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Bird Visitations

I was a crow caught in a pot. They were going to cook me, to make crow stew. I flapped my wings, clang-clang, and the lid flew off the pot. "But we were going to eat you, Crow!" they said. "Eat another crow, not me," I squawked. "I'll have nothing to do with your ceremonies." They watched me fly through the back door, their arms hanging at their sides.

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"What can I do?" he said. "Eat crow," I said. We went out, shot a crow, came home, steamed it in an inch of water. "I'm going to watch," I said. First he pulled the feathers out and licked each quill, setting it aside on a plate. Then he ate the whole, stringy crow. He was making faces the entire time, but I didn't let him stop. Finally, he finished the crow, belched. "Satisfied?" he said. "No," I said, and flew out the window.

*

Two birds were clinging to my shoulder, a finch and a parakeet. Every so often, they would deflate and I'd have to revive them with food. I gave birth and my baby turned into a parakeet the size of a thumb. I forgot to feed it and it withered like a dry condom.

I saw a shining, dark blue bird on the grass, unable to move. I bent and saw its neck was choked in a band, the head turned wrong way around. I put my hands around the bird and was able to pick her up and unwrap the noose. Instantly, her head turned around the right way and grew normal-sized, and she flew free.

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"How can we atone?" they chanted. "Revive all the birds you murdered," I said. They took slingshots, held them up, tried to coax the stones back in, but the stones lay mute and unmoving yards away on the barren ground. "You see," they said, "there's nothing to be done." "Then," I said, "I will take away your book of birds." And I took it, and wound it in wire so that it could never again be opened. If they needed to identify the remaining bird species, they would have to find a new language.

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They say the god entered her in the form of a bird. I say change the old stories to new ones. Say that he was the sky and she was the bird and he cradled and carried her. Say that he was the pond and she was the stork and drank from him. Say that he was the tree and she pecked at his bark and was fed deeply. Even say that she lost herself in the maze of his twigs. Only don't say that he entered her in the form of a bird. If I could dictate the laws, I would make it against the law to say that.

A Thrush by Utamaro

Although it looks the picture of perfect balance, and although I'd imagined nothing could be steadier (yellow legs stapled to the softer yellow of a bamboo stake) and envied its way, at once solid and light, of being in the world, in fact the bird is only in the picture for its name—*komedori*—which means *to be unbearably troubled*. But then I see that what I was really admiring is the way its tenacious grip on things is sustained in spite of how the world of broken stake and bursting chrysanthemum blossom is going to bits around it, its *unbearable trouble* being borne and lived inside as the creature must live inside its own name, remaining upright against the odds and holding on to the long bamboo as though it were a flute, whose music might match the thrush's own wood-notes, songs raised over wreckage when the momentary dust has settled.

Amarillo Ramp [Excerpt]

There is no escape from matter. There is no escape from the physical nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are on a constant collision course. You could say that my work is an artistic disaster. It is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter.

– Robert Smithson, *The Collected Writings*

Amarillo, Texas, is the birthplace of Cyd Charisse, the site of the Frying Pan Ranch (the first ranch on earth to be enclosed by barbed wire), the home of the headquarters of the American Quarter Horse Association, and the site of earthworks sculptor Robert Smithson's death-by-plane-crash as he surveyed the location by air, working on what would be his last piece.

Amarillo Ramp lies twenty-six miles north of Amarillo, Texas, in a playa, Tecovas Lake. The lake was created for irrigation purposes by the construction of an earthen dam at one end of a canyon and is dry for most of the year. The ramp itself is 3,676 feet above sea level at its base, rising fourteen feet above the ground as it curves, forming an incomplete circle with a diameter of 150 feet.

Robert Smithson was killed by his own art in a catastrophic accident as he surveyed the area where he had marked, on the ground, by hand, the boundaries of the ramp. Smithson wrote of vast time, of ruins and geology, of the de facto monuments of our civilization, but in the moment of crash he experienced instant entropy. He was snapped out of history into geology, shot across the infinite plain of the instant where he as a mind ceased moving forward along the time axis.

All of the art criticism surrounding the art hero Smithson says, at most, that "the pilot and photographer also died." The absence of their names from all literature about Smithson has struck me as a hole. None of Smithson's major works could have been created by

one man alone, yet in his essay, "Mirror Travels in the Yucatan," he himself omitted the other people with him on his travels. In part, this essay is a recovery mission, however impossible. These names have been erased from the picture and so the earthwork stands alone in majesty. The humans smashed away, the catastrophic instant effaced.

