otata 24 (December, 2017)
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From otata’s bookshelf —

F.J. Seligson
The Life of Words
& Other Mysteries
Tokonoma

When I started out, my hair had started to turn to silver. My friends thought I was crazy. There was not one word of encouragement from them. They thought I would surely kill myself, walking all over. But that didn’t bother me. I just went ahead and did what I had to do. They didn’t know that with inner peace I felt plugged into the source of universal energy, which never runs out. There was much pressure to compromise my beliefs, but I would not be dissuaded. Lovingly, I informed my well-meaning friends of the existence of two widely divergent paths in life and of the free will within all to make their choice.

There is a well-worn road which is pleasing to the senses and gratifies worldly desires, but leads to nowhere. And there is the less traveled path, which requires purifications and relinquishments, but results in untold spiritual blessings.

— Peace Pilgrim
bird in the willow sings
  clean tones: small bill
    beak yellow: black form
  vivace: bird’s song
that it is deep
the leaf breathes
in its own way
this unifying fire

that drives all
that flows
burns gloriously
(as it should)

in memory
as much as now
the path climbs
& we follow

this bright arc
the heart stills
enter the depth
of things

& everything burns
everything sit
in this dome
of vivid tree

teleming with light
a system potent
forms the leaves
shape space

& glow a prism
walk in the process
of respiration
a transfer south

we turn the earth
follows everything
folds outwards
opens a volume
consumed flame
serves the sun’s zenith
leaves sessile
above

this oak the sky
above the sky
radiant space
uncomprehending

& below the bark
buds wait (not
willed) links
in a ring of

moments this third
is depth feel it
grow follow the sun’s
arc breathe light

blow the wind
thiswards ever
a cycle drift
thermal currents

lift far power
drives the function
there is no mystery
but this fruit forms

this wave shapes
what is life a leaf
converting energy
into green deeps

the earth turns
on an axis of fire
hidden betimes
blazing again
transferring energy
da crystal lattice
the space between
weaving life

in three dimensions
light burns &
this needle turns
following sun’s

trajectory brings
warm air home
leaf radiates
what it is to be

what it was again
this volume holds
its own form
its own flame
Your typical Wednesday morning, 9:30,  
parking lot in front of the grocery store  
packed, no one inside the open  
store. Each driver, alone in a car, pretending  
they're alone in the universe, each  
talking aloud while writing a poem  
about potatoes. There's time, after finishing a few  
poems, to shop — but now's  
when each mind in each vehicle  
strives  
to place the potato  
squarely, solidly, fragrantly,  
unforgettable, perhaps even  
angelically, into syllables  
and rhythm, breath  
without corners.
To John Phillips

Dear John,

It is Sunday again. IOU a letter.

IOU is three letters.

I wonder if other languages have an acronym for debt. Googling this, it seems Japanese borrows IOU and pronounces each letter with equal stress. I was thinking a little earlier about how prowess makes me picture a boat, but it turns out it can be any pointed or projected front part of something, such as a car or building. So the I in IOU is a bit prowish. Searches related to prow, according to Google, include waddlesome. Following up on that, I find this: The ship waddled into port. This waddles down the page, swaying or rocking. According to Dictionary.com the Word of the Day is anthropocentric, viewing and interpreting everything in terms of human experience and values and/or assuming human beings to be the final aim and end of the universe. Who could assume that, even on a Sunday? You and I may agree that humans have likely engineered the end of Earth eventually, but we may also agree the universe will not end at the same time. Cheery letter, this
isn’t yet. I almost began it (after mentioning it’s Sunday) by telling you about the webs
on the windowsill this morning behind the blinds and
in the sun with the spider, the author
waiting for readers to
arrive within the lines, but
so far none. All that work, the
individual lines, and hollow form

anchored to our home. It is
a light yellowish-brown, that
eight-legged child of
the universe with its
fangs and 48 knees (thank you, Google). Before
you and I were born, back
in the 1920s, people said in English that something
was the "bee’s knees" (an expression some
would say "has stood
the test of time"). I suppose they didn’t consider
multiplying the wonder
by saying it was "the spider’s knees" and thus
24 times better. This
letter is about over
and will end by following the spider
detour

into one last Googled fact: some
tiny spiders carry about 25%
of their brain in their legs. I mean how
can I think of killing it
in my home
thinking of how that brain is likely
both above and below
dozens of knees?

