

writing in the dark



David Antin

thanks it really is a pleasure being here surrounded by friends
 people i know or think i know if i don't know them i think
 i do which is almost as nice because I wanted to talk about a
 number of familiar things i had a number of things in mind and was
 prepared to start thinking about them when i was interrupted
 by something i found it was a simple thing i was in lindas
 office waiting she wasnt there i got here too early i try not to
 get to any place too early but i got here too early and i was sitting
 there waiting to go on and leafing through some catalogues when
 i noticed something that surprised me a brand new one and a
 half inch wood screw lying on the floor and i was puzzled there
 didn't seem to be any place where this would be affixing anything
 to the wall or to some wood panel it didn't seem to make sense
 there it was lying on the floor like that and i asked myself should i
 pick it up or should i leave it if this turns out to be a part of some
 important fixture that should have been held in place and neglected to
 be held in place and something collapses perhaps
 injuring someone i would be responsible on the other hand if i
 dont pick it up its unlikely to come to anyones attention
 and the unfixed thing might collapse so there was an ethical problem

here i'm trying to decide whether it was better for me to take the screw or leave it there ultimately i decided to take the screw and do the best i could with it i'll give it to linda at the end of my talk maybe she can find its home because a homeless screw can be an invitation to disaster

but it was only one of the two things that happened to me while i was waiting

i received a call from the west coast elly was on the phone in a very trembling voice she had just been to see a dentist or a dental surgeon and she was on the way to see him a second time today because he said she had a dark spot on her tongue and he thought it might need a biopsy and this would not have been significant except that she had had melanoma a number of years ago and she was frightened that it was a serious recurrence in spite of the melanoma experts' assurance that it was almost certainly nothing so we were talking on the phone and i was trying to calm her down and i didn't succeed even as i reminded her of what the great local melanoma expert had said it had been seven years since her melanoma and there were no signs of recurrence so according to a survey of all documented cases of melanoma the odds against recurrence 7 years after treatment are 98 to 2 against the demon those are pretty poor odds for the nasty thing

that should have been reassuring

but i remembered another telephone call from eleanor a few months earlier she was going to visit her gynecologist for a routine mammogram and id been nursing a nasty sore throat so i was lying in bed when the phone rang and eleanor said im all right i said you're calling to tell me youre all right whats up she said the car is totaled i said but you're all right so where are you shed been on the way to downtown san diego and she was just getting onto the freeway but this particular entrance is complicated by the fact that there are two freeways that run north south through the county the old I-5 that runs directly north south and the 70s constructed 805 which starts at carmel valley and gradually diverges to the southeast but at this point just south of carmel valley the 805 whose point of origin is just west of the I-5 crosses over it and swings east so that any car entering there and desiring to get on I-5 has to cross over the four lanes of the 805 and this is difficult to manage during the rush hour elly was

negotiating this crossing skillfully weaving her way across lanes one two three and four and was cautiously entering lane one of the I-5 when she glimpsed a shadow in her rearview mirror and then felt an enormous shock at the back of our jeep cherokee that sent it spinning back across the four lanes of the 805 where it crashed into its barrier wall and elly had sat there helplessly thinking of nothing she could do and this nothing turned out to be the best thing she could do because if she had hit the brakes the car would certainly have skidded and probably turned over while this way as she experienced it the car simply floated across four lanes of traffic bounced off the barrier wall and collapsed and she walked away without a scratch

but the back of the car the car was a foot and a half shorter than it had been before the accident according to the appraiser and ellie didn't get a scratch but not getting a scratch doesn't mean you dont have a mental scratch she walked away from this accident that could have killed her in this terrible way it should well have i dont want to say should have killed her but by all rights she was extremely lucky in her unluckyness she was in terrible danger of dying as a result of it and i wouldn't have bet much on her ability to survive if someone had told me about this event but there she was feisty eleanor complaining about this that or the other but nervous really nervous and in slight shock and she escaped now escaping death doesn't mean you're through with it

a short while ago I received a death sentence which shouldnt have surprised me because everyone is born under a death sentence thats as inevitable as its execution is indeterminate but i wasnt thinking of that when a doctor told me david you have parkinsons which is a neuro degenerative disease for which there is no cure but just naming it makes it seem more definite and irrevocable look i said i have no tremor my only locomotor problems are limited to some uncertainty of balance and some stiffness on my left side the doctor was not a doctor but a physical therapist so he amiably suggested it might be a parkinson syndrome that i should check with a neurologist thats when i discovered that neurology is not so much a clinical practice as a spectator sport i went to see a neurologist recommended by a doctor friend he looked at my medical records and said "so

