by human relations, but by the land itself, the contours and climate that contribute to shaping a sense of communal identity: “I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world.” (Neruda, 1977, 6). The poet Adrienne Rich articulates another dimension of poetry’s relation with “the people”: the centrality of poetry to culture itself, poetry as a cultural necessity. “I have never believed that poetry is an escape from history, and I do not think it is more, or less, necessary than food, shelter, health, education, decent working conditions. It is as necessary.” (Rich, 1993, xiv)

latter characteristic with which this essay is concerned. As bridges, or hinges, poems may be able to swing open to a wider accessibility the abstractions of critical theory, expressing and expanding the insights of theoretical, academic discourse about “identity,” “the subject,” “meaning,” and the creative and constraining power of the motion of discourse itself. The double or layered function of a poem involves its ability to simultaneously explicate ideas and their relations/meanings *and* to create or perform what it claims. In a poem, the *what* and the *how* are particularly inseparable, making it a uniquely complex, layered and interdisciplinary tool for contemporary and future discourse. The ability of poetry to create connections between the academic and various widely influential national, ethnic, gendered, economic and religious conversations seems crucial at the present moment, a moment holding in its multiple conflicts the dynamic capacities either to open a new global epoch of relational possibilities for human lives, or to close us into narrower selves with the too familiar preoccupation of actively seeking one another’s deaths.

Poetry, however, often meets with a certain resistance, particularly in academic circles. In my work as an adjunct professor, graduate student and poet in Northern California, I have repeatedly heard various scholars voice that resistance in phrases such as, “I just don’t like poetry,” or “I don’t get poems.” I sometimes reply by asking how often the person actually reads or listens to poetry, and I find myself wondering why so many people expect to “get” poetry without having read much of it. No one would expect to understand a technical or constructive philosophical text without first having worked to develop a facility with its language and movements, with the way connections are made. A facile sense with poetry, the ability to take off and land with the leaps of a particular poem, requires doing at least some work, building a capacity for poetry’s motions of proportion and resonance, for language as a heard music. Another expectation that sometimes bolsters a resistance to poetry in the academic world comes into play around the concept of meaning. The other day a friend, who is the president of a well-respected academic institution, said to me, “I don’t have a poetic bone in my body. I just can’t seem to understand exactly what poems mean.” (He did not notice that “having a poetic bone” in one’s body is already a poetic phrase.) What exactly does a poem mean? That may be a less than helpful question with which to approach a poem. Poetry is equally and inseparably about performativity, about how meaning happens. Because a poem is not “about” definitional, categorical language, but about the motion of meaning, the question I prefer to ask of a poem, is the inquiry with which some years ago, John Ciardi entitled his book: *How Does A Poem Mean?*

I believe it is well worth our time to work through whatever our difficulties and resistances to poetry may be, because poetry exists on cultural edges crucial to contemporary discourses on meaning. Precisely because of the inseparability of *what* a poem is and *how* a poem is or

becomes or performs itself, poetry is uniquely poised to both reflect on or analyze experience and simultaneously to be or to perform an experience. The poet Ruth Gendler writes, In our time we commonly view poetry as a rarified form that doesn't have much to do with our lives. Many of us stay away, afraid it will either be too abstract and inaccessible or sentimental and precious. Yet, poetry may be the more precise language we have for talking about the world. Poets who give language to states where the soul meets the world, the inner and outer intersect, are charged and changed by the energy at the edge. (Gendler, 1991, xxi)

How is it that poetry “may be the more precise language we have for talking about the world?” What is it about a poem which evokes, draws upon, is charged, changed by and itself changes “the energy at the edge” of language, of knowledge, of human experience, of our categories and habits of perception? If it is precisely the inseparability of the links between the “what” and the “how” of meaning by which poetry balances, pushes, charges and is charged by the creative energies which linger at the edges of our cultures, our perceptions, and the motions of meaning between us, then are there ways in which we can examine or characterize such links?

As John Ciardi wrote forty years ago, “The poem is inseparable from its own performance of itself.” (Ciardi, 1959, 668) Ciardi's statement demonstrates more than a little affinity with the claims of feminist and lesbian theorist, Judith Butler, as well as with other developers of anti-foundational, post-structuralist thought who claim that meaning, identity, and the subject are performatively consolidated by discourse. Ciardi's characterization of the poem's ability to simultaneously *explicate* relations and meanings *and to create or perform itself*, to become that which it claims, foregrounds the poem as a potentially expansive and clarifying tool for the *theoretical* work of contemporary critical scholars. For Ciardi, the poem demonstrates that “words are living forces” (Ciardi, 1965, 765), and he underscores poetry's deconstructive tendencies: “The language of experience is not the language of classification. So for poetry the concern is not to arrive at a definition and to close the book, but to arrive at an experience.” (Ciardi, 1965, 666) And whatever “experiences” a poem may “arrive at” not only elude the language of classification, but may crack, fragment, dissolve, expand, exceed and perhaps even explode definitional limitations.

