
THE
BREEZE
BEHIND
THE
BREEZE
JOSEPH
DONAHUE

Also by Joseph Donahue

POETRY VOLUMES

Before Creation
Monitions of the Approach
World Well Broken
Incidental Eclipse
Red Flash on a Black Field
Terra Lucida
Dissolves
Dark Church
The Disappearance of Fate
Infinite Criteria
Wind Maps
Música Callada
Near Star
Disfluency
This to That and Thus
The Palace of Boundless Cold



TRANSLATIONS

First Mountain by Zhang Er

THE BREEZE BEHIND THE BREEZE

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THE BREEZE BEHIND THE BREEZE

JOSEPH DONAHUE

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for Nathaniel Mackey

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A breeze blew thru me, took me with
it. "Stay with us," I heard some-
one say. The abandoned boy, the
abandoned girl, I thought, fodder
what
I once thought real. . . Lamp, table,
telephone, breeze under it all, breeze
not breeze it seemed. "Don't leave,
don't
leave. Stay with us," I heard, plea
woven thru what breeze there was, breeze
what
it all now
was

— NATHANIEL MACKEY, "Song of the Andoumboulou: 117," from *Tej Bet*

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PREFACE: THE FOUR MATTERS

Dream is a second life.

— GÉRARD DE NERVAL

I

In hand, the book opened. Did a breeze open it? No doubt not. But a subtle, undetectable whirl of less than immediate air, there but not there, behind which a more distant, original breeze? The book was a book on the Talmud flipped to Mishnah Chagigah 2. (My 1983 bookstore discount-table skim may still be happening. In my head I still hear that sacred, chance passage, that random rebuke to unorthodox wonder.) Reading, in that moment, what the rabbis said brought me the title of my first book, *Before Creation*: "Whoever looks at four matters, it would have been better for him had he never entered the world: Anyone who reflects upon what is above the firmament and what is below the earth, what was before Creation, and what will be after the end of the world." But who can resist asking about the before and after, the above and below? Who can resist the thrill of illicit inquiries? Better to never be born? As if steeped in Yeats, those long-dead rabbis knew such taboos taunt into metaphysics any modern who finds a way to them.

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II

Long before my afternoon of browsing, whatever their command of the Talmud, the poets who first mattered to me likewise taunted, were keenly alert to the forbidden four matters. Their words brought intimations of a cosmological before and after, brought glimpses of above and below. Before, after, above, below, here and now, wherever that elsewhere, could it be one where we might more fully think and feel, might comprehend death? Such was what the poetic image in all its worldly precision promised. Hart Crane confirmed as much: "The imaged word it is that holds." Further figures such as William James, Henry Corbin, and Norman O. Brown outlined the state of attention required for such an image to arise, as clear as a paper bag on an updraft outside a twenty-ninth-floor office window, or a face within a fading dream, or a scandal in the *New York Post*, page 6, or a whisper from an intimate confidence you betrayed, or a stray phrase from "the blab of the pave." Such an image, should it ever arrive, might it close the tumultuous distance between wanting to use words and wanting to be used by them? True poetic images, fresh images that yet fresh images beget, came from and testified to an elsewhere (André Breton assured me, "Existence is elsewhere"), just as every night the dreaming mind brought worlds, narratives within those worlds, and, sometimes, words to convey them, in lines already written in our heads when we wake up. Rich, threadbare, vivid, vague, banal, fantastical, dreams alone were beyond doubt. Of them as of the poems they joined in the waking day it could be said, with some conviction: "This, at last, is something true. I know this is true because I had nothing to do with it . . . "

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III

From the start of my conceiving poems as dreams, I took pleasure in picturing richly desolate landscapes, observing eerie particularities. I visited with slain Kennedys, debated heresies with priests, heard not infrequently from past loves with enduring issues about how things ended. In one early dream I learned the poet Dante was imprisoned in Central Park. In a corporate boardroom I argued he should be given pen and paper. Though skeptical about much in the waking world, as a poet I heedlessly accepted night's guidance. I took up night's creed: The incidentals of any day hide revelations. Robert Duncan, H.D., John Ashbery, Robin Blaser, and others would soon hover at my side, whispering an addendum, or so I'd like to believe, "And the despairs of any day hold hidden hopes." Hopes of, at the least, more forceful images, more nuanced feelings, more precise evocations, more shameful disclosures. Images that were micro-dramas reaching me from unknown myths. These images could arise only within a poetry untainted by intention, purified of the will, a poetry I did not yet know how to write but which like dreams would bring word of worlds not otherwise credible, word finding its way to words upon waking, words as if arriving across great distances. This bounty might come to rest in a shining emptiness, in a consciousness that resembled a movie screen in a Hiroshi Sugimoto photograph, aglow, blank, in an empty, old-fashioned movie theater. In my first book, *Before Creation*, and in books that followed, I tried to write as if dreaming and waking had equal authority, as if inner and outer were not to be distinguished, as if the overheard, the spoken, the unheard but imagined were all equally at home in the poem. All phrases could be annunciates of a still-arriving reality. Over the years, I reasoned my way toward an indefensible conviction: In the flow

