

THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD

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Special thanks to Stuart Shave, to the poets, to Cate Olson & Nash Robbins, & to Hedi El Kholti, whose zines were the inspiration for the present volume. Contents include images of occasionally poor quality, ripped from the internet without permission; of these, two are by living artists whose work I gratefully acknowledge: Nicole Eisenman on page 15 and Rosemarie Trockel on page 66. The sound engineer was Ben Sharony. Images from *THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD* at Stuart Shave Modern Art were taken from filmed documentation by Ingham Brooke Studio. Two drawings, showing a map of Haiti and a spider, were made in March 2010 by an orphan named Esdras, whose last name I do not know. This book is for Julien Raffinot.

Audio of “On the Origin of the World” from the Nag Hammadi Library: <http://www.semiotexte.com/images/REINES-OTOOTW.mp3>. Translated by Hans Gebhard-Bethge and Bentley Layton. Voice: Ariana Reines. Sound Engineer: Ben Sharony. Text online: <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/origin.html>

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ARIANA REINES

semiotext(e)

Opus Imperfectum



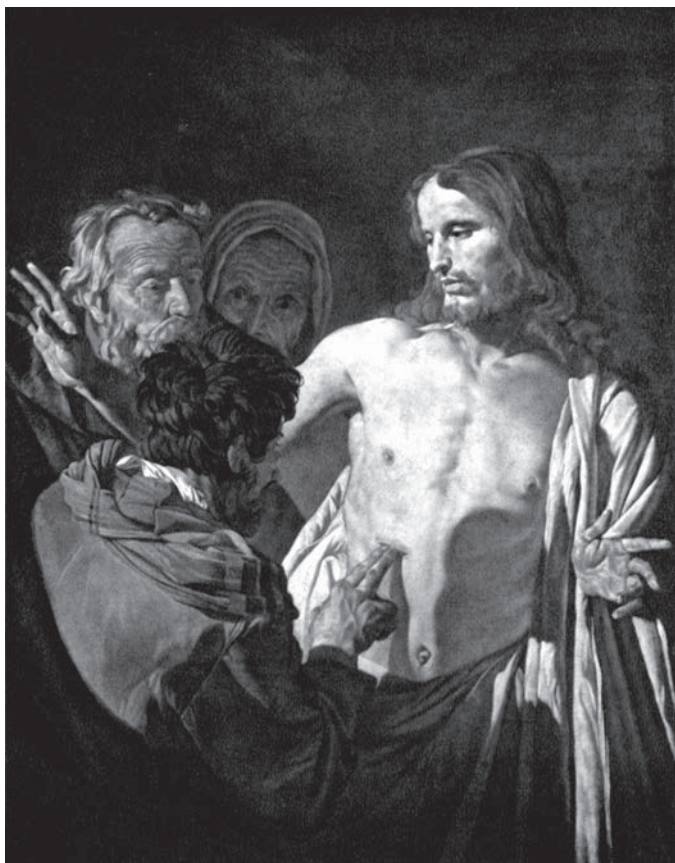
I want to tell you what I see
But I do not want to tell you what I see
And I don't want to tell you what I don't see
Also. But I will. I want to
Try





















