

COMPREHENDING
MORTALITY



JOHN BLOOMBERG-RISSMAN
AND
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Comprehending Mortality

**John Bloomberg-Rissman
and
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**Locofo Chaps
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Cover: "Owl on a Frog" (ca. 1620). Austrian,
Innsbruck. Bronze with brown lacquer patina.
Height: 17.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of
Art's The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, 1982

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*Your title "Comprehending Mortality"
is SO good that you need to write
a poem about it.*
—Thomas Fink



Achilles (2003-2017)

For Achilles

Considering the sky, considering that

it has no distance is therefore not
even space but just nothing,
for if you went to the moon, you'd
have to go to the other moon, and
if you went to the other moon, you'd
have to go to still a further moon,
and if you went to a further moon,
how many more moons? How many
snowflakes? How many snowstorms
of snowflakes? of universes of
moons do you have to visit before
you'll learn there is only no meas-
urement and therefore no distance
and therefore you must have a
moon in your eye lash inside an
atom of its tip and

How to freeze each inevitable stutter of love—

Dear John, today marks the one-year anniversary
of the assassination of Berta Cáceres, murdered
by US-backed Honduran government-backed
death squads on March 3. Like many who knew
and worked with her, I was aware that this
fighter for indigenous people wasn't destined to
die of old age. She spoke too much truth to
power — not just for indigenous rights, but for

women's and LGBTQ rights, for authentic democracy, for the well-being of the earth, and for an end to tyranny by transnational capital and empire. Since her murder, it's ever more clear what her community says: Berta did not die, she multiplied!

Meditation, if conducted deeply, must harvest pain—

'In Intuitionist Mathematics, it is posited that what we call infinity is equivalent to a pure human feeling.'

Radioactive yellows and reds make plastic flowers inappropriate for marking grief. But how else to see them by roadsides when traffic passes swiftly?

- = inhalation (hard)
- = exhalation (hard)
- = hissing (whistling between the teeth like the sound of a snake)
- = rattling in the throat
- = growling like a dog (like a dog about to bark)
- = grasping (gasping?) (hoarse sound) made with the windpipe by pulling up the belly
- = sigh (made simultaneously by the windpipe, mouth and nose)

- = snoring
- = hiccup
- = cough, clearing the throat
- = belch
- = clicking the tongue
- = farting sound (with the lips)
- = (crackling (as in imitating the sound of an auto)
- = spitting sound (a sort of poo-pah-pitooey together)
- = kissing (noisily)
- = whistling (simple, not melodic)

To see—

This archipelago consists of ten principal islands, of which five exceed the others in size. They are situated under the Equator, and between five and six hundred miles westward of the coast of America. They are all formed of volcanic rocks; a few fragments of granite curiously glazed and altered by the heat, can hardly be considered as an exception. Some of the craters, surmounting the larger islands, are of immense size, and they rise to a height of between three and four thousand feet. Their flanks are studded by innumerable smaller orifices. I scarcely hesitate to affirm, that there must be in the whole archipelago at least two thousand craters. These consist either of lava and scoriæ, or of finely-stratified, sandstone-like tuff. Most of the latter are beautifully symmetrical; they owe their origin to eruptions of volcanic mud without any

lava [...] Considering that these islands are placed directly under the equator, the climate is far from being excessively hot; this seems chiefly caused by the singularly low temperature of the surrounding water, brought here by the great southern Polar current. Excepting during one short season, very little rain falls, and even then it is irregular; but the clouds generally hang low. This brief display implies what is to come: many flickering letters put into motion and shaped into patterns before receding back into a blank screen.