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of phenomena a secret shape would reveal itself, a shape that all that was sensible was within, that was perceptible, given—need it even be said—a dependable despair and serial ecstasies.

IV

An amour of those long-gone years, deep in her own Jungian vision quest, woke one night and spoke a poem. This dictated dream I now see as Love's own revelation, speaking a deep unhappiness through her and within her and sent on to me in the dark before dawn. This dictation was a crucial part of the first of the writing that began then and culminates here. Reading it now, I see a depiction of where poetic art starts. Her dream that was a poem was also an opening into what happened long ago, back around the time her soul was approaching the hour of its arrival in her body, though it may also be, in the gnostic hell of the present, a glimpse of what was happening now or what would someday happen when her soul faced further trials. Less grandly, her dream was the telling of the end that was heading our way. It was setting before us all we did not yet know about our life together and apart but sadly soon would.

ERRAND IMMANENT

Silver bowl, bloodied rim: the moon. Radiant smoke
    pouring from
heaven's gutter, night sky through which electrons beam
documents of further holocaust.

In blue televised light let the builder rest, the actress
    find peace.
But the singer, let him enter a darker continuum.

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Is this the hour the soul flies from its house to rest in
the arms
of the Beloved?

Nights in New York. The murdered girl awoke. The
theater, wreckage
and cloud. The gold harp smeared with her blood.

Six times sun and moon ignite the ocean's broken
glitter.

She becomes a breeze blowing to the land of the dead.
Branches, green;
and a garden walled in stone. Her guard begins:

> Allow nothing but the violence you no longer feel.
> You can stay here, dwelling in thought.
> Nothing will restore you to life.

V

On the far side of such a poetry, a poetry aspiring to a dreamlike flow of image and feeling, a poetry that delights in finding likeness across great distances, a poetry that honors surprise, that treasures incongruity, that celebrates sharp turns of tone, that is ruled by what I think of as a magnetic aesthetic running from *Before Creation* through such books as *World Well Broken*, *Incidental Eclipse*, *Red Flash on a Black Field*, and *The Disappearance of Fate*, *Wind Maps*, culminating in *The Breeze Behind the Breeze*, is the ongoing multivolume poetic song cycle *Terra Lucida*. *Terra Lucida*, in marked contrast and in devotion to H.D., takes up a simple but ancient form: the couplet. The poems move fluidly through many modes: myth, elegy, pastoral, dream, and

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love poem. The overall tone is hushed, contemplative. *Terra Lucida* holds fast to a neutral if ecstatically inflected diction. It also davens to the dreamlike but holds as well to an imaginative decorum that shuns much of what the more magnetic poetry draws toward itself: polyvocality, humor, violence, politics. It aspires to a transparency not averse to elegance. Some days I think of the poems in *Terra Lucida* as liturgical song cycles; other days, as symbolist canticles. Over the weekend, I think of them as phenomenological jottings, at once intimate and impersonal. These two poetic modes are the fruits of some still, to me, obscure self-division, as if each would-be self had its own serial form. Sometimes I think, crudely, the would-be self that has been at work for decades now on *Terra Lucida* is one that never moved to New York, that lives on like an apparition out of "The Jolly Corner" in the ethno-religious enclave of childhood, living there untroubled, amid many kin, taking the local as the ground for poetry, perhaps writing fiction, and looking forward to dying what Wallace Stevens might call "a parish death." (Though as that most Yeatsian of all poetic rabbis, Allen Grossman, once said to me, skimming through some of my earliest work: "Donahue, Catholicism is much stranger than you make it out to be.") The other would-be self moved to New York, had an art-changing encounter on an Amtrak train to Boston, Christmas break, 1979. An open seat. A long-haired Asian guy. Tinted aviator glasses. Army jacket. Was he a member of Steely Dan? No, it was a poet, John Yau. We quickly got to gabbing, all the hours north. As Boston closed in John gave me his recently published chapbook, *The Reading of an Ever-Changing Tale*. The first few pages wowed me. I was up in a mingling of realms of thought and feeling, notable for their sensuality, their wit, and their absolute dedication to beauty. I was dazzled. Over the months and years to follow I saw in real time his extraordinary stylistic evolution. His poems could be both rigorously formal and hands-

