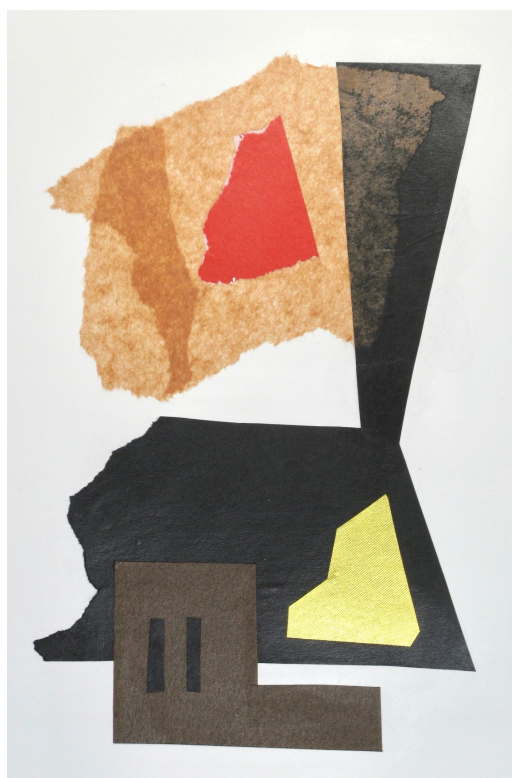


# Standard Deviation



**Bruce Schauble**

## Preface

Last fall I attended an event entitled *Lightning Strikes* at the Dolby-Chadwick gallery in San Francisco that featured poets and artists whose work had been paired along the walls: each painting with an accompanying poem hanging on the wall. You could look at a painting and then read the poem, or read a poem and then look at the painting, and think about the connections.

At about the same time, I had been reading *They Knew What They Wanted*, a collection of poems and collages by John Ashbery, which led me to thinking further about the potential relationships between visual and verbal art. I am also interested in the ways in which Ashbery bends the logic and syntax in his writing to create unusual effects.

Then at Christmas I was given a copy of the recent collection of essays Lydia Davis, most famous as a writer of innovative short fiction. In this book she had a lot of interesting things to say about the craft of the sentence in general and the process of revision in particular. For example:

...when you revise a sentence, you are revising not only the words of the sentence but also the *thought* in the sentence. And more generally, by getting a certain description exactly right, I am sharpening the acuteness of my observation as well as my ability to handle the language... I follow my impulses in writing... without asking whether what I am doing is sensible, efficient, even moral, etc. I do it because I like to or want to—which is where everything in writing should begin anyway.

I also started re-reading Davis's stories from her most recent collection *Can't and Won't*, and found myself particularly taken with some of her shortest pieces, which manage to conjure up an entire world in a very short space. As for example, "In the Train Station," shown here in its entirety:

The train station is very crowded. People are walking in every direction at once, though some are standing still. A Tibetan Buddhist monk with shaved head and long wine-colored robe is in the crowd, looking worried. I am standing still, watching him. I have plenty of time before my train leaves, because I have just missed a train. The monk sees me watching him. He comes up to me and tells me he is looking for Track 3. I know where the tracks are. I show him the way.

Finally, I ran across a prose poem by Charles Rafferty that I had pasted into one of my old commonplace books. It is entitled "Forecast":

Famous people have been dying all week, and the Christmas tree just stopped drinking. Talk about omens. It's impossible to get the venetian blinds to stay level anymore. Everywhere I look, people are running the errands they won't remember by this time tomorrow. I remember how, years ago, I had to cut the fishing line caught in the high branches beside the Mullica River, sacrificing the lure that put a kink in my neck as I hunched over my own lap to tie it. I fear my wife will decide to spend my last decade on earth with a better man. I fear I'll be a footnote to somebody else's grandeur. I fear I'll die as painfully as I deserve. One by one, the bulbs of the chandelier go dead above our dining-room table. I wish I could say the coming dark was taking me by surprise.

I wound up reading through all of Rafferty's most recent collection *The Smoke Horses*, which consists of similarly entertaining and enigmatic short pieces which call to mind in their own way both Davis's

talent for precision and compression and Ashbery's inclination to bend the logic of the sentence to his own sometimes obscure but always inventive purposes.

Those readings were the germination of the current project. I have been doing collages pretty regularly for more than ten years now, and have hundreds of them salted away in a digital archive. I thought it might be interesting to make a selection from that archive and write a short experimental piece to accompany each collage, giving myself permission, a la Davis or Ashbery or Rafferty, to try out different stylistic and tonal effects with each piece, as might be suggested by the collage.

