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THE
STAIN
OF
STEIN

(FOR CHIMERIC WRITING)

We are all bewitched, and mostly by accident, a composer once said. This is the story of a bewitchment, by accident.

The composer was Harry Partch, I always wanted to steal his titles: imagine an essay called *And On The Seventh Day Petals Fell In Petaluma*, or *Delusion Of The Fury*, or *The Cogno-scenti Are Plunged Into A Demonic Descent While At Cocktails*, or *The Dreamer That Remains*. He used the term bewitched in relation to what he called *extraverbal magic*: the process of making less poor *the pathetically impoverished language of tone*. One day I found myself bewitched by a faulty voice recording which, by failing to conform to its nature, led my understanding into another tone. That day I was looking for a CD by Partch that contained his piece *The Bewitched*, which I wanted to use as a slightly out of synch rhythmic template to read a long litany of names I've been assembling for some time: names of writers who write in hybrid forms but not in English, along with names of writers who write in English as a second or third language, as strangers, slightly out of synch, in the attempt to respond to the Anglophone canon that is being consolidated these very days. Having realised that the delivery in my reading could barely match Partch's rhythms, I decided to carry on with musical models (I am, after all, 'that Italian who writes about sound') so I started thinking of my list of foreign names as the fuga from the canon, the fugue. One of the earliest forms of fuga in music was called *ricercar*, to research: to research and to flee, I like that, I'm digressing, fleeing, and to continue and digress, I shall say that I like to call this hybrid writing that flees: chimeric, from the mythological chimera, the monstrous creature made as a composite of three different animals, I like that, it is charged with imaginal qualities, and impurity, and monstrosity.

Imagine chimeric writing: it is implausible, and it exists.

Imagine what the voice of chimera could sound like.

As I was looking for *The Bewitched* I came across *Voices of the Avant-Garde*, one of those collections pervasive in the archival re-release frenzy of the turn of the century. As you will know, CDs are not infallible, sometimes they glitch, and unlike the locked grooves and jumps of vinyl records, the quality of glitches in CDs is less mechanical, or traceable, it sounds like a haunting from within the very medium. This haunting quality in the glitch led many musicians to embrace it around the mid-nineties, remember glitch music, *Systemisch by Oval*, the early releases by Mille Plateaux and Mego; remember Coil/ELpH when they entitled an album *Worship the Glitch* and how couldn't they, always so attuned to unnatural histories, the tainted workings of mystery, mystification, and magic. But back to those *Voices of the Avant Garde* I played a recording of the voice of Gertrude Stein, and it started to glitch, and sounded so clumsy, and oh my I said, and I kn- kn-, t- t-, and I knew too, the voice of the canon started to glitch!, and I, and I knew too, I kne-, t-, t-, I knew too, this is great, one of those encounters that stop and startle us even before we know why; and we find ourselves *groundless but not without ground* like Elfriede Jelinek once said, ever so cryptically, ever so clearly. That impurity, the voice of the canon suddenly sounding so awkward, disturbed, interfered with. At this point I shall tell you that for some time I've been playing around that refrain by John Cage, *I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it*, changing it to *we have nothing to say and we are saying it and that is criticism as we need it*, thinking of we as the voices in my head, and wondering how I can write criticism when there is apparently nothing to say, apparently, because I hear so many voices, different reference points, another language, other cultures at play, or there is: silence to write from, and there is: poetry, and poetry is never erased. How to write criticism entangled, chimeric.

