

THE ORDINARY WEATHER

C.J. MARTIN

PART I

It's three months since my father and grandmother died in a tornado, and I'm reading David Brazil's *The Ordinary*. That formulation—*it's three mo.'s since and*—has become the implicit qualifier of every sentence now, so that, with even the most banal things, the entire life is tempered by that fact, which precedes even pleasure, as debris (now I think) must precede all form. Dad was a junker and, if he'd liked books of poems, I think he'd have liked David's book, the material conditions of which might be called a heuristics of junking, typified in the central poem here, "Economy." I want to talk about both—this loss and this book—I want to hold my grief up alongside my reading, because of (if nothing else) the sheer unwieldiness of it, the profanity of pleasure (reading itself, even) in the wake of that loss. I sense a growing impatience in me with the dailinesses, like poems, that would before have passed the time—a petulance in the face of days, a test of each thing down to the last minutiae against the heft of grief. So there's an unreasonableness in my reading that I hope David will forgive me for, that I can't quite mute.

9-8-13 — In a dream two nights ago, Michael Cross and Thom Donovan had come to visit Julia and me in Texas. I was walking with the two of them down some farm road when a cluster of funnel clouds formed over a house in the distance. When they touched down they looked like arms, a torso, head and all, and they ripped at the house while we watched unharmed. Later on in the dream, I missed our flight to some important reading.

In real life the storm had in fact been that precise: it landed on my grandmother's house where she was with my parents, but their house, just across the driveway, survived mostly unharmed. All it left of the first house was porches. They could have survived had they happened to be in any of the cars or in the other house when it hit. And they couldn't have known this. Fucking arbitrariness of the event—precise, but arbitrary.

7-28-13 — Reading “Kairos”: In the first section of David's book, “Kairos,” the poem's instance is roughly a month's time: each poem is dated, about a poem per day. I understand *Kairos* to mean, roughly, both ‘event’ and ‘weather.’ But the poem's a facsimile of the draft of the poem, so here event is blurred. There's an ‘after’ that—notes, strikethrough's, packing tape piecing together the worked-over sections, etc. The time of after-the-poem's-time, after the event. My model here is Ponge's *Making of the Pre*, and I know I spoke to David about this when I published a chapbook of part of “Economy.” But I know that eventually the whole book's a question (for me) of “Am I doing the right things with my time?” (“Economy”). So, reading “Kairos,” I want to posit another way to ask that question: “What's the weather?”

What's the weather when it marks our time?

And I like an allowance for Heisenberg, so I remember his formulation, “nature as exposed to our method of questioning,” and immediately qualify:

What's (our relation to) the weather?

Am I doing the right things in relation to what I understand as the weather?

: & if I read *past* the evidence of drafting, if I ignore it and attempt to read some ‘final’ form of the poem, as incident, then what?

: & if I stand back to survey the ‘whole’ work (as a picture of work, of time, of weather)—am I doing the right things in my reading?

: & if I attempt to reconstruct (silly?)—to read *all* the debris of the event, put them back in place, even, in some kind of relief effort?

(At the debris site the relief workers spent weeks sifting through the wreckage, climbing through brush and digging in the mud to retrieve anything they thought might be significant. We loved them for this, but what it looked like, at the end of

the day, was someone approaching you with a frisbee full of pocket change they'd found with a metal detector (this is literally what it looked like). My dad would have, had he survived able-bodied, been right there alongside them—The Man on the Dump—because he'd spent his life collecting the junked remnants of life (from estate sales, storage wars) and never selling them, hanging onto them for what we often wondered. He'd read *all* the debris.)

I don't draw this relation because it's acceptable, as metaphor, but because I feel myself at a loss, after loss, to read otherwise than to give in to a preoccupation of grief. So I don't mean to craft some theory of the storm of writing or reading, the disaster of it, but maybe to test it by holding it up next to the world, to real weather. A test, maybe, of whether there is in the debris of this writing a knowledge of that other debris, and of the impossible nature of the question of "right things" (when I wonder about reading and writing in the first place now, as right things).

Can't not ask, can't answer: What's the weather as exposed to our method of questioning? This is not a problem of the mediated, but of the irremediable (i.e., the answer won't change anything).