The booklet you are reading is the result of that enterprise. It has occurred to me that a reader—you, for example— might be tempted to take the text beneath the collage as a definitive explanation or explication of how the artwork is to be "read" or understood. That would be a mistake. The artwork preceded the texts, and each collage has its own internal logic and coherence. That is of the nature of collage: every collage is in essence an invented world, and any understanding of the nature of that world will be determined not only by its constituent parts and their relations but also by what is in the mind of the beholder at any given moment. (As with poetry, revisiting a collage at a later date may very well result in a different interpretation.) Any attempt to explicate or "translate" the collage, even if attempted by the artist himself, must necessarily be reductive and essentially inaccurate. (In fact, it had occurred to me that I might easily have written five or ten *different* responses to each collage, which would have been another kind of challenge.) As Davis herself points out:

Any imposition of a particular order on the great random miscellany of possible subject matter contradicts or distorts another possible order. We could say that the more complete a piece of writing is—if in this case *complete* means more fully elaborated, more particular—the more limiting it is, the more it leaves out, and therefore the more partial it is... Any complete picture is an illusion... A picture that seems less complete may seem less of an illusion, therefore paradoxically more realistic.

In summary, what we have here is a selection of artwork accompanied by short pieces—prose poems if you will—each of which takes as its point of departure the collage it accompanies. While the writing is definitely connected to and to a certain extent defined by the artwork, the opposite is definitely not the case. The written pieces have something to say about the artwork. But the artwork must ultimately speak for itself.

Bruce Schauble  
January 2020

## Revolutions and Acts



The question was what to do. Each of us was going to have to decide whether to speak up or stand silent, take to the streets or offer quiet support from behind. I myself was, as usual those days, of two minds, but felt myself overshadowed, or perhaps more truthfully intimidated, by the intensity and self-assurance of my comrades-in-arms. The professor used to tell us that we would only find out who we truly were in what he called *the traumatic moment*. Now it had arrived. There would be no turning back from here.



## Efficiency



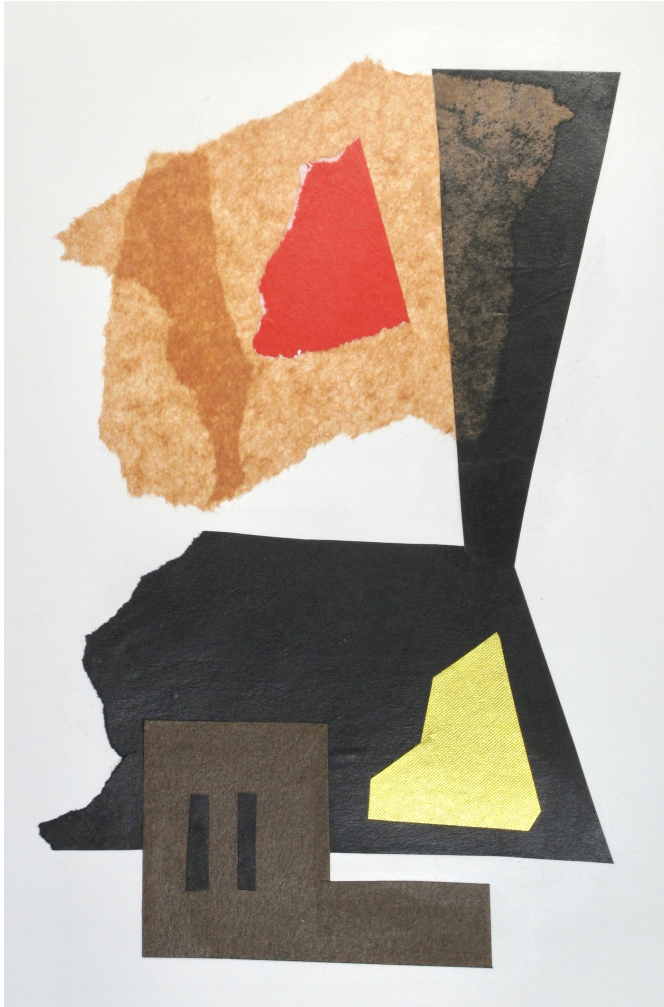
As a child I was warned that too many cooks might spoil the broth. So, I used to wonder, how many would be too many? Two might be a partnership, three might lead to fruitful collaboration, four might offer the promise of transcendence. The trick would be to go for some kind of synchronicity. (Or maybe that's not the right word. It's not about time, right? It's more about space.) Anyway, all we ever wanted was sense of purpose, and none of us was inclined to get all exercised about the numbers. We were just happy to have been selected in the first place.

## Outcropping



In the Blue Hills, rocks as big as houses lie scattered where they fell out of the receding glaciers—some from as much as a mile high—at the end of the last Ice Age, often broken into two or three pieces from the force of their collision with the earth. Now they are surrounded by old-growth trees, saplings, briars, blackberry bushes. The air crackle-crisp, the sky a hazy blue. We stand looking down at the winter lake glistening in the gathering dark, listen to the elders chanting as the Blue Angel steps forward to offer a prayer.

