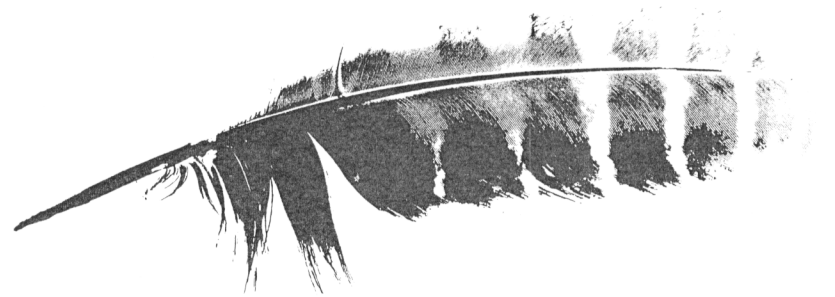


NEWS OF THE
UNIVERSE poems
of twofold consciousness

chosen and introduced by ROBERT BLY



SIERRA CLUB BOOKS SAN FRANCISCO

INTIMATE ASSOCIATIONS

The natural world is a spiritual house, where the pillars, that
are alive,
let slip at times some strangely garbled words;
Man walks there through forests of physical things that are
also spiritual things,
that watch him with affectionate looks.

As the echoes of great bells coming from a long way off
become entangled in a deep and profound association,
a merging as huge as night, or as huge as clear light,
odors and colors and sounds all mean—each other.

Perfumes exist that are cool as the flesh of infants,
fragile as oboes, green as open fields,
and others exist also, corrupt, dense, and triumphant,

having the suggestions of infinite things,
such as musk and amber, myrrh and incense,
that describe the voyages of the body and soul.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE / 1856?
translated by Robert Bly

THE SECOND POEM THE NIGHT-WALKER WROTE

Over all the hilltops
Silence,
Among all the treetops
You feel hardly
A breath moving.
The birds fall silent in the woods.
Simply wait! Soon
You too will be silent.

GOETHE / 1780
translated by Robert Bly

THIS POEM IS FOR BEAR

“As for me I am a child of the god of the mountains.”

A bear down under the cliff.
She is eating huckleberries.
They are ripe now
Soon it will snow, and she
Or maybe he, will crawl into a hole
And sleep. You can see
Huckleberries in bearshit if you
Look, this time of year
If I sneak up on the bear
It will grunt and run

The others had all gone down
From the blackberry brambles, but one girl
Spilled her basket, and was picking up her
Berries in the dark.
A tall man stood in the shadow, took her arm,
Led her to his home. He was a bear.
In a house under the mountain
She gave birth to slick dark children
With sharp teeth, and lived in the hollow
Mountain many years.

snare a bear: call him out:
honey-eater
forest apple
light-foot
Old man in the fur coat, Bear! come out!
Die of your own choice!
Grandfather black-food!
this girl married a bear

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Who rules in the mountains, Bear!
you have eaten many berries
you have caught many fish
you have frightened many people

Twelve species north of Mexico
Sucking their paws in the long winter
Tearing the high-strung caches down
Whining, crying, jacking off
(Odysseus was a bear)

Bear-cubs gnawing the soft tits
Teeth gritted, eyes screwed tight
but she let them.
Till her brothers found the place
Chased her husband up the gorge

Cornered him in the rocks.
Song of the snared bear:
“Give me my belt.
“I am near death.
“I come from the mountain caves
“At the headwaters,
“The small streams there
“Are all dried up.

—I think I’ll go hunt bears.
“hunt bears?
Why shit Snyder,
You couldn’t hit a bear in the ass
with a handful of rice!”

GARY SNYDER

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THE HORSE

Many times the size of man, the horse has flaring nostrils, round eyes under half-closed lids, cocked ears and long muscular neck.

The tallest of man's domestic animals, and truly his designated mount.

Man, somewhat lost on an elephant, is at his best on a horse, truly a throne to his measure.

We will not do away with the horse, I hope?

He will not become a curiosity in a zoo?

. . . Already now, in town, he is no more than a miserable substitute for the automobile, the most miserable means of traction.

Ah, the horse is also—does man suspect it?—something else besides! He is *impatience* nostrilized.

His weapons are running, biting, bucking.

He seems to have a keen nose, keen ears, and very sensitive eyes.

The greatest tribute one can pay him is having to fit him with blinders.

But no weapon . . .

Whereby the temptation to add one. One only. A horn.

Thereby the unicorn.

The horse, terribly nervous, is aerophagous.

Hypersensitive, he clamps his jaws, holds his breath, then releases it, making the walls of his nasal cavities vibrate loudly.

That is why this noble beast, who feeds on air and grass alone, produces only straw turds and thunderous fragrant farts.

