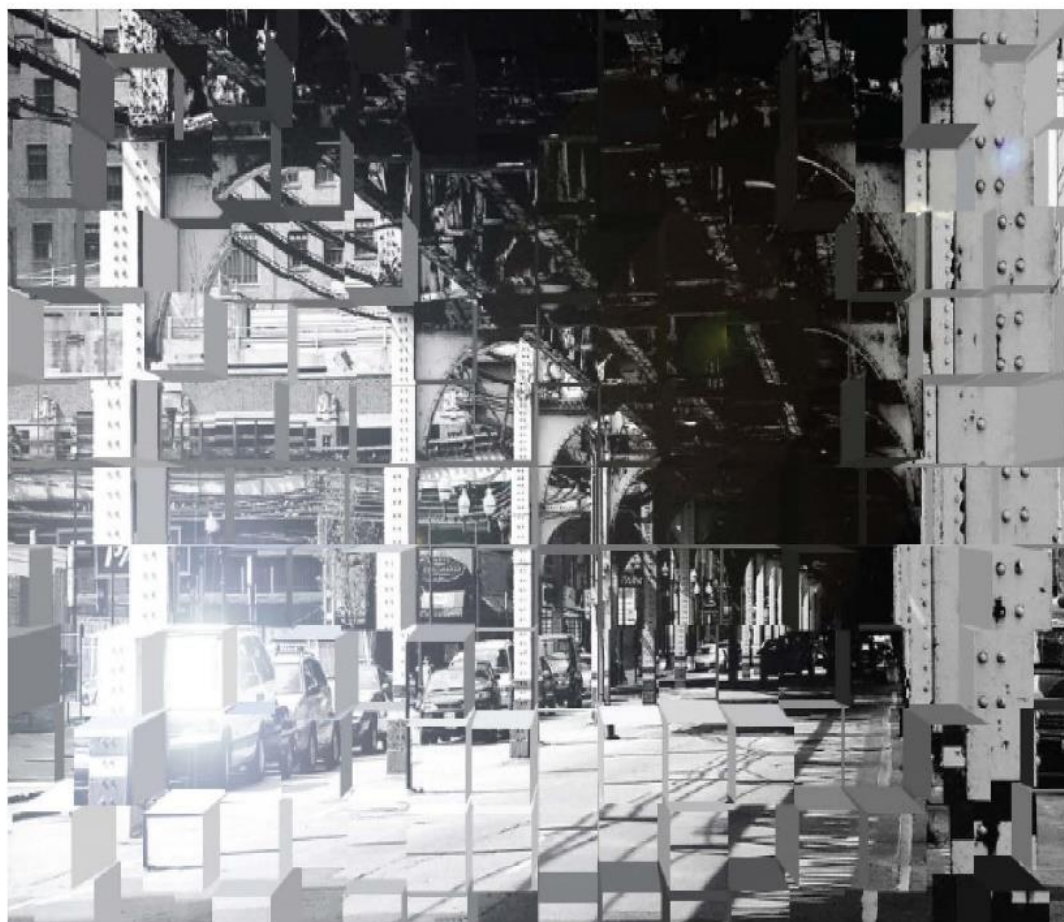


Aspects of Strangers



Piotr Gwiazda

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*From the beginning, cities have been places where strangers live together in close proximity to each other while remaining strangers. The company of strangers is always frightening (though not always feared) since it is part of the nature of strangers, as distinct from the nature of both friends and enemies, that their intentions, ways of thinking and responses to shared situations are unknown or not well enough known to calculate the probabilities of their conduct. A gathering of strangers is a site of endemic and incurable unpredictability. — Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life**

*To be of no account to others. No one listens to you, you never have the floor, or else, when you have the courage to seize it, your speech is quickly erased by the more garrulous and fully relaxed talk of the community. Your speech has no past and will have no power over the future of this group: why should one listen to it? You do not have enough status—“social standing”—to make your speech useful. It may be desirable, to be sure, surprising, too, bizarre or attractive, if you wish. But such lures are of little consequence when set against the interest—which is precisely lacking—of those you are speaking to. — Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (trans. Leon S. Roudiez)*

I saw the actual essence of all things. I looked at houses and they had lost their usual meaning—that is, all that we think when looking at a house: a certain architectural style, the sort of rooms inside, ugly house, comfortable house—all this had evaporated, leaving nothing but an absurd shell, the same way an absurd sound is left after one has repeated sufficiently long the commonest word without heeding its meaning: house, howss, whowss. It was the same with trees, the same with people. I understood the horror of a human face. Anatomy, sexual distinctions, the notion of “legs,” “arms,” “clothes”—all that was abolished, and there remained in front of me a mere something—not even a creature, for that too is a human concept, but merely something moving past. — Vladimir Nabokov, “Terror”

ASPECTS OF STRANGERS

You see their other faces.
You hear their other voices.

You pass them in the airport
or the subway station

or any street and plaza . . .
Are you a part of them?

Your face gives you away.
Your voice denies you.

