

The POET'S NOTEBOOK

*Excerpts from the Notebooks of
Contemporary American Poets*

EDITED BY

Stephen Kuusisto

Deborah Tall

David Weiss



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Susan Mitchell

I keep many different notebooks, so many, it's possible I have a notebook fetish. The notebook I take with me everywhere is narrow ruled and $7\frac{3}{4}$ by 5: it fits easily into my pocketbook. In this notebook, I jot down lines for poems, ideas for essays, and thoughts that occur to me during the day. I have three other notebooks identical to this one. *Nuts & Bolts* is a very technical notebook where I write down my thoughts on craft and technique, along with lines from poems that I admire. In the notebook called *Gradus Ad Parnassum*, I set exercises for myself. Then there is the *Commonplace Book*, in which I copy out passages from books that have particularly impressed me. Besides these, I keep notebooks that accompany special projects—translations, a long poem, a heavily researched essay. The project notebooks are leather bound, looseleaf, and measure $8\frac{1}{2}$ by 11. The excerpts that follow are largely from the $7\frac{3}{4}$ by 5 notebook that is always with me. Most of the entries I have chosen are from 1992, but after a while these run into dated entries which record the beginnings of the poem "Music," included in this anthology.



1992

It would take tremendous energy to be the first person not to die, the first person to live forever, simply because no one had ever done

this before. If no one thinks it is possible, then no one is going to try to figure out how to put eternity together like an airplane or a submarine or a rocket. Doing it the first time without a plan, without any manual of instructions would be the hardest, but after a while, it would get easier. Begin by imagining the impossible. A hummingbird trapped in a screened-in porch darts through the mesh. At the precise moment of passing through, it folds its wings, pulling them in tight against its body. It does this too quickly for anyone to notice. It is not possible to witness such events with the eye. But I remember a momentary break in the sound its wings had been beating. As if a song had passed through the eye of a needle. That break is a knot of silence no bigger than a drop of blood.

*

Last night around eleven, I went outside to have a look at the boats in the canal. Hearing something behind me, I swung around and took it by surprise, the glare of my flashlight in its face. Caught off guard, the darkness reared up like a horse. Within the circle the flashlight made, everything was ordinary. Beyond that circle, the darkness was chased further and further into itself. I had never seen darkness so clearly. It outlined the boats. It outlined the creaking of the ropes as the boats pulled against their moorings.

*

For my epitaph: "ready to be anything in the ecstasy of being ever."
—Sir Thomas Browne

*

"She said flawless so often, it sounded like worthless."

This line remembered from a dream in which I was looking through a book. The book consisted of drawings and maps, as well as writings. The maps resembled old-fashioned watches, the kind that men pull from their pockets on long gold chains. There were many intricate parts to the watches, or rather, to the maps. The maps journeyed in on themselves, delineating interiors not visible, but somehow present. The book impressed me, and I wished I had made it.

On waking, I thought: Well, I have made it since I dreamed it. But not really. It's the difference between the first mental draft of a poem and the written poem.

*

Originally, the word *site* suggests a place in which everything comes together, is concentrated. The site gathers unto itself, supremely and in the extreme. Its gathering power penetrates and pervades everything. The site, the gathering power, gathers in and preserves all it has gathered, not like an encapsulating shell but rather by penetrating with its light all it has gathered, and only thus releasing it into its own nature.

—Martin Heidegger

I know that the poems I am writing are going to make a book when I feel that they are all breaking off from the same site. The site is not any one of the poems taken by itself. And the site cannot become a poem. The book of poems is the site. Or it is a map that allows the reader to create the site in his or her imagination. For a long time, there was a poem I kept trying to write, but each time I tried, I ended up writing a different poem. At last I understood that the poem I could not write was the site. The site was nonverbal. When I imagined it intensely, I wrote poems that were broken off from it. I could point to images that made up that site, but it would be best not to point. Even gesture would begin to disturb a silence that needs to be preserved. I need to keep secrets from myself, perhaps? Or, I need the site to remain visual if it is going to have the power to generate language.

Whenever a book of poems is very powerful, it creates a site that other poets begin to draw on. Instead of working from their own sites, these other parasitic poets feed off this Ur-site. So a curious kind of theft takes place, the theft of a power source in the imagination.

*

Whenever I read Walter Benjamin's "A Berlin Chronicle," I experience the world of his childhood through my knowledge of what will happen to him later in life. I read his chronicle through those losses still in the future: what will happen to him as a Jew when Hitler comes into power. So I am always reading this essay differently from the way Benjamin intended. I read it through the tragedy of his suicide. Could I learn to read it in a more innocent way? Or will Benjamin's Berlin always be a ruin for me? But doesn't this also happen when I reread a novel or a poem and know how it ends? If the work

ends tragically, then when I reread it, its end is always present for me in its beginning.

There is a kind of love that always contains loss—as premonition and as remembrance of the past.

*

Why is it that pain can wipe out all memory of pleasure while in pleasure there is often some intimation of loss, however vague? Is there pleasure that abolishes all memory of pain for extended periods, not just the few seconds of orgasm? For me, this would have to be sleep, a dreamless sleep, but with remembrance on waking that I had been drifting into deeper and deeper sleep, dropping from one level of sleep to the next like a boat going through locks in a canal. Maybe it's odd to think of sleep as pleasure, but on waking from deep sleep, I feel as if I were actually separating myself from something physical that I had been intertwined with, something luxurious and soft and intoxicating.

