

Millennium Letter

Michael Gregory

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*Cuando miro la forma
de América en la mapa,
amor, a ti te veo
- Pablo Neruda*

*this land
is our lover
- Kenneth Patchen*

*so love might be
a figure of eternity
- Catullus*

I

Running late for my flight to Vegas
(another conference in the desert
on how they plan to poison the water)
trying again to figure out
what to do with the energy
between a . . . between *this* man and woman
without making that classic mistake
of thinking you know someone because
you think you've understood her words

I head up Tombstone Canyon through
the tunnel they call the Time Tunnel
up onto Mule Pass divide
saying goodbye again for now
to the aging *Queen of the Copper Camps*
who as we speak is releasing
a seven-mile stream of acid
wastes from under her tattered skirts
into the regional water table

— then down into the San Pedro
green again after the rains,
Spanish bayonets glistening
in the sun, the whitethorn's
red branches heavy with fruit
while the river is running orange
with sludge from the Cananea tailings

— down past the makeshift crosses †
strung with faded plastic flowers
marking places loved ones have died

— through the cowboy kitsch of *The Town*
whose billboard jingle proclaiming it

(despite the silver mine cyanide
leaching into the drinking water)
Too Tough To Die can't hide
the fact that living in the past
especially one that never was
is just another kind of death

{sta
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—through the bluffs above the sites
where men in black with bowed heads
backed up by men dressed in steel
brought those they found there to their knees
in the missionary position

—through the beehive wards apparently
thriving under the yellow plume
from the local dynamite plant
dusting the latter-day homesteads
with what some call the smell of money
shutting down the artesian wells
unto the seventh generation
from nitrates in the aquifer

— following redundant curves
along the disappearing river
past the mobile home parks
real estate developments
gas station convenience stores
up the grade onto I-10
the *Pearl Harbor Memorial Highway*
then flat out across † the sand,
joining the wagon train to Tucson:
Macks and Whites and Peterbilts
welfare ranchers in 4 X 4s
the speed limit like time itself
relative: the mirage that sleek
Latina in her red Jaguar

those air-conditioned families
the salesmen and blue-haired
snowbirds all aim for oblivious to
the dance of high voltage Kachinas
paralleling the interstate,
powerlines like snakes in their mouths
leading us toward a Magritte sky
the bluest blue and whitest white clouds
America West lifts us into
exploding in their soft underbellies
the surficial myth of binary vision
the practical myth of linear time
the tactical myth of isolation

so lost in the sudden whiteness I see

{no
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za}

the dragon spines of mountains rising
out of the Mojave between
the blue Pacific and orange Colorado
where our paths without quite touching
first crossed † again this time around

—and see south to the thorn desert,
the ironwood and boojum forest
something out of Lewis Carroll
at the edge of the Sea of Cortez

—and north to sagebrush and cheatgrass
the cold Great Basin deserts
the alkali sinks and alluvial fans
between the Rockies and Cascades

—then further south to the Nascan lines
ages older than Machu Picchu
drawn at such length in the bone
dry desert pavement they
can be figured out only from this
high in the sky

—and further north
where antediluvian forms trudge
across † the tundra white on endless
blizzard white calling us
into the blinding arctic night

— until with safety belt instructions
in my ear and a sinking feeling
in my stomach they drop us
back through the clouds into this
more immediate wasteland, this
ugliest city west of Gomorrah
this neon sore throbbing for cash
in her refrigerated slots

but what's really happening is
one dream or memory
or false memory after another,
cinematic variations
on a theme: like this young
stacked single mother blonde
in a red minidress

{no stanza}

running down the white marble steps
of Griffith Park Observatory
(all those Jimmy Dean flashbacks)
away from her draft dodger lover
who's just slapped her around again,
running now that same afternoon
through the Sunday crowd in the park
into the arms of L.A.'s finest
who books her this time for nothing more
than letting it all hang out:
legs and arms and figures of speech
young and hurt and trying her wings
a vice charge in the City of Angels

her tears dissolving this time to

the arid Xinkiang, the paleolithic,
near the old city of Loulan
the shore of ancient Lake Lop Nur
not yet melted into glass
at Chairman Mao's say-so
not yet the Great Leap Forward
onto the list of earth's eternal
sacrifice zones (a Yucca Flats
Made in China) but still then
the windswept sacred burial ground
where archaeologists lately unearthed
a thirty-plus-thousand year old blonde
the press calls Lulu: poor Little Lulu
unable to sleep despite the pet names
the *too la loo ra* lullaby
the blessings they laid her down with:
Bebopping Lulu
our lost Caucasian grandmother
always out of place never quite
out of mind now forever
out of breath her dug up rattling
disrespected bones walking
into my own lust-driven past