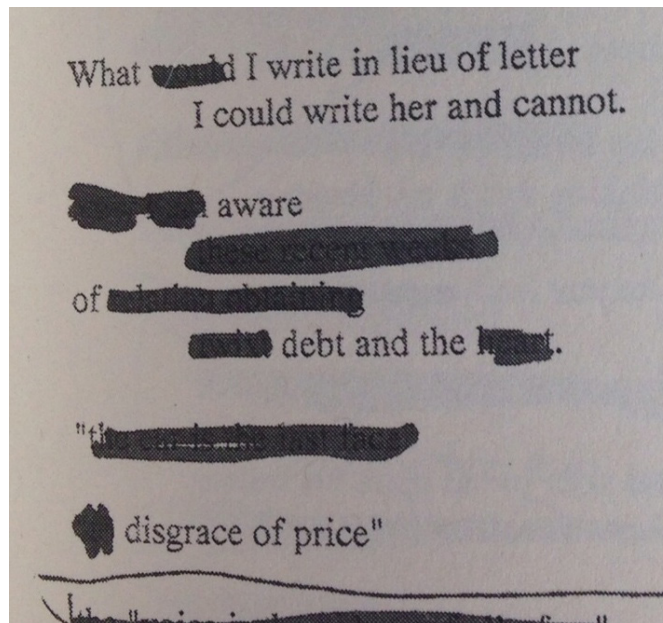
8-4-13 — Irremediable: distracted, preoccupied nature of *reading* (even before this). Cf. Blanchot on reader as greatest threat to reading: can't be read as a doctrine or corrective b/c can't *not* be true. Reading is always preoccupied. Even an ascetic practice begins with a world from which to withdraw, an unclear head.

PART II

8-23-13

ECONOMY: At the second joint funeral—my mother couldn't leave the hospital for the first, so we had two (times two)—the preacher offered re my father and grandmother: "I can sum up each of their lives in three words: they *cared*, they *shared*, and they *loved*."

That's 1.5 words per life, less than a word per eulogy. Fuck that guy for letting what he wanted to say prevent him from saying anything at all.



In "Election," the second section of *The Ordinary*, both "debt and the disgrace of price" are problems of the letter, of the attendant risks of offering your two cents. (My dad calling back: *don't let your mouth write a check your ass can't cash*.) One elects to get legible, to chime in or sum up (in however many words), or one elects to abstain, to keep quiet. Both are arguably just as risky, but Brazil's book deploys a third strategy: seen here as a kind of textual self-scarification, the blacked-out and crossed-out text reads less and less (to me) like facsimile or erasure. Instead, redaction here seems to want a critique of the effort to get legible in the first place, seems even to offer a kind of apology.

Letter turns to coin, but what if I shred the bill as I hand it over?

So, this writing “in lieu” of what could (but can’t) be written: a text that questions its own rationale for being here to begin with, its presumption to make an account. *Am I doing the right things (i.e.—are my own accounts in order)?* (& “what can they have meant?” XXXI)

8-24-13

Like Spicer’s Gwenivere in *The Holy Grail*: “I am sick of the invisible world and all its efforts to be visible.”¹ The complaint runs directly counter to the urge to say it aloud, and the poem happens somewhere in the interim.

8-25-13

I don’t think David’s drafts are included here in the interest of transparency, but rather, of *immediacy*. We’re shown the material, the poem-as-drafts, so that we can (hopefully) engage an event, so that we can get at some part of *working* that exceeds ‘the work.’