Poetry As Excess

Poetry lends itself well to contemporary anti-foundational reflection and the expanding motions of such reflection into broader realms of political and social discourse, because it carries a capacity to perform that which evades the definitional, rational and often binary categorizations that characterize traditional academic discourse on experience and meaning. As novelist Jeannette Winterson writes, “Art is excess.” (Winterson, 1995, 94). For Judith Butler, “excess”

involves that which is systematically denied by the traditional philosophical notion of a fixed, volitional subject and by the habitual processes of categorization that characterize our thought and language. Butler's work involves a philosophical deconstruction of essentialized identities of gender, sex and sexuality by moving "outside" of the metaphysics of substance and its reliance on subjects who possess identifiable "traits" that precede or "cause" concomitant acts or behaviors. For Butler, gender and other categorical "identities" are not "essential" ways or traits of being human, which are then simply "named" in language. Identities are not causative of behaviors or of marked traits. Rather such identities are *effects* of the processes of naming/being named, of constantly "iterating" or "becoming" within repressive regimes. "Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." (Butler, 1990, 25) Gender is an effect of the "fiction" of the binarism of compulsory heterosexuality, and for Butler, "identity," including gender identity, "proves to be performative-- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be." (Butler, 1990, 25) While she develops her notion of the creative and constraining power of discourse from Foucault, and draws on Nietzsche for the sense that there is no "doer" who precedes the "deed" of "becoming" one's identity(ies), it is from psychoanalysis that she reworks the concept of "excess" in a way that offers particular relevance for the function of poetry in contemporary discourse. Excess, for Butler, is characterized by that which exceeds, disrupts or cannot be contained within, by or through categorical "sites" of identity such as gender, race or sexual orientation. Excess is that which cannot be expressed in or by any single performative category or act of identity, but which despite all regulatory regimes and institutional powers and categorizations, persists in its "disruptive promise." (Butler, 1991, 315).

Some months ago I asked Judith Butler for some personal feedback on a paper I had written. The paper was about subversion and novelty, written in a traditional academic style and genre, and her response was positive and encouraging, but very low key. During our conversation it was not until I mentioned that I was writing poetry about the same set of ideas and cultural motions, that she became animated. "Poetry," she said, "now *that's* subversive." (conversation, May 1998) Why is poetry subversive? Why does poetry, in particular, carry and foster flashings of cultural transformation and disruption? Perhaps it is in a poem's capacity for, its performance of, *excess*, of that which is systematically denied by denotive, categorical performances of meaning, that poetry's subversive potential pulses. For it is precisely the excess of a poem that allows the poet (and the reader or hearer) to contest, leap beyond, spill over, exceed the conventional and constrained ways in which language and experience are performed. As Winterson writes, "It is the poet who goes further than any human scientist." (Winterson, 1995)

This sense of the function of poetry in and for society, as that which *exceeds* social norms and conventional usages, grammatically, logically, imagistically, emotionally and imaginatively, is not at all a new perception, and in many ways it is also not unrelated to that which is considered sacred in many religious traditions. As St. John Perse said, “The poet is the one who breaks through our habits.” In a world that persists in tearing its populations apart, isolating, limiting, and even killing its citizens in the name of identity politics, that which breaks the tyranny of identity and yet expands the cultural spaces for real human difference and future relational possibilities is desperately needed. Peace cannot happen with any sense of human dignity or integrity and expansiveness of relation in a world where persons and cultures are characterized and fixed by violently restrictive habits of categorization, by definitions of human realities that function through exclusion, binary opposition, and the comparative devaluing of opposing positions. Political strategies and habits of language, basing themselves on the iteration of firm identity categories without a valuation of subjective multiplicities, fragmentation and boundary play, will never move toward a peace dynamic and complex enough to embrace the layered contrasts and ever-shifting, relational intensities of reality. For the breaking open, over and over again, of the simultaneous motions of reflection and experience, of the abstracted, logical categories and grammatical structurings by which our institutional structures and languages often violently fix and limit our humanity, poetry is a crucial tool, a desperately needed series of performances uniquely suited to fostering excess in and for the academy, in and for the world.

