

CHRISTINE ANNE STEWART / The Urging Surface

Before we were narrative, we were boots and vertigo. (Majzels 18b)

I read *The Good Bacteria* as an urgent and peripheral articulation of surface. Its view is horizontal, ranging over planes of shifting exteriors. Its subjects, shining and not shining, each anticipating an encounter, moving towards (in desire) and away (in ruination) from the catastrophic, claustrophobic, ebullient, frayed edges of being, from the endless stuff that makes us, devours us. Here, “[c]orpus meum and interior intimo meo . . . the subject is its exteriority and its excessiveness: its infinite exposition” (Nancy 42).

Meaning, its moat and its ruin. Nothing unusual.

*He who has kissed
a leaf*

*need look no further—
I ascend*

*through
a canopy of leaves*

*and at the same time
I descend*

*for I do nothing
unusual . . .*

—W. C. Williams, *Spring and All*, 1923 (*The Good Bacteria* 5)

To “do nothing unusual.” Kiss a leaf. Engage surface with surface: an oscular act. A non-teleological physics, a field of bodies finding no final place.

*I saw him coming down the street in the sunshine
eating an apple he'd bought at the grocery store.
The sea, the sea
glinted and humped behind him
devoid of any but anchored boats (18)*

The street, the man, the light, the apple: not significant except each in its particularity and of itself (and its exteriors).

Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody (Zukofsky 12).

devoid of any but anchored boats

The space in “devoid” echoes in “of” evoking the space and sound of *o* as it runs through the *anchored boats*. The word void (in devoid) doubles the ruin. The repeated “a” in *any* and *anchored*, situates, locates, hooks a second of sound—an anchoring of nothing: usual aural striking.

“[F]or the ears drink in the air which has been set into motion by other bodies” (Vico 706).

The cadence of a work sets the space of a page into motion by word bodies: the ears drink in the rhythms of their relations.¹ Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness (Zukofsky 12).

¹ Thesen identifies Robert Bringhurst’s *A Story As Sharp As A Knife* as the inspiration for the cadences in the first section of poems, and thus evokes the Haida stories that Bringhurst translates—ones that attend to the surfaces of the world in precise and rippling ways. While the Haida stories attend to particular past, present and future necessities, the cadences in “The Good Bacteria” evoke for me the urgent need in North America to increase attentiveness to aboriginal philosophical, religious, cosmological frameworks that formed outside of the Western European context. This urgency also necessitates the acknowledgment of the complex and problematic impact of Bringhurst’s translations within a contemporary aboriginal context.

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“The order of all poetry is to approach a state of music...” (Zukofsky 18)

Attending to the music of words attends to the surface and the sonics of the letter on its page. The visual corresponds graphically to the acoustics. There is music to the structure and ink of exteriors.

“The experience of being within an outside.” (Agamben 69)

Bacteria ghosts are cells with their DNA removed, used to fool and fight death.

Cells without design, used in the scientific search for purity, disease-free immortality. No more elegies.

No more bloody ghazals! one ghost shouted to another. (Thesen 11)

Eating, driving, bridges, blasted cells for microbiological experiments. The traffic. The consumption.

In the morning they ate again, and took their penicillin pills. (11)

You can try penicillin to clean things up, but that just speeds us towards another end, another stillness: a cleaner death.

It killed all the bacteria, good and bad, like death or God.

Though death, being a matter of bacteria, is also life. (11)

Is this writing *anti anti-bacterial*? Populating, coating the linings and layers of the reading gut? Illuminating the life of the aspect?

It was easier to walk to Kamloops. (11)

The traffic of technology is teleological. Or it would like to think it is.

*He lugged his own laptop; it was easier that way.
On his lap sat the known universe.
When he sat down, the known universe sat in his lap. (11)*

The known universe sat on his lap. He owned the known when he sat it sat
on his lap. What is the chain of events at the end of which sits a laptop? Is the
laptop a new phallus? Just wondering.

*A known ghost. The trees burned all the way to the sky.
His stomach burned when he took the penicillin. (11)*

Penicillin, or fire, or titanium.

*She pressed upon the part of her mind
that was titanium, Queen of Faeries. (12)*

The lines touch, are touched and touching on all sides—oscular (pressing
stomachs against fire, metal against story, plates against brain). The lines
have an immediate logic. And the logics of these relations keep a world (mo-
mentarily) whole within a particular cadence.

We drink the air with our ears that (our air and our ears) have been set
into motion by other bodies.

And this post-bacterial world is ours—wherein the “real” is cleansed:
“...like a movie / or a corpse” (22). The fire in Kamloops is fallout from the
real we have made (too clean, too bare, too hot). In the destruction the
strange scaffoldings are visible: “an island kitchen, and killer ensuite” (22). In
the hollow left by the burned (murdered and murdering) “killer ensuite,” the
mind reaches across desperate for new relations: it finds catastrophe.

In the dream we had, a mountain fell down.

