

Rick Barot

The Image Factory

THIS POEM IS, FIRST OF ALL, ABOUT WORK. OR MORE SPECIFICALLY, IT IS about people during their lunch break at work, that small return to the self, that quiet in the middle of the workday's momentum:

Now they are resting
in the fleckless light
separately in unison

like the sacks
of sifted stone stacked
regularly by twos

about the flat roof
ready after lunch
to be opened and strewn

As in all of William Carlos Williams's poems, the insistence on "Now," on the poise of the present moment, seems a necessary corollary of his other insistence on no ideas but in things. Then there are the stanzas' things, encompassed by a seeing that lightly roves and keenly calculates at the same time, noting weights and measures, lights and darks, the separate-but-together array of phenomena occupying one visual field: the unspecified "they" against the solidity of the stone-filled sacks, the passivity of "resting" and "stacked" pivoting towards the energy of "opened and strewn," the clear light and the flat roof. These first stanzas of the poem are about time, readiness, imminence. They are also about the poet's sonic wit, found in the iambic pentameter line broken into the poem's first two lines, and in the almost heavy-handed alliteration of "sacks / of sifted stone stacked." And they are about the angularity of the poet's seeing, which in the next three stanzas arrives at a point of terrifying focus:

The copper in eight
foot strips has been
beaten lengthwise

down the center at right
angles and lies ready
to edge the coping

One still chewing
picks up a copper strip
and runs his eye along it

Reading “Fine Work with Pitch and Copper” early in my life as a poet, I was still deep under the impression that poems needed a proper subject. More often than not, that subject was ultimately the poet him- or herself. In a tacit but clear hierarchy that I intuited in the two or so years I had been reading poetry, the things in a poem served the poet’s subjectivity. Narratives, landscapes, images: everything was meant to illustrate a feeling or an idea of the poet’s. If I had seen workmen in a poem before, they were like the workmen in Whitman’s poems, who were attached to an elevated notion about labor or fellowship or strength. And if I had seen the gritty materiality of Williams’s poem in other poems, it was always in the light of a poet’s interiority: Eliot’s wry melancholy, Rich’s fierce desire. Poem and self were inextricably involved. As Stevens had put it, “Things seen are things as seen.” That dynamic, given the undergraduate’s emotional chaos I was in, was what drew me to poetry in the first place. Poetry seemed to make a virtue of the mess within the mind, within the self.

Williams troubled that first understanding about the primacy of the self in poems. In “Fine Work” and in other Williams poems, I encountered things that were things, and were valuable as subjects in themselves. His poems’ things were decidedly ordinary, and were unlikely items to be found in poems precisely because of their ordinariness. The shards of glass behind a building, the weeds by the road, the sacks at a worksite: these images had a lucidity unencumbered by subjectivity or by heavy-handed meaning. The things were things. And if the self and its emotions appeared in these poems at all, the nature of their manifestation was too subtle for me to register during those early encounters with Williams’s poems. Later, I would of course realize that his poems were as saturated with self as any other poet’s. From the first word of any poem—“Now,” for instance—the poet’s presence was present. But it was crucial for me to have gotten those initial lessons from Williams’s work: that the world, the things around me, had a vivacity that was its own subject; that my poems could be invested with a purpose that went beyond the enactments of selfhood.

In “Fine Work with Pitch and Copper,” the lunchbreak scene impressionistically established in the first stanzas is sharpened when the next two stanzas fix on the copper strips that are part of the workers’ materials. The strips have a keen particularity. They are copper, and eight feet long. They have been “beaten lengthwise // down the center / at right angles,” which makes us see more acutely the strenuously shaped metal. And we learn their function: they are meant to “edge the coping.” The two stanzas’ description of the copper strips feels like an intensification, as though a panning camera had stopped on a detail of the scene and stayed there. When the worker appears in the last stanza, he gives a startling focus to what had been a disembodied attentiveness in the poem. That he is in the middle of chewing his lunch only heightens our surprise: despite the poem’s bright details, we’re reminded that the scene is absolutely commonplace.