I have read Smithson's writings. I have made the pilgrimage to the recently unsubmerged *Spiral Jetty*, walking, as if pacing out a medieval labyrinth on the floor of a cathedral, the salt-encrusted boulders in the blizzard-like glare of the Great Salt Lake's as-of-now receding shore. The *Spiral Jetty* is an ongoing collaboration between Smithson and the earth which doesn't care, which moves on. I visited Smithson's three mounds of matter (broken glass, sand, dirt) with embedded mirrors in the new DIA museum in Beacon, New York. Soon enough, I'll go to Los Angeles to see the Smithson retrospective just opened last Friday (which has since opened and closed at the Whitney).

"The pilot and photographer also died."

Smithson, the pilot, and the photographer had flown up into the air so that photos could be taken of Smithson's latest large-scale earth-sculpture-in-progress. The three flew up to see where *Amarillo Ramp* would rise and eventually erode, not as an isolated object but as part of the total context of the chosen site.

It is still there eroding for you to go see.

I spent hours on-line reading through writing on Smithson trying to find out more about the accident. One website, only one—based in Finland—indicates that Smithson died on July 20, 1973, giving me a place to begin looking for the names.

Zoom in on that day:

July 20, 1973: I am seven months old. The cancer that would kill my father was no more than a glimmer in his eye. I do want to

bring forth these names, these art world D-listers. To make these people matter, to make everybody matter. Matter to who? At the end of a movie, at the Vietnam Memorial, we get the names of everyone involved.

July 20, 1973: Robert Smithson, thirty-five years old, wakes up somewhere in the vicinity of Amarillo, Texas. He has been there for some time, weeks, at least, overseeing the creation of his latest work. *Amarillo Ramp* had been commissioned by Stanley Marsh 3 (who felt that a roman numeral was too pretentious so replaced it with the "3")—eccentric millionaire and rancher. Marsh's home on his ranch is called "Toad Hall." Oddly enough, shortly before he ventured to Amarillo to oversee the construction of the ramp, Smithson and his wife, Nancy Holt, made an eight-minute film entitled "Swamp." The exact location of Amarillo Ramp is to be in the playa, Tecovas Lake, used by Marsh to irrigate his land.

July 20, 1973: Entropy disperses the universe.

Summer 1974: Marsh will host a wild, ranch-wide party to unveil and inaugurate the piece that his property is most famous for, San Francisco-based art group Ant Farm's *Cadillac Ranch*. Ten Cadillacs lined up chronologically by year of manufacture from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s: they were driven, headlights first, one after another, into the ground at forty-five-degree angles, the dirt up to the edge of their front doors. They stand at angled attention.

Marsh is heir to his family's oil and helium extraction fortune. Upon arrival in Amarillo, Smithson could have seen, downtown, the fifty-five-foot tall Helium Time Columns Monument, erected upon the 100th anniversary of the discovery of helium in the sun's atmosphere. In the reflective four columns of the monument are time capsules assembled by staff at the Smithsonian Institution, current site of the Smithson papers in the Archive of American Art. The items in the capsules are sealed in helium, which, due to helium's non-corrosive, stable properties, will be able to be examined in near-perfect conditions nine-hundred-and-ninety-five years from the year Smithson will die, the year that the containers,

by decree, are supposed to be reopened.

On July 20, there are four million cattle in Amarillo ready to be processed into food. Robert Smithson wakes up and does whatever he might do on a trip after waking up. He goes by car to the Tradewinds Airfield, where the pilot is waiting for him. The photographer arrives at some point also—maybe Smithson and the photographer arrive in the same car.

One of the central concepts in Smithson's work is the "site/ non-site" dialectic. Much of Smithson's work, though not all, involves both a remote place, such as the New Jersey Pine Barrens, the land at the edge of an airport runway, or the Great Salt Lake. These remote locations function as the "site." The "non-site" is the accessible, non-remote container for some physical substance from the "site." The non-site could be a series of boxes in a gallery corresponding to the locations from which objects present in the boxes were collected. The non-site could be a televised image in an airport terminal showing a live broadcast of a flat sculpture at the end of the runway. The non-site could be a film entitled "Spiral Jetty" about the making of a spiral jetty of rocks that could be shown in New York, Los Angeles. The non-site could be photographs of the temporary mirror arrays that Smithson created in the Yucatan, in trees, on the sand, and printed first with accompanying, framing article in *Artforum*. This all may seem fairly obvious—of course there are things and they come from somewhere— but for an art world led by Clement Greenberg, centered on objects, or "objects-in-themselves," the invisible dotted line that Smithson drew leading away from the gallery and into the material world was part of a major shift in American art. Rather than being a landscape painter, he brought pieces of the material landscape into the gallery. Smithson's idea was in the vanguard of the movements pointing away from further explorations of the surface of the painter's canvas, which had become by Smithson's time, under Greenberg's decree, the only important scape, the end-all, be-all site of "Art" in the wake of abstract expressionism.

