

Smoke and Mirrors



Bruce Schauble

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For MBLW



*...You that see now with your own eyes
all that there is as you suppose
though I could stare through broken glass
and show you where the morning goes
though I could follow to their close
the sparks of an exploding species
and see where the world ends in ice
I would not know where Maoli is*

- W. S. Merwin

Preface

A poem is a box, a thing, to put other things in. For safe keeping...

— Marianne Boruch

One of the enduring attractions of the sonnet is that at fourteen lines it's long enough that you can sink your teeth into a subject, but it's short enough to demand a certain amount of compression and attentiveness to each syllable. It's also very versatile in terms of the structural possibilities it presents, familiar to anyone who had to endure high school English: *Octave and sestet. Three quatrains and a couplet. Seven and seven. Five and five and two.* And the history of the sonnet in English is rich with examples of poets who just made up their own patterns within the fourteen-line constraint.

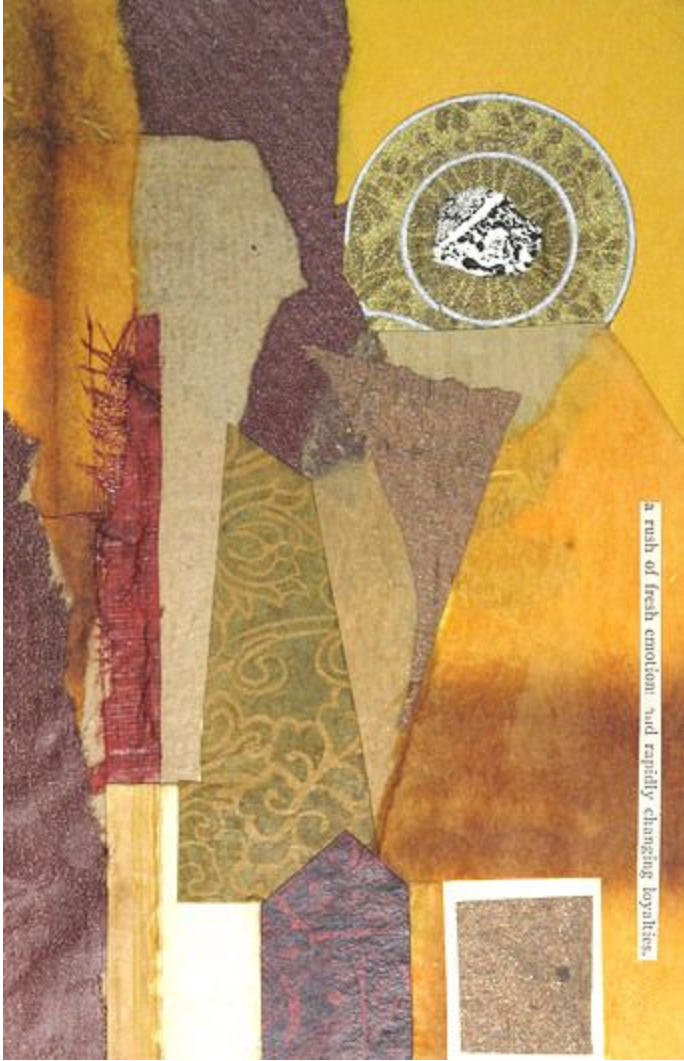
Over the last year or so something like 80 or 90 percent of the poems I've attempted to write have turned out to be sonnets, at least sonnet-ish. (While I sometimes like to work with strict iambics and traditional rhyme schemes, more often I don't.) It's not like I started out any of these poems with the *intention* to write a sonnet. One of the challenges in writing any poem is to open a topic, develop it, and then find a way to bring it to a conclusion. For me, that sequence often results in a piece of writing which is in the neighborhood of 14 lines anyway, and thinking of it as a sonnet provides me decision points for revision: *I need to cut two lines. I need to add a line and a half. That line is too long. That line is too short.* This is of course one of the reasons that poets choose to work in forms in the first place: the form gives you something to work against; it forces you as a writer to come up with something just slightly—or maybe completely—different than what you might have said if you were just spooling out words as they came to you. It gives you the opportunity to surprise yourself.

