

When the Fugitives Decide to Stay

Bruce Bromley

Abstract

"When the Fugitives Decide to Stay" looks at how language use, for many of us, marks value and non-value, and this marking becomes especially troubling under pandemic conditions. The essay juxtaposes bodily valuation and non-valuation during the AIDS epidemic and during our ongoing COVID moment, arguing that we need to expand our abilities to critique human desire and its operations.

*That's the job of consciousness, to turn Now into Always,
to mistake what is for what was meant to be.*

Richard Powers, 2018

Any language allows speakers to aim sound at what they ought to see, once a word lands on the thing it's meant to name. At this moment, the English that fills my head makes it possible for me to say, *Love is the thing I want*, or, *It's about to rain*, as if love and weather were objects to be gained, rubbed against, fingered over—done to. I know that the languages available for our use remember the ones who spoke or wrote the words before us, that their repository of memory can be modified, shaded differently, if enough of us commit to that difference. But some of the tension that Powers points to, in words I've taken from his novel, *The Overstory*, begins—in the case of English—with the blur, the haze, that's always attended this little word: thing.

Those Northern speakers who long ago preceded us intended, according to their verbal practice across time, that *thing* should mark a court, an assembly, a lawsuit, a space where any principle would be argued over and defended, the contest sometimes judged by consensus, sometimes by a king, and, rarely, by a queen. They decided that the word was capable of noting an object of perception and an event and a person not yet granted the right to a name. They also designed *thing* as a gesture towards the idea of all these referents, so that concepts of entity and process were launched, already, on a merger, an accretion, resistant to separating out.

In terms of *idea* and its double meaning in the Greek, of phantom and form, such speakers must have been enfolded in a longing to stay the wobble in the word. Favoring form over phantom, they appeared to stabilize that ghostly thing, *idea*, treating it like a sort of matter, exposed to employment and manipulation. They disregarded the word's incompatible registers, of being both tough to grasp and susceptible to handling, because they could. Words don't rebuff those who use them.

But the problem of incompatibility, of mismatch, remains. It won't submit to repair, since confusing things with our idea of them powers the ability

to encroach on what seems other than ourselves, and that encroachment still sounds out, for multitudes of us, why we're here at all.

I'm reading Reggie Ugwu's interview, in *The New York Times*, with theoretical physicist and research professor, Sean Carroll. Their talk focuses on Alex Garland's limited television series, *Devs*, which looks closely at the confusion and conceptual misalignment that rise up, in a whiz of neuronal static, from debates about determinism, about freedom, how the two will forever balk at reconciliation. We're in California, at a visual slant to Silicon Valley's present. Forest, played by Nick Offerman behind a bush of a beard, directs his quantum computing company from inside the stone temple he's put it in, swooped over by thick trees, surveillance systems, and guarded by a statue of his once shin-high daughter, Amaya, now stretched so tall that her fiberglass eyes, their startled blueness, open on everything she's lost to. Amaya and her mother, Lianne, never got up from the crash that cut their car in two, and Forest doesn't know how to find the means to escape his responsibility for their absence. But he can move to the side of that responsibility, claiming how every event must be the effect of long prior causes, that those causes can be located, pinpointed, measured, as if to determine the mechanisms behind what happens enabled you to stand outside the machine that can only be the world.

Carroll observes the lack of quantum mechanics-orientation here, given that Forest holds to a determinism negating the notion of anything exterior to it and to emplacement in a "beyond," from which he calculates the nimbus of phenomena he thinks he sees. Even so, the seer affects the thing-like event whose scope he struggles to compute, and that computation will alter him, if he lets it. Carroll critiques the too tight equal sign that Forest draws between all particles of life as collections of atoms and the preordained, developmental operations that Forest believes we mistake for the drive to choose. Carroll also rightly counters the multiple vocabularies, scales, the levels of precision, of imprecision, meshed together and at play in what Garland offers us. Yet I need to add: Forest transfers the pain of a Now he can't withstand to an Always busy with erasing the prick of it. And in the middle of that act, he conceptually disappears.

I've arrived at disappearances significant to this Now I'm writing in—and to the Always I want to buck.