II

resurrected on that mystic
cross † that stone trajectory
my love of those years and I took

{no
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za}

through this joyous cosmology

† Long Beach to Long Island
Bend to Big Bend and back again
† San Diego to San Francisco
Land's End to Plymouth Rock

on the road, into it
coming into the promised land
discovering first hand by dawn's
early light and midnight's luster
America's voluptuous body

✦ San Clemente to Chappaquiddick
Okanagan to Osceola

all too willing to forget
the roads we felt so free on
with windows down and wind in our hair
were built with cold war money
to move troops efficiently
evacuating target cities
when the time we were running from came

✦ Coronado to New London
Point Mugu to Newport News

back by way of Tucumcari
the moon glimmering on White Sands
driving our youngest (paranoid
from all the old time murder ballads
we sang from Okemah to Ruidoso)
to jump ship, disappearing
in Alamogordo's nuclear madness
until the squads of cruising airmen
turned on by *esprit de* Adolph Coors
to intimations of napalmed flesh
harried her back to our port in the storm:
Indian bedspread festooned above
sagging Goodwill mattress and pillows
incense seducing the innocent air
station switched to megawatts
of Dylan the Doors the Butterfly
flight control set on higher yet
The String Band embracing The Mothers

{no

somewhere over the headwinds

—taking nature's course, crossing †
the Continental Divide where it
goes by the name of the Animus Mountains,
bound for Phoenix Blythe the sixties
coming of age in California

† Michoacan to B.C.
Stinson Beach to Salt Lake City
† Astoria to Ensenada
Escudilla to Signal Hill

manifesting the nation's own
westward shift of gravity
the eastern wave breaking against
the ocean of oriental mind
rolling back on itself catching
us in the riptides tossing us
back and forth in the cross † currents

† Panama to Beijing
Bogotá to Benares and Lhasa
† Mexico City to Mekong
Chicago to Cambodia

up and down † the coast loaded
with hitchhikers in various states
becoming experienced in our own
time/space in these astonished bodies
reiterating the chemical blessing
the promises of the chemical wedding
learning to love the ones we're with
in the narrowing pendulum swing

† Alsea Bay to Imperial Beach

El Capitain to Mt. Tam
✦ Sycamore Canyon to Silverado
Shelter Cove to La Jolla Cove

: Santa Ana half way down
the dead end street to the cannery,
sitting on the rug all night
for what seemed centuries
filling thousands of double aught caps

{no stanza}

from a pile of blue powder,
licking our fingers now and then
priding ourselves on the lives we saved
by passing out hits to draft age men
who otherwise would kill and die
in some damned country somewhere

: Topanga Canyon a few mansions up
from the one where a few years later
the fortune made on the fright flick
about the devil's baby turned into
a real life blood bath
while meanwhile back at the ranch
Charlie and his closet queen
counterpart at the FBI
wet-dreamed the Black Messiah:
the cowboy President sent more
kids into the Big Muddy:
scientists in uniform
put chemicals in the water supply
put bugs and viruses in the air
to see what it might do to us
before they tried them out in Asia:
and spooks with acronyms for names
put chemicals into the black ghettos
put chemicals onto silver spoons
from penthouse to penitentiary
in order to keep the dollar almighty

to keep the chemical banks solvent

: Pagemill Road Los Altos Hills
Beulahland with Gandolf and friends
liveoaks courtesy of Saint Joan,
the air perfumed with fragrant herbs
the dragon eagle and great bear
a ring of fire in the darkening sky
folksongs and laughter lifting the room
building resistance to the martial
disease infecting the rest of the world

: Noe Valley where we sat
in circles on the floor deciding
less how than where to keep ourselves
together if we were going to:
and where one day a very civil