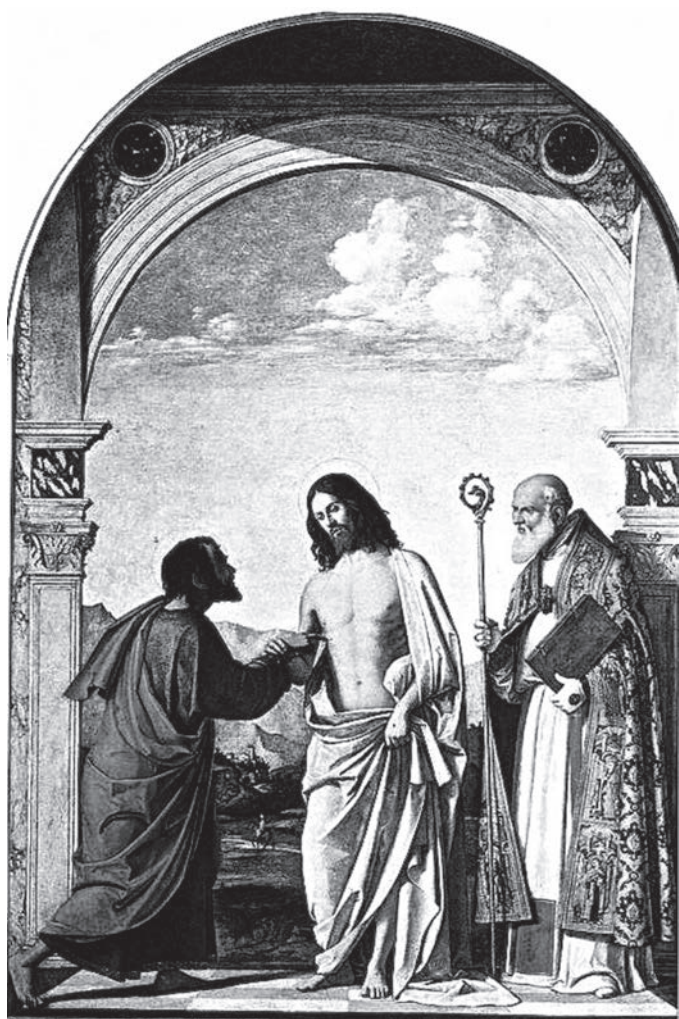




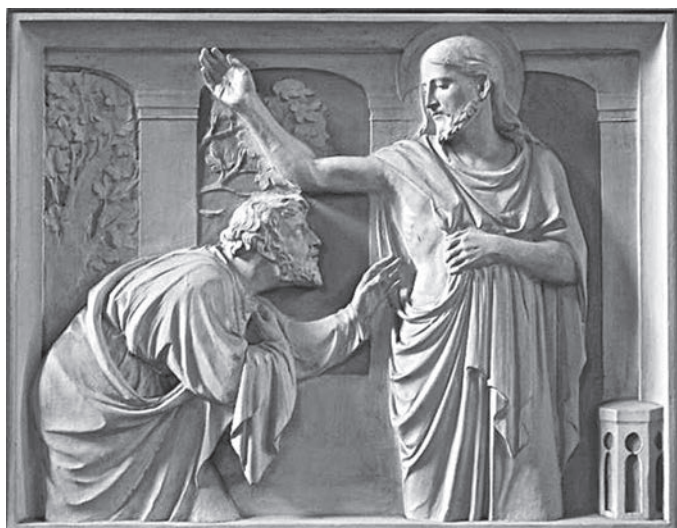








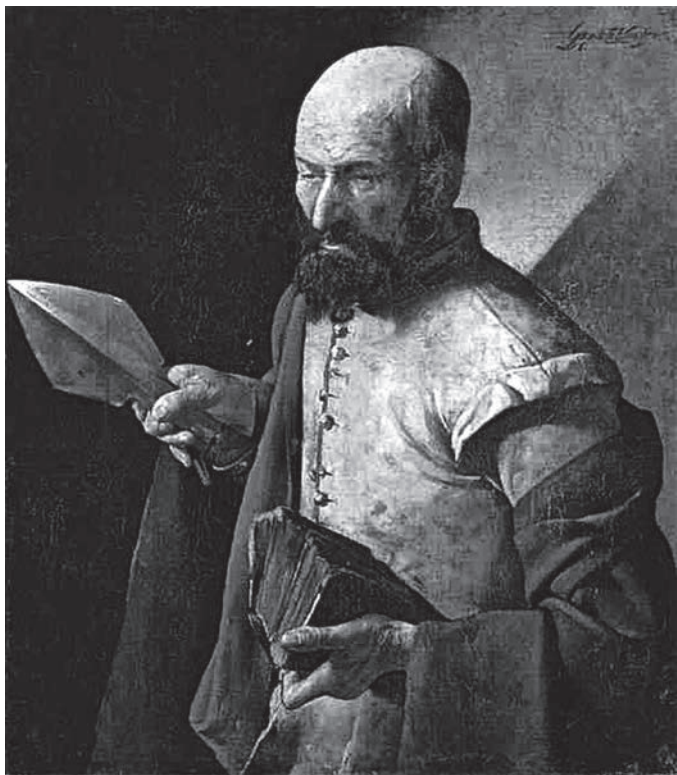


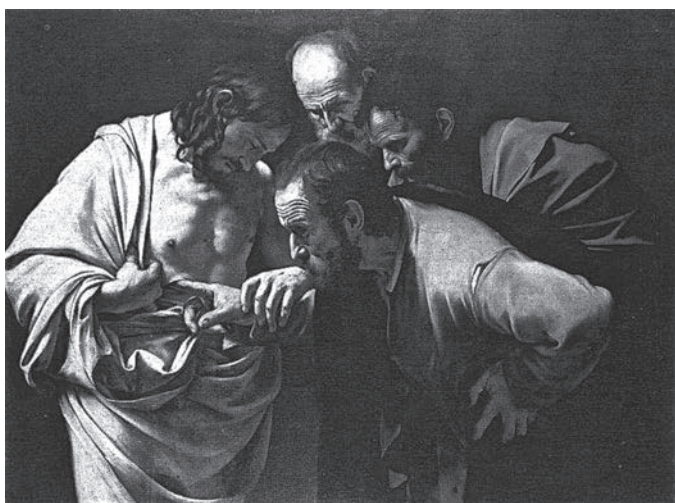






















In order to tell you one thing that I'm too shy to tell you I
have to tell about another thing I can't possibly tell. If I can
achieve the second I guess I'll have accomplished the first.