But then another surprise, this one shocking: the worker “picks up a copper strip / and runs his eye along it.” The shock, of course, is in the briefly ugly

delay when our semantic sense lags behind the image we have swiftly conjured. The worker is only looking at the copper strip—we know this. We know this even as the locution Williams has used—“and runs his eye along it”—forces us to imagine a ghastly meeting between eye and strip. Williams knows that the reader will slip into the mistake, even as, just as quickly, the reader will make the swerve to the correct sense of the line. Williams counts on that misreading. The double meaning embedded in the last line, its knowingly strange wit, is what the poem hinges upon. In the last stanza, what’s ostensibly celebrated is the worker’s act of seeing, casual and intent at the same time. The worker is a culmination of the poem’s paean to work. But just underneath that first meaning is seemingly another meaning, a cautionary one—that looking can be a dangerous act.

II

In the four years between the end of my undergraduate life and the beginning of graduate school, I had a job and I wrote poems. These were the years I became a poet. In the years before and after this period, I was reading and writing poetry, too. But in the period I’m talking about, there was an intensity to my education as a poet—an intensity drawn from the fact that I was educating myself. I knew no other poets, I showed my work to no one. At the time this felt like isolation, though I see now that it was the condition of freedom. To me at twenty-three and twenty-four and twenty-five, one of the revelations of being a grownup was that I could read anything I wanted. There were no more syllabi. My mind was mine. And my time was, more or less, also mine.

I lived in Oakland but my job was in San Francisco, in the area south of Market Street. This was in the mid-1990s, which meant that the industrial past of this part of the city hadn’t been completely erased by the tech companies and design and creative firms that would eventually take over. The building where I worked had an elegant Art Deco façade, but once you found yourself inside, the building’s true nature as a converted warehouse space was instantly clear. The assortment of business concerns in that building struck me even then as remarkably varied. Every day meant walking past the open doors of these businesses and glimpsing a distinct world inside. The limo company with the hulking Russian men who ran it. The insurance agency with the gray-looking agents. The architectural office whose architects looked like male models. The commercial photographer who shot computers and electronics. The one-man graphic-design firm. Towards the back of the building, two companies took up the rest of the cavernous space. One was an electrical company that kept its equipment—ladders, big spools of wire—behind locked cyclone fencing. The other company was a garment finishing business, where Chinese women sewed buttons onto children’s clothing that arrived daily in enormous boxes. Being at work meant being surrounded by different kinds of work, and, as young as I was, I wasn’t beyond romantically thinking of the place as a kind of cheerful village.

The company I worked for was a stock photo agency. This meant that it had an inventory of tens of thousands of slides, kept in plastic sheets each holding

twenty slides, sheets which were in turn filed in about a dozen tall filing cabinets. A complicated tagging system kept track of each slide and the image it held. If a textbook editor called and asked for an image of, say, a dentist standing over a reclining patient, we would gather the slides we had of that image—perhaps as few as a dozen slides, or as many as a hundred, and taken by as many different photographers—and send them to the editor for possible use in the textbook. Ad agencies would ask for pictures of beaches. Magazines needed shots of Tuscan towns. Greeting card companies always wanted flowers and sunsets. I lived among images all day, bent over a light table, peering at things through a loupe. To the poet in me, this was fair enough compensation for the reality that I was paid eight, then nine, then ten dollars an hour during the years I worked at the company.

Even in my free time at the office, when I wasn't researching images for a client, I would go into the files and wander around in the world.

To say I worked for a "company" is probably an overstatement. There were only two of us. Ted, my boss, was a photographer in his seventies, and the company was the earnest diversion of his retirement. In his prime, Ted had been a regular photographer for magazines like *Time* and *Life*. When, in the '60s, Joan Didion traveled around California reporting the pieces that would be collected in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*, Ted was sometimes the photographer who accompanied her. Ted was born in Shanghai, to Russian parents who were merchants there. He still had a soft Russian accent and would occasionally startle me by reciting, in what sounded to me like a native speaker's accent, the names of Chinese cities listed on the slides. Ted was imperious, fastidious, and difficult. He took on a partner who didn't last more than a year. Other researchers came and went. I stayed because I could work three or four days a week and have the rest of each week to read and write. The job's basic features—part time and low pay and no benefits—were a hitch for others but a boon to me.