Smoke and Mirrors is divided into two sections, *Operatics* and *Ars Poetica*. It is not an accident that the titles are anagrams of one another. Nor is an accident that each of the sections contains 14 poems of 14 lines each. Nor that the ink drawings on the front and back covers are in a kind of dialogue with one another. I was interested in symmetries, both to echo the title of the collection, and to provide some thematic reinforcement. "Smoke and mirrors" is a traditional phrase used to refer to the methods of the illusionist or magician. But the words can be taken individually as well, and each carries literal and symbolic freight. There are times, when my writing or artwork is going well, that something inexplicable occurs that comes from another place. Magic, if you will.

- RBS

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Operatics



a rush of fresh emotion and rapidly changing loyalties.

Encounter

A boy sits on a rock in the woods. He has come to watch the pond where he can sometimes pick out the eyes of a frog staring at him from beneath the blanket of algae, or a turtle sunning himself on a branch. Once, after sitting a very long time, he caught sight out the corner of his eye of a movement near the water's edge, and moving his eyes without moving his head he saw a deer, a doe, which at the same moment saw him and froze, one leg in the air, and then after a few moments in which neither of them seemed to breathe, she slowly lowered her head to the water and drank. Finished, she looked back in his direction, turned, and leapt into the underbrush.

Autumn Early Afternoon

Sky bright blue but only where
the encroaching clouds have not yet
taken over. Trees releasing golden
leaves into the chilly air. Crows doing
what crows do: swooping, cawing,
harrying whatever hawks intrude
upon their domain. Something
in the air: a warning, a threat,
questions left unstated. What
did you expect? What do you
want? What reason do you have
to stay, to go, to care one way
or another? The sun, for a moment,
breaking through. The leaves on fire.

Yearlings

My mother and I stood by the barn watching the yearlings chase each other in the paddock, nipping at each other's necks, kicking out at random, withers glistening in the morning sun.

I took my knife from my pocket, sliced the twine on a bale of hay, tossed a few armfuls over the fence. Wheeling, they charged over, and, stamping and snorting, snatched great mouthfuls, grinding the alfalfa into green paste in their mouths. I reached through the fence to retrieve a piece of straw from the bay's mane.

Doc Morgan will be here at ten, she said. They'll need their shots before the auction. Looking down, I saw a branch knocked loose during last night's windstorm. I picked it up, broke it into pieces, and hurled them into the weeds beside the corncrib. From the valley came the groan of the schoolbus making its way up the hill.

Okay then, I said, and walked down to the road to wait.

Quarter to Twelve

A strident sun overseeing what might
be desert, what might be sea. Rocks
just here; on the horizon, perhaps, hills.
Something breaking up in the middle
(where it all began, where it always
begins): buckthorn bursting into bloom,
grackles harassing wrens, an axe
thrown at the attacking apparitions.
Over on the right, a building? A book-
case? A mirror? All of the above?
The whole surrounded by a wall:
contents under pressure. The light
doing its definitive work. The day
nearly over, or just about to begin.

Intersection

Four way stop at Maple and Main. Betty's Better Donuts:
red and white awnings, wrought-iron tables and chairs.
Round-topped blue post office box by the door. Lonely-
looking dog on a leash. Next door, two rundown houses,
porches caved in, ivy tendrils climbing the walls,
growing around and into the wheels of a rusted tricycle.
In the next lot, bounded by barbed wire, a swaybacked
bay mare swishes her tail, nibbles at weeds. In the oaks,
three crows stare off into the fog just starting to burn off.
Across the street, at the playground, two mothers sitting
side by side on a bench watching their kids chase each other
around the jungle gym. Up above the clouds, a white needle
pulling thread: vapor trail of a jet to high up to see. Me,
I'm looking out the window of the bus pulling out for Ames.

Waiting

Swabbing the decks. Mending nets. Sewing patches on torn sails. Polishing the brass fittings along the rail. Ship at anchor under still black clouds. Clusters of seagulls screech in the rigging, cruise over the dark water in search of scraps. The captain has gone ashore, for how long no one knows. Ripples of water lapping at the hull. Smell of salt water and rotting seaweed. The beach by the pier deserted but for two homeless men in skull caps warming their hands over a driftwood fire. The storefronts along the boardwalk shuttered, the streets empty. The flag in the town square limp against the pole. Distant ringing of bells from the churchtower somewhere near the hills. On the afterdeck men sit and stare out to sea, the first mate whistling as he sharpens his knife.