Among other facets, the “excess” of a poem can involve affective experience, what may be characterized as the “emotional,” the felt experiences which analytic, rational ways of thought have often attempted to systematically eradicate. (Though in systematic thought, emotions and affective commitments are usually only obscured rather than expunged.) Poetry, by contrast, often moves by the resonances and contrasts of sound, the music of language, by images and by deliberate leaps of “felt” experience. John Dewey, in his 1934 *Art as Experience*, highlights the value of the affectional and imaginative dimensions for making significant human connections. “Works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own.” (Dewey, 1934, 333). The poet Adrienne Rich underscores the trajectory between the affective and the intensification of human relational possibilities. “I knew-- had long known-- how poetry can open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire.” (Rich, 1993, xiv) If poetry accesses affective, imaginative dimensions, inviting and creating capacities for “forms of relationship and participation other than our own,” if poetry can “break open locked chambers of possibility,” why has academic convention eschewed poetry as a legitimate method and means of discourse? Perhaps the unexamined privileges of academic lives and perspectives are themselves

threatened by poetry's subversiveness, whatever claims anti-foundationalist thinkers may be making for the deconstruction and transformation of structural hegemonies?

Poetry offers itself as a particularly dynamic tool for the deconstructive tasks of anti-foundational thought, performing and broadening not only capacities for affective, imaginative, layered connection, but also for intensified engagement of the activities of perception. John Dewey's *Art As Experience* continues to be one of the most lucid explications of such engagement. For Dewey, experience occurs continuously, but because of "distraction and dispersion," we constantly interrupt ourselves and break off the building intensity of any particular engagement with the world. We live by starts and stops. "In contrast with such experience," he writes, "we have *an* experience when the material experience runs its course to fulfillment,... and is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation." (Dewey, 1934, 35) The artist, poet, musician, or anyone involved in a creative act, has, in Dewey's view, "a heightened sense... of the reality of things of *ordinary* experience" (Dewey, 1934, 201), of the *processes* of the becoming of actuality. Many artists and writers have alluded to something like this intensified, dynamic sense of ordinary reality. Simone Weil developed it as "attention," Hannah Arendt in her concept of "thinking." The poet Denise Levertov spoke of a "fidelity of attention." For Levertov, "during the writing of a poem the various elements of the poet's being are in communion with each other and heightened. Ear and eye, intellect and passion, interrelate more subtly than at other times,... not a matter of one element supervising the others but of intuitive interaction between all the elements involved." (Levertov, 1992, 69). Such moments or sets of moments of "being attentive" waken the poet's ability to work in such a way that the "what" and the "how" of the poem together come into existence and take on their inseparability. The affectional and imaginative facets are engaged, so that there is not only an intensification of "noticing," but a motion of attuned resonance. Poet Mary Oliver describes it simply, "Poetry is a life cherishing force." (Oliver, 1994, 112)

The Sedimentation Poems

The seven poems on themes of "sedimentation" following this essay performatively engage anti-foundational theoretical insights through the medium of poetry, where the "excess" is deposited, lifted, flows, eludes, leaps and pauses through the unconventional punctuation and grammar, in the interstitial spaces between the poems, and by the play between the poems' epigraphs and the motions of the images. These poems in some ways attempt to perform philosophical ideas while still remaining imagistically poetry. The title poem carries an epigraph by Judith Butler, "Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to contest what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary." (Butler, 1997, 145) All seven poems play off of that notion that "non-ordinary meanings" of language are useful for subverting or complexifying normative

meanings, and all seven utilize images of sedimentation. Sediments, those accumulations of gravel, sand, mud, clay and parts of dead and decomposing plants and animals that make up sea floors and river beds, give a way of imaging the reading of our history, of seeing several layers of historical or personal time at once, like examining a rock formation and “seeing” layers of geologic time. Like the rings of a tree, sedimentary layers reflect past events, and though the mountain rock that has been lifted from some deep sea trench is seemingly fixed and solid, it is also a part of a process ever in motion: silt depositing itself, layers of shale and other rock forming and lifting, sometimes violently, hardening, falling apart, crumbling, being washed away. Sedimentation, that action or process of forming or depositing sediment, carries nuanced images and ways of glimpsing and engaging anti-foundational or social-constructionist thought. The complexities of layers of history and meaning, the sense of continuous motion and unfixedness, as well as the weight and density, the *mattering* of layers sedimented through time in real human lives and living languages, can all be retained and developed.