Like one twin pulling out from his dead brother a song.

A song with no words, let us say, though it should have
been told & it haunts like a song: the opposite of everything
that has ever been.

Or.

Two men lesbiating.

Two men lesbiating for the ages. Lesbiating for the ages & covered over by them. Not gay men. But like. Two men working with their hands.

The one mistaken for a doubter, the other mistaken for worse, & more.

Or an essay about the conflation of sight & touch. Which is a book I haven't written.

If I were a French poet maybe I could write one called *Words in Reverse*, made of disappearing calligrammes & sentences that sweep away their having passed like Jains walking backwards.

But I can say that the opening in the side of the Christ is an eye that doesn't see, even if I don't know how to write it.

It's a bloom, a jewel, a wound that rhymes with the vagina that opened up in Adam's side, I mean the eye through which Eve poured.

I just mean I'm sick of seeing things that don't change my life. That won't change my life.

When you're gazing into a hole that's not one. All that Christian art prepared me, even me, a Jew who can't see, to subjugate the word to the bloody hole & the holes that get pounded. Everybody knows how to recognize what we're supposed to see. I'm sick of seeing. Once I saw something that "changed my life." It changed my life.

“Immediately her word became accomplished fact,” says
On the Origin of the World.

All worlds are engendered through speech. A word can invert the world. Not just any word. There are the words which precede us & the ones near our cause & then there are the words we have to commend back to the heavens; back down to the roots of the Earth.

And I would go “to the ends of the Earth.” To the ends of the Earth.

For you I could say.

You whom I love I could have written. Whoever you are.

It was just a mania to discover a different symmetry, maybe the real symmetry hidden in what’s wordlily asymmetrical. A skeleton key to inequality.



two philosophers in a dark time



strabismus of the translator who is also a writer

When I came out I was cross-eyed. They had to do something to the muscles so that the eyes in my head would look out at the world. I think when I was a baby they operated on me. Then one eye appeared to be stronger than the other & they did tests & it was. My head cocked inquisitively to the right but only slightly but for good. I don't remember what I saw. They covered the stronger eye with an eyepatch, which was a big ovoid bandaid with the customary white square at the center, to correspond with the wound. If I didn't wear this eyepatch the weaker eye would never catch up to the stronger one, though they were twins, conjoined by the rest of sidelong me.

If the "two rogues that are twins" are not the breasts of the Queen of Sheba but the eyes in any head, then my eyes were fraternal twins. If the origin of the world, or humankind, was not in "modeled forms" but in what

transpired through them to inspire them with spirit, with soul, then what Thomas probes when he touches the wound of the Christ is only the aperture that someone, at least someone should have understood the apostle to be *indicating*, not merely palpating in doubt.

But in the Song of Songs it's not two *rogues* that are twins—it's two roes, feeding among the lilies.

Still I like two rogues feeding among the lilies, like two eyes goggling in bliss.



visionary twin whose twin sister died when they were six weeks old

Last summer I flew to London to give a poetry reading & present a performance at Stuart Shave Modern Art. Ricky Ricardo, the fellow I live with, went too. On the plane I watched an Ethel Kennedy documentary & he watched one on Freddy Mercury. So much for our androgyny. The gallery put us in a Thatcherian hotel helmed by imperiously ravaged Slavic blondes & a battalion of bellboys reminiscent of the twink pornstars I used to read about on Dennis Cooper's blog. Stuart Shave had mentioned Richard Tuttle loved this hotel. Great, I probably said. When I first met Stuart he was wearing patchouli and I liked him immediately. England is a foreign country. Oh really. They never had their revolution I kept saying to Ricky Ricardo, cretinous with jetlag. By which I mean I was. The reading went fine. London was in a heat wave & everyone was ruddy & dewy & fanning themselves dramatically, in honest discomfort. As a New Yorker & a poet ie a bottom-feeder accustomed to all kinds of privations & mortifications of the flesh I was relatively unperturbed by the meteorological situation. I was & remain however un-immune to discomforts & anxieties of the soul & mind. The performance was slated for the following day. At night full of beer & fish & chips, swollen in anticipatory stupor, I did sun salutations before a portrait of Samuel Pepys or someone in the hotel corridor. I visualized the empty gallery & likewise emptied my head.

On July 5, 2013, at 3 in the afternoon, I presented THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD.