Love,
John

P.S. I emailed Philip Rowland and asked
if he knows if IOU is used in Japan. Not
as far as he knows and he asked Yuriko, his
wife, and she agrees. Did IOU
this P.S.? I just didn’t want you to be misled.
ra-TOO-shin-SKY-yuh

After reading this morning’s New York Times obit — of Irina Ratushinskya (1954 - 2017) — I put my coffee down and take out a scissors. I hadn’t heard of her before, but should’ve. In a gulag she wrote poems with burnt matches, on pieces of soap, memorized the poems, would then wash her hands and send the poems down the drain. She’d copy the poems later and smuggle them out on cigarette paper to her husband. Her last name is pronounced ra-TOO-shin-SKY-yuh and the obit quotes a single poem about the beauty of frost on a prison window.

I tape the obit to the inside of my study door, then retrieve my coffee. Floating atop the coffee is a dead black bug, small as a period in 12 point font. No obit for it, unless this counts. I intended to write about this late bug and yet began this poem with a title taken from the obit, a guide to how to pronounce the late poet and dissident’s name. The coffee did go down the drain, although just a bit of it — a spoonful
the bug starred in, sharing
the two leading roles in this poem (its
costar Irina ra-TOO-shin-SKY-yuh, whose
poems I plan to
Google later today, a Saturday
in July). "You know nothing, Jon Snow," I
unexpectedly recall my wife quoting
from Game of Thrones, then asking
the name of the slain character who kept
telling Snow how little he knew. Neither of
us could remember right then.

Ygritte. Irina’s middle name
was Borisovna
and for a moment, reading her obit, I thought
that name was perhaps her mother’s
maiden name, but it turns out
her father’s name was Boris and so
perhaps if she’d been a boy
her first name would’ve been Boris.
I admit I like, almost as much

as her frost on the prison window poem, how
her last name is pronounced,
ra-TOO-shin-SKY-yuh. And now just

for the SKY. I wonder (morbidly) if the bug’s
last moment, last vision, was of
what may have seemed a sky, but was

a kitchen ceiling.
Overacious

Over and under the words we go, typo
or not, following. My friend meant to type voracious and I'm delighted that he created, inadvertently, a spacious adjective, far from specious for me despite its newness. The sky, say, over us, overacious. My mother if she were still with us might come up with a couplet rhyming overacious and delicious to celebrate some loved one's birthday or anniversary and then she'd sing her new song and if at home accompany herself on piano. I used to sing with her, often it was Moon River, before I got older and older, and then she died in a hospital unexpectedly. Lives are over and that's a given. I wouldn't want, if I were in charge of writing the definitions, to let overacious mean the end of anything living.
Five First Lines by Rebecca Elson
Then Three First Lines by Alice Oswald

for Julie Swarstad Johnson

We astronomers are nomads,
Above a pond,
Under the breath of roses
Faint blue galaxies
For one long day we were like that,

It is the story of the falling rain
A questioner called Light appeared,
I’m going to flicker for a moment
meadowlark ...
the sun lights her
greying hair

the mountain
we imagine
evening fog

light snow ...
a plow shovels
sparks
deep breathing
like a telescope

the trick
a brick
is just
a brick

on writing
something
of a ripple
in anything
but water
fiocchi leggeri
si appoggiano un istante
sulle mie mani

light flakes
poised an instant
on my hands

tempo dei sogni
il seme muore
sotto la neve

dream time
the seed dies
under the snow

il lago all’alba
poche stelle nel cielo
miriadi sull’acqua

lake at dawn
a few stars in the sky
myriads on the water
before the end of my broken
onjoji vase story
she’s checking messages from space

first to estimate
the weight of a neutron star
the bricklayer’s son

only child snowflake
has joined the crest
of a moon-bright drift
pitted by freezing rain
the wings of the boy’s
snow angel

blizzard
the flunk ink
of a startled crow

short-punching wind
baring the woad flesh
of a dead crow

snow fog
the sour taste
of this spotted apple
grey wet chilly shivery swatches of day on old skin, the kind of touch invisible fingers shrinks
one’s soul, hence…

