

*THE BOX
IS THE
WOMB OR*

THE BOX IS THE WOMB OR
by Elisabeth Workman

Dusie Kollektiv 9

for Marthe Reed, everywhere everywhere

THE BOX IS THE WOMB OR

THE TURIN HORSE

I was vexed at an angsty point in my life the first time I watched Bela Tarr's *The Turin Horse*. If you've seen the film maybe you had the experience too of a kind of restless body syndrome while watching its slow black-and-white expression (a cruelty in itself) of the long tail of cruelty. How it comes back. How you have to eat it. How it's yours. How ourosboros. For weeks after the experience, and even now in just thinking about it, the repetitive rhythm of the windstorm that courses throughout the entire film comes to mind and by mind I mean my entire my body.

AN AURAL GHOST

If it were a musical score the last bars of the wind's refrain would be tortured whole notes, a moan plugged into a wah pedal. If you were to scan the wind as poetry it would read: unstress STRESS | STRESS STRESS |STRESS STRESS | over and

into a rhythmic droning awkwardly gaited inescapable. It boars through me and I am a hag stone. Tarr's last film imagines, he suggested, *how the world will be over, the horse will be over, life will be over*. In its aftermath—another lashing.

DEATH'S THRONG

The film begins in voiceover with the story of Nietzsche's legendary encounter with a horse being ruthlessly beaten by its driver on a street in Turin. (*If it's Turin, straight streets that never end when you look out over the railings of the balconies, a double row of trees fading into a beyond of white skies.*) Purportedly Nietzsche was so distraught by the cruel spectacle he inserted himself in it, threw his arms around the horse, wept there, and then collapsed. That point in Nietzsche's life from which he never really returned or wrote again—*Mutter, ich bin dumm*—marks the beginning of this film which imagines what happened to the horse.

I think of that wind and I think of debt. A perpetual white noise, an agitational menace, howling into the eventual dark where

A MARE MEANS STARVE STARVE

Cut to a doom/*dumm*-pastoral, where a windstorm is rising. A dark horse, blinders on, with visible effort pulls a cart and grizzled driver along a dirt road through billowing dust and the orchestral anxiety of swirling minor strings to a farm far out in the country. The horse is stabled, the man/the patriarch retreats to his house, where a young woman, his daughter, tends to their life in silence. Where is the writer in this scenario? In the house? With the horse? On the throne?

One of the few family vacations that wasn't a trip to the Jersey shore my family took when I was a kid was to Colonial Williamsburg. I remember the soft muzzles of the work horses we pet over the historically accurate fencing, the pineapples stenciled above thresholds, the name Rockefeller and its hyperboles. On the tour we must have taken of a debtor's prison—I remember the cell with the “throne” in its middle—a raised toilet with steps leading up to it, presented, I seem to recall, with a kind of smirk—center stage, defecation theater. The throne was a disproportionately considered, terrifying feature to an otherwise barren room. Was anyone ever released from debtor's prison? Into the so-called free (for the male landowners of particular origins) world again? I imagined living in that cell trying to negotiate its dead end.

THIEVING TIME

When I cannot write I panic. I care for. I preen. I loaf. I fail. I pet. I pitch my body into the fray. I receive. I fret. I fuck around (not enough). I protest. Laugh with. Eat with. Drink with. Wonder with. Gossip with. Imagine with. Get lost with. Become with. Cannot write can mean the maelstrom of the life I have found myself in—its loves and to-do's and hunger and chores and indignities—keeps me from the page as much as it can mean I—in the havoc of my skull, its despots of impulse and self-loathing and nordic malaise in their competing coups--can't quite arrive. When I do write I co-exist with the thought that I am stealing time, that there are myriad forces in the world that insist on obsequious purchase and I am violating the contract. I stray. And wander to the edge, terrified. In the struggle to arrive I am slow to discover I am already there. It is never a victorious rebellion as much as a revelation of its counterpoint in which I am complicit. Going there--to that opening up of uncertainty, that uncontrollable clearing—keeps me going.