Crow

My duty: to keep watch, alert for dangers of any kind—
hunter, hawk, coyote—and warn my tribe in the event
of any unexpected intrusion. My pleasure: to soar,
To swoop, to fly from treetop to steeple to telephone
wire, to drop softly to the ground and peck out
the soft spots in whatever animal has met his fate
in the forest or along the roads the humans have laid
over all the world. Sometimes my tribe is summoned
to congregate, to gather by the thousands and confer
in the branches of whatever tall tree will support our
numbers. And woe to the owl that trespasses here:
he will be harried, he will be abused, he will be driven
from his roost and into exile far from the shadows
he was foolish enough to think would keep him safe.

Rules of Thumb

A twist, a turn a revolution, a relentless unrepentant investigation. Kitchen sink, a bottle of ink, odd abrupt circumlocutions. Oatmeal and honey. Yet another squandered opportunity. Hammer and nails. Passing thoughts: a flock of crows, a ladder, a flag unfurled. Questions no one wants to ask. Bottle of wine, scrap of paper, wisp of smoke. Three good reasons. Glint of sunlight on lake-water. Shards. Shriveled heads. Shadows on the side of the mountain. A nod, a wink, a shrug. Dead letters. Obsidian arrowheads. Forlorn hopes. Isocetes triangles. Dangling participles. Red sun rising over the bay.

Fever Dream

Enter reluctant disparities in keen-edged thwarted restorations, relentless gravel and rock grinding, storm-wind caterwaul, pellets of rain pounding down, what we never expected, after cross-stitched emendations, to be cast again back into hard weather, notions ridiculous and scorned actualized, weaponized, hard now at work, seething, stamping, spewing bits of bone and hunks of flesh, smoke and stench roiling, rivers of gravity-based black ink everywhere, recoiling wretched malodorous eddies swirling, swallowing whatever you make of them and spewing it back out on blacktop do you remember what you thought you had got before it all exploded and the smoke came rolling down from the hills and choked your eyes.

Take That

The light aggressive, intrusive, squinting
a stratagem, but only against perhaps a half
of what might effectively be blocked. Then
that noise, no longer white but burgeoning,
like motorboats growling on the mirrored
skin of the lake, or warrior ants sowing
trepidation and deliverance. What next?
Odor of skunk and lemon under the boughs
of the pin oaks. Working from outside in,
you whisper as if in supplication the words
of a nearly forgotten prayer. Overhead
a plane circling, circling, just audible above
the dripping leaves and the hum of the cicadas,
looking for some trace of human life.

Sketch

I'm suspicious of the knock at the door. Suspicious of anyone offering me a special deal. Of promises of any kind. People who think they know something. True believers. Priests and pastors and self-help entrepreneurs. Principals. Poetry critics. Fox News. Teacher-proof curriculum. Common core standards, high-stakes testing. Senators, congressmen, school board members. Boy Scout leaders. Boy Scouts. Spokespersons. Used car salesmen. Television personalities. Drill sergeants. Life coaches. Snake oil salesmen. Miracle cures. Miracle diets. Miracles period. Descriptions of the afterlife. Dogma. Sports commentators. Stock market analysts. Expert witnesses. Weather forecasts. One size fits all. Diet Coke. Technological breakthroughs. First time callers. Autobiographical memoirs. Once upon a time. Happily ever after.

Sentry Duty

Once again we find ourselves
here on the ramparts, peering
into the morning fog, looking for
the flash of arms, listening for
the creak of saddles, any clue
as to what might be happening
out there in the wilderness.

So far, nothing, except for some
disturbance among the crows,
which might mean something.

Or not. And so, we stand and squint
and stamp our feet to stay warm,
keep watch for whatever it is
out there that is coming for us.

Sunday Afternoon, Mid-December

Rain, doing what rain does, falling, relentless,
spattering, pooling on pavement, soaking
into the soil eventually to be siphoned up
by the roots of the trees, denuded now
of leaves, still standing tall beneath the onslaught
of the heavy drops of water, branches blown
every which way by the gusting winds, bent
by the relentless weight bearing down on them.
None of this is metaphor, although in the end
it may well serve as a mirror to my inner weather:
out there the grey, the cold and wet, the afternoon
lost to the elemental forces of cloud and mist and rain;
in here, the warmth and light of the lamp over desk
where I sit, pencil in hand, words falling onto the page.

Ending with a Line from Bob Dylan

Pen in hand, she sits at her desk by the window,
watches the sun dropping into the hills, the shadows
of the evergreens creeping toward the house. She recalls
her years in Honolulu, once the city of aloha, now choking
on traffic, blanketed with encampments of homeless
displaced by developers after the quick kill.