Fragrant thunderisms.

What am I saying, feeds on air? Gets drunk on it. Sniffs it, savors it, snorts it.

He rushes into it, shakes his mane in it, kicks up his hind legs in it.

He would evidently like to fly up in it.

The flight of clouds inspires him, urges him to imitation.

He does imitate it: he tosses, prances . . .

And when the whip's lightning claps, the clouds gallop faster and rain tramples the earth . . .

Out of your stall, high-spirited over-sensitive armoire, all polished and smoothed!

Great beautiful period piece!

Polished ebony or mahogany.

Stroke the withers of this armoire and immediately it has a faraway look.

Dust cloth at the lips, feather mop at the rump, key in the lock of the nostrils.

His skin quivers, irritably tolerating flies, his shoe hammers the ground.

He lowers his head, leans his muzzle toward the ground and consoles himself with grass.

A stepstool is needed to look on the upper shelf.

Ticklish skin, as I was saying . . . but his natural impatience is so profound, that inside his body the parts of his skeleton behave like pebbles in a torrent!

Seen from the apse, the highest animal nave in the stable . . .

Great saint! Great horse! Beautiful behind in the stable . . .

What is this splendid courtesan's behind that greets me, set on slim legs, high heels?

Giant goose of the golden eggs, strangely clipped.

Ah, it is the smell of gold that assails my nostrils!

Leather and manure mixed together.

Strong-smelling omelette, from the goose of the golden eggs.

Straw omelette, earth omelette, flavored with the rum of your urine, dropping from the crack under your tail . . .

As though fresh from the oven, on a pastry sheet, the stable's rolls and rum balls.

Great saint, with your Byzantine eyes, woeful, under the harness . . .

A sort of saint, humble monk at prayer, in the twilight.

A monk? What am I saying? . . . A pontiff, on his excremental palanquin! A pope—exhibiting to all comers a splendid courtesan's behind, generously heart-shaped, on slender legs ending elegantly in high-heeled shoes.

WHAT IS THIS CLACKING OF THE BIT?

THESE DULL THUDS IN THE STALL?

WHAT'S GOING ON?

PONTIFF AT PRAYER?

SCHOOLBOY IN DETENTION?

GREAT SAINTS! GREAT HORSES (HORSES OR HEROES?), OF THE BEAUTIFUL BEHIND IN THE STABLE,

WHY, SAINTLY MONK, ARE YOU WEARING RIDING BREECHES?

—INTERRUPTED DURING HIS MASS, HE TURNED HIS BYZANTINE EYES TOWARD US . . .

FRANCIS PONGE
translated by Beth Archer

THE END OF FALL

What fall amounts to is really a cold infusion. The dead leaves of all herb species steep in the rain. But no fermenting goes on, no alcohol-making: one has to wait until spring to see the effect a compress has when applied to a wooden leg.

The counting of votes goes on chaotically. All the doors of the polling places fly open and slam shut. Into the wastebasket! Into the wastebasket! Nature rips up her manuscripts, tears down her bookcases, knocks down the last fruits with long poles.

Then she rises crisply from her work table. Her height all at once seems unusual. Her hair undone, she has her head in the fog. Arms loose, she breathes in with ecstasy the icy wind that makes all her ideas clear. The days are short, the night falls swiftly, who needs comedy.

Earth floating among the other planets regains her serious look. Her sunlit side is smaller, invaded by clefts of shadow. Her shoes, like a hobo's, are great with water, and a source of music.

Inside this frogpond, or energetic amphibiousness, everything regains strength, hops from stone to stone, tries a new field. Streams increase.

Here you see what is called a real soaking, a cleaning that cares nothing for respectability! Dressed as a naked man, soaked to the bone.

And it goes on, doesn't get dry right away. Three months of healthy reflecting goes on in this state; without any circulatory disaster, without bathrobe, without horsehair glove. But her strong constitution can take it.

And so, when the tiny buds begin to point, they know what their source is and what is going on—and if they come out hesitatingly, numb and flushed, it is in full knowledge of why.

indeed to this marvelous substitute-for-a-head, this unbounded clarity, this luminous and absolutely pure void, which nevertheless is—rather than contains—all things. For, however carefully I attend, I fail to find here even so much as a blank screen on which these mountains and sun and sky are projected, or a clear mirror in which they are reflected, or a transparent lens or aperture through which they are viewed, still less a soul or a mind to which they are presented, or viewer (however shadowy) who is distinguishable from the view. Nothing whatever intervenes, not even that baffling and elusive obstacle called “distance”: the huge blue sky, the pink-edged whiteness of the snows, the sparkling green of the grass—how can these be remote, when there’s nothing to be remote from? The headless void refuses all definition and location: it is not round, or small, or big, or even here as distinct from there.²¹

Harding’s assertion that he has no head must be read in the first-person sense; the man was not claiming to have been literally decapitated. From a first-person point of view, his emphasis on headlessness is a stroke of genius that offers an unusually clear description of what it’s like to glimpse the nonduality of consciousness.