Over the course of working on this piece in which I'm thinking about debt and poetry I:

- saw my inbox reach 13,376 unread emails
- read an essay that asked “do you want to be a writer or a responder to emails?”
- failed to call my mother
- forgot to make a payment on a bill (2x)
- forgot to respond to a text (6x)
- regretted something I posted on Facebook (5 x)
- cried at my desk at work (2x)
- had a dream in which a poet wearing a baseball cap with an eyeball on it was hunting me down for what he was “owed”
- saw my checking account bottom out (1x)
- got paid (2x)

IS THIS REAL REAL REAL

In this age of complicity, in which defecation theater is our unacknowledged reality show (*what we are told is a new post-truth era in which William Burroughs's man who taught his asshole to talk has taken office*), does it get good ratings? Self-questionnaire: To what extent are you a prisoner? To what extent are you a warden? Light issuing through the bars? To what extent are you starving? I remember the feeling of dread that would open up in me whenever I heard my parents worry about money. We were a bartender and a school teacher and two daughters living in a cul de sac beyond our means. People can't revolt when they have deep debt, or so goes the logic of capitalism and its attendant ~isms—i.e. The Cruel State.

O CYCLOPS

O remote father. O sick. O reinforcing proprietary pyramid. Cyclopticon. Is human history a tautology? Myopticon repressing these deeds that have been written over. *Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars require time; deeds, though done still require time to be seen and heard.* These power lines. These media of reaction reaction reaction...*perhaps the first thing we need to do is pull our American heads out of the exceptionalist ass of America.* Who's there. Empire. So dad. So dead. Who's there. Genocide. Who's there. Unceded land. The voices of generations—CENTURIES—of trauma. The vibrational resonance and vitality of all that requires acknowledgement and grief and reverence untold in the gilded narratives. O monolith of suffering. Apocalypse after apocalypse. Whose. Which. Western Civ is a serial apocalypse.

O PENDULOUS

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

O ROWDY

Cut to Roddy Piper discovering a box of magic sunglasses—the revelation that the rich are not-humans and capitalism a brainwashing system of oppression and control. A billboard of a white, heteronormative couple sunbathing on a beach when viewed through glasses reads MARRY & REPRODUCE. Dollar bills with their cyclops pyramid proclaim OBEY. The pro-wrestler wrestles with the illusive power of capitalism. As I once learned sign/signified (and the unintentional comedy of the macho heroic narrative) as a student, I show my comp students this film. I'm sorry, I say, and you're welcome.

Over the course of writing this I:

- went on a payday trip to the grocery store which was underwritten by cheerful delusional decision making (x1) and the subsequent thought how do we already need more food? (x5)
- gathered the receipts I remembered to save from “lunch meetings” and “dessert meetings” because if you are a writer everything is relevant (?) to tally for taxes (the year is 2017)
- met with someone to help me prepare my taxes but because I was late and she was clearly annoyed and the baby was fussing I forgot to share that tally of meeting expenses with her and when I did remember I just thought fuck it
- fantasized in a daymare about the existence of the Turin Canyon Day Spa, whose menu of services lists various forms of invisible labor with corresponding fees for service:
 - Consolation \$500
 - Worry about expenses \$500
 - Encouragement \$500
 - Honest, tho potentially difficult to hear, feedback \$500
 - Deciding what needs to be done \$1,000
 - Doing what needs to be done. \$1,000, etc.
- try and fail with a group of women to form a writing group (2x)--*if we were men, Sarah says, it wouldn't be this difficult*
- struggle in the spring semester 2017 in a creative writing workshop I am teaching with the course text I had selected months prior. An anthology of hybrid writing suddenly seemed anachronistic, and lacking in the urgency I as a teacher was feeling and sensing from the class but failing to acknowledge
- checked my account balance before paying a bill(x?)