I thought had nothing to say about Stein, and yet that glitch in her voice recording haunted me, and in all that, I kept misspelling STAIN instead of STEIN, and, THE STAIN OF STEIN, THE STAIN OF STEIN, I started chanting in my head, clumsily, and half smiling, and, what a disgrace!, I said to myself having realised that this writer, who often writes with assonance, rhythms, word games, and peculiar forms of sounding obsessions (generically summed up as ‘that Italian who writes about sound’) had barely read anything by Stein except for *Tender Buttons* (in 2014, with some residual recollections around a fire) and *Portraits and Repetition* (in 1997, hardly any recollections, but much substance in the matter of understanding being-in-words-in-cadence, or so my friend D. says). The absence of Stein was becoming a stain on this writer’s credibility: a disgrace. Baffled at the realisation, though tempted by the sound of the stain of Stein — its stubborn alliteration pointing at a stuttering in understanding which could steer me toward a distinct, unstable way of understanding — I email my friend C. about the stain of Stein and he writes back: ‘Perhaps there is a signature lurking in her poem *A Petticoat!?!: A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm.*’ The disgrace in Stein’s words echoes my more mundane disgrace, in a wink across time. An ink spot in response to the stain of Stein, summons me via email through the words of a friend I never met if not in reading, in letters, and in emails; a friend who wrote a book called *No Medium* around the substance of works erased, silent, blank: and blank is my stare when I see my work repeatedly placed by others in connection with Stein’s words. ‘Of course, you must have read Stein! It goes without saying...,’ I heard so many times. Actually no, let me say it, rather, I have read a lot by the Italian poet Amelia Rosselli, who used glitches in spelling to trigger uneven forms of cadence which, according to Pasolini, revealed language as a putrified object. What to do with this of-courseness of references? I thought I had nothing to say about Stein, but finding my nothing, my blank stare, stained and steined by an ink spot proves that there is no nothing to say, ever, or at least what is perceived as nothing to say is already something for the very fact that we are considering it,

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entering in some type of relation with it, illicit but present — illicit because constructed through assonance, attraction, conversations, rhythms: ephemeral clues — and sometimes this relation is an entrapment: we find, we hear words in a mesh of connections, despite ourselves.

So often knowing is encountered despite ourselves.

Knowing, and realising that what we know is a stitch in a web, not a dictionary entry: enmeshed, not defined. The question of having nothing to say about Stein becomes a question of how to stay: very close, to the ink spot that stains the absence of Stein, the ink spot, the mark of writing. And to write against the apparent nothing is to write a subtler sense of presence, a realisation of entrapment.

In such a condition I begin to see and hear other signs, other stains: on meeting Gertrude, Alice B. Toklas apparently said that *she wore a large round coral brooch and when she talked... I thought her voice came from this brooch. It was unlike anyone else’s voice... like two voices.* A voice from a brooch, like two voices: it was from the time of Charles Cros that I hadn’t heard such an uncanny pronouncement of vocal entrapment and excess. Brooch, jewels, a voice that is two voices, one held, one transmitted, the same, and not quite so. Cros, poet and inventor in the late 19th century of the paleograph, a sound recording device akin to Edison’s phonograph, wrote in his collection *The Necklace of Claws: Like features in a cameo / I wanted the beloved voices / to remain a keepsake, forever cherished, / repeating the musical / dream of an hour all too brief; / time wishes to flee, I master it.* There is no mastering time: beloved voices trapped in a cameo hover between what is held and what flees, the eternity of voice is gained at the cost of its disembodiment. I learn from my friend D. that for Stein there is no such thing as repetition, there is insistence: it is not possible to repeat the same thing with exactly the same emphasis, she wrote. I write, no matter how many times you might play a recording, it will not sound the same because the world around it will have changed.

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recording is not a record of what was: it misses what cannot be held. There is no repetition. Voices eagerly longed for, invariably reach us: broken. The double voice is there and not quite so, not doubled perhaps but split, halved, and half slip is another term for petticoat, half-slip, slip of the tongue, stain of Stein, and for the stain of Stein I began listening into the few signals I received, faint but persistent ones, the other half of knowing, the less accepted threads, like the email which led me to connect no medium and ink spot, in the attempt to assemble knowing from paucity of material, and work from there. I want to think of knowing as a morphing state, it does not have to be tied to access, locked sources, exhaustive surveys: it emerges as I work with what is at hand, what I hear or overhear, stumble upon, receive from others. And sometimes, on the periphery, there doesn't seem to be much, and still it is possible to know, if I choose not to stand on firm grounds but move on the oscillations of resonance; not perceived as shortcomings but as a disposition toward otherness, following hints as I find myself: groundless but not without ground, entrapped in a mesh and with no intention to disentangle it, but to continue the knotting until words begin to echo each other, untidily, unrulily, more echoes, a disturbing song, flip of a book, half slip of the tongue, stain of Stein, rhyming words as much as rhyming a disposition with that of a friend, the split voice of understanding, the same and not quite so.

