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Slowness

16 strokes fast and slow.

BY MARY WALLING BLACKBURN

Author's note: This essay was written in Chicago, Illinois, Marfa, Texas and Brooklyn, New York over a period of two years (2006-2008).

Each public reading occurs on the passage between the island of Manhattan to Roosevelt Island between 6:00am and 2:30am. The reader and listener meet at TramPlaza, located at 59th street and Second Ave in Manhattan, New York and board the tram. For four minutes the tram glides at approximately 16 miles per hour and travels 3,100 feet. At its peak it climbs to 250 feet above the East River. When reader and listener return to Manhattan, the reading concludes.

1

Use each flash of lightening to read further – an unstable bedlamp if there ever was one.
What will you read? What you have slid under the bed.

The strobe, its fleeting– the read, slow.

[flash]
“the mouth”
[darkness.]

[flash]
“of the river”
[darkness]

[interrupted]
“held the boat.”
[resumed]

The house shivers and accordingly, the bed, and the book shake.

If you are reading, the act of reading becomes a kind of trembling. Sieving the language from the light is work and it alters you. The national average of words read per storm is one paragraph. This bedtime masturbator’s rate fares better than the average because she is looking at pictures instead of words; and she only needs one searing second to memorize the image: La Motorcycle.

E.G. Hocquenghem makes a beautiful entreaty for the queering of the motorcycle: according to e.g.h the motorcycle is not just an object for ownership but another sex, neither male nor female. This text details how cruising mimics the sexual behaviors of motorcycles – for example, the accident of seeing, of crashing, of riding, of being rider, ridden, run. Ah, to be fast! Hey, go faster.

2

We are lauding the process of speed?
Valorizing its undefined outcome?
Are we asking to be delivered from time?

Why?
For what purpose?
Yeah.

Deliver me. Wait, don’t. Don’t deliver me.

3

It takes a long, long time for N.'s ivory leg to wear down.

He's tilting now.

Our fifth grade teacher makes a word problem out of N.'s condition.
In her equation D equals distance and T equals time. F is flesh and H is heat.

Class 5-B understands the properties and friction of an ill fitted stroll versus the unencumbered brisk walk. Furthermore, our teacher believes we are fit to be challenged and has given us an equation to figure in emotion. She provides values for Endless Ambition, Bitter Exhaustion, and Unmanageable Hope.

In the classroom: children who are in the mists of developing a future sexuality based on antique industries and extinct animals will have to search further a field: a celluloid atomic bomb explosion is edited by educational specialists in Houston to repeat itself five times over in the dark of the Science Room.

One child feels this explosion from a distance and it is a luxury- the pleasure of removal and the pleasure of repetition. When the shades are lowered, her whole body relaxes. She knows that light will flood her eye in a second and she won't have to ask or answer. This atomic repetition in this educational documentary is nothing short of the editing technique in stock pornography that creates the 'money shot'. As a result a word problem develops based on the wear and tear of replaying the same sequence of a film over and over – values E, T, P.
Explosion x Time. The P flickers between assignments.

4

When the painter, Frederic Edwin Church of the Hudson River School, bought a swath of land that would later be called "Olana", he decided that he would uproot the existing vegetation, shift hills and valleys and replant the landscape he wished existed; he would make it into what he wanted to paint. Decades past before the land outside of his mansion began to resemble the land inside his head. In his studio, I remember, his last painting is propped unfinished on its easel. I have only seen it once and that was when I was a twelve year old, touring the estate with my aunt; it is my favorite of his. I recall the white gaps of unpainted canvas and the edges of the fledgling strokes. It ripped open notions of what *complete* means and maybe more specifically, made clear that I craved something open-ended and undone – the infinite as bare minimum.

5

Is open-ended and undone synonymous with slow... the ecstasy of delay? With stamina we can observe desire beginning to assemble itself; the pleasure of its approach begets patience. And, anyway, isn't there some song about some lady needing someone with a *slow* hand? I think so. And then there's the song that was ubiquitous on the streets of the Lower East Side five summers ago: "I'm gonna lick lick lick lick you from your head to your toes." That takes time.

6

These warring discourses; it goes without saying that they aim to dismantle one another:

The marginalized and holy discourse of slowness versus the intoxicating and schizophrenic discourse of speed. But why the dialectics -that is, one universe over the other?

Why can't we root for multiplicity? How about a third sex?

You say: There is already a third sex! Remember *La Motorcycle*?

I say: That's not a Third Sex. He says he wants us to fuck like motorcycles and we already do.

You say: Heteros and Homos fuck like motorcycles?

I say: Heteros and Homos.

So, how about a third orientation based on a small wooden canoe, hand-built with some power tools in the mid-1940's. You say: ok.

This canoe travels from a modest river to a lake so vast that it could be called an interior sea.

And in dusk's quietude, this opening of the interior is barely noticed because *the canoe* is a gender that slowly opens up into itself and does not notice a phenomena that is repeated within.

Another way to describe this traveling from and through one surface to another is disemboque: *to come out into the open sea from the river*. The word originates in Spanish's embocar *to put into the mouth*.

