

Richard Jackson

Shadows

Why is there something rather than nothing?

— Parmenides

What a consoling poem this will be if the roadside
 crows that scatter into the pines as each car passes,
 that rise like the souls of the dead in Van Gogh's wide
 and confused heaven, are not the signs of your loss.
 What a consoling poem this might be if I could remember
 the first secret place where the pitiful world did not,
 as Flaubert says it does, surface in terrible error
 like the bloated bodies of dogs in a stream near his retreat
 at Rouen, those poor shadows of the dead, despite
 the stones tied to their necks, and surface in the sentences
 Flaubert wrote trying to find a secret place for each right
 word, a place that did not mean the old disgust for happiness.
 I thought I had seen death. I see instead those rising crows
 again, remember your leaving, and, scattered here, in shadows
 that fall across this page, figures I'd forgotten, shadows
 that seem to rise from the faded newsprint, that seem to show
 how each private loss is part of a larger loss we might
 remember; — yesterday's news is the young boy in Providence
 R.I., who followed the consoling words of some killer one night
 into woods where animals later tore off his face, or two Palestinians,
 two boys, faces covered, who followed one street or another
 with a crowd of protesters and were shot, or how, unable to let
 death take him, a Bantu tribesman clutched the dirt of his father,
 lifting himself again so the Pretoria soldiers could not forget.
 Listen, it is nearly dawn here. I wish all these losses
 could hide in the shifting forms for these words, that you could hide
 in their dream that tries to tell you not to abandon your past
 in a few clothes on the shore, no place left to hide.

I didn't know, when you left, about poor Flaubert never finding the words to dominate the absurd sounds of parrots he kept hearing, the plaintive sounds of cicadas that always haunted him, how he would mutilate phrases, how he'd shift sentences, how each word was, he wrote, an "endless farewell to life," crossing out repetitions that meant he only had one voice, that meant, really, hearing the endless terror of his own voice. I didn't know, then, about Van Gogh, who was finding in an asylum, while Flaubert tried to write an asylum for his life, a style to hold off death, a style that he feared, that he kept even from his brother. I hadn't read, then, those poor sentences to Theo, haunted by the power of color and shape, haunted by shadows of enemies he invented, the way the birds haunt his last painting, *Crows over a Wheatfield*, where the lost voice of Christ seems to dissolve into darkness that moment his sentence was finished, those crows that could be flying towards us, finding only our losses, or up towards heaven, or maybe they keep wavering, flying both ways at once, the way Van Gogh's life would, as he himself knew, painting, he wrote, his own life in theirs. I can't help but wonder how those crows haunt all his last paintings. I believe he must have found a way to keep a secret place somewhere on each canvas, the way Christ's voice seems to hide beneath the thick paint. I believe he must have found how the birds carry the painting away from itself, as Flaubert's sentences

were meant to lead him away from what he called the sentence of his life. And because he saw a halo shimmering around each life or object the way he had as a young preacher, what did Van Gogh find,

what consolation against all that pain? I am still haunted by that faceless boy in Providence, the African without a voice, the Palestinian boys kept from their home, these deaths that keep announcing their obscene selves. Like Flaubert, I'm going to keep trying to find some style, some shape for these sentences.

I believe I can hear, in Van Gogh's painting, the poor voice of Christ which is the voice, too, of Flaubert, and these lost lives that haunt me now. I believe that the last demon that haunted Van Gogh was his fear that, outside his frames, nothing was found to keep the "troubled skies" from his life, nothing even in his sentences to Theo — "what's the use?" he asked hauntingly, finally, like the voice of Christ, crying to be found.

Listen, I am writing to you now, on this table crossed by shadows, that the answer is anyone hearing your voice, anyone hoping the next news of you is not your loss, trying by these repetitions to call you back, though the place keeps shifting because I can't hide the world Flaubert, at Rouen, fought inside each phrase, and you wouldn't believe a story with no form for suicide or death. Here I am again thinking of Van Gogh, listening to Lightnin' Hopkins say the blues are everywhere, the blues are us, these stories he sings on the scratched tape, the stories we read about Van Gogh, the headlines, the poems, the way the blues rhythms never change, 4/4, as if we needed something that constant against our fears, as if we knew how much these sad stories showed us what it means to go on. Here I am again, listening to the blues, starting to understand it is my own despair I mean to fight. Last night, I stood on the bridge where a friend dove into the shadows of the Tennessee and was afraid I understood. I was thinking of the faceless boy again, remembering how the man who found him by the pond where he lay face down, turned him over, saw what the animals had done and knelt in prayer, knelt for the pity of it, for the faces of everyone dead or missing, knowing how he must go on. I was thinking, too, how the mothers of the Palestinian boys must also have knelt, must have touched the life leaking from them, must also have prayed, unwrapped the cloth around their heads hoping some other life, not a son's, was missing. I have been thinking how the map of this table, ever since you left, scatters the shadows of fears this poem tries to shape, and how Van Gogh's pictures, the dark secret places in Flaubert's phrases, show all our words as a care for life, a color we have to hold.

