



# Anthony Etherin

## Edges

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[songsofinversion@gmail.com](mailto:songsofinversion@gmail.com)

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## **Edges**

You have discovered to your surprise the formal edges of an animal. A pale swan arches from its gut and gives birth to a crow. Folded as they are, there's an urgent need for motion. Let us store it in the hour, in the space we imagine between us.

You see: Useful has become an ugly word. Its e stands with its back to us, Cyclopean and still, with the brainless, slack-jawed girning of a crisp and crescent moon...

Of course, the same could be said of those edges and the animal they contain. But somehow that's okay. You stroke it if it is a dog.

## **Banisters**

My first birth was in error. Mother got it wrong, and I was born into a universe that consisted only of banisters.

There were no stairs to climb, just the suggestion of an infinite stairwell. There were no portraits, no walls, no windows, no people and no clouds. All banisters lay in darkness.

Space itself was a banister, an enormous, pliable arc in which all other banisters nested like crows. Time was a banister too, curled into itself like a poor argument. (These days, when I am asked whether I believe time to be cyclic, I recall the banister world, where time was the shape of a q or a p; that is, possessed of a linear root that led to a point of eternal return.)

I would have been frightened, were fear itself not a banister. I would have reached out for something to hold, were it not for my rigid banister arms. I would have thought the universe strange, were my consciousness not a banister, and were my soul something other than a slowly fading varnish whose only quiet yearnings were for the Invisible Landing of God.

## **Three Inventors**

In the city there are three inventors. The first is a reticent doctor, the second a mad old priest.

The third owns a black Labrador called Melvin or Lawrence or Dante. "Names reflect the soul," he says, "and dogs' souls are forever in flux." His wife doesn't agree. She insists that the dog is a cat and should have a cat name like Thomas or Tabitha, depending, of course, on its sex. They argue every night, Husband and Wife. Wife is sick of chasing a Labrador off the kitchen table (with a broom). Husband cannot accept that cats have souls.

## **Midnight**

1896. A café. Saint-Germain-des-Prés. A mercenary from the Old West sits beneath a poster for *Ubu Roi* and with his back to a grand piano. A bare breasted waitress stands beside him, aware of the artist's eye.

The mercenary is holding out two miniature marionettes. The one on the left is an outlaw; on the right is Deputy Storp. It is midnight in both the café and Storp's saloon. The outlaw is about to escape through an imaginary window located between a bottle of absinthe and a menu, but Storp intends to follow, to chase down his adversary and challenge him to a duel.

While we can't see the mercenary's eyes beneath his oversized cowboy hat, we get the feeling that he has further imagined a table in the saloon, where a lost Mallarmé sits with a dusty bottle of bourbon in which can be seen a Parisian café framing a bare breasted waitress, an ill-fitting grand piano, and a poster for *Ubu Roi*. The mercenary is in there too, with his twisted marionettes, and so asymptotically onwards in a sealed mise-en-abyme.

Perhaps the waitress knows this. Perhaps she believes that she and the mercenary are themselves a third or fourth generation copy, and that this is why her skin is like coral pink cellophane, why the black of the grand piano has bled into the mercenary's chair, and why the tiny marionettes are faceless, held by invisible strings.

## **Wilber Mutton, Chicken Murderer**

Wilber Mutton beat a chicken to death with the blunt end of a saw because he believed the gods had demanded it. I saw the whole horrendous display. When he had finished, I stole the chicken.

The chicken stayed with me for over a year. It would occasionally mate with a fox. I once saw it give birth to a litter of chicks – six little aching bloody lumps of knotted feather and bone.

The next week, there was a knock at my door. It was Wilber Mutton, demanding I hand back the chicken. I told him he should ask the fox.

Wilber Mutton beat a fox to death with the blunt end of a saw because he wanted his chicken back. I saw the whole horrendous display. When he had finished, I stole the saw...

