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Robert Kelly
Bard College

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FRAGMENTS OF THALES: 3

for Charlotte

The kind of woman
you carry the thought of
like a cup

in the desert
a sign
of the final rightness of the mind

of water.

18 March 1993

AN INTRODUCTION TO MY EDITION OF
THE FRAGMENTS OF THALES

Perhaps because I grew up near the sea and every summer evening walked listening to it while the sun was busy gilding the water from which it had come and sinking effortlessly into what all day long had till then seemed like solid land. Nothing is solid. Nothing is fixed. Perhaps because I liked listening better than I liked listening to people. Listening, like language, is too holy to waste on communication.

Perhaps because I smelled the sea and sometimes smelled of it and the black muck of tide flats and acres of tuberous cat tails waving glib in the at last cool breeze. Perhaps because the sea I knew was the flat sea of glacial outwash plains and frail lagoons and sandbars that do not last the winter. Perhaps because this flat sea was hardly different from the open sea the bounding main the song tells of. Perhaps because the sea was stronger than the land.

Or perhaps because I was always thirsty.

For these and many other reasons I am in a position now to make you certain assurances. Taken rightly, they will ease and please you, and make you less unforgiving of that Dæmon Time who carries so many of us and so much of ours away.

It is a mistake to suppose that all the writings of Thales have vanished. First philosopher that Prof. Aristoteles could remember, he was said to have taken Water as the primal matter or First Contingency.

It is a mistake to suppose that writings vanish. Pages vanish, and books, and blocks and steles and posters and billets-doux and scrolls roll up like dry leaves and blow away. But writing is not its evidence. Writing once written lasts.

Littera scripta manet, the Romans said, wiser than they knew. The forensically-charged ambiguity of that word *letter* —both the sign or rune and what it is used to communicate “in” writ-

ing. *The letter once written stays written forever* — even if the paper goes missing.

We are naive indeed to believe in some inextricable marriage between message and medium such that the former cannot perdure without the latter. Would it were so! perhaps. Alas, alas, nothing is lost. Nothing mind proposes can ever be lost, alas. Where is there for it to go?

But things can hide. Just as the letter that came three weeks ago Tuesday can hide from you for half an hour while you search through shirts and magazines and phone bills, so also the text (as we simplistically think to call it, as if it too had some final or fixed integrity — whereas all it has is what any textile has: drift, extension, continuity) can hide.

Wiser than us, the Tibetans several hundred years ago discovered and perfected the technology of hiding and retrieving messages, texts, teachings, songs. They can be hidden in the earth or in the rocks of earth, or they can be encrypted as rock. Hidden as water in water. Hidden in the sky. They can be dug up from the gentle patient earth or tugged out of clefts in the rock, they can be read in the clouds or they can sift down as the feathers of birds. They can be read in the fall of twigs after windstorms, in the track of insects in the sand. But mostly, mostly, they can be hidden in the mind.

Safe in the mind where all things are made and all things certainly said, safe in mind they wait the rapture or the idle flirt of wind or train of associations to catch them and recall. Language is re-calling.

And the truest texts are won from effortless compassionate listening, but of such texts, such treasures, I do not here speak, having neither the wit nor the quiet to win them.

What I can offer, however, are some fragments, treasures of their own meek sort, caught from continuous mind. They appear to be, have the seaside tang of, scripts of Thales himself, heard by me and percolated through the silt of my own preoccupations and obsessions. But, distorted as they no doubt are, here they are.

You will notice these are not translations. Mind, ten seconds previous to language, reincarnates these meanings in my sort of English, since that's all I have to offer. Mind makes do with me. As you must, too, if you would like to read the finally re-discovered fragments of the writings of Thales, the famous Greek philosopher.

You must not suppose for a second that I'm the only transmitter of Thales, or that these are the first words of his that lie before the reader. Constantly the fragments of the past are reinscribed in the attention of the living, and some of those attendants are kind enough to write down, all over again, what once got written in Greek or Sumerian or Nostratic or Atlantean or the Edenic dialects whose bitter runes Cain read on his own forehead as he bent to drink.

So you have read Thales in Taliesin (who even took his name from that acoustic parentage) the poet born from water. And you have read Posidonius of Rhodes in William Beckford's ravings. And Ovid's lost Gothic poems you have read in the preposterous dreams of Ibn Batuta. When Nietzsche's prophet sauntered in the mountains he talked with Chuang Tze, and learned his kindly insolence from the Emperor Gesar of whom more songs are sung than of King Arthur. Not that Nietzsche knew a bit about this — but he did know listening. Which is why he is still some use to us, last philosopher who may have committed the sin of *philein Sophian*, loving Sophia, loving that Wisdom which is the Speech of Mind in our Body when we're listening. [18 March 1993]

THE CHEMICAL

for Charlotte

Captured as by time
a snow thing

call it a bird
or flower that makes noise

the matter
needs no naming

just a timing
through us

to pace it through our spaces
racing

the mystery of being anything
we notice

in the hurry of the world
all of a sudden single

it is secret as what happens
happens

in the mouth of a man
not speaking

relishing the taste
of his silence

the curious freshness
that comes all over the mouth

when one has said nothing
for an hour

or has spoken
but to no one

quiet taste
a water of one's own.