The past is thick, and the present thin

Entes ... Entes ...
GHOSTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTRAIN

**Tears / not diluting the martial energy of
a gaze**

So that's how you do it. Dear Angel of Dust. You have become familiar in my neighborhood like the lady with the gold turban staring fixedly, silently, desperately through the window of Twin Donuts. You have become as familiar as the man with the face of wrinkled black velvet picking at mismatched sneakers, one with laces, as he hugs his knees bent over the bench in front of Häagen Dazs from which he battles 10-foot demons. What are you thinking behind your

eternally-smiling face as you walk in and out of stores with the wind chimes you hawk, bunched together like a handful of dead chickens? What are you thinking as the mobiles which need only wind to sing are rejected again and again? Dear Mama, you said it again when you watched me read poems at the Library of Congress of these here United States. Not bad for an immigrant. Dear Angel of Dust. Etcetera, etcetera ... Bahala na ... relationship, recovery, revelation, redress, rebellion, red, restoration, renaissance, redrawing, review, re_____ ... from 147 Million Orphans. Dear Angel of. We watched F___ slice mushrooms delicately then spread thin segments on wood planks to dry under the sun. Dear Ange.

This tree will never grow. This bush
Has no branches.
I wonder how our mouths will look in
twenty-five years
When we say

I don't understand why half the
world is still crying, man,
when the other half of the world is
still crying too, man ...

I wonder how our mouths will look in
twenty-five years
When we say

Tomorrow never happens, it's all
the same fucking day, man ...

We'll look like seaweed thrown

Against a pier

A dead starfish on a beach

All the oceans of emotion [full stop]
Are full of such fish

Absence a singe

Yet let us commend encaustic for protecting the fragility of paper—

When I returned, years later, I found the same random patterns there on the wall. As Katsumi Omori said, “I must go to Fukushima. I must shoot the radiation (though it cannot be shot).” The resulting film imbues a concrete world with dream logic as it flows through three parts: Argentinean suburbs, Mozambique’s liminal grasslands, and the dense green of a Philippine jungle. But work isn’t stable or guaranteed, though that doesn’t seem to weigh too heavily on anyone. Their task remains enigmatic, more so after a coworker pulls out an odd black cone. Screens, wires, disarray, outages. I think of Achilles. And Misha Mengelberg just died. Strange how I watched a video of him playing with Bennink and Dolphy just the other day. I’m glad we were coteremporaries, as they put it in the 19th century. Think about it. A good word. Co ... temporaries. I advance cautiously, on all fours at first, then find the earth penetrable, my limbs

entering the soil as I move forward. Where it had
seemed cold, the effects of the cold have passed;
where there was weight, weight is
undifferentiated, the pressure valve

turned two quarters to left
traces of hair & skin
twenty-three by twenty-three harmonic
inches
every slant is a tooth, albeit soft
in the polystyrene conference hall; those
that meet well eat first the head down
sucker in structure, no moon to take
the whole the day off.

Pushkin / grieved because Beauty exists

Avalokitesvara despaired as he looked down into
the hells which were rapidly filling up again even
though he had emptied them many times
through his teachings. He became so
disheartened that his body shattered into
thousands of pieces, true to his original vow. He
cried to the Buddhas for help. Of the ones who
came to him, one was Amitabha Buddha, who
became his teacher and helped him take on a
new form — a female one with a thousand hands
to provide aid to those who suffered, and with
the eyes of Wisdom in each of the palms. And
thus Avalokitesvara became the goddess Kuan
Yin. Then Kuan Yin despaired as she looked
down into the hells which were rapidly filling up
again even though she had emptied them many

times through her compassion. She became so disheartened that her body shattered into thousands of pieces, true to Avalokitesvara's original vow. She cried to the Buddhas for help. Of the ones who came to her, one was Amitabha Buddha, who became her teacher and helped her take on a new form — or forms, I should say, visible and invisible, each and every one of the “ten thousand things”, from subatomic particles to songs to galaxies, each with a myriad thousand hands to provide aid to those who suffered, and with the eyes of Love and Wisdom in each of the palms. And still the hells filled, seemingly faster than the speed of light. At this point, Gert of the Well starts laughing. He knows the Sultan is going to want to hear his story, tho there is nothing to be learned from it. He pulls himself up off the bed and goes into the bathroom, the relief of his old age. Blue and sea-green tiles gleam on the floor and the walls. The big basin occupies one whole side, two yards in length. It can be filled continuously from two pipes that pour in hot or cold water. The water, heated in a cistern on the floor above, is allowed to flow in as one wishes, and mixes with the cold water that comes down through the other pipe. He immerses himself in the warmth of the basin, motionless. Let the Sultan wait. This is all we want today. And yet ... and yet ... and yet the world swirls around us. We wake up in the night with just each other ...

