Mark Young

A vicarious life — the backing tracks
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Mark Young
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My thanks to the various editors.

A vicarious life — the backing tracks

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The first time for some time past, the river. It seems surprisingly low, even though for the four or so years before the recent floods this is how we always knew it. On to the backroad short-cut, only to find it’s still closed, water over it, not quite a causeway. I describe an ankh, then retrace the stem. Galahs on the wires, Madonna on the car radio, *Cherish*, a boppy song. I bongo the steering wheel on the longer way home.
so much depends

upon the direction
you’re coming
from
but

bicycles &
red wheel
barrows
always have the

right of way
even when
it’s not /
raining
is not to have thought

According to the patter over & in between the tracks from those unsigned bands that the late-summer elephant is playing, a burst of radio energy from deep space is likely to cause the scaling back of opium production on campus.

The peer reviewed literature proposes the use of ritual cleansing & the wearing of underwire bra bikini bathing suits with low cut bottoms to prepare for any subsequent mayhem.
& so the silences are

In the middle of the night, just before that first or last train — a kilometer of coal heading for the power station up the highway

past the cattle yards — rattles through, I am struck by the possibility that noise was invented to make silence more bearable.

*

I walk out into the garden. Words are rattling in my head, nowhere near a thousand meters — might possibly measure one meter if you stretched the words out & wrote their meanings in after them.

*

The garden is an infinite silence until it starts to talk to me.
A / little something / for Ray Craig

The temperament of birds. Cardboard containers of take-out noodles. Light, elongated? No, not that, the things it touches. Ensuing.

Off The Hill

For much of the time he functioned as any politician's wife would.

The Dowager's Palace

I listen to the peacocks & invent new poets from the T'ang Dynasty.
Last words

A zone into which things come, even if not easily, but at least, sooner or later...

The cat abuses me when I arrive home late.

There are first paragraphs, first verses, first words, first thoughts, blank screens, the computer not even turned on.

The cat wants to stay inside, attaches herself to me, insists I make up for all the time I have spent away from her. The computer turned on.

I try & make sense of the sounds of the night. Trucks on the highway, fruit bats, geckoes, frogs, trains. There is no point in trying. They make sense to themselves, bind together without any outside interference. Blank screen.

Humidity hangs in the house like the smell of washing in wet weather. I open the windows. The cat decides I am worthless this time in. Goes outside, lies on the path, listens to the night. It makes sense to her. First thoughts.

The night comes in. I shut it out & turn on the air conditioners. New sounds. Purposeful, meaningless. Excludes everything. There is a logjam in my mind but I can’t find a way to clear it. I decide I am worthless & go outside, to find a green frog clinging to the deep indian red of the steel support posts. Two colors my mother told me should never be seen together. Imperial colors to the Chinese. I incline to the latter.

First words.
How I fell in love

He entered like the last of the Mogul princes, susurrations of silk & so out there that you knew his line would never be continued. Bach as the background music, setting up his entrance, sweeping around the bottom of his robes & lifting them until he seemed to be floating. Part of a dance that I was also part of. My right leg back, my left bent at the knee. Arm sweeping down & across my body, eyes lowered, a supplicant position. I have yet to look him in the face.
The Dance


changing paces

The pace of change / the change of pace. A small transposition of words that shifts the locus & focus from without to within. It has now become differential calculus; the rate at which we change pace relative to the pace of change around us.
But...besides...

He caught the subway out of Tombstone. It was as she'd said, the past is another country.

Fortunately he’d come prepared, crushed ice in his jacket pocket, a survival manual in 35 languages counter-balancing the imprint of his wallet against his ass. Gunshots still reverberated in his ears, but he’d stayed on top of it all until halfway across the Atlantic, when his smartphone gave out, & his heart went with it.
Lost, & looking for his sidemen

When all else fails, he comes back to the music of Miles. It is a point of familiarity, something that has served him well in the past. But, too many trips to the well & eventually it runs dry. Dare he say it, but even Miles is Muzak at certain times.
Transcript

Back from an hour-long walk. Not much traffic.


No recent rain. No frogs. Instead, cicadas.

Flying foxes flap leatherly from trees inches above our heads.


Talking whilst walking. Conversational avenues.

Different from solitary walks where you go out looking for poems.