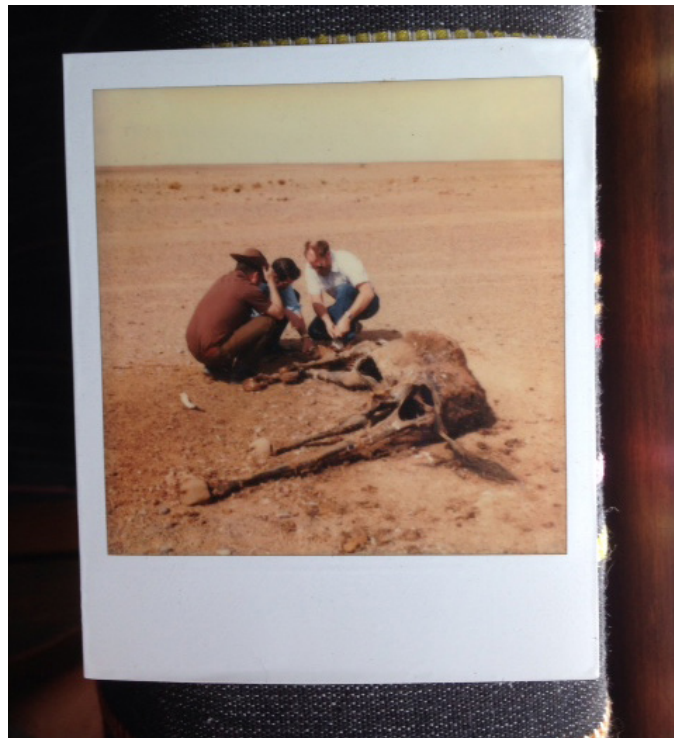
My grandfather died six years ago, and one of the upsets of the storm in May was that virtually none of his carpentry survived intact. The relief workers collected chunks of splintered wood (keep anything, we told them, that looks handmade), and much of it sits now in storage, will likely end up in the trash.

Seeing what the storm *didn’t* destroy beyond recognition was almost always a punch in the gut: like the hope chest my grandfather built for my grandmother, which I could precisely locate at the moment when the storm hit—it was between where my father sat on my grandmother’s bed and where my mother stood in the doorway to the room. In the hospital, my mother recounted the story compulsively whenever anyone new came to visit. What they’d done in the hour before, where they were when the entire house and its contents were tossed 300 yards. The chest probably isn’t repairable, but that it was still legible as itself in the aftermath took the wind out of me.

Other items surfaced that didn’t hurt as much to confront, but that still had the effect of making a story I received second-hand somehow suddenly immediate. My grandmother used to tell of a group date that got interrupted when my grandfather stopped the car to pull teeth from a dead camel. Working for El Paso Products (natural gas) had taken them to Algeria in the late seventies, and one evening my

grandparents were out with other couples from the gas plant when Grampa saw a camel carcass, and thus potentially unclaimed ivory (the teeth). It was one of my favorite (because most perverse) stories about their time abroad, and she always swore there was a photo but could never find it.

I was at the debris site helping my uncle sift through some of what had been recovered when I saw what remained of the wooden chest. Immediately after, I picked this up from a pile of photos, and felt like my grandmother was finishing the story (Grampa's the pompadour in the middle):

