"The brain will let any number of things go to pot as long as 'I' stay alive. That's because the brain is part of I. Look. A book is, a ship is, Tarik is; the universe is; but, as you must have noticed, I am." (Samuel R. Delany, Babel-17)

There is less of an I than we think there is.

Neoliberal selfhood is such a barren, tawdry thing. It's a kind of gilded aspirational selfhood that's always really about inexistence: of time, happiness, restfulness, spaces of the body and its surroundings... an accumulative mass of plasticated bullshit. In some ways, it's quite a new thing (in terms of the convocation of precarity, naturalised selfishness and digitised socioeconomy), but in other ways it goes back to disastrous thinkers such as John Locke, who formulated a modern (i.e. colonial, proto-capitalist) conception of the self that effectively constituted an enclosure of personhood.

One of the perennial enemies of experimental/innovative/radical/whatever-you-want-to-call-it poetry is lyric poetry; that is, poetry that addresses and expresses (or perhaps projects/promotes) personal emotions, often in the first person. Naturally, the assumptive subject of lyric, the I who wanders lonely as a cloud, has frequently been some white dude (probably William Wordsworth), who has the option of poetic self-expression by virtue of occupying the unmarked position.

Of course, lyric poetry was at one point itself experimental/innovative/radical/new, and there isn't necessarily a causal thread or arrow that can be drawn straightforwardly from Locke to Wordsworth to Thatcher to our present moment. However, the "I" of lyric has come to be the default mode of poetic expression. "I" is also "eye," that is, a way of seeing, and a position(alty) from which things are seen. Poetry has lost its purchase as a language of the commons – "I" doesn't really address anyone reading it, except inasmuch as they might aspire to replicate that mode of selfhood.

Some of my favourite contemporary poetry – I'm thinking here of Stephen Mooney's The Curary Epic and Robert Kiely's Gelpack Allegory – instead enlists a poetic "you" that's simultaneously precarious/dystopian/deflated [realism] and liminal/protean/chaotic [strange]. A poem in the second person is genuinely trying to reach someone – as David Ashford, another excellent poet, says: "like a message in a bottle across the dystopian ocean..."

Another thing which springs to mind when I think about the "I" of poetry (and of neoliberalism) is the notion suggested by some science fiction
scholars (Samuel R. Delany, Damien Broderick) that science fiction is a mode of writing/fictioning in which the object takes precedence over, or perhaps displaces/replaces, the subject. Delany suggests that this is something sf and poetry have in common, a preoccupation with the thinginess of things. Of course, people are things too, both in the dystopian sense of sinking to the level of the commodity, but also in that we are part of the commons of life.

In Delany's novel Babel-17, there's a scene where the protagonist (a queer, polyamorous, neurodivergent Asian poet/space captain/codebreaker called Ryder) is speaking to another character (named Butcher) who has no sense of self, largely due to speculative military industrial complex shenanigans/brutalities, and trying to help him develop an understanding of what "I" and "you" mean. After some initial progress, Ryder realises that Butcher has been using "you" to mean "I" or "me" and vice-versa:

"What I talk about as I, you must speak of as you. And the other way round, don't you see?"

"Are they the same word for the same thing, that they are interchangeable?"

"No, just ... yes! They both mean the same sort of thing. In a way they're the same."

"Then you and I are the same."

Many (perhaps all) of my poems are written with what I think of as "Babel-17 rules" in mind: that is, feel free to read any "I" as "you" and vice-versa. Read as intentionally or unintentionally as you like, in whatever direction you fancy, skipping or repeating lines or words or segments. There is no misreading, or perhaps there is only misreading.