Windchimes somewhere though not much breeze.

Train noises. A lifelong constant.

Geckoes on the front porch. I yearn for mountains.
Forget the

*flight of small
cheeping birds*
that WCW wrote
about—old age
is a house-arrest
bracelet woven
from the stupid-
ities that you

now commit
when you venture
out, & fallible be-
cause it doesn't
always signal
an errant action.
Kōan

How far would science & philosophy have progressed if an eternal antelope had lived in the gardens of Plato & Newton & reached up on its hind legs & eaten the apples before they fell?
Eclectical compliance

Call it as you see. Fit everything in. There is no federal reserve & eventually the entropy meter will burst its banks. In the coming world your part-time lover may be your mother & the act no longer an obscenity.
I / take down / the frog calendar

The New Year's fireworks in Sydney finished fifty minutes ago, but they're being replayed on TV as if they were live because this state doesn't believe in daylight saving, fearing that the cows mightn't milk & the curtains might fade because of that extra hour of sun.
The Tao of mixed herbs

You can fill out an online questionnaire HERE & find out what your personal formula of mixed herbs is…

& you can order it for just $15, all pre-mixed up for you, too! Plus, your video guide to DIY Feng Shui is also here!
The Prize

A moment
when two or
more lines
of thought

that have
taken long
independent
journeys arrive

coherent &
incandescent
in the same
singular space.

intimidation

She left gaps
in the conversation
to be filled
with his guilt.
Threads

Later, after the whales had been re-floated, she went down to the beach & lay in their indentations. She pressed her ear against the wet sand. The shell principle, a tin-can telephone. Though not the sea she heard singing but the threads leading back from it.
The Archer

Just as I pass over
the Tropic of
Capricorn, 100 ibis
rise & circle above
me. Egyptian birds
in the Queensland sky.
Perhaps they have been
released to celebrate

the Grand Reopening
of the famed Library
of Alexandria. Maybe
Rockhampton is to
be the new repository
of ancient wisdom &
I am getting in
on the ground floor.
Ma Caw

In the background, the empty vessel that is Céline Dion parrots the words of others with as much emotion as a cash register can generate.

in edifices, edification

Nobody was there when he visited the Great Hall of The People.
humming

Th'e
 l
e
g
a
n
c
e

of bright birds

is often
[obscured by]
their
color.
A vicarious life—the backing track

Whenever it started
to get away from him
he would slide in under
the ropes clutching a
variety of extended
instrumental versions
of his life — usually
kept in a box in the car
boot — & hold karaoke
nights so he could watch
other people doing the
words that were meant for
him. Only then would he
decide which track he
wanted to record next.
Conversation Piece

"The art of conversation is dead."

Do you agree or disagree? SMS your answer to 1234 567 890.

the narrow road

a s unlit piece of s tone p laced on a h ill side re counts t he t ravels
The yin & yang of Christopher Columbus

The macaques’ rabid caroling kept him awake on his return to Europe. He dreamt of the Americas & the capuchins’ plainsong.

behind the times ephemera

Left to its own devices & desires will the mayfly eventually become a june-bug?
Rabatical

He
ate Moroccan
to
raise his level
of
couscousness.

Thanksgiving Day, 1976

I have never
liked the last
waltz of The
Last Waltz, but
the rest of the
movie is magic.
I sight; eyes, right?

I am attentive
to detail, so much
so that I have
sat at this or
one of the other

sidewalk tables
for two years
now, & have only
just seen that the
small street that

borders the café
& runs down to-
wards the river
has both a sign-
post & a name.
Thought transference

I wake up with two voices in my head. One, a pure tenor, is singing "America the beautiful;" the other is Maxwell Smart saying "Good thinking, Ninety Nine."

A baby gecko clings to the ceiling. I know how it got in, through the small gaps around the air-conditioner. But how did these other things enter?

Rodgering Hammerstein

The hills are alive with the sound of muskrats.
The Division of Surplus

We are not that hip to Hindi, but know that the Tantras teach there is a Lingam within each Yoni. It is not so much a collection of strokes, but a series of phases of intention evolved from a convenient same-sex marriage of peace comics & security spiders. The Yoni does not do the slow train with no seat routine.
A hubric note on the music of J. S. Bach

Unless
we are all
Gods

then
this is not
just

God's
music.

re / deco / rating

looking
for places
to put things

/

looking
for things
to put places

[untitled]

Loaded. Dais
Tocsin. Shock.
Moss. Destruction.
Empty. Fret.
song

I start
with the
the of
thee. The
e later.

questions, always questions

Who will I be-
queath my
dental floss to?