And there was this: Ted was a superb teacher, though at the time neither of us would have thought to call what he did teaching. When a want list came in from a client, I would watch Ted bring together the images for that client, and be amazed by the range of possibilities that he encompassed in his choices. And when he edited my work, he would carefully explain the merits and flaws of the images I had put together. I learned about cameras and films, about photographers and their sensibilities, about lighting and composition and color. I knew instinctively that these lessons were, in a kind of osmosis, affecting my work as a writer. I was learning how pictorial properties worked, which gave me some of the terms I needed to understand how my poem's images were working. The images in the hundreds of slides that I looked at each day gave a textured reality to things, in the way that language eroticized, actualized, the mind's things.

Ted was also teaching me something about quality, in regard to the gradient of values that made a commercial photograph what it was and made a fine art

photograph what it was. And that, too, had something of an echo in the study I was doing as a poet. I could read the work of a popular poet like Billy Collins one week, and feel a pleasure in it—only to read the work of an elliptical poet like Michael Palmer the next week, and feel pleasure in that as well. I looked at everything with an avid openness. I was figuring out what the differences among poets meant—their assorted postures towards form, narrative, semantic legibility, closure, subject matter. But I didn't yet know about the aesthetic fault-lines that broke up contemporary American poetry like a cracked mirror—lines that would, in many ways, vex my later life as a graduate student. What I knew in those years was that Collins and Palmer were in the stacks of the Oakland Public Library, a place I thought of with the same greed that a gangster feels when he thinks of a bank.

Everything seemed to happen when nothing was going on. On the bus-rides over the Bay Bridge to and from work. During my lunch hours at the nearby park. In the Berkeley coffeehouses where I would spend whole days. I was always reading, which meant I was always writing. Dozens of spiral-bound notebooks—part diary, part working journal, part commonplace book—filled up with my scribbling. Very little of what I wrote was anything that I could actually call poems, but I knew somehow that that was the way it was supposed to be, operating on something like the principle in mining that required the crushing of three tons of rock to yield an ounce of gold. I read the letters and diaries and interviews of writers: these gave me notions of how to work, how to think about the work, in the same way that their actual works provided ideals that my own poems could strive towards. It took me four years to go, finally, to graduate school for writing poetry, because I didn't know you could go to graduate school for writing poetry. If there are now hundreds of M.F.A. programs in writing, there were only two dozen or so then, and their presence was slow to register on my scattered sense of the current poetry scene. One part of me had known that the life I was living couldn't be sustained forever, but an equally stubborn part felt that having a writer's life would mean always adhering to the contours of the life I already had: the shoebox studio, the low-paying job.

In its basic elements, what I'm describing here probably resembles every writer's beginnings. My state of continuous concentration was a kind of caricature, though the experience of each hour and each day during those four years didn't feel ridiculous: the effort and bliss were sincere, and they were my own. What I see now is that the circumstances of any writer's beginnings aren't especially important—what's important are the small arcs of becoming that complete themselves within those circumstances. In my case, the first of these involved a different understanding of my solitude. Initially, I thought of my solitude as a poetic aloneness, but I began to see that this solitude was in fact a necessary condition for work. Being alone wasn't so much a preference as it was a functional prerequisite. That initial conception of solitude was attached to a sense of writing as a form of specialness—as though I were the only person ever to have been moved to make a secret of myself and transform my feelings into

profound language—while the latter notion saw solitude as the indispensable periphery that every artist needs to inhabit in order to make his or her art.