"You are not frightened of the things I am frightened of. I am not frightened of the things you are frightened of. That's good, isn't it?" (Babel-17)

There is less of an I than you think there is.
Memory doesn't exist/
because it isn't mine
take my feelings
i don't especially
want
or need
depletion
them
the problem is
there are more than enough
extinctive
accumulation
hydrocarbons
to do it over
again
A Cruel Fiction // Epigenetics

it's not phony to assert that what's mine is yours and what's yours is your own my time is your time, it's your money, and your time too

My time is your time I mean it's yours you've bought it paid me up it's for you you can use it like it were yours though having so much of your time makes mine/

there's so much but that's okay you can afford it which is just as well as my time is really yours
Hit Points

progress/
‘outdated’
science
the world we
inhabit,
that is continually
destroyed and
remade
has been set to
osseous parameters
going back to the invention
of ‘race’
what does it matter
that my ideas are
flawed?
intoxicated
by systematisation
the undying, unchanging
self
the lands beyond
the west
a genocide
guaranteed
dream of an
emptiness
just / for / you
Diminishing Returns

You Have Failed
You Have Failed To
Reproduce
You Have Failed
To Replicate Yourself
(The Conditions Of Your Possibility)
Being Born
Was Your First
Opportunity To Fail
And You Failed
You’re A Terrible
Amoeba
And A Worse
Consumer
(But That’s Okay)
Fail
Smarter,
Better,
Mercilessly,
Pragmatically,
Efficiency
Is Only A Limiting Factor
I, You,
Believe In You
So
Keep
It
Up,
Peasant.
Colchian Skeletons need their Overnight Oats

deflation
inhaling space, there'll
always be a little bit more

a little bit
just a little
sunk costs,
as a treat
can keep growing
through
Finitude
caustic ash
shredded sail lines
crying without a tongue
without a voice
without a name
the long, long
Downturn

i'm really not at my best right now,
you know
i'm really not
at my best
come back later,
please,
and you’ll see
what i mean
it's not really okay
it isn’t
we can keep shrinking and
growing smaller,
relative to everything else
An Enormous Eye
hoping that
capital
and plastics
outlast us all
stay close
just a little close
(goodbye, sweet jellyfish)
No need
for a time that is
our Own
when we can just
Breathe
Out

structed—
everything
Coping Methods/If You Have Formed a Space to Go Into/Go into it Yourself

what the fuck do we even know

i'll show you i would like by all means include indeterminate
my influence to learn to be where debt is the
i'll unend a person condition of weaning off there's nothing
your awkwardness i am intrigued communicate the currency
that was at the prospect crunched slithering into
never my own of really ice bags receipts (chemicals) the intensity
i would instantiating fragment what is the basis of the process
like to be the butchery end of year of your attention in which
upset neoliberal subject restrictions what is the basis extreme
i don't to truly of your duration boredom
need complicity, possess a is suppurating,

enough salt mind of 'your in the rafters

oozing forth
to hedge against i mean my from the cardboard
terminus. 'own'

who is we what is we

the humid silence
Manic Pixie Mushroom and Her Extinct Goth Tree Girlfriend

I've whispered seventeen trees, 
now, each time 
their musty groan 
an exhalation of duration 
a release 
years upon years of 
pollutants 
we're neither the disease 
nor the cure 
there is no historicity, toxicity 
is a blank space, if space it 
can be called 
They've never listened, except 
really that means I really that means 
we, if we can be called. 
They're listened to, outside the walls 
of borders of corpses of ever straightened 
lines of degradation without decay 
of ruins denied their own ruination 
poisoned and shattered to a wreckage 
labour without pay

I'd like
I'd really, like
I'd like to, really . I would like
my desire isn't possible.
You'd prefer what would you prefer.
no, let's water our garden
If I inhale, pricked by dry grass,
the insects softly insecting
It doesn’t need to be a confinement
It can be a space
our space in between
beetles, worms, gossamer, violets
to these are a few of my favourite names
ripe with decaying life

don’t trouble, slough off your entire skin
before the cruel sun of today, malignantly
dominant, burns it away. Stay close,
I’ll press softly against you, beneath your
shade, in your lee. You, me, our friends
the microbes, here, now, formerly before,
not yet the not-yet. Mortar our glimpse
of such moments, but let the bricks be soft
and crumbling, so that foxes and other exceptions
to our chosen aesthetic can slip in and out. The
moss rusted, the rust mossed. A pool of
dank pond life/murkily reflecting/your macabre
beauty (it’s good to teem, now and then), until
enough of your fallen canopy
exhausts the oxygenic capabilities
of our small, small world
I don't bother unlocking the gate, we're beyond such things, really, if you think about it, if you feel anything at all.
This is our last moment, I am not here, you are not now. You were my seventh, sometimes when moonlight splashes sweetly, just so I touch my hair in a way that's carefully careless, hold my breath as I briefly remember our time together.
Dryness. I need things like you to be a part of it, to share conversation/in the scarce greenways. I grow on your ruin, hold you in my living death, but I can live without you.