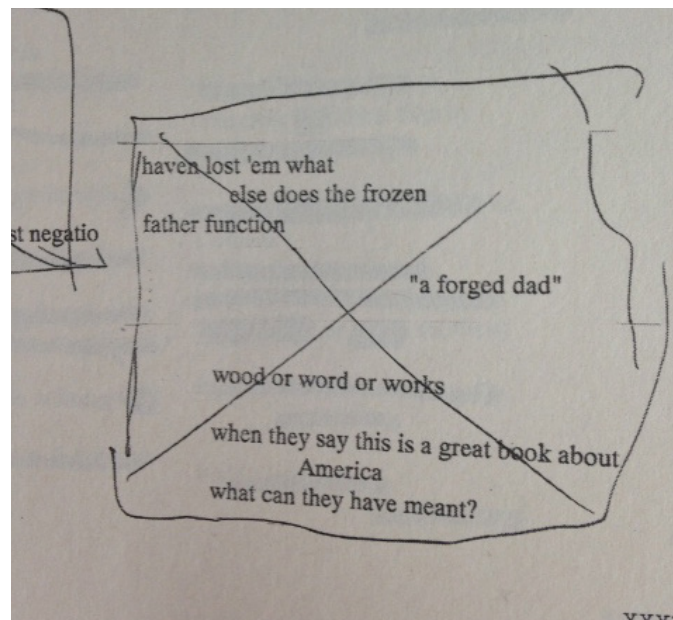


8-26-13

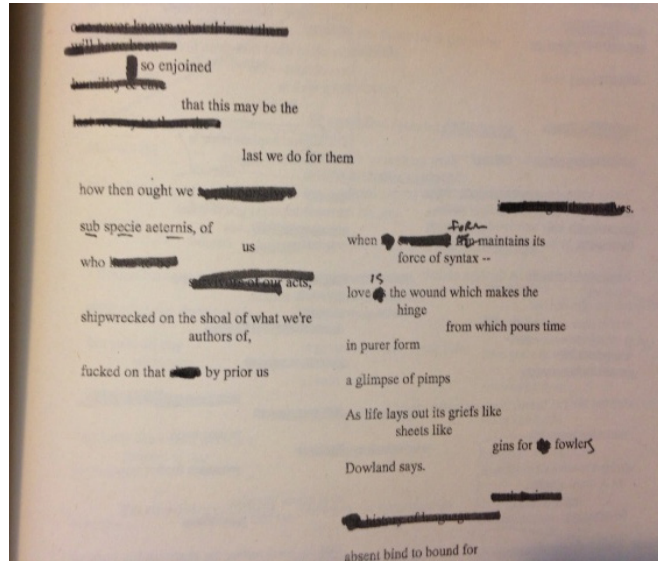
In *The Ordinary*, there are blacked-out passages, but there are also chunks of text that have been more hastily circled and slashed through. As a drafting gesture, this would seem to suggest complete elision, but included as such, *as* the poem, these passages remain almost entirely visible. A reader has a choice: read these still legible passages or move on. If this were a more sustained critical engagement, I think it'd be useful to examine the distinction between redaction and circle/slash,

if only to complicate this notion I'm nursing that "immediacy" is what this poem's after—an immediate, if not unmediated, experience of event. There's staging in David's book, but I don't think the book presumes to *be* the thing it's a facsimile of, nor is it simply an effort to put indeterminacy in play (though it's in a tradition of like efforts).

My take: there's what we elect (what we keep and discard, what we protect or raise up, what we ignore), and then there's weather (undemocratic). Subject to weather, our elections (in writing, in reading) are readily overturned. There are moments in David's book when I feel myself exposed to the elements:



PART III



9-2-13

From "Election": "Love is the wound which makes the hinge from which pours time in purer form."

9-3-13

Conversation w/Julia while walking around North Loop two nights ago: per David's "Kairos," and per actual weather—and probably per Spicer—a process shaped on the writing event as an interval of time. So drafting/writing that takes shape and dissipates—not contra revision but against the push to arrive at some final form (a poem *shaped* as such, a book, etc., recognizable as such in its shape). Against the willed shape or gesture. Writing as an interval that punctuates thought, language, speech, or art as a disaster punctuates a life. (So writing as punctuating a life.)

Also, yesterday, listening to Grenier/Ratcliffe talks and feeling less in common with the daily practice of the latter now, after my having set out on a slow version (monthly) last year. Or at least aware of a new proclivity in me toward some more dramatic interval than dailiness, as an instigation to work. Or, in David's

formulation, “Love” as “wound” or cleft that opens onto “time in purer form.” A process shaped on *that* hinge, *that* opening.

9-4-13

Inasmuch as first responders annotate a disaster site—drafting from the unoccupied to the expired or still hanging on—they literally offer the first response.



From what I could gather, there wasn't much to their shorthand—a square with an X in it when a structure had been cleared (i.e., no bodies inside) and elsewhere, the count of those who'd perished on site (“1 D.O.S.”). All of which spray painted large on cars and sides of houses—as visible a gloss as possible on any structure likely to have been used as shelter during the storm.

Tracing this weird, almost surgical itinerary, the first responders' marginalia are *inextricable* to me now from David's strike-throughs—though I'd pry them apart if I could, and I think I probably should. The one above I attempted (in my panic) to remove with sandpaper, and now it's permanently installed on the window of my dad's (now my) Silverado.