{no stanza}

man in black from hat to boots
who said he was from the East and his name
was Malik came up where we were parked
and got himself invited to dinner
drawn to speak to us he said
because the mandala we had painted
between the tail lights of the bus
didn't grow lighter toward the center:
and where young blacks would ring the bell,
come in and after casing the place
walk out with whatever they felt like taking:
and where the big white guy just
out of San Quentin with calloused veins
lay like Gulliver on the floor
held down only by her in his arms
her like a feather on his chest:
while out in the Bay the Indians
were breaking into Alcatraz
under the banners of prior right,
justice, Red Power, and irony

: The Castro with family and friends
in the bedroom drumming chanting
laughing drinking cactus tea
urging the birth of Juniper Tree
that clan's latest manifestation
through long labor and clouds of unknowing
rainbows filling the air at daybreak
the way it was when the goddess of breath
first sang this flowering world into being

: Navarro River, tribes with wings
still wet around the singing fire
bearded and breasted hominids
under the antediluvian redwoods
reminding each other of our trips:
while Happy the sweet thing from Elk
brought Orange Sunshine day and night
before the dysentery set in
that brought thousands to their knees
doubled over face to face
with ugly agonizing death
in communes from Myrtle Creek to Goleta
but never hit the straight press

{stanza}

: Takilma while the smoke and smell
still rose into the morning fog
from the church and freestore burned down
the night before in the name of Christ

: Anacortes, where the preacher
in swan white robes and beard
coming down from the wedding party
on Olympia recalled
his previous lives to his present wife
while friends and flock built from plans
they found in the *Whole Earth Catalog*
a cement ark to take them all

to a south Pacific paradise

: the Sechelt Peninsula
where Québécois separatists
camped among the First Nations
between the shingle and rain forest
stockpiled bombs and bided their time:
while half a continent away
in the Chicago Coliseum
what was left of the old New Left,
split along the seismic faults
of action faction and praxis axis,
hacked itself into past history:
the same big-shouldered city
where half a century earlier
the Old Left had butchered itself
on much the same pig-sticking grounds:
and less than a year and half ago
hoist on the points of like dilemma
while the world watched the police
riot in the name of order
the ambidextrous liberal left
disemboweled *en masse* in public
giving the game away to that
even more sinister liberal cast
waiting in the far right wing

: that pub up in the Cariboo
where we left our 1-A lovers
with a new identity
watching Apollo land on TV
unconvinced by the special effects

{no
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of flags shook out in the solar wind
or one step moonwalk rhetoric:
while back on earth in black and white
a journalist familiar with

the darker side of Camelot
told us how a year before
cream of the crop American boys
dressed fit to kill in green berets
raped and butchered women and children
in a village called My Lie

: St Johns just the two of us
(thousands of miles and millions of years
west of the loud speakers at
what turned out to be the biggest
born-again get-together
there in the Burnt-Over District
since the Great Disappointment)
one in the spirit and the mud)
finding ourselves alone that night
shimmering and undulating
in the aurora borealis:
curtains and cataracts of rose
light silently opening:
transforming the circumpolar sky:
illuminating as if from within
the Yukon icemelt rushing down
the stone bed of the river before us

: Quesnel BC on tubes and wires
eighteen liters of fluid replacement
thanks to socialized medicine
making it through out of-season
moose liver and toadstools
or whichever one it was:
while somewhere back in Crypto City
a former war hero was xeroxing
secret papers that were soon
to put an end at least for a while
to US bombs in southeast Asia:
slippery Dicks in the White House:
innocence as a national norm

: Briceland where drugstore cowboys
on electric wine played William

{no stanza}

Tell with cross † bows against the fence
outside the A-1 Truck Stop
Post Office and General Store
before that day the truckers and growers
strung steel cable from tree to tree
making their stand there, armed,
blocking the road to Whitethorn,
Shelter Cove and Ettersburg
(the Lost Coast where we had dreamed
under the tanoak, madrone and myrtle
beside the whispering Blue Glide Creek
among the old growth redwood stumps
of outgrowing war and greed),
turning around for now at least
this time at least the sheriff and narcs
who'd come to bust the lot of them