I name the hour November
not a caw of protest from a crow soaked in rain

I forgot to wipe the grease
a plumber left off his thick soles strangely like cloven hooves

I remember half-devil half-horse figures
rising off my cousin’s comic books fathers wearing masks

I saw him bite a cow-butt roast
choked croaked hang his head on the meat, “todiefor”

I still hear laughter

as I scrape bottom items of a dictionary for a letter-string how to call, “death”, not saying it
because we swore never to invoke…

words! (words)
squeezed out of brambles (because they)
lip-mark foggy windows

like rain

trapped in foliage... (remind me) if a bit of sky falls
does it with dozing stars?

blossom

long over, still an arborist
examines the genus (of our seeds)

ballooning

in a closet, tubers senile a(u)nts
nibbled (at half-time)

glowballs

mistaking at solstice calm
token-spirits (waving, ‘hellos’) 

ofuntruths/ofuntruths

~ 23 ~
autumn unseen

1.
on marble walls
rain pencil-dancing
with headlights
on fallen leaves
an empty sky

2.
churning in a vat
night racks up roiling aches

glum busts of returnees peeking into unlit rooms from bus windows

where fall winds howl supplications
a shoe pair creeps out of deeper deep inclines

over crushed lavender hems
the smudged moon sails

churning night storms in a vat of leers
the secret life
of a saucer of milk
new moon
fichi d’India —
i frutti saporiti
maturi in autunno

prickly pears —
the tasty fruits
ripe in autumn

mandarini —
il colore del sole
nel mio giardino

tangerines —
the colour of the sun
in my garden
nu jeg er 60 kan jeg løfte mine hænder og sænke dem igen mens jeg sukker

uden at kende Mozarts Requiem
flyver en sommerfugl
fra elmen til ahorntræet

now that I'm 60 I can raise my hands and drop them again sighing

not knowing Mozart's Requiem
a butterfly goes
from the elm to the maple

ved siden af Biblen er der en rulle klisterbånd. det betyder sikkert ikke noget.

anden dag Kyrie eleison uden ophør

next to the Bible there's a roll of adhesive tape. it probably doesn't mean anything.
second day Kyrie eleison ceaselessly
hvordan kan vejret ikke være stabilt i sin vedvarende instabilitet?

mens jeg vasker pensler
én stjerne og én stjerne
og én …

how can the weather not be stable in its constant instability?

washing brushes
one star and one star
and one …

i et kort øjeblik den anden dag ku’ vi lave små skyer med vor ånde.

mellem
observerbare
supernovae

en espresso
og en smøg

For a brief moment we could make small clouds with our breath the other day.

between
observable
super novae

an espresso
and a smoke
Margherita Petriccione

odore di stallatico —
il silenzio della terra
in attesa

smell of manure —
earth’s silence
waiting

schiocchi di merlo —
impercettibilmente
il buio

a blackbird snaps
imperceptibly —
the dark
på visse togture opdager du at regnen er større end din rejse
armbåndsur tid klistrer til dig

on certain train rides you discover that the rain's bigger than your journey
wrist watch time sticks to you

og når regnen endelig stopper genopdager du ensomheden
tilmed i din indre celle fluer

and when the rain finally stops you rediscover loneliness
in your inner cell too flies
две чаши на масата
в едната -
onази вечност...

two glasses on the table
in one of them -
that eternity…

арабски пазар
вихър от цветове
и мустаци

the souk
welter of colours
and moustaches
утринна мъгла
църквата търси
кръста си

misty morning
the church is looking
for its cross

краят на лятото
мирис на бавно кафе
без обещание

the end of summer
scent of slow coffee
without promise

нова история
само между мен
и огледалото

a new story
only between me
and the mirror
лястовици
прекрояват небето
време за вечеря

swallows
cutting up the sky
dinner time

нова луна
най-тънкият акорд
на цигулката

new moon
the finest chord
of the violin
malinconia...
un’ape distratta
dimentica il fiore

melancholy...
a distracted bee
forgets the flower

nella radura
i dolci tonfi dei ricci
— echi d’infanzia

in the clearing
the sweet thuds of chestnuts
— childhood echoes
peony...
the wet caress
of thunderstorm