The images of sedimentation lead to an exploration of layers themselves, and the poems move: from layers of rock forming and unforming; to street pavements; to layers of sound and the resonance of overtone series while a piano is being tuned: the simultaneous sounding and decay, and the fullness of sound created when the strings, repeatedly pounded and adjusted, nearly but never quite exactly match each other’s pitch; to layers of light unfolding in the making of apricot jam; and finally, to the shadows, colors and complexities of the motions of light layered around a set of pyriform balusters lining the terrace of a public building. Most of these poems were completed during a five week residency during the summer of 1998 at the Villa Montalvo Center for the Arts in Saratoga, California, where I had the solitude and undivided focus to as Thomas Merton wrote, be “attentive to the times of the day: when the birds began to sing, and the deer came out of the morning fog,... and the sun came up... a sense of the unfolding mystery in time...” (Steindl-Rast, 1979, 49)

Sedimentation

*Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to
contest what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary.*

-- Judith Butler, *excitable speech*

layers
invisibly fallen through
shafts of light
 and dark
murk of the murky
 settled
into soft ancient stillness
(*reified* sacred)

some fresh and terrifying
silt current
 --stirring way down
 and deeply strafing
surfaces
into troughs and crevices
 rifts and leaping mountains

sun shadow all
broken open mingling--

lifts yesterday
and all the ages
 whirling round
until we cannot help
 but know
 in the thick silky chaos midst

of layers unlayering

that we are grounded

in motion

Sedimentation II: Mt. Diablo

*A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence--
even, and perhaps above all, in those aspects of it that are most familiar, most
solid and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday
behavior.*

--Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*

Picking at black shale
peeling apart striated deposits
into tiny sheets
breaking and broken

“Many myths are connected
with the mountain.
The Ohlone Indians of the Bay Area regarded it
as a place of power,
the residence of spirits.”

Southwest and just below the summit
of Mt. Diablo
under burgeoning clouds
carrying snow toward April
with Laura
my niece nearly thirteen

we squat a moment
my fingernails unraveling
the mountain
 upturned layers of silt
more red than black
and finely flecked with mica

I wait for her voice

to find and pry open
 some dry laminate of double surfaces
fragile between us

“Though it has mistakenly been
 described by many
 as a volcanic cone,

the mountain is actually
 a large block of colorful
 metamorphic Franciscan rock
which has been pushed up
 through the overlying sedimentary
 beds, turning up
steeply inclined layers of sandstone
 on the southwest and northeast.”

These upturned layers
 of silt
 pushed so far *so hard*
 (*by what force? what metamorphic pressures?*)
and fingertip crumbling

and beside me
ebullient Laura turning quiet
 compressing

We came in search of snow
 found ice blown
 into chaparral manzanita and digger pine
 on the north side
of the mountain north side of every tree and bush
 hardened

Our bare fingertips
 scraped thick ice crystals

as they tapped down
all around crashing and white and
 melting against our skin

laughing we threw them
 at each other
handful after spreading handful

“During the height of the drought
 in 1977, a rare summer
 thunderstorm set a fire
 which consumed
the whole north side of the mountain...”

Here on the south side
 we are sun-warmed and out of the wind
The black shale packed
 lifted from the bottom of some unfathomed sea
 has turned reddish and unlayering

 there are only
 tiny glistenings
between us between cloudshadows

moments of sun
 falling into dust

Note: Quotations are from Bob Newey’s *East Bay Trails: A Guide for Hikers, Runners, Bicyclists and Equestrians* (Hayward, CA: Footloose Press, 1981, 108-9)

Sedimentation III: The Sea

One is in despair over the current manifestations of malevolent imbecility and the
seemingly invincible power of rapacity, yet finds oneself writing a poem
about the trout lilies in spring woods. And one has promised to speak at a
meeting or help picket a building. If one is conscientious, the only solution is
to attempt to weigh conflicting claims at each crucial moment, and in
general to try to juggle well and keep all the oranges dancing in the air at
once.

--Denise Levertov, *New and Selected Essays*

The sea surges
juggles plankton
sea dust

billions of oranges
speckled and catching
the ever shifted
bluegreen light

Wild underwater
minglings
they are galaxies of dark star
fleck of idea
current spun

at each crucial moment
settling and
lifted
and flung

Sedimentation IV: The Resurfacing of Solano Avenue

(Albany, California)

*There is being sifted
The sand of your time, turning as you turn...
Some day, not accountable, you may look down
To see in your palm as on a field of history
The grain of time you recognize as yours.*