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down deranged. He followed the flow of invention wherever it went. His poetry and prose could be raw and confessional, delicately quotidian, hilarious, both wry and goofy, mythological, apocalyptic, erotic, or tragic. At the turn of a line, his writing could shift from high style to blunt realism. He coolly drew on direct experience but also on fantasy, on folk beliefs, critical theory, paranormal accounts, gnostic cosmologies, on his immense knowledge of art, as if all existed at once in a single ongoing Anglo-Chinese American's waking dream. John's poetry rested—and rests—in no mode but that of continual transformation. I have yet to recover from that train ride. My first book and all my subsequent books are indebted to his friendship and take inspiration from his example, this book no less than any.

VI

As for the now at hand: "Without Rent or Seam" is a poetic sequence continued from *The Disappearance of Fate*. It proposes wholeness as a poetic ideal while its lines weave and unweave tableaux that seem at times both torn and stitched. "The Heavenly Tree," throughout its many parts, also imagines a cogent totality. The title touches on a range of arboreal mythologies, from Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (which grows in my natal state of Texas) to the poet Gerrit Lansing and his great poem "The Heavenly Tree Grows Downward," the tree of kabbalah, in the shadows of the limbs of which life passes, to Nathaniel Mackey's Low Forest, to the wooded swamp around my house. "Not Yet Pentecost" presumes an endlessly deferred descent of the dove, when everyone, whether they want to or not, will be speaking in tongues. In "Life on a Boat" past lives, voices, dreams, landscapes, and psychic realities rise like a reef within any passing moment. Elegies upset the ongoing song with ac-

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tual deaths. First, the painter Bonnie Melton, brilliant eye, wry tongue, a soul shrewd and generous. "Nothing Now Not Happiness" honors Nathaniel Tarn, anthropologist, poet, desert raconteur, admired and deeply missed friend. "For Janet Rodney" is a lament for his wife, a masterful poet as well, deeply wise, said to be a Buddhist nun, also much missed. For the duration of this book, "magnetic chatter" is what a poem is; "*magnetic*," an adjective beloved by Whitman, recalls magical powers hidden within matter, powers that bind words together or propel them apart, as if on the cosmic plane of a cosmic refrigerator. Further, "magnetic" recalls both geomancy and early scientific works such as William Gilbert's *On the Magnet and Magnetic Bodies, and on That Great Magnet the Earth*, published in 1600, and recalls the now archaic meaning of the word "magnetic" as when magnetism was synonymous with hypnosis. "Magnetic" evokes for me an earlier age's belief in prophetic dreams, in trance states, in the emergence of secondary personalities, in telepathy, in uncanny foresight, and in communications from the dead. At the start of writing this book I read a study of pre-Socratic thought. I took heart from the ancient practice of sleeping and dreaming in the caves of inactive volcanoes (which I have yet to do). This was for them a divinatory practice. Certain pre-Socratics found in dreams an ever-evolving interrelation of depth, surface, and sky. Such charged sleep, in Sicily or elsewhere, gave them glimpses of before all came to be and of a life beyond death, such as might once have come to the philosopher Empedocles.

VII

The Breeze Behind the Breeze wonders where breezes begin and end. It's a fantasia about causality, about how things proceed from other things or appear out of nowhere, if such can be de-

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termined, if such determinations can be accurate, if such accuracy could be a sign of impending gnostic reprieve from impermanence. However, these poems also cast doubt on causality itself, even on those causes that lie within causes. At times these poems intimate that all causes, apparent or concealed, are illusions that let us feel we know how things came to be, how things are, how they will end. Nonetheless, regardless of what we surmise, the breeze behind the breeze blows from before creation. It blows through the heavens and through the stone and water of the earth and continues till all is gone. It's the breeze that blows all things back to what might be the One, might be Nothingness, might be what the dead know, should they exist, should, in existing, they know. In this book I have in mind a world ever on the edge of a revelation, as if through poetry the unseen secretly composing the seen is sensed, is continually felt.

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