The mediating shoreline and its dark fir reflections gently resist the all-knowing sex practices of the first, second, and third gender because it is unclear whether

the coalescence of Speech and Speed and Sunlight is sustainable. The fourth sex searches for someone/something to hold, tip, rescue, and release.

It does this in darkness.

Like Jean-Luc Nancy, this is a sex in favor of touching over penetration.

For this body is not a knife and the other body is not a wound.

In concert with this, the canoe is not penetrating the interior;

it floats- half in air and half in silken water.

It remains simultaneously inside and out.

The water forgives the weight of the canoe. The canoe forgives the wind's rough handling. Animism wins the day – as water, wood and air are touched like skin that presses towards and breathes against and goes wet and cools down.

Waterway, treeline, boat, and bones- all this can be enfolded into a new gender.

More than objects, there are behavior patterns endemic to this third:

the canoe is weighing its passengers, nuzzling the embankment, demanding balance.

It is very slow and deliberate, *the canoe*, and it coaxes a whole new dimension of human behaviors from those who realize it is their orientation. These of this persuasion gravitate towards one another; they collect in hushed places like the holy caves overlooking the suburbs, the abandoned chalk mines below the city and in the restaurant's nearly deserted walk-in freezer.

But for one of the fourth sex, bunkered down in Glasgow, companionship is found when it is discovered that its mate has been living in a hole in the wall beside the bed all along. And all it will take to unite is to dig through the plaster.

It takes several days to dig through but that's ok because they've stockpiled water. And besides, they're turned on by waiting, as they have structured everything on longing- its vast gaps, and a tangle of nerve endings that engineer syncope. The shovel just grazes the shin.

Let Me Make Record: The Whole Night, I dreamt of an outdoor theater projecting an Endless Movie on a bed sheet. A slight breeze just lifted the hem of the screen and in the ever-present night of the dream, in the grass beside the make-shift projection, we were slowly kissing in the Warm World.

7

Can I claim immunity to the lure of speed?
And if I concede that I am not immune, what will speed provide me?

It will fill; it will fill to excess.
Speed engines the water that tops the dam, that floods over and bursts its
limns.

But there is another unstoppable need- oppositional and equal to rapid excess: to
be filled with emptiness.

And I wonder if it is possible to achieve a state of emptiness flash-freeze fast?
Or does it always happen in increments? Similar to the way a vessel bound in
pack ice breaks up mid-ocean- so slowly – there's time to pull supplies onto the
snow, time to shoot the dogs for food.

Week after week, beached on that ledge of ice, there is time to slowly wake; to
remove frost black fist from morning hard on, pull hands out of furred pants and
extract journal from rucksack; to make record of nocturnal dreams that were
freighted with the Other Life: that is, Slow-Roasted Game, and Fast Heedless
Fucking, Open-Ended Forgiveness and Open- Pit Ambition. On rising, you reach
a deeper emptiness. Your stranded sleep has subtracted semen and tears from
your fragile arithmetic.

8

“When you have horses, it will change everything”

(This, from a book regarding the evolution of speed within the North American
continent – Rebecca Solnit begins with tribal transportation and ends with
motion pictures. She lets us know that we have been a nation obsessed with
hogtying time; harnessing technologies to freeze memory - using speed to *get*
slow.)

9

The citizens of Ho Chi Minh City eventually shot out the loudspeakers that had been erected by the government on every corner. Before the speakers were broken, propaganda was loudly broadcast from sunrise to sunset; with light there was loudness.

And after that slow ascent to collective and covert action, the speed of the bullets brought silence- a tenuous silence to each block liberated from the tyranny of scripted noise.

And when the first public clock towers were erected in France, they, too, were often shot at.

A gunpowder and second hand minuet. A speedy retort to the threat of speed. A hierarchical determination of the body's hours.

10

(Maybe you were listening but you didn't have the time to pay attention: "When you have horses, it will change everything".

When passengers first started riding trains, they claimed that the landscape went by too fast to actually understand what they were seeing. (Speed was blindness.)

When trains wrecked, unscrupulous photographers began to produce glass negatives with spirits rising from the carnage. (Speed stopped itself short. Fixer as subterfuge.)

When people began to drive cars, the birthrate rose – an exhilarating ride and a languorous stopover unseating chastity. (The ecstasy of fast and slow.)

Always, apparently, there is this desire to waylay that, which escapes: the body, the image, the spirit, and the animal. Will the horse reign? Can the penis persuade? Will the camera recoup its losses? Can the paintbrush perform a recovery? Yes to all of this. No as well.)

11

I can't claim immunity; speed bridles me, too.
Because me and speed have this personal genealogy.

At fifteen years old, my mother shoots speed into the soles of her feet. (This technique will not leave track marks). (Additionally, this indirect method of shooting up signals a faith in slow time – a desire for her beauty to endure past the high and its wreckage.)

My mother's soundtrack is her adrenalized hymn AKA the death song of the turnpike –her car drafts a semi; without incident, the truck drags the tailgating car along with it – and the hatchback, it saves on gas.

More History: When I arrive, I arrive two months early: my eyes undeveloped, my infant lungs filled with liquid. The nurses bandage my eyes. (Speed was blindness.)