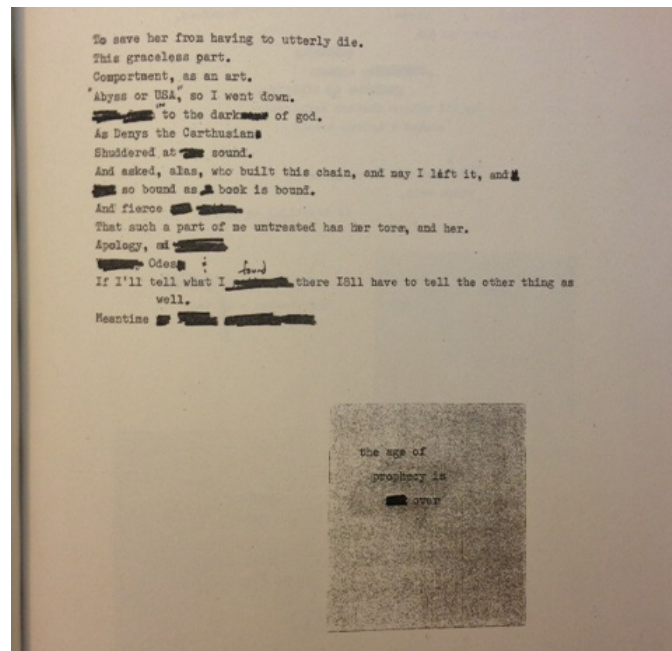
9-5-13

Not after an open form, but a form opening, forms of opening. That hinge.

9-10-13

A book confronting the problem of “If I’ll tell what I found there I’ll have to tell that other thing as well” (LXXXV).

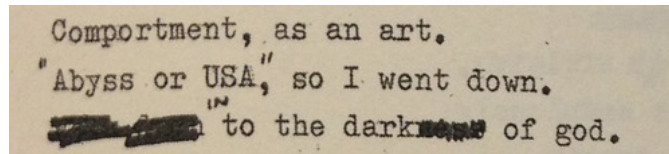
In “Descort,” one of the previously self-published Xeroxed chapbooks featured in *The Ordinary*, debris itself is a kind of nonce form. Each page features a Xerox of typed text with strike-throughs and a square typed scrap:



This page I can’t quite shake. There’s something of guilt or worry in the concern about telling “that other thing,” but I also recognize it as naming an anxiety about cohesive telling, so that “what I found” and “that other thing” would stand for something like *debris* and *the impossibility of organizing the report about the debris*. Or “matter and its conditions for being otherwise” (Elizabeth Grosz). Or maybe *form* and *comportment*. In Susan Gevirtz’s “Belief’s Afterimage: The Recent Work of Barbara Guest,” she offers “comportment” as a useful alternative to “poetics”:

A comportment toward language, the mystery. A practice of approach, that is, of writing “which expresses ‘yes’ and at the same time ‘no,’ [named] by an old word, releasement toward things.” The release of meaning to its own life beyond what is meant “Moves outside the text into the dark under text...”²

In particular, the idea that “the release of meaning to its own life” is a *downward* momentum—Guest’s “dark under text”—is something that resonates with “comportment” in David’s poem, which itself is “an art”:



Comportment, as an art.
"Abyss or USA," so I went down.
~~to the dark~~ to the dark... of god.

Walking the path from my grandmother’s house to the area where the house landed, I often felt myself becoming somehow heavier. Not just my steps, but my whole person sagged under whatever weight, dug in like my center of gravity was a foot below the surface of the ground. The path went from the evacuated footprint of house and shed to their strewn remnants. Someone had pointed out for my brother the spot where my family landed, which was where I’d inevitably wind up. (Under the weight of meaning released to its own life? Gone under, *with* meaning?)

In the wake of what happened to my family, we’ve all (at some point) attempted to thread a narrative through the events that would be capable of recovering sense in what happened. In a way, it’s a kind of lifeboat gesture—not that there’s a way out, but (smaller goal) that there might, in the right narrative, be a way to stay afloat.

One story goes that my dad saved my mother’s life by telling her to hold onto the doorframe, which she did. This one, by the time it got to the reporters, became the overwrought lead-in to the article on my dad and grandma in the local paper: “Tommy Joe Martin would probably be alive today if he had been a more self-centered person.” (Fending for himself most certainly wouldn’t have saved him from a tornado touching down on the house he was in.)