Here are Hofstadter’s “reflections” on Harding’s account: “We have here been presented with a charmingly childish and solipsistic view of the human condition. It is something that, at an intellectual level, offends and appalls us: can anyone sincerely entertain such notions without embarrassment? Yet to some primitive level in us it speaks clearly. That is the level at which we cannot accept the notion of our own death.”²² Having expressed his pity for batty

old Harding, Hofstadter proceeds to explain away his insights as a solipsistic denial of mortality—a perpetuation of the childish illusion that “I am a necessary ingredient of the universe.” However, Harding’s point was that “I” is not even an ingredient, necessary or otherwise, of *his own mind*. What Hofstadter fails to realize is that Harding’s account contains a precise, empirical instruction: Look for whatever it is you are calling “I” without being distracted by even the subtlest undercurrent of thought—and notice what happens the moment you turn consciousness upon itself.

This illustrates a very common phenomenon in scientific and secular circles: We have a contemplative like Harding who, to the eye of anyone familiar with the experience of self-transcendence, has described it in a manner approaching perfect clarity; we also have a scholar like Hofstadter, a celebrated contributor to our modern understanding of the mind, who dismisses him as a child.

Before rejecting Harding’s account as merely silly, you should investigate this experience for yourself.

Look for Your Head

As you gaze at the world around you, take a moment to look for your head. This may seem like a bizarre instruction. You might think, “Of course, I can’t see my head. What’s so interesting about that?” Not so fast. Simply look at the world, or at other people, and attempt to turn your attention in the direction of where you know your head to be. For instance, if you are having a conversation with another person, see if you can let your attention travel in the direction of the other person’s gaze. He is looking at your face—and *you* cannot see your face. The only face present,

from your point of view, belongs to the other person. But looking for yourself in this way can precipitate a sudden change in perspective, of the sort Harding describes.

Some people find it easier to trigger this shift in a slightly different way: As you are looking out at the world, simply imagine that you have no head.

Whichever method you choose, don't struggle with this exercise. It is not a matter of going deep within or of producing some extraordinary experience. The view of headlessness is right on the surface of consciousness and can be glimpsed the moment you attempt to turn about. Pay attention to how the world appears in the *first* instant, not after a protracted effort. Either you will see it immediately or you won't see it at all. And the resulting glimpse of open awareness will last only a moment or two before thoughts intervene. Simply repeat this glimpse, again and again, in as relaxed a way as possible, as you go about your day.

Once again, selflessness is not a "deep" feature of consciousness. It is right on the surface. And yet people can meditate for years without recognizing it. After I was introduced to the practice of Dzogchen, I realized that much of my time spent meditating had been a way of actively overlooking the very insight I was seeking.

How can something be right on the surface of experience and yet be difficult to see? I have already drawn an analogy to the optic blind spot. But other analogies may give a clearer sense of the subtle shift in attention that is required to see what is right before one's eyes.

We've all had the experience of looking through a window and suddenly noticing our own reflection in the glass. At that mo-

ment we have a choice: to use the window as a window and see the world beyond, or to use it as a mirror. It is extraordinarily easy to shift back and forth between these two views but impossible to truly focus on both simultaneously. This shift offers a very good analogy both for what it is like to recognize the illusoriness of the self for the first time and for why it can take so long to do it.

Imagine that you want to show another person how a window can also function like a mirror. As it happens, your friend has never seen this effect and is quite skeptical of your claims. You direct her attention to the largest window in your house, and although the conditions are perfect for seeing her reflection, she immediately becomes captivated by the world outside. *What a beautiful view! Who are your neighbors? Is that a redwood or a Douglas fir?* You begin to speak about there being two views and about the fact that your friend's reflection stands before her even now, but she notices only that the neighbor's dog has slipped out the front door and is now dashing down the sidewalk. In every moment, it is clear to you that your friend is staring directly through the image of her face without seeing it.

Of course, you could easily direct her attention to the surface of the window by touching the glass with your hand. This would be akin to the "pointing-out instruction" of Dzogchen. However, here the analogy begins to break down. It is very difficult to imagine someone's not being able to see her reflection in a window even after years of looking—but that is what happens when a person begins most forms of spiritual practice. Most techniques of meditation are, in essence, elaborate ways for looking *through* the window in the hope that if one only sees the world in greater detail, an image of one's true face will eventually appear. Imagine a teaching like this: *If you just focus on the trees swaying outside the window without distraction, you will see your true face.* Undoubtedly, such