Every night for the last four months, I watch my partner, Neil, almost sleeping. He's joggled by trying to visualize a particular word that the Romans left us, this one short, quick, deadly. Or at least what it calls to in the four-dimensional world can be. He troubles himself to see the slick, the slime of a liquid poison crowning the animal populations of the earth, including our kind, so often averse to inclusion in a category that situates us in an enlarging bog, where we join the nonhuman animals we know how to own and eat, valued for their subjection to what we do to them. But airborne, this shining ooze, this coronavirus, makes us its territory. Among the covers, I hear again our president renaming it "the Chinese virus," as if an infectious agent ever laid claim to a nationality, as if nationalities were like undergrowth, a component part of what nature burgeons. What we mean by nature can never be crowned by human will and its dictates, but how that will proceed affects what the natural becomes. Lying on my back and to the rhythm of Neil's breathing, I replay in my head Jane Goodall's recent YouTube interview with Norwegian journalist, Fredrik Skavlan. Pinpointing that the world becoming viral isn't about bats, Goodall clarifies: our species-incursion into their habitat, our flattening forests, crowd animals together that once were distant from one another, and the crowding costs. In terms of Asian wildlife food markets, vendors and customers pay that cost by risking contamination from urine, feces, blood, spilled by bats urbanized due to the push of a world economic system too easily mistaken for ordinary, normal, given, immune to the pause of being reimagined.

Our four months lockdown, our chaining in place mandated by government officials, gives me time to recall Virginia Woolf's 1937 BBC broadcast, "Craftsmanship," recorded when much of Europe was about to be Nazified, with borders breached until the breaching came too close for those who, suddenly, cared to notice it, so the bombs began to fly. Before that cataclysm, Woolf praises words as "full of echoes, of memories, of associations"—along with "their need of change." She maintains that "the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided." Because of that "complexity," they "survive." I know the thing we call a virus lasts according to its capacity for spread, replication, mutation. I struggle to hear it like a sound with the volume on high. Yes, playing by the book we've made, sticking to the "normal" we've crafted, got us here. I listen for how this all-people-affecting virus might lead numbers of us to mind how to move, change, survive in ways that will challenge what many consider, uncritically, too dear to let go of. And I'm certain that the phrase "cost free" has unendingly been a lie.

After reading of thousands upon thousands of the viral dead, I'll take this soul-heaviness that's more than mine a few blocks west of our Brooklyn apartment and stand in the middle of the road. I push the loops on either side of my mask around my ears and am suspicious of "soul," this tag for the ensemble of forces animating the flesh that we and other beings are, dispersed— in the case of those thousands—by a virus already under-researched, under-tested, under-resourced before it sprawled here, lacks programmed by our country's leader in a shrug of irresponsibility that the now dead have been obliged to pay for. Walking, I recount: much of Plato's work sold the soul as recompense for the body's liability to collapse; eternally effused through a diversity of multiple lives, it never died; it made us special; it made us human. But let's unspool that "us."

"Us" couldn't reference, in Plato's world, the ones who suffered the misfortune of starting elsewhere, the "barbarians" othered by not being born Greek. It couldn't include the slaves performing labor that their opposites understood as self-evident, defining tasks. It only partially made way for Greek wives and daughters and sisters, their monthly bleeding, their delivery of the species, contracting the scope of their souls and debilitating energy, this logic goes, whereby women might think of more capacious lives. So, for Plato's time, for the Aristotle who followed him, for the cultures that bought these ideas and accepted how others would pay their price, for our current moment, "us" means the pallid men with traceable names or at least the cash-flow to prop up economic networks that enregister what their companies recognize as value.

Because it excludes most of life, because it's prepared that exclusion, because the word would plant a knee, if it had a knee, on the necks of those seen as void of its putative, redeeming grace, I turn from "soul." I don't take it with me while I walk across the clustered blocks between home and the spot I'm aiming for. Powers paraphrases, in *The Overstory*, Kant's *Lectures on Ethics* from the late eighteenth-century, italicizing a series of triple assertions for emphasis: *As far as nonhumans are concerned, we have no direct duties. All exists merely as means to an end. That end is man.* But this exclusionary "we," the "man" attached to it, the particular men who can't imagine othering and its disasters because they don't have to, treat the earth as an engine, and its workings slow, braked by a virus whose effects are all that we can see of it. I'm in the middle of the road, under beeches and maples and cherry trees, my head raised high, face tilted back, greened by their branching light. I recall the "normal" that I thought my essay-writing students would yearn for, be

pleased by, rejoining their parents under an enforced locking in place. But normality frightened them. I heard what they needed to teach me.