Look at this city—
buildings, statues, pigeons,

Empire's avenues,
a bus stop, a lamppost, a trash can,

and this and that
or even more subtle clues:

a shoe on the lawn,
a genie trapped in the fountain,

a grocery store
selling yesterday's papers.

Look at these people
“cloaked in purpose”—

a woman hailing a cab,
a man texting,

a coffee vendor,
a dog walker, a nun,

and other revelations
of the camera eye.

Some crossing the street,
some crossing the plaza,

some sitting on benches
“the lifelong June,”

some standing motionless
on the escalator, each

protective of the tiny
swath of earth they call

body—its exact (no, *in-*
exact) coordinates,

its latitude, longitude.
The *multitude*: each

“too distantly a part.”
Are you a part of them?

Some crossing the street,
some crossing the plaza,

in random order.
(And yet there are patterns

if you watch closely.
There are patterns

if you listen—)

The lonely, the unloved,
the anxious, the paranoid,

the dying (the departed
shadowing them in-

conspicuously),
the guilty, the ashamed,

the angry, the confused,
“the hypocritical & the sincere,”

human statues, pigeon feeders,
the tourists, the poor—

*all you can eat
from a trashcan—*

and les riches, indifferent
to you and me, blending

with movie posters for *Nine*,
Invictus, *The Hangover*,

Alec Baldwin and Meryl Streep
disappearing inside the

elevator (*It's Complicated*),
Bank of America, Swatch,

GET YOUR 15
SECONDS OF FAME . . .

They are uncomfortable with the idea of revolution because of their inherent faith in progress. They willingly submit to hypnosis and propaganda. They don't begin to form their own opinions until well into their thirties, even forties. They set their clocks back and forward. Goal-oriented . . .

They divided their planet into several large countries and thousands of small ones (each with a flag and anthem). Then they began to send probes into outer space. Their hair, in varying color and quantity, is distributed over random parts of their bodies. They don't know what to make of holograms.

They hold a rational worldview, but accept the fundamental uncontrollability of nature. They fear accidents in bad weather, phone calls in the middle of the night, anthrax spores in a potato. They pledge not to live according to a previously written script. Yet even their wisest philosophers can't distinguish between a bank account and a giraffe.

They no longer assume that the world is composed of perfectly straight lines, circles, triangles, and rectangles. Their art is nonrepresentational; no one understands their statues. They hesitate between austerity and affluence. “Look at the light,” she said, “have you ever seen such pink light?”

Experience comes *to* them—a hand holding a dove. They visit cities like Paris and El Paso to collect souvenirs. They have no knowledge of geography; they dream in a foreign language. As they emerge from the subway, they look baffled, peering in all directions to ground their location.

They devote themselves to the pursuit of pleasure yet forget to live in the moment. They sleep with their eyes open, wash their faces and hands neurotically . . . They wear sunglasses all day long, even in rainy weather. In heavy snowstorms, they abandon their vehicles by the side of the road.

They draw knowledge from symbols: the serpent, the mandala. Yet their eyes glide over even the most unusual objects: a deer among the ruins, a corpse holding a baby, shoes hanging from a wire. They have no word for “light-sadness.” Their language, in any case, is a kind of camouflage.

Their museums are filled with spoils of war, broken plates, headless torsos. They read newspapers and their hands smell of the bodies of victims. They are also compulsive shoppers; they are satisfied with their purchases. Some carry guns. Some wear facemasks.

Some imagine mysterious landscapes. Some tap into hidden resources. Some have weak nerves. Some embrace stasis. Some practice indifference. Some preach the message of love. Some are betrayed. The haves and the have-nots.

They insist that the differences between them are quite superficial (this is frankly absurd). They pray to a doll or a child. They meditate on the blank. They log on, log off . . . He never knew what he was missing: a historic concert, a new virus.

They are prone to envy and indignation, but their most genuine emotions are fear and shame. They refuse to accept responsibility for their actions; they breathe the polluted air. Their statues stare blankly into the future—the living, the unborn. What a sad masquerade . . .

They don't just watch TV; they *watch* TV. They cover their heads in cold weather to prevent heat loss (long after the myth had been debunked). Their inner organs are impossible to discern. As for their outward appearance, they are chameleon-like. Advertisers compete for their eyeballs.

Sometimes they engage in morally questionable activities like atom smashing or deer hunting. (They call this “creative destruction.”) Then they complain to their doctors about their fear of dying. They have no spatial intelligence—a yacht, a glider, a segway. “What kind of man was he?” “Oh, he was a kind man.”

They communicate with their hands more effectively than with words. After the performance, they applaud (though without enthusiasm). After the funeral, they consign their bodies to the flames. They are like tugboats in winter, moving along the river of time.

They can become anything: an insect, an earthworm, a grass snake. They can show you a new trick, they can show you a new system. They hesitate between cosmopolitanism and homesickness. Their newspapers print daily corrections and obituaries.