I was calling the name of my son. (22)

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Frances Boldereff, Charles Olson's lover, a driving force in his writing. La Motz. A woman of many names.² A "Holy Experiment" focuses on Frances' funeral, or rather it does nothing of the kind. The periphereic is maintained. The poem, in part, takes place during the time of Frances' funeral, in Jerry Geiger's house (a friend of Boldereff), after the funeral. The death, the life of Boldereff, is noted on its rim, on the edge of an occasion. No glance is given to the centre, only the corners are illuminated: the cider, the homemade medicines ("reddish-brown & / dark green" [26]). This piece displays what Thesen calls, in a reference to Olson, "a [particular] stance toward reality" (xvi). "[H]abit[s] of thought being also habits of action" (xvi). Or habits of seeing. The subject is not central but disparate—extending into the peripheries, the exteriors of the objects that surround, entangle, and encounter. The subject becomes one of the many things and their narratives: "Science magazines in stacks / ... kitchen table, radio antennas / at several different angles..." (27). The embarrassment of returning for "tickets and passport" (28). We are moving with the present into the past that we have already (never) left behind. The Susquehanna: "pouring... new to my tongue" (25). William Penn. The purple car: "Galanta" (29). The afternoon, "frightened, like a commercial for insurance" (29). And there alongside, Frances is mentioned in a slight slant way—"ashes... beneath a fresh pile of dirt" (25). Looking at the moon, without a decent hairbrush. Frances. Mattering on the edges, materializing in the anticipation of an encounter.

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In "Relative to History," subjects as objects range in an particulate architecture of shoes, nostalgia, homunculus, time, Sweet Marie, hair, grief, Scratch and Win, fire, bills, cigarettes, sky, mist. They are all that that comprise us: "You are abducted by aliens from outer space / who remove the steel pin from your hip and the silver hoop / from your sidekick's left earlobe." (61). We are our carapaces, hinged, pinned—not whole. Absurd and mundane. Where we alight manifests meaning and being. The matter,

² Thesen edited Boldereff and Olson's correspondences with Ralph Maude: *Charles Olson and Frances Boldereff: A Modern Correspondence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1999).

"those brown Prada shoes" (36), is fragile, and the relation (connection) is questionable: "the green and red leaves appliquéd" (36). Hamlet holds the skull of Yorrick in a contemplation of existence. Here, consider shoes: expensive glued shoes (the desire, horror, and embarrassment of being). Infinity abates. Existence is bared. In the excess choices are made. We desire the exteriors and we are exteriorized, mortalized, com-postable, absurd, aghast: the "cowlick," "the skull / skyll," "shorn and bare, / aghast under the coffin lid" (36).

But it is not over (ever). The text is inexhaustible, the reader "turn[s] on embroglied pivot" (Robertson ll. 549).

I noticed everything— (59)

Our proximity, the excessiveness of the uncontainable contained which grazes our surfaces, is desire (Levinas 58): "Legion are the myths of springtime, more / legion myths of springtime's cusp with winter" (Thesen 48). The subject's relation to itself, to springtime's cusp, to its surroundings, is fragile and ecstatic. Subjectivity is the result of a compelled upsurging of the subject's exteriority. This exteriority is comprised in the subject's extended edges alongside which it greets the world: "[t]hrough the blue / recycling bags you can see the news / of yesterday, the smeared faces, / juice boxes, sheets of instructions" (40). The repeated daily longings of the subject to note, to relate, to encounter allows the un-free subject moments of astonishment and address:

*Suddenly through trees ahead
a gleam of blue, the lake! (55)*

But the gleam is no lake:

*Nope. A blue tin roof.
Actually
a blue awning.*

*Actually the blue and white striped
awning over the back patio
of the Creekside Pub and Rib House—*

domicile and breathing cage... (55)

Only awning, patio, and Rib House: “*domicile and breathing cage*” (55). The awning dims the view. Exteriors deny depth; humour ducks the serious. The inexplicable human world, the circumferences of the integumental body: we are not free. The destination is meat, sucked bones, entrapment, sauce. And yet, the subject remains fascinated with itself, its imprisonment, its unceasing (ludicrous) relations:

“His face behind the screen door smooth and handsome, / his hair is grey and so is his moustache. Behind his right ear / he displays a card with his face on it: Mr. Love.” (52)

Production based in a desire that no satisfaction can abate: “*Things come up on the screen in throbbing turquoise... Their cards throbbed in slots*” (57). These are the veneers we know: smooth and plastic (inane, obscene), extending the planes and spaces of our desire.

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The Fire

“[T]hreaded / even the largest needle / I tremble and miss the eye.” (76)

Sew while Kamloops is burning: “*helicopters above the roof*” (77).

Sew and “a barker’s booth / at the circus where you throw softballs / at the passing ducks...” (78). Terror and the materials of diversion, the odd banal associations the mind makes when the world ends:

“and you really want to win the large pink jaguar.” (78)

As the burning bleeds—“*red resin plasma*” (82)—the subject dissipates into the blasted ashes of its surroundings:

extinct matchsticks leaning
tip to tip (84)

On the charred edges we reread a beginning and then the elegies of its ruin. And “Weeping Willow” is an elegy, to Angela. Even here (or most poignantly here) the expectation of depth is thwarted. The exteriors of death, of the narrator, of Angela and the reader are revealed. The desired exquisite surface does not fulfill desire; it deepens it. There is a catharsis in the Aristotelian sense, a collective action of mourning, in this reading: “*Thinking pours from her hair, / head-to-toe silk on the way to the car, / fresh cigarette in ivory holder / clenched to one side / as she reached back into coat arms— / perfume floating, rainy day, time to go*” (98).

The small, daily, fragile phrase, “time to go.” The subjects and their textures dissolve. There is no transcendent progression toward a final destination; there is no decline to meaninglessness, there is no cure—only carefully noted movements, bodies moving aghast toward endings and longing toward beginning. “Angela” the speaker laments, “*I can’t write love poems.*” “*That’s alright, she says*” (97). And it is all right. And these are love poems.

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