

A Few Words

from Jan Carroll

Spring 2022: One Thing Leads to Another/Inspiration

“Nothing you create is ultimately your own, yet all of it is you. Your imagination, it seems to me, is mostly an accidental dance between collected memory and influence, and is not intrinsic to you, rather it is a construction that awaits spiritual ignition.” —Nick Cave

A few months ago, a university student interviewed me about writing poetry. Her questions encouraged me to think again about why and how I write poetry. All of that led to me writing this poem, which also drew from other sources of inspiration I was experiencing at that time. It strikes me that sometimes inspiration is like a relay race: you grab the baton from one person, run your leg, then hand it on to the next person. Or maybe it's sometimes like a piece of family furniture handed down through the generations, each generation using it in a different way: a dresser, a desk, a cupboard for art supplies, a baby's changing table, a liquor cabinet, or an altar of sorts for family photos.

Because You Asked Me Why I Write

for Lisa

I've been waking up from dreams sobbing. This morning I took pains to carefully cross a footbridge on dangerous ice to get to a café's

secluded back table, that refuge where I often find I can write.

But up front, there was a man horribly coughing, a woman

loud, chatty, shrill, laughing, coming too close, so I left, everything lost, it seemed, this morning a wash.

Last night I jumped when I thought I heard an explosion,

but when I ran outside, no sirens, no wreckage, no bombsite,

some walking by alarmed too, others just waved, quizzical, kind.

So I went back into my kitchen, into Ashbery's open poem

"Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," which is in part about long-ago artist Parmigianino painting himself to look like he was

in an old barber's mirror, that is, a mirror whose surface curves out, you could say curves *toward* whoever

is looking at it but also toward the nearby light source, like when you see yourself, though distorted, in a shiny

metallic Christmas ornament or like the security ball hanging high in a corner of a hallway helps you see what might

be coming at you, disfigured, misshapen. The image is smaller than the object but gets bigger as the object approaches, as in the foreground of the painting, one of the artist's hands, enlarged, partly obscures him and Ashbery ponders whether that hand (as art's vehicle) is moving away from or toward the viewer, and how that question lingers (or loiters) in all art. Is the artist's hand, or the poet's (their work), a reaching out to or a bringing back from? Does the image, say a metaphor, loom larger as the reader draws closer and sees herself in it? Is there anything in a poem, say, or a multi-award-winning TV show, that can warn you about what might be coming around the bend and how to deal with it, the human experience retold or reshown in a stirring, fresh way? At the time, no one else had ever painted himself to appear to be in a convex mirror and that startled people, made them a little bit uncomfortable, but also sort of blew their minds. The work, as I see it, is something offered from or through the poet, the artist, as well as something taken from the world. Something held out, something held within, and the painting, the poem, is that moment when you can't tell which is which, or where both merge. For me watching the third season of *Northern Exposure* again all these years later and in these different yet similar times makes me yearn for, long for (cry for?), that beautiful distillment of being human depicted in each episode, for example that one where Chris in the Morning first is enraptured with the idea of tossing a live cow with a catapult as a novel way to say something primal (disastrous for the animal!),* something rebellious yet surprisingly poignant he was in touch with inside, all art a mirror. But then Ed tells him Monty Python already did it, and he's crest-fallen, only finding again his raison d'être when Maggie's house burns down and he discovers in the ruins his phoenix, his prize, deciding instead to catapult her burnt, out-of-tune piano with the contraption he designed, born in his mind, the launch, the flight, the crash delivered to the crowd gathered by the lake where he lived in a trailer, everyone there

* In the show, the character Dr. Joel advocates strongly for the right of a cow not to be catapulted to its death.

experiencing it together and through, of course, their own eyes, too, not sure what to expect, but for at least a few minutes (and carrying it on with them, remembering), something strange, bizarre, yet hauntingly, aching, familiar amazed and (almost inexplicably) satisfied them.

Though I left that café and came home (yes, back over that treacherous bridge over that river) this poem, probably better for that and for all struggle, still came to/out of me in a kind of never-quite-exactly-like-this-before-seen fireworks display/demolition, throwing off my whole day, my preconceived plan, leaving me sort of oddly happy, sort of bewildered, sort of returned to myself, and sort of carried away.



A local man named John Wayne Cera built the trebuchet for the scene. Ten pianos were filmed being flung so the footage could be put together to allow the viewer to see the process from various perspectives.

Later, entrepreneurial folks packaged little bits of the broken pianos and sold them in a gift shop in the town where the show was filmed. A good way to clean up the mess *and* allow tourists to take home a tiny piece of Chris's, and the show's, creation.

Below is Parmigianino's self-portrait.

As I watched through the rest of the *Northern Exposure* series, I found I didn't like the ending. I was reminded of how the show often used flashback, flash-forward, or even sideways realities of the story line. That inspired me to begin writing an alternate ending to the series, one that seemed more apt, more satisfying. A practical version of that I mostly just did in my head. But I also had the idea of writing a sideways ending to it, a group of poems that draw from the *Northern Exposure* story, but hopefully will stand on their own too.

Maybe sometimes we need to rewrite the endings that haven't satisfied us. Not to deny or escape reality but to envision a better reality where we are more fully our best selves. Maybe what we learn from that will ripple out into our next story, and the next, and the next.





So, what about YOU?

I wonder what creative project all this might inspire you to begin.

Just imagine the possibilities!

“I’ve been here now for some days, groping my way along, trying to realize my vision here. I started concentrating so hard on my vision that I lost sight. I’ve come to find out that it’s not the vision, it’s not the vision at all. It’s the groping. It’s the groping, it’s the yearning, it’s the moving forward. I was so fixated on that flying cow that when Ed told me Monty Python already painted that picture, I thought I was through. I had to let go of that cow so I could see all the other possibilities. Anyway, I want to thank Maurice for helping me to let go of that cow. Thank you Maurice for playing Apollo to my Dionysus in art’s Cartesian dialectic. And thanks to you, Ed, ‘cause the truth shall set us free! And Maggie, thank you for sharing in the destruction of your house so that today we could have something to fling. I think Kierkegaard said it oh so well, “The self is only that which is in the process of becoming.” Art? Same thing. James Joyce had something to say about it too. “Welcome, Oh Life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” We’re here today to fling something that bubbled up from the collective unconsciousness of our community. Ed, you about ready? The thing I learned folks, this is absolutely key: It’s not the thing you fling. It’s the fling itself. Let’s fling something, Cicely!”

—Chris, as he launches his creative project, from the *Northern Exposure* episode “Burning Down the House,” written by Robin Green

“your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning but holds something of both” —John Ashbery, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”