They are uncomfortable with the idea of indeterminacy because it increases their irritability. They have explained their origins, mastered the vast ocean. They hang their paintings upside down (one shows a boat on the horizon, or just below). They are estranged from their statues.

They obsess about fluids and history; they believe in something called “blood ties.” Yet they know nothing about their ancestors (one owned a tavern, one died at sea on an errand of mercy). Their maps are inaccurate and their money is worthless. Gasoline flows through their systems. No, adrenaline.

Sometimes they engage in morally questionable activities like wood engraving or throwing pebbles into a lake. (“Creative resistance.”) They chain themselves to a cloud or a lamppost. They can read your mind, they can take a picture of themselves. Yet even their wisest philosophers can’t distinguish between the actual and the virtual.

Some are drawn to beautiful vistas. Some consult the horoscope. Some understand the speech of animals. Some have nightmares about catastrophic weather events. Some have remarkable memory. Some forget their own name. She was intimidated by her neighbor, staring at her all day from his gazebo.

Time is on their side, yet all their buildings and temples will eventually turn into heaps of stones. They copulate, propagate, hoping that after they die they too will be reborn. They desperately want to tell you their dreams: “I dreamt I was fleeing radiation,” “I dreamt I was a drop of water.” A decaffeinated culture.

They believe in the transmigration of souls, especially animal souls. They protect their eyes from the sun (they are afraid of the sun). You can easily mistake them for robots. Don't tamper with their systems. Beware of their hands and of their little sharp fingernails.

They protect their gardens and forests with weapons of mass destruction. (KEEP OFF THE GRASS!) They shake their fists at the sky, write messages to the departed on the roofs of their houses. They walk along the beach, unseeing and unmoved. Under their feet, necropolis.

Time is everywhere, yet it eludes them. They can hold their breath under water for up to ten minutes, yet few of them have had the experience of finding themselves in totally unfamiliar surroundings. They take pills, stay connected . . . Their nerve cells produce electric discharges.

Some live in glass houses. Some live off the grid. Some have rain inside them. Some have night inside them. Some blend into nature. Some appear otherworldly. Some are on friendly terms with the dead. They will believe any you tell them!

They reluctantly accept the possibility of the existence of other planets. When requested, they use emergency exits, follow escape routes. They live in the clouds—a multitude, a rabble. They pick up their luggage at Carousel Three and you never see them again.

Were you afraid?

*Afraid of flies
and mummy masks.*

What do you remember?

*The smile of a child,
a shepherd.*

Where do they live?

*In basements, clouds,
forgotten things.*

What is the moon?

*The moon gives back
a woeful look.*

What did they say?

*Say No, say Yes
to fortune tellers.*

What did they look like?

*Like the mannequins
of de Chirico.*

These are their core values:
aesthetics, aesthetics, aesthetics.

They fetishize technology
and the idea of good and evil.

They have a penchant for mimicry.
They understand nothing.

They have kind faces
and a genetic predisposition for war.

They are not unlike hermits
on the islands of sociability.

They speak about the ineffable
in highly self-conscious tones.

Sometimes they break into song
or an orgy of flower arranging.

They believe in reincarnation,
being “vertically” connected.

They can never “see” themselves.
Their mirrors are ambiguous.

They believe in art for art’s sake.
They inhabit the human form.

They study weather reports.
They follow safety precautions.

They disappear in one decade
and reappear in another.

They live in affluent suburbs
stretching from sea to sea.

They collect archetypes.
They study their palms for clues.

They rake leaves in November.
They prefer roots to trees.

They watch movies at sunset.
They read flash fiction.

Sometimes they refuse to enter
the realm of the symbolic.

They pose for photographs,
rehearsing nonexistence.

They ride on the escalator.
They are internal emigrants.

They talk on portable devices,
each in a different language.

Their cities attract the lonely.
Their temples shelter the doubting.

Their buildings sway in the wind.
Their statues look upward.

Their hospitals teem with magicians
long intimate with death.

Their supermarkets sell produce,
household objects, guns.

Their history lacks accidents.
Their religion lacks bloodshed.

Their science lacks certainty.
Their philosophy lacks gossip.

Their literature lacks altitude.
Their rooftops are white.

Their enemies lack ammunition.
Their joy is incomplete.

Their flags are patriotic.
Their fences are cosmopolitan.

Their nightmares are scripted.
Their needs are mass-produced.

Their cars are unbreakable.
Their missiles are unstoppable.

Their art represents nothing.
Their dogs are psychic.

Proportion is anathema to them.
Perfection is catastrophe to them.

The absolute is relative to them.
They maintain equilibrium.

Their future is unknown to them.
Their destiny is unfair to them.

Their solitude is poetic to them.
They embrace contradiction.

OZONE

You board a flight on which everything seems routine

Whose hands on the tarmac took your suitcase away?