True love / is never chaste

But love is also / a source of difficulty

:::

Sudden affinity for tender hours

NOTES

John Bloomberg-Rissman

Sources for my portion of this assemblage/
homage:

considering ... tip and: Jack Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*; *Dear John ... multiplied!*: Chung-Wha Hong, Grassroots International, "Remembering Berta Cáceres", email rec'd 2 Mar 017, approx. 6:06am PST, and Beverly Bell, "Berta Cáceres, Presente!", at <http://fpif.org/berta-caceres-presente/> Foreign Policy in Focus, 10 Mar 016; *'In Intuitionist ... feeling'*: an unnamed friend of Alana Siegel's, quoted in Siegel's Alana Siegel reviews Katy Bohinc", at <http://poeticsresearch.com/article/alana-siegel-reviews-katy-bohinc/> *Journal of Poetics Research* 2 (a review of Bohinc's *Dear Alain*); = *inhalation ... melodic*): Isidore Isou, "The New Letteric Alphabet", in *Lettrisme: Into the Present* (ed. Stephen C Foster); *this archipelago ... hang low*: Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle Round the World, Under the Command of Capt. Fitz Roy, R.N.*, in Charles Darwin, *Evolutionary Writings* (ed. James A Secord); *This brief... screen*: CT Funkhauser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959–1995*; *Entes ... Entes ...*: Lenora de Barros, "Entes ... Entes ...", in CT Funkhauser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959–1995*;

GHOSTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTRAIN: bpNichol, "Poem for My Father", in CT Funkhauser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959–1995*; *So that's ... do it*: Bobby Seale, quoted in Stephen Shames and Bobby Seale, *Power to the People: The World of the Black Panthers*; *Dear Angel of Dust*: Nathaniel Mackey, *Bass Cathedral*; *You have become ... immigrant*: Eileen R Tabios, "The Conductor", "Dear Mama", in *IMMIGRANT: Hay(na)ku & Other Poems In A New Land*; *Dear Angel of Dust*: Nathaniel Mackey, *Bass Cathedral*; *Etcetera ... Orphan*: Eileen R Tabios, "The Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon", "Hay(na)ku with Ducktail", "from *147 Million Orphans / Haybun MMXIV*" in *IMMIGRANT: Hay(na)ku & Other Poems In A New Land*; *Dear Angel of*: Nathaniel Mackey, *Bass Cathedral*; *We watched ... sun*: Eileen R Tabios, "From "The Ineffability of Mushrooms"", in *IMMIGRANT: Hay(na)ku & Other Poems In A New Land*; *Dear Ange*: Nathaniel Mackey, *Bass Cathedral*; *This tree ... we say*: Jack Spicer, "For Russ", in *Admonitions*; *I don't understand ... crying too, man*: Janis Joplin, "Ball and Chain" (live, Toronto, July 4, 1970, during the train tour across Canada); *I wonder ... we say*: Jack Spicer, "For Russ", in *Admonitions*; *Tomorrow ... day, man*: Janis Joplin, "Ball and Chain" (live, Toronto, July 4, 1970, during the train tour across Canada); *We'll look*: JBR; *like seaweed ... fish*: Jack Spicer, "For Harvey", "For Mac", in *Admonitions*; *When I returned ... wall*: Gil Ott, *Traffic*, in *arrive on wave: The Collected Poems of Gil Ott*; *As Katsumi Omori said*: JBR; *"I must go ... shot)"*: Katsumi Omori, quoted in Marc Feustel, "Photobooks After 3/11", at

