

Caleb Puckett: Poems

Quick Response Code

One by one, block by block, the squares have won: image is prompt.

Barcode

Say blackened tree trunks stand above a glut of vipers. Say Medusa's head writhes below columns of white light. Say a blade makes a mirror and a mirror makes a flame. Say a bright red light means you've bought our object here. Say our object and your subject acquire the same face. What do you make of graven images, then? An age unweighted with gold? The roots of abstract currency? Unique identification? The narrative implications of this barcode?

Headlines

“Old credit union
converted into church

Why low interest rates
not necessarily a blessing

Hell, not Heaven,
helps keep society safe”

Lines cross your head,
score a memorial.

Chicago Pre-Face

Water stains warp the edges of the page. Bowing to universal usage—what must be called “style” (Author-Date?)—we still mind our ways yet manage to wax the vessel as poetic as fictional pirates might. Pervasive, it reflects—casts and spells—a massive “how-to book” with hooks and nets. For example: how to mark type with advice. Reorganized, greatly expanded—the wealth of a nation enmeshed in no-nos. Downright electable posture despite suggestions of disrepute in certain circles. Step-by-step: mechanics, terminology, methodology, maybe even the glue for binding. Terms. Items. Rights. Lights. Law. The fundamentals of tithing. A conversion chart. Mother of all Babel. Boxed language kits. A foil of static folios for a sail of energized sheaves. This reflects the arts of our predecessors, which is to say guileless proprietors. Windy cityscape full of thieves. Hollow from the first to last holler. God’s least of these.

Peace in the passing understanding. Day’s correctness built upon foundations of trees blown into tomes in a virtual Bermuda Triangle of brownstones. Predecessors of word-processing slaves at the home office of Academic Homilies and Presidential Skulls. Coeval style fundamentals—meaning deus ex machina set in stony patronymics. Guidance becomes a slender voice in these wee-wee hours on deck. Doubt. Demand. Outside specimens with obscenely bloated fish eyes. Either perfectly clear handwriting or leaf-entwined rules and regulations in nature of case. Rock-ribbed obstacles avoided with italicized swimmer’s legs. The peculiar nature of throwing deviation—such deviation—upon the merits of an eviscerating wave of norms. Deference expressed to the weather-eaten maw of our masthead. The meeting of deadlines—the general charge—save good sense of supposition. This revision begun at a privateer’s gunpoint, some might say in the stead of a truly cool head.

Peel back the map for the exegesis of X. Many people mention suggestions that are reflected in the visages of the final members of the party who fool about with shovels in hands. This press—correspondents of this questionnaire do hereby attest—forces confessions about witches from innocents once the gold rolls in. The text set system under the direction of editors actually debts writers and distracts readers. Grateful for their expert, careful suggestions, these dull supplicants nonetheless pledge allegiance to a moderately jolly rogering of the official flag once the club gives them the thumb. When wet and exposed to wind, one supposes it will do for a compass.

Consider this note from the book’s previous owner: *I weep for who I was once studying the then unknown magic of word artists beyond my modest world. Once an intricate series of roars from trusted advisors broke all that was fair but seemed the sum civilized for me, I stumbled through this damnable manual of credit to separate the mere citation of language from the shared sentiment of disparate ages grown into a single point of fine expression. I drowned for the effort.* This is to say a shared symbol swamped with quotation layers brought him/her low. S/he adds, *Part I is a superfluous chapter on what?* Our answer: Bookmaking, or more accurately The Art of Attribution in Material Culture. Call it a pre-face for rules regarding the use of ideas that

somehow neglects to credit the intellectual history of its very form. Call it an object of hypocrisy, dear soul.

Arc for a Courtroom Drama

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before

word
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ward

a
while
after

Cozy Mystery

Christie comes. She comes with a mysterious smile. She comes at me with a smile and a carving knife. She comes at me with a knife. She comes at me with a knife in her trembling fist. She comes at me with her fist and cries. She closes in on me with a smile, raising a knife to my face. She closes in on me with a cry, leaving me few options. I eye the blade and open my mouth for a taste. I cry, "Baby, you're a bloody culinary genius!" The flavor she has produced from such commonplace ingredients is quite striking to say the least. Our guests will be completely distracted by the fine cuts on the platter. None of them will ever question our cozy little party's true purpose. Nothing, I assure her, will ever seem to be the matter. As I turn to stir the broth, I feel a sudden prick in the ribs. "Cozy?" she asks with a new smile no less mysterious than the last.

Esperanza's Earthly Possession

She imagines blackbirds as rocks drop from the stratosphere. She takes shelter in a blind alley beside the library. The tunnel vision comes. She struggles to back out. Baroque graffiti snakes through cracks in the facades, promising both death and ecstasy to any who dare enter this territory. She rotates her scarred wrists and pushes beyond the agonized pulse of the moment and its savage pretension of permanence, knowing the past breathes somewhere still among these buildings. Forced to guess, she hazards she's cursed for the long term, even as she halts in temporary pardon beside the soot-covered ruins of The Western to puzzle out the seeming promise of a plastic toy box left untouched atop an iron pedestal. How did it survive?