Let's keep infesting each other, just for now, in this now we once had, our porous dream, for as long as I can stay. I miss you, and every other tree I've loved. The world, extinct, forgets, but I'll remember in my own way a short while, water the garden we once had.
Writing in 2020, Anna Hundert (in "A Carrier-Bag Theory of Revolution") suggests that perhaps revolutions, circlings, are the only certainty. I'm not sure about that, but I like the idea. It's clear to me that nature – of which we are a part – is always in change. For all their appeal, I distrust and disbelieve monoliths, straight lines, arcing arrows.

Following Elizabeth Fisher's suggestion (in Women's Creation) that "The first cultural device was probably a recipient," Ursula K. Le Guin proposes a Carrier-Bag Theory of Fiction in her essay of the same name. I recommend reading the piece, which is short, accessibly-written, and easy to find online, but the gist of it has something to do with breaking away from grandiose patriarchal-colonial ways of thinking about narrative, subjecthood and history. She's against "the ascent of man" and its privileged position in culture. (Hundert says: "continuity without resolution").

My second favourite quotation from Le Guin's essay is this: "The average prehistoric person could make a nice living in about a fifteen-hour work week." I'd prefer a zero-hour working week (in an actual sense, not this shit non-time we're saddled with in the horrid post-Fordist digitised haze of global capitalism), but it makes me happy.

Bini Adamczak has written about the idea of "circlusion" as an alternative to penetration – something to do with circling around, wrapping things up, swallowing/swaddling/enfolding them. She's talking about fucking, but sex is of course a strand of the spiderweb (or perhaps carrier-bag) of life, so she's also talking about many things. (This is something Samuel R. Delany does marvellously, his Neveryon books are kink-oriented cousins to Le Guin's carrier-bag thinking).

Anyway: circlusion, revolutions, recipients. Le Guin talks about "the killer story" of history/hegemony and trying to find the "life story" – a story of everyday life, but also a story which makes a claim for and about life. Her characterisation of the
killer story makes me think of the “conquering gaze from nowhere” of Donna J. Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges” which is a neat summation of the end goal of the immortality-chasing, afterlife-colonising patriarchal wizards of Le Guin’s Earthsea series. This desire to live forever as an unending, unchanging Selfhood is shown to be a denial of life, of the relational, reciprocal interconnectedness of life. On the other hand, Hundert invokes an image of pollination, which makes me think of Anna Tsing’s notion of contamination (in The Mushroom at the End of the World). Let all things be messy, because that’s how they are. The mess is around us and in us. And we are part of the mess, and we are the mess.

Here’s my favourite quotation from Le Guin’s Carrier-Bag piece:

“If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time’s-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one.

It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality.”

Hundert invokes the image of a “salvage-bundle,” which I like well enough. In various workshops, conversations and game design notes I’ve tended to use the term “grab-bag” as both an articulation of how I tend to think and as a description of the kind of practice I want to use to engage people and communicate with them. Having gone on Google while writing this, I’ve found two suggestions for what a grab-bag is supposed to be. The first (which seems to be the dominant interpretation) is a bag of unknown/random goodies to be taken home from a party or function. The second is a container of emergency supplies, kept close to the door, ready to be grabbed at short notice when needing to leave in a hurry. I think this zine is probably both of those things, and no doubt a lot more and less than that too, and I hope you enjoy it.

– Francis Gene-Rowe, Bow/Winchester, Autumn 2023
Strange Realism
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