It consisted of triangulating structures whose primary elements were, in order of importance, (1) an audio recording of a relatively unknown ancient text, (2) a Chilean Rose tarantula, & (3) my body. Its container was a readymade: an exhibition of preliminary drawings by Tom of Finland.

Doesn't Freud describe form somewhere, all form, any form, each cultural structure, as having arisen in response to an anxiety. But if form (norm; ritual) is the human (latterly male) response to anxiety, then what are we to do with the anxiety provoked by form.

It turns out that whenever I've made something—a book, a play, a performance, a way of teaching—my main occupation has been to discover unanxious forms through which to contend with difficult, even impossible problems. It turns out I'm not interested in provocation or in confrontation, but I do have rage. I think everybody does.

I lay on the floor naked with the tarantula on my body while the recording played. I'd closed the shutters to dim the light so it would feel like story hour or naptime: that daydreamy post-lunch haze when the flow of gastric juices lulls the body into a very mild state of autoeroticism, at least that's what happened to us in kindergarten.



If I have a problem & I do, if an artwork has a problem & it must, then the key is to find out a form that will address the problem, even exacerbate it, while producing less anxiety, not more—ideally none—and yet never to become escapist, mendacious, or otherwise lame. Soporific is ok though because everybody needs sleep, and dreams. Lately I look for ways to emulsify & dissolve the structures of my containment & the systems to which I volunteer my body & soul for cannibalization without employing the rage my cannibalization engenders.



That's wrong. I am employing the rage but like a quote unquote construction ball, as though I'm not. But I'm just practicing is the feeling I have constantly lately.

Before entering the main space of the gallery I had a whiskey with Stuart Shave & met Mark Amey, Rosie's trainer & an exquisite man. Mark had glittering blue eyes & sleeves of hardcore tattoos, many of them depicting spiders; I think he wore a silver spider charm around his neck. He described the mechanics of tarantula sex to me & Ricky Ricardo: the female will absolutely murder the male if she can. This was why my original fantasy of eight, count them eight spiders on my body for the performance would have been impossible: they would have murdered each other and I would inevitably have been bitten; poisoned. At sexual maturity the male tarantula's two front legs shorten to become like two boxing gloves, Mark's term. The male ejaculates onto his boxing gloves, mounts the female, & does his best to rub her in the right place. If he escapes he'll keep doing this until a female kills and eats him. Sexual maturity in a male tarantula carries him straight to his death.

A crowd of people assembled. I was happy to see a man in the front wearing nothing but red short shorts since I was about to get naked and London is so polite. I stripped in the corner and lay down. Mark laid Rosie on my hip, and story hour began.



THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD was meant to invoke the Courbet beavershot, beavershot being a purposefully outmoded term contemporaneous, I think, to the heyday of Tom of Finland; I learned it from Kurt Vonnegut. It goes without saying, or perhaps it should, that no spreading of legs would be necessary for this particular ORIGIN: the hairy tarantula, rhyming with the gorgonic mess on my head, would be the living metonym & synecdoche, respectively, to my own hairless thing.

The horror tarantulas have been known to cause would likewise be present, during the performance, as a parody of gay male vagina terror & of the anxiety humans of all genders must at some point confront around the mystery of where we come from—our mothers I mean, but especially the contingency of all existence.

But the idea that anyone would honestly be horrified by a tarantula was also probably laughable, given the extreme shit people pretty much have to see in this day & age.

It is such a relief to touch when you have seen too much. It is so easy.

Because this performance penetrated a Tom of Finland environment, whose world neither originates with nor includes anything remotely vaginal, the title was meant to be playful, if not exactly funny.

Likewise my own confrontation of a personal phobia, a fairly negligible one on the scale of legitimate fears, though no less real, though also (as it turns out) no trouble to overcome, the whole thing turned into a pantomime of gentleness, even a pantomime of peace: a kind of laboratory demonstration of an unrigid, nonconfrontational mode of fearlessness, or of the dissolution of fear.

I liked the way Rosie squeezed me a little with ends of her thick, furred legs, kind of like the way a cat will dig its nails into your flesh in delight, while it's purring & you're the one making it purr.

But the performance's real referent—the punchline hidden behind Courbet's pornographic joke, not that Courbet can possibly have intended it—was a far less famous entity: a Gnostic scripture called *On the Origin of the World*,



which was found in a jar near Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945, among other texts ranging from the sayings of Hermes Trismegistus to an iffy translation of Plato, not to mention The Gospel of Thomas, & perhaps the greatest poem ever written, “The Thunder Perfect Mind.”