She wanders on while guarding a star map under a coat gone to molt well over a millennium ago. What a rare reward the Elysium Theater offers at this late date: a rag-thin cowboy curling back into the instrument of his revenge beside an emergency exit. She keeps this secret while knowing she's also being kept. She recalls the sly black eyes of the innermost member of her nested doll set. She understands the difference between an invitation and this beckoning.

The port hovers ahead. She recalls the humming machines and the blackened hands. Pulleys and crates. She recalls how halved days turned to half-lives. The suck and sear. The first light. The road has become deeply rutted by fulvous runoff from the factory's collapsed reservoirs. She has almost become numb with the weight of imagining reconstruction. Who will begin again? With what strength of purpose after such proofs? She crosses the parade grounds in her black velvet heels. She circles the field of daisies in her black velvet skirt. She crosses the levee in her black velvet blouse. She circles the lake in her black velvet cap. She crosses herself now entirely bare. She circles her eyes with ash. The object gone errant. Chivalry shirked. Attack. Denial dismissed the vow and will dismiss the tear at last. Her purpose pushes her onward.

The sun dissolves, blanked out by massive blue curtains, leaving little more than a metallic reflection to replace the empty space where certainty once surged. Push on. Project or recall. A glass of sour milk, a plate of hard biscuits and a pair of ripped nylons gather dust in the silent room. Although darkness coaxes the somatic urge, she breaks the spell of slackening, groping for the door outside of the mezzanine where the echoes of cabalistic footfall suggest those ritual chambers where newspaper shrouds peel away to reveal the entrails of prophecy and the comet-bound figure of salvation. Circuits of stairwells and hallways. All of the fuses blown but one. How useless now. What name? What number? The hunter must be there. He reclines in a red chair. As ever, his stern face betrays an infinitesimal hint of benevolence. The garden below the window withered a millennium ago, but the hunter still dreams of genesis, populating the physical world with only two citizens: Esperanza and her unshakeable shadow, Hope. She imagines him in his isolated oblivion. She twists the door handle, imagining the shock of her return.

A Titan of Industry

Mr. Kronister's lips are flecked with savory bits of flesh. The esophagus he devours looks quite fresh and tender. Its vibrant purple hue is visually arresting and alluring, even from this distance. One can only admire his choice in victuals and the fervent but deliberate manner in which he masticates them. He's a true master when it comes to making a management metaphor out of meals. And he's so unapologetic about the whole affair! I suppose common table manners become laughable once a person has reached Mr. Kronister's level. One impresses through an unassailable display of will alone. As is his wont, he swallows the final morsel of this newest child with relish and washes it down with a tepid shot of salt water. He claims the combination can lead to immortality for those few with the right constitution. His beard whitens and lengthens as the liquid travels down his throat, but I can see no wisdom issuing from it—despite all that I have heard regarding his timeless insight. If anything, all I see are the remnants of dry leaves and twigs twisted through his follicles—a matted mélange of the forest floor made semi-civil in this conference room setting. Mr. Kronister wipes his mouth with a starched napkin, lubricates his lips and asks for a dimming of the lights. A twig drops to the podium as the light switch snaps off. The hour seems incredibly late or early now, depending on one's proximity to the glowing exit sign. My neck begins itch as he introduces the topic of his talk: "The Myths of Innovation."

Mr. Kronister has practiced his talking points well, knowing where every productive contradiction must fall. Although no one in the group has spoken, he appears to listen for the right clause in our mental dialogue—perhaps a dependent one—to interject his dictates. My mind swarms with the majesty of his near-psychoic ability to anticipate my every question and direct me towards the cryptic yet inevitable conclusion. Mr. Kronister's dictates, of course, always sound invitingly philosophical. His dominance takes on the character of a vigorous, mutual nod, despite the fact that we are afraid to move at all. This concept is called "collaboration," according to his notes. He rakes his fingers through his beard and takes a moment to compose his thoughts before surveying the room. He calls for volunteers, but refers to them as "partners." Did he smile? It's impossible to say for certain. From this distance, I have difficulty making out his expressions, let alone understanding his real desires, discerning his real genius. This must be another one of his strategic vagaries—this opaque beard rushing the room in all directions, wadding up the doorframe and corners, forming an inescapable center—a corral for semi-domesticated beasts. I suspect, in the end, even Mr. Kronister has a superior watching him somewhere. Is our leader hiding his true convictions behind these "standards" he outlines? We all suspect it, but we dare not explore the matter, lest the matter become fleshy—a vibrant purple morsel for his grinding teeth. As the overhead projector heats the room to an uncomfortable degree, Mr. Kronister's lips become a monstrous shadow on the wall. My eyes mist over and my cheeks grow damp. Something pricks my shoulder.

