Foreword

CARL PHILLIPS

There are many notes on which a new voice—its sensibility—might announce itself; perhaps that of vertigo is not the worst one. Noah Warren's *The Destroyer in the Glass* opens (not counting, for now, the dedication poem, though I'll get to that) with "Like the Pelican," a poem that resists parsing for what we usually seem to mean when we speak of meaning. The opening stanza of the poem seems clear enough, until pushed against:

The shape of the pelican
swings back and forth
across the mouth
of the Cove of Now and Then.

A shape can indeed swing across the mouth of a cove, but why does the shape here seem disconnected from the pelican? Not the pelican, but its shape (not its shadow) swings across the cove's mouth—how? And if the cove itself is not an actual cove but an abstract one, the Cove of Now and Then? So we have the shape of a thing—shape itself a form of abstraction—passing across the mouth of an abstraction. And yet the sentence that delivers this information sounds confident, as if announcing some unassailable fact—a brief, direct sentence that also takes the form of a closed, envelope (a-b-b-a rhyme) stanza, a mirroring, at the level of sound, the sonic closure adding to the stanza's authority, or at least the feel of it. That's the poem's first sentence. The rest of the poem consists of a single, ultimately undiagrammable sentence that stretches across six stanzas. Part of what makes for the feeling of vertigo is the sudden shift from the tightness of the first stanza (closed, declarative) to the sprawl that takes over: not only are all the

stanzas open, enjambed (in meaningful tension with the fact that they, too, are envelope stanzas), but the poem itself ends without punctuation; meanwhile, not only does this six-stanza sentence let go of entirely clear syntax, the images inside the sentence swerve clear of easy connection—black notes, an ark, fingertips, the sea’s lungs, two stars, eternity as choice and death, “all pity for the dying union,” reefs of bone There’s a sense at once of close observation of details and of being lost in, overwhelmed by, those details, all of it ending, though, in a clear-enough plea (if not prayer, exactly), not to the you who seems to have been lost sight of, but to the “dark water”:

trickle through my cells, my eyes, persist in me
like the pelican
that I may learn
to see and not to see

Simultaneously seeing and not seeing—maybe that’s what it means, to see the pelican’s shape and not the pelican itself. Why long for this, though? Here, I find the dedicatory poem—cagily titled “To the Book (And Its Author)”—helpful, its ending, specifically:

Swiftly, silently
you fly from me.
Still I fear you

are not you
except where
you melt into air.

This idea of the self (the “you”) as only being itself when it melts into air—that is, lacks actual substance—is telling. As with the desire to see only the shape of the pelican, not the substance around which a shape becomes possible, something seems to be getting said, here, about a fear of self-knowing, if

to know the self is to understand the very substance—both physical and metaphysical—of which the self is made. The form of “Like the Pelican” enacts the tension between containment and sprawl, it lets us feel what that tug of war *feels* like, between the certainty of knowing and a willingness (and/or desire) to give in to disorientation, its wild *uncertainty*. And I would suggest that the sensibility that governs this book as a whole has no choice but to live squarely inside that tension, as we watch the speaker shuttle back and forth between substance and an impulse away from it, sometimes “crouched like Samsa” (“New Vintage Stereo”), the man who famously lost his shape/identity in Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” sometimes recalling the not-yet-filled-in nature of the body in boyhood (“the muscles were mere / ideas, tender, beautiful,” from “The Tines”), or being twenty-two, that time when

. . . . by exertion or hunger
or sex or abject failure
I could arrive at a state in which my body
was hollowed out, leaving
a skin which lived
and seemed to see.

(“On the Levee”)

At other times, as in “The Problem Bear,” there’s on one hand a desire to find one’s own substance in another’s:

It wasn’t till we sawed the head
off and peeled away the pelt
that it became my body spread
on the steel table, my muscles dark
under a clear blue membrane, fist
sized pockets of fat.

And there’s a concomitant desire to destroy the found self as a way toward freedom:

But it took me straddling
 the carcass and smashing down the raised ax
 to break open the ribcage—

I seemed to walk through a door.