“On the Origin of the World,” not altogether unlike Courbet’s painting, designates the feminine aspect of the divine as both posterior & superior to the entity that created

our world. Its vision of creation integrates the cosmology of the Greeks with Judaic & Christian modes of thought, & its diagnosis of the source of all evil in the world has haunted Western civilization since slightly before the dawn of Christendom. What do I know about Christendom. It's a word I learned from Merlin in Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*.



On the Origin of the World, along with the other texts in what came to be known as The Nag Hammadi Library, were first published in English in 1977. The text is didactic, a fascinating blend of insight & opprobrium, with the contradictions & obscurities that make gospels gospels. It's a Gnostic telling of the story of creation, & it accounts, both logically & psychologically, for the earthly problems of sexuation & oppression. It describes the feminine principle of the divine as precedent & superior to the masculine entity that created our world. All divinities in the text are androgynous—but they are also all gendered, either male or female. It's a book you sometimes see in the bedrooms of men who play in metal bands.

The latency of books. What is this jar of papyrus compared to gilded torahs in their arks, the scrolls draped in jewels the rabbi & his men would parade around the sanctuary for us to kiss by touching them with the kissed corners of our books? To read a torah you must not even touch it. Instead you use a thing like this to keep your place.



A jar pregnant with every idea “the West” would repress. Like the genital of every heresy & every vision that has since unfolded. There are different moods & modes of gnosticism and some of them are tacky and some of them are angry & scatological, & some of them wallow in the wrongness of things. I’ve said that I have rage & that I wanted to employ it nonconfrontationally.



For example there was a shade of aggression in me—really just a quiver—against Tom of Finland & what I perceived as the gallerist’s move to detach the oeuvre from the ghettoes of kitsch and/or faggotry: I did want to invert, & gradually to devour, to denature, to relegate to the sphere of mere decoration, & to demote to the register of an afterthought, the masculine world of Tom of Finland—and, as I explained to the galleriest at our first meeting, also to make explicit by inversion the male homosociality of the culture industry.

I supposed that the public would expect me to flip Tom of Finland with some kind of aggressively feminist performance—after all, the gallerist himself being gay, not to mention a reasonable gamble on the tastes of prospective collectors, he could have celebrated the opening of this exhibition with something a lot gayer or at least more male than me. I surmised that my performance was intended, in some ways, as a legitimating balance to add value to work that I liked fine but wasn’t like *in love* with and somewhere inside me that made me want to kill.



About halfway through the audio, around the part when Adam and Eve are coming into existence, and the jealous angels rape Eve, Ricky Ricardo slipped off his clothes and started crawling toward me. I was staring at Rosie so hard I didn't see him til he was right in front of my face.





There was a boy named Quentin when I was five. I can still see his eyebrows, sheer hyphens the color of fawn, & his thin mouth swollen red because he chewed & chewed it.

Whenever the teacher called on him to read aloud his voice was hoarse & halting. He looked like a pencil. I've never forgotten him.

One day during story time he took off his pants. When the teacher saw she hissed his name & slapped him on his naked white ass.

I remember that I didn't understand what he'd done wrong but supposed dully it had to do with his clothes. I think something in me envied him because he was French and I wasn't but his difficulties were on the outside and all of mine were on the inside.

I'm saying I think I must have envied him or even admired him because why else would I remember his

name & his face when I've forgotten everybody else's. At this point I guess I love him. I must.



After storytime it would become naptime. The shades would be turned down. Or we'd go with our blankets in a line two-by-two to the sleeping room with soft blueish sweateery light & some people sucking their thumbs. I'd fold myself over my blanket & pillow like a Muslim, to make love to them. I'd seen a room full of Muslims in prayer the same way I did it, in a mosque in a picture in National Geographic. A picture of great, great happiness.

I had a special word for it. A word I'm too shy to record. The most obscene word in the world. The dirtiest word, for the most indescribable feeling. A word I made up. A disgusting word. The thing that I did, which I loved most of all, which I fantasized about teaching to everybody, in other words all the kids, so that we could become like that image of mass delight from National Geographic in which I had first recognized myself, & my own sacred method. A lot of times during naptime other kids did what I did. It

was the most intense most private feeling. Nobody'd taught it to me. I was innocent.

I dreamed it would be the main event of my fourth birthday party, but for a reason I cannot fathom was canny enough not to make this request aloud. My mother, reading my mind in a way, & one-upping the secret of my delight to the cliché of girlish sexuality, dazzled all my guests & their parents with a rented pony instead. I was so bowled over that I refused to ride it.