18 March 1993

BEL CANTO

for Charlotte

these then these also
wait for soft nodes
that connect them

to Babylonia
where the trolley car
carries her, fated one,

into the valley of people.
This is an aria
by Rossini.

It doesn't work
in English—
the lake at Montreux

is too glary
with sun-yolk,
the Swiss don't understand

my money.
I made this dollar
for you special

here I sign it
with someone's blood:
amitiés, Voltaire

with a big sweep
in the capital vee
like vultures sailing away

finally fed.
You think I am someone
so you're frightened

whereas I am everyone:
be at peace
gentle bankers

every profit
profits me
every secret

whispers incessantly
into my personal ears.
Everything

has been said,
what's left
(listen,)

is just music.

18 March 1993

An arriver with new surmises is at my door
dressed as a squirrel, a carnivore model
fresh from the birds' suet, and he casts shadows
(as even the Greeks could see) with his curious tail—
o with this commodity I sweep your eyes asleep.

Later there are hop marks in wide snow,
his tracks to the locust tree. Imagine
a world without fear. Where seeds fell
gently from large-winged birds soaring
peacefully on air currents high above our daze—
I will never wake you, will dream you ever. So high

you can't see them. So seed, they grow before you touch.
And suddenly the world is there, 3,000 languages,
stone bridges, street lights, a squirrel in the snow.

19 March 1993

SEQUENCE FOR THE FEAST OF ST JOSEPH

So much rests on
you so little
matters what you
do. They are here.

They are yours. They
are nobody's.
Everybody's.
Who are you now,

again, the man with
horse, bridle, sack
slung from shoulder
full of stale bread,

you were born long
before wine and
water even
is strange to you,

you are mostly
about walking
beside them and
carrying him

sometimes and some
times you carry
her also, her
hand, her shadow

rests on your skin.
You'd carry them
out of the earth
to protect them

but they will stay.
You grow old in
their company.
You are like us,

dazzled all day
by her, by his
unfathomed fact.
You sleep in us.

19 March 1993
for Charlotte

FIVE OF HEARTS

Let this be pianola —let this be a shade
rolled up fast so the stick of it
jumps out of its sockets and falls on the bed
waking the beloved with a smack on the back
and she is puzzled at the effrontery of light

I don't know why this isn't enough to make a career of
a canoe to slip through white rapids on my way
to an unpronounceable island,

honey! bilberries in the woods! Your corn
has weevils in it. Your water has little floating clouds
that probably are not good for you,

I'm telling you honestly, this is music.

19 March 1993

FROM THE PERSIAN

As if it were a letter you were trying to sign but kept flapping
around in the wind on the redwood table by the empty pool

my heart is resistant to the kind of catalogue system by which
it comes to be known and shelved and numbered and owned.

But your arms being strong and shapely and like the rest of you
softly persuasive there's only a slim chance it will keep its own name
and it comes down to it my heart is just something you said.

19 March 1993

The bewildering presence of everybody else
is enough to startle but not surprise a crow
stalwart as we are, soaring opacities
in your bright sky, we know that all danger
is the same as the taste of food, the spray
of water, the glint of life below in eye or fur
that waits to hunt us. All of us. The sky is safe
sometimes when one is big and slow. Earth
is a death unfurling. From our branches
in the balconies of trees we watch and cry.

20 March 1993
first hour of Spring

IN MEMORY OF JACK CLARKE, 2

The fact of it is that no environment is safe
and never has been. Livy presided over a loss
of sacred presence. The mountains defile the sky.

If you see it so. It is up to me to do otherwise.
Tug her by the sacred mind to the sacred portal
and leave her there. She is a mother, a book,
a camel of the sort no Greek ever sacrificed.

Cliches started out by being true and gradually
lose even the semblance of meaning anything at all
let alone whatever is the case. No offering
is safe without the salt. No language lasts.
But language does. The sea does. The worry.

20 March 1993

SPRING

Like spring
I am one hour old

and know nothing
except to make
soft noises

sometimes loud

these sounds
you hear as words
at your peril

and anyhow it's snowing.

21 March 1993

EXILE'S POSTCARD

Or the sky is a cafe
closed now
because it's early morning

will we survive
till that glamorous impossible Parisian evening
opens all the windows with keys of light?

21 March 1993

My hand trembles
with my heart's wish
to make my lips speak
into the all too empty air.
What sort of a machine am I
so composed? So discomposed?

21 March 1993

The corporeal the wind
blowing through the trees

Things stir in absence

A dish is ready for some leaves

Sometimes to look a thing a single color is.

22 March 1993

OUT IN THE WORLD

for Charlotte

The peculiar memory of knowing my mind.
What will I do with this bowling ball in my hand?
There is a cycle to measure stars with
young bulls jump over fences.

It is Ireland
maybe. Caught in a groove of becomingness
a maiden ages towards marriage. Sour fog.
Sound of thunder, no thunder. People
never get old their bodies do. Who
is talking in me now? This merry eon
full of other people's wars. Salt fog,
I mean, forgetting the old heroes of the cycle
who could fight or swive or sleep in surf and marrow—
all the old stories. The stench of the hairdresser's
pervades the food court in the mall. Remembering
is just too easy. Buy a fish from a Vietnamese
and let it go free in the river. Over the midden
at the edge of the parking lot a million gulls are wheeling.

22 March 1993