## **Willard Rex**

Willard Rex had a dream whose type was recurring. So familiar became Willard Rex with the dream that one dreamtime the dream became lucid. When the dream was the type that is lucid, Willard Rex changed its features and failings. Another dreamtime he turned it quite blue. Several dreamtimes later he found he was able to protract it in a temporal way. He made a short nap's dream last a fortnight. When he found out he was dying, he entered the dream and he dreamed for ever...

## **The Analyst**

The Analyst forces his head through a crack in the wall.

Inside, he turns to face the room from without.

A cable hangs beside him. It is raining in the wall.

His umbrella a road map, the Analyst shakes his head.

## **Mr Magnetic's House of Rubber Proxies**

A woman picks up a rubber teapot and examines it, and she cannot help but think that very few teapots are metal in the first place and that Mr Magnetic has created an entirely unnecessary product for the super highly charged. She decides to buy it anyway, if only out of politeness.

"How much for the teapot?" she asks.

Mr Magnetic smiles like a big rubber shoe. "Quartz is a jewel in a marsh frock. Onyx loves the blind thorn's plight," he contests.

"Please, I'm in a hurry," says the woman.

"Vinyl nihilism, netball, exploding jackets. A quilt hen, her starless horizon, the horror of a swan's throat."

"You're being very silly, Mr Magnetic. May I please just purchase the teapot and leave?"

At this point, the rubber teapot falls from her hands and shatters into a thousand rubber-coated pieces of iron.

"Oh, Mr Magnetic," says the woman. "The coiled worm of my heart unfurls every time you are dishonest. I want to purchase your love with the butterfly kisses Grandma gave me as a child."

"Three ninety-nine," says Mr Magnetic, presenting the palm of his hand.

## **Mr Carrot**

Mr Carrot had found Mr Broccoli in bed with his wife. He had yelled and chased Mr Broccoli away. He had returned to his wife and said, "Mrs Carrot, how could you do this to me?" Mrs Carrot had said, "Because Mr Broccoli is a sexual maestro, and I am an orange whore." Mr Carrot had started to cry. "Oh, and because Mr Broccoli has two penises," Mrs Carrot had added, "which means he can penetrate two orifices simultaneously. He calls it 'bifuckation theory' because he's a mathematician who's fond of puns." Mr Carrot had said, "That's not funny. It's just disgusting. Besides, most people won't get it." Mrs Carrot had said, "I don't care what you think, mono-cock." Mr Carrot had picked up a vase and smashed it over Mrs Carrot's head. Mrs Carrot had been killed. Mr Broccoli had run back in, having heard screaming. "What have you done?" he had said. Mr Carrot had said, "I've murdered my wife!" before falling to his knees and sobbing noisily. "Don't worry about it," Mr Broccoli had said. "It's only a carrot." But Mr Carrot had not stopped crying and still cries to this day.

Occasionally, Mr Broccoli will sit beside him and mockingly join in, "affecting wails and gestures of catastrophic grief," he informs me, "as hyperbolic as a conic whose eccentricity exceeds unity."

## **The Buffalo**

They have found a small round buffalo, no larger than a brick, on the roof of their Winnebago. Mother strokes it but it quivers fearful. Father tells her that it must be diseased. Daughter says ugh and steps back.

The buffalo spreads its tiny wings and floats across the prairie.

## **my bedside lamp**

my bedside lamp whose head turns all the way round is beginning to shake maybe frightened by the bumping and squeaking coming at us through the bedroom wall which could be our neighbours but maybe I have no neighbours and maybe next door is haunted because ghosts go bump and squeak according to some they like making noise you see they like making noise but they rarely show us their faces it must be that they're shy shy but noisy like owls and that's why they are yet to provide any concrete empirical data in support of their existence and why they only ever tell psychics the first letter of their names because they are desperate to be heard but don't want us knowing their names like enraged yet cowardly pamphleteers and this is why you will never catch apparitional owls disseminating opuscular propaganda but nonetheless they make quite a racket twittering on about laws that exist or should be when the fog of night descends and they turn their white and wispy heads all the way round like the earth or a racquet or a doll or a demon or my bedside lamp

## **Enough!**

The Analyst wanted to protect his mind. He cared not for his body.