: Halloween coming down from high
in elfin forest and laurel grove
among the bent and weathered entwines
moaning for lovers lost at sea,
glad that we're still young enough
to join in the sunshine's afternoon laughter
somersaulting down the golden
Mendocino headlands in touch
with vast and shining Pacific below,
vast and shining sky above:
then back on the blacktop, brakes about shot
but stopping at every houselight we found
along the winding fogbound road
keeping our promise to take the kids
trick-or-treating even after
they got into the mescaline stash:
while at his mother's house in St Pete
Kerouac was dissolving:

his beer-soaked guts hemorrhaging
his brain a sentimental mush

: Telegraph Av with everyone
from Panhandle Jack to Hambone Jane
on the verge of breaking up
breaking it off breaking out
in sidesplitting giggles in absolute terror
following Laffing Water over
the cutting edge of meth-math delight

{no stanza}

under the bridge up in smoke
personal mythologies
mystic personalities
radio waves in sunspot season
giving the zigzag litmus test
to Barbie deals bent out of shape
by delphinium Oracles
giving the lie to that old mare's tale
the revolutionaries of love
on set for the last shoot
drawing attention to themselves
on point for the last laugh
dispensed on the corners of every block
blaming things less on the Great White Grandpa
than each on his own self untrue

: Livermore one moonless night
just down the road from Altamont
years before the Stones and Airplane
cashed out the decade of peace and love
with another blood sacrifice
playing their *We Can Be Together*
up against the wall and *Under My Thumb*
while hundreds beneath the bandstand
screamed on bad acid and angels
on camera beat a fool to death):
where engine blown in our borrowed Ford

we hitched a ride with two guys
dressed in jeans and checked shortsleeves
in a hurry to hit the road,
one bruised and bleeding from the fight
he'd just killed an Angel in:
then at dawn on the outskirts of Stockton
got picked up by another two
driving a carpet cleaning van
who took us down the central valley
almost to the grapevine
with short pull-offs here and there
at out of the way ditches and bushes
for bottles of Four Roses they'd stashed
to replace the ones they drank
on the way back south while
they waved around and argued about
what to do with the gun
they'd shot the liquor store man with

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‡ 69, the year of the fish
yang yin yab yum
the night after the premature
revolution the night before
the morning after 70s,
the downward swing to disillusion
riding on empty except for the *OM*
the drone of the spheres in our bellies
the sixty cycle buzz of the road
always
 in
 our heads
 until

III

Ecce signum at the crossroads †
coming out of the woods again
on what was to be our last trip
out of California
stopping in Orange County to say
goodbye to old friends and lovers
(returned to the scene of the crime)
our Lapis Lazuli Church of the Red
Earth our Bluebird goddess Erzuli
spinning her rear duals in a ditch
(a ship of fools run aground)
at the bottom of the hill
we'd come down after watching
the smog-transmogrified sun set deep
in the heart of John Birch country:
busted waiting for the towtruck
(a sitting duck on the Slough of Despond)
outstanding warrant for overtime parking
during an anti-war demonstration
ages ago at Irvine
(the old lessons: *Keep moving*
Never in one place too long
Never get caught for two at once)

cross-legged † upright floating
all night in Santa Ana jail
without benefit of substances,

{no
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not knowing how well they'd search the bus
but knowing what they might find,
meditating like crazy all night
trying to keep my mind off that
afraid the energy might guide them

wondering (while my fellow threats
to straight white lawn order threw up
babbling alcoholic epics

of hardcore dark-skinned poverty,
the stinking racist reality of
this teller's cage squirrel cage
Bank America dream)
how many millions of us
there are in here or if it's just
we two imagining each other
in all our possibilities
or just the one exercising
our Self in names and verbs and syntax
(the lover as Eckhardt says turning
always into what is loved)
multiple personalities
unity in diversity
diversity in unity
all of us born of the same parents
removed several times over
each character in the dream
dreaming all the others in
a universe of mirrors

how many
trying this time to not end up
bitter at best seeing our lives
as flounderings in utter delusion
(hands on the wheel eyes on the road
heads up between our legs
as if switching lanes in heavy traffic
would get us anywhere faster),
but find instead with any luck
among the strings of *and* and *and*
(*just one damned thing after another*)
some chord to trip up time
to dance with the infinitesimal
infinities some melody
to sing us through the white noise