Jule Styne tune,

Sammy Cahn lyrics, sung by Sinatra. Saturday night (is the loneliest night of the week). Such social change since 1944, no-one now dances, cheek to cheek, have not done, many years since, early teens, last dance, even then, way out, on the.

Full moon, frogs, flying foxes.
Where is Juárez

Strange shit goes on in the bars of Juárez. Something to do with the architecture. So many corners & temporal anomalies to hide within. & even without concealment there is always a tension waiting for the next word to make its way out from behind the plastic curtains that the women drape serape-like around their bodies.
Gerontion

You know you're getting
old when the poetry of

Thomas Stearns Eliot rattles
the bars of your cage.

fast amulets

parrakeets anneal the landscape
he changed the room around
five meters of mud lay between the path & the water
the last vestige of light was a yellow butterfly

A Night at the Opera

In the evening
he would play

hillbilly songs
on a banjo. What

was worse, we
sang along.
The Frog ficcione

The flowers arrive
laughing at my oilskin cape –
vernal equinox.

Mizu no Oto (1694-1744)

DIY

So that not only
the eye but the

ear is engaged,
a soundtrack

will be added to
this piece, maybe

something you
wrote yourself.
Quick! Before the stream dries up completely

Accident
Identikit

Axolotl
Idolatry

Axiom
Idiom

Axle
Idle

Ax
Id

A
I
prickly thoughts

The animal’s not found in these parts, nor anywhere nearby. Yet I'm sitting under the house thinking about porcupines. Their quills particularly. How they're straight or only slightly curved, unlike the smoke from my cigarette which is going in all directions.

There is a frog clinging to the security screen that guards the laundry window, drawn to the moths that are drawn to the light I have left on in order to give me some idea of where to stumble. A batrachian bonus. From here it shows as silhouette; from inside it is an anatomical exhibit.

The smoke drifts past it, pools beneath the floor of the deck above me, then seeps up through the floorboards. I wonder how to vent it elsewhere, consider yurt designs at first. But the prospect of spending nights in the Gobi drives me eastwards across the Pacific to the Nine Nations. Equally romantic / much more appealing; & there's some tenuous link with arrows that lets in porcupine quills to prick the mind.

That’s what sitting beneath the house can do when there’s not enough light to contemplate your navel. Allows your thoughts to drift & pool & seep into unexpected places. I put out the cigarette, leave the laundry light on. The frog thanks me. We have an understanding. It stays focused which lets my mind jump around. Not too far & closer to home.

I am thinking about echidnas.
Prelude

Begin with "melody inside." The implications of it. The song within. Within the poem, within silence, even within a song. It's what we listen out for, what we strive to hear.


More / Harry photos / may emerge soon

Feverish handiwork?
Or unformatted head-

space? Some
other thing

often takes the
place of structure.

there is

no such thing

as

no such thing
A small canto for Dante

Three levels of visible activity. A police helicopter circles. Beneath it swallows swirl incessantly like those mythical birds that never come down to land. & on the porch

the cats pace round & around, pissed that I will not let them in now that I’m about to have lunch. Who knows what the worms are doing. Or Beatrice, far below.
Looking out

In the morning, after the rain, she listened to a couple of Aretha Franklin tracks & then got ready to go out.

On Friday

Faster than fingers or speech. The mind.

Not what you thought but a belated précis of it. Bits missing. This is Thursday’s poem.

For K.

…..& so it is the coming in, one foot across the other, model strut, the dressage horse. Such an en-trance. Only. Is not the coming in, is a coming out…..
The Love Song of Kurt Weill

When the music comes to me, it is
always first heard
as if being sung by Lotte Lenya.

Travel / Travail

I try not to undertake journeys
that have only the one destination
but somehow they always overtake me.

