

Twelve Poems



John Levy

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Acknowledgments

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“Between Cages at the Zoo” was published in Bob Arnold’s series of broadsides entitled “50 numbers that just happen” in 1995.

John Martone published an earlier version of “Paul Klee, Drafted at 35” in *SOMETHING LESS BALANCED* (tel-let, 1996). David Miller published an earlier version of “Paul Klee, Drafted at 35” in Kater Murr’s Press poem card series in 1998.

David Miller and George Touloupas published “Rorschach” and “Two Paintings by Degas” in the Piraeus Series of Kater Murr’s Press broadsides in 2003.

Notes

THE SHAPE OF ELEGANCE, mentioned in “The Shape of Pelicans,” is the subtitle of *FRANK OKADA: THE SHAPE OF ELEGANCE*, published by the Museum of Northwest Art (La Conner, Washington) in 2005, a catalog about the painter Frank Okada with an excellent essay by Kazuko Nakane. It is distributed by The University of Washington Press.

For David Miller

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Death

When you're dead, my seven-year-old daughter explained,

one of the first things you do
is get lessons

on how to be invisible
so you can come back

as a ghost. And then
it's not

so different from being
alive.

I didn't get her words
verbatim, nor did I say

But you may find out, my
love, how being alive

you also get lessons
on what it is like to be invisible.

The Shape of Pelicans

I mentioned THE SHAPE OF ELEGANCE to my wife yesterday
and she said she liked the title. It's a catalog

about the painter Frank Okada. A minute later
she told me she thought I'd said THE SHAPE OF PELICANS,

which we both then agreed would be a good title
for a poem. Allyson, eight years old, says the poem

should say, "Pelicans,
belicans, smellicans, tellicans,

zellicans,
yellicans – they

yell a lot
because they're yellicans, they're

cans

of yellyness."

Busts of Diego Giacometti

*A*lberto Giacometti made busts of his
brother, over and over
compressing that face into a slice

pressured, touched, pushed all over.
Alberto and Diego's mother
once told Alberto, "You'd

never win a
beauty contest." Another time she
in-

formed him
he looked as if he'd come
from a land of dark fogs.

He probably didn't
reply, "Yes, I'm
your son." Alberto

made Diego look
like he comes, gouged,
out of the land of minus.

Two Paintings by Degas

“*The Racehorse, Amateur Jockeys*” took more than 13 years to not complete. Is that the opposite of racing?

Early on, after he’d started it, he promised the singer (for whom he’d agreed to paint it) he’d have it done in 5 days.

Nine years later the singer demanded it and Degas asked him to wait a few more days because it wasn’t finished. Where, if anywhere, is the meaningless race against time?

About six months later the singer told Degas to hand it over or get sued. Degas surrendered it. The painting: several horses, four jockeys, two spectators in the foreground, a line of spectators distant enough to be a solid band of varied color, a small puffing locomotive, and behind that a hill with a road leading to houses, sky.

Years later, apparently within a short time, Degas painted a riderless horse and a fallen jockey. The horse turns his head to us as he leaps over the fallen man. No race anywhere in sight. The landscape simple now: grass and sky. The grass sketchy in places. Done, it looks unfinished.

Notes

*B*rambles scribble, bamboo does not, roses address. Leaves, together in breezes, in branches. A day with so much sound and all of it song. Birds in trees. Bees in tall asphodels. The Greek boy studying English makes up a word: atmostair. A Greek girl writes of her family holiday: "Failures were forgotten and we looked on the bright of things." Robert Lax says: "think the thing to try to be in the body of the universe is one good microbe."

*l*ittle time to do little
no tree would think

Dealt

*T*he rat of spaces. The ace of lies. The ten of horror. Deuce of stone. The jack is dressed

in a potato costume, you can see his dark eyes: the jack of insanity. The queen of

addictions is almost nude, her bikini top old, discolored. The king of lies (there are two cards

for liars) is shown in a small room surrounded by corpses. The bumpkeeper

is the dealer, never cheats in any way you can detect. You stare,

rarely with disbelief, at each card. The nine of despair, six of lust,

four of betrayal, three of shame. Five of helplessness. The seven of bitterness and resentment

is a cluttered collage, small dark scenes, ugliness. Sometimes

you manage to discard. Sometimes you feel free.

Rorschach

*M*y life as a hut, a roar
shack, no

joke, all joke, ink
blot, ink botch, take a guess, live

a guess, look at this mess, an
ink

spill. My life an inked
shape on a page, a writer, an eraser, here

is my drafty shack, my hovel, I have
at it, tilt at it, go full tilt, half-tilt, full blot,

blottingly. And with this blotty paw
hand you this blotisque self

poured
onto, into, through a page.

Paul Klee, Drafted at 35

for David Miller

World War I, a red piece of paper from the German government: Klee must enter the infantry. Issued a helmet removed from a corpse. Transfers to flying school, varnishes wings.

Transfers to another flying school, works in the paymaster's office, finally has a place where he can close a door and be alone. His office near the landing strip.

Planes have canvas skin. After the planes crash and the dead are pried out, and/or washed out, Klee walks over to the mess to cut off pieces of unburnt canvas. He paints in a desk drawer he shuts when he hears footsteps.

Philip Guston

*A*s a boy Philip came home. He was 10
or 11. He came home

then found his father
had hanged himself.

He was the first to find his father.
Philip was the youngest of seven.

His father hung himself
from a rope thrown over a rafter.

He found his father. And he began to draw
cartoons. He shut

himself in, at home, in a large closet with its one
light bulb, and he'd draw.

Draw draw draw draw draw draw draw.
Repeated, it almost begins to sound

like a crow's call, or sound like the opposite of
snow, nothing white falling from the sky but,

instead, the pencil lead and what hand
makes appear

out of a hidden place
or a place that wasn't there before, that only he

Between Cages at the Zoo

3-year-old-girl, alone
stands on, and bends
over, the grated rain gutter

looks down into it

sticks
her fingers through

and shouts
into the darkness
Hi

(after Basho)

*M*y poems aren't
really mine. Any more

than a frog
owns its croak

or its splash as it dives
beneath the green surface.

You see the surface translated
into language

ripples. (The frog invisible,
immersed.)