{no
stan
za}

of factual experience

(a room with a view of the house on the hill:
the five-sided figure raised on the fill
where the swamp used to be:
the temple where the price of money
gets set by the priests who traffic in it:
the court of last resort seating

{no
stan
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men and women of the cloth:
the barricaded state house:
all built by those who live without)
giving opinion an attitude

how many trying to kill desire
instead of themselves or love itself,
convinced by the *Myth of Sisyphus*
not to slice our wrists quite yet
but go into isolation like Moses
in Mississippi teaching black kids
math, like red diaper babies
Romantic hearts with Enlightenment heads
incommunicado for good
reasons: pride remorse confusion
whatever survival instinct demands:
never opening the door
without asking first who's there
never using names on the phone
never sure which bed has bugs:
a cold eye in a warm body

how many caught in the bind between
biology and mind asking
how we could dare to bring children
into this war-infested world,
nurse them on milk contaminated
by products of free enterprise
(better killing through chemistry)
here in the heartland where we who wanted
only to live in peace now fight

fire with fire an eye for an eye
becoming our own worst enemy
making the scorched world blind
afraid even here: land of the brave:
alien nation: to say how we feel
tell it like it is for us
for fear some night we won't make it home
or find if we do instead of mail
a rattlesnake a letter bomb
a stab strangle bullet or worse
from men we're nothing to but a job

how many blowing their brains out
with cathode tubes attached to their eyes

{no
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corporate probes stuck in their ears
jumping like frogs on a galvanized wire
to tunes in the register labels prefer:
getting cancer from x-ray exams
chlorine daughters in the water
benzene rings in fossil fuels
things that food manufacturers
put in our mouths words their lawyers
write into our laws in order to fix
our unwritten constitutions
so they and theirs are never
proved guilty as (or if) charged

how many
having learned the hard way
that the first freedom is
the freedom to be let alone:
liberty: privacy:
the right underlying all
the rest, including the second: the right
to live in an unpolluted world,
sharing its necessities
respectfully and equitably,

the privacy of our intimate bodies
let alone our hearts and minds
uninvaded by military
industrial complexes

how many

economic refugees
in spiritual retreat crossing
one or another border just under
the wire under aerial
surveillance under the bottom line
with only the clothes and sun on our backs
a bottle of water if we're lucky
on foot in a foreign land (as lovers
always are) unfamiliar
with the native tongues

how many

re-learning the ancient tantras
You can't possess the one you love
You can't know what something means
unless you know what it might mean

{no
stan
za}

The goal is nothing the movement all
The personal is political
Language is never innocent
The myth must be the motive for action
Love is its own satisfaction
Existence its own justification
These bodies are the soul

how many

priding themselves on getting high
not just for the fun of it,
because it feels so good (except
when it doesn't) especially in bed:
but for knowledge, to understand
who we are, and what, and where,

how best to live these lives
given all the givens we never
asked for — poor, nasty,
brutish, short, *etcetera*

how many having lost the faith,
unsatisfied with head trips
freedom found only in ideas
satisfaction only in spurts:
unable to separate *is* from *does*
what's happening from *who we are*:
unable to locate or presume
a unified sensibility
a still point or center of
psychoneural stability
persisting through time and space and tribe:
unable like some to believe we are
simply because we think we think
or think we know anything
we didn't already believe in first:
unable like some Renaissance men
minds bent into Greek positions
to privilege the rational
the immemorial the purely
imaginary ideal over
the idiotic novelty
this unimaginable clutter of
real life death redundancy

how many pretty much convinced

{no
stan
za}

words games are what's happening,
making a view of anything else
hard at best to imagine,
so making a virtue of that perhaps
ontological condition
by joining in the fun of making
novel verbal opacities

how many looking sideways at things
so their edges disappear
into metaphors with no
particular rhyme or reason this
identical to that one
identified with one and having
made that leap of faith not knowing
where to stop: literally
drowning in possibilities
heartfelt correspondences
physical limits apparently
irrelevant or out of order
for the time being as if
whatever conjecture the mind conceives
is real and death mere illusion

how many coming to believe
for want of a better explanation
that fundamental reality
is light, mood, understanding
and fear, like the man said, in that
order: and authenticity
(that old-fashioned shibboleth
as riddled with rhetoric and chatter
as any corpse in the heat with maggots)
harder to come by than ever

how many coming to see ourselves
less as who we were (what
our elders did or didn't do:
where we come from how we got here:
how we happen to still be there)
than what we're going through right now
in time space: no up no down
no field no ground: paternity
more genitive than genital
more ethical than visceral