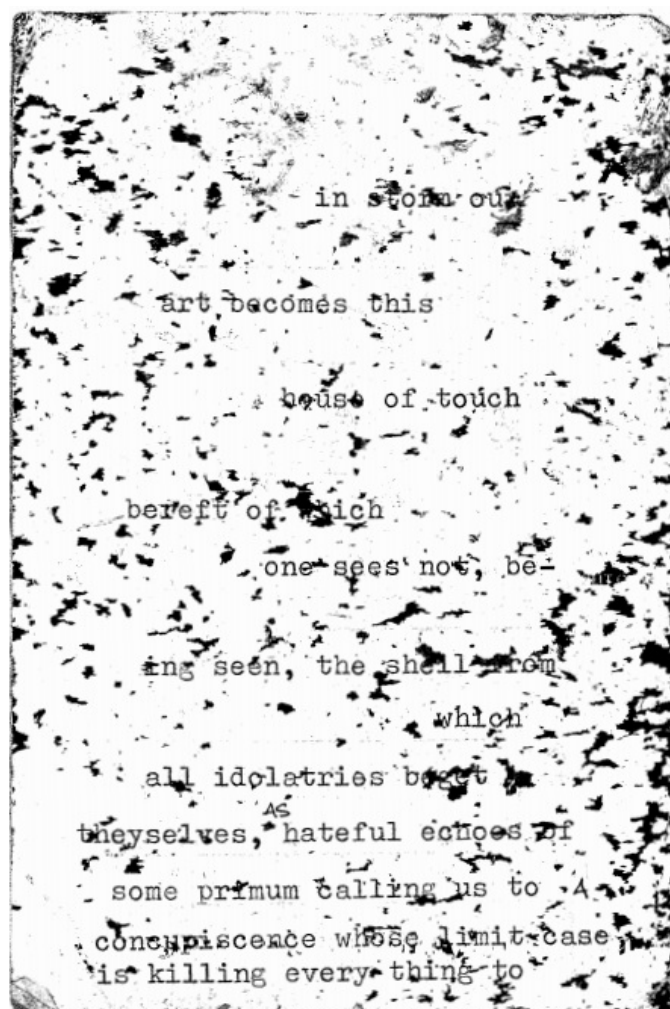
And there were the efforts to pin down a timeline that would show the storm hitting *before* the emergency siren went off. It’s literally across the street from my parents’ house, and the neighbors, who helped us look for both the contents of the house and someone to blame for their dispersal, say it went off too late.

Such efforts at sense attempt to tamp down questions that seem to insist on darker meanings: like the question, for my mother, of whether my father knew, in the last moments before they were thrown, what was about to happen—whether it was resignation in him that made him just sit down on my grandmother’s bed—and what she’s supposed to *do* with that image.

Or for those of us who could easily have been at the houses that night, the question of what that would have mattered. Julia and I, along with two of my mother’s siblings, had visited days before for Mother’s Day, and any of us could have stayed on until Wednesday (we’d all considered it, if memory serves). My dad’s sister and her husband had planned to come visit my parents on the night of the storm, but stayed home once they saw the weather forecast. Confronting the question of what might have been different is something I think we’ve all wrestled with, despite the likelihood that *more* people would have meant little more than *more people gone*.

The notion of “a releasement toward things” or “the release of meaning to its own life beyond what is meant”—of *comportment*, as portable to the context of grief, as a potential aid in finding a relation to meaning in the aftermath—I want to think that I can *practice* this. That I can work at “releasement toward.” If I say that I *will* work at it, I’m probably also saying I’ll *fail* at the work. Or if it’s about releasing *control* of meaning, maybe *comportment* is less a strategy than a means of surrender.

PART IV



“Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?”

—Wallace Stevens, “Auroras of Autumn”

Stevens’ question from “Auroras of Autumn”—which, I told my brother as we walked down the aisle to the viewing at the first funeral, is a poem about the *indifference of weather*—seems like some strange cousin to David’s question in “Economy” about “doing the right things with my time.” There’s an ambivalence in David’s poem (back of exuberance, back of activism) as to what possible outcome can be expected from a work of poetry, and I think it’s this ambivalence that ultimately justifies the project of defining or interrogating ECONOMY *in precisely a book of poems* instead of or prior to, say, Oscar Grant Plaza. David’s poem

precedes, chronologically, much of Occupy. It opens onto Occupy, is perhaps a first report, in poetry, of the milieu or nascence of that movement(s).