Airline pilots are called philosophers of space

Their eyes are opaque like the eyes of Modigliani's

figures

Only painters can speak with authority about feelings

In America a man gunned down many people once

For three weeks fear was synonymous with white truck

Toll roads, data centers, communication satellites

A bird's eye view of the Valley of the Fallen

First objects, then affects, then forms of cooperation

The ozone layer and other particulate matter

We live in a Heraclitean age (which is like all ages)

Along the river, diamond-shaped signs ALCOSAN

Your eyes cling to any text they can find

A billboard advertising daily wear contact lenses

Protesters with banners addressed to the people of

America

So what if history no longer knocks on the door

Resistance is no longer punishable by death

The membrane of consciousness is language (Bernstein)

Blue ink from blue pen, blue notebook cover

Attempts at speech while dreaming and while awake

An eyelash, a stray comma, on the pillow

From an unfinished dream, an unfinished reality

Words too far in the past to know what they mean

Encounters with the vastness of nature on the Aegean Sea

He composed while sitting for hours in total darkness

Image taken by the Hubble Space Telescope, Courtesy

NASA

The year of hope and flag burning, the year of the snake

Keys tossed into the river, attempts to define “dusk”

At the Omni Hotel, a panel of intellectuals

Able to fight two wars at once, how many souls aboard

Rancière’s *Mute Speech*, pictures of sea and sky

No such thing as society, just a child born with no name

Black and white monuments, skyscrapers in the rain

Have you ever seen a thing spontaneously disintegrate?

A renewed demand for social realism in our age

In our age of small, artificially pacified nations
A man with dilated pupils discourses on cosmopolitanism
Clouds are a product of memory, a genre of time

The infinite multiplicity of history (a burning museum)
Stumbling on yet another improvised memorial
decades from now

I felt something I didn't know I was capable of feeling

Only once, two times maybe, did you notice the stars

Pay attention to root causes — begin with institutions

A new currency or co-op, “like particles or waves”

At the Kosmos Cinema, the first rain of summer

Your t-shirt is not a site of agency

Your grade is not a reflection of effort

The protesters with banners, the police, more police

Some singing in unison, some thinking in unison

Refusal is not enough

Here's a map: this part belongs to you, that to barbarians

Stoned to death by the Taliban in a rudderless state

The meaning of "we" in the party of "no"

The sun, says the guru, is the first metaphysician

Money doesn't have a country, says the voice on the radio

We toured the historic city among posters of the missing

Tears streaming down his face or hardened lava

To identify the precise date when the shift occurred
A software program with a hidden design flaw
In August the river dried out, revealing an ancient statue

An old record was shattered at the Beijing Olympics
From *Ich bin ein Berliner* to *We Are All Socialists Now*
A leaflet from the street protest, to prove I was there

Music is muddle and everyone is an artist
He pulled up his shirt to display a small gunshot wound
A six-foot dollar sign stood beside her coffin

MORAL COMMERCE

America has always been hospitable to fame seekers, risk takers, creative geniuses, nonconformists, engineers and scientists, the world's highest IQs, etc.

Also to religious zealots, starving artists, celebrity magicians, deposed tyrants, fugitives from the future.
(*Welcome to the Soft Parade.*)

Import/export. At the pier, a ship delivers human cargo.

*

Burials are rare occurrences, yet they take place every day. (Hence realism.) So do terrorist attacks. (The ecstasy of a suicide bomber.) So do hostage standoffs. (*Lone gunman, death toll to rise.*) So do football games. (Nothing's more exciting than an empty stadium.) So do UFO sightings. ("What's in Fort Meade, Maryland?")

*

We haven't yet had suicide bombings in: airports, hospitals, libraries, churches, museums, hotels, casinos, shopping malls, amusement parks, train stations, movie theaters, waiting rooms, farmers' markets, restaurants, bars . . .

Toilets and ideology (Žižek). Shit and graffiti (Banksy).

*

Celan: “The poet is a pirate.” (Is there a video footage of him? Did he even exist?) In the internet era, the poet is more like a hacker. Or a plagiarist. (“He both loved and mistrusted words.”) Cut and paste. Copy and paste. Public domain, public gain.

In the war between Empire and the pirates, we side with the pirates.

*

The remains of the victims mixed with the remains of the perpetrators.

*

“The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure” (Jefferson). By the same token, terrorist attacks, shooting rampages, energy crises, etc. are good for the national metabolism.

Governor O’Malley orders flags to be flown at half-staff.
General Petroleum offers a rare apology.

*

“Let’s just say we are neighbors,” says the visitor from space.

*

Utopia, or “the stubborn negation of all that is.” Utopia, or “the opposite of the forgotten.” Utopia, and we’re almost out of time.

A blind climber. Game of Thrones. Double-entry bookkeeping. Brainwashed North Koreans. Pussy Riot.

We speak in figures to approach the unimaginable. Hence our failure to visualize utopia. Above and below us, all-reflecting blue.

*

Is peace patriotic?

*

We know all about Martians, but what about Venusians? The Venusians are different, with “pretty” faces and “nice” bodies. Be careful what you wish for, though. Some are prone to sudden metamorphosis.