Mendeleev's Lament

I never could find the element
of surprise in the Periodic Tables.
& if one remembers

The water-pockets in the canyon overflow with ticker tape & 1000 year old Anasazi writings. Wild-flowers bloom along the one arm which is all that remains of the Y chromosome.
culturing the seabass

A sponge cake that is covered with ice cream is important for both landscape architecture & urban applications. It also helps to minimize the effect beta blockers have on the annual pelagic carbon flow even when swiftly harvested by brail net & plunged directly into an icy brine. Insurance won't cover any losses; but the sense of security is heightened to the level of a strategic national requirement.
radical changes to tempo

Lear’s madness shows us how to spice up your lunch game & that mandrels come in all sizes. So control your drone now that Pokemon Go inspires you to make the boldest loops.
capillary zombies

The replicants in *Blade Runner* are smooth to the touch, have been stock-piling contraceptives for months in anticipation of a possible postelection surge in demand. Meanwhile the price of crude remains at a healthy $54-plus, & there is incremental restocking across the entire steel supply chain.
Obi-Wan Kenobi may be getting his own standalone movie

The clones all have slightly different yet recognizable color patterns, are primarily used for fitting clothing. People are more concerned about taking pictures of the pieces than experiencing them. The Han Solo movie nears the end of its troubled production.

It takes serious commitment & effort to be the gift that keeps on giving.
baseball cadavers

Law school is difficult, is the epitome of luxury living. One might think evil never happens. A huge, relatively private beach where deck chairs line the strand. The weather starting to warm the one-of-a-kind nightlife. A small town in Canada leads the way.
At the skating rink

The inner shell is grounded & filled with gargoyles or garlic — the translation is unclear. Filming is not allowed, nor is the spoken word, nor even thinking about them. Definitions do not necessarily match the codes given by the docents, nor do the docents align with any given schedule sheet. They float, speechless, cameras consigned by gravity to act as loincloths.
chamomile terraces

The post-nuclear world is living with its mother in a rented sand box that consists mainly of a hot tub & a shaky balcony that has some sort of obstruction which tends to spoil the view.
You do not need to put it in a plastic bag

We have lined our playaway
tops to make them heat up

quickly, enough to melt & pop
a balloon. Men might find it

baffling, but the kinetic energy
helps us pipe melted white

chocolate so it can be x-rayed by
officials when passing through

a security checkpoint, or, later,
be mistaken for food by wildlife.
edificent

The test of. That is, an ability to withstand most weathers. But define it first, be definite on what you want out of it. An open plan is fine if all you need is shelter from the sun.
stopgap shutdown

Translation memories are created by human hands,

but the ammunition is carried by the Inspector-

General of the Social Security department. It features

nice cosmetic upgrades in either Mocha or White accent

colors. Tap to unmute the plurality of recesses.
flagrant environs

Feeling ran high in the seminaries of wickedness south of the river. Un hélicoptère était en position stationnaire au-dessus, defending the public interest & suggesting one should devenez fan de la page facebook de votre édition des Hearth Tax returns of the 1660s & 1680s.
a liszt for Tom Beckett

list
pissed
pitch
missed
mast
mist
massed
past
pasta
pizza
piazza
byzantine
bicarbonate
soda
coda
clerk
jerk
park
peak
fountain
mountain
slow
snow
piste
poste
lost
last
post
partum
liszt
All gendered writings about music are built on the joint premises that nuclear power still poses grave dangers, & that there are a plurality of housing portions located near one another which might possess a harmonic relationship. Confused by the different levels within the semantic elaboration flow, she became a nun. She consulted no one.
after the tsunami

Life imitates the art of war.

Dump the bodies in long trenches.

Use bulldozers to cover them with earth.

Fill in the details later.
Formal de Hyde

When is a sonnet?

Where are there sunspots on the moon?

What will the river rise?

Why, on a street of high-class jewellers, couldn't she buy an autographed copy of *The Life of Caesar*?

How are the antelope lonely?

---

**Why / don't you / all f-fade away**

I should have listened to The

Who—*talkin' 'bout my generation*—

should have died before I got old.
coda

It is raining when we land.

My inbox fills up with dolphins.
Mark Young lives in a small town in North Queensland in Australia, & has been publishing poetry since 1959. He is the author of around fifty books, primarily text poetry but also including speculative fiction, vispo, & art history. His work has been widely anthologized, & his essays & poetry translated into a number of languages.