He said, "Enough!" and dug a hole and hid for twenty years.

His wife would bring him coffee, cheesecake, sometimes cigarettes. She would lie by the hole at night and watch the false and furrowed sky.

One day, she fell in love with the stars that bind Orion's belt.

She said, "Enough!" and bit her lip and climbed above the trees.

## **The Robin**

A robin in a thin pink necktie stops by a snowy iron gate.

Shadows out of rhythm. The moon an imitation cloud.

Open-mouthed villagers stare at the bird as though a light skip might justify winter.

One can barely make out their scarves behind hopeful fists.

## The Lobster

The lobster was grinding its teeth again. Fourteen yellow letters fell from its lips. An unstable countess played cello in the corner, bowing with a claw.

Monsieur Caldron entered in French.

Mister Beckett acknowledged the fireplace and solemnly declared, “Whenever she starts to play, that damned lobster appears.”

“Perhaps,” Caldron said in earnest, “it has nowhere else to go.”

The yellow letters on the floor spelled ‘actions whisper’.

The countess changed key with bleeding fingers.

“If I thought that were true,” said Beckett, “then I would be remiss.”

The yellow letters on the floor spelled ‘how can i persist’.

The lobster dipped its head; the pale countess raised hers.

“Well, whatever the case may be, *mon frère*, it certainly is a nuisance,” said Caldron. “Can we not kill it?”

Mister Beckett shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he replied. “It’s not like other lobsters.” He promptly left the room.

The yellow letters on the floor spelled ‘crown this sepia’.

Monsieur Caldron approached the unstable countess and kissed her forehead, said goodbye.

The yellow letters on the floor spelled ‘now spirits ache’.

## A Chance Discovery

Fortune tastes itself when cold to find its pale afternoon. She is lonely, naturally, and I unlock my desk to discover a piece of her beauty misplaced. Is this what she is missing or am I still in her heart?

## Comets

It is now known that comets were once inquisitive, thoughtful beings. They would visit our corner of the galaxy only in order to feed off the sun, and spent most of their days roaming the depths of space and time, exploring uncharted worlds, wagging their icy tails with joy.

But over the years their orbits were calculated, and they have since been reduced to dumb, regimented drones...

The comets of today are tame and torpid creatures of rock, irretrievably ensnared by the reckonings of man.

## The Balloon

A balloon had a boy connected to it by string and by hand. The boy would watch the balloon all day. He would follow it across wheat fields and brooks.

The boy loved the balloon, but he did not – could not – know that the balloon loved him back. When the boy dropped dead one day, the balloon flew up to find him in Heaven.

## Hooves

He stepped on his hoof, stumbled. Sparks flew in a twisted half-circle. This man, who was like all other men – respectable, aloof – felt different only in that he had hooves, and that when he stumbled sometimes sparks flew, in twisted half-circles, from his hardy iron shoes. Yes! His shoes were those of a horse, for he had hooves like horses’.

He<sub>(2)</sub> had hooves like horses: great, clumpy growths of mangled flesh and rot; long toothy faces hanging lazily like dolls; a heart of knotted nothing; hair spun thin as a web of light. He<sub>(2)</sub> had hooves that were thus themselves hoofed, hoofed with hooves which, if inverted, would reveal he<sub>(1)</sub> stumbling along, sparks flying in twisted half-circles as horseshoe meets pavement and he<sub>(2)</sub> meets he<sub>(1)</sub>.

He had hooves like horses' he<sub>(2)</sub>: a truth that he never knew, for the world is opposed to inversions. When he stumbled, sometimes sparks flew.

## The Colonel

All the things he rolled between his fingers turned to fingers.

He rolled a silver spoon, a woollen scarf; he rolled a small and porcelain crow.

He placed his three new fingers neatly in a row, parallel and nail up on cold aluminium foil.

