

Beginning Was

Poems
by

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Preface

Language was born all at once. . . After a transformation . . . a change has taken place, from a stage where nothing had meaning to a stage where everything had.

C. Lévi-Strauss

I wrote these poems in 1979-80, over a period of about a year. I had been reading Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and decided to go back to look again at Claude Lévi-Strauss (the pre-post-structuralist, or just plain structuralist, anthropologist.) When I read the sentence above, I was overtaken by a sensation of what a cacophonous effect that would have had—I mean if language came all at once, just like that. An empty, placid head, nothing much doing. Then, what? I had a vision that the whole of human history might well have been a series of failed attempts to come to terms with the profound trauma of this "transformation." I've never had much confidence in words. Odd, you might think, for someone who makes his living with them. But that is exactly what words do, make us odd, make us living. That's why I wrote these poems.

Hyperuttereme

Way back in the back of
his wackiest dream, words woke,
wafted up in him like smoke.
Meaning-mirages flickered, flared.
Hair to his feet, stutter in
his step, he muttered down
the mountain, re-nouned now.
An alien image shimmered at his feet:
he studied himself in a puddle of his fear.

Carefully surveying his semblance
for structure, he spotted a specter
lecturing a tree: "I am nothing
and I run this show. So there!"
The tree did not reply, just stared
vacantly past the horizon,
frowning its brow, all the answers
it had carefully prepared
fleeing piecemeal in his wind.

Unaccustomed to the suddenness of
sundown, a rush of pitch, he breathed
deep to quell a quiver in his voice.
He pretended he was dumb.
But he was not. Moonrise.
Lightfall through the leaves.
Lithe shadows dancing
around trees. He cleared his throat,
composed himself: "I am nothing

and I run this show. So there!"
Chaos! He scratched his chin,
wondered at the that mess he was in,
climbed a tree to find out what went wrong.
Peering down from the topmost branch
he saw something ugly and inevitable
lying beneath him on the ground
beating up dust with dirty wings.
He waited for himself to descend.

Motes

There came weather fit for any king.
This is awfully sweet fruit to eat,
he thought, gnawing as he walked.
He torched a bush and nothing
was consumed. He caught a fish
and fed himself for weeks. Rain
came down like breadsticks at his feet.
He made a coat that sparkled in the sun.
He sharpened all his teeth.

He was the only player and made up
all the prayers. He brought
a boulder back and boxed it.
He was the apple of his eye.
Puffed up like wind, inscrutable
as night, he swelled, spelled,
yelled, mayhem in his wake.
This is heavenly he thought,
the way it ought to be.

Huntsman and herdsman
he hounded sounds around.
Blameless, he changed the rules,
rolled a bigger boulder back.
Then the weather changed.
Black clouds, stacked up sticks,
sparked a few hard ones in his ears.
In the echo of the last blast,
a whisper of a warning in the air:

"It's snake eyes this time, pal. See."
Those words like stones were spoke
and broke his teeth. Silver slivers
pierced his tongue. His coat
went up in smoke. In a squalor
of solitude, he dug in deep.
From the dark hole of his head peering,
he saw nothing but the tiny light
of a distant bush burning in his eye.

Spume

He hid out long, sucked whites of eggs
through straws, squeezed a boil
on his butt, offered up a flock
of explanations. Nothing worked.
Water lapped his ankles as he paced.
He slaked his throat to pray
but the gall of it all caked
his tongue in salt. This was a world
for frogs, and he was not.

Caught in the crotch of
a dilemma, stripped stark to his sole
self, he lapped and babbled.
The wind-flogged waves lapped
and babbled back, slapped
disappointments down.
One minute lightning stroked
from pillars of clouds. The next
fist-size hail pelted him senseless.

Bellicose winds rolled over him
like war, draping sheets of rain
over corpses of his dreams.
He tried to sleep but tossed like froth
on the swells of an ungovernable sea.
He swam until his arms and legs
were jello, bellied up and waited
for the end. He woke on bald rock,
a dead bird at his feet.

No one read his rights.
His wrongs were booked and printed
on two tablets in his hand.
He popped them in his mouth to stop
the hammers whamming in his head.
He built a cell and polished all the bars,
slammed the door and threw away the key.
He waited for a signal from the stars.
His heart beat like a kettle drum to be free.

Well-Done

Free at last from his checkered past
he gird his loins up like a man,
found a desert of his own.
This is sackcloth time he thought,
time to tame the beast. He squatted
in a hovel made of sticks, fasted
down to bone, sat still as any stone,
heard nothing but rusty music
of dying wind among dry reeds.

His tongue stuck to his palate
and was dumb. It was a long season
down among the snakes. They grinned
and writhed like women naked at his feet.
They told him dirty jokes.
They drank and smoked.
Temptation upon temptation came
and went. Tough as any nut to crack,
he just grinned back and bore it.

Then one day, honed hard,
he came out flailing, stomped
the snakes, pulled their teeth
and scattered them like seeds.
Up they sprouted, longer, fatter,
meaner, baring bigger fangs.
They coiled tight to strike.
He gird his loins up like a man,
turned his tail and ran.