- thought about the cul de sacs of our thinking and something Robin Wall Kimmerer said: *In Western thinking, your imagination is something that's locked up within the personal property of your skull. It's just yours, and it's sort of fantastical. But, the way the Mohawk think about it is your imagination is not in your head, your imagination is where your being merges with all the thoughts of the other beings. So the fantastical quality that comes because you're accessing the knowledge of non-human beings so that what we think of in the Western world as so deeply personal is in fact collective. The self is so much bigger than in Western confines.*

THE BOX IS THE WOMB

(the box is her womb) Among the Greek writers who feared the void, women, and poetry: *Hesiod is writing in the 7th century of Pandora who is sent down to punish men....Hesiod calls Pandora the first of the species, a separate species from men. The myth in our English ideology comes armed with a box, but in Greek what she comes with is a pithos and pithos is the Greek word for jar. Now, the Greeks had a thought that a woman's womb was shaped like a pithos, so really what Hesiod is talking about here is Pandora being made the first woman comes with the first womb and when inevitably that womb gets opened and the opening of course is from intercourse, what flows out is all the evils of the world.*

OF WHAT THEE SING SANG SUNG

At the time of watching *The Turin Horse* I was a grad student in an institution that privileged—it will come as no surprise—a voice of white supremacist, patriarchal privilege. I was—in my own white-bodied privilege—an older grad student, married with a very young daughter, and there because I wanted the three years of the time, health benefits, and no-tuition it afforded. There was much to refuse in the program of mastery, and in the accumulation of collective acts of refusal, we formed a disorderly shadow school, of students and faculty—supportive, curious, generative, expansive, messy, emergent. At the time I felt vexed by two creative impulses—to nurture vs. to destroy. I tell a therapist during this time that my 2nd chakra feels enlarged, both distended in my voracity and engorged with unspeakability. The womb site, the wound site, o belly, o void. I imagine the embodiment of this ambivalence: the high priestess, *the second trump*, standing with a spoon in one hand and a knife in the other, belly swollen, pregnant with ambient, magical nothing.

In the process of writing this, after a failed attempt—the crowded room, the long line of readers, my daughter on the verge of tears, an unexpected anxiety dwarfing me—at reading it in public I:

- stop. I stopped writing this. I stepped away, and lost a feel for its gravity. I got tired of myself. Maybe it was the idea of cataloguing personal debt in the first year of the last American president, its myopia, that turned me off. Or more simply: I was afraid of what I would find out.
- *STOP // the universe is everywhere and its childlike patience protects us
STOP*
- realize in the distance from it—the task of delineating what is more or less than what others have—is part of the defecation theater, because, as Simone Weil would say, it is personal.
- the lie in each bullet
- the I in each lie
- eat shit
- *THE SOLAR BOAT IN THE MIDDLE OF ITS COURSE GETS
SIDETRACKED IN ORCHARDS IN A PORCELAIN SKY
STOP FULLSTOP STOP STOP*

A VOICE OUT-SIDE-VOICE-SIDE

I think of *The Turin Horse* and I say debt is masculinist cinema, too—an artifice, a coercive seductive magic dependent on our complicity. A voice outside says debt is the spell of the state, while the spell says this is all there is, that debt makes us good citizens, that we are exceptional superior beings entitled to the dream of hoarding wealth and insisting on our separateness. The austerity and repression in this spell squelches imagination

- the way Christians are born indebted to Jesus
- the way in America—the most expensive and least supportive country in which to give birth—debt is created in order to deliver a human being into this world
- the way if you are privileged enough to attend college and make it through, you will most likely “graduate” into massive debt
- debt to work, debt to marry, debt to reproduce, debt to die
- the way artistry is often relayed in institutions—couched in terms of mastery and craft as the debt owed to the masters—in which art becomes bureaucratized and given the conditions, corporate
- even the way artistic production gets usurped by a notion of brand and its insistence on personality (legibility) rather than mystery, uncertainty, contradiction, messiness, mutation—the very crux—suggests a debt to the market.