And this is where words begin to turn. And this is where the cameo speaks, in turn; the other half of voice, to turn on the voices trapped in a cameo, words begin to flee, in uneven zigzags, like in Rosselli's poem *La libellula, The Dragonfly*, which suddenly says *e ti chiamo ti chiamo chimera, and I call you I call you chimera*. Do you know the voice of chimera? Monstrous, composite, impure. Bewitched, beglitched, and Gertrude, you wrote and *I sing and the tunes I sing are what are tunes if they come and I sing. I sing I sing*. Yes, do not assume that because a voice is silenced, unheard, or out of tune, it will cease to exist, cease to sing, to spell chimera, to sound chimera. Nothing to say about Stein morphs the critic into the cry-tic, for the tic of crying out loud, crying

out nothing, for the compulsion to say and say again and repeat the words and conversations we are drawn into even in spite of ourselves, crytic I wrote, not cryptic, this has little to do with hidden codes, it happens on the surface of words, cry-tic for the stain of Stein, stain, Stein, stain, Stein, stubborn, stutter, stain, Stein, Styx: river of the underworld which in a sonnet by Mallarmé rhymes with ptyx, which means nothing in French and fold in Greekx, and in between a river of the underworld, a nothing, and a fold, lies an *aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore*, abolished *bibelot* of sonorous inanity, and *bibelot* is a small ornament, once again a brooch, a cameo, holding uncanniness, holding and not holding voice, sonorous inanity, core rhythm of being. This is how thinking and knowing are assembled. And this is when I begin to speak to you, Gertrude (stay, Gertrude), Gertrude, who wrote that what matters is how things are written, by written you meant made, by made you meant felt. You understood, by listening, that insistence is emphasis which changes all the time. *How* people say what they know. By listening, you understood that. That to be alive means to be talking and listening at once, transmitting, receiving. Because there is no difference between clarity and confusion in the hard and slippery substance of knowing, hard, and slippery, like slate, of slate is made the ground I stand on, stand and stand still, speaking the ink mark, speaking the stain, stay stain, stay Stein, say stain, stand on slate, beat out this cadence into another tune, stain Stein, think of stain, hit the slate, stain Stein, stay, hush and hush, now, choke. To stand, to choke, coated in a slate-grey layer of tacit. Slate slate, the ground I stand on, slate, and think, all the words you couldn't tran—, the objects you couldn't tran—it's slate this ground is made of, of slate a dark gray, stay, Gertrude, stay. Words unhinged don't seem to conclude much but push push, one then another, like the presence, like the voice they can no longer hold, with a sense that my self, my sense, my styx, were written in it too because Gertrude, prophetically you wrote, *and I sing and the tunes I sing are what are tunes if they come and I sing. I sing I sing*.

I understand, I want you to stay, oblige me, stay, Gertrude. Oblige me, Gertrude Stay-n.

A few weeks later, H. writes to me of an encounter with Rilke's poem *Abend*, and how in the very last verse the stone in 'stein' made her think of the stain of Stein, and she wrote, *how wonderful to have 'stone' as a last name*, last name for Gertrude, premonition for me, or strange return, a call, a stone, bald begrenzt und bald begreifend, abwechselnd Stein in dir wird und Gestirn, your life, now bounded, now immeasurable, it is alternately stone in you and star, stone star, stone Stein, stone *petra*, now I want to tell you about *Dante's Rime Petrose, Stony Rhymes*, the one which begins by saying *così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro com'è ne li atti questa bella petra, la quale ognora impetra maggior durezza e più natura cruda*, I want to charge my words with so much harshness as this enchanting stone has in her actions, she who is ever growing harder in nature and more fierce and ruthless, against all odds, this was odd, beglitched, bewitched.