She waits

now for the words to come, the right words to express
her dismay at the willful disregard for facts she senses
in the lives of her friends and neighbors, who cannot see—
who choose not to see—what's coming: California on fire,
Arizona without water, Miami submerged, millions
of refugees out after anyone with gold or food or water
left to steal. Outside, crows chatter in the black branches.
She studies the sky. *It's not dark yet, but it's getting there.*

Ars Poetica



Ideation

The work of words in the world—
to bind fast the wisps of thought
at least long enough to glimpse
their lineaments, their musculature,
so that in time they may be laid
side by side to be compared,
end to end to be fashioned into
ever more curious and elegant
configurations, until at last something
arrives unbidden, unanticipated,
wholly new, an idea that changes
your sense of who you are, the way
you see the world, how you will spend
the time that is left to you in this life.

Travell'd

The words we want are not where we can find them,
unless we wake and wrench them from the dream
already fading, write them down before they inhale
themselves like ghosts reluctant to appear where
only the alive are allowed to congregate, to conjugate,
to contemplate the state of what is real and what is only
smoke and mirrors. Eyes and ears do not suffice to hold
what disappears when stumbled upon unawares,
and so we seek another source, another force to span
the boundary between what is sensed and what is seen.
In that other hidden place we may perhaps discern the face
of what it is we cannot guess—unless the spell of words
we cast can conjure up that face at last, and in that moment,
with *wild surmise*, we'll see what is before our eyes.

Elsewhere

*I heard things once, blurring out of sleep
or some other elsewhere to
none of us the same.*

- Marianne Boruch

Perhaps the spatter of water overflowing
the lip of the leaf-choked gutter, falling
in fat drops to splatter on the concrete
floor of the porch outside my door.

Or the distant whirr of traffic over yonder
on the freeway, soft white noise
impinging ever so slightly on the borders
of my dreams as I seek the solace of oblivion.

Or the keening spirits of the dead who wander
in the dark and harrow the souls of those
of us still embodied, not yet released
from the world of mere appearances.

Or all of the above, ambient irrecoverable
messages we nearly hear but never understand.

Background

Particulate matter in constant jittery motion, a quivery fog of interconnected discontinuities. Leaves adrift on wind currents. Ragweed spores. Mushroom clouds. Crowds of crows harassing hawks. Electrical impulses skittering across the skin. This constellation of nervous presentiment. Not something about to happen, but something already present and not yet available to the senses. How is it ever even possible to see what is right in front of our eyes? Dust motes riding on the merest of breezes, words fleeing the predation of the apprehending mind.

Messengers

Is this something? I don't know. It seems to want to be. These pillars, these roots, these rocks, this yellow sky imply a hand, a mind perhaps under the thrall of imperatives it has not chosen but submits to nonetheless. What we know is that what we know is not enough. And so we proceed, guided not by intention so much as by impulse and circumstance: this ink in front of me, this paper at hand, this fragment of a dream that hinted in its uncanny way that it wanted to cross over into the world of time and substance. Now it is here, and it makes me wonder why, and what the answer might be to the question I would put to it, if I only knew what to ask.

Eurhythmic

I am not sure that I will that I will ever be
the kind of writer who can easily
come up with things to say that are acute
or demonstrate originality.

My hours of labor rarely bear the fruit
I hope to see. And so one might dispute
whether in fact my time has been well spent.

But I will persevere. I'm resolute
in my belief that only to the extent
that I am optimistic, confident,
and dedicated to work at hand
will I begin to realize my intent.

What I have written is not what I had planned,
but now it's done. I hope you understand.

Midwinter Night

Once again into the breach, the moments given over
To waiting for whatever it will turn out to be to arrive,
Be it dream, prayer, praise, damnation, blasphemy or
Simple braid of melody: winter rain pelting the roof
Outside my window, wind raking the leafless branches
Of the trees, distant churn of water in the flooding creek.
I sit in front of the glowing screen, fingers on the keyboard,
And watch as the words muster themselves and fall in place,
Obedient to some logic that must emanate from within
My mind but feels not exactly alien but other, purposeful
Only in its insatiable linearity: what has appeared so far
Determining to some necessary degree what is appearing
Now and what will eventually announce itself as what
Will only in retrospect appear to be a foregone conclusion.