I think of Turin and I think of the mystery of Elena Ferrante, or the writer publishing under that pen name, living in the same city where Nietzsche met his end. Turin, the city where her Neapolitan novels end and where in *The Days of Abandonment* Olga, betrayed, free falls in psychic despair, *as she roams the empty streets of Turin, a city she has never learned to love.* Betrayal is a form of abandonment: *When we discover that someone we trusted can be trusted no longer, it forces us to reexamine the universe, to question the whole instinct and concept of trust. For a while we are thrust back onto some bleak, jutting ledge, in a dark pierced by sheets of fire, swept by sheets of rain, in a world before kinship, or naming, or tenderness exist; we are brought close to formlessness.* Cruelty is a form of abandonment: *How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood of us?* The personal as a means of forgetting our obligation to each other.

GIFTS OF THE WITCH

Elena Ferrante has opted out of the market's insistence on the personal—personality-based publicity and readings and panel appearances and social media and author photos. Refusing the formula. *Writers should be concerned only with narrating as well as possible what they know and feel, the beautiful and the ugly and the contradictory, without obeying any prescription, not even a prescription that comes from the side you're on. Writing requires maximum ambition, maximum audacity, and programmatic disobedience.*

In her attention of energy to the emotional risks of writing Ferrante returns a magical sentience to the book: *I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors. If they have something to say, they will sooner or later find readers; if not, they won't. . . I very much love those mysterious volumes, both ancient and modern, that have no definite author but have had and continue to have an intense life of their own. They seem to me a sort of nighttime miracle, like the gifts of Befana, which I waited for as a child. . . .*

NO SOUVENIR

I return to Colonial WilliamsburgTM and its euphemistic quasi-theme-park portrayal of America's corrupt origins, its adjacent golf course, and the absence in my memory of any formal reckoning regarding slavery or the genocide intrinsic to colonialism—we should have left grieving—and with that problematic absence (whether in my memory or the place)—its explicit violence. Its violence in relation to the strange feeling of stasis throughout the trademarked place, not past or present but trapped as if captive in time-space nostalgia gelatin.

WHAT HURTS

The suffocation of imagination—*The body is imaginary, not because it lacks reality, but because it is the most real reality, an image that is ever changing and doomed to disappear*—is the suffocation of bodies. The human bodies, dandelion bodies, the crow bodies, rose bodies, belladonna bodies, elephant bodies, reef bodies, bodies becoming other bodies, bitch bodies, hermaphroditic bodies, both bodies, equine bodies, mushroom bodies, water bodies, celestial bodies.

A collective conception of debt might better hear what's real, what's felt, what hurts, and that is the debt the cruel state owes the peoples and beings subjected to / objectified by its insane violence. Released from conceptions of the personal or property, it could occasion caring and connection to an imagination beyond us. To think about suffering in these terms too: rather than agree on the abstraction of debt via sorcery like money and credit, take self-care and creature-care and collective-care seriously. Not because it's owed but because

“caring for yourself
=
caring for another entity
=
the beginnings of ecological care”

My void baby cries and cries. *Put the conflict into it and stop having answers.* O (widening womb) O (my capacity for evil) O (my capacity for love) O (the pendulum's opal orb) O (*dark core*) O (a crowning) O (seat of power) O (throne mouth) O (fontanelle the crystals shimmer out of) O (*allowing inner space to sparkle madly*) O (ourosboros of death and compost and hot transformation) O (gigantic maggot mouth!) O (fire's first hole in the celluloid) O (incinerator) O (embryonic shapelessness) O (a large gathering of cells collaborating) O (confection around the infection) O (bardo) O (*snuggle yourself in between the worlds, the world of ordinary people and that of witches*) O (I have no idea how to write poetry anymore and I am writing it) O (*the creatrix, the matrix*) O (soft amplitude of tenderness)

HORSE KIN

I hear, days before finishing this, a recording of Val Vinokur reading his English translation of Mayakovsky's "Getting Along With Horses," about the poet's encounter with a work horse who has collapsed and is the laughing stock of the "wind-stripped" city street. As if a suggestion for how to proceed, these lines leap out from thin air:

*Some kind of common animal anguish splashed
and poured out of me and dissolved in a rustle.*

[...]