I had joked with Ricky Ricardo the day before that if he got bored during the performance he could always just fuck me, but when he entered my field of vision I didn't even want to let him kiss me. I was afraid he would break my relation to the audience & to Rosie. I was afraid the performance would become "aggressively heterosexual." He mirrored my movements, femizing himself. I'd penetrated Tom & he penetrated my penetration so in a way it was perfect & then it just was. We became an androgynous eight-limbed thing to rhyme with Rosie. The whole thing

took on a kind of Ecole des Beaux-Arts academicism—like we were figure models in a life-drawing class—but because of the gnostic context imparted to the space by my voice on the recording & the pretty drawings of men fucking on the walls, ours became something like a Gnostic classicism. Tame but still against the world.





...The Dying Gaul



...Ingres

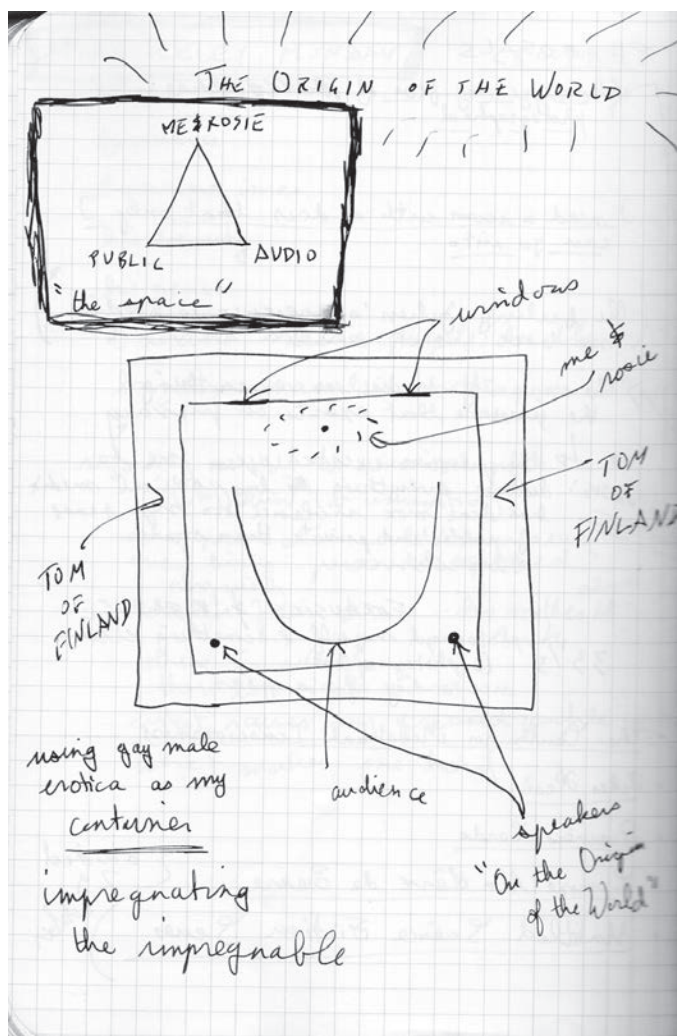


...Cupid & Psyche etc



or Jerome Robbins. Agnes de Mille.

My recording of *On the Origin of the World*, translated by Hans-Gebhard Bethge & Bentley Layton, is included here. You can also read it on the Internet.



Last night I got drunk because I was anxious about this essay, but it was also Christmas, so that was a fair reason to get drunk too. I've been avoiding getting drunk lately; somehow it stopped altering me or I stopped feeling altered enough by it or maybe it was everything alongside the idea of ever being altered by what it is within my rights to be a little bit of while the rest of me devotes herself to the strenuous mentation required not to die every second from sheer bathos or heartbreak. That's fatuous but it's also simply the description of a truth. I don't have to say I know I'm not the only one because I know I'm not the only one. In any case it doesn't matter except I had to wade through just such anemic & directionless mentation just to begin to tell you that I try to have my brother over once a week because he needs & deserves a break from my mother & he came over last night, which as I said was Christmas.

He has no confidence in himself, a lack to which he has surrendered totally. Give yourself a chance is something I say to him a lot. It is also frequently necessary that I say this to myself. My brother likes to talk & needs sane people to talk to. Listening to him is difficult, partly because, given the savage tendencies of my own inner voices I always end up contorting myself into at best a burlesque of normalcy for his sake, & I know something within me believes that there is a way in which this works, as in functions, as in succeeds, for both of our sakes. Nevertheless I sense that being around me unnerves him to a degree that he can't totally perceive, or his meds dull the affect that might otherwise accompany such perception. Whereas my meds make me just megalomaniacal enough not to mind. I just said that. His sentences don't end. They commit suicide. Formally speaking I mean, he cannot make a statement without then negating it. & he is the kind of

talker who likes to make statements. A philosopher, if you will. & I am the kind of seasoned negater-of-self for whom what Californians used to call negativity & maybe still do is, & here I lay my lily-livered cards upon the table, poison.