They possess many kinds of intelligence (the bigger the dumber). Due to their unique capacity for sympathy, they internalize one another's pain. Their hearts seem to be on the wrong side of their chests.

Averse to technology, they live in primitive suburbs. Inside their improvised dwellings they produce dazed newborns. Their only expressions are phatic expressions, which are universal expressions.

All in all, the Venusians are more gentle and peaceful than humans. When you stare at them for too long, they change into basalt rock. When you touch them, they emit a loud piercing sound.

*

“Thus the discourse proper to Utopia is description: to draw out a representation. It consists in projecting a perfect and total presence into language accessible to the mind. For that the proper disposition and the right amount of time must be available, for a hasty sketch will not do, if for the simple reason that the description of an image is never-ending. The visible will always be in excess of the ‘sayable.’” (Louis Marin, *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath)

*

Nothing ever gets fixed there. Pictures hang crooked on the walls (their painters, in any case, seem blind). Elevators remain out of service for years. The people can take a lot: a sudden doubling of subway fares, for example. Their labor supports a well-fed, well-educated minority. Still, next to Stalinesque statues one notices a highly developed graffiti culture. On the crowded bus, a future revolutionary is reading *Principles of Argumentation*.

*

Europa, cramped Europa (versus still spacious America). Europa, which is largely a state of mind. Europa, i.e. no future. Europa, or Lars von Trier. Europa, "I love my life." Europa, what a mess!

The spirit of the carnivalesque pervades every political rally. Spanish ants among Roman ruins. A visit to Pessoa's grave. Old Polish music.

*

"Do what I say or face obliteration," says the visitor from space.

*

“Utopia is a city which cannot be founded by us but can found itself within us, can build itself bit by bit in our capacity to imagine it, to think it through.” (Italo Calvino)

*

Designed in California. Assembled in China.

*

One in five Americans believes that intelligent beings from other planets have made contact with humans on Earth. (Not confirmed by NASA.) One in five Americans believes that socialism is superior to capitalism. (Progress is lovely.) One in five Americans reports excessive sleepiness. (Who needs intellectuals?)

*

On the red carpet. Afghan village. Speed limit enforced by aircraft. Ads for sunglasses. Flash mobs and banner drops. We no longer eat animals, but when will we stop eating people? (We named our fish Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.)

One ecosystem destroys another ecosystem. Those who remain satisfied with the status quo . . . remain satisfied with the status quo. I can't believe they bleeped him! During the Q&A: "So what is one to do? Go and rescue those women?"

*

There have been complaints about loitering outside our local Royal Farms. The president of the Village Merchants Association says the loiterers are bad for business. A "NO LOITERING" sign has been posted on the door. The police can do nothing, though, because the loiterers (they may be lazy, but they aren't stupid!) say they are just drinking coffee or waiting for a bus.

What's wrong with laziness? In 1883 Paul Lafargue proclaimed it "the mother of the arts and all the virtues." More recently, the philosopher Carlos Fernández Liria has defended "the right to laziness." And who can forget Neruda's "Ode to Laziness" (*Ayer sentí que la oda / no subía del suelo*)? Not to mention Walt Whitman's "I loafe and invite my soul, I lean and loafe at my ease . . .?"

*

"Magic, next to my poetry, is the most important pursuit of my life. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write." (Yeats to John O'Leary, 1892)

*

It is difficult to get the news from poems, but can you get poems from the news? At a press conference, a disgraced politician wears a blue denim shirt in order to appear vulnerable. Time is running out on scientists looking for a fossilized skeleton in Australia. “Our mission is to make the world more open and connected.” UFO spotted on Beltway was a military drone. The police used the taser to subdue him and he stopped breathing.

*

To use or not to use line breaks.

*

At an exhibit outside of Lisbon, an experimental artist pokes his penis through a hole in the wall. In Tokyo, Mao Sugiyama has elective surgery to remove his genitals (to “underscore his commitment to an asexual lifestyle”), then serves them at a banquet, cooked and garnished with button mushrooms and Italian parsley.

The end of style. Polka dots (aka “infinity nests”). Painting while blindfolded. Making sound “visible.” Carwash epiphanies . . . Yet only a century ago artists wanted to “fling a pot of paint in the public’s face”! Earlier they drew horses and buffalo on cave walls. “How can you work on a full stomach?”

Debussy: “To express the inexpressible.”

*

My students pretend to write poems. They show, not tell. Writing doesn't come easily to them. They say it is not a natural act (they may be right.) I give them pointless exercises: *retype a poem, relineate a poem*. They don't know tree names, bird names. Without the internet they feel . . . sad.

I teach them to look into the Abyss. I teach them to set themselves on fire. I teach them ambiguity, complexity, multiplicity. Then, to confuse them, I teach them cynicism, hypocrisy, detachment. I teach them moral relativity: “Nothing to hold onto, nowhere to stand.”

This is called knowledge transfer.

*

Lutosławski: “Fishing for souls.”

*

“They do not discover the truths that are worth writing about” (Brecht).