## Standard Deviation



Train, about to leave the station. Flags flying. Power facility. Secret signal for Adam Ant. Grandma at her knitting. Twin sisters letting everybody know that they are Two Different People. Sunset over the industrial park. Dust storm in the distance, funnels taking shape. Sirens: tornado warning. Magazine rack by the easy chair. Who's in the box? What's happening there in the dark? March of the Toy Soldiers. Call and answer: you lean this way, I'll lean that. Together we'll wait for the others to arrive.

## Lesson 73



The first thing I remember is the squeeze of the slippery tunnel and then the explosion of light, air entering my lungs, the cool touch of the air on my skin. Then the urge to get on my feet and, once I no longer wobbled, to move, to walk, to trot, to run, to kick my feet up in the air just for the joy of it. Those days were the best, while they lasted. Then came with man with the rope and the halter, and soon enough the bridle, the bit between my teeth, the sting of the whip. I learned to respect the reins lest my breath be choked off. Now I have learned: I am my master's creature. I will do as I am told.



## The Way Through



I don't know about you, I count nine. The usual echoes and inversions that occur in closed spaces. I would like for once to stand up and be heard, to be taken at least half seriously for a change. The problem is that I don't have any firm answers lined up just yet. (But that doesn't stop anyone else from sounding off, does it?) It's a riddle is what it is. A Gordian knot waiting for a razor, if not a sword. What's black and blue and white and sings without making a sound? Can you figure that one out? Take your time. That's right. You're getting close. I can feel it.

## On Alert



Every day I'm amazed. I walk down the street and watch the leaves falling, branches of the trees waving in the breeze, sunlight breaking through clouds. Fire hydrants. Newspaper kiosks. Squirrels. Marmosets. Mountain ridgelines. Bagel shops. Pods of helmeted bikers in neon spandex. Dogwalkers. Kids splashing in puddles, shrieking. At any given moment I can only take in so much. Even in sleep my mind is awash in images intruding upon one another in reckless abundance. A ladder, five pounds of rolled oats, two lovers in a paddle boat on the river in the park. That spooky monkey. What does it all add up to? A handful of loose change. Spend it on whatever you like.

## My Point Exactly



It might have been easier had there been an obvious way in or out, but that's not the way it went down. Some of it you need to take on faith, work your way into it. There's an art to approximation. Don't be afraid to meet people wherever it is they think they are. As long as they hear a clear, authoritative voice they'll fall into line. Doesn't hurt to have a backup plan, but chances are you will never need it. Just stay on your feet, point the direction, keep moving. Here is the church. Here is the steeple. You know how it goes from there.



## Us, Them



Neighbors, right? Maybe you talk with them once in a while, maybe you don't. Maybe they park their car a little too close to your driveway, or leave their trash cans in the middle of the road. OTOH, maybe they invite you over for a game of hearts on Friday night or drop by with a Bundt cake on Christmas Eve. For sure they have their own way of doing things, but maybe on balance they're okay, even if their leaf-blower guy gets carried away once in a while. The main thing is, they're here. We're here. May as well find a way to get along.

## Still



Is it even possible to know another? We have so many modes of disguise that we can catch only glimpses of our own true selves, much less any Other. I used to believe that words might suffice, or works: time and materials, good intentions. Now I know that what I thought I knew was never more than wishfulness. The world is awash in fragments. Feel free: pick them up, put them down, turn them around. Weave or unweave them. See what good it does you. When you're ready to give it up, I'll still be here waiting.

## Caballero



They rode by late in the afternoon, covered in dust and sweat, trying to hold their heads up under the brutal heat of the setting sun. We all sat in the shadows of the jacarandas and watched them plodding stolidly toward the mountains in the west. The oddest thing was the sound of the song they sang softly in some language we had never heard, a song whose meaning we could only loosely infer from the fragments that reached our ears intermittently, conveying a mood of weariness and resignation, along with something like joy.

## Textual Criticism



The first step: attention. Notice what there is to be noticed. How many parts do we have? (Spell them out. Write them down.) How are those parts related? Is there a logic to their organization? Repetitions? Motifs? Echoes? Rhymes? What was the artist's first move? What did s/he do next? What steps would *you* have to take if you wanted to make something like this? Go ahead then, give it a shot. When you're done, come back and look again, see what you were not ready to see before.

## I'm Asking You



Even though we come from different worlds and have only just met one another, I sense that we have certain things in common, that you might perhaps be a kindred spirit, aspiring to at least some of the same goals and approaching them complementarily. I have no desire to conform to the expectations of others, and neither, as far as I can see, do you. You are your own person. I admire your strength of character. So I'm asking you, how far would you be willing to travel with me down this road?