I can't forget that faceless boy. I can't stop wondering what last thing he touched or saw. I get up, punch another tape into the player, Charlie Parker, "the Bird," taking off into rhythms and harmonies more unpredictable than Van Gogh's crows — taking notes from what he touched or saw — dogs barking, the hiss of a radiator, the sudden squeal

of a train's brakes, the rhythm and harmonies of the unpredictable drunk shifting in a doorway, changing every sad thing so that the dog's barking, the hiss of the radiator, the squeal of brakes becomes not a sign of loneliness or loss, but joy, the notes shifting like Flaubert's words, like the drunk in the doorway,

discovering in each phrase and note some secret place among the flattened fifths meaning either loss or joy, among the odd intervals of chords his alto sax remembers, until he fell asleep for good in an armchair in New York, nearly 35, "I'm just a husk," he said, in the end, just a phrase or interval you remember, and I do, in this poem for you taking these hints from the flights of the bird, Charlie Parker, who lived beyond death in each note, each husk, each phrase, above the deaths of the boy, the Palestinians, the tribesmen.

I remember last summer, — finding an old sax player just waking among the remnants of fieldstone cellars some quarry workers left half a century ago outside Gloucester, Mass., a place called *Dogtown*, where he tried among the sounds of stray dogs Parker would have loved, to remember the clear notes of the alto sax rising above the trees, above his memory of the war, unable to sleep without checking the perimeter, each hour, to keep all the shadows named and held, unable to sleep at all if it rained because he couldn't hear the enemy's footfall.

It could have been you there, he said, and I know,

I know all our shadows, *it could have been you*.

And I am remembering the Bantu tribesman, how he could tell immediately that the difference between dirt and blood no longer mattered, that the lost children he fought for, the child detained for questioning and found weeks later among the smoldering garbage, his tongue cut out for talking to newsmen, were what his death might be about, a death that gathered above the tin roofs as the past gathered — maybe the way it gathered in the eyes of the sax player who could not forget, as he told it, the way his base camp was overrun, the way, after a while, the haze he was seeing was not dawn, not even the smoke of rifles, but the unbelievable smoke of bodies burning, and the terrible vapor that rose from open wounds, the sickening stink that took the place of words, screams, whatever he tried to think.

When things were bad, he said, he could remember the service for William Williams in New Orleans, how the entire brass had gathered for the long march to Corolloton cemetery — the Eureka Brass Band — with its slow dirges, its heavy hymn notes to “In the Sweet Bye and Bye,” the trombones leading the way, he and his father among the baritone horns of the second rank — and how they danced on the way home to “St. Louis Blues,” music, he said, you could raise the dead with, as now, he just wanted once more to hear the consoling notes of Parker, some sound to drive away his fear.

Listen, I have tried to find for us a shape for all this grief, a form to make, as Parker and Van Gogh did, our fear into a strength. It may be that any form is a kind of belief that the losses, the shadows on this table, the enemy we fear when the world goes dark, can be contained beyond our moment. In Berea, Ohio, once, I came across an old graveyard next to a quarry, centered by a concubine pine, a tree that grew around its own cones and branches that were bent around the trunk, as if the tree took as its form the discarded parts of its own past and future. Now I want to believe the long embrace of that tree, to touch my hands to your face, I am touching my own face now, unable to forget that faceless boy, the frightened sax player, hoping to find here some place where we can kneel before these shadows, where we can bless and embrace our pasts. I am blessing the past of a friend, torn coat, hovering in a doorstep in Belgrade before he escaped the Russians, who would twist gunpowder out of shells to sell to gangs for bread, who watched a kneeling soldier smile to slit a prisoner’s throat, who chose not the Danube, but life. Not long ago I knelt in the park where he played, one secret place where finally the dead were only distant shadows. I was feeding the few ragged crows that could have been Van Gogh’s birds, leaving them a little bread and cheese, thinking again of you, of your sadness, of how form may be only, as Whitman said, another name for the body, for all the secret places we contain, the only consolation we have known, —

and I was gathering you around me, building my own secret place inside you, feeling you move again unpredictably, like Parker’s rhythms, the shifts in Flaubert’s sentences, knowing, having known, that this poem begins in your body and ends in the same place, feeling the world move, trying to stay this way forever.