That shift in posture from being special to having a certain task also meant a shift in emphasis from feeling to thought. At some point, a young poet begins to write his or her poems out of thought rather than feeling. Which is to say that, at some point, he or she realizes that any feeling is in fact a multitude of thoughts and sensations brought to a particular intensity. As my notion of poetry's spectrum of subject matter enlarged—the lyric had more textures than I had first known, and poetry itself had within it multiple genres—so too my notion of the parts of myself that I could write from. My poems could think, I was beginning to see, and were not just limited to expressing a feeling, as I was already making them strenuously do. This was not only a discovery about poetry's range—after all, I had been reading poems of wildly broad subjectivities and subjects for a while. Instead, it was an essential discovery about the poet I was and could be, and what I might be able to free myself to do.

III

When I first read Robert Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas," what I felt was panic. The panic was in equal measure to the immediate love I had for the poem—a panic grounded in the stupid idea that because there was only a finite number of great poems, encountering "Meditation at Lagunitas" meant there must be one great poem fewer for me to discover, to be stricken by. I was in love not just with poems like Hass's but with poetry itself, which meant operating on an irrational calculus predicated on hunger and loss, rather than on an understanding of poetry's largeness. I was reading so much poetry that I thought I would eventually run out of poetry to read. As in my encounters with the other poems that I loved at the time, I wanted my first reading of "Meditation at Lagunitas" to happen over and over again. In fact, given the poem's complexities, each reading of the poem did feel like the first time. There was always something new there. In those early readings, I both understood and didn't understand the poem. One thing I did understand was that the poem was about a mind walking around in itself, a mind thinking:

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.

If earnestness is often the starting poet's default tone—a tone which I

happily picked up in an undergraduate class on British Romanticism, a class that more or less made up my mind about becoming a poet—the tone in the opening lines of Hass’s poem had a bracingly impersonal evenness. Here there was clearly a mind thinking and a voice speaking, but there was no “I.” The formulation presented in the first two lines had an epigrammatic authority: it announced a clever thesis for the poem, a cleverness made ironically poignant by the ongoing, irresolvable loss that was the subject of that thesis. Because I was only a year or two past my philosophy courses, I could just about hear the poem’s allusion to Plato in that “first world / of undivided light,” and the Aristotelian resonance in the image of the particular erasing “the luminous clarity of a general idea.” And in the distinction made between the worldly blackberry and the word *blackberry*, I could hear once again the exhilarating but maddening discussions from my junior-year seminar in critical theory. It was thrilling to find all this intellectual stuff in Hass’s poem. Even though vestiges of the poetic were in the poem’s opening lines—the woodpecker, the birch, and the blackberry—the first part of the poem wasn’t poetic in the way I had known the poetic. Instead, it presented a kind of urbane argument, one that didn’t need a defined speaker or narrative to convey its ideas. And when the speaker and his situation did appear, in the poem’s middle section, the lyricism I had looked for materialized, but with that lyricism made more sweet and more dark by what preceded it:

We talked about it late last night and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,
pine, *hair*, *women*, *you* and *I*. There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to do with her.

After the poem’s high-flown opening, the register in this middle section was companionable. More than companionable, in fact: intimate, confessing. The opening’s declamatory largeness had given way to a different kind of largeness: the largeness of a man remembering things, the largeness of a man feeling, of a man *returned* to feeling after the thinking that had governed him in the opening lines. Not that the philosophical discourse that informed the opening lines had disappeared: its weight informed the speaker’s swerve into memory. To the speaker and his friend, talking together in a kind of Socratic dialogue about the nature of reality, language, loss, and beauty late into the night, the headiness of the talk had the melancholy effect of dissolving everything. That is, in light of the powerful abstraction of thought, the actuality of things wavers. And beside the duration of language, experience is always dissolving, is fleeting.

On the other hand, language is incapable of fully accounting for the dynamism of experience—a dynamism lushly and mysteriously made evident in the speaker’s memory. Associatively veering from the lover, the lover’s shoulders, the thirst for salt, the river of childhood, the willows and boats and the little fish, the speaker’s remembering has an ampleness that argues against diminishment and grief. This middle section of the poem doesn’t, of course, articulate its argument in the rhetorical register of the first section. It’s too deep in reverie—too deep in a Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings—to be that clear. Its clarity is instead that of lyric climax, of a matter of fact violent wonder. And when that charged moment ebbs, the rest of the poem is inflected by equal energies of thought and feeling, which grapple with each other sentence by sentence:

Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
the things her father said that hurt her, what
she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.

