

I Began the Day, by Renee Gladman

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Renee Gladman

By Renee Gladman, from Calamities, a collection of linked essays that was published this month by Wave Books. Gladman is the author of eight works of prose, including the novel Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge.

I began the day having given myself the task of compiling a list. I wanted to see whether I could trace all the problems — large and small — I had taken on in my somewhat long career as a writer. I didn't mean those asinine problems of writer's block or other equally frustrating problems of self-worth (feeling too much or not enough). Rather, I wanted to document the questions that led to writing, writing such as I was doing then. I had to put my pen down. Suddenly, I was flooded with sensations of a sexual nature. I didn't know from where they'd come. As I just said, my mind was, in that moment, fixed on academic matters — what it meant to write and what I in fact had written — and usually I approached such topics with discipline: I was a serious writer; there was nothing inherently sensual in the act of writing (hands tapping at keys). So when out of nowhere I felt her pressing against my back, I had to put my pen down. "What are you doing?" I asked an empty, flaming room.

I began the day looking up at the whiteboard, wondering how I would do the thing I needed to do. My students were waiting. Robert Frost was their picture of contemporary poetry. I didn't think that this would help them with Ed Roberson. I was going to try to draw a grid of light as if one were looking down on it, a grid that extended across an opaque surface, and then draw, a good distance below that, a container, inside which would be symbols. From the lower container, I wanted to draw lines that reached the opaque surface and became the actual lines of the grid. I would call those lines emanations. Without being essentialist, or perhaps being only momentarily so, I wanted to say, Often when reading poetry, it's the grid you're experiencing, and the grid is not the same thing as that subterranean container, where some meaning might lie, the actual story of the poem, rather it's the shape of the emanations refracted through language and feeling that you're reading. I didn't know how to draw the effect of looking down on something, so I asked for a volunteer. Someone tall offered, and as I was looking up at his attempt to look down, I realized that there was a flaw in my thinking. The place from which the emanations arose was not intact, it was not a container wherein lay meaning. It was itself a grid, but of what, I could not explain within the allotted time. I had to let the class go: it was 3:51, one minute into their "free" time. I couldn't find my words; the students remained sitting there. How could I send them off to read Roberson's book without having explained poetry to them? "There is a grid above and a grid below," I said slowly, trying not to uplift my voice into a question. Perhaps to read poetry was to read through a

sieve. I wanted to incorporate the idea of a matrix. “Poetry comes out of nothing,” I said, opening something I would never be able to close: 3:52. “Read the nothing,” I shouted after them as they walked out the door.

I began the day thinking about the university level — where it was and who was allowed to go there. I felt in my body a sense that there were a series of gates to pass through, a grand lawn, and then an elevator to take you down into the earth. The university level would be on the top floor of something that rose above all the surrounding structures but did so inversely, deep beneath the ground, perhaps forty levels below, where meaning was made and the core burned brightly. You had to take a bus to reach the site where the university soared, and it took six months and seventeen days, and the rules dictated that you go alone and read nothing and sip a little bourbon. I was at the university level, but I couldn’t remember how I’d arrived there. I had to watch people for years to put the story together. You took a bus that drove all day for many days, then climbed into a car; the car eventually drove through gates — one gate and then another and a stop for lunch and then four more gates — until it pulled up to a building that looked like an enormous well. It was brick and wood and cloaked in mist. You had long forgotten about the sun. The well had a door that the body had to squeeze through and a thick rope that the body climbed down; at the end of the room the body landed in an elevator. A picture of a book was pasted next to the controls: it was maybe your book, your first, or a book by your favorite author. There was a sign that talked about the university, how you might find it, which button to push. But it didn’t explain why the button wasn’t on the panel, the button for the university level. You ran out of numbers before you got to where you were going, so you just had to sit there. You sat, I was told. And nothing happened. No food came; no one screamed down to say hello. You waited, perhaps for days, perhaps in a timeless way, and suddenly felt a jolt. It was a different feeling from the bus, which jolted, but horizontally. This was a free fall. The body fell in a cage through darkness, sweating and inhaling the core of the earth. The core called out to you in a torpid voice.

I began the day trying to say the word “body” as many times as I could, for myself and for everyone in the room. I wanted to exchange the word with all my correspondents. I wanted to say “body” to them: How is your body, or Write through the body, or How does the body activate objects in the room. I hoped to say “body” and see a change come over your face: inside your body, the edge of the body, your body split. (I split you.) I hoped to reach a point in speaking where when it was time to say “body” I could go silent instead. I’d pause and everyone in the room would sound the word within themselves. I’d go, “Every time you put a hole in the _____,” and demur. Lower my head like a forty-watt bulb, look solemn. Or say, “We all carry something in our _____” (it could also be plural), and the collective internal silent hum would overwhelm my senses. This would be real communication: something you started in your _____ would finish in mine.

One of my favorite words was in my mouth, and I was torn between chewing and swallowing it so that it could become a part of me, another organ that processed or eliminated some material of my being, or spitting it out immediately, without doing any damage to its form, so that I could study the word in all its glory. That word was “sentence,” and it wasn’t that I had just the word “sentence” in my mouth but the essence of sentence as well, such that against my tongue I felt I was harboring a kind of chain, as one might wear around one’s neck, but rather than being made of metal it was paper in content, though nothing like the paper one wrote on or drew on, perhaps more like the paper one glued and immersed in water and turned into sculpture. My sentence had sculptural content that I couldn’t deny. I began the day with this word in my mouth that absorbed every other word around it. It sucked everything in and enforced an order that made me particularly aware of time. I tried to move forward in my mouth, using this paper chain to describe the experience of being in my mouth. I was ready for its philosophy; but when something is in the mouth, there is not always that clear relationship of container to contained. The thing inside you could be so enormous (in concept) or conversely so minutely intricate (like overlapping web structures) that although your body encloses it, it is the only reason you know your body. It is the only way you have to say, “There is something in my mouth.” Something reversed on me when I tasted “sentence,” as if now I was consumed, sealed inside some container; and though this sounded like a bad situation to find oneself in — mouth full of papier-mâché, a word that represented all thought-structure sitting right on the tongue — it was like dreaming inside a machine, or dreaming up a machine that was your life.

I sat in front of it and felt distinctly without conflict that we were separate: I was a body and it was an object, albeit the thinnest I’d ever seen, and the most cavernous. I was a body and it was a page and we both had our proverbial blankness. I was poised to write. I was poised to open and write or to open and let writing happen. Since it had yet to be determined what writing actually was, how it formed, and where it went once it was made, you didn’t know what you had to do in order to write. You seemed to want to make a map of that blank slate; you seemed to want to make a mark; you seemed to want to pull a mark out of the blankness. The page opened. It was clean but it crackled like something was living there. I wondered about the signs we were wearing — if somewhere on me was the sign writer and somewhere on it was page, because somehow we knew what we were going to do. I was going to make a mark, and it was going to open and crackle and seem electrified: blank but full of presences and questions. My blankness was harder to define; when I looked for it — reached into myself for it — it was only the page that I found. I didn’t know whether at some point in my past, perhaps at the very first moment I set out to write, the page had fallen out of me or I had risen out of it.