Every now & again he'll interrupt his keeping of yes & no unsplit to mention something from the realm of wishes or cool feelings like the babe from *Wayne's World* or something about Thurston Moore, you know, like gesture toward a time-tested entity from popular culture about which it is possible to have only positive feelings, then proceed to cite a family memory that never fails to cause me surgical pain, like he recollects things that only he could know & always brings them up in front of boyfriends I swear because he wants to hurt me for not having grown up to become a complete & total abortion, even if I remain fetally unwanted to myself in my every cell at certain times of the day/the month/the year & then he'll be like Do you want to listen to Napalm Death.

In general I pass hours or days in deranged hopelessness after having been near him. I know it would hurt him to know this. I pray that he never reads this. I love him; I cannot think of him without maternal pain & I cannot face any fleeting sensations of motherliness within me without confronting the narcissism of my self-disgust over having failed for so long ever to rescue him or even help a little.

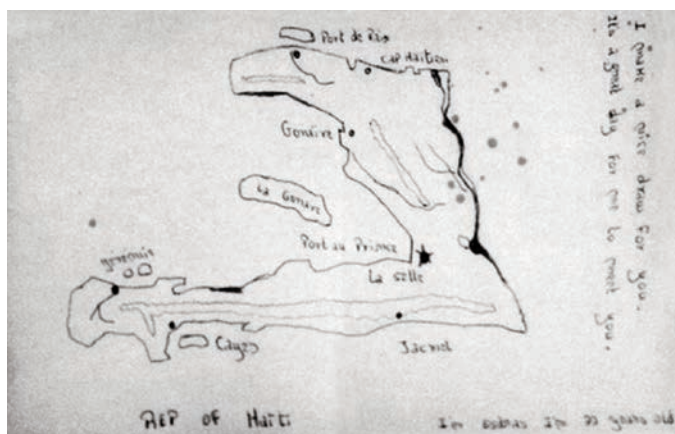
Maybe I have helped a little. I'm making a rule that you're not allowed to beat yourself up when you're at my house, I say, in a tone moronically jocose. But it's the only thing I'm good at he says. Believe me I know the feeling I say. I do too says Ricky Ricardo, with great compassion shining

in his eyes. In the penumbra of hopelessness within which we three were commiserating my brother's intelligence flickered & flared; the desire to offer company to the miserable swerves easily into motivational twaddle & dutifully I swerved hither & yon. Just to triangulate, a thing it turns out I'm pretty devoted to doing, I'd retreat periodically to the back room to put on headphones & type sentences into this machine.

It's like exposing camera film to a magnet, I said this morning to Ricky Ricardo, or touching kryptonite or whatever. I forget how actual film gets erased; it's an outdated metaphor. We were lying on our sides in bed & I was explaining what I was trying to do with this essay. Outdated metaphors are ok with Ricky Ricardo. He's 32 but he probably comes from the seventies. The only reason I gave him that name is he & I know each other domestically. The man is in the house announcing to the woman that he is home. For a year or so we've been loving each other. The way I was putting it in my head for some months was that he was domesticating me, ie teaching me by example how to live like a person from civilization. Then I started to think of it in terms of him teaching me peace, or giving it to me. I'm a beginner.

I opened a bottle of champagne one of my students had given me. I was broke last night which by both inference & consequence means that today I'm also broke. Sharing the champagne was a way to feel adult & responsible ie having something to give to a guest which is also a way to play sane & in fact it was the sane thing to do, because then I invited some friends over, & they came with their big hearts & their whiskey & beer & aggressive affections. All America makes me think of is incarceration & if it's not incarceration it's things happening in rooms, I thought. I

suspect that the anxiety I experience over finding the external world somehow wanting or absent is generally attributable to a fleeting lack of heart on my part. Whatever needs to be done to give myself heart, which is courage, it's my duty to do.







The river is like a whitening hair. The birds' nest that has been my comfort all autumn is exposed in its tree & appears uninhabited. In the playground across the street a little girl in a pink parka has just scurried across a wooden bridge. The sky is chalky & dry behind its torn clouds. I know there is something inside me. I know there is. But I can't reach it. Today.