Yes, but poets are artisans! They should work with their hands more (*poiein*). They should use *space*. Make things that are practical. Things like murals, fountains, bridges. (No more shit poems!) Things that matter. Things that endure.

*

Gunman on campus. Police still searching.

*

My students write about their feelings. Feelings are clichés, I tell them (parroting Lyn Hejinian). Quote unquote. They are not open to experiments. Yet taking advantage of the well-documented plasticity of young brains, I tell them about Yeats, Dostoevsky, Spinoza (“Spinoza remains an enigma”). I tell them about Whitman who, even when he attended political rallies, always stood apart from the crowd, never in the midst of the crowd (“both in and out of the game”). I tell them how to read a poem, how to avoid category mistakes, how to bite the hand that feeds them. I tell them to google “truth.”

Then we have a frank conversation about complicity.

*

Q: “Why do you read so much political theory?”

A: “It gives metaphors to my poetry.”

*

Josiah Warren, the first American anarchist: “The performance of a piece of music for the gratification of oneself and others, in which the performer feels pleasure but no pain, and which is attended with no contingent cost, may be said to cost nothing; there is, therefore, no ground of price. It may, however, be of great value to all within hearing. This intercourse of the feelings, which is not addressed to the intellect, and has no pecuniary feature, is here distinguished as our *moral commerce*.”

*

I teach them the Bible and Marx. I teach them Flarf. I teach them to define the “real.” I teach them *Vorschein*. I teach them transport. I teach them origins. For instance, the origins of capitalism.

At my university, the student to faculty ratio is 19:1.

*

The red card changes the game. Red and yellow make one hungry; hence McDonald's. "Unlock the doors of your perception, unclog your pores," says the health guru. My father resists getting a hearing aid. In the waiting room, a copy of the *National Geographic*. Color-coded folders.

*

Repurpose. Debrand.

*

Some will become landscape photographers. Some will become massage therapists. Some will become events coordinators. Some will become social workers. Some will become copy writers. Some will become accountants. Some will become lifeguards. Some will become exterminators. (Could we please kill rats more humanely?)

*

A course on water. A course on "great sayings."

*

The language of air traffic controllers. The language of hunger and love. The language of disaster movies. (We read but never believe in fiction.) The language of “ought” and “is.” The language of resistance and cooptation. The language of poetry. (Poetry in overheated rooms.)

*

Claudio Abbado on Mahler: “We are trying to get as close to the genius of these people as we can. We are faithful to the score. But we don’t understand what is behind the notes; behind the notes there is the universe of possibilities.”

*

I’m afraid I’ve become a collector of maxims. An intellectual dog walker!

*

Certain cities give off a special light that serves as an inspiration to poets, painters, and songwriters. Hence New York—the most poetical city in the world.

It was not always so. The title of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* was meant to be ironic.

*

Poems on NPR. Poems on the subway. A poem by Mario Benedetti on the emergency window of a bus in Granada. A poem written across the sky over New York City (June 2, 1982).

Inscriptions on buildings, plaques on walls. Poems in alternative weeklies. Poems in cancer clinics. Poems in fitting rooms. Conceptual poems (yuck!). Poems at polling stations.

They place them there to keep ordinary people miserable, alienated. To make them feel stupid. Art, always in the service of the elites!

*

Maybe today you will do "something slightly unusual"? Take a walk by a lake, unearth a mastodon tusk, get trapped in an elevator, have your card swallowed by an ATM, open the door and discover your lost son (who happens to be your age), stare in the eye of a whale, befriend a Poe impersonator on the airport shuttle, see a clown riding a unicycle through the campus?

*

Favorite color? Blue (green). Favorite season? Autumn (spring). Wrote poems since the age of nine. Avoided crowds. Hated trees, their pathetic cries. Hated language. Sought obscurity in the same way other people seek fame. (*Her name misspelled on her tombstone . . .*)

Ideas came to him easily, like pieces of luggage on the conveyor belt. You could recognize him from a distance by his stooping shoulders. “It’s to the other man, to Borges, that things happen.” Lost a 5,000-page manuscript while changing trains (planes) . . . Poured his entire life into that little book!

“The element of surprise is what I look for when I’m writing” (Naipaul). But how to satisfy the clicking public?

*

Bilingual feelings . . . It’s never about the right word; it’s about the *next* word. (His accent suddenly thickened.)

It’s about being at home in neither language. (It’s never about language; read Nicanor Parra’s “Último Poema.”)

Slips of the tongue. Speech overheard. The ineffability topos.

A shower or two a day.

*

My body demands that I do something with it (start tweeting condolences). I open the curtains to a heavy-lidded morning (“Nice knowing you!”). I sit down to my last meal (a chicken that, like me, has had a good life).

Please do not come to my funeral. Please donate my organs to the person who has been patiently waiting for them.

*

In his diary, every line neatly blacked out.