Something Else Then

This is how we proceed. Without attachment, without recourse:
Disagreements, reconciliations, fresh starts doomed ultimately
To failure. As if that mattered. Listen: off in the distance there,
Something fumbling about in the shadows. The ghost of a memory.
What you had intended to say to but could not. Articulation times
Zero amounts to nothing you can count on. Despite elegant design
And luxurious appointments, not much really to hope for. So, what?
Are you ready to wait as long as it is going to take? (What choice
Do you have?) Actually, it's mostly a matter of momentum: one, two,
Three, like coyotes running under a blood moon, eyes gleaming.
Or consider the lame doe in the backyard, looking over her shoulder
Toward your window, where you sit with your pen, navigating the maze
Even as you invent it. The secret? Harbor no fears, no expectations.
Even if the worst were to happen, no one would hold you responsible.

Pausing

Another momentary pause amid the onflowing
unselfconsciousness, a harkening: I make it
my business to listen. Listen. Distant strands
of song borne on the wind from that place
just beyond my ken, over the hill and far away,
as they say. I want to find a way to make a music
of my own, to play a song to celebrate the day
of all days gone by and yet to come, the sum
of all that I have seen and all the more that has
escaped my apprehension as I have made my way
through one day after another, a life given over
to what exactly I can no longer even comprehend.
I had thought by now some portion of wisdom
would inform my song. It seems that I was wrong.

Composition

A point of practice, collecting texts
exclusive of parity, seeking singularity,
sounding signals no matter how unproven—
patterns of color, shapes, what passes for purpose
even when cold and darkness impinge, keeping
closure at bay, even at the edges of sleep,
consciousness not so much present as
dimly apprehended, the thought just behind
whatever sequence presents itself:
an imperative, an admonition, a message
of such import as to pierce complacent
territorial prerogatives, the polite dismissive
privileging of the familiar, the predictable and
comforting presence of what we thought we knew.

Intention

Morning. Smoke. The mind moving,
pencil in motion as well, making marks,
pushing into the blank white emptiness
in search of, well, some kind of meaning
by means of some kind of music, the way
the words do or do not work in concert
with one another, their sounds and shapes
in or out of sync, each line a tracery,
a track, a trespassing. Too easy it is
to be contained, fenced in by familiar
contentments. I want today to be different.
I want to find my way to a place I have
not yet visited, open my eyes and mind
and heart, breathe fresh air, begin again.

Lessons Learned

*I listened to the trees.
They had a secret
Which they were about to
Make known to me,
And then didn't...
- Charles Simic*

And that's pretty much the story of my life, right? Like last Thursday, I was sure that I would be hearing back from a friend to whom I had loaned a couple hundred bucks to he could visit his dying mother in Vermont. Imagine then my surprise when over the weekend he posted pictures of himself on Facebook at a rap concert in Atlanta.

Actually, I just made all that up. Although, in its broad dimensions, the story is true enough. But it wasn't last week, it was 1970, and the money wasn't for a visit, it was for my musician friend Liko to rent studio time to cut an album. But instead he spent the money on a dope deal that fell through and never did pay me back. Now I'm listening to trees too, for all the good it'll do me.

The Burden

At the heart, something hard
as flint. Not easy to reach, much less
to mollify or extract, even if you
make your approaches with all due
ceremony and tact. Understand,
there's a history here, too many feints
and subterfuges, too many lacerating
disappointments. And thus your motives,
innocent as you may think them to be,
will be called in question, your pledges
discounted. None of which is to say
that you must not proceed. Go then,
make ready, prepare yourself to do
what it has been given to you to do.

In Anticipation

You'll need to

*Invent a new language. You'll need to find replacements for every time
You've opened your mouth.*

- Dara Wier

I was told I was being untoward, which I took to mean that what I chose to say at that moment was not meeting my audience where they lived. Fair enough, but with all due respect, I don't see the point in trying to tell people what they already know. Not useful to them, not interesting to me. Are even the most ordinary of moments not fraught with mystery?

Take, for example, these two butterflies—one golden, the other black. Notice how intransigently the sunlight bears down upon them, how the surrounding silence gives shape to their ephemerality. How lucky it is that we can be instructed in this manner, one incidental incarnation after another. How else could we sustain the hope that every captive soul at last will find release? Look over there: seven dark angels riding hard in our direction. You won't believe what's coming next.

Artwork:

The Man in the Mirror, pen and ink (Front Cover)

Walkabout, gel print (Frontispiece)

Fresh Emotions, collage (Operatics)

Arise, pen and ink (Ars Poetica)

Donkey Hotee, pen and ink (Back Cover)