The proliferating prism of the self. The big-thinking part of the self that can declare something like “Longing, we say, because desire is full / of endless distances.” The wounded part of the self that can remember the smallest things: “the way her hands dismantled bread, / the things her father said that hurt her.” Then the thinking, philosophical self once again: “There are moments when the body is as numinous / as words.” Followed again by the tender self, which gets the final word: “*blackberry, blackberry, blackberry*.”

That prismatic self is what I learned about in Hass’s poem. In those four years before I started graduate school, there were certainly other lessons. The work of ethical engagement in the poems of Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Carolyn Forché. Jane Kenyon’s plain style and Amy Clampitt’s baroque style. The modes of ambition in Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Jorie Graham—modes that were absolutely singular and specific to each poet. And more. But what I took from Hass was crucial in that it came at a time when I needed to know that it wasn’t just a voice I was trying to develop, but also the angularities of consciousness that made that voice even possible. The self is full of selves. Reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” would reinforce this. So too “Song of Myself” and the “Dream Songs” after that. I had gone into poetry for the same vaguely unexamined reason that brings many beginning poets to poetry: writing poems gave my emotions an aesthetic significance. But the more I read poems and wrote them, the more I saw that it was the whole of my identity that was the subject.

I was born in the Philippines. When I was ten, my family immigrated to the United States, settling in Oakland. My father worked in a factory that made

cardboard boxes, my mother worked at a government office. Between them were over a dozen siblings, scattered throughout California: aunts and uncles who were accountants, nurses, telephone company workers, postal service workers. They had all gone to college, but had the immigrant's understandably practical view of why you went to school, why you went to work, what things you could get from working. Among these aunts and uncles were readers of books and lovers of jazz and opera, and distantly, in past generations of my father's side of the family, there had been writers. But otherwise life was family, work, and church. Nothing here was a spur or a hindrance to my becoming a writer, and so I went ahead. Because I had gotten good grades all my life, everyone assumed I knew what I was doing with myself—even if, in the years I'm talking about, I always had my eyes averted, I was always a blur at the edges of gatherings and conversations.

And if I knew at some level that poetry was supposed to encompass the whole of who I was, it would be a very long time before I knew what that whole could include. Poetry was this paradox: it invited a largeness of self even as it foreclosed my ability to see myself as anything beyond the poet I desperately wanted to be. Poetry was emotion, it was intense language. It was a tradition, a canon. Poetry for me was a deeply literary identity before I saw it as a space where sociological, social, political, and other elements of identity also converged. Being an immigrant, being gay, having had an ambitious education, having grown up middle class in a liberal, diverse, culturally abundant part of the country—these were real enough facets in the lived life, the way categories of identity could be checked off on an application form. But in the poems I tried to write, these things were abstract, puzzling, barely available and acknowledged resources. I didn't know how these things could be expressed in my poems, nor did the poems and poets that I loved at the time give sanction for expressing them in the first place. A time would come when I realized those resources were there; but that was much later.

In the period I'm writing about, I went to work and looked at images all day. I read books, I wrote poems. I had an electric Brother typewriter. Towards the end of this period, I applied to M.F.A. programs, was accepted at a number of them, and decided to go to the University of Iowa. In those years my father was working the swing shift: he left for work at one o'clock in the afternoon and got back home at eleven each night. My mother worked in a downtown office building. My sister was studying to be a chef. I was living in my first apartment. My grandparents were still alive, except for my father's father, who had been an elementary schoolteacher in the Philippines, and who had died of a heart attack in his forties, before I was born. Because I thought I was in love with him, I wrote long letters to my best friend, who lived in Chicago. It was a safe way to be in love: a country was between us. Then, that spring, my maternal grandfather got sick, and then he was dying. At the end of the summer, his life ended. And that was when I left for Iowa, where my education as a poet would begin again.