

THE POETICS
of Trespass

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I CARVED A LARGE “P” into a medium-sized American city today. It was an attempt to inscribe language into a non-linguistic space, one in which, due to the billboards, liquor stores, gas stations and theaters, temples, churches and restaurants, strip clubs, bus stops, and the Planned Parenthood office, any possibility of tracing a curve with one’s steps has been rigorously and systematically thwarted.

Had it not been for parking lots, alleyways, playgrounds, unlocked gates, and my willingness to cross busy streets at places other than the corners, I would not have been able to carve as round a “P” as I did. That I could not carve as round a “P” as I would have liked is the reason I left the house in the first place, walking seven blocks north, then curving southeast for four and southwest for four more.

From space, my letter would be difficult to see. But of course the letter, unless you’re willing to follow the pattern of my shoeprint in the snow, has already disappeared. And though I did indeed carve such a letter in the city, reading about it here, on the page, is the only proof of its existence.

*

In 1811, New York’s city planners decided that all of the streets north of Greenwich Village would run in straight lines. More remarkable yet, since they were not the first to employ the grid, they decided to flatten the island, which was then relatively hilly. When, years later, Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted began to build Central Park, they had to reconstruct the hills the city’s fathers had previously flattened.

A system of intersecting lines was carved into the earth, creating the endless avenues Sartre is said to have found so fascinating. Creating, also – though this could hardly have been foreseen – an

existence in which each line of each wall of each room in each building in each block of that square city can curve only in rare instances. When someone revolts against the straight lines, right angles. When, against the machinery governing physical space, someone *goes off the grid* and rejects the concrete swaddle. When someone decides that, like a river, they want to wend.

In 1884, at a conference in Washington, D.C., held at the prompting of President Chester A. Arthur, it was determined that all locations on the curved surface of the earth would be designated, mapped, by the imposition of an invisible grid of longitudinal and latitudinal lines – the central line of longitude running in perpetuity, and by international agreement, through Greenwich, England.

So we speak of *carving out* time, of *carving out* space, and these carvings are the grids overlaid on our days, our homes, our eyes, the gently receding horizon, and the hills that bubble up from the sea only to be flattened, tamped down by human hands.

But time does not move according to a grid. Nor, for its part, does space. Neither is orderly. They curve. They decussate. They wound.

*

Cosmologically speaking, the world formed along a wound: astronomers report having seen “in the patterns of galaxies scattered across the night sky, the vestiges of sound waves that rumbled through the universe after the Big Bang.” Stars and galaxies, they say, formed along the ripples of those waves as they reverberated through space.

And at the centers of galaxies are also wounds: massive black holes (exploded stars) like irremediable scars around which matter accretes, spreading through interstellar space in a kind of concentricity. It’s not unlike how a pearl forms: a grain of sand or a piece of plant finds its way into the shell of a mollusk and is slowly covered in nacre.

But suppose it was another sort of explosion that bade me begin my walk. A boy in dirty corduroys comes up to me and says: “give

me a dollar for a bottle of Coke.” And when I say I’m sorry, an inadvertent kind of lie, I hear him say *Muerte* as I step onto the bus. *Die*, in other words, you scum.

Something moves in me, the sound of death’s desiring, and what it does as it twists down the ear canal and into my brain, does not so much resemble the dropping of that empty, unbought bottle along the cobbled street, and so breaking, as the sound of a fist cracking a bone – say, in the cheek.

At my desk months later, I repeat the word *die* over and over, as if to inscribe in my mind that sound hovering in the afternoon air, like so many misunderstandings. I would make a world from that sound, or from my mouth’s tracing of it, but what kind of a world would it be?

*

If we were to remake the world in the image of the wound, would we have our choice of wounds? The boy’s wound was the world’s, but was the world’s the boy’s? Barthes writes:

for us the “subject” (since Christianity) is *the one who suffers*: where there is a wound, there is a subject: *die Wunde! die Wunde!* says Parsifal, thereby becoming “himself”; and the deeper the wound, at the body’s center (at the “heart”), the more the subject becomes a subject: for the subject is *intimacy* (“The wound...is of a frightful intimacy”). Such is love’s wound: a radical chasm (at the “roots” of being), which cannot be closed...

The modern city, as Baudelaire knew, opens this chasm in us.

The city: scarred space.

But a poem is also a chasm “which cannot be closed.” The poet Robert Creeley once told the story of a woman who approached him after a reading to say, charmed as she was to meet him, she couldn’t get around the violence in his work. When he insisted