There are Smithson, the pilot, and the photographer, ready to walk

across the already hot Texas morning, across the tarmac to the small propeller plane. It's windy and the sun is bright. Maybe Stanley Marsh is there to wish them well. Maybe Stanley Marsh is still sleeping or is on the phone with another artist he would like to invite to create work on his sprawling property, the vast flat ranch with its fields of wheat and sorghum.

Loud engine roar, the taxi down the miraging runway, ripples in the heat, and then up, off the ground, like a paper airplane, light and soaring up. The pilot grips the controls. The photographer fiddles a bit with his light meter. Smithson looks out the window down onto the green brown expanse that is the outer reaches of mapped Amarillo. Down Route 40, the main highway, which would have been visible from the sky, the truckers and travelers on their way in their cars, the blocky flow of trucks. Maybe Smithson could see the outlines of the "Big Texan," the major hotel/restaurant off 40, loud and bright, enormous, a giant cowboy hat. Turning further south, they could see the grid of the little city, the helium monument, and the tallest building, the American National Bank. They bank and turn toward Marsh's ranch. The photographer takes a few shots with his camera. The ramp is to be made of tons of bulldozed dirt, local dirt, starting at ground level and then circling, higher and higher. The ramp is to end its smoothed brown-red road of earth abruptly in the air.

There, in the air, are our three men, in their silver object hurtling through the light and wind.

Always, it is one sentence: "Smithson died in an airplane crash in 1973."

“At Fourteen in Rome . . .”

If ye find my beloved, tell him that I am sick of love.

—Song of Songs 5:8

At fourteen in Rome from Tennessee, I practiced
the twist and heavy droop of grapes.
In line for dinner, I slid, a steady weight, to the floor.
Yes, readers, you could say: dehydration, August, unconscious
only for a moment.

But I say: swoon,
drafting my practice of desire,
flinging myself into flowery glades.
After all, we had walked that day
from the center of the city
to the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla and back.
Oh, I was surely white as a sheet.
As treatment: dinner, aqua minerale, Coca-Cola,
and then to the gelataria across the square.
All the fuss was sweet fruit to my taste.

The shop served rose.
I had not known it was a flavor.
I had allowed only a flower, a color, a scent.
The world was breaking open.
My heart ran, unbound, a hart across the steps of my ribs.
I looked to see if the shop served cedar or fir.

In San Terenzo, early in Mary Shelley’s fifth pregnancy,
little red foxes ran down her legs.
There would have been so much blood that I cannot see it
though my mind returns to skirt its far spread edges.
Too many poems describe such stains as a rose – a wide, new
bloom on the sheets.
This is ridiculous.

Its petals have limits.
Its thorns do no more than what you can lick off the tip of your
finger.
Kudzu, maybe.
A single tendril, but then in a moment it has covered the Subaru
Justy on blocks, smothered
the hillside, killed everything it covered,
and made no wine.

The doctor was delayed.
Her friends tried vinegar massages, brandy, and eau de cologne.
Percy demanded ice.
The others did not believe, but he lifted Mary up
and placed her in a tub of it
till she was but the frost of heaven.
Her journal says he used the ice *unsparingly*;
that he was the only one who saved her,
without mercy, without restraint.

Mary and Percy Shelley weren't even getting along,
but still kept getting pregnant.
That can happen.
We want all kinds of things.

So, readers, can you tell? Can you guess?
Marry me.
Yes, may this be my shotgun honeymoon on the Continent.
My blood, my busy bee, thick as if from a broken honeycomb.
I will dangle, a damsel in distress.
I will offer no helpful tightening, no resistance.
I want to feel the lift, the heave.
I will cover myself in red as with a garment.
I will stretch my insides out, unhide my heavens.
I do not want to be spared.
Did they not love this lily among thorns?

Did they not love the apple tree among the trees of the wood,
the wood for burning?

I want to be spoiled, to be ruined.
Did it not bear its fruit? Its fine taste? Its red fire?