you have parkinsons” i said i thought that remained to be determined
 look i work out with a physical trainer twice a week i do
 twenty eight pull ups in two sets i run thirty minutes twice a week
 im more fit than an average marine i have no tremor but i
 have a little stiffness on my left side and a bit of a balance problem
 what convinces you i have parkinsons he said why dont you try
 these pills and he gave me these little yellow pills to take three
 times a day and if i felt ok before i took his little yellow pills i
 felt better after and that’s how i was introduced to my demon by
 means of a magical ingestion followed by an incantation that
 begins dopamine mitochondria and goes on substantia nigra
 pars compacta basal ganglia hypothalamus hippocampus
 amygdala that reflects strange alliances of a great number of
 demons whose precise interaction is not very clear or the shape
 shifting capabilities of a single demon whose results may not be so
 different from aging look im seventy seven years old and im
 not through with aging or the shock that comes from the realization
 of it i don’t know what aging means and i’m resisting it all the
 time i refuse to get older or maybe i refuse to recognize
 getting older and i don’t give a damn i refuse to accept parkinsons
 and i refuse to accept aging and i can do it all i like but if it
 comes on it comes on and sometimes things come on in spite of
 your best efforts things that are contingent and beyond anybody’s
 control

now we’re all confronted with the demon at some time the
 demon of disease seems to confront all of us at some time or
 another but growing old is not exactly like having a disease its
 a little bit more like a car running out of gas so the first thing i
 wanted to do was to try to distinguish between having parkinsons and
 getting older because both of them undermine you in certain ways
 that are curious for example parkinsons is thought to consist of
 the progressive and irreversible loss of dopamine resulting from the
 dying of the dopamine producing neurons in the brain this dying
 off of the dopamine producing cells seems to be associated with
 damage to the mitochondria the mitochondria are what little
 cellular organelles inside cells and responsible among other things
 for the energy production within the cell you hear theyre not doing
 well theyre not doing well i never thought about them at all
 they may not be doing well but we have things that will help

them do better how would you help them do better we're not sure but perhaps they will do better or perhaps they won't

i said so what's wrong with them now well the mitochondria seem to be be damaged and this damage is associated with the dying off of dopamine generating neurons that act as transmitters of the information required to govern locomotion balance and certain cognitive functions of the rest of the brain making the system fluid and workable now the exact relationships between these neural components is very poorly understood by neuro scientists no one knows the exact relationship between the mitochondria and the dopamine producing neurons

so i said look ive been feeling a little stiff but you know ive also had double vision occasionally but thats seen to be a side effect of the medication im taking not the illness that they give you but for whatever reason either parkinsons or its treatment medications include the possibility of double vision and i have double vision but not often it comes and goes and i must say i was very pleased to have double vision earlier today watching lynne tillman work because it indicated the brilliant equivocality of the work there was the lynne tillman who was fascinated by the work of a painter who diligently painted one painting over and over again and his commitment to painting perfect representations of the same image and there was the lynne tillman who was fascinated by her fascination so there were two lynne tillmans there and i was delighted to find that there was a creative use for my double vision i was sitting behind george quasha who was a little taller than i am in his seat and i could go back to a single vision of lynne tillman as long as i moved part of her behind george so i moved part of her behind george and i said this is singularly lynne tillman but then i could watch lynne tillman dialogue with herself and see both of them together if i moved a little further to the right and i said that's ok i said it's ok there's a value to my double vision or maybe there isnt i also have a certain tendency to occasionally forget individual words or the names for certain things not very often but the one word that didnt occur to me very well for a while was mitochondria its a good word to remember i kept saying what is it that i cant remember i cant remember mitochondria what do you mean you cant remember how do you know you cant remember mitochondria because when im looking for it it

