



TALISMAN

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Lewis Warsh Issue

Interview
New Work
Commentary

Irish Poets

ed. Tuma and Walsh

Bromige • Armantrout

Sobin and Heidegger

Recently Received

*Gustave Moreau: "Thracian Maid
with the Head of Orpheus" 1865*

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BARBARA HENNING

“Different Trains”:
Reading Lewis Warsh

I love Lewis Warsh’s writing because he writes beautiful, long sentences and he relentlessly interrogates the intimate secrets of women and men. His poetry is lyrical with detail and song turning as easily to philosophical reverie as the clarity of everyday conversation. In *Avenue of Escape*, he asks questions about the language of love, desire and experience. Just as we can’t ever get close enough to what we most desire, elusive as it is, the answers to Lewis’s questions slip away and the reader goes chasing after them, running fast and furious down the wrong street even though there is a sign in the sky that says: you are on the wrong road or you are riding the wrong train.

Different Trains

I
I’m coming home
in the rain with
no excuses
I’m late
it’s late in
the day to
give lies
credence, to
believe one’s
own lie
(but I was just
talking to
myself), to
strike a nerve
alive with
the desire to
speak the truth
to unnerve meaning
through clenched
teeth & open
eyes

The title and second line in this sequence of twenty poems begin with a rhyme, and meaning immediately slides away from the logical sequence, rain being much more unpredictable and messier than train tracks. This particular narrator wants to tell the truth, despite the rain and all the circumstances, despite how easy it is to believe his own lies. And what shall I, the reader, do with these clenched teeth? Shall I call the speaker a narrator and try to

“unnerve meaning” along with him or shall I think of Lewis and all the memories I bring to my reading of him. I have known Lewis for twelve years, at first as a lover and then for most of those years as a very close friend. When I think of rain and Lewis, I remember walking in a thunderstorm with him on Canal Street in ’85 or ’86, under an umbrella that was large enough to shelter us both. Soon after that walk we stopped being lovers. This poem was written, however, several years later when he was living with Wang Ping. Instead of pursuing meaning with clenched teeth, I prefer to read and ramble, sleeping in each car, looking into the intimate interiors, taking a ride with Lewis, the author and my friend, or then again with a narrator whose sense of self is made up of a polyphony of voices and logics, a narrator who laments the fact that he can’t tell the truth or even reach a specific location. Thinking and talking are ridden with problems. Communication is a tangled up affair, especially between lovers (lover/lover or reader/author). Lewis solves this problem by inviting the reader to eavesdrop, first on a guilty interior struggle between honesty and pleasure, and then a moment when bewildered thought ceases and love is as simple as an embrace.

The wind came off the page & embraced me. *And then the words of the author embraced me as well.* The wind blew the pages forward & back. I lost my place, I forgot what I was reading. Usually, when I stop reading, I fold down the corner of the page to mark my place. I remove my reading glasses & put on the glasses I wear to see distances. I placed the book on the ground at my feet & watched the wind riffle the pages. I balanced the open book against the stump of a tree & watched the wind blow through the pages until all the words were erased. I fell asleep in my chair with a book open on my knees. (#3)

The destination is the destination. Heaven is right under this tree. All the guilty worry and sincere attempts to tell the truth are irrelevant as the wind riffles the pages and words. This peace is only possible, though, Lewis reminds us, when we allow ourselves to be lovingly held by the author and words. But as quickly as peace arrives, an argument unfolds with the voices of accusation and justification, external perhaps between two lovers or the push and pull of internal voices. “Who put the words inside your mouth?/ They weren’t there when I saw/ you last. Someone speaking in capital// Letters, surface thoughts (an/ endless diatribe of anger & regret)” (#4). Lewis and I have had thousands of conversations about poems, poets, detective fiction, Long Island University, our families and our lovers, probing the nature of our relationships and our