My mother died, just shy of 100, a few weeks before the virus touched here. She lived through sixty years of marriage to a man whose beauty she had no words for. If she ever found them, or when she found them, she kept the words to herself. I see her sometimes, upright in a box of sun that our living room's skylight throws on the floor. Elbows raised, she wiggles her fingers through grains of light and looks at her hands as the things that have threshed them. Her sister spent too much of her life in a plot to control the men who escaped her, though their flight gratified her, a kind of freedom from the shroud that desire for them had become, a fabric she needed their help to break out of. This virus got her a month ago, at 95, muting nearly every life around her in the nursing home she no longer had the words to identify. In a bureaucratic mishap that workers deemed essential are prone to, in overtaxed despair at what they can't unsee—authorities later tells us—my aunt was put in a body bag and ferried to Hart Island, stacked in a grave bulking from the ones not yet claimed by those who loved them. There, in the 1980s, at the onset of another viral scourge, thousands of my same-sex-loving-kind were tubed in plastic pouches and buried in separate graves by inmates from Rikers Island. Paid 50 cents an hour for that toil, inmates stood in jumpsuits saving them from pathways to transmission that awaited a future more ably ready to understand how those pathways worked. I tell my 45 students none of this. I don't want my stories to cover theirs. We reconvene via Zoom, in the paradox of a remoteness that the camera brings up close. I affirm: there's nothing in our work that necessitates you should delete yourselves from what we do, so try to write about how what I'm going to show you speaks to where you now are. I'm in a dwarfed square to the right of Adrienne Rich, soon to read her poem, "What Kinds of Times Are These," filmed by NPR in 1995. At the first sound, that first image, her past spills into our collective present.

Rich appears to carry the rain with her, though her trench coat's dry as she approaches the rostrum, her collar a sharp half-circle on the rust-colored top that takes you to the red in her short curls. The camera cuts off her striding across the stage to the mike, but there's a walk and a tip/tap in the movement of her vowels among the crisper sounds, as if rainwater had legs and could travel the way legs do. She's looking at "two stands of trees" grouped around a hill whose grass grows upward, at "the old revolutionary road" that tumbles into shadow and at "a meeting-house" forsaken by "the persecuted" who vanished "into those

shadows.” The poem hitches itself to a repeated “dread,” an awed fear at how adroit America has been, since the time of its invasive fathers, at disappearing those whom it had no long-lived use for. I’m thinking, if we could mutate the rainy pulse of her voice into deep puddles on the grass of her poem, would we see the brown bodies that got in the way, hacked down for the concept that earth exists to be owned and disappears into that ownership? Would we pick out the wavering faces of those who, in 1991, when this poem came to Rich, were under-cared-for and heated up by the HIV that, fanning out to a general population sure of its own immunity, its straightness, its disaffection for needles, broke the promise of a right to safety always impervious to infection? What we do to, and on the land, Rich suggests, some of us do to many. Coupling trees watch all of it, while their under and overstories link the life below with the life above, until human hands ax them into air.

Esperanza’s in her bedroom. Polaroids of herself over time, from the small ages to the bigger ones, climb up the wall behind her, in rows. She writes in Zoom’s chat window, as her colleagues do, but in her case, she’s wondering what these photos forget. They omit any indication that she’s her family’s first-born American girl, that her El Salvadoran mother braved the trek to Queens pregnant and alone: Esperanza’s father had been carved up by tattooed arms he couldn’t dodge, and they left him to leak out in a ditch from which his body would never be retrieved. The photos don’t picture her mother’s Temporary Protected Status or all the time that Esperanza stands, staring with her mother at plexiglass in immigration services, only to be told to come back next week, when the English she’ll translate might allow her mother not yet to be disappeared. They don’t image how her mother returns to sterilizing floors and surfaces in supermarkets, open to the virus that can disappear her. Toniah, listening to Esperanza, says she’s in her Baltimore home with a Nigerian mother who’s already rubbed her away. Even with *Paris Is Burning* posters above her bed, with Toniah’s girlfriend who’s cooked up a simmer among the sheets since this lockdown clamped shut, her mother praises the everyday miracle of a simple friendship that her God refuses another name for. Justin, outside Santa Monica, writes that he’s in a place he doesn’t have words to put to. The virus landed on his elderly father, his mother’s caved by tears, he’s the parent of a father-child who wheezes in the middle of disappearing, and Justin admits he can’t know the incantation that will summon his father back. But a shared screen shows him the words he thought he couldn’t say.