<http://www.marcfeustel.com/the-photobook-review-issue-8/> Marc Feustel
(reprinted/posted/reposted/whatever from *The PhotoBook Review*, Issue 008, April 2015); *The resulting ... outages*: Danielle Burgos, “The Human Surge”, at
<http://bombmagazine.org/article/2611228/the-human-surge> BOMB, 3 Mar 017 (re Eduardo Williams, *The Human Surge*); *I think ... Co ... temporaries*: JBR; *I advance ... undifferentiated*: Gil Ott, “The Hawk”, in *arrive on wave: The Collected Poems of Gil Ott*; *the pressure ... off*: Verity Spott, “Slack Against the Committee – A Charm”, at
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<http://www.goddessgift.com/goddess-myths/avalokitesvara.htm> Goddess Gift; *Then Kuan Yin ... light*: JBR; *At this point ... wait*: Luther Blissett / Wu Ming, *Q* (tr. Shaun Whiteside); *This is all ... other*: Juliana Spahr, “Poem Written from November 30, 2002 to March 27, 2003”, in *The Connection of Everyone with Lungs*.

Eileen R. Tabios

The lines in bold-face came from my poem
“Achilles” which I’d first entitled “HIRAETH:
Grieving Over My Departed Dog While Editing A

Poetry Manuscript." I wrote the poem for my beloved dog, Achilles, who transitioned while I was editing a poetry manuscript entitled *HIRAETH*. Shortly after Achilles passed, I returned to the editing process. During the process, a poem for Achilles surfaced as a result of certain lines evoking her love for Achilles as well as Achilles' love for the world.

Hiraeth. In the diaspora, one's home is often where dogs reside. For a dog is pure love.

ABOUT THE POETS

John Bloomberg-Rissman has spent the last dozen years or so working on a long project called *Zeitgeist Spam*. Parts published so far: *No Sounds of My Own Making* (Leafe Press, 2007), *Flux, Clot & Froth* (Meritage Press, 2010), *A Picture of Everyone I Love Passes Through Me* (a collaboration with Lynn Behrendt, Lunar Chandelier Press, 2016), and *In the House of the Hangman* (Laughing/Ouch/Cube/Press, 2016). Additionally, he “authored” the “conceptual” work *2nd Notice of Modifications to Text of Proposed Regulations: Regulation and Policy Branch, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation* (Leafe Press & Laughing/Ouch/Cube/Publications, 2010). He is also the editor or co-editor of several volumes: *1000 Views of “Girl Singing”* (Leafe Press, 2009), *The Chained Haynaku* (Meritage Press & xPress(ed), 2010, co-edited with Eileen R. Tabios, Ivy Alvarez and Ernesto Priego), and *Poems for the Millennium 5: Barbaric, Vast & Wild* (Black Widow Press, 2015, co-edited with Jerome Rothenberg). He is now at work on the next section of *Zeitgeist Spam*, *With the Noose Around My Neck*.

Eileen R. Tabios has released over 40 collections of poetry, fiction, essays, and experimental biographies from publishers in eight countries and cyberspace. Her most recent include her first trilingual (English, Romanian,

Spanish) edition, *YOUR FATHER IS BALD: Selected Hay(na)ku Poems* (Bibliotheca Universalis, 2017); *THE OPPOSITE OF CLAUSTROPHOBIA* (Knives, Forks and Spoons Press, 2017); *AMNESIA: Somebody's Memoir* (Black Radish Books, 2016) and her first bilingual edition (English, Romanian), *I FORGOT ARS POETICA* (Bibliotheca Universalis, 2016). Recipient of the Philippines' National Book Award for Poetry for her first poetry collection, she has seen her poems translated into eight languages. She also has edited, co-edited or conceptualized 11 anthologies of poetry, fiction and essays. Inventor of the poetic form "hay(na)ku," she maintains a bibliophilic blog, "Eileen Verbs Books"; edits *Galatea Resurrects*, a popular poetry review; and steers the literary and arts publisher Meritage Press. More information is available at <http://eileenrtabios.com>

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