--Josephine Miles

Solano Avenue broken open
 chunks of subroad
 old pipe
 piled like monuments

pavement gone
 parts of the roadbed graded almost smooth
 all the shops still open
but the street bare
 tumbled as if after
 earthquake
 war

earthmovers massive and silent
 in near dusk
 clamped claws
 curled inward

I would drive one
 roll unstoppable
 lift the scooping
 arm high high

 but there was *Night In Fog*
the year I was twelve

bull-dozing
of the toppling bodies
the back and forth
hard pushing
of death already happened

and twenty-five years after my distress
fifty-four years after the deaths
a distant train
slowing to pass through warehouses and intersections
sounds the first
three note minor chord
yet again

Dusk soft air
coolly lifts the chalky musk
of old concrete
crumbling

smell of earth rolled open
of the construction zone
across the road from our house
in Karlsruhe, Germany, 1964,
new houses lifting daily
and deserted every afternoon

yellow wood
and half-empty beer bottles
sand in shovel-stripped piles
drenched grey

I was a child
who knew the scent
of concrete dust
before the pouring

Before cement was mixed or dumped or scraped or troweled or set

I knew the hardscrabble

earth

under roads under house and grave

played there

rolling small subterranean stones

in my bare hands

(for Jeffrey Potter)

And if the “I” is the effect of a certain repetition,
one which produces the semblance of a continuity or coherence,
then there is no “I” that precedes the gender it is said to perform;
the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances
that constitute and contest the coherence of that “I.”

--Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Subordination”

pounds note after note
 one at a time
immense patience
 of one string
 then two
 then three

listening for reverberations
 back to childhood
all the felt overtones
 unlayering

space that is not *after* sound
 nor before but *during*

preening of each barb
 every feather
 the whole wing outstretched again and again
the felt strip stabbed with the thin beak of a screwdriver
 between muting every surrounding string
 tap of the tuning hammer
all that work repetitive
 but not

After two hours
the piano flies

clean throbbing space
under every pressed key
lifting into my hand

Sedimentation VI: Jam Time

*layer (n): one thickness, course or fold laid or lying over or under another;
stratum; horizon; a branch or shoot of a plant that roots while still
attached to the parent plant*

*layer (v): to form or arrange in layers or form out of superimposed layers;
to separate into layers*

Summer early morning
To beat the heat of the day...
peaches apricots maybe red plums
resting softly on each other's flesh
in the shallow crates,
morning sun thick and bright
on every white tile
beside the sink.

The biggest pots are all
on the stove
roiling with water.
You move between stove
and countertop and sink
and I stand too still--
Move, you say.

I help a little
not with melting hot wax

or the syrupy sweet:

dangerous.

How can something so easily

scorched itself burn skin
so deeply?

I dip whole fruits in boiling water

one minute

haul them out with the slotted spoon
their steam climbing the sunlight.

I slide their skins

smoothly over the tender

heavy flesh yellow orange or pocketed
with red.

The skins shimmy

right off slither onto

the pile of discarded jackets
in the sink.

I cut off bruises

but you do the slicing,

turning each shrinking fruit against

the paring knife quick gleam

in your hands

bright crescents slipping and slipping

into the steel bowl

the wet mound rising gold and vermillion

falling over itself

so no one could ever tell

if they cared

which slice came from which fruit.

I skim foam from the tops

of every hot and cooling jar.

The foam rises and rises:

all morning without visibly moving

beads of amber sun lift,
layer the jars,
sweet glow bubbles
of trapped air
I free with my teaspoon,
ease into a white porcelain bowl.

I eat the sweet warm skimmings
air and heat and fruit stained
light
for my lunch,
the only part of the jam
that interests me.

But all winter you will spread
your toasted bread with the thicker layers
of summer.

Balusters

baluster, from the Italian, balaustra, wild pomegranate flower

If there are boundaries
 skin surfaces of water
crust of the earth
 bark countries
 of difference divided

let the barriers be of balusters
 full vases painted
with the swellings of light
 scything spaces between
into napiform passages
 where air flows free
rain and fog day and night
 the vault and bend of evening

let the boundaries be round
 stems of glasses
 on a wooden table
lathe-turned legs under
 and lustered and of the table
heavy bulbs of chiseled stone
 flexing low half formed by
 evening light half turned of early morning

If there is a rail
 let it be wide enough
 to support our bodies
our settled hips and hugged knees
 voices talking the night through

let every balustrade be broken
 by broad stairs by thresholds
open roads leading several
 directions water moving
 round and under breezes and clouds and over

let parapets protect only the plunged edges
 of platforms roofs bridges
and the spread stone terrace
 red tiled patient enough to bear
parties and footsteps silences
 of every kind

each baluster performing its slow dance
 catching turning and lifting
layers of light shadow
 the glow edged air
in ceaseless
 stroking curves

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