doesnt come to my mind or my mouth yeah but what about other words well i said i once lost the word bricolage where did you lose it i lost it in the middle of a talk on levi strauss i was saying that levi strauss invented this useful term which i feel a great affinity for its called what is it called in english i would call it handymanism but there is no such english word yet if there was an english word for it it would be handymanism or jack of all tradesism actually levi strauss whos a bit of a pedant when it comes to defining his novel term bricolage insists that the bricoleur is not a handyman and then spends some time describing the set of actions performed by his bricoleur which turn out to be exactly the same actions produced by the american handyman and levi strauss is a utopian technophile in the distinction he makes between the so called french handyman and the french engineer who he sees as some mad graduate of the ecole polytechnique the engineer is the one whos supposed to resort to a theoretical basis for any of his interventions requiring every act of construction or reconstruction to invent its own ideal tool while the handyman can only resort to the limited set of tools that happen to be in his toolbox the range of which is determined by the history of his experience as a repair man speaking for myself i never knew any engineer who ever satisfied the requirements for levi strauss imaginary engineer while his description of a bricoleur bricoleur is the word i forgot is somebody who takes the things that he has to hand and adapts them to the purposes at hand and that sounds an awful lot like the engineers i knew it sounded a lot more like the engineers i knew and went to school with it was an engineering high school and everybody was involved in pretty much the same way but the term bricoleur is useful beyond that as it describes a grand improviser who is willing to take whatever comes to hand in all its imperfections you take whatever comes up and you do what you can with it as a poet it seems to me we're all bricoleurs or at least those of us who are more like blaise cendrars than stefan mallarme or more like dekooning than mondrian

a couple of years ago we were rebuilding our house now rebuilding is not starting from scratch there are parts of the house that we are not touching that were built nearly fifty years ago parts that were built thirty years ago and parts built only

ten years ago by handymen so the brilliant design of our architect had to address the eccentricities of our existing house so the studio we built for elly consisted of a bridge over a ravine so we needed to use an adequately artistic contractor and we found one here in san diego but he had to have access to sufficiently esthetic subcontractors and he managed to find some but he couldn't find a satisfactorily ingenious plumber but ellys sister marcia had a handyman who could repair anything and happened to be a licensed plumber who easily adapted to our houses eccentricities it had begun as a putting together of two military prefabs around a great stone fireplace that had been modified as necessary by its original owner when i say as necessary i mean that building codes were followed when it was convenient and ignored when it was too much trouble so it was a building with lots of surprises so it was just suited for harold to work on and we were quite happy living with the final results and we managed to adapt ourselves to some small details for example the glass doors of the guest room shower were hard to close perfectly leaving an occasional flood on the bathroom floor and there was some protuberance on the little metal grate over the shower drain of the master bathroom that hurt your foot if you forgot it was there and stepped on it but this was so easily avoided we never took the trouble to deal with it until one day we were replacing the showers spray head and i took the opportunity to examine the drain grate and i observed it was held in place by a small round headed screw and that was the problem it shouldve been held in place by a flat headed screw which wouldnt have projected above the surface of the grate which harold would have known but most likely happened not to have in his tool box that afternoon the down side of bricolage its difficulty with screws perhaps but you know we were in a slight accident the other day i wanted to go to a mall to buy myself a new pair of elegantly white running shoes so that i could appear sparkling at this event and i was heading toward the shopping mall that had the very best new balance shoes in extra wide which are very uncommon and as a good consumer i knew where to go to get them so im driving to the freeway and i make a right turn and another car was making a right turn from the other turn lane and the two of us were too close to each other and i managed to get away from him significantly

except that my car and his car scratched each other now when two cars scratch each other in a very uninteresting way it turns out to be more of a pain in the ass than you might think we who come from california car culture know that its going to deal with insurance companies and appraisers and all you did was scratch another car nobody was hurt nothing happened and yet there will be this endless train of interruptions of events fortunately i had just given my book of essays to chicago it had followed the final nagging lunch that i had with charles bernstein on the occasion of eleanors show in new york back in 2008 it was a modern take on the contingencies engaging ancient greek poetic heroes from the point of view of its heroine and was consequently called helens odyssey anyway charles and i arranged to meet at le pain quotidien a pleasant lunch place across the street from ellys gallery and most of the lunch was spent with charles assuring me that my book of essays was very important and needed to be published i don't know if it was needed but i probably would not have sat down immediately on returning from new york to san diego without your pushing me and it took the next year for me to be able to get all the trivial mistakes and errors out of texts that were published some time between 1966 and 2000 because the book contains twenty-one essays ranging from a 1966 essay on andy warhol to much more recently published works on the rothko chapel on wittgensteins tractatus and on john cage and it meant taking all the cheesy little errors out of them which required reading everything in a very nitpicking kind of way that was driving me crazy but actually charles was the inspiration for me to finish the damn book and it is finished although i expect the readers to tell me that im going to need a paragraph or two to explain the backgrounds of individual essays i realize that i can tell shaggy dog stories for any of them but do i really want to so i have to hear what they say these imaginary figures of authority that are like spiritual deities that will be hovering over the book until july first making a report from the kingdom of publisherland as to what would help these works find their way through the culture very little would help books of this type find their way through culture we sell very few books we generally dont participate in all of the cultures sacred rituals or respect its values and we have a whole set of counter positions on almost everything and feel perhaps