desires, complaining, justifying, longing. Lewis begins in this poem to build a ladder with and away from talk and explanation: tell the truth through clenched teeth, even though it is probably a lie to yourself, enjoy your guilty transgressions, samadhi under a tree reading, in love with the wind and the book, alive in a fantasy world, believing one's own lies. "Don't raise me to the heights/& then discard, that's all I ask./ Don't buffet an obsession so flimsy,/ my nightgown caught on a nail" (#6). Pronouns shift and the voice speaking can often be from either sex. For the most part, I experience the voices as once heard or spoken, male or female, and now internalized as part of the narrator's self. This interior world made exterior on the page is interrupted in the seventh poem by Janice and Bill "making/ in the bedroom," a betrayal, as if in the middle of deep and fluttering thoughts about the possibility and impossibility of love, the television screen throws out its story, a scene from a soap opera. While Bill's girlfriend is asleep in the bedroom, he makes her roommate scream with orgasm. Like Harry Mathews in the blurb on the back of Lewis's latest book of short stories (*Money under the Table*), I don't like *these* people, but I keep reading because I like the narrator's investigation of his conscience, the voices resounding inside and out, and his hopeless wish to uncover the truth.

The solution to the problem is sitting there in a sealed envelope ("The letter arrives/like an arrow/ crossing the margin/ of destiny, but/ no one has the nerve/ to break the seal" (#8). Like Poe's "Purloined Letter," so obvious but not available for reading, at least for the time being. When it arrives, whether opened or not, some destiny unfolds. The "words reverberate like/ recently sharpened pencils/ to address the air/they float through" (#9). Little fragmented thoughts line up like a connected group of railroad cars, pushed or pulled by a locomotive—a series or row; something that is drawn along; an elongated part of a skirt or robe trailing behind on the ground; a course of reasoning, trailing along behind you. Words don't stick to things and the narrator reverts to memory and to the silly things people have said. He switches from one train of thought to the next, metonymically, that is, from "gnawing a bone" to "taboo about a bone" to "mother" to a "new lover" to "Amor equals action" to "pleasure" to "gift of speech" to "in this form alone." He tries to discover truth (or hears others trying to discover truth) and value by looking at the surface: tattoo taking the place of taboo. From the deep mythological roots of the gorgon and the mother, we are left with a pragmatic transformation of sexual power: "Sex, not work: but/ you're fired, we've hired/ a new lover." This poetic sequence is a lament of the jilted lover or the lament of the lover whose object keeps switching. He isn't being replaced. He is a token, yet acting and the action is love, but love on the surface only. He doesn't get the bone, only the tattoo or the twitching skirt, the dangling earring.

The narrator travels and yet he's directionless and "Every place is the same." The mind is floating. "A dot filling a hole/ that didn't exist before you came. They reserve a place for you & you fill it" (#11). Just one person after another, one word after another, one story after another. Is love a train of thought or different trains of thought, intersecting and reflecting each other? And the trains of thought take you far away from yourself, as a diversion, a

plane out of here. Ultimately they don't work: "I get off the plane & no one's there." With only one, love seems impossible. And how can one tell the truth, pulled here and there by one's desire, language and understanding? How can one be an ethical lover when one is a dot filling a hole? Some people are so lonely or so sexy or so complicated that they crave more than one dot at a time. All these trains of thought want to transcend the monotonous thinking body and the pleasure of anonymous fucking and breaking taboos—two at a time. When Lewis reads his poetry out loud, there is an underlying monotone and at the same time a series of speaking voices and each one looks for an escape and yet is enclosed in a narrative structure that laments the impossibility of ethical love, ethical desire, ethical pleasure.

The worst possible scenario: "All my words add up to a single/ thought, don't you know?" (#13). There is in fact no escape, only illusions. There is "one" thought and unfortunately it is not the truth. Everything in the body speaks to thought as does the outside world; the wind blowing across the body in dream affects the dream and our daytime awake thinking. Thinking holds almost everything, even the rules and truisms that help justify this floating feeling. In this poem, Lewis questions the truisms running over and into each other. How to escape? "Focus your attention on one/ other person & hope for the best" or "All you can do is bury your head/ under the blankets and weep."

