

Castings

I go back to one beginning while casting another, again and again with a very small thing. After all, what's in a name: H.T. Harrison? Castings of various kinds, rife with transformation and return. I come back through naming poet spirit-guides and renaming myself. Casting out filament by filament, as Whitman said of the noiseless, patient, spidery soul. Thinking of language as material, as a sculptor would cast metal. Casting a performance into memory trace so as to step forward into light. First we are named, then we name ourselves: Emily Dickinson's "baptized, before, without the choice, / But this time, consciously, of Grace--" She stops being what others are expecting, and puts away a part of herself she no longer needs.

In H.D.'s 20th century long poem ***Trilogy***, the shellfish is an image of the artist's soul and integrity. She senses her own limit yet knows the pull of vast tides within her, and sea tides surrounding her:

be firm in your own small, static, limited

orbit and the shark-jaws
of outer circumstance

will spit you forth:
be indigestible, hard, ungiving,

so that, living within,
you beget, self-out-of-self,

selfless,

that pearl-of-great-price.

The secret of a small orbit is a certain strength and mutability made possible by "living within," under the din and buzz. An artist's life turns on invention and change through attention to both inner and outer worlds. Some days you walk through honey, others, vinegar. The air peels back as you move through those "shark jaws of outer circumstance" that open the writing body, the writing mind. Here is George Oppen's message "To the Poets: To Make Much of Life":

'come up now into
the world' no need to light

the lamps in daylight *that passion*
that light within

and without

I am looking for the balance between opposites or extremes and trying to be in that balance, even as writing poetry involves extremities of mind. . . "a head walking around without a body when space gives itself over to time." What I mean by this line in my book **Resurrection Papers** is that I feel stuck in some condition that heightens my sense of disconnection in a disconnected culture. Distracted or cut off from my feelings as the world becomes increasingly endangered for all living beings. *No need to light / the lamps in daylight...* There is a girl in the dark at the top of the stairs, a girl in the slant snow light outside the door, a girl under the dome light of the library and the shadow of her reading lamp. Each year she needs stronger glasses to see what she saw and stand what she sees in the world. Does she recognize herself? Oppen again: "The self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something for us to stand on."

The light, the ground, the cure is one place where H.T. Harrison begins. Wallace Stevens is another poet-guide:

It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.
We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground
Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure
Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness. (from "The
Rock")

In Rome, the buildings stand side by side with ruins, rising from the jagged shards. I am walking around Rome provoking a confrontation with memory. Face to face with mediations of the visible and invisible, sanction and error laid bare. The city brims with arguments over altars, relics, sacred places—the Mouth of Truth, the Sacred Staircase. The soul is an ember, the trace containing all past traces, small, indestructible in its fire. Embers of ocher, apricot, terra cotta, a concerto of sunset and sunrise. Walking along the Street of the Blackbirds, combing the winding stone narrows around the Pantheon, the Capitoline steps at night, the invisible tripwire between life and death. Deep underground beneath Roma Termini station the day after the London subway bombings. Enmeshment of beauty and brutality assured as our human history of destruction and rebirth.

We live these days without questioning our own actions and those taken in our names? What shall we say we couldn't stand to see?

This is to say an esthetics of dissent begins with the self. I was born Heather Harrison Roland, adopted by my stepfather as Heather Harrison Thomas, and changed my name again for marriage. "Harrison," my mother's maiden name, is my most constant surname. H.T. Harrison ties my original poetry signature H. T. to this surname.

When my first chapbooks were published, I used my initials as a signature. The poems traced private stirrings of a voice that I wanted to make public. A convergence of urgencies demanding utterance. But I was shy, so I would try first one voice, then another. Would words uttered from a silence at the heart of my own chaos find others who heard their own silences calling? Could we speak our silences together?

The poems in *Voiceunders* evolved from "discarded finds," traces, bits, and fragments of phrases from my experience and observation. But it was something I read by Picasso that articulated for me what I was doing. His cautionary message about the "pretty discoveries" one makes in the beginning of any artistic venture became the book's epigraph: "Destroy the thing, do it over several times. In each destroying, the artist transforms its, condenses it, makes it more substantial. What comes out in the end is the result of discarded finds."

Mostly, my signature has changed over time because I want to protect my freedom. There is a passage by Matisse that I copied out years ago and still keep by my desk. Matisse writes that for many people success is a prison, and "the artist must never be a prisoner of himself, prisoner of style, prisoner of a reputation, prisoner of success." He notes with pleasure that the ancient Japanese painters changed their names several times during their lives. Why did they do this? They wanted to protect their freedom. So goes H. T. Harrison, who had many names.