“You,” he said to the finger on the left, “are the colonel. You are Colonel Martin Storp. You look like a child’s idea of God – only wearing khaki shorts. Your beard is neatly trimmed and nearly white. You have flashbacks to the Battle of Britain, even though you were never there.

“And you,” he told the central finger, “are Lieutenant Martin Brekkon. You shiver and you shake even when the air is warm. Your life has been shaped by the memory of returning home one day from school, calling ‘Father! Mother!’ and, following a lengthy search, finding only your father’s bloodstained toupee.”

He turned to the finger on the right and said, “You are Private Martin Martin, a taciturn stamp collector and pacifist. You signed up for service by mistake. You have a fondness for willows and the prose of Hemingway. Your toes are the shape of acorns and your eyes resemble glass.”

He dipped the colonel into a soft-boiled egg and gnashed his teeth nine times – in rhythm with a quickened *Für Elise*.

## The Mountain

The mountain folds into its blackness. A party draped in eveningwear begins its slow ascent.

Bowties bend sideways and top hats collide. A trumpeter loses his trumpet.

The party is being tidally stripped by a skeletal singularity. Halfway up the mountain, we can see only their feet.

Red leather heels climbing wretched to the summit.

## Clyde Dubois

The sun up waltzing slow as yellow nothing to the window. Fever sinking, feeling-woken, Clyde Dubois has ankle swept the curtain leaning carpet piled by books.

Then rubbing eyes half stood.

His bedroom left of trodden stair a seated breakfast table shaken small with juice and paper leather shoe. Bus seat the morning more the button pressed the feet a crooked lady smiling knitting woollen fingers slowly thumb her scarf.

Then factory in a noises full of grey or upper down is clouded by.

“I take the sky my grounded shaking fist,” his boss, of tongue.

“Well, here’s a thought: The corner of a wheel.”

“You tell a lie.”

“Your sister saw me falling in a dream.”

“I own a hat.”

“I bought a dove. It went all brown and dead.”

“Ha ha.”

“December saw me plucked like goose or flower.”

“True. I still believe in mice.”

So creeps their hangnail star returning here for rite of night before...

“My feeble fucking toes are frozen green but yours are gone.”

“I knew too much. Let’s sacrifice a pun.”

“It’s done. The water’s much too warm but someone said that I would drown.”

Go nod the head by dropping then but rise. “We like sometimes.”

A longer when. The ritual had a snap of dance – whence bending they their toe-like knuckles thrice upon the heel.

## A Building Whose Four Inner Walls Are Blank

A building whose four inner walls are blank proves a daunting environment for someone of your disposition. Your anxiety isn’t helped by the fact that the walls are of equal height and width. After all, should you not offer these four equal features an equal amount of attention? Should you not stare as intently at each? And even touch each surface the same number of times?

But which wall will you touch first, and why? You soon begin to realise that no correct order has made itself apparent and that you, sadly, are in control. In touching one random wall before the others – perhaps the one on the right – you have unwittingly stated a preference, and no matter how many times you place the tips of your fingers against the smooth white paintwork, against the cold impassive planes that border your world, you will always have touched one wall first.

One wall! Or rather, one fingertip-shaped portion of wall: one chance set of coordinates in space and time from which your future neuroses will unravel. And as you try desperately to put things right, rushing from surface to surface, tapping each wall in rhythm to a nonexistent beat, you begin to curse the date of this horror’s conception. You wish you could go back to the start, when the world was pure and all walls were untouched; you wish you could place your fingertips on all four surfaces simultaneously; you wish you could touch every point on these walls for all moments in time. In essence, you wish you were as God: all meaning and all being – not a desperate shadow who came from an arbitrary point, to live to an arbitrary age, with an arbitrary purpose, forever running from wall to wall, forever running out of time, tapping and screaming from birth until death.

## Letters from Nowhere

The distant sounds that shape us, among which one finds the thunder of others' smiles, have become an empty mirror. The same is true of Nowhere.