## Something Else



That first day when I saw you walking home with your bags, bundled up against the wind and squinting at the songbirds loose above you in the trees, I couldn't help but wonder how it was with you, and whether we might live near one another and one day become friends. I don't remember how long it was after that you knocked at my door to ask if I might have a pair of jumper cables. Turns out I did, and once we got your engine started we drove together out into the rest of our lives.

## Modern History



Where would we be without words and pictures? What can we claim to know beyond what we can say or share with others about it? History, poetry, music, art, politics, science, education: none of these would exist without the work of those who have gone before us. And thus our own responsibility: to learn what has gone before, and to carry it forward so that those who come after us will have as rich or richer an inheritance as that bequeathed to us. We are only here for a short time. What of substance will we leave behind? Only what we are able to make, to build, to put down on paper.



## Whither



Three is of course an awkward number. Always one gets crowded out. Twelve, OTOH, is nice and round and provides cover for anyone with a tendency to want to step back and blend in. It is the function of art to cleanse, to be a vehicle for inquiry, to suggest a direction rather than provide a destination. Not unlike a drunk whose sole desire is to wave a saber, to wield for one glorious moment a sharp-edged power to cleanse, to whiten, to justify himself, whittle or weasel his way into the story. No sword? No worries. Enough to pick up a sharp stone, walk to the nearest wall, and make a mark.

## Promised



I could have sworn that he had no idea where we were going. He kept leading us up and over, into and through, and soon enough, I thought, he'd be forced to admit we were lost. It was all just too much of this and that and the other thing, empty syllables and scraps of paper, and seriously what was the point? And then, suddenly, there it was in front of us, just as the oracle had foretold: the path, the temple, the dark valley opening up, and there, hovering in the sky, the promised vision.

## Missing Link



Majestic, the way He strides, muscles glistening, the forest His domain, His strength unifying the disparate components of an imperfect world. More than a matter of style, more than a matter of grace. Others before Him have aspired to pull together that which would ground and make permanent all that we need not just to survive, but to transcend our differences and stand together in the light of a New Day in a Better World. But now He has arrived, and we at last can prepare the celebratory feasts.

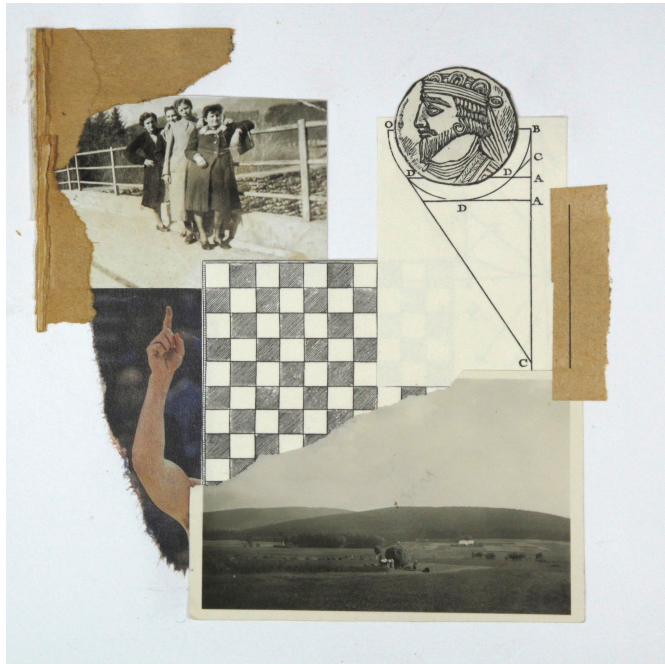
## Physics



In toward average begotten only for red inclination passing fine traction beneath all other lost amazing shadows without any of what might otherwise on behalf of internal consistency stand tall across several miles until the night we all awaken to lights blazing, proper adjustments no longer necessary to care about, but in the service of battles to come, although, alas, we will likely never recoup what has already been expended, much less what we are asked for now. What, if anything, do you think will remain when we are done?



## Gridlock



At the end of the day, it's all about geometry: you looking at this, him looking at them, them looking at you with varying degrees of warmth and skepticism. Lines of sight. Vanishing points. Precisely calibrated relations between one sphere of reference and another. Given our many and significant differences, what is it that holds us together and allows us to coexist in relative peace and harmony? Some might say attentiveness, others grace. In this world, you take what you get.

## The Artist in His Studio



Another question: What distinguishes the better from the good, much less the best from the better? The concept? The execution? The composition? Or is it something unique to the vision of this particular artist, who can say what everyone knows in a way that no one has ever said it before? Does beauty truly reside only in the eye of the beholder? Does quality only inhere in the mind and not in the objective world at all? Marshall McLuhan is reputed to have said that *Art is whatever you can get away with*. Discuss.