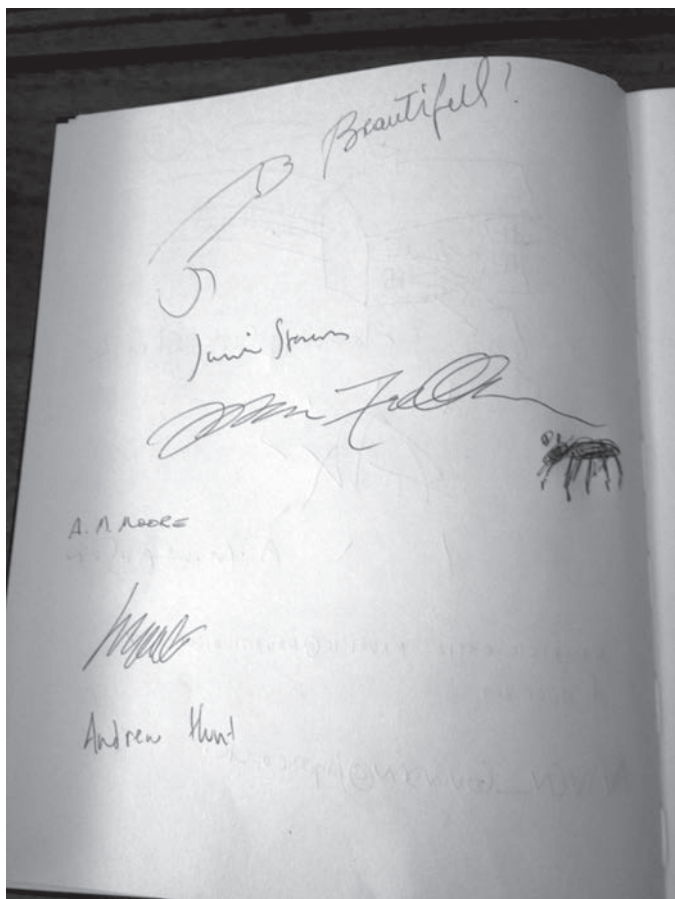
I am a woman who has seen too much, declares authorially one voice inside me. Which is only a feeling, says the voice that comes after: she's the nice lady who wants me to "live." I feel like a woman who has never seen anything & I want to be gangbanged & rolfed, burnt by the sun, soaked, licked, murdered with hockey sticks & same thing awarded prizes for literature from European countries so that some figurehead of expired preeminence with a puff pastry face should have to hang the gold coin with its red

satin sash around my neck as I became the very narthex, not nexus, of the squalid cathedral of all human longing, or while waiting for the aliens to take me back to my home planet I want to learn to feel truly natural in bars & in all sad & reliably populated places, to shed the spacesuit of my impregnable sensorium such that when strangers tell me their secrets I become lovingly permeated by them & present to them & not shredded by the serrations of their very proximity & aliveness, yea, I want to become honest & simple, or a rugged retiree with a deep bank account & a tan & long white hair & a priapic old belly hard & brown & pugnacious above the elegant ruin of his genitals, or banalest of all & most frequently, in the most attainable register of these descants, to resemble, convincingly to myself & others, a woman fully woman who has all her shit together & then simply to walk down the street as though I were one, loving myself upright like some Bukowski in bed or like rappers in cars: a living breathing inversion of the world, even if as in the song “Long Black Veil” nobody knows it but me.

Self-negation in the entrepreneurial mode: it's information's parody of imagination, the part of “the truth” that forces itself into writing as if to obscure—to protect?—the thing I'm really here to tell you about, which is waiting behind this curtain like the octopus basking behind the spreading black clot of her first inky discharge.

The skin around my eyes is still tight from the two tears that sprung to them this morning on the train. One eye one tear that was all that I got. I think Hunter S. Thompson called ours a nation of frightened dullards. When I'm a frightened dullard I know it. I know that's how they want me. They. I think “thought catalog” & following that “mending wall”: the Aran island that floats

in my belly, floating island, a just dessert: a prayer for munificence, when the water starts to plump in your mouth. The sun reddens over the instant in which you will finally have known yourself to have seen exactly enough, & you close the machine which calls itself a book & rise from your chair & walk out the door & never, ever return.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ariana Reines is the author of *The Cow* (Alberta Prize, 2006), *Coeur de Lion* (2007), *Mercury*, (2011), *Thursday*, (2012), and *TELEPHONE*, (2009, commissioned & produced by The Foundry Theatre), an Obie-winning play. For Semiotext(e), she is the translator of *The Little Black Book of Grisélidis Real: Days and Nights of an Anarchist Whore* by Jean-Luc Hennig, and *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* by TIQQUN. For Mal-O-Mar, she translated *My Heart Laid Bare* by Charles Baudelaire. Performances and theatrical works include *THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD* at Stuart Shave Modern Art, *LORNA* (with Jim Fletcher) at the Martin E. Segal Theatre, *MISS ST'S HIEROGLYPHIC SUFFERING* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and *SWISSNESS*, at The Swiss Institute. Current projects include a choreographic work in progress for Le Mouvement Biel/Bienne in Switzerland in August 2014. She will be a fellow at The Center for the Humanities at Tufts next fall.