I visit the latter in search of the Truth:

Dear Self [I write], The journey was a dream; my spacecraft melted to its bones almost as soon as I had passed the tropopause; it grew dull grey skin and thick gorilla fur; its wings became lolloping arms; so large became the beast, and such was its invincible impatience, that it swept the moon into its fleshy palm and heaved it towards its chest. You may have noticed a shift in the tides.

Dear Mother, I am hopelessly lost. I cut my own hair so that I look like someone else. I live in a hut with a cat named Bob and my dog is a word spelled backwards. I have planted seven strawberries. I have torn the lid off a daffodil. Father is here at Christmas, chasing potatoes atop toes of carrot and sage and monstrous cranberry hills. My brothers and sisters watch him gather gravy till they cease. (P.S. You will, no doubt, be dismayed to hear that I refuse to shave now – even for weddings.)

Dear Audrey, I have discovered that I am composed entirely of bees. My eyes are dripping honey and my ears are buzzing hard. My elbow joints are stinging. O Audrey! Is there a place in the world for a man who's made of bees? I fear not, and, as I fear it, I see my toenails, toes, and fingers splitting up to fly aw–

Dear Sir, There is a problem with your subscription to Whores Tickling Whores With Feathers While Other Whores Watch On, Tickling Themselves. The central problem is that no such publication exists. After all, not only is the magazine ludicrously titled, but there is, I imagine, little chance that its content (or what I imagine to be its content, given its less than equivocal title) would attract a sufficiently sizable demographic. I certainly wouldn't buy it. Neither, for that matter, would I publish it. It would be a poor investment. Moreover, I should not wish to be associated with such a lascivious enterprise. I am a family man and owner of a moderately successful fishery southeast of Lowestoft. In all honesty, I find the very notion that I have even heard of Whores Tickling Whores With Feathers While Other Whores Watch On, Tickling Themselves an outrageous slur against my good character, made all the more outrageous for the publication's existential failings, and I should, come to think of it, take action against this slanderous accusation forthwith, lest the reputation I have tried so hard to cultivate over the years be irreparably harmed. Good day, wicked Sir. The next letter you receive will be from my lawyer...

Dear Future, Where have you been? I once sought to unravel the nature of time and space and being, slowly. My search for an answer took me halfway around the world and the best part of my life, but the only thing I've learned is that there's no such thing as adventure.

Dear me, what have I done?

## Spokes

Holding a velvet bag  
with crystal knuckles on its sides  
and staring vainly at the spokes,

she turned to Claire Monet  
and said, "This one. I'll one day buy  
this 'cycle. I can see myself

already in an ecs-  
-tasy of centripetal turns."  
But Claire Monet was silent. In

the window, Mr Will-  
-is span a wheel and turned away.  
"I'm cold," said Claire, "let's go inside,

or otherwise just go."  
Alicia shook her head and raised  
a hand. "Not yet." The clouds evolved:

rain fell on time and Claire  
Monet recoiled and shivered, saw  
the shades of winter spread across

the court. Alicia turned  
to Claire. "Okay, let's go. But come  
the spring I'm coming back; I'll buy

that 'cycle. Then it's done.  
I'll buy that bike and ride away.  
You'll miss me when I'm gone, I guess,

but that's what happens. When  
it's done, it's done. It's something we  
all do." Claire nodded stoically

and held Alicia's hand.  
A small boy span towards them like  
a helicopter, stopped and said:

I saw hair like yours once  
in a funeral parlour  
in Cannes.

## **Ballerina**

Gaia, ballerina;  
her avian spine  
the provisional the.

She folds herself into a moth  
and flutters left to a cage of pins.

Maggots flower in the split of her thorax.

The Earth, a paper swan  
still writhing  
at the hook or the fix of its folds,  
is rising up from a wreath of skulls...

Gaia, ballerina, caught  
between identity's dimensions  
like a quantum pirouette,  
her naïve beak pecking at the veil  
of a butterfly tomb...

This is this.

A Ge model warps,  
a red nude suffused under  
a sprawled omega...

And the mad dancer floats  
with a tetrahedral soul  
inside her shuddering slump of bone...