{no
stan
za}

where two come together where paths
cross + is as close as we get
to what they call transcendence:
that having the one you love inside
alive aware touching each other
edges in common is about all
any one can stand or hope

{no
stan
za}

to understand: that gender not sex
gender not eros is
the Great Wall the politic
of separation belligerence
and war

how many of a mind
to realize that love, like art,
is made not found, a strategy of
the physical as the physical is
of desire, the *primum mobile*
seeking connection with another
even before an other is known
to exist

how many understanding
that concepts abstractions and memories
whatever we may have forgotten at birth
ideas themselves the mind itself
have no life of their own but only
in living flesh as we persist
of this living world its dancing
with its ineffable self

how many
trying to make that revolution
real: to keep the natural world
natural: personal: communal:
the law of the commons the common law:
to stop the real Third World War

the war against our real estate—
the mountains and coasts and rivers that join them,
the fields forests and flocks eaten
away by those with means to buy
what can't be sold except in legal
fictions what can't be held except
in common: in trust: in touch with more
than just a passing sense of places
our lives cross † but can be killed:
the topsoil paved the water poisoned
the past denied or dismembered
the present taken at face value
the generations yet to come
deflowered by the invisible hand

IV

But that was later yet,
after ages of passing each other
on the same translucent path
lifetimes spun through the Milky Way
apparitions involved in the same
amazement. Now the wind picks up
the ocean the sky lets it fall
turning the world into *film noir*
La Niña early as usual
drowning poor Orpheus again
his mind shaft of steep regret
pulling his headless body parts
down the cement bed of the river
under the freeway overpasses
under the seagull's raven laughter
out to sea with millions of condom
jellyfish and used needles
glistening in the darkening foam
washing away the smell of my cellmates'
vomit sweat and cigarettes

this sickly sweet room deodorant
every third slots player
seems to be drenched in leaving the good
clean honest wet dog smell
of your longhaired white moonlight
the smell of you on your own fingers
the smell of the tide pulling out
our lovers pulling out of our lives.

Notes

With thanks to Sharon Doubiago for marking the trailheads.

Cuando miro la forma/ de America en la mapa. Pablo Neruda, "Pequeña America," *Los Versos de Capitán* (1953), tr., Donald D. Walsh, *The Captain's Verses (Los Versos del Capitán)*, NY: New Directions, 1972, p. 110.

this land. Kenneth Patchen, "Joe Hill Listens to the Praying" *The New Masses*, (1934) rpt., *Collected Poems* (NY: New Directions, 1968), p.46.

so love might be/ a figure. Catullus, #109.

action faction & praxis axis. Ed Sanders, 1968: *A History in Verse* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1997), p.102.

You can't possess. From the *Tantra Upanishad*.

You can't know. Common paraphrase of E.H. Gombrich.

The goal is nothing. Edward Bernstein, criticizing Lenin; quoted, Timothy Garton Ash, "Ten Years After," *New York Review of Books* (18 November 1999), pp.16, 18-19; 18. Cf., Antoine de St.-Exupéry: "Perhaps the goal doesn't mean anything, but the getting there delivers us from death," quoted, Breytan Breytenbach, "An Open Letter to Nelson Mandela" (1994), in *The Memory of Birds in Time of Revolution* (NY: Harcourt, 1996), pp.82-87; 83.

The myth must. Cf. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "America 1968: The Politics of Violence," *The Crisis of Confidence* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), ed., Tom E. Kakonis and Richard J. Shereikis, *Scene Seventy: Recent Nonfiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), pp.269-2282; 276 [citing Julian Sorel].

Language is never. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, tr. and ed., Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology* (NY: Beacon, 1967), p.16.

Existence is. Cf. William James, "To the Homeric Greeks. . .existence was its own justification," "Is Life Worth Living" (1895).

light, mood, understanding. Cf., Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr., John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (NY: Harper and Row, 1962), esp., "Being-in as Such, pp.131-194.