*

Understand: to stand under, so as to take what streams directly into the mouth, the water from a waterfall, the drip of icicles melting

Über Berg und Tal
Ist ein Wasserfall

*

a noise of birds
a roof of birds taking off like tar paper
the birds (starlings?)
the roofs across the plaza, the
palm trees are overflowing
many have only the air to inhabit

Construct a life to provide for the idleness of sustained effort

*

It surprises me that so many people think of transforming themselves only after they have had a traumatic experience. So and so has left them so they feel pressured to change. But why can't self-transformation be a response to one's work? The work needs me to

change, so I will. For the work to become better, I have to become other than what I am. In a way, writing is trauma—sustained, ongoing, chronic trauma. Can I feel more, can I laugh more, can I go deeper?—this is what my work demands day after day. If I can't change, then my work will grow bored with me.

*

It is possible to enlarge a photograph of the face until it appears to be a blossom and further, until the blossom has stairways and pulpits. Who could have guessed all our possibilities?

*

If music had its way with us, language would become a thing of the past.

*

Sometimes there is a clitoral intensity to seeing, as if an optometrist kept adding more and more lenses, turning them this way and that. *Is this better? Or is it better this way?* Sharper and sharper until it almost hurts. Those drops Milton has the angel put in Adam's eyes until Adam swoons from seeing.

*

That feeling I had for a long time after surgery, that the universe was empty, flat, that I was pressed up against a wall, the wall the end of the universe, the limit against which: bare, blank, cold—that feeling is finally gone. The universe is full again, exciting, achingly so. What seemed like a terrible revelation no longer has meaning. Is either view correct? Are both views correct? Neither? Niels Bohr says, "The opposite of a shallow truth is false. But the opposite of a deep truth is also true." And happiness is not thinking about any of this. Probably, it was pain that led to the invention of language. Pleasure is pure immersion.

*

When I am certain that I have nothing in common with a person, I tell myself that we both know what water tastes like, and neither of us can describe that taste.

*

It was late afternoon when we entered the church by the side door. We had stopped for tea first, and Odette had poured milk into my

cup and then the steaming Lapsang Souchong, a smoked tea I have loved ever since. The tea room was very warm, and the babble of French around us made me drowsy. The French Odette spoke seemed heavily outlined because she spoke slowly for my benefit. Odette kept her hat on. The hat was a dark color indistinguishable from the color of her coat and her dress. *ide*, it was almost dusk, the streetlamps, the headlights of cars already on. We had come to the Isle Saint Louis because Odette had wanted me to see a painting by George de la Tour that was in the Eglise Saint Louis, that splendid Baroque church Le Vau designed. Today when I wanted to verify the name of the painting, I could not find any mention of it in the five Paris guides I consulted. Perhaps the church sold it. I know, though, that it was there in 1963. When we entered the church, the lights were off. There was only a faint glow around the altar where candles were lit. Odette asked the priest if we could use one of the altar candles to illuminate the painting, and in response to something he mumbled, she dropped a coin in the box and dipped a candle in flame. When she held the candle up to the painting, light jumped out at us. The candle that George de la Tour had painted seemed to take fire from ours. I even thought I heard that flap of wind when flame catches and flares up. In the painting, a girl with bowed head sat before a candle. There must have been more, but that's all I remember of it now. That and the sound of one candle catching fire from the other. The painting made me forget momentarily Odette's philandering husband and something she always said when we passed his photo in her living room—*Mon Ange!* and then to me in English, *Never marry for love.*

Why did I suddenly think of this today? Why remember something I have not thought of in years? Now that I have remembered, I am obsessed with it, especially with that sound of the flame flaring up. There's a glaze over the memory, the kind of glaze that Van Eyck used. Even the obscure, smoky places in the memory, even what I don't see clearly is highly glazed and shines as if a candle were held to it. Even that sound, that flap of air, breath catching—shines.

*

Today in Liberties Bookstore I began to hear the tinkle of the little silver bell my aunt would ring when she wanted the next course brought to the dinner table. As I turned pages of books, the bell kept

ringing. When I got home, I napped for a while and dreamed that I called my mother to ask her if she still had the bell. *Do you want to hear it?* she said to me. When she rang the bell, it sounded more tinkly than I remembered, but I think that was because my mother let the bell dangle from her fingers. My aunt rang it with more force—from her wrist and with a specific purpose in mind. The slight difference in tone makes me think of something that Artur Schnabel wrote in his edition of Beethoven's piano sonatas: "The key which is touched by the third finger should produce a tone hovering between reality and imagination—but must be heard, none the less."

*

August 17, 1992

MEMORIZING THE SONATA OF KINGDOM COME

Which is a sonata yet to be written and listening
to the ———, I know the one most likely
to compose this is not yet born

I want to learn this by heart which will be
like learning another heart

This is the unbound sonata, not yet scrolled, the time
not yet decided with imbecile signatures

A bigness unending

it had broken off from, and what it had
broken from could still be felt

August 21, 1992

How anemic the eye that looks outward
immersed in blur and bludgeon. Give me visions
that whirl the optic nerve

December 25, 1992

The bird cracking the same note, smashing
it against rock,
lashing at it, splitting

it down the center
where inside another note just like it,
the same DNA, the same three notes
streaming out of one
or a note like a fig
its many seeds
filling the ear
lodged in the ear
buckshot

April 15, 1993

JOSEPH BEUYS AT MOMA

· · ·
s/c/ore 2/ implement—to score
to keep score
musical composition
scorch
arch
to score = to cut, incise, notch
to get revenge

August 9, 1993

"MUSIC"

The rose closes on it
the rose closes its mouth
on it
so the thumb can
almost taste itself
tasted
singability
dolphin clicks

the rib cage

February 25, 1994

and those things for which I haven't
a name