What I mean is: it's precisely in poem-work, with all its thrown wrenches—where “art becomes this house of touch” NOT RHETORIC & NOT YET DIRECT ACTION—precisely here that the question of economy can be hazarded without recourse to consensus-toward-movement—& where the *question* of will it have mattered (or will we be strung up anyway) can nonetheless land with the force of an inexorable *momentum* (of fucking proceeding regardless). I remember David's poem as calling back to the Arab Spring & I think of it, now, alongside poems like Herman Melville's “The Portent”—a kind of herald.

10-4-13

Meaning, it isn't really a question of *whether* to be doing these poems, now, or if it is, it's a late question & speaks to its own too-lateness as much as anything else:

attempts to cognize it ? It
requires grasping & ~~presenting~~ presenting
a representation, at just the moment when
my thought around what representation is is
~~in~~ undergoing a sea change. Because I am

In William Carlos Williams' 1939 essay, “Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist”—where he offers a sometimes useful but more often aggravating set of claims about art's historical immanence, its permanence—he lights out from a series of questions that would seem to have some proximity to David's concerns (but don't):

WHAT SHOULD THE artist be today? What must he be? What
can he do? To what purpose? What does he effect? How
does he function? What enters into it? The economic, the
sociological: how is he affected? How does his being a man
or a woman, one of a certain race, an American enter into it?

Williams' individualistic hero-artist (to sum up) stages a resistance to *weather* (read 'history') by adopting formal strategies that circumvent the prevailing winds, so to 'survive.' But in David's formulation, "right things" are done "*with my time*" (emphasis mine). Representation in "Economy" isn't a question that can be safely situated as belonging to poetics or to art (*Is The Artist doing the right things in relation to historical time?*), and it isn't strictly a formal question (*Am I doing the right things with my line?*)—it's a question of DOING-WITH (i.e., in concert).

So, not poems *against* the weather, but (like everything else) *subject* to it. Not poets charged with representation, but people, gulping after it, in commons.



How the WCW model fucks me:

In a dream last week, I walked out onto the screened-in back porch of my grandmother's house (one of the last things my mother remembers from when the tornado hit is that "the porch came inside"). My grandfather sat looking out in the direction of where the house landed, but in the dream everything was intact. I approached and put my hand on his shoulder (sense memory in the dream of touching his sturdy frame & feeling the bones of his shoulders, etc.—in life). We were laughing in the dream, and when he said to me, "YOU COULD HAVE CHANGED EVERYTHING," we laughed even harder. My brother might have been there.

On waking, this dream renewed the profoundest sadness in me, even though I know—or tell myself I know—that the dream's thinking, or my waking thought, is toxic.



What happens when thought about representation undergoes a sea change:

My mother's recovery was crowd-sourced, as were the funerals. Because she had no medical insurance, we knew that we couldn't afford either, so when a friend of my mother's set up a donation account at a local bank & a friend of Julia's set one up online, I sent word to everyone in my address book. In addition to people who already knew my family, so many poets sent money, & family and friends of those poets. A benefit chapbook was compiled, but by the time it had been edited and assembled, my mother had received so much support that she requested the funds be donated (in my father's name) to Poets in Need. & I'm now convinced, and filled with gratitude, that there are communities of poets DOING-WITH their time, not absenting themselves from it.

10-5-13

Cf. Williams' story of George Washington's going into the woods of open formation & Brazil's home economics of "the junked house" (or the house disintegrating):

Braddock in Pennsylvania was advancing down a narrow, wooded road with his men in close formation. They were among the finest troops in the world. Suddenly being picked off panic-stricken from behind trees, they stampeded to the rear until Washington—whose advice had been earlier put to scorn—sick as he was, grabbed a horse, rode up and got his Americans out among the trees to fight the enemy at its own game. He gave each man his liberty, under orders, to look out for himself in open formation. The result was to save the day—to whatever extent it could be saved.