This is hair shirt time he thought,
time to salve the soul.
He squatted in a hovel
made of stone, whipped himself
in shape, made nothing but rusty
music with his chains, to which
he chanted in a stupor till he slept.
He was dark and stunning in that dream.
He gave himself the creeps.

Logos

Caught in the gauze of violet dawn
he hung like haze between leaf and light.
The landscape was transmogrified,
violent and weird. He was beaked
and tweaked and spindled, poked
and pulled and poled. Rosy fingers
picked him up like dust, flicked
him back to dreams. Schizophrenic
clouds raced in and out, stage left:

a genial soliloquy, translucent
and profound; stage right: a chorus
of thunder inviolable as night.
An audience of one clapped
with one hand in his ear. He felt
a wine-dark breath breathing
down his neck, heard the clack
of hooved feet at his heels.
He headed for the hills.

He hid inside a cave and built
a fire to keep warm. All night
he watched shadows dancing
on the wall. Full of leading questions
to himself, he followed jerkily
where they led. Correspondence
baffled him at first, but he heard
the wheels that make it work
whirring quietly, high above him

in the sky: what is not is true.
He pulled out memories like a skein,
snipped them into pieces
at his feet. He flew like dew
between leaf and light and knew.
He heard the croak of frogs, the chirp
of birds announcing dawn. He wafted
down on the wings of dying flies
to the silence of ideas behind his eyes.

Wholly Smoke

This is enough to use for now he mused.
Exhausted from late nights, confused
he decided on vacation time: a cruise.
Wrong from the start. Wind hit hard,
piped up wicked music from the rocks,
licked and tickled him like tongues.
Bound and determined to stick it out,
he sailed the straight and narrow
till it split, faced both ways at once.

A conundrum fit for a king: should he
run the rocks and risk a pounding
headache? or skirt the drain he knew
would suck him down the chute?
Out of his depth on this one,
he weighed anchor. Then he weighed
his words. He had to have a cause--
that was final. Godly mountains
poked through gathered clouds.

A smoky voice stoked up, spoke.
Was it his own? He listened like a child.
It told how bold and heroic on his broad
shoulders he held up the whole shebang,
had fought hard against stiff odds
to make it speakable and neat,
his long labors straightening up
the stalls, a word for every thing,
everything penned in words.

He lolled for hours balanced on the mast,
memorized the rhythm of the waves.
He was efficient in his work,
thought it out and back and out again,
polished his material till it shone.
Ready at last he assumed a formal air,
lit his pipe and lectured like a pro.
The wind and waves shrank back.
The rocks dropped off to sleep. So did he.

Locus

Like all dreams this could never last.
He woke to a world rational as glass.
Predictable as clockwork he punched in,
settled to the task: He tracked down
planets in their paths, greased
a brand-new axle for the stars,
set right the flywheel of his mind,
picked his brains, numbered all his
bones. He made himself at home.

On his way to lunch he slipped on wet grass.
The attractive earth beckoned and he sat.
There ought to be a law, he muttered.
And there was. He inclined himself
to the plain truth and thought: I think
I am. He marveled at the leverage
this gave, geared down for the long
haul downhill, positive his differential
would keep him steady on the curves.

His lexicon was eloquent and trim,
a perfect execution of sentences
he pronounced. He catalogued a wilderness
of names, climbed a ladder halfway
to the moon, tamed a troop of angels
to stage a sideshow on a pin.
Weather was cool and sunny as a rose.
Lovely dreams of dreams slid by
his eye. Nothing left to know.

Then thick fogs rolled up the shore.
Things began to rust. The grease
so right for sunlight congealed at night.
There was friction in the works.
He felt the axle give. A time clock clanged.
He punched out with his fist. His flywheel
grew eccentric and he shook. Insomnia
set in. His nerves were shot. This
is a crying shame, he cried. And cried.

Audit

His dreams were shards of tinted glass.
He fitted piece to piece, puzzling up
a maze to trap sunset on the wall.
Too late. Coffin-lid dark slammed down,
spindles of starlight, spikes of moonlight,
midnight black and white. His memories
flew south to bask and tan. He stayed,
bleary-eyed by candle-light,
keeping the books: a plague of red.

He tried to find a balance,
spent knights, put dividends
in the mail, taxed logic
with deductions, took exemptions,
sheltered yearnings, subtracted something
from nothing, filled ledgers
with loopholes, a melody of numbers.
Easy street, he thought.
Then his memories drove back,

well-bronzed, revved-up, ripped.
His middle was distributed wide
across his seat. They wheeled,
dealed, peeled off wads of cash.
His assets were locked in stocks.
Losing interest fast, his currency
devalued, came the crash of pale
and feverish dawn. Unenlightened,
he nodded down in lamp black, broke.

Unable to break the bank,
He armed himself with lenses
and a trick. Finally in a fuzzy
negative, he found the fudge-factor:
not in what he saw, but how he looked.
To resist temptations to convert
ambiguity to fixity, avoid contradiction,
he posited tolerance as a first principle,
stopped copying, hobbled off to sleep.