Francesca's typing at her desk in Atlanta: *I'm a black trans girl from the south. English has been a prison for me. I've never been asked to show up in it. Its formulas for expression going wonky just as you think you've applied them on the right occasions. Professors so needy to get their own words gifted back to them. Reading these voices, I let mine go. And the page makes room for me that I can see.*

I gave our last class over to reading aloud Richard Siken's 2005 poem, "Scheherazade." Wondering about the room that we can and can't take, I pause at what we do with the taking. I'm in Zoom's wide rectangle, prised by photons sliding in through the window to my right. Outside, in our French neighbors' backyard that butts against our own, their shrub-sized daughter rails, *This fence has to come down*. We talk, my students and I, about the Middle Eastern origins of the name that titles Siken's poem, how this is the way in which nineteenth-century German translators turned the Middle Persian sounds that stood for her. She married a king who beheaded every wife before her, after the marriage bed was mussed and steaming, so he could save himself from their potential for infidelity. But she built a fence of stories around him, and the telling, the taking of that room from night to dawn, kept her breathing.

Siken notches his poem together with three imperatives to "tell me." Tell me about the dreaming where you—the man I love—and I yank "the bodies out of the lake / and dress them in warm clothes again," so they can remember what it means to live. Tell me how everything that follows from this, "and love too, will ruin us." Above all, "tell me we'll never get used to it." Siken makes his "it" big enough to carry the dream-resurrected dead and love daring ruination because that love must be the counter of habit, unfeelingly replayed. My students heard every word as a farewell in the face of horrors that remain with us. Yet Juno insisted: getting used to it was her target. What she's used to, she controls. She allied that claim with the island off Connecticut where she and her parents live, in a house that doesn't waggle, always there, supported. But islands are intimate with water that sucks away at them and that keeps them floating.

I look at last month's Instagram post by queer performer and trans activist, Justin Vivian Bond. It's a shot from early 1991, when *The New York Times* reported that our country's AIDS-dead had reached 100,000. Unlike the paper's recent coverage of an identical number of Americans killed by the coronavirus, *The Times* "didn't bother writing their own

story,” opting instead to run one from the Associated Press: “on page 18. Below the fold. No pictures. No names.” Bond mourns the ample differences here, and there’s the right type of acid in that mourning. Remembered bodies reflect what any culture decides to see. The elided ones were never there.

Dreaming, I wonder, if we could collect all the hair self-cut and snipped at over these long-locked months, would that talismanic collection return us to the period before this virus descended? Would the dead spring up, reassembled into a life we’d recognize? No reset button exists for suffering. If we had recourse to that button, it wouldn’t gather the viral-levelled so they might stand again. It wouldn’t revive George Floyd or Breonna Taylor or those others who accompany them in deserving the wholeness that they were denied. Our kind will never equal the machines we fabricate, the reset buttons we build, because we predate every one of them, including the ideas that seem to travel ahead of us as if they were the fugitive, fleeting things both capable of locomotion and of overstaying their welcome that many desire them to be, invulnerable to readjustment. But this can only be the wrong longing.

Behind each word I’m writing now, at three in the morning of a sticky late June, not a single car wheeling down the road, I hear the last lines of “Leaflets,” which Rich published in 1969: *I’m thinking how we can use what we have / to invent what we need*. And all my body’s sludge-like forces of animation try to tell me, still, that needing better ought to be our common business.

About the author

Bruce Bromley is the author of [*Making Figures: Reimagining Body, Sound, and Image in a World That Is Not for Us*](#) (Dalkey Archive Press, 2014) and [*The Life in the Sky Comes Down: Essays, Stories, Essay/Stories*](#) (Backlash Press, 2017), nominated for the 2018 Victoria & Albert Best Illustrated Book Award. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in *Out Magazine*; *Open Democracy*; *Gargoyle Magazine*; *Fogged Clarity: An Arts Review*; *Environmental Philosophy*; *3:AM Magazine*; *Cleaver Magazine*; *Entropy Magazine*; *The Nervous Breakdown*, and elsewhere. He teaches writing at New York University, where he won the Golden Dozen Award for teaching excellence. Email: bdb2@nyu.edu.