All of us are horses—sort of.

Every one of us a horse in our own way.

FORMULA

The myth of Pandora was for many generations oral before it was written, and the version we have unleashes upon the world a fear of the femme, a fear of non-human bodies, a fear of the mother's body, punishment of curiosity and desire to know, a formula for scapegoating, pigeon-holing, and rigid/binary thinking, insistence on closed states, closed minds, giant fucking walls, and a failure to recognize personal failure and one's inherent capacity for evil. *In its classical version, a girl* (notably created as a form of punishment to the male-only, one-gender world) *opens the box and releases evil upon the world. Her name, however, means "all-giver," and originally signified the Goddess of Earth.*

TURNING HORSE

Writing is a paradoxical perversion—the language that takes me closest to my wildness is that which has the power to cut me off from it, to foreclose my recognition of the wildness, the sentience, the languages in everything. A certain hubris for so long has put certain humans and certain (uses of) language(s) at the top of a cruel hierarchy; I'm so ready for the tender destruction of that by moving attention to an elsewhere unknown and uncertain.

with lip—with lung—with a long history of cut like a phantom ex in the age of smoke & mirrors—with horse eye—with sentient plume—with impulsive truffles—coated in the sugar of death—with mortal sap—with salutations where authority has begun to wear—with tentative extension—with extension elated in release from containment's eternities prior—with a billowing out of phonemes—with phones switched to mutate—with affect switched to miasma—with soft rays—all purity abandoned—with a new feeling—with whelp & wah—with one foot stateside and the other—stirring stars and the other—webbing into the fat tongue of an inevitable tide and the other—stepping into fire—with cut-offs and a glass of orange juice—with doulas—with misfits—with unfuckers—with stigma and style—with gills—with sublunary agony—with ampersand & embodied dash—with ostensibly mixed signals—with tentacular charisma—with abject entanglement—with love with love with love

This (poe)messay, in a slightly different form, appears in *The End of the World Project*, edited by Richard Lopez, John Bloomberg-Rissman, and T.C. Marshall (Moria Books 2019); the two-volume anthology is available for free download here: <http://www.moriapoetry.com/ebooks.html>

It was Marthe who connected me to the project, and though this chapbook may be more of a reiteration of the prompt for this Kollektiv, it is “staying with the trouble” that seems in kinship with Marthe’s poetics.

Thank you, MC Hyland, Double Cross editor/poet/punk peripatetic, and the wise Ashleigh Lambert, whose Double Cross Press chapbook *The Debt or the Crisis* first inspired this writing.

In italics, the voices coursing thru: Bela Tarr in an interview with the Walker Art Center, Salman Rushdie reading Italo Calvino, Nietzsche, Elizabeth A. Povinelli in “What Do White People Want?: Interest, Desire, and Affect in Late Liberalism,” Howard Zinn, Sarah Fox, Robin Wall Kimmerer said in an interview with Scott Parker in *The Believer*, Dr. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones in an interview with Dr. Amanda Foreman, Etel Adnan in *The Arab Apocalypse*, the cover leaf of Elena Ferrante’s *Days of Abandonment*, Adrienne Rich in “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” Elena Ferrante in an interview in *The Paris Review*, then in a letter to her publisher, Octavio Paz, Samara Golden, Virginia Woolf as quoted by Adrienne Rich, Bjork in correspondence with Timothy Morton, Hans Peter Duerr in *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary Between Wilderness & Civilization*, Adrienne Rich (ibid), Mayakovsky, as translated by Val Vinokur from the *Night Wraps the Sky* anthology, edited by Michael Almereyda, and Rachel Pollack on the Death Card

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