Seeking shape, eluding it; finding the self, only to destroy it;
 longing for that time, predisaster, when “The world was still,
 and it held / a measure of emptiness” (“A Beginning”), and yet
 realizing somewhere that that emptiness, the vestigial life, is
 more often only a distraction from the fact of substance, hard
 reality:

Walking so long, so slowly,
 you become a vestige, a flaw
 hidden in the long-exposure photograph—
 as you desired—and you feel safe—
 but your hands, pilgrim,
 have twisted into claws of bone;
 frantically you rub them; they only grate.

(“Holt Hill”)

Speaking of pilgrims: by that name, or by the name of tourist,
 there are many travelers in these poems; we find ourselves
 variously in Crete, Boston, New Orleans (city of masks and of
 shape-shifting if there ever was one), Helsingør (site of Kron-
 borg Castle, the model for Hamlet’s Elsinore), at the Winter
 Palace in Saint Petersburg . . . Warren reminds us that travel is
 at least one means of, if only temporarily, escaping reality, we
 come to strangers with no apparent history—as we present our
 selves, we can also invent them. Travel is also, though, a form
 of communion, another tricky element in these poems. Through-
 out the book, I find an impulse toward communion with others
 as a way of, quite simply, not being utterly alone, even if that
 communion involves people who don’t know we’re there, as
 when the speaker of “Hopelessly Baroque, My Soul” hears the

neighbors playing the *Eroica*, seems half to envy them their camaraderie, and in his own way joins in:

I hoped that apartment was full of friends
nestling together or sprawled on the floor
with cups of cheap merlot, and some
had closed their eyes for the funeral march
and were humming along like me.

At other times, the sensibility is decidedly more insensitive, if we can believe the account of a passing girlfriend:

Or he would point questions: Was speaking
as hard for me as it was for him?
I had hurt; but had I hurt enough to speak?

This last he mused in a cruelly even voice
as I rode him: he refused to move with me
and instead pinched hard the inside
of my upper arm, then my ass, my full breast.

("A Bought Scene")

What communion requires is empathy, that ability to extend oneself in such a way as to inhabit and know the self of another—a difficult business for someone who has enough trouble with self-knowing. As Warren puts it in "Thereafter," "To contain so much empathy is hard—/ Aristotle knew what practice does to you," referring to that place in the *Nichomachean Ethics* where Aristotle says empathy is learnable, it just requires practice until it becomes second nature. What Aristotle doesn't say, as far as I know, but what Warren implies, is that empathy can be learned to one's detriment. Empathy may at times save us from assuming the world revolves around ourselves exclusively:

I know I'm not the only one whose life is a conditional
clause

hanging from something to do with spring and one
tall room and the tremble of my phone.

I'm not the only one that love makes feel like a dozen
flapping bedsheets being ripped to prayer flags by
the wind.

("Cut Lilies")

But at other times the world—the self included—*can* be too
much with us, perhaps especially for the poet, constantly at
work trying to forge

his forebrain to a lyre: some thing
he can hold and have, that returns
more life than it burns, a thing
gorgeous, worthless, and self-betraying.

("Automatic Pool Cleaner")

At one point in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes his child self as the "fell destroyer" of others' property; and he describes his indifference to the damage he caused. I take *The Destroyer in the Glass* to refer to the self as seen in the mirror, the potential destroyer, equally, of others and of oneself. What to do with that destructive capacity, which is finally also a form of energy—which is to say, life—is indeed a question. Necessarily, these are not poems of resolution, easy or otherwise. They exist more committedly in that space of negative capability than most poems I can think of, these days. Of course there can be no "answer" to what it means—how to make meaning *from* it—the particular difficulty of being human, self-conscious, in a world of plants, animals—things—and of relative indifference to the doomed and radiant facts of our passing selves. "When I stand in full sun I feel I have been falling headfirst for decades," Warren says early on in this book ("Cut Lilies"); it doesn't seem the best position to be in. Toward the end of the book, though, falling seems more worth embracing than resisting:

If my life is sad rich music,
very well—
may it fall upon the ear
drop by drop.

If I am tumbling from a high place,
may it last.

(“On the Levee”)

Resolution? Not quite. But honest—absolutely. There is confidence, here—even swagger, at times—but always tempered by a self-awareness that can be the catalyst for humility and, yes, empathy. Shakespeare speaks of glass doubling as mirror and as window. If Warren sees himself as the destroyer reflected in the mirror, he seems as well to see past that, I sense he sees me, too—I’d half forgotten that feeling, what only the highest art, in the end, provides.

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