silent fountain —
only the crickets’ chirp
in the sultry air

reading Lorca
...a tangerine’s droplet
on the page
le ali screziate
d'una farfalla morta
— mosse dal vento

the pied wings
of a dead butterfly
— moved by the wind

la prima uva...
un gecko mi osserva scegliere gli acini

the first grape...
a gecko peeks at me picking grapes
a man
a bottle of wine
embers of paper
light on
the isle
in the
middle of
this river
as seen
from this
bank in
the very
same light
now in
light on
the isle
in the
middle of
this river

d this river
d this river
d this river

after Bob Lax
the olive's
silver light
in leaf
carousel
I get on its
swiftest horse
going as far as my umbrella's edge
more of the sky fallen leaves
lago al tramonto …
un airone ripiega
le sue ali

sunset over the lake
a heron refolds
the wings

vento d’autunno …
una gazza dondola
lieve tra i giunchi

autumn wind …
a magpie swings
among the rushes
hummingblrrd
the imprint of dreams

golden midges
circle in and out
of existence

around the moon
a halo widens

mackerel skin
patterns in the wet sand
become strato cirrus

the familiar becomes
the imprint of dreams
before the siren

autumn sunset
before the siren
the flash of lights

deeper into night
da bedside vigil

leg twitches
the ragged snores
of an old hound

a breath of wind escapes
the sanctuary of light
changing wind
on the chess board
fallen pieces

walking...
a dog follows
kings and drifters

origins rain into a lake rain

balcony a dove tumbles to the sun
dark matter
the difficulty
of reconciliation
If a person survives a traumatic event, he or she cannot completely understand his or her experience. Is it even possible to communicate what is not understood? The act of trying to understand the meaning of an event changes the survivor.

For an eleven year old child, seeing a mother’s dead drowned body brought up out from a well she’d let herself fall down was a traumatic experience that Santōka spent many years trying to find the meaning of. It might be said that it was an event which transformed his entire life, setting him off on a quest, the goal of which was acceptance.

It has been suggested that Santōka was so disturbed by his mother’s suicide that, beginning as a young adult, he sought relief with saké, or that he eventually took to walking in order to accommodate an undesirable past. Taking it outdoors provided ample room to air maybe.

We might wonder why it took so many years for that event to become the issue it eventually did. After all, subsequent to his mother’s suicide, Santōka seems to have led a life relatively undisturbed by traumatic memories. He continued schooling and got good grades (continually in the top 25% of his class). He did not become a juvenile delinquent. He was not violent towards others. Nor did he torture animals and insects. He did not set things on fire. He did not inflict himself with wounds. He did not run away from home. He exhibited none of the behaviors typically associated with a “problem child.”

But in the five years of schooling (at a time when four years were compulsory) prior to entering a junior high school course there were 1500 school days. Santōka attended 977. That is only a 65 percent attendance record. There is no known explanation for all the absenteeism. Nor is it known whether his times absent from school increased after his mother’s death.

Truancy is a word that might characterize certain aspects of his later life as husband and father. Not there a lot of the time. And then it becomes a permanent state in which he is often never anywhere settled.

It is possible that Santōka was not even conscious of the fact that being absent was his way of dealing with trauma. In certain works by Freud and Ferenczi, life itself is seen as trauma. We’re all terrorized and because we are we’re absent (not in the here and now).
Santōka described himself, and his life, as a mess. Traumatic experiences tend to leave personal histories that are messy and unresolved. The only means available to Santōka was poetry. Making poems, he tells us, is one the few things he is good at. Another was drinking saké.

It is not my intention to pick out particular poems and tell readers they represent his striving to understand his mother’s suicide or deal with the abandonment the boy Shōichi (Santōka) may have felt. But is the fact that he turned to poetry and that poetry became a mainstay of his life connected in any way to that sad loss of his mother? Poetry became a surrogate mother. That is the red thread umbilical connection that had been broken (drowned); poetry was its reconstruction. It is her renewed body as his body of poetry.

Why couldn’t he disappear in a crowd? Why did he have to pursue a life of singularity? Because she left him. Mother in Japan—and elsewhere too maybe—is the prime buffer between child and world. She helps the child blend in. She is love’s body/bodhi. All is lost when she’s gone when he’s eleven.