not content with that but satisfied that we are doing what we want to do which stands like a screw in the shoe of anybody holding a place in the dominant culture or perhaps an imaginary pebble in the shoe of the publishing industry which we hope they step on often enough to make them hesitate in their judgments

but i still have to untangle the snarl of events triggered by my trivial car accident as soon as i get back when what i really want to do is to start sitting down at my computer and writing up certain new things that i have to print and publish so here i am out of san diego trying to find my way through this to find where i am where am i am i here or am i there am i somewhere from which in the orderliness of language i can report on my difficulties with language and my difficulties with experience my proprioceptive derangement that causes me to always see cars on my right as much closer than they really are or my double vision all of this i can report on but i can't report on the kind of odd mixture of pleasure and anxiety pleasure at discovering the problematics of my experience and anxiety produced by trying to figure out how to deal with it how do i know anything that's bothering me is not a matter of aging at this point im seventy-seven years old i was seventy-seven on february first and i don't feel any older than i felt when i was fifty-two and i may not be as i say i may not be i want to ask what is chronological age at some point the system runs out for everybody but i dont feel it running out nor do i sit behind seventy-seven years of accumulated wisdom i stand somewhere in the middle of what im doing and i figure im in the middle of my career as a writer or an artist not really at the end and of course i can't be at the beginning

although i could start a brand new work the way elly started a set of brand new works about eight years ago that don't look anything like her earlier work elly's the eleanor antin the conceptual artist that many of you know and she undertook to construct photographs of imaginary scenes from the classical repertoire in a style evoking the salon paintings of mid 19th century artists like almatadema or puvis de chavannes but engaging with homers great poem from the point of view of its greatest heroine so the show is appropriately called helens odyssey but since helens participation in homers narrative is minimal elly ignores the story and produces a work thats a collection of scenes that might have affected her

and then exhibits them as grand scale photographs that look like paintings but aren't you have to remember that she put this show together with great effort drawing on all the traditions of historical image making to create still photographs that imitated victorian paintings of classical antiquity for reasons that were mysterious to everybody but eleanor but then nobody cares about reasons when they look at an art work or shouldn't what do i care what the reasons are i mean i don't know what motivated marcel duchamp to put together his bizarre last work etant donnees what does it mean for a conceptual artist like duchamp to painstakingly create this medieval stage set with its massive wooden door in a fragment of brick wall that bars access to a flimsiiy constructed scene of a landscape with a motor driven waterfall in which a naked lady seen only from the neck down lying in a bed of twigs holds up a gas lamp in her left hand to illuminate her open pussy all of which is visible only through two peepholes drilled in the wooden door what does it mean to ask of such a work what does it mean you make a work that is s combination of things these things resonate by themselves and with each other you make a work again and again and again and its a different work and its done out of concentrated continuing increasing intensity and that's one way of working another way is to as it were drift slowly over the surface of your interests and let yourself cruise lightly over them dropping in on a concern and dropping out of a concern as it resonates for us so should i go to visit my neurologist again every time they describe parkinsons i know i don't look like a parkinson victim you know i can close my eyes and stand on one foot so what do we have you've had the pills you're feeling better feeling better you must be sick usually you come to a doctor with a complaint and the doctor hands you a disease in return you know your gift to him his gift to you but i didn't even come with a complaint it started out i that i was lifting weights and i had a strained muscle a strained bicep and maybe a bit of tendonitis and i went to physical therapy and the therapist said one of your nerves is not responding i can't get it to trigger when i stimulate it i said does it matter and he said well you never know go see a neurologist i went to see a neurologist and the neurologist said well you may have parkinsons syndrome i said i may have parkinsons syndrome because i