Shadowbox

Today was another defeat. He took it hard,
licked wounds, sat ringside to think.
Sick of playing weakling to the world,
nursing nasty bruises between bouts,
he vowed hard work, a rematch and revenge.
He rolled a boulder up and down a hill,
pounded rocks to pebbles with his fists,
skipped breakfast, lunch and rope
until his muscles bulged and brimmed.

Square jaw set like concrete, eyes
like fuming coals, he climbed into the ring
to have it out. His thighs were cinderblock
and brick; his back, coiled copper
wound to springs; his stomach, anvils
in his gut; his lungs, big bellows
huffing up a storm of brimstone
on his breath. He raised up arms
like smokestacks and they smoked.

He electrified the crowd, which roiled,
thundered, roared for something more.
He thrust an iron fist down the furnace
of his throat, forged a new vocabulary
of steel. It clanged: the fight was on,
exhilarating, blood-curdling, obscene,
a holocaust, a war to end all wars,
as ugly a match as ever was and worse.
It was even after eight. He dished it

out and took it on the chin. Air was thick
as cyanide by ten. He panted like a dog.
Sweat oozed out like benzene by thirteen.
Thirst burned like tumors in his throat.
The final bell. His atomic arms were heavy
and dead as lead. His stomach backfired.
The decision was split against him.
So was he. He limped back down the runway.
Only to find he had no place left to lie

Logoff

In wonder had he begun. Now in astoundment
he stopped. Where to go from here?
Contemplation was fine for sleepless nights.
But this carbon-black dark tugged
eyelids shut. Pale and somnambulent,
perfectly dreamless, he set his probe
for objective facts and probed. He tuned
his headset, tracked them down—beep,
beep—beneath his feet. He flipped a switch

and shadowed them—blip, blip—across
a screen. Soon he found them everywhere,
a world pocked and scabrous with facts.
He honed a jargon sharp to lance them.
He cultured them in tubes.
Heuristics buzzed and swarmed
like fruit flies. Algorithms
multiplied like rats. A downpour
of statistics, run-off at the mouth.

He was hypnotized by digital displays,
mystified by miracles of gear.
Nifty bag of tricks! All night he plotted
graph after graph predicting
graceful and delicate dawn. Done.
The sun squealed out garish, hot and loud.
His heartbeat revved, sputtered
to a stall. Haywire day raced down.
Dumbstruck he wondered:

had the mechanic or his method gone
stark mad? In abstraction had he begun.
In perplexity now he stopped.
Potholes pocked the blacktop.
Power failed. An elaborate cast
of shadows collapsed around his feet.
Nothing was revealed.
He sat in the shade of an apple tree.
He decided not to eat.

Alarming

At a certain angle of incidence, daylight
amputated the tallest trees, pried up stumps
and scattered them like teeth. He stood
on a smooth stone, its message
worn off and distributed insensibly
in the sand. He watched his own
footprints sink into the same sand
and vanish. He conjured up a crowd
of others something like himself.

On their way out of his future and into
theirs, some swung briefcases,
others brandished knives. After a few
nights, a balance was established
at the intersection of one group
with the other. Like the buzz of a fly
past his ear at night he heard his words
passing through the passing thoughts
of generations, digested and excreted,

bland handfuls of damp sand,
leavings of leashed dogs
littering vacant lots with dotty notions.
He spit in the dirt and mixed it
with a stick. With an hour's close
attention, he carved a glyph.
He let it harden in the sun. Someday,
he thought, a briefcase and a knife
will dicker over what it's really worth.

The noise of his existence was ringing
in his ears. His sleep could never
last. On the fringe of his final dream
(a parade of insects through his brain,
fireworks and flags) a dim image
fluttered like frayed and faded braid:
a man, himself, typing out the words
that came and went without a sound,
a grim smile glued to his face like a twig.

For Good

Stopped at last in his tracks by the train
of his thoughts, his wits wafted
off somewhere like steam. He wanted
to station himself, stand straight
as a rail, feel wild wind whine
past while summer leaves held fast.
But they flew off, fell down further
and faster than sound, curled up
crisped, and rotted on the ground.

He took a long look at himself and shook.
He wanted out, went out on his knees
and wept. Trees kept themselves intact
through frost and the fall and he knelt there
on the leaf-fall through the long nights
and all and he knelt there through snowfall
and snowmelt until time came to crawl down
waist deep in leafmeal, chastened and afraid
of all he had come to know by posing

as himself. And then he too fell back
hard on his luck and it burned
black and blacker and blackest
fueling all his doubts. Forests came
and went, pressed up next to him,
and he lay down with them, waited
to be mined and trucked to breaker, cracked
and picked and sorted, packed and sold,
dark veins gone up in smoke to stem the cold.

His heritage was ashes on the floor,
clinkers left behind to clog the grate,
a landscape pocked and pitted, all a waste.
But one black thought escaped, lay down
in loveliness and slept. Somewhere
in the back of his wildest dream it poked up
through bald rock, self-hewn, perfect,
multifaceted, brilliant in the light,
a blue-white beacon beckoning his kind.