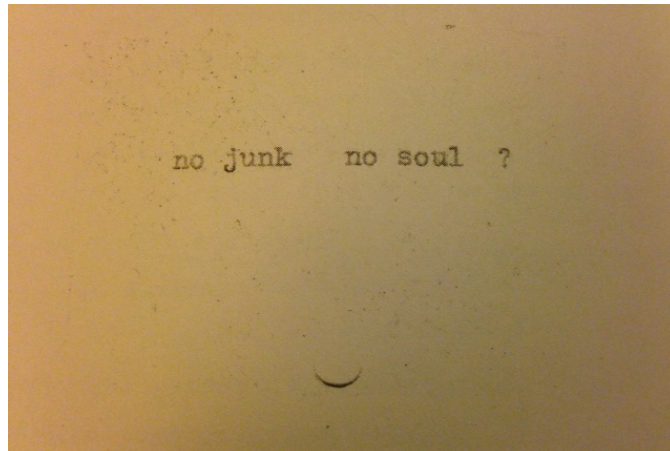
In WCW's parable about Washington, which quickly charges onward to talk of Whitman's poetic form, he opts for open form as a strategy that does little more than reify the war effort (on the heels, we might add, of a double theft—of land, of strategy). Washington goes into the woods to *take* the woods. In WCW's bleak but misleading formulation: "Disperse and survive."

By 2011, we have as our inheritance that we find ourselves in the thick of a socio-economic wilderness, and so these movements that put on homelessness as a critical countenance, that squat in homes to defend domestic life from abstract accumulations of wealth, and that block harbors to retune the very project of "home management." The house is "junked" because uncovered to be "the 'hidden abode of production'":

all scraps I gather here to make a holy
name of your profession, your
vocation and the sign, to
be redeemed at this last strand of the house of
its peculiar flowthru, the junked house,
the new bridge being built alongside the
one that is unsafe and we're still on. It
was not us that gave ourselves the power to make our
weapons efficacious, the
"hidden ~~abode~~ ~~of~~ abode of ~~the~~ production" an
infernal or an it may be diviner council.

For me, David's question isn't about which woods is ours, but rather, *how go into a woods w/o possessing it*. I understand "Economy" as an effort to work out survival against not an enemy but the very conflict that pits one person (*the* person) against systems (personified).

PART V



11/10-11/19/13

Dear DB—

Whether one has soul or no (reading soul in the sense of ‘man, that cat’s got soul’—or maybe reading the former as breadcrumb if I’m on the latter’s case), the junk washes up regardless.

Something’s got the best of me & I guess I’m trailing—even before signing—off. But let me leave some junk w/you first:



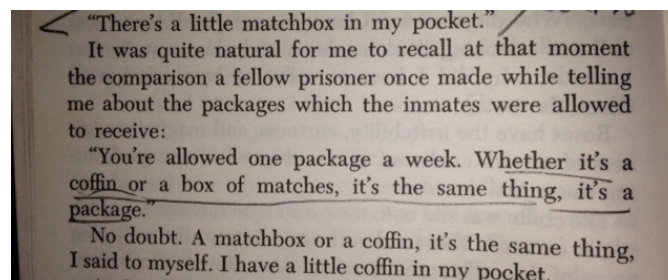
It's not quite a silver spoon ... Maybe there's a junk joke in this one—it was a gift from my uncle to my dad, on my getting born, who were already estranged and would get even more distant: I only met him once as a kid & not again until all these years later, at the hospital after my dad's death. He's the older brother, always had much more money-junk (flew his own plane to the funeral, etc.). They didn't get along much. Put his hand on my shoulder at the hospital & said, "I'm sorry about your old man, kid." Seemed broken, kind even. Awkward. Full of regret.

So now I inherit the junk joke & some other junk:



My brother found this key at the debris site, picked it up & handed it over at the hospital. I carried it in my pocket for about a month afterwards. One of hundreds of keys my dad never threw away. Would have opened a trailer at a rig site, I think. Dad was a rough-neck, sometimes a driller (so never quite management, always busting his hump), so this would be the key to a sleeper or something, a break room.

As soon as I had it in hand I pocketed it & thought of Genet's matchbox coffin in *Funeral Rites*:



& after a summer of sifting, sorting, trashing (repeat, repeat—& more to come), I
reread your poems in light of all this junk & think about value—about the kinds of
value I'm unwilling to discard—& I keep reaching for this: *these little acts of salvage*
as touch, as what value's to be had or held in that daily sift, funereal or not—

Signing off, w/a little kairos in my pocket...

Your friend,
CJ

Notes

1. Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press: 2008), 342.
2. Susan Gevirtz, *Coming Events* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2013), 110; quoting Heidegger and Guest, respectively.

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