The markers of speeding persist: every year flashing meteors rain down on my August birthday.

My mother and I spend a long time, hanging out at highway vista points, waiting for the meteors to slice through our atmosphere to come into mid-August. Stoned, she loves their blaze. Sober, I love their fall.

For decades, after my birth, I have swum in the swift spring current with the river waist-high;
the river mouth-high.

In seconds, the fast swell of the snow-melt can cleanly end this swim. I entertain this option,
for the rest of my life – to put the river in my mouth. *Embocar.*

12

*Please.
Begin.
To come near.
Speak slowly.
I want to make record.*

13

"Nollet soon succeeded in killing a sparrow by means of a Leyden jar discharge. He observed that it appeared as if the bird had been struck by lightning; on dissection it was found that most of the blood vessels had burst."

I remember a seven am breakfast of speed and orange juice in college. I remember a beautiful exam – every answer flashing before my eyes, and speed fueled sex that popped and burned itself out- the morning sun was muted and the air was tender.

And I recall the speed of light leaving this earth – at the end of the day, when the hills are in flux, and light mottles them for only seconds before dusk's darkness.

The speed of the nervous system, transferring information in record time. The veins bursting with love and light.

I recognize this. Recognize you. Recognize everything at once. Recognize nothing at once. Is it the speed of everything or the slowness of everything that causes me to forget you? It's both.

It was an early electrical experiment. It happened before we knew there were other options – outside of the exhaustion of falling in love.

I'm told a psychoanalyst says there's another verb to try: 'standing in love.' It isn't that ol' self-eradication in the arms of another. I'll wade towards it.

*

Death broke down beside us. A Broken Man. We coaxed him out of his embarrassing depression. Eventually, we watched him go. He slowly swam across the river and I felt your hand tugging restlessly in mine. You wanted to swim in his electric wake. And you would and will.

14

Husband Come. This is what she writes. Repeatedly. In German.

It's sometime around 1919.

She is being treated in a psychiatric hospital by art historian and physician, Hans Prinzhorn. Her drawing which is a letter- drawn letters- consists of this phrase alone.

Husband Come

Her command remains intact until one-iteration lapses over the other; until unintelligibility reigns.

But its envelope address is in the neatest cursive.

Gut open *waiting*, writes Hans in his head, she has gutted opened waiting. What falls out is slow time and crude space; what is revealed is endless repetition.

To Hans, anything repeated endlessly becoming an arithmetic figured in the field of infinity.

So her man is always en route, just left and never arriving.

15

There's an aggression to slowness made evident by a careful study of Agnes Martin's paintings. But I took a short cut, coming to my scholarship nocturnally and it didn't matter that Agnes was a ghost – traveling sideways from her death into my dream. They were contiguous countries.

I dreamt I was in Martin's studio.
She was preparing gallons of white paint. I watched her pour gunpowder into the bucket and mix it in.

I woke, knowing her paintings more precisely: the violence of their silence, the violence of their whiteness, how we, willingly or not, may be sacrificed for our remedial gait.

16

How do the Authorities calculate half-life, nuclear or phantom?

The remains of nuclear process burn radiant for what's described as middling eternity.

There's something extraordinarily slow going on despite the speed of the machinery and its energy.

A slow decay. Slower than you'll ever know.

Then there's the irregular speed of a future of volcano-fueled appliances- the lava-fed car, the magma heated hot tub. I imagine a coming anti-paradise where I race all over Iceland in my speedster and ease my boner in the Jacuzzi.

Some refuse any other direction other than this.

I take a hot shower and lay down, reading my magazine by the lava's light. It's steady and red. It sets the mood. I read: *Observe how the boundary between the slow and fast remain indeterminable...broken and breachable. Each leans into the other and mines its opposite.*

It's an open-pit operation of fast and slow; I think we'll suffer it forever.

And the caesura of the stalling engine—its' pulses and give-ups...? You should cling to them.

And the silent path of the rivercraft at nightfall? It has a weird schedule-
arrhythmic, seasonal.

It charts an odd course – this little boat.

But a map of the sunken ships just under the surface lies within the Captain's head and once in awhile he even steers the canoe around a man slowly swimming by. The man, he is drinking the river with each stroke.

Mary Walling Blackburn's open letter to the deputy director of the CIA, Gina Haspel can be read [here](#), published by Tamawuj, an off-site publishing platform for the Sharjah Biennial 13.

This year, Blackburn has been working in New York City, San Juan, Puerto Rico and Sofia, Bulgaria. In 2017, Blackburn's sermon charts (secular diagrams) were interpreted by musicians at St. Mark's Poetry Project and Triangle (Che Chen and Hava Toobian).

A recent Art in General commission instigated a summer exhibition of these charts at SWIMMING POOL in Sofia, Bulgaria.

In the spring, a sermon chart, *Tsipar a Xeh Ot* (devised from a 1970's spell concocted against rapists), was performed at Casa del Sargento, Beta Local, in San Juan, PR. While musicians Alexandra Buschman and Shanti Lalita were interpreting, an impromptu revival adjacent to the live performance necessitated that the musicians harmonize with and against the pastor's sermon.