*

In those years, I’d always carry with me a copy of Badiou’s *The Century*. Also Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, Hardt and Negri’s *Empire and Multitude*, Agamben’s *State of Exception*, Mouffe’s *The Democratic Paradox*. Also books by Harvey (“unreconstructed Marxist”) and Arrighi (“never looked too healthy”). Also *The Essential Žižek*.

With stacks of political theory under each arm, I felt like a superhero in a body armor.

*

Blood and soil. Language and soil. The most expressive part of you is your face, followed by your thumbs with opposable joints. The driest part of you are the tips of your elbows. A common side effect of crying is feeling a lump in the throat, otherwise known as “globus sensation.”

Tears and laughter. *Weird English*. Air Malaysia. Oh yes, and “my constant compulsion to read and write” (*Austerlitz*). I’m sorry I’m such a poor correspondent . . . From the window, I see a plane flying perpendicular to mine. I’m a citizen of the country in which I’ll die.

*

Something lives in my house. As soon as I open my eyes, the beast leaps at me. As soon as I close them, I confront a potential trauma. “If I don’t recognize the number, I don’t answer my phone.” In my neighborhood, even a baseball bat can serve as a weapon.

If you see something, say something. During a trip to the dunes, a young couple asked me to take a picture of them. At the movie theater, I spotted a man with a fake beard and video-recording sunglasses. At the airport, a stranger handed me a small package.

*

My left hand grasps my right hand in a sudden fit of sympathy. Lyricism in spite of itself!

*

Words to no one in particular: a hand wave, a gesture. “Unseen reality apprehended by consciousness.” The return of the forgotten.

Daydreaming. The mysterious blue (glaucomous?) light you never see at four o’clock in the morning.

But inspiration is just a matter of chemical imbalances in your brain! After all, “I” is just a grammatical convention.

*

The first sentence of Mairéad Byrne’s bio in *The Best of (What’s Left of) Heaven* (Publishing Genius, 2010): “Mairéad Byrne emigrated from Ireland to the United States in 1994, for poetry.”

*

Anne lives in Warsaw. Mark lives in New York City. Another Mark lives just outside of New York City. Dawn lives in Chicago. Richard lives in Baltimore. Sean lives in Venezuela, modestly. My parents live in Connecticut suburbs. (Genes and culture.)

Wallace Stevens found Hartford ordinary, left it poetic. Peter lives in Florida. John Travolta also lives in Florida. For the last two years, I've been spending a lot of time in hotel rooms. Justin wants to retire in Marfa (and he's only thirty-five!)

The old man sleeps in his car. The cab driver is from Ukraine, not Russia. Joe, with an eye tattoo on his neck, lives in the park. Chelsea suffers from a degenerative disease that completely disables the body while leaving the mind intact.

Shame lives on the eyelids. The future lives in the present. Dorothy A. Murphy currently resides at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Williamsburg, Virginia. (*Virginia is for Lovers.*) The blind Chinese activist lives in Washington, D.C.

Bobby lives inside another person's body. Animals live in the moment. (Harry hides in the closet.) Americans live in the future. Philosophers live in the clouds. Cosmopolitans, as the name indicates, live in the cosmos.

As soon as she entered the plane, she switched to a different language.

*

This is your habitus speaking. You can look but not touch. The longest time you can look is four to five seconds. Any longer look will be considered ogling.

When you shake hands, allow no more than two or three seconds. After that, any touching becomes sexual. The palm leaves a faint residue of oil and salt that can damage even the hardest surface.

*

The end of civilization will be marked by a series of cataclysmic events: the icecaps melting, a rogue wave, an earthquake, forest fires, a global monetary crisis, tornados (tractor trailers, grand pianos flying through the air).

The past in front of us, the future far behind. Uranium and plutonium.

Only the internet will survive. *Save? No.*

*

A dog ran up to him, started to lick his face . . .

Everyone should have their own pet, especially one from a shelter. Everyone should have something to stroke, to fondle.

*

Share the road with animals, share the planet with animals
. . . Sure, but they will always remain predatory and
rapacious, despite our best attempts to domesticate them.

(Google “bored orcas.”) For this reason we now have
bigger cages in zoos.

What a disgusting, vile-looking fly!

*

This street is a museum. The security guard in front of our
branch of Bank of America will be shot in a leg two
weeks from now during an attempted robbery, but at least
he will be OK, which can’t be said of the Chinese
restaurant around the corner: it will unexpectedly go out
of business in seven months’ time, never to return again.
We like their moo shu.

*

The person you pass on the street may be a fascist, a
torturer, a bigot, a child molester, a psychopath, a
Satanist, an assassin, an alien.

For instance, this elderly woman at the bus stop: “I
remember music. I remember clouds. I remember when
people actually swam in the ocean.”

You keep on walking, your fists clenched intelligently.

*

The barbarians. Yes, always a kind of solution.

*

We don't want old people, with their wool sweaters and cocoon sunglasses, on our fast-speed boats. Let them stay at home and collect anniversary coins. We have the right to our amusements, our orgasms.