have one nerve that isn't firing right wouldn't it be doing
 a more thorough job it seems like an insufficient achievement for
 something like parkinsons it seems like overkill for the
 consequences to be made of it he said well you know what you
 can do he said you can take this medication and this was a couple
 of years ago and i said why should i take the medication
 he said because you're a little stiff i said ive been a little stiff at
 various times in my life and i can still be a little bit stiff and i don't
 see the point he said well then do whatever you want to do
 he said exercise is good for it i said i exercise plenty he said
 well then keep doing it so he was very nice about all this and
 then another doctor friend recommended another great specialist
 who took one look at me and said parkinsons i said how do you
 know this one was too important to answer how he knew he
 just looked at me and said we can tell i said there are lots of
 people who feel that way about their advice but im not sure
 about yours and so we parted on not too amiable terms and
 then it was suggested that i see a third neurologist im doing all
 this out of a kind of amiability because im not sure that i need any
 help and this one came up with three medications no
 actually there was somebody before that who came up with sinemet
 and then another one came up with two new medications which are
 supposed to help the sinemet i feel so helped i mean i feel
 like im literally in place ready to go as an astronaut at this point
 im in such perfect health go look at the moon up close i
 don't have the time to take a trip to mars my age would prevent
 me from going to mars because it takes too long and i have too
 much to do and i couldn't write on the trip or at least i doubt if
 i could write on the trip so im sort of in the middle of this kind
 of game with how much is age the contingency of age you
 know you're eventually going to die but it could be in ten years
 probably not fifteen or twenty but you could be killed by an
 accident in five a couple of months ago my 84 year old biologist
 friend stanley mills was diagnosed with a brain cancer that had
 already metastasized and was so far advanced that his doctors told
 him he had just three months to live on the way home from
 his diagnosis his oldsmobile cutless was hit at an intersection by
 a mitsubishi eclipse that ran the light and he was killed or at
 least thats what carol his exwife told me the police report had it

a little differently in that account stanley ran the light was hit by the eclipse and killed with a choice between the two i see stanley driving home in a rage with his doctors with their disease and their timing driving faster and faster through the streets coming to the intersection at washington and san diego avenue and seeing his light turning from yellow to red and the eclipse just entering the intersection he guns the engine into the crash with a wicked grin that tells me hed stolen the date of his execution it was not an accident it was a seizure of control

my friends charles and susan had an accident that recently occurred i refer to it as an accident because i see it as an accident their daughter emma an extremely beautiful and intelligent young woman whom i knew only fragmentarily as a promising young artist had taken an internship at the peggy guggenheim collection in a beautiful and frigid venetian december that was as beautiful and frigid as only a venetian winter could be and was attending a seminar from which she walked out early to go to the bathroom and hung herself i see this as an accident and probably an improvisation a succumbing to a momentary self destructive impulse this beautiful and brilliant kid who had so much promise attested to by the drawers of chic and ironic photographs she left behind that might have weighed into the contest between the impulse to life and art or the devastating impulse to destruction and death if it had lasted a few moments longer still as always this act has been attended by the usual attempted explanations romantic professional and trivial a difficult lover frustrations with her work the bad venetian weather all inadequate as explanations tend to be and i believe at this point we have to imagine her as a flare of intelligence and beauty rising up over the landscape a richly colored flare climbing to a peak from which we expected a final flowering but its light suddenly went out and i wanted to write to my two friends but at the time they were in a state of near shock into which i hesitated to intervene but i keep thinking of her as an emblem of brilliance a kind of illuminating being who didnt get the chance to illuminate as much as she could but then i reflected on how difficult and inconvenient to choose hanging as your way out without significant rehearsals which suggests she must have been seduced by the demon but for charles and susan there is no explanation only the

contingent fact and that is an accident eleanor could have been
wiped out in a car crash of no significance and we look at ourselves
and say where are we today that isn't an accident how much of
life is not contingent as poets artists we have to deal with
contemporary contingencies they come up we deal with them
badly or well but these contingencies are there and we cant
control them but we can resist and im talking about charles and
susan having to resist i resist being old i resist having parkinson's
disease and i will resist until they kill me this is probably the best
we can do is to fight a retreating battle in this sense art
is a kind of war against annihilation we tend to struggle
against annihilation we struggle for life we struggle for life
whether were painting a simple glass or whether we're trying to map
something unmappable whether we're presenting something
different and totally beyond the range of our capabilities i usually
feel that im working beyond the range of my capabilities so that
im not surprised i feel that we do the best we can which as
i've said before is all an artist can do is to do the best we can

san diego august 23, 2013