He becomes increasingly unconnected with the world and the adult roles it asks him to play: husband, father, provider. For a person of his sensitive nature, is poetry where he feels most secure?

He was able to “get over” his father, but his mother held him back. He was moved towards the Buddhist priesthood early on, but his inability to transcend his mother prevented an encounter of the highest perfect wisdom kind. He couldn’t become an “enlightened Zen master” as did Ikkyū, Hakuin, and Ryōkan. Unable to extract himself from her death, he continually fell back into the world’s disturbances. Ups and downs, he tumbled as in an automatic clothes washer, seeking a way out through a poem. His poems are all about her.
first snow
my steps
among his little footprints

bowl of rice
watching the snowflakes
disappear

incense stick
imagining his face
every night
Angiola Inglese

poplar —
the bank of the river
winds in the sun
Hearing with Silence

Climbing the ridge to the cave shrine, a glimpse of serenity in the scudding clouds, in the slow-motion plunge of a waterfall, in the slabs of larch shadows and in the rise and fall of a lammergeir’s call over the outcrop. Even my vagabonding mind pauses for a moment.

where roads end
a lone star
keeps silence
**Surrendering to Moments**

Sometimes when it seems the whole past has become an indistinct mass, beyond reach, some memories come to me: The soft gold of an old bamboo mat in the family room and the aroma of chestnuts roasting on the open fire.

*filling the eaves*
*after the house martins*
*hiss of night wind*

---

**The Disorder of Dreams**

In grief I dream frequently, intensely. Your name in letters of gold pulses like a beacon among the moon-piercing spruce. The air is aromatic as if the forest itself is offering incense. A strike of light appears in the distance. I rush towards it stumbling on the sprawling roots and lose my way in the chill mist.

*anniversary offering*
*your favourite blue pine*
*bristles with spikes of frost*
Inadmissible imaginings

When the pyre is lit,
the bones, flesh and organs
burst, crackle and sizzle
in the juniper-infused flames.

We mourn
this palpable sundering
from a parent, a sibling,
a lover, a friend.

Gather their ashes
for tsa-tsa offerings
in sacred caves, ravines,
rivers and lakes.

Offer
a hundred-and-eight prayer flags,
thousands of butter lamps
and endless prayers
to the deities of the realms.

Yet, what it is like for the Dead?
What form of karmic return
And when?
Is it an unending Bar-do
or a quick eternal bliss
and a joyous tryst
in the Copper-coloured-Mountain Paradise?
these hills
where I drag my misery
are a stairwell to the stars
the birds sing themselves out
in deepening boreal shadows

oak leaves
fall like whispers
in the gloaming breeze
this sorrow of things
I do not know
faded ink
on an old postcard
autumn rain

no small talk between you crows
An autumn night
hearing the bars of Satie's
Nocture No.1

Mother and father
were very critical
I wore a windbreaker
Alessandra Delle Fratte

tre gelsomini
profumano il mio tè –
e si fa sera

Three jasmines
scent my tea –
evening is coming

cade la neve –
solo un ramo di pruno
trova dimora

the snow is falling –
only a branch of prune
finds a home

ritorto ulivo –
nell’ombrosa frescura
tutto s’acquieata

twisted olive tree –
in the cool shade
everything calms down
drops suspended
above a ray of sun —
cyclamens

home —

a scent of oranges
in the alleys
black dog I feed scraps of my thought

what’s left of the sun the mourning dove
specific gravity

weight of your body
against its imagination

*

the sea at its border turns
itself over
to itself

*

a snail snailed to a wall
for winter

*
in the Plaza de Armas
a woman with two hands
holding a yawn to her face
(Iquitos: 2014)

*

death is the balance
between all decisions –
when the body makes up
its own mind

*

etymology is the spiritualism
of language
when words speak
with their ancestors

*

tomorrow will be
another sky

*

this river propelled
by the fins of fish

*
wind through a bamboo forest
carved from flutes –
that blows my mind
perfectly

* 

stone
not wishing to become statues
or walls of municipal buildings
remains silently
in the mountains
* 

the hyphen that connects
summer to imminent winter –
body of an old man

*

an artist draws breath
no one can see