We don't want fat people to sit next to us on a plane. We don't want the homeless to sleep on our newly repainted park benches. The stench their bodies produce . . . When I say such things, I'm aware I sound like a bigot.

We blame the fat for being fat, the homeless for being homeless. The homeless know this. They go back to their mansions, remove their rags, take a shower. They deposit their money in the bank. The fat take off their body suits.

*

Stop only for ambulances and caravans.

*

Check your account daily, your pulse hourly. Watch these ads carefully. Do not cross median. Take responsibility for your actions (feelings).

Eventually your computer will know whether it's you or someone pretending to be you.

*

A kind man with bad breath: "We should put these people in special camps, where they can be taught to appreciate great literature and music, especially classical music. A little Mozart never hurt anybody. Their children should be sent on field trips to Civil War battlefields. They should be taken to galleries and museums and introduced to famous works of art. *If you believe in education, you must believe in reeducation.*"

*

Be careful not to click twice. You will be charged twice.

*

No one likes being rained on, spat on. Payphones, mailboxes, antennas . . . The map says: *You are here.*

On the bus, the insane, the homeless, the addicts, and the working poor. On the phone, “This is Charity speaking.”

At the stop, you give all your change to the homeless.

*

Chances of being in a plane crash are infinitesimally small, yet almost every day a plane crashes somewhere in the world. In most aviation accidents, a number of things have to go wrong. Until the final report comes in, we shouldn't jump to any conclusions. Then the flight attendants started chanting: “Brace! Brace!”

*

Please do not listen to this message if you are not the person we are calling. Please call back if this is a wrong number.

*

Spymasters read spy novels, football players play football video games. Firefighters fire petards at a political rally in Seville (2010). In America, politicians hold a golf summit (2011). *Put politicians on minimum wage and see how fast things change*, says a graffito on the internet. In the museum, white dots on a white wall. We thought it was a part of the stunt.

TV reporters talk only to each other (“Back to you, Anderson”). In the movie, a flight attendant takes over for the pilots who have suddenly fallen sick. First the candidate engaged in a debate with his foreign-policy aide, then the two men switched sides and argued opposite positions. A typical performance of *The Surprise Symphony* lasts about 23 minutes. Is this real world or exercise?

Confusing fiction with reality, I once punched a guy who had insulted me in a dream. I once dropped a lighter into a sewer and, as I was trying to recover it, realized that I had watched exactly the same scene in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train*. “Like the sensation of being followed . . .” I’ve never seen so much real world stuff happening during an exercise.

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Piotr Gwiazda is the author of two previous books of poems, *Gagarin Street* (2005) and *Messages* (2012). He has also published two critical studies, *James Merrill and W.H. Auden* (2007) and *U.S. Poetry in the Age of Empire, 1979-2012* (2014). His translation of Grzegorz Wróblewski's *Kopenhaga* appeared in 2013. He teaches at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC).

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Praise for *Aspects of Strangers*

Stranger, from estranged: added to, from without. Like Robert Frank's photographs in *The Americans*, Piotr Gwiżdza's poems manage to arrest the wholly contemporary moment with a clarity that sees through to the underlying structure—the intention, the idea—latent underneath. “They pose for photographs, / rehearsing nonexistence.” “Their maps are inaccurate and their money is worthless. Gasoline flows through their systems.” Funny and furious, wry and engaged, Gwiżdza is a poet of astonishing intelligence and accomplishment, wholly in the American grain while at the same time international—or cosmopolitan—in his influences and interests. These poems provide us with a kind of magic, self-estranging looking-glass, enabling us to see ourselves from a great distance. How small we look, how odd. Reading this book I begin to understand how the future (if there is one) might regard us—with pity, amusement (we are, after all, family) and a deep, deep frustration. *Aspects of Strangers* is the antidote to that frustration, which makes it that rarest of things, a necessary book of poetry. — Andrew Field

The dislocations that locate you, the clues one builds from the generic similarity of places, how behind them a universal mystery rises—these are the starting points of Piotr Gwiżdza's excellent *Aspects of Strangers*. It's an important thing that Gwiżdza reminds us of, this call to attend, to be aware of ourselves, even as we become a “they,” where language also becomes “a kind of camouflage.” Gwiżdza's is an important and different take on the contemporary situation, and for that a necessary voice to consider, and do as you're asked: “Please call back if this is a wrong number.” — John Gallaher

Piotr Gwiżdza gives us the postmodern flâneur in *Aspects of Strangers*, somewhere between “Station of the Metro” and *Sans Soleil*, between dystopia and the abyss. The language of the pedestrian in the necropolis is sharp and ironic, but his peers are deracinated, clueless, and reasonably content, in a Deleuzianly vertiginous way. Gwiżdza's dazzling carnival of maxims, observations, inverted slogans, pieces of dreams, quotations, asides . . . is like a miniature twenty-first century *Arcades Project*, and in the throes of his caustic *ars poetica* perhaps there is a glimmer of hope for awakening from the bad dream we've induced. — David Lazar

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