Quickly he shifts to the advice one gives a child. He dedicates #14 to Sophia, his younger daughter, a vibrant, talkative and dramatic young woman. I can see her now as a little girl reaching over to tie her shoe. And in the midst of all the plans and details, "a dead man's rattle." Some rules help ("Or so I told you/ as you were starting/ out: stay calm/ cross at the corners// in perfect visibility") and we hope our children remember that learning how to deal with traffic can be a metaphor to study throughout life: know where you are, where you are going, and how you will get there, even though there is a hopeless rattle over your left shoulder, even though some days you feel like a photograph on a table.

A photograph of myself & my children on
a lake in the country ten years ago. All
words, my voice, the beginning & end
of a sentence. A person listening to what
I say, a shock of disbelief on her face. (#15)

A lover becomes a "person." The inner life of another becomes "a shock of disbelief on her face," the face and the shock equal to "a cup of tea." We are acting in a television sitcom. The script has already been written. We are spectators of our own lives, dots in the middle of holes, erased and rewritten.

"Dominates," "crash of dominos," and "the domino effect." Silence submits to words in #17, words that exist only to be memorized, and then there is a commercial and time for lunch before everything collapses under the weight. Crash. Is it a kiss or a hangman's noose? Can we transform our own relationship to pleasure and redefine it so that it can also hold disaster and vacancy in its core? The writing of the poem becomes a way out of the problem: "The lines

of the page were like the rungs of a ladder/ Leading to heaven, & I was the medium/ Through which they flowed back to earth" (#17).

In his story "Secret," Lewis writes: "I tell people my secrets in the hope that they'll tell me theirs. People think I'm an attentive listener but the only reason I talk to them is to see what they say in my writing." Beware of the ear of the transcribing poet. Or perhaps this, too, is a secret someone told Lewis. In #19, he enumerates the many sacrifices and lame attempts to justify the pains of love, perhaps including your secret strategy: separating physical pleasure from loyalty and affection; accepting the middle ground; becoming a slave to one's lover; writing failure and disaster into the narrative before one even reaches a climax. And then the narrator makes a quick turn and says, "but I'd be/lying to myself if I thought we could last forever,/ that one night, as we lay in bed with the blankets/ on the floor, hair matted to the silk pillowcase,/ the cops aren't going to arrive with their clubs/ & accoutrements & cart us away in the back/ of their tiny trucks" (#18). Such a strange and unexpected fear of the police in this poem. At first, I suspected the narrator of lying to himself by bringing in a voice from a television drama. Most tv dramas are built around the structure of reconciling and revealing secrets and lies. A sexual liaison that is forbidden or dangerous, hidden with lies, is all the more exciting, and one other possible train to catch.

20 (Coda)

I know that somewhere it's written
in bold type on yellow parchment
for everyone to read, but the signature
an X on a line changes intermittently
& with some humor, so that bathing
stepping up out of the bath where
everything descends, is part
of what I miss, what I'm blocking out.
The story, I miss you, every few inches
another window, & you're looking back
at me from the ledge, bird-like, alive
to what's most real, the cars
on the parkway, no longer alive
to what I can almost feel
is you, listening & breathing
in the other room. Sobs intermittent
keys on a chain, to adore you, no, to
be impervious to your adoration.
To dominate is not to adore in pain.
No thought is impervious as the
clouds are, a natural wonder,
no longer exempt from suffering, but free—
& the air yields.

Apparent and available since ancient times and yet the name on the line is always interchangeable, always unreadable. Our thinking and our love seem muddled beyond recognition. Is it possible to love each other without causing immeasurable suffering? Lewis's ladder takes us to the clouds. Look up and away for another avenue where the clouds and the wind and we are the same. I loved reading this poem over and over again, riding in each car, embraced and quickly abandoned by the words of an author who I imagine looks like my friend, Lewis. Bird-like with his hair rumped, he sits in the distance at the foot of a tree, reading while the train speeds by.

Works Cited

- "Different Trains," *Talisman